

A Study on the feasibility of creation of Gender-neutral characters in visual storytelling

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Abstract: Gender equality is an issue of utmost importance and is an essential element requiring action for the development of society and its long-term sustenance. The concept of gender equality gave rise to ideologies such as gender neutrality rendering that policies, language, and other social structure should avoid granting roles depending on someone's gender in order to be free from the discrimination that may come along with such roles. Media portrayal of genders, thus, are extremely crucial for determining, conforming and formation of public perception. With body representation becoming a critical issue for cultural as well as personal identity and varying character designs surfacing with new narratives and stories, concerns rise about the body representation of non-binary gendered characters.

Aim: This study aims to decipher the possibility of producing the visual design of a gender-neutral character.

Methodology: To explore the possibility and feasibility of production of the visual design of a gender-neutral character, qualitative survey was conducted with a focused group of character design experts (n=6) to capture their perspectives.

Results & Discussions: The discussions with the focus group consisted of the representation of the existing modern gender stereotypes i.e. how existing genders are perceived by the modern society and how character design elements can be implemented to depict the gender of a character in visual format, and whether they can be broken and manipulated to create a gender-neutral perception of a character.

Conclusion: Despite the differences between the participants on whether a gender-neutral character is possible or not, the evidences conclude that owing to the rigid gender stereotypes prevalent in the society and the lack of awareness among the people about gender as a subject, creating a gender-neutral character is not possible aligning with public perception since the current audience may not correctly interpret the intended identity.

Keywords: Gender representation, Gender-neutrality, Character Design, Gender equality.

1 Introduction

In the modern age, gender equality has become an essential factor to foster equal representation and social development in a society. In its developing stages, the concerns of gender equality movement were centered around reforms on a macro scale. Owing to the large-scale, abundant use of social media in the 21st century and the democratization of communication systems has led to recognition of each individual's opinions on a wider platform, which rendered the users extremely conscious of how individuals are treated on a micro scale in a social setting.

In western society, specifically western Europe, gender equality was recognized as a social factor and came into great significance with the Women's suffrage movement of the 19th century for women's right to vote and since then there has been several developments including emergence of several different policies in many different countries across the world resulting in a dramatic change in the social attitude of the masses [1]. By the year of 2015, gender equality was established as the sustainable development goal (SDG) when the UN member states adopted the 2030 agenda for sustainable development [2].

The concept of gender equality gave rise to various ideologies, a notable one being gender-neutrality. In sociological terms, it means that policies, languages and other social institute/structures should avoid granting roles depended on a person's gender in order to be free from the discrimination that may be associated to these roles [3]. Additionally, gender equality gave rise to the different influential waves of feminism of the 20th and 21st century. Feminism is the belief in social, economic, and political equality of the sexes. Although largely originating in the West, feminism has manifested worldwide and is represented by various institutions committed to

activity on behalf of women's rights and interests [4].

These different ideologies, gender-neutrality, gender equality, feminism have the same objective of abolishing sexism, the concept being initially formulated to raise consciousness about the oppression of girls and women amidst the early societies, although by the early 21st century it had been expanded to include the oppression of any sex, including men and boys, intersex people, and transgender people[5]. Sex is a biological trait which determines the development and function the human body will perform while gender is a tool of perception people use to contextualize individuals into social settings and set expectations of interaction among each other dependent on their sex. On a more fundamental perspective this idea of gender equality is closely linked to post-genderism, providing the argument that gender is an arbitrary and unnecessary limitation set on human potential. Advocates of post-genderism argue that the presence of gender roles, social stratification and gender differences is detriment to human society and for further development, must perish [6]. The inception of LGBTQ+ community in the 1990s and its growing recognition since then, has supported and could argue that the existence of a society independent of gender roles is possible.

Design plays an important role in shaping our societies due to its accessibility and daily interaction with the common person- it has substantial influence on how people interact with tangible matters, such as products, services and environments and intangible matters including emotions, identity, culture and social norms. Majority of design practices endorse human centered approaches, catalyzes innovation and economic growth, promotes sustainability and fosters behaviours and social values [7].

Visual design practice such as filmmaking has long been one of the most powerful cultural tools, deeply influencing how people in society interpret the world around them, understand how it functions and

understand the dynamics of interaction between people of this society. As an art form that combines visual storytelling with sound, film has the unique ability to evoke emotions, provoke thought, and inspire action. The impact of film on society spans several areas, including cultural development, social awareness, individual's behaviour, and political discourse [8].

