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Animation: A True Art

by Elyse Warnecke

(English 1102)

When you were a kid, do you recall what you did every day after school? Many people recall watching cartoons the first thing after arriving home. You might have enjoyed shows like *SpongeBob*, *Jimmy Neutron*, *Dexter's Laboratory*, and *The Grim Adventures of Billy and Mandy*, to name a few. Behind all of these shows are extensive crews that work together to bring characters to life and make the shows enjoyable. They all feature characters facing struggles, interacting with others, following a specific plot line, all through a series of illustrations. Animation has evolved vastly along with technology, branching out to three-dimensional images created using computer programs. As there are numerous roles involved in the process of animating motion pictures, it is impossible for all the jobs to fit under one “umbrella.” However, the same general skills and attitudes are required for each job--teamwork, time management, creativity, and an open mind to new ideas. Animation serves many significant purposes, as a form of art, education, and entertainment.

According to their specializations, animators create backgrounds or characters, and are responsible for making synchronized movements between the characters and the scripts for either television, film, video games, or the Web. Animation incorporates technology and humor to make an entertaining production. There are various styles and processes for animation.

The earliest forms of animation were presented about 180 A.D., when the zoetrope, the first animation device, was invented in China by Ting Huan. In the article “Prelude to Animation,” John and Marilyn Connelly inform readers of the history of animation by listing and explaining the different forms of early technology that were created. The article continues, “William George Horner produced the modern zoetrope in 1834” (Connelly 2). The zoetrope is a cylindrical device with small rectangular slits evenly spaced around it. Through the slits, there are smaller silhouette images, and when the outside cylinder is spun, the images appear to be one moving figure. The zoetrope was a popular and educational children’s toy in the Victorian era. The phenakistoscope, a similar invention, spun vertically, the pictures seen as moving through a single slit. Next, flipbooks were created, “a set of sequential pictures flipped at a speed that creates the effect of animation.” The flipbook was patented by John Barnes Linnet in 1868. What launched the development of animated productions was the praxinoscope, a larger, “more sophisticated version of the zoetrope.” According to *Animation* by Ferguson, the praxinoscope was invented by French scientist Emile Reynaud, which he used to create “what is considered the first animated cartoon in 1892” (6).

The animation industry sparked in the 1900s. Stop-motion, another form of animation, was patented by Frenchman Leon Gaumont in 1900 (Ferguson 6). The stop-motion industry spread through Europe, but it does not remain popular today. Recent productions using stop-motion animation include Tim Burton’s films, *The Nightmare Before Christmas* (1993), *Corpse Bride* (2005), and *Frankenweenie* (2012). These films use puppetry, whereas other stop-motion productions use a style called claymation. Cartoon Network’s television series on Adult Swim *Robot Chicken* features a variety of stop-motion techniques: Puppetry, claymation, and “action” figures of characters.

Further, animation became more widely used with hand-drawn frame projections, and the creation of cels. Patented by John R. Bray and Earl Hurd in 1915, cels are an earlier technique in animation using small box-shaped sections of celluloid, which is clear plastic. As explained in

Animation by Ferguson, “The outline of the image is applied to the front of the cel, while the colors are painted on the back” (11). Ferguson also explains how Walt Disney became prominent in the animation world: “In 1923 he sold his first cartoon, *Alice’s Wonderland*, which featured a real child actress in the cartoon, to a distributor....By the late 1920s ‘talkies’ had replaced silent films and Walt Disney had created the cartoon character Mickey Mouse, which still entertains young and old to this day” (7).

Following the invention of Technicolor in the 1930s, animation’s “golden age” began, sparking the creation of several animated films. Upon the 1937 debut of Disney’s *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs*, animated films became wildly popular. In the 1960s, Hanna-Barbera studio entertained millions with the productions of *The Flintstones*, *Yogi Bear*, and *The Jetsons*, and became one of the most successful studios in the animation industry (Ferguson 8).

As animation continued to evolve, computer-generated imagery (CGI), was introduced to the industry. In 1988, the first major production using CGI was Disney’s *Tron*. Equally important, Walt Disney Studios released *Who Framed Roger Rabbit?* (1988), which was the first film to combine live-action and animation (Ferguson 9). From there, the use of CGI has increased and continues to improve today.

