

Wednesday 20 December 2017

Occasional Address delivered by Curtis Wong at UniSA Graduation Ceremony

Before I begin, I would like to acknowledge and thank:

- Mr Jim McDowell, Chancellor
- Professor David Lloyd, Vice Chancellor and President
- Members of the University Council
- Academic and administrative members of UniSA
- Ladies and Gentlemen,
- And MOST OF ALL My fellow graduates today!

I have a little secret to share with you. Even though I've worked for some of the biggest technology companies in the US, I'm really not that interested in technology for its own sake.

What has interested me is how we can leverage technology to explore new worlds, create new learning experiences, share and preserve culture and to empower people to do things they never imagined they could do.

I created Art Museum.net in 1998 because great art exhibitions were like theater before the invention of film. If you happened to live in cities like NY, LONDON, PARIS you are blessed with a plethora of choices of what to see but if you lived in a remote area of the country, you would have very few such exhibitions coming to town.

ArtMuseum.net was conceived to deliver great cultural experiences to people everywhere by recreating the virtual experience of a great art exhibition where you could take the same guided tour from the physical exhibition and walk around to examine each painting to see a brushstroke. My favorite feature was to take photo postcards in the virtual museum with a link to invite friends to join you in the virtual museum.

AMN featured exhibitions from the National Gallery of Art, the Whitney, the Van Gogh and other museums before the .com bubble burst. While tragic, that ambitious first effort, paved the way for art museums to do more with technology to enhance and expand access to culture more broadly around the world via the Web

A decade later I started work on a new project called WorldWide Telescope or WWT. This time, the museum space is the Universe and the paintings are objects in the sky. WWT featured a seamless visible light view of the night sky that is a trillion pixels in resolution where you can see the entire sky or quickly zoom into the heart of a distant galaxy. There are more than 85 other sky surveys from infrared to gamma ray that reveal structures that are uniquely visible in specific parts of the electromagnetic spectrum.

You could find the familiar constellation of Orion in the sky and quickly zoom into a fuzzy patch below the belt to reveal details in the highest resolution Hubble imagery of the Orion Nebula to see new solar systems forming and the birth of a new star peeking out of a disk of dust where new planets will form.

Just as easily you could fly through the canyons of Mars and out of the Milky Way to see a million other galaxies that define the large scale structure of the Universe. You can select any of those galaxies to pull out the spectra and download much more data from the SDSS database about that specific galaxy.

I love stories, so we built an authoring environment in WWT where anyone can create a guided tour to places in the Solar System or the Universe, complete with music & narration to make a tour and share it with other WWT users around the world.

While both of those projects leveraged a lot of technology to simplify access to massive data and science quality imagery, it was designed to be simple enough for a young child. In fact the very first published tour was by Benjamin who was 6 years old and he talks about his love for the Ring nebula and how it will eventually spawn new planets.

What I love about both of these projects is that through stories, you get drawn into understanding the objects whether they are paintings or nebula. As you hear more stories about objects, you begin to understand the larger context of the inter-relatedness of what were once random objects and begin to see the larger constructs that form the foundations of the world of art or the larger patterns and structures of the Universe itself.

These two projects were my own experiments to explore how technology can inspire and inform. I very much look forward to seeing what you will do in your respective fields in the years ahead, sharing stories to inspire, inform and engage all of us to make the world a better place.

Congratulations to all of you graduates!!