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Tiger Tech: Students get real-world experience using supercomputer

The Daily Reveille

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Jonathan Olivier | **0 comments**

Posted on September 10, 2013
by **Jonathan Olivier**

Digital art students are calling upon one of the top 500 supercomputers in the world, the University's SuperMike-II, to aid in visual effects projects that will give them a sense of what it takes to be professionals in their field.

SuperMike-II, located in the Frey Computing Services Center, is essentially a cluster of computers working as a group called a render farm. This allows for applications that take video or animation and compute it at fast speeds, said Lisa Giaime, manager of the University High Performance Computing facilities.

Two art classes are spending the semester focusing on creating digital projects with the help of the render farm, green screen technology and newly installed motion capture software, which are processes used on a daily basis in the professional field.

"It saves a ton of time," said Derick Ostrenko, assistant professor with a joint appointment with the University Center for Computation and Technology and the School of Art and Design. "[Projects] would have taken days to render out on a laptop or lab computer. SuperMike cuts it down. What would've taken days then takes minutes or hours."

The student projects range from using computers and an array of graphics programs to create objects like a spaceship to short movies, combining real-world film with digital animation. The assignments start on the students' laptops, go to SuperMike-II for final touches on graphics, then back to the students' computers for applications like music, Ostrenko said.

While SuperMike-II makes putting the finishing touches on a digital project faster, Ostrenko said it also teaches students in his Moving Image class, as well as adjunct faculty member Kolby Kember's Digital Art IV class, how professionals use those same tools.

Digital art senior Jody Knight is enrolled in Kember's class, which will have students focus on making one large digital project throughout the semester.

"You can present it to a potential employer," Knight said. "You can be like, 'Hey, this is what I can do.' We're going to go through the whole gambit of what a professional would do."

Knight said his project has a sci-fi theme and will be organized like a movie trailer. His project will feature scenes and shots made from real-life video footage and digital effects.

"We're doing pre-production stuff right now, which would be like models, any images and shooting video," Knight said. "I will probably be using the green screen and motion capture studio for the project."

The graduating senior has worked with Ostrenko on the new motion capture studio located in the Art Building. Knight helped orient the motion capture cameras and has begun working with them, the motion capture suit and the software to accompany it.

Six infrared cameras in the motion capture studio capture light reflected from markers on the motion capture suit, which allows users to create a 3-D image on the computer.

The new motion capture studio leaves room for the potential for digital art students to create more elaborate, in-depth projects and get the real-world experience they need, Ostrenko said.

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Center for Computation & Technology
2003 Digital Media Center • Telephone: +1 225/578-5890 • Fax: +1 225/578-8957