

**Animating the Frenzy of the Possible via Internet Collaboration and the Super
Mario Afterlife**

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Abstract

The research found in this paper poses inquiries into postmodern animation in relation to the aesthetic effects of stylistic constraints. I propose that contemporary consumers of animation possess an inherent awareness of the limitations of what can and will be depicted based purely on their knowledge of what is technically possible. Using philosopher Gilles Deleuze's concept of the virtual and striated space, and contemporary theorist Jean-Luc Comolli's understanding of the ways in which technologies are adopted and abandoned, I introduce the idea of the "frenzy of the possible." This idea pertains to a state wherein a viewer facing a work that adheres to a singular, unified style experiences a level of comfort that is based on limitation. This paper and its accompanying animation *Pratfall Origarch* are investigations into hybridity that by contrast function primarily through a process of *discomforting* the viewer. By combining diverse styles such as hand-drawn and computer assisted animation, green-screen live action footage, video game hacking, and more, I have crafted an aesthetic which establishes expectations just long enough to subvert them.

In addition to Deleuze's and Comolli's concepts, I draw on the importance of community-based online collaboration in the context of a long history and sustained knowledge of gaming. To this end, the Grand Guignol theatre's combination of violence and comedy is contrasted with the modern examples of the *Electric Retard* webcomic and the animated program *Xavier: Renegade Angel*. Further to this, the act of playing the video game *Super Mario Bros.* is reflected upon as a way of demonstrating the striated virtual (a concept developed in this paper), and the role of intuition in learning how to use technology for

artmaking. Instability, as a concept and as a method, is both the point of arrival and departure for investigation.

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List of Abbreviations

P2P – Peer-to-Peer.

IDM – Intelligent Dance Music.

SSS – Soulseek Sampling Series.

NES – Nintendo Entertainment System.

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Dedication

For Seth.

Introducing...

...The Author

I have a distinct memory as a child of watching a Saturday morning cartoon that made use of the painted background technique in which characters and the objects they interact with are animated with a small, bright palette on clear sheets of plastic. In this technique, the background is a still image that employs a full spectrum of color, upon which characters are then overlaid. In the cartoon, a group of characters were walking through a hallway filled with a number of doors, all of which were a part of the painted background and which shared qualities with other static background elements of the environment. Suddenly a door appeared that was distinctly different from the ones that preceded it. This door was distinguished by qualities of color that were similar to that of the animated characters. Upon seeing this door I immediately thought “that's the door!”, and I was able to predict where the characters would be going based solely on the fact that the material and technical means of production affiliated that specific door with the action of the characters. I was merely a child then, and had no knowledge of the techniques behind the production of that animation. However, my intuitive understanding of the sameness that existed between that door and the characters in relation to the difference provided by the background allowed for an experience of “unintentional reflexivity”: a sequence of events, of which I was only subliminally aware, that led me to make an accurate prediction of what would happen.

...The Mediums

The project that accompanies this paper takes two forms. The first, a short animated piece, implements the theoretical positions I will introduce in the following chapters. This theory is utilized to create a work that is not limited by activating in the viewer the unintentional reflexivity referred to above. It is opposed to providing the viewer with the ability to predict the course of the narrative. The mechanism for this implementation is a hybrid animation style, using permutations and combinations of techniques that mitigate against the viewer intuiting the narrative outcome from the material conditions of production. Rather than the practical considerations for the generation of an image dictating the process, the goal, which is framed by a reverence for surprise, is to use techniques according to how they influence the emotional resonance of an image. I employ an experimental narrative that runs parallel to this technological approach, exploring the potential of selective incoherence by privileging processes of fragmentation and collage, within a consistency provided by the characters and a linear passage of time.

The second form of the project entails the development of an artist community website *24hourcastle.com*. This website is crucial to the realization of the hybrid animation style I seek. With the development of this online community I emphasize the act of collaborative creation, designing multiple tasks for participants to complete. These tasks have generated some of the content for my animation.

...The Methodology

The methodology implemented in this research reflects the innovations of the thesis animation project. The methodology is framed by postmodernist and poststructuralist theory;

the histories of animation; innovative animation techniques and co-creative practice in animation; the political implications of humor; video gaming and the Internet; and the narration of first-person experiences within animation culture. Elaborating these multiple connections allows me to position my work in a historical context, and highlight the particular knowledge contribution this project represents. This is a methodology of hybridity. I am arguing for an approach that finds depth in multiplicity. This essay simultaneously exemplifies and makes a case for these methodological strategies. My intent in the following pages is to demonstrate through the juxtaposition of a variety of approaches knowledge that can only be generated at their points of connection. This paper represents both a manifesto concerned with an approach to artmaking in general, in addition to specific ideas unique to my chosen medium of animation.

Chapter 1: Caught in an Internet

Postmodernism and the Story of Soulseek Records

The relevance of postmodernism to my research can best be explained through an examination of the evolution of Soulseek Records, an artist community that formed around the Peer-to-Peer (P2P) filesharing network Soulseek. P2P software such as Soulseek or Napster allowed users to share files with one another, with the primary use being the illegal sharing of music. Full disclosure: I was a participant in the activities of Soulseek Records, and my music can be found on a few of their releases under the artist name ACP.

Throughout my life, I have been immersed in the ambiguity and fragmentation that characterizes the postmodern moment. In the anecdote that began this essay, I describe a childhood memory of a reflexive experience that depended on intuition, and I linked that intuitive experience to a specific aesthetic. This is an important link because the concept of reflexivity in relation to aesthetics is defined as “the practice of making viewers aware of the material and technical means of production by featuring those aspects as 'content' of a cultural production” (Sturken and Cartwright 364). In what follows I will be focusing on those aspects of postmodernism most relevant to my work: the aforementioned experience of reflexivity and the act of pastiche.

