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[Taken from Chapter 05: The Three Cs, Part 1: Character]

Who Do You Want to Be Today?

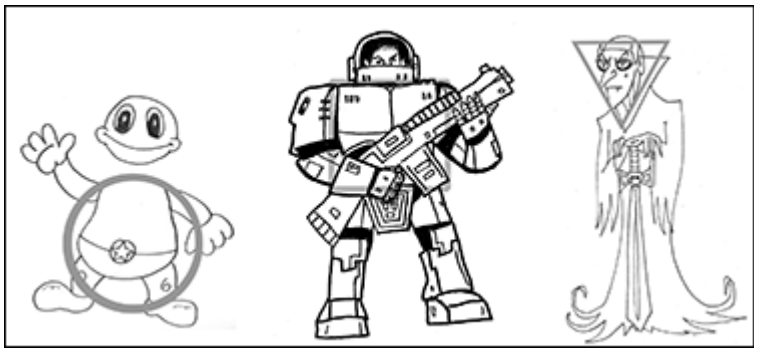
As you are creating your character, you need to think about his or her personality. What are the three personality traits that you would use to describe your hero?

Mario—Courageous, bouncy, happy

Sonic—Fast, cool, edgy

Kratos—Brutal, vicious, selfish

Apply these traits to your character's physical appearance. Animators have known for decades that the shapes you use for your character's design will help communicate his or her personality. Circles are used to make a character feel friendly. Squares are often used for strong or dumb characters, depending on just how big the square is. Triangles are interesting. A downward-pointing triangle is often used to give a heroic character a powerful frame. However, if you use that same downward-pointing triangle for the character's head, he seems sinister.



Try rotating, mixing, and matching shapes to create compelling characters.

Another old trick that all professional character designers and animators use is the **silhouette.** A strong, clear silhouette of a character is important for many reasons:

- Tells you the character's personality at a glance

- Helps distinguish one character from another
- Identifies “friendly” or “enemy” characters

For example, look at the silhouettes of the player characters of *Team Fortress 2*.

Due to their unique silhouettes, you can immediately distinguish one character from another. In the preceding image, the Heavy is clearly distinguished from the Pyro from the Spy. Body language also plays a huge part in creating unique personalities. Each character’s silhouette not only gives you a snapshot of their personality, but also indicates differences between characters. This was no happy accident. It was an intentional decision by the game’s designers. They knew that making their characters distinct and instantly recognizable was important to gameplay. This way the player would know which enemy was gunning for them—or more importantly, who is in their sights. Boom. Headshot.

If you’re designing several characters that appear on-screen at once, as in multiplayer games, design them together. Use their silhouettes to make your characters “fit together” even when they are standing apart. This is an especially useful trick when creating “duo characters” like Jak and Daxter (tall and short) or SpongeBob Squarepants and Patrick Star (square and pointy) or Mario and Luigi (fat and thin).

Other ways to distinguish your characters from each other include using color and texture. Super heroes in early comic books usually wore bright patriotic colors like red and blue, whereas villains were dressed in darker, “opposite colors” like greens and purples. In the original *Star Wars,* the heroes (Luke, Leia, and Han) wore black and white baggy and flowing clothing. Although Darth Vader and the Stormtroopers also wore black and white, their costumes were hard edged and metallic.

Of course, what determines whether your character is good or bad, noble or evil, is personality.

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Let's Get Personal

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Traditional role-playing game characters are often "blank slates" defined more by their role (Fighter, Magic User, Thief, Soldier, Medic, and so on) and gear than their appearance or personality. But that doesn't mean these characters can't have character: you just have to surface it through the play styles. For example, at first glance the wizard character in *Card Hunter* (Blue Manchu, 2013) may only seem to be a template for staffs, robes, and arcane items. The character has no predetermined personality. His name, visual, and gear are all editable, meaning you could change core aspects about him at any time. You could even change his character to female. However, it is the depth of gear selections that helps craft the wizard's character. Because the different spells possess different attributes—for example, lightning attacks can be used to hit specific targets at a distance versus fire attacks that work at close range to damage both friends and foes—a play style emerges that starts to create a character. I found my lightning-throwing wizard became more cautious and more of a team player, whereas my fire-casting wizard was reckless and burned anyone who got in his way. You can see this happening frequently in MMORPGs like *World of Warcraft* and FPSs like *Team Fortress 2* where the play styles of characters and the weapons they use inform the characters' personality regardless of who is playing the part.

Speaking of weapons and equipment, you may choose to give your character a signature weapon and gear/appearance. In this case, they shouldn't be customizable. These weapons are part of the character's identity. Most licensed characters use signature weapons and gear to keep them unique. Can you imagine a Ghostbuster without his proton pack? Dante without his trench coat? Cloud Strife without his humongous sword?

Think about how the players are going to be using these items for gameplay. Make the items appropriate to the action. Although I advocate form following function, sometimes these items can help inspire the design to determine the players' actions.

Sometimes the most important item in a character's design isn't even one that character can use. Because most video game characters are viewed from behind, it's important to have something that creates the feeling of movement. For example, many characters have an object swinging from their back. With Lara Croft, it was her ponytail. With Batman, it was his cape. While these objects added movement and personality, they required both unique and sometimes complex code to create. Talk to your art and programming leads to make sure these visual markers are feasible.

