

Chapter 1:

Design for Motion

Beautiful Motion Begins with Beautiful Design

Motion design is the art of composing change over time. However, before we begin to make things move, it helps to have a plan. We have a much better chance of creating beautiful motion when we begin with beautiful design. A strong visual composition captures a viewer's attention, tells them where to look, communicates ideas and feelings, and often provides a jumping-off point into a narrative. A motion design piece without a strong design plan will have elegant movements at best but will more than likely fail to connect with a viewer.

Figure 1.1 is an excellent example of design for motion. Every frame feels like it belongs in the overall piece because of a unified visual aesthetic. Color palette, contrast in dark and light values, contrast in positive and negative space, and illustrative line qualities all define the constraints of this unique design style. The piece also tells a story and communicates ideas. Cinematic considerations are represented by changes in camera distance. Transitions are clearly designed as well, serving to demonstrate how the visual story moves from scene to scene. Additionally, the concept of memory is explored through various images that inspire a viewer to feel a dramatic range of emotions. Each individual frame is called a *style frame*.

“It’s like the relationship between a songwriter and a singer. Someone who writes a song is creating the

structure of the music, but then a singer takes that and brings it to life in real time—they can’t fully exist without each other. Similarly, to be a designer of motion is like being a music composer writing down notation, but the ultimate form of your work is the performance of that music—for us, that performance is the animation.”¹ — Stephen Kelleher, *Designer*

Style Frames

Style frames are the visual representation of what a motion piece will look like prior to animation. A style frame is a single frame or image that depicts the look and feel of a motion design project. Style frames are one of the primary outcomes of design for motion. From a business perspective, they help to win pitches for commercial projects. One image can be the difference between a studio or designer winning a project or losing to the competition. Because style frames help to win jobs, the designers who create them play an extremely important role in design-driven productions.

Ideally, a style frame is both beautiful and functional. Style frames present the ideas, emotions, and narratives associated with a concept. Although style frames are singular moments of a motion piece, each frame can propel a story forward. It may take a lot of practice to consistently make strong style frames, but if you enjoy image-making and storytelling, embrace the process of

