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Motion Illustration: Incorporating emerging trends in any-sized program

In 2014, I presented a paper at ICON8 called "Hello New Media," which discussed why animation tools are important for illustrators to learn because of growing markets in entertainment, gaming, and toy design as well as the shifting needs of publishing and advertising clients. With this paper, I will discuss why motion continues to be integral to the modern illustrator's toolset as well as a variety of methods for teaching motion from an illustrator's perspective. This paper will be focused mainly on illustrators and their clients who use a combination of motion-based illustration and social media to connect with their audiences. Supported by market-based examples, this presentation is meant to inspire educators to include motion in their classrooms and/or reconsider how motion-based illustration is taught, regardless of the scale or flexibility of their illustration program.

This paper has two main sections, the first is a survey of how contemporary illustrators are using motion, and the second is a reflection on my experiences teaching motion to illustrators for several years. Before digging into the main content of this paper, however, I thought it might be interesting to take a look at what has changed in the past few years that has affected illustrators who create with motion.

- **More illustrators are creating GIFs, and more clients are asking for them.**
While this is an anecdotal observation, I will point towards visibility within *The New York Times*. In 2013 *The New York Times* featured 3 animated GIFs in their "Year in Illustrations" (Taha, 2013), while in 2017 they feature a whopping 15 (Syam, 2017).
- **The line between illustrator, animator, and designer continues to blur.**
Artists like Nicolas Ménard, Christina Lu, Chris Piascik, and Tracy Ma blend illustration, animation, graphic design, and motion design in collage of digital and analog media.
- **Social media platforms become more motion illustrator friendly:**
 - Instagram adds video functionality (Warren, 2013).
 - Twitter adds native GIF support (Kastrenakes, 2014).
 - Creatrs by Tumblr is launched, connecting artists with brands to create social content (Lapowsky, 2015).
 - Facebook adds native GIF support (Mchugh, 2015).

Survey of Contemporary Motion-Based Illustration

To better understand why motion is important to the illustration field, I reviewed the work of more than 60 illustrators and began to notice trends in the type of clients commissioning motion work as well as the qualities of the work itself. I chose to organize this section into *advertising*, *editorial*, and *narrative* categories because each of these areas is aimed at a different audience and therefore requires a different way of thinking about image-making. Illustrations designed for advertising must sell a campaign's message; illustrations designed for editorial offer the illustrator an opportunity to comment on a newsworthy issue; and illustrations designed for narrative, such as those used in comics or films, will tell a story sequentially over a sequence of images. While most illustrators do not exclusively produce work in just one of these categories, organizing the work in this way showcases the different approaches these illustrators must take to create functional work for advertising, editorial, and narrative purposes.

It is also worth discussing in brief why the works included in this paper are something unique from cartoon animation and instead described as "motion illustrations." Cartoon animation traditionally uses performance and character acting to tell a story in a linear fashion over an extended period of time. Alternately motion illustration must communicate a story or idea immediately with a combination of visuals and animation. Unlike cartoon

animation, which is typically meant to stand-alone as a singular piece of art, motion illustration is generally designed to exist with text and/or to live on a multimedia webpage in the context of an advertisement or written article.

Advertising

While advertisers continue to explore how to effectively use social media to promote brands and products, a trend has emerged in which illustrators are commissioned to create clever, silly, and transfixing looping animations designed specifically to be shared across social media channels and engage potential consumers with brand messaging. Illustrators working on advertising and commercial projects are also growing into art direction roles where they use their ability to tell visual stories on team projects that might use photography, typography, or complex cartoon animation. These illustrators are tasked with creating fun and attention-grabbing imagery with the potential for viral sharing. Cindy Suen's work for companies like Subway, Apple Music, and Giphy showcase how charming character designs can be used to engage audiences. Some standout advertising projects are listed below:

