

Creating Believable Characters

Character motivation in animation and games design

Why motivation matters

Motivation

The reason a character pursues a goal or makes a choice.

Animation

Actions help the audience understand and care about a character.

Games design

Goals and responses help players understand their role and other characters.



Goals, needs and fears

Goal

What does the character want to achieve now?

Need

What deeper emotional need influences them?

Fear

What do they want to avoid, and at what cost?

Design question

How will the audience or player recognise these through action?

Internal and external motivation

Internal

A belief, emotion or personal need drives the character.

Animation example

Fear and family relationships influence a character's decisions.

External

An event, obligation or threat gives them a reason to act.

Game design example

A guard needs their wages, but orders forbid helping the player.

Consistency, backstory and conflict

Backstory

Choose a past experience that explains a present behaviour.

Consistency

Actions should follow the character's priorities and circumstances.

Conflict

Competing motivations create difficult decisions.

Across both media

Show why a character changes their mind.



Audience engagement and player agency

Shared principle

Love, belonging and fear can make unfamiliar characters understandable.

Animation

The creator controls the sequence of actions and revelations.

Games design

Players may control actions, timing or dialogue within designed limits.

Design challenge

Character goals, available actions and rewards should support each other.



Performance and interactive behaviour

Animation performance

Use posture, expression and timing to reveal intention.

Dialogue and sound

Pauses, tone and reactions can suggest an unspoken motive.

Interactive behaviour

Give NPCs responses to player actions and changing circumstances.

Readability

Make important reactions clear in the intended camera view.

Animation case study: Elsa

Motivations

Protect others, express herself and maintain family bonds.

Conflict

Her wish for freedom competes with fear of harming people.

Evidence task

Identify a gesture, decision or line that reveals this conflict.

Analysis

Explain how the scene shapes the audience's understanding.



Games case study: Kratos and Atreus

Story goal

They travel to fulfil Faye's final wish in God of War (2018).

Character motivation

Kratos must learn to be the father Atreus needs.

Gameplay connection

Atreus assists Kratos during their journey.

Discussion

How do performance and shared actions communicate their relationship?

Motivation across scenes and systems

Animation

Reveal changing priorities through decisions and performance.

Games design

Check dialogue, objectives and repeatable behaviour for consistency.

Player and character

Consider whether the player's reasons differ from the character's.

Critical question

What evidence shows the motivation, and what contradicts it?

Character design exercise

Starting point

Create a character with one goal, one deeper need and one fear.

Animation route

Sketch four key poses for a short scene that reveals their motivation.

Games design route

Plan one interaction with two player actions and the character's responses.

Peer feedback

Can a partner infer the motivation? Revise one unclear decision.

Review and discussion

Believable motivation

Give the character a reason to pursue their goal.

Visible evidence

Reveal that reason through performance, choices or responses.

Medium matters

Consider audience interpretation and the player's available actions.

Independent study

Analyse one character using two specific examples as evidence.