

Taking a museum experience to your real world
Exploring a new usage of museum audio/visual guide
in children's hospital, retirement homes and more

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S W E D E N

Background

A friend of mine, Ritsuko Segawa, who is a well established independent scriptwriter and a producer of programs for museum audio tours once told me about her personal experience as following. She was contacted by a certain gentleman whose elderly Mother had been in a hospital with a terminal illness. This gentleman, with an assistance of museum's public information office, phoned Ritsuko and asked her a permission to borrow her audio tour equipment personally and take it outside the museum so that his Mother could hear the program in her hospital bed.

At first, Ritsuko was hesitant about this request. As being a professional in museum education, providing content for audio tour at various museums for many years, she was afraid that the program might not be understood correctly without actually seeing the exhibition itself. But then, this gentleman explained that his Mother knows the floor plan of this particular museum and the subject of the exhibition really well.

This story took place at the National Museum of Nara a couple of years ago during the time of annual exhibit of treasures of "Shoso-in" which is the most popular subject at this museum. The Shoso-in is an ancient deposit of imperial treasures in the Todai-ji Temple in Nara-City and the National Museum there has been organizing the exhibitions to show these treasures with different themes annually every fall-winter season for long many years. The Mother of this gentleman too had been going to these exhibitions every year without missing once up until the previous year. Touched by this gentleman's thought for his Mother, Ritsuko decided to take a chance and let him take the audio tour equipment to the hospital.

Upon returning the equipment, the gentleman told Ritsuko how his Mother enjoyed listening to the program, especially with the help of her son's personal comment on how the exhibition is laid out this year. The Mother and the son talked also about their experience together in past

exhibitions at the museum and obviously it was a valuable moment for both of them to share.

This story was quite inspiring and I couldn't help starting to explore the possibilities by talking to colleagues what we could possibly do as educational institution to step in between museums and the people with restricted mobility. When I say "people with restricted mobility", I mean any patients in the hospital, particularly young children with problems with their immune system who are not allowed to contact the world outside hospital, and elderly people, or any adult anywhere with inability to drive, or taking public transportation by themselves. My idea was to deliver museum content in a lively form for those who cannot physically come to the museum. I was determined to do something more than just putting up static pictures of the museum buildings, galleries and collections on the web, or letting the people outside to use the audio tour equipment without any images. We had to find something to bridge between these two.

Here comes the age of Pod-casting

In the fall of 2005, just about the same time as I started talking to my colleagues what could be possibly done to implement my idea, we began to see Universities and Museums' experimenting the use of "i-Pod" for providing educational content.

Naturally, we too turned into this direction and started exploring the possibilities of using pod-casting technology. But at that time, or even now at this moment, most of these experimenting services are restricted to audio files only and nothing is fancy, with most cases, as it lacks moving images.

After many hours of discussions among ourselves, we reached a conclusion as following. We, an educational institute, as an intermediary agent between museums and visitors/general public should develop a web platform where museums can provide movie files of educational content easily and visitors/general public could come, view the materials and download them easily for video casting on their MP4 players. So we developed a new platform that we currently call the "VOLUMEONE" (based on FFMPEG for the Beta version) that enables various movie files encoded automatically to FLV without much difficulties.

Entering the new platform: "VOLUMEONE"

(<http://www.volumeone.jp/> *Flash player 8 is required to view this site.)