- Evan Cohen for Hudson Valley Brewery
<http://www.evanmcohen.com/hvb>
- Yukai Du for Lush
<https://www.yukaidu.com/lush-christmas-2017/>
- Cindy Suen for Tumblr
<http://cindysuen.tumblr.com/>
- Rafael Varona for Mykita
<http://www.rafael-varona.com/>
- Eden Weingart for Delta Travel Stickers
<http://www.edenweingart.com/deltastickers.html>
- Ellen Porteous for Quantcast
<https://www.ellenporteous.com/#/quantcast-logo-gifs/>

Editorial

New possibilities for editorial work are growing as publications pivot to leverage the animated and interactive potential of smart devices. A growing list of contemporary illustrators have taken advantage of digital media to promote themselves as a new kind of motion illustrator. They still visualize concepts and ideas, but now use moving elements to capture the attention and imagination of the reader. While it is possible to add motion to an image initially designed to be static, the strongest illustrators in this category rely on animation as an integral storytelling tool. A great example here would be the work of Rebecca Mock, which typically utilize subtle environmental motion that helps place the viewer in the space of the image, but doesn't distract from the adjacent text. Many of these motion illustrations must be designed for mixed use (digital and print) and therefore must function effectively with and without animation.

- Robin Davey for *Financial Management*
<http://robindavey.co.uk/>
- Luis Mazon for *The Atlantic*
<http://mazonluis.com/>
- Rebecca Mock for *The New Yorker* and *The New York Times*
- <http://rebeccamock.com/>
- Stephen Vuillemin for *Bloomberg Business* and *The New York Times*
<http://stephenvuillemin.com/>

Narrative

Illustrators are also using motion to extend a rich history of narrative storytelling in a variety of medium including sequential art, children's books, and animated short films. This category is expansive and includes illustrators who

create narrative work that celebrates their personal vision. Nicolas Ménard, for instance, is an accomplished 2D illustrator who often tells animated stories with his sharp sense of visual design. The translation of his illustration background into filmmaking is evident in his framing choices, use of color as a device to convey mood, and a hand-made aesthetic that permeates the designs of characters and sets. These projects can be personal, such as Jen Lee’s serial comic *Thunderpaw*, or straddle commerce like Adam Ellis’s comic strips for BuzzFeed.

- Oamul Lu, “Little Gluttonous Monster”
<http://www.oamul.com/little-gluttonous-monster/>
- Adam Ellis for BuzzFeed
<https://www.facebook.com/buzzfeedadam/>
- Jen Lee, *Thunderpaw*
<http://thunderpaw.co/>
- Nicolas Ménard for MTV
<https://vimeo.com/195869155>

Teaching Animation to Illustrators

This section is based on my experiences over the past 6 years teaching motion to illustrators first at the Columbus College of Art and Design, and now as part of the illustration program at The University of the Arts. The survey in the previous section demonstrates how important motion-based illustration is to the contemporary illustrator, and I predict it will continue to become more important as we become more reliant on digital devices for communication, news, entertainment, learning, and shopping. The good news for educators is that over the past several years teaching motion, I have observed that students are starting school with better digital literacy and a stronger innate sense for animation and timing, which is wonderful because we can spend more time talking about design and content. The sections below are written to show examples of how motion-based illustration can be implemented in several different ways for programs of all sizes.

Scalable, Tiered Teaching

The main challenge in teaching digital animation to an illustration cohort is helping students develop functional technical skills that will allow them to express their creative vision. I approach courses that involve the use of digital tools with three stages in mind beginning with an emphasis on technical training and concluding with conceptual and design thinking. These stages are scalable and can be used within a single project, as an outline for a semester-long course, and/or as a way to tier motion training across a whole illustration curriculum.

	Stage 1 Fundamental Training	Stage 2 Exploration	Stage 3 Design Thinking
Technical	Learn software at most basic level.	Create complex digital rigs and effect combos.	Bend software to execute sophisticated designs.
Conceptual	Practice basic animation principles and timing.	Use motion to support and draw attention to narrative.	Control narrative across a long piece with pacing and styling.
Single Project	Technical Demo	Exercise	Project
Standalone Course	Project 1	Project 2	Project 3
Curriculum	Freshman	Sophomore/Junior	Senior

Table 1. Stages for digital training in blue are scalable from a single project, to a standalone course, to a complete curriculum.

