

# Escaping Stereotypes

by David Clarke

There is a pattern of "development" for gamers. Initially the emphasis is on cold statistics and success - this is the period in a gamers' life of hack and slash and Monty Haul. What follows is a transition period, where some mystical force calls them to put down the long sword +5/+6 vs. deities and the barrels of rubies to play the role of a character with Oscar-winning skill.

What is a good role-player? Having watched some of them in action, I would say this: A good role-player is one who can give his character a personality and "life" that are unique, rationalized by his background, consistent, and not based on stereotypes. So how does one become a good role-player? I have a method. Since it's not easy to learn "personality," this method focuses on first getting good personalities for the characters that the player can become familiar with easily and play easily. Ultimately, players learn to role-play better and to create their own "good" characters.

Consider the following scene at a campsite on the freezing tundra. Five characters huddle among ancient ruins:

Dwarf: I'm sleeping away from the elf.

Priest: I'll pray before I rest.

Fighter: I'll polish my sword during watch.

Mage: I quickly glance over my spell book.

Halfling: I'm wishing I was back home.

At one time, the above would have passed for role-playing in my campaign. On the surface, the characters' statements seem appropriate; each character has reacted to the setting in a manner typical to their race or class. The problem for many role-players is moving beyond the stage where their characters are the sum of race, class, alignment and ability scores. Even some veteran players who have never adventured in a "role-rich" campaign may ask, "What else is there?"

The answer is, personality - above and beyond what can be seen on paper. Paladins should be as diverse a group as teachers, and halflings should have only as much in common as do average people in the street. A race or occupation is but a fragment of one's personality. Role-playing the stereotype of a fragment is dooming the character to live in one dimension.

Beyond a paper-bound existence, PCs should have hobbies, opinions,

attitudes, perspectives, phobias, strengths, and weaknesses. In addition, there should be only a limited connection between the character's statistics and his personality. For example, a stereotypical trait of thieves is "sneakiness"; but if all the thieves share their traits, there can be no variety.

An excellent list of personality traits, interests, etc. can be found in the back of the 1st Edition Dungeon Masters Guide. Working from this list, intended to help DM's create NPCs, players can create excellent personalities. Unfortunately, there is no information available on how to role-play "compassionate" or "arrogant," and some listed traits are far more abstract. There is certainly no guide to playing these traits in conjunction with one another.

For example, consider a human priest who is arrogant, compassionate, interested in fine music and food, boastful, and cowardly. How does this character react to being bullied by ogres, asked for alms by a beggar, or being sent to a frontier settlement? One of the great challenges for role-players is playing a character with consistency. With the above example, however, even a veteran player may have difficulty making a personality gel around those traits.

Many veteran role-players would say the answer lies in the character's background. Unfortunately, this is the second problem with random trait personalities - or at least it should be, if the background is done right. Background should not only explain what a character was doing before becoming an adventurer or where he's from, but also why he is who he is. What happened to this priest over the course of his life to cause him to be both arrogant and compassionate? Where did he learn to appreciate fine music and food? As a coward, what does he have to boast about? (In addition, how did he choose his vocation? What type of social, political, or familial environment did he grow up in?) These questions almost seem to make the situation more confusing, instead of offering explanations.

The solution lies in looking at the problem from the opposite perspective. Instead of starting with traits and building a character, start with a character and pick out traits. I discovered this method by "modeling" my characters on either real people or "media characters." I was playing in a role-intensive campaign and was called upon to create a character quickly. Without telling my fellow players what I was up to, I proceeded to model my character on a friend. I quickly realized how easy the character was to play, and how detailed, consistent, and "alive" she seemed to be. Because I knew the model so well - her views, hobbies, phobias, and overall personality - the character sprang to life within the first few minutes of

gaming. My character was quick tempered - even belligerent - but liked to be needed and could be very warm once in a while. She was proud, secretive and rather quiet (except at parties). She loved cats, books, and beer.

Naturally, I wanted to play more characters with such ease and success.

Unfortunately, not every person I knew had a personality compatible with life in a fantasy world, and some of those who did I felt I didn't know well enough. I started basing character on "media models" like Indiana Jones, Ross Perot, even Cookie Monster. One source I stayed away from was traditional fantasy (e.g., J.R.R. Tolkien, Terry Daniels, the Conan movies). Many of the stereotypes I wanted to get away from were based on characters from these sources; after all, who more typifies the wise-wizard-with-a-beard than Gandalf?

