

## Jonathan Gladden

Critical Review

Art 894x12 History of Computer Graphics

Instructor: Wayne Carlson

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A critical review of "Planet Paranoid", made by Wolfgang Morell at the Fachhochschule Wiesbaden in 1998.

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**Planet Paranoid**

### **Welcome to Planet Paranoid:**

SIGGRAPH Video Review: Siggraph 99 Animation Theater Program Part1, Humor.

"Planet Paranoid", made by Wolfgang Morell at the Fachhochschule Wiesbaden in 1998.

For my Critical Review I choose "Planet Paranoid" by Wolfgang Morell which is a humorous animation about the possible discovery of the Voyager Spacecraft by Alien beings. "Planet Paranoid" is also an allegory of the misunderstandings that can occur across cultures. It is a parable about cross-cultural communications, and what can happen we people make rushed judgements about the meaning of a message, in this case a visual message.

I will review each part of the animation looking at the principles of animation and cinematography used, the sound and music, and the plot and storyline. Some principles of animation to look for in a critical review are: timing, anticipation, staging, exaggeration, appeal, personality, and secondary action. Camera angles and shots are also important to look for. How does the camera view advance the story, or highlight a character or actions taking place? What transitions are used between cuts, are they fades, dissolves, straight cuts or stylized transitions?

Many of the significant advancements from the history of computer graphics such as texture mapping, lighting, atmospheric effects, and reflections can be seen used in this animation. These advancements were incorporated into the SoftImage application that Wolfgang used to create this film.

### **The Writing of the Video Disc:**

The scene where the Video Disc is written uses the concept of staging to set up the idea of the green grapes which will be important later in the film. The green monochrome computer display denotes the time frame as around the 1970s, and slight flicker on the green grapes frame hints at its future importance to the plot. Some exaggeration takes place, because they did not have videodiscs in 1977, the round disc on the Voyager spacecraft was a record with the sounds of earth. Also it is not possible to write a video disc with a record/LP style needle. The cartoon-style video disc writer was not meant to be realistic, it is just included in the animation to show that the disc was written by NASA with images of earth, including the one with the green grapes.

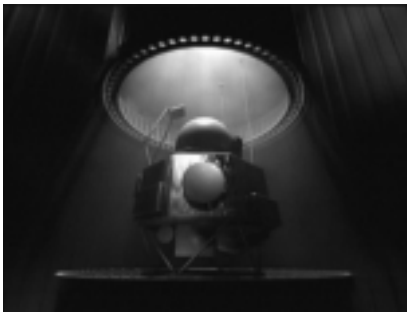
Good use of dramatic lighting is used when the disc is placed inside the spacecraft. The flip of the disc from the writer turns into a transition to the Voyager spacecraft-probe spotlighted inside the rocket.

### **The Voyager Rocket Launch**

Advances the story by showing how the disc got to the alien planet. Some artistic license is taken in order to speed the story along, the spacecraft's travel time is time compressed, no sense of how many long years the journey would have really taken. This is another example of exaggeration, in this case, time.

The sequence of the spacecraft hurrying toward the planet is a nice use of a first-person subjective camera view. Later the scene cuts to an objective view of the probe crash landing on an alien planet.

When the spacecraft crash lands on the surface of a distant planet, the disc



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falls off and begins to bake in the sun. Here we see the inclusion of significant advancements in the history of computer graphics such as the use of atmospheric effects and reflections. The clouds and dust move by and there is a sense of heat from the atmospheric distortions seen in the sun. This effects stages the next scene when the disc is discovered by an alien being. The viewer now knows that the disc is hot, so they anticipate they alien burring his finger on it, and are not surprised by that. Other atmospheric effects are not as well done as the baking in the sun sequence. The atmospheric effect of smoke from the initial rocket launch is a little too bright, and it becomes hard to distinguish smoke from rocket flames.

The crash landing scene also shows laws of rigid dynamics in computer graphics. Because the ground is rigid the spacecraft behaves in a predictable way during it's collision. The animator was sure to show the damage affects of the crash to enhance it's realism and give dramatic effect.

### **The Discovery of the Disc by an Alien**



The alien that discovers the disc is not shown right away to give the viewer a scene of anticipation ( what will the alien look like ?).The reflection in the disc cover slowly reveals the aliens appearance to the viewer. The movements of his eyes and his gesturing reveal his emotions of curiosity.This technique demonstrates the principle of giving a character appeal and personality in an animation. The other being that he initially shows the disc to, also communicates his curiosity through gestures and eye expressions.

