



# **Compelling Character Design: Female Anti-Heroes in Adult Animation**

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BACHELOR'S THESIS  
May 2023

Media and Arts  
Interactive Media

## **ABSTRACT**

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Media and Arts  
Interactive Media

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Compelling Character Design: Female Anti-Heroes in Adult Animation

Bachelor's thesis 40 pages, appendices 4 pages  
May 2023

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Character design is an integral part of any storytelling medium, whether it is for film, television, games, or something else. This includes both the outward, physical appearance of characters as well as the personality traits and backstory.

The focus in this thesis was on female anti-heroines in adult animation. The objective was to create an easy-to-follow checklist to aid in character creation. Existing characters in adult animation films and television series were examined, as well as the research on the topic of character design. Some key questions were then collected into a checklist.

For demonstration, an example character along with a script for an existing animated television series scene were created, using the checklist to guide the process.

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Key words: character design, animation, anti-hero

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**GLOSSARY**

alliteration	the repetition of the same letter or sound at the beginning of adjacent or closely connected words
anima	a model of feminine sexual and gender characteristics
animus	a model of masculine sexual and gender characteristics
antagonist	a person who is actively opposing someone or something; an adversary
archetype	a model of a type of person, good or evil
protagonist	a leading character in a film, novel, etc.

## 1 INTRODUCTION

“When most people think about characters or character design, the first thing that comes to mind is: I need to have a hero. I need to have a bad guy. I need to have a beautiful woman.” (Tillman 2012) Even when the hero of your story is considered a bad guy, there still needs to be some opposing force to them: an even worse guy, someone for your anti-hero to take down. The aim of this thesis is to find out how and why some objectively horrible characters gain the love and adoration of the public and to combine the findings into a checklist for character designers to use while creating compelling anti-heroes.

The research methods used for this thesis include reading books and articles on the topic of character creation as well as several case studies of adult animation characters. The television series chosen for the case studies were chosen for the author’s familiarity with them and personal preferences.

## 2 CHARACTER ARCHETYPES

### 2.1 Western media

Carl Jung, a Swiss psychiatrist, is behind the most commonly used character archetypes today. (Faber & Mayer 2009) He identified four major archetypes, which serve as the foundation for many later models. These include the anima/animus, the self, the shadow, and the persona. Additionally, Jung mentioned the wise old man, the child, the mother, and the maiden (Jung, 1928). From all of these archetypes devised by Jung, I created the archetype chart shown in Picture 1. The 12 character archetypes featured in the chart are: Innocent, Orphan, Hero, Caregiver, Explorer, Rebel, Lover, Creator, Jester, Sage, Magician, and Ruler. It is important to remember that these archetypes are somewhat fluid, and often appear as combinations of multiple types with qualities of one type being prominent in an otherwise strong archetype of another kind.



PICTURE 1. 12 literary character archetypes and their characteristics in a chart. (Erika Markkinen 2023)

## **2.2 Similarities and differences across cultures**

In Western culture, the hero archetype is perhaps the most prominent. The hero is typically a character who possesses moral and physical strength and who fights for justice and good. Good examples of the hero archetype are characters such as Superman, Luke Skywalker, and Harry Potter.

Literary archetypes in Eastern literature are also often the embodiments of specific roles or types of people, such as the heroes and villains, that are recognizable across cultures. However, these archetypes do reflect the cultural values, beliefs, and ideals of their specific regions. In Western culture, individualism, personal freedom, and achievements are highly valued; in contrast, Eastern culture tends to value harmony and the betterment of the community above the individual. This leads to the anti-hero archetype being common in both Eastern and Western media, as the struggles between the characters' own desires and their sense of duty to others as well as the pressure of societal norms are reflective of the cultural values. (Kirkland 1964)

## **2.3 Anti-heroes and villains**

The protagonist of a story is usually a hero or some combination of a hero and another archetype. When considering anti-heroes, as the name implies, these characters lack traditional heroic qualities such as courage or selflessness. They might exhibit behaviours traditionally associated with villains, but they will sincerely believe they have a good reason to do the things they do. It could be said that anti-heroes are defined by some objectively horrible character trait, belief, or behaviour, setting them aside from other well-written hero characters. According to novelist Jenkins (2021), the most memorable, plausible, believable heroes exhibit human, flawed behaviour. This goes a long way explaining why and how people can relate to these villain-type characters and even root for them.

Villains are an important part of storytelling as the opposing force to the hero, even if the hero is a flawed anti-hero themselves. The behaviour of the antagonist and the protagonist can be very similar, and the villains will sometimes even mock the heroes or attempt to manipulate them by stating they are not so different from each other. An example of the villain highlighting the flaws of the hero and taunting them can be seen in *Raiders of the Lost Ark* (1981), where Indiana Jones's former friend and a rival archaeologist Rene Belloq tells Indiana Jones:

You and I are very much alike. Archaeology is our religion, yet we have both fallen from the pure faith. Our methods have not differed as much as you pretend. I am but a shadowy reflection of you. It would take only a nudge to make you like me. To push you out of the light.

Both villains and anti-heroes can also have certain physical attributes to clearly show the audience they are not the typical good guys. Knowing these tropes and the expectations that come with them allows character creators to create complex characters that surprise audiences with their actions.

### **2.3.1 Problematic villain tropes**

Physical villain tropes are very common in media, but some of these have become outdated and are no longer acceptable because of their harmful implications. (Carr 2022) While some of these features may not be problematic themselves, the use of disfigurement or disability as a sign of evil, malevolence, or some other negative personality traits may enforce harmful stereotypes about people with visible differences in their appearance.