Workers in the field of animation create the stories for productions, as well as their settings and characters, and they work in teams to sharpen the final production. In *Your Career in Animation*, David B. Levy explains the multitude of jobs involved in animation, from the artistic side to the more technical side. The foundation for a production is created by the writers. They are responsible for the dialogue and story’s contents. Levy describes the role of the writer as the “storyteller” through a known professional: “According to Adam Peltzman (*Blue’s Clues*, *Backyardigans*), an animation writer must have a sense of story structure, character, pacing, tone, humor, etc.” (qtd. in Levy 59). These might include explanations of each scene in an episode of *Ed, Edd, n’ Eddy*, where Eddy beats Ed upside the head a different way while delivering a colorful insult.

To put the characters and script into action, the storyboard artist creates thumbnail shots according to the script (Levy 32). Storyboards are created in a form similar to a comic strip. Storyboard artists create about a page of these per day, once the shots are approved by the director. Writers and storyboard artists create what is happening with the characters.

Background artists build a specific setting for the characters, like the forest in *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs*, where most of the film takes place. The background works with the characters to effectively tell the story. Artists use Adobe Photoshop and Painter to make the backgrounds look more natural, and these programs are more time-efficient than the hand-paintings they used to work with.

Character animators bring their characters to life through 2D or 3D images, encompassing the basic principles of animation and giving a unique voice to the production. They animate characters assigned to them by a deadline, creating movements based on recordings, such as drawing the characters’ mouth to match the dialogue or mapping out the physicality for a character’s reaction. Character animators design how a character moves, such as SpongeBob’s outlandish body poses in his bubble-blowing “technique.” These animations use influential 2D programs such as Flash and After Effects, along with strong acting and storytelling skills. As mentioned in *Your Career in Animation*, Flash allows artists to draw directly on the computer screen (32). On-screen drawing can aid in tasks like adding to characters’ facial features. Character animators obtain their jobs by creating and submitting sample reels.

Reels are necessary for everyone working in the animation industry. They serve as the job resumes, in that they broadcast an artist’s best work and sketches, and any other productions an animator has been involved with. According to animator Morr Meroz, “The length of your reel should not be over 2 minutes.” Meroz also advises that the reel needs to be polished, give every segment its time, and include work that will be memorable and humorous to directors.

Stop Motion Animators work with an assigned stage, and supplies from the set department for props, the puppet department for characters, and exposure sheets from the track reader. Levy further explained that these sheets are used for animators to make notes for the positioning and movement of characters, and time out a character's speech to match the track.

Directors, producers, animation designers, and editors work together to make a polished production. Directors guide artists throughout the process of an animated production. Producers, designers, and editors are all generally responsible for sharpening the final product and making sure the images are up to standards.

In addition, animators are generally required to have a bachelor's degree in fine arts, animation, or computer graphics, a well-constructed portfolio, and proficiency with technology. There are various institutions from which this degree and necessary skills can be obtained. David B. Levy's *Your Career in Animation* lists California Institute of the Arts, Dartmouth College, Pratt Institute, Sheridan College, The Art Institute of Philadelphia, The Art Institute of Toronto, The School of Visual Arts in New York City, New York University Tisch School of the Arts and several others (228-235). Other schools that include animation programs are Columbia College Chicago; where many different people who work for industries like Cartoon Network or Nickelodeon have received their education; University of California Los Angeles; and Ithaca College in New York.

Further, experience is needed along with a degree. When beginning in the animation industry, artists are tested for employment in a specific area. In *Your Career in Animation*, David B. Levy recalls the tests he performed in animation: "To complete the test, I needed to create two drawings falling inbetween two extreme positions....When I took the storyboard test for *Blue's Clues*, the show had only been on TV for six months. In anticipation of the test, I ordered cable and started taping episodes of the series....I got the job" (23-24). In order to obtain the desired career, many animators must be able to complete a certain task in the amount of time that the director wants it done.

The Bureau of Labor Statistics' Occupational Outlook Handbook reports that a lot of training is done on-site at animation studios, allowing workers to become familiar with the studio's computer programs (United States 4). The main programs animators must be skilled with include Adobe Photoshop and Flash, which allow artists to animate the storyboard and add drawings through the computer, such as moving a character to a new setting, or adding a character into a scene. Another software, Wacom Cintiq, allows artists to draw on-screen. Stop-motion animators make QuickTime videos to view the smoothness and correct the timing of their scenes.

According to the BLS, "The median annual wage for multimedia artists and animators was \$63,630 in May 2014," and \$30.59 per hour. For motion picture and video industries, the area I am looking to specialize in, the median annual wage is \$65,330. The technical side of animation is said to have higher earnings than the artistic side. To compare, software publishers make \$72,960, whereas those who work in advertising earn \$59,600 (United States).

