

# Consistency breakdown of stylized characters to transfer them into an environment, which differs in its medium and art style

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## Introduction

In animated media we often come across projects, which feature a new version of characters, shown in a different environment than what they originate from.

In this context, environment is defined by the visualizing **medium** (2D, 3D, Live-Action) and **art style** (stylized, photorealistic) of the surroundings.

Prominent examples for this are **reboots**, **remakes** and **adaptations** like The Lion King (2019), Detective Pikachu (2020) or Scoob! (2020).

When transferring stylized characters into a different environment, it often occurs that their original medium and art style get translated accordingly, such as changing their medium from 2D to 3D and the art style from heavily stylized to photorealistic with biological based anatomy.

These changes, however, take the project at risk to lose the characters recognition value, wreck the once working design or anger fans of the original.

## Goal

Exploring **what** design choices made past projects transferred characters successful or unsuccessful, based on which certain criteria can be worked out. This should help future projects, artists and directors approaching a character transfer with minor risk.

Furthermore it should examine **how** a stylized character can be changed throughout maintaining its original 'essence' while still fitting into the new environment.



## Background & Motivation

When working in the industry the probability is high to come across a project that is based on an already established trademark. Reboots and remakes have to fight with the stigma of changing a characters design to the worse. Enraged fans, even if the project wanted to target a new group of people, will inevitable influence the rating and its future production. When such an environment change is commissioned, its up to the artists and directors to make the best out of it and avoid cases, like it happened at Sonic the hedgehog (2020) at all costs (Figure 1).

Paramount dropped the official trailer for "Sonic" on April 30 and received **backlash** for changing the character's look from the video game. ... "Sonic" fans were outraged over the character's appearance, so much so that Fowler announced May 3 he would be redesigning the character for the film. 24.05.2019



Fig.1

## Approach



Fig.2

## Results

The analysis results overlap with the answers of the survey-participants. On a scale from 1 to 10 they had to rate a characters appearence after their own subjective feeling of appeal, no matter if they know the original design or not (Figure 2)

There are two extrem ways of transferring a stylized character: the first one takes the original and puts it into the different environment, without changing at all, even if its medium and art style is completely different from its surroundings. The second way takes the character and completely changes the art style and medium accoring to the new environment.

The participants and analysis showed that the approach of a good mediocity is generally preferred (Figure 3).

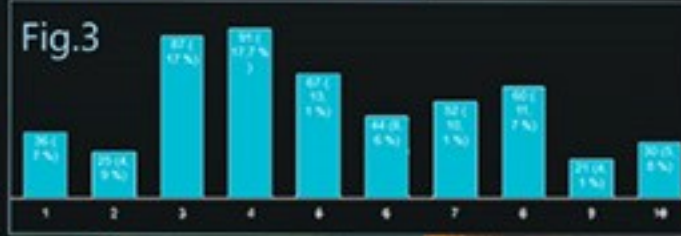


Fig.3

The 'character transfer experiment' (Figure 4) featured concept art of the famous character Stitch (Walt Disney), transferred into a live-action environment. The participants voted version 3 (translated medium, slightly adapted art style, realistic textures) as best and most appealing option.



Fig.4

*'I was thinking about the Lion King Remake. The CGI was stunning, but that desperate attempt to reach hyper realism sucked all the life out of an iconic, vibrant, colorful movie and turned it into a bland nature documentary'* -an answer from one of the 513 survey participants when asked for further comments.

Figure 5 and 6 show the results of further related questions.



Fig.5

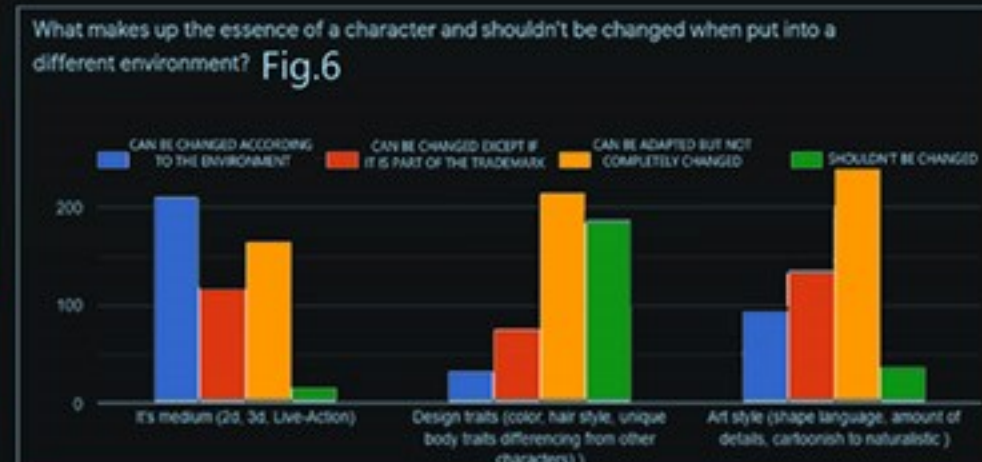


Fig.6

## Evaluation

The analysis and survey concluded, that the transferred characters which have been accepted the most by the audience, didn't lose the trademark, that once defined them. Even if it means, that the character will fit less to its surroundings and logically wouldn't make sense in the new environment. The approach, that has exposed itself as the most successful one, is done by breaking the character **down into its consistency: art style traits, design traits, medium traits** and further establish its **'essence'/trademark**. This trademark can already be found in the art style (extremely round shapes, conjoined cartoonish eyes), a way of acting only possible through the art style (overacting cartoonish, looking extraordinary cute, anthropomorphic emotions), a genre supported by the art style (comedic shape language approach, action shape approach), medium traits (being 2D is part of the gimmick) or design traits (color scheme, unique body features). Once the consistence of the trademark is found, a.e via survey or reducing to the minimum, changing these traits should be done with extreme care.

Basic design traits should persist or only be adapted for modern yet similar approaches, the rest of the art style can be adapted to the new environment, mostly in the sense of textures and shading while the shapes stick to the original. Furthermore, a change should feel like it adds something expanding to the character, that wasn't possible to visualize in the original medium/art-style/design, to give the alteration a reason. Psychological it is natural to react critical to any kind of change. The best way of counteracting the negative view about change is by explaining why it is needed so that it adds to the original charm and does not downgrade it.

## Conclusion

*'For Hollywood, American Moviemakers say, remakes are a way of investing in a concept that has already proved itself with an audience, in a business where millions are at stake with each movie deal.'* (Sharon Waxman 1993).

This research paper showed that not only the idea of the character and story are part of this concept, but also the art style and general visualization whose changes could not only enrage old fans but also make the whole concept unserviceable for a new audience. The more of an old fan base still exists, the more careful the changes should be approached, even if the project plans to target a different or new audience and genre.

Moreover it showed how important an appealing character design is for the first impression and estimation of the project, which attracts the audience, even when the rest of the project will later be judged by the other parts of the of the execution, such as the story or acting.

Changing the number of details in their texture only, let the character immerse enough into the new environment for the audience to not experience an 'immersion break', there is no need to change the whole anatomy and art style when putting a stylized character into a live-action environment.

This effect is also called the 'Suspension of disbelief' defined as 'The temporary acceptance as believable of events or character that would ordinarily be seen as incredible, such as a cartoon character in a realistic environment. Due to the subjective nature of this research, its recommendable to do further investigations in the topics of the uncanny valley effect and art style rules for appeal. Furthermore artist as well as directors should be encouraged to do more user-testing, since so much is at stake with a lot of unpredictable factors, while making themselves clear that the targeted audience is not necessarily the audience, that will be attracted.