Friend, Ian ORCID logoORCID: https://orcid.org/0000-0002-0357-3811 (2019) How does a Transnational Audience Factor in Character Design for Professional Broadcast Animation? Animation Studies.

How does a Transnational Audience Factor in Character Design for Professional Broadcast Animation?

Ian Friend

During my animation career I've found myself working in many areas of animation but most of my production experience lies in pre-school television. This can probably be attributed to the fact that most of the animation work produced in the UK is for a broadcast pre-school audience. I now teach full time in the University of Gloucestershire. In one of my modules we study the relevance of audience in regard to animation character design and how best to tailor an animation designer's work to a desired viewer. The module's content is related to the work I have developed as a character designer during my career. In teaching this module, I emphasise the importance of character design and its relationship to target markets and perceived audiences for animated media.

It was during one of my stints at a games studio that I realised the importance of audience in animated design. I had been given the task of creating concept art for a possible new video game starring Nazis and zombies. I produced the work in my usual style. The characters were bright and colourful with fairly cute designs. I made sure that the subject matter was still what it needed to be for an older teen targeted game: bloody and violent. However, I was aware that the cute and cuddly characters I designed were a little different than the norm for this kind of work. I was told by the producer of the project that the designs were far too soft and childlike and the work needed some changes before it could be approved. So with this in mind I added some more mayhem, violence, and gore. In desperation I even added a screaming skeleton character running through the background on fire. I thought the characters were drawn well enough and stylised appropriately to be approved. Unfortunately the image came back again and again, until in the end I was told it's just not right for the publisher.

With hindsight, I realised that I had been working on pre-school productions for so long that my perspective was misaligned to that of the target market for the game. It was financially important for the games distributor that the game was attractive for the intended older teen audience. Most likely, this demographic was sought by the games company due to their perceived brand loyalty and disposable income (Wesley And Barczak, 2010 p.56). I should have delivered something far more palatable for the intended mature audience. Realistic gore and horror is the norm for games like that and would have been exactly what that particular audience would have expected from such a game.

In reflecting on this experience, I wondered what other audiences expect and what could constitute adult focussed character design, apart from any obvious considerations like nudity, sex, blood, and gore. Through my research I want to consider the relationship between different types of audience (including age and locality) and the creation of successful character designs. I am especially interested in how universal (or culturally specific) this kind of design work can become. This particular study focusses on character design for broadcast purposes rather than consider other forms of animation (like video games or features) because this is where my experience and industry contacts lie. In order to undertake the analysis below, I have contacted current industry designers who have

agreed to participate in this study to tell me about their experiences working on character design for international co-productions.

A broadcaster's perception of its audience (or consumers) is an important consideration in the successful creation of animated character-centered productions. Paul Wells (Understanding Animation, 2013, p.233) mentions four considerations when looking at an audience for animated film:

- Empathy and Identification
- Fear and Concern
- Treats and Occasion
- Codes of Contentment

I was drawn to idea of "Empathy and Identification" in regards to my own design work. Wells states that:

> animation becomes the most appropriate vehicle for projection of a child's imagination into a mode of 'reality'. The animated form both represents a similarity to the ways in which literary narratives have been illustrated in children's books, and the ways that a child starts to conceive some aspects of the real world before they have been socialised to specific kinds of order (2013 p.233).

Wells suggests that all viewers (admittedly a young one in this particular case) desire to feel a certain familiarity and identity with the animated work. The intention of animators like myself is to generate a sense of familiarity that can provoke a feeling of empathy between our viewers and the character designs in our work. Considering this I felt that my work in the example cited above was lacking the emotional and generic connection that would be typically targeted to the perceived mature audiences that this particular game company was courting. As Ekström and Tufte discuss: "Consumers, young as well as old, negotiate relations, identities and lifestyles through their consumption" (2007, p.12). An audience for a particular product must be able to easily recognise and see themselves in successful animated work. With this in mind, I started to research audiences and their demographics in regard to UK and US broadcast animation in order to think reflexively about how character designers experience the demands of audiences when working across national borders.