To get a feel for the animation industry, I gathered information by reading advice from successful animators in Levy's *Your Career in Animation* and conducting an interview with Tony Venezia, the associate professor of the Motion Picture Television department at College of DuPage, and educator in animation. First, Levy makes important points about starting out in animation, such as the importance of adopting and experimenting with several styles, rather than focusing on a specific style. He mentions that a common tendency students have is "the Anime bug," where they draw everything based on the style of Anime. Levy explains, "Being a slave to your style can hold you back from taking in other ideas and growing as an artist" (7). He emphasizes that it is imperative that students keep an open mind so they can continue to grow as artists as they learn basic fundamentals and mechanics.

Venezia had some extremely useful advice as well. Having worked as a production assistant in studios around Chicago, and in special effects at Midocean Motion Pictures after receiving his

Master of Fine Arts degree at UCLA, Venezia developed many strong skills with experience. He refers to these skills, such as the ability to deal with clients, work effectively under pressure, and present creative ideas, as the “bag of tricks” one develops in animation. Venezia emphasized that this all comes with a substantial amount of experience.

Another important action to take that helps animators become more successful is to join a major organization associated with the field. Not only do the events and publications give animators some material to learn from and allow them to put their own work out there, but these, along with other benefits of the organizations, allow animators to be more united across the globe and form together as a community, sharing the same love for animation. One association affiliated is ASIFA (Association Internationale du Film d’Animation / International Animated Film Association), founded in France in 1960, with over 30 chapters around the world. Chapters in the U.S. include East, Hollywood, San Francisco, Central, Northwest, and Canada (Levy 217-218). ASIFA-Central, the chapter involving the Chicagoland area, includes the benefits of co-sponsored programs featuring well-known animators such as Don Bluth, a “chief animator” at Disney. The events include the Chicago Film festival, where the chapter is involved in the judging process for the animation portion. This chapter is extremely beneficial because it presents multiple networking opportunities. The cost for individual members is \$33, national or regional chapters, consisting of at least 10 people, is \$150, and for countries with no chapter and one person “in charge of a ‘national office,’” it is only \$15.

Another well-recognized association in the field is Society for Animation Studies, an international organization begun in 1987 by Dr. Harvey Deneroff. This organization focuses on history and theory of animation; holds annual conference for members to display their findings, consisting of more than 220 members. SAS has three levels of membership: institutional-\$60 a year, professional-\$35 a year, and “student or economic hardship”- \$20 a year. According to their website, SAS members receive discounts to festivals and other events associated, the SAS Newsletter, publications in the online journal *Animation Studies*, addition to an email discussion, and listing in the “SAS Animation Experts” directory. Whether they are professionals or not, the Society offers anyone interested in animation an opportunity to view and learn from other people’s work, and to be a part of the animation community.

Animation is expected to grow exponentially in careers. However, it is imperative that artists stay updated on style and technology, as there are more and more advancements in computer programs. Proficiency in software programs is an essential skill for artists to be hired. According to *Animation*, “[Supporting artists] with the most up-to-date skills will have the best employment opportunities in this highly competitive industry” (114). Ferguson adds that outsourcing may limit employment in that many jobs will go to people in countries with lower wages.

Animation is truly an art in that anyone and everyone can interpret it the way they feel. A common interpretation by people is the formation of “conspiracy theories,” regarding the true theme or storyline of a show. There are countless episodes, scenes, and shows overall that people, mainly parents, have been concerned about, such as perceived sexual references, strong political undertones, references to events such as 9/11, and, even more commonly, racism. Several shows plummeted in ratings and were canceled for these very reasons. Additionally, various shows have episodes that could not be aired in certain countries because of their content. An example of this is an episode of *The Powerpuff Girls* entitled “See Me, Feel Me, Gnomey.” The episode can be found on Netflix, in the 5th season of *The Powerpuff Girls*. According to *tv.com*, Cartoon Network had aired this episode, but the original air date is unknown. It was aired on Canadian network YTV on March 18, 2004.

Featured as a “musical parody,” the episode begins with almost all of the Powerpuff Girls’ villains destroying Townsville. When the girls step in to save the day, they are soon unable to fend off so many villains at once. Upon their loss of the battle, the sky downpours, as if on cue. Devastated, the girls wish for “a day of peace,” “a day of love,” and “a day of understanding” to

quote the lyrics. When the last drop of rain falls, a rose grows from a crack in the ground, and the petals open to reveal a tiny gnome. The gnome agrees to grant the girls' wish in exchange for their powers. However, when the girls finally comply, the whole town becomes enslaved to the gnome. The song "Freedom Beef" points out the issue that the townspeople are not living their lives because they are consumed in worshipping the gnome. The girls then confront the gnome to get their powers back. The gnome realizes he "cannot exist in [his] utopian mind" and the girls and townspeople learn that essentially, there must be conflict in order for society to function and achieve balance.

