

## Animating Reality

Kyra Glass von der Osten

### Creating a New “Real” With Animation Tools

In 1945 Gene Kelly took the screen with one of his most famous dance partners, Jerry the mouse from the animated series *Tom and Jerry*. This sequence is part of a story Kelly’s character tells to a group of children. The first images of this story are literally projected onto a child’s forehead. The sequence that follows in which Kelly is surrounded by animated creatures of every kind is clearly the creation of imagination. This use of animation to represent the inner world of characters and the imagination has a long tradition. Animation (as well as animated/live action hybrid movies) has been around since the turn of the last century; but since the days of *Gertie the Dinosaur* attempted to fuse animation and live-action film in 1914, the lines have become increasingly more blurred between the animated imaginary and the cinematic “real.” Gone are the days of the clear delineation between Gene Kelly and Jerry Mouse or Roger Rabbit and Bob Hoskins; now we have Tim Burton’s Tweedledee and Tweedledum, which eschewed motion capture for a hybrid of animation and Matt Lucas’s actual face and body. Where Lucas ended and the animation began becomes very difficult for the casual observer to discern.

Rather than undermining our conception of the real, such phenomenon emphasize the fallacy in presuming that the external and corporeal take precedence over the internal and “imaginary” when it comes to the “real.” For many Disney fans, the “real” Princess Jasmine is not the flesh and blood woman walking the streets of Disney World but is the original animated figure. The aura of authenticity in an era of animation is not accrued by the most concrete or physical manifestation of something but by the instance with the greatest cultural capital and viewer emotional investment.

If this power of animation to express the “real” of inner and emotional lives can be traced back to the days of Gene and Jerry, then what makes this cultural moment any different? Ubiquity is certainly part of it. Several television stations are entirely or primarily devoted to animation, adult animated series are becoming more common, as are animated elements melded into live-action television, film and web series. One of today’s most lucrative media industries, video games, is almost entirely based on animation. However the difference is more than just an issue of volume. More than ever, animation is becoming accessible. While the serious work of CGI or video game animator is still dependent on technical and artistic skills, more computer programs and video game engines are built to allow even the artistically challenged the opportunity to bring their inner world into the visual realm of animated worlds.

*Little Big Planet* provides players the tools to create their own levels, virtual playgrounds of the imaginary, into which they can invite others. Animated versions of ourselves are only a few brief clicks away since every video game system, many games, and media productions as disparate as *The Simpsons* and *Mad Men* are churning out avatar creators. Creating a Mii may seem a world away from not only the question of reality and “real” animation, but even this simple act of avatar creation has significant bearing on our conception of the “real” self. Do we build an avatar to look as close as possible to a photograph of ourselves? Or do we build it based on how we think we look? fear we look? would like to look? Or do we build one with no bearing on our physicality at all but rather one that exemplifies something about what we believe, feel, want or fantasize about? The decisions we make when creating an avatar can be superficial, but

they can also be part of a process of self articulation in which we explore elements of our “real” conception of ourselves.

Moral panics have surrounded virtual worlds like World of Warcraft and Second Life. Anxious parents fret that their children are too divorced from the real world. Yet many users of spaces like Second Life find that they can only express a part of themselves, work out a fear, or experience a fantasy in these virtual spaces. Someone may see a friend from the neighborhood every other weekend but spend time with an on-line friend’s animated avatar three hours a night. Which experience, which relationship is more real? In a society in which the fictional and narrative (and in an era of reality television the difference between the two can be hard to discern) are so prominent, the lines between the animated and the corporeal may seem like one of the remaining secure markers of the real. However, looking at *Tweedledum*/Matt Lucas’s rotund form it quickly becomes clear that such distinct divisions are difficult to maintain and that the borderline between the real and its obverse is ever more difficult to find.