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- [advertising](#)
- [editorial schedule](#)
- [subscriptions](#)
- [acknowledgements](#)

member login

email

password

[new members](#)

[forgot password](#)

search:

[← back](#)

## realtime 74

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special features

contents

### Artists [as] Educators

The university: A new home for new media

Christy Dena



Mark Cypher, Biophilia 2005

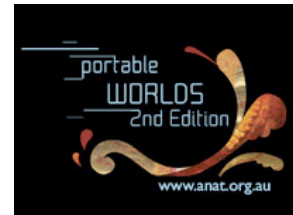
"They've sold out." "They've got it easy." "They're working too hard." Some of the new media educators interviewed for this article felt this was the way non-educators regarded them. Have they sold out, do they have it easy or are they working too hard? And are these the sort of questions that will bring us closer to understanding a new media educator-artist in Australia circa 2006?

An artist getting a day job is nothing new; an artist getting a job teaching art isn't either. So what is new about a new media artist choosing to move into education? Johannes Klabbers, Course Coordinator and Senior Lecturer, BA Multimedia Arts, School of Visual and Performing Arts, Charles Sturt University, vividly recalled his motivation for moving into education many years ago:

There were trucks full of incontinent sheep thundering down the main street (the campus is in a regional town)...but it was when I saw the Macintosh 8100AV with 128MB of RAM with all the software you had ever dreamed about, which I could access 24 hours a day, that I signed on the dotted line.

Klabbers, who has worked with photography, video installation art and then with "all forms of media new and old that are available to an artist: image, text, sound, performance", also had the "idea that facilitating the learning and development of creative people would be fun." Likewise Mark Cypher, Senior Lecturer and Program Chair of Multimedia, School of Media, Communications and Culture at Murdoch University, who uses computers as a "new sculptural medium", enjoyed teaching "immensely" and "discovered [he] was getting paid for it." Hugh Davies, Lecturer, Digital Imaging and Manipulation and Multimedia Production, Photography and Screen Department, Adelaide Centre for the Arts, TAFE, is a sculptor, film and "alternate reality experience" artist who also found "teaching to be very infectious...the more you do, the better you get and the more you enjoy it." For Troy Innocent, Deputy Head (Research), Senior Lecturer, Multimedia and Digital Arts, Art and Design, Monash University, who has been exploring the "language of computers" through virtual worlds, academia provided an "opportunity to both reflect upon and articulate my approach to new media arts to others."

For last year's RealTime Education edition, new media postgraduates were asked how



they chose their institution and department (RT 68, p32-33). They unanimously cited the supervisor as a critical factor in their decision-making. For the majority of educators interviewed for this article, however, the experience was quite the opposite. Cypher exclaimed, "You don't choose the institution, the institution chooses you!...and the reasons are never really clear for why you get or don't get lucky." Ann Morrison, Lecturer, Information Environments Program, School of Information Technology and Electrical Engineering, University of Queensland, who works with installations using various media, added that positioning herself in an IT school was an intentional environment choice to "implement more technology into [her] own art practice" and selecting a "university that valued research" was so that the "teaching loads were lighter."

### **Exhibiting more or less?**

All the teachers gave positive responses to the question of whether academia has effected their exhibition output. Innocent is exhibiting "more or less the same—as [he is] based in an institution that recognises art practice as research activity." Davies and Morrison found their practice slowed at first but picked up again once they, as Morrison put it, "learnt how to 'work' better within a university system." Both Klabbers and Cypher feel that less is more now. Cypher concentrates on "making 1 or 2 really good works a year and then spends the next year or 2 pushing those works internationally." A perennial problem, regardless of how supportive a department, is the need for academic credit for creative works. But in addition to this age-old, discipline-wide issue, is that of peer recognition of new media.

### **New what?**

Cypher has observed a "lack of understanding about new media, both theoretically and practically from...both within art schools and in the general humanities areas." In an attempt to circumvent such misunderstandings Morrison takes a multi-lingual approach: "I speak IT, Interaction Design, Humanities and Visual Arts/New Media Arts speak depending on who I am discussing my 'research'/ artwork with." On the topic of new media curricula, Innocent laments that although there is an improved synthesis of practice and theory "we are still dealing with the legacy of new media arts study as largely an activity involving the acquisition of technical skills."

Although access to technology, to 'grunt', is a factor in new media artists choosing academia as a job, it was also noted that universities are not early adopters. Despite blogs being a few generations of net-phenomena behind us, students at some institutions are unable to be even introduced to them due to bans, not to mention prohibitions on citing web-based material regardless of their peer-reviewed status. Davies highlights the point that many of the technical skills being offered in tertiary education, even at third year levels, are now being taught in most high schools. Education, he adds, is not keeping pace with technology.

