

Help! My Players are Talking to Things!

By The Angry DM

Well, here we are again with another installment of "Getting the Most Out of Your Skill System." Now that I've taught you how to handle basic actions and we've looked at the basics of encounter and how to build good non-combat, non-interaction encounters, it's time to shift gears. In this article (and the next one), I'm going to look at social interaction. In this first article, we'll discuss the basics of how to handle social InterACTION! as individual actions. After that, we'll look at some techniques for building social InterACTION! encounters. No, that InterACTION! thing is not a typo.

As before, if you prefer, you can download this article as a PDF to read on the couch or in bed or on the pooper. I won't judge you.

What the Hell is InterACTION! and Why Does it Need All Those Capital Letters?

An InterACTION! occurs when a PC tries to get something out of an NPC by talking at them. That something could be an item, a resource, assistance, information, sex, or anything else the PC might want. The talking could include persuasion, pleading, seduction, deception, interrogation, interview, debate, coercion, negotiation, blackmail, or even torture. The key is that the PCs are trying to secure an NPC's cooperation somehow.

Why the capital letters and the fancy exclamation point? Partly because I like shouting but mostly because I want to emphasize that an InterACTION! is an ACTION!, first and foremost. For some reason, a lot of otherwise intelligent, capable DMs develop all sorts of strange ideas and weird hang ups when it comes to social InterACTION! They think InterACTIONS! follow different rules and require a different mindset from normal actions. Well, they don't! Exclamation point!

Actually, that's not entirely true. There are some special things to keep in mind when adjudicating an InterACTION! But the rules of adjudicating actions still hold true. The basic exchange is the same. The player decides to do something and communicates that. The DM determines the player's intention and approach. If the action can succeed, can fail, and carries a risk or cost that prevents the action from being repeated, the DM calls for a die roll. Then, the DM determines the outcome and any consequences and narrates the results.

The other reason for going capslock crazy is that I want to emphasize that there is a difference between social interaction and an InterACTION! An InterACTION! is an action the PCs take to accomplish a specific goal, one that is worthy of being resolved with a die roll. Interaction is simply PCs and NPCs talking to each other. It may or may not accomplish anything. We're worried about InterACTIONS! Actually, real, honest-to-goodness interactions that accomplish something.

Not all interactions are InterACTIONS! Got it?! Exclamation points!!!

But, before we continue, let's look at some of the stupid baggage some DMs bring to this discussion, complicating matters and triggering all sorts of internet fights. Because, as much as I love a good internet fight, this s\$&% just gets in the way of running the best damned game you can run. And you may be bringing in some of this baggage with you. So we need to jettison it.

Role-Playing vs. Roll-Playing (I F\$&%ing Hate That Phrase But I Couldn't Think of a Better One)

People endlessly debate how to deal with InterACTIONS! as if they are some strange, incomprehensible part of the game where all the rules suddenly change. I don't know why. People are

stupid. Its like this: suppose your friend got some new breed of dog. One of those strange hybrids like a cockapoo or a piddle or a rottschaund or whatever. You might ask “is it safe to pet him” or “what sort of dog is that?” You would not ask “hey, that thing is not suddenly going to distend its jaw and snake out a tentacle to strangle the life from my body, is it?” Because it is a still a f\$&%ing dog. A weird-looking dog is still a dog! And InterACTIONS! are still actions! But, when we try to discuss them, we hear stupid s\$&% like: “should you roll dice or just role-play it out or give random bonuses because the person took an acting class or maybe we shouldn’t roll dice at all because that isn’t really role-playing.” ARGH!

I am not going to rehash all of the arguments here. Just know that if you put all of the different ways to “handle InterACTIONS!” on a spectrum, you’ll find these two endpoints:

- Never ever roll dice, just act out conversations naturally and whatever happens happens.
- Roll dice for everything the PCs might say but do not allow players to speak in character because it is the character’s skill that matters, not the players.

You can go look up the actual arguments for yourself. The point is that they are all stupid. I understand some of the reasons for each, but I also understand the reasons why some people might have actually enjoyed Pacific Rim (reason: damage to key brain lobes). Just because a reason is comprehensible, that doesn't mean it is a good reason.

Let me try to spell it out for you. When an InterACTION! begins, a player might describe what their PC says to an NPC. Something like “I’ll tell the NPC to let us in or I’ll kick his ass.” Or maybe “let us in or I’ll kick your ass.” Then, the player is going to look at you, the DM, for a response. Something like “please don’t kick my ass, I’ll let you in.” Or maybe “the NPC stands aside and let’s you in.” Or even “the NPC is unimpressed by your threats.”

So, we have a player trying to accomplish something (getting in) and describing how their character tries to do it (threatening to kick one or more asses). And the player is expecting the DM to tell him how it works out. If only we had some way of modeling that particular exchange...

It’s Adjudicating Actions you thickhead. I mean, it is exactly Adjudicating Actions. Word for word. Same motherf\$&%ing step-by-step process I spent 8,000 words pounding into you!

All of that debate about how it should be handled and whether dice should be rolled and whether you give bonuses for this or that or penalties or whatever? It all completely misses the point. When the player speaks in character or describes their character’s words and actions, they are declaring an action. They are trying to accomplish a goal by doing something. That’s all it is. Of course dice should be rolled if dice need to be rolled. And of course what the PC says and how they say it should have an impact. But it is no different than swinging on a chandelier or leaping onto a horse and riding it away or swinging a battle axe into an orc’s skull. Mostly.

