



# ANIMATING EROTICA WITHOUT SHAME: AN AUTOETHNOGRAPHIC CREATIVE ACCOUNT

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**Abstract.** This article explores the experience of shame and guilt that is associated with producing explicit erotic animated content. By employing the reflective practice journaling method, this autoethnographic essay discusses cultural and psychological challenges that need to be overcome by an animator from the Western cultural sphere in order to be able to produce content with sexual overtones. Findings suggest that to create erotic content, it is necessary first to overcome psychological barriers. But even then, the ability to portray animated sexual rapport requires specific animation skills and aesthetic understanding that are difficult to transfer from previous experience. The article concludes with a discussion on how to approach erotic content and what possible challenges the creative team may face in a project with erotic overtones.

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**Keywords:** adult animation, animated erotica, autoethnography, censorship, mature, pornography, reflective journal, self-censorship.

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## 1. Introduction

Today, adult animation is the fastest-growing segment in Western mainstream animation (Evershed, 2020, 2021b). And that growth is multifaceted – the segment is growing in number, variety of genres and overall content quality. Yet adult animation is also the least researched topic in the animation field. Among topics within adult animation phenomena, one topic stands out as especially under-researched – the subject of erotica. And there is one simple reason for that – the subject is particularly stigmatized.

However, it is essential to note that the shame arising from erotica topics negatively affects not only the quantity of scientific output. The shame of combining erotic elements with animated content is also evident in the output of animated content. In other words, animated content creators today are fine with portraying profanity and extreme violence (narrative elements suitable only for adult audiences), but erotic imagery is still an unshakeable taboo.

Animation is in a bizarre situation if we compare it with a live-action medium, where nudity and the presentation of sexual activity are the norm. Or, to provide some context – 66.8% of all prime-time television shows in the United States (US) contained some form of sexual behavior (Fisher et al., 2004). Furthermore, studies on prime-time programming in the United Kingdom and Ireland show that the appearance of intercourse scenes on television screens is considerably higher than in the US (Medved, 1997; MacKeogh, 2004). Finally, theatrical films are a couple of times more abundant with sexual content than the prime-time television

lineup (Hetsroni, 2007; Abramson & Mechanic, 1983; Greenberg et al., 1993). So, it can be argued that eroticism in live-action films and television media is not shocking or startling, but quite the opposite – today, it is an integral part of the storytelling for adult audiences.

Unfortunately, today, there are no studies that would allow us to clearly understand how often mainstream adult animation includes sexual themes in its content. However, even in the early 1920s, when animated content for an adult audience almost doubles for a few years in a row (Evershed, 2020, 2021b), it would be hard to find mainstream content portraying explicit animated nudity or sexual activity. This situation demands a qualitative research approach to identify the nature and scope of it.

This article will first provide a general overview of the censorship apparatus and its impact on the mainstream adult animation segment. Then, the autoethnographic methodology used to gather data from the reflective practice diary to gain insights about the self-censorship phenomenon when producing explicit sexually themed animated content will be outlined.

## 2. Censorship in mainstream animation

From the medium's beginning, there was a perception that animation is primarily light-hearted entertainment for juvenile audiences (Boivin, 2017; Mitkus & Nedzinskaitė-Mitké, 2018). Previously, only one animation segment was truly desirable for buyers and distributors – content intended for children. Although the animation medium is over a century old (Bendazzi, 2017), the rise of animated content (in mainstream media) created explicitly for adult audiences is still relatively new and niche. However, in order to identify the reasons for this, it is necessary to explore the importance of censorship for the overall development of animated film and television content in the Western cultural sphere.

Most Western democratic countries abandoned formal censorship systems (ones that censor films based on political, religious, or moral stand) in favor of ones that rate cinematic and television content based on suitability for different age groups. In other words, the age rating system became the primary tool used to protect certain groups in society from potentially harmful cinematic content by rating classifications that either warn parents or guardians about violent, sexual, or obscene material or restrict theatre access to children. This new censorship system allowed live-action filmmakers to explore various narrative and cinematic subjects that would have been impossible within the old system. However, although the same opportunities were formally available for animation creators, animation content remained almost without exception intended for children.

The continued trend to demand only animation content that is targeted at young audiences (even after the abandonment of formal censorship) was due to the global economic model when cinema and television enterprises were interested only in content that fills each time slot with the most attractive cinematic production for the largest possible number of viewers. And because adult animation content was not perceived as something that could become mainstream (*i.e.*, having mass appeal), the scarce animated content that was targeted at older, more mature audiences basically come in three flavors – irreverent (adult swim), family sitcoms (*Fox*) and Japanese *anime* (Evershed, 2020). In other words, adult animation in the West could attract distributors and buyers only if it is cheap to make or to buy.

