



ALA Video Round Table Digital Media Discussion Group Report

American Library Association Midwinter Conference
Seattle, WA Saturday, January 20, '07, 1:30pm - 3:00 pm
Washington State Convention & Trade Center (210/211)

On January 20, 2007, the Video Round Table sponsored its annual Digital Media Discussion Group (DMDG). Expanded from its prior format of one hour to one and a half hours, there was no shortage of topics to discuss. Major topics covered included new high definition market technologies, multimedia production in libraries, streaming of media resources, and video gaming in libraries. Many of these topics had also been discussed in previous years, however the continuing evolution of new technologies in the media arena necessitates increasing attention to these areas. DMDG attendees included a broad array of professionals including primarily academic and public librarians as well as school librarians, film producers and media vendors.

A brief recap of recent developments specific to high-definition media formats kicked off the discussion. At the 2006 discussion, the general impression was that Sony's Blu-Ray format would likely win the "high-def" wars (over Toshiba et. al.'s HD-DVD format), largely due to the announcements that (1) the majority of studios would be backing this technology and (2) Sony would be including a Blu-Ray drive in its highly anticipated Playstation 3 console. Unfortunately, the battle royale continues. Neither manufacturer has conceded, resulting in a somewhat stagnant market for both technologies. Neither the movies nor the players are selling as consumers wait for both improvements in the hardware and indications as to which technology will prove dominant. Although the Playstation 3 console was released with the Blu-Ray drive, a six month delay in its anticipated release date and supply problems have dampened its anticipated effect on the HD market. The console's production expense continues to cause problems, selling for nearly \$600 (a \$300 loss). Technical problems also plague the Blu-Ray and HD-DVD formats, which can best be characterized as slow and clunky. The start-up on the players is glacial at best, taking a full minute to boot. Essentially the players function as hard drives, and the time it takes for the machines to navigate complex copy-protection schema, etc., leads to a slow response time. It was recently discovered that some discs attempting to take advantage of the new functionality this technology offers have failed – *The Descent*, released with Java coding, would only play on Playstation 3 consoles and not on the standalone players. Additionally, the AACS (Advanced Access Content System) copy protection system has already been bypassed by hackers, necessitating further development in this area.

Some new developments are appearing on the horizon that may bridge the gap between Blu-Ray and HD-DVD. Warner Brothers recently announced their Total HD format, which will incorporate both formats onto on disc. LG has announced that it will be selling a dual platform player for \$1200. Questions remain as to whether this is the most

efficient use of technology resources, since the inclusion of the dual platform functionality essentially doubles production costs. New technologies appear on the market continually; producer and distributor John Sinno brought an article to the group's attention that describes a third, lower cost format developed in Britain called HD VMD¹. As it stands, a survey of DMDG attendees shows that librarians are waiting alongside consumers as these technologies continue their battle for dominance and work out the numerous technological deficiencies along the way.

The next topic of interest to discussion participants was the issue of multimedia production centers in libraries. As academic libraries continue to respond to the evolving needs of media-savvy students, many librarians have found themselves working in the arena of multimedia production. Several participants outlined their experiences with different service models, computer platforms, software, and equipment. The Emory Center for Interactive Teaching follows a faculty-driven service model where instructors are assisted on Mac workstations as they digitize video clips. Their focus is on user-friendly applications (hence their adoption of the Mac platform) and higher-end software such as Final Cut Pro. Another discussion participant concurs with the observation that Macs are generally more user-friendly, relating experience with his institution's PCs, which are more cumbersome and which consistently cause trouble. Other facilities focus on assisting students as they complete course-related multimedia assignments. One issue librarians may need to think about is their role in archiving productions and even working program files. Several attendees share anecdotes about faculty who expect that a production completed semesters ago will be available as they wish to update or alter the teaching tools they have created. One participant notes that such facilities provide the opportunity for libraries to function as exhibit spaces. Academic librarians are not the only ones to encounter multimedia production as part of their daily workflow. School librarians report the use of video production software such as Windows Movie Maker to create educational multimedia presentations for their classes. Because of the continually-evolving nature of hardware and software necessary to support multimedia production, it is likely that this will continue to be a topic of great interest for future discussions.