Now, some people like to give bonuses for exceptionally good “role-playing.” I find this to be bulls\$&% for a couple of reasons. Firstly, as you’ll see when we get to encounter building, I like to give bonuses for actual, useful, meaningful things. Secondly, remember that talking in character isn’t role-playing, it is acting (I wrote an article about that too). Acting is a specific skill and involves specific talents. Some players are better, some players are worse, and some players are just uncomfortable with it. Rewarding good acting with a bonus is no different than giving someone a bonus for describing their axe swing particularly well. And if that sounds okay, remember that both of those are exactly the same as giving someone a bonus for having good penmanship on their character sheet. Or color coordinating their dice. They aren’t relevant to what’s happening in the game. They are arbitrary bonuses for things that have no real impact on the characters and the world. Moreover, they reward certain skills or talents and therefore punish the players who don’t possess them.

If you want to do it, fine. I can't stop you. As an American, I support your right to be willfully incorrect whenever you wish. But, do you know how people say there is no right way to run a role-playing game? They are wrong. There are right ways and THIS ISN'T IT!!! (Exclamation points!)

Speaking vs. Describing: The Other Stupid Debate for Morons

Many people also get up in arms over whether it is "correct" or "preferable" for players (and the DM) to speak in the first-person, as if they were the character, or to speak in the third-person, describing what the character says. For example:

First-Person: "Hello there, innkeeper. My friends and I need a room for the night."

Third-Person: "I walk up to the innkeeper and try to rent a room."

If you couldn't tell from the subheading, I don't have any f\$&%s to give about this particular debate either. It's idiotic and it changes nothing. And so help me, if you mutter the word "immersive," I will deck you. Because you don't know what immersive means if you think that's it.

Again, it comes down to comfort, preference, and talent. Some people like to throw themselves into the role and act as their character. Other people don't. Neither of the examples above fails to convey the necessary information to everyone at the table. They work fine. Don't get your panties wadded up over this!

But, here's my advice, if you want it (and you do, or you wouldn't be 2,000 words into this already): as a DM, learn to do both and switch back and forth. That way, your players can pick whichever way is the most comfortable for them, individually, and you can follow suit. Here is social interACTIONS! sound like at my table:

Player 1: "I tell the innkeeper we need three rooms."

Me: The innkeeper says the inn is full. He apologizes. [Rolls Dice] You get the sense that he's uncomfortable and might be hiding something.

Player 2: "Your stables are empty and there's no one here in the common room. You don't have any empty rooms? You're lying!"

Me: "I don't have any empty rooms for the likes of you is what I meant! I'll be in my grave before I'll let some elf sleep under my roof!"

Player 3: "My character finds that offensive. He throws out a racial slur in elvish about humans and tells the rest of the party he won't sleep here even if a room suddenly opened up."

Me: "Go kiss a tree, skinny!"

Yep. That is pretty much what social interACTION! sounds like at my table. Renting rooms and racial epithets. F\$&%ing Shakespeare, isn't it? But my point is that each player has their own style and comfort level. It doesn't change the tone of the scene. Everyone knows what is going on and everyone can follow the conflict. When you get very good at it, you can even address specific players in their preferred tone. So, learn to switch back and forth and let your players pick their own styles.

Parsing InterACTIONS!: Understanding What the Hell the Players Are Trying to Accomplish (And How)

I've talked before about Adjudicating Actions (you know, between the exclamation points and the callbacks, reading my articles would make one hell of a drinking game, huh?). All actions start with a player somehow communicating what they want to accomplish (intention) and how they want to

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accomplish it (approach). Social InterACTIONS! are like any other action. Take, for example, the statement: “let us in or I’ll kick your ass.” The intention is that the NPC allows the PC to enter. The approach is threatening the NPC. What about “we need three rooms for the night?” The intention is to secure three rooms. The approach is by asking for them, though offering to pay for them is implied.

Teasing out approaches is actually a little bit trickier in an InterACTION! (drink). On the surface, the action is the same every time: the PC says something. But the approach is determined by what the PC said and how the PC said it. Is what the PC said true or false? Is the PC being hostile or polite? Is the PC being insulting? Is it accidental or on purpose? Is the PC offering something or making a promise? Is there an implied promise? There is no easy list of questions to think about. Worse yet, the number of possible approaches is nearly infinite and it is hard to adjudicate infinity.

You can’t even rely on something like the list of possible skills. I can’t stress that strongly enough! It is not good enough just to fit an action into a skill! You have to define the approach in more detail! (drink, drink, drink) For instance: playing for sympathy, offering a convincing argument, and seduction all fall under the D&D definition of Diplomacy. But they are very different approaches that might elicit different responses. A greedy, evil merchant doesn’t have any sympathy (that’s what greedy and evil mean), but some convincing arguments might work and he or she might like a good sexing from a high Charisma character. Who doesn’t?

You’re just going to have to practice. Get good at figuring out how the PC is trying to convince the NPC to cooperate. I’ll make this a little easier on you in a little while, but I wanted to mention it now. Nuance is central to good InterACTION!

One way to practice is to watch a good procedural cop show that has a lot of witness interactions. When the cops have to deal with a reluctant witness, wait for them to say or do something to convince the witness to cooperate. Pause the show and try to figure out how you would describe the approach. Procedural cop shows work best because the interactions are usually InterACTIONS!, an action taken to accomplish a specific goal. Because, remember, not every interaction is an InterACTION! (three more drinks, right?)

If all else fails, ask the player how they are trying to do things. “Hey, that sounded threatening. Did you really mean to threaten the NPC?” “You don’t really work for the Duke, do you? You’re lying to the guy, aren’t you?” “It sounds like you’re promising the NPC a good sexing. Did you really mean to do that or did that wink and nudge mean something else?”

The Tennis Match that is an InterACTION! Scene (Because I’m So F\$&%ing Good at Sports Metaphors)

It is almost impossible to separate out a single InterACTION! from your game. Unlike other actions, which are easy to see by themselves, a single InterACTION! is like scoring a point in tennis. Sometimes, you score on a serve. But most of the time, the point comes after a series of returns. And each one of those returns is important in how the player finally manages to score. You were expecting some comical, stupid sports analogy, weren’t you? Like calling it a home run or something! Well, I fooled you f\$&%ers, didn’t I? So now the score is Love to Nothing, Angry.

