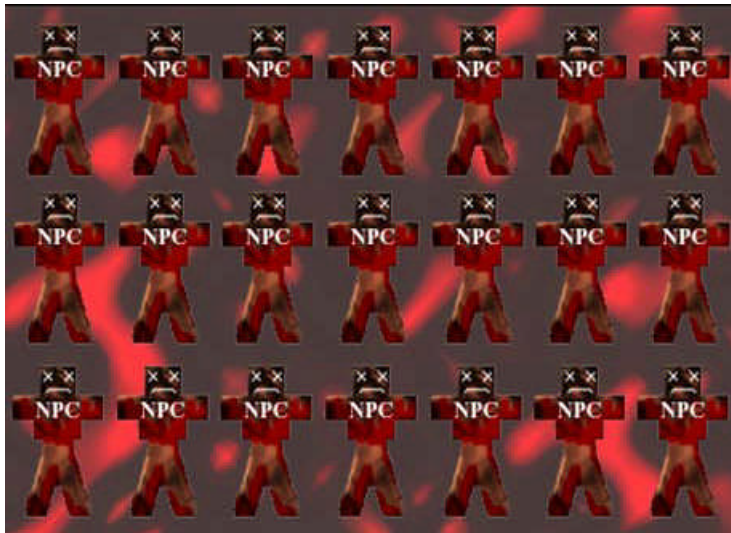


Blackjack's Guide To Bitter Gamemastering #3

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Cannon Fodder

When I first started GMing I generated NPCs using the "Crunch all you want, we'll make more" philosophy. Not only did this add up to a lot of time filling out sheets but it also galvanized the players to the point that they had the same emotional reaction to blowing away a cop as they did towards buying a bag of potato chips. I blame this attitude primarily on my few very early role-playing experiences, mainly with obscure systems which are no longer around, where the GM equivalent would send forty Nazis at me while I was carrying around a machine gun while making it perfectly clear that my only option was to turn them into coleslaw. This really messed me up.

My change in attitude paralleled a change in gaming philosophy. I decided one session to try GMing without NPC sheets and instead use NPC descriptions. With this change I also made the conversion from plot driven runs to personality driven LIVES. Many interesting things began to happen. First off, my NPCs fought to the death a lot less often. When I thought of a security guard as a B:4 Q:5 S:5 C: 3 I:4 W:3 piece of paper it was a lot easier to let him get wasted. When I thought of him as a Jim from Renton with two kids, a dog named Sammy, and a bracelet for his wife's birthday in his locker, things changed. The Yakuza soldier who normally would have stood in the middle of the street blazing away at the runner's van before getting run over suddenly started hiding behind stuff and taking more reserved shots. I really liked the feeling of depth and character I got from GMing this way. Converting my PCs was a bit trickier.

If your runners have any decency at all, the use of this playing method won't be all that tough to convert to. If you're GMing a bunch of cold blooded killers you're gonna have to trick them. I had turned my players into a bunch of heartless pricks (and prickettes) who had gotten to the point that they probably would have firebombed a puppy farm for the right price. Then, one day, they hooked up with an NPC who went by the street name of Kill Em' All McKay. McKay needed assistance with a hit on a small gang living in an old apartment complex. As the runners walked up the staircase they encountered a teenage boy who, upon seeing them, turned and ran. One of the runners reacted by mowing the kid down with an SMG. And then, with great drama, Kill Em All McKay, he who is feared by God himself, responded to

the action with complete horror and revulsion. "You shot a kid! A goddamn kid!!!". The boy, who was not entirely dead, proceeded to drag himself with one arm, crying, screaming, and trailing blood, into his mother's apartment. And, to top it off, his little sister, aged seven years, boldly waddled into the hallway holding onto her blankie and, through a river of tears, screamed at the runners for hurting her big brother. The runners mellowed a bit after this.

Personality Problems

Next topic: the one annoying little player type in every running group who can't role-play worth crap. Sure they try but for some reason or another, perhaps faulty genetics, they can only take on one personality: their own. I actually feel kinda sorry for these people and now regret the times in the past when I simply booted them out of the group. All of these people want to be creative, otherwise they wouldn't even be trying to play. One thing you can do to solve this problem is make them answer all of the questions on the personality "survey" located in the Second Edition rulebook, and then yell at them every time they screw up. But if you prefer a more subtle method, try the following.

Put them in a situation they couldn't possibly use their normal personality to react to. Read the player's personality. What do they never say or, better yet, what are they afraid to say? Then put them into a situation where they absolutely must say these things or something very, very bad will happen to them. They'll be forced to make something up, and making stuff up is what role-playing is all about. I had a player once who was a fairly reserved individual in both reality and the game. I railroaded him into a situation where he was being paid to work with a bunch of amateur runners who were performing a raid on a weapons warehouse. I had these NPC runners come up with the stupidest plan ever imaginable, something involving a hot air balloon and crossbows, a plan which, even if it went WELL, would have gotten them all killed several times over. The player finally voiced an alternate plan as the NPCs were in the process of replacing their arrowheads with suction cups.