



October 2007, Volume 20, Number 2

October dinner meeting

5:45 p.m.
Tuesday, October 2, 2007
Place Louis Riel
190 Smith Street

Alex McIlraith: The Shockknife: using electronics to replicate the user experience [see details in next column]

Please confirm your attendance by noon, Friday, September 28, with Joanne Kusiak at meetingcoordinator@stcmanitoba.org

Noon, September 28, 2007

Deadline for photo contest!

Help us replace the background of our banner with a new photograph of Manitoba scenery! In addition to the opportunity to display your work, you may win \$50.

The deadline is noon on September 28, 2007. Send your entry as an electronic file (in .jpg format; not exceeding 1 MB) to Brad at brad.l.friesen@gmail.com.

For contest details see the September issue of *Manuscript*. You can access *Manuscript* via a link on our web site: www.stcmanitoba.org.

October dinner meeting program

The Shockknife: using electronics to replicate the user experience

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The story of the Shockknife™ starts with Jeff Quail, a Manitoba police officer responsible for teaching other officers how to respond to edged weapon attacks. He wanted a tool that would simulate the feeling of being stabbed, but would be safe in training. He built the first prototype, a wooden knife with metal 'blades' and circuitry from a commercially available cattle prod.

To move from the prototype to a commercial product Jeff sought help from Phil Poetker, a local product designer. Phil in turn approached the Electrical/Electronic Engineering Technology department at Red River College for help with the electronic part of the product. Alex McIlraith responded to the challenge.

Intense research and development reduced the size of the circuitry, increased energy efficiency and improved manufacturability. With Alex McIlraith's help, the team reached these goals within one year. Currently over 500 Shockknives are in use by law enforcement agencies in over 15 countries.

Presenter's Biography. Alex McIlraith is an instructor at Red River College in Computer Engineering Technology. He teaches of computer networking, electronics and computer programming. Alex

("Shockknife" continued on page 3)

STC Manitoba is a chapter of



Creating and supporting a forum for communities of practice in the profession of technical communication

About Manuscript

Manuscript and its shorter sibling *Micro Manuscript* are the official newsletters of STC Manitoba. Together, they are published 10 times annually between September and June. The opinions expressed are those of the authors. Submissions, news, reviews, and other items of interest are welcome. Contributions may be edited for length. Deadline is the fifteenth of every month. For example, the deadline for the November issue is October 15. Submissions and ideas are welcome. Please make arrangements in advance with the editor. By submitting an article, you agree to its publication in *Manuscript* and for other STC publications to reprint it without permission. The writer holds copyright. When submitting an article, please let the editor know if it has been published or submitted elsewhere.

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Meeting coordinator, Joanne Kusiak
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Members of Manitoba's STC chapter gather at the Annual General Meeting in May and elect members to the STC Chapter. Each member on the executive is elected for a term of one year.

From the President

Well, the days are getting shorter and the geese are starting to invade my backyard again. This can only mean one thing: summer is over and STC Manitoba is back in action!



We kicked off this season with a great turnout and an excellent presentation from Nirdosh Ganske. Nirdosh provided us with a plethora of ways to improve document readability. Thanks to everyone who came out to the September dinner meeting and be sure to read the September dinner meeting write-up in this issue of *Manuscript*.

At this month's dinner meeting, Alex McIlraith will be presenting the shock knife. So what exactly is a shock knife? This particular shock knife simulates the feeling of being stabbed, but without actually being stabbed. As a former student of Alex's, I am really looking forward to his presentation. I imagine it will be pretty shocking!

I would also like to take this time to welcome back Joanne Kusiak as an STC Manitoba volunteer. Joanne is our new meeting coordinator. She has kindly agreed to take on the responsibilities of coordinating and organizing our monthly dinner meetings. Thank you Joanne!

That's all for this month. As always, if you have any thoughts or suggestions please feel free to send me an e-mail at brad.l.friesen@gmail.com. You can also send me a private message on the STC Manitoba Forums.

Brad

From the (acting) editor

Well fall is officially here and we've held our first dinner meeting of the year, the leaves have fallen, and once again I continue with one of my favourite pastimes—being a professional student (in between work and my volunteering of course!)

