Specification Process

Revision History
Author
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Notes

Rachel Garb
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Specification Process

This document outlines the process of how AOL Productions's product specification documents ("specs") are developed, lists the required information, and indicates which team members are responsible for writing or contributing the various pieces of information.

What is a spec? A spec provides detailed, objective information to both the client and AOL Productions on the user interface, functionality and content in a product. When the spec is complete, development should be able to begin implementation, and QA should be able to write test procedures.

What are addendums? Addendums are AOL Productions-internal, project-related documents and information that the team refers to during the course of the project. Because the information is internal, and because it may be subject to change during the course of the project, it is not included within the spec document. Instead, the producer posts and maintains a list of addendum documents, indicating where they can be found, when they were last updated, and who is the author of the document. This information should be kept on the project's working server and all team members should know to regularly check for updates.

How do revisions work? Both the spec and its addendums tend to evolve and change during the course of a project. Therefore, it is important not only to notify and distribute updated revisions of all documentation, but also call out the changes that have been made since the previous revision. In the near future, it is likely that AOL Productions will have a file version control system in place, which will require people to check out documents before being able to change them, then require people to provide a description of changes before being allowed to check in the changed file. Until this system is in place, the process of maintaining a history of changes is a manual one.

Developing the Spec

Objective writing. The first step in good writing is to know your audience and purpose. The spec is AOL Productions's information resource by which...

...development engineers determine feature requirements.
...QA engineers develop test procedures.
...production specialists understand the navigational flow for roombuilding.
...business managers know what we are contracted to do.
...the team resolves any confusion about any aspect of the project.
...everyone, including clients can understand what the final product will be.

This is just a subset of the many values of the spec. Given the fact that so many depend on this document, it is criticial that the spec be written in such a way that nothing is left to interpretation or argument. Everyone should be able to read any given passage in the spec, and come away with the very same meaning. For example, consider the statement:

"The Introduction movie is large."

This could be interpreted in a number of ways:

The movie takes up a lot of space on the disc
The movie takes up a lot of space on the screen
The movie takes a long time to watch.

Correct ways to rephrase this are:

The Introduction movie is 28 MB in size.
The Introduction movie is 320 x 240 pixels in size.
The Introduction movie is 2 minutes long.

Content and organization. The following table lists the required topics for the spec, in the recommended chronological order. This arrangement is designed to break out the explanations of complex functionality from the descriptions of rooms, so as not to bog down the reader who may just be interested in getting a rundown of the elements and basic functions of a room. (Also, some rooms may share the same functionality, and this allows us to write about it once and keep the spec thinner.) However, these complex explanations are important to many readers, and therefore, references should be made to them from areas of the spec in which they apply.

To further improve retreivability, at least the top three levels of sections in the spec should be numbered. That way, people can refer to "section 3.4.1 in the spec" rather than "the section in the spec that talks about the menu in the search dialog..."

Some of the following topics are listed as an appendix. Appendixes are supplementary topics of external information that are more likely to change during the course of the project, and certainly from edition to edition. By placing them at the end of the spec as an appendix, they don't disrupt the page numbering of the bulk of the spec, which could invalidate the table of contents each time that information changed.

Who develops the spec? Everyone on the core product team is involved in developing the spec. In the following table of spec topics, the team member listed in bold is responsible for writing about that topic. The other team members listed are expected to help contribute information when asked to do so by the writer.

The producer[1] initiates the development of the spec, and is responsible for assigning team members to write and contribute to topics, setting deadlines for receiving that information, and doing the appropriate follow-up.

When the writer completes the task of writing that topic, he/she should then submit the copy to the producer. The producer is responsible for compiling all of the topics, and may edit and reorganize the information for consistency and readability. The producer is also responsible for placing references between topics for greater accessibility.

[1]Often, an associate producer is heavily involved in the spec development process. All mention in this document of "producer" should be interpreted as "either the producer or the associate producer."

Specification Process

TOPIC
CONTRIBUTING TEAM MEMBERS

Table of contents.
Producer

Introduction. A high-level description of the product, intended purpose and audience, and client's objectives.

Producer, Client, Business Unit

Rooms. Detailed, thorough statements about each room/section of the product. Provide snapshots or B&W illustrations of each key screen, and indicate the functions/navigation of all buttons, fields, etc. on the screens. In every room, for each user interface element, indicate the following if applicable:

What type is it? (push button, read-only field, etc.)
In what situations is it available/unavailable to the user?
What does it do or allow the user to do? If this varies, depending on the situation, cover all actions for all situations.
What information does it contain? If variable, explain how the information is calculated or determined.
What are the differences among the platforms?
Where in the spec should readers refer to for more information?

Specific information on the more complex/technical functionality, such as installation, searching, and dynamic updating, should not be included here, as these topics are covered elsewhere. Do, however, make reference to these sections when applicable. (For example, if a room contains a search button, explain that it performs the search; for more details, refer to the chapter on Searching.)

This is the bulk of the spec! A good way to organize is to have one room per chapter.

