

## ***On Running the Perfect Convention Game:***

### ***It's the Characters, Stupid!***

by Christopher Paul

I had the pleasure to attend ORCCON in Los Angeles over President's Day weekend. I used to be a strategicon regular, as I used to live in Los Angeles. I attended my first strategicon con in 1989. At that con, I played my first convention tournament GURPS game with Bill Roper and Stu Venable. My group of friends "won" their preliminary round and got to do the "final" adventure; I was awarded the best role-playing award at the table, and was presented with a die-cast batmobile as the prize. This encounter ultimately led me to join Bill and Stu's home campaign in Long Beach for a couple of years (good times!), and also turned me into a huge GURPS fan and a strategicon regular, a habit which lasted long after the Long Beach games had tapered off.

Over the course of about a decade I went to a lot of strategicons. For a while, I played a lot of GURPS at these cons. Later, I started running games; mostly GURPS, but then occasionally *In Nomine*. Without any pretense at modesty, I quickly gained a substantial fan base for my con games. Perhaps not as much of fan base as if I ran an RPG podcast or anything, but still, my games were always full, with full alternates, and sometimes audiences. I ran cool games. Who doesn't want to play in "GURPS: Hell" (characters are all demons seeking to curry favor in the hot place), or "GURPS: Orc Special Ops," or "GURPS: Watch my stance!" (Hong Kong cinema inspired martial arts). Heck, sometimes I ran games that I tried to make sound not cool just to see if folks would still sign up. I offered "GURPS: Fred" -- full table. I offered "GURPS: Shut up or I'll kill you!" -- full table (it was a terrorism/hostage scenario where the players were the terrorists; but they didn't know that when they signed up). I joked about "GURPS: Get hit in the face with a baseball bat" but never actually had the balls to write it down.

Why were my games so popular? What made them so awesome? What is it that makes for a good con game?

Many of the characteristics that make a GM good in home campaigns make them a good con game GM. Having good story ideas and plots, coming up with creative campaign settings, being able to create compelling interactions with NPCs, creating memorable NPCs, being well organized, having good pacing, knowing the rules, running interesting and dynamic fights. However, just because a GM is a good home campaign GM does not guarantee they will run good con games. Why is that?

The answer to that question lies in the differences between con games and home games. There are several that matter. First, the con game is a fixed and relatively short timeslot, where home games are not. Home games tend to start late, tend to finish late, tend to not care if a bunch of time gets wasted with a side plot, or an out of game interruption, and thrive on cliffhangers. Not so the con game. You've got four hours. Fine if you finish

an hour or so early, but a bummer if you have an ending that is anything other than some kind of resolution.

Second, the home game has backstory and continuity. Everyone knows what has gone before, knows the game world, knows the other characters, knows the established relationships between the characters, etc. At a con game, unless you are using a published (and popular) game world (or something close to historical or contemporary Earth), players will know only what the GM provides in quick synopsis. The players will know the characters only to the extent that other players introduce them at the start of the adventure, and character relationships will exist only to the extent that they are made clear in quirks, disadvantages, or brief written backstory (“Merpyl is the bodyguard of Magus Raynard”; “Sir Gavin and Glenn Stafford have been friends since childhood”).

Third, in a home game, the players know each other, and are known to the GM. Everybody knows that Sue is fairly quiet, but has great in-character conversations if you give her the space to actually start talking. Everybody understands that Dan is only there for the combats, and will get angry if someone talks their way out of what should obviously be a fight. The home GM knows that some of his players love mysteries, and he can count on them to investigate anything that seems out of the ordinary without providing any further incentives. In a con game, sometimes it is folks who know each other (folks met at previous cons, or small groups of friends who are at the con together), but usually some (and sometimes all) are totally new to each other. Sometimes some of these personalities have to be finessed in ways a GM might not be used to at home.

Finally, and most importantly, in a home game, everyone has made their own character. They have made the character they want to play. Hopefully in discussion with the other players, they have designed their character to fulfill a role within the party (or intentionally failed to do so). If there is a problem with the character, they put it there. If there is a bonus or modifier hidden somewhere on the character sheet, they know about it, because it is their character sheet. If the character has disadvantages that make it hard to actually play, or personality defects that prevent harmonious interaction with the rest of the party, or is totally redundant with one of the other characters, that is all the player’s fault, as he or she created it. By contrast, in the con game, the GM has pregenerated all the characters. Any problems with the characters, or with the character sheets, is all on the GM.

