

John Wick



PLAY DIRTY





PLAY DIRTY 2 EVEN DIRTIER

WRITTEN BY JOHN WICK



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CONTENTS

Forward	2
Introduction: The Magician	5
Episode 1: The Friendly Game	10
Episode 2: Power to the Players	22
Episode 3: Four Simple Questions	26
Episode 4: Get a Helmet, Part 2	34
Episode 5: Happy Halloween	40
Episode 6: Con Games	45
Episode 7: Sylvie Hates the Bye-Bye Box	51
Episode 8: The Kobold and the Beautiful	59
Episode 9: The Little Things	67
Episode 10: Kick in Your Heels	75
The Glamour Girls	81
John Wick's 10 Commandments	102
Backer List	103



HEY FOLKS!

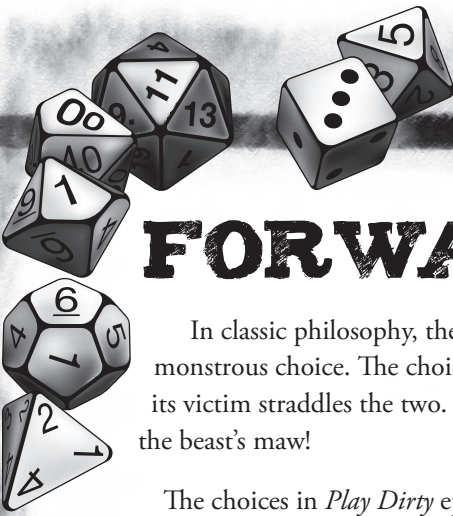
Our lovely layout artist Jessica made a suggestion that you'll see in the sidebars of this book. Those dice? Those words? Well, here's what they're for.

First, if you're short on dice, just flip the book to a random page and you've got a roll. And trust me, Jessica spend days pouring over Excel sheets trying to make these things right and random.



Second, the words. You need a quick NPC? Just flip to three random pages, select the words there and BANG! you've got yourself a brand new NPC! "Treacherous, honest and sadistic." Hm. Sounds like a dream date...





FORWARD

In classic philosophy, the “horns of the dilemma” represents a monstrous choice. The choice (*lemma*) is a beast with two horns (*di-*), and its victim straddles the two. Grasping one or the other, you still fall into the beast’s maw!

The choices in *Play Dirty* epitomize this dilemma. Players face all kinds of choices in role-playing games. For many players, it’s a matter of finding the optimal solution to each problem—Which weapon gives me the best damage? Which spell will finish this encounter the quickest? Which stratagem will uncover the enemy so that we can target the right person to win the day and live happily ever after?

Players look for these choices and their solutions because that’s what players have learned to do. While there may not be “losing and winning” in role-playing games, it sure feels like winning when you kill the monsters and come home with treasure and fame. When you have a few choices and some have good outcomes while others have bad outcomes, you seek out ways to maximize the good and minimize the bad. Why yes, I’ll take that ability that lets me hit harder in battle—why wouldn’t I? After all, I’m going to win by killing my foes!

For a meatier story, you *Play Dirty* by presenting dilemmas that always have consequences. Maybe a given choice has a slightly better result than its alternative, but by whose standard? What do you do when every choice has an unfortunate consequence? All things being equal, when it’s down to the wire and you have to jump left or jump right and either way will hurt, which way do you jump?

These kinds of choices are interesting because they are meaningful. You’re not just asking a player to master a particular set of rules and decide on an “optimal” way to solve a game problem—you’re asking a player to think about what results they can live with, when any solution comes with a price. This kind of story doesn’t just ask what a character does well; it asks what a character believes. Sure, you can swing around a magic sword and slay any foe you meet, but is slaying your foe always the best solution? What if your foe is your father? Society? Time? What happens if killing your foe is just as bad as letting your enemy live?

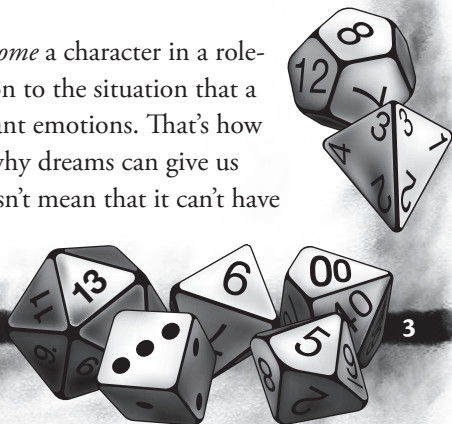
Why do our characters do what they do? In asking and answering that question, we also tackle the questions of why we do what we do, and what we believe in, once-removed.

In *Play Dirty* articles you're going to read all about characters getting stomped, mangled, devastated, and driven insane. Yet the players always come back for more! That's because this isn't your purely dice-decided adventure game where the whims of chance determine that a character's time has come and the player has no say in the matter. The binds these characters get into are a result of the choices that the characters and their players make. Time and again, the players decide that they have to do something, that they have a goal and that they're going to see it through. By putting them in a position where the solution isn't a matter of "good choice" and "bad choice" but rather of *different* choices, we get to explore what we consider important, what we're willing to compromise in order to get what we want, and what price we'll pay. That means the game isn't just about winning or losing, it's about what we believe in, and that's a game that players will line up to play in.

Of course, creating those kinds of stories means that you need to know what will motivate your players. You need to listen to what they consider important and build challenges around how they deal with the problems of trying to get what they really want. That's a kind of game mastery that takes more than a battle. This battlefield is fought over principles, social roles, and loyalties.

That's why the characters in these stories actually *have* stories. Their stories are about the fictive lives of those characters, about their dreams and ambitions, about their triumphs and their mistakes. These are characters who exist in a world, who have friends, relatives, mentors, and adversaries. They have motivations that carry them to make commitments and to foster connections. Thus their stories become about more than just flukes of luck or interpretations of rules—these stories tell about personal experiences.

While it may not be possible for someone to *become* a character in a role-playing game, a player can certainly feel a connection to the situation that a character is in. Imagination lets us feel real, significant emotions. That's how movies, books, theater and cinema inspire us, and why dreams can give us hope or terror. Just because something isn't real doesn't mean that it can't have an effect upon us.





OBSTINATE

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To get that kind of emotion, you need to relate to the situation that the character's in, and that means the character has to feel like a person rather than a page full of numbers. So the characters in *Play Dirty* are ones who have that tie to an imaginary world that makes them feel like real people. They hurt, they rage, they love and lose and they get back up to challenge the world again, because that's what people do. Sometimes they fail, sometimes they fall, and sometimes they die, and those moments are wrenching because we can imagine being that person and having that moment of loss. Without vulnerability, you can't have intimacy, and it's that intimacy with the character—with the thoughts and feelings of an imaginary person that we share among our friends and fellow players—that evokes the powerful connections that seize hold of our waking dreams and *make us* care.

That's why we *Play Dirty*: Because nothing makes you want to fight more than being kicked when you're down, and because we exalt the most when a triumph is hard-earned and well-deserved. If you're going to play a game or tell a story in which you're making choices, you might as well make them count!

- Jesse Heinig



INTRODUCTION

THE MAGICIAN

Listen closely now. I'm going to tell you a secret.

Thousands of years ago, we used to believe in the power of the shaman. The strange man who lived on the outside of our village. He had power. Invisible power.

The shaman's job was to communicate on the edge of the village. He was crazy. He talked to things that were not there. And when you needed to commune with your ancestors. You went outside the village, you crossed the dangerous wilderness, and there, in that dark, little tent, you sat there with the shaman and he threw dust into the fire and he held your hand and he led you into the invisible world where you could communicate with your ancestors.



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EASILY OFFENDED





In *Runequest*, Greg Stafford introduced this concept into the world of roleplaying games. The shaman helps you walk into the Hero Realm were you interacted with the gods and heroes and their stories in a real way.

And if you are clever and you are strong and your courage holds, you can change the world around you.

This is the role of the shaman.

Hundreds of years later, when the shaman became the magician, he still holds that power. He holds the sacred art. The art of the invisible world. The art of ideas. The art of language. And from that place, he pulls his power.

His grimoire is grammar.

And his spells are spelling.

Using the invisible power of language and symbols to change the world around them.

Even now, that power is still held by some in our own world. The power of language. Using this power to communicate ideas and change the world around us. Contacting the invisible world.

We define love. We define hate. We define the world around us with the invisible power of language. The symbols of the letters.

Five hundred years ago, romantic love was not going on a date. It wasn't getting a burger at the drive thru. It was a dangerous thing. It was something that could get you killed. Five hundred years ago, the word "love" meant "lust" because that's how the people in charge of the language wanted it to mean.

But the bards of Britain changed that word. They were able to redefine that word. They did it with language. And now, the old idea of love is impossible for us to recognize.

They changed the entire world—they changed it with love—by changing the meaning of the word. They changed the world with language.

You are not just a game master. You are a shaman.

You use language to change the hearts and minds of your players. You invoke emotion within them with just words.

You create an entire world with just words. And you make them feel love and hate and passion and revenge and sorrow and tragedy and triumph with just words.

This is what a game master is. He is a magician. He's a shaman. You go into his place, surrounded by symbols and strange signs. And he throws dust on the fire and he takes your hand and he leads you into the realm of heroes and gods.

And if you are clever enough and strong enough and if your courage holds... you can change the world around you.

* * *

The whole point of being a game master is using tricks to make players believe in things that are impossible. Things that are invisible. Things that don't exist.

When I was working on *Legend of the Five Rings*, one of the events I planned on happening was the seppuku of the Lion Clan Champion, Matsu Tsuko. Dave Williams, the lead game designer, objected immediately. His objection bordered on angry. Dave was a Lion Clan fanboy (we all had our favorite Clans) and he was angry that I had even suggested it.

His reaction only strengthened my resolve. Dave's reaction showed me exactly how other Lion Clan fanboys would react: with raw emotion. And that emotion was spawned by something that did not exist. For ten minutes, he talked about why the Lion Clan players would be upset. He was passionate and he was sincere. And after ten minutes, we decided that Dave's reaction was *exactly* why we had to do it.

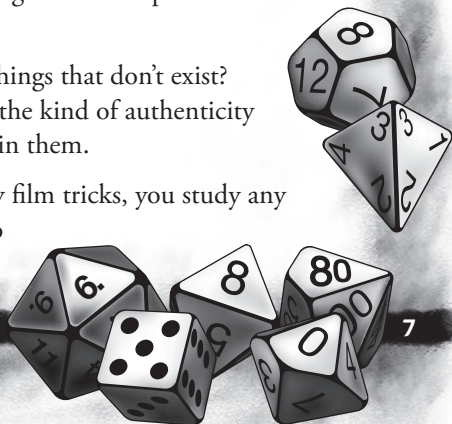
Matsu Tsuko was a card. A piece of cardboard. That's all she was. Except, that's not all she was. She was an *idea*. And murdering an idea is a powerful thing. It is not a simple thing. Nor should it be undertaken lightly. Tsuko's death had to be meaningful. It had to have purpose.

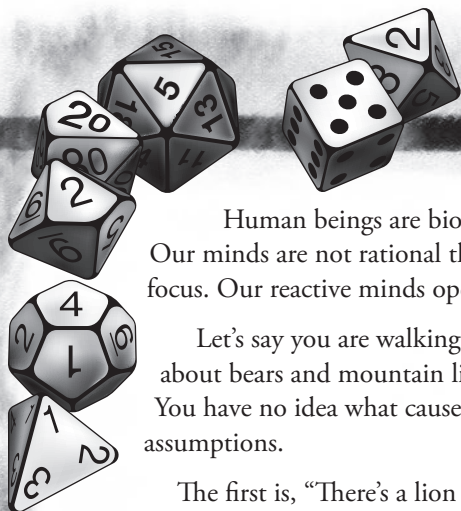
In other words, we did not want Matsu Tsuko going out like a punk.

Creating Dave's reaction is every Game Master's job. Your job is to make your players believe in something they know isn't real. That's impossible to believe. It's to make your players believe in something that doesn't exist. For even the briefest moment, turning off their rational mind and allowing them to step into the Hero Realm and walk with heroes and gods.

Now, how do you get your players believing in things that don't exist? You have to infuse your characters and worlds with the kind of authenticity and energy that makes your players *want* to believe in them.

As a GM, if you study con men tricks, you study film tricks, you study any kind of storytelling tricks, you learn how to tap into emotions, and draw them to the surface.





Human beings are biologically equipped with the ability to do this. Our minds are not rational things. Reason and logic require energy and focus. Our reactive minds operate on emotion. Let me give you an example.

Let's say you are walking on a mountain path. You've seen the warnings about bears and mountain lions. Suddenly, you hear a noise in the bushes. You have no idea what caused the sound. You could make two different assumptions.

The first is, "There's a lion or a bear over there."

The second is, "A bit of wind caused the noise."

The safer choice would be to assume danger. In fact, our minds usually jump to that conclusion. We assume danger. It's one of the reasons we've existed so long on this planet: we jump to the conclusion that there's something in the bushes.

If you assume danger and there's no danger present, you've made a "false positive" error. There was nothing in the bushes, but you assumed there was, and therefore, you move away.

If you assume there is no danger present and there is in fact a mountain lion in the bushes, you've made a "false negative." You assumed there was no danger when, in fact, danger was present, and now you are dead.

Like I said, the safer assumption is to assume there is something in the bushes. To assume something exists when, in fact, it may not exist. This is how our brains are wired to work.

Let's use a more imaginary example.

You're lying in bed at night. The room is pitch black. You wake up from a terrible dream. You wake up to find your foot is off the side of the bed and there's a dreadful feeling in your heart about the monster under the bed. He's going to grab your foot and drag you off the side. Ever since you were a child, you've had this notion in your head. You can't ditch it. And so, you move your foot back to the bed.

The monster under the bed may even be the monster in the closet. You make sure, every night, to close the closet door.

You know in your mind that there is no monster under the bed. There is no monster in the closet. And still, you close the door every night and make sure your foot never goes off the side of the bed. No matter what you tell yourself, no matter how you console yourself, that emotion is always there. Always there. You can't ditch it, no matter how you try.

False positive. Better be safe than sorry.

Baseball players operate on superstitions. They believe that wearing women's underwear gets them hits. They believe wearing the same pair of socks every game gets them hits. They believe all kinds of stupid things.

But they believe. And that's what gets them hits.

As human beings, we are programmed to believe in impossible things. It's the reason stories work. We are not only programmed to believe in impossible things, we *want* to believe in impossible things.

Don't believe me? Go check out the Flat Earth Society. Yeah, they really exist. And they'll tell you all about their hypotheses about how the moon landings were faked and how nobody's ever really been around the world and all sorts of crazy stuff. They're real. Go check 'em out.

Another example. My friend, the Legend Jessie Foster, is one of the most responsible parents I've ever met. He's a sweet guy. One of the nicest I've ever met. He's generous and kind. And he runs *GURPS*. He does *amazing* things with *GURPS*. Things I never knew were possible with a generic universal roleplaying game that's not really generic or universal...

...and right now, in your mind, you've already got a picture of him. (If you know him already, that's not fair.) But you've already started creating a picture of my friend Jessie Foster. How tall he is. What color hair he has. Is he clean-shaven or does he wear a beard? Does he have glasses? What kind of clothes does he wear? How does he talk? How does he walk?

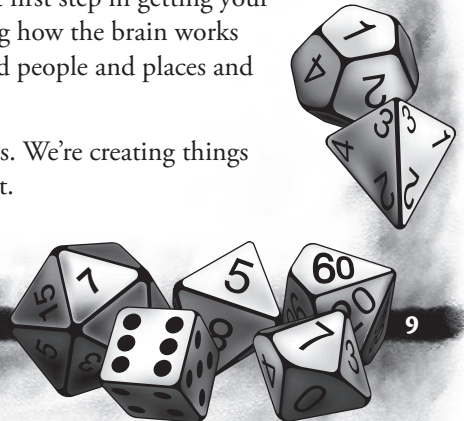
You're already forming a picture of him.

That's because we are a race of storytellers. We are designed to receive stories and to create mental images and conclusions just from the process of hearing that information.

As a GM, knowing that one fact is an important first step in getting your players to believe in things that don't exist. Knowing how the brain works and how stories work will help you draw images and people and places and emotions from your players.

We are not just Game Masters. We are magicians. We're creating things that don't exist and getting other people to believe it.

Pulling rabbits out of our hats.





EPISODE 1

THE FRIENDLY GAME

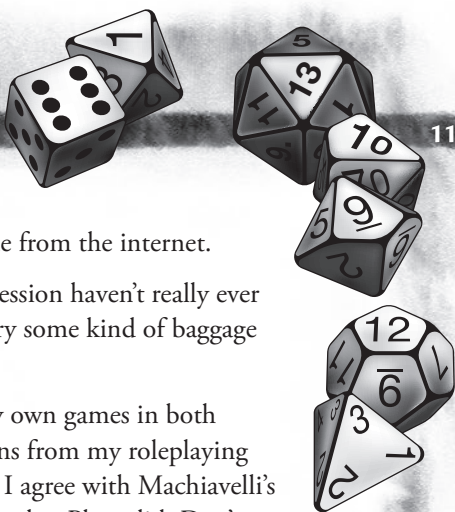
I'm a bully.

That's right. I'm a bully.

I use my authority as the GM to abuse the trust the players give me. Since I'm a physical wimp, I take out my frustrations on others with intellectual muscle.

I'm a bully.





At least, that's the impression you'd get about me from the internet.

But I find that most people who have that impression haven't really ever read anything I've written, or if they have, they carry some kind of baggage with them before they've read it.

For example, I've tried to use examples from my own games in both the previous *Play Dirty* book and in the GM sections from my roleplaying games. I use examples from games I've run because I agree with Machiavelli's approach to instruction: *use real examples*. Don't do what Plato did. Don't make up a fake continent and use hypotheticals. No. Use *real examples*.

Therefore, when I talk about the principles of my own Game Mastering techniques, I use anecdotes from my games. I mean, what I am I supposed to do? Use examples from *other people's games*?

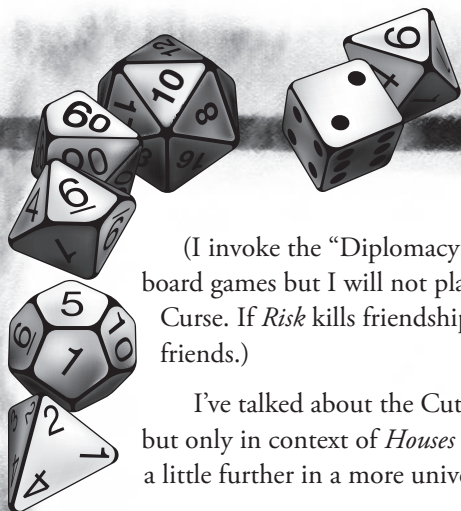
OK. I'll do that. Right now.

I learned this trick from a man named Matt Colville. A great gamer. He's got an amazing mind for strategy. He's also a sucker for a good story so that doesn't hurt, either.

Matt taught me a rule that he and his friends use at their table. Whenever they're playing a board game, if someone makes a mistake, he asks, "Friendly game?" If everyone agrees, that player can take his move back and try again. If unanimous consent is not reached, it is no longer a "friendly game." The implication, of course, is that if you agree, you may be allowed to take back a mistake, as well. But once "friendly game" has been retracted, blood is in the water and there's no turning back.

After seeing Matt's Friendly Game rule in action, I wondered...could it be applied to roleplaying games as well? And then, I gave it a try.

I employed Matt's table rule in the *Houses of the Blooded* roleplaying game. I suggested two modes of play. The first was the Friendly Game. Players did not actively try to kill each other's characters, but instead, selected enemies from each other and worked together to create a compelling story for others to enjoy. The second mode, the Cut-Throat Game, was the exact opposite. Players were encouraged to seek out ways to kill each other's characters. And even rewarded, by me, for doing so. Obviously, both of these game modes are for different kinds of players. If you like one, you probably don't like the other.



(I invoke the “Diplomacy Curse” here. *Diplomacy* is one of my favorite board games but I will not play it with my friends. That’s because of the Curse. If *Risk* kills friendships, *Diplomacy* makes you want to kill your friends.)

I’ve talked about the Cut-Throat Game and the Friendly Game before but only in context of *Houses of the Blooded*. Here, I’d like to examine them a little further in a more universal context.

ORIGINS

I’ve played a lot of live action games. Tons of them. The problem is, I usually get frustrated and I can’t quite figure out why. Then, one day, it hit me.

Most LARPs are PVP. That is, they’re “player versus player.” Just like playing an online first person shooter. Not only can players take out other players’ characters, the game *encourages* them to do so.

At first, I was enamored with this idea. It was like life-sized chess. I had to be careful with my character, keep deep secrets, and protect him against the other players. Gave the game a kind of edge.

But then, after years of playing this way, I finally figured out why I was always getting so frustrated: because it doesn’t work. Here’s why.

Over the course of my career, I’ve done a lot of co-writing. Short stories, RPGs, a novella. The key to collaboration is *trust*. If you don’t trust the person you’re working with, getting any kind of real work done becomes a lot harder. It becomes next to impossible.

Roleplaying games are, at their core, cooperative storytelling games. You and a group of friends get together to tell the stories of your characters. The game works because you trust each other. And because you trust each other, you can tell stories together.

(Hopefully, we’ve all moved beyond the “GM as enemy” phase.)

Now, think about this: you go to a game with as many as twenty, thirty, or even forty different players—some of whom you don’t even know—and you engage in a cooperative storytelling activity. And, to make it worse, some of these people are actively trying to kill your character.

Try co-writing a novel that way. Or a short story. Or a TV show. Or a movie script. Try shooting a film with the knowledge that other actors are plotting and prepping ways to kill your character. How far do you think that's gonna go?

This is the chief problem with PVP RPGs and LARPs: they undermine the very reason that RPGs work in the first place.

Trust.

I thought about that a lot when making my own table top and LARP rules for *Houses of the Blooded*. And after a while, I came to some conclusions. Those led to rules. And now, after that long introduction, here they are.

OPEN SECRETS

One of the things I saw happen most often in LARPs was what a friend of mine called “couching it.”

LARPs usually start around 7:00-8:00. At around 10:00, “the plot” would show up. (LARPers call this “The Ten O’Clock Monster.”) Once that happens, the heavy-hitters in the game capture the plot, go to a quiet room, and lock the door behind them so they can have the plot to themselves.

Why would they do this? Because the plot has all the juicy rewards. Catch the plot and you get the super cool MacGuffin the GM set up for it. And because the heavy-hitters have the character sheets to do so, they grab the plot and keep it for themselves, leaving everyone else outside the room and “couching it.” That is, sitting on the couch until midnight when the game is over so they can collect their XP.

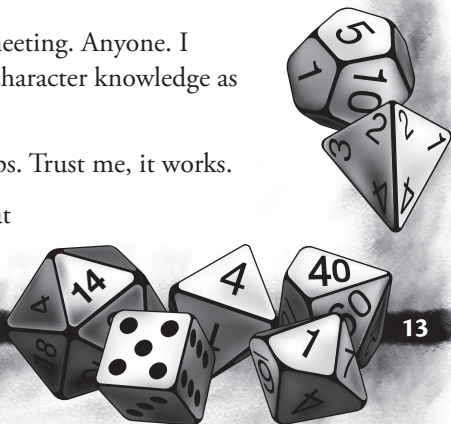
After watching this phenomenon (for years), I came up with a mechanic to address it: Open Secrets.

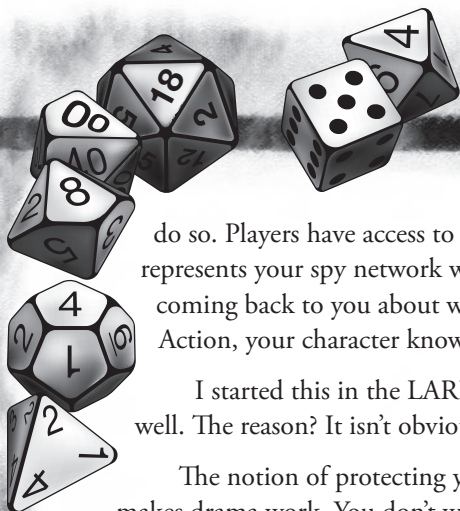
Whenever a secret meeting occurs at my *Houses of the Blooded* LARP, the players know to announce it. “We’re having a *SECRET MEETING* over here!” they shout. Here are the rules.

Anyone can go in the room to watch the secret meeting. *Anyone*. I assume we’re all adults and nobody will use out-of-character knowledge as in-character knowledge.

Yes, I know. I’m assuming LARPers are grown ups. Trust me, it works.

Now, if you want to know what happened in that meeting *in character*, you must spend a resource to





do so. Players have access to “Espionage Actions” during the game. This represents your spy network watching the area, jotting down notes, and coming back to you about what they saw. If you spend an Espionage Action, your character knows what happened in that room.

I started this in the LARP, but then I applied it to table top games as well. The reason? It isn’t obvious yet? Let me explain.

The notion of protecting your character goes against *everything* that makes drama work. You don’t want to *protect* your character, you want to *expose* your character. Every writing class teaches this, every acting class teaches this. Only in RPGs are we taught, “You must protect your character.” In fact, some games (who shall remain nameless, but have the initials “D” and “D”) have *three redundant systems* to protect your character: hit points, saving throws, and armor class. They all do the *same exact thing*.

As a GM, I don’t want the players protecting their characters. I want them exposing their characters to danger, exposing their weaknesses to people they shouldn’t trust, and throwing themselves into stupid situations because of things they believe.

All three of those are things players *never* do inLARPs. Except me. Because I’m an idiot and I’m fooling myself into thinking that’s the way I have fun atLARPs.

But I digress.

