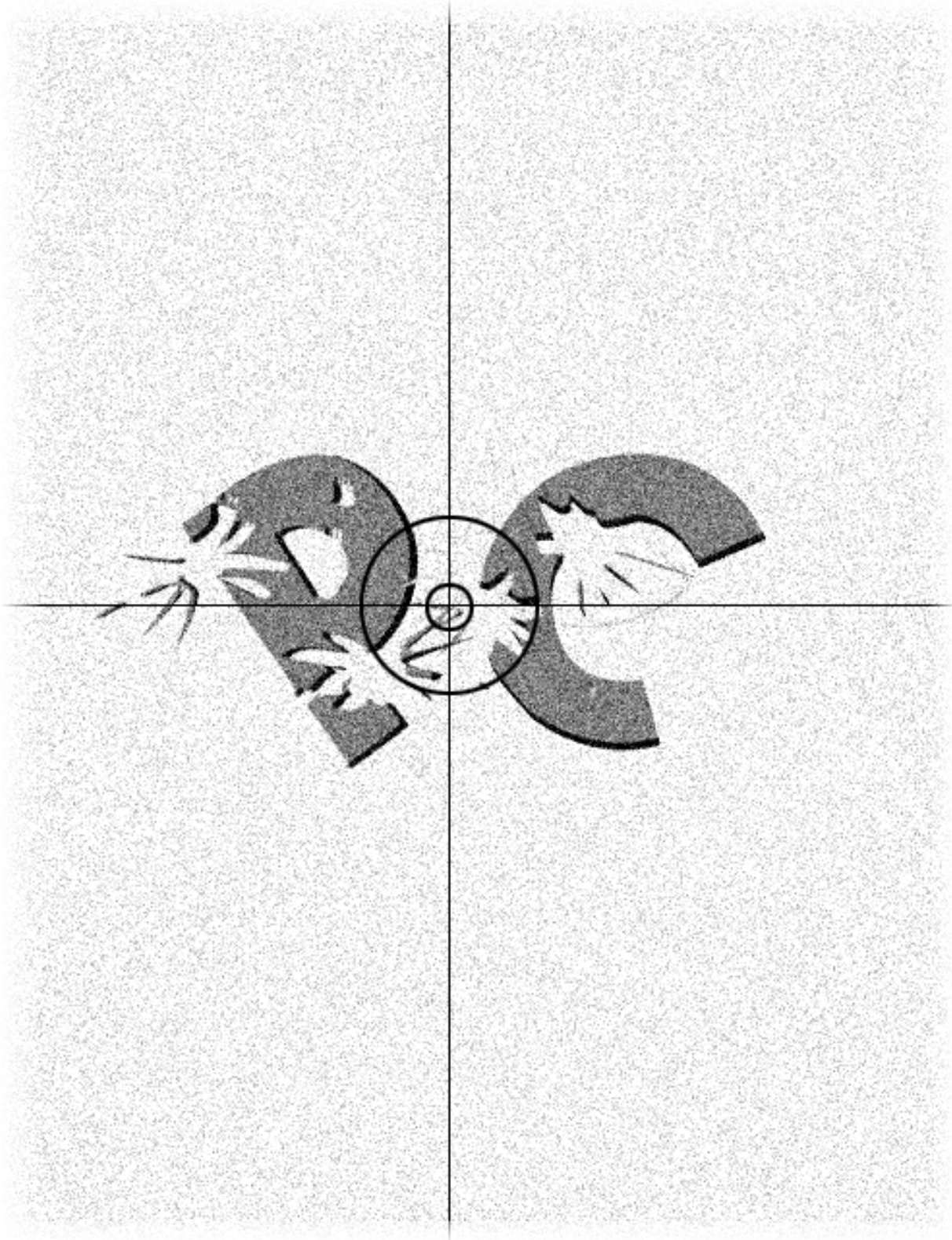


SHADOWRUN ACCORDING TO BLACKJACK PART 2



BLACKJACK'S GUIDES TO
BITTER GAMEMASTERING

INTRODUCTION

Shadowrun According To Blackjack Part 2: Blackjack's Guides To Bitter Gamemastering is a collection of advice oriented writings which have appeared on Blackjack's Shadowrun page over the last two or so years. Unlike many of my other writings which handle GMing problems in a semi-logical and sensitive fashion, the Bitter Guides tend to suggest more drastic measures (Moosooooooooo! <crunch>) for dealing with those pesky PCs. So here they are, Bitter Guides 1-7 and Shadowrun 101 (an article I wrote before I even had a decent page but which pretty much started out this whole SR Bob Vila thing).

Have fun.

-bh

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Blackjack's Shadowrun Page

<http://www.interware.it/users/blackjack/>

The Shadowrun Archive

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SPECIAL THANKS

Paolo Marcucci, Tom Whitter, Drew Rader, anybody who's ever been a PC in one of my groups, and the literally thousands of people who have written me E-mail over the past 2.5 years expressing desperate anguish over things like autopistol rules. I couldn't have done it without you.

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ing events, and they never even go shopping for food anywhere but at Bud's Ration Depot. Sometimes this is the GM's fault (PC: I turn on the Trideo. GM: Nothing's on.), but a many PCs just don't spend time simply finding out what's going on in the 'real world'. This can cause problems when a Shadowrun involves something tied to world events, as well as leading to an outdated wardrobe.

A way to motivate the runners to do more than simply pull a trigger is to occasionally insert a bit of information that may help them in a run (or keep them from screwing up) into the general media or environment. If a runner watches TV, the GM may state that he sees a news article talking about a weapons bust on the corner of 12th and Park - the same location the runners were supposed to hook up with a fence. Had the runners not tuned in, they would have walked into the back room at Big Al's House O' Chicken and immediately been surrounded by the 15 cops staked out there.

