

Aligning ‘serious games’ to corporate training

By Kevin Corti

There has been much written about ‘serious games’ or, as I prefer to call them, ‘immersive learning simulations’ (ILSs) over the last year. As with any nascent industry there are always early adopters - characterised by their willingness to embrace innovation - but most organisations tend to be more risk-averse and thus harder to convince. For the wider adoption of ILSs to happen, suppliers and commissioners need to counter the fear of change with coherent designs allied to sound business reasoning. This article seeks to provide some ideas to support this.

Deliver upon organisational needs

To paraphrase the 1992 Clinton election slogan; “It’s about the business, stupid!” Most corporate learning professionals lack an awareness of what is required to implement an effective ILS. Likewise many suppliers, especially those whose origins are in the entertainment games and multimedia industry, lack an appreciation of what is required to create a truly effective and appropriate learning solution.

If a potential client fails to feel comfortable with how to go about implementing an ILS they shall remain only a potential client. As designers of interactive learning applications we are naturally enticed by the potential of simulations to create learning experiences that are characterised by being ‘engaging’, ‘fun’ or ‘immersive’. I have no doubt that many corporate training (and school education) activities could benefit with being, for example, ‘more engaging’, but in order to obtain commercial buy in we need to link the descriptive terms we use to accepted business terminology, drivers and practices. That is to say, do not try selling an ‘engaging game’ to the CFO. Focus instead on the attainment of measurable performance, productivity and quality improvement benefits such as the reduction of induction time/time to competency, material waste and frequency of accidents or errors. Where it is not possible to be quite so explicit, focus instead on obvious opportunities for organisational improvement such as, for example:

- Delivering effective just-in-time ‘job aids’ that enable employees to resolve problems at the point of need (to increase productivity and cut costs).
- Increased awareness of role within the wider organization (improved communication and collaboration equals increased productivity)

- Deeper understanding of complex processes and systems such as complex sales, consultancy, Six Sigma and SAP (better return on capital investment)

Be realistic!

Creating a commercially successful entertainment computer game is very hard work. Those who do not earn their living working in that industry very often fail to understand this. ILS implementations will not need to match the high end production values and technical wizardry of the latest entertainment computer games but they are, nonetheless, likely to require more investment, time and effort than your average ‘rapid eLearning’ project. Failing to recognise this will cause potentially project-stopping problems. As a guide; the majority of ILS projects typically fall into the £25k to £250k range and take between three and six months to complete. Do ensure that there is appropriate time to do the job well and include sufficient time for thorough design, development, integration and testing. Giving your ILS specialist six weeks to deliver a huge bespoke multiplayer simulation to train thousands of staff in the latest release of your enterprise-wide supply chain management system is really not a clever idea.

Remember the organizational objectives

It is very easy to get carried away with the ‘shiny new toys’ and, if you have not previously implemented a game or simulation before, to fall back on what you know about those great PlayStation, Amiga or Atari games you played when you were younger. Those experiences can be useful to inform your decisions but do not forget that your primary motivation in adopting an ILS-based approach is not to entertain your audience but rather to solve your internal or external client’s business/learning-related problems. Let the ILS specialist drive the design vision and development practicalities.

Partnering

Many an eLearning company will, if they come across it in a tender invitation, greet the word ‘partnership’ with an (often justified) deep sigh on the basis that what this probably means is something along the lines of “we expect it cheap”. In the brave new world of ILS however, partnerships will become perhaps more prevalent than they have ever been before and for good reason. An ILS vendor is an expert in *interactivity* above all else and, because creating an effective ILS focuses on higher-level skills development (deep learning) rather than simplistic information delivery (shallow learning), most ILS projects will require a Subject Matter Expert (SME). The business models of large-scale ILS projects may well dictate that ‘cost sharing’ is necessary but in keeping with the adoption-related theme of this article, it is the nature of the learning design challenge that will often dictate that ILS projects need to be carried out in some form of formal partnership between three or more organisations.

Reuse technology & tools

Seek to develop (or invest in) technology which can be used more than once i.e. seek out a commonality of features and functionality when working on one project which can be used again in other projects or products. By adopting this approach organisations can leverage their investment (and amortize the initial costs) across multiple customer accounts, projects or products rather than trying to tackle every project on a custom build basis. This approach applies not just to vendors but also to commissioners of immersive learning simulations. Given that an ILS may be more time and cost-intensive than traditional eLearning (but with a bigger ROI) it makes little sense to reinvent the wheel each time you start a new project.

Consider alternative business models

If ILS project costs start to exceed the fairly well-accepted £25k/hour cost of “high-end eLearning” then stakeholders may well start to get cold feet. Given that learning requirements are very rarely unique to a particular organisation, no matter how much they may like to think so, why not ask the client if they would be receptive to some form of arrangement whereby you, the service/technology provider, can re-purpose the end product, remove and replace any truly client-specific elements, and then create a generic product? It is quite feasible to get your development costs covered by a first client and then to be able to generate healthy profits from every subsequent sale after that.

If you are on the commissioning side of the project and you are struggling to get approval for the budget that the ILS specialist is quoting then why not look for other organisations which could contribute towards the development costs in return for being able to use the end product? You could find a third party that would be interested in licensing and selling a generic product. You may even be able to achieve the holy grail of turning internal training activities, traditionally a cost-centre, into a profit centre. Now wouldn't your CEO like that?

My company, PIXELearning, has been involved in several such arrangements; some that we proposed and some that the client instigated. The negotiations can, of course, extend the sales process, elongate the design process and, of course, delay revenues and/or profit. As a developer, however, such an arrangement can quickly give you a portfolio of commercially viable ‘off the shelf’ content or, at least, a white label product that can be customised to new customers quickly and easily.

Kevin Corti, CEO, PIXELearning

Linkedin: www.linkedin.com/in/kevincorti