



Notes from the Bunker The Criminal Mind

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, I explore some corners of the **d20 Modern** rules, create rules variants, and offer suggestions based on my experience writing and running games.

We've spent the past two months talking about crimes; now let's talk about the people who commit them. For the record, I believe the material in this column applies just as well in FX games as it does in non-FX games, though slight modifications may be needed to accommodate nonhuman characters.

Disclaimer

I'm not a career law enforcement officer, nor am I a professional psychologist or psychiatrist. The information presented in this column over the last several months is based on the best information available to me.

This column is very short, and human motivations are very complex. So if you want to inject some realism into your GM characters, don't stop here. I recommend checking out a few books, such as *The Writer's Guide to Character Traits* (Linda N. Edelstein, Ph.D., 1999, Writer's Digest Books), and *Malicious Intent* (Sean Mactire, 1995, Writer's Digest Books), for specific information.

Criminals

This month, we're going to talk about the people who commit crimes in the same order as we talked about the crimes themselves in the last two installments -- at least to the extent that's possible. Then we'll take a moment to talk about career criminals and members of organized crime syndicates.

General

There are as many reasons to commit crimes as there are people on this planet. Below are some general motives that cover a wide variety of crimes.

- People stand in the way of the criminal achieving a particular goal.
- The criminal figures the end result is worth the risk and the damage.
- The criminal wants revenge for a real or imagined offense.
- A good end justifies evil deeds.
- The crime doesn't seem as wrong to the criminal as it does to the victim.
- Outside influences put pressure on the criminal so that he feels as if something made him do it.

- The criminal lacks a sense of responsibility. (Such crimes are often blamed on temporary insanity.)
- The criminal has no desire to remember because the past is irrelevant.
- The crime is committed as a form of self-defense -- often in an emotional sense. For example, a criminal might kill loved ones to prevent them from leaving.
- The criminal has a different memory of events than her victims have, either because of a genuine personality disorder or because perceptions vary from one individual to another.

Career criminals of all stripes have definite personality types, and we'll talk more about those at the end of the column. In the meantime, let's take a look at the kind of criminal minds associated with particular crimes.

Arson

The true arsonist starts fires for the sake of seeking things burn -- not to destroy evidence or conceal some other crime. Such arsonists come in two basic types.

One kind of arsonist is usually a juvenile male with a poor school record who still lives with his parents. He sets fires out of maliciousness and usually has a specific reason for burning a given site. He may need a group of peers with a similar grudge to encourage him, and little planning is involved in the crime.

The other type of arsonist deliberately sets fires and enjoys every aspect of the process from start to finish. He likes watching the fire and may resent having it extinguished. This arsonist usually begins setting fires in childhood and does so repeatedly. He's often socially inadequate and may look for a job that directly or tangentially involves fires, such as a forest ranger or a firefighter.

Counterfeiting

Counterfeiters and forgers consider themselves artists. They draw inspiration from the work of others and always base their own work on someone else's technique. As far as motivation goes, greed is usually secondary to a desire to create a sensational object. Most professional counterfeiters actually enjoy the challenge of outwitting and deceiving others. Amateurs, however, may be motivated by envy, jealousy, feelings of inferiority, or a desire for attention.

Fraud

Con artists are as numerous as con games, and entire books can be filled with descriptions of such crimes. In general, however, con artists have little in common with petty criminals. People who set out to fleece others are determined, patient, presentable, and personable. They tend to be good talkers, and they always dress appropriately for their roles. Individual con artists may prefer "short cons" or "long cons," and each tends to specialize in a particular kind of grift or gimmick. Con artists are not sociopaths; in truth, most are quite capable of sympathizing with other people -- a talent that makes them insidiously effective. Some con artists may hold nongrifiers in contempt, believing that their victims are sheep and that shearing them is simply part of the natural order.

Gambling

The gambler is a neophiliac -- a person excited by novelty. She is aggressive and doesn't see risks the same way that others do. The gambler denies the random elements involved in any venture and insists that personal skill can always win out. She tends to be impulsive, fearless, and carefree.

People who run illegal gambling operations, on the other hand, tend to be exactly the opposite of the compulsive gambler. Gambling operators like systems and predictability. Like any other businesspeople, they calculate risks carefully and possess many of the traits of career criminals.

Murder

All violent people share several of the general traits given below.

- A craving for excitement
- A desire for escape
- A drive to obtain retribution for perceived wrongs
- A self-centered nature
- Selfishness
- Poor self-esteem
- Self-indulgence
- Impulsiveness
- A history of severe abuse
- A need to express overwhelming emotions to anyone available
- A lack of social skills that could provide other tools for expressing anger

Psychologists say we have all become more willing to kill over the last sixty years due to desensitization, conditioning, and denial. In fact, most murderers are not career criminals, though many have arrest records. Murder can happen because of an argument, as a result of an unrequited sexual fixation, for money, or for the sake of patriotism, religion, or some other strong belief.