Using real world resources allows the GM to create a more complex tapestry of information. The runners might have been hired for a run by Alice Cobb, during which they were supposed to steal a prototype weapon from a Global Tech lab. The runners have a few days before then, so one decides to watch some trid and two others go to the Seahawks game. The singer of the anthem at the game turns out to be Day Summers who is sponsored by Digiweap Industries. The runner at home sees a news story about a controversy involving the CEO of Global Tech, Erving Gray, who has been running a spawn corporation, Robinson Publishing, off the books. The group meets up later and decides to go to a bar. On the way there they hear over the radio that Day Summers will be representing Robinson Publishing at a fancy dinner that evening. Then, after the inebriated runners file into their dwelling later that evening, one of them sits drunkenly in front of the trid and decides to watch Seattle People because they're too drunk to change the channel to something decent. Then, what appears on the screen: Day Summers, Alice Cobb, and Erving Gray performing a toast at the dinner earlier that evening.

Hmmmmmm.....

In this issue I've made a bit of an attempt to answer some of the questions I've received over the last few weeks from frustrated gamemasters, some of whom are on the verge of purchasing cross cut shredders for the express purpose of destroying character sheets. Much to my personal glee I didn't get through all of the questions, which means I'll have something to babble about in Blackjack's Guide VII. Also, I think I'm beginning to repeat myself. For these

redundancies, I apologize. Also, I think I'm beginning to repeat myself.

Playing Fair

Recently I've received a lot of E-Mail regarding problem players involved in Shadowrun campaigns. The complaints range from an individual's tendency to monopolize the game to the apparent need to create outrageous character stats to a player being an outright asshole. While I'll cover a few of the situations on a case by case basis later on in this article they all fall into the category of violating one of the most essential rules of any gaming system, or any game for that matter: Playing Fair.

The definition of "fair" differs greatly from situation to situation. In Shadowrun I've always defined "unfair" as being anything which upsets the game balance. This balance must be achieved on many levels; player participation, pc statistics, attitude, aggressiveness, etc. When an individual creates a situation which upsets any of these balances I consider it an unfair action.

Consider, in brief, the idea of pc stats. If one player decides to create a kick ass character with a bad attitude he throws off the game balance for anybody who has the desire to play a less aggressive archetype. The gamemaster has no choice but to send in his heaviest NPCs when combat is involved and inevitably the weaker characters get torn to shreds in the battle. The gamemaster cannot specifically target the offending PC because it would not make sense. One group equals one target. By creating his kick ass character the player has messed up the game for everybody else.

In an ideal world such an individual would simply create a character more suited to the environment at hand. More and more I am finding out that such people tend to be rather thick skulled when it comes to change. It's a shame that some people want their fun, even if it's at the expense of everybody else's.

The best way to solve such problems is to simply talk it out. The biggest argument one will encounter from such players is the idea that they're sacrificing their fun for others by making their characters, and themselves, less aggressive. I think this is a shallow point. Almost all of such individuals tend to create characters with the following attributes: High stats, aggressive attitude, mindless killing. That, folks, is one archetype. Look at the characters. They almost follow a formula. There might as well be a Kick Ass PC printed in a book.

On the other hand there are a million other options if the player will simply drop the Wired 3

and buy a van and guitar or a cyber camera or forget the million and get some unique skills and build a story around them.

Unfortunately, discussion and logic won't always work, which is why you sometimes have to find a bitter way to get the message across. Damn shame...

21 Questions

I am a firm believer in the utilization of the 21 Questions. As a player it allows you to figure out exactly what kind of personality your character possesses and, as a gamemaster, it allows you to make sure the player is following his or her own guidelines. The answers you give to these questions are not to be taken lightly. At least not in my game. At least fifty percent of the karma I distribute is based on good roleplaying, mostly measured by how well the player portrayed the personality he or she created by answering the 21 questions. If the character acts in ways that do not reflect their personality they tend to get screwed, karmawise.

Think of your own personality, if the concept doesn't frighten you too much. Mine tends to revolve around spending too much time mulling around my apartment thinking of new and creative ways to justify not getting anything done. The odds of me suddenly bolting out the door and "getting down" at a nightclub are virtually nil. The one time I did end up at one I made sure I kept myself sufficiently inebriated as to ensure I would remember nothing of the experience the next day.

A character personality must be played in much the same way. If your character knows nothing of luxury, having spent their entire lives in the barrens, then, at the very least, they will have a hell of a time picking out a suit for an upper class run. If a character of this type walked into a clothing store and requested an Armani with pearl cufflinks I would really begin to wonder what part of the barrens they were from.

One of the biggest problems players have with the 21 Questions is that they find them too restrictive to their roleplaying freedom. Well, guess what, having a personality is SUPPOSED to be difficult and, often times, restrictive. If a player wants his PC to be a hotshot when it comes to negotiation with corps he should have written that in at the time of character creation and made sure it jived with the rest of his personality. A street samurai from a lower class Redmond district cannot simply pull corporate negotiation skills out of their ass. Even if, in reality, they can masterfully negotiate they must suppress this ability and remember that their character has never been in a

building with more than ten floors, let alone an archology.

This does not, however, mean a character cannot grow. In fact, watching a character progress from a rather naive street person possessing a bunch of cyberware they sometimes fear and don't remotely understand is probably one of the funnest (if "funnest" is a real word) part of the game. After the Redmond street sam experiences the terror of attempting to negotiate with a few stony faced guys in suits who not only have the comfort of armed bodyguards but also a fleet of Auglers he'll have a better understanding of exactly who he's dealing with. It would be an excellent time to pick up that Corporate Negotiations skill.

