



Get a Helmet

A Minor Prelude

Not too long ago, a group of friends and I were sitting around a table, listening to Dennis Leary's *No Cure For Cancer*, laughing ourselves sick. One bit caught us by the collar and threw us down to the floor: the Doctor Leary Psychoanalytical Seminar. You don't need to deal with issues of family, you don't need to deal with "stress," you don't need to grasp your inner child. What you need is a good, swift kick in the backside.

"But my father, he abused me when I was. . ."

Whack! Shut the (insert obscenity here) up! Next!

"I don't know what do to about my girlfriend, she. . ."

Whack! Shut the (another obscenity) up! Next!

In short, "Life is hard. Get a helmet."

And let me tell you something, I've worked with a lot of kids in my day, some of whom have *real* issues, not the crap the people I know grouse about. It's like my grandfather told me when I was younger, "If you ever think you've got it bad, open up your (Irish obscenity) eyes and look around. You'll find someone who's got it a whole helluva lot worse."

All of this comes to a very important point. Stay with me. We're getting there.

There's a whole lot of people in this world who spout the "Get a helmet!" philosophy. Then, life kicks them in the teeth with iron-tipped combat boots and they start crying like a fifteen year old who just found out the first girl he ever kissed didn't fall madly in love with him and, in fact, has moved on to someone new. Then, they bitch and moan and complain about how unfair life is, and how if only he'd done things differently, it'd all be different and how could she be so cold, so uncaring, such a heartless, cruel, calculating. . .

Hey. Wait a minute. Where's your helmet?

Like Super Chicken says, "You knew the job was dangerous when you took it."

For those of you who haven't figured it out, here's a bit of existentialist truth for you to chew on.

Life. Isn't. Fair. The sooner you learn that, the better off you'll be.

Now the question you have to ask is this:

If roleplaying games are supposed to simulate life, why are so many people obsessed with making them "fair?"

And with that in mind, let's move on to this month's topic. Twenty bucks says you can't figure it out until we're all done.

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PART ONE: The Problem

Character death is a very difficult matter to handle. Game Masters have to be careful when dealing with a player character's mortality. At least, this is what people tell me. I really don't see what the big deal is.

When it comes down to killing characters, there are really two groups of GMs. The first group are the Dicers. These folks insist that GMs don't kill people, dice kill people. Of course, these are the same people who think guns fire themselves. Secondly, we have the Free Formers. These people insist that dice should *never* have influence over a character's life. Of course, if you actually *play* in one of these games, you'll soon find out that you're playing second fiddle to the GMs NPCs while they tell you a story they could have done all on their own.

No, my friends. The answer lies somewhere in the middle, I think. Somewhere between perception and reality. That's where the GM shines best, stuck right between those two.

It's the reason I have such a problem with *Star Trek*. Whenever I watch it, I know nothing significant will happen to the main characters. Oh, one of them will learn some sort of "life lesson," but nobody ever really changes. The only reason people ever change on TV shows is because they're leaving the show (which means the character gets killed), get pregnant (which means the character gets pregnant), or have to make a movie (which means they go into a coma for a week or two). But in the end, nobody really changes.

Unfortunately, this disease has crept into our industry, polluting it with the same puerile fan-boy fiction we see on *Trek* webpages. Nobody ever changes. Nobody ever dies.

And when we sit down with our favorite character ever Friday night, we have the comforting feeling that we'll be leaving with that character intact. The worst thing he'll have to encounter will be a valuable life-lesson that shows him how he can make himself a better person.

Not in my game, buddy.

You sit down at my table with one understanding: You'd better wear a helmet.

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See, the problem comes down to a simple assumption: you ain't gonna die. If the dice roll badly, the GM will fudge the roll and you'll be okay. Or, you just make sure not to put yourself in a situation where the dice roll badly, and you don't have to worry about getting killed. Besides, only Killer GMs arbitrarily kill characters.