During my time working within the broadcast animation industry I tended to break down the audience for animation into four different archetypes. My own practice aligns with Winder and Dowlatabadi's (2011 p.60) suggestion in their book, *Producing Animation*, that we can label these archetypes as:

- Pre-school
- Tween
- Teen
- Prime Time (adult)

Each of these audiences have different expectations and desires that make are supposed to be reflected in the animated works offered to them (Bazalgette and Buckingham, 1995;

Wasko, Phillips and Meehan 2001). I therefore decided to concentrate solely on broadcast animation for this study. The majority of my previous experience working in industry was gained producing animation to be broadcast on television. Looking at previous broadcast animated work and the television companies that have commissioned it, we can start to see some of the different requirements that each archetype demands, how this differs between countries, and how we can target our design to suit.

Pre-school children's experiences are generally assumed to involve bright colourful toys. In my experience, animated work aimed at the pre-school audience tends to reflect that in order to keep their attention. Pre-school animation character design can thus be described as fundamentally "toyetic" (Steemers, 2010). In my own experience a substantial amount of funding for pre-school production must be sourced from merchandising partners like toy companies. As a result, this age group gets characters designed along abstracted, easily replicable character designs, with simplified features and body shapes, normally based on rounded, soft designs. Additionally, even the most prolific broadcasters of animated pre-school product in the UK and US are required to include educational elements in order for the shows to be accepted by television's controlling bodies. Looking at America's Public Broadcasting Service's (PBS) producer guidelines for pre-school content, the all-important first consideration to be made states that: "All programs accepted for our children's schedule must have explicit age appropriate educational goals that are clearly incorporated into the program's storylines" (2010, p. 4). It is not just academic goals either. Animated content for pre-schoolers may also be required to include basic morality plays instead of typical academic subjects such as reading and arithmetic. Broadcasters such as Milkshake and Ceebeebies in the UK, and foreign broadcasters like PBS in the US all demand educational elements in their pre-school programming. Consequently, these kinds of educational remit and requirement continue to shape and nuance the character designs in pre-school television, not just at those big producers, but also within the independent animator sector that is pitching new animated television to those big broadcasters.

New categories that sit between childhood and adulthood are becoming increasingly important to discussions of character design strategy. For example, Tween is a fairly new target market for animated content, gaining popularity in the last 15 years. The book *Brand Child* states that the typical age of a tween audience member ranges between 8 and 14 (Lindstrom and Seybold, 2004, p. 185). The book describes a need for content that is a mix of pre-school and teen. Buckingham and Tingstad add to this perception of liminality, mentioning that "Children frequently aspire to consume things that appear to be targeted at a somewhat older audience" (2007, p. 60). This again brings us back to questions of empathy and identification introduced by Wells. The evidence here suggests that tween audiences look toward older children's viewing choices to inspire their own entertainment, but that the programmes pitched to them are required to fit within a niched space between child-oriented and teen programming. Broadcasters such as Pop, CBBC in the UK, and American broadcasters like Disney XD predominantly deliver tween work. Character design in tween broadcast animated programming can thus closely resemble pre-school content in style. The work often consists of soft friendly characters similar to those found in the pre-school programming, but they tend to avoid the heavy educational element required by US and UK broadcasters for pre-school work. Despite this, morality issues like friendship and good versus evil are introduced.

Teen work in animation has a tendency to break with the educative and moral characters of pre-school and tween age groups animation, and is sometimes perceived as pure entertainment in the US and UK industries. This is due to the omission of the educational broadcast requirements that are placed upon most pre-school targeted animated work, and which linger at the margins of tween broadcasting. Teen broadcasters such as that found on CITV and CBBC in the UK, and on American channels like Cartoon Network and Nickelodeon, tend to produce predominantly entertainment shows rather educational material. Programs such as Cartoon Network's *Adventure Time* (2010-8) and *Regular Show* (2010-7) generally tend to reflect teen priorities, such as hanging out with friends and playing video games rather than looking at moral or educational issues. Teen broadcast animation concentrates on themes that are important to the target audience like family, friends and adventure. Character design targeted toward a teen audience also tends to be more varied, running from abstracted styles to collage, as is demonstrated in such shows as Disney's *Pickle and Peanut* (2015-8) and Cartoon Network's *Uncle Grandpa* (2013-7). Both shows utilize photomontage to augment their character designs. Considering the success of these examples, we can assume that the teen audience is generally more open to exaggerated, and innovative uses of animation design.

