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Illustration BA

ADAD5004 Research in Practice

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Proposal

Relatability – Appeal - Simplicity

Wordcount: 2747

In this proposal I have chosen three words supported by the theories and art of others to explore the correlation between the design of characters seen in popular works to how relatable they are. I will attempt to link the words, relatability, simplicity and appeal through the examination of popular characters and ideas presented by McCloud in his book *Understanding Comics*, designs from popular characters as well the phenomenon of pareidolia to bolster my understanding of character design so that I may create effective characters for narrative illustration projects like comics.

Relatability as defined by the Oxford Dictionary is “making you feel that you can understand and have sympathy with somebody/something”. Focusing on the idea of conveying feeling and sympathy is accurate as I am linking a fictional character’s design to how much someone can relate and feel towards them. Sympathy indicates an understanding which is usually the goal of a character in a work of fiction, to be unpacked and understood, their design should also promote this. An area of a character’s design that has potential to make them relatable are human features which we see in cartoons, in particular the way facial features are exaggerated. Humans see themselves as relatable, and as humans we tend to see ourselves in lots of things, the phenomenon of pareidolia where we perceive patterns and imagery in the inanimate is filled with instances of us seeing human faces and features with a general emotion being interpreted also. We tend to see ourselves and relate in these instances of pareidolia, an electrical socket, the surface of the moon and a drawing are no different, however in the case of a drawing it can be refined and made to specifically emulate human features and exaggerated to be even more relatable. Making a character relatable and more resembling a human or taking advantage of the traits we see as more relatable such as large eyes and heads would be a great way to enhance stories, to get people invested based on initial design and looks alone, as well as to sell merchandise of a character’s likeness.

The definition of appeal I am using is defined by the Oxford Dictionary as something “to attract or interest someone”. What is considered appealing is not a metric we can measure, and the factors that make something appealing will vary from person to person. Brooke Eggleston of *Character Design Forge* uses a metaphor in his video essay explaining what appeal is in character design to highlight that it varies, but some aspects are generally liked and seen as appealing. Eggleston compares appeal to food, it being a matter of personal taste with the way it is prepared, and the ingredients used to artistic techniques. There are ways of using clarity, good shape language and colours for example to make a character design more readable and appealing, or as Eggleston states “visually appetizing”. (Eggleston, 2018)

Appeal is important and sought after in character design for a variety of reasons, I would highlight another one of my words “relatability” as one of them, as in most pieces of media it is important for anyone experiencing that character to understand and relate to said character. If a character is not appealing then there may be a disconnect, it makes sense that you would not want to see or root for a character that is not visually or narratively appealing. Eggleston uses the 2010 DreamWorks movie *How to Train your Dragon* as a good example of appeal being used in character design stating:

Compared to the rest of the dragons, Toothless is more appealing, more balanced. Has rounded features that allude to cats and dogs, ... the other dragons in the movie are harder to empathise with. When we first see the dragons, they are at odds with humans.

(Eggleston, 2018).

Eggleston points at Toothless (Fig 1) and his rounded features, the whole form is soft and rounded to be more appealing. The allusion to “cat’s and dogs” which Eggleston mentions is also important as they are familiar animals which are most often associated with companionship, they are friendly and appealing to many as they are the most common types of pets. This helps Toothless by extension become appealing as those traits are used in his design. The eyes are another very important part of appeal, with large expressive eyes mimicking those of a cat which have been established as an appealing animal, but large eyes are also seen across a wide swathe of visual media through character design, Japanese art styles are often synonymous with having big eyes due to the appeal they add to the characters. Eggleston also uses the reverse by mentioning that the other dragons are “at odds with humans” (Eggleston, 2018). This not only applies narratively but visually through design, taking the Deadly Nadder another dragon (Fig 2) which features a much more rugged design with spikes running along it’s head, long sharp shapes throughout its body and sharper angles used in its leg shape making it seem more dangerous. The designs work with the narrative, reversing the typical appeal of an approachable character design. Designs don’t need to be cute or promote virtuous characters alone however, Eggleston even states “A by-product of appeal can be empathy, aspiration or even loathing” (Eggleston, 2018) Indicating even a villain or antagonist can be appealing and should be, by using the tools of shape, colour and balanced mentioned before but utilizing them in a different way, which is something I’d like to keep in mind as I do not only want to create traditionally appealing characters all the time.



(Fig 1) Toothless (DreamWorks, 2010)



(Fig 2) A Deadly Nadder in the centre (DreamWorks, 2010)

The definition of “Simplicity” according to the Oxford Dictionary is “the quality of being easy to understand or use”. Ultimately a character design’s job is to convey information so that anyone viewing them will understand the content presented through the design, it would therefore make sense that simplicity when used effectively would equate to a successful character design as it easily serves its function. We often see very simple designs in media aimed at children, likely due to the ease at which these designs convey information, alongside keeping production costs low.

Characters designed for small children are often colorful, made from basic shapes and make use of exaggerated facial expressions, showing clear changes in their mood, behavior and social interaction (Tillman 2011, 104– 109.) Simple character design optimizes the information necessary at the processing ability of a small child, thus making the character enjoyable for the demographic.

