Flashimation: The Context and Culture of Web Animation

AUTHORS

Dan L. Baldwin
Computer Graphics Technology
Purdue School of Engineering
and Technology, IUPUI
danbaldw@iupui.edu

Michael S. Daubs
PhD Candidate
Faculty of Information and Media Studies
The University of Western Ontario
mdaubs@uwo.ca

John B. Ludwick
New Media
Indiana University School of Informat
IUPUI
jludwick@iupui.edu

Introduction

On October 15, 1997, the first-ever cartoon produced solely for the web made its premiere [Sullivan 1997]. Spumco, a Hollywood-based animation house formed by "Ren & Stimpy" creator John Kricfalusi, commonly known as John K., produced the first installment of The Goddamn George Liquor Program after experimentation with Marcomedia's popular animation and interface-development program, Flash [Tanner 2001]. Although only eight one-minute episodes of the program were produced, the web cartoon launched a new style of animation, which has since earned an unofficial nickname: "Flashimation." The purpose of this paper is to explore the origins and effects of this type of animation; examine the forces that turned animators towards the web, its visual style, and the meanings with which it is associated; and the effect Flashimation has had on modern animation and the current animation community.

Several threads of thought explain the evolution and culturalization of the new-media phenomenon known as Flashimation. Television animation, increasing access to and preference for the internet, the technological restrictions of this new medium, and the availability of animation software itself have coalesced to produce a major change in the cultural reconceptualization and consumption of modern animation. Collectively, they explain a complex and layered transition from "kid-vid" cartoons to short and crude forms of sophomorically humorous animation produced specifically for an adult audience.

The Roots of Flashimation

An underpinning of Flashimation in Western culture can be traced to the years immediately following World War II as concisely described in Charles Solomon's *Enchanted Drawings: A History of Animation* [1989]. By 1947, movies were losing patronage for the first time since the depression [Sklar 1994]. Contributing to this decline was the rise in popularity of the television in the 1950s. As the "small screen" proliferated into American households, MGM Animation was among the first studios to close because of rising production costs. As a result, two of their director-producers, Joseph Barbera and William Hanna, were forced to lay off their entire staff of artisans [Solomon 1989]. To survive as animators, they turned to television to create economically viable cartoons using limited animation, a streamlined technique of breaking down characters into efficient pieces, which reduced the time required to draw the images [Corsaro 2002]. Limited animation in combination with ambitious production schedules was able to reduce the cost of a half-hour of cartoon production from USD $40,000 to $3,500 per episode, making animation practical for television broadcast [Solomon 1989]. This television animation, notably including "The Flintstones," "Yogi Bear," and "Gumby," was initially innovative.

However, limited animation did not showcase the sweeping, life-like forms of full animation popularized by Disney. Instead, broken, two dimensional puppets pieced together with a heavy exploitation of dialogue filled empty airtime on television. Emphasis was placed or dialogue rather than the visual elements that had to be produced a frame, or several frames, at a time. The result was clever writing s ported by limited visuals. It could be said that the catalyst for form early television animation was "airtime."

When cartoons were moved to fill Saturday-morning timeslots, the did better in the ratings, though they were designed to be seen in prime time [Solomon 1989]. The limited-animation form, the cartoons' content, and the timeslots in which they were available sent cultural message: "Cartoons are for kids." Commenting on the state of television animation, the Warner Brothers director Friz Freleng stated: "TV is such a monster. It swallows up all this animation whether it's good or bad ... The networks don't look at the show, they just look at the ratings. If the ratings are good, to heck with the show. They don't care whether it's just a bouncing ball" [Solomon 1989].

Regardless of quality or content, the public's demand for more animation increased as the 1970s approached. In attempts to fill the voracious appetite of television airtime and shorten production schedules, animation became even more limited. This prompted the animation community to dismiss television animation as nothing more than "illustrated radio" [Solomon 1989].

In the 1980s, cable television emerged with incredible airtime demands that exceeded the decade before a hundredfold. Immersed in this demanding production scheme was animator John Kricfalusi, who worked on Ralph Bakshi's "New Mighty Mouse" cartoon. Although he was a successful and talented modern animator, Kricfalus was versed in animation history [NNDB 2005]. It was this connection of the past and the present that led Kricfalusi to develop one of the most successful animation franchises of the 1990s, "Ren & Stimpy," for the Nickelodeon network. When he began production in 1991, Kricfalusi used the opportunity to both parody and revive 1940s animation and couple it with parodies of the limited cell animation made famous by Hanna-Barbera [Goodman 2004].

