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Crafting NPC Interaction Plans: Designing Encounters With Your Players In Mind

From Johnn Four

Roleplaying Tips Newsletter #0265

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A Brief Word From Johnn

Gamer Classifieds?

I receive a lot of requests from gamers, freelancers, and grass roots companies to publish news about their services, website, and/or products in the e-zine. I always appreciate e-mails from readers and folks interested in the e-zine, but my policy has been to decline for a couple of reasons. First, I'd like to keep the e-zine focused on gamemaster tips. Second, I've found that when I have posted a plug, I soon receive a lot of additional requests.

I feel it's not fair that I advertise for one gamer and then not the others. However, I also recognize that, with 13,000 of us reading the e-zine each week, and another 7-10,000 reading online, it's a wonderful way to spread the word. Also, while ad space is available for purchase, the low rate is still out of reach for struggling game companies and folks who just want to, for example, advertise their eBay auctions.

I'm thinking that a win/win would be to create a Gamers' Classified section at the end of each issue at a very, very low rate. The space would allow gamers, writers, and RPG companies to spread the word, provide readers a "bulletin board" of interesting links, information, and opportunities each week, and be placed in an accessible spot that wouldn't get in the way of the tips. The low rate would help me offset any extra listhost bandwidth charges, and maybe even cover some of my regular hosting expenses.

I'm also thinking the Gamers' Classifieds would be 3-4 lines per ad, up to 5 or so ads per issue, and be included in the e-mail and online version of the e-zine.

As a reader and gamer, would you find a Gamers' Classifieds section of interest? As a potential classifieds purchaser, would you find the opportunity and exposure of value?

I'd love to hear your opinions, ideas, and feedback on this, if you have a moment to write in

Cheers,

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Crafting NPC Interaction Plans: Designing Encounters With Your Players In Mind

Crafting interesting and entertaining NPCs is a core GMing skill and an essential ingredient for running fun sessions. The e-zine has covered NPC building tips in the past, and this week I'd like to focus on one particular aspect: factoring in your players.

When the characters—and their players—meet an NPC for the first time, he will be a giant question mark to them. Your group will have no idea what dreams and plans you might have for him. They won't yet have a clue about the time you spent fleshing out his personality, and they won't understand his place in your scheme of things.

The best case you can hope for is that the NPC performs exactly or better than envisioned, and that interaction with the group goes as desired. The worst case scenario is that the NPC says, “Greetings...” and the party pulls out their weapons and attacks, lol.

These two extreme cases create a spectrum of possible outcomes, and you want your NPC to place as far along the success end of the spectrum as possible, regardless of whether he's a recurring character, guest star, or combat construct. A solid technique for doing this is, after initial design, to sketch out an interaction plan.

The following tips will hopefully help you craft an interaction plan and optimize it.

Establish GMing Goals First

It's important to know what you want. This evaluation will give you a roadmap to follow and something to measure your mid-encounter results with. As a GM, you won't always get what you want due to the interactive nature of the game, but with an NPC interaction plan, you can hopefully use your toolbox of tricks and techniques to sway things in your desired direction without compromising player and character freedom. With an NPC in mind, ask yourself, "What do I want?"

- What role do you want the NPC to play in your game?
 - Informant
 - Minor foe
 - Major enemy or villain
 - Party companion or henchman
 - Rival
 - Canon fodder
 - Bit part
 - Recurring character
 - Plot device
 - Ally, friend, or supporter
- What kind of encounters do you want to have with the NPC?
 - Combat
 - Roleplay
 - Puzzle (the PCs must solve how to get what they want from the NPC)
 - A combo of the above choices
- How do you want the NPC to be treated by the characters?
 - Ambivalence
 - Respect
 - Hated

- Friendly
- Suspicion
- Neutral

Answering these three questions gives you a great NPC interaction profile you can use to guide your planning and GMing. In your NPC documents/character sheets, I'd even recommend adding three new lines:

Role: _____

Desired Encounter Type(s): _____

Desired Treatment: _____

Create A Per-PC Relationship

If this method works well for you, then I would recommend statting out this information for each PC—for your important or key NPCs, at least. In-game, your major NPCs will have different relationships with each PC because of differing personalities, races, classes/skill sets, interests, and associations. They'll like, dislike, and get along with each PC differently.

Also, each time an NPC interacts with one or more PCs, it results in a deeper or expanded relationship as the history of interaction gets developed. This means a greater likelihood that the nature of the relationship with each PC is going to diverge.

Finetuning your NPCs with per-PC interaction profiles definitely adds to NPC depth, believability, and entertainment value.