A quick word about what makes a good model: the primary attribute is familiarity. Cookie monster made a good model, but if you're not very familiar with him, he won't work well for you. Remember, the purpose of a model is to help you define the character's personality and play him consistently. The second important attribute is uniqueness. A grumpy Detective Fish (Barney Miller) would be pretty close to the stereotype as a dwarf, so what would be the point of using him as a model? A Norm Peterson (Cheers) or Popeye would be much more memorable.

There is the issue of racial tendencies to consider, if only to keep the campaign world consistent. Many official source books describe the races as having somewhat predetermined characteristics, whence the stereotypes arise. That is still no reason why a character could not have any personality you choose. Let all the other dwarves be dark and brooding, yours could still be David Addison (Moonlighting), dancing, singing, and rhyming his way through life. In fact, going against the grain adds to a character's background because now, the player has to explain why his character is so different. Did he grow in a different racial environment? Is he sane? Cursed? The possibilities for explanation make the character all the more interesting.

Finally, good models are themselves well developed personalities. If the model is one-dimensional or not well detailed in its own setting, it will take a lot of work and ad-libbing to fill the character out.

Media models have more obvious traits that are interesting to play in a fantasy setting. The trade off, however, is that they tend not to be as multi-dimensional as personal models and can be more difficult to play with consistency. Oscar Madison is obviously not too tidy and loves having a good time, but what would he do if begged for help by an elderly man or a voluptuous princess? Cookie Monster likes cookies and isn't too bright, but

how brave or cowardly would he be if facing a dragon? These questions must be answered in order for the character to be multi-dimensional and consistent.

One means of answering such questions is within the character's background. Background is often hailed as the salvation of stereotypical, one dimensional characters. The reason two dwarven thieves are not identical (even if they are, statistically) is because one was a prince, a rogue, and a deceiver, exiled for dishonoring his father the king. The other was a slave of neighboring fire giants, who escaped through stealth and dexterity but chose not to return to his homeland. These backgrounds, although not very detailed, are sufficient to explain why the characters chose their class. What is not addressed, something essential for all characters (model-based or not), is an explanation for why the characters are the way they are. Why was the prince a rogue? How did he dishonor his father? How did the former slave acquire great dexterity? How did he survive his enslavement? At what age was he captured? Does he remember a life among dwarves? What effect has wealth or poverty had on these characters? As more traits are revealed and more depth given to the background, it becomes impossible for two characters to have identical personalities. (I once played a brother and sister who were nearly opposites based solely on their age and, as a result, what each remembered about a past tragedy in their lives.) A good background not only explains where the character is from, but who he is, and why.

Once a complete background that fully explains a character's personality traits is compiled, it becomes much easier to understand the interplay of traits, like those from the back of the original edition of the DMG. For example, look again at our human priest. Arrogance, compassion, interest in fine music and food, boastfulness, and cowardice taken together rather aptly describe Major Winchester from M\*A\*S\*H. His upper-class background made him arrogant and allowed him to be exposed to intellectual discussion, tastes, and interests. His conceit often leads to boasting, but he often backs down from confrontations, especially with superiors. On occasion he can be quite compassionate, but those moments are rare. The questions posed previously about this character have obvious answers now: he might back down from the ogres (though he thinks they're inferior) and would likely help the beggar. He would despise life in a frontier settlement where he has few of his favorite luxuries. By using models, players learn to play characters consistently, to gain insight into their characters' perspectives and motivation, and to break down personalities into complex and even contradictory traits. In this way, players become better role-players.

The next step is for players to begin creating their own characters

without losing too much of the depth and consistency of modeled characters. One way to do this easily is to begin creating characters with a single trait as their focus. To some degree, you may find that some character depth is temporarily lost, as more input from the players is required. This is, however, an important transition step in enabling players to create their own characters from scratch.

A priest who sings, a dwarven thief with a drinking problem, or an old fighter suffering from senility would make a good transitional characters. With a background to explain the character, he is quickly ready for play. The character will gradually gain secondary traits and depth as situations arise that don't correspond directly to the focus trait and cause other traits to emerge spontaneously. It is important that the players be on the lookout for these so as to keep them consistent. As each trait emerges, the player learns to play it in conjunction with other traits, slowly building toward the "good" character.