Pastiche is a practice intimately connected to postmodernism as a condition of cultural production whereby elements of form from a variety of styles are combined as a singular aesthetic which celebrates idiosyncrasy, homage, or a combination of the two. It has a "quasi-anonymous definition... as 'neither original nor copy'" (Hoestery 5). The practice of pastiche developed out of the sixteenth-century Italian practice of *pasticcio*, a "highly imitative painting

that synthesized-'stirred together'-the styles of major artists, often with seemingly fraudulent intentions, i.e., to deceive viewers or patrons" (Hoestery 1).

Over time, pasticcio was transformed into a process for music and film called pastiche structuration. This is a technique that "in many contemporary films goes beyond mere quotation to comprise a complex medley and layering of different styles and motifs" (Hoestery 46). Although many films have illustrated this process, music criticism of the past decade clearly shows that this is not a medium-specific phenomenon. David Day describes the musician M.I.A's *Arular* in his review for *Dusted Magazine*:

[...] a blaring, drum-machine driven mish-mash of, well, all sorts of shit: dancehall, Asian beat, old school hip hop, baile funk and grime. It's music generated from the Gulf of Mexico, the Bay of Bengal and the North Sea. Or, better, it's Ragga meets Ghettech meets Bollywood Breaks. (Day)

The structural reconfiguration of established elements into alternate forms is a touchstone of current practices of pastiche. The key to it resonating with an audience is the condition that the audience be aware of the established practices being used. There is as much pastiche in M.I.A's *Arular* as there is in Day's list-making. In fact, M.I.A's pastiche requires a co-operation highlighted by Day in his review, which emphasizes that the pastiche itself is co-generated by the music and the listener. The importance of the relationship between artist and audience in the creation of meaning in an artwork present in the practice of pastiche is also a key component of my research focus.

Indeed, pastiche was the practice of choice used in the Soulseek Records *Massacre* series and *Soulseek Sampling Series* projects. The *Massacre* series, as described on the Soulseek Records website entry for *One Minute Massacre Volume 1*, is that "each artist

creates 1-2 minutes of music which is then passed to the next artist, who smoothly (or not so smoothly) picks up from the end and attaches another 1-2 minutes of his or her own" (Timpanelli). In this project, the idea of creating a derivative work was just as valuable, if not more so, than focusing on the implementation of an 'original' work. When I first approached the Souseek Records *Massacre* project, it was clear to me that the ideal form of the project as a whole was one in which the work functions as an homage to itself; a continuous piece of music that while containing stylistic differences achieves a distinct unification through self-referentiality (which can be, of course, a form of reflexivity). However, the desires of the individual artists who come together in the *Massacre* project actually serve to prevent the metaphorical *pâté*, associated with the term *pastiche*, from occurring. All was not lost, however, as threads of *pastiche* did emerge through the creation of lineages. A standout example can be found on *One Minute Massacre Volume 1* in the form of a contribution from music critic Matt Wellins. Wellins simply took the song previous to his and recorded himself criticizing the song as it played. The creation of a lineage comes about when the following artist then sampled Wellins' criticism, taking Wellins' voice and using it in the musical structures that Wellins had criticized. This represents an important moment because not only was the practice of creating emergent lineages uncommon in the industry, it occurs only briefly in the *Massacre* series itself. Indeed, the example of creating lineages within a compilation album can be cited as a sort of statistical outlier in relation to the development of an aesthetic. On the large majority of the tracks in this series, there is a moment in which the listener can tell that the artist begins operating under their own constraints rather than critically responding to the work of another artist on the compilation as they had done previously. But the struggle with the representation of an ideal *pastiche* is ever-present in each entry.

We can see a similar struggle in the *Soulseek Sampling Series (SSS)*, a project wherein each month a different artist assembled a collection of sounds, which people would then use for the creation of another piece of music. Although elements of pastiche existed, the primary concept at play in this project was bricolage, a means of "'making do' or piecing together [...] whatever is at hand" (Sturken and Cartwright 64). What it is important to note here, is that not only do the artists create new lineages commenting on the ideas of other artists, but they also bricolage "found" or otherwise already existing objects. In this process, the artists in question manipulated samples, structuring and arranging them over a timeline, altering the qualities of the sounds themselves through effect processes. Pastiche comes into play in the shared experience between participating artists all working with the same sounds, and able to compare their own practices of making with the work of others.

In my own work, the influence of Soulseek Records is reflected in both the hybrid aesthetic that I use and the development of the artist community, *24hourcastle.com*. The activities of Soulseek Records inspired my development as an artist; by eliminating some elements of choice, I was able to more closely focus on an aesthetic that relied on pastiche. Based around a methodology of sample manipulation, I was able to treat the various constraints as a playground within which I developed strong beliefs about how I wanted to put sound together in music. After being given the space to develop my aesthetic sensibility I was self-motivated to create even more work outside of any artificial constraints, and it was at that point that I began to take artistic practice seriously. I owe a great deal to the collaborative community of Soulseek Records, and I hope to continue the spirit of that community at *24hourcastle.com* in order to provide other developing artists with a space in which they can grow.

In some aspects I worked to remedy the limitations I identified in my experience with the Soulseek Records community. After beginning in 2002, Soulseek Records completed an entry in the *Massacre* series annually, ending in 2007, following which the organization all but ceased to be. The artists' chat room on the Soulseek P2P program was empty, and whatever community was left felt inaccessible to participants. The question, then, is what are the factors that led to the community's formation and why was its peak activity not sustained for a longer period of time? This question is of tremendous importance to my research as I am using Soulseek Records as a case study to develop my own artistic community.

To answer the question we must first look to the origins of Soulseek, the P2P software. It was initially launched to the small community of fans around the electronic music subgenre of Intelligent Dance Music, or IDM. My own experience of discovering the software was finding the Soulseek URL placed into the filenames of every contemporary IDM release on other filesharing networks. In this initial promotional period for Soulseek, a large number of the IDM fans who joined the service also made their own electronic music in some capacity, and it was from this focused community of artists that the Soulseek Records collective drew. As such, the projects that were initiated were geared towards those who made electronic music. Artists operating within that genre had a much easier time using recorded material and manipulating it into work of their own. This resulted in a lack of diversity in artistic approach dominating the community and stagnating its growth.

