

The Performance of Gender in Animation

How trans, non-binary and gender non conforming characters are designed, narrativized and portrayed in modern and post-modern animation.

Gender non-conforming characters in live action vs. animated media.

- ▶ Live action examples have been present since the early 1950s, most being irresponsibly depictions featuring cis-male actors in the role and often used as comedic roles at the expense of the character.
- ▶ The first suggested use of trans characters in animation have been around since the early 1980s. However, most characters were not explicitly expressed or identified as trans, but rather alluded to within the context of the show.
- ▶ Gender non conforming and non binary characters can be seen as far back as the 1960s in Japanese animation.



Image 1



Image 2

The Rose of Versailles (1979) - Riyoko Ikeda

- ▶ [The Rose of Versailles](#) is one of the earliest examples of a character blurring the line between gender identity and expression.
- ▶ Despite being designed and identifying as a woman, the character of Oscar, is presented with unambiguous masculinity, dressing and presenting as male throughout the show. Initially designed as a stopgap to a problem, original creator Riyoko Ikeda, designed the character “because she felt unable to convincingly portray a male soldier” (Shamoon, D., 2007) the character evolved into the protagonist and a remarkable popular character amongst young girls in Japan.
- ▶ “She proves to be an accomplished officer and a natural leader. Although she dresses and behaves as a man, however, Oscar’s sex is never a secret; the other characters all know that she is in fact a woman. Despite her masculine dress and bearing, she retains feminine features, specifically long hair and large eyes, as well as compassion and empathy.” (Shamoon, D., 2007)

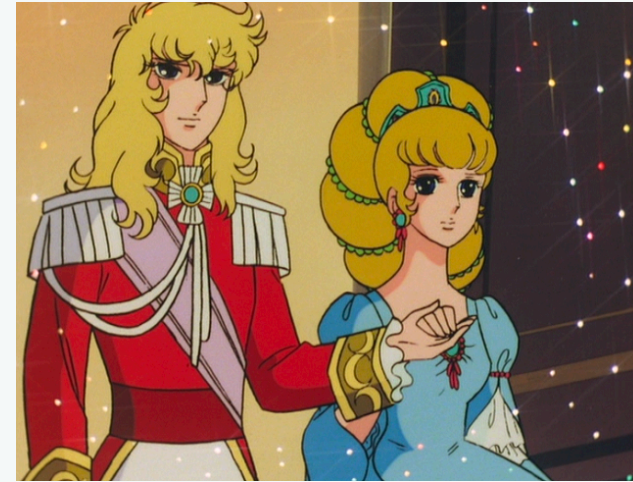


Image 1



Image 2

The queer coding of characters and fandom assertions.

- ▶ Implied queerness and queer baiting.
- ▶ Villains are often queer coded in a way that demonises the queer community.
- ▶ Fandoms have a tendency to ‘adopt’ characters that are coded as queer or at least perceived to be by audiences. Some examples are:
 - ▶ Jesse and James from *Pokemon*
 - ▶ Link and Zelda from *The Legend of Zelda*
 - ▶ Luigi from *Super Mario Bros*
 - ▶ Velma Dinkley from *Scooby Doo*
 - ▶ Danny Phantom from *Danny Phantom*
 - ▶ Ms. Frizzle from *The Magic School Bus*
 - ▶ Howl from *Howl’s Moving Castle*
 - ▶ Marco from *Star Vs. The Forces of Evil*
 - ▶ “It was truly remarkable to see sympathetic characters gleefully crossdressing in a kids’ show in 1999—never to seduce someone, and not even necessarily to trick someone (there is no nefarious reason for [this](#) or [this](#)), but simply because they felt like it. Sure, it was comical at times, but no more or less than any of their other costumes, and mostly it was presented with total matter-of-factness or even a sense of grace and artistry. Team Rocket wore what they wanted, when they wanted, and they looked amazing doing it.” (Dee, 2019)



Image 1



Image 2



Image 3

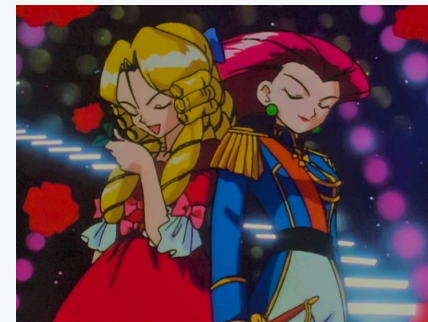


Image 4

HIM - *The Powerpuff Girls*

This character disturbs expectations by not allowing the girls or the viewer to feel safe in their skin... "His gender is often something of confusion, as his voice, clothes, and mannerisms often contradict each other"...This so-called confusion erupts from discord between high-toned male voice which echoes over itself, as though existing in a state of flux and multiplicity that will not settle into a univocal chord. Likewise, his clothes signify beyond easily legible codes of gender...Him expresses an integral transgender feminism that invokes the multiplicity and creative possibilities for gender.

(Bychowski, 2014)



Him becomes scary by means of an indeterminate gender.

- Bychowski, 2014

Case study - Dead End Paranormal Park

- ▶ Released this year, Hamish Steele's Dead End Paranormal Park is according to Steele the first animated show ever to have a trans character as the protagonist.
- ▶ The show is a horror-comedy, based around Barney and Norma working as night guards in a theme park overrun by demons and the paranormal. Barney and Norma serve as the bridge between the show and the audience, with Barney especially acting as the 'everyman'. Barney as a character is explicitly trans within the narrative of the show and is out to both us as an audience and certain characters within the show itself.

