South African hacked animation methodologies:

A conceptual foundation to studying animation in local production practices post-2020

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ABSTRACT

South African animation studies have historically been constrained by outdated frameworks that fail to reflect current local production realities. This paper argues that contemporary South African animation must be analysed through locally adapted production methodologies, digital distribution strategies, and shifting intellectual property (IP) structures. The discourse around "authentic" African animation remains problematic, as outsourced productions are dismissed as "odourless," while local content is critiqued for not being "native" enough. These views overlook how studios creatively adapt to economic, political, and infrastructural challenges through "hacked" production techniques—innovative, resourceful strategies that work around systemic limitations.

With the rise of platforms like YouTube and Netflix, studios are bypassing traditional distribution barriers but still face algorithmic biases reinforcing dominant Western norms. This study calls for an updated and decolonised framework that addresses both Web 4.0 technologies and culturally situated analysis. Drawing on case studies of Rams Comics and Cabblow Studios, the paper highlights how animators assert creative agency and IP control.

CCS CONCEPTS

• **Computing methodologies → Computer graphics → Animation** • **Social and professional → User characteristics → Cultural characteristics.**

KEYWORDS

South African Animation; Decolonial Animation Studies; Creative Hacking; Adapted Animation Production Methods; Internet Distribution; Intellectual Property (IP) Ownership; Web 4.0 Technologies; Animation; Internet; Jonas Lekganyane; Kabelo Maaka.

1 Introduction

South African animation studies are outdated and too restrictive in their discourse and must be updated to reflect current local modes of animation practice. Furthermore, local animation practices have changed due to internet-based technologies and in response to local constraints. For example, animation studios are self-publishing online because of the lack of a local distribution supply chain [23]. Additionally, the discourse around South African animation studies is restrictive in what is considered "authentic" animation [6]. For example, international outsourcing to local animation studios is often considered to be "odourless" in terms of cultural representation [6]. Lu, quoted in Callus [2012], notes that racial and cultural ambiguity in the production design and is often attributed as a "commercial tactic to maintain non-Caucasian audiences while expanding in the Western media market". However, this perspective dismisses how outsourcing provides income, networks, and exposure to local South African animation studios. Conversely, African productions are often critiqued by Western scholars as not being "native" enough, as Enwezor notes (quoted in Callus [2012]).

These constrained viewpoints on "authentic" African animation are problematic in the current context where demand for video-based media [24] and African-centred film [9] is growing. Current South African animation practices – including adaptations to economic, political, skills, and infrastructure challenges – are not fully reflected in existing scholarship. Many studios are producing international content while creatively adapting their pipelines to the unique constraints to the local animation ecosystem [24].

In response to the constraints, South African animators employ "hacked" production methods to enable production. This study borrows the term "hack" from the term "creative hacking", meaning a "creative, resourceful approach that uses innovative, often unconventional strategies" [12]. These hacks are evidenced by the adaptations found in local production methods. For example, Rams Comics studios utilises a limited animation style to reduce production time while leveraging the internet to create and retain audiences to the studio [23]. Sidogi

[2021] also notes in his study that local comic and animation artists' "slapstick, edgy, and canny short stories" have gained popularity despite remaining under-researched.

International and South African animation partnerships have increased [24], but global interest does not necessarily translate to locally owned content. For example, *Kizazi Moto: Generation Fire* [2023] is an animation anthology distributed globally by Disney+ and is a collaborative project with South African animation studio Triggerfish [19]. All eight episodes were written and directed by creators from across the African continent, including Kenya, South Africa, Nigeria, and Zimbabwe. Each episode features visuals and stories that deeply incorporate folklore, characters, and production design from the culture of the country represented. However, Disney+ owns the intellectual property (IP) of these stories, and thus retains the revenue of the franchise. Ownership structures like this are critical to how South African animation should be discussed in academic discourse. As international demand for African content rises, it is essential to interrogate how hacked production methods democratise production and expand local critical frameworks.

This leads to the core line of discussion in this study:

1. How do South African animators adapt to their unique challenges to produce animation?

This paper employs literary analysis and case studies to frame a conceptual discussion on indigenous methods of animation production in South Africa. It begins with a short overview of South African animation history and then discusses current scholarship on South African animation. Two case studies are examined with particular attention paid to issues of intellectual property ownership, technology and their roles in shaping local production practices. Following that is a discussion on the study impact and limitations. This paper aims to establish a conceptual foundation for future empirical research into how hacked methods influence the metamorphic qualities of animation as a medium. By documenting indigenous animation practices, this study advocates for developing of local analytic frameworks that may operate outside of established institutional paradigms in animation studies.

