John Wick

15th ANNIVERSARY

PLAY DIRTY

CARTER COOP

PLAY DIRTY

DIRTY

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Thanks to everyone on my Facebook page who submitted words for the margins. You guys rock!

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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 adventure? Just flip to three random pages, select the words there and BANG! you've got yourself three key words for an adventure hook!

FORWARD

John Wick lies.

You're thinking "He says that on page one. That's no secret."

Yes, but that's not his greatest lie.

John's greatest lie is the title of the book.

John wants you to think he plays dirty. And in many ways, he does. The best lies always have a grain of truth to them.

So yes, John shares a lot of great tips for Game Masters to get under their players' skin in Play Dirty (and I can't wait to read Play Dirty 2). He shows you how to screw with your campaign's most powerful characters in ways you likely never thought of—like messing with their pride until they're babbling simpletons begging for their arch enemy to finish them off. He teaches you how to push your characters to limits that would make Frank Miller's Daredevil run seem like YA Lit. He illustrates how to replace tired concepts like "damage" and "hit points" in your games and replace them with images of meat chunks and coughing blood. Best of all, he shows you ways to mess with your players' minds as much as their characters'.

But here's the real lie. John isn't out to get your character. This "desert Oz" behind the curtain actually has one goal—to make sure his games are the most memorable events his group has ever played. His intent is to give you a great time. If he has his way, you may become so immersed you shake with rage or cringe at the thought of what's going to happen next—but in a good way. Like the best horror movies that leave you shivering even after the credits roll. The way that sticks with you for years after the Mountain Dew and Doritos were sacrificed to the gaming gods.

Fortunately for the rest of us, John doesn't hoard his secrets. This Smaug shares his gold. He talks and writes about his thoughts and experiences and shares them with anyone genuinely interested in upping their game. And he knows his stuff. John Wick is something of a "pulp academic." He has the rare ability to both treasure the pulp nature of our hobby without belittling it and still analyze it like a scholar. He can follow in the footsteps of Howard and Burroughs and Gygax

FULFILLED DREAMS
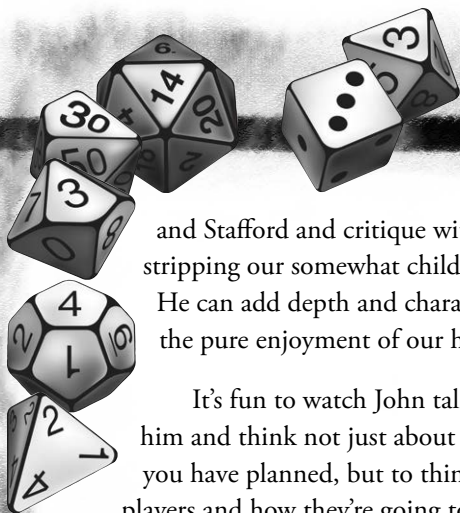
and Stafford and critique without mocking. He can analyze without stripping our somewhat childish tales of action and adventure of their fun. He can add depth and character and serious thought while still reveling in the pure enjoyment of our hobby.

It's fun to watch John talk about gaming. It's challenging to talk with him and think not just about your next campaign and all the cool events you have planned, but to think about how they're going to impact the players and how they're going to interact with the world.

Sometimes John is deliberately provocative. Maybe sometimes people don't pay attention otherwise. Maybe it's just his style. But it's always done with a wink and never with malice. John runs a discussion like he runs his campaigns—you'd best bring your A game.

As designers go, John Wick and I seem about as far apart as you can get. I like more traditional role-playing games with lots of dice and tactical combat. John is best known for a more narrative approach. That's obvious now with games like his Houses of the Blooded and Wield, but even his work on Legend of the Five Rings and Seventh Sea was outside the usual realm of '90s RPGs. There was a lot more talk about how to play your character or the importance of tea ceremonies and nobles oblige than there was of combat maneuvers and movement rates. It was a different way of thinking about the game. And it was hugely successful.

I always found the approach fascinating and watched it from afar…like someone who likes opera but doesn't really understand it (which is totally me as well). I admired and appreciated John's avante garde approach, but I didn't really get how it might apply to the kinds of games I normally ran or played.

Then I moved to Arizona. John and I had been friends for a long time since Pinnacle and Alderac worked together in the late '90s, but we'd never gamed together or spent any real time talking about games or game theory. In 2013, we both attended a convention called RinCon in Tucson. I listened to John talk at some of the seminars we did together, and as always, was fascinated by what he had to say. Some of the specifics applied mostly to more narrative approaches, but the high concepts could be used in any campaign. And they were "dirty." They got right in under the players' fingernails and hurt. His talks made me consciously think more about how to get my players even more emotionally invested in their characters

and the game world. I like to think I'm a pretty good Game Master, but John was pushing me to another level I hadn't really even considered before. This was good stuff.

For those who won't have the opportunity to spend this kind of time with John, reading Play Dirty is the next best thing. John's writing style is some of the most engaging text you'll ever lay eyes on, and what he has to say will make you think about your RPG sessions in all new ways, whether they're rigid and rules-heavy or freeform and narrative.

And here's another lie—John's book isn't just for Game Masters. There's no reason you as a player can't influence your story in many of the same ways John describes. Talk with your Game Master about what you want out of a campaign. It's okay to tell her you want your hero to reach epic heights—and are willing to pay the terrible price that goes with it. Read the story about Jefferson Carter's downfall in Episode 2—it's one of my favorites. Push yourself. Hard. Don't be afraid to fail. Sometimes failure is far more interesting than success. Hell, most of the time failure is far more interesting. And when you do succeed in the end? The payoff is far more fulfilling when you've paid blood for it.

I've watched John do this in the games I've run for him. He's a hell of a player. Besides being clever and imaginative as you would expect, he's also dynamic, gracious, and puts a lot of effort into making sure everyone is included in the action—just as he does when he's the Game Master. Remind me to tell you sometime about how he convinced his fellow legionaries to let the world burn in the Weird Wars Rome game I ran.

Having John as a Game Master or player in your game is a mighty treat. Reading Play Dirty is the next best thing. And if you're lucky enough to get to play with him one day, use those tricks against him. You can play dirty too. It's okay. John likes a good fight.

- Shane Hensley

SECRET BETROTHAL

INTRODUCTION 2014 VERSION

WIPING MY HANDS CLEAN

Fifteen years ago, I was married and living in Los Angeles. I also just quit my dream job. AEG and I had slowly been moving in different directions and it was finally time to cut the cord. I cried when I did it. Breaking up with AEG wasn't easy, but it was important for both of us to move forward.

It was the first time since I was sixteen that I'd ever been unemployed. Like most born in the state of Minnesota, I had that Protestant work ethic pounded into me. "We Minnesotans work twenty hours a day," Garrison Keillor once said. "Then, we go home and feel guilty we couldn't do more."

MISSING BRIDE

It was a hard time. Southern California is not a cheap place to live, and with only one income (my wife's), we were struggling.

Then, I got an email from *Pyramid Magazine* editor Scott Haring. He had read a rather divisive GM advice article I wrote for the Gaming Outpost and wanted me to write something similar for *Pyramid*.

I jumped at the chance.

Scott told me, "Make it controversial. I want to stir up the pot. The *Pyramid* readership has gone soft. They need a bit of a kicking around."

I got to work.

Now, remember: I was angry. Angry about breaking up with AEG, angry that the job market sucked, angry that my attempts at getting scripts published were getting nowhere.

(In fact, I had to *leave* LA for a full year before I got a phone call. And now, *two* of my games are optioned. LA is like a jealous lover, I tell you. Once she has you, she doesn't want you. But once you leave, she can't let you go.)

I was angry. Damn angry.

And, honestly, it came across in the essays. I had a damn chip on my shoulder and it showed.

I wrote the first three columns and sent them in. Scott loved them. He sent me money and I was happy.

Then, the first column popped up. And did it make a noise.

Pyramid had a five-star grading scale back in the day. One star meant, "I don't want to see anything like this ever again." Five stars meant, "This is awesome and I want more of this please."
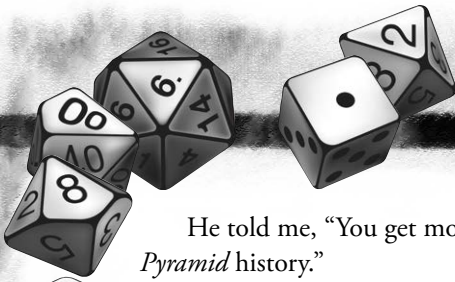
A week after the first column went live, I asked Scott how the response was.

"Well," he said. "I've got good news and bad news."

I asked for the bad news first.

"You get more one star reviews than any other column in *Pyramid* history," he told me.

Oh, crap. That wasn't good. "What's the good news?" I asked.

He told me, "You get more five star reviews than any other column in *Pyramid* history."

I sat on the phone, stunned.

"Congratulations," he said, laughing on the other end. "Mission accomplished."

I wrote eleven episodes for *Pyramid.* This book contains ten of them. One of those episodes I've re-written. I didn't like the way it came across. It was just too passive aggressive and bullyish. You'll see it when it comes by.

* * *

In the original introduction to this book, I said that the John who originally wrote these essays feels a lot more like a younger brother than a younger version of myself. But as I've grown older, I've also rediscovered the anger that was seething through me back then. I'm 45 years old now. I look at the younger men and women who design games and some see me as that cranky old man with the shotgun, telling them to get off my porch. And that makes me kind of smile.

Some think the advice in these pages is out of date and doesn't address the "new wave" of "indie" games hitting the market.

Ah, youth.

Let me tell you something about the whole "indie" thing, buddy.

A lot of these games seem to have mechanics specifically designed to separate you from your character. As if they want to constantly remind you, "You are not your character."

But to me, the whole point of an RPG is to do the exact opposite.

RPGs are the only literary medium where the author and the audience are the same person. So says Robin D. Laws. (Well said, Robin.) And that means RPGs are the only medium where we can blur the line between the two.

When something dramatic or dangerous happens to your character, there's that moment where you forget your character is someone else. You don't think, "This is happening to my character!" Instead, you're thinking, "This is happening to me!"

As a GM, that's always been my goal. Blurring that line. Getting the players to the point that they feel the same emotions as their characters.

Movies can't do that. Books can't do that. TV can't do that. Plays can't do that.

In all those other mediums, only RPGs can do that: make you feel as if *you* are the character.

Most (not all) of the indie RPGs I've read sabotage that precious moment with everything they've got. They throw so many mechanics in that the game seems to shout at you, "YOU ARE NOT YOUR CHARACTER!"

And that's just as unsexy as a combat system that takes four hours to resolve a ten second fight.

So, yes: all you indie guys and gals could learn something from the episodes in these pages. You can learn that all the "narrative mechanics" in the world don't mean squat. What matters are the techniques and tricks that give your players the unique sensation of stepping into their characters' skins, even if it's for a single moment. That experience you can only get from an RPG.

I've been doing this for a long time now. Longer than 15 years. Since 1981, I've been looking for ways to trick my players into that moment. To push them, kicking and screaming, if necessary.

Play Dirty is all about that moment. And I will cheat to get you there. I will break every rule. I will lie, steal, beg, distort, deceive. I will ignore dice. I will misread them. I'll throw them through the window. I will scream, whisper, jump on the table. I will hide friends in closets. I will arrange for mysterious phone calls in the middle of the game. I will turn out the lights, I will set the thermostat to 40 degrees Fahrenheit. I will conspire with the other players without your knowledge. I will switch out character sheets, making subtle changes without telling you.

I will cry. I will bleed if I have to.

I will do *anything* to get to that precious moment. Because I'm the GM and that's my job. And because you deserve it.

November 30, 2014

LOVELESS COUPLING

Introduction to Episode 0

So, a man named "Graveyard Greg" approached me to write an article on a website called the Gaming Outpost back in 1999. He wanted something controversial, something that would stir the pot.

"All right," I said to myself. "What could I write that would get people talking?"

I thought about it for a while and started writing about the *Champions* game I ran back in college. Unfortunately, I didn't think to give any context to that game. I just posted the horror stories of things I did.

Let me correct that error now.

Back at the University of Minnesota, we had a bunch of different GMs who ran different games. There was the *D&D* guy, the *Traveller* guy, the *Empire of the Petal Throne* guy (it's Minnesota, after all) and then there was me. I was the *Call of Cthulhu* guy. And my table was damn ruthless.

A kind of tradition had built up around my table. "John can kill any character, no matter how good you make it." I took pride in killing off characters in very creative and bloody ways.

Now, remember, this is 1987. A much less "enlightened" era. It was also the beginning of the "splatterpunk" movement in horror. I was (and still am) a Stephen King fan and I subscribed to the philosophy of, "If you can't scare 'em, gross 'em out!" I used that philosophy to run one of the deadliest *CoC* games I've ever run.

Then, one day, it happened. Someone said, "You should run *Champions*."

I asked why.

He said, "Because you can't kill a *Champions* character."

My head tweaked just a little. "Oh, really?"

I went out to the game store and bought my first copy of *Champions*. Second edition. I read through it. As a coincidence, I was also reading Frank Miller's *Daredevil: Born Again* series (appearing in issues #227-231) and Alan Moore and David Gibbons' *Watchmen* and Miller's *Batman: The Dark Knight Returns*. The whole concept of the superhero comic was transforming before my eyes. And I learned, quite quickly, that you don't need to kill a superhero when you can destroy him.

So, I agreed. I'd run *Champions*. But I made myself a promise.

I wouldn't kill anyone.

Instead, I thought of ways to destroy them.

Thus, the article you're about to read. Listed below are all the tactics I used to wreck superheroes.

Now, you'll notice that the article begins with a claim:

"I have a bit of a reputation. I kill characters. A lot of characters."

I hoped readers would notice that throughout the article, I never killed a single character. Not one. Okay, well, I did kill one character, but that was near the end of the campaign and it doesn't count because…well, you'll see why it doesn't count.

I was hoping the reader would pay attention to that initial claim and then notice that I really didn't kill anyone. Unfortunately, that's not what happened. I was too clever for myself or I overestimated the reading skills of the typical gamer. Probably a bit of both.

Some folks read the article and called me a "Killer GM" when I hadn't killed anyone at all. They missed the whole point of the article: you don't need to kill a *Champions* character when you can destroy them instead.

Alas, my cleverness was lost on many. A few picked it up, but only a few. So, I'm coming right out at the beginning of all this and saying it as explicitly as I can.

You don't need to kill characters. You can hurt them in ways that have nothing to do with their character sheets.

Just go to Hell's Kitchen and ask Matt Murdoch. He knows all about it.

HIT 'EM WHERE IT HURTS OR,

"THERE'S MORE THAN ONE WAY TO KILL A CHAMPIONS CHARACTER"

One of my favorite things about being a Game Master is watching players bring me their characters for the first time just before we begin to play. The sheets are clean and white, waiting for the pizza stains and other scars that they will acquire over the months and years of play. I carefully peek over the sheets as the player watches, anxiously biting their lip, because they know exactly what I'm looking for.
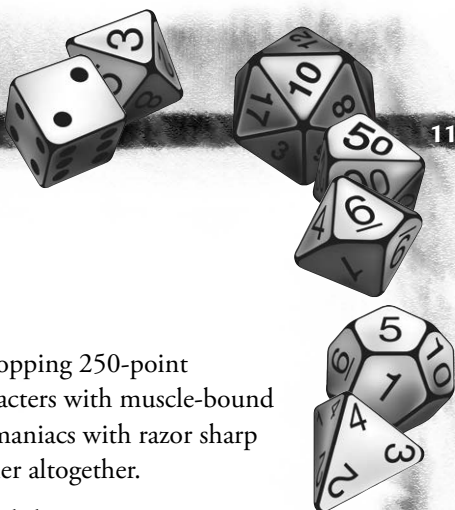
You see, I have a bit of a reputation.

I kill characters.

A lot of characters.

Even in my *Champions* campaign, those big whopping 250-point monsters don't stand a chance. But I don't kill characters with muscle-bound monstrosities or lonely, brooding cigar-chomping maniacs with razor sharp claws. No, I kill characters in a very different manner altogether.

I hit them where it really hurts: where they spend their points.

This article is designed to show Game Masters how to use a character's Disadvantages, Powers, and Resources against him. The examples listed here were used in my *Champions* campaign, but with a little creativity, a GM can use these ideas in just about any game. Now before we begin, let me introduce you to an old friend of mine.

MEET JEFFERSON CARTER

> "I've read dozens of books about heroes and crooks and I learned much from both of their styles"
>
> *Jimmy Buffett*

Jefferson Carter is an NPC I use in a lot of my campaigns. As the head of Carter Enterprises, he is a model millionaire. He donates millions of dollars to charities, opens homeless shelters, fights for the rights of the working class, and is always seen with the beautiful people. He is a handsome face with a charitable, giving heart.

Carter Enterprises is also responsible for the founding of United Superheroes (or, "US"). Using his vast funds, Carter brings together the most enterprising and resourceful superheroes to fight crime in the city's streets and root out corruption in the city's government. His involvement with US has always been a public matter: he doesn't believe that a good deed should ever remain anonymous. He defends the rights of superheroes to help support the police department and other law enforcement agencies. He was instrumental in passing "The Vigilante Act" a few years back that made the acts of superheroes legal, and has a staff of the best lawyers in the nation on payroll to keep his employees out of jail and on the streets.

In short, Jefferson Carter is the best friend a superhero could have.

And with friends like him…well, I think you can finish that one by yourself.

CARTER'S SECRET

Hold your allies close to you, but hold your enemies closer.
Sun Tzu, The Art of War

Jefferson Carter is a meta-human. Carter has many abilities that allow him to seek out a hero's most precious secrets, and then he uses those secrets against them.

In my *Champions* campaign, even if the heroes weren't employed by US, Carter would still consider them "employees." In fact, those heroes would be an even greater challenge to his intellect and resources.

Why has Carter gone to all this trouble?

The answer is simple.

Because he can.

Carter is a mastermind, a genius beyond mortal measurement. Ever since his childhood, he has played "human chess" with his teachers and playmates. His acquired fortune came about from his ability to manipulate the minds and lives of mortals, and now he has learned to manipulate the minds and lives of meta-mortals.

In short, he is causing pain, misery, and conflict for his own enjoyment. And, don't forget, he's doing it for his employees. After all, he provided for the Vigilante Act. He provided United Superheroes. He equips and trains the supervillains they encounter. Carter is the reason they are living the life they are. And if his tricks and traps take out one or two heroes here and there… oh well. What is life without a little risk, eh?

THE METHOD

Now down to the nitty gritty.

Carter looks for a hero's greatest weakness and exploits it until the character breaks. Listed below are some of the more popular Disadvantages Champions characters take. Under each one is a method I used (Carter used) to get at the character.

Just a friendly warning: some GMs may consider these techniques to be "underhanded." For those GMs who feel that they should be fair and arbitrary (as I so often hear), I suggest they look up "fair" and "arbitrary" in the dictionary.

Then, we can talk.

DNPC

For those of you who don't recognize DNPC, it stands for "Dependent Non-Player Character." I understand it's a fairly common Disadvantage among players, but after this little stunt, I had a severe shortage of DNPCs in my campaign.

One of my more resourceful heroes was a young lady named Malice. She was a martial artist who had a poison touch. She was fast, deadly, and very lucky. She was also a big, fat thorn in Carter's side. She was getting too close to his secret, so he decided to retire her.

When she wasn't running around in black tights, Malice was taking care of her aging grandmother. Grandmama was not too fond of those costumed heroes, especially that Malice girl. She looked like a hussy in that tight little costume. And what right did they have to do a policeman's job? Grandpa was a policeman, after all (and the main inspiration for Malice to turn to a life of adventuring). In short, it would break Grandmama's heart if she found out about her granddaughter's secret.

By now, you should be getting the picture. Just show Grandmama pictures of her granddaughter getting into the Malice costume and everything will be hunky dory, right?

Wrong.

When Carter does things, he does them with style.

On Grandmama's seventieth birthday, Malice took her out to her favorite restaurant. In the middle of the meal, one of Malice's most hated enemies showed up on the roof with a bomb. Of course, Malice made an appearance. Her enemy (who knew she would show up) was prepared. He had a single agenda and he stuck to it. In the middle of the fight, he hit her with a paralyzing ray, ripped off her mask, and threw her through the glass ceiling—right in front of Grandmama. The combined shock of seeing her granddaughter get thrown through the glass ceiling, fall fifty feet, and slam to the floor was shocking enough. Add to it the realization that her granddaughter was that masked hussy was a bit too much for Grandmama to handle.

Her heart seized, and as Malice watched on, trapped in her paralyzed body, her grandmother died.

Malice retired the very next day and nobody ever bought a DNPC again.
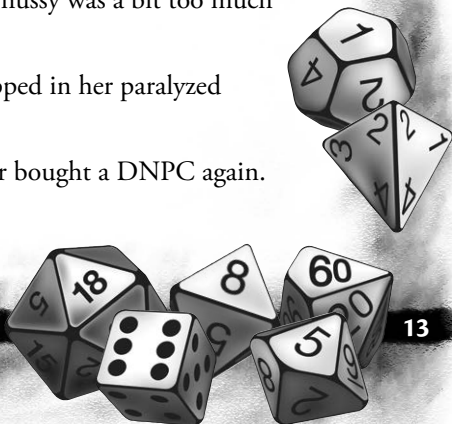
BERSERK

I love this one. Whenever I get to take a character away from a player for a while, explain that they've been unconscious, and then have them wake up with blood on their hands is a chance to have some real fun.

I had one of those berserking scrapper guys in my campaign for a short while. His name was Scrapper (I didn't pick the name, guys) and he got hired on at US for only a short while. The player knew all the *Champions* loopholes and he exploited every one. Instead of asking "What kind of idiot do you think I am?" I let him have his little combat monster, keeping a steady eye on his Berserk Disadvantage.

After a couple of sessions, I got complaints from players. They complained that the character was nothing but a walking bundle of powers, a glory-hound, and a bad roleplayer. I agreed, but asked them to be patient. After seeing a familiar wicked glint in my eye, they smiled quietly to themselves and waited for the hammer to fall.

The next session, they encountered one of my favorite villains. His name is Mindbender, and you can figure out the rest. Mindbender took one look at Scrapper and he knew what to do. He invoked a little mental heavy artillery and before Scrapper knew it, I was rolling dice, making a regretful look and asking him to make his Berserk roll. Now Scrapper only goes Berserk when he sees red trolley cars (his mother was killed by a runaway red trolley car). He knew there were no trolley cars in Minneapolis and asked me why he was going Berserk. I told him he was seeing trolley cars wherever he looked and he had no choice but to make the roll—and make it at -5, at that. After all, he was surrounded by the bloody things.

He failed the roll, went nuts, and I took away his character sheet. At that moment, Scrapper started attacking everything in sight, including his buddies. They had no choice but to defend themselves against a little rule-bending combat monster who was going at them full tilt. His little rampage caused a whole lot of damage and took out a small child's eye before they got him under control. The parents sued US; Scrapper was brought up on charges of negligence and reckless endangerment of life and spent the next twenty years in prison.

I suggested to Scrapper's player that he should be more careful with his Disadvantages. Surprisingly enough, the next character he made was a little more respectful of the rules. Go figure.

PSYCHOLOGICAL LIMITATIONS

Some of the most powerful Disadvantages are "Psy Lims." Codes of Conduct are always fun to play with. One of our heroes, a guy named Tristan Thomas who went by the name of "Paladin," had a pair of interesting Limitations. He would not strike a woman, no matter what the circumstances, and he was a firm believer in The Law. He would not tolerate any infringement of the law, not in himself and not in others. Of course, this provided me with a whole bunker of ammo to use against him.

The first thing I did was have him fall in love with a pretty little librarian Angie Isolde. That should have been enough of a clue for him, but unfortunately (for him), he didn't pick up on it. You see, Angie was a "renegade super" named Vengeance. She had no license to practice and often found herself at odds with US. Neither of them knew their Secret Identities, and Paladin was beginning to develop a nice, healthy hatred for Vengeance. She had picked up on his "don't strike women" code (thanks to Mr. Carter's agents) and would somehow always know where Paladin was. She would choose the day and date of her attacks carefully, embarrassing him at every opportunity.

As the rivalry between Vengeance and Paladin heated up, so did the romance between Angie and Thomas. When the time was right, Carter arranged for a subtle drug to get slipped into Paladin's system that would drive him to the edge just at the right moment. He met up with Vengeance (right on schedule) and as she prepared for another opportunity to humiliate him, the drug kicked in and he started in on the unprepared super-babe. Needless to say, under his drugged state, he demolished the poor girl (he had 50 more points to play with, after all). When he gained control, he realized what he had done and watched as the police (who were conveniently called in on the scene by an anonymous tip) took off her mask and carted his beloved off to prison.
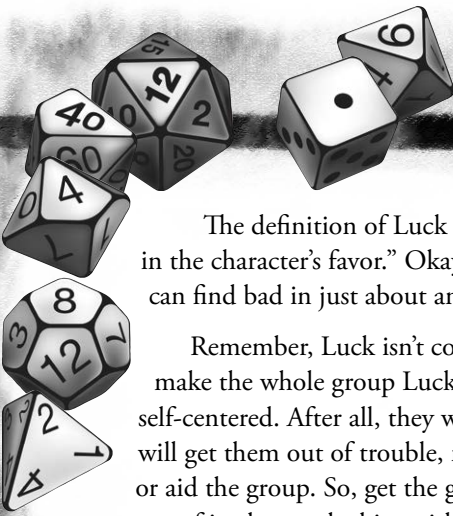
LUCK

"Okay," you say. "That's just fine taking advantage of a character's disadvantages. That's no new trick. So what?"

All right, how about using a character's advantages against him?

"Talents" can be a Champions character's worst enemy. Luck is a great example. Players buy Luck for their characters all the time. It's like a little security blanket. It makes them feel as if they have something to fall back on if everything goes bad.
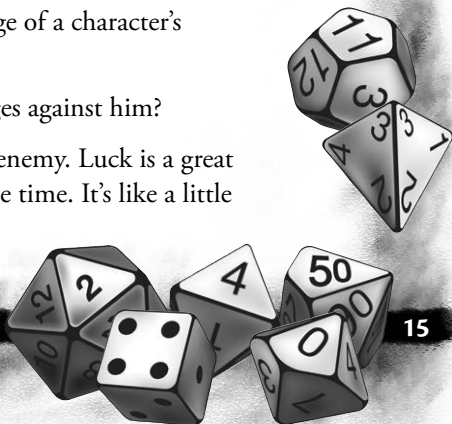
The definition of Luck is "…that quality which helps events turn out in the character's favor." Okay, that sounds fine, but trust me, a good GM can find bad in just about anything.

Remember, Luck isn't contagious. Making a character Lucky does not make the whole group Lucky. Characters who buy Luck tend to be a little self-centered. After all, they would rather spend points on something that will get them out of trouble, rather than something that would complement or aid the group. So, get the group in trouble, let the Luckster roll his way out of it, then make him wish he didn't. It's called "the frying pan and fire technique," and here's how it works.

Imagine the group getting hit by some area-effect weapon. Of course, the Luckster wants to roll his way out of it. You tell him that's fine and he makes his Luck roll. He flies out of the effect and looks back to see his buddies frying.

(Feel free to apply guilt here. After all, he could have grabbed someone to fly out with him, right?)

Then, right after he's out of the blast radius, have him notice that he's flown right into a mob of supervillains, just ready and willing to pound on one lone hero. Let's see him Luck his way out of a combined total of 1,500 points of hard-hitting villains. If only he had stayed behind…

Or perhaps by Lucking out he's put his buddies in deeper trouble. For instance, let's use the area-effect weapon again. Perhaps one of his powers could have countered the effect? If he had stayed behind, he'd have been able to help them out. But he chose to Luck out, and now his buddies are frying. Good thing he's Lucky, isn't it?

Another example. The character is in an airport. He's in the restroom and he stumbles across an envelope somebody dropped. He opens the envelope and discovers its filled with thousand dollar bills. Get you get any more lucky? Of course, the money belongs to a crime syndicate or someone even more diabolical, and they're going to be looking for that money and who "found" it (of course, they believe the hero stole it). And all of this trouble because the character was Lucky.

IMMUNITY

Immunity gives a character supernatural immunity to diseases and poisons. It's a very popular advantage. Of course, Mr. Carter had to do something about that.

I had his scientists come up with a disease that would kill off anyone with the "super gene" that meta-humans had. Carter had a cure, of course. The only problem was all those super fellows who bought Immunity were, well, immune to it.

FIND WEAKNESS

My favorite trick has to do with Find Weakness. This little puppy lets characters observe their enemies to find a weakness in the defenses of a target. The better they roll, the more damage they can do.

A lot of combat monsters take this one. I always let them. They only use it once.

Carter designs supervillains with a weakness the heroes can exploit. These villains he calls his "throwaways": punks he can throw at the heroes to watch their fighting styles and skills. He shows the heroes films of the throwaways and shows them the weakness he's "found." Then he sends them out to confront the baddie, armed with the knowledge he's given them. They find the throwaway, engage him, find his weakness, and hit him as hard as they can.

This little strategy always has the same result.

The villain's eyes go wide, he mumbles something about forgiveness, and the hero watches the life slip out of his eyes.

Killing a villain is a major crime. Heroes are expected to bring the bad guys in alive. But there's no need to worry. The hero can rest assured that Mr. Carter's lawyers will take care of everything.

THE RETIREMENT OF MR. FABULOUS

One last story, which I can't take full credit for.

One of my players, my buddy Danny, came to me after a game session with a problem. He had been playing a character for the whole run of the game, a very popular character who went by the name "Mr. Fabulous."

Out of all my *Champions* campaigns, Mr. Fabulous was one of my favorite characters. He was a modest little superhero with just a little bit of super strength, speed, and endurance, and a whole lot of heart. He dressed up in a colorful costume and fought for truth, justice, and the American Way because it was the right thing to do. He always took a morning jog along Hennipen Boulevard and a mob of kids would
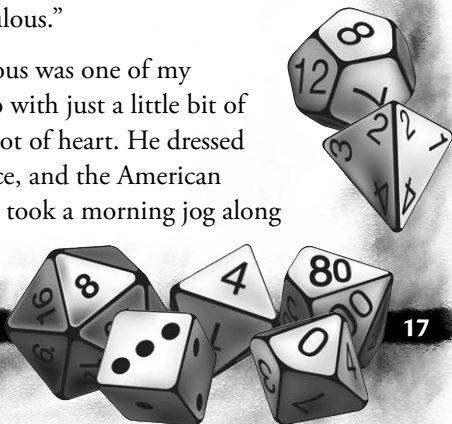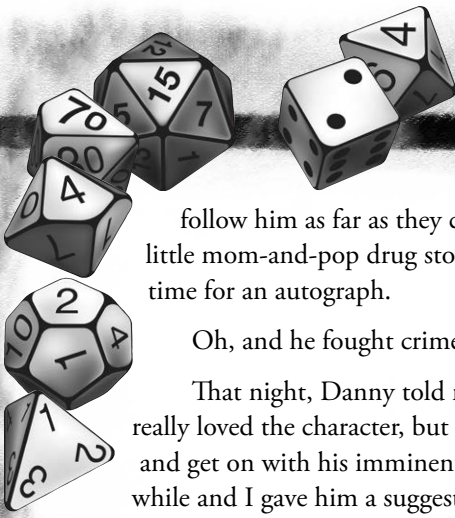
follow him as far as they could. He bought ice cream and hot dogs at the little mom-and-pop drug store on the corner for lunch, and he always had time for an autograph.

Oh, and he fought crime, too.

That night, Danny told me that Mr. Fabulous was going to retire. He really loved the character, but he felt it was time to let him take off his mask and get on with his imminent middle age years. We talked about it for a while and I gave him a suggestion. At first he was shocked, but then, as he thought about it, he agreed it was the only way to end the story of Mr. Fabulous. We shook hands and the very next week, the event we discussed took place.