But you have to start with the 21 questions and follow them until there is a reason not to. And the gamemaster should make sure the player is following these guidelines by withholding karma when they don't. During the game the NPCs the character is dealing with should look upon the him with curious and mistrusting eyes when he starts to act out of the ordinary. They may accuse him of being on drugs. Or being psychotic. Anything to remind the player of who they really are.

Eternal Archetypes

I've never considers the creation of characters based on the same archetype a problem in itself. A problem arises when each of these characters is played in an almost identical fashion. Basically, it's the same character. Sure some of the stats may be a bit different but the PCs personality and dispositions tend to remain constant.

If the player is creating a new character personality based solely on the personality of an old one then, odds are, this new character is going to end up the same way the old one did, usually dead. As a gamemaster the biggest complaint you'll get from players when you try to persuade them to do something new is that they won't have any fun using a different personality. They'll say they like being a, and I quote from an actual E-Mailed complaint, "cocky, braggart, trigger fingered, asshole." (Ok, the "asshole" was mine.) Or, maybe, they're perpetually insane, or constantly wacked out on drugs, or any number of possible personality constructs. They'll point out that this is the only way they can have fun. Well, if they feel this way, not only is the player narrow minded but their character is, ninety nine percent of the time, worthy or getting killed.

A snotty, uppity, annoying, vicious type of individual doesn't last long in ANY world, especially

that of Shadowrun. In reality these people usually end up in jail. In Shadowrun these people usually end up dead. As a gamemaster you have more than the right to make sure the latter occurs.

The problem with most gamemaster approaches to solving this situation via death is that it involves the illogical and spontaneous appearance of many people bent on wasting the character. Instead the gamemaster should use the logical and planned appearance of many people bent on wasting the character. As I mentioned in *Blackjack's Guide I*, the more people the character messes with or outright kills, the more people who will want to kill him. Even if the character covers his tracks there's going to be at least a few who figure out what he's doing. Some of these people may have a demolitions skill and know where the character parks.

Identity Crisis

I'm getting really tired of waxing deckers who decide to place themselves at the wrong end of the assault rifle. Perhaps the matrix makes a person vaguely suicidal. I don't know. What I do know is that ninety percent of the deckers I've encountered can't take a bullet, let alone nine of them. Not that they should have to.

Lets face it, deckers are not built to withstand the punishment of a fire fight. Neither are most riggers or a dozen other archetypes for that matter. If, for some reason, they are able to fair well in physical confrontation then they must be pretty bad at doing what they're supposed to do, such as deck or rig or whatever. They are their archetype by name only, not having the skills necessary to preform their duties properly.

This is bad because, although they may be able to kick a little butt in the beginning, pretty soon they're going to realize that they've spread their skills way to thin and therefore will never be able to stay up to par in their profession. And even if they do get their skills up to a decent level they'll be so far behind the level they should be that it may be impossible to catch up to, say, a decker who was created for the sole purpose of being a decker. A problem seems to arise when the individual creating a decker, for some reason or another, figures he's going to get his face bashed in if he takes a body of 3 and diverts all of his skills into those he needs to successfully preform his job. This perception usually arises because of one of two reasons.

The first is caused by a situation, probably in a past game, in which he was placed into a position where he had to confront armed individuals

and ended up getting wasted. My question is: Why was the decker (or, again, rigger or whatever) in such a position? Why in the hell wasn't he standing BEHIND a fellow team member who actually knows how to use a gun and who has more than enough dermal plating to take the bullets? Or even down the street at a cyberterminal? For whatever reason it should be clear that the decker should never, ever have placed himself in such a position. The moment it was apparent that a fire fight was immanent he should have literally dove (being careful not to scratch his deck) behind a fellow group member who was more qualified to deal with the situation. If the decker was motivated he would have attempted to find a location to jack in and start playing with the lights or messing with local security robots or SOMETHING that he could actually do. And if there were no other options then, perhaps, he could have pulled out his light pistol and cracked off a few rounds blindly while hiding behind a wall of ballistic concrete. If he was working with a professional shadowrunning group the street samurai or former mercenaries or anybody else with combat experience, and if these people liked having him around, they would have pointed out, probably by pushing the decker out of the line of fire, that it would be best if he left the fighting to them. The last thing a group wants to do is lose their decker or, god forbid, their rigger. How would they get home?

The second reason an individual may be motivated to take too many skills outside of their given area of expertise is, and I hate to say this, a bad gamemaster. If the gamemaster is constantly throwing large numbers of heavily armed large people at the group, far to many large people than its crew of sams or mages can handle, then the group is certain to get wasted if all of its members don't have good combat skills. In such situations it is important that the gamemaster balance what they send after the PCs against what the PCs can actually take without getting totally smeared. If the gamemaster has written up five guards with assault rifles and the group consists of a decker, rigger, and a samurai then he may wish to drop the number to two or three to create more of a balance. The decker will run off and try to retrieve his vehicle, and the decker will huddle in the corner and try to get his heart started again after seeing many armed people coming after him and his friends.

Yes, many of you may or may not be saying, but what happens when the group has no decker? Won't another character have to compensate for the lack of decking skills by developing them? Uh, no. At least not in my game. I figure, on any given night, there a plenty of NPC deckers who would be

more than happy to take a cut of the pay for doing what they do best. Hire one. Sure it's a little extra work for the GM but nobody said his job would be easy. In fact, you should buy him stuff for being such a nice guy.