While video game character design allows for a wide variety of stylization, the goal of many video game art directors is to create realistic characters. But be aware of the phenomenon called the **"uncanny valley,"** in which a character doesn't look quite right to the viewers. It can be distracting for the players, especially during cutscenes, if this occurs. Here are a few tips to remember when creating realistic-looking characters:

- **Facial proportions**—Realistic human characters look odd if given features used to enhance personality traits. Watch out for features such as large eyes, exaggerated chins, and wide mouths that can make characters look inhuman.
- **Movement**—The more realistic the model, the worse animation tends to look precisely because of the uncanny valley. Be careful of stiff-limbed movement in the arms and shoulders. Hands can be particularly troublesome because most game art can't support jointed fingers and treats the hands as simple objects, which end up looking like hams. A

human is a very flexible being, so make sure your character moves realistically. Put the effort into rigging your character's skeleton to be so.
- **Humanity**—If a character looks extremely human (especially a non-human character, like an alien or robot), people will expect it to do human things and have a human personality. However, you can give humanity to non-human characters. Claptrap from *Borderlands* is a great example of playing against this expectation.

Now, for the other side of the coin, here are some tips to remember when creating stylized characters:

- **Facial proportions**—Enlarge facial features such as eyes, chins, and mouths to convey greater expression and range of emotion. You find this all the time in Japanese games and anime.
- **Movement**—If you don't have the time and money to spend on motion capturing, you might be better off using stylized character animations. The more stylized your characters, the more exaggerated the movements can be. Watch and learn from old Tex Avery cartoons (for example) to see just how far you can go with exaggerated character movement.
  Humanity—The great thing about stylized characters is that they don't have to be human. Humanized animals have a long-standing place in video games ever since Donkey Kong captured Pauline. Anthropomorphic characters like Ratchet (and Clank), Sly Cooper, and Aero the Acrobat can provide just as much emotion and player investment as human ones can.

Realistic or stylized? It's a choice that comes down to what is best for your game. For example, the *Team Fortress 2* team started building their game with realistically designed characters and then did a 180 with character designs inspired by artists J. C. Leyendecker, Dean Cornwell, and Norman Rockwell by way of Pixar. It was a great choice—one that changed the tone of the entire franchise for the better.

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When More Is More

Sometimes [one or two] characters aren't enough. *Mortal Kombat: Armageddon* (Midway, 2006) has 63 unique playable characters! Games with large casts can be found in many game genres: fighting, car combat, RPG, RTS, FPS, and survival

horror games.

Start your character creation process by creating a stereotype: the old “fighter, magic-user, thief, cleric” class/profession model, for example. Wait a second, what about creating unique, compelling characters? Yeah, yeah, that stuff’s all great, but sometimes players will need to judge a book by its cover. At the beginning of many games, players don’t have the luxury of a storyline; they’re just going to pick a character that looks the coolest or that they identify with the most.

But that doesn’t mean your characters have to be stereotypes, particularly in the way they play. Your characters should have something significantly different to offer to gameplay. It helps to build an abilities matrix to compare and contrast your characters so none of them have the same abilities. The characters in *Team Fortress 2* live in one of three classes: offensive, defensive, and support. They have three categories that impact gameplay: health, speed, and attack. Let’s see how they stack up:

Offensive Class	Defensive Class	Support Class
SOLDIER • High Health • Mid-to-Strong Attack • Medium Speed	DEMOMAN • Medium Health • Slow-to-Mid Speed • Strong Attack	MEDIC • Medium Health • Medium Speed • Medium Attack
HEAVY • High Health • Slow Speed • Strong Attack	PYRO • Medium Health • Medium Speed • Strong Short-Range / Weak Long-Range Attacks	SNIPER • Weak Health • Medium Speed • Medium Attack (Headshot=Instant Kill)
SCOUT • Weak Health • Very Fast Speed • Weak-to-Mid Attack	ENGINEER • Weak Health • Medium Speed • Medium Attack (Turret can be improved to Very Strong Attack)	SPY • Weak Health • Fast Speed • Weak Attack (Backstab=Instant Kill)

As you can see, the characters in *TF2* are very finely balanced. No two characters share the same attribute specs, and weaknesses are counterbalanced with strengths. Where the heavy is slow, he has the strongest attack. Where the scout has a weak attack, he is very fast. Even the most statistically average character in the game, the medic, can heal and grant temporary invulnerability to the other players—an ability that is totally unique to this character. This balancing act is like a game of Rock, Paper, Scissors, where each character has a weakness and a strength.

To design a Rock, Paper, Scissors (or RPS) system you need clarity. An RPS system gives the player three choices to choose from. Those choices need to be simple and clear for the player to understand so they can make the right choice. For example, in a fighting game, there are three types of moves: an attack, a throw, and a reversal. Attacking beats throwing, throwing beats blocking or reversing, and blocking and reversing beat attacking. Making sure the player understands what choices are available and what the possible results of that choice will make for a good RPS system.

These characters also support different types of gameplay: the sniper, heavy, and engineer all work best when they root themselves in place. Notice how one of these types occurs in each class? Your characters will become more balanced the more classifications there are to gauge them against, such as

- Movement speed
- Movement type
- Attack speed and rate
- Attack strength
- Attack range and duration
- Armor strength
- Health
- Encumbrance
- Advantages (such as health or puzzle solving)

Be careful to make sure these values and traits are easily editable; if you need to make a global change in your game, you don’t want to spend all your time tweaking values.