Again, there are a few qualities that make a good trait. Familiarity is a factor, but players can't choose traits they're unfamiliar with in real life, so it's a moot point. Instead, the two truly important factors are breadth and weakness. Broad traits are ones that are applicable or visible often. Foolhardiness, arrogance, and paranoia are traits that can be applied to many situations, unlike thriftiness or fear of water. Using a broad trait prevents the need for many secondary traits to cover situations not applicable to the focus trait, and yet will still allow some secondary traits to develop. (I've yet to find a trait so broad that it covers every possible situation and prevents secondary traits from surfacing.)

The most important quality the focus trait should have is that it should be a weakness. How hard is it to role-play smart, funny, brave, or outgoing? Everyone has a weakness; so should all characters. Role-playing a character as childlike, obnoxious, foolhardy, or lecherous makes him more interesting and offers a greater challenge to players. This challenge is what gets the creativity flowing and helps the player in the next and final stage.

The "good" character is defined as one whose behavior is consistent but flexible enough to vary from situation to situation. A "good" character should be awash in details such as habits, hobbies, accents, phobias, mannerisms, and numerous other idiosyncrasies; all consistent with the character's overall personality and background. For example, Griffio, a halfling priest, never does anything to excess except collect maps. His father was a diplomat in an era when the halflings had a weak militia, so he stressed peaceful resolution to problems both at home and at court. For

Griffo, the eldest son, he brought maps from all over the known world. His frequent absences, however, forced Griffo to frequently assume charge of the family and be very protective of those he cares about. Nowadays, that protectiveness is especially shown toward the weaker members of the party. He is generally good-natured and open-minded, except when it comes to the rake, Valerius, who once tormented several of Griffo's companions.

Reuben, a human fighter acquainted with Griffo, is much more child-like. He opens every encounter with barmaids and bugbears alike by offering pieces of rice candy (which his grandfather used to eat). Growing up with his grandfather (a wise, though slightly senile man) Reuben learned to live life for its wonder and

excitement - Gramps always encouraged him to try everything at least once. Reuben's favorite items are a kaleidoscope, mechanical toy bear, and his eyes of minute seeing. Because of his fascination with new things, he is often fearless (or senseless) in battle - fortunately he's good with the broadsword. He's actually rather bright (and stemming from his love of games and puzzles an excellent problem-solver), but he usually comes across to strangers as rather dim.

One way of telling whether a character qualifies as "good" is to try describing him either to someone else, or on paper. If you find that you can go on and on, honestly describing the character's behavior and background, odds are you've got a "good" character. Sometimes it's a good idea to do this - especially with the DM - to ensure that your character is consistent with your characterization. Reuben's personality has occasionally become dominated by his childlike quality; but by continual review, by and with other players, he never gets to drift too far.

Obviously, the process of creating a good character takes time. For DM's creating NPCs, then, it becomes prohibitive for all but the most important or frequently met ones. The model or one-trait methods, however, are lifesavers for DMs. A list of models and traits can be made ahead of time on 3 x 5 cards and assigned to shopkeepers, palace guards, and the like as necessary. (I prioritize my list by familiarity, so more influential NPCs get good models, moderately important ones get a trait or mediocre model, and average NPCs have ordinary traits).

The limited roles of many NPCs allow the DM to use models that could never be useful for PCs. The local judge, town drunk, and landlord can use up all the good ideas that couldn't be filled out enough to create PCs.

Unfortunately, a player creating a new character under this system can be a problem for the DM. For example, new characters starting in my campaign are allowed to start with experience points equal to the lowest of any

existing character. (Those most recently created are around 7th level). As a DM then, I've allowed players to have a lot of input into what non-magical items their character might have, as well as what type of magical items they might be most likely to use.

This sounds awfully generous of me but I use it to encourage role-playing. By giving a mischievous mage a wand of wonder, Reuben his eyes of minute seeing and a priestess of Horus a gem of retaliation, I allow the character to come into existence in my campaign with evidence of the personality they've supposedly already developed.

