✠ Blackjack's Guide To Bitter Gamemasting #6
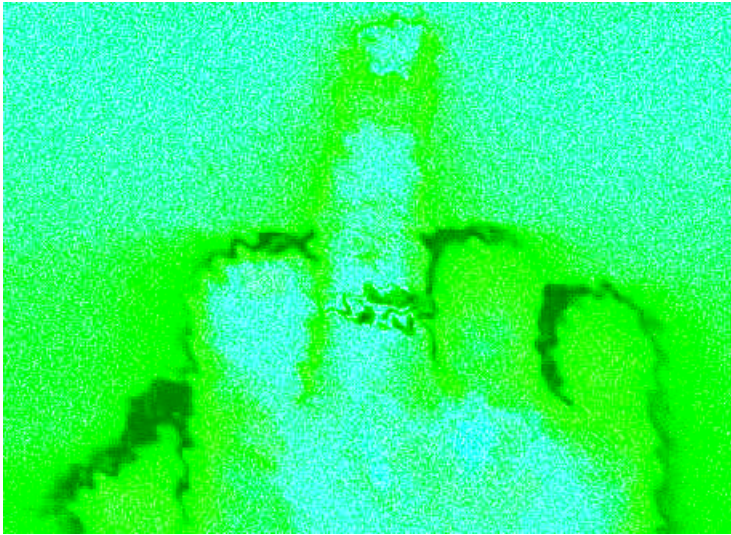
In this issue I've made a bit of an attempt to answer some of the questions I've received over the last few weeks from frustrated gamemasters, some of whom are on the verge of purchasing cross cut shredders for the express purpose of destroying character sheets. Much to my personal glee I didn't get through all of the questions, which means I'll have something to babble about in Blackjack's Guide VII. Also, I think I'm beginning to repeat myself. For these redundancies, I apologize. Also, I think I'm beginning to repeat myself.

Playing Fair

Recently I've received a lot of E-Mail regarding problem players involved in Shadowrun campaigns. The complaints range from an individual's tendency to monopolize the game to the apparent need to create outrageous character stats to a player being an outright asshole. While I'll cover a few of the situations on a case by case basis later on in this article they all fall into the category of violating one of the most essential rules of any gaming system, or any game for that matter: Playing Fair.

The definition of "fair" differs greatly from situation to situation. In Shadowrun I've always defined "unfair" as being anything which upsets the game balance. This balance must be achieved on many levels; player participation, pc statistics, attitude, aggressiveness, etc. When an individual creates a situation which upsets any of these balances I consider it an unfair action.

Consider, in brief, the idea of pc stats. If one player decides to create a kick ass character with a bad attitude he throws off the game balance for anybody who has the desire to play a less aggressive archetype. The gamemaster has no choice but to send in his heaviest NPCs when combat is involved and inevitably the weaker characters get torn to shreds in the battle. The gamemaster cannot specifically target the offending PC because it would not make sense. One group equals one target. By creating his kick ass character the player has messed up the game for everybody else.

In an ideal world such an individual would simply create a character more suited to the environment at hand. More and more I am finding out that such people tend to be rather thick skulled when it comes to change. It's a shame that some people want their fun, even if it's at the expense of everybody else's.

The best way to solve such problems is to simply talk it out. The biggest argument one will encounter from such players is the idea that they're sacrificing their fun for others by making their characters, and themselves, less aggressive. I think this is a shallow point. Almost all of such individuals tend to create characters with the following attributes: High stats, aggressive attitude, mindless killing. That, folks, is one archetype. Look at the characters. They almost follow a formula. There might as well be a Kick Ass PC printed in a book.

On the other hand there are a million other options if the player will simply drop the Wired 3 and buy a van and guitar or a cyber camera or forget the million and get some unique skills and build a story around them.

Unfortunately, discussion and logic won't always work, which is why you sometimes have to find a bitter way to get the message across. Damn shame...

21 Questions

I am a firm believer in the utilization of the 21 Questions. As a player it allows you to figure out exactly what kind of personality your character possesses and, as a gamemaster, it allows you to make sure the player is following his or her own guidelines. The answers you give to these questions are not to be taken lightly. At least not in my game. At least fifty percent of the karma I distribute is based on good roleplaying, mostly measured by how well the player portrayed the personality he or she created by answering the 21 questions. If the character acts in ways that do not reflect their personality they tend to get screwed, karmawise.

Think of your own personality, if the concept doesn't frighten you too much. Mine tends to revolve around spending too much time mulling around my apartment thinking of new and creative ways to justify not getting anything done. The odds of me suddenly bolting out the door and "getting down" at a nightclub are virtually nil. The one time I did end up at one I made sure I kept myself sufficiently inebriated as to ensure I would remember nothing of the experience the next day.

