

Angela G Sonntag

TE 838

3.4 Reflecting on Technology

2/1/10

Explain what you have learned about the development of technology across time. Consider the evolution of cartoons and films!

As a child who grew up on Saturday morning cartoons, I don't think I ever put too much thought into how the cartoons I was watching have changed over the years. I had a very vague idea of how long cartoons had been around for, but when I started this assignment, I had a little bit of a number shock when I realized it went back to over 100 years ago. I began my exploration of cartoons from the early 1900's with *Steamboat Willie*, *A Cat's Life*, *In My Merry Oldsmobile*, *Balloon Land*, and other various cartoons. What I noticed first was the obvious use of only black and white and that there was little speaking taking place before the 1930's. The dialogue that was voiced over in the cartoons was seemingly short and had a crackly sound, as did the music that took place during the entire length of the cartoons. Due to the lack of technology, it was not feasible to create a cartoon with clear sound and voices, since it had to be added to the animation after its initial production. In order to add to the animation through other means of communication, I noticed a lot of thought and speech bubbles that the characters used to communicate.

As the years progressed Technicolor became a popular technique in order to "amp up" the cartoon world. In the mid 1930's Walt Disney and UB Iwerks began to animate cartoons like *Hot Choc-late Soldiers* and *Balloon Land* in Technicolor, which added a whole new depth to the animation world. Some of the cartoons that used color early on, only had a few different shades of grays, greens, yellows, and brown, but the clarity and vibrancy used with Technicolor as the years passed I found truly amazing. Not only was the color beginning to look incredible, but the sound quality and visual affects also began to make great leaps.

When I watched the clip about the creation of the multiplane camera and the creative process that went into creating full length animated films like, *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs* in 1937, I was really amazed at how they came up with those ideas. The animated world was no longer limited to short clips, but now branching out into the film industry and competing with live action films. When Disney created the multiplane camera, I could definitely see the affects on animations as I watched various clips on YouTube. I noted that in many of the cartoons produced after its creation, there was a noticeable difference in the angles and views the animation was able to display. In the Superman cartoons I could also see different layers of animation as I noticed people in the background and foreground moving around the main characters sandwiched between the two layers. From reading about the multiplane camera, I was better able to understand how they created this multilayered look and compare these animations to ones before its development.

What I found most fascinating was the animations that "interacted" with live actors. It was only a matter of time before the animation world tried to merge with the live acting world, and the clips from *Anchors Away* with Gene Kelly and Mary Poppins proved to be ahead of its time. I was very puzzled as to how they could create these cartoons without the use of a blue/green screen. The time it took animators to film the live actors and then animate around them was extensive, which explains why it was so

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risky for Walt and Roy Disney to attempt. Beyond entertainment purposes though, what I think was most eye opening was the information from the *Animation Learns a New Language* article by Hubley and Schwarts. I read that animation was not solely used for entertainment, but also for communication purposes as they animated trainings and information during and after World War II. Hubley and Schwarts explained that animation was one of the best means possible to communicate because it allowed for flexibility and a wider scope of expression. With animation, there are no limitations, because the artist is able to “control the images of a drawing and has the ability to change its shape or form.” The ability of film to combine animation and photography during this time period allowed them to appeal to a larger audience, more was being retained through this genre, and it was better able to express the inner ideas/thoughts that were difficult to photograph alone.

Consider the ways that technology helps and hinders film making.

The film making industry has always looked for ways to push the envelope and see what great leaps they could accomplish. Even though films have not always been used for entertainment, it's now one of their largest genres whether it is animated, live action, or CGI. I find that the development of technology is crucial to helping films stay successful in a time where so much new technology is available to anyone who can go to their local Best Buy. Modern times sometimes calls for modern measures and with the development of techniques like the blue screen and CGI, films have gone above and beyond what animators and filmmakers once dreamed possible in the 1900's.

When a script calls for the film to take place before the invention of the light bulb, the filmmakers rely on technology in order to make the film more believable. The audience realizes that it's not possible to travel back in time, but with the help of costumes, makeup, sets, blue screens, and CGI you can go as far back as the beginning of time. This technology can help children better understand how settlers lived, how the first dinosaurs roamed the earth, and what life was like when TV only came in black and white. Books and pictures can't always capture the attention of the children born during such a technological time, but by using what interests them (technology) we are better able to explain the unknown to them. Not only does technology help films become like a time machine for educational purposes, but it allows the audience to go places like outer space or a fantasy land, that may never be possible.