In this month's issue, we're profiling our newest senior member of the chapter and reminding those of you who couldn't make it what was said and done at the September dinner meeting. Of course, all this hard work could not be done without the help of my assistant editor and our newsletter proofreading committee. Thank you everyone!

We're still looking for volunteers for different committees in the chapter. Whether it's for the newsletter or the conference committee, why not consider volunteering? [Is that the sound of a broken record? Why yes, yes it is...]

So if you're a regular dinner meeting attendee, why not write a summary on an upcoming dinner meeting? Was there something about last month's issue that you wanted to cheer or jeer? Share your opinion with a letter to the editor. Have you found something interesting that you'd like to share with your peers? Why not write an article? We're always open to hearing our members, so don't be afraid to speak up!

Rachel

Report from the September dinner meeting

Ten ways to improving document readability

by Rachel Ines

Nirdosh Ganske started off the year with her presentation “Ten ways to improve document readability: For managers, engineers, and others who write.” The first dinner meeting proved to be a success; 25 people attended, including new and familiar faces alike.

Attending the STC’s 54th Annual Conference this past spring in Minneapolis, Minnesota, Nirdosh picked up several tips on document layout and design and provided 14 tips on improving document readability and references from some noted technical communicators. Focusing on three areas spatial, spatial-contextual, and textual, Nirdosh provided examples of how to improve documents for the reader. Some of her tips included

- Avoid tight layouts except in special cases—use a square or top and bottom layout instead.
- Increase line spacing to improve readability—larger fonts and default spacing does not help with readability.
- Choose a column arrangement that lets you do more such as help the reader with navigation or

balance white space with images.

- Look for opportunities to list items. Lists are easier to scan and understand; they force you to analyze if the information you’re grouping really belongs together.
- Use tables and charts to summarize information. Information is often buried into the text and can be more readily understood when placed in a small table.

The meeting ended on a high note. At the May 2007 Annual General Meeting, then Chapter President Nirdosh Ganske handed out a number of awards to STC Manitoba members. However, one notable person was not recognized and that person was Nirdosh herself.

Chapter President Brad Friesen presented Nirdosh with a special gift on behalf of last year’s executive, acknowledging the tremendous amount of work she undertook as President. “I think the thing that sets Nirdosh apart is her amazing attitude. Nirdosh is always willing to help, and she works harder than almost anyone, and is happier than most while doing it. She brought a lot of energy to the executive committee and was extremely supportive of our ideas” noted Brad.

Heuullllppp!

The current STC Manitoba volunteers would very much appreciate your company. The following positions are still open.

For the STC/RRC conference, term ending May 2008:

Position	Duties
Conference chair (or co-chairs)	Act as lead for organizing the conference, schedule regular meetings with conference committee, identify conference theme, plan and organize the conference
Committee members	Assist with planning and organizing the conference—various positions, attend regularly scheduled meetings

If you are interested in filling any of these positions, contact Brad Friesen at brad.l.friesen@gmail.com or Rachel Ines at rachines@hotmail.com.

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earned a Bachelor of Science in Ecology, a Master of Science in Botany and a Master of Science in Electrical and Computer Engineering, all from the University of Manitoba. He held a number of positions in science as a lab technician, research associate and as a sessional instructor at the

University of Manitoba and at Memorial University of Newfoundland. Alex has worked in the electronics industry in analog and digital electronics design, software development, project management and manufacturing support. He still consults in electronic design, biological sciences and statistical analysis and is actively involved in applied research at the college.

Creating visual help

by Neil Perlin, STC Associate Fellow

In a prior column—A “Homebrew” Usability Testing Tool—I discussed using visual help authoring tools like Captivate and Camtasia in an unusual way, as usability test recording tools. In this column, I’ll take a closer look at the tools themselves and some interesting developments from two vendors, Adobe and MadCap.

Note that there are many such tools. An April 2006 thread on the Help Authoring Tools and Technology list noted several dozen. (To reach this thread, go to www.yahoo.com, follow the “Groups” link, search for “HATT”, then search for “Captivate alternative”.) I’m sticking to Adobe Captivate and Madcap Mimic in this column for several reasons:

- I support both tools and am very familiar with them.
- These tools illustrate how different vendors can take different paths.
- They use an intuitive “slide” metaphor.
- Column length limitations.

