

COLLABORATION IN DESIGNING FOR THE CREATIVE INDUSTRIES IN THE AGE OF INTERACTIVE MEDIA FOR PROMOTING AFRICAN CULTURES IN FILM AND ANIMATION

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ABSTRACT

In this digital age, it is said that the most creative innovations come from those who are able to connect arts and sciences and this characterizes this research. Collaborative interdisciplinary relationships using digital tools and media technologies is crucial in creative media production. However, collaboration has inherent challenges that include blurring boundaries of occupational roles and coordination which was properly addressed so as not to hamper content production. This action research used Adaptive Structuration Theory (AST) in firstly, analyzing the utilization and penetration of new interdisciplinary media technologies for production using African cultural motifs. The research then tried out various innovation possibilities before embarking on a design structure promoting in particular an aspect of Nigerian culture in animation and film. The design produced, confirms that good effectual virtual reality in films and animation is dependent on collaboration by multi-disciplines to enhance African cultures in African films and animation. Recommendations are proffered for more involvement in creative innovations for the creative industries.

Keywords: Collaboration, interdisciplinary approaches, African culture, animation and film.

1.0 INTRODUCTION

In today's world, various media collaborate into one multimedia form in the production of Film and animation. On the use of digital tools, Hobbs and Coiro (2016) advise that creative collaboration experiences generate personally meaningful, transformative learning by promoting personal reflection in a social context. It is important to provide cognitive and emotional support for the risk-taking cycles of experimentation and trial-and-error process that is essential for learning to use digital tools. By using inquiry learning practices through collaborative and creative media production, adult learners thrive by taking on distinct and enmeshed roles that inevitably involve creative tension that stimulates and energizes innovation. Woolrych, Hornbæk, Frøkjær and Cockton, (2011) and Johnson, Hyysalo, Mäkinen, Helminen, Savolainen, and Hakkarainen, (2014a) suggest one method to use in collaboration, which is to draw upon the metaphor of cooking. They claim that the proliferation of recipes, i.e., method descriptions, in current research comes at the expense of due attention to the needed ingredients, i.e., the low-level techniques and mundane acts that are needed to operationalise the recipes, that is, the methods. They contend that in real life, even if a recipe is followed, it is mainly meals that are prepared, which in essence means that methods are always adapted and deployed to feature as part of broader and concrete design work.

The goal of this paper, is to explore and show how collaborative efforts of different professionals are essential to germane for film and animation production. The research used primary and secondary sources in the study and analysed contexts which unraveled consequences of the design processes in interaction with the computer interface and digital environment particularly in understanding the roles within scenes in the context of the story line.

1.0 Background to the study on creativity and innovation for advancement in this Digital age

Baty (2021) the chief Knowledge officer of Times Higher Education reported that "in the 2022 edition of the Times Higher Education World University Rankings, two institutions renowned for science and technology topped the list for arts and humanities. Topping the list of the best universities in the world for a group of subjects including history, philosophy, performing arts, language, literature, theology and architecture, were two institutions world-renowned for science, technology and engineering. Stanford University, the institution at the heart of America's Silicon Valley whose students have spawned Google, Cisco, Hewlett Packard, Yahoo and Netflix, took first place in the world. It was closely followed by its east coast counterpart, the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT)."

The question is why? The answer is not far-fetched. Batty claims that "These institutions recognize that we need a new generation of critical thinkers to guide us through the Fourth Industrial Revolution." It is no wonder that at IMT, graduate students come to MIT for advanced degrees in disciplines including architecture, design, media, philosophy, linguistics, science writing, comparative media studies and multidisciplinary programs such as art, culture and technology (ACT), Media Arts and Sciences (MAS), and History, Anthropology, and science, technology and society (HASTS). It is said that the emphasis on the arts, design and humanities extends from education to research, to arts programming and reflects the Institute's view about the range of knowledge vital to advancing human and planetary well-being.

