

## Characterization Made Easy

A little personality goes a long way for all characters

by Scott Bennie

Munchkin: "My character is 30th-level barbarian-cleric demigod with a sword of the cataclysm, plus sixteen other artifacts!"

DM: "Yeah, well, what is he like?"

Munchkin: "Well, he's got a strength, constitution, dexterity, and charisma of 26, and he has more hit points than Odin!"

DM: "I mean, what's his personality?"

Munchkin: "Personality? Oh, alignment! He's chaotic neutral. That way he can do anything he wants. If anyone tells him what to do - oh, man, can he ever cut him down! Heh, heh, heh"

DM: "No, I meant personality."

Munchkin: "Well, he has a pet dragon, Gogetem, that has three heads, and it can eat Bahamut and Tiamat for breakfast. . . ."

The AD&D and D&D games involve the role-playing of character personalities that exist in a game world. However, there are quite a few players who play these games as exercises in combat without the slightest idea of what a "role" is. While people are entitled to play these games in any ways that they see fit, I've found that these games (and all other role-playing games, for that matter) are a lot more fun when I role-play than when I am involved in nothing hut search-and-salvage or combat sessions.

Some people say that role-playing is not easy and that the use of role-playing makes a game enjoyable only if you have some background in drama. I do have a bit of experience with drama (which might prejudice my remarks), but I think that it is possible to role-play effectively without much acting experience. Besides, aren't we all natural actors inside? This article is meant to give you ways to add depth to your characters beyond the things normally found on character record sheets.

The AD&D and D&D games assume that characters come from a fantasy medieval background and get involved in adventures using that very setting. However, in both actual medieval times and in fantasy novels, not everyone became an adventurer. To leave the mundane life behind is to live a life of constant danger, to confront terrors that only the truly heroic or truly

insane would think of facing. This requires a special type of individual, "take a look at your character and ask yourself: Why is he an adventurer? Why did he choose to risk his life seeking fortune and adventure, instead of settling down and being a farmer, a mason, or a blacksmith?

What kind are you?

People become adventurers for any number of different reasons. Here is a list of possible adventurer types, along with relevant motivations and examples:

**Adventurer:** The character cannot live without excitement in his life. This character craves the thrill that he can get only by putting his life on the line. Rumors of great danger and peril will urge him into the unknown. Prince Valiant, from the popular comic series, is a good example of this sort of character (being under a curse of lifelong restlessness and discontent with complacency).

**Avenger;** This character has a single goal: revenge. He wants to get back at someone or something that has wronged him, settling an old score. Rumors about the hated subject motivate this character into adventure. Batman is a prime example of this sort of adventurer, as is Conan in the movie Conan the Barbarian.

**Comrade:** This character is an adventurer because his friends are adventures. He is a follower, not a leader, and is motivated by friendship; he enjoys socializing with adventurers. When his friends embark on an adventure, he will follow. A hero's sidekick (such as Moonglum in the Elric series) is a good example of a comrade. NPC henchmen can be comrades.

**Crusader:** This character is out to save or reform the world. He has a mission in life that may far exceed his reach, but he will strive for it though it may not benefit him directly. A crusader may have associated goals, such as saving damsels in distress or slaying dragons. Rumors about the existence of evil in one form or another will prod him into adventuring. Most paladins are good examples of crusaders.

**Hoarder:** This character believes that the love of money is the root of all fun. The hoarder wants to become as wealthy as possible. He may spend money extravagantly, wanting to live a life of luxury, or he may make Scrooge

look like a spendthrift. The hoarder is motivated by new sources of wealth; rumors of vast treasure caches send him off on new quests. Dwarves are often played as hoarders, contributing their gains to clan or personal hoards.

**Paragon:** This character views adventuring as a personal challenge, putting himself in peril to test his abilities. A paragon wishes to improve one or more of his skills to absolute mastery (e.g., the best archer in the city of Botheringdale might wish to become the best archer in the kingdom). When a paragon learns about a possible challenge to his abilities, be it a challenger at a tournament or a monster from which no man has ever escaped, he will do his best to meet and master that challenge. A character who has specialized with a certain type of weapon (like a kensai from the AD&D Oriental Adventures tome) could be considered a paragon, as could a character who develops a reputation as a dragon-slayer.

**Power-seeker:** This character seeks power, be it political, military, spiritual, or economic. A power-seeker won't necessarily try to get as many magical items as possible to squash potential opponents, but he will usually go after positions of power within the campaign's social structure (e.g., a cleric would strive to become the high priest of his religion, while an ambitious yeoman would work toward a captaincy). A power-seeker might develop a goal and work toward it, or else develop his skills and look for a goal. Adventures that offer possibilities of furthering one's goal will interest power-seekers (e.g., rescuing a noble's kidnapped daughter might offer favors from the noble.)

**Psychopath:** This character adventures for the sheer joy of killing and violence, usually just to prove to himself how tough he is. This is not an alignment-specific role; a lawful-good character might adventure for the joy of killing orcs, giants, and demons, getting no satisfaction from an adventure unless he has killed something. It takes very little to motivate a psychopath; any victim will do (the easier to destroy, the better). A psychopath is usually seriously disturbed and has probably suffered some severe trauma that is connected to the object of his hatred (e.g., a ranger whose family was slaughtered by orcs is now becoming feared for her fanaticism in slaying all orcs and goblins she can hunt down).

