

From The Ultimate Guide to Video Game Writing & Design. By Flint Dille and John Zuur Platten, Lone Eagle Publishing Company, 2007.

[Taken from Chapter 5: Building Characters]

Summary – The Character Biography Template

SAMPLE SETUP

Okay, so you’ve created an idea for a game called *Hades Hit Man*. In the game, you play Jack Slag. He is trying to work his way out of the lowest corners of Hell, so he’s doing nasty jobs for the Dark One. The rule is that he has to kill a good person every ten minutes or he will be banished into eternal torment. However, he is forbidden to kill a human who’s been infested by a demon (of which there are many). That means, he must use his “power of discernment” (a variation on heat vision) to make sure he is killing an innocent.

In laying out the premise for the game, we can fairly easily extrapolate some of the core gameplay. Often, story leads to logical game mechanics and vice versa. We can see the tone (dark, controversial even). We can imagine the levels, both in hell and in the real world. We know that we’ll be up against both humans and demons ... maybe even angels. We know that we have “powers” from hell. We know that there is a ticking clock, with severe consequences for failure.

Now, let’s take a look at the template. From the above setup for *Hades Hit Man*, we’ll fill in the template for Jack, and see where it takes us.

Character Template

Name	Jack Slag
Story Purpose	We are going to follow Jack on his road to his own version of redemption, no matter how twisted or perverse it may ultimately be.
Gameplay Purpose	Player character
Alignment	Neutral evil. He won’t kill randomly, but he will kill just about anyone that gets in his way.

Persona	Bad-ass
General Disposition	Indifferent and vacant. He may be too far-gone, although, occasionally, there is still a hint of life in his eyes.
Special Abilities	He can see an innocent soul, which he must then reap to the Dark Lord. Note that it is possible that he finally reaches a soul so pure that even he can't pull the trigger, and this leads to more chaos than he could have ever imagined.
Education/Intelligence	College educated, maybe even a doctorate degree. He has come a long way since he walked among the living.
Family	None that he can remember. He'd like to, though.
Aspirations	Jack realizes that he is eternally damned. He's just hoping to make his eventual suffering a little less worse. It's not much as far as hopes go, but at the moment, it's all he's got.
Addictions	Gambling. The only time Jack felt alive when he was at the craps table.
Occupation and attitude toward it (good or bad)	Hit man for Beelzebub. At first, he wasn't too happy about his occupation, but lately he's been warming to the task.
Objective(s)	Kill innocent souls and deliver them back to hell. Avoid eternal damnation (beyond what he is already facing).
What does this character want?	Ultimately, to be left alone. However, that doesn't look like it is ever going to happen.
Who or what does he	Jack has vague recollections about a family pet. He

love?	can't remember if it was a dog or a cat. Maybe a parrot. He thinks he loved it ... he'd like to think he did, anyway. It bothers him that he can't remember.
What is he afraid of?	Nothing. That is what makes him so dangerous. If the Devil had known this, he might not have decided to use him.
Why does he involve himself in this situation?	He has no choice.
Other roles and identities?	Jack can pass among the living, able to fit in by looking very much like any other person you'd ignore if you'd passed them by on the street.
Single adjective to describe this character	Weary
Skills	Expert marksman. Lightning fast. (You would expect a hit man to know how to use a gun. We'd have a unique angle if he doesn't—maybe he has to learn how to become a hit man, this is part of his adventure.)
Reports/Answers to?	The equivalent of hell's field operative. This could be someone still living, someone dead, or the wild idea, something not human, but not necessarily a demon. Perhaps he can communicate and receive orders psychically.
Who reports to this character?	No one.
Trademark Object	Jack has a cursed gun with a sentient desire to kill. He must placate it or it will turn on him.

Common emotions (pick three): Exhausted, confused, ecstatic, guilty, suspicious, angry, hysterical, frustrated, sad, confident, embarrassed, happy, mischievous, disgusted, frightened, enraged, ashamed, cautious, smug, depressed, overwhelmed, hopeful, lonely, love-struck, jealous, bored, surprised, anxious, shocked, shy	Exhausted, sad, mischievous
Signature Move or Tic	Jack bunches up his shoulders when he talks, as if he was trying to get out of his own skin.
Nationality	Open. This character can be from about anywhere.
Ethnicity	Also open.
Religion	Fallen (and fallen hard) Catholic
Favorite Food	Sautéed Mushrooms
How does this character dress? (Note: Characters might wear a variety of clothes, but there is a “standard” way you see them. Bond wears a tuxedo. Indiana Jones wears a leather jacket and a fedora.)	Getting tired of every anti-hero wearing a duster, so let’s see what we can come up with. Perhaps a dark suit or even the clothes he was buried (or died) in. We want something iconic, but also original.
Accent	Interesting. A vague, hard to place accent could hint at backstory we may want to explore.

