

Character Development

UNIT.05

ARCHETYPES OR STEREOTYPES

All stories are character-driven. It doesn't matter what form this takes; if there is no character, there is no one to tell the story about. In animation anything can become a character – from animals (Mickey Mouse) to toys (Pinocchio and Toy Story) to mountains (Fantasia).

This is characterisation and animation – bringing to life nonhuman and inanimate objects. They are exclusive to our chosen medium. Character development is something that covers all realms of storytelling, whether in the form of a novel, play or film. Whatever format we choose to tell our story in, our characters have to be believable, no matter what they

☑ *The genie in Disney's Aladdin is a composite of many of the archetypal characteristics. He is a shapeshifter, a trickster, a herald and even a mentor to Aladdin – and all this with Robin Williams' unique sense of humour.*

look like. This is even more important when creating nonhuman characters. So how do we make them realistic and engaging?

All the great writers agree on one thing: archetypes, not stereotypes. Archetypes are universal characters, whereas stereotypes are localised, with cultural conditionings that keep them tied to their specific area. Archetypes are heroes and villains whose personality traits are recognisable in any culture and go beyond the external forms. There are seven basic archetypes,

classified by Joseph Campbell in his book *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*: hero, mentor, threshold guardian, herald, shapeshifter, shadow and trickster. Read the book to gain a proper understanding of these archetypes as it is too complex a subject to cover here. An example of the archetypal hero is Jason in *Jason and the Argonauts*; the mentor, Gandalf in *The Lord of the Rings*; the shapeshifter, or the one who is not what he or she seems, Agent Kent Mansley in *The Iron Giant*; the shadow, the Emperor from *Star Wars*. These various character types have specific roles to play, and their appearance is dictated by the way your story unfolds.

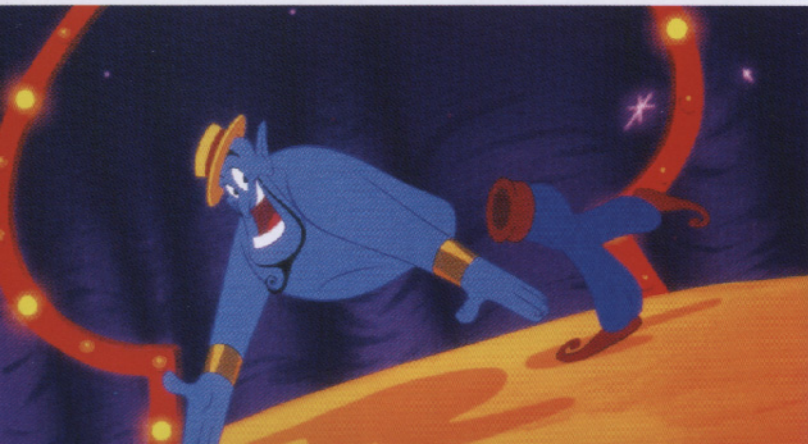
Taking the archetypes as the basis for our protagonists, we also need to give them personalities. We have to give them a history, and out of that history we can assign the necessary traits and moods. Even though your characters are on screen for maybe only minutes, you have to create a whole life for each of them and know the details

FIG02



☑ *Hanumana, the Hindu monkey god, can be seen as the archetypal herald. In the story of Rama it is always Hanumana who announces the hero's action. He is the one that carries the messages for Rama, just as Hermes and Mercury did. Hanumana was also a trickster, causing chaos for his adversaries with his sense of mischief.*

FIG01



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intimately, such as how and why they would react in a situation. You have to know how they came to be there in the first place, and this has to be conveyed to the audience without wasting screen time. If you have to create 24 images for every second your character is on screen, you want to convey your message as quickly as possible and get on with the action.

One other key aspect of character development is getting the right voice. Could you ever imagine Sylvester or Bugs Bunny with a different voice? Would the way you perceive them change? Getting the right voice can also affect the way your character behaves and influence the film's final outcome, as Robin Williams did in *Aladdin* (fig 01).

OBSERVATION

Observation is the key to developing realistic characters. Start by observing yourself – how and why you react in a particular way in certain situations. What is it from your past that causes you to act in a certain way? People-watching is another important pastime for animators. Shopping centres, parks or sports games, or better still a street café, are perfect places to go armed with index cards or a notebook, to watch people acting and reacting. And because they are strangers you can let your imagination invent histories for them. This is one of the more pleasurable activities of the creative process, and just as important as sitting at your drawing board or computer.

FIG03



King Arthur and Merlin is one of the best known hero and mentor relationships, retold many times on the screen in both animation and live action. Of course, the relationship between Obi-Wan Kenobi and his two generations of Skywalker apprentices is probably better known to more recent generations.

FIG04



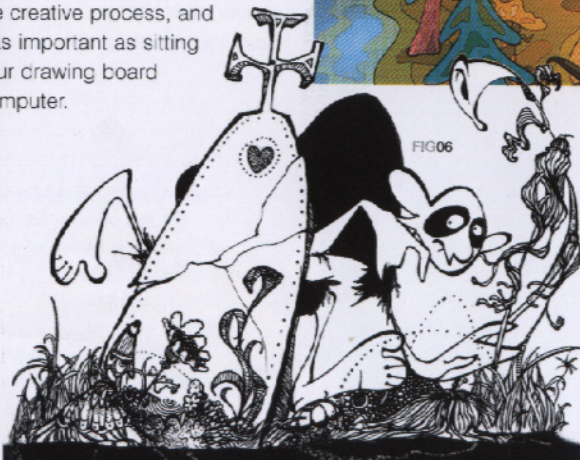
The original Cyclops, not the one from X-Men, could be considered a threshold guardian. He was not a true enemy but an adversary who tested the hero's courage to continue with his quest. This is the role threshold guardians play.

FIG05



Trickster gods often appear in mythology. Hanumana in Hinduism, Loki in the Norse tales and the raven from this Alaskan tale, Raven Steals the Daylight. Tricksters are often represented by animals and nearly always have a great sense of mischievous humour. Rabbits are commonly used, such as Errol Rabbit, and everyone's favourite, Bugs Bunny.

FIG06



The shadow archetype is the dark side of our personalities. It is the Gollum that wants to kill Frodo, it's the werewolves, the Mr Hydes, the Green Goblins and the Darth Vader's. It's Hermann Hesse's Steppenwolf. It is the deranged cannibal (fig 06) from Cartoon Saigon's Underground. The shadow is the villain and the negative force that has to be overcome by the hero, whether it is external or internal.

OVER TO YOU

01/01

When you watch a film or read a story, see if you can identify the archetypes in the characters. It is not uncommon for characters to display more than one of the attributes. Jot them down so you can build up a clearer picture of what they are and how they work in the story.

01/02

The indispensable tool for any animator is the index card. Jot down ideas about your character's life and personality traits, make sketches of expressions to match the written descriptions, and slowly you will develop a fully rounded character. Do this for all your characters until you have a pile of cards that will become reference points as you write your screenplay and make your animation.