According to them the MIT mission is to serve humankind, and the arts and humanities are essential resources for knowledge and understanding of the human condition.

Of interest to this paper is MIT stance that while the technical, scientific and humanistic research domains have distinctive qualities and methodologies, they are also mutually informing modes of human knowledge. And many of today's most consequential issues will be solved *only* with collaborative research. Recognising the high stakes in this moment in human and planetary history, MIT's community has increasingly embraced problem-solving approaches that can integrate sci/tech advances with humanities, arts, design and social science research, analysis and insight.

1.1 Research Methodology

It is with this backdrop by Stanford University and MIT that this research was initiated. From the two institutions, it was observed that the range of knowledge vital to advancing human and planetary well-being as well as the insights of science and engineering as courses, are crucial to addressing many of the world's most urgent problems. In particular, the explanation given in their mission statements that these fields operate within human societies, and can serve the world best when informed by the cultural, political, spatial and economic complexities of human existence, beliefs and ways of inhabiting the earth propelled this action research titled "*Reliving the life of Sango*".

This is an action research based on primary and secondary data with a descriptive report of the project. The team on the project, comprised a creative artist, a multi-media artist, and an engineer. Experiences from the team work prompted the need to report findings and enlighten the public on how to achieve creativity through collaboration of professionals from varied disciplines.

The study used Adaptive Structuration Theory (AST) in firstly, analyzing the utilization and penetration of interdisciplinary media technologies for production using African cultural motifs.

1.2 Marriage of science and arts for technological innovations

Today's world recognizes and appreciate technological innovations and this is affecting the different spheres of productions both in the arts and sciences. This millennium is not a preserve of the appreciation of scientific innovations. In visual arts for example, the achievements of the past in painting where scientific innovations. This was explained by Picasso who had this to say of painting:

"I hope to show that ours is a regularly taught profession; that it is scientific as well as poetic...and to show by tracing the connecting links in the history of landscape painting that no great painter was ever self-taught... Painting is a science and should be pursued as an enquiry into the laws of nature. Why, then, may not landscape be considered as a branch of natural philosophy, of which pictures are but experiments?" (Ifeta,2017)

In the age before the advent of photography, the painters and sculptors where engrossed with using scientific principles for innovations such as the art of pointillism. Later artists, such as Alexander Calder the American sculptor produced mobiles; kinetic sculptures powered by motors or air currents. By 1996, Soukari Douglas a British Nigerian sculptor was recorded by Keen (1996) to have produced 'Echoes of the Kalabari' exhibited at the Smithsonian Institute. The assemblage was a composition of dancers and musicians programmed to play music and dance as the audience stepped inside the room.

Modern films explore engineering art which is absent in films from countries in Africa. Wikipedia

reports that 'Europeans pioneered the motion picture industry with several innovative engineers and artists have been making an impact especially at the end of the 19th century. Louis Le Prince became famous for his 1888 Round Garden Scene, the first known celluloid film recorded.' Ever since, Engineers and artists have turned out numerous films. Such films include 'Dr Who, 'A trip to the Moon' 'Star' Trek', 'Star Wars' etc.

1.3 Africa's disposition to digital Technology

Hayward (2006) reports that "African cinema dates back to the early 20th century, when film reels were the primary cinematic technology in use. During the colonial era, African life was shown only by the work of white, colonial, Western filmmakers, who depicted Africans in a negative fashion, as exotic "others". As there are more than 50 countries with audiovisual traditions, there is no one single 'African cinema.'" Olatunji and Osunkoya (2019, p.448) claim that drama was the only means of entertainment among the elites in most cities in Nigeria apart from film medium. The most popular group called *Alariyo Theatre* championed the development of dramatic productions in towns and cities. They became popular before 1960 when television took sway in the field of entertainment. This claim is buttressed by many scholars such as Adedeji (1971), Clark (1978) and Ogundeji (1988) who claim that Hubert Ogunde pioneered film production in Nigeria.

