Cultural Daily

Independent Voices, New Perspectives

Does Technology Have a Secret Sauce?

Catherine · Wednesday, February 12th, 2014

On one level, this is the story about how I – the most unlikely person on the planet – learned how to abandon my fear of code, embrace technology tools and consume enough Red Bull to win prizes at four Hackathons in six months. At the same time, I was awarded a US Patent for my invention of a new form of mobile entertainment. Not bad for a card-carrying member of the AARP. But the overall gist of this story is that if an old lady with dyslexia can pull it off, then why not you?

My descent into the world of technology began when I was 25 years old, a signed client at the William Morris Agency writing scripts for hit television series. After having the audacity to have children and sit out a few seasons to be a stay at home mom, I was quickly aged out of a job when the entertainment industry decided I had become too old and raising children had caused my brain to turn into a gelatinous substance incapable of meaningful thought. Having little other choice, I reinvented myself as a journalist and started covering digital media and the technology that supports it.

The digital world has a lot of fascinating “silos.” Rather than focus on one particular silo, I immersed myself in all of them. I learned how to spot the difference between a fad and a trend. I started to play around with predictive models and accumulated a significant accuracy ratio. In essence, I realized how to look at the big picture of media and technology and entertainment.

Imagine that you are building a car. You gather the engineers and the mechanics. You create or purchase the necessary parts. You even set up a packaging and fulfillment process that leads to the sales team. But you forget to consider the importance of the designers who will make the final product look and feel sexy or desirable, so what you wind up with is a functional machine that lacks a human element. This is the way that much of our technology is being developed. It also explains the fact that even though there are more than 4 million apps available to be downloaded onto your phone or tablet, we all seem to use the same 200 of them.

Technology is designed by Engineers and built by Software Designers. Attorneys protect the Intellectual Property. Information Technology teams keep the system running while Business Executives and Venture Capitalists create companies designed to exploit the technology. This is the template for thousands of tech startups that emerge every year, most of which fail quickly. The reason they fail is that all of these intelligent professionals are missing the key ingredient – the secret sauce that makes it all work.

The Secret Sauce is EMOTION.

The intersection of emotion and technology is, perhaps, best exemplified by Steve Jobs. He didn't build brand awareness by talking about mgs or ram because he knew that those concepts would scare the average consumer. Instead, he reached out to us through emotion. His shocking and perfectly timed 1984 Super Bowl commercial enabled us to feel like rebels, overthrowing the huge "system" (fill in the blank of what that means to you) and freeing our minds:. The subtext is that the Macintosh was so easy to use even a girl could do it. This was followed up by an appeal to the artist, creator and inventor inside of us through a commercial that honored "the crazy ones" who dare to "Think Different." While this commercial was released with a voice over by Richard Dreyfuss, Jobs also recorded a version with him doing the narration. In light of his passing, it lends a special poignancy to the message.

Formidable obstacles stand in the way of an artist's ability to successfully access technology. If you're over 35, you weren't born cable ready and you haven't had a computer or a video camera in your hands since you were a toddler. If you are a girl in the same age group, you probably had no reason to consider technology as a viable career option. To put it bluntly, when I was in graduate school (Florida, circa 1975) the guys who operated the computer lab at my university told me not to touch anything because I would break it. At the same time, as a girl in film school I was told in no uncertain terms that I could not direct films because girls don't direct. (Yes, they really said that.) So, after growing up in a world where ignorance is offered as conventional wisdom, turning to technology is probably not your first instinct.

That's where you make your big mistake. Technology NEEDS artists in all genres to bring the element of emotional meaning and desire into the equation. This is not, by the way, a secret. At every hackathon I've attended people are looking for graphic designers so that they can create an aesthetically appealing user interface. Data Scientists depend on graphic designers because nobody will read tables of data unless they are presented in the format of a visual story, aka infographic. But chances are, these opportunities were not discussed in your art classes.

On a more basic note, technology only succeeds when it involves a story. Rovio created dozens of unsuccessful games before striking gold with Angry Birds. Years earlier, they had built another game on the same software engine. Surely you remember the Flying Penguins game…no? Probably not. But when they added a simple story element – "The pigs stole our eggs! Let's get them!" – they added an element of "emotional value" to the player's score. On the other hand Dong Nguyen, creator of the iOS game Flappy Bird, was accused of using bots to generate thousands of positive reviews for his game. The allegation that he tricked the system created enough pressure for him to withdraw the game from circulation – in spite of the fact that he was allegedly earning $50,000.00/day from in-game advertising. Mind you, the game will continue to generate income for him from the millions of players who have already downloaded the game. Yet, the groundswell of controversy arose over a negative emotion. Presumably, our game developers will now be on guard: if you want us to play your games, you better play fair in the marketplace.

It is important to acknowledge the fact that the Secret Sauce of Emotion has a dark side – the primordial quicksand of FEAR. If you think technology is too complicated for you to figure out, then it will be. If you think that introducing technology into your creative equation will break the creative flow, then it will do just that. Fear of technology will become the security blanket that will prevent you from taking chances and moving toward the opportunities that technology offers for creative artists. But if you are willing to conquer those fears and willingly embrace the latest tech tools, you will be delighted to discover how quickly you can increase your professional standing.

Cultural Weekly’s Technology Edition

Guest Editor: Catherine Clinch

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Top image: Flappy Bird

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