Creation of the "Japanese Animated Film Classics" Database

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1. Introduction

One of the oldest existing Japanese stop-motion animated movies is *The Dull Sword* (Photo 1), first screened in 1917. The year of the symposium (2017) marked 100 years since the first animated movie was released in Japan. In commemoration of the 100th anniversary of Japanese animation, the "National Research Project for the Sustainability of Born-Digital Cinema" (BDC Project) of the National Film Center of the National Museum of Modern Art, Tokyo (NFC)[1] and Akihiko Takano and his team's laboratory at the National Institute of Informatics (NII) jointly developed the website Japanese Animated Film Classics,[2] which was launched to the public at 2:22 PM on February 22, 2017.[3]

Having received the 2016 "Cultural Arts Promotion Grant (Projects to Assist in the Promotion of Priority Areas in Art and History Museums)" from the Agency for Cultural Affairs, the BDC Project conducts practical research on motion picture digitization and

Photo 1 Screen shot of *The Dull Sword* (Junichi Kouchi, 1917)
https://animation.filmarchives.jp/en/works/playen/
100183 (accessed July 24, 2019)

preservation technology as well as research for exploring new methods of releasing collections to the public. Akihiko Takano and his team's laboratory conducts research on technology to publish information on cultural property collections and material archives online and has developed services to provide information on cultural properties such as Cultural Heritage Online,[4] which is operated jointly with the Agency for Cultural Affairs, IMAGINE for the National Museum of Art,[5] and the Keizo Shibusawa Archives.[6] These organizations had the idea that they could contribute their unique expertise, experience, and research results to create an unprecedented website.

To accomplish this, the NFC and NII launched a joint study titled "Study on Digitally Streaming Historical Motion Picture Materials" to develop a website for the pre-World War II (WWII) animated movies in the NFC's film archives. In the following paragraphs, I will discuss the requirements for developing a website to convey the results of the motion picture film study from the standpoint of one who was mainly involved in planning and directing production of the website. Furthermore, I will provide an overview of the completed Japanese Animated Film Classics website.

2. Website Requirements

The NFC is the center for film research in Japan. It engages in a variety of activities to deepen understanding of movie culture and pass it on to future generations in ways such as collecting and preserving motion picture film, conducting research, holding exhibitions, and screening movies. The center's BDC Project conducts research on digitizing the motion picture films in its collection and building and managing digital archives. The project's efforts have resulted in building digital archives that contain over 100 animated movies created in Japan before WWII.

In developing the website with a view toward preserving Japanese animated movies and conveying our research results, we aimed to present visual digital archives—that is, our research results to date—so that their value could be properly communicated. To accomplish this, we formulated the following four development requirements:

(1) Stream the digitized animated movies
(2) Publish research results on the films and movies in the NFC's collection as well as those productions' creators
(3) Convey the appeal of early Japanese animated movies
(4) Reach worldwide users with no previous knowledge of Japanese animation

The first requirement was to make the digitized movies—the most important outcome of the digital archives study—broadly available to the general public online. If we take the time and effort to digitize and restore the movies but no one can see them, we cannot convey their value. Streaming the movies online holds promise to be an effective way to do this.

However, simply streaming the movies online could end up merely increasing their use for entertainment purposes, and this would not sufficiently convey the value of the

research. For this reason, we made the second requirement to also publish the results of our research on the movies. Specifically, this refers to information about the films in the NFC's collection such as film format; screening dates; techniques that can be derived from scripts, animation cels, and other materials; and information on the people involved in creating the movie such as directors and staffs. The NFC conducts research on motion picture films and related materials using an empirical, multi-faceted approach. Publishing the results of many years of research along with the movies would be a more effective way to convey the research results.

The third requirement concerns the Japanese animated movies that form the main content of the website. The animation artists who were active at the time are not well known today, and neither are their works. For that reason, if we were to present the movies in a way that would do nothing more than give the impression that they are "old movies," people may not even try to view them. To present the movies effectively, we needed to incorporate a number of creative measures in the planning, structure, and design of the website. More specifically, these include positioning the website's global navigation menu so it stands out, giving the animator profile pages an easy-to-understand layout, making the characters that appear in the movies prominent, and offering special contents.