Mbembe (2015) adds that Africa was digital before the digital and when you study the cultural history of the continent carefully, a number of things come to the fore in terms of how African societies have constituted themselves and how they operated. Mbembe said further that the African Continent is a fertile ground for the new digital technologies, because the philosophy of those technologies is more or less exactly the same as ancient African philosophies. This archive of permanent transformation, mutation, conversion and circulation is an essential dimension of what we can call African culture. Bolat (2019), enlightens that Africa, like the rest of the world, has participated in the global new media digital revolution. However, unlike Western countries, Africa has taken a very indigenous approach, mixed with integration and conflicts, to the adoption of information and communication technologies. This approach is often associated with authentic culture and creativity. This is certainly the case for modern Nigeria, where internet connectivity, reliance on mobile technology, and use of social media networks have revolutionised the media landscape, specifically impacting on businesses and consumer experiences.

Bisschoff (2017) enlightens that the digital revolution has had a major impact also on the African creative industries, not only in terms of production, but importantly, also, on the exhibition and dissemination of art. Shake (2004) portends that songs, music dance etc., are employed by African film makers as authentic indices of African cultural practices and also as masks revealing aspects of contemporary African politics and social practices. Digital technology has, for instance, been the driving force behind the development of Africa's first economically self-sustainable popular film industries –through the video-film phenomenon spearheaded by Ghana and Nigeria's Nollywood. This model of popular low-budget filmmaking, enabled by affordable digital cameras and desktop editing software, has now been replicated all over the continent. Whereas Nollywood films were initially primarily distributed on DVD and VCD (video compact disc), improved broadband and internet streaming technology means that these films can now be downloaded or watched on multiple VOD (video-on-demand) platforms

online, in Africa and internationally. This is similarly true of many other audio-visual, graphic and literary African art forms and creative output, with digital technology thus having played a crucial role in the proliferation of content creation and providing wider access to African art.

2.1 UNDERSTANDING THE CONCEPT DIGITAL ART

Hope and Ryan (2014, p.3) define digital art as artistic work or practice that uses digital technologies as an essential part of the creative and/or presentation, dissemination and exhibition process. According to them, it is impossible to define as a single phenomenon, but instead includes changing and fluid sets of artistic techniques, technologies and concepts. Graham (2007, p. 93) simply defines digital art as ‘art made with, and for, digital media including the internet, digital imaging, or computer-controlled installations’.

Bisschoff (2017) explains that we know that the impact of digital technology has transformed more traditional creative practices such as painting, drawing, sculpture, photography and music, while new forms, such as net art, digital installation art and virtual reality have become recognized and accepted artistic practices. While the techniques of digital art are used extensively by mainstream media in advertising and by filmmakers to produce visual effects, digital art is also increasingly used in less mainstream and commercially orientated ways, to produce new media art less concerned with economic factors and more with experimentation and creative expression. Bisschoff further explains that in Africa, the distinction between gallery-sanctioned ‘high’ art and ‘lower’ forms of popular art, folk art and crafts has always been less clear cut, often artificially enforced by western art markets and patrons. Thus, the shift to digitally produced art in Africa is not so much a transformation of more established and conventional art forms than completely new and innovative ways of cultural and creative expression. We have to retain an understanding of the polycentrism of digital arts, that the dynamics between “the global and the local, the centre and the periphery, the north and the south, are as vital to consider as the broad-scale impacts of globalisation and the traditional geographical centres of economic and cultural power”.

Bisschoff made reference to the website African Digital Art (africandigitalart.com) that has recognized the increasing importance of digital technologies in artistic practice and serves as a virtual space to collate, document and explore the proliferation of new media art on and from the continent. Founded by Kenyan digital artist Jepchumba, this website Bisschoff claims has indeed been the inspiration behind the idea of a special issue. It has become a platform for innovation and inspiration, highlighting new talent as well as successful designers and artists, with ‘Pushing Digital Boundaries’ as its tagline.

