All Change at Daden!

The changing face of the Daden office

Back in May I was lucky enough to be able to start to draw down a couple of pensions (as a result of wise early career choices!) Given the financial impact of that, the continued weirdness that is COVID and Deborah's own changes in employment and career we've taken the tough decision to change Daden back into being my own consultancy and for me to aim to work only part-time. Unfortunately, that has meant that we have had to make Darrell, Steven and Sean redundant, but at least we could give them plenty of notice and being talented people I'm pleased to report that they had no problems in getting new jobs (and in fact Darrell has been working on contract for us for the last few months anyway).

The big upside for me of all this is that I can now focus on the things I really want to do, rather than the bits that pay the rent or salaries. In reality, it means the same things I've always done – virtual worlds and virtual humans. The renewed interest in the Metaverse (thanks Facebook – see next page) and the ongoing interest in Artificial Intelligence means that there is no shortage of fascinating stuff going on in these areas, and I've now got a bit more time to experiment with them all and to try and sort the wheat from the chaff.

In terms of my working model going forwards it is very much a consulting-led one, letting organisations access my 20+ years of experience in these fields, either in exploring opportunities, defining projects, helping with vendor selection, acting as a customer friend, or just facilitating exploratory sessions to help understand what these areas are all about and how they can benefit individual organisations.
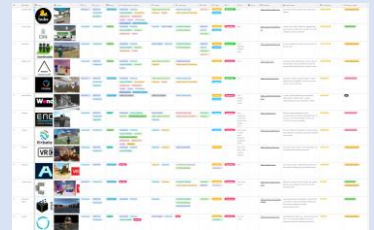
I'll continue to do a fair amount of prototyping myself to explore ideas. Where a client wants me to do the design and development work (particularly in an R&D/proof of concept context) then I'm identifying a number of partner organisations that I can team with for the development and delivery part (and I've just finished a successful MOD project using such a model). I'm also continuing to develop my relationships with the academic community and look forward to continue to provide domain and commercial expertise in support of their research projects.

It's a big change, and adapting to it all through COVID and lock-down has been weird (no final day in the office!), but I'm excited by the new opportunities that it will hopefully open up.

So, if you need help around a virtual reality/virtual world or virtual human/chatbot idea or project then just give me a call and I'm more than happy to have a virtual reality, Zoom or even physical chat!

David

Virtual Worlds Database

One of the first internal projects I've kicked off is improving my list of all the interesting virtual environments out there. I've moved the list from a spreadsheet to Airtable as it: a) looks better, b) is easier to update and c) can be made publicly available. You can find it at:

https://airtable.com/shrCMIXC2BysCng8j

It is very much a work in progress – and probably always will be – but hopefully pulls all the key systems together and gives you a way to compare their different looks, features and capabilities.

Within the table there are probably about 6 main types of platform:

- "True" virtual worlds like Second Life, OpenSim and possibly SomniumSpace, Decentraland etc
- Collaboration led platforms like Hubs, Frames, Spatial etc
- Event led platforms like VirBela
- Training led platforms like Immerse etc
- Community platforms like AltSpaceVR, VRChat, Neos etc
- Pure tools, such as Wonderland, Zoe etc

I'll be updating the table on an ongoing basis – it's already proving a useful resource for me, I hope it will be for you too.

The Metaverse

Mark Zuckerburg's presentation on the "Metaverse", and the change of the Facebook holding company name to Meta attracted a lot of attention, and the hype that had already been building over the metaverse has been in overdrive ever since. I went into Oculus Venues with my Oculus Quest VR HMD to watch the presentation, but apart from Mark Zuckerberg finally "getting" virtual worlds there was really little there that wasn't being talked about 10-15 years ago and already being explored in Second Life/Open Sim. Sure, the tech is moving on but there are still lots of areas which need to be sorted. Key points for me from the presentation were:

- Better integration of your desktop (and phone) into VR so you can stay in VR whilst checking "RL" information or having chats with people in "RL"
- A big announcement for the short term was that Oculus products will not now mandate FB accounts, so the concerns that many corporate/academic clients had might go away. They will also continue to allow sideloading onto Quest, so it looks like the Quest will remain a more open platform and not be locked down to FB/Meta - hurrah!
- Project Cambria will be their next generation high-end headset, non-tethered but more expensive that the Quest, but beginning to enable MR as well as VR experiences, and with sensors to detect facial expression and eye-movement for more natural avatar interaction, nice.
- Lots of work on a Thalmic Labs MYO style electromyography (EMG) device, worn like a wrist band but which would allow you to type and gesture control in very subtle ways.
- Steady improving avatar representation through their Codec photo-realistic avatars - volumetric and based on face/body scans, but with the ability to then change hair, clothes etc.

Of course if Facebook was really serious about the metaverse they'd open source the whole lot right now. My fuller blogpost on the event is on the Daden Blog and you can watch Mark's presentation for yourself on YouTube.

Daden on Medium
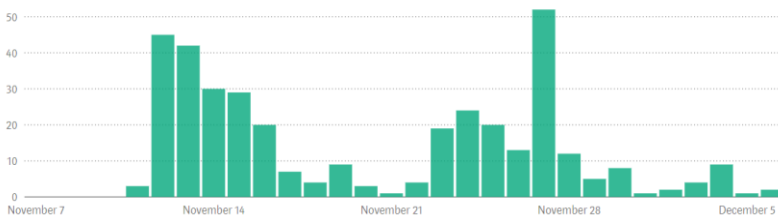
In the never ending quest to get more eye-balls on what I write I've decided to start putting all of my "long-form" content on Medium. Whilst the quality of posts on any platform will vary I probably find more interesting and thoughtful writing on Medium than elsewhere – and it just looks so nice! I'll still post links to the Medium pieces from the Daden Blog and my Twitter, but the originals will be on Medium. To kick things off I've updated my two AI Landscape posts – and as you can see from the history above they are already attracting a reasonable amount of attention and generating followers. I'll aim to put a new post up at least once a month.

Recently we've also …

- Continued to support the MOD in a set of simulation exercises – our focus has been in using our natural language processing skills to generate synthetic social media messages around the exercise activity.

- Run an introduction to virtual worlds event in Hubs for a European network of service design/co-creative professionals

- Delivered two projects for MOD through the Serapis framework.

- Inspired a story (through our Virtual Humans work) in the RAF's Stories from the Future publication.
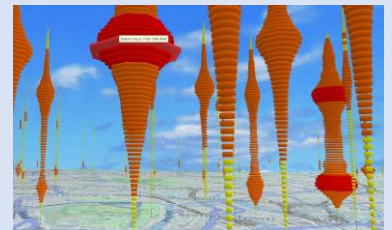
- Updated the Immersive Visual Analytics White Paper – still an area of interest. The other white papers will be updated in the next quarter.

Get in Touch!

If you want to talk through a potential project, or just understand the tech better then just email me at info@daden.co.uk or call me on +44(0) 7811266199, or visit my website at www.daden.co.uk. I look forward to talking to you.

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