The final requirement is about the website's users. Assuming that the visitors would have little knowledge of early animated film, we decided to build a website with a user-friendly interface and easy-to-understand contents. Moreover, considering that interest in Japanese animation has been extremely high in other countries in recent years, we added the requirement that the website must be in both English and Japanese.

3. Selection of the Contents and Structure of the Website

With these requirements in mind, we began to discuss which movies we would stream on the website. We first decided that the website would cover early animated movies made before WWII and provide basic information such as screening dates and film formats. We originally intended to place 100 titles on the website in commemoration of the 100th anniversary, but due to copyright issues, we ended up with 64. In regard to publication of the research results, in addition to the above-mentioned basic information, we decided to provide as much detailed information on the creators of the movies as possible, including photos and chronologies.

We had decided to create a searchable database of the movies that would display a list of search results but thought that general users would not view the movies if that was the only way to find them. Therefore, in addition to the "List of Works" page, we decided to create a "Categories" page, which is further divided into four easy-to-understand pages: Genre, Type of Motion, Techniques, and Characters. To create these pages, new data editing work such as extracting and processing still images from the movies had to be carried out in addition to the existing digital archives. This difficult work was completed mainly by the NFC team members.

As another measure to present the contents in an attractive way, we decided to

create a special page featuring materials related to animation artist Noburo Ofuji. Noburo Ofuji was an animation artist who garnered high acclaim for his works and unique production techniques, and the NFC has a considerable amount of materials related to his animation production. During the course of our research, the NFC held a special exhibition titled "Noburo Ofuji: Pioneer of Japanese Animation" in 2010. Leveraging the results of the exhibition, we decided to digitize and publish the exhibited materials on the website.

4. Japanese Animated Film Classics Website

Designed based on the above-mentioned contents and structure, the Japanese version of the website was completed and finally made accessible to the public in February 2017. This was followed by the launch of the English version on May 10. Photo 2 shows the main page as of November 2017. The website is available in Japanese and English, and the languages can be switched on almost every page. In addition, four entry points have been placed on the main page to make it easy for general users to navigate. The following paragraphs provide a detailed description of each entry point.

Photo 2   Main page of the Japanese Animated Film Classics website
https://animation.filmarchives.jp/en/ (accessed July 24, 2019)

4.1 List of Works

The website streams 64 animated movies that were screened in Japan from 1917 to 1944. All are digital versions of movies from the NFC's collection that can be released to the public. The "List of Works" entry point enables visitors to search a list of all the movies on the website (Photo 3). The list can be sorted based on the production date or narrowed down to display only silent movies. The page also includes a full-text search function that searches all textual information, including descriptions, enabling visitors to search for movies by keyword. Search results display the work's title, production year, director, and a brief 30-word description beside a thumbnail of a scene from the movie.

Clicking on the thumbnail or title will direct the visitor to the details page of the relevant movie (Photo 4). This page provides the movie's production date and credits such as those for the creator, as well as descriptions such as duration, whether it is silent or has sound, whether it is color or black and white, a description and background information on the film, and material on the digital restoration process. For some silent movies, original intertitles are also provided, and in such cases, the full text is included on the page. The page also includes information on the film's properties and history as archival material, such as frames per second, completeness of the film, and the source of the digital copy, which is one of the unique features of the website. Furthermore, it includes a description of the plot and commentary by experts. This allows visitors to see the results of the research on the movie on a single page.
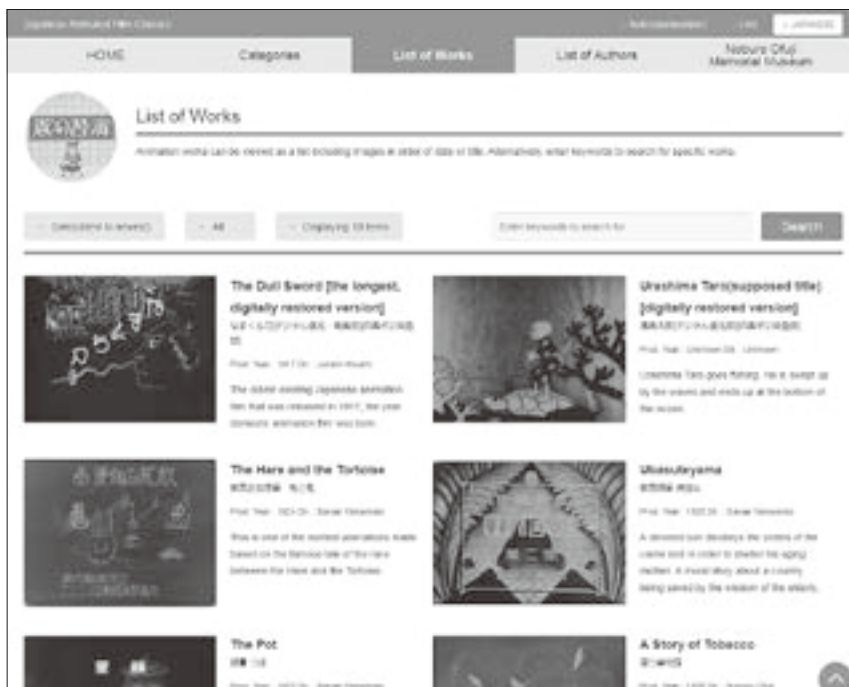

