Impossible Choreographies: the database as creative tool

Gregory Bennett
Auckland University of Technology, Auckland, New Zealand
gregory.bennett@aut.ac.nz

Artist Talk Proposal

This artist talk is a reflection on my own art practice as a direct engagement with high-end industrial 3D animation software, and discusses the emergence of the database as a creative methodology, and a key organizing principle in the generation of an ongoing series of 3D digital animated artworks. Through explication and demonstration of creative process I aim to elucidate the intricate relationship between technology, process and artistic intent, framing this within relevant emergent critical frameworks around digital creative practice. The aim is to recognize some of the inherent qualities of 3D digital production, and the mapping of the operations of the 'database' as a pliable creative tool.

Working directly into high-end 3D modeling and animation software, and taking the actions of a generic male figure as a point of departure, my animations are created in a modular fashion, building up units of performed movements, loops and cycles (both animated and motion-captured), creating a sometimes complex movement vocabulary.

This recalls Lev Manovich's notions of the database and the loop as engines of (non-linear) narrative in digital media work, in particular his principles of modularity, automation and variability as intrinsic to new media objects.[1] In working with complex software tools I also acknowledge in the fabrication process what Rachael Kearney has termed the 'synthetic imagination'[2], and Malcolm Le Grice's conception of submerged authorship in the interaction with the 'intelligent machine' – the creative act as a collaboration with the embodied intellect of the software itself.[3]

Drawing on and remediating a range of sources including the photographic studies of Eadweard J. Muybridge, the choreography of Busby Berkeley, nineteenth century optical toys, and the contemporary digital video game, these works present figures which occupy a space between the animate and the inanimate, between automata (devices that move by themselves) and simulacra (devices that simulate other things).

Manovich models the creation of a digital media work as the 'construction of an interface to a database...the interface [providing] access to an underlying database.'[4] So rather than fashioning a unique work of art 'within a particular medium' where interface and data are one, in 'new media, the content of the work and the interface are separated. It is therefore possible to create different interfaces to the same material.'[5] Elements can be composed and recomposed, duplicated, altered, retrieved and deleted non-destructively, representing a shift from creation to selection.

What I recognize in this dynamic between 'creative' user and complex software tool, in my own incremental process of engagement and expertise with 3D animation software are alignments between form and content, where my capabilities with, and employment of, generic and pre-set functions (loops, database structures of storage and retrieval), and intrinsic formal characteristics (Manovich's 'Modularity', 'Automation' and 'Variability') form a feedback loop with aesthetic and thematic concerns.

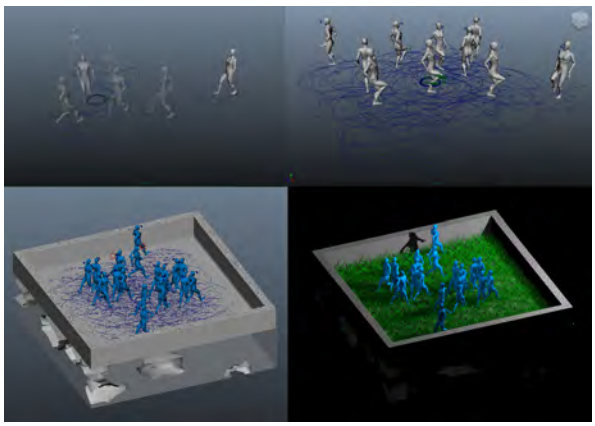

Fig i. *Making of Utopia I*, 2011, Gregory Bennett, HD Video, Copyright the artist. Looped animated figures are duplicated and assigned to motion paths. These are then placed in 3D environments.

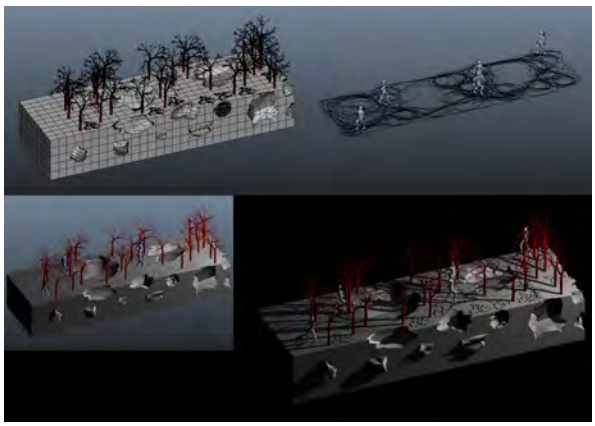

Fig ii. *Making of Utopia I*, 2011, Gregory Bennett, HD Video, Copyright the artist.

