

THE ART OF CHANGE OVER TIME:
ANALYZING ALTERNATIVE PRODUCTION PATHWAYS IN ANIMATED TELEVISION

by

Andrew Patrick Hodge

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Supervisor:

Elizabeth Buckley

Second Reader:

Jordan Morille

ABSTRACT

The purpose of this paper is to provide prospective show runners, producers, and executives with a framework for examining the production process for animated television, understanding the issues present in the status quo, and identifying existing and emerging alternatives which they can integrate into their own projects. This paper does this by examining the history of animation in the USA from its conception to the modern day, with the goal of better understanding how this history contributes to the present issues that the American animation industry faces. From there, it constructs a working definition of “success” for an animated TV show. Finally, it analyzes emerging trends, business models, technologies, and production methods in search of more effective ways to achieve success compared to the legacy system. Throughout the paper, expert interviews are used to provide additional perspective on each topic. This paper concludes that there are several actionable methods which creators can utilize in their own projects to improve their production practices.

DEDICATION

To my family, without whose love and support I would never have been able to complete such a massive project.

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

	Page
I. ARRESTED DEVELOPMENT: WHAT’S WRONG WITH AMERICA’S CARTOONS?	1
The Saturday Morning Massacre.....	3
With All Due Respect.....	5
Flipping the Bird in Technicolor	6
The Moral of the Story	8
II. CONSTRUCTING A DEFINITION OF SUCCESS	9
Long-Running	11
Profitable	12
Creatively Fulfilling	12
Materially Supports the Creators.....	13
Some Final Points.....	13
III. ALTERNATIVE PRODUCTION PRACTICES	14
Getting Your Story Chosen	14
Adapting Existing IP.....	14
Learning from other National Industries.....	15
First Steps Forward.....	16
Methods of Production	16
2D, 3D, and Blended Animation.....	17
Limited Animation.....	18
Emerging Technologies	19
Globalization.....	20
Methods of Distribution	23
Traditional TV	24
Streaming	24
Social Media	27
International Distribution.....	28
Marketing Practices.....	28
Fan Work and Existing Audiences	28
Parasociality	29
Establishing a Brand	29
No Golden Ticket	29
IV. CONCLUSION.....	30
REFERENCES	32

I. ARRESTED DEVELOPMENT: WHAT'S WRONG WITH AMERICA'S CARTOONS?

Sixteen years. That is the amount of time that it took for Dan Povenmeyer and Jeff “Swampy” Marsh to get their animated show premiered on network television. These two men had worked on some of the most popular animated shows in America during their careers: The Simpsons, Rocko’s Modern Life, Family Guy, and King of the Hill. Despite this, it took years of shopping around to even get their foot in the door, facing rejection left and right. Their pitch became the wildly successful Phineas and Ferb, which was one of Disney’s most popular animated television shows for nearly a decade straight (Stevens). While one might see this story as the triumph of the creators’ dedication to a concept that they believed in, I feel that it highlights a much darker truth about the animated television industry in America: namely, the fact that it has been fundamentally broken for decades now.

If there are problems, there must also be solutions. The animation industry is full of creative and ingenious creators at every level of production, and their solutions have the potential to revolutionize the industry. By examining the history of animation, specifying what constitutes success for an animated TV show, and analyzing alternative production practices which can be implemented, I believe that the methods which are currently the status quo in American TV animation can be improved, leading to longer runtimes, increased profits, expanded creative freedom, and an improvement in the material conditions of the people making the shows.

This paper has some important clarifying criteria for what it seeks to examine. First, it will focus on “traditional” TV animation and its history. More specifically, it will draw a distinction between long-running television and short-form films and miniseries. While the

artistic skills used are the same, the expectations for television make it distinct in terms of production practices. However, films and miniseries do provide novel techniques which television productions can learn from and implement.

Second, it will examine the animated television industry from both a creative and business perspective. Television is a commercial medium as well as an art, and neither side of production could function without the support of the other.

Third, it will examine both the internal and external perspectives of animation in America and how it influences legacy animated TV. It will look at what the position of animation is in American culture, and how this has impacted and been impacted by the business of animation production.

Fourth, it will only focus on improving American animation, which is defined here as a show which is primarily produced by American showrunners and/or for a mostly American audience. This would include shows like *Family Guy* (which exports most of their actual animation to Korean animation studios) and *Spongebob Squarepants* (which is made for a primarily American audience despite being translated for international distribution), and excludes Japanese Anime (which is made for a primarily Japanese audience and then distributed internationally) and shows like *Total Drama Island* and *6Teen* (shows that were produced in Canada for a Canadian TV network, before later receiving an American distribution). However, other national industries will be analyzed in much the same way that films and miniseries will be—as sources of inspiration.

In an era of increased globalization, it can become difficult to determine whether a show is “American” or if that is even a reasonable way of discussing the animation industry anymore. It is important to emphasize, then, that this paper will be discussing the practices of US-based

animation studios, and not just the shows that they produce. Regardless of the global nature of a *show*, the attitudes and issues that a domestic *industry* faces remain just that —domestic.

The ultimate goal is to honestly and truthfully examine the production of animated television in America in order to better compare it to the various other avenues which currently are (or may one day be) available to showrunners and creators as viable alternatives. In other words, to really understand just how valuable these alternatives are we need to see just how fundamentally broken the legacy system is. Here are the questions the reader should be asking: is this a system I would want to work in if I was a creator? And is there a better way? To find out, we will need to begin at... well, the beginning. Specifically, the beginning of animated television in the US.

