



Notes from the Bunker

Highly Motivated

by Rich Redman

Welcome to your bunker. I'm Rich Redman, one of the designers of the *d20 Modern Roleplaying Game*. I may not be an expert, but I'm experienced and opinionated. Here in the bunker, we can explore some corners of the **d20 Modern** rules and create rules variants, and I can offer suggestions for your campaign based on my experience writing and running games.

This month's topic is motivation. While this subject may not seem entirely seasonal given the proximity of Halloween, it makes a good follow-up for the last three columns on crime and criminals, and it may help you flesh out the opposition for your heroes. Besides, I've chosen some examples that are entirely seasonal to illustrate my points.

Why We Do It

Earlier this year, I was considering writing some more **d20 Modern** adventures for publication, and I discussed the idea with fans on some message boards. One poster replied, "Not that I've found it lacking in your work, but I can't stress enough the need for one particular element: motives, motives, motives. Nothing is worse than trying to run a game and realizing that the GM characters have no good reasons for what they do. The [Heartless](#) series in particular was very good about explaining why events occurred as they did. I love that. Keep it up." I found that piece of wisdom incredibly useful a short while later, when an adventure that I ran for my weekly group went off the rails. (We'll talk more about on adventures going off the rails in a future column.)

Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs

Human motivation is a complex subject that psychologists have been trying to unravel for centuries. Of the many theories and models that have been put forward, Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs suits our purposes especially well. This model is a diagram of human motives in the shape of an eight-level pyramid, created by Abraham Maslow. The five lower levels are rife with motivations for criminals, evil beings, and simple beasts. The motivations represented by the upper three are most often reserved for heroic characters.

Let's take a moment to examine this model and the theories on which it is based.

The Basics

The most basic needs, which form the bottom of the pyramid, are physiological. We need food, water, and enough shelter and clothing to stay alive. We also have a built-in drive to reproduce in order to continue our species. Nonintelligent creatures function almost exclusively at the physiological level, and such needs are also primary for certain very primitive humanoids, such as orcs, ogres, and many barbarians.

Safety needs come next. At this level, creatures are concerned with protecting themselves from danger, not just from the elements. Those who lack any higher motivations may attack at the slightest indication of threat, no

matter how innocent or accidental. Animals operating at this level often attack because they are terrified and believe they must defend themselves. Among dogs, this behavior is called "fear biting."

The Middle Levels

A sense of belonging is the basis for the motivations at the next level of the pyramid. Given enough food, shelter, clothing, and sex, intelligent beings start looking for close relationships. They want emotional intimacy in addition to physical intimacy. Many animals with some degree of intelligence, such as dogs and cats, function at this level.

Just above this level comes the need for esteem. People operating at this level want to achieve, to know they are competent, and to gain approval and recognition. A great deal of human behavior springs from this level. Jealousy, both personal and professional, has its roots in the need for esteem, and the conflicts that arise from this need can be bitter and even violent. For example, suppose a junior executive believes that someone else is succeeding (and thereby threatening his job) because of personal relationships rather than competence. A reasonable person might work harder or strive to reveal the competitor's limitations. An unreasonable person might blackmail the supervisors with whom the competitor has personal relationships.

No matter how civilized we consider ourselves, we are all very primitive beings under the surface. Any circumstance that degrades the approval and recognition a person receives on the job can trigger fears about more basic needs as well. Losing a job results in not only loss of esteem, but potentially loss of shelter, food, and relationships as well. Seen in that light, the news reports of disgruntled ex-employees shooting up their former coworkers and places of employment start to make sense in a horrific, world-gone-wrong sort of way.

The next level is the need for knowledge, understanding, and exploration. It's easy to see how people fixated on such needs can precipitate disasters. We've all seen movies and heard stories about mad scientists, secrets that humans weren't meant to know, and wizards who read one blasphemous grimoire too many.

Our Best

Three more levels of the hierarchy remain: the need for beauty, the need for self-fulfillment, and, at the very top of the pyramid, the need to transcend the self entirely and help others. These levels are the realms of heroic motivation.

Balance

In a pyramid, each successively higher level is at least slightly smaller than the one below it. This arrangement makes it a very stable structure. If one level is larger than those below it, the pyramid starts to lose its balance. Thus, overemphasizing a need, or emphasizing it at the expense of others, creates a personality imbalance that can be used to generate some very interesting villains. For example, an overwhelming need for companionship at the expense of other needs could create a serial kidnapper or even a murderer.

Why You Care

You care because understanding your characters' motives and needs helps you, as a writer, to develop fully realized characters and plots. It also helps you react appropriately when your players take an adventure in an entirely unexpected direction, since you know how your GM characters should react and what their priorities are.

It's just that simple.

To create a villain based on the Hierarchy of Needs model, either stop development at a lower level than you would for, say, most of the people you know, or overemphasize one need at the expense of others.