Thus, for the greater part of the existence of animation medium, the world's animators working in the mainstream media have devoted a great deal of effort to hide or avoid adult themes in their creations. As Cohen (1997) noticed, during formal censorship in the US (1934 to 1968), most writers were careful not to create anything that could cause problems. And this self-censorship, in turn, was adapted into a way of life. Most animation creators added that they were never affected by the censors as they never worked on anything that needed to be changed (Cohen, 1997). In other words, animators adapted to the situation caused by formal censorship so well that they no longer perceive the situation as limiting their creative expression.

Avoiding controversial themes or images can be a powerful economic motivator for filmmakers (Timsit, 2018) because some important film markets outside of the Western field (such as China) have shown that adult-specific animation as a phenomenon, is still essentially unimaginable or, at very least, it is very heavily censored (Chen, 2020; Milligan et al., 2005). Thus, narratives that choose to address socially sensitive topics could potentially lose access to film markets where the censorship apparatus is politically motivated or have conservative moral views.

### 3. Self-censorship in mainstream animation

It is important to note that although age-based censorship is a much healthier approach than the system based on moral or political grounds, as presented in the previous section, the question of an age census still exerts an incredibly powerful influence when investors seek to evaluate the commercial success of mainstream film or television projects. This aspect is analyzed quite extensively in the 2006 American documentary *This Film Is Not Yet Rated* (2006, director Kirby Dick), where interviews with filmmakers revealed that *NC-17* ratings often significantly reduce a film's chances at the box office (and overall commercial success), because many US movie theatres refuse to show *NC-17* rated films, and even if they do it is for very limited periods.

However, this extremely unfavorable situation for Western animators (who would like to tell mature stories) finally turned for the better with the rise of subscription video on demand (SVOD) platforms. Presenting it in an oversimplified way – SVODs, unlike linear format platforms, do not need to worry about how time slots would attract the largest possible number of viewers. Thus, the economic model of SVODs has made it possible to provide high-quality (even the most niche) animated content for its adult audience and (most importantly) stay profitable.

However, although the adult animation segment in the last few years showcased growth and diversity, the content is still mostly composed of just a few genres. This situation can partly be explained by investors' strong reluctance to take risks – such adult animation segment genres as comedy, irreverent, and *anime* have already proven capacity to attract populous numbers of viewers. Thus, creating the temptation to seek to replicate the past successes of the named genres. However, this also means that animation creators who want to break down established creative patterns naturally face greater challenges.

The genre problem in the adult animation segment is part of a vicious cycle – without success stories, it is very difficult to expect creators and investors to risk (their finances, prestige, and time) and experiment with new genres and types of adult-themed stories. And success stories cannot emerge if no one is willing to invest in new (essentially experimental) content. Thus, animation creators, to this day, are strongly motivated to invest their own time and talent into content ideas that they perceive as having the greatest chance of being picked up.

This creates a peculiar situation because, according to the Adult Animation White Paper (Evershed, 2021a), adult animation content is far more often created by live-action television writers rather than talents from the animation industry. In other words, storytelling specialists outside the animation industry believe in this medium's ability to tell compelling, mature-themed stories more than animators themselves. Furthermore, content creators from the live-action medium come without prejudices or misconceptions about the animation medium and are motivated by opportunities not constrained by artificial censorship (Mitkus, 2023). But, of course, this is just a part of a broader problem that largely leads to self-censorship in the animation industry.

There seem to be many indirect indications that it is very difficult for animators to reorient and be able to create content for adult audiences. Whether it is because of the belief that content intended for children has a much higher chance of success or because of self-doubt and disbelief that animators will be able to create content worthy of the attention of adult viewers. Whatever the reason, Evershed (2020) summarizes his view on the global animation industry where kids animation studios often not well suited to adult animation.

Thus, the literature review suggests that not only erotica genre is stigmatic to the animation creator but also that conventional animators' skills and knowledge are insufficient to create content for adult audiences. Furthermore, it seems that the adult animation segment needs storytellers from other mediums to unleash its creative potential fully.

#### 4. Defining erotica

Erotica is a genre where sexual overtones are intended companions with the imagery of explicit nudity or sexual intercourse. In other words, in this genre, nudity is presented in such a way that it invokes sexual stimulation or arousal. Furthermore, in erotic stories, sexual sensations are pursued as beauty in aesthetics – as something pure and ethereal (Seltzer, 2011).