The Open Secrets rule meant players could see other people’s characters in ways they never would. They get to see weaknesses. They get to hear secrets. They get to see *the full context of the game*. Instead of experiencing the game as a first person limited narrator, they see it from a third person omniscient point of view.

Now, once I implemented this rule, a few things started to change.

First, players got emotionally involved with other players’ stories. Because they knew the whole context, players could invest in the stories they were interested in, know the secrets, and thus, know the implications of every twist and turn. If players don’t know the details of a secret plot, they won’t understand the payoff. That means they won’t care.

And the last thing you want at your game is players who don’t care about the story.

Let me give you an example.

Two players have a secret romantic plot. They aren't supposed to be lovers, but they are.

Now, in a typical game, they'd keep this secret. They'd probably only communicate in emails or when they are certain they are alone. Nobody else knows about this. They don't get to see the machinations these two pull off to keep this thing a secret.

Then, suddenly, they get betrayed and exposed. What's the other players' reaction?

"Oh, they had a secret. Well, I didn't know that, never saw it, don't care. I'll get on with my own plot."

However, if we handle the situation with Open Secrets, the other players *do* know about the affair. They get to see the subtle innuendos the characters throw at each other. They get to see the way they dodge danger. They get to see the secret notes passed back and forth. They get to see *all of it*.

And, if it's a story they care about, when the betrayal comes, they care. They're emotionally invested.

As I told my buddy Sheldon in *PDI*, "Assume the other players are your audience." You are the author of your story, and yes, you are in this to entertain yourself, but if you're in it to *only* entertain yourself, you might as well go write a short story.

Roleplaying games are *cooperative storytelling*. That kind of implies—no, it explicitly states—that you work *with other people* to tell a story *to other people*.

Keeping secrets just sabotages the whole enterprise. Don't do it. Encourage your players to *expose* their characters' secrets. Share them with others.

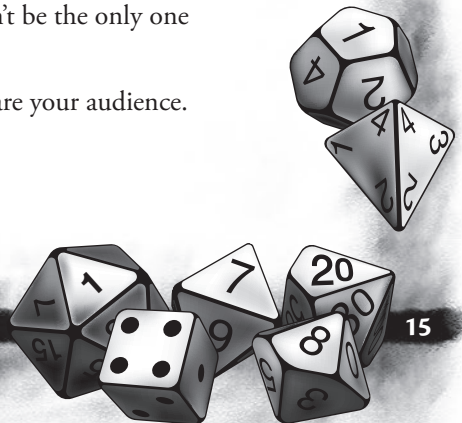
Otherwise, everyone is just sitting alone, telling stories to themselves.

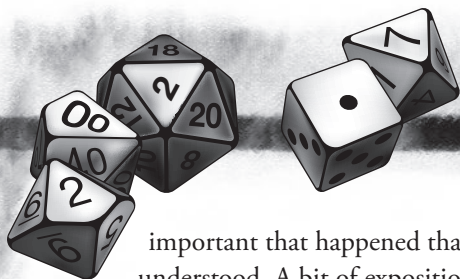
All of this can be summed up with one sentence:

If you make your character's story cool, you won't be the only one interested in hearing your character's story.

So, make it cool. And assume the other players are your audience.

Oh, as a quick post script, at the end of each LARP, I asked players to announce anything





important that happened that other people might not have seen or understood. A bit of exposition.



A lot of things happen with forty people over four-to-six hours and you can miss 'em. Having everybody list the important stuff that happened to them helped a lot.

And this isn't "shout outs." This isn't saying, "I really liked that scene." No, this is people saying, "You guys may have missed this and it's going to be important later."

Again, making sure everybody who wants to be involved with your story gets a chance to see and understand everything that's happening.

ENEMIES

In a PVP game, you worry less about the GM's plots and more about the other players. And this, I feel, is the crux of the problem.

You can't trust other players. You can't. Not even your own friends.

The level of suspicion is so high, it's near paranoia. I've seen players stand in corners, hoping nobody notices them, praying they can make it to the end of the night so they can collect their XP. No part of the game is safe. Hell, I've seen characters die in *email exchanges*.

Yeah. And you thought that bit from the *Paranoia* adventure where the characters died in a sidebar was a *joke*. In PVP LARPs, that's a common occurrence. Common.

I've even seen characters die *when the player wasn't present*. Don't get me started on that one.

How in the world can you expose your character when she could get killed in an email exchange? How can you feel safe enough to explore her weaknesses if everyone is looking to kill you? Quick answer: you can't. Nor should you.

So, I had to find a way to address this problem. A rule. This is what I decided.

I decided to let people choose their own enemies. Here's how it works.

You know you need an antagonist for your story. So, you go to a friend and say, "Hey, would you be my enemy?" If your friend agrees, the two of you sit down

before every game and plot out how you're going to screw each other over. Just like professional wrestling.

Trust me, gaming always comes back to professional wrestling.

Let's say you and I are enemies. I come to you and say, "Tonight, I'll be passing a secret note to my spy master. I need you to intercept that note and do a public reading. It'll embarrass me and sabotage my plans." Then, when we figure that out, I ask, "What do you need me to do?"

Now, some folks may be asking, "Where's the surprise in that?"

Again, you're assuming you are the only person at the game who is interested in your story. If you've been playing with the Open Secrets rules, other players are now emotionally invested in your character's fate. By arranging for your enemy to have enough information to sabotage your plans, *the other players* get to see the betrayal, feel the knife stick in their guts, and enjoy your story.

Now, there are times when you can tell your enemy, "I don't have any plans tonight. Surprise me."

But that would take... um... what's that word?... uh... oh yeah...

It would take *trust*.

Try that in a PVP game.

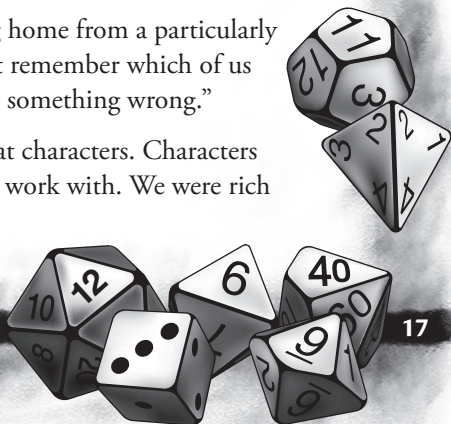
THE MORLEY-WICK METHOD

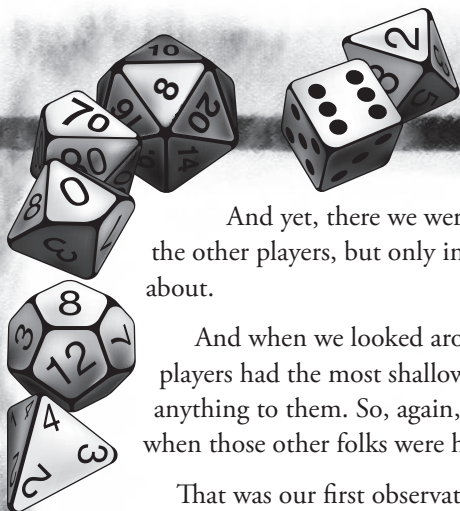
Some of this text appears in *Houses of the Blooded* in a slightly different form. I've revised it to fit better for a general audience.

I used to go to LARPs a lot. Living in LA means you have to drive an hour to get anywhere and getting to a LARP in LA was no exception. An hour drive there, an hour drive home. Sometimes, even longer.

I was in the car with my buddy Sheldon, driving home from a particularly boring LARP, complaining as we usually did. I don't remember which of us suggested it, but one of us said, "Maybe we're doing something wrong."

But what could we be doing wrong? We had great characters. Characters with history. Deep history. Well-written and easy to work with. We were rich with potential. Untapped potential.





And yet, there we were. Bored out of our skulls. We'd interact with the other players, but only in a shallow way. There was just nothing to talk about.

And when we looked around, it seemed to us that the most successful players had the most shallow characters. That is, there really wasn't anything to them. So, again, why were we having such a miserable time when those other folks were having so much success?

That was our first observation, but in fact, we were wrong. Our observation had betrayed us. It took deeper analysis to understand our problem. So, we sat at Norm's (at 2:00 AM) and talked about it. Sheldon came up with the solution.

"We're playing the wrong game," he told me.

I grabbed the ketchup and Tabasco for my eggs. "What do you mean?"

"Our characters have deep secrets."

"Yeah," I said.

"That nobody knows but us."

That made me pause. And think. "Yeah," I said. Slowly.

We spent the rest of the night talking about the problem. It wasn't a problem with the other players. They were playing the game correctly. The problem was with us.

I think Sheldon also nailed down the guy who could solve our problem. David Mamet. The director/screenwriter. His books and essays on "the method" approach to acting really inspired Sheldon, which in turn, inspired me. Using Mamet's critiques, we came up with a solution to our problem.

From Mamet, to Sheldon, to me. To you.

WHAT'S WRONG?

So, after that long introduction, let me explain what Sheldon and I were doing wrong and why it relates to David Mamet.

"The method" is an acting technique. Actors try replicating real life emotions, calling on sense memories from their own past similar to the emotions the character experiences. Method actors also create "rich interior landscapes." That is, they create

detailed histories for their characters. They know everything about their characters, so when a circumstance arises, they'll know how their character would respond.

Rich interior landscapes.

Watching an actor on stage, watching him respond to something seemingly innocuous with a cryptic sigh or a mysterious glance or some other enigmatic gesture. The audience doesn't know what it means, but obviously, the actor's done his research. He's done the work. He's using the method.

Unfortunately, the audience doesn't know what it means. The actor isn't communicating anything to the audience.

In other words, he's failing the entire purpose of acting. Communicating to the audience.

As gamers, we have a similar problem. We come up with elaborate and detailed backgrounds. Rich internal landscapes. And then, when we start playing, whole sessions go by without the other players having a single clue. Cooperative storytelling.

Characters have secrets. Sure they do. That's fine. But authors use devices to give the audience clues as to why a character responds a certain way. We get to see that rich internal landscape. Even if a reaction is a mystery, we trust that somewhere down the line, the author will let us in on the secret. We'll eventually understand all those cryptic sighs, mysterious glances, and enigmatic gestures. Eventually.

But in roleplaying games, we keep secrets. We write the GM private notes. We take him aside for a whispered meeting. We keep that 24-page background to ourselves. Nobody else gets to see it. It's ours and ours alone.

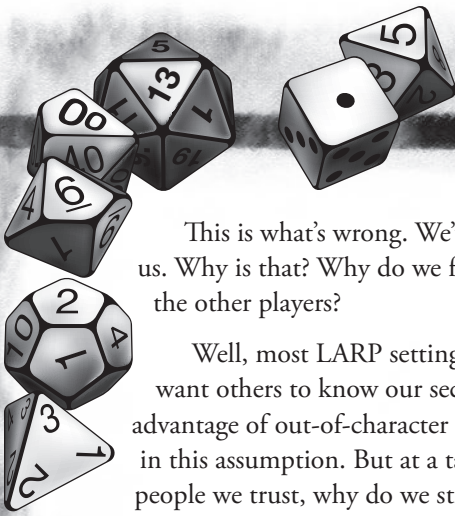
The method. Secrecy. Otherwise known as mental masturbation.

You are, quite literally, playing with yourself.

Nobody else is invited. Nobody else gets to know about your character's past. That lost lover. That blood feud with your father. That private conversation you had with your mother. Your childhood rivalry with your sister. Your covert marriage. That secret you've kept for twenty years and never told a soul.

All that rich background you're selfishly keeping to yourself. That no other player will ever know about. It's yours and yours alone. And you're the only one who will ever enjoy it.





This is what's wrong. We've got great characters and nobody knows but us. Why is that? Why do we feel we need to hide our characters' secrets from the other players?

Well, most LARP settings are PVP (player vs. player), so we don't want others to know our secrets. We assume the other players will take advantage of out-of-character information. And, sadly, we're usually correct in this assumption. But at a table top game, surrounded by friends and people we trust, why do we still follow the same behavior?

Reflex perhaps. Maybe it's just habit.

Well, let's break that habit. Let's get out of the "method" philosophy of character creation and play. Let's try something different.

CHARACTER BACKGROUND

One page.

Tell your players that's all they get. Just one page.

If you want to go even more extreme, give them index cards. "That's for your character's background."

Now, this may seem strange considering other advice I've given. After all, I'm the guy who wants all that background so I can exploit characters in ways their character sheets can't address, right?

But if a character's background stays in the background, it doesn't matter. If it never sees the light of day, *if the other players never see it*, it's never important.

In one of my games, a player made his character do something that made no sense: he betrayed the rest of the party. Just sold them down the river. When I asked him why he did that, he said, "My character would have done that. It makes perfect sense."

I said, "I don't see that. Explain it."

He went into a *huge* backstory that started when his character was eight years old. I let him go about two minutes before I stopped him.

"Who knows about this?"

"Well," he said. "Only me."

“Then how do any of us know that your character’s actions make any sense?”

“They don’t,” he said. “It’s my character. Not theirs.”

And that’s the crux of the problem. If we—the other players and me—never get to see that character background, then a whole ton of stuff doesn’t make sense.

You want to see it. As the GM, you want to know it. More importantly, you want other players to know it. Why?

So they can help that player tell his character’s story.

I know, you’ve got a lot to say about your character. This is what I call “Character Control Syndrome,” or “CCS.” You think this is the last time you’re going to have any control over your character, so you want to squeeze as much content and detail in there as possible.

I was playing a character once. A magic cop. I really didn’t have any idea about his past. I just kind of made him an arcane Columbo. But I bumped into a story involving a kidnapped girl. Something triggered in my head. I had no idea about my cop’s family. Wife, kids. No clue. I hadn’t really thought about it. But at that moment? That very moment? I knew he had a daughter. And he lost that daughter. I didn’t know how or why. I just knew it. I knew it.

That one little detail, a detail I didn’t know until I started playing, changed the entire course of the character’s past and future. Completely changed him. Turned him from an arcane Columbo into something much deeper. And, in a lot of ways, a lot scarier.

All because I had kept a detail open and filled it during play.

* * *

This may be the *longest Play Dirty* essay I’ve ever written, so I should probably wrap it up. I mean, I could go on and on about this subject.

Trust me. I know from experience.

The key lesson here is to get your players to open up. Expose their characters. Get them to show you the weaknesses.

It’s the only way to give them what they really want.





EPISODE 2

POWER TO THE PLAYERS

It never fails. Whenever I run a *Play Dirty* seminar, there's always some guy who asks me this question. Without fail. So, I'm going to answer it here. Hopefully, it will kill off the question because, frankly, I'm tired of answering it.

"How do I keep my characters getting too powerful too fast?"

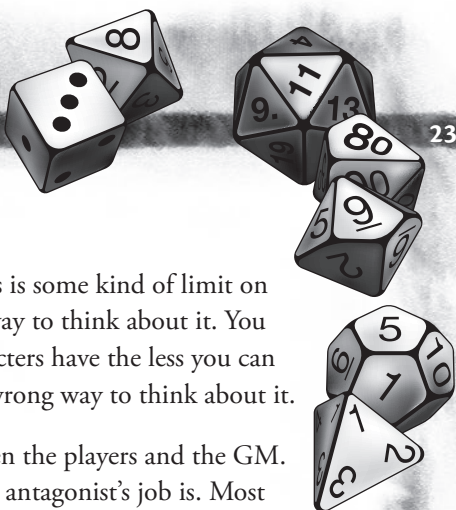
My answer usually goes something like this.



WORN OUT

JOHN WICK | Play Dirty 2: Even Dirtier

23



You're assuming that having powerful characters is some kind of limit on your power as a GM. Well, first, that's the wrong way to think about it. You should be thinking that the more powers the characters have the less you can challenge them. And, to be honest, that's also the wrong way to think about it.

Some games assume an antagonistic role between the players and the GM. There's no problem with that if you know what the antagonist's job is. Most people don't. These are the same people who think "ironic" is a synonym for "tragic." Or folks who think "tragic" means "something bad happening."

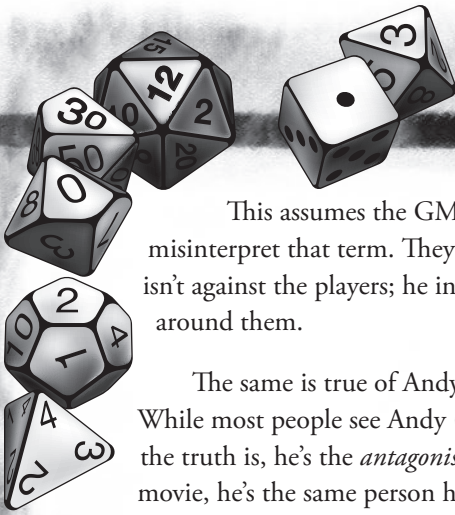
The GM's job *is* to be an antagonist. But what does that mean? It means that his job is to challenge the characters by putting them in situations that force change. Let me give you some examples.

My favorite Shakespeare play is *Othello*. Along with *Richard III*, it's one of his plays that really challenges the concepts of antagonist and protagonist. We know that Iago is the antagonist. We also know Othello is the protagonist. But Othello is a weak character. Not physically weak—he's a bad ass—but he spends the majority of the play confused and weeping. Shakespeare even gave him epilepsy. The scene where he collapses into a seizure reduces the protagonist to a pathetic, quivering mass. In the end, Othello gets tricked into betraying his best friend and murdering his wife. Not an easy character to sympathize with.

On the other hand, Iago is charming, witty, and clever. He out-thinks everyone. He's only undone by the mistakes and failures of others (and his equally cunning wife). It's easy to fall in love with Iago—despite his assurance to us that he's *evil*. Despite that, we find ourselves lured to sympathy for the villain. For the antagonist.

But I digress. The point of this is to illustrate that Iago's antagonism causes change in the play. His plots and schemes screw everything up. That's because the antagonist's role is to be an agent of change. Specifically, he causes change in the character of the protagonist.

If the protagonist survives the changes imposed by the antagonist, he comes out stronger in the end. If he does not...well, we call this "tragedy."



This assumes the GM has an antagonistic role. But most folks misinterpret that term. They don't understand what an antagonist is. He isn't against the players; he initiates *changes* in the characters and the world around them.

The same is true of Andy Dufresne from *The Shawshank Redemption*. While most people see Andy (Tim Robbins' character) as the protagonist, the truth is, he's the *antagonist*. Andy never changes. At the end of the movie, he's the same person he was when he went in to that prison. But Red (Morgan Freeman) is transformed by his friendship with Andy. He's a changed man. In the beginning, he's a man of fear. Fear of change. Fear of the prison. Fear of the guards. Fear of the warden. Fear of *leaving* the prison. At the end, he's a man of hope. Andy changed him. That's because Andy is the antagonist.

Think about your role as a GM in that way. You are the catalyst for change in the characters' lives. How you initiate and manage that change is up to you.

In my experience, players generally do not want to change anything about their characters. OK, that's not right. Generally, players want their characters to *get better*. Experience points.

However, having designed a few games that reward characters for *changing* rather than just *advancing*, I've seen a bit of a shift in that attitude.

(Go figure; I'm an antagonistic game designer, too. Dammit.)

* * *

So, what does this have to do with making characters too powerful?

If you look at the characters' "power level" as a guide for what kind of challenges to throw at them, you're moving away from the target. What the characters *can do* is not important here. What you and I are concerned with, as GMs, is what the characters *will do*.

Let's look at Batman as an example.

Try building Batman in any superhero game. Include all his skills, contacts, wealth, the Batmobiles (he always has at least three), the gadgets, the mansion, the faithful butler, the detective skills, the physical combat training, and the Batcomputer. And don't forget Robin and Oracle and Commissioner Gordon and

any other ally he has to find a way to pay for. That includes the Justice League, by the way.

Batman is a damn expensive character. He's hyper competent. He stopped a whole damn Martian invasion by himself. He represents hundreds—if not thousands—of experience points. But, for some reason, writers find compelling ways to get him into trouble. Is it because they're taxing his physical skills? No. Is it because the present him with puzzles he can't overcome? No. Is it because they take away his Batcave and Batmobile and Batcomputer? No.

It's because Bruce Wayne made a promise over the grave of his dead parents. And screwing with that promise is the way to screw with Batman.

The same can be said for Indiana Jones. He's got no powers. He can't fly, can't run fast, can't see through walls, and he's got no magic power ring. But Indy is no starting character. Hell, even Young Indiana Jones isn't a starting character. But there are plenty of ways to trip him up. None of those methods have to do with his skills. It all has to do with the fact that Indy feels like he should do the right thing, no matter the cost. And that's the way to screw with Indiana Jones.

(This raises a deeper issue—a game design issue—that asks the question, “Why the hell do starting characters suck so much?” So we can wade through the suck to get to the awesome? How is that fun? But, I digress...)

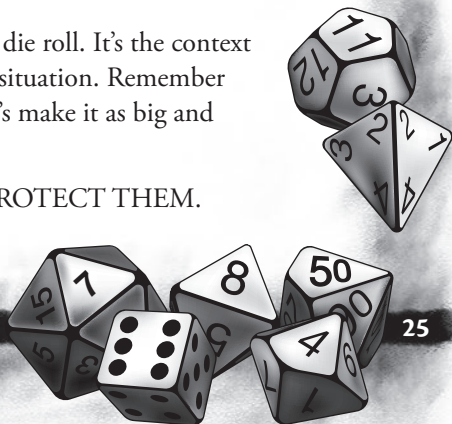
It doesn't matter what the characters *can* do, all that matters is what they *will* do.

Batman won't kill. So, put him in a situation where he can kill or let someone else die. If you put Batman in a situation where he must choose whether or not to compromise his principles, all the Batgadgets in the world won't help him. That's why putting a gun in Batman's hands has such an emotional punch.

Put your players in dramatic situations that challenge what their characters *believe*. And then, you've got yourself a game.

Drama does not come from the uncertainty of a die roll. It's the context of your characters' actions that brings drama to the situation. Remember that. And just to make sure you do remember it, let's make it as big and plain as possible...

THEIR CHARACTER SHEETS CANNOT PROTECT THEM.





EPISODE 3

FOUR SIMPLE QUESTIONS

So, your players want a dungeon crawl, do they?

Leave the city behind, go trekking through the wilderness until they find a deep, dark, and dank hole in the ground? Go lurking through there, looking for loot?

Okay. We can do that. Sure, we can.

And there are things we can do to make sure they *never* get this stupid idea again.





Just kidding.

“Give the players what they want.” That’s our motto here.

Let’s ask four simple questions. And by the end of it, you’ll be ready to give them a dungeon crawl like they’ve never seen before.

“WHY ARE WE DOING THIS?”

So, you’re sitting in front of your computer reading this essay and you get an email. The email tells you that there’s an opportunity to earn a whole lot of money if you quit your job, leave your family, move to a country you’ve never heard of, pick up a gun, and murder people you’ve never met.

Big money. Like hundreds of thousands of dollars. All you have to do is leave your life behind, pick up a gun, and kill people.

Interested? Well, why not?

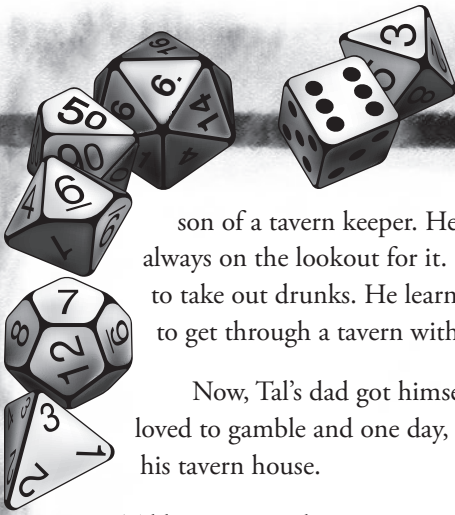
Now, I’m not going to insult your intelligence. You know the metaphor I’m using here. But let’s be honest. The thought of being “an adventurer” is not glamorous at all. In the novella I wrote for *Wicked Fantasy*, “The Courage of Tamyn Taval,” our titular character tries talking an old friend, Valera, into becoming an adventurer again.

Valera refuses. She’s become a courtesan since retiring from adventuring. Now, she has wealthy admirers who pour money on her for just the illusion of love. She has a beautiful home, jewelry, expensive food delivered to her door every day. She drinks wine, eats grapes, and lives in luxury.

She asks, “Tell me why I would leave all of this for mud and rain and broken bones and orks shooting arrows at my head?”

The question, “Why are we doing this?” is an important one. In fact, I’d argue it’s just as important as strength, dexterity, and hit points. It’s something your players should consider, and it’s something for which they should have a good answer. Here’s an example.

I once played a thief (not a rogue; rogues are wannabe thieves) who was the son of a tavern keeper. His name was Tal Tevish. Little Tal was a thief because he was the



son of a tavern keeper. He learned how to pick pockets because he was always on the lookout for it. He learned how to “backstab” because he had to take out drunks. He learned how to move in shadows because it’s easier to get through a tavern without being seen.

Now, Tal’s dad got himself in trouble with the local thieves guild. He loved to gamble and one day, he gambled too much. Now, the guild wants his tavern house.

Tal became an adventurer to get his dad out of debt. He needs the money and he needs it *fast*. The best way to make fast money—without attracting legal attention—is by joining a group of adventurers. Yes, it means he’s putting his life in danger, but *it’s his dad*. His dad worked his whole life for that tavern. Tal can’t let him lose it over a few stupid card hands and a few bad dice rolls.

So, Tal joins up with a crew heading out to take care of some mess with a necromancer and his goons.

After the first encounter, Tal nearly gets himself killed, but when the fighting is over, he’s looking at a pile of coins. A pile of gold coins.

Remember: a gold piece is enough to keep a family fed for a year. And here’s two hundred of them. The party divides the shares up equally and that means Tal gets forty gold. A good start.