Chavez (n.d), in her write up “*How artists can bridge the digital divide and reimagine humanity*” reflected on the inflatable pavilion designed by Espacio La Nube that transformed into a learning space for the integrated STEM arts youth program at the 2018 PASEO Festival where 700 students from across Taos County, were given the opportunity to look under the hood and hear from the artists how the magic is created through the merging of art, science, and technology. This is explained by Bisschoff in the assertion that Digital Technologies have further broken down the boundaries between artist and audience, and often promote a form of interactivity and gave some of the innovative examples of digital arts to include African digital collage, a growing art form that utilizes technology to produce a range

of artworks that incorporate digital video, animation, photography, animated gifs and digital photo manipulation. Looking to the past – often-misrepresented, subjugated and suppressed through histories of slavery and colonization – African digital collagists use ethnographic images of Africa to recreate and reinterpret visual representations from the pre- and postcolonial eras. Creating alternative narratives of the past, websites such as the Nigerian Nostalgia Project (nigerianostalgia.tumblr.com) have become a popular online resource for collagists to find historical materials including photographs, videos, sound clips and graphic art.

3.1 THE CREATIVE PROCESS OF THE PROJECT AND THE NEED FOR COLLABORATION

A number of computer engines are relevant for digital creativity. These include Unity, Unreal, Blender, Photoshop among others. These are used by the different members of the team. The need for collaboration in film making is emphasized by Olatunji and Osunkoya (2019, p.451) who asserted that film making is a contributory venture. It involves different aspects of professions in which any film production hangs. Filmmaking requires the services of costumes designer, make- up artists, scenographer, technicians photographers, graphic artists, stage design, editor, director and others. In producing animation, collaboration also involves professionals such as character artists to draw, sculpt and model the characters, sound engineers and artists, and software engineers for programming motion.

The need to develop literacy skills through collaboration is observed by Chaves in the movement STEAM (science technology, engineering, art and mathematics) that stresses the achievement of an inclusive and equitable digital society. Chaves advises that it is crucial not only to bridge “first level” digital divide of access to and affordability of information and communication technologies (ICT) but also to address the “second level” digital divide, called “production gap”. Filling this gap would give people around the world the necessary knowledge and skills to move collectively from being consumers of digital content to producers of it.

Before embarking on the project, the team got a story line with a pre-determined genre. Geduld and Gottesman as quoted by Sobchack (1975) define genre as “a category, kind, or form of film distinguished by subject matter, theme, or techniques.” Olatunji (2019, p.501) further enlightens that genre is a French word that simply means kind or type. Borwell and Thomson (2004, p. 108) claim that Genre can be identified with the western film culture, the musical film, the action picture, the horror movies, the comedy, the romance film because film making at a particular time is tailored towards any of this particular trends in vogue to make a mark. Truby (2008) advises that film makers have to know how to transcend the forms (genre) so you can give the audience a sense of originality and surprise.

In this project a cultural theme was chosen which is “*Reliving the life of Sango*”. It became necessary to determine the stylistic criteria and type of Genre to be produced from the different types of films including Action, Comedy, Drama, Fantasy, Horror, Mystery, Romance and Thriller. The team agreed that it will be ‘action’ oriented. Heyward (2006) claims that Action films have been popular with cinema audiences since the very beginning. It is also one of our very best examples of the evolution of our

cinematic hero's journey versus villain narratives which you'll find across cinemas and genres.

3.2 Understanding the possibilities of the Blender Engine

The project team agreed to use Blender for the project. Blender is an open-source 3D computer graphics software toolset. Microsoft (2018) enlightens that it is used for creating animated films, visual effects, art, 3D printed models, motion graphics, interactive 3D applications, virtual reality and computer games. Blender is particularly chosen for the project because it is free, which means that assets to be used are free and accessible. In addition, it is user friendly. It supports the entire 3D areas of modelling, sculpting, rigging, 3D and 2D animation, compositing, rendering, motion tracking and video editing.