But how can GMs directly deal with players who insist on trying to be everything? I'm glad you asked. If the possibility of not amounting to anything because the PC has a hundred different skills, none of which are all that spectacular, doesn't phase them you can try a semi humiliating technique I may or may not have brought up yet, depending on where this particular section is placed in the final document. When a Johnson hires a rigger or decker they want to hire a rigger or a decker. They don't want to shell out new yen to a person who kinda-sorta knows decking but is also pretty good at athletics, boxing, knitting, and a dozen other things. They want to know what A: This person knows how to deck. and B: This person has a good reputation. If he finds out the character once went to a decking bar and got laughed onto the street because he mixed up the concept of Constructual Object Expression and Expressional Object Construction during a conversation along with getting his butt kicked while running Tam's Under The Needle because he didn't know about the new Blaster upgrades because he was too busy getting that wrist gyromount installed then, at the very least, he's going to lose a few bucks from his paycheck.

If anything, choosing and sticking to an archetype will yield much satisfaction when you realize that, despite your inability to fire a gun without flinching, you can really kick ass in your chosen profession. And if you don't, you may learn of the ultimate discomfort of getting wasted because you tried to be a samurai when you were really nothing more than a data entry specialist with a handgun.

Living In A Box

The exact opposite of having an identity crisis is when all a character takes are skills directly related to their profession and absolutely nothing else. Although this problem is rare it can amount to multiple degrees of frustration for a gamemaster when he encounters a street samurai with no vehicle, negotiation, ettiquette, or language skills whatsoever and no way of justify why this is.

I'm not going to dwell on this subject because it's not that prevalent a problem. All I can say is that, despite the feeling of annoyance I get when I

ask a character how they're going to get downtown and they reply "I dunno.", this issue can actually create interesting roleplaying opportunities if used effectively. Take, for example, the amateur street samurai who has never once had a run outside his little corner of the barrens. He may possess no vehicle skills because he has never, ever been in a vehicle for longer than a few minutes. Or, perhaps, he used to be a gang member and was just now attempting to escape his situation. Through a street contact he hooked up with a group who needed muscle and, as the group's rigger lands his Ares Dragon in the middle of an abandoned lot, the former gang member looks upon the monstrosity with awe.

Or maybe not. In any case, and in contradiction to the above, having a too limited number of skills is also a definite way to limit your roleplaying possibilities. I will not allow a character to effectively negotiate in the gaming world unless they have the proper skill, even if, in reality, they could convince me the world was flat and that airplanes were held up by strings. But, again, in contradiction to my contradiction, this also gives the player the opportunity the roleplay the development of these skills. Sure they may never be all that hot but they'll keep him from getting his butt kicked when he tries to finagle his way past a bouncer by flashing a few bucks.

Side Effects

A roleplaying issue which didn't really become apparent to me until I read through the opening chapters of Cybetechnology is the effect that various "internal" forces have on a character's tendencies and personality. To clarify, these forces can include magical ability, perceptions of reality through mechanical devices (such as decking or rigging), cyber and bodyware, and other aspects. Until this point I had conducted the game under the notion that a character becomes used to these forces and their presence is eventually acknowledged subconsciously and does not need to be dealt with under normal roleplaying circumstances. I see now I was greatly mistaken.

When something as profoundly life altering as cyberware or magical power enters an individual or that individual's soul it is impossible to ignore. Sure, they may get used to it, but I firmly believe they will still recognize that these forces are there and they will profoundly effect the individual for their entire life. Far too often I see a mage PC tossing around spells without showing any acknowledgement whatso-

ever of the fact that they are channeling a small aspect of something they, even after years of study, hardly understand through their frail meat bodies. A samurai will waltz around with high level wired reflexes, ignoring the fact that this equipment creates the possibility that he will strike out and kill his own mother if she surprises him. A decker may go through the simply process of buying a soy burger after spending a two days in the matrix without even hinting that he may not be perceiving this reality quite right and may, unconsciously, try to use a nonexistent attack program to crash the nonexistent persona of the very real troll who just cut in line in front of him.

When you create a character already loaded down with spells or cyberware you sometimes lose respect, or simply never have respect, for the mysterious mechanics or magic which effect your character's existence. It is as if the character was "pressed" at a factory, rolled off the assembly line, and waltzed onto the street without a second thought about their cyberware or the pain and confusion involved in getting it. Recently I gamemastered a game in which a character, a former corporate worker with no more cyberware than a datajack, was seriously injured attempting to hijack a truck. Fortunately the individuals who hired the runners were connected, strangely, with Lone Star who were nice enough to haul him, or what was left of him, to a decent police owned medical facility. There the character had both an arm and a leg replaced, although he didn't realize this until he awoke a week later in a Seattle hospital. The player roleplayed this experience beautifully. He hated the new cyberware, the phantom limb experiences, the fact that he felt less human. He's still bitter, although some of this bitterness has subsided since he realized the gleaming chrome from his right arm gains him a bit more respect and allows him to fit in more at the runner clubs. But, still, he has nightmares about an arm that is not his own. Sometimes he drinks to suppress the feeling that the arm owns him and not the other way around. Had he had the limbs from the start he probably wouldn't have given them a second thought.

And on a final note to anybody who may view the roleplaying prospects I've portrayed as being nothing but a string of downers, I present a situation I experienced while, believe it or not, playing a PC. To make a long story short my former Renreku company Man character, one of the few Ex-Renrekus who are still alive, and the rest of his team had entered an upper deck of a parking garage. For one reason or another I was mulling around the idea that wired reflexes make you incredibly edgy and at that exact moment somebody tapped me on his shoulder. My gun

was out of its holster and into the face of the offending tapper before the gamemaster had even finished letting me know somebody was there. I observed, my gun a mere millimeter away from his nose, a corporate official with the Renreku Red Samurai emblem on his security armor. He spoke:

"Renreku high command has issued orders for the retrieval and/or elimination of a certain Harashiko Grey. Would that be you?"

Bang.

