

What makes an appealing animated character?



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Introduction

This theoretical basis explores the appeal of 3D Disney/Pixar characters and understanding the basic aspects of an appealing character. Firstly, this study will analyse the core elements of an appealing character looking at personality and features. Secondly, deconstructing the key aspects of a character's shape. This will all piece together from researching other artists and case studies and gain their theoretical thought towards the understanding of an appealing character.

By the end of this independent inquiry this paper will help gain a better grasp of how 2D shapes translate into 3D geometry when creating a character, and to create flowing lines with arcs and curves in which help make their personality come through. The notion of creating a realistic representation through animation comes from an aesthetic culture. Developing an appealing character comes from the hypothesis that constructing an appealing 3D character is produced with posing. Circles have a fun and friendly appeal to them, they have a protagonist look to them. Dynamic shapes indicate a mix of combinational personalities mainly seen within evil characters the reason for all that is visually sharper shapes tend to hurt us more visually but also in the real world.

It will also explore the changes throughout the years into what makes an appealing referencing cultural shifts during these times. It will be focusing on the female culture specifically however this will reflect with how societal culture changes affected outlooks on female characters.

History of animation overview

In 1923, Los Angeles, California, the Walt Disney Company was founded. Two brothers stumbled across Disney brothers cartoon studio. The company had a huge impact on the entertainment industry. When animation and cartoons first burst onto the scene Walt Disney was at the forefront of it. He wanted him and his company to be the best of the best at Animations. Disney set about gathering 9 supervising animators which would later be known as the “Disney’s Nine Old Men”. They were enlisted and then sent to study for years on end in order to create a framework for animation. They eventually settled on what is currently known as the “12 Principles of Animation”. At the time they wouldn’t have realised it but this today is what all animations live and die by. The 12 Principles were as follows squash and stretch, Anticipation, Staging, Straight ahead action and pose to pose, follow through and overlapping action, Slow in and slow out, Arc, Secondary action, timing, exaggeration, solid drawing and appeal. These on their own did not make much sense but together they created a more entertaining animation.

The same could be said for creating characters, this is why seeing a character mid movement is so much more appealing than a straight on front drawing. The reason this is, is mentioned by the 9 Old Men of Disney. During the times of these icons of animation, they were intrinsically a part of the design team as they would ping pong back and forth to optimise appeal. They found that characters were enhanced through animating them.

Creating an object or character in the 3D world needs to be appealing to the viewer, there is no right or wrong way to develop this but it must include having a solid idea and being able to tell a story through animation or posing. Irrespective of the right or wrong way of creating a character there are basic design principles which can build a strong foundation to achieve appeal.

Disney's 'Up' and Shapes

Empathy

In this section there will be an exploration of how different aspects can be utilised to create an appealing character. Films such as 'Up' which was released in 2009 is a good example of this where they used many of these techniques to good effect. The viewer can react in many different ways when watching a film as there is a real sense of empathy they can recognise this through scenes created with 3D characters. The style, shape and form of a character can influence the way we feel but also the placing of a camera and the props within the environment, can control the way the viewer identifies a distinguishing emotion and or mood.

When an artist creates a story they delve into the most insignificant of personalized items, and when adding to the environment as it will be a background filler some great lengths and thought have gone into the props to symbolise the character in a unique way, it may not be needed but subconsciously acknowledge the smallest of information.

Shape is a fundamental aspect of character design. When you see both the characters featured in 'Up' at the start they are both young happy and full of life, and as time goes on the transition in the shapes do not change that much just that they grow old but the contrast is that Carl becomes even-more sharp as opposed to his wife remaining round and soft. Carl being more square and Ellie being more rounded makes a clear distinguished design point within the character design process. The environment reflects these design choices as they have bought respectively sharp and round objects/furniture. It all comes together to make an appealing character not just with who

they are but their personal belongings, such as Carl in a square chair and Ellie in a more rounded soft chair. The conventional use of variations of visual shapes for props allows the audience to engage with the characters within their surrounding area.