However, before one can aim to define erotica, it is necessary to establish how erotica is different from pornography. And interestingly, there is general agreement across disciplines that there are difficulties in defining pornography and erotica (Cameron, 2005; Rea, 2001; Slade, 2001; Pope et al., 2007). Although, most politicians, content creators and scholars agree that erotica and pornography are not synonyms. In other words, even if some groups would like to ban both genres, everyone concurs that both genres have recognizable differences. Thus, it seems that the problem lies with the ability to create easily applicable criteria to clearly identify which genre the (art)work belongs to.

It is vital to note that this challenge to determine to which genre the audio-visual content would be assigned is extremely important for creators who aim to create content with explicit nudity. Depending on which label – erotic or pornographic – the audio-visual work will obtain

will determine what distribution opportunities the content creators will receive. And in some cases, the ability of content creators to be able to distinguish erotica from pornography also can help to avoid jail time.

For example, in such European countries like Lithuania, producing erotica is completely acceptable. However, if one aims to produce pornography (with the aim to distribute it), that person would face up to one year in prison. Therefore, there are situations when having a fundamental understanding of the difference between these two genres is more than trivial.

The very word *pornography* comes from the Greek words *graphos* (writing or description) and *pornei* (prostitutes). Hence, pornography – writings about prostitutes. At the same time, the term *erotica* comes from the Greek word *eros* (love). In other words, the genre has its name not only from the phenomenon that poets and musicians claim is the most rewarding of life goals but also from the name of the Greek god of love and sex. Thus, it is fascinating how two genres that tell stories about fundamentally the same subject can be named by identifying one with prostitutes and another with god. In all things related to sex, those two cannot be more distant from each other. However, American and European courts have yet to define the difference between these two terms (Black Wing, 2015).

While this segment is about the definition of erotica, it is easier to define this genre by establishing what pornography is first. Therefore, the author of this article will present definitions of pornography (Table 1).

As seen from the given examples, there is an enormous variety of definitions. However, it is easy to notice that the definition of pornography depends on the context in which it is used (research, medicine, law, psychiatry, criminology, politics, etc.) and for what purpose. In other words, the given definition of pornography will shift in its formulation towards the goals the definition author wants to achieve – to understand, control, or censor.

Yet it is possible to establish some patterns that definitions of pornography emphasize: (i) pornography is primarily designed to produce sexual arousal in its viewers; (ii) it is sexually explicit material; (iii) it has very little or none of the aesthetical value; and (iv) the term also includes sexual perversions. The last one is very unfortunate for the genre, as it means that pornography, as a term, can be simultaneously used to label legal and criminal material.

Therefore, one can conclude that erotica is a genre where (i) sexual arousal is not the primary goal; (ii) it is not explicit material; (iii) it has strong aesthetical value; and (iv) it does not include any sexual perversions. Thus, erotica is a genre where sexual themes are used in given artwork (sculpture, painting, film, photography, animation, etc.) and is an integral part of the narrative development.

As Scarlett (2018) states about erotica as a literature genre, “Erotica is not just a book with lots of explicit sex in it”. Yes, sexual themes (or even explicit sex) should be found in a book (or any other medium for that matter) that is labelled as erotica, but these scenes need to be integral to the story because, without them, the character’s journey would not make sense. As Suraiya (2004) sums up, “Erotica represents the complex cartography of desire, full of hazard and mystery, inviting endless exploration”, while pornography “is a dumbed-down diagram leading to a cul-de-sac whose only destination is libidinal claustrophobia”.

