Quick and Dirty Background Investigation Reports

by Shane Ivey

It is a staple of modern investigative roleplaying, and the bane of overtaxed gamemasters everywhere: the spontaneous request for a background report. (I will pause here for the GMs out there to utter a reflexive groan of irritation.) It sounds so easy as a player: "Hmmm, this guy is acting suspicious. Let's run a background report on him." The gamemaster, of course, is then stuck with the challenge of faking a complete history for a character who may have been invented not 30 seconds before.

If you have prepared the character ahead of time, no doubt you will be ready for such impertinence with a handout detailing what the authorities know about the individual, crafted so as to offer hints and possible false leads for the players to reason through. And for important characters this is a necessity: even a minor detail can be turned by crafty players into a completely new plotline. But relatively minor characters rarely get this kind of attention from the Game Master. And players can usually tell. If you deliver a complete background report handout for Villainous Victor, and you answer the same question with monosyllabic muttering about Nobody Ned, the sense of mystery will be diminished by that slight degree.

If, as is often the case, you have been caught with a background investigation request from out of left field, this is a tool to make your life a little easier. Get your dice, get a pencil, and prepare to spend the next 90 seconds preparing an answer to those pesky players' demands!

Preliminary Reports and Full Reports

A background investigation will delve into a variety of facets of a subject's life. Some of those facets are more easily explored and reported than others. Legal records, criminal records, and credit ratings are all routinely recorded in local or national computer databases, easily accessible with the proper clearance or contacts. Other facets of a subject's background, such as personal behavior, work history, and medical history, can often only be obtained by conducting careful interviews of people known to the subject and following the "trail" that is developed from each new set of facts. For convenience, these different levels of investigation are categorized here as preliminary reports and full background reports.

Preliminary reports typically require only a search of computer databases or a few minor phone calls to compile, and may be completed in 1d6 hours -- or in a manner of minutes if the player characters have solid investigative resources and access to the right databases. Preliminary reports include:

* Criminal Background
* Civil Legal Background
* Credit Rating

Full background reports require more in-depth investigation, often requiring detailed reviews of records or interviews of individuals who know the subject. Note that some information may not be available to a standard background investigation: most background investigations will not have the authority to request medical records, for instance. Full reports take at least 2d3 days to obtain, and sometimes more. Full reports include:

* Tax Records
* Medical Records
* Professional Standing
* Academic Standing
* Personal Background

Form and Scope

Start each background investigation report with the "basics" of the character: include the character's full name, date of birth, and place of birth. (There are no charts for the basics -- you're on your own here.) If the character's place of birth is unusual, add a sentence clarifying the character's situation. Then write the "meat" of the report, the items described below. Where it is feasible, each "item" of the background investigation report should be written as one sentence. This will enable you to compile a complete report in a single clear paragraph for the players to review.

It will quickly become apparent that these tables are somewhat cursory. This is intentional. They reflect American terminology and characters, primarily because the author is American and is much less familiar with the various trends and legal patterns of other countries. International game masters will hopefully be able to adapt the information easily to their own settings. These tables also do not reflect the wide demographic variety of even the United States, but instead offer a single simple chart to use for any character. It should not be difficult to alter the results slightly if you are hurriedly developing characters whose background ought to include more or less likelihood of a particular incident or circumstance.

Finally, note that a background investigation can leave a lot of holes and unanswered questions. Particularly if the players leave it to non-player characters to conduct the BI for them, it is entirely possible that a fact was misinterpreted or even missed altogether, leading to a dangerously inaccurate report. Use this fact to allow yourself some flexibility as the gamemaster. If you roll an item here which later contradicts what you need to do with the character, go ahead and allow the contradiction. When the players conduct a more thorough investigation of the facts you can allow them to "figure out" exactly what they got wrong, and blame it on the NPCs they enlisted to do the grunt work for them.

After all, the rules are for the little guys -- er, the players.

Criminal Background

Past Convictions (1d100)

01-50 None
51-85 1d3 minor violations
86-90 1d8 minor violations
91-94 1d3 misdemeanors
95-97 1d8 violations + 1d3 misdemeanors
98-99 1 felony + 2d4-2 misdemeanors
00 1d6 felonies + 2d4-2 misdemeanors

For felonies, roll 1d100:
01-90 indicates a local felony;
91-00 indicates a federal felony.