By the end of the adventure, Tal not only had a few hundred gold, he also had a magic sword the fighter didn’t want (it didn’t have enough plusses or something), which turned out to be worth a few thousand gold.

A few thousand gold. Enough money to feed an entire city for a year.

So, at the end of that adventure, Tal retired. After selling the sword, he had enough coin to get his dad out of debt. He took over the tavern, became a local hero, and that was that.

Of course, a clever GM can figure out a way to get Tal out of the tavern and back into the adventuring business, but that’s a different story.

The moral of all this is: if your players give their characters good reasons to be adventurers, those reasons carry through the adventure and influence the choices

they make. Plus, we have a word for someone who goes on a killing spree for no reason at all.

“Psychopath.”

“WHERE IS THIS PLACE?”

This is an old trick I’m gonna share with you called “The Dirty Dungeon.” You may have heard about it or seen it on my YouTube channel, but these days, whenever I run a dungeon crawl (or just about any kind of “mission” adventure), I use it. Here’s how it works.

Before our heroes get to the dungeon, they have to *find* the dungeon. How do they do that?

Well, they’ll do research in libraries, ask older adventurers who may have been there, check with the bard for some handy information...

Sure. That’s all well and good, but why not make a *mechanic* out of it.

Get yourself a bowl. Then, get yourself a bunch of counters, beads, or even small candies like Hershey’s Kisses. Then, tell the players:

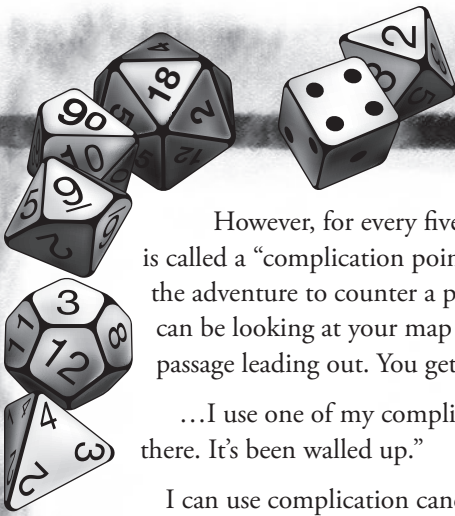
I want you to tell me what you find out about the dungeon. Yes, I mean, I want you to make stuff up. Like, where it is, hold old it is, what kind of monsters and traps are in it. Anything you can think of. I can veto stuff, but if it’s cool, I’ll probably accept it.

For every cool or dangerous part you add to the dungeon, I’ll throw a candy in the bowl. You keep adding stuff, I throw more candy in the bowl. I’ll write everything down and it will be part of your “research” for the dungeon.

Each candy is a bonus d4 on any roll while you are on the adventure. Go ahead and take the candy out. You can eat it if you want. When you make a roll, add a d4 to your roll. The candy represents the benefit of research.

If you do something really cool, like hand me a hand-drawn map of the dungeon, I’ll put two and maybe three pieces in the pot. The more dangerous and/or cool you make it, the more pieces you get.





However, for every five pieces of candy, I get a piece, too. My piece is called a “complication point.” Which means, I can use it any time during the adventure to counter a piece of research you’ve done. For example, you can be looking at your map as you try to escape and you see there’s a secret passage leading out. You get there and...

...I use one of my complication candies to say, “There’s no secret passage there. It’s been walled up.”

I can use complication candies to cancel or thwart your plans.

And that’s really how it all works. There are a couple of advantages to this plan.

First, the players tell you what kind of stuff they want in the dungeon. This is always a good thing. Players communicating what they want makes your job easier. You don’t have to guess and you don’t have to hope. They say it. You give it to them. Everybody is happy.

Second, you’ve done no prep!

I mean, think about it. They’ve done all the work for you. They’ve drawn a map, they’ve listed the monsters, they’ve devised the traps. They’ve done everything for you. You don’t have to spend a week coming up with this stuff, it’s already done.

Finally, they’ve done it *in character*. It’s part of the adventure. If they stay in character, they can talk about how they interviewed the bard who told them about the rhyming trap. They can talk about the old adventurer who lost his leg fighting the giant rat monster. They’re doing all of this in character. And that’s more than awesome.

Of course, a common question arises whenever I detail this little trick. “What about the jerk who doesn’t play fair and screws it up for everybody else?”

I always have the same answer.

“Why are you playing with that guy?”

“WHAT’S THAT SMELL?”

With the players sitting comfortably, I stand up on the other side of the GM screen and say...

You approach the place the legends and maps hinted at. The side of the mountain. The twisted tree. The black rock. You step closer...

...and you see a hole in the side of the mountain. Carved stone floor. But you also see a rotting corpse trapped under three iron spikes. One of the spikes has split his skull open, brains spilling out onto the carved stone floor. You see small animals and bugs scatter as you approach and interrupt their feast.

And you smell... you smell what can only be the rotting flesh of the corpse. Fetid and awful. A sweet, rotten smell. You can see that his death unlocked his bowels and left a mess in his trousers. His eviscerated guts have been quite the meal for local fauna.

As you come closer to inspect the trap this unfortunate soul tripped, a mouse emerges from his open mouth and skitters down the corridor into the darkness. You hear a metal snap!

More traps waiting. But first, you have to deal with this one.

We're talking about a hole in the ground, right? You know what lives in holes in the ground? A whole lot of really scary and deadly stuff.

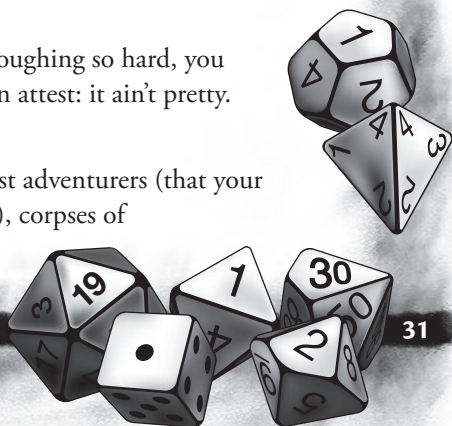
When your players go down into a dungeon, remember that this is a place that's been exposed to the elements for hundreds of years. There are entire colonies of bugs waiting for them. Spider webs they have to walk through. Not giant spiders, just regular old eight-legged, eight-eyed freaks that skitter down your armor and bite your backside. And there's probably worms and maggots and tons of flies. And mosquitoes. I come from Minnesota, man. Don't you ever underestimate the power of mosquitoes.

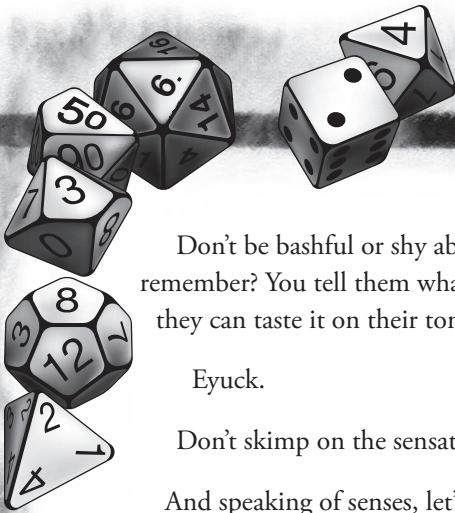
And the stones are wet and covered in black mold. The air is thick and wet. It gets hard to breathe down here. Adventurers start coughing. Ever have a coughing fit? You know when it's the worst? When you're stressed out and exerting yourself. You know, like when you have to fight those damn orks.

(The preferred spelling, by the way, is "ork." Not "orc." That's the elven spelling. We're racially sensitive here. Oh, and you don't want to know what the elven word for "human" is. Trust me.)

You start coughing so hard, you can't breathe. Coughing so hard, you throw up. As someone with asthma (raises hand) can attest: it ain't pretty. And it can be damn scary.

And the place stinks. It stinks with corpses of past adventurers (that your party can stumble across and deal with as they wish), corpses of monsters, mold, mildew, fungus... you name it.





Don't be bashful or shy about this. You are the players' senses, remember? You tell them what they hear and see. And smell. A stink so bad they can taste it on their tongues.

Eyuck.

Don't skimp on the sensations. Give them all cannons blazing.

And speaking of senses, let's spend a moment talking about the most important one...

"WHO'S HOLDING THE LIGHT?"

GM: So, you turn the corner and you see a dozen orks going over the bodies of another group of adventurers!

PLAYERS: Charge!

GM: Who's holding the light?

PLAYERS: What?

GM: The orks can see in the dark. They don't need lights. You do. Who's holding the light so you can see?

WIZARD: I need my hands to use magic.

FIGHTER: I need one hand for my sword and the other for my shield.

THIEF: Don't look at me! I can't sneak around while holding a torch.

CLERIC: I need both hands for my shield and hammer.

GM: So, who is holding the light?

PLAYERS: Uh...

GM: Okay, while you figure that out, the orks get initiative...

It's a simple question. But those kinds of questions can stop everything.

My grandmother used to say, "It's the little things that make the soup."

Light is such a little thing. We take it for granted. Whenever we walk in a dark room, we instinctively reach beside the door for the light switch.

Think about the little things.

I remember a friend of mine talking about playing *Tomb of Horrors*. He said, “One of us, the wizard, got teleported naked at the beginning of the dungeon.”

“I remember that,” I said.

He said, “Yeah. Then ten minutes later, we were crawling down one of those little tunnels. Remember that?”

“Yeah,” I told him.

He said, “And I was behind the wizard. And I remembered that he was naked. And he was bent over and I was right behind him, looking straight up his...”

I stopped him there. The visual was enough.

The little things. Keep them in mind.

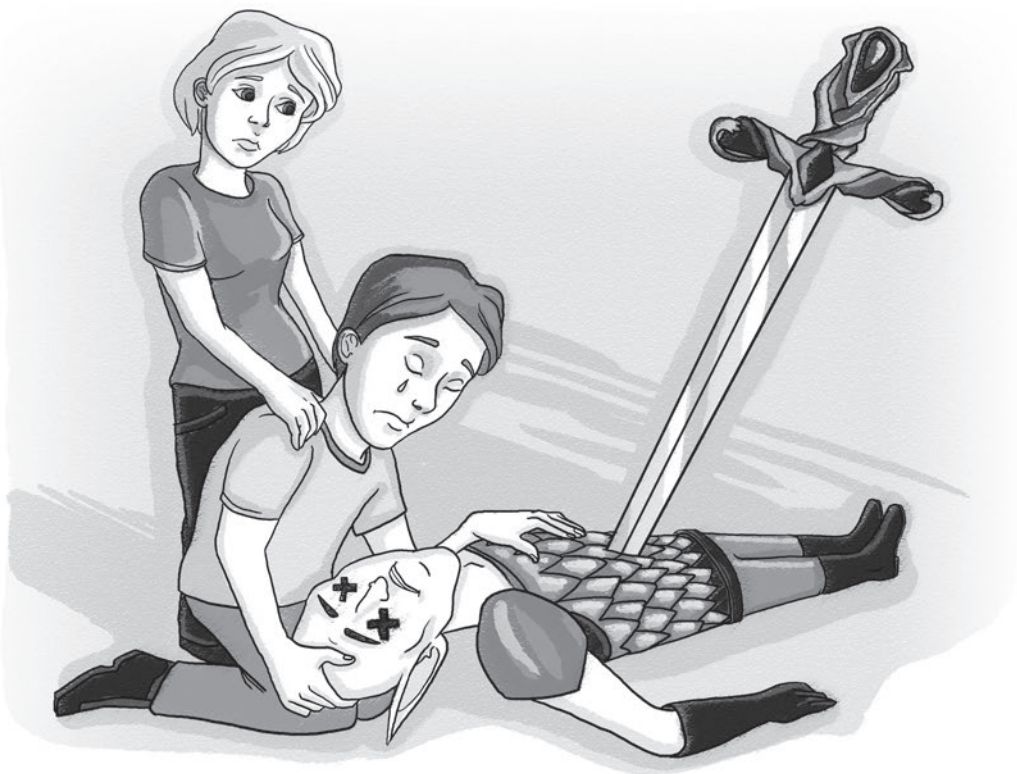
CONCLUSION

So, that’s just a brief glimpse at a few little things I take into consideration when running a dungeon crawl. I’ve got a few more, but I’ve run out of words and I don’t like taking up too much of a stranger’s time.

But, if you’d like to see more, give me a ring.

Just be sure to bring candy.





EPISODE 4

GET A HELMET, PART 2

If you've read *Play Dirty 1*, you know that I devoted an entire episode to the problem of killing characters. Funny thing is, I had forgotten I'd even written it. Don't blame me, I'm an old man. I forget things.

So, when I was editing *PD2*, I came across this episode and realized I'd unintentionally written a sequel. Another essay on the same subject, just from a different point-of-view. Like Kenobi.

I felt a huge temptation to edit this, to make it fit with the previous episode or... you know, change it. Fiddle with it. George Lucas Syndrome. But, in the end, I decided

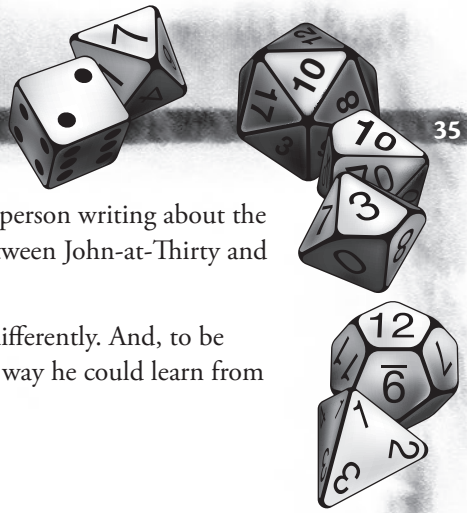
JOHN WICK | Play Dirty 2: Even Dirtier
FRUSTRATED



HONEST

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35



to keep both articles as I wrote them. It's the same person writing about the same subject fifteen years apart. A conversation between John-at-Thirty and John-at-Forty-Five.

We do some things similarly and other things differently. And, to be honest, I learned from him. I just wish there was a way he could learn from me.

* * *

You want to talk about killing characters? Okay. Here's my advice.

Don't.

I mean it. Just don't.

Killing a character is what professional wrestlers call "cheap heat." It's easy. As the GM, you can kill characters with ease. "A meteor falls from the sky and whacks you on the head." How hard is that?

I mean, you'd be a jerk for doing that, but you can still say, "I'm the GM and that's what happens."

But there's an implicit promise between the players and the GM.

I'm your friend. I'm looking out for you. I may be the antagonist in this relationship, but I'm here to help you tell a story with your character. Trust me.

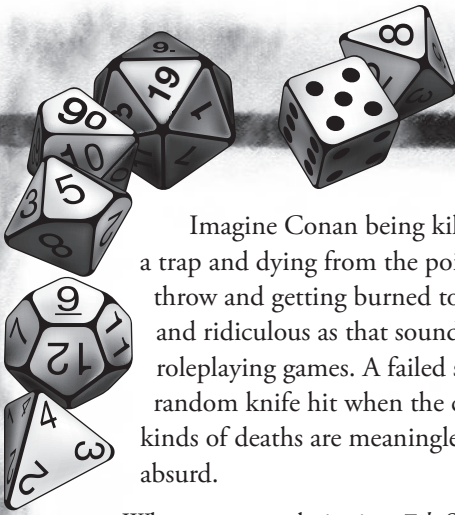
That's the promise. It's a sacred promise. Something that should never be broken.

Of course, you know what they say about things that shouldn't be broken...

* * *

A while ago, my buddy Jesse Heinig and I worked on 3rd Edition *Chill*. The game itself has yet to see the light of day (but we're hoping!) but Jesse came up with a brilliant mechanic for the game. He called it "dire peril."

Dire peril is a response to a question about character mortality in a horror game like *Chill*. There's an implied promise in most roleplaying games: the GM is your friend and he's not out to get you. Even when I'm running games, the players know that even though I'm running all the antagonists, I'm still a collaborator. I'm still their friend. I'm not out to kill them. Why? Because a character's death shouldn't be random. It should have meaning.



Imagine Conan being killed by a kobold. Or Elric failing to detect a trap and dying from the poison needle. Or Raistlin failing his saving throw and getting burned to a crisp by a wayward fireball. As stupid and ridiculous as that sounds, that's *exactly* what happens in so many roleplaying games. A failed saving throw, a missed Perception check, a random knife hit when the character had only a few hit points left. These kinds of deaths are meaningless. Worse, they are the very definition of absurd.

When we were designing *7th Sea* at AEG, this thought was dominant in my head. Like Samuel L. Jackson, I did not want our heroes “going out like some punk.” So, we created a rule that said a character could not die unless certain conditions applied. We took that implied promise and we made a rule out of it. “Don’t worry,” we said. “Your character is a hero and his death will have meaning.”

Now enter Jesse and dire peril.

This is the exact opposite of what *7th Sea* promised. Dire peril means, “this is some stupid crap your character is about to pull and he could die for it.”

In other words, dire peril notifies the players that real danger is afoot. Watch your step.

Dire peril only exists because of the implied promise. Using dire peril became a thing for both Jesse and me. He uses it in his *Dying Kingdoms* games. I use it for just about everything. And when it works...it stops the players in their tracks. Let me show you how.

* * *

I’ve used dire peril many times in the past, but the two times it was most effective was during a *Vampire* game and during a *Houses of the Blooded* live action game.

Friends of mine asked me to run *Vampire* to help introduce two new players to roleplaying games. I ran a trimmed down version of the game, omitting most of the rules but keeping the rich flavor. One of our players, my (now) brother-in-law Nick asked if he could play a mage instead of a vampire. I told him “No.”

Now, I know this violates the “Just say yes” rule, but that’s okay. Like killing characters, some rules were meant to be broken. I refused Nick’s request because I

knew later on in the game, I'd give him exactly what he wanted...but not in the way he wanted it.

I encouraged Nick to play a sorcerer—a kind of “lesser” spell-caster with strict powers that were still magical in nature but did not have the full fledged reality-altering power of a true mage. He created his character and played him for about six sessions. That’s when I sprung the surprise on him.

Nick’s character was approached by a real mage, who informed him that Nick’s magical conman was nearly ready to become a mage himself. But this would present a problem. As soon as his “avatar awoke” (translation: he becomes a mage character), reality would notice and immediately try to kill him. He would be attacked by all sides. The whole world would, in fact, become so antagonistic, that even crossing the street would be a deadly exercise.

I told Nick that for this entire session, the Promise (mentioned above) was null and void. I was going to do my best to kill his character. Then, I took a mage character sheet from my pouch and showed it to Nick. “But if you make it...if you survive this session...you can trade in your sorcerer character sheet for this one.”

I then looked at the other players and told them, “If you try to protect Nick, if you get in the way, you’ll be collateral damage.”

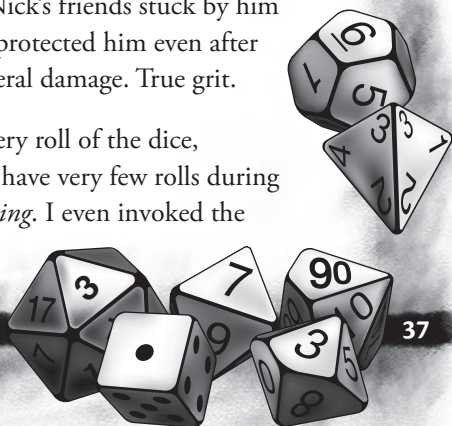
The rest of the game was a race. They tried to find a hole in the wall to dig in and hide. That didn’t help. Vampires found them.

They tried leaving the city. That didn’t help. Werewolves found them.

They tried hiding in plain sight, standing on street corners. That didn’t help them, either. Vampire hunters came looking for Nick’s friends and, somehow, all of their crossbow bolts and fire bombs seemed to find Nick instead.

They ran and they hid and they persisted. And Nick’s friends stuck by him through all of it. They never gave up on him. They protected him even after I told them that they’d be nothing more than collateral damage. True grit.

The tension was so thick, they were watching every roll of the dice, leaning in close, sweating on their brows. Usually, I have very few rolls during a game. But that night, I made them roll for *everything*. I even invoked the





critical fumble rules—something I never do—just to make them sweat a little more.



At the end of the night, Nick's sorcerer was still alive and I gave him the mage character sheet. He was smiling. And that's an accomplishment. There are times I swear that Nick can make *The Dude* look tense.

(If you haven't seen from *The Big Lebowski* and have no idea what I'm talking about, fix that problem as soon as you can.)

Nick earned that character sheet. And, if given the opportunity, I would have killed his character. Not because I'm a jerk, but because I made a different kind of promise.

"I'll kill you if I can."

The sincerity of that statement means a lot. And it should not be used lightly. Nor should it be used too often. In the entire run of that game, I used it once. And I meant it. But Nick made it out alive. His friends took heavy damage for him. Used sparingly, it can change the entire course of a game.

* * *

The second example comes from the *Houses of the Blooded* live action game I run here in Phoenix. The game not only has the implicit promise behind it, but also an explicit rule. "Your character cannot die without your permission." That goes to the Friendly Game rule I talk about elsewhere in this book.

But I also explained dire peril to my players. I told them about the rule when they decided they wanted to explore a ruin for artifacts.

"You are poorly equipped for such a chore," I told them. "And if you go down there, I'm invoking dire peril." A couple new players asked what I meant. I told them. The entire party quickly decided against that course of action.

But dire peril does not only lurk outside the ballrooms and secret libraries of ven society. Sometimes it crashes the party wearing a red dress.

One of the more feared characters in the game was Beryl Tal (played by the lovely and talented Jessica Kauspedas, who you can find in the credits of this book).

She was a kind of reaction to previous *HotB* games she played in. She wanted to make a duelist. A deadly character. She had played less combat-oriented characters in the past and she made Beryl just as deadly as they come.

Beryl also had a particular attitude about sorcery. She killed sorcerers. In the world of *Houses of the Blooded*, sorcery is illegal (a law most ven ignore in the same way we ignore speed limits) and Beryl made sure that law was enforced...even if it was by her own hand.

She was the bodyguard of another character in the game, a fellow by the name of Caliban Ru. Caliban's player, my buddy Ben, plays him as the ven equivalent of Iago from *Othello*. All the *players* know Caliban is the villain but the *characters* do not. The characters trust Caliban. Especially Beryl Tal. Which made her discovery of his many, many sorcerous deeds all that more painful.

Word got out that Beryl had discovered Caliban was a sorcerer. I made sure everybody knew. I also warned them that both Caliban and Beryl would be at the next party.

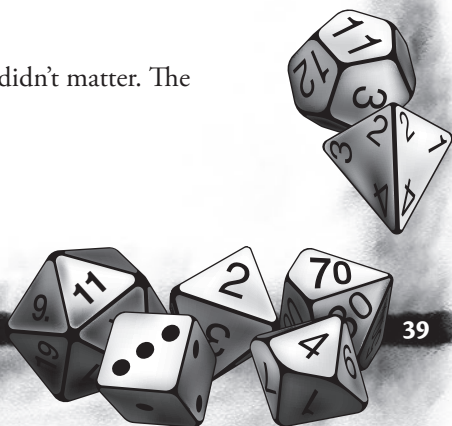
Jessica waited until the game was already a couple of hours in before making her dramatic appearance. And when she did, I was behind her holding up a banner.

It said, in big letters, DIRE PERIL.

As she walked through the room, I watched the players' reactions. Some of them backed away, fear in their eyes. Beryl approached them anyway asking if they had seen Caliban. Their stuttering responses were worth the two bucks I shelled out for the poster board I held above Jessica's head.

When a few got in her way, she cut them down. Later, Jessica told me that those same players e-mailed her before the game, asking if they could get injured by Beryl to add to the scene.

Beryl didn't kill anyone that night, but that fact didn't matter. The players *believed* it. That's what counts.





EPISODE 5

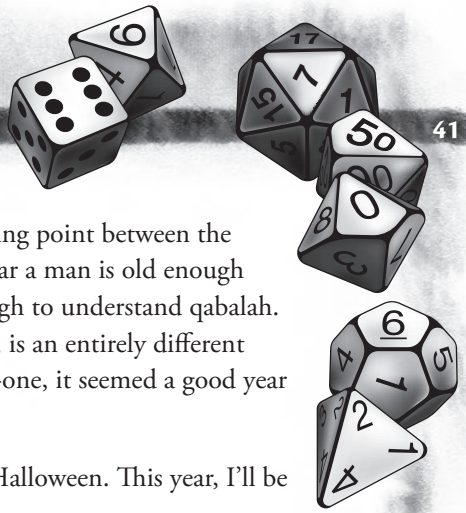
HAPPY HALLOWEEN

Every Halloween, I run *Call of Cthulhu*.

It's a tradition. Something I've rarely broken. Every year, I dress up in my "Man in Black" outfit (black pants, black shirt, black vest, black jacket, black tie, black hat and Yellow Sign pin) and I tell a story of man's futile attempts to understand the universe.

But this year, for various reasons, has proven to be a year of breaking traditions. I'm forty-one-years old this year—forty-two on December 10th—and the whole





three hundred and sixty days seemed to be a hovering point between the magic and mysticism and absurdity. Forty is the year a man is old enough to start learning magic. At forty, he is mature enough to understand qabalah. It is the year of the Magician. Forty-two, of course, is an entirely different number with its own significance. And so, at forty-one, it seemed a good year for breaking as many traditions as possible.

Therefore, I'll be running a different game for Halloween. This year, I'll be running *Schauermarchen*.

Schauermarchen is one of the "little games" I designed a few years back, a nightmare I decided to do something with. An abandoned village full of broken windows and junk, inhabited by a tall, scary man and a horde of little, hungry children.