Scarring on a character's face can be a good indication of a hard life full of adversities or a tragic event in their past: Wade Wilson, the lead of several comic books, films, and tv shows, better known as Deadpool, is a great example of this trope being used with an anti-hero. Another well-known, fully scarred character is Darth Vader, introduced in *Star Wars: A New Hope* (1977). (Picture 2) His scars are a direct result of his turning to the dark side and embracing evil, and the special machinery that is keeping him alive is designed to look tall, dark, oppressive and menacing.





PICTURE 2. Darth Vader without his mask in Star Wars Episode VI: Return of the Jedi. (Lucasfilms)

A recurring villain in the James Bond films, Ernst Stavro Blofeld, has been portrayed by several actors. The character has appeared in six films during EON Productions' classic continuity between 1962-2002, and out of these appearances, the first two did not show his face, hiding it either with camera angles, shadows, or opaque glass. The version portrayed by Donald Pleasance has a large scar over his right eye, and its origins are not revealed; interestingly, the following two portrayals by Telly Savalas and Charles Gray have no such marks. In the current James Bond films, from 2006 to the present day, Blofeld is portrayed by Christoph Waltz. The character starts out without any scars but becomes scarred and blinded in his right eye after escaping an explosion in *Spectre* (2015).

*The Witches* (2020), a remake of the 1990 film based on the 1983 novel of the same name by Roald Dahl, received criticism for its portrayal of disabilities as something hideous or scary (Rubin 2020). The antagonists of the film, the witches (Picture 3), all have missing fingers, similar to a limb malformation called ectrodactyly or split hand. The apparent implication that disabilities are monstrous caused a backlash from the community and organizations such as Paralympic Games and RespectAbility. This eventually prompted the studio and the main actress to release a public apology and promise to do better in the future (Rubin 2020). Ultimately, it is the responsibility of character creators to be mindful of what they are implying when deciding to use any disfigurement in their creations.



PICTURE 3. The Grand High Witch in the 2020 film *The Witches*. (HBO Max)

### 2.3.2 Using psychology

Understanding how humans are wired allows us to create truly terrifying villains and surprise audiences by subverting their expectations about a character. Colour theory is a commonly used tool to influence our perceptions and can enhance a character's sense of menace and danger (Meier and Robinson, 2005, 239-257). Villains in animated features are often colour coded according to colour theory principles, and the same goes for the heroes as well. Picture 4 displays the colour palettes used by Walt Disney Animation Studios for their villains. Differences between cultures do exist, but generally, certain colours can be said to elicit similar emotional reactions, positive or negative, in people in vastly different circumstances.



PICTURE 4. Colour swatches created from Disney's villains (Matt Benson, 2018-2021).

Tapping into behavioural psychology and exploring the various things that humans instinctively shy away from, unlocks a treasure trove of inspiration for the creative character artist. Uncanny valley (Cherry 2022), a concept used to describe the unsettling feeling of seeing an almost, but not quite, human-like being is an often-used method in horror movies and games. For example, the villain of the indie horror game Slender: The Eight Pages (2012), Slenderman, is a tall, thin, humanoid creature wearing a suit and tie but lacking a face. The familiar human shape and human clothes combined with the strangely elongated limbs and the lack of face are unsettling and confusing, also tapping into one of our core fears: fear of the unknown. Slenderman is possibly one of the most famous uncanny horror creatures of the modern day. (Conliff, 2017)

### **3 MEASURING SUCCESS**

#### **3.1 Commercial success**

Commercial success is often measured by the financial performance of a product, but the success of a TV show or film can be measured in various ways. Sales are a key measure of commercial success, and when it comes to films and TV it usually translates to physical or digital copies, movie tickets, and selling the rights to air the show or film on various television stations or streaming services around the world.

Even though streaming has only increased in numbers since the beginning of the covid-19 pandemic (Nielsen, 2020), people are still buying films, episodes or full seasons of TV shows to be able to watch them independently from internet access. For example, according to Nash Information Services (2023), the complete Game of Thrones series, an HBO original TV show, has estimated Blu-ray sales of \$281,986,470 and \$268,791,597 DVD sales in the United States to date. Since the pandemic has passed, movie ticket sales are back on the rise as well; Picture 5 illustrates how Nash Information Services reports box office data provided to them by distributors. Verifying the exact numbers of streams for a film or a TV show can be difficult, as the various streaming platforms do not generally publish this information, and independently verified statistics are difficult to access. Barb, a company from the United Kingdom, combines online viewing data with people-based panel information, but the streaming services must sign up to have their viewership numbers included (Barb Audiences Ltd, 2023).

Another way to measure commercial success is to consider ratings and viewership: if a show has a strong viewership among younger audiences, which is an important demographic for advertisers, the more revenue there is to be gained through advertising.

# THE NUMBERS

## Weekly (Fri-Thu) Domestic Chart Starting on April 7, 2023

	Movie Title	Distributor	Gross	%LW	Theaters	Theaters Change	Per Theater	Total Gross	Weeks In Release
1	(1) <b>The Super Mario Bros. Movie</b>	Universal	\$202,554,835	+248%	4,343	+318	\$46,639	\$260,823,700	2
2	(8) <b>AIR</b>	Amazon Studios	\$19,815,096	+245%	3,507	n/c	\$5,650	\$25,562,950	2
3	(3) <b>John Wick: Chapter 4</b>	Lionsgate	\$19,720,906	-48%	3,607	-248	\$5,467	\$152,187,705	3
4	(2) <b>Dungeons &amp; Dragons: Honor Among Thieves</b>	Paramount Pi...	\$18,942,673	-60%	3,856	+1	\$4,913	\$66,720,213	2
5	(5) <b>Scream VI</b>	Paramount Pi...	\$4,806,452	-37%	2,286	-730	\$2,103	\$105,337,852	5
6	(6) <b>Creed III</b>	United Artists	\$3,766,047	-45%	2,002	-825	\$1,881	\$154,222,817	6
7	(4) <b>His Only Son</b>	Angel Studios	\$3,742,818	-52%	1,930	+10	\$1,939	\$11,536,864	2
8	(7) <b>Shazam! Fury of the Gods</b>	Warner Bros.	\$2,153,685	-65%	2,203	-1,248	\$978	\$57,157,103	4
9	(-) <b>The Lord of the Rings: The Return of the King</b>	New Line	\$1,176,085		1,107		\$1,062	\$379,021,990	1,009
10	(10) <b>A Thousand and One</b>	Focus Features	\$866,170	-63%	926	n/c	\$935	\$3,226,320	2