Professional killers work for money or favors. Their "work" is separate from other aspects of their lives, and they are likely to have families who are unaware of their true profession. Because assassins consider killing to be "just business," they work quickly and spend little time at the crime scene. Individuals may specialize in particular techniques or weapons, and some consider an improvement in a technique to be an advancement of their "art." Assassins tend to be emotionally distant -- killing does not excite them, and they consider killing anyone other than the target to be messy and unprofessional. Most have a history of violence, but not of theft or sexual assault.

The other category of murderers is serial killers -- the gothic horrors of the modern world. Serial killers are predominantly white males, eighteen to thirty-five years old, with above-average intelligence. Most of us have seen enough police dramas to be familiar with the typical serial killer's history, which may include bed-wetting,

fire-setting, cruelty to animals, and childhood abuse. Serial killers may take trophies of their kills and display them in their homes. They rarely express their inner emotions to family, friends, or neighbors, and they rarely know their victims. An individual serial killer usually develops a ritual that becomes more elaborate with each killing.

Career Criminals

Career criminals are generally intelligent, polished individuals. The crimes they commit are never petty -- they are high-stakes players who use efficient and intricate techniques that would never occur to criminals of lesser caliber. Such criminals consider themselves skilled in their art and may also have regular jobs that they perform while planning for, or hiding after, a crime. They generally have some social skills that serve them well in setting up their crimes. In general, criminals in this category would rather use con games, forging, extortion, and shakedowns than do anything so crass as breaking and entering.

Organized Crime

The typical member of an organized crime syndicate has a long history of committing ordinary crimes. Narcissistic and amoral, he usually demonstrates poor impulse control and difficulty with expressing emotions in any constructive way. This combination often leads to frustration and violence. On the other hand, the organized criminal has a code of personal loyalty and a very strong allegiance to his organization's leadership. He follows the organization's code of behavior, at least when it's convenient or when someone is watching. Because he lacks the ability to visualize and plan for the future, he often appears irresponsible -- spending money like water and acting recklessly. The truth is whichever story best serves his interests.

Putting It Together

Two months ago we talked about arson as a crime, and this month we talked about arsonists. Here's an example of how to put together an encounter using those pieces of information.

The Crime

The crime and the crime scene are the "hook" -- the means by which the heroes are introduced to the adventure. Thus, it's wise to build them as carefully as possible to encourage your heroes to follow the path you have in mind.

As mentioned in an earlier column on [mystery plots](#), no crime grabs attention as well as a brutal murder. So if we want our crime to be arson, at least one person should die as a result of it. We could make the victim someone out of place -- such as a child in an abandoned warehouse miles from the nearest residence -- but that choice shifts the players' attention to how the child got there, and the adventure focus becomes kidnapping rather than arson. We could make it someone who just happened to be in the burning building -- a homeless person seeking shelter, for example -- but such an accidental death isn't as compelling as a purposeful killing. On the other hand, an obvious murder gives away too much information too fast. If the heroes can assume the fire was set to cover up a murder, they don't have to do as much investigating, and you end up with less playing time for your adventure.

So let's assume that the arson occurs in a shop, and the dead person is the shop's owner. You can decide what kind of shop it was and dream up some information about the owner, keeping in mind the details presented

below. We can also make one other decision right away -- the owner did not set the fire. The evidence may initially indicate that he did, but in fact he didn't.

The Criminal

Now it's time to create the criminal. The first decision to make is his motivation. Once you know why he commits his crimes, you know a great deal more about both him and the crime, and possibly the victim as well.

The primary reasons for burning down a business are money and terrorism. Maybe the owner owed money to dangerous people, or perhaps he needed the money from his insurance policy. Alternatively, a new organization that's just moving into the area might have burned down the business as a lesson to other business owners -- that is, used terrorism to support its protection racket.

Choosing any of these options tells us that the business wasn't doing well. If it had been, then the owner could have paid any debts he owed, and the new organization would have tried to find a less profitable business to use as its object lesson. The death is more difficult to explain in the case of a new organization because it would have no reason to kill the owner. Its members wouldn't hesitate to kill the owner if he caught them setting the fire, but they wouldn't set out to do it.

The choice of criminal is important to how the investigation unfolds. If the owner wanted to hire a "fire bug" to burn down his business so he could collect the insurance, he would probably choose the second sort described in the Arson section (see above) simply because shiftless youths tend to be untrustworthy. With the second kind of arsonist, this fire would probably be one in a series, and again the story would shift from investigating a murder to investigating another crime -- in this case, serial arson. If the people who set the fire did so on behalf of an organization, they would have no emotional attachment to the act -- they would simply set the most efficient blaze they could and leave. That option doesn't change the focus of our example story, and it sets up the heroes to investigate the protection racket, the new organization, and organized crime in general as the campaign progresses.

