Character Design

Without question, the script is the most important ingredient of any film, but the character designs play a huge role in the execution of that script when it is animated. The animated characters are the equivalent of a cast of actors in a live-action movie. Your visual casting of the characters is of paramount importance, as is their capability to perform in ways that the storyline dictates. Character designs must work well individually, but they also have to work well together.

How many movies have you seen where the principal characters have a particular style of design but the incidental characters look as if they are another species? The design approach should be consistent throughout, from character to character and from characters to backgrounds or environments.

Character designs especially need to caricature the personality and emotional traits of the individuals concerned. It is always easy to create insects, robots, and aliens that will fight out a fantasy adventure script, but it is extremely hard to design humanesque heroes and heroines that have to sensitively deliver dialogue and convey subtle emotions. It is equally important that they don't look insipidly cute, overly saccharine, or wishy-washy. It is extremely easy to create a wicked villain but very, very difficult to create an acceptable hero.

Like live-action casting, it is so easy to fall into visual stereotypes with animated character design. How many TV shows or big screen movies reveal who the bad guy is the minute they walk on the screen? They just look menacing, dangerous, or flat-out bad! Similarly, the male and female leads are always handsome or beautiful, and the fool always looks a fool, so you can identify these characters before they even say a single word! It seems to be the same with animated characters. All too often, we see characters that are just rehashes of previous stereotypical characters.

The Evolution of 2D Character Design

Since anything is possible in animation, there should be little problem coming up with character designs that are both original and exciting for an animator to work with. However, much of the contemporary animation conforms to the same old stereotypes.

In the early 20th century, when 2D animation was still in its infancy, there were few restrictions to the appearance of animated characters. However, as the needs of a professional production operation required (i.e., enabling a whole number of different artists to work in the same style with little trouble), simple, rounded cartoon characters were developed.

These characters held little respect for the restrictions of the real world. Their limbs were rubbery, twisty, and able to squash and stretch in length, at the whim of the animator. In fact, these characters soon became known as "rubber hose characters," and the films of the 1920s were dominated by them.

Even early Disney used a rubber hose style of movement, until Walt looked for more innovation and reality in character design. The Disney studio, therefore, slowly began to design animated characters with a more human dynamic.

They evolved characters that appeared to have a skeletal structure, and that brought in an entirely new challenge for animators. They were no longer able to twist, stretch, and distort their characters' limbs at will. Now these limbs could only bend and move the same ways a human skeleton would.

As animation consciousness evolved further over the years, it became obvious that it was not enough to simply move characters well. Now, if their true personalities were to evolve and be fully convincing for an increasingly discriminating audience, these characters had to emote and feel as well. The personality within the body had to be fully realized, and certain characters even underwent an analyst-style assessment of their psychological attributes.