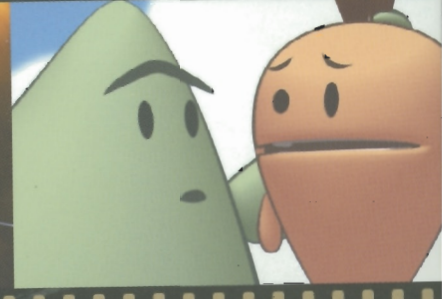


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inspired  
3D SHORT FILM PRODUCTION



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## chapter 3

# Character Development and Design

**M**any scholars agree that a story's ability to attract and hold an audience is more a result of strong character development than strong plot progression. It can easily be argued that all memorable films contain memorable characters. Where would *The Godfather* be without Don Corleone? Or *The Wizard of Oz* without the Scarecrow? A *memorable* character is believable, relatable, and interesting. And a *well-developed* character will successfully channel the emotional impact of the events of your story to your audience.

It has been said that there are only a few basic storylines. However, an infinite number of variations exist through the introduction of new characters with unique points of views into this otherwise finite group of plots and scenarios.

Some short films of the fine arts or especially abstract variety, such as Hitoshi Akayama's *Garden of the Metal*, don't require any actual characters in order to provide an audience with engaging entertainment value. However, if your intention is to create an animated short that tells a story, you'll likely need at least one living, breathing, thinking protagonist. Audiences expect to *identify* with or at least be *interested* in the main characters of the films they enjoy. One or both of these character-audience connections is crucial to an engaging character-based narrative. If the viewer sees recognizable features of your main character and can relate to his attitude and behavior, this connection will be well established. However, relatable character traits are not always absolutely necessary. Your protagonist might look and behave in ways that are entirely misunderstood or completely alien to your viewers, but if he or she is sufficiently interesting, your audience will still feel compelled to watch the story unfold. Concern, curiosity, or preferably both is what you ultimately want from your viewers.

Furthermore, it is not necessarily important, nor even desirable, for your audience members to actually *like* all of your characters. When creating a villain, of course, you often want your audience to fear, dislike, or distrust him. Such characters that we love to hate include Darth Vader, The Grinch, Vic Vinyl from Phil McNally's *Pump Action*, and Raf Anzovin's puppet master (see Figure 3.1). Remember that in order to connect your audience to your characters, sympathy is optional but empathy and interest are essential.

Live action films have a decided advantage over animated films when it comes to creating audience-character connections. Assuming that the main characters are human, audiences will automatically identify with the cast members of a live action film because they can safely presume certain shared attributes

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“What is your name?  
 What is your quest?  
 What is your favorite color?”  
*Monty Python and the Holy Grail*

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**Figure 3.1**  
A villain should inspire an appropriate negative reaction from your audience.

and motivations. When creating animated film characters, however, this connection cannot merely be assumed; it must be effectively constructed through design, behavior, and/or dialogue. No matter how realistic your attempt, all animated characters stray from absolute realism by some degree. And most, in fact, are significantly different from their live human or non-human counterparts. Regardless of the species and abstraction level of your main characters, you must establish a connection between them and your audience. To do this effectively, you must give your characters some familiar or identifiably human attributes and goals (see Figure 3.2). Buzz Lightyear is a toy, Stuart Little is a mouse, and Shrek is a monster. However, all of these non-human characters have familiar and relatable traits and desires. Buzz wants identity and respect, Stuart wants to belong to a nice family, and Shrek just wants to be left alone.

### Character Styles

The characters in your short film can be humans, animals, anthropomorphized toys or vehicles, vegetables, minerals, spiritual entities, or aliens—or they can defy any standard classification whatsoever. You might choose to make them highly realistic, stylized, idealized, exaggerated, caricatured, abstract, or symbolic (see Figures 3.3 through 3.7).



**Figure 3.2**  
Even anthropomorphic, abstract, cartoony, or fantastical characters need to have a few familiar human attributes, needs, desires, and behaviors.



**Figure 3.3**  
Semi-real, cartoony, and abstract humans



**Figure 3.4**  
Realistic, cartoony, and abstract animals



Figure 3.5  
Realistic, cartoony, and abstract monsters

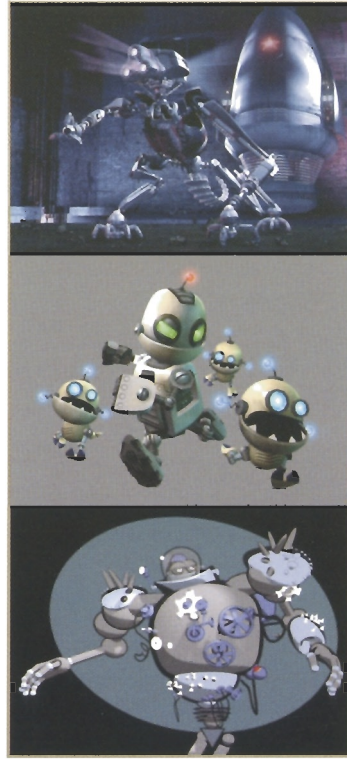


Figure 3.6  
Realistic and cartoony robots



Figure 3.7  
Realistic, cartoony, and abstract minerals and vegetables

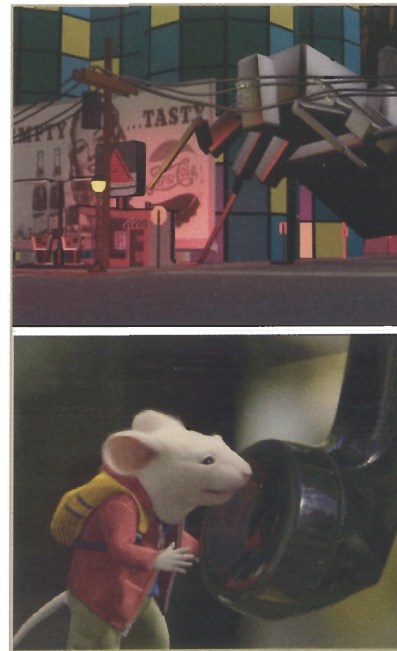


Figure 3.8  
A character can be a design hybrid, like a robot-alien-insect, or an anomaly hybrid, like Stuart Little, whose appearance is that of a mouse, but whose behavior, posture, dialogue, and dress code are that of a human.

Table 3.1 shows a handy matrix used to classify 3D story characters by genre and style.

Most narrative characters can find an appropriate spot in Table 3.1. Some characters, of course, are hybrids, combining elements from two or more genres. Jimmy Neutron's best friend, Goddard, is a robot dog, and Stuart Little can be considered a hybrid because he looks like a mouse but walks, talks, and dresses like a human (see Figure 3.8). Although mixing genres in a single character can be quite interesting, mixing styles rarely leads to appealing results. Introducing

**Table 3.1 Genre/Style Chart**

<i>Genre/Style</i>	<i>Real or Semi-Real</i>	<i>Abstract or Cartoony</i>
Human	Aki from <i>Final Fantasy</i> The baby from <i>Tin Toy</i> The old man from <i>Geris' Game</i> The girl from <i>Respire</i>	Woody from <i>Toy Story</i> <i>Major Damage</i> The blue boy from Keith Lango's <i>Lunch</i> The couple from <i>Polygon Family</i>
Animal	The protagonist from PDI's <i>Bunny</i> Falcon from <i>Stuart Little 2</i> The prehistoric beasts from <i>Dinosaur</i>	Scratch from <i>Ice Age</i> Our feathered friends from <i>For the Birds</i> Cubicle from <i>Squaring Off</i> The Antz The tadpoles from <i>Early Bloomer</i>
Aliens, monsters, and mythological creatures	The bugs from <i>Starship Troopers</i> Draco from <i>Dragonheart</i> Gollum from <i>The Lord of the Rings</i>	Shrek Sulley and Wazowski from <i>Monsters, Inc.</i> <i>The Chubb Chubbs</i> The dragon from <i>Top Gum</i>
Machines and robots	<i>Luxo Jr.</i> <i>The Iron Giant</i> The robot from <i>Dronez</i>	B.E.N. from <i>Treasure Planet</i> Clank from the game <i>Ratchet &amp; Clank</i>
Food, minerals, and other inanimate objects	<i>Horses on Mars</i> The leaf from <i>Alma</i> The carpet from Disney's <i>Aladdin</i> <i>Bunkee &amp; Booboo</i> The hero from <i>Coffee Love</i>	The California Raisins <i>Killer Bean</i> Archibald Asparagus from <i>Veggie Tales</i> The characters in <i>Bert</i> Hew and Kew from <i>Das Rad</i>
Too abstract to classify	<i>Rolie Polie Olie</i>	The 7-Up "Dot" <i>Poor Bogo</i>

abstract or cartoony elements into an otherwise realistic character design generally looks more odd than creative (see Figure 3.9). An exception might be when the opposing elements are particularly stylized, as in the mixing of cartoony heads and more realistic bodies in many Japanese Anime films. Furthermore, the line that separates semi-real from abstract is sometimes a bit blurry. The original video game version of Lara Croft is certainly idealized, but should she be considered semi-real, or are her proportions so exaggerated that she should fall under the category of a cartoon?

Consider the advantages and disadvantages of different character styles, as discussed in Table 3.2.

Be sure that the style of your character works with the genre of your film (see Figure 3.10). Imagine the loss of effectiveness if the characters in dark, poignant morality pieces, such as *f8* or *Balance*, were cute, goofy bunnies with enormous eyeballs and yellow polka-dotted bowties. Similarly, if you plan to drop anvils on life-like human characters without causing any real or permanent damage, you run the risk of confusing your audience with inconsistent internal logic. Cartoon physics generally works best on cartoon characters.

Sometimes it is indeed appropriate and quite fun to apply cartoon logic to human characters: however, such rule breaking is usually only acceptable if your piece is a particularly wacky comedy in the style of *The Three Stooges* or Hiroshi Chida's *Polygon Family*.

## Character Types

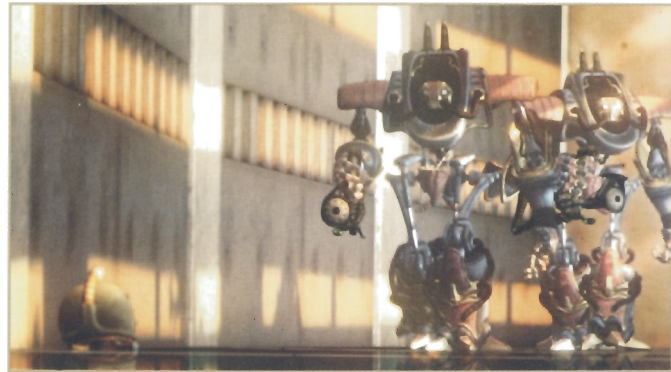
Every character in your story will ultimately fall under one of the following classifications, listed in order of story importance:

1. Protagonist
2. Partners, sidekicks, antagonists, and objects of desire
3. Supporting roles
4. Minor characters
5. Extras

The most important (or perhaps the only) character in your story is called the *protagonist*. However, assuming your story has multiple characters, the protagonist doesn't necessarily have to be the first one you invent or introduce. It might be desirable to start with your antagonist. After all, he is the one who will very likely create your story's central conflict. Sometimes it is easier to create a hero when his source of antagonism has already been established. Similarly, you might invent an interesting or amusing character who turns out to be more appropriate as a sidekick or a vice president. His particular attributes might even help determine those of his boss.



**Figure 3.9**  
Mixing realistic and cartoony styles within the same character will tend to look odd, rather than uniquely imaginative.



**Figure 3.10**  
In general, the style of your characters should feel appropriate to the genre of your film. A dark, tragic science fiction tale such as *f8* works well with fairly realistic robotic villains.

**Table 3.2 Pros and Cons of Character Styles**

<i>Style</i>	<i>Pros</i>	<i>Cons</i>
Realistic characters, especially humans	Immediate relatability. Easy to find and study reference material.	Your audience will expect subtle, realistic movement, which is the most difficult form of animation.
Slightly caricatured characters	Close connection with reality, therefore relatively direct relatability. A bit more creative license allowed when it comes to exaggerating behavior and stylizing animation.	Sometimes difficult to find just the right balance between realism and imagination when developing nearly lifelike characters. If the behavior of such a character is too realistic, perhaps there was no good reason to exaggerate him in the first place. If you exaggerate him too much, his behavior and movement will run the risk of being inconsistent with his design.
Cartoon characters	The greatest opportunities for creativity and exaggeration. You can and should feel encouraged to invent your own rules of proportions, symmetry, physics, gravity, and timing; your audience won't expect perfect realism and subtlety from your animations.	Creating unique and appealing cartoon characters is not as simple as it looks. Too much exaggeration can lose all connection with reality. Not enough might just look freakish. It is also sometimes difficult to maintain audience connection with such characters because their designs will stray significantly from real life. Therefore, you must make their behavior sufficiently identifiable and expressive.
Abstract characters	Anything goes. Feel free to break every rule of realism in the book.	Such characters will have the most difficult time establishing an immediate connection with your viewers. Believable movement and behavior will be crucial.

