



CHAOS AT THE TABLE: BRINGING PROBLEM PLAYERS BACK TO SIGMAR

By Rae Russell



We have all lived with them at our own table or someone else's. Your group might include the Egomaniac, who thinks that every single second of the game should revolve around his character. Or perhaps your evening sessions are plagued by bouts of struggle with the Questbuster, who gets his gaming pleasure from pointing out the tiniest inconsistencies in your plot. Whatever form they may take, problem players can be like the insidious presence of Chaos: subtle at first, slowly consuming pure players until the campaign ends up in a state of disrepair, then deteriorating so fast that your campaign is annihilated before you know what hit you. Here are a few ideas about how a GM can put a stop to problems, without donning his Witch Hunter hat and burning his entire group at the stake.

IDENTIFYING PROBLEM BEHAVIOR

To fix a problem, you must have a clear and nuanced understanding of it. No matter how irritated you might be, take a deep breath and give yourself one more session to observe the problem carefully. (If the problem is about to tear your group apart, you can skip to the next step.) If possible, take some notes behind your GM screen about moments that disrupt the game. Write a bug report: What were you doing at the time the behavior occurred? How did it affect the

other players at the table? What did it do to the flow, pace, or execution of the game?

After the session, go back and think about what you would have liked to see instead.

Example:

Alec's screwing around at the start of adventures drives me crazy. During this session, the NPC hook, a lame boy who walks with a crutch, begs for the party's help. Alec's character sniffs out the hook, kicks the crutch out from underneath him, and makes fun of him so harshly that it no longer makes sense for the boy to ask the party for help. The other players get annoyed but do not know how to stop him, and we end up wasting time as I scramble to create another much less interesting hook character. When confronted, Alec says he is 'just playing his character, who is a jerk like that.' I'd like to see him play his character in ways that forward the storyline rather than wreck it. He really only does this when hooked for an adventure, though, so I guess that's something that can be said for him.

Now think a bit about what might cause this behavior. Focus on the player's behavior at your table. For the example above, one might realize the following:

Now that I think about it, Alec dislikes it when the GM takes the spotlight for more than a few seconds; he gets antsy during scene changes and hates extended negotiations with NPCs. Maybe hooks just take too much spotlight away from the PCs for his taste?

Use the same techniques for meta-game problems, as well. At what points in the game does that one player usually start checking his iPhone? When does the usually silent player finally pipe up and start contributing? What does the rules-lawyer try to achieve when he bargains with you? Knowing the answers to these questions gives you a bargaining chip; perhaps you can give the player what he needs in a constructive way.





Once you have finished, come up with a quick list of three things: the behavior you dislike, the behavior you want instead, and the reason why the existing behavior is counterproductive to the game. Keep your descriptions of these behaviors short (a few words each,) but note specific examples of each. You will need these as you move forward.

TAKING ACTION

You can take action in several different ways. I recommend one of the first two options below if you have a single disruptive player, but you may find the teaching section of the article more useful if all of your players are gravitating towards an undesirable behavior. As you plan, refer back to the list you created in Step One.

TAKING ACTION I: TALK TO ME

If you have a single player causing a rather specific problem, you may want to start by talking to him. (A radical idea!) I prefer to do this outside the scope of a particular gaming session so that it does not make the other players uncomfortable or invite their direct involvement. I also like to offer the player something special for his trouble; I might use my meeting with him to talk about the behavior, but also to add a plot twist to his personal character background, which will reduce the sting of the conversation we will have.

In your conversation, stay calm. Talk about your the behavior rather than the player personally. Use the I-perspective, and give specific examples from the game. Instead of turning the conversation into GM vs. player, talk about the dynamics in your group of players.

Example Nay:

When you screw with my NPCs, it really pisses me off and wastes a lot of time.

Example Yea:

When your character ticks off my hook NPCs, it keeps the others from sharing in the investigation piece that

often starts an adventure. And when your character runs the NPC off, we waste valuable playing time as I make a new NPC.