A further point involves the nature of the filesharing on the Soulseek software. The protocol used is one of direct connection. A user shares a file, and another user searches, finds that file, and downloads directly from the single sharing source. If the sharing user disconnects, the download ceases. In 2001, the BitTorrent protocol was developed. Rather

than a single direct connection for the file, the torrent allows a user to connect to a large cloud of users, all uploading and downloading the same file or files. These multiple connections allow for much greater speed in downloading and the transfers are considerably more reliable. With Soulseek, if the user being downloaded from disconnects, the transfer ends and the user is left with an incomplete file. With BitTorrent, any number of people can disconnect, but so long as the downloader is connected to one person, the transfer continues. Over the course of the decade users migrated from direct connection software such as Soulseek, to clients which utilized the BitTorrent protocol. By 2007, a study of P2P downloading by Ipoque in Australia, Eastern Europe, Southern Europe, Germany, and the Middle East found that 66.7% of P2P traffic was using the BitTorrent client (Internet Study 2007). Soulseek and the community of artists using the software began forming before the BitTorrent client's development. As users adopted BitTorrent, they abandoned Soulseek, which in turn led to diminishing participation in Soulseek Records.

Although the community is still active, and as of December 9, 2009 is currently preparing a compilation album centered on astrological signs, the activity is still diminished from the amount of work produced between 2003-2004, when both the *SSS* and *Massacre* series were active. With that in mind, I have attempted to avoid these obstacles for community growth, focusing the website solely around the idea of the unrestricted presentation of any artwork, and the facilitation of any artistic collaboration. Rather than having the community based around something not related to artmaking, and linked inextricably to the popularity of a particular thing, I have established *24hourcastle.com* which has as its sole focus being artists and their practices. I hope to develop a community which

presents the spirit of collaboration and connected work that existed at Soulseek Records, but with a wider appeal and better potential for growth and sustainability.

The *24hourcastle.com* projects working towards the production of my cartoon were of an especially composed variety. Participants were provided with lists of dialogue and encouraged to submit their own performances of a dialogue entry of their choice. In addition, visual content contributions were also solicited. Strict instructions were provided for the generation of this content. This solicitation was not entirely successful, however, and I found difficulty in finding participants. A remedy to this situation was found by obtaining permission for manipulating unsolicited work, in taking the artwork shared on *24hourcastle.com* and transforming it into something for my own work.

One image I have used is Jay Harmon's *Repulsive Creatures*, an 8x11 marker drawing. When I first saw the image I was struck by the sense of depth, and how the colors seemed to make the image 'pop out'. Curious if I could take this further, I decided to load the image into Adobe After Effects and attempted to apply an effect that would make the image function with 3D glasses.



Figure 1. Jay Harmon *Repulsive Creatures* (2009) Illustration, Used with permission.

Although that didn't work, what I did discover was that I was able to distort and manipulate the image into interesting forms, an act of bricolage that created something distinctly different for use in the animation. Upon obtaining Harmon's permission to use the image, I continued experimenting with effects, and began to notice the beginnings of a face. With that goal in mind, I wound up creating an entire character design, the source of which was Harmon's *Repulsive Creatures*. Without that image, this design would

not exist. The reason I highlight this collaboration is that by having my work originate from the work of another in this transformative fashion, I am in a position of allowing outside influence to contribute to the unpredictability that is a central tenet of my work. This manipulation of the work of other artists incorporates opportunities for collaboration with the Soulseek Records model, providing it with a constant, minor activity to help maintain the attempts at larger-scale collaboration. Although in my completed animation, I did not end up using this character design, this transformative activity highlights the potential of this methodology, and I hope to take it further in future endeavors.

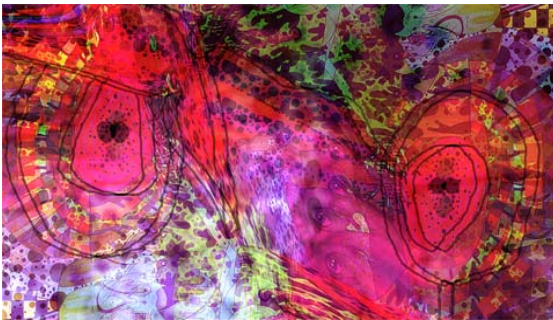


Figure 2. Alex Tripp Manipulation of Repulsive Creatures (2009) Animation.



Figure 3. Alex Tripp Character Design from Manipulation (2009) Illustration.

Feeling Bad For Laughing at the Grand Guignol

Of course, one of the other aspects that drew me to mention Soulseek Records is the irony of a record label forming out of the P2P environment, an environment that has gained a reputation for killing the music industry. I feel that any sort of critique of the music industry that was presented by the non-profit, democratic approach to Soulseek Records has only been enhanced by the record industry's piracy situation. In my animated work, I strive to create an environment that is simultaneously presenting subjects critically and comedically, with a focus on violent imagery. This interest can be best put into context through an examination of the Grand Guignol theater of Paris.