Slaughtering Sammys

The following is a response I sent to somebody requesting a method of dealing with slaughtering samurai. I would have elaborated on the items written but I have a valid excuse not to, this excuse being that I am profoundly lazy. - - - Slaughtering Sammys are a definite problem. Before you take any action against the character you should ask yourself one thing: Is the character the problem or is the PLAYER the problem. Dealing with bad ass characters is much easier than dealing with a bad ass player. The character you can simply kill. Unfortunately certain laws restrict doing the same to the player. If the player is the problem then you can waste as many of his characters as you want and he'll just come back with a new one who's a bigger asshole than the last. So, in short, I suggest the following. **PROBLEM CHARACTER:** Most likely the rest of the PCs in his shadowrunning group are just as pissed as you are. I suggest using the "you kill them, they kill you" philosophy. What this means is that you don't make things tougher for the character by bringing him, along with the rest of his group, into a bad situation. You get a lot of NPCs he has wronged by killing their friends, loved ones, ect., to target him personally. These NPCs have no qualms against the rest of the group, they probably won't even try to hurt them. They are after the Sammy, and the sammy alone. And if he's being as much as a jerk as you say the rest of his group won't mind turning their backs for a while. **PROBLEM PLAYER:** Since the player exists in reality you can simply lecture him. And the lecture should have one aim: To make him feel like shit. Degrade the bastard. Insult his roleplaying ability, because if he is playing the same bad ass all the time he's not being all that original. Let him know he's messing up the game for everybody else. If he says he doesn't care, tell him, but only as a last resort, to "Go find someone to play D&D with, you can't handle a game as good as Shadowrun." Make sure this takes place before or after the game so it doesn't interrupt play. And if he still doesn't

care...tell him to go home.

Dealing With Dragons (or "Put Down The RPG Launcher, Damnit!")

I believe I've sent my PCs on a grand total of maybe two runs which have involved coming into contact with an actual dragon, usually in the form of runners getting stuck out in the wilderness and wandering a bit too close to a cave containing one of the highly territorial beasts. And during the grand total of two runs involving such creatures the runners have responded to the dragon's presence by launching an attack on it or its dwelling with a degree ferocity that would better suited for an assault on a small European commonwealth or corporate headquarters. On both occasions the dragon was simply taking a nap.

Now what gets me is I had no intention of having the dragon attempt to rack up the runners in any way, shape, or form and had simply inserted it into the sequence of events for the sake of inserting it into the sequence of events. And then the runners pick its signature up on thermo and proceed to direct large, self propelled ordinance in its direction for god knows what reason. I'm guessing it's because they were afraid it might try to waste them but, from what I know of dragons, if you don't mess with them they don't mess with you as well. Dragons are as intelligent (if not more so) as the runners themselves and knows full well the benefits of not going around wasting stuff for the sake of wasting stuff. If I was in the PCs position I would be THRILLED to come across a dragon and although I'd have my grenade launcher at the ready I'd want to see if I could talk to it, ask some advice, see if it would pee in a cup so I could sell it to a magician, etc.

Perhaps my subject is not that of dragons specifically, but the idea that sometimes things need to be thought out more than they usually are and that, at times, there is the need to lighten up on the defensive posture PCs usually hold and simply see what's going on before they start to make things explode. Some runners are so on edge that their reaction to anything; scary people, large creatures, sunspots, etc., involves the use of large caliber weapons. Sometimes its more interesting to put the safety on for a few seconds and see what's up. The dragons will thank you.

Ha Ha, Very Funny

There are some people in this world who are gifted with the ability to come up with a snappy

and humorous response for virtually every possible statement a human can make and although this is great at parties involving beverages with a high alcohol content it can make a role-playing session a living hell for the gamemaster. I am good friends with such an individual who, somehow, sneaked into my apartment late one night, opened up my skull, examined the portion of my brain which responds to humor, and wrote up a list of remarks which have such a profound effect on this brain portion that he would routinely have me laughing until I contracted, in pain, into the fetal position. It was quite a distraction.

Fortunately I was good enough friends with this individual that I could tell him that if he didn't stop I would kill his character and then set his car (my friend's, not his character's) on fire, possibly with him in it. He agreed to cool it and aside from the occasional snide remark things returned to as close to a state of normality as one can expect for this particular group. Unfortunately, it's not always this easy. There always seems to be the token player who can make a joke out of anything or, along the same lines, a smart ass comment or complaint. Usually the complaints and comments take the form of low volume mumbling regarding the way I handle the rules such as, "Target of six, sheesh, should've been five because I wasn't running." Again, it delays the game because I have to commit time to seething over the fact that this prick should know by now that I could come up with a valid excuse for giving him a target of 45 and his comments are designed for the simple purpose of pissing me off.

There are two ways I handle such situations. Method number one involves me shouting at the individual a few times, as a warning, and then simply getting up and leaving and going somewhere to shoot pool for maybe an hour or so while the rest of the players scream and holler at the individual for ruining the game. By the time I return either this person has left or has been beaten into submission by his fellow players. Method number two involves a nasty little technique by which the gamemaster simply makes all of these annoying little comments audible in the fantasy world. An example:

PLAYER (In Game): I want forty thousand for the run instead of the thirty we set earlier.

GM: Roll negotiations, target of six.

PLAYER (In Reality, mumbling): Yeah, six. Should've been a five.

NPC: Did you call me a Six? That gang killed my brother! Die samurai scum!!!!

And then of course the player will say: "But I didn't say that!", to which I usually reply: "I don't care." or "Yes you did." and a large argument erupts

and eventually, after this occurs five or six times, the player gets the point. Either that or I go shoot some pool.

Some Things Just Don't Make Sense

I admit it, every once in a while I mug my PCs. Not every day, mind you, just the occasional beating to remind the character that general crime oriented scum does not exclude runners as targets. I also have to admit that my assailants usually lose, as would be expected, muggers are rarely equipped and skilled enough to take on a runner which is why they rarely do. But when one of these events falls far from the characters' favor, there's usually hell to pay. Unfortunately this hell usually manifests in reality.

