

# TAXONOMY OF CHARACTEROLOGY

## Pt I: Character Generation Strategies

You can't go far in the way of thought, belief or abstraction without encountering characterological constructs. You have a character like God, for example, that accounts for natural phenomena. You have figures of speech, relating a human subject to something non-human through a shared quality or qualities, and in that metaphoric tradition abstraction, art and so on. Companies, cities, nations and the planet are treated as characters in popular discourse. Occupations are characterological. *You're a banker, you're a chef, you're a Santa...*—each with a corresponding type of hat. But this "Taxonomy" is less a broad take on the characterological paradigm than a **COLLECTION OF STARTING-POINTS for POP-CHARACTEROLOGICAL GENESIS**—compiling **CHARACTER-GENERATION FORMULAE** from the iconic to the more recondite, dating from the mid-nineteenth century to the present day.

### I. POSITIVE CONSTRUCTIONS: CATEGORICAL ANTHROPOMORPHISM

The easiest way to churn out a cast of characters is to make the characters variations on a theme, or subcategories within a closed set. In this way, the characters will be differentiated but retain a common essence. The personality and design of the characters should correspond and counterinform one another, if one subscribes to the popular school of hyper-communicative, narratively-oriented character design.

#### A. GEOMETRIC PRIMITIVES-STEPHEN UNIVERSE (2013-)

(The first Cartoon Network series created by a woman and the first to depict LGBTQ+ relationships between main characters)



"There is this Bauhaus theory of design, which was a test: There's a cube, a cone and a sphere. And you would have to know, intuitively, which one would be red yellow and blue. And the implication was that if you didn't have that intuition, then you were just truly not a designer". - Rebecca Sugar, Series Creator

#### B. COLORS- PRIMARY-COLORED HEROES VS. SECONDARY-COLORED VILLAINS<sup>2</sup>



<sup>1</sup>"The cone is yellow because it's sharp and directional, the cube is red because it's strong and grounded, and the sphere is blue because it's fluid and loose."  
<sup>2</sup> Categorization from *retropes.com*

Pt.1 is intended as a creative reference, lowering barriers to entry for the characterologically disinclined. It focuses on esoteric, critical, formally inventive or coded examples within the characterological discipline. The more straightforward political stakes of characterology- its propagandistic dimension- will be explored more fully in Pt 2. - LH

**TLDR;** *Beginner's guide to Characterology, taking into account narrative, illustrative, socially critical, and promotional applications of character design, multi-national franchises as well as internet vernacular culture.*

### C. ANIMALS- J.J. GRANDEVEILLE'S CARICATURES (MID-1800'S)

"At first sight, Grandville animals, dressed up and performing as men and women, appear to belong to the old tradition, whereby a person is portrayed as an animal so as to reveal more clearly an aspect of his or her character (...)the lion, absolute courage: the hare, lechery."



"But as one goes on looking at Grandville's engravings, one becomes aware [of] the opposite movement to that which one first assumed. (...) These animals have become prisoners of a human/social situation. The culture as landlord is more dreadfully rapacious than he is as a bird. The crocodiles at dinner are greedier at the table than they are in the river(...) The movement that ends with the banality of Disney, began as a disturbing, prophetic dream in the work of Grandville."<sup>3</sup>

>**BONUS CREATURE FEATURE**<  
 MIT's mascot is a beaver-  
 "Nature's engineer."



### D. OPERATING SYSTEMS- OS-TAN MEME

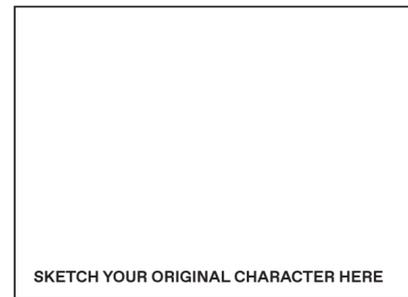
One of the most popular forms of categorical anthropomorphism is the cast of anime/manga<sup>4</sup> style girls. Artworks based on this trope have proliferated on forums and online communities like deviantart. The OS-tans, for instance, personify different computer operating systems (as well as applications) though their clothing, accessories, and personalities.



The personification of Windows ME-tan was supposedly inspired by perception of the operating system as unstable and crash-prone, like a "fickle, troublesome girl."

<sup>3</sup>From John Berger's 1980 *Why Look at Animals?* essay.  
<sup>4</sup>Anime=animation, manga=comics

BY Liby Hays



The OS-tan meme functions as a parody of *moe* (pronounced [mo.e]) aesthetics- a genre of anime defined by the strong affection viewers feel towards characters. Moe protagonists tend to be "naïve and not overly independent," qualities which are explicitly intended to "foster a protective feeling"<sup>5</sup>. Characters are almost always depicted as white schoolgirls with super-stimulus features- big eyes, shiny hair and bow-legs.