The depictions of a character in a film or other visual medium are the responsibility of character design. Since visual media heavily influences the perception of the general audience, accurate depiction of characters in these visual mediums becomes really important as it influences the perception of social and cultural norms which affects the values the general public hold regarding the kind of persons being represented by these characters. Design over the years has developed and changed in accordance to how society and its norms has changed as it represents and works on the manipulation of social factors that exists in a society, since now there is a possibility of the existence of people independent of their gender, it leads to the question of whether or not it is possible to accurately depict such a person as a character in visual format of storytelling. Through discussions with character design experts, this study sought to explore the following objectives:

1. To find and analyze the current factors which influences the depiction of gender in a character in a visual format.
2. Find the possibilities for the manipulation of these factors for the depiction of a gender-neutral character.

2 Methodology

To explore the possibility of feasibility of a gender-neutral character, a qualitative survey was conducted with a focused group of character design experts(n=6) regarding what elements influences the gender of a character and is there a possibility of manipulating those elements to create a gender-neutral character;

While selecting the interviewee's the ratio of male to females was kept 1:1 ensuring the elimination of any gender bias that could influence the investigation of the research paper.

For the survey the following structured questionnaire was created:

1. What are the elements of design that are most essential in character design on a fundamental level?
2. Do these elements and their perception vary through cultures and places?
3. Is it possible to depict gender of a character through these elements?
4. Can these elements be used to depict the two binary genders that are associated with the two binary sexes?
5. Do you think these elements can be used to depict a gender-neutral character? If yes, then what limitation should one consider while creating such character?

The questionnaire was structured on the basis of investigations of concepts that are primarily linked to the main concept of gender-neutral body.

Exploration of fundamental of character design is essential in determination of elements that are most basic to a character design which influences the design's perception by the general audience, investigating whether the perception and the meaning associated with the elements which contribute to the core of character design are universal in nature or these perception vary according to different cultural background which might influence its application in visual design, there are different applications of these elements in character design, depending on the context of paper, depiction of sexes and gender of the character is one such application of these elements, the guideline for the application can vary according to the gender, the two binary sexes which are prominent in the current societies, males and females, have different guidelines for its application which is used for their depiction. Understanding the guidelines of depiction of the two biological sexes and the gender roles associated with these sexes can lead to the manipulation of these guidelines to create a character that is gender-neutral.

3 Results and discussion

Through the critical analysis of the data collected from the qualitative surveys and interviews, given below are the compiled pointers which summarize the information communicated by the selected designers.

3.1 Shapes language

There are certain design elements that work together and are essential to create a character design, the most basic among these being the forms and shapes- that are utilized in making of such a character. The application of these forms and shapes is termed as shape language. The designers opined that an entity which is constructed independent of utilization of shape language is incapable of being interpreted as a character. Though some of the elements of character design and their meanings vary through cultures and traditions, there are certain attributes and meanings that remain consistent universally. For reference, a triangle would be perceived as something sharp and pointed independent of the cultural context, likewise, shape language and its application remain relatively consistent universally rendering depiction of gender through shapes apt.

Shape language for existing gender stereotypes:

Shape language has been used to depict several characteristics of characters such as personality, emotions, feel etc. It is also used to depict gender of a character, for example, traits such as masculinity has been traditionally depicted using squares and rectangular shapes with broad and sharp lines. In contrast, femininity has been traditionally depicted by using ovals and circular shapes with thin and smooth lines. Though there has been experiments in visual design by breaking these traditional guidelines to create characters such as women that have masculine traits and males that have feminine characteristics, these general stereotypes are still prevalent in the wider society.

Shape language for gender-neutral character:

The existence of a shape language for a gender-neutral character has become a much more relevant question as society is modernizing and is moving to a future where technology enables the existence of humanoid robots, since robots are not assigned a gender, they can be considered to bear a gender-neutral-identity. The possibility of creating such a shape language that can be perceived as gender neutral lies in balancing the feminine and masculine characteristics associated with different shapes so that the audience will not be able to put any emphasize on any particular gender characteristic.

3.2 Anatomy:

Anatomy plays a major role in the depiction of gender in character design. Anatomy contextualizes a design into a specific sex and its cognitive utilization in regards to socially perceived gender. The application of anatomy in the representation of character varies depending on what context the character is based on (does it belong to a human society, animal kingdom or a fantasy world, etc.), and how it is stylized (is it cartoonish, semi-realistic, realistic or hyper-realistic?). Similarly, the depiction of gender as a characteristic in anatomy of a character varies through the following lenses:

3.3 Form:

Human: Contextualizing character into the design of human forms restricts the character's depiction to only specific sexes because of the structure and differentiation of the human body according to the sexes. This biological difference in structure is the reason for the associations of specific shapes to a certain gender of a character, for example, females are generally associates with circles or curves while male characters are associated with squarish, angular shapes. These associations are one of the major factors contributing to creation of gender stereotype of femininity and masculinity prevalent in the society. Though these structures guidelines form a

stable foundation for the depiction of the two binary sexes , but because of these structural limitations of human anatomy creating a character that is gender-neutral deems impossible in case of a hyper-realistic character.