The main broadcasters have historically been the providers of adult focused prime time animated entertainment due to the expensive nature of animated production. The BBC, and Channel 4 in the UK and American broadcasters such as Fox and HBO have all distributed adult targeted prime time animated work. As viewing methods are changing, smaller broadcasters like Cartoon Network (with their Adult Swim programming block) and Netflix have entered the market for prime time animation. Animation targeted towards a prime time mature audiences has to reflect adult sensibilities. However, these sensibilities are limited, and even prime time animation for adults is tamer than porn or violent video game content. Broadcast animation targeted towards a mature audience reflects an older viewer's own social situation and will generally revolve around familiar ideas driven by family life. The first prime time adult focussed animated sitcom to air in the United States was Hanna-Barbera's *The Flintstones* (1960-6). Dobson states in her chapter "TV Animation and Genre" (2019, p.183) that the Flintstones were modelled on similarly themed live action prime time counterparts such as *The Honeymooners* (1955-6). The live action influence offered the animation a realistic element that focused the narrative on married life. This made the animated show far more palatable for a prime time audience. *The Flintstones*'s writers chose to focus on a typical working class sitcom set-up for most storylines and relegated the outlandish prehistoric setting to sight gags. As this example demonstrates, animation can allow viewers to experience a world radically different to their own, but grounded in fairly similar social situations. This can offer the work the essential points of empathy and identification outlined previously by Wells, enabling the viewer to relate to the slightly caricatured or simplified aesthetics of the animated characters. Character design for an adult audience is, therefore, usually the more conservative than that produced for some of the other viewing groups covered in the study. Characters are generally realistically proportioned and lack the overt abstraction that can be evidenced in shows for the younger demographics. Shows like *The Simpsons* (1989-present) and *Family Guy* (1999-present) contain fairly uniformly designed human like characters. This can be supposedly attributed to prime time animation's origins in the newspaper cartoon strip (Dobson, 2019, p.182).

Hayward suggests that successful narrative characters will have a level of "agency" over the animated work (2017, p17 and pp.31-32). Those feelings of agency will allow an audience to care and become involved in our animated narrative. Considering the age of our target audience and incorporating Wells's empathy and identification categories, we can imbue our animated characters with that desired feeling of agency. The agency will give our characters a hook that an audience can use to identify with them. With all this considered I wondered if there would be any differences if we were to work towards an international co-production that would include a non-English speaking audience. Would the same principles of empathy and identification apply to a globally broadcast animated character's design and to what extent will we need to tailor our work towards an international audience?

Westcott states that "Animation, which is easier to dub and has much less local context than live action drama, also travels easily" (2011, p.254). Therefore, the presumption is that changes to the animation itself should be minimal in a transnational context, partly due to animation's abstracted characters and content. From this starting point, I contacted to other industry practitioners for the purposes of this paper. I asked them if there were any differences they considered making to character designs during their work for international co-productions, especially in comparison to their work on domestic properties. I hypothesized that the ideas of agency, empathy and identification in regard to the foreign audiences may have been acknowledged and wished to investigate how design changes would have been implemented. I have included some of their correspondence here with their permission.

Driver Dan's Story Train (2010-present) is a co-production between 3 Line Media (UK) and Twofour54 (Abu Dhabi). Series creator and designer Rebecca Elgar told me that the project was fairly well developed before the Middle Eastern producers came on board. Elgar explains the impact of international co-production in terms of character as follows:

> One of the biggest changes I made was turning the kangaroo character from the original pitch into the camel Precious. when developing the concept, I'd worked very hard to rule out specific place information. The only other change I made was to add some yellow slopes/shapes to the existing green ones that made up the landscape and added a wider range of tree shapes to look more like the partner's native environment (Elgar, email correspondence, April 2018).

Elgar told me that the addition of the camel was at the request of Twotwo54, and that the foreign partners felt that particular animal would be familiar to a Middle Eastern audience. The addition of sandy coloured hills and fauna to the show's backgrounds were also included at the co-producers behest, creating backgrounds that would appear locally in the foreign partner's environment. The inclusion of familiar elements convinced the Middle Eastern broadcaster that the show would be well received locally, thereby demonstrating the importance of considering a target audiences locales within design work.