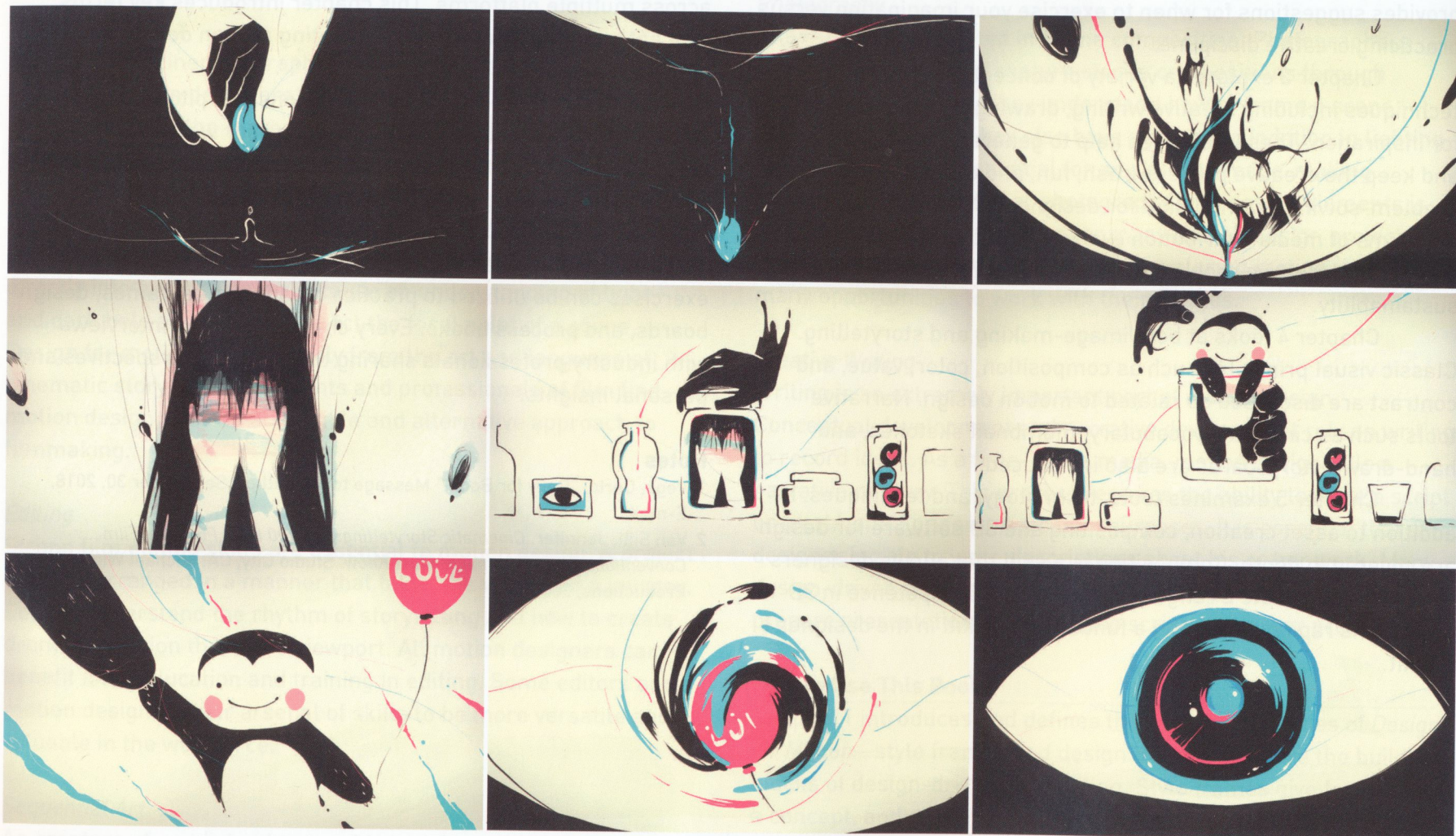


Figure 1.1: Design board by Yeojin Shin, Designer at Buck. Board created at SCAD, Design for Motion class.



Figure 1.2: Style frame by Peter Clark, Freelance Designer/Director. Style frame created at SCAD, Design for Motion class.



Figure 1.3: Style frame by Chris Finn, Art Director at Gentleman Scholar. Frame created at SCAD, Design for Motion class.

iteration. Grit, determination, and making a lot of style frames will make you a better designer.

Look & Feel

The purpose of a style frame is to establish a unique look and feel that visually holds a motion design project together. Stylistic choices include which method or medium to use, such as 2D, 3D, illustration, collage, etc. Inexperienced motion designers will often rush through this phase of a project or skip it altogether. It is easy to tell when a motion designer has not spent time on style frames. Concepts are not fleshed out, compositions are uninteresting, stories are flat, and transitions are not considered. Conversely, when motion designers invest time and effort into

