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“Creative Use of Superhero Powers in *My Hero Academia*”

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Abstract

This article examines the conceptualization of fantastical superpowers in the battle shōnen anime *My Hero Academia* in order to illustrate how the series emphasizes and prioritizes the creativity of the fantastical rules and systems that governs its characters' abilities. Through cognitive and aesthetic analysis of the series' deployment of constraints and limitations, pausing, character dispositions, explanatory diagrams, and the incorporation of superpowers into character development and plot progression, this article argues that the creative superpowers are integral to the series' dramatic interest. In doing so, the article also touches on various anime and manga conventions, as well as discussions of the superhero and battle shōnen anime genres, in turn shedding light on how the fantastic can be conceived of as a disciplined system rather than escapist excess, where constraints reveal how the appeal of the fantastic can lie not within limitless imagination, but in creative limitation, particularly in terms of elaborate action sequences.

Keywords: superhero, anime, superpowers, television, *My Hero Academia*, battle shōnen, narrative

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Creative Use of Superhero Powers in *My Hero Academia*

THIS article discusses the superhero anime television show *My Hero Academia* (2016–2025), analyzing how one of the series’ primary narrative interests and points of emphasis resides in its creative use of the characters’ superpowers. In the world of *My Hero Academia*, roughly eighty percent of the population is born with superpowers, or what the series refers to as “quirks,” ranging from the mundane (growing bull horns out of your head) to the powerful (shooting explosions out of your hands). Heroes are licensed by the government and those who aspire to become heroes attend high schools specializing in hero training, including the main protagonist of the series, Izuku Midoriya, who enrolls in the prestigious U.A. High School. Over the course of the series, Midoriya bonds with his schoolmates, hones the use of his quirk, and battles numerous opponents, including not only super villains but also his peers in various friendly competitions. Accordingly, *My Hero Academia* is described by a range of genres, including the battle *shōnen* genre (fighting-focused anime aimed at teenage boys), the superhero genre, and the high school coming-of-age story, with the former two falling squarely within common definitions of the “fantastic,” in which seemingly supernatural phenomena are inexplicable by the laws of our everyday reality.¹

There is a lot to recommend the series, which intersects with various discourses surrounding anime. For instance, Susan J. Napier

¹In calling the series “fantastic,” I am aligning myself with the common use of the term, rather than Tzvetan Todorov’s narrower definition of the “fantastic,” which he reserves for stories in which there is *uncertainty* over whether seemingly inexplicable phenomena are actually supernatural, or whether they can be explained by the laws of nature. Todorov would classify narratives with supernatural phenomena as the “marvelous.” See Todorov (1973, 25, 41–42).

argues that anime often addresses identity through fantastic metamorphoses of human bodies, which *My Hero Academia* exemplifies through the wide-ranging bodily transformations created by various quirks (Napier 2001, 35–38), while Alberto F. Rodríguez Espada argues that the series’ societal structure, in which heroes are licensed and regulated by the government, provides some implicit commentary on Japan’s collectivist society, which limits individualism in order to benefit the greater good (2022, 19). Likewise, Andrew Terjesen (2010) notes that superhero properties have seldom been popular in Japan because Western superhero conventions conflict with Japanese notions of ethics and morality, yet *My Hero Academia* has achieved great popularity (both in Japan and elsewhere) by blending these values, such as by showing how selflessness can sometimes be harmful or how heroes are not always unassailably morally virtuous.²

However, I argue that one of the series’ central appeals – perhaps even its primary appeal – is the creativity with which the characters’ superpowers are incorporated into the narrative. This includes not only the powers themselves, which range from imaginative and amusing variations on conventional superpowers to more unusual and original ones, but more significantly, the many ways in which the series emphasizes characters using their powers creatively to overcome adversity. Perhaps most notably, the series devotes significant time to explaining and hypothesizing about characters’ abilities, their uses, and their limitations, often pausing a climactic and action-oriented encounter to have characters strategically analyze how various superpowers work, either in dialogue or voiceover, and sometimes illustrated with flashbacks or cartoonish charts and diagrams. Such techniques not only help make sense of the ensuing action but also draw explicit attention to the creative uses to which the powers are put. Indeed, this focus on creative use of superpowers is often integral to advancing the series’ more conventional narrative components, such as character development and plot momentum.

Accordingly, through cognitive and aesthetic analysis of the series’ deployment of its fantastical diegetic rules and systems, this article contributes to debates around world-building and narrative form in contemporary media by shedding light on how the fantastic can be

²See Espada 14–21 for a compelling analysis of how *My Hero Academia* accords with Terjesen’s argument regarding the conflicts between Japanese ethics and morality and Western superhero conventions.

conceived of as a disciplined system rather than as escapist excess, where the appeal of the fantastic lies not within limitless imagination, but in creative limitation, especially in relation to elaborate action sequences. Ultimately, creative and dynamic superpowers are a crucial part of what makes *My Hero Academia* such an engaging and appealing battle *shōnen* anime.

