

## The Greatest Arcade Hero Ever

The man stands behind the boy, observing him stalking down yet another corridor, laser gun in hand, intent on finding and meting out justice to alien malefactors.

This is all on the computer, of course. The boy has been doing this for about five years. But today the man decides enough is enough.

"I've got an idea," he says. "Let's come up with an arcade hero of our own. One that's better than these guys."

The boy turns to him and blinks, adjusting to the light of the room.

"How do you mean?" the boy asks.

"Well, let's think it through. To create something different, first you identify what's normal. What do most online heroes do now?"

"Mostly, they fight and kill things."

"OK," the father says. "Then our hero will do the exact opposite. Instead of taking away life, our hero will give life, create life, cause life to flourish."

"Like ET?" the boy asks. "You know, ET touches the dead flowers, and they come back to life. Or like the Genesis Project in Star Trek. One blast from the Genesis Bomb and life sprouts everywhere. It's got the power of making life out of nothing."

"Excellent. This hero will have super powers of inspiration to restore life, to bring things back that are discouraged, or defeated, or feeling low. That's an excellent idea, by the way. ET made a ton of money. So what else would be different?"

"Well, most heroes are always off on faraway adventures. That kind of hero is a visitor, a stranger."

"I see where you're going," the man says. "Our hero will be the opposite -- a hero who stays home, and does heroic things right there."

"Right. Here's something else. Most heroes in these games, I've noticed, are not much better than the villains. Everybody just shoots everybody else."

"So," the father says -- "our hero could be someone who interacts, and talks to people, maybe even brings out the best in them. Instead of blasting away, our hero could negotiate things. Find out what the bad guys really need, and see if there's a way to get them to stop being bad."

"Wow."

"In fact, the main thing about this hero is really caring, and having a gigantic heart, full of sympathy and understanding. A hero that could not just make you cheer, but could make you cry."

"Oh, dad, that's really good. How about a something like in the Terminator, where the hero is totally dedicated to protecting others. Like, a hero that would die rather than let harm come to people."

"Where loyalty becomes a superpower," the man says. "More powerful than a speeding locomotive. Leaps over tall builds with a single bound! Now here's the next thing. Lots of superheroes are invulnerable. Bullets bounce right off them. But how heroic is it if nothing hurts you? How about if we make our hero capable of being hurt?"

"Yeah, that means our hero takes greater risks. And that takes courage." The boy nodded solemnly.

The two jot ideas down right and left. To get more ideas, they think of movies they liked. "What's the scariest movie you ever saw?" the man asked the boy.

He frowned. "Alien, he says. "Where the creature grows inside the person's body, and when it's ready, it bursts out and kills the person."

"Gross," the father says. "Well, let's do the opposite again. Let's let our hero be the host, that the creature grows inside. But instead of being a completely evil creature, make it a nasty creature that will grow and change and one day save the world.

The man continues: "And the hero has to put up with the pain of this parasite, because the creature, who is very selfish and tyrannical now, will be really important one day. That's another superpower -- the willingness to suffer. The hero tolerates pain no ordinary person ever could tolerate. Because the hero's love is so great."

The son puts his hand to his forehead and arches his eyes. "Dad, this would make such a sweet game," he says.

"It is a sweet game," the man tell him. "Because everything we decided to call heroic is already happening right here in our house."

The boy frowns. "Huh?"

"You think about it," the father says. "Now go set the table for breakfast. Put out the good silverware. And give your mother a kiss."