### Character Type 1: The Protagonist

The main character in a story is the protagonist (or hero). Although the word “hero” generally implies an individual who is willing to sacrifice for the good of others, we are using the term a bit more loosely to simply refer to any character who strives to overcome a dilemma or a conflict. The protagonist is the person who most directly interacts with the story’s central conflict, journey, or punch line, and he is the character the audience is expected to follow, identify with, or care about the most. With very few exceptions, every story has a single main character. Even in buddy films, one partner is always a bit more dominant than the other. In *Monsters, Inc.* and the short *Das Rad*, Sulley and the smaller rock, Kew, respectively, are slightly more dominant if only because their character arcs are more significant (see Figure 3.11). While ensemble films like *Crimes and Misdemeanors*, *Magnolia*, and Supinfocom’s *Tom the Cat* have multiple and seemingly equal protagonists, these movies are collections of individual stories, and each one indeed has a single main character.

Protagonists are rarely perfect or all-powerful. Most have a flaw or two—an Achilles heel, a significant fear, or an obsession of some sort. This is generally necessary to establish believability because, after all, nobody’s perfect. Furthermore, protagonists are not always heroes. If a protagonist’s flaws dominate his personality, he becomes an antihero. The audience still sympathizes or empathizes with him; however, society would label him as an outlaw or at least a social misfit. Wile E. Coyote is one of the all-time great animated antiheroes. We empathize with his hunger and sympathize with his stupidity, but he is, after all, the villain. Other examples include Leon from *The Professional*, Robin Hood, and Shrek. Thieves often make for interesting antiheroes because they have needs and desires just like the rest of us and they come in a variety of types, including pickpockets, cat burglars, complex heist leaders, crooked politicians, or corporate swindlers. Also, protagonist film thieves usually don’t intentionally cause physical harm to their victims, so they are easier to like. The best way to turn a criminal into a sympathetic protagonist is by making *his* enemies even bigger scoundrels (*Payback*, *Ocean’s 11*, and Supinfocom’s *AP2000*).

There are many other types of heroes as well—unwilling heroes, who are compelled or forced into action despite their fears, laziness, or better judgement (Dorothy or Luke Skywalker); unsung heroes, who remain somewhat anonymous while others gain from their deeds (Aaron Altman from *Broadcast News*); tragic heroes, who suffer significantly for their triumphs (Maximus from *Gladiator* and Alberto Giacometti from *Eternal Gaze*); catalyst heroes, who don’t necessarily change or grow themselves, but instead improve the lives of those around them (Monty Brogan from *25th Hour*); superheroes, who have powers or skills beyond those of mere mortals (Spiderman or Major Damage); and underdogs, who beat the odds (Rocky or Supinfocom’s *Sarah*) (see Figure 3.12).



**Figure 3.11**  
Even in buddy films, one of the two partners nearly always has a more significant character arc, thus qualifying him as the singular protagonist.



**Figure 3.12**  
There are many types of heroes. Alberto Giacometti is portrayed as a tragic hero in Sam Chen’s award-winning *Eternal Gaze*. Another common hero type is the underdog, exemplified by the little girl in Supinfocom’s *Sarah*.



## Character Type 2: Nearly Equal Partners, Antagonists, and Objects of Desire

Many short films require only a single character. Such simplicity has obvious time, budget, and technical advantages to the individual filmmaker or the small team. However, a second character of nearly equal importance to the protagonist is very often necessary:

This category represents the second most significant character in a story—assuming, of course, that more than one exists. Such number twos generally fall into one of the following three classifications:

- Partner, buddy, or teammate
- ◆ Antagonist
- Object of desire

### The Partner, Buddy, or Teammate

This character, often only slightly less significant than the protagonist himself, directly contributes to the resolution of the story's central conflict. Laurel had Hardy; Riggs had Murtaugh (*Lethal Weapon*); and Dan Bransfield's Fishman has his patient sidekick (see Figure 3.13). Rarely are a protagonist and his partner of exactly equal significance. The protagonist virtually always has either a bit more screen time or a more significant character arc. And it is almost an absolute rule that the buddy must have a remarkably distinct personality from that of the protagonist. Lennie and George (*Of Mice and Men*), Cates and Hammond (*48 Hours*), and Lilo and Stitch are almost complete opposites; however, they generally share a common goal. One is often the straight man to the other, more comedic role (Martin and Lewis, Shrek and Donkey). If you create two main characters who have basically the same traits and personalities, consider the possibility of simplifying your story by combining them into a single character. A protagonist might also have a group of teammates, each with nearly equivalent significance, such as the Marx Brothers or the members of *Ocean's 11*. Furthermore, the teammates are not always there by choice, nor do they necessarily agree with the protagonist (*Saving Private Ryan*). Regardless of the number or willingness of the partners, they are always at least slightly less dominant than the protagonist.

### The Antagonist

More often than not, the second most important character in a story is the antagonist—an opposing force that might be human, animal, monster, or machine. A story's antagonist can also be a non-character element like time or Mother Nature. Antagonists might be full-blown villains who create the central conflict by stealing the gem, kidnapping the princess, or threatening the planet, or they might be mere opponents who compete against the protagonist for a trophy, a dog biscuit, a love interest, or a courtroom judgment. The element that generally distinguishes a villain from a mere opponent is that a villain usually hopes to harm or destroy the protagonist, while an opponent simply wants to win the prize or reach the finish line sooner.



**Figure 3.13**  
The second most significant character in a film is often the sidekick, like Fishman's trusty partner, shown here.

Remember that just **as heroes** are usually not flawless, villains are usually not all bad. Often they are quite generous and loving to their families, partners, henchmen, or pets. **It is often** desirable to **give** your villains some sympathetic qualities so your audience will **accept** their motivations, and it is not a bad idea to create a villain whom your audience will partially envy, even if they'd rather not admit it. Despite our associated fear or **disgust**, most of us would probably love **to be** as brilliant as Hannibal Lecter or as powerful as Saruman.

Opposing forces **must be powerful** or evil enough to represent a significant and interesting **challenge** for the protagonist (see Figure 3.14). If a tennis ace plays against an **extremely** inferior opponent, the game won't be very exciting. Similarly, if your villain is easily **defeated**, **your story won't be** especially climactic or memorable. The more powerful the antagonist, the greater the triumph.

Many villains are obvious bad guys and can easily be identified as such because they display fangs, exposed weaponry, angry dispositions, or especially nasty behavior. However, many of the most sinister villains are demons hiding behind seemingly benevolent or even philanthropic guises. Examples of such wolves in sheep's clothing are Norman Osborn (aka the Green Goblin) and The T1000 from *Terminator 2: Judgement Day*.

It is usually undesirable to have multiple villains in the same story unless they are partners in crime, teams of outlaws, or one is a non-human element, such as a sinking ship mixed with a villainous fiancé (*Titanic*). And unless they are simply psychotic like Norman Bates or sadistic like Vic Vinyl from Phil McNally's *Pump Action*, villains must have logical motivations for their evil deeds. In a short film, however, it is not always necessary to provide this information to your audience. In fact, often you simply won't have time to do so. However, it is usually a good idea for you to know where your bad guys are coming from, even if you don't let your audience in on the secret.

Common human villainous motivations are greed (Big Al from *Toy Story*), power (Dr. Evil in the *Austin Powers* movies), revenge (*Cape Fear*), jealousy (*Fatal Attraction*), and prejudice (*Mississippi Burning*). Common animal and monster motivations are hunger (*Jaws*), territoriality (*For the Birds*), and species preservation (*Alien*).

Remember that most villains see themselves as heroes. **Even** the most sinister antagonists often believe they are in the right. Badness and goodness are relative—they depend on your point of view and the **comparative** maliciousness of each **opposing** force.

### The Object of Desire

The third category for character number two is **the person waiting on the other side of the conflict**—the kidnapped princess, **the injured father** trapped in a mineshaft, or the elusive love interest (see Figure 3.15). The **protagonist** must reach, obtain, entice, or **rescue** this character in order for them to live happily ever after.

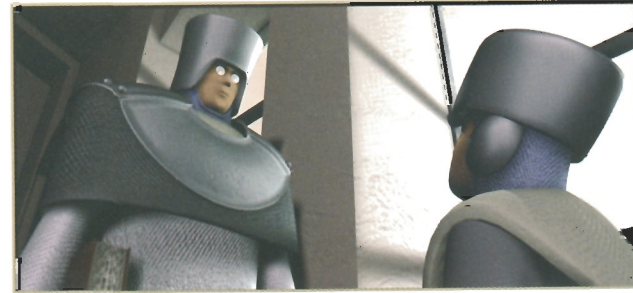


Figure 3.14  
The force of antagonism must be sufficiently threatening.



Figure 3.15  
The elusive love interest

### Character Type 3: Supporting Roles

Very often, stories will contain secondary characters who assist or impede the conflict resolution, but not at the same level of significance as the partner or the villain. The archetypal mentor is one such character, as are the seven dwarves, the trusted canine companion, the wacky neighbor, or the enemy's henchman. If your main character is a villain, his victims can probably be appropriately classified as supporting roles. If one of them happens to escape or perhaps defeat your villainous main character, the former victim might indeed graduate to the role of a full-fledged antagonist, even though he will probably be seen as the good guy.

### Character Type 4: Minor Characters

Sometimes a few additional characters crop up to sell weaponry, offer brief advice, guard the castle gates, or serve cocktails. These minor roles usually have limited screen time and only marginally assist or temporarily impede the plot's progression or the protagonist's quest. Often they appear to simply give the hero an opportunity to demonstrate a character trait as a result of their interaction.

### Character Type 5: Extras

Characters who merely exist as background noise or perhaps as minor obstacles are often included for realism and detail. Extras typically do not speak or directly interact with the main characters.

## Character Development

Before, during, or after the creation of your story you'll need to spend some time deciding on the specifics of your protagonists, antagonists, supporting players, and background extras with regard to their physical attributes, personalities, motivations, relationships, and arcs. Demonstrating these characteristics and their progressions to your audience is known as *character development*.

### Character Resumes

Before you can successfully describe a character to an audience, it is often helpful to create a resume or biography for him that will indicate physical, historical, social, and psychological specifics. It is generally a good idea for you to know your characters intimately, even if you won't have the time to deeply develop them within the timeframe of your short film. You can easily assemble a character resume by applying the method-acting technique and asking yourself a few questions about the character. A good place to start is by asking, "What is his dominant character trait?" Everybody has one. Perhaps it's shyness, greed, generosity, musical talent, stubbornness, pacifism, obesity, arrogance, fashion sense, or schizophrenia. Selecting a single dominant trait will help guide your character's design and behavior. Other questions will help to round out the details:

- ◆ Where did he come from?
- ◆ How old is he?
- ◆ What does he look like? Is he exceptionally tall? Dangerously skinny?

Keep in mind that protagonists and secondary characters do not necessarily remain static in their classifications. Villains can become partners (my dog, Butch). Partners can turn out to be villains (Denzel Washington in *Training Day*). Mentors might become partners (*The Wedding Planner*). Heroes can fall (Anakin Skywalker), and villains sometimes heroically save the day (Darth Vader).

- ◆ Do people generally like him? Does he have many friends? Enemies?
- ◆ Do you want your audience to like, despise, or fear him?
- ◆ What does he need or desire? What skills does he possess that will help him achieve his goals?
- ◆ What is his biggest fear? Does he have an Achilles heel?
- ◆ What, if anything, does he do for a living? Is he good at what he does?
- ◆ What is his addiction? Alcohol? Coffee? Chocolate?
- ◆ Is he married? Does he have kids?
- ◆ How does he see himself? Is it different than the way his friends or enemies see him?
- ◆ What are his favorite song, color, and ice cream flavor?

While it is certainly not necessary to complicate your task by answering all of these questions, if you wrap your own head around the most significant attributes, history, and motivations of your character, it will be that much easier to deliver this information to your viewers. And the more you know about your characters, the easier time you'll have appending scenes to your story or someday producing a sequel.

When describing a character, use specifics such as Persian rather than cat or crotchety instead of old. If your film is going to have multiple characters, indicate their relationships in their resumes. Also take some time to think about the specifics of your characters' environments. Do they exist in a tranquil forest or a dangerous battlefield? An isolated desert island or a heavily populated big city? A housing project near the train station or a penthouse apartment in Beverly Hills? Where a character lives or operates can significantly influence the specifics of his design and personality.

Because you will ultimately be delivering a film, which is primarily a visual medium, a sketch or a render with a few typed or handwritten notes can make an excellent alternative to a formal resume made up of descriptive text (see Figure 3.16).

Although creating a resume or a bio for your characters is recommended, it is certainly not required. You might choose to keep your piece rather abstract and metaphorical, where a generic character with little or no underlying biographical attributes will be most appropriate. Or perhaps you've designed an especially unique flying dragon and you don't really care about his history or why he is menacing the townspeople and eating all the cows in the village. Perhaps you just want to deliver some exciting flying sequences punctuated with a fierce and explosive confrontation against a powerful and equally one-dimensional wizard.