One other good quality of Blender is that it comes with a built-in video sequence editor that allows us to operate basic actions such as video cuts and splicing and also carry out complex tasks that include video masking or color grading. The video editor of Blender includes audio mixing, syncing, scrubbing and waveform visualization; live preview, luma, waveform, chroma vector scope and histogram displays; up to 32 slots for adding video, images, audio, scenes, masks and effects; speed control, adjustment layers, transitions, keyframes, filters etc.

3.3 Execution of the Project

3.3.1 Pre- production stage

Before executing the project, there were pre- production steps, planning, scripting and story boarding. Composition for animation, follows the same preparation as in film. The screen play had to be formatted. The storyboard was visualized. This includes the:

- Slug line: we had to determine if a scene is in an interior or outside. Next is the location and when the scene is taking place i.e. in the daytime or night-time or what we call dawn or dusk. The script lines were checked to see if the flow of line between 2 scenes are continuous or interrupted and if there is passage of time; till later in the day

- Action: Action lines were scrutinized to check where the tone, pace, visual and visceral experiences of the screenplay were established. Action is description of what is happening on the screen which is always written in the present tense e.g '*Sango looks up and spits fire.*' They are used to create atmosphere, through locations or natural elements to arouse feeling.
- Character name: This is emblematic and the first letter of the character name is different from the characters in the rest of the screenplay. It is centered and all caps. If the character is speaking from off screen but is still part of the scene it is written as - Sango (OS) but if the character is not part of the scene but doing a voice over -Sango (VO)
- Dialogue: This is the way to convey or express a characters point of view. Dialogue conveys the mood or tone. The text is centred on the page and keeping a left side alignment. The details of what the character is doing while speaking are added using parentheticals.
- Parentheticals: These are words referred to as "wrylys" written under a character's name in dialogue. They are adjectives used to describe how someone says a line or could be verbs that give the character some kind of action to do while they say their line.

These were scrutinized in the pre- production stage.

3.4 Lighting of the screenplay

Lighting is fundamental in the screenplay and was properly planned out because it defines and supports the genre of the film/ animation, it determines the visual mood, atmosphere and sense of meaning for the onlookers. The lighting is setup as guide for the eye to a specific character, or part of the scene. In addition, lighting reflects the psychology of the characters, therefore, the amount, size, colour and harshness of light surrounding a character was to be adjusted to match their emotions.

3.5 The Production process

3.5.1 Building the characters

The characters were sketched out and built using base mesh. A base mesh is simply a 3d model in virtual three-dimensional space used as starting point for sculpting. It has a well-built topology wireframe that is connected by a number of faces or polygons that allows for stretching and other transformations without any warping. After building the base mesh, it was rigged by just the press of a single button “create armature.” This is the beauty of Blender. The characters built for the project were further detailed using sculpture tools in the environment shown to the left of the viewport in Fig. 1.

3.5.2 Landscape

Blender has built-in add-ons for building landscape and here noise settings and display settings

