Chapter 6: Acting

Animators are, in many respects, actors who use a mouse, pencil, or clay to bring a character to life. An actor is a natural show-off, someone who always wants to be in the spotlight. Animators tend to hide behind their CRTs and light tables, but the performances they create must have the same vitality as any created in live action.

The animator makes characters communicate, not only with each other, but also with the audience. Characters must not only tell a story, but they must tell it in a believable and entertaining manner. When the audience pays for a ticket to your film, switches on your TV show, or downloads your movie off the Internet, they are expecting to be entertained, enlightened, and amused.

Bringing your character to life in a convincing manner means understanding the techniques of acting— being able to think and breathe like your character. When you truly step into a character, the actual act of animating becomes a bit of a blur. You become the conduit from the character to the mouse.

Acting Versus Animating

Plenty of people and schools can teach you how to act. These can be of great value to an animator. As you become more involved with creating characters, you can draw upon many techniques from the art of acting.

Acting, however, is fundamentally different from animation. Acting happens in real time, usually in front of an audience. Actors need to learn how to deal with the here and now. If a fellow actor flubs the line, a good actor is quick enough to cover the faux pas flawlessly. Because actors must operate in real time, they cannot go back and fix just a couple of frames; they have to re-create the entire performance.

Animation is much more of a solitary pursuit—most of the time it's just you and the computer. Animating is like acting in slow motion. Rather than act in real time, you do it a frame at a time. You go through many of the processes that an actor goes through, but the actual motions are translated through the mouse into the computer. Animators have the luxury of going back over a performance frame by frame until they consider it perfect.

Acting and Story

The characters that you animate are the storytellers. They need to convey the script to the audience in a convincing and entertaining manner. The greatest story in the world can be ruined if it is told by a poor storyteller. To make the story jump off the screen, you need to understand the story, story structure, and how each scene moves the story forward.

Each scene has an objective—a point it needs to get across. Each character within the scene also has an objective. A policeman, for example, wants to take the convict to jail. The convict's objective is freedom. How these two objectives work out determines how the story progresses. If the criminal escapes, you have *The Fugitive*. If he goes to jail, you have *The Shawshank Redemption*. When you animate a scene, be clear as to your character's objectives and how they affect the story.

Know Your Tools

Acting is pure right-brain activity. You need to remain totally "in the moment" so that you can truly become one with your character. In a Zen sense, when you connect with the right side of the brain, your character flows through you and subconsciously takes control of the mouse. You don't have to think consciously about how a character is moving; it just moves. Constantly stepping out of this mindframe to solve technical problems or to consult the manual breaks the flow and cheapens your animation.

Before you ever start acting for animation, you need to learn mastery over your chosen software tools. You should be able to set and modify keyframes automatically, without conscious thought. Your characters also need to be rigged properly so that they are rock solid and easy to manipulate. You don't want technical issues to crop up during animation and break your creative flow.

In addition, a good knowledge of human motion, which is discussed later in this book, also helps you remain in the moment. You should be able to construct natural, balanced poses without much effort. Thinking about the pose is a left-brain activity. Don't go there.

Know Your Audience

One thing that tends to be overlooked is the audience. If you are animating a Saturday morning children's show, your acting choices are probably different than they are if you're animating for a late-night comedy show. Knowing your audience helps you create a performance that will be understood and accepted.

Don't, however, fall into the trap of letting the audience dictate the performance. Pandering is not allowed. Don't make obvious choices. If you do what the audience expects all the time, they become bored. Always think of the unexpected turn—what are you going to do in this performance to make it interesting and keep the audience entertained? Your audience must understand and empathize with the character. You must fully understand your character and be true to its personality. If the audience empathizes with your character's plight, then you have them won.

Know Your Characters

The foundation of good acting is understanding who your character is and what makes it tick. If you truly know your character, you innately know how and when the character is going to move and how it reacts to the world. Understanding a character can be a long and involved process, and actors use many techniques to accomplish this. The first thing you need to do is answer a few simple questions about the character.

Some of the questions that are already dictated by the character's design include the following:

How tall?

Fat or skinny?

Healthy or sickly?

What ethnicity?

How old?

