LRTV's Community Message Board
Technical Information

For other community access channels interested in starting or upgrading a community message or bulletin board similar to Lake Region TV's, here's a brief description of its evolution and technical aspects.

When LRTV was first formed in the fall of 1992, one of the first steps was to get a community message board up and running. At that time, the only computer we had was an Amiga 600 which offered NTSC composite video output. A software company based in Sweden, Scala International, had produced a software program for the Amiga called Scala Multi-Media, which was somewhat similar to Microsoft PowerPoint. Because we had no loop through video monitors or distribution amps, all message board screen creation was done live while watching the return signal over the LRTV cable channel! Several of our early volunteers joined because they became fascinated watching the mechanics of screen layout on their home television set. By 1994, we had progressed to an Amiga 2000 and Scala's Multi-Media 100. The system even had its own VGA monitor, so our days of live updates came to a close.

In 1996, we made the decision to convert our facility to an all IBM PC compatible one as the Amiga was rapidly fading from the scene and to be able to use PC compatible files and especially clipart images. We wanted, however, to be able to re-use our hundreds of screens designed in Scala and the experience gained with this software product. Fortunately, Scala International had just introduced Scala Multi-Media 200 for Windows 95. At about the same time, LRTV also received the gift of a used Pentium 200 MHz computer system. Because the information defining a sequence of Scala screens is stored as a text file containing various scripting commands, it was easy to import the Scala MM 100 scripts from the Amiga. Transferring all of our Amiga clip-art (mostly in .iff format) to the PC was much more difficult. Scala 200 was even easier to use and followed most Windows conventions. It really shines in displaying still photo images and transitioning between them in hundreds of ways.

Because the PC did not have any NTSC composite video output, we needed to find a VGA to Video Scan Converter. After trying several inexpensive units and being very disappointed with the output, we purchased a Super-Emotia II Scan Converter manufactured by Extron for about $1,300. This gave us excellent quality video which was also fully adjustable as to size and position on the screen and a freeze frame capability so useful to apply while doing a quick update to the message board.

In 2000, we replaced the Pentium 200 MHz system with a Pentium III 800 Mhz system from Dell which helped speed up the loading of screens and smooth out the sometimes jerky in and out transitions of lines and pages. Soon after, we upgraded from Scala MM 200 to Scala's new Info Channel Designer which added the capability of line and object drawing, tile-able backgrounds, recognition of .wmf clip-art files, and much more. Those who have used IC Designer all say they like it much better than

than Microsoft PowerPoint, the presentation software used by many other access channels.

We have also moved all of our clip art, still images and Scala IC Designer scripts to a Snap 30GB network attached storage file server accessible from any of our workstations over a 100 MB Ethernet peer-to-peer network. This allows the message board computer to run uninterrupted while changes and additions are made to the message board from another computer on the network. Once saved, these changes and additions appear live on the channel during the next cycle of the message board.

Now that LRTV has added non-linear editing capabilities in the fall of 2001, our next project will be to begin utilizing Scala IC Designer's capability of playing back video files (mpg and vfw formats) as imbedded objects on message board screens.

Because message board screens are defined by the well-documented Scala Scripting Language and are saved as very compact text file, it is possible for us to automate their creation. This capability is utilized extensively by our custom designed Microsoft Access database of all of our available programs and each evening's schedule. After one of our volunteers selects which programs are to show and when and which channel, Visual Basic for Applications (VBA) code in a MS Access module not only writes a Scala script for the week's schedule to be shown as part of the community message board but also via a RS-232 interface sends programming commands to our Leightronix Pro-8 automation controller which then starts, stops, and rewinds our playback decks. Because the VBA code does all of the deck assignment and ending time and pre-roll time calculations before sending commands to the Pro-8, a once major source of cablecast errors are eliminated. Cablecasters only have to place the correct tape in the assigned deck and cue to tape to the proper spot in the countdown leader.

If you would like more detail on any of the above systems, please contact our manager and systems designer, Bill Severance, at his home e-mail address of mainerovers@earthlink.net.

For information on Scala InfoChannel Designer please check out their website at http://www.scala.com/designer/index.html.

For information on Extron scan converters please check out their website at www.extron.com. Although the Super-Emotia II is no-longer manufactured, it is our understanding that their VSC-75 model is very similar in capability and quality.

Written by Bill Severance for LRTV – January 2002