

La Ofrenda – Making a Day of the Dead Altar  
Interactive Design & Media Application – ITGM-705-OL  
Final Project Statement  
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This project was created with the vision of Universality in terms of content and uniqueness in regards to development methodology. The assignment requires that only one concept gets chosen, so I will write this paper from the point of view of Universality because the content of the project is what really gives soul to the interaction.

In Mexico and a few other Latin American countries the last days of October are sacred, there are various celebrations to honor the ancestors as well as recently departed friends and family members. The celebration itself lasts anywhere from two to six days depending on the geographical location and local customs. One unifying concept throughout is the building of an altar, or offering. On the offering many items get placed including some staples such as food, flowers, candles, a photo of the person being honored and copal resin incense. In addition to these items, there are always other customized things that relate more personally to the spirit being “invited”. If the spirit is that of a child, then toys or sweets can be part of the offering, if the person smoked, a box of their favorite cigarettes could be an option, and some times, even clothes or other personal articles can be added.

The setting of the altar is a family activity and more often gets done in the main room of the house, but in some cases people go to the cemeteries and place the altar offerings directly on the gravestones of the

dead. Then they have a family picnic on the spot. It's a way to share food and drink between the living and the dead.

The custom is a mixture of ancient Aztec traditions to honor the dead (such as the incense, paper cuts, and food), and ancient Celtic traditions brought to America by way of Spain in the shape of "All Saints Day" (such as the date of the celebration, Halloween has the same roots, the use of candles and the religious aspect in general).

This is the perfect topic to showcase the Universality of concepts. Even for people from different cultures, the idea of assembling something to honor the dead can hold meaning.

The user interface is simple. The user has an option to view a tutorial on how to get started, then proceeds to choose an altar, and then drag-and-drop items from different categories that can be navigated from the top of the page.

The design concept is clean and uncomplicated. Not too much text, very colorful visuals, specific designated areas where things happen and minimal functionality. The altars, once chosen, cannot be changed unless you start over, but all the other items are movable and can be disposed of, swapped or moved at any given time.

The drag-and-drop interface is very well known for people who often visit interactive web pages. It's a common way to allow interactivity for the user and thus should be simple to figure out, especially after watching the tutorial.

The idea for this project is to allow the user to build a virtual altar using Adobe Flash 8. The front-end of the project is not necessarily very innovative in that it uses a standard drag-and-drop method to make the items move and get positioned. This has been done before many times, but there were several other features added to customize this traditional method. For example:

- resizing of the altar as it gets placed
- multiple item spawning on click to allow the user to place several instances of the item on the stage
- delete option where items disappear on the side
- the ability to stack items at different depths depending on which one gets placed last.

Additionally, the actual technical challenge of the project involves a combination of ActionScript, PHP and a MySQL database in an attempt to save and store user created altars for later display in a gallery.

This particular technology has only be used a handful of times online and there is no source code available for it that could be found. Everything had to be created from scratch. There is documentation and a few code samples to allow the bitmapped picture to get exported and sent to a server using the POST method through the browser. This particular part of the project has to be done on the Client's Side and the challenge began as the images being posted were much too large for the connection and server to handle. The bitmap being output by Flash was raw data, pixel to pixel and thus incredibly big. Every time the method was tested, the browser timed out.

As a solution for this, there was a suggestion to parse the bitmap in four separate quadrants, upload to the server, reassemble, compress to jpg

quality (for size convenience), and display on the gallery. This method was successful for the most part but required the information to get posted and retrieved in the correct order (each quadrant being reinterpreted in the right order in relation to the others). The final part involved using PHP to create thumbnails, place them in a template and when clicked, they will take the user to the large version of the picture.

As of Release version 3.0 of the Altar project, the PHP thumbnail technology was functional but not included because there were no images in the database to pull from. Instead, short instructions have been provided to "Print Screen" and send the document in to be posted in the gallery. A few samples were included in the gallery as well, but all were hand-included. Rather than completely declaring the project not functional, this alternative was provided to at least be able to give the user part of the experience.

There is another option to try when exporting information from Flash. There is a possibility to create a comprehensive hash table with all the positions and depths of the altar objects, export it as an XML document and re-import into an empty "swf" shell that can redraw the altar from a shared library of symbols. Although this is certainly an avenue to explore, it's not the original essence of the project, which was designed to export bitmap information from flash and store in a database.

In retrospect, more thorough testing and deeper research on the Flash bitmap export API would have yielded a more realistic expectation in terms of difficulty and time expenditure to make it work. There a generous amount of custom PHP and Actionscript code that needs to work in synch that is not doing exactly what it should. At the time of this submission, the status is still unfinished. The user can build an altar, all

the art is in place, the interface works and get to the Post section. The altar gets parsed, chunked and sent to the server and it reassembles. Unfortunately there is no visible result for the user to see the result and thus this part will be disabled until it can be made to work properly. Regardless of the evaluation for the class (which is important, but it's out of my hands now), I have come too far to leave it unfinished. So I will work on it until we can see something and will post on this same link as soon as it happens.

This has been one of the most fun and frustrating learning experiences I've had so far and I'm hoping that as soon as I have something working, I can post the method online to share with the Flash community. I found a need for this in many of the forums without much guidance.

As of 8:00pm Pacific time on November 18, 2006, this project ended up being more along the lines of "Transience" than "Universality". The user can make an altar, but as soon as the browser is closed, the altar is gone. The soul of the topic will always be universal and I hope you enjoy the colors of death as we enjoy them in Mexico.

Project can be found at:

**[http://www.lunadreams.com/savannah/post\\_img/altar/](http://www.lunadreams.com/savannah/post_img/altar/)**