

Blackjack's Guide To Bitter Gamemastering #2

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Say Something!

GM: You enter a warehouse the size of a football stadium packed with a maze of crates and moving equipment. It is dimly lit, a few low wattage bulbs dangling from the catwalk overhead provide the only illumination. No windows can be observed and other than the large door through which you entered there is no other entrance visible to yourselves.

PCs:

GM: The catwalk creaks and faint footsteps on metal grating can be heard from the far side of the warehouse.

PCs:

GM: Your thermo vision picks up a faint heat signal moving up the catwalk.

PCs:

GM: The signal continues to approach and is now about twenty meters away. The thermo intensity appears faint around the upper body.

PCs:

GM: This is probably the result of a large amount of body armor.

PCs:

GM: As he enters the faint light you can see he is carrying an assault rifle.

PCs:

GM: With a grenade launcher.

PCs:

GM: He also has a kazoo up his nose.

PCs:

GM: In his other hand he appears to be carrying a Donna Summers album.

PCs:

GM: I believe it is the one with the remake of "MacAuthur Park".

PCs:

GM: He ties a rope around the catwalk railing and begins to descend.

PCs: We shoot him.

OK, I know we all have our off nights. Maybe we haven't had enough sleep, or have to go to work the next day, or have been doing shots of Tequila for several hours. But it appears some groups are simply prone with the "_____ " disease. And when you GM it gets annoying. There are only so many things somebody can say about a warehouse and at times it feels as if the PCs would allow me to continue until I'm describing the individual termites infesting crate wood. It's nice to have help from time to time. It is a lot easier for a GM to answer questions about a location than it is for him or her to keep vomiting scenery.

There are several ways to conquer this problem. The simplest is to double the number of NPCs for every fifteen seconds the PCs don't say anything. But this results in the players getting wasted, and tons of NPC sheets, and it's no fun for anybody. A better way is to let the PCs generate some of their surrounding themselves. Although you do have to establish limits ("I'll dive into the cockpit of the Wasp.") it takes some of the load off the GM and speeds up the game tremendously. Instead of the PC: "What's immediately to my left?" Burned Out GM: "A crate" PC: "I'll dive behind it." dialogue you get to skip right to the end. The person I once bribed into being the GM so I could play let me do this and it was fun. There's TONS of things I had always wanted to do, simple things like vaulting off the head of a dwarf, that I normally couldn't do spontaneously without asking "Is a dwarf next to me?". Will allowing the PC to spontaneously reach for a paperweight and whip it through a window off set the game balance? Hasn't happened to me.

Do THIS!

I've never figured out why, while I'm keeping track of NPCs and half a million dice and fifteen out of date books, I can come up with better PC actions than the PCs can. Every GM has experienced it at least once. You're in the middle of a fire fight, the NPC is partially concealed behind an apartment's front door, the PC is across the room on the floor behind a couch and he just LAYS there, occasionally taking a shot at the door before returning to just LAYING there. And the GM, pissed that he or she has to wait a full minute just to hear the PC say "I pop up and shoot" is silently screaming "Do this! Do THIS!" while two billion possible actions play jai-ali inside his skull. You just want to possess the player's body for a few moments and have him shatter the coffee table, grab a piece of glass, and frisbee it under the door and into the NPC's foot. But you can't and just sit around waiting for the PC to slowly say, once again, "I'll pop up and shoot."

The way I handle this is to have the NPCs beat the crap out of them with creativity. Not only does it give the PCs a glimpse at what they should be doing but it also gives the GM a way to divert his or her hostility so it doesn't result in a reality based speech. Give the NPCs weapons other than guns and skills which aren't based solely on making a bullet go really really fast. Have a troll throw furniture or an ork bust through a wall. Splash hot water in the kitchen, throw the top of a toilet, make traps out of razor blades. Get away from the BANG, bang, BANG, bang exchanges. And if all else fails: Force six turn gun into silly putty.