

Representing Social Judgement Through Visual Metaphors and Character Performance in Stylized 3D Character Animation

Research Question

How can visual metaphors and character performance be used to represent social judgement in stylized 3D character animation?

Keywords

Visual Metaphor; Character Performance; Stylized 3D Character Animation; Social Judgement; Social Labelling; Symbolic Representation; Visual Storytelling; Character Acting; Animation Aesthetics; Animation and Social Commentary.

Draft Introduction

Animation has long been recognised as a storytelling medium capable of expressing ideas that are difficult to represent through live action. Through stylization, exaggeration and symbolic visual language, animation transforms abstract emotions, psychological experiences and social concepts into tangible visual experiences, allowing audiences to engage with complex meanings beyond literal representation.

One increasingly common social experience is social judgement. Individuals are frequently classified based on initial impressions or incomplete knowledge, resulting in preconceptions that shape identity, behavior, and interpersonal interactions. Although these judgements remain

invisible, they can generate anxiety, hesitation and emotional pressure that shape everyday social interaction.

Stylized 3D character animation offers a unique opportunity to externalise these experiences through symbolic representation. Abstract concepts such as judgement or social pressure can become physical objects or environmental changes, while character performance including posture, facial expression, gesture and timing communicates their emotional consequences.

Despite extensive research on symbolism and character acting, limited attention has been given to how these elements function together to represent social judgement. This research addresses that gap through a practice-based investigation culminating in an original stylized 3D animated short film.

The film follows a young protagonist meeting his partner's friends for the first time. During casual conversation, symbolic labels gradually appear and attach themselves to his body. As these labels accumulate, they become increasingly heavy, transforming ordinary interaction into a visual metaphor for the emotional burden of social judgement.

Draft Literature Review

1. Visual Metaphors and Symbolic Representation

Visual metaphors convert abstract ideas into visual forms of representation, allowing viewers to find meaning from symbolic images rather than verbal explanation (Lakoff and Johnson, 1980; Zhang, 2022).

Animation extends this process by transforming invisible emotions and psychological experiences into visible and dynamic elements (Wells, 1998; Furniss, 2016) .

Within the framework of animated storytelling, symbolic objects, the transformation of the environment, and exaggerated visual effects are used in order to convey the ideas of identity, anxiety and isolation rather than relying on literal representation (Fišer et al., 2017).

Rather than explaining emotions directly, these techniques encourage audiences to experience them through visual interpretation (Wells, 1998; Furniss, 2016).

For this research, visual metaphor serves as the primary storytelling mechanism through which social judgement becomes visible. The accumulation of labels eventually becomes a physical weight, resulting in a visual metaphor of the intangible psychological weight that comes from interpersonal assumptions. This approach is based on current studies while expanding upon them by applying visual metaphor to the representation of interpersonal social judgment.

2. Character Performance in Animation

Character performance is fundamental to animated storytelling because audiences connect with movement, posture, facial expression and gesture (Hooks, 2017; Williams, 2012).

Performance communicates internal emotional states while strengthening audience empathy and narrative engagement (Thomas and Johnston, 1981; Fonseca, 2015).

Within this project, performance reinforces visual metaphor. As symbolic labels increase, the protagonist's posture lowers, movement slows and hesitation becomes more apparent. These gradual physical changes communicate the emotional effects of judgement while supporting the symbolic visual language established throughout the narrative (Hooks, 2017; Fonseca, 2015) .

3. Stylized 3D Animation as Expressive Storytelling

Stylized animation emphasizes expressive communication rather than realism, enabling creators to manipulate movement, color, and environmental design to strengthen narrative meaning (Wells, 1998; Fišer et al., 2017) .

Simplifying and exaggerating the chosen visual aspects allows stylization to draw attention to emotional and intellectual rather than physical realism (Fišer et al., 2017; Furniss, 2016).

This approach gives stylized 3D animation particular potential in portraying invisible processes in society. Previous studies suggest that animation can communicate complex psychological and social experiences through symbolic storytelling that extends beyond children's entertainment (Agoha, 2018; Wells, 2002).