Photo 3   List of Works (sorted oldest to newest)
https://animation.filmarchives.jp/en/works?orderby=year_asc (accessed July 24, 2019)

Photo 4 Detailed information on *The Dull Sword*
https://animation.filmarchives.jp/en/works/view/100183 (accessed July 24, 2019)

On the right side of the details page is a "Watch" button. Clicking the button opens a streaming video page (Photo 5) in a new tab, enabling the visitor to watch the entire movie right there on the screen. Below the watch button are related categories and thumbnails of the main characters that appear in the movie.

4.2 Categories

The "Categories" entry point enables visitors to browse movies via four different categories. Many people who are not experts in animated movies started watching them because of the genre or a character in a movie. The "Genre" page therefore divides all 64 titles by story type, enabling visitors to search by easy-to-understand subcategories such as legends, sports, and *jidaigeki* (period drama) (Photo 6).

Focusing on the lifelike movements distinctive to animation, the "Types of Motion" page displays several icons made from scenes in the movies representing various types of motion such as "Run & Walk," "Eat & Drink," and "Dance & Sing" (Photo 7). These icons look like characters' icons, but they are actually GIF animations that start to move

Photo 5   Page with streaming video of *The Dull Sword*
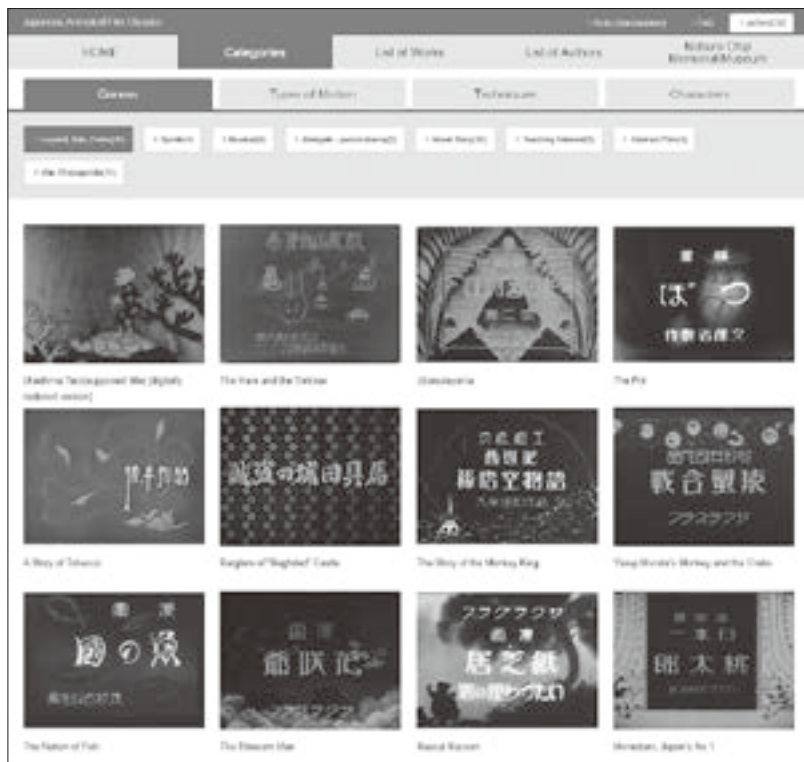https://animation.filmarchives.jp/en/works/playen/100183 (accessed
July 24, 2019)