I would be remiss, however, if I failed to point out a third option -- that the murder and the fire are coincidental. If the owner had been cheating on his wife, she might have poisoned the food he took with him to work. If he succumbed to the poison after closing for the night, the organization's terrorists might do their work without ever noticing he was there. Also, an accident that left the owner unconscious would result in the terrorists committing murder via arson without even realizing it.

The Crime

The last option discussed above seems like a winner. A new organized crime group is moving into the neighborhood where the business is located. It's setting up a protection racket by threatening to cause "accidents" if businesses don't pay for "protection." Other criminal groups in the area, including street gangs, are either wiped out or forced into the new organization. The organization could be part of the local Cosa Nostra looking to expand its operations, or a Chinese triad, or a Yakuza group. (Personally, I would favor the last option, since the Yakuza are known for using terrorist tactics.) You could also make up an entirely new organization composed of hobgoblin gangsters and gnoll street soldiers, or of psionic criminals, if you like.

Our victim is named Paul Bring, and he runs a small business in the neighborhood -- a deli, a sandwich shop, a pizza parlor, an appliance repair shop, or whatever. For the sake of argument, let's choose a dry cleaning shop. Paul actually does the cleaning on the premises, so he keeps plastic dry cleaning bags and volatile chemicals in

the shop. Paul's business is barely paying the bills, but he's happy being self-employed, and he takes tremendous pride in owning his own business. His wife, Maricella Bring, is more ambitious and is trying to find ways to expand the business into "a real money-maker."

The organization responds to the resistance it faces from the neighborhood in general by making an example of someone. They choose Paul Bring's business because it's not particularly profitable and isn't likely to bring them a lot of protection money anyway. Two men go to Paul's shop after it closes, set the fire, and leave, not realizing that Paul is in a supply closet, unconscious but not yet dead, when the fire begins.

The Clues

A quick Google search for "arson" gives more than 765,000 hits, including Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) sites, International Association of Arson Investigators (IAAI) sites, corporate investigative sites, and more. Of course, we can also check out the old reliable www.crimelibrary.com. Any of these sites can help us develop clues for our heroes.

From our crime, we also know the following information.

- Gang violence has been increasing in this part of town over the past several weeks.
- Several business owners in the area sport injuries ranging from black eyes and split lips to broken fingers. (The organization wants others to see the evidence of its violent handiwork.)
- The owner has both toxic chemicals (from the supply closet) and smoke in his lungs, so he must have been alive when the fire began.
- The heat from the fire caused several containers to burst inside the closet, badly damaging the owner's body. The burns from the chemicals coupled with those from the fire make it extremely difficult to find evidence of any other injuries that he may have sustained. The coroner can find no evidence that he was shot or stabbed, and the toxicology report is negative except for the fumes in his lungs. (Thus, he wasn't poisoned and wasn't taking drugs.)
- The method of ignition was very simple. Gasoline-soaked rags were left under an electrical outlet in which the wiring was deliberately damaged. Sparks from the outlet then fell on the rags, igniting them. The person who left the rags under the outlet may have been the same one who damaged the wiring, or it may have been someone else.
- Flammable chemicals splashed on the floors and counters further accelerated the fire. (Such an arrangement produces noticeable burn patterns with spots where the fire burned hotter and faster than elsewhere.) The chemicals used were of the sort typically found in a dry cleaning shop.

A few false clues sprinkled in among the accurate ones can add to the sense of mystery. See the previous installment on [mysteries](#) for some information on the value of such red herrings. So let's add the following clues to the mix.

- Maricella complains to everyone in the neighborhood that Paul doesn't make enough money.
- Paul recently complained to the owners of some neighboring businesses that he felt stressed out by Maricella, and at the same time guilty for not giving her the life she wanted.

- Elsewhere in the city, several fires in abandoned buildings were also started using gasoline-soaked rags, though they were lit with cigarettes. Perhaps the firebug responsible for those blazes is expanding to new locations.
- Paul recently took out a new life insurance policy on himself, listing Maricella the sole beneficiary.

Parting Shots

Once you have a realistic criminal, a crime, and some clues, you're ready to make the heroes work at putting them together. Skill checks are worth experience points in the **d20 Modern** game too, and this scenario should require quite a few.

While investigating the example crime we've built, the heroes would need to cooperate with police detectives, arson investigators, insurance companies, and the coroner's office, and they would have to thoroughly question other business owners and the neighbors of the Brings. Winning the confidence of the other business owners should get them some information about the protection racket and the new organization. Once they gather all the evidence, their conclusion should be that someone accidentally killed Paul Bring while setting the fire.

This conclusion wraps up this particular adventure, but lots of questions remain unanswered, and plenty more crimes can stem from this one. That's where your campaign really takes off.

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.
