



Time to Take Off the Kid Gloves

I've been getting some good press around here recently. Granted, folks have said, "I don't agree with John, but I see his point and he writes pretty good."

I do not write "pretty good." I write *well*.

Get your high boots on, folks. We're about to get *real dirty*.

* * *

This month, we're talking about Problem Players.

Now, the chief problem with these guys is that most of them are friends of yours. Like Bob who sits at the corner of the table with his laptop open, playing *Starcraft* when he should be paying attention, with his Übermonster character all full of loopholes, who barely looks at his dice when he rolls them (and hopes nobody else does because they'd see that 17 he rolled is really a 7), who won't go along with the rest of the party because that would "compromise his character concept." Yeah. That guy. We're talking about *him*.

This month, I'm going to give you a few pointers on how to deal with Bob, taking into consideration that he's probably a friend of yours that you've known for a few dozen years, who is really a nice guy, and you don't want to hurt his feelings by telling him that he's ruining the game for everyone else.

And, by the way, that is the *real* way to handle this situation. If Bob is screwing up your game, you *tell him* he's screwing up your game. But if that tactic doesn't work (or you're afraid of the repercussions of doing it), then try a few of the following tactics.

Understand that you will probably not be able to use *all* of these methods. Also understand that they should be used with caution. Finally, understand that half the intention of this installment is to provide you with a cathartic experience.

You might not be able to use *any* of these techniques, but by the end of it all, you'll sure *wish* you could.

Breaking the Cord

There's something I like to call "the PC umbilical cord." Most of you have figured out what this

means without me explaining it, but just in case. . .

The players are supposed to be a *group*. That is, they make decisions together; they act as a unit; they face the consequences of their actions *together*. Player parties have very little room for the Snake Pliskens of the world. Everyone in the group plays a specific role in the group, complementing each other's strengths and weaknesses.

Every once in a while, however, you get that dark loner. You know the guy. He's a bad man but he's very good at what he does and what he does isn't very pretty. That guy. When he joins a party of bounty hunters, he always kills the target rather than capturing him because "The Weed of Evil Bears Bitter Fruit." Despite the fact the party is trying to act as a unit, he always acts on his own, living by his own rules, by his own code of ethics. And when you confront *the player* about the problem, he just shrugs and says, "That's the way my character is," or worse, he gets offended and starts spouting the time-honored favorite: "Don't make me compromise my character concept!"

Now the key to preventing this guy from ruining your campaign is. . . don't let him make that kind of character! Unfortunately, players are sneaky. They'll make characters that *look* friendly and willing to Play Well With Others, but when the crunch is on, they sneak into the shadows, steal all the loot and tell the others that they have *no clue* what happened to the booty they were after.

Well, this guy doesn't last long in my games because I invoke a little thing we like to call "consequences." Here's how it works.

Every action has an equal and opposite reaction, right? That means the next time the Merciless Killer Without a Heart goes and whacks the NPC the party is supposed to *capture* (for ransom, for the law to deal with, whatever), you give him some time, then spring The Law on him.

The Law shows up at 3:45 AM (the time All Bad Things happen in my games) with stun guns, tear gas, tasers and all other kinds of nasty wickedness. They capture the entire party and throw them all in jail for interrogation regarding the illegal murder of The Guy We Were Supposed to Take Alive. Then, spend the rest of the evening interrogating the party. Each one, by himself, under a sunlamp. Go out and get one at Wal-Mart; they usually cost under ten bucks. Use the same tactics cops use when they interrogate prisoners. Tell them that their friends have ratted them out. Tell them that they're going to spend a *real long* time in prison. Then, when they *think* they've beaten the rap, reveal to them that the guy they were chasing was an undercover cop. *Now*, they're facing Murder 1 charges, which means life in prison (or the death penalty, depending where they're at). Sooner or later, one of them will give up The Killer Without a Cause. Either that, or evidence shows up that gives the cops a solid case against him.

Then, we have the trial. A lot of game sessions can go toward a trial. Or, if you prefer, you can do it the short way: go right to the verdict. Of course, Mr. Don't Make Me Compromise My Character is found guilty as charged and gets sent to prison.

For life.

Now, I don't know about you, but I have a rule in my games: you don't get to make another character until the one you're playing dies. That means, Bob gets to play his perfect combat machine in an 8x8 cell for the rest of his natural life.

"What are you doing this round, Bob?"

"I'm watching the cockroach crawl across my cell."

For life.

If he asks really nice (and agrees not make that kind of character again), I'll let him make a new character. Of course, a few years later, Mr. Bad Ass breaks out of prison and goes after the party for revenge.

As an NPC.

Played by Robert DeNiro.

The Laws of the Table & Karma Dice

Now, I have to admit, this one is *seriously mean*. While I usually play dirty with my players, I also play fair. By "playing fair," I mean that like a mystery writer, I show them everything they need to solve the situation at hand.

However. . .

I have a limit, and that limit is my players' enjoyment. When one player starts stepping on the other players' fun, I start fighting fire with fire. Specifically, I mean the players who feel it necessary to "break the game." They take advantage of rules. They lie about rolls. They make rolls for skills they don't have. You know who I'm talking about. I'm talking about cheaters.

(Usually I don't give a rat's petunia about cheating. Players *expect* the game master to cheat, but for some reason, game masters are supposed to poo-poo players cheating. Maybe this is because the GM is expected to cheat *for* the players. Maybe. As GM, I may hit the players below the belt, but I'm also looking out for their better interests.)

