Drawing and Visualisation Research

The Impact of Digital Technology On My Drawing Practice

by Sharon Katz

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Summary

Digital technology has made it possible for me to work in what was once the elaborate medium of animation. The immediacy of playback, and the availability and flexibility of the digital animation tools, have made it a welcoming route through which I have broadened the scope of my drawing practice.

Digital technology has made it possible for me to extend my drawing practice beyond still imagery to the study and creation of animated images.

Each individual frame of the four animated phrases attached to this contribution is a digitally hand drawn image that is meant to be seen for 1/12 of a second and is only one of a string of images that run consecutively over time. While the playback software allows us to examine each frame incrementally, and to read it as if it were meant to be a still drawing, each of these images is drawn for its contribution to the overall motion.

I was trained as a visual artist in the late 1970s and early 1980s and much of my practice has been in the realm of drawing. In 1994 I was introduced to animation by a colleague (J. Blatter,) who gave me an introductory workbook for animators (White 1988). I was intrigued with the art form but without access to an animation studio I thought it would not be possible for me to experiment with images in motion.

At the time I had a Macintosh LC computer. The same colleague suggested I purchase HyperCard. It came bundled with a free version of a very basic animation software application. Using a mouse, I began my first experiments in digitally rendered motion. In addition to the standard one pixel aliased brush, the software offered a blobby anti-aliased airbrush with adjustable size and flow parameters.

I quickly mastered the concept. Using the one pixel brush to create a simple line, I drew a ball, then redrew it on the next frame in a slightly different position. After continuing in this way for 12 or so frames, I played back the clip and was delighted to watch the ball bouncing in space over time.

I soon added a Wacom tablet and stylus pen to my kit. Now I was able to draw faster and smoother.

While animation in pre-digital days was mostly limited to those who had access to the elaborate equipment required to produce it, digital technology has made this medium generally accessible to any visual artist.

I created *Happy Birthday Hannah*, my first 3 minute animated short, in 1999 on an early model Macintosh computer using the free software bundled with HyperCard. I edited the film in an early version of Adobe Premiere. There was no budget to speak of for this film other than for the foley (sound effects), and it successfully screened in competition at major film festivals and was sold to television broadcasters. Digital technology has made animation a universally accessible medium, from production right through exhibition and sales.

What does it mean, then, to have animation in the hands of practicing artists? Artists often push the boundaries of technology in creative ways, bringing to the table interesting new ways of solving old problems.

The software that I animate in today is Synthetik Studio Artist. Within seconds of animating a sequence, I can be watching it play back in real time. In the pre-digital world the cels had to be drawn, shot onto film, the film developed, and then played back on a projector. It could be days, even weeks before the artist could review what had been animated. Not only can I instantly playback what I have animated, I can also edit the sequence, tweak the images, adjust the timing, etc. Working in this way allows immediate trial and feedback, a ripe environment for experimentation.

I discovered early on that if I drew a series of gestural marks that emphasized the motion I was trying to depict rather than drawing object detail, the animated imagery was more interesting to my eye (though the object was not as well defined.) This intrigued me and I began to draw for the motion rather than drawing for the representation of the object.

Depending on the context, today I postpone object recognition, hint at it subtly, present it overtly, or even abandon it entirely. My principle concerns, working with this medium, lie in defying the flat 2D plane of the film surface, investigating the rendering of motion, and maintaining at least some narrative or figurative context for my work.

Notes

An alias mark is a digital mark that is hard edged. On magnification larger than screen resolution, the diagonal edges of an alias mark appear as step-like solid pixels.

An anti-alias mark is a digital mark that has soft edges which blend with the background pixels.

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