Sloppy or neat?

Etc.

Other questions are more personal and internal:

How smart?

Are there goals and dreams?

Any addictions?

Morning person or night person?

Family background?

Favorite foods?

Etc.

These questions are really just the tip of the iceberg. To truly understand your character, you will need to write a character description and a biography.

Character Descriptions

A character description puts down on paper who the character is. Many times the writer does this as part of the writing process. If you are animating a one-shot character in a commercial, however, you may have to come up with your own description.

A character description is a paragraph or less and goes over the basics of the character. Usually, it covers just the important things, such as age, sex, and personality. Here are two character descriptions for *Karen & Kirby*, a series of interstitials I produced for Warner Bros.

<u>Figure 6.1</u>
Karen Jones—Karen is 9 years old and the second most popular girl in school. She's high maintenance and used to having things her way, the easy way. This is not to say she's spoiled. Karen is very likable, and absolutely everyone likes Karen. Because of this, things just naturally tend to go her way. She looks to Kirby as a brother and trusted companion. Karen lives with her dad in a low-slung suburban bungalow that's quite stylish and very neat.

<u>Figure 6.2</u>
Kirby Derwood—Kirby is 10 years old and the second most *un*popular kid in school. Clever and intelligent, he takes great delight in creating very complex solutions to very simple problems, which causes things to blow up in his face. Kirby is a bit of a neurotic—if things don't go as planned, he tends to freak out. This happens a lot. Kirby lives with his dad in a small Airstream trailer parked in Karen's backyard that's very cramped and somewhat messy.

Exercise #1: Adding Personality - Take a character that you've modeled and give it a

personality by writing a brief character description. This should be about a paragraph long.

Character Biographies

Many times, you can get by with just a simple description. This is fine for short-form projects, such as commercials and interstitials. If you are animating a longer-form project, such as a feature, you may want to create a more in-depth biography that really nails down the character's personality.

A biography is more formal than a description, and is longer—usually a page or two long. Like the description, it gives the basics of the character but with a lot more depth. It might go into a character's education, family, traumatic events, or anything else that has shaped the character's life.

Some people go totally overboard in a character biography, writing what amounts to a good-sized FBI file. For a feature film, this is probably a good idea, because the character needs to be as fleshed out as possible before animation begins. If your character is going to show up for 15 seconds in a malted milk ball commercial, though, you'll do just fine without knowing the names of the character's maternal grandparents.

For characters in a TV series, the biography is constantly evolving. Sometimes it's best not to lock things down because the writers and animators invariably discover new things about the characters as the series progresses. When *Rocko's Modern Life* was pitched, there was no information in the character descriptions about Heffer's parents. In the first season, Vince Calandra wrote a terrific story about how Heffer's parents were actually wolves who adopted him with the plan of fattening him up for dinner. Instead of eating him, however, they fell in love with him. This episode was both hilarious and poignant, and it added a whole new dimension and direction to Heffer's character.

> **Exercise #2: Creating a Character Biography -** Take the character description you just created and flesh it out into a full-fledged biography. The biography should be at least a page long and give an in-depth view of your character's personality. Who is this character? Where was he born? Where did he grow up? What are his parents like? Does he have siblings? What are they like? What sort of childhood did he have? Who's his best friend? Who's his greatest enemy? What is the character's biggest fear? Greatest desire? You can ask zillions more questions; ask as many as you need to truly nail down the personality of your character.

Acting Technique

Once you finally understand your character, you need to put that knowledge into action by acting and performing the character. Acting is an art form, and like any art form, it has a number of core principles. These principles, however, are only the tip of the iceberg. As with any art form, the deeper you explore, the more you see there is to learn.

Creating Empathy

The big goal of an animator, as well as of the writers, is to create empathy for the character. *Empathy* means the audience emotionally connects with the character on some level and identifies with him. This is not to be confused with *sympathy*, where the audience simply feels sorry for someone. When a character evokes sympathy, members of the audience say "I pity that guy." When the audience feels empathy, members of the audience can say "I know how that guy feels—I've been there myself." An empathic character plays to the heart.