What does all of that mean? It means that even if you are not running a full blown InterACTION! encounter, there is almost always going to be a scene surrounding that one true InterACTION! that resolves things. A conversation. There doesn’t have to be, but there usually is. I can say “a player will say something and that something will work like a declaration of action,” but the truth is the actual “action” may be spread out over several conversational volleys.

So, you’re going to have to play a role (in a role-playing game!?! Holy s#%\$!!!) (yes exclamation points in parenthetical remarks count). You have to be the NPC and banter a bit with the PCs, setting up the one return that is going to count as a real InterACTION! Think of it like this: the player has to tell you what they want to accomplish, show you how they want to accomplish it, and it has to have a chance of

actually working for it to count. Those things don't all have to come at once, though. A player can build them up over time.

DM (as Nicky the Squid): "What do you want?"

Player: "I want to know what you were doing at the docks Friday night."

DM (as Nicky the Squid): "Yeah? What business is it of yours?"

Player: "I'm makin' it my business. Got a problem with that?"

DM (as Nicky the Squid): "Maybe I do."

Player: "Well then maybe we can continue this conversation downtown. And we can also talk about these watches you're selling that I'm sure were legitimately acquired and not one of the serial numbers will have been reported stolen."

DM: Roll an Interrogation check!

Player: "Seventeen."

DM: "All right, all right. Geeze, it wasn't a big deal anyway. A business associate asked me to check out..."

That was a single InterACTION! but the intention and a useful approach were spread out over several remarks. First, the player declared his intent: get Nicky to explain his presence at the docks. Then, they bantered a little bit, but the player wasn't really adopting a useful approach. Finally, the player leveled a threat at Nicky. The DM realized that Nicky might respond to that threat. Or might not. Nicky could have said "you got nothing on me and you're grasping for straws. I'm exercising my legitimate businessman's right to refuse service. Get out of my pawn shop." At that point, the DM called for a skill roll because there was now a complete InterACTION! to resolve.

And that is how most InterACTIONS! tend to flow at the table. You, the DM, enter the role of the NPC and you and the players hit the ball back and forth until the players finally put themselves in a position to score. You need to constantly watch for an attempt to score and that is when you halt the scene to resolve the InterACTION!

I could stop there, but I'd be remiss if I skipped out on trying to give some advice for playing a role. And then, I swear, we'll get back to the juicy bits.

Some Advice for Playing a Role (And Then I Swear I Will Get Back to the Juicy Bits)

First of all, when talking as an NPC, do not force it. Do not try to dress up your speech with flowery or archaic language. Don't worry too much about anachronisms. Speak naturally. I know I just gave a thousand basement-dwelling wannabe thespians a heart attack and someone is going to scream about immersion in my comment feed, but those people are wrong. It doesn't matter nearly as much as you think it does. If your speech doesn't come naturally or you use words your players don't understand, its going to ruin the scene much more than an out of place remark. I'm not saying you should refer to cars and trains and lasers in a medieval fantasy game, but don't worry about having your medieval police inspector speak a little more like Joe Friday than Inspector Javert. It'll get the point across and players will actually get a stronger feel for the character if they understand the character and can relate it to something. So, just be natural.

If the players say something that is unclear, do not be afraid to ask them to clarify. And you can let the NPC do the asking. After all, if you are confused, the NPC probably is too. This is the one time when you can actually ask the players direct questions through the game world and have it make sense. Take advantage of it.

Likewise, remember that if people want something, they will eventually say so. If an NPC has a price or some reason why he doesn't want to help the party, he'll only banter for so long before he

outright says “I don’t trust you guys” or “it’ll cost you.” It is a natural habit for DMs to withhold that stuff because they like to make an InterACTION! a puzzle. But it usually ends up being an unfair and frustrating puzzle because the players can’t read minds and the conversation just sounds bizarre and unnatural. Sometimes there are legitimate reasons for an NPC to be cagey (like not wanting to ask an official for a bribe), but usually, not asking for something is the quickest way to not get it.

More generally, don’t be afraid to give the players clues as to how they can wrap things up. In a combat situation, a good DM uses descriptions to communicate information about the monsters, right? A monster that dodges a blow instead of blocking it with a shield or just taking it on the armor is obviously more agile and has a good agility defense (or whatever). A monster with heavier armor is harder to penetrate than one with light armor. And so on. If you know the NPC needs a reason to trust the party or that the NPC is afraid of ratting on the crime boss, hint at those things or say them outright. It gives the party something to play off and stops them from spinning their wheels. “Why should I trust you?” “I can’t talk or I’m a dead man.” Whatever.

When you get started, it is more important to run InterACTIONS! (drink) correctly than to worry about bringing them to life. But you can inject a bit of personality into every NPC pretty easily. Begin by practicing (away from the table) how to change your phrasing to match a specific personality trait. While you’re driving to work, take a single phrase or question, and repeat it over and over, using a different tone every time.

Neutral: "What do you want?"

Helpful: "What can I do for you?"

Curious: "what are you looking for?"

Suspicious: "What do you want from me?"

Beauracratic: "With what do you require assistance?"

Angry: "WHAT?"

Frustrated: "Yeah? What do you want?"

Obviously, typing it out doesn't convey tone and tone is important. That's why you have to practice. Then, during the game, you can assign an NPC a single word that defines their personality and phrasing. Each time you say something as that NPC, phrase it to match the tone you've chosen.

