

## Crime and RPGs

### Player Characters Are a Bunch of Anti-Social Bastards

If there is one thing that Role-Players cannot credibly deny, it is that their fantasy alter-egos lead lives of unrelenting criminality. Even the most upright knight do-gooder commits various kinds of mayhem, grave-robbing, and trespass on a regular basis. In addition, PCs are generally heavily-armed strangers without local community ties – just the sort of people who make the powers-that-be extremely nervous. The sort of social isolation endured by roving bands of adventurers that people end up dead (or worse) around has serious psychological consequences, if not legal complications.

A word, first, about the perspective from which Your Humble Narrator speaks. I have been a game master in many systems, and in many settings for over 35 years. I am, in the mundane world<sup>1</sup>, a lawyer. I have been both prosecutor and defense attorney. I have also been an appointed judicial official. I can tell you truly that the sort of people who live lives even remotely like those your PCs lead are very, very likely to face the hard, dirty end of the system's stick. And when that happens, the results are likely to be very significant indeed.

As a GM, your job is twofold, if you want to make your narrative both emotionally impactful, and interestingly plotted. First, you must make your players inhabit the lives of their PCs, and second, you must provide them a complex, vast world to plot those PC's lives within. Whether the setting of your narrative is a Tolkienesque fantasy, a Sci-Fi adventure, a costumed super-hero derby, a historical epic, or a modern horror campaign, sooner or later, your players are going to come up against the fact that in any human (or humanoid) society there is a class of people who feel they have the legitimate right to monopolize the use of violence. The majority of the common citizenry will agree with that assessment, regardless of how inept or corrupt that class happens to be. That creates conflict for your players, and conflict is the stuff of which our gaming dreams are made.

### Scene of the Crime

The first question to ask yourself about the relationship between your players' PCs and the powers-that-be is "who's in charge here?" Not who is officially in charge, but who actually has a stake in seeing things remain quiet and orderly. It won't always be the "badges." If your campaign is set on the North Side of Chicago during prohibition, the real local heat on the street belongs to Al Capone, or Johnny Torrio. And if you're going to do crime on his turf, it's his rules you're going to have to deal with. If your PCs are running around Sherwood Forest during the early 15<sup>th</sup> century CE, you are going to be dealing with the rough justice dealt out by Robin Hood. Travel a bit to Nottingham, and you deal with the Sheriff. And so on. Ask yourself, before

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<sup>1</sup> Calling it the "real world" is just too painfully ironic.

the narrative begins, the following critical questions:

### **Who has the real authority?**

This is a key question. In the chaotic world that many PCs inhabit, the local authorities may have very little to do with how things go down day-to-day. The King is the law, but the local baron, warlord, capo, or hetman may be the person who the PCs will really deal with. And even in places where the local constabulary has a strong presence, they may well be in the pocket of someone who really calls the shots.

### **What do they want from the people who live under their power?**

What's the number one priority of the local boss? Taxes? (usually.) Peace and Quiet? The fulfillment of some utopian dream? Their own preservation and aggrandizement? (the second most common motivation.) How the authorities react to the disruptive presence of the PCs will largely be determined by how threatened they feel their agenda to be.

### **What system do they use, day to day, to keep order?**

There is always, and everywhere, a system. Even in a post-apocalyptic nightmare with no "official" authority, people will band together, and leaders will evolve. And those people will have to deal with transgressions against the order that holds them together and helps them survive. Even a lynch mob is a system, of a sort. But usually, in any human-type society, you will be dealing with a system that is considered "legitimate" force. How do they deal with those that are credibly accused of crimes? What are the rights of the accused? How are the accused expected to behave?

What do they consider unacceptable behavior?

What means do they use to enforce their decisions?

What resources do they have to enforce their will?

How good are they at it?

### **Summation**

When you have thought carefully about how the issue of "law and order" is to be handled in your campaign, you will have prepared an important dramatic element that will reinforce several themes, such as social isolation, the consequences of violence and anti-social behavior. Your PCs are exceptional people, but they have to live in a world designed for, and inhabited by, normal people. That interaction and social friction should be a useful arrow in your storytelling quiver.