At the Grand Guignol theater, which operated from 1897 to 1962, "an evening's entertainment would consist of several plays interspersing trademark 'horror' drama with comedies in the tradition of French social satire" (Hand 1). This type of theater has a reputation for amoral content, as Frantisek Deák argues: "the negation of the moral aspects of contemporary life are not deficiencies of the genre, merely part of its definition" (qtd. in Hand 4). In the article "The Grand-Guignol: Aspects of Theory and Practice" by Richard Hand and Michael Wilson, they rebut this:

The Grand-Guignol frequently follows a traditional moral structure: the flawed and hypocritical are punished; those who lived by the sword—or vitriol—get slaughtered or maimed; the over-reachers (those who have conducted unethical scientific experiments or have had too much faith in technology or have explored sadomasochism to excess) meet an appropriate nemesis [. . .] Nevertheless in some plays destruction is meted out to the innocent and undeserving. This is why we may reject Deák's assertion that the Grand-Guignol

is an amoral drama. A better definition is to interpret the Grand-Guignol as morally erratic, taking place in an indifferent universe where there is no justice but definitely retribution, albeit far from divine. (Hand 4)

This is not to downplay the strength of the horror imagery that was presented within the walls of the Grand Guignol, but merely to suggest that the morally erratic mode does have the potential to evoke a critical approach to subjects of power and representation by presenting the extremes of a message without the author coming from a too-easily dismissed space of proselytization.

For an example that does live up to the amorality associated with the Grand Guignol, and which appears to have no positive potential for instigating change in its audience, we can look to the web-comic *Electric Retard* by the artist Sigvatr. The comic is presented with primitive renderings of rape, murder, obsessions with fecal matter and semen, torture, pedophilia, racism, and sexism. The presentation of this is taken to absurd degrees, with the rituals of violence being quite elaborate and prolonged, and committed upon men, women, and children. The comic's violence is always performed by a white man, and not once is any degree of punishment dealt to the wicked. Upon the Grand Guignol's closing in 1962, its director Charles Nonon said, "We could never compete with Buchenwald. Before the war, everyone believed that what happened on stage was purely imaginary; now we know that these things--and worse--are possible" (Pierrion). *Electric Retard* addresses this problem by including a giant, naked Hitler as a recurring character. This, I feel, is a better example of the sort of amorality generally associated with the Grand Guignol Theater, and it is the antithesis of what I want to accomplish in combining horror and comedy. Additionally, a community exists around *Electric Retard*, encouraging others to create derivative works based upon the

template Sigvatr established. The maintenance of existing power roles and unrelenting presentation of acts of violence as visual gags seems to encourage nothing more than nihilistic thought in people privileged enough to have private Internet access. I believe such action is grossly irresponsible.

Something contemporary from which I hope to take a more positive example is the animated television program *Xavier: Renegade Angel*, created by Vernon Chatman and John Lee. The show follows Xavier, a man covered in brown feathers with a beak for a nose and a snake arm. Xavier wanders from town to town, encountering various stereotypical characters who often greet him with the phrase "We don't take kindly to no freaks", and then beat him senseless. Although the show is very loosely plotted and often goes off on tangents, the general structure of an episode will find the stereotypical characters that are in power revealing vulnerabilities or transgressive behavior, and a chain of events will eventually lead to Xavier wreaking elaborate, large scale destruction which kills everyone he encounters in the episode. Here, like in the Grand Guignol, an erratic morality is in effect. Although harm does often fall upon the innocent, it is seldom that any character is not receiving some form of punishment that alters the power structure. Through the layers of ironic representation, a point of view of the world from Chatman and Lee is clear, and the viewer is potentially encouraged to think critically about the power relationships they encounter and in which they participate.

For the cartoon that accompanies this paper, I have created an experimental narrative that works with the above ideas. The bulk of this narrative focuses on conversations between two characters, discussing subjects such as the end of the world, global warming, and being an "alien". The anxieties that I experience regarding these subjects are exaggerated, and ideas

that could be presented in a way that have the potential to make a person feel powerless in the real world, instead work to make a fictional world exciting or compelling. To accomplish this, the work occupies a tenuous position between horror and comedy, wherein an audience laughs, feels uncomfortable laughing, and wonders why this is. To return to my earlier point, the relationship between the viewer and the artwork in the creation of meaning is key to this research. By engaging the viewer's sense of humor in the fashion of cognitive dissonance, I hope to provoke the viewer to find a morally positive message to the work, in spite of its violent or disturbing imagery.

Chapter 2: The Frenzy of the Possible

The history of animation is rife with contradiction: the medium is able to hint at an unlimited ability to realize the imaginary, yet it is so quick to fall into consistency or trends to enable its own production. Is it possible for animation to overcome this? In this chapter, I will use philosopher Gilles Deleuze's concept of the virtual in conjunction with the idea of striated space to examine how potential takes form in animation, and to explore avenues in which this formation of potential can subvert the typical striation of the virtual that occurs.

So, the virtual. In Deleuze's essay on Bergsonian memory, he says "the virtual is not the same thing as the possible: the reality of time is finally the affirmation of a virtuality that is actualized, for which to be actualized is to invent. Because if everything is not given, it remains that the virtual is the whole" (Deleuze 30). The virtual, then, is not merely the possible; it is the entirety of duration. To say it can be striated is somewhat inaccurate. The virtual exists outside of what is currently actualized; encompassing all that has been and will be actualized. Rather, it is the way in which the virtual is actualized, our access to the virtual, that is striated.

Striation is best thought of in contrast to smooth space. The smooth space of a blank page becomes striated with the introduction of inscription as "it introduces distinct orientation" (Lamarre 155). The striation introduces a path; it gives a logic to linearity. When applied to the virtual, setting boundaries around what is accessed, it is also establishing all of the virtual that *will not* be accessed. What I intend to show is that, in an artistic medium, these boundaries occur dependent upon the technical practices put to use within that medium.

For an example, we can look to animation. In the essay "The Animated Gay Utopia" Alexander Stewart writes of various potentials in the techniques put to use in American

animation from the 1920s, and of the techniques that followed which left these potentials inert. He cites Disney's first feature length film, *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs* (1937), which featured painted, static backgrounds. Stewart compares this with Disney's short *Oswald* cartoons of the late 1920s, in which the background elements were animated in the same way as the foreground characters, capable of all sorts of motion. Of this change, Stewart says:

The graphic possibilities of Oswald's fluid landscape has been converted into a calcified storybook painting. The Seven Dwarves may move with an elasticity similar to Oswald's, but they have very different rules directing their behavior. They have lost their ability to interact with their world as if it were made of the same material as their own bodies; their world has become 'real' while they remain caricatures. (Stewart par. 10)

The implications of this variation in technique extend beyond the material and into the virtual. The new technique striates the virtual, masking but not hiding, making apparent the blocked out areas of the virtual that were accessible with previous techniques.

