

TRENDS AND OBSERVATIONS

Painting with pixels

BY RAUNO PERTTU



Rauno Perttu

Our accelerating technological revolution is continually changing our lives. We all see it happening, but we rarely stop to recognize and appreciate the fundamental nature of many of these changes. I want to comment on a couple of obvious areas of technological advancement that have changed our world and our daily routines, and to touch on a change that may not be as obvious.

We all recognize the changes that have occurred over the past century, not just in music, but also in how we listen to music. A hundred years ago, if you wanted to hear music, your only practical options were to find a live performance or learn to play an instrument or to sing yourself. By the time we “graysters” were growing up, we had other options. We heard our music on phonograph records, radio and television. By the mid-1960s, technology started replacing our records with tape cassettes, which were replaced by CD players 25 years later.

Compact discs have now gone the same way as the cassette and vinyl records. On my last birthday, my daughter Emily told me I should join the modern age and gifted me an iPod digital music player, which is just a bit smaller and much thinner than a deck of cards. Most of my previous CD library is already uploaded to this tiny device, and with more time and effort digitizing, all of our old vinyl records will fit on it as well. As novel and impressive as this still is to me, I expect our methods of storing and playing music to continue to evolve and improve.

Another, perhaps more fundamental way technology has changed and continues to change our lives is in our use of computers. When I was young, computers were strange wall-sized machines with blinking lights, used mostly by IBM for mysterious calculations and by science fiction writers and moviemakers as wondrous aids to launching and operating

space ships or as evil entities seeking to rule or destroy our world. With the creation of personal desktop computers with automated programming, PCs quickly became a necessary tool and toy for many people. Soon, computer games and online communication moved many kids from outdoor activities to the depths of their bedrooms, and many relationships evolved from face-to-face to screen-to-screen. PCs also changed the way we receive and seek out information, replacing many traditional roles of libraries while creating new ones for them and opening up the world to all of us in ways not possible before. We can judge for ourselves which parts of this are for the better or for the worse.

Researchers are already working to replace the laptop, which I thought was just invented yesterday, with one small lightweight device that will replace everything we used to carry or even even thought about carrying.

One early victim of this technical change is the wristwatch. While I, as a “semigeezer,” would feel slightly naked without my wristwatch, a large and growing number of younger people don’t even own a watch. They use their phones to tell time, and also to check the weather, send and receive e-mails, check the stock market, catch the news, etc. Small wonder printed newspapers are disappearing.

While not as obvious as these other changes, I see another change in full bloom.

I’ve recently rediscovered my long-neglected passion for oil painting. When I was young, I almost chose to major in art, but fell in love with geology, and decided geology would provide more certainty of eating. Being a starving artist didn’t really appeal to me. After years of not making the time, I’ve recently started setting up my easel again.

I’ve always felt strongly that the

development of the camera profoundly impacted art, and painting in particular. Before the development of the camera, paintings were the primary visual way to preserve people, places, events and memories. I don’t think it was an accident that Impressionism and all of the non-representational art movements that followed coincided with the development of photography and film. Photography provided a more efficient and visually accurate way of preserving faces and events. Artists conceded much of their former role as recorders of visual history to photographers, and expanded into the new realms of modern art. They went through a crisis of trying to redefine their relevance to the modern world. I think we are culturally richer for that artistic crisis and what it triggered.

As a result of new technological advances, the art world may be going through another crisis. The new challenge is coming from the impressive advances in computer graphics. Hopefully, when the pixels settle, we will again be culturally enriched.

When I look at the spectacular effects achievable using computer graphics,

whether in modern films, in visual art, or even in the new video games my son shares with me from

time to time, I recognize that traditional artists are being challenged. I personally think we old weekend painters—and even professional painters—could become novelties. At some near-future time, paintings may be replaced by digital artwork, some of which is very good. It may not be very long before we replace paintings on our walls with flat screens, or their next technological descendent. These screens could change their images as often as desired, and could incorporate motion, sound, and much more.

It’s clear to me that digital art has become a new mainstream of art. Just as

new devices for music that are easier to use and more flexible have replaced earlier devices on a continuing basis, I believe similar changes are happening to art. Digital art allows people to create their visions on a computer screen without the need of a brush or paint. Although different skills and tools are used, the results can be more precise, varied and striking than can ever be accomplished with a brush.

Technology is changing the art world, but I think even more profound changes are yet to come. I am impressed with the art coming from the growing community of digital artists. They have the ability to incorporate movement and sound into their visual images, expanding their options further. It’s clear that continuing technological advances will allow artists to blur the boundaries between art and other media, and eventually even between art and what we consider reality.

If you are unfamiliar with digital art, you can get a feel for the variety of this art on your computer by googling “digital art” or “CG art” and exploring from there. Alternatively (and don’t be scared off by the site’s

name), www.deviantart.com is perhaps at the core of this new art culture and a great place to start looking. The cliché “It’s a changing world” is an understatement.

Meanwhile, I will continue to use my oils and brushes. It’s what I learned when I was young, and recently rediscovered. There are moments, however, when I look at the dramatic effects those digital artists can create and wish, “*If only I could do that with a brush.*”

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