Creative Quirks

Character superpowers in *My Hero Academia* are almost always creative in one way or another. Some characters possess relatively conventional quirks, like super strength, speed, or various elemental powers (fire, ice, etc.) – all common in both Western superhero stories and other battle *shōnen* anime – but these appear in imaginative or amusing variations in *My Hero Academia*. For instance, one of Midoriya’s classmates, Rikido Sato, possesses super strength but can only activate it by ingesting large amounts of sugar (so, naturally, he’s also skilled at baking sweets). Likewise, another classmate, Tenya Iida, possesses super speed not because of some intangible or invisible characteristic of his physiology (like DC’s Flash or Marvel’s Quicksilver) but because he literally has engines in his calves, with exhaust mufflers that protrude from his skin. Other characters possess more unusual or original superpowers: one classmate, Minoru Mineta, has hair made of detachable sticky grape balls (he’s good at restraining opponents); another, Hanta Sero, can shoot tape out of his elbows like a human tape dispenser, while another, Fumikage Tokoyami, can extend from his body a sentient shadow version of himself, whose personality and strength depend on the relative brightness or darkness of his surroundings.

The creativity of these superpowers, both conventional and unconventional, is one of the ways *My Hero Academia* navigates what Geoff Klock describes as the problem of repetition, where latecomers to popular genres must find a way to make common genre conventions (like superpowers) feel fresh and new (2002, 122–123). Indeed, the series’ idiosyncratic approach to superpowers, especially conventional ones, makes it exemplary of what Peter Coogan calls the “Renaissance Age” in superhero comics (2006, 198), where genre conventions are reestablished in a way that demonstrates self-awareness of previous genre iterations. Such comics implement well-trodden

genre conventions while also demonstrating winking reflexivity about them.³ One might also liken *My Hero Academia*'s creative approach to conventional powers to what Scott McCloud refers to as "genre maturity" in Japanese manga (from which much anime, including *My Hero Academia*, are adapted), where years of reiteration and differentiation yield highly specified renditions of various genres, superheroes included (2006, 216, 226, 240–241).

Aside from reflexive self-awareness, even more relevant to *My Hero Academia*'s navigation of the repetitive nature of genre conventions are the limitations the series imposes on the characters' abilities. As Peter Coogan notes, in superhero comics, one of the difficulties of creating stories about heroes with superpowers is finding ways to limit the heroes in order to provide them with meaningful challenges to overcome (2006, 121, 135). *My Hero Academia*'s solution to this dilemma is to place significant constraints on the superpowers themselves: most quirks have rather strict limitations or disadvantages. Tokoyami's shadow-self, for instance, is very weak in bright settings, but he has trouble controlling it in very dark settings. Another classmate has a navel laser, but it makes him queasy if he uses it for too long; another can discharge electricity from his body, but he can't control its direction, and exceeding his wattage leaves him in an hour-long stupor. Another classmate is like a human 3D printer: she can create any non-living object, but she needs to eat a lot because her quirk burns calories, large things take longer to make, and she must know the object's molecular composition (thus one of her favorite hobbies is reading technical manuals and encyclopedias). A quirk's limitations are crucial to both a character's development and to the narrative action. A character's personal growth is often tied to how they rationalize, overcome, or compensate for their quirk's limitations, while at the same time, these limitations often force characters into careful strategizing during combat, which in turn is a part of what makes the fighting in *My Hero Academia* so compelling, and their victories so earned: characters are constantly having to think through how best to deploy their quirks or work in tandem with others to make up for their own limitations and counteract the abilities of their opponents, often in unexpected and creative ways.

³Ryan Johnson also characterizes *My Hero Academia* as a "Renaissance Age" series, arguing that the series' self-awareness manifests in its emphasis on positivity, its rehabilitation of prickly heroes, and its emphasis on the transmission of prosocial values (2022, 110–111).

The specificity of these quirks and their limitations in *My Hero Academia* differs significantly from other popular, contemporary battle *shōnen* anime such as *Naruto* (2002–2007), *One Punch Man* (2009–), *Jojo’s Bizarre Adventure* (2012–), or *Jujutsu Kaisen* (2020–), all of which purport to have a stable set of rules or systems that govern the action and the characters’ capabilities, but where a protagonist’s fighting skills are often simply a matter of some amorphous power level.⁴ In these and other series, a character’s skill is often conceived largely in terms of raw power, and often they are only as strong as they need to be in order to suit the plot’s purposes in a given moment, or their special abilities are so flexible that they can be shoehorned into a solution to just about any problem. In other words, these other series treat characters’ limitations as malleable rather than absolute. Often this is a matter of motivation, where a character is suddenly able to do something new with their abilities simply because the plot needs them to do so, rather than because of anything inherent to them or their development. In other cases, less defined supernatural power systems result in character strategizing seeming more like *ad hoc* plot servicing than the creative application of diegetic rules.

