A Student Project Experience: A Virtual Campus Tour

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**ABSTRACT**

This paper describes a class project combining web technology, communications, and graphic design to produce a virtual campus tour. This project combined interdisciplinary learning, modern web technology, and service to the institution. We believe that this serves as a case study in putting Computer Science into a larger context, allowing students to collaborate with outsiders that have expertise in a variety of areas. This project was “just right” in a number of ways: it was doable in a single semester, it surpassed the capabilities of an existing expensive software system, and could be implemented in a stand-alone manner.

**INTRODUCTION**

One of the main difficulties in building this project was creating a realistic software development experience for students. To do this, we needed to interact with people outside of the Computer Science community. This made presentations and demonstrations difficult because they were clueless as to what was happening “under the hood” of the program. So conversing about Javascript and Python to the marketing department was out of the question. We focused more on the look and overall effect that this project would have on the school. Another difficulty in creating this project was motivating students and showing the importance that the project had for the institution. The institution was very excited about our project because of the amount of money they were currently spending on the virtual campus tour. It would also give them the ability to modify the campus tour without giving up too much money. Students were informed of the high possibility that this project could go live, and ultimately become the new virtual tour of Western. The project was created through client side web programming. This was beneficial to us because it allowed us to make things happen dynamically on the web page.

Talk about the difficulty in providing students with a realistic software development experience. Cite some SIGCSE papers here. Stress the importance of interactions with people outside of the Computer Science community. Motivate students by working on a project that can go live and is important to the institution.

Talk about client side web programming and the Javascript software development process.

**Project Goals**

Design goals of the tour:

1. Incorporate the institutions marketing message into the tour
2. Create a tour that uses a variety of media to “tell the story” of the institution, including information about the location, the community, the surrounding area.
3. The tour should be personalized – information should come from student voices
4. The tour must work on most devices – from phones to full sized screens

**Design of the Virtual Tour**

This project was created when there was a need for an updated version of our current virtual tour. Every year the institution spent $20,000 for a tour on YouVisit. YouVisit is a service that creates a virtual tour for a school, resort, or any additional place. Multiple schools use this website but it has some serious downfalls. The YouVisit tour has an audio recording of students guiding the user through the tour. Instead of being helpful or informative, the recording was annoying and made future students lose interest. Additionally, when one actually tries navigating through the tour there was a superfluous amount of stops between each building/location. The map that YouVisit uses to help guide the user to their location had issues with movability and the display. When one tried to move the map it would disappear completely. Annoying pop-ups would appear urging the future student to contact admissions. Any additional content such as panoramas, pictures, or videos were severely disconnected from the original tour. YouVisit advertised more for their site then our university. There was no branding from the university that connected with the virtual tour. As a class, the tour that YouVisit had produced did not suit what we believed future students should be experiencing and did not represent our university. From this discovery it became the classes mission to create a unique personalized tour for our university.

**Implementation**

In order to begin the Virtual Tour Project, the class needed to be divided up into groups to work on certain aspects. Some of the groups consisted of the menu, spy, carousel, testing, integration, etc. One of the main tasks for the spy was to investigate current campus tours and JavaScript libraries that other Universities were using. We found many great libraries and tours to choose from but we needed to narrow it down. This was a great place to start because it allowed us to figure out what and how we wanted to build our Virtual Tour. Eventually, the groups began coding separate parts of the tour and presenting them to the class. These groups were given input on their code and sent back to make improvements before the pieces were integrated together. The integration group was divvyed into about 4 people who were in charge of making sure all of the code fit together nicely. As you can imagine, with multiple groups creating their own code, this took some time. One of the individuals was in charge of the screen layout and making sure that the tour was suitable for everyone. Once we had the basic structure of the tour, we began testing in different browsers and difference devices. This process was very important because of the popularity of mobile devices. After multiple presentations to the marketing department, we reached the point where the tour was ready to present to the cabinet. The cabinet was impressed and gave positive feedback on the tour. They liked it enough to give us funding over the summer and continue making progress on the tour.

Steps in creating the project

1. Investigation of current Javascript technologies
2. Investigation of existing campus tours
3. Decision to put the logic at the client side
4. Coding of separate parts
5. Integration and testing
6. Use of meta-programming to customize the project and avoid using a remote database
7. Presentation to the cabinet and funding

Key technologies:

1. Javascript development environments – talk about browser-based development
2. Multiple JavaScript libraries were used to complete necessary features for the project. Instead of students spending hours writing code this allowed for energy to be focused elsewhere. These libraries varied in usefulness but showed students the perks and disadvantages of using code that was from a stranger. Bugs became harder to fix and implementing the individual JavaScripts did not always work.
3. GitHub was used as the main source code control. This allowed students to monitor insertions, deletions, and any changes being added into the project. A moderator of the GitHub was constantly ensuring that any particular piece of code would not destroy the rest of the project. GitHub provides a integrated issue tracker that helps identify any bugs or issues with the project. GitHub also made it so that collaborative code reviews could be possible. This enables students to ask any question, propose changes, and get involved with every aspect of the code.

**RESULTS**

Describe the basic engineering of the system. Don’t go too deep into specifics – no need for massive code dumps.

1. Talk about the basic structure of the project: a single html file with javascript support that implements a state machine.
2. Talk about the layout of the screen and how the different objects are integrated.
3. Talk about the data underlying the tour and the classes that represent it.
4. Talk about different roles that students had during development.

**FUTURE WORK**

Work on this project is far from over. Once the basic tour has been completed there is multiple outlets to continue this endeavor. In the future, analytics will be added. This will allow for further information on how the users explore the tour. With this information, a personalized tour can be created as they explore or the tour will be updated based on data from the analytics. Analytics will also give marketing a way to monitor the success of the tour and if it is successful with future students. To continue developing and adding content to the tour once student have graduated a user-friendly option for the marketing team needs to be created. This will allow them to evaluate and add content in the future. Additional call-to-action buttons and interactions will be added to encourage users to contact the school or at least allow marketing to obtain an email from them. With these developments yet to be seen this will ensure the future employment of students and a perfect solution for a campus tour.

**CONCLUSIONS**

The tour is currently being developed so that all functionality will work flawlessly. Improvements are being made by student workers and will be replacing the current virtual tour by the fall. Having the tour work on mobile devices is of upmost importance and is currently the main objective of the programmers. Device testing is the last step before the basic version of the tour will be released on the website. Future developments will be continued after all major milestones are completed. This will include any additional features that are not necessary for the function but make the universities tour stand out. This virtual tour project was a unique opportunity to learn multiple aspects of web programming and proved as a successful software development environment for students.

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