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More is Better: Group Character Creation

Welcome to **More is Better: Group Character Creation**, the ninth free PDF from Treasure Tables! This PDF was released to celebrate TT's second birthday on July 11th, 2007, and contains all-new material.

Over the years, I've found that group character creation is by far the most consistently successful way to lay the foundation for a really fun campaign. You can get a lot of things wrong without risking killing your game, but chargen isn't one of them. The approach outlined in this PDF works well, and can be easily adapted to fit your group's play style and preferences. Enjoy!

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WHY IS MORE BETTER?

When it comes to character creation, there are two main approaches: individual creation, where each of your players goes off on their own and comes back with a character, and group creation, where everyone sits down and comes up with at least the building blocks of their PCs together.

Both approaches can produce a party of fun characters that work well together, but group character creation is *much* more likely to do so. When it comes to something as important as the PCs – the principle investment your players make in the campaign – why not stack the deck in your group's favor?

The concept of group character creation isn't complicated, but it can be helpful to have some guidelines to follow. With that in mind, here's a quick and versatile approach to creating the perfect party.

Throughout this PDF, I'll use the same example to illustrate each step: a modern-era campaign featuring the PCs as *X-Files*-esque paranormal investigators – let's call it "Alpha Sanction" (ooh, mysterious). Examples will be in italics.

STEP 1: GET ON THE SAME PAGE

After agreeing on which RPG to play (Step Zero, if you will), you should briefly discuss the theme of the campaign with your players. How you handle this step depends a lot on the dynamics of your group.

Some players like to have a lot of input in what kind of game everyone will be playing, while others prefer to go with the flow and adapt their interests to whatever the group winds up doing. Either way, it's important that your players are all on the same page when

they begin creating their characters.

In our example, your group has agreed on a modern-era game in which the PCs are all involved in investigating paranormal incidents. There's an *X-Files* vibe, so the campaign will include detective work, conspiracies and occasional realistic gunplay. Knowing this, your players can now create characters that fit the campaign, rather than just creating a random group of PCs and hoping that everything works out.

STEP 2: DISCUSS PC CONCEPTS

This is the heart of group character creation, and it breaks down into four aspects: sharing ideas, giving the party a reason to adventure, niche protection and connecting PC backgrounds.

SHARING IDEAS

Chances are, at least one of your players already has a character concept in mind by this point. Start things off by having her throw out an idea, and see where it goes. This should snowball fairly quickly, with your other players tossing ideas into the mix, improving on each other's suggestions and generally working together to create the party. Don't hesitate to help your players get the ball rolling, either: give them ideas, work with the concepts they describe and look for ways to help.

Several character concepts stand out for our Alpha Sanction campaign: detective, cop, government agent, scientist, conspiracy wonk, researcher and ex-military officer, to name a few.

A REASON TO ADVENTURE

“We met in a bar and decided to trust our lives to one another on a daily basis” doesn’t cut the mustard. A good party – a party that won’t strain your group’s suspension of disbelief, and that will make sense in the context of the campaign world – should have a solid reason for adventuring together. Not only will this be easier for everyone to swallow, it will provide inspiration during character creation and beyond.

Possible reasons for the party to be together include family connections, a common patron, membership in an organization (military, government, etc.) or a shared purpose (a cause or crusade). Since this element of the campaign will be largely your department as the GM, you should have a few suggestions at the ready when you reach this point in the chargen process.

It’s possible to arrive at this common bond after the fact, but it’s a lot more helpful to establish it early on – and it doesn’t have to be complicated or overwrought. As long as everyone is happy with it, it can come up in play as often or as rarely as you like.

For the Alpha Sanction campaign, a mysterious patron would probably work best – a person or group that has a vested interest in the paranormal, and in uncovering the campaign’s central conspiracy, who can provide resources and a common bond for a group of characters from all walks of life.

NICHE PROTECTION

When each character has at least one distinct area of specialization, the whole game tends to go better. This idea harkens back to the “balanced party” from old-school D&D: fighter, wizard, rogue and cleric. There’s no need to take it quite that far in most games, but the core element – every PC having a role to play in the kinds of stories around which the campaign will revolve – makes for an excellent goal.