(Nieminen, 2017, p. 8)

Nieminen cites that the elements of basic shapes and clarity are common in characters designed for children's media due to how it "optimizes the information" (Nieminen, 2017). We can use the popular children's television show *Peppa Pig* (Fig 3) as an example of a design targeted at children. Peppa's design is very simple consisting of a few basic shapes and lines, but there is a clear face with a lot of room to make a variety of expressions. Features like her snout, tail and ears, along with her pink colouration clearly indicate her being a pig, despite these features being very simple. Peppa is made to be instantly understood by young children, she's simple and readable in her design so they can enjoy the show. This is something I'd like to incorporate into my work because it has the potential to increase relatability, but also due to how simple designs can also be drawn much quickly and exaggerated easier leading them to be perfect for short comics.



(Fig 3) Peppa Pig (Astley and Baker, 2004-)

Simplicity isn't just relegated to children as people of all ages can appreciate simple designs, a very popular and timeless one being *Garfield* created by Jim Davis officially debuting in 1978 and continuing as a regular serialized comic strip to this day. Part of its success should be attributed to Garfield's design (Fig 4) as although it has changed over time it still features important qualities that make it a recognizable and successful, such as the simple use of rounded shapes to indicate Garfield's weight, large but droopy eyes to indicate laziness and the bold orange colour that is synonymous with Garfield.



(Fig 4) Garfield April 19, 2022 (Davis, 2022)

The *Pokémon* series is an excellent example of the aspects of relatability, appeal and simplicity and how they all interlink and work together to create countless beloved and successful designs.

The designs of the Pokémon species themselves that lend to the success of the series, thanks to a mixture of relatability and familiarity. ... allowing players from a wide variety of styles to find a partner they enjoy and relate to.

(Gray, Screenrant, 2021)

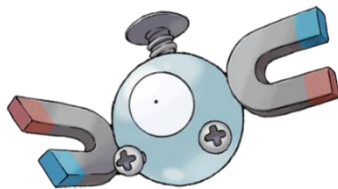
Gray puts an emphasis on the relatability and familiarity of the design of a Pokémon citing its success in the diversity of designs which touch on these factors. Pokémon aren't just meant to be monsters, but friends and partners like the article suggests (Gray, 2021). Just like there are people you will connect to well in the real world, there is a Pokémon design that will appeal to you, which you'll relate to, your very own partner.

One of the biggest reasons Pokémon Species are more compelling than other monster-catching games, however, is because they can be related back to objects or animals players already know.

(Gray, Screenrant, 2021)

The simple designs that *Pokémon* possess which usually relate to objects or animals, further indicate the relatability of their designs as they have a basis in the real world, where people will have a sense of familiarity to them. Like the pareidolia phenomenon, with the designs using inanimate objects or taking the likeness of a person or animal into a design it acts in a similar way with how our minds show us the facial features and expressions of these creatures. In the case of *Pokémon*, using objects such as magnets for Magnemite (Fig 5) and rocks in Geodude (Fig 6) we see a variety of inanimate objects being anthropomorphised not

too dissimilar to Pareidolia. In a way they are embodiments of this phenomena, taking the relatable and mundane and attributing human attributes to them making them relatable and appealing. On a meta level they are just pictures, a collection of shapes, colours and lines but our relation to concepts and objects fill in these details giving them form and personality.



(Fig 5) Magnetite (Sugimori,K, 2004, Pokémon Fire Red and Leaf Green)



(Fig 6) Geodude (Sugimori,K, 2004, Pokémon Fire Red and Leaf Green)



(Fig 7) Growlithe (Sugimori,K, 2004, Pokémon Fire Red and Leaf Green)

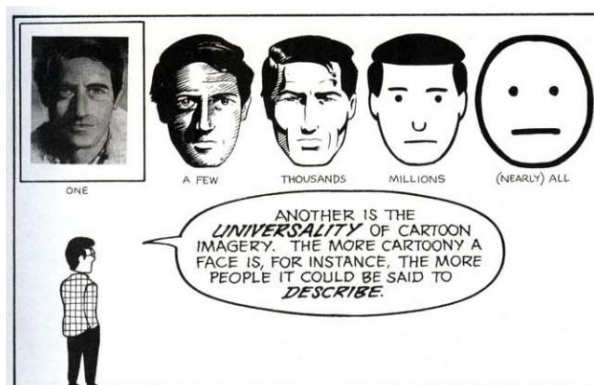
A Pokémon with a set of doglike characteristics like Growlithe (Fig 7) will be understood and appealing to many who like dogs because we are familiar with them. Even extinct creatures like dinosaurs in the case of Bulbasaur (Fig 8) will be appealing and understood as it originates from a simple concept many people find appealing. But *Pokémon* goes even further and uses its simple design philosophy to make them even more interesting but still visually digestible. Looking back at Bulbasaur, it looks like a lizard, its name implying its likeness is derived from a dinosaur and its bulb on its back links it to plants and nature as well as its colouration. Its eyes are big with a contrasting colour to the rest of its design which draws you to them, its mouth is even curved in a cute smile shape. This creature is designed to be instantly read and understood so anyone seeing it will quickly assess what they like about it intuitively, choosing it as a favourite Pokémon they want to play with in the games, ultimately caring for it and have it be a friend to them. The way the series uses the aspects of familiarity paired with simple concepts and simple designs is a big reason as to why I think it is successful with children as it is something they can easily understand. Using similar ideas, I could create characters for comics or other narrative illustration projects, focusing on creating designs which people will become attached to so they will ultimately care for my stories and messages more.