Don’t be afraid to pause and think about how to respond. You are doing a lot of mental gymnastics whenever you run an InterACTION! and players just need to f\$&%ing understand that! You are acting, playing a role, trying to pace the game, trying to offer hints and clues, and watching for the inevitable true InterACTION! so you can demand dice rolls and resolve the stupid scene. Sometimes, you need a moment to think.

In real life, people use all sorts of verbal and physical cues to say “hold on, I’m thinking.” When someone asks you a question and you say, “ummm...” or “well...” or “let me see...,” those are social cues. They indicate you have heard the question and that you are now thinking about how to respond. “Please wait, loading speech file, language will come out of me in a moment.” Most people, as part of learning how to be social, learn to shut the hell up when those happen. Use that to your advantage.

When you need a moment, drop a pause indicator. “The guard thinks this over for a moment.” “The elf says ‘Hrmmmmmm...’” Or just you, yourself can go, “Welllll...” either in character or out of character. Body language works too, but sometimes it is too subtle for people to pick up on. Still, breaking eye contact and looking at the ceiling will stop most players from talking for a moment, as will stroking your chin, looking down at your hands, or other “thinking” gestures. Breaking eye contact is a vital first step. It is the clue most people respond to right off the bat.

Objections and Incentives: Enough Artsy Fartsy Bulls\$&%! (Drink)

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Eventually, a player is going to accidentally present both an intention and an approach. If you remember my article about Adjudicating Actions (callback: take a drink!), the next step is to decide if it deserves an actual resolution. Does it really, truly count as an InterACTION!? The criteria we use is:

- Can this succeed? Can this specific approach actually lead to the player's intention?
- Can this fail? Can this approach somehow not lead to the player's intention?
- Is there some risk or cost or consequence that prevents the player from trying over and over until they succeed?

Well, InterACTIONS! are no different. We need to worry about the same steps. But, we worry about them a little differently.

Firstly, that last question is generally a moot point. In social interactions, (all of them, not just InterACTIONS!), everything each party says somehow affects the mood of the conversation and the direction it takes. Just like in combat, every action taken or not taken changes the shape of things, the way things are going to play out. So, don't worry about it. Assume that if people are talking, everything said is going to have some kind of impact. All you have to worry about is whether things are possible or not. Strangely enough, that is where many DMs make a huge gigantic mess of their tennis game and send a ball careening at the umpire's head.

Here is a perfect for example: the players are looking for a blacksmith so they can get some armor repaired. One player says, "I will walk over to a passer-by on the street and ask if they know where a blacksmith is." The DM responds with "roll a Gather Street Information Diplomacy Urban Survival Charisma check." Or something. And when I see that, I put my head through a wall. Because that DM is a f\$&%wit.

Let's be realistic: there is no reason, NONE, why the players can't just get directions. If you stop random passers-by on the street, you'll eventually find someone who will help you. You might have to ask two or three people, but this isn't an InterACTION! It can't fail. And even if it did fail, it isn't exciting. It's just frustrating.

But it gets worse. It seems like some DMs respond to every question a PC asks with a social skill check, no matter what the question is. "Did you see who stabbed that girl?" Roll Interrogate! "Hey, what time is it?" Roll Intimidate! Seriously. People DO THAT! And since I am not allowed to hunt down these DMs and beat them to death with a Pathfinder Core Rulebook, I am stuck just ranting about it on the internet.

Let's make this as clear as crystal. I'm going to break out the big guns: bold face all caps: **IF THE NPC HAS NO REASON TO REFUSE TO HELP THE PCS, THERE IS NO INTERACTION! DO NOT ROLL DICE!**

As crazy as it sounds, in order for something to count as an InterACTION!, the NPC has to have a reason to want to NOT help the party. Why? Remember when we talked about Sources of Conflict in Four Things That Make Your Encounters Not Suck (callback)? I said that the DM does not create conflict, the DM creates reasons why a conflict could happen. I also said that a given thing is not a source of conflict. The source of conflict is the reason why the thing opposes the party. In an InterACTION!, the NPC is not the source of conflict. The reason why the NPC won't help the party is the source of conflict. I'm going to make that obvious, too: **IN AN INTERACTION! THE NPC IS NOT OBSTACLE! THE REASONS WHY THE NPC WON'T COOPERATE ARE THE OBSTACLES! THOSE ARE WHAT THE PLAYERS HAVE TO OVERCOME!**

The guard is not a source of conflict. The guard's orders not to let anyone inside the compound and his fear of getting in trouble for not following orders? Those are the sources of conflict. So any NPC who is going to play a part in an InterACTION! must have a reason to not want to help the party.

At the same time, if the NPC is ever going to help the party, they are eventually going to need a reason to want to help the party. Some NPCs start off with a reason to want to help the party, but their reason to want to not help is preventing them from helping. They are conflicted. Others have no reason to help party and the players will have to provide one. Or create one. Or overcome all the NPCs reasons to want to not help.

For simplicity, I refer to any reason an NPC has to not want to help the party as Objections. And I refer to reasons why the NPC does want to help the party as Incentives. Objections are the reasons an NPC wants to not help the party. Incentives are the reasons the NPC wants to help the party. And they can be anything. ANYTHING!

Objections: fear of getting in trouble, helping is costly, spite against the party, spite against the party's patron, fear of danger, offended, thinks the party is up to no good, dislikes authority, dislikes strangers, religious objections, a vow or promise, protecting someone or something, and on and on and on.

Incentives: something in it for the NPC, desire to do the right thing, a vow or promise, respect for the party's patron, inclined to respect authority, has something to prove, possibility of sexing, personal feelings toward the PCs, wants to put the PCs in their debt, unburden guilt or shame, avoiding personal harm or injury, just putting an end to the pain, and on and on and on.

Before you can run an InterACTION!, you need to have at least one Objection for the NPC. If you can't think of one, you don't have an InterACTION! If you want to make life easier, you can also create an Incentive. But you can also rely on your party to create Incentives.

