

Virtual Soapbox



Six Reasons to Play the Villain Mette Hedin*

Known in Dr. Who costuming circles for portraying several nefarious villains, the author explains why she enjoys portraying the characters people love to hate.

At a Doctor Who convention a year or two ago, a fellow costumer who mostly costumes as The Doctor was suggesting a potential costume idea to me, but interrupted himself with: "...oh, but you only costume as monsters". This took me by surprise as I have never walked exclusively on the dark side, and have certainly cast myself as a fair number of good-guys too.

In that moment I was stunned into confused silence and I never managed to correct him on his misconception, but it got me thinking about why there are both villain and hero costumes in our arsenal, and why the people who channel only the good guys are missing out. So here are six reasons why I like to costume as a Villain and why you might enjoy it too.

1. Villains get the cool clothes.

Heroes are easy to identify with, because the narrative structure is almost always set up for us to identify with and



The Vashta Nerada are not actually visible in this picture; they are invisible piranhas of the air in the *Dr. Who* television series. But if you let them loose in a space suit, they get to accessorize with the skeleton of their prey.

cheer for them and even form an emotional attachment with them. The villains on the other hand tend to occupy far less screen time and therefore it has to be intuitively obvious to figure out who is the bad guy and why he or she should be vanquished. This is one of the main reasons villains get the cool and visually interesting outfits.

The Villain has to look impressive and menacing so as to not make the Hero's heroic battle with them seem unimportant. So while the hero may often get a more nuanced color and design, the Villain is generally almost always a visual caricature in comparison. Add distinct logos, menacing colors, uninviting spiky features and/or an

interesting physical deformation and it spells bad guy right away. But let's face it, it also looks pretty cool. Then there is of course the ultimate emblem of evilness, the immediate entry into the villain club: the addition of Skulls. As one SS Officer says to another in an episode of the sketch show *That Mitchell and Webb Look*: "Have you noticed that our caps have actually got little pictures of skulls on them? Hans, are we the baddies?".



Some anti-heroes or reluctant heroes may at first appear to be villains, such as Midna in *Zelda: Twilight Princess*.

A natural side-effect of these more outlandish and elaborate costuming details is that if you want to hone your costuming skills, the Villains tend to offer more interesting challenges in materials or techniques. The majority of heroes in contrast tend to wear fairly normal clothes and look human so that we can identify with them. If you like to sew, a Hero is perfect, but if you want to play with chemicals and unusual techniques, you tend to have to go villain to get your hands on some really interesting stuff.

2. *It's the perfect excuse for not being perfect.*

If you dress like the Hero at a convention or party, people almost always expect you to behave in an exemplary fashion. If you are the villain on the other hand, they are more likely pleasantly surprised if you don't do anything downright nasty. Whereas Superman might get frowned upon for spilling a drink on the carpet, if the Joker does the same, you're just happy he didn't physically injure anyone.



Human Footman and Troll Axethrower from *Warcraft II*. While we are trained through appearance and narrative to view the alliance forces as the heroes, they were the aggressors.

People generally get annoyed if people are loud, obnoxious and abrasive at conventions, but will pay good money at the Klingon bar to get the exact same treatment and will almost compete in who can get insulted the most. Of course, be aware that if people don't recognize the costume, your carte blanche for bad behavior goes right out the window.

At a recent convention I was dressed up as the super villain Syndrome and enjoying

a cigarette outside the convention hall when an angry man scowls as me at yells "Well that is disappointing, a smoking super hero!". I instinctively retorted with, "I'm a Super Villain!" since I felt this perfectly described why he had absolutely no reason to be upset with me or my behavior. I have used similar excuses without even questioning it when confronted after a masquerade skit by an



Disillusioned as a child by the hero in *The Incredibles*, Syndrome takes his revenge by becoming a classic super villain.

angry child who wanted an explanation for why I had treated the poor hero so badly (I stole his sword).

But the basic truth is there: if you want to go in with automatically lowered expectations of your social skills, villain is the way to go.

3. *You may get more interesting lines.*

If you like to cosplay, the hero can get some good one-liners, but the villain gets the whole range from childish outbursts when the evil plans are foiled to the ultimate vocal accompaniment to any costume: The Evil Laugh. Of course, picking a more verbally dextrous villain helps, but generally the more normal looking villain, the more heinous the dialogue. If your villain wears a suit, chances are you are going to

have to be able to utter some choice four-letter words to get the point across.

Be aware that sometimes the opposite holds true. The more evil your villain looks, the more unlikely he is to utter anything useful. Take Darth Maul from "Star Wars: The Phantom Menace" as an example. He has all of three lines in his entire screen time but also some of the most bad-ass and recognizable make-up in the history of

movies. He looks so inhuman he doesn't have to say much to convince people that he is on the wrong side. Find the balance between dialogue and looks that suits you best.

