Descent to the Underworld: A Game-Film® Project

Nora Barry

Descent to the Underworld: A Game-Film is a collaborative project that networked sixty-five students from universities in five states and three countries via the Internet2 networks and the Access Grid, to form an online classroom and multipoint production studio. The project used new technologies and high speed networks to bring together students from multiple, diverse cultures to interpret a common, ancient narrative.

The universities worked together in four teams to create media files for a Game-Film, a videogame wherein the game play results in a short film. As players move through the game they acquire scenes from a film (instead of points or health). At the end of the game, the film scenes are automatically edited and streamed, giving the player a short cinematic story of the game action.

Descent to the Underworld is the first example of the Game-Film. It is based on the common mythological narrative about a journey to the Underworld to find a loved one who has been lost or kidnapped. Each of the three narrative teams produced its own version of the story and the fourth team created the soundtrack and sound effects.   During game-play, players can opt to see only the film clips from one team (and hence their version of the story), or they can have the computer randomly generate scenes from different teams, and produce endless variations of the story.

The online team collaborations began in mid-February and finished at the end of April. Teams met once a week, via the Access Grid.   In class, they discussed and agreed upon the interpretation of the storyline, drew up a task list and production timeline and allocated those tasks. When not in class, the students kept in touch with each other via team bulletin boards and WIKI's.   In less then fifteen weeks the students produced sixty film clips, a soundtrack and a sound effects library.

The teams were given information about familiar "Descent" myths, such as *Demeter and Persephone* and *Orpheus and Eurydice*, as well as comparative myths from Ireland, Norway, India, Thailand and the North American Indians. They were encouraged to debate and build their own interpretation of the myth.   The production guidelines included color coding of the main characters: purple for the Underworld character; blue for the hero; and gold for the person being rescued. In addition teams were given a set length for each scene (ten seconds) and asked to open and close each scene in a medium shot. These standards were necessary because all of the film clips are databased and visual continuity was necessary for the auto-edit.

The teams met using Access Grid, a large display, multi-user video collaboration software that enables real-time video and uncompressed audio. The Access Grid was powered by Apple Computer Xserve and networked using the Internet2 high speed nets, including Abilene in the U.S., CERNET in China, CERN in Europe and ANSP in Brazil.

Descent to the Underworld was created and produced by Druid Media. The participating universities were: the University of Utah in Salt Lake City (faculty: Chad Griffiths); Northwestern University in Evanston, Illinois (faculty: Scott Lipscomb); Drexel University in Philadelphia (faculty: John Serpentelli); Tsinghua University in Beijing (faculty: Maoke Chen); the University of Washington in Seattle (faculty: Kathy Gill); Unisinos in Sao Leopoldo, Brazil (faculty: Lenara Verle);and Louisiana State University in Baton Rouge (faculty: Steve Beck).