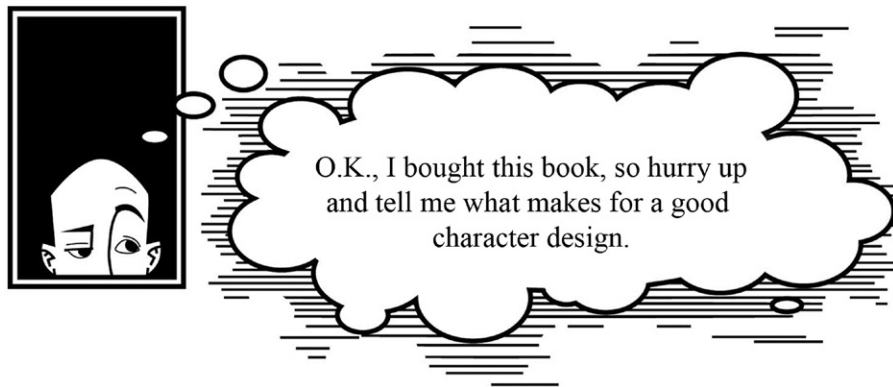


Chapter 1

What Makes For Good Character Design?

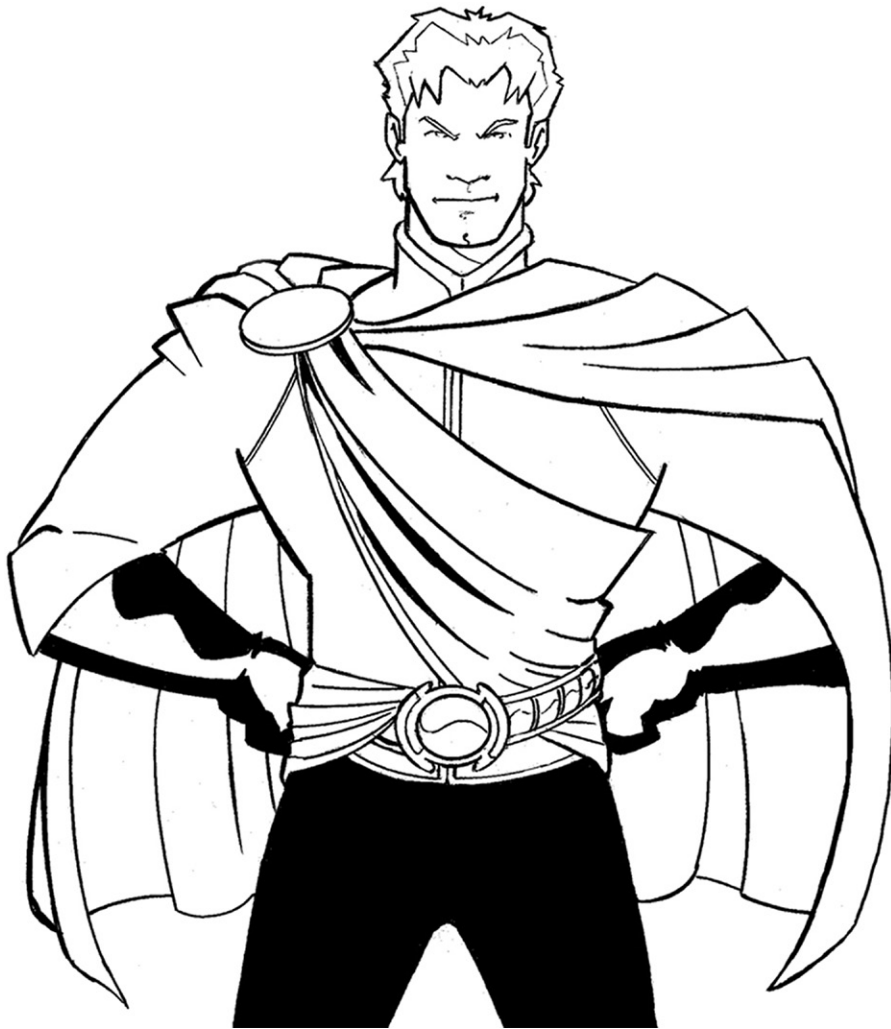
You are probably thinking to yourself:



Well, I hate to have to tell you, but you are just going to have to read the whole book to find out. Sorry. One thing I have learned in my years as a teacher is that the quick answer won't teach you anything in the long run. It is like cramming for a test. You know everything you need to know for the test, but then you forget everything the very next day. So I'm not going to do you that disservice, but what I will do if you are in such a hurry is give you a brief overview of what this book is all about. So, sit back, relax, and enjoy this fast-paced high-octane summary of creative character design. Are you all strapped in and have your helmet on? Great! Here we go.

