Forum: Teaching Gems for Art and Design

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Abstract

Despite the artistic maturity computer graphics has gained throughout the 1990s and into the new millennium, what we call the art student "wow" factor in computer graphics—the phenomenon of student obsession over new technology instead of artistic substance—is still a point of contention. It remains a challenge to teach computer graphics to art students while maintaining a balance between thoughtful art and sophisticated technology. In this session we will, with the help of the participants, reveal pedagogical solutions and uncover various approaches to teaching art students to use digital media in rich and expressive ways.

When the curve of new computer graphics technology was steeper and interfaces were not as intuitive as they now are, much of student learning was centered on the hardware and software and students struggled to comprehend digital media's place in the art world. In essence, we were in what Marshall McLuhan referred to as the first phase of a new technology—a stage in which, in the context of teaching digital media in the arts, the students were trying to understand computer graphics technology in terms of what they already knew. A digital image became a painting or a photograph, and 3D modeling and animation were understood in terms of film studies. Further, many students did not understand the scope of digital art and how it encompassed sculptural digital installations, how the art did not have to result in physical objects, or how the pieces could exist as interactive programs or websites. Students also worried more about the technology—what it could do and how to use it—rather than understanding the unique ways in which they could create aesthetically pleasing and profound works of art.

Today, computer graphics-based art is now closer to being established in the art world and embraces a more intuitive and sensible mode in which to create. However, the "wow" factor is still a problem and the changing pace of technology still keeps students and teachers alike tuned into the tool. Students are still trying to understand what the technology can do and often forget why or what they are making. Art instructors have a genuine struggle with balancing the time to teach students how to do something digitally with teaching them how to express themselves visually. Further, some software programs are truly complex and the concepts behind them require the student to understand, at least intuitively, the laws of physics, lighting, and how things change over time. Perhaps in some ways we are still in the first phase of digital technology in the arts.

From uncomplicated to elaborate software, how can instructors approach lessons without being bogged down with too much technology? Should instructors teach software or should they teach concepts, thus emphasizing the importance of technology as a means to an end rather than the end? What are some examples of lessons, assignments, or overall approaches that give proper weight to art and technology? How can teachers facilitate unique and expressive works of art?

Even if instructors are successful teaching individual expression with computer graphics technology, what domain within this vast field is most important? What are some areas on which teachers could focus their energies? Are some computer graphics disciplines harder to teach than others? Is it more difficult to express ideas and compose formally beautiful works in some forms of digital graphics? Why or why not?

The best lessons and the best pedagogical approaches still will not hinder the dedicated special effects gurus from obsessing about what the software can do instead of the resulting work. How can instructors help these students care more about the art works?

Finally, and maybe most importantly, how can teachers keep up with the technology? Perhaps it is the teacher's concern with keeping current that influences the way they teach and what the students perceive as important. What are some solutions for instructors to keep up with changing computer graphics technology without compromising the core of the art they want to teach?

We ask the participants to come prepared to talk about some of these ideas and more. Once we target issues to resolve, we will ask the forum participants to put forward their gems: lessons, approaches, philosophical bends, and ideas that have worked or they believe will work. Attendees will leave the session with a notebook full of ideas and solutions to teaching students how to be expressive and create aesthetically pleasing works of computer graphics based art.