



Why cartoons have animals

Description

Why do adults and children like to see animals as characters in fictional stories and cartoons, especially when stories about animals are so confusing?

Everyone knows that Micky Mouse (a mouse) lives in a house and has a pet Pluto (a dog) and a friend Goofy (a dog that talks). I recently caught up with *The Reef* (Wonderworld Studios), a CGI animation involving a cute female fish who's the love interest of a killer shark, and *The Ant Bully* (Legendary Pictures) where two co-worker ants (I think) are courting, but there's still a queen of the colony, the one who lays all the eggs. In any case there's no consistency within and across stories. Mickey (Disney), Jerry (*Tom and Jerry*, Warner Bros) and Mighty Mouse (Terrytoons) are confusingly different species of mouse it seems.

Anyway, here are nine reasons I can think of for this baffling bestiary or animal *melangery*.

1. Almost human: Non-human animals are the closest thing we have to humans, but are sufficiently different for us to make them do and be whatever we want. They are more flexible and **adaptable** than humans for storytelling



2. Symbiosis: Humans are a pet-loving species. The story goes that we

co-evolved with other animals adapted to living side by side with human populations: eg dogs that scavenge off our scraps and in return bark off intruders, and eventually helping us to hunt. We have a

biologically wired sympathy with animals. So they make good **companions** in our stories.

3. Darwinian: We are creatures who compete, and we like stories about contest. Cats chase mice, sharks eat smaller fishes, lions chase zebras, coyotes go after *geococcyx californianus*, and hunters hunt ducks and rabbits. As a hunting species we thrive on stories of the **hunt**. Once-upon-a-time such stories transmitted and enhanced our hunting prowess.

4. Anthropological: According to anthropologist Claude Levi-Strauss human societies grab whatever is to hand in constructing their myths and meaning structures. A tribe will identify with bears or eagles if they are to hand. In other parts of the world it could be mountains, trees or leopards. Gangs and football teams choose to identify with tigers, rockets, weather elements, and whatever fits. Thanks to world travel, education and the mass media thereâ??s a whole zoo of traits, characters and behaviours to choose from and with which groups and individuals can identify. We use whatâ??s around us, in our practical dealings, languages and story-telling. Levi-Strauss calls this â??bricolage.â?•

5. Jungian: The psychologist Karl Jung argued that our myths and narratives typically follow some kind of interaction between key archetypes, such as great mother, father, wise man, and **trickster**. The trickster is a recurrent type in myth and folklore and is often associated with elements in nature, including animals: coyote, fox, raven, monkey. These are â??mischievousâ?• animals that try to deceive us, and confound rationality. They make us laugh, and they are cunning deceivers. Childrenâ??s stories are populated by animal tricksters: the mouse that outsmarts the cat, the wise-old man who is a fox in disguise. In the end, the hunted becomes the hunter, roles ambiguated and



reversed.

6. Matter out of place: According to anthropologist Mary Douglas we tend to be disturbed or disgusted by things that are in the wrong place: shoes on the dinner table, saliva on the salad, a snail on the pillow, a mouse in the biscuit tin. Nothing is disgusting in its own right; just the unusual relationships set up by its misplacement. Thereâ??s little thatâ??s disturbing about noses, eyes and mouths, but eyes that look like human eyes on an animal face create something close to **monstrous**. Animal ears on a human body have a similar unsettling effect. Animals feature in the menagerie of monsters, imaginary and real, that populate our stories. Mixing up animals with different attributes in the same stories (Pluto and Goofy) also lures us into the realms of the monstrous.

7. Exaggeration: Animals present as **caricatures** of human beings. See previous post on exaggeration. â??Realisticâ?• representations of humans in cartoons are difficult, and can look wooden and cadaverous. Animals are already caricatures and so are easier to draw.

8. Metaphor: If monsters are made up of human and animal parts out of place, then metaphors are objects in the wrong place (ie misclassifications). Mice that have pet dogs, ants that make love, fish that talk and caterpillars that read are **category errors**, which is to say metaphors. Metaphors are part of

our language and thinking.



9. Supremacy: Man is superior to the animals in that he can stand upright and look to the heavens (said Vitruvius and Milton). We oscillate between wanting to see our inferiors struggle as entertainment (bear baiting, cock fighting, lion taming) and as vulnerable creatures to be petted and nurtured. Some representations of animals have big eyes and other human features and behaviours that make them â??cute,â?• so we can incline to parent them, like children.

Mole, Ratty, Toad, Pooh, Piglet, Eeyore, Tigger, Rupert, Mowgli, Bagheera, Mrs Tiggy-Winkle, Kermit, Brâ??er Rabbit, Monkey, Pigsy, Horse, Bunyip Bluegum, Sam Sawnoff, Snowy, Tintin, Gromit, Lola Bunny, Tobermory, and Great Uncle Bulgaria â?? spot the human in this list.

Hereâ??s a great digital short by the very human Callum Barton, Chris Prescott, Egle Petrauskaite, Hu Wang, Katja Taksholt, and Ruixin Ma, tutored by Heida Bjork Vigfusdottir.

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Notes

- On the trickster, see [LOL Security reproduces the trickster function](#), and Coyne, Richard. 2005. *Cornucopia Limited: Design and Dissent on the Internet*. Cambridge, Massachusetts: MIT Press, pp.157-187 on the trickster function.
- See a description of our [MSc by Research in Digital Animation](#).
- Thanks to Alan Mason, Animation Lecturer at Edinburgh College of Art, for introducing us to the philosophy of Tom and Jerry, and Halldor (Hawk) Halldorsson of [Dunedin Arts](#).
- For a **10th** reason see [Why cartoons have animals \(2\)](#) (added 26 April 2014).

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Date Created

May 5, 2012

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