



Chapter 3

The Most Important Part of Character Design

Did you do your homework assignment? Great! Now it's time for a pop quiz!
(Bet you didn't see that coming.)

Define the following archetypes:

- The hero
- The shadow
- The mentor
- The fool
- The trickster
- The anima/animus

Hopefully, you were able to define these archetypes without referring back to Chapter 2. Now that you have committed that information to memory, let's move on.

It is now time to talk about the most important part of character design: story and storytelling. You probably are tired of hearing that, but it is very important and essential to good character design! Everything can and will always point back to the story. No matter what character you look at, you must try to figure out the story behind that character. It is human nature to try to pinpoint which category of archetype a character fits under.

I challenge you to look at any character and not try to label that character a good guy, a villain, a monster, a sex symbol, and so on. It is nearly impossible—unless you are not at all interested in what you are looking at. In that case, the aesthetic is all wrong for you, and, well, that's another chapter in this book.

Take a look at this character. Stare at it for a couple of minutes.

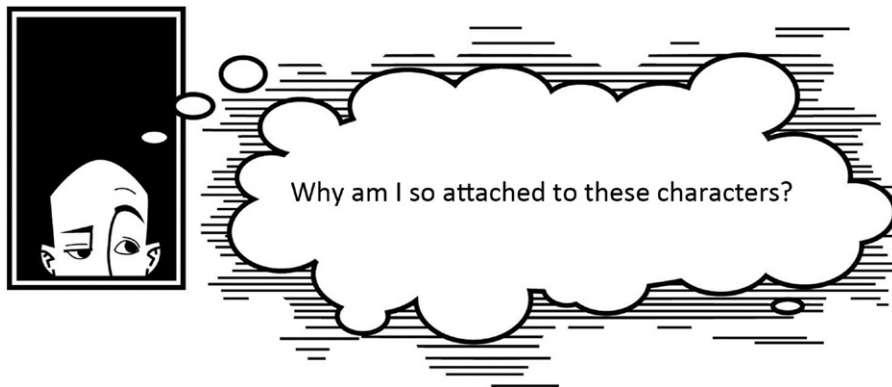


Did you find yourself trying to figure out if this is the hero, the trickster, or any of the other archetypes? Or did you find yourself trying to figure out what his back-story is, what makes him tick, or why he does the things he does? Why do you think that is?

- A. Because, we just got done talking about archetypes, and this chapter is about story.
- B. Because that's what I told you were going to be doing.
- C. Because, as human beings, we are very inquisitive and want to know as much as possible.

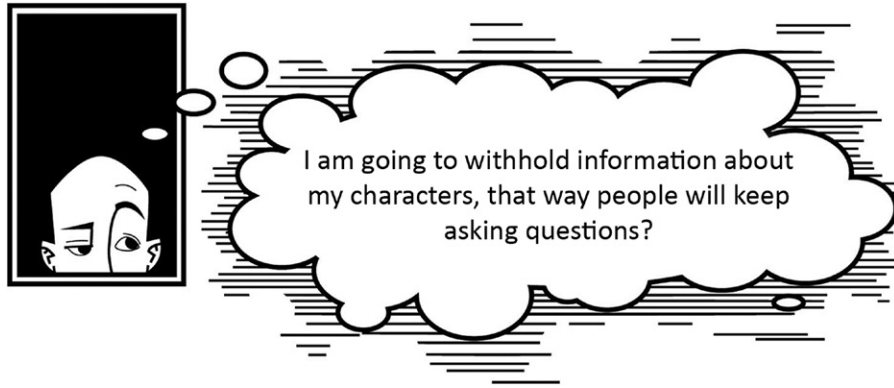
If you answered C, then you are on the right track. The main reason we become engaged with a character is that we generally want to know as much as possible about a person. Science established a long time ago that it is people's nature to be inquisitive. If we weren't inquisitive, we would never have had so many advances in science, the works of Shakespeare, or perhaps even discovered the new world.

This is even more evident when dealing with characters like elves, people with super powers, people in history, or any character who has captured your interest. Most character designers and storytellers use this to their advantage. How many times have you felt compelled to watch an entire TV series or read an entire book or comic series, only to ask yourself:



The answer, once you finally break away from how pretty the character or characters look, is that the designer or storyteller has given you something, be it information or an illustration, that is causing you to ask questions that remain unanswered. So you stick with the character or characters and hope that your questions will be answered.

