

A Quick Guide to Creating Memorable Non-Player Characters

by
Rich Staats, 1999

Gregory bit his tongue, and the blood joined the rain pattering down on his matted hair. The streams trickled annoyingly down his chin as he watched his comrades disappear in a ball of flame. Amazingly, several of the group emerged alive from the conflagration. Gregory ran forward with healing salves and a strong sword arm to defend his comrades while they recovered from the ill placed fireball. Gregory identified the Seldari priestess and headed that way.

"Best to heal the healer" thought Gregory. "How did I get myself paired up with this group of miscreants?" he mused. "I should have known something was wrong when they hired me on to help assault Borgbad keep. What was I thinking of?" Gregory asked himself aloud. He was almost to the party now and had to step carefully over the charred, uprooted brush and small trees. A filmy grime covered everything, and the smell of freshly burned pine was almost overpowering. Gregory's eyes smarted as tears brimmed around them.

As he bent over Rose, the priestess, Gregory thought "well, I always was a sucker for a pretty face!"

The goal of the GameMaster (GM) is to create a pleasant role-playing environment for both himself and the players which allows the players to suspend disbelief. The GM has several means of bringing his or her world "to life" for the Player Characters (PCs). Some of these include: event and place descriptions, handouts, sound effects, visual aides, etc., but from a role-playing standpoint, none of the other methods beat well done NPCs. In our example above, Gregory was more than a nameless, cardboard linkboy. He had motivations all his own, and when the players thought of Gregory, they could imagine his appearance, views and desires. The first issue in an article on creating memorable NPCs is the question of why worry about NPCs at all? Although it is possible to construct entire scenarios without including NPCs (most notably those involving parties struggling against the ravages of nature), scenarios will generally involve NPCs in pivotal roles.

NPCs perform many functions for the GM. They provide local color for the PCs and highlight unique aspects of the GM's world. NPCs can provide the party with valuable clues or sources of information. NPCs may be sources of skills that the party desperately needs to complete a mission or adventure. NPCs give the GM chances to introduce emotions or create atmosphere. Well constructed or memorable NPCs provide motivation, and they can offer plotoooks for an entire campaign. Perhaps most important NPCs give the GM the chance to role-play. So, how does one go about making memorable NPCs?

This article will focus on seven characteristics of effective and enjoyable NPCs. We will begin by describing these characteristics and explore each of them in more detail. Then, we will give practical examples of how to use these concepts illustrating them using NPCs from the author's campaign.

The key to effective NPCs is **VAMPIRE**: **V**aried, **A**ffect, **M**ultifaceted, **P**oint out, **I**ntersect, **R**easonable, and **E**xist. We will explore each of these concepts in the paragraphs which follow.

The first letter in **VAMPIRE** is "**V**", and this stands for **varied**. NPCs should be varied and clearly identifiable. If all characters in a GM's world look alike then the NPCs will become an indistinct blur in the player's minds. Variations can run the gamut from physical distinctions such as hair color and clothing to nuances of personality and interests. For example, the baroness is a magnificent woman. She stands a good two meters and has red hair like the fiery furnaces of hell!

Try an assortment of differences between NPCs. Clothing is an easy way to differentiate NPCs, but if it is used to the exclusion of other methods, it will wear thin. (Pun intended!) ;-) Interesting voices or speech patterns are nice touches too, but the most memorable NPCs have unique personalities.

Something else to avoid is over differentiation. This is the "over the top" syndrome. If every NPC is bizarre, soon that becomes the norm. Let the common NPCs be varied, but at a less ostentatious level than the main NPCs. Well crafted NPCs have motivations for their actions. NPCs are meant to be living parts of your world and not art displays. This leads us to the next major attribute of the well done NPC.

The second letter in **VAMPIRE** is "**A**", and this stands for **affect**. No matter how differentiated your NPCs are, the NPCs will soon become nothing but interesting landmarks unless the party feels it is able to affect the NPC. The PCs should be able to take actions which allow or inhibit the NPCs from accomplishing their goals. There must be reasons for the players to want to interact with the NPCs. Note, this is not the same as having the NPCs be able to affect the PCs! It is all fine and well that the wizard can turn the party into a herd of toads, but it is far better if the PCs have discovered some secret weakness of the wizard's that allows them to turn the table.