In a feature film, character history and motivation are important elements for audience connection; however, a short only needs to maintain an audience's attention for a few minutes. Therefore, it is perfectly reasonable to leave out such biographical information and simply deliver a protagonist with a cool

#### RESUME FOR MY DOG, BUTCH

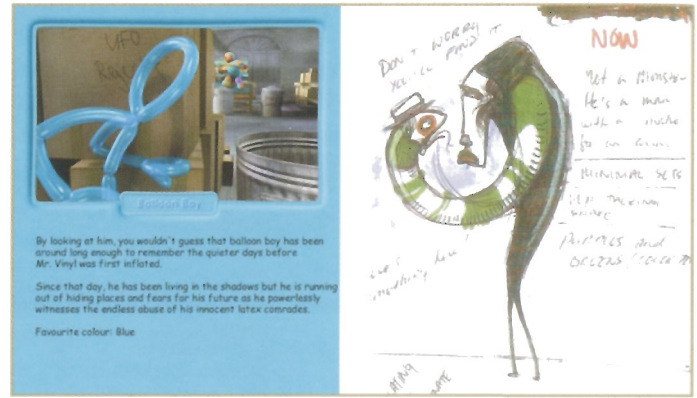
- ◆ **Breed:** Black Labrador.
- ◆ **Color:** Black. (Duh!)
- ◆ **Age:** Seven (or 49 in dog years).
- ◆ **Size:** 28 inches at the shoulder blades.
- ◆ **Weight:** 75 pounds.
- ◆ **Where did he come from?** Not sure. He just showed up at my door one day.
- ◆ **Favorite food:** Fluffy-burgers and apparently my wife's fettuccini alfredo.
- ◆ **Favorite movie:** *Man's Best Friend*.
- ◆ **Least favorite animated short:** *The Cat Came Back*.
- ◆ **Favorite hobby:** Beach Frisbee.
- ◆ **Biggest fear:** Spiders.
- ◆ **Favorite place to sleep:** In front of the refrigerator.
- ◆ **Other:** Generally suspicious of strangers but loves kids. Often dreams about being a member of the fire department. Wishes we would give him Evian instead of tap water.

look and some exciting mannerisms. By the time your audience starts wondering about where your protagonist came from and why he's behaving with such menacing ferocity, your film will be over. Just remember that if you choose to leave out character history and motivation, the design and behavior of your characters or the significant events of your story will need to be particularly unique and compelling to keep your audience engaged.

### Simplicity and Exaggeration

When creating your characters, try to keep them fairly simple in both design and personality. A short animated film is no place for complex characters with lengthy biographies and introspective soliloquies. Choose a few major character traits and explore them sufficiently. Don't arbitrarily add details under the mistaken belief that more is necessarily better. The most important attributes will be the ones that directly relate to your character's behavior within the scope of your actual film. Details can round out characters, but too many can make it difficult to decide how they will react to the events or other characters in your story. Also realize that if you give a character an extreme trait such as a limp or a missing arm, your audience might be distracted from your story while waiting for this abnormality to be explained. Only include such details if they directly or indirectly relate to your story (see Figure 3.17).

Keep in mind that because a short film needs to deliver more in a smaller timeframe, it is often a good idea to exaggerate your characters' most significant traits. If your protagonist is fat, make him obese. If your villain is muscular, make him enormous. If a character is allergic to peanuts, make him deathly allergic. Exaggeration not only increases the clarity of your characterizations, but also allows for a bit more margin of error when it comes to modeling and animation. Audiences will generally forgive the bending of physics rules when they are applied to an exaggerated or caricatured character (see Figure 3.18).



**Figure 3.16**  
A render or drawing with some descriptive notes and questions can work quite well as a character resume.



**Figure 3.17**  
It is often tempting to arbitrarily add details in the interest of making your characters unique or interesting. However, such elements should only be included if they are important to your story or to the reaction you want to inspire from your viewers.



**Figure 3.18**  
It is often a good idea to exaggerate a character's dominant trait. A bumbling thief should be particularly dorky and clumsy, like this fellow from *Egg Cola*.

## Character Development Tools

A filmmaker has four basic tools for developing characters:

- Names
- Words (text, narration, and speech)
- Design
- Behavior

Names can be descriptive, connotative, ironic, or completely generic. Words, while often left out completely, can be used to help establish nationality, history, personality, goals, back-stories, and future outcomes. Design will indicate physical attributes, species, profession, social status, and perhaps a few personality traits. Behavior, which is ultimately the most effective method of characterization, will demonstrate personality, attitude, and motivation.

### *Character Development Tool 1: Names*

Long-form writers have the advantage of time: their characters can be slowly and deeply developed through behavior. The short-story author, however, must rely on a few shortcuts to effectively develop characters within the limited timeframe. Names can be particularly effective in this capacity.

Although it is very common and perfectly acceptable to give your characters completely generic names, such as Butch, Sarah, or Sally Burton, you can use more descriptive monikers as handy shortcuts for describing or implying a few important bits of information about your characters. For instance, names can be used to indicate species, profession, or nationality, as in Roger Rabbit; Mr. Potato Head; Krusty the Clown; Luxo Jr.; or Marvin the Martian and his trusty companion, K-9.

A name might also demonstrate an unmistakable character trait, as in Dr. Evil, Dopey, Speedy Gonzales, Bill the Butcher, or Poor Bogo.

Other names contain more suggestive words, allowing them to remain a bit more interpretive or ironic. For instance, Jimmy Neutron is probably smarter than your average schoolboy; Han Solo is presumably something of a loner; Donnie Darko probably doesn't smile a lot; Augustus Gloop likely has a weight problem; Sprout is undoubtedly very young; and oddly enough, a character named Curly is usually bald.

Still other names imply certain personality traits simply because they are associated with particularly famous or infamous historical figures or celebrities, such as Amadeus, Madonna, or Shaquille. The name Arnold was once reserved for bookworms; however, ever since Mr. Schwarzenegger arrived on the scene, that particular handle now inspires images of squared-off chins and oversized biceps. An episode of *Hill Street Blues* once featured a character named Vic Hitler who couldn't understand why his standup comedy career was not more successful. And while it is certainly acceptable to give a particularly adorable little bunny the name Killer, doing so might distract your audience because they will likely spend a fair amount of time wondering whether this name foreshadows some future event or is simply ironic.

You might want to design the look of your characters before giving them names. Often, if you look at a character drawing, a name that feels right will just pop out at you (see Figure 3.19).

### Inspired 3D Short Film Production

Of course, it is often desirable to forego naming your characters at all. In many films, especially short ones, the design, actions, and dialogue of the characters are more than sufficient as narrative tools, and names are simply not required. Vagueness can sometimes be a powerful narrative device because it often allows for a bit more audience interpretation.

#### Character Development Tool 2: Text, Narration, and Speech

The limited timeframe of a short film is often insufficient for complete and effective character development through behavior. Displaying text or providing voiceover narration at the beginning of a movie is a timesaving technique you can use to add biographical information and details to the otherwise incomplete character development contained within the scope of the film itself. An advantage of this technique is that it provides the filmmaker the opportunity to open his story in the midst of an action without the need for any actual on-screen setup. Examples include the *Star Wars* films, *The Road Warrior*, and Eric Anderson's *Horses on Mars*.

Similarly, adding a few text lines or a bit of narration at the end of a film can be an effective way of punctuating the piece by providing a bit of information regarding the ultimate outcomes of the characters. This convention is very often used in documentaries, such as *Dogtown and Z-Boys*, films that are based on true stories, such as *Remember the Titans*, and comedies, such as *Animal House*.

You might also choose to intersperse your film with dialogue cards to either simulate the style of early silent films or avoid the time-consuming task of lip-synching.

With regard to actual monologues and dialogues, the pitch, tone, volume, style, accent, vocabulary, and content of a character's words can indicate or imply personality, nationality, status, intelligence, motivation, and goals. Conversations between characters will further define these identity specifics and reveal the nature of their relationships (see Figure 3.20). When Jerry Seinfeld contemptuously greets his neighbor with a sarcastic, "Hello, Newman," we are immediately informed of the fact that these two individuals definitely know one another but probably wish otherwise. Dialogue is one of the strongest devices available for character development (see Chapter 9, "Vocal Tracks").

#### Character Development Tool 3: Design

Sometimes it is preferable to tell a story with completely generic and unremarkable-looking characters that have no distinguishable features whatsoever (see Figure 3.21). Certain metaphorical narratives, such as *Balance*, are often best told with such characters so audience members might have an easier

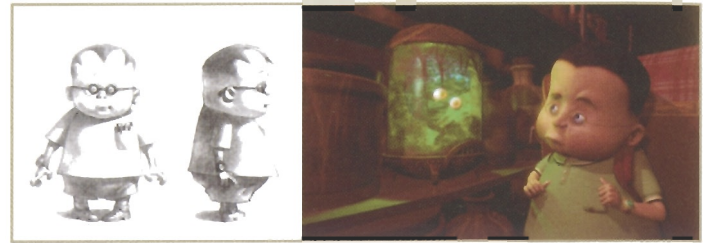


Figure 3.19  
This poor kid is definitely a Hubert.



Figure 3.20  
The ways in which people and other creatures interact with one another help to characterize them.

time folding their own points of view into the story. If your desire is to tell a story with generic characters, you will need to connect the audience to them through behavior or dialogue. However, since the short-story format often does not afford the author enough time to effectively develop a character through a lengthy series of indicative actions and conversations, it is generally a good idea to demonstrate at least partially your character personalities and motivations through design.

### Definitive versus Interpretive Visual Cues

Before you begin designing a character, ask yourself how important his or her look will be in effectively telling your story. This will help you determine what kinds of painfully clear or vaguely interpretive visual elements your character designs should include. If you want your audience to immediately recognize or understand certain important character traits at first glance, design your characters accordingly with specific and unmistakable visual elements, such as professional uniforms, bloody fangs, wheelchairs, or enormous muscles. However, if you want your characters to be a bit more vague and interpretive, keep such indicative visual clues to a minimum. Giving high heels to a female character or a mustache to a man is certainly a valid element of design, but it doesn't speak to the owners' personalities, attitudes, or goals. Putting those same high heels on the man with the mustache, however, is a much stronger design convention and implies quite a bit about the character's personality and attitude (see Figure 3.22).

### Appeal

A well-designed character should have appeal, but keep in mind that the word "appealing" does not necessarily mean "attractive." Rather, in terms of design, it simply means "interesting to look at." And of course, appeal is highly subjective (see Figure 3.23).



**Figure 3.21**  
Generic characters can work just fine in animated shorts as long as their behavior or dialogue is sufficiently interesting.



**Figure 3.22**  
Otherwise generic visual cues, such as mustaches and high heels, can become quite descriptive when combined in a single character.



**Figure 3.23**  
Appeal is in the eye of the beholder.



### Indicative Design

A character will also be considered well designed if his visual cues tell the audience something about him. Even if that message is, "I am completely generic and unremarkable," some thought needs to go into the look of that particular character to deliver such a message successfully. Character design can effectively reveal physical attributes (such as strength, gender, age, or race), mental and emotional attributes (such as shyness, intelligence, or courage), and biographical information (such as nationality, religion, or profession) (see Figure 3.24). Motivation and goals are more difficult to imply through design and usually require behavior and dialogue to be demonstrated effectively.

A good character design should also invoke some kind of initial reaction or expectation from your audience (see Figure 3.25). You might want your viewers to immediately feel sympathy for one of your characters, so give him sad eyes, ragged clothing, and a pair of crutches. Or perhaps your audience should be fearful or disgusted at first glance, in which case you should deliver angry brows, sharp weapons, menacing horns and fangs, or huge scars. You might prefer your audience to be confused; therefore, inconsistent visual elements might be in order, such as a tattoo of a peace sign on a soldier's forehead. Or you might want to make a character's design elements more generic and vague so your viewers are forced to wonder about the details of his past, present, and future.

It is sometimes advantageous for a character's design to actually contradict his true nature. For instance, while it is often desirable for the look of a villain to inspire immediate hatred or mistrust from your audience, occasionally the most interesting and dangerous antagonists appear quite harmless until their surprisingly malicious true intentions are revealed.

In general, you simply want to avoid the possibility of your audience reacting to your characters with complete indifference. Some visual cues, even if they are subtle, vague, intentionally confusing, interpretive, or altogether generic, should be included in your character designs to capture at least some degree of audience attention from the start.



**Figure 3.24**  
Character design can imply more than just physical attributes, such as age, species, or gender. Personality, nationality, religion, or profession can also be indicated clearly with the right visual cues.



**Figure 3.25**  
Well-designed characters will often create an immediate audience response. Do these characters inspire sympathy, empathy, suspicion, laughter, or fear?

## Faces

The most distinguishable and expressive part of a character is usually his face. Size, shape, placement, orientation, symmetry, and relative proportions of facial features will generate appeal (or lack thereof) and indicate species, realism level, age, gender, personality, and most importantly, emotion. You can choose to **create** faceless characters for your film, but keep in mind that doing so will force you to completely rely on body language, animation, and behavior to **deliver** information regarding personality and emotion.

