



Familiar Faces

Human Expression in the Nonhuman Form

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Introduction

Humanity is one of the most important facets of animation - audiences respond to human connection, they can interject themselves onto characters, and find familiar connection in the quirks, interactions, interests and emotions of the characters on screen.

The beauty of animation, however, is that animation can be about anything. So how do you engage a human audience when humans aren't the thing present?

My project aims to explore the idea of 'humanity' in animation, how we can use it, how we interpret it, and how we can use it for and against the audience to elicit certain ideas, reactions and emotions.



1.



Exploration 1

Body Language and The Basics of Shape

Humanity in animation, as mentioned, is usually elicited through human bodies doing human things and moving in human ways. Through the principles of animation, we know that exaggerating these movements helps convey these ideas more effectively [1].

However, even without a human body, we can use these principles and some clever techniques to still imply emotion. The 'flour sack' animation test is commonly used for beginners to test this exact concept [2].

Beyond that, I aim to explore further how basic shapes, when in the context of human form, can show and elicit certain characteristics through minimal changes. This includes the true fundamentals of human expression and how the silhouette can be applied in the most basic sense, how we can simplify human ideas and incorporate them into subtle visual language to make non-living items feel more approachable to the psyche.

Another idea in this category is exploring characters with limited expression, for example Gromit from the 'Wallace and Gromit' series [3] who only expresses using eye movements (and doesn't talk otherwise). This limitation breeds creativity in how he physically communicates, in such a way still identifiable to an audience.

This will be the initial stage of my exploration, I believe this will offer a strong fundamental base to further explore the concept and my ideas on a grander scale.



2.



Exploration 2

Injecting Humanity into the Everyday Object

A common theme in animation is emotive objects, the idea of giving life to every-day aspects and items. I think this avenue gives me many areas to research and explore, especially due to the diversity of humanity and how that's applied in so many places.

This is seen in many Disney/Pixar movies, such as Toy Story (1995) [4], Cars (2006) [5] and as recently as Elemental (2023) [6]. While these stories could hypothetically work in the context of pure humans, their exact story lines are arguably more effective due to the inclusion of iconographic items instead of purely human characters.

- In Toy Story, the characters can break and tear, be old, be broken, be used and passed on - this exact thing wouldn't work in a human context, the existence of the toy is fundamental to the story being told, even if we are humanising them by giving them personalities, emotions, relationships, so on.
- For Cars, while specific elements may work in a human setting (race car driver, rather than a race car themselves - for example), it works more efficiently to visually show the car themselves, especially for younger audiences trying to understand the story and how these elements connect. Children know cars are fast, so we make the characters themselves cars so that association is easier.
- In Elemental, we as the reader already have a preconceived notion as to what fire is, what it does, how it harms, and our existing opinions about that make understanding the main character's relationship with water easily understandable.

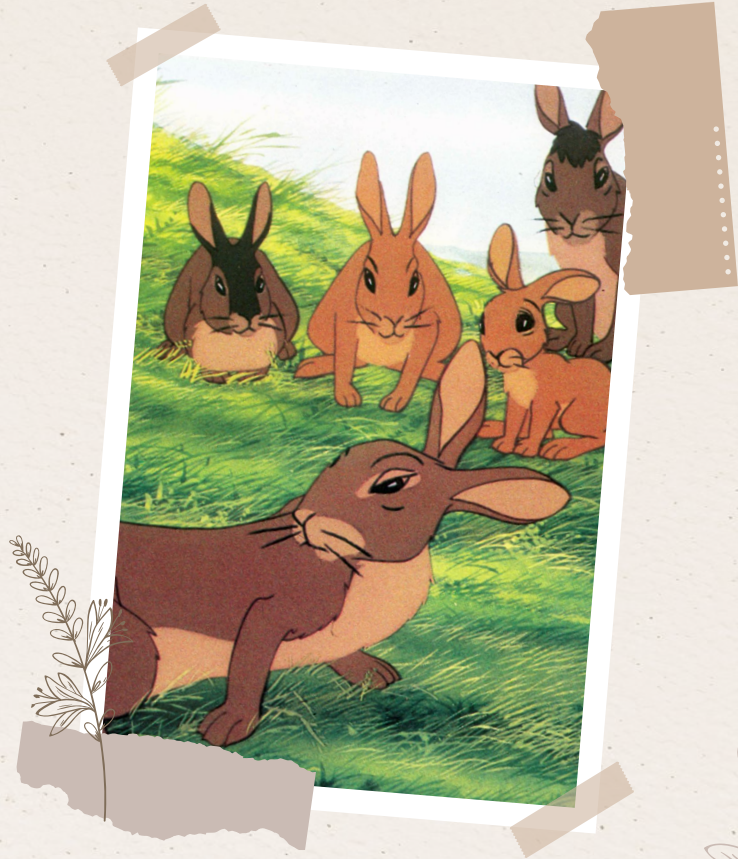


This also goes into the concept of xenofiction (stories told from the perspective of non-humans, typically animals, and their interpretation of the world through those lenses) [7]. Film like *Watership Down* (1978) [8] and *The Plague Dogs* (1982) [9] are excellent older examples of this kind of media, where despite being feral animals, their hardships and traumas are exceptionally evocative to the human audience - including topics like religion, mental illness, the hardships of death and the desire of freedom.