"Why the (bad word) did you do that?????" the player yells into my face, swinging their die bag in a menacing manner. "It had nothing to do with the run! It had no plot forwarding value! And it just didn't make any sense!"

I usually take this opportunity to remind the player of the concept behind a mugging, the fact that weird things happen, and that, yes, some things just don't make sense. From here the conversation usually turns into one of those "GM being an asshole" tirades ending with the player's character running around doing random and senseless things and eventually getting run over by a Citymaster. The simplest way of dealing with the problem is by showing how random and seemingly senseless acts of aggression can befall oneself in reality as well as in fantasy by spontaneously taking the actual player out back and beating the hell out of him. Unfortunately most localities prohibit such actions so you'll probably have to make a little speech. Here's mine:

Walk down the street. What do you see? Actions. Actions which from our perspective seem to be spontaneously and randomly occurring around us. Fortunately, most of these actions are rather harmless. Your characters live in a world where a much larger portion of these actions are not so innocent. Simply because you are a runner does not mean you are only in risk because of this profession. You also face the risks millions of other people face in their every day lives. You may not fall to an archenemy's bullet, you may fall to a child thief who's a lucky shot. You may not go out in a blaze of glory as a panzer round rips through your Wasp, you may have your throat slashed by a passing go gang as you're crossing the street. There's a lot more to be worried about than the cops and the cops. There is also reality. So don't

be such a baby.

This usually results in either understanding or the random hurtling of pizza oriented food products in my direction. Either way I win. I like pizza.

Fantasy Within Fantasy

Every once in a while I like to get a little weird. Ok, a little weirder. Even the world of Shadowrun with its glorious mingling of magic, electronics, and flesh can seem limited at times. You sometimes want to create a completely different shadowrun setting, where guns don't work, where there's no calling for backup, where the sky is always blood red, and the sand can talk.

Agreed, it is possible to do this on the planet Earth in the year 2055 but anyone who's tried it realizes that things can get kind of stupid. If your campaign exists in the world of Shadowrun it has to follow its rules. If your runner wants to make a cellular phone call you have to think of a reason why it won't connect. If your runner decides to walk directly West for days you'll have to figure out why they don't eventually run into a city they know is there. The situation can quickly get out of hand with the gamemaster having to create some kind of excuse for everything. Realism is lost and the fantasy world is shattered with inconsistencies.

It's ten times easier to simply create a world away from Earth and 2050 and find a way for the runners to end up there. No longer in a world governed by any known laws or rules the gamemaster can state that green marbles roll up and not have to give an excuse why. It is a new world. A world of fantasy for the characters as well as the actual players.

I've created two of these worlds: One sort of D&Dish while the other closely resembled the world of Spacemaster. And it was fun as hell. Of course the runners had a goal while they were in these places and knew what they had to do to get back and, surprisingly, had very little problem with the fact that their pistols didn't function because, hell, no bad guy's would either.

But that isn't even the best part. It was a rush to introduce elements from the world of Shadowrun into these fantasy lands. In my D&D setting a local tribe worshipped a god they called "Pansaire". The runners eventually came into contact this god: A fully operational Banshee Panzer which had crashed into the alternative world years before. In the future they encountered a an Aztechnology nuclear satellite which had disappeared a few years earlier and which has in the process of being converted into a bomb.

The introduction of a fantasy campaign should be carefully planned, it being most accepted and enjoyed when the runners are in the middle of a rut of defeats or screw overs. But don't get too out there or you might never be able to switch back. A simple escape can do wonders for morale but it can also destroy the characters reality. And, most importantly, always make sure they have a way to get back home.

Cannon Fodder

When I first started GMing I generated NPCs using the "Crunch all you want, we'll make more" philosophy. Not only did this add up to a lot of time filling out sheets but it also galvanized the players to the point that they had the same emotional reaction to blowing away a cop as they did towards buying a bag of potato chips. I blame this attitude primarily on my few very early role-playing experiences, mainly with obscure systems which are no longer around, where the GM equivalent would send forty Nazis at me while I was carrying around a machine gun while making it perfectly clear that my only option was to turn them into coleslaw. This really messed me up.

My change in attitude paralleled a change in gaming philosophy. I decided one session to try GMing without NPC sheets and instead use NPC descriptions. With this change I also made the conversion from plot driven runs to personality driven LIVES. Many interesting things began to happen. First off, my NPCs fought to the death a lot less often. When I thought of a security guard as a B:4 Q:5 S:5 C: 3 I:4 W:3 piece of paper it was a lot easier to let him get wasted. When I thought of him as Jim from Renton with two kids, a dog named Sammy, and a bracelet for his wife's birthday in his locker, things changed. The Yakuza soldier who normally would have stood in the middle of the street blazing away at the runner's van before getting run over suddenly started hiding behind stuff and taking more reserved shots. I really liked the feeling of depth and character I got from GMing this way. Converting my PCs was a bit trickier.

If your runners have any decency at all, the use of this playing method won't be all that tough to convert to. If you're GMing a bunch of cold blooded killers you're gonna have to trick them. I had turned my players into a bunch of heartless pricks (and prickettes) who had gotten to the point that they probably would have firebombed a puppy farm for the right price. Then, one day, they hooked up with an NPC who went by the street name of Kill Em' All McKay. McKay

needed assistance with a hit on a small gang living in an old apartment complex. As the runners walked up the staircase they encountered a teenage boy who, upon seeing them, turned and ran. One of the runners reacted by mowing the kid down with an SMG. And then, with great drama, Kill Em All McKay, he who is feared by God himself, responded to the action with complete horror and revulsion. "You shot a kid! A goddamn kid!!!". The boy, who was not entirely dead, proceeded to drag himself with one arm, crying, screaming, and trailing blood, into his mother's apartment. And, to top it off, his little sister, aged seven years, boldly waddled into the hallway holding onto her blankie and, through a river of tears, screamed at the runners for hurting her big brother. The runners mellowed a bit after this.