2   Background: History and Structure of South African Animation

This section provides a brief overview on how the history of the South African animation industry and provides context on how it is organised in terms of income and commission. Historically, much of South African animation has focused on advertising and visual effects [22]. In the 1940s, studios produced animated advertisements and short films screened before cinema features, often emulating American and European studio models due to foreign trainers [22]. Many studios adapted their own methods to achieve effects comparable to Hollywood, as they could not afford modern equipment [22]. Television broadcasting through the South African Broadcasting Corporation (SABC) began in 1976, under the Apartheid regime, where programming served a "patriotic agenda" to influence the masses through commissioned documentaries, advertisements, and children's shows [22].

Post-Apartheid, government strategies in the 1990's aimed to grow the economy, promote employment, and support social cohesion through creative industries [14]. Funding opportunities were expanded to promote local film productions for South African audiences [14]. However, due to the high costs of animation, the local industry remained small, with most studios operating as outsourced service providers for international IP, and a continued dominance of advertising work [24]. The 2008/2009 Global Financial Crisis is cited as a major turning point for South African industry growth as the budget cuts to international productions allowed for local companies to lobby to produce animated commercials [24]. South Africa remains a popular outsourcing destination due to its time zone proximity to Europe and the UK, and favourable currency exchange rates [24][20]. Notable South African feature film animation productions distributed internationally include Triggerfish Animation's *Adventures in Zambezia* [2012][25] and *Khumba* [2013][25]. Studios like Mind's Eye Creative and Triggerfish have worked on international projects such as *F is for Family* [2017][2][16], and *Revolting Rhymes* [2019] [21], with *Revolting Rhymes* winning a BAFTA in 2017 and an International Emmy in 2018 [25].

Meanwhile, local broadcasters largely do not commission animations [24], although platforms like YouTube and Netflix are beginning to disrupt traditional distribution models. However, there are challenges to the local industry to get these opportunities, which are outlined below. These figures are sourced from the latest report from the South African Cultural Observatory, titled "SA's Animation Industry: Ecosystem Analysis" [2022]. The report is a multi-institutional collaboration to determine the state of the animation industry of South Africa:

Economic Challenges in South African Animation

- Securing funding or partnerships to actualise original animated content. Government funding is limited for the sector, accounting for only 28% of total funding for animation. 58% is provided by the private sector or self-funded by the animation studio.

- South Africa's tax exemption policies are only supportive to the investors involved in production, not to investment in film marketing and distribution,

which further hinders audiences being able to access the films.

Political and Policy Challenges

- The incentives created by The Department of Trade, Industry and Competition (DTIC) for the film industry were cited as a means of catalytic growth in industry. However, in 2018 those incentives became difficult to qualify for as they were exclusionary on racial and citizenship grounds. There is anecdotal evidence that BBBEE policies aimed to address racial transformation of the industry have impeded its growth and have further forced some market leaders to base some of their operations outside the country.

- The Copyright Amendment Bill (CAB) and the Performers' Protection Amendment Bill (PPAB) are two linked legislative bills in which the fair use provisions are too broad and thus would not protect domestic authors and would undermine the copyright market discouraging foreign investment in original content due to the current climate of legal uncertainty in copyright ownership.

Skills and Infrastructure Challenges

- There is a shortage of highly experienced animators in South Africa – and elsewhere in the world, e.g. Ireland [11] and the United Kingdom [13]. Additionally, is the general sentiment from local animation studios that the large influx of animation graduates are not prepared for integration into a studio pipeline. SETA grants that previously bridged education institutions and industry, currently have late approvals and limited eligibility. This results in a widening gap between graduate competence and the animation industry's needs.

- Animation studios' use of time and capital is impacted by large-scale scheduled power disruptions – known as Loadshedding in South Africa. Some studios opt to purchase equipment to allow them to continue to work during power cuts. Which hinders investment back into animation equipment, IP, and business development.

3 Hacked Production Methods

Despite all these challenges to the pipeline and distribution of animation, several animation studios, incubators and artists are leveraging the internet and opensource tools to release content [7] [24], using "hacks" to adapt their pipelines around these challenges. These hacks, and the differences in production approaches they produce, are of central to this study, as they reveal distinctive characteristics of South African animation processes and their impact on productions' stylistic qualities. In other words, economic strains, and an under-developed supply chain for South African animation (e.g., distributors, producers, film marketers) have created circumstances where South African animators adapt pipelines and build their own supply chain solutions – or hacks. Most of these hacks utilise the internet in modes not accounted for in recent South African animation studies.

