All Video Games Are Animation, and Here's Why It Matters

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INTRODUCTION

Mamoru Oshii once claimed that 'all films will become animation' (Oshii 2004), and Alan Cholodenko went even further, asserting that not only is animation a form of film, but film is also a form of animation (Cholodenko 1991). He also argues that all media is a form of animation (Cholodenko 2007), which makes video games, if seen as interactive systems of movement, even more so. This paper expands the concept of animation beyond its traditional boundaries by exploring its role in digital media through the lens of movement, the core element of animation and 'animating'. The primary focus is on how animation mediates movement across different media, specifically films, video games, and robots, and what this framework brings to the existing research landscape.

Animation, fundamentally about endowing life or movement to static, lifeless, or ambiguous forms, exists at the threshold between reality and illusion, human and non-human, life and lifelessness in a Deleuzian perspective of *movement-image* (Deleuze 1986). By mediating movement, images are thus 'animated' into *movement-images*, while in the meantime characters as well as objects are brought to illusory life, creating an 'illusion of life' as Cholodenko describes (1991). This in-betweenness, echoing concepts from other theoretical traditions such as cyborgs (Haraway 1991) or liminality (Turner 1967), offers a powerful theoretical framework for understanding games: it foregrounds not only representation but also the embodied experience of movement that takes place in a medial space where opportunities emerge.

In practice, a range of cases can serve as evidence to substantiate this framework. Some video games surged in popularity during the pandemic because they offered immersive entertainment and virtual spaces for social interaction, allowing people to connect despite physical separation. Many animation studios even survived by producing cut-scenes for video games (Hirasawa and Mihara 2022). More crucially, video game production demonstrates how creative labour sets up rules and algorithms to automate the generation of movement. Developers and designers establish approaches that allow virtual characters and objects to respond dynamically to user inputs or environmental changes, blending creativity with computational precision (or chaos). Video games are

therefore not only cultural artefacts or rule-based 'procedural rhetorics'(Bogost 2008), but animated spaces where movement is imagined, designed, and enacted.

Equally important is the perspective of production studies. Through the creativity and technical expertise of developers, animators, mocap actors, and riggers, movement is given form, characters and objects are animated, and stories come to life. More importantly, the creative talents also animate themselves in the process of their creation; they need to balance their lives with their passion, and devote themselves to the affective labour in order to make animations happen. This, as Gill describes, is an in-betweenness in the middle of the passionate, self-expressive work and the economic precarity that inherently come with it (2011). Ultimately, movement, whether crafted by hand, automated through algorithms, or performed by autonomous systems, can be seen as a form of creative labour and as a universal thread connecting diverse media forms. By centring animation as a conceptual perspective, this research aims to reposition video games as the hinge where traditional media (such as film) and new media (such as robotics) converge, while also revealing that video games themselves best demonstrate systems of animated movement.

In light of this, this research does not intend to challenge the ontology of video games but to reframe animation as an alternative perspective for understanding them. By positioning video games as forms of animation, the project foregrounds the production of movement itself. This reframing expands the theoretical concerns of animation studies into the realm of video game production, emphasising not only what players experience but also what developers actively seek to create through animation pipelines, procedural systems, and design choices. In doing so, it connects the cultural aspects of meaning-making in game design, such as how movement communicates identity, emotion, or atmosphere, with the technical and labour practices that give those movements form. The argument that all video games are animation thus becomes an ambitious attempt to unify existing strands of thinking: from cultural and experiential analyses of play to production-focused understandings of creative labour, ultimately situating games within a broader media ecology of animated movement.

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BIO

Will Mu is a second-year PhD student in Media and Communication at the University of Sydney. His research explores how movement is mediated as an 'illusion of life' across films, video games, and robots. Before beginning his PhD, he spent more than a decade in China working as a creative producer and project developer in film, VFX, and animation production houses, collaborating with directors and screenwriters to develop screenplays for films, animations, and TV series. He holds a Master's degree in Media, Culture, and Communication from New York University.