

Concept Development for Computer Animators Workshop

Concept Development for Computer Animators is a workshop for educators who teach time-based media using computers. One of the major problems facing young time-based media students is understanding how to prioritize concept and idea over technology and technique – how to allow technology and technique to support the idea. Without a good idea there is no piece. The workshop addresses issues specific to concept development: how do you take students through a process that will empower them to develop robust concepts that make sense to do using the computer? Participants are introduced to the analogies between computer animation and theater, computer animation and film, and computer animation and sound. Participants are taken through motivational exercises suitable for an animation class and shown examples of work from the concept development class taught at Ringling School of Art and Design.

Teaching computer animation can take many forms, but all teachers tend to struggle with a common problem: how do you teach the technical aspects of the discipline and still have time left for the aesthetics of experimentation and creativity? Paradoxically, our field is perceived as innovative and experimental, yet it is already associated with many clichés and conventions. A primary barrier is the computer animation process itself. In computer animation, the mouse, CPU, and software are interjected between the idea and the result. The challenge is to make the interface a partner rather than a barrier in the process. But too often, students begin posing questions that are third-person neuter: Can it do glass? Can it

make ripples? Can it do particle systems? When “it” is referred to as the work, students write themselves out of the process completely. This objectification manifests itself in other ways. Students with a clear technical understanding tend to push to make the software do everything all at once. They apply “lens flare” to every image they create. They program “glowing” buttons for interactivity. They ray-trace glass spheres in reflective rooms till all hours. And they model familiar clichés to learn the tricks of the trade. At the other end of the spectrum, those students who are not familiar with the technology painstakingly move through each demo tutorial. Paralyzed by fear, they never deviate from the path.

So how do you control the extremes and focus on the primary task of making artwork, using the computer as a tool for communicating content?

A creative catalyst is needed to balance curriculum with just the right amount of instruction and experimentation. That catalyst must provide a smooth blending of the technical and conceptual aspects of animating on the computer. There are three basic elements of this overall philosophy: a holistic balance between the conceptual and the technical, a strong emphasis on game theory and experimentation, and a concentration on problem-solving strategies. This workshop introduces participants to motivational exercises suitable for time-based artists, discusses course objectives for developing animation concepts, and concludes with a discussion of the critique process for time-based media.

Motivational Exercises

In theater, the concept of representation connotes realism. Stanislavski’s method calls upon actors to represent reality based upon motivations culled from personal experience: a logical, rational building of emotion. In 3D computer animation, a distinct paradox emerges regarding the use of the term “representation.” The trend toward photorealism in architecture, design, and scientific visualization can overshadow the “presentational” aspects of computer animation as fine art. This trend is as inhibiting as the realist/naturalist movement was to theater at the turn of the century. Even Stanislavski, the man most associated with the realist movement in theater, ultimately rejected the meticulousness of external realism, and urged his actors to strive for an “inner realism.”

Participants in the workshop explore the difference between inner realism and representation through body movement and motivational exercises suitable for time-based artists. These exercises are designed to introduce students to basic animation concepts (exaggeration, gesture, timing, and weight) while at the same time demonstrating the importance of “on-your-feet” brainstorming and improvisation. Examples include the “machine.” Participants must build a human machine in which each person generates a sound and a body movement that goes with what the other people are doing. Another example is the object/verb analogy, where participants must “act out” an inanimate object executing a random action.

Concept Development Course Objectives

At Ringling School of Art and Design, our concept development class serves as a useful catalyst for the generation of new ideas. Such a class can also reinforce the need for working through animation as a process, rather than expecting it to spring forth from the head into the computer as an already complete entity. In concept development, we have designed assignments to help students explore multiple aspects of computer animation. In addition to the "acting" aspects of computer animation, directing and design aspects need to be addressed, and a history has to connect with a variety of ideas in order to make sense. The history of electronic art connects to 20th century art through numerous movements, particularly surrealism and conceptual art. It has influenced and is influenced by the history of other time-based arts such as performance, video, and film. It is also shaped by a variety of industrial and scientific applications that have influenced both the visual nature of computer animation and the means by which we create it. These make up the visual references that shape animation ideas. Guiding students toward this kind of visual literacy and making them comfortable with the technology in the process is no small task. Here are some sample objectives for concept development assignments:

Understanding metaphor, symbol, semiotics, and icon:

- Develop concept through dreams, stream of consciousness, or games.
- Understand the use of image as metaphor, symbol, and icon.
- Begin to identify what constitutes a good idea and develop flexibility to change ideas.
- Learn brainstorming techniques such as "what if..." making check lists, forced connections, object analogy, abstraction, finding the essence, "AH HA," metamorphosis, hunches, and use what you have.
- Do storyboards and drawings away from the computer to emphasize the importance of generating ideas on paper and to avoid "Photoshop filter clichés."