Say that you need to animate the oldest gag in the book: a character slipping on a banana peel. You can have the character's feet fly out from under him, have him land on his kiester, and then get up and move along. Pretty boring, and the audience will not feel much empathy for the character.

Instead, try to bring out your character by showing a side of his personality to the audience. This enables the audience to go beyond the simple action to feel what your character is feeling. If the character is an extremely proud person, he might get up quickly and look around to make sure he didn't embarrass himself in front of others. If the character is starving to death, then perhaps he'll pull the banana peel off the bottom of his shoe and eat it, turning an unfortunate incident into a humorous blessing.

Villains also need to generate empathy. How many times have you seen a cartoon where the villain was completely evil with no redeeming qualities? These villains are usually two dimensional and not very interesting. Just like the hero, villains also need to get the audience on their side. The scariest villains are the ones who appear real to the audience. A villain is essentially a hero with one fatal flaw. The character might be an everyday individual who turns bad because of something that happened in his past to make him evil. This dark past would be the fatal flaw. A great example is Darth Vader, from the *Star Wars* movies. He was a hero until he joined the Dark Side—his fatal flaw was his desire for power.

Think of Kathy Bates in *Misery*. She created a very real and very scary character. Most people know people who are big fans of something—an actor, a TV series, a movie, or, in this case, characters in a series of books written by an author (played by James Caan). When Kathy Bates's character learns that the book series (along with its main character) will essentially be killed, she does what she must to protect them. Her fatal flaw is an overwhelming love for a fictional character. She detains James Caan and forces him to keep her beloved character alive by writing more books. It's almost like it's her motherly duty to protect those characters. Despite her fatal flaw, the audience identifies with her, both as an ardent fan and a protective mother.

When you animate, try to get the audience to understand your character and what it is feeling. Go beyond the actions to dig deep into the character's personality and find actions that define your character.

Creating Inspiration

Animation is performing, and a good performance is an inspired performance. One starting point for creating inspiration is a concept Stanislavski, the originator of the modern style of realistic acting, described as the "magic if." The "magic if" asks the question "What would I do if I were in these circumstances?"

The answer to this simple question can be a springboard to creativity and inspiration. As an animator you get the chance to be someone else for the day—a fictional character, a cartoon. In a true cartoon world, what WOULD you do if you had an anvil dropped on your head? For the cartoon character, this sort of stuff happens all the time and is perfectly normal. When you put yourself totally in the character's environment and circumstances, it inspires you.

Figure 6.3
In a true cartoon world, what WOULD you do if you had an anvil dropped on your head? When you put yourself totally in the character's environment, it inspires you.

In many respects, this technique is a lot like play-acting. A child truly believes her doll is real. It is the job of animators to make the digital props and sets real to themselves. By using the "magic if," animators grant themselves permission to "believe" in these imaginary objects.

Creating Movement

Until a character moves, it is nothing but a nicely modeled mannequin. Animating a character—bringing it to life—requires that you move it. The first thing a novice animator does is start moving body parts around to see what happens. This trial and error approach can have its moments, but a professional animator needs a much larger arsenal. First, you need to understand that characters always move for a reason. Those reasons are almost always emotionally driven. You cannot "will" emotions. In life, emotions result from stimuli, which affect the character's senses and evoke an emotional response.

The emotions the character feels dictate the type and quality of the motion: a sad character moves much differently than a happy one, for example. Being able to convey a character's emotions through motion is what makes an animator great.

Figure 6.4
Different emotions cause a character to move differently.

Most of the time, people do not think about the individual actions they perform. When you walk, you usually do not think about placing one foot in front of another. If you're in love, you're thinking about your lover—while you happen to be walking. The emotions dictate the character of the walking motions.

When a comedian tells a joke, you laugh; you do not think, "Now I'm going to laugh." This is the key to good animation. Your character's movements need to be unforced and natural. When you are truly animating, you are not really thinking about the individual motions. Instead, you are in a creative flow, where the motion just happens as a consequence of the emotions your character is feeling.

Cause and Effect

Cause and effect drive a story. A story is a sequence of events. Each event has an effect on the next. Cause and effect also drive how a character is animated.