In the early seasons of *Jojo’s Bizarre Adventure*, for instance, the main characters harness “hamon” energy to do seemingly anything: heal injuries; melt flesh; purge poison; ignite fires; climb sheer surfaces; use echolocation; hypnotize; strengthen kicks and punches; elongate limbs; turn ordinary objects into lethal projectiles, and so on. Seemingly every episode comes up with a new application that suits the very specific needs of the characters’ latest predicament, making “hamon” energy into something of a magic narrative tool, akin to Harold’s purple crayon. Likewise, *Jujutsu Kaisen*’s “curse” energy, while more specific and limited than the “do anything” nature of *Jojo*’s “hamon” energy, is still somewhat ill-defined, and also suffers from characters announcing capabilities they hadn’t previously demonstrated in order

⁴Despite their sometimes haphazard application, these rules and systems are often given considerable weight in these series’ narrative action, and are even codified by various diegetic ranking institutions. *Jujutsu Kaisen*, *One Punch Man*, and *Naruto* all feature institutions (schools, hero agencies, and fighter clans, respectively) that assign rankings to various characters based on their supposed power, experience, or skill, and these rankings are often explicitly worked into the plot. Indeed, the central joke of *One Punch Man*’s parody of the battle *shōnen* genre is that the protagonist, Saitama, needs only one punch to defeat any opponent, no matter how powerful, and the series repeatedly derives humor from Saitama defying the ranking system of the prevailing hero institutions.

to effect surprising turns in battle.⁵ Such revelations are one of *Jujutsu Kaisen*'s most frequent narrative devices, occurring at least once in most protracted fights. Both of these examples are very unlike *My Hero Academia*, where rather than one character simply being "more powerful" than another, having hidden abilities, or abilities so malleable that the diegesis seemingly bends to their will, the characters have narrowly-specified and unique quirks, each with various strengths, weaknesses, and limitations that force them into impressively creative uses under constrained circumstances.

The creative limitations of superpowers are especially evident in the series' main character, Izuku Midoriya. At the start of the series, Midoriya is among the twenty percent of the population born without a quirk, but he soon inherits a quirk from his idol and mentor, All Might, who is essentially the equivalent of Superman: a super-strong symbol of peace. However, this inherited quirk also poses a severe limitation for Midoriya: it is so powerful that he cannot control it. For roughly the first third of the series, Midoriya grievously injures his own body whenever he activates the quirk, shattering the bones in his arms or legs when he throws a punch or kick. This limitation forces Midoriya to become very selective about using his quirk: in some situations, he tries to abstain from using it to preserve himself for later; in others, rather than throwing a punch with his entire arm, he'll merely activate his quirk in one of his fingers, injuring himself piecemeal to extend his ability to contribute to confrontations. Thus even for a character whose power is more or less fairly ordinary (super strength), its limitation is not only creative in itself, but also generates further creativity by forcing the character to think carefully about how he uses it.⁶

For instance, early in season two, Midoriya competes with his classmates in a friendly tournament (a battle *shōnen* plot staple), where the top-ranking students face off against one another. Late in the tournament, Midoriya is pitted against his classmate, Shoto Todoroki, a prominent secondary character who possesses a powerful two-pronged quirk: ice powers on the right side of his body and fire

⁵For instance, when a character in *Jujutsu Kaisen* seems as though he is about to be impaled on pointy tree roots, he suddenly reveals that he can switch places with another object by clapping his hands, a heretofore unmentioned ability.

⁶Later seasons complicate his quirk further: it also allows him to manifest the other, additional quirks of those who previously inherited it.

powers on the left. As the two fight, Midoriya begins to expend his healthy fingers by using them defensively, blasting away the huge walls of ice that Todoroki launches toward him. After using up all of the fingers on his right hand, he tries to blow Todoroki out of the arena with his entire left hand, and when that still fails to end the match, he surprises Todoroki by continuing to fight using his already-injured hands, and tries to goad Todoroki into a war of attrition, hoping to win by exhausting him.