Style

Stylised character design is diluting reality to exaggerate cartoonistic features.

'we wanted to take this very simplified idea of the circle and the square and pull back the animation, trying to keep the animation very stylised, very simple.' (Hauser and Docter, 2015) Making a character stylised does not only mean that their visuals will be altered but it also allows the creator to make more use of the principles of animation without looking out of place. Subconsciously in our mind, we understand that a square human is wrong by nature but as it acts like a human and talks like a human then we believe it. This allows the creator to meld the two realities into something somewhere in between.

At the beginning of the animation the two main characters get married, you see how bubbly Ellie is and her family this shows a lot of similarities within their characters and when the camera pans over to his family they are all in dark suits and do not seem very happy this is perhaps foreshadowing Carl's character and sets him up for the rest of the animation.

Emotion

Russel from 'Up' is somehow related to Carl and Ellie. Russel has a very rounded shape just like Ellie had and has a bubbly personality. Ellie in contrast to Carl is softer and rounded which is why Carl taken a liking to Russell as he reminds him of Ellie in his intentions and how he acts. *'Russell is supposed to be an oval shape, almost like and upside-down egg. So his neck well, he doesn't really have one. It's so stylised that the silhouette of his head and body all together look like an oval.'* (Thomas Jordan, 2009 pg54). Russel symbolizes the child they could never have. The young boy is not their own, as the age would not make sense but somewhere down the generation they are connected. Understanding the boy needed one more badge to help an elderly man is heartwarming but also interesting why upon his requested was to be knocking on Carl's door of course we know there are many other elderly people surely to live in the area as seen throughout the film. (Boone, 2014) Stated that *'Russell is Carl's guardian angel, of sorts. Russell needs one last badge (a badge for "Assisting the Elderly") in order to become a "Senior Wilderness Explorer." Or, in this interpretation, that last act is what would earn him his wings.'* On reflection I agree with Boone's theory, this is more of a intune example of Russels character within the animation. Boone states that Russell is

like a guardian angel and upon delving deeper it makes sense. After Ellie's death early on, it was like a piece of Carl had died with her. Throughout the film it is almost as if Russell was fated to help get that piece of Carl back. Disguised as an adventure to live out his days in his and Ellie's dream it was actually repairing Carl from all the heartache. This seemingly impenetrable, sharp and harsh character was being eroded away with the innocence of Russell. Thus making Carl grow closer and closer towards his old self.

Carl's character is seen going through the biggest transformation through the film, the different personalities that shine through his character are heartwarming, the beginning where he is very upset and stuck in his ways to an adventurous outgoing upbeat old man is something of a kind. The evolution of his character. This very fundamental shape in geometry used within computer animation, the shape language in 'Up' is the mixture of shapes within the animated short is sophisticated in terms of the design. Although shapes depicts a lot about a character personality this is also pursued by emotion. Curves and arcs depicts a specific emotion trying to put across to an audience.

Over the years of Carl's appearance the subtle changes within his overall look at subconsciously we understand the changes within his appearance. During the early stages of the film he has the slightest bit of square still in his facial features but he also has a round look to it as well. The more he grows as a person the weaker his wife gets until she passes away. Therefore during these stages you see him become more shaper with time. *'Carl is a box, a heavy brick, because of how close to the ground he has sunk. After the death of his wife, he has shut off the world around him. So he's stuck in his ways, very square. Impenetrable. Unmovable. There's heaviness to his soul. It's easy to read that he had been through a lot.'* (Daniel Lopez munoz, 2009 pg40). This statement to me could not be any more accurate, personally he is stuck in his ways, yes. If you think outside the box about two shapes objects the circle and the square which one would be able to move forward? The circle of course, with a square you would not be able to push this object down a hill it would not go anywhere just like Daniel stated stuck in his ways, where as the circle would. This symbolizes the shapes within the film Up, the old man Carl is square due to him not wanting to pursue new milestones in his life without doing everything by his wife's side.