The cause can be any sort of action, from a force of nature to the actions of another character. The effect is how your character deals with those actions. Your character smells smoke—he looks around for flames. Your character sees a bully walking down the street—he decides to turn in the other direction. Your character hears funky music—he starts dancing.

Think of how cause and effect work with animation. If you simply create a pose with a bent arm, the audience reads the pose as a character with a bent arm. If instead you create a form like a bent arm with a specific force in mind, the bent arm now becomes a form with intent. The force causes the arm to bend, and the resulting pose is the effect of that force.

Other times, the cause of an action is internal—drawn from a memory. A character remembers a pleasant childhood moment and smiles. A starving character remembers the taste of apple pie and his

mouth waters. In these cases, the eyes still matter. A character remembering something always moves its eyes as it searches for the memory.

Object of Attention

As we move through the day, our attention shifts from place to place, from object to object. Things happen. Those things demand attention.

Right now, your attention is focused on this book. You're exercising only those parts of the body that are used for reading. The rest of your body is relaxed. If the telephone were to suddenly ring, your attention would shift away from this book to the telephone. You would then exercise those parts of the body needed to travel to the phone and pick up the receiver. You would forget about the book momentarily as you focused completely on the phone.

Lee Strasberg, the father of method acting, would say that, in this case, the individual's object of attention has changed from the book to the phone. The object of attention is a basic building block with which both actors and animators work. By having the character concentrate on an object, which represents the task at hand, the animator establishes a sense of belief that the character is truly involved in what he is doing.

When a cat toys with a catnip toy in the kitchen, it uses only those muscles necessary to concentrate on the object of attention: the toy. The cat is simply trying to accomplish a specific "task": to conquer the toy. All other muscles are completely relaxed.

If the dog dashes into the kitchen looking for a drink, the cat's body suddenly changes its demeanor as she focuses on the new object of attention: the dog. The cat may tense up and arch her back, but she still uses only those muscles necessary to concentrate on her new object of attention. The cat's task has changed and she has momentarily forgotten the toy; her new task is to put the dog in its place.

Figure 6.5
When the character is reading the book, he's exercising only those parts of the body that are used for reading.

Figure 6.6
When the phone rings, the character's attention completely shifts to the phone. He momentarily forgets about the book.

The dog's object of attention, which had been "water," now becomes "the cat," and his original objective to "drink water" now becomes "growl at the cat." The dog is using only those muscles necessary to accomplish this task. He is focused on the cat, not the water.

Exercise #3: Changing the Object of Attention - Create a short scene where a character is focused on doing one task, and then switches his object of attention to another. Be sure the character is completely focused on each task. Once you animate this, extend the scene by shifting the focus back to the first task.

Clarity

Making your character 100% focused on the task at hand gives your performance clarity. The audience knows exactly what the character is thinking at any given moment. Even when a character is distracted momentarily, it focuses 100% of its attention on the distraction for that fleeting moment.

Take the dog and cat situation a step further. Perhaps the dog becomes indecisive—he really needs that drink but still has to deal with that pesky cat. If you were to split the difference, the dog would focus 50% of the way between the cat and the water. The audience then wonders, "Why is the dog staring into space?"

Even in his indecision, the dog needs to switch between objects of attention—100% on the water, 100% on the cat. He looks longingly at the water, and then turns back to growl at the cat. When he is looking at the water, he can really imagine that cool drink. When he is facing the cat, he is totally absorbed in that task.

<u>Figure 6.7</u>
The dog really needs that cool drink ...

<u>Figure 6.8</u>
...but he also needs to deal with the cat. Even when your character cannot make up his mind, he is fully focused on one possibility or the other.

If your character is 100% focused in the scene, the performance is crystal clear. If the character is not focused, the performance is muddy. Even when your character cannot make up its mind, it is fully focused on one possibility or the other. Of course, the audience needs to be in on the indecision as well. Be sure to hold your poses long enough so the audience can read them. Once the poses are clear to the audience, you can switch back and forth between them more quickly.

> **Exercise #4: Focusing on a Single Object -** Create a scene where a character needs to decide between two objects (soup and a sandwich, for example). As the character decides, shift the object of attention from one to the other and make sure the character is completely focused on only one object at a time.

