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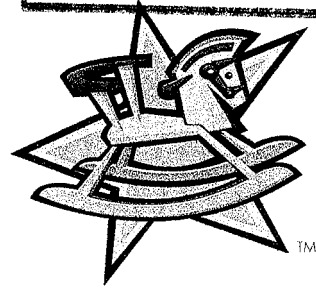
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Having been fortunate enough to have been invited by the House of Representatives Standing Committee on Communications, Information Technology and the Arts to enter a submission into the inquiry into the future opportunities for Australia's film, animation, special effects and electronic games industry, the authors would like to discuss the following points relative to the animation industry in the country and the international industry's effects on it:

- the use of new technologies and maintaining 'best practice' standards
- the educational facilities around the country offering teaching in animation and its methods and practices
- industry support
- unions and their influence
- national and international marketing of the Australian animation industry and its products
- international agreements and co-productions on animated projects
- the development of Australian content in animated feature films, television series and short films.

As the authors' areas of expertise and experience lie primarily within the animation field, it is to this industry that we will limit our submission, with a passing reference to the electronic games industry that contains significant levels of animated product.
Whilst we understand that taxation treatment and funding issues are not being focused on during this inquiry, *brief* mentions will be made if we feel the reason important enough to influence this inquiry. It is all very well to say '*ars gratia artis*', but 'art for art's sake' doesn't pay the bills or foster a burgeoning Australian animation industry.

New Technologies and 'Best Practice' Standards

There are many countries around the world that have significant animation production industries. Examples of such are America, Canada, Korea, France and India. Some of these countries specialise more in the functional production side (such as assistant animation, and digital ink and paint), whilst others are quite well known for their original

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ideas for animated projects which may, or may not, be produced in their country of origin. There is, therefore, much competition to not only secure agreements with other animation companies to co-produce animated projects, but to come up with the next new, although not necessarily original, animated product concept. Such competition means that Australian animators must maintain their skills to a current international industry level, as well as be able to read the current trends in subject matter and narrative structure. This information can be garnered from industry publications and newsletters, as well as monitoring what gets screened on the television stations, and at local, national and international film festivals. The style of popular products is frequently copied, because the thought is that something that has been successful once will be successful again. Copied matter can be artistic visual style, animation style, production methods, and subject matter. It takes a brave producer to present something different.

The latest trend in animation production appears to be the use of Macromedia's Flash software to produce animated projects, mainly in the area of TV series and short films. It is an attractive piece of software for animation production for many reasons:

- it is relatively cheap in price in comparison to other animation software packages
- it is more user-friendly than other animation software packages
- it reduces production time by effectively eliminating the stages of ink and paint, and to some extent the stages of assistant animation and camera. Compositing can be done in Flash, but more often than not the software is paired with a separate editing software system such as Adobe After Effects or Final Cut Pro.
- It can reduce budgets due to the elimination of certain production stages
- it allows animated content to be broadcast on the web due to Flash's relatively small file size upon output, increasing market exposure
- it works well with some of the current visual and animation styles in favour

The thing that currently causes the most problems for the industry is Flash's ability to reduce animation production budgets. Most investors see Flash's price tag, it's production speed and its ability to combine several animation stages into one, and construe that this means that the cost of animation production can be halved, or at least significantly reduced. This is erroneous, irritating and extremely damaging.

> "The industry buzz that it makes the whole process cheaper is not always true," says Jeffrey Nodelman, founder and CEO of New York City-based Noodlesoup Productions. "Flash gets you from A to B, but you still have to develop stories. And that takes time and money."[1]

Flash's user-friendliness also allows operators untrained in animation to produce animation, giving a poor aesthetic result which reflects badly on Flash animation as a whole.

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[1] 'Flash Forward – Why Macromedia's hot software has become the new toon era's weapon of choice' by Chris Grove, *Animation Magazine* March 2003

"Flash is just a tool. Great animation comes from great animators and a great 2D digital series is the one that you can't tell is animated in Flash. And even if you could tell which tool was used, the good story, the well-crafted characters and the great animation within that context is what makes a great series."[2]

Good story, well-crafted characters and great animation require the skill of those trained and experienced in such elements. Computer software cannot produce it; only talented artists can, and talented artists deserve something better than meagre payment for their efforts. This is a fundamental fact that many producers, broadcasters and investors either do not, or choose not to understand, and smaller budgets make more artists wonder whether it's worth it to accept such a financial situation.

