

# Creating a character

A summary of a process with exercises and advice

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## Introduction

This article is written as an introduction to a methodology that is useful for creating more vivid and thorough characters for larp. It is about the creation of the personality and the physical representation of the character as the first part of a three-part article series about character creation and larp preparation for the player. The second part is about the character's relationships, goals, morals and background, while the third part is about the social position of the character and the interaction with the surrounding culture. These two parts will be published on my homepage<sup>1</sup>.

In this article I present some exercises that have been picked up from the world of theatre and been used to great avail by both beginners and veterans of larping. These exercises are used in workshops and it might

<sup>1</sup> <http://www.interaktivproduktion.se/pedagogik/texter.html>

take some time to carry them out. I advise you to pick a few, try them out and then use what works for you. Do not overdo it – bite off as big a chunk as you can handle at a time. Try to focus on what the exercises make you *feel like*. It is not a question of necessarily portraying a character by the exterior representation and copying from the real world like in theatre or film, but rather a way of helping you find what makes the character different from yourself and what helps you get into the game. Many of these exercises are *hooks* that you can use to pull yourself back into the game again if you feel you have lost the flow/character/play.

These exercises are geared towards making the character a “second skin” for the player, but what you come up with is not written in stone. Everything you create can change at a later point in the cyclic process.

## Archetype and basic background

We start character creation by thinking of a concept or dramatic archetype for the character. You can do this by starting to form a mental image. Make this as specific as possible. Start applying words to the image: Young woman coming of age, slimy bad guy sidekick, wise and helpful old man, evil megalomaniac scientist etc.

Also, decide some basic background for the character. Where is it from? What does it do for a living? Any major traumas? The basic background of a character will be important for developing its body and personality later on. There is a big difference, for instance, in how a farmer and a clerk move. Similarly, there is a big difference in your body posture and state of mind if you were abused as a child, compared to if you were not. Therefore think at least briefly about the background of the character and let it keep growing in parallel with the rest of this work.

# Personality development – the personality tripod tool



■ *Illustration*  
Morgan Jarl

The personality tripod is a way of thinking about your character in a simplified manner that can help you find the basic psychology behind your character's actions. You choose three personality characteristics that describe your character. This tripod is basically a skeleton of your character's personality that you then flesh out by adding nuances and tints created by mixing these characteristics. Compare it to mixing two painting colors together creating different colors. If a character is proud, irritable and stubborn it is very different from a proud, irritable and loving character. Three is a good number to use, since that gives us a well-rounded character without complicating the acting too much. It keeps your work focused and simple.

## Gestalt development process

We will now look at how your character is going to be physically represented. Your body is the basis of your character, but you move like you do not just because of the body you have, but because of the image you have of yourself. Everyone can change the way they use their body to represent someone other than themselves. You can catch someone else in a gesture, an intonation, a specific rhythm and a phrase they often use. It is even easier to create a physical representation of a person who does not exist since your imagination and exploration have free room to play.

Always be aware of what or who you feel like in the following explorations. What emotions or characters do a certain way of moving elicit in you? Find out what makes you feel like the character you want to portray.

## The physical tripod tool

We will look at a tripod of physical characteristics that can work in a similar manner for your body as the Personality Tripod Model works for your mind. As you work through this guide, remember that just because you decided something in an earlier step, it does not mean that you cannot change later on. During the larp you should not think consciously of these factors, just let your character-work influence what you do and help you during your game.

### *Explore the walk (10-30 min)*

To start off with you should try out some walking. Walk around the room, without engaging others. Work on your own. Explore the difference in your body if you put down the inside of the foot first, or the front, the back or the outside. Walk with your toes pointing inwards and outwards. Explore long strides or short strides. Combine the different ways of walking. How does it change your body, breath and face? What does it make you feel like?

### *Explore the center of gravity (10-30 min)*

Next let us explore the center of gravity. Stand in a neutral erect position with legs apart and head up. Try shifting the weight around in the body. Try it high, held in the head or chest, or maybe low, deep down in the pelvis. In front of the body, making you fall forwards into your walk, or maybe behind you so you pull yourself along. Try the sides; what if the center of gravity is slightly to the right? Walk around with the different centers of gravity to try how it affects you.

### *Explore the focus (10-30 min)*

Finally, we try out different points of focus. The point of focus is easiest understood as the leading part of the body, where the character's movements originate from. Is it the hands, the head, the nose, the forehead, the chin, the chest, the stomach or the groin? Try leading from different parts

of your body, walk around the room and examine things, sit down, do a dance, greet someone etc.

Discuss what you have found in the different exercises with your friends. Putting the experiences into words will make it easier to move on to practice later on.

