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It's the place where creativity and technology meet

The Boston Globe

By Cate McQuaid, Globe Correspondent | April 26, 2007

CAMBRIDGE -- Dan Paluska rises in a crowded room. The lights dim, and he starts up digital slideshow about Totemobile, a 50-foot-tall, 11,000-pound robotic sculpture -- a giant transformer that unfolds from a car into a totem pole. Paluska got involved with the Totemobile at artist Chico MacMurtrie's Amorphic Robot Works in Brooklyn.

"It's the first time I worked on something that really frightened me, which could have killed someone," Paluska begins. His audience murmurs appreciatively.

Welcome to the Collision Collective. Once a month, two dozen or so people show up at Jonathan Bachrach's Inman Square apartment, bearing chips, beer, and sushi. They crowd onto the sofa and every chair; they sit expectantly on the floor. Engineers and artists, robotics specialists and printmakers, they've come to listen and talk about the growing overlap between new technologies and art. Their mailing list has 150 names on it. When they meet, it's a Collision Collective Collusion.

Paluska was the speaker at the April Collusion. The members' main agenda is to meet, talk, learn, and support one another, but also high on the list is making and showing their art. It's one of several art/technology collectives in the Boston area that have sprung up in the last few years, in part because new-media art is burgeoning, and it often demands collaboration.

"People work off variations of ideas," says Bachrach, an MIT robotics researcher whose artistic alias is jackbackrack. With a scruffy beard, an aw-shucks attitude, and a trademark slouch, he's the collective's guiding light. "Certain themes get pushed. People are confident with themselves, not afraid to make mistakes, and open to others running with their ideas."

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The group has been around since 2001, and it has a following. Last weekend "COLLISIONeleven," its exhibit at the MIT Stata Center, saw throngs of visitors. Almost as many kids as adults passed through the show, part of both the Boston Cyberarts Festival and the Cambridge Science Festival.

Nearly every piece begged to be played with: There was "ai8ball," Rob Gonsalves's high-tech, large-scale version of the magic eight ball, and Bachrach's mobile podium "Sketchy," with a screen quickly rendering in a rough sketch whatever's in front of it. People patiently waited their turn and offered others friendly advice about how best to work some of the art pieces.

"Collision shows were always packed," says Catherine D'Ignazio, the former director of Cambridge's Art Interactive, where the group has often held exhibits. D'Ignazio and Sasha Rasovic, both software developers and artists, founded the Institute for Infinitely Small Things, an artist collective of about 25 members, including engineers, social scientists, and a professional hula hooper, around the same time Collision Collective sprang up. The Institute's focus is more on public performance and social criticism than new-media art. [Continued...](#)

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