Now you might be thinking this to yourself:



Be forewarned, however, that withholding information is a double-edged sword. For example, if you have been withholding a certain nugget of information about your character—for example, the ability to conjure up dragons at will—that is probably going to be a cool revelation, and no one should get upset.

On the other hand, let's say you have a character whose past is a mystery, but throughout the story we keep learning more and more about his past. This is what keeps the character interesting. Not knowing exactly *who* the character is adds intrigue and mystery to both the character and the design. But now say you go ahead and reveal everything about this character—where he's from to what makes him what he is, and well let's face it, all these revelations don't live up to the hype you have created, and this is going to make the audience pretty mad. You built up all of this expectation only to end with a big letdown. If this happens, you just lost your readers because they are no longer invested in the story.

Therefore, you have to be very careful about how and when you answer the popular questions that most people will ask you. What questions are they going to ask? Simple:

- Who?
- What?
- When?
- Where?
- Why?
- How?

I told you it was simple, but if you can answer these six questions with conviction, people will accept your character's story. Now that doesn't guarantee that you will have a good, compelling, and intriguing story, only that you will

have a complete, basic story that gives readers just enough information to make them want to know more about your character and what happens next.

Let's try it out. Let's make up a character's story right now, on the spot, and answer the six important questions.

Who?: Who is the character in question? Who are we talking about in this character summary?

I am going to create a hero character. His name is going to be the Golden Grasshopper. His real name will be ... Chuck Johnson.

What?: What does this character do in the story?

Let's see. ... The Golden Grasshopper is a superhero who fights crime with his superhuman jumping abilities that are amplified by the sun. Yeah, that sounds good.

When?: When does this story take place?

I am going to say that this story takes place in 1942.

Where?: Where does the story take place?

Since it is a beautiful city, I am going to say the story takes place in Savannah, Georgia.

Why?: Why is the character motivated to do what he does in the story?

This is where the meat and potatoes of this character's story are going to come from. So let's see. ... I think I got something. Chuck Johnson always was a good person. He would do everything in his power to help his fellow citizens. He even joined the military to protect and serve his country.

Tragedy hit Chuck when he grew ill after being exposed to a new form of biological weapon. While Chuck was in the hospital, all he did was read superhero comics. He dreamed of a world where he could be a superhero just like the ones in the comics. When the doctors told Chuck he had only a short time to live, he made a request. He wanted to feel the warmth of the sun one last time. The doctors were more than happy to grant his wish.

As the doctors were wheeling Chuck outside, he began to feel strange. His body felt different, stronger, and healthier. Once Chuck was outside and completely engulfed by the sun, he felt a surge of energy shoot through his body. He jumped out of his wheelchair and, to everyone's amazement, leapt 18 feet into the air. Once the doctors were able to get

Chuck back into the hospital and run some tests, they determined that it was a medical miracle. Chuck was completely healed.

The doctors wanted to make sure that the lab results weren't wrong, so they retested them again and again. What they found out was that Chuck's blood had mutated, and it was this mutation that allowed him to jump so high. It was at that moment that Chuck vowed to be the superhero he dreamed about. He vowed to be the pillar of justice in a time of war. He vowed to become the Golden Grasshopper.

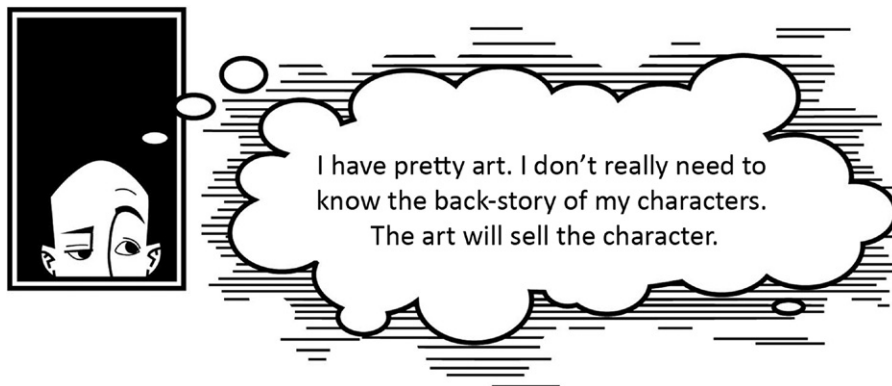
The "why" is basically the back-story to your character. You want to make sure that you know what your character's back-story is. That will determine what your character says and does and even how he or she dresses.

How?: How does your character do what he does? Sometimes this question can be answered in the why question.