During the early development stages the film 'Up' was originally going to be a floating castle which is disconnected from the environment around the world below. The family that lives within would be a king and his two sons. There was going to be a tall bird who would guide the two brothers to understand everything. After a discussion this was not taken forward as much as it was intriguing, they couldn't get it to work. On reflection there is much to commend from this original idea but ending up with something

completely different. (Catmull and Wallace, 2014) *'Only two things survived from that original version, the tall bird and the title: Up.'* what was processed from this quote is that not every original idea needs to be followed through directly, there is a sense of direction in which to take an animated sequence. Normally you will feel if a certain idea is not right then it may be worth rethinking some aspects at the end of the day we are creating this for appeal for the viewer and we can all understand emotions as we all experience it.

Disney's approach to creating characters is something unique, the design behind 'evil' and 'good' characters as different features that can be noticed subconsciously by the audience. The idea of red being an evil colour can show so much through an appealing character for example red lipstick and or a red outfit. A less loveable character is designed and built a lot sharper using triangles and squares, shapes with points. Where as the more loveable characters always have rounded features. This is all to do with the current situation that they are in. (Bendazzi, 1994) *elucidate that 'Gradually, Disney's 'good' characters acquired ever more rounded forms and newborn-like features with large heads, overdeveloped eye's, short arms and showy buttocks.'* When looking at disney characters although the features may change slightly, such as smaller eyes make the character older and the larger the eyes make the character younger. This is still something that has become a very unique art style although it is not very realistic we still follow the guidelines as they simply seem to ooze appeal.

Mulan and Cultural changes

Mulan is an animated Disney movie made in 1998. Mulan is a female young woman who felt out of place in society wanted to bring honor back to her family and to save her father. With her skills in martial arts she decides to take the place of her father and disguise herself as her father and he was approaching old age, along with adding his leg was injured and was unable to attend the war and to follow with the army.

Personally, Mulan is more appealing to the chinese cutler due to the background of the original story. *'Mulan seems to be a feminist film which encourages individual women to take care of themselves. However, the film is not free from traditional gender roles. While the film may be progressive by removing the "damsel in distress" plot, further analysis shows it isn't a feminist film at all.'* (123helpme.com, 2019) However, Mulan is an appealing Disney Princess but in a very unusual way, she is not the stereotypical princess in fact she exchanges makeup for a good work ethic. Although she was due to marry the prince. With her going off to war, this is her way of finding herself and understanding herself as a person and not just helping out her family in need of support.

Although that is a portion of it the benefit of her using her skills in martial arts helped her make the final decision to go off to war. It seems that the film is not feminist at all, it is conceived of gender equality and female empowerment.

Cinderella's audience is based heavily in the western culture. Although the changes made during the development of Mulan made it more appealing to a larger audience mainly American's cultural background. *'We cannot rule out the possibility that white buyers prefer to purchase white characters for no other reason than skin color. In the case of Mulan, the cultural gaffes in portraying a revered Chinese character could have deterred buyers, especially Chinese shoppers who were more apt to be aware of the way in which the story was Americanized with so-called cultural deformities'* (Xu, 2013). With the above quotation from 'Xu' creating an animation to come across appealing for all cultural purposes can be proven more difficult than suspected. In fact production companies go through many variations in order to create an appealing character for all cultures worldwide. Despite making changes for a larger culture audience's subconsciously linking to earlier animation such as 'Snow white' we only capture a white princess. It is not till the 49th animated feature film, The Princess and the Frog (2009) that we see a black Disney princess named Tiana, this is after we see a shift to more equality from an African background. Although these are two different cultural backgrounds that interlink together. Firstly, it would only be a matter of time before major changes would come to fruition about women joining the army, although there was a time where people would not have seen this coming. It did when the first woman Loretta Walsh, in 1917, she became the first woman to enlist in the U.S. Navy. In 1948 a new law was permanently made that women would be part of the military services. Years later there were a group of women allowed to enter the U.S. military academy. Secondly, Rosa Parks, refusing to give up her seat for a white man in Alabama on a bus in 1955, helped change the start of the civil rights movement in the United States of America. The seamstress became the root of activism. These two people alone changed many people's ideas and were at the frontier of active thought into cultural backgrounds. Although there are still signs of cultural problems there have been major changes to where we are worldwide with colour and feminism.

