

New major uses socially-influenced technology

By Natty Morrison

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Technology has usually been examined in terms of direct application and utility. How will it make my life easier? How will it help me stay in touch with old friends? How can I use it to fulfill all my online shopping needs?

But can technology be seen as art?

One of Purdue's newest areas of study in the Division of Art and Design, Electronic and Time-Based Art (or ETB) is centered around the conceptual and social influences of technology in everyday life. It is an interdisciplinary program that fuses facets of art and design, computer sciences and computer graphics, among countless others. Students involved in electronic time-based art utilize resources from digital video and sound, real-time computer graphics, interactive digital systems, virtual reality, physical computing, robotics and other electronic time-based media forms to create pieces of art. The program is chaired by Fabian Winkler, an assistant professor of visual and performing arts.

"Electronic time-based art looks at how technology has become absorbed into life ... and the responses from within technology," Winkler said.

But not all electronic time-based art projects deal strictly with technological notions; Winkler mentioned his 2009 project "The Elocuter," which he created with his wife and Purdue colleague Shannon McMullen, as an example in which electronic time-based art addresses issues outside the realm of tech. The device affixes to a computer screen via suction cups and the computer's USB port, and then goes to work "harvesting news headlines reflecting the economic crisis from online sources such as CNN, Bloomberg and The New York Times."

The randomization of the selected words mirror the process of dadaist poetry, which, in turn, paints the political and economic worlds in both a humorous and critical light. The piece is reflective of the medium's far-reaching influences and topical focuses.

The more traditional media of art, such as painting or ceramics, can be viewed historically in terms of a linear progression, whereas the lineage of electronic time based art is far more circular and inclusive. Winkler explained that as the genre continues to draw from more and more fields, its history becomes a fused mass of varying areas of study – both artistic and technological.

"It's all part of this really broad spectrum," Winkler said.

Winkler compared the ever-widening genealogy of electronic time-based art to the evolution of film technology, which arose from photography and was revolutionized by concepts of chronophotography. Essentially, Winkler explained, the genesis of the field cannot be pinned down easily.

“There’s not really one singular history we can base it on.”

According to McMullen, who holds a doctorate in sociology, the blending of these fields is not an illogical step.

“Fine arts and media arts is necessarily interdisciplinary,” McMullen said.

The program was established by Winkler upon his arrival at Purdue in 2006. It was created as a major, while the minor was introduced the following year.

“The idea of the minor was to allow students outside of (Visual Performing Arts) to get involved,” Winkler said.

But while the program was initially aimed at undergraduate involvement, Electronic Time-Based Art eventually garnered more interest from students in the graduate program.

“It forced us to change gears and start developing the (Master of Fine Arts) program,” Winkler said.

Though the program continues to thrive as an MFA program, the challenge, McMullen says, is to simply “let people know we exist.”

“Since we’re so new, it’s a challenge to figure out how to grow,” McMullen said.

As Winkler and McMullen work to reestablish electronic time-based art as an undergraduate area of study, Winkler continues to feel that the program is a vital part of the School of Visual and Performing Arts as well as the University. Winkler spoke to the varied group of students expressing interest in time based art. Students from areas as diverse as art and design, computer science and computer graphics have taken classes in the area of study.

“We try to teach students to be flexible,” Winkler said. “This is a free space for students to really try to realize their ideas. It’s important to maintain it.”

The Exponent
P.O. Box 2506
West Lafayette, IN, 47906
(765) 743-1111
online@purdueexponent.org

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