Mr. Fabulous did indeed announce his intention to retire. Carter and US throw a huge party to celebrate Mr. Fabulous' twenty years of fighting crime. The event was on the front page of every newspaper in the nation.

On the morning before his retirement, Mr. Fabulous stopped in the mom-and-pop drug store for his ice cream and hot dog. A young kid with frightened eyes was there with a gun, taking money out of the register. Mr. Fabulous held up his hands and tried to talk the kid into putting the gun down. The kid, with eyes full of tears, lowered the pistol. For some reason, Mr. Fabulous' Danger Sense wouldn't stop ringing in his ears. He turned around a little too late and took a bullet from the kid's older brother right in the face.

The ambulance arrived ten minutes after the incident. Mr. Fabulous was found, barely alive and in shock. They turned off the siren five minutes outside of the hospital.

The death of Mr. Fabulous was a dark day in my campaign. He was one of the first superheroes, a mentor to more than half of the members of United Superheroes. A national day of mourning was held and we spent an entire game session on the funeral, listening to each superhero talking about their memories of their hero.

What did this accomplish? What does this little incident have to do with using a character's Disadvantages against them? Well, every character has one single disadvantage in common, and it isn't on their character sheet. Sometimes we don't see it, and it often becomes invisible in a superhero campaign. That little Disadvantage is that each and every one of us is mortal. In the world of superheroes, we sometimes forget this. While each of us would like to live forever, it is often a character's death that defines him, not his life. Mr. Fabulous died trying to talk a

scared little kid out of doing the wrong thing. He could have pounded the hell out of him, but he didn't. He died trying to stop a crime without using his fists.

What was Mr. Fabulous' Disadvantage? He had a Code vs. Killing. Carter found out about it and set up the whole incident. But this time, his little gambit backfired on him. He thought killing Mr. Fabulous in a simple robbery would dishearten the superheroes of Minneapolis. He was wrong. It brought them together, creating a bond that could not be broken. And he was sloppy. One of the heroes began digging and found out the kids were paid to commit the crime. It was the beginning of the end for Mr. Carter.

But that's another story.

In which the Author introduces himself, reveals why Chumbawumba is the key to great Game Mastering, then discloses why everything you know is wrong.

UNINTENTIONAL STABBING

Introduction to Episode 1

About halfway through this little article, you're going to stumble across something that people talk to me about whenever they bring up *Play Dirty,* and that's "Good Guy Vader."

I must make a confession: I'm not entirely responsible for that.

My friend Steve Swarner first suggested that Old Ben and Yoda might not be exactly how they portray themselves. He brought up the Jedi mind trick Ben tries to use on Luke on Tatooine and he also showed me how Yoda almost panics when Luke asks, "Is the dark side stronger?"

From that, I began riffing. It became a game between he and I, looking for inconsistencies in the *Star Wars* trilogy that confirmed our suspicions. Nowadays, it's something I share with everyone who says, "I'm a Star Wars fan."

"Ah," I say. "So, you know the secret message?"

"What secret message?" they ask.

"The dark side will 'forever dominate your destiny,' and the good side makes you want to sleep with your sister and murder your father."

I even made one *Star Wars* fan break down and cry. Because I'm a bastard that way.

* * *

Much later, just in the last few hours, in fact (November 29th, 2014), I've stumbled across another little swerve in the *Star Wars* Universe.

It's entirely possible all this Force stuff is happening in Luke's head.

Nobody else ever hears Kenobi's voice.

Nobody else ever sees Force Ghosts.

Nobody else goes to Degobah and hangs out with Yoda.

(Okay, we've got R2D2 there, but we don't know what he's saying, so all those beeps and boops could be, "You crazy bastard! Who are you talking to? I'm the only one here!")

My buddy Jesse Heinig calls this phenomenon "Tyler Durden, Jedi Knight." And if you think about it, the whole thing falls together perfectly.

Han Solo is right. He goes to sleep for a while and his friends start having delusions of grandeur.

Think about that the next time a player wants to have a Jedi character.

"Sure, buddy," you say. Don't smile too much. You'll give it all away.

* * *

Steve was also responsible for one of the best *Amber Diceless RPG* character quizzes I ever read. For those who aren't familiar, let me give you some context.

When you make a character for *Amber*, you fill out a quiz that asks you in-character questions. You give in-character answers and you get bonus points. I stole this for the *Legend of the Five Rings* RPG back in the day.

I suggest you follow this little trick for *any* game you run. Even if it's just five questions, make your players fill it out as their characters. Let me show you why.

First, Steve's quiz made me laugh so hard, I nearly lost bladder control. And while that's a good enough reason to try this trick, there's a more important reason.

Steve's answers had a singular theme: Corwin—the narrator of the first set of *Amber* books—was not just an unreliable narrator, he also lies throughout the entire series.

In one scene, Corwin watches his brother Bleys fight up the side of a mountain, killing hundreds of men as he goes. (Because the Children of Amber are supernaturally strong and fast and pretty and…yeah, you get the picture.) One of the most powerful lines I ever read in any book was Corwin's description of that fight.

"For hours I watched him. And they died and they died."

But then, in the middle of the fight, Bleys slips on a patch of blood and falls off the side of the mountain. It's a sudden and unexpected turn of events…one Steve's character (Stavros) did not believe.

According to Stavros, Bleys didn't slip. He was pushed. By Corwin, of course.

Later, I asked a question: "You're on a plane that's lost its engine and is crashing to the ground. There

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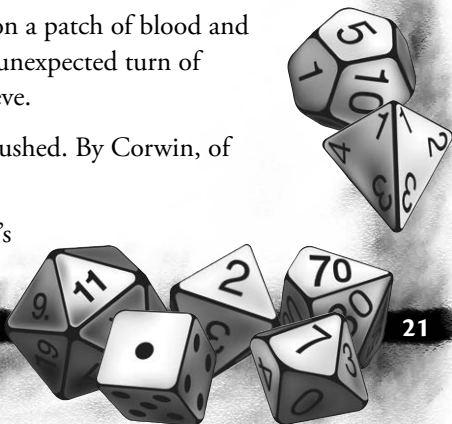
are only two parachutes. You get one, but which of your other family members gets the other one?"

Steve's answer was brilliant. He went through each of the *Amber* characters and gave me reasons why *none* of them even *needed* the parachute. They'd all survive one way or another.

"Gerard will survive the crash."

"Benedict took one look at the plane and never got on."

"Fiona trumps out."

"Caine…that's not Caine!"

The quiz not only gave me a great way of looking at Steve's character, but also gave me a ton of ideas for the game I was about to run. His hyper-paranoid vision of the *Amber* universe made it even darker and more full of twists and treachery than I had planned.

Another key to great GMing: find ways to ask your players questions and then listen to their answers.

GETTING DIRTY

Hello.

My name is John Wick. I believe we've met before. No? Funny, your face is familiar. Well, if I am hallucinating, maybe I should introduce myself. I've served a term with a company called Alderac Entertainment Group, and while there, I was a staff writer for *Shadis Magazine*, Continuity/Story editor for three collectible card games, wrote three roleplaying games along with over two dozen supplements, helped design a collectible dice game, and bunches more.

Nowadays, I'm starting up my own little game company, writing about orks and fluxes, freelancing for folks who can tolerate me, and keeping up with a regular weekly column over at the Gaming Outpost. I've also got a day job, but don't tell my wife that. She'll wanna know where the money is. Oh, and I'm married to a girl

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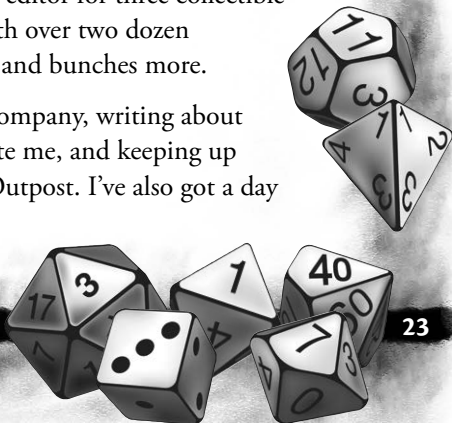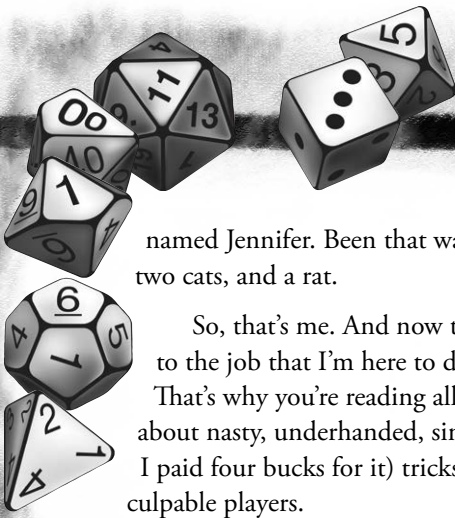
named Jennifer. Been that way for two years on December 31. Got a dog, two cats, and a rat.

So, that's me. And now that we're all acquainted, maybe I should get to the job that I'm here to do. You know. Talk about Game Master stuff. That's why you're reading all of this, right? To see what I've got to say about nasty, underhanded, sinister, and otherwise praetorian (like that one? I paid four bucks for it) tricks to play on unsuspecting, innocent, naive, and culpable players.

But before I get started, I'd like to lay a couple of ground rules. After all, the title of this column could be a little deceptive. We're here to talk about GM tricks. Nasty GM tricks that would make Ol' Grimtooth himself do a doubletake. What we are not here for is killing characters. Nobody wants to play with a Killer GM.

But everybody wants to play with a Dirty GM.

Just to make sure you know what I'm talking about, let's spend a moment or two defining terms. In some circles—the ones I was educated in—that's a pretty important step.

A Killer GM is someone who takes glee in destroying characters. He kills them without remorse, without compassion, without care. He does it because he can. Gives him some sort of sick rush.

This is bad.

A Dirty GM, on the other hand, is someone who uses every dirty trick in the book to challenge the players. Keeping them off balance with guerrilla tactics, he increases the players' enjoyment with offbeat and unorthodox methods, forcing them to think on their feet, use their improvisational skills, and keep their adrenaline pumping at full speed.

This is good.

So, now that we're all speaking the same language, let's get down to business.

* * *

The first step to becoming a Dirty GM involves a little syndrome I call "The Die Hard Effect." (I've talked about this before in other places, so I'll keep it brief.) Essentially, all players want their characters to be John McClane. You know, the guy

Bruce Willis plays in the *Die Hard* films. They want to be knocked down, punched out—bloody, battered, and beaten.

But (and this is an important "but," folks), every time they get knocked down, they want to be able to get back up.

That's right. Just like the Chumbawumba song.

Being Irish, it just comes to me naturally.

Players want to be a bloody mess at the end of the adventure, but they still want to win. And they want to feel like they won by the skin of their teeth. They want to think that last die roll was the luckiest one they ever made. They want to feel that their characters' lives were hanging in the balance, ready to fall like a pin hanging on the edge of a precipice.

That's what players want.

And that's what a Dirty GM gives them.

Because he throws stuff at them that they never counted on. He uses techniques that are so outside the mainstream that they hit the players like a left hook to the jaw. He uses everything at his disposal to knock them down—so they can get back up just in time to dodge the next hit. All of this comes under the basic premise that the GM is there for the players' enjoyment; he's providing them what they want. That's the GM's job. When it's all said and done, the Game Master's fun is helping his friends have fun. At least, that's the way I've always seen it.

BAD GUY CORWIN

Now, on to the Game Mastering advice.

I'm going to be using a very specific method in this here column. First, I'll explain a technique, and then I'll give you a practical application. In other words, I'm going to tell you, and then I'm going to show you. The first technique we'll employ is something a friend of mine nicknamed "The Bad Guy Corwin Technique." He dubbed it thus because he first saw me use it in my *Amber Diceless Roleplaying Game*, but you can use it in just about any

FATAL DISEASE
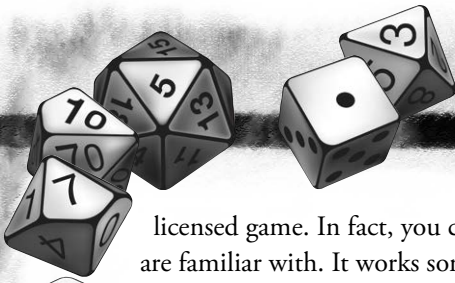
licensed game. In fact, you can use it in almost any RPG setting the players are familiar with. It works something like this.

We get to see Roger Zelazny's famous *Chronicles of Amber* through the eyes of one character: Prince Corwin. (For those of you who don't know a single thing about *Amber*, here's the rundown. You've got one real world and everything else is just a pale imitation of that one real world. Even Earth isn't real, it's just a "shadow" of this place called Amber. That means that everyone living on these shadows aren't real either, and the only real people are those from Amber. "Amberites" can walk through shadows and are ten times faster, stronger, and smarter than us shadow-people. And because they're the only real people, the only folks that are worth challenging are their own siblings, making Amber a hotbed of political and military intrigue. That's the gist of it. Now go read the books and find out what you're missing.)

As you read along, you watch his transformation from egocentric bastard to sympathetic martyr. The change is incredible.

A little too incredible if you ask me. Corwin himself admits that he's not an entirely trustworthy narrator. When I started planning an *Amber* campaign, I decided to take that statement to the extreme. I based the idea on a great little book by Philip José Farmer called *The Other Log of Phileas Fogg*. In that book, Farmer takes all the mistakes (not a very pretty word, but an accurate one) Verne and his editors missed in *Around the World in 80 Days* and uses them to build a quiet conspiracy the likes even Umberto Eco has never seen. When a character has his glass in his left hand in one passage, then in his right in another, that's not a mistake—it's a clue! It's a brilliant little book whose methods have inspired me on many occasions.

On this occasion, I decided to use the same technique on Zelazny's *Amber*. I told my players that they'd be making characters that were sons and daughters of the Elder Amberites (the characters from the books), but the game would take place during the time of the novels. They'd get to witness all the cool stuff that was going on and fill in the blanks that Corwin never quite filled in. They made up their characters and got ready to watch the events of the novels unfold.

But things didn't go exactly as planned. Not by a long shot. In fact, within one hour of gameplay, they were as jittery as a junkie waiting for his fix. You see,

everything was wrong. That is, everything was happening the way it did in the books, but Corwin's role was a lot different than the role he spelled out on the page.

In other words, he lied. A lot.

As soon as the players thought they had things figured out, I threw another loop at them, playing off their assumptions and using those same assumptions to set them up for nasty traps. Here's an example.

In *Amber*, it's possible to go out into shadow and find a perfect (albeit inferior) duplicate of yourself. After all, anything an Amberite can imagine is out in shadow, you just have to be willing to look for it. At the end of the first book, Corwin is imprisoned for four years in the bowels of Castle Amber. What's worse, he has his eyes burned out. The player who took the role of Corwin's nephew didn't like that one single bit.

But there's a snag, you see.

That ain't Corwin down in the dungeon. It's his shadow.

And so, all through the rest of the series, the Corwin that's telling the reader his story is a shadow who believes he's Corwin, while the Real Deal is behind the scenes, operating unseen, manipulating events while his dummy-self keeps everybody's attention.

And make no mistake: Corwin is a bastard.

Now for those of you who don't read or play *Amber*, here's another example so you can get a picture of what I'm talking about.
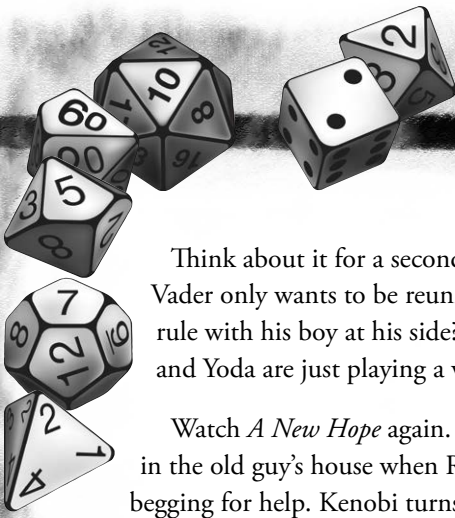
GOOD GUY VADER

Chew on this.

In *The Empire Strikes Back*, Yoda warns Luke about the Dark Side of the Force: "Once you turn down the dark path, forever will it dominate your destiny."

Yeah. Right. And the Good Side makes you want to sleep with your sister and kill your father.
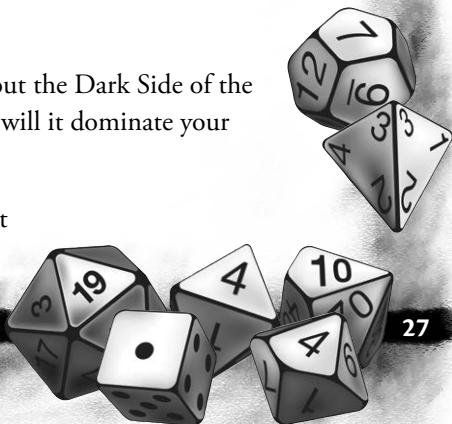
Think about it for a second. What if Vader ain't such a bad guy? What if Vader only wants to be reunited with his son, overthrow the Emperor, and rule with his boy at his side? What if he wasn't lying? And what if Kenobi and Yoda are just playing a very complicated game of revenge?

Watch *A New Hope* again. Watch the scene with Kenobi and Luke in the old guy's house when R2-D2 shows the video of the fair princess begging for help. Kenobi turns to Luke and says, "You must come with me to Alderaan and learn the ways of the Force." What's good-hearted, sweet-faced Ben Kenobi trying to do there? He's using the old Jedi mind trick! Watch it! Watch Luke staring at him with glassy eyes! Watch Luke pull away (because the Force is too strong in him). Then watch Kenobi use Luke's desires against him. "I need your help, Luke. She needs your help."

Yeah, Luke. You know what she needs.

They even lie to him. They tell him his father was betrayed and killed by Vader. And no, it ain't a different point of view. It's a lie. My mommy taught me better than that. Kenobi and Yoda manipulate Luke all through the films, trying to convince him that the Dark Side isn't stronger—just quicker, easier, and more seductive.

Let's think on that for a while.

The Dark Side is quicker to learn, easier to learn, and just as powerful? Where do I sign up?

And for those of you who are saying, "Yeah, but it'll forever dominate your destiny!"—I got one thing to ask you. Did Ol' Emperor Palpatine look all that dominated to you when he was frying Luke's skull with blue lightning? Ever see Yoda or Kenobi do the blue lightning trick? I didn't think so. He was the absolute ruler of the Universe! Come on! If that's dominated, I'd hate to see "liberty."

Oh, wait. That's right. Liberty is living in a desert wasteland scaring Sand People for fun. Or how about rotting away on a mudhole hiding out from the big guy in black armor that can kill you with a flick of his wrist. You know. The one that's got his destiny dominated. The one with his own Star Destroyer.

You can use the Bad Guy Corwin technique in just about any game that's licensed from film or literature.

Think about Bad Guy Gandalf or Bad Guy Aragorn.

Think about Good Guy Doctor Doom or Good Guy Lex Luthor.

Think about Bad Guy Picard or Bad Guy Kirk.

If you're willing to look, you'll find the patterns.

The Bad Guy Technique throws players' assumptions out the window and forces them to think on their feet. Everything they believe they know is now wrong. It doesn't matter if they own every little sourcebook on every little subject, because everything is up for grabs.

And once their confidence is shaken, once they don't know where they're going, they'll realize that there's nothing they can count on—but themselves.

That's a great starting point for that li'l thing we call the Hero's Journey. And you haven't broken a single rule or fudged a single die roll. But you're still playing dirty.

* * *

Convinced? How about a little shaken? You pullin' out your copies of the *Star Wars Trilogy*, ready to look for more? Congratulations. You've just graduated Dirty GM 101. And, by the way—welcome to the Dark Side. Hope you enjoy your stay.

SPLIT PERSONALITY

Introduction to Episode 2

Here's where I outline the Fall of Jefferson Carter.

The main motivation for this episode came from accusations that I was a "Killer GM" who only enjoyed torturing characters and never let them win. I realized I had only been showing one element of how to run a *Play Dirty* campaign and neglected to show the most important part: the payoff.

After you've tortured your players for two years, the payoff had better be fantastic. Epic, even. The payoff to my college *Champions* game was, I believe, worth all the pain the players suffered. They finally got their hands on Carter and sent him up the river for life.

But is that enough?

One of my favorite movies is *The Sting*. It's the first movie I remember watching in the theater. My family lived in Iowa, I was all of five years old, and my dad wanted to see the movie, so he let me tag along.

(My dad has always had high confidence in me.)

When the movie was over, I said, "I want to be *that* when I grow up." And, in many ways, I did.

Anyway, the whole plot of *The Sting* revolves around a bunch of grifters getting revenge on an Irish crime boss for killing one of their own. Midway through, Henry Gondorff warns the young Johnny Hooker that stealing the mob boss's money had better be revenge enough, "Because it's all we're gonna get."

(Is it enough? Watch the movie and find out.)

Justice is never enough. Revenge is never enough.

When Carter got sent up the river, I wondered if any of my players thought about getting their hands around his neck. I gave them plenty of opportunity to do it.

None of them took it.

Oh, they wanted it, but they never took it. A testament to their character¼ and their characters' character.

THE RETURN OF JEFFERSON CARTER

It's time to set the record straight. You see, a friend of mine and I have been getting some bad press lately, and while I don't mind if people talk trash about me (not that much, anyway), my buddy does care. What's worse, he usually does something about it. Something rather violent. And so, the purpose of this second episode of *Play Dirty* is devoted to explaining the often-misunderstood actions of one of my oldest friends, Jefferson Carter.
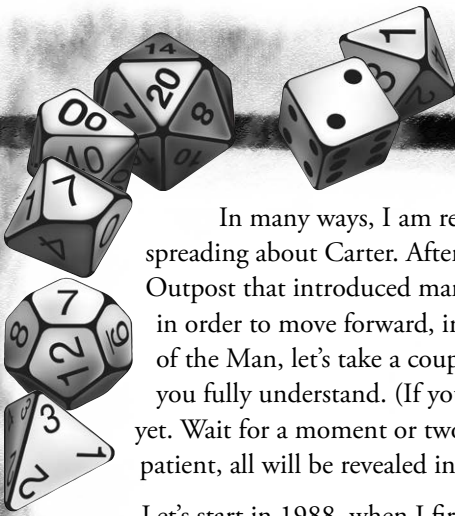
In many ways, I am responsible for all the talk people have been spreading about Carter. After all, it was my own article on the Gaming Outpost that introduced many people to Jefferson and his methods. So, in order to move forward, in order to give you a complete understanding of the Man, let's take a couple of steps back. Then, and only then, can you fully understand. (If you haven't read the article yet, don't. Not just yet. Wait for a moment or two. I'll tell you when you should go read it. Be patient, all will be revealed in time.)

Let's start in 1988, when I first started college at the University of Minnesota. I was a Game Master, running a regular *Call of Cthulhu* game on Thursday nights (*CoC* being my first love, the first game I ever bought and the first game I ever played—well, ran). The game gained quite a reputation. Everyone else was running games that were far more forgiving of PC error. I did everything I could to make the game legendary at the campus, including using every single last suggestion the rulebook threw at me. I even used a few suggestions from other games, most notably *Paranoia*, to keep the players on their toes. After all, if the mortality rate stayed high, people would know I meant business.

Soon enough, surviving John's *Call of Cthulhu* game became a kind of badge of honor. People wore buttons to the weekly meetings with numbers on them, indicating how many sessions they survived through so far. The highest number (I believe) was a young fellow who boasted a 17. He never read a single book, never cast a single spell, and always had three sticks of dynamite on his body every moment of every day. He also had a "panic button" that detonated the dynamite—just in case.

Well, after a year and a half, I wanted to run a different game. After all, I was "the guy who ran *Cthulhu*," and that kind of reputation didn't settle with me. I didn't want to get stuck in a genre, I wanted to be "the guy who ran damn good games." So I announced I was capping off my *Cthulhu* game and would run a new campaign in a completely different genre. Something that no one would suspect.

The next week, I brought *Champions* to the table.

Now, keep in mind the reputation I already earned around the club: John Wick chews up characters and spits them out like juiceless jerky. I liked that reputation; it served two very important purposes. First, like I said above, it meant that people knew I meant business. You screw up in John's game, it costs you. Second, it meant that people were very careful in my games. They were afraid for their characters' lives. (I still practice that strategy to this day. At every con I attend, I run the "I kill

'em, I keep 'em" game. People bring their *Legend of the Five Rings* characters to the game, and if a character dies, I keep the character sheet. That way, folks know that they're playing for keeps. It works well in a samurai game, with the players knowing that they're always four feet away from death. Final. Permanent. Death.)

I was faced with a difficult decision. I could maintain the same strategy for the *Champions* game, or I could adopt a much more heroic mentality. I decided to do both. Inspired by Frank Miller's *Born Again* series (a book that every superhero fan should read), I decided to keep the rules the way they were (meaning characters were very difficult to kill) while hitting them in places they never knew they could be hurt. But I wouldn't kill them.

I wouldn't kill a single character.

In a few weeks, it became obvious that mortality in Wick's superhero game was not an issue. It was now all about Willpower. (This is the point you should go read "Hit 'Em Where It Hurts" over at the Gaming Outpost. Even if you've read it before, you may want to freshen up. You can find it at the Gaming Outpost—do it now, then come back here. We'll talk about it when you're done).

(And, speaking of Willpower, it is very difficult for me not to spend the rest of this column defending that article. I might slip once or twice. If I do, I apologize. If I'm human—rather than divine—for a moment or two, I hope you'll forgive me. Us game designers gotta get forgiveness whenever we can.)

(And, one last parenthetical statement. Instead of saying "players" as if I understand the totality of gaming, I should say, "in my experience, the players I've Game Mastered for." However, just saying "players" is a bit easier on my fingers and on your eyes. Sorry for the confusion.)
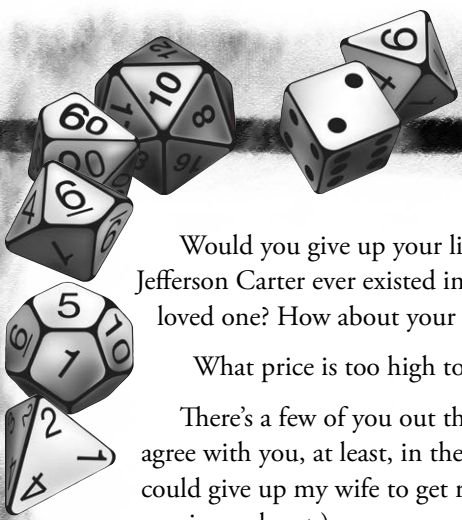
So, now you know the devious plot of Mister Jefferson Carter. You know his motives and you know his methods. A serious bastard, that Carter fellow. Evil down to the core.

In other words, an evil worth fighting. What would you give up to eliminate the Carters of the world? What sacrifice is too great?

Let's pretend for a moment. We're roleplayers, we can do that. Let's pretend that God Himself comes down from Heaven with a list of Carters. He tells you, "Pick one, and I'll remove him from the planet, erase him forever from Existence." Then, the Lord looks you in the eye and says, "But you have to give something up. Something precious."

Would you do it?

MANIPULATIVE
LEADERS
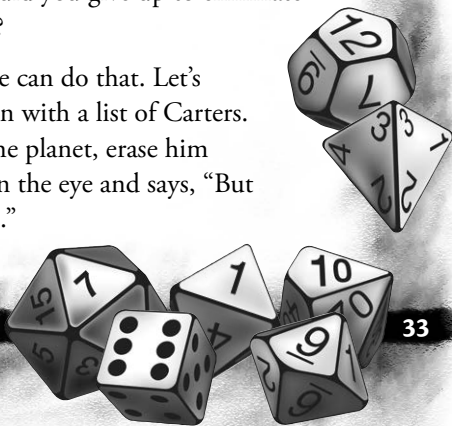
Would you give up your life to make sure that no such person as Jefferson Carter ever existed in our world? How about a limb? How about a loved one? How about your sight or hearing or touch or taste or smell?

What price is too high to erase evil?

There's a few of you out there who are saying, "No price is too high." (I agree with you, at least, in theory. But I have to be honest; I don't know if I could give up my wife to get rid of Carter. I don't know if I have that much courage in my heart.)

How about…your Aunt May?

(Was that a low blow? I can't tell anymore.)

The point here should be obvious. Heroes, real heroes, are willing to pay any cost to rid the world of its Jefferson Carters. Any cost at all. I only told you about the characters who failed, who lost resolve.

You see, Carter and I were partners in crime. However, I wasn't completely honest with him. (This is where the apology starts.) While he believed we were crushing characters, I had a secret agenda.

I was testing them. Pushing them. Pushing them beyond any limits they had set for themselves. Because a hero isn't measured by how many times he gets knocked down, he's measured by how many times he gets back up. When Carter arranged for that villain to "crash" Malice's little party (sorry about the pun), I was watching her closely. When her grandmother died, she had a choice. She could hang up her cape and cowl, or she could fight through the grief, fight through the pain, and keep going. She failed. She gave up.

So many of them failed. So many of them gave up.

But they weren't heroes. They were quitters.

There was one hero in the campaign, but we'll talk about him at the end. After all, it was his death that started my and Carter's downfall. Time and time again, players kept redesigning new characters, thinking they created the ultimate "anti-Wick" character. "Let's see him kill this one!" they'd say.

But they kept missing the point. I never killed anyone. I just pushed them. Pushed them as hard as I could, as far as I could. Some kept fighting the good fight. Others gave up and left, disgruntled that they'd been "Wick-ed" (a term someone

on the *Pyramid* discussion boards just recently invented). I never killed them. But they always—always—gave up.

Soon, my *Champions* game became as legendary as my *Cthulhu* game. "Just try and survive in any Wick campaign" was the battle cry around the club. "He'll screw you seven ways to Sunday."

But a few stuck it out. A few of them found themselves on the Short End of the Wick Stick (the term from school; the one I prefer—for those of you who care) and kept on going, no matter what the cost to their characters.

Those are the ones who were the real heroes.

And those are the ones who brought down Carter/Wick Demolition Inc. Remember Mister Fabulous? Remember his sad death? The people in that *Champions* game do. In fact, we held a wake. A live-action wake. People wore name tags ("Hi! I'm Stupendous Lass!"), and my buddy who played the Fabulous One lay perfectly still through the whole three hour event. He was a trooper. Everyone who ever played in the game came in character and said something about him.

I played Carter. I was the last to speak at the ceremony. I was the one who sponsored his heroic exploits for so many years. I remembered him fondly. I also laid a bunch of verbal clues on them at the wake. Some of those clues resonated with people who no longer played in the game. That meant if they walked away, they walked away with the key to identifying the man who really pulled the trigger on Fabulous' life and career.

After the wake was over, many of the players who no longer played in the game came to me privately. They said they wanted back in. I told them that the game only had room for five…but they could make cameo appearances if they wanted.

