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# IS THE AGE OF EXPERTISE OVER?

As I read journalists' reports about the decline in confidence in many financial institutions, the troubles in modern education, and the failure of diplomacy to solve international problems, I am faced with the question: Is the age of expertise over?

The 30th anniversary of the SIGGRAPH conference celebrates a community that is diverse in esthetic design, technological application, and philosophical assertion. Yet, outside of this community, I am surprised to still find experts questioning the magnitude of influence that digital media already exert. Overuse of such words as "convergence" and "divergence" has not diluted the potency of their meanings, for both are actually operating in tandem. An ongoing question remains: Are digital media simply adopting the esthetic traditions of previous art forms (merely replacing one type of paintbrush or camera for another), or do digital media, by nature of the fact of their differences, demand a new set of creative objectives? Although there has always been an inter-relationship between technologist and artist, it has never been so dramatically apparent as today. Interconnectivity, made possible through digital media, creates a type of art that, whether printed onto paper, or coped to disc, or remaining fully interactive within the digital domain, can all be distributed in ways that no previous medium has ever enjoyed. This simple fact suggests that digital media be thought of as different from the "traditional media" that inform them. Although they are inevitably influenced by the past, it is not merely an extension of painting or even experimental filmmaking. Digital technology is not "just another tool" for the artist to use, for its potential effect on the way that experiences are shared has profound international implications. Of course, those same elements that have been used in great art throughout the ages still remain: composition, color, texture, mood, style, and story. Perhaps, in some ways, the art of experiencing is being more affected than the art of creating?

Those who perceive themselves as experts expect attention from an audience that may no longer recognize their authority. The experts of the past are not necessarily pre-ordained to determine our future. They can continue to serve a vital purpose in the roles they originally were involved in, but might never become primary voices in newer manifestations. The developers of the railroads did not invent the airplane. Telegraph producers did not invent the telephone. Classical musicians did not invent jazz. More recently, filmmakers did not invent television, and television did not invent the web. Their "brand names" did not convince people to ignore the newer possibilities. Past expertise did not empower a vision in re-inventing their futures. Although economically viable in the current business climate, people now debate whether movie theaters, bookstores, or even museums will be successful in the future digital world. I continue to hope that they are, but I know that they all must continue to prove their evolving value in the future marketplace of ideas. Exhibition spaces are as much a reflection of the time in which they were created as they are institutions of ongoing relevance. Museums continue to serve as an excellent way to experience "object-based art," but they may never be the best way to explore web-based art. Creative communities such as Hollywood must learn from this and find ways to re-invent themselves continuously. In effect, digital media relate to Hollywood as rock 'n' roll relates to the big-band era. Digital media are not its subordinate, for they may well become its replacement.

When the electric guitar was invented, it was seen by its developers (such as the great musician/inventor Les Paul) as a way of allowing the acoustically challenged guitar to survive. Through electronic amplification, guitars could suddenly be heard with the much louder horn sections that had become the mainstay of popular western music. Instead of simply finding its place in the big bands, the electric guitar competed against them and, ultimately, forced them out of business. It not only competed technologically, but also socio-politically, rebelling against the current popular tastes and creating a new, even-more-popular esthetic. The inventors of these instruments had not foreseen that adopters of the electric guitar would create an entirely new category of popular music and in doing so have profound worldwide sociological effects. Some nostalgic individuals continually prophesied the "return of the big bands," and, other than a few short-lived attempts, production of music continued to move ever forward and become ever more electronic.

Some believe that entirely new forms of digital creativity are already in evidence around the world, and may render traditional entertainment models obsolete.

Mobile communications may well be the electric guitar of the early 21st century, and the emerging mobile digital culture may be its rock 'n' roll. Non-location-dependent, and self-invented by its user base, this culture is creating a new language system that combines graphics, text, and sound into a meta-language that transcends borders and develops without the oversight of such "gatekeepers" as investors, publishers, distributors, or curators. If this is not truly an art form, then I don't know what is. Nations such as Finland have not only pioneered the technological devices that enable such experiences, but they are also contemplating the sociological implications of such a world, recognizing fully that they will be observers as well as producers and participants. At any time, unforeseen developments may toss the best predictions into the discarded intellectual trash heap of history.

We all laugh at the early 20th century's failed predictions of life in the 1980s: the flying cars, the moving sidewalks, the end to poverty, disease, and war. We may even laugh at the more recent predictions of a little over a decade ago, when "experts" announced with confidence the arrival by the early 1990s of a widely available home-entertainment medium produced around "virtual reality." These over-confident experts failed not only in understanding the essential current technological shortcomings of their predictions, but also often failed to predict the actual "killer apps" of the 1990s: the world wide web, mobile communications, and digital video. Although experimentation must be encouraged, intellectual accountability as to the economic viability and engineering feasibility of such predictions must become an essential part of the media theory process.

Now that several years have passed since the hype of the dot-com hysteria and its resulting implosion, we must continue to put into perspective the lessons we can learn from that unique period of recent history. Many of the "mavericks," "gurus," "visionaries," and other self-anointed egomaniacs have returned to obscurity. Digital video and mobile communications have also been hyped in a similar fashion. Those of us who rely on these tools for our economic as well as creative survival must seek ways to separate the over-abundance of rhetoric and unrealistic enthusiasm from the necessary information, through which we can navigate our work.

Digital literacy is teaching us that the Age of Expertise may well be over. There is simply too much information for anyone to have more than an over-specialized knowledge base and an under-generalized understanding of the human condition. This puts the value of their expertise into question. Despite our newfound

connectivity, contemporary society continues to become more fragmented and less homogeneous. Digital technology is doing far more than introducing improved tools to a more media-democratized planet, for it is inventing metaphors for widespread use of a personalized environment by which legacy, influence, and identification can be preserved. How can we fully appreciate these phenomena? Thirty years of SIGGRAPH conferences may be a clue. The need for an ongoing, interactive, and pluralistically authored history of digital media seems like the promise as well as the solution to the ongoing problems of exclusion and misinformation. A history authored by witnesses and participants, rather than "experts." A history that is constantly updated and modified as previously forgotten or under-represented information is integrated. Hard-copy applications such as books or videos are not ideal formats for such a project, which would, by necessity, be interactive and probably web-based. A history that would also include the environment by which the work was integrated into the culture's perception, the art spaces, festivals, publications, and other venues that were first brave enough to take seriously that which had yet to be accepted by the standard curatorial perspective (sites such as www.walkerart.org are promising beginnings). We must become informed enough as a society to under-stand that no one history can ever again be sufficient to explain or critique the efforts of past invention, neither artistic, scientific, nor socio-political. Let digital media producers be among the first to acknowledge this possibility. And rejoice in their lack of expertise. I, for one, delight in knowing that any "expertise" that I may currently have will be short-lived, and that I will continue to be both student of and witness to the collective history that unfolds around me.