PICTURE 5. Box office charts in the US (Nash Information Services, 2023).

Merchandising is another indicator of commercial success. If a show generates a significant amount of merchandise sales, it is a sign that the show has a strong fan base. The popularity of a single character within a show can also be gauged by the types of merchandise available, as the most popular characters will typically have the most merchandise made featuring their images. However, companies don't always get their predictions of a character's popularity correct and might end up sitting on top of a pile of unsold merchandise or having to scramble to answer the demand for t-shirts featuring a character they did not think would be that popular (Cadorniga 2022; Wilson 2022).

### 3.2 Critical success

The critical reception of a TV show is another way to measure success. This includes reviews from professional critics as well as feedback from viewers. A show that receives critical acclaim is likely to generate more buzz and interest and thus is considered a success.

A poor review is similarly thought to be able to ruin a film (Mendelson, 2017). A page like Rotten Tomatoes collects reviews from professional critics and calculates an overall score based on the number of positive reviews. Consumers can then check the so-called “tomatometer” for the scores from both the critics and audiences; these ratings are often quoted when talking about the success of any given film or a television series. Another metric often cited is IMDb, a database that provides information on films, tv shows, cast and crew members as well as star ratings given by critic and user reviews. Industry members can get an IMDbPro account, and make sure all the information about their projects is current and accurate.

Another way to measure critical success is through awards and nominations from industry organizations such as the Emmys, Oscars, and Golden Globes, just to name a few. An award from one of such organizations can secure more funding, a second season for a TV show, or more chances for future projects by the people involved. According to Business Insider (Kalb 2014), Hollywood talent agents and managers estimate that their clients will get a 20% pay increase for their next film if they win the award for Best Actor or Actress at the Oscars. Even a nomination can have a similar effect and boost the success of an otherwise relatively unknown project. An award or nomination provides validation, and using this so-called validation stamp in advertising increases the desire of consumers to see the films. It also keeps the films in theatres longer, boosting box office sales. The same effect carries on downstream and increases DVD sales, streaming, downloads, and cable TV revenues (Kalb, 2014).

### **3.3 Fan following**

In addition to commercial success and critical acclaim, a very important part of success is fan following. One of the most obvious indicators is a large and active fan community. This can be seen through social media platforms, like Twitter, Instagram, and Facebook, as well as Reddit, Tumblr, or other dedicated fan forums. Fans use these platforms to share their thoughts and opinions about the show or movie and to interact with other fans. Hashtags related to the franchise often trend on social media platforms, which is a sign of a dedicated fan following.

Modern fandom culture also means that fans are no longer passive consumers of media, but rather active participants who create their own art, stories, and merchandise related to their favourite franchises (Jenkins, 2006). As seen in picture 6, fans often take existing characters or stories and change or add to them, creating something new – in this case, a female version of a male character of a video game.



PICTURE 6. A fan cosplaying a female version of Pyramid Head, the antagonist from Silent Hill (Mineralblu, 2017).

Fan conventions are another way that fans can engage with movies and TV shows. These events bring together fans from all over the world to celebrate their favourite franchises. One of the most well-known of these types of events is the San Diego Comic Con, where fans can meet actors, attend panels, and participate in cosplay contests and other activities related to their favourite franchises.

Several actors and other celebrities regularly attend these events (Picture 7), and often new sneak peek teaser trailers for big projects will be unveiled for the lucky fans in attendance.



PICTURE 7. Mark Ruffalo snapping a photo of his co-star Cate Blanchett at a panel discussion at San Diego Comic Con (Winter 2017).

Sometimes a show can be seen as a commercial and critical flop, but it can still attract a cult following of fans who will actively campaign for their favourite show online on platforms such as Reddit or dedicated fan forums. For example, the 2016 TV series *Lucifer* originally aired on Fox and got cancelled after the third season due to budgeting reasons. The fan community of the show mobilized online and launched a social media campaign using hashtags #SaveLucifer and #PickUpLucifer, which ultimately lead to the streaming platform Netflix picking up the show and giving it three more seasons, bringing the total up to six (Billet, 2022).

The internet is full of fan fiction, fan art, cosplay, and other fan created content. This can become so widespread that it can even have a wider impact on popular culture, being mentioned or joked about on other shows and movies.



## 4 CASE STUDIES

### 4.1 Films

Animated feature films geared towards more mature audiences can be considered unsuitable for children or teens for a variety of reasons, such as graphic violence, profanity, dark humour, or sexual content. However, adult animation as a genre is not to be confused with cartoon pornography or erotic animation, which is a small subset of adult animation. The characters and topics explored can be more complex and address subjects like philosophy, social justice or political issues.