Soon, folks began showing up to the game for 15 minutes or so, just to relay the information they gained at the wake. One particularly powerful Empath (who I nailed with a Psychic Vampire chick who leeched away almost every ounce of emotion he ever had) told them that Carter lied to him about where he was the night Fabulous was murdered. Another—an accountant whose mathematical genius was destroyed by an endless math loop devised by Carter and was now working for the IRS—told them that Carter Inc. owned a company that owned a company that owned a company that was run by a local Mob boss who sold the gun to the kid that shot Fabulous. Another character—a super strong, super tough, super nasty rotorooter with teeth who had his bones turned to jelly and now worked in a physical rehab clinic for war veterans—told them that the kid

DOPPLEGANGER
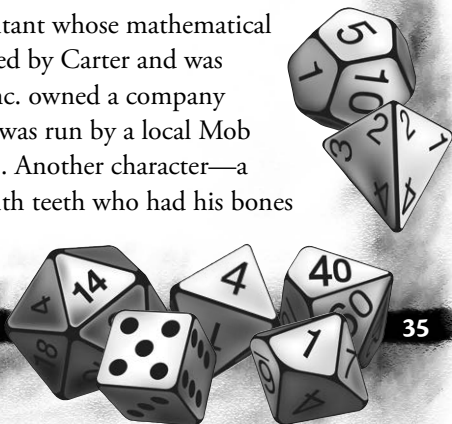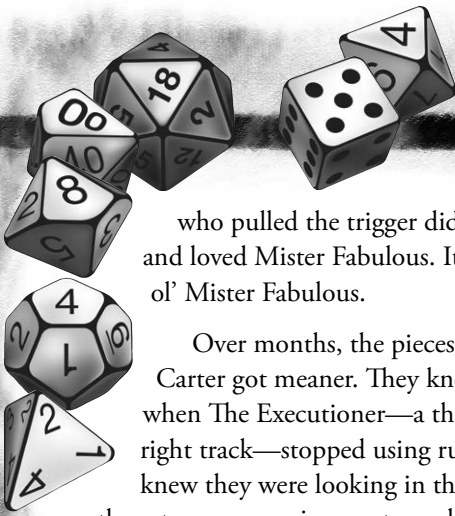
who pulled the trigger did volunteer work for him every once in a while and loved Mister Fabulous. It didn't make any sense he should shoot good ol' Mister Fabulous.

Over months, the pieces were coming together. And as they got closer, Carter got meaner. They knew they were looking in the right direction when The Executioner—a thug that Carter hired to keep people off the right track—stopped using rubber bullets and started using real ones. They knew they were looking in the right direction when Carter started giving them too many assignments, and all of them deadly.

Then, when they got close enough to discover the truth, he pulled their funding. They found themselves audited by the IRS. They found out their rent checks for the last six months were never cashed, and they were thrown out on the street. Their friends disappeared. Their families disappeared. One of them was busted for cocaine possession, even though cocaine was poison to his alien system (nice Disadvantage, that one). One of them was charged with rape. Another with child abuse. For six weeks running, one of the characters was in jail. Every four-hour session, he'd sit at the corner of the table—in jail—and watch as his friends struggled to maintain their lives.

("What do you do this turn, Roger?" "I imagine the look on Carter's face when I rip off his ears.")

Six weeks.

But he didn't give up. Even though he had a life sentence and no chance of parole and no chance his buddies would get him out of the most advanced prison ever designed for meta-humans, he stuck it out. ("What do you do this turn, Roger?" "I imagine the look on Carter's face when I make earrings out of his…" "Okay, Roger. I get the point.")

But break him out, they did. In one of the most exciting sessions in any of my games. And when he got out, he looked at me and said, "I'm still here."

I smiled. "Yes. Yes, you are."

He mimicked the motion of putting his cowl over his head and whispered, "And Carter is %$#ed."

That was the response I was looking for. For 19 months I'd run that game, knowing what Carter was doing to them. Nineteen months of preparing for that very moment, when they'd know the truth and had the gumption to go after him.

That very moment, I was proud. Proud like a papa. Nineteen months of screwing players every way I could. Nineteen months of pushing them beyond the limits of their bodies, their patience, their dignity, and their resolve. Nineteen months of giving them pain that no point configuration could protect them from.

Nineteen months were about to pay off.

It took them a whole month to get to Carter. The man protected himself well. But when it was all over, they finally had the man who arranged for the death of Malice's grandmother, the man who broke Tristan's heart, the man who shot Mister Fabulous through the head, in their hands.

And that's when they proved they were heroes.

They didn't kill him. They didn't maim him. They didn't cause a single point of Stun or Body. Instead, they turned him over to the authorities with all the necessary evidence to convict him for 17 life sentences. The prosecuting attorney was a young woman who used to be known as Malice, making a special appearance for that night only. We did the whole trial, the same way we did Fabulous's wake. The room was filled with almost every member of the gaming club. We selected jurors (folks who were playing in the three-year long *Palladium* game that might still be going for all I know) and they turned in a verdict of guilty on all but one count. Jefferson Carter would spend the rest of his life in prison. If he lived to be 2,017 years old, he'd still have 500 years left on his sentence.

The good guys won. The bad guy was behind bars. The campaign was over. I ran a couple more one-shot games of *Cthulhu* then moved to California where the name "Jefferson Carter" has popped up a couple of times, but not in the way it did in that 19-month long *Champions* campaign.

* * *

Had to take a break there. Wrote that entire piece in an hour. Cool down. Cool down.

This should have been my first column here at *Pyramid*. I say that because in that first essay about Carter, I forgot to mention the most important part of *Playing Dirty*: the payoff.

Catching and convicting Carter took them nearly two years of real time. In that time, they watched nearly a dozen heroes go down under Carter's heel (second pun for the evening; sorry), never knowing

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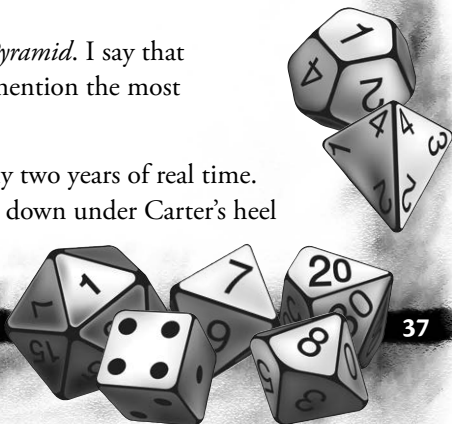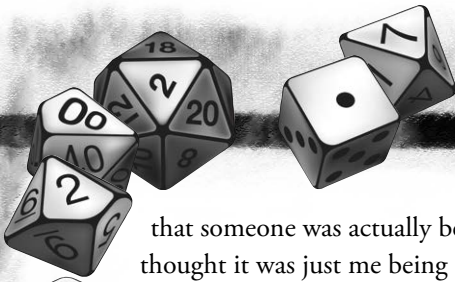
that someone was actually behind the whole thing. For the most part, they thought it was just me being nasty.

Oh, no. There was method. There was also madness, but there was much more method. And in the end, when they pinched the bastard, it was all worthwhile. Even the folks who didn't survive Carter's meat grinder helped out in their own way. The players who walked away from the game, knowing they'd been crushed, said to newbies, "You'd better watch yourself. Wick's got it out for heroes." What they should have been saying was, "You'd better watch your buddy. Sticking together is the only way to survive."

* * *

If you don't mind, a brief, personal afterword.

Writing about all this again has reminded me of something, something I'd forgotten over the last three months.

For those 90 days, I'd been unemployed. Southern California isn't too nice to folks who spent the last five years of their life at a "fake job." Yes, I've been an editor, a writer, a game designer, a product manager, and a layout assistant. I've written ad copy and I've done so many game demos, I think I've got more customer service and sales experience than most of the salesmen I know.

But it was all done at a "fake job." Tell someone you design games for a living and they say, "Wow. That's a neat job!" Ask them to hire you, and they turn away.

So, because I can't get a job in Southern California that pays any kind of salary, Jennifer and I have to move into a smaller place (losing our two bedroom, two-and-a-half bath condo). In other words, for the last month, I haven't written anything. I've had my hands full looking for a new job and looking for a smaller place for my wife and I to move into. I've turned in over 150 applications. I haven't gotten a single phone call. I did get a phone interview for one job, but someone else got that one.

One job.

So, the guy who won the Origins Award for the Best Roleplaying Game of 1997, the guy who was on the design team for one of the top-selling CCGs in America

that isn't *Magic* or *Pokemon*, has to get a retail job. I've won four Origins Awards. The games I designed and helped design have made millions of dollars.

For other people.

But when it's all said and done, I don't own a single piece of any of the games I've been involved with. Not *L5R*, not *7th Sea*. Not even a single point.

That's the game industry. You only make money here if you own the property, and I spent the last five years of my life developing properties for other people. The reason I left AEG was so I could develop my own properties, and make money in the game industry. Of course, in the meantime, I can't find a job in the real world that pays the bills.

As of Sunday night, I wrote a letter to a friend of mine telling him that I was done with the game industry. Finished. There's no money here. I could write an RPG that might reach 1,000 readers or I could write a novel or a screenplay that would reach hundreds of thousands. Of course, that kind of work would also pay my bills, rather than making new ones.

And, if you read the message boards, I ain't the most beloved individual in the game industry.

So. Why not just quit?

Then, I sat down to write what would be my very last thing for the gaming industry. This column. The one that earned me so much love on the *Pyramid* lists. I reread the Carter article. Read about Malice's grandma. Thought about why I did that to the poor girl.

I was pushing her. Pushing her.

She quit. Not because she didn't have her points allocated the right way, not because her Ego wasn't high enough, or she didn't have enough ED or PD or Stun or Body. No, she quit because she didn't have the resolve to keep fighting.

Writing those words, those very words reminded me. Reminded me why I love this industry so much. Why I love roleplaying games so much. Because we are the only medium where the Author and the
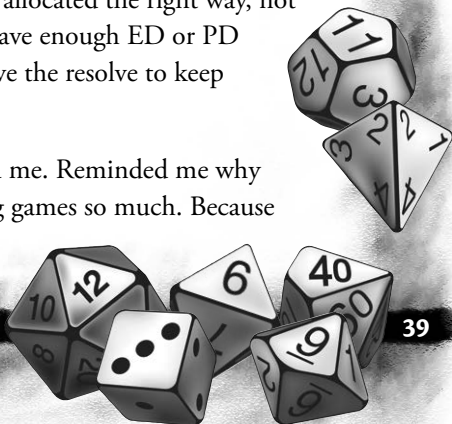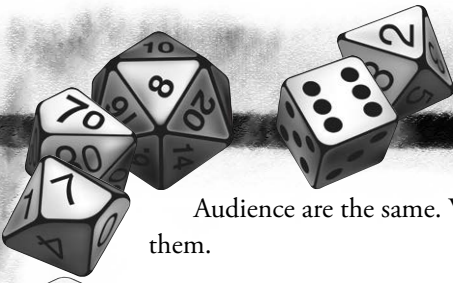
Audience are the same. Where we live the stories we tell as we tell them.

The whole point of mythology is to teach lessons that cannot be communicated any other way. Roleplaying is living myth. We aren't hearing the heroes' trials, we are the heroes. We aren't walking in their footsteps, we're making the footsteps. And the Game Master/storyteller/Dungeon Master is the Dragon. He's Grendel. He's the Whale. Yes, he is God to our Jonah. ("Did you slay Leviathan? I did.")

And why does he send us pain? (Dangerously invoking Ellison.) Because pain is what pushes us. We don't grow without pain. We don't evolve without pain. We don't learn without pain. If nobody ever knocked us down, we wouldn't know the bliss of getting back up.

I've been knocked down. I've been hit harder than I ever have in my entire life. And just now—right now, as I type these very words—I know the bliss of getting back up.

All because of a gamer war story.

I said this when I won the Origins Award for *L5R* RPG. With a very slight modification, I'll say it again. Don't let anyone—and I mean anyone—tell you that gaming isn't important. Because right now, it means all the world to me.

Introduction to Episode 3

Out of all the chapters in the book, this is the one that I get the most feedback on. "Narrative control" (the concept of putting a mechanic in a game that gives players the same kind of authority as a GM) is old hat these days, but back in 2001, most GMs had never even heard of it.

The idea of giving players a voice in my settings came about completely by accident. I had new player. She had no experience with RPGs and that inexperience allowed her to do something nobody had ever done at my table. She just started making stuff up.

"I want to go to the shop on the corner where Mrs. Bingsley has the best dried apples."

I sat behind my GM screen completely confused. "Huh?"

"You said this is a game about making things up," she said. "Can't I make things up?"

I blinked a few times and said, "Uh, I guess you can."

Other players told her, "No, only the GM can do that."

I told them to shut up.

In fact, I started encouraging other players to do the exact same thing. I encouraged them to make things up about the setting. One of the first, and most memorable, was in a *Chill* campaign. Together, my players created Ms. Carmichael, the English Professor.

"She's pretty," one player said.

Another said, "She loves Byron."

"She's single," said a third.

A fourth: "And she likes cherries."

That's how it started. It quickly became a tradition at my table: you can make stuff up and John's okay with it.

ENCHANTED HOTEL

I had been doing it for years, but it wasn't until I met Jared Sorensen that I got the idea to make a mechanic. The reason why? Jared already did. His game *Inspectres* was the first to introduce the idea of narrative control as a mechanic to me.

We met at a game convention in San Francisco. We were eating lunch and I said, "I never run the games I write the way I write them."

"Maybe you should," he said.

That one piece of advice changed everything.

Instead of writing huge GM chapters full of "advice," I started turning that advice into rules.

* * *

I have been told by trustworthy sources that this episode inspired much of the "city building" mechanic found in *The Dresden Files RPG*. These trustworthy sources may have had names that rhymes with "Dead Sticks."

Contrary to some opinions, that kind of inspiration makes me very proud.
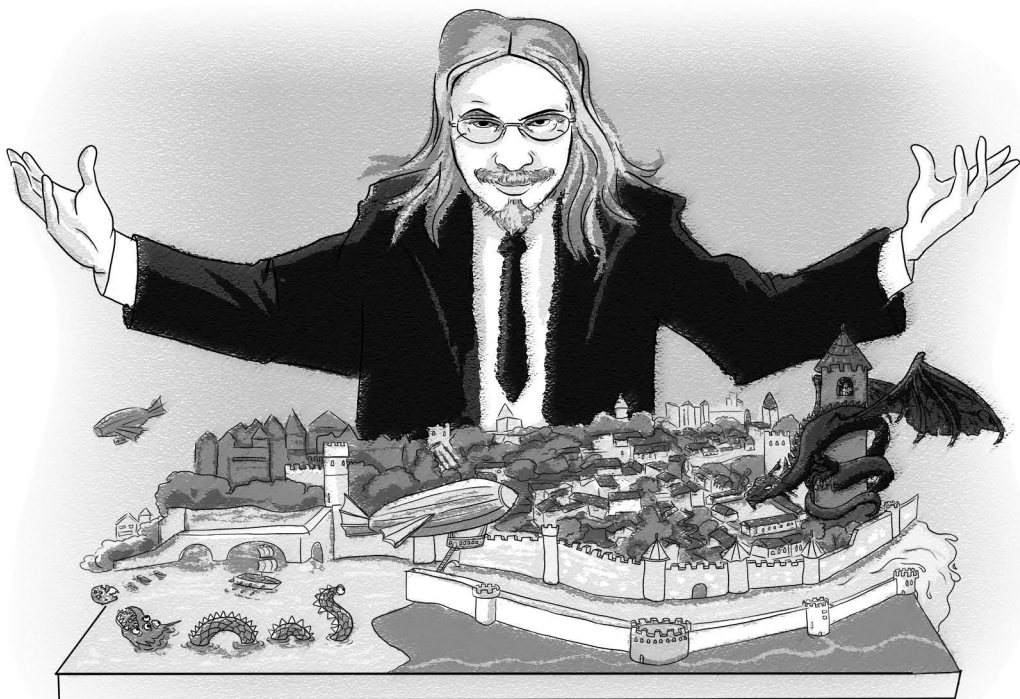
THE LIVING CITY

(Note: If you do not have a consistent setting in your game, this month's column will not help you in any way, shape, or form. Don't read it. It will not help your campaign. There's nothing to learn here. Move along.)

A common Game Master trap lies in designing setting. Many GMs think they have to spend hours, weeks, months getting to know every cobblestone, every brick, every face in the crowd. Well, I'm here to tell you that's a load of horse hockey. This month, I'm letting you in on some nifty little tricks that will make your environment come alive for your players in ways they (and you) never thought possible.

I can already hear you saying, "Hey, isn't this supposed to be a column about dirty, underhanded Game Master tricks? How is designing an environment low-down and nasty?"

ANCIENT CONSPIRACY
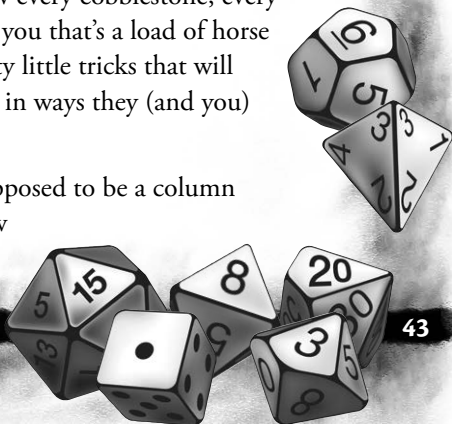
I'll tell you.

Your players are gonna do all the work.

* * *

"The Living City" is a term one of the players used to describe the city of my long-running *Vampire* game. New Jerusalem was indeed a living, breathing city. It was awake even when the players were asleep. Plots were born, lived, and died without the players ever knowing what was going on. Monumental changes occurred while they wasted time in the nightclub picking up the evening's meal. They never found out about most of those changes and events until it was too late to do anything about it. But then again, that's when heroes really shine, isn't it: when everyone else thinks it's too late.

The best part about New Jerusalem is how little work I put into it. I mean, I did a *little* pre-game work, had myself an outline, knew the names of all the important people (living, dead, and undead) in the city, and I knew what I *wanted* to happen, but everything else was up to the players. *They* were the ones who really made the city come alive. And here's how I let them do it.
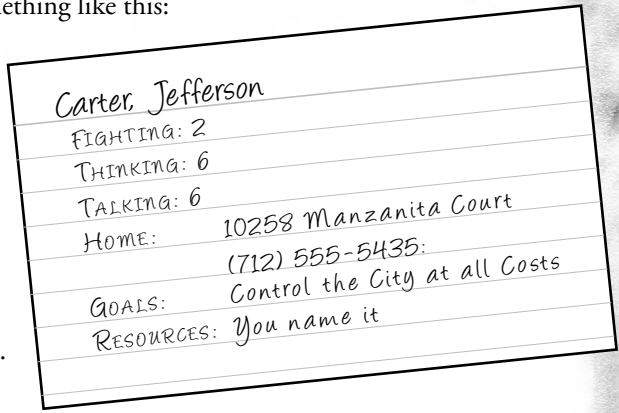
THE CITY IN A BOX

The first thing I did was get a bunch of index cards and a box to hold them in. I also got little dividers to separate them out. I had a section for NPCs, Magic Items, Important Places, Events, and Other Notes.

NPCs

First off, I didn't spend a lot of time on designing NPCs. I had an idea of how each one was going to be, but I really didn't want to invest a lot of time in building their personalities (you'll see why in a minute). I gave each one only three stats: Fighting, Thinking, and Talking. I rated each one with a number, telling how many dice he'd roll for each situation. This works really well for Storyteller games, but with a little ingenuity, you can make it work out for just about any system. Then, at the bottom of each NPC card, I wrote three words (or phrases) that reminded me what made the NPC distinct when I played them.

So an NPC card looked something like this:

Then, at the beginning of the game, after I read all their character sheets and knew the kinds of characters they wanted to play, I assigned them NPCs to play, as well. I gave them each an envelope with a copy of the card and a list of objectives for the evening. The envelope also contained information on where the NPC   was that night, so if the players wandered into   the Taboo nightclub, my buddy Ian knew that Donny Vanucci would *also* be there. If Donny got involved with the players, I'd take over Ian's character until they were done with him, then Ian got hold of his character again.

> Carter, Jefferson
> FIGHTING: 2
> THINKING: 6
> TALKING: 6
> HOME: 10258 Manzanita Court
>   (712) 555-5435:
> GOALS: Control the City at all Costs
> RESOURCES: You name it

(Here's how I made it work. I usually have players wearing name badges so they don't have to look up the character names. As soon it's time for one of the players to take a different role, I stand next to them and put my hand on their shoulder. I take off their name badge and give them the new one. Then, I put on their name badge. As soon as the scene changes, I give them their badge back and take the old one.)

Players also got to play NPCs when their own character wasn't involved in a scene. For example, the players are in Taboo, talking with Jocasta, the regent of the Brujah. Meanwhile, across town, the Tremere are talking about how to deal with that miserable group of 13th Gen losers who keep making trouble for them (that's the players, by the way). I'm playing the role of the Tremere regent and Eric's playing his chief lieutenant. At some point, the butler (played on cue by Ian who was notified to step in by his note for the evening) informs us that the regent of the Toreador was here to see us. *She* was played by the lovely and talented Elizabeth, who plays the role of a southern belle to the hilt. She lets us both know that one of the 13th Gen losers has something that belongs to her, and she is willing to do just about anything to get it back.

RIDDLE

Events

Miracle: The poor man's coincidence.
The Tao of Zen Nihilism

This little technique offered me a whole lot of advantages. First, I didn't have to come up with a personality for each and every damn NPC in the city: the players took care of that for me. From the Prince of the city right down to "Mean Mr. Mathers," the rottenest Math professor on the college campus (the *only* man on campus who ate the split pea soup in the cafeteria, I might add), they populated the city with colorful characters that would have *never* occurred to me.

Second, the players were no longer lone individuals; they were a part of the city. Each NPC they played gave them another investment in the events that occurred around them. Ian was playing Daniel Hayden, the bad-ass Brujah, but he was also playing the Toreador who *might* have been Oscar Wilde. Mike was playing Aristotle Jones (*all* the Malkavians were named "Jones"), but he was also playing Tori, the Nosferatu who took care of the thing in the sewers they called "Mother."

Lastly, the players got to look at the city in a way individuals cannot. They saw what other clans were up to, but more importantly, they saw the consequences of those actions. They saw that one single event could change the lives of hundreds of people. Things were moving all the time. The players got a real sense that they were organs in a larger organism. Not only did they see others' actions take effect on their own lives, but they saw their own actions take effect on the lives of others. In short, they learned that there's no such thing as an "isolated incident."

Convincing players to give up control of their own character so they can play the Prince of the City/Evil Wizard-Emperor/Cyber-Dragon Mafia Boss is easy. Convincing yourself to give up control of your campaign…now *that's* the hard part. You've got to be willing to surrender your best NPCs to the whims of someone else. In order to do that, you've got to swallow a little bit of pride and have some faith in your players. Of course, you've also got to make sure you assign the *right* NPCs. Giving someone the *wrong* NPC can be disastrous. But then again, sometimes, it might be the best thing to do.

I had a player who was the God-King of comedy roleplaying. The guy was an improvisational genius, always hitting the group with off-centered humor that would make Steven Wright look twice. In the *Vampire* game, I always gave him Malkavians to play, a fact that made our nutjobs both humorous and dangerous.

But one day, I decided to have him play the quick-witted Toreador assassin, Jack. "Jumping Jack Flash" was a deadly serious Englishman who looked like a sinister version of 007. When Bill got a hold of Jack Flash, he slunk into a brilliant Sean Connery impersonation that was absolutely perfect. He accommodated himself to the role, flexing his roleplaying muscles a bit more than he had before.

It was a double-edged victory. I got a Jack that was what I wanted plus a whole lot more, and Bill got to stretch his roleplaying skills in a direction he never counted on.

Improvisational Environment

I talked a little bit about this in the *7th Sea* GM Book and Robin Laws also invokes it in *Feng Shui*. It's all about getting the players to *use* the environment around them.

|	
GM:	You're in a bar fight.
PLAYER 1:	I grab a bottle of whiskey and smash it over a guy's head.
PLAYER 2:	I grab the candle on the table and shove it into another guy's eye.
PLAYER 3:	I grab a log out of the fireplace and smash another guy over the head with it.

You get the idea. You never *said* all those things were in the bar, but then again, they *make sense* to be in the bar, right? Why penalize a player for being creative?

But don't let this technique stop at bar fights. Just as your players can help you populate your city, so can they help you decorate it.

Some of the best parts of New Jerusalem came from my players. Remember Mean Mr. Mathers? I didn't create him, one of my players did. They were standing in the college campus cafeteria and one of them said, "And there's Mean Mr. Mathers over there, eating pea soup." Then, another one chimed in. "He's the *only* one who eats the pea soup." It was brilliant and I let it stick.

Once the players got the feel for it, they started decorating the city every chance they got. They invented a comic book shop

FORBIDDEN LOVE
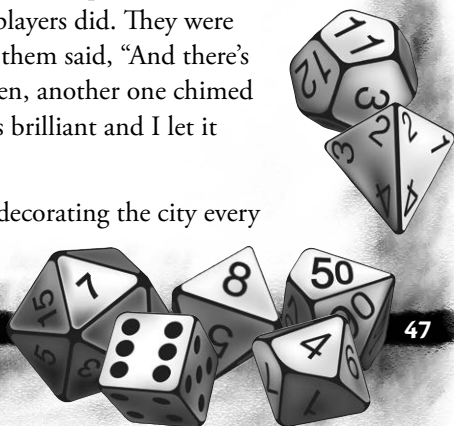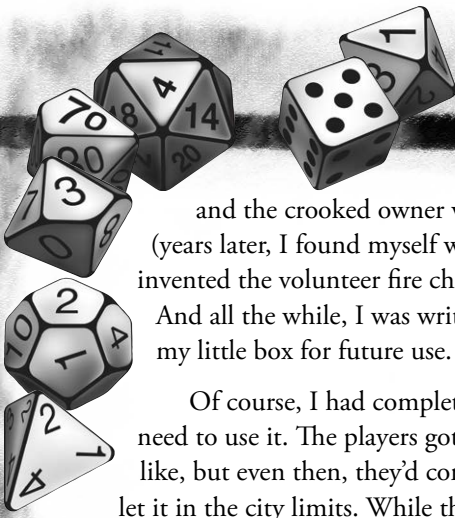
and the crooked owner who cheats kids out of their valuable books (years later, I found myself wondering how he'd do with *Magic* cards). They invented the volunteer fire chief, the city librarian, and nearly all the police. And all the while, I was writing it down on index cards, shoving them into my little box for future use.

Of course, I had complete veto power, but after a few weeks, I didn't need to use it. The players got a hold on the kind of stuff I liked and didn't like, but even then, they'd come up with something so creative, I'd have to let it in the city limits. While the standing rule was the player who created the NPC got first dibs on playing him, we did more than our share of grogging the locals (see *Ars Magica* for details).

CONCLUSION

Maximum effect for minimum effort. (*Slack!*) That's what we're gunning for here. I know a lot of you complain that you don't have time to run games anymore. I know you say you're too busy to come up with creative ways to confront your players. Well, this month you got a non-confrontational way to challenge them: let them use those brains of theirs for something other than counting experience points.

If you let them in on the Big Game, if you let them have a whack at creating NPCs, and even give them a chance to plot against *themselves* (I always loved that bit), maybe they'll appreciate all the hard work that goes into running a game.

And maybe—just maybe—I'll figure out a way to show *you* all the hard work that goes into *designing* one.

Introduction to Episode 4

When I read through this episode I came away thinking, "I don't like it."

I was talking to my illustrator about it and she said, "Why don't you just re-write it? It's your book after all."

I took her up on that suggestion.

90% of the material in this episode is brand new. As for the old stuff, I don't think I'd use most of it. These days, when I run into a trouble player, I usually just sit a player down and ask, "Why are you doing that?" Then, I'd listen to the answer and we can talk our way to a resolution. Because that's really the best way to handle "trouble players." Find out why they do the things they do and work it out. And if things can't work out, politely ask them to leave.

A lot of these tricks I suggested were very clever, but they were also more than a little passive aggressive. You should never treat fellow grown ups that way.

But then again…there are times…
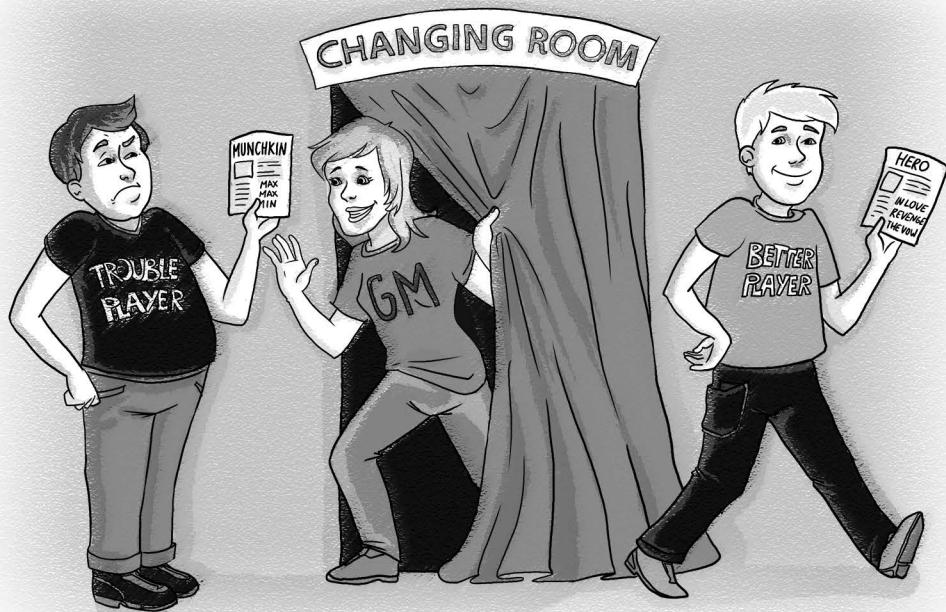
EPISODE 4

MAKING BETTER PLAYERS

On my YouTube channel, someone sent me an e-mail. They said, "Your techniques only work if you're dealing with good players."

My response was, "Why are you playing with bad ones?"

I thought this was a more than adequate response. I don't play with bad players. I don't play with people who find joy in sabotaging the game. I don't play with people who are only interested in their own enjoyment and sacrifice the enjoyment of others. I don't play with people who use "the Nuremberg Defense." I just don't do it. I show them the door.
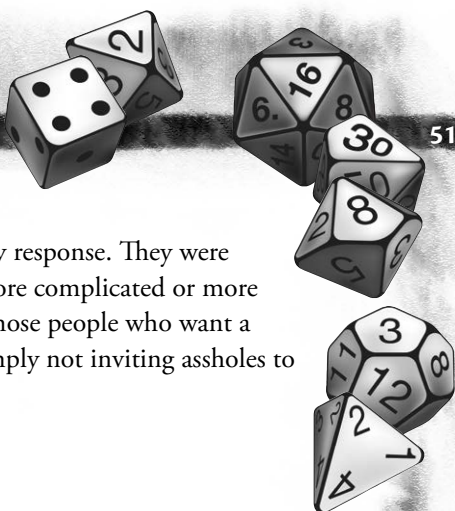
But, apparently, some people took offense to my response. They were looking for a more complicated answer, I guess. More complicated or more clever. And so, this chapter of *Play Dirty* is for all those people who want a solution that's more intricate and involved than simply not inviting assholes to your game.

All right. Let's talk about Bad Players.

REWARDS

Immediate rewards for good behavior. That's what we're talking about here.

Most RPGs reward players at the end of a session. "Here's your XP, thank you for playing." What I'm talking about is immediate rewards for good behavior.

Every single RPG I've designed has had this little trick. In *L5R*, it was void points, in *7th Sea*, it was drama dice, in *Houses of the Blooded*, it's Style. You hand the player a poker chip or a piece of candy or a glass bead or *anything* and you do it immediately after they've done something awesome. Why? Two reasons.
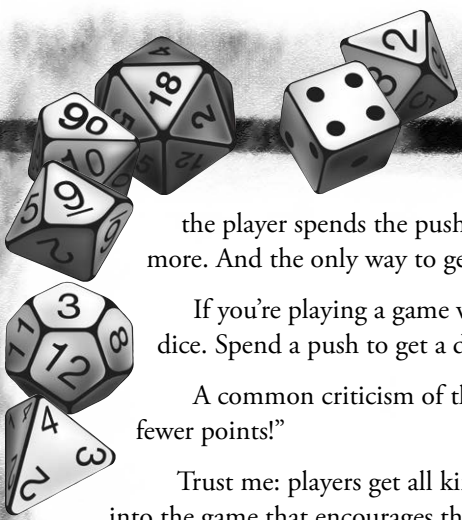
First, because Pavlov showed it worked.

