Implementing a DAM system at Ubisoft – Interview with Allen Adler, Vice President of Creative Services at Ubisoft

Allen Adler

is vice president of creative services at Ubisoft and has been with the company since 2002. Allen's responsibilities include leading a creative team in producing the company's design and advertising. Prior to joining Ubisoft, Allen held creative management positions at The 3DO Company and Galoob Toys, a division of Hasbro. Allen began his career as a designer working on projects for such clients as Coca Cola, RCA and Nestle. He later joined Mattel Toys, where he was instrumental in a significant redesign of the Barbie line packaging, creating what has become famously known as the "pink wall." Allen has consistently played a major role in shaping imaginative, creative solutions for numerous national brands by structuring activities to meet business and financial goals. Allen earned a BFA at the Art Center College of Design in Los Angeles.

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Abstract Michael Moon interviews Allen Adler, VP of Creative Services; Anthony Trask, Director of IT Project Management; and Sharlene Siegel, Senior Digital Media Analyst; all of Ubisoft; regarding their recent deployment of a MediaBin-powered DAM. Ubisoft is a leading international developer, publisher and distributor of interactive entertainment products.

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MM: Let's make a round of introductions. Allen, let's start with you.

AA: I'm Allen Adler, Vice President of Creative Services, in the marketing department at Ubisoft.

MM: Allen, if you would, just give us a quick little background in terms of Ubisoft.

AA: Ubisoft is a video game publisher. We are the third largest independent publisher in the world. Our headquarters are located in Paris, France. We have 17 development studios located around the world. We have offices in 23 countries. Our sales and marketing office for North America is located in San Francisco.

MM: Who's the next person?

AT: This is Anthony Trask. I'm the Director of the Project Management Office within IT here in San Francisco.

SS: This is Sharlene Siegel. I'm the Senior Digital Media Analyst. I'm here, and I work in the PMO office, in San Francisco.

MM: If you would, would you just describe a little more in terms of the creative services role function in some of the things that you guys do?

AA: This is Allen, speaking. Creative services are an internal design and advertising agency for Ubisoft. We create and provide a large portion

of the creative work for our office. The work we create includes logos, key art, packaging, product naming, print and television advertising, and many sales, channel and promotional materials.

Over a couple of years, this is what led to realizing the need for a DAM system at Ubisoft. When I started working at Ubisoft in creative services, there was a fairly frequent occurrence of requests for assets from different departments. It was often difficult for us to furnish those assets.

Even when we tried to find the assets from other departments, it was almost impossible. Nobody had any formal system. Nobody even had an informal system.

MM: What kinds of things did people request?

AA: They needed box shots or artwork from packaging and print ads that had been produced, logos and various promotional pieces that had been created. Requests were for a variety of art assets. A lot of rich media, as well as other art files such as Adobe Photoshop, Adobe Illustrator and Quark Xpress.

MM: So you had all these various kinds of groups asking for these materials. Could you just quickly survey the various types of groups that were asking for things?

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AA: They were usually from the brand management group, the PR group and from our sales groups.

MM: Did you have resellers or channel partners asking for things? Or did that get filtered through your sales organization?

AA: They usually got filtered through our sales organization, or through our internal channel marketing team.

MM: About how many requests do you suppose you were handling a day?

AA: I'm going to estimate — this was about five or six years ago — probably four to five requests a day.

MM: And that only accelerated with the advent of the web and the interconnectedness of markets and their creative partners. Right?

AA: Eventually, yes, but at that time, however, I found that we had stored our many assets in cardboard boxes, on unlabeled disks. We had an immediate need to get organized, to at least find out what we did have.

Once we got organized, we were able to start fulfilling the requests. Once we started fulfilling the requests, we actually got more requests.

The time that we spent finding, retrieving and distributing the assets increased in my department to the point where we were spending so much time gathering and distributing assets, that it was detracting from the time to create the assets.

MM: That sounds like a catalytic event or some symptoms.

AA: Exactly.

MM: At what point in time did you go, “God — we’ve just really got to get out of the logistics business, here?”

