



Amiga LiveChat:
A Web-Based Chat Application
for Foreign Language Teaching and Learning
and other Academic Purposes

Courseware Website: <http://babel.uoregon.edu/amiga>

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A Web-Based Speech Tool for Foreign Language Teaching and Learning

NWACC Final Report

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Submitted by Jeffrey Magoto,
Grant Principal Investigator

Summary

Amiga LiveChat is a web-based speech (and video) conferencing tool designed to improve one-to-one and small group communication for academic purposes. It comes in two versions, one that runs inside the Blackboard course management system (CMS) and is aimed at improving the conferencing capabilities of all students using that CMS. The other is a standalone web application, primarily aimed as a language exchange and tutoring tool for foreign language students. The same Flash Communication Server-based application provides the streaming audio and video that drives both versions.

An *Amiga LiveChat* courseware website has been established and contains documentation, suggestions for use, and a video tutorial on basic use from within Blackboard. The website is at: <http://babel.uoregon.edu/amiga>. Since Summer 2005 we've done presentations and trainings on the software at state, regional, and national language and technology conferences as well as numerous in-house talks and demonstrations at the University of Oregon.

NWACC proof of concept funding enabled us to build the prototype of *Amiga LiveChat*—especially the standalone version. That was ready for beta testing at the start of the academic year in September, well ahead of schedule. Demand from UO colleagues for the Blackboard version led us to put the standalone one on hold for much of the 2005-06 academic year and focus our work on getting the Blackboard one done (the latter was funded by a UO Educational Technology Grant).

We finished the Blackboard version in time for the start of the winter term in January 2006, where it was used in language, education and art history classes and for advising purposes by the career center. Feedback has been quite positive. Faculty and students say *Amiga LiveChat* is simple to use, a nice combination of audio, video and text, and that they see it having lots of different uses in their teaching and research (See “Introducing Amiga LiveChat” in the Spring 2006 issue of the UO Computing Center News).

In April 2006 we returned our attention to the standalone version of *Amiga LiveChat*, which is being targeted as a foreign language tutoring tool and as a core component of a suite of speech-based web tools that we are calling ANVIL (a national virtual language lab). We're currently working on a backend database that will enable any student who signs up for UO's Foreign Language Exchange (free) to be paired with a language tutor and to be given access to the Amiga tool.

To students in our language programs at UO, we hope it will become an indispensable communication tool, providing them with opportunities for oral language practice with native speakers and peers in ways that had previously not been possible. We look forward to being able to offer *Amiga LiveChat* as a service to language students at other institutions by September 15, 2006.

Timeline

The table below summarizes our activities during the past year. Our team consisted of: a chief developer, Jim Duber, who did the Flash Communication Server programming, Tony Kay, Java programming and Blackboard Building Block Development, Tim Boshart, Blackboard implementation, and Jeff Magoto, documentation, UO faculty training, and grant PI.