Pausing and Quirk Analysis

This fight between Midoriya and Todoroki also illustrates another facet of *My Hero Academia*'s emphasis on the creativity of hero superpowers: the series often goes out of its way to emphasize the dynamics of the heroes' powers by pausing or drawing out the action to do so. Sometimes these pauses are literal: a brief freeze frame – and accompanying title card – highlights a character as a voiceover narrator explains their quirk, a technique often used when a quirk is first revealed. Such pauses are frequent near the start of the series, when the show's voluminous roster of characters is still in the process of being introduced. Indeed, the series uses freeze frames so often that the narrator (who is also a character in the series) even makes a reflexive joke about it when he reintroduces the quirk of Midoriya's teacher late in season two, shouting, "Here I go again!" before dispensing with the explanation.

More commonly, the pace of the action will slow down to allow time for heroes or villains to strategize, analyze, or explain their powers or their interaction – either through dialogue or interior monologue – in the midst of otherwise climactic action set pieces. Such is the case with the tournament battle between Midoriya and Todoroki: at one point, the action essentially stops for half a minute to allow time for Midoriya's interior monologue as he assesses the situation. He realizes that he has only a limited number of chances to devise a way of defeating Todoroki and that Todoroki is defending against Midoriya's blasts by creating an ice backstop (itself a creative use of Todoroki's power). This pause even includes a brief flashback to an earlier fight while Midoriya weighs his options.

Pausing, of course, is fairly conventional for anime in general, *shōnen* or otherwise, partly because of industrial practices, where the

limited budgets of early anime hits, particularly *Astro Boy* (1952–1968), placed constraints how much movement could be animated, which resulted in limited animation becoming an industry-wide practice (even when the budgets are large) (Ueno 2019, 102 and Lamarre 2009, 187). Anime producers have devised a variety of techniques to compensate for such limitations, like filming fewer images per second, moving a rostrum camera over still images to create the illusion of movement, creating animation loops for repetitive movements (like running), and, crucially, extra use of still images that can appear on screen for several seconds: a character’s face, a dynamic gesture, a cutaway to a detail in the scene, and so on (Richmond 2003, 13, 235 and Li et al. 2006, 57, 88). Many anime series turn such techniques into an aesthetic advantage by treating them as narrative pauses which can slow down a story’s pace and allow the series to linger over particular events, stressing a certain mood, plot point, or action (Richmond 2003, 182). Thomas Lamarre even posits that limited animation can be considered a desirable and deliberate anime aesthetic (2009, 188–189, 199).

Aside from industrial factors, pausing might also be considered a product of many battle *shōnen* anime being adapted from manga source material, as is the case with the examples raised in this article, all of which were originally published in the popular manga magazine *Weekly Shōnen Jump*. A manga can serve as a “ready-made” storyboard, which can then influence the pace of the anime adaptation as well (Le Blanc and Odell 2013, 32 and Lamarre 2009, 292). After all, the depiction of time is remarkably flexible in comics, where the implied duration of a single image is highly variable, and where long interior monologues can accompany seemingly brief moments in a fight.⁷ Manga panels depicting characters’ interior monologues can be preserved in the anime simply by rendering them as pauses in the action.

The prevalence of pausing in many battle *shōnen* anime might also be explained by Japanese cultural inflections. Scott McCloud has observed that in contrast to Western comics, manga tends to feature a higher proportion of “aspect-to-aspect” transitions between panels, where the action pauses as the artwork explores different aspects of a scene, which in turn provides a strong sense of mood or place (1994, 74, 79). Shunichi Ueno elaborates on this idea, writing that in

⁷For more on the representation of time in comics, see McCloud (1994, 94–117).

aspect-to-aspect transitions, “time seems to stand still,” allowing for “quiet, contemplative combinations” as viewers interact with parts of a situation, giving “full scope to the Japanese readers’ imagination” (2019, 99–100). Thus the pauses in *My Hero Academia* and other battle *shōnen* anime might also be understood as a way of translating aspect-to-aspect transitions from manga to the screen, although as McCloud and Ueno describe them, aspect-to-aspect transitions seem rather meditative and languid, which is quite unlike how pauses are used in battle *shōnen* action scenes. Aspect-to-aspect pausing thus seems less significant in accounting for pauses in battle *shōnen* anime action sequences than the pauses being derived either from production contexts or from the challenges of adapting interior monologues between two media with very different means of representing time.