Photo 6   List of "Legend, Tale, Fable" works in the "Genre" category
https://animation.filmarchives.jp/en/categories/stories/6 (accessed July 24, 2019)
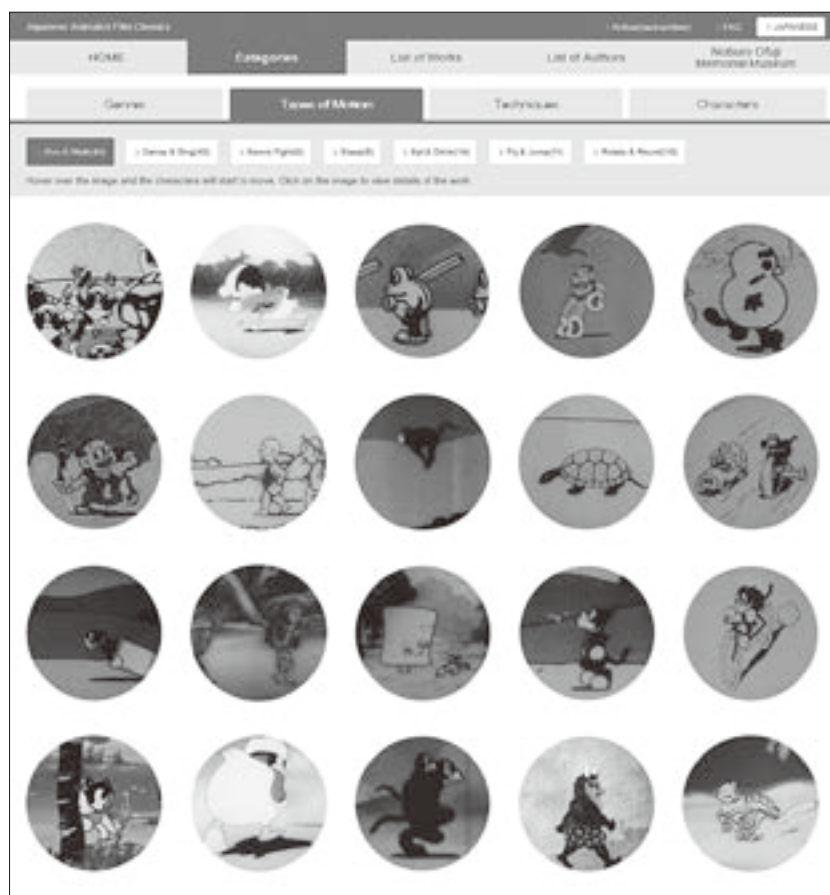
Photo 7   List of "Run & Walk" characters in the "Type of Motion" category
https://animation.filmarchives.jp/en/categories/motions (accessed July 24, 2019)

when the mouse is placed over them. This is something we did to help convey the appeal of animated movies in an easy-to-understand manner.

The "Techniques" page divides the movies by the techniques used to create the animation. The subcategory of cel animation, the type of animation well known to the public, contains only nine titles. The "Cutout" subcategory contains 47 titles, including the *chiyogami* cutout animated movies of Noburo Ofuji (Photo 8). This shows visitors the differences between the techniques that were used in early Japanese animated movies.

