

## **How to personify non-human characters in animation?**

### **Abstract**

In addition to human characters, more and more various non-human characters are designed to be personified in order to increase the interest, creativity and variety of animation. Anthropomorphism gives humans' characteristics to non-human characters who usually have no thoughts or feelings. They can have appearance, expressions, body language and humanity. This critical report focuses on how to personify non-human characters in animation. The personification of non-human characters requires special design of their appearance, expressions and body movements according to human characteristics. At the same time, anthropomorphic character design will allow non-human characters to have human nature, sensitive psychological activities and thoughts.

### **Key Words**

Anthropomorphic design, Non-human characters, Appearance design, Expressions, Body language, Human nature, Psychological activities

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## 1. Introduction (86)

Characters are performers in an animated movie. People, animals, plants or inanimate objects can be performers. In the animation, the anthropomorphic approaches bestow non-human characters with humans' characteristics, and make them more lively. The anthropomorphic style allows animators to create more touching stories, and deepen the emotional communication between the animation and the audience. Therefore, anthropomorphic approaches have become more and more crucial to create non-human characters in animation. Personifying non-human characters mainly involves the anthropomorphic design of their appearance, expressions, body language and human nature.

## 2. Literature Review (358)

This critical report discusses how to personify non-human characters in animation from aspects of appearance, expressions, body language and humanity. In *Zootopia* (*Zootopia*, 2016), there are 64 different animal characters in total. The designers added human-like features to each animal so that they could move and speak freely like humans. Therefore, the animal character design of this animation is a very persuasive source to analyze how to reasonably design the natural anthropomorphic appearance of animal characters. Bliss also analyzed some examples of such anthropomorphic appearance design in *Redefining the anthropomorphic animal in animation*, and believes that anthropomorphic design can strengthen the emotional connection with the audience (Bliss, 2016, p. 32).

Moreover, anthropomorphic non-human characters cannot just have a human-like

appearance. They still need to be able to make human expressions and actions. Keum-hi Mun's Personification of a Cat Robot Design for Early Treatment of Children with Developmental Disorders specifically analyzed the anthropomorphic design of animal shaped robot (Mun, 2014, p. 108). Although the animal shaped robot is not an animated character, it is also a personified product character, and same with anthropomorphic non-human characters in animation. There are similarities between Wall-E and Keum-hi Mun's article. The robot Wall-E (WALL-E, 2008), the protagonist of the animation, cleans up the earth's garbage and tries his best to make the earth a better place. Although it is a robot, its eyes, expression and behavior are just like a human being.

In addition, the overall important characteristic of human beings is their humanity. When non-human characters are humanized, it's easy for the audience to empathize with them. In Yan and Garzia's A project entitled Anthropomorphic Animal Characters in Disney Animated Films: The Representations and Impositions of Human Nature, they explore the inseparable relationship between human nature and animals, and the influence of anthropomorphic animal characters in animation (Yan & Garzia, 2020, p. 5). The Secret Life of Pets successfully portrays animal characters with different personalities (The Secret Life of Pets, 2016). At the same time, they also have different human nature, like human beings live in the human's world, even want to take revenge on humans. Personalizing non-human characters makes them more lively.

### 3. Anthropomorphic appearance design (375)

In the aspect of designing non-human characters in animation, the

anthropomorphic methods have unique advantages which can not be ignored. The anthropomorphic design can skillfully make the appearance of the non-human characters similar to that of humans. As a result, these characters will become lively, lovely, rich in interest, and give people a sense of intimacy. According to Bliss's analysis, in order to create a sympathetic talking animal character, Chicken Run's chickens were designed to keep the appearance of chicken, but have human-like teeth and legs that bend and move like human legs, based on the physical characteristics of humans. The audience can empathize with the characters' movements such as speaking and walking (Bliss, 2016, p. 32).



*Fig. 1 Chicken Run, DreamWorks Pictures (2000)*

When designers create animal characters, European and American animation studios usually keep the original shape of animals, then add features of human's appearance onto the characters. In Zootopia (Zootopia, 2016), The designers implanted

humans' unique attributes into animal characters, such as humans' figures, wearings and jobs, used animals to be main characters, and built a large, interesting and anthropomorphic modern animal world completely based on the setting of human society. On the basis of maintaining the appearance characteristics of the animals, animators let all the animals walk upright, just like humans walking. The hind limbs of a quadrupedal animal became legs for walking. Their forelimbs were arms and hands which they could flexibly use. At the same time, the designer gave each animal eyebrows that the animals were not born with, and also simulated humans' teeth and eye expressions to achieve a better anthropomorphic effect.



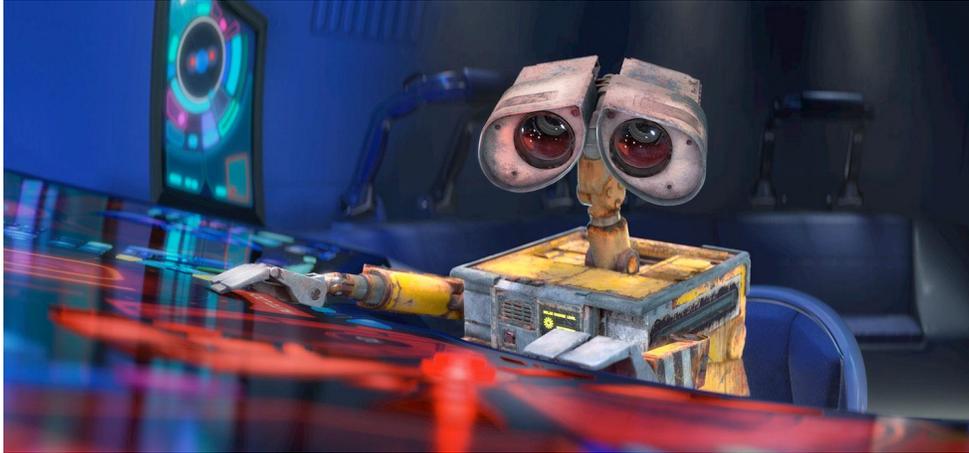
*Fig. 2 Art of Zootopia, Walt Disney Animation Studios (2019)*

