Connect Fall 1997 The Digital Arts

Teaching Technology for Entertainment and the Pop Culture

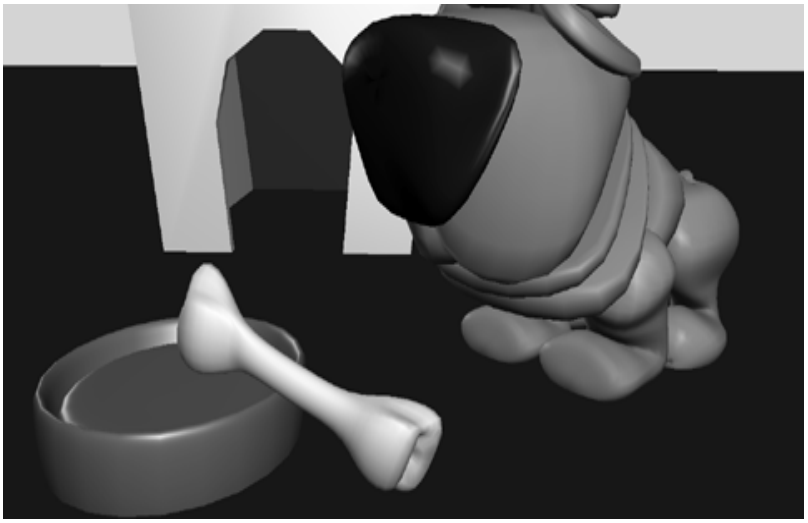
Sarah Sanders with Chris Darner

The entertainment industry is now the largest and fastest growing employer in the state of California. The most explosive component of this revolution is digital effects and computer animation. Digital special effects and images are appearing at an astounding rate in film and television. The top seven special effects films of the past year have already generated over 2 billion dollars. The world of digital production is growing. It is no longer limited to big budget movies - the technology has crossed all platforms transforming the Internet, education, politics - basically revolutionizing the way we process information and create art.

In August of 1996, New York University became a part of the digital future when it unveiled the Center for Advanced Digital Applications. CADA is a new phenomena in the area of art and technology. Its philosophical mission is to train artists to use the latest and most advanced digital tools. Theoretical and aesthetic issues are taught simultaneously with the practical problems of self expression with modern tools. The center is a collaborative project with NYU and Silicon Graphics, Inc.

History

Originally the formation of CADA was the idea of Dean Gerald Heeger and Silicon Graphics Inc. Hardware and facility creation was supervised by Vice Dean Fran Gottfried and academic and administrative guidance was provided by Dean William Cipolla. The philosophy of the curriculum and courses were designed by CADA's current Coordinator and Master Teacher of Digital Production, Peter Bardazzi. One of the most important decisions that set the fundamental tone at CADA was that the Center would be guided by artists.



Facilities

Located in SCE's Midtown Facility at 11 West 42nd Street, CADA consists of four networked studio labs and several classrooms used for lectures. Currently CADA has 25 SGI Indy workstations and 11 Indigo2 SGI workstations with an additional 15 high-powered O2 SGI machines arriving for the Fall 1997 term. Each machine has loaded and available to the student a wide selection of cutting-edge software used by post-production houses across the country.

Course sizes are kept small to guarantee a quality education and to provide each student with their own machine. In addition to workstations, studio labs are equipped with state-of-the-art audio and video capabilities representative of what students will find in the post-production industry. This video technology allows every student the opportunity to leave class with work on a viewable VHS or BetaSP tape in addition to the standard DAT digital format. The design of the studios themselves lend to the creative process with emphasis placed on a sensible function and visual aesthetic. CADA class curriculum is designed with focus on art and design, aspects sometimes forgotten when working with the kinds of complex tools used by the students.

Advisory Board

Important to current and continued success of CADA is the relation it has with the digital post production industry. CADA is a joint venture between NYU's School of Continuing Education, the hardware and software makers, and the digital post production industry. CADA's Advisory Board regularly meets to discuss how CADA can compliment the rapidly expanding digital post-production industry. Currently the board consists of: Bob Greenberg, President of R. Greenberg Associates, Ed McCracken, CEO of Silicon Graphics, Dean Winkler, President of Post-Perfect and Martin Nisenholtz, President of New York Times Electronic Publishing.

Courses

Currently, CADA offers courses in 3D and 2D computer animation, compositing and digital post production. Classes are offered as non-degree, non-credit courses and open to all interested students. A working knowledge of the hardware and operating system, IRIX, is a strong recommendation for all levels of studio classes. Certificate programs are available for each of the two major 3D software packages; an Intensive Digital Post Production certificate program is also offered.

CADA's 3D computer animation courses include the industry-standard Alias|Wavefront's Power-Animator which was used to model the lead "actors" in Toy Story as well as for scenes in Mission Impossible. CADA also offers a course in Microsoft's Softimage which is used in feature films like Casper and The Mask and heavily relied upon by the video games industry for animation and game effects. To teach compositing (the combination of computer effects and film footage) and 2D image manipulation CADA teaches Discreet Logic's Flint. Flint is an industry standard compositing and special effects tool used in such films as Twister, Judge Dredd and countless commercials and music videos. CADA also offers a certificate course in Intensive Digital Production which includes six widely used digital post production tools including: Adobe's Photoshop for SGI, Xaos' nTitle and Pandemonium, Avid's Matador, and introductions to 3D and compositing theory using Alias PowerAnimator and Flint.

Featuring only the latest versions of the software, students get hands-on experience using what is current in the very version-savvy digital post-production industry. Students are given exposure to a facility unlike any of its kind, technically on par with the digital post-production houses all over New York city eager to find people trained in this kind of technology.

Instructors

CADA instructors are working industry professionals who bring a professional and practical perspective to the classroom. CADA's Softimage instructors include Paul Lipsky, a senior animator at Manhattan Transfer and Edit, and Steve Talkowski, senior character animator at Blue Sky Studios. Mr. Talkowski is currently sharing his teaching time with working on Aliens 4: The Resurrection. Other industry professors include Tree O'Donnell, Michael McMahon, and Brad Fox.

The Future

While CADA's current curriculum centers around computer animation and digital post production with an emphasis on film and video, the program is set to expand upon that area and into others.

Adding to the computer animation program, CADA will add the hot animation package Houdini to its list of courses taught in Fall 1997. In the compositing and digital image manipulation area Avid's Media Illusion will add to the selection of tools available for the digital artist to learn. Entirely new types of software will also be taught, such as Interactive Effects' Amazon 3D Paint, which actually allows the digital artist to use 3D models as his canvas, making changes and viewing the results in real time.

In addition to expansion within the animation and digital post-production areas, CADA will also be offering a certificate in Video Games Development which covers all aspects of the design and production of video games. There will also be a new certificate in Special Effects available in the Fall. The Special Effects Certificate will be a combination of lecture and software classes that gives the student history, theory, and knowledge of premiere digital special effects software tools. This is the first certificate of its kind offered at any college.

Software Used in Current CADA Courses:

Alias|Wavefront PowerAnimator
Microsoft Softimage
Discreet Logic Flint/Flame
Amazon 3D Paint
Pixar Renderman
Avid Media Illusion & Avid Matador
Side Effects Houdini
Xaos Pandemonium & Xaos nTitle

Sarah Sanders and Chris Darner are staff members at the Center for Advanced Digital Applications.
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