

Between Realism and Stylisation:

Visual Style and Emotional Storytelling in 3D Animation

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Design for Animation, Narrative Structures & Film Language

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1. Abstract

This study examines what happens when 3D animation is highly realistic versus more stylised, and how this affects the narrative and the audience's emotions. The main question is: which style makes the story clearer and elicits a stronger emotional response?

To investigate this, the study uses two things:

a literature review on realism, expressiveness and the uncanny valley, and a comparison of three films: Final Fantasy: The Spirits Within (2001), The Lion King (2019) and The Incredibles (2004).

The films are compared on aspects such as character design, facial expressions, materials and surfaces, lighting and movement style.

The conclusion: stylisation often works better for emotion, because shapes and expressions are clearer and acting becomes easier to “read”. This makes it easier to empathise and improves timing. Photorealism can be very powerful for world-building and immersion, but it also makes the audience more critical: if faces or eyes don't move quite naturally, it can reduce the connection with a character or even cause discomfort due to the uncanny valley.

2. Key Words

3D animation, visual style, realism, stylisation, storytelling, emotional engagement, character design, Uncanny Valley.

3. Introduction

In recent years, 3D animation has made enormous strides in how realistic everything can be: skin, hair, light, textures and even motion capture. However, “more realistic” does not always mean that a film works better on an emotional level. Sometimes a hyper-realistic character can feel uncomfortable or distant, something that is often linked to the Uncanny Valley. This idea is reflected in research on both human and animal 3D characters. (Morgan, 2010) (Kraft, 2017) (Frick, 2023)

In addition, recent research shows that both realistic and expressive styles can influence 3D stories, and that the balance between these styles can determine emotional engagement. (Wibowo, Nugroho and Wibowo, 2024)

In this study, I investigate how realistic and stylised 3D animation styles change the way stories are told and how audiences feel while watching.

To answer this question, my research combines a literature review with a visual analysis of 3D animated films, comparing realistic examples such as *The Lion King* (2019) and *Final Fantasy: The Spirits Within* (2001) with a more stylised example such as *The Incredibles* (2004). In each case, I analyse visual elements that shape emotional storytelling, such as character design (proportions and silhouette clarity), facial expression (texture and shading), lighting, and movement style.

4. Literature Review

Debates about realism in animation often start from the idea that better technology automatically results in better stories. But research shows that this is not always true.

Morgan sees realism as a constant urge to imitate real life. At the same time, he warns that “ultra-realism” can be counterproductive: as soon as animation looks almost real, viewers start to judge it as if it were reality. This makes small mistakes in acting or facial expressions more noticeable and can create emotional distance (Morgan, 2010). However, this is mainly a theoretical argument; it is not based on experiments or audience data. It is therefore more of a warning than hard evidence of how people respond. This argument is mainly based on theoretical reflection, not on experiments or audience data.

Hodgkinson offers a similar critique of what he calls the ‘temptation’ of realism: technical advances can push expressive choices into the background. His argument is particularly valuable because it shifts the focus from the question ‘how real can we make it?’ to ‘what does realism do narratively?’. However, the limitation is the same: he points out the risks, but does not specify which visual variables, such as material representation, eye expression, timing, lighting or texture, most consistently evoke discomfort or emotional distance (Hodgkinson, 2009).

Perceptual research provides clearer indications. Zell et al. demonstrate that greater realism does not automatically mean that a face becomes more attractive or less creepy. What does matter is how form and material are stylised together: different combinations change how people assess realism, attractiveness and the power of expression (Zell et al., 2015).

Power questions photorealism: expressive styles can enhance emotions by simplifying or exaggerating signals, thereby increasing legibility (Power, 2009). His approach links style to emotion but is difficult to test directly.

Therefore, recent research suggests that expressive choices should be prioritised over realism (Wibowo, Nugroho, and Wibowo, 2024). However, the specific stylistic decisions in films that improve clarity and engagement are often unclear.

In summary, the literature views realism and stylisation less as “quality levels” and more as different strategies with their own advantages and risks. This supports my focus: comparing films to determine how design, materials, lighting and movement either enhance emotional readability or increase immersion but also raise expectations.

5. Realism & Emotional Distance

In realistic 3D animation, the image can appear almost as real as live action. This can be confusing for the audience, especially when a human or animal looks “almost real”. People then automatically expect more: very natural facial expressions, subtle acting and perfect timing.