I’m not a bad GM; I’ve played with better, but I do all right. But the reason my con games have always been popular is because of the characters. In fact, I would argue that the secret to the perfect con game is in the characters.

Here, I’m going to try to summarize and share some of my secrets for great con characters:

*Make sure that every character is one that you yourself would not just be willing to play, but would be excited to play.* This was always my guiding principle, and is the big headline takeaway from this essay. If you stop reading now, you’ve still received the

main point. I always approached the creation of each and every con character in such a way as to be sure that I personally would be happy to play that character. It worked. At my games, there was no mad scramble to grab a good character and avoid being stuck with a crummy character. In my character stacks, there was never a boring female mentalist superhero, and never a healing priestly type who can't really do anything other than heal. None of the characters sucked (unless all of the characters sucked, on purpose; see GURPS: Hell and GURPS: Fred).

*Make sure every character is able to make a contribution.* Not only does every character need to be attractive to players, but every character needs to be able to make a contribution. This is as much about the story you have planned as it is about the characters. It is perfectly OK to have a character who is a combat monster, but has little to do outside of combat, unless you've planned an investigative adventure with combat being unlikely. Similarly, it is OK to have a character who is a brainiac but virtually unable to participate in combat, unless you plan to roll out the battlemat at the start of the session and be in initiative order the whole time. In a home campaign, it is OK to have a session that does not emphasize the talents of some members of the party; they'll get their day in the sun in some other session, and besides, serves 'em right for making a one-dimensional character that can't always contribute. In a con game, if you make a one-dimensional character whose dimension isn't relevant to the adventure, you suck.

*Make the characters distinct and memorable.* The characters should all be different from each other, and have a clearly discernable role or style. When someone at the table says, "I got this," it should be clear that they are the sole holder of true expertise in that task.

Characters should not share the same forte (unless it is fighting). If they for some reason must share the same forte, one should not overpower the other. No character should be wholly redundant. If you have one explosive ordinance disposal tech, you should not also have a second explosive ordinance disposal tech who is just better at it. If you have an explosive ordinance disposal tech, you can have a second character who has some experience with EOD and can support the first character (or pinch hit that task if the first character is elsewhere, indisposed, or just didn't get picked at the table), but that second character should have some other specialty that is their own "thing."

Characters should have memorable names, distinct personalities, and unique sets of characteristics. People are going to be much more interested to play "Yeniver, Disciple of Kale" than "<unnamed female mage>" or "<product of some nasty random name generator>". Buy yourself a baby names book for starters or for inspiration. Spend a few minutes really thinking about your characters' names. Names can go a long way toward setting the tone at the table (humorous, heroic, etc.) No one who played in my Orc Special Ops games will forget the leader of the band, the orc Urgassy Axe-bitch, or the goblin infiltrator, Gynelotrimin. No one who played a game as the fighter Thad Badpants, Professional Casualty, will forget the experience.

Point buy systems like GUPRS and HERO offer disadvantages, which are a great way to capture elements of a personality in the rules and on paper. Don't give out too many

vanilla disadvantages that don't show up in game, or don't contribute to personality. Don't give too many of the characters the same disadvantage, and certainly don't give any characters exactly the same disadvantages.

*Make the characters complete.* This ties in to every character being able to make a contribution. Don't make the characters minimal skeletons of identity skills and gear to fill a single role; make them whole characters. Complete characters have a full suite of life skills and can contribute at least a little bit in many situations without having to make an ugly skill default. So what if the fighter isn't a used-car salesman and doesn't have loads of points invested in fast-talk. Everyone, unless they are intentionally unsocial (which could be a valid complete character) has some kind of social skill, even if it is only a half-point in diplomacy, or a half-point in savoir-faire. Similarly, every character, unless a total geeky academic or a cloistered priest, has at least a half-point in brawling. Every character should have at least a half-point in area knowledge (somewhere). Every fantasy character should have at least a half-point in knife, unless they are a pacifist or one of the cloistered types mentioned earlier.

