

Learning Maya is Child's Play

Lewisham City Learning Centre unveils the imaginative world of computer animation to its students

“CAN PRE-UNIVERSITY students learn Maya?” Jones asks. “The films our students have created categorically answer the question. Results are impressive and the answer is yes! It’s just a case of access and opportunity.”



Planet Odd Arrival by Ethan Johnston, age 12



A city shot from Happy Planet made by the Maya Maniacs team at Lewisham CLC

Lewisham City Learning Centre (CLC) teaches Maya® software to both primary and secondary students, proving to sceptics that the software used in the making of Academy Award® winning films can be made accessible to all ages. Jones believes that learning Maya fosters creativity, heightens the desire to learn, develops team skills and problem solving abilities, and prepares students for the future.

When 15-year-old Daniel Grigsby attended the 6th Form Open Evening, an event showcasing pre-university courses available for study, he had no idea his destiny was about to reveal itself. He immediately headed over to the ICT (Information and Communication Technology) stand with an air of curiosity and child-like excitement.

“What’s Maya?” he asked the man behind the stand, as he pointed to a small book on the table.

“It’s computer animation software. Films like *Spider-Man®*, *The Lord of the Rings™ Trilogy* and many others use it to create all kinds of special effects,” was the enthusiastic response.

“I want to work in special effects,” Daniel almost whispered. His eyes were dancing as he picked up the book and lingered over its pages.

“Well, you’ve come to the right place,” smiled the man.

That was a year ago and the man behind the stand was Rob Jones, Digital Arts Facilitator and Maya instructor at Lewisham City Learning Centre (CLC). Daniel has since worked on two animated films and is preparing to attend Bournemouth University, a leading school in computer animation.

“When I met Rob Jones by accident, I was very lucky. I am now able to learn this sophisticated software long before going to university,” says Daniel. “Having this experience has given me the encouragement to work hard to achieve my goal.”

Fostering Creativity

Pablo Picasso once said, “Every child is an artist. The problem is how to remain an artist once we grow up.” Jones teaches his classes with this in the forefront of his mind.

“With the younger primary students, the emphasis is more on play and exploration,” shares Jones. “They are taught a very limited part of the Maya tool set, but are encouraged to experiment freely.”

“I’ve always likened learning Maya to learning a musical instrument,” says Jones. “A lot of practice is required, and as long as it seems like fun and not work, students love it.”



Oasis in the City by Aziz Salter, age 16

Arming the students with Maya experience and knowledge will not just prepare them for the future, but will ensure them a running start. “I am teaching Maya because it is simply the best 3D software in the world,” says Jones. “It is generally considered the Top Dog in the CG industry, so why not use the industry standard?”

By the time students reach the ages of 16-18, they have developed the cognitive skills to handle technical vocabulary. What’s more, at this stage many start seriously considering future careers in the computer graphics industry.

“Despite my age, I have already fixed my mind on a career in 3D animation,” says Cem Ormesher-Hussein, a 13-year old Lewisham CLC student studying Maya.



From Underwater Love by Lawrence Keohane, age 10

Students discover that creativity is not just about knowing how to draw or paint. Maya opens new avenues for children to explore their diverse creative gifts. All students are taught the tools to model, texture and animate objects. When creating the animated film *Underwater Love*, they were first shown the movie *Finding Nemo* and then told to create their own fish character. The results were highly imaginative.

Love of Learning

Jones is a strong advocate of project-based work where students “invent” their own tutorials based on their particular challenges. “What you have at the end is a community of creative Maya users and a finished product, like a film,” explains Jones. “Instead of a set of 20 perfectly executed tutorials on how to make a teapot.” Working on meaningful projects gives the students a context in which to learn and explore.

“I would say emphatically that adopting a project-based approach to teaching classes like Maya is highly rewarding,” Jones adds. Students at Lewisham CLC realize that although Maya is a highly sophisticated software package, it is very easy to get immersed from the first lesson. The fun and excitement of creating 3D animation keeps students coming back for more.

Teamwork and Problem-solving

The Maya-based projects that students work on are done in collaborative teams. One of the animated films, *Happy Planet*, involved the work of 40 secondary students.

“Students get the sense of working as part of a team,” Jones told the *Times Education Supplement* last month. “They share ideas and see the results of everyone’s work come together.” Teamwork is important not only during the school years, but it is also a highly desired skill when entering the workforce. A career in the computer animation industry will require a high degree of team skills, collaboration and the ability to problem-solve with colleagues. Another reason Lewisham CLC uses the project-based learning approach is to help students develop strong problem-solving skills.

“In the world of professional animation, problem-solving is a vital skill, because each problem is different,” Jones continued. “You don’t encounter real-life problems with a tutorial-based approach.”

Preparation for the Future

John Vince, Head of the National Centre for Computer Animation (NCCA) and a professor at Bournemouth University, is a strong supporter of the Maya training that Lewisham CLC is providing for pre-university students. He believes that students going on to study animation at university will one day require prior 3D skills. This will result in less need to teach software skills in the first year enabling universities to focus on higher-level skills like storytelling and filmmaking.

Zali Collymore-Hussein, Lewisham CLC Manager, says that their philosophy is to offer students and teachers access to the latest industry standard technology and to equip them with skills for the future. The use of Maya for 3D animation projects strongly reflects this philosophy and has provided the opportunity for the students to unleash their creative potential.

Lewisham CLC wants to encourage its students to dream big and, as Rob Jones did for Daniel Grigsby, help them discover their destiny.

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