"...it's frustrating that TV broadcasters seem to think that if you are working in Flash, it should be super cheap. But the reality is, if it looks like real animation, it will cost the same as real animation regardless of whether you're doing it with a pencil and ink or in Flash."[3]

The simple fact is that if an investor is not willing to spend the time and money to produce something aesthetic, exciting and original, then the returns are going to be mediocre for all involved: the product won't sell as well because it doesn't stand out from the rest; reputations won't be improved by producing something that is average, probably dull and visually bland; people unfamiliar with animation will see the product and think that's the best the industry has to offer which will decrease investor, distributor and broadcaster interest; and the artists will be unable to showcase what they're really capable of achieving on behalf of the industry.

Traditional animators, that is animators who have been trained in hand-drawn animation techniques rather than computer animation techniques, frequently bemoan that their skill is being superseded by more popular forms of animation media, such as 3-D computer animation (examples of such are Pixar's *Toy Story* and Dreamworks' *Shrek)*. Employers must be prepared to expend the effort to train their staff in the use of current technologies and methods rather than letting them go in favour of those who may be experienced in operation of animation software, but not versed in solid animation skills.

Educational Facilities

Indeed, the trend in many educational institutions for animation is to encourage their students to use computers in animation production. This is not entirely negative, and in fact has many positives. Computer animation is here to stay, and the animator who has

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[2] Jocelyn Hamilton (VP Production for Nelvana Flash projects) in 'Flash Forward – Why Macromedia's hot software has become the new toon era's weapon of choice' by Chris Grove, *Animation Magazine* March 2003
[3] Rob Davies (President and CEO of Atomic Cartoons) in *Flash MX Design For TV and Video* by Janet Galore and Todd Kelsey, Wiley Publishing 2003

skills in both traditional AND computer animation makes them a more attractive potential employee. More potentially employable Australian animators encourages more animation production when a producer, whether Australian or foreign, feels confident that his or her staff can animate well and confidently in a particular medium.

Up-to-date animation production skills are essential in any animation course curriculum as well as in animation production studios. The teachers and lecturers must be versed and familiar with new technologies and styles of animation production in order to teach their students adequately. It is true that there are basic skills of animation that transcend animation media boundaries, but this cannot be solely relied upon to make an employable animator. Technology and equipment in educational facilities must be kept as current as possible.

Whilst saying this, the authors must stress that with this increasing focus on computer animation has come a more lax attitude regarding adequate basic animation skills being taught within educational facilities. It is true that computers do save a lot of time by eliminating the need for the animator to go through some labour-intensive and menial processes, but we feel that sometimes this is used as an excuse to let the computer handle too much of the creative animation content. Such a reliance on computers to do this results in bad animation timing, poor scriptwriting in favour of some shiny three-dimensional graphics, and some truly ugly choices of colour and design. One need only turn to the internet to see manifold examples of such lack of basic animation production skills. The problem with having relatively cheap animation software means that anyone can use it, especially those untrained in the skill of animation. Why, if the computer software can do most of it, then why waste money on training people? And why waste money paying for skilled animators to work on an animated production when anyone can wield a piece of animation software? And, to be honest, it's no wonder that attention has turned away from the traditional forms of animation (such as hand-drawn, claymation, and cut-out animation) when investors, and unfortunately most producers, deem it to be slow, inefficient and expensive. If there is no support for animated products using the traditional media, then animators skilled in such areas will not be employed. Educational institutions want their students to be employable or their animation courses may be cut altogether, but a few weeks using animation software does not an animator make. Unskilled 'animators' bring down the quality of Australian animation, to say nothing of poor animation scriptwriting.

It is unrealistic to assume that a scriptwriter for drama, theatre or film can automatically write adequately for animation. Animation is not live-action, and operates under different guidelines and narrative structures. Frequently our industry gets lumped in with the generic terms of film and television. It is a specialist field requiring specialist scriptwriters, and thusly, animation scriptwriting instruction must be compulsory in educational institutions. All the prettiest pictures in the world won't save a bad animation script, the same way that all the flashiest special effects won't save a truly mediocre feature film. Conversely, stick figures moving around on a white background with few props can reduce an audience to laughter, tears or rare moments of deep thought if the script is tight and the characters well developed. There needs to be a strong foundation of basic skills, in drawing, design, animation and scriptwriting, in order for the Australian animation industry to stand for some kind of quality in order to stand out from the international crowd and attract investors to our shores.