Stylized: Stylizations of character in various medium render flexibility and manipulation of human forms with a possibility of breaking the limitation set by the human anatomy for the representation of sexes and gender while keeping the body proportionate. Thus, stylizations can be used to transcend human forms which entails that it would be difficult for the general audience to contextualize the character into social norms and human social setting (these social norms and settings regularly puts emphasis and are majorly associated with gender roles),perceiving it as something alien which allows freedom for the assumption of an entity which the general audience is not familiar with, thus making the feasibility of a gender-neutral character possible in stylized format.

3.4 Background of the character:

The origins of character determine the social context which it belongs to, influencing the perception of character by the audience. A character that belongs to the human society would be perceived through social norms of that society and a character which belongs to, for reference, the animal kingdom would be perceived through the rules and laws of that world. Perception of gender roles associated with the two binary sexes are strongly held by human societies making it difficult for the creation of gender-neutral character in a social context of the modern human society since gender-neutrality is not yet a social norm in the modern world . A society which is alien to humanity or is drastically different from our social setting can overcome the limitation set by the social norms of human society making it apt for the existence of a gender-neutral character. Thus, an anatomical structure which would be perceived as alien and does not fit in the modern human social context is more apt for a creation of a gender-neutral character.

3.5 Context:

Gender perception of a person or character by an audience is influenced and formed through social and cultural context of a society, for example, the colour blue is considered to be masculine is a cultural norm, this cultural norm was developed and popularized by design and marketing. Similarly, since media now is a huge part of our society and has major influence on the general audience and their perception, storytelling in design has emerged as a medium which can create a new gendered stereotypes or can popularize any existing gender stereotypes.

Context of storytelling: In storytelling, apart from its visual design, the perception of a gender of a character is majorly influenced by the context of the script, plot and theme- the factors providing for the character's initial design. Thus, a gender-neutral design must be rendered to a character that is already established as a gender-neutral in the given story. At the onset of a gender-neutral character being appreciated by the public, a new stereotype

may be formed or existing gender stereotypes that contribute to sexism and association of unwanted gender roles to individuals can be challenged. Thus, a gender-neutral stereotype can be created in the current society with the application of better storytelling and large-scale marketing in mainstream media.

Furthermore, the initial design can be contextualized by using props and costumes which also have gender roles associated with them. Thus, to create a gender-neutral character, props and costumes should be balanced according to their gender roles to avoid the favouritism towards a specific sex.

Cultural context: The two binary sexes have been associated with many different gender roles, the associations with which have been formed over the years and still prevalent in the society. For example, the way women sit has been stereotypically perceived as very different from how a men sit. Distinct roles make it easier for the recognition and perception of a male or a female sex while providing a hindrance in the representation and recognition of a gender-neutral identities. Developing a gender-neutral character with respect to these cultural norms would be to assign its characteristics and gender roles that are common to both the sexes thus making emphasis on neither or to make a character that denies or transcends the current state of the society. To make a character that belongs to a different world or is thus, to make it alien to the public perception.

4 Conclusion

There is a possibility for the feasible creation of a gender-neutral character in visual storytelling in the current state of the society despite its rigid social norms. The research concludes that, for accurate depiction of such character, certain limitation on guidelines associated with character design and film-making along with social and cultural norms have to be accommodated. These include:

- Appropriate manipulation of shape language
- Restriction of the anatomy of the character to a stylized form, avoiding the humanoid structure.
- Excluding themes which put an emphasis on gender roles in our society.
- Justification for the characters design through the script, plot and themes of the story.
- Developing a new cultural stereotype for a gender-neutral character through the use of justified storytelling and mass marketing.
- In social and cultural context, creating character in a context which does not follow the social norms of the human society i.e. creating a character which does not belong to a human society making it difficult for audience to associate the character to gender norms of human society.

The discussions with the designers and experts reveal the varying factors that may lead to the design of a gender-neutral character. However, how it may be received or perceived by the society at large and its subsequent interpretation needs to be further explored in reference to human centered design applications.

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