

Fighting the Good Fight

***Advice for creating more dynamic characters
by Cynthia Celeste Miller***

As any cartoon fan can tell you, all the best retro-toons had a plethora of fantastic characters, both heroes and villains. The ones that featured lackluster characters almost invariably went the way of the zoot suit, and rightfully so. Nobody cares about bland characters in cartoons.

And nobody cares about them in role-playing games either.

This article will offer you some tips and advice for making your characters as cool as they can possibly be.

THE THREE QUESTIONS

There are three questions I ask myself when I begin making a *Cartoon Action Hour* hero.

Will the Character Make a Cool Action Figure? The cartoons of the '80s were almost always linked to a line of action figures. In fact, many detractors accuse the cartoons of being nothing more than over-sized toy commercials, but we all know better, right?

Whatever the case may be, most cartoons were based on toys, not the other way around. The animation studios were generally at the mercy of the toy companies in terms of content. If the toy company wanted to have its newest batch of action figures appear on the cartoon, the cartoon writers had no choice but to obey.

Seeing as how the action figures were so central to what the characters in the cartoon would be like, I sometimes try to create characters as action figures first. This usually takes the form of a simple sketch of the action figure. I'm no artist, but that really isn't important – the only thing that matters is getting the gist of the character's concept.

During this time, you're liable to stumble across a fun theme. For example, let's say I started doodling an action figure that has a very muscular frame and a big monkey wrench. This reminds me of a mechanic type character, so I run with it. I add a whole belt full of tools and name him Otto Body.

Another popular tidbit for action figures is the action feature. Many toys of the day had something cool that it could do, a little something that increased the figure's playability, no matter how dopey it is. After all, there was one action figure that emitted a foul stench. That was its action feature. Seriously.

Is the Character "Eighties"? The 1980s were filled to the brim with flavor. Try to make this flavor evident in your character. The decade had numerous trends, fads, and peculiarities that could easily be incorporated into the hero in some way. A few examples:

- The character is a hair metal rocker with spiky hair and loud clothes.
- The character gains his power from a mystic puzzle cube.



- The character break-dances.
- The character has the Don Johnson look.
- The character is a ninja.
- The character can zap people into an arcade game world.
- The character (if female) wears pastel or rainbow colored clothes.

Never underestimate the influence of popular motion pictures. *Star Wars* alone spawned what seemed like a million Darth Vader clones, so loosely basing certain aspects of existing characters from movies (or comics, novels, etc.) is actually staying faithful to the retro-toon milieu.

Is the Character Cartoon-Like? Obviously, in a game called *Cartoon Action Hour*, you'll want your character to seem as if he stepped right out of the television set. This is something to keep in mind all throughout the character creation process. This question is most relevant when hashing out background and personality.

For most series, the K.I.S.S. method works like a charm. In case you aren't familiar with the abbreviation, K.I.S.S. means Keep It Simple, Stupid. Most cartoon characters had very little in the way of complex and intricate backgrounds. This wasn't always the case, mind you, but there are always exceptions to any rule.

That's not to say character backgrounds were dumbed down or uninteresting – the truth is that most of the retro-toon characters possessed intriguing pasts. Simple, but intriguing nonetheless. As long as you avoid making the character's history convoluted, you should be okay.

The most important things to accomplish with the background are:

- To establish the character's "hook" (e.g., a cowboy character who was a rodeo star).
- To establish the character's motivation (e.g., the character's parents were kidnapped by the villain group and have not been seen since, so now he wants to join the good guys to find them).
- To create potential for plotlines later on in the series (e.g., the character has no memory of the last five years and will eventually face the truth behind it all).

As far as the personality is concerned, try to remember that nearly every cartoon character fell neatly into one of two categories: good or evil. While some retro-toons featured a sympathetic villain here or an anti-hero there, it was still very rare. The heroes were admirable, noble individuals and the villains were despicable, evil bastards.

Don't get the wrong impression though – characters weren't generically the same. They came in a myriad of varieties, each with their own distinct quirks, idiosyncrasies, and mannerisms. The trick is to bring this out in your character.

CHOOSING TRAITS

The majority of the characters seen in the cartoons of the '80s had a few specialties that really cemented his worth to his group. There was usually something that he could do better than any of his teammates. Sometimes, this spilled over into his equipment or powers, but most of the time it started with his own natural (or not so natural) skills and abilities.

Fighting the Good Fight, cont'd

Positive Traits. The first thing I do after laying out the character's background, personality, and appearance is to select one Trait to be his primary ability. I'll then buy a high rating for that Trait. No other Trait will have a rating as high or higher than this one.