The Saturday Morning Massacre

The introduction of animation to television was inevitable. Animated films entered a tailspin after *Paramount v. United States* gutted most animation studios at the time. Younger animators were left with little choice but to look towards television for jobs (Perlmutter, 34-35). For the early years of television animation was mostly relegated to advertising and the airing of older short films, the work of William Hanna and Joseph Barbera changed this. Although the two of them had achieved critical and financial success with MGM Studios' animation department with the creation of Tom and Jerry, MGM shut down their animation department in 1957 (Creeber, 177). With both men out of the job, they decided to take their talents to the small screen with their own studio. Their company, Hanna-Barbera, became a powerhouse through the use of limited animation, which helped to cut expenses at the cost of animation quality (Perlmutter 42-43).

This stands in contrast with another pair, Jay Ward and Bill Scott, who created the wildly

popular characters of Rocky and Bullwinkle. Despite their critical success, the two men never achieved the same level of cultural prominence as Hanna-Barbera was able to achieve with their factory-esque ability to pump out show after show, although of the two studios their work was considered to have more artistic merit by both their contemporaries and modern scholars (Perlmutter, 40).

Hanna-Barbera began by creating shows that appealed to all ages, such as Huckleberry Hound and Yogi Bear. Although they were certainly primarily enjoyed by kids, there remained a significant adult audience at that time. It was because of this that Hanna-Barbera attempted to create the first animated show that was geared specifically towards adults: *The Flintstones*. The show was devised as an animated sitcom, similar to *The Simpsons* in concept, and the first three seasons were oriented towards an adult audience. This was followed by *Top Cat*, *The Jetsons*, and *Johnny Quest*, which followed in a similar vein and attempted to capture an older audience as well. Unfortunately, Hanna-Barbera was not able to escape the changing cultural view that America was beginning to develop towards animation at that time thanks to a new phenomenon: the Saturday morning cartoon (Perlmutter 54-66).

Devised by Fred Silverman of CBS (a man who was, ironically, an avid fan of animation), the Saturday morning cartoon time slot had the effect of essentially crippling the artistic expression of television animation in America. Despite the fact that the audience for animation had often been primarily children, it was not until the introduction of Saturday morning cartoons that it became known as a medium that was *exclusively* for children. At the same time, television was about to enter the most rigorous period of censorship that it had ever faced. Both governmental agencies and socially conservative interest groups began policing animation in the hopes of protecting children from what was seen as a potentially corrupting

influence (Perlmutter 114-120). As historian Jason Mitchell explains:

The appeal of cartoons for children was always considered a default —what changed in the mid-1960s was the assumption that adults could like cartoons too. Following the creation of the Saturday morning enclave, cartoons became stigmatized as a genre only appropriate for children, removing the traditional affiliations with a mass audience. This was accomplished partially by [the] networks latching onto an existing phenomenon— adults watched the least amount of television on Saturday mornings. But the industry furthered this association by marketing Saturday morning cartoons solely to children, by forgoing the visual complexity and adult humor that marked earlier animation, by sponsors advertising only to children during the timeslot, and by isolating cartoons from all other genres and timeslots to maintain tight associations between all the texts within the generic category (Mittel 51).

With All Due Respect...

The results of this divide can be clearly seen in America's treatment of animation as an art form. The American Film Institute has categories for Drama, Science Fiction, and... Animation (AFI). The Academy Awards and Emmy's have awards for Cinematography, Direction, and... Animation. The implicit statement here is that animation is separate from live action film. An animated film cannot win Best Picture. An animated tv show cannot win Outstanding Comedy or Outstanding Drama. An animated film cannot be one of the top 10 best sci fi films of all time. The disdain and disrespect that voters for these awards have towards

animation was put on full display when The Hollywood Reporter published the ballots of several Academy voters two years in a row. Not only did several of them abstain from voting for Best Animated Feature due to not watching all (or even any!) of them, the ones that didn't abstain sounded like this:

I only watch the ones that my kid wants to see, so I didn't see [*The*] *Boxtrolls* but I saw *Big Hero 6* and I saw [*How to Train Your*] *Dragon* [2]. We both connected to *Big Hero 6* — I just found it to be more satisfying. The biggest snub for me was Chris Miller and Phil Lord not getting in for [*The*] *Lego* [*Movie*]. When a movie is that successful and culturally hits all the right chords and does that kind of box-office — for that movie not to be in over these two obscure freakin' Chinese fuckin' things that nobody ever freakin' saw [an apparent reference to the Japanese film *The Tale of the Princess Kaguya*, as well as the Irish film *Song of the Sea*]? That is my biggest bitch. Most people didn't even know what they were! How does that happen? That, to me, is the most ridiculous thing I've ever seen (Amidi 2015).

The validity of The Lego Movie snub complaint aside (it is a great movie in this writer's opinion), this open disdain is being expressed by a member of the entertainment industry's old guard. Their judgement is considered worthy of consideration when it comes to animated films because according to Hollywood, that is the amount of respect animation deserves.

Flipping the Bird in Technicolor

What would eventually assure the permanent divide between children's and adult's animation in future decades was codified on October 30, 1973, when George Carlin said “Fuck”

on the radio. It was his risqué comedy routine which led the station airing it to the Supreme Court in *FCC v. Pacifica Foundation*. The Supreme Court determined that content not suitable for children should be aired during a time when they were less likely to watch, such as late at night. While the quality of animated television varied in the decades following this change, it remained firmly in the realm of children's entertainment. That would change with the introduction of *The Simpsons*, *South Park*, and *Adult Swim* (Creeber 186-187).