**Table 1.** Definitions of pornography (source: created by author)

A proposed definition	Source
"An incentive to action" expels nudity from the realm of art and creativity.	Nead (2001)
"Representation, without aesthetic or sociological justification, of sexual acts with an intrusive vividness, which offends commonly accepted standards of decency".	Webb (1975, p. 1)
"I know it when I see it" (Potter Stewart on how he distinguishes pornography, <i>Jacobellis v. Ohio</i> , 1964).	Tarrant (2016, p. 3)
"Pornographic information – information that openly and in detail shows real or simulated sexual intercourse, genitals, defecation, masturbation, or sexual perversions (paedophilia, sadism, masochism, zoophilia, necrophilia, etc.), and this is the main purpose of such information".	E-seimas.lrs.lt (2006)
"[...] pornography representation is one that combines two features: it has a certain function or intention, to arouse its audience sexually, and also has a certain content, explicit representation of sexual material (orans, postures, activity, etc.). A work has to have both this function and this content to be a piece of pornography".	Williams (2015, p. 137)
[Pornography can be recognised by] "that it was produced solely or principally for the purposes of sexual arousal".	Legislation.gov.uk (2017)
"Pornography is the graphic sexually explicit subordination of women through pictures and/or words which includes one or more of the following – women presented as dehumanised objects; enjoying humiliation and pain; tied up, cut, or mutilated; shown with severed body parts; penetrated by object or animal".	<i>Jisc: Archives Hub</i> (1989)
[Legal pornography is everything except] "any publication [with] a dominant characteristic of which is the undue exploitation of sex, or of sex and any one or more of the following subjects, namely, crime, horror, cruelty and violence, shall be deemed to be obscene".	Government of Canada: Justice Laws Website (2023)
"[...] professionally produced or user-generated pictures or videos (clips) intended to arouse the viewer sexually. These videos and pictures typically depict sexual activities, such as masturbation and oral sex, as well as vaginal and anal penetration, in an unconcealed way, often with a close-up on genitals".	Peter & Valkenburg (2016, p. 510)
Pornographic artefacts typically have certain features: they are sexually explicit; contain nudity and scenes of a sexual nature; they have the potential to arouse sexually their viewers; and they are often used as "masturbation material".	Mikkola (2013)
[Pornography is] "the material supplied by adult entertainment corporations, made available on pornography websites, and consumed by individuals looking for pornography".	Cawston (2019, p. 626)
"[...] pornography's being principally a money-making venture, the very word pornography (or better, porn) almost invariably connotes a certain exploitation – at times degradation or desecration – of human sexuality".	Seltzer (2011)
Pornography, is viewed and used alone, not in the company of others.	Pope et al. (2007)
"Pornography is not merely nude pictures. It is the depiction of erotic behaviour designed primarily to cause sexual excitement. [...] It desensitises one's emotions so that explicit pornography is needed to find satisfaction, and it conditions readers to deviancy. It demeans and degrades women and children".	Peacock (1997)
"[...] pornography means a manner of representation in which sexual acts are brought to the foreground in a vulgar and intrusive manner and other human relations are disregarded or relegated to the background".	<i>Riigi Teataja</i> (2012)

A similar perception is extended to audiovisual media. Erotica, as one author argues, is not the same as pornography, as the genre is first mostly about the characters' inner journey:

"The pornographic film has as its primary purpose the graphic depiction of sexually explicit scenes. It generally depicts these scenes in a way that is degrading to women or, less frequently, to men. [...] Erotica, on the other hand, seeks to tell a story that involves sexual themes. Sexually explicit scenes in these films serve a secondary role to the plot. Erotic film displays sexually explicit scenes in a more realistic and equal fashion that is not degrading to either gender" (Gehrke, 1997).

This notion is supported by *Filmsite* (1996–2023), which argues that erotic "films often appeal to the viewer's emotions, emphasizing pleasure, physical desire, and human companionship". The ability of erotic art to move its observer emotionally is an essential element of the genre.

To sum up, erotica is the genre that celebrates sexuality. Animation has aesthetical tools to truly provide a captivating depiction of naked sensuality and sensuous delight of excitement. Furthermore, animation medium has aesthetic tools that allow erotic stories not only to engage with the audience on an emotional level but also to stand out from live-action content. However, in the last half of the century, there were only a few cases of (Western) mainstream animated artwork that fully embraced sexual overtones in its content. Thus, there must be internal reasons why Western animators can embrace the violence and profanity in content targeted at adults yet are unable to include explicit nudity in their narratives.

## 5. Going inward to understand the phenomenon

In order to identify what internal challenges an animator from the Western cultural field faces when seeking to create animated erotic content, I chose to employ a qualitative autoethnographic approach with a reflective practice diary as a key method to gather rich data. A rationale for using a reflective diary to collect data (rather than other methods such as focus groups, interviews, or observation) is that the topic of animated erotica could be uncomfortable for the participants. Also, with the interviews, there is a chance that participants cannot recall events or feelings (Alaszewski, 2006; Coxon, 1996). In addition, as literature analysis suggests, many animation practitioners could have created mental justifications for why they do not need erotic elements to tell their animated stories. In other words, because of the nature of self-censorship, animators could not perceive the avoidance of erotic themes in their work as something negative or limiting.

Autoethnography is a qualitative research methodology that has become popular in the social sciences and is being adopted in a wide range of disciplines, including business, health sciences, education, social work, communications, and humanities. This methodology takes the researcher/author as the subject of research (Denzin & Lincoln, 2002; Ellis, 2004; Richardson, 2000, 2002). Autoethnographers aim to examine their feelings, insights, and understandings to gather data on the research topic, so researchers are both the research subject and the analysts who examine and interpret the data (Dumitrica, 2010).

Although autoethnography is related to other qualitative methodologies such as critical ethnography, reflective ethnography, or performance narrative (Denzin & Lincoln, 2002), autoethnography's key difference is that empirical data is gathered from researchers' personal experiences.