Kricfalusi quickly became known as a controversial renegade because of his belief that if the narrative inspired laughter among his staff writers, no matter how bizarre or infantile, it went in the show. It was this irreverent storytelling style that led to the character George Liquor, whom the network deemed too indecent for broadcast. At the height of an ongoing struggle over story control and direction, Nickelodeon removed Kricfalusi from the Ren and Stimpy series and, furthermore, retained the rights, allowing the network to continue producing the wildly popular series without his input [Solomon 1989]. Due to this schism, Kricfalusi sought solace and autonomy in the uncensored frontier of a burgeoning technology: the internet.

Kricfalusi saw the web as his salvation and "the future of every-thing" [Tanner 2001]. In an interview with Wired in 1997, Kricfalusi said: "What you see every day on the street and laugh at, you aren't allowed to see in a cartoon. Well, now you can" [Sullivan 1997]. By producing his own cartoon exclusively for distribution on the internet, Kricfalusi was able to circumvent this corporate control. The first installment of "The Goddamn George Liquor Program" is certainly full of imagery, vocabulary, and characters that would be deemed unfit for broadcast on American television including, among other things, the title of the "show" itself and a detailed animation of a dog passing excrement. Indeed, internet content produced a stark contrast to the landscape of contemporary broadcast television; popular programming like "Touched By An Angel" and "7th Heaven" proliferated and were at the top of the Parents Television Council Publications "Most Family-Friendly Shows" [1998].

The Creation of a New Visual Style

Along with content dissimilarity, the process of creating a cartoon for the web involved the development of a new visual and animation style developed out of real-world constraints. To understand the aesthetics created by these restrictions, we must first briefly explore some technical concepts. In commenting upon the development of online virtual worlds, Manovich [2001] notes: "Because of the limited bandwidth of the 1990s internet, virtual world designers have to deal with constraints similar to and sometimes even more severe than those faced by game designers two decades earlier." This same bandwidth limitation affected web animation as well. In the words of John Kricfalusi:

When we started using Flash for animation on the Internet back in 1996, we were told the program couldn't do this and couldn't do that. Everything I was told couldn't be done, I figured out a way to do it ... Of course, the trick is to get the medium and the joke to work together. [The Hollywood Reporter 2005]

The "trick" to which Kricfalusi is referring is the mastery of three core principles of Macromedia Flash itself: vector graphics, "tweening," and the employment of symbols.

As opposed to raster images such as the common web JPEG and GIF image types, which must store colour information for every pixel to create an image, vector images are defined by essential coordinates or, in other words, mathematically [Ulrich 2004]. For example a square is defined by its four vertices, or a circle by its center and radius. Since significantly less data are stored for each object, vector images are significantly smaller in file size and therefore more viable for internet delivery.

"Tweening," short for "in-betweening," is the automatic process of generating incremental frames between "keyframes" to give the appearance that the image in the first key frame evolves smoothly to result in the second [Ulrich 2004]. This process removes the need of animating every frame as in traditional cell animation. Instead, "keyframes" mark the start and end of a movement and the computer interpolates the frames or motion in between. The result is an animation technique perfectly suited for a swift production schedule. Additionally, in a web cartoon, these calculations take place on the viewer's computer, significantly reducing the download time for a Flash cartoon.

A third technique engineered by Macromedia Flash to combat bandwidth limitations is the concept of the "symbol": an element (a graphic, tween, movie clip, button, etc.) that can be repeatedly used within a Flash animation. Urlich [2004] describes the symbol as a "master recipe." Each instance of a symbol refers back to the master, with only changes in size, colour, and orientation recorded, a method that is more efficient than even using duplicate vector shapes. In addition, symbols themselves can contain other symbols, allowing for a modular structure [Urlich 2004]. Thus, seemingly complex characters or animations can be constructed from simple, reusable elements that, as Manovich explains, can be "assembled into larger-scale objects but continue to maintain their separate identities" [Manovich 2001]. The incorporation of symbols within the Flash environment, and their utilization by modern artists, directly mirrors the limited animation practices developed in the 1950s.