The key point is that the party must feel as though it can affect the NPC; it does not have to be the case at the time of the scenario. For example, the party will definitely feel that it can affect an NPC if it has the means at hand to do

so, but it is only slightly less satisfying to have some means of research or an ally who offers this same potential. (Being fair as a GM builds credibility. If the GM has shown that the party can influence events in the campaign in the past, the party will be more likely to accept more deterministic situations in the short run.)

As the party researches or spends more time with the well crafted NPC, the PCs will want to learn more things about the ally or adversary. Like an onion, the more the party peels back from the memorable NPC, the more there is to learn about him or her. This brings us to the next key aspect of NPCs.

The third letter in VAMPIRE is "**M**", and this stands for **multifaceted**. The human mind is designed to be constantly learning. If every NPC is only paper thin then soon the campaign will carry as much interest as tying one's shoe.

We all have interests outside of our work and family, and the well crafted NPC does too. Often, these take the form of hobbies. Even the vilest villain can have some enlightened area of interest. Is the Blood Duchess an avid gardener? Perhaps the Black Prince is an authority on the history of candy.

A multifaceted NPC can have a hidden weakness or secret. Does the village healer have an affair going on with the village blacksmith? Is the groomsman at the manor clandestinely nursing a drug addiction?

A word of caution is appropriate here. No matter what you choose as the secondary and tertiary motivations for the NPC, these should highlight something you are comfortable with. The GM must feel at ease with the subject matter in his or her campaign.

It is best if an NPC can highlight a key aspect of your gaming world which you wish to emphasize or an aspect of the campaign you enjoy. This brings us to the next letter.

The fourth letter in VAMPIRE is "**P**", and this stands for **point out**. One technique of making an NPC come alive for the party is to have that NPC associated with a key aspect of the campaign or cosmos. For example, the party might always remember Snee Bob the Magnificent, because he was a nose mage. The NPC who points out a unique aspect of the gaming world accomplishes two ends. First, the NPC is well on the road to becoming a truly memorable character, and second, the NPC provides the party with an entry point for exploring an interesting and potentially rewarding aspect of the campaign.

The fifth letter in VAMPIRE is "**I**", and this stands for **intersect**. The interests of the NPC should intersect with those of the party in either a competitive or a cooperative sense. If the NPC was a member of a race of subterranean creatures who had never any cause to meet or interact with the PCs, it would be a dull addition to the world indeed. Clearly, the more the goals an NPC and the PCs have which intersect, the more interested the party will be in that NPC. Goals can intersect in a variety of ways. If the PCs have some type of affect on the NPC, there is a natural intersection taking place through this influence. Perhaps the PCs and the NPCs are competing groups attempting to slay the same dragon, catch the same chicken or destroy the same cosmos. The ruler of the land and the party may both have an interest in maintaining peace and order in a region. Conversely, the party and a lawless band both may have an interest in caravans in the region; the party is interested in guarding the caravan, and the band is interested in stealing the goods from the caravan.

We will speak more of combining the various aspects of a memorable NPC below, but in general, the more of the aspects which an NPC embodies, the better received and more noteworthy the NPC will be. This is especially true with the intersection aspect. If the reason for the intersection is interesting, complex and originally hidden from the PCs, it will make for a much more memorable NPC.

There must be some explanation of why the PCs and the NPCs have an area of mutual interest. It must flow naturally from the campaign world and the gaming milieu. This brings us to the next letter.

The sixth letter in VAMPIRE is "**R**", and this stands for **reasonable**. The NPCs actions and motivations must make sense in the context of the world. NPCs should not randomly change their motivations or goals. There should be root causes. The goals that an NPC has should be related to past experiences and the capabilities of the NPC.

There are times when reasonableness is not the rule of the day. In the game TOON(tm), reasonableness is the not the main watchword during a session. Likewise, an NPC might be truly insane and act in an apparently random manner. However, in a serious milieu, it will not be well received if all of the NPCs act with apparently ad hoc motivations. Help the players suspend disbelief. Let the players see some of the rationale behind NPC actions or views. It will go a long way toward player happiness and their interest in your NPCs.