Autoethnography embraces researchers' subjectivity rather than attempting to restrict it; this methodology is best used when the researcher's experience can extend the understanding of a particular discipline or culture (Holt, 2003). However, while all personal writing could be regarded as an inquiry into the culture, not all text is autoethnographic. Not all self-reflective processes promote awareness of the relationship between self and others, or self and society, not to mention that by employing autoethnography, there are aspects that may invoke ethical concerns.

When researchers employ ethnography, they study culture's relational practices, common values and beliefs, and shared experiences to provide insiders (cultural members) and outsiders (cultural strangers) to understand the culture better (Maso, 2001). In addition to telling about the researcher's experiences, autoethnographers are also required to analyze these experiences. The text is usually written in the first person when using autoethnography to gather data. It features emotion, dialogue, and self-consciousness as relational and institutional stories affected by history, social structure, and culture (Bochner & Ellis, 2016).

When a researcher decides to use the autoethnography methodology, there is much to consider even before writing the first words. Lapadat (2017) argues that autoethnography clearly states the study's background and personal perspectives, theoretical stance, interaction style, and political aims. Therefore, Lapadat (2017) continues, autoethnography needs to say *I* in the journaling to present subjective interpretations and resist the temptation to produce authoritative accounts or interpretations that generalize.

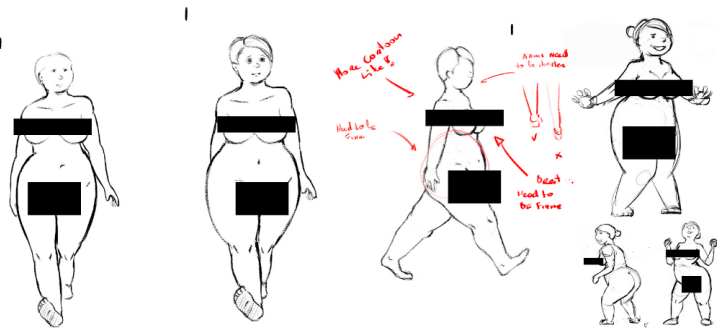
By the point of composing this article, I had used the practice diary for 18 months and produced 90 pages (over 38 thousand words) of content. Every single entry in the diary has five data points: (i) date; (ii) task name; (iii) comments before starting; (iv) comments during the task; and (v) comments after finishing the task. It is important to note that the section "Comments before starting" establishes my goals with the specific practice task, the challenges, and how I will approach it. Thus, the final segment of the entry is always a critical reflection on how I succeeded in achieving my goals and what worked and what did not. Finally, during the task, I would document in detail my thought process, creative approach, mid-task results, *etc.* This section is usually the largest text-wise as it functions as the rich data that will help me later to analyze overall creative, emotional, and thought processes and determine how to improve them.

In order to test several hypotheses, I formulated four animation tests that I decided to implement on my own and one test that will be executed with the help of an additional animator. Objectives of the five animation tests:

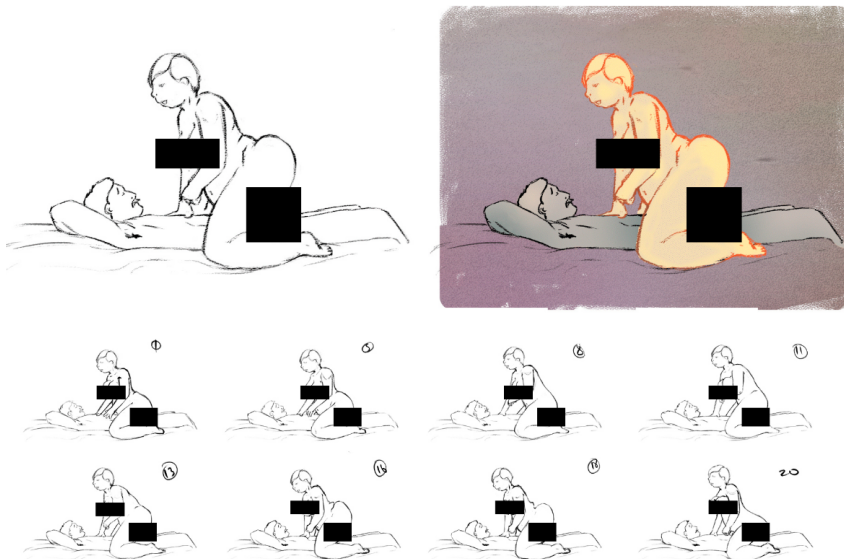
- Test 1: nude woman walking (cycle) (Figure 1). The purpose of this test was to animate a fully nude woman (from the front and the side). This test hypothesized that nudity, which has no erotic element, would not cause any emotional discomfort;
- Test 2: couple having sex I (erotic, cycle) (Figure 2). The purpose of this test was to animate sexual intercourse between a man and a woman. This test hypothesizes that (in contrast to the first one) this exercise will cause me mild to moderate emotional discomfort and physical anxiety;
- Test 3: couple having sex II (explicit, cycle) (Figure 3). The purpose of this test was to animate sexual intercourse between a man and a woman. However, unlike the previous test, the sexual penetration must be clearly visible (compositional focus point). Up to the very start of the test, I did not have any formulated hypothesis, as I did not know if I would manage to go through with it;



