Social Interaction and New Media

With a device that fits into the palm of my hand, I can chat face to face with a friend halfway across the globe, or access entire libraries of information. I can dictate messages and reminders, control basic functions of the device, and even goad some snarky responses from the software. My phone isn’t just a machine. It’s my connection to friends, and oftentimes a friend all on its own. This interaction intrigues me, because, when reduced to their barest components, aren’t phones and computers really just highly ordered patterns of dots, responding to the whims of zeroes and ones? How do humans create intimate, but seemingly nonchalant, attachments with a computer? In an age when people can converse with complete anonymity, or converse via avatar representations of themselves, has social interaction been fundamentally changed, or has it just taken on a new dimension? Social interaction has only been formally studied for the past hundred years, but the emergence of new media creates a series of questions that lead me to believe that the research might never be over. The world seems to become more digitally immersed, and I hope to pursue an individualized major that will give me the tools to start figuring out how the emergence of this new media has, and is, affecting human interaction.

Answering these questions of changing interaction demands an interdisciplinary approach. Initially, I hoped to study Computer Science and minor in Psychology, but this plan of study focused on software engineering and lacked the human component – my approach treats the computer as a fascinating and dynamic tool, but a tool nonetheless. Thus, rather than designing efficient algorithms, I would like to learn about the human factors that make software intuitive. A psychology degree alone seems to focus on individual perspectives, and can’t necessarily accommodate the cultural, philosophical, and aesthetic factors that are involved in the interaction between a human and a novel medium. Thus, I hope that, in addition to a Psychology major, I can combine these bodies of knowledge to create an individualized major in Social Interaction and New Media.
My plan of study spans Psychology, Sociology, Anthropology, Communications, Comparative Literature, and Philosophy. My coursework in the social sciences provides some information about the fundamentals of human interaction with courses like Social Psychology, Social Theory, and Social Anthropology giving a variety of perspectives on the subject. More specialized courses like Effects of Mass Media, Communication Technology and Social Change, Human Factors Design, and an independent study in Anthropology of Media will help to connect these social theories to the sphere of media. By including Philosophy in my plan of study, I’ve given myself the opportunity to face some of the ethical challenges involved in robotics and social networking, for example, while also establishing the ontology of actual versus virtual reality, or the aesthetics of an interface. My work in Comparative Literature would focus on media studies, and understanding the role that new media has played in the canon of human creation. I have also found courses entitled “French Global Civilization” and “Homer” that have a focus on video games in culture and education respectively.

With this varied coursework, I believe that I’ve created a compelling body of knowledge that would allow me to pursue my inquiry at the graduate level with an openness and aptitude for interdisciplinary study. Alone, each of these disciplines provides a unique, but necessarily limited, perspective. Together, however, I can take the hard data from the social sciences and use it to say something compelling about abstract theories like those found in media studies, aesthetics, or metaphysics. In the opposite direction, the meticulous process of experimentation in the social sciences provides a valuable insight into the way social interaction works. With a broad exposure to the humanities and a varied background in social science, I imagine that the experiments could become more complex and ultimately provide more accurate results about the subtleties of human interaction. Philosophy, for example, provides rationality and thought experiments as its primary source of proof, and the understanding of that process and the logical ambiguities inherent in value judgments allows for understanding. In a way, I believe that this humanistic background could even help avoid experimental
error – or more seriously, unethical behavior in the experimentation process. Ultimately, various disciplines have tried to come up with a satisfactory answer to the question of how humans interact with the world, and an understanding of that variety should provide breadth that will create a holistic depth in my future work in graduate school, and beyond.

Outside of the classroom, I will be working as a Research Assistant in a lab in the Center for Health, Intervention and Prevention, studying sexual risk behaviors in virtual environments. This opportunity will allow me to get practical experience in research and programming while also analyzing the social problem of family planning and HIV risk behavior. I am also working to become more involved in the topic of digital humanities by attending workshops and conferences whenever possible, and hopefully using my last year and a half at the University to contribute to the program in some way. I am also working to find time to pursue an internship at the ESI Design Firm. My study abroad experience in France and the Conference on Ethics in America have seriously impacted my approach to this major, if not my direct plan of study, by making me think of culture and, of course, ethics.

As my interest in media studies grow, I find myself at the intersection of social sciences, humanities, and to an extent, engineering. I hope that this individualized major, in conjunction with a major in Psychology and programming experience, will provide an interdisciplinary background that allows me to ask innovative questions about human interaction and media studies. I hope to attend graduate school for Human-Computer Interaction or a social science department that deals with the topic of Human-Computer Interaction, and I’m confident that the varied perspectives will help create new lenses for identifying and solving the problems of researching this new field. I hope that one day, I won’t simply wonder at the interface between my computer and myself, or marvel at the social interactions of a guild on a popular online multiplayer game. Instead, I would like to analyze them and understand the subtle ways in which ones and zeroes mimic communication.