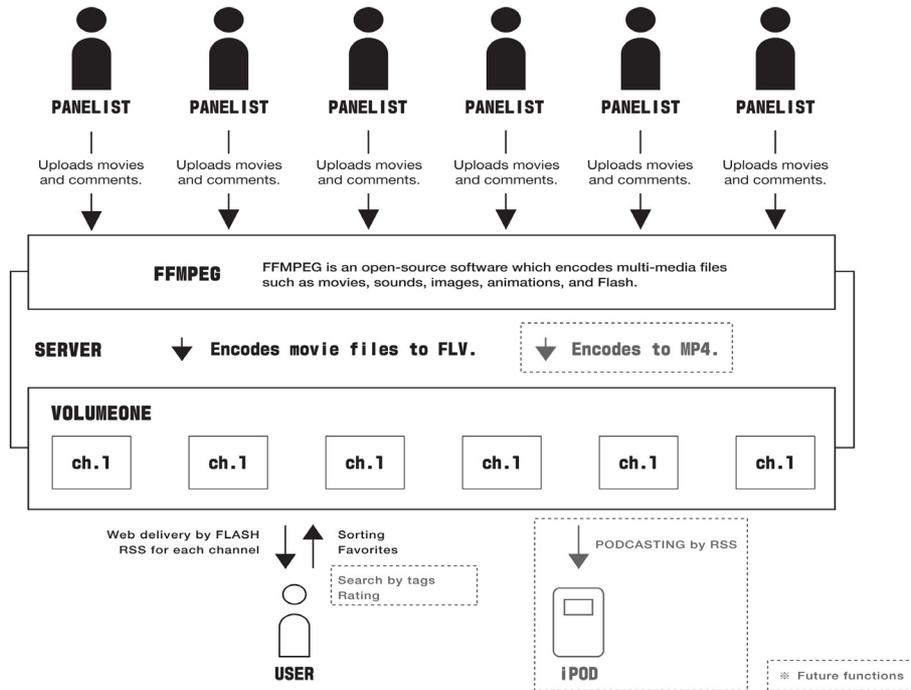


Figure 1

By using the "VOLUMEONE," any program administrator (shown as "Panelist" here in the *Figure 1*) of a museum with assigned ID and a Password by the "VOLUMEONE" could upload their movie files on the web wherever they are and make these files video-castable almost instantly. Since the first version of "VOLUMEONE" was released on May 10, 2006, we have been only providing the URL information on each movie file by RSS, but by the end of July, we will actually start video-casting from this platform.

Another unique feature of the "VOLUMEONE" is that each movie file assigned with a permanent link can be exported to weblog page run independently by any museum. With a little help of "VOLUMEONE," museums can make their weblog pages full of movie content. Users

can watch those movies on the web with detailed explanations in text on their PC, or download it to their MP4 players by video-casting and carry them around.

Taking a museum experience to your real world with the "VOLUMEONE"

As an educational institute, we don't mean to intervene with interests of producers of museum audio tour. Our purpose, hopefully, is to explore the possibilities to enhance multi-media capability of museum's educational programs, so that those who love museums, yet cannot come to the museums due to their restricted mobility, could have better chance of enjoying the content of museums in much better perspective.

Since "VOLUMEONE" is so easy and quick to upload any movie files, museum staff could make a new presentation and upload one everyday, or make a full advantage of existing video programs within their institutions and show them all on the web. They can choose, or not to choose video-cast these programs to MP4 players.

With "VOLUMEONE" easy to upload capability, a museum staff with a DV Cam could ask a group of 10 years old to tour with him. Capture comments on what these kids see as they walk through and make the video clip available on the web for public viewing afterwards within few hours. Such lively comments that only real 10 years old could give, with moving images of their faces with exhibition and other activities going on in the background, will be a gift to the kids of same age group in the hospital. At the same time, elderly group might enjoy watching the kids having a good time in the museum as it will remind them the atmosphere and physical sense of being in the museum with young people. We hope the "VOLUMEONE" to provide alternative ways to enhance more structured museums' official educational programs.

Conclusion as of May 10, 2006...

We are still in the developing stage of so called "VOLUMEONE" and we keep adding features of new functions to it. We will start experiment video casting from this platform shortly and will commence collaborative programs in June with Kawasaki City Museum and in July with the BankART, a not-for-profit gallery of contemporary art, in Yokohama. Then, we are hoping to conduct monitoring tests in collaboration with children's hospital and retirement homes within the vicinity.

We understand that this is going to be a long term and time consuming project, but our ultimate goal is to set an example of democratizing multi-media tools for on-line educational programs at any museum anywhere. We want to help particularly those museums with financial restriction for developing original web site, yet hoping to have flash capability and produce pod-casting video programs internally

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We are also looking into the usage of mobile phones with same purposes, but since the technology used in mobile phone is heavily dependent on each device, one may have to make a serious commitment with a particular company for the programs to run on a particular device. With such conditions, we choose rather to wait for a while until all the mobile phones have MP4 capability and come with bigger screen. This may not take too long before it becomes true.

Acknowledgements

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