

The Systems Model Applied to Animation:

An examination of the systematic nature of creative practice in
digital animation

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Table of Contents

Abstract	3
Introduction.....	3
Theoretical Perspective.....	4
Methodology	4
Practitioner Based Enquiry (PBE)	5
Journal Keeping.....	5
Advantages and Disadvantages	6
Why PBE is Appropriate	6
Analysis	6
Domain.....	8
Field.....	9
Individual	9
Conclusion	10
References	12
Appendix.....	15
A) Shot List.....	15
B) Stills	18

Abstract

Through Practitioner Based Enquiry, informed by the systems model of creative practice, the challenges and successes of the animation ‘Siksruk’ are examined. Revealing creativity and creative practice is better understood through a systematic confluence approach.

Introduction

Siksruk is a short digital animation with a narrative based on the indigenous practice of whale hunting in Northern Alaska. This animation can be considered an individual project and my roles were extensive and varied. The goal was to create an engaging, stylised animation that, in conjunction with sound design, would capture the tension of hunting a whale in a dangerous and remote environment. Although defining what constitutes animation and subsequently the role of an animator is difficult and subject to some conjecture (Pilling, 1997, p.4), it can be said that it requires managing the relationship of changing properties over time (Thorn 2015, p.2). With this in mind, I consider my primary role was managing this relationship in an attempt to work creatively.

Initially my understanding of media production was underpinned by romantic concepts of creativity. However, as my understanding of creativity progressed along with the media production, it became apparent that creativity and creative practice were systematic. This understanding is informed largely by Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi’s (1988, 1996) systems model of creativity in conjunction with a re-conceptualisation of creativity (McIntyre 2012). The following exegesis is an examination and application of the systems model through practitioner based enquiry. It illustrates both the problematic nature of romantic myths about creativity, and the more useful understanding of creativity as systematic.

Theoretical Perspective

Csikszentmihalyi's systems model (1988, 1996), as a confluence approach to creative practice (Fulton & Paton 2016, p.28) will form the basis of my research. This approach, its application (McIntyre, Fulton & Paton 2016) and development (Kerrigan 2011) progresses the understanding of creative practice beyond only the individual or only the sociocultural, both of which in isolation inevitably lead to reductionist theories on creativity. In contrast, Csikszentmihalyi's systems model renders visible the complex iterative interplay of the domain (cultural), the field (social) and the individual (agent) that produces creative practice. It must be understood that each of these components is necessary but not sufficient by itself to produce and understand creativity. Recognising factors beyond the individual moves the understanding of creativity beyond the romantic myths (Boden 2004) that persist in common sense understandings of creativity (McIntyre 2012). By applying the system model to my own creative practice it is possible to observe the multitude of factors that exists outside myself, their interdependence and interrelationships, all of which impact my creative practice.

Further, it can be seen that these external structures found in the domain and field should not necessarily be resisted and viewed as only constraining. In line with Giddens' work on structuration (Haralambos & Holbern, 1995), it is possible to see structures as both constraining *and* enabling, as well as their interdependent relationship. Stages in my process that were initially resisted may have stemmed from my romantic notions and preconceptions of creativity, underpinned by my previous view of agency being in binary opposition to structures. However, through the application of the systems model and a reconceptualization of creativity (McIntyre 2012), the process of creating an animation was better understood and consequently improved my creative practice.

Methodology

The following examination employs Practitioner Based Enquiry (Murray & Lawrence 2000), informed by the systems model of creativity (Csikszentmihalyi 1988, 1996). Journal entries and analysis as well as reflection on the process and creative artefact

were carried out, with a view to better understand creativity and inform my future media practice.

Practitioner Based Enquiry (PBE)

PBE is a process where practitioners ‘enquire into their own practices to produce assessable reports and artefacts’ (Murray & Lawrence 2000, p.10). It includes examination and reflection of a practitioner’s activity through the process of conducting that activity, adding a much needed insider view on creativity (McIntyre 2006, p.4). By embedding the information in a theoretical framework, in this case the systems model, it becomes possible to produce findings that inform practice (Murray and Lawrence 2000, p.13). PBE seeks to provide “intellectual autonomy, improved judgment-making and enhanced technical competence”, returns that go beyond educational awards or cultural capital, therefore improving the entire discipline (Murray & Lawrence 2000, p.10-11). For this to occur practitioners must be both self-reflective and self-reflexive (McIntyre 2006, p.4). According to Bolton, being reflexive relates to focusing on one’s own actions, feelings and considerations, and their effects (2001, p.7). While being reflective includes a consideration of the entire situation, including other persons and place (Bolton 2001, p.7).