The culmination of these techniques, made necessary by the technological limitations of the internet, namely bandwidth, results in a unique visual style, much different from traditional hand-drawn cell animation. Certainly the character designs are unique (those in "The Goddamn George Liquor Program" are characteristic of Kricfalusi's other cartoon characters), but the general style common to all early Flashimations includes simple, clean shapes, limited colouring, and a simplified animation that is more akin to moving illustrations than traditional, full animation. The development of this visual style must not be dismissed, however, as a necessity of technology. While it is certainly tempting to interpret new media, including web cartoons, as having two separate layers, what we might call a "cultural layer" and a "computer layer," we must examine how these forms interact [Manovich 2001]. In the words of Manovich [2001]:

Because new media is created on computers, distributed by computers, and stored and archived on computers, the logic of a computer can be expected to significantly influence the traditional cultural logic of media; that is, we may expect that the computer layer will affect the cultural layer. The ways in which the computer models the world ... influence the cultural layer of new media, its organization, its emerging genres, its contents.

We can see this is certainly true in the example of Flashimations produced for the web: the computer layer has a direct effect on the cultural layer. We can also approach this as a consideration of form versus content. Because new media can be presented in several different forms, it is difficult to see a connection between the form or interface and the content [Manovich 2001]. We assume a separation exists. The problem is that proposing a separation between form and content is suggesting that content exists before form in some sort of "idealized medium-free realm" [Manovich 2001]. However, there is a "motivated connection" between content and form in art, or to use new media terms, content and interface [Manovich 2001]. In short, "the choice of a particular interface is motivated by a work's content to such a degree that it can no longer be thought of as a separate level. Content and interface merge into one entity and can no longer be taken apart" [Manovich 2001]. This is not a notion developed with the rise of new media. In referring to forms of art, Kandinsky [1984] wrote in 1912: "The form is the outer expression of the inner content ... [n]ecessity creates the form.".

But what are the ramifications of this interplay between content and medium? What message does the form of Flashimation contain? These questions lead to speculation on whether the visual style of Flashimation provides any insight into the type of content presented in the animation. This concept is not limited to Flash animations. McCloud [1994] notes that static cartoons or drawings are nothing more than icons, images used to "represent a person, place, thing, or idea." He later notes that the style of those images can indicate the type of cartoon strip being viewed. In other words, the form or style becomes an indication of the content. Case in point: the level of abstraction apparent in the rendering of a character can indicate if the story is a serious adventure comic or a humorous comic strip. But McCloud takes his point further, stating that the simplified artistic style in cartoons has the effect of focusing the reader's attention on specific details and ideas; it amplifies meaning.

As noted above, Flashimations contain not only simplified art and colouring, but also simplified animation. If McCloud's statement is true, then what is the amplified meaning of Flash cartoons? In other words, what does the visual style of Flashimations signify? We can begin to decode this problem by considering the first episode of "The Goddamn George Liquor Program" discussed above. While this cartoon would have been considered shocking, or at least indecent, if seen on television in the United States in 1997, the fact that it was shown on the web – that it was Flashimation – made the crude and/or obscene elements acceptable. In essence, the crude animation style allows the crude content. Because society has been exposed to Macromedia Flash cartoons for nearly a decade, and their popularity has grown, modern users have acclimated to this animation style. In addition, users have become acclimated to the content as well, or to the idea that a Flashimation might contain crude content. The point of interaction (in this case, a web browser or player accessing a web-based cartoon) "acts as a code that carries cultural messages" [Manovich 2001]. As Manovich explains:

In cultural communication, a code is rarely simply a neutral transport mechanism; usually it affects the messages transmitted with its help. For instance it may make some messages easy to conceive and render others unthinkable. A code may also provide its own model of the world, its own logical system, or ideology. [2001]

The visual aesthetics of a Flashimation might now have the effect of signifying a certain amount of crude or obscene content, and our new cultural ideology keyed by the visual style of Flashimation tells us to accept this crudity with humour rather than shock or disgust. The form itself defines the content and the reaction the user or viewer should experience.

Flashimation vs. Animation
On the AnimationNation.com message board, a community comprised of industry professionals and self-proclaimed "Voice of the Animation Industry," one animator proclaims: "It's hard when toilet humour gets picked up over your intelligent, well-thought content" [AliasMoze 2001]. As stated previously, limited animation was cultured by early television, and industry professionals like Friz Freleng voiced their concerns over the paradigm shift of content and style. This new technology, or "monster" in his opinion, threatened the craft and livelihood of an entire industry. Half a century later, in the midst of yet another technological tsunami, has the resentment in the industry changed or merely its target? Another AnimationNation.com

member says:
Frankly, Flash animation, with its replacement of body parts approach, reminds me of back when I was in public school, where some of the less artistically inclined kids would avoid having to actually draw or paint by instead cobbling together cut'n'paste photo collages for their art assignments. Looks to me like the cut'n'paste kiddies have grown up and taken over the industry now [PonsonByBritt 2001].