Next, I choose one to three Traits to be his secondary specialties. I then purchase ratings for these at levels just beneath the primary Trait's rating. I don't have any sort of formula for this – rather, I like to play it by ear, which helps create more diversity between characters. Don't be afraid to shuffle things around a bit until it's all to your liking.

Following this, I select some more Traits as things the character can do well, but without being the focus of the character. These Traits tend to stay within the rating range of 1 to 2. Of course, this may vary, depending on the series parameters.

Negative Traits. Lastly, I focus on negative Traits. I pick out a couple areas the character is sub-par in, and slap a -1 or -2 rating on them in most cases. This really serves to give the character some depth, and can make for interesting scenes later in the series. I mean, what if the character with -2 Driving ends up having to make a getaway in a stolen enemy tank? The potential for an exciting (and slightly humorous) scene awaits. Just add water and shake well.

A Note About Appearance. One last thing I want to address here is *Appearance*. While this may seem like a weak link of the Traits, it adds plenty of character to your hero or villain. If he's monstrous in appearance, give him a -2 or even -4. If he's a handsome, lantern-jawed fellow, jack his rating to 3, 4, or even beyond. Besides, you never know when it's going to come in handy.

CREATING SPECIAL ABILITIES

The SA creation system grants you the ultimate freedom to design your character's powers, weapons, gear, and so on, from the ground up. This means that you can do anything you want, as long as it's in the spirit of the series and your Game Master approves.

Back to the Action Figure. Remember when we discussed thinking of the character as an action figure, and when I mentioned putting some thought into the action features and accessories? Well, here's where you can tie it into the game system. You wanted your character to have a "Twist-and-Punch" action feature? Great! Give him "Thunder Punch" or "Power Strike" as an OSA. You decided to give your character's toy an action feature that enabled it to squirt water from its eyes? Then there's no reason not to design a "Hydro-Blast" OSA for him.

Power Versus Color. Emphasize colorful SAs over powerful ones. While it may be tempting to outfit every character with an OSA that deals massive damage and a DSA that protects from all but the most devastating attacks, it's simply not as colorful as a prehensile tongue or a wind gun. *Cartoon Action Hour* isn't a competitive game, and while it may be important to be able to beat the bad guys, it's even more important to do so with style.

Some of the most interesting characters I've come across are ones that actually had no OSAs at all. These characters strayed off the beaten path by making their primary worth most evident away from the battlefield.

Fighting the Good Fight, cont'd

One particular character was from a “giant transforming robot” series that occurred during playtesting. The character had a -1 or -2 in every combat Trait and had a low Body rating as well. However, he had two other things going for him. Primarily, he could transform into a gargantuan spaceship capable of transporting numerous teammates from planet to planet. Secondly, he had a bunch of inexpensive, but helpful, sight-based SAs – he could see for great distances, through walls, in the dark, and in tiny detail, but not all at once. His visor would change colors to show which SA was in use. Needless to say, the other heroes relied on him often, even though he wasn’t much help in a scuffle.

New Modifiers. If you want your SA to have a drawback or benefit that isn’t represented by the existing modifiers, go ahead and create a new one. By using common sense and the list of modifiers as a measuring stick, you should be able to devise a balanced modifier fairly easily.

If you’re having trouble, discuss it with the Game Master or the other players. They may be able to give you advice on the issue, and maybe even improve the modifier in some way. Collaboration is a great way to balance things out, and it makes your fellow participants more involved in your character to boot.

OTHER WAYS TO BRING YOUR CHARACTER TO LIFE

Creating a character’s stats is only the beginning of the fun you can have. Here are some ideas about how to go that extra mile to make the character more interesting.

Once Again, the Action Figure. If a picture is worth a thousand words, a customized action figure is worth a million. Nothing says “cool” like coming to the game with a toy of your character.

This can be as simple as a basic repaint of a store-bought action figure or as detailed as one made from the parts of various existing toys and modeling putty. It just depends on how much time and effort you’re willing to invest in the project.

You’ve never tried your hand at action figure customization before? No problem. There are numerous sources for instructions and tips both online and in toy magazines.

Artwork. If you have any artistic talent, you may want to draw one or more pictures of your character. It doesn’t have to be anything more than a quick sketch, but a full color picture is even cooler. If you can’t draw, coax a friend who can draw into working something up.

If you’re really ambitious, you can go for a mini-comic or file card instead of just a single picture. These are time-honored traditions of the ’80s tie-in toys and would be perfect for making the other players interested in your character.

Voice Acting. When roleplaying your character, try giving him a distinctive voice. Perhaps he has an English accent or speaks with a lisp. If he’s not a terribly bright character, you can do a “dumb guy” voice (you know the voice I’m talking about). How about making him sound like a particular movie star? It doesn’t really matter, so long as it makes the character more vivid.