EMOTIONAL POSTURING FOR IMAGING CHARACTERS

Yauger Williams
Texas A & M University
Department of Architecture
MS-3137, College Station, TX 77840
yauger@tamu.edu

Abstract

How do character traits influence viewer emotion and identity perception about images?
Investigating past trends of iconic characters we will evaluate traits that inspire sustainable impressions of a figure. Examples of various formal techniques will demonstrate methods for creating character empathy, including stylistic strategies for influencing a Viewers emotion.

Viewing a variety of characters we will observe engaging and immersive qualities, including posture exaggeration traits for personifying happiness, sorrow, anger, and fear.

Examining characters spanning a wide range of emotional attributes, I will show how characters have a particular emotional gravity, personality, and identity that are formed over time. Through this discussion I hope to give artists and viewers a different perspective about their relationship to the past, present, and future of characters.

Introduction

“Judge of your natural character by what you do in your dreams.”- Ralph Waldo Emerson

In a time where we have more portraits of people than people themselves, what is the role of accentuating an individual’s image? What are past trends that influence our perception of an individual’s qualities or character?

This paper will discuss how we can use these trends to explore new paths for contemporary image development and the potential to create future characters.

The portrait and the desire to recreate and express itself has a history dating back over 17,000 years, yet in the twenty-first century character creation appears to be more vital than ever. In this brief paper, we will examine some historical images/icons of characters with a compositional look and resulting feel that suggest identity. We will investigate three methods for character identity, including: life-like representational accuracy, re-presenting styles, and literal or abstract presentation. We will explore how these strategies combine as different media and processes for reaching a character’s intangible essence. Through this analysis and interpretation of various character icons, I will integrate aspects of a character’s composition and identity in relationship with their composer and their viewer. By correlating the formal objective aspects of a character with its resulting subjective interpretation, I hope to stimulate new ways of creating and understanding character’s intangible identities.

Why create a character in the first place? Looking back more than 17,000 years, around the time when the form of Homo-Sapiens developed, it had the unique ability to represent itself. Human beings depicted versions of themselves, in various colors, and sizes, and in complex compositions, such as in circular patterns on the high ceilings of the French Lascaux caves. Early images of humans were depicted in a variety of earth-tone pigments, with various techniques of applications including brushing, pouring, and spitting. These techniques and styles of paintings continued in similar styles that were sustained for thousands of years. In Medieval times, perspective, and the notion of showing the body and head at differing angles, became a period of development in the representation of perspective. Artists such as Giotto, depicted figures at ¼ angles revealing figures in a more life-like sense by showing dimension from more angles. Images created by artists were moving closer to a more believable character in which the viewer could relate themselves and empathize with the created character.

By Renaissance times character’s perspective was almost mastered by many artists and painters who explored the
mechanics of color, shadow, and light. Artists such as Rembrandt created paintings that appeared so life-like that if one pretended they were looking into a window they might believe the character was real. Then in the late eighteen hundreds, an even more convincing method of representation was developed with the photograph. Photographers such as Niepce used materials that exposed a record of light mirroring an image of something as it appeared. This marked a major turning point for image generation and character creation, as many future artists chose to focus on stylization instead of representation. Artists such as Muybridge advanced image representation further with the Motion Picture by sequencing a series of photographic images that depict a character’s movement in time.

Each of these periods -- early Cave Paintings, Medieval Times, Renaissance, Early Photography, and Motion Pictures -- share universal elements that add up to what we might consider central factors to a character’s form. A character’s form can be seen as being composed of its primary structure, resulting posture, aesthetic details, and body motion. In the early Cave Paintings we have a sense of structure that gives us a feeling for what the individual might be like. We get a basic sense of proportion of body, limbs, and head as they relate to each other. From examining the image’s proportions, we are able to make generalizations about its skeleton, muscles, and skin. The structure of the bones, muscle, and skin serve as a kind of record of function and experience of the image’s history, which may contribute to generalizations of the character’s abilities and experiences.