AA: It took about two years. Once we got organized, we developed a pretty good system of tracking and managing our assets. We completely organized a file structure on a secure portion of the server for our department, only. So we were able to manage the system pretty well for a while with only a couple of people.

But as the company grew and we were creating, acquiring and distributing more assets, it became clear that the problem was not contained to creative services, and that there were other asset-management problems in the rest of marketing, which included brand management, PR, media and promotions and even other departments in the company.

MM: In this secure file server, that basically required that you developed out a pretty well defined or explicit file structure of folders — nested folders and so on?

AA: That's correct.

MM: Did it also entail having to develop an explicit if not arcane file-naming system?

AA: I'm going to let Sharlene comment on that. She's now extremely familiar with our filing system.

SS: Yes. I think he described it perfectly.

MM: What were some of the elements you put into your file-naming stream?

SS: The name of the game, the asset category, whether it's a box shot or some type of packaging art or an ad. The platform — whether it was for a PC game, PS2 game or X-box. Then just an assigned number — in the order of the job. It would be the game code, the job number and then the type of asset. Then it would say, for example, PC... And it would have a number related to the year. I think the year and maybe the month.

MM: Did it also have pixel dimensions in it?

SS: No. We didn't capture that kind of information. It was mostly an Excel Spreadsheet. We just needed to keep track of the assets that we had and where they were located.

AA: Once the assets were completed, we burned CDs or DVDs, and stored them in three-ring binders. We had an Excel Spreadsheet that was a cross-referencing file, and an index in the binder that referred each disk to a line on the spreadsheet.

MM: That sounds like a lot of typing into Excel.

AA: It was a lot better than unmarked cardboard boxes.

MM: About how many files are we talking about, here?

AA: At that time, probably about 40,000 files.

MM: A lot of files.

There you were chugging along. You had a nice catalogued set of files residing on CDs. When somebody needed something you could either go the spreadsheet or the book or the binder, remove the CD, load it up and send it off. How would you send them?

AA: It was usually by FTP. If it were a rush or an urgent project, we'd also follow that up with a physical mailing of a CD, in case the FTP file became corrupted up in transit.

MM: About how many times do you suppose FTP files got corrupted, in terms of a percentage per month?

AA: Maybe 20 per cent of the time.

MM: So this entailed what? Burning a CD or DVD a day? Or two a day or week? What did that translate to?

AA: I think we probably averaged about ten a week.

MM: Those were then often DHL'd or FedExed out. Right?

AA: Correct. There was another kind of catalytic activity that led to our DAM system. The only way we had to transfer large files between creative services and the other departments was through our internal server that we called, "The Tunnel." The tunnel frequently got filled up and had to be purged.

When the files were purged from that system, nobody ever knew where they went. An individual in the department with files on the tunnel might've burned CDs or put them on their hard drive. They might've thrown them away. Nobody ever knew.

So outside of creative services, there was no apparent system for keeping or archiving any files. Whenever we needed anything from anybody else, there was no system for finding them.

MM: You said you were a Paris-based firm. Is there a localization activity that happens there in your group?

AA: Most if not all localization is done in Europe.

MM: So that's where they translate from whatever language? Are most of the games developed in English?

AA: I believe they are.

MM: Where is the artwork created — in Europe or in the US?

AA: Executive management determines the division of responsibility. The US has the lead on some products. Europe has the lead on other products. All the art that is created in the US is for products that we have the lead on, here.

MM: So you're in charge of making sure these assets then get out to EMEA and PacRim? Or AsiaPac?

AA: That's correct.

MM: About how many products are we talking about over the course of a year?

AA: My guesstimate would be about 400.

MM: About how many launches do these 400 products entail? You have multiple products per launch — right?

AA: Yes. That's correct.

It would be 400 products for approximately 150 titles.

MM: Those will get launched across multiple platforms?

AA: Yes.

MM: You had 40,000 or so assets. And at the time, you probably had fewer than 150 titles. But certainly that was accelerating. At what point — how many years ago — did you think, "Wow. We need to get a database for this?" What was your initial thinking in terms of what you needed to do?