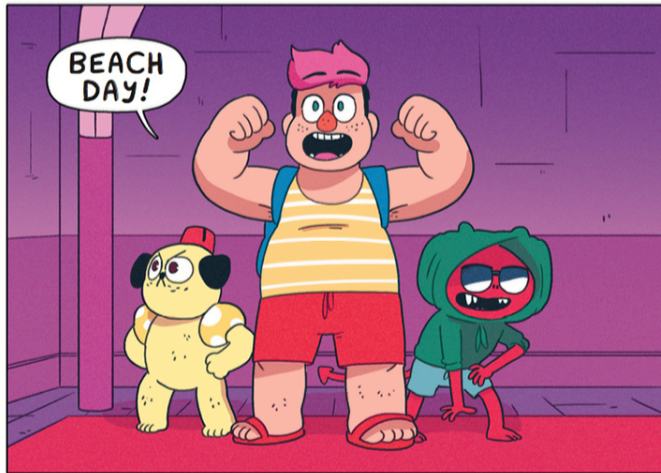


Image 1



Image 2

Interview with Hamish Steele - Via Zoom 29/09/22

► Expectations/resistance during production

- *“had been pitching this kind of stuff on other shows and always been shut down.”*
- *“I’d had a lot of experiences of a room full of straight people telling me what good gay representation is, they kept wanting to make the wizard gay as a closeted coming out thing. His defining trait is that he lies to everyone, and the thing is I was like; sure but only in addition to these other things, that can’t be the only thing...They were talking about representation as if I wasn’t in the room and that I didn’t have a voice.*
- *“It became a survival instinct, so that when I was working with Netflix I was assuming or at least working on the basis that any queer representation I would have to sneak in somewhere down the line or confirm on Twitter after the fact. Then as soon as they said “no no that’s the reason we want the book and want to adapt this”, it fully flipped on to the other side we need trans writers, we need trans actors, we need to go all out.*

► Responsibility of representation - trans creatives and actors

- *“The [network] were very concerned about a trans woman of colour being ostensibly like a villain, even though in season 2 I knew that she gets more nuanced, we learn about her perspective and learn what’s going on, so I said “Okay, lets cast more trans women of colour then.” And this is what happened so much at networks; they get so scared of the optics of casting someone in a role that isn’t positive that they don’t cast them in that role.”*

► Queer stories and the avoidance of tokenism

- *“It’s from his perspective, I wanted the show to feel queer in its bones, in its DNA. I feel like a lot of the time in shows it comes from a kind of heteronormative perspective and then we meet the queer character who is defined by their difference. And usually it’s like any time they have a bit of queer or non-binary rep they will have a character who is like “I love who I am and I use they them and I’ve already figured out everything about my personality and everyone accepts me” and that’s a nice thing to give a little kid, but our show is more for the older kids and It exists in a world in which homophobia and transphobia exist; which is a decision we made in the writers room because you could go the other way and that everyone accepts Barney and its all great. Barney was never meant to be other by shows narrative - he is meant to be the perspective and when it comes to the show being queer in its DNA and bones its set in a rainbow themed theme park run by a drag queen.”*

Interview with Hamish Steele - Designing a trans character for animation

- ▶ Barney's character design
- ▶ Use of shapes in character design and its drawbacks
 - ▶ Oversimplification
 - ▶ Dependency on societal norms
- ▶ Responsibility and consciousness of the animators
- ▶ Barney's design difference between the web comic and the animated series
- ▶ Expectations of trans characters
- ▶ Authenticity and research



Image 2



Image 1

The progression of animation studios - queer work by queer artists.

- ▶ Prominence of working being created by queer creatives for not just a queer audience, but universal themes told from a queer perspective.
 - ▶ She-ra and the Princesses of Power, The Owl House, Steven Universe and Kipo and the Age of Wonderbeasts.
- ▶ Tokenistic allusions still exist far more commonly than unambiguous representation
 - ▶ Voltron: Legendary Defender, Amphibia and Avatar: Legend of Korra
- ▶ Hamish Steele: The importance of the writer's room
 - ▶ “With *Dead End*, nothing came from one of the writer in the room meekly saying “can we have a character like me”. We started knowing who the main characters were, then we got a writers room that reflected the show. And we also tried to make sure that no one in the writers room was the only ‘blank’ and had to fight their own corner. Everyone overlapped with each other or had different variations of the same experience.” (Steele, 2022)



Image 1: 'Double Trouble', 2018, https://she-raandtheprincessesofpower.fandom.com/wiki/Double_Trouble, 12/10/22

Image 2: 'Perfuma', 2018, <https://she-raandtheprincessesofpower.fandom.com/wiki/Perfuma>, 12/10/22

Image 3: 'Jewelstar', 2018, <https://canon-lgbt-characters.tumblr.com/post/629623385519013888/jewelstar-from-she-ra-and-the-princesses-of-power>, 12/10/22

In Conclusion:

- ▶ The inclusion of trans, non binary and gender non conforming characters is better than it ever has been before.
- ▶ Inclusive, diverse work can only better inform us as creatives and as audiences.
- ▶ There is still a lot of work to be done to ensure authentic and responsible representation.
- ▶ Designing GNC characters must be done with care, attention and culpability.
- ▶ Writers rooms, animation studios and all production processes should be reflective of the stories that are being told.
- ▶ Make space and create platforms for people to be empowered to tell their own stories.

Any questions?



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