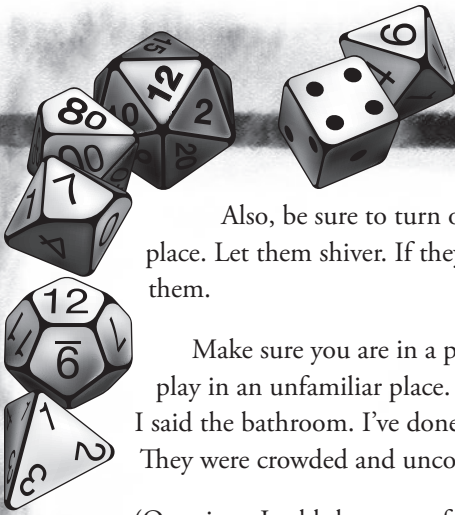
While the game may change, my tactics remain the same. In fact, running *Schauermarchen* opens up possibilities my beloved *Cthulhu* does not. And those tactics are what you and I will be talking about this evening.

THE HAUNTED HOUSE

I look at my Halloween game as a haunted house. When you step into a haunted house, you go in knowing that the rules on the inside are not the same as the rules you left behind.

Your players should know this. They should know that they are willingly giving up the illusion of safety for a different illusion. They want to be scared? Then they have to be willing to play by the rules.

This isn't your typical roleplaying game. This is something different. Your players should know this. If they don't, tell them now. Tell them that they should expect anything. They should expect everything. Before the game even begins, prime them up. Tell them you've read an article John Wick—you know, the guy who wrote *Play Dirty?*—wrote about running a game that would scare the hell out of the players. Tell them that John guy suggested a whole ton of stuff that was just terrifying. But you won't be using the really mean stuff. Some of it was just too extreme. But some of it...yeah...some of it was really insightful.



Also, be sure to turn on the air conditioning. Get it cold in the place. Let them shiver. If they complain, just shrug. “I don’t feel it,” tell them.

Make sure you are in a place where you can control the light. In fact, play in an unfamiliar place. Even if you have to play in the bathroom. Yes, I said the bathroom. I’ve done it before. Moved an entire group in there. They were crowded and uncomfortable. And it all worked to my advantage.

(One time, I told the story of Bloody Mary before the game. You know the story I mean, right? The woman in the mirror. Go into the bathroom, turn off the lights, and say her name ten times while staring into the mirror. And she appears and drags you through. I told that story before the game. One of my players went into the bathroom...and found that the lights didn’t work. All gone. She didn’t go back in the rest of the night.)

Prime them. Get them worried before they even sit down. They are already yours and they don’t even know it yet.

THRENODY TO THE VICTIMS OF HIROSHIMA

Once they sit down at the table, show them their character sheets. Let them look the sheets over. Or, if this is one game of a campaign, tell the players to get their character sheets out and give them one last look over.

Then, when they’re ready, turn off all the lights. I mean all the lights. We need complete darkness.

Let them sit for a few moments. If someone tries to make a joke or talk, give them a polite “shhhh” and let them sit a little longer.

Finally, when your eyes have adjusted, play this piece of music for them. It’s the *Threnody to the Victims of Hiroshima* by Krzysztof Penderecki. You can listen to it yourself on YouTube: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FfBVYhyXU8o>

Actually, almost any of his work will do. Penderecki is brilliant at creating really terrifying atmospheres. I’m listening to the *Threnody* right now. It’s 3:00 in the afternoon, the sun shines through the window, and my cat is curled up on my lap.

I'm listening to the *Threnody* right now...and I'm afraid something is over my shoulder. I kid you not.

Play the whole thing in complete darkness. Just let them sit there and listen. Then, halfway through the listening, get up and take their character sheets away. One at a time.

Finally, use one of those light sticks. You know what I'm talking about. Emergency light sticks that you "break" and they fill with glowing liquid? John Tynes used them for lighting in his brilliant *Grace Under Pressure* adventure with the players locked in a submarine. They give off a weird glow that makes everything look unnatural. Use those for lighting and nothing else.

When I ran *Curse of the Yellow Sign, Act 3*, the players used their iPhones for lighting. This was also perfect. The game ran long enough that their batteries died. And all the light went away...

THE CHARACTER SHEET

Most RPGs use the character sheet as a kind of shield against the machinations of the GM. Horror RPGs are no different. All of them have little tricks to help the players protect themselves from the monsters you summon.

Not this time.

This time, you have the character sheets. They can roll dice, but you keep the sheets. They don't get to look at the sheets. If they forget something that's on their sheet, that's too bad.

"Do I have pick lock?" they ask.

"Roll and find out," you tell them.

If they fail, they fail. If they succeed, they succeed. But they don't get to do any math. They don't get any comfort from their right brain logic and reason. No, we want them steeped in the fear center. We don't want them to have any access to the parts of the brain that tell them there's really nothing there in the dark with them. No. We want them alone and shivering and terrified.





THE RINGER

This is a trick I've used several times. I used it for the playtest of *Curse of the Yellow Sign, Act 3* and detailed it there. I'll give you the synopsis.

When you send out the invites for the game, make sure you have one person on your side. In fact, you may want to make it someone who doesn't usually game with you. Tell them your plans and have them show up early. When they show up, stuff them in a closet or some other place that's near your gaming table.

Then, at the dramatically appropriate moment, have them knock on the closet door. This should be when one of the characters is alone and investigating the haunted house or a murder scene or something else appropriate. You say, "You hear a knock on the door," and then they do.

The moment will startle them. Trust me. If you've primed them well enough with the lights and the music and the cold, this little bit will freak the living hell out of them.

* * *

Just remember this: your players want to be scared. They have shown up on Halloween to play a horror game. If they don't, they should go play a roleplaying game where *they* get to be the serial killer.

You know. A game where they wander around murdering everything in sight, plundering from the dead bodies, and moving on without any consideration for the life they just took or the moral consequences on their conscience, becoming more and more powerful with every murder they perform.

Oh, if only I could think of one.

That game would be really scary.



EPISODE 6

CON GAMES

It's July and that means convention season is in full swing. We're smack dab in the middle of it, getting ready for the Big Daddy of Gaming Conventions (in the US, at least), GenCon.

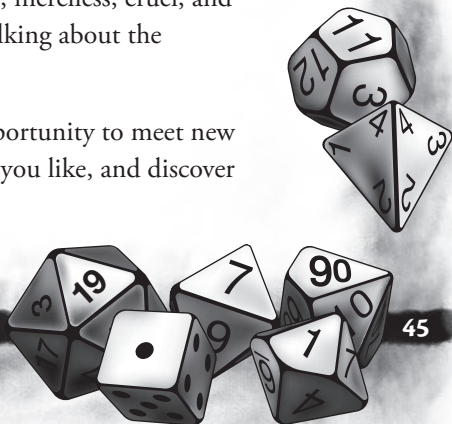
Of course, that brings to mind the most ruthless, merciless, cruel, and terrible experience a GM can ever encounter. I'm talking about the convention game.

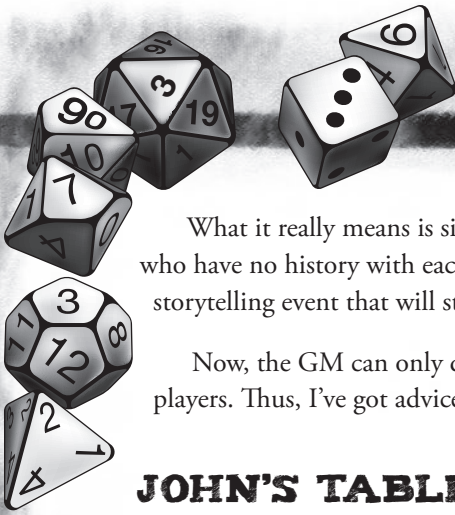
Sure, people tell you that conventions are an opportunity to meet new gamers, play new games, introduce others to games you like, and discover games you've never played before.

Yeah. Right.

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CRUDE





What it really means is sitting down at a table of complete strangers who have no history with each other for the purpose of making a storytelling event that will stick in their brains forever.

Now, the GM can only do so much. Some of the burden falls on the players. Thus, I've got advice this time around for both GMs and players.

JOHN'S TABLE RULE

I know what you're thinking.

"John, everyone talks about 'social contracts' in gaming, but they all talk about it in this idealistic and abstract way. It really doesn't help me because everyone has a different idea about the rules at a table and everyone's got their own idea of fun and..."

Screw that noise. I'm giving you a real one. Something you can read to your players or you can print out and have them read.

(I suggest reading it to them. Unless you're horrible at that, in which case, have someone who is awesome at that do it for you.)

Here it is:

Entertain Us

Your job as a player—and my job as a GM—is to entertain the other people at the table. We do not sit down at the table to entertain ourselves. There's a word for that and you can do it in your hotel room all by yourself.

If everyone at the table has this goal, we're golden. Everyone is looking to entertain everyone else. That includes you on both sides. So, go out of your way to find out how the other people at the table play, what makes the game fun for them, and make it happen. Remember that right now someone else is reading the same words you are and they're trying to think of a way to help you have fun at this table. Make the job easier for them and tell them.

Be the player that others go home and talk about in an awesome way. "Man, we've got to get that guy at our table." Or, "Dude, I met this lady at the con and we've got to play with her."

Do this and I promise you, your experience at my table will be something nobody will ever forget.

PLAYER ADVICE

Here's some additional advice for players. Take it with cream or sugar, as you like.

Please Don't Make Me Be a Jerk

In other words, don't put me in a position where I have to correct your behavior. When you do this, you owe me a favor. You've put me in the place where I have to correct you in front of others. That makes me the bad guy. If have to tell you to stop doing whatever it is you are doing, I'm gonna get really mad. Pissed, even.

Please don't do that. Not ever.

Please Focus

I know this is the first time you've gotten to sit with new people and you're just dying to impress them or entertain them or whatever, but here's the deal... no segues.

No Monty Python jokes. They were all written almost half a century ago, we've all heard them, and John Cleese is a lot funnier than you.

Don't talk about this week's episode of BLAH. It has nothing to do anything that's going on with your character right now. Unless your characters want to talk about it, and it fits the genre, then go right ahead.

No war stories about other games. You do this and you will get the Glare of Doom. You don't want the Glare of Doom. Trust me.

GM ADVICE

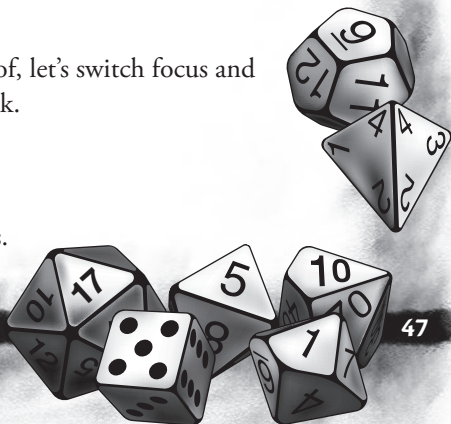
Okay, now that we've got the players taken care of, let's switch focus and talk about what you need to do to make all this work.

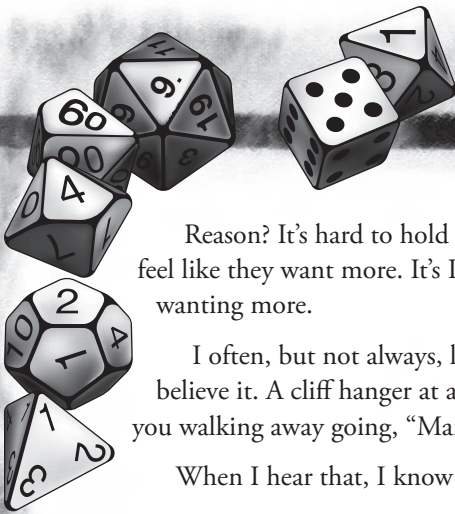
In and out

I seldom run games that last longer than 3 hours. That may or may not include character creation.

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PEACEFUL





Reason? It's hard to hold people's attention. Also, I want them to feel like they want more. It's P.T. Barnum's old rule: always let them leave wanting more.

I often, but not always, leave games on cliff hangers. Players can't believe it. A cliff hanger at a con game? Yup. You'd better believe it. I want you walking away going, "Man, I wish we didn't have to stop!"

When I hear that, I know I've won.

Cell Phone

At the beginning of the game, I tell folks to turn off their cell phones. It's rather bad form to tell them to put them in the center of the table (those things are expensive), but "Keep your cell phone in your pocket," is good enough.

If I even see a cell phone, on or off, I stop running the game. I just stop.

I stop and look at the player.

I don't say another word. I cross my arms and just look at them.

If that doesn't work, I pick up one of the black go stones I carry with me to conventions and I start counting down from 10.

I seldom reach 7.

In Medias Res

Start the story off fast. Put them in the middle of a fight. Strap them into a plane with burning engines plummeting toward a mountain. Don't waste time with the "getting to know you" phase. There's plenty of time for that later.

Hit them hard and hit them fast. Get them thinking right away.

Don't Give Them Time to Breathe

Start the game with the players on the edge of their seats and keep them there. The "In and Out" trick ensures they won't have time to think. They'll start with a disaster, move on to another one, then end diverting a third.

Plan ahead for this. If you run a 3-hour game, give them a disaster for each hour. Sure, they'll probably solve them quicker than that, but that means they'll only feel

accomplished when they solve all your problems and you say, “That’s all I’ve got.” They’ll slap each other on the backs and start chanting, “We’re awesome!”

We want that, you and me. That means we’ve done our jobs.

Turn It to 11

What I want you to do is take all the GM advice you’ve ever heard from me or anyone else and turn that volume knob all the way up to 11.

Convention games tend to veer toward silly. Folks want to have fun and we want them to have fun, so take all the advantage of that mentality.

Bring hats. Switch them out for each NPC they meet. Use a distinct voice for each one as well.

Wear not just a shirt, but a jacket or a vest (or both), and use various combinations for each character.

Get a flower and put it in your hair. Pull your hair down in front of your eyes. If you don’t have hair, get a cheap wig. Trust me, a cheap wig is worth every penny.

Ignore the Rules and Give Them What They Want

In a convention game, rules are far less important than people think.

So less important, in fact, I generally throw them out.

Rules are there to allow the players to communicate to the GM. “I have a high Archery Skill,” means, “When my character shoots things with a bow, they die.”

Game rules seldom allow this kind of awesomeness. So, just give it to them.

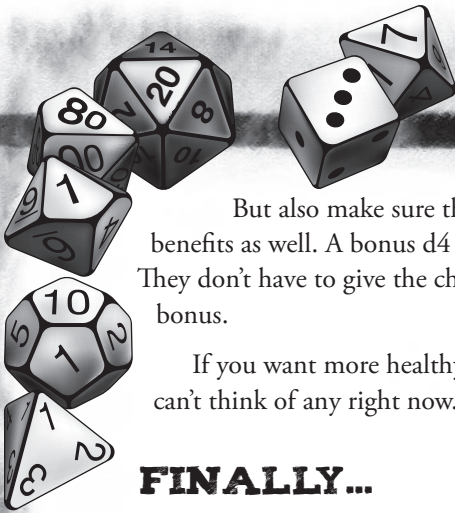
If the lady at the table wants to be Legolas, let her. If the guy wants to be James Bond, let him. If another player wants to be Cthulhu...

...okay, well, sometimes players can go too far. But, hey, maybe being Cthulhu is awesome! I will never ever forget the moment I heard, “Cthulhu checks for traps,” at a game table. One of the best games I ever ran. I’ll tell you about it someday.

Goodies

Make sure to bring something to reward good roleplaying. Little chocolates work wonders.





But also make sure those rewards can be “turned in” for in-game benefits as well. A bonus d4 or d6, a +1 to +4, a free refresh, whatever. They don’t have to give the chocolate back... they just eat it to get the bonus.

If you want more healthy snacks, you can do that, too. I... um... just can’t think of any right now.

FINALLY...

A friend of mine once told me that if I wanted to win “Best Roleplayer” at an RGP tournament, “Always pick the dwarf.”

“The dwarf?” I asked.

He nodded. “Yup. Because it gives you an excuse to be big and loud.” He laughed. “Think about it. Is the elf going to be big and loud? The halfling? The human? No! The dwarf is gonna be bragging, boisterous, drinking beer. and swearing on his beard. That’s the way to win.”

It’s true. It’s also true for the GM.

Be loud. Be boisterous. Swear on your beard.

(Ladies, swearing on your beard might not be a SFW activity. Up to you.)

You’ve got a lot of competition at a convention. Tables shoved together, full of gamers. All of them loud.

Well, you want to be louder than loud. To quote Jim Steinman, you want your table to be “Everything louder than everything else.”

So, bring the big guns. And your beard. And make everyone else in the gaming room look at you and say, “Gee... I wish I was at that table.”



EPISODE 7

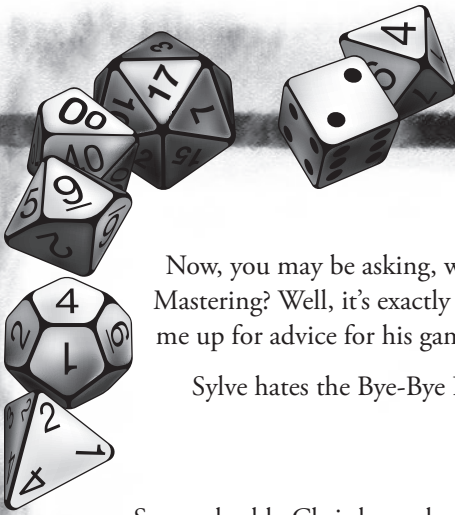
SYLVIE HATES THE BYE-BYE BOX

I've had a few cats in my day and for most of them, one truth stands above all others.

Cats hate the Bye-Bye Box.

Our current feline, who suffers the name "Sylvie," is no exception to this rule. Sylvie hates her Bye-Bye Box. That's where she has to go whenever we take a car trip. She goes into the Bye-Bye Box. She fights, she scratches, she mews. She hates it.





Now, you may be asking, what does this have to do with Game Mastering? Well, it's exactly what I thought when my friend Chris called me up for advice for his game.

Sylve hates the Bye-Bye Box. You're gonna hate it, too.

* * *

So, my buddy Chris has a daughter (sixteen years old) and he's running a *GURPS* high fantasy campaign with her as one of the players. He called me up and asked me what he could do with her.

See, being sixteen years old, she has certain ideas about what a hero is. The word "invincible" comes to mind.

Thank you, Wolverine.

Her character has a magic stone that makes her invulnerable to pain and injury. I mean, she can be injured, but she heals so quickly, injury is of little concern to her. So, like Wolverine, she jumps into combat without ever thinking about the consequences. She's invulnerable. What does she have to worry about?

Chris was lamenting about how the *GURPS* system usually doesn't reward such behavior. The system is brutal and deadly. However, her character doesn't have to worry about those problems.

Well, first I chastised Chris for letting his daughter make such a character. Then, I let him off the hook. I told him, "You forgot the first principle of Game Mastering."

He asked me, "What's that?"

I told him, "Their character sheets cannot protect them."

* * *

First, I told Chris, "Take the other players aside and tell them what you have in mind. Make them your ringers. Tell them exactly what's going to happen, ask them to play along. Once they hear what you're gonna do, they'll be in like Flynn."

I then outlined a plan.

There's this wizard who can see the future. He sees that he's going to take over the world. He's gonna be the Hitler of this fantasy world. He's going to enslave and/or obliterate all the good races and send the world into a thousand years of darkness.

And he's seen that Chris' daughter's character will be his downfall. She is the only one who can stop him. He can't see how she does it, but he knows she's the one to do it. He also knows about that magic stone in her heart. He knows he can't kill her—the magic of the stone is too great, even for him—so he comes up with a different plan.

He creates a set of enchanted chains. The chains are made from the same stuff the stone in her heart is made from. The chains will bind her, make her immobile, and lock her up forever.

He arranged for the characters to meet up with the wizard. The first thing he does is cast a paralysis spell on the girl. Then, one by one, he kills off the other characters.

Kills them off. Dead. One by one.

Remember, the other players are in on this, so they're helping along with the plan.

And the girl—the one with the stone that prevents her from being killed—watches each and every one of her friends die.

When the last friend falls, the wizard binds her with the chains. Then, he takes her out to the center of the ocean. He puts her in a wooden box. He seals the box with a magic seal. And he throws the box out into the ocean.

It falls into the water and slowly starts to fill with water. The cold water freezes her skin. It fills the box.

Up to her chin. And she's bound and helpless.

Up to her nose. And she's bound and helpless.

Over her nose. And she's bound and helpless.

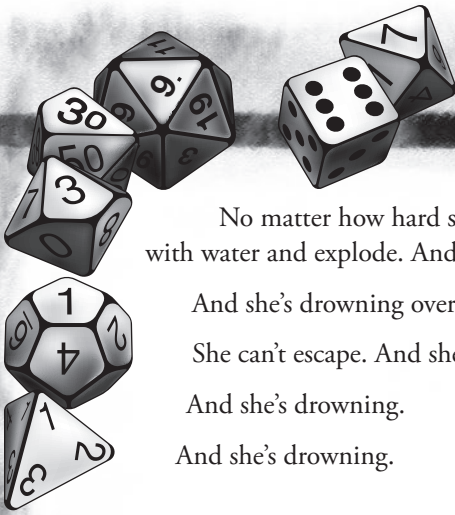
And she begins to drown.

And because the stone in her heart allows her to heal, when her lungs expand with water and eventually explode, her lungs heal back up.

She can't die. She keeps on healing.

Suffocating. Healing. Suffocating. Healing.





No matter how hard she tries to hold her breath, her lungs expand with water and explode. And heal again.

And she's drowning over and over and over again.

She can't escape. And she's drowning.

And she's drowning.

And she's drowning.

200 YEARS LATER...

There's a kind of character I'm particularly fond of. He's appeared in a lot of games I've designed. That's the protector. The bodyguard.

In *Legend of the Five Rings*, there's the yojimbo. In *7th Sea*, it's the swordsman. In *Orkworld*, the entire point of being an ork is protecting the mother, the downga. In *Cat*, you protect humans from monsters they can't see.

Stories about Secret Service agents drive me wild. You know, in the detail, there's a guy who has the job of putting himself between the shooter and the President. Not to disarm the gunman—that's someone else's job—but to *take the bullet* for the President.

If that doesn't send shivers up your spine, nothing will. Screw Frodo walking a ring to some volcano. There's a guy who has the job of standing between the shooter and the President. That's a damn hero.

If there's a better definition of "hero," I don't know it. If there's a better example of what humanity is capable of doing, I don't know it.

And that hero is what Chris' other players are going to play.

Two hundred years later, the descendants of the original heroes—the ones who she watched get murdered—are going to pull her up from the water. They're going to unseal the box. And they're going to unlock the chains.

“And when they make these characters,” I told Chris, “let them make any kind of characters they want.”

Chris asked me why.

I told him, “Because they’re all going to die.”

At this point, what does it matter what kind of points they have on their sheets? What does it matter what kind of powers or spells they have? It doesn’t. They’re all gonna die.

They pull this poor girl up from the water and through sheer compassion, they’re gonna drag this girl back to sanity.

You see, for two hundred years, she’s been feeding the ocean’s ecosystem. She’s covered in algae and coral. Little fishes have gotten in and feed on her. She heals and they feed on her. She heals and they feed on her.

Two hundred years.

And they tell her what the wizard has done to the world. A world of slavery and subjugation. A world where shadow creatures look for children who have the potential to become heroes and slaughter them in their cribs. A world where the wicked are rewarded. There is no more sun in the world. No more light. No more hope. Only death and despair. No songs. Songs are outlawed. No stories. Stories are outlawed. Kill all the bards. Murder all the storytellers.

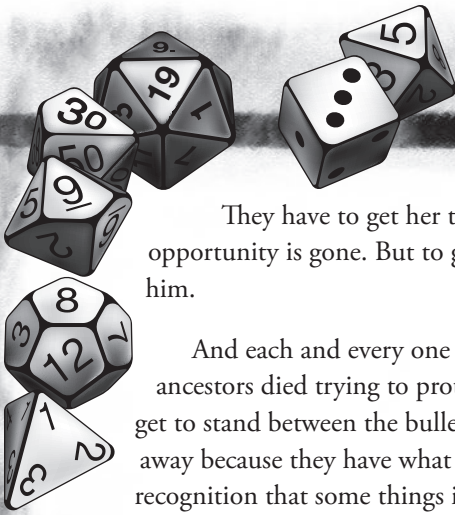
We must not allow the seed of hope to find any soil. Only cold, dry stone.

Then, they tell her the prophecy. That she’s destined to defeat the wizard who did this to her. But there’s a problem. The door is already shut. The opportunity is gone.

What these people have to do is get her into the wizard’s tower. There’s a spell there that can get her back to the time before she was captured so she can change what happened. She can change what she did. So she doesn’t go rushing into combat full tilt.

And those shadow creatures? Those awful things that look like something that came from Lovecraft’s worst nightmare? They can smell that stone in her heart. And the moment they set her free, they started looking for her. They have precious little time.





They have to get her to the wizard's tower. Not to defeat him. That opportunity is gone. But to get her back to a time when she can defeat him.

And each and every one of them will die. They'll die just as their ancestors died trying to protect her. Each and every one of them will get to stand between the bullet and the President. They'll throw their lives away because they have what Aristotle called "true courage." That's the recognition that some things in this world are more important than you.

And isn't that what being a hero is all about?

FOLLOW-UP

Since I originally presented this as a video on my YouTube channel, I've heard back from Chris. He did indeed put his daughter in the Bye-Bye Box. He made a few changes to my original suggestion—to better fit his campaign—and he told me the experience was a huge success.

When I asked him how it went, this is what he wrote.

