



The Living City

(Note: If you do not have a consistent setting in your game, this month's column will not help you in any way, shape or form. Don't read it. It will not help your campaign. There's nothing to learn here. Move along.)

A common Game Master trap lies in designing setting. Many GMs think they have to spend hours, weeks, months getting to know every cobblestone, every brick, every face in the crowd. Well, I'm here to tell you that's a load of horse hockey. This month, I'm letting you in on some nifty little tricks that will make your environment come alive for your players in ways they (and you) never thought possible.

I can already hear you saying, "Hey, isn't this supposed to be a column about dirty, underhanded Game Master tricks? How is designing an environment low-down and nasty?"

I'll tell you.

Your players are gonna do all the work.

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"The Living City" is a term one of the players used to describe the city of my long-running *Vampire* game. New Jerusalem was indeed a living, breathing city. It was awake even when the players were asleep. Plots were born, lived and died without the players ever knowing what was going on. Monumental changes occurred while they wasted time in the nightclub picking up the evening's meal. They never found out about most of those changes and events until it was too late to do anything about it. But then again, that's when heroes really shine, isn't it: when everyone else thinks it's too late?

The best part about New Jerusalem is how little work I put into it. I mean, I did a *little* pre-game work, had myself an outline, knew the names of all the important people (living, dead and undead) in the city, and I knew what I *wanted* to happen, but everything else was up to the players. *They* were the ones who really made the city come alive. And here's how I let them do it.

The City in a Box

The first thing I did was get a bunch of index cards and a box to hold them in. I also got little dividers to separate them out. I had a section for NPCs, Magic Items, Important Places, Events and Other Notes.

NPCs

First off, I didn't spend a lot of time on designing NPCs. I had an idea of how each one was going to be, but I really didn't want to invest a lot of time in building their personalities (you'll see why in a minute). I gave each one only three stats: Fighting, Thinking and Talking. I rated each one with a number, telling how many dice he'd roll for each situation. This works really well for Storyteller games, but with a little ingenuity, you can make it work out for just about any system. Then, at the bottom of each NPC card, I wrote three words (or phrases) that reminded me what made the NPC distinct when I played them.

So an NPC card looked something like this:

CARTER, JEFFERSON
Fighting: 2
Thinking: 6
Talking: 6
Home: 10258 Manzanita Court, (712) 555-5435
Goals: Control the City at all Costs
Resources: You name it

Then, at the beginning of the game, after I read all their character sheets and knew the kinds of characters they wanted to play, I assigned them NPCs to play as well. I gave them each an envelope with a copy of the card and a list of objectives for the evening. The envelope also contained information on where the NPC was that night, so if the players wandered into the Taboo nightclub, my buddy Ian knew that Donny Vanucci would *also* be there. If Donny got involved with the players, I'd take over Ian's character until they were done with him, then Ian got hold of his character again.

(Here's how I made it work. I usually have players wearing name tags so they don't have to look up the character names. As soon it's time for one of the players to take a different role, I stand next to them and put my hand on their shoulder. I take off their name badge and give them the new one. Then, I put on their name badge. As soon as the scene changes, I give them their badge back and take the old one.)

Players also got to play NPCs when their own character wasn't involved in a scene. For example, the players are in Taboo, talking with Jocasta, the regent of the Brujah. Meanwhile, across town, the Tremere are talking about how to deal with that miserable group of 13th Gen losers who keep making trouble for them (that's the players, by the way). I'm playing the role of the Tremere regent and Eric's playing his chief lieutenant. At some point, the butler (played on cue by Ian who was notified to step in by his note for the evening) informs us that the regent of the Toreador was here to see us. *She* was played by the lovely and talented Elizabeth who plays the role of a southern belle to the hilt. She lets us both know that one of the 13th Gen losers has something that belongs to her, and she is willing to do just about anything to get it back.

Events

"Miracle: The poor man's coincidence." - The Tao of Zen Nihilism

This little technique offered me a whole lot of advantages. First, I didn't have to come up with a personality for each and every damn NPC in the city: the players took care of that for me. From the Prince of the city right down to "Mean Mr. Mathers," the rottenest Math professor on the college campus (the *only* man on campus who ate the split pea soup in the cafeteria, I might add), they populated the city with colorful characters that would have *never* occurred to me.

