Chapter 20
Framing Complexity:
Digital Animation as Participatory Research

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ABSTRACT

This chapter introduces digital animation as an arts-based research medium by laying a theoretical foundation for its use and describing how it can become a participatory methodology. The authors link research through digital animation to performance, ethnodrama, film, photography, and visual arts traditions leading to a rationale for using animation as a qualitative research tool. A vignette of an ongoing ethnography contextualizes animation as a process and as a product. In this chapter, the authors argue that digital animation (1) facilitates the use of metaphorical imagery to vividly and emotively capture lived experiences and (2) invites a unique audience into the research discourse.

INTRODUCTION

Research Discourse in the field of education often reinforces entrenched positivistic paradigms by marginalizing work that seeks to develop deep conceptual and emotive understandings of lived experiences. The type of work that delves into exploring the experiences breathed by human beings situated in complex relationships with others, with the self, and with ideas relies on progressive forms of research to appropriately communicate multilayered findings (see Norris, 2011). Still, as Belcher expressed in 1989, the academic *tribe* continues to validate words strung together according to specific empirical structures which, in turn, situates the author within a hierarchy that is defined and maintained by gatekeepers in the academic establishment (Giroux, 1995; Apple, 2004).

We do not deny that the written word is powerful; as Bulwer-Lytton (1839) aptly illustrates, "the pen is mightier than the sword" (p. 52). Yet, there

are spaces within educational research that need a more personally meaningful form of expression "beyond conventional, linguistic representations of data in print texts" (Loveless, Bhattacharya, & Griffith, 2012, p. 5). An audience consumes aesthetic, visual, audio, and dramatic texts differently than printed words (Denzin, 2000, 2003; Cahnmann, 2003; Saldaña, 2003), enabling varied interpretations of multidimensional human experiences to emerge during the research process that includes data generation, analysis, and dissemination. The audiences, researchers, and participants' relationships with these sorts of polymodal texts provide multiple lenses through which to view emotional and perceived realities.

Though it is often overlooked by scholars, methodologists, and academics; we believe animation can be such a powerful research tool. In this chapter, we provide a rationale for conducting research with digital animation as a progressive form of inquiry. We aim to show how the affordances offered in animation complement other validated forms of research, and we argue for animation's place in arts-based research alongside ethnodrama and narrative inquiry.

In making a case for digital animation as a research methodology, we first provide a brief background of arts-based research that supports the inclusion of animation as a qualitative research narrative. Next, we present our rationale for using animation by considering contributions animation can make to research processes. We argue that the aesthetic characteristics and methods of production of digital animations facilitate the transformation of research into an affective and emotive experience that can reach a broader audience. To contextualize this discussion, we briefly describe an ongoing ethnography in which we use digital software, in conjunction with traditional qualitative research methods, to create animations as a research process and product. We conclude the chapter by exploring the research possibilities and challenges of animation.

BACKGROUND

Qualitative Research and Arts-Based Inquiry

A systematic study of phenomena that emphasizes transformative action (Finley, 2008), arts-based inquiry invites the audience to assume a critical and interpretive stance to construct deep understandings (Barone, 2001). Arts-based researchers and participants recast the contents of experience to explore diverse themes of the human condition (Cahnmann, 2003) and form new questions (Barone & Eisner, 2006). Artistic mediation of research findings prompts researchers and audiences to reflect, critique, discuss, and act in new ways. Thus, such mediations "recast the contents of experience into a form with the potential for challenging beliefs and values" (Barone, 2001, p. 26).

The forms and media, used to represent the world, influence not only what can be said, but also what is likely to be experienced (Eisner, 1998). As McLuhan and Fiore (1967) succinctly state, "the medium is the massage" (p. 27). By *massaging* perception, media transform thinking and alter environments. In this way, societies and individuals are shaped more by the nature of the media than by media's content (McLuhan & Fiore, 1967, p. 8). Because forms of communication simultaneously represent the world and create it, communicating in diverse ways creates new dialogues leading to varied possibilities.

According to Parry (2007), the western narrative views art as being solely representative of reality, illustrating the world through artistic embodiments. Such art has a "uniquely instructive role" (p. 210) as it recasts the world in narrative and aesthetic forms. Thus, the world and how it is experienced are unchanging and can be singularly represented. Contradicting this stance, *defamiliarization* (Shklovsky, 1965) views art as presentations of the world in new forms to

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