Establish Personality and Behavior

What is your NPC's personality like? Regardless of whether your NPC is a one-quirk character or a fully fleshed out game element, try to fit some time in to answer these interaction-focused questions:

- What does the NPC want? What are his goals and dreams?
- How does the NPC act and behave, in general? This is where you should factor in quirks, if there are any, as they can skew behaviour a lot.
- How does the NPC think? Try to get inside your NPC's head for a minute. Even if you leave this information undocumented, closing your eyes and envisioning life and encounters through an NPC's eyes helps you design and GM them better.

You might already have your NPC's personality fleshed out, but even if you do, you can now factor in what your wishes are for that non-player character in-game in terms of role, desired encounter(s), and desired treatment, as per [Tip #1](#).

This process might be time-consuming at first, and might cause busy GMs to balk, but with practice it becomes automatic and fairly quick. As previously tipped in the e-zine, use the folks around you in your day-to-day life as templates and sources of inspiration to build up a pool of ideas to draw upon, which will help speed this process further.

A potential pitfall to think about is: more complex and better understood NPCs often results in longer roleplay encounters. If this is a good thing for you and each of your players, then that's awesome—move along to [Tip #3](#). Consider, however, that some players and some GMing styles are quite EXP oriented. Longer roleplay can mean upset players wanting to get on with the game and on to encounters that'll reap more EXPs.

One solution to this is adjusting your rewards system. Another possibility is to use your newfound NPC knowledge to make roleplay encounters more efficient. You know what you want, you know what the NPC wants, and you have a good grasp of the NPC's behaviour and personality. Use this knowledge to communicate the NPC's unique personality to the PCs faster. When you're unsure of an NPC, it takes

longer to warm up to him and get his personality across to the players and to play out his story role. Now you can do that faster.

Predict Player (Re)Actions

Once you have a clear idea of an NPC, his personality, and his behaviour patterns, you can anticipate how your players will react to him. Use this information during your planning and design stage to veer away from situations and actions where you won't achieve your GMing goals for that NPC, as per [Tip #1](#). To perform this step, it might help to chart out your players' general tendencies. For each player, note:

Roleplaying

- Willingness to roleplay
- Amount of time they can spend roleplaying before getting bored or wanting to move on
- Preference to roleplay vs. combat or action

Tendencies. What is the general gaming style of the player? Examples, in relation to NPCs:

- Suspicious
- Rude or aggressive
- Polite
- Shy or quiet
- Combative
- Tricky
- Comedic, smart-ass, silly
- Varies based on circumstance. If this is true of a player, then try to define circumstances that generate certain tendencies and what those

consequent tendencies are.

Reactions. How does a player react to various NPC types and NPC actions?
Consider how he usually reacts to:

- New NPCs
- Becoming bored during roleplay encounters
- Rude NPCs
- Comedic NPCs
- Serious NPCs
- Retentive NPCs
- Foes
- Authority
- Quiet or passive NPCs
- Children
- Race/class XYZ
- When they don't get what they want
- When they get what they want too easily
- Bizarre or quirky NPCs
- NPC quirk, personality trait, or behaviour XYZ
- Challenges
- Being attacked
- Being brushed off or ignored
- Being insulted
- When spotting weakness
- When tempted by wealth, power, or advancement of some kind

Though predictions are never guaranteed to come true, profiling your players' reactions this way can help a lot in making your GMing goals and dreams for that NPC come true.

For example, suppose you have an important encounter planned where the player characters will meet with the King. Your biggest worry is that the party will go berserk and attack the King, putting you in a tricky situation of smacking down the PCs with the King's defenses (guards, magical wards, instant dead-or-alive warrants) and derailing your plot plans, or in compromising the NPC and game world to save the PCs or your story by having something unbelievable happen, such as letting the King perish or having him flee and forgiving the PCs.

Thinking in advance how your players will likely react to the King can help preserve your plans and the game. If a certain player automatically distrusts and rebels against authority, then you might switch things up and have an agent approach the PCs instead, let the King appear in disguise, or craft the King's personality so that he's less likely to provoke that player.

Another example might be an NPC with an informant role who is unwilling to part with what he knows. How will your players react the first time the NPC says no? Will swords get drawn? Will the brass knuckles come out? Perhaps a shocking grasp spell? Maybe some good roleplaying?

If you desire a good roleplaying encounter, but you know that one or more of the players is likely to attack first after being balked, then predicting this in advance will help you tweak things so that a roleplaying outcome is more likely. Perhaps the group can receive some advice beforehand about dealing with the NPC.

Alternatively, while you might desire a roleplaying encounter, you might decide not to make tweaks but craft a second means for getting the information to the PCs as a back-up plan in case things get ugly.