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.



This is pretty much standard, but I know some of you are now yelling at the book:

"Hey, my hero is a Ninja!"

or

"My bad guy is a situation, not an actual person!"

or

"My villain is a woman!"

Yes, you are allowed to have these variations. It has just been my experience that, when given the task of creating characters, the preceding three are the most common. As you continue reading the book, we will get into variations of the initial thought process of character design. However, for the sake of this introduction, we are going to stick with these core principles.

The first pieces in good character design are these core principles, known as *archetypes*. Archetypes represent the personality and character traits that we as humans identify with. There are many different archetypes, but there are a common few that keep reoccurring in all types of stories. They are needed in order to propel a story forward, and it is the personal story of each character that makes for good character development.

Story is the second piece in good character design. Even though it is the second thing mentioned, it is the most important. If you are willing to put in the time and effort to develop each character—their back-story and personality traits—before you start drawing, you will have a stronger and more well-rounded character design. The thing that you as the character designer must remember is that the characters are *always* in service to the story—not now, nor will it ever be, the other way around.

I am sure that your blood is starting to boil, and you are asking:

“Wait a minute! I’ve created characters without a story before.”

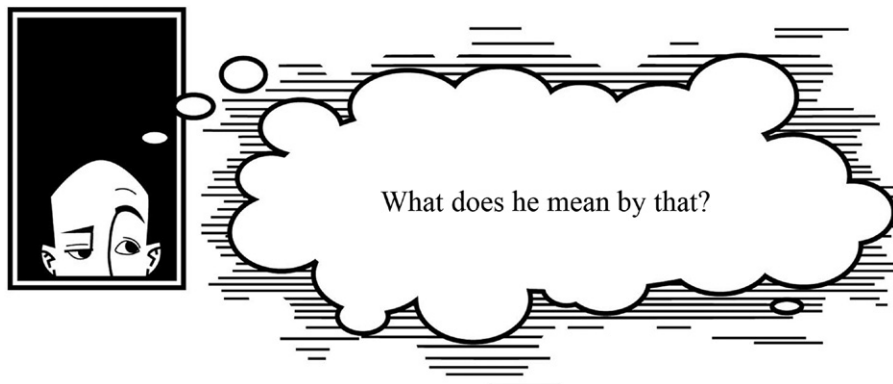
Yes, it is possible to draw a character without a story, and people do it all the time. The problem is, when you do that, and you want to keep the character, you always have to go back and create the story for that character. I don’t know about you, but whenever I created the design of a character without writing his or her back-story first, the design of the character always changed once I wrote it. Has that ever happened to you? If you answered yes (which all of you should have), what you were subject to was:

The character is *always* in service to the story.

The third thing we are going to talk about is the idea of being original. When you are writing your back-story, it will be impossible to ignore the things around you. Whether you want it or not, every day you are being influenced by the things you see, hear, and do. That is why it is so hard to come up with an original idea. I’m not saying that it is impossible, but it is really hard to do. Have you ever heard this before?