Paula Callus's doctoral thesis "Animation in Sub-Saharan Africa: trajectories of ideas and practice" [2016], provides a valuable foundation on the impact of ICT technologies upon sub-Saharan animation, though it predates developments like web 4.0 and the mass proliferation of generative AI for public use. This study also draws on Callus's article "Reading animation through the eyes of anthropology: a case study of sub-Saharan African animation" [2012] as theoretical underpinning. She argues that applying interdisciplinary studies – like anthropology – to animation studies, can open more nuanced readings of global animation practices. She treats local animation as a rich site for cultural expression and ethnographic insight, especially within postcolonial identity formation. This reframing of animation theory offers tools for analysing hybrid, local, and resistant productions outside dominant Western models.

However, while Callus [2012] critiques Western-centric frameworks, the paper focuses on Western academic and festival gatekeeping, with limited attention to African audiences' own interpretative or reception studies. It relies on heavily on qualitative interpretation, without empirical audience studies, or interviews from a wider sample of animators. Callus [2016] addresses this partially with semi-structured interviews and sub-Saharan animation residencies in its methodology. However, her research, conducted between 2005 – 2012, does not address the technological shifts shaping current South African animation production, like mobile-first consumption or YouTube distribution.

Furthermore, while proposing anthropological approaches, Callus [2012] does not sufficiently address the colonial baggage of the anthropological approach – a historically Western discipline. This risks perpetuating "Othering" of African animation even within postcolonial frameworks. These two gaps – the technological and theoretical limitations – are what this study seeks to address, focusing specifically on the contemporary South African context.

In response, this study now turns to two specific case studies that illustrate how South African animators creatively adapt to local challenges. These examples of "hacked" production methods demonstrate how internet technologies and alternative pipelines are reshaping contemporary animation practices in South Africa.

Hack 1: Internet as a Tool for Self-Publishing and Distribution

Pfunzo Sidogi [2021] suggests that the internet "has created the ideal public and virtual museum for animated African comics to exist" both for its economic opportunities for African creatives, and "the transgressive power of the internet to unsettle unrepentant hegemonies". Opensource streaming sites like YouTube bypass traditional publication and distribution barriers. This democratising of publication empowers local animators by hacking a system that provides minimal support for South African animation distribution [23][24]. Online distribution is also suited to a context where, in 2023, 96.5% of South African internet users aged 16 to 64 streamed video content weekly [11], and YouTube had 25.80 million users [11].

There is also more creative freedom with self-publication, allowing creators to curate content for specific audiences, and inject it with cultural representation with South African appeal [23]. An example of this model is Rams Comics Studios. Owner Jonas Lekganyane gained success by posting his animated shorts, *The Adventures of Noko Mashaba* [2013 –] on YouTube [13]. The studio creates content for clients using their characters Noko and Malome Dons, but retains their IP by licensing the produced media for a stipulated period [23]. When licenses expire, the content, e.g. an animated advertisement, is uploaded onto the studio's social platforms for monetised views [23]. The motion comics style of the animation is quick to produce, emphasising dialogue and story over fluid animation. *The Adventures of Noko Mashaba* is also recognisably South African, using of vernacular and local signifiers to satirise South African popular culture [23]. The character Noko also has verified social media platforms to promote the studio, engage audiences, and participate in internet trends like the TikTok "Bottle Flip Challenge" shown in Figure 1.


Figure 1: Noko Mashaba challenges his uncle to the bottle flip challenge. TikTok: *You play stupid games, you win stupid prizes* **(2023), [18]. Used with Permission: Rams Comics Studios.**

Hack 2: Merchandise-Driven Preproduction Strategies

Many South African animation studios adopt business models focused on international collaboration to strengthen global distribution relationships and expands the reach of local representation [1]. However, ownership of IP remains a point of contention, especially when projects are funded externally. Retaining IP rights allows studios to control creative output and long-term revenue generated through licensing and merchandise, while maintaining agency over how local stories and identities are represented [23]. By controlling narratives, studios can challenge colonial stereotypes that historically depict African storytelling as primitive or uncivilised [23]. As [23] notes, "these animated narratives [offer] an outlet for the 'virtual African public' to consume their own myths, narratives, and iconography". Thus, IP ownership preserves both cultural agency and economic benefits within the local creative economy.