Personality Problems

Next topic: the one annoying little player type in every running group who can't role-play worth crap. Sure they try but for some reason or another, perhaps faulty genetics, they can only take on one personality: their own. I actually feel kinda sorry for these people and now regret the times in the past when I simply booted them out of the group. All of these people want to be creative, otherwise they wouldn't even be trying to play. One thing you can do to solve this problem is make them answer all of the questions on the personality "survey" located in the Second Edition rulebook, and then yell at them every time they screw up. But if you prefer a more subtle method, try the following.

Put them in a situation they couldn't possibly use their normal personality to react to. Read the player's personality. What do they never say or, better yet, what are they afraid to say? Then put them into a situation where they absolutely must say these things or something very, very bad will happen to them. They'll be forced to make something up, and making stuff up is what role-playing is all about. I had a player once who was a fairly reserved individual in both reality and the game. I railroaded him into a situation where he was being paid to work with a bunch of amateur runners who were performing a raid on a weapons warehouse. I had these NPC runners come up with the stupidest plan ever imaginable, something involving a hot air balloon and crossbows, a plan which, even if it went WELL, would have gotten them all killed several times over. The player finally voiced an alternate plan as the NPCs were in the process of replacing their arrowheads with suction cups.

Say Something!

GM: You enter a warehouse the size of a football stadium packed with a maze of crates and moving equipment. It is dimly lit, a few low wattage bulbs dangling from the catwalk overhead provide the only illumination. No windows can be observed and other than the large door through which you entered there is no other entrance visible to yourselves.

PCs:

GM: The catwalk creaks and faint footsteps on metal grating can be heard from the far side of the warehouse.

PCs:

GM: Your thermo vision picks up a faint heat signal moving up the catwalk.

PCs:

GM: The signal continues to approach and is now about twenty meters away. The thermo intensity appears faint around the upper body.

PCs:

GM: This is probably the result of a large amount of body armor.

PCs:

GM: As he enters the faint light you can see he is carrying an assault rifle.

PCs:

GM: With a grenade launcher.

PCs:

GM: He also has a kazoo up his nose.

PCs:

GM: In his other hand he appears to be carrying a Donna Summers album.

PCs:

GM: I believe it is the one with the remake of "MacArthur Park".

PCs:

GM: He ties a rope around the catwalk railing a begins to descend.

PCs: We shoot him.

OK, I know we all have our off nights. Maybe we haven't had enough sleep, or have to go to work the next day, or have been doing shots of Tequila for several hours. But it appears some groups are simply prone with the "_____ " disease. And when you GM it gets annoying. There are only so many things somebody can say about a warehouse and at times it feels as if the PCs would allow me to continue until I'm describing the individual termites infesting crate wood. It's nice to have help from time to time. It is a lot easier for a GM to answer questions about a location than it is for him or her to keep vomiting scenery.

There are several ways to conquer this problem. The simplest is to double the number of NPCs for every fifteen seconds the PCs don't say anything. But this results in the players getting wasted, and tons of NPC sheets, and it's no fun for anybody. A better way is to let the PCs generate some of their surrounding themselves. Although you do have to establish limits ("I'll dive into the cockpit of the Wasp.") it takes some of the load off the GM and speeds up the game tremendously. Instead of the PC: "What's immediately to my left?" Burned Out GM: "A crate" PC: "I'll dive behind it." dialogue you get to skip right to the end. The person I once bribed into being the GM so I could play let me do this and it was fun. There's TONS of things I had always wanted to do, simple things like vaulting off the head of a dwarf, that I normally couldn't do spontaneously without asking "Is a dwarf next to me?". Will allowing the PC to spontaneously reach for a paperweight and whip it through a window off set the game balance? Hasn't happened to me.

Do THIS!

I've never figured out why, while I'm keeping track of NPCs and half a million dice and fifteen out of date books, I can come up with better PC actions than the PCs can. Every GM has experienced it at least once. You're in the middle of a fire fight, the NPC is partially concealed behind an apartment's front door, the PC is across the room on the floor behind a couch and he just LAYS there, occasionally taking a shot at the door before returning to just LAYING there.

And the GM, pissed that he or she has to wait a full minute just to hear the PC say "I pop up and shoot" is silently screaming "Do this! Do THIS!" while two billion possible actions play jai-ali inside his skull. You just want to possess the player's body for a few moments and have him shatter the coffee table, grab a piece of glass, and frisbee it under the door and into the NPCs foot. But you can't and just sit around waiting for the PC to slowly say, once again, "I'll pop up and shoot."

The way I handle this is to have the NPCs beat the crap out of them with creativity. Not only does it give the PCs a glimpse at what they should be doing but it also gives the GM a way to divert his or her hostility so it doesn't result in a reality based speech. Give the NPCs weapons other than guns and skills which aren't based solely on making a bullet go really really fast. Have a troll throw furniture or an ork bust through a wall. Splash hot water in the kitchen, throw the top of a toilet, make traps out of razor blades. Get away from the BANG, bang, BANG, bang exchanges. And if all else fails: Force six turn gun into silly putty.