So how then do these techniques come into play in the history of animation? What is the process of their emergences and disappearances? For this, we must turn to Jean-Louis Comolli's essay "Machines of the Visible". In this essay Comolli presents an hypothesis on the implementation of technology in society's practices, perhaps best summed up in his citation of Gilles Deleuze and Claire Parnet:

'Never', say Gilles Deleuze and Claire Parnet, 'is an arrangement-combination technological, indeed it is always the contrary. The tools always presuppose a machine, and the machine is always social before it is technical. There is always a social machine which selects or assigns the technical elements used. A tool,

an instrument, remains marginal or little used for as long as the social machine or the collective arrangement-combination capable of taking it in its phylum does not exist'. (Comolli 122)

Technology is an inert force in society until it is picked up by some sort of social machine. It is as though the landscape of progress is littered with technology which remains discarded on the ground until plucked up, only able to be a part of a progression when the social machine uses the technology for its own advancement. Truly, this is a relationship in which technology is fairly powerless in driving progress; it is merely something which enables progress.

Comolli explains this relationship in his essay through the example of the cinema. He cites, among many other examples, the film industry's sudden standardization of a new type of film stock around the year 1925, which necessitated changes to be made throughout the production process:

As far as we know, it is not exactly within the logic of technology, nor within that of the economics of the film industry (in the mid-twenties already highly structured and well-equipped) to adopt (or impose) a new product which in an initial moment poses more problems than the old and hence incurs the expense of adaptation (modification of lighting systems, lenses, etc.) *without somewhere finding something to its advantage and profit*. (Comolli 131)

The advantage, Comolli says, was in this new film stock's "gain in realism" (131). The increase in realism offered by this film stock was not taken up by the cinematic apparatus immediately. But even at the time of its use, the technological configuration was not equipped for the new implementation. Here was a technology, lying in wait, until the social configuration found a need for it, regardless of the other factors, exactly as Comolli described.

Accordingly, animators have always had to base their products on the limitations of technologies available. Each one striating the accessed virtual in their own way, demonstrating through the technology they utilize, all of the potential circumstances they actively ignore. This awareness of ignored potential is a central concern of my work, and further, is an awareness familiar to others of my generation, who like me, grew up in what I will shortly define as a “frenzy of the possible.”

Comolli brings up the idea that “the second half of the nineteenth century lives in a sort of frenzy of the visible ... the effect of the social multiplication of images: ever wider distribution of illustrated papers, waves of prints, caricatures, etc.” (122). Simultaneous to this expansion of visual technology, the world saw a number of “journies, explorations, colonisations, the whole world becomes visible at the same time that it becomes appropriatable” (Comolli 122). It was in this frenzy of the visible, this onslaught of new visual information that the birth of cinema occurred. And it is from this frenzy that the “extreme eagerness of the first spectators to recognize in the images of the first films – devoid of colour, nuance, fidelity – the identical image, the double of life itself” (Comolli 124) came.

I propose that in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries, we are experiencing another frenzy in various artistic mediums, a frenzy of the possible. It is in this frenzy that I was able, as a child with no technical knowledge, to experience reflexivity. It is in this frenzy of various social configurations in which the striation of the accessed virtual can occur, where knowledge of the plethora of styles that comes simply from viewing media from a span of history makes apparent all of the forms of the virtual that individual styles ignore.

This frenzy of the possible, while demonstrating the limitations of previously established styles, also suggests the potential for the creation of new styles, ones which will

not have their striation of the virtual made so apparent, where the viewer won't experience unintended reflexivity, where the viewer cannot be certain of what aspects of the virtual are left out through striation until the end of the production. I am thinking in particular of Masaaki Yuasa's 2004 animated film *Mindgame*. In this film, the production techniques used are never constant for long. A character appears drawn and colored in one minute, and then composed of a photographic image the next. Although the specific techniques on an individual level all have their forbearers, this was my first experience seeing a work use hybridity in technique in concert with the narrative, with the progressions of both serving to each other's benefit.

In *Mindgame*, Yuasa's implementation of a variety of techniques, generally seen in isolation from each other, is an excellent representative of the frenzy of the possible. Technically, this approach is considered an instance of reflexivity due to the breaks in the consistency of the reality that is presented. But the implementation of these techniques has the opposite effect. The instance in which the character Nishi has changed from being a hand-drawn cartoon character to being represented as a photographed human occurs in a moment of heightened emotion for the character. The love of his life has just told him that she is marrying someone else, and the change in his being serves to enhance that moment and the connection with Nishi. The frenzy of the possible is both acknowledged and tamed, with the viewers' knowledge of all that can be in animation recognized, with intent put behind the utilization of a different possibility. Rather than remind the viewer that they are watching a film, it adds to the emotional depth of what that film can be.

In the time of Comolli's frenzy of the visible, the goal in mind was to find a representation of reality which could be accepted as the double of life itself. As the cinema progressed, a variety of insular realities were formed, and as they became digested in larger

groups, the appearance of the striation of the accessed virtual, the things that simply could not happen in the reality being presented became apparent. This has led to our current situation, the frenzy of the possible, in which this awareness of what is ignored becomes all too clear. The need for artists to acknowledge this glut of possibilities, to tame this frenzy by way of utilizing the established visual vocabulary and settling realities which acknowledge the potential of what they can be, is only growing. By utilizing co-creative practices, this taming of the frenzy of the possible is within the reach of so many artists. And as the frenzy of the visible led to a believable representation of reality, the frenzy of the possible can lead to the creation of realities capable of surprise, of eliciting excitement solely out of the fact of their existence. The frenzy of the possible can lead to productions that don't broadcast their futures like the old Saturday morning cartoon from my memories. It is by harnessing this frenzy that the depths of multiplicity I wrote of in the introduction can be further explored.

