

Business & Technology

Innovative student brings thesis to life

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Robert Nideffer's sociology doctoral thesis flies, sings, shouts and explodes.

UCSB sociology professors are touting it as the first doctoral thesis -- possibly in the nation -- submitted on CD-ROM.

Building on a longstanding drive to merge his artistic and academic interests, Nideffer decided on the unorthodox venture, but knew he had to find an appropriately visual topic for such interactive technology.

So for the past few years, Nideffer has been compiling and researching video clips, games, graphics and news reports revolving around the Persian Gulf War.

The finished product, a small disk holding thousands of images and words is called "Bodies, No-bodies and Anti-bodies at War: Operation Desert Storm and the Politics of the 'Real.'"

The thesis argues that critics of the war thought the public had lost touch with its reality because of the way it was portrayed by the media. Instead of morbid depictions of battle slaughter, the views were "more like a Nintendo game, high-tech, sanitized," said Nideffer, who lives in Goleta. He argues that what happened in the Gulf War was not unprecedented, but merely a variation on a theme.

The sounds of a CNN broadcast bring viewers into the text. Nideffer's face and voice appear on the screen, explaining the thesis chapters and giving a brief explanation of how to navigate the project.

The disk is rife with images, such as Iraqi President Saddam Hussein addressing his troops, President Bush addressing the nation and broadcast news reporters filing stories while Scud missiles strafe the skies overhead. The tiny image of a television screen allows viewers to click on channel or volume knobs, controlling information much like a real television.

"The images coming through the television into my living room were perfect," Nideffer, 31, said. "The beauty of working in a digital environment is that I had tremendous flexibility in terms of reworking the imagery."

In a bound paper thesis, readers are offered annotations for further research. On Nideffer's disk, the viewer merely clicks on a subject reference, and the image or text appears. For example, he wrote about a speech given by Bush, and the viewer can instantly see it on the computer screen.

"I wanted to link everything I was referencing in my text with the actual materials," he said. "So instead of people saying, 'Oh, that sounds interesting,' and having to go to the library to look it up, they just click on the referenced item and it takes you to the whole article, which the actual hard copy does not have. Which is why this whole thing is really meant to be experienced as CD-ROM. You can't get it any other way."

On a particular clip, Nideffer shows a U.S. pilot talking about an air strike he had just completed. His description, charged with the adrenaline of battle, "captures the pilot perspective in a way text never could," Nideffer said.

"I think it's a great project, even if there were no CD-ROM component," said Harvey Molotch, a UCSB sociology professor. "It's excellent work. The really inventive thing, which is the CD-ROM, has fantastic application."

Among the possibilities, Molotch explained, is the intense amount of documentation which could be included in one disk.

"There's just no end to it," he added. When writers address cultural phenomenon, Molotch said, "It's difficult to document what they're saying. You can say it was violent, there was innuendo that was salacious, or whatever argument you're making about it. As a writer, you can characterize it as best you can. As a reader,

you take the author's word for it unless you see it yourself. With this method, the reader can see it right then and there.



Robert Nideffer displays the CD-ROM disk containing his doctoral thesis on Operation Desert Storm. It is believed to be the first such use of interactive computer technology to earn a higher degree in the country.