This must also be coupled with education in the differences between independent animation methods and current studio practices. One thing that the authors have noticed and experienced is the marked difference between making an animated product independently, and working within an animation studio environment. Many of the educational institutions offering animation courses in various forms do not offer current information regarding studio practices. This is most likely due to two reasons: the course offered is to teach the student to become an 'independent' animator who makes their own films, in their own time, on their own subject matter and with their own finances or those provided by a funding body; the other reason being that the lecturers have been out of the animation studio production area for so long that their knowledge is lacking. We shall now consider both these reasons.

The Independent Film Maker Focus
Independent animators do not make much money, not only for themselves, but also for the industry in Australia and overseas. Rare exceptions to this are student and independent films that have caught the eye of a potential investor or producer to the extent that serious considerations into making a larger animated project based on this short film are made, usually through development with a large animation production company. There are some large and well-known film festivals that showcase animation, and reward the best, or most popular, examples with awards that sometimes extend to money. Independent and student animators are a vital source of original animation material and should definitely be encouraged in their efforts, whether that is through funding, through support from the local, national and international animation community, or more widespread exposure in the media. Often, independent animators have several original short film ideas, but are unable to bring these projects to a production stage due to lack of money, which is usually indicative of a lack of support from government bodies, or producers not willing to take a chance that they can assist in producing something fresh and original. Funding is a key issue, which cannot be discussed here.

Current Industry Experience In Educators
With regard to those in positions of animation instruction, it can only be of benefit to the students to have lecturers that are current practitioners of animation. Those lecturers who are active in animation production are gold mines of information for their students on how to operate within the industry, both as an independent animator and as a studio animator. Admittedly, it is hard to be both teacher and practitioner. Animation is very time-consuming and expensive, and it can be almost impossible to reconcile both roles in a way that doesn't make the students disadvantaged through lack of lecturer contact, or by causing the lecturer to have a nervous breakdown from work overload. A possible solution would be to have external lecturers teach students for certain time periods in certain animation practices. For instance, a local independent animator can be invited to discuss their experiences with students and perhaps act as a mentor or guide for those students producing short animated pieces of their own. Knowledge of local, national and international film festivals and the tricks of applying for securing funding can be imparted. An animation producer can be called in to discuss with students methods of marketing and promotion for an animated product, as well as to offer insights into the working of the national and international animation industry. A studio animator can pass

on their knowledge to those interested in following a similar path. The more information, instruction and skill a student has to work with, the better the chance of them being attractive to a potential employer, to be a confident animator and storyteller, to enter into a position with minimum effort being expended on the part of the employer, and to seek out opportunities to enrich the Australian animation industry with unique ideas, solid animation skills and an important excitement and love of the animation medium.

Industry Support

Industry support needs to be increased, certainly within Australia. The problem arises from few Australian animation production companies being in such a position to do so. The nature of the industry is changeable at best, especially in the current economic climate. There are few investors willing to take risks even on supposedly sure-fire ideas i.e. ideas that borrow from other successful animated products. Animation is an expensive and labour intensive skill. It requires patience, persistence, accurate budgeting and scheduling, faith, marketing, artistic skill and a solid grasp of the basics of animation. SBS television has supported animated programs, especially those tailored to a more adult audience. Examples of such are *Southpark, Eat Carpet* and *John Callahan's QUADS!* This is a very pleasing development for our industry, as not only does it increase the amount of animation currently broadcast, but also it shows that animation is not just for children. ABC television appears to have the highest volume of animated content, mainly for their younger audience. Unfortunately, very recently the ABC announced that due to lack of increased financial support from the government, two of their cable channels that showcase animation, Fly TV and ABC For Kids would have to be take off the air, thus saving the ABC $7 million.[4] Most of the television stations in Australia do not care to screen animation unless it is to fulfil certain broadcast requirements or if the product has already been a success overseas. This attitude does not foster the Australian animation industry. If there is little interest from Australian television networks, then the opportunities for Australian animation production companies are narrowed to working on co-productions of overseas products, or the odd series or short film depending on scanty and uncertain finances. If the production companies are not able to maintain year-round production, then the opportunities for apprenticeships, internships or animation concept development with independent animators and employees are virtually nil.