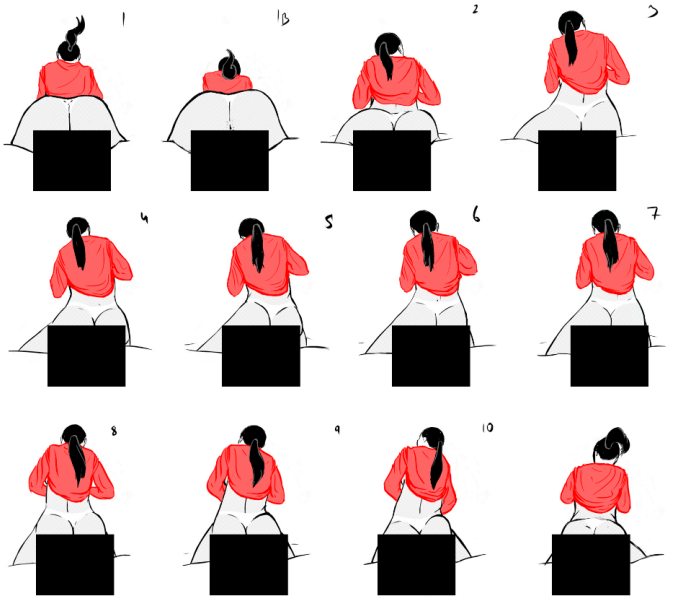
- Test 4: seduction (erotic) (Figure 4). The aim of this test was to animate a semi-nude woman performing an erotic (seductive) act. The purpose of this test was mainly to test aesthetic, creative decisions. Also, the hypothesis was that by this point, it should be much easier to produce erotic animated content;
- Test 5: science fiction sex scene (erotic) (Figure 5). The purpose of this test was to animate a complete erotic sequence (and not a single shot like it was done in previous tests). The science fiction setting was chosen to illustrate how animation medium could provide an environment where live-action would struggle to produce believable execution.



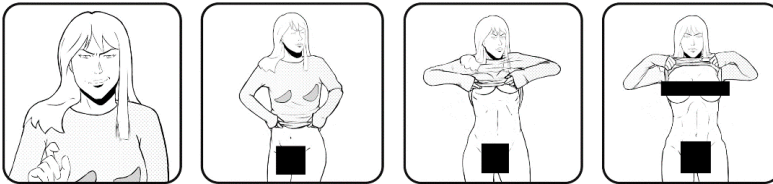
**Figure 1.** Animation test 1: nude woman walking (cycle). On the left – two forward walking tests to see how different proportions affect 2D female character’s appeal (source: created by author)



**Figure 2.** Animation test 2: couple having sex I (erotic, cycle). This test also includes experimentation with colours to determine whether the use of colour creates an erotic (rather than pornographic) feeling (source: created by author)



**Figure 3.** Animation test 3: couple having sex II (explicit, cycle). To create an attractive animated interpretation of a movement of a sexual act, it is necessary to exploit all the principles of animation (source: created by author)



**Figure 4.** Animation test 4: seduction (erotic). This test sought to telegraph to the audience not only the short narrative taking in the animation, but also to convey certain character traits in the character (source: created by author)



**Figure 5.** Animation test 5: science fiction sex scene (erotic). This was the most anatomically complicated animated test the author ever produced. Additional challenges in this test were created by the use of colour and shadows (source: created by author)

It is important to note that, although the initial lineup of the animation tests was constructed at the very start, with the completion of every test, the goals and hypothesis of follow-up animation tests were corrected based on experiences, outcomes, and insights.

## 6. Results and discussion

This section will present how I implemented all the animation tests (Figures 1–5) and what outcomes and insights I gathered. All animation tests were conducted in chronological order the way they were presented. All notes presented in this article come from the reflective practice diary.