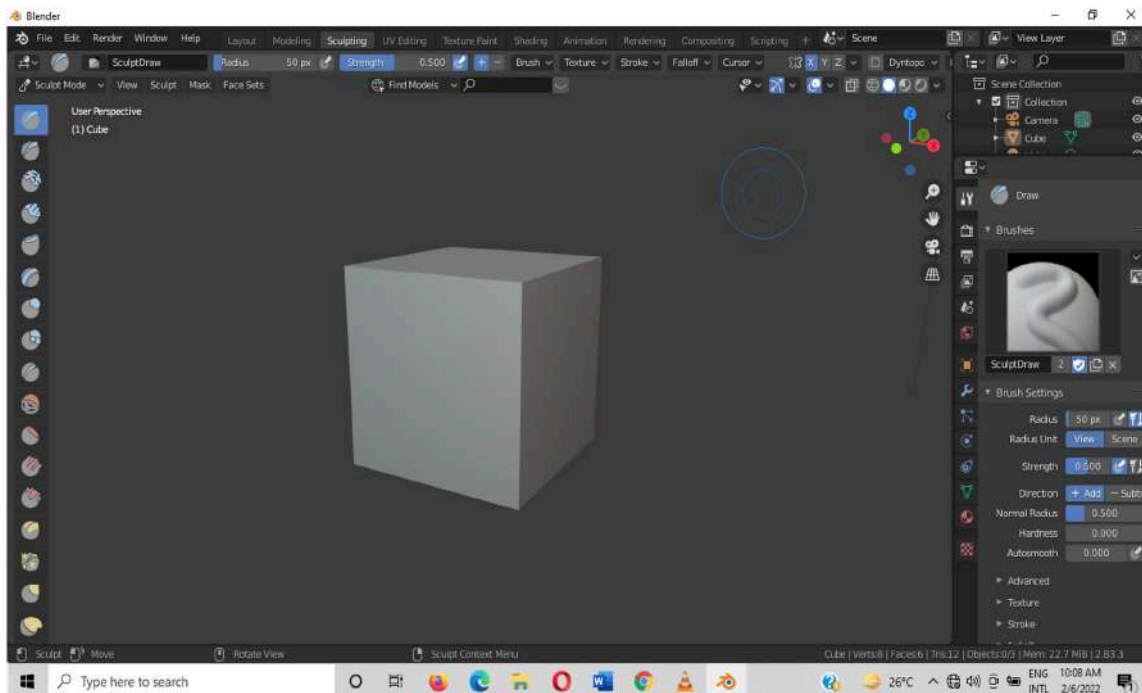


Fig.1 Sculpture tools to the left of the viewport.

were made. Blender also has tabs that make building landscape easy. These include UV editing, texture painting, shading, and compositing. There are also many free addons used for creating landscape tried out e.g. 3D terrain with google map. The good thing about using Blender, is that it gives access to free assets from apps such as Blenderkit.

3.5.3 Animation

Animation was done with ease using Blender. The environment is as in Fig 2. All the characters were built, and sculpted and shaped in other areas with UV editing, Texture painting, Shading, and