Journal Keeping

Bolton identifies a learning journal as a “collection of expressions of thinking and exploration” (2001, p.160). Although a journal provides evidence of academic work, it is not a chronological description of events, but rather a way of enquiring in the PBE process (Murray & Lawrence 2000, p.14-15). What constitutes a journal entry or examination goes beyond the written word. It is broad enough in scope to include sketches, proposals, presentations and artefacts, in addition to written entries. For example in this examination I will reflect on concept art, previous presentations and production documents. Through this process it becomes possible to better understand issues, which may otherwise have been missed (Bolton 2001, p.162). This self-reflection can be seen as a continuous process, where ideas and arguments are more fully expressed and developed. However, the act of journal keeping is not sufficient by itself and must be done in conjunction with a wider reflective practice and theoretical framework, ideally with the involvement of others (Bolton 2001, p.169). In this regard a journal acts as an antecedent to a report (Murray & Lawrence 2000, p.15), or in this case an exegesis.

Advantages and Disadvantages

There are strong criticisms to self-investigative research like PBE (Lynch, 2000). The criticisms are based on the notion that PBE is too subjective and produces unreliable results that are difficult to interpret, replicate and apply to other areas of research. Further it is claimed that the data gathered may be affected by the interests of those gathering it, that is, the practitioner. However, criticisms may also be founded in the desire for total objectivity, missing the important requirement of subjectivity if we are to gain an insider's perspective (Kerrigan 2011, p.37) as has been advocated (McIntyre 2006, p.4).

Claims that results from PBE are not transferrable to other projects, as they are specific to the artefact produced, may result from a conflation of the creative process with its resulting product. Once creativity is better understood through PBE, it follows that the creative process, including factors within our control, can be better understood. (McIntyre 2012, p.204). Therefore, the creative process and its understanding becomes transferrable to other creative projects.

Why PBE is Appropriate

PBE is not in opposition to ethnographic approaches. Rather, it is complementary and adds to existing research rather than undermining it (Kerrigan 2011, p37-38). PBE provides a chance to determine what is happening during the media production process in a way that research restricted to studying the final artefact cannot. Like all research it must not be viewed in isolation and we must move past reductionist oppositions, including about how research is undertaken. While PBE is not impervious to criticism, if conducted correctly and viewed in conjunction with other research methods as part of a theoretical framework, it can produce valid and useful results.

Analysis

A reconceptualization of creativity (McIntyre 2012, Sawyer 2012) and the confluence approach informed by Csikszentmihalyi's systems model (1988, 1996) applied to my creative practice reveals a rational explanation for creativity, a greater understanding of the process and the reasons for successes and failures during the project. As my own understanding of creativity and the systems model developed alongside my media project, I was able to attribute certain elements of the creative process to components

of the systems model. This allowed me to then observe how the complex interaction of the components produces creative practice, shifting my understanding beyond individual conceptions of creativity. While the individual plays a significant role, the domain and field are also required and creativity “can be observed only in the interrelations of a system made up of three main parts” (Csikszentmihalyi 1996, p.27). In order to incorporate this systems approach, I also had to reconceptualise creativity.

There persists a common sense view of creativity (McIntyre 2012) that is “intimately linked to the Judeo-Christian creation myth and the Greek ideas embodied in the Platonic notion of the muse” (McIntyre 2009, p.157). This view is based in inspirational or romantic myths of creativity, is problematic and provides little understanding of creativity (Boden 2004). Further this common sense view informs much of today’s media practice (McIntyre 2012, p.3) and underpins the doxa in creative fields today (McIntyre & Coffee 2016). I can now recognise that these myths and common sense understandings, that is that creativity is either largely or totally ascribed to the individual, influenced my projects conception, planning and practice.

The project will be individual and I will be responsible for the direction, production and composition of the animation. This will result in autonomy, but also total responsibility.