In Medieval painting of body torsion, and increasing detail of perspective, we can establish a sense of posture. Posture can help distinguish two similar structures, or show a range of experience within a character’s structure. Posture is depicted throughout the body and often exaggerated within the face. Within the face it is often depicted with the eyebrows and mouth working in contrast sharing a variety of emotions including happy, sad, mad, and scared. These emotions may be suggested through varying degrees of, for example, raising or lowering the eyebrows in contrast with the mouth. For instance, a happy person would have high eyebrows and an upward smile, and these upward motion tendencies might be echoed in various ways throughout the head, body, and limbs. This is in contrast to a scared figure who is both excited (an up emotion), and nervous (a down emotion); this character might have raised eyebrows and a downward smile and with up and down elements, be extended throughout the head, body, and limbs. Together, posture and structure give clues about a character’s time, place, and more.

Surface elements such as hair, skin color, clothing, lighting, and surrounding environment are aesthetic details that help give a mood or tone to the individual’s image. Rembrandt and other Renaissance painters focused on detailing representational aspects of the character’s surface such as skin coloration, hair texture, clothing folds, and light and shadow interaction. Characters had reached a point of looking so life-like the characters could be seen as almost being hyper-real with their accentuated veins, wrinkle skin, and detailed representation. The life-like process of producing a representation quickened with photography when artists such as Niepce revealed light onto an emulsive material that reflected the environment. With the invention of the photograph it appeared that one was almost capturing a real moment of time. We now had a record of what had occurred, if only for a brief moment, it showed something as we might have seen it ourselves. Muybridge extended this illusion of a real character one step further by showing a character’s movement. This gave us new information about character representation; now we could examine a character’s tempo, range of motion, and type of movement, among other things.

These early years of representation give us a foundation for the core elements in considering an individual’s structure, posture, aesthetics, and movement. Artists were exploring and developing convincing ways for realistically placing two-dimensional figures in a space or ground. During these times artists were invested in analyzing their subjects (the things they were going to paint), and analyzing their materials and finding a way to
reproduce what they saw. After the artist had analyzed a subject to the point of clear articulation, the viewer could then assume the role of interpretation of the subject. The focus of these times emphasized representation and representation was a significant portion of the image’s content.

Now that figures could realistically be reproduced many artists shifted their attention to stylistic methods and understanding ways of re-presenting an image. Instead of presenting an image as it was, the focus would be to present an image in a manner other than as it was. Re-presentation could be viewed as a sort of remixing of the image often focusing on the materials or processes by which it was created over its ability to reflect an individual’s literal vision.

Methods for form and character exaggeration were explored with the Impressionists Pointillism or reducing the mark-making application to the canvas to the technique of little dots. This breakdown of form contributed to a formal separation of color, light, and form. Artists such as Van Gogh dabbed brush strokes apart from each other to give the impression of an image; one might connect or interpret the dots to see the overall character.

Form was further fragmented by the Cubists who stacked, layered, and combined two-dimensional images to show a character from various perspectives in one viewpoint. Cubism emphasized the geometry and spatial relationships within the image of the character. Artists such as Braque collaged and twisted images to push beyond their natural involvement with space and reconfigure how one might envision an individual.

The character was then put into exaggerated motion by the Futurists who depicted versions of an image sequencing through some sort of cycle as if it were moving across a background. Futurism emphasized movement, speed, and noise, and often showed fainter versions of an image tracing, or streaming along the background of an image. Artists such as Balla repeated similar versions of the same image in stages to depict a particular type of motion in a fixed image.

While characters were being represented in photographs, and exaggerated in modern painting; drawings and motion pictures were advancing with virtual “toons”. The toons elements suggest a figure, however, the virtual aspects allow the toon to exist in a world unto itself. The Toon Mickey Mouse is a combination of both human and mouse characteristics. Unlike a real mouse, Mickey talks and walks around on two legs; however he does have some features that look like a real mouse, such as a tail. Mickey is an exaggeration and morphing of stereotypes that present us with a unique form of character. For example, Mickey is not alive, he can exist forever potentially and be continually used and evolve in any matter the artist sees fit. Furthermore, like the modern paintings, Mickey exists in worlds in which the space is not as we see it; and therefore the ground in which the figure exists give the artist the ability to develop new interactions between the character and its environment, making the spatial ground become an important part of the character’s depiction.