This, unfortunately, leaves you and me in a bind. We can't kill characters without making ourselves look like a villain/schmuck/jerk/Killer GM. If we do whack someone off, we have to blame it on the dice. Otherwise, we get whiny player voice all night long, complaining that he doesn't have a character to play with, and now he has to sit out and wait for the rest of you to finish because *you* killed his character.

Well, friends and neighbors, I got solutions for you. A whole ton of them. So, let's get started.

* * *

PART TWO: The Supporting Cast

The first solution is the easiest. Players always assume they're the main character. Well, just because they believe that don't necessarily make it so. In fact, try running a game where the characters are all Red Shirts. You know the language I'm talking.

This really works for my buddy Ray's *Star Trek* game (he was running the FASA version, that's how old this story is). We didn't play the bridge crew in that game, we played all the guys who went down to the planet *before* the bridge crew showed up. Fortunately, Ray had a very good sense of drama, so we didn't have Kirk and Spock beaming down at the last second to save our bacon every week. No, the officers on the USS Kirkland were a bit too important for that kind of heroics. *We* were the Away Team, sent down to an alien planet to investigate unusual tricorder readings. And by the end of the year, we were the best-trained Away Team you ever saw.

However. . . we went through about seven crew members in the course of that year. We were expendable, and we knew it. Now, a lot of folks may say, "But how do you get attached to a character you know is going to die?" My answer is simple: "How can you get attached to a character you know *isn't* going to die?"

Another good example is *The Thirteenth Warrior*. The narrator of that film (Antonio Banderas) ain't the main character. In fact, he's a very *minor* character. The real hero of that tale is Beowulf (however you want to spell it). He's the one who gets to kill both Grendel and his Bad Mommy (so bad, she don't even got a name). It's *his* story. And though we know Banderas ain't gonna get whacked (he is the narrator, after all), imagine a player in that kind of situation. He *knows* he isn't the hero. He *knows* he isn't the one who gets to kill the Boss Monster. He *knows* he's the sidekick. So, what does he get to do? He supports the Hero. And if he's weak, if his courage breaks, that puts the story one step closer toward tragedy.

Even in a modern game, setting your players up in supporting roles can really give them a sense of mortality. You don't play Romeo, you play Mercutio. And, let's be

honest for a second, if offered the choice, who would you want to play? Which brings up a very good point: it's always the side-kick who gets the best lines. He's witty, clever and an all-together great guy. And you can always spot him at the beginning of the film. You know the hero will make it to the credits, but you just don't know if the side-kick will. But you *hope* he does.

Almost as if he was your character.

PART THREE: "They'll be back by sweeps. . ."

This one isn't entirely mine. It's inspired by a story Steve Hough and Rob Vaux told me about a Cthulhu game they were playing in. Apparently, the rest of the party (including Rob) left Steve's character for dead after a vicious attack by Mi-Go. Well, the next week rolled around and Steve showed up. In fact, Steve's *character* showed up.

"Hey Steve!" one of the characters said. "We thought you were dead!"

Steve didn't say a thing. He walked right passed him.

"Hey Steve!" said another. "Where have you been?"

Steve didn't say a thing. He walked right passed her.

Right about then, he reached the gun rack. Before anyone could say anything, he picked up a shotgun and asked the GM if it was loaded. The GM said it was.

And Steve started shooting.

He started shooting and didn't stop until the big, bad combat character (you *always* need one of those in a Cthulhu game) got a hold of Steve and broke his neck.

Of course, if it was *my* game, that wouldn't have slowed Steve down a single bit, but they had a merciful GM and the broken neck put Steve down for good.

The point here is that you really can steal from any source. Like. . . oh, let's say soap operas. Yeah, I said soap operas. I used to date a girl who was addicted to one of those things, I watched it every day so we could talk about it when we got home from work. And there's one rule that's *always* true on *every* soap:

If you don't got a corpse, they'll be back by sweeps week.

PART FOUR: With Friends Like Me. . .

"All right, John," you're saying. "That's all fine and well, but what do I do when I really do kill their character?"

I understand. I really do. When you kill a character, that player has to sit around for the rest of the game. At the very least, he has to make up a *new* character, so he can jump back in.