Throughout the episode there were several occasions in which the lights flashed for about 15-20 seconds. In an article on *wired.com*, Brandon Keim mentions that "[s]eizures are triggered by light flashing between 5 and 30 times per second." The longest period in which the lights were flashing was 20 seconds of red and white alternating rapidly. Because everything was tinted more red when the gnome came to power, people discussing the episode can also argue that the "communism vs capitalism" theme was considered a bit too mature for the show's main audience. Upon viewing the episode myself, I could definitely see this theme; however, there is no real way to know the animators' true intentions.

Other examples of these controversial episodes or scenes include Nickelodeon's *Invader Zim*; in the episode "Door to Door" there is a scene showing what appears to be the city of New York in ruins, with smoke clouds emanating from buildings and the Statue of Liberty sinking in the ocean. A YouTube video posted by Nicktoons Network plays the original scene side-by-side with the edited scene, which shows people being swept off the streets instead, and only mild damages to the town. According to Nicktoons Network's description attached to the video, "Nick thought [it] was a bad idea to show [buildings being destroyed] due to the 9/11 attacks just happening."

Amidst the distinct content for children and adults, Pixar films serve as a happy medium in that they appeal to adults just as well as they do children. In her article *Agony and Avoidance: Pixar, Deniability, and the Adult Spectator*, Ellen Scott talks about adult themes expressed in the films in a way that is subtle enough that children can enjoy the lighthearted nature while adults can contemplate their thoughts and fears in a wholesome way. Scott writes, "One of the distinct pleasures in Pixar's films is the pleasure of seeing the deepest of human struggles, timeless philosophical questions projected in and through remote forms of representation" (3-4). Scott also explains "adult" themes in the films *Toy Story* and *WALL-E*. In *Toy Story*, the toys fear the inevitable; being forgotten, and, in a sense, destroyed. *WALL-E* focuses on relationships, which can easily be compared to real-life experiences. With no concerns regarding censorship, Pixar films reach out to a wide audience and are known and loved by people of all ages.

Furthermore, the use of animation will essentially help people to understand the world better. Animated news broadcasts are a great advancement, and likely the start of a new movement. The animations tell the story of an event, and as depictions catch most people's eyes, more will be aware of current events. Animations in the news can also explain certain events and issues going on in a way that is generally easier for people to understand. In an article for *The Independent*, Adam Sherwin explains the huge step that BBC news is deciding to take. Upon seeing an animated story of the Michael Brown case in the U.S., BBC decided to "reinvent" their news broadcasting in a similar way. Animated news has covered serious issues such as ISIS and the fear that the people of the Islamic community live in. The animations show sequences of the people in the Middle East protecting themselves, explaining the seriousness of the situation and the measures the citizens must take.

Another beneficial purpose for animation is an aid in education. Interactive animations are very helpful to young children, such as *Dora the Explorer* and *Go, Diego, Go!* These shows teach children about colors and shapes, animals and geography, and even language, with the use of Spanish words. Another way that animation is used as a tool for education is through *Schoolhouse Rock* videos. Along with other students, I have learned from elementary school and the following years,

about history and the principles and mechanics of the English language. This series is one of many animations that teach important concepts in a way that is entertaining and educational to a vast audience.

Finally, animation will continue to evolve, making for more detailed and realistic images. It is apparent that recent films have strayed away from 2D animation. CGI films have become increasingly popular, and they are the foundation for successful DreamWorks films like *Shrek* and *Madagascar*, with extended series. *The Peanuts Movie* (2015) shows the evolution in animation by transforming 2D animations into 3D. In theaters, people can see that animated films are now all made in 3D, and the images appear to come “alive” more than 2D images. Though 2D is used as more of a basis or starting point for films, there are many popular television shows that use 2D animation. Technology in animation is so advanced, it is possible to produce hyper-realistic images, such as the CGI animation using images of real animals in *The Jungle Book* (2016). Whether it be 3D-animated productions, or TV cartoons, children can learn lessons from the characters’ situations and viewers can relate to the characters in some ways. As animation is so widely used and has become increasingly popular at this time, the industry will be booming with opportunities for animators. Animators are essentially educators and entertainers to adults and children alike.

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