Second, because it communicates to the player, "This is the kind of behavior I like and reward in my game."

Third, because players smile when you do it.

Okay, that's three reasons. But that last one is important. If you've never rewarded players for doing stuff, you have no idea how it feels. It feels awesome. And it feels awesome for both of you. You don't appreciate how powerful this is until you do it. This isn't waiting until the end of the game and getting XP, it happens *when they do it*.

Now, many games don't have immediate reward systems. We can fix that.

If you're playing in a d20 game, when a player does something awesome, give him a *push*. You can represent it with poker chips or candy or whatever. (I like candy the most.) With that push, a player can boost a roll by one point. In other words, the player can boost a 15 to a 16, a 17 to an 18. They can spend multiple pushes to get bigger bonuses. Some GMs may think that's too much, but I don't. Big bonuses make players feel their characters are big heroes and I like that. What's more, once

the player spends the push, it's used up. If he wants more, he has to get more. And the only way to get more is to continue acting awesome.

If you're playing a game with dice pools, you can use pushes as bonus dice. Spend a push to get a d4 or d6 to add to your roll. Easy peasy.

A common criticism of this kind of trick is, "Less vocal players get fewer points!"

Trust me: players get all kinds of vocal once you introduce a mechanic into the game that encourages them to be vocal.

Also, as a side note, you can use pushes to encourage player choices. Offer a push if a player decides his character falls in love with the evil sorceress plotting to overthrow the king. Or, offer a push if a player decides to overthrow the king!

TALK! TALK! TALK!

Encourage your players to talk to you.

The character sheet is a means the players use to talk to you. If a player has a lot of physical skills, he wants a lot of action in the game. If a player has a lot of social skills, he wants a talking game.

Look at Inigo Montoya. If you look at only his character sheet, all you see are sword skills. He put all his points into sword fighting. He even took a disadvantage—Alcoholism—to get more sword skills.

If you look only at his character sheet, you'd assume this player wanted to be in sword fights. But we all know that is not what Inigo Montoya wants. Sure, he gets into fights, but that's not the end goal. The end goal is to get good enough to defeat the Six-Fingered Man and avenge his father's murder. That's what makes Inigo different from the standard fighter. In order to learn that, you have to *talk to the player*.

Characters without motivations are nothing more than numbers. Playing in game systems that don't acknowledge character motivations…well, let's just say you should be playing a board game.

You shouldn't just make sure your players' characters have motivations, you should make *mechanics* for them. A lot of games do this these days—and that's a good thing—but a lot of games don't. If your favorite game doesn't, *make a mechanic for it*.

For example, you have a player who is about to make a character for your game. Ask her, "Why is your character here?" Or, better yet, give her suggestions.

"Is your character here because she's looking for revenge for her murdered mother?"

"Is she here because her brother is under a curse and you need enough magic knowledge to break the curse?"

"Is she here because she needs money to pay off a family debt?"

Ask leading questions. Give your players ideas. Target those ideas so they fit the campaign you plan on running. If you have a big villain, perhaps the big villain did something dastardly to a character's father on his way up the power ladder. Or, perhaps the character used to be aligned with the villain until said bad guy betrayed her and now she's looking to make things right.

Once you have that in place, it's time to assign a mechanic for it. And you already know how to do that. Give your players pushes when they take actions to resolving their goals. The further away they get from achieving that goal, the fewer pushes they get. They don't get punished for wandering off track, they just don't get rewarded.

There's a lost subplot in the movie *The Crow* that I love. The current cut of the movie hints at it, but doesn't directly address it. The invulnerable, powerful, and deadly Goth Superman remains invulnerable, powerful, and deadly so long as he stays on his path to revenge; but if he meanders, if he tries to help others, he becomes vulnerable. He loses his super revengy powers.

I liked that a lot. It was a mechanical reward for following the goals the player of Eric Draven chose when he made the character.
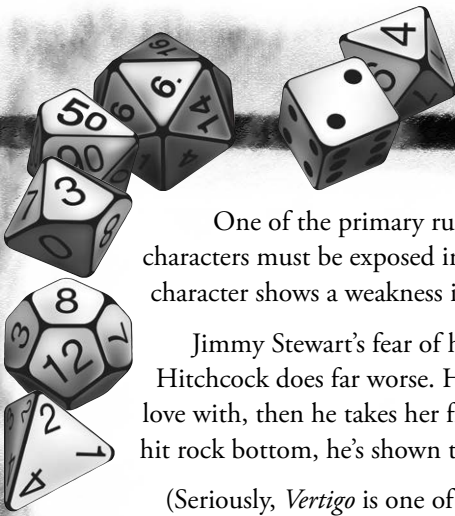
DIGGING THEIR OWN GRAVES

This sounds insane, but trust me, it works.

Go to a player and ask, "How can I hurt your character?"

Can I bury him alive? Can I make him fall in love with an NPC who will betray him? Can I lead him on an investigation where he discovers that he's really the bad guy with amnesia? Can I cut out an eye or make him lose a limb?

REVENGE PLOT
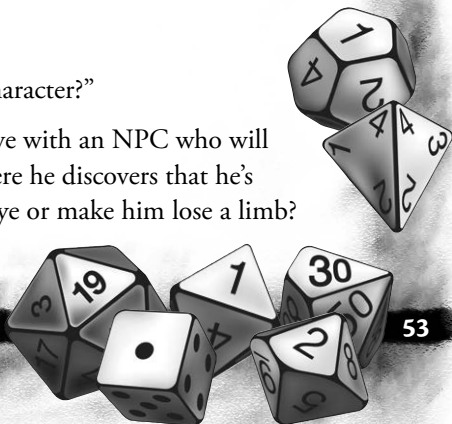
One of the primary rules of theater (and literature, in general) is that characters must be exposed in order for drama to occur. In other words, if a character shows a weakness in Act 1, you'd better use it by Act 3.

Jimmy Stewart's fear of heights in *Vertigo* comes to mind. But Hitchcock does far worse. He gives the hero a beautiful woman to fall in love with, then he takes her from him. And just when the hero thinks he's hit rock bottom, he's shown that he hasn't even broken the surface yet.

(Seriously, *Vertigo* is one of the most heartbreaking movies you will ever see. If you haven't seen it, go watch it. If you have seen it, watch it again. Think of Hitchcock as the GM and Jimmy Stewart as the player of his character, Scottie Ferguson. You think the stuff in this book is mean, you haven't seen anything yet.)

For drama to happen, characters must be exposed. Not protected, but *exposed*. I say this a lot because most RPGs are built to *protect* characters. (Hell, *D&D* has three redundant systems to protect your character: hit points, armor class, and saving throws all represent the same damn thing.) But perfectly protected characters are boring. Nothing ever happens to them and they solve every problem with ease and without bringing danger to themselves.

An RPG's mechanics encourage player behavior. If a game's mechanics encourage the player to protect his character, he'll do that.

But if an RPG encourages a player to put his character in danger…what happens?

Well, at first, the player revolts. He's been taught all his life that the mechanics are there to protect him against the GM's plot. We need to wean players away from this way of thinking. And we're doing to do that with *mechanics*.

As an example, in *Houses of the Blooded*, I encourage players to put their characters in danger with Style Points. Style Points run the game. They're incredibly powerful, allowing players to have narrative control, change details in the world, and otherwise act as the GM for a moment. But a player can only get a Style Point if he deliberately puts his player in danger or chooses to have his character make a decision he knows will lead to disaster.

Along with the Style Point comes the explicit promise from the GM, "I won't screw you on this… any further than you want to be screwed."

That's where communication comes into play. You talk to the player and say, "What's okay? What can I do to put your character through the ringer?"

Find out what the players want and then give it to them in spades. Let them give you the knife. Then, bury it to the hilt.

Once players know what's going to happen, once they tell you what they want you to do, unleashing hell on their characters becomes okay. It's what they want.

And that's what our job is. Giving the players what they want. Or, more specifically, giving them what they need.

RICH INTERNAL LANDSCAPES

I have to admit: as a player, I've been guilty of this. Really damn guilty.

I once wrote an eleven-page backstory for a character. Eleven pages. Only the GM and I got to see it. What's worse, I did it for a LARP, the place where players and the GM have the least amount of interaction.

None of the other players got to see it. None of them even knew about it. You know what that makes the eleven-page backstory I wrote?

Masturbation.

Now, don't get me wrong, I encourage players to have backstories. I encourage them to have histories. What I *don't* encourage is keeping them secret. I want them to talk about those histories in public. After all, if we don't know why you're character acts a certain way, *we don't know why your character acts a certain way*.

I blame all of this on a player named Tony. I once put him in a difficult spot. Tony stood up, put his hand on his chin and started talking out loud. He was voicing his character's inner dialogue, going through the thought process his character was going through. He said it out loud so the other players could hear it. It let the other players see his character as if they were looking at the scene from a third person omniscient point of view. They were in his head and saw, first hand, the pain his character was going through. And when his character made the difficult choice he had to make, they knew the inner struggle his character suffered to make that decision.

After I saw that, I encouraged all my players to do the same thing. I wanted to hear them *think*. I wanted them to go through the same process.

It made all of us the audience. And that's the strength of an RPG. A strength no other medium has. We're right there, in the room with the characters. We're not just watching them, *we are them*.

OLD SCORE
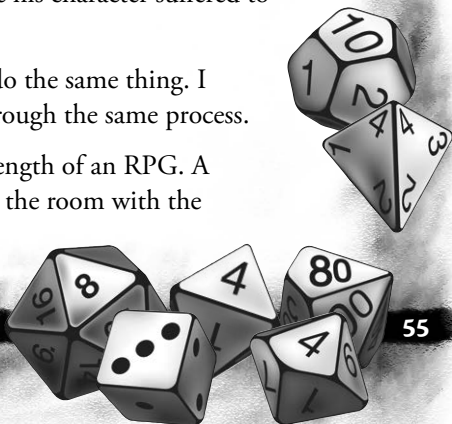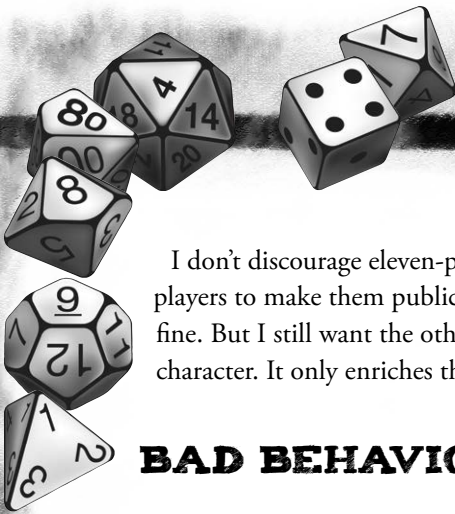
I don't discourage eleven-page character histories, but I do encourage players to make them public. If they want to keep a secret or two, that's fine. But I still want the other players to have an inside look at your character. It only enriches the experience.

BAD BEHAVIOR: INTERRUPTORS

There is no such thing as a bad player, there are only bad behaviors. You and I can fix those.

An interruptor is someone who interrupts the flow of the game. They try to show videos on their smart phone in the middle of the narrative, they start anecdotes that distract from what's going on, they talk about the latest episode of their favorite show right in the middle of a dramatic scene.

Honestly, the best way to deal with interruptors is to tell them what they are doing is inappropriate. The most polite way to do this is to say, "Save it until after the game." You do this enough, most interruptors get the point.

Of course, one of the best ways of dealing with interruptors is taking away their cell phones or otherwise forbidding them internet access. They're surfing the internet while the game is going on, only tangentially paying attention, when they stumble across something they think is cool and want to share it.

It's fine if you want to share that, just make it after the game. Make a note and when we're done, we can all watch it.

No clever trick here, just forthright communication.

The clever trick is putting all the cell phones in the center of the table. That's all you really need to do. You've addressed the issue. Nobody wants to be the person who grabs their cell phone.

Of course, the first one who grabs their phone loses something off their character sheet. Or, they roll a d10 instead of a d20, a d4 instead of a d6, whatever.

That's the clever trick.

BAD BEHAVIOR: THE NUREMBERG DEFENSE

What is the Nuremberg Defense? You know it. You've seen it. It's been used on you. You've used it.

It goes something like this…

After killing/robbing/screwing over another player's character, the Nuremberg Defense says, "Sorry, I'm only playing my character!"

My first response? "Okay, let's have you make another character because this one is clearly not working with the group."

After all, most designers make "ensemble" RPGs: the focus is on the group interplay. If you have one person using that to make others miserable, he can either change his character or he can leave the group.

No, seriously. He can leave the group.

Personally, I don't have any patience for trolls. Everyone at my table agrees to work together to tell a story. If you have a different goal, you need to play with a different crowd.

Like, go join a *Vampire* LARP.

Now, while I give this advice all the time, I always get the same responses. It's usually, "We can't uninvite him because he's our friend."

Buddy, you need better friends. Yeah, I said it. I'll say it again.
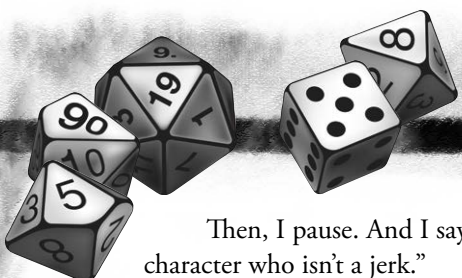
YOU NEED BETTER FRIENDS.

If you want to keep him around, talk to him about the problem. He may not even *know* that what he's doing is a problem. In that case, you can tell him, "This behavior doesn't work at our table. You're sabotaging the game. Please stop it."

And if he doesn't, there's always the *Vampire* LARP.

Again: communication equals win. Talk to him. Then, if that doesn't work, I have another solution.

When a player pulls the Nuremberg Defense at my table, I give a kind smile and say, "A bolt of blue lightning strikes down and kills your character dead-dead-dead. He's a little blob of quivering jelly."
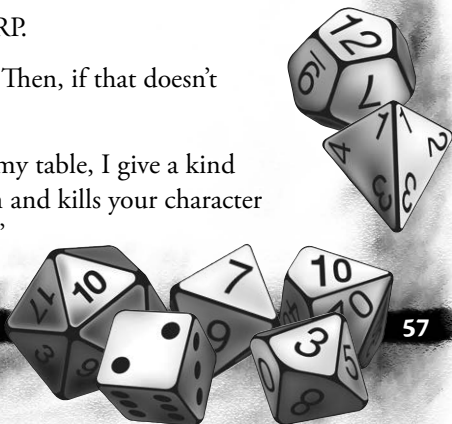
Then, I pause. And I say, "Sorry, I'm only being the GM. Now make a character who isn't a jerk."

BAD BEHAVIOR: THE LONER

There's something I like to call "the PC umbilical cord." Most of you have figured out what this means without me explaining it, but just in case…

The players are supposed to be a *group*. That is, they make decisions together; they act as a unit; they face the consequences of their actions *together*. Player parties have very little room for the Snake Plisskens of the world. Everyone in the group plays a specific role in the group, complementing each other's strengths and weaknesses.

Every once in a while, however, you get that dark loner. You know the guy. He's a bad man, but he's very good at what he does, and what he does isn't very pretty. That guy. When he joins a party of bounty hunters, he always kills the target rather than capturing him because "The Weed of Evil Bears Bitter Fruit." Despite the fact the party is trying to act as a unit, he always acts on his own, living by his own rules, by his own code of ethics. And when you confront *the player* about the problem, he just shrugs and says, "That's the way my character is," or worse, he gets offended and starts spouting the time-honored favorite: "Don't make me compromise my character concept!"

Now the key to preventing this guy from ruining your campaign is…don't let him make that kind of character! Unfortunately, players are sneaky. They'll make characters that *look* friendly and willing to Play Well with Others, but when the crunch is on, they sneak into the shadows, steal all the loot, and tell the others that they have *no clue* what happened to the booty they were after.

Well, this guy doesn't last long in my games because I invoke a little thing we like to call "consequences." Here's how it works.

Every action has an equal and opposite reaction, right? That means the next time the Merciless Killer Without a Heart goes and whacks the NPC the party is supposed to *capture* (for ransom, for the law to deal with, whatever), you give him some time, then spring The Law on him.

The Law shows up at 3:45 AM (the time All Bad Things happen in my games) with stun guns, tear gas, tasers, and all other kinds of nasty wickedness. They

capture the entire party and throw them all in jail for interrogation regarding the illegal murder of The Guy We Were Supposed to Take Alive. Then, spend the rest of the evening interrogating the party. Each one, by himself, under a sunlamp. Go out and get one at Wal-Mart; they usually cost under ten bucks. Use the same tactics cops use when they interrogate prisoners. Tell them that their friends have ratted them out. Tell them that they're going to spend a *real long* time in prison. Then, when they *think* they've beaten the rap, reveal to them that the guy they were chasing was an undercover cop. *Now*, they're facing Murder 1 charges, which means life in prison (or the death penalty, depending where they're at). Sooner or later, one of them will give up The Killer Without a Cause. Either that, or evidence shows up that gives the cops a solid case against him.

Then, we have the trial. A lot of game sessions can go toward a trial. Or, if you prefer, you can do it the short way: go right to the verdict. Of course, Mr. Don't Make Me Compromise My Character is found guilty as charged and gets sent to prison.

For life.

Now, I don't know about you, but I have a rule in my games: you don't get to make another character until the one you're playing dies. That means Bob gets to play his perfect combat machine in an 8x8 cell for the rest of his natural life.

"What are you doing this round, Bob?"

"I'm watching the cockroach crawl across my cell."

For life.

If he asks really nice (and agrees not make that kind of character again), I'll let him make a new character. Of course, a few years later, Mr. Bad Ass breaks out of prison and goes after the party for revenge.
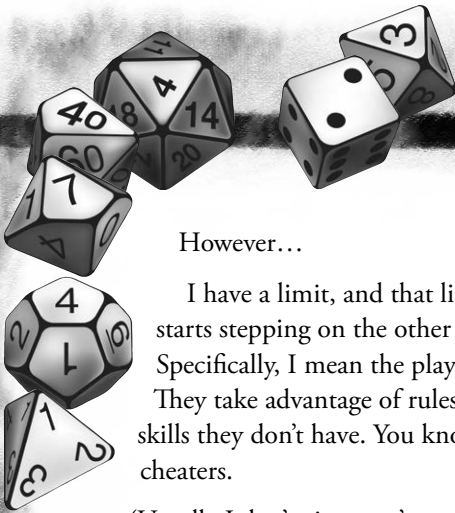
As an NPC.

Played by Robert De Niro.

THE LAWS OF THE TABLE & KHARMA DICE

Now, I have to admit, this one is *seriously mean*. While I usually play dirty with my players, I also play fair. By "playing fair," I mean that, like a mystery writer, I show them everything they need to solve the situation at hand.
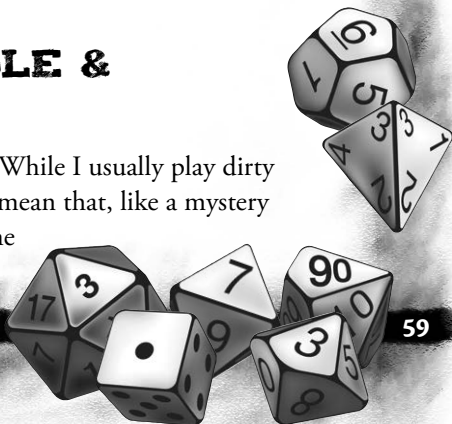
However…

I have a limit, and that limit is my players' enjoyment. When one player starts stepping on the other players' fun, I start fighting fire with fire. Specifically, I mean the players who feel it necessary to "break the game." They take advantage of rules. They lie about rolls. They make rolls for skills they don't have. You know who I'm talking about. I'm talking about cheaters.

(Usually I don't give a rat's petunia about cheating. Players *expect* the Game Master to cheat, but for some reason, Game Masters are supposed to poo-poo players cheating. Maybe this is because the GM is expected to cheat *for* the players. Maybe. As GM, I may hit the players below the belt, but I'm also looking out for their better interests.)

But then there are players who feel they need to break *other* rules. You know, the ones not listed in the book. "The Laws of the Table," one of my players called them.

> I.   **Pay Attention**
>
> II. **No Monty Python**
>
> III. **Don't Read at the Table**
>
> IV. **If You Must Speak, Whisper or Pass a Note**
>
> V.   **No cell phones and no laptops**

Those kind of rules. Players who can't seem to follow these simple rules of etiquette really chap my hide. And so, in order to deal with breaches of etiquette, I use Kharma Dice.

I've mentioned this one somewhere else, but not everyone is a *7th* Sea fan, so I'll put it here, too (and I'll be brief). In short, whenever someone breaks a Table Law, put a black die in a bowl in the center of the table. Then, later on in the game, when *another* player is making a really crucial roll, remove the die from the bowl, turn to the player and say:

"YOU FAIL."

The emphasis is important.

In short, the rude actions of one player crush someone else's success. I've found this keeps the *Boldy Brave Sir Robin* choruses down to a minimum.

If you like, you can also use Good Kharma Dice that work in exactly the opposite manner. Whenever a player does something selfless, courageous, or noteworthy, give them a white die. When another player is making a crucial roll, they can give that white die to the player and you tell them:

"YOU SUCCEED."

Again, the emphasis is important.

THERE'S ALWAYS SOMEONE BIGGER

Now this is a *nasty* trick. I used to use it a lot when I was running *Champions*. As we all know, there are a few hundred bazillion loopholes in the Hero System, and we've abused all of them in our time (remind me to tell you about Multiplier Man someday). But abusing character creation rules has always seemed so petty to me, especially when people are *proud* of it.

("Great. You made a combat monster. Big effin' deal. What's his mother's name?")

So, in order to deal with the Power Player, I taught him a rule that orks (and all the other one hit die monsters in the world) know all too well:

There's Always Someone Bigger Than Yourself.

First, I designed an equally abusive Combat Monster to deal with our Bruiser Bob, but that ain't enough. No, sir. Not if you're gonna play dirty. Since Bob feels it necessary to cheat to have a good time (and let's not mince words, that's *exactly* what he's doing), it's time for you to show him that you can cheat, too. In fact, you can cheat *better* than he can, which makes you a better person. He who cheats best (makes the best broken character and/or bends, twists, and bends the rules best) wins, right? So, here's what you do.

Get yourself three sets of identical dice. This is easy if you're playing a game that requires only one die type like *Vampire* or (coincidentally enough) *Champions*. Then, arrange a set of those dice for the perfect roll behind your screen. Save 'em. Don't touch 'em.

Finally, when you've beaten Bruiser Bob to a bloody pulp, make a roll. Ignore it. Look very sadly at the dice behind your screen—the ones you arranged before the game began. Then, lift the screen and show the players your "roll."

BLACKMAIL

A critical hit. Bruiser Bob's turned into Bloody Pulp Bob. Too bad. Time to make a new character.

BAD BEHAVIOR: THE RULES LAWYER

Now, under most circumstances, Rules Lawyer Bob is your friend. He knows all those little nuances of the game that you can't keep in your head and reminds you when you need a nudge.

However…

There's that fellow who's always telling you: "You're doing that wrong."

Or, "That's not how that works."

Or, "Let me look that up."

This guy is The Enemy. Instead of relying on your judgment to make a snap decision, he wants to play things By the Book. Instead of accepting that you're improvising things, juggling story, character, narrative, *and* a rulebook, he's insisting on everything going by What the Author Intended. And if he does it enough, players start looking to *him* for rulings rather than you. This kind of challenge to our authority is unhealthy. Therefore, you have to do something *drastic*. Something *dramatic*. Something *dirty*.

First, take away his character sheet. Then, tell him if he doesn't remember how many dice to roll, or if he rolls the wrong number of dice, or if he forgets something on his character sheet…

HE FAILS.

It's all about emphasis.

This isn't so much being mean as holding Rules Lawyer Bob to the same standards he expects from you. If *you're* supposed to know all the rules, if *you're* supposed to be the Rule Encyclopedia, holding everything to memory…

There is nothing in the rules that says you *can't* do this. Therefore, you can.

Of course, if this doesn't work out for you, try a different tack.

I'll use the Storyteller System as an example. Whenever Bob starts his rules ranting, take away his 10-siders and give him 4-siders.

"Here, Bob. You make all your rolls with *these*."

There is *nothing* in the rules that says you *can't* do this. Therefore, you can.

When Rules Lawyer Bob gets hit with a blind spell, blindfold him.

"What did you roll, Bob?"

"I can't tell. I'm blindfolded."

"Well, then…YOU FAIL."

Finally, if he insists on looking things up…let him. While he's looking things up in a book, the rest of the game goes on without him.

"Bob, you just got hit. You took a stunning amount of damage."

"How? I didn't hear any dice roll."

"He didn't need to roll. You weren't paying attention. You were looking at something else."

That'll learn 'em.

LAST WORDS

Like I said above, the techniques this week are generally mean, nasty, and underhanded. They are *not* for everyone. Most of the time, I really don't need to use them…more than once.

But the *reason* to use them is specific. I don't play a roleplaying game to win. I don't create a character to demonstrate how to "break" a character creation system. When the Game Master speaks, I listen.

The fact of the matter is this: everyone in the group either wins or loses. If everyone is having a wonderful time, we all win. If one player decides that he wants to have fun *in spite of everyone else*, he's selfish. If he feels he needs to show off his character design skills in such a way that messes with other players' enjoyment, he's acting like a twelve-year-old jerk with serious confidence issues.

Granted, he's also your high school buddy Bob. And that makes things all too complicated. I hear so many people saying, "Gaming is a social activity." Then why the hell are so many gamers lacking in any kind of social skills? Maybe it's because gaming has always been about blind acceptance. So many of us came to gaming because we were "outsiders" of one kind or another.

But that doesn't mean we can't learn. And that doesn't mean we can't grow.

LOST MEMORIES
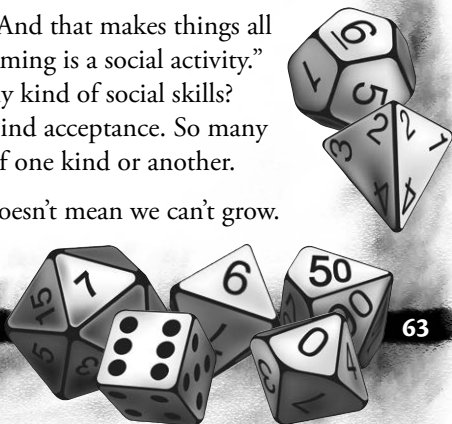
Introduction to Episode 5

I've said this before and I'll say it again. Most RPGs read like they're written by virgins.

The combat system is 50 pages. A ten-second fight takes four hours of real time to resolve. You've got different stats for the broadsword, the short sword, the bastard sword, the cuirass, the scimitar, the two-handed sword, and the katana. All have different damage dice, different speeds, different range, parry modifiers, breakage chances, different damage depending on the size of the target, affect armor differently…

But seducing the barmaid takes a single roll.

Like I said, a game designed by virgins. Virgins with sword fetishes.

* * *

Not trying to sound like Tyler Durden here, but before a game designer tries making a system for simulating violence, he should probably get himself in a fight. At least one. Because once you've been in a fight—a *real* fight, not the fake fighting stuff they do at boffer LARPs and at SCA wars—you'll know that speed factors, parry modifiers, breakage chances, and all the rest of that stuff don't mean squat.

Most fights last less than ten seconds. And when I say, "most fights," I mean just about all of them. There's a reason boxing and MMA break things down into 2-minute rounds: you get damn tired. And you get damn tired damn fast. Those breaks between rounds are meant to give you a chance to get your wind back. To make the fight last a little longer. If a fight just went on without rounds, it wouldn't last longer than five minutes. That's because both fighters would be sucking wind.

Fighting is *hard work*. To steal professional wrestling jargon for a moment, "You'll blow up faster than a balloon."

Besides, the reason boxing and MMA last as long as they do is because those fights have *rules*. A real fight? There are no rules.

In a show fight, you can't gouge eyes, bite ears, kick the groin, rake your nails across your opponent's face, fishtail the mouth…trust me, if you're in a fight and someone's pushing their thumbs against your eyes, you give up. None of this, "I have fifty hit points left!" nonsense.

You. Give. Up.

I'm always amused when people tell me that games like *D&D* and *GURPS* have "realistic combat systems."

Let me fill you in on a little secret: hit points are the furthest thing in the world from "realistic." They're *abstract*. "Abstract" and "realistic" are not synonyms.

When I first started designing *Legend of the Five Rings*, the rule for getting hit by a katana was, "You die."

If you know anything about the history of the katana, you know that blacksmiths tested them by piling corpses on top of each other and cutting through the pile. A good katana could cut through at least three bodies, sometimes up to six.

So, my katana is a "five-man katana." It can cut through five bodies with ease. And you want to argue about how many hit points you take from getting hit with it?

The rule gave the samurai a way to dispatch dozens of enemies easily and it made samurai damn dangerous. Unfortunately, I was overruled on that rule, and we went to a standard hit point system instead.

Later, when designing *Blood & Honor*, I reintroduced the idea. You get hit by a katana, you die. No hit points, no saving throws. You die. I used the idea for the same reasons. It made anyone trained with a katana damn dangerous. That made samurai damn dangerous.

But I had a counter for the katana: the musket. A weapon a peasant could use. And if you got hit with a musket, you died. No saving throw, no rolling for damage. You just died.

Watch any *chanabara* film or study the history of Japan and you know exactly what that rule does to a samurai setting.

The goal of those rules was not to be "realistic," but to encourage behavior in characters. To enforce the themes of the setting.

Read through the rules of *7th Sea* and you'll see an entirely different kind of fighting. Not because it was realistic, but because we wanted the rules to encourage the players to make certain choices over others.

* * *

Finally, I'd like to share a mechanic with you that may help out your game.

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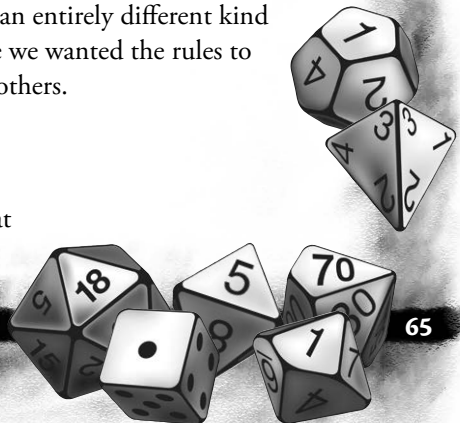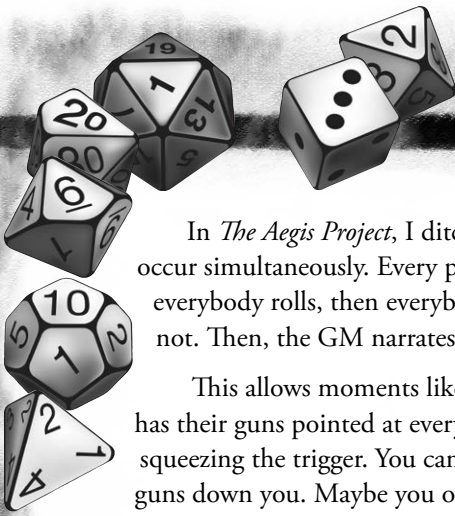
In *The Aegis Project*, I ditched the notion of "initiative." All actions occur simultaneously. Every player announces what their character is up to, everybody rolls, then everybody tells the GM whether they succeeded or not. Then, the GM narrates the scene using that information.

This allows moments like the end of *Reservoir Dogs*. Everybody has their guns pointed at everyone else. There's no initiative. There's just squeezing the trigger. You can gun down your opponent the same time he guns down you. Maybe you only get grazed in the shoulder or maybe you take a debilitating gut shot. Maybe you hit him square between the eyes or maybe you miss. It all happens at once, with all the consequences of all actions happening at the same moment.

