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**Character acting:  
a case for better animation reference**

**ABSTRACT**

*Animators are often expected to film their own acting reference. However, most animators are not trained actors, and as a result, their performances lack depth when dealing with emotionally-rich subject matter. The result is superficial acting in both reference and final animation. This superficial acting is essentially a caricature of an emotion, rather than the emotion itself, and has been used to create ‘many believable characters with individual personalities’. However, while superficial acting may suffice for some caricatured performances, this paper explores how emotionally-driven and authentic acting reference provides benefits to all types of animated performance. I propose a methodology for achieving emotionally-driven acting reference, based on my experience as an actor and animator. I also compare and contrast superficial animated performances with emotionally-driven animated performances. This research extends the possibilities for greater acting possibilities within animation, including a greater emotional range of animated characters and more emotionally-rich subject matter.*

**KEYWORDS**

animation  
acting  
emotion  
reference  
3D

**1. INTRODUCTION**

The process of creating believable and emotionally-rich performances with animated characters is one of the most challenging goals for animators. Not only must animators be fluent with their chosen medium (hand-drawn, computer-generated, etc.), they must also make their creations ‘act ‘or ‘perform, ‘as if the performance itself were taking place in real time. Emotionally connecting with the audience is *de rigueur* for trained actors on stage and screen, but those actors would find it impossible to create believable performances if they had to craft their acting frame by frame. Yet character animators are expected not only to be able

to faithfully depict their subjects but also imbue into those images a powerful sense of emotion dissected to the level of twenty-four frames per second.

Since the early days of animation, animators have used a variety of tools to assist them with studying the human figure in action, from rot scope to film. Today we are able to record video on mobile devices with high-definition clarity and replay the footage instantaneously; yet this enhanced sophistication is of no better use if the actor performing the reference is ineffective. While it is sometimes said that animators are merely actors with pencils (Hooks 2005: x), very few animators are trained actors. Animators often must be the subject of their own video reference, and having minimal acting experience is not necessarily a problem when the animator merely uses the reference as a guide for physically complex actions.

However, when the reference demands an emotionally-driven performance, most animators lack acting prowess and instead rely on obvious or clichéd acting choices that lack believable emotional depth. Without a strong foundation to work from, the final animation inherits superficial acting from the video reference. While superficial acting may suffice for some caricatured performances, a greater degree of emotionally-driven animation is available to animators who are willing to create the quality of reference required to achieve it. This paper provides a rationale for how animation benefits from emotionally-driven acting reference, and indicates what is required of an acting framework that would maximize this benefit. With greater emotional flexibility comes a larger range of acting choices, providing animators and audiences with richer and more interesting performances on screen.

## **1.1 – DIFFERENCES BETWEEN LIVE-ACTION AND ANIMATION**

It is a mistake to approach the production of animation in the same way as that of a live-action film. Animation as a medium has its own codes and practices that are simultaneously derived from and wholly different to live-action. Animation theorist and historian Paul Wells cites the position of British animators John Halas and Joy Batchelor that live action presents physical reality, while animation presents metaphysical reality with ‘not how things look, but what they mean ‘ (Halas & Batchelor cited in Wells 1998: 11). Dave Brewster describes animation as a form of caricature that should capture the impression of a figure and its movement, rather than copy it directly (Jones & Oliff 2008: 117). Shamus Culhane agrees and suggests that motion and figures within animation are limited by their construction, and sticking too close to the filmed movements of actors adds nothing to the quality of an animation (Culhane 1988: 44).

Perhaps the fundamental difference between the creation of live-action and animation is temporal: live-action is filmed in real-time, capturing motion and emotion as it occurs. Animation seeks to create a similarly moving and emoting result, but the process of its creation is constructed one frame at a time. Animators are tasked with much more work, spaced out over a much greater expanse of time, in order to achieve a comparable result. Animated action must be precisely planned through storyboards, whereas storyboards for live-action provide a rough blocking of characters and a general layout for each shot. The storyboard dictates an animated character's performance, whereas the live-action storyboard provides suggestions that the actor expands upon (Beiman 2007: 17). Further complicating matters, the vocal track of an animation is recorded before the character's performance is created. The animator uses the vocal track to guide the animation (20-21), which creates an artificial separation between action and thought.

