



## Eight Plot Devices for Forging Unforgettable Non-Player Characters

Non-player characters are more than the occupants of a world: they are in fact the world itself. The keen GM understands them as tethers to the game world, as well as the driving force behind much of the plot. In order to master this crucial element of role-playing you need to build more than a cool name—you need to build an emotional experience.

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This article intends to provide plot devices which you can use to engineer memorable NPCs into your campaign. By applying these devices I hope that you will be able to replace tiresome social encounters with rich, dynamic, and entertaining player-NPC relationships. As a result hopefully your world will feel more real, your players will grow more invested in it, and every roll of the dice will carry a little more emotional weight for everyone sitting at the table.

## The Monster in the Forest

Select a monster (or a group of monsters) that the players are too inexperienced to defeat. At the same time busy them with urgent quests while allowing the monster's activities to inconvenience them. In order to do this, reflect on the beast's behaviors and evolve these natural tendencies into unrelated threat to the PCs. Let the monster's presence be felt—from afar.

Depending on your tastes, you can force the players into conflict with the creature suddenly, or let them rise to action when the time suits them. In either case remember, the creature is precisely that; a creature. It has its own interests and motivations. Not all battles are fought with steel and not all conflicts end in death.

The Monster in the Forest helps the players understand that not all NPCs are humanoid. Its point is to lend a sense of reality to the otherwise fantastic experience of living amongst fell beasts. This can provide a GM with the opportunity to show the players what happens when the brave and powerful don't—or can't—oppose the darker forces of a world.

## The Little Hero

The Little Hero is a NPC who has been inspired by the players to become a champion in their own right. They aren't as powerful as the players—not at first anyway—but they make up for it through their idealism.

The Little Hero is created in three stages. The first begins with them being the victim of some misfortune. Be it a bandit capture or a lost horse, the characters aid The Little Hero. When this side quest resolves, allow them to believe the relationship is over.

Stage two is easy. Wait. This is an important step towards building consistency in your world by emphasizing the passage of time and heightening the sentiment your players feel toward the cast you create.

Initiate stage three after a few sessions have passed. In a tense or cinematic moment have The Little Hero return—and do so with style. Replace the trembling farmhand they once saved from raiders with a small-time, almost folksy hero. One who carries herself bravely and with principles. To draw out the effect, leave the identity of the ally a mystery, perhaps one that is revealed a round or two into their dashing rescue of the players.

As you can imagine, this can provide you with a way to pull the party out of trouble if a combat goes south, especially if you've accidentally placed them in a lose-lose situation. Take care to allot time for the players to catch up with The Little Hero and, if you can, begin thinking about how their paths might cross in the future.

## The Little Villain

The Little Villain is an unsavory character driven to villainy through either the character's thoughtless actions or their own unwillingness to take responsibility for their life. A balance of the two is usually best.

Unlike The Little Hero, you should use The Little Villain to make the players feel responsible for the world. Moreover, The Little Villain might inspire, albeit darkly, the players to take on a challenge they'd otherwise choose to avoid. Even after they defeat this foe, they may be accountable for the still-unresolved machinations set into action by The Little Villain.

Part of the beauty of The Little Villain is that he can be installed into a campaign retroactively. In fact, it's better if the players aren't aware of the trouble they've caused. Perhaps when fighting bandits in a city they knocked over an artist's cart, or otherwise disrupted a pivotal moment in The Little Villain's life. Whatever you choose, make sure to twist it in the worst possible way. Ferment the event into something almost unrecognizable—because that's precisely what The Little Villain will have done.



When crafting The Little Villain, consider creating him without a stat block or class in mind. The Little Villain's dark obsession, connections, and creativity might prove far more dangerous than any spell or sword.

## The Big Hero

The point of The Big Hero is to mark the players' growth and underscore their increasingly meaningful social status in the world. In terms of the story this can provide you with a continuous source of plot hooks. Also, it can be an excellent way to dispense tailored magic items to the players.

The Big Hero is executed best when she persists throughout the entirety of a campaign. The consistency of The Big Hero's presence is an important objective, however, not as much as the ultimate goal, which is a classic role-reversal. In order to do this, deliberately peel back the layers of formality between The Big Hero, and the players. Don't do so too quickly. Eventually The Big Hero, an expected source of stability and power, will come to the players seeking for their aid—and it is at that moment you want to emphasize the responsibility the players now have with them and the rest of the world.