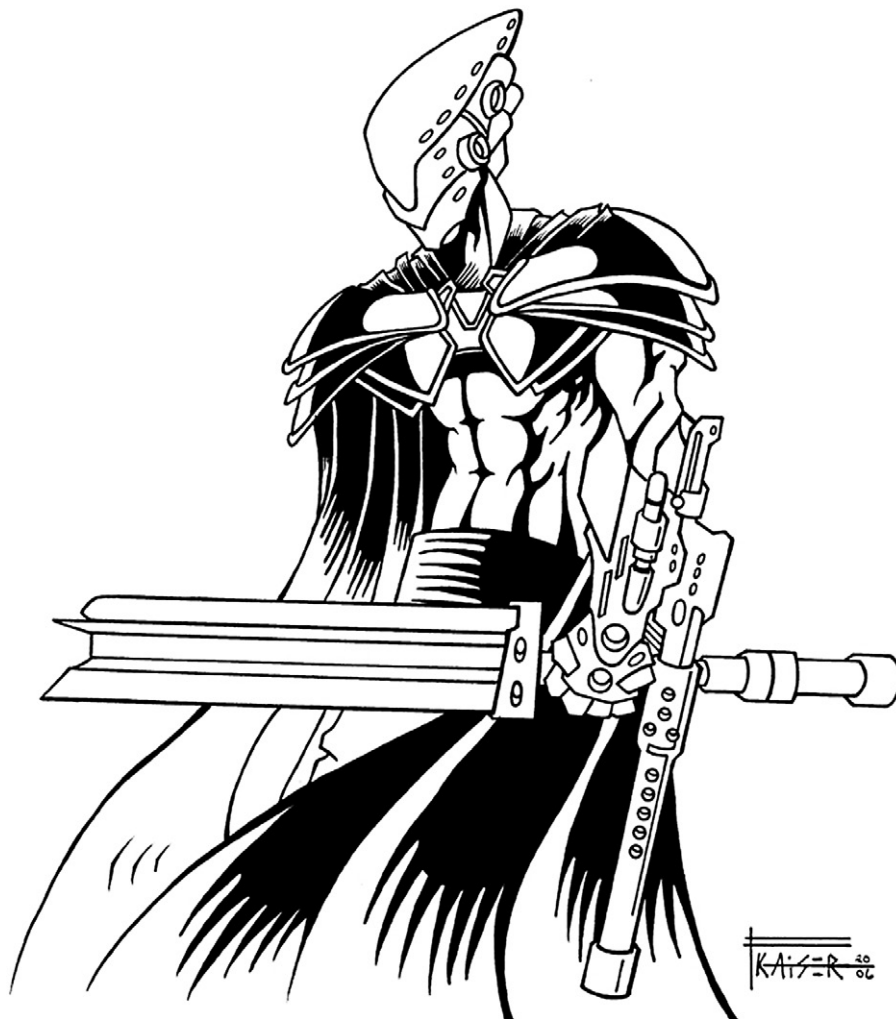
“Oh, that story sounds great. It reminds me of the other story.”

If that has happened to you, don’t get discouraged. It’s perfectly okay. The only thing you need to remember is that you bring some form of originality to the table.



Well, you are just going to have to read the chapter on originality to find that one out.

Moving right along, the fourth subject in the book is shapes. That's right—*shapes*. Shapes play a big role in character design. They can tell a story about the character visually. How is that possible, you ask? Well, every shape has a meaning behind it. If you are thinking in terms of a basic square, circle, or triangle, it might not make too much sense, but when you start tweaking these shapes, they tell a story. What do you think this character is all about?



Did you notice you were coming up with a story based on the armor, the helmet, and the weapons? All of those have distinctive shapes that were chosen to tell a story about this character visually. Shapes also give us the means to talk about silhouettes and functionality, which we will talk about in depth later in another chapter.

The fifth subject—reference—is one of my favorites. The topic of using reference is what plagues my students the most. Here are some of the most common statements I hear when talking about reference:

“I already know how to draw a tree, so I don’t need reference.”

“I couldn’t find exactly what I was looking for, so I just made it up.”

“Isn’t using reference cheating?”

Here are my responses to the three statements above.

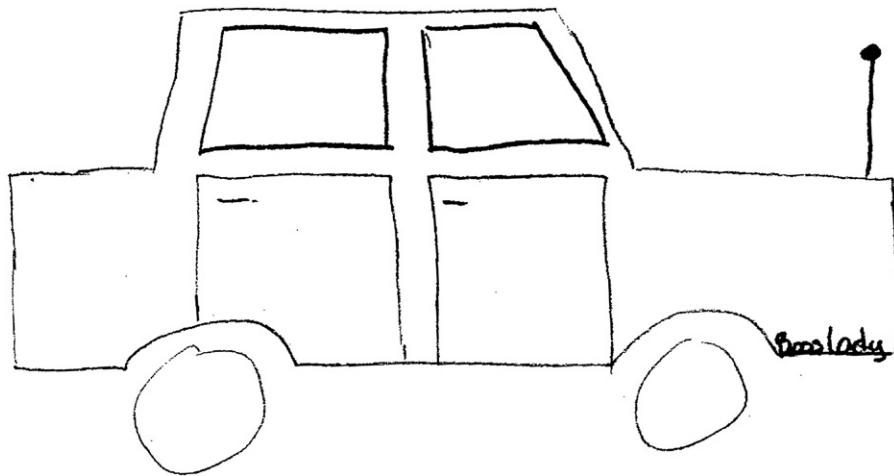
“Yeah, you do.”

“You have got to be kidding me.”

