



How to avoid clichés in Animation

A study in making better acting choices

“Never bluff emotions. This lady (the camera) would know.” -Michael Caine



There are two ways animators define clichéd acting choices.

1: The acting choices that we have seen repeatedly in similar shots so we would prefer to see something else.

2: The "go to" acting choices that pop into our heads when we think of acting for animation. For example snapping fingers and smiling to show that the character has an idea or is having a "A-Ha" moment. Or a snarky, knowing smile with one eyebrow down and the other raised.



Most animators grow up watching animation. Animated TV shows, Disney, Ghibli movies, all have introduced us to the magic of animation and motivated us enough to become storytellers ourselves. These shows that we grew up watching constitute a big part of our visual library. Intentionally or not, whenever we think about animation ideas, we tend to go to that library to pick out poses, gestures and actions. Even when we act for our animation references, we often try to emulate that level of broad, exaggerated acting choices. We act and animate as we think it should be and go for acting choices that depict our perception rather than the personality of that character. Every character we animate risks becoming just a copy of our personality or something too close to it.

There is nothing wrong with having a visual library that's built on the work of such amazing movies and television shows: it's actually a great thing. However, it would be a shame to not take that knowledge and build on it. Instead of going back and re-using same poses, same acting choices and same actions, it is better to reinvent them, based on your character. When you can't re-invent the wheel... put your own spin on it.

This spin can always come from the personality of the character that you are animating. It can come from the situation that the character is in or it can come from the design or limitations of their body.

becoming just a copy of our personality or something too close to it.





How does one avoid clichéd acting choices?

In order to avoid the obvious clichéd choices, consider these:

1. Acting based on personality and subtext:

Instead of thinking about the action, think about the thought process and the personality of the character. Is the character an extrovert or an introvert? When he gets an idea, does he act broadly, jumping up and down and using the space available to him or he is an introvert who just shows that he has gotten an idea by having his eyes widen. How good are his people skills? Questions like these really help one to narrow down the personality of a character.

Once you are sure about the personality it is time to think about the **subtext**.

The subtext is the unspoken thoughts. It is the content underneath the dialogue and reveals the true motives that drive the character to act in a certain way.

Finding the subtext and coupling that with the personality of the character would make your acting choices authentic to the character.



2. Watch live action movies and study the acting choices

Pick a movie that has a good critical acclaim and study it. This will help you bypass the obvious choices and come up with more creative acting choices. Why are the actors doing what they are doing? Or you could consider it from another angle: What would be your take on the same scenes?

3. Bring your life experiences to your work:

Let your own culture and experiences influence your acting choices. But try to make sure that your choices will be readable by others. Your work should be original and interesting but also universally understandable. Otherwise, the audience won't be able to connect to it and your storytelling may suffer.



4. If cliché has to be used, then do it well:

Clichés are good in the sense that they get the point across clearly. Everyone has seen them; everyone understands them. Sometimes the best choice turns out to be a clichéd action. If that happens, then do it well. Make sure it serves its purpose well and adds something to the overall performance. These acting choices, just because they are used repeatedly are not necessarily bad choices, we just want to avoid too much sameness. If every girl character starts tucking her hair behind her ear every time she gets confused, we are going to get tired of it. So you may want to pair that action with other elements that we haven't seen.

More about how to avoid cliché acting in animation

Learning acting is hard. Learning to be an animator is doubly hard. Not only do we have to learn acting but we have to understand WHY body parts act the way they do when a character is sad or angry or happy. Actors have it easier (Don't ask Andy Serkis) because their bodies do it without them thinking about it. Animators can't.

Want to show your character be scared? As an animator, we have to dilate the pupil, raise the brows, shrug the shoulders, pull the arms together...We don't just push the scared button in Maya.

But we all know we have to do that stuff. Let's deal with the problem of the subject of this post – avoiding cliché acting.



First, let's define cliché. According to Dictionary.com the definition is *a trite, stereotyped expression*. In Gassaway terms, it's something that you see every day and ONLY shows exactly what the character is saying. Let's take the example of confusion, or the "I don't know" expression. As you can see in that handsome guy on the left, it's the typical I don't know expression. Hands up to the side, eyebrows up, corners of mouth down. Pretty boring.