The last letter in VAMPIRE is "**E**", and this stands for **exist**. The interesting NPC has a life outside of the time the party sits around the gaming table. The daring NPC who has the potential to accomplish the mission and beat the party to the prize makes for a more challenging and interesting character than the NPC who springs to life only when the party comes through the swinging door.

The seven aspects of memorable NPCs work together in a synergistic way. The NPC with an existence outside of the gaming sessions does so because of his multifaceted nature and deep seated motivations. He is different from the other NPCs the party has met and has unique goals, and the party cares about this NPC because his goals intersect those of the party. If the party takes no action, the NPC will prevail.

With all these exciting aspects, does it mean that every town drunk and guardsman should require three to four hours to construct? The simple answer is certainly not! Time is a precious commodity, and no GM can afford to lavish that level of attention on every NPC.

NPCs come in two varieties, the incidental and the deliberate. Incidental NPCs include such noteworthies as the leper at the entrance to the village and the young punks throwing horse apples at the party as they ride into the sunset. Deliberate NPCs are those who will play major roles in one or more sessions. Typically, deliberate NPCs are more carefully crafted. A deliberate NPC might embody four or more of the aspects of a memorable character while an incidental NPC might have only one or two.

The clever GM uses scenario preparation time to the best advantage. The GM spends the majority of the preparation time on those NPCs and aspects of the game which will bring the players the most pleasure and simultaneously promote the plotline. This is not to say that incidental NPCs are haphazard or should be poorly played. Frequently, in my own campaign, an incidental NPC would become a recurrent feature or deliberate NPC through coincidence or unforeseen circumstance.

A small anecdote from my long running RuneQuest campaign will illustrate this point and demonstrate how VAMPIRE made this particular NPC a memorable character. This tale revolves around an NPC named Imal from the old Judges Guild Supplement called The Duchy of Lei Tabor. The party had finished off the "Rainbow Mounds" (a famous Chaosium starter setting) the previous session. During their searchings of the Mounds, the party members discovered an ancient parchment. They elected to follow the hints on the yellowing manuscript to an undead warren. After a ghastly melee, the battered party discovered the moldering treasures of the wights. Most of it was old and useless (to anyone except a wight anyway), but in the furthest recesses of the catacombs, the party found some scattered gems and a bag of gold-silvery coins. The nearest major settlement was Lei Tabor, and the party headed back to rest, recoup and spend their hard earned gains.

After checking out the inns in town, the party finally settled on staying at Imal's Inn. The party was feeling quite generous. The typical peasant earned about two coppers a month and a gold piece was worth 200 coppers. Now, lodging at Imal's was pretty expensive, about one silver per night, but the party was looking at setting up some type of base of operations. The party members had elected to make Imal's Inn that home away from home. The party reckoned that by giving Imal 150 of those new found gold pieces (each gold piece being worth 20 silvers) that they would be able to come and go as they wanted for some time to come at Imal's place.

When the party gave Imal the coins, his eyes nearly fell out of his head. Imal asked the party repeatedly if they really meant for him to have this many of the coins. Thinking Imal to be a simple bumpkin, the party reassured him of their generosity. The party did make it clear that the members expected to be housed at his inn for an indefinite period. Imal replied that the party was free to stay in this inn or any other inn he might own with meals included for as long as they lived. The party was puzzled by this, but they attributed this generous behavior to the babblings of an old coot.

The truth became obvious to the party in small bits. Some time later the group came across another Imal's Inn in a different town. The party thought this was a strange happenstance, but a few seasons later, the party pulled into the holy city of Resserlin to find a grand opening of an Imal's Inn. This was too much of a coincidence. The dusty, saddle sore party members made their way to the front of the crowd.

