



New Look

## **Belfast woman gears up for European multi-media conference**

**By Shanna McNair**

BELFAST (Aug 4): Conceive of a world where all change happens through the will of your imagination. Imagine parents, teachers and doctors are trying to compartmentalize your life; they sense you have unusual power.

Your unusual power comes out when you have magic seizures that give you the ability to transform everything. You're a 5-year-old girl named Essien and the main character of a new video game called "Breakdown."

"It's more of a concept, really. We're still planning out exactly how the game will go," said Belfast dweller Margaretha Haughwout, a creator of the game. Breakdown, she stressed, though still being worked over and cultivated, is completely protected by copyright law.



Belfastian and University of Maine student  
Margaretha Haughwout.

Haughwout is one of four members of the team and has just been chosen by her U-Maine professor, Dr. Joline Blais, to help represent the team in Linz, Austria at the prestigious Ars Electronica conference. Other members of the game team are Kristen Murphy, Shannon

Thompson and Nathaniel Bates, all U-Maine students in Blais' Narrative/Game/Theory class, where the seeds of Breakdown were planted around four months ago.

Haughwout, Murphy, Blais and John Bell have received funding from the multi-media department at U-Maine to go to Ars for the conference in early September. Haughwout spoke passionately about the messages popular video games give.

"Most popular video games on the market portray some kind of power fantasy," she said. She went on to point out that in these action games, killing equals winning in the fantasy. Further, the common gaming impetus of anger contrives a warlike backdrop.

Haughwout said Breakdown has "some degree of action, some degree of anger," but that the modus operandi has nothing to do with whipping out a gun and blasting your opponent. In Breakdown, your opponents may seem to be the outside figures of parents, teachers and doctors, but what's truly to be rallied against in this game are the mind's constructs, the struggle against confines that dull the imagination.

The game pushes the envelope of virtual space in this way; what is reality, imagination seen and unseen and the life of the mind as art.

The theme or topic at Ars this year centers on code and is called, "Code -- The Language of Our Time."

Blais chose Breakdown for its unusual narrative code. For the gaming world, she said this 5-year-old girl with tremendous personal power that can destroy and create entire worlds, "like an Indian Siva," is remarkable. Other students in class were building "Quake"-like games, she said, but a child -- a girl with that much power was more terrifying to them than their own army scenarios.

Blais said that code is life and law, both in virtual and sensual worlds, citing the code of DNA as an example. To further elaborate on the importance of narrative and story, she said, "A story is not the same as a plot -- a plot is invisible to us, the shape of the plot determines the narrative. Breakdown has a rigorous sense of plot."

Haughwout will be present at Ars not only to explain the workings and psychology behind the Breakdown concept but to talk about the future of multi-media in light of the ostensibly new global communications of the internet.

Other items to be discussed by those invited to Ars are an artificial intelligence (AI) webcreature named "Alice," who through a range of programmed features "lives and explores" within the web. Alice is saddened by the state of the Internet, especially by advertising. Bell did much of the coding for the webcreature.

Bell also worked extensively on another project to be presented at Ars, called "The Pool," which Blais describes as a virtual community for distributed creativity. Blais lists a fourth project as "Internet2@UMe, a broad-band protocol for connecting university artists, researchers and faculty."

This year's Ars conference will be Blais' third. She got her students and those involved in U-Maine's New Media Society "turned on by what they saw" when she presented some work from Ars last Fall.

"Students come into New Media (class) thinking they'll learn about web page design and video," Blais said. "But when they saw what came out of Ars -- they saw examples of real creativity in animation. And they saw computers talking to each other and the audience,"

Blais said.

Blais said the New Media Society submitted "Alice" to a number of categories of contests at Ars this year.

"They didn't win the contest – but it would be like winning the new media Olympic gold," she laughed. Blais connected UMO to Ars anyway, sending a letter of interest and receiving an invitation to show the "collage of four projects." Blais "lobbied pretty strongly" to get funding, and some is coming from her own pocket.

"Ars is one of the major media venues in the world, if not the major venue. They have a permanent collection, exhibitions, conferences – they're at the cutting edge of field. I believe it's also fully funded by the town, by Linz."

Blais and the students have been invited to set up in Ars' "Electro-Lobby" and "Electro-Lobby Kitchen," choice spaces at the conference, Blais explained, as only six to a dozen from around the world get to be there to share their projects.

Blais said there was a bar students had to meet criteria-wise, in order to maintain the strongest presence possible at Ars. Students has to have: passion for the subject, be well articulated, know the deeper issues including connections to politics, ideology, aesthetics, and be able to truly make connection with others, to reach out.

Blais said that she would have "liked to have sent all involved in Breakdown," but said it wasn't possible. Blais had to select only few for the four projects being presented at Ars.

"All the students chosen have those characteristics. But Margaretha can speak on two of the four projects that are going, since she was also involved with Internet2," Blais said.

"Linz was a sleepy town along the Danube and now it's a multi-media center, modeled around this sort of information economy. We hope to spark that kind of thing here in our communities -- I hope it just snowballs here." Blais said.

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- Visit the ["Breakdown" website](#).
  - [Ars Electronica website](#).
  - To donate to the Linz trip, please call 581-4477.
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Based in Belfast, Shanna McNair can be reached at 338-0484 or by e-mail at [smcnair@VillageSoup.com](mailto:smcnair@VillageSoup.com).

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