Although there are examples of women getting more equal rights, it was not until 1998 before large scale film companies were willing to 'risk' upsetting the public. A wide array of the public had fully embraced the cultural shift specifically for females and ethnic minorities. That being said there were still those that were stuck in the old ways. Throughout the latter part of the 20th century the slow shift in culture affects many aspects of daily life. Even with the release of Mulan Disney had not quite converted to

this new way of thinking, giving many of their characters a white American characteristics.

What made Mulan so appealing?

During this time general equality and female independence was as widely accepted in culture around the world, therefore when they made the film Mulan they had to drift away from some of the original Chinese cultural ideas due to a primarily Western audience. Although in this century this view has changed as both genders have a much more equal outlook on gender specific roles and jobs.

During her time at the army she became an appealing individual although her beautiful looks as a female change when she covers for her dad. Even so slightly, the changes can be seen within the jaw line.

During the transition scene for when Mulan becomes a soldier, some noticeable changes happen to the character's design. For one very obvious change is that they cut her hair much shorter. This is to symbolise her cutting away her femininity to birth a harder, tougher version of herself. It is also noticeable that once she is wearing armour or representing "Ping" (her male alter ego), the way in which animators draw her jawline changes. It becomes much more square and less rounded. Disney have also done these changes to her body whilst appearing as Ping. You will notice that the width of her torso and shoulders are drawn much wider than they would really be even with armour on. This is primarily to accentuate the masculine world that she is walking into.

Mulan was one of eight films to be reviewed in greater depth due to the time of release where there were many ideas being explored. Such as looking at what the stereotypes and expectations were like through the history of the earlier Disney films. This is an interesting topic of conversation in regards to stereotype as they were very much visible in Mulan, however it also challenged a lot of them as well. The main human characters who fought beside Mulan all had a very stereotypical character in the form of a tough guy, a ladies man (or so he thinks), a big friendly giant and the all star captain who seemingly was 'perfect'.

Despite the changes within the original story to create something of an appeal for the American viewers. There is still a large part of the story with a lot more meaning behind it such as linking connections with the first woman to go to war. In this case Disney were reactive to the culture change and not wanting to risk anything by being revolutionary.

Subconsciously, looking at the time *Mulan* was made is a stage in a generation where impersonating the other gender was not appropriate and possibly punishable quite harshly (Challenging cultural beliefs at the time) for the world at that specific time the look of *Mulan's* gender paradigms. Although the audience was to see her as a cross dresser this was a transparent disguise for the audience as they knew she was simply a strong brave individual who wanted to help out her father and was willing to undergo any challenges in order to help this situation. Also this was a lot to do with the character not knowing much about herself and wanted to explore and understand the meaning of her existence, as for when she was at home, she was very unhappy with her identity but after fighting in war she understood herself again after which she then returned home. The film itself discusses and analyses the conduct of gender. You see a lot of this toward the end of the film where male characters dress as women to incorporate both male and female characteristics in order to achieve a specific reaction from other characters within the film. This inherently is the key to the start of a sequence of events which brings down the main antagonist and his goons. This can be seen as using femininity as a powerful weapon almost as it was used to deceive and disarm the henchmen giving *Mulan* and her allies a clear advantage. This can be seen as a growth of character for Disney as it shows an element of acceptance and perhaps a bit of respect for women struggling to overcome these gender hurdles.

