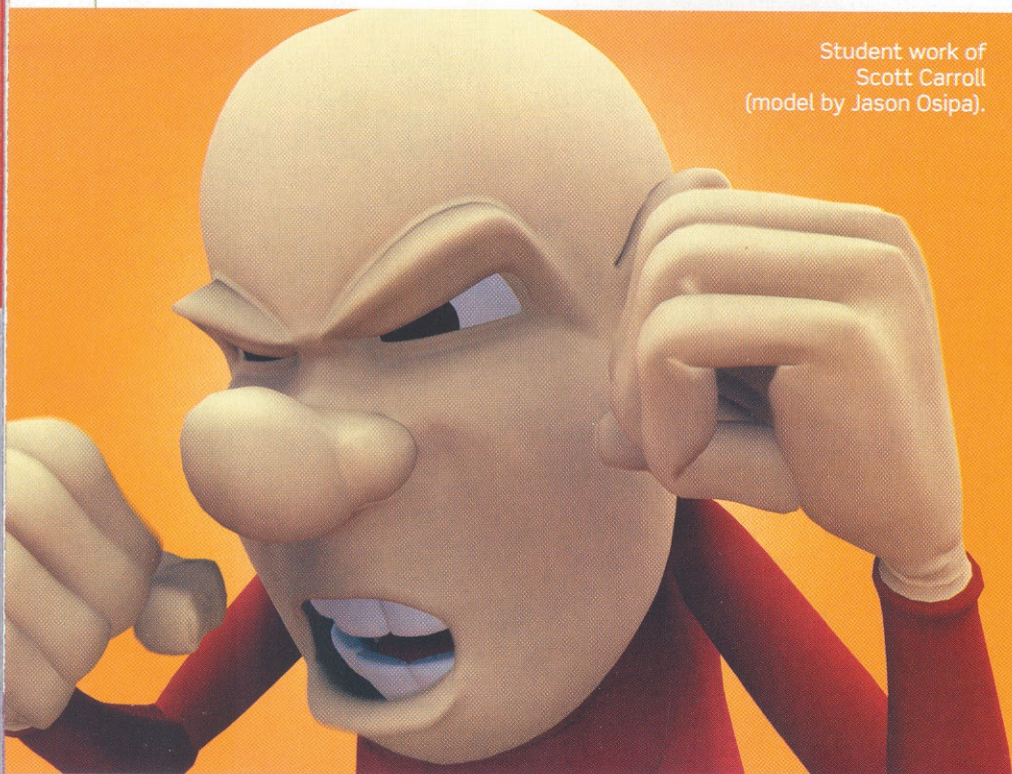


Student work of  
Scott Carroll  
(model by Jason Osipa).



## The Lowdown on Virtual Classes

BY ELLEN WOLFF

There may be no clearer sign of our busy plugged-in times than the rise of online education. Web-based classes enable working people go back to school—virtually speaking—in their spare time and allow students living in far-flung places to access teachers they could otherwise never “meet.” Until recently, the technical barriers to online animation classes have been

daunting, but that’s changing, and fast.

The steady expansion of broadband Internet access and improvements in web animation software are just two of the factors spurring this trend. This spring marks the debut of at least two online ventures—a certificate program called AnimationMentor.com, taught by animators from studios like Pixar, PDI/DreamWorks and ILM and a master’s

degree program from the Art Institutes Online. They join a growing field that includes Westwood College Online, which offers an animation B.S., and Academy of Art University Online, which has animation tracks leading to associates, bachelor’s and master’s degrees as well.

Unlike online programs offered by bricks-and-mortar schools, AnimationMentor.com, is a character animation program that exists only in cyberspace and takes 18 months to complete. Even with a price tag of \$13K there are already enough applicants to enroll 300 students. With 24 full-time and eight part-time mentors, the self-funded venture expects to have a ratio of 25 students per mentor. After a year of beta testing, they’ve refined broadband technologies that allow students to participate in web conferencing and view 45-minute streaming video sessions.

Co-founder Bobby Beck, a former Pixar animator whose credits include *Finding Nemo* and *Monsters Inc.*, asserts, “It’s the first of its kind. A lot of people laughed at us and said, ‘It’s not possible to stream that much video and have it protected.’” But Beck and his co-founders—ILM animator Shawn Kelly and Pixar animator Carlos Baena—persisted and found Britain’s Theory 7 to develop the necessary technology. That includes enabling teachers to draw on top of a student’s work, capture that video and send it to the student. Beck explains, “It’s recording it on the fly and compressing it without having to batch upload it later.”

Making online classes mimic real-world ones is clearly challenging. But one inherent advantage is that students can work with multiple techniques—computer animation in Maya or 3ds max or scanning and uploading hand-drawn animation or stop motion. AnimationMentor provides 3D Maya models for students to work with, but, Beck says, “We encourage students to do some stop motion and traditional animation. They’re allowed to download free pencil-test software

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OPPORTUNITIES



Bobby “Boom” Beck



Shawn Kelly



Carlos Baena

The three founders

## OPPORTUNITIES

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called Monkey Jam, which can also be used as a stop-motion frame grabber."

"Trying to teach animation online is a whole new ballgame," agrees Westwood Online director Nathan Pieratt, "We've gone down some rocky roads." During the two years that WOL has offered its animation B.S., the school has utilized video tutorials using software like TechSmith's Camtasia and Macromedia's Captivate and Breeze. Through the Breeze interface, the instructor can take control of the student's computer and show them how to perform a task. Pieratt notes, "We're now launching weekly chat sessions where students can show their work in real time through webcams and the Breeze interface." While 3ds max is the primary 3D package used by students, Pieratt says demand for Maya is growing.

WOL has 225 students in its 36-month/195-credit program, which is taught by working professionals who hold master's degrees. Most students are U.S.-based, although some participate from military facilities overseas. One of the most intriguing aspects of its web-based education is that it can connect U.S. animation pros with an international student body.



AnimationMentor's Beck notes, "Most of our applicants are from England, France, Spain, Taiwan and India. And we've really tried to encourage women. My wife, who's an animator, keeps saying, 'Make sure it's not a boy's club!'"

Online animation is not only geared toward certificate programs like AnimationMentor or bachelor's programs

like Westwood's. The Art Institute's new online M.F.A. program consists of six 11-week quarters, with students taking 15 credits each quarter. Susan Varnum, who chairs the Computer Animation program at the AI campus in Miami, explains, "It's a combination of seminar-style and studio courses. Students can work with 3DsMax, Maya, Flash or traditional 2D animation. We're design-

ing it to mirror our on-ground program. Classes meet at a set time each week so that students' peers and faculty can critique the work. In a classroom, sometimes you don't have enough time to ponder your responses. We think the online medium will help in terms of what people put in their critiques."

Online degrees aren't discounted, however. Tuition is comparable to campus-based programs—typically anywhere from \$300 to \$500 per credit. But one unique advantage these programs offer is a diverse faculty. Varnum notes, "We have the liberty of having teachers from around the country. The courses are designed by people who have both master's degrees and industry experience. Some are AI faculty, and some also teach at other on-ground institutions."

Varnum is based in Florida, Pieratt in Colorado and Beck in California, but to their online students, that doesn't matter at all. Beck sums up this new paradigm when he says, "This will change the way things are done on the web forever." ■ Ellen Wolff is a Los Angeles-based journalist who specializes in visual effects and animation.



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