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2010-04-28: It's a marketing system! It's a digital art enhancer!

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It's a marketing system! It's a digital art enhancer!



Prof. Russell Pensyl demonstrates his facial recognition technology with student Lauren Stornetta.
Photo by Lauren McFalls

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Imagine walking into a retail store and encountering a digital screen that instantly flashes tailored advertising to you in the blink of an eye. This clever marketing strategy is the result of innovative facial recognition technology being developed by W. Russell Pensyl, a professor of art and chair of Northeastern University's **Department of Art + Design**.

Pensyl describes the technology as "an unobtrusive, ubiquitous content delivery system" in which a camera scans a person's face and, using expansive libraries of comparable images, determines

the person's gender and approximate age. A screen in front of the shopper then loads and displays corresponding advertisements or other types of marketing or media content based on that profile.

The system can also detect whether the person is wearing glasses and if the person is smiling, and Pensyl hopes to develop the software to analyze other attributes, such as fashion sense and hairstyle. The key, he said, is to have an easy-to-use interface that is adaptable for future applications that may arise.

The technology has enormous potential and is ready to be shown to venture capitalists for the funding to bring it to the marketplace, said Pensyl.

"It can be anyplace in an environment, and it can play certain types of media content based off of the profile that we define," Pensyl said.

He also stressed that the technology operates in a run-time environment, meaning no information captured on camera is stored and collected. "Once they exit the frame, it's gone. There's no goal to do any data capturing," Pensyl said.

Other possible uses include observing shopping habits and shoppers' reactions to products and store layouts. In addition, a handheld device could be used to scan the products themselves and provide helpful background or comparison information.

However, this technology means more to Pensyl than just its commercial potential. He also plans to have his students work on interactive paintings that incorporate the technology. For instance, Pensyl said, in a digital painting of flowers, the flowers' age could mirror the age of the person viewing them. Or if the person viewing the painting is smiling, the flowers could blossom or the colors could become more vibrant.

"If this thing has commercial success, that's great. But as an artist and designer, I'm also interested in how to build cultural artifacts on top of the systems," he said.

For more information, please contact Greg St.Martin at 617-373-5463 or at g.stmartin@neu.edu.

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