

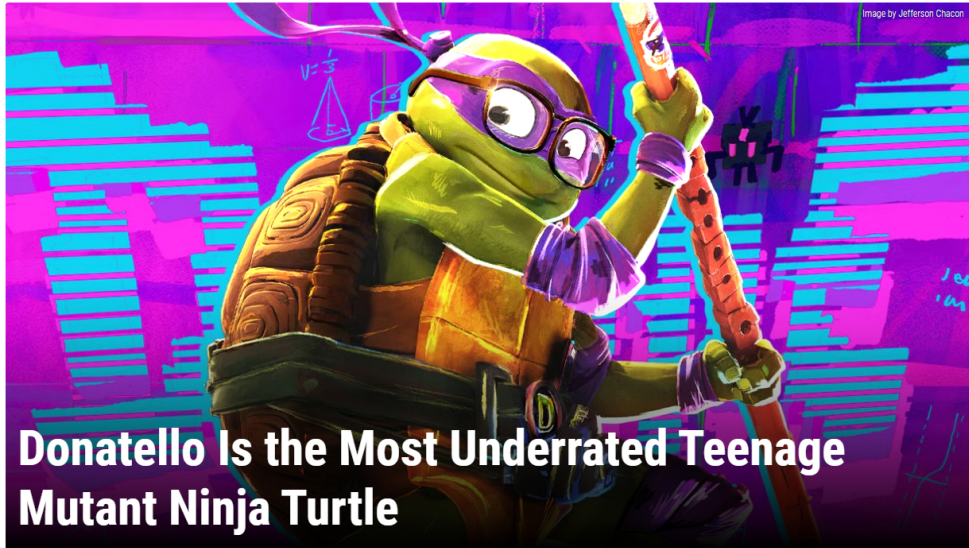


Image by Jefferson Chacon



By Rachel Sandell

Published Aug 7, 2023, 5:30 AM EDT

Rachel Sandell is an experienced editor and proofreader with a love for language and storytelling. A graduate of the creative writing MFA program, The Rainier Writing Workshop, she is the author of five short stories and analyzes the different facets of fiction her spare time. She's also a huge...



See more Collider stories on Google.

Add us on Google

SUMMARY

- Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles is a beloved franchise that continues to reinvent itself, with each new iteration giving a fresh spin on the characters.
- Donatello, the "smart guy" of the group, has often been overlooked in comparison to his more conflict-driven and comedic brothers, but recent years have seen his character evolve to the point where he can no longer be ignored.
- The Five-Man Band trope, which classifies characters into archetypal roles, is effectively utilized in TMNT, with Leonardo as the leader, Raphael as the lancer, Michelangelo as the heart, and Donatello as the brains. Donatello's character has shown flexibility and growth, breaking free from traditional limitations of the "smart guy" archetype.

Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles is a franchise that has existed for decades (since **1984**, to be exact) without growing old or stagnant. With the release of **Seth Rogen's *Mutant Mayhem***, the new film proves that the turtles are still very much beloved in modern pop culture, with **each new iteration** taking a new spin on the characters.

Leonardo, Raphael, Michelangelo, and Donatello have become staples in the pop culture world — even those who haven't seen a single TMNT show or movie easily recognize these characters. However, one of the brothers almost always gets overlooked.

As the resident "smart guy," Donatello has received an impressive amount of character evolution over the years, but in comparison to the more conflict-driven dynamic of Leo and Raph and the loud and lovable shenanigans of Michelangelo, his contributions often fall to the wayside. In recent years, though, the evolution of his character has reached a point where he can no longer be an afterthought.

Ad

WHAT TO WATCH



July 20, 2025

The 72 Best Movies on Netflix Right Now

Ad

The Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles and the Five-Man Band Trope



TRENDING NOW

**'Chicago P.D.' Reunion Officially Set at CBS****Tom Hardy's 2-Part Crime Saga Officially Sets Return With Explosive First Trailer****The 13 Best 'Ted Lasso' Characters. Ranked**

Some of the most time-tested fictional character groups, or teams, use some form of archetype or archetypal system to classify their characters and more easily fit personalities together into a cohesive unit. For instance, it can be an effective storytelling and world building practice to work from a template and then make significant modifications. This is where the **Five-Man Band** trope comes into play.

RELATED:

Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles Will Never Get Old For This Reason

Ad

The Five-Man Band traditionally consists of the Leader, the Lancer, the Heart, the Brains, and the Brawn. Personalities can differ, shift, change, and evolve, but typically the roles of these characters remain the same, which is what TMNT excels at. The franchise makes effective use of this trope despite also making significant changes and combining its roles. The main group — Leo, Raph, Donnie, and Mikey — only consists of four characters, not five, but the honorary “fifth turtle,” human April O’Neil, often takes the last role on the five-man band, even though the four brothers are typically the most important characters in the story.

The **Leader** is fairly self-explanatory: they take the burden of responsibility and call the shots for the other members of the team. Leonardo consistently takes this role, with nearly every TMNT iteration making him the obvious choice for a leadership role.

