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In Praise of the Antihero by Michael Wallwork

Some of the most memorable characters in literature, comics, and movies are neither true heroes, nor true villains. They are antiheroes, characters who fall into a grey area between right and wrong. Often well meaning, they fall short of being true heroes due to their questionable morals or the unsavory methods they employ. Their heyday was in the late 1980s and early 1990s, especially in comics, when antiheroes old and new were given a big push along with any hero who was considered "edgy" or who was viewed as pushing the limits of what it meant to be a hero. Lately, the antihero seems to be in decline as we move toward a cleaner, starker contrast between the "good guys" and the "bad guys." This is unfortunate as the antihero, more so than the villain, helps us define heroism and provides the best measuring stick for all true heroes regardless of genre – comic books, movies, pulp fiction, and of course in gaming.

What Defines an Antihero?

One of the most overlooked aspects of the true hero is that he is good not just because he wants to be, though that is important, but because he knows *how* to be a hero. Many, if not most, antiheroes see themselves as heroic individuals. However, they fall short of being true heroes because they lack some necessary trait that true heroes possess, most often the ability to separate the ends they desire and the means used to achieve those ends. Thus, one form the antihero takes is that of an activist for a good cause who either cannot or will not accept the moral limits society imposes on the methods of those seeking a change. An eco-terrorist is a good example. On the one hand, the character wants to protect the environment, which is a good thing. But if the character achieves that end by blowing up buildings owned by companies he perceives as evil or tries to make "political statements" by killing executives of such companies, then that character cannot be considered a hero, no matter how much good they might do saving the environment. Characters who pursue one man crusades against crime also fit into this category if they routinely kill those they perceive to be guilty.

Similar to the character with a social cause is the individual with a scientific one. His work may be intended to benefit mankind; but his methods or results, if not both, are highly unethical. Dr. Frankenstein is a perfect example. In an effort to benefit mankind and learn how life works, he robs graves and constructs what becomes, quite literally, a monster. Any scientist who experiments on humans that are unwilling or unknowing participants could also fit into this

category as would any scientist knowingly doing dangerous research without proper safety precautions, provided that he is doing research that he intends to use to benefit mankind rather than for personal gain.

Occasionally, we run into individuals who are not capable of being good but want to be good or, at the very least, do not want to be evil. They are tragic characters whose very bodies (or minds) betray them and lead them into violent confrontations where they cannot help but hurt people, even though they do not want to or mean to. Frankenstein's monster (especially the movie version) fits here very well. This is also the place for characters with weak wills who do not wish to do evil but who are seduced or overwhelmed by it. Their actions are often marked by indecision or regret, and such characters may even apologize to a hero at the same time they betray him or her.

Finally, we may also find in the antihero ranks people who are "on their own side." These people may have a sense of duty, honor, or even morals, but who first and foremost are "looking out for number one." The loveable thief or scoundrel would fit here as would many vengeful heroes. These characters tend to oppose a villain not because it is the right thing to do but because of some personal interest, whether it is survival, revenge, or an attempt to rescue a loved one. Such characters often have a very specific opponent and can be easily recruited to help against that one particular opponent but often can't be bothered to help out in almost any other situation.

Antiheroes and Villains

It is important to note briefly the relationship between antiheroes and villains. Antiheroes occasionally work with villains because their mutual interests *in the short term* may coincide. Most often, this occurs when both antihero and villain choose the same target (though likely for different reasons). An antihero, for example, may elect to team up with one crime family in order to wipe out a more powerful syndicate. But once the job is finished, the antihero will probably sever the alliance and begin working against his partners.

Partnering with villains is possible not only because the antihero and villain may occasionally share a target but also because they share similar methods. Indeed, the methods of most antiheroes are not very different from most villains. Often, what separates the antihero from the villain is not his method but his motivation.

artwork by Darren Bulmer

The Art of the Interview by Bob Greenwade

The *HERO System* has two good Skills – Conversation and Interrogation – for extracting information from targets who are actively trying to withhold that information. However, the system currently assumes that an attempt to get information that the target is willing to convey automatically succeeds.

While that assumption is generally true, it's not always quite that simple. Memories fade, perceptions become confused, and any number of things can happen. Police at the scene of a robbery can talk to ten eyewitnesses and get twelve different stories with fifteen different suspect descriptions (and sometimes even differing numbers of suspects). Victims of violent assaults – particularly sexual assault – may have emotional difficulty in remembering details.

Getting an accurate story from a cooperative – or at least willing – subject is the function of the *Interviewing* Skill. Had such a Skill appeared in *The Ultimate Skill*, it might have looked something like this.

Interviewing

Type: **Interaction Skill (roll: 9 + (PRE/5) or less)**

Cost: **3 Character Points for a base roll, +1 to the roll per +2 Character Points**

This Interaction Skill enables a character to extract information from a willing target. The Skill is not needed for the basics of a report; however, it can be useful for testing the accuracy of the target's memory, or for helping the target remember forgotten details. The character knows what questions to ask, what tone of voice to adopt, when to push and when to back off, and other aspects of helping a witness make a thorough and accurate report.

Though cooperating, the subject may be emotionally distraught, traumatized, or just plain forgetful, and good use of this Skill can help bring the right information out. A character with this Skill can also detect when a subject is exaggerating, coloring his statement with prejudice or preconceptions, or lying outright.

An unscrupulous interviewer could use this Skill to manipulate the target's memory, especially with Persuasion as a Complementary Skill (or, more often, vice versa). This doesn't have to be a conscious, deliberate effort; if the interviewer is convinced of a particular story (whether because of incomplete evidence, personal prejudices, or something else), he may persuade the target of that story over the actual truth. In a game, this should only happen when the GM feels it advances the needs of the story,

or when the PCs do it deliberately; in the latter case Persuasion would be the primary Skill, and Interviewing would be complementary.

In many cases Conversation may be used as a Complementary Skill. For example, the subject of an interview may leave hints in his speech about some interesting or important detail that might otherwise be missed; Conversation could help the character detect those hints. Deduction may also serve the same Complementary function.

The function of Seduction to allow the character to gain trust and friendship may help witnesses to relax, making it a good Complementary Skill.

Other Skills may also be Complementary, depending on the type of interview being conducted (as described below).

USING INTERVIEWING

There are many people that a character may be called upon to interview. The most obvious, of course, are crime victims and any witnesses at the scene. Informants, witnesses acquainted with the victim or the suspect, experts, consultants, and many others are also potential interview subjects. The subject of an interview can depend somewhat on the subject of the investigation and the occupation of the interviewer.

Police usually start with the victim and any direct witnesses. Then, depending on what they get from them and what else they need, they may move on to the victim's family, friends, coworkers, service providers, and others, including data banks.

Private investigators (including reporters and attorneys) investigating criminal matters don't often talk directly to the victim or accuser, especially when building a criminal defense. They may talk to any other people to whom police investigators talk.

In a missing persons case, the first person interviewed is typically whoever brings the matter to the investigator's attention. From there the investigation moves to the missing person's family, friends, and so forth.

Fugitive searches and "skip traces" (the scope of bounty hunters) are very similar to missing persons. However, they start with the family, friends, data banks, and similar resources, having somewhat less to start with than in a regular missing persons investigation.