So Chuck Johnson is able to fight as the Golden Grasshopper because of his contact with an experimental biological weapon in the military. As a result of the contact with the biological weapon, his blood has mutated, allowing him to jump to extreme heights.

There you go—an on-the-spot description of a character we just made up. You don't have to believe me, but we did just make that character up. Now I am not saying that this is the best character story, but if you wanted to, you could tell someone else—someone who hasn't read this chapter of the book—about the Golden Grasshopper and convince that person that you know all about this character. Of course, we both know that we don't know *everything* about this character. Right? Right! But thanks to the six questions, we have a good understanding of what the Golden Grasshopper is all about.

You might be thinking to yourself:



Wrong! Well, maybe you would get lucky and never really have to talk about your character to anyone, but chances are that after someone sees your wonderful art, that person is going to want to know more about the character. In all my years in this business I have yet to come across a character design that was so visually pleasing that the story wasn't even necessary. Almost always, when the visuals of a character design stop someone in his or her tracks, the next set of questions is about the character's story. The only time that doesn't happen is when the art deals with a character that has already been established—for example, Spider-man or Batman. Everyone knows their story already. So, yeah, you really do need to know the back-story of your characters.

I actually have an example of when the art wasn't enough. I was at a convention with my studio, and a young man came to my table and wanted to pitch his characters for a comic book. His work was absolutely stunning, and I was instantly hooked. I asked the artist to tell me about his characters, but he couldn't answer the six questions. Needless to say, I passed on this artist's fantastic art because I had no idea what motivated the characters, and since he was trying to get them into a comic book, that information was absolutely imperative

So as you can see, being able to answer the six questions is pertinent to any good character design. Now I have to admit that I too have created characters without thinking of a story first. I never said that you couldn't create characters without starting with the story, but if you start with the story, it makes things a lot easier in the long run.

Have you ever created a character on a whim and really liked what you came up with? Of course, you have. We all have. At that point you probably decided to keep going with the design of your character. As you started thinking more and more about your character, did things start to change about your character design? It has happened to me, so I am pretty sure it has happened to you as well. What was happening at that point was that your character design was talking to you, telling you about itself. Have you ever found yourself saying this about your character, "Oh, he would never do that" or "She wouldn't say something like that. She just isn't that kind of person"? If so, it means that you are immersed in your character's story, and the more you know about your character's back-story, the easier it will be to create the final design. So why don't we go ahead and do that now.

Following is a development worksheet that I give to my Character and Object Design class. This worksheet will help you to better understand your character. Many different character development worksheets are available,

and for the most part they are all trying to get to one final product, so a lot of them have the same information. If you manage to find one that has something on it that yours doesn't, go ahead and add it to the one you use. This character development worksheet is detailed enough to provide a good description of the character you are creating. Yes, I know there are those that are more detailed than this one, and if you want to use one of those that is fine as well. The more information you know about your character the better. Here, I break down what each section is asking and then I am going to answer all the questions for our Golden Grasshopper character.

BASIC STATISTICS

Name:

What is your character's name?

Alias:

Does your character go by a different name in your story?

Age:

What is the character's current age?

Height:

How tall is your character?

Weight:

How much does your character weigh?

Sex:

Is your character a male or a female?

Race:

Is your character Caucasian, African-American, Elvin, Dwarven, etc?

Eye Color:

What is the color of your character's eyes?

Hair Color:

What is the color of your character's hair?

Glasses or Contact Lenses:

Does your character wear glasses, contact lenses, or neither?

Nationality:

What is your character's nationality?

Skin Color:

What is the color of your character's skin?

Shape of Face:

Is your character's face round, square, triangle, oval, etc?

DISTINGUISHING FEATURES

Clothing:

How does your character dress? High fashion, sloppy, professional, or casual?

Mannerisms:

What unique gestures and movements set your character apart from other characters?

Habits:

What habits, good or bad, does your character have? Smoking, drinking, pencil tapping, cleanliness, etc?

Health:

What is your character's current health?

Hobbies:

Does your character have any favorite hobbies? Basketball, video games, sniffing glue, etc?

Favorite Sayings:

Does your character have a favorite saying?

Voice:

What does your character's voice sound like? Raspy, sexy, soft, etc?

Walking Style:

How does your character walk? Heroic, sneaky, nervous, etc?

Disabilities:

Does your character have any disabilities, physical or mental?

Character's Greatest Flaw:

What is the one negative thing that stands out above all the rest?