The **Lancer**’s role is closely tied with the Leader’s: they are meant to be the foil to the Leader and often come into conflict with the authority of whoever is in charge of the team. Their job is to question, scrutinize, and contrast the Leader. While often coming off as antagonistic, they aren’t necessarily an antagonist and are often very close with the Leader in terms of relationship. Raphael fulfills this role with gusto and is often highly critical of Leonardo’s leadership. Some versions of Raph even threaten to leave the team to strike out on his own, but when it comes down to it, Raph is incredibly loyal; he just has a bit of an attitude/anger problem (despite insisting that his rage is “not a problem”). TMNT has also combined the Lancer role with the **Brawn** role, making Raph the heavy hitter of the squad with the most brute strength and the most willingness to smash first and ask questions later.

Ad

The **Heart** is often the optimistic and emotionally available member of the team and naturally falls into caretaker or supportive roles. If there’s conflict within the team, they are usually the one to mediate, and their unending reserve of silver linings and half-full cups can keep the team going even in the darkest circumstances. Michelangelo exhibits these light-hearted traits, and his carefree “party dude” personality also draws from the comedic relief character, or the **Funny Guy**, another example of TMNT modifying the Five-Man Band trope to fit its needs.



The **Brains**, or the Smart Guy, is the one who comes up with ideas, relying on logic and reasoning to get out of tough situations. They can appear as inventors, techies, hackers, etc., and can think their way out of trouble (and sometimes into it), making the Brains an important support unit to the team.

Ad

This trope does come with limitations: the Brains is often portrayed as less physically capable than other members of the team, and they can sometimes have a more **complicated relationship with emotions**. The Brains comes in all forms of personality, though, and is usually more accurately defined by their skills and the level of their intellect than how they behave in relation to other characters.

As the resident Brains on the TMNT team, Donatello is always busy at work, casually creating a new invention, computer program, security system, or even transportation for the team to use. He falls solidly into the Smart Guy category with a few modifications. Though the Brains is often more of a "**guy in the chair**," Donnie is a fully trained ninja and is no less capable of winning a fight than his brothers.

Character Dynamics: Donatello and the Smart Guy Trope



Ad

The Brains can often fall by the wayside and become more of an afterthought than a character in stories where the Brains isn't the protagonist. TMNT is an interesting franchise due to the fact that any of the four main turtles can be the protagonist for any iteration — they are all main characters. What's more, Donatello follows TMNT's pattern of trope modification.

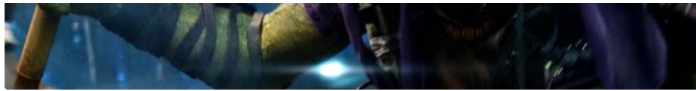
Despite being just as physically capable as his brothers, Donatello personifies the smart guy trope in a lot of other ways. He is the team's main tech support, making him somewhat of a jack of all trades. Depending on the iteration, he can be their computer genius, tech wizard, or mechanic, and sometimes all of the above. His wide array of abilities reflects his character's ability to change with each adaptation and still remain true to his character.

This sort of flexibility in a character archetype is immensely helpful for characterization within the story, as well as adaptability for an IP as old as TMNT. There's a lot of potential here for different directions to take the character — and modern iterations of Donatello have taken full advantage of that.

Ad

Storytelling Dynamics: Screen Time, Characterization, and Modern Donatello





The turtles have become a quippy bunch, each with their own personal spin to the fun-loving side of crime fighting. In the 1990 live-action film, Donatello (**Corey Feldman**) doesn't get much screen time, but one of the running gags involves his inability to come up with a cool catchphrase.

Nerdiness has always been a major part of Donatello's personality, but the cool factor is present in all four turtles, including him. Donatello in particular has had an interesting evolution over the years. Despite being strangely afraid of guns in the first installment in 2014, Donatello (**Jeremy Howard**) develops a sense of detached bravery in the 2016 follow-up to **Michael Bay's** iteration, *Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles: Out of the Shadows*, when he calmly reminds the team of the "plan" before **casually jumping out of a plane**. This version of Donatello introduces a sense of recklessness that would grow in future versions.

Ad

Around this time in IDW's comic run (specifically, **issue #44**), Donatello demonstrates a similar mixture of cleverness and bravery when he uses Shredder to his advantage against the Krang, unfortunately resulting in a brutal fight against Bebop and Rocksteady. Despite the odds, he puts up a good fight.

2017 saw the fifth and final season of Nickelodeon's cartoon adaptation, which was a bit of a return to the more traditional Brains archetype by portraying Donatello (**Rob Paulsen**) as more of a lovesick nerd. He also serves as the voice of reason alongside Leonardo, often acting as a steady support system, much like the Bay movies.

One of the more noticeable evolutions of Donatello happens all at once in 2018 with the premiere of *Rise of the Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles*, which embraced a highly goofy tone for the TMNT and made a lot of character personality changes and tweaks for a fresh take. Some changes fell flat, while others prospered, and one of the best changes is that of Donatello (**Josh Brener**).

