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Course at Northwestern U. Melds Theatrical Improvisation and Digital-Media Design
By Thomas Bartlett
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SYLLABUS COLUMN
A bike messenger is hit by a car. The driver, a doctor, climbs out of his Mercedes SUV to see if the messenger is hurt.

What happens next depends on the actors.

Because this is improvisational theater, there is no script. The actors, who are undergraduates in **Kathryn Farley** and **Dan Zellner's** class, "**Projects in Art and Technology: Multimedia Improvisation**," make it up as they go along.

In this course, students at Northwestern University learn about both the time-honored art of improv and the relatively new art of digital-media design. In the bike-messenger scene, for instance, video of the Mercedes SUV is projected on a screen behind the two actors. The tape was shot and edited by students, who also operate the projection equipment during performances. "Improv has a history and rules, but it also has this kind of malleable form that is perfect for integration with digital technologies," says Ms. Farley, a lecturer in the Center for Art and Technology at Northwestern.

Ms. Farley, who has performed at the Second City theater in Chicago and is a cousin of the late actor and comedian Chris Farley, says the inspiration for the course came from her own artistic work, which combines digital media and improvisation. She and Mr. Zellner, a multimedia-services specialist at the university and a playwright, designed the interdisciplinary course for students who were new both to performing in front of an audience and to working with digital media.

More than 50 students vied for the 15 spots in the class. The instructors had each applicant write a short essay explaining why he or she wanted in. "We weren't interested in how much experience they had, but in how open they were to trying new things," says Ms. Farley.

The class is going well, the instructors say, despite a few bumps along the way. "When you work with technology, there are always going to be challenges, but all in all it's been good," says Mr. Zellner. "It's fun to watch students putting their hands on the technology and seeing the different things they can do with it."

Students say:

"It's definitely been one of my favorite classes at Northwestern," says **Win-Sie Tow**, a junior majoring in radio, television, and film. "It's really more like two classes combined in one."

Reading list:

Assigned books include *Commedia Dell'Arte: An Actor's Handbook* (Routledge, 1994) and *Hamlet on the Holodeck: The Future of Narrative in Cyberspace* (MIT Press, 1998).

Assignments:

Each student writes a proposal for a production that would use improvisation and digital media.
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New Class Blends Digital Design with Improv Theater-Multimedia Improvisation to Pursue 'Deeper Meaning' in Comedic Scenes

By Lindsay Sakraida
Northwestern Daily News
May 22, 2003

The worlds of technology and performance arts will come together next fall in a class college students will only find at Northwestern. Multimedia improvisation, a new class offered through the Center for Art and Technology, will use digital media design to complement comedic improvisation -- a topic that has generated interest among students. "There are plenty of universities that offer classes in digital media design and others which focus on teaching improvisational methods, but this is the only course in any university which combines both," said Kathryn Farley, a graduate student studying theatre who is one of the class instructors.

Farley said she will teach students how to combine improvisational acting techniques with digital media by projecting images onto a portable screen behind the actors. In the class, students will be challenged to develop characters and storylines instead of going for cheap laughs, she said. "I often felt frustrated by the pressure to pursue quick laughs on stage, rather than having the patience to penetrate the material for deeper meaning," said Farley, who has performed at two Chicago improv clubs, Second City and the Annoyance Theater.

Farley and **Dan Zellner**, a multimedia services specialist at NU, developed the experimental curriculum for the center. Zellner said he hopes the class will challenge students of all academic backgrounds to expand their ideas of traditional theater. "I hope (students) take away a new concept for theater so that they don't get too locked into one idea of what theater can be," Zellner said. Students will study theoretical perspectives on

digital techniques while working on scenes they develop themselves, Farley said. The final performance will be a piece drawing on familiar Chicago characters, places and narratives to formulate a comedic tale of ambition and power.

Zellner said he is also planning to give students a chance to understand how their skills can be used in the acting industry by providing visits from experts, although none have been booked to come. "The biggest division is between the theory itself and the applied part," Zellner said. "You have to adjust your style (to the new medium)."

Zellner and Farley have received inquiries from nearly 30 students interested in taking the class from departments as diverse as computer science, history and mechanical engineering as well as performance studies and theatre. Only 15 spots are available, Farley said. Registration began this week for Fall Quarter classes and continues until mid-September. "What I hope is that they have an appreciation for theater and what it can do as an art form (when) applied to other disciplines," said Zellner.

Kurt Cason, a Weinberg freshman, said he hopes to bring a new perspective to the class because he's not the typical performance student. "A lot of great people in comedy come from different backgrounds," said Cason, who is undecided about his major but came to NU planning to prepare for medical school. "A lot of inspiration can trace back from those origins."