

Theatre & Dance

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"Quantified Self" to premiere at CU Boulder's ATLAS Studio

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"Quantified Self", a new experience in technology, theatre and immersive storytelling, comes to CU-Boulder's ATLAS Studio

An expansive, immersive and interdisciplinary new project called "Quantified Self" will premiere and run April 28-May 1 in the Atlas Studio at the University of Colorado Boulder. The exciting new experience is rooted in immersive theatre, interactive tech art, science fiction and data science and will allow attendees a tangible experience of how all of the data shared with companies gets used and recycled back into our lives.

"Most people are unaware of how their data is bought and exchanged for the sake of research, product development, marketing," said project lead and author Michael Skirpan. "We felt that the discussion of this has been dominated by privacy advocates and moreover by articles simply telling you about the 'data revolution' or that 'privacy is dead'. We wanted

to do something to encourage people to tangibly grasp how the data will shape our future. For that reason, we wanted something you could be a part of—touch, feel, see, and hopefully, think about.”

The project involves around 35 students and staff from seven departments, ranging from computer science and electrical engineering to theatre and dance, art and music. William Lewis, PhD student in Theatre and Performance will direct the project and Fast Forward Labs serves as an industry partner.

“This has been an incredibly collaborative venture between the multiple people involved,” said director and artistic producer William Lewis. “It isn’t very often that the sciences and the arts come together in such an interesting and compelling way. Michael and the team in computer science have been uniquely interested in how theatrical narrative has the potential to connect people to our message about data ethics.” The unique interactive experience told by the actors in conjunction with the technology will be unlike anything most people have encountered.

“Quantified Self” received a “prototype” award from the John S. and James L. Knight Foundation. The foundation’s “New Challenge on Data” grants look for projects that empower communities to use and think about data and will help determine the feasibility of a longer-running production with a hopeful premiere date sometime in 2017.

The piece will use people’s data to customize and detail a show, slightly altering the performance and experience for each attendee. It is on the cutting edge of interactive art and immersive theatre, being the first to incorporate data customization into the artistic process in this way. Skirpan wants to make sure attendees feel secure in the information they share. The creative team has been in constant consultation with lawyers and security experts to ensure the shared data during the experience is taken care of and private. In fact, the information shared during “Quantified Self” will be more secure than any entity used for email, social media or the like.

“We think that if the public can step away from their personal fears of being embarrassed or something awkward happening within the confines of a two-hour theatre piece and open up to the fact that this data can harm them in more insidious ways than this, we can really get new dialogue going between users and the companies they trust” said Skirpan.

Tickets are almost sold out and are free due to our generous funding. You can find out more about the project and get tickets here: <http://www.iamadatapoint.com/>
(<http://www.iamadatapoint.com/>)

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Computer Science

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'Quantified Self' immersive theater experience tackles data ethics

April 11, 2016

Big data. Data privacy. The general public may hear these buzzwords often, but how many of them truly understand how companies are using the data they share online?

Mike Skirpan, a third-year PhD student in CU-Boulder's Department of Computer Science, wants to help deepen that understanding with his team's immersive theater performance, "Quantified Self Data Experience," premiering in the ATLAS Institute Black Box Experimental Studio on April 28 - May 1.

"The general public is just starting to learn about what's possible with data and the future implications of how it's used," Skirpan said. "Rather than telling them that in an article, I wanted to show them."

When attendees register for a free ticket for the show, they will be asked to authenticate with Google, Facebook or other online services. On the night of the show, they will wear an RFID bracelet that uses data collected from those online services to customize their interaction with the 15 exhibits.



Exhibits could include a mock interview in which the interviewer is open about what they know about the theatergoer based on public data, or a game in which two participants' information is mixed to see how well they know their own data.

Skirpan expects each attendee to take away something different from the show. For engineers and others working with data, he hopes they see the opportunities and implications of their work.

"For people who don't have the same kind of training, we hope they come out with an understanding of what their data is actually used for," he said. "The only thing people directly see is how it's used to advertise to you, but we want to get them thinking about how an engineer thinks about data."

For Skirpan, the attraction of immersive theater is that it makes the topic tangible and personal to both types of theatergoer without making it confrontational.

“We’re doing it in the sci-fi realm because we think that’s a neutral space,” he said. “If we make this fake world, no one feels like they have to be defensive.”

Skirpan, who has a bachelor’s degree in philosophy, said his natural instinct is always to look at what people intend to do versus what they’re actually doing, a habit he has carried into his PhD studies with Assistant Professor Tom Yeh.

“Over the summer, I was attending roundtables with these chief data scientists about data ethics,” he said. “What I thought was missing was a discussion of what users understand about how their data is being used. Personally, I don’t think the regular user realizes what they’re consenting to.”

But he also believes things will change in the next few years, as data ethics continues to move to the forefront and legislators begin considering privacy issues.

“If there’s any good time to bring this stuff I’ve been talking about for years into a project, it’s now.”

Among the more than 30 CU-Boulder students involved in the production are Jacqueline Cameron, a PhD candidate at the [ATLAS Institute](http://atlas.colorado.edu/) (<http://atlas.colorado.edu/>), and William Lewis, a PhD candidate in [Theatre and Dance](http://www.colorado.edu/theatredance/) (<http://www.colorado.edu/theatredance/>). Micha Gorelick of industry partner [Fast Forward Labs](http://www.fastforwardlabs.com/) (<http://www.fastforwardlabs.com/>) captains the data engineering team.

The project is sponsored by the [John S. and James L. Knight Foundation’s Knight News Challenge](https://www.newschallenge.org/challenge/data/semi-finalists/quantified-self-data-experience-understanding-your-data-and-the-world-it-creates/) (<https://www.newschallenge.org/challenge/data/semi-finalists/quantified-self-data-experience-understanding-your-data-and-the-world-it-creates/>) and CU Boulder’s [Engineering Excellence Fund](http://eef.colorado.edu/) (<http://eef.colorado.edu/>).

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Theater-Goers' Online Identities On Stage for "Quantified Self"



Each time we sign up for something online, we give someone, somewhere, information that can be leveraged; data is currency, bought and sold. Do you know where your info goes?

That's what Michael Skirpan explores in *Quantified Self*, which piloted in the ATLAS Black Box, April 28 to May 1.

Skirpan describes *Quantified Self* as "an art project with civic responsibilities." The goal is to create a personalized experience through performance and interactive art that shows audience members the extent of the information they've shared online. "Personally, I don't think the regular user realizes what they're consenting to," says Skirpan.

A mix of interactive narratives, exhibits and experiences, *Quantified Self* is an immersive theatrical exploration of data and online privacy. To gain admission to the show, attendees complete an online form, granting the organizers access to their social media streams. When they arrive, they receive a digital bracelet that is used to check into the various installations and exhibits.

In addition to presenting guests with sometimes edgy mashups of their social media streams through the various interactive installations, attendees rub shoulders with actors and become part of the theatrical performance that plays out over a 90-minute period.

The story features Amelia Bloom, an employee at tech giant DesignCraft, who becomes suspicious that her company is misusing the information they have about her. By joining forces with audience members, she attempts to bring the massive corporation down. Skirpan says, “We’re doing it in the sci-fi realm because we think it’s a neutral space.” At the end of the show, participants are invited to discuss the event and ask questions before seeing their personal data removed from the system.

Skirpan says the project is not just a discussion of privacy. “We aim to show people the possibilities around product development, research, artificial intelligence and human inference given the amounts of data owned by third-parties.” It is an open source work, so that others can build on the idea, and bring data transparency and understanding to everyone. The hope is not to scare people away from the World Wide Web, but instead “to close the gap between technologists and users to improve dialogue around ethics... to help move toward a more moral and transparent society.”

As a computer science PhD student at CU-Boulder, and a graduate intern at New York’s Fast Forward Labs, Skirpan is focused on the ethics of information and human-centered design.

William Lewis, the show’s director, is a PhD student with the Department of Theatre and Dance, where many of the 30-member cast and crew were recruited. In addition, a significant contingent of ATLAS students were involved, including PhD candidate Jackie Cameron, one of the show’s three producers, and set designer Danny Rankin, a graduate student enrolled in Creative Technologies and Design.

Jill Dupré, associate director of ATLAS, says “ATLAS explores technology policy and online privacy in a variety of ways, so we were thrilled to support this novel and innovative production. It was by far the most ambitious student-led project we’ve seen this year in the Black Box, and

they pulled it off in style: technically complex, nuanced and the set was beautiful. I had a blast!”

In addition to support from ATLAS and the University of Colorado’s Engineering Excellence Fund, the show received \$35,000 from The John S. and James L. Knight Foundation’s Knight News Challenge, which “accelerates media innovation by funding breakthrough ideas in news and information.” Stay tuned for more: If *Quantified Self* is granted ongoing support from the Knight Foundation, a national tour will begin in the fall.

By Grace Wilson

More info: [The Knight News Challenge Brief \(https://www.newschallenge.org/challenge/data/entries/quantified-self-data-experience-understanding-your-data-and-the-world-it-creates\)](https://www.newschallenge.org/challenge/data/entries/quantified-self-data-experience-understanding-your-data-and-the-world-it-creates)

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