This, of course, goes all the way back to fundamental story-telling, how we as readers interpret certain animals, colours, items, etc. and attributes we associate with them.

For example, foxes are typically associated as being tricksters (see Aesop's Fables [10], *Reynard the Fox* [11], and multiple religious and cultural associations dating back as far back as 2400 BCE [12], and evidence to suggest acknowledgment of foxes before that [13].)

Overall, I feel this aspect of story-telling can be extremely useful for researching existing examples of this topic, and the importance of it in animation overall.



3.



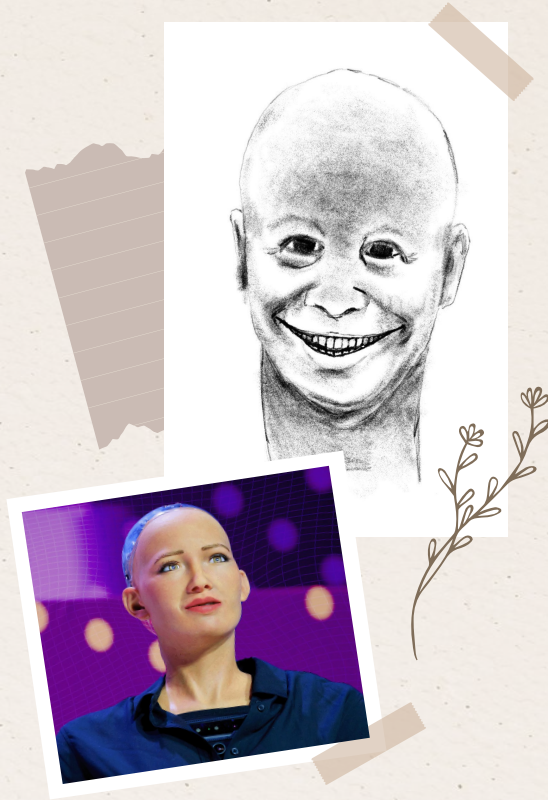
Exploration 3

Inhumanity and the 'Uncanny Valley'

Another thing I'd like to touch on is inhumanity, how and where nonhuman traits can be applied deliberately to create an unsettling combination

The 'uncanny valley' is described as a "hypothesized psychological and aesthetic relation between an object's degree of resemblance to a human being and the emotional response to the object." [14, 15], or to simplify, a discomfort when seeing something between 'too human' and 'not human enough'. We often have this in response to humanoid machines, odd animation or other forms of humanoid artistic expression (dolls, wax figures, etc.)

While my focus is primarily on adding human traits, I think it would be worth it to explore avenues where leaving that touch out might be more effective in the context of horror or eerie animation, and acknowledging which areas of human characteristics can be more unsettling to include.



Artistic Exploration

I also aim to create visual work related to this concept.

As primarily a concept artist and animator, ideally I will develop a character surrounding this concept and take them from concept to model.

I can use this character in a few ways:

- Development from origin to completion will allow me to explore my avenue explorations and consider all aspects of my chosen project. This includes things like shape language and pushing the silhouette and their identifiable human features.
- I can produce character work using this character, such as poses and expression sheets.
- I can produce short animated tests using the character, allowing myself to explore movement with the borders I set myself during the character design.
- Generally, showing how a design can use human expression in a non-typical way backs up my project's ideas in an easy to understand visual outcome.

Ideally this artistic exploration will be a chance to push my creativity and give myself limitations in how to express my ideas in a physical format.



References

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- [15] Wikipedia Contributors, "Uncanny Valley," Wikipedia, Feb. 20, 2019. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Uncanny_valley (accessed Oct. 19, 2026).

Ideas for Further Research:

- [Book] T. Bancroft: Creating Characters with Personality.
- [Book] Tom Bancroft: Creating Characters with Personality
- [Book] Frank Thomas and Ollie Johnston: The Illusion of Life: Disney Animation
- [Online resource] LinkedIn Learning: "Flour Sacks and Body Language"
- [Video] Pixar in a Box: "Shape"
- [Academic] Boria Sax: "Animals in Folklore"
- [Academic] K. F. MacDorman: "Too Real for Comfort? Uncanny Responses to Computer Generated Faces"
- [Academic] H.-J. Uther: "The Fox in World Literature: Reflections on a 'Fictional Animal'"



Thank You