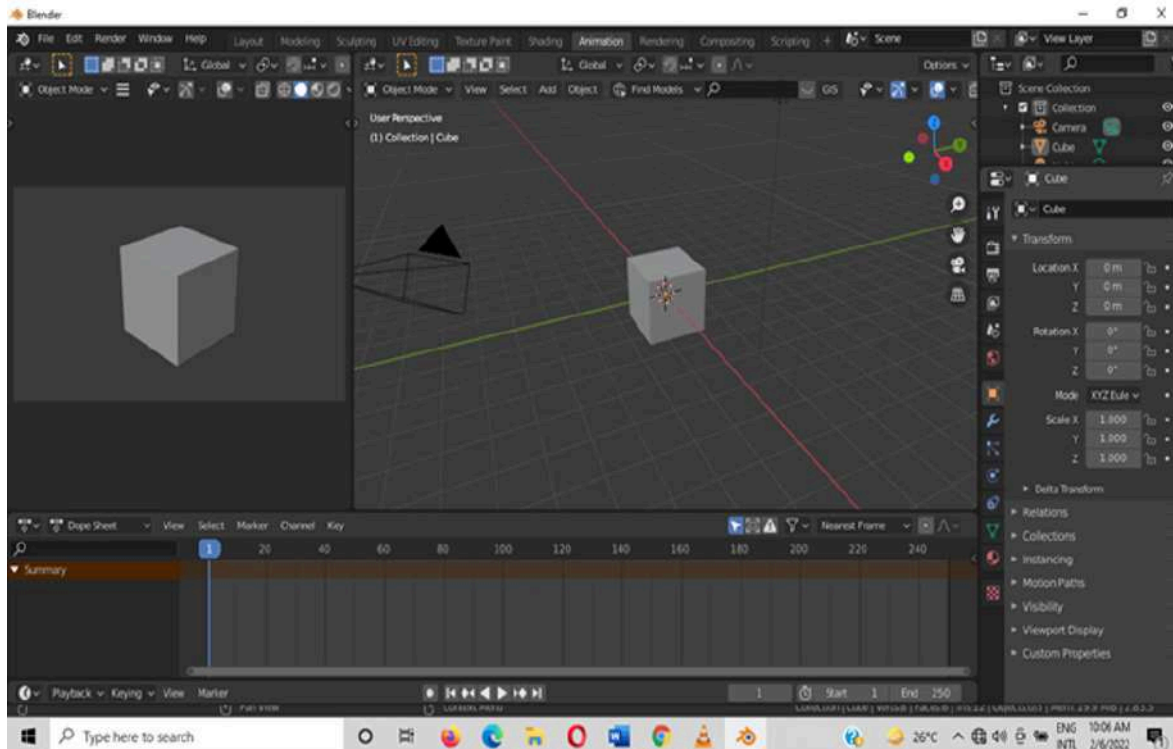


Fig 2. Animation viewport , Editor and Timeline.

compositing before transferring to the environment in Fig 2. The main challenges here was in timing. However, the skill of scripting scenes and operating the scene with good timing and frames in the timeline gave smooth and natural flow in movement.

3.5.4 Importing and Exporting Music /Sound

Blender has an extremely customized interface for animation. The choice for relevant music was done by going to Melody loops. Here surfing was done for African music. Melody loops has an interesting collection comprising percussion, exotic animated, energetic, hypnotic, playful, mamba, easy going, tense, tropical, colourful energy, voice New age, Nature flute, Tribal solo. Atmospheric , cinematic sacred etc. It is from these blend of music that the different scenes were backed to create the right moods and effect. Another site of relevance to the project is Royalty free African Music with interesting background tunes.

In Blender, panels were created and each panel was changed to desirable editor for relevant work e.g video sequencer which was used to bring in sound and later audio scrubbing was done. Playback here was used to set Sync or changed to AVSync for smooth animation and video. Also, in this customized interface, sound was adjusted; increasing or decreasing to increase or reduce pitch and to achieve value. Fading was also done to the sound where required. To export sound, the Printer icon was selected and under encoding, Webm/vpg was typed in front of video codec. By going to Audio Codec and scrolling to Vorbis, the folder was exported to a file. Next, Render animation was clicked and the web/in file accessed to play the sound effect. Post- editing was later done for perfection.

4.1 SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION

Producing films and animation is no easy task, however, in collaborating sculpture with a music technologist and an engineer, the work was easier and was fun to produce an animation. By using Blender with free inbuilt addons and free assets the project was actualized. In conclusion, although producing an animation or film is cumbersome however, collaboration with different professionals made the task easier.

Lessons from the project shows that African film industry will become more interesting when serious efforts are made to imbibe digital exploits to increase the range of films. Africans must collaborate particularly with engineers that are vast in programming languages and artists venturing into coding to create effects so that Africans will not only be producing drama and fantasy but also Hybrid Genre scenes e.g. thriller, Horror and Sci-fi (Scientific-fiction) film genres. These will be possible through collaboration of engineers and music technologists with artists that have experiences in coding programmes.

4.2 Recommendation

The experience gained from working on the project “Reliving the life of Sango” shows that collaboration by relevant professionals is recommended for the production of films and animation. African nations are hereby encouraged to venture into hybrid themes with modern colouration in science travel, Sci-fi films and thriller using African culture story lines and mythologies through collaboration by varied professionals in the digital media.

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<https://events.saip.org.za> > getFile.py > access

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