### 6.1. Animation test 1: nude woman walking (cycle)

As was hypothesized, animating the nude woman walk cycle created no emotional discomfort. However, mentally, this exercise felt more like an academic study at a university with nude models than something integral to erotic studies. Therefore, I decided to push exercise a bit and try to add eroticism to the character's walk (body language). I added wider hips swings, more expressive breast bouncing motion and more confident facial expressions (instead of neutral). As a result, the character's sex appeal increased slightly (see Figure 1). However, the animation was still more asexual than erotic. Finally, it is important to note that while I aimed to produce more erotic walking cycle content, all these additional aesthetical changes to the animation test did not affect me in any negative way.

### 6.2. Animation test 2: couple having sex I (erotic, cycle)

This test aimed to produce erotic animated artwork that portray explicit sexual intercourse between heterosexual couple (see Figure 2). In my notes, I mark that I do not have any set goals, and it is an exploratory test in nature. The start of this test was much more nerve-racking than the previous one. For this test, I realised that I needed to research some pornographic videos to understand body motion, timing, *etc.*, because my initial blocking did not look appealing. Luckily, this research was conducted during the quarantine because I do not know how this would be possible in a university environment. During the research, I was looking for interesting movements seeking to find more aesthetically pleasing examples rather than vulgar displays of sexual activity. Once the (pornography) research was done, I started animating.

However, from the start, I felt great discomfort and thought this was my first truly erotic animation. I thought that I was crossing some sort of line from where I will not be able to come back. I recorded one thought in the diary: "I'm looking at the nicely animated bouncing tits and big flappy ass, and I feel like six years old because grownups do not do that kind of stuff". This entry captures the feeling of shameful immaturity that was present almost throughout the exercise. In other words, I could not shake the feeling that this activity was unsuitable for a mature person.

Interestingly, the diary entries are full of insights and notes on creating an aesthetically pleasing animated motion of a sexual act. This suggests that in order to realise an aesthetically appealing sexual act in animation media, not only (visual) research but also testing is

necessary. Also, various explorations during the test helped me to formulate some insights about what elements in 2D aesthetics allow one to move images from the feeling of pornography to the feeling of eroticism.

Finally, I had a critical moment at the end of the exercise because this scene was supposed to include a penis penetration animation. The angle I chose to portray the couple (side view of couple having sex) made the penis part clearly visible if an anatomically correct approach were taken. However, I could not make myself animate it.

My notes state:

“Second interesting thing I must write down is my internal fighting about penis animation. [...] and it is ridiculous that by animated explicit sex scenes, I still have one taboo that I cannot break, but it is a huge one. In my mind, I know that I should, no – must draw it, but it just feels like after that, there is no way back. I will come back to it, but at the moment, I will cave into my insecurities”.

But I never did come back to it. My final notes were:

“Being able to animate penis penetration is the boss level in this game. Being able to work with the erotic genre is mostly a mental obstacle [...]. In other words, there is no one step that flips a person from never doing erotic art (animation) to being fully able to do it. It takes time and will. Support is also very important because the feeling that one is doing something wrong is overwhelming”.

### 6.3. Animation test 3: couple having sex II (explicit, cycle)

My notes from the diary before starting the third experiment: “This is it. PORN animation test. I have to do it. Even if I will not show it to anybody”. In other words, for this experiment, I was determined to animate an explicit sex scene (see Figure 3). It was important for two reasons. First, to (finally) break the metal taboo that I had. And second – to push me and animate scenes that most viewers would formally consider to be pornography<sup>1</sup> so that I would compare how it differs from erotic exercise in emotional and aesthetic aspects. It is important to note that this was supposed to be the only explicit hardcore test that I planned to do (in my life).

In addition, it is important to note that it took me roughly about two weeks to mentally prepare to start animating this test. It would be an understatement to say that this creation of animated explicit content was emotionally distressful. Furthermore, there were moments when emotional distress could be felt physically (racing heart and high blood pressure). It is one thing to study animated erotica (and pornography) and entirely another thing to produce it. I can firmly state that if not for this research (and the sort of protection that academia provides), I would never undertake to implement explicit animated content.

### 6.4. Animation test 4: seduction (erotic)

My first aesthetic goal for this animation was trying to capture the sexuality of the female body movement. In other words, the goal of this test was to make animated character acting

<sup>1</sup> It is important to note that in this context, the label *pornography* is given only because of the explicit nature of animation, not because its sole purpose is to provide sexual arousal and be distributed, as most legal terms define the genre.

(that it would be perceived) as playful, sexual, and arousing (see Figure 4). Another goal was to test the hypothesis that, eventually, the production of erotic content would become mentally and emotionally easier. And I can firmly state that I did not feel any distress by this point. In fact, the feeling was starting to be close to the one I was experiencing while producing the walking cycle test. On the contrary, I was feeling rejoiced that erotic animation had become just another creative task for me.