**Servant:** This character is in the service of either a person or an agency. Samurai, clerics, paladins, and guild-member thieves are good examples of these adventurers. He is either sworn to serve his master (as a feudal knight is pledged to his king) or is in his master's direct service (e.g., a prince's bodyguard). He goes adventuring because he has either received orders from his master or he has heard information that concerns his master (such as an assassination plot against one of his master's allies).

**Subsister:** This character is not normally an adventurer, and he probably lived a comfortable life until (often reluctantly) he was forced into adventuring due to circumstances beyond his control. Perhaps his family was outlawed, his village was destroyed in an ore invasion, or his sister was lured into a chaotic-evil order. Subsisters may either enjoy adventuring and become full-time adventurers, or else try to settle back into a normal life as soon as possible (with frequent interruptions). Think of Bilbo Baggins in J. R. R. Tolkien's *The Hobbit*, or nearly any monster-investigating character in Chaosium's *CALL OF CTHULHU* game.

**Superstar:** The superstar has but a single goal in life - glory! He wants to become as famous as possible and actively seeks a good reputation. He might even have hired bards to accompany him, although this tactic can backfire (as witnessed by Sir Robin in *Monty Python and the Holy Grail*). A superstar goes on an adventure when he hears about an opportunity to earn glory. Many cavaliers and knights are prone to this role.

Note that these motivations are not mutually exclusive. There is no reason why a character can't be both a crusader and a paragon; he simply has more than one goal. People are complex, and so are characters.

## **Past & future**

It has been said that to understand someone's present state, you must understand where he has come from and where he is going to. Once you have established your character's motivations, ask yourself what caused your character to have these attitudes. Why does your character act like this?

One commonly neglected area that is absolutely essential to character role-playing is a knowledge of that character's background. Why is your

character lawful good or chaotic evil? Why is he an avenger, a crusader, or a power-seeker? What forced him to go adventuring?

Finding these answers is often more difficult than you would think. But understanding your character's background is crucial in role-playing. Here is a checklist of questions that, when answered, will enhance your character.

### **1. Background**

- a. Where was your character born?
- b. Who raised him?
- c. What was happening in the region when he was growing up?
- d. Does he have any relatives? If so, how did he get along with them? What are they doing now?

### **2. Motivation**

- a. What are your character's immediate goals (i.e., what would he like to do in the coming year)?
- b. What are his long-term goals (i.e., what would he like to be doing 20 years from now)?
- c. What type of person would be his ideal mate?
- d. Who is his patron deity? Is he a devout worshiper?
- e. Is he a devout member of any nonreligious cause (i.e., is he a loyal servant of a king or baron)?
- f. Is there any race, creed, alignment, religion, or the like against which he is strongly prejudiced?
- g. What is his greatest fear?
- h. What is the one task he absolutely refuses to do?

### **3. Idiosyncrasies**

- a. What is your character's motto or favorite saying?
- b. What is his favorite color?
- c. Describe what he would wear if money were no object.
- d. What is his favorite food? His favorite drink?
- e. What is his favorite animal?
- f. What habits of his friends annoy him most?

#### 4. Traits

Rate these behaviors for your character on a scale of 0 to 10 (0 means he has no trace of this trait, behaving in a completely opposite manner; 10 means he has great amounts of this trait).

|             |             |                |              |
|-------------|-------------|----------------|--------------|
| Courtesy    | Valor       | Self-sacrifice | Generosity   |
| Sobriety    | Optimism    | Forgiveness    | Patience     |
| Helpfulness | Calm temper | Curiosity      | Cheerfulness |
| Honesty     | Loyalty     |                |              |

Name at least one other trait in which your character possesses a rating of 8 or better.

#### 5. Miscellaneous

- What well-known media figure from sports, movies, or politics most closely resembles your character?
- What would be his theme song?
- If his friends were to write his epitaph, what would it be?
- What would his job be in modern society?

A lot of these questions are trivial; certainly, not all of them are needed to understand your character (although they can be fun to think about). Furthermore, a character's background often relies on the campaign background and can be heavily influenced by the Dungeon Master. Sometimes, too, it takes a long time to get the feel of the character's role. This list should be something to think about when you design your character, not something that must be filled out. However, if you have been playing the character for a few years and you can't really answer these questions, maybe you need to work on developing his personality.

Adding those details

Some character traits that are rarely developed are weaknesses and phobias. Most people have them. Considering the horrors that are rampant in most fantasy worlds, shouldn't each character have something that gnaws in his gut and makes him break out in a cold sweat? Perhaps a great fighter was tormented by kobolds when he was a boy; although he could now slay a hundred of them, he still fears them. Such phobias are present in fantasy and adventure literature and movies. Conan, the greatest of all barbarians, feared magic due to his superstitious upbringing. Indiana Jones hated snakes.

