[mild spoiler warning]

Netflix is starting to become the new home for amazing cartoon shows. 2018 alone debuted Hilda, Final Space, Dragon Prince, Disenchanted and one of my immediate favourites, She-Ra.

It's a reboot of a show of the same-ish name from 1985 which was a spin-off from He-Man from 1983 which was based on a series of toys from 1982. This meant the character design of this and other shows of it's kind looked… very samey.

And this made sense at the time because, as entertaining as they were (trust me, I was a kid of the 80s, I was the target audience), they were still, basically glorified commercials to sell dolls or action figures, which are the real dolls… no wait, that's something else. Therefore the majority of characters had to fit the same cookie cutter design for mass production.

Of course nowadays, cartoon shows are no strangers to tie-in merchandise, but they can be more imaginative with the character designs without those same body type limitations. Unless they're those god-damn creepy FunkoPops. No, just no.

So Noelle Stevenson and their team are much more liberated when it comes to redesigning the She-Ra characters without having to worry about a single thi- [all the negative comments]

Now, I'll say right here, you don't have to like these new designs, if you don't I don't care enough to try and convince you and this video isn't going to change your mind. The beauty of art is that there's something for everyone and not everything is for you. And that's fine. You might feel that She-Ra looks "too androgynous" and that's a valid opinion, as long as you respect that it's subjective and not everyone shares that view. For example, in my opinion She-Ra/Adora does not look androgynous, she's definitely effeminate. In the original series, She-Ra has a very curvaceous body and scant costume because her design is partially inspired by classic imagery of goddesses and, to fit into the He-Man universe, influences from Conan the Barbarian and the works of Frank Frazetta. The new She-Ra has been aged down and so her body reflects that. It's less sexualised because she's just a 17/18 year old, going out discovering the world and herself, which is what the show is all about just with magical sword powers and a talking horse. There's nothing wrong with sex appeal being part of a character's design, I just did a video that had Jessica Rabbit in it after all. It can still be empowering without being exploitative, it's just not relevant here. Sorry if this genuinely upsets you but if it helps, here's a colon and the number 8 and at some point they'll pass each other, so if you hit pause at the right time, they'll look like a pair of boobs. Have fun.

I'm not a character designer… as you can tell, but I'm trying to learn more about animated shows and what goes into making them, and making videos like this helps me learn more, like copying someone else's homework but rewriting it in your own words. So this is my

gross oversimplification of what I've learnt about character design, using She-Ra 2018 as an example.

Side note: These aren't strict rules, more like a guide which can be applied or ignored as seen fit, that's the other beauty of art - you can do whatever the F-- you want

Step one: Know your character
(personality, quirks, props, accessories, demographic)
The character's personality should shine through their design like a sunny day. Take someone like Spongebob. His personality is unbridled joy and optimism, so he's been designed with large eyes, a huge smile and a wildly expressive body.
In She-Ra, Catra has been made quite scrawny, so she comes across as scrappy. Her different coloured eyes could be a reference to her conflicting feelings towards her allegiance to The Horde and to her old friend Adora who has betrayed them by defecting. Her old human-form and cat-form have been merged to more of a hybrid of the two, which allows for more body language, with her ears displaying her emotional state, much like Judy Hopps. Which is one of her quirks, an involuntary unusual trait or behavior. Rick Sanchez is a reckless self-destructive mess of a human, so this is displayed with heavy drinking, constant belching and lots of drool and spittle.
In She-Ra, Entrapta is obsessed with technology, to the point where she can be quickly distracted or easily led. So despite being not typically princess-like, she's dressed with thick gloves, stained clothes and a welding mask, so she's ready to tinker with tech at a drop of a hat.
She's also so scatterbrained she's constantly recording things in a log, which brings me to props and accessories that help accentuate and define a character. Kenny's parka that muffles his voice, the overcautious Huey and his junior woodchuck guidebook, Popeye and his spinach, Eddache with his weird left mouth (HEY!) and She-Ra, of course with her… hair! Adora is practical and straightforward, so she has a no-frills ponytail, this is in stark contrast to her alter-ego She-Ra whose hair is massive and evokes feelings of boldness and empowerment. But this is still Adora, so the costume is still practical with the addition of shorts and straightforward with the top being button up military style, reflecting her upbringing and training. The more you know your characters, the easier these design choices will come to you, essentially making them do all the hard work for you.
(Cartoon character butler doing all hard work for me)

Step two: Diverse shapes and colours
(reflect personality, distinct silhouettes, different body types and races, comparisons, line thickness)
First impressions are important so the body shape should tell us a lot about a character before they even speak. From their face, their posture and their attitude we should get an inkling of this character's personality, even if we don't realise it. Like judging a book by it's cover. And this is commonly done, with circles, squares and triangles. We see these shapes in our everyday lives and they evoke certain feelings. Squares are firm, steady, strong, circles are soft, safe, friendly and triangles are prickly, edgy and sharp.
Let's look at Steven Universe and the Crystal Gems. Garnet is made out of a square, as she is the strong, firm leader of the group. But the edges are rounded off, showing she has a soft

side too. Amethyst is mainly circles, which suits her easy-going carefree nature. And Pearl is a triangle but also a circle, forming a teardrop. Shapes can be mixed together to create a mix of feels. Pearl is prissy but at times can still be delicate.

