

The FilmTech Experience

[Project Proposal for Funding from Interdisciplinary Innovations Fund]

Project Leaders

Roger Cook, Director of Film Studies Program

Jeffrey Uhlmann, Associate Professor of Computer Science

Brief Project Description

This project brings together students and faculty from several departments and programs in three different colleges, as well as staff from the Missouri Film Office and Student Life to work collaboratively on a feature film project. The filmmaking venture will enable students to use cutting-edge information technology on a competitive industry project and to gain professional experience and credits in the entertainment field. It will also open up new interdisciplinary areas of curriculum, both in the various major fields and with the new Film Production course that will be offered in Spring 2009 in conjunction with the project.

Endorsements:

Michael O'Brien, Dean
College of Arts and Science

James Thompson, Dean
College of Engineering

Stephen Jorgensen, Dean
College of Human Environmental Sciences

Ruth Brent, Chair
Department of Architectural Studies

Kitty Dickerson, Chair
Department of Textile and Apparel
Management

Clyde Ruffin, Chair
Theatre Department

Mark Lucas, Director
Department of Student Life

Goals And Objectives:

The goal of this project—The FilmTech Experience—is to engage students in a feature film project which introduces them to the information technology tools that are critical to every phase of the production process. Specifically, what distinguishes filmmaking from theater and stage production is the critical role of technology: software for scheduling the order in which scenes are filmed to maximize efficiency; web-based collaboration tools for planning and production management; CAD/CAM tools for visualizing wardrobe and set designs; high-definition camera for recording digital video and audio; software for editing the digital audio and video; computer animation systems for creating digital effects; and hardware and software for final color processing and surround-sound audio mix. Students today are already familiar with a wide array of tools for manipulating digital images, MP3 audio, and digital video; however, they lack the experience necessary to understand how such tools can be integrated within a project to produce a full-scale, marketable multimedia product such as a feature-length film. The objective of our project is to immerse students from a broad range of academic areas—including art, set design, computer graphics, acting, music, textiles and apparel management, and creative writing—in a full-scale film production so that they will have the experience, technical skills, and confidence necessary to undertake projects on their own in the future. Immediate opportunities for applying this experience include the campus iLife Challenge and Silver Screen competitions, as well as national and international contests for student film projects. The educational value of a film production is its scale of integrated effort constrained by a fixed budget. Typical technology courses cover relatively narrow topics, e.g., computer animation, divorced from their real-world applications. This means that students are never forced to consider, e.g., when it is more cost-effective to digitally animate a part of a filmed scene or to animate the entire scene. A unique feature of this project is that it guarantees that students will see the entire lifecycle of the production through to its entry into the marketplace at major film festivals around the world. Critics' reviews and audience feedback (e.g., from IMDb viewer comments) will allow project participants to assess the tradeoffs made and to apply lessons-learned to future projects. There is no substitute for the experience of making decisions within the constraints of a fixed budget and seeing the consequences of those decisions. There is also no substitute for the level of interest and contagious enthusiasm that we have seen from students who participated on past film productions associated with the university to motivate them to seriously consider the entrepreneurial opportunities of making their own films. The Missouri Film Office was relocated to the MU campus because the state believes that the synergy between higher education and filmmaking will yield significant economic development dividends in the future. This project will further that goal. The project is also expected to spur interdisciplinary cooperation among departments across campus to facilitate future on-campus film productions (possibly annually) that can become self-financing and ultimately revenue-generating. To achieve the goals and objectives stated above, we request support in the amount of \$25,000 which (in combination with promised matching funds and in-kind support) will cover the cost of specialized technology, outside technical expertise, an on-campus course, and certain production-related expenses.