Omissions should be intentional. There are times when you don't want certain characters (or any of the characters) to be able to do certain things. If your characters are complete in other ways, but a certain needed skill is missing, players are more likely to have in-character frustration at the situation and try to find another solution than to have out of character frustration at the character maker for accidentally omitting a skill that the character "should" have.

Completeness extends to gear, too. Not that you need to detail the personal basics, the toothbrush, the number of changes of clothes a character has, but it is often valuable to make some elaboration of gear. The obvious stuff can be covered with "standard adventuring gear" which can be listed on the sheet in exactly those terms, and everyone knows will include a bedroll, some rope, torches, a flint and steel, etc. When I ran orc special ops I was very careful and thorough in listing equipment, as lack of specific gear was intended to be part of the challenge of the adventure. In modern games, I'm inclined to be much softer with gear, figuring everybody has a cellphone, laptop, credit card, and car if their character has a job. What does need to be completely listed in all genres is weapons and armor, if there's any danger of combat during the session. In as much as every fantasy character should have knife skill, they should also actually have a knife, or an interesting reason they don't.

*Present only the necessary information, but present all the necessary information.* Having complete characters does not mean that every character needs to be 7 pages of biblical detail. Especially in point based systems, there is a lot of information on a full character sheet that you just don't need when you actually play the game. These include point values and intermediate calculations. For a con game, feel free to go minimalist and just list the attributes, advantages and disadvantages, combat statistics, skills, powers, and gear. The less unnecessary information there is, the less likely players are to be distracted by unnecessary information. Do, however, do all the necessary summary math for combat. If elves get +1 with sword or bow, add that to the attack summary for the

character's sword and bow; if combat reflexes gives +1 to all active defenses, increment all listed active defense by one. Don't expect the players to know all the details of all the rules, or to know to look three different places on an unfamiliar sheet to gather their combat modifiers. Don't present things they don't need to know, but be sure to present everything they do need to know, and in as concise a format as possible.

Third party character-making software or spreadsheets are particularly dangerous in this regard, and they often use formats other than the standard game-official character sheet, but include all the ancillary and unnecessary information, and may or may not automate the addition of bonuses for combat or other calculations. Use with caution, and don't be afraid to build characters in such a spreadsheet to get the math right, but then cut n' paste to an abbreviated summary character sheet for actual player use at the con.

Now I'm going to give some examples from the three games I played in at ORCCON with pre-generated characters to highlight adherence to, or running afoul of, these suggestions.

DISCLAIMER: I had fun in all three of these games. The GMs were good in all three games. And, without diminishing that in any way, in all three games the characters could have been better, and it only could have made the games even better.

Game 1: GURPS (Space), Avatar sequel story line: This was a fun game, though lightly attended. With only two players, the GM handed each player two characters. This was a mistake, for several reasons. First, playing more than one character at a time is disjoint and constrains character interaction. Second, nothing in the adventure required the extra characters; the scenario as it played out would have actually been better with just two characters. Third, and most ugly, is it exposed an egregious violation of "make the characters distinct and memorable." As I looked down at the two characters I was given to play, I could see that they were very similar, identical in fact in the ways that most matter to me. Their attributes were only slightly different, and their skills sets had substantial overlap, but with different areas of specialty (one was a pilot, the other a martial artist and swordsman). However, *the two had the exact same set of advantages, and the exact same set of disadvantages*. Seeing this, I glanced across the table at the two characters my cohort has been handed, and discovered that they were also advantage/disadvantage clones, identical to my two. And no, the scenario did not specify that they really were clones, or otherwise selected on those specific personality flaws, or anything else. Disadvantage-wise, they were all the same damn character. Apropos of something else, the GM, who runs games at lots of cons, indicated that he had had to make over 240 GURPS characters for this convention season. While I sympathize that that is a lot of characters, I couldn't help but ask myself, "wouldn't you be better off to make 24 different and good characters, and then reuse them?"

Other than the fact that they all add the same advantages and disadvantages, it was one reasonably well-put together character, at least. There was a personality there, and each character had a nice suite of skills. The summary character sheet was nice. No point values, but final skill levels for all skills. Skills were listed paragraph style, separated by

commas, instead of in traditional column format. One suggested improvement that we actually mention at the table was to alphabetize the skills for easy reference, or to group them in some kind of sensible grouping, rather than just having them willy-nilly in a big text block.