Lao Bao Bei (2018) is a co-production between Cloth Cat Animation in the UK and Magic Mall in China. Its Animation Director Ryan J Neal explained to me that:

We were asked to be aware of certain Chinese sensibilities. Food and environmental vegetation were important to the Chinese producers. Food was a very specific consideration where we were asked to look at different dishes and be careful how characters eat and especially hold chopsticks! We often got notes about that! There was an instance or two where the room backgrounds were designed in a way that looked good to us, but wasn't something that would be seen in a typical room layout in China. One thing that comes to mind is that characters should not kneel down in front of another character, but instead 'squat'. Another is to keep all the characters right handed as in China a dominant left hand isn't permitted! There was a bit of a back and forth at the beginning where we tried to push it super 'Kawaii' as we were given the freedom to do so, but then they would reign it in a bit and bring it back more western. I guess we were excited to go more anime and they were excited to go more western, each looking for that greener grass on the other side! (Neal, email correspondence, May, 2018)

Neal states that Magic Mall desired a co-productive feel to the show. He explained that the Chinese production partner Magic Mall insisted on various elements being introduced that were familiar to a Chinese audience, most notably regarding food and vegetation. Regional dishes, Asian vegetation, and room layout were all considered in depth and designed to evoke feelings of familiarity for a Chinese audience. In this case, it also appears that the UK based production partners at Cloth Cat initially tried to amplify the "Asian" feel of Lao Bao Bai but were repeatedly restrained by the Chinese partner. Surprisingly, the production's Chinese partner also requested that any left-handed characters were omitted due to local negative perception of left-handed people (Kushner, 2013), making this production oriented to its Chinese market, more than any other international market. However, Neal suggested that the Chinese partner also wanted to include as many Asian friendly western concepts as possible to the work in order to make it feel more European. This transnational design strategy emphasizes the importance of not just a target demographic, but also a having key target nation in animation design. As with the previous example, UK and US animation companies are working to hide the national origins of the animation, and to mask them with tropes of other national cultures, adding character design to the localization processes Westcott noted around dubbing.

My third respondent was for an animation called *Frankenstein's Cat* (2007)*,* which is a co-production between Mackinnon & Saunders Ltd (UK) and Kayenta Production (France). This example saw some of the animation produced at Kayenta, and series creator Curtis Jobling told me:

I have to say that the French design aesthetic was no obstacle. I specifically wanted it to feel like a remote European country on the brink of industrial revolution. There were no design requests that surprised us from Kayenta, but the show's director made some odd arbitrary decisions. It was often a battle for myself, Mackinnon and Saunders and the BBC to get the co-producers to agree with our direction. They often strayed into territories of clichéd animated excess like a Japanese cartoon. E.g.: when the character Big Top had to cry. We wanted a simple few tears squirting outgrow the corners of his eyes. What we GOT was enormous OTT waterfalls, in

spite of our requests for that not to happen. (Jobling, email correspondence, April 2018)

I initially surmised that the French architecture used in the series may be a way to allow the French audience to identify with the work, but Jobling explained to me that was always a part of *Frankenstein's Cat's* design ethos. The work was intended to resemble something like a Hammer horror movie. The series had included gothic architecture and European peasant villagers since its inception. Jobling mentioned that the French partner favored a style similar to Japanese anime, further indicating the transnational influences at work in the design of the series. Indeed, Tom Westcott's article for the *Creative Industries Journal* states that French animation is rarely funded locally (2011, p.256). Most French animated productions must sell abroad in order for the producer to see a return on their investment. It may, therefore, be a business decision to include anime-style elements to make the animated work attractive in multiple territories. There may also be other factors involved though. Japanese anime and manga are incredibly popular in France: "In 2008, manga accounted for 35.8% of the new comics titles published in France, and manga grabbed 37% of the French comics market, by selling 12.3 million books sold for a value of more than 160 million euros" (Bouissou, Pellitteri, Dolle-Weinkrauff and Beldi, 2010, p.263). Consequently, introducing these borrowed elements may make the transnational work more palatable for a French anime loving audience.

Winder and Dowlatabadi state:

> In the television arena, the target audience markets are very defined and niche, based on the demographics of the viewers and the network's brand. Ask yourself if the concept is aimed at a preschool, tween, teen, a prime-time audience, or is it best suited for adults only? If it is not clear who the viewer is, you may want to reconsider your choice or make defining it a top priority during development (2011, p.60).