Animation techniques similar to the ones used to create Mickey were integrated with other motion picture techniques to create collaged imagery of lifelike photography with drawing. Characters such as Roger Rabbit have the ability to communicate with characters outside of the virtual toon world. Now toons can interact with human characters in either the toon’s world or the human’s world.

A continual theme through Impressionism, Cubism, Futurism, Animation, and Animated Film, is the idea of re-presentation. In Impressionism, the idea was to fragment the form into modular components. Cubism images were of layered relationships of characters, one top of another, to show new perspectives for visualizing. And Futurism images emphasized the speed and energy of motion into a single image. Virtual characters such as Mickey fuse together in a world of their own, a world not unlike the Modern painter’s world. A world with no boundaries and only the limits of the frame. These different methods expressed new exaggerated ways for characters interacting with each other and their environment. The toons were brought closer to reality with the integration of photography and animation which created an image in which a toon might exist in
our perception of space.

While these stylistic tendencies and characters evolved, the idea of re-presenting the character and its intangible identity was pushing towards the core and its essence as the content. The emphasis was not on depicting it as it was, but rather to explore to that which it had the potential to be seen as. Now, the viewer was doing the analysis of the subject, and the artist had become the interpreter; they have switched roles. The next step was that neither the artist nor the viewer would assume the role of interpreter or analyzer. Rather both the artist and the viewer would assume both the role of interpreter and analyzer in characters that were created not as representations, or re-presentations, but now Presentations. The presentation mode of expressing characters could be seen as the most romantic. Characters that are presented exist not only in a world unto themselves, but a world that is vacuous and self-referential.

Surrealist artists such as Salvador Dali helped spawn such romantic visions of dreams that seamlessly blended reality and illusion into a world completely of its own. Artists such as Willem De Kooning pursued the pure Abstract essence of a character; while others pursued the most Minimal or literal essence such as Mel Bochner who depicted characters as rulers the length of figures. Or Pop-Artists such as Andy Warhol would relate the mundane characters of famous people as a way of depicting iconic images of famous characters. These lofty fine-art methods were depicted in their own popular culture ways through the development of a new method of representation which might be the most significant development in image-making since the camera: the computer. The computer had the ability to integrate all of the fundamental aspects of basic character modeling previously described. Max Headroom was a noted icon for a completely computer graphic personality. Like Mickey, this character existed in a world unto itself; however, this character was not generated by the human hand, but rather through a machine keyboard.

The idea of the virtual character was extended further through the computer game, which allows the audience to control the character moving through space. Characters such as Super Mario exist in a world unto themselves however; they are controlled by people from our world, once again blurring the lines between reality and fiction.

Conclusion

Presentation of images in a self-referential manner has given way to a variety of believable and unique characters. Many of these characters are part of what we now consider a cut-and-paste culture of integrating previous styles as their own style. Characters and representation have a basis that goes back further than the history of aesthetics; they have wandered their way through art history, and now are moving further into visualization culture, and daily reality. Images of characters begin with the simple idea of depicting ourselves, and exploring our potential. The most recent trends of computer graphics and a push further into pop culture, vacuous or immersive environments, integrated environments with our daily lives, and interactive environments will call for what I believe to be an even greater exaggeration, distortion, of reality. While the techniques and materials are changing; the ideas are the same, to push the content to where it has not been before, to take the character one step ahead of us. Let the games begin…

Yauger Williams, Assistant Professor at Texas A&M University, College of Architecture
M.F.A., University of California Berkeley, 2000,
Areas of interest: Web; 3D and modern art with a focus on the art historical contextualization of new media; multi-media communication and expression.