

Three grad students sit in a glass-walled room on the eastern edge of MIT's campus, huddled around a Mac. One of them reaches for the mouse and, opening up a crude painting program, absently sketches a glass of water. As air bubbles begin swirling around the glass's yellow straw, the three—Burak Arikan, Brent Fitzgerald and Amber Frid-Jimenez—try to explain how MIT's Media Lab is going to save art. >>

OPENSTUDIO

HOW MIT IS GOING TO SAVE ART

BY PAUL MCMORROW | PAUL@WEEKLYDIG.COM PHOTOS BY DEREK KOUYOUJIAN

>> “Suppose your kid tells you he wants to be an artist,” Fitzgerald says. “For you, it’s a dismaying thing to hear—there’s no economic future in it. Creativity is valued in our society, but it isn’t economically rewarding. We want to see how creativity can play a role in an economy.”

Arikan, Fitzgerald and Frid-Jimenez are three principal developers of OPENSTUDIO, a year-old online research project of the Media Lab's Physical Language Workshop. (The project's other two senior partners, Kelly Norton and Annie Ding, apparently preferred soaking up gorgeous summer weather to enduring a reporter's queries.) Together, the five have cast OPENSTUDIO as an online artistic community with its own closed, fictitious economy—a digital economy that, its founders hope, will successfully meld capitalism with creativity and collaboration.

How does it work? OPENSTUDIO fuses art galleries and online social-networking systems with social research and economics. Artists create, buy, sell and collect digital art using Java-based freeware and a closed economy based on a fictional currency (the Burak, annotated as β). And by studying the little artist rats as they scurry around in their online environment, Arikan says, Media Lab researchers hope to uncover “economic models for digital art.”

The whole experiment began modestly enough, Fitzgerald says, with an inquiry into whether MIT could create “web-based alternatives to Photoshop.” In the digital age, he says, “One of the first impediments to creativity is the cost of the tools. But if you have an online community, you can take advantage of [free] tools that exist in a networked environment.”

From that point, the OPENSTUDIO crew began wrestling with the bigger questions. Even if they could leverage cheap creative tools, they reasoned that the basic economics of digital art would prove prohibitive to all but a small coterie of artists. This, the OPENSTUDIO folks argue, is a result of a shift in the way art is created and commodified. In the past, to eat, artists not only had to create, they also had to find suitably deep-pocketed individuals to buy their creations. Then the internet came along, took an already outdated artist/patron model and smashed it to pieces.

“How do you evaluate the worth of a digital image?” Frid-Jimenez asks.

“If you grab something for free off a Google image search, you’re taking away that image’s worth.”

“If any digital image can be copied and sold,” Arikan adds, “what does that mean for the digital artist? Art should always be open to the public. [But digital art] doesn’t feed into the [traditional] capitalist world. Since you can copy it and distribute it freely, the question is, how do you support yourself? That’s what we’re exploring here.”

By imposing an artificial economy on the OPENSTUDIO community, researchers can map out systems for economically supporting creativity. Artists receive an initial $\beta 50$ stipend for joining OPENSTUDIO; that money can be hoarded away, or it can be used to buy artwork, which is then hung in one’s own digital gallery. After they receive their initial $\beta 50$ in seed money, however, artists can only generate capital by creating and selling their own art, or by “flipping” purchased art for a profit. To survive, participants can’t just create art; they must create art that others value enough to buy.

It’s an old-fashioned capitalist idea, and one that closely mirrors the classic artist-patron paradigm. However, in the real world, patrons and investors are buying tangible, collectable goods. OPENSTUDIO is applying capitalist economics to intangible, digital art—images that anyone in the online community can see. Members essentially buy and trade creativity. And yet, OPENSTUDIO has developed a social model that encourages economic activity.

“People build up economic and creative connections,” Fitzgerald says. “There’s a value in connecting people—like social capital.”

“Social capital is very important,” Arikan adds. “If you buy something from John and put it up in your gallery, you’re saying you’re interested in what he does, you value his art. [Exhibiting] lets others see what people are interested in. And when you buy something, you buy the whole discourse around the image, not just the piece itself.”

Participating artists are also trading rights and processes. When an OPENSTUDIO member buys a piece of art, that member is purchasing the rights to alter, pirate or even mutilate the digital image. OPENSTUDIO servers track these changes, so viewers can track an image’s history.

ACTUAL ARTWORK

