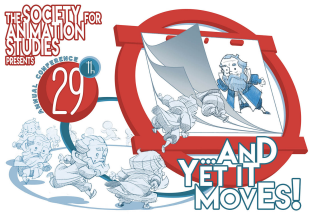
Panel G1

Auditorium

Death, Life, and (Re)Animation



Gregory Bennett

From Animatronic to Animation: the Digital Resurrection of Historical Figures

The animatronic resurrection of historical figures for hypercinematic audience spectacles such as the Disneyland theme park attraction Great Moments with Mr. Lincoln, first presented in the State of Illinois Pavilion at the 1964 New York World's Fair, can create a complex feedback loop in audience reception and response, as signalled by Bolter and Grusin's characterisation of the pleasure of viewing illusionistic visual effects cinema as experiencing 'the oscillations between immediacy and hypermediacy produced by the special effects…the amazement or wonder requires an awareness of the medium.' (Bolter and Grusin 1999:157).

This dynamic would also seem to include pleasure in the aura of presence – of the desire to share physical space with the personage coupled with a 'frisson' in the observation (whether intellectual or perceptual) of uncanny failures in the resurrection itself, and its technologically sophisticated artifice.

In addition the animation and narrativising of the attraction experience, with its move from the frozen historical tableau as featured in Madame Tussaud's waxworks museums, to an animated performance in the form of an audio-animatronic 'puppet/mannequin' version of U.S. President Abraham Lincoln reciting excerpts from his famous speeches, would appear to strive towards recreating an 'authentic' auratic experience 'in time and space', as per Walter Benjamin's conception of auratic preservation and loss in his essay The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction. Signifiers of authenticity to underscore the truth-value of this experience are also a requirement, recreations that are 'created through a direct physical relationship with their referent' (Lister et al 2009:136). Thus the face of Disney's animatronic Lincoln is publicised as being based directly on an 1860 'life mask' by sculptor Leonard Volk, considered 'the most reliable document of the Lincoln face, and far more valuable than photographs, for it is the actual form' (Fairbanks 1960).

This paper examines these issues through a virtual reality project designed for a museum experience. This project aims to recreate a digital version of the historical figure of Antarctic explorer Captain Robert Falcon Scott using animation, performance capture and photo-realistic modelling and texturing based on surviving photographic and film evidence. The virtual reality experience will be situated in a digital version of the interior Scott's Antarctic hut, recreated using photogrammetry and 3D scanning from data gathered from the actual hut itself, located on the north shore of Cape Evans on Ross Island in Antarctica.

The particular status of the animated recreation of a famed historical persona, in this case within a narrativised virtual reality experience, will be examined through Benjamin's characterisation of the loss of aura through reproduction as the loss of 'its presence in time and space, its unique existence at the place where it happens to be'. How might this be complicated through the immersive experience of photorealistic 3D animation in virtual reality, and the indexical ambiguity of elements such as photogrammetry and 3D scanning will be explored, as well as responses to the encounter with the digital presence of an

animated and performance-captured digital character in the shared virtual space of the VR experience.

Bibliography

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Biography

Gregory Bennett is a Senior Lecturer in the Digital Design Department, School of Art & Design, Auckland University of Technology, and a practicing artist who works with 3D animation, motion capture, projection mapping and interactive and virtual media. He has a Master of Fine Arts degree from the Elam School of Fine Arts, University of Auckland, and has been teaching at AUT since 2005 where he established the first courses in motion capture. He is also Director of AUT’s Motion Capture Lab and is currently involved with developing research around Motion Capture and Virtual Production in a range of areas including Dance, Performance, Fashion, Pedagogy, and Virtual Reality. He has presented both his creative practice and research at international new media conferences and festivals such as SIGGRAPH, ISEA, CURRENTS, and SIMULTAN. As an artist he has exhibited both nationally and internationally, including Australia, the USA, and Europe, and his work is represented in both public and private collections.