#### 4.1.1 Catwoman: Hunted

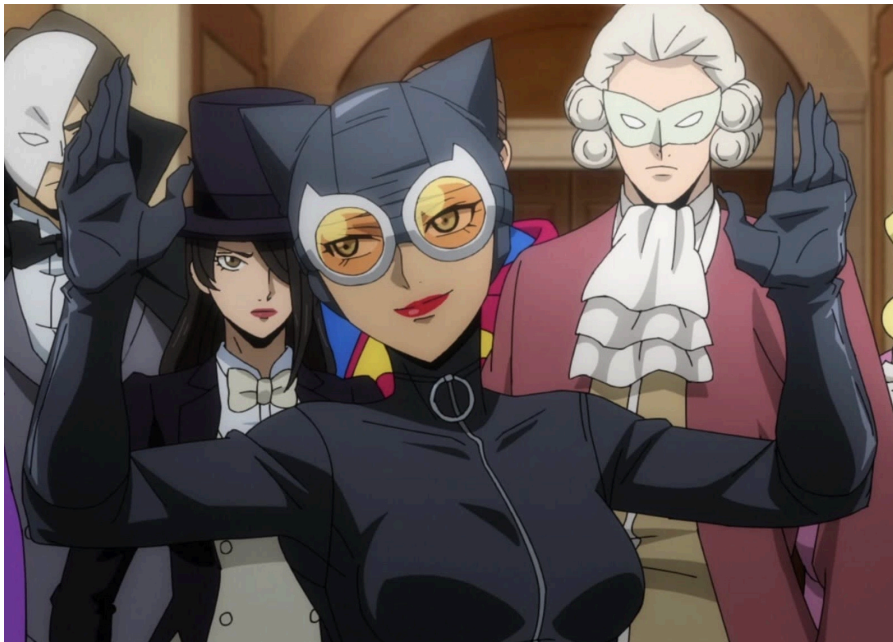
Catwoman: Hunted (Picture 8) is an American-Japanese animated superhero film based on the DC Comics character Catwoman, produced by Warner Bros. Animation in collaboration with OLM Team Inoue for DC Entertainment. The film was released in 2022.



PICTURE 8. North American Blu-Ray cover art for Catwoman: Hunted. (Warner Bros. Home Entertainment)

Catwoman, also known as Selina Kyle, is a fictional character created by Bill Finger and Bob Kane in 1940. She is most often depicted as a talented thief, wearing a skin-tight leotard and wielding a whip as her weapon of choice. Her original design was more of a traditional femme fatale supervillain, but more modern iterations tend to lean more towards the anti-hero, or even as a hero fighting alongside Batman, with more of her moral code and motivations explored (Batman Wiki, 2023).

In the 2022 film, Catwoman is a strong anti-hero. She is introduced to the viewer mid-heist, stealing a valuable gem from the leader of a crime cartel called Leviathan. During her escape, Catwoman is apprehended by Batwoman, and the gem ends up back with the true villains of the piece, causing Catwoman to team up with law enforcement and Batwoman against Leviathan. Interpol agents promise Catwoman complete amnesty for her past crimes in exchange for her co-operation, but it is later revealed she has another motivation for fighting Leviathan. As a former victim of sexual abuse, she is strongly opposed to the activities of the criminal cartel and has already managed to break up one of their sex trafficking operations in Sochi, rescuing the girls and taking them under her wing in the process. By the end of the film, Catwoman returns to her thieving ways, but her choices and actions make her a more relatable character with more depth than just a burglar trying to avoid getting caught.



PICTURE 9. Catwoman in the 2019 film *Catwoman: Hunted*. (Warner Bros. Home Entertainment)

The design of Catwoman (Picture 9) in the 2022 film is rather traditional, keeping her black, skin-tight outfit and signature whip. The choice to leave her eyes visible through her goggles allows her to be more expressive and makes her a more relatable character than many of the other characters featured in the film, who only have white eyeholes in their masks. The cat-like visuals are also present, with the long nails, hood with cat ears, coiled whip trailing behind her like a tail, and her yellow goggles reminiscent of yellow cat's eyes. This imagery obviously suits a thief very well, as cats are notoriously agile and soft-footed while also being fierce predators. Black is also a great colour choice for an anti-hero, as it is often associated with power, evil, death, and mystery. In some cultures, it is also associated with rebellion. (Chapman 2021)

## 4.2 Series

The themes of animated TV series aimed for adults are much the same as the themes of adult animation films, often including explicit language and sexual situations or dark humour not suitable for children. On television, adult animation tends to air late in the evening or at night but is not typically pornographic or obscene in nature.

### 4.2.1 Harley Quinn

Harley Quinn is an American adult animated dark comedy superhero television series featuring many heroes and villains from DC Comics. (Picture 10)

The titular character is based on the DC Comics character Harley Quinn, created by Paul Dini and Bruce Timm in 1993. The series premiered in 2019 on DC Universe but has since been moved over to HBO Max.



PICTURE 10. The title card for the 2019 animated series Harley Quinn. (DC Entertainment)

Dr Harleen Frances Quinzel is better known as Harley Quinn, the Joker's female sidekick. In her original comic appearances, she is completely devoted to the Joker with no concern over his psychotic tendencies, and this portrayal has stayed more or less consistent with the more modern adaptations as well.

The relationship between the Joker and Harley Quinn is a complex and abusive one, the Joker being manipulative and cruel while also seeming to care for Harley in his own twisted way. Despite her depiction of being madly in love with and devoted to the Joker, Harley has become more than just the female sidekick and is featured in multiple films and TV series as a more independent character.



PICTURE 11. Harley Quinn in the 2019 animated series. (DC Entertainment)

The series focuses on Harley Quinn's (Picture 11) journey of self-discovery after her friend, Poison Ivy, helps her realise she is in a toxic relationship with the Joker who does not, in fact, love her. After breaking up with the Joker, Harley struggles to shake off the image of a mere sidekick and prove to the world she is a villain in her own right, aspiring to join the exclusive villain cabal called the Legion of Doom. The series allows the audience to understand how Dr. Harleen Quinzel became Harley Quinn by showing glimpses of her childhood and visits with her family in the present day.