## 1.2 ACTING IN ANIMATION

Although the differences between the production of live-action and animation is well-documented, the differences in acting styles between the two is less understood. There is a paucity of research into acting for animation (Beiman 2010: 8), and nonexistent research for different acting styles for animation.

While a few recent movies (*Epic*, *The Croods*) have sought to expand on the emotional range and subtlety of acting of their characters, most acting in animation remains, ironically, crude. Culhane offers cautionary advice: ‘... [There is] no point in writing an animated film that places the burden of subtle acting on the animator... Very subtle acting may never be possible to attain in this medium ‘(1988: 43-44). This may be overly pessimistic, but the difficulty in adapting subtle acting to animated characters is multi-fold. We are intimately familiar with seeing the human face and figure every day, and we intuitively know how a human is supposed to move. We can instantly determine if someone walks normally, or with a limp, or gaily, or sadly. Recording human motion on film presents no problem as the figure is faithfully captured, but animating the human body requires a transmutation of flesh and blood into a graphic representation. Much of our understanding of the subtleties of human interactions are based on tiny nuances within all that flesh, and it is very difficult (and often undesirable) to recreate everything in the graphical figure. After all, doing so would merely copy the existing form, rather than graphically adapt it to the style of the animated medium. As Beiman states: ‘Animated characters should be believable, not realistic ‘(Beiman 2007: 13).

Adapting acting to animation faces several non-technical challenges, as well. Foremost, actors always work in real time, whereas animators create ‘the *illusion* of a present moment ‘(Hooks 2005: x). A performance *flows* out of the actor, whereas the animator *injects* a performance into the animated character. The actor is his or her own instrument, capable of creating an emotionally-connected performance on its own. The animated character is functionally useless without input and guidance from the animator. Actors do not focus on creating specific poses and gestures, whereas animators carefully craft their character's gestures into storytelling devices (Hooks 2011: 40). Whereas the actor's performance can come alive with spontaneity, the animator must break down every idea to give the illusion of spontaneity to a character (Gordon & Luhn 2013: 19). Much of the spontaneity an actor enjoys is as a result of his interaction with other actors in the cast. The chemistry between actors can lead to performances unreachable by the actors on their own. By contrast, a two character scene is an even greater challenge for an animator because he or she must create *both* characters' performances. It is up to the animator to generate chemistry between the animated characters, rather than having it emerge organically as part of the acting process (Thomas & Johnston 1981: 18). An actor receives immediate feedback for a performance, and may quickly respond to that feedback through a series of takes. An animator spends a tremendous amount of time delicately creating a performance that may be given feedback later in the day, week, or month. Due to tight production schedules and the amount of time it takes to animate a scene, the animator often gets only one shot at getting it right (Serrand, cited in Dunlop 2013: 42). Compounding this issue an animator must often follow acting cues from the storyboards, which were created by other members of the team who may be brilliant visual artists, but unlikely actors (Hooks 2005: ix).

Plenty of successful, entertaining, even powerful animated films have been made without the animators necessarily needing to work from emotionally-connected reference. In a Q&A with Pixar animator Andrew Gordon, he stated that when it comes to employing different acting styles such as Method Acting, ‘animators don't do that ‘(Apr 2013). Because most of these films involve stylized characters rather than realistic humans, audiences are more forgiving for the style of acting used. This style typically relies on external silhouette and poses to achieve a given acting goal, whereas an actor uses internal motivation and emotional-connectedness to do the same. Both approaches to acting ‘have in common... a vested interest in the moment ‘(Jones & Oliff 2008: 182) while employing similar principles in completely different ways (Hooks 2011: 7). The latter approach is especially well-suited to physically-demanding actions, and many animations are full of exaggerated and grandiose

movements (Gordon & Luhn, 2013: 19); in fact, much of the humour in these films is derived from such actions. However, while this approach works well for motion, it is less effective for conveying the subtlety necessary for emotionally-driven performances. As such, most acting in animation is presentational: gestured, but not felt; indicated, but not instilled.