AA: It was in mid-2004 when we determined that there was a need for something more than an Excel Spreadsheet. I realized it was a bigger business endeavor than I could handle in my own department. So I engaged the help of IT, which was, at the time, just starting its Project Management Office. That's when Anthony Trask got involved in the project.

MM: Anthony, as you got involved in this — coming from IT — you saw this as an IT problem to solve, probably. Take me through that kind of mindset. As you were hearing these requirements coming from Allen's group, how did you first make sense of them? What were some of the initial conclusions you came to?

AT: It was actually more of a business problem than a pure IT problem. We took the perspective that marketing needs to figure out how to more efficiently work with all their content.

There were two components to that. We had to understand how they worked. Their business processes and the marketing asset flow. Then we had to look at what technology could enable that process. That was the framework approach we took.

I'll have to admit that we didn't have much expertise in DAM technology and DAM systems. It took us a while to understand the nuances of handoffs of art assets within the Marketing teams. "How do you market a product? How do PR, brand, creative services, media promotions all interact?" We spent a lot of time gathering requirements and doing process mapping. Figuring out who was accountable in handing off a piece of content from one to the other.

We also did some research on technology available on the market. That led us to, “Okay. Now we know what the requirements are and how you work, a bit, and what technology exists out there.” We then hired an external consultant to advise us on the ECM/DAM landscape — just from an IT strategy standpoint.

This was three years ago, when ECM was a big buzzword in IT. We wanted to look at DAM technology in the context of enterprise content-management. “Should that sway a technology decision or not? Or should we just focus on a DAM point solution?”

So the consulting firm we used was DocuLabs. I’m sure you’re familiar with them. We engaged them for a DAM strategy, with ECM growth in mind. They validated our requirements, and they short-listed the vendor landscape, based on our needs.

MM: When you say, “Short-listed a set of vendors, based on your needs,” that was DAM? Or DAM and a workflow?

AT: Good question. We didn’t really look for workflow or a work-in-process component. In the end, we realized the scope and focus was around more of a pure classical DAM environment (final assets) versus collaboration through the whole lifecycle of an asset. DocuLabs short-listed DAM vendors that were established and could have either partners or other components to their suite. So if we wanted to add workflow and collaboration and other ECM-type functions, we could in the future.

MM: If you can, could you share with us who was on the short list?

AT: We narrowed it down to Artesia (at the time they weren’t part of OpenText), Interwoven’s MediaBin and the third was ClearStory’s ActiveMedia.

AT: DocuLabs did a good job of summarizing the next tier of vendors that were good, but why they wouldn’t recommend them. Their recommendations seemed very sound to us. We moved on with those three vendors and did a formal RFP process, with a very extensive review of our requirements. Onsite demos with our scripts. That whittled it down to pretty much Artesia and Interwoven. They were very close choices.

Through just our vetting process, we felt more comfortable with the MediaBin product and Interwoven, at the time.

MM: What would you say were the criteria that were most definitive in making that choice?

AT: Ease of use of the actual application was extremely important. I think all those vendors had the core functionality of thumbnails, transformation, etc. Some of the fundamental stuff you’d expect from an enterprise DAM system.

I think what stands out is the ease of the use of the interface. The customer references. The actual sense from the vendor that they were there to help us solve the problem and not just sell us software. I think that helped a bit.

We established a good rapport with the Interwoven engagement team. Allen or Sharlene?

AA: We wanted to make sure that there wouldn’t be a lot of development required to get up and running quickly. We didn’t want the project to get stalled. It seemed like Interwoven offered a good out-of-the-box start, even if we wanted to do development down the road.

Also, as Anthony mentioned, we did have an IT goal of this being part of a larger ECM project. I think there was a feeling that Interwoven was a good path to that.

MM: Who was your web content-management or document-management provider, at this point?

AT: Michael, I’m going to apologize. I have to step out. So I’ll try to answer this, and then I think Allen and Sharlene can speak well to the rest of it.

We didn’t have a vendor providing any core document management or web-content management. I’d say our WCM solution is and was at the time an in-house-built solution. We used SharePoint 2003, at the time — very lightly — for collaboration and simple document management. We were more of a file-server kind of environment. We almost still are.