In our example campaign, niches would include investigative skills (detective, cop), combat aptitude (ex-military, cop, government agent), connections (government agent, conspiracy work) and specialized skills (scientist, researcher). In the case of combat skills and investigative abilities, the party could easily support more than one character with talents in those areas – as long as they don’t overlap entirely.

CONNECTING BACKGROUNDS

At this stage, you’ve got a party of characters who work well as a group, and a reason why they’d be together in the first place – now it’s time to bring it all home by connecting the PCs through their backgrounds. All of the work you’ve done up to this point should also have brought out a few possible connections – use those ideas as the seeds of a collective brainstorming process.

Every PC doesn’t need to be connected to every other PC – there just need to be enough ties to pull the whole party a bit closer together, to offer your players more roleplaying opportunities and to give you, the GM, some good hooks to work with.

Here’s one sample connection for our Alpha Sanction party: the detective met the ex-military officer in cadet training, but the detective washed out and decided to join the police force instead. This connection can lead to others: they might have NPCs in common, or have shared other experiences that put them on their current paths.

STEP 3: HONE THOSE CONCEPTS

There are two ways to tackle honing the PCs: stay together and polish them up as a group; or call it a night and let everyone finish up on their own. Which approach you use comes down to personal preference – they both work just fine.

In fact, you’ll probably have one or two players who are completely finished with their PCs, and one or two who aren’t that far along yet. Again, that’s no problem. As long as everyone is ready in time for you to prep the first session, you’re good to go.

Either way, there are two goals for this step: find opportunities to make your players’ characters more fun to play, and to ensure that you have enough background hooks to work with. These goals are intertwined, and in both cases you should use a light touch – don’t impose your ideas on your players, just offer them up as possibilities.

In terms of hooks, some players prefer to flesh out their PCs more during play, while others like to hammer everything out before the first session. The latter group is likely to give you enough hooks right off the bat, while the former group might need a bit of gentle prodding – perhaps being asked directly for one hook, for example.

Looking at the detective and the ex-military character in our Alpha Sanction game, you notice that both of them mentioned becoming interested in the paranormal after seeing a ghost. What if it was the same ghost, encountered by both PCs after leaving a cadet training school class?

AN ASIDE: SECRETS

One common objection to group character creation is “What if I want my character to have secrets?” The beauty of this process is that there’s nothing saying your players can’t keep secrets from each other – just don’t discuss them as a group. Instead, cover them between the character creation session and the campaign kickoff session, perhaps via email.

As always with PC secrets, unless you’re running a game that is going to feature lots of intra-party conflict (and if you are, make sure your players know that!) you should carefully vet all secrets to make sure they won’t screw up party dynamics.

STEP 4: TRIAL RUN

The first session not only kicks off the campaign, it serves as a test drive for the PCs. You should write the session with this in mind, striving to both showcase what the campaign will be like and to test the PCs in different ways, giving everyone an opportunity to shine. It’s the “trial” aspect that’s most important for our purposes, though.

Let your players know that within reason, they’re free to change aspects of their characters before the second session (primarily the mechanical stuff, but don’t rule out background changes). This allows them to field test their character concepts, see if they mesh will with your GMing style, weed out bunk abilities and smooth over choices that don’t seem quite as appealing during play. Nothing is more frustrating to a player than feeling like they have to keep playing an un-fun character, and this step will help you avoid that sticky situation.

After failing three perception rolls in a row, the player of our Alpha Sanction researcher decides he’d like to bump up his PC’s observation stats. Learning that the party’s patron will be providing them with transportation, the scientist’s player drops her character’s wealth level, which she’d raised primarily to be able to afford a van for the party to tool around in.

THAT’S IT!

With any luck, the effort everyone put into group character creation will have paid off – the party will have a compelling reason to stick together, every player will have fun things to do during every session and you’ll have plenty of material to work with when coming up with adventures. That’s the power of group character creation, and I hope this approach yields many successful parties for you and your players.



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