But then there are players who feel they need to break *other* rules. You know, the ones not listed in the book. "The Laws of the Table," one of my players called them. They boil down to a few simple rules:

- I. Pay Attention
- II. Don't Invoke Monty Python
- III. Don't Read at the Table
- IV. If You Must Speak, Whisper or Pass a Note

Those kind of rules. Players who can't seem to follow these simple rules of etiquette really chap my hide. And so, in order to deal with breaches of etiquette, I use Karma Dice.

I've mentioned this one somewhere else, but not everyone is a *7th Sea* fan, so I'll put it here, too (and I'll be brief). In short, whenever someone breaks a Table Law, put a black die in a bowl in the center of the table. Then, later on in the game, when *another* player is making a really crucial roll, remove the die from the bowl, turn to the player and say:

"YOU FAIL."

The emphasis is important.

In short, the rude actions of one player crush someone else's success. I've found this keeps the *Boldy Brave Sir Robin* choruses down to a minimum.

If you like, you can also use Good Karma Dice that work in exactly the opposite manner. Whenever a player does something selfless, courageous or noteworthy, give them a white die. When another player is making a crucial roll, they can give that white die to the player and you tell them:

"YOU SUCCEED."

Again, the emphasis is important.

There's Always Someone Bigger

Now this is a *nasty* trick. I used to use it a lot when I was running *Champions*. As we all know, there are a few hundred bazillion loopholes in the Hero System, and we've abused all of them in our time (remind me to tell you about Multiplier Man someday). But abusing character creation rules has always seemed so petty to me, especially when people are *proud* of it.

("Great. You made a combat monster. Big effin' deal. What's his mother's name?")

So, in order to deal with the Power Player, I taught him a rule that orks (and all the other one hit die monsters in the world) know all to well:

There's Always Someone Bigger Than Yourself.

First, I designed an equally abusive Combat Monster to deal with our Bruiser Bob, but that ain't enough. No, sir. Not if you're gonna play dirty. Since Bob feels it necessary to cheat to have a good time (and let's not mince words, that's *exactly* what he's doing), it's time for you to show him that you can cheat, too. In fact, you can cheat *better* than he can, which makes you a better person. He who cheats best (makes the best broken character and/or bends, twists and bends the rules best) wins, right? So, here's what you do.

Get yourself three sets of identical dice. This is easy if you're playing a game that requires only one die type like *Vampire* or (coincidentally enough) *Champions*. Then, arrange a set of those dice for the perfect roll behind your screen. Save 'em. Don't touch 'em.

Finally, when you've beaten Bruiser Bob to a bloody pulp, make a roll. Ignore it. Look very sadly at the dice behind your screen - the ones you arranged before the game began. Then, lift the screen and show the players your "roll."

A critical hit. Bruiser Bob's turned into Bloody Pulp Bob. Too bad. Time to make a new character.

The Rules Lawyer

Now, under most circumstances, Rules Lawyer Bob is your friend. He knows all those little nuances of the game that you can't keep in your head and reminds you when you need a nudge.

However. . .

There's that fellow who's always telling you: "You're doing that wrong."

Or, "That's not how that works."

Or, "Let me look that up."

This guy is The Enemy. Instead of relying on your judgement to make a snap decision, he wants to play things By The Book. Instead of accepting that you're improvising things, juggling story, character, narrative *and* a rulebook, he's insisting on everything going by What the Author Intended. And if he does it enough, players start looking to *him* for rulings rather than you. This kind of challenge to our authority is unhealthy. Therefore, you have to do something *drastic*. Something *dramatic*. Something *dirty*.

First, take away his character sheet. Then, tell him if he doesn't remember how many dice to roll, or if he rolls the wrong number of dice, or if he forgets something on his character sheet. . .

HE FAILS.

It's all about emphasis.

This isn't so much being mean as holding Rules Lawyer Bob to the same standards he expects from you. If *you're* supposed to know all the rules, if *you're* supposed to be the Rule Encyclopedia, holding everything to memory.

There is nothing in the rules that says you *can't* do this. Therefore, you can.

Of course, if this doesn't work out for you, try a different tack.

I'll use the Storyteller System as an example. Whenever Bob starts his rules ranting, take away his 10-siders and give him 4-siders.

"Here, Bob. You make all your rolls with *these*."

There is *nothing* in the rules that says you *can't* do this. Therefore, you can.

When Rules Lawyer Bob gets hit with a blind spell, blindfold him.

"What did you roll, Bob?"

"I can't tell. I'm blindfolded."

"Well then. . . **YOU FAIL.**"

Finally, if he insists on looking things up. . . let him. While he's looking things up in a book, the rest of the game goes on without him.

"Bob, you just got hit. You took a stunning amount of damage."

"How? I didn't hear any dice roll."

"He didn't need to roll. You weren't paying attention. You were looking at something else."

That'll learn 'em.

Last Words

Like I said above, the techniques this week are generally mean, nasty and underhanded. They are *not* for everyone. Most of the time, I really don't need to use them. . . more than once.

But the *reason* to use them is specific. I don't play a roleplaying game to win. I don't create a character to demonstrate how to "break" a character creation system. When the Game Master speaks, I listen.

The fact of the matter is this: everyone in the group either wins or loses. If everyone is having a wonderful time, we all win. If one player decides that he wants to have fun *in spite of everyone else*, he's selfish. If he feels he needs to show off his character design skills in such a way that messes with other players' enjoyment, he's acting like a twelve year old jerk with serious

confidence issues.

Granted, he's also your high school buddy Bob. And that makes things all too complicated. I hear so many people saying, "Gaming is a social activity." Then why the hell are so many gamers lacking in any kind of social skills? Maybe its because gaming has always about blind acceptance. So many of us came to gaming because we were "outsiders" of one kind or another.

But that doesn't mean we can't learn. And that doesn't mean we can't grow.

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