Facial features can be absent, sparse, highly detailed, cartoony, abstract, or photo-real. Play around with facial feature specifics when designing your characters. Try large eyes and a small mouth, small eyes and no mouth, one large eye and one small eye, a large mouth but only one eye, a huge nose and tiny ears, and so on. Draw many versions of the same character's face with subtle changes in size, placement, and relative proportions of features to find just the right indication of personality and emotion. Try a variety of different facial expressions to see the range of emotions you'll be able to deliver. Scan one of your character sketches into the computer and play around with a digital paint or morph program that will allow you to warp head shapes and feature sizes and see whether anything interesting and unique results. Examine the facial features of existing film characters who emote effectively and **apply** your discoveries to your own **designs** (see Figure 3.26).



**Figure 3.26**  
Facial features come in a wide variety of shapes, sizes, styles, and proportions

## Hands

Generally speaking, next to facial features the second most expressive parts of a character are his hands, so don't neglect them in your design phase. If a character has **no** facial features whatsoever, hands (or paws or claws) will often **become** the **primary** tools for expressing personality, desire, and emotion. **Hands** can be **mere** stubs or simple mittens, or they can contain three, four, five, or perhaps **even** more fingers (see Figure 3.27). If you expect to rely on **hand** shapes, poses, and movements to deliver necessary information about a character, make **sure** you design them appropriately. Give your character **enough** fingers to get the job done, but realize that a full set of four-plus-thumb is rarely necessary unless you are going for a high level of realism. **Fewer** fingers will be easier to model, set up, and animate; however, if you don't have enough fingers it might limit the expressiveness of the poses you will be able to **create**. For instance, you can't make a peace sign with a mitten.

### Keep It Simple and Think Ahead

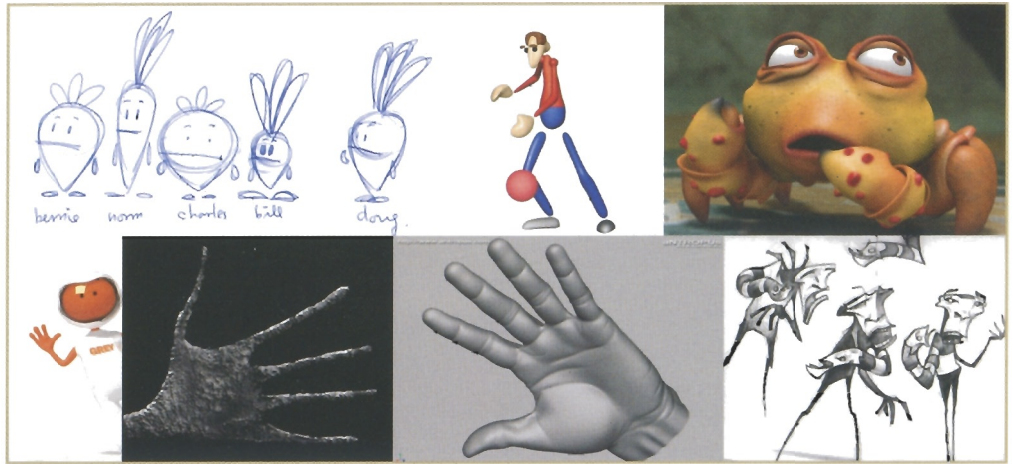
Details will round out a character and often add interest or unique qualities, especially when it comes to realism (see Figure 3.28). However, be careful of overdoing it. Loading up a character with too many obvious visual cues can turn him into a cliché or a confusing mess of unnecessary details (see Figure 3.29). Be efficient and economical with your design elements. A healthy balance between clarity and subtlety is always a desirable goal, and elegant simplicity in design is usually quite appealing (see Figure 3.30). Also remember that it is not necessary to display or demonstrate a particular design element or character trait unless it is important to the story.

Arbitrarily adding details is the same as blindly adding more ingredients to a soup. Less is very often more.

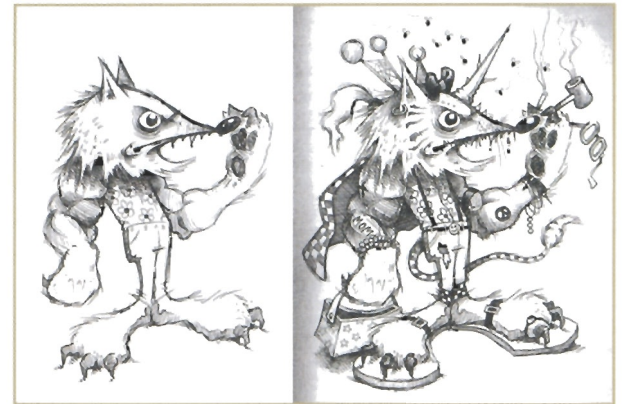
Always think ahead as you design your characters. Only create characters that you or your teammates will be able to model, rig, and animate efficiently (see Figures 3.31 and 3.32). If you give your protagonist a tail, your audience will expect it to swing and



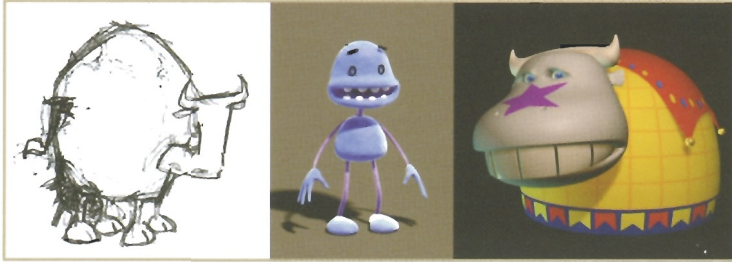
**Figure 3.28**  
Details are important visual characterization tools.



**Figure 3.27**  
An expressive hand can be a stump, a mitten, a claw, a four-finger collection, a full five-finger set, or something else entirely!



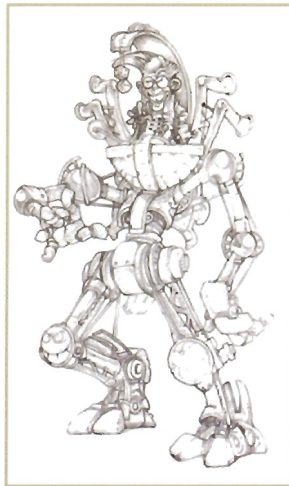
**Figure 3.29**  
More isn't always better. Over-designing a character with too many visual cues and unnecessary details can turn him into a cliché and a modeler's nightmare.



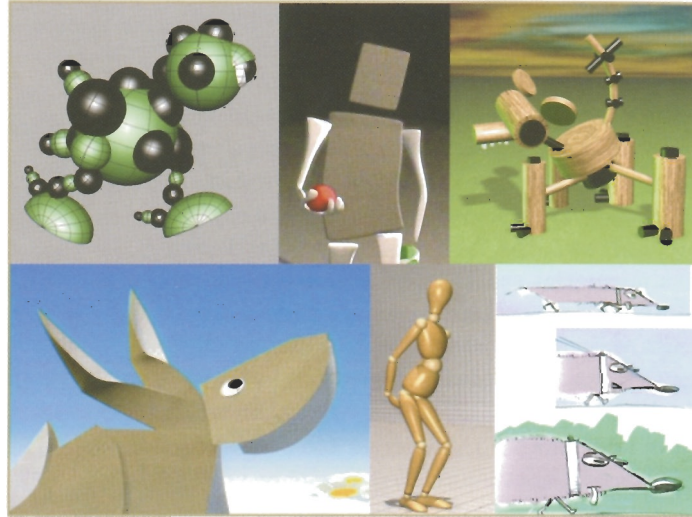
**Figure 3.30**  
Elegant simplicity is often quite appealing

sway convincingly, and doing so will require more animation time. If you give your protagonist a huge belly, you're going to have to add appropriate deformers and controls to your character setup to make it squash and stretch properly. A character with a huge head and short arms might not be able to scratch his nose. Short legs and large feet make it difficult to create walk cycles.

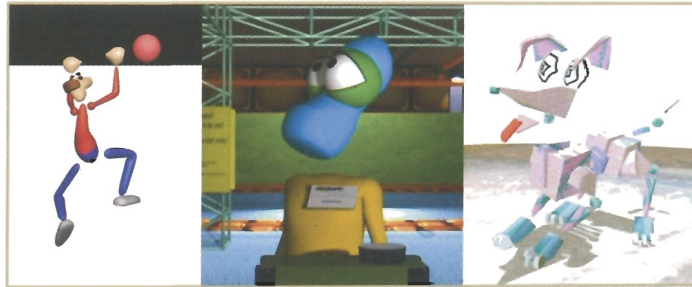
Constantly consider how your designs will affect the future stages of your pipeline and consider the possibility of leaving out unnecessary anatomical details. For instance, if you are creating a film with no dialogue, perhaps your characters don't need mouths. If your characters are cartoony or abstract, you can perhaps get away with omitting necks, shoulder joints, or even arms and legs, leaving hands and feet connected to a torso by mere implication (see Figure 3.33). If a certain character will only ever be seen from a distance, don't bother to include very small anatomy or clothing details.



**Figure 3.31**  
This is a great character design, but will you or your teammates have the time and skills to model, rig, and animate such a creature efficiently?



**Figure 3.32**  
Simple characters like these will be relatively easy to build and quite interactive when it comes time to animate them.



**Figure 3.33**  
In a cartoony or abstract character, you can save yourself a lot of future modeling and rigging time by leaving out anatomical details, such as necks and joints or even arms and legs. Your viewers' innate sense of closure and basic knowledge of anatomy will allow them to visually accept such omissions.

Of course, we are not suggesting that you compromise your designs based on the limits of your current skills. After all, the development cycle of your film should be a learning experience, and it is definitely a good idea to give yourself a few technical and aesthetic challenges along the way. Just realize that character elements such as hair, feathers, loose clothing, and multiple limbs will require additional work down the line (see Figure 3.34). Robots, toys, mannequins, and insects are certainly easier to work with than other more organic creatures, but your story might require more complex characters. If so, consider ways to stylize them that will reduce your future workload. Try using two-dimensional, cartoon-style eyes that float in space (see Figure 3.35). A six-legged spider might look just as convincing as one with the proper eight. A tucked-in shirt will be easier to manage than one that flaps in the breeze. A ponytail will be easier to animate than long, flowing locks. Three fingers will take 25 percent less time to animate than four, and mittens are simpler than gloves. Design your characters to your liking, but think ahead and strive to avoid unnecessary production complications.

Also during the design phase, consider how the physical details of your characters will ultimately affect the style in which you animate them. If you create a robot, is he six inches tall or six stories high (see Figure 3.36)? Is he made of heavy, solid steel or hollow, nearly weightless aluminum cans? Knowing such specifics will be extremely important at the animation stage of your production.

### Art Skills

Always remember to think in three dimensions, even if you are designing in two. If you envision your characters as combinations of basic shapes (cubes, spheres, cylinders, cones, and so on), it will be that much easier to design them as the three-dimensional characters they will ultimately become. Make a few construction drawings of your characters that show the simplicity of their underlying forms (see Figure 3.37).



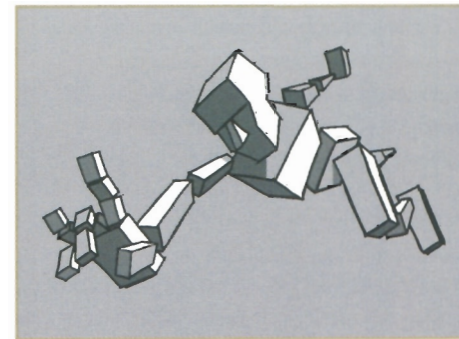
**Figure 3.34**  
This character from Kirill Spiridonov is both unique and appealing, but if you design such a creature be aware that your viewers will expect to see his hair move appropriately. Will you have the time, tools, and skills to accomplish this successfully?



**Figure 3.36**  
Is this creature two inches tall or two stories high? Knowing such details will be important when you start animating.



**Figure 3.35**  
Stylizing features such as eyes will make life easier for you during your production phase.

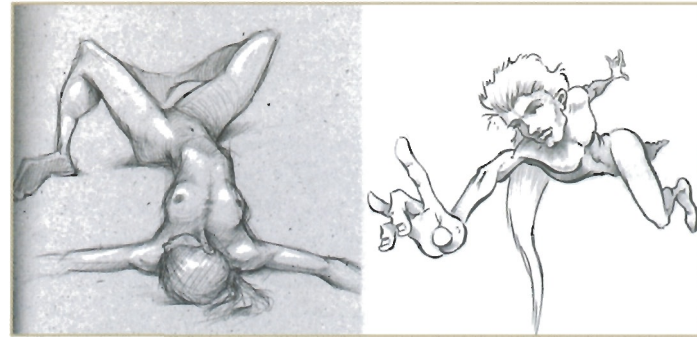


**Figure 3.37**  
Construction drawings of your characters will help you visualize their forms and apply proper perspective and foreshortening in your drawings.

This will not only help you understand dimension and form, which will really come in handy at the modeling stage, but it will also assist you when you draw your characters in different poses from various camera angles.