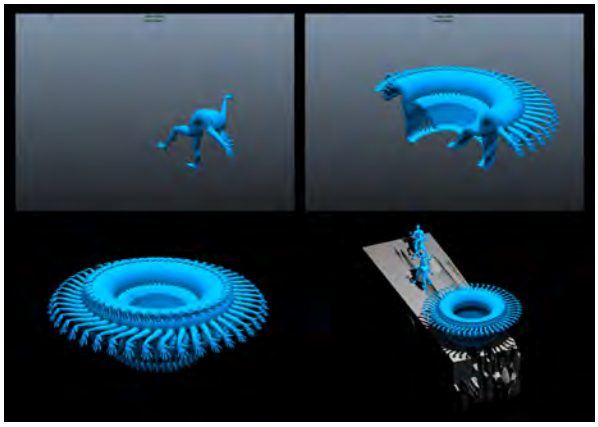

Fig iii. *Making of Utopia I*, 2011, Gregory Bennett, HD Video, Copyright the artist.

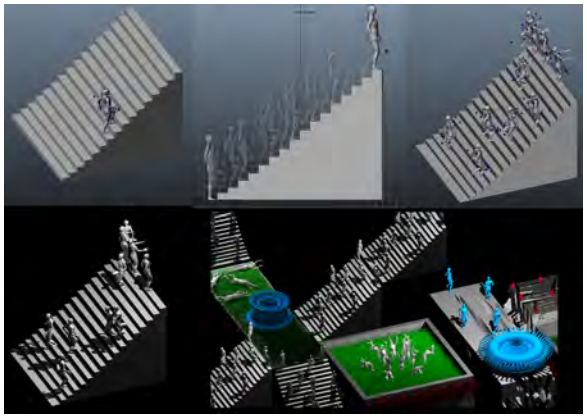

Fig iv. *Making of Utopia I*, 2011, Gregory Bennett, HD Video, Copyright the artist. A database of 'already-activated elements' can then be drawn on to construct larger composite environments.

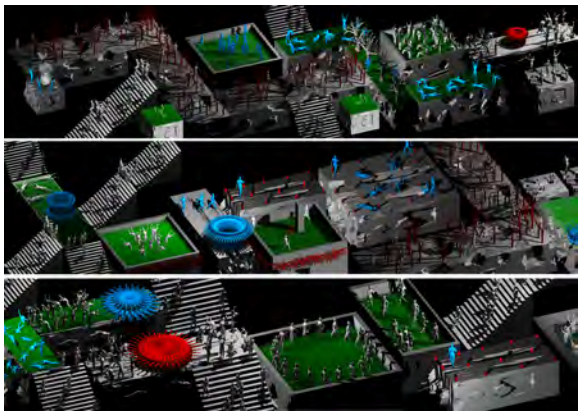

Fig v. *Making of Utopia I*, 2011, Gregory Bennett, HD Video, Copyright the artist. Elements from the 'database' are flexibly arranged and re-arranged to form a continuous virtual 'world'.

Final work on Vimeo: https://vimeo.com/44791389

Links to selected documentation material.

3D database elements on *Sketchfab*:

3D models from *Utopia IV* (2013):
https://sketchfab.com/models/83de4471c840466b802856b13ded060a
https://sketchfab.com/models/755eb24794e54fedaa89c6787bb9ac05
https://sketchfab.com/models/41e9db18686242ee88b6d4955cc07e61
https://sketchfab.com/models/49b1f4eabb54460abf5b1d20f4e9e2bc
https://sketchfab.com/models/02f8fd0d116a44468495fed3b306ca70
3D models from *Dromosphere I* (2103):
https://sketchfab.com/models/81dad92287054189b696dcc15376a2bc
https://sketchfab.com/models/f6cff72fd409468cb2d02d48f1af1c87
3D models from *Floratopia I* (2013):
https://sketchfab.com/models/c693c50e469945de8857a25e3fb38f19
https://sketchfab.com/models/e20aea51c3e34648b9e091feab92f178

Final works on Vimeo:

Utopia IV (2013): https://vimeo.com/72710217
Dromosphere I (2013): https://vimeo.com/78191627
Floratopia I (2013): https://vimeo.com/78199720
Panopticon I (2015): https://vimeo.com/133249309

References

1. Lev Manovich, The Language of New Media (Cambridge, Mass: MIT Press).
2. Rachel Kearney, Animated Worlds and the Romantic Imagination in *Animated Worlds*, Ed. Suzanne Buchan (Eastleigh: John Libbey Publishing, 2006), 7.
3. Malcolm LeGrice, Experimental Cinema in the Digital Age (London: British Film Institute), 240.
4. Lev Manovich, *The Language of New Media,* 218.
5. Lev Manovich, *The Language of New Media,* 218.