Chapter 3: Where does Super Mario go when he dies?

How is the frenzy of the possible tamed? Although my collaborations with others are important in my work, equally important is my relationship to the tools used in the act of making art. I take a collaborative approach in the utilization of technology. The output is a negotiation between what the technology is capable of, what I initially envision, and my own abilities to push the technology past its perceived limits. I see my lifelong practice of playing video games as preparation extraordinaire for the artistic/technological collaborations in my work. In this chapter, I intend to explain how. As such, the best demonstration of this is through a reading of *Super Mario Bros.*, a Nintendo Entertainment System (NES) game released in 1985. In what follows, as a visual example of the striation of the virtual, I explore the way that conventional paths through the virtual in an artistic medium are established, and how these conventions can be subverted. This example further illustrates an intuitive relationship with technology in art making practices.

Super Mario Bros. is a fairly unforgiving game. It is of the platformer genre, in which the players traverse a number of levels, running and jumping to navigate, until they reach the end of the final castle, and find the princess. The game starts off with five lives, which allows for five separate failures in a performance of the game, a failure either being killed by one of the enemies that are scattered throughout the levels or falling into one of the environmental obstacles. Although there are opportunities to increase the number of lives, it is easy for the rate of failure to outpace this, with more deaths than increases in the number of lives available to the player in a single game. This leads to a “game over” message, and the game must be started again from the beginning. Over the years, this inability to progress in skill led to much

frustration in my attempts to master *Super Mario Bros.*, and even though I began playing video games at age five, I was unable to finish all the levels until the age of eighteen.

The only thing delaying my successful completion of the game during this time was my own lack of patience. To successfully complete the game, I had to embrace the repetitions it required of me, committing the maps of each level to memory. I used the term performance earlier, and that is intentionally meant to evoke the idea of musical performance. A part of what makes *Super Mario Bros.* worth noting compared to the games that preceded it, is its use of one button to run. The accumulation of speed in the character's movements provide for a great deal of nuance in successful play; much in the same way that the score of a musical composition can be recognizable in spite of a performer amateurishly stumbling through it, a level of *Super Mario Bros.* can also be completed with a similar awkwardness in gesture. Like a music student practicing a piece of music, I practiced *Mario*, using the repetitions the game imposed to refine my gestures, and to put to better use the concept of momentum in seeing the levels through to completion.

This process is a focused attempt at developing intuition as this concept is understood in Gilles Deleuze's essay "Bergson: 1859-1941". In this essay, two modes of memory are established: recollection-memory and contraction-memory. Deleuze says of the latter that it is the "essential one" to the topic of intuition and that in it "the past survives in itself" (Deleuze 29). Deleuze continues, stating:

The past does not have to survive psychologically, nor physiologically in our brains, because it has not ceased to be, it has only ceased to be useful – it is; it survives in itself [...] If the past had to wait to be no more, if it were not immediately past, "past in general", it would never be able to become what it is,

it would never be “this past”. The past is therefore the in-itself, the unconscious, or more precisely, as Bergson says, the virtual [...] The past is not constituted after it has been present; it coexists with itself as present. (Deleuze 29)

The way in which intuition utilizes the past is in a compacted form: the entirety of past experience is stored within the moment of the present, thereby promoting an immediate response to stimuli. Deleuze goes on to describe the past occupying the present in coexistent degrees, saying of these degrees, that they are “simultaneously what makes duration something virtual and what makes it so that duration nonetheless is actualized at every instant, because they delineate so many planes and levels that determine all the possible lines of differentiation” (Deleuze 30). In a moment of intuition, these divisions, carrying the difference of separation and connection, play themselves out in some pasts being prioritized over other pasts. That is why the development of my intuition as it facilitates my progress through *Super Mario Bros.* is inextricably linked to *which* past I am drawing from.

For all the times I had attempted to play *Super Mario Bros.* but gave up, what prevented me from acquiring the necessary skill to complete the game was a failure to adjust my intuition accordingly. Some aspects of what I required fell under recollection-memory, where I needed to be able to access the composition of whichever level I was playing, but I never had the maps committed to memory. Rather, what was necessary was to develop a sense of expectation. In the game a number of the platforms a player runs and jumps across are brown boxes, which if struck from the bottom, can produce items, or “power-ups”, to ease in the completion of the game. I am never able to recall the specific locations of many of the boxes that contain items. But the arrangements of boxes tend to hint at where a power-up may be located, and what I

learn is a sense of where a power-up should be based on the composition of the level and the level's relative placement in the game. This process is a fully intuitive one.

Some of the adjustment in intuition involved the conscious decision to stop relying on experience I had outside of the game, as it was actively detrimental to my performance. For instance, when running through a level, with the next slivers of the composition revealing themselves on the right side of the screen, the player will be confronted with enemies in fixed positions who shoot fireballs or throw hammers that can result in death, and between the time when the enemies are first spotted to the time that they are reached, a decision about how to progress must be made. My intuition regarding what I should do when faced with these immobile enemies was to stop and allow myself more time to observe the pattern of their movements, and then initiate the correct move when the time was right. However, this actually led to countless failures. After some time, I discovered that the large majority of these immobile enemies' patterns were set in a way that the perfect window of time to approach them was always available when they were approached at full speed, without any momentum sacrificed through giving the action further consideration. This adjustment of intuition to the internal logic of the game was difficult, but necessary in learning to perform the game in the manner it demanded.

