

Multimedia—Taking the Plunge

Jack Massa

Multimedia has traditionally been the province of large teams and specialist companies. But developments in recent years have made it more practical to create small-scale, “fast-track” multimedia projects. Technical communicators can be ideal candidates to initiate and take charge of these projects—as designers, project managers, and multimedia authors. This paper discusses tools and the development process for fast-track multimedia and looks at some example projects.

THE CHANGING FACE OF MULTIMEDIA

Business multimedia projects have traditionally been the province of large teams and specialist companies. The expertise of many team members was needed to understand the different media types and the technology for working with them. Long development cycles were required to plan, design, and develop projects that integrated multiple media. As a result, the decision to use multimedia typically meant large investments of time and money.

But in recent years, development tools have become more affordable and easier to use. Meantime, with the expansion of the Web and the proliferation of CD-ROM drives on even basic PCs, audiences’ expectations for multimedia content have expanded. These circumstances have created many more opportunities for small-scale, “fast-track” multimedia projects to be developed.

Technical communicators can be ideal candidates to initiate and take charge of such projects. The skills we’ve learned as writers, web-developers and online Help authors transfer well to the design and development of multimedia projects.

This paper discusses the tools you need to create small scale, fast-track multimedia for CD-ROM delivery.

It then describes three such projects as examples: a software guided tour, a CD-browser, and a software marketing demo. The paper concludes with guidelines for managing fast-track projects as compared to traditional multimedia development.

THE TOOLS YOU’LL USE

For the kinds of multimedia projects we’re discussing here, there are two essential tools and lots of optional ones. The essential tools are a multimedia authoring program and a paint program. Optional tools can include any number of software and hardware products for creating and working with different types of media.

Multimedia Authoring Tool

The authoring tool is the main program you use to produce a multimedia project. Think of the authoring tool as the workspace where you assemble and orchestrate the different media objects that make up your presentation. Authoring tools typically employ the metaphor of a scene or stage, with the different media objects as players. You, as the author, move the players on and off the stage and manage their activities or “life” while they are there. The players or objects normally include text and graphics, and may also include sounds and videos.

Some objects you can create within the authoring tool, while others you produce with external tools and then

import them. Authoring tools differ in terms of their capabilities to create media objects, as well as their complexity, ease of use, and cost.

Leading authoring tools at the high-end of the scale include Macromedia Director and Asymetrix Toolbook. More modest but still capable tools include DemoShield and DemoNow.

Paint Program

A paint program is a versatile tool for working with raster graphics. I consider this the second essential tool for fast-track multimedia development because you normally use raster or “paint-type” graphics a great deal in these projects.

For example, you can use a good paint program to create backgrounds, import and modify clipart, create screen captures, and work with digital photos. Often, you will want to adjust the brightness and contrast of images or to modify color depth or the color palette. Two leading paint programs on the Windows platform are Adobe PhotoShop and Jasc PaintShop Pro.

Optional Tools

A host of other tools are available and may be needed in your toolkit, depending on the project.

- Word processors can be used to create long passages of formatted text that you then export as an RTF file.
- Draw programs are used to create vector graphics, which may be useful as diagrams and flowcharts.
- Animation programs or screen-camera type tools (such as Lotus ScreenCam) can be used to create on-screen movies and save them as separate files, which you can then import into the authoring tool.

- If you want to include more than the simplest sound effects in your project, then you’ll need a good sound-editing program. Uses for sound in fast-track projects include musical fanfares, sound effects such as clicks to signal feedback of user interaction, and occasional voice-over narration for important segments. Use sound judiciously, however, as sound files are big and will increase your overall project file size.
- A scanner can be useful for converting paper-based images into raster graphics that you can work with.
- If your project has a marketing slant, then a digital camera can be an excellent addition to your toolbox. Today’s digital cameras are surprising easy to use to good effect. Actual photos of people using your product can send a remarkably powerful message. For the very adventurous, some new digital cameras even create short video clips.

Not Reinventing the Wheel

When designing a project, the need for media objects can seem overwhelming. But bear in mind that you will not need to create all—or even most—of the media yourself. Enormous resources of clipart and clip media are available. Many authoring, graphics, and sound programs come with large collections of clips, and there are numerous libraries of royalty-free art and media clips on the Web.