She is consistently shown to be intelligent, an extremely talented gymnast and a fiercely loyal friend, all traits she retains despite the criminal career she embarked on. Like any good character and especially a good antihero, she has her flaws, being impulsive, selfish, and stubborn, but she does follow a moral code of her own. As Poison Ivy tells Harley Quinn in episode 7 of season one of the series, “You are a bad guy, but you’re a good person.”

The character design of the series is clearly influenced by Margot Robbie’s depiction of Harley Quinn (Picture 12) in three films up to date: *Suicide Squad* (2016), *Birds of Prey* (2020), and *The Suicide Squad* (2021). The 2019 animated series begins with a similar turn of events as *Birds of Prey* (2020), where the Joker and Harley Quinn had just recently broken up.



PICTURE 12. Margot Robbie as Harley Quinn in *Suicide Squad*. (Warner Bros. Pictures)

In the series, Harley breaks up with the Joker but starts out wearing her traditional black, white and red harlequin outfit with a mask and a jester’s hood. The removal of her mask is tied to her freeing herself from the Joker and showing her personality. The colour scheme of her new outfit is still red and black, and colour theory gives a great insight into the reasons. Red is the colour of anger, passion, love and violence. Red is also used to indicate danger, like on warning labels and stop lights. Similarly, black is associated with power, evil, death, and mourning. (Chapman 2021) These colours symbolise Harley Quinn’s fiery personality and her pain, all the conflicting emotions she has.

#### 4.2.2 Helluva Boss

Helluva Boss (Picture 13) is an American adult animated series created by Vivienne Medrano and produced by SpindleHorse Toons. The pilot was released in 2019, and the first episode of the first season was released almost a year later. The series is currently available only on Medrano's YouTube channel.



PICTURE 13. The title card to the animated web series Helluva Boss. (SpindleHorse Toons)

The series is set in hell, revolving around the demons who work at an assassination company called I.M.P. (Immediate Murder Professionals). The location sets the tone for the series, featuring very dark humour, explicit language, and violence, while the focus is on the relationships between the characters and their struggles getting through their jobs.

Helluva Boss' main character cast includes two female characters, a hellhound receptionist called Loona and an imp called Millie. They both have very different personalities and backgrounds, but are both very compelling anti-heroes in their own right.

Millie (Picture 14) is a strong, self-sufficient woman who was raised on a farm with her many siblings, very outgoing, loving, and optimistic. Despite her generally happy temperament, when the people she loves are in danger, she can get almost feral in her rage.



PICTURE 14. Millie next to her boss from I.M.P. (Vivziepop)

Loona (Picture 15), on the other hand, is an orphan who was adopted by the boss of I.M.P. and appears as aloof, quiet and cynical with a very quick wit and a sharp tongue. Loona seems to be lazy and disinterested in most things, but when she can be convinced to do something, she is extremely efficient and capable.



PICTURE 15. Loona in a work meeting at I.M.P. (Vivziepop)



In many ways, Millie and Loona are the complete opposites of each other, showcasing how many ways there are to creating an interesting anti-hero. The relationship and the dynamic between these characters can also be more complex and interesting due to their many differences. The situations these characters find themselves in are often violent and they frequently commit horrible crimes, but they care for each other and always have each other's backs – murdering humans is just a part of their job, and it is not personal.

The colour palette of both Millie and Loona is mainly black, white, and red, with the addition of yellow in the eyes of Millie. Black and red are both strong colours, associated with violence, anger, evil, and death. (Chapman 2021) Red is also traditionally associated with the devil, making it the obvious choice for the skin colour of demons. In Western culture, white is often seen as the colour of purity and virtue, but interestingly it is the colour of mourning and death in many Eastern cultures. (Chapman 2021) Having Loona, the orphan, have white fur could be seen as a further emphasis on the loss of her parents and how it has shaped her.

The non-human characteristics can also serve to make audiences perceive the characters as dangerous and evil, despite the warmth and affection they have for each other. (Cherry 2022 & Carr 2022) Certainly sharp claws, teeth, and horns are things most humans instinctively know to be careful around, and they create a sense of unpredictability to the characters, like with wild animals.

## 5 CHECKLIST FOR COMPELLING ANTI-HEROES

The goal of character design is to create characters that audiences will remember, ones that cause some kind of emotional response and make people want to know what will happen next in their stories. Some key things to consider are what trait makes this character come alive and why, what sets this character apart from other similar characters and what will this character be remembered for (Hart, 2004). Combining the research in this thesis to create a series of questions, a checklist, for both the physical and the more intangible qualities of characters will hopefully help creating characters that will get an emotional response – whether it is a smile, laugh, cry or frown. It is important to remember to not be a slave to the checklist, as it is intended to be used as a diagnostic tool to help in design and not an instant shortcut to success.

To demonstrate its usability, this checklist is also used to create a female anti-hero fitting into the story world of Harley Quinn, a 2019 animated series from DC Entertainment and Warner Bros. Animation. (Picture 16.) In addition to the visual design of the character, she is also introduced in a short scene where her personality and behaviour can be perceived. APPENDIX 1.

### 5.1 Physical characteristics

Some of the most important physical attributes that affect how humans perceive each other are cues to attractiveness, age, and health. In animation, the art is typically stylized, and this allows the designers to conform to, exaggerate or defy the natural anatomy of humans and change how audiences will observe and interpret a character (Sloan, 2015). Keeping that in mind, the checklist (Table 1) for physical characteristics includes traits that humans can't really change – like their skin colour or height – as well as things that they do to change their appearance, such as dyeing their hair or getting tattoos. These things are naturally tied to the culture the character is from, as something appealing to some cultures is disgusting to others. Any disabilities or disfigurements should be carefully considered and used in a respectful manner.

