

Notions of the Hybrid :
A Particular Hybrid Educational Methodology / RISD Digital Media
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The Digital Media Department is new to the Rhode Island School of Design (RISD). It is now in its second year, with a total of 30 graduate students participating in a 2 year MFA [15 first year and 15 second year graduate students]. As the new head of the department, three major briefs were given during the construction of the curriculum — that the department be interdisciplinary in nature; that most graduate departments at RISD participate in some manner; and that the department should center on new forms of practice that embrace digital media.

In developing the curriculum I looked for a new approach. I recently finished my Ph.D. dissertation that dealt with emergent meaning as arising through what I call Recombinant Poetics. Here is a short definition:

Recombinant Poetic works are characterized by the interaction of a participant with a computer-mediated mechanism that enables her/him to become actively engaged with aspects of experience arising from the combination and/or recombination of text, image and/or music/sound elements. The functionality of these works is made operative within an authored computer-mediated generative environment. It is the technological functionality of this mechanism that enables direct engagement with digital (and/or analogue) media-elements. These modular variables of text, image (or object) and music/sound can be observed as fields of meaning experienced within a variety of constructed contexts through processes of interaction.¹

The operative notion is to abstract this generative methodology, one that enables a participant to explore emergent meaning, and apply it to the educational context to derive new hybrid educational potentials.

Ideas surrounding the new curriculum for the Digital Media Department were initially discussed with the heads of all 16 graduate departments. Not to disrupt the longstanding curriculum already in place in these departments (RISD is 125 years old), the approach is to generate a series of new courses that on the one hand deals with digital media while simultaneously these courses bridge to the existing graduate departments. The idea is to make the Digital Media Department a central virtual hub.

RISD has a rich array of physical facilities for media production. The second notion of the overall curriculum is to make a second generation digital — a physical | digital hybrid curriculum to fit with the nature of RISD's history. A Bauhaus like tradition is conjoined with a very new physical computing and sensing paradigm. Thus, the continuum between the physical and the digital becomes central.

The curriculum has first a core set of classes for incoming grad students, and then the students select from a series of “node” classes. These are five hour studio classes. The students take three of these the second and third semesters giving them a broad range of contemporary classes to choose from. Digital Media students come into the program with the equivalent of four years of digital media related study; an education in media arts; and/or a combined art/design education. In some cases media computer scientists and/or

media oriented electrical engineers are considered. It is expected that students, on entry into the program, would already be well versed in the creative use of multiple digital programs. Students need to demonstrate strength in conceptual understanding and the ability to express complex thinking using the digital paradigm and/or digital foundations. Basically, the computer must fall somewhere in the loop of creative production. The department looks for people who display a deeply creative “spark”. Many of the students are talented across a series of domains.

The node classes are designed to facilitate interdisciplinary and transdisciplinary practice. The model is as follows. Each node class potentially consists of 5 DM students, 5 Students from the bridging department and 5 students from the larger grad community or Brown University Grad students. Advanced seniors and 5th year students are welcome to join into the classes with permission of instructor.

Central to each class is the development of a bridging language, where each discipline expressed its goals. Students respect the difference in each department’s approach to production. The fact that the classes are shared means that the curriculum can be much larger than one associated with 30 grad students. This means that students can carefully choose the Node classes that best fit their interests. This enables educational hybrids to be formed through a dynamic recombinant strategy. Students can also take classes at Brown University through a reciprocal exchange program. Many strong ties have been established with Brown. In particular, collaborations with their electronic music department headed by Todd Winkler, the Visual Arts Department, Electronic Literature, Computer Science, as well as Modern Culture and Media are currently being facilitated.

The notion is that students can undertake unconstrained research into new forms of interface and interaction design with a focus on creative expression and cultural critique. The student experiences team-based work first hand, and develops strong bonds with people from multiple disciplines. The exciting potential is for particular groups to form where they may define new forms of transdisciplinary creative and/or applied practice.

We are now beginning our second year of operation. The curriculum of this digital arts program explores cutting edge contemporary theory and practice. Expanding on a media art focus, the vision of the program is to provide a diverse environment for interdisciplinary and transdisciplinary exploration of digital media. The department enables individual inquiry, high level collaboration, and team-based media production. The program unfolds over a highly engaging two year course of study.

The goal of the program is to provide a resonant environment for cutting edge artistic research and practice, focusing on the creative, expressive potentials of digital media. The program has an emergent focus — hybridizing, redefining and re-articulating the digital arts as an ongoing pursuit. It fosters exploratory practice which seeks to exhibit a high degree of innovative visual, sonic, and/or textual expression, conceptual clarity, and technological skill.

The student draws from a number of potential study areas to define their own personal and/or team oriented practice. Current research areas defined for exploration in the program include the following foci: interactive digital media; virtual environments; augmented reality; motion graphics; digital audio production; Internet oriented authorship; hybrid architectural/media environments; new forms of sensing and physical interface production; experimental media-related industrial design; ubiquitous computing as an expressive form; experimental games; wearable computing; new forms of literary media production; expressive digital tool building; installation art; digital media research; real time technological performance; rapid prototyping; large format digital print; and the exploration of new forms of computer related expression. The entire roster of classes can be found at <http://digitalmedia.risd.edu> .

The program is facilitated by top practitioners in the field drawn from many disciplines. A cutting edge lecture series and visiting artist program examine the latest trends in digital media production as well as provides a critical/historical context for the understanding of current digital art and expanded media design practices. Critical cultural reflection is central to the goals of the program and related theory courses are presented in conjunction with digital studio practice.

Self-motivated graduate level media production, individual and group feedback, team teaching, local and international media collaborations, visiting critics, as well as an exciting curriculum, foster a dynamic expansive approach to digital media production. Graduate students work independently and/or in teams under the supervision of a faculty advisor and thesis committee. A major final thesis project (either individual or team-based), and a written thesis with multi-media documentation are required. The study of media history and theory complement and help to articulate the thesis project.

Highly self-motivated work, the ability to research advanced technological issues independently, and to think "outside of the box" are all central to the successful completion of the program. Interest in team-based production is also essential.

The department offers assistantships involving various departmental support responsibilities. Specific research-oriented funding is also available on a limited basis. An interview with the graduate program coordinator is required after the initial selection process and can be arranged by contacting the Digital Media program office. The purchase of a specific laptop computer from RISD is required.

Thus, a dynamic hybrid curricular approach has been initiated in the Digital Media Department at the Rhode Island School of Design.

ⁱ See Seaman, Bill, *Recombinant Poetics: Emergent Meaning as Examined and Explored within a Specific Generative Virtual Environment*. PH.D. Thesis for CAiiA – The Centre for Advanced Inquiry in Interactive Art. University of Wales, Corleon Campus, 1999 (available in PDF form from the Langlois Foundation) and/or <http://billseaman.com/>