The Simpsons is massive in the world of American animated television, just as it is massive in American pop culture in general. Despite an initially shaky start, it would become a cultural powerhouse that is still going strong to this day. It helped to pioneer a certain kind of animated show, one that used the acceptance that animation was for children to shock its audiences with decidedly child-unfriendly content. This was exemplified even further when, almost a decade later, Comedy Central debuted *South Park* (Creeber 179). *South Park* went beyond *The Simpsons*' combination of slapstick comedy and surreal animation with sitcom tropes and moved directly into transgressive and offensive humor that was meant to horrify parents and amuse college students. This was the dyad of the new genre of adult animation, and it was these shows that adult animation would style itself on to this day. Shows like *Family Guy*, *King of the Hill*, and *Rick and Morty* all follow a similar formula to these two powerhouses. They vary in quality and aesthetics, but they all fall into the same box: irreverent comedies with highly episodic structures.

With the new programming came a new program: *Adult Swim* debuted in 2001 as a way to consolidate many of these new adult shows into a single time block. With their flagship shows *Aqua Teen Hunger Force* and *Robot Chicken*, *Adult Swim* broadened the possibilities of what adult animation in America could look like—as long as it was still a comedy. The conclusion

that one comes to is that oftentimes, adult animation does not defy the idea that cartoons are for kids so much as it plays into the idea for shock value. It is a system that inherently reinforces the cultural stigma around animation in America. Animated television is allowed to do all sorts of things, but it is never allowed to take itself seriously.

The Moral of the Story

This is where America's current conception of animation comes from. Animation is either emphatically for children, or it is a comedy for adults. No shows produced in America exist outside of this dichotomy for long before they find themselves cancelled. There are certainly good and well-made shows that can exist in this dichotomy, but they *must* exist in that dichotomy (Heckleton). More insidiously, America's long history of censorship and corner-cutting with animated television has produced a culture that is distrustful of innovation and new ideas. Returning to the story of Phineas and Ferb, the reason why it was ignored for 16 years was the fact that it was *different*, and as a result too risky to consider.

The riskiness that comes with new shows is partially due to the fact that American animated television runs on a similar principle to live-action television when it comes to initial production. Both methods begin with the shows being pitched to executives, who then choose to commission a pilot (or less often, an entire season). Unlike a live action show, however, animated shows are incredibly expensive to produce (even when corners are cut) and require exceptional manpower. This is on top of the already expensive process of getting a show off the ground that all shows must deal with, live action or animated. This means that animated pilots will often get made, requiring a massive commitment, but end up never seeing the light of day after the studio determines that the show won't work. There is also the risk that a show will prove to be a ratings failure and cancelled after a single season. Thanks to the high costs of

animation, a ratings failure can still apply to a show that is enormously popular. After all, a TV network is a business first and foremost, and if a show is underperforming relative to its other shows, the studio or network will often abandon it. The most egregious example of this is known in online animation circles as “The Spongebob Effect”. This phrase refers to Nickelodeon’s tendency to cancel any show that is unable to maintain the same ratings as their eponymous flagship series.

Before beginning work on a project, aspiring showrunners must ask themselves a slew of questions. *Is my idea something that could be classified as a children’s television show, or an adult comedy? If not, can I compromise my artistic vision to make it one? Even if I meet that criteria, will my show ever get picked up? If it does, will it be cancelled in a season or less for reasons outside of my control?* When faced with these questions, it becomes clear why traditional television in America is broken. Not every creator of the next hit show has the connections and privilege to wait sixteen years, much less a show that conforms to the narrow standards that networks demands of animation. The industry is designed to promote conformity and discourage innovation. Because of this, America’s animated television industry remains in a state of constant arrested development. I would like to ask the reader to consider the question I asked near the beginning of my paper: is this a system I would want to work in if I was a creator? If the answer is “no”, don’t worry! The rest of my thesis will explore *alternatives* to this currently existing system.

II. CONSTRUCTING A DEFINITION OF SUCCESS

Before we move on to explore the various alternative production practices available to aspiring creators, it would be wise to take a moment to figure out exactly what “success” means in this context. What is the metric that a showrunner should use to measure success? In any

creative endeavor a quantitative measure is impossible; different people will want different things out of a show. What was clear is that a useful definition needs to include multiple perspectives. Therefore, in order to construct a working definition of success I chose to interview five experts in the field who have worked at every level of production to learn how the industry measures success. The professionals were:

- Brad Graeber is the CEO and chief creative officer of Powerhouse Animation Studios, which has produced the shows Castlevania, Seis Manos, Blood of Zeus, and Masters of the Universe: Revelations, among other projects.
- Charlie Gavin has worked as a writer and artist for Clarence, Harvey Beaks, Big City Greens, and The Mighty Ones. He is currently working as a Director for Boxtown and Strange Planet Project.
- Jameel Salem works as a producer for Bob's Burgers, wrote for Disenchantment, and has worked on South Park's TV show and video games.
- Joe Rothenberg currently works as a senior illustrator and animator for Charles Schwab and professor at Austin Community College. His work has appeared on ABC, Netflix, Hulu, and the Nicktoons TV channel. He has also worked as the head of his own animation studio, Joe Rothenberg Animation.
- Louie Granda worked at Powerhouse Animation studio as an animator, production director, outsource producer, and currently works as production manager. He also works as an adjunct professor for Austin Community College.
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I also examined existing academic and professional literature which discussed how different studios measured success. With this information, I was able to create a working definition of

success that balances the financial and artistic elements of television production by finding four fundamental pillars. This is the definition which we will be using for this thesis: For an animated Television show to be successful, it must be long-running, profitable, creatively fulfilling, and materially support the people creating it.

Let's examine each of the four pillars to better understand why they are so essential to creating a successful show, and how the loss of any one pillar undermines the others.