As discussed in an article about *Star Wars: Attack of the Clones* by Kristin Rattini, the blue screen technology allowed for live actors like Ewan McGregor to “interact” very believably with an alien that does not really exist. Producers were able to film the real actors up against a blue screen, add in the computer generated characters after they “cut and paste” what they need, and have a well crafted scene with the real and nonexistent. Even beyond creating films where live actors are combined with computer generated backgrounds and characters, there is the advances made in “animation” with movies like *Toy Story* by Pixar. Technology has come so far in the film industry that hand drawn animations are no longer the “in” thing, and completely computer animated films are what the audiences desire. Also, according to various resources from *Variety*

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Magazine and the *Wall Street Journal*, using all computer generated animation is actually a bit cheaper compared to the combination of 2-D hand drawn animation combined with 3-D computer animation.

It seems as though technology can only help filmmaking through all of its advances, but really there are some things that hinders as well. Through interviews with actors about the production of movies like *Bedtime Stories*, you can sense their excitement in being able to create such a fantasy world, but it also can be difficult and timely when filming. Sometimes actors are in a blue sheeted room with no scenery to help them develop their character or they may be looking at an empty space that will eventually be their computer animated co-star. For those actors that are not well trained, this could cause a potential problem in their ability to act believably. Also, even though the cost may be reduced for animated films by using computer animation, the same can not always be said for films combining computer animation with live actors. According to Wikipedia, films like *Lord of the Rings* had productions cost of about \$430 million in order to create their realistic fantasy world based on the novels by JRR Tolkien. Sometimes this expense doesn't always pay off either, as we found out as we discussed the failure of *Disney's Treasure Planet*. The movie was estimated to cost about \$140 million to make and only grossed about \$38 million in the US and Canada. There are many different beliefs as to why this Disney film flopped. Yet, whether it was due to its lack of a romantic duo, leading villain, or poor combinations on the soundtrack this chance Disney took on a film using their technology was a pricey blunder.

What do you plan to take forward from this week as you look at the course in general, and after the course is over?

This weeks activities were not what I initially expected them to be when I thought about a class involving children's literature and film. I was very surprised at first that we were going to be looking at cartoons, animation, film, and technology, but the more involved I became in the activities, the more I understood the need for them. Many times I only wear my "teacher hat" when I am reading a children's book or watching a children's film. When reading and watching something that I need to critique and analyze for work, I often forget about many aspects that still need to be considered. Last week we really focused on *Charlotte's Web*, and so I was able to take my new understanding of film terminology and production into consideration this week. My teacher hat is no longer just for what my students will read or watch, it now carries over into the many areas that affect how films came to be.

Using what I knew about films and what we studied this week with technology, I felt that I better understood the process, history of animation, and current styles of producing films. Many times I never thought twice about what a movie like *Star Wars* or *Bedtime Stories* would look like without all the jazzy visual affects, but I feel as though that has already changed. By appreciating what I know now about multiplane cameras, blue screens, and CGI I don't think I can really ignore what it took to produce a film that used that kind of technology. It was easy to just sit and watch mindlessly before, but with this knew knowledge I am more interested and make connections to our course work

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as I watch. Also, it really astonished me how much it takes to produce a film, even back in the mid 1900's! I felt that doing the research on the films brought a whole new understanding to our course work, because I found some great informational articles about the business end of things with companies like Disney. All of my classmates in this course have found different information and being able to share our new findings was extremely beneficial.

This week has really helped me to appreciate films that I have already seen and will make me appreciate the ones I will see in the future. It has been like a behind the scenes look at cartoon and films that there is no going back from. I can now continue through the course with more background knowledge and leave this course being able to apply what I know. I doubt that my movie going experiences will be anything but dull, because I can already see myself wanting to post ideas and comments on a discussion board after I go to the movies. I won't be able to have this opportunity to communicate with such a unique learning community in the future, but I'm sure I will find ways to get my thoughts out into the web.

One of the most interesting things that I think I will take with me after this class has ended is the curiosity to watch films and cartoons that I grew up with. I never really thought about the themes, visuals, and sound of cartoons the way I did this past week and my mind has been running rampant with questions. Even after the discussion board closed, I watched many episodes of Looney Tunes that I was obsessed with to find some very shocking themes of name calling and violence. My new outlook on animation and film will definitely affect the choices I make when allowing children to watch TV when I babysit or have children. It seems odd to me that I never picked up on some of the scandalous dialogue of my childhood favorites, but I'm glad I am more prepared to make better choices for those that I influence.