Notice (and this is super important) that I keep saying an Objection is "a reason to want to not help." I don't say an Objection is "not having a reason to help." Not having a reason to help is not the same as having a reason to not help. The first simply means the NPC feels neutral. They will help if it is convenient or not help if it is onerous and that's it. And nothing the players can do will affect that. A reason to not help is more active. It is a thing in the NPCs brain that tells them not to cooperate. It is an actual obstacle. No matter how convenient it might be to help, the NPC has a reason not to. In order to make a real, useful InterACTION!, you need a true Objection. Something the players can attack.

Possible and Impossible: Using Objections and Incentives

So, you have an Objection (and maybe an Incentive) for the NPC. And a player has finally managed to spit out an Intention and an Approach. And now, it is time to decide whether the InterACTION! can actually work. This is shockingly easy.

In order for an InterACTION! to have any chance to succeed, it really must do one of three things:

- Overcome an Objection
- Appeal to an Incentive
- Create an Incentive

If you think about, it makes perfect sense. After all, why would I say things that don't make sense. QED. But if that is not proof enough for you, think about it this way: ff someone has a reason to want to not help you, and you get rid of that reason, the person will help. Likewise, if the person already feels inclined to help you, and you strengthen that feeling, that will tip the scale and they'll help. Finally, if the person has no reason to help you, and you provide them with a good reason, they will help you.

For a single InterACTION!, that's all it takes. One of those three things. When we build more complex scenes and encounters, we'll revisit these strategies and add a layer of complexity.

So, when the player finally provides an Approach, you have to decide if it does one of those three things. If it does, it is worth resolving. If it doesn't, it cannot get the party anywhere. I know some DMs will balk at that idea. But these same DMs are okay telling a player that they cannot go west if the only exits to the room are to the north, south, and east. These same DMs wouldn't allow a fighter to kill an ogre with a purple maul or a wedge. Like any other scene in the game, the players have to choose effective actions within the context of the scene or else there is no role-playing because there are no rational decisions. There is just rolling dice.

Let's look at an example: suppose there is a guard guarding the crime scene where the elvish ambassador was murdered. The guard has been ordered not to let any unauthorized people inside. The guard's Objection is that he doesn't want to get in trouble with his superiors. However, the guard is scared that, if the crime goes unsolved, hostilities will reopen with the elves and he'll end up on a battlefield. That is his Incentive. Then, one of the PCs, a level 3 human unauthorized person, shows up.

Guard: "Halt! Authorized people only!"

PC: "Stand aside you fool. I'm authorized by the Duke himself and if you don't let me in there will be hell to pay!"

In this case, the PC (who may be lying or telling the truth) is Overcoming the Guard's Objection. The guard doesn't want to get into trouble. But he won't get into trouble if he lets authorized people in. In fact, he might get into trouble if he doesn't let authorized people in. This InterACTION! CAN SUCCEED!

Guard: "Halt! Unauthorized people only!"

PC: "Please, I just need to come in for a moment. I actually work for the elves and I'm trying to prove to them that this murder wasn't sanctioned by the Duke and we're doing everything to stop it. I want to prevent this from turning into a war! I'll be gone before you know it."

In this case, the PC is Appealing to an Incentive. The guard wants to avoid a war for fear of being assigned to the front and the PC is trying to convince the guard that he wants to prevent the war. This InterACTION! CAN SUCCEED!

Guard: "Halt! Unauthorized people only!"

PC: "Please. Something terrible has happened here and I'm an agent of Bahamut, the God of Justice. I need to make sure the guilty party doesn't escape to kill again. Justice and right must be served."

Here, the PC is not Overcoming an Objection or Appealing to an Incentive. Instead, he seems to be appealing to the guard's sense of justice and the greater good. In other words, the PC is Creating a New Incentive. As the DM, you now have to decide if that new incentive is one that the guard will actually accept. You have to use your best judgment, based on what you know of the guard. I can't tell you how to decide. Ultimately, YOU have to run your game.

But I'll tell you that I tend to be reasonably open to any new incentive that is consistent with the NPC and that shows that the player is giving the situation some thought. For example, I don't think the guard is a bad guy. I think he probably does have some sense of the greater good and justice. His motives are primarily about fear for himself, but that doesn't mean he can't be a good person. And I can see the logic the player is using: "the guy is a guard, he'd probably care about justice and he might

respect Bahamut.” You might rule differently. You might decide the guard is too afraid of getting in trouble and won’t risk himself to do the right thing for a stranger.

For that matter, you might interpret the whole scene differently. You might decide that the PC is actually Appealing to the same War Prevention Incentive as before. After all, if the crime is solved and justice is served, the elves can be placated. That is fine too. There is no right way or wrong way to deal with this, provided you are consistent in your approach. I can’t tell you how to answer all of these questions, but I can help you figure out what questions to ask in the first place.

A Digression: Costs, Prices, Bribes, and Motherf\$%&ing Bartering

Sometimes, the only objection an NPC has is that the cooperation will cost them something or require them to take a risk. Technically, buying a sword from a blacksmith is an interACTION! in that the NPC has a reason not to provide the PCs with a sword: it cost him time and money to make it. The act of paying for the sword overcomes that objection.

Price as an objection in an RPG has two problems. First, if you pay the price, there is no uncertainty in the outcome. Once you hand over the gold, the NPC has no further objection. There really is nothing to roll. Second, the disparity between a reasonable price and the amount of gold PCs are usually carrying around means that most non-adventuring NPCs will let their help go relatively cheaply. Still, some DMs will either artificially inflate prices for no logical reason or else force the players to roll to see if the NPC accepts the price. That’s fine in some cases, but most of the time, it doesn’t work. It’s just strange and artificial. And stupid.