The Vampires surrounded the party, armed with weapons of deep evil. Midnight, with the fury of a wild beast, charged the Vampires with murderous intent. Her companions, inspired by her rage, followed her into combat. The battle, however, was lost before it began, for it was all a trap.

They fought valiantly, but one by one, the Vampires defeated the party, and fed on them until they were but dead husks. All except Midnight, as they had special plans for her. The Master wanted her broken, removed from his plans. And the Vampires had a use for a woman that could not die. She would become a meal for the next hundred years.

* * *

When I wanted to give my daughter a different kind of gaming experience, I asked John for an idea to make it interesting. Considering where my campaign was at the time, I was not able to use John's idea exactly as he described, but I improvised with what I had. Once my daughter had been captured, as the story

above states, I closed the session. When the next session opened, I sent Aurianna out of the room. I handed the party new characters and spent about 15 minutes briefing them. Then, I brought Aurianna back to the group and had the party take over.

I then described her situation: that her character, Midnight, had been in a dark pit for one hundred years, being used as a blood bag by vampires. You see, there was a prophecy that the undying one would kill this Wizard, who was on his way to becoming a Lich. He had found a ritual to do so without the potion phylactery that would normally make him vulnerable. If the ritual was finished, he would become indestructible. She was fated to kill him before the ritual and he had been trying to find her. In a previous adventure, they had found him, but as they did not know of the prophecy, they did not know to kill him. But he knew to kill her. He set his minions to watch her and, when the time was right, they killed her companions and captured her until the ritual was done.

Hundreds of years later, the world was changed: a land filled with undead. Very few living beings were left, and those that weren't yet undead were slaves or those who were or in hiding. The future party was led by the descendant of the original party, who had carried the story of Midnight's plight and the prophecy through several generations until they could gather a group of people willing to risk their lives to send her back in time to defeat the Lich before the ritual.

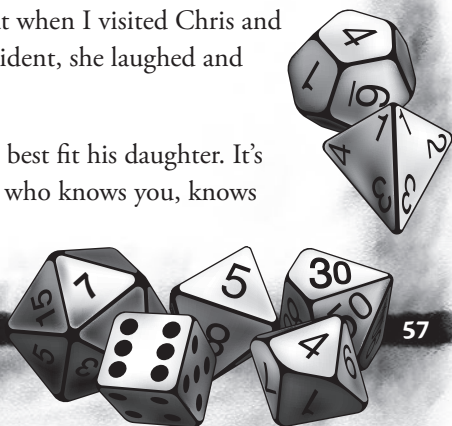
They did, of course, manage to get her through a portal that led back to her own time and she managed to slay the Lich before the ritual. But now, she was changed. More primal, instinctive. Almost feral. She would not allow herself to be captured again.

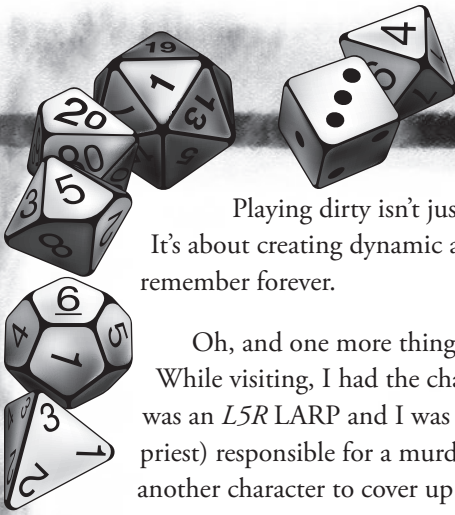
* * *

Chris' campaign continues, but Aurianna's character has been changed forever.

As a follow-up, I should also mention briefly that when I visited Chris and his daughter this year, and I asked her about the incident, she laughed and told me, "That was mean...and awesome!"

I trusted Chris to adapt what I had given him to best fit his daughter. It's that kind of trust that makes a good GM. Someone who knows you, knows your character, and wants to help you get the most out of the experience.





Playing dirty isn't just about bullying players and their characters. It's about creating dynamic and dangerous scenarios that players will remember forever.

Oh, and one more thing before we leave behind Chris and Aurianna. While visiting, I had the chance to play in a LARP with them both. It was an *LSR* LARP and I was playing the villain: the shugenja (magic-user/priest) responsible for a murder. I sent Chris—my yojimbo—to murder another character to cover up my first foul deed.

I was talking to my apprentice—that's Aurianna—in character about preserving our traditions and maintaining the purity of our Clan. Then, I broke character for a moment and said, "By the way, I sent your father to go kill what's-his-name, the Dragon investigator, just now. Just to make sure he never discovers what I've been up to."

Aurianna's eyes bulged and her jaw dropped. In character, I was her trusted teacher. Her mentor. A father figure. And I had just dropped out-of-character knowledge on her that destroyed that entire image.

For the rest of the game, she had no idea what to think of me. In character, she thought I was an honorable man, but out of character, she knew I was the villain responsible for all the wickedness that had been happening in the castle.

Blurring that line, causing confusion and mayhem in that poor little girl's head, made the game that much more complicated. I did it because I wanted her to have the same emotion as an audience member watching Shakespeare's *Othello* with two-faced Iago fooling everyone and winking at the audience.

In that sense, I *was* Iago. Everyone trusted me. But she knew. She knew what I really was. And she could not stop me. All she could do was watch as I manipulated the other samurai and shugenja.

It was a dirty trick; the second I'd helped play on Aurianna. Hopefully, someday, I'll get a chance for a third.



EPISODE 8

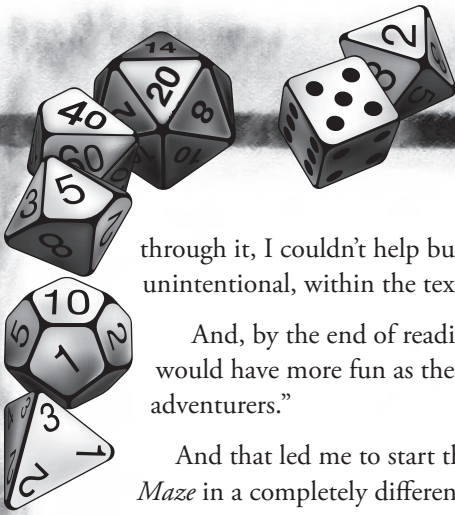
THE KOBOLD AND THE BEAUTIFUL

Believe it or not, I have friends.

Yes, after all the nasty things you've heard me say and do—only a third of which are actually true—there are people who still speak with me and even enjoy my company.

Recently, a pair of them, Hyrum Savage and Stan!, started their own game company called Super Genius Games. It's part of their "One Night Stand" adventure series and they called it *The Kobold Death Maze*. Both Stan! and Hyrum are smart, funny guys. On the surface, it looked like a standard dungeon crawl, but as I read





through it, I couldn't help but notice the humor, no matter how subtle or unintentional, within the text.

And, by the end of reading it, I had a thought. That thought was, "I would have more fun as the kobolds using tricks and traps to outsmart the adventurers."

And that led me to start thinking about how I'd run *The Kobold Death Maze* in a completely different way.

First, when you print out the adventure, don't read it. I mean that. Don't read it. Just print it out and hand it to your players. You have no idea what's in there. That's because you're not going to be playing the kobolds...your players are.

Let's take the idea of the "One Night Stand" at face value. This is an adventure designed to be a one shot. So, tell your players to put their character sheets away. Instead, tonight, they'll be playing the kobolds in the Death Maze trying to protect their home from mercenaries trying to kill them and take their stuff.

The Death Maze is a sacred place, after all. It isn't just a treasure trove. It's got an altar and other religious significance, as well. Just imagine a group of mercs breaking in to a Catholic church or a mosque or a Jewish temple for the purpose of stealing the holy relics so they can sell them for a profit. Oh, and we're gonna murder all the security guards, too.

That's what this is about. The goblins revere this place. They consider it holy. Shove that into your players' heads.

Now, the place is full of tricks and traps. They'll be able to defend it if they think and use the Maze to their advantage. In fact, you should *give them the adventure booklet*. Let them look at the map and the trap descriptions so they know exactly what to do.

Give them some time to get prepared. While they do, you get prepared, too. You're going to play a standard adventuring party looking to raid the place for its treasures.

Now, when I first proposed this idea, a few GMs told me, "I can't keep track of five or six characters! That's too much to ask!"

Seriously? Trading off an entire dungeon full of monsters for handling just a handful? Sounds like I'm giving you a break.

Now, to give this little trick even more, let's make this a generational game. We all know the goblin races are short-lived. So, why not put a little *Pendragon* action in here and play not just one character, but *generations* of characters.

Split the dungeon into groups: the orks, the goblins, the kobolds, etc. Each player gets control of one group. Bob gets the orks, Sally gets the goblins, Dan gets the kobolds. Make characters for each group. Then, as time passes and the current generation dies, it's time for the new generation to step up and defend their territory against the humans, dwarves, and elves who are coming to get their stuff.

Speaking of younger generations, it's too bad a lot of you don't know or remember *Wormy*. I miss that guy.

* * *

And right now, you probably think, "That's a cute idea, John. A reverse dungeon. Been there, done that."

Oh, no, my friend. Oh, no. That's just the appetizer. We've got a few more courses to go.

See, this episode isn't about pulling a reverse dungeon on your players—although that would be cool—but instead, we're going to be backstabbing (+4 to hit) one of my least favorite assumptions in fantasy RPGs.

See, most fantasy games have a peculiar viewpoint on "race." This probably stems from the fact the whole notion of "race as a mechanic" comes out of the 1970's and we didn't have a very good idea about the topic back then. In fact, we've learned a whole lot over the last few decades, both culturally and biologically.

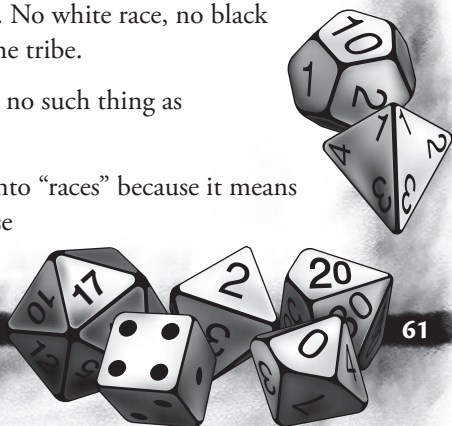
Richard Dawkins summed it up with the kind of brevity the Bard wished he had when the good doctor said, "We're all Africans."

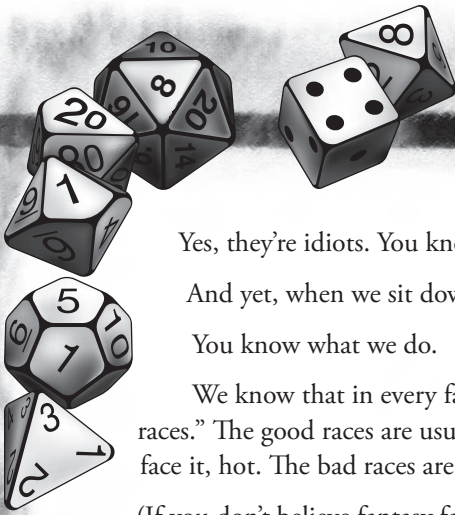
(I've got to get one of those t-shirts one of these days.)

There's really no race other than the human race. No white race, no black race, no Asian race... none of that. We're all the same tribe.

(Please don't mistake this for me saying, "There's no such thing as 'racism.'" I didn't say that and don't mean it.)

Some segments of our tribe like to break us up into "races" because it means they can lie to themselves and feel "superior" because of stupid things like skin color or culture. Idiots.





Yes, they're idiots. You know it and I know it.

And yet, when we sit down behind the GM screen, what do we do?

You know what we do.

We know that in every fantasy world, there are "good races" and "bad races." The good races are usually smart, sophisticated, cultured, and, let's face it, hot. The bad races are... well, not.

(If you don't believe fantasy fans think dwarves are pretty, just do a Google search for "Gimli slash." Go on. I dare you. Or, I'll introduce you to some of my gay friends who like "bears." Oh, yes.)

This is a staple of our industry, of the literature we read, the movies we watch.

Orks are evil creatures made by evil gods to do evil things. I kid you not when a Brand Manager for that game with two initials once said, "The reason orcs (sic) are chaotic evil is so my daughter doesn't have to feel any moral qualms when she slaughters them."

Just replace the word "orc" with "Jew." Go on. You know you want to.

I look through books and see some races listed with the alignment "chaotic evil" and I have to wonder. I think I'm safe in saying that characters such as Hannibal Lecter and the Joker are chaotic evil.

How do you have a *culture* of Hannibal Lecters? How do you have a *culture* of Jokers?

Now, I can hear some objections saying, "Well, they live in a tribal system of might makes right!" But that's not what chaotic evil means, nor is it how chaotic evil works.

The short answer is, you *can't* have a culture of Jokers and Hannibal Lecters. You have a few thousand of those guys running around and you don't have any culture, you have chaos. It just doesn't make any sense.

And even if these "other races" are all evil, why don't they have any semblance of society? Think about it. Trolls are a sentient race, so where are the troll villages? Trolls can think, can talk, can hunt. Why don't we see troll mothers and children?

I'll tell you why. Because it's easier to think of them as nothing more than XP if you never see the mothers and children.

All the typically evil fantasy races—goblins, orks, trolls, ogres—are sentient creatures capable of using tools. Some of them even speak more than one language.

Do *you* speak more than one language? The goblin's got one on ya, buddy.

“Okay, John,” you're saying. “Enough with the lecturing. Where's the GM advice?”

Buddy, this *is* the GM advice.

I was asked to run *D&D* once. I agreed. Everyone made 3rd level characters.

They were a traveling band of adventurers looking for fortune and glory! Winter was approaching and they were looking for shelter from a storm on its way. They found a set of caves and bunked down for the night.

A few hours later, they heard a sound coming from deeper in the caves. They geared up and followed the sound.

They found a group of orks huddled around a fire circle. They could hear the orks talking.

Talking about the nearing winter and how they didn't have enough food.

Talking about the fever that killed two babies.

And they talked about the humans in the village at the bottom of the hill. How the humans came up from the village, snuck into the caves during the day when the orks were sleeping and couldn't see. The humans killed their best hunters and stole the salted meat they were keeping for the winter. Stole the furs and pelts. Killed three of their women while they were on their knees, begging the humans to spare the babies.

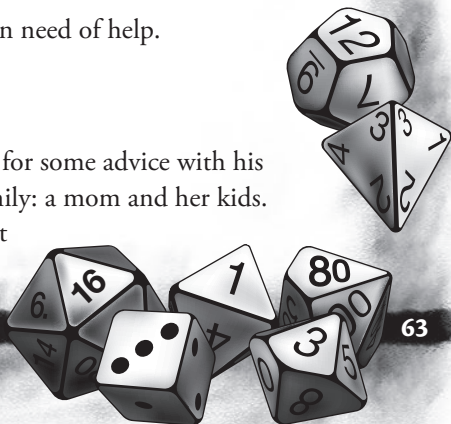
Finally, one of them said, “What are we going to do?”

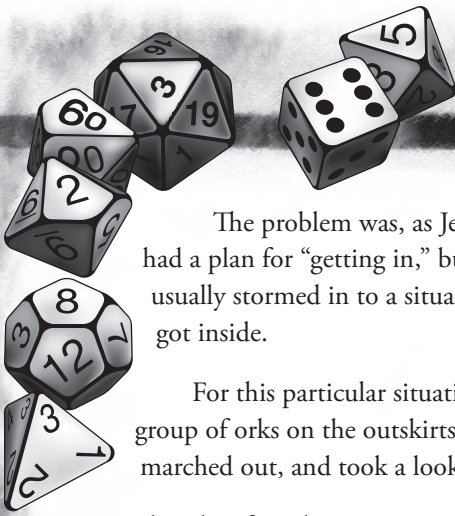
The players sat in silence.

I said, “Go on. Kill them. They're worth 100 XP each.”

The dilemma here should be clear. The orks are in need of help.

My buddy, the Legend Jessie Foster, came to me for some advice with his *GURPS* players. He was running the game for a family: a mom and her kids. They wanted to learn roleplaying and Jessie is a great teacher, so it worked out pretty well.





The problem was, as Jessie explained it to me, that the kids always had a plan for “getting in,” but never had a plan for “getting out.” They usually stormed in to a situation without any idea of what to do once they got inside.

For this particular situation, a local King hired them to take out a group of orks on the outskirts of his kingdom. They got all geared up, marched out, and took a look at what they had to deal with.

What they found was an army. A thousand or so orks, all on the border, ready to invade.

Jessie figured, “They’ll report back, tell the King it’s an army, and we can move forward from there.”

Unfortunately, that’s not what they did. They spent the rest of the session devising a plan to take out the army. All five of them against a thousand orks.

Jessie and I were sitting down at lunch and he told me this story. “Next session,” he said, “they’re all going to be dead.”

I shook my head. “No,” I told him. “Try this instead.”

I told him, “Instead of the orks killing them, they capture the whole group. Then, they send one guy back to the king with a ransom note. The King takes one look at the ransom note and says tells the messenger that he and his buddies are on their own.”

The King isn’t a good guy. In fact, he’s much closer to bad guy territory. He doesn’t give a single fig about the party. Sure, the ransom the orks are asking for is reasonable and it wouldn’t even sustain him for two days, but he’s not going to pay a single gold coin for them. Not one.

So, our messenger now has a problem. He can go back to the orks and tell them there’s no ransom or he can just leave his buddies to their fate.

In the end, their buddy returned to the orks and told them the King wasn’t going to pay any ransom. He begged the orks not to kill his friends. The ork chieftain laughed, “Of course we aren’t going to kill you,” he said. “What do you think we are?”

The orks let the adventurers go, but only if they promised not to interfere with the invasion of the kingdom. The crew was impressed with the orks, hated the King, and decided to help the orks invade the Kingdom.

* * *

I love *War of the Worlds*. One of my favorite books. For me, the book is a horror story, a reverse telescope. An advanced civilization comes along, murders us by the millions, and the only thing that saves us is the common cold.

Most modern audiences don't know Wells wrote the book during the height of British (and American) colonialism. He put his audience in the shoes of a narrator who helplessly watches as a technologically advanced culture destroys his own.

You know. Like those Native Americans we almost killed to extinction.

So, let's use Wells' novel as an inspiration.

Robert B. Poteete told me about a story in his fantasy campaign that involved hobgoblins running roughshod over human, elven, and dwarven colonies. He said, "... (I)n the same way Western Europeans moved in on the Native Americans." Running with that premise, let's assume hobgoblins have discovered something really powerful out in the wilderness. Maybe something like a magical equivalent of the Monolith from *2001: A Space Odyssey*.

Someone has uplifted the hobgoblins.

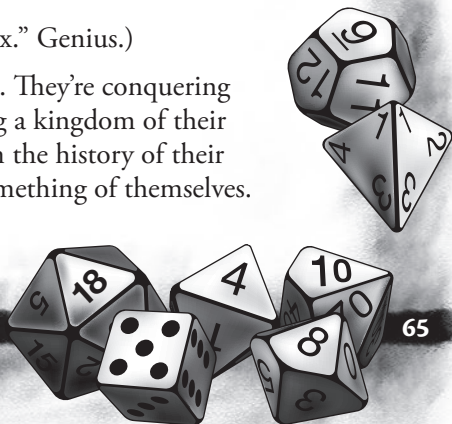
A few years later, we see the hobgoblins raging through human villages with superior weapons, superior magic, superior tactics, superior technology. Oh, and they're also carrying some kind of deadly virus. You survive a hobgoblin attack, you get sick. And in a matter of a month, you die.

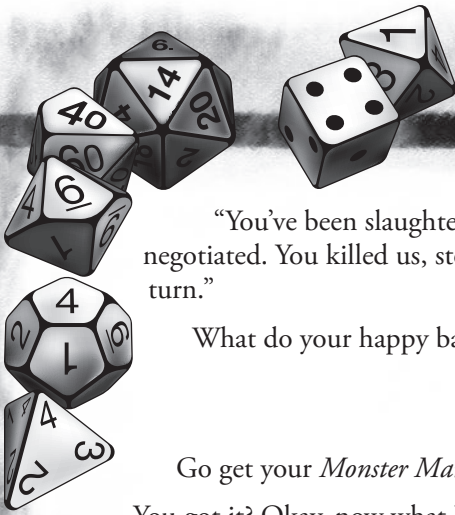
Now, I'm assuming your fantasy world doesn't know about microscopic life. Sure, you've got clerics with "cure disease" spells, but how many clerics you got? Can they handle a full on pandemic?

(By the way, Robert called the disease "gob-pox." Genius.)

Meanwhile, hobgoblins continue their raiding. They're conquering land as they go, establishing outposts, establishing a kingdom of their own. Why? Because they can. For the first time in the history of their people, the hobgoblins have a chance to make something of themselves.

Go on. Try to negotiate with them. You know what they'll say?





“You’ve been slaughtering our people for generations. You never negotiated. You killed us, stole our property and land. Now, it’s your turn.”

What do your happy band of adventurers do now?

* * *

Go get your *Monster Manual*. Do it. You need it for this last part.

You got it? Okay, now what I want you to do is look through all the descriptions of “monsters.” How are they different from the “races”?

“Monsters” and “races.” See what’s happening here?

It’s okay to kill monsters. They’re different than us. They’re The Other.

Here’s what I want you to do. I want you to think of your *Monster Manual* as nothing more than elf propaganda. It’s the equivalent of *The Protocols of the Elders of Zion*: a document designed to perpetuate hatred against the goblinoid races. Unfortunately for your players, it’s the only reference they’ve got. It’s what they’ve been taught since they were children.

The orks are evil. They’re out to get us.

The trolls are evil. They’re out to get us.

The goblins are evil. They’re out to get us.

This book contains all the information your PCs have on orks and goblins and their kin.

And if you don’t think its possible for racial propaganda to take over the minds and hearts of elves, dwarves, and the other “civilized” races, just consider how easily racism has kept its claws in our own culture. Our own literate culture with information, quite literally, at its fingertips. For a culture such as the ones often portrayed in fantasy literature, where perhaps 10% of the people are literate, where a farmer barely wanders 10 miles from his home... yeah, these people don’t have a chance.

Remember: any game that divides sentient species into two groups—“races” and “monsters”—is *dividing sentient species into two groups*. And one of them is clearly good and the other group is clearly evil?

You’re smarter than that. You’re better than that.

And you can use it.



EPISODE 9

THE LITTLE THINGS

So, this episode is a bunch of “little things.” None of them were big enough to make their own episode, so I’ve thrown them all together for your enjoyment.

Folks who are familiar with some of my older games—such as *L5R* and *7th Sea*—may recognize some of these, but rest assured, I’ve spiced all them up with some new surprises.





I: CHEAT TO WIN



The reason fudging dice rolls feels so wrong is because it's cheating. The rulebook has an agreed sense of things. These are the rules. You, the GM, the players agree to play by the rules. If you fudge dice rolls, you're cheating.

And I think that's why I always feel a little guilty for changing dice rolls, even if they are in the players' favor.

So, let's make cheating a rule.

Dice are arbitrary. That means they don't care. They don't care about your world, your characters, or anything else. They're going to roll numbers based on the statistics. That means dice can provide story elements you didn't count on, but it also means dice can ruin stories.

Cheating undermines the players' confidence in your narrative abilities. "If you have to cheat..."

A lot of games, including games I've written, have rules that allow you to fudge dice rolls. Rules for cheating.

Why not do this for the GM, too!

For example, if the GM makes a roll that would completely kill one of the characters, or chooses to cheat in players' favor, he can fudge. "That roll didn't count, I'm rolling again." If he does it, there are consequences.

If the GM fudges a roll that cheats in the players' favor, he gets a "cheat point." He can use this point in the future to turn any significant die roll into a "1." In other words, he can turn a crit against one of his villains into a "1." (Or whatever the equivalent is in your favorite system.) It has to be significant. In other words, it has to be a roll that would impact the story or another character's life.

Now, just because the GM gets to call the "1," it doesn't mean he gets to narrate the failure. The players still get to narrate the failure. That way, the players aren't completely helpless. Yes, a character fails, but the player gets to say how and why.

The player is giving up something here and the GM should recognize that. Because the player is deliberately putting his character in peril, you the GM should be responsible with that. Remember the first principle of Play Dirty: you are here to entertain the players.

2: THE OTHER 100 POINTS

Fans of *7th Sea* know this one pretty well.

Give each of your players a piece of paper and ask them to write down four words: “Action,” “Mystery,” “Romance” and “Intrigue.” (You could also add “Military” and “Exploration.” Those were specific to *7th Sea*, so I left them out.) These are the *Campaign Themes*.

Then, tell your players that each of them has 100 points to allocate to the Themes. The more points they put under a Theme, the more important that Theme becomes in the game.

For example, let’s look at a chart that a group of players has filled out.

	Action	Intrigue	Mystery	Romance
Andy	60	20	10	10
Bill	20	80	-	-
Cindy	50	-	-	50
Deborah	30	40	10	20
Eddie	20	40	40	-
Totals	180	160	60	80

Looking at this chart gives us a whole lot of information. We know the major focus on the campaign should be Action and Intrigue. Players show very little (some none at all) interest in Mystery and Romance.

On the other hand, Cindy put *half* her points in Romance and the other half in Action. That says a lot to me about the kind of game that Cindy wants to play. I’m going to make sure she gets what she wants by peppering the campaign with romantic interests and dangers.

