

# ALIGNMENT THEORY

## Defining Those Notorious Double Adjectives

by Robert B. DesJardins

Whenever anyone asks me what my favourite aspect of role-playing games is, my answer is quick and definite: character. Playing crabby halflings and insane princes is my bag of tricks. Building a character that I can relate to (not talk to, mind you; I'm not that far gone) is not just fun; it's delightful! Furthermore, it's what the game is all about.

Fortunately, the onus of creating realistic characters for a role-playing game is not entirely on me. The people at TSR, Inc. (geniuses of their own time) have devised a simple system for determining a character's basic personality type. Nine general types (called alignments) are given in the rules of the AD&D® Game. When I am creating my character, I can select an alignment from those given, or use the dice to choose one randomly. Once the character's basic viewpoint is established, everything is set up for me. All I have to do is fill in the details.

### Understanding Alignments

Alignment is not just another aspect of role-playing. In my opinion, it is the most important aspect — as crucial to the character as hit points and as necessary for good play as game mechanics.

Unfortunately, some players have trouble grasping the basic concepts behind the various alignments. In some cases, this can be traced to the fact that those players started with the D&D® game, in which the alignment system is not as sophisticated. (In fact, some try to play both at once, and become completely confused.) The D&D game offers only three choices (lawful<sup>1</sup>, neutral<sup>2</sup>, and chaotic<sup>3</sup>), instead of the tumultuous mix-up of nine found in the AD&D game. A player of the D&D game knows that the good guys are usually lawful and the bad guys are usually chaotic. But the AD&D game offers apparently contradictory choices, mixing good and evil with lawful and chaotic, with neutral thrown in for added confusion.

Many of us have seen the problem when a new player enters an AD&D game campaign.

**D&D game player:** What's chaotic good? Isn't that a paradox?

**AD&D game player:** No, chaos simply refers to a great respect for individual initiative in achieving one's goals, be they those of good or those of evil. Chaotic good creatures are apt to regard law and order as too restrictive of individual freedom to seek one's own destiny, while chaotic evil<sup>1</sup> creatures may see the weak as cumbersome to society, and the genius of the strong as insurance of a deserving individual's survival.

**D&D game player:** Oh. I . . . er . . . see.

Ultimately, therefore, a lot of misunderstanding is completely understandable. Take, for example, the lawful neutral<sup>1</sup> alignment. Would the LN creature be friendlier with the lawful good creature or the true neutral creature? What's the difference between these two? Is the LN creature likely to help an evil creature overcome the good guys in battle to help keep balance in the cosmos?

### A Pseudo-Mathematical Theory

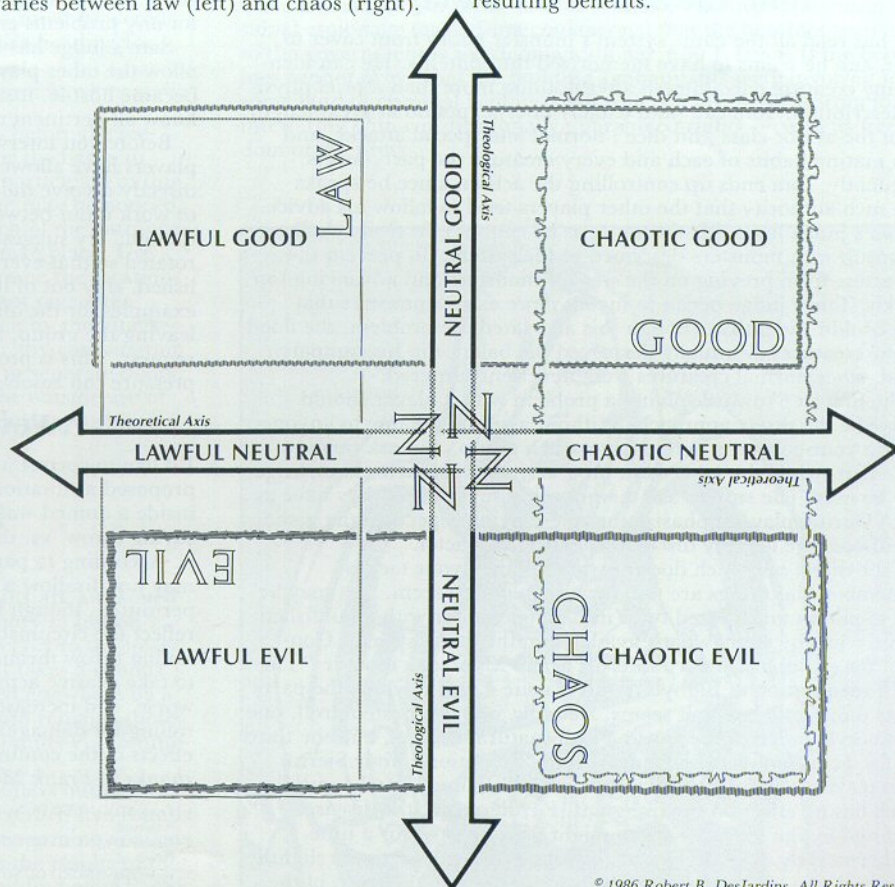
To answer all these questions, I have taken Mr. Gygax's diagram from the *Players Handbook*, which illustrates the relationship between alignments perfectly, and added a few details on it to produce the diagram illustrated on this page. It displays quite well my understanding (fact or fallacy) of the various alignments and how the concept of neutrality fits in.