A character personality must be played in much the same way. If your character knows nothing of luxury, having spent their entire lives in the barrens, then, at the very least, they will have a hell of a time picking out a suit for an upper class run. If a character of this type walked into a clothing store and requested an Armani with pearl cufflinks I would really begin to wonder what part of the barrens they were from.

One of the biggest problems players have with the 21 Questions is that they find them too restrictive to their roleplaying freedom. Well, guess what, having a personality is SUPPOSED to be difficult and, often times, restrictive. If a player wants his PC to be a hotshot when it comes to negotiation with corps he should have written that in at the time of character creation and made sure it jived with the rest of his personality. A street samurai from a lower class Redmond district cannot simply pull corporate negotiation skills out of their ass. Even if, in reality, they can masterfully negotiate they must suppress this ability and remember that their character has never been in a building with more than ten floors, let alone an archology.

This does not, however, mean a character cannot grow. In fact, watching a character progress from a rather naive street person possessing a bunch of cyberware they sometimes fear and don't remotely understand is probably one of the funnest (if "funnest" is a real word) part of the game. After the Redmond street sam experiences the terror of attempting to negotiate with a few stony faced guys in suits

who not only have the comfort of armed bodyguards but also a fleet of Auglers he'll have a better understanding of exactly who he's dealing with. It would be an excellent time to pick up that Corporate Negotiations skill.

But you have to start with the 21 questions and follow them until there is a reason not to. And the gamemaster should make sure the player is following these guidelines by withholding karma when they don't. During the game the NPCs the character is dealing with should look upon the him with curious and mistrusting eyes when he starts to act out of the ordinary. They may accuse him of being on drugs. Or being psychotic. Anything to remind the player of who they really are.

Eternal Archetypes

I've never considers the creation of characters based on the same archetype a problem in itself. A problem arises when each of these characters is played in an almost identical fashion. Basically, it's the same character. Sure some of the stats may be a bit different but the PCs personality and dispositions tend to remain constant.

If the player is creating a new character personality based solely on the personality of an old one then, odds are, this new character is going to end up the same way the old one did, usually dead. As a gamemaster the biggest complaint you'll get from players when you try to persuade them to do something new is that they won't have any fun using a different personality. They'll say they like being a, and I quote from an actual E-Mailed complaint, "cocky, braggart, trigger fingered, asshole." (Ok, the "asshole" was mine.) Or, maybe, they're perpetually insane, or constantly wacked out on drugs, or any number of possible personality constructs. They'll point out that this is the only way they can have fun. Well, if they feel this way, not only is the player narrow minded but their character is, ninety nine percent of the time, worthy or getting killed. A snotty, uppity, annoying, vicious type of individual doesn't last long is ANY world, especially that of Shadowrun. In reality these people usually end up in jail. In Shadowrun these people usually end up dead. As a gamemaster you have more than the right to make sure the latter occurs.

The problem with most gamemaster approaches to solving this situation via death is that it involves the illogical and spontaneous appearance of many people bent on wasting the character. Instead the gamemaster should use the logical and planned appearance of many people bent on wasting the character. As I mentioned in Blackjack's Guide I, the more people the character messes with or outright kills, the more people who will want to kill him. Even if the character covers his tracks there's going to be at least a few who figure out what he's doing. Some of these people may have a demolitions skill and know where the character parks.

Identity Crisis

I'm getting really tired of waxing deckers who decide to place themselves at the wrong end of the assault rifle. Perhaps the matrix makes a person vaguely suicidal. I don't know. What I do know is that ninety percent of the deckers I've encountered can't take a bullet, let alone nine of them. Not that they should have to.

Lets face it, deckers are not built to withstand the punishment of a fire fight. Neither are most riggers or a dozen other archetypes for that matter. If, for some reason, they are able to fair well in physical confrontation then they must be pretty bad at doing what they're supposed to do, such as deck or rig or whatever. They are their archetype by name only, not having the skills necessary to preform their duties

properly.

This is bad because, although they may be able to kick a little butt in the beginning, pretty soon they're going to realize that they've spread their skills way to thin and therefore will never be able to stay up to par in their profession. And even if they do get their skills up to a decent level they'll be so far behind the level they should be that it may be impossible to catch up to, say, a decker who was created for the sole purpose of being a decker. A problem seems to arise when the individual creating a decker, for some reason or another, figures he's going to get his face bashed in if he takes a body of 3 and diverts all of his skills into those he needs to successfully preform his job. This perception usually arises because of one of two reasons.

