

Designing Cool PCs and Forming a Gaming Group

by

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On to the topic at hand! There are two pieces to this issue. The first is creating interesting player characters (PCs), and the second is in selecting the "right mix" to run a long term party. We'll deal with each piece separately below.

MARKET-PC (Or, Creating the Best PCs You Can)

The demon-spinner gestured. A gate opened behind the party. Slarg whirled about when he heard the howling and felt the hot, fetid wind on his neck. Curses! Vochma and Drew, the party's magical firepower, blocked him from advancing to the gate. Whatever emerged from that rip in the fabric of the world would make quick work of the mages.

Tirelessly the demon-spinner attacked. Slarg felt the warm spatters of Corlis' blood on his neck. Corlis had stood toe-to-toe with eleven hellhounds and never flinched. The party was going down.

Slarg reached beneath his jerkin for his god's blood pendant. The pendant could teleport the entire party to safety, but if Slarg used this blessing then the pendant would crumble to dust. It had been in his family for thirteen generations, and Slarg would never be elevated to the patriarch of the tribe without the pendant. So many ancestors had resisted the temptation to use the pendant to flee.

The gate vomited a seven-armed, scaled monster with razors for teeth. Slarg heard Micah scream as the demon-spinner attacked again.

Slarg snapped the thongs on the pendant and held it aloft. The passage filled with light. The demon-spinner screeched in rage and frustration. Slarg's future crumbled and slipped between his fingers.

Dust and tears fell to the earth.

Player characters (PCs) form the nucleus of role-playing adventures. This article describes some key factors in making interesting and playable PCs. Whether you are a new player looking for help generating your first heroine, or whether you are a seasoned gamemaster (GM) searching for a new and different way of breathing life into a thirty-year campaign, this article is for you. The acronym **MARKET-PC** is the guide to the eight key factors in creating PCs that are both memorable and fun to play.

The first letter is "M," and it stands for **Motivation**. Every PC should have something that matters to him in the context of the gaming world. This is both character motivation for the player, and the motivator is a great potential plot hook for a resourceful GM. In the story at the beginning of the article, at least two things mattered to Slarg -- party loyalty and Slarg's birthright. Some of the best role-playing opportunities arise when PCs must choose between conflicting motivations. Like spices, conflicting motivation should be used sparingly and to each GM's taste. Motivations can range from the obvious to the very subtle. A PC for a "one-shot" tournament module will generally be easier to play if the PC has some obvious, strong motivation that is directly related to the module at hand. A more subtle and longer term motivation would be interesting for a campaign. Motivations have two features, duration and strength. Defeating a particular villain is a motivation that might only last one adventure while defending a village might last throughout an entire campaign.

The next letter is "A" and stands for **Appeal**. Appeal has two aspects, interest and identification. Interest in a character is usually related to differences between a character's and a player's backgrounds, skills, and motivations. A unique character from a vastly different environment than present day Earth could be very interesting to play, but the player should still be able to identify with a character's desires and goals. The more closely a player can identify with the challenges and desires of the PC, the closer the bond will be for the player to the PC. Part of appeal is comfort. Some players may find certain types of characters very interesting, but they might be very uncomfortable playing this type of PC. The session will be more enjoyable for all concerned if the GM and players respect those feelings.

The letter "R" stands for well **Rounded**. To ensure the PC is well rounded consider the factors and applicability. Having a character with good breadth means that the PC has a variety of skills or capabilities. Applicability on the other hand deals with how useful those skill or capabilities are in game play. It might be interesting for a couple of sessions to lay

an expert swimmer in a land locked desert, but the excitement will soon fade if the Gm never finds a way to engage the PC's talents. Crafty GMs and skillful players can often find unique and enjoyable ways of applying *seemingly* non-applicable skills. In a "Mad Max" like world, a PC with mechanical and surfing skills living in a desert might design a windboard.

To give the PC both more playable and give the GM the opportunity for inserting more plot hooks, it is useful to have the PC illustrate a **Key aspect** of the world. Key aspects include both unique items about the GM's setting as well as set-ups for important themes and plots for the campaign. In a tournament setting or one-up, a key aspect could be a particular skill or piece of knowledge that the party needs to complete the module.

The GM should be careful to balance key aspects with the other factors involved in character creation. Just because the GM is interested in nocturnal flying fishmen, it does not mean that the players would like to play one as a PC.

Expandability is a very important factor in designing a PC for a campaign. It may be quite interesting to play a linkboy with nowhere to improve for a session or two. Unfortunately, the novelty will soon where off. This is especially true if the player sees her friends' PCs advancing in skills and powers.

PCs can expand in many different areas. Personal prowess is a traditional area of PC expandability. Examples of this include increasing levels, improving skills, and acquiring new capabilities. Typically these are tied directly to a game mechanic. The clever GM can add other areas for the PCs to expanded. Increasing a PC's span of control in the campaign is an underused way of expand the PC. Many of the modules written for highly experienced PCs involved tougher and tougher challenges from a game mechanics standpoint. A greater challenge overall that might require more role-playing skill would be to put the PC in charge of a group of lowly non-player characters (NPCs) and ask the PC to accomplish some mission while keeping the NPCs safe from harm. Accumulation of value is a third way of expanding the PC. Gold pieces, noble rank, land, arcane knowledge, etc. are all things that PCs can acquire, and all increase the value of the PC.