Many Australian animators are faced with the choice of moving overseas to countries where the animation industry is either more established or certainly more in favour. As many of the international animation production companies are themselves struggling to secure productions, the outlook is relatively bleak for those who search overseas, as the visited country will be more likely to hire its indigenous animators rather than be lumbered with the administrative nightmare that is linked with visas and sponsorships of overseas workers. Those who choose to remain face great uncertainty in acquiring employment in animation. Many animators have turned, in some degree of despair, to other industries such as the electronic games industry, illustration, graphic design, special

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[4] 'ABC Axes Digital Programs' *The Age* May 26 2003

effects, or industries that do not handle artistic material whatsoever. Teaching is particularly popular in that regard. Many animators cite the lack of certain income as their main reason for ditching the industry altogether, and the Australian animation community has lost many valuable, highly skilled and imaginative individuals because of this.

Unions

There are no industry-specific union organisations for animation and animation workers. We feel that this is to the disadvantage of the industry. Previously, animators were able to join the MEAA (Media and Entertainment Alliance Association). Currently, there is no mention on the MEAA's website as to whether this is still the case. Just as it is inadequate in many ways to consider animation as part of the film and television group, it is not conducive to the industry to not have its own union, or at least a separate department in a media union.

The authors have not been union members for several reasons:

1. They felt the union fees too high for a relatively small return on such an investment.
2. They did not feel confident that their union representative had a good grasp of the animation industry and the process of animation, and thus could not adequately understand the needs of animation workers.
3. It was somewhat frowned upon by management to be a union member
4. They did not feel that the union was all that interested in representing what is a small section of the media industry in comparison to other industries.

These are reasons that have been repeated by other members of the animation community we have had contact with, who have also been disinclined to become union members. If animators do not feel confident in supporting a union by becoming members, then there will not be much regulatory clout for us as a collective body. All animators have experienced the unpleasant situation of taking on an animation job that pays below the industry minimum, or very poorly in terms of a freelance rate just in order to bring some income in, however small. Being undercut by untrained animators and artists does not help the situation either, both in terms of a generally poorer end result in the product, and lowering rates that potential employers are willing to offer.

However, MEAA was instrumental in establishing industry minimum wage levels and role classifications for animation in Australia in collaboration with the animation production company Animation Works. This was generally considered an important step forward in industry regulation, but there appears to have been little advance since then. With the increase in the computer games industry, and the increasing use of Flash in animation (enough to warrant a separate job classification), the industry minimums and role classifications need to be re-examined for the good of the industry as a whole. America has an animation union that covers animators, and there is also a writers' guild that supports the needs of animation writers. It is inarguable that the animation industry

is larger than that of Australia, and therefore the practicalities of having an animation union are greater, but if the Australian animation industry is to be encouraged to grow and strengthen, then an animation union should be seriously considered.

National and International Marketing of the Australian Animation Industry and its Products

The authors have had little experience in this area, so our comments regarding this topic will be limited to suggestions that could be beneficial to the promotion of the industry, so admittedly they may be methods that are already in effect.

- Australia has been promoted as an attractive country for film production, with lower pay rates, conscientious workers, and new film production facilities. The animation community viewed positively the construction of large film studios such as Fox Studios in Sydney, and Movieworld on the Gold Coast, hoping that animation production facilities would be included. Alas, that has not occurred, and this is most likely due to a combination of lack of overseas interest in Australia as a source of animation production, and the lack of confidence nationally in our own industry. There is no reason that animation production studios cannot be incorporated into such large film production facilities – the key is garnering potential animation project investor interest.

- Greater state and federal government promotion of the Australian animation industry would be of tremendous benefit, providing industry standards were current and enforced. Australia is able to offer lower costs for animation production in comparison to its better-known industry relations, such as America and Canada.

- Industry representatives at international animation festivals and seminars would be ideally placed to promote the benefits of bringing a production to Australian shores.

- Australian animation organisation affiliations with overseas animation organisations would allow a greater level of industry networking and promotion.

