How to Make a Great Villain

Avalon Games

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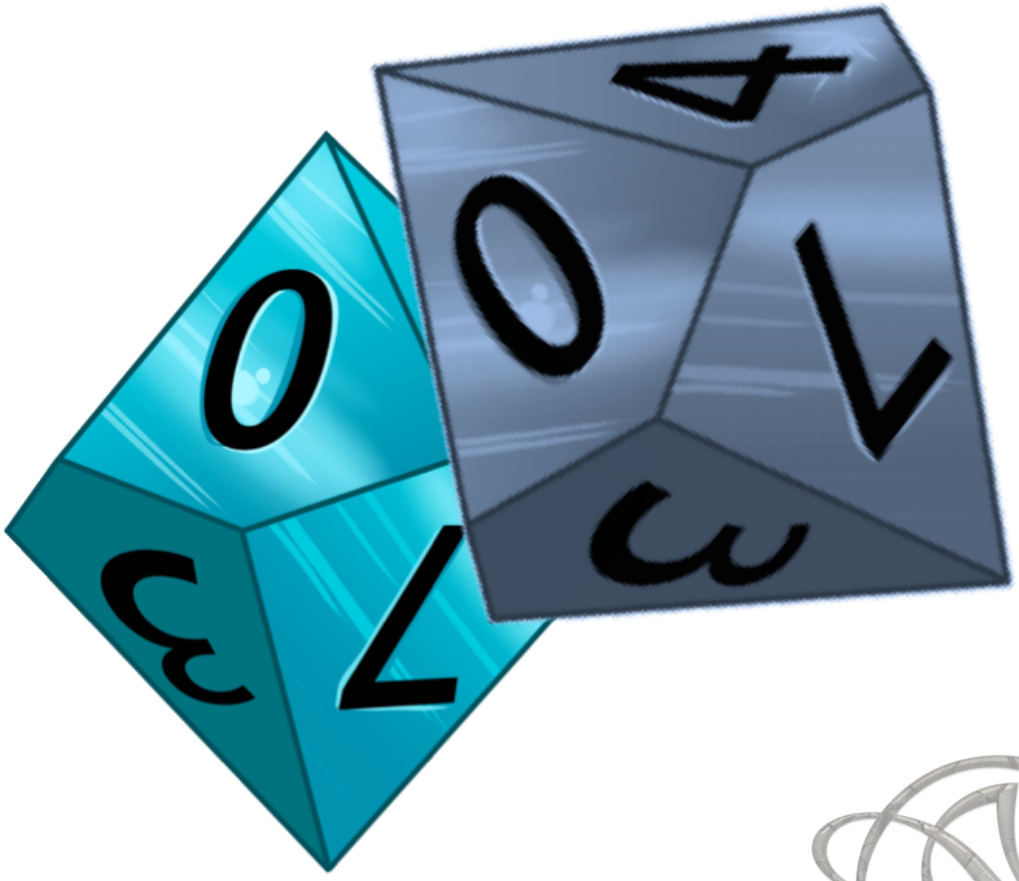

"He has roamed the dark streets for nights.

Before this investigation Detective Saunders had no idea about the depths of depravity that infested the city where he patrolled the streets. He knew about the drug dealers, the organised criminals and the other common low-lifes, but he had no idea about the cultists and the strange creatures they claimed to worship.

The first clues had lead him to occult bookshops and a series of brutal slayings. The next clues pulled him into a shadowy world, dark tunnels weaving between the utility shafts and the underground rail lines. Saunders had brought a handful of cultists up to the surface, to interrogate them and imprison them, but every cultist was released due to a lack of evidence.

He had begun to suspect that his true enemy might not be in the underground world at all, but someone in the heart of the police department. There were two options, and both seemed career suicide…he could take up the issue with internal affairs, or he could find the temple of the underground cult and destroy it once and for all.

Heavy breathing at the end of the corridor…the smell of sulphur…perhaps the cultists were worshipping something real after all."

Think about some of the iconic villains of the 20th century; Superman has Lex Luthor, Batman has the Joker, Gandalf has Saruman. Every larger than life hero needs a larger than life villain.

What is it about great villains that make great stories?

There are dozens of answers to this question, and this guide is designed to reveal some of them while leaving you room to explore the idea of villains in more depth.

One villain may be a person who drives the story from behind the scenes, but another villain might be a temporary menace on the path to larger things. One of the key things to remember when creating a great villain is that not every villain needs to be memorable or great, think of the law of averages, or story pacing. If every villain is just as intricate and detailed as the lasts, they will all tend to blur together into mediocrity, the story will slow to a snail's pace and most players will get bored. If you throw in a range of villains, some trivial, some substantial, and a few key villainous figures, then the important ones will start to stand out in the memories of the players and they will remain a significant aspect of the ongoing story.

This guide touches on the creation of general villains; the lackeys, minions and foot soldiers, but these are relatively easy to master. The guide focuses in more depth on the villainous characters inserted into a game to truly shape the story, and give meaning to the character's actions.

