

Blackjack's Guide To Bitter Gamemastering #8

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I'm dedicating this issue of Blackjack's Guide to all of those thousands of poor NPCs that have been wasted countless times in countless games over the relatively short number of years the game of Shadowrun has been in existence. I've never been a spectacularly big fan of deceased non-player characters and have prepared a few suggestions on how you Bitter GMs out there can keep the NPCs alive longer than the duration of a few die rolls. While the common solution to NPC fatalities seems to involve the use of tank-like body armor and weapons whose barrels could be used as sewage conduits, this half-assed fix often results in something even worse than dead NPCs - dead PCs. So, here's a few suggestions on how your NPCs can get the upper hand while refraining from creating situations that generate numerous PC and NPC corpses. The cemeteries of Seattle are already overflowing with them.

Retreat

This may not sound like a very good way to help your NPCs win, but the simple act of retreating will often baffle the PCs so thoroughly that they begin to pull some boneheaded maneuvers. When a group of PCs and a few NPCs are hunkered down in a hallway tossing several kilograms of ammo at each other, the sudden disappearance of the opposition generates an interesting bit of disarray - not to mention paranoia. Remember: NPC guards, mercs, hired runners, etc. are often fighting on their home turf. They know the layout of the building right down to the air ducts and by retreating they give themselves a chance to mount a new attack, resulting in a battle that isn't merely based on surprise. Most fire-fights erupt simply because two opposing forces bump into each other while walking down a corridor, sewer, etc. While the PCs tend to hammer away at their opponents in such a situation, the NPCs have the additional option of using their knowledge of the 'battleground' to create a strategy not based on the tossing of bullets.

Variety

When I say 'variety', I'm not referring to the traditional construction of a combative NPC force (i.e. a few people with guns, one or two with magic, somebody with heavy armor, etc.). I'm referring to the various tactics, spells, weapons, appearances, etc. utilized by each individual NPC. It's really easy to sit down and crank out a group of NPC guards with the normal archetype spread. But such a simplistic view of NPC group construction usually results in a group of NPCs whose skills involve direct combat and little else. When a GM limits his or her combative options by creating such a group, you end up with NPC/PC encounters that result in little else than bloodshed by the gallon.

This is why it's important to remember the wide variety of options a GM has when creating combative NPCs. Mundane guards need not be armed with the traditional pistol/SMG combo; they can utilize squirts, grapple guns, stun sticks, exotic bladed weaponry, etc. Magicians can utilize unconventional or custom spells, deploy watchers to mess with the PCs heads, etc. If the GM doesn't want to mess up the PCs too badly they can arm the NPCs with everything from stun rounds to gas grenades. Not only does this variety of weapons create more interesting, and often less deadly, combat, it also creates a hell of a lot of PC confusion when they realize that they can no longer predict exactly what they're going to be up against. A locked bullet barrier won't do any good if the opposition carries crossbows as a side arm.

Scary Toys

One of the best things about GMing is that you get to play with a whole bunch of neat toys that the PCs

will probably never get their hands on. As long as the weapon is at least remotely technologically feasible, the GM is pretty much free to pull whatever weapon they want right out of their ass. Use this freedom to create unique stun weaponry, or weapons that create a frightening show but possess low lethality. If you're afraid that the PCs might get hold of the weapon should they kill off the NPCs, just remember that you always have the option of saying that the batteries in the Sonic Knockdown 2k are extremely advanced and rare and were built in a factory in Peru that - whoops - mysteriously blew up last week.

Be Flexible

Remember that your NPC sheet (if you use an NPC sheet) is not written in stone. There's really nothing stopping you from bumping up the attributes of an NPC if the PCs are stronger than you thought or exchanging an NPC's heavy pistol for an automatic shotgun with stun rounds. You can also toss in additional NPCs if you feel you need them (for some reason a lot of GMs seem to forget about this obvious little pointer). Just be careful that you don't start tossing in MP Lasers because you're pissed off at how easily the PCs ripped through your last group, and - always remember this - make all changes BEHIND the GM screen.