MM: One last question. In the PMO, did you deploy any project-management software suites? Basically, extending your MediaBin DAM with customer development or a plug-in, or something like that?

AT: We kept the MediaBin DAM product focused on the marketing solution. We didn’t build in heavy extensions to adding our own workflows, or project-tracking capabilities.

We did customize the UI. We did customize the search. It is enhanced.

The PMO just provided an execution team. Almost like internal IT consulting. We managed it. We scoped it. That's the function of my department. We're the internal delivery and execution.

MM: I was thinking in terms of project management in terms of a suite of software tools specifically for managing projects.

AT: We could deploy an EPM suite, and use that around the company. But we're a fairly nimble and lightweight team. We're using team-based project management solutions at the moment.

MM: Yes. I understand. Anthony, thank you. So there you are. You've selected a vendor and you selected it on the basis that it was a fairly fast, out-of-the-box deployment process. It didn't entail a lot of custom programming. It met your needs. And then it suggested hooks into a larger ECM framework. At this point it remains a future proof or a roadmap. Is that a fair summarization?

AT: Yes. It is. Part of that consideration, too, was the possibility of expanding this to Europe, as well.

MM: By expanding it to Europe, that would mean deploying another DAM in Europe and then connecting them or federating them in some way?

AA: At the time we started, we knew we needed to get something launched. We were successful in getting the support of our executive management here in the US. We had a go-ahead on the project. But we didn't have a go-ahead for an international rollout. It was something that was a possibility in the future.

All of our considerations were made with that in mind. We formed a cross-functional team with some representatives from our EMEA group, who helped us define our requirements, and EMEA included some of their own requirements as well, so we actually had a requirements document that was international in scope when we were selecting a vendor. Sharlene — is that correct?

SS: Yes. DocuLabs and Interwoven both laid out two architectures for us. One was where we'd just share the same DAM system, and have the servers located in Montreal, which is our IT

server hub for our global tools. Or we could take a look at syndication.

From a budget standpoint, we wanted to try to make the single-server hub solution work.

MM: Has that proven out as the way to go? Or are you now thinking about cloning?

SS: Currently, it is working for us. I think we're still taking a look at the performance and we still are planning to grow the project more, to include assets that have been localized by different countries. So as we grow and as we get more countries onboard, we may have to re-evaluate our architecture, down the road. But currently, everything is still as we started.

MM: That's great.

So there you are. You've got an architecture that you're going with. Take us through the deployment process in terms of...

You've had your PMO — your Project Management office — basically running this as an internal systems integration project. Take us through the process of deploying the system, in terms of time and some of the key interactions.

SS: One of the things we'd done in our research was some detailed workflow analysis for each of the groups. As the product was being configured we were also starting to train some of the user teams, based on their workflows. So we had some extensive training. We also had an internal awareness campaign going on at the same time.

MM: So if I understand that correctly, you had a left- and right-hand, or two parallel projects happening? One was the actually structured workflow of, "Here's how we used to do things," and then perhaps, "Here's how we're going to be doing things," given this repository.

Then the second part was in having an awareness — almost an internal brand awareness. A launch process for the eventual deployment and launch of the system. Is that correct?

AA: Those are two parts of the three-part approach. The other part was the technical aspect of actually getting the software implemented. That's where Sharlene was instrumental.

MM: Sharlene, do you want to just take us through the technical part of deploying this?

SS: Right. Let me think back, here.

I was hired in the spring of 2005. We actually chose the vendor in the summertime.

MM: Sharlene, your background is in IT? Or in content management — library science?

SS: Yes. Library science.

So when I came in, that's when we started work on the taxonomy, and looking at how we would use the system. How all the workflows would translate into the system. We also were deciding on our vendor, and trying to see what kind of architecture would work.

MM: Would you spend a moment just describing — as a librarian — the process that you went through to develop your taxonomy and metadata schema.

SS: The first thing I had to do was really understand all the groups that were creating assets. A lot of groups were using the same assets, but they weren't really aware that they were using the same assets.