The third topic discussed evoked as many questions as there were answers: streaming of multimedia resources. Although there were a number of librarians present who have been providing streaming access to users for two years or more, it is still a very new and unsettled area in regards to delivery systems, pricing models, and licensing negotiations. Before delving too deeply into these complex areas, one non-librarian attendee questioned the very idea of libraries offering streaming access ("Why would anyone want to watch a video on their computer [rather than DVD-quality playback]?"), providing the group with the opportunity to briefly reflect on the increasing desire for "anytime, anywhere" access as well as the fragility of the DVD medium.

A number of challenges arise when attempting to provide users increased access via streaming technologies. Those in the academic realm report challenges in coordinating streaming services with campus IT departments. Others report that use (particularly of

¹ "Brit Developer Enters DVD Fray", Variety, 01/14/07
<http://www.variety.com/article/VR1117957325.html?categoryid=19&cs=1&nid=2562>

reserve titles) is on the verge of outpacing technical capabilities – said one participant: “We are limiting our expansion of this service due to a fear of high use.” Paramount to the myriad technological concerns are cost and licensing issues. Even matters of semantics enter the fray – Michael Brewer (University of Arizona) reports that his institution is taking a statistic-based approach across multiple campuses. The number of times a title is used will help determine which titles to purchase for long-term access. However, what exactly constitutes a “use”? Would it be considered a use as soon as the title is accessed, even if the user only views the content for a few seconds?

Input from streaming media vendors added greatly to the conversation. Diane Bilello of Films Media Group reports an increase in consortial deals for her OnDemand and digital rights products. Another challenge that affects vendors as much as it does librarians and users is the lack of standards. Because of the many ways media content can be delivered, challenges faced in each situation are often unique and require new solutions. Because of this, many of those with experience in this arena recommend thorough testing of delivery, authentication, and DRM (Digital Rights Management) programs. Several participants also stressed the importance of communication between both the librarian and the vendors and within the institution as well. Some of those who are not purchasing digital files or licensing content are beginning to offer streaming media of programs produced by their home institutions (such as convocations, speakers, sporting events, etc.).

Public libraries are beginning to experiment with products from vendors like Recorded Books and Overdrive to provide patrons with digitally formatted media. Although one librarian noted that it is too soon to judge the success of these new products, she did note that marketing / user education is essential for the success of these initiatives. Cost is also a major consideration – one service mentioned costs its library \$3.00 per use plus an annual subscription fee. Many of these new technologies, such as Playaway digital audio books (Recorded Books), are highly valued because they provide equitable access to new technologies for patrons who may not have access to MP3 players or other devices.

The last topic discussed concerned video gaming in libraries, both in recreational and research collections. New faculty lines are cropping up at many academic institutions in new media, providing evidence that the anti-media bias might be shifting in some cases. “Edutainment” software is being developed and utilized at a quickening pace. At UNC-Greensboro, one participant reports of a game developed by a professor to teach macro- and microeconomics courses. The increasing popularity of Web 2.0 applications (such as Second Life) is having implications for education and libraries as well, serving as both a source for entertainment and a realm for learning and research assistance. Filmmakers themselves are envisioning the merging of interactivity and gaming elements with what are now considered traditional documentary elements. Howard Besser of NYU reminds us that the life cycle for gaming systems is much shorter than with other media formats (while VHS had a lifespan of 15-20 years, most game systems are used for roughly three years or so before users move on to a new platform). A range of solutions exist for those institutions interested in keeping legacy gaming platforms in their collections (such as the use of emulators); however, they require careful planning. Complicating these matters is the fact that there are not many standards among video game makers, although there do

seem to be indications that this is starting to change. As with many digital media topics, copyright is a murky area. Public librarians using video games in programming wonder if special licensing is required for gaming 'tournaments' and other activities.

The growth in attendance between the 2006 (25+) and 2007 (70+) DMDG discussions indicates the exponential growth in librarians' interest in, and experience with, digital media. Attendees benefited from the breadth of experience brought to the table by all participants, and we look forward to an even more fruitful exchange in 2008.

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