**Two students in UCSC's new graduate program in Digital Arts and New Media make C-SPAN interactive**

# Pixels in the Public Interest

By **Scott Rappaport**

One evening last year, UC Santa Cruz graduate student Abram Stern logged on to the C-SPAN web site to gather information for an art project. Stern knew that the cable television network had been providing live, gavel-to-gavel coverage of U.S. Senate and House of Representatives proceedings for more than two decades as a public service, and he was looking to obtain some older footage from its archive.

But Stern made an interesting discovery. He found that footage from the House and Senate floor is only posted on the C-SPAN web site for one week—with the size of the video image slightly larger than a postage stamp. You can't keep it, store it, or use it in any way. But you can buy it from C-SPAN—at prices ranging from $3,450 for a two-day, nine-hour, and 27-minute 1988 Senate session about federal election campaign financing, to $29.95 for a four-minute piece of footage from a 2004 House proceeding.

A student in UCSC's new Digital Arts and New Media graduate program (DANM), Stern shared his finding with a fellow classmate, Michael Dale. Both students were doing research on the structure and organization of archives, and they were amazed that a comprehensive public record of the country's congressional proceedings did not exist on a free, user-friendly web site.

In response, they hatched a new plan for their thesis project—to create an enhanced and easy-to-access archive of the video feed from the C-SPAN sessions on the House and Senate floor, the only part of the network's wide-ranging footage that legally resides in the public domain.

The project would be ambitious: They would capture the feed of C-SPAN's static coverage of the House and Senate sessions, design a system that would enable particpants to add contextual layers of information to the footage, and create a foundation for long-term access and modification.

Like *Wikipedia,* the popular communal online encyclopedia, the archive would be designed as a nonpartisan, open-source web site that applies innovative technology and art for the public good. "It's about opening up access to the public," Dale says. "It shouldn't take a multimillion-dollar corporation to do that anymore."

Stern and Dale will both earn master of fine arts degrees in June along with 11 other candidates as the first graduating class of UCSC's DANM program. Students and faculty are drawn to the program from a wide variety of disciplines including the humanities, computer engineering, arts, and social sciences.

"The goal is to enlarge our collective imagination through an investigation of the boundaries and possibilities of digital art and new media," says theater arts professor and DANM faculty member James Bierman, who helped write the proposal that launched the program.

The two students' project is a prime example of the program's potential. Their archive—which they began collecting on January 1—has been creatively configured to become a flexible tool that can be used for both educational and artistic purposes.

When users visit *www.metavid.org,* they will be able to watch the C-SPAN footage, add a number of enhancements created by Stern and Dale, or manipulate the students' templates to create original overlays and links of the user's choosing.

For example, by adding a list of campaign contributors to the screen of a senator giving a persuasive speech about a major energy bill, the site could be used by political watchdog groups, teachers, and voters seeking information. Or, as senators debate a war-funding bill, direct links can be added to search engines that provide the most widely read blogs written about the bill.

The students built their own computers for the project to meet the tremendous storage needs of the archive—which requires space to record up to 16 hours of video a day, five days a week. "There are also lots of technical reasons for building your own computers," notes Dale. "For example, if one of your hard drives goes down, the others can kick in so you have uninterrupted footage."

Stern and Dale employ a TV capture card—a TiVo-like recording device—to store the C-SPAN footage on their computers. They utilize free software and the Linux open-source operating system to make the project universally adaptable. "Someone, for example, could download the source code and modify it to launch a system that covers their own town's city council meetings," says Dale.

But Stern notes that the archive is more than just a research tool. It also has almost unlimited potential for artists and humorists. "If someone is so inclined, they could average out the collective images of Senate faces to get a composite face representing a senator from the Republican or Democratic Party," adds Stern. "Or set up a comic overlay of a report card grading the literacy level of a particular politician. The possibilities are virtually infinite."

After Stern and Dale graduate, the archive will continue to be maintained by DANM under the supervision of assistant professor of film and digital media Warren Sack. "My intention is to keep the project going—the web site will stay on a server in my Social Computing Lab," notes Sack. "I think it's a great project; they found something that should be a public resource. And public universities like UCSC should be able to host projects like this that are in the public interest."

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