I had to figure out what those sets of assets were and what all the groups called them, and to reconcile them. That was a big step, actually.

MM: So, common naming conventions for various kinds of assets?

SS: Yes. Then I took a look at how all the different groups were storing those assets, also. Then I could get an idea of what kind of organizational structures or what kinds of data were important to them in order to file things and find things in the future.

MM: Part of understanding how they store things is understanding how they'd want to retrieve them.

SS: Right. So I also wanted to make sure the vocabulary aligned with other systems at Ubisoft. I needed to make sure that our system was using the same titles as, for instance, PeopleSoft, and I needed to make sure that we aligned with the genres used by our corporate team. That was part of it, also.

MM: Did this result in what some people call a “faceted” taxonomy?

SS: I would say it's faceted in terms of you can find things by asset category, by title, by platform, in any order. It's not purely hierarchical. But a lot of people navigate through the folder structure instead. So it's not faceted in that most people don't use the search and look at different components. They tend to find it more useful to go through the folder structure.

MM: That's typically the creative mindset, though, isn't it? The creative people think in terms of projects and “my” part of the project. Right?

SS: But I also think it's that we don't have a lot of customers coming to a website who don't know anything about how things are organized or what they're looking for. All our users right now tend to be people who are very familiar with the assets and know exactly what they want. For them, it's just easier to go to a point in a folder.

MM: The technical term we use for that is, “Smart Rat.”

There, you basically elicited from your creative staff — principally — how they create, store, retrieve, and how they “see” that C-drive cyberspace or however you want to call that. Then, tried to recreate that in terms of common vocabulary and search-retrieves or access routines. Is that a fair characterization?

AA: Yes. One of the things we discovered early on, too, was just how much all the groups were using the same assets. We were looking at their different folder structures and trying to decide how we would organize things. At first we were looking at a departmental organization, so that we would know who owns the assets. Then we realized at some point that everybody was just using the same assets over and over, and storing the same assets. Then we really had to look at more of a combined structure that would work for everyone.

MM: So you started to develop this taxonomy. You have particular boundaries or a framework within which to work in terms of the MediaBin product. What sort of user-acceptance testing or future proofing or testing the validity or usability of the system before you actually deployed it?

SS: All through this process, we had representatives from each of those marketing teams. We had a representative from PR, a representative from Brand, a representative from on-line. We also had representatives from our sales teams and some of the user groups, also.

We actually did a pilot test, in which we had a certain number of titles that we started with. We got each of the representatives from Brand and PR and Production that were working on those projects, so we could see assets flowing from end-to-end, and how it worked. Then we got their feedback on it.

MM: This was actually using an instance of MediaBin, configured in the best way you knew

how. Then you got fast feedback on that from actual users.

SS: Yes.

MM: About how many times did you iterate on your metadata and overall user interface?

SS: I'd say probably one big time, right after the pilot. Then about six months into the project, we did a re-evaluation, also. At that point, we had more of an idea that EMEA might be coming onboard, and we wanted to make sure that we evaluated the system before then, so that it would be in really good shape.

MM: You did your pilot. You let it run for six months, to get a whole bunch of user comments or experiences. Then you came back and did a fairly detailed design review of the system. Is that what you did?

AA: It wasn't a six-month pilot. It was actually a one month pilot that got extended to three months. Then we actually launched the product and it ran for six months before EMEA decided to come onboard.

MM: Allen, one of the things I'd heard that was a little unusual is that you did some fairly extensive surveying and contests around the system, in terms of finding things. Is that correct?

AA: Yes. It is. In my years of corporate experience, I've come across a number of programs and systems that have been implemented in companies that are met with a lot of apathy or resistance. Like, "Why do we have to do something different? Why can't we just do what we did before?" Or, "Another one of those programs?"

I knew that the success of this really depended on how well received it would be by the users. Being in creative services and having an advertising background, I wanted to create a demand for the product, and drive the user-acceptance to a point where it would be a welcome tool, and everybody would understand that it was coming.

I wanted people to *want* the product when it finally launched.

MM: Take us through that as a set of lesson points or, "Here's what really worked."

