

ENHANCING CONTENT DELIVERY IN DISTANCE EDUCATION WITH ANIMATED NARRATORS

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ABSTRACT

Animated narrators are Microsoft characters (epitomized by the infamous paper clip) that can speak and perform actions in PowerPoint presentations. The creative use of animated narrators in courses like the graduate level management science class in an online MBA Program and the undergraduate AACSB production/operations management class will be shown, and the authors will relate their experiences and results in such classes. All workshop attendees will receive a CD with workshop related materials.

Many faculty in today's academic arena are involved with delivering courses over distance education channels. The forms of delivery are varied: video tapes of lectures, distributed files of supplemental material, websites from which students download files, CDs, DVDs, etc. In almost every case, PowerPoint is used as one of the programs to deliver content. Unfortunately, the presentations are often tedious, requiring the student to read and study complex slides to deduce what the instructor is trying to communicate. Reviewing a PowerPoint presentation, without any information, aside from the slide content, is generally only marginally informative. Realistically, it is usually what is said about the slides, rather than the slide information itself, that carries the content in a presentation. Two potential improvements are evident to any PowerPoint author: including speaker notes (embedded text describing the slide) or adding audio narration for each slide (a time consuming and large file exercise).

An alternative that exists to these two approaches is the use of animated narrators to deliver the instructor's content. Animated narrators, if known at all, are usually epitomized by Microsoft's infamous 'paper clip' that appears in many Microsoft packages like Word. Typically, the 'paper clip' character offers advice that, to many, seems cryptic and insufferable. However, less well known --- and used --- is a set of Microsoft characters that are much more versatile and likeable: Merlin, Genie, Peedy, and Robby, and a huge collection of third party characters. In PowerPoint, these characters speak (using a text-to-speech engine) scripted lines and perform actions that have been written for each slide. Coupled with the animation capabilities of PowerPoint, the use of narrators can create an engaging and informative presentation, particularly when the narrators are used creatively, e.g., with interchanges between narrators and the use of humor. Voice and typing interactions with these characters can also be incorporated.

The workshop will illustrate basic and extended uses of narrators in delivering course content, illustrate characters from catalogs of available characters, allow workshop attendees with computers to experience the process of adding narrator scripts to existing PowerPoint presentations, and present attendees with information regarding where to find the technology and how to employ it. All workshop attendees will receive a CD with workshop related materials.