Why take the scenic route? In fact, why not have him play someone the party already knows.

Like the antagonist.

I was just watching *Batman: The Animated Series* with my wife and the villain was one of my all-time faves: R'as al-Ghul.

"Who?" my heretical wife asked. Ah, the naivete of youth.

The whole kicker with al-Ghul is that Batman's in love with the bad guy's daughter. The kicker with Ghul's daughter is that she's in love with Batman. The kicker with Ghul is that he's in love with his daughter.

And no, not in *that* way. Perv.

It makes a great triangle of love and duty. The power of that theme is seldom captured well, but in the case of Batman and the al-Ghuls, it's perfect.

So. . . why do the players always have to be the protagonists? Why can't one or two of them play *antagonists*? But antagonists the protagonists have some kind of unbreakable link with? That's powerful mojo. Mighty good stories come out of that kind of relationship.

So, what you do is get together with a player before the game starts. You talk to him about your plan. He plays a wacky, lovable character - let's call him "Bob" - for the first eight or ten sessions, then you whack Bob mercilessly. It's a big, bloody Bob mess that won't ever clean up right.

Then, Bob's player drops out for a week or two while the rest of the party looks for the Bad Guy who killed Bob the Loveable Sidekick. Two weeks go by, and your player shows up again, but this time, he's not playing a new character. . . he's playing the Heavy Who Killed Bob (*Bum bum bum BUM!*).

It's a typical technique. Create an intriguing, capable villain in Episode 1, then make him an ally by the middle of the season.

You folks who watch *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* know what I'm talking about. That show is *littered* with Good Bad Guys and Gals: Faith, Spike, Angel, Jenny the Gypsy Chick, Anya the Vengeance Demon are great examples of bad people the Scooby Gang *has* to work with.

Unenlightened folks who *don't* watch the best show on TV may get what I'm talking about with these examples:

Magneto and the New Mutants.

Han Solo, Lando Calrissian, and Darth Vader.

7 of 9, Quark and Garrik.

(I've got another one, but I don't think anyone will remember her. The first one who can tell me who Princess Aura has a crush on gets a No-Prize.)

All NPC villains (at least anti-heroes) who turn into PCs and join the good fight. If Lucas can do it, so can you.

(Or, if you prefer, the villain doesn't have to be a PC; he can just stay bad. But that requires some serious, heavy duty roleplaying on the part of your player. You have been warned.)

PART FIVE: The Secret

This is the second part of a three-part series about assumptions. The Big Assumptions. Many of you may have guessed that this month's part was about killing characters.

You're wrong.

This month's episode was about something a lot more powerful than death. It's about perspective.

("Perspective: use it or lose it." - *The Tao of Zen Nihilism*)

We all know the players view the world through the Game Master. He's their eyes, ears, tongues, noses and skin. But there's an assumption that goes along with that. Players assume that the GM has to be honest about those perceptions.

Heh. Let 'em.

(How many times have you met a beautiful woman who was convinced she was fat? Anyone who says, "I'm bad at math" is right. So are the people who say, "I can't quit smoking." Absolutely right. Like Richard Bach said, "If you argue for your limitations, you get to keep them.")

People trust their perceptions more than logic, reason and sometimes even reality. (That's called "faith".) Players are the same way. They *have* to trust everything the GM tells them. He's their only source of information.

If the players perceive they're invulnerable, they'll believe they're invulnerable. If they perceive they're just a pack of red shirts, they'll feel that mortality hanging around their necks.

If the players believe all PCs are good and all NPCs are antagonists (at least anti-heroes), they'll lose out on some valuable allies. . . and leave their backs open to ringers (a topic we'll talk about in a few months).

If the players believe that death is the end. . .

What the players perceive is what their characters believe. Have fun with that perspective. Be responsible, but have fun.

After all, it's only a game, right?

* * *

Next month, we'll tackle another assumption. The last one. Not sure which one. Maybe you'll find out when I do.

Take care, and you'll see me in thirty.

But not if I see you first.

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Article publication date: May 19, 2000

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