

Rise of the Bit-Ped: animation and automation

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Often, when we talk about animation or automation, we refer to the thing that has been automated or animated: the automated till or the moving line. There is, however, a kind of paradox in this description, as the endpoint somehow remains at the beginning, and we miss out the bit in between: the process that enacts animation or automation.

For instance, we might say that the line has associated with it the illusion of movement. But is the line simply moving or is it animated? I'm aware of being on dangerous ground in asserting a distinction between movement and animation, as movement is after all one of the defining qualities of animation. Without movement animation is not in evidence. Nevertheless, it is also true to say that there is something different between making a line move and animating a line.

The question this presentation will cycle around is to ask what changes in the process of animation, or to put this another way, how might we understand something to have altered as it has become animated or even automated. In particular, my interest lies in the ways in which the technological interface of an animation package is relevant to our understandings of the nature of the animated object. More precisely, as an animator negotiates their way through the expressive and creative possibilities offered to them as they use an animated package such as Flash, how does the negotiation between the human user and the technological user reveal itself in the animated object. My choice of the term 'bit-ped' gives some hint to where I want to take my answer: the animated object is neither wholly under the control of the animated package, nor under the intentional sway of the artist. Instead it emerges in the twists and turns of how something is given the illusion of movement, in the compromises and strategic deployments of opting for some decisions above others

The question of agency is central to the themes of the Animation and Automation event. One way of thinking about the shifting boundaries of agency in animation,

perhaps even to find away of saying something about the quality of liveliness of animated things, is to think about the interface of a human-user and their technological interface as a kind of communication. To define communication I'm drawing on the specific construction developed by Niklas Luhmann. For Luhmann the communicative event was a three-stage process: information selection, utterance, and understanding. The difficulty with mobilizing the idea of a communicative event based on a nuanced interaction between two participants, is that it is not quite appropriate for a communication between an animator and the technological interface with which they are working. Instead, we have a more delimited communication where the user interacts with the opportunities available to them via the capabilities of the technology. Despite this, the usefulness of Luhmann is to deploy the aspect of his formulation in which the agency and the intentionality of the communicative event is dispersed, because it allows a way of thinking about the technological interface as an influence within the decision making of the creative process.

By using different examples of Flash animation, such as the *Simon's Cat* series (Simon Tofield), the web-based *Animator vs Animation* (2006, Alan Becker) and the more experimental *Blur Belt* (2008, Sebastian Buerkner), I argue that this influence does not simply result in a particular aesthetic that is contingent on the limits of the animation tools. In addition to what's sometimes called the Flash aesthetic, the process of negotiation between the animator and interface yields a dynamic that has embedded within it the recursive possibilities of an interface explored by the creative play of an animator. The bit-ped that rises from the recursive possibilities of Flash are a consequence of a negotiation between the animator and the ability of the package to both make a line move and to animate it.