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Cartoon Animation – An Evolving Art Form

By Jake Gorst

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The past 150 years has seen tremendous strides in technological and scientific research and invention. Who would have ever imagined that men would walk on the moon or that open heart surgery could be performed with robotic assistance? Still, with all of these advances man has consistently failed in one field of research: the creation of life from inanimate material.

This desire, coupled with an inborn need to find creative expression, has lead to some interesting discoveries. Man has developed the illusion of creating life from nothing. Spectators of this illusion are at times amazed and often carried away from reality, even if just for a few hours.

We are talking about the art of cartoon animation. Using various methods an artist has the ability to make his drawings move and speak. With modern computer technology, the artist's drawings may even appear to interact with with the observer. Walt Disney, a monumental figure in the history of animated film once said, "Animation can explain whatever the mind of man can conceive."

What is the history of this art form? What advances has it made in recent years?

A Brief History of Theatrical Animation

On December 28, 1895, the world of art and entertainment took a drastic turn. Upon invitation Georges Méliès, a well known Paris magician, attended the first public showing of the Cinématographe. Méliès never forgot that evening.

"The other guests and I found ourselves in front of a small screen...after a few minutes, a stationary photograph showing the Place Bellecour in Lyon was projected. A little surprised, I scarcely had time to say to my neighbor: 'Is it just to have us see projections that he has brought us here? I've been doing them for ten years.'

"No sooner had I stopped speaking when a horse pulling a cart started to walk toward us, followed by other vehicles, then passerby – in short, the whole vitality of a street. We were open-mouthed,

dumfounded, astonished beyond words in the face of this spectacle."

How exciting it must have been for early pioneers of motion picture to learn and develop their art! Within a very short period of time, these individuals began experimenting with different forms of expression through this new and mysterious medium.

In 1896 J. Stuart Blackton, a native Englishman who emigrated to the United States, walked into a studio that would change his life and launch a new industry in the motion picture field. Blackton was a journalist and illustrator for the New York Evening World. He was sent to interview the inventor of the Vitascope, Thomas Edison.

Blackton immediately fell in love with the cinema. That same year he founded a production house

called Vitagraph. Within a very short period, he discovered that by exposing film frame by frame and manipulating a scene between exposures, the illusion of motion could be produced with inanimate objects. At the time, a standard movie camera would expose eight frames per turn of a crank. Camera operators learned how to alter the camera to expose only one frame per crank, and the technique of animation became known as "one turn, one picture."

In time, Blackton realized that he could bring drawings to life using this method. In 1906, Vitagraph released a short film entitled "Humorous Phases of Funny Faces." Blackton's hand draws a man and a woman on a blackboard. When his hand leaves the frame, the faces roll their eyes. The hand appears again and erases the emboldened animated characters.

In 1905, Winsor McCay, a cartoon illustrator for the New York Herald, created a strip called "Little Nemo in Slumberland." This cartoon became so popular that it was developed into a Broadway musical. In 1911, McCay left the paper and began working for the New York American. During this time, he began experimenting with the idea of using animated pictures as part of a vaudeville act. His first project was a film adaptation of "Little Nemo." With no story line, "Little Nemo" was a beautiful study in movement.

McCay's second film was entitled "The Story of a Mosquito." The film, a story of a mosquito's encounter with a drunken man, was a hit. Some theatergoers felt that McCay was performing a trick with wires, not understanding the the nature of drawn animation.

To prove that his drawings were actually moving McCay responded by producing the film "Gertie the Dinosaur." Ten thousand drawings inked on rice paper were used in creating this masterpiece. Gertie debuted February 1914 in Chicago as part of a vaudeville act. As the film was projected on screen McCay stood nearby and interacted with the animated dinosaur. Gertie laughed and cried. Audiences loved it. The film had a storyline and a star – the first of its kind in animation history.

