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Behind the Flash Exterior
Scratching the Surface of Online Animated Narratives

Introduction

The flat simplified graphics and limited animation of Flash online creations recall 1950 and 1960s cartoons for TV and stand in stark contrast to the photo-realistic forms and naturalistic movement of high-end 3D computer realisations. Celebrated for its ease of use, its affordability, and its enhanced dissemination, Flash has become the 'people's choice' in animation software. Yet its widespread use and apparent simplicity (its association with pop culture 'toons') veil sophisticated modes of reception. Just as the animations of the Zagreb School and the United Productions of America (UPA) studio, with their pared down graphics, stylised forms and limited movement, are now feted as unique animated expressions, Flash animations can also be appreciated for exploiting medium-specific narrative effects via reflexive strategies and interactivity.

This paper argues that despite outward appearances (simple graphics and limited animated movement), Flash can engage an audience in more complex relations with the text through active participation (via interactive functions and reflexive representations) than more passive modes of reception (often associated with high-end realist animations). Similar to comic art, Flash animations are able to activate imagination in the audience by offering representational cues rather than providing an immersive experience; in distancing an audience from the illusion – via stylised imagery, flattened space, non-naturalistic movement and overt transitions – space is provided for critical reflection.

Flash has enlivened the medium of 2D animation and empowered a new generation of animators. It appeals to contemporary audiences (re)discovering the stylisations of 1950s-60s graphics and to counter-cultures weary of big-budget realism and enjoying the freedom of a new kind of 'writing' – Lawrence Lessig's 'to rip, mix and burn' (2004).

This paper scratches the surface of the Flash phenomenon by considering the machinations of online Flash animation in its relations with audience. I argue that despite Flash's outward simplicity – what Ross Olson details in 'The Flash Aesthetic' (2001) as scaling, 2D style, heavy strokes and motion without cycles – complex relations with audience are possible.

This paper acknowledges the many aesthetic possibilities that are generated by developments in Flash software, including efforts towards a 'fuller' animation. However, it focuses on, and celebrates, the visual features more commonly associated with the software, and identified above as the 'Flash aesthetic' – that is, Flash as 'limited animation.'

Limited vs Full Animation

We are all aware of the drive towards realism that has informed and motivated the technology of animation. Disney figured prominently in efforts towards a realist aesthetic that some argue brought animation closer to the public but further from its unique potential: In later years, Disney's 'realism' became more and more dominant … many sequences became minute, decorative copies of reality, breaking the basic unwritten rule of animation never to challenge live-action cinema in its own territory. (Bendazzi, Giannalberto 1994, 65) The most recent manifestations of this are, of course, high-end photorealist 3D CGI productions. We also know that from the very beginning of film, a stream of anti-illusionist animated cinema

can be identified that – in exploring imagery, movement and sound beyond the reach of the live-action camera – has been celebrated by many for its expression as, or at least proximity to, 'pure animation.' In a history of figurative animation perhaps this stream's best-known examples are the limited animations of the UPA studio and the Zagreb school.

However, despite this critical acclaim, limited animation's reputation has waxed and waned. In the 1960s, in its association with cheap animated productions for TV, limited animation was dismissed as the animated equivalent of fast-food, paling in comparison with the visual feasts of the big-budget feature:

> TV is such a monster. It swallows up all this animation so fast that nobody seems to care whether it's good or bad. These kids' shows are badly done technically; it seems as though nobody really looks at them but the kids. (Friz Freleng in Solomon, Charles 1989, 229)

More recently, in its easy fit with the mechanics of the web, its accessibility and affordability, Flash has reinvigorated limited animation so that its graphic charms are feted once more. Yet, beyond this aesthetic appeal, Flash animations can be seen to differentiate themselves from realist works in offering the potential for significant relations with audience via interactivity and reflexivity. Whilst realist works offer illusion and spectacle that generates passive escapism, Flash animations offer both active engagement and a critical distance that opens a space for audience participation.