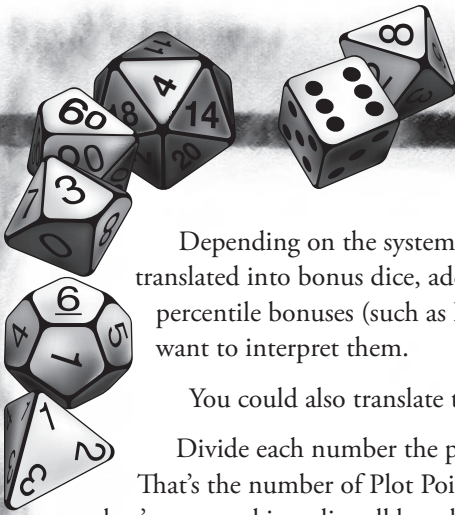
You can replace the Campaign Themes with others—like I said, *7th Sea* had more than these—and tailor it to your own campaign.

As with everything else in this book, this is a tool that allows your players to say, “I want this!” Listen to them.

So, that’s what I gave players in *7th Sea*. But wait... there’s more!

Take a look at those numbers again. If these things are so important to your players... why not give them bonuses for them!





Depending on the system you're playing, these numbers could be translated into bonus dice, adds to rolls, bonuses to saving throws, straight percentile bonuses (such as Luck in *Call of Cthulhu*), or however else you want to interpret them.

You could also translate them into Plot Points. Here's how that works.

Divide each number the player puts into a Campaign Theme by ten. That's the number of Plot Points they have for that Theme. Whenever they're engaged in a die roll based on that theme, they can spend a Plot Point to automatically succeed, gain +10% on their roll, gain a re-roll, or whatever other mechanic you want to assign to it.

In other words, when they tell you what they want, you reward them for it.

3: THE CHARACTER QUIZ

In a previous episode, I mentioned a "character quiz" that I gave my players and asked them to fill out in their characters' voices. I stole the idea from *Amber Diceless* and incorporated it into both *Legend of the Five Rings* and *7th Sea*. It's been a decade since I've thought about the idea, and now that I have, I've got some new thoughts about it. Chiefly, I want players to think about their characters more *as characters*. You'll see what I mean when you see the questions below.

Each question has a mechanical benefit of some kind. Players only get that benefit if they answer the question to your satisfaction. (Note, there are no "yes/no" questions.)

By the way, "Gain 100 XP" is code for "gain the appropriate amount of in-game reward for your game" and "Gain a d4" is code for "insert here a mechanic that fits your game."

1. Name something your character does not want to lose.

Gain 100 XP when you lose this item.

Gain a d4 when trying to get this item back.

2. Name something your character would die for.

Gain 100 XP when you defend this cause.

Gain a d4 when fighting for this cause.

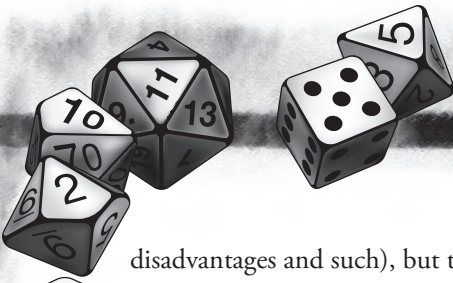
3. Name something your character would kill for.
Gain 100 XP when you defend this cause.
Gain a d4 when fighting for this cause.
4. What is your character's favorite color?
Gain a d4 when your character wears a piece of clothing with this color.
5. What is your character's favorite food?
Gain a bonus d4 to use on any roll when your character eats this food.
6. What is your character's most important current goal?
Gain 100 XP when you take an action that directly leads to that goal.
Gain a bonus d4 when taking an action that directly leads to that goal.
7. Who is your character's best friend?
Gain a d4 when protecting that character.
8. What is the secret your character does not want others to discover?
Gain a d4 when trying to protect that secret.
Gain 100 XP when that secret is revealed.
9. Describe your character's perfect mate.
Gain a d4 when trying to protect that person.
Gain 100 XP when that person is put in danger.
10. How will your character die?
Gain 100 XP when you put your character in a situation that could lead to this demise.

4: FOSTER'S VILLAGE

The Legend Jessie Foster (yes, he's real) runs a unique *GURPS* game at conventions. His games all take place in a small village called "Green Haven." It's a tiny place with only about one hundred or so inhabitants. But it sees a whole lot of trouble.

Players take the roles of normal people in the village: the blacksmith, the carpenter, the cobbler, the baker... you get the idea. Again, these are *normal people*. Typical *GURPS* characters have about 100 points to their names (plus extra points from





disadvantages and such), but these characters are closer to 25-50 points.



Every once in a while, a problem shows up and the villagers have to take care of it. They've had to deal with all sorts of problems (including a dragon) and they're just ordinary people. Not adventurers, not heroes. Just people.

The trick here is that Foster runs this adventure at every convention he goes to. Whenever someone makes a character for Green Haven, that character goes into Foster's folder. If you play at another convention, you play the same character—unless that character dies, that is.

So, his folder is filled with characters. Over one hundred different people have played in his game, populating the village with all sorts of folks. And every game, they have another problem to deal with. Monsters from the hills, bandits, a necromancer looking for a lost artifact... and the only people who can take care of it are the blacksmith, the cooper, the baker, and the rest.

Now, why do I share this story with you? Because it's a helluva lot of fun, that's why. Players who have never met before know about Foster's Village because they've played in it. Think about that for a second. You and I, we've never met, but we both have characters in *The Legend's* game. We've both been part of the ongoing story of Foster's Village. That's one reason and it's awesome enough.

The other reason is because the characters have such depth and continuity, players really care about the fate of the village. And have I mentioned, these are *ordinary people* enough times? People who have never travelled more than five leagues from the place they were born. Most are illiterate. They only know the one hundred people they've grown up with. Maybe two or three of them have even seen a sword, let alone picked one up.

That's what's awesome about Foster's Village. You should visit sometime.

5. MY TREK GAME

The Great and Mighty Jesse Heinig and Chris Colbath (my future factotum) are both huge *Star Trek* fans. Every once in a while, I get the notion I want to run a *Star Trek* game, especially for them. The PCs are cops on a small, 6-man patrol ship that orbits Earth. They keep smugglers and other criminals out. Then, they stumble on

a shape-shifter/Cardassian plot to blow up the Earth. They notify Starfleet who tells them SF Intelligence cannot confirm their information and dismisses it.

Then, the Earth blows up.

Every Federation ship goes offline. The shape-shifters and Cardassians invade Federation space with their allies, the Romulan Empire, destroying Federation bases and ships as they go.

The Klingon Empire divides on whether or not to help the Federation. Civil war breaks out.

The Vulcans take the only logical alternative: complete surrender and willing subjugation.

Meanwhile, our little crew of Federation cops has to deal with a universe with no Federation. Is there any way to rebuild it? To save it? To restore what was? Or, do they have to deal with the universe as it is: controlled by the Cardassians and Romulans.

And, of course, somewhere out there, the Borg watch with a cold, calculating interest.

One day, I'll run that game for Jesse and Chris. One day.

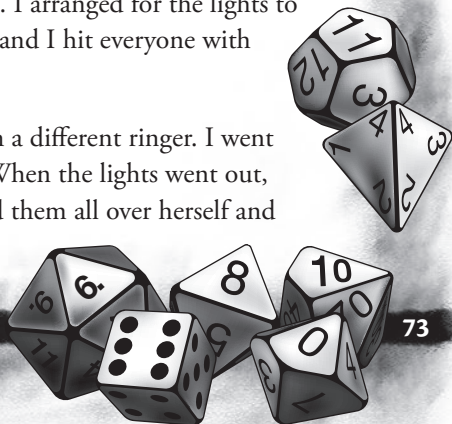
CONCLUSION

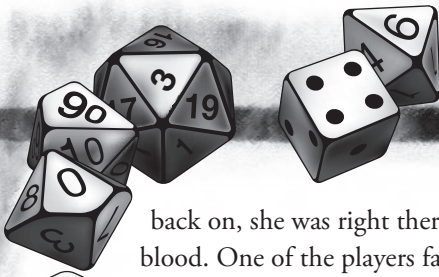
There are other little things I could list here.

Like the time I had a guy in a Knights Templar costume show up at the climax of the *Thirty* game. He stood outside, knocked on the door at the appropriate moment... Oh, man that rocked.

There was the time I ran *Chill* and I had a squirt gun filled with fake blood. The PCs were locked in a house with a werewolf outside. I arranged for the lights to go out (the owner's wife shut off the power on cue) and I hit everyone with the fake blood.

Many years later, I pulled off a similar stunt with a different ringer. I went to one of the players and filled her in on the plan. When the lights went out, she pulled blood packets out of her pockets, slapped them all over herself and sprayed herself on the table. When the lights came





back on, she was right there, in the middle of the table, covered with blood. One of the players fainted.



I ran a *Call of Cthulhu* game in the middle of the woods once. It was a summer camp and the leadership asked me to run a “scary game.” I conspired with the youth (and a couple other leaders) to sneak out after hours and haunt the small fire circle with strange sounds and lights. Camp kids freaking out the camp counselors. There’s a little revenge for you.

Or the time in Poland when folks asked me to run *L5R*. I called for a bathroom break, went outside, and noticed four guys with foam swords. I told them, “Hey, follow me.” I showed them the door and said, “When you hear me shout for guards, I want you guys to rush in and point your swords at everyone.” They waited and when they heard the signal, they rushed in. You should have seen the looks on the players’ faces.

Had a player with a PC going crazy. I switched out his regular dice with blank ones and got the other players to agree with whatever I said he rolled. I swear he spent thirty seconds honestly believing he was nuts.

My usual *Pendragon* game starts with Utherpendragon and the Duke of Cornwall at war. I ask the players to pick a side. They know Uther is gonna kill the Duke, have sex with Igraine, and sire Arthur, so they usually pick Uther. Problem is, I make Uther a real jerk and the Duke of Cornwall the coolest dude on the planet. Again, using the players’ knowledge of the setting against them.

Speaking of which, what if the *Harry Potter* novels are just Hogwarts propaganda? We all know Harry’s dad was a complete jerkface, right? Who says Harry didn’t inherit his dad’s bullying behaviors? Take a few classes from him and find out.

Ever wonder what happens when one player discovers that all the other PCs in the game are just alternate personalities in his own character’s head? Try it once and find out.

Oh, there’s just so much more I could share! But the hour is getting late and deadlines loom. Maybe next time, my friend. Maybe next time.



EPISODE 10

KICK IN YOUR HEELS

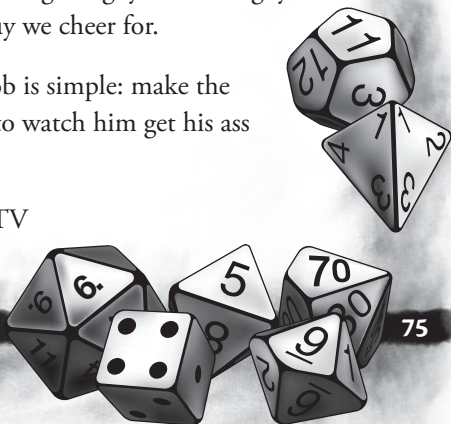
“Heel” is a term from the very strange world of professional wrestling. As most everyone knows, pro wrestling is filled constellations of good guys and bad guys. A good guy is the “babyface,” (or just “face”), the guy we cheer for.

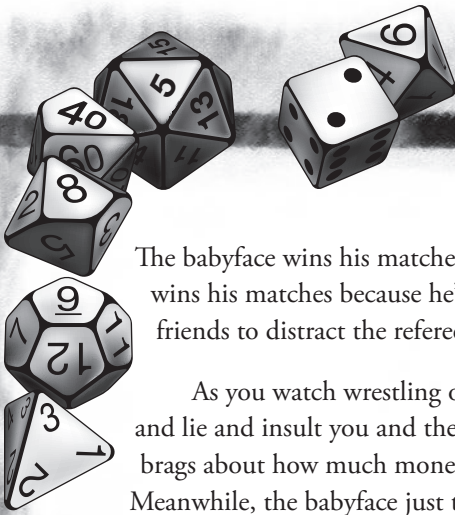
The villain, on the other hand, is the heel. His job is simple: make the audience hate him so much that they’ll pay money to watch him get his ass handed to him.

That’s how professional wrestling works. It uses TV to introduce us to both the heel and the babyface.

JOHN WICK | Play Dirty 2: Even Dirtier

FIERCE





The babyface wins his matches because he's an awesome wrestler. The heel wins his matches because he's a cheater, a liar, a bully, and he relies on his friends to distract the referee so he can pull off villainous shenanigans.

As you watch wrestling on TV, you see the heel cheat and swindle and lie and insult you and the audience. He thinks he's better than you. He brags about how much money he has and all the women who want him.

Meanwhile, the babyface just talks about how he wants to keep getting better and entertain the fans who pay money to watch him wrestle.

Then, the heel and the babyface meet for the first time. They are scheduled to have a match, but the heel shows signs that he has no intention of getting in the ring with the face. As the match starts, some of the heel's bad guy buddies come out and walk around the ring, distracting the babyface. They shout at the face and the audience both, getting the crowd shouting back. And just when it looks like our hero may conquer the villain, the heel's friends jump in the ring and ruin the match.

They all jump on the hero, and while he holds them off for a short while, eventually, the numbers are too much, and it takes other babyfaces running from the back to save our hero.

Then, after the commercial break, we see our reliable announcer interviewing the hero. He has blood on his face and he's pissed. We've never seen the babyface like this before. He points at the camera, his face red with anger and blood. He swears he's going to get revenge on the heel and challenges him to a match at your local sports arena. Just below his face, words flash on and off, telling you the phone number and website address where you can buy tickets and watch the hero get his revenge on the dastardly villain.

This is how professional wrestling works. It's simple. Use TV to convince the audience that they want to pay money to watch someone get beat up. And this, my friend is how you and I are going to convince our players that they care about your game.

We're not going to give them villains.

We're gonna give them heels.

NASA AND THE GRINNING MAN

Whenever I run a *World of Darkness* game for my friends, one of them always spends Background points for a contact at NASA. I know it sounds strange, but it's true.

The reason? A gentleman by the name of "Mister Finger."

You see, if my players ever catch Mr. Finger, they're going to use those contacts at NASA to fire the bastard into the sun.

No joke. This was their plan.

Now, there's a loooooong history to this fellow that begins when I was about four years old. I saw him under my bed. That pic, right down there on the right, is damn near close to what I saw. (Aaron Acevedo did an amazing job catching the bastard's likeness.) Needless to say, he scared the crap out of me.

I ran downstairs to my grandfather (both myself and a mad Irish King inherited his name) and told him what I saw. I remember that he was watching professional wrestling and, even to this day, I remember the smell of his pipe. He took one look at me and in his deep Irish accent, he said, "Well, we'd better do something about that, then."

He grabbed a baseball bat, put it in my hands, and walked me back up the stairs to my room. Then, he told me to sit on the edge of the bed and wait. "And if the bastard shows his face," he said, "you hit him." Then, he left me alone in the room.

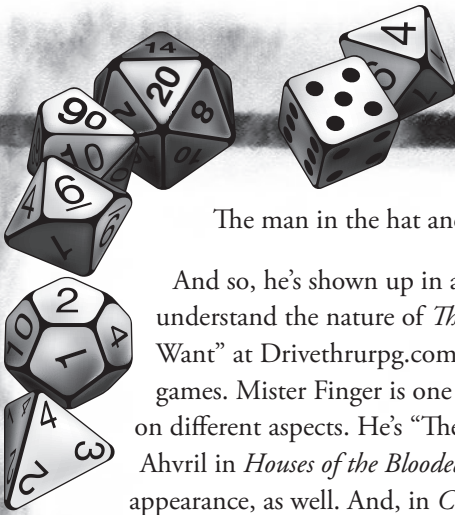
I woke up the next morning with my feet off the edge of the bed and that baseball bat in my hands. When I came downstairs for breakfast, my grandfather asked, "What happened?"

I told him the man under the bed never came back out.

Grandpa nodded. "Ya killed him ta death," he said, "'cause you weren't afraid."

I've told that story a million times, but it's the origin of that right evil bastard.





The man in the hat and the grin. That bloody, toothy grin.

And so, he's shown up in a ton of my games. Folks who have read and understand the nature of *The Flux* (which is available for "Pay What You Want" at Drivethrurpg.com) know that certain NPCs re-occur in my games. Mister Finger is one of them. He goes by different names, takes on different aspects. He's "The Grinning Man" in *Schauermarken*. He's Ahvril in *Houses of the Blooded*. In my novel, *No Loyal Knight*, he makes an appearance, as well. And, in *Curse of the Yellow Sign*, you get a sense that he just might be something a lot more dangerous than just a monster.

Don't get me wrong: this guy is a monster. A horrible creature that epitomizes evil. I played him for a Camarilla LARP as a Sabbat vampire for a while (in this incarnation, he was a Tzimisce) and I got honest-to-Discordia requests to "please keep Mister Finger away from me."

I took that as a compliment.

"But why," you ask, "why do people hate him so?"

Well, it isn't because he's evil. I mean, plenty of villains are evil. And it isn't because of how creatively evil he is.

No, friends. The reason people hate him—enough to buy contacts at NASA—is because Mister Finger isn't just evil, he gets personal.

MAKE IT PERSONAL

He doesn't kill heroes—oh no!—he kidnaps them. Then, he cuts off a finger and sends it to the other PCs with a note that says, "One a day!"

(He did that in the *Changeling: the Dreaming* game I ran for my wife and a few friends.)

When my friend Steve had to take a two-month break from another *WoD* game I was running, Mister Finger used fleshcrafting (a Tzimisce power) to mold Steve's character into a ball of flesh, put it inside of himself, and went around pretending to be Steve's character. The reason? He wanted to get busy with another PC who shared the True Love merit with Steve, and since Steve's PC was *inside* the villain, her true love radar said, "Yes, this is your lover."

Yeah, he's *that* kind of jerk. He makes it *personal*. He doesn't kill PCs, he *hurts* them in very specific ways. And that's why my players hate Mister Finger with the passion of a thousand suns. They know that when he shows up, someone—one of them—is gonna get hurt in the most *intimate* way possible.

That's why they buy contacts at NASA. To shoot the bastard into the sun.

And this is how you, my fellow Game Master, can introduce villains into your game that your players will *hate*. Because if you think of all the villains in literature, TV, film, comic books, etc., the ones you hate the most are the ones who did permanent damage to the hero. Something that can never be taken back or healed. And they did it with a smile.

Even after Vader permanently disfigured Luke, the young Jedi Apprentice still had the will to fight. It wasn't until Vader told him the truth about his father that young Skywalker lost all hope.

In *The Usual Suspects*, Kayser Soze doesn't make generic threats about murdering you. His agents make warnings like this:

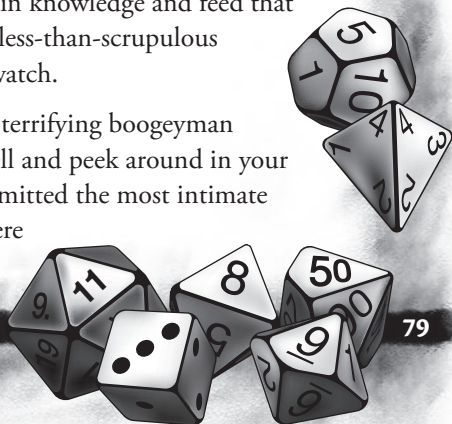
"If I see you or any of your friends before then, Miss Finneran will find herself the victim of a most gruesome violation before she dies. As will your father, Mr. Hockney. And your Uncle Randall in Arizona, Mr. Kint. I might only castrate Mr. McManus's nephew, David. Do I make myself clear?"

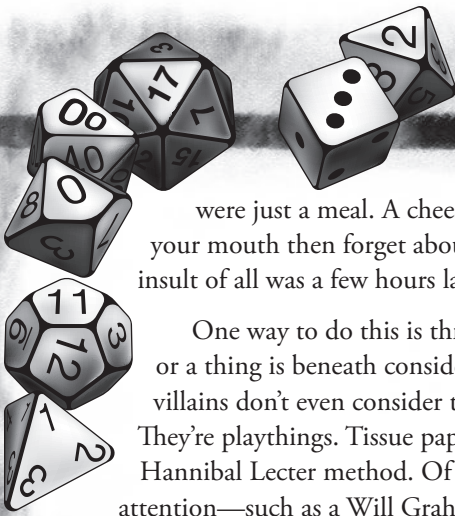
Meanwhile, in David Fincher's movie, *Se7en*, John Doe makes things *very* personal for Brad Pitt's character, David Mills. While I don't think there's any danger in giving away spoilers to a movie that was released in 1995, it's safe to say that nobody wants to know what's in the box.

In *Ladyhawke*, the Bishop of Aquila arranges for the Best Curse in Movie History. And it's the Best Curse in Movie History because of how *personal* it is.

The character of Max Cady has shown up in both versions of *Cape Fear*. He's a diabolical bastard who spent his time in prison learning how to get revenge. Years. With nothing more to do than gain strength and gain knowledge and feed that hate in his belly. The ways he gets at Sam Bowden's less-than-scrupulous lawyer are worth seeing, but incredibly difficult to watch.

Before he became "cool," Hannibal Lecter was a terrifying boogeyman who could reach out through the glass wall of his cell and peek around in your soul. Why was Lecter so terrifying? Because he committed the most intimate crime of all: he ate you. To demonstrate that you were nothing more than a cow or a chicken to him. You





were just a meal. A cheeseburger. Fast food. Something you put into your mouth then forget about for the rest of your life. And the most vulgar insult of all was a few hours later when he flushed the toilet...

One way to do this is through *contempt*. “The feeling that a person or a thing is beneath consideration, worthless, or deserving scorn.” Your villains don’t even consider the heroes worthy of that much consideration. They’re playthings. Tissue paper you use once, then throw away. This is the Hannibal Lecter method. Of course, when shows up who is *worthy* of their attention—such as a Will Graham or a Clarice Starling—that’s when the real horror begins. Someone worth notice. A challenge. And what happens when our heroes fail to meet our villain’s expectations? Oh, dear.

Another way of handing this is what I like to call “the Joker Approach.” M. Night Shamalan took this approach in *Unbreakable*: the villain sees himself as the ultimate outsider, his existence only justified by the existence of another.

I always saw the Joker as a man who was on the edge of suicide and the only thing that kept him from pulling the trigger was Batman. Why? “Because if there’s a Batman, it’s okay that I’m here. He’s just as screwed up as me and that means I’m not alone.”

This is why so many published adventures feel...well, like they were written for someone else. That’s because they were. The person writing the adventure generally has his or her own gaming group in mind. “How will Bill react to this? How about Sharon? Steve will jump at this part...”

The reason we write this way (yes, I’ve written my fair share of “generic adventures”) is because our own groups are the only reference we have to go on. We trust that the people in our groups are like the people in *your* groups. At least, that’s what I do.

Yes, it’s true that every party is different, but it’s also true that gamers are gamers. You’ve got a rules lawyer and I’ve got a rules lawyer. You’ve got a pair who is always in a romance with each other and I do, too. So, in order to get your players to care, I try to write adventures that can be tailored to your group. The best adventure writers do this. We know every group is different, but we play on the similarities. And we use those similarities to get your group to care about what’s actually going on.

We make it personal.



THE GLAMOUR GIRLS

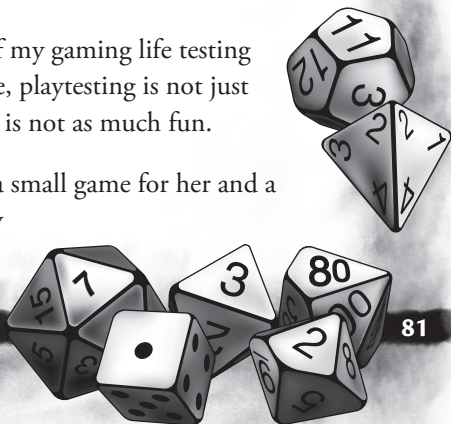
For almost a year, I ran a Changeling game for four women. It came about because my wife got tired of playtesting.

As a game designer, I spend almost every hour of my gaming life testing out different mechanics for my games. And trust me, playtesting is not just playing the game. It's very different. And, frankly, it is not as much fun.

So, one night, my wife Ro asked if I would run a small game for her and a couple of friends. I told her I'd run any game on my shelf. All she had to do was ask.

JOHN WICK | Play Dirty 2: Even Dirtier

EXPLORER





She picked White Wolf's *Changeling*. (In my opinion, the best of the *New World of Darkness* books. A damn fine game that's worth checking out—even if you aren't a fan of White Wolf games in general.)

I ran an ongoing *Changeling* game with four wonderful ladies, the Glamour Girls. Together, we told the story of four Changelings living in a small place called Dinkytown between St. Paul and Minneapolis, MN. (It's a real place. Go check it out.) Vampires surround the Girls on all sides, isolating them and throwing a dark shadow over their little domain.

And here, for the first time, I'm sharing with you all the back stage stuff I did to pull off this epic tale. So, without any further ado, let's begin.

THE SETTING

First thing I did was get my setting in order.

Changeling puts the players in the roles of humans who have been kidnapped by the creatures of Arcadia (the Faerie Lands) and transformed by the magic there in terrible ways. While they spend time in Arcadia, the Fae Folk replace them with "fetches," which are magical creatures who take on the appearance of our kidnapped heroes. Someone can spend decades—or even centuries—in Arcadia. Some manage to escape. For others, their owners just become bored and let them cross back over "the Hedge" into our own world.

The horror element of *Changeling* comes from the fact that you've been replaced and nobody ever knew you were gone. Sure, you've got cool new powers (it's a *White Wolf* game, after all), but who are you? For some Changelings, their time in Arcadia is sheer torture. For others, it was magical bliss. But here you are, back in our own world, and something else has taken your place. The people you loved and remembered didn't even know you were gone.