The "Characters" page divides the characters that appear in the movies by type. Many of the movies, especially fairy tales, feature animals. Visitors can browse from over 20 types of animals such as "Dog & Wolf," "Cat," "Monkey," and "Rabbit." The "Person" subcategory contains thumbnails of 47 scenes. The people, animals, and supernatural creatures have a huge variety of facial expressions, so this category helps convey the wide range of expressions and possibilities in animation.
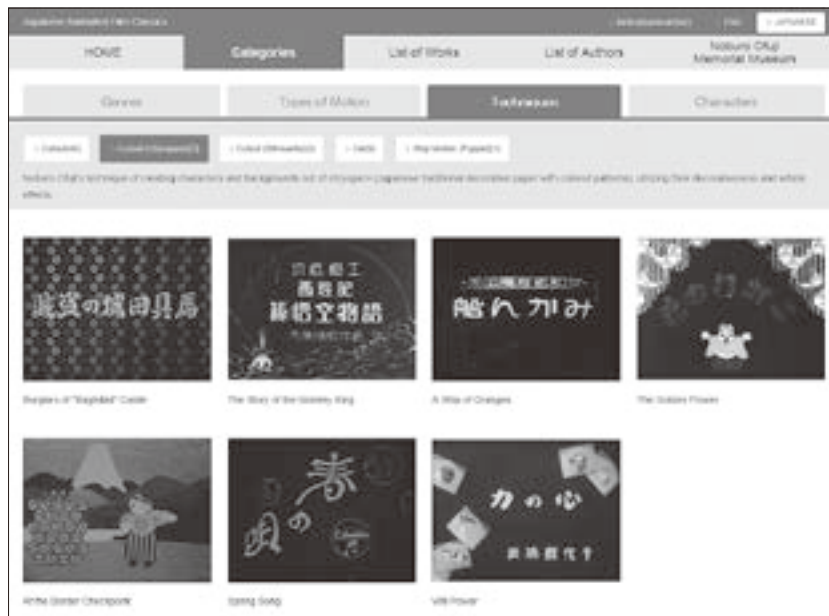
Photo 8   List of "Cutout (Chiyogami)" works in the "Techniques" category
https://animation.filmarchives.jp/en/categories/techniques/3 (accessed July 24, 2019)

4.3 List of Authors

Learning about animation artists helps visitors gain a deeper understanding of those artists' works and the background behind the production of the works. The "List of Authors" page features the ten animation artists who created the 64 movies available on the website (further research has revealed that one of them was, in fact, not the creator of the works attributed to him on the site). The page provides photographs and brief descriptions of each artist, including dates of birth and death, place of birth, and their main works (Photo 9). Clicking on an artist's name directs the visitor to a details page with information such as a 300-word biography and a list of works available on the website along with introductory sentences (Photo 10).

4.4 Noburo Ofuji Memorial Museum

The "Noburo Ofuji Memorial Museum" is a section of the website featuring materials related to Noboru Ofuji's animation production. Its structure is based on the "Noburo Ofuji: Pioneer of Japanese Animation" exhibition held at the NFC in 2010.

The "Biography and Filmography" page allows visitors to see Noburo Ofuji's filmography—the results of the NFC's animation research. The page displays a chronological table with information such as his main works and the techniques he used as well as links to the details pages of the works available on this website. The table also lists accolades and other major events related to the production of his works and indicates whether the work is a sound, silent, or "record talkie" movie, in order by year.

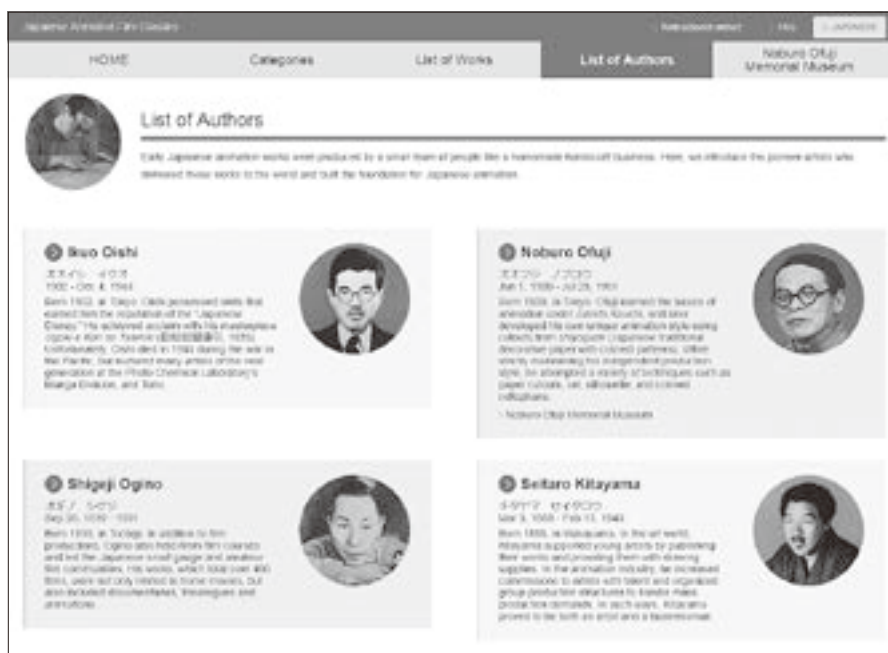The "Gallery" page features a matrix table of exhibited materials divided by "chapters"

