

## Falling Down the Uncanny Valley

Over the past couple decades, the technology and art of 3-D character modelling and animation has made so much progress in terms of realism.



Fred Parke, 1974

Large studios, specifically Pixar, were responsible for a lot of the innovations on the technology side due to their resources. Their earliest attempts at human representation were, shall we say horrifying, but over time they figured out how to use stylization, non-human characters, and fantasy elements to their favor as their tools caught up.



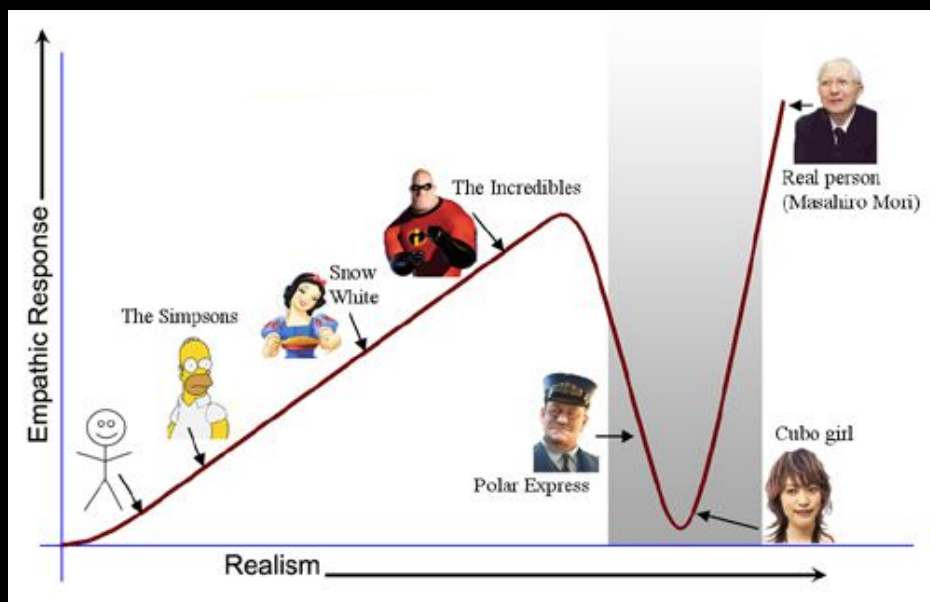
Tin toy, 1988 vs Rapunzel, 2011

Even with the ability to make realistic textures, lighting, and movement, Disney/Pixar continues to use heavy stylization to make their characters look cute and cartoony, because even with the ability to make near perfect realism, they know most consumers still find realism creepy.



[Dove Chocolate Commercial, 2014](#)

Dove received a lot of attention as well as backlash in 2014 for using a facial action coding system to revive Audrey Hepburn for a commercial. The comments section alone will tell you how most people felt about the moral implications of that, but mainly it's unsettling to see such a realistic face that is even partially CG.



Masahiro Mori coined the term Uncanny Valley in 1970 to describe how realistic robots needed to be in order for humans to empathize with them. The term has been applied to the entertainment industry as studios struggle to achieve better graphics without alienating their audience from empathizing with the characters.



Mass Effect: Andromeda, 2015

3D games often have to use crude or stylized character designs in order to render at high frame rates without lagging. When they try to attempt realism, the results often fall into the uncanny valley. Mass Effect was one of the biggest examples of this problem in games. So you can see why a company like Pixar avoids the valley by staying safely in stylization. However, Pixar has gotten flack for their stylization, especially with female characters for all having nearly the exact same proportions and features.



Clearly this has nothing to do with eurocentric beauty standards or gender norms. I don't see what all the fuss is about, there's absolutely nothing wrong with having the exact same character design in every single movie since 2013. I'm mainly concerned with how they are all supposed to breathe through those tiny noses?

studios: ok it's absolutely imperative that the audience knows which one is a GIRL wolf and which one is a BOY wolf

studios, every single time: ok wait I got it



Still, it's okay to critique Pixar's apparent lack of creativity while appreciating their contributions to the field. Many early pioneers like Ed Catmull's techniques are still used in programs like Blender.

Even with these tools however, most independent artists and smaller studios can't afford to create the same detailed and realistic characters of big budget feature films. Instead, artists across many disciplines are leaning into the uncanny valley of stylized humanoid characters. Outside of the entertainment industry and character driven narratives, artists don't have to be as concerned with gaining the audience's empathy, but communicating personal expression, societal critique, and experimental aesthetics.





NEPTUNE PRINCE

Amari Eternal aka NEPTUNE PRINCE is a 3D artist that makes forms that reflect pop culture's representation of the female form. I can't speak to her intentions, but her stills and animations combination of gore, sexuality, and an ethereal aesthetic seem a lot more creative than anything I've seen come out of a big studio in the past decade. While the bodily proportions are exaggerated, the faces appear closer to realism than cartoon, while still being idealized and plastic looking.



SOPHIE- Faceshopping

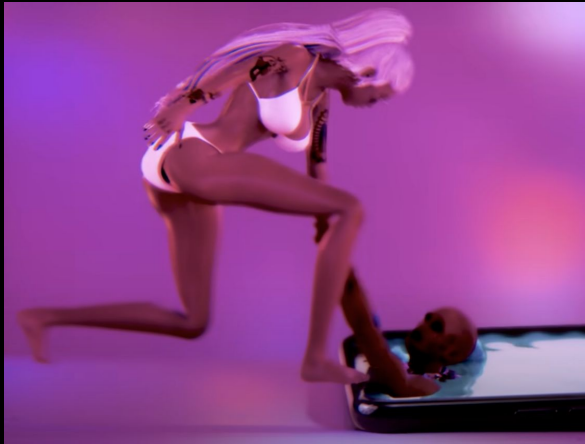
Because 3D art is easier and more accessible than ever, more and more musicians are collaborating with CG artists for music videos that often toy with the concept of beauty standards, gender norms, and consumerism. SOPHIE's Faceshopping video combines a 3D effigy of herself being distorted and sliced with text and images referencing corporate advertising.



[Shygirl - Slime](#)

Shygirl's recent music video similarly shows avatars of herself in matching outfits, makeup, and sets to her real self as they sing, dance, and act similar to herself, but with cartoonish, dare I say disneyfied, movements and features that contrast and reflect herself. Together they almost create an uncanny valley as it cuts between the video and the animation.

Rico Nasty's music video for iPhone more directly references how we use technology to affect the way we see ourselves with face filters as she sings intercut with figures made in a similar style to NEPTUNEPRINCE's work. The term selfie dysmorphia has been getting a lot of buzz recently in reference to people getting plastic surgery to look more like they do with face filters from platforms like snapchat and instagram, because they started tying their identity to how they saw themselves most frequently. I don't think it's coincidence how similar those filters are to the "disney face syndrome".



Rico Nasty - iPhone

The trend of music videos using 3D animation straddles the line between the entertainment industry and independent artists, and the concepts behind them often reflect on these issues of self representation and representation in pop culture due to those blurred lines. While these artists often reference how the media typically shows the human body, they have the opportunity to subvert and critique those methods from the perspective of marginalized identities. Artists of color, trans artists, fat artists, and female artists are clearly not being listened to at studios like pixar and it shows. Collaborating with musicians and using social media as a platform for art seems like a much more preferable alternative.

By Adam Dabbs