Intelligent Art, Artificial Intelligence: Grad student uses technology to build community connections

BY JULIE SIEVERS
OFFICE OF GRADUATE STUDIES

Ask Harold Chaput what artificial intelligence and digital technology have to do with real people and their lives, and he'll show you the passion that drives his work.

For his dissertation, Chaput is building better robots by studying how infants learn. With Dr. Les Cohen, director of UT's Children's Research Laboratory, Chaput has drawn on the fields of psychology, neuroscience and computer science to develop a neural model of infants' cognitive development.
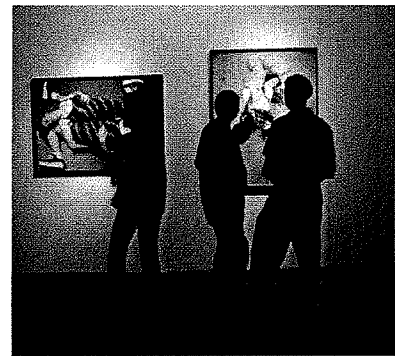
"If we can understand how infants develop the ability to understand and manipulate their environment," Chaput said, "then we will have unlocked a mystery central to human intelligence."

Working with both Dr. Risto Miikkulainen's Neural Networks Research Group as well as Dr. Benjamin Kuipers' Robot Lab, Chaput plugs his computer model into autonomous robots, letting the robots learn about the world just as human infants do. With an infant's powerful learning strategies, Chaput hopes his robots will become smarter, more versatile and more reliable.

In 1997, Chaput founded the Austin Museum of Digital Art (AMODA). The non-profit AMODA is the first museum in the world to focus exclusively on digital art. It holds monthly art events, semi-annual exhibitions and works with local youth organizations to give them access to digital art and technology.

Chaput's work with AMODA also introduced him to The Griffin School, a private high school for at-risk youth. A member of the school's advisory board, Chaput has taught several classes, including "Computer Programming," "Web Design" and

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"20th Century Art & Music."

In January 2000, Chaput also joined fellow student Tal Tversky to found the Forum for Artificial Intelligence, a lecture series designed to keep UT researchers informed about the scientific, cultural and ethical issues surrounding artificial intelligence.