Flash and Interactivity

Interactive Flash animations offer an audience the chance to engage directly with the text; designs may be customised, narratives navigated, actions activated, and dialogue posted. As a departure from the passive modes of traditional viewing, this is a significant aspect of Flash animations. However, this interactivity is common to and perhaps even exploited further in 3D CGI realist modes that boast enhanced narrative participation. The interactivity in these mimetic realities facilitates an immersive experience so that participants feel as if they are within the story as first person players or in the form of avatars. Yet, enveloped as they are in these fictive worlds, this paper questions whether a critical distance for the 'reader' is at risk, such that sensorial experience overshadows considered reflection.

Interactive Flash animations, on the other hand, offer the possibilities of direct engagement with the text, while clearly maintaining the distinction between text and reader. Moreover, they preserve a creative space in which the audience 'completes' the narrative, by improvising, personalising and responding to the graphic narrative cues.

Reflexivity and the Comic(s) Comparison

Christopher Stapleton and Charles Hughes (2003) relate that 'Hemingway once compared a good story to an iceberg. He believed that a book represents only the tip of the iceberg and that three-quarters of the story is "beyond the page"' (12) – that is, in the reader's mind. The representational cues embodied in simple graphics, flattened space and limited movement in many Flash animations serve a similar function, leaving space 'below the surface' for the activation of imagination and creative response as audiences join the dots, complete the illusion, and make the narratives their own.

Chris Lanier (2000) compares Flash animation with the (printed) comic, celebrating the creativity engendered because of, not despite, the limitations of the form. The most profound 'liberation' effected by the limitations of Web animation is the removal of the

burden of spectacle. … Comics (and Flash animations) are a profoundly collaborative medium. [They] draw you into an imagined world through the efficacy of 'closure.' In *Understanding Comics* (1993), Scott McCloud describes the 'gutter' (or interval between panels) as the space in which the reader enacts closure. In seeking narrative continuity, the audience closes this gap, thereby entering into the story telling process and creating personalised meaning.

McCloud offers an example by way of a 2-panel comic sequence, the first of which depicts a panicked individual, with assailant in the background, axe held aloft. The second panel offers a wide shot of a darkened city skyline with the letters 'EEYAA!!' splattered across the sky. 'I may have drawn an axe being raised … but I'm not the one who let it drop, or decided how hard the blow, or who screamed, or why. That, dear reader, was your special crime, each of you committing it in your own style' (1993, 66).

McCloud is discussing the gap between panels, which, for the comic, facilitates narrative time. Yet Flash animations, although endowed with the dimension of time in motion, can be seen to engage an audience in similar ways. When Flash animations do not attempt to mimic reality via realistic imagery, natural movement, or seamless continuity, the comic's imaginative gap is activated. McCloud's gutter is evident, albeit in a conceptual sense, between both (stylised) image and (limited) animated movement and their references in the natural world, and in transitions from scene to scene. In a reflexive sense, attention is drawn to the constituents and mechanics of the text; audiences are asked to invest life in overtly inanimate forms, and to collaborate with the text (and author) in creating narrative coherence.

In such animations, the evocative potential of the written word (think Hemingway's icebergs) is retained via imagery and sequences that (like comics) hover somewhere between the iconic (a relationship of resemblance between the image and what it refers to) and the symbolic (a conceptual relationship between the image and its referent) (Saraceni, Mario, 2003, 13-33); indeed, the incorporation of written text in many Flash animations emphasizes this symbolic facility. Interactive Flash animation makes no claims to stand in for reality but, as Matthew T. Jones explains, once again in relation to the comic:

> through the use of reflexive strategies, authors and readers (of comic art) are able to contextualize the narrative act and experience an approximation of intimacy or closeness by making clear the link between the (comic) text and the outside world in which it was born, and of which it is a part. (2000, 20, my emphasis)

This approximate relationship between symbol and referent (between stylised 2D image and idea) allows space for individual interpretation and inflections, albeit within the bounds of visual and narrative conventions. Visual metaphor, abstract notions, suggestion, implication, inference, ambiguity are given space to expand; the gap is left open for imaginative response, and less conjures more.

