The history of 2D animation

Animation is very closely bound to the development of movies, and for the same reason – the need for a long strip of photographic film with frames that can be projected onto a screen in sequence without blurring. Repetitive animation devices like the Zoetrope and flip book (described in https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/History_of_animation) were used from the middle of the nineteenth century, but could only project brief sequences of motion, all of them drawn.

The development of cameras that could record a sequence of photographs on strip film, either in real time or in response to a single shutter press, opened up many creative possibilities. Stop motion, discovered by accident when items moved between scenes, was the first. Later it was realized that flip book style drawings could also be photographed individually and become a movie. One of the earliest American animators was Windsor McKay; you can see his 1914 Gertie the Dinosaur at https://youtu.be/TGXC8gXOPoU. The technology is impressive for being well over a hundred years old, but something about Gertie is (if you’re not awed by the new technology, as of course contemporary audiences were) well, boring. Once animated movies became familiar to audiences in the early twentieth century, studios realized that they could improve on reality.

This improvement was the Twelve Principles of Animation, generally agreed to have been developed in the Disney Studios in the 1920s. You can see a well made video about them at https://youtu.be/uDqjldI4bF4. These principles meant that animations became faster and more entertaining, enhancing reality as well as being more entertaining.

Quite apart from the Twelve Principles, other conventions developed. Some of these relate to cinema – and we’ll look at a few later in the course – but others were specific to animation (incidentally, I’m going to refer to animated drawings as animations; cartoons are static drawings). That being said, Wikipedia has a useful page on “cartoon physics” at https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Cartoon_physics that is accurate and entertaining. These again are principles developed in the 1920s to 1940s, mainly in Hollywood based studios.

There is a 13 minute video describing the techniques of 1960s and 70s traditional 2D animators at https://youtu.be/o8OVkUhr0W8.

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