When *Mulan* was first created she was very intriguing Disney character as she tended to not need help from a man to impact the story. The following quote states how polarizing she is compared to previous Disney princesses. *'What sets Mulan apart from the damsel-in-distress is that she does not need saving by a prince.'* (Barber, 2015) Many animated Disney films that are based on princesses can be seen the majority of the time with a male involved in some sort of man saving scheme. *Mulan* is a Disney character, but saying this she is not your typical 'Disney Princess' she is a strong independent ambitious princess who not only fights like a man but does not need a man to rely on. While some believe that *Mulan* portrays a stronger female gender role, there are others who think otherwise, *Mulan* fits in this era much more due to drastic changed through generations of gender roles.

Today's society is much more accepting and wouldn't think twice about the gender role issues faced at the time prior to *Mulan* being created. They are a more equal in every aspect of life. This does cause a difference in views between previous generations and so many of the films and animations are subjective in their appeal. The more old fashioned damsel in distress tends to sit better with the older generation, and the more free flowing characters of today are a mark of the younger generations tastes. It has also been noted that these sort of stereotypes have can be somewhat risky if they aren't

aimed at the right audience. The difference between *The Princess and the Frog* and *Mulan* for example, both show a diversity in their female leads for different reasons however *Mulan* did much better than its counterpart in many people's eyes. It was said by Mari Ness that the reason this happened was because *Mulan* was story driven and *The Princess and the Frog* was marketing driven.

'We've found over the years that if people are enjoying the world you've created, they will forgive little inconsistencies, if they noticed them all. In this case, nobody noticed or if they did, they didn't care' (Catmull and Wallace, 2014)

This evidence suggests that creating an animated film is a bit of a risk to whether the audience find this appealing or not. However there are tried and tested methods to go about to ensure you have a good foundation to create your character/animation from.

In the animation industry, the flaws of the world created may have some mistakes but looking out or noticing these can become rather annoying, although people discuss these flaws and inconsistencies subconsciously as much as we dislike them, we actually like the more. Bad guy etc. (Catmull and Wallace, 2014) say people will forgive the inconsistencies if they notice they did not care. First and foremost, people do care as little as it may be when watching an animated film with some inconsistencies people always talk about the larger inconsistencies but the smaller ones may not get touched on more. They care but may not care enough to create a theory on such a smaller object or scene.

Animations are often and engaging and enjoyable to watch. There is a growing communities within animation which consists of hours of investing of people of all ages around the world. Animation is such a strong way of capturing emotion within a television universe. Despite the subconsciousness of a character whether we like or dislike a Disney princess or a talking dog there is always something that draws us in.

'I feel like the only reason we're able to find some of these unique ideas, character, and story twists is through discovery.' (Catmull and Wallace, 2014). This quote is such a strong description of the belief of an animated universe where very little happens to our daily lives. Subconsciously when we are growing up, this is the perfect world that we wish to achieve. No matter anyone's age we could all sit down and watch a Disney movie and still feel we could somehow subconsciously in the back of our minds have this 'perfect life' that does not really exist. Although through discovery can be nearly impossible to pursue something which is rather difficult, all things that happen in movies happen on this earth granted that you can make up a lot of things with a creative mind, but this takes time as the audience needs to see the believability.

Female characters stereotyped in disney/pixar? Shift in pattern

The view of a Disney princess has changed throughout the ages coming from a damsel in distress and more domestically focused all the way through to them being the main hero in the film being more rebellious and ambitious, making most of the impactful decisions in the feature film. This changed mainly due to cultural trends which initially saw that women needed saving by a man in most aspects of life. This eventually grew to encompass more forward thinking views that have today been saying that it is more the individual instead of the gender which determines where you get in life. This was a reflection of the times with any and all material portrayed by various types of visual media promoting this cultural switch . Disney created a string of very strong and independent females which were the main characters in each of their own feature films. This can even be seen in the sequel of Mulan where she is shown as much more of a leading role compared to her first rendition. The first movie was released in mid 1998 and then Mulan 2 was released in early 2004. This shows how rapid this cultural trend was in that in under a decade the portrayal of women had changed quite significantly. More recent Disney princess such as Merida from Brave or Anna and Elsa from Frozen carry this new take on how a female should be displayed going forward. This move tries to make women feel empowered instead of having a male superhero to aspire to be, they now have their own heroines to look up to.