Ad

In the *Rise* iteration, he maintains the nerdiness of previous incarnations but wholeheartedly embraces the mad scientist side of the Brains trope (usually seen in villain groups). Donatello has become **flamboyant**, arrogant, and flexible in his ability to learn and grow (evidenced by his relationship with the mystic arts in the series). The change is more noticeable than previous shifts in the character with other iterations, but this Donatello never strays beyond the set characteristics hinted at in previous versions and still remains steadfastly in the Brains archetype.



Ad

When the character descriptions dropped for 2023's *Mutant Mayhem*, it became clear that this latest version of the TMNT is taking more steps toward quippier evolutions for the characters, and for Donatello (**Michael**

of the TMNT is taking more steps toward quirkier evolutions for the characters and for Donatello (**mean Abbey**) in particular. The sass that has been developing in film and TV over the years has become rooted in this latest version as well, as this version of Donnie is extremely self-aware and proud of his intellect. He also apparently dreams of becoming a K-pop star, which is in line with this latest version of the **TMNT being depicted as younger**.

With *Mutant Mayhem* now in theaters, Donatello's potential for character evolution is clearer to see than ever. The film incorporated many instances of pop culture references (these, along with **Easter eggs from past versions**, is somewhat of a tradition for TMNT as an IP), and Donatello's modern interests were added to his character. As a lover of both K-pop and anime, Donatello has widened his pool of interests from logic and tech to other fun hobbies, one of which comes into play during a battle against Superfly (**Ice Cube**).

Ad

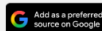
The film also highlights the importance of family and working together, taking great care to showcase each turtle's strengths, including Donatello's. This younger version of Donatello is an example of how the character keeps surprising us.

While Leo and Raph usually eat up most of the screen time due to their rivalry, and Mikey is typically an audience favorite (usually getting enough screen time for his quips and "cowabunga"s), Donatello's support role often keeps him on the sidelines. However, recent iterations of the character (beginning with the level-headed Donatello who calmly jumps out of a plane in the Bay TMNT's sequel and particularly evident with the arrogant and bordering on mad scientist Donatello in *Rise*) have seen a shift from the standard "smart guy" archetype to give him more time to shine.

And now, with *Mutant Mayhem* in theaters, Donatello's personality only seems to be evolving further, taking advantage of his character's limitless potential. With more emphasis on the "teenage" part of TMNT, roles within the team are still being establishing and are evolving, meaning that Donatello's importance is on the same level as the others.

Ad

Thankfully, the "smart guy" trope seems to be evolving with him, giving more freedom to characters who fall under it but have become overlooked because of its limitations. *Mutant Mayhem*'s reimagining of Donatello could mean a positive change for the "smart guy" archetype in general.



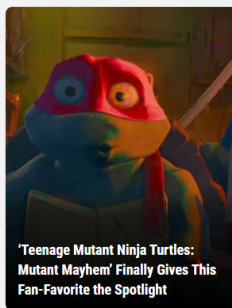
Add as a preferred source on Google

Google is updating how content is shown. Don't miss our industry-leading content, written by humans, by setting [Collider as a preferred source](#).

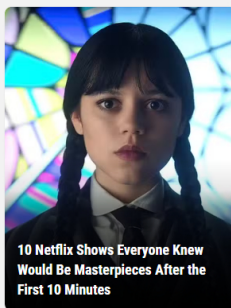
Movie Features



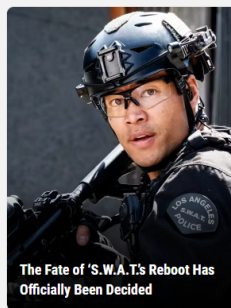
RECOMMENDED



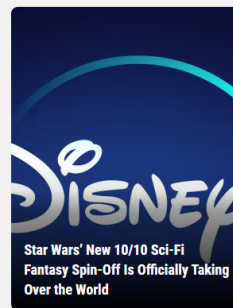
'Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles: Mutant Mayhem' Finally Gives This Fan-Favorite the Spotlight



10 Netflix Shows Everyone Knew Would Be Masterpieces After the First 10 Minutes



The Fate of 'S.W.A.T.'s Reboot Has Officially Been Decided



Star Wars' New 10/10 Sci-Fi Fantasy Spin-Off Is Officially Taking Over the World

**Collider**Part of the [Valnet Publishing Group](#)**SUBSCRIBE**

The best of Collider, directly in your inbox.



By subscribing, you agree to receive newsletter and marketing emails, and accept our [Terms of Use](#) and [Privacy Policy](#). You can unsubscribe anytime.

FOLLOW US**EXPLORE**[Movies](#)[TV](#)[Music](#)[Gaming](#)[Screenings](#)[Collider Signature](#)[Streaming Guides](#)[Lists](#)[Reality TV](#)[Reviews](#)[Interviews](#)**FYC**[Trailers](#)[Videos](#)[Got A Pitch?](#)**ABOUT**[Join Our Team](#)[Our Audience](#)[About Us](#)[Press & Events](#)[Media Coverage](#)[Subscribe to Premium](#)**CONTACT**[Contact Us](#)[Careers](#)[Advertising](#)[Have a News Tip?](#)**LEGAL**[Terms](#)[Privacy](#)[Policies](#)