AA: The first thing I did was to get my creative team together. I wanted an awareness campaign for this, so that by the time we launched, everyone would know what it is and would want to use it.

I wanted to rebrand it — give it a Ubisoft personality. MediaBin, although very descriptive of the product, didn't quite fit our culture. So we came up with the name, "FindIt!" We created a logo around that name. Then we created an ad campaign — the slogan for which was, "Want it? Lost it? Need it? FindIt!"

Then we came up with a series of off-the-wall, humorous e-mails with several funny topics. Things like, "How can you get time to have lunch outside of the office?", "How you can leave work early to have dinner with your wife, or walk your dog?", "How to avoid having to spend your lunch hour finding an asset that your boss wanted."

MM: These are emotionally relevant vignettes that reinforce the promise or the value proposition of FindIt!

AA: Right. Each message was designed to convey a benefit *to the user* of FindIt!, so that everyone would understand what was in it for them when they started to use FindIt! After a series of messages, we started training for our users. Then we began series of emails that were multiple-choice contests. We awarded \$25 gift cards to a randomly drawn winner of each contest.

Shortly before the actual launch, people *really* were stopping me in the hall and asking me when FindIt! was coming. We had really achieved our goal!

MM: Two things. You said MediaBin as a name is a nice, descriptive, functional name, but that it "didn't fit your culture." Could you speak a little more about the facets or the contours of the Ubisoft corporate culture? And what you needed to harness, in terms of cultural norms?

AA: Well, we're a fast-moving, fun company. We just needed something more fun and less corporate.

MM: Your company skews toward a younger group of folks. Is that correct?

AA: Generally.

MM: Also, because it's a game company, the notion of playing games is part of who you are. The notion of, "games," is not necessarily a pejorative or negative connotation. It's actually kind of "Cool," and "What we do."

AA: Yes. Using games to sell a product to a gaming company turned out to be a pretty good idea, after all.

MM: The larger lesson of this comes from cognitive science. When you ask somebody to

convince you to do something, that person will generally invoke a strategy. In this context, we call it a “convincer strategy.” In their convincer strategy, they use metaphors, keywords and phrases. To use a fancy term, “tropes.” So when you ask somebody to convince you to do something, really what they’re doing with you is sharing the metaphors, terms and concepts of how they convince themselves. So you can just simply extrapolate that to a company, in terms of how a company does its marketing. That is, how does it convince or persuade people to buy their products.

That has a certain set of assumptions. Humanistic, philosophical, metaphysical and psychological assumptions.

The reason I’m saying this, also, is that there’s a third group in this conversation. The readers of the interview. Right?

AA: Yes.

MM: You said that Ubisoft is a fast-growing, young, playful company that markets games. So, therefore we want to create demand for FindIt!, and use a lot of the things that we normally do. To make a game out of it. To make it fun. To link emotional benefits and so on.

In the course of launching this, there were a series of events and experiences that you gave people. Just tell us what happened at the point of launch, at this point.

Yes. You launched it, so now it’s launch day. Was there a launch party? Was there a contest awarded in some sort of ceremonial sense? There it is. It shows up.

AA: We didn’t have a launch party. But before launch, we had created buttons for everybody with the FindIt! logo. On the morning of the launch, we put a button on every one of the users’ desks. Then we sent out an animated e-mail letting everybody know that FindIt! was live.

MM: What were some of the other things you did to reinforce adoption or uptake?

AA: We did have a lot of training going on before and during that period. We didn’t just let the users start using the system without any background.

MM: Who led those trainings and what were they about?

SS: I led the training. I held general user training sessions in terms of, “This is what the interface looks like, and these are all the functionalities.” Each session was organized by

user group. So people I knew were primarily searching for assets would get training on searching. People I knew were uploading the assets would get more training on that.

I also held additional process training sessions to make sure that, for instance, the brand managers knew how their entire workflow would look in FindIt!, and PR managers knew how theirs would look.

AA: Another helpful aspect: because we had executive buy-in on the project from the very beginning, any time we had a roadblock or resistance from anybody on using the system, support from the executives was very useful.

MM: How did that support manifest?