Regardless of whether anime’s predilection for pausing is a product of industrial constraints, the idiosyncrasies of adaptation, or a uniquely Japanese cultural sensibility, *My Hero Academia* turns these circumstances into an aesthetic tool by filling its pauses with characters performing strategic analysis. Indeed, this is true of many other battle *shōnen* anime, like *Jujutsu Kaisen*, *One Punch Man*, and *Naruto*, which also pause battles so that characters can analyze their situation and strategize their next moves.⁸ Such pauses might be seen in relation to what David Bordwell argues as the “pause/burst/pause” rhythm of fighting in Hong Kong action cinema and postwar Japanese *jidai-geki* (or period drama). In the former, brief pauses in the flurry of action can both highlight certain action beats and provide a momentary respite that makes the action easier to comprehend, while in the latter, lengthy pauses contribute to suspense by building up anticipation for the brief bursts of action that follow (Bordwell 2011, 140–145). The pauses in battle *shōnen* anime are more akin to those of *jidai-geki*, given their length, but they also serve very different functions, as I argue here: allowing time for characters to strategize, analyze, or explain powers and their interactions. Any suspense that might result from a pause’s delay of the action is more of an ancillary byproduct than the pause’s main purpose. Accordingly, the pauses in *My Hero Academia* – and to some extent in these other series, despite their power systems

⁸Likewise, *My Hero Academia* is hardly the only anime to use freeze frame title cards to identify some aspect of a character. To take just one example, *Jujutsu Kaisen* occasionally does so as well, as in episode 14, where the main characters’ rivals from a sister school are introduced in this fashion.

being less consistent, precise, and concrete – don't come across as tedious delays, stilted handholding, or compensation for a limited budget both because the powers themselves (and their limitations) are often so imaginative and original that watching characters analyze, strategize or explain their interactions is often fascinating in its own right, and even more significantly, because these pauses often provide opportunities for characters to demonstrate either their dispositions or their character growth.

Nowhere is this tendency clearer than with Midoriya. Midoriya's backstory – growing up lacking a quirk of his own but wanting nothing more than to become a hero – motivates one of his principal dispositions: his gift for analyzing others' quirks and their uses. Midoriya is borderline-obsessive about others' quirks; he keenly deduces their capabilities and limitations, and frequently consults and updates his multiple personal journals on the subject.⁹ Sometimes the series even plays Midoriya's analytical disposition for laughs; he will get carried away murmuring to himself about his observations, exhaustively extrapolating on their ramifications, much to the annoyance (or even disturbance) of those nearby. Inheriting All Might's quirk allows him to actively pursue his dream of becoming a hero and also allows him to make practical use of the analytical abilities he's spent his childhood honing. He frequently devises strategies for effectively deploying his own quirk and those of his classmates, and often deduces the capabilities of his opponents' quirks while in the process of fighting them. Thus the series motivates one its primary appeals – analysis of character quirks and their creative use – through the dispositions of its main protagonist, whose centrality provides the series with ample opportunity to regularly incorporate such analysis into the action, via the pauses that are conventional for anime.

Indeed, Midoriya often provides analysis of other characters even when he is not involved in the action. In another lengthy student competition arc in season five, Midoriya frequently analyzes how his classmates have enhanced and developed their quirks as he observes them skirmish with other students. For instance, when Tokoyami reveals that he's learned to fly using his sentient shadow-self, Midoriya giddily explains the logistics, bubbling over with enthusiasm for

⁹Alek Sigley argues that this makes Midoriya an *otaku* (someone consumed by their interest in their hobbies), which in turn makes *My Hero Academia* a unique representation of heroic masculinity, setting it apart from other battle *shōnen* anime. See Sigley (2002, 77–98).

Tokoyami's ingenuity. Likewise, even in scenes without Midoriya, *My Hero Academia* will still emphasize the intricate functionality of heroes' powers by having other characters perform the same sort of strategic analysis typical of Midoriya, even with characters who don't otherwise exhibit Midoriya's analytical skill. For instance, when Midoriya's peers spar with one another in season five, Hanta Sero – a minor character whose interior monologue we almost never hear – performs the same sort of deductive reasoning typical of Midoriya. Sero is fighting against Setsuna Tokage, who can split her body into fifty different pieces, each of which can levitate and which she can control remotely. Early in the fight, she splits up her body and starts tapping on the surroundings in order to confuse Sero about her location; midway through the fight, Sero spends nearly a minute trying to deduce her limitations in order to effectively counter her abilities, much like how Midoriya often thinks through his own fights. Sometimes other characters will even analyze Midoriya's fights, providing us with further perspective on his capabilities and demeanor. Such is the case in his season two battle against Todoroki, where many different observers comment on Midoriya's skill level and his willingness to injure himself.