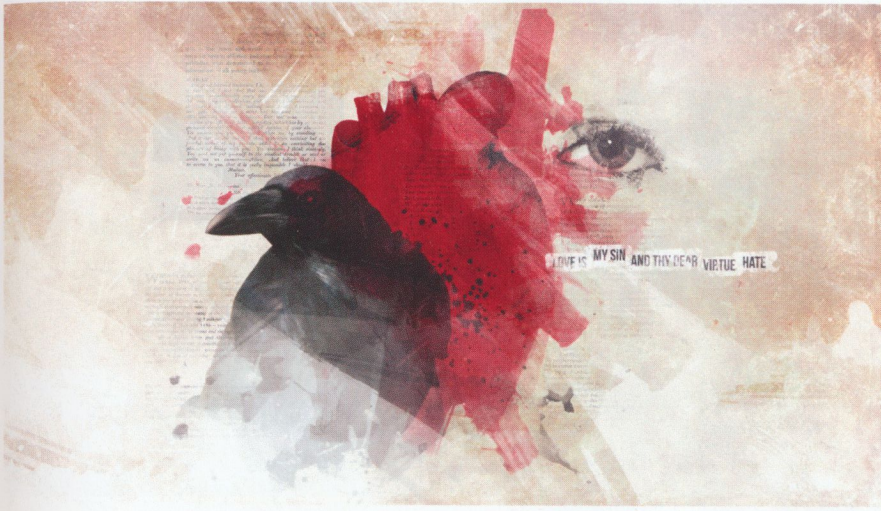


Figure 1.4: Style frames by Rick Kuan, Freelance Designer. Frames created at SCAD, Design for Motion class. These style frames show a defined and consistent visual pattern through the use of texture, contrast between dark and light values, a limited color palette, variations in opacity, and the treatment of positive and negative space.

style frames, the odds of creating beautiful motion design are greatly increased.

“On a personal level, style frames are about completion of an idea and a concept for yourself. On a professional level, style frames are important because they set the stage for everything. They inspire and inform your team, they give your client confidence in you and your ability to execute. Ultimately, they are your target. They are like a map to a hidden treasure—you can’t find the treasure without drawing your map first.”² —Joshua Harvey, *Designer/Director*

Stylistic Guides

Aside from their financial importance, style frames help to direct a production team’s efforts. They serve as visual guides by establishing the creative boundaries of a project. Style frames provide clear specifications about the use of visual elements

such as color, typography, texture, camera placement, etc. They are especially important when working with large teams of animators, composers, and 3D artists where everyone needs to be working towards the same visual goal. For large-scale productions, ideally there will be a style frame for every scene or setup within the project to maintain overall cohesion. For smaller productions, or even solo projects, style frames are just as important because taking the time to define a visual aesthetic before going into motion will help create a much stronger project.

Concept Is King

Style frames should be visually striking, but, more importantly, they should express a concept. Even if a style is beautiful, a weak idea will be eye-candy at best. This kind of design falls into the category of *form over function*—an error that occurs when a designer focuses only on making something look great. The design may be flashy, but it lacks an impactful message



Figure 1.5: Style frames by David Conklin, Motion Graphics Designer at Rockstar Games. Frames created at SCAD, Design for Motion class. These style frames demonstrate a compelling concept coupled with a distinct illustrative style. The illustrations suggest interesting ideas and narratives that are open to interpretation. The contrast and limited color palette form a particularly striking and memorable vision.

or purpose. However, a beautiful design coupled with a strong concept is powerful. As Frank Lloyd Wright said, “Form and function should be one, joined in a spiritual union.”³

Design like a Champ

If you are interested in being a designer for motion, then you will need to build a portfolio of your best work. Design as if you have an infinite budget at your disposal and a roster of insanely talented production artists who will bring your vision to life through motion. In other words, do not dumb-down your style frames or limit your design to *what you think you can animate by yourself*. You can always reduce or modify the scope of your project once you begin to make things move. Chances are your

motion will turn out better than you thought, especially if you begin with strong design.

In design-driven productions, it is common for large teams to work together to create a motion design project. In addition to designers, a creative team can include animators, composers, 3D artists, live-action directors, cinematographers, editors, and producers. It is not realistic to expect a single person to create the same caliber of motion as a full production team. However, you can always *design* like a champ.

Enjoy the Process

Motion design is a serious business that requires a professional attitude, especially in the realm of commercial art where



Figure 1.6: Style frame by Jackie Khanh Doan, Designer at We Are Royale. Style frame created at SCAD, Design for Motion class. This style frame is an example of an aesthetic direction that is very intricate. It combines many layered organic elements and expressive facial features. In production, it would be very time-consuming or technically challenging. However, with a team of experienced animators and composers, it has the potential to be an interesting motion design piece.

design-driven production is fueled by financial budgets, teams of creative artists, and producers. However, this professionalism does not mean that we cannot enjoy the process. We should always do our best and strive for the strongest outcomes, but we will probably create better work

if we are having fun. Additionally, we should not sacrifice our wellbeing to achieve our creative goals. Learning how to pace yourself while retaining the joy of being creative are essential for a sustainable practice.