Long-Running

Television shows are oftentimes measured by the number of episodes which they produce. In order to be considered for syndication, 100 episodes is the typically accepted threshold for television. This seems to have changed since the advent of streaming, where fewer episodes per season tend to run slightly longer. However, the overall purpose of a TV show as being a long-running storytelling medium remains the same, even as the lines between series and miniseries are blurred. With miniseries having a different goal in mind (a limited number of episodes is established from the beginning), the main difference is that a series will have strategies for more than one season. This is important because it emphasizes the value of good production practices; a miniseries can operate more like a film production, where the team making it can approach it more like a film. A long-running show, on the other hand, has to be prepared for an indefinite number of future episodes. Granda explained that “With television roughly 198 minutes of animation is expected to be done in a year in a half, in contrast with features where a 90 minute feature length film takes two years.” The difference is that of a sprint vs. a marathon. A TV show that is not long-running is less likely to be profitable, it will likely frustrate both fans and the creators, and it will prematurely put the entire crew out of a job. Saleem put it simply: “90% of new shows don't make it.”

Profitable

This is a somewhat obvious concept; The television industry is, after all, an industry, and it needs to be profitable for it to be considered successful by the people funding it. This is oftentimes one of the biggest struggles for an animated TV show. Animation is expensive and the profit margins are often razor-thin. This discourages innovation and encourages cost-cutting, both of which can have a negative impact on a show. Most importantly, if a show is not profitable, it is likely going to be cancelled. Gavin explained that creators need to be prepared for these practical realities of making a show: “None of these institutions are altruistic... People tend to glamorize what being at these studios is like, and I think it’s good for everybody to keep in mind that if you want to engage in this industry thing, you have to be aware that it’s a business, and there’s certain realities that come along with that.” Rothenberg, for his part, argued that the priorities of different aspects of production lead to differing perspectives on success: “Executives are looking at a 5 to 10 year timeline, while animators are looking at the next six months.” Finally, Granda pointed to creative success as being reliant on financial success: “Shows like *Castlevania* are getting the budgets because they’re proven to generate the ratings.”

Creatively Fulfilling

This is the flipside of commercial success; the people making and watching the show should be getting something of value out of the content that they are making/watching. This is not to say that every TV show should be high-brow art; whether the goal is groundbreaking quality or simply to make people laugh, a show should have a vision which its creators and viewers can buy into and support. Granda pointed out that oftentimes, creative fulfilment is part of why people get into animation in the first place. “As an animator, it’s kind of your life.” The showrunner for *Arcane*, Christian Linke, summed it up succinctly in documentary *Bridging the*

Rift: “We should never work on a project that doesn’t offer us something personal to explore.”

Materially Supports the Creators

This, unfortunately, is a pillar which is often overlooked or even intentionally ignored by the industry; the glamor surrounding animation in the eyes of fans often means that when those same fans enter the industry, they are more likely to accept lower pay and harsher working conditions. This can be seen from the animators themselves, to the voice actors, to the writers, all of whom are historically compensated less than their live-action counterparts in the industry. While this practice can save money in the short term, the effect of this in the long term is burnout, disillusionment, and a lower-quality show. To make a successful show, fair compensation and treatment of the people making it is essential. Graeber and Granda attributed Powerhouse’s success to this concept “Powerhouse has been so successful because we prioritize everyone who works here, making sure they get paid.” Said Graeber. Granda agreed: “The reason we’re able to pull in the talent is that we’re employee centered. We take care of our people. A lot of companies take advantage of the starving artist idea, and we try to pull people out of that.” Rothenberg, for his part, points to differences between how animators are treated in corporate vs. creative industries: “Ironically, it’s been more liberating creatively to work at a place like Charles Schwab than to work for myself, because at 5:00 I get to close my computer and work on whatever I want.” The fight to improve conditions for the animation industry has expanded to unionization efforts, which have garnered support from the more protected live-action guilds and unions (Lang 2022).

Some Final Points

Each of these pillars, you may have noticed, is fundamentally connected to the rest of the pillars. While there are exceptions to every rule, generally weakness in any one of these

categories often precedes issues in the other three. A healthy production will make an effort to uphold each of the four pillars. Granda agreed with this assessment, stating that “You can tell when one of those areas fails, the quality of the show begins to go down. “Throughout the next section of my thesis, I will return to these four pillars to explain how different production practices might help to support one or more of them.

III. ALTERNATIVE PRODUCTION PRACTICES

Getting Your Story Chosen

Adaptation and existing IP

Because of the risks that come with creating animated television, executives have always been preferential to adapting existing IP over creating original content. Saleem pointed out that by doing so, studios can save money while still reaching a larger audience: “You can spend half the money on a marketing budget because you already have people on board.” He points out how even successful shows like *South Park* often faced a difficult path to distribution when there was no preexisting content to fall back on. “*South Park*, they pitched the show to FOX,” Saleem said. They went in with these big cutouts of the characters, they were very sure they were gonna sell it, but FOX didn’t want to take the chance so they didn’t get it. If they had already been a comic or a video game, it would have been easier for them to make that leap.”

Because of this, it has become common practice in the industry to rely on adaptations for new series. And because existing IP impose less risks, executives and audiences are more willing to accept stories that fall outside of the animation binary. Generally, The more popular an IP, the more they are able to transcend the cultural expectations surrounding animation. This can be seen with the wildly successful *Arcane*, which has received critical acclaim for its quality and tragic narrative. Because *Arcane* is based on global video game phenomenon *League of Legends*, an

already existing fanbase of millions meant that the creators not only had the freedom to deliver quality, but also a responsibility to those same fans to create something exciting and new.

Arcane is an extreme example of this concept, but shows like *Batman, the Animated Series* and *Castlevania* show that adaptations are (ironically) often able to innovate more than original shows. In fact, adaptations of superhero comics have a long history of being adapted into cartoons, with the most recent example of this trend being Amazon's *Incincible*. Even *The Boondocks* got its start as a comic strip *a la Peanuts*.