However, just before finishing the exercise, I accidentally learned that Lithuania is one of the few European countries that still criminalise pornographic content (it is not allowed by law to own, produce, and distribute it). This fact extremely disturbed my mental constitution, and I, for a short time, completely stopped my research in order to understand how to deal with this new (potentially illegal and criminal) situation.

Luckily, my university promised to provide legal assistance if law enforcement should be involved. In addition, consultation with Lithuanian lawyers allowed me to identify aspects I should avoid while implementing this research. And although, after a few weeks, I did manage to calm down, the fact that if my erotic art were perceived as pornographic, I would be facing time in prison was highly unsettling. This situation potentially explains why (at least in my country) animated erotica is such a stigmatic subject.

### **6.5. Animation test 5: science fiction sex scene (erotic)**

At this point, I am comfortable with the erotica genre. However, the fact that in my country, pornography is criminalised is lurking somewhere in the corner of my brain. I counted that it took more than three months to eliminate the emotional distress while producing explicit erotic content and another two months to completely accept this type of content as just another creative task. But this situation is applicable only when I am animating alone and not showing created content to others.

Thus, for the next animation experiment (see Figure 5), I really wanted to involve another animator to experience how this type of animation project would feel if I were required to give directions about portraying erotic imagery to another creative specialist. However, the animator I was involved with was also my colleague from the university. Thus, he already knew that I was researching this topic. Therefore, I believe it did help me to minimise any emotional distress and, in turn, distorted the goal of this exercise. In other words, it is very likely that if I aimed to hire someone with no previous knowledge of my research, it would evoke considerably larger emotional distress or even anxiety.

After going through the diary, I realised that the animator had the same problems as I did at the beginning of this practice-led research. Thus, after a few weeks of somewhat unsuccessful tests, the animator finally grasped the mechanics of body movement involved during sexual intercourse and started producing much better-quality animation. Interestingly, when animation shots started to be considerably better, I complimented him on that and ended by saying that this could be a good portfolio piece. However, the animator almost instantly responded with mild shame and said: "Yeah, a portfolio piece for producing porn". So, although the animator is fully committed to the experiment, he still associates this work with pornographic material and not erotic. Therefore, the content should not be displayed publicly.

The results of this particular exercise showed that the feeling of shame is strongly linked to the erotic genre. However, the experiment also showed that the main challenges of working with this genre were almost identical between my colleague animator and me. And, arguably most importantly, it is significantly easier to achieve mental and animating skill breakthroughs with mentorship.

## 6.6. Experiment outcomes and gathered insights

The autobiographical research approach allowed me to experience first-hand how cultural programming and the Judeo-Christian ethics pressure affect animators who set themselves the goal of creating explicit animated erotic content. However, it is interesting to note that watching or reading (doing academic research) about the production of erotic content does not transfer the understanding of the strong taboos surrounding the erotic genre in the animation medium.

Thus, the findings clearly indicate how (mentally and emotionally) challenging it is for an animator from the Western cultural sphere to produce erotic content. It should be noted that in the context of this study, the fact that pornographic content is still criminalised in the country where the experiment was conducted created additional stress that probably would not have been caused by the study in another European country. However, the emotional stress was clearly felt and long-lasting even before learning the latter.

On the other hand, this experiment proved that this taboo can be broken. But it requires substantial time investment and strong will. It is important to address that although it was decided to implement explicit sexual content in the context of this study, it does not mean that such a decision should be made with other animators. Quite the contrary, for animators to be able to break taboos is quite enough to produce (softcore) erotic content animation.

However, the willingness to break the taboo shackles is insufficient to produce high-quality erotic content. My experiments indicate that research and practical experimentation are essential in order to grasp how to produce not only aesthetical content but also one that would showcase the strengths of the medium. Therefore, it is strongly recommended that animators who want to create animated content of the erotic genre set aside adequate time for experimentation.

## 7. Conclusions

Mainstream adult animation has quite a few (mental) boundaries to break before animation medium reaches the creative potential that live-action medium has with the genre of erotica. Various sources indicate that the golden age of adult animation is within reach. However, self-censorship is a serious problem that prevents the medium from reaching its full creative potential. An experiment carried out to identify the effect experienced by an animator trying to create erotic genre content showed that the feeling of shame has a very strong effect. Interestingly, this taboo affects not only the desire to create content in the erotic genre but also the ability to analyze and create animated content. Thus, I would like to encourage other animators to experiment with this genre and break away from constraints that, at the moment, are reserved only for this cinematic medium.

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