And then there is negotiation and barter. Motherf\$%&ing barter. Thanks Pawn Stars dips\$^%s for making this look like a fun game to play. Look, people: barter in any non-modern, non-real RPG DOESN’T WORK! Don’t play it out. Don’t try to make an extended scene out of barter. Bartering is based on pricing, economic forces, and a deeply ingrained sense of what things are actually worth and how much the money in your pocket can buy. None of those exist in an RPG. So, neither the DM nor the PC can really figure out what is a “fair” price and how much variation someone might reasonably accept in that “fair price.” If you must do barter, make it a single die roll. Maybe an opposed check between the PCs and the NPC. Whoever succeeds adjusts the “fair price” by 10% or something.

Apart from barter, when it comes to costs and prices and money changing hands, don’t try to nitpick it too much. If you want an actual challenge, do not make it about the price. Make sure the NPC has some other objection, a reason not to want to do business with the PCs. And let the PCs overcome that. Alternatively, you can create a situation where the NPC has a price and the PCs can overcome that price with a persuasive argument. You can even do both at once, creating a short (two action) encounter wherein the PCs first try to get the NPC to deal with them at all and then can try to knock the price down to a discount or to nothing.

Players: We need to take your horse!

Farmer: No! I love that horse! I birthed it and raised it! I couldn’t part with it!

Players: Please! We need to get to the next town as quickly as possible. Disaster is coming and many people will die! We’ll take good care of your horse, but innocent lives are on the line!

Farmer: Well... okay, but I will need ten gold to get a new horse.

Players: Lives... are on the line and you want to quibble over coin? I had heard the people of this village were upstanding, gods-fearing people. But this makes me question that.

Farmer: Okay, okay... take the horse. Be good to her, though.

When it comes to bribes, treat a bribe like you would any other action. Decide whether the NPC would really accept a bribe. If so, don't bother quibbling over the amount unless it is truly trivial. Just accept it and allow it to work. I personally prefer not to roll see if a bribe works. It just seems that once the PCs hand over the coins, the decision is all on the NPC as to whether or not the bribe is worth it. The PCs really can't influence that decision too much, though a good scene COULD be built around convincing someone how much they need the bribe if they are wavering. Those are the exception though, not the rule. I'm not willing to die on that hill, though, so just use your best judgment.

Sometimes, the PCs will offer a ridiculously expensive bribe. Offering a laborer ten gold in D&D 3E is approximately the same as offering someone about 14 weeks of pay. And you, as the DM, are on your honor to do two things. First, warn them that that is a HUGE amount of money and they could probably get the same result from a single gold (because you represent everything the PCs know about the world and letting them make mistakes like that is being a d\$^%bag DM). Second, after you talk them down to "reasonable," be realistic and consistent. That is, if they offer a huge amount of money to an NPC, most NPCs without other objections will give in as soon as they see the gold. A massive bribe to the right NPC is an "I win" button. You can piss and moan about letting the PCs automatically succeed (or buy success), but in the end, it is your own stupid fault for setting up an encounter with the depth and complexity of buying a soda from a vending machine and hoping to get a great encounter out of it.

Outcomes, Consequences, and Ending InterACTIONS! (If Only It Was This Easy to Escape Conversations in Real Life)

Once you've figured out the Intention and Approach and decided it is a real interACTION! (still drinking?), ask for a skill check based on the approach and see how that goes. It is either going to succeed or fail. Shouldn't be any surprises there. But then you're back on the spot. You have to decide what happens next.

Firstly, if it is a success, the PCs probably get what they wanted. Right now, we're sticking with single interACTIONS!, but I will be looking at interACTION! encounters soon enough. Of course, you could decide that the success is not enough. Maybe it only knocks down one objection. Or maybe the NPC is conflicted rather than outright refusing to help. Decide right now whether the PCs won or if there is more to scene.

If it is a failure, you might end the scene or you might allow it to continue. But that is going to depend heavily on the consequences. Which brings us to...

Secondly, consequences. Remember, any approach the PCs take can lead to consequences, regardless of whether they succeed or fail. Of course, how those consequences manifest will depend on whether they are short term or long term and whether PCs succeeded or failed. The MANIFESTATION of consequences varies depending on success or failure, but their EXISTENCE should not. All actions have the potential to create consequences and that is what makes choices important.

Consequences can be short-term or long-term. Short-term consequences are useful in the scene you're running. So, if you've decided the scene isn't over, you want short-term consequences. If the scene is over, you might want long-term consequences. But you need to be careful. After all, depending on the importance of the NPC and the scene, the consequences might never come up again. And that's fine. Every action doesn't have to break the world. As long as enough actions change the world enough for the players to notice, the players will know their choices matter. Sometimes, offending a shopkeeper or random laborer just doesn't have any impact. That's fine. Look, some DMs insist on making sure that everything that might have consequences somehow comes back to haunt the PCs. They call it "making failure interesting" and it is a spiral of disaster. DON'T DO IT! What it means is that nothing ever closes. The PCs make a decision and the consequences come back and they make a decision to deal with those consequences. That decision comes back and they spawn a new set of consequences dealing with the

result of the previous consequences. Taken to the logical endpoint, that means the entire campaign is a series of events spawned from one decision and nothing ever gets closed, resolved, or advanced. That is s\$&% DMing, and the DMs who do it scream about how wonderfully engaging their campaigns are because the players decisions affect everything! I prefer my games to go forward rather than stay mired in an extended example of the butterfly effect.

Digression aside, if the scene is going to go on, decide what the short-term consequences are of the approach the PCs took. If they lied and got caught in the lie, the NPC is probably going to start to doubt their sincerity. If they bullied the NPC, the NPC may be afraid of them, but may also be offended or may be looking to escape the conversation. Or the NPC might have called their bluff and think that the PCs are all talk and no action. If the PCs were polite or proved their good intentions, the NPC might be more cooperative or more inclined to trust them. You need to figure it out. Use your best judgment.