Beyond video games and superhero comics, where can aspiring creators turn to for potential avenues to initially grow an audience? With the emergence of the internet, a new method of reaching an audience was born. Today, the barriers to creating a story are lower than ever. Podcasts, webcomics, and serialized narratives have all found a place online, and many of these smaller projects have developed a dedicated and outsized following. Equally important, the independent nature of the story means that the creators often have complete creative freedom to tell whatever story they want. Rothenberg points to webcomics and podcasts as specific avenues to developing an idea in order to pitch it as a show: "Podcasts and comics exist to get ideas out in the world as quickly as possible... they have an outsized reach compared to animation, and they allow you to be in control of your content."

Learning From Other National Industries

The effectiveness of adaptation is not purely theoretical. In other countries it is an established business practice. This can be seen most especially in Japan. Japanese anime relies heavily on manga, light novels (cheap serial novelizations similar to American pulp novels) and webcomics to build an audience before adapting properties to television (Morrissy 2016). This has been common practice for decades, now; even back in 2002, over 60% of animation on

television in Japan was an adaptation of a manga (Masakazu 2002). The benefits of this system is that for the artists and writers of these stories, there is a clear pathway to getting a show created.

Another national industry which has more recently begun to embrace a more accessible on-ramp to developing stories is South Korea. The recent merger between Korea-based Webtoons and Canada-based Wattpad into Wattpad Webtoon Studios is poised to develop a global platform for creators to leverage successful stories and webtoons (unique webcomics which utilize a mobile-friendly scrolling format) for long-form storytelling which includes animation (Zorrilla).

First Steps Forward

The current American system of creating large amounts of bespoke animated content threatens to undermine all shows by saturating the market, making it impossible for any show to maintain profitability. Instead, studios should reduce the amount of content being made and help to develop a healthy “minor league” of cheaper stories through original comics, narrative podcasts, or even video games, as well as giving space for animated shorts and miniseries to gain an audience. While creators whose love of animation as an art form might balk at the idea of animated television no longer being dominated by original content, Rothenberg points out that the challenges of animation make this arrangement preferable to the status quo: “Who says that the original expression of an idea has to start in animation for it to be original? I don’t think that it’s important. It’s rare that animation has existed on its own.”

Methods of Production

Congratulations, your show got picked up! Now you actually have to create the show. From pre- to post-production, every step requires careful consideration. A lot can be done in this stage to help ensure the success of a show, but there are also pitfalls that need to be avoided.

2D, 3D, and Blended Animation

In TV animation, the two reigning animation styles are 2D and 3D animation. Stop-motion, while it does have niche uses with shows like *Shaun the Sheep*, *Robot Chicken*, and *Morel Orel*, is less common with long-form animation. Even *South Park*, which uses stop-motion-style graphics, is actually created digitally (aside from its pilot episode, which was traditionally filmed using physical cutouts according to Saleem). Most studios specialize in one type of animation, and although there are industry standard programs such as Toon Boom, every studio tends to have a unique workflow and methodology when it comes to their animation. Granda explains that while people might work at several studios in their lifetime, traditionally there was not much in the way of overlap, especially between different methods of animation. As Granda explained: “A lot of the methods and techniques that each studio uses are going to be proprietary.”

For most of television history, 2D animation was the go-to method of creating show. With the invention of digital rendering tools, however, it became cheaper to create shows using 3D animation. Graeber explained that the reason why 2D animation fell by the wayside was that there was a perception that 2D animation simply couldn't improve enough to keep pace. Graeber said: “The big problem with 2D animation was that the technology lagged behind, there was technological inertia.” The lack of technological innovation made 2D animation too expensive for TV. However, Rothenberg explained that when 2D animation made the jump to the digital realm, it was able to return to commercial viability. Rothenberg said: “When the tools used to create 2D animation improved, 2D animation became able to compete again.”

3D animation, for its part, has become a staple of the American media diet, especially on the big screen where it remains dominant. However, trends in animation point towards the

creation of a new method of animation: blended animation. Also called hybrid or 2.5D animation, blended animation has risen to dominance on both the big and small screens; while studios like Disney have been using 3D models in 2D films for decades in films like *Beauty and the Beast*, *Tarzan*, and, *Treasure Planet*, in recent years critically acclaimed films and TV shows like *Spider-Man: Into the Spider-Verse*, *Klaus*, *The Dragon Prince*, and *Arcane* have become the heralds for a new way to animate, one which seamlessly integrates both animation methods and utilizes their strengths (Luntrararu 2022).

It is notable that with blended animation, many of the innovations which are beginning to be seen in television began with feature films. That is a common trend in technological innovations; films have more room to experiment with new styles and technologies, while TV shows are much more risk-averse. However, with blended animation having more than proven its effectiveness at large budgets, more cost-effective versions of the same method are increasingly viable in the world of TV.

Limited Animation

Limited animation has a bad rap in the USA. The term brings to mind cheaply made cartoons, often crassly commercial, with cut corners and childish subject matters. What makes matters worse is that such animation is far more common in television, thanks to the simple math of “pencil miles”. Graeber explained the concept simply: pencil milage is the number of literal miles of lines which a team of animators can create with a given budget and time frame. Combine that with the simple arithmetic that a TV show will have more “minutes” in it than a film, and you have a situation where a smaller budget has to be stretched further with a smaller time frame. As Louie Granda explained: “With television roughly 198 minutes of animation is expected to be done in a year in a half, in contrast with features where a 90 minute feature length

film takes two years.” Because of this, limited animation is an unavoidable fact of production when it comes to animated TV, and exceptions like *Arcane* tend to have the benefit of large budgets, extended amounts of time, or both. However, the way that studios approach using limited animation can help to mitigate the negative effects.