If you choose to design your characters using traditional media, you'll need some basic drawing or sculpting skills. Keep in mind that you don't have to become another Michelangelo to design characters effectively. Many great designers are not necessarily great illustrators; however, if you are not comfortable with your chosen medium, the process of designing characters can feel like a chore rather than a fun and rewarding experience. Indeed, it takes many years to master figure drawing or cartooning, but it actually doesn't take that long to learn enough of the basics to get by. If you're looking for some good books on these subjects, review a few of our recommendations in Appendix B. Although it wouldn't be feasible for us to offer any comprehensive drawing lessons within the scope of this text, here are a few tips that might help you expedite the learning process:

1. **Attend figure-drawing classes as often as possible.** The more you know about the form and structure of real humans, the better you'll be able to effectively create unique exaggerations or abstractions. Always think in three dimensions as you draw. Imagine your piece of paper is actually a box and you are sculpting the model rather than creating a two-dimensional drawing (see Figure 3.38). Try drawing the figure as a collection of simple geometric shapes to more effectively understand volume and perspective. Draw a variety of different poses at different speeds. Do many quick sketches to capture overall lines of action, as well as long sittings where you can really study the details. Challenge yourself by choosing difficult poses, especially those with plenty of foreshortening. Flat, straight-on poses are much easier to draw, but they don't provide you with an opportunity to further your understanding of posing and three-dimensional space. Imagine yourself in the model's pose and try to feel the balance of forces acting upon him or her. Try caricaturing the figure as you draw. This will force you to identify the most meaningful and expressive details of the model. Focus on faces and hands. If figure-drawing classes are not available to you, practice drawing toys, action figures, stuffed animals, and sculptures from many different angles. Working from photographs is less than ideal. Because your creations will ultimately be three-dimensional, your sources should be as well.
2. **Study anatomy.** The most important anatomical elements to study as a character designer are bones and muscles. Unless you are actually designing a skeleton, try to learn about bones in groups rather than individually. Understand the overall shape of the entire ribcage, rather than the specifics of each rib (see Figure 3.39). Gain a cursory understanding of where the major bones fit together and their approximate rotation limits. Also, learn which bones can be seen protruding through the skin. With regard to muscles, it's more important to understand how they work than exactly what each one looks like. Realize that muscles can only pull; they cannot push. Every major muscle causes a joint to bend, and all muscles have opposing counterparts that generate the opposite joint motion—biceps versus triceps, quadrilaterals versus hamstrings. Remember that muscles expand when they operate, but depending on the pose, most of them are usually in their relaxed states. Study the differences between bipeds, quadrupeds, fish, and birds. With all species, a global knowledge of overall bone groups,

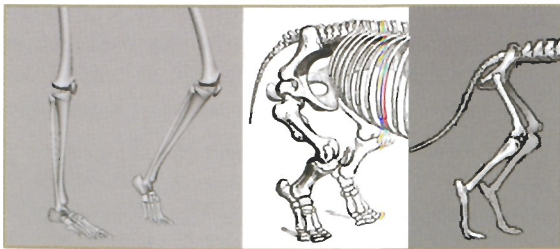


**Figure 3.38**  
Think of your paper as a box and imagine that you are sculpting rather than drawing when you work from live models. Visualizing the human form in this manner will greatly increase your ability to design three-dimensional characters

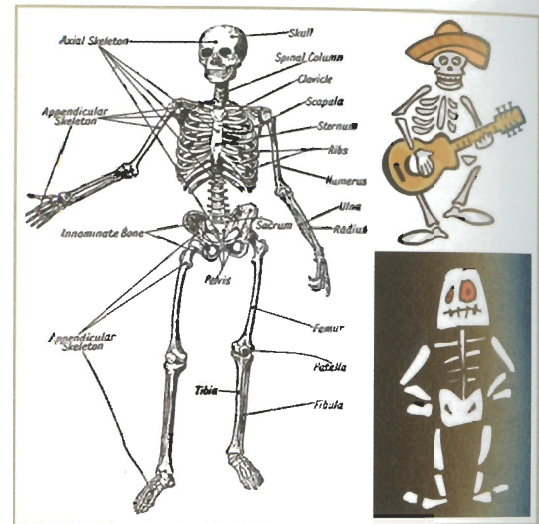
## Inspired 3D Short Film Production

muscle systems, and proportions is more important than minutiae. Learn, for instance, that the hind legs of quadrupeds do not have two knees. Rather, four-legged animals walk on the balls of each rear foot, where the lengthened ankle only appears to be a second backward-facing knee (see Figure 3.40).

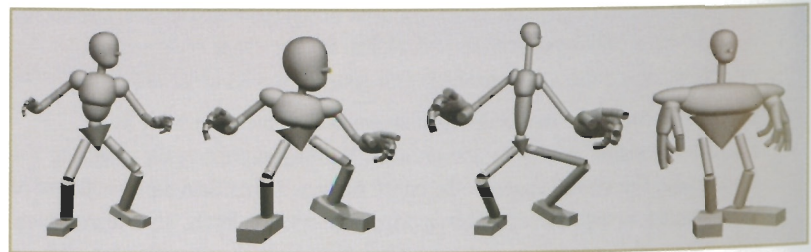
3. **With regard to proportions, trust your innate knowledge of the human form as well as your eye for appeal.** Don't allow yourself to get caught up in the overly academic proportion rules found in many art books. For instance, the "fact" that the human body is approximately six heads tall is hardly a consistent reality, and this "rule" will only help when you're drawing an adult human standing straight up from a centered camera angle. Once you apply a low-angle POV, a bit of foreshortening, or an age difference, such rules go right out the window. Indeed, understand the existence of this tendency, but realize that it is not a hard and fast rule and trust your instincts. Doing so will make it easier for you to design unique characters and draw odd poses from various camera angles. Remember: If it looks right, it is right (see Figure 3.41).
4. **Understand perspective.** Although there are dozens of very thick volumes available describing all of the rules and details of this subject, the notion of perspective really just comes down to two basic concepts. Objects, dimensions, and relative distances appear smaller as they move away from you, and objects in the foreground tend to obscure objects behind them. All of the specific details of one-, two-, and three-point perspective are actually variations on these two simple concepts. Of course, if you design your characters with sculpture or CG modeling tools, you'll get proper perspective for free.
5. **Learn about color theory.** Color theory is best learned by noticing interesting and appealing color combinations in the real world and then recording your findings in a continuously growing library of quick color sketches you can reference when you are designing your characters and textures.



**Figure 3.40**  
Contrary to what some people think, quadrupeds do not have two knees in each rear leg. Rather, they have extended ankles and stand on the balls of their feet.



**Figure 3.39**  
When learning anatomy, simplify your education by studying bones in groups, rather than individually.



**Figure 3.41**  
The notion of correct proportions can be rather subjective. If it looks right, it is right.

If you really hate drawing or sculpting or you feel that you simply don't have the ability to effectively put your imagination down on paper or clay, consider collaborating with a friend who has the time and the appropriate skills.

### Visual Elements of Effective Character Design

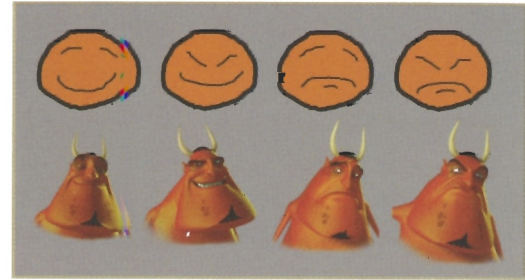
A character designer has a number of visual devices at his disposal, which can be used to effectively indicate or imply a character's physical attributes, personality traits, biographical information, and goals with descriptive clarity or interpretive subtlety. They are as follows:

- ◆ Basic design elements
- ◆ Biological and anatomical specifics
- ◆ Color
- ◆ Posture and facial expressions
- ◆ Style, grooming, and condition
- ◆ Clothing and accessories
- ◆ Exaggeration

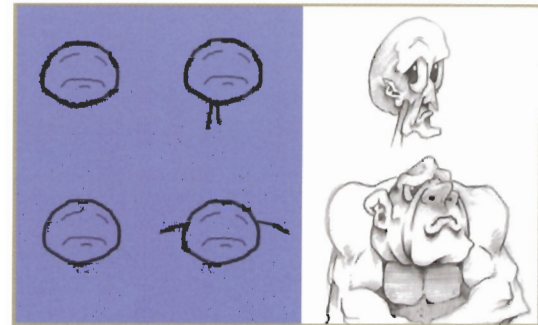
#### Basic Design Elements

If you work out the design of your character with pencil and paper, consider the connotative values of different types of lines and shapes. Horizontals tend to imply tranquility. Vertical lines tend to imply rigidity or balance. Curved lines imply gentleness, while hard angles imply danger or stubbornness. And jagged, erratic lines imply energy, confusion, or imbalance. A cuddly and sympathetic little bear cub will work well with mostly curved shapes, but his angry, battle-worn, man-eating grandfather might be a bit more angular. Try balancing straights against curves for interesting variety. A few simple lines in a circle can not only indicate a face, but also demonstrate a surprisingly large range of emotions depending on their lengths and angles (see Figure 3.42). Appropriately-placed lines can also indicate proportions and attitude (see Figure 3.43).

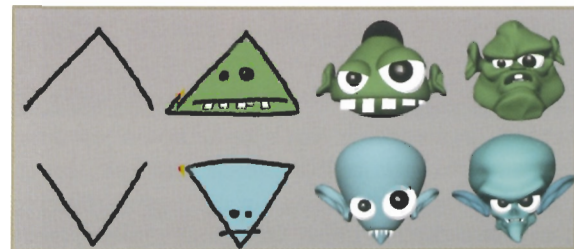
Basic overall shapes can also have connotative qualities. A V-shaped head might belong to a character with an abnormally large brain, while an A-shaped head looks more Neanderthal (see Figure 3.44). Similarly, someone with a V-shaped body might not necessarily be stronger than someone with a body shaped like an A, but he can most certainly outrun him (see Figure 3.45).



**Figure 3.42**  
Simply varying eyebrow and mouth shapes can create a wide variety of facial expressions.



**Figure 3.43**  
The simple placement of a pair of vertical or horizontal lines can drastically change the overall proportions and attitude of otherwise identical characters.



**Figure 3.44**  
These very different characters are based on the same basic shape turned upside down.



## Inspired 3D Short Film Production



**Figure 3.45**  
Using those same two overall shapes for bodies may suggest the difference between sloth and strength.

Try drawing your characters in silhouette to better analyze the appeal and visual connotations of their overall shapes (see Figure 3.46).

Symmetry is often considered a necessary component of beauty, but introducing variety in elements such as individual eye sizes can make for some rather interesting character designs (see Figure 3.47).

Introducing extreme contrasts is another basic design strategy that can lead to appealing results, especially when applied to cartoon characters. Think about angular chins with rounded cheeks, huge eyes and a small mouth, or legs so thin they couldn't possibly support the weight of your character's enormous head (see Figure 3.48).

Remember that even subtle variations in basic lines, angles, and shapes can result in drastic changes in mood and personality.

### *Biological and Anatomical Specifics*

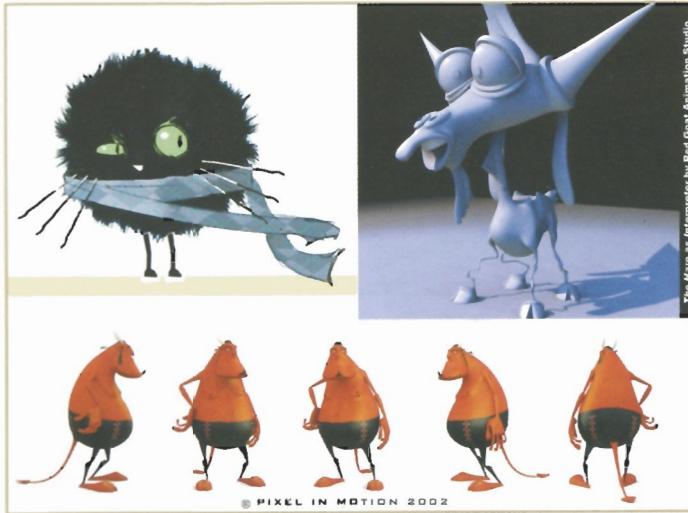
Fur, teeth, number of legs, skin color, fur texture, ear shape, and tails can indicate species, while details such as hair length, eye color, nose length, and body proportions can imply age, gender, nationality, and certain personality traits. Exaggerated physical attributes, such as huge ears, ultra-thin limbs, missing necks, or squared-off chins, can also imply intelligence, strength, and self-esteem. Shape and curve specifics such as bowed legs or pigeon toes also contribute to characterization. Interesting proportion contrasts, such as a large tummy and a small head or very long legs and a tiny torso, will also add to a character's interest and appeal. Except in the cases of injury, birth defects, or mutations, all members of our animal kingdom contain an even number of arms and legs, so try 1, 3, or 5 if you want to suggest an alien race.



