



WEEK 01

Characters I

Visual Development and Design

Lesson 1: Characters I

The Brief as Constraint · Regional Visual Record · Displacing the Default

Lesson Objectives

1. By the end of this lesson, the learner will The design brief as a constraint document
2. By the end of this lesson, the learner will Reference gathering for an Al-Baha and wider KSA visual record
3. By the end of this lesson, the learner will The pop-culture default as a design risk

Lesson Learning Outcomes

- The learner can Names the personality, role, and regional-context constraints the brief sets and states which design decisions each constraint governs
- The learner can Assembles named Al-Baha and KSA visual material alongside mainstream anchors and traces each image to its source
- The learner can Identifies where a character idea is defaulting to mainstream pop-culture imagery and names the regional-record counter that displaces it

INTRODUCTION — 10 MINUTES

Every character design in production begins with a decision that was made before the first line was drawn. When Barajoun Entertainment's art directors sat down to develop the characters for Bilal: A New Breed of Hero, they were not looking for "what looks good" — they were reading a document that told them which design decisions were already closed and which were still open. That document was the brief, and the visual specificity of those characters came from taking it seriously as a constraint, not as a suggestion.

For a junior visual-development artist, the brief is where your job starts. If you treat it as a mood prompt — a general sense of the character's vibe — you will spend the next three weeks iterating toward a design that could work for any character in any project. If you treat it as a constraint document, you will spend those weeks narrowing a specific design space with evidence. The character at the end will be defensible. The Sarawat Animation scenario you are working in has a director who needs defensible directions, not a single guess, and a lead modeller who cannot begin blocking until the design space has been visibly opened. Both of them are reading the same brief you are.

By the end of this session, you will have a working constraint map drawn from the Sarawat Animation brief and an annotated reference set built against it — Al-Baha and KSA visual material alongside mainstream anchors, each image traced to a named source and tagged to a brief parameter, with displacement annotations on every mainstream anchor. That set is the only reference your thumbnail work draws from, and it is the foundation the character-development work ahead stands on.

1 The Brief as Constraint

The design brief as a constraint document

In Arcane (Riot Games / Fortiche Production, 2021), the published production notes for Vi, Jinx, and Jayce show that every costume silhouette, palette, and material choice was traceable to the brief's stated personality, faction allegiance, and social role — the brief was not a mood statement, it was the document that closed certain decisions before any design work began. That traceability is what separates a design decision from a design guess.

Core: Constraint Mapping

A brief does not describe a look. It describes a set of constraints that rules design decisions in or out before ideation begins. A personality trait like "working-class background + impulsive anger" closes texture register (not fine fabrics), palette direction (unsaturated, utilitarian), and silhouette weight (compact, low-centre-of-gravity) — not because these are stylistic preferences but because they follow from the brief parameter. This is constraint mapping: for each brief parameter (personality trait, role, regional-context note), identify which design decisions it governs and which it leaves open.

The constraint map takes two columns. Column 1 holds the brief parameter exactly as written. Column 2 holds the design decisions that parameter governs — proportion register, gesture weight, silhouette type, palette register, material family. An entry in Column 2 means that decision is already made; you are not free to contradict it in ideation without revisiting the brief first.

Brief parameter

Design decisions it governs

Personality: impulsive, working-class

Compact silhouette; worn-in material register; unsaturated palette

Role: front-line combatant

High gesture-action readability; visible wear and functionality

Regional context: Al-Baha highland setting

Grounded palette; textile and architectural vocabulary specific to the region

The map is not created as a design aid — it is created as a filter. Reference that does not speak to a constraint in Column 1 is out of scope; reference that does is the only material that enters the working set.

Checkpoint

Given one brief parameter from your assigned character's brief, name two design decisions that parameter closes before any drawing begins, and one decision it leaves open.

REFLECTION ACTIVITY — 10 MINUTES

Open the Sarawat Animation brief for your assigned character (provided in the assignment). Without drawing or searching, complete a constraint map: list each brief parameter in Column 1, and in Column 2 write the design decisions each parameter governs. Mark any decision it leaves explicitly open. The constraint map is a document, not a sketch — work in text. When complete, count how many decisions are already closed: if fewer than three, re-read the brief and look for parameters you treated as optional.

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DISCUSSION — 10 MINUTES

In small groups, discuss "The Brief as Constraint". Share one example from your own experience or from work you have seen. Listen for differences in how peers interpreted the same material.

2 Regional Visual Record

Reference gathering for an Al-Baha and wider KSA visual record

When the *_Bilal: A New Breed of Hero_* (Barajoun Entertainment, 2015) production team assembled character reference, they documented their decision to source from Islamic architectural ornamentation, Bedouin textile patterns, and pre-Islamic Arabian visual material rather than supplementing a Western or East-Asian animation default. That sourcing decision — naming the visual record they wanted as a

baseline, not a supplement — is what gave the film's designs their regional specificity, and it was a design decision made before any sketching started.