However, because an African context is external to the West, some narratives may be deemed "chaotic" and international intervention often seeks to "correct" stories for perceived marketability [10]. For example, Rorisang and the Gurlz, is an original animated series and Webtoon by South Africa's Cabblow Studios. The show follows a group of friends forming an Afropop band at their conservative Christian high school. Studio owner Kabelo Maaka explained challenges faced when pitching their show internationally, as the setting – a common South African experience – was misunderstood. On the authenticity of her experience as an African: "one of those realities is that we do have Christian schools, and we grew up in those contexts…that maybe people are not so aware of. When we would have discussions with potential distributors, that would be the thing they would just get stuck on, the faith bit. But that's most of the schools in South Africa" [8].

Resistance from funders led Cabblow to first publish the property as a Webtoon, testing audience reception to Rorisang's content and proving market interest [3][8]. To finance the TV pilot, Cabblow created and marketed branded merchandise, promoted through their social media channels [5]. Their main character Rorisang also maintains active social media profiles, posting playlist updates to Spotify and engaging fans, further expanding audience reach [3]. This strategy, marketing before full production, exemplifies a hack to production scheduling. It allows the studio to retain IP ownership and grow independently [8].
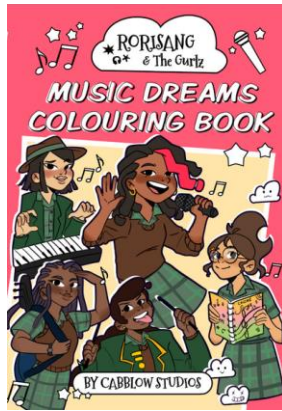
Figure 2: The *Rorisang and the Gurlz* colouring book merchandise sold by Cabblow Studios on cabblowstudios.com [4]. Used with Permission: Cabblow Studios

Both above examples illustrate the democratising power of technology, and the importance of hacks for creators' IP control. However, online publication presents disadvantages: the overwhelming and continuous generation of new content. It is "a contracting space whereby the visibility and access to this data diminishes" [7]. Algorithms reinforce dominant ideas of popular animation, limiting the recognition of diverse forms of animation and reinforcing Western standards [23].

4 Impact on South African Animation Studies

To account for the impact of hacks upon local animation studies, this study proposes two calls to action:

1. *Update existing research on South African animation, particularly regarding its relationship to the internet and streaming services post-2020.*

Callus's research into the qualities of sub-Saharan animation and its relationship to the internet remains seminal to this study. However, in the decade since its publication the nature of the internet and AI have changed the face of technology drastically. Animation study must be updated to reflect these changes. Although the internet offers opportunity, algorithmic searches can further marginalise already underrepresented voices in South African animation. Future research must address how evolving technologies impact both animation production and artistic practice.

2. *Decolonise the gaze in both South African and international analysis.*

As discussed, current South African animation studies constrain definitions of "authentic" South African animation. African productions are often critiqued by Western scholars as not being "native" enough, and from their own territories as not being "authentic" enough [6]. The restrictive views frustrate artists that must "navigate minefields of discourses on authenticity, exoticisation, myth and identity" [6]. Outsourced "odourless" animation improves international networks, and proves South African studios' high-quality animation capabilities and international relevance [6]. The hacked methods used by local animation studios also call for changes in how animation is taught and analysed in academic institutions [26]. Since the form has been "radically altered… [in] its context and in its changing roster of practitioners" [26]. Developing culturally specific critical questions in animation studies would foster local analytic frameworks that incorporate these hacked production methods.

5 Limitations and Areas for Future Research

The study is limited to a theoretical analysis based upon scholastic observations. This theoretical basis is intended for the study of South African animation production pipeline. Further research could apply updated and decolonialised lenses to specific local productions. Additionally, the study has remained limited to changing internet technologies but does not examine the impact of generative AI. Further research should investigate the impact of generative AI on animation production pipelines. Comparative studies across North, West, and East African regions are also needed. Further research includes the gathering of qualitative data from local animators on their production practices. Additionally, these interviews would provide insights into how adapted pipelines shape the final animation production.

6 Conclusion

The changing technologies of animation and the use of hacks democratises the animated medium. They enable South African animators to create and distribute their productions, while adapting to their unique circumstances and challenges. Social media and opensource streaming platforms enable animators to reach and maintain audiences with culturally specific South African stories and retain their IP. However, the expansive and algorithmic nature of the internet does hinder animation visibility, which further entrenches dominant modes of animation recognition from the West. The study proposes updating South African animation studies to incorporate local internet practices and decolonise rigid definitions of authenticity. These changes in the local discipline would, therefore, invite changes in how animation is taught and received in academic institutions.

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