Age is definitely an important consideration for the intended audience, but the location of an audiences is equally as important. The global demand for animated content continues to increase even as funding opportunities have started to decline. Hayward suggests that the global appetite for animated content is at its peak, due to online digital animated consumption changing the nature of the contemporary audiences (2017 p.31). As a result, traditional broadcasters are now more reluctant to fully fund animated content by themselves, shifting the market for animation production in a transnational direction. One by-product of these shifts are new avenues of distribution that are now available to animation producers through digital broadcasters such as Netflix and Amazon, but they still offer only limited budgets. As the appetite for animated content increases around the world some to predict that "The total value of the global animation industry is projected to reach US$ 270 billion by 2020" (Global Animation, VFX & Games Industry: Strategies, Trends & Opportunities, 2018). However, this landscape is requiring animation companies to quickly transnationalize. Successful transnational co-productions continue to be a viable way forward for the funding of animated broadcast work.

In terms of character design, these rapid changes are requiring sensitivity to the demands for markets far beyond the animator's local experience. It is still early in my research, but I

think the concepts of empathy and identification are still just as relevant in design for a transnational audience as they are for a domestic one. In my case studies, the changes that animation designers made during international co-productions worked to naturalize their animation for an intended overseas viewer demographic, and gave the international audience (regardless of archetype) familiarity with content and agency to relate to the domestically co-produced animated work. Introducing elements that were familiar to the transnational viewers gave the work a pathway to ideas of agency, empathy and identification (suggested by Wells and Hayward) to its intended audience and the international broadcasters who commissioned it.

References

Anon. *Global Animation. VFX & Games Industry: Strategies, Trends and Opportunities* (2018). Online: https://www.globenewswire.com/news-release/2018/05/01/1493712/0/en/Global-Animation-VFX-Games-Industry-Report-2018-2020.html (Accessed 24 March 2019).

Bazalgette, Cory and Buckingham, David, eds. (1995) *In Front of the Children: Screen Entertainment and Young Audiences.* London: BFI Publishing.

Bouissou, Jean-Marie, Marco Pellitteri, Bernd Dolle-Weinkrauff, with Ariane Beldi (2010). 'Manga in Europe: A Short Study of Market and Fandom.' in Toni Johnson-Woods, ed. *Manga: An Anthology of Global and Cultural Perspectives*, New York: Continuum, pp. 253-266.

Buckingham, David and Vebjørg Tingstad (2007). 'Consuming Children Commercialisation and the Changing Construction of Childhood: A Project Description.' *Barn*. 3. Online: https://www.ntnu.no/documents/1272099285/1272488364/buckinhamting.pdf/91cf697c-c82a-40be-8ca8-2367e23cf55d (Accessed 24 March 2019).

Ekström, Karin M. and Birgitte Tufte, eds. (2007). *Children, Media and Consumption – On the Front Edge*. Götenborg: Götenborg University.

Dobson, Nichola (2019). 'TV Animation and Genre' in Nichola Dobson, Anabelle Honess Roe, Amy Ratelle and Caroline Ruddell, eds. *The Animation Studies Reader*. New York: Bloomsbury, pp. 181-189.

Hayward, Susan (2017). *Cinema Studies: The Key Concepts*. London: Routledge.

Kushner, Howard I. (2013). 'Why are There (Almost) no Left-Handers in China?'. *Endeavour*. Volume 37. 2, pp. 71-81.

Lindstrom, Martin and Patricia B. Seybold (2004). *Brand Child: Remarkable Insights into the Minds of Today's Global Kids & Their Relationships with Brands*. Rev. Ed. London: Kogan Page.

PBS, Children's Programming and Interactive (2010). *PBS Producer Guidelines for Children's Content.* Online: https://klru-pdfs.s3.amazonaws.com/pbskidssubmissionguidelines.pdf (Accessed 24 March 2019).

Steemers, Jeanette (2010). *Creating Preschool Television: A Story of Commerce, Creativity and Curriculum*. Basingstoke: Palgrave.

Wasko, Janet, Mark Phillips and Eileen Meehan, eds. (2006). *Dazzled by Disney?: The Global Audiences Project*, London: Continuum.

Wells, Paul (2013). *Understanding Animation*. London: Routledge.

Westcott, Tim (2011). 'An Overview of the Global Animation Industry.' Creative Industries Journal. Volume 3. **3.** 253-259.

Wesley, David and Gloria Barczak (2010). *Innovation and Marketing in the Video Game Industry: Avoiding the Performance Trap*. Abingdon: Routledge.

Winder, Catherine and Zahra Dowlatabadi (2011). *Producing Animation*. 2nd Ed. London: Routledge.