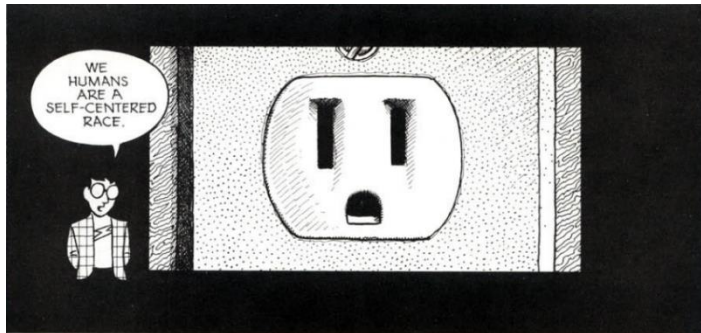
(Fig 8) Bulbasaur (Sugimori,K, 2004, Pokémon Fire Red and Leaf Green)

In McCloud's book *Understanding Comics* he poses the question "why are we so involved?" (McCloud, 1993, p.30) when referring to cartoon characters. I believe all three of my chosen words aid in exploring and answering this question as McCloud himself uses similar ideas throughout his book. McCloud presents the idea of how universal cartoons can be (Fig 9) stating "The more cartoony a face is, the more people it could be said to describe" (McCloud, 1993, p.31) coupled is the image of a variety of faces, each less complex than the last. The idea presented that we all possess certain characteristics that might lead characters to be more relatable to us, and that we as humans like to see ourselves in other things such as characters and inanimate objects. Returning to pareidolia McCloud also presents this in his book (Fig 10) with the caption "We humans are a self-centred race" (McCloud, 1993, p.32) with the implication that we see ourselves in almost anything, which pareidolia proves is true in some cases, the image of the light socket which is a household sight is something any person will see a resemblance to a human face within. The simplicity of a character, the fact that they usually have a basic set of human facial features (or other animal) which is something appealing to us will ultimately lead to us relating to said character. McCloud

stating (Fig 11) “**Who** I am is irrelevant. I’m just a little piece of **you**” (McCloud, 1993, p.37), is his way of showing how the reader of the book, likely without even acknowledging it is projecting a part of themselves onto McCloud, the narrator due to him being characterized in a cartoon format. Because the design he has made for himself is so simple and features basic human traits it appeals to us and so we relate to him, making it easy to read the book as this character narrates for us. McCloud himself states in the book “That’s why I decided to draw myself in such a simple style” (McCloud, 1993, p.36) (Fig 12) referencing how we put ourselves into cartoon characters and why he had not drawn himself in a more realistic style stating, “would you have listened to me if I looked like this??” (McCloud, 1993, p.36) (Fig 12). The realistic version of McCloud lacks the simplicity of the design we see throughout the book, as established previously this would hinder how many people would universally relate to it.



(Fig 9) The Universality of cartoons (McCloud, 1993, p.30)



(Fig 10) Humans are a self-centred race (McCloud, 1993, p.32)



(Fig 11) The narrator is you (McCloud, 1993, p.37)



(Fig 12) Simple vs detailed McCloud (McCloud, 1993, p.36)

Through the ideas presented by McCloud and the popular designs we see in Pokémon patterns begin to form with simple designs being appealing on a surface level, being able to convey information easily and being designed in a way where we relate to them in a similar way to real life animals or people. My exploration into cartoons and their simple designs was a way to highlight how important they are and how they can be used to great effect in creating likable characters which I would like to use in my practice. Being able to make designs that convey a lot of information visually while also being a source of relatability to those seeing would greatly benefit my narrative illustration and graphic novel work as a large part of those thrive on good characters. I would also like to convey messages and feelings in the deepest way possible, utilizing the characters design should be part of that.

My proposed practice would be to make characters in a short sequential narrative comic that are simply designed, appealing and relatable in a similar way to *Garfield* (Fig 3). Tackling everyday topics and more complicated ones through a character people can empathise and understand. To explore these ideas further and to further my understanding of why people are fascinated by cartoon characters I propose the question “Why do we love cartoon characters so much, and can we use their designs to make the world a brighter place?”.

Pictures

Dreamworks Animation (2010) Fig 1 How to Train your Dragon Toothless. Available at:
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Dreamworks Animation (2010) Fig 2 How to Train your Dragon Deadly Nadder. Available at:
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