The first is caused by a situation, probably in a past game, in which he was placed into a position where he had to confront armed individuals and ended up getting wasted. My question is: Why was the decker (or, again, rigger or whatever) in such a position? Why in the hell wasn't he standing BEHIND a fellow team member who actually knows how to use a gun and who has more than enough dermal plating to take the bullets? Or even down the street at a cyberterminal? For whatever reason it should be clear that the decker should never, ever have placed himself in such a position. The moment it was apparent that a fire fight was immanent he should have literally dove (being careful not to scratch his deck) behind a fellow group member who was more qualified to deal with the situation. If the decker was motivated he would have attempted to find a location to jack in and start playing with the lights or messing with local security robots or SOMETHING that he could actually do. And if there were no other options then, perhaps, he could have pulled out his light pistol and cracked off a few rounds blindly while hiding behind a wall of ballistic concrete. If he was working with a professional shadowrunning group the street samurai or former mercenaries or anybody else with combat experience, and if these people liked having him around, they would have pointed out, probably by pushing the decker out of the line of fire, that it would be best if he left the fighting to them. The last thing a group wants to do is lose their decker or, god forbid, their rigger. How would they get home?

The second reason an individual may be motivated to take too many skills outside of their given area of expertise is, and I hate to say this, a bad gamemaster. If the gamemaster is constantly throwing large numbers of heavily armed large people at the group, far to many large people than its crew of sams or mages can handle, then the group is certain to get wasted if all of its members don't have good combat skills. In such situations it is important that the gamemaster balance what they send after the PCs against what the PCs can actually take without getting totally smeared. If the gamemaster has written up five guards with assault rifles and the group consists of a decker, rigger, and a samurai then he may wish to drop the number to two or three to create more of a balance. The decker will run off and try to retrieve his vehicle, and the decker will huddle in the corner and try to get his heart started again after seeing many armed people coming after him and his friends.

Yes, many of you may or may not be saying, but what happens when the group has no decker? Won't another character have to compensate for the lack of decking skills by developing them? Uh, no. At least not in my game. I figure, on any given night, there a plenty of NPC deckers who would be more than happy to take a cut of the pay for doing what they do best. Hire one. Sure it's a little extra work for the GM but nobody said his job would be easy. In fact, you should buy him stuff for being such a nice guy.

But how can GMs directly deal with players who insist on trying to be everything? I'm glad you asked. If the possibility of not amounting to anything because the PC has a hundred different skills, none of which are all that spectacular, doesn't phase them you can try a semi humiliating technique I may or may not have brought up yet, depending on where this particular section is placed in the final document. When a

Johnson hires a rigger or decker they want to hire a rigger or a decker. They don't want to shell out new yen to a person who kinda-sorta knows decking but is also pretty good at athletics, boxing, knitting, and a dozen other things. They want to know what A: This person knows how to deck. and B: This person has a good reputation. If he finds out the character once went to a decking bar and got laughed onto the street because he mixed up the concept of Constructual Object Expression and Expressional Object Construction during a conversation along with getting his butt kicked while running Tam's Under The Needle because he didn't know about the new Blaster upgrades because he was too busy getting that wrist gyromount installed then, at the very least, he's going to lose a few bucks from his paycheck.

If anything, choosing and sticking to an archetype will yield much satisfaction when you realize that, despite your inability to fire a gun without flinching, you can really kick ass in your chosen profession. And if you don't, you may learn of the ultimate discomfort of getting wasted because you tried to be a samurai when you were really nothing more than a data entry specialist with a handgun.

Living In A Box

The exact opposite of having an identity crisis is when all a character takes are skills directly related to their profession and absolutely nothing else. Although this problem is rare it can amount to multiple degrees of frustration for a gamemaster when he encounters a street samurai with no vehicle, negotiation, ettiquette, or language skills whatsoever and no way of justify why this is.

I'm not going to dwell on this subject because it's not that prevalent a problem. All I can say is that, despite the feeling of annoyance I get when I ask a character how they're going to get downtown and they reply "I dunno.", this issue can actually create interesting roleplaying opportunities if used effectively. Take, for example, the amateur street samurai who has never once had a run outside his little corner of the barrens. He may possess no vehicle skills because he has never, ever been in a vehicle for longer than a few minutes. Or, perhaps, he used to be a gang member and was just now attempting to escape his situation. Through a street contact he hooked up with a group who needed muscle and, as the group's rigger lands his Ares Dragon in the middle of an abandoned lot, the former gang member looks upon the monstrosity with awe.

Or maybe not. In any case, and in contradiction to the above, having a too limited number of skills is also a definite way to limit your roleplaying possibilities. I will not allow a character to effectively negotiate in the gaming world unless they have the proper skill, even if, in reality, they could convince me the world was flat and that airplanes were held up by strings. But, again, in contradiction to my contradiction, this also gives the player the opportunity the roleplay the development of these skills. Sure they may never be all that hot but they'll keep him from getting his butt kicked when he tries to finagle his way past a bouncer by flashing a few bucks.

