

## Death in Role Playing Games

“Don’t Fear the Reaper”

If your campaign is going to have any dramatic legitimacy, it must be possible for PCs to die (or be permanently disabled, incurably bonkers, etc.) RPGs are about action, and action has consequences. If it isn’t possible for players to lose their characters, they will be reckless, their role-playing will become superficial, and the emotional tension will slacken.

This is not to say you should set up inescapable death traps, or allow PCs to bite the dust at random. PCs are heroes – people of significance, and their deaths should be significant. Players may be upset when a long-cherished PC gets his ticket punched, but if the story of the PC’s death is memorable, it will be satisfying.

In some situations you should allow a PC to die. Notice I say “allow.” If you allow a die roll to kill a PC that you would rather keep alive just to be “fair,” then you’re a ninny – an incompetent GM. There is always a subtle way to allow a lesser consequence. First thing, though *Never allow your players to see your rolls for NPC actions*. Never. Then, if you decide that a hit that would have killed the PC only knocks him into a coma, then you don’t have to explain yourself.

Now, when do we allow our beloved PCs to fall into the reaper’s icy clutches? In three circumstances:

1. The player was unforgivably careless
2. The plot requires it
3. Administrative reasons

There are no other circumstances in which you should allow a PC to die. You are building a story here, not serving a bag of dice, or a rule book.

### The Player Was an Ass

I recall a session in which the PCs had blithely blundered into an ambush set by an opponent that they had been warned they were in no position to take on in a frontal assault. The player who had decided that his PC was some sort of kamikaze martial arts madman rushed headlong into enemy fire, screaming, “Yippee-Ti-Yay, Motherfuckers!”<sup>1</sup> Then, he caught a .223 round between the eyes and his head exploded. Dead. Instantly. The player was stunned. He was suffering from the illusion that his PC had “plot armor,” like a main character in a comic strip. This ain’t a comic strip. Yippee-Ti-Yay, Motherfucker.

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<sup>1</sup> Lack of originality or inappropriate pop culture references kill more PCs in my campaigns than evil magick, demons, and voodoo combined.

The rest of the PCs suddenly rediscovered the virtue of seeking cover, and of tactical withdrawal. They now hated the enemy with a real, visceral passion, and they were afraid of the consequences of careless action. The dramatic tension level in the campaign ramped way up – the stakes were higher, and stupidity had consequences.

The player who had the headless horse's ass was upset, but, hey, c'est la RPG. More later on what to do when a player loses a PC, and you want him to continue in the campaign. Of course, if he's a wanker, and you want him gone – if he's spoiling the game for everyone, just tell him he's welcome to watch, but you won't have a place to insert a new PC in the plot for several sessions. There are few things more boring and frustrating than watching other people play an RPG.

On the other hand, maybe you want a "lesser sanction." Fine. There are several ways to accomplish this, some cruel, some kind, but the best ways will allow future plot points to develop off of them. In one of my campaigns, a PC botched a demolitions roll that he should not have attempted (I told him, "Your expertise in this matter tells you that this is way beyond your current skill level." He went right on.) and BOOM.

I didn't need to kill him at that moment, and he wasn't consistently screwing up the plot, or everyone else's fun by being an idiot.<sup>2</sup> So I rolled behind my screen, ignored the result, and said, "Lord Percival is not moving. He's not breathing." The PCs had to extract him under fire, leading to several of them being seriously wounded. They managed to get him to medical help, but he suffered serious consequences. His PC was out for several game sessions in the hospital. His stats for perception were permanently reduced (due to burst eardrums,) and loud sudden noises forced him to make a saving throw or panic. Obviously, these disabilities create plot possibilities for a clever GM, and they are just enough of a nuisance to dissuade further foolish behavior.

Don't be afraid to saddle PCs with infirmities and stat reductions as a result of wounds. This shouldn't be routine – the PCs are heroes, after all, and they should be very resilient. But they must *never* think they are invulnerable. Make them respect the hazards. Make them feel lucky, and skillful if they make it.

## The Plot Requires a Sacrifice

Sometimes, a PC is due to die. The PC may make a noble sacrifice, or the story you have in mind requires their death. This should – this *must* be an epic moment. Indulge in a little subtle

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<sup>2</sup> When players say some variant of "...but my character is an evil, narcissistic moron, and I'm just role-playing the character!" I always ask, "Is your twit of a character an organ donor?"

foreshadowing. But make certain that the PC's death advances the plot.

In a campaign in which I was a player, I was told at the very beginning of play that my PC was doomed to die. The victim of a curse on his family. But I had a great time making sure that that death was worth retelling, and that I got my fellow PCs further down the road to the McGuffin. It was a very satisfying campaign.<sup>3</sup>

## Administrative Death

Sometimes, a player leaves a campaign. The reasons are many – work, unsympathetic spouse, getting a life, general dickery, etc. If you don't think he'd make a worthwhile NPC (and it's my belief that NPCs should *never* accompany the party for more than a very short time – they invariably become an all-knowing party leader,) then kill him. The PC, not the player. Most campaign structures can not afford a part-time PC who drops in whenever his player feels like showing up. It plays havoc with your plotting, and it isn't fair to the other players who are working at building the narrative. The second time a player doesn't show up for a session and doesn't bother to call, kill his PC. Make it epic. I don't think you'll have to do it again to make your point.

On the other hand, if there is a legitimate reason that the player won't be with you anymore, you may consider plotting the PC's death in secret with his player. Set up a grand sacrifice, unbeknownst to the other players. Send him out in a blaze of glory. He'll appreciate it, and so will your players. It's a way to turn an unfortunate circumstance into a great, dramatic moment.

## So What Happens When a PC dies?

It is of critical importance to a well-plotted campaign that some of the NPCs surrounding the PCs are emotionally tied to them. I award extra character creation points for players who provide significant NPCs in their backstories. Parents, children, old friends, etc. are useful plot hooks. They can provide advice, insight, money, and yes, hostages<sup>4</sup>. But they can also provide new PCs when a PC dies. A son or daughter may want to know what happened to his/her parent. A colleague may find a suspicious notebook. A detective who was trailing the PC might want to know what *really* happened to that fugitive.

If you have a few PCs that are important to the plot, you can have a character sheet prepared. Then, there will be no loss of time or momentum while a player rolls up a new character. Giving him some options, or some extra points to distribute will be welcome – no one likes to be handed an entirely prefab character.

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<sup>3</sup> One could almost say that I was dying to play in that campaign. One could, but one shouldn't.

<sup>4</sup> Please don't overdo this. Always having to disrupt the plot to go rescue a "Jimmy Olsen" gets tiring fast.

A GM can also award “Karma points,” points that allow the player to give his new PC an edge based on the performance and role-playing of the now defunct PC.

## In General

One of the great weaknesses of most role-playing narratives is the absence of real danger to the PCs. The impact and import of violence in a narrative is primary – have you ever been in a campaign where combat wasn’t a significant part of the story? But the dramatic tension of violence as a plot element is diluted when the players think their characters can just be popped off to the nearest Miracle Max to come back as good as new.<sup>5</sup> Death is THE great, dramatic moment in most narratives, and the possibility of it will give a new edge to your games. Trust your players to handle it. As for their PCs, maim or kill one of them once in awhile. It’ll do them good.

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<sup>5</sup> The Princess Bride reference allows me to point out that the hero, Wesley, is disabled for most of the last act of the movie. The problems this creates, and the drama of the scene where he bluffs the villain into surrender is something that is instructive for GMs, and storytellers in general.