Art history combines with graphic design to create online learning tool

by Caroline P. Smith  
Assistant Editor

Who said history can’t be fun? Art history professor Arne Flaten and graphics design professor Paul Olsen have collaborated their two departments and created an online learning tool that is totally innovative.

Using the knowledge and skills of art history and graphic design students, the two subjects have combined to form a unique online Web site designed to make ancient history animated and interactive. The site is called Ashes2Art and is the brainchild of Flaten and Olsen.

Ashes2Art will combine animation, video game technology with historical and archaeological knowledge of ancient cities in Italy to create a device that enables students to learn about these places within an interactive environment. In the 2005 Maymester, Flaten traveled to Italy with a group of students as part of the Study Abroad program at Coastal Carolina University. After the students left, Professor Olsen joined Flaten in Florence where they took digital panoramic and still pictures of various piazzas and monuments.

In the fall of 2005, Flaten offered an art history course that focused on developing this project. Students enrolled in the class were told the basic idea and then given free rein as to how they wanted to put it together.

"Everything that was done with this project was done by students in the art history class," said Flaten.

There were four students in the class who handled the majority of the web design and animation, while the other students took care of the research and historical aspects.

"The students ordered the books they needed, figured out what each object or statue was and decided which ones were important enough to be included on the Web site. We also had to compile a comprehensive bibliography," said Flaten. "For example, if you’re walking into the Apollo at Delphi, which is in ruins, we want you to hit a button and have the whole thing, using animation, build up around you in full color. Then we want you to be able to walk through it like a video game and pick things up and to look wherever you want; or walk through doorways. Then you will be able to right-click to a discussion about iconography, or about the materials used for artifacts or buildings, and so on."

Ashes2Art is a one-of-a-kind idea, and although it is still in the baby steps of production, Flaten and Olsen are looking forward to continue improving it.

"The idea itself developed over a round of [beverages] at El Patio," said Olsen. "It was originally Arne’s idea, but after we talked about it, it blew up into what it is now. We really have high hopes for what it could become."

Expansion for Ashes2Art is right around the corner. Flaten and Olsen are taking another Maymester trip this summer, but this time they will travel to Greece and offer a photography class to take pictures of the historical monuments and statues there.

The art history course will be offered again in the spring of 2007, although Olsen and Flaten admit that combining two different subject classes can be problematic. They hope to eliminate some of these problems by cutting down the workload and continuing to add and improve Ashes2Art as it exists now until the class begins.

"In the future, we plan to visit lots of other geographic locations like Egypt and Crete and slowly, with enough financial support, implement all kinds of cool software combined with published archaeological evidence," said Flaten.

Further expansion will take place this summer in July when Flaten will attend a two-week National Endowment of the Humanities (NEH) program at UCLA titled "The Models of Ancient Rome." He recently received a Summer Institute grant from the NEH to travel to California on an all-expenses-paid trip to learn more about other virtual reconstruction projects that are similar to Ashes2Art.

Ashes2Art can be pursued by going to http://visualart.coastal.edu/ashes2art/Students interested in being a part of this project should contact Arne Flaten at arnflaten@coastal.edu or Paul Olsen at polsen@coastal.edu.