Stage 1

In the first stage, students are introduced to the software with exercises that have zero-stakes. The goal is for the student to feel comfortable enough using the software that they are willing to make discoveries as well as mistakes that allow them to deeply learn how the software functions. At the end of this training, illustration students should feel confident using the software as an art tool. An example of a Stage 1 exercise would be an interactive demonstration of how to use the “Timeline” in Adobe Photoshop.

Stage 2

In the second stage, students are encouraged to explore the nuances of digital animation with additional zero-stakes exercises that offer some amount of freedom to express their creativity. These exercises can be used as an introduction for more complex projects where students should be asked to develop illustrations where the motion can help support or direct attention to the narrative. It is still important at this stage to have some technical constraints that will bring focus to the area of the student’s exploration. An example of Stage 2 would be using an exercise to teach students how to make repeating animating patterns, and then following up with a project where the students apply this technique to a pattern-based illustration.

Stage 3

In the third stage, students should be proficient enough with the animation software as a tool that they can design their own illustration project and research how to do any specialized technique that they want to implement on their own. During this stage, the focus of the teaching can shift completely from teaching the student how to use the tools to dealing with conceptual and design issues such as how well the image communicates and idea or the strength of the visual design. An example of teaching Stage 3 would be to ask the student to develop a short film, work in a group, or develop a series of motion illustrations. At this stage, the proficiency of the student should be strong enough that the student can create anything they want to, provided they have the passion and interest to follow through.

It is worth noting that because each software package is only capable of a limited style of animation, students should consider the strengths of the software that they are using and design their illustration around these strengths. I teach mostly with Adobe After Effects, which is very good at creating digital puppets, simulated 3D spaces, and compositing multiple art elements. However, it is very difficult in After Effects to achieve frame-by-frame techniques, such as a rotating a figure in space which students often want to do. I encourage students to reconsider the capabilities of the tool and reverse engineer their designs to take advantage of these.

Additionally, when setting up specs for projects, I like to keep in mind current trends and requirements for social media platforms. Right now, Instagram seems to be the most popular place for illustrators to showcase their work, so I will often ask students to create in a square format to take advantage of how Instagram displays work.

With the next sections I will summarize some specific projects, exercises, and courses that I have taught as well as how they fit into the tiered model.

Embedded Motion into Existing Courses

As noted in the previous section, motion can be incorporated into an illustration program in many different ways. Many programs already include a motion experience, which might range from asking students to convert an illustration into a looping GIF all the way into standalone courses designed for illustrators to experiment with motion. For programs that don’t currently have a formalized motion experience, the simplest way to incorporate motion into a curriculum is by embedding workshops and/or projects into existing illustration courses. Some of the ways I have experimented with this are listed below.

Animated GIF Workshop

Learning Objective: Gain experience with basic digital animation techniques.

With this workshop I walk students through the Timeline feature in Adobe Photoshop. In three short parts

I demonstrate how to use the “tween” button to automatically animate the position of a layer, then the transparency of a layer, and finally creating a line boil by alternating visibility of 3 separate drawings of the same subject. This workshop can be completed in about an hour. This is my favorite method of introducing motion to illustration students that have no prior experience. I have taught this workshop with students of all levels including freshman in an introductory digital course and seniors in a portfolio class, and have found it gets the students excited and inspired about how they can use motion in their work.

Adding Motion to an Existing Design

Learning Objective: Explore how motion can add depth and meaning to an image.

For curriculums and courses with limited time to spend on motion, asking students to add motion to an existing design is a simple way to get them thinking about motion without a significant time commitment. This works well as a follow-up to the GIF Workshop. An example of how I have run this kind of project is asking students to add animation to a magazine cover that they have previously designed and illustrated (see Figure 1); the idea being that the animated version would be used for web and app versions of the publication. The success of this model can be mixed because the motion design comes after the visual design. On the successful end students come up with clever, exciting, and subversive ways to reinvent their static work, however on the flipside the animation can also appear unplanned, have poor timing, and/or divert attention away from the messaging of the original design.

Design an image for Motion

Learning Objective: Plan and create an image that uses motion to help convey a message or idea.