As time passed, other artists became involved in the animation industry. In 1923, Walt and Roy Disney formed the Disney Brothers Studio and signed a contract with Margaret J. Winkler, a New York film distributor, to produce six short films based on the Lewis Carroll book "Alice's Adventures in Wonderland." These films featured a mix of live action and drawn animation. The fifty–sixth and last

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Alice Comedy film was released on July 15, 1927.

In 1928, the Walt Disney Studio released "Steamboat Willie," the first cartoon built around a soundtrack. This film featured Disney's latest character, Mickey Mouse. It was a sensation.

In the years following "Steamboat Willie" Disney's studio developed the novelty of animated film into an art form that could express emotion and personality. In December 1937, the studio released "Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs," the first full length animation feature. Skeptics called this project "Disney's Folly," stating that the public would not sit through a lengthy animated feature. They were wrong. Snow White was a smash hit and maintains an audience today.

Over a sixty-three year period, the Walt Disney Studio has produced 38 animated features and countless animated shorts. Other companies such as Warner Brothers, MGM and DreamWorks have also produced notable animated theatrical works.

Animation and the Television

Animation (usually made-for-theatre cartoons) hit the small screen as early as 1930, but due to high production costs and the fact that the television audience was minute, it was relegated to a non-commercial, experimental novelty.

On July 1, 1941 the U.S. Government allowed the National Broadcasting Company (NBC) to become a commercial entity. This meant that NBC could now charge for commercial advertising between and during broadcast entertainment. Botany Mills was the first company to produce animated commercials. These commercials (seven in all) featured the Botany Lamb plugging the company's line of wool ties.

The production of "TVs" came to a stop at the end of 1941, when aluminum (required in TV production at the time) was rationed for war purposes. After the war, the TV manufacturing business exploded. In 1946, eight thousand TVs were produced. In the next year, over 38 million sets were sold in the United States.

The early days of commercial television created a problem for the advertising and publishing industry. Large corporations were not spending their money on print advertising, but opting instead to experiment with TV.

Animation lended itself to this new medium. A live person talking about a product worked, but a cute little animated character bouncing around the screen commanded attention! In 1949, Television Magazine indicated that four of the six most popular television ads were animated.

In 1957, MGM decided to get out of the animation business. Bill Hanna and Joe Barbera, creators of the successful Tom and Jerry theatrical cartoons, found themselves out of work. The two formed their own company and immediately began work on a made-for-television animated series called Ruff and Reddy. This series remained on the air until 1964, one hundred episodes later.

With the release of The Flintstones in 1960, the Hanna-Barbera studio became the premier production

house for television animation. Acquired by cable mogul Ted Turner (founder of the Cartoon Network) in 1991 and then merged into Time–Warner in 1996, Hanna–Barbera cartoons are experiencing a new–found popularity.

Many other animation companies have produced television programming over the years. The Walt Disney Company, for example, has produced several programs, from animated segments of the Mickey Mouse Club (1955–59) to series such as PB&J Otter on the Disney cable network. The Nickelodeon network regularly produces several animated programs for children. The Fox and Comedy Central networks have promoted animated cartoons geared toward an adult demographic, such as The Simpsons, The Critic and South Park.

Animation and the Internet

The Internet, as it is currently known, is still a new medium. In 1993, a group of students at the National Center for Supercomputer Applications (NCSA) developed a computer program called "Mosaic." This program, known as a "browser," allowed text and graphics to be transferred via telephone lines from one computer to another and be assembled in a predesigned layout on a computer monitor. Mosaic's page layout ability was very limited and was not a forum for any type of animation, however. Recognizing the limitations, the team of graduate students and trainee programmers who created the software left NSCA to form a new company: Netscape Communications.

In October 1995, Netscape released a new browser known as "Netscape Navigator 2.0." This new browser had the ability to display small animated graphics known as "animated gif files." These animations could be inserted on a Web page easily, but were limited in scope. Slow data transfer over telephone lines made it impossible to animate anything other than a few seconds of looped motion.