Description:

The FilmTech Experience brings together students from different academic disciplines, departments and colleges to work collaboratively on a filmmaking project. The students will work in teams under the guidance of faculty members and industry professionals with practical filmmaking experience. Teams will be formed to work on the following areas of the film: set design, art design, musical score, script revision and dialogue, computer graphic imaging and special effects, and wardrobe design and production. The faculty mentors from the participating departments (Architectural Studies, Art, Computer Science, English, Film Studies, IT Program, Music, Textile and Apparel Management, Theatre) will provide guidance and expertise, but the creative impulses and ideas should be generated by the students themselves.

The basis for the project is a film script for a sequel to a film that was produced at MU and is now screening at major film festivals around the world. The process and basic timeline for the new project will follow the same successful pattern of the previous film: planning and pre-production in fall semester 2008; preliminary production work during spring semester 2009; and shooting of the film in early summer 2009. We will recruit students and form teams in the respective areas during fall 2008.

The success of the IT Program in establishing a cutting-edge curriculum of technology for digital film and entertainment provides a unique and solid foundation for this project. Its recognition that film production is as much an engineering exercise as it is an artistic endeavor is a radical departure from traditional film and theater programs. As mentioned in an article on the program in *MovieMaker* magazine (the highest-circulation film magazine in the world), the University of Missouri-Columbia is the only university in the nation that produces a feature film each year as part of such an entertainment technology program.

The requested funding from the Interdisciplinary Innovations Fund will provide the impetus to get programs from other colleges (programs traditionally engaged in creative endeavors such as film) integrally involved in this unique program with its innovative entrepreneurial learning component. The IT Program with assistance from other learning technology units (ET@MO and DoIT) will help students from these programs use state-of-the-art information technology in their work on the film. This includes CAD/CAM tools for visualizing wardrobe and set designs; high-definition camera for recording digital video and audio; software for editing the digital audio and video; computer animation systems for creating digital effects; and hardware and software for final color processing and surround-sound audio mix.

The student teams will be responsible for designing and executing important areas of the film production. This will require the teams in the different areas to coordinate their efforts in conjunction with the overall creative vision and the work of the other teams. For example, teams in art design and set design will have to work together closely with the each other and the key members of the filmmaking team (director, cinematographer, etc.). This process will help students learn how to adapt their creative ideas and work to an extensive collaborative project and the demands of the commercial culture industry.

In conjunction with the student teams we will also offer a new Film Production course taught by an industry professional with industry experience. Students participating in the production teams will be given priority for enrolling in the course. The course will instruct students on the coordination of production areas in the filmmaking process, the roles and responsibilities on a film set, and the use of equipment. The instructor will also help in the supervision of participating students in the actual production.

In addition to providing an innovative learning experience, a critical aspect of the project is to introduce the elements of entrepreneurship to participating students. The goal of the project is to produce a profitable product, i.e., a film that generates revenue in excess of its production cost. This means that decisions made in every production area must justify costs in terms of impact on the marketability of the film. In many cases, the best approach for reducing costs and improving production quality involves the judicious use of information technologies. This includes computer software to schedule filming to minimize the number of shooting days; computer displays to visualize options for designing and decorating sets; and of course software for producing editing, visual effects, and audio-video mastering. In the end, students will also be able to see how the final product fares in the marketplace and assess how and why (based on reviews from film festival judges and prospective distributors) it succeeded or failed.

This is not to be a one-time interdisciplinary project. Rather it is designed to launch an ongoing collaboration of programs that fit in naturally with IT's media and entertainment emphasis.

Management Plan:

The project will run through academic year 2008-09 and into the first part of summer 2009.

Timetable and Phases:

September 2008 — Screenings of two films made on-campus in collaboration with the IT Program (*Mil Mascaras: Resurrection* [2007] and *Academy of Doom* [2007]) will serve as a kick-off and recruiting event for the project. Plans for the screenings—either at the Missouri Theater or Jesse Hall—are already in preparation by the Missouri Student Association independent of the Interdisciplinary Innovation proposal. Arranged by Jeffrey Uhlmann; recruiting efforts organized by Roger Cook.