Here's the step-by-step way to do it.

Step 1: The GM Explains the Scene.

You tell everybody what's going on, giving them enough information to make decisions.

Step 2: Announce Intentions.

Go to each player and ask them what their character is doing. Take notes. Make sure you get it all; you don't want to miss anything.

Step 3: Everyone Rolls.

Now, every player rolls for their intention. After they roll, they tell you whether or not their roll was successful. Then, everyone rolls for effect. Again, write down everything you need to know to resolve the scene.

Step 4: GM Narrates

Once all that's over, the you narrate all the actions as if they happen within the span of a few seconds. Everything happens at once.

For example: a PC shoots his gun at an NPC at the same time the NPC shoots his gun at the PC. Both succeed. The PC rolls enough damage to kill the NPC and the NPC rolls enough damage to only harm the PC. Both things happen. The NPC dies and the PC takes damage.

Another example: we have the same situation, except in this case, the PC fails his roll and the NPC succeeds. Both things happen at once. The PC misses and the NPC hits his target.

Yet another example: the NPC rolls enough damage to knock out the PC and the PC rolls enough damage to injure the NPC. Both things happen at once. The PC's shot hits the NPC in the leg and the NPC's shot knocks the PC unconscious.

Step 5: Round Two (if Necessary)

If you need to keep going, do it.

COMBAT EXPERTISE

Here's a new skill for your crew. Note, in Step 1 above, I didn't say you give the players "good information" or allow them to make "good decisions." You may consider having a new skill called "Combat Experience" or something similar. This skill allows you to look at an environment and make good decisions. The better the roll, the more information they get. Those who don't have the skill at all may even get *bad* or *inaccurate* information.

Combat Expertise may also allow some characters to take actions that resolve *before* all other actions. That's a damn powerful skill and I'd suggest making it hard to acquire.

"Hard to acquire" as in, you have to get in a fight to get it.
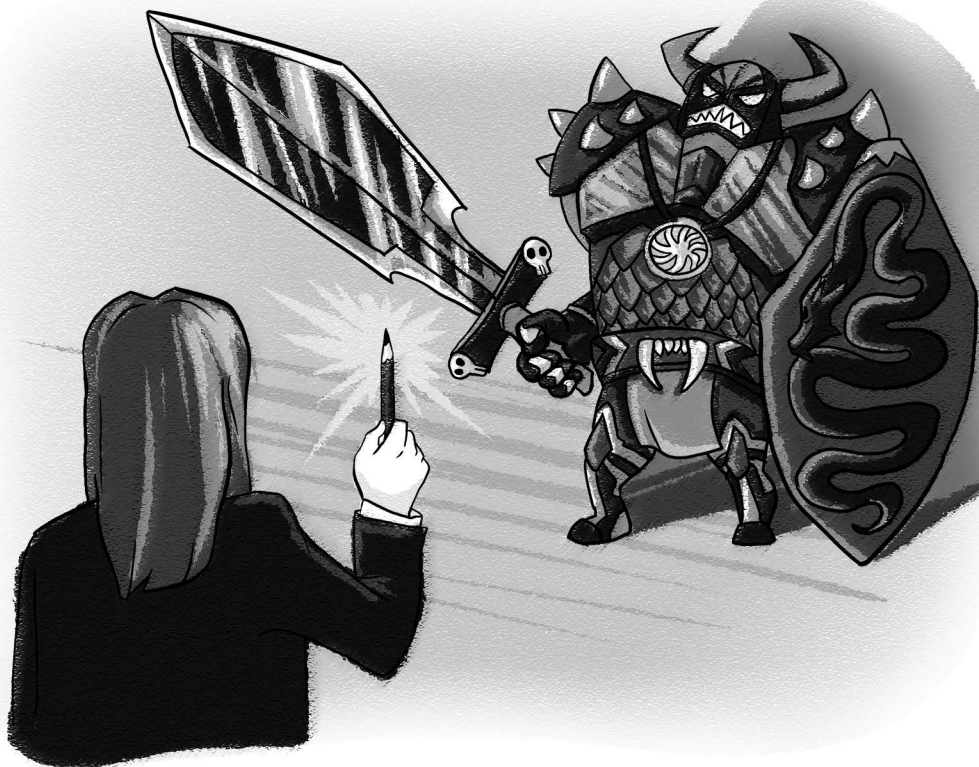
EPISODE 5

DIRTY FIGHTING

(OR HOW TO MAKE IT HURT LIKE HELL)

SMALL FOREWORD

A few folks have been commenting that while my column is very entertaining (I *hope* so!), it wasn't very useful to them. I can understand that. I've often found that teaching through example and anecdote is the best method, but then again, I've also found that occasionally, I've got to change my tone and style to keep the rest of the audience awake.

SMUGGLING

And so, this month, we're going to take a break from the whole "there was this time in band camp" voice and get down to the nitty gritty.

Let's you and me roll up our sleeves and get some licks in. Let's fight.

* * *

I know what you need. Oh, yes. I do.

You have a problem with the way your game is playing, but you can't quite put your finger on what's wrong. But I know what's wrong. Oh, yes. I do.

It's your fight scenes. Quite frankly, they're not very exciting. Don't worry, it's not your fault. You just been taught poorly. Never blame the student, always blame the teacher. "Teacher say, student do" as Mr. Miyagi would say.

You see, *you* think the excitement of a combat scene comes from the uncertainty of dice rolls. Like I said, it isn't your fault. This is what you've been told all your life. Well, we're going to take care of that. Right here, right now. I'm gonna show you some nasty, dirty, rotten, low-down tricks to make your combat system fly. Your players will forget about their dice entirely because their hands will be too busy gripping the edge of the game table with excitement, fear, and anticipation.

MAKE IT HURT

Let's start with a basic problem. They're called hit points. They're also called wounds, stamina points, and a few other pretty names, but when all's said and done, they're hit points.

Players believe that hit points make them safe. "I can still fight," they tell themselves. "I'm only down ten hit points!" They'll continue to fight until they reach the Level of Uncertainty—"I've got 15 hit points left! Gotta make it back to the cleric!"—and run away. This is an easy one to solve.

Take the hit points away.

There are a few ways to do this. We'll look at each one individually, then at the end, we'll see how they all work together.

REALISTIC COMBAT

All too often, when running games that I didn't write, I encounter a small problem. Combat lasts too long. See, I've studied on this subject. Did a bit of kung fu and kenjutsu and judo and even gotten into a good old-fashioned slobberknocker
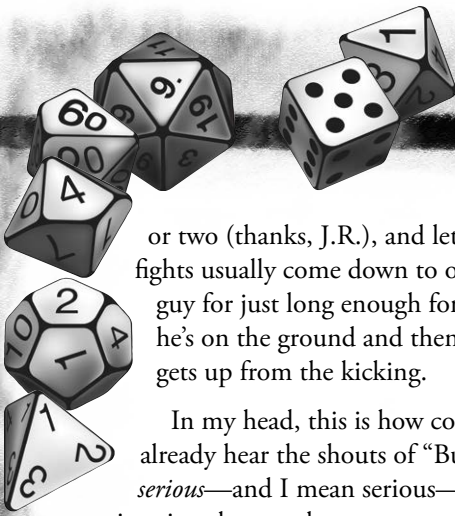
or two (thanks, J.R.), and let me tell you from the voice of experience, fights usually come down to one hit. Just one. That one hit stuns the other guy for just long enough for you to give him an even *better* hit, and then he's on the ground and then, it's all over. Except for the kicking. He never gets up from the kicking.

In my head, this is how combat in roleplaying games *should* work. I already hear the shouts of "But that's not very heroic!" Let me ask you a *serious*—and I mean serious—question. What's more heroic: charging into a situation that you know you can't lose, or charging into a situation that may very well kill you? What act demands more courage? More guts? More "intestinal fortitude"? I think we know the answer to that one.

So, here's what you do. Take away hit points entirely. No hit points. You get hit, you get hurt. You get hit again, you get killed. (That's how *Orkworld* is gonna work, but that's for another column.)

"But players wouldn't stand a chance!"

Oh, yes they would. If they fought with the wisdom of Sun Tzu they would. If they fought with the cunning of Musashi, they would. But usually, they don't, which means they end up making another character by the end of the night.

HIDDEN HIT POINTS

A lot of folks call this the "Jonathan Tweet Solution," but I learned it from a guy named Danny Beech in Albany, Georgia, so I call it what he called it: "Hidden Hit Points." In short, all you do is keep track of all the damage rolls and hit point totals. The players *never know* how many hit points they have. Ever.

Oh, they've got a rough idea. The cleric knows he's rolling d8s and the fighter knows he's rolling d10s and the thief knows he's rolling d6s, but they never know for sure.

NARRATIVE COMBAT

"But how do they know how hurt they are?" you ask. Just make sure you use another little trick called "Narrative Combat." Those of you who've practiced some martial art or another know how combat *really* works. You get hit, you get hurt. That's what combat is *supposed* to do: hurt your opponent. So, when you run combat sessions, make sure to enforce the hurt.

Never let your players say, "I roll to hit." You know what they're doing, you want to know how they're doing it. Ask them important questions like:

- Where are you trying to hit him?

- How hard are you trying to hit him?

- Is this a real strike, or a feint?

Go on, ask them those questions. Then, give them *game bonuses* when they give you the answers. Give them *bigger* game bonuses when they do it themselves.

On the reverse end of things, make sure that whenever characters get hit, they *get hurt*. Ten Hit Points of damage doesn't tell you *anything*. Instead, keep track of *where* characters get hit and *how hard* they got hit. Here's an easy way of doing it.

First, write down how many hit points each character has.

Next, figure out a 10% loss of hit points, a 20% loss of hit points, a 25% loss of hit points, etc. Do this *before* the game begins. Be prepared. Then, assign descriptions to each HP loss. In other words, a 10% hit is a flesh wound. No big deal. But a 25% hit is a crippling hit, one that causes major blood flow, loss of sensation in the limb (if that's the head, you've got problems…okay, *he's* got problems).

Finally, when a player takes a hit, describe it in the most visceral way possible. (Multiple viewings of *Saving Private Ryan* or *Ravenous* may be appropriate for you to get into the right frame of mind.) If a player takes a 25% hit to the left arm, his fingers go numb, blood sprays in his face on regular intervals, and the pain shoots up his arm, into his neck just behind his eyes. Don't forget the fact that all the pressure in his blood stream is now compromised, making his heart beat a lot faster and a lot stronger as it tries to compensate. He'll lose a bit of his vision from the pain, experience disorientation, and possibly black out from the tissue trauma.

(For those of you who don't know, "tissue trauma" is what kills you when you get shot in the foot. Everything in your body is under constant pressure. When you get a wound, you get tissue trauma. The insides of your body try to force themselves outside by the sudden change of pressure and the whole body suddenly goes into shock. Just imagine your body as the interior of a jet plane that just lost cabin pressure. Just so's you know.)

One of the objectives of the *7th Sea* game system was to do this: encourage players to use words like "feint" and "beat" and "riposte." If they're *right there* on the character sheet, players will use them. If they don't know they can do it, they won't do it. Which leads us to our next section…
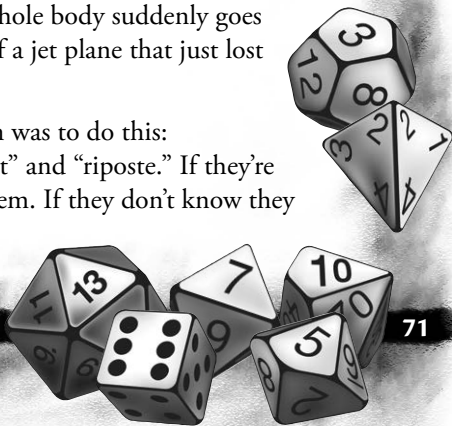
CREATIVE COMBAT

I remember the first time someone looked at me from across the GM Screen and said, "You know the rules don't cover this, but I'd like to try it anyway."

Like I said a moment ago, if players don't know they can do something, they won't do it. Experimental players are rare in the extreme. All too often, they think, "Well, there's no rule for it, so I can't do it."

This mentality is in *direct violation* of the Roleplaying Prime Directive: *If there isn't a rule for it, make it up.* (Of course, a lot of people have forgotten this rule, but that's a subject for another column.)

No Game Master or game system can cover *every* contingency, but that doesn't mean that your players should be punished when they come up with something both you and the rules never counted on. In fact, they should be *rewarded*.

THE WOUNDING SKILL

Hidden Hit Points not only get you a neat way of making characters edgy during combat, it also opens up other, very useful, rules. Like the Wounding Skill. Here's how it works.

If you spend a lot of time fighting (like fighters) or healing (like healers), you get to know how bad a wound is just by looking at it—or poking your fingers around in it, whichever works for you. Thus, the Wounding Skill. Folks who spend a lot of time fighting or healing can take a look at a wound and say, "Wow! That wound was a) slight, b) serious, c) grievous, d) crippling, or e) fatal. Eventually, if they get into enough fights, other characters—besides the fighters and healers—can figure this skill out, too.

FIGHT DIRTY, FIGHT SMART

Now, let's spend a moment talking about villains.

Your players face off against a villain. There's only one of him and an average of 4.5 of them. He's built off the same number or a greater number of points/is one or three levels higher… you get the picture. But, there's 4.5 of them. He's vastly outnumbered. He's in deep trouble, right?

Wrong. *They're* the ones in trouble. Why? Because my villains know how to fight. Here's what happens.

THE WISDOM OF SUN TZU

If you haven't read Sun Tzu's *Art of War*, do so now. Right now. You will learn more about strategy and warfare (and how they are a part of everyday life) in those few pages than you'll learn anywhere else.

My villains are students of Sun Tzu's teachings. They understand that in order to face an enemy of greater number, you have to get allies. And sometimes, the ground you stand on can be your ally. In this case, our heroes have infiltrated his lair and caught him "off guard."

This is a mistake. Fighting a villain in his own lair, where he knows the terrain and they do not, is to his advantage. He knows all the safe places to hide. He knows where all the tricks and traps are. He's not alone; he has his lair on his side. And, because Joe Villain's an Eagle Scout who follows the Scout's motto, he's prepared for such a contingency.

He has nerve gas to stun any characters who are susceptible to it. He has the floor wired for electrocution. He can kill the lights, grab the hidden infrared goggles, and proceed to kick ass. He's ready for them. Of course, when it comes to ass kicking, Joe Villain follows the advice of another master of martial arts…

THE RUTHLESSNESS OF MUSASHI

Miyamoto Musashi's *Book of Five Rings* is another study in tactics, but on a more personal level. Musashi said, "With my way, one man can beat ten, ten can beat one hundred, and one hundred can beat one thousand." Or something like that. Musashi understood one very important fact about one-on-one fighting: if you don't use every method at your disposal to win, you're not only a fool, but you're a fool on the wrong end of a 4-foot razor blade. Congratulations, that makes you a dead fool: doubly disqualified from the game of life.

When Joe Villain fights, he fights dirty.

First, he tries to gouge the eyes. Hey, if you can't see, you can't fight. One hit, you're on the ground, and the kicking starts.

Then, he kicks you in the knees. Hey, you can't stand, you can't fight. One hit, you're on the ground, and the kicking starts.

Then, he kicks you in the groin. Or, he makes cuts above your brow, so blood oozes down into your eyes. Or, he makes cuts on your hands and wrists so the pain slows down your thrusts and parries and

RANSOM
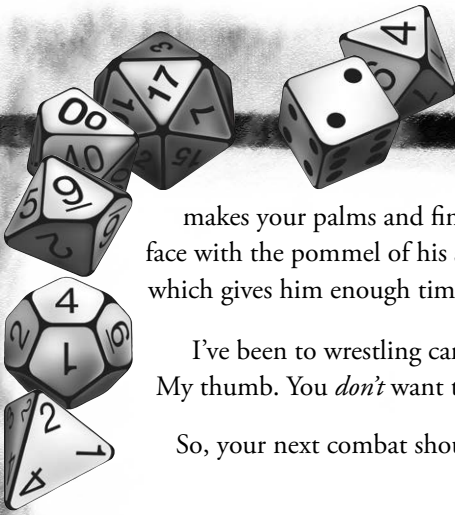
makes your palms and fingers slick from blood. Or, he hits you in the face with the pommel of his sword so you're stunned for just a moment, which gives him enough time to put 4 feet of steel through your heart.

I've been to wrestling camp, folks. I've been taken down by *my thumb*. My thumb. You *don't* want to know how that feels. Trust me.

So, your next combat should sound like this:

Player: I roll to hit. Succeed. Roll to damage. Ten hit points.

Game Master: The villain grabs your sword arm *(DICE ROLL)*. He succeeds. You can't use your sword next round because your sword arm is tangled up.

Player: Uh. Okay. Roll for initiative?

Game Master: Sure. But you subtract two from your roll because you're surprised.

(DICE ROLL.)

You lose?

Player: Uh, yeah.

Game Master: All right. He twists your arm. He rolls Strength. You roll Stamina. He gets a +5 because he's got an arm bar on you.

Player: Uh, okay.

(DICE ROLL.)

Game Master: All right. The villain won. He takes you down to the ground. Now, he's on top of you. You're face down on the ground. He's got your arm behind you, and your shoulder's making strange sounds. He grabs hold of your hair and pulls your head up just before it comes slamming down into the castle's stone floor.

Notice: Not once did you mention hit points.

Fighting Dirty is just like Playing Dirty: use everything at your disposal. Throw tapestries on them and pull them out from under their feet. Throw a bucket of

flammable liquid on them, then swing torches in their faces. Kick, bite, and gouge. Hit them in the soft places that bone doesn't protect. How did *you* react when Tyson bit off a piece of Holyfield's ear? That's how you were *supposed* to react. Unfortunately, it just pissed Holyfield off, but the plan was solid. If it stunned you for even a *second*, it worked. You'd be on the floor and then there'd be kicking.

(Of course, my wife just walked in and notified me that the word I should use instead of kicking is "stomping." But then again, she's always been a lot meaner than me. Smarter, too. And prettier. Get the impression she's reading over my shoulder?)

Losing hit points doesn't hurt. Losing an ear does.

Just ask Holyfield.

Episode 6 Introduction

(chat recorded Friday, November 7, 2014, 1:52 PM)

Sheldon: John I need your ST help. I want to $%^& with Rob for his 5th Order ordeal tonight. 5th Order ordeals have always been about emotionally tweaking both the character AND the player, but Rob is so damn stoic. And I also want him to die as his retirement, since this is his last game. How do I give someone an unhappy ending and make it satisfactory. You're the master at this, and I'm stumped.

John: Ask him.

John: Let him write his character's demise.

Sheldon: *blink*

Sheldon: That honestly didn't occur to me.

John: It may not be a surprise to him, but it'll be a surprise to everyone else. That way, he's emotionally invested in telling the story with you.

Sheldon: Boom.

John: If that doesn't work, if he wants to be surprised, come back to me and we can work something out. But sell him on the "The other players are our audience. What kind of story do we want to tell?"

John: Assume you are the actor and the other players are the audience watching your performance of your character. No rich interior landscapes allowed.

Sheldon: Yeah, it's hard to break out of that mindset sometimes, but I totally get it. And I think that Rob would be on board.

Sheldon: I got caught up in wanting to surprise him.

John: We've been trained by…other larps…to keep secrets. To protect our characters. which is the LAST thing we want to do. Drama is about EXPOSING the character, right?

Sheldon: Exactly.

Killing characters is always a tricky subject. Over the years, I've read a bunch of advice on how to do it, when to do it, and even if you should do it.

One of the questions I ask people at game design seminars these days is, "Can characters die in your game?"

I mean, think about it. Does your game need a mechanic to kill characters? Do characters have to die…or is there a different solution?

Sherlock Holmes never died, even when he fell off Reichenbach Falls.

Doc Savage never dies.

The Shadow never dies.

Luke Skywalker is never really in danger of dying. Neither are any of his compatriots.

And then there's the whole question of, "If characters *can* die, what's the mechanic?"

Limiting yourself to "going to zero hit points" is about as exciting as putting together bookshelves. Hit points, wounds, injuries, and the rest all represent a character reaching physical limits. Sanity Points, Willpower, and other similar mechanics represent a character reaching mental limits.

What if character death only occurs when a character meets a *narrative* limit? In other words, "I will die destroying the Death Star." Or, "I will die when I help the Kingdom of Avalon win its freedom."

Forget health points and wounds and all that stuff. Those are just hurdles on the way to the finish line. Instead of focusing on physical trauma as a character's end, focus on the character's *story*.

If a character hits zero hit points, he gains a *permanent wound*. Something that haunts him for the rest of his life. In the *Cerebus* comic, the titular character goes through all kinds of dangers, but as readers, one of the worst was when he lost an ear. A scar that continued for more than one hundred issues (until he finally met his death in issue #300).

I remember that moment clearly because it hit me in the chest. "This is the closest Cerebus has ever came to death." It was dangerous. That's because Dave Sim kept that moment. He held on to it. He didn't threaten Cerberus with death and dismemberment every issue. He kept it for over 180 issues until he sprung it on us. Keeping it made that moment special.

If the characters face death and dismemberment every time you play, the risk pales. Then, if you

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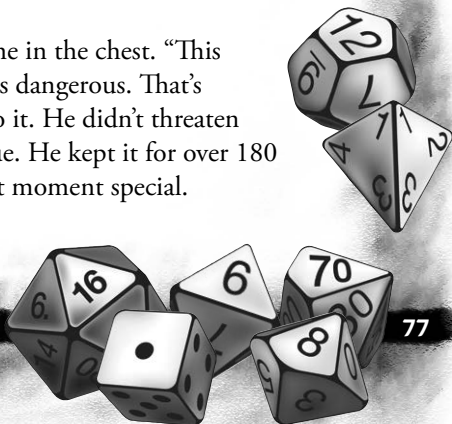
have access to resurrection magic or technology, death becomes nothing more than a video game respawn.

Oops. You died. Lose some money and try again.

At that point, death doesn't even have a sting. Death becomes an annoyance.

Let me say that again and I want you to pay attention this time.

Death becomes an annoyance.

Don't you ever—and I mean *ever*—allow your campaign to get that far: where a person's death becomes anything less than the most awful thing your character ever experiences.

* * *

Finally, while going through the episodes for *Play Dirty 2*, I realized I had recently written an episode on killing characters (cleverly entitled, "Killing Characters"). Reading through that essay then going back to this one, I couldn't help but notice the differences and similarities.

If you get a chance, I suggest reading through the episode (that I've renamed *Get a Helmet, Part 2)* after you read through this one. It was like listening to a conversation between thirty-year old John and forty-five year old John.

And yes, there are days I wish I could reach through the time vortex and smack him upside the head.
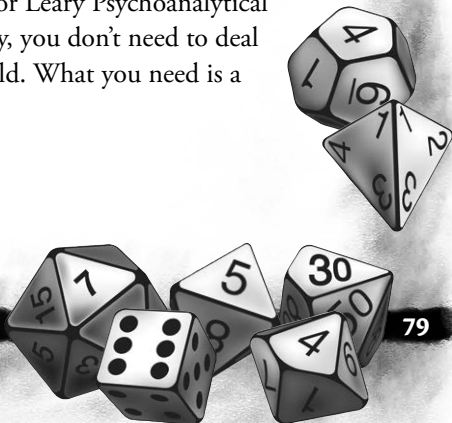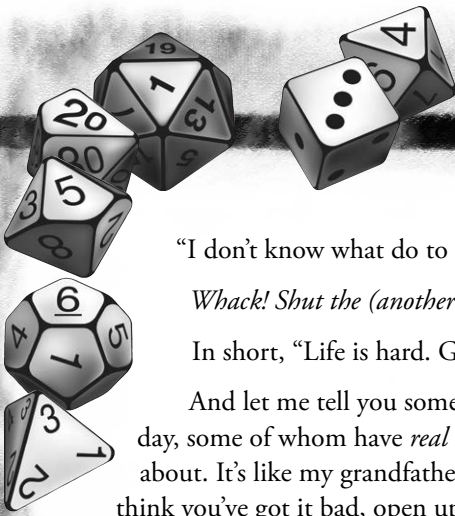
GET A HELMET

A MINOR PRELUDE

Not too long ago, a group of friends and I were sitting around a table, listening to Dennis Leary's *No Cure For Cancer*, laughing ourselves sick. One bit caught us by the collar and threw us down to the floor: the Doctor Leary Psychoanalytical Seminar. You don't need to deal with issues of family, you don't need to deal with "stress," you don't need to grasp your inner child. What you need is a good, swift kick in the backside.

"But my father, he abused me when I was…"

Whack! Shut the (insert obscenity here) up! Next!

UNEXPECTED
OPPORTUNITY

"I don't know what do to about my girlfriend, she…"

Whack! Shut the (another obscenity) up! Next!

In short, "Life is hard. Get a helmet."

And let me tell you something, I've worked with a lot of kids in my day, some of whom have *real* issues, not the crap the people I know grouse about. It's like my grandfather told me when I was younger, "If you ever think you've got it bad, open up your (Irish obscenity) eyes and look around. You'll find someone who's got it a whole helluva lot worse."

All of this comes to a very important point. Stay with me. We're getting there.

There's a whole lot of people in this world who spout the "Get a helmet!" philosophy. Then, life kicks one of them in the teeth with iron-tipped combat boots and he starts crying like a fifteen-year-old who just found out the first girl he ever kissed didn't fall madly in love with him and, in fact, has moved on to someone new. Then, he bitches and moans and complains about how unfair life is, and how if only he'd done things differently, it'd all be different and how could she be so cold, so uncaring, such a heartless, cruel, calculating…

Hey. Wait a minute. Where's your helmet?

Like Super Chicken says, "You knew the job was dangerous when you took it."

For those of you who haven't figured it out, here's a bit of existentialist truth for you to chew on.

Life. Isn't. Fair. The sooner you learn that, the better off you'll be.

Now the question you have to ask is this:

If roleplaying games are supposed to simulate life, why are so many people obsessed with making them "fair"?

And with that in mind, let's move on to this month's topic. Twenty bucks says you can't figure it out until we're all done.

PART ONE: THE PROBLEM

Game Masters have to be careful when dealing with a player character's mortality. At least, this is what people tell me. I really don't see what the big deal is.

When it comes down to killing characters, there are really two groups of GMs. The first group are the Dicers. These folks insist that GMs don't kill people, dice kill people. Of course, these are the same people who think guns fire themselves. Secondly, we have the Free Formers. These people insist that dice should *never* have influence over a character's life. Of course, if you actually *play* in one of these games, you'll soon find out that you're playing second fiddle to the GM's NPCs while they tell you a story they could have done all on their own.

No, my friends. The answer lies somewhere in the middle, I think. Somewhere between perception and reality. That's where the GM shines best, stuck right between those two.

It's the reason I have such a problem with *Star Trek*. Whenever I watch it, I know nothing significant will happen to the main characters. Oh, one of them will learn some sort of "life lesson," but nobody ever really changes. The only reason people ever change on TV shows is because they're leaving the show (which means the character gets killed), get pregnant (which means the character gets pregnant), or have to make a movie (which means they go into a coma for a week or two). But in the end, nobody really changes.

Unfortunately, this disease has crept into our industry, polluting it with the same puerile fanboy fiction we see on *Trek* webpages. Nobody ever changes. Nobody ever dies.

And when we sit down with our favorite character every Friday night, we have the comforting feeling that we'll be leaving with that character intact. The worst thing he'll have to encounter will be a valuable life-lesson that shows him how he can make himself a better person.

Not in my game, buddy.

You sit down at my table with one understanding: You'd better wear a helmet.

* * *

See, the problem comes down to a simple assumption: you ain't gonna die. If the dice roll badly, the GM will fudge the roll and you'll be okay. Or, you just make sure not to put yourself in a situation where the dice roll badly, and you don't have to worry about getting killed. Besides, only Killer GMs arbitrarily kill characters.

This, unfortunately, leaves you and me in a bind. We can't kill characters without making ourselves

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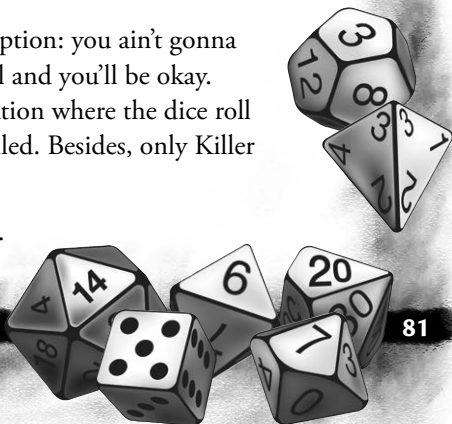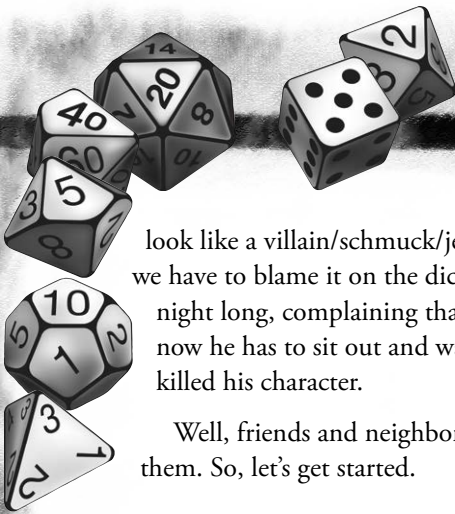
look like a villain/schmuck/jerk/Killer GM. If we do whack someone off, we have to blame it on the dice. Otherwise, we get whiny player voice all night long, complaining that he doesn't have a character to play with, and now he has to sit out and wait for the rest of you to finish because *you* killed his character.

Well, friends and neighbors, I got solutions for you. A whole ton of them. So, let's get started.

PART TWO: THE SUPPORTING CAST

The first solution is the easiest. Players always assume they're the main character. Well, just because they believe that doesn't necessarily make it so. In fact, try running a game where the characters are all Red Shirts. You know the language I'm talking.

This really works for my buddy Ray's *Star Trek* game (he was running the FASA version; that's how old this story is). We didn't play the bridge crew in that game, we played all the guys who went down to the planet *before* the bridge crew showed up. Fortunately, Ray had a very good sense of drama, so we didn't have Kirk and Spock beaming down at the last second to save our bacon every week. No, the officers on the USS Kirkland were a bit too important for that kind of heroics. *We* were the Away Team, sent down to an alien planet to investigate unusual tricorder readings. And by the end of the year, we were the best-trained Away Team you ever saw.

However…we went through about seven crewmembers in the course of that year. We were expendable, and we knew it. Now, a lot of folks may say, "But how do you get attached to a character you know is going to die?" My answer is simple: "How can you get attached to a character you know *isn't* going to die?"

Another good example is *The Thirteenth Warrior*. The narrator of that film (Antonio Banderas) ain't the main character. In fact, he's a very *minor* character. The real hero of that tale is Beowulf (however you want to spell it). He's the one who gets to kill both Grendel and his Bad Mommy (so bad, she don't even got a name). It's *his* story. And though we know Banderas ain't gonna get whacked (he is the narrator, after all), imagine a player in that kind of situation. He *knows* he isn't the hero. He *knows* he isn't the one who gets to kill the Boss Monster. He *knows* he's the sidekick. So, what does he get to do? He supports the Hero. And if he's weak, if his courage breaks, that puts the story one step closer toward tragedy.

Even in a modern game, setting your players up in supporting roles can really give them a sense of mortality. You don't play Romeo, you play Mercutio. And, let's be honest for a second, if offered the choice, who would you want to play? Which brings up a very good point: it's always the sidekick who gets the best lines. He's witty, clever and an all-together great guy. And you can always spot him at the beginning of the film. You know the hero will make it to the credits, but you just don't know if the sidekick will. But you hope he does.