Ultimately, many of the characters in this series are adept at strategic quirk analysis. Midoriya is most prominent among them, naturally, given his centrality, but many other minor characters also demonstrate similar analytical acumen when given the opportunity, regardless of whether or not that acumen is one of their well-established dispositions, simply because the detailed and dynamic parameters of superpowers in this world – their strengths, limitations, applications, combinations, interactions, counteractions, and so on – are one of the main points of narrative emphasis, creativity, and fascination in *My Hero Academia* in general. The centrality of this creativity is especially relevant for the series' many lengthy student competition arcs – school tests, tournaments, and the like, some lasting as many as twelve episodes – which risk becoming tedious since their action tends to lack any significant narrative stakes. Such arcs often function to demonstrate either the quirks of newly-introduced characters, or the extent to which familiar characters have undergone either dispositional or quirk-related growth. However, they are made compelling by revealing the ways in which the characters creatively exercise – and think through – their superpowers, overcoming either external constraints or internal limitations in the process.

Illustrative Diagrams

Many of these examples also reveal another common tactic that *My Hero Academia* uses to emphasize the creativity of its heroes' powers, one that is fairly conventional for battle *shōnen* anime in general: in the case of complicated quirks that require explanation, deduction, or analysis, the series will cut to diagrams illustrating how the quirk functions. When Midoriya analyzes Tokoyami's ability to fly, for instance, or when Sero tries to deduce the limitations of Tokage's body-splitting abilities, their deliberations are illustrated with diagrams of varying abstraction: an image of Tokoyami activating his quirk in a blank space, and an anatomy-style depiction of Tokage regenerating parts of her body. Mirio Togata, a third year student at U.A. introduced at the end of season three, provides a more elaborate example. His quirk allows him to phase all or parts of his body through solid matter. It is a simple quirk in theory, but the series spends roughly three minutes having Togata explain how it is actually complicated in practice (let alone in a fight). His quirk allows him to avoid attacks and quickly move around in space, including phasing through and launching out of the ground (and his clothes). However, his quirk also comes with severe limitations that make it difficult to wield: when it is active, he cannot breathe, see, or hear, and even a simple action like stepping through a wall requires him to sequentially activate his quirk in different parts of his body. As he describes all of this, we see multiple abstract diagrams illustrating his explanations: a stick figure phasing through the ground, Togata falling naked through empty space, and a stick figure carefully stepping through a wall, all of which help to emphasize the great skill it takes for Togata to use his quirk effectively. Togata is a relatively minor character, yet the show sets aside time to explain his power in great detail, with multiple diagrams, partly because its logistics are fascinating in their own right, further illustrating that one of the series' primary interests is the way in which hero powers function in this world.

Quirks and Character/Plot Development

Of course, *My Hero Academia* doesn't come across as a dry encyclopedia of hero powers and their functions; it's also a coming-of-age story and compelling superhero drama about heroes combating

villains. Thus the intricate explanations, deductions, and analyses of hero powers are often causally intertwined with more conventional narrative and genre appeals, particularly character development and plot advancement. Midoriya provides arguably the biggest and most complex example of how the intricacies of a quirk are connected to character growth. As the series progresses, Midoriya's growth is often tied to his slow mastery of his quirk: he gradually gains the ability to control how much power he puts into his punches and kicks, often announcing the percentage of his strength that he is able to safely deploy, allowing viewers to chart his progression based on his literal power output. Likewise, he also develops his own fighting style; initially, he simply tries to imitate All Might's brute strength, but the severe damage he inflicts on his hands and arms eventually leads him to rely more on agility, particularly leaping and kicking. Thus the more conventional aspects of Midoriya's character growth, like his increasing confidence and leadership capabilities, are tied to his evolving mastery of his quirk.

Most of the combat scenarios provide an opportunity for those involved to grow as characters. Such is the case with Midoriya and Todoroki's bout in the season two tournament arc. In addition to wanting to win the fight, Midoriya also has an ancillary goal in this match, which is to goad Todoroki into using the fire half of his fire and ice powers, not because doing so will help Midoriya win, but because it will help to heal Todoroki and make him a better hero. Up to this point in the series, Todoroki has refused to use his fire powers because he inherited them from his abusive father, Endeavor, who is himself a powerful fire-based hero. Todoroki's resentment of his father has led him to pursue heroism without relying on his fire half, but Midoriya wants Todoroki to be the best hero he can possibly be – Midoriya sees it as the responsibility of heroes to be the best versions of themselves in order to maximize their positive impact on the world – and that means Todoroki must use of both halves of his quirk. Thus, when Midoriya finally convinces Todoroki to use both his fire and ice powers during their fight, Midoriya makes the fight harder for himself, but he also accomplishes a larger and more important goal in making Todoroki a more capable hero-in-training. Here, the series explicitly links Todoroki's use of his powers to his growth and development, and also establishes Midoriya's nascent leadership potential, both through his helping Todoroki compartmentalize his hatred of his father and

through his willingness to injure himself in the pursuit of his goals (the latter of which is a product of a number of factors, including his not wanting to disappoint All Might, his desire to prove that he belongs at U.A., and his self-sacrificial conception of his own heroism). Each character's growth in turn lends dramatic weight both to the extensive deliberations about the characters' abilities and to the fight in general, which might otherwise register as a fairly tedious contest with no otherwise obvious dramatic merit, given that it is basically a sparring match between allied characters.¹⁰