Simplicity

Another way to achieve clarity is through simplicity. An old animation adage is "one thing at a time." This is similar to the concept of attention, but it also helps clarify the individual actions. A character trips, then falls, and then gets up—it doesn't do them all at once.

You also should be clear as to what the individual action represents. Don't animate anger—that's too broad and general. What exactly is the character angry at? It's better to animate "I hate my boss." This simplifies the emotion as well as it gives your character focus. To give the anger even more depth, add the survival objective "I am angry at my boss, but I need my job to survive." This adds even more depth to the emotion so the audience can truly empathize with your character.

In addition, try to simplify each of your character's poses and actions to keep them as clear as possible. The actions are like the links of a chain. They all fit together sequentially. If each action is clear and easily read, then that link of the chain is strong. An overly complex pose or action could possibly break the chain and lose the audience.

The Moment Before

One aspect of a character that is often overlooked is what the character was doing just before the scene started. Imagine a character entering a locker room. Is the character coming in off the street? Coming back from a heavy workout? Returning from a losing game? Each one of these situations affect how the character carries itself when it enters the scene. Knowing what happened in the moments before this moment helps you keep your character focused.

Exercise #5: Animating a Prior Event - This one is simple. Animate a character walking into a room. By the character's motions, make it clear to the audience what happened immediately before the character entered.

Status

Figure 6.9
In each of these images, what happened just before the character entered the scene?

When animating multiple characters in a scene, you need to determine their status in relation to each other. Understanding who is "top dog," so to speak, helps tremendously in guiding the interactions between your characters.

A servant always defers to the master. In politics, everyone is expected to stand when the President walks into the room. A drill sergeant dominates his recruits. These are all extreme examples, but status is important in any society, and it translates to every aspect of our dealings with others, no matter how subtle. One character is always more dominant, and others are more submissive.

There is also a status transaction, which happens regardless of rank and file and has to do with who is commanding the scene at the time. If you handle your poses in such a way that clearly illustrates who is in control of the scene, the emotions will be more easily read. An example would be a man proposing to a woman. He is in control of the scene when proposing, and then she is in control with her response. No one is necessarily higher than the other in a sense of society or rank and file, but each has a command of the scene at different times.

Status is displayed through body posture. The character with the higher status usually stands tall and projects his energy outward with a steady gaze. A submissive character leans forward and gazes down, sends his energy toward the floor.

A good example of status would be in the film *Ghandi*. Normally, a prisoner is accorded a lower status than the guards, but when Ghandi is sent to prison, he maintains his high status through the position of his body. His actions are always centered and very self-assured as compared to his captors'.

Givens

Whenever you work with a character, things are "given" to you to work with. These are the things you cannot change about the character. You may or may not agree with some of the decisions made before you took control of the character, but you need to accept these givens and use them to your advantage.

Figure 6.10
Which character has the higher status?

Voices are one of the biggest givens for the animator. Typically, this is positive, because a good voice performance is an excellent foundation from which to build convincing animation. Big conflicts can arise, however, when an animator doesn't agree with the voicing of the character.

Other givens include the design of the character, the virtual sets, and other constraints. If you are integrating a character with live action, you may have to go as far as to match your character's movements with that of a live-action actor.

With any of these givens, the trick is to use them to your advantage. Working with the director may help to clarify the choices that were made before the work got to you. Many times the cleverest solutions come out of limitations.

Acting and the Body

Knowing the specifics of how the body moves as it reacts to stimuli is something every animator should know. The body can be broken up into a few major parts. The head and face are important, as well as the hands. The spine and its position also factor in to how a character is perceived.

The Head

The head is the center of intellect. The position of the head determines, to a great deal, how the audience perceives a character. Cocking the head to the side throws the body off center. Generally, this can indicate confusion but also curiosity. If a character is affirming something, his head may nod slightly as if to say "yes." Conversely, the head may shake from side to side slightly when a character is in disagreement.

Figure 6.11
Head cocked to one side can indicate curiosity.

Figure 6.12
The head raised high is more childlike.

Figure 6.13
Lowering the head indicates authority—on a kid, it's downright creepy.

