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TechTalk

S E R V I N G T H E M I T C O M M U N I T Y

Hollywood designer urges focus, creativity before technology

Media lab artist: 'All bets are off in pop culture'

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Alex McDowell, production designer of "Charlie and the Chocolate Factory" (2005) and "The Corpse Bride" (2005), has two views of the future. He could just lock himself up in a room and dream things up for the screen. Or, he could sit down with experts working on actual new technologies. Add a dose of imagination, and he will have a fantasy of the future with believability.



Alex McDowell

That was McDowell's approach when helping to create the look of the year 2054 for Steven Spielberg's sci-fi saga "Minority Report," released in 2002. And it's his approach this day as he studies the undulating lines projected on a screen in the MIT Media Lab, where McDowell is a visiting artist.

Across the table, graduate students Mike Fabio and Steve Pliam manipulate the image, which represents the centerpiece machine of the robotic opera "Death and the Powers." "Powers" is composed by Tod Machover, professor of media arts and sciences, with a libretto by Robert Pinsky, former U.S. poet laureate; it is being produced by the Media Lab staff.

"How much vertical movement would we get out of the rotation?" asks McDowell in his soft-spoken British accent, as he peers through thick, post-punk glasses.

Fabio turns the image with a laptop as the three discuss how to make the machine, dubbed "the chandelier," both dramatic and functional.

The Los Angeles-based McDowell has been invited to be a visiting artist at the MIT Media Lab to work on "Death and the Powers," scheduled to premiere in 2008. His challenge is to help design an instrument that not only can be "played" but will function as an emotive character in the opera.

The challenge is in keeping with his eclectic resume. His other credits include some of Hollywood's most visually innovative films, including "The Lawnmower Man" (1992), "The Crow" (1994), "Fight Club" (2002) and "The Terminal" (2004). He also worked on "Bee Movie," an upcoming animated feature with Jerry Seinfeld.

A conversation with McDowell can be an A-list exercise in name-dropping, but the innovative designer who integrates both digital and traditional techniques in his work speaks eloquently about the future of popular entertainment with pointers for MIT students who want to

venture into this brave new world.

"I think that it's important now for people coming into the entertainment or pop culture business to know that all bets are off," McDowell said. "We don't necessarily know that filmmaking as we know it will exist in few years. We don't know that gaming is going to look the way it (now) looks or TV is going to look the way it looks. There is no doubt that there is convergence happening through these various media."

For starters, McDowell recommends that universities rethink the way film or set design is taught. "I don't think you can teach film design as it is traditionally taught without fundamentally understanding how animation works, how gaming works, how environmental design works."

McDowell's career underscores his advice. He lived his first seven years in Indonesia before attending British Quaker boarding schools. He later studied painting at the Central School of Art in London. His work designing album covers for punk rock bands led to production design for music videos and commercials. Eventually, he branched into feature films. Married and the father of two children, he is currently designing a massive multiplayer online game for children.

He has worked with directors like Tim Burton, who has "a lovely perverse joy with things that are creepy and crawly." For Spielberg, he started designing the sets of "Minority Report" even before a movie script was done. "We designed a whole world with only a synopsis of an idea—the script started writing to some of the rules of the world," such as the vertical car chase sequence.

For "The Terminal," in which Tom Hanks' character is trapped in political limbo and forced to live in an L.A. airport for months, the challenge was "placing a fairy tale, an absolutely fantastical story, in a completely grounded, contemporary reality story," he said. "You cannot possibly spend two nights in an airport, let alone 11 months." So the design had to find "some believable set of rules."

Likewise, even the fantasy world of cartoons needs a dose of realism. The animated "Bee Movie" had to reflect the relationship between two societies: New York City and the hive—"a fully functioning society inside the hive, with the queen and workers," he said. "The premise is bees are a little more advanced than humans; they can talk, they have a full, functioning society—they just don't let us know."



GRAPHIC COURTESY / ALEX McDOWELL

Innovative production designer Alex McDowell views the movie, gaming and publishing fields as a multilayered, mandala-like production world. He is currently designing sets for Tod Machover's robotic opera, "Death and the Powers."

Echoing a theme often cited by other MIT media experts, McDowell sees entertainment as more than an interlude for amusement. "We are all engaged, whether on 'Lost' or 'Minority Report' or 'World of Warcraft,' in creating a world for an audience," he said. "And it's a narrative world. And I think design is coming front and center to all this."

It's not a question of new filmmaking techniques or technologies. Indeed, over-reliance on special effects can detract from a film's impact: witness the way-too-long battle scenes in "The Lord of the Rings" trilogy, McDowell said. "It's time for us filmmakers to restrain ourselves and use the tools to do sophisticated storytelling as opposed to just look what we can do if we just press this button."

While McDowell has worked for a wide range of directors, perhaps the one trait they had in common was "an obsessive personal vision." Thus, students interested in filmmaking should work on forging their own vision, not simply mastering various software skills. No one, he insisted, can predict what filmmaking (or TV or game) technology will be standard in the future.

"You couldn't even begin to predict what technical skills you might need. I was trained as a painter and I'm engaged in entirely three-dimensional problems for 20 years," he said. "The painting was about learning how the creative process works. I think you learn the intellectual language of the subject."

"The thing I love about the Media Lab is that it's never about the technology. It's about what you do with it."