TABLE 1. Physical characteristics checklist

Age	
Height	
Weight	
Body type	
Skin colour	
Hair colour	
Eye colour	
Scars or handicaps	
Tattoos	
Piercings	
Other distinguishing traits (voice, hair style, skin texture, etc.)	

## 5.2 Personality

Characters do not exist as static images, and their personality and the way they act is an important part of character design. Part of the charm of anti-heroes is the fact that they can and often will do the things people wish they could get away with in real life or get into outrageous situations with outrageous ways of solving problems. The personality checklist (Table 2) includes a variety of different things that impact the way the character sees the world around them and how the world sees them. It is not necessary to always have something written down for every single little detail, but it can be beneficial to consider how each little detail affects the decisions the character will make going forward and how they choose to present themselves to the world. Getting to know the character in exhaustive detail will also aid in writing great stories where the character behaves consistently and does not break the audiences' suspension of disbelief.

TABLE 2. Personality checklist

Education	
Work experience	
Relationship status	
Best friend	
Friends	
Enemies (Why are they enemies?)	
Parents (Who, where, alive, relationship?)	
Fears	
Ambitions	
Strengths	
Weaknesses	
Sense of humour	
Temper	
Hobbies	
Favourite types of music, art and literature	
Interests	
Speech (idioms used, speech traits, e.g. "you know")	
Favourite colours	
One-line characterization	

### 5.3 Applying the checklist

Creating a complete, unique story world was out of the scope of this thesis, but the environment and the other characters in it obviously have a great impact on the characters. Rather than creating a character without any broader context, I decided to choose an existing story world and create a character that would fit into it. For this purpose, I chose the adult animation series Harley Quinn (DC Entertainment and Warner Bros. Animation 2019). The show revolves around supervillains and heroes, so it seemed like the perfect stage to add a new anti-hero in, and my familiarity with the series and its characters made the designing process easier. I used the two checklists, Table 1 and Table 2, to help in the process, checking back if there were things I forgot to think about, but I never physically filled it in. This, I felt, allowed me to remain flexible in my design process.

The art style of Harley Quinn (DC Entertainment and Warner Bros. Animation 2019) guided the design, so I could focus more on the type of character I wanted to create. I wanted her to be a fierce fighter, skilled in hand-to-hand combat, so I looked to female wrestlers for inspiration, and zeroed in on Rhea Ripley (Picture 16) as my main inspiration. Her mannerisms and general style were the base that I started with to develop the visuals of my character.

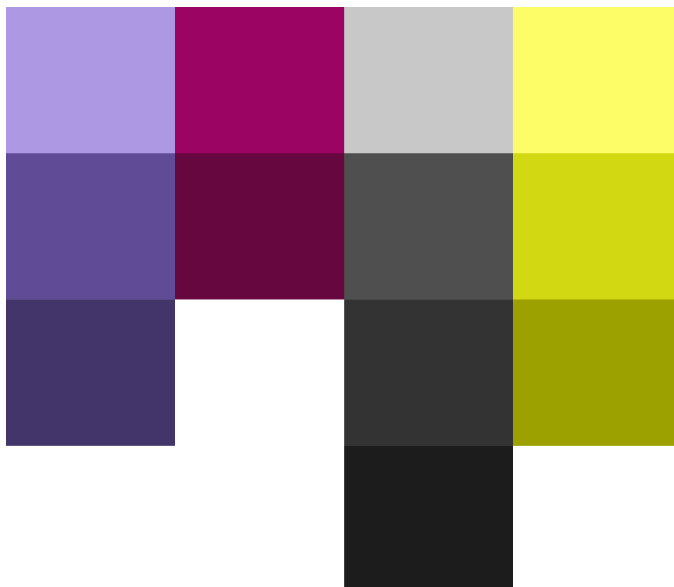


PICTURE 16. WWE wrestler Rhea Ripley. (WWE 2023)

Having gotten the basic visuals down, I began to think about the personality. I wanted to have this new anti-hero be an antagonist to Harley Quinn, and so I began by analysing her character using the checklist in Table 2. In many ways the idea was create a similar but opposing force.

Harley Quinn's favourite weapons are a baseball bat and a large wooden mallet, both blunt weapons; this is why I chose to have my character prefer blades instead. While Harley is a former gymnast and uses her acrobatic skills in fights, my character relies more on her strength and technical hand-to-hand combat abilities. This provides a balance between the more expressive form of fighting with acrobatics and the heavy impacts of strength-based attacks. The outfits of both characters are also of similar cut and design, for very similar reasons – they need to be able to move about without being restricted or being uncomfortable, run fast and perform other physical activities.

The next step was to think about how to visually code my character as an antagonist, and I developed a colour palette (Picture 17) based on the research on colour theory featured in this thesis and the colours present in the Harley Quinn (DC Entertainment and Warner Bros. Animation 2019) series.



PICTURE 17. Colour swatches for the character design.

I chose purple to be reminiscent of one of the main villains of the series, the Joker. The skin tone I wanted to be an unrealistic, bleached colour, similar to both Harley Quinn and the Joker. I did not want to have her hair be a realistic hair colour either, and felt the pink suited the purple of her clothing and would set her apart from the other characters.

