

VILLAIN PSYCHOLOGY



Every villain tells a story. Shouldn't that be a 'picture'? Well in a sense, villains are pictures, pictures of the darker sides of ourselves. The darkness that must be restrained, a reason for heroes to exist. As long as we hold the capacity for darkness, we will need heroes. It is an eternal need. We dream about these heroes, and we explore this heroism when we play *Champions*.

And yet, the villains are appealing too. Seductive. We recognize ourselves in them; we too desire wealth, we seek to obtain the power to steer our fortunes, we desire excitement, and when wronged we feel rage and seek vengeance. These are fantasies, but fantasies about the most concrete of realities. If the struggle between heroes and villains weren't relevant to our lives then human literature would not have described that struggle, as it has done since stories have first been told.

All of these thoughts are very nice, but they're rather long-winded and not very relevant to the game at hand. We continue to describe this struggle in our gaming, and one of the ways we explore this conflict is by creating characters, especially villains. In *Champions*, every good campaign will develop their own villains at some point. Once new villains start coming out of the woodwork, then the gamemaster is free to put his own direction to the campaign. And there are many directions that a campaign can take.



One common mistake in villain design is to make every villain the same. They don't necessarily have the same powers, but they have much the same personality and react the same way when presented with a situation. For example, if every villain bargains with the heroes and then backstabs them, then the players are going to respond to the villains in the manner most appropriate to dealing with backstabbers. You may say, well, that they are villains and they are supposed to be nasty. Why shouldn't they backstab all the time? It's in the contract or something.

But of course, there isn't a contract.

Why do villains act the way they do? Because they are evil? Some of them undoubtedly are. Because they are misguided? Some are misguided. Because they are just out having fun? Some villains just want to have fun, and don't care about the effects of their actions on others. Villains have different motivations, just as people do when they do things that are nasty. Villains are usually people too.

Likewise, villains do not have a uniform code of beliefs or conduct; each villain believes what he believes or does what he does for different reasons. Some villains don't kill, and will have a stronger aversion to harming innocents than many heroes. Others enjoy killing. Some villains refuse to think of themselves as evil; the government is evil, the banks are evil, and they are just trying to get their fair share. Others enjoy being **evil**. Human beings have a habit of coming up with justifications for unjustifiable actions. Just look at history books. Villains don't have to think of themselves as evil to do horrible things.

One common cliché is that 'variety is the spice of life'. Cliches are clichés because they are often true. If you provide your group with a variety of villains with different motivations who react in different ways to the same situation, your players will be surprised more often. And it is the element of the unexpected that keeps a campaign going for a long time.

One thing that should be expected, though, is the eventual victory of the heroes. Heroes should win most of the time, foiling the "evil" plot and sending the villain to Stronghold. Some villains may be harder to snag than others, and sometimes the heroes will get thrashed, but the heroes should be victorious in the end. The biggest flaw in many of the *Champions* gamemasters is that they love their villains too much, can't bear to see them put down, and arrange matters so it is impossible for the heroes to score a clear victory ("well, if the heroes had gotten this neutron disintegrator in this underground lab that they knew nothing about, they could have won..."). Don't fall into this trap! If your players keep finding that they can't put a dent into the villains with an extended blast, sooner or later they will give up, probably sooner. All villains weren't meant to be tough. There is a difference between making the PCs sweat and making them fail. It's the difference between a great game and a waste of time.

Just as villains shouldn't have identical motivations, they shouldn't have identical powers. If your players keep fighting the Legion of Battlesuits or the Ninja of the Week Club, they are going to get bored. Look at published villains for ideas. Some Gamemasters are very fond of borrowing from other game systems, or even the comics for powers. Go ahead — this can stimulate your imagination. But try to put a creative twist on it or else your players will figure out what you are doing. A word of warning: some GMs enjoy creating humorous (often silly) villains. There is nothing

wrong with having fun, just be aware that your players may not share your taste in humor. And don't make your comic relief villains tougher than your normal villains. Please. No one enjoys being humiliated by a joke.

Good villains are memorable, and they are memorable because the gamemaster uses them to play on the characters' emotions. When you are creating your villain, ask yourself what emotion you want the characters to feel once they find out what makes the villain tick. Fear? ("I better retreat and figure out a new plan — he could kill me!") Disgust? ("I can't believe anyone would do anything like that!") Hate? ("I am going to get him for what he did to those people — the kid gloves are off!") Respect? ("I don't agree with you, and I'll give my life to stop you, but at least you are trying to help the world, in your own warped way.") Pity? ("It's not the poor creature's fault that he's the way he is.") Do you want your players to like the villain? Is the villain redeemable; can he be turned into an ally if approached properly? Anything should be possible. How about "heroes" who are very good at manipulating public opinion, but are actually scum? The best role-gaming sessions are those in which the players get emotionally involved; the best way to get that involvement is to create villains who will create the desired reaction.

An easy way to get that reaction is to use a nemesis, an arch-foe designed specifically to fight a single character, and a single character alone. The nemesis may be sympathetic ("there but for the grace of God go I"), or represent the exact opposite of the character. The nemesis can have powers that are similar to the hero (brick vs. brick), or the exact opposite (cold projector vs. flame user). The nemesis might be a relative of the character ("I never knew I had an evil twin sister!"), or someone closely tied to the hero's origin. When the nemesis appears in a scenario you immediately stimulate that character's interest. When the nemesis appears, the character should think: "All of a sudden things have gotten **personal!**"

Combat is a staple of *Champions*; the threat of combat should be in nearly every scenario. But there is nothing more boring than a scenario which put the villains on one side and the heroes on the other as quickly as possible and has them duke it out. Tell stories. Look at the comics. Every single page isn't a fight scene.

Creating villains can be a lot of fun. Have fun, that's what this game is all about. Just don't forget about the stories; when you start telling them, you'll find yourself participating in one of mankind's oldest and most enjoyable activities.