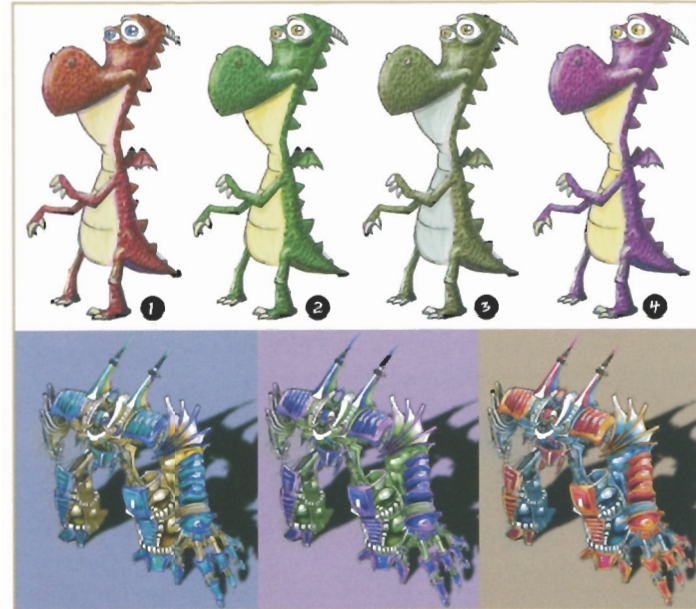
**Figure 3.46**  
A character's silhouette will reveal his overall shape construction, which can immediately indicate whether he is warm and friendly or perhaps sharp and dangerous.



**Figure 3.47**  
Asymmetrical eye sizes can be interesting in cartoon characters.



**Figure 3.48**  
Extreme design contrasts, such as huge heads or hands and skinny legs or arms, can be particularly appealing in cartoon characters.



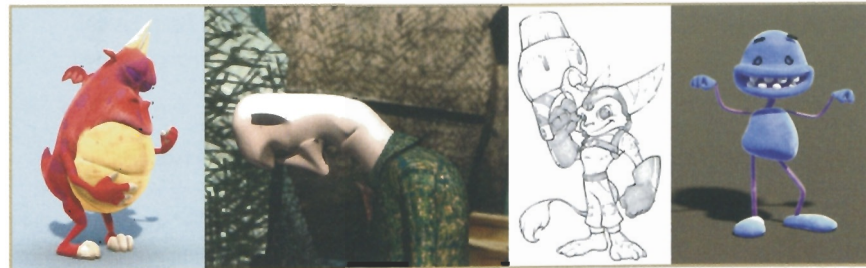
**Figure 3.49**  
Try different color schemes in your character drawings.

### Color

Unless your film is going to be black and white, experiment with different color schemes and combinations when designing your characters (see Figure 3.49). Changing a bear from brown to white will result in the suggestion of a different homeland. Making a human character bright green might imply that he is not from this planet. A black top hat might belong to a magician or a nineteenth-century president, while that same hat in orange or purple might belong to a clown or a pimp.

### Posture and Facial Expressions

Chest out, shoulders back, and a smirk might imply confidence, while an arched back, drooping shoulders, and upturned eyebrows might suggest meekness or depression (see Figure 3.50). A limp will certainly imply an injury of some kind. Hands on hips and pursed lips might suggest femininity. A character who grins all the time might just be eternally happy, but be careful—he could be hiding something quite sinister



**Figure 3.50**  
Posture will help indicate a character's physical condition, emotional state, personality, or attitude

instead. Pay attention to spine and leg curvature. A cat with a concave spine might be old, hungry, or perhaps a bit proud. That same cat with a convex spine might be stealthy and ready to attack or perhaps extremely agitated. Similarly, the overall posture curve of a character will indicate a lot about his personality, condition, or emotional state. Curved postures are natural and dynamic and will imply confidence, age, and condition, depending on the overall shape and direction of the arc (see Figure 3.51). An extremely rigid posture might indicate a missing sense of humor or a creepy disposition. Recall the first time Hannibal Lecter appeared in *Silence of the Lambs*. His calm but abnormally symmetric and vertical posture was certainly less than reassuring. The way a character sits can also indicate attitude. Crossed arms and crossed legs send a very different message than knees apart and outstretched arms. When designing your characters, draw them in a variety of different poses to discover and suggest mood and personality.

### Style, Grooming, and Condition

Hairstyles, mustaches, beards, sideburns, ponytails, baldness, lipstick, eye shadow, and nail polish can indicate attitude, age, social status, and gender (see Figure 3.52). The condition of these elements will also say a lot about a character. Someone with torn clothes, unkempt hair, broken fingernails, and dirt all over their face might very well be homeless. Then again, this person might simply be following the latest fashion trend. Or he might be wandering away from a recent auto accident or alien abduction.

### Clothing and Accessories

Type, color, style, and condition of clothing and accessories can imply personality, nationality, age, gender, and wealth (see Figure 3.53). Someone dressed all in black might be a funeral director, a cat burglar, or perhaps a deep, introspective poet you couldn't possibly understand. Psychedelic colors imply a free spirit, while browns and grays often belong to more conservative types. A computer nerd might pull his pants up much too high, while a wannabe rap star might wear them a bit too low. Untucked shirts and untied shoes might imply laziness, haste, or a casual nature. Hats, scarves, cigarettes, corn cob pipes, walking sticks, backpacks, glasses, bowties, snow boots, weapons, pocket protectors, roller skates, jewelry, tattoos, and uniforms can also indicate personality as well as profession.



Figure 3.51 The overall posture curve of a character will help imply confidence or perhaps the lack thereof.



Figure 3.52 Grooming specifics, such as hairstyles, can help add personality to your characters.

## Exaggeration

Different levels of exaggeration can indicate extremes in traits, such as strength, confidence, femininity, and malevolence. A superhero will appear especially *super* if his biceps are larger than his head. In general, the larger the teeth, the scarier the shark. Keep in mind, however, that extreme exaggeration can cause the opposite effect. A vampire with 12-inch fangs, a huge cape, giant bat wings, glowing red eyes, foot-long fingernails, and enormous, pointed ears will actually be more amusing than a subtler version—not more frightening (see Figure 3.54).

With effective use of the aforementioned tools, the look of your character can directly indicate or merely imply a great deal of information to your audience and quickly establish empathy, familiarity, or interest. Once you've successfully established such a connection between your characters and your audience, your viewers will follow your characters' actions and outcomes with interest. Ask yourself what you hope the design of your characters will indicate to your audience.

- ◆ Do you want your viewers to like your protagonist?
- ◆ Should they immediately fear your villain or should they be unaware of his secret agenda?
- ◆ Should they think your protagonist is strong and courageous or nervous and cowardly?
  - Male or female?
  - Straight or gay?
  - Old or young?
  - Rich or poor?
  - Terrestrial or alien?
  - Animal, mineral, or vegetable?

Play around with some of these design elements and see what kind of information your character can exhibit through visual cues alone. However, keep in mind that most visual design cues can be interpreted in many ways depending on the nationality, culture, history, experience, and opinions of your viewers. Snakes will attract some viewers but



**Figure 3.53**  
Clothing choices will help indicate character specifics, such as age, gender, and personality.



**Figure 3.54**  
Be wary of over-exaggeration. If large fangs are scary, extra large fangs aren't necessarily more so. If you exaggerate scary elements too much, they may become comical.

## Inspired 3D Short Film Production

scare others. Horn-rimmed glasses might remind one person of his favorite aunt but bring up painful memories of a strict and abusive third-grade teacher to someone else.

### Designing Multiple Characters

When you are designing partners, teams, or groups, it is generally a good idea to include a fair amount of variety unless you are creating a swarm of killer robot spiders (where it might be more appropriate to make them all exactly alike). Contrasting shapes, sizes, and styles can often make for interesting visual and relationship dynamics (see Figure 3.55). The short, stout man with the tall, thin wife is a familiar combination. The seven dwarves are all approximately the same size, but each has his own style, look, and of course, personality.

### Character Design Progression

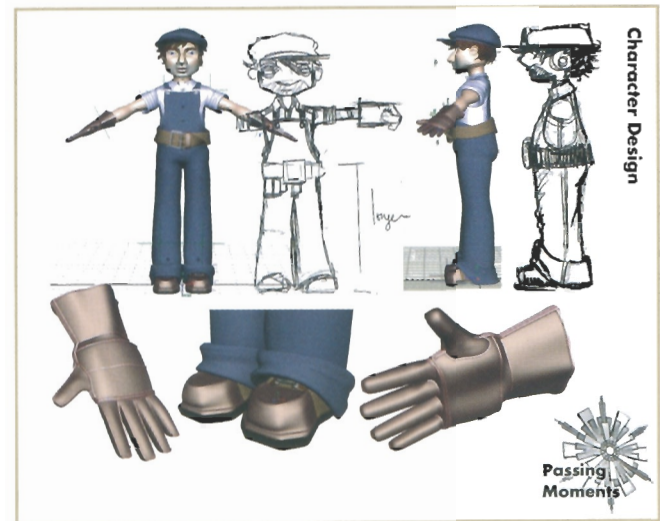
It is often perfectly acceptable and sometimes even crucial to your narrative to alter a character's physical attributes over time. Examples include overall size increase or decrease, black eyes, smeared makeup, a new crew cut, a torn shirt, an uncharacteristic wardrobe, improved posture, or a shaved beard and mustache. Making such a change can contribute to the indication of a character's development, growth, or decline over the course of your story. If Sammy the Slob shows up in an expensive and well-pressed Armani suit, it might not necessarily indicate any particular change in his attitude or personality, but it will likely indicate that something significant has occurred (or is about to occur) in his life. Perhaps he won the lottery, finally got a real job, or is about to meet his girlfriend's parents for the first time.

### Model Sheets

It is always a good idea to create formal model sheets of your characters, especially if you are working with a team. Since you will be designing three-dimensional characters, an effective model sheet will show each of them from several different angles (see Figure 3.56). A variety of poses and facial expressions as well as head and hand close-ups, silhouettes, translucent drawings showing the basic underlying forms, and a few descriptive notes are also important details to include. Character design should be a fun, exploratory process, so draw a lot. Filling up a page or two with a series of small blitz drawings of your character in many different poses and actions is also an excellent way to get to know your character and provide this information to your teammates.



**Figure 3.55**  
It is usually a good idea to vary proportions between partners or teammates.



**Figure 3.56**  
A model sheet showing your character from a variety of different angles will greatly assist you in the future modeling stage.

When you design characters using pencil or brush, it is important to realize that although 2D elements such as line quality and paint strokes will deliver style and appeal to drawings and paintings, they do not translate into 3D. By all means, include such artistic details in your two-dimensional artwork, but pay particular attention to volume, color, shape, proportion, posture, and texture. A poor character design might become a better drawing if you add interesting, calligraphic lines and cross-hatched shading patterns, but doing so will not help the digital sculptor you will eventually become (see Figure 3.57). Always think in terms of three-dimensional space and movement when you are designing your characters.

### Character Development Tool 4: Behavior

No matter how effectively you design a character, his true nature will ultimately be defined by his actions, reactions, and interactions. As the comedian Bill Maher once suggested, “You are what you do.” In most short films, there simply isn’t enough time to fully develop a character this way. Therefore, you must apply shortcuts to successfully characterize through behavior. Exaggerated mannerisms are often quite effective in this capacity. A man who strokes his chin, a girl who twirls her hair, or a cat that limps will be immediately identifiable every time he or she is displayed on screen. In Moonsung Lee’s *Bert*, the small vegetable characters trip and fall often. This recurring mannerism helps to identify them as children. Often, providing a character with one or two quick initial actions or gestures is sufficient to tell the audience all they really need to know about a character’s personality and goals (see Figure 3.58). In *The Wrong Trousers*, Gromit (the dog) reads a birthday card at the breakfast table and dismisses it with a roll of his eyes. This quick, singular action indicates that he is not only more intelligent than your average illiterate canine, but perhaps a bit less childish as well. Within a few seconds of seeing this character for the first time, viewers have all the information they need to decide whether they’ll identify with (or at least be interested in) this character.

### Choices

Behavior is made up of actions and choices. How your character dictates or responds to the events and other characters of your story will define his personality. Is he confident or meek? Intelligent or mentally challenged? Selfish or altruistic? Stubborn or flexible? Serious or comedic? If he decides to kill someone, he will be seen as a villain. If he decides to kick a dog, he will be seen as a really horrible villain. If he chooses to run from danger, he is either a coward or rather practical. If he chooses to face a threat head-on, he is either brave or stupid. Keep in mind that in order for a character’s decisions to



Figure 3.57

A nice, detailed drawing does not necessarily always make for a good CG character design image. Make sure you focus on dimensional specifics, such as shape, volume, and proportions, rather than line calligraphy and shading when you create your characters on paper.



Figure 3.58

Deep characterization through behavior is next to impossible in the limited timeframe of most shorts. Therefore one or two indicative actions in the beginning of a film can be an excellent shortcut for defining a character’s personality, motivations, and attitude.