Besides this creative space between image and idea, the other kind of gap which can be appreciated in many interactive Flash animations is from scene to scene. As the reader activates buttons to prompt changes of scene and progression through the story, her agency is required to suture the scenes on both a physical and imaginative level. Unlike virtual environments in which the illusion of a continuous unfolding of space (and time) is relatively seamless (usually via simulated hand-held camera), Flash interactives are generally progressed via a more overt application of classic cinematic transitions (wipes, cuts, dissolves, or rudimentary zooms). These reflexive devices ask that we create such closure in our 'mind's eye' – and 'beyond the page.'

Mention also needs to be made of this overt employment of narrative transitions in drawing attention to the constructed and subjective processes of storytelling through animation (or any other medium for that matter). When audiences are made consciously aware of the grammar of film, literacy is enhanced, so that participants are not only placed in a position of complicity (as discussed above) but they are also empowered in the tools of creating their own filmic narratives.

Simon Norton's Testimony: A Story Machine, 'an interactive comic strip', is a fine example of an online animation that exploits the interactive and graphic possibilities of Flash. By clicking on a central character (innocuously chomping on a sandwich), further frames are generated across the screen inviting a reading from left to right, as per a comic (or storyboard). This sequence indicates an event – a figure falling from a building behind the central character.
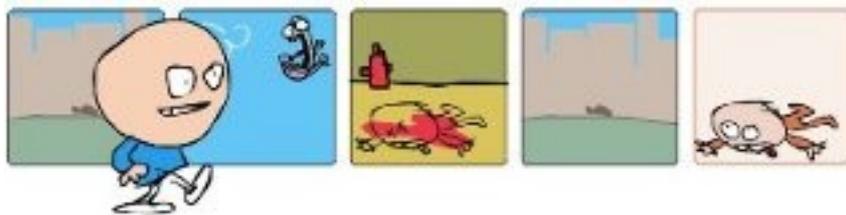
Upon further movement of the cursor however, each frame is seen to be active, and it is from here that Norton's world opens up for us. By clicking on any of the frames, different sequences (stories) can be generated across the screen, and by continued clicking on the one panel, a narrative 'thread' can be followed sequentially into the screen, resulting in endless narrative combinations across both planes. There appears to be no one set (logical) narrative sequence that underlies these improvisations. Rather Norton provides prompts for endless invention; time and space is teased out in an overtly reflexive manner. Participants invest in their 'narratives' in three ways: across the story (closing the comic gutter), into the space (seeking cinematic continuity) and by attributing life to the simple graphic symbols of the 'Flash aesthetic'; their engagement is active, conscious and creative. Physical and conceptual space is left open for play.

Although Norton's animation is more or less an experiment in interactive narrative, with no ambitions for a classic narrative arc in evidence, its graphic style, limited animation and interactive aspects make explicit the potential of the Flash aesthetic when applied to more conventional interactive narratives.

The Case for Children

There is much literature about the possibilities of interaction (and immersion) in a learning context for children. Authors such as Krystina Madej urge creators to exploit the potential of new media for meaningful content rather than shy away with preconceptions regarding its present use: Rather than seeing the immersive and compelling qualities of computers and video games as negatives, it is encumbant on us to study these qualities and use the information to create equally immersive and compelling digital narratives that will help children understand and cope with the world. (2003, 15)

Certainly the rewards of active involvement in meaningful texts for children are clear (and well documented): greater sustained attention, greater investment in the narrative, greater learning and retention, and yes greater immersion in story – yet this paper argues for immersion in the more traditional sense as fostered by 2D presentations: the knowing suspension of disbelief in imaginative worlds of our own making.

Immersion in virtual worlds – particularly photo-realistic virtuality – encourages a heightened experience but is it not an experience which potentially squeezes out the child's attempts at effecting (imaginative) closure? In its prescriptive representations, is not the child's act of enlivening visual symbols encumbered? Is not contemplative space (a fast-fading phenomenon) edged out in the act of so much hands-on against the clock haste?

Research thus far has revealed not a lot in the way of engaging online 2D interactive stories for kids. Madej claims that a lot of work is failing to exploit the possibilities of new technologies; older formats (static image and text) are clung to, with very little in the way of genuine interaction beyond page turning. The few exceptions in evidence point to great opportunities in the way of engaging children in imaginative and educational narratives.