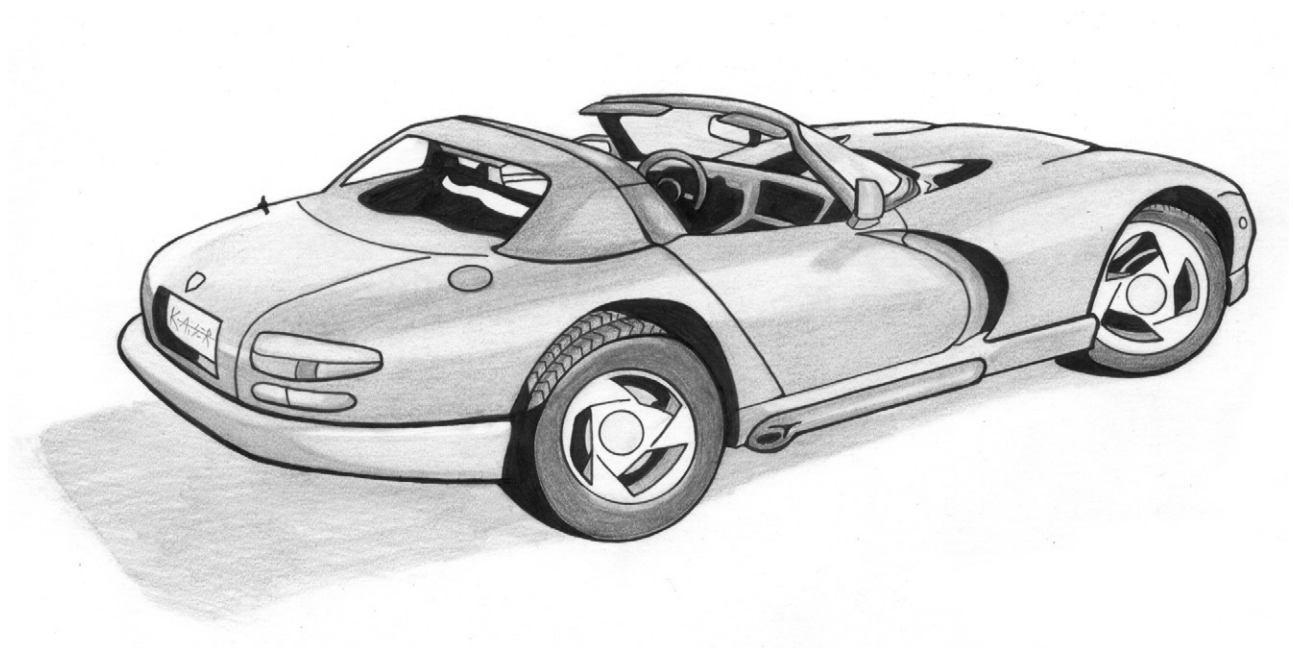
“Let’s see. All of the pros use reference, so ... *no!* Now stop being stupid!

I know the last statement might have been a bit harsh, but let me explain. It is one thing to use reference, and it is another thing to let the reference use you. Don’t copy your reference! If you are going to do that, then you might as well just take a photograph and save yourself some time. Reference is very important to character designers and, well, artists in general.

You might think you know how to draw everything in the world, but trust me—you don't. Here is an example: Ask somebody to draw a car, and see what that person comes up with. Anyone can draw something that resembles a car—for example:



Now ask somebody to draw a Dodge Viper.



There are two ways the drawing will be accurate. One is that the artist is a Dodge Viper fanatic and eats, sleeps, and dreams Dodge Vipers, and the other is that the artist got the proper reference before creating the drawing.

From that we move on to number six: aesthetic. This is the one that the majority of all character designers go after first. The aesthetic is the look of the character. Since we are mainly talking about a visual medium, this is a very important subject. The way a character looks determines whether the viewer likes, dislikes, connects with, sympathizes with, or anything else. There are many things to consider when thinking about aesthetic—for example:

What style should be used when creating this character?

What colors should be used?

What medium is this character going to be used for?

Who is the character's audience?

These are some of the questions that need to be answered before you get to the final piece. If any of these questions are answered after the final design is created, then I can guarantee you that changes will be made to your design. This is extremely important to the success of your character design, and we will cover it in full detail in a later chapter. (I know you want to look. Go ahead, I'll wait. Just make sure you come back.)

Welcome back! Okay, let's finish this up with a brief summary of the final subject. The last subject deals with something I like to call the WOW factor. Every design needs to have this. Every designer wants this in his or her designs. What is the WOW factor, you ask? Well, I'm not going to tell you yet. You will have to read the entire book to fully understand it.

There is one thing, however, that I *will* tell you: Once you've read this book, you will have the knowledge to create eye-popping, jaw-dropping character designs. So what are you waiting for? Go on to the next chapter!