All of my *WoD* games take place in the Twin Cities. I use St. Paul/Minneapolis because I know it and my players don't. I can call on memories for details. Also, it invokes reality (there really is a St. P/Mn) while at the same time having that "Far Away Land" sense to it. It's really there, but it's also strange and foreign.

In this case, I set up Dinkytown as the place where Changelings congregate. Stuck right between the Twin Cities, Dinkytown occupies a few blocks between

the St. Paul and Minneapolis campuses of the University of Minnesota. It has pizza joints, sub sandwich shops, a Goodwill, a comic shop, cheap apartments, expensive apartments, a game shop, a used book store, and everything else you'd expect to find on a college campus. The girls could choose to be college kids or not college kids, just as long as they had a reason to be in Dinkytown.

On either side of our girls were the Twin Cities: each ruled by a different vampire Prince. St. Paul was more civilized while Minneapolis's vampire community was known to be wild and nearly out-of-control.

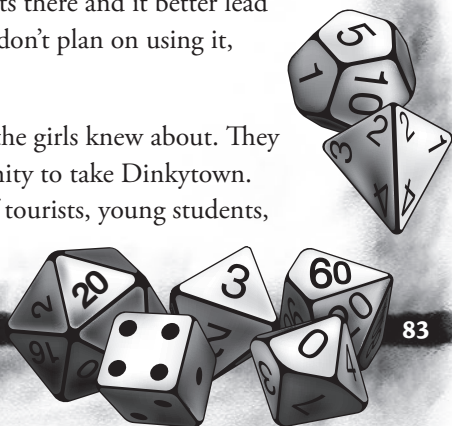
The wall between our world and Arcadia (the world of Faeries) was thin in Dinkytown, which is why so many Changelings found their way from the endless mists to Minnesota.

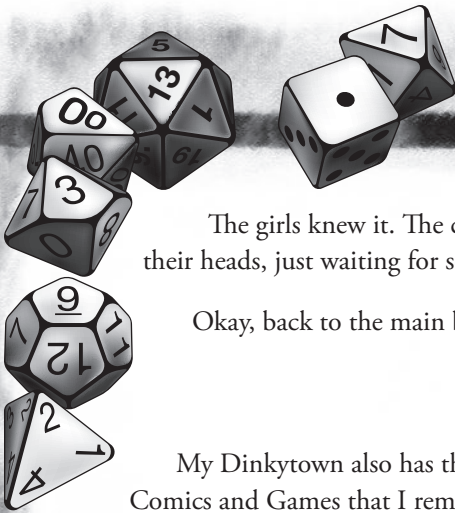
And it isn't the true Dinkytown; it isn't the place that's actually there. Instead, it is the Dinkytown of *my memory*. The lay of the land is different. It fulfills my needs as a storyteller. The Dinkytown of my memory has a bridge that cuts over the Mississippi River, connecting the two cities, making Dinkytown almost an island, isolated from the rest of the urban sprawl. And vampires cannot cross the river. It's part of a contract between the Changelings and the vampires. So long as the Changelings don't mess with vampire politics, the vampires can't come into Dinkytown.

That last part is important. Why? Because it's plot, that's why. Do you think for one second I'm not going to use that last bit to endanger my PC's home base? Of course I am! The trick is getting *them* to do it.

And this gives me a reason to interject a bit about world building. If you put something in your setting, the players better know its there and it better lead to story. If the players don't know about it and you don't plan on using it, you're wasting your time.

The Changeling/vampire contract is something the girls knew about. They knew the vampires were just *itching* for an opportunity to take Dinkytown. Why? It's prime feeding grounds, of course! Tons of tourists, young students, teachers... the place is a blood bank.





The girls knew it. The contract was a huge Chekov Gun hanging over their heads, just waiting for someone to pull the trigger.

Okay, back to the main bit.

* * *

My Dinkytown also has the small basement version of The Source of Comics and Games that I remember when I was there. It has a White Castle, the Goodwill (on the second story above a pizza place), a coffee shop owned by an Ogre, and a pub owned by... well, he's something. Not exactly sure what he is. But he's Irish, that's for sure. The pub is called "O'Bannon's" and the people who know him call him "Jack."

The coffee shop Ogre is Barnabas. He loves coffee. Watching Barnabas drink coffee is like watching a priest preside over a mass. It's a ritual. Sacred and holy. He's huge: standing over seven feet tall. He used to be a professional wrestler back when Verne Gagne still ran the AWA. But since then, Barnabas has retired. He's also the de-facto leader of Dinkytown. Everyone assumes it was he who set up the contract with the vampires, although nobody's asked him yet.

That's My Dinkytown. Because it's a real place, I printed out a map, made some changes, marked important spots, and asked the girls to fill in the blanks. They came up with stuff and wrote it down on the map. Of course, this helps me out. It fills in the blanks but also shows me the stuff they want.

Step 1: Ask your players questions.

Step 2: Listen to what they say.

THEMES

Looking through the themes of Changeling, I decided the thing I liked most were the themes of loneliness and abandonment. It is a game about orphans. Also, with a group of women, I'd enjoy playing on female archetypes. Nobody ever talks about the Faerie King. There are no stories about him. It's always the Queen. Powerful. Terrible. Beautiful. We'd be dealing with that. Arcadia, in my mind, is a very feminine place. Cities are masculine with their geometry and cold concrete. But

Arcadia is lush and growing. Green and warm. Playing off those two very different settings would be fun.

Also, I wanted to give the orphan girls (Lost Girls) father/brother figures. Barnabas and O'Bannon fit perfectly.

Barnabas is slow, methodical, and practical. Patient. Comforting. The coffee house with its warm cups that you wrap your hands around in the cold, Minnesota winter mornings. Muffins and bread. Breakfast. There's just something comforting about breakfast.

Barnabas was my "Safety Parent." He would be the one the girls go to when they felt in danger. Everyone saw Barnabas as the "leader" of Dinkytown, even though the place had no formal hierarchy. When I played Barnabas, I lowered my voice, opened my hands, and stood. I wanted to be taller than the girls. I wanted them to look up to him.

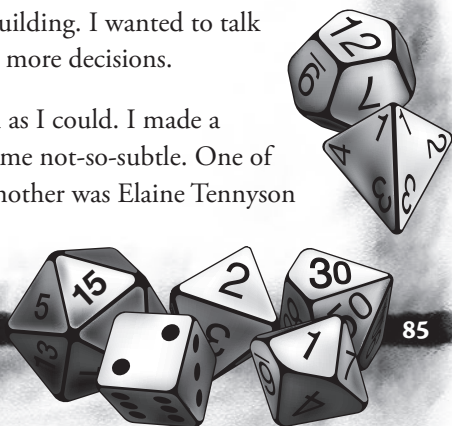
And then there was Jack, the O'Bannon. Loud, boisterous, dangerous, and fun. He drank all night long, fell asleep, and stayed that way most of the day. He got angry a lot, but never at them. He started fights. He sang songs. He showed off scars and told them where he got them. Sometimes, when he spoke, it seemed to them that he was talking about centuries other than this one. And, on more than one occasion, he died. One night, they saw a crack open up in the concrete street with fire and screaming and an awful stink coming up from the hole. And there, before their eyes, Jack pulled himself up out of the hole.

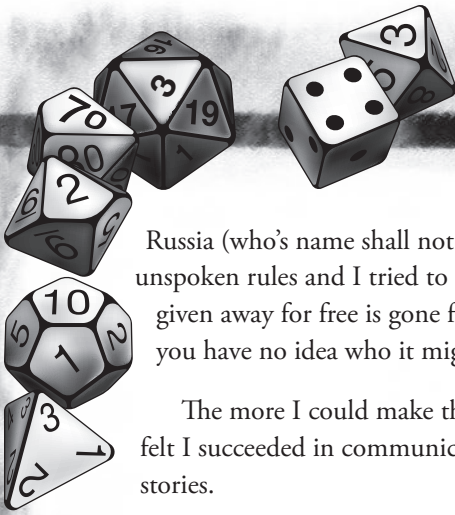
Pulling himself up from Hell, it seemed. Just as he was the last time they saw him.

Jack was my "Play Parent." He always looked them straight in the eye, never looking down at them.

With those two men in place, I stopped world building. I wanted to talk to the girls about their characters before I made any more decisions.

I also wanted to throw as much fairy tale stuff in as I could. I made a whole ton of references at them: some subtle and some not-so-subtle. One of the characters was William Tamerlane (Tam Lin), another was Elaine Tennyson (Elaine of Astolat, The Lady of Shalott), and yet another invoked the Kindly Grandmother of





Russia (who's name shall not be uttered here). Fairy tales have subtle and unspoken rules and I tried to incorporate them whenever I could. Anything given away for free is gone forever. Always be kind to a stranger because you have no idea who it might be. That sort of stuff.

The more I could make the environment feel like a fairy tale, the more I felt I succeeded in communicating the environment and the themes of the stories.

THE CAST

Each of the Glamour Girls were different, coming to the table with different needs and wants. I had to size each of them up, figure out what they wanted, then figure out the best way to give it to them.

Ro wants to play a protector. She also wants to invoke some of the playfulness of the old game without betraying the themes of the new one. This means she wants me to put her in dangerous situations to protect other Changelings. Her character is Kiera, a Beast Changeling who was transformed into a messenger blackbird. She likes shiny things.

My long-term goal for Ro was to put Dinkytown in danger. She was invested in the setting—especially in Barnabas—and putting the entire town at risk was my key to getting her emotionally hooked.

Jessica wants to have the inner conflict of identity. Her character is in full denial of her ever visiting Arcadia, and so she's split her personality into two: the one who knows she's a Changeling and the one who doesn't. This means she wants me to put her character into situations where that division becomes dangerous. She also wants to discover elements of her personality and uncover things she may have intentionally forgotten.

My long-term goal for Jessica was throwing things at her that made her question her memories and her identity. I would do this by presenting a “past life” scenario that hinted she may actually be a reincarnated soul, thus further confusing who she “really is.” Jessica's character is “Bess” when she's “mundane” and “Misty” when she's fully awake.

(As a side note, Jessica had different colors for her character sheet: the dots that Bess had, the dots that Misty had and the dots they shared. This kind of behavior deserves rewards.)

Emily is a new player. This may be her second RPG. She made her character at the game, which means I didn't have a lot of time to prepare for her. She made a Fairest who plays fiddle like nobody's business. But that doesn't tell me much about what the player wants. I wasn't exactly sure what she wanted until we actually started playing and then I discovered the part Emily really wanted was the "Cordelia" role. She wanted to be a part of the story, but be somewhat detached from it, and make very witty and barbed comments as the others engaged the story head on. Emily's character was Melanie, one of the Fairest. That meant she was stunning. That part was important to Emily, so I made sure it came up a lot in the game.

Because Emily is a "casual" player, I let her choose how engaged she wanted to be. Occasionally, I nudged her and gave her reasons to go along with things, but I wanted to let her feel out her own comfort zones. I also kept in contact with her, making sure she wasn't getting bored, and asked her if what was happening to her character was what she wanted to happen.

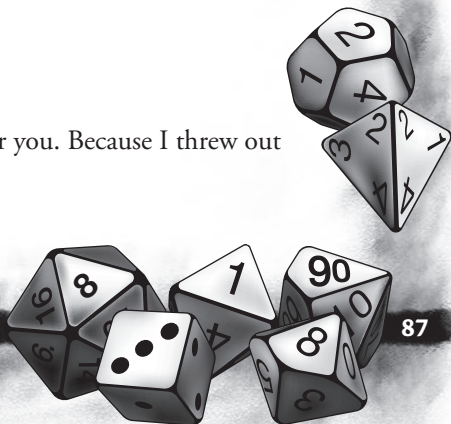
Surena wanted to play a magical character. She didn't say so up front, but her choice of "Changeling type" was "wized." She wanted her character to have trinkets and spells to play with. Surena is also an actress. Like a currently studying in Chicago at Second City actress. She stumbled on RPGs and loved the chance to fully immerse herself in a character and test her improv skills.

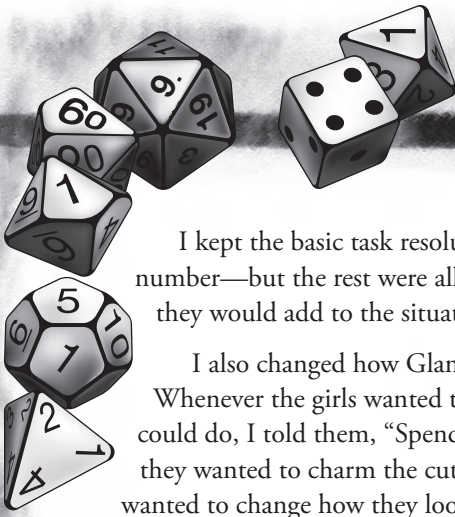
Her character was Lilith and for long-term goals, I developed a sub-plot involving a *Mage* character, pulling on the same storyline I planned for Jessica's. Her character had magic in her bloodline, which is what made her so attractive to Faerie in the first place. Strange things would happen around her. Subtle at first, but as she began to understand her heritage, they would become more common.

RULES

Now here's where things might get a bit dicey for you. Because I threw out most of the rules.

And by "most of the rules," I mean about ninety percent of them.





I kept the basic task resolution mechanic—trait + skill vs. target number—but the rest were all optional depending on whether or not I felt they would add to the situation.

I also changed how Glamour worked. I made it a lot more powerful. Whenever the girls wanted to do something that made sense a Changeling could do, I told them, “Spend a Glamour” and that was the end of it. If they wanted to charm the cute guy at the bar, “Spend a Glamour.” If they wanted to change how they looked, “Spend a Glamour.” I engaged the system when *they* felt comfortable with it, not when the game told me to. And I did it to a different level depending on each player.

Ro wanted the rules. She also knew the rules she wanted to play with. So, when she wanted to roll dice, I let her do it, no questions asked.

But with Emily, I handled everything differently. I noticed the first time I had the group make a roll, Emily almost blushed, embarrassed that she didn’t know what to do. This is something I **did not want** at my table. I did my best to avoid any situations that made the players roll together. Or, if they needed to make a group roll, I just encouraged them to spend a Willpower point to avoid the roll. Emily did that a lot. I made sure she always had a good pool of Willpower so she could avoid rules.

For Jessica, the rules were a way for her to say, “I’m good at this.” The dots on her sheet proved she was good at this. She liked rolling dice because they confirmed that her character was indeed good at what she wanted her character to be good at. So, I let her roll dice all she wanted.

Surena was also a new player and for her, rolling dice was like an improv game. She didn’t know which way they would fall and the outcome gave her an opportunity to improv the result. I let her narrate the outcome of all her dice rolls because I knew the challenge of improvising the outcome was “her fun.”

Removing rules allowed me to be this loose and fast with the players. When they rolled together, the trick was giving each player what they wanted.

TALKING

I discovered something in the very first session I ran for the Girls: they were more interested in talking (in character) than they were in action.

Now, I know what you're thinking. "Yeah, John. I ran games where my players never picked up dice, too." No, I don't mean that.

I mean, they spent *multiple* game sessions, sitting in the coffee shop, just talking in character. About everything. The plots going on, NPCs, stuff they saw on TV. Yeah, that was a neat one. Instead of talking about the shows they were watching before the game started, they waited until the game started and talked about them *in character*.

At one point, one of them said, "Uh, maybe we should do something? I dunno. About, you know, stuff?"

I laughed for ten minutes.

The majority of the time I ran the Glamour Girls game, I sat back in my chair and just watched them talk. For hours. I didn't say a word. Because the interaction was the most important thing.

I could have nudged them, but they were having so much fun. They were laughing and eating and talking. And the rules and sheets and dice *just didn't matter*.

The action stuff got started when *they* decided they wanted it. Otherwise, I just sat back and listened.

And that was the real key to the game's success, I think. Listening.

They talked about the plots and NPCs and the city and everything else and I just sat back and let them. And when they came up with a better idea than I had planned, I scratched my idea and inserted theirs.

Now, don't get me wrong. *A lot* of stuff went down. But for the first time ever, as a GM, I had a group of players for whom plot was *secondary*.

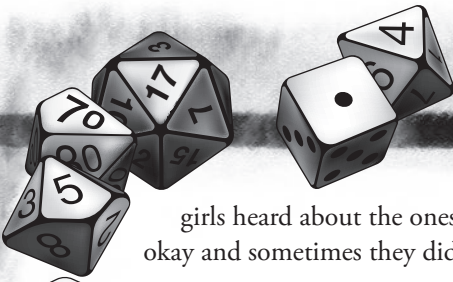
NPCS

Speaking of which...

I'm a strong believer in something Alfred Hitchcock (may have) said: "If you have great characters, you don't need plot."

I didn't decide on a single plot, but instead, had characters with motives that either coincided with the Girls and Dinkytown or clashed with them. I threw them at the group and waited to see which ones they swung at. The ones they weren't interested in, I resolved "off screen." The





girls heard about the ones they didn't chase: sometimes they ended up okay and sometimes they didn't.



WILLIAM TAMERLANE

Tam Lin is one of my favorite stories in the world to tell. It's the quintessential fairy tale full of everything that I love about fairy tales. And when Ro asked me to run *Changeling*, I knew Tam Lin would be one of my plot seeds.

In fact, the very first session of the game, this plot almost fell on their heads.

The Girls had snuck out of Dinkytown after dark (they weren't supposed to do that) and went to an open mic club where Melanie (the Fairest) wanted to sing and play her fiddle. They managed to get a bit of Glamour for the night (emotional energy from humans), then made their way home. It's too late for busses and good luck finding a cab. But it's only a forty-minute walk... through downtown Minneapolis. Home of the crazy vampires.

And on their way home, a young man fell from an open window into a trash bin, his leg snapping on the metal edge.

They ran to look and saw he was also a Changeling, but one they had never seen before. They checked his ID: "William Tamerlane." He whispered, "Help me," before passing out. When they looked up at the window, they saw someone looking back down... then poking their head back in.

I threw this problem in knowing that Ro's character, Keira, would jump all over it. They have to get this Changeling back to Dinkytown, but he has a broken leg. Still no busses. Forget about a cab. And they're at least twenty minutes from home... walking through downtown Minneapolis. Home of the crazy vampires.

As they're carrying him back, they notice he has many tooth marks on his arms, like a heroin junky has needle tracks. And the marks don't all match. A lot of vampires had been feeding on him for a long time. Now, things were starting to get scary.

I threw a lot of shadows at them but no real problems. Not until they got within sight of the Dinkytown bridge. (Remember, it's like an island and vampires can't cross it.) As soon as they got close, the vampires started showing up. One in particular: a tall, regal, statuesque, and terrifying woman with pale skin and raven black hair.

She pointed at the boy. “That belongs to me and I want it back.”

The Girls—just like Janet from the song—tell the tall, regal, statuesque, and terrifying vampire lady that she can’t have him. And if they want him, she can come right across the bridge and try to take him.

It was a beautiful little standoff. The Girls were still getting used to the game and uncertain what they could and could not do. I stopped the action and told them, “Ask me questions. I’ll give you straight answers.”

So, the action stopped for about ten minutes while they asked me about the bridge’s rules and using Glamour and all the rest. Yes, I gave them time to figure it out. I didn’t start shouting, “TEN! NINE! EIGHT!...” and the rest. This was a different kind of game. We had one brand new player, two new players, and one veteran, and I didn’t want the new Girls to feel like I was taking advantage of their naiveté. That countdown stuff is for experienced gamers who want a challenge. I could already tell, in the first session, that these players were not the kind of players who wanted that kind of challenge.

Again: a lesson in listening. Tactical choices were not what the Girls were interested in. They wanted emotional dilemmas at their own pace. I learned that the first session and carried it on.

The mean vampire lady (who bears a strong resemblance to the Faerie Queen) told the Girls there would be consequences for taking her toy away. She made the sky thunder and the ground shake, but the Girls stood on their side of the bridge and told her to sod off.

(If memory serves, that was the actual phrase they used.)

That first game session ended with the Queen and her little vampire buddies walking back into the darkness, but not before she paused and gave them a warning.

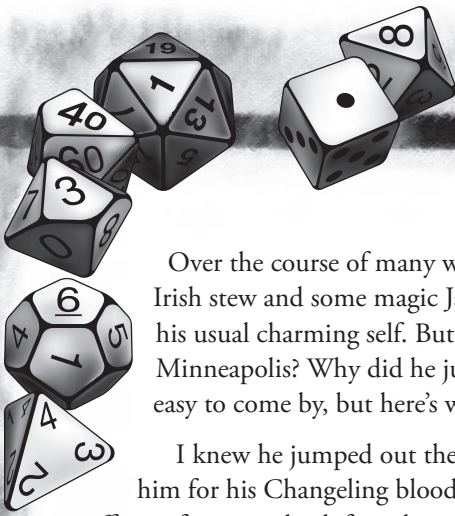
“This bridge will not always be here to protect you.”

Then, she faded away into the darkness.

Yeah. Foreshadowing.

William became a regular cast member after that. William wanted to go back. He insisted. The Girls discovered that vampires use their own blood to “bond” humans (and Changelings), making them slaves. They needed to break the bond the Queen of Minneapolis had over William.





Over the course of many weeks, they nursed him back to health using Irish stew and some magic Jack gave them. As time went on, he became his usual charming self. But what happened to him? How did he get to Minneapolis? Why did he jump out that window? Those answers were not easy to come by, but here's what I had planned.

I knew he jumped out the window and I knew the Evil Queen was using him for his Changeling blood (very tasty) and I knew other vampires were offering favors to drink from him. What I did *not* know was how deep the rabbit hole went. I listened to them talk about the situation and learned a lot.

Hearing them talk, I grew to understand the Girls were afraid—and I mean *terrified*—of vampires. They knew nothing about them other than Dinkytown was surrounded and that they were very powerful. I tinkered (tinkered/thought about—it's a new word—enjoy) with the *WoD* breed of vampire a bit, making them more “traditional.” Thus, the “no crossing running water” bit with the bridge. I also pulled some of the more obscure vampire vulnerabilities out of my folklore library. I wanted them to *discover* vampires. None of them were familiar with the game, so it was easy to switch things up. I could ditch stuff they'd never miss and add stuff they'd never notice.

They had no idea if their powers would work on vampires. They had no idea if vampires got burned up in sunlight, were afraid of crosses, couldn't stand garlic... *nothing*. Having run games for so many *WoD* fans, it was a refreshing experience. When they ran into a Nosferatu sneaking around, making himself invisible with Obfuscate (one of the most common powers in the game), they freaked out. “Vampires can do that?” My other friends, much more jaded, would have recognized the power immediately, made a Vampire Lore roll, and dealt with it. The sense of discovery made each encounter a moment of true terror.

So, I thought about other ways I could make vampires scary and new. I decided that the big reveal of vampire society—that these things actually work together in highly organized ways—would be something that would flip their lids.

So, I set up a fake hospital.

A couple of the Girls got involved in a car crash (more on that later) and when they woke, they were in hospital beds, hooked to IVs. The nurses told them everything was all right and they should stay in bed.

For some reason (Willpower check), Melanie wasn't buying any of it. She used her Glamour to charm the nurses and get her friends out of the room. They quickly found out they weren't in a hospital at all, but in an abandoned warehouse in Minneapolis. The Queen of the City set up the place for kidnapped Changelings (moving it to here after William crashed out the window). The place was filled with sedate, drugged Changelings who provided blood to the highest bidders.

The Girls escaped, got back to Dinkytown and told Barnabas and Jack about their experience. Vampires kidnapping changelings, keeping them locked up, slowly draining their blood.

A confrontation was in order.

But before we get to that, a quick word about the "hospital."

There were different ways I could have introduced this part of the plot. I could have William just tell them. That would be easy. But it wouldn't be as horrifying as *actually waking up in the place*.

Imagine what kind of control the vampire community must have to pull that off. They had to have influence over the ambulance drivers, the local hospital, police, and other officials. Then, in order to keep the place running, vampires must have control over inspectors, more police, the media...

When they started thinking about it, the Girls knew they were in big trouble. Vampires controlled everything. How in the world could they ever fight them?

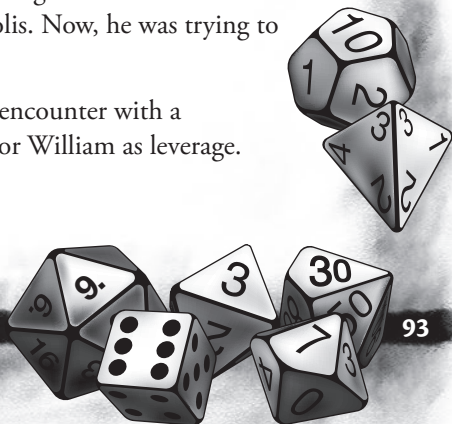
That little spell keeping the bloodsuckers on the other side of the Bridge seemed damn handy all of a sudden.

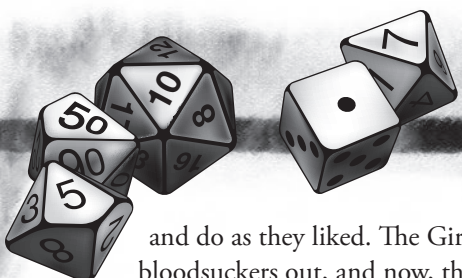
It all came to a head when William escaped. They had him locked in a room, but he managed to get out and make a run for it. Strange thing, though. He wasn't running for Minneapolis, he was running for St. Paul...

They knew he was blood bound to a Prince, but they never found out *which* Prince... until now. Apparently, William used to belong to the Prince of St. Paul, but was kidnapped by the Prince of Minneapolis. Now, he was trying to get back to the source of his addiction.

They ran off to St. Paul and had an unfortunate encounter with a vampire holding William hostage, hoping to use poor William as leverage. The unfortunate part? They killed the vampire.