'While looking specifically at Disney princesses, the depiction of females and their gender roles can be described in at least one of three ways. One, the original portrayal of Disney princesses is the stereotypical damsel-in-distress, and very domestic. This can be seen through Snow White, Cinderella, and Sleeping Beauty. A second portrayal arose and shifted the roles of female characters to be seen as rebellious and ambitious. This picture can be seen through the characters of Ariel, Mulan, and Rapunzel. Lastly, a final shift has taken place and the female characters are portrayed as independent and free spirited. This type of depiction can be seen through seen through Merida, Anna and Elsa.' (Barber, 2015). This quote evidences the shift in Disney's depictions of females.



(Medium, 2019)

This move from domesticated earlier versions of a princess and then this new idea of how a female character should be has implications with design going forward. It shows that appeal in design changes as we change. The idea of what a woman in the mid 20th century is has changed drastically to what it is today. As you can see in the image to the left the “in” designs were all based around small waists, large hips and accentuated busts. The recent cultural shift in promoting feminism has played a part in the shape, sexuality and ethnicity of the leading characters of Disney among others. The stories have also shifted pace starting from a boy meets girl, boy saves girl, live happily ever after to a girl goes on an epic adventure to save friends or places from evil. This is partially a sign of the times as stereotypes have been altered and morphed throughout the 20th and 21st century to a point where it is a very controversial topic of conversation. Many of the animation companies have tried to walk down the path of least resistance and following with how society has changed.



(Amazon.com, 2019)

Conclusion

The goal of this study was to figure out the foundations behind creating an appealing character. The theories presented interpret a lot of studies and creativity, understanding and knowledge of an appealing character within this generation, and how it is going to continue to change with the coming years. Changes within the creative industry have already started morphing tradition character design into a much deeper creative process. This thesis has shown it is not only about an appealing character it is also about the environment and shapes around them that really finish off the final character you are going for.

A crucial component to creating a character is the target audience you are creating it for and why you are creating it. There are people who are always going to dislike characters as their appeal may not be as strong to that particular viewer. This is something that will always be an issue due to the industry taking a step into the unknown with some of these new characters and creating something we are not yet a custom with on screen. Having an attractive appealing character is something we all thrive to achieve but also subconsciously we thrive off the less clean cut characters which is why some bad guys can have just as much or even more appeal than the main character. This is not only down to whether or not a viewer likes the character but more the characters motives and beliefs which can spur on appeal.

Pixar is a leading example for production companies taking a calculated risk and pulling it off for their target audience. It has been done a few times throughout their time in office. More recent examples like Brave or Frozen can be seen echoing the messages that were first iterated by Mulan.

Disney tried to be a leader in changing the cultural background of the princesses it put in the limelight with The Princess and the Frog. However this wasn't as big of a hit for them, perhaps they had made the leap of faith too early and then made a more measured attempt with Mulan. In one of Disney's more recent films Moana which celebrates a more Pacific Islands culture soared to the top of the box office when released which could be a sign that the vast majority of people have fully accepted female commanding lead roles as well as a more culturally diverse on screen show.

Character design is not just a section of the studio production mechanics alone, it has a significance that extends beyond mere visual design or geometric design principles, to one where we consider socially challenging ideas of representation, gender and cultural identity. There are basic conventions which can establish a generic design that

includes the 12 principles of animation, however it may guide more towards visual and narrative design that includes emotional connection and empathy.

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