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inform an audience of his nature and personality, his choices must not be obvious or trivial. You'll learn nothing about a character who simply chooses pleasure over pain or wealth over poverty. Rather, a character will define who he really is based on the difficult choices he makes—for instance, wealth-plus-misery versus poverty-plus-happiness. Choosing between two negatives might shed some light on a character as well. In Martin Scorsese's *Casino*, a pair of cheaters is caught with their dishonest winnings. One gets his hand smashed by a hammer. The other is given a choice: The money and the hammer or no money and the door. The latter might seem like the obvious choice to most people, but a particularly greedy masochist might take the former. Choosing between a pair of positive scenarios can also be rather difficult. Two dates for the prom sounds like an ideal situation, but the ultimate decision will leave at least one member of the equation somewhat disappointed.

### Character Arcs

A series of actions, reactions, choices, and interactions will ultimately bring about a change in your protagonist's physical, geographical, social, or mental status. For your story to be particularly interesting, it helps if this change goes from one extreme to another or perhaps comes full circle back to the original status. Examples include

- ◆ Life to death
- ◆ Rich to poor
- ◆ Naïve to wise
- ◆ Indifferent to in love
- ◆ Drunk to sober
- ◆ Desert island to the civilized world
- ◆ Male to female
- ◆ Rags to riches to rags
- ◆ Loner to social butterfly, then outcast again

Probably the most effective situation in which you can fully develop a character is by showing how he attempts to solve the main conflict of your story. This is where the men are separated from the boys, the strong are separated from the weak, the cunning are separated from the foolish, and often the living are separated from the dead. No choices are more telling than those made under pressure.

Such a change in a character's status is known as a *character arc*. The central plot of many stories is actually contained within the physical or mental arc of the protagonist, rather than through a series of external events. More often than not, plots and character arcs intertwine to form a narrative whole.

For a character to arc, he must have some degree of free will and the capacity to act upon his desires and goals. A paralyzed man who dreams of Olympic gold will not initiate much of a story unless he makes a miraculous recovery, lives vicariously through another, or has his story told as a dream sequence. Make sure the characters you create have the desire and ability to participate in the story you want to tell.

Some characters are tragic, and a downward-spiraling arc will indicate this most effectively. Other characters are comedic in nature, often because their behavior indicates that they are not aware of their flaws. Buzz Lightyear is funny because he believes himself to be something more than just a toy and he behaves accordingly. Dan Bransfield's Fishman is humorous because he actually thinks he's a pretty good superhero. If the arc of a flawed character brings about an awareness of his dysfunction, it will no longer be an amusing element of his personality. If Archie Bunker had ever suddenly realized the folly of

his bigotry, he would've become hesitant or introspective, and the flaw would no longer have been humorous. If handled properly, such a drastic personality change can make for a rather interesting character arc or plot progression.

### Dominant Character Traits

Most story characters tend to have a singular, dominant trait and the majority of their actions will be consistent with this personality detail (see Figure 3.59). Recall the fable of the scorpion who hitched a ride on the back of a tortoise to cross a river, but stung the tortoise before reaching the other side, drowning them both, because he couldn't escape his true nature. Sometimes it can be interesting for a character to behave outside of his true nature; however, a good reason must exist for this occurrence or your audience will lose their connection with your character.

### Gender and Age Specifics

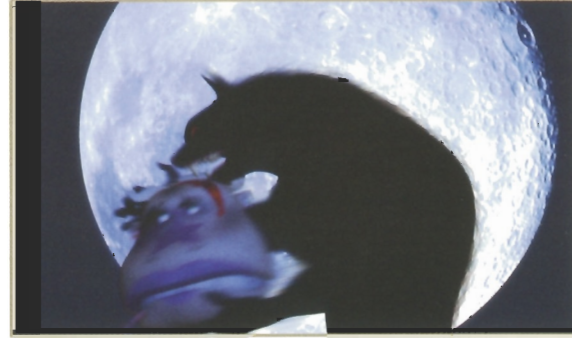
When you are creating aliens, monsters, and otherwise abstract or inanimate story characters, it is generally not necessary to indicate gender and age. However, when you are creating humans or familiar animals it is often a good idea to do so, either through design or through behavior.

### Through Design

In terms of design, it usually helps to exaggerate the otherwise subtle and stereotypical differences that exist between males, females, children, and adults to sufficiently sell the identity of your characters. With regard to human beings, females tend to have rounder edges, thinner necks and noses, larger eyes with longer lashes, fuller lips, longer hair, wider hips, smaller ribcages, longer legs, and smaller feet. Women typically dress and accessorize differently than men. Dangling earrings, heavy makeup, sparkling jewelry, bathing-suit tops, skirts, and high heels do not always necessarily indicate gender, but these accoutrements do imply a certain degree of femininity. Exaggerating physical tendencies is definitely appropriate when designing cartoony humans.

Animal gender differences are usually indistinguishable to the casual observer. Exceptions include lions and antelopes. You can, however, adorn cartoony animals with typically human attributes to indicate gender.

Human children tend to have shorter limbs; larger heads; smaller, upturned noses; bigger eyes and ears; and fewer hard edges. Certain grooming styles and articles of clothing, such as large hair bows, pigtails, saddle shoes, oversized short pants, mittens, and absence of facial hair, can also help indicate youth (see Figure 3.60). With regard to animal proportions, youngsters tend to have larger eyes, ears, and feet, with shorter legs and tails. Cartoony animals often wear clothing; therefore, dressing them like human children is often appropriate and effective.



**Figure 3.59**  
Most characters will behave in ways that are consistent with their true nature.



**Figure 3.60**  
Design specifics can easily indicate gender and age.



### Through Behavior

Indicating an animated character's gender through behavior often requires exaggeration, politically incorrect generalizations, and a bit of stereotyping. For instance, it has been said that men seek to control their emotions with logic, while women often control their logic with their emotions. Men seem to prefer shopping rather methodically, while women seem to enjoy a more casual approach. Men often elect to repair their own cars and program their VCRs on their own, while women will often seek help or read the directions. Women will tend to be calmer in extreme situations, but they freak out if they see a tiny spider. Men will attempt to solve their friends' problems by offering advice or assistance in physical retaliation, while women will provide a good hug instead. Girls play house, while boys like guns. And girls tend to be cleaner and more polite. How might these stereotypical tendencies manifest themselves in the behavior of your story characters?

With regard to the indication of age, children tend to be less subtle, less balanced, and more extreme in their reactions. They often carry toys and will generally respond more physically than their adult counterparts. Children tend to act before they think, while adults strive to do the opposite (although they often fail). Adult dialogue is often more sophisticated and less direct. Children tend to get right to the point even if they can't always find the right words.

Remember that all of these are mere generalizations, but it is very often necessary to exaggerate stereotypical differences to effectively indicate age and gender in animated story characters.

### The Sliding Scale

When you are creating a film character who will not be intentionally lifeless or generic, your goal will be to eventually establish a relationship between that character and your audience. The longer your film, the deeper that relationship needs to be to keep your audience engaged. In a feature film, the connection between a viewer and a story character can be considered a long-term relationship. Because of the depth of this relationship, the audience members will ultimately expect to get to know the protagonist rather intimately. To accomplish this effectively, a feature film must present a sufficiently long series of actions, reactions, decisions, explanations, interactions, and conversations. The benefit of the long form is that it allows for a more gradual pace when delivering these behaviors, and this slow, complex delivery results in relatively deep character development. Once a character has been on the screen for several minutes, the audience will start to wonder about his history and goals. Who is this guy? Where did he come from? What is he trying to accomplish? At some point during the course of a feature film, these questions must be addressed to keep the audience engaged.

In a very short film, however, the protagonist will be little more than a passing acquaintance to an audience member. Your viewers won't care so much about the specifics of your character because your film will be over by the time they start asking questions. Therefore, more shallow (but not altogether absent) character development is often perfectly acceptable in a short film. You must still establish an audience-protagonist connection, but you must do so rapidly. This is most effectively accomplished through descriptive design, exaggerated mannerisms, and perhaps introductory text, narration, or dialogue.

Behavior is the most effective and appropriate character development tool in a longer film, while design is especially effective and appropriate in a very short film. The in-betweens will exist on a sliding scale (see Figure 3.61). At one end of the spectrum sits the four-hour epic, in which design

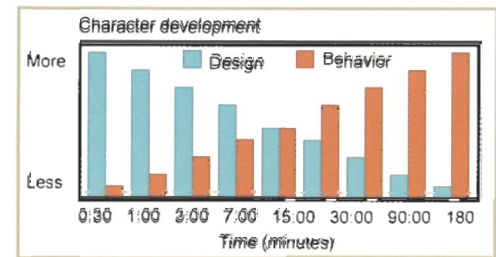


Figure 3.61

The shorter your film, the more you must rely on indicative design for characterization. Behavior is generally a preferred characterization tool in longer films.

is preferably more subtle and a multitude of actions, reactions, conversations, and choices are presented. At the other end of the spectrum is the 30-second gag, in which there is only time for perhaps one or two actions—therefore, design is usually quite descriptive and often much more exaggerated. The longer your film, the more you can rely on gradual development through behavior. The shorter your film, the more you must rely on design and exaggeration.

## How Do You Feel about Your Characters?

Once you've at least partially designed your characters and given some thought to their onscreen actions and reactions, it is important to consider how you feel about them. Remember that your relationship with your characters will be significantly longer than that of your audience: therefore, it is especially important for you to like or be interested in your protagonists, antagonists, and supporting players. As the psychologists say, if you don't like yourself nobody else will. The same is true for your story characters. Try to look at your character designs objectively and decide whether they inspire concern, curiosity, neither, or both. If your good guy makes you sneer and your villain makes you feel warm and fuzzy inside, you might indeed require professional help, but more than likely your designs could use a bit of rethinking.

## Where to Get Ideas for Characters

Ideas for your characters can come from almost anywhere. For example:

- ◆ **Think of a person or a pet you know (or knew, or know of) and then vary, exaggerate, twist, or caricature with subtlety or reckless abandon.** For design, try using Photoshop or morphing software such as Elastic Reality to alter a photograph of your chosen victim (see Figure 3.62). For behavior, consider the feelings that come up when you think about this individual, and use that information to drive the choices your story counterpart will make. Exaggerate what you know or remember about this person or animal. If it was your strict grandfather who liked watching films, have him behave like a drill sergeant and regularly quote famous movie lines. If it was your small and gentle pet garter snake, perhaps make him a rather large and ferocious king cobra instead.

**Combine elements from the genre/style matrix (see Figure 3.63).** Put a tiger's head on a robot body, bat wings on a swordfish, or a pair of space antennae on an old man.



Figure 3.62

Using software to mess around with a drawing or a photo is an excellent method for coming up with a new, caricatured, or severely exaggerated character.

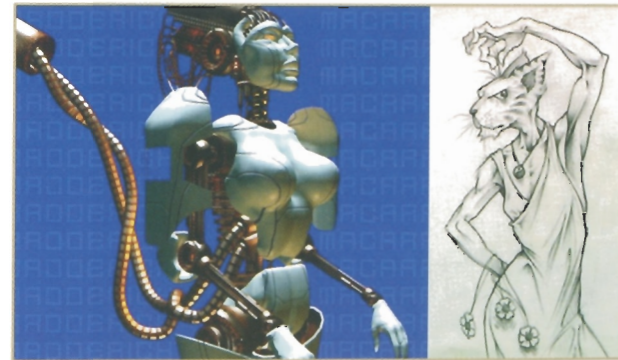


Figure 3.63

Mixing elements from different genres or species can lead to some interesting results.

- ◆ **Anthropomorphize a non-living entity.** You can accomplish this by giving *character* to a non-character or by adding human elements to an otherwise inanimate object, such as facial features and appendages to a traffic light (see Figure 3.64), or lifelike animation to an office supply (*Luxo Jr.*). Flip through a toy or gadget catalog for ideas. Or take the opposite approach and make an animal, alien, or toy based on a real celebrity or a historical figure (such as Rover Dangerfield).
- ◆ **Alter, multiply, mix up, or omit anatomical elements.** Give a human six arms or a giant chin. Put someone's eyes on the back of his head. Omit a torso and just have the arms and legs emanate from an oversized head (see Figure 3.65).  
**Think of interesting contradictions or juxtapositions.** Examples of this might include a Chihuahua puppy as a guard dog; a six-foot-tall infant; or a typically ferocious, flying mythological creature who has tiny wings and behaves like a coward (*Run, Dragon, Run!!!*). (See Figure 3.66.)
- ◆ **Try immersion.** Look at a large number of character images from comic books, action figures, animated films, children's books, and video games. Then close your eyes and let your internal sensory overload combine elements from these various sources in new and interesting ways.



Figure 3.64 Giving character to non-characters or adding limbs to an otherwise inanimate object can be fun.