4. You get to terrify small children (and adults too).

If you do an effective and recognizable villain, you will find people avoiding you, especially small children. I have had parents wanting to take a picture of their children with my costume only to have the child absolutely refuse to go anywhere near me. This can be very handy especially at larger conventions as children often do not treat costumes very gently.

Some adults, no matter how rational, may also freak out. A friend of mine would always tease me relentlessly at conventions, but when I was wearing my Ood costume (a monster recreation from Doctor Who) all I had to do was take one step toward him and he would basically be running away from me shrieking. Do keep in mind that this may backfire if there is alcohol involved, as some of the drunker specimens may be grabbed by sudden Alcohol-Induced-Hero-Syndrome. This affliction is especially volatile in mundanes (people not part of the regular convention crowd).

I was once walking around a party floor as a Lego Darth Maul and was suddenly without warning punched in the face by a fairly intoxicated young lady. Luckily my villain costume was well padded, and protected me, but it still stuns



Qui-Gon Jinn and Darth Maul from *Star Wars: The Phantom Menace*. Though the Lego version may be silly, you still aren't in doubt what is going to happen when they walk on the masquerade stage. Photo by [Richard Man](#).



The Ood look like villains but are actually a the victims, a race enslaved by humans for profit in the *Dr. Who* television series. They are subservient and harmless, until their eyes turn red that is. Photo by Mel Siermaczeski.

me that merely by wearing a costume I managed to inspire violence in someone I had never seen either before or after the incident.

5. It's easy to be the big fish in the small pond.

Deep down I think most people have a need to be the Hero. They want to recreate a character they looked up to as a child, or a character they can identify with as an adult. Wanting to reenact an admired character is many costumers' whole reason for making a costume in the first place. I find this to be especially typical for beginning costumers, but can persist for entire costuming careers for some. I also know cosplayers that are so deep into imagining being the character that they wouldn't dream of being a villain as they would be hating themselves while wearing the costume.

Let's go back to the Doctor Who convention at the beginning of this article. I go every year, and the place is absolutely crawling with Doctors. Despite there being 11 incarnations of The Doctor, it is impossible to pick one as your costume and be unique, and you are inevitably going to be compared to other costumers, which may not be to your advantage. People even go out of their way to pick interesting accessories from specific episodes in order to stand out. At the same time I have only once had the awkward "We're wearing the same dress" moment as a monster at the same convention.

That means the Hero costumer often has to be perfect in skills, age and body type in order not to be remarkable in his or her faults. As a villain or monster you often have a lot more leeway, since it is far less likely someone else came in the same costume.

6. Heroes are boring on their own

By far the best reason to make a Villain costume is to complement the Hero costume of a costuming partner. The word *Hero*



The Silurians, a race of reptile-like humanoids in the *Doctor Who* television series, try to reclaim Earth from humanity by releasing a deadly virus and attempting to disperse the Van Allen radiation belt. Photo by [Richard Man](#).

originates in the Greek and originally meant demigods of Greek mythology. In order to prove their heroic status however, and serve as the moral examples they are intended to be, there must be some conflict to resolve and for that they need the Villain. Without a Villain to fight there wouldn't be much distinguishing them from regular non-hero people.

The Hero needs a reason to grow as a person and realize his potential, and without the Villain to fight, Luke Skywalker wouldn't have gone far from the farm, Sarah Connor might have stayed a waitress and Harry Potter would have been just another well-adjusted average magician. Not exactly the stuff of legends. Their encounters with the Villain gave them the motivation and reason to rise above their peers and become the demigods of their universes. The tension and conflict between the hero and the villain drives the story forward without much effort.

That same trick can be the difference between a decent walk-on performance in a masquerade and a action packed crowd pleaser. If you put two characters in costume on a stage with a pre-established conflict, the audience doesn't need any further set-up to expect that something interesting is about to happen. At the same time neither will win easily over the other, in order to extend the lifespan of the natural story engine. As the Joker says to Batman in *Dark Knight*: "I don't want to kill you! What would I do without you? Go back to ripping off mob



Cloak and Dagger from *Spy vs Spy* were inspired by the cold war. Either can be seen as the hero or villain depending on your point of view -- one of the more subtle fights between good and evil.

dealers? No, no, no. No you, you complete me!"

Mette Hedin is a sci-fi and fantasy costumer who specializes in recreations of things that don't exist in the real world. She loves learning new techniques and materials, and is always looking to expand her costuming horizons. Visit her [Costuming Fools](#) web site.