Dialogue Tics and Slang?	Perhaps Jack speaks with idioms from another era, and that hints at the fact that he has been trapped in hell for a lot longer than we originally thought.
Locations where this character is mostly likely to “blend in”	Hell and various locations around large metropolitan cities.
Where was the character born?	Springfield, Illinois, though Jack can’t remember this. Yet.
Where has the character been?	Jack traveled the world. As he visits various parts of the globe looking for innocents, he makes deja vu of locations he visited while he was alive. There may be a connection here that becomes clearer as the game progresses. There is a larger plan in motion, and the locations he’s being forced to “hunt” in are not as random as we believe.
Where does the character live?	Jack has no home.
Where will (did) he or she die? And how?	Jack died in a car accident as he was trying to evade the cops. He can’t remember why, but he does remember that other people died.
Objects the character wears on his or her body (jewelry, tattoos, etc):	Jack has a set of dice tattooed onto the palms of each of his hands. The weird thing is, depending on the situation and his mood, the dice changes their face-up positions. Possible this could be a foreshadowing device ... if Jack looks at his palms and see “snake eyes,” his odds are not good. If he sees a seven, it’s a different story.
Dichotomy of Character (inner conflict in the	Jack finds a “true innocent,” and can’t pull the trigger. This could be the crisis that becomes both a major story and gameplay reversal. We could also

character)	have a tone issue to contend with here.
Character reaction to different events in the game (walk through a few beats)	Early on, Jack will start as indifferent to pain and suffering (in fact, he is the cause of most of it). At some point, something will affect him in an unexpected way. Perhaps he feels joy, or dare we say, love.
Relation to other significant characters	The Devil—starts as an errand boy, and then slowly becomes a threat.
The Innocent (character to be determined)—This is the character that will help Jack stop his fall.	The Angel of Death—elbowing in on his territory while working for the “wrong side.”
What we’d think if we saw this character on the street	We’d be nervous, not because of his physical appearance, but because of his intensity and vacant eyes.
Three days before the party started: Often as not your game will be about one of the peak moments in this character’s life. What was he or she doing before it started?	Suffering endlessly in the lower corners of hell.
How did this character lose his or her virginity? (This is always a fun one.)	Crazy idea, maybe Jack is a virgin.
Morality: Moral choices the character makes in the game. Does this affect how the player should	We are into some morally ambiguous territory with this character. We may want to consider doing a wild reversal, where we start in a world without consequences, and let Jack (and the player) go wild. Then, we turn everything on its head, by making

play him?	Jack deal with all the chaos that he caused.
Emotional Stability	Jack is slowly losing his mind. He's in the first stages, but it may manifest itself through dialogue, or his interaction with other characters.
What do they do to comfort themselves?	Dreams about gambling.
Phobias: heights, snakes, darkness, etc.	Jack can't stand to be alone, although that is all he desires.
Vanity	Jack has a casual cool. Even in his present situation, he looks like a movie star without trying.
Tagline	"Time to meet your real maker."
Epitaph: What will go on the character's tombstone?	He died too soon, but he deserved it.
Actor Suggestions	Let's think about this one.
Impressionistic Age and Health	Midthirties. Failing health.
Impressionistic Height	Taller than most, but he hunches over a little when he walks.
Impressionistic Weight	In shape
Body Type	Lean and muscular
Hairline/Color	Thinning fast. Dark brown with gray sideburns.
Eye Color	Deep green
Facial Hair	None

CHARACTER TEMPLATE SUMMARY

Okay, so what did we learn about our character by filling out the template? We've definitely started to think about all the ways that we can play Jack Slag (lost soul, tormented, or even liberated, and enjoying his task now that he has already seen the worst hell has to offer). And we have an obvious question

to ask: What did Slag do in life to get him into hell in the first place? This is probably one of the core plot points for the game, and one we now need to answer, but we've already given ourselves some material to work with.

In our example, you'll notice that in addition to the straightforward answers, we occasionally went off on tangents inspired by the question being asked. This is the value of developing characters with this structure. So in this simple premise, and by working through the template, we're already off the races. We can see gameplay, and story, and our antihero.

You'll notice that the driver's-license-type questions (height, weight, eye color, etc.) are at the end of the template, because you'll often discover your character morphing on you as you explore his or her motivations and desires. A character's physical appearance is often a manifestation of his wants, needs, status, current situation, and life experiences. We like these questions toward the end so we don't limit our creativity or ourselves as we think through the character.

Very little of this is straight backstory, biomaterial. It might be interesting to know where the main character was born, but the real question is: "How does it affect gameplay?" If a character is working in his hometown, it will be a different experience than if he's operating in a place he's never been before.

We want to stick to what is relevant. For instance, it matters to us to know about Harry Potter's parents, but not James Bond's. Sometimes, the design of the game, which often precedes the story, dictates certain things about the

character—if you are doing an underwater exploration game you'll obviously need to create a character that is pertinent to underwater exploration. The interesting thing about in-depth character bios is that they are often a powerful tool for helping to not only flesh out the characters, but core gameplay, levels, set pieces, etc.

Teams love the fertile ground of character templates because they stimulate ideas, discussion, and debate.

Obviously, this template is designed for major characters. When you're filling out a template for minor characters, you can delete the questions that are too deep, or you can use another template that we find useful; one that deals with organizations and their hierarchies.

Create a character by utilizing the template. This can be your hero or your main villain. If you don't have an original character to build, try filling it in with your personal details. Maybe you'll discover something interesting about yourself in the process (like you should be a character in a video game).