Exegesis Proposal Section 2 – Roles to be undertaken. 9/9/2016

What I now consider foolish, was my insistence on working as an individual, an unrestricted agent free from the hindrance of other people and structures. In line with the romantic notion of an artist being removed from society (Wolff 1981), my main concern was to minimize distractions and employ conditions that would encourage creativity. Although I understood work and action would be required on my part, I resisted the input of others and failed to realize the role of factors outside the individual. I initially resisted using conventional preproduction documents (Appendix A), viewing them as largely an unwanted necessity in the assessment process. Surely my time would be better spent in production I thought. However once these documents were completed I began making more tangible progress, and the structured documents and conventional process proved to be enabling. While I do not regret working as an individual, it was naïve of me to think I would be wholly responsible for the creative practice. It would also require social and cultural factors. This recognition and reconceptualisation of creativity beyond romantic notions of the individual is in line with the systems models requirement for all three components, domain, field and individual,

to be present in order for creativity to occur, much in the same way a flame requires a spark, tinder and air (Csikszentmihalyi 1996, p.7).

Domain

Csikszentmihalyi argues that the domain “consists of a set of symbolic rules and procedures” (1996, p.27) that are deliberately shared and learned. The domain can be considered the cultural element of the systems model (Fulton & Paton 2016), where individual domains are nested within culture (Csikszentmihalyi 1996, p.28). It includes pre-existing works, but also conventions and standard practices (Sawyer 2012, p.265). From this perspective it can be asserted that it was my ability to access the domain that enabled my creative practice. My practical animation skills are not innate, but developed from many hours of practice and tutorials. They simply would not exist without access to the domain of animation. I also observed an internalising of domains, often long before what might be considered the conception of my idea. In my media project pitch I noted the influence my recent trip to a heritage centre in Alaska had had on the formulation of my narrative.

One of the stories that really got my interest was of the ancient whaling techniques... those storys are what I'll be basing my animation on.

Siksurok Pitch PowerPoint Presentation – ‘Alaska’ slide. 23/8/2016

We can see a direct influence, in the way ideas exist long before their conception. A view that artists are totally responsible for the conception of ideas cannot be sustained (McIntyre 2012, p.57). The domain is not only restricted to influencing ideas, it extends to the conventions and form. It is because of the existence of the domain and form that creative works are able to be understood (Boden 2004, Berger 1994), and this form is what enables communication (McIntyre 2009, p.163). I employed a basic narrative structure including conflict and conflict resolution, or lack thereof, in my bid to work creatively. By ending the animation at the peak of conflict (Appendix B), I hoped to act creatively and produce a domain variation by breaking from convention. However, that was only made possible by my understanding of how a narrative usually resolves and what I believe audiences will expect - a resolution. This understanding of form and convention exemplifies the interdependent relationship of tradition and innovation (Negus & Pickering 2004). As well as demonstrating domain, internalisation can be implicit (McIntyre & Kerrigan 2014). Whether I am successful and my work is deemed creative will require judgement from the field.

Field

To move creativity beyond a subjective phenomenon it is necessary to incorporate a judgement on creativity (Csikszentmihalyi 1996, p.25). In line with this, McIntyre argues, “when something is recognised as creative a judgement of some sort must be involved in making that recognition” (2012, p. 5). This impact of the social is the field component of the systems model and was observed in my own practice. While my work may never reach acclaim in larger circles, it is possible to scale the systems model to a smaller more useful level. Rather than art or film critics passing judgement, course professors and peers may assess my work’s value, showing the systems model in action. I recall a conversation with my professor where it was explained a comparison of my work to professionals or experts in the animation field would be unfair, and an attempt to do so would likely result in anxiety as my challenges were too high and beyond my skills, exemplifying Csikszentmihalyi’s concept of ‘flow’ (1996). As a consequence of this interaction with the field, which had been proactive in this instance, I was able to clarify my goals and adjust my challenges to be in line with my skills. As a result hours passed in the edit suite in what seemed mere minutes, an indication of the autotelic experience ‘flow’ (Csikszentmihalyi 1996, p.121), as well as demonstrating the field’s proactive presence and impact through an interaction with the individual.

Individual

The acknowledgement of these cultural and social factors does not come at the expense of the individual. As Wolff, citing Giddens, reminds us “the de-centring of the subject must not be made equivalent to its disappearance” (Giddens quoted by Wolff 1981, p. 136). Of course the animation did not create itself and I was a very necessary, although not sufficient part in the process. It is the individual who is responsible for producing a variation in the domain (Csikszentmihalyi 1988, p.330). Kerrigan’s (2011) development of the systems model to include agent rather than individual should be noted here, as it broadens the scope of the model to include collective enterprises. In line with Bourdieu’s notion of habitus (McIntyre 2009, p.161), I was able to employ my habitus and various forms of capital throughout the process (Fulton & Paton 2016, p.36). I was predisposed to make domain variations based on my idiosyncratic background, which is distinct to me and shared with others (McIntyre 2012, p.78). It predisposed me to act in certain ways and make certain creative decisions, even if they were implicit. My own skill level was a considerable factor in the process.