Examples

The following examples come from an adventure I wrote and ran for my own group. The plot centered around a group of necromancers (I used Heirs of Kyuss from the [Urban Arcana Campaign Setting](#)) who stole bodies for their experiments. Eventually, they unleashed one of their creations on Los Angeles, the setting I have chosen for my campaign. To make the story work, I had to outline my necromancers, the insider helping them acquire bodies, and their financial backers. I decided early on that none of these characters would be Shadow creatures, and that none except the necromancers were even aware of Shadow. This decision was made deliberately and for a particular purpose. Except for one combat encounter with some mummies to keep things lively, all the Shadow creatures in this adventure were friendly and even helpful to the heroes, whereas most of the humans were villainous. (I felt that my campaign overlooked that aspect of the *Urban Arcana Campaign Setting* and wanted this adventure to address that lack.)

The Necromancers

The *Urban Arcana Campaign Setting* says that the Heirs of Kyuss "strive to rediscover the techniques and knowledge of their namesake." Members of this group consider themselves scientists engaged in pure research. Some want only knowledge; others want knowledge they can use to gain personal wealth and power.

Since the spawn of Kyuss zombies are described in the text, it's safe to assume that the Heirs of Kyuss have already uncovered the techniques for duplicating their namesake's most famous work. So for the purpose of my campaign, I needed to understand what their next goal was. I decided that my little four-necromancer cabal wanted to uncover the secrets of creating even more powerful undead -- perhaps even liches. Their desire for knowledge was the upper limit of their development according to Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs, and that desire overshadowed all their others. Since I knew they didn't care as much about food, health, or clothing as other people would, I described them as gaunt, pale humans in shabby, dark suits.

To finance their venture, the necromancers sought out wealthy people (see The Investors, below) who wanted to gain the secret of immortality while they were still young enough to enjoy it. The members of the cabal managed to convince a few people that their methods were more promising than those practiced by more legitimate scientists, and they gained the backing they needed for their research. But the necromancers' dependence on outside funding meant that -- much to their annoyance -- they had to deal with the needs of their investors.

Clearly, the necromancers needed raw materials -- specifically, intact human bodies. They knew of several places to obtain them, but most carried a high risk of exposure. Based on some research I did and some plans I had already made for my campaign, I decided that the necromancers should operate behind a front business. Thus, they created a funeral home that didn't really exist so that they could win contracts from the state for disposal of the corpses of indigent people. (Personally, I found this tactic pretty cold-hearted and horrible, since we all deserve some degree of dignity in death, regardless of our relative wealth.) But to get the contracts and the best cadavers, the necromancers needed someone on the inside.

The Insider

I knew that the insider had to be vulnerable in some way that the necromancers could discover; otherwise they wouldn't be able to manipulate him. Fortunately, they had the research tools of their investors at their fingertips, and money with which to bribe information sources.

So I created a blue-collar guy named Erik, who was a key element in the state's remains-handling process. Erik was struggling with funeral expenses for his mother, who had died unexpectedly of entirely natural causes. But because she hadn't been very organized, her estate was very difficult to unravel. Even if she had money that would help Erik pay the expenses associated with her death, he couldn't find it.

Erik was not motivated by greed. He was a happy fellow, proud of his work for the state, concerned with the dignity of the deceased for whom he was responsible, and a big sports fan. His highest needs were at the knowledge (or possibly the aesthetic) level. I made those choices because I wanted him to be a character who could side with either the heroes or the villains, depending on how my players decided to handle the situation. He could also serve as a source of information and an ally for the heroes if necessary.

Then the necromancers entered the picture. At first, all they did was offer him bribes to make it look as though the current remains-handling company was handling cadavers improperly. Then they bribed him to influence the selection of a new "vendor" in favor of their front company.

Erik was smart enough to be suspicious of this new remains-handling company. Because its executives were obviously ready to act in unethical and illegal ways, he knew that they wouldn't hesitate to get rid of him if they felt the need. But the bills were piling up, and Erik needed the money they offered. So he took their bribes and helped them, but he also made preparations for a quick, secret escape.

From the necromancers' point of view, Erik was a bad risk. They could see that he wasn't spending their money, and they couldn't expect to control a person who wasn't greedy. So they gained the cooperation of a sympathetic legal aide named Ms. Vaughns, who was involved with untangling Erik's mother's estate. At the necromancers' behest, she suggested that Erik attempt a séance to contact his deceased mother for more information about her finances, and perhaps to get some closure. Desperation won out over suspicion, and Erik made the attempt. The Heirs of Kyuss made sure that the séance, which was conducted by a local charlatan, was an abysmal failure because they knew that a first-time success would seem suspicious to the skeptical young man.

Erik was angry when he arrived at the second séance accompanied by Ms. Vaughns and found the Heirs of Kyuss waiting for him. They treated him calmly and with respect, telling him that they had only just learned of his need to contact his late mother (a lie) and that they wanted to help (a misleading statement, but essentially true). They had decided that it was time to take Erik completely into their confidence (a lie) and reveal the true nature of their research, which related to the afterlife (sort of true). By contacting a deceased relative of Ms. Vaughns, they demonstrated both their skill at communicating with the departed and the fact that the spirits sometimes lie.