Indeed, almost every fight sequence has some sort of implication for character growth or plot development, even for those involving very minor characters. The series is littered with examples: one fight will feature a character learning to become more confident in their ideas and more assertive in team dynamics; another will feature a character learning to work better with teammates; another will reveal a new and inventive use of a character's quirk that lets them accomplish more than they could previously, and so on. Season three provides a concrete, relatively self-contained example in a scene featuring two students, Itsuka Kendo (who can enlarge the size of her hands) and Tetsutetsu Tetsutetsu (who can turn his body into steel) squaring off against a villain, Mustard, who emits an enormous cloud of sleeping gas that allows him to sense people's movements within it. Initially, Mustard subdues Tetsutetsu and appears to have the upper hand, but eventually Kendo outsmarts Mustard by waving her enlarged hands to disperse the gas and a revitalized Tetsutetsu successfully incapacitates Mustard, whose defeat allows other parts of the plot to move forward, namely simultaneous fights between other students and villains taking place in the vicinity.

Kendo, Tetsutetsu, and Mustard are all very minor characters in the grand scheme of the series. Mustard appears only in this one episode, and Kendo and Tetsutetsu only appear sporadically, since they aren't among Midoriya's nineteen other homeroom classmates, nearly all of whom receive more screen time and character development. Yet this scene is clearly meant to demonstrate these characters' dispositions and their growth as capable heroes. Kendo displays analytical and leadership skills prior to the fight, deducing that the gas must have

¹⁰ Adding further dramatic significance, Midoriya's actions in this fight also contribute to his relationship with other characters that observe him, many of whom express concern over the harm he inflicts on his own body.

a source and how to find it, while Tetsutetsu demonstrates both his admiration for Kendo's intelligence as well as his own hotheadedness when Kendo stops him from charging into battle without first understanding what they're up against. Even a one-off villain like Mustard is given a distinctive personality. He taunts the heroes when he seems to have them outmatched, and the nature of his taunts implicitly suggests some of his backstory. He repeatedly berates the heroes for fighting so poorly and unimaginatively given the lofty pedigree of their school – the prestigious U.A. – and Tetsutetsu also notes that Mustard is wearing a school uniform (odd for a villain). Both of these details suggest that Mustard is enrolled in some other high school, and is bitter over not being admitted to U.A. When the duo finally defeat him, Kendo retorts that the students at U.A. have what it takes to be heroes, since they always find ways to go beyond their limits to achieve their goals (itself a frequent motif in the series overall), which in turn further suggests her and Tetsutetsu's maturation. Not only does this example reveal how action scenes involving even minor characters are inflected with compelling character beats, it also demonstrates the superpower creativity that is at the heart of *My Hero Academia's* appeal: a character with a quirk that makes him impervious to most physical attacks (Tetsutetsu) encounters a villain who can effectively counter these abilities, and another character whose quirk seems useful only for punching (Kendo) instead uses that quirk defensively, creatively nullifying the villain's abilities. Such dynamically inventive fights saturate *My Hero Academia* and they are deeply rooted in more conventional appeals like character growth and plot momentum, which is as true for minor characters as it is for major characters like Midoriya and his more prominent classmates, which in turn suggests how central hero powers are to the show's dramatic appeal.

Increasing Complexity

One last significant characteristic of *My Hero Academia's* creative deployment of superpowers is that the series gradually increases the complexity of its heroes' powers and their interactions, building up to more and more complicated scenarios. In the premiere of season seven – the penultimate season – the series' main antagonist, Tomura Shigaraki, confronts an American superhero, Star and Stripe, who has

come to Japan to try to end the worldwide threat Shigaraki represents. Star and Stripe's quirk allows her to change the "rules" or properties of anything with which she comes into physical contact. This is an extremely versatile quirk: she can change the properties of nearby air to create a vacuum around her opponent; she can redirect and reshape lasers; she can manipulate her own body or that of her opponent's, and so on. Its only significant limitations (which will prove fatal in her fight with Shigaraki) are that she can only impose two rules simultaneously, and that in order to impose a rule on a living target, her perception of her target's identity has to align with her target's sense of self. That is, her understanding of her target's identity needs to correspond with the target's own sense of identity: she would be unable to affect someone she misrecognizes. This is already a relatively complicated quirk, but her fight against Shigaraki is made even more complex by how complicated (or even convoluted) Shigaraki has become over the course of the series. Shigaraki began as a villain with a rather simple disintegration quirk – he can disintegrate anything he touches – but eventually he underwent an operation to merge with his villainous mentor, All for One, whose quirk is the ability to steal other quirks. Thus Shigaraki, like All for One, possesses a kaleidoscope of different stolen quirks by the time he fights Star and Stripe, and, crucially, he no longer possesses a unified sense of self. He is both Shigaraki and All for One simultaneously, thus Star and Stripe's quirk fails to take effect when she tries to impose a new rule on Shigaraki, since she doesn't realize that he is undergoing an identity crisis and is also All for One.