Short-term consequences change the current interaction. Assuming the PCs have to keep talking to the NPC (because there is more to the scene), you will have to change the NPC's behavior to reflect that. I like to overwrite their personality/phrasing with a new personality/phrasing reflecting the change.

Informant: (helpful) "I'd sure like to help you guys, but I'm worried about what will happen to my family if people realize I'm helping you."

Players: "You'd better help us or we'll make sure something happens to your family!"

Die roll, failure, conversation continues, players try a different tactic.

Players: "Please. We need your help. People are dying and you're the only one who can help us."

Informant: (untrusting) "Why should I believe you? You threatened my family!"

See how the NPC went from helpfully saying no to saying no because he didn't trust the party?

Short-term consequences can actually be used to assess bonuses and penalties to future interACTIONS! This is a very smart thing to do. Some DMs balk at the idea, but those are the DMs with too much baggage about how different social interACTIONS! are. Imagine, during a combat, a cleric casts a Bane spell that penalizes the enemy. How is that any different than the cleric being really polite and friendly to an untrusting NPC and getting them to lower their social defenses to the party? It is not. Don't be an idiot. These are useful, meaningful bonuses and penalties. Not like those bulls\$&% ones I mentioned earlier based on how good a thespian you are! (drink)

Long-term consequences can be active or passive. Passive consequences just mean that the NPC's future interACTIONS! with the party are tainted (or enhanced) by the consequences. If the party is very nice to an NPC, that NPC will open future interACTIONS! in a more friendly, helpful way. I make a note of these things so I can remember them in case the PCs talk to the same NPC again someday. Beyond that, passive consequences have no impact and they might never be seen by the party. That is perfectly fine, remember?

Active long-term consequences mean the NPC takes a specific action for or against the party later on. The NPC might send the party a gift or he might spread the word among the members of his professional guild so other shopkeepers are nicer to the party. Alternatively, the NPC might badmouth the party, report their activities to the authorities or the party's enemies, or they might hire thugs to rough up, rob, or kill the party. Such consequences might provide an advance warning that puts the party's enemies on alert. The possibilities are limited only by your imagination. Just remember: if the players can't connect the consequences to their actions in some way, they don't f\$&%ing count! If the enemy hideout is on high alert, you have to make sure the party notices it.

DM: "The Crimson Scourge gangers look like they are already ready for a fight when you burst in and immediately defend themselves! Someone must have tipped them off to expect trouble!"

Remember: if the players don't see it, it didn't happen! And they only see what you tell them they see! (drink, drink)

Returning the Serve: How to Respond to Social InterACTIONS!

Back to tennis. One of the trickiest things a DM has to do (and one that I have never seen covered in any published DM Guide) is respond to social InterACTIONS! That is, after the dice are rolled, the outcome determined, and consequences thought about, the DM has to communicate with the players. The DM has to tell the players how it came out, end the scene, or help keep the scene going. And there is an art to it.

Ending the scene is easy enough. Either the NPC says that they will help and helps or else they say they won't help and say, firmly, that the conversation is over. Once the scene is ended, the DM can step out of playing the character and narrate, in no uncertain terms, that the NPC is not listening.

DM: "Enough! I can't listen to any more of these lies! Get out of my shop!"

Players: "No, look, we're not lying! Please, just listen."

DM: "The NPC turns back to his work. He is not even listening to you."

Players: "I'll go put my hand on his shoulder and turn him around..."

DM: "The NPC leaps backward, looking horrified. He threatens to scream for the guards and raises his work hammer desperately to fend you off. He isn't going to listen. Are you willing to escalate this?"

Nothing the players do will make the NPC listen or cooperate and that is clear. They can start a new scene, attacking, kidnapping, or torturing the NPC, but that is not the same as continuing the old scene.

But, if the InterACTION! doesn't end the scene, the DM has an obligation to provide a couple of things. Specifically, the DM's response should:

- Indicate whether the InterACTION! succeeded or failed.
- Indicate why the InterACTION! is not over.
- Provide an opening to continue the conversation.

To get started, until you've gotten really good at playing NPCs in character, you can simply use a very formulaic "three sentence response" and the players will probably never notice: response, reason, opening.

Responses are easy. You can just say things like "yes" or "no" or "I can't give you my grandfather's sword" or "I'm not telling you anything." If all else fails, take the player's intention and restate it.

Reasons can be a little trickier. If the InterACTION! failed, the reason why it failed is also the reason why the scene has to continue. But if the InterACTION! succeeded, you have to explain why the NPC still isn't helping the party. In that case, the response and reason can take the form of "I want to... but..." And the reason is usually an objection that still needs to be overcome.

Here's an example: imagine the PCs are trying to get information about a murder from a witness. The witness wants to do the right thing but is afraid for his safety.

Player: "The victim was just an honest citizen, like you. Just trying to go about their life. Don't you want to see the criminal brought to justice?"

DM: "Roll a Persuasion check. Oh, a success? (That's good, but not good enough. The guy wants to help, but he is still not entirely convinced)."

DM as Witness: "I want to help, but I'm afraid I'll be in danger if I talk."

That sounds nice and natural coming out of just about any NPC's mouth.

Openings are a little trickier. In real life, when we want a conversation to continue, we give the other person something to respond to. "How are you?" "I'm fine, you?" "I'm good. Did you get that problem sorted out?" Well, it is vitally important for a DM to provide those openings to keep the conversation going and to guide the players toward ways to resolve the conversation.

