# Next-Gen *Arts* in Academics

BY MELISSA NOWAKOWSKI

As most art is now produced and consumed in digital formats, the next generation of artists is fine-tuning their talents to meet the changing conditions and complexities of the digital age. In Oshawa, Ont., **Durham College** and **Ontario Tech University** provide students with a unique blend of creative exploration with digital media know-how.

When one thinks of post-secondary arts programs, fine arts, theatre, music and creative writing are the first things to come to mind. However, with digital media prominent in today's arts scene, new programming has garnered a spot in the faculty of arts at universities and colleges in the Durham Region.

Take Durham College, for example. The Animation — Digital Production and Game — Art programs at this Oshawa-based college, both three-year advanced diploma programs, were created in the early 2000s and have since become more specialized to reflect the changing needs of their respective industries. "Animation has always been really popular, but it's more technical than people think," says Barry Waite, executive dean for the Faculty of Media Art and Design (MAD). "When you think of the entire pipeline in terms of everything from modelling through lighting, how you bring the characters to life, and in terms of storytelling, it requires artistic talent and also technical skills."

Unlike many other post-secondary programs that run for two years and focus on 2D animation only, Durham College's Animation – Digital Production program focuses on both 2D and 3D animation. (2D animation is the more traditional form, whereas 3D animation creates computer-generated digital objects to mimic a 3D world, like Pixar's *Toy Story*). Skills in 3D animation certainly open doors in television and film but also create opportunities in other industries, such as real estate (digital walk-throughs of buildings) and marketing (like digital avatars for point-of-sale pieces in retail). "If you've got imagination, the sky's the limit in terms of the different stuff you can do with animation," Waite adds.

Much of the animation work at Durham College takes place in two innovative, software-equipped labs, and there are opportunities to collaborate with other educational streams like Game — Art or Film Motion Design

and additional facilities, like the Mixed Reality Capture Studio (MRC). Students are also exposed to work-integrated learning, which means they can work on real-life projects while completing their studies. For example, animation student Kera Mahmood participated in an internship with Guru Studios in the fall of 2022 and winter of 2023, where she worked on the infamous children's television cartoon *Paw Patrol.*

While the Animation program is centred around art for film and television, its Game — Art program is focused on training artists for the games industry. Students in this program use their artistic talents to create characters and realistic environments for digital games. The program combines aspects similar to animation, like lighting and rigging, with creating digital drawings using specialized tablets or "digital canvas" and "digital brushes" to bring characters and their detailed environments to life. "Our game students are really interested in creating what I like to describe as 'fantastical worlds,'" Waite explains, "They bring these incredible characters and settings to life, and then they take those worlds to programmers to take care of the coding and hardwiring of the games."

These "fantastical worlds" have spurred numerous success stories from the Game — Art program. Most notably, students from this program have won Ubisoft Toronto's NEXT competition in the 3D Design category two years in a row. Earlier this year, student Melissa Friesen was one of them, taking home first place for her haunting depiction of the inside of a psychic's shop. This

win earned her a paid internship at Ubisoft Toronto.

"Our Game — Art students winning the Ubisoft NEXT competition is a testament to the combination of skills they develop inside the classroom and with hands-on learning opportunities," Waite says, "but also to the amount of work that these students put into creating these incredible and creative gaming environments."

Animation isn't the only art form to have become digitized. Fine art, music and even storytelling have also found a digital presence. Visual artists are expected to have websites that showcase their work, and negotiating digital royalties with publishers for audio and online books has become the norm. On-stage music and theatrical performances are live-streamed, and television programs and films are streamed through online platforms like Netflix and Disney+. E-commerce and technology giants like Amazon and Apple have added an entertainment studio and distributor division to their roster of services. Even gamers can now be found on platforms like Twitch and YouTube, and online influencers utilize social media platforms like Instagram and TikTok to express themselves and share their thoughts and ideas.

In Oshawa, Ont., Ontario Tech University's Communications and Digital Media Studies (CDMS) program delves into the economic, social and cultural influences of various digital technologies and creative media forms. This cutting-edge program was developed to empower students to understand the digital world and creatively and conscientiously



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use the tools of the digital age to share stories and make positive social change.

Part of the CDMS's interdisciplinary focus is the "digital disruption" to the creative, arts and entertainment industries and the strategic communications fields.

"Digital media has disrupted the traditional models of creating and bringing art forms to the public and the market," says Dr. Tanner Mirrlees, director of Communication and Digital Media Studies. "From social media platforms to smartphones, digital media software and hardware have become integral to the creation, publication, distribution, exhibition and consumption of various art forms."

The CDMS program fosters an interdisciplinary understanding of digital media arts in society. Its courses, guided

by professors and creators alike, explore digital media's interactions with industry and internet business models, politics, laws and creative policies, emerging technologies, changes in audience preferences, and a wide range of social, ethical and cultural topics.

The Bachelor of Arts with Honours in Creativity, Digital Arts and Entertainment Industries, one of two Bachelor of Arts with Honours programs offered in the CDMS program, explores the business of the creative industries. It covers the legal, policy and regulatory landscape that influences creative work on the internet, as well as the design, communication and societal impacts of digital ideas, images and stories. Students in the CDMS program can also access experiential work opportunities, like practicum placements and intern-

ships and the Faculty of Social Science and Humanities' Creator Studio, where students learn to pitch, incubate and create multimedia products, from podcasts to web series.

The list of success stories from the CDMS program is long, including Saad Khan, a 2016 graduate who has built a career in brand marketing at Shopify, specializing in social media marketing strategy, content production and creative direction.

"The CDMS program holds immense significance for students seeking to explore the popular arts in contemporary society," Mirrlees says. "As creativity permeates the world's largest and fastest-growing industries, including Hollywood and Silicon Valley, it has become an integral part of our society and is central to numerous careers." ✳