Technology is not the only problem confronting industry professionals today. Adding to the anguish felt by many modern animators is the proliferation of inferior artists, which has generated an oversupply of substandard work. Art, design, and animation software abounds, and its broad availability provides multitudes with options other than the formal academic arenas or apprenticeships where artists once trained and honed their craft. C. C. Edwards, a freelance animator working in New York, states:

One consistent thing that technology has done for all the commercial arts is enabling less and less talented people to participate in the artform. Why learn how to draw and animate the way the old masters did when you can click a mouse and move things around? [2006, pers. comm., 16 January]

But is the integration of the masses into a once small, tightly knit industry a valid concern for today's animation community? According to Jeremy Semour, an animation director at Primal Screen Studios in Atlanta, Georgia, it is not.

I feel that this helps the animation community. If someone wanted to do a short animation, traditionally it would take a team of people and months of time. Projects like that can now be accomplished by a fraction of staff, and much less time. This also floods the market with a large amount of animation, which pushes us to do better work. [2006, pers. comm., 18 January]

Conclusion
As the last quote indicates, perhaps the proliferation of Flashimation, which is now appearing on television as well as the internet, is not as negative as some within the animation community fear. Exploration of the roots of Flashimation, starting in the late 1950s and early 1960s with shows such as "The Flintstones," demonstrates that the introduction of cheaply produced, limited-animation cartoons is not a recent event. Despite the frustrations and fears expressed by animators in that era, more traditional animation, as in feature films, thrived. In addition, an examination of the interplay between the form and content of Flashimation suggests that the visual style may be becoming more prevalent simply because of its relation to the content of these cartoons rather than the result of falling standards across the entire animation field. In short, crude or sophomoric animation indicates the crude or sophomoric humour which seems to be in demand. Similar parallels between form and content are apparent in Japanese-produced anime cartoons, in which visual style is often a clear indicator of the type of cartoon (drama, comedy, action, etc.) being viewed. This semiotic value of Flashimation, especially in conjunction with its appearance on television, which does not have the technical constraints of the late-1990s internet that influenced the visual style of Flash cartoons, is worthy of further investigation.

References

AliasMoze. 2001. Interesting ..., Available at: www.animationnation. com/cgibin/ultimatebb.cgi?ubb=get_topic;f=1;t=000575

Corsaro, S. 2002. The Flash Animator, New Riders Publishing, Indianapolis.

Goodman, M. 2004. When Cartoons Were Cartoony: John Kricfalusi Presents. Animation World Magazine. Available at: mag.awn.com/index.php?article_no=2214

Kandinsky, W. 1984. On the Problem of Form, in Theories of modern art: a source book by artists and critics, ed. H.B. Chipp, University of California Press, Berkeley, California.

Manovich, L. 2001. The Language of New Media, The MIT Press, Cambridge, Massachusetts.

McCloud, S. 1994. Understanding Comics: The Invisible Art, Harper Collins, New York.

NNDB 2005, John Kricfalusi. Available at: www.nndb.com/people/574/000044442/

Parents Television Council. 1998. Top 10 Best & Worst Family Shows on Network Television: 1996-97 TV Season, Parents Television Council Publications. Available at: www.parentstv.org/PTC/publications/reports/top10bestandworst/97top/main.asp

PonsonByBritt 2001. This is the TV Animation Golden Age. Available at: www.animationnation.com/cgi-bin/ultimatebb.cgi?ubb=get_topic;f=1;t=008592

Sklar, R. 1994. Movie-Made America: a Cultural History of American Movies, Vintage Books, New York.

Solomon, C. 1989. The History of Animation: Enchanted Drawings, Random House Publishing, Inc., Avenel, New Jersey.

Sullivan, J. 1997. In His Way, John K. Will Challenge the World' Wired News. Available at: www.wired.com/news/culture/0,1284,7566,00.html

Tanner, S. 2001. Toon In, Turn On, Streaming Media. Available at: www.streamingmedia.com/article.asp?id=6720

The Hollywood Reporter. 2005. John Kricfalusi, The Hollywood Reporter. Available at: www.hollywoodreporter.com/thr/film/feature_display.jsp?vnu_content_id=1001096312

Ulrich, K. 2004. Macromedia Flash for Windows and Macintosh, Peach Pit Press, Berkeley, California.