Character's Best Quality:

What is the biggest thing that makes your character great?

SOCIAL CHARACTERISTICS

Hometown:

Where is your character originally from?

Current Residence:

Where does your character currently live?

Occupation:

What does your character do for a living?

Income:

How much money does your character make?

Talents/Skills:

Does your character have any talents or skills that might be useful in the story?

Family Status:

Does your character have any siblings, parents, grandparents, aunts, uncles, etc, and what is his relationship with them like?

Character as a Child:

What was your character's status as a child? Child prodigy, school dropout, petty thief, etc? Why did your character have that status?

Character as an Adult:

What was your character's status as an adult? King, beggar, genius, ninja master, etc? Why did your character have that status?

ATTRIBUTES AND ATTITUDES

Educational Background:

What is your character's highest level of education?

Intelligence Level:

What is your character's IQ?

Character's Goals:

What is one short-term goal and one long-term goal that your character wants to accomplish in his/her lifetime?

Self-esteem:

When your character looks in the mirror, how does he/she see himself/herself, physically and mentally?

Confidence:

Is your character overconfident, not confident at all, or of average confidence?

Emotional State:

Is your character ruled by emotion or logic or both?

EMOTIONAL CHARACTERISTICS

Introvert or Extrovert:

Is your character an introvert or an extrovert?

How does your character deal with

- sadness?
- anger?
- conflict?
- change?
- loss?

What would your character like to change about his or her life?

Is there anything your character would change about his/her life if he/she could?

Motivation:

What makes your character get out of bed in the morning?

Fear:

Is your character afraid of anything?

Happiness:

What makes your character happy?

Relationships:

How is your character with relationships—social, emotional, physical, etc?

SPIRITUAL CHARACTERISTICS

Does your character believe in God?

Does your character have a strong connection to his/her faith?

Does your character live his/her life according to the laws of his/her faith?

CHARACTER'S INVOLVEMENT IN THE STORY

Archetype:

Is your character the hero, the mentor, the shadow, or one of the other archetypes?

Environment:

Does the environment affect your character physically or mentally? Does it affect the way he/she dresses?

Timeline:

Describe five important events that led up to your character's storyline. What five events in your character's back-story led up to the current story that will be presented to the audience?

So there you have it! Now I will use this character development worksheet for the Golden Grasshopper.

BASIC STATISTICS

Name:

Chuck Johnson

Alias:

The Golden Grasshopper

Age:

35 years old

Height:

6 feet tall

Weight:

197 pounds

Sex:

Male

Race:

Caucasian

Eye Color:

Baby Blue

Hair Color:

Brown; military haircut

Glasses or Contact Lenses:

Neither

Nationality:

American

Skin Color:

A nice California tan

Shape of Face:

His face is that of a hero. He has a square jaw with a butt chin, and it is always cleanshaven.

DISTINGUISHING FEATURES**Dress:**

Chuck is meticulous about his clothes. His military background doesn't allow him to let himself go, so he is always in khaki pants and a button-down shirt. As the Golden Grasshopper he wears the traditional military boots with long brown pants. He wears a black short-sleeve t-shirt. He has a golden chest plate, golden forearm bracelets, and a golden half-mask that resembles a grasshopper's head. He also wears black gloves so he doesn't leave fingerprints.

Mannerisms:

Chuck often cracks his neck as a result of an injury sustained during a secret military mission.

Habits:

Chuck has no bad habits. He is the ideal person.

Health:

Now that he has recovered from his illness as a result of his exposure to the biological weapon, he is enjoying perfect health.

Hobbies:

Chuck loves to play chess. He is always trying to stay two steps ahead of his opponent. Chuck also loves all types of music. Music puts his mind at ease.

Favorite Sayings:

"Holy crap! I didn't know I could do that, too."

Voice:

Chuck's voice is calm and respectful. As the Golden Grasshopper his voice is deep and mysterious.

Walking Style:

He walks very heroically, with his head up and chest out.

Disabilities:

He has mutated blood that is affected by the sun.

Flaws:

Chuck believes that he isn't doing enough to help humanity.

Best Quality:

Chuck's best quality is that he values life over all other things.

SOCIAL CHARACTERISTICS**Hometown:**

San Diego, California

Current Residence:

Savannah, Georgia

Occupation:

Superhero

Income:

Since the government funds the Golden Grasshopper, he is able to afford anything he wants.

Talents/Skills:

Except for the skills he learned in the military, Chuck doesn't have any other special skills or talents.