Predict Character (Re)Actions

Knowing how the characters will treat NPCs and react to them will also help you craft encounters and NPCs more likely to achieve your GMing goals. It's a good

idea to first profile your players, as per [Tip #3](#), because some gamers tend to break character and react personally to certain situations, or perhaps the style of game you run is more casual, and in-character (re)actions are often your players just being themselves. Use the lists from Tip #3 to help you profile each character in the party in the same way you profiled each player and predict how they'll react to various situations and NPC personalities and behaviours.

Plan Out NPC Reactions

Once you have a good idea of your GMing goals, an NPC's personality, and the players' and characters' expected (re)actions, you can plan out potential NPC reactions. When an NPC encounter is triggered, either the NPC will act then the PCs, or the PCs will act first. In either case, assuming the NPC is still 'alive' and active, an NPC reaction is in order. You can think of NPC reactions as an important GM tool to add to your toolbox. Choosing how your non-player characters handle various player character actions gives you some options:

- Guiding an encounter in a certain direction by:
 - Influencing future player actions
 - Influencing future character actions
- Affecting one or more plot threads
- Altering the story

For example, you have profiled a character to be lecherous. You have a tavern meet with an ally planned, and your GMing goal is to make the encounter a fast one that will progress the story. You anticipate the PC to give the waitresses a hard time, so you craft the following plan:

- PC misbehaves in some form around a waitress
 - Waitress reaction: laughs it off

- Ally delivers information item #1
- PC misbehaves again
 - Waitress reaction: gives a general, non-inflammatory warning
- Ally delivers rumour #11
- PC misbehaves again
 - Waitress reaction: switches tables with a male server
- Ally delivers information item #5
- PC pursues waitress (50% likely)
- PC gets bored and tries to start a fight (25% likely)
- Player sulks (25% likely)
 - Waitress reaction: returns to PCs' table and starts chatting with PC (a bluff to get PC seated again and a GM ploy to stall for time, keep player happy and having fun, and keep character occupied until encounter objective is complete)
- Ally delivers information item #2 and leaves

This example takes just a couple of extra minutes to plan and it will hopefully generate the best possible outcome for all concerned. Things can get hectic and confusing while GMing, and a plan will help you decide what to do, how to react, and how to have an NPC react in the heat of the moment.

The example above demonstrated a problematic situation, but you can also use an interaction plan to optimize a positive situation to help everyone get even more value out of an encounter and to help make your game even more compelling.

Feel free to use the lists in Tip #3 to plan out your NPC reactions, but that can be a time-consuming activity, and might be overkill for a majority of your NPCs. Consider this abbreviated list of situations instead:

How will the NPC react if:

- Treated with respect
- Treated with disrespect
- Threatened or insulted
- Met with violence
- Exposed to chaotic behaviour
- Exposed to an evil act
- Exposed to an unlawful act
- Exposed to a good/lawful act

How do you know if your NPC interaction plan is a good one? You won't be able to predict every possibility, but after crafting several plans and GMing these plans for a few sessions, your accuracy will improve and planning time will decrease.

Here's a quality checklist you can use to measure and edit your plans with:

GMing Goals. Will it achieve your GMing goals for the:

- Encounter?
- NPC?
- Plot thread?
- Story?
- PCs?

Gameplay. Does your plan:

- Seem to create believable gameplay?
- Deal well with your listed player profiles?
- Deal well with your listed PC profiles?
- Stay true to the NPC's personality?
- Have too many dependencies and what-ifs?
- Remove player and character choice?
- Is your plan fun?

Create An Interaction Log

Interaction plans depend heavily on how well you've profiled your group and the PCs. With new players, new PCs, and new gameplay circumstances, your data is likely to be inaccurate. The best solution is to log how well your plans performed. When you have a moment after a session, return to your profiles and make notes about the actual choices and reactions made in-game.

You might consider creating a summary profile chart for each player and PC to help during planning, and then create a separate log for each player and character to track on-going choices and reactions. The log format allows you to look back at previous games and encounters, so you can re-evaluate as needed and not have to rely on memory. If time is precious, even recording the broad strokes will help.

If you don't have time to pre-plan NPC interactions, then at least a minimal log will help educate you so that you make better in-game GMing decisions. For example, for a basic log, you might divide a sheet of paper into the following columns:

- Character/Player Name
- Interaction Type (i.e. beggar, insult, threat, guard)
- (Re)Action (i.e. violence, parley, quiet)

For some GMs, even a basic log might be too much to maintain—especially if it takes away from your core planning time. If this is the case, take a few moments between games and run each encounter that took place last session through your mind. Picture where your players were seated and use that as a mental checklist to remember how each player and character acted and reacted. Don't forget to include yourself! Doing this should give you a rough idea of typical reactions over time.

How your group and current party make-up have reacted to NPCs in the past is a good indicator of how they'll react to your NPCs next session. Non-player characters can heavily influence gameplay and the story. Being proactive by crafting an NPC interaction plan for each encounter and/or NPC not only lets you build better NPCs and encounters, but they help your GMing overall so that, even when you haven't done any planning, the game is likely to be fun and entertaining for all.



