Shape Language in Stylized Character Design

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Summary

The report examines the main types of shapes, their use and their importance in character design development. The psychological and emotional impact of the forms used for stylization in design solutions is analyzed. The importance of the shape language in creating eye-catching design is analyzed and presented through visual examples.

Key words: concept art, character design, shapes, shape language, stylization.

When we watch a movie, read a comic or play a computer game, for example, we constantly perceive visual information that our mind processes naturally. This visual information consists of simple and more complex elements, which we understand more easily or more difficult, respectively. Shapes are components of this visual information. Shape is any element that we use to give or determine form. Shapes also communicate ideas.

Shapes are geometric, organic and abstract. Geometric shapes can range from simple to very complex, in this report we look at the basic geometric shapes – circle, square and triangle. Organic forms are those that we associate with nature such as animals, flowers, trees – with natural look. Abstract shapes can be explained as simplified or stylized organic shapes, abstract shapes can be a combination between organic and geometric - this type of shape represents an idea, concept and meaning.

Animated cinema conveys visual information through its characters and their environment. From the first cartoons to present day, the way this information is presented has changed and evolved. Today, character design is not only an art, but a whole science made up of rules, techniques and approaches. Emile Cohl and J. Stuart Blacktop were the first animators to introduce the concept of character design to cinema. In the 1920s, Walt Disney created the Mickey Mouse character. Mickey Mouse's extreme movements and simple lines and body structure set new foundations for character design. Successful character design involves several steps: developing a concept that includes the character's personality traits, backstory, and appearance, generating multiple sketches of the character's body shape, facial features and clothing. Sketches are refined until the final design is chosen. Next comes the selection of the character's color palette to establish its identity. Detailed images of the character from different angles were created to help the animators ensure consistent movement. The final step is creating model sheets with the final design, changes and notes on the character's personality and movement style to use as a reference during the animation process.

The design concept starts with plot research – who is the character, what is his/her story. Despite the specifics of each particular project, there are several established character archetypes, that represents a universal pattern, and therefore appeals to our human 'collective unconscious'. There are no universal character types, but common ones are: The Hero, The Mentor, The Ally, The Herald, The Trickster, The Shapeshifter, The Guardian, The Villain[1]. Apart from the role in the plot, the

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[1] What are Character Archetypes? A Definition. [online]. [Accessed November 8 2023]. Available at: https://www.novel-software.com/character-archetypes/#_Toc7000466

characters can be classified according to their psychological personality – openness, extroversion, conscientiousness, agreeableness, and neuroticism.

In her Degree Project in Game Design „How Can a Character's Personality be Conveyed Visually, through Shape", Hanna Ekström explains: "Character designer David Colman talks about the who versus the what…This refers to that a character designer should not only focus on what the character is; to focus on the actual design of the subject, e.g. a tiger. Nor should they only focus on who the character is, which would mean that the character depicts a lot of personality but looks like any other tiger that has been seen before. It is essential to combine the physical traits with the narrative - and vice versa - to show the viewer who the character is. The who and the what are both equally important traits in character design. The key is to first get to know and understand who the character is and then bring that out in the design"[2]. Character Design itself is just that – a combination of an idea, personality, spiritual, immaterial and at the same time – matter, form, materiality. This immaterial part, we perceive through form. The form carries the message and conveys the meaning of the idea through the shape language.

The shape language is an approach in design that considers the psychological and emotional impact of different forms. Both geometric and organic shapes have their psychological and emotional meaning. The direction and flow of shapes can lead the viewer's eye through the composition.

Contrasting shapes create visual interest and balance, while unity is achieved through repeating shapes to create harmony. The use of minimalistic, simplified shapes often enhances the focus on the main message. Proper use of form in design helps visual communication.

Circle shape creates a sense of freedom in movement. Symbolic meaning of the circle in art psychology represents unity, wholeness, infinity and cyclical nature of life. The circle has no beginning or end and implies inclusion, protection and perfection. Circles convey a sense of community and completion.

Triangle is associated with danger, evil and unpredictability. This shape gives a sense of action and power. In art psychology the triangle is associated with action, tension and conflict. It represents energy and dynamism. Triangles can symbolize science, law and religion. They suggest stability and strength due to their wide base.

Square shape gives a feeling of persistence, strength, reliability and support. The square is a symbol of stability, balance, structure and constancy. This shape means safety, shelter and containment. Squares suggest logic, order and predictability and are perceived as masculine shapes.

This report examines the use of shapes in the design of stylized characters. In art the term "stylization" means simplification and generalization of depicted objects - people, animals, plants, objects - by bringing to the fore their most characteristic elements at the expense of other, more specific details. Stylization gives abstractness and convention. A stylized drawing is any drawing that is not strictly realistic - cartoon, anime and any non-realistic drawings are considered "stylized". In stylized drawings the figure or face, that is depicted, is more often simplified, omitting parts of the body such as the nose, ears, etc. and other non-essential for the plot details. Another important aspect of stylizing is changing proportions, increasing the character's head and decreasing the body is a very common change in proportions. In general, the change in proportions is simply an artistic choice. The main approach in the stylization of an image is to analyze what are its characteristic features - to emphasize and exaggerate them. In character design the stylization of the figure boils down to the basic shapes we know. Shape theory in character design process is a basic concept that involves using geometric shapes to create a sense of balance, proportion and harmony in character designs.