Tool Tips

Here are some tips for selecting tools for your projects:

- **Define your requirements first.** As much as possible, decide what you'll need the tool to do and how you'll use it.
- **Try before you buy.** Whenever possible, download and try a copy of the tool first. Most manufacturers offer some sort of demo or trial version. Nothing can be more helpful in deciding whether a tool is right for you.
- **Check your authoring package.** The major authoring tools have many built-in capabilities, so you may or may not need a separate, dedicated tool (for example, for animation or sound editing).
- **Consider low-cost tools.** Research and try low-cost or shareware alternatives. For fast-track projects, these may be exactly what you need.
- **Check your current tool set.** Consider tools you may already have (such as the video camera application that is packaged with RoboHelp).

THREE EXAMPLE PROJECTS

A Software Guided Tour

As I am using the term here, a software guided tour is a high-level introduction to the main features of a software interface. A tour can be packaged as a standalone presentation or linked to the application's online Help. It can serve both the marketing function of introducing potential customers to a product and the training function of introducing new users to how the product works. The techniques you use

to create a tour are the same as you would use to create a tutorial or the brief "show me" clips often included with Help files.

This type of project may be the easiest way for a technical communicator to take the plunge into multimedia, since it can be developed rapidly, at low expense, and without stepping outside of traditional organizational boundaries. If you are interested in authoring multimedia, creating a successful guided tour can build your skills and establish your credibility for more elaborate projects.

A multimedia guided tour normally consists of screen shots and some form of narration. The simplest way to explain the interface is to use text boxes and arrows (see Figure 1). Voice-over narration can also be used, but this adds significantly to both the development effort and the file-size. Also, timing the sound clips to match the visual elements can become extremely tricky. Unless you have some expertise with digital sound, or a lot of time to experiment, you should probably avoid this method.

Another important element is motion. You can use a screen camera tool to capture cursor movements and software actions and store them in an animation file. Another method is to simulate motion by timing the appearance and disappearance interface elements within the authoring tool. I've found that combining these methods yields excellent results.

If you are creating a large tour, you should break it down into segments and provide a menu (Figure 2). Also, keep in mind that your goal is to *introduce* the application, not show every field and dialog box. Keep your sections brief: a few minutes or less.