In this study, the physical heaviness of symbolic labels is used to transform an ordinary conversation into a metaphorical visualization of interpersonal judgment.

4. Research Gap

Existing research has extensively explored visual metaphors, symbolic storytelling and character performance as individual aspects of animation studies (Wells, 1998; Wells, 2002; Hooks, 2017).

However, relatively little attention has been given to how visual metaphors and character performance operate together to represent social judgement within stylized 3D character animation. Furthermore, few studies examine how interpersonal experiences such as labelling and rapid categorisation can be externalised through symbolic visual language (Agoha, 2018).

This research addresses that gap through a practice-based investigation that combines theoretical analysis with the production of an original animated short film. By integrating symbolic imagery with expressive character performance, the study aims to demonstrate animation's unique ability to communicate complex social experiences through visual storytelling.

Research Methods Outline

This research adopts a qualitative practice-based methodology that combines theoretical research with creative production. Literature review, case study analysis, visual analysis and reflective practice will be used to investigate how visual metaphors and character performance represent social judgement within stylized 3D animation.

The literature review establishes the theoretical framework surrounding symbolism, visual storytelling and animated performance, while selected animated films and short animations

provide case studies for analysing symbolic objects, environmental transformation and character acting.

Visual analysis examines how composition, movement and spatial relationships communicate meaning beyond dialogue. These findings directly inform the practical component of the project.

The practical outcome is an original stylized 3D animated short film in which symbolic labels gradually attach themselves to the protagonist and become increasingly heavy, influencing posture, movement and behaviour while the surrounding environment becomes quieter and more isolated. Following production, reflective evaluation will assess how effectively visual metaphors and character performance communicate the emotional experience of social judgement.

General Outline of Each Chapter

Introduction

Introduces the research context, defines social judgement as an invisible interpersonal experience and explains the significance of visual metaphors and character performance within stylized animation.

Chapter One: Visual Metaphors and Symbolic Representation

Covers theories of symbolism & visual metaphor, concentrating on the use of animation to interpret abstract ideas visually.

Chapter Two: Character Performance and Emotional Communication

Investigates posture, gesture, facial expression and movement as tools for communicating psychological states and strengthening audience engagement.

Chapter Three: The Representation of Social Judgement Using Stylised Animation

Combines visual metaphors and character performance through theoretical considerations and case study analysis to lay the foundations of the practical project.

Chapter Four: Practice-Based Research

Documents the development of the original animated short film and evaluates how symbolic visual language and character performance communicate social judgement through creative practice.

Conclusion

Summarizes the findings and evaluates the impact of practice-based research on modern animation studies and symbolic storytelling.

Draft Chapter

Chapter One: Visual Metaphors and Symbolic Representation in Stylized 3D Character Animation

Animation has the power of bringing out the invisible experiences of psychology and social interaction in a symbolic way. Through stylization and exaggeration, animation makes emotions

and interpersonal dynamics visually apparent, allowing the audience to interact with ideas that are not already apparent.

Visual metaphor serves as an expression system rather than attractive visuals, allowing people to understand emotional experiences without utilizing descriptive words. Stylized animation uses visual language to symbolically portray meaning and emotions rather than to recreate reality. By employing visual language, they enhance the audience's ability to interpret and understand abstract concepts.

The practical part of this research involves social judgment. Every single assumption that other characters have about the protagonist is conveyed through symbols in the form of labels. The labels, at first, are merely temporary labels, which indicate that these assumptions have been formed in the course of normal social interactions but when the number of assumptions increase, the labels transform into permanent ones.

Character performance reinforces this visual metaphor through increasingly restricted movement, lowered posture and slower timing, allowing the audience to experience the emotional consequences of judgement through physical behaviour. However, the surrounding environment becomes increasingly silent and isolated, visually representing increasing societal pressure experienced by the protagonist.

Although it lacks explicit social commentary, the animation allows viewers to understand the protagonist's experiences through simple observation. This shows how social judgment can be conveyed successfully using visual metaphor alongside stylized 3D character animation.

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