Sample Violations (1d4)

1 Speeding
2 Parking
3 Loitering
4 Disorderly Conduct

Sample Misdemeanors (1d6)

1 Vandalism
2 Petty Theft
3 Disturbing the Peace
4 Drug Possession (marijuana)
5 Driving While Intoxicated
6 Trespassing

Sample Local Felonies (1d12)

1 Conspiracy (with others to commit a felony)
2 Drug Possession (cocaine, heroin, PCP, LSD, or methamphetamines)
3 Drug Distribution
4 Fraud
5 Burglary
6 Grand Larceny
7 Armed Robbery
8 Extortion
9 Assault
10 Kidnapping
11 Manslaughter
12 Murder

Sample Federal Felonies (1d10)

1 Tax Fraud
2 Smuggling
3 Transportation of a Fugitive
4 Transportation of Drugs
5 Transportation of Firearms
6 Transportation of Stolen Property
7 Bank Robbery
8 Assault on a Federal Officer
9 Interference with the Mail
10 Misrepresentation as a Federal Officer

Civil Legal Background (1d100)

Roll 1d3 times per ten years. For each incident roll 1d100: 01-50 indicates the character was plaintiff; 51-00 indicates the character was defendant.

01-50 None
51-75 Divorce
76-88 Divorce + Custody Dispute
89-93 Contract Violation
94 Civil Rights Violation
95 Assault
96 Battery
97 Fraud
98 Trespass
99 False Imprisonment
00 Wrongful Death

Credit Rating (1d100)

01-25 Perfect.
26-75 Good: moderate debts, no more than minor problems in the past.
76-90 Poor: high debts, multiple delinquencies or defaults.
91-00 Bankrupt: 1d6 years ago.

Tax Record (1d100)

01-75 Clean Record: payments have been timely and accurate.
76-95 Fair: 1d3 minor incidents (serious delay or discrepancies).
96-00 Poor: Suspicion or conviction of tax fraud, possibly resulting in fines and/or jail time.

Medical Record (1d100)

01-50 No major injuries.
51-00 1d4 major temporary conditions or injuries.

Constitution (3d6)

03-06 Major chronic health problems.
07-09 Minor chronic health problems (asthma, heavy smoking, Gulf War Syndrome, etc.).
10-18 No significant health problems.

Sample Major Chronic Problems (1d8)

1 Diabetes
2 Substance Abuse
3 Nerve damage
4 Sexually Transmitted Disease
5 Severe allergies or asthma
6 Spine damage or deformity
7 Hemophilia
8 Cancer or leukemia

Professional Record (1d100)

Roll once per ten years or fraction thereof:

01-30 Excellent: one job, excellent performance.
31-80 Good: adequate performance at one job or excellent performance at 1d3+1 jobs.
81-90 Poor: problematic performance at 1d4 jobs.
91-00 Very poor: problematic performance at 1d3+3 jobs.

Educational Record

Each game system has a different method to determine a character's education. This chart will allow some rough fleshing-out of the numbers generated by your game.

Formal problems (1d100)

01-70 None
71-90 Academic probation
91-95 Disciplinary problems
96-00 Suspension: Academic probation and/or disciplinary problems

Personal Background

For each ten years roll 1d3 locations of past residence according to the character's role and background.

Location (1d100)

01-90 United States
91-95 A Territory of the United States
96-00 Another nation

Personality (1d100)

01-35 Friendly and well-liked
36-70 Moderately Friendly
71-85 Quiet and distant
86-95 Sullen
96-99 Belligerent
00 Frightening

Dependability (1d100)

01-40 Very dependable
41-90 Usually dependable
91-00 Not dependable

Ethics (1d100)

01-30 Scrupulous
31-90 Average
91-00 Always breaks the rules

Conclusion

Player 1 (the Professor): "He says his name is Ned, does he? I don't like him."

Player 2 (the Cop): "Let's run a background check on him. Just to be sure." (Both players eye the gamemaster smugly.) Gamemaster (after 60 seconds of furious dice-rolling and note-taking): "You get a preliminary report back in a few minutes from your friend in the Company. Ned Nobody, age 45, businessman. His record is pretty clean; he had a couple of loitering tickets in college and a parking ticket four years ago, then a drunk-and-disorderly violation right after that. He's been in court a few times: plaintiff in a contract dispute eleven years ago; defendant in an assault lawsuit (no criminal charges were pressed) two years ago, then his wife divorced him. Fair credit rating, but he's been listed delinquent on his mortgage payments twice, and his credit cards are charged up pretty high. Your friend wants to know if you need a full background or not."

Player 1 (writing furiously): "Wait! How do you spell 'loitering'?"

Player 2: "Sheesh. With that much background, this guy *must* be somebody important. Better run that full check."

Gamemaster (smugly): "No problem."