The suggestion that emotionally-driven acting reference benefits animation does not imply all traditional acting for animation techniques should be replaced. Such an approach to acting reference is meant to build upon traditional techniques and provide the animator with some additional options and ideas that may not be available without an emotionally-connected reference to work from. The main differences between an actor's methods of creating a character versus an animator's method comes down to *presence*: the actor experiences the character's emotions as they happen, whereas the animator is distanced from the character, never able to interact in real-time. The actor 'works from the inside out, the goal being to justify all behaviour in terms of emotional truth... [whereas] animators work from the outside in, being mindful of gestures, facial expression, power centres and such' (Hooks 2011: 49).

## **2. APPROPRIATENESS OF METHOD**

It is important to recognize that no one method for creating animation reference will suit all animation styles or audiences. The animator must determine what the needs of the animation are and which reference style will best serve them. However, animators who lack a more sophisticated acting style will likely create formulaic and predictable acting (Beiman 2010: 201), recycling the same style of acting and acting choices over and over again. This leads to stale and clichéd acting that is not appropriate to a specific character. Gordon suggests that only about thirty-percent of his fellow animators at Pixar tap into emotional territory in their reference (Q&A, April 2013) , and this is at one of the best recognized animation companies in the world. It is interesting to speculate how much more robust acting in animation would be if more animators undertook acting training and used it in their reference – especially training in emotional-centred presence and performance.

This paper is specifically interested in improving the quality of animations that involve a large emotional range. Many animations do not have such a requirement and can subsist off of the type of superficial acting common to this medium. Such a distinction is not meant to denigrate but rather to recognize different approaches to acting in animation. For instance, animation for children does not typically employ complex or subtle acting. This is in part due to limitations in production budgets, but is also influenced by the fact that young

children do not yet possess the capacity to recognize such subtleties. Characters for young children tend to be simpler and more obvious in their acting and goals (Hooks 2011: 44). (1:00)

Character-driven stories will benefit from emotionally-centred reference more than plot-driven stories. Glebas defines a character-driven story as ‘one in which the desires of the character drive them to take actions and these actions are what drive the story, ‘whereas a plot-driven story is ‘where the sequence of actions is decided independent of characters’ (2008: 22). A character-driven story evolves from the internal motivations and reactions of its characters, and therefore is ideally suited for acting reference that is emotionally-derived. A plot-driven story remains the same regardless of its characters, and therefore is less concerned with emotional material and subtext.

Among animators who possess some acting training, method acting is the most common. The method school of acting was developed by the legendary Constantin Stanislavski ‘to encourage the greatest authenticity in naturalistic acting’ (Wells 1998: 106). While method acting promotes the use of sense memory and emotional memory in order to achieve this *naturalism*, the reality is that unless actors are exquisitely well trained in this system, they merely recall emotional experiences rather than actively participate in them. This can lead to sloppy and/or put-upon performances that do not maximize the intended benefit from the acting reference – that is, to provide greater opportunities for authentic emotional reactions and subtext. Due to the ease of creating perfection with CG animation especially, subtext is critical to making CG characters seem more real and empathetic. Subtext creates opportunities for character flaws and ulterior motives to shine through. This increases the complexity of a character’s performance and makes it more interesting to watch. Building in subtext allows the character’s performance to go beyond just what is written in the dialogue and make the character more believably.

Emotions can be difficult to classify in any comprehensive way. However, for the purposes of acting and animation, several shortened lists have been devised. Hooks suggests there are seven basic emotions to be considered: happiness, sadness, anger, fear, disgust, surprise, and contempt (2011: 63). Beiman offers a slightly more simplified list, including: love/joy, anger, greed, boredom, curiosity, and sickness (2010: 32). Boredom and sickness do not fit the definition of emotion present here as an automatic value response, and can therefore be removed from consideration. Greed and curiosity might be triggered by an emotional reaction, but are not likely automatic value responses in themselves. Morris provides a simplified and axiomatic approach to emotions with just four: love, hurt, anger,

and fear (1998), and these are confirmed by Kennedy (2011). This coincides well with Glebas' categories of joy, sadness, anger, and fear (2008: 87). When thinking in terms of core emotions, a shorter list is desirable: all other emotional states can be derived from one or more of the four core emotions.