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[2] Ekström, Hanna. How Can a Character's Personality be Conveyed Visually, through Shape. [online]. 2013. [Accessed November 8 2023]. Available at: http://www.diva-portal.org/smash/get/diva2:637902/FULLTEXT01.pdf

Any character could be broken down into primary shapes onto which we are projecting our real-life experiences. We often subconsciously assign qualities to a person or a character by only perceiving him/her as a combination of shapes[3].

[4]Additionally, shape language can be applied to specific elements of a character, such as their anatomy and features. The choice of round, bulky shapes or angular, sharp shapes can significantly impact the character's visual appeal and perceived attributes. Moreover, the interplay of shapes within a design, including the flow and contrast of shapes in costumes and props, adds depth and visual interest to the character.

Circles represent softness, friendliness and approachability. Characters based on circles are usually kind and squishy and are rarely the villains of the story. Depending on the role and goals of the character we want to create, we are directed to the use of characteristic shapes and their meaning. In character design every shape has meaning and carries a message about the essence of the character, about his/her role - whether it is positive or negative. Body shape has a huge impact on the overall impression of the character.

Circles are organic and natural shapes. These forms evoke a feeling of coziness and hospitality. Characters who have rounder shapes are often perceived as approachable, cute, friendly and harmless. We often see circles used in the design of characters such as mothers, small children and pets, suggesting to the audience that these characters are caring, kind, gentle and trustworthy.

Figure 1. From left to right: **Russel** (Up), **Po** (Kung Fu Panda), **Mario** (Super Mario), **Mama Odie** (The Princess and the Frog).

Square shapes are associated with stability, solidity, strength. They are suitable for heroic characters with a strong physique. Square shapes in character design are used to denote that the character is strong, sturdy, reliable, supportive and tenacious. This is why these forms are also often found in protagonists, father figures, protectors and any other characters, who provide a supporting role.

[3] Nikolaeva, Bilyana. How to Convey Character's Personality Through Shape, Variance and Size. [online]. [Accessed November 8 2023]. Available at: https://graphicmama.com/blog/conveying-characters-personality/

[4] Mastering Shape Language for Captivating Character Designs. [online]. 2023. [Accessed November 2023]. Available at: https://www.toolify.ai/ai-news/mastering-shape-language-for-captivating-character-designs-63622

Figure 2. From left to right: **Hulk** (Marvel Comics), **Ralph** (Wreck-It Ralph), **Massimo** (Luca), **Carl Fredricksen** (Up).

As opposed to round shapes, triangles are used to convey that a character is dangerous, evil, unpredictable and clever. Among the three shapes under consideration, triangles are known to convey the most malice and aggression, they are mostly used to design antagonistic characters (Figure 3. depicts the main villains in the annotated films). [5]Triangles also give direction. In contrast to squares, where we have only two directions-vertical and horizontal, here we have three. Besides portraying horrifying characters' personalities, artists also use them to show a hero's determination, drive and opportunism.

Figure 3. From left to right: **Scar** (The Lion King), **Maleficent** (Sleeping Beauty), **Dr. Doofenshmirtz** (Phineas and Ferb), **Hades** (Hercules).

It is increasingly common to combine different types of shapes in order to build a complex and multi-layered character. For example, adding circular shapes to the design of negative characters disguises their true nature. Adding circles to villains can imply their level of weakness and express that they do not have to look dangerous to be dangerous (Figure 4. The Queen of Hearts, *Alice in Wonderland*).

On the other hand, triangles are not only used for the design of negative characters. Adding such shapes to the character's design could speak of high intelligence (Figure 4. Sherman Mr. *Peabody and Sherman*).

The combination of square shapes with triangles contributes to the construction of a solid, strong, but dangerous and evil character (Figure 4. John Ratcliffe, *Pocahontas*).

[5] Nikolaeva, Bilyana. How to Convey Character's Personality Through Shape, Variance and Size. [online]. [Accessed November 8 2023]. Available at: https://graphicmama.com/blog/conveying-characters-personality/

Figure 4. From left to right: **The Queen of Hearts** (Alice in Wonderland); **Sherman** (Mr. Peabody and Sherman); **John Ratcliffe** (Pocahontas).

Although there are many approaches to conveying the character's personality, undoubtedly the language of form is one of the most practical and effective techniques for character design. The main shapes and their meanings are always in front of the eyes and the audience subconsciously perceives the essence of the character.

Shape language is an important tool not only in animation, but also in graphic design, game design and visual communication, as it can convey feelings, thoughts and concepts without using words. Creating Stylized Character using the shape language can represent the goal of the design in the best possible way.

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