Core: Sourcing Discipline

Reference is not found by searching what a character looks like. It is assembled from a named visual record by deliberate sourcing decisions. The distinction is consequential: a search for "warrior character" returns a genre type; a search for Al-Baha regional dress, Al-Baha architectural ornament, and KSA folk textile patterns returns a regional visual record. The two sets answer different questions. The genre-type search answers "what does this character category look like in existing media." The regional-record search answers "what visual material is available from the specific place and culture this brief invokes."

The sourcing discipline has two requirements: (1) every image is traced to a named source — not "found online" but the specific collection, archive, publication, or named location it comes from; (2) every image is tagged to a brief constraint it speaks to. An image that cannot pass both requirements does not enter the working reference set. This is not a labelling formality — it is the mechanism that keeps reference from drifting back toward genre type over the course of a project.

The regional visual record for this brief draws from named Al-Baha and KSA material: the Al-Baha Museum's documented holdings, the traditional garments of Al-Baha province (silhouette, embroidery pattern, occasion-wear distinctions), Thee Ain Heritage Village's stone-palace architecture and material palette, and the architectural vocabulary of Zafir columns and juniper-wood doors specific to the region. Mainstream anchors — named animated films, named character design references — enter the set as comparators, not as the primary record.

Checkpoint

You have collected an image of a traditional Al-Baha embroidery pattern. Before it enters your reference set, what two things must you be able to write about it?

REFLECTION ACTIVITY — 10 MINUTES

Using the constraint map from Topic 1 as your filter, begin assembling reference for your assigned character. Collect a minimum of eight images: at least four from named Al-Baha or KSA sources (architecture, dress, craft, landscape), and at least two named mainstream anchors. For each image, write one line: the named source and the brief constraint it speaks to. Do not annotate default-displacement yet — that is Topic 3's layer. If you cannot write both the source name and the constraint tag for an image, discard it before it enters your set.

DISCUSSION — 10 MINUTES

In small groups, discuss "Regional Visual Record". Share one example from your own experience or from work you have seen. Listen for differences in how peers interpreted the same material.

3 Displacing the Default

The pop-culture default as a design risk

When the *_Spider-Man: Into the Spider-Verse_* (Sony Pictures Animation, 2018) design team worked on Miles Morales, they began by naming the default: "standard Marvel superhero silhouette." Then they sourced specific Brooklyn neighbourhood visual material, Afro-Latino cultural references, and deliberately non-heroic body language to displace it, item by item. The design operation was not "avoid looking like a Marvel hero" — it was "this brief constraint points to this specific sourced material instead of that genre convention." The before/after is visible in the production art; the default is named, the displacement source is named, and the relationship between them is a design decision, not a stylistic preference.

Core: The Default-Displacement Operation

A pop-culture default is not laziness. It is the first image a visual record produces when a brief is read — the genre-convention answer to a brief's category. For a "warrior character in a folkloric setting," the default is likely whatever warrior-type the learner has consumed most recently in mainstream animation or games. That default answers a different brief (genre convention) rather than the actual brief (the Sarawat Animation scenario with Al-Baha grounding). The risk is not that the default exists; the risk is that it goes unnamed and therefore operates invisibly as the design baseline.

The displacement operation is two steps: (1) name the default explicitly — which genre image, which film or game type, which visual convention; (2) name the regional-record material that displaces it. The displacement is not a negation ("not like that"). It is a substitution grounded in sourced material: "this brief's regional-context constraint points to Al-Baha stone-palace proportion and Bedouin textile geometry instead of the armoured-warrior silhouette the genre record offers."

This displacement layer is added to the reference set as a third annotation column:

Image

Source

Brief constraint

Default displaced

Al-Baha stone-palace facade

Thee Ain Heritage Village (Visit Saudi)

Regional context: Al-Baha highland setting

Fortified-castle silhouette from Western fantasy genre

Traditional Al-Baha embroidery

Saudipedia — Traditional Garments of Al-Baha Province

Personality: grounded, community-connected

Generic "exotic" textile pattern from animation genre default

Checkpoint

You have a mainstream-anchor image in your reference set — a named animated film's character design. What two things must your displacement annotation include before the reference set is complete?

REFLECTION ACTIVITY — 10 MINUTES

Return to the reference set assembled in Topic 2. For each mainstream anchor in the set, write a displacement annotation: name the default it represents (which genre convention, which media type) and name the Al-Baha or KSA visual material from your set that displaces it. When every mainstream anchor has a displacement annotation and every Al-Baha/KSA image has a source trace and brief-constraint tag, the reference set carries three annotation layers. This annotated reference set is the challenge deliverable — the document the thumbnail work in the following session draws from.

DISCUSSION — 10 MINUTES

In small groups, discuss "Displacing the Default". Share one example from your own experience or from work you have seen. Listen for differences in how peers interpreted the same material.

HOMEWORK

Step 1: Constraint map (supported)

Open the Sarawat Animation brief for your assigned character. Read it once without drawing or searching. Then produce a constraint map in any text tool: two columns, one row per brief parameter.