What is a Villain?

According to an online dictionary, a villain is:

1. a wicked or malevolent person
2. (in a novel, play, film, etc) the main evil character and antagonist to the hero
3. *jocular often* a mischievous person; rogue

There are more definitions than these, but while these three definitions may seem very broad, they don't cover the true scope of a villain. Consider The Wicked Witch of the West in “The Wizard of Oz”, from the perspective of the piece she is truly a dangerous and nasty individual. But when you read Gregory Maguire's recent best-selling book, the Wicked Witch is hardly as evil as everyone would make out. She shifts from a two dimensional caricature and becomes a truly complex literary figure. She still retains the role of Villain from the perspective of Dorothy's story, but from her own story she is merely a troubled individual out of her depth in a dangerous political landscape. In the Witch's story, there are much darker villains at work in the land of Oz (though I won't mention them here in case you plan on reading the book and don't want spoilers).

It seems that every story has a villain, and some would even argue that every story must have a villain in order to be a true story. This is true in one respect; every story that has a protagonist has an antagonist. The stories we most commonly tell through roleplaying games certainly fit this model, with the players often taking the role of the protagonists or heroes, while the GM takes on the various roles of antagonists and villains.

The least significant villains might simply be people with agendas that conflict with those of the heroes. If the hero wants to get in somewhere and a guard wants to keep them out, then the guard is temporarily a villain in the piece. Who is to say whether the “hero” is morally right in this scene, or the “villain” is morally wrong; but since the two individuals have conflicting agendas, they each become one another's nemesis.

The majority of opponents faced by a hero should fall into this type of category, they certainly aren't villains in the truest sense and they probably perform a better role in the story if we don't know their back history and their motivation. Such an opponent is simply an excuse for some die rolls, some temporary tension in the story, or a chance for the GM to sap away some of the player's resources before the true menace appears.

More significant villains should be more than just an excuse to play with some game mechanisms; they should start to have motivations beyond their own. These individuals aren't just following orders, they are either following them for a reason or they made specific choices that are bringing them into conflict with the characters. One of the most important things to remember when making more significant villains is that the statistics don't really make a lot of difference, it's the motivation and the characterisation that get remembered in the gamer anecdotes weeks and months after the event has passed. A dragon capable of matching a dozen trained warriors in combat is only a little less noteworthy than a dragon capable of matching twice that many. The story becomes more intriguing and interesting when we know why the dragon needs to be faced by those warriors.

The Role of the Villain

In a traditional story, the villain is a catalyst for story. Usually, the events of the world would follow a destined course of action, but the villain decides that they want more, or they simply want the world to take a different path. Once one person steps out of the shadows to change the course of destiny; another person inevitably steps up to stop them. In more complex stories, a second party might not seek to stop the changes in progress; instead they may seek to create further changes of their own.

When placing a villain in a story you need to consider the type of story you are planning to tell. If it's a battle between good and evil, then the heroes will fight for good and the villains will fight for evil…it's as simple as that. For a great example, look at popular media such as Star Wars. Some critics complain that the actual story is pretty flat and one dimensional, and they might be right, but the popularity comes from the interesting characters within the story.

If you're telling a more complex story, then you need to put a bit more thought into your villains and how they interact with the heroes. Every villain should tell us something about the heroes; both become more defined as the story progresses.

Most villains in stories are used as a method to highlight a hero's strengths and virtues. Taking an example from comics: the Joker's disorganised henchmen fall easily when faced with the gadgets, martial arts and discipline of Batman; they reveal that even though batman is a mortal his edges in training and equipment place him well above the average person on the street. Taking an example from fantasy: Saruman's orcs flee when they are confronted with the majestic power of Gandalf's magic; the orcs other men aces show that Gandalf is effectively a demigod walking upon the world of Middle Earth. Remember that the two stories referenced here are tales about heroes, we read them and watch them to feel a sense of empowerment; a lot of people engage in role-playing to get the same types of feelings.

Other villains are used for the opposite reaction; they highlight the hero's vices and weaknesses. Using the same example from comics, the Joker is a step removed the mundane masses, with gadgets of his own, but with killer instincts and insanity instead of training and discipline. The Joker often has mad schemes designed to push Batman into moral quandaries; by this stage we know Batman's advantages, but the situations imposed by the Joker reveal his inner humanity, show the limits of his gadgets, or even tempt him to cross onto the dark side of vigilantism.

Again, using the same fantasy example Saruman is more than a match for Gandalf magically, his additional degree of power and decades of planning place him a step ahead of the grey wizard at every turn. Gandalf's efforts against Saruman are further hampered by his respect for life, particularly the various nations of humans across the land. Gandalf is confronted with the choice of turning to the darkness to gain strength, or remaining true to his principles.

Villains used to test a character's weaknesses should only appear occasionally, at appropriately dramatic moments. When they appear at the start of a story, a hero should be unprepared to face them, but as the story progresses (and experience is gained) the hero should gradually accumulate the tools necessary to defeat such an individual.