

Beyond Tradition

STEPHEN FOSTER, ASSOCIATE PROFESSOR, VISUAL ARTS

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Visual, video and media artist Stephen Foster explores identity politics by combining his expertise in new media with an interest in documentary as an art form—it's research that examines the connections between documentary and new media, and the effects of combining the two.

According to Foster, documentaries traditionally follow a fixed formula—often a single narrative theme dictates the linear nature of the documentary content. When new media is applied to documentary the entire process becomes much more inclusive and the interpretations become much broader. Web-based technology has increased interactivity, as well as the expectations for interactivity from an audience's perspective.

"When you make a documentary you shape the content by the way you present it, which raises issues or politics of representation in art," says Foster. At the same time, the application of new media to documentary allows for what Foster defines as "multi-level shared responsibility of authorship" to occur. The community participants, the author, and the audience all apply unique filters to the content and essentially everyone shares in the authorship of the end product.

"No longer just consumers or simply the objects of representation, but now active subjects and producers of visual art, individuals and communities are actively seeking ways of using things like video to mediate understandings of their lives," says Foster.

One community pursuing the potential applications

of new media is the Prince George Métis Elders Society (PGMES), which approached Foster and Indigenous Studies colleague Mike Evans to develop an interactive DVD documentary.

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The PGMES DVD project not only creates a visual record in digital video for future generations, but also serves as an artistic expression and interpretation of Métis culture, something that until recently was uncommon.

"The opportunity for many people at the margins of majority ethnicity and mainstream society to speak to others through video is extremely limited," says Foster.

The development of indigenous media in recent years challenges the stereotype that indigenous productions are exclusively traditional in nature. Ultimately, Foster and colleagues seek to produce a work that embraces traditional documentary film, yet simultaneously provides avenues to disrupt such traditions.

"We seek to complicate the representations coming from this program by using participatory techniques to share the power to produce coherent narratives with our community collaborators," he says. "Such power-sharing operates at the level of process and product, and ultimately, through the use of new media technologies."