And cliché.



So how do we avoid it? The easy answers are: learn more acting, try different poses, express yourself. That's all well and good but that always leads to another question. HOW?

That's a little easier but takes a heck of a lot more time. It's called get to know your character. Hello, Character. How are you? Having a good day today?

If you work for a studio doing television, games or movies, most of this next work is done for you. If, however, you are TRYING to get into one of those hallowed halls (which you are) you have to do this on your own. It's not easy but it's simple.

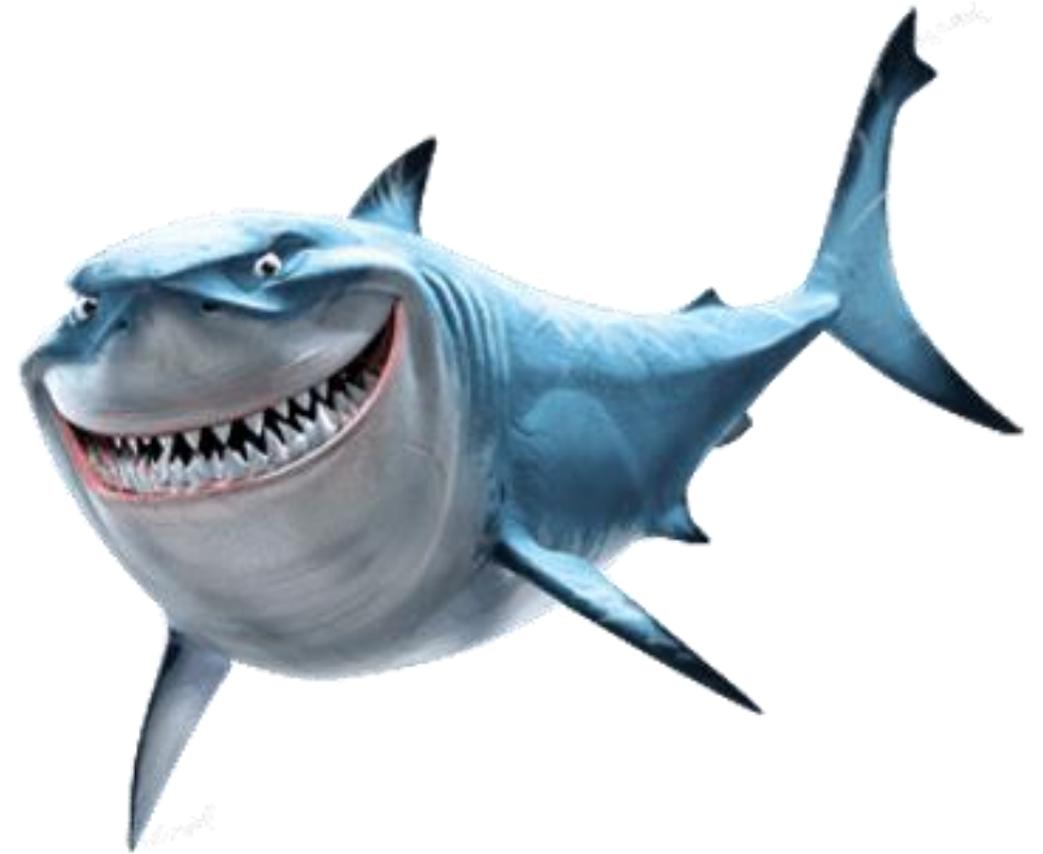


First invent your character. Give them dimension. What do they like? Do they get their hair done weekly or monthly? Frozen yogurt or ice cream? Are they afraid of the dark?

Now hold on a sec. What the heck am I doing? What does this have to do with animation?

Everything.

You want to get a different performance out of a character, you have to have a DIFFERENT character. By giving them dimension, life, desires, fears, you give him depth AND, better yet, you put a mental thought in your head as to who this character is.



Take about 30 minutes and dream up a character- invent one. It's a great way to open the doors within you to new ways of performance.

THIS will lead you away from clichés. Give the character some backstory. Give him a job. What happened to him RIGHT BEFORE this scene?

Do that and you have won half the battle.