Photo 9   List of Authors
        https://animation.filmarchives.jp/en/writer.html (accessed July 24, 2019)

as in the original exhibit along with thumbnail images. Tags such as "still photo" and "script" are placed under the thumbnails to make it clear what type of materials they are. Videos of the movies available on the website are included among the exhibited materials. Play button symbols have been placed on the thumbnails to clearly indicate which ones are videos. The videos are linked to the details pages of the movies, and materials with multiple pages such as scripts can be viewed using eReading,[7] a digital reader developed by Takeshi Abekawa, associate professor by special appointment at NII. Some original drawings and colored cels are displayed as GIFs, which you can see moving in the thumbnails.

The materials in the "Noburo Ofuji Memorial Museum" are all valuable cultural properties that show what animated film production was like at the time. We hope that making these research results available to the general public through this website will deepen the understanding of and stimulate further interest in and attention to early Japanese animated film.

5. Conclusion

The Japanese Animated Film Classics website was developed as a service to provide information in order to convey the appeal of early Japanese animated film worldwide. The number of visitors has increased steadily, and as of the end of November 2017, the website had reached one million page views. Sixty percent of visitors are from outside

Photo 10   Example of detailed information on the author (Junichi Kouchi)
https://animation.filmarchives.jp/en/writer09.html (accessed July
24, 2019)

Japan, and looking at visits by country, we can see that interest from Europe and North
America is particularly high. The response to the NFC since the launch has exceeded
expectations, so in order to handle the increasing inquiries from within and outside of
Japan, we implemented supportive measures such as adding Japanese and English FAQs
to the website. To expand the opportunities for users to discover movies on the website,
we are also planning and working on implementing new features such as providing an
easy-to-understand list of the movies in order of popularity and commentary on the
movies by experts.

To create a website that conveys research results, you need to have expertise on the
subject and create data in line with the website plan. For this website, we formed an
editorial team composed mainly of NFC project members. Thanks to the team leveraging
its high level of expertise and focusing its efforts on editing, Japanese Animated Film
Classics has become a fascinating website. Despite the accumulation of materials that
had resulted from years of research, we had only one year to prepare for launch. The fact
that almost every page is in both Japanese and English is a testimony to the hard work

of the editorial team.

We had originally planned to make Japanese Animated Film Classics accessible to the public for a limited period of time, until December 31, 2017. However, on December 21, 2017, we decided to narrow down the number of movies on the website and keep it throughout 2018 and beyond. This decision was the result of our judgement that the entire BDC Project, including the efforts to provide information through the website, had gained high acclaim and aroused unprecedented levels of interest, based on factors such as direct inquiries and comments to the NFC, responses to a questionnaire set up on the website, being featured on domestic and overseas media outlets such as the UK's BBC Television,[8] and access statistics. The joint research project between the NFC and NII continues to this day, and we are considering continuing to research new ways to provide information using the film archives and research results.

Notes

1) NFC was reorganized as National Film Archive of Japan on April 1st, 2018.

2) http://animation.filmarchives.jp/ (accessed October 18, 2018)

3) http://www.momat.go.jp/english/fc/jafc-press/ (accessed October 18, 2018)

4) http://bunka.nii.ac.jp/ (accessed October 18, 2018)

5) http://imagine.artmuseums.go.jp/ (accessed October 18, 2018)

6) http://shibusawakeizo.jp/ (accessed October 18, 2018)

7) Digital version "Keizo Shibusawa work collection" browsing system e-Reading
    https://shibusawakeizo.jp/writing/images/eReading.pdf (accessed October 18, 2018)

8) Japan's oldest cartoons shown to mark 100 years of anime. *BBC News*, 23 March 2017.