Producer, Designer, Engineering

Installation. Explanation of how the product is installed. What installation product and version is used. Specify all major components to be installed, including other vendors' products, fonts, utilities, etc.

Engineering, Producer

Startup. What happens when the user starts the product, such as system checks, password prompting, etc.

Engineering

Searching. Explanation of how the search engine in the product works.

Engineering, AMS, 3rd party documentation (if applicable)

Dynamic updating. If applicable, an explanation of how dynamic updating works in the product.

Engineering

Printing. What is offered in the way of printing capabilities.

Engineering

Quitting. What happens when the user quits the product, such as files saved, etc.

Engineering

Screens. Screen size and various bit-depths used for various monitor settings. (Production details should be addendums.)

Producer, Engineering, Production Specialist

Assets. List of asset types in the product, and approximate number of each expected (new, revised, and existing). (Production details should be addendums.)

Producer, Client

System configurations. Target and minimum system configurations for all supported platforms should be listed.

Producer, Client, Engineering, QA

System requirements. List pre-requirements, such as fonts, 3rd-party applications, ATM version, printer driver version, etc.

Producer, Client, Engineering, Business Unit

Performance expectations. Measurable performance objectives to test against. More of an issue for products in which clients have stated some performance requirements, or in which there have been tech support calls related to performance.

In established products with no current client-identified performance problems, this section may be as simple as "the performance will be the same as in the last edition."

Producer, Engineering, Client (sometimes)

Appendix: Updates for this product edition. List of feature changes, new asset types, and other changes that are being made to the product for this version. No need to get into great details, as those details will be covered in other sections.

Producer, Client

Appendix: Project schedule.

Specification Process

Producer, Client

Appendix: Spec change history. Until we have a better/automated way of calling out changes to a spec, the best we can do is keep a log of published revisions, and which areas changed.

Producer

Appendix: Glossary. This is an optional section for projects in which the producer feels that the client or team could benefit from having a glossary of technical jargon. Do not include AOL Productions internal jargon–this should be covered in addendums.

Each team member should identify terms from their "world," write definitions, and submit to the producer to compile.

Team

Who reviews the spec? The core team members involved in the development of the project are required to actively participate in a review of the first complete version of the spec. The focus of the review is to ensure the accuracy and completeness of the information. Depending on the type of project, the core team consists of:

- Producer
- Associate producer
- Development engineer(s)
- AMS engineer
- QA engineer
- Art Director/Designer[1]
- Production specialist
- Video producer[2]

Optional reviewers of the spec are:

- Studio managers (Production, Engineering, AMS, QA)
- Tools & Technology
- Business unit (General manager, Account manager)

Developing Addendums to the Spec

Content. The following table is a list of addendum topics that likely apply to all AOL Productions projects. Depending on the project, there may be additional addendums needed.

In the case of Production and A/V process documentation, this information may already exist. All Production and A/V process documents live on the PROJ_MGT server, and should remain there.

Who develops addendums? For a given topic, the team member listed in bold is responsible for writing about that topic, and maintaining it. That is, if information in that addendum changes, that person is

[1]In projects with very little or no user interface (re)design component, such as established info systems, the core team does not include an art director or designer.

[2]In projects with no video component, the core team does not include a video producer.

expected to publish an updated version of the addendum. The writer is also responsible for maintaining a change history. The other team members listed are expected to help by contributing information when asked to do so by the writer.

TOPIC
CONTRIBUTORS

Rooms navigation map. Indicate the navigational flow among rooms, with filenumbering conventions to refer to rooms on the map.

If this is a new product, or a major redesign to an existing product, include a black & white illustration for each major screen in the product.

If this is an update to an existing product, without any major redesigns, it is not necessary to include illustrations. More important are the names, descriptions, and flows to other rooms.

Producer, Engineering, Design, Production, Client (sometimes)

Asset production process documents. Specific information on the asset production processes for the project, such as presentation processing, art processing, and Acrobat indexing.

Check for existing documentation relating to a specific project in PROJ_MGT:PRODUCTION.

Production

Video production process documents. Specific information on the video production processes for the project.

Check for existing documentation relating to a specific project in PROJ_MGT:A/V.

A/V

Screen art production process documents. Specific information on the screen art production processes for the project, including fonts used, how dropshadows and other nifty effects were created, gamma correcting, etc.

Check for existing documentation relating to a specific project in PROJ_MGT:PRODUCTION.

Design or Production

Asset management process documents. Specific information on the entry system, the dbs used by the code, and the asset management process. Special cases and little quirks that are encountered in the project.

AMS

Engineering technology documents. Specific information on new technology used in the project, such as compression, or how our code integrates with a 3rd party application.

Engineering, Tools & Technology

QA test procedures. Detailed list of test cases, etc.

QA, Engineering

Internal schedule. Internal version of the schedule.
Producer, Client

Project task list. Task list for the team.
Producer

For identification purposes, the addendum should contain a title page which lists information about the author and change history. All newly created documents should use the Spec Addendum Template (location on server TBD). A printout of this template is shown on the following page.