As suggested by the complexity of these quirks, their battle is one of the peaks of superpower creativity in *My Hero Academia*: a character with a quirk that can do almost anything facing off against a character with an abundance of stolen quirks, complete with all of the pauses, strategic analysis, and diagrams described thus far (which seem especially necessary here, given the complexity of the quirks in play, and given that this battle is also Star and Stripe's first appearance). After their initial skirmish, Star and Stripe's quirk is explained in voiceover during a freeze frame. Her quirk is so intricate, however, that it requires further explanation as the battle progresses. Midoriya is absent from this scene, so Shigaraki becomes the primary mouthpiece for strategic analysis, particularly when he finally deduces Star and Stripe's limitations. At this point, the battle pauses for over

two minutes as Shigaraki describes his deductions in voiceover, with diagrams helping to illustrate his reasoning about Star and Stripe’s capabilities, as well as his capacity to exploit her quirk’s limitations. These deliberations are incredibly elaborate, involving freeze frames, flashbacks to parts of the battle from minutes earlier, a repetition of the rules governing Star and Stripe’s quirk, diagrams featuring sliding meters, color-coded silhouettes, and cartoonish *chibi* or “super deformed” renderings of the characters (*chibi* caricatures are commonly used in anime for expressing heightened emotion, particularly shock, anger, fear, surprise, or, as in this instance, for injecting humor into a scene) (Le Blanc and Odell, 2013, 33). The scene clearly demonstrates how one of the series’ primary interests is in exploring the intricate details of these complicated and creative superpowers (rather than, say, narrative suspense or unrelenting action). Not only does the use of cutesy *chibi* caricatures undercut the narrative suspense by rendering part of the scene in somewhat cheeky fashion, but the narrative action more or less stops as Shigaraki explains to himself the details of Star and Stripe’s quirk. Presumably, the scene – like many others that pause the action – is indulging in subjective temporal expansion, where our experience of the character’s interior monologue takes longer than the time that passes objectively in the diegesis, lest the characters simply stare at each other for over two minutes while Shigaraki makes his deductions.

The rest of their fight – which spans two episodes – proves similarly complex as both Star and Stripe and Shigaraki attack and counterattack one another, and features further use of all of the action-rendering techniques described thus far. Perhaps most creatively, the fight ends with Shigaraki stealing Star and Stripe’s quirk and disintegrating her body, but not before she imposes a new rule on her own quirk, which is that it will fight other quirks. Thus when Shigaraki steals it, it starts to destroy the many other quirks Shigaraki has accumulated, which is itself depicted as a physical battle on a sort of astral plane within Shigaraki’s consciousness – a fight within a fight, as it were, one which renders what would be an interior monologue-filled pause into more narrative action in itself. *My Hero Academia* gradually built up to the elaborate sophistication of this fight sequence, and its excitement, legibility, and ingenuity is largely a product of the series’ devotion to creatively exploring the intricate system of capabilities and limitations that governs how superpowers work in this narrative universe.

Conclusion

Overall, the creativity of characters' superpowers is one of the major features at the heart of *My Hero Academia's* appeal, as evidenced by the many ways in which the series emphasizes characters' quirks. This includes not only the creativity of the superpowers themselves and their limitations, but also the hefty narrative weight given to characters' strategic use of their powers, both in climactic action set pieces, as well as in action scenes with far lower stakes, often emphasized through pausing the action so that characters can think through the ramifications of how a superpower works. Moreover, the centrality of this creativity is also evident in how character growth and development are often tied to characters honing and developing the use of their powers, as well as in deductive reasoning being one of the main character's central dispositions, a disposition appearing in minor, ancillary characters when the main character is absent. Likewise, the series' commitment to explaining and understanding quirks makes legible and compelling the increasingly complicated battle sequences toward which the series builds in its later seasons. Taken together, these qualities help *My Hero Academia* stand out from other battle *shōnen* anime by making the creativity of its superpowers one of its central appeals and demonstrates how placing constraints on a fantastical world can yield creative dividends.

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