

DESIGNING AND DEVELOPING INTERACTIVE  
ENTERTAINMENT AT BELL h@BITAT,  
CANADIAN FILM CENTRE

There is a need for professional producers who are able to create, plan, execute, market, and sell new-media content and interactive entertainment in Canada for the Web, interactive TV, interactive installations, and newly emerging broadband and wireless applications such as multi-user virtual communities and distributed storytelling systems via instant messaging devices.

The School of New Media at the Canadian Film Centre, currently known as Bell h@bitat, began offering its training in new-media product design and development in September of 1977. The vision of the New Media Design Programme is to drive the evolution of new-media content creation in Canada and elsewhere by training new-media thinkers. The program is now completing its fourth year.

#### THE RESIDENTS

The five-month course, offered in the fall and winter, accepts a maximum of 12 students, referred to as residents, per session. Embracing the philosophy that compelling interactive entertainment products are best created with input from a variety of specialties, the New Media Design Programme is both project- and team-based. It brings together people from a variety of countries and disciplines, including writers, graphic designers, programmers, filmmakers, television producers, musicians, lawyers, and others already involved in new-media creation. In addition to several years of professional experience, or a portfolio of non-professional work, applicants must demonstrate an entrepreneurial spirit. The program demands people who can work in a collaborative and self-directed environment, and turns out people whose independence suits them to careers in producing interactive entertainment. About half of the residents return to their former industries and become the new-media experts, and the other half begin their own businesses.

The students work together in self-organizing teams. They spend the first two months in a series of hands-on, project-based exercises that provide the building blocks for developing new-media products. In the second half of the course, each team completes a new-media project. Ranging from treatments and prototypes to finished products, these projects draw on each team member's area of expertise, and they provide a practical context for testing new skills.

When the teams do not have all of the required skills or resources needed to complete a project, team members and faculty use their social and professional networks to find the appropriate human skills (a 3D designer; a cartoonist; a soundscape designer; actors; or a Lingo, Java, or XML programmer, for example) and resources (from cutting-edge generative music software to third-generation wireless phones and WAP or Bluetooth software and technology.)

#### THE FACULTY

Throughout the program, participants are guided by leading Canadian and international new-media professionals and academics. The faculty at Bell Canada h@bitat is comprised of a team of new-media educators from major universities in Toronto and new-media professionals from Ontario and Quebec.

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All of them are innovators from the areas of storytelling, technology, leadership, team building and collaborative project process, and business and entrepreneurial aspects of new media.

#### THE CURRICULUM

The first phase of the program consists of a seminar-based, industry intensive, self-directed learning schedule made up of four separate training modules. The second half of the program consists of a production phase in which residents complete prototypes in a collaborative and real production environment.

#### Phase I

##### 1. Leadership Development and Team Building (week one)

The leadership and team-building section of the program is based on the recognition that the new-media industry demands new ways of thinking and interacting. Leadership no longer filters down from the top but emerges throughout an organization in individuals who possess vision, passion, and creative insight. Teams are the fundamental units of interaction in the production and creative realm of new media, and together with wise use of leadership, they ensure that great ideas not only become a reality but also get to market on time and at a reasonable cost. The objectives:

- Learn to apply collaborative skills that enhance both creativity and effectiveness.
- Learn how planning, task clarification, and rapid prototyping ensure on-time completion and satisfying team relationships.

##### 2. New Media Technology Section (weeks two and three)

This section provides an examination and comparison of the evolution and influence of new-media technology and tools on the nature of different media. It involves three production exercises using Web, video, and interactive software. Residents prepare for this session by gathering written visual and audio material to tell a story. The story is then told three times, first using a linear "video" model, second using a hypertext or Web model, and third using a hypermedia model. Residents are encouraged to work together in teams to create collaborative stories.

##### 3. Digital Storytelling (weeks four and five)

Digital storytelling and interactivity are two of the most overused and least understood terms in the new-media environment. One of the continuous discussions during these two weeks is: What is digital storytelling? Is it storytelling using digital media? Are we witnessing the emergence of a new grammar or a new genre? Or is it hype and hoopla and

nothing more? This section examines digital storytelling through a combination of theoretical inquiry; analysis of concrete storytelling models; case studies of Web sites, interactive installations, CD-ROMs, and interactive television sites; and hands-on explorations. Residents interact with numerous guest speakers (first-nation storytellers, installation artists, virtual environment designers, and game designers) and visit the Canadian Broadcasting Company's New Media Group and a number of leading-edge new-media companies.

Working in teams, residents choose a work that has been translated into more than one form or medium and examine ensuing changes to narrative structures; dramatic structure; and concepts of immersion, absorption, and engagement. They also assess a number of interface designers and address issues of accessibility, functionality, and usability. The interfaces range from telephone message systems to new-media interfaces such as mind maps or immersive environments.

#### *4. New Media Business Practices (week six)*

This component explores the differences in strategies and methods that new media impose on traditional media processes, from production through distribution.

