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Relatable frustrations have been important narrative devices for the Donald Duck character. Everett Collection Inc / Alamy Stock Photo

Donald Duck at 90: how the Disney favourite has evolved to appeal to a changing society

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Languages

Français

Portuguese

English

Donald Duck's first appearance on screen was the animated short titled *The Wise Little Hen*. He was intended as a one-off supporting character, but his immediate popularity meant Disney used him in subsequent comic stories and animated shorts.

In Donald's early days, female characters were often limited to representing beauty, domesticity and subservience to the patriarchy – reflecting the experiences of women the world over. For example, Daisy Duck was originally almost never shown as having her own job or career, in sharp contrast to Donald, who is shown in many jobs including private detective, postal worker and salesperson.

In more recent years, though, female characters have developed to reflect the modern world. This includes the animated debut of characters such as Donald's sister Della Duck. Della is a skilled pilot, often found in the middle of action scenes and essential to the plots of the comic-book series *Ducktales* (2018), as well as the television show of the same name. Della Duck, Daisy Duck and other female characters have agency in these stories – they are main characters and not merely there to support the male superstar.

Arguably, Donald Duck is a more relatable character than aliens from a galaxy far away, or teenage royals from a place of “once upon a time”. Donald and his friends meet the same daily challenges and enjoyment we do; traffic jams, job (dis)satisfaction, seaside holidays, festive family gatherings and so on. It is not difficult for his audiences to empathise, identify and understand the situations Donald finds himself in.

In *Ducktales* (2017), Della Duck is a female character, and one of the stars of the show.

Relatable experiences have been an important narrative device for Donald Duck over the past 90 years. Donald enjoyed the technological developments of radio and television in the animated shorts he starred in during the 1930s, 1940s and 1950s. And in his most recent animated appearances in *Ducktales*, characters are seen using social media platform QuackChat – an obvious parody of Snapchat.

Donald Duck is eternally popular because he is the “everyman”. People the world over still find much to relate to and laugh at in his temper tantrums at life’s travails. He provides a way to project our own frustrations in a comparable way to more adult cartoon stars, such as Homer Simpson of The Simpsons or Peter Griffin of Family Guy.

As long as Donald keeps pace with society, and continues to reflect the ever-changing world we live in, this duck is unlikely to fly away anytime soon.