Furthermore, While designing non-human characters' anthropomorphic appearance, designers need to add the characteristics of the human body according to

the real personality and features of the characters. In Zootopia, the hot-tempered police chief was modeled depending on the African buffalo. By combining the character's fiery temperament, the designer exaggerated his horns, strengthened his muscles and put him in a close-fitting police uniform. Therefore, he was shown as a tough guy who was just a brave and unselfish chief-police in the animation. This kind of animal characters' anthropomorphic design can effectively change the audiences' stereotypical impression of the old stereotypical animal characters. Through this anthropomorphic method, animals can also live like humans in animation.

#### 4. Anthropomorphic expressions and body language (344)

Moreover, in addition to adding human physical features to the appearance of non-human characters, character designers can also personify the expressions and body language of non-human characters. The human face can show an infinite number of very subtle expressions. Facial expressions and movements change very quickly, agile and meticulous, and can truly and accurately reflect emotions and convey information. Keum-hi Mun stated that the facial expression of an animal robot needs to imitate the facial expression and work of humans because the facial expression of animals is different from that of humans. Therefore, the audience can sympathize with the animal robot and have a good impression (Mun, 2014, p. 108). Non-human animated characters can also effectively convey a variety of emotions and moods by simulating human expressions and body language, showing their own personalities and attracting the audience's attention. Pixar's WALL-E features an anthropomorphic robot named Wall-E who can't talk (WALL-E, 2008).



*Fig. 3 Wall· E, Disney Pixar (2008)*

Although WALL · E did not have anthropomorphic facial features that allowed him to make visible facial expressions, he did have large, watery eyes. These eyes are his only means of expressing emotions and communicating to the audience. Because its eyes highly imitate human eyes, and can make some subtle expressions, the character designer will successfully create a pure, kind, persistent, timid anthropomorphic image. It is also the biggest highlight of the animation, which can tightly grasp the hearts of the audience.



*Fig. 4 Wall· E, Disney Pixar (2008)*

Meanwhile, since he doesn't have the exaggerated facial expressions that humans do, viewers can only guess what he's thinking through anthropomorphic body movements and electronic sounds. Wall · E would rub his little hands together to show that he didn't know what to do, and cover his eyes to show that he was scared. This action design succeeded in making an old little robot with a human personality and emotions. Wall · E could not express his thoughts through words, but he could convey his emotions through his eyes and body language. This kind of emotion goes beyond words, and the robot's silent performance can be shared by the audience.

#### 5. Human nature of non-human characters (391)

In addition, not only does the anthropomorphic method simply make non-human characters wear human clothes, walk and talk like human beings, but it also can make them possess the characteristics of human nature. Yan and Garzia presented that adding the weaknesses of human nature to animal characters can make them be more like humans. Simba from the Lion King is a telling example. Because of his father Mufasa's death, his pride and inflated self-esteem were replaced by self-blame and self-doubt (Yan & Garzia, 2020, p. 5). A little rabbit called Snow Ball in the Secret Life of Pets also can support this point (The Secret Life of Pets, 2016). The designers didn't use anthropomorphic design to change the rabbit's appearance, but personified its personality emphatically, which is fierce in appearance but soft in heart. Snow Ball was the leader of the abandoned animals in New York City. It always wanted to fight against all human beings, and save the animal world since it was abandoned by its own owner. The rabbit never really wanted to revenge the human society although it always

presented that it was anti-social and anti-human.



*Fig. 5 The Secret Life of Pets, Universal Pictures (2016)*

In the end of the film (*The Secret Life of Pets*, 2016, 01:16:05), Snow Ball was found by a little girl when it incited its members to carry out revenge activities against human beings. When the little girl held the rabbit, it still tried to fight and get free. But it relented because the little girl said, "rabbit, I will love you forever". Actually, it only wanted a kind pet owner to accompany it, and will never abandon it. The rabbit's personality was a child in a psychological rebellious phase to fight against the injustice of fate, but it was also eager for love. As a result, in addition to anthropomorphic appearance, letting non-human characters have human nature is also an anthropomorphic approach. As Yan and Grazia pointed out, this way can show different kinds of human nature, and effectively make the audience connect themselves with the

characters in the works as they possibly have the same personality. Audiences tend to see their own shadows from animation's characters. Then there is an emotional connection between audiences and the characters, thus causing changes in the audiences' psychological feelings. Therefore, some viewers may think about their rebellious period when they see Snow Ball.

## 6. Conclusion (47)

In conclusion, anthropomorphic methods are indispensable to be used in animation. Animators can personify non-human characters through designing anthropomorphic appearance and giving characters human nature. By this means, the animation will become more appealing and make the audience resonate with the characters and stories in the animation.

Word Count: 1601

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## 8. Filmography

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## 9. List of figures

Fig. 1 DreamWorks Pictures. *Chicken Run*. (2000) Available at:

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Fig. 2 Walt Disney Animation Studios. *Art of Zootopia*. (2019) Available at:

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Fig. 3 Disney Pixar. *Wall· E*. (2008) Available at:

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Fig. 4 Disney Pixar. *Wall· E*. (2008) Available at:

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Fig. 5 Universal Pictures. *The Secret Life of Pets*. (2016) Available at:

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