Importantly, as an artist, I put this intuitive relationship with technology into practice. The artist can substitute the final destination of *Super Mario Bros.* with the goal of production at the end of an artmaking practice. In this way, the artist sets the conditions for their own game, drawing from prior applications of technology to simultaneously create a range of artistic performances, and all of the traps and potential deaths that result in a failure to achieve the desired production. With practice, the gestures required in operating pen, mouse,

or whichever instrument is in use become embodied, and the intuition surrounding the tool's implementation is guided. The artist is able to avoid these deaths, and achieve their goal.

For better or for worse, making art is not as strict and unforgiving as *Super Mario Bros*. The artist is not sent back to the beginning by an external force when they encounter a death; in fact, they may not even be aware of it, and complete the work without knowing of the failure that undermines their goal. Discipline and an awareness of these metaphorical deaths in artmaking is required for the intuitive relationship to produce the desired results, like the adjusted intuition I needed for my performance of *Super Mario Bros*. Within art this manifests through the adherence to conceptual frameworks, such as the twelve principles of animation laid out by Frank Thomas and Ollie Johnston in their classic text *The Illusion of Life*. But in some scenarios, the terms by which an artist sets their work as living or dying are impractical. An artist is fully capable of working within a conceptual framework that demands more resources than they have to offer, ensuring that the process of their work accumulates unavoidable deaths, setting up their work for inherent inferiority against whatever has already set the terms of the game.

I have encountered an inherent inferiority like this in playing *Super Mario Bros*. by comparing my performances to those of the "speed run" community on the Internet. A speed run is a recording of a game with the goal of having the shortest duration of play possible. The community often uses computer assistance to achieve these goals, using software to repeat every single gesture until the absolute optimum one is recorded, and to perform gestures which are nearly impossible to attain with hand and controller, using the programming of the game to navigate levels in ways that subverts their composition. I am not intending to denigrate the talents of the speed runners. I am merely pointing out that they have resources I

do not have when playing the game on a console. If I'm playing their game, I am going to lose. I will return to this idea momentarily.

One thing that never crosses my mind when playing *Super Mario Bros.* is the question of where Mario goes after he dies. The strict discipline of the game insists that the player repeats the attempt that led to the failure. But this question of "where an artwork goes when it dies" is important in circumventing the inherent inferiority I mentioned above. In *Super Mario Bros.*, death occurs due to a failure of acting out the gestures that the game demanded. Death in the artistic-technological collaboration is the same, a failure to act out the gestures that the conceptual framework demands from the artist. But rather than viewing a position as death, it can just as easily be reconfigured into an alternate pathway that finds an entirely new goal. Or the terms of the approach can themselves be changed, and the conditions of embodiment within this game can be altered to better suit achieving the desired results.

The other part of this equation is in the idea of a transformation of death/failure within a technological collaboration, which can be explained through the glitch aesthetic. In Iman Moradi's dissertation *Glitch Aesthetics* he explains that through the experience of visual phenomenon of the "pure glitch", or visual content produced by "malfunction or error", artists have been inspired to either present these glitches as ready-mades or to deliberately use these glitches or replications as a "glitch-alike", intentionally positioned in a composition (Moradi 9-10). In these instances, the artist is allowing for the design of the engineers, programmers, and designers of the software they are using to shape their work. And they are doing so in a way that takes a death in technological collaboration, a failure to represent under the artists' standards: "Glitch artists either synthesise glitches in non-digital mediums, or produce and create the environment that is required to invoke a glitch and anticipate one to happen..."

(Moradi 10). In other words, they either completely reposition their goal, putting their path through this failure, or take the failure out into a different context in which it becomes a success.

A further influence in my thinking both about playing *Super Mario Bros.* as technological collaboration and about the idea of the glitch is the *Super Mario Movie*, a hacked video game from Cory Archangel and the artist collective Paperrad. Using the process of ROM hacking, in which the data of a videogame is altered to produce new results, they transformed the *Super Mario Bros.* game into their own narrative work, telling the story of Mario attempting to navigate his world after it has undergone twenty years of decay. This story sets up the terms of their collaboration with the *Super Mario Bros.* ROM and the technology they use to edit it. They maintain the familiarity of the imagery of the game, but represent this imagery with the variety of possible configurations afforded by alterations to the programming, graphics and sound, bringing the technical limitations of each to the forefront. The idea of decay in the narrative comes out in the glitches that are applied to the aesthetic, with colors shifted, text displayed incorrectly, and transitional sequences that bring the visual content to a similar level of abstraction as can be achieved by a malfunctioning NES game.

In the *Super Mario Movie*, a relationship occurs between artists and technology wherein the implementation of technology is absolutely deliberate. Here, an idiosyncratic aesthetic is crafted with a dynamic and intentional use of the glitch and the limitations of the tool, the influence of both being essential to the meaning of the work. The visual cues of a failure of representation in the standard playback of a videogame - the visual glitches that informed the player that their machine was malfunctioning - are treated as a path to

expressing ideas around the concept of decay, in ways that could not be expressed with a flawless system.

When I approach a technological collaboration, I try to keep in mind the strengths of the awareness and utilization of technological failure and limits that were exhibited in the *Super Mario Movie*. The opening scene of my thesis project *Pratfall Origarch*, a short experimental narrative animation, is a simple, black and white hand-drawn animation of the main character struggling to open a can before slicing his finger off. When watching Internet video, a "choppiness" can occur, with the video stuttering at an inconsistent frame-rate. I decided that for this scene, I would use this glitch in streaming playback intentionally, drawing out the frames of animation with the idea that they would be played back at an inconsistent frame rate. This created a variable fluidity, which I put into effect to augment the action being depicted, to make the abrupt changes in flow a key part of the character's acting. Frames for certain poses hang on the screen for a few split seconds before the stream of frames regains its flow, in a way that helps to further depict the struggle of opening the can, as opposed to being something which disrupts the depiction of this action.