Morgan discusses this with examples such as *Final Fantasy: The Spirits Within* and *Beowulf*. According to him, these characters are exactly halfway between animation and live action. As a result, they sometimes feel neither quite one thing nor quite the other, which can make it more difficult for the audience to read and feel emotions properly. (Morgan, 2010)

Even though the film aims to be serious and realistic, it is precisely those “almost real” faces that make small mistakes extra visible. This ties in with what Kraft says: too much realism can work against you, and a more stylised style can therefore be safer for character design (Kraft, 2017).

In *Final Fantasy: The Spirits Within*, the facial animation attempts to be very subtle and natural. But because the skin and especially the eyes are so realistic, it is immediately noticeable when micro-expressions are limited. Emotional scenes often depend on small changes in the mouth or eyebrows; if these are even slightly stiff, the emotion feels less powerful. This is the limitation of “almost live action”: the more photorealistic a character becomes, the less room there is for exaggerated poses or clear timing to convey emotions. Realism often demands not only realistic images, but also extremely precise acting and animation.

A similar example is *The Lion King* (2019), although that film features animals. These animals must display emotions that are clear to humans, while at the same time looking almost real. Because the models follow the actual anatomy of animals, there is less room for “human” facial expressions that are easily readable. As a result, the emotion comes mainly from other things, such as voice acting and body language, and less from the face alone.

Frick shows that it can become uncomfortable when realistic images and emotional expression do not match well. Especially when facial expressions do not match the realistic model, animals can evoke a disturbing feeling (Frick, 2023).

6. Stylisation & Emotional Engagement

Stylisation gives creators more freedom to adjust shapes, proportions and movements. This allows emotions to be conveyed more quickly and clearly. Power says that expressive styles do not attempt to replicate real life exactly. Instead, they focus on feeling, atmosphere and suggestion, allowing a stylised style to evoke a great deal of emotion even without realism (Power, 2009).

A good example is *The Incredibles* (2004). The characters do not look real: they have large shapes, clear silhouettes and faces that you can immediately “read”. The exaggerated eyebrows and mouths make it easy to see what emotion someone is feeling. Because there are fewer small, realistic details in the skin and clothing, you focus mainly on the acting and expression. This is in line with Zell et al., who show that realism alone does not automatically make characters more attractive or reduce uncanny feelings (Zell et al., 2015).

7. Implications for Practice

Realism can help build a film world, add small details and create atmosphere. It makes the environment feel more credible and can draw the viewer more deeply into the story. (Hodgkinson, 2009)

Hyperrealism can be risky when it comes to characters. If a character looks almost real, the audience expects perfect facial expressions and natural acting. As soon as something is off, it can quickly cause discomfort or disappointment, which fits with the idea of the Uncanny Valley. (Morgan, 2010) (Kraft, 2017)

Stylisation gives more control. Animators can design shapes, materials, and expressions in a way that makes emotions more legible and the character more appealing. (Zell et al., 2015) (Power, 2009)

Wyatt explains this with a change in working method, which he calls the “tradigital” approach. This is a combination of 2D-like imperfections and stylised choices, made within a 3D workflow. The aim is to avoid the emotional distance that sometimes arises with highly realistic 3D animations. In this way, hybrid styles can remain warm and clear, while still benefiting from modern 3D technology. (Wyatt, 2024)

In practice, realism and stylisation are primarily tools: realism often helps to build atmosphere and experience, while stylisation usually makes emotions easier and clearer to read. The best choice is therefore a style in which design, materials, lighting and movement all support the same emotional goal.

8. Conclusion

This paper demonstrates that realistic and stylised 3D styles influence storytelling and emotional engagement in different ways. Stylisation typically makes emotions more readily and clearly discernible, allowing the audience to empathise more easily: creators can consciously adjust form, timing, and expression to convey feelings directly. Realism, on the other hand, is strong in world-building, detail, atmosphere and immersion, but can also be risky with almost photorealistic characters: the audience then expects extremely subtle and flawless facial expressions, which means that small deviations are more likely to cause distance or discomfort.

The most important lesson for my own work is therefore: don't just choose “realistic” or “stylised”, but ensure that design, materials, lighting and movement follow one clear emotional intention, so that the audience can quickly and unambiguously read the intended feeling.

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