Fears provide dramatic moments and excellent chances to role-play. If a character overcomes his fears, then he can claim that he's really accomplished something. However, such weaknesses shouldn't be used by the DM to terrorize the character (or the player).

Likewise, a character should have some clear virtues. A character with no good points is utterly unsympathetic; would you sympathize with a petulant, greedy, cowardly fool? You might if the fool was in a comedy, but that is not the stuff of heroic fantasy.

Even evil PCs need not be totally reprehensible. One of my characters, Morgor the Maleficent (a lawful-evil fighter) was born in a town that he despised. His major goals in life are to become a rich and powerful fighter, hire an army of mercenaries, raze the town, sow its fields with salt so that nothing will grow there, then hire an evil cleric to place a curse on its ground so no creature may dwell there. He is arrogant, loves violence, and belittles the people he is with, constantly insulting them. Pretty rotten guy, huh?

Well, for all of his faults, Morgor has earned the respect of those with whom he travels. He is very brave, sometimes facing monsters single-handedly while the rest of the group hides. He is honest, courteous toward women, and despises torture and other acts of gratuitous brutality. He does not steal, nor does he try to take too great a share of treasure. He might even be redeemable, if people weren't too busy checking his alignment and writing him off as a lost cause.

While most evil characters I've seen (and a lot of chaotic-neutral characters, too) tend to be an indistinguishable line of greedy, back-stabbing, disruptive morons, Morgor has personality and strength. Morgor starts a lot of personality clashes when he enters a group, but such conflicts aren't necessarily settled by swordplay or assassination.

### Escaping stereotypes

Another concern in role-playing involves the use of stereotyped roles. How many can you think of in 60 seconds? I thought of these:

1. All wizards are old men with long beards and robes.
2. All evil characters wear black.

3. All good characters wear white.
4. All half-ores are ugly and nasty.
5. All giants are stupid.
6. All thieves are small and cowardly.
7. Evil characters are unredeemably awful.
8. Elves are flighty and carefree.
9. Major bridges are guarded by trolls, who ask for a toll.
10. Every dungeon has a chessboard trap.

I'm certain you thought of others. Some of these represent traditional views of archetypes in the fantasy genre, but they are so overused that they have become clichés. Why can't one tribe of elves and a clan of dwarves be friends? Why can't the supposedly bright evil wizard be convinced that his plan to conquer the world is unfeasible?

Why can't a half-orc be lawful good? (I once played lawful-good half-orc, and it was a lot of fun) although he never understood why those dwarves were so hostile to him.)

Some people find that most fantasy games become boring and predictable in time. Perhaps this is because the players cannot break free of their stereotypes, so that everything in the game is old hat.

Another sort of stereotype is created when a player runs the same type of character over and over again (the same class) the same alignment, or the same race (or simply the same in all respects). Variety is the spice of life; if things get dull, try something new. It could be fun even if it seems uncomfortable at first. (Ignore the other players, who will look up and say, "But you only play neutral-good human clerics!")

One last note: Some players, particularly male adolescent players, are unwilling to play female characters. Some people have even walked out of tournaments when they were handed female characters to play. I've been in groups that have given me a hard time because of some of the weird characters I've played, but it is peculiar that they would let people play nonhuman creatures such as dwarves and elves, but not human females.

Adding an accent

One great thing about playing roles is that you get to be an offbeat actor.

I enjoy using funny voices and accents when I play, and I am delighted when I get a chance to do something that adds to my character. It isn't easy, however; it is helpful to use models for your characterizations. My Boston professor from our CALL OF CTHULHU game had a voice based on Charles Winchester from the TV show M\*A\*S\*H. One of my superheroes, the Pacifier, has a very slow drawl out of a Clint Eastwood spaghetti western, while the villainous Skeletos has a voice based on J. R. Ewing of Dallas (one of my female supervillains has the voice and personality of Joan Collins's character on Dynasty). The mage Gilmatrix has an eloquent yet sinister voice based on British actor Clive Revell, who did Vector on the old TV fantasy series Wizards and Warriors. These accents can be brought over to AD&D and D&D games (and any others) quite easily. It is even possible to have a character based on Inspector Clouseau of the Pink Panther movies (I seem to recall a prominent DRAGON Magazine editor who had a gnome thief with "an outrageous French accent"). You don't have to study dialects for 10 years to have this sort of fun. All you need is the courage to try something different.

Dialects, accents, and so on are not the only mannerisms that you can give your character. Body language (e.g., flailing arms, constant blinking), behavior patterns (e.g., flirting, drinking, insulting), and favorite sayings (e.g., "It's clobbering time!") also add to the character - but don't let these define your character so rigidly that they become stereotypes, too.

The ultimate aim in role-playing, in creating a character and playing it out, is to have fun, of course. Sometimes, by examining your character and finding new ways of making him interesting, you can increase the amount of fun you have.

Besides, I'd like to walk into a game store and hear people talking about their characters, not their characters' statistics.

(Special thanks go to Jim Deak and Chuck Huber for their suggestions on motivations, to Aaron Allston for his inspirational article on Cinema and Justice, Inc. in Adventurer's Club #7, and to Scott Ruggels for his advice on dialects.)