In *Super Mario Bros.*, there are three separate states of being for Mario, beginning with the smallest and weakest state, then growing larger, and then finally gaining the ability to shoot fireballs. This is not the alteration of the conditions of embodiment that I mentioned earlier, however, as the items that allow for these altered states are a part of the composition of the level. The game is designed to be played with these abilities. But what if Mario didn't have to be Mario? What if he could be embodied in the game with entirely different conditions for existence, with a different sort of jump, or maybe no jump at all? The approach to the composition would change entirely. And in the conceptual frameworks through which

artworks are realized, artists embody themselves through the tools they use. So what I am arguing for here is a hybrid approach to the use of technology, as a form of a conceptual glitch. This other aspect of hybridity, a fragmentation in the conceptual framework, supports my goals of surprise and selective incoherence.

Earlier, I mentioned Thomas and Johnston's twelve principles of animation in *The Illusion of Life*. In my own work, the conceptual glitch that I am bringing about to enable my hybrid approach to technology is connected to one of these principles, solid drawing. Solid, in the sense that the Thomas and Johnston intend, means "good": "Signs were hung on many walls where the young trainees would be sure to see them, and the one we remember best was this: 'Does your drawing have weight, depth and balance?' - a casual reminder of the basics of solid three-dimensional drawing" (Thomas and Johnston 67). What I am proposing is that one doesn't need good drawings for good animation. The artists of the past who followed the twelve principles have created tremendous work, and artists in the future will do the same. I am by no means arguing against the validity of such pursuits. But if I were to attempt to match the work that most exemplifies this principle, the inherent inferiority that I mentioned with the online speed run community would rear its head again. I would be set in competition against agencies with resources I do not have, who are able to invest the time of numerous people in the production of work. So rather than trying to compete with good solid drawings, I can work on a parallel plane, using "bad" drawings.

Now, using bad drawings on their own does not help this inferiority; in fact this would only serve to aggravate the rift. But by using bad drawings in character animation, although still retaining theatrical expressive abilities, the idea of the character as a real person who exists within 3D space is subverted. By Thomas and Johnston's standards, this is a failure of

representation, an unmistakable death in the conceptual composition of a good animation:

"The *audiences* will make our little cartoon character sad - actually, far sadder than we could ever draw him - because in their minds, the character is real" (Thomas and Johnston 20). So if the character is not real, it is held back from a full emotional connection with the audience.

This is where hybridity becomes crucial. If the audience is made aware that a character is a drawing, then the audience is capable of accepting the greater variety in the qualities of drawing, in quality of line, and dynamic proportions. They are also more willing to accept the character as a videogame sprite, or a clay figure, or some alternate form of representation. These behaviors are unacceptable from the cartoon characters that are supposed to be real people. What I am attempting in my thesis project is to regain any ground lost in emotional expressiveness of characters through the use of bad drawings, and to get the expressiveness to occur from the technical conditions of the character's representations.

To some extent, this process of hybridity runs counter to the idea of an intuition-driven collaboration with technology. My intuition-driven relationship with *Super Mario Bros.* is at such a level that I can carry on conversations and not even really think about my actions, and still perform well. In fact, I gave a presentation on an early form of the ideas within this essay while playing *Super Mario Bros.*, and successfully beat the game. But in fact, I actively seek to avoid this level of intuition-led action in my artistic practice. My relationship with technology requires intuition, but includes knowing when to refrain from relying solely on intuition.

In my thesis project, Mario comes into play directly in one of my own attempts at ROM hacking. I hacked into the *Super Mario World* ROM image for the Super Nintendo Entertainment System, and altered the visual data of the game so that Mario's head was replaced with my own character's. Then, using the emulation software SNES9x, I disabled the

various layers of visual data until only the character remained, with a solid blue background behind him. The reason for limiting this implementation of ROM hacking is simple: the process is incredibly frustrating.

The visual data of a ROM is broken up into eight-by-eight pixel tiles. For the entire collection of tiles, only eight colors are available. Each tile is assigned its own palette, enabling each of those eight colors to represent any of the colors the system is capable of producing. Without doing a great deal of research into how the video game uses each tile (for instance, a blank tile could have numerous iterations across a screen), using this process to compose a specific image requires a great deal of trial and error. The intended image could in fact be impossible to realize without making compromises for the game's method of tile assembly. I could actually embrace the glitch here, filling in any sort of data to replace whatever needed replacing with no regard as to how the tiles are re-compiled. The time requirement to adjust to the learning curve of the process is too daunting, and becoming an expert in minute details with no outside applicability seems too impractical an activity.

And so, facing a prospect of constant death similar to the one I faced in *Super Mario Bros.* before I had learned the game, I chose to redefine the terms of technological implementations in my own work. It was enough that the extent of my video game hacking was to represent the movements of my character with the movements of Mario. Representing an environment under the same video game-based conditions as the character was something I found appealing, but the time required to achieve that level of ability was outside of my resources during the two-year Masters degree for which my project and this paper were prepared. For my purposes, it is acceptable to implement technologies which will more easily produce what I desire.

Conclusion

In this essay I have attempted to contribute to a critical understanding of hybrid practices in the production of art. This research is by no means definitive; I have only begun to scratch the surface and hope others will join me in taking this knowledge further.

As the means for production of animation become more widely accessible the number of solo practitioners who take up the technologies discussed will likewise increase. These artists will not be content to create work that is simply an inferior version of what already exists, at least not all of them. For those with a desire to create work that not only engages technological innovation in the field, but is capable of generating experience able to speak to the contemporary imaginary, I believe I have established a method towards achieving this goal through the specific approaches to technology and intuition that I have outlined. I will in my own practice continue to push at these limits, and anticipate other collaborators who will also seek to defeat conventional expectations that have to a large degree defined past animation practices.

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Appendix

Accompanying this written thesis is a Blu-Ray disc containing my cartoon *Pratfall Origarch*. The cartoon can also be found on the Internet at <http://www.alextripp.com>.