In the prior column, I described the tools as “...non-stop screen recorders. They record activity on the screen as a series of consecutive screen shots, like frames in a filmstrip, that you can play back as a movie. You can also annotate those frames with text captions...audio, video, animations, interactivity features, and more in order to create movies ranging from simple... demos to interactive... simulations or even... eLearning. These tools are also cheap (\$599 for Captivate), and quick and easy to learn (a two-day training course is enough to teach Captivate’s basic features).”

Different tools differ, of course. Captivate offers eLearning and LMS integration; Mimic does not. Captivate and Mimic use a slide metaphor; Camtasia uses a “chunk of video” metaphor. But the general description in the previous paragraph applies to all these tools.

The tools are simultaneously easy and hard to use. They’re easy in that their features are simple and often re-used for different purposes, which reduces the learning curve. For example, Captivate re-uses the feature that creates mouseover popup hot-spots to create highlight boxes. The hard part lies in doing the up-front planning and design needed to use these simple

features effectively. Many new developers don’t do this until they’ve been burned on their first project.

After the up-front planning and design, the recording of the actual frames (for a software demo) or the creation and insertion of slides with images and other elements (for sales or HR-style simulations) is fairly simple. It gets difficult again when developers must edit the slides to insert text captions, interactivity features, and so on. But even then, the work goes surprisingly fast. Creating a movie to illustrate one task in an application, such as changing a style in Word, takes just a few hours. As an experiment, I timed how long it took me to create a simple HR-style interactive simulation. I finished a near-final version—a clean flow but some timings and transitions needed tweaking—in two hours. Another testimonial came from two attendees in a Captivate class who told me that their company had taken three months to create a training simulation using, as I recall, ColdFusion, that they could have created in three days using Captivate.

These tools are also surprisingly flexible. Originally meant for creating software-oriented movies, they also lend themselves well for human interaction-style movies. Some could act as usability test recorders, as I noted in a prior column. An acquaintance recently asked my opinion about using Captivate to create a game. I’d never even thought of that but, once she raised the idea, I saw no reason why it wouldn’t work. It wouldn’t be Doom, but it could be a game-like simulation for training purposes.

It’s also interesting to see how different vendors can take similar tools in very different directions. For example:

- Adobe Captivate was originally eHelp RoboDemo—eHelp was the original home of RoboHelp. RoboDemo was a simple, low cost (about \$350) tool when it first appeared in the early 2000s, but one of its features was the ability to create simple quizzes. Since then, its owners—Macromedia, then Adobe—have dramatically expanded the quiz feature into eLearning and LMS integration. Captivate 2, the current version, is as much an eLearning tool as it is a screen recorder, supporting the

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AICC and SCORM standards and the fairly new PENS standard. The price has gone up, now \$599, but is still much cheaper than mainstream eLearning tools. It'll be interesting to see what Adobe includes in future versions, the effect on the price, and how much further Captivate moves into the eLearning camp.

- MadCap is taking a different path with Mimic 1. The tool is simpler and cheaper (\$299) than Captivate. It has fewer features (but more options than Captivate for comparable features) and does not support eLearning and LMS integration. But it does support the use of variables for elements like text caption box entries, and is programmatically integrated with Flare and Capture, two other tools in MadCap's suite, so that the three tools can share variables. It'll be interesting to see whether MadCap keeps Mimic as simple as it currently is or whether eLearning features are on the horizon.

I expect one of the next advances to be the addition of single sourcing features. The use of variables in Mimic is a good first step. The next step will be conditionality features. Why conditionality specifically?

We tend to think of mainstream, big-screen devices like PCs and laptops as the media on which users will view our training movies. However, other devices, particularly mobile devices, continue to penetrate the culture so it's likely that companies will want to create movies to be viewed on these devices in addition to, or even instead of, PCs and laptops. At least one company, p.o.d. Training (<http://www.podtraining.us/home.php>) does so today, creating video training to be viewed on video iPods.

Technically, standard movies created using Captivate, Mimic, etc., can also run on video iPods or other mobile devices. However, design

elements that work well on large-screen devices, such as text caption boxes, fail on mobile devices because the text is too small. (I've tried creating standard-sized movies and scaling them down to mobile device screen size; the text is absolutely unreadable.)