Family Status:

Chuck is a family man. He enjoys a great relationship with his parents. They don't know that Chuck is the Golden Grasshopper. He is also very close to his younger sister and is helping her and her infant son since her husband left her. She also doesn't know that he is the Golden Grasshopper.

Status as a Child:

He was just an ordinary kid.

Status as an Adult:

As an adult, Chuck Johnson is the Golden Grasshopper, the defender of justice.

ATTRIBUTES AND ATTITUDES

Educational Background:

Chuck graduated from high school.

Intelligence Level:

Chuck's IQ is 109.

Goals:

His short-term goal is to figure out what he is capable of doing with the new powers he has. His long-term goal is to uphold justice, stop all evil, and bring peace to all.

Self-esteem:

Chuck sees himself as a superhero who isn't doing enough with his gifts.

Confidence:

Even though he thinks he isn't doing as much as he could now, he is very confident that one day he will.

Emotion:

Chuck is a very logical man, but in certain life-threatening situations his emotions take over completely.

EMOTIONAL CHARACTERISTICS

Introvert or Extrovert:

Chuck is an extrovert.

Chuck deals with sadness by immersing himself in music.

Chuck is quick to throw his fists when he gets angry, but it takes a lot to make him angry.

Chuck deals with each conflict very logically. He always thinks before he acts.

Chuck thinks change is good. If it wasn't for change, he would be dead now.

Chuck deals with loss like most people. He reflects on what he lost and hopefully is able to move on in time.

Goals:

Chuck is completely happy with the way his life is now. The change already happened, so now he has to make the best of the hand he has been dealt. He plans to put his powers to good use, not just for himself but for everyone.

Motivation:

Chuck always wanted to be a superhero. That is why he joined the military. Now that he has super powers, his main motivation is ultimately to create peace for everyone to enjoy.

Fear:

Chuck's biggest fear is failure. Now that he has been granted this gift, he doesn't want to fail the people who depend on him.

Happiness:

Knowing that he is making the world a better place puts a smile on Chuck's face every day.

Relationships:

Being the family man that he is, Chuck is really good with people. Everyone seems to like him. If there is someone whom he can't get along with, that generally means that person is evil at heart.

SPIRITUAL CHARACTERISTICS

Does your character believe in a supreme being? If so, whom?

Chuck believes in God. Does your character have a strong connection to his/her faith?

Chuck's moral compass is directly connected to his faith. That is what kept him humble in his time of sickness and is the main reason he believes he has been blessed with these powers.

Does your character live his/her life according to the laws of his/her faith?

Chuck is not a religious fanatic. He believes in God and tries his hardest to live by his commands.

CHARACTER'S INVOLVEMENT IN THE STORY

Archetype:

Chuck is without a doubt a hero type.

Environment:

The environment is the main reason why Chuck is the Golden Grasshopper. Without the sun he would still be sick. The sun is the source of the Golden Grasshopper's power. The government designed his armor to act like mini solar panels so he won't lose his powers on overcast days.

Timeline:

The story takes place in 1942. The following five events led up to Chuck's storyline:

- Chuck Johnston was one of the few soldiers who were inducted into the special military detail. He would be the military's secret weapon against the enemy.
- Chuck was exposed to an experimental biological weapon that was being used by the enemy on a special mission. When he came into contact with the weapon, he became ill and had to be transported to the hospital.
- The doctors at the hospital worked hard to find out what Chuck had and how to cure it. It was here that Chuck rekindled his passion for comic books. As he read them, he dreamed of the day that he too could be like one of the superheroes in the comics.
- Chuck was told that what he had was incurable and that he only had a short time to live.
- Chuck asked if he could go outside to feel the sun on his body one last time. When the sun's rays hit him, he started to feel different, stronger, and healthier. He felt a surge of energy shoot through his body, and he was able to get out of his wheelchair and jump 18 feet into the air. Once the doctors were able to get Chuck back into the hospital, and run some tests, they determined that it was a medical miracle. Chuck was completely healed, and a short time later he decided to protect and serve as the Golden Grasshopper.

Phew! That was intense. I don't know about you, but I feel pretty darn good about the development of this character. I am sure that after watching and reading the development of the Golden Grasshopper, you are just itching to get started on your own character. Well, go right ahead. You can download my character template at <http://www.kaiserstudio.net/charactertemplate.doc>, or you can use the character template at the back of the book. Your homework is going to be to fill out the character sheet anyway, so you might as well get started. I will see you in the next chapter.