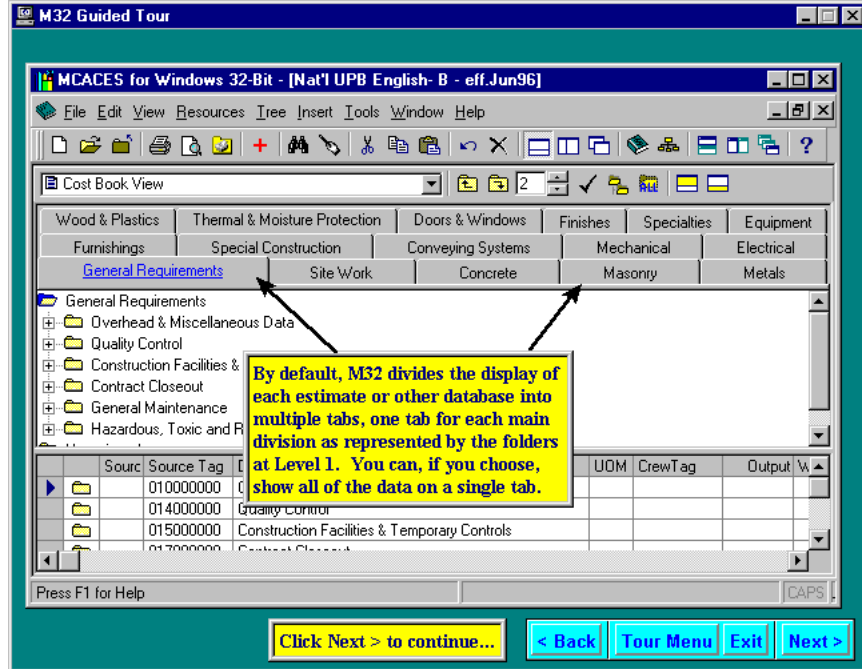


Figure 1 – Software Guided Tour Narrative Screen

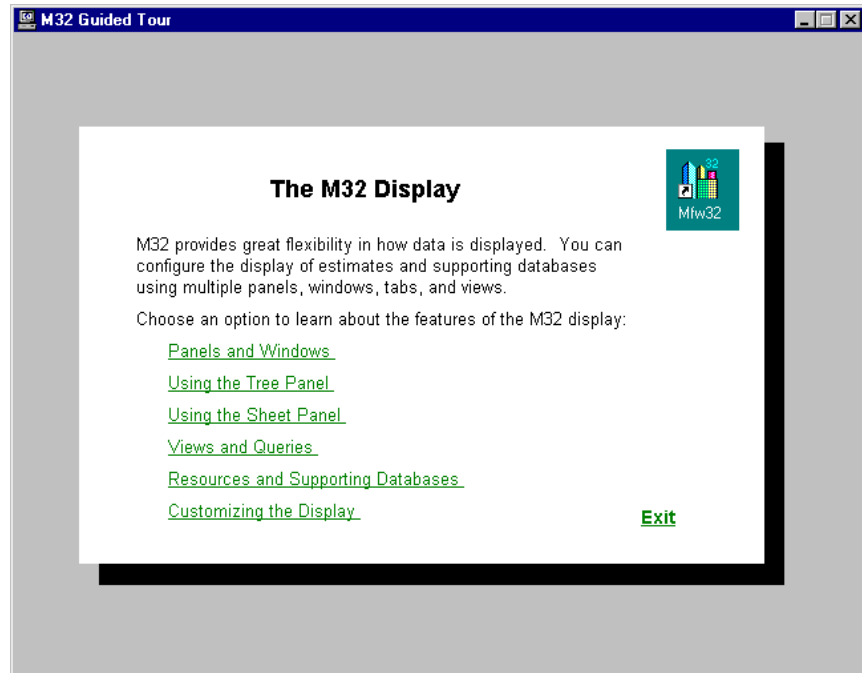


Figure 2 – Software Guided Tour Menu Screen

A CD Browser

When you install software from a CD ROM, you are often presented with a menu of choices for what to install. As software packaging has become more sophisticated, this Installation Menu has evolved, in many cases, into a user-friendly front-end program called a *CD browser*.

In addition to launching installation programs and enabling easy browsing of the CD contents, CD browsers are typically used for marketing purposes—such as providing corporate profiles, cross-selling information on related products, and displaying company contact information. They can also be used to provide easy access to online documentation files and to launch multimedia demos or guided tours that may be included on the CD. Figure 3 shows an example menu from a CD browser.

You can use a multimedia authoring tool such as DemoShield to create an effective CD browser. If working on such a project, consider including these elements:

- Menu options that launch the external setup or installation programs on the CD (required).
- One or more bitmaps of corporate artwork (perhaps from your company's web site) to serve as attractive background images.
- An option for browsing the CD contents. This is normally accomplished by launching Windows Explorer.
- Options for displaying online documentation, such as PDF or HTML files. This can be especially useful for installation instructions or configuration information.
- An option to launch a multimedia demo or guided tour of your software product, if available.
- A screen of company contact information, perhaps including both Sales and Support. E-mail and web addresses can be made live links to bring up mail and web-browser clients.



Figure 3 – CD Browser Menu

A Software Marketing Demo

A marketing demo is typically a larger project than the others we've discussed. It is also a more traditional form of multimedia. Historically this kind of presentation has usually been outsourced to a "multimedia company." Even in a very small company, it's impossible to create this form all alone: you must at least have the participation of the sales and marketing staff.

If you are writing or managing this kind of project, you may need some political savvy, since you will probably have to coordinate different marketing visions and balance them against the need to create a coherent and effective presentation.

There are as many ways to approach the design of a marketing demo as there are approaches to marketing. In most

cases, you will use some screen shots and animations similar to those in a guided tour. Typically, you will also use "PowerPoint-like" bulleted text (with or without accompanying voice-overs) to speak the marketing message.

A particularly nice technique I've found was suggested by a marketing writer I worked with on a demo. Her script began each section of the demo with a story that illustrated a problem situation, which the software was designed to solve. We accompanied the text with digital photos that we took of people at the company—posed to represent characters in the stories. (See Figure 4.) This approach worked well because it tied the presentation to the real-world concerns of the viewer and dramatized those concerns with pictures.