Second, the players were no longer lone individuals; they were a part of the city. Each NPC they played gave them another investment in the events that occurred around them. Ian was playing Daniel Hayden, the bad-ass Brujah, but he was also playing the Toreador who *might* have been Oscar Wilde. Mike was playing Aristotle Jones (*all* the Malkavians were named "Jones"), but he was also playing Tori the Nosferatu who took care of the thing in the sewers they called "Mother."

Lastly, the players got to look at the city in a way individuals cannot. They saw what other clans were up to, but more importantly, they saw the consequences of those actions. They saw that one single event could change the lives of hundreds of people. Things were moving all the time. The players got a real sense that they were organs in a larger organism. Not only did they see others' actions take effect on their own lives, but they saw their own actions take effect on the lives of others. In short, they learned that there's no such thing as an "isolated incident."

Convincing players to give up control of their own character so they can play the Prince of the City/Evil Wizard-Emperor/Cyber-Dragon Mafia Boss is easy. Convincing yourself to give up control of your campaign?now *that's* the hard part. You've got to be willing to surrender your best NPCs to the whims of someone else. In order to do that, you've got to swallow a little bit of pride and have some faith in your players. Of course, you've also got to make sure you assign the *right* NPCs. Giving someone the *wrong* NPC can be disastrous. But then again, sometimes, it might be the best thing to do.

I had a player who was the God-King of comedy roleplaying. The guy was an improvisational genius, always hitting the group with off-centered humor that would make Steven Wright look twice. In the *Vampire* game, I always gave him Malkavians to play, a fact that made our nutjobs both humorous and dangerous. But one day, I decided to have him play the quick-witted Toreador assassin, Jack. "Jumping Jack Flash" was a deadly serious Englishman who looked like a sinister version of 007. When Bill got a hold of Jack Flash, he slunk into a brilliant Sean Connery impersonation that was absolutely perfect. He accommodated himself to the role, flexing his roleplaying muscles a bit more than he had before.

It was a double-edged victory. I got a Jack that was what I wanted plus a whole lot more, and Bill got to stretch his roleplaying skills in a direction he never counted on.

Improvisational Environment

I talked a little bit about this in the *7th Sea GM Book* and *Robin Laws* also invokes it in *Fung Shui*. It's all about getting the players to *use* the environment around them.

GM: You're in a bar fight.

PLAYER 1: I grab a bottle of whiskey and smash it over a guy's head.

PLAYER 2: I grab the candle on the table and shove it into another guy's eye.

PLAYER 3: I grab a log out of the fireplace and smash another guy over the head with it.

You get the idea. You never *said* all those things were in the bar, but then again, they *make sense* to be in the bar, right? Why penalize a player for being creative?

But don't let this technique stop at bar fights. Just as your players can help you populate your city, so can they help you decorate it.

Some of the best parts of New Jerusalem came from my players. Remember Mean Mr. Mathers? I didn't create him, one of my players did. They were standing in the college campus cafeteria and one of them said, "And there's Mean Mr. Mathers over there, eating pea soup." Then, another one chimed in. "He's the *only* one who eats the pea soup." It was brilliant and I let it stick.

Once the players got the feel for it, they started decorating the city every chance they got. They invented a comic book shop and the crooked owner who cheats kids out of their valuable books (years later, I found myself wondering how he'd do with *Magic* cards). They invented the volunteer fire chief, the city librarian, and nearly all the police. And all the while, I was writing it all down on index cards, shoving them into my little box for future use.

Of course, I had complete veto power, but after a few weeks, I didn't need to use it. The players got a hold on the kind of stuff I liked and didn't like, but even then, they'd come up with something so creative, I'd have to let it in the city limits. While the standing rule was the player who created the NPC got first dibs on playing him, we did more than our share of grogging the locals (see *Ars Magica* for details).

Conclusion

Maximum effect for minimum effort. (*Slack!*) That's what we're gunning for here. I know a lot of you complain that you don't have time to run games anymore. I know you say you're too busy to come up with creative ways to confront your players. Well, this month you got a non-confrontational way to challenge them: let them use those brains of theirs for something other than counting experience points.

If you let them in on the Big Game, if you let them have a whack at creating NPCs and even give them a chance to plot against *themselves* (I always loved that bit), maybe they'll appreciate all the hard work that goes into running a game.

And maybe - - just maybe - - I'll figure out a way to show *you* all the hard work that goes into *designing* one.

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