Unfortunately I simply do not have the skills to create everything that I would like to...It can be humbling to just admit, I'd like to do that, but I can't.

WIP PowerPoint Presentation – ‘Issues and Concerns’ Slide

18/10/2016

This admission shows the important role the individual still plays in a systems model. While my access to the domain was relatively unlimited and I had a proactive field, the individual component was still required and possibly limited in this instance. However rather than being an impassable roadblock to creativity, it presents the possibility that through further interaction with and immersion of the domain and field, an individual can develop these skills which then manifest into habitus and capital. This exemplifies the systems model requirement that all three components are present, and that their complex interaction is what produces creativity.

Conclusion

The application of this theoretical framework to my creative practice has shown creativity to be systematic. The animation was undoubtedly shaped by factors beyond me - the individual, counter to romantic common sense views on creativity. The domain provided the antecedent conditions for my creative practice, as well as the standards for it to be understood and assessed. The field and their understanding of the domain provided that assessment and demonstrated its ability to be proactive in its selection of novelty as well as demonstrating how the systems model is scalable, in this case down to a smaller level. The agent was still very much required and I was responsible for producing a variation on the domain, with my animation. While it became apparent that all three of these components were necessary but not sufficient by themselves, it was also observed that it was the complex iterative and recursive interaction of these components that produced creativity. The process of creating an animation in conjunction with creative theories has shown creativity to be systematic. This re-conceptualisation of creativity and a systematic approach has not meant that the role of the individual or the ability to produce extraordinary work is diminished. It

can be argued, however, that it allows a more useful and pragmatic understanding of creativity.

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Appendix

A) Shot List

SIKSURUK

Shot List

Scene Still/Sketch

Description

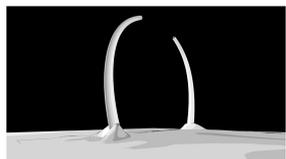
Ambient noise track - Strong gusty winds
Fade in from black to landscape/environment
shots;



1. Panning shot of water with small mountains as light snow falls on a mostly clear starry night. ambient calm ocean and wind noises.



2. Shot of canoe with slow pan at shoreline as stars move above. Ambient noise of wind and water lapping at shore.



3. Pan around whale bones that have been erected into an arch on shore. More whale bones scattered on ground.



4. Aerial shot of whale swimming close to the surface through small chunks of ice. Water displacement/swimming sound fx

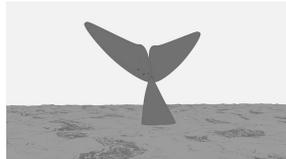
SIKSURUK

Shot List

Scene Still/Sketch

Description

First vision of hunter and up close shot of whale.
Music begins as hunter moves towards whale.



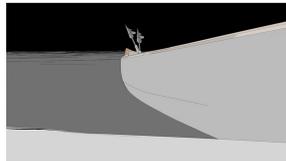
5. Whale disappears under water.
Shot shows tail submerging.



6. Up close shot of hunter as he
watches water. Music plays for first
time.



7. Hunter moves towards the ocean.
Shown by boot lifting and crunching
in snow.



8. Canoe loaded with rope and
harpoons is pushed into water. Sound
fx of wood on wood and water
displacement.

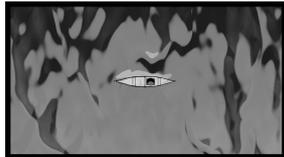
SIKSURUK

Shot List

Scene Still/Sketch

Description

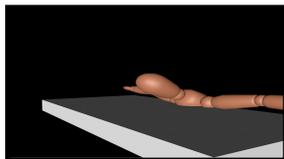
Main conflict/battle and ending.



9. Aerial shot of hunter in canoe in centre of frame, waiting for whale. Large shadow appears under canoe. Whale breaches water from directly under canoe.



10. Low side-on shot of hunter being thrown into water as whale breaches.



11. Hunter clings to small ice chunk as canoe is capsised next to him.



12. Hunter leaps of ice chunk, springs of canoe and launches into air while drawing back harpoon. At the same time whale breaches in the direction of hunter. End by cutting straight to black as they are about to engage.

30 second current render + Prototypes

B) Stills