And in She-Ra we have Bow made out of squares, Glimmer made out of circles and Catra made out of triangles. Characters can be comprised of many shapes, it's just working out the best ones that portray your character.

The more diverse and unique your characters, the better. For example, who's that Simpsons character? Giving your character a unique silhouette helps tell characters apart, especially in ensemble shows. Let's try again with, who's that Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtle? Bit harder that time, isn't it? The original series of She-Ra had a difficult task, having to conform to the mould of the same body-design across the board because of toys, but the reboot series is able to have a cast with an array of body shapes, which is in turn more representative of the broad spectrum of bodies of women.

The character Spinnerella has been met with criticism because she is, in massive quotation marks, "fat" which is apparently "bad". Now, this may blow your minds but sometimes people are just big and sometimes it's nothing to do with eating a lot. It could be down down to the body type they're born with, side effect of other health issues like polycystic ovary syndrome or depression and so on. Even if it is because they ate a lot of food, so what? If more tv shows can portray large people in a positive light, maybe less people will have to suffer from social anxiety, anorexia, bulimia or even suicide.

Representation matters. This goes for skin colour too. It's inclusionary while also being another defining feature to tell characters apart.

Speaking of colour, this is something the original series got right, well not the skin colour, but the clothes. Making up for the lack of differing bodies, the characters sport different colours to help differentiate them. Colours can contribute to evoking feeling in a characters design. Red, Orange and Yellow are warm colours, sunny, energetic, passionate. Green, blue and purple are cool colours, calming, natural and relaxing.

Glimmer is comprised of mainly pinks and purples. Pinks evoking sensitivity, caring and loving while purples evoke royalty which makes sense being a princess and daughter of the only on-screen queen (sounds like heavy metal album name). Colours can interpreted in many ways, like purple can also mean luxury, romance or even death and mourning. Entrapta is also comprised of purples but has a much different personality to Glimmer.

It's just a case of playing around with what feels right for who your character is. It's all about interpretation. What's does that mean, I'll let you decide...

Step three: Simplify and exaggerate
(expressive, less distractions, realistic for animation)

It might be tempting to cram in as many personality elements into one character design but you gotto keep things simple. Clarity is key for audiences. Throw too much shit at them and they're probably going to stop looking at you also don't throw shit. Take all your elements and boil them down to the absolute essentials. What's the most character you can portray with the fewest things? You see this regularly with comic strips or cartoon shows that have been going for a long time, the designs evolve and change but keep the core elements in tact.

And there's naturally some real life considerations. Shows may only have limited budgets and it's unrealistic to expect them to maintain highly detailed animation all the time. The

original series, while arguably more detailed, also frequently used what's called stock. Recycled animation that was retoscoped with actors and then repeated where possible due to the amount of episodes required in a short space of time. You'd see this recycled animation all the time with Scooby Doo and even some Disney movies. So short cuts are common and the flashy stuff reserved for key moments. But done stylistically, this is easy to overlook, maybe not even notice.

But where you might strip some elements back, you may also want to exaggerate others. Like giving a strong person large oversized muscles. The She Ra characters don't have much in the way of exaggerated bodies, following the footsteps of the more, semi-realistic proportions as seen in shows like Voltron. But both Western and Eastern animation frequently share the trope of giving their animated characters big eyes. The eyes alone can convey an incredible amount of emotion, even if the character doesn't speak (Gromit). Shadow Weaver can still convey terror and evil even without a visible face. As long as the character's expressions can be clearly read, it doesn't matter if they're not very photorealistic. The characters of She Ra in general have large eyes and sometimes even larger eyes, taking some ques from anime influences, just like the He Man series did in it's own reboots.

The character designs aren't earth-shattering or massively revolutionary or anything, but Noelle Stevenson and their team have done wonders with She Ra.
The 1980s series may have ultimately been a tool to sell toys but it was one of the very few female-led action cartoons of it's time and it granted women like Barbara Hambly, Justine Dantzer and Gwen Wetzler, unique opportunities to flesh out a world, story and characters in a male-dominated industry. It was rare for women in animation to have such high ranking roles but it's this spirit of progressivism, equal opportunity and inclusivity that is championed by the new series, managing to make something that both pays homage to the history while forging their own path forward. And they also sell toys!

There's a ton more to read up on the subject of character design and if you're interested in learning more, I linked to some resources in the description below.