## The Mentor

The point of the mentor is to embolden the players to move beyond their comfort zone. Apart from being a catalyst, The Mentor is ideal for newer gamemasters as this NPC be a source of infinite plot hooks.

While The Mentor can come into the story amid a whirlwind of trouble and misfortune, it's best if they are sought out by the players. Either way, The Mentor will rarely solve any of the players' problems. Often, he'll lock the characters into challenging contracts and leave them seemingly unprepared to contend with the obstacles at hand.



The Mentor is the wise woman and the sage. He'll answer the player's questions with two more, send them on a fool's errand just to prove a point, and usually behave in enigmatic and paradoxical ways for fun. Just when the players are convinced they hate their taskmaster, The Mentor should do something huge for them—something which endears him or herself to the players forever.

## The Betrayer

The point of the betrayer is shock, as well as the genesis of a great and memorable villain. Not only can The Betrayer have the greatest emotional impact on the players, but it also happens to be one of the easiest NPCs to employ.

After many sessions, select any NPC and ask yourself one question: how might they become evil? Select a moral failing that leads them to ruin—and

enjoy! Make sure to ponder as to when this might have the greatest impact and build toward it. If you want to enhance the effect further, pick a NPC your party not only likes but adores, ideally an individual the players rely upon. The queen of their realm, a high priestess, or the party's leader are all great starting points to find a great Betrayer.

## The Dark Twins

They stole the players' ship, they foiled your party's attempts to bring back an ancient guardian, and now, they've launched a full-out assault on the castle. Their tactic's range from impossibly obvious to masterfully subtle and, worst of all, they are exactly like the players.

This device relies on the players coming across an adventuring party remarkably similar to their own, both tactically and perhaps in appearance. The point of this, among other things, is character growth. By forcing the players to face foes who fight as they do—or even better—you will force them to evolve their characters.

This mechanism can also be used to impart a sense of urgency to an adventure, or as a way for the whole party to gather magic items specifically well-suited to supposedly defeat The Dark Twins. Alternatively, The Dark Twins can appear just after the players have endured a defeat, or when they aren't picking up the GM's hints to abandon a fight. As a rule, the best time to employ The Dark Twins is at the worst possible time for the players.

When drawing out these encounters, do what you can to make The Dark Twins seem just a little better than the party. Play on their insecurities and then, when the time is right, allow your players to have the vindication they deserve. Trust me: the bitterness of half a dozen defeats will make a final victory against their sworn enemies especially delightful.

## The Strange Bedfellow

The point of The Strange Bedfellow is to thrill the players with a classic literary twist. This should be a fun, almost preposterous, confrontation between the players and their expectations. Moreover, it can

assist a GM to introduce a new character to the party, or provide the perfect space to close the book on an old villain.

Here's how you do it. Design an adventure or two with a particular villain (or group of villains) in mind. Force the players to confront this villain as an enemy before the direst circumstances convert said foe into an ally. Now that the players are obligated to endure close and protracted interactions with The Strange Bedfellow, represent her in even greater detail. This may lead to the villain becoming enduring allies with the party, or to build tension for the inevitable battle the players will have with her. Either way, the interactions here should be magnetic—sudden bursts of selflessness and cooperation should be twisted, at a moment's notice, into utter repulsion.

The Strange Bedfellow can be great for lighthearted campaigns, as the particulars of camping with a troll are the stuff of slap-stick. However, a serious variation of this can be terrific as well. Imagine listening to the mercenary who nearly killed you sharpen her knife from within a nearby tent. Sweet dreams.

## Helloes, and the Here and Now

People will tell you introductions are everything and, honestly, they have a point. There is another perspective though. When defining NPCs—the ones that matter at least—try not to think about what they do for the plot or how they first meet the players, but rather how they *leave* them. This is where the meaning of, and the real value in, the best NPCs can be found.

It's also the greatest tool I can give you for creating a cast that matters.

The discerning GM thinks about the time between adventures and campaigns as well as the sessions themselves. You would be wise to do the same. If you're ever trying to spice things up, you might wonder less about the artistic concept of a NPC—and more about what kind of cast you want your players to remember after the die have stopped rolling.