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Dragonlance: Tasslehoff's Map Pouch

Straight from the pouch of the legendary Tasslehoff Burrfoot (the original), comes this collection of a dozen maps set in the Age of Mortals. The collection starts with a full-sized poster map of Ansalon, continues with regional and location maps, and concludes with a pair of kender-style maps rendered by the irrepressible adventurer himself....

[Dragonlance: Tasslehoff's Map Pouch at RPGShop](#)



Tips From Roleplaying Tips Game Masters

Have a roleplaying tip you'd like to share? E-mail it to johnn@roleplayingtips.com – thanks

Use Post-Its To Create Fog Of War

From Mike Bourke

When you have drawn/printed your map, cut out Post-It Notes the size and shape of the different rooms and corridors. Note any reference key on the exposed surface. This lets you just “peel off” exposed sections of the map as players enter it.

Plotting Using Reverse TV

From Mike Bourke

Having trouble thinking of a scenario? Pick a remembered episode of a TV show completely different in style from your campaign, then do the exact opposite. Now change the tone of the show 180 degrees as well. Treat the result as your scenario outline, then make sense of it and integrate it into your campaign genre.

For example, from a situation comedy:

Character's mother shows up complaining about her kids forgetting her 65th birthday. 'You don't love me any more.' 'I'm getting old.' And so on.

Turn the whole thing around:

Mother doesn't care about approaching birthday and vanishes instead of attending the planned celebration. Evidence suggests the mother is getting younger, not older. And, instead of comedy, play it dramatically. This plot could be made to work in a sci-fi setting (experimental anagathic drugs), a law-enforcement setting (plastic surgery), or a fantasy setting (mother has become a vampire). [Johnn: for help remembering TV show episodes, check out: <http://www.tvtome.com/>]



Containers For Square Counters

From Don F.

Slide film cases (they hold about 24 diapositive slides) make great containers for square counters and large counters.



A Bonus Experience Point Method

From Charlie Bell

In my group's 3rd Edition D&D game, I don't distribute any discretionary or bonus experience. Instead, I allow each player to have a pool of 100 experience points per level of their character. They get these points at the beginning of each session. They can award any or all of these points to other players' characters for anything they feel is appropriate and deserves an extra bonus.

The only stipulations are that the players don't get to keep any points left over in their pool at the end of the session, and the DM reserves the right to veto any inappropriate handouts (to prevent player abuse).

This has proved useful for several reasons. It helps build party cohesion and cooperation. It allows players a tangible way to give each other a pat on the back for a job well done. It tends to help characters that are lower in level than the rest of the party catch up to their peers. It also helps players appreciate each others' playing styles, since each player may give out rewards for entirely different things—some for good roleplaying, some for a clever plan, some for a descriptive action in combat, some to say “thanks for saving my character!”

Make Your Surveys Anonymous

From Johnn Four

[Roleplaying Tips #264](#) Several GMs wrote in following up on the GM survey articles with tips about making them anonymous. It was felt that by providing an anonymous means for players to give feedback, a GM would receive more honest, complete, and open answers. Here are the methods those GMs mentioned, plus a couple of others:

- Players create e-mail accounts at a freebie provider, such as Hotmail, Yahoo!, or GMail, and they e-mail their surveys to you.
- Players e-mail a single player with all of their survey answers. That player compiles a master list of responses and submits it to the GM.
- Use a freebie poll service, such as zoomerang.com, and don't ask for player names during the poll.
- Create your own poll on a web server.

- Use your regular gaming online site (such as a Yahoo! Groups, Google Groups, a forum, chat) and players create second accounts for surveys using IDs that won't give their identity away.

If you have more ideas for keeping player feedback anonymous, drop me an e-mail. Thanks!



Lords of Madness: The Book of Aberrations

Wizards of the Coast

Unnatural Creatures of Unspeakable Evil.

Trembling hands have recorded horrifying stories of encounters with aboleths, beholders, mind flayers, and other aberrations. The victims of these alien creatures are quickly overwhelmed by mind-numbing terror—their only comfort is the hope for a quick death.

This supplement for the D&D game presents a comprehensive look at some of the most bizarre creatures ever to invade the world of fantasy roleplaying. Along with information about the physiology, psychology, society, and schemes of these strange beings, you'll find spells, feats, tactics, and tools commonly employed by those who hunt them. *Lords of Madness: The Book of Aberrations* also provides new rules, prestige classes, monsters, sample encounters, and fully developed NPCs ready to instill fear in any hero....

[Lords of Madness: The Book of Aberrations at RPGShop](#)

Updated October 23,

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2022

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