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## Interview with David Gillette

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David Gillette

## INTERVIEW WITH DAVID GILLETTE

Phil Fetzer

*Q. Please tell us a little about yourself.*

A. I was born in Loveland, Colorado where my father was working for the forest service. Most of my family was from the western slope. I entered the University of Iowa majoring in Broadcasting and Film with a minor in Latin American anthropology. I intended to make documentary films after leaving school.

After graduation, I arrived in Ireland with a few dollars in my pocket and eventually found work with a small theatre company that produced a wide range of plays from Shakespeare to Beckett. I enjoyed that very much but eventually returned to the United States and ended up in Arizona where I made television commercials and then went to Iowa where I produced an early-morning news and music radio show for a local NPR station. Before long I found myself in Japan teaching English. After a few years in Japan, I returned to the United States to work toward a master's degree in creative writing from the University of New Mexico (UNM). I continued my studies at the university and received my English Ph.D. from UNM, specializing in rhetoric and the history of the novel. At the same time, I helped form a small technical writing company with Jonathan Price in which we wrote books about different software systems and worked as documentation consultants with places like Claris, Apple, HP, and for some New Mexican corporations. My work as a technical writer, and my savings from my teaching in Japan helped pay for graduate school. While teaching as a graduate student at UNM, I taught some of the university's first classes in hypermedia and electronic text. The year I graduated with my Ph.D. and started looking for a university-level teaching position, hypertext study was a hot topic and allowed me to secure my first teaching position at the University of Central Florida, in Orlando. I taught technical communication and digital media design in Florida for six years, then in Fall 2001, I took my current position here with the Cal Poly English Department.

*Q. What's your definition of "technology"?*

A. One of the broader definitions of this term, one that I find useful for my classes and research, is that technology is something we have created outside of ourselves, outside the human form, to interact with the environment that surrounds us. I consider practically anything we create as a type of "technology." Writing, by this definition, can be considered a form of technology, and to some degree we might even consider a good deal of our language as a technological creation. With this broad definition of technology in mind, the study of technology, therefore, becomes a study of the human condition. We are, in many ways, the creation of our tools and our tools are a reflection of how we see ourselves as a society and as individuals.

*Q. How did you get interested in technology?*

A. I have always been interested in writing, film and theatre, both for their narratives and for the technologies they use to present their stories. I love the smell of the pages in an old book, the feel of a well-worn cover in my hands—like most bibliophiles, I am very attached to the technology of the book I am also a film fanatic. Film is more clearly a technological medium, and so is, to a large extent, most live theatre. I guess at the core I'm a nerdy guy, a "techie," who is interested in how things are put together; how to put a story together, how to film a scene, how to block a sword fight, how to make the witch appear in the middle of an audience.

From the limited experience I have had with commercial film and theater, I find that most good artists are also good technicians. My fascination with the "nuts and bolts" of things is probably why I love magic shows, and admire elaborate con artistry and seamless slight of hand—all of which are probably the ultimate combination of storytelling, technology, artistry and commerce.

Computers are now becoming a key technological component in the evolution of the arts, storytelling, and presentation. And of course, computers are also connected to commerce, and are at the same time an interesting mix of magic and con artistry.

When we talk about the "arts" standing apart from technology that makes me nervous because I feel that statement is simplistic, and clearly untrue. The statement also makes me question depth or seriousness of the art involved. If art is to be concerned with life, with the nature of being human, then it is certainly, to a great degree, engaged with technology.

Artists should be interested in the tools they use, they should be intimately familiar with their paints, their brushes, the ink they use, the quality of the paper their stories are printed on. They should be interested in the technologies that surround them, both in their positive and negative aspects.

My father spent most of his life as a working artist, as a photojournalist and as a photojournalism professor. All of my summers and a good deal of my free time as a child were consumed by helping my father as we traveled from story to story. My job was to load cameras, record interviews, set up lights, and basically run his equipment. He is a good photographer, a good artist, but also a great technician so this childhood experience certainly informs most of what I now think about the arts and technology.

*Q. Why should liberal arts faculty and students be interested in technology?*

A. We fool ourselves as members of the liberal arts if we say "We're not technicians." We use technology so fluently, as such an intimate part of most of our creative work, that we often forget that we're using technology. As an example of this, I often tell my classes about an incident related in a book by Henry Petroski, at the start of his book about the history of the pencil. Petroski talks about when Thoreau went into the woods he wrote down a list of the items, the technologies, he intended to bring with him: string, an ax, paper, pins, needle, thread, , matches, and soap. He left off one thing from the list—his pencil, a technology he was apparently never without, something so essential to who he was as a writer, as a thinker, it never occurred to him to "remind" himself to bring it along in his quest to be alone.

As we adapt to our technological creations, as we integrate them into how we talk, how we express ourselves, in how we record our histories and how we tell our lies, we forget about these devices, these “things,” and they instead become part of ourselves, they become ubiquitous, invisible, and we only begin to notice them in their absence.

*Q. Is technology alienating us from ourselves?*

A. We certainly have created some “alien technologies,” over time. Technologies that are so new, so unusual, so powerful, they seem to certainly be inhuman, not part of us, alien, frightening, and dangerous. Because many of us are not warriors, are not trained to kill each other, we therefore focus on the technologies of warfare when we speak about the dangers of technology, the atom bomb, nerve gas, the gun, the sword, the catapult.

We are more conflicted about technologies we use to talk with each other. It seems the more we use something for communication, the less we fear it, the less alien it becomes. For example, when the phone was first invented it was an accepted notion that people would only use the awkward, “alien” device for emergency situations, not for the warmth of a casual or deeply personal conversation. We now talk about cell phones being “isolating” or “rude,” but they are only continuing the progression that was initiated when people first began using the phone for more than the occasional “formal” announcement or for making a call of distress. We adapt to our technologies, they change us in the process as they also adapt to us, evolve, change, and become more “human.”

Desktop computers were initially not designed to serve as message machines, as text-based telephones, but it is hard to imagine computers now without also thinking about the communication network that connects them, a network, a connection, that allows us to talk with each other about everything from the official, the silly, to the deeply personal. Computers appeared to have limited application at first, or at least were intended for very specific purposes that mostly had to do with crunching large amounts of statistical data. Now we use them for dating, for talking to our kids, for gambling, for looking at fish in someone’s fish bowl on a desk somewhere in Russia. Who knew?

Computers are now casually used as a key component in the visual arts, for mixing music, for building interactive theatrical experiences, and for storytelling of every form. They are becoming more personal, more human, and eventually will become invisible and we’ll forget we have them around. We will only notice them when we go into the woods without them. Will that be a terrible thing? Probably not. Will that be a good thing? Will it make us “better” as human beings? Who knows.

The way computers and their related technologies change and influence us will depend on how artists comment on, accelerate, delay, and mold what happens as computers begin to vanish into who we are. *Interview took place on January 17, 2003.* 

*Philip Fetzer is a Professor and Chair of Political Science. He specializes in civil rights issues and is currently doing research on affirmative action in higher education. He recently contributed several essays to **Native Americans – A Political History** (CQ Press).*