This has worked well, but an unexpected side-effect has been players' ideas about their characters. We have dealt with balance-threatening ideas on modification of ability scores, unusual race or class combinations, and more minor ones. The only guidelines I've followed in dealing with such cases are that they are acceptable only if they add to the character's personality and the character does not benefit "statistically" any more than he would have with the unmodified scores, or different race, etc.

For example, the Cookie Monster character originally had S 16; D 10; C 16 I 13; W 9; Ch 7. The player and I agreed to lower Cookie's Intelligence to 6 and increase Strength and Constitution by one point each. The ability scores matched the personality and the character did not benefit (losing seven points and gaining only two). Likewise, all drow characters in my campaign are created with the understanding that they will not have any innate spell abilities. Usually the character is half-drow; this also explains their existence out of the Underdark.

Players' suggestions for modifications to their characters should be viewed as a sign of interest and creativity on their part. Usually reminding players that they'll be expected to play the character better as a result of a DM's flexibility and that experience will be awarded accordingly is enough to prevent any problem.

In a similar fashion, once players have interesting characters, they may begin to want to alter the campaign world-or at the very least, ask questions the DM is not prepared for. For example, when characters enter a city, they usually look for inns, weaponsmiths, taverns, gem cutters, and the like. In my cities, how-ever, I have to be prepared to answer queries about cartographers, frogs, deep-fried camel-steaks, and "people who smell odd," to name a few. These are examples of the characters fitting into their worlds and your world, and should be seen as very positive signs.

It's a two-way street; you can include a bard playing, "As Time Goes By" to see how the character based on Rick Blaine (Casablanca) reacts. He may become enraged and chase after the bard, starting a whole new adventure

for the party. In this manner, the party may choose adventures you hadn't intended, such as choosing to ignore the rumors about the dragon and its hoard in favor of the rumors of pixies with a large vat of dandelion wine. You may find you have to disguise your adventures if you're a DM who likes to "lead" your party down particular paths. In the end, the players' involvement is a blessing because it takes some of the creative weight off the DM and tells the DM what kind of environments and adventures the players are interested in.

Ultimately, this system has the potential to revolutionize a campaign. Players who longed only to slay and spend may turn their swords into plow shares. Players who couldn't role-play previously certainly would not have enjoyed it, but by learning to take on roles (whether from models, traits, or their own imaginations) may find the game considerably more fun. Likewise, they will have benefitted both by learning to create more interesting characters and also from learning to portray those characters better.

## Model Suggestions

### **Fighter** (general)

Vampires Lestat and Louis (Anne Rice), X-Men Beast and Wolverine, Archie Bunker, Ross Perot, Cookie Monster, Reverend Jim (Taxi), Norm (Cheers), Kane (Kung-fu), Barney Fife and Otis Campbell (Andy Griffith Show), Jethro (Beverly Hillbillies), Elmo (Sesame Street), Dirty Harry, Tom (Legend)

### **Thieves/Assassins**

James Bond, Han Solo, Rick (Casablanca), Bart Simpson, Rambo, Carla (Cheers), Captain Ron, the Fairies (Willow), Fletch, Sinbad the Sailor, the Marx Brothers, John Lovitz's liar character (Saturday Night Live)

### **Paladins**

The Lone Ranger, Batman, Luke Skywalker, Felix Unger (The Odd Couple), Popeye, Sheriff Andy Taylor/Griffith, Zorro, Lancelot and Bedivere (Monty Python's Holy Grail), Spartacus, Judge Harry Stone (Night Court), Fish and Dietrich (Barney Miller)

### **Priests**

Gandhi, Mr. Spock and Dr. McCoy, Ronald Regan, Father Mulcahey, Dr. Winchester and Hawkeye (M\*A\*S\*H), Oprah Winfrey, Rush Limbaugh, televangelists

**Wizards**

Any Dr. Who, Sherlock Holmes, George Will, the genie (Aladdin), Cliff Clavin (Cheers), Grannie (Beverly Hillbillies), Ged (Ursula K. Leguin), Prof. Xavier (X-Men)

**Bards**

Bugs Bunny, Bob Dylan, Keith Richards, Mork, Bob Hope (The Road movies), Dan Fielding (Night Court), David Addison (Moonlighting), Damiano (R. A. MacAvoy)