### **Presentation of the Video Disc to the Alien Population**



The sound of a crowd talking is used to help the viewer anticipate the group of aliens interested in the disc that has gathered to see what's on it.The crowd is curious at first, and displays a sense of wonderment and fascination towards the video disc and it's imagery. This is mostly shown through their facial expression (eyes) and gesturing. A parent alien gestures towards it's offspring when it recognizes the image of a human baby in one of the slides. The aliens don't appear to understand the slides of formulas and equations even though NASA thought that mathematics would be a universal language. Maybe it's that the principles of mathematics are universal, but the way that they are encoded into a written symbols is not. Later the reaction of the crowd turns to shock and panic when they misinterpret the image of a man eating green grapes. They have no context to understand what a grape is, so the crowd interprets the green objects to be something they know, their own appearance. This leads to the misjudgment that the man is eating little green aliens, which causes reactions of confusion, shock, panic, fear, and paranoia in the crowd.

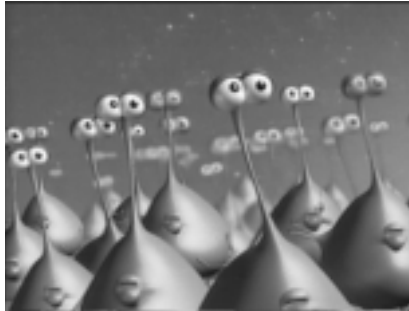


The alien crowd demonstrates the technique of communication through gesturing. The animator used gesturing techniques in the choreography of the crowd to communicate their reactions to the images from earth on the screen. The images from earth on the videoscreen raise issues of the semantics or meaning of graphic images and symbols, and their difference cultural interpretations. The speech and language of the aliens is not comprehensible, but the tone, pitch, and inflection of the voices hints at their reactions to the on-screen imagery.

Fast camera zooms and quick cuts from the green grapes to reaction shots of the crowd, also show the group's feelings of shock and panic.This conveys how the camera shot can be used to communicate an message. The camera focuses on those characters who are relaying the message and they are never upstaged by secondary action, a difficult task when the primary means of communication is gesturing and expression.

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**The Destruction of Planet Earth**



The paranoid and fearful reaction of the crowd motivates the alien presenting the disc to take action. He has made the judgement that the earth is bad and must be destroyed base on the misinterpretation of the NASA imagery. This animation becomes an allegory of the misunderstandings that can occur across cultures. It is a lesson about cross-cultural communications, and what can happen we people make rushed judgements about the meaning of a message, in this case a visual message. The alien presenting the disc does not take time to fully evaluate the situation, get all the facts, and not make rushed judgements about the images and customs of another culture. His hurried reaction based on fear and paranoia causes the destruction of human society.



The stylized laser cannon that the alien uses to destroy the earth, alludes to classic Warner Brothers cartoons such as Marvin the Martian and his P-38 Space Modulator. This inclusion pays homage to the legacy of tradition animation. The principle of anticipation is seen again, as the pointing of the cannon at the earth anticipates it's firing.

This animation also shows that the intended message of symbols and images will not always be understood by another culture. It is arrogant to assume that all other cultures will understand the visual messages of your own. It is ironic that the images that NASA had intended to be peaceful and friendly, would be misinterpreted as hostile, and have such a devastating effect. "Planet Paranoid" has a humorous plot yet an important underling message.



After the earth is destroyed the gesturing and expressions of the aliens shows a sense of relief and resolution of the situation. They seem to convey the idea that they have done the right thing.

**Behind the Scenes at Fachhochschule Wiesbaden: The Making of Planet Paranoid:**

The photos of earth from the Voyager missions provided by the NASA Jet Propulsion Laboratory were the inspiration for this animation. I was fortunate enough to get to see Wolfgang working on this film when during my exchange program visit to the Fachhochschule Wiesbaden department of communication design. He was hopeful that it would get into SIGGRAPH 99, and I was really glad when it did get in the Animation Theater program.



The Fachhochschule is a technical school in Wiesbaden known for it's visual communication and interior design programs. Aspects of communication design involve video, cinematography, motion graphics, and computer animation. I took a multimedia course in the multimedia and computer visualization program organized by Prof. Schubert who was the advisor of Wolfgang Morell. My course was primarily a 2-D multimedia design course using Macromedia Director, but it was held in the same computer lab where students were working on 3-D computer animations and visualizations. Wolfgang used a Silicon Graphics O2, running SoftImage to produce "Planet Paranoid". He asked for my advice about the expressions of the aliens, and if they were communicating their emotions clearly. Other students helped him compose the music and sound. The final animation was edited and composited in After Effects. Wolfgang's project was also featured in a student video promoting the Fachhochschule Wiesbaden's design department.