Unless you are designing a solo module, a PC who is able to participate and contribute to a **Team** will be more successful and fun to play in the long run. The seventh thief to join the party contributes less overall than the first or second. The GM and the player should try to select PCs that consider the group the PC will be adventuring with. GMS need to be mindful of fair4ness when applying the team concept. For example, a party is assemble and a few of the players get to chose their PCs' backgrounds while others simply "fill in" the missing skills or abilities. This can lead to perceptions of favoritism and resentment. Another approach is to let the players each have some say their character and limit the capabilities of the PCs so they depend on each other. You can also give out the required but missing skills to NPCs. This leads directly into the next area.

In a campaign environment, the GM and player should mutually **Participate** in PC creation. The GM and player come into the PC creation process with different viewpoints. A player wants to develop a PC that is *fun* to play while the GM is interested in brining on-board a PC that will fit into his world and advance the campaign's themes and plots. Although the viewpoints are different, they don't have to be in conflict. One technique that works well is for the GM and player to both write down their views of what an ideal PC would be individually. Then the two get together and try to find common ground. Mutual participation gives both the GM and player a sense of ownership in the PC and the campaign. Certainly the GM has veto authority, but the players have the ultimate ve3to authoring by voting with their feet. If the players continue to show up for a GM's sessions, the players offer their support and approval. If the sessions are no fun, or individual players do not enjoy playing their PCs then the campaign will not last long. Having the players and GMS participate other in PC creation process also tends to produce more interesting and varied PCs.

The final aspect of PC creation we will discuss is **Conflict**. The GM and player need to work collectively on this aspect. A PC with no competing goals (internal conflicts) or competing challenges (external conflicts) is boring while a PC with too many conflicts is impossible or very frustrating to play. The goals is to introduce conflict that will make PCs more interesting and challenging to play rather than to do conflict for conflict's sake. There is a clear synergy ...

Assembling the party

The question this issue is the heart and soul of any gaming session whether for an on-going campaign or for a one-shot at a convention. A famous game designer once summarized the goal in successful role-playing as the suspension of disbelief. There are seven key factors in putting together a player character (PC) party, and these factors are described *appropriately in light of our goal of suspending disbelief* by the acronym **DECEIPT**.

The "D" stands for **Desire**. The "E" stands for **Equilibrium**. The "C" represents **Challenging**. The second "E" means **Expandability**. The "I" represents **Interaction**. The "P" stands for **Plausibility**, and the "T" represents **Total**.

All the factors are important, but player **Desire** is probably the most significant. If a player is not happy with her PC then she is not going to have as much fun playing in the session (if she plays at all).

Character **Equilibrium** is an often-overlooked factor that though subtle can have dire consequences if ignored in a long-term campaign. IF you have as assassin and a paladin together in the same travelling band for a long enough period of time then sooner or later one of them will "wake up to find themselves dead," and this likely would not be a lot of fun.

The party should have an adequate mix of skills and capability to be able to perform their missions, but the party should still find the sessions **Challenging**. Sending a party of demi-gods to fight a few kobolds (even very clever kobolds) would probably not be very much fun after the initial few minutes of play.

Expandability is not a significant issue for a one-shot, but for an on-going campaign you will want to ensure that the characters can expand their capabilities or influence. Expandability does not have to refer to traditional measures such as skills or levels. Although these are fine to use in and of themselves, and they are often expected by more experienced players. Fame and fortune are two measures of expanding a character's influence. Noble titles, holdings, etc. are all legitimate ways of increasing a character's capabilities.

Interaction refers to two separate but equally important aspects of gaming. The first is interaction between the PC and the gaming world. As a gamemaster, you want to encourage PC interactions with your NPCs and the gaming world in general. The second is interaction between the PC and the remainder of the party. Although it was an interesting movie, *Ladyhawk* would be a difficult scenario for most players to game in.

By **Plausibility** we are referring to whether a PC makes sense in light of the rest of the gaming world. Even famous game designers (who will remain nameless) ☺ have ignored this aspect to their regret. If the PC does not fit within the established context of the campaign, the best thing that can happen is that the GM and player will struggle every session trying to fit the PC in with the flow of the adventure. The worst thing is that the presence of the PC could create enough significant character and player issues to unravel the campaign.

The last letter "T" is the summation of the other concepts or their **Total**. The PC group should be well balanced for the campaign or adventure that you are planning on running. While the group should have all the skills necessary to complete the tasks you set before them, there should be some uniqueness to each and every PC in the party. Everyone should have the chance to play the hero during at least part of the session. A little bit of redundancy is good too. If the one PC with the healing abilities is taken out in the first moments of the session, the party's morale (and possibly yours) is sure to suffer.