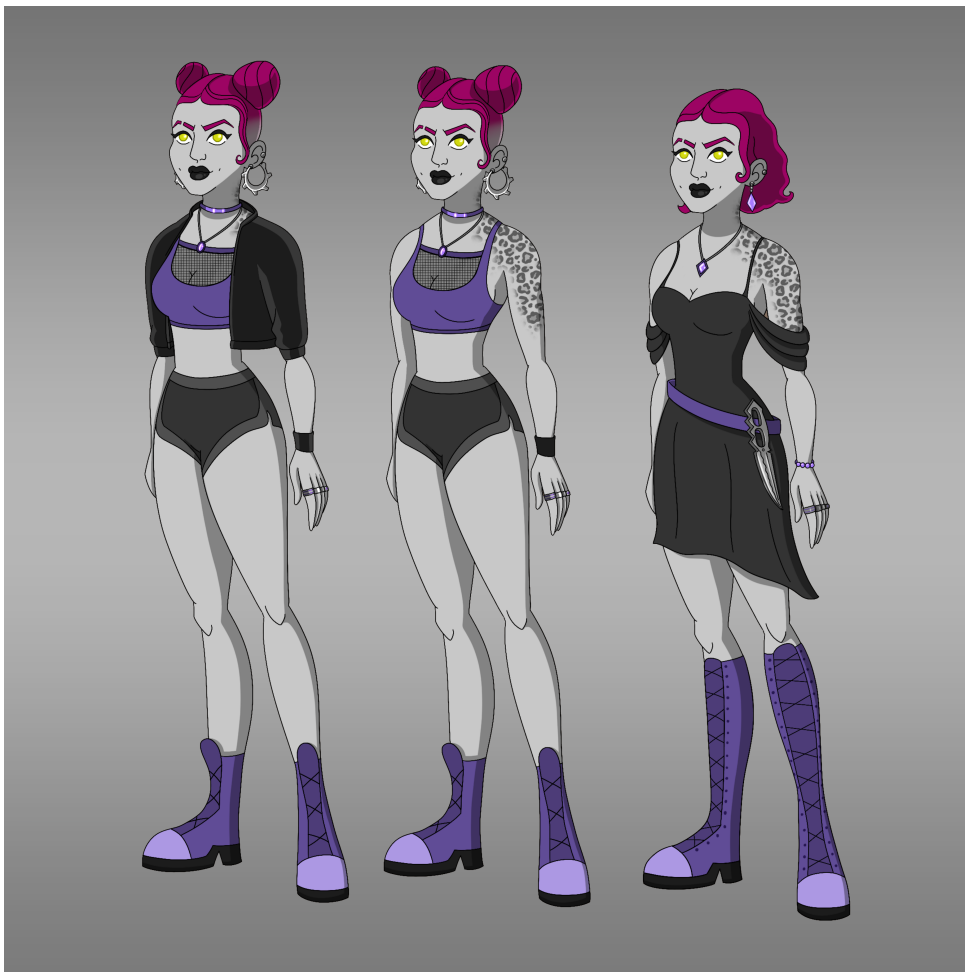
According to colour theory, yellow is typically seen as the colour of hope, but it can also be associated with deceit (Chapman, 2021). I also wanted to convey a sense of danger, and yellow eyes give a predatory feel for the character, as many predators like big cats have yellow eyes. The character also features a leopard print tattoo on her shoulder, which emphasises the feel of a predatory big cat of her design.

During the scriptwriting process I feel like the personality and all the little details of my character really became clear to me. I spent a long time thinking about the name, as I wanted it to be meaningful and convey a feeling of the character. The name I landed on was Morrigan Madden. The Morrigan or Mórrígan is a figure from Irish mythology. She is a goddess of war and is associated with predicting doom, death, or victory in battle. Superheroes often have names featuring alliteration, e.g. Peter Parker and Wade Wilson, so I wanted to have a surname beginning with the letter M. Madden obviously sounds like “mad” or the verb “to madden”, but it also has interesting, and fitting, etymology: Madden is the anglicised version of the Irish O Madaidhin, from a diminutive of madadh, meaning "hound".

A detailed picture of the final design is shown in Picture 18. It features the regular outfit, with and without a jacket, and a more dressed up version the character would wear in the scene I scripted (Appendix 1).

The scripted scene shows a glimpse of Morrigan Madden's personality, and I referred to the checklist in Table 2 while I was figuring out how she behaves and why she is the way she is.

Morrigan Madden and her younger brother Max grew up with their grandmother, who passed away when Morrigan was 17. Since then, she has been providing for herself and her brother, working long hours as a bouncer at local bars. Working nights at a low paying job, she was unable to go to college. Life seemed unfair, and she figured out that sometimes stealing was just the easiest way to get by.



Picture 18. Character design of Morrigan Madden.



After I had her backstory and looks figured out, I needed to make sure the visuals of my design would fit into the world of the animated series, and so I created a mock-up of a scene. For this mock-up I replaced a background character in an existing scene with my design. (Picture 19)



PICTURE 19. A scene mock-up with Morrigan Madden in the background.

## 6 DISCUSSION

Character design is a very well researched topic with many books written about it, so the source material is plentiful. However, exploring the topic and applying the knowledge in a practical project provides a whole different level of understanding of the process, and this is a vital skill to have for anyone aspiring to work in animation. A checklist for character design with different things to think about helps the designer to get to know the character and truly bring them to life.

All anti-heroes do not necessarily have to be the protagonists of the stories, and some anti-heroes can be very villainous and still be considered the protagonist. The animated medium allows for a lot more extreme behaviour, which would not be considered suitable for a live-action project, and when the animation is meant for mature audiences, the anti-heroes can shine. They can use explicit language, act violently or sexually, often in ways that are memorable with their pure outrageousness.

