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Technology

Musing Over Art App Is Enhancing Museums

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The Hays Free Press of Buda, Texas

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The process of naming the Texas State University-created iPhone application for museums called Musing was "long and drawn out," said Grayson Lawrence, assistant professor in the university's School of Art and Design.

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"It kinda came together at the very last minute," Lawrence said, adding that the year-long process of creating the app culminated in mid-September when it became available as a free download. "We spent a lot of time trying and failing."

What started with "amuse" led to "muse" and many other names for the app that were rejected by Mary Michael Stump, Texas State art gallery coordinator, Lawrence remembered.

But what is in a name?

Musing, an augmented reality app that allows museum visitors to scan artworks in order to learn about the historical, political and social meanings behind art through a variety of mediums, launched in September in the University Galleries at Texas State to accompany Houston-based artist Eric Zimmerman's exhibition titled "West of the Hudson."

The month-long exhibition, which ended earlier this month, featured a collection of drawings and sculptural objects, among others.

Lawrence said there are other cell phone apps that experiment with augmented reality, like Ikea and Google. He said Stump suggested this be the next step in their collaboration, which began with incorporating QR codes that are scanned by smartphones in a previous gallery exhibit.

"Augmented reality is where you use the phone's camera to show something in the world," he said. "Using the view-finder, the program places an object or information over this live camera feed."

People's understanding of modern art may be furthered through the use of the interactive Musing app, Lawrence said. The creation of the app was a collaborative effort between Texas State's School of Art and Design and the Department of Computer Science.

"It's really kinda crazy stuff, which is also way over our heads in the art department," said Lawrence."... It's not just making it work, making it look good and branding it, but then when you also scan the painting, it's gotta do something."

While Lawrence was the app's designer and Stump worked on its content, Dan Tamir,

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Texas State associate professor of computer science, was responsible for the user's experience.

Tamir said he was approached by Lawrence several years ago about having the two disciplines collaborate on graduate-level courses to reflect what is happening in the industries of both fields.

This multidisciplinary approach attracted the attention of their respective college deans and department chairs, who gave them the green light to work on the app. Funding was provided through a Texas State Research Enhancement Program Grant.

The year-long project was also an opportunity for two Texas State undergraduate students to obtain professional hands-on experience in the computer science field.

Gentry Atkinson, Texas State computer science senior, said he was hired last spring as a part-time research assistant by Tamir, a former professor of his.

"We had no idea what we were doing," said Atkinson, referring to his and Kevin Whiteside's experience in creating cell phone apps.

While there were hurdles, Atkinson said the work paid off when the app could recognize Zimmerman's art.

"It was pretty great to see it working out in the wild," he said.

Lawrence said Tamir helped and guided Atkinson and Whiteside, who did the majority of the work on the development and programming side.

"Many times I identify talent early," said Tamir of his decision to hire Atkinson and Whiteside."... My philosophy is a lot of this stuff you can learn on your own or with direction."

The project has received additional university funding for next semester to enhance the app, Tamir said, in hopes of having it incorporated in museum and gallery exhibitions across the state.

Lawrence said the team is working on an Android version of the app, with a tentative summer release. He said there are also plans to incorporate the app in a February exhibition in the University Galleries at Texas State.

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ORIGINAL PUBLICATION DATE: DECEMBER 4, 2013

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