Many traditional project management methods do not transfer well to new media development. In reality, new-media management shares many similarities with the management of innovation. Anticipation of risk, continuous environmental scanning, and Internet time are important. The faculty examines these issues and challenges with presentations from leaders in the new-media field, seminars, and project management activities.

#### *Phase II*

At the end of the six-week course modules section, residents are asked to form teams, self-selected based on a series of in-depth brainstorming sessions about projects. These teams range from three- to six-person groups, with projects ranging from interactive documentaries to experimental Web art. For the next 10 weeks, these teams produce prototypes that typically act as proofs of concept for their ideas about what makes for a compelling interactive experience.

Faculty at this stage switch roles, from facilitators to project consultants. Once a week, residents and faculty get together in a fish bowl environment to critique the progress of each team and the direction each project takes.

#### SOME OF THE PROTOTYPES CREATED AT BELL H@BITAT:

##### *1953: A Night on Shuter Street*

This prototype invites users into an immersive 3-D storyscape. A darkened stage encourages users to uncover the dramatic events surrounding a 1953 jazz concert at Massey Hall, a performance that some consider the greatest concert ever. Collecting visual clues from an environment filled with music and voices, users build their own version of the past from the stories and memories of the event. Creative team: Alastair Jarvis, Katie MacGuire, Carolina Ostos, and Tamara Rebanks

##### *esc*

A user-empowered narrative journey filled with digital suspense as five "cyber friends" dare to attempt meeting each other in person. Users direct their experiences of the story by selecting the perspective from which to view the action. They may also interact at certain plot points to push the narrative forward. The plot, however, is time-based and is in constant movement toward its ultimate resolution. The *esc* experience is startlingly close to that of everyday life. Creative Team: Andrew Brady, Daryl Cloran, Jim Hand-Cukierman, Michael Kaspro, and Rebecca Scott.

##### *Home*

An example of a dramatic, non-linear narrative that moves away from cyberspace in its creation of a cyberplace. This is an intimate journey through household objects that reveal stories about personal history, memory, and identity. Creative Team: Suzanne Stein, Clementina Koppman, and Alan Wong.

##### *i matter*

A unique creative resource that takes the notion of career and turns it on its head. This prototype, primarily for teenagers, showcases interviews with professionals who share stories of their life's work, their passions, and their career advice. Creative Team: Aurea Dempsey, Richard Lane, and Sharman Wilson.

##### *Maço Ads*

Explores the next generation of episodic and story-based collectible Web advertising. The user keeps tabs on the journey of two people who fall in love, then decide to meet. The episodes are delivered via rich, interactive video banner ads that are designed to be collected and traded. It's viral marketing at its best. Creative Team: Maxim Fishman, Yong-Eui Hong, and Aidan Tierney

*My name is Elliot B.*

An edgy interactive drama that delves into the soul of an urban loner. As the story unfolds, users apply simple and intuitive navigation to pursue distinct narrative paths that revolve around different use-selected themes. Creative Team: Donald Anderson, John Kalangis, and Maria Rotella.

*Revelation*

An interactive narrative about a man who has lost his memory from “The Great Crash” and begins his search to find it. Revelation creates a user-defined, experiential process for storytelling. The user directly participates in the process of one man’s journey to self-discovery. The prototype reveals one possible outcome when society becomes too dependent on “computer systems.” Creative Team: Noam Muscovitch, Lisa Santanatos, Ed Wong, and Annabelle Hoffman.

*The Great Canadian Story Engine*

The first-ever interactive and immersive online exploration of Canada, its people and places, past and present. Imagine it as an online time capsule for the millennium that gives Canadians the power to tell their own stories without being filtered through traditional media. The engine has the capacity to connect us from one side of the country to the other. It is a brilliant example of how new technologies will revolutionize human communications. Creative Team: Tessa Sproule, Jason Cliff, Kato Wake, Rena Dempsey, and Rand Ardell.

*The Seen*

A new entertainment genre: A Webshow that combines elements of sitcoms, video games, cartoons, and music videos. To be released episodically over the internet, this is the story of Mark Ryder, his childhood in the digital age, and his quest to get a life. Creative Team: Jeremy Diamond, Denny Silverthorne, and Adrian Carter.

## CONCLUSION

Bell h@bitat is a unique environment that changes with each new programme session. Producing new-media prototypes with teams of highly accomplished and creative people from a variety of disciplines who hardly know each other, in a short period of time, almost seemed too daunting a task to undertake. And with each programme session, we are always amazed by the capacity of talented individuals to produce not just any work but very good work indeed. Part of this success has to do with the talent itself, but part of it has to do with the type of environment we are constantly striving to create in Bell h@bitat: flexible, responsive, supportive, and open.

We have discovered interesting ways to create such an environment and have stumbled upon challenges that make creating such a space difficult. We would like to engage in a discussion with our colleagues at SIGGRAPH 2001 about what makes for a challenging and creative learning environment, and share with them the lessons we have learned and the questions we have yet to answer.