Building a Better Character Model

The Art and Process of Character Design

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A Senior Thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for graduation in the Honors Program
Liberty University
Spring 2016
Acceptance of Senior Honors Thesis

This Senior Honors Thesis is accepted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for graduation from the Honors Program of Liberty University.

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Abstract

The art and process of character design flows from understanding the world a character lives in and how that world affects his or her actions, personality, and storyline, and also inspires a character's dress, poses, and accouterments. This thesis was influenced by the overwhelming prevalence of action-oriented female characters who are demeaned through suggestive poses, clothing, and degrading actions that sexualize the characters whether they are weak or strong; this is often done with no logical reason from the perspective of the character. In this thesis, the process of character design will be shown through the author's character Joanna. The author will illustrate Joanna's physical design with digital drawings to show her as a beautiful woman who dresses and acts according to her background without over sexualizing and objectifying her.
Building a Better Character Model

The Art and Process of Character Writing and Design

Character design is much more complex than drawing a character with a beautiful or alluring appearance. Before a character's design can truly take form, the creator must fully understand the world in which the story takes place and give the character a suitable look. In direct contradiction to this idea, many prominent character designers, especially designers of female characters, focus on sexualizing the characters at the expense of plausible proportions and sensible clothing, as well as place the characters in poses inconsistent with their personalities and backgrounds. The artwork in this thesis is based upon the in-depth process of character design to portray the main female character of a story as an attractive woman without over sexualizing her.

Character Conceptualization

The World

When beginning to write a new character or storyline, the author must first study the world in which the character lives. Fictional characters with logical and consistent backstories are heavily shaped and defined by their environments. The actions that propel the storyline must also tie into the fictional world, or the character driving the plot will seem irrational.

David Herman (2002), author of *Story Logic: Problems and Possibilities of Narrative* writes:
To tell and comprehend stories is to operate within a system of probabilistic rules in which events are preferentially (but not absolutely or inevitably) viewed as goal-directed actions--these actions in turn forming part of a large sequence of actions within a storyworld. (p. 28)

For instance, if a young girl grew up alone in a frigid city in a fantasy world, she would likely be malnourished by her mid-teens. Her clothes would be ragged items pulled together to protect herself from the elements. This girl would be hardened by her life, her years of being alone, and having to defending herself. Though she might be lonely, she might also be defensive and suspicious when other people try to help her. If she were suddenly forced to make an important decision, she should act in accordance with her background. However, if the same young girl grew up in a higher class urban society, she would be well fed, well dressed, and less suspicious of others; she would probably have a hopeful outlook on life, potentially leading her to a different choice than her impoverished fantasy-world counterpart. If either girl made a decision inconsistent with their respective backgrounds, it should show the natural progression of their character arcs and the influence of the new people and environments around them. Those new characters should, in turn, flow from the changes made in the overarching world by the story. As Jaber F. Gubrium and James A. Holstein (2008) write in their book *Analyzing Narrative Reality*, "Discern the big stories of local culture with a constant eye towards their individual articulations. Approach the big and little stories as reflexively related, not categorially distinct, dimensions of narrativity" (p. 144). Later, they continue, "If public places . . . have big stories, the stories return to storytellers to shape their own accounts and their identities, roles, and relationships. These identities, roles, and
relationships, in turn, exemplify and ramify big stories" (p. 148). To paraphrase the idea, small narratives based around characters should stem from and interact with the larger narratives of the world in which the characters live.

Another aspect that should be understood before a character can be fully fleshed out and visually designed is the fact that a world is not static. The actions of the characters in the world change the world. Georg Henrik von Wright (1966) articulates:

"Acting [is] intentionally bringing about or preventing a change in the world . . . Giving a complete description of an action requires describing three items: (a) the initial state, or the state in which the world is at the moment when the action is initiated; (b) the end state, or the state in which the world is when the action has been completed; and (c) the state in which the world would have been had it not been for the action in question. (p.p. 123-24)

For instance, if Character A shot Character B, the reason for the shooting should stem from the world in which Character A lived. When Character A shoots Character B, he changes the world in at least some small way. If a character performs an action in a story, there should be a reason for the action to take place; otherwise, his action weakens the integrity of the storyline.