First of all, I have superimposed a pair of axes upon the diagram. The horizontal one varies between law (left) and chaos (right).

Since it represents basically political opinions, I have named it the *theoretical axis*. Likewise, the vertical axis represents choices of the heart, varying between good (top) and evil (bottom), so I have designated this as the *theological axis*.

We can now, using primitive set theory (I hated it too, but it can occasionally come in handy. Occasionally . . . ) label the set of all points to the left of the vertical axis as *law*, and the set of all points to the right of the vertical axis as *chaos*. Likewise, let's call the set of all points above the horizontal axis *good*, and the set of all points below the horizontal axis *evil*.

*Law* represents those creatures who believe that organization is the proper way to achieve results, and *chaos* represents those who believe that individual freedom is the best way to achieve one's "proper destiny." Similarly, *evil* represents creatures who believe that the weak and incompetent should have no place on the earth, and that the strong and mighty are the ones who should reap the benefits of her resources, whereas *good* represents those who believe that all creatures should care for one another, and that all should share in the resulting benefits.





From here, the relationship of our diagram to the original becomes obvious. The area where the sets *law* and *good* intersect (overlap) can be labelled *lawful good*<sup>1</sup>. Characters whose viewpoints fall within this portion of the chart have both lawful and good tendencies, though the exact proportions of each can obviously vary widely. Likewise, the other three intersections of the four basic sets can be labelled *lawful evil*<sup>2</sup>, *chaotic good*, and *chaotic evil*.

But although those four extremes take up most of the diagram, they don't represent quite all of the possible points — those on the axes themselves are still unaccounted for. So how should those be characterized in our model? Well, the set of points on the *theoretical axis* is not part of *good* or *evil*; it is something in between. Theologically, all those points are neutral, though they still vary theoretically (along the horizontal axis). Conversely, points on the *theological axis* are theoretically neutral — neither lawful nor chaotic, but something in between.

The intersection of *theological neutrality* (the horizontal axis) and *law* is labelled *lawful neutral*, and the intersection of *theological neutrality* and *chaos* is labelled *chaotic neutral*<sup>3</sup>. Note that *lawful neutral* and *chaotic neutral* are subsets of *law* and of *chaos*, respectively, but not of *good* nor of *evil*. Therefore, both lawful neutral and chaotic neutral creatures are concerned only with theoretical considerations; one is dedicated to pure law and the other to pure chaos. Likewise, *neutral good*<sup>4</sup> and *neutral evil*<sup>5</sup> are subsets of *good* and of *evil*, respectively. Creatures of those alignments are concerned solely with theological concepts, not with which political means are used to achieve them.

The point where the two axes cross is both theologically and theoretically neutral. It is not included in *law*, *chaos*, *good*, or *evil*, so we will label it *true neutral*<sup>6</sup>.

## Interpreting the Chart

At this point, let's try to define what is wrong with the average new player's interpretation of alignment, which basically states that lawful good characters are the nicest and chaotic evil ones are the meanest. This is entirely false, as would be the statement: "The average communist is more 'good' than the average capitalist." Law is a theoretical concept, and it is no more "good" than chaos. Neither have any relation to good or evil. Law could only be directly related to good if there were no chaotic good alignment available, not to mention lawful evil. The simple fact that these possibilities exist disproves this theory, at least for game purposes.

Why is this misinterpretation so widespread? Just why is lawful good considered more good than chaotic good, when in fact it is only more organized? Personally, I believe the presence of the various neutral alignments creates the confusion. If the only alignment choices available were lawful good, chaotic good, lawful evil, and chaotic evil, we could readily see that there are two variations of good and two variations of evil. Mentally, such a grouping makes the relationship obvious. A chaotic good crea-

ture is free-wheeling and individualistic, while a lawful good creature is orderly, but both have equally good intentions. The "degrees of good" argument does not appear until we add the neutral good alignment. At first glance, neutral good seems to be a sort of half-way point between the other two; hence it appears that the three alignments represent three different "degrees" of goodness. But this couldn't be more wrong.