- There needs to be greater support of original animation productions within Australia that can portray the diversity of talent within our industry instead of the usual run-of-the-mill 'safe' production styles.

- Australian animators who produce short films and pilots of their own material should be encouraged to submit their works to overseas festivals, thus allowing a greater exposure of Australian-produced animated projects to an international audience.

International Agreements and Co-Productions on Animated Projects

If the Australian animation industry is unable to support a production of its own, then co-productions are certainly another option. Having worked on a couple of large co-productions, the authors have experienced the pros and cons of such production structures. It certainly allows a reasonable period of constant employment for animators, as well as positive promotion of the capabilities of Australian animation production. Being able to list a well known animated production on the résumé of an individual or a company certainly makes it more likely that another potential employer will regard the résumé's owner positively. Co-productions with larger and more experienced animation production houses also allow Australian animators and producers involved to cut their teeth on a large production without having to bear the full burden. It is a natural stepping-stone in working towards a solely Australian animation production. Animation is an expensive medium, and co-productions allow a sharing of financial responsibility that is most welcome in the current economic climate. International agreements regarding animation productions can open up a much larger potential market and distribution network. Associations with distributors would assist in a more widespread dispersal of Australian animation, providing that the Australian industry is able to supply attractive, cost-efficient and marketable products.

Development of Australian Content in Animated Feature Films, Television Series and Short Films

There is a persistent focus on the inclusion of 'Australian content' within animated products produced within Australia. Whilst the authors concede that the exploration of 'Australian identity' through Australian content should be encouraged, they feel that this criterion has been overused and is in fact hampering the industry to a significant extent. Having sat through many animated short films and series that focus on 'what it is to be Australian', have Australian fauna as animated characters, or reference out-dated examples Australian society and environment, the authors are frequently left wondering what happened to the notion of an interesting or at least well balanced story. The stipulation of 'Australian content' should not supersede decent script writing, character development or an appealing and entertaining idea. The authors are also aware of projects that have had to be 'Australianised' in order to generate interest from funding bodies. It is all very well to desire an Australian flavour in Australian animated productions in order to stand out from international animation productions, but it shouldn't be the primary stipulation. There are productions that have received funding that have 'Australian content' that are sent overseas to be produced. This is damaging to the industry, and indicates that 'Australian content' does not necessarily encourage the growth of the national industry. The authors feel it would be much more beneficial to focus on production *within* Australia instead of jamming in Australian content where it is not going to benefit the production from a storyline or artistic perspective. This is not to say that there should be no references to Australian life-styles, attitudes, sense of humour or environments – it just needs to be carefully incorporated into the production so that

supports an original and appealing concept. Exciting and viable potential productions shouldn't be disregarded because there is not 'significant Australian content'.
The definition of 'Australian content' is ambiguous and doesn't seem to have been consistently translated or described. Is it having Australian voice actors and animators? Does it involve some quantity of Australian investment? Does it have to address some societal issue within Australia? Does it have to answer the question: what is Australia's identity? Does it simply have to mean that it is produced within Australia? The authors would certainly support the last definition until the nation's industry is stronger, more stable, and more widely supported.

In conclusion, the authors feel that the following actions need to be taken in order to support, nurture and grow the Australian animation industry:

- a specific union, or at the very least some form of regulatory body, needs to be formed to look out for the best interests of the Australian animation industry
- sufficient training in educational facilities for adequately skilled animators must be supported and encouraged by the industry, state and federal governments, and the educational facilities themselves
- a revision of current funding attitudes concerning topics and subject matter
- greater support from television broadcasters in screening animation
- more substantial marketing of the Australian animation industry worldwide
- the incorporation of animation production facilities into new and recently-built film production studios
- greater interaction between animators, artists, producers, investors, broadcasters and distributors to discuss methods of understanding and strengthening the animation industry and its reputation nationally and internationally

Australian animators love what they do. They work in an industry that has the capacity to be highly original, exciting, creative, imaginative, moving, and fun. They want to keep working in animation. They want to see the reputations of Australian animation and its workers increase and rival those of other countries. They want to feel that what they are doing is appreciated, respected, adequately rewarded and supported. They know that currently, their nation's industry cannot support that wish, but they are willing to examine and discuss ways to change this.

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