In 1996, Macromedia, Inc. developed a program called Flash. Macromedia Flash created animations based on vector information – mathematical instructions that are much smaller in file size than animated gif files, allowing longer animations. This program has revolutionized the art form. Flash is generally accepted as the only truly effective way of delivering animated entertainment online. Many companies are now producing made–for–Internet cartoons.

One notable Internet cartoon series is "The Pink Donkey and The Fly," by a New York based design house called Funny Garbage. The Pink Donkey series features the artwork of Gary Panter, best known for creating the designs and characters for the children's television program Pee–Wee's Playhouse. Some of Funny Garbage's work can be viewed at www.cartoonnetwork.com/wpt.

Other notable series include the Bulbo Toons by MishMash Media (<http://www.bulbo.com>) and Capital III by JibJab (<http://www.jibjab.com>).

Macromedia Flash animation is also being used to enhance e–business Web sites. One Long Island based Internet design and marketing firm, Exploded View, is dedicated to the integration of new technologies in the Internet marketplace. "No matter what technology is used in a Web site, there are basic psychological design principles that must be adhered to," said Jake Gorst, Exploded View President. "Animation can be a great enhancement to an e–business site if it does not distract from the

customer buying experience."

These "psychological principles" include the proper use of color and vocabulary, object placement and navigation. For example, a Web site that features a large corporate logo and predominantly displays corporate news information could be frustrating to a customer looking for products. If the products are not clearly visible, sales will be low. If the Web site features a color that is not popular with the target audience (due to religious, political or other reasons), viewer attention will be minimal.

"Once these principles are in place, animations can be added that compliment the overall message of the site," says Gorst. "Care must be given not to create a distraction, however."

Richie Saccente of Troll Studios (<http://rollstudios.com>), an Exploded View customer, is very excited about the integration of animation in his company's Web site. "We are using a small troll-like character to guide viewers through our site," says Saccente. "To my knowledge this is the first time Internet animation has been used in conjunction with psychology in this manner. I love our site."

In this day and age, the animation industry is so vast that a synopsis of every possible application could not be made in a single article. In addition to Internet applications, experiments in animation are also taking place in video games and virtual reality technology. What does the future hold for this art form? Only time will tell, but for the artist involved in the animation world, this is a good time to be alive.

Jake Gorst is a writer, film maker, and president of Exploded View (<http://www.explodedview.tv>), a new media advertising and design company. He also is a frequent contributor to various trade

publications on topics related to Web site and architectural design psychology and trends. Previously, Gorst served as Vice President and Chief Creative Officer for E-Media Publishing, Ltd. and as an Internet content developer for Citibank and other Long Island based corporations.

An Extended Christmas Animation

By Nashville

An Extended Christmas Animation by Nashville

According to the blog entitled "Animation" which was posted by Neil last December 2, 2004 at www.eightlines.com, someone spent way too long on a Christmas Flash animation. You can actually view the animation at http://www.tongcom.co.kr/dingani_13.htm. It was definitely enjoyable and entertaining! The animator used the song "Last Christmas" by Beatles as the background for the animated Christmas music video.

I must say that the one who made this animation has already mastered the Flash software. For your information, Flash is a powerful software program that can be used to create animated movies that are small in file size, load quickly, and incorporate user interaction and sound. Apparently, it may appear to be a relatively simple program because of its few tools compared to other software programs.

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However, a world of complex authoring structures, advanced techniques, and sophisticated effects begins to unfold as one learns more about Flash.

Regarding the creator of this animation, he certainly has a good combination of images, graphics and sounds in this masterpiece. He must have used his creativity and imagination meticulously in this animation. I was really impressed with the way it was created. It's very fascinating.

With what I've seen, I'm looking forward to see your other creations, too. I hardly find experts in this software application and whenever I do, I'm always impressed with their works of art. You'll get two thumbs up from me.

To the creator of this Christmas animation, I only have three words for you. "You definitely rock!" Keep it up, dude! Godspeed!

For comentaries, explanation and additional info about the article you may contact the author at <http://www.mypostcardprinting.com>



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