Blackjack's Law Of Having Money Without Spending It On Anything

One phenomenon I've continually encountered while GMing is a PC's tendency (at least those who run in my campaigns) to compile large amounts of cash for no apparent reason other than the desire to compile large amounts of cash. They never seem to spend it on ANYTHING, and it really ticks me off. See, I figure most runners acquire money so, in addition to buying the occasional object simply for fun, they can make themselves a better runner. A samurai would acquire money so he can upgrade his cyberware, a magic user so he can buy better foci, a decker so he can acquire a better deck. They at least have some kind of goal in mind, a goal which is logically attainable. The samurai, for example, may wish to upgrade his wired 1 to wired 2, he would not be saving up for a military grade targeting computer. Even the wired 1 to wired 2 jump may be extreme if the runner is a fledgling as it may take many, many runs to acquire the needed cash. In order for a PC to make more money, he must get better at what he does through the constant improvement of skills and equipment. If the runner saves for a year for his wired 2 he'll be stuck doing dinky runs until that time. If the runner does something less drastic, however, like upgrade his head gear with a cyber camera and better mag vision he is not only bet-

ter equipped for the kitty cat runs but also has the hardware necessary to embark on a whole new category of adventures, many of which pay more than those that simply require he blow someone away. If the runner continues with a series of these smaller upgrades he may quickly reach a point that within a few runs he has the cash to buy the wired 2. But this isn't my point. What the hell was my point? Oh, yeah..

My runners tend to build up large amounts of dough for no apparent reason and as a game master who is somewhat perturbed at never getting the chance to play and actually spend money myself, I am required to do something malicious. This brings us to "Blackjack's Law Of Having Money Without Spending It On Anything". The law's properties are simple: The more money you have for no reason, the more shit happens to you requiring that you spend it. Although ethically misguided, this is my favorite GM power. The runners are more than welcome to go on runs and stockpile new yen and never do anything with it. And I am more than welcome to give them many hints regarding what they should be doing with it in the form of destroyed vehicles and medical bills. Now please understand that if the runners somehow inform me, usually through good role playing and distribution of funds, that they do indeed have a goal in mind I don't touch them. If the runners go out, come back, and sit on their butts drinking Soyweiser and upgrading their hotel reservations and pastry snacks they may have a problem. Back in 1922 when I last played an actual PC he was always spending cash developing his skills and style and trying to better himself as a runner until an unfortunate Jackrabbit crash sent him through a windshield because he never wore a seat belt. The point is, he always had running on his mind. He had a hunger for being the best, but realized that there are certain logical steps he had to take to get there. When a runner doesn't improve he, and the game, become stagnate and boring.

Cows From Space

I have no idea who originated this idea but it seems to be a universal concept present in the unspoken architecture of any role playing game. It is a metaphor for ultimate GM control. It essentially involves the dropping of a cow, or other large object, onto the PC when he or she becomes too "disobedient". Now before all you player characters out there spit on the monitor let me carefully give you my definition of "disobedient". I consider a runner to be disobedient when he or she no longer follows the game

premise. Basically, the person is simply not playing the game. Not playing the game is usually achieved through really terrible role playing. I'm not referring to bad role playing as in forgetting to use your southern accent, I'm talking about a decker who never wants to go on any runs and wishes to spend the entire playing session blowing away nuns with an assault cannon. That kind of bad role playing. I'm sure we've all met players like this and if you're a GM trying to run a serious campaign or a player attempting to be true to your archetype it gets to the point that it is impossible to enjoy the game. And as far as I'm concerned if the player doesn't think he has to play the game right, neither do I. Fuck him. This is where the cows come in. It is the GMs method of blatantly telling the player that he is not wanted here. Methods such as gang ambushes or explosions don't work with these people because it may be unclear exactly what the GMs intentions are and muddies the other players perceptions of the GMs methods. There is no arguing with a cow from space. I've only had to use three cows because the players quickly got the hint and either left or readjusted their attitudes. Cows work, but use them sparingly.

Crazy Eye

I have to admit that, sometimes, after gamemastering for about a week because nobody will let me actually play (did I mention I never get to play?) I get a little lazy. Normally when a runner wants or has to go somewhere, they role play the journey. The verbal exchange usually takes on one of two forms. PLAYER: "I'll take the subway." ME: "Ok." Or: PLAYER: "I'll take the subway." ME: "And I'll assume that you're assuming the assault cannon and grenades will be concealed nicely underneath that leather jacket." Since my runners can never hold on to a car for more than a few days (See: Blackjack's Law Of Money) they usually end up having to take some alternative form of transit. Depending on how much ordinance they're toting along this can be rather simple or it can turn into an incredibly painful ordeal for both me and the runner. If I just don't feel like dealing with another turnstile fire fight I call in Crazy Eye.

Crazy Eye

Archetype: Bus Driver

Description: Appears to have had a rough time dealing with the Awakening resulting in his ingestion of mass quantities of various illicit substances. He has long messy white hair with a bald spot in the middle and appears to be in his mid fifties. He dresses in tattered army fatigues, sports pupils the size

of fleas, and talks so fast he could easily read off the first half of War and Peace in a little under a minute.

Information: Crazy Eye used to be a Seattle mass transit bus driver until they fired him for drinking tequila on the job. With his sole life focus thus taken away he purchased a bus of his own and psychotically continues to drive his old route. For a price he is more than willing to take a passenger anywhere that happens to be placed on dry land.

Ok, so there's Crazy Eye. During one of my down times he'll come rolling up to the runners and offer to take them where ever they need to go, again for a price. I tend to let him have the run of the town, driving psychotically on sidewalks, through walls, etc. He also provides great comical relief when things slow down or when the player's and I have had too much to drink.

Friends Of The NPC

Occasionally PCs need something to remind them that NPCs are people too. Although I do keep myself from outright banning players from creating the kill everybody type of character I do give them many reminders that the more people they kill, the more people will want to kill them. A scenario to illustrate my point:

The runners have just succeeded in extracting a scientist