When the head is held up, exposing the throat, it indicates a more naive and childlike character. Kids are short—they look up a lot. When the head is down, hiding the neck, the character is more authoritative and serious. Think of Jerry Lewis. When he was young and paired with Dean Martin in the '50s, his character was that of an innocent and naive man. He kept his head high. When Jerry Lewis hosted the telethon, he had to be a lot more compelling. In this instance, he lowered his head.

The Shoulders

Shoulders often express mood or emotion. In some respects, their motions are related to those of the hands, but shoulders can express themselves outside of hand motions. The shrug is a good example of expression through shoulder motions. A character pushing its way through a crowd may lead with the shoulders, much as a linebacker does.

The general position of the shoulders can also indicate mood. Slumped shoulders indicate weariness, while squared shoulders indicate alertness. If a character is defending itself, it turns the body and raises the shoulder facing the attacker. This presents a smaller target to the attacker than if the character were to face it directly.

The Hands

The hands are one of the most expressive parts of the body. In most instances, they communicate more than the face. The hands can gesticulate over an area of several feet, whereas the face covers only a few inches. Of course, in film, the close-up can place more emphasis on the face, but most shots usually involve the body.

Figure 6.14
Slumped shoulders can indicate weakness or weariness.

Figure 6.15
Squared shoulders are more forceful.

Figure 6.16
Shoulders can also indicate emotion, such as in this shrug.

The big question with most animators is what to do with the hands. Some hand positions are universal in their meaning. Hands folded across the chest, for example, indicate that a character is closing itself off. Hands clasped behind the back are an indication of respect and lower status. A character with one hand on the hip might appear relaxed, whereas both hands on the hips make a character appear to be confrontational.

Hands above the head are more intellectual. Where the hands are raised in relation to the body can also communicate a great deal about the character's demeanor. If the character raises his hands above the shoulders, it is a more intellectual gesture. Anxiety is a very intellectual emotion, and anxious people tend to hold their hands fairly high. Hands held lower are more primitive. A construction worker gesturing at a pretty girl will position the hands below the chest.

The Spine and Posture

The spine is very important to the overall look of the body. The spinal cord is where all the sensory data from the body is transmitted to the brain. The spinal cord also has a bit of its own intelligence—many reflex actions actually happen in the spinal cord rather than the brain.

Figure 6.17
Hands held lower are more primitive.

Figure 6.18

Hands near the chest are more emotive.

Figure 6.19
Hands above the head are more intellectual.

Posture is a very important indicator of a character and its demeanor. Your mom always told you to stand up straight for a reason. A proud character stands tall and arches its back to stick the chest out. Conversely, a depressed character tends to hunch over more. As the body ages, the spine stiffens, which makes it difficult for older characters to twist the spine and turn around.

Figure 6.20
A character's posture is a strong indicator of its mood.

The spine also figures prominently into status negotiations between characters. A character with high status stands taller and straighter. This goes pretty much for any character with higher self-worth. Such a character tends to keep its weight at the center of its body, near the hips. Characters with lower status subconsciously lower themselves by bending their spines and lowering their shoulders.

The Spine and *Chakras*

When you're trying to understand a character, you need to understand where on the body the character's personality emanates. One way to look at this is with a bit of Eastern philosophy and the concept of a *chakra*.

The word *chakra* is Sanskrit for wheel or disk and signifies one of seven basic energy centers in the body. Each of these centers correlates to major nerve ganglia branching forth from the spinal column. The *chakras* also correlate to levels of consciousness, developmental stages of life, colors, sounds, body functions, and much, much more.

For animators, the best way to understand this is that the more primitive the emotion, the lower it sits on the spine. This little tidbit can be used as a guide to animating a character. The character's personality emanates most strongly from that point on the body. Primitive personalities, such as Rocky Balboa's, emanate from low on the body. People who love others tend to emanate their personalities from the heart, or the middle *chakra*. An intellectual's personality, such as Woody Allen's, emanates from the head.

Figure 6.21
The seven *chakras* affect different areas of the body.

In general, the three lower *chakras* are connected to the main needs—of survival, fertility, and the free will—whereas the four higher *chakras* are in connection with a character's psychological makeup and define love, communication, and knowledge, as well as spirituality.