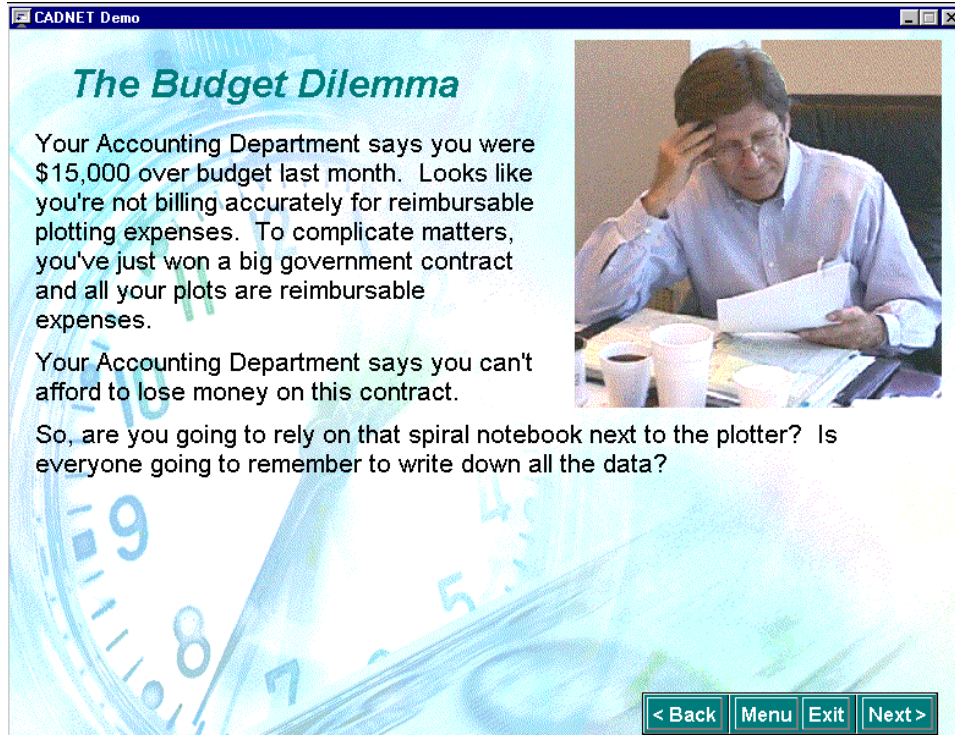


Figure 4 – Marketing Demo Screen

FAST-TRACK MULTIMEDIA DEVELOPMENT

Technical advances and accelerating audience expectations over the past few years have made possible a new, fast-track approach to creating business multimedia. This approach contrasts with the traditional development model in vogue since the 1980s.

The traditional model requires an interdisciplinary team with clearly defined roles, extensive preliminary planning and paper prototyping, formalized signoff procedures, and often a working prototype review stage before full development.

The Fast Track approach works especially well with small-scale projects. It still has to cover the same ground as the traditional approach, but must do so more efficiently. It includes: one or a few team members filling multiple roles, a combination script/storyboard for the preliminary review cycle, and rapid development with frequent reviews of pieces along the way.

Traditional Model	Fast Track Model
Large team	One or few players
Segregated roles and expertise	Players wear many hats
Extensive upfront planning	Take the plunge
Formal design specification	Design/script/storyboard all in one
Formal review and sign-off	Frequent review and revision of pieces

TAKE THE PLUNGE!

To conclude, I would urge interested technical communicators to look for opportunities to work with fast-track multimedia. Your employer or clients can benefit from your skills and creativity, and you can benefit also. Working with multimedia not only adds to your expertise and marketability, it's also challenging and fun. Don't be afraid of getting wet.

Jack Massa
Principal
Guidance Communications, Inc.
1922 Walton Woods Circle
Tucker, Georgia 30084
Phone/FAX: 770.621.0526
e-mail address:
jack@guidancecom.com
Web site address:
www.guidancecom.com

Jack Massa is Principal of Guidance Communications Inc., an Atlanta-based consulting company focusing on communication solutions for high-tech firms. Jack has 16 years experience in technical communication, with nine years developing online information. He has won numerous awards for technical publications, online Help, and Web development, and has made presentations to STC and ACM-SIGDOC conferences at the regional and international levels. Jack was involved in all three of the projects described in this paper, as script writer, designer, and multimedia author.