

Swan Lake: Moving Image & Music Award

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ABSTRACT

At present there is a whole range of award schemes which aim to promote the best in multimedia production. The EUROPRIX Top Talent Award in Austria has become the first point of contact for the up-and-coming multimedia producers. What is lacking across Europe, however, are programmes that prepare young students and producers for such competitions, and not only transfer the necessary knowledge and skills needed for international cooperation, but also empower them to use the right technology when realising their ideas in a multi-medial form.

The dominance of e-content and over technology is mentioned more and more often. As a result, nearly 80% of all productions are designed in Macromedia Flash. In response to this situation an idea arose to create a scheme that approaches and mobilises the corresponding resources in the educationally oriented sector. Thus, the creativity and the understanding of how to use digital media tools could be combined. The main goal of this scheme is to realise the idea of networking, the key concept behind the founding of EADiM's "Instructors Network".

This paper introduces the Swan Lake: Moving Image & Music Award (SL:MIMA [SLA2004]), a joint collaborative project between German and English universities, which builds upon the cooperation of young musicians, students and partners from the industry in two European countries. The basis of this students' competition is the creation of stimulating visual imagery set to the new age music genre. A series of workshops accompanies the programme and is aimed at familiarising students with the whole range of digital art technologies – from visualisation and rendering techniques, to digital aesthetics, cross-media events and interactive virtual spaces, and experiments from the ambient multi-medial area [LUG2002].

TECHNOLOGY-BASED ART

These days a number of different expression channels exist in digital art. Computers have been accepted as means of artistic expression. Today, however, the issue of the value of digital aesthetics has re-emerged in quite a new context. A new awareness for communication driven societies has surfaced and computer art has amongst others also become a catalyst for a cultural shift in the strategy on how to be prepared for the inevitable changes in comprehension of art in the future.

Digital aesthetics are mostly technological aesthetics, whose constitutive feature – the digitalisation – raises a number of universal questions. Questions of the unity of a piece of art, or the value of the original (a digital work of art can not be simply owned), or the role of the artist, or the situation of the observer – all this needs to be re-thought radically. Art itself is fused with media and technology: something new arises, that has to receive its own new value. Digital art is no longer bound to any kind of material – it is intangible, it can be projected onto a screen anytime, or can be printed out – these are basic differences to traditional works of art. The electronically saved picture is a mere collection of data and can therefore be manipulated freely. The security of the authenticity that is granted by an actual picture is lost. Using interactive image processing any picture can become a completely new entity on the computer. Of course the possibility of duplication itself offers the chance to introduce one's art to a massive audience. All the information in a detailed exhibition catalogue can be published together with the works themselves, and the experience of art can be deepened with extra knowledge. Interactivity plays a central role. The artist can offer context on the computer, and the observer is free to call upon this input, play with it, or comply with it. As such, digital art can open up a new dimension of thought and sensation.

The new mobile “always on, always connected” technology paradigm challenges the openness of new ways of conceptualising art as a means of dialogue with the observer. It seems that we are at the beginning of this fundamental rethinking process but still far from an upsurge of empathy to the issue.

EDUCATIONAL PROBLEMS IN MULTIMEDIA TEACHING

The basic aim of education is the acquisition of facts and skills. But actually it is only the first step in an educational process whose ultimate goal should be to educate students to critically evaluate those acquired facts and skills through careful interpretation, critical thinking and analysis in order to be able to apply them to particular problems at hand. Higher education environment has changed considerably in the last five years or so. Falling motivation, lack of creativity, the increasing disorientation of young people in self-organised learning environments, as well as other factors, such as introduction of tuition fees in UK universities, unfavourable economic and political developments and increasing unemployment, have had an adverse effect on the optimal transfer of knowledge in the educational area. A significant proportion of students finds it difficult to think critically and laterally as well as achieve a level of abstraction required in education today. In addition, students do not understand why some basic elements of philosophy, economy, fine arts or civil

society, for example, need to be integrated into technologically oriented courses of study.

"The number of disciplines that lay claim to multimedia has traditionally antagonistic cultures" [GON2000]. Designing a course curriculum that brings these disciplines together to create a real fusion of techno-creative diversity requires a precise engineering approach. The balance of technical and creative aspects needs to be maintained while at the same time sufficient attention needs to be given to commercial and management issues.