AA: A word of encouragement and noting the importance of FindIt! to the company.

MM: What sort of roadblocks showed up — without naming anyone?

AA: Well, a lot of this was going on during some of our heavy work periods. So it required people to devote some time to learn something new when they were already busy doing their normal jobs. It wasn’t that there was resistance so much as there was just a lot of work to do, and working on FindIt! wasn’t part of the normal routine.

SS: I also have another example. For all the games that we launched with on FindIt!, there were a lot of existing assets. So marketing teams might be in the middle of their product launch cycles, and we needed users to get all of those assets uploaded and organized properly on the file servers so that we could then upload them into FindIt!

MM: In retrospect, was that a good idea?

SS: Well, in retrospect, it was a good idea. In fact, when we rolled out with EMEA, we took it a step further.

MM: What did you do?

SS: With EMEA, we had them put together spreadsheets of data as well, so that we could automatically merge the data with the assets afterwards. In the US implementation, we relied on me to add the metadata to these assets.

MM: So that probably gave EMEA users a much more direct and comprehensive appreciation for metadata as a domain, and specifically their metadata, in particular.

SS: Yes. I think it probably did. It was more work for them, but I think it probably did set them up for that.

MM: About how many pieces of metadata do you typically associate with a creative asset?

SS: We have about five required fields. Based on what users fill out in those fields, I also go back and associate more metadata with them. I use an automated tool.

We have a data warehouse that draws information from our PeopleSoft system and some other homegrown systems. So we know the launch date for a game or the developer for a game. Or we know the international product code that unites the titles across different countries.

Based on what the users fill out, I can then populate those other fields.

MM: If I understand you right, your asset creators provide about five pieces of metadata on their work product.

SS: Right.

MM: On the basis of that, you're able to associate additional pieces of data from your various production systems?

SS: Right.

MM: Anything else?

SS: In the future, hopefully, we could just automate this data update. Right now, I actually have to do some manual processing when I run the tool, also.

MM: What tool?

SS: The tool that reaches out and says, "Okay. Based on this data, fill in this data." Pulling directly from those systems I mentioned earlier.

MM: Is this tool something that you developed or that you license?

SS: We developed it.

MM: There you have all of these assets in your walled garden. It's all brightly lit, tagged, manicured and maintained, etc. You've maintained versions with parent/child relationships, I assume. So as people create versions, they're still linked back to their master source?

SS: There is versioning in the system. Yes.

MM: Once they leave the walled garden and go off into somebody's file server, do you keep track of them? Or is that something that the user has to manage themselves?

SS: That's something the users manage themselves.

MM: In the metadata schema, are you using anything like XMP? Where you're imprinting metadata into the actual file header?

SS: No, we're not. There are a couple of reasons for that. One is that the data is not already being filled out on the original files. It's just a matter of where users would fill out the data, and we know we can make them do it in FindIt! Also, a lot of our created assets are Illustrator or In-Design files, and they have placed images and fonts. So we want to keep them all together as a package.

We often archive them to a SIT file. So the XMP data is not really accessible once they're...

MM: ...all packaged up.

SS: Yes.

MM: You now have one instance of MediaBin that lives up in your Montreal data center. Accessed by your North American group.

And as you're continuing to develop more titles and more content related to the titles, at some point, you'll need to look at whether it makes sense to then federate this or distribute it to multiple instances of MediaBin.

In the course of doing that, you have your content services or your digital asset services. Sharlene, I understand you're heading that up. What do you see next, moving forward, in terms of the kinds of things that you anticipate doing the next year to two years?

SS: The first is probably that we've gathered some extensive reporting requirements so that we can analyze usage, anticipate storage needs and perform security audits. We plan to import FindIt! data into our data warehouse so that we can produce those reports.

Also, the EMEA team is looking at building a press extranet. Once they decide on the solution they want to use for that, we're going to see how we can integrate FindIt! with the press extranet. Whether that would be some automatic push or what the process will be — that's kind of our next step.

We've discussed possibly some type of SharePoint integration down the road. It's kind of on two sides. SharePoint could be our work-in-process piece, so that some types of assets automatically move from SharePoint to FindIt! when they're final. On the other end, if we use SharePoint for our intranet, we could publish things from FindIt! to SharePoint.