Neutrality is much simpler than that. Think of the letter "N" as a "neutralizer," crossing off a space where a C, L, G, or E would otherwise appear in a character's alignment designation. On the graph, note that the term "Neutral" applies to points which lie in no more than one of the four main sets. For example, a lawful neutral creature believes that good and evil, as long as they balance each other out, are not really worth considering. Such a creature's decisions are not based on whether the resulting actions are "good" or not, but simply on whether they're orderly, logical and likely to keep things running smoothly.

Similarly, a neutral good creature is not the second nicest type, but a creature devoted totally to good, whose decisions are not based on the degree of freedom or order involved, but rather on the ultimate benefit which can be achieved.

## In Practice

All this theory is fine and good, but how do characters with various alignments behave? Consider first a hypothetical situation in which government officials of various good alignments are debating the best way to feed their people.

**Lawful Good:** Listen, the best way to feed our starving people is by organizing a committee to divide up the responsibility and delegate the jobs to those who are best qualified to handle them. It won't work unless we all know our places in society and act as a well-oiled, national machine.

**Chaotic Good:** Baloney! If we force people into a totalitarian sort of society, they'll be suffering anyway! Let all men be free to feed themselves without government interference and things will work out a lot better.

**Neutral Good:** Look, we all agree that our country must have as little suffering as possible. What difference does it make how we do it, as long as we do it? Forget all of these little political ideals; let's feed the people!

All three officials had equally noble intentions; they simply disagreed on the best means of achieving the goal. Now let's look at the interactions of six alignments in a hypothetical role-playing scenario in which a group of good characters meets a group of evil NPCs who oppose their king. Startled, both groups must decide what to do.

**Lawful Good:** We've discussed this already. We decided that, if the evil group attacks first, we should engage. Otherwise, we let them go their way. After all, it would be pretty tasteless for a group representing an enlightened and

progressive country to act so barbarically!

**Chaotic Good:** Are you blind? Those guys are probably the scouts for the army that's coming to lay siege. Let's get them before they infiltrate!

**Neutral Good:** Yeah!

**LG:** But we agreed!

**NG:** Listen, we know that these people will attack our fair city if we let them pass! He's right — we shouldn't let them get through!

**LG:** Well, I refuse. There's been no fair trial.

**CG:** Fine. Then we'll attack, and the two of us will take whatever treasure they have for ourselves. Since you didn't help, you won't get any. How does that grab ya?

**LG:** What? That's ridiculous! What if there's something only I can use?

**CG:** Maybe we'll just sell it and keep the money.

**NG:** Hold on a minute. It would be idiotic not to let him use something that would help all of us simply because he didn't win it in battle. That would be cutting our own throats!

Meanwhile, the evil NPCs, are engaged in a similar debate. Their captain has told them not to attack any armed groups they meet on the road because they must reach their destination.

**Lawful Evil:** Let's just leave 'em be. As the captain said, it would be taking a risk, and we really do want to make it to the city. We would be more valuable there.

**Chaotic Evil:** Aw, what does that jerk know? I like the looks of that shiny blade the big lout is carrying. They shouldn't be any problem to take out; besides, the captain would never find out.

**Neutral Evil:** Well, whaddaya think? They look pretty rich; d'you think we can take 'em?

**CE:** Sure!

**LE:** No! If we start disobeying the Cap, we'll never get a crack at that wimp they call king.

**CE:** But what's this got to do with that? This could just be a profitable side venture.

**NE:** Yeah, and what if we get smoked?

Note that, in both situations, the theoretically neutral character played the role of mediator, weeding out the most logical and effective way of achieving good or evil, neither consistently lawful nor consistently chaotic.

Rules and regulations aside, the privilege of developing your character's personality is yours. As long as the judge and players mutually agree regarding general alignment principles, there is a wide range of possibilities for individual characters. Choose a general type, and tailor it to suit yourself. Even if you're way out in left field, so to speak, no one from TSR, Inc. is ever going to come and check up on you. The name of the game is enjoyment (speaking figuratively, of course) and that's where the domain of regulations ends. Good gaming and Hasta Manana!

1. From ADVANCED DUNGEONS & DRAGONS® *Players Handbook*, © 1978 TSR, Inc. All Rights Reserved.

2. From the DUNGEONS & DRAGONS® Game, © 1974 TSR, Inc. All Rights Reserved.