As described by L.T. Walczowski & A. Nagy [WAL2002]. "The cornerstone of the multimedia teaching philosophy is based on the concept that we, the teachers, act as facilitators of learning, windows through which students become active participants in their own learning processes rather than purely passive receivers of knowledge." The teacher's role as that of a 'learning process facilitator' has also been discussed by Wierzbicki and Wankelmuth [WIE2003].

TECHNOLOGY: EUPHORIA AND FRUSTRATION

Our initial enthusiasm and euphoria about the advent of new technology makes us believe that it will solve all our problems and improve business. However, the initial exhilaration soon turns to frustration and disappointment at its inability to fulfil the promise [SCH2004]. In technological terms, a kind of periodic change of focus can be observed. Somewhere around 1994 internet technology became available and omnipresent and after some two to three years of being euphoric about the technology the focus moved towards creation of user friendly interfaces and applications with a clear added-value, stripped from needless gimmicks. One of the technology oriented mainstays at the end of the 20th century included, among others, Macromedia Flash. Again, the fascination with new possibilities stimulated technology oriented design until really tangible Flash-based applications at a later time followed. Today mobile technology has become mainstream. With more and more sophisticated technology the delay between launching a technology and becoming truly familiar with it grows. It develops faster than we can introduce it into educational programmes and it is becoming more and more expensive as well. In the past few years more and more attention has been paid to story-telling, interactive narratives and e-content than to multimedia technologies themselves. However, this back-to-basics approach has not always to do with a content driven application design paradigm. Sometimes it is purely our ignorance making us believe that we primarily need content, not the technology. The truth is that we need both [MED2000]. Shielding us completely from the technology is definitely the wrong approach.

To address the problem of the lack of technological knowledge, we need projects which can provide some financial background and make technology and knowledge happen. As usual, coming up with an idea is simple, realizing it is more difficult.

SWAN LAKE: MOVING IMAGE & MUSIC AWARD

Swan Lake: Moving Image and Music Award [SLA2004] is a joint collaborative education project between German and English universities which originated from the need to join the efforts of multimedia teachers in Europe and open minds to new ways of multimedia expression. The project builds upon the cooperation of young musicians, students, video makers, story tellers, technologists and partners from the industry. SL:MIMA in 2005 aims to be a truly international event bringing together students from Germany, England, France, Finland and Poland.

The focal point of the programme is the students' competition, the creation of stimulating visual imagery set to the new age music. A series of workshops accompanies the programme and is aimed at familiarising students with the whole range of digital art technologies – from visualisation and rendering techniques, to digital aesthetics, dramaturgy, interactivity in virtual environments and experiments from the ambient multi-medial area. The award itself aims to focus on discovery and promotion of young talent from university environments across Europe. The main goal of this scheme is to realise the idea of networking, the key concept behind the founding of EADiM's "Instructors Network" [INS2004]. The programme will also forge links with the industry.

The very first Swan Lake Award Reel took place 2004 in Mittweida, Germany, where the programme also originated. The name has actually been inspired by the address of the Media Department of the University of Applied Sciences in Mittweida, Am Schwanenteich (At the Swan Pond/Lake). However, the swan is also a symbol of elegance, purity, graceful movement and aesthetics, which has always fascinated humans. This fits well in the programme image, where all the elements need to be combined for the sake of creative and artistic digital expression. The SL:MIMA aims to involve students and award winners as tutors and programme facilitators. This should provide a beneficial cross-age learning environments, which enhances the academic performance of students and scholars.

REALISING VISIONS THROUGH NETWORKING

All the goals of the SL:MIMA project build upon the idea of true cooperation. Networking is an essential means for promoting innovative, creative thinking and actions and for supporting the continuous process of change within the mobile open society [MUR2004, MOS2004]. SL:MIMA also aims to create direct links to the main networks of local authorities at creative environments in Europe. The extensive use of the Internet will also provide the virtual forum for joint decision-making and extensive exchange of expertise. SL is also interested in a collaboration with institutions with related or overlapping missions, which have already been recognized.

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