Almost as if he were your character.

PART THREE: "THEY'LL BE BACK BY SWEEPS…"

This one isn't entirely mine. It's inspired by a story Steve Hough and Rob Vaux told me about their *Cthulhu* game. Apparently, the rest of the party (including Rob) left Steve's character for dead after a vicious attack by Mi-Go. Well, the next week rolled around and Steve showed up. In fact, Steve's *character* showed up.

"Hey, Steve!" one of the characters said. "We thought you were dead!"

Steve's character didn't say a thing. He walked right passed him.

"Hey, Steve!" said another. "Where have you been?"

Steve's character didn't say a thing. He walked right passed her.

Right about then, he reached the gun rack. Before anyone could say anything, he picked up a shotgun and asked the GM if it was loaded. The GM said it was.

And Steve started shooting.

He started shooting and didn't stop until the big, bad combat character (you *always* need one of those in a *Cthulhu* game) got a hold of Steve and broke his neck.

Of course, if it was *my* game, that wouldn't have slowed Steve down a single bit, but they had a merciful GM and the broken neck put Steve down for good.

The point here is that you really can steal from any source. Like… oh, let's say soap operas. Yeah, I said soap operas. I used to date a girl who was addicted to one of those things; I watched it every day so we could talk about it when we got home from work. And there's one rule that's *always* true on *every* soap:

If you don't got a corpse, they'll be back by sweeps week.

PLAGUE
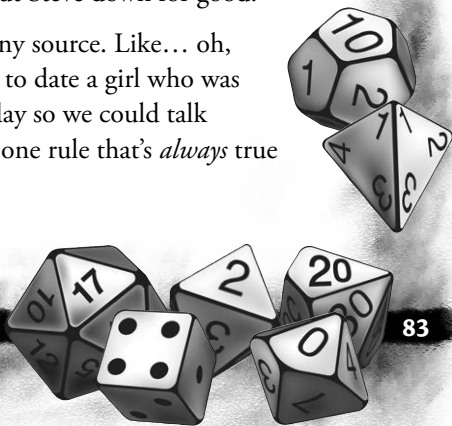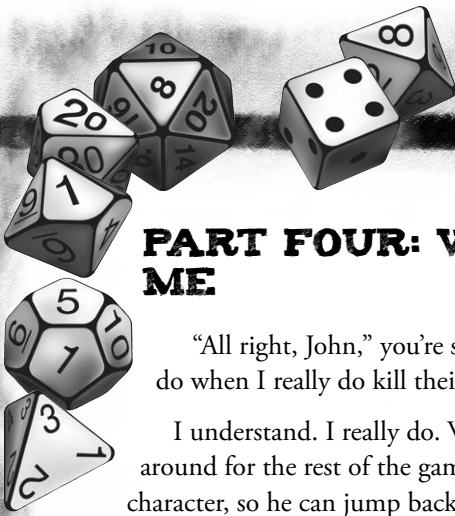
PART FOUR: WITH FRIENDS LIKE ME

"All right, John," you're saying. "That's all fine and well, but what do I do when I really do kill their character?"

I understand. I really do. When you kill a character, that player has to sit around for the rest of the game. At the very least, he has to make up a *new* character, so he can jump back in.

Why take the scenic route? In fact, why not have him play someone the party already knows.

Like the antagonist.

I was just watching *Batman: The Animated Series* with my wife and the villain was one of my all-time faves: R'as al-Ghul.

"Who?" my heretical wife asked. Ah, the naiveté of youth.

The whole kicker with R'as is that Batman's in love with the bad guy's daughter, Talia. The kicker with Talia is that she's in love with Batman. The kicker with R'as is that he's in love with his daughter.

And no, not in *that* way. Perv.

It makes a great triangle of love and duty. The power of that theme is seldom captured well, but in the case of Batman and the al-Ghuls, it's perfect.

So…why do the players always have to be the protagonists? Why can't one or two of them play *antagonists*? But antagonists the protagonists have some kind of unbreakable link with? That's powerful mojo. Mighty good stories come out of that kind of relationship.

So, what you do is get together with a player before the game starts. You talk to him about your plan. He plays a wacky, lovable character—let's call him "Bob"—for the first eight or ten sessions, then you whack Bob mercilessly. It's a big, bloody Bob mess that won't ever clean up right.

Then, Bob's player drops out for a week or two while the rest of the party looks for the Bad Guy who killed Bob the Lovable Sidekick. Two weeks go by, and your player shows up again, but this time, he's not playing a new character…he's playing the Heavy Who Killed Bob. (*Bum bum BUM!*)

It's a typical technique. Create an intriguing, capable villain in Episode 1, then make him an ally by the middle of the season.

You folks who watch *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* know what I'm talking about. That show is *littered* with Good Bad Guys and Gals: Faith, Spike, Angel, Jenny the Gypsy Chick, Anya the Vengeance Demon are great examples of bad people the Scooby Gang *has* to work with.

Unenlightened folks who *don't* watch the best show on TV may get what I'm talking about with these examples:

Magneto and the New Mutants.

Han Solo, Lando Calrissian, and Darth Vader.

7 of 9, Quark, and Garrik.

(I've got another one, but I don't think anyone will remember her.

The first one who can tell me who Princess Aura has a crush on gets a No-Prize.)

All NPC villains (at least anti-heroes) who turn into PCs and join the good fight. If Lucas can do it, so can you.

(Or, if you prefer, the villain doesn't have to be an ally; he can just stay bad. But that requires some serious, heavy-duty roleplaying on the part of your player. You have been warned.)

PART FIVE: THE SECRET

This is the second part of a three-part series about assumptions. The Big Assumptions. Many of you may have guessed that this month's part was about killing characters.

You're wrong.

This month's episode was about something a lot more powerful than death. It's about perspective.

("Perspective: use it or lose it." - *The Tao of Zen Nihilism*)

We all know the players view the world through the Game Master. He's their eyes, ears, tongues, noses, and skin. But there's an assumption that goes along with that. Players assume that the GM has to be honest about those perceptions.

MACGUFFIN HUNT
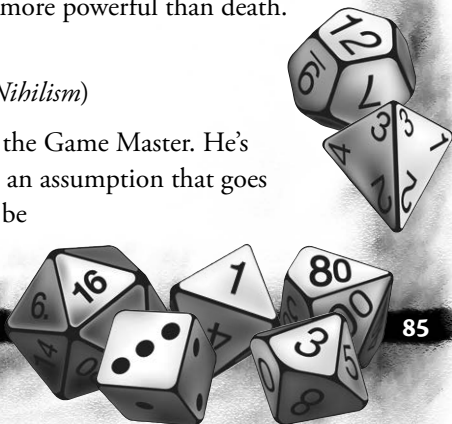
Heh. Let 'em.

(How many times have you met a beautiful woman who was convinced she was fat? Anyone who says, "I'm bad at math" is right. So are the people who say, "I can't quit smoking." Absolutely right. Like Richard Bach said, "If you argue for your limitations, you get to keep them.")

People trust their perceptions more than logic, reason, and sometimes even reality. (That's called "faith.") Players are the same way. They *have* to trust everything the GM tells them. He's their only source of information.

If the players perceive they're invulnerable, they'll believe they're invulnerable. If they perceive they're just a pack of red shirts, they'll feel that mortality hanging around their necks.

If the players believe all PCs are good and all NPCs are antagonists (at least anti-heroes), they'll lose out on some valuable allies…and leave their backs open to ringers (a topic we'll talk about in a few months).

If the players believe that death is the end…

What the players perceive is what their characters believe. Have fun with that perspective. Be responsible, but have fun.

After all, it's only a game, right?

* * *

Next month, we'll tackle another assumption. The last one. Not sure which one. Maybe you'll find out when I do.

Take care, and you'll see me in thirty.

But not if I see you first.

Introduction to Episode 7

Assumption: a thing that is accepted as true or as certain to happen, without proof.

Over the course of two episodes, I tackled player assumptions. But, in truth, you could say the whole *Play Dirty* series is about tackling player assumptions.

Playing with assumptions is the key to giving players the Third Act twist/betrayal they deserve. Players assume their characters are the protagonists. They assume they're doing the Right Thing. They assume the whole world is about them. They assume they're going to win.

It isn't turtles, it's mistakes, all the way down.

However, there is a danger in undermining assumptions, and again, I'll be using professional wrestling to illustrate this example.

In recent years, many pro wrestling promotions have become obsessed with "the swerve." This is an unexpected complication you throw at the audience with no forewarning. It became particularly popular during "The Monday Night Wars" when the two big wrestling promotions were trying to outdo each other, trying to steal each other's audience.

What you do is throw such a dramatic, unexpected surprise at the audience that they're guaranteed to tune in next week to find out why it happened.

For example, you have one good guy wrestler suddenly turn on his best friend. Why did it happen? Tune in next week to find out!

Unfortunately, you do this too much and the audience gets tired of it. In fact, they get tired *fast.* It's like a pitcher who only throws curve balls. You've got to switch it up every once in a while to keep the batter on his toes.

It also doesn't hurt that the folks throwing all those swerves at the audience forgot one very important element that makes the swerve work: you've got to prime the audience for it.

When you hit the players with an unexpected complication, they have to be able to look back and say, "Oh, man! Remember when that thing happened before? We should have seen this coming!"

Foreshadowing, foreshadowing, foreshadowing.

Protective Symbiont
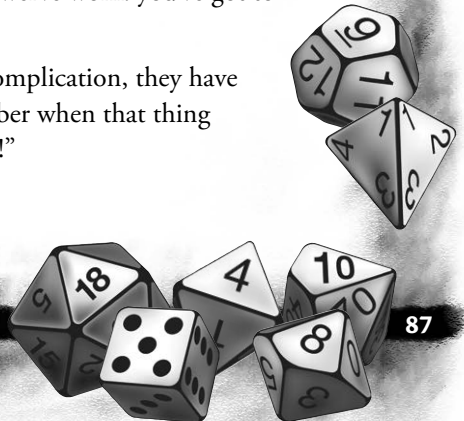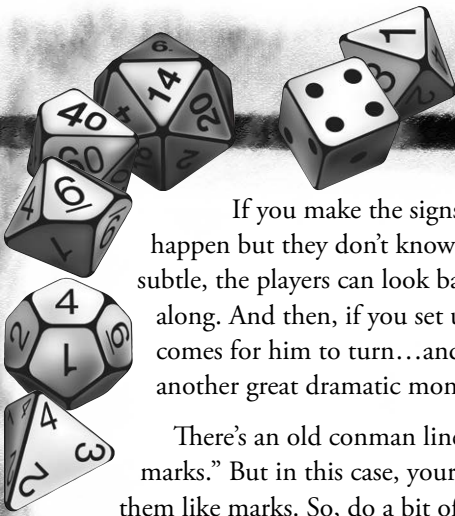
If you make the signs explicit, the players are waiting for it to happen but they don't know *when* it will happen. Or, if you make them subtle, the players can look back and see that you were ahead of them all along. And then, if you set up an ally to be a villain, and the moment comes for him to turn…and he suddenly decides against it, you've got another great dramatic moment for the players to remember.

There's an old conman line that goes, "Don't play your friends like marks." But in this case, your friends—your players—are *asking you* to treat them like marks. So, do a bit of both. Set them up for the sucker punch, but give them just enough so they know when to close their eyes and stick out their chin.
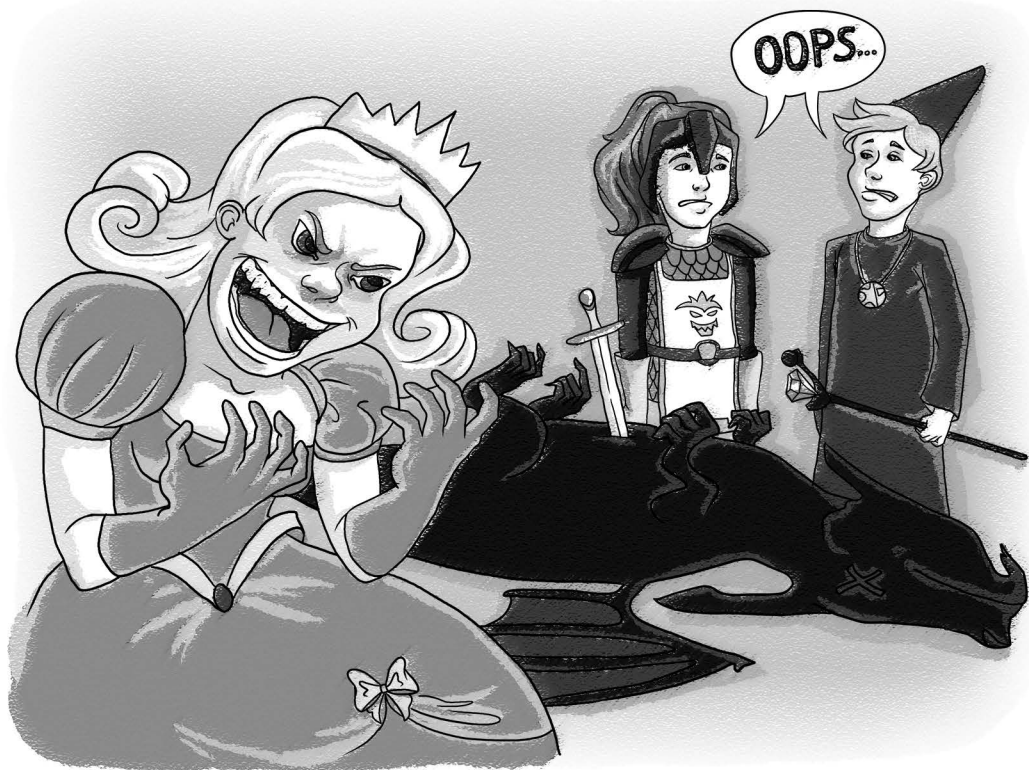
EPISODE 7

WHAT'S IT WORTH?

(All right, ten seconds to go. Cue audience. Cue Wick. And in five…four…three… two…one…)

"Welcome back to Players Assume the Craziest Things! And here's your host, Joooooooohn Wick!!!"

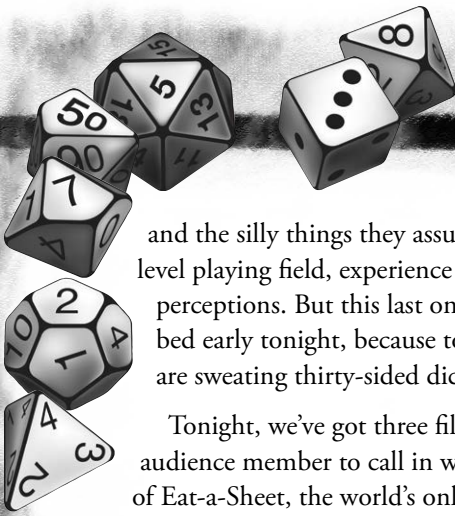Thank you. Thank you. If I could think of something funny to say, you'd all be laughing now.

(cue laugh track)

Well, we've reached the end of another season. It's time to take one last look at those wacky players

SEWERS

and the silly things they assume. So far, we've talked about starting on a level playing field, experience points, character death, and even character perceptions. But this last one…whew. You may want to send the kiddies to bed early tonight, because tonight, we've got such a whopper, the censors are sweating thirty-sided dice.

Tonight, we've got three films, all based on a theme. The first at-home audience member to call in with that theme wins a special one-year supply of Eat-a-Sheet, the world's only edible character sheet.

Well, let's get on with the first film. It comes to us from a Jefferson Carter of St. Paul/Minneapolis. He calls it "Bait and Switch." Let's take a look.

(cut to Carter tape)

Here we have a group of freelance superheroes operating in Twin Cities area. These happy fellows (and one lady) hire out to the highest bidders, adopting the "If the money's right, we're there for the fight" attitude.

Well, that all works well and good until they're hired by a lawyer representing an individual who wishes to remain anonymous. "My client's son recently died from an overdose," the lawyer says. "He'd like to see the people responsible brought to justice. *You* can go where the police can't go. You can do what they can't. He needs you and he's willing to compensate for your services."

That's when he hands over a check—from the attorney's law firm—for $50,000.

"The next check will be double," the lawyer says, "if the criminals are convicted."

The heroes agree. The operation goes smooth, and the bad guys captured before you can say "unstable molecules." The case gets picked up by the same legal firm that hired the players and the jury deliberations last about as long as a Tyson fight. The players receive a hundred thousand dollar check and they spend it on danger room renovations.

So, what's the catch?

The man who hired the players doesn't have a son. His name is Hunter Rose. He's one of the crime lords of the city.

The criminals were competitors. Now, thanks to the players, Mr. Rose controls *all* cocaine on the west side of Minneapolis.

Those wacky players. Well, I guess what they never knew never hurt them.

Player Assumption #1: They're Always Doing the Right Thing.

Girlfriend: Are you watching this?

Boyfriend: Not really."

Girlfriend: That means I can change the channel.

(CLICK.)

(Insert obligatory, repetitive and redundant Danny Elfman
"bouncy, yet creepy" theme.)

"Hello, kiddies! Your old pal the Wick Keeper here with another
deliciously demonic tale. This one I call… Bug Hunt."

(CREDIT PLACARD READS:)

based on a short story originally appearing in

SHADIS MAGAZINE

written by John Wick
published by Alderac Entertainment Group

It's a sci-fi scenario that opens in the middle of things. The players wake up in cryo-chambers to the sound of klaxon alarms, screams, and ripping flesh; a splash of blood on their faces. They open their eyes and see spiders the size of cows moving like lightning through the room. A couple of chambers are filled with a thick, web-like substance. If you listen carefully—through the screaming klaxons and the screaming bodies—you can hear muffled voices begging for help.

The players fight their way out of the room. They fight their way to their weapons. They fight their way to the bridge and find out where they are. It's a small planet with a smaller research station…sending out an SOS. That's usually when the players figure out what's missing: their memories. Obviously, they're a rescue team here to answer that SOS. Right?

Wrong. When they get to the research station—more spiders waiting for them outside—they find out the truth. They're not a rescue team, they're mercenaries sent to steal secrets from the research center…at any cost.

SLEEPWALKING

Every corpse in the research station? That's their work.

Mercenaries. Merciless. Murder, murder, murder.

Turns out the researchers were finding ways to communicate with the spiders. The creatures are powerful psychics, and research shows ingesting spider milk is a powerful psychic stimulant in humans. That's what the players are here to steal.

Unfortunately, two things went wrong after the mission. The first was a group of spiders who snuck on board while they carried out their dirty deeds. The second problem? The players' employers don't want them coming back. Their ship was designed to detonate when it escaped the atmosphere—only the spider serum would survive the explosion.

Of course, now that things have gone wrong, the research station sensors indicate another ship is on its way. A cleaning crew.

Can the players find a way to communicate with the spiders and save themselves from a band of bloodthirsty killers?

A group not a whole lot unlike themselves…

Player Assumption #2: The Players Are the Protagonists.

Girlfriend: Yuck. Spiders.

Boyfriend: You've got the clicker.

Girlfriend: Yeah. Right.

(CLICK.)

The Starbucks Theater Presents…

The Blair Witch Rip-Off

With your host, John Wick

Open on a group of players (three humans, one demi-human, and one half-breed) in the woods. It's dark. They ran out of supplies a week ago. They have no flint, they have no steel. The NPC they hired (the guy with the Hunting and Survival Skills) took off two weeks ago…with all the gold, food, and fresh water he

could carry. He also got away with the magical whutzzit the king's gonna pay 'em ten billion gold pieces for. Apparently, the NPC wanted the reward more than they did.

How did this happen? The players treated the NPC like…well, like most players treat NPCs: a pile of bantha poo-doo. So, he left 'em. Alone in the dark.

They don't even know how to find true north.

And while they're out in the woods, the Ranger saved the kingdom, married the king's daughter, and stands in line to inherit the throne.

Hey, wait a second… was that *Dueling Banjos*…?

Player Assumption #3: The World Revolves Around Us.

Girlfriend:	Isn't there anything good on TV?
Boyfriend:	There's always the Playboy Channel…
Girlfriend:	You had to say that, didn't you?

(CLICK.)

It's a sin we're all guilty of, not just silly players. We all believe we're the hero in a story told for our own pleasure. Like Neal Peart wrote, "We're only immortal for a limited time."

Players assume their characters are the protagonists. They assume the story revolves around them. They assume that everything the Game Master tells them is true. They assume everything they know is fact. They assume everyone in the whole wide world is there for their amusement.

Players assume they will win in the end. After all, the books they read (schlock fantasy), the TV they watch (*Star Trek*), the movies they watch (*ID4*) all have happy endings. The hero defeats the bad guy, gets the girl, and lives happily ever after.
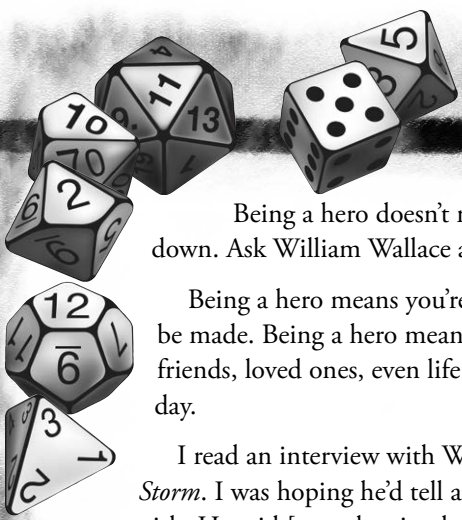
And most importantly, the hero never—ever—dies.

Like in *Braveheart*. Or *Gladiator*. Or *The 13th Warrior*.

Or *The Usual Suspects*. Or *A Tale of Two Cities*.

Being a hero doesn't mean you live to see the end of the story. Ask Moses about that.

SECRET OF
IMMORTALITY
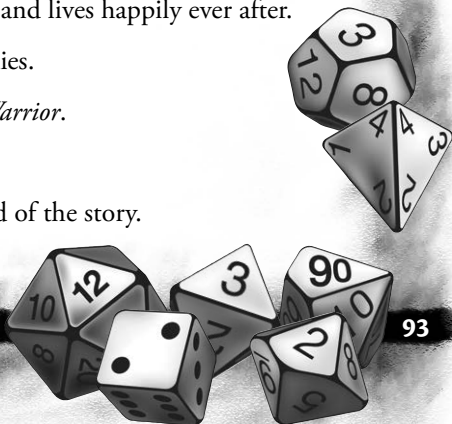
Being a hero doesn't mean you're always there when the villain goes down. Ask William Wallace about that. (The movie version, that is.)

Being a hero means you're willing to make sacrifices when they need to be made. Being a hero means you're willing to give up everything—family, friends, loved ones, even life itself—to make sure justice sees the light of day.

I read an interview with Wolfgang Peterson—the director of *The Perfect Storm*. I was hoping he'd tell a certain kind of story. I think I'm gonna get my wish. He said [paraphrasing here], "It's a big story about a little struggle." *The 13th Warrior* was like that for me. No saving the world. Just thirteen men standing against thirteen thousand, all to save a bunch of people too vain to save themselves.

Frank Miller's *300* has the same kind of energy. Three hundred Spartans standing against three hundred thousand Persians, their deaths buying time for the rest of Greece to get its act together.

So, what's all this amount to?

There's no such thing as a free lunch. (I'm showing my stripes.)

I've GM'd for groups who thought having big guns made them heroes. I introduced them to guys with *bigger* guns. They weren't heroes. They were Swiss cheese in seconds.

I've GM'd for groups who thought having big spell books made them heroes. I introduced them to guys who *didn't need* spell books. Frogs, every last one of them.

You want to be a hero? It takes more than 100 points, a cool name, and witty banter. Just because you assume you're the hero doesn't make it necessarily so.

That's a title you've got to earn.

Introduction to Episode 8

For a moment, I'm gonna sound like an old man. I apologize.

Fifteen years ago, there was no www.tvtropes.org. Now, I know that doesn't sound like much, but the fact of the matter is, we were all a lot less cynical.

Things like the website I mentioned encourage the notion, "There are no new stories!" Anyone who tells you this needs to get hit on the head with a Thomas Pynchon novel.

Just because all you read are fantasy trilogies that all tell the same story over and over again does not mean there are no new stories. You just keep reading the same stories over and over again.

Look, I loved Joseph Campbell. But the gorram hero's journey is just one damn story. We can do more than that. We can do better than that. We can tell *new* stories.

It's like people who have been playing the same LARP character for ten years. That's someone caught in a comfort trap. They probably read the same novel again and again, just to make them feel good.

I love spaghetti. It's my favorite thing in the world to eat. You ask me what I want for dinner, the first thing I think of is noodles and red sauce. But I'm not so foolish to say, "There's no new food."

If you want to be comfortable, you'd better go to someone else's table because I'm not here for that. I'm here to give you a helluva time, yes, but comfort food is not something I'm interested in handing out.

If I stuck to the things I loved to eat, I would have never discovered the melt-in-your-mouth pleasure of sushi. I would have never discovered the delightful burn of Indian spices. Korean, Greek, South American…

Damn. Now, I'm hungry. Be right back…

* * *

Okay, sorry about the food metaphors. Let me get back on track.

Point is, the world is full of storytellers who are telling *new* stories.

ILLUSIVE COINS

SUSPICIOUS TRANSLATION

This episode is about movies. And let me tell you a secret from someone who's been behind on set: Hollywood is *terrified* of new ideas.

New ideas are dangerous. New ideas are risky. And when you're spending an amount of money that could feed an entire nation of starving people, you've got to make sure the movie you make is *safe*.

The budget for *Harry Potter and the Half-Blood Prince* was $250 million. *Spider-Man 3* was $258 million. *Pirates of the Caribbean: At World's End* was around $300 million.

You don't put that kind of money behind a risk.

Now, are there companies taking risks? You bet there are. The entire Phase 1 plan for the Marvel franchise was perhaps the biggest risk in Hollywood history. But then, those were still *superhero* movies telling *superhero* stories. Stories folks like you and me have seen and read before. Many, many times.

If anyone tells you, "There are no new stories," give them a copy of Jared Sorensen's *Lacuna Part 1: The Creation of the Mystery and the Girl from Blue City*. Let them figure out where that fits in Campbell's hero's journey. Think you can't do anything new with a modern setting? Fly them into Al Amarja International Airport and let them try tackling the surreal danger of *Over the Edge*. If they think all fantasy worlds are just different iterations of Middle Earth, lead them to the *Empire of the Petal Throne*. If they think all science fiction settings are the same, have them fly off to the *Sky Realms of Jorune.*

These games are *different* and you can tell *different* stories with them.

Now, I'm not saying that RPGs can't be used as wish fulfillment and comfort food. Of course, they can. What I'm saying is, we can use them for something *more than that*.

And you don't even need to spend three hundred million dollars to do it.

LET'S ALL GO TO THE MOVIES!

Let's not waste any time this month. I'm late, you're impatient. and we've got a lot of material to cover.

This month's column deals with a tricky subject: something we authors like to call "creative plagiarism." And before you get any funny ideas, consider the fact that Wee Willy Shakespeare is the God-King of this little practice. Bill stole the plots for almost all his plays, but the trick here is that he changed almost everything else. Like our friend Mister Lucas, he made "old stories in new costumes."
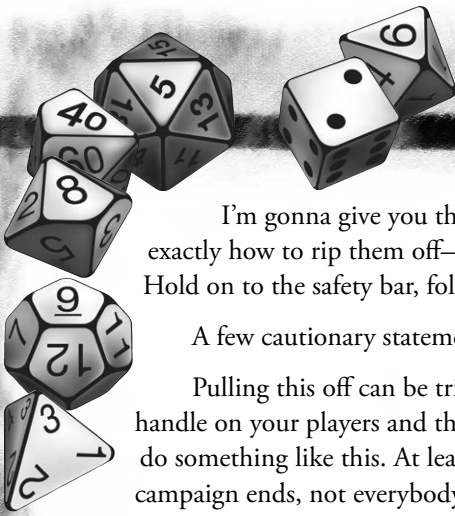
I'm gonna give you three plots from Hollywood films and show you exactly how to rip them off—while keeping your dignity at the same time. Hold on to the safety bar, folks. We're going at top speed this month.

A few cautionary statements.

Pulling this off can be tricky. You've obviously got to have a good handle on your players and they've got to have a good idea that you're gonna do something like this. At least, they have to understand that when the campaign ends, not everybody gets out alive.

Now that we've got the preliminaries out of the way, let's get down to business.

THE WALKING, TALKING TIME BOMB

One of the oldest stories in Hollywood involves a little plot device I like to call "The Walking Talking Time Bomb." As I alluded to last month, this little gem of an idea came to me from that marvelous film *Escape from New York*, directed by John Carpenter. I'm pretty sure I don't need to go over the premise with you; this is one of the standard staples in any gamer's video library. Suffice to say that our protagonist—a dubious anti-hero we know as "Snake Plissken"—gets a tiny little bomb put in his arteries that'll blow up in the final seconds of the film. It's a mean little incentive to make sure Snake doesn't take off without completing his mission first. Well, this puppy has been used in a whole mess of films both before and after *Escape* hit the screens. From a plotting point of view, it helps a Game Master in three important ways.

1. It keeps the players on track. All too often, players have a tendency to wander off course. I'm not talking about railroading your friends onto a one-way plotline, I'm talking about when they start making Monty Python quotes, relating old war stories, stop for a minute to watch a cool music video, or pull out their *Magic* cards because they aren't the center of attention at the moment. When they find out there's a microscopic bomb in their arteries that's gonna explode in precisely 17 hours, 24 minutes, and 16 seconds, they ain't gonna get distracted by nothing. They're *always* the center of attention.

2. It gives you a time limit. Ever take a timed test? Then you know the difference, don't you? Something happens when the professor tells you, "You have 45 minutes to finish this section of the test." You start economizing your time. You don't dally on questions you don't know the

answers to. You start to sweat bullets when that 40-minute mark hits and you've only gotten through half the questions. Timed tests are supposed to do that. Timed games are exactly the same. The players don't spend a lot of time dallying with the barmaid. They don't spend a lot of time trying to sell off that helmet they took off the troll they killed ("It must be worth a couple of copper pieces!"). When they know they're gonna die in less than a day, everything suddenly becomes very important. Which leads us to our final very important way this technique helps you as a GM:

3. It's a test of character. I love that test in the second *Star Trek* film. (No, I can't spell Kobiashi Maru, and I ain't even gonna try.) "It's a test of character," Kirk says. Of course, later we discover that he cheated to win, but that shows us something about Kirk's character, now doesn't it? You find out a lot about someone's character when they find out there's a bomb in their arteries ready to go off at any time. You strip away the veneer and get to look at the naked soul without any of its trappings.

There's one more important thing, but we'll talk about that one at the very end. First, I've got a scenario for you. A real juicy one, too. (Suddenly, I feel like the Crypt Keeper.) I call this one…

The Mega-Corporation Just Put a Time Bomb in Your Head

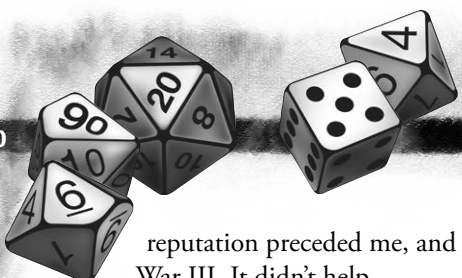(Did I mention I really suck at titles?)

I'd been running a *Cyberpunk* campaign for almost a year. It was time to draw things to a close. As I said before, I don't run open-ended games. I don't like comic books that run for 700 issues, I don't like sitcoms that run for 17 years where the characters never seem to change, and I don't like soap operas. I like stories, and stories have a beginning, a middle, and an end. After a year, it was time to end the story.

My boys (there weren't any girls at the time) had been working for a Megacorp for a few months. What can I tell you, they sold out for the money. But, they figured they could run little black bag operations when the Megacorp wasn't looking; kinda biting the hand that fed them sort of thing.