Imagine the party members' surprise when they spied Imal propped in front of the newly dedicated inn! Imal had done well for himself; he was wearing silks, jewels and finery. Later that same day over many mugs of ale, plates of mutton and fresh loaves of bread (there were elves in the group), Imal explained to the dumbfounded party members what had happened. The coins the party had handed Imal were very rare, semi-magical entities known as Krinn. The Krinn were minted millennia in the past and were nearly indestructible. Best of all, each was worth nearly 10,000 silvers apiece. Like any good Issaries (trader), Imal parlayed his good fortune into an excellent investment, a chain of inns.

Imal became a recurring NPC in the campaign. Imal continued to expand his lodging empire ("when you want the best, stay at Imal's"), and afterwhile, nearly anywhere the party went, they had a free place to stay and warm meals to eat. Naturally, the party's connection with Imal generated many adventures.

We will use the elements of VAMPIRE to analyze what made Imal such a memorable NPC. Imal represented variety. Imal was a famous inn keeper, not a king or hero. Imal liked silk and garnets, and he tried to use these as often as he could in his wardrobe. Imal was also very fond of goat cheese, and whenever the party wanted to get on Imal's good side, they tried to ply Imal with fine cheese.

The party was able to affect Imal. The party gave Imal the nest egg that he used to found his lodging empire, and Imal felt he owed a debt to the party members. Thus, even after Imal became rich and famous, the party still had some reasonable leverage (which the party never abused) over Imal.

Imal represented a multifaceted character. The story of Imal's success came to the party in bits over time rather than all at once. The party went on to find out more about Imal's past such as his aging mother and his half witted sister whom the party eventually had to rescue. Again, the secrets were revealed in small bits so that the excitement and sense of mystery was preserved. The story of Imal and the Krinn pointed out some important aspects of the campaign world to the party members. The world was expansive, and commerce and communication spanned a far greater area than the party at first believed. Also, the world's occupants were industrious. They did not just "hang out" waiting for the party members to arrive and make their lives meaningful. The world had hosted many ancient and mystical civilizations, and

occasionally the lucky or unfortunate (depending on circumstances) party would run across relics from these long buried societies. Most important, the party learned that they had allies in the world, and, as long as they treated characters reasonably, most NPCs would be supportive in kind.

Imal and the party had intersecting interests. The party was one of the best advertising gimmicks Imal had going (especially as the party became more famous -- Imal was actually invited to the coronation of King Phineas). Likewise, the party was given needed rest and sustenance on more than one occasion.

Imal certainly had reasonable motivations. As a merchant/inn keeper, Imal was interested in his bottom line which profited through his actions. Imal also revealed other sensible motivations during the course of the campaign such as his devotion to his mother or concern for his old friends, the party members.

Imal existed outside of the party member's immediate influence. Whilst the party fought orcs and solved ancient riddles, Imal lived in the present, strengthening his mercantile interests and expanding his range of influence. One of the players once remarked that of all the accomplishments of his characters, the one he thought was the most interesting and would be the longest lasting was the chain of inns his actions allowed Imal to form.

The last two NPCs we will examine in this article were extremely memorable for the playing group which encountered them. Halwulf was a villain who eventually became an ally of the party, and Eloise was a hated adversary who was not stopped even in death.

The party was trying to stop an evil influence which pervaded a portion of the Kingdom of Eldenvaan. The group had determined through a combination of hard work and good, old fashioned PC luck that the culprit was Skuggalla, a priest serving the gods of evil. As the party maneuvered ever closer to the final confrontation at Skuggalla's base of operations, they came across Skuggalla's henchmen, Eloise and Halwulf.

The party members first met Eloise as one of their own henchmen. The group was seeking help for a mission to explore some old ruins and discover what had happened to the inhabitants. Eloise volunteered as soon as the announcements became public. At first the party was enamored with Eloise, but as the mission progressed, some party members overheard Eloise invoking the names of certain outré and dire demons in her incantations. At the critical moment in the adventure, Eloise struck and took out several of the other henchmen and severely wounded a PC. Fortunately, the party was able to strike back, and the PCs drove Eloise off. The party never personally hated an NPC more than it hated Eloise.

The party's first interaction with Halwulf and Eloise together was during an adventure unrelated to Skuggalla. The party was attempting to rescue one of the local noble's sons who had been taken prisoner by an orcish tribe. The party had defeated the first line of the orcs' defenses, but the party's magics and energy were nearly spent. As the party fell back in good order, they were ambushed by Halwulf and Eloise.

The two NPCs offered extremely contrasting combat styles. Whereas Eloise went in for the maximum pain and carnage, Halwulf apparently fought with honor and dignity. As Eloise terrorized the fallen with shades and foul spirits, Halwulf respected those who had grievous wounds or were unarmed. Eloise killed several of the party's henchmen and maimed a PC before the party was able to rally and drove the two away.

As the party grew nearer and nearer to its goal of rooting out Skuggalla's evil, the group encountered Eloise and Halwulf more and more often. Although Halwulf and Eloise frequently appeared as a team, they occasionally discovered Halwulf and Eloise as individuals.

Eloise served Skuggalla's evil gods more directly than the dark priest. She had promised her soul to a demon lord, and as a witch, Eloise had access to quite an array of offensive capabilities. Eloise was cruel beyond compare, and she rarely went for a quick kill. Eloise would rather capture a hostage and "question" a victim over an extended period.

Halwulf was quite different from Eloise. As mentioned, Halwulf respected the fallen, and he only seemed to use the minimum of force required to achieve his goal. Halwulf frequently disarmed rather than killed foes. Although Halwulf was a terrible opponent in combat, the party came to respect rather than revile him.

The turning points for the party with respect to both of these NPCs came at about the same time. During a scouting mission, the party made two important discoveries. The party found out that Halwulf served Skuggalla largely because Skuggalla held Halwulf's sister captive. The party also ascertained that Eloise drew much of her strength from her familiar.

During the final battle with Skuggalla, the party was able to neutralize Eloise and convert Halwulf to its side using information the PCs had gained over time.

We will now use the elements of VAMPIRE to analyze why Eloise and Halwulf were such memorable characters for the players. Eloise and Halwulf were both varied. Halwulf favored purple clothing as well as having a basically honorable disposition. Eloise spoke with a guttural quality and always dressed in shabby clothing.

The party was able to affect both Eloise and Halwulf. In the case of Eloise, once the party figured out she was a witch, they were able to counteract some of her more vile magics. Also, the party capitalized on Eloise's reliance on her familiar to thwart Eloise in her last mortal confrontation with the group. The party successfully used its knowledge of Halwulf's sister to bring him to party's side in the fight against Skuggalla.

Halwulf and Eloise were both multifaceted. Details about these NPCs were revealed little by little over time in a teasing, anticipatory way. It was not initially clear Eloise was a witch, and even when the party figure this out, it took

some time to determine ways to counteract her magics. Halwulf's family situation and his honorable nature were not obvious at first glance. Most important, it was a challenge for the party to learn more information about the two.

Both Eloise and Halwulf pointed out interesting aspects of the gaming world. Eloise indicated there were folks in the world who were in league with the dark forces; still, the forces could be defeated through the application of the proper knowledge and persistence. Halwulf showed that not all seemingly evil NPCs were driven by the desire to see malign forces triumph, and even essentially good folks can succumb to temptation when presented with a sufficiently desperate set of circumstances.

The interests of the party intersected with Halwulf's and Eloise's interests. For various and sundry reasons, Halwulf and Eloise served Skuggalla. The party wished to see Skuggalla destroyed. These goals not only intersected, they also conflicted. For dynamic NPCs goals sometimes change. In the end Halwulf also had a pressing desire to see Skuggalla fail.

Halwulf and Eloise had reasonable motivations and existed outside the context of the PCs immediate actions. The party knew that if they did nothing, Skuggalla would prevail, and Eloise and Halwulf were constantly taking action. Just because the deeds were out of sight of the PCs at the moment did not make the consequences of those actions any less real for the party. Halwulf had a complex hierarchy of reasons for his actions. One of the foremost was love for his sister, an entirely understandable and laudable emotion. Likewise, the party understood Eloise. Frequently conversations revolving around these NPCs would start off with words like "how would Eloise react to this plan? Let's think about that."

Try using VAMPIRE in your own campaign. Better yet, try it, and let me know how it works by dropping me an e-mail at rstaats@lmi.org.