



Customer story: BBC (Jamie Kane)

For thousands of teenage girls, Jamie Kane is one of the web's most enigmatic figures. He lived, he loved, he sang. He died. Or did he?

Critically and publicly acclaimed, the BBC's Jamie Kane alternative reality project is a complex murder/mystery drama that has broken the rules of mainstream gaming and created a few new ones along the way.

And it wouldn't have been possible without Creative Virtual's Lingubot technology – which has personalised the game for users, as well as managing and moderating the game-playing process itself.

This is the story of how it happened...

The challenge

As part of its public charter the BBC has a responsibility to push the creative boundaries and produce experimental work across all media.

The corporations' Interactive Drama & Entertainment team is very much at the forefront of this new thinking – and it was they that first came up with the idea for Jamie Kane. Part game, part drama, it concerns the mysterious death of a fictional pop star, subsequently leading users on a 15-day odyssey spent unraveling the story of his last days and hours, searching for information and clues across the web.

The BBC faced several challenges as they fleshed out this groundbreaking project. Foremost was making the experience *authentic* so that the game users were seeing and interacting with every day seemed “real” to them. At the same time the BBC needed to find a way of moderating the game and avoiding loopholes and short-cuts that game players could use to ultimately...cheat!

What is a Lingubot?

Lingubots are virtual, interactive assistants capable of holding conversations with web users in real time, 24/7. Lingubots are unique in their ability to understand the context of questions, which in turn enables them to emulate human conversation – a feature that's unique in the world of natural language solutions.

The Lingubot's "brain" comprises a knowledge base of content that is built to anticipate customer questions and respond to them based on sophisticated word and phrase pattern matching technology.

Creating and managing this underlying knowledge base doesn't require any formal programming skills. So after the initial training from Creative Virtual, customers are able to build their Lingubot entirely at their own pace – which makes the solution both affordable and flexible.

Why Creative Virtual?

Creative Virtual was the only company able to tackle the BBC's two major challenges of delivering a "real" user experience and also managing game playing itself.

The game is aimed at the oft-neglected market of teenage girls – who as we all know, love to chat. However, many users have been amazed at the quality and realistic responses of the Lingubots, especially the first character they meet; a fellow teenage girl called Jess who can wax lyrical on everything from Girls Aloud to Celebrity Big Brother.

"There's a real art to structuring these virtual conversations and that's what we've been learning," explains Cooper. "We spent a great deal of time working on the knowledge base and working with Creative Virtual to find sophisticated ways of making the conversations as realistic and foolproof as possible."

It also helped that the BBC took time to write the game very much in its audience's language, as well as including tools that they love to use, like chat rooms and e-zines, which made the experience as much of a drama as a game.

Meanwhile, Lingubots, with their unique reporting technology, have enabled the BBC to regulate game playing effectively. There are a series of puzzles that the user needs to solve in order to complete the game. However, without some mechanism for feeding back to the production team when users had reached those milestones there was no real way of knowing if someone has completed the game properly.

Thanks to their innate ability to capture every word and action a digital user makes, the Lingubots solved this problem at a stroke. They also helped the BBC overcome some unique hurdles. For example, at certain points of the game, users need to make phone calls to imaginary characters. However, the BBC had to ensure that its young audience had a free, alternative solution. "We were able to use the Lingubot characters to effectively make the call on behalf of the player and then report back what was said," says Cooper.

How have Jamie Kane and the Lingubot performed?

The BBC team had three main barometers for the success of the project:

- Audience reaction.
- Audience size.
- Critical/industry reaction.

All three have exceeded expectations.

“The game has a user base in the tens of thousands, which for a small sector of the digital audience is great,” says Cooper. “And the feedback from both those that played the game and the gaming industry itself has been excellent.”

Reaction from teenage players has been monitored by the BBC, via the transcripts that are automatically captured every time a user converses with a Lingubot.

Ultimately, says Cooper, Jamie Kane has delivered the goods for the BBC, providing around 15 hours of high-quality digital entertainment for each user.

"Creative Virtual's expertise and creativity helped us deliver a product we're all very proud of," says Rob Cooper.

And what exactly did happen to Jamie Kane?

...You'll have to play the game to find out. (www.bbc.co.uk/jamiekane)