Designing the motion during the planning phase of the illustration is the ideal way to work with advanced students. This method allows the student to design an image that specifically uses the motion to help convey its message. It also prepares the student for working with an art director because it adds early approval steps to the motion design process. This method can be applied to any type of illustration project, but specific examples I have done with my students include:

- Web banner ad
- Animated style frame for a platform game (See Figure 2 and Figure 3)
- Comic with animated panels
- Editorial GIF



Figure 1. Angeline Stein created this magazine cover painting for a freshman digital literacy course at UArts. To close the project, students were asked to add motion to their designs to practice creating animated GIFs. Stein created a looping smoke effect emerging from the coffee cup.



Figure 2. "Princess Olga of Kiev" Video Game Skin by Anna D'Amico, created at CCAD. In the GIF version, the characters have a 2-frame idle animation and the stars in the background blink on and off.

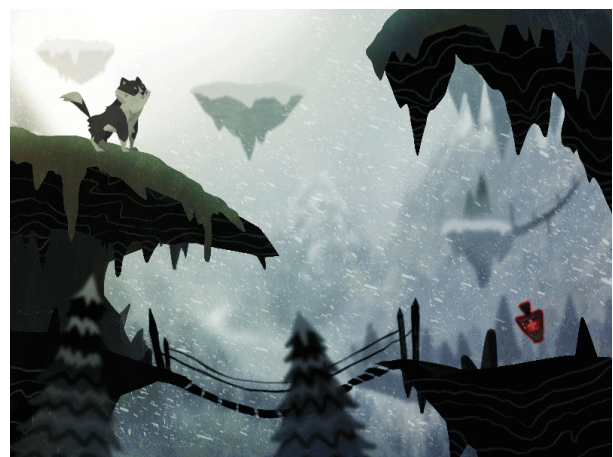


Figure 3. "Balto" Video Game Skin by Jessica Wallace, created at CCAD, features looping animation of the snow in the background swirling.

Standalone “Motion for Illustrators” Course

Some illustration programs may have the flexibility in their curriculum to allow for a standalone motion course designed specifically for illustration students. I have taught a semester-long course called “Motion for Illustrators” five times since its launch in 2013 at CCAD. This course was designed to give illustration students experience developing motion-based work in their visual style while simultaneously training them with digital animation tools (in this case Adobe After Effects). I have since joined the illustration program at UArts and we are launching a similar elective this Spring. I am eager to share the results from this modified version that has been altered to fit differences in scheduling and program culture.

I strongly believe in tiered learning, and the arc of this course is planned around the 3-stage strategy outlined in the previous section: beginning with fundamental training, allowing for self-exploration, and concluding with complex design thinking. The current iteration of this course has four projects, each supplemented with a series of zero-stakes workshops that walk the students through fundamental technical skills that will allow them to apply their creativity to a larger project. The table below describes the projects and the learning objectives. A hyperlink in each section shows examples of student outcomes.

Project	Learning Objectives
<p>Project 1: Greeting Card Students create an animated greeting card assembled out of 4 GIF loops, each demonstrating a basic transformation. https://vimeo.com/213743324</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Practice using After Effects to create animations. • Design illustrations to feature an animation technique. • Explore how audio can enhance mood.
<p>Project 2: Fashion Illustration Students create simple fashion illustrations with moving patterns. https://vimeo.com/213743391</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Create looping animated patterns. • Practice using mattes and masks.
<p>Project 3: Character and Environment Design Students illustrate and animate walk cycles to march across a 3D layered background. https://vimeo.com/213743458</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Develop layered assets that can move well. • Practice using 2.5D tools in After Effects. • Generate unique characters and environments that tell a story.
<p>Project 4: Group Film Students will break into small groups and create short animated films featuring a sequence of motion illustrations set to music. https://vimeo.com/166262390</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Collaboratively develop and pitch an idea for a modular short film. • Use motion to enhance the meaning of illustrations.