Characters do not exist in a vacuum, however. Even if the character is the best designed one in the world with the most interesting physical appearance and cleverly thought-out personality, does not mean the animation will be a success. The character needs others to interact with, a world to react to. A good story and the world it takes place in as well as the other characters in it are all things to keep in mind when designing any character.

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## APPENDICES

## Appendix 1. Script

1 (4)

INT. LEGION OF DOOM HEADQUARTERS IN GOTHAM - NIGHT

HARLEY QUINN, POISON IVY and the rest of her crew are gathered at the Legion of Doom headquarters for the annual villain awards that the JOKER is hosting. All of the notable villains of Gotham City are in attendance, seated around beautifully decorated tables. All the tables are covered with various awards and trophies - all except Harley's.

HARLEY QUINN

This is such bullshit. If we don't win the main trophy, I swear I will use this cocktail stick to grab one of Joker's eyeballs and use it as an extra olive for my martini.

The Joker, standing in the middle of the stage and clearly annoyed by the loud complaining of Harley, clears his throat. There is also a background noise like the whirring of chopper blades, slowly growing louder.

JOKER

And now, for the one all of you awardless losers have been waiting for. The "Villain of the Year" award!

The crowd erupts in cheers as the Joker opens the envelope.

JOKER (CONT'D)

And the winner is... me! Haha, just kidding, I know I can't win because I am the host... Ha. Haha. Ahem. The winner is... Prevenger!

HARLEY QUINN

(whispering to Poison Ivy)  
What the hell? Why would she get Villain of the year?

A CCTV montage of PREVENDER appears behind the Joker, showing the highlights of her breaking into the Gotham mint: taking down guards and kicking doors off their hinges.

JOKER

Prevenger earned this esteemed honour by being the first ever to successfully break into the Gotham mint...

Many villains in the audience begin protesting loudly, all claiming to have been the first one to break in.

(continues)

2.

JOKER (CONT'D)  
...and getting away with it!

The villains' complaints die down with lots of ashamed looks and pretending to never have spoken up.

HARLEY QUINN  
That's just one heist! Anyone could have done that. I bet even Bane could have pulled it off.

BANE, the huge muscular man, looks hurt and makes an unhappy groan.

JOKER  
Let's hear it for the best villain who isn't me! Prevenger!

There is a moment of confusion as no one appears on stage. The villains begin looking around, Bane even lifting a neighbouring table and knocking over their drinks to check if Prevenger might be underneath. The background noise has gotten very loud.

Suddenly, the grand skylight of the auditorium explodes and the room fills with smoke, swirling around as a chopper hovers over the hole. The chopper is fitted with several lights and speakers, providing an epic lightshow with a heavy rock soundtrack as a figure leaps out of the chopper, doing a "superhero landing" right on the stage. She has aggressively pink hair with an undercut, a short black dress with a knife hanging from her belt. Despite looking dressed up, she is wearing knee-high combat boots. It is Prevenger, in the middle of the spotlight, posing for the audience, flipping her hair back and sticking her pierced tongue out. She takes her time, strutting around the stage looking smug before ending up next to the Joker, grabbing the microphone from him.

PREVENGER  
Thank you all so much. I couldn't have done it without my loyal followers and minions.

Harley scoffs and mutters under her breath.

HARLEY QUINN  
Loyal followers? More like brainless goons.

Suddenly, Prevenger turns to face Harley.

3.

PREVENGER

Oh, I'm sorry. I didn't realize they let sidekicks into these things. Aren't you just Joker's little girlfriend?

Harley's eyes widen in anger and she stands up.

HARLEY QUINN

We broke up!

JOKER

It was mutual.

PREVENGER

Aww, did I hit a nerve?

HARLEY QUINN

I dumped him! And what kind of a stupid name is Prevenger anyways? It should be something like the Avenger- no, not that, that would be problematic. Lots of expensive litigation. Maybe the Revenger?

PREVENGER

Oh please, I strike before anyone else has even a chance to attack. I pre-venge.

JOKER

(laughing)

It is pretty stupid. You might have pulled off an historic heist, but you would be better off taking a while to think about that name before even trying to join the Legion of Doom. Right guys?

The Joker's henchmen and the rest of the Legion of Doom villains nod and agree with him.

PREVENGER

Ugh. Fine! Morrigan. Just call me Morrigan.

Prevenger/MORRIGAN MADDEN takes a deep breath and composes herself.

MORRIGAN MADDEN

You're lucky your ex is so happy to stand up for you, since you clearly need other people to fight for you.

4.

Harley balls her fists and charges at Morrigan who instantly grabs her knife, ready for a fight, but Poison Ivy steps in and holds her back.

POISON IVY

O-kay, that's enough now. Calm down Harley. She is clearly trying to provoke you.

Morrigan relaxes her stance, winks and blows a kiss at Poison Ivy. This causes Harley to renew her efforts to struggle against Poison Ivy's hold on her, but Morrigan does not pay any attention to her. She yanks the award from the Joker, holds out the microphone and lets it drop on the floor, causing the speakers to let out a horrible whine.

POISON IVY (CONT'D)

Don't let her get to you. And I mean, you gotta admit. She did earn the trophy.

Harley is seething with anger and jealousy and whips around to storm off, kicking Bane on her way out.

BANE

Oww! What did you do that for?

HARLEY QUINN

Come on Ives. Stop flirting with that.. that...

MORRIGAN MADDEN

Sexy thang?

HARLEY QUINN

Yes. No! Come on Ivy!

Poison Ivy looks back to Morrigan and waves apologetically as Harley drags Poison Ivy out with her crew, leaving the Legion of Doom headquarters. Morrigan watches them with a wicked grin on her face.

MORRIGAN MADDEN

(to herself)

Harley Quinn... And Poison Ivy. It would be such a shame if someone came between you two...