Animations in a *Flash*

Ryan Patton

Animation is one the most popular forms of entertainment today. Children can create short animations with Adobe Photoshop, PowerPoint, or Gif animator, which is a free downloadable software, or many other programs. However, students can also use more sophisticated animation software, such as Adobe Flash.

This article is about how I have taught animation with Flash, and why Flash is valuable for students to learn at a young age. For the last six summers, students from ages eight to fifteen have taken part in creating their own animations at the Smithsonian in a week-long Flash animation program.

Art teachers can modify the activities I describe below, and should not be concerned that they have the most current software and newest computers in their classroom for their students to create animations. Students at the Smithsonian use Flash 4, released in 1999 with PCs running Windows 98. Additional equipment includes Internet connections, scanners, and a microphone compatible with their machines. If scanners are unavailable, digital cameras will work.

Students develop their concepts, put storyboards on paper, draw characters and backgrounds, and then animate their work, adding sound and music to their final projects. In the past, themes have varied widely, from political stories, parodies of popular culture, and personal narratives. Teachers may put limitations to the content, or base the work on a unit theme, or require research that links the animations to specific subjects, perhaps in collaboration with a science or history teacher.

Like other story-based projects, details like how to show action needs to be decided in planning stages and re-evaluated as production begins. It is important for students to write down their ideas for ongoing reference. I encourage students to work in groups, finding that animations are a great opportunity for students to collaborate.

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Creating Characters
In a five-day program, students spend the first day exploring the Smithsonian, making sketches for their characters. Sharing their characters with their team, stories are generated and developed in a collaborative process. To get students to invest in their group animation, each student contributes one character. Teams present their story-boards to the other groups, and in the process develop their presentation skills and receive peer feedback similar to a critique.

Digitizing Characters
The second day focuses on digitizing the characters to be uploaded to a computer for animation. Students scan their drawings and modify them in Photoshop or import them directly into Flash. Students are often comfortable drawing their characters directly in Flash.

I show students how to make a simple animation of a ball moving. They use these basic skills to start animating their own work, demystifying a component of New Media. Over the next few days, students develop their animations, adding scenes to their pieces. Additional demonstrations of more complicated animating techniques are shown. Understanding that quality and consistency is important in filmmaking and storytelling, instructors should check for continuity in the animations. Screening the animations in process will help motivate students to refine their work.

Adding Voices and Music
Adding voices and music enlivens the animations. Using the microphone and free sound-editing software like Audacity, students can put their voices to their characters. Music can be added to provide a soundtrack, while running credits gives additional ownership to their projects. The final movie player files are small and can be saved onto CDs or uploaded to a class website. An entire class of animations can be saved on one CD with a Flash player to be viewed on any computer. Teachers may want to host a world premiere.

Animation provides students the opportunity to work on a complex project while doing it in a fun and interesting way.

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