One answer is to create two movies, one with text caption boxes and voiceover for large-screen devices and one voiceover-only for mobile devices. However, this approach is a step backwards from the trend toward single sourcing in tech comm. Instead, we should be able to create one movie, create text caption boxes with voiceovers, and conditionalize the text captions (and other features as well), so that they display or hide automatically depending on the device on which the movie is running. Then we'll have single sourcing for our movies as well as our online help systems.

Summary

What these tools really offer is the ability to create a virtual instructor who's with the user every step of the way. You've probably sat down with users to show them how to use a piece of software—"Okay, now click on the Add User button. The New User dialog box opens, and you can now type the address information..." and then have them try it on their own—"Okay, ready to try it yourself? Good, go ahead." That's what these tools let us create in software form.

We can also easily insert these movies in help systems created using tools like Robo-Help, Flare, Doc-To-Help, etc., to create hybrid help systems. These systems present different types of information in whatever form is most suitable—textual for conceptual, procedural, and reference information and a visual "show-me" and "let me try it" form for procedural information. A picture may not always replace a thousand words, but it can do a great job of supplementing them.

Neil Perlin is president of Hyper/Word Services (www.hyperword.com) of Tewksbury, MA. He has 28 years experience in technical communication, with 22 in training, consulting, and development for online formats and tools like WinHelp, HTML Help, Java- Help, CE Help, RoboHelp, Flare, Captivate, and others now known only in legend. Neil is a member of IEEE and STC, an associate fellow of the STC, and the founder and manager of the STC annual conference's Beyond the Bleeding Edge stem. You can reach him at: nperlin@concentric.net.

You may view issues of the Boston Broadside at <http://www.stcboston.org/broadside/>

Our chapter's newest senior member

Meet Cheri Frazer

by Rachel Ines

At the Annual General Meeting in May 2007, outgoing President Nirdosh Ganske announced that Cheri Frazer was the newest senior member of STC Manitoba. Cheri has “officially” worked as a technical communicator for 7 years, but including her previous work she’s been working in the field for 17 years. She is currently working as a Corporate Documentation Specialist at Vansco Electronics LP.

As a member of STC Manitoba, Cheri has been an active member of STC Manitoba. She first began volunteering for the chapter as a Hotline volunteer in 2002. Since then, Cheri has continued to volunteer for a number of committees including serving on the executive committee as Secretary (2004–2005) and volunteering to be a member on numerous committees: conference committee, web site redesign subcommittee, and the nominations committee.

M: How did you become a technical communicator?

Cheri: I had been working as an academic editor and writer for many years; through referrals I began to get more corporate work in various

industries. The writing requirements in industry are quite different from those in the academic world, so I realized I needed more training. A friend suggested I look into the Technical Communication certificate program at Red River College and I was hooked from the first course. The program completely changed my approach to both writing and editing.

M: What does it mean to you to become a senior member?

Cheri: It looks darned impressive on paper! I continue to meet amazing and talented people through the STC the same as I always have, but it’s nice to be recognized for my involvement. I also value the recognition efforts of our local chapter, such as the innovative “Bring a Guest” contest and the meet-and-greet opportunities with the Technical Communication students each year.

Congratulations to Cheri once again on reaching senior member status in the chapter. She joins the ranks of a number of our chapter members—both past and present—who have achieved this honour from the Society.

Rachel Ines is the current Vice-President of STC Manitoba. She works as a research technician with the IEGC Project at the University of Manitoba. Rachel graduated from the Technical Communication Diploma Program at Red River College and has been a regular contributor and has worked as guest editor on *Manuscript*.

Chapter Dinner Meetings Schedule

Tuesday	Topic	Presenter
October 2	The Shockknife: using electronics to replicate the user experience	Alex McIlraith
November 6	Comparative Analysis	Ron Blicq
December 4	Job Competencies	Keith Sinclair
January 6	Various topics in Progression	TBA
February 5	Emotional Intelligence	Heather Erhardt
March 4	Organizational Development	Leanne Douglas
May 6	Annual General Meeting	TBA