Their demonstration had exactly the effect they had hoped for. Erik threw in his lot with the Heirs of Kyuss in return for a slight increase in bribe money and the opportunity to successfully contact his mother. He returned to work until the incident that sparked this adventure. At that point, instead of leaving town, Erik ran off to the Heirs of Kyuss.

The Investors

My campaign is set in southern California, so I exaggerated the obsessive youth culture for which the area is famous into a ruthless pursuit of literal immortality. My investors had one desire in common -- they wanted to live

forever. This obsession is a form of the survival need -- one of the most basic motivators in human psychology. These particular individuals had already fulfilled all their other needs but could not advance to transcendence because they were unable to put others ahead of themselves. Their need for immortality began to overshadow everything else in their lives.

One investor was a Russian immigrant with ties to Russian organized crime. He had forged a career in America as a filmmaker, but too much of the good life had driven him into drug-fueled paranoia and mental instability. Because he had begun to catch glimpses of the Shadow world around him through the grotesque filter of his drug-addled perceptions, his movies had shifted from high-minded dramas to bizarre horror films. By investing in the necromancer's project, the filmmaker hoped to outlive his enemies and still have enough money for sybaritic luxury. Since several of the heroes in my campaign are actors or stunt people, his most recent, unfinished film will come back to "haunt" my campaign later.

The next investor was a business tycoon who started off in junk bonds, then moved to real estate and made some lucky investments. Along the way, he collected indictments and accusations of unethical conduct the way other people collect stamps. This fact, which the heroes can easily discover, indicates this investor's ruthless nature. Unlike the others, he was born with some money and privilege, though not as much as he has now. Immortality was the last trophy he could imagine, and his competitive nature drove him to seek it.

The third investor was a Silicone Valley wunderkind -- a hardware and software genius with a ruthless streak. The fact that he wasn't above stealing other people's ideas and intellectual property is also available to heroes willing to do some research. The computer whiz wanted immortality so that he could outlive his competitors and create a business empire that would monopolize the world.

The fourth and final investor was a former porn actor who had moved behind the camera to direct and produce films. While he often mistook sex for emotional intimacy, he really wanted quality relationships. He didn't understand his own motivations, nor did he know why he couldn't form a lasting relationship, but I knew his motivations and could use them to decide his actions. Because he couldn't imagine anything better than an eternal relationship with a woman he loved, he decided to pursue immortality.

A mutual desire for immortality at the expense of morality and ethics brought the investors together and made them vulnerable to the necromancers' pitch. But they all had other drives as well -- most importantly, the need to remain anonymous. They understood the stigma associated with disturbing the dead and didn't want to be stained by it. They also needed to see results from their investment. Otherwise, it would be no different than investing in a more legitimate, long-term technology such as cellular regeneration, biological research into primitive organisms, mitochondrial and RNA research, and "macrobiological protocols" such as reduced caloric intake. The necromancers knew about Shadow and understood that most people, including their investors, couldn't see the truth about the Shadow creatures around them. So they put on a demonstration that proved they could return a corpse to some semblance of life, even though it clearly had no soul and little (if any) mind. Unfortunately, the corpse they animated was a spawn of Kyuss, and it got loose in a local mall. As a result of this mall "outbreak," about forty spawn of Kyuss ended up roaming the city. The conventional news media saw these monsters as crazed, homicidal bums, and the heroes were called upon to investigate.

Although the investors were satisfied that the necromancers were making progress, the incident interfered with their desire to remain anonymous. The conflict this situation generated between the necromancers and their backers has created a rift that might give the heroes a chance to uncover the truth of the matter and put a stop to the evil necromancers.

Parting Shots

To be an effective GM, you need to establish motivations for your major GM characters. Taking the trouble to do so helps you keep the adventure moving when your players make unexpected choices and enables you to write richer, more enjoyable adventures.

Players need to be aware that not all GM characters are cardboard cutouts motivated only by a desire to kill heroes. This extra insight can allow your heroes to resolve encounters without combat by taking advantage of GM characters' needs and weaknesses.

Using Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs is entirely optional, but it is presented here as a tool to spark your own ideas.

About the Author

Before [Rich Redman](#) came to the RPG R&D department at Wizards of the Coast, Inc., he had been an Army officer, a door-to-door salesman, the manager of a computer store, a fundraiser for a veterans' assistance group, and the manager of Wizards of the Coast, Inc.'s Customer Service department. Rich is a prolific game designer who has worked on the **Dungeons & Dragons** game, the *d20 Modern Roleplaying Game*, the **Marvel Super Heroes Adventure Game**, and **Dark*Matter**. When he's not working as vice president of [The Game Mechanics](#), a d20 design studio, Rich works fulltime, does freelance game design, cooks, and practices yoga, tai chi, and silat.