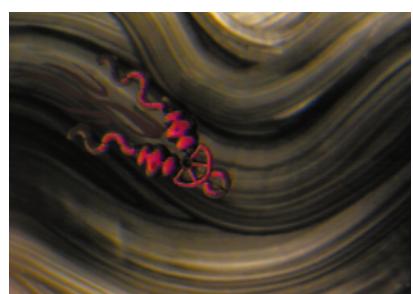
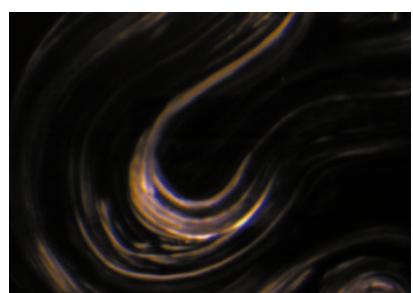
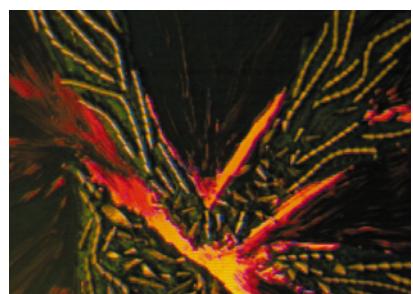


Manny Trujillo: Metaphor, Symbol, Semiotics, Icon Assignment

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Understanding synesthesia, the perfect balance between sound and image:

- Students develop concepts using sound as the source for content.
- Students are introduced to the concepts of juxtaposition, environment, gesture, atmosphere, expression, and impression, as opposed to concepts that have a literal interpretation.
- Limit students to using their mouths or bodies to create sound (this introduces them to the practice of "roughing a soundtrack").
- Students create a balance between sound and image where neither can exist without the other.



Scott Moore: Synesthesia Assignment

Understanding Transition and framing as language in relationship to layering and compositing:

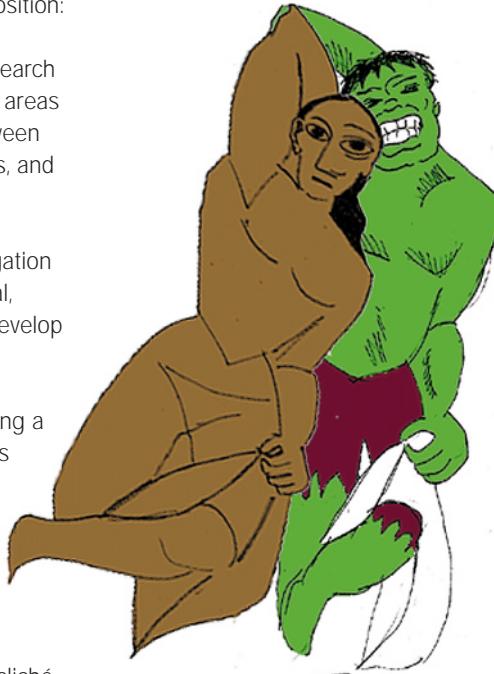
- Students explore framing as language, developing sutures, sequences, scenarios, and narratives.
- Students explore transition as montage, code, layering, and compositing associated with digital animation.

Steve Zafros: Transitions Assignment



Understanding references through research, recognition and juxtaposition:

- Develop concepts through research and comparative analysis. The areas of comparison are visual: between fine arts, time arts, applied arts, and media.
- Include in research an investigation of image as personal, historical, technical, ethical, cultural, to develop a critical perspective.
- Introduce the concept of making a visual comparison over time, as opposed to a verbal or textual comparison, as in a research paper (an extension of the concept of metamorphosis and transition).
- Learn to recognize and avoid cliché, and understand references both in content and technique.



Dani Rosen: Reference, Research and Juxtaposition Assignment

Constructive Criticism for Time-Based Art
In theater, critique is an integral part of the rehearsal process, with a democratic approach to directing. Actors are seldom told what to do by directors; they are coached through a process of exploration and experimentation. There are no wrong ways, only different approaches and interpretations to find the best way.

The animation critique process is similar to the theater critique process. Both are time-based art forms, both require problem-solving strategies where there can be multiple solutions, and both require a "rehearsal" period to test these strategies. For this reason, critique is part of the creative process of animating. In addition, because animation takes so long to produce, a project can easily become stale, and one way to prevent this is to show it to as many people as possible in order to gain a fresh perspective.