Amiga LiveChat NWACC Project Development Timeline

May-July, 2005	Yamada Language Center (YLC) receives NWACC funding. Research begins on software specifications and learning objectives. Review of extant chat programs; backend database design scenarios and research on language tutoring/strategies
June 1, 2005	YLC receives UO EdTech funding to build a Blackboard version of <i>Amiga</i> to open up its conferencing capabilities to the UO community
June 15, 2005	Work begins on <i>Amiga</i> beta version; Duber travels to Eugene for consulting. Simultaneous work on UI for standalone and Blackboard building block (plug-in) versions.
August 1, 2005	<i>Amiga</i> v.90. Piloting begins in-house and with small number of university faculty in languages; YLC distributes 50 high quality headsets to labs at UO to promote A/V conferencing.
August 15, 2005	<i>Amiga</i> Standalone first presented (as an A/V conference) at international language lab directors' meeting (IALL in Provo, UT)
September 15, 2005	<i>Amiga</i> presented at in-services for language teachers and self-study tutors NWACC web site updated with progress reports.
October 15, 2005	<i>Amiga</i> Standalone demonstrated at fall foreign language (COFLT in Bend) and ESL conferences (ORTESOL in Portland).
November 2005	<i>Amiga</i> included as one of the core IT project areas in a DOE Title VI proposal for a "national virtual language lab".
December 2005	<i>Amiga</i> v.92. Duber travels to Eugene for mini-work session with foreign language and ESL specialists. Initial piloting ends. Substantial changes to Blackboard version UI; work begins on <i>MySQL</i> data base for standalone version.
January 9, 2006	<i>Amiga</i> presented at in-services for language teachers and self-study tutors.
February 2006	NWACC web site (babel.uoregon.edu/amiga) updated with documentation and video tutorial. Both print and video tutorials are added.
March 23, 2006	<i>Amiga</i> presented at in-service for UO IT professionals; short article in UO Computing Center News details <i>Amiga</i> 's use in online Art and Human Values Course
April, 2006	<i>Amiga</i> v.2: revisions of all components: client, database, pedagogical instruction. Final work on finishing <i>Amiga</i> standalone begins again.
May 5, 2006	UO Foreign Language & Int'l Studies Day Conference—Hands-on training with <i>Amiga</i> and YLC Message Boards for 20 high school language teachers
June 26, 2006	Training on <i>Amiga</i> -Standalone for Pacific NW higher ed and secondary school teachers participating in UO's Center for Applied Second Languages (CASLS) Western Initiative in Language Learning (WILL)
July 1, 2006	Begin work on next iteration of <i>Amiga</i> -like speech tools suite: Focus will

	be on accessibility, a small group version (4 chatters at once) and better integration with other YLC speech tools
September 15, 2006	Amiga-Standalone is coupled with YLC's Language Exchange and made available to the world.

Evaluation

In our original proposal we specified that the success of this project would be measured in three ways:

1. Usage rates for the tool itself and qualitative feedback from pilot users
2. Year-long study of 3rd year French classes where tool will be required; course evaluations from students in all language courses using the tool; interviews with faculty members
3. Types of use, frequency, and persistence in language courses and those of other campus departments

It turns out that except for the first of those goals, we didn't have time to look at the pedagogical or organizational aspects of this software. We did a considerable amount of usability testing, from which we improved both the interface and the level of Blackboard integration. As a result, our goals and criteria for assessment became focused on implementation and faculty training:

1. Could we deliver a stable version of *Amiga* for Blackboard?
2. Could we train enough faculty and GTFs in the use of *Amiga* to see it becoming part of at least 20 regular courses by Spring 2006?

We feel we met the first goal in a timely and efficient way. *Amiga* now appears as a standard communication tool inside every Blackboard course at UO. As for the second, as I write (early April) the spring term is just getting underway and it seems that we'll easily double or triple our adoption rate goal.

Future Plans

While there are now more chat clients written with speech and/or video in mind, few have an academic focus or are ad-free, even fewer are cross-platform, and even fewer are written for a multilingual audience and are available within familiar course management systems such as Blackboard.

Our goals for *Amiga LiveChat* for the coming year include: finish the standalone version, research the pedagogical issues outlined in our original proposal (above) and provide better accessibility for disabled users.

As noted, we intend for *Amiga* to become part of a national initiative aimed at providing foreign language students with speech-based learning tools.

Related Links

<http://babel.uoregon.edu/amiga>

Home page for *Amiga LiveChat* and related supporting materials

<http://babel.uoregon.edu/amiga/Tutorial.html>

Tutorial and short how-to video explaining *Amiga*'s features and functionality. The training focus is on the Blackboard version of the application.

<http://babel.uoregon.edu/messageboards>

Home page for YLC's speech-based message boards. Future plans call for integrating this with Amiga and other speech-based tools (testing, note-taking, etc.)

<http://amiga.uoregon.edu>

Home page (under development) for Amiga standalone version.

<http://babel.uoregon.edu/ylc/exchange/select.html>

The Yamada Language Center's foreign language exchange program—the standalone version of Amiga (above) will become part of this tutoring service, which will be open to all university students.

<http://cc.uoregon.edu/cnews/spring2006/amiga.htm>

Recent article in the UO Computing Center News about one instructor's experience with *Amiga*