Two websites which begin to exploit such possibilities are Starfall, specialising in teaching comprehension and phonics via online books and activities, and Nickjr, which complements and extends Nickelodeon's television presentations. In stories like Peg the Hen (which features the short letter sound of 'e'), Starfall's audiences drive narratives based on simple causality and incorporating bold naïve imagery. Children are given space and time to learn at their own rate, as they curse over the letters of the text, each generating their respective phonetics. They can revisit and repeat text, go forward or back in the story; they can personalise experience and effect change by customising characters with choice of colour, by dressing characters, and with rudimentary intervention in the character's actions.

Nickjr's Rumble, Grumble, Gurgle, Roar, an online story by Jonny Belt and narrated by Whoopi Goldberg, is set in the North Pole and aimed at an older audience. Children can once again dictate the pace of the story; they might linger a while and chip off some more melting icicles (an environmental message?) or click on the central penguin character to generate more hungry sounds from its belly. As in the previous example, imagery is simple and flat, animation is rudimentary, and written text is incorporated. In both cases, children are able to drive the narrative, play, seek closure, and importantly flesh out the reality/fantasy of the story actively and in their imagination.

A third case study incorporates both 2D and 3D platforms in its interactive narrative. F. Garzotto and M. Forfori describe their FaTe (Fairy tales and Technology) and FaTe2 projects as designed to exploit 'storytelling, edutainment, and collaborative interaction (as) powerful paradigms to promote learning in young kids' (2006, 113). They suggest that FaTe2 offers a 'combination of these paradigms by providing a web based, multi-user, two and three dimensions virtual space where children (aged 7-11) can meet, chat, explore, play, and perform storytelling activities in collaboration' (2006, 113).

Similar to other self-directed narratives for children, the structural elements of traditional narrative (initiating event, subjective response, objective response, consequence, reaction) are maintained for their learning potential and perceived resonance with the human condition; variance (participant input) is made possible within each narrative component. What is of interest to this paper is that the 2D presentation is employed for the presentation of story, whilst 3D space allows for tangential exploration and collaborative input within a narrative component. It would seem that, for the FaTe2 project, the Flash platform is deemed appropriate to the abstract schema of story, providing conceptual space for its contemplation (of narrative 'components'; their causal implications, and personal relevance) whilst the 3D platform provides physical 'doing' space for encountering simulated objects, for engaging with others, for posting story ideas, and for collaborating.

Conclusion

This paper has argued that despite the apparent simplicity of Olsen's 'Flash Aesthetic', it is exactly the limited nature of much animation created in Flash which enables complex relations with an audience. In comparison to more traditional modes of passive reception, the Flash Aesthetic's stylised forms, strong outlines, bold flat colours and limited movement, invite participants to effect narrative closure in a creative relationship with the text. In interactive online narratives created in Flash, agency for the reader is twofold: via this reflexive nature of aesthetics and form, and through manual participation in the text (interactive buttons).

Although developments in Flash have pushed the software towards wider applications that include more realist imagery and fuller animation, it is the more emphatically 2D flash animations that are being celebrated here. Flash animations that employ pared-down imagery, that use limited means of movement and rudimentary transitions, exploit the creative potential of McCloud's comic gutter and thereby invite an audience into a collaborative production of meaning; meaning that is personalised and individual. Alternatively, narratives that immerse the participant in realist imagery, full animation and seamless continuity (be they 2D or 3D driven) risk closing this (imaginative) gap so that individual inflections are fettered; experiential spectacle leaves little space for imaginative play and speculation.

A full debate on the relative merits of immersive animation is beyond the scope of this discussion; this paper does not deny the huge potential of the virtual world, rather, it suggests that amidst the pursuit of more fully realised interactive animated spaces, we should not overlook the imaginative possibilities of more simply rendered reflexive realities. In the case of children, let's allow them to flex their imaginations, let's encourage their appreciation of abstract ideas (and stylised imagery) and their ability to apply the conceptual to their individual realities; let's leave room for their enacting closure.

By experiencing a good story well told, we create our own immersive environments, with details unrivalled by electronic media. We are able to see the anxiety in faces, we can hear the excitement in voices, we can smell the food in kitchens, we can feel the hairs on the back of our neck react to scary situations. Technological additions should complement the immersion already present in the human system.   ❧

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