Game 2: GURPS (Fantasy): We had a full table of six for this game, with six characters. Each of the characters was distinct and interesting, with a niche or role, and a distinct personality that was clearly indicated in the disadvantages and quirks. We had a great game, and the characters were all more than adequate. However, many of the characters fell down with regard to completeness. I played a barbarian horse archer. He had relevant archery skills, riding and horse tending skills, and a brace of survival and tracking skills. He had a bow and horse. What he didn't have was any melee weapon or unarmed combat skill at all, any social skills at all, or any melee weapons at all. See my guidance above about fantasy characters and knives.

The character of the player I sat next to was even worse. Her character was an impulsive swordsman with a great code of honor and highly amusing compulsive vowing. However, the character only had three skills: broadsword, shield, and carousing. That's it. How an impulsive character could develop skills at carousing without also learning a little bit of brawling is beyond me, and the complete lack of any other kind of skill at all left me feeling a bit sorry for the player. Especially since we ended up talking our way out of any fights longer than a single blow.

Game 3: Fantasy HERO: We had a table of seven for this game, and seven characters. This game was a "round 2," continuing a story that had been begun in a previous session with the same characters; however, none of the players were the same. This ended up being a bad thing, as it wasn't a discrete and concluded previous adventure (for example: "In the last session, this team investigated the kidnapping of the princess. At the conclusion of the adventure, they concluded that she was being held in the tower of the Evil Mage Gathag. Today's adventure begins with the team standing in the shadow of Gathag's tower, ready to attempt a rescue"). Instead, we began play right in the middle of an ongoing investigation of a haunted house, and the game started with a somewhat confusing and disjoint 20 minute narrative account of the discoveries of the previous adventure, many of which were relevant for the ongoing adventure. Not well done.

But I digress; this is about characters, after all. Seven players, seven characters. Each was distinct and had a clearly specified role/niche that the GMs (it was a tag-team table) announced when they handed out the characters: Monk/priest, gnome magician, dwarf armor/tank and jack of all trades, swordsman, etc. One of the characters was a little concerning, as the GMs made disclaimers about the rogue being "a sneaky rogue, but not a particularly damaging rogue" with perhaps little to contribute in combat. The disclaimer implied that combat was likely, which begs the question why the character wasn't designed with more of a possible combat contribution in mind in the first place.

Once the characters were distributed, a huge, glaring, character fault was revealed. *The characters did not have names.* They were just "Gnome magician" and "Barbarian" and

“Monk.” They were referred to that way in the recounting of their previous adventures, in the initiative sequence, everything. We weren’t encouraged to, or even offered the opportunity to, name our characters. Because the characters had already been adventuring together and because the characters and their prior actions had been recounted by the GMs, there wasn’t even an “introduce your characters” round where we could have slipped in freshly made-up names. This lack of names was particularly disjoint given what excellent character NPC narrators the two GMs turned out to be. They offered an uproariously funny impromptu conversation between an elderly roadside apothecary and his elderly wife that may well have been the highlight of the session. Curiously, in that spontaneous conversation, the two NPCs had names with which to refer to each other (presumably made up on the spot)!

Mechanically, the characters were fine. Hell, I’ll even admit that they were cool. They all had different combat shticks (except the aforementioned rogue). I was playing the barbarian, a huge scarred brute with an axe and a fanatical devotion to his deity. He had all kinds of cool conditional powers that worked only when he was acting in the service of his god. I was prepared to be pretty pissed if none of the action in the adventure could be construed as in the service to this god, which would have left all those cool powers untapped. However, the one major fight did provide “the Barbarian” the chance to come to the aid of “the Monk” who was also a dedicant of this god, thus serving the god’s will by saving the other character, and enabling all the conditional powers.

The character sheets were fine if you are familiar with HERO (as I am). For folks who weren’t, combat required a lot of explaining of characters that could have been avoided with a little more upfront work by the character creators.

So, to sum up, good games that could have been even better with a little more work. Always remember that con GMing is a slightly different animal than home game GMing, and if you are using pregenerated characters (and you should; nothing gums up a con slot like starting with an hour of character generation), you should spend the extra time and mental energy to make sure that the characters are awesome, interesting, distinct, complete, and effectively presented on their sheets.