Misunderstanding extends to the students too. Younger students, Davies observes, "are often not concerned about creative development but high grades." Cypher and Klabbers are both concerned that students are more focused on attaining employment than developing creativity. This approach is ironic, Klabbers continues, since "most prospective employers are more interested in finding people to work for them who are flexible, who are problem solvers, who can apply creative ideas in a range of contexts, than in which version of the software they are familiar with."

### **Then what?**

UK media performance group Blast Theory recommended in their Adelaide Thinkers in Residence report, *New Media, Art and Creative Culture* (2004), that the outcomes required for R&D and cultural funding should be broadened to facilitate blue sky thinking; something that universities are ideally poised to actuate. Innocent concurs:

New media arts study can effectively work as a research lab to nurture a synergy between concept development and technical/production skills. There is the opportunity and time for students to take risks and play with possibilities within the relatively safe environment of the university. These opportunities are less likely when working within the industry or in an arts practice that may be limited by access to gear, expertise, space to play etc.

Morrison recommends that universities "be prepared to allow experimental machines with admin access and no firewalls." Davies wants to see teaching through new media

rather than just about new media, using "game-based learning and web research based assignments." Innocent champions a hybrid space of a lab and studio environment that facilitates a more creative space. Ideally though, Innocent muses, it would be best to have the students acquire skills through independent research "so that the studio can focus more on other issues such as concept, interaction design, language, theoretical background, context etc."

### **Teaching vs practice**

Morrison found that referring to her works-in-process to her students caused them (her works) to stall because the students started implementing them. Now Morrison invokes her own works only when they are a "fait accompli." Cypher observed that he found it more difficult when he was teaching in exactly the same area as his art practice "because the last thing you want to do when you come home after talking about art all day is to make art." Now that there is a slight difference in what he's teaching he is more freed up. All of the academic artists acknowledge that the long hours they're working do affect their practice, but just as much as anyone with many jobs. Red tape and internal politics were also listed as being stifling, as one interviewee succinctly relayed it: "Money. Cynicism. Money. Fear. Money. Laziness. Bureaucracy. Money. Bean counters." However, ongoing financial support relieves the mind of thoughts of pennies, leaving room for pixels and punch cards.

### **Networking**

Interviewees also cited collegial networking as a benefit of academia. Davies comments that he has "access to opportunities that come with the networks of other artists and, being within an institution, I also think that there is a certain prestige that being an educator holds that being a mere artist does not." For Klabbers too, the contacts he has made through his work at the university have facilitated projects such as the Wagga Space Program and the UnSound festival (RT 64, p10). Klabbers explains that in "a small city like Wagga the university is very important to the economy and the wider community, especially the arts community." Cypher has "most definitely benefited from being employed by a university [because now he has] a truly international practice and [is] lucky enough to work with the smartest people...constantly engaged with ideas that have been the prime motivating force of [his] professional life".

### **Potential artist-students**

Davies recommends, "[a]rtists should be more involved with universities but it's a 2-way relationship. Universities must also support artists and allow and encourage students to work with artists. Mentorships should be more readily available to students." Klabbers recommends artists become students "for developing your critical faculties." Morrison offers tactical advice, specifying a degree-agnostic approach where you "[s]hop around and don't necessarily do a whole degree, but choose some courses from one, and some from another to gather the skills you need to do your own work." Likewise, Innocent champions a faculty-agnostic approach and cites the Master of Electronic Media Art (MEMA) at his institution that "is open to artists, designers, computer scientists and software engineers", which facilitates "interfaculty supervision across Art and Design and Information Technology."

And as for new media artists teaching new media art? All recommended it, with the caveat that it is not for all. It depends on the person, and whether they can live with a "growing together of diverse elements into a newly evolving entity, that never fully congeals" (description on Mark Cypher's website of his work *Concrescence*, *Beapworks*, 2006). It is probably prophetic that when the internet was being developed that although the creative exploits of the medium, such as Will Crowther and Don Woods' *Colossal Cave Adventure* (1973-77), were rife they were created in addition to official research. Funding went to strictly academic and military investigations and not to art. Perhaps in the current arts funding crisis and with the help of the new media artists cited in this article, academia has the potential to offer a new home for new media art.

Mark Cypher: [www.mcc.murdoch.edu.au](http://www.mcc.murdoch.edu.au)

Hugh Davies: [www.anat.org.au/pages/about\\_board.htm](http://www.anat.org.au/pages/about_board.htm)

Troy Innocent: [www.iconica.org/](http://www.iconica.org/)

Johannes Klabbers: [www.csu.edu.au/faculty/arts/vpa/staff/klabbers/index.html](http://www.csu.edu.au/faculty/arts/vpa/staff/klabbers/index.html)

Ann Morrison: <http://anmore.com.au>

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