**Female Character Clothing and Objectification**

There is precedence in comic books, video games, and other forms of entertainment to have female characters dress, pose, and act in a sexually provocative manner. Karen E. Dill and Kathryn P. Thill (2007) write that of the female characters in their study's large sample size, 80% of the female character were sexualized, scantily clad, or were treated as a vision of beauty (p.859). Usually, there is no logical reason..."
from a character’s perspective for the character to be scantily clad or sexualized. Similar situations carry over to other popular forms of entertainment. According to Julia T. Wood (1994), women are typically put in secondary roles in commercials, music videos, and other widely viewed media. These women are usually portrayed as though their only value is as an object of male desire. Wood also notes that women are often shown in various states of undress, while men are usually fully clothed (p.p. 34, 36). A more recent paper by Rachel M. Calogero, Stacey Tantleff-Dunn, and J. Kevin Thompson (2011) demonstrates that the trend has continued: "Media exposure spotlights women's bodies and body parts while depicting women as the target of a non-reciprocated male gaze" (p.6).

Since the author's character depicted later in this thesis will be in graphic novel format, it seems only appropriate to focus on comic book heroines to illustrate the habitual lack of appropriate clothing on popular female characters. The three characters pictured below are, from left to right: Psylocke, a masterful psychic ninja. Elektra, a highly trained assassin. Jean Grey, otherwise known as The Phoenix, one of the most powerful forces in the Marvel universe (see Figure 1).

Despite the fact that these three women are regularly engaged in combat and are extraordinarily skilled, powerful beings in the Marvel universe, none of these women dress appropriately for their situations. The costumes each of these women wear leave them naked for all intents and purposes. Their musculature, breasts, and buttocks are clearly defined despite the women technically being clothed. Each of these women is portrayed in a borderline pornographic manner, which is not aligned with their extraordinary, superheroic feminine characteristics. When designing a character based on
her background and lifestyle and not on making a female character a sexual object, a
designer can rarely dress powerful women who participate in combat like swimsuit or
bodypaint models without compromising their characters.

Figure 1: From left to right: Psylocke, Elektra, and Jean Grey/The Phoenix.

Some clarification is necessary; there is nothing wrong with having a female
character who embraces her sexuality and dresses accordingly. However, female
characters currently express their sexuality constantly with their appearances, to the
detriment of any other aspects of their characters. Therefore, these women are being
objectified instead of empowered by the unbalanced emphasis on their sexuality. A strong
female character should clearly show other facets of herself besides just her sexuality; in
the context of her broader and deeper characterization, depictions emphasizing her
sexuality then demonstrate her empowerment and control over her own femininity rather
than reducing her to an object. Character designers have a responsibility to recognize the line between empowerment and objectification and design their characters accordingly.

The reason that recognizing the line between objectification and empowerment is important is briefly outlined by Dawn M. Szymanski, Erika R. Carr, and Lauren B. Moffitt (2011): "Research on the psychosocial correlates of sexual objectification is supportive of feminist theorists' assertions that sexually objectifying experiences and self-objectification have negative impacts on the psychosocial and relational well-being of women" (p. 109). Other research presented by Barbara L. Fredrickson and Tomi-Ann Roberts (1997) elaborates on the harmful nature of objectification by presenting research on women exploring the adverse effects of being treated as a collection of body parts whose main function is pleasing other people. To summarize, objectification damages many women by pushing them to alter their perspectives and see themselves as objects to be evaluated and validated by the opinions of others (p.p. 174, 177). Rachel M. Calogero, William N. Davis, and J. Kevin Thompson (2011) confirm the concepts presented by Szymanski, Carr, Moffitt, Fredrickson, and Roberts by delving further into the psychology of objectification and the effects of self-objectification, including body image problems, eating disorders, depression, and a myriad of other mental and physical problems. The root harm of self-objectification is convincing countless women that they should not be comfortable in their own skins because they will never be good enough physically to please other people, and that they have nothing to offer to the world but their bodies (p.p. 33-34).
Sexual objectification is also absorbed by young girls exposed to the mass media, influencing them as they experience puberty and mature into adults. Paul J. Wright's (2009) study reports:

Adolescents themselves acknowledge that they turn to the mass media for information about sexuality. For example, a national study carried out in 1993 found that teens aged 13-15 ranked the mass media as their fourth most important source of sexual information and teens aged 16-17 ranked the mass media as their third most important source of sexual information. (p. 182)

Young girls beginning to have an interest in sexuality turn to the media to learn more, and often unconsciously absorb the message of objectification without discernment or evaluation.