Suddenly, the magic of the Bridge was gone. Vampires could walk right in to Dinkytown





and do as they liked. The Girls had broken the magic that kept the bloodsuckers out, and now, they had to fix it.

This led to renegotiating the contract with the two Princes.



TWO PRINCES

I wanted the two Princes to emulate the City they controlled. The Prince of Minneapolis was the Faerie Queen: wild and untamed. The Prince of St. Paul was shadowy and dark, a master manipulator.

Likewise, I wanted the Twin Cities to feel different. I used different language when describing the buildings and streets. For Minneapolis, I used words that conveyed its savagery. For St. Paul, I used softer, more subtle words.

And the vampires they met fit the mold as well. The Seneschal of Minneapolis was our old friend The Grinning Man, Mister Finger. The Seneschal of St. Paul, however, was Anton Fix: a vampire of sophistication and intelligence. And, as unlikely as it may seem, a vampire with a sense of compassion. A weak and feeble sense of compassion, but it was more than they would get from Minneapolis.

When Fix first met the Girls, he saw them as potential allies, but as he grew to know them, he saw them as more than that. Not much more, but just enough.

I tried making the act of negotiating with the two Princes, through their Seneschals, two different experiences. When they arrived in Minneapolis to renegotiate terms, they received this agreement:

Article 1

The environs of Dinkytown shall be defined as the four blocks between the Minneapolis Bridge and the St. Paul Bridge.

Article 2

The Crown of Minneapolis allows the Changelings to inhabit the environs of Dinkytown.

Article 3

No subject of the Crown of Minneapolis shall cross the Minneapolis Bridge nor the St. Paul Bridge nor violate the environs of Dinkytown.

Article 4

The safety provided the inhabitants of Dinkytown shall not cross the Minneapolis Bridge nor the St. Paul Bridge.

Article 5

No inhabitant of Dinkytown shall raise arms against the Crown of Minneapolis nor its subjects.

Article 6

Should any inhabitant of Dinkytown be found outside its borders, Dinkytown recognizes the Crown's authority to deal with the trespass as it sees fit.

Article 7

The inhabitants of Dinkytown shall submit to the Crown of Minneapolis a Tithe of Blood upon All Hallow's Eve. The Tithe of Blood shall be one of its own inhabitants who willingly crosses the Minneapolis Bridge alone.

Article 8

Should the Crown of Minneapolis or the inhabitants of Dinkytown break this agreement, those responsible will be punished as deemed appropriate by the offended party.

Article 9

This Contract shall remain binding so long as the current Crown of Minneapolis retains her title. Should she lose her title, this Contract becomes null and void.

Of course, I made it very pretty. Vampire contracts are always very pretty.

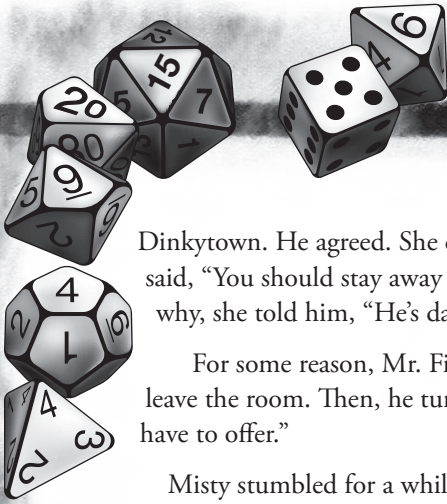
Needless to say, the Girls did not like Article 7. They talked about it. They contrasted it with Article 9. It was only spring now. If they could replace the Prince of Minneapolis by Halloween, the contract would be null and void. After an hour of talking about it, they agreed to sign the contract, but only after adding an "Article 10" guaranteeing them safety back to Dinkytown after signing it.

Then, they went to St. Paul to talk that Prince into taking over Minneapolis.

When they arrived, they met with Anton Fix. He was, at first, very cold. He told them they were in St. Paul without permission and without a contract. He would let them go but not for free.

Lilith offered to tell him something about his future in exchange for safe passage back to





Dinkytown. He agreed. She closed her eyes and concentrated. Then, she said, “You should stay away from anyone named ‘Smith.’” When he asked why, she told him, “He’s dangerous.”

For some reason, Mr. Fix accepted this as payment and asked her to leave the room. Then, he turned to Misty, the Darkling. “And what do you have to offer.”

Misty stumbled for a while, and then Mr. Fix made an offer. “When you make your new contract with the Prince, an article of that contract will be allowing me safe passage to and from Dinkytown.”

Misty shook her head. Mr. Fix told her that perhaps Misty was more valuable as a hostage. “I know a few people who would be interested in you showing up in Minneapolis,” he told her. Then, he told her to call Dinkytown and tell them he wanted a ransom for her return. She used her cell phone and called O’Bannon.

“What’s wrong?” he asked over the phone. When she told him, he said, “Put me on speaker.” And then, he started yelling.

“YOU’VE GOT FIVE FUCKING SECONDS TO LET HER GO OR I START BLOWING UP BUILDINGS!”

Mr. Fix said, “I think you should...”

“FOUR SECONDS!”

Mr. Fix said, “Now, listen...”

“TWO!”

Mr. Fix said, “I don’t think you...”

“DONE!” And then the phone went dead.

Fortunately, the Girls *did* escape—with some help from a mysterious homeless man named “Adam”—but before they got back, Jack was already blowing up buildings. Security cameras showed him walking into the Prince of St. Paul’s rumored abode, holding something in his hand. Security guards rushed to him and he pushed a button. He detonated, taking the rest of the building with him.

The next night, he was back.

After that, negotiations with the Prince of St. Paul went a lot easier.

WILLIAM WALKER

One of the more common NPCs they ran into was a magic cop named William Walker. Like the vampires of the Twin Cities, I made the Mages a bit different. Essentially, he could alter chance (Mage fans would call this “Correspondence”), but at a price. He never hit a red light, always seemed to be in the neighborhood when they called him, seldom missed a shot with his pistol. He also wore a ring that triggered their Faerie Sight, but it wasn’t Faerie magic. It was something else.

Two of them were in the car with him when he was pushing his luck hard. They asked him how he always got away with it and he told them, “I don’t. When you stretch the world, sometimes, it snaps back at—”

That’s when they got hit by a truck. The Girls woke up in the “hospital.” Remember that part? Good, we can move on.

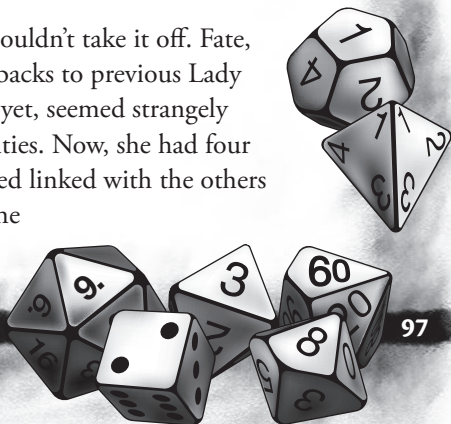
Walker had two important links to the Girls. The first was with Bess/Misty.

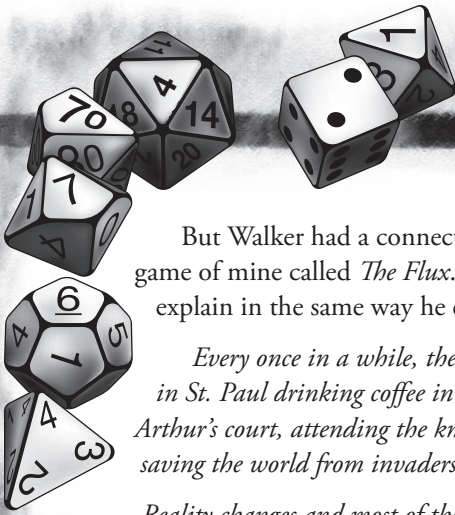
Jessica’s character had multiple personalities and a confusing past. This gave me the opportunity to assume everything she knew about herself was, at best, muddled. Through her character sheet, Jessica also showed me that family was a big part of her character, so I decided to play with that. I started by murdering her mother.

Early in the game, Kiera discovered a body floating down the Mississippi River (she was watching for Changelings coming through the Hedge). The body was the late Elaine Tennyson, a woman of some wealth, living in an old house in Minneapolis. After some investigation, the Girls went up to the house and that’s where Misty discovered Elaine was her real mother. She also discovered a curious ring that felt the same as the one Walker wore. Misty put it on and a flood of memories came over her.

The ring told her who she was: the rightful inheritor of the title, “Lady Fate.” A member of an ancient secret society dedicated to protecting humanity from the kinds of horrors only the *World of Darkness* could provide.

Unfortunately, once she put on the ring, Misty couldn’t take it off. Fate, it seemed, had plans for her. The ring gave her flashbacks to previous Lady Fates, showing her lifetimes that were not hers, and yet, seemed strangely parallel to her own. Misty already had two personalities. Now, she had four hundred years worth of them. Also, Lady Fate seemed linked with the others who wore rings. Walker was one of them, wearing the Lord Strange ring that he inherited from his father.





But Walker had a connection with another of the Girls. I invoked a little game of mine called *The Flux*. If you aren't familiar with it, I'll let Walker explain in the same way he explained it to Lilith:

Every once in a while, the world fluxes. It changes. One minute, you're here in St. Paul drinking coffee in a college town and the next you're sitting in King Arthur's court, attending the knights at the Round Table. A month later, you're saving the world from invaders from another dimension.

Reality changes and most of the world doesn't notice. Except for a few. We can remember when the world was haunted by extraterrestrial horrors or when corporations ran the planet and governments were just shadow masks.

But no matter how much things change, most of it actually stays the same. In some lifetimes, you and I are friends. But in others... you're my daughter. And in the last lifetime, I lost you. You were murdered by that psychopath going around calling himself "Mister Finger." And I'm not going to let that happen again.

This accomplished a few things for me. First, it gave Lilith a deeper character. It established the "past lifetimes" bit that was going on with Misty, but in a different way. I could run parallels and hint at things that were to come. Knowing that she was killed by Mister Finger in another lifetime made him all that much more dangerous in *this* lifetime. I didn't need to have my villain kill an NPC to establish he was dangerous; he *already killed Lilith*. That made her terrified of him. In fact, it hit all the Girls hard. They knew he would kill them if he got the chance. They also knew he was more than just a monster: he was an entity that seemed to move through realities without ever losing his memory. That made him even more dangerous.

Giving Walker deep connections with the Girls made him important to them on so many levels. Of course, both Lilith and Misty responded to him differently.

Misty resented him and his intrusion on her life. She didn't want to be Lady Fate, didn't want to be connected to him. These were not her choices. She knew he was a good man, but she didn't want these things. Lilith, on the other hand, felt a deep and powerful connection to him.

I could give both of them dreams and visions from the past, using those to foreshadow stuff that was coming in the future. I could let them live through those past moments through flashbacks. It deepened the campaign, giving it a more epic feel than before. This wasn't just about Dinkytown but a long history of events

that all seemed to be coming to a head. Four hundred years and many worlds, all converging around them.

And then, I brought it all back with a dead body. Specifically, one of theirs.

THE CHANGELING KILLER

I threatened them with all kinds of dangers, but after I read the *Slasher* book (a very fine WW volume that I suggest you check out), I wanted to throw the Girls a serial killer.

But I needed something that was very different from your standard Hollywood slasher. I wanted something that was...well, I wanted something that made them think about what they were.

Changelings are human children stolen from this world and replaced by a faerie duplicate called a “fetch.” When they return or escape from Faerie, they discover this fetch has taken over their lives. This Faerie duplicate isn’t even completely real. It doesn’t have a soul. It’s a living, magical doll. Most Changelings hate their fetch. A few just ignore it. I was going to mess with it in the worst way I could find.

It started with the Girls reading the morning newspaper. Two of them worked in a coffee shop and they check out the headlines every morning. I built a headline in Photoshop and gave it to them.

CHANGELING KILLER STRIKES

The Girls stared at that headline for a long time. Not just because of the title, but because the victim was a fetch. One of theirs.

The next week, the headline read,

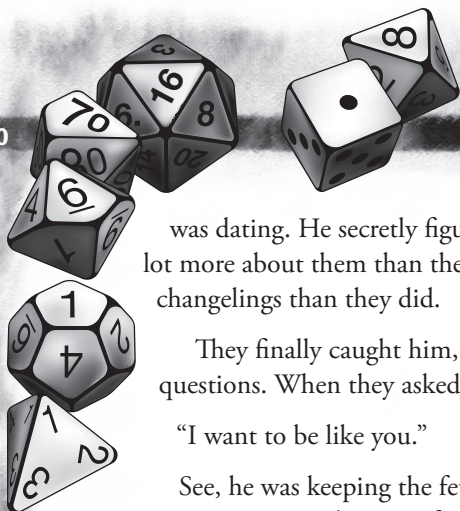
CHANGELING KILLER STRIKES AGAIN!

Again, one of their fetches had been murdered. That’s when they started to get worried.

The mystery went on for a few weeks. They investigated. They drew in contacts. They broke and entered and called in favors. And when they broke into the morgue to look at the bodies—their own bodies—with their dead faces looking back up at them...the autopsy scars on their chests...their dead, lifeless eyes and still, lifeless bodies...

Finally, they caught the guy. Of course, it was someone they knew. A medical student Melanie





was dating. He secretly figured out they were from Faerie and knew a lot more about them than they suspected. In fact, he knew more about changelings than they did.

They finally caught him, tied him to a chair and started asking him questions. When they asked him why he was doing it, he told them...

“I want to be like you.”

See, he was keeping the fetches alive long enough to eat key parts of their anatomies. He wanted to transform himself into a Faerie. And the only way he thought he could do it was catching and eating fetches.

And when they questioned him, he asked...

“Why do you care?”

They stared at him for a moment. Then, he explained.

I was killing fetches. They aren't even real. You don't even care about them. You don't give a shit about them. You've even talked about killing them yourself. But I'm no killer. To be a killer, I have to commit murder. These things aren't even alive. I was knocking the heads off dolls. When they died, they turned into piles of string and twigs because that's what they were! String and twigs and Faerie magic.

So, I ask you. Why do you even care?

That made the Girls stop for a moment. Why did they care? It's true: their apathy toward fetches was on record. They didn't care. Why did they suddenly care so much? He went on, talking to the “magic cop” they brought with them.

What crime are you going to book me with? Killing fetches? Murdering magical constructs? I can prove that all the girls I “killed” are still alive and living above a coffee shop in Dinkytown. What are you going to do?

And now the Girls are in a real spot. He can expose them. He knows what they are and he can expose their identities. To the authorities. To their families. Families who think they've died.

No skill or ability or power on their character sheet can help them with this one. They had to deal with him. They spent the rest of that session just talking about what to do with the Changeling Killer. Murder was an option. But, in the end, they decided on something worse.

They dumped him in Faerie.

My serial killer did more than just scare them by putting their names and faces in the newspapers. He made them think about their own beliefs. When the incident was over, two of the Girls actually agreed with him. Their fetches really were just animated dolls. The other two...not so much. Before the killer came along, the Girls were a real band of sisters. After that, a small and silent wedge found its way between them. Something none of them thought would ever happen.

But it did happen. And it was a wedge none of their powers or skills or abilities could remove.

THE BIG ENDING

And for my last trick of the evening...

Remember *The Flux*?

When things looked like they were about to fall apart, with the Girls separated, I hit “play” on my laptop.

At first, it was too quiet for them to hear. But slowly, the sound grew. A ticking clock.

Lilith knew exactly what it was and she knew what was about to happen. She knew if they were all together, there was a better chance of them remembering *this* world as it transformed into the *next* world.

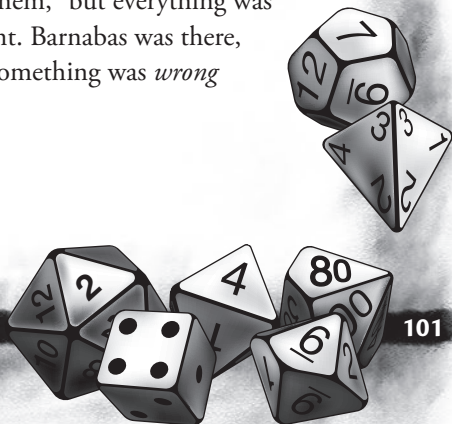
She tried to get the Girls together, but as it turned out, only three of them made it. Kiera did not.

A vortex of light and sound washed over them, blinding and deafening them. And when they awoke...

Well, that’s another story. Let’s just say I pulled my *Pendragon* books off the shelf.

Suffice to say, the Glamour Girls campaign came crashing to an end, but not an end. More of a transformation. They were still “them,” but everything was different. Jack O’ Bannon was still there, but different. Barnabas was there, but different. Even William Walker was there, but something was *wrong* with him. Another problem to solve.

Old faces, new problems.





JOHN WICK'S 10 COMMANDMENTS

THOU SHALL...

- ... pick a gaming day and keep it holy.
- ... only kill a character when you have a damn good reason.
- ... steal good ideas from other media and make them your own.
- ... read and play as many games as possible so you may expand your knowledge and skills.
- ... listen to your players and figure out what they want. Then, give it to them.
- ... change, adapt, modify, edit, remove and erase any pre-conceived plans if your players come up with a better explanation for "what is happening."
- ... take any and all opportunities to make new gamers.
- ... give your players something beautiful to care about with all their hearts and souls, then give them a villain who crushes it mercilessly and laughs in their faces. This is the key to all drama.
- ... never allow table talk once the game starts. Also, make them put away their laptops, cell phones, tablets and any other distractions. When it is time to tell stories, it's time to tell stories. Their email can wait. If they can show that kind of respect in a movie theater full of strangers, they can show it when sitting together with their friends.
- ... always remember that we tell the tales of heroes to remind ourselves that we too can be great.

BACKER LIST

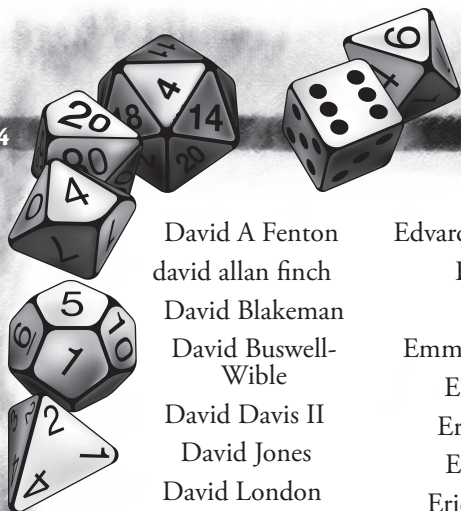
MINION

A Fool's Fool
A.P. Klosky
Aaron Nuttall
Adam
Adam
Adam Drew
Adam M
Adam Rajski
Adrian
Adrian Smith
Alex
Alex Dingle
Alex Moore
Alexander Cherry
Alexis Lamiable
Alice
Allan Williams
Anders Lindström
Andreas Listl
Andreas Rugård Klæsø
Andrew Barton
Andrew Betts
Andrew Cowie
Andrew G. Smith
Andrew McMenemy
Andrew Moran
Andrew Peregrine
Anthony
Armin Welk
Barak Blackburn

Behrooz 'Bezman'
Shahriari
Ben Mercer
Benjamin Blanding
betraye001
Bill Sundwall
Black Kestrel
Blackdere
Blaise DiLeo
boboliwysy
Bonwirn
Boris
brad w crow
Brand
Brent Naylor
Brian Dysart
Bryan
Byron Williams
C Swenson
C. Stevens
Candida Norwood
CaptainEpix
Carl Morgan
Cédric Jeanneret
Cedric Snow
chad brown
Charles Etheridge-Nunn
Charlie A Main
Chris Czerniak
Chris D

Chris Hall
Chris Mortika
Chris Smith
Chris Thesing
Chris Trotter
Chris Wilmoth
Christa Janx Wagner
Christian Balzer
Christina Kennedy
Christina Rowe
Christoph Flandorfer
Christopher Lackey
Cody blaschke
Corey
Corey Ernst
Corwyn Crawford
Cpas
CR
CrackerAxe
Dale Friesen
Damien Brunetto
Dan Behlings
Daniel Fidelman
Daniel Krümborg
Daniel Schlegel
darksigil
Darrell Hayhurst
Davi Tassinari de
Figueiredo
David





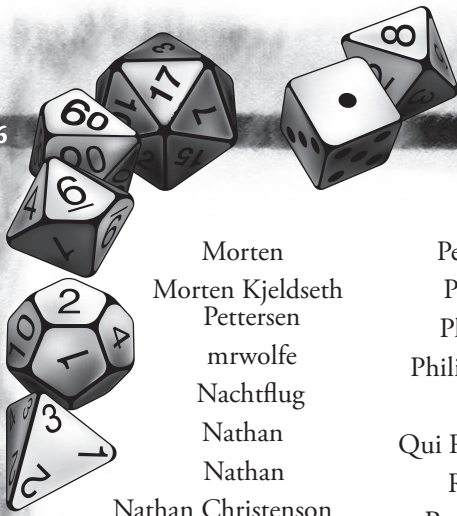
David A Fenton	Edvardas Mikalaukas	Guns_n_Droids
david allan finch	Ellusionist	Haggai Elkayam
David Blakeman	emdk	Hannu Kokko
David Buswell-Wible	Emmanuel SIMON	Hazel Chudley
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lavonardo
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Lloyd Barrass

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Mofte
Mopsothoth
Moritz





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 Nathan
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 Neal Dalton
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Tobias.Wolter
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Tyler McLaren
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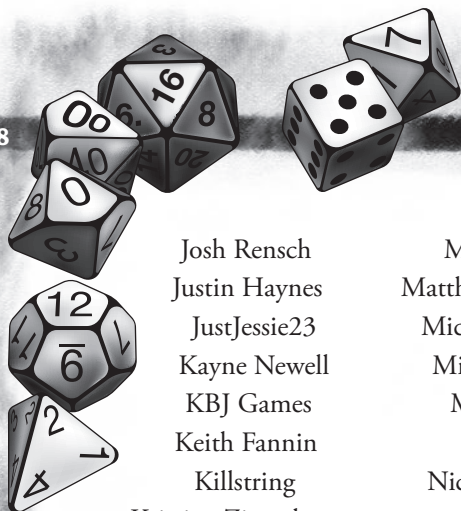
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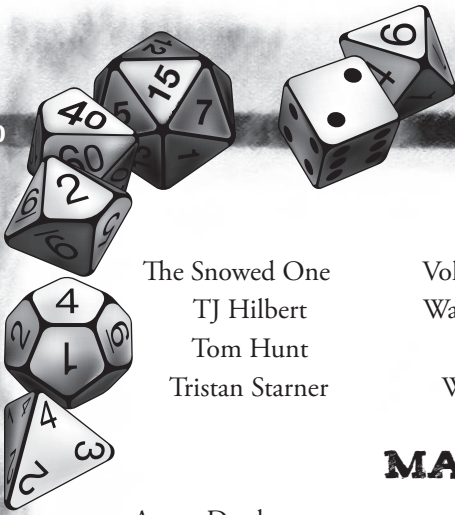
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 Adrienne
 Albert Jen
 Alex
 Alex Hunter
 Alexander
 anderland
 Andrew John Smith

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 Ben Morgan
 Bernard Kerckenaere
 Black-Thing
 Bradford Stephens
 Brent Ahern
 Brian Dees

Bruno
 Bryan Stiltz
 Cameron Blackwood
 Chris Bernhardt
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 Chris Henry
 Christian Kleman
 Christopher F. Tanzos

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Derek	Johnn Fourr	Petri Leinonen
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Jack Brown	Matt Whalley	Steven Lord
Jacob Kemery	Matthew Federico	Ted L
Jae Lerer	Maxim Nikolaev	Terrell
Jake Leeder	Michael Bergh Hansen	The Plaid Mentat
James Amundsen	Michael Kruley	





The Snowed One
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Tom Hunt
Tristan Starner

Volker Jacobsen
Warren Sistrof
Werehare
Will Munoz

William Jones
William Walters
WuseMajor
Y. Lee

MASTERMIND

Aaron Dunlap
Aelred
Alex Lim Yang
Alexander Shendi
Allan Morstein
Andre "Silver Ninjatten"
Bernier
Andrew
anonymous1453
Boojum
Brandon Kern
Brian Allred
Brian I
Champ Tanit
Chris Cadeau
Chris Hartwig
Christian Turkiewicz
Contesse
Corinna Vigier
Daniel Reising
Darren Stalder
David Wallace
Donald Ferris
Eamon

Emily
George Moralidis
Graham Billiau
Greatlich
Harvey Howell
Jacob Walker
Jesika Wolff
Jez Clement
John Lambert
Josh Snyder
Manuel
Marcello Larcher
Mark Edwards
Mark Kinney
Matthew Mitchell
Michael
Michael Falinski
michael gorodin
Michael Hill
Michael Meike
Michael Pleier
Mike Bell
Monjoni Osso
Morgan Hazel

Nathaniel D
Pablo Domínguez Castro
Paul Tevis
Peter Burrows
Phillip Bailey
Relborn's Wonderland
Robert Biskin
Robert H. Nichols
Róbert Novotný
Ross Ramsay
Scott Kammerzell
Shawn Brateng
Shawn Moore
Simon Carter
Stephan Reitz
Steven Knapp
Sven H. Waesermann
Tanya Lussier-Normil
Tasha
Thomas Fiorentino
Toby
Victor van der Velde
Zoltan Ujhelyi

MASTERMIND PLUS

Blake Deakins

Matthew Roark

Michael Pietrelli

Phill Zitt

Robert Fulkerson

MASTERMIND DOUBLE PLUS

Chris Colbath

Sirko Rückmann

MASTERMIND TRIPLE PLUS

Ana Silva

Michelle

TRUE MASTERMIND

Marek Starosta