A comparative study of Japanese and American limited animation by Yong-Seob Lim of Se-Han University found that although Japanese animation utilized limited animation for TV shows, they tended to have even fewer frames of animation than their American counterparts per episode (Lim 2019). However, the approaches to animation as a whole are different between the two countries. Thomas Lamarre divided the approach of both industries as being the difference between “drawing movement” and “moving drawings” (Lamarre 2002). Lamarre explains that anime is typically focused on cinematography, symbolic movement, and dynamic posing rather than creating an illusion of movement, which is the American style. Because this style is designed with limited animation in mind, it is well-suited to make the most out of limited pencil milage. Graeber pointed towards younger animator’s interest in anime as being an important part of developing the signature style of Powerhouse Animation Studios. Graeber explained that “about half of the studio is old guard, and the other half are younger... we can combine Eastern and Western techniques to get the most out of both methods.”

Emerging Technologies

Throughout the animation process, new softwares with powerful tools have helped animators to increase the speed of their workflow exponentially. One of the most useful aspects of this is that it allows for animators to improve their skills at an accelerated rate compared to in the past. Granda pointed out that it has always been new technology that has pushed animation forward, and even allowed it to exist in the first place: “Technology has always played a huge part in

animation since the beginning.” Graeber, for his part, shared his personal experience from when he first learned to animate to modern software: “When I was getting started, it took months to animate a single sequence. Now, that same sequence can be done in a fraction of the time using digital tools.” Graeber went on to explain that because of these technological innovations, the current workforce for animation is able to hone their skills more quickly, and professional productions are able to create more high-quality work at a faster pace. Saleem pointed to the difference in production between South Park’s pilot episode—which took 70 days to make—vs. the six days that episodes can be made in today. Saleem explained: “All the assets are built, so when it comes time to do a scene the animators import the characters and animate them. That’s how they can make episodes so quick, nothing is hand drawn.”

This paper will examine a few examples of emerging technologies with varying degrees of potential use, to illustrate examples of potential new innovations which animated TV shows might be able to utilize in the near future.

Machine Learning and A.I.

“Aren’t you going to ask me about A.I.?” asked Granda during our second interview. While it was meant as a joke, it certainly does point to there being a huge interest in machine learning, especially in the entertainment industry. A.I. like Midjourney and DALL-E have become notorious in creative circles for controversy surrounding questions of copyright, art theft, and the validity of A.I. generated content as “real art”. However, the fact of the matter is that outside of interest as a curiosity, the applicability of machine learning is limited. Granda explained that “A.I. isn’t able to replace animators wholesale.” The uses that exist for machine learning in production look very different than the popular conception of generating art wholesale. In fact, the most effective use of A.I. in the animation industry can be seen in the film

Spider-Man: Into the Spider-Verse. Mike Seymour’s interview with Pav Grochola, Effects Supervisor for the film, explains how the line effects which give the film its comic-book feel were the result of tandem effort by artists manually adding lines and a machine learning software helping to speed up the process. Seymour explained that “The translation back to a 3D space happened automatically, saving the artist time and effort to make these adjustments (Seymour 2019).” Machine learning is only effective as a supplement to artists, not as a replacement for them. The program relied on a dataset which was provided by in-house artists, ensuring that the end results would closely fit the desired end result. As Granda pointed out, “There is no button you can push that says ‘Animate.’”

Remote Work

While AI is unlikely to see broad adoption outside of niche uses, the same cannot be said for remote work. When the COVID-19 pandemic first began, most of the entertainment industry was hit hard. Productions came to a halt for months or even years as safety measures were developed. Live action film simply couldn’t be done. For the animation industry, however, the transition to remote work was much smoother. With most of the work of animating in the US being digital already, working from home was a possibility for practically every stage of production. And while making the transition came with its own challenges, Saleem explained that studios have been able to refine their process and that “A lot of things have become easier in this post-COVID world of animation production.” Decentralizing provides numerous benefits for studios; a smaller office space (or even no centralized office at all) is more affordable, while the pool of talent which studios can draw on has expanded to everyone with a good internet connection and computer. Some studios might choose to move entirely to remote work moving forward, but a hybrid style is likely to become the norm. Saleem agreed, saying that “The

industry is going to be keeping a lot of the remote work moving forward.” This is especially important because the pandemic led to an enormous increase in viewing numbers for streaming services (Luo 2020). With animation having been the only product which could continue production, the “streaming wars” gave a temporary financial edge to animated properties over their live-action counterparts. While it is difficult to say what the long-term effects of that advantage will mean for the animation industry, it is a possible point of growth moving forward.

Real-Time Rendering

Real-time rendering is less flashy than machine learning or remote work, but the implications of it have enormous potential benefits for animation in the near future. For most 3D animation software that is industry-standard, rendering animation is an expensive and time-consuming process relying on extensive render farms to complete. Real-time rendering, in contrast, is the standard practice in the video game industry. It allows for the game engine to render everything that the player sees as they move around the game, without having to wait and generally without specialized computational power. This allows the user to interact with the file as it appears, and without needing extensive render times and allowing animators to make adjustments on the fly. There are, of course, tradeoffs which have to be made for this speed; real-time rendering tends to have lower quality output, and it takes more time up-front to create the models. Because of this, it is a poor fit for feature films, where long render times are an acceptable tradeoff for higher quality. Moreover, most real-time engines are not built with animation in mind, making the use of it in production clunky and awkward. As games continue to become more graphically intensive, however, programs like Epic Games Unreal Engine have begun to approach usability for pure animation projects, and early proof-of-concept projects like *This Tape Deck is a Time Machine*, an upcoming animated series by Nexus Studios, seem to

indicate a real interest in the technology. The benefits for series, where reusing assets and quick production of a greater number of minutes of animation is expected, are clear. Moreover, the lower quality of animation for television is generally an already accepted tradeoff of longform animation content, meaning that the same things that make real-time rendering a poor choice for films make it an excellent choice for TV shows. As engines continue to improve and are tweaked to fit the needs of animation studios, it will likely see increased adoption in the near future.