This was a mistake. As we all know, the Megacorp is always looking. Too bad for them.

So, I let them know that the end of the campaign was on its way. They had one more week, and at the end of the following Thursday, the game would be at an end. My

FABRICATED DISCOVERY

reputation preceded me, and they spent that Thursday preparing for World War III. It didn't help.

At the beginning of the game, I put an old white egg timer on the table and set it for 1 hour. They asked me what it was for. I told them they'd find out soon enough. Then, I announced the game had begun and started the egg timer. I asked each of them where they were and what they were doing. Each of them gave me the expected answer and I sat back and watched. For an hour. I did nothing. Said nothing. Just sat back and watched.

When they asked questions, I answered them as quickly and expediently as I could. I didn't want to waste their time. But that first hour, they did a whole lot of nothing, waiting to see what was going to happen. At the end of that hour, the bell rang, I rolled a few dice, consulted a homemade chart and looked up at the Fixer. "Your head explodes," I told him. "You're dead."

His pencil dropped to the table like a piece of his brain hitting the floor.

Then, I reset the egg timer and sat back. Waiting.

That's when the questions started to fly.

To make a long story short ("Too late!"), they spent the rest of that time figuring out what was wrong with them. Turns out, a small nanotech virus was put in each of them. At the end of each game hour, the virus would activate in one of them, causing some sort of awful reaction. Each was different. The first one was a simple mind-bomb. The second one erupted into tiny flechette rounds that caused 1d10 wounds to everyone else in the room. As I reset the clock, they made a quick decision to separate in the final seconds to make sure whatever came out of the unlucky soul whose turn it was to detonate didn't harm any of the other players. The third was a weird kind of fungus bomb that sent spores out 100 feet in every direction. Nasty killer poison spores.

There were only two of them left after that. By then, they'd figured out that no amount of tinkering was gonna get rid of those bombs. They had to find the guy who made them and get him to do something about it. At around 3 hours and 47 minutes, they found out that the guy who commissioned the bombs was their contact at the Megacorp. ("Surprise! Surprise!") He found out about their black bag sabotage missions and decided to teach them a lesson. He had the antidote. And he was all the way across town.

Tick, tock. Tick, tock.

The fourth guy didn't make it in time. He exploded into napalm. The fifth guy, however, did make it. With two minutes to go. He burst into the villain's office, barricaded the doors, and sat on the Corp's desk and put a huge, nasty gun in his mouth. I looked at the player standing in front of me, his hands in the pantomime gesture of holding a big, huge gun and saw the mad smile on his face. "I'm gonna detonate in less than two minutes," he said to the Corp. "I don't even know what's gonna happen to me. But I do know one thing. Whatever happens to me is gonna happen to you."

A perfect *Cyberpunk* ending.

* * *

So what's the last little thing I mentioned above?

Every second counts. You and me, we're dying by the second. Right now. You've got a time bomb in your head and it's ticking down. You never know when it's gonna go off. You don't even get to see the egg timer. Every second counts.

HOW TERRIBLE IS WISDOM

My buddy with the Master's degree in film tells me that film noir isn't about murders, missing statues, femme fatales, and cities without pity. Rob tells me that the whole theme of the genre (yuck) is "Who am I?"

As the private investigator goes through the dirty city looking for answers, he's really looking for himself. Just as the above theme lets us take a look at the inner workings of a protagonist's soul, so does this kind of journey allow us to transform it. We start off with caterpillars and we end up with butterflies. The PI starts looking for a missing person and ends up finding himself.

Here's how it works.

The film I'm invoking is a nasty, bloody affair directed by the same guy who directed *Evita*. Of course, he also directed *The Wall*, and *The Commitments*. We're talking about Alan Parker, and the film is *Angel Heart*. (If you haven't seen this little gem just yet, you may want to skip down a bit. In other words, we're about to enter spoiler territory. The faint of heart may wish to skip this part of the ride.)

Harry Angel is a cheap private eye hired by a very rich fellow named Louis Cyphre to find "dance-band scumbag" crooner, Johnny Favorite. Angel's journey leads him on a dark path. He discovers Favorite
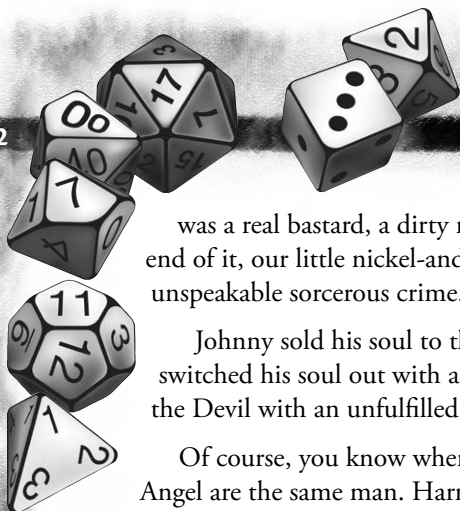
was a real bastard, a dirty man with a black, sorcerous soul. By the end of it, our little nickel-and-dime PI finds himself in the middle of an unspeakable sorcerous crime.

Johnny sold his soul to the Devil and when it came time to pay up, he switched his soul out with a soldier's, thinking he could disappear, leaving the Devil with an unfulfilled contract.

Of course, you know where this is going. Johnny Favorite and Harry Angel are the same man. Harry's been looking for himself the whole time. And our buddy Louis Cyphre (masterfully played by Robert De Niro) was the one who sent him on the journey to begin with. There's a great quote from Oedipus (one of the oldest stories exploring this theme) at the end of it all: "Alas, how terrible is wisdom when it brings no profit to the wise."

The theme of the whole thing is clear. We have to be careful with wisdom. We have to make certain we're ready for it when it comes knocking on our door. Knowledge isn't always a blessing; sometimes, it's damnation. This is the key theme to *Call of Cthulhu*, but that's an easy out. Let's use it somewhere else. Somewhere players would never expect it.

HEROES FOR HIRE

For a very short time, I ran a *Marvel Super Heroes* game. This was long after my *Champions* days. The club I was running at loved the game, and asked me to run a campaign. Unfortunately for them, I knew a bit more about the Mighty Marvel Universe than they did. Okay, that's a lie. I knew a whole lot more than they did. I set them up as a freelance troubleshooting group. Kind of a "Heroes for Hire" trick. They liked it and we got on with the game. Their motto was a whole lot like the motto of the crew in *Deep Rising*: "If the money's there, we don't care!" This kind of attitude got them in a whole lot of trouble. Of course, they didn't see the trouble until it was much too late. Two quick examples.

They got hired by a representative of a foreign embassy to retrieve a stolen jewel. A large, multifaceted, red jewel. Of course, they didn't ask any questions. In fact, they didn't even ask which embassy the guy was from. Turns out the jewel was stolen by a wealthy, unscrupulous collector. They trashed the guy, got back the jewel, and returned it to its rightful owners: the Latverian Embassy.

Then they got hired by a large corporation to take care of a little embezzling problem. One of that corporation's side projects was developing weapons for the government. Seems these fellows were stealing secrets and selling them to

undisclosed parties. While they never discovered who those parties were, they did bring the criminals to justice. They were very highly paid for their services—by the Fisk Corporation.

More than a few of you already know what's going on. Our buddy Doctor Doom is the man who rules Latveria, and that red ruby is one of the Merlin Stones. The Doc needs 'em to go down to Hell and rescue his mom. A noble cause. Even if it means stealing stones from their rightful owners to complete his collection. And any fan of Spider-Man or Daredevil knows exactly who Wilson Fisk is. Unfortunately, my players only knew him by his nom de guerre: the Kingpin of Crime.

I pulled this trick a few times, and they never suspected a thing. Not until the Avengers came knocking on their door, that is.

* * *

A group of heroes hired by a mysterious fellow. The path they walk leads to darkness. It's not the kind of darkness that Harry Angel finds, it's more of a candy-covered darkness, but it still proves a point. Player ignorance is a powerful tool. Especially the self-inflicted kind.
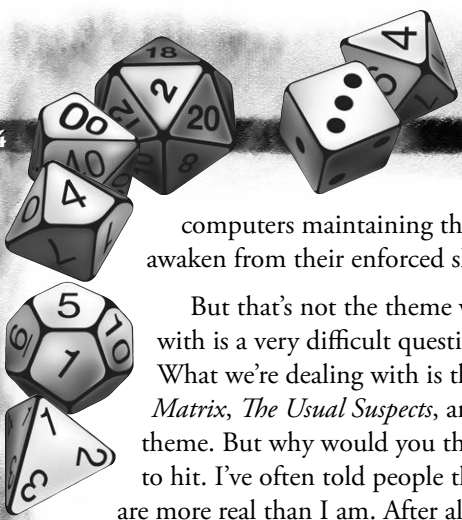
AGAIN AND AGAIN AND AGAIN

Last story for the night. A lot of folks like calling this "The *Groundhog Day* Cheat," but that's not where I got it from. Granted, it's the most famous use of this little theme, but Bill Murray wasn't the first fellow to find himself trapped in a reoccurring nightmare.

You know the story. Bill has to live the same day over and over and over again until he gets it right. Specifically, he has to figure out how to win his true love's heart. Until then, he's stuck.

Well, the theme we're working with here worked for me rather well when I wanted to get folks to play *Over the Edge* and they wanted to play *AD&D*. Some of you may remember that I covered that little ditty in the article "Deja Vu" written for *Shadis* magazine. In essence, the characters were reliving the same day over and over and over again, trapped in a loophole of time. But as soon as one of them died (a suicide in my case), he awoke naked in a canister of goo under the island of Al-Amarja, surrounded by the other players in the same kind of canisters. The death triggered a malfunction in the
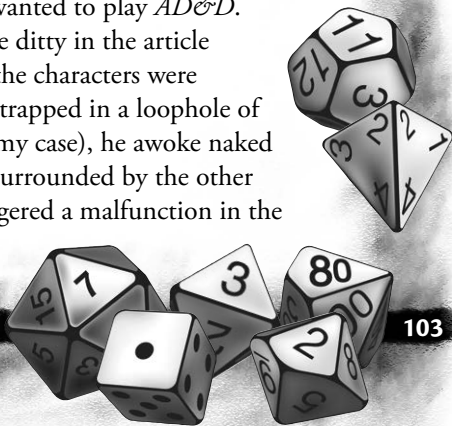
computers maintaining the fake reality and the rest of the characters awaken from their enforced sleep.

But that's not the theme we're dealing with here. What we're dealing with is a very difficult question to answer, even for folks who study it. What we're dealing with is the question: What is real? Movies like *The Matrix*, *The Usual Suspects*, and *Fight Club* are the best examples of this theme. But why would you throw it at your players? It's a tough curve ball to hit. I've often told people that the characters I've created for my games are more real than I am. After all, more people know about Bayushi Kachiko than John Wick.

It's one of my favorite themes. So many people only believe what they can perceive, ignoring the fact that because they're human, their perceptions are flawed. So much goes on in our world that we can't see, so much important stuff. On the other hand, we take a lot for granted. How does your clock radio work? How does your VCR work? How does the phone work? So much technology, and so few people who really understand what makes it tick. (Tick, tock. Tick, tock.)

What's real? Let's take a look at that little subject in a story I like to call…

SELF-REFERENTIAL AWARENESS WITH A LEMON TWIST

There are a whole lot of angles to this one. In short, it's letting the characters know that they're characters. Most folks learned this trick when they tried making themselves up as characters in their favorite system. (How many points are you worth in *GURPS* numbers?) Of course, soon after, they have to run a game with those characters. Are you a Thief or a Fighter? A Magic-User or a Cleric? (I'm a 4th Level Bard, myself. The new Bard, not the Fighter/Thief/Druid kind.)

A few others learned it from the second edition *Over the Edge* RPG under the title "Self-Referential Awareness." The last time I did it, I ran it as listed. I just added little of a lemon twist to make it a bit more…deadly. It can be found on page 224. What it boils down to is revealing to your characters (not the players) that they're PCs in a roleplaying game. How do you respond to that kind of knowledge? What do you do with that kind of knowledge? Here's how I did it. You may want to do it a bit differently. (I should also repeat the warning found in *OtE 2nd*: Do not try this while your players are on psychedelic drugs.)

After a few months of running a *Chill* game, I hit them with the Deja Vu scenario. Their *Chill* characters woke up in *Over the Edge* with no memory of who

they were or how they got there. They spent another few months figuring out their new environment. Finally, they were approached by a fellow who told them he could answer all their questions. They went to a dark warehouse, where the mysterious figure then gave each of them a copy of the *Over the Edge 2nd* book. He told them they were characters in a roleplaying game. Even showed them their character sheets. Finally, he showed them a room where five figures were tied to chairs with hoods thrown over their heads.

These, of course, are the characters' players. "And," the mysterious figure says to them, "the only way to be free—"

That's when the figure gives them a gun.

"All your pain. All your suffering. All of it comes from them. They did it to you. They did it for fun. The only way to be free is to kill them. Only then, will your fate be yours. Until then, you're just pawns."

You should have seen the looks on their faces.

Did they pull the trigger? Sorry. I don't kiss and tell.

* * *

Scent of a Woman through the lens of a fantasy game turns into a party of first-level adventurers finding themselves in charge of a blind 19th-level Fighter who wants one last "Huzzah!" before the curse put on him nine years ago hits him on the full moon of this month. *Last Action Hero* turns into a story of a *Feng Shui* character who suddenly finds himself in an *Unknown Armies* game, chasing after the Fu Manchu clone who plans on using his powers to wreak horror on the more "mundane" reality. And don't tell me that any GM worth his salt can't turn *The Usual Suspects* into a dynamite *AD&D* campaign.

* * *

So. Here we are. At the conclusion.

They say imitation is the highest form of flattery. They also say that good artists borrow, but the best steal. Stealing ideas and telling them with your own voice is a time-honored storytelling tradition. Don't be ashamed of it. Find stories anywhere you can. Steal 'em without prejudice. Kurosawa did it with *Ran*, *Throne of Blood*, and *Yojimbo*. So can you. Of course, Kurosawa changed the matter to communicate it to his audience. So can you.
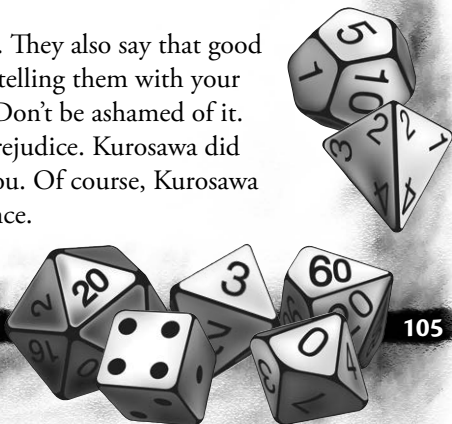
Introduction to Episode 9

This episode ends on a cliffhanger that doesn't deliver.

I promised to write another Great Assumption to challenge and the next episode talks about Play Dirty advice for players. My apologies for that.

However, because this edition exists, I can make up for it. I can give you the follow-up right here and right now. Consider this, "Episode 9.5" except that you get it before Episode 9 and…uh, yeah. It's complicated.

Let's call this one…

EXPOSING YOUR IGNORANCE

At the end of Episode 9, I talk about writing an essay on game balance. Recently, I wrote an essay about that topic called "Chess Is Not an RPG." It was a quickie. Off the top of my head. I intended on revising the essay for a presentation for *Rincon 2014* (one of my favorite conventions) and figured a limited audience would see it.

I had no idea it would explode into a huge mess.

Needless to say, after much debate and discussion, I've had a lot of time to think about that essay. Also, I should note that I don't debate "to win," I debate "to learn." I want to know if I'm wrong about the things I'm writing about. As Ray Bradbury said, "If you hide your ignorance, no one will hit you and you'll never learn." That little mantra has been in the forefront of my mind ever since I read it in Junior High School. (It's from *Fahrenheit 451*, by the way. Should be mandatory reading for every Junior High School student.)

So, with that in mind, a slightly revised take on the whole notion of game balance as it relates to RPGs.

Now, I've been writing and designing roleplaying games for a while now (ever since 1995, so almost twenty years as of this writing) and if there's one thing that I've learned, it's this:

Game balance doesn't matter.

What *does* matter is something called *spotlight*.

See, when players talk about game balance, what they're usually talking about is one character getting more for his buck than another character. An example.

When *D&D 3* came out, a bunch of us got together to try it out. I chose to play the fighter and my buddy Tom chose to play the thief. We both had first level characters and we both launched into a cliché premise about rescuing a little farm girl from a pack of kobolds. The pack of us rushed out, ready for adventure.

Problem was, when we got to the fighting part, Tom's thief was outshining my fighter by a long shot. He built his character with a specific purpose, exploited that purpose, and made my fighter look like a wimp. I missed almost everything I swung at, but because he bought that feat that allows you to use *dexterity* instead of *strength* for his "to hit" rolls, Tom hit everything he swung at.

He hit more often, did more damage, and dodged more damage. In the first fight, I went to zero hit points and Tom *took* zero hit points.

Now, most folks would point at this as an example of a game that was unbalanced. True enough: I wanted to play a beefy fighter but the thief—*the thief*—was outshining me.

As the GM, the character sheet communicates to you, the GM, what the player wants. Looking at my sheet, I picked the generic fighter. I wanted to be effective at fighting. Pretty straightforward.

(I was only interested in how the system worked and didn't really put anything into my character's personality.)

The game failed because the system failed me. The system promised me, by picking the fighter, that I'd be the most effective character at committing violence. But Tom designed his character smarter than I did. I went with nothing more than a straight up fighter. Tom's character had nuance. In this case, nuance beat straight up.

This is a perfect case of the system failing the player. This is what people usually talk about when they invoke "game balance."
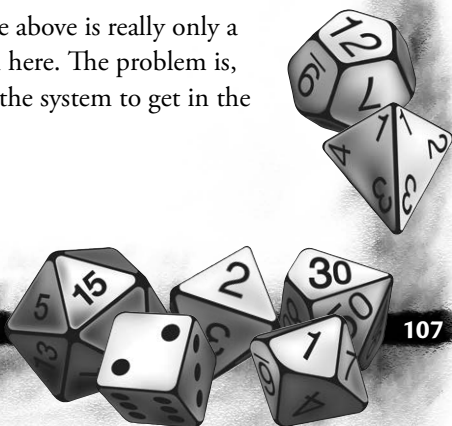
But what's the root of this problem? The example above is really only a symptom. There's something much deeper going on here. The problem is, "The player expressed a desire and the GM allowed the system to get in the way."

Don't let this happen.

If the system gets in the way, ditch it. If the system helps accomplish the goal, keep it.

SURPRISE INHERITANCE

THE PERFECT GIFT

Our lovely illustrator told me a story about something she did after reading this chapter. It was her *Houses of the Blooded* game and she decided to "reward" a player with a baby ork. At first, the player was uncertain about this…reward. I mean, what do you do with a baby ork.

As it turns out, the ork was incredibly useful, friendly, and loyal. That last trait is hard to find in *HotB*. It was also deadly. The unorthodox gift turned out to be exactly what he needed.

This chapter is about unorthodox ways of rewarding players for their ingenuity. When they go out of the way to contribute to the game, you should go out of your way to reward them. Find new ways to do it. Different ways. Out of the box ways.

Then, wrap them up in pretty boxes and hand 'em over.

They won't know what to think.

EPISODE 9

"PLEASE SIR, CAN I HAVE SOME MORE?"

Let's start with a quick story.

At the beginning of any game, I ask my players, "So, what are you guys focusing on?" After all, nobody can focus all their attention on everything they do all the time. So, I make them choose that One Thing they're practicing. All their XPs go toward that One Thing. All of them. They can't switch their focus until that One Thing goes up in Rank/Level/Ability. If they do, they lose all the XPs they invested. That's called "keeping your focus."

INDUSTRIAL SABOTAGE
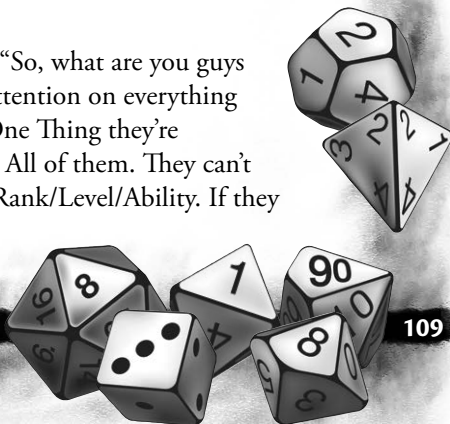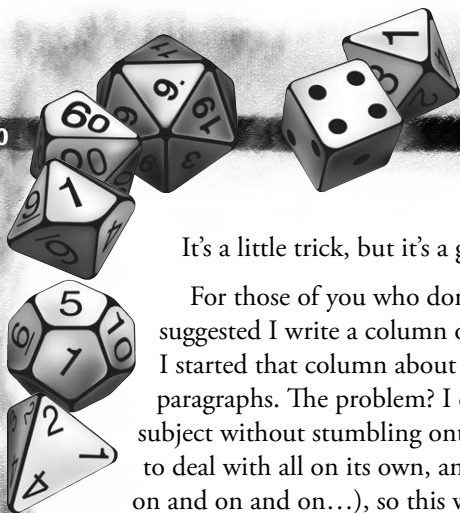
It's a little trick, but it's a good place to start for this month's column.

For those of you who don't keep score in the *Pyramid* Forum, someone suggested I write a column on how a Dirty GM rewards his players. Well, I started that column about seven times, but never got further than a few paragraphs. The problem? I couldn't keep focus. I couldn't keep on one subject without stumbling onto another one. Each was a big enough subject to deal with all on its own, and I've got a word count here (otherwise, I'd go on and on and on…), so this week is the beginning of a series.

In this series (I *think* it's going to be a three-parter), we'll take a look at a few assumptions that nearly everyone takes for granted in roleplaying games, and how a Dirty GM turn those assumptions to his own advantage. This month, we begin our series with one of the greatest assumptions in roleplaying, and when I say greatest, I mean Greatest.

I'm talking about Experience Points.

Nearly every game system uses them (including the three I designed), but that's not the point I'm trying to make here. The point is: *Nearly every game system uses them exactly the same way.* This is so prevalent that you don't wonder if a game system uses XPs, you just assume it does. So this month, let's take a look at a few ways to play dirty with rewards.

THE FIRST GREAT ASSUMPTION: AMERICAN HERESY

The first one starts before anyone even rolls a single die or writes a single number on the sheet. It's the thought that All Characters Are Created Equal. The assumption that all characters are equal is ridiculous. Is Elric equal to Moonglum? Is Aragorn equal to Gandalf? Is Frodo equal to Aragorn? Now, granted, Fafhrd and the Mouser are pretty equal, but they're the exception rather than the rule.

The fact of the matter is that roleplaying games are supposed to simulate the literature that inspired them. In fantasy literature, wizards are more powerful than anybody else. Only in game fiction is there a sense of "equality" amongst the group, and that's because those groups were built from characters created within a game system that spouted game balance. The Fellowship of the Ring was *not* a group of balanced characters. Nor were the folks running around in Shannara or the characters in the Thomas Covenant sagas.

So, I suggest you try something new the next time people create characters. I suggest you make them do a write-up of their character before they even touch a character sheet. If the players ask you, "How long should it be?" fall back on the old English 101 answer: "Make it as long as it has to be."

Then, as you look through each description, give out character creation points based on those writings. And I don't mean "Just reward the long-winded guys." Here's an example from my very own head.

Like I said in a previous column, I got the chance to play in a *Vampire* game recently. The character concept I started with was the Toreador assassin (killing is his art) from my New Jerusalem stories. Unfortunately, Jack Flash (with the 5 Dexterity, 5 Firearms, 5 Melee and 5 Celerity) wasn't all that interesting to play. There was no *character* in that character.

On the other hand, the character I wound up playing was much more interesting. He was an Assamite who lived eight hundred years ago. Instead of sneaking into castles, he sent a very formal letter saying, "I'm coming to kill you. I'll be there on the 17th. Make whatever preparations you need to make. You'll be dead by dawn." Unfortunately for the Assamites, my little buddy found Buddha and ran away to the mountains to find spiritual peace—for eight hundred years. He's come back recently because he's had a vision: the peace he seeks is in Los Angeles. So he's back, the guy who used to send kind notes, and while he's still a killing machine (5 Dexterity, 5 Melee, 5 Brawling, 5 Celerity), he *chooses* not to use his skills because he's found inner peace (Humanity 9).

Now, let's pretend I'm two different players, each presenting you with the above characters. Both of these characters look identical on the page (although one speaks Old English and the other speaks French), but don't you think one of them deserves a little bonus? They're both killing machines, designed to abuse the combat system beyond comprehension, but there's some *character* in the Assamite. Besides, as a GM, I can screw around with the Assamite. He balances himself out right well. But that Toreador I have to watch out for. I have to come up with super-bad killer NPCs to keep his quick self in line. But the Assamite keeps *himself* in line. All of his conflict is *inside his own head*. In Electric Johnland, the Assamite gets whatever character points he needs to make up his character. The Toreador, on the other hand, gets exactly what the game system allows.
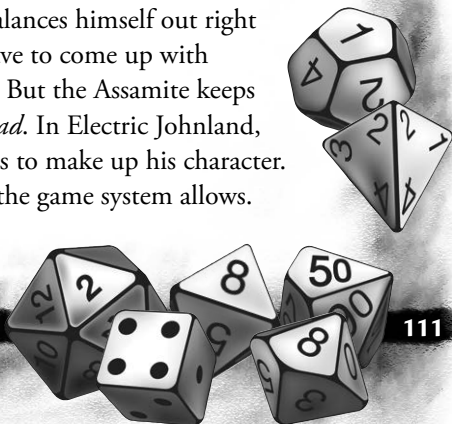
TOO MANY HAMS, NOT ENOUGH PINEAPPLE

The real problem with rewarding Experience Points is the uncomfortable feeling that you're rewarding the good roleplayers and punishing the average ones. Joe isn't a great roleplayer, but he's a good one. He shows up every week, plays out his character to the best of his ability, and always brings chips and sodas. Tim, on the other hand, is a natural wit. He always gets a great laugh, always knows exactly what to say, and is always on his toes. He figures out how to fast-talk the guards, knows how to sweet-talk the princess, and figures out all your traps in half a heartbeat. Of course, that means Tim always gets that bonus XP at the end of the game and Joe gets left out in the cold.

See the problem here? Joe's not getting the bonus XPs because he's playing to his ability and Tim's getting those bonus points because…he's playing to his ability.

All too often, we Game Masters (and I did say "we") reward the hams while forgetting about everyone else. Old improv rule (that I learned from those Sea Dog folks): you can't have ham without a little pineapple. In other words, it's all fine and good to give rewards to the players who put themselves in the forefront of the party, but don't forget the guys in the back.

"But, John," you say. "What kind of reward can we give Joe? After all, Tim's entertaining. He's making the four-hour game session interesting. Aren't we supposed to reward players who get into character and make the game fun?"

Yes. Yes, you are. But there's more than one way to reward a player. Even the quiet ones.

For example, Joe's character is a wizard. He doesn't talk much. He spends most of his time in Tim's shadow. However, like we said above, he's always there for the rest of the party. He always shows up on time and always brings chips and soda. He doesn't do funny voices, or get into character like the rest of the party, but he's always there with the right spell, just when the party needs it.

So, reward Joe for what he *is* doing. And don't reward him at the end of the game, reward him *when* he acts. Immediately. (Especially when it's his spell that saves Tim's overconfident hide.) When Joe's choice of spells is innovative or clever, give Joe bonus XPs to his spellcasting *right then and there*. Show him that you're paying attention and you know that what he's doing isn't as flashy as Tim, but it's just as necessary. A little of this kind of help goes a long way.

REWARDS BY PROXY

Here's another little Experience Point trick. Tell each of your players they have one Bonus XP they get to award to someone else tonight. Only one. When someone else does something super duper fantastic, they can reward that player with their Bonus XP.

REWARDS WITHOUT EXPERIENCE POINTS

Even the term is misleading. "Experience Points." I've never liked the fact that XPs can increase your Contacts, Friends, Allies, or other Social Bonuses your character has. Experience Points should improve what's inside you. Maybe Experience Points are more like Insight Points. Maybe there's another kind of XP that helps you develop your Contacts, Friends, Allies, and other Social Bonuses, eh?

Or maybe we should think outside the box for a second and figure a way to reward players *without* using points.

We all know there are a lot of different breeds of gamers. Some like social characters, others like combat characters, still others like introspective loner characters. Each deserves his own unique brand of reward. In other words, drop the whole generic "XP" thing and figure out a way to reward each individual character with something that will *really* make his eyes shine.

Had me a player who loved his Duelist character back when I was running *AD&D*. Now this guy was the *luckiest* fella you could ever meet. Always rolled 20's on this little jewel red d20. Thing was beautiful. Had a bubble in it. The character he played was an elven swordswoman who was cocky to the extreme. We didn't have the Overconfident Disadvantage back then, or she would have had it. This little Duelist was his favorite character. "Lady Luck," he used to call her. And so, when the time came to reward Lady Luck, I reached into that GM bag of tricks and pulled out two things.

The first was a beautiful red ruby—with a flaw in its heart. It was a Luckstone. Added one to every roll she ever made. The second was a sword—a Sword of Sharpness. I think you know the language I'm talkin' here.

Another fella in the game played a Dwarf Berserker. The problem with this little guy is that he was under a curse: he couldn't talk. If he muttered even a single word, he'd go nuts and kill everything in the place. Once again, I reached into that GM bag
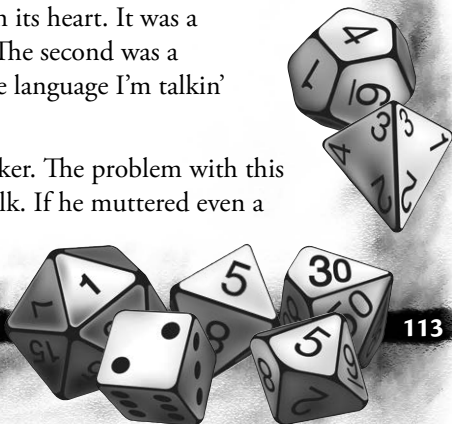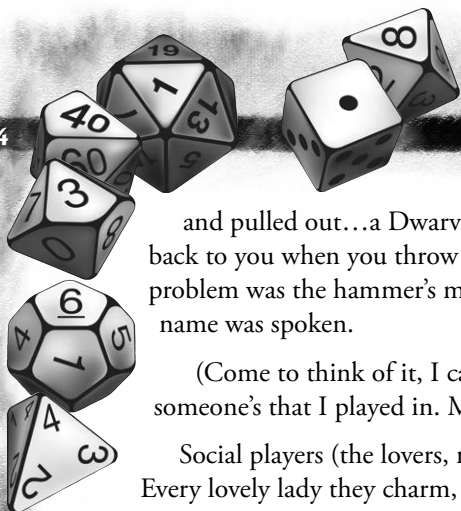
and pulled out…a Dwarven Hammer. You know, the kind that comes back to you when you throw it and kills giants with a single blow? The only problem was the hammer's magical properties would *only* work…when its name was spoken.

(Come to think of it, I can't remember if this was *my D&D* game or someone's that I played in. Memory can be a tricky thing sometimes, eh?)

Social players (the lovers, not the fighters) are even easier to reward. Every lovely lady they charm, every warlord they impress, every prince they poetically pontificate (sorry, got carried away) is a magic item unto themselves.

The lady can use her own beguiling beauty to win the character favor in court, thus getting him into the best parties, shaking hands with the *real* movers and shakers. You know the rule: "It's not what you know, it's who you know." But then again, making friends in high places isn't the only way to reward a player.

A Bard in one of my *D&D* games stopped in the street to tell a group of children a story. He wanted the XPs (he needed ten to hit the next level), and I told him, "Tell a story and you've got it." It was a great story, and I gave him the XPs he needed.