### *The physical tripod*

Now try a few different combinations of walk, focus and center of gravity to feel the difference and see what kind of people you come up against. Now think about what kind of person your character is and apply the physical tripod to it. A farmer might have a low center of gravity to lift heavy weights and handle animals, a postal rider might have a turned out, wide stance from all the riding and a warrior might lead from the chest in a proud manner. Try to find the body you would connect to the character you are to portray. Play around by walking, sitting, standing, laying down, jumping etc. in your character's body.

When working with these aspects, always remember the work you have done with your character concept and revise if you feel it is necessary. In the third part of this article series we will also touch upon status and other ways of interacting with the surroundings. This might change your perception of your character's body too.

## The breath and the voice of the character

Now we move on to breath and voice. To change the way we speak will make us feel very different from our everyday persona.

### *Examine breath (5-15 min)*

That which brings life to our bodies is the breath. Examine how you breathe; just breathe in and out and observe. Try breathing low, down in your stomach. Try breathing with the lower ribs in the back. Then try the front of the chest; breathing with the whole shoulders; very shallow high up in the chest. Walk around and move in different random ways and see

how the breath animates you. If you choose a certain breathing for your character, how does that influence the body you worked on and its movements?

### *Examine rhythm (5-15 min)*

Try playing with different speeds and rhythms. Can the breath be short or staggered or slow? See how the character moves while tired, or excited, or in a hurry, or angry. See where the mental activity of a character can influence the rhythm, someone who is slow in the head might be slow also in physical appearance or not.

### *Character rhythm and breath (5-20 min)*

Now try the same exercises with the character you are working on specifically in mind. How does the posture of the character change the rhythm and breath? How does the character personality-work influence this work?

### *Voice of character (10-30 min)*

You might already have an idea of how your character's voice sounds, or you might have no clue. Start with trying out sounds that come from the character breath, then simple words, and finally full speech. Think of the kind of expressions your character would use. Where in the mouth does it put its words? Does it have a lisp or a stutter? What pitch does it have: low, high or mid range? Does it tend to pronounce certain sounds a bit quirky? Think of speech patterns: Long sentences or short? Rhythmic or droning speech? Round or sharp phrasing? Far back in the mouth or far forward? Nasal voice? Do not make a funny voice but experiment, try things out. Make sure that you can sustain the speech too. You don't want to lose your voice the second day of a larp. Refer back to your personality work here, too. The voice plays a big role in how we perceive someone's personality.

## Character mask

A character mask is not just something that the actor wears over his/her face (it could of course be), but rather the full physical attire of the character. Try to dress your character; costume, make up, tattoos, other body art, personal props and accessories. Be as specific about these things as possible, play with them. See how they influence the character's movements and concept as defined before. You might get a character tic by having a personal prop like a whistle, or an accessory like a bracelet. Does your character carry a small bag or a pouch, or does it have pockets? What is in these bags/pockets? It might also help with a history behind every item you have, which will give your character more background. You can do this whole process along with the creation of your character's final background. (See the History development in Part 2 of this article series)

## Emotional development tools (passions and movement qualities)

With a clear sense of the character's body and mind, we can start on a more nuanced exploration by including passions and moods, by examining how the character moves with different qualities. These exercises are bonus exercises that you can do if you would like to deepen the internal work of the character, making it more systematic. In general these elements can be created in collaboration with other players in relationship improvisations (See the Relationship and History development in Part 2 of this article series), but some individual exploration is sometimes helpful.

### Quality of movement

Now let us try some different qualities of movement. In character, try to be soft, hard, pushy, pulling or sharp; like water, or fire or wind; like different animals. If these qualities influence your play it might give you different emotions or states of being. If you can feel the way in which your

character is soft then it might be your character – and not you – that touches your character’s beloved.

## Moods of character

We have already tried some exploration of emotions and moods, but now let us be somewhat more systematic about it. First try out, in your own body, how you would move if you were Sad, Angry, Scared or Happy. Do not necessarily try to experience the feeling, but examine how the breath moves and the body moves when that particular emotion is inside you. Try to sense it objectively in your body, not to feel the emotion in your soul. Now apply the same exploration to your character’s body and mentality.

## Concluding words

If you have done all this you have probably spent between one and four hours, which is more than most people normally spend on these exercises. You might find that you come back to the ideas of the character’s body over and over again, trying new stuff out. This is great. Personally I make my characters second nature by taking them on while I am out walking, so that I become the character walking rather than myself. This helps me clearly define the character’s personality, background, relations to and view of the world etc. I have time to look at things, to think as the character would and to get the tics and mannerisms right. This is the way I would do all this work, rather than setting aside several hours of specific work time. I hope this has helped you in some way, and that you can use these exercises/techniques Do not hesitate to contact me with ideas and questions.