



METROPOLIS OBSERVED  
**Font of Knowledge**

In the Cooper-Hewitt's virtual museum, Web games designed by Parsons students teach kids to look at the world in a different way.

By Lisa Selin Davis  
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In the game typeFaces, designed by Parsons students Amelia Marzec and Pinar Ceyhan, users learn font history as they create a character from a pile of letterforms at the bottom of the screen.  
Courtesy Design & Technology, Parsons School of Design



In 1981 Andrea Dezso took a school field trip to a clothing factory. "It was the first time I realized that clothes didn't just come out of nothing, they weren't just made by machines or robots," she says. She began to think like a designer, seeking out the story behind everyday objects.

Now Dezso, a professor in Parsons' Design and Technology MFA program, and Dorothy Dunn, education director of the Cooper-Hewitt, National Design Museum, are teaching children to think like designers, too. "We've developed a group of hands-on strategies for interpreting design as a verb instead of a noun," Dunn says. "We often call it 'demystifying the obvious.'" Though the museum has long had an education department, in fall 2003 it decided to translate its printed educational materials into digital ones. Partnering with Parsons, the museum has created an interactive Web site that will not only teach young people about design, but also instruct designers in developing content aimed at young people.

Courtesy Design & Technology, Parsons School of Design



Parsons students in Dezsó's collaboration studio are building the site, drawing from the museum's vast resources--such as the world's largest assembly of wall-coverings and its collection of historic cutlery--to create interactive games for children. "Design-a-bag," for example, walks users through choosing the shape, color, fabric, and ornamentation for a handbag; at the end they can print out a pattern, with easy sewing directions included. In "About Wallpaper," users learn about pattern, symmetry, and color to design their own wall-covering. Kids can create mosaics, design a typeface, or build a geodesic dome while learning to look at everything around them--the chairs they sit in, pen caps, telephones--as functions of design.

Courtesy Design & Technology, Parsons School of Design



In the coming months children (and adults who will surely be unable to resist) will be able to play these games on computers at the museum or elsewhere, but they're not the only ones learning. Dezsó, who worked in the corporate world before joining Parsons' faculty full-time, runs her classroom more like a boardroom, so students work with real-world clients as they learn to create Web sites. "You learn what you've been given from generations before," Dezsó says, "and with respect to that heritage you add your own mark to it."

Courtesy Design & Technology, Parsons School of Design

Students who enroll in the second semester of the studio spend the first five weeks revising, adding functionality, and debugging the games designed by the previous semester's participants. In the second five weeks they propose and develop their own games. This means the class is never the same twice, and the Web site will always be evolving.

The partnership is a boon to both institutions, as funding for arts and education continues to drain. "It allowed things to happen that we couldn't have afforded on our own," Dunn says. Cooper-Hewitt has posted several of the games on its [Web site](#) this month as it moves toward development of a virtual museum.

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