A little later, that glib tongue of his got himself (and the rest of the party) into trouble with a band of nastiness in a local tavern. The party was outnumbered three to one, and the fellows had black poison dripping from their twisty blades. But then, a dark cadre of men stood up in the corner of the room and pummeled those ruffians into a bloody mess. When the fighting was done, one of the shadowy fellows walked up to the bard and said, "I heard that story you told the children this morning. Brought a tear t'me eye, it did." Then, the ruffians walked away.

That same band of ruffians turned out to be the best allies the party ever made. They were the Thieves' Guild.

NO WORK, NO ROLL

Every GM rewards his players for good roleplaying in one way or another. Some GMs say, "If you roleplay it, I won't make you roll it." Others say, "If you roleplay it, I'll give you a bonus to your roll."

Check this one out. (By the way, a future game system may well include this trick. It was *my* trick, so I'm using it here, but if you recognize it, remember where you saw it first. Besides, the folks I gave it to are cool, so they'll give me proper credit for it. I hope.)

I recently had a discussion with a few friends about a religious RPG they're developing. They asked me for advice. I took a look at the system and was very impressed. But something was missing. I just couldn't figure it out. After a few hours of pizza and sodas and character creation, it came to me.

They were using Faith.

Now, in my book, Faith sums up to "Believing in something you can't prove." If you're gonna have Faith in an RPG (something I'm figuring out in *Orkworld* right now), you can't call it "faith." There's a mechanic for it. Players can see it. Players can *prove* it. That ain't Faith. That's Devotion.

And with that thought, another came to me. The game system should really use *two* sets of dice: d10s and d6s. If the characters were serving their god, they got to use d10s. If they were serving their own worldly interests, they only got to use d6s. Problem is, the Target Numbers don't change. Heh, heh, heh.

(Of course, now that I think of it, we could always throw in the "Sinful Rule": serve the Enemy, you use d4s.)

That's one for all you clerics out there. Hope you get to see it soon.

LAST TRICK

Back to the *Vampire* game. When my players got Blood Points, they got them in the form of Hershey's Kisses. You know, the kind wrapped up in red?

When Viscicitude came to town (a nasty vamp disease for those who don't know), I started giving out the ones with the crunchy middle. By the time they bit down, it was already too late.

CONCLUSION

Experience Points are all well and good, but they aren't the only way to reward your players. The *best* way is to look at the character sheet and find a reward that fits. A reward that *complements* the character in some way.

Don't let the assumptions get you in a rut. Find new ways of handling everything. See you next month when we tackle another Great Assumption. Maybe something small next time; something like Wounds. Or maybe Game Balance. Yeah. Game Balance. That should shake a few nests…

TRANSPLANT
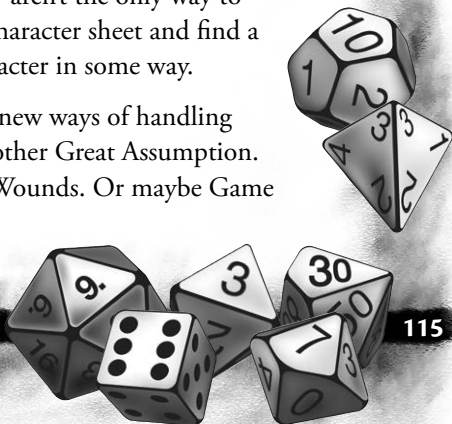
Episode 10 Introduction

This chapter is all about giving the players a bit of power. In *Play Dirty 2*, I'll be talking about that subject in greater detail, but for now, let's give you guys a tool to play with that both helps out the GM and gives you some real go-go juice. I stole this idea from *Houses of the Blooded* and switched it up a bit so you can use it with just about any system. And GMs, when I say this is gonna help you out, you'll see exactly what I mean as I explain.

Most of the time, I use index cards to keep track of things in the game. I use them to keep track of NPCs, places, items, etc. I write down a couple of things on the card so I can remember them, but other than that, I almost never detail out anything. If I need an ability or skill, I write it down on the card then make the roll. In other words, the more the players interact with an NPC, the more stats they get. The more the NPC needs mechanics, the more fleshed out he becomes.

This allows me to avoid what I like to call "The Bob Problem."

See, I can flesh out all the NPCs I want. I can give them rich back stories, I can fill out their character sheets, I can come up with funny voices for them…but in the end, my players are going to find Bob more interesting.

"Who's Bob?" you may ask. Oh, he's the bartender at the local pub. He was a throwaway character they happened to fall in love with. So now, I've got this other NPC that I spent hours trying to make as real and intriguing as possible and my players are much more interested in Bob.

So, let's not discourage this behavior. Instead, let's give each player a token at the beginning of the game. Let's call it an "Awesome Token." (You could also call it a "Bob Point" which is what my game called them when I first thought of this idea.)

Whenever you introduce a new NPC to the game—or a place, an item, whatever—players can spend their Awesome Tokens on that new thing. You say, "That's awesome!" and hand over the token.

Now, what does that accomplish?

First, it gives the players the ability to say, "I like this and want more of it in the game."

Second, it means you add an ability, trait, skill, whatever to his character sheet. In fact, if you're feeling generous, you can give the player the ability to do that. (I usually do.)

You might be surprised how many Bobs become full-fledged important NPCs in my campaigns because of players giving input this way. Or, you might not.

Yeah, screw it. Let's call 'em "Bob Points." If your players ask why, tell 'em. Bob deserves it.

EPISODE 10

THE PLAYERS STRIKE BACK

(A Minor Prelude: Thank you to everyone who found me at Origins and said, "I love your column and use your techniques all the time!" Big thanks also go out to the people who said, "I really like your column. I don't use the ideas, but they give me different ideas to use." Thanks also go out to the people who said, "I like your column. I disagree with nearly everything you say, but its fun to read, so I try to catch it every month.")

(Thanks guys.)

All along, we've been discussing dirty tricks the GM can use to make sure his players are on their toes, jumpy, and unsure

RIVAL GANGS
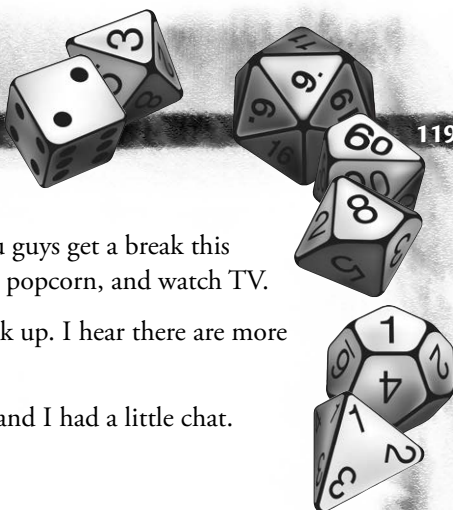
about which way the story will turn next. Well, you guys get a break this month. It's your turn to go rent a movie, pop some popcorn, and watch TV.

(And who knows, maybe the readership will pick up. I hear there are more players than GMs, ya know.)

So, all you GMs: get lost! It's time your players and I had a little chat.

* * *

Right, now that we've gotten rid of the fat, let me tell you a little secret about your GM.

Despite all the perils he puts you through, despite all the traps and deadly poison needle triggers, despite the beasts and evil barons and blunderbuss bearin' bugbears, deep down inside…he wants you to have a good time.

Don't you think you should be doing a little of the same thing for him?

He wants you to be entertained by all of his shenanigans. I've got some dirty little tricks for you to play that not only make sure that you stay one step ahead of that GM, but also keep a smile plastered on his face. That way, he never knows just how hard you're workin' him.

BREAKING THE RULES

I've mentioned my *Vampire* character before. You know, the super-duper killing machine Assamite nobody can stop?

Well, just recently, he went through an entire police station. Yeah. True *Terminator* moment. He didn't use a single gun. He didn't kill anyone. He broke a lot of bones, pulled a lot of tendons, and threw a whole heavin' lot of nerve punches, but he didn't kill anyone.

The reason? We needed to get into that cop station and get one of the other players out before the sun rose.

Now, I have to admit, my assassin fully abuses nearly every combat rule in the Storyteller System, making him the most dangerous thing on the planet (player characters are the center of the universe and don't let anyone else tell you any different).
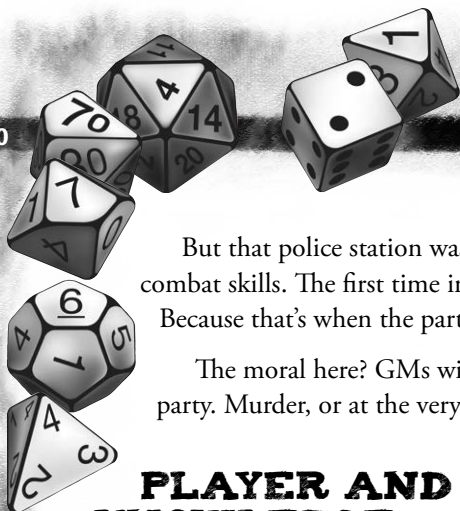
But that police station was the first time he ever used any of those combat skills. The first time in more than a handful of sessions. Why? Because that's when the party needed him to use them.

The moral here? GMs will let you get away with murder if it helps the party. Murder, or at the very least, a whole lot of broken kneecaps.

PLAYER AND CHARACTER KNOWLEDGE

Let's get rid of one assumption right quick. This whole "Player vs. Character Knowledge" hoo-ha has got to go. The reason we use this rule is because naughty players use it to their own advantage at the expense of everyone else.

"I open the door from the left side, carefully avoiding the poison dart trap, stepping on only every third tile, putting 60% of my weight on my left foot while singing The Yellow Rose of Texas…what's that? No, I haven't read the adventure."

Yeah. That guy.

The fact is, a player sharing knowledge with his character can aid the group and make the whole roleplaying experience a lot more fun.

For example, let's say your character has the Intelligence of bantha poo-doo. Yeah, he's not supposed to know that opening the Black Book of the Dead is a bad idea. He's not supposed to know that (accidentally) catching the pages on fire is an even worse idea. And he's not supposed to know that spilling the sacred wine on the pages is the worst idea in ten thousand years.

The mummy comes to life, attacks the group, and you all run for your lives.

That's player knowledge in the character's head. Breaking the rules. And you just helped out the GM by kick-starting his campaign.

Good-Player-You. Have a Hershey's Kiss.

Another example.

Your character knows absolutely nothing about nuclear fusion. You, on the other hand, are the God-King of Nuclear Physics. How many movies/comic books/novels have you read where the guy disarming the Big Bad Bomb has no clue what he's doing, and he disarms the thing anyway because he gets lucky?

If you make it entertaining, if you make it fit the plot, if you don't abuse the power the GM has given you, he'll let you get away with it. Trust me on this.

It's because he's a sucker who wants to make sure his players are all having a good time. As long as everyone is laughing at the end, you're in the clear.

Let's try another one.

A LITTLE PSYCHOLOGY

It doesn't matter how long you've been playing with your GM; you should know him pretty well by now. You know the kind of books he reads, the movies he watches, and the TV he lets rot his brain. You should also know the kind of games he runs. That is knowledge, and knowledge is power, my friends.

Let's abuse it.

The Wife is a great example. She knows I like to run big, mythic games, full of symbolism, heroism, and little victories. Because she knows that, she's nearly always fairly certain she won't get killed until the dramatically appropriate time… if she gets killed at all. So, she pulls off all kinds of daring stunts, daring me to whack her character.

She knows me too well. And she abuses that knowledge with the same kind of joyful glee the Grinch stole Christmas.

My buddy D.J. also knows the kind of game I run. I have nasty NPCs. They spend a whole lot of time plotting against the players. Well, in my *Amber* campaign, he and another player (The Wife, again) ganged up on one of my NPCs, shunting him into a Shadow (parallel world for you non-Amber literate folks) that was an endless sewage pipe. That got rid of my chief villain NPC, forcing me to change plans.

As soon as I was off balance, they started implementing their own plans. They made sure my chief foil was in a sewer Shadow, and they took advantage of it.

If you know your GM doesn't flesh out NPCs, start getting conversational.

If you know your GM doesn't run good combats, get into fights with important people. (This works especially well if you know how to fight and he doesn't.)
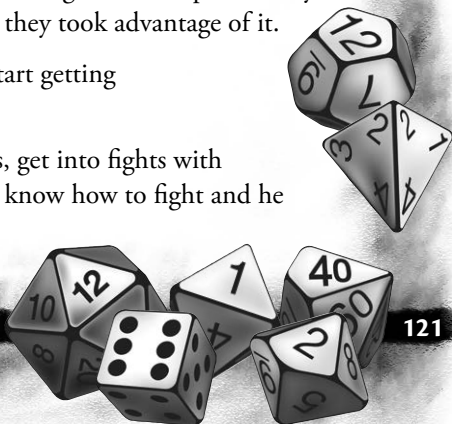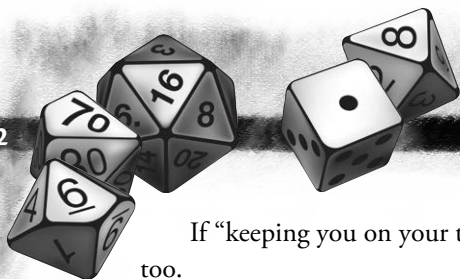
If "keeping you on your toes" is good for players, it's good for the GM, too.

(However, intentionally going against the grain of the GM's plans is just rude. Knowing he wants you to save the princess and you just blow her off kills the game. We're not talking about that here. We're talking about keeping the GM unsure about which way you're going, not killing the entire evening for everyone.)

"YOU JUST DID WHAT?"

You want to really give your GM a hard time? Expand your character.

Groosome the Barbarian, the biggest, baddest, dirtiest, rudest, horniest barbarian this side of the Iron Spine Mountains just found God. He's had an epiphany. He has to serve his God. He throws off his barbarian leathers, tosses his axe, and breaks his bow across his knee. Then, he rushes into the church and explains that God wants him to do the Good Work.

You can hear the GM's jaw dropping, even as we speak.

Spikey the Thief, the most clever, conniving, and cunning pickpocket this side of the Bloodwash River, just fell in love with a barmaid. The most beautiful barmaid he's ever seen. Spikey pulls out all the gold he's pilfered over the last few days and tells her he's on his way to buy a wedding ring. Right the hell now.

Of course, Groosome and Spikey don't derail the campaign with their newfound faith and love; they're just adding spice to the stew. Groosome goes out on the adventure without a single weapon in his hands, hoping to win over the kobolds, giants, and ogres with the Good Word. After all, if it was enough to convert him, it should be enough to convert them, too. And Spikey's still going down in that dungeon, he's just gotta make sure all the gold and silver he gets go toward that ring. And wouldn't his new bride like those tapestries? And those boots? And those chests.

A TERMINAL END

It's a bit short this month, but I've been busy. I had to get *Orkworld* to the printer, pack up my house, get galley copies of *Orkworld* for Origins, pack for Origins, fly to Origins, fly back from Origins, supervise movers, pack up road trip stuff, drive from San Bernardino (LA) to Petaluma (San Francisco), and get ready

for a New Job with Totally Games. Very busy this month, but I've got one last Player Trick for you before I go.

Tell your GM how you want your character to die.

Be very specific.

Then, when the opportunity arises, snatch it and hold on with both hands. Wrap your legs around it, sink your teeth in, and don't let go.

Go with a bang and a smile.

Take care, and I'll see you all in thirty.

Introduction to Episode 11

I was working for Neopets when I wrote this episode, writing for the Neopedia and creating stories. I was the lead writer for the "Battle of Meridell" storyline, created the Grey Faerie, and gave the worlds of Neopets a lot of backstory.

I was having a blast (and honestly, should not have left to work for another company). More importantly, I got to see the number of hits each of my stories got. Hundreds of thousands. That was the most rewarding part of the job: writing a story and watching the hits go up.

I hadn't designed or played an RPG for years. There was some talk of me designing a Neopets RPG, but that never got up off the ground.

Then, a few folks suggested I run a *D&D* game. "Only if everyone plays thieves," I said. It's my standard response. I've got an ongoing thieves campaign whenever someone asks me to run *D&D*. My "City of Thieves" has seen over 100 players walk through its streets. Maybe one day, I'll get around to publishing it.

By the way, for those who are curious, "Happy Fun Ball" was Annie Rush who went on to design such wonderful RPGs as *The Secret Lives of Gingerbread Men* and *Run Robot Red,* among others. You can check her out over at http://www.itesser. com/.

THE RETURN OF THE PLAY DIRTY

Hi. Remember me? I'm the kid who had an article called *Play Dirty* a while back. Then, I disappeared. Some of you may be wondering where I went, what I've been doing with my time. More than a few of you probably either don't remember me or couldn't really give a d4 where I've been. But, for those who are curious, let me just say that I've been busy getting paid to write. It's good work, if you can find it. I *did* find it, so I've been doing it, because as Robert Wuhl in *Bull Durham* so sagely observed, "It beats working Sears."

In the meantime, I've rediscovered an old flame. For a long time, I gave up on gaming. Just gave up on it. Wrote a novel, wrote for a video game company, kept a journal of my

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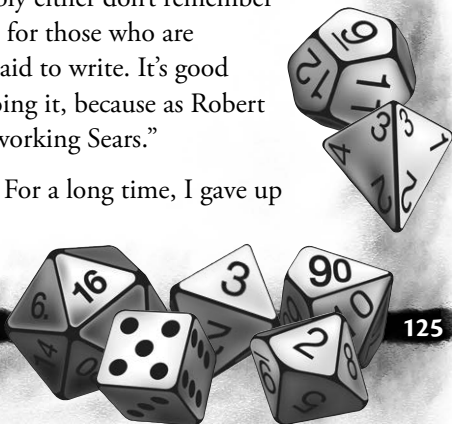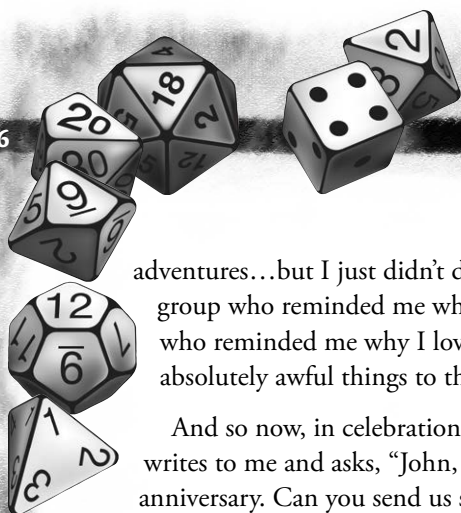
adventures…but I just didn't do any gaming. Not until I bumped into a group who reminded me why I love it so much. These wonderful folks who reminded me why I love gaming and I returned the favor by doing absolutely awful things to their characters.

And so now, in celebration of *Pyramid*'s 10th anniversary, Mr. Marsh writes to me and asks, "John, we'd really like a *Play Dirty* for the 10th anniversary. Can you send us something?" Well, I'd walk on fire for Mr. Marsh (as long as they gave me asbestos boots), and for such a big event, I should give him something *huge*—like Atlas huge, like Zeus' libido huge. But, instead I've got something very *small*.

I share with you now one of the little tricks I've used in that time since we last talked. I say "little," because it is, really. A trifle. Barely a mechanic at all. Can't even call it a technique. It's just this tiny, little thing I did for a tiny, little player of mine. The smallest thing in the world. But, then again, as my Grammy used to say, "It's the little things that make the soup."

And who knows…if Marsh digs it, maybe I'll send him another one. But only if he sends me those boots…

HAPPY FUN BALL MEETS THE GOD OF MURDER

There's a new girl in my life. I say "girl," because that's what she is. Barely out of high school, but smart, and cute as a button. And bouncy. She's gained the Secret Superhero Nickname of "Happy Fun Ball." Cute, bouncy, and full of potential disaster. "Do not taunt Happy Fun Ball" is what everyone says whenever someone gives her a hard time. 'Cause you just don't know what she's capable of.

Happy Fun Ball works with me at my current place of employment (which shall remain nameless… until the bio section of this article) and when she found out I was running a *Dungeons & Dragons* game, she jumped at the opportunity.

(Yes—believe it or not, a *Dungeons & Dragons* game. One of the not-so-dirty secrets I've learned of being a good GM is you run what the *players* want to *play*, not what *you* want to *run*. Remember this rule, and, as the Umpa Lumpas sing, you will go far.)

The game isn't your standard hack 'n' slash campaign, though. Oh, no. I've got something much more interesting in mind. At least, interesting to me, and hopefully, interesting to the players.

Thieves. Just thieves. No, not "rogues." Thieves who call themselves rogues are like Trekkies who call themselves "Trekkers." Lame.

All of them—all six of them—have taken at least one level of thief. And the game takes place in The City. They're all members of the guild, and they have to pay dues, and they have to watch out for members of rival guilds, and dodge the town guard. Carrying a weapon is illegal…without a permit. Using magic is illegal…without a permit. Doing just about *anything* is illegal…without a permit. So, even being *adventurers* is illegal without paying the proper taxes to your local representative and carrying around a nifty piece of paper that says it's okay for you to do it. This is the campaign setting, filled with mystery, intrigue, and plenty of places to loot and get rich.

Like I said, everybody's got at least one level of thief. We've got the thief-ranger (he's a city ranger), the thief-sorcerer-noble, the thief-monk, the thief-thief (that's Happy Fun Ball), and the thief-paladin.

Yeah. A paladin of the Goddess of Thieves. Pardon me while we take a very long aside here.

* * *

I can get away with a thief-paladin this because I've ditched alignment. Funny how many ideas that liberates, eh? Besides, if you think about it, the whole thing makes perfect sense. It all came to me after a conversation I had with Jesse Heinig (who gets mentioned here because this is half his idea anyway).

Paladins tend to have a high charisma. The high charisma tendency indicates someone with a lot of flair and panache. The paladin archetype we gamers are all familiar with is a chivalrous soul who adopts righteous causes, helps the helpless, thwarts the wicked, all that good stuff. When applied to a medieval character, we get images of Arthur, Lancelot, and the like. But, what if we applied it to a Renaissance figure, or a Restoration figure? And why don't we just throw on a little bit of roguery on to that paladin…and *voila*!

As a "goodly soul," the paladin-thief is a gentleman of high character who inspires others and gives them the courage to survive. When he "lays on hands," it's not "I lay on hands and heal you with divine
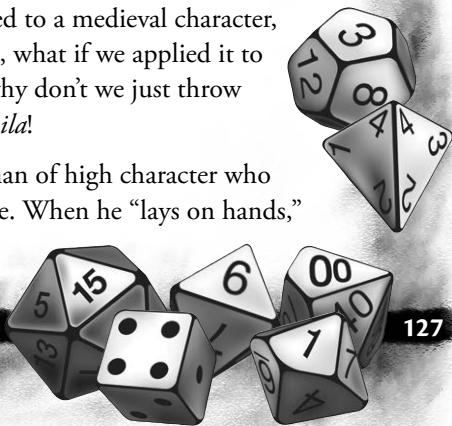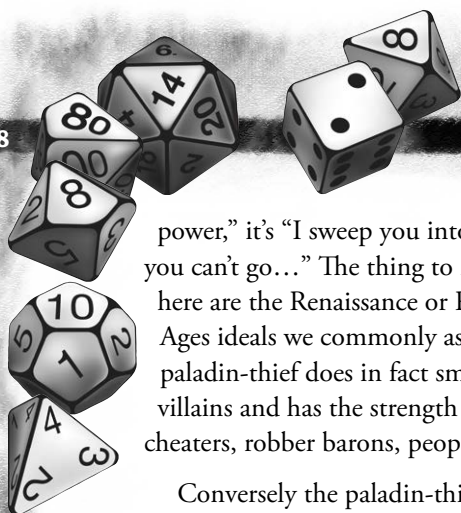
power," it's "I sweep you into an embrace and kiss you and tell you that you can't go…" The thing to remember is that the ideas of "virtue and vice" here are the Renaissance or Restoration-era ideals, not the Early Middle Ages ideals we commonly associate with *Dungeons & Dragons*. Thus, the paladin-thief does in fact smite evil—but that's because he casts down villains and has the strength to fight against people of low character— cheaters, robber barons, people who abuse women, liars, etc.

Conversely the paladin-thief is an example to others of how to be a courtly figure: you can still be witty, be involved in romances, even be involved in some "nocturnal hijinx." The difference is that the paladin-thief does things with a pure heart and conscience. He rendezvous with his secret sweetheart out of a pure love and romantic ideal, not out of some treacherous desire to possess her and destroy his rivals. He races across rooftops at night helping his larcenous friends because he hopes to lead them into worthwhile causes—tweaking the nose of an overbearing church, throwing down unjust rulers, inspiring the populace to find their own inner heroic strength. He is not a man with a rigid and inflexible dogmatic code that says "I can't have fun, I can't steal, I can't be in romances." He's a man with a romantic code that says "I must inspire others, I must never let the wicked rest, I must abide by law in public, but in private I am driven by charity and compassion for my fellow man, especially those who are downtrodden by a wicked society."

That's the thief-paladin. Feel free to use him. Just make sure to thank Jesse for him, because without Jesse, he wouldn't exist.

* * *

Anyway, one of the antagonists our party encounters is a priest of the God of Murder—Ikhalu. See, he and his brother had a bet at the beginning of time about who would be the God of Death. Each made a house for men to rest in when they died. Ikhalu made his difficult to get into—so only the worthy would enter. His brother, Khalee, made his easy to get into—so *anybody* could enter. The men chose Khalee, and Ikhalu got pissed. Now, he's the God of Murder, and his priests use daggers that steal men's souls and send them to Ikhalu. So, when an assassin-priest of Ikhalu kills you with one of his magic daggers, you go off to that black fortress in the sky. What's more—the guy who killed you? You (and everybody else he killed) get to serve him when *he* enters the House of Ikhalu. The assassin-priests of Ikhalu. They'll be seeing your *d20 System* shelf any day now.

These guys, they're one of the first antagonists my party meets. Now, Happy Fun Ball, she's never played a roleplaying game before (she says I'm ruining her for other GMs; a gross miscalculation of my skills, I assure you), and we're playing *Dungeons & Dragons*…but a slightly modified version. A "wicked" version you might say. Because I've introduced a little mechanic called Hero Points into the game. Not a new idea, not even a novel one. Just a way for the players to get little bennies now and again and modify really bad die rolls.

Well, our Happy Fun Ball has chosen her thief to be a specialist in knives. So, while they're all fighting these assassin-priests, she sees one of those magic knives in the dead hand of an Ikhalu Priest…and I tell her to make a Willpower Save. She looks confused at me. "What for?" she asks.

"Just do it," I tell her, firmly, but with a smirk and a wink, just to let her know nothing's gonna kill her. So, she does. And she fails. And I say…

"The next thing you know—you've got the dagger in your hand."

Happy Fun Ball jerks in her seat. "I've *what*?" she asks.

"And," I continue, "there's an Ikhalu priest with his back turned to you." The smirk stays on. "That means if you attack him now, you'll get your full sneak attack damage bonus."

She nods. "Okay," she says.

"You don't need to roll to attack," I tell her. "Your strike hits perfectly. Roll for damage and assume you got a critical."

She's smiling now. She's not too much of a noob to know what that means. She rolls a whole handful of dice and adds up the damage. She tells it to me. I don't even consult the guy's hit points. Why bother? The moment is the moment, and it's moving fast. No need to ruin it with number checking now.

"Your knife enters his back, slips between two ribs and finds his heart. You feel the pointed blade slip into the muscle there, and you feel something *cold* rush down your arm, into your chest, and down into your own heart… before it slips away."

The thief-paladin asks, "Was that his *soul*?"

I say nothing. Okay. That's a lie. I do say something. "Annie," I say to Happy Fun Ball. "You get a Villain Point."
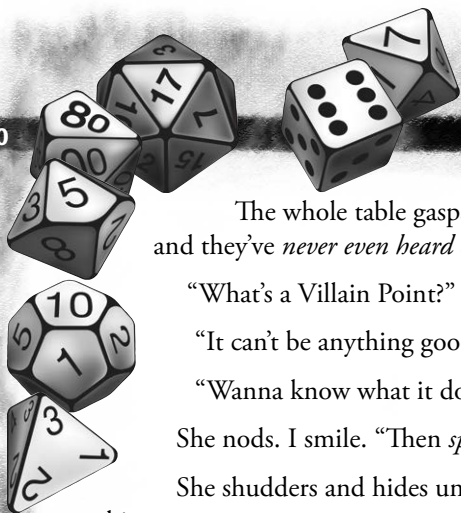
The whole table gasps. We've been playing for many months now, and they've *never even heard of Villain Points.*

"What's a Villain Point?" she asks me.

"It can't be anything good," says Evilzug, the thief-sorcerer-noble.

"Wanna know what it does?" I ask Happy Fun Ball.

She nods. I smile. "Then *spend it*," I tell her.

She shudders and hides under the hood of her sweatshirt. Poor little thing.

Happy Fun Ball has had that Villain Point for a few months now. Every time she's in trouble, every time one of the other characters is in trouble, every time they could really use a hand, I always turn to her and say, "You know, you *could* spend your Villain Point."

That's when she shrinks down and pulls the hood of her sweatshirt over her head.

Poor thing. One day she'll find out what a Villain Point does. And so will the other PCs. But, until that day, they'll just have to sweat it out…knowing that one of them has a Villain Point. And could spend it at any moment.

Now, you may be asking, just what *does* a Villain Point do? Faithful Reader, the answer to that question should be obvious! It *is* obvious to all those astute GMs out there who have used the same technique. It isn't a new one. It's a very old one. Something I picked up a hundred years ago in Tibet from a wise old GM who taught it to me in exchange for a d16—a rare artifact, indeed.

What does a Villain Point do? My friend, you just *saw* what it does. It sits on Happy Fun Ball's sheet and stares at her. Reminds her that she's capable of doing something awful…something dreadful…something—dare we say it?—*EVIL*.

That's what it does. It mocks her, torments her, and yes, even taunts her (do not taunt Happy Fun Ball). And I don't have to do anything at all. Just ask her once a session, when she's rolled really cruddy and someone's at 9 hit points and really needs help *right the hell now*…and it says to her, "*I* could help…all you have to do is ask."

Just one little Villain Point. It's changed the face of the game. Gave it a depth it didn't have before. Brought to focus what all the other PCs are capable of becoming. *Villains*. And it teaches them something else, too. That not all villains are born evil.

Some are smart, cute, bouncy girls who duck under the hood of their sweatshirts when things get hot. To hide from that little point at the top of her character sheet.

GM RULES

Rule #1: There are no rules.

Rule #2: Cheat anyway.

EXTRA ADVENTURE WORDS!

Roll a d100 to choose from the chart.

1. Unethical Charity
2. Ethical Secret Police
3. Mysterious Deadline
4. Barbed-Wire Soul
5. Unintended Consequences
6. Side Effects
7. Wrongfully Accused
8. Runaway Vehicle
9. Radiation
10. Ultimate Weapon
11. Jail Break
12. Cover Up
13. Magical Catastrophe
14. Alternate Universe
15. Spy Network
16. Stolen Prototype
17. Manchurian Candidate
18. Cuckoo
19. Rapture
20. Nine Lives
21. Mystery Cult
22. Serial Killer
23. Two Grifters
24. Golden Key
25. Blood Sacrifice
26. Mask
27. Ritual Dagger
28. Ghost Tears
29. Wizard's Hidden Heart
30. Seven Demon Bag
31. Mutiny
32. Thieves Guild
33. Enigma Drive
34. Faith Chip Implant
35. Time Machine
36. Evil Ex-
37. Magnum Opus
38. Desperate Monarch
39. Angelic
40. Dungeon
41. Dragon
42. Hastur Cult
43. Alien Invasion
44. Underworld Door
45. Dynastic Feud
46. Unholy Water
47. Memetic Weapon
48. Rivalry
49. Mutation
50. Desecration