Specific reference helps to make the character more convincing and honest while dispensing with cliché acting choices, soulless execution, and over-gesticulation of a particular emotion. A good example is a character whose emotional state transitions to anger. It is a mistake in animation (and acting) to have the character instantly switch from one emotional state to another. We do not immediately jump into anger; instead, it is a process, a negotiation. We often negotiate with ourselves whether it is worth revealing our anger to someone else, or to the crowd that surrounds us. After all, there are consequences to such actions that will need to be lived with. It is easy to forget about these momentary negotiations when you simply draw quick sketches of an action without working from reference of genuine emotion.

### **3. ADVANTAGES OF A CORE-EMOTIONAL APPROACH TOWARD REFERENCE**

As mentioned previously, the Stanislavski model of method acting is most common to animators who possess a modicum of acting training, but this method falls short of an ideal form of active emotional participation. The Stanislavski approach tends to be technique-heavy and recycles emotional memories rather than engaging with active and present experience and feeling. As a result, many method actors fall into the trap of separating their acting technique from their personal reality (Morris & Hotchkis 1998: 2). Personal reality is an awareness of how you feel and respond to the stimuli present in this very moment. As an animator, you need to know your character so well that you can identify his or her personal reality at every moment throughout your animation. Hooks provides the following example:

If I lean over and gently touch your cheek, you will have a reaction. And I will then react to your reaction. This fact of life is an essential part of acting... Both doing and reacting are part of the illusion of life (2011: 22).

Such automatic reactions are essential to creating believable animation performances, but because these reactions are automatic and spontaneous, we are not consciously aware of them. Just trying to 'think' what a reaction should look like without proper reference will lack

convincing nuance. Only when genuine emotional reactions are filmed for reference can such discoveries be revealed.

An approach to acting does exist that encourages active emotional participation, and I can attest to its remarkable effectiveness for animation reference from my own experience as an actor. The method used is a modified version of a technique developed by Eric Morris, who focused on the concept of *being*. Morris defines *being* as a state of awareness where an actor becomes closest to what he or she really feels, often producing unpredictable changes of emotions. Actors are in a being state when they acknowledge how they feel and express that feeling totally (1998: 4). A simple example makes this easier to understand:

When an actor in a scene attempts to achieve a particular emotion, what usually occurs is that his presentation of that emotion is flat and one-dimensional. I refer to this phenomenon as ‘on the nose’ acting. It happens because the actor is concerned with delivering the result ‘on the nose,’ so consequently the emotion doesn’t contain all the elements from which it came, the sources, the impetus which caused the emotion in the first place. When the actor is function from a BEING [sic] state, all that he feels is included in the life being expressed, and then the resulting emotion contains all of his own personal truth and reality (4).

When an actor stops trying to act an emotion and simply approach the emotion from a *being* state, his or her performance greatly improves and becomes more complex and imaginative. The actor injects his or her own personal uniqueness into that role, instead of consciously trying to achieve a specific result or imitating another actor’s performance. Precisely because the results are unpredictable they are also authentic, just as the genuine emotions we feel in everyday life are unpredictable. The performance feels unique, as if this is occurring for the first and only time (4). There are no pretend emotions here, only genuine emotional realities that can be changed through impulses and reactions from the present being state to the being state that the material requires (29). This only happens when actors stop trying to act and simply listen to how they feel, and then express that feeling completely as a starting point. This is in sharp contrast to the stereotypical performance where an actor jumps from one emotion to the next in abrupt punctuations. Such a treatment does not reflect how emotions gradually change and blend with each other over time, which produces a much more interesting gradient of emotional nuance.

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## CONTRIBUTOR DETAILS

Jason Kennedy is a lecturer at Auckland University of Technology's Digital Design programme, specializing in 3D animation. He left palaeontology to become a 3D artist after he discovered dinosaurs were more fun to animate than to dig up. His research focuses on developing a methodology for creating authentic emotional performance for animation reference.

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