An opening gives the player's something to respond to. If the action was a success and there is still something keeping the scene going, the opening should provide a way to bring the scene to a close. Sometimes, this comes as part of the reason. Other times, you need to add it on. Most openings involve the NPC outright stating either an Objection or Incentive that the party can tackle.

If the interACTION! was a failure, you might withhold an opening. That is one way to make the scene more challenging. But you should usually give some sort of opening so the PCs can move toward success. Remember, if an NPC wants something, there is no advantage to the NPC in hiding what they want. It is perfectly reasonable for an NPC to draw attention to either an Incentive or an Objection. If you want to add some challenge to a scene without potentially stalling a conversation, you can use a deflection. A deflection is an opening that won't get the party anywhere. I'll talk more about these when building interACTION! encounters.

Consider the same example as above:

Player: "The victim was just an honest citizen, like you. Just trying to go about their life. Don't you want to see the criminal brought to justice?"

DM: "Roll a Persuasion check. A failure, huh?"

DM as Witness (opening using objection): "I can't help you. I'm afraid. If I talk, how can you guarantee I'll be safe?"

DM as Witness (opening using incentive): "I can't help you. You don't seem capable of doing this. I want to see justice done, but why should I trust you over the City Guard?"

DM as Witness (no opening): "I can't help you. I'm not convinced."

DM as Witness (deflection): "I can't help you. I'm not convinced. Why should I care about the victim? He wasn't even from this city?"

As you get more skilled, you'll realize how easily you can roll the response, reason, and opening into one sentence.

DM as Witness: "I want to do what's right, but I'm afraid I'll get hurt if I help you."

Even though it doesn't end in a question, it still provides the response, reason, and opening it needs to keep the conversation going.

The response, reason, opening method is a little repetitive at times, but it ensures you do everything you need to do. You'll also start to inject more of the NPC's tone into it. The only way to get good at responding is practice, of course. But this is a great way to learn social InterACTION! tennis and return every ball until the players manage to score or shoot themselves in the foot and end the scene.

And In Conclusion... (Finally)

The key takeaway from all of this is that InterACTION! is no different from any other form of action adjudication once you learn how to look at it. Of course, looking at it in terms of objectives and incentives and learning how to pace the conversation and learning how to deliver responses, reasons, and openings make it seem different. But remember: objections and incentives are just a stand-in for “is this action possible” and pacing and narration are just like pacing and narration in any other scene. When other DMs try to load you down with social baggage, now you know better. Unless you played the drinking game. If you played the drinking game, you are probably unconscious. And, if you’re not unconscious, I’m really impressed. GREAT JOB!!!!!!!!!!!!!!

Bonus Section: The Four P’s! A Simple Way to Bring NPCs to Life (Metaphorically, Not Like Dr. Frankenstein)

It would be really sucky of me to end this right now before I give one last little piece of advice. Actually, that’s not true. Everything I gave you above is solid f\$&%ing gold and I’m nine kinds of awesome for writing it all up. But I’ve got one more thing to give. Consider it a bonus for reading the previous 8,000 words. Your prize: a couple hundred more words to read! Yay.

Here it is: The Four P Method for bringing NPCs to life!

I’ve already talked about the importance of knowing the NPC’s objection(s). But, apart from that, I like to have four things handy to help bring an NPC to life. I call them: the Four Ps. These won’t help you run a good InterACTION!, but they will help you get better at bringing NPCs to life and making them seem like real people.

Personality (or Phrasing): This is a SINGLE WORD that describes the general personality trait that the NPC displays most strongly. Remember when I talked about how to practice saying things in different tones? You don’t! It was right in this f\$&%ing article! Well, go back and read it. And then come back here, because this is the word that tells you how to talk as the NPC. This is also the word that I cross out and replace when the PCs trigger short-term consequences. Every time the NPC speaks, look down at the word, fix it in your mind, and let that shape your response.

Posture: Body language is important for two reasons. First, it helps convey information to your players. Second, if you adopt a specific posture that isn’t natural to you, maintaining it reminds you that you ARE the NPC and helps remind you how to speak and act. So, pick a posture to adopt when you are playing the NPC and adopt it. A few words is all it takes. It really does help. While you are “being” that NPC, keep that posture.

Pause: I’m afraid to ask whether you remember what I said about pause indicators. If you need a reminder, go find it. I ain’t helping you. You should have paid attention the first time. Pick a pause indicator: a short word, phrase, sound, or sound+gesture to use whenever you need to buy time.

Pfidget: Everyone has some sort of tic or habit or fidget that displays some sort of quirk. Real people fidget occasionally. Fictional characters fidget a lot. I won’t go into the reasons why because I’ve wasted enough words on this acting bulls\$&% already, but pick a pantomime gesture or a repeated verbal phrase or habit. Puffing an imaginary pipe, shuffling papers, looking around suspiciously, drumming fingers, steepling fingers, whatever. Stick this in, say, every time you respond to an InterACTION! and people will be amazed at how life-like your NPCs are.

Some DMs overload their NPCs with personality traits and backstories and goals and motives. And most of it never ends up seeing play or it actually ends up confusing the issue. Me, I stick with Objections, the Four Ps, and sometimes Alignment. That is all it takes. And best of all, you can get the

entire damned thing on an Index Card. Hell, you can also improvise a living, breathing NPC pretty easily. You can come up with the four Ps in the bathroom.

Players: "We'll go ask that aristocratic knight for help!"

Me: "Good idea. Let me just run to the bathroom first! Don't ask why I need an index card in the bathroom! I just do!"

Incentive: Wants to earn respect and glory

Objection: Is afraid that helping the PCs will damage his reputation

Alignment: Lawful Neutral

Personality: Knightly

Posture: Ramrod straight, hands in lap

Pause: Break eye contact, look straight up, murmurs "hmmmmm"

Pfidget: Glances around to see who might be watching