### SEE ALSO:

**E. THE FOUR ELEMENTS- THE FANTASTIC FOUR (1961-)** By Jack Kirby and Stan Lee- 1.Mister Fantastic-*Water*// 2.The Invisible Woman-*Air* // 3.The Human Torch- *Fire*// 4.The Thing-*Earth*

**F. THE FOUR HUMORS- SCOOPY-DOO! (1969-)** 1.Daphne- *Sanguine (blood)*// 2.Velma-*Choleric (yellow bile)*// 3.Fred-*Melancholic (black bile)*// 4.Shaggy- *Phlegmatic (phlegm)*// 5.Scooby-*eclectic*

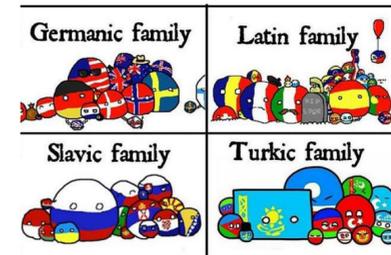
**G. THE ALPHABET- THE GARSHLEY-CRUMB TINIES (1963)** by New England illustrator Edward Gorey- "A is for Amy who fell down the stairs..."

**H. THE 12 CHINESE ZODIAC- FRUITS BASKET (1998-2006)** Big-selling shōjo manga by Natsuki Takaya, adapted into an anime

**I.NATION-STATES- COUNTRYBALLS**

Webcomic starring national flag orbs

**J. THE FOUR PHASES OF FREUDIAN PSYCHOSEXUAL DEVELOPMENT- CHARLIE AND THE CHOCOLATE FACTORY (1964)** by Roald Dahl- 1.Augustus Gloop (*Early oral phase-suckling*)// 2.Violet Beauregarde (*Late oral phase-chewing*)// 3.Veruca Salt (*Anal phase*)// 4.Mike Teevee (*Phallic phase*)



<sup>5</sup>Via *AnimeNewsNetwork.com*

## II. NEGATIVE CONSTRUCTIONS: PHANTASY & DETERMINISM

We might consider characters 'negative constructions' in the sense that they are brought into being to address a lack. One type of void that they fill might be symbolic, and come across through their diegetic role in a story (the realm of fantasy). But characters also live as technological, economic and politically-mediated entities, and can be profoundly shaped by the demands of the market (determinism). These examples could be analyzed in either sense.

**A. DIEGETIC PROBLEMATIC**- Characters fill some void through their function within the diegesis



### 1. WINDOWS ME-TAN (PT.II)

*Void type:* Desirous

In the case of Windows ME-tan, the metaphoric relation between an unpredictable, crash-prone software and the plucky, emotionally transparent anime heroine points to a larger characterological problematic—the trope of female characters as fractured, hysterical, and constructed from the outside-in to fill 'the void of desire.' The fact that the OS-Tans personify hardware also links them to the trope of femme sex-bots—servile humanoids that are literally assembled and controlled by the owner or engineer, on shows like 2002's *Cho-bits*.<sup>6</sup>

### 2. LIQUID HERO ALEX MACK (1994-1998)

*Void type:* Aqueous

The Nickelodeon live-action show chronicled the day-to-day life of a girl who, after being contaminated with a top-secret chemical, gained the ability to transform into a puddle of water instantaneously.<sup>7</sup>

### 3. HYOUTAN-TSUGI ,THE ORIGINAL TROLL-

*Void type:* Qualitative

The Hyoutan-tsugi was the signature emblem of Osamu Tesuka, known widely as the 'Godfather of Anime and Manga' for creating series such as *Astro Boy*, *Kimba the White Lion* and *Buddha*. The icon was based on a childhood drawing by the artist's sister of the fruiting body of a mushroom. The character appears in nearly every comic in Tesuka's expansive oeuvre, and often materializes as an expression of intense emotion, replacing a character's head or being kicked in a fit of anger.



In other instances it pops up as an easter egg, hidden on a character's sleeve, in the background, etc. Its inexplicable insertion into intense dramatic sequences, coupled with its blank, autistic stare and furious quivering seem to anticipate troll humor/meme humor on present-day forums and social media.



<sup>6</sup>For more on this topic, read Thomas Lamar's excellent 2009 book of media theory, *The Anime Machine*

<sup>7</sup>When Alex liquefies her clothes liquefy as well- the actress was uncomfortable being naked when the character returns to her solid state.

## B.EXTRA-DIEGETIC PROBLEMATIC

Circumstantial constraints radically shape the character's design and legacy.



### 1. KILROY(1940'S)-

*Determinism:* Political determinism

Kilroy is a drawing of a large-nosed bald man overlooking a wall that began showing up in soldiers' graffiti during World War II. The accompanying caption, "Kilroy was here," orients the drawing as a fictive self-portrait.'Kilroy,' like 'soldier' is an identity anyone can take up in passing. The doodle became popular internationally, under various guises: "Other names for the character include Chad (in the U.K.), Foo (in Australia) Smoe, Clem, Flywheel, Private Snoops, Overby, The Jeep (as both characters had sizable noses), and Sapo."

### 2.TOY STORY (1995) & A BUG'S LIFE(1998)-

*Determinism:* Technological determinism

The reason why Pixar's first movie was about toys and its second, insects? Since it was highly difficult to achieve a smooth range of motion with computer animation at the time, stories were built around stiff, segmented or doll-like entities.

