

Striving For Truth

The Ars Electronica Model

Introduction

Located in Linz, Austria, [Ars Electronica](#) is an internationally unique centre for digital media, technology and culture. The innovative model consists of four divisions: an avant-garde festival, a competition to showcase artistic excellence, a museum dedicated to imparting knowledge of digital media and culture and a media art lab. Since 1979, Ars Electronica is defined by its quest for innovation, focusing on the nexus of art, society and technology – how they change and their relationships. Ars Electronica has been a catalyst for regeneration in the city of Linz, showcasing it to the world as a hub of progress and innovation. This unique model has paved the way for an entirely new model of collaboration to take place between culture, business and academia that most UK organisations could certainly learn from.

The exhibition

The [Ars Electronica Center](#) is a unique structure, both architecturally and functionally; the building itself is of a unique design with no parallel edges, while the content inside is culturally unparalleled. The building is the museum aspect of the Ars Electronica model, and contains 3,000m² of space for exhibits, 400m² for seminars and conferences, a 1,000m² plaza for open air events, as well as catering facilities. At the core is a 1,000m² gallery with interactive exhibitions designed to stimulate scientists, artists and school children alike. The exhibition showcases new technological developments and digital art installations/pieces and aims to educate visitors on the relevance of these artistic and technological developments to their own lives.

For example, an exhibit entitled '[Funky Pixels](#)' is a response to the way digital technology creates an alternative view of humankind as we construct doppelgangers of ourselves through digital communications. An exhibition entitled '[Artists, Creators, Engineers](#)' features a new form of art which bridges design, technology, science and entertainment to illustrate how our media-based society is shaped. One of the artworks, named '[100 Erikas](#)', consists of one hundred portraits designing different identities for pop idol Erika Sawajiri, symbolising the different identities we can also create online.

Another exhibit, '[Deep Space](#)', focuses on CAVE technology (a visual computerised environment), allowing visitors to interact with their artistic environment in ways only possible through new technology. '[Extreme Resolution Images](#)' gives a new perspective on some of the masterpieces of art history such as [Leonardo da Vinci's 'Last Supper'](#), as a few square millimetres of the image can be enlarged up to 16x9 metres. As the original in Milan can only be visited by small groups for a very short time and from a distance, the digital replication invites a free study of the intricacies that would

previously not be visible. Other images available include an aerial photograph of [Barack Obama's inauguration ceremony](#) taken through the clouds above. The GeoEye-1 technology is capable of discerning objects on the ground as small as 0.41 metres. Both of these show the potential of how digital technology can affect cultural memory and perception.

The festival

The second component of the Ars Electronica model is the annual [Festival](#), which first took place on September 18 1979 spotlighting the beginning of the digital revolution. By staying ahead of the curve, it has since grown into one of the world's foremost media art festivals, growing from 20 artists and technologists in 1979 to 484 speakers and artists from 25 countries in 2008. This is one of the reasons why the Festival is so important – its international appeal and audience. The most recent Festival was entitled 'Human Nature', symbolising the fact that technology not only allows us to change our environment, but also the fundamentals of life itself. The Festival exists with the support of partnerships from many organisations, such as the European Commission, IKEA and Sony DADC.

The competition

The third part is the [Prix Ars Electronica](#), a competition organised by Ars Electronica Linz GmbH and ORF's Upper Austria Regional Studio in collaboration with the OK Center for Contemporary Art and the Brucknerhaus Linz. This competition offers the largest cash prize for cyberarts worldwide and each year six Golden Nicas, twelve Awards of Distinction and approximately 70 Honorary Mentions are presented. There are seven categories: Computer Animation/Film/FX, Interactive Art, Digital Musics, Hybrid Art, Digital Communities, u19- Freestyle Computing and [the next idea] grant. Prominent artists and scholars make up the jury.

One recent winner of the Golden Nica for Digital Communities is Piratbyrå (Pirate Bureau), a Swedish organisation that supports the individual in the fight against copyright and intellectual property through the sharing of information and cultural artefacts. These are issues we will encounter later in these studies concerning digital content and part of Ars Electronica's successful business model is undoubtedly linked to their recognition and forward looking approach to the issues and opportunities presented by digital technologies.

Although these are art prizes they are frequently pushing technology's capabilities and have commercial application, which the Ars Electronica network helps facilitate. Ars Electronica is a vital stage in the process of this technology coming to market – which is really pushed by the FutureLab.

The FutureLab

The final component of Ars Electronica is the '[FutureLab](#)', which aims to formulate and implement the future manifestations of the interaction between art, technology and society. Bringing together concepts of artistry and scientific research, it is a workspace for researchers, artists, technologists and academics to work together on commercial research & development commissions. This is decidedly different to most other working models that exist today to tackle the collision between science and art.

Here, the emphasis is on ‘Shared Creativity’, the only other close example is that of the Pervasive Media Studio at Watershed which is explored later on in this paper.

FutureLab is the commercial component to Ars Electronica as the projects they work on are funded and commissioned by the commercial sector. For example the Vodafone group research & development department commissioned them to develop an [e-newspaper](#) which combines traditional media with new consumer behaviours. The product allows readers to browse through the newspaper’s sections, pages and articles by rotating the open double-page screen. All it takes to swap newspaper content is to stack the sending and receiving devices on top of one another.

Their expertise are in virtual and augmented reality and FutureLab has completed work for SAP (featured later in this paper), Siemens, Mobilkom Austria, the University of Linz, MIT Media Lab and the Brucknerhaus Linz.

Conclusions

Ars Electronica is not just about partnerships between culture and technology, but about the full application of the potential of this technology for sustainable business. In our discussion of collaboration between arts organisations and businesses, we should keep in mind the philosophy at the heart of Ars Electronica:

‘That what human beings have always found most fascinating has been themselves—a fascination that has also exerted a spellbinding attraction on art and science, two varieties of one and the same striving for the truth about our world and ourselves.’¹

It does have a unique business model – a physical space, events and festivals for animation and focus, research & development facilities – all of which cross-fertilise one another in terms of ideas, products and staff. Cross-disciplinary ways of working and knowledge transfers are at the heart of the concept and key to its growing success. Maybe this is a model for digital art organisations of the future – combining the true artistic and commercial potential of its capabilities.

¹ www.aec.at