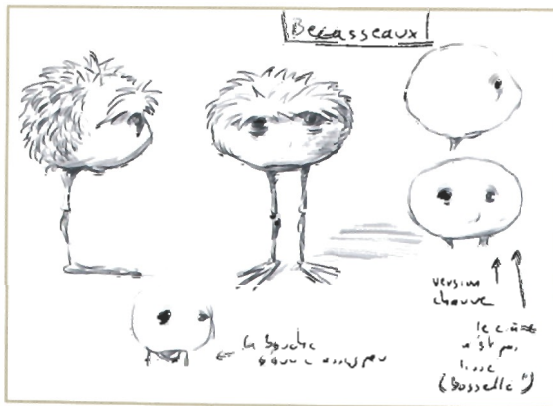


Figure 3.65 Try leaving out major anatomical elements, such as arms, mouths, or in this case, a torso.



Figure 3.66 Contradictions make for interesting characters, such as a cowardly dragon or a fuzzy, floppy-eared warrior.



Figure 3.67  
Who might live in one of these places?

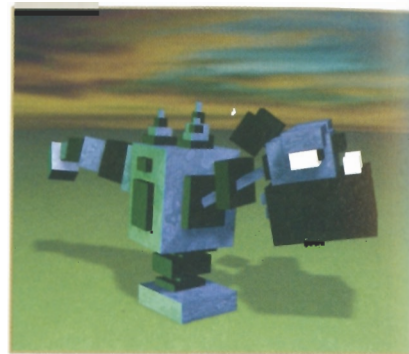
- ◆ **Imagine the world or setting of your story and then consider who might live or operate in such a place.** Who lives in the jungle? What types of mutated insects or reptiles might live near a nuclear power plant with questionable safety standards? Who lingers in dark alleys? (See Figure 3.67.) How has evolution dictated the physical attributes of your alien characters who live on a gravity-free world that is always 400 degrees below zero?
- ◆ **Consider your plot progression and then think about what kind of characters will be appropriate to your story.** An underdog-beats-the-odds scenario might require an introverted little schoolboy with a pocket protector and thick-rimmed glasses. A natural catastrophe might need a superhero or a particularly tenacious military official to save the day. A futuristic space battle should probably involve a few interesting aliens or robots.
- ◆ **Consider your character's profession or goal and then give him appropriate physical and mental attributes, a proper uniform, and all the right tools.** A mountain climber will be lean, fit, determined, and adorned with ropes, spikes, and energy bars. A restaurant critic might be overweight and carry a notepad. A junkyard dog will probably be large, ugly, missing one eye, and drool a lot.
- ◆ **Start with your character's nemesis.** What kind of resourceful hero will rid the city of its giant rat infestation? Who might slay the evil dragon? Who will save the day when Shotgun Sherman escapes from prison and comes to town to exact revenge on the elderly and unsuspecting sheriff? Will it be the deputy, the town drunk, or young Timmy and his trusty slingshot?
- ◆ **Begin with a name.** What will Shotgun Sherman look like? How about Joey "The Squirrel" Rigatoni or Doctor Henrietta Frankenstein? How might a pitbull named Gandhi behave? What kind of eating habits can we expect from Albert the Anaconda?
- ◆ **Take a blank sheet of paper and allow your pencil to wander aimlessly around until something interesting or familiar begins to appear.** Then explore and refine until something more concrete develops. Draw some scribbles and random shapes of differing sizes and then add facial features and appendages. Grab a hunk of clay and start pushing and pulling until you see someone you know.
- ◆ **Work in a similar exploratory fashion with some CG modeling software.** Assemble a pile of primitive shapes and then translate, rotate, scale, connect, and combine them until some interesting and more complex designs begin to materialize (see Figure 3.68). Create a sphere with a large number of vertices and start pulling points and adding deformers until you see something appealing, then run with it.

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- ◆ **Put descriptive words in a hat and pull out a few.** Man, woman, old, young, policeman, stupid, Martian, dog, unicorn, alcoholic, extroverted, overweight, .... Put two or three together at random and then try to draw the resulting combination.
- ◆ **Go people-watching.** Sit in a park or ride the subway and observe clothing, hairstyles, accessories, and behavior. Then go home and invent a story around someone you saw. Combine elements from a number of different individuals into a single unique character. Or do the same with zoo animals.
- ◆ **Try to think of an animal species that hasn't been used too many times.** Cats, dogs, birds, mice, fish, dragons, rabbits, ducks, ants, and dinosaurs have all gotten more than their fair share of attention from storytellers and character designers. How about a lemur, a tapeworm, or a Portuguese man-of-war instead? Collect reference images from nature books and then try to create caricatured, cartoony, or abstract versions of some of the less popular members of the animal kingdom. If you can't find any new ones, create your own by combining elements from a few different animals.

**When designing creatures, examine animals.** Go zoo-drawing and look at animal documentaries and textbooks, especially those that feature predators, deep-sea animals, or insect close-ups, such as the film *Microcosmos*. As it turns out, Mother Nature is an extremely creative character designer, and many film creatures have been based on existing animal species (see Figure 3.69).

- ◆ **Look at rocks, clouds, and trees, searching for suggestions of faces and figures (see Figure 3.70).** Sketch your findings and then evolve them into more complex or realistic entities with some appropriate personality traits and perhaps clothing.
- ◆ **Choose a fundamental emotion and build a character around it.** Psychologists list the six basic emotions as happiness, sadness, anger, disgust, surprise, and fear. Each could very well be the central character trait of a protagonist, a villain, or a sidekick. Use variations of these six as catalysts for a character's physical attributes and behavior.
- ◆ **Peruse a psychology text or a book on personality types.** One such book is *The Writer's Guide to Character Traits* by Linda N. Edelstein. Select a few character traits (preferably disorders or dysfunctions) and see whether the corresponding descriptions inspire any ideas. Edelstein's book describes physical and mental conditions such as amnesia, insomnia, and hypochondria. Analysis of such disorders and their corresponding causes and manifestations might have been the inspiration for films such as *Memento* and *Hannah and Her Sisters*. Perhaps reading the characteristics of narcolepsy or schizophrenia might generate some ideas.
- ◆ **Do some blitz drawing.** Rapidly fill a few pages with quick sketches of figures, faces, animals, aliens, clothing styles, and interesting poses. Don't worry about quality, just quantity. See how many different character doodles you can spew out in 30 minutes. Explore and exaggerate with reckless



**Figure 3.68**  
Using various shapes and sizes of simple objects as 3D puzzle pieces within a CG software package can be a playful way to invent a new character.



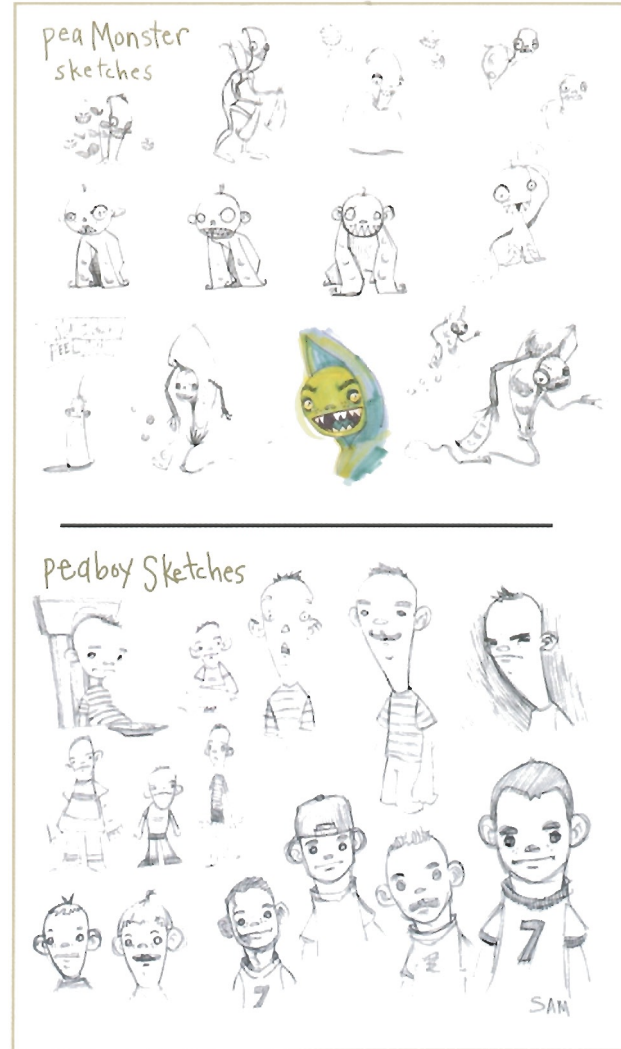
**Figure 3.69**  
Use Mother Nature's imaginative animal design sense as a catalyst for your creatures.



**Figure 3.70**  
Find interesting faces, figures, and postures in the real world.

abandon, and don't erase. Just keep drawing (see Figure 3.71). Try different styles and species. Close your eyes on occasion and if a character appears before your mind's eye, put him down on paper as quickly as possible.

**Use or alter standard archetypes.** Investigate such sources such as Joseph Campbell's *Hero with a Thousand Faces* and the Italian *Commedia dell'arte* theater for characters, such as mentors, shape shifters, tricksters, harlequins, wealthy misers, and arrogant captains. Consider variations on typical character types from stage and screen, such as the wacky neighbor, the trusted canine companion, the voice of reason, the oppressive boss, the clueless parent, the clown sidekick, the elusive love interest, or any of the seven dwarves.



**Figure 3.71**  
Fill a page with a series of small, quick blitz drawings to find your character's look and personality.

## Show Them to Others

Show your character designs to others and note their reactions. Ask your viewer to tell you something about your character based on what they see. Do they like, hate, fear, or feel sympathy for your characters? If their response is not what you planned or expected, you might want to review your design elements.

## A Few Examples

Let's take a moment to examine a few unique and interesting CG characters with regard to the concepts discussed in this chapter.

Bart Goldman's Robobird is a hybrid character that combines robotic design elements with those of a wingless bird (see Figure 3.72). His relative size is established by the inclusion of the lampposts in this image. The overall design is elegantly simple, while details such as gears and pistons help to clarify its mechanical nature. This character would be fun to animate, and the limited number of moving parts would make him highly interactive as well. Based on his displayed behavior, Robobird's personality appears curious and instinctive. A couple of details that might further refine this character would be some texture mapping and perhaps a name.

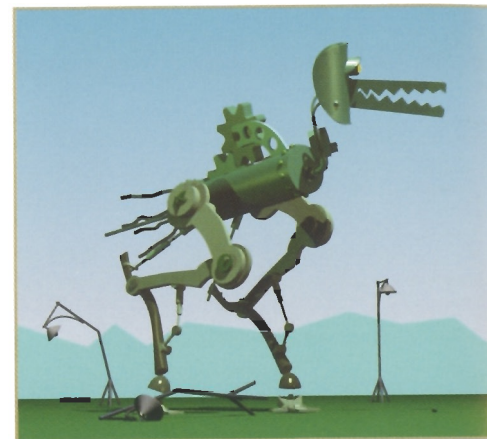


Figure 3.72  
Bart Goldman's Robobird

Phil McNally's Vic Vinyl from his short film, *Pump Action*, has a maniacal expression and exhibits sadistic behavior, clearly identifying him as a rather psychotic villain (see Figure 3.73). This character is particularly interesting because one does not normally associate the notion of evil with balloon people. The design elements and behavior that create this contradiction make this character especially unique. Vic's design is fairly simple and was therefore presumably not too difficult to model and rig. Using mitten hands and drawing rather than sculpting his face are a couple of design choices that contribute to Vic's overall simplicity and readability. Other details, such as seam folds, an inflation valve, and a plastic hook on the top of his head, add interest and believability. The alternating colors of his different body parts also help with readability.



Figure 3.73  
Phil McNally's Vic Vinyl from *Pump Action*

Goffer from Francois DeBue's *Sahari* is an amusing space alien, identified as such by his green skin and helmet (see Figure 3.74). According to his bio (<http://home.tiscali.be/sahari/char.htm>), Goffer is a member of the half-man, half-gherkin race of Agurkans from the planet, Agurk. He is 30 years old, weighs 75 kg, is 1.85 meters tall, and believes himself to be a great leader, despite the fact that he is employed as the mother ship's janitor. This disparity between his self image and his true identity defines most of his onscreen behavior. Much of Goffer's appeal comes from his proportions and facial structure. He has a thick, rounded chest, very thin arms and legs, and large feet. He has no ears or nose, thus focusing attention on his large mouth, goofy eyes, and expressive brows. His two lower fangs add a bit of personality and humor to his expression. Goffer's design is a bit more complex than that of the first two examples; therefore, he was presumably a bit more difficult to model



Figure 3.74  
Francois DeBue's Goffer from *Sahari*

and rig. However, he still certainly falls under the category of elegant simplicity and does not contain any unnecessary details. Goffer is friendly but perhaps a bit too trusting; his curiosity ultimately gets the best of him.

## Summary

Believable, relatable, and interesting characters are equally, if not more, important than strong plot progression. A well-developed character will inspire concern or curiosity from your audience, but keep in mind that deep and complex character development is next to impossible in a very short film; therefore, design and behavior often must be exaggerated to connect your audience to your characters. Character arcs are important elements of storytelling and involve some form of change over time. Whenever possible, apply the concept of elegant simplicity to your characters to help ensure an efficient production cycle. In the next chapter, the subject of art direction and look development will be addressed.