Column 1 — the brief parameter exactly as written (personality trait, role, regional-context note).
Column 2 — the design decisions that parameter governs. Do not move to Step 2 until every brief parameter has an entry in Column 2.

Step 2: Guided sourcing

With the constraint map in hand, locate and collect named Al-Baha and KSA visual material — architecture, dress, craft, landscape — alongside a named set of mainstream animated-film or character-design anchors. At this step, the only requirement is sourcing discipline: every image must be traced to a named source (collection, archive, publication, or location) before it enters your collected set. Do not filter by constraint yet; collect for breadth and source traceability. Aim for at least ten images before proceeding.

Step 3: Annotation pass

Annotate each collected image with three things: (a) the named source, (b) the brief constraint from your map that it speaks to, and (c) for each mainstream anchor, the pop-culture default it represents and the Al-Baha or KSA material in your set that displaces it. Images that cannot be tagged to a brief constraint are cut from the set at this step. Mainstream anchors without a displacement annotation are incomplete — do not submit them without one.

Step 4: Finalize the reference set

Review the annotated set against the brief one more time. The final reference set must include: at least four named Al-Baha or KSA images (each traced to source and tagged to a brief constraint), at least two named mainstream anchors (each carrying a displacement annotation), and a constraint map readable alongside the images. Arrange the set as a single document — constraint map first, then the annotated images — and export to PDF.

Submission

Submit the finalized, annotated reference set as a single PDF.

Feedback questions

- Which brief parameter most narrowed your sourcing choices, and what did you cut from your collected set because of it?
- Name one mainstream anchor in your set and describe what the Al-Baha or KSA material you chose as its displacement counter contributes that the mainstream anchor does not.

References

Readings

Writing A Concept Brief — Neil Blevins / Soulburn Studios Art Lessons — Practitioner breakdown of how a brief constrains a design space — the 5-W structure, the difference between a blue-sky and a locked brief, and how parameters govern which decisions are open.

http://www.neilblevins.com/art_lessons/concept_brief/concept_brief.htm

Traditional Garments of Al-Baha Province — Saudipedia — Encyclopedic entry on Al-Baha regional dress covering silhouette, embroidery, and occasion-wear distinctions — a citable, sourceable anchor for the regional visual-record sourcing work.

<https://saudipedia.com/en/article/2557/society/garments-and-accessories/traditional-garments-of-al-bahah-province>

Watch

Art of Into the Spider-Verse (Part 1) — Character Design References — Production art gallery showing Miles Morales character development passes; the displacement of a genre-default silhouette through culturally-grounded sourcing is the practitioner model for the default-displacement operation.

<https://characterdesignreferences.com/art-of-animation-7/art-of-spider-man-into-the-spider-verse-part-1>

Play

Regional Museum of Antiquities and Heritage, Al-Baha — Visit Saudi — Browse the museum's documented holdings for a first-hand encounter with the Al-Baha regional visual record that no standard image search returns.

<https://www.visitsaudi.com/en/al-baha/attractions/al-baha-museum>

Resources

Thee Ain Heritage Village — Visit Saudi — Photo-documented reference for Al-Baha stone-palace architecture, material palette, and landscape; reach for during annotation when tagging regional-context brief constraints.

<https://www.visitsaudi.com/en/al-baha/attractions/thee-ain-heritage-village-in-albaha>

The Harmonious Architectural Artistry of Al-Baha — eTurboNews — Overview of Al-Baha architectural vocabulary — Zafir columns, juniper-wood doors, patterned stonework — useful when brief-constraint tagging requires naming specific architectural features.

<https://eturbonews.com/the-harmonious-architectural-artistry-of-al-baha-saudi-arabia/>

Recall Test

Based on the content of this lesson

Your instructor will conduct a retrieval practice recall test based on the content of this lesson.

The test is low-stakes · it is not formally graded. Its purpose is to strengthen your long-term memory of the material by requiring you to actively retrieve what you have learned, rather than simply re-reading it. Research shows this is one of the most effective study strategies available.

What to expect:

- 15 minutes, closed notes
- Questions will draw directly from this lesson's concepts, vocabulary, and processes
- You will receive immediate feedback · the goal is to identify gaps, not to catch you out

Why retrieval practice works

The Testing Effect

Roediger & Karpicke (2006) demonstrated that students who practise recalling material retain significantly more over time than those who spend the same time re-studying.

Desirable Difficulties

Bjork (1994) showed that learning strategies that feel harder in the short term · such as recall · produce stronger, more durable long-term memory.

Principles of Instruction

Rosenshine (2012) identifies daily review and retrieval as one of the most evidence-backed habits of effective instruction.

Roediger, H. L. & Karpicke, J. D. (2006). Psychological Science, 17(3), 249-255.

Bjork, R. A. (1994). In Metcalfe & Shimamura (Eds.), Metacognition. MIT Press.

Rosenshine, B. (2012). Principles of Instruction. American Educator, 36(1), 12-19.