**The Character's Design Rationale**

For the purposes of this thesis, the author will be using a world and characters of her own creation to illustrate basic character design. The world created by the author is an urban fantasy world, with the main story taking place in a large metropolitan city. This fantasy world will have vampires quietly living amongst humans and remaining unknown to humanity at large.

The main character, Joanna, is the daughter of a prosperous businessman. The story revolves around her trauma following a vampire murdering her family and her difficulty in dealing with post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). Joanna comes from a fairly high class, well-to-do socialite background, and her story deals with the difficulties she experiences after her personal life is abruptly and brutally ripped apart.
Joanna's Visual Design

The artistic portion of this thesis will consist of digital drawings of Joanna and other characters from the story at important parts of the story's timeline. Since her character, her world, and the storyline within it have been completely developed, the next step is to visually design Joanna's character. The first aspect to consider is her body type and general appearance. This design will include the types of clothing she wears, and whether she possesses any particular items that she should always have with her. Joanna is a young woman of average height, erring slightly on the short side. She is curvacious, though realistically proportioned, and she has medium-length dark blonde hair. Since she lives in an metropolitan area and is from a well-to-do family, she is capable of dressing fashionably; however, she usually wears more casual clothing such jeans, leggings, and comfortable shirts. Her city is fairly cold and damp; unless she is wearing something specifically to be fashionable, such as a dress that accentuates her legs, she dresses appropriately for the weather. While Joanna is attractive for the purposes of the story, she will ignore the media precedents requiring her to always look her best no matter what has happened to her. She will not dress or pose provocatively unless the story calls for it. Even when she does dress or pose provocatively, Joanna will not exceed reasonable expectations for her clothing or posture. Therefore, the artist for her character design should focus on more naturalized positions instead of trying to make her sexually appealing to viewers at every moment.

The lack of revealing costumes will also help set the tone for the story. Given its subject matter, the story is intended for adults and deals with mental problems and reactions to death, fear, and horrific circumstances. A darker, slightly more gothic theme
and more realistic poses are far more appropriate for the story than sensual, idealized visuals forcing Joanna to look sexualized in her weakest moments. Despite the characteristics of females commonly seen in much of gothic literature, Joanna is not a damsel in distress whose rescue depends on her sexual appeal. She is a three-dimensional character who must deal with her own weakness, summon her own strength, and interact with other characters at a level that goes far beyond the superficialities of sexual pursuit.

**The Character's Design**

With her appearance and clothing types considered, the final step is to state which parts of the story will be illustrated with digital drawings in this thesis.

**Birthday Preparations.** The first piece will be of Joanna in a sleeveless dress extending down to her mid-thigh, which is the outfit she wears when she is first appears in the story. She is taking her younger sister out for her birthday as the story begins. She should look happy and relaxed, though not sexualized, since she is dressed up for her sister and is not trying to use her physical attributes for any other motive. In this picture, her face is not fully drawn to symbolize the fact that her character is about to be severely changed from the trauma after this moment.

**Shellshock.** The next piece will illustrate Joanna after the murder of her family. She will be wearing sweatpants and a camisole while lying on her side in the fetal position and crying from her loss.

**Grief Counseling.** Following Joanna's loss and her subsequent attempts to deal with her trauma, Joanna will discover how to locate other vampires accurately and will hunt them to help herself feel safe and recover from the murders. This piece will show her crouched with her knife over the body of a vampire as she stabs him.
Conclusion

This series of visual vignettes depicts a strong and attractive female character from a graphic novel in a way appropriate to her world and her situation without overemphasizing her sexuality or objectifying her. The artist, this author, is thus fulfilling her responsibility to create and depict a fictional character in a way that will edify readers, thereby making a positive contribution to the way they view themselves and interact with people in their own world.
Birthday Preparations
Shellshock
Grief Counseling
References