Side Effects

A roleplaying issue which didn't really become apparent to me until I read through the opening chapters of Cybetechnology is the effect that various "internal" forces have on a character's tendencies and personality. To clarify, these forces can include magical ability, perceptions of reality through mechanical devices (such as decking or rigging), cyber and bodyware, and other aspects. Until this point I had conducted the game under the notion that a character becomes used to these forces and their presence is eventually acknowledged subconsciously and does not need to be dealt with under normal roleplaying circumstances. I see now I was greatly mistaken.

When something as profoundly life altering as cyberware or magical power enters an individual or that individual's soul it is impossible to ignore. Sure, they may get used to it, but I firmly believe they will still recognize that these forces are there and they will profoundly effect the individual for their entire life. Far too often I see a mage PC tossing around spells without showing any acknowledgement whatsoever of the fact that they are channeling a small aspect of something they, even after years of study, hardly understand through their frail meat bodies. A samurai will waltz around with high level wired reflexes, ignoring the fact that this equipment creates the possibility that he will strike out and kill his own mother if she surprises him. A decker may go through the simply process of buying a soy burger after spending a two days in the matrix without even hinting that he may not be perceiving this reality quite right and may, unconsciously, try to use a nonexistent attack program to crash the nonexistent persona of the very real troll who just cut in line in front of him.

When you create a character already loaded down with spells or cyberware you sometimes lose respect, or simply never have respect, for the mysterious mechanics or magic which effect your charector's existence. It is as if the character was "pressed" at a factory, rolled off the assembly line, and waltzed onto the street without a second thought about their cyberware or the pain and confusion involved in getting it. Recently I gamemastered a game in which a character, a former corporate worker with no more cyberware than a datajack, was seriously injured attempting to hijack a truck. Fortunately the individuals who hired the runners were connected, strangely, with Lone Star who were nice enough to haul him, or what was left of him, to a decent police owned medical facility. There the character had both an arm and a leg replaced, although he didn't realize this until he awoke a week later in a Seattle hospital. The player roleplayed this experience beautifully. He hated the new cyberware, the phantom limb experiences, the fact that he felt less human. He's still bitter, although some of this bitterness has subsided since he realized the gleaming chrome from his right arm gains him a bit more respect an allows him to fit in more at the runner clubs. But, still, he has nightmares about an arm that is not his own. Sometimes he drinks to suppress the feeling that the arm owns him and not the other way around. Had he had the limbs from the start he probably wouldn't have given them a second thought.

And on a final note to anybody who may view the roleplaying prospects I've portrayed as being nothing but a string of downers, I present a situation I experienced while, believe it or not, playing a PC. To make a long story short my former Renreku company Man charector, on of the few Ex-Renrekus who are still alive, and the rest of his team had entered an upper deck of a parking garage. For one reason or another I was mulling around the idea that wired reflexes make you incredibly edgy and at that exact moment somebody tapped nt charector on his shoulder. My gun was out of its holster and into the face of the offending tapper before the gamemaster had even finished letting me know somebody was there. I observed, my gun a mere millimeter away from his nose, a corporate official with the Renreku Red Samurai emblem on his security armor. He spoke:

"Renreku high command has issued orders for the retrieval and/or elimination of a certain Harashiko Grey. Would that be you?"

Bang.

Slaughtering Sammys

The following is a response I sent to somebody requesting a method of dealing with slaughtering samurai. I would have elaborated on the items written but I have a valid excuse not to, this excuse being that I am profoundly lazy. - - - - Slaughtering Sammys are a definite problem. Before you take any action against the character you should ask yourself one thing: Is the character the problem or is the PLAYER the

problem. Dealing with bad ass characters is much easier then dealing with a bad ass player. The character you can simply kill. Unfortunately certain laws restrict doing the same to the player. If the player is the problem then you can waste as many of his characters as you want and he'll just come back with a new one who's a bigger asshole than the last. So, in short, I suggest the following. PROBLEM CHARACTER: Most likely the rest of the PCs in his shadowrunning group are just as pissed as you are. I suggest using the "you kill them, they kill you" philosophy. What this means is that you don't make things tougher for the character by bringing him, along with the rest of his group, into a bad situation. You get a lot of NPCs he has wronged by killing their friends, loved ones, ect., to target him personally. These NPCs have no qualms against the rest of the group, they probably won't even try to hurt them. They are after the Sammy, and the sammy alone. And if he's being as much as a jerk as you say the rest of his group won't mind turning their backs for a while. PROBLEM PLAYER: Since the player exists in reality you can simply lecture him. And the lecture should have one aim: To make him feel like shit. Degrade the bastard. Insult his roleplaying ability, because if he is playing the same bad ass all the time he's not being all that original. Let him know he's messing up the game for everybody else. If he says he doesn't care, tell him, but only as a last resort, to "Go find someone to play D&D with, you can't handle a game as good as Shadowrun." Make sure this takes place before or after the game so it doesn't interrupt play. And if he still doesn't care...tell him to go home.