2D CHARACTER DESIGN

Introduction

The design of an animated character - 2D, 3D, or stop motion puppet - means considering many factors. First, who is your intended audience? Not everyone sees people the same way. A character wearing a hoodie, for example, may appear threatening to an older audience, but relaxed and companionable to a younger one. The reverse may be true if your character is wearing a suit and tie. Giving them a T-shirt or a sweater avoids the problem (and provides a clue to the weather, which may be important).

Equally, what role is this character going to play in your animation? As the saying goes, first impressions last. The hero starts with a smile, the villain with a snarl - unless you want to provide a surprise change of character. Provide something that immediately communicates to your audience what is going on in the scene. If you succeed in that, then you’ve saved a lot of time and can hit the ground running.

A protagonist (hero character) who doesn’t appeal to the audience will not be able to carry the plot. A character who doesn’t behave like your audience expects will confuse them. Let’s look at a few examples and principles.

Is the character a hero, villain, comical, or minor?
   How will they emote (show emotions)? By expression, voice, gesture, or posture?
   What is their age, sex, and occupation?
   What historic period is the animation set in, if any?
   What actions will the character perform? Will these be easier to animate if they are a particular shape?
   What clothing and props will they need to perform their role in the animation?

A great example of the use of posture is the Birdbox Studio animation Sketchy Duel (https://youtu.be/ Qi2kaDzGh9A) where the four figures’ characters and parts in the action can immediately be figured out from their relative heights and favored postures and gestures.
The use of assumptions

Whether you’re creating a character for a game or an animation, neither you nor the audience have time for a lot of back story. As soon as they look at the character, they’re going to make assumptions based on its appearance. These assumptions will include occupation, historical context, age, and character. Help your audience if you want to move on to developing the plot. Occupation clues don’t have to be very detailed - look at the cartoon from Tom Gauld below to see how simple they can be.

Another way to convey information about a character is through the use of proportions. The ration of head to body height changes throughout life, as does typical posture:

You can also indicate the type of character through the use of stereotyped outline:
Remember that as far back as the 1920s Disney realized that clearly defined outlines for a character made them easier to pick out in a fast moving action scene. This is the reason Mickey Mouse’s ears are side by side, no matter where his head faces.

Even today, Pixar uses distinctive outlines for its characters:

Expressive features
How is your character going to communicate? In words, maybe, but definitely through one more more of the following ways:

expression
gesture
and posture
Expression is the arrangement of facial features, and the most important to communicating emotion and intention are the eyes and eyebrows.

minimize the distance between eye and eyebrow

Clearly changing the distance between the top of the eye and the base of the eyebrow communicates surprise or anger; changing the angle of the brows indicates sadness or confusion. Changing the size of the pupil indicates disinterest, attraction, or fear. The image on the left shows the way that Blue Sky and Pixar dealt with this in two widely known characters, Scrat (from the Ice Age movies) and Wall-E (from the Pixar movie of the same name). Scrat’s top eyelid serves the purpose of a brow, while Wall-E’s camera pods rotate to indicate emotion, and his camera irises expand and contract to do the same.

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