The workshops, exercises, and projects taught in this course are incrementally more complex over the semester and I have had great success training students of all skill-levels as competent digital animators with this model. However, because the course is planned around technical training, the drawback of this approach is that the student outcomes have a templated quality that may function better as learning tools than as portfolio pieces. I have had conversations with instructors from other national animation programs and have seen fantastic student outcomes from courses that teach in an open format that favors conceptual thinking and self-training. In my experience, however, this type of self-initiated digital training works best with students with interests that skew towards 3d animation, gaming, and programming. The majority of illustration students I have worked with have been eager to learn how to work with digital animation tools, but can easily become frustrated and discouraged when they run into roadblocks with the software. While the project constraints can limit student’s ability to create the unknown, they do allow for deep exploration of the defined variables presented at each step.

Some considerations

The paper concludes with challenges and successes I have experienced teaching motion-based illustration to multiple cohorts of students over several years, which may function as a guide for educators when thinking about how to introduce motion in their programs.

Challenges

- ***Curricular implementation***

It can be challenging to find space in an academic plan that is already crowded with important fundamental illustration skills like drawing, media, design, and conceptual thinking. As I wrote about in the “Teaching” section, however, short workshops can be a way to embed this into a course with a minimal time commitment. Workshops could potentially also be offered as an extracurricular activity outside of class.

- ***Qualified faculty***

Finding faculty with the appropriate experiences and qualifications can be difficult as motion-based illustration is still a young field and because schools often require their faculty to hold advanced degrees. Over time this will likely become easier, but in the meantime encouraging faculty to play with digital animation tools is a great start.

- ***Breaking the technology barrier***

I have already mentioned the difficulty in getting to the juicy creative and conceptual aspects of illustration work because the barriers of learning how to use the software. While young students are more and more savvy each year with technology, the technology seems to get more and more complex. When students are struggling to navigate technology they can become frustrated and lose interest. The challenge for the instructor is to find ways of teaching with technology that empowers the student to explore without fear of failure.

Successes

- ***Strong technical skills***

I have had great success working with students of all skill levels with the 3-stage strategy outlined in this paper. Because it limits the variables at each step in the learning process, it ensures that every student has the opportunity to practice in a zero-stakes environment and deeply learn how to use the tool. While I typically teach to a specific software platform, I believe that the fundamental animation concepts that are discussed with any modern software are universal and transferrable.

- ***Students are more marketable***

The ability to work with motion is a great skill on an illustration student’s resume, especially when they are looking for work in the first years out of school. As shown in the survey at the beginning of this paper, clients in all illustration marketplaces have need for illustrators who work with motion.

- ***Working in groups***

Illustration is traditionally a solo venture, but teaching motion can offer fantastic opportunities for students to work together to create longer and more complex projects that would be difficult or impossible to create alone. Asking students to create a short film or collaborate on an animated comic, for example, requires them to negotiate interpersonal skills, artistic strengths, and time management. These group experiences can help illustrators prepare for team-roles in advertising or entertainment industries, or simply help them better communicate with art directors.

Going forward

Motion-based illustration is still a relatively new area within the larger field, and it is exciting to see recognition from notable organizations such as the Society of Illustrators, American Illustration, and Communication Arts that now feature motion as a category in their competitions. As we move forward it will be important for educators to continue looking at how contemporary illustrators and their clients are experimenting with motion. The relationship between motion-based illustration and social platforms will also be important to watch as clients find creative ways to publish their work online.

Consider where motion can be integrated into your curriculum either as a single workshop, a dedicated class project, a series of tiered projects delivered over multiple years, or even as a specialized course.

Biographical Note

Adam Osgood is an Associate Professor in the illustration program at the University of the Arts. His personal work explores how motion can be used to add value to illustration projects, and he has worked for clients including Hyundai, Lionsgate Films, the History Channel, and Yahoo. His animated films have been screened at festivals including Siggraph Computer Animation Festival 2015, London International Animation Festival, and Holland Animation Film Festival. He contributed a chapter to *The Theory and Practice of Motion Design* published by Routledge, entitled "The Blurry Intersection of Illustration and Animation." He has a Master of Art & Design in Animation from North Carolina State University. www.AdamOsgood.com

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