### 3. EWOKS from STAR WARS: EPISODE VI (1983)-

*Determinism:* Economic determinism

George Lucas has been accused of inventing the Ewok characters to sell stuffed plushes, among other precalculated merchandising moves.

### 4. PISSING CALVIN-

*Determinism:* Ironic inverse economic determinism(?!)

Bill Waterson, in a legendary display of artistic integrity/antiestablishmentarianism, turned down potential billions by refusing to merchandise his popular comic strip characters, Calvin and Hobbes. Ironically, Calvin's image resurfaced as one of the most puerile and proliferant pieces of bootleg kitsch in Western history, the Pissing Calvin graphic. (Most often seen as a car decal.)

### 5. ROY G. BIV-

*Determinism:* Mnemonic determinism

Ah, Roy G. Biv, the most elusive of characters, present only when light refracts through droplets of water, or passes through glass at the right angle...

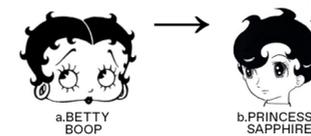
## III. STYLISTIC CONSTRUCTIONS: THE FRANKENSTEINIAN APPROACH

This approach to character generation involves stitching together design elements/body parts from pre-existing characters. These elements will encapsulate a certain characterological lineage or genre-amalgam.

### A. SPIKY HAIR (A BRUSH WITH FATE)-

Rumored accounts of tonsorial influence.

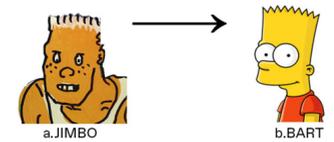
#### 1. FEMME-



**a.BETTY BOOP (1930)**- Neotenic Great Depression-era cartoon by Max Fleischer **INSPIRED->**

**b.SAPPHIRE** from *PRINCESS KNIGHT (1953)* by Osamu Tesuka, making Betty Boop the true manga progenitor

## 2. MASC-

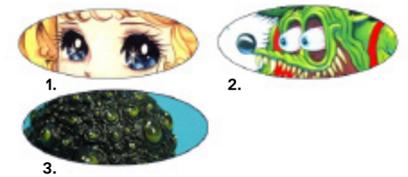


**a.JIMBO (1988)** comic book character by underground cartoonist Gary Panter **INSPIRED->**

**b. BART SIMPSON (1989)** by Matt Groening (Panter's best friend at the time)

"I owe Gary Panter a lot of money..."—Matt Groening

## B. EYE STYLES-



**1. SHOJO 'GALAXY' EYES-** a mirror regression of orbs within orbs; intergalactic affect.

*Pictured:* Illustration by Tadatsu Yoko from the cover of 1960's *Margaret* shōjo manga magazine

**2. LECHEROUS EYE TROPISM-** Artist Mike Kelley points out how in Californian hotrod art<sup>8</sup>, the characters' eyes distend phallically in a savage parody of the male gaze.

*Pictured:* Ratfink, by lowbrow legend Big Daddy Roth

**3. PROLIFERENT EYES-** The Shoggoth from H.P. Lovecraft's 1931 *At the Mountains of Madness* is described as "a shapeless congeries of protoplasmic bubbles, faintly self-luminous, and with myriads of temporary eyes forming and un-forming as pustules of greenish light."<sup>9</sup>

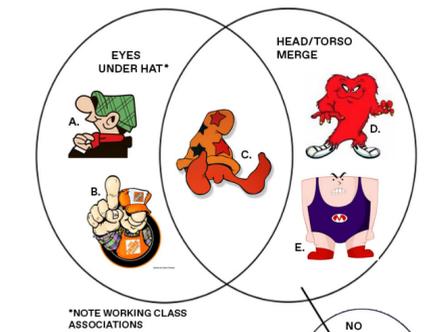
The monster seems to anticipate Google's 'Deep Dream' neural network, which generates imagery teeming with psychedelic eyeballs.

*Pictured:* Shoggoth Model by Shengu Models

>**BONUS COLLECTOR'S TIP (RATTED OUT)**< When appraising vintage Mickey Mouse collectibles, the general rule is: the longer the snout, the higher the price.

## C. FUGITIVE MORPHOLOGIES-

Characters with missing, enshrouded or condensed body parts



**A. ANDY CAPP-** English comic strip character/Hot Fries Mascot

**B. HOMER, THE HOME DEPOT MASCOT** since 1981

**C. CHEECH WIZARD-** Underground comics character by Vaughn Bodé, running in *National Lampoon Magazine* (1967-1975)

**D. GOSSAMER-** from *Looney Tunes* (1930-1969)

**E. STRONG MAD-** from Homestar Runner web cartoons (2000-2010)

**F. LEGS-GO-ALL-THE-WAY-UP GRIFFIN** from *Family Guy* (1999-)

<sup>8</sup>Associated with car customization & the Hell's Angels  
<sup>9</sup>"Teeming, seething, swelling, foaming, spreading like an infectious disease, this nameless horror..." Lovecraft excerpted in Deleuze & Guattari's *1000 Plateaus*