Globalization

While this paper focuses on American production practices, it would be impossible to ignore that animation has continued to move towards globalization as a rule. In fact, very few animated TV shows are created by a single studio in a single country. Especially in 2D animation, a bulk of the animation work is typically outsourced to studios in other countries. Granda explained that this method can allow animation studios to focus on their strengths. “Collaboration between animation studios allows for an increase in specialization.” Granda said. “With features, you don’t have a lot of subcontractors. At Powerhouse we need to outsource a substantial portion of our work.” While this method provides numerous benefits, Granda went on to explain that it is not without its challenges. Differences in language, production practices, and technology mean that there is rarely a smooth transition of work between studios, although long-term relationships between studios can help to mitigate this issue. “Studios in Korea are only now beginning to digitize,” said Granda, using an example from *Castlevania*’s production.

Because most animation studios tend to specialize in either 2D or 3D animation, the increase in blended animation means that studios will likely need to collaborate not only across countries, but also across animation methods.

Methods of Distribution

Where a show is distributed can be just as important of a question as how a show gets made. Different audiences, benefits, and drawbacks mean that there is no single correct answer for all animated TV shows. The best option is to weigh those benefits and drawbacks to find the distribution which works best for the show.

Traditional TV

Even after the increased prevalence of internet-based distribution, traditional network TV continues to pull audiences. While ad-driven TV tends to be limited in what it can show, cable networks like HBO have more freedom. For shows that have existed for longer than streaming (such as *The Simpsons*), this is still the primary method of distribution. However, as established, it is with network TV that the current animation dichotomy was established, and it remains a bad fit for shows that fall outside of that dichotomy. For shows that can fit in it is a valid choice, but the limited nature of time slots mean that new TV shows are directly competing with IP giants. This is the cause of what is known in animation fan circles as “The Spongebob Effect,” which is the perceived tendency for Nickelodeon to prematurely cancel shows which do not immediately become hits on the same level as *Spongebob Squarepants*. Specialized programming blocks like Adult Swim and MTV’s Liquid Television have occasionally put out shows that would otherwise not have a place on network TV, such as action-adventure show *Samurai Jack*, surreal internet-personality-based *Smiling Friends*, and erotic sci-fi thriller *Aeon Flux*. Moreover, some shows have been able to push the boundaries of animation after garnering enormous audiences, such as *Avatar: The Last Airbender*, which leveraged its popularity to tell increasingly complex and mature stories from season to season. However, as its sequel series, *The Legend of Korra* shows, there are limits to how much risk studios are willing to take even with beloved properties.

Streaming

Streaming services are the primary reason for why there has been an increase in the variety of animated stories breaking into the mainstream of American culture. Graeber explained that this was partially due to the unexpected success of Japanese anime on services like Netflix; ratings revealed a “hidden audience” which had not been detectable up until that point due to the prevalence of pirating among American anime fans. The evidence that American audiences (especially teens and young adults) were interested in a wide variety of animated stories which were targeted at them allowed streaming sites to take risks with the content that they produced and distributed. Granda summed it up thusly: “Streaming has been largely responsible for the ramp in animation production.” In addition, the reliance on subscriptions instead of advertisement means that there is a greater degree of freedom, similar to cable.

Unfortunately, the current state of the streaming landscape is not favorable for animation; many streaming sites have been aggressively cutting back their original animated content. Shows in production have been cancelled, and at HBO Max already-released shows have been completely removed from the internet altogether, meaning that for many of those shows it is now impossible to access them at all (Jackson 2022). Gavin explained that this kind of scorched earth approach is largely due to increasing pressure on streaming services to beat the competition: “There is a survival of the fittest battle happening among the top studios.” However, because streaming sites do not have to share information such as viewing numbers, the decisions to cancel shows can seem arbitrary and opaque, and the reasoning behind the decisions are rarely provided to even the creators of the shows themselves. Gavin explained: “We don’t have an institution like Nielson Ratings, a third party, and [streaming services] don’t share that information.” However, there are some indications as to how streaming sites make these decisions. Internal Amazon documents acquired by Reuters showed that their metrics focused on

how many new Amazon Prime subscribers each show was able to bring in compared to how many dollars it cost to produce the show (Dastin 2018). Another metric that streaming services tend to care about is the popularity of a show on a global scale. Gavin explained that “These streaming services don’t just want them to do well domestically, but they look at global numbers as being important.”

Shows on streaming services also tend to have fewer episodes per season compared to the 24 episodes that network tv can expect to have per season. Saleem stated that “Steaming is usually around 8-10 episodes.” He went on to explain that “it’s not always the best thing because [the people making the show] don’t have as much work.” Because streaming services do not have to fill timeslots, they have complete freedom to release shows however they want, at whatever time works best for them. Saleem explained: “With streaming services, there’s no set schedule. We have 10 episodes ready to go and we’re just waiting for Netflix. We made 20 episodes, and Netflix released 10 of them.”

Historically, streaming sites have chosen to release their shows either all at once or in chunks, capitalizing on binge-watching tendencies. However, streaming sites such as Disney + and Netflix have begun to move away from this method and towards weekly releases, in the hopes of combatting the “peak TV” fatigue felt by viewers and the drop-off in fan interest caused by binging a new show with no new content to look forward to (Wallenstein 2017, Porter 2022). Despite the issues which have begun to emerge in streaming, the variety of shows which it has produced in recent years is undeniable. Boundary-breaking series such as *Love, Death, and Robots*, *Arcane*, *Dragon Prince*, *Invincible*, *Castlevania*, *Pantheon*, and *Midnight Gospel* show that for shows that seek to do something innovative, streaming is still a better option than network TV.