After you identify the behavior, define the behavior you would like to see, and give the player credit for the things he does well.

Example Nay:

So cut it out, or you're out of the game.

Example Yea:

I like how you're taking the opportunity to play your curmudgeonly PC, but for fairness's sake, I'd like to see everyone get equal say in whether or not the party takes a mission or interacts with a major NPC at the start of the adventure. Are there other ways I can help you play your character? Are there NPCs from your past that might give you the RP opportunities you want?

Now you have shifted the terms of the conversation from something negative and destructive to something positive and constructive. The plot twist from your player's character background can help give that player time to do the things he enjoys. In this case, the player likes to be mean; give him someone specific to torment, so he leaves your hook NPCs alone!

You might meet a loot-hound's needs by giving him a limited amount of cash to spend in a huge city with a whole host of merchants, or you might encourage an inactive player by making him the center of a key plotline. Be creative, and encourage a constructive version of a negative behavior.

If your player's problems are about meta-game issues, talking to him directly usually works best. You will be hard-pressed to solve the issues of a rules-lawyer or a nitpicker in-game, but redirecting his impulse to pay attention to the tiny details into something positive like taking notes or drawing maps may help keep you both sane.





TAKING ACTION II: CRIME AND PUNISHMENT

Sometimes, though, you will have a player who will not respond to a rational plea or whose poor behavior is so ingrained that he cannot change it easily. One option can be to penalize the player for the behavior until he stops. Most GMs tend to use this quick and elegant solution. However, punishment can accidentally penalize good players too, so use it with caution. Luckily, WFRP3e puts an extensive system of in-game punishment at your fingertips that can target specific types of undesirable play.

Ideally, the penalty will make the offending player's life hard enough that he stops, but not so hard that you have broken your own game. You might, for instance, be tempted to have him make an enemy of the main hook NPC for the scenario, but if that means that the party as a whole cannot progress through the storyline, you have inadvertently punished all of the players for one player's behavior. Assigning individual punishments like corruption points or conditions will make it clear which player and which behavior you find problematic, but a stubborn or inept player may end up with a character-breaking stack of mutations from his corruption points at the end of a few sessions.

POSSIBLE PUNISHMENTS

- Withholding fortune points (could solve any disruptive behavior).
- Giving corruption points (good for pointlessly immoral behavior, whether in keeping with the PC's original concept or not).
- Assigning negative conditions (good for the excessive in-game drinker or drug user who uses addiction as an excuse for questionable RP or actions).
- Allowing local in-game authorities to get involved (good for those who torture the little folk or engage in destruction or property; also good for those who actively snub nobles).
- Giving the character a "wanted" status (good for those who threaten nobles, town authorities, the military, or the town guard or for those who generally behave outrageously).
- Having the character make a lifelong enemy or enemies (good for a character who loses his cool in a particular scene or acts poorly around a particular NPC, or good if you have an NPC who represents part of a group the character has been hounding).
- Making the character lose an important ally.
- Letting the forces of Chaos take notice of the character (excellent for an immoral character or for a character whose role-play is too self-righteously good for your tastes).

If the player role-plays in a way that disrupts the narrative, punishment within the game world (like authorities or a Chaos cult taking notice) may allow you to add an interesting plot twist to your game, but you might need to rewrite a scenario accordingly. Do not hesitate to do this, as it can allow the individual character a chance to change not only his play style but his character history; however, make it very hard on him and very rewarding for the other players, too—otherwise, you may have your hands full of bad behavior so that everyone can get his own scenario rewrite!

If you make a simple rules change along the lines of "anyone who tortures animals or NPCs from here on out will get corruption points," be sure you are up front with your players about the change, especially if the behavior has happened before and you have not punished





it. Think about the limits of those rules: What happens if a major NPC asks them to engage in the behavior? Will that be a fun moral conundrum or a game-stopping problem? Think, too, about the ultimate outcome if the players do not change the behavior, and be sure you explain it to your players: "If you end up taking many corruption points and getting a mutation, here are some of the things you can look forward to: constant illness, having to hide your mutation from the authorities, having a connection to a Chaos god, and so on."