Fall Semester 2008 — Formation of the student teams and enrollment of students in the Film Production course. Where appropriate, students can arrange with faculty for course credit or course project credit for other courses. Directed by Roger Cook.

Early December 2008 — A pre-production meeting of all student and faculty participants with the filmmaking team to lay out a production plan and timeline for the spring. Organized by Jeffrey Uhlmann and Roger Cook.

Early Spring Semester 2009 — A final pre-production meeting of all participants to finalize the timeline and plan collaboration between the various teams and filmmakers. Organized by Jeffrey Uhlmann.

April 2009 – Begin film production. Organized by Jeffrey Uhlmann.

June 2009 – End film production / Begin Editing and Post-Production. Organized by Jeffrey Uhlmann and Roger Cook.

Summer 2009 — Roger Cook and Jeffrey Uhlmann write the outcome report.

September 2009 – Submit finished film to local and international film festivals prospective distributors; disseminate feedback from festivals and distributors as it is received to all project participants. Organized by Roger Cook and Jeffrey Uhlmann.

Evaluation Criteria:

The project should be evaluated according to the following criteria:

The extent to which students were able to incorporate new information technology tools into their work on the film.

Signs of growth in the knowledge, skills, and creative vision of the student participants—the participating faculty members in each field will be asked to evaluate their students in this regard.

The extent to which students become involved in the production teams, carry through with the work throughout the entire production process, and contribute to the film in a way that shows tangible results, including film credits that can bolster student résumés.

The effectiveness of the new Film Production course and its viability for the future. The idea is to make this a regular spring semester course associated with an annual film project. Both student evaluations and assessment by faculty engaged in the project will be used to evaluate the course.

The development of new approaches to teaching the various disciplines that can be applied in the future, either in connection to another film project or to other areas of applied learning.

The value of the project as a resource for course credit in the students' major areas.

The ability to bring students and faculty from different disciplines together in a way that has continuing benefits for interdisciplinary collaboration.

The success of the film itself and the sustainability of the project as an ongoing venture. The expectation is to refine the project and repeat it the following year, funded by revenues from earlier films.

The ability to attract outside funding for future projects (another indicator of the success of the entrepreneurial effort) to augment the revenues from earlier films.

Budget:Funding:

\$25,000	ITF award
\$10,000	matching funds from IT Program/Computer Science Department
\$5,000	matching funds from the College of Engineering
\$1,000	matching funds from Missouri Students Association
\$1,000	matching funds from Student Life
<hr/>	
\$42,000	Total

In-kind Support (with approximate dollar figures):

\$8,000	10% effort of Project Leader, Roger Cook, Film Studies Program
\$40,000	50% effort of Project Leader, Jeffrey Uhlmann, Computer Science Department, who will lead the IT Program involvement in the production
\$40,000	50% effort of another Computer Science Department faculty member This will be the second IT Program person involved in the production
\$4,000	5% effort of Kannappan Palaniappan, Computer Science He has been a co-producer on one film and associate producer on others
\$9,000	5% effort each of Participating Faculty Members from Architectural Studies (Newton D'Souza), Textile and Apparel Management (Pamela Norum), and Theatre (Heather Carter)
\$4,000	10% effort of Kathy Murray, Assistant Director, Student Life
<hr/>	
\$105,000	Total

Other in-kind contributors without a percentage or dollar amount attached to the efforts include: Thomas McKenney, Professor of Music (Composition), Jerry Jones, Director of the Missouri Film Office, Andrea Sporic, Project Coordinator, Missouri Film Office, Student Volunteers from Student Life

Costs:

\$10,000	Professional support for film production work. To the extent that we can cover these responsibilities with in-house people these funds will be redirected to material costs.
\$8,000	Production equipment to complement what will be provided by the College of Engineering.
\$8,000	Instructor of Film Production course / On-set supervisor of students
\$12,000	Material resources for sets, art and wardrobe
\$4,000	Miscellaneous expenses that arise during shooting
<hr/>	
\$42,000	Total