Also, we have a few other DAM systems — homegrown systems — existing in our studios today. Like a 3D objects bank and a textures databank. I think down the road at various

points, if those teams express interest in somehow integrating together with FindIt! — or actually using the same technology — that's a longer-term thing we might look at.

MM: So these textures and 3D objects — are they using any special tool for that? Or is it just basically spreadsheets and file-management systems?

SS: The studios are pretty tech-savvy. They like developing their own tools. Different studios have developed different tools that they're using.

MM: Allen — in terms of creative services — what do you see as the next year or two years beyond what's obviously been successful — FindIt! — DAM?

AA: Certainly ongoing refinement of the process, and how we utilize the assets. We continually look at the process and make refinements.

One of the questions that we sidestepped when we started this project was how to manage “work-in-progress.” The reason we sidestepped it was because we realized it was a separate and more complex issue. So we decided to use FindIt! for our finished assets, only.

MM: Allen, that's a very common report that we hear from other companies in a similar position. We've found that it really breaks into one of three interrelated sets of issues or technologies. The most difficult of the work-in-process piece is the review and approval process. That gets a little more challenging when you're dealing with larger rich-media assets like video and animation and/or 3D objects.

That second piece we've found is more project management, which is (fantasy). Workforce allocation. Load balancing and that sort of thing. You could call that federated work management or work-process management. But it's really about who's doing what, where — and who owes what to whom — and when. That sort of thing.

The third piece is for some of the more mature DAM workflow systems. They're still kind of scratching their heads about how to do this... The scheduling piece. That starts way back at the marketing or creative brief. How do we get a coherent databased view of the work that we need to do three or four months from now? And do we have enough headcount and enough people? Can we identify ahead of time bottlenecks as a function of, “So many things

have to get scanned in such-and-such a time,” or, “So many things have to get produced. Do we have enough people to do that?”

So, review and approval. A kind of project management or project statusing — reporting management and scheduling — tend to be the next big pieces.

That's what I call going upstream into the creative process. Downstream, we've found that companies really tend to focus on a couple of things. One is automated publishing into the website. You brought up a great point, Sharlene, in terms of your press extranet.

A lot of times, companies will have downstream partners — be they resellers or channel partners and such. It's their way of publishing content on both print and online content into those marketing operations or marcom operations.

The other part that oftentimes becomes rather sticky and a fairly significant investment of time and resource is the whole pan-regional localization process. How can we speed up the localization process across the EMEA area, for example?

That oftentimes starts to bring forward the notion of a pan-regional marcom operation or a pan-regional collateral operation. Or a pan-regional web operation. Those would be the more forward-looking concerns. It all has to do with the nature of your business and what really drives the business forward.

Is it faster time-to-market? Or is it faster time to communicate messages to a market? Does that make sense?

AA: Yes. It makes a lot of sense. From my point of view, these are all things we're aware of. We know they exist. We will need to look at some of them in the future.

We also shouldn't lose sight of the fact that tools could have a tendency to become a substitute for human communication. That's something that we don't want to lose here at Ubisoft. We communicate very well. We want to make sure that our tools are tools that help us — rather than replace critical elements of our working relationships and processes.

MM: I had a conversation with a CTO of a collateral factory over in the Netherlands. He drew a really crisp and useful distinction about a well-designed system. He said, “You know, if everything's going along fine and there's not a lot of pressure — both in terms of deadlines

and/or crises — people will tend to use the systems that we want them to use.”

The critical distinction is that when all of a sudden there’s a crisis — when it looks like you’re going to have to pull a series of all-nighters — does the system enable you to get through the night? Or is it an impediment to doing the work that’s mission critical?

He makes the case that we only want to design and deploy systems that enable you to

get through the night. That is to say that if you don’t use your system, you’re going to be missing a whole week of nights, as opposed to just one or two.

That really gets to the notion of using technology to support and enable critical activities without adding a lot of new work — new layers of technology interface stuff — between you and getting your job done.

AA: Completely agree.