Example Nay:

Oh, by the way, every time you do this now, you're going to get a corruption point. Here's your first.

Example Yea:

Okay, we're going to change things a bit this session; from here on out, you'll get corruption points if you end up behaving in extremely violent or torturous ways towards innocent NPCs or NPC animals. This new rule gives us the opportunity to get some neat complications and mutations on the table that will make the storyline more exciting. I've also noticed that some of you get so violent so often that it stalls the storyline because you've killed or alienated key NPCs. I don't want to prevent you from playing your character concepts, but I do want those choices to have consequences. Let's try corruption points out this session, and if they don't work, we can revisit them later.

TEACHING OLD PLAYERS NEW TRICKS

Sometimes, a style of play that does not fit the WFRP universe or the scenario at hand can become a problem. Players who treat WFRP as though it were D&D, for instance, may constantly look for the next big monster, hurl magic around, or ask every noble for an exorbitant payment. Mindsets quickly become a whole-party problem, and while the party with the wrong mindset may not exactly play against the rules, they often miss the opportunity to explore the game as fully as possible.

PARTY BEHAVIORS YOU MIGHT WANT TO UN-TEACH:

- Rushing headlong into every fight without thinking tactically, counting solely on firepower to get them through.
- Paralysis due to analyzing the tactics of the upcoming fight, spending hours planning their approach instead of just attacking.
- Refusing to participate in politics and intrigue.
- Constantly hurling around too much magic.
- Players so wrapped up in the mechanics of the game that they forget to role-play (or vice versa.)
- A party so focused on individual character goals that they miss the overarching mission (or vice versa.)

None of these examples represents inherently bad or illegal play styles *per se*; the party just focuses too much on a single mode of playing WFRP and misses out on the complexity that makes Warhammer shine. Often, single-style play stems from players who have extensive experience with another system that emphasizes that style. While you would not want to punish your players for a lopsided play style, particularly if they enjoy the game as it is, you might want to show them how to engage in a different style of play. You might explain to your players that you want to give them more tools to use in their RPG toolboxes.

Helping your players expand their horizons takes a bit of time and ingenuity on the GM's part, but it can be well worth it when your game becomes more complex and interesting. Before you undertake any of the following techniques, have an honest discussion with your party about what you intend to do and why. Explaining that you really want them to think about how to fight tactically before running a tactical fight scenario, for instance, will not only allow them to practice the new skill, but will also prime them to think about what makes that new way of playing enjoyable (or to think about why they avoid it!)



You might also point out ignored skills that they can now use in this new 'mode.' Sometimes players do not know how to use skills they took at creation, so those skills sit unused on their character sheets for months. Showing your players how to use those skills can open up a whole new set of possibilities for them.

TEACHING BY MEANS OF A SCENARIO THAT HIGHLIGHTS A PLAY STYLE

Perhaps the quickest way to get players to think in new ways is to run a scenario that forces them to do so. If you have a party that focuses on fighting rather than on investigation, find a scenario that forces them to investigate. If you want them to think about sneaking rather than fighting head-on, select a scenario that forces them to use other modes of confrontation. If they wait to be given orders by an NPC, choose an open-ended or sandbox-style scenario that requires them to figure out a plan of attack on their own.

Whatever you do, though, do not expect them to know how to engage in a style of play that is not their own. Help them by suggesting tactics and skills, and remember to make the experience rewarding so they continue to use the new play style in the future. Sneaking around should feel just as intense and require as many exciting critical rolls as a fight. Social combat should carry hefty penalties for failure. Playing their individual characters well should help them complete the scenario goals. And remember to point out what they do well; often, players who are new to a play style think only in terms of successes and failures. If they think of something clever, point it out—even if their die roll ultimately fails.

You need not rewrite or run an entire scenario to make this work. You can simply change a single pivotal fight or include an additional social combat in an existing scenario.