Social Media

Social media is the lowest-barrier method of distribution, available to anyone. Because of this, it is the distribution method of choice for independent studios, small teams, and individuals. However, the methods of monetization available to creators are typically less effective than purpose-built distribution services, and social media sites tend to keep a substantial portion of any revenue made. Rothenberg's assessment of the relationship between social media and creative content was pessimistic, and he went so far as to say that "The social media platforms are completely vampiric to creators." Because of this, creators relying on social media typically rely on alternative monetization methods to supplement their income. Another problem with social media is that because its algorithms prioritize engagement over everything, they tend to prefer content which is cheap, long, and derivative, which is difficult for animation to achieve while remaining monetized. Rothenberg pointed out that "There are a few animators who have made it on Youtube, but they are by far the exception, and they usually make derivative work."

Still, there are creators who have managed to utilize the potential of social media to build audiences of dedicated fans which allow them to continue creating animated content. Original shows like *Tales of Altherion*, *Helluva Boss*, and *Bigtop Burger*, and parodic or derivative fan content like *If the Emperor Had a Text to Speech Device* have been able to attract huge numbers of views, rivaling traditional network TV and streaming sites with a fraction of the budget. In addition, projects which such as Channel Frederator have provided jumping off points for high-production-value shows like *Bravest Warriors* and *Bee and Puppycat*. Unfortunately, the expectation that online content should be free to access limits the monetization options for social media animation. Rothenberg explained that "People won't buy animation on its own. Most people will just watch whatever's on their subscription. They're not going to buy a DVD of a

show they like anymore unless they're a super fan." While there are signs that this is changing, for the time being it remains true for the vast majority of consumers.

International Distribution

As discussed in the streaming section, success in the modern world often requires for a show to be popular outside of the country in which it was made; a show can no longer just be popular in America. While having a global audience obviously allows for more viewers, it can also lead to censorship issues. Shows like *Steven Universe*, *The Owl House*, and *Gravity Falls* have had to deal with network pressure to conform to the expectations of a global audience which is socially conservative in regards to things like LGBTQ+ representation. Streaming is more flexible in this regard, but if a show cannot be streamed in another country due to their obscenity laws it can lead to a loss of revenue which they may not be willing to risk.

A flipside of international distribution is that many independent projects which become popular online are made by people all over the world and have a global reach. IP such as the online webcomic *Lore Olympus*, which has an upcoming animated series in production, was created by New Zealander Rachel Smythe, distributed on a Korean website, and is being produced by the US-based Jim Henson Company.

Marketing Practices

Fan work and Existing Audiences

Dedicated fanbases have become an essential aspect of marketing for all entertainment properties, as they provide an IP with longevity, free marketing, and an oversized share of revenue compared to casual consumers. Healthy fan communities tend to produce derivative content which acts as free advertising, keeps audiences invested in the product even when nothing is being released, and does so without costing a cent. Because of this, even monetized

fan work (which might or might not violate copyright laws) is generally a positive which should be encouraged, not suppressed. Companies which are overly harsh in enforcing their ownership over properties tend to fritter away goodwill and enthusiasm for a product with little benefit in return, while companies which embrace fan work and even provide legitimate paths to monetization for independent creators tend to produce positive dividends in the long run.

Parasociality

The double-edged sword of fan communities, however, is the potential for unhealthy relationships to form between creators and their fans. Parasocial relationships can be detrimental to the creative process, with shows like *Steven Universe* acting as a common example in animation circles for how boundaries between audience and creator are necessary to avoid cultivating toxic behavior from fans.

Establishing a Brand

The value of marketing is that it can shape people's perception. The stigma surrounding animation today began as a result of marketing decisions, and clever use of marketing has also been used to help restore adult interest in animation. The most obvious example of this in action is Adult Swim, where a new programming slot for adult animation built a successful audience thanks to smart marketing choices on the part of Cartoon Network. Equally important, however, was a willingness by the network to take risks in the creation of it (Bahr 2021).

No Golden Tickets

Before concluding this article, it is important to recognize that in all of my research, there was no singular solution that would apply to every production (aside from improving working conditions for the people making the shows, which is evergreen). In fact, during the process of interviewing professionals for this article it was a recurring theme that there was no one-size fits

all approach to creating animation. Rothenberg voiced this belief most directly: “The one thing I hate is when people say there’s only one way to do it, because then you get these cults, like there’s the cult of [Ren and Stimpy creator] John K. People think there’s only one way to make animation, when the truth is you get different results from different processes. So experimentation should be encouraged.”

Moreover, there is no guarantee that good production practices will ensure success. Like all creative industries, success can sometimes boil down to random luck and industry trends that can neither be predicted nor defied. As Gavin put it: “It’s cyclical, there’s good and bad times.” Even Powerhouse Animation, which has seen incredible success, isn’t safe from failure. Granda admitted as much in his interview: “We’re not immune to things getting cancelled.”

However, failure is not the end of the world. The cyclical nature of the industry means that in the same way that failure cannot always be avoided, it is also not eternal. Rothenberg explained: “if you look at animation of the 60s, 70s, 80s, were a pretty sad time to be an animation fan. But now, even in economically tough times for animation, the technology makes it so that It’s easy to communicate skills so there’s a lot more artists with a high level of skill than ever before.”

IV: CONCLUSION

With all of the doom and gloom surrounding streaming services cancelling shows left and right, there is a tendency among those familiar with the industry to catastrophize. But animation, no matter its ups and downs, will never go away. The pure creative potential of animation as a medium means that there will always be artists, writers, and producers who will be ready to catch

the ever-changing winds of the market in the hope of creating the next great show. By improving production practices, we can create more opportunities for showrunners to seize the day with stories that entertain and inspire.

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