The Seven *Chakras* and Personality

	CHAKRA	ISSUES	GOALS	DESIRES	PERSONALITY
1 –	Root	Survival, grounding	Self-preservation	Stability, health, prosperity	Physical

2 –	Sacrum	Sexuality, emotions, desire	Self-gratification	Pleasure, sexuality, feeling	Emotional
3 –	Solar Plexus	Power, will	Self-definition	Spontaneity, purpose, self-esteem	Egoist
4 –	Heart	Love, relationships	Self-acceptance	Compassion, acceptance, relationships	Social
5 –	Throat	Communication	Self-expression	Communication, creativity, resonance	Creative
6 –	Brow	Intuition, imagination	Self-reflection	Perception, interpretation, imagination	Perceptive
7 –	Crown	Awareness	Self-knowledge	Wisdom, knowledge, consciousness	Intellectual

Exercise #6: Animating Dialogue Through Chakras - Take a simple line of dialogue, such as "Boy, I'm really tired," or "These pretzels are making me thirsty," and animate the line three different ways. First, animate the character from the lower *chakras*. Next, animate the character from the middle ones, and finally from the upper ones. You'll soon discover that each zone of the body communicates the line differently.

Other Techniques

There are dozens of other acting techniques and theories about acting. Basically, they all boil down to psychology and how to get the body to do things it would not normally do. How many people can actually cry on cue? Not many, I imagine. An actor with sufficient training, however, can do such a task reliably. As an animator, you never need to cry on cue, but understanding some of these techniques can help you empathize with your character and animate it better.

Sense Memory

If you have ever been really hungry, the thought of food was probably enough to actually make your mouth water. This is an example of your senses remembering the taste of the food and your body responding accordingly by activating your salivary glands. As an animator, you can use your sense memory to conjure up emotions and actions for your character.

If your character is hungry, try to remember the last time you were truly hungry. How did it feel? Did it make you light-headed? How did you move? Slowly? Were you easily agitated? When an animator does a sensory exercise such as this, he may find emotional responses occurring that he may not have

anticipated.

Animal Exercises

If you are having problems trying to understand a character, you may need to look at it from a different angle. One method is to try recreating the character as an animal. What animal does your character move and act like?

When doing this exercise, you need to be very specific in your observation. Go to the zoo and watch the animal for at least an hour. What is the animal's posture? How does he move? When does he move? Why does he move? Can you imagine what the animal might be thinking?

If you can, try to physically imitate the animal's motions. Again, as specific as possible. Look into the animal's eyes. Does it seem intelligent? Tame? Wild? Dangerous? Try to transfer the animal's thoughts to your own thoughts.

Of course, in animation, you often have to animate animals themselves. Many times, this demands the same sort of observations. In some cases, however, the animals don't act like the bodies they inhabit. Think of the elephant "Shep" in the live-action remake of *George of the Jungle*. The elephant was raised as a pet and acted more like a dog than an elephant—even going as far as to fetch a "stick," which was actually a six-foot-long log. In this case, a couple of hours spent watching your dog would be very helpful.

Affective Memory

Using "affective memory" is one of the most widely known procedures in all of "method" acting. Simply put, it tries to put an actor as close to a character as possible by asking him to recall a similar event or experience in his own life.

This technique is used most notably in the sorts of scenes that expect an actor to dig really deep—those scenes with a very strong emotional content, such as when a character loses his best friend to murder, a character's spouse demands a divorce, or a character discovers he has an incurable disease. In these situations it may be necessary for the animator to find similar experiences in his own life, and be first willing, and then able to relive those experiences as the character is animated.

This technique is most often mentioned when characters are in stressful and traumatic situations. But affective memory can be used for lighter moments as well. If your character wins the lottery, try to recall a moment in your life when you had a similar experience that both shocked you and made you joyously happy—perhaps the moment you got accepted into animation school!

Conclusion

As you have seen, acting is very important to the animator's craft. Study your characters and understand them fully before you tackle a scene. When animating, be conscious of your character's personality and the objectives of the scene. The audience needs to be able to relate to the characters on the screen—characters always needs to evoke empathy from the audience. Without empathy, you're sunk.