Players might write up short-term and long-term goals for their characters (including trade and craft goals,) and the GM could then add NPCs to the towns, boats,

SCENARIOS THAT TEACH NEW PLAY STYLES:

These scenarios highlight particular types of tactics, skills, and modes of play that might be useful for helping your players think differently:

With a Little Help from My Friend

(<http://tinyurl.com/c5jqk3p>)

Early in this scenario, PCs must leave their weapons behind. The scenario highlights observation, sneaking, and interrogation instead of fighting.

The Edge of Night

(Available from Fantasy Flight)

This sandbox-style adventure encourages players to investigate the problems in the city and create their own path based on their findings instead of relying on NPCs to point them in the right direction. It also encourages use of the whole range of WFRP rules.

Carnival of Darkness

(Included in this issue of Liber Fanatica)

This wonderfully balanced scenario requires the party to investigate, negotiate, and fight well. If you want to emphasize investigation or social skills, one of the Carnival NPCs could easily fit into a particular PC's personal background or into the group's overarching campaign mission. If you would like to have the party practice tactical thinking, you can emphasize the terrain and layout of space in the final battle.

Master of Shadows, Part Two

(Included in this volume of Liber Fanatica)

If the players need to think about individual character



motivations, this scenario might prove ideal, since characters move to different locales and interact with a cross-section of society.

The Prisoner

(<http://tinyurl.com/cg2moke>)

This highly-customizable one-sheet campaign can be tweaked to teach players to look before they leap; it makes for an excellent choice if your party tends to trust too easily, and you can add investigation and social combat as needed. Good, too, for reminding a magic-heavy party of the dangers of showing off their powers!



and carriages who could help them meet their goals.

Strategic use of just the right scenario can really help players see the parts of the system they have missed. Read descriptions of existing and fan-made material to get a sense of scenarios available to you; you may not have any intention of running a particular piece right now, but a mental catalogue can come in handy if you want to show your players a particular technique later on.

TEACHING BY CREATING A ONE-OFF

Sometimes, players box themselves in because they associate their PCs with a particular style of play. Perhaps you have a party that has only taken combat-heavy skills, and you would like to teach them to value social skills—but you cannot do it because they have not taken any! Perhaps they sneak through every fight because they have few combat skills, or perhaps they fail to RP their individual characters as they have written them because they focus too much on getting the “right”

answer to the scenario storyline. Consider running a single-shot, one-day adventure with premade PCs whose skills highlight the types of play you would like to encourage. One-offs allow players to try out new techniques in a scenario that will not have long-term consequences, which can make them braver about moving out of their established playing patterns.

One-offs can also get passive players more involved. You can assign a passive player a key mission or leadership position to give him the chance to take control, or you might ask him about what he would

THINGS TO CONSIDER BEFORE WRITING A ONE-OFF:

- What skills do I want to give my premade characters that my characters tend to ignore? Do I want them to think about the value of social skills? Or fighting? Will I need to teach or retrain any basic mechanics for them to use these skills effectively?
- What new play style do I want them to learn? How can I create a scene that allows them to use this style productively? Design your scene with the characters in mind; you might create physically weak premade PCs and very talented fighting NPCs to encourage the players to sneak.
- Is there any lore that I can work into this one-off that might be useful to the main characters? Can the scenario be a prologue to something happening in the main game? Can I give history about allies, enemies, or a key location?
- If your party has a favorite (or hated!) NPC, could you bring him back at a different time in his life or under different circumstances? Develop your storyline so the one-off does not feel like such a departure from the main mission.
- Do the PCs' main characters get rewards for this mission? If a particular player uses a new skill very well, you might bend the advancement rules in your main game and give the skill to his main character; that encourages him to transfer his new play style to the existing game.



like to do that he has not had the chance to do in the main mission.

If you are not keen on taking time out of your play schedule to do a one-off, you can also accomplish the same thing by doing a “cut scene” in which the players briefly take on the roles of NPCs. Not only does a cut scene allow them to try out new play styles,

but it also lets players see the ongoing storyline from a new perspective.

TEACHING BY TAKING A CUE FROM OTHERS' (AND OTHER) GAMES

Ideally, a GM should watch others GM in order to improve his style. Attend conventions, visit friends'

ENHANCEMENTS FROM OTHER GAMES

- **Vampire's Prologues**—in these, players have a special session with the GM to role-play one or more crucial scenes in the character's background. Prologues encourage your players to think deeply about their character's psychology and life choices, and they give the GM a chance to establish strong emotional ties between a particular PC and important NPCs in his/her past. This helps players who do not know how to develop their character, and gives them a chance to work out how their PCs will react to challenges.

- **Mouse Guard's Player Turn**—at the end of a Mouse Guard session, the GM turns the reins over to the players and allows them to decide where the narrative will head. The Player Turn lets individual characters resolve issues that stem from their character backgrounds and may not impact the main storyline. Mouse Guard only allows a limited number of dice rolls, or “checks,” to be expended during the Player Turn; players earn these checks during the regular GM-centric adventure. See the Mouse Guard rules for details. Player Turns can train players who are too dependent on the GM or the NPCs for guidance, to think outside the box and set their own goals.

- **Burning Wheel's Beliefs, Instincts, and Goals**—players of Burning Wheel write Beliefs (the single guiding principle of the character), Goals (the main thing the character wants to accomplish right now), and Instincts (the thing that the player automatically does, no matter what) at the beginning of each game. Each player then shares with the other players. The act of writing makes players revisit their characters' motivations anew at the beginning of each session. A group check-in at the end of game allows each player to reflect on how well he has role-played his own goals over the course of a session. I have found these so helpful in encouraging

great RP that I will probably never run any RPG without using them in some fashion. Beliefs, Goals, and Instincts can help players think about their own characters, but the sharing of B/G/I also cements players as a team and allows them to appreciate each other's work at the table. The table chatter around what went well and was appreciated in a mission can also allow players who are not fitting in, to hear what the other players enjoy.

- **Pathfinder Society's Lodges**—we often see GMs on forums asking how to string together “official” Warhammer adventures, especially when they've mixed a few scenarios from v2 and a few from v3. Ideally, you would write your own involved overarching story, but not everyone has the time, especially if your gaming group plays several different RPGs at once. In Pathfinder, each scenario requires the party to complete tasks for the Pathfinder Society, but each individual PC completes side missions within those scenarios for his home faction. Adapt this for WFRP. Give your party an important contact in Altdorf for whom they work; you need not even flesh him out now, as they can discover more about him as they progress (and as you have time to write him!) Then, ask each character a bit about his background (or use info that came up in the Prologue, if you played one.) Choose a personal contact and have your PC do a few additional missions during each scenario for that contact. If you can get the personal and the main contact at odds with each other, so much the better! You will end up having the impetus for some great tension in-game, and every PC will get the spotlight at some point in each session. Finally, do not let the writing of all these NPCs overwhelm you; negotiate them with your PCs, and ask each PC to do a bit of writing about their contact if you get stuck without ideas.



FINAL THOUGHTS

games, or stop by your FLGS so you can see other GMs in action. A terrible GM can teach you a lot about what not to do, and a good GM for a game you do not like, may teach you what you most value about WFRP.

Listen to podcasts of play sessions as well, like Reckless Dice. Podcasts often play through official content, so you might be able to hear the pitfalls of running a particular scenario you mean to run in the future.

In truth, other systems manage some aspects of the game better than Warhammer does. Lift tidbits from other systems and bring them into your own game!

Sometimes, a player just will not fit in with your group, and you will have to part ways. In most cases however, problem behavior stems from a player's desire to experience the game in a way that does not mesh well with the GM's vision. Negotiating the differences between the player's and the GM's expectations can often be eye-opening for both, and the conversation may lead to a better game for everyone involved.

Unlike putting on your Witch Hunter hat and burning your Chaos-causing players, skillful negotiation keeps you on the right side of the law...and keeps you from having to explain how that pyre got in the living room.

