In 1989, WSU Vancouver operated out of Bauer Hall on the Clark College campus. The faculty roster was small, with two or three professors for each area of study, and they sat intermixed—wherever there was an extra desk.

This kind of togetherness was unlike most university settings, where faculty have offices near others from the same discipline. The proximity and the lack of discipline-specific peers resulted in innovative conversations, and one day the discussion turned to the humanities.

Humanities majors often had to go on for a master’s degree in a professional discipline in order to find satisfying work and a decent wage. The faculty wondered: Aside from graduate school, what else could they do with a bachelor’s degree right out of college?

“We wanted humanities majors to have relevancy in the marketplace,” said Leslie Wykoff, WSU Vancouver library director emerita, one of the people who helped start the Bachelor of Arts in Digital Technology and Culture.

In the late 1980s and early ‘90s, science and technology had stolen the headlines. Faculty members had started to think about what computers could do in scholarly work and in humanities specifically. At the same time, the business community was looking for people who weren’t just computer scientists but also good communicators—people with humanities training who would have a holistic, creative way of looking at things, said Wykoff.

The program started in 1997 as electronic media and communication. It was an interdisciplinary program designed to provide a well-rounded education in culture as well as technology. Then as now, it focused on the relationship between technology and humanity, integrating critical thinking, creativity and computing skills with coursework in the arts, humanities, social sciences, management information systems and computer science.

WSU Vancouver launched the major and the Bachelor of Arts in Digital Technology and Culture in 2003, and WSU Pullman and WSU Tri-Cities followed suit. It was the first degree launched from a non-Pullman campus.
Now on the cusp of its 20th anniversary, with 200 students declaring majors and minors, the degree is offered through the Creative Media and Digital Culture program in the College of Arts and Sciences. The commitment to interdisciplinary approaches stands firm, but the program has changed with technology. Today students may study one of six specialties, including:

1. Game studies and design
2. Web and mobile design and development
3. 2D and 3D animation for simulation and visualization
4. Digital publishing
5. Physical computing
6. Social media/search engine optimization

Computer nerds, digital artists, gaming gurus and budding bloggers flock to the degree. “We talk in terms of ‘superpowers’ and believe everyone has at least one,” said CMDC Program Director Dene Grigar. “The faculty help students identify their superpowers and encourage the development of them so that when they graduate, they excel in their lives and careers.”

Digital technology and culture majors work under five Standards of Excellence:

1. Envision, imagine and invent digital media objects that do not yet exist in the world and, in creating them, understand the importance to reflect upon their potential impact upon the people and cultures for which they are made and by which they will be used
2. Engage in the rigorous examination of assumptions and values about the self, others and the world in order to advance knowledge and promote wisdom for bettering the environment and human condition
3. Communicate ideas and viewpoints clearly, elegantly and creatively with a variety of technologies and modes of expression
4. Delight in discovery and experimentation, recognizing that leadership in innovation demands courage and curiosity, and requires an understanding of many forms of and approaches to knowledge
5. Place civic engagement and service to the community at the heart of creation and innovation

The emphasis on civic engagement and service to the community has driven the CMDC program to seek opportunities for students to give back before graduation. All majors must take Senior Seminar 497 during their last semester before graduation. In that class, students often develop a project for a community client. Websites, applications, information kiosks, museum exhibits—the projects are as limitless as the creativity of the students and the needs of local businesses and nonprofit organizations.

AHEAD OF THE CUTTING EDGE

Education combined with real-life experience makes digital technology and culture alumni valuable employees. Alumni work in marketing and communications departments, in businesses and nonprofits, at creative agencies, as game

“I loved the cutting-edge element of the program. Students work on the latest and greatest projects, often for real clients, and always work in teams.”
—MADISON KOZACEK-HANTHO

DTC student Madeleine Brookman spent the summer as a video editor intern at Sony Playstation’s San Diego Studio. As part of the Product Development and Services Group creative team, she served as a production assistant for on-location film shoots, including MLB Fanfest.

PHOTO COURTESY MADELEINE BROOKMAN
developers, business owners, freelancers and more.

“I loved the cutting-edge element of the program. Students work on the latest and greatest projects, often for real clients, and always work in teams,” said Madison Kozacek-Hantho, 2012 digital technology and culture alumna who works today as a marketing manager for The Vancouver Clinic.

Because technology is always changing, digital technology and culture alumni appreciate that their education taught them to teach themselves. Kozacek-Hantho approaches new things every day. She said she has come across a plethora of programs, applications, coding languages and content management systems she had never worked with before and appreciates the ability to teach herself what she doesn’t know.

“My time at WSU Vancouver gave me the confidence to take on new things and continue to learn,” said Joe Winton, 2004 digital technology and culture alumnus who works today as director of web and digital marketing for the University of Nevada, Las Vegas.

The program and degree will continue to grow and change with technology. “We are getting more involved in virtual reality and augmented reality,” said Grigar.

“Digital preservation is another area we are getting heavily involved in. For every digital object we make, there is a need to find a way to document and preserve it over time. I see this as a Grand Challenge that is sorely overlooked by media developers.”

“In the digital world, collaboration is key. The stronger your team is, the better your results will be. Don’t be too proud and try to do it all. In the workforce, writers need to collaborate with designers, and developers need to collaborate with account managers. Be sure to understand what others do and listen to their expertise. You’ll be a stronger asset when you can work with a team.”

—BRIAN BATES, 2005 ALUMNUS

Alumni advice to future digital technology and culture students

“Digital technology and culture is one of the most rewarding majors you could choose. The program has an extremely high number of students who are placed in jobs immediately after graduation. Because students learn a little bit of everything in the program—video, animation, graphic design, augmented reality, social media and more—everyone comes out very well-rounded with a wide range of skill sets that employers are interested in using.”

—MADISON KOZACEK-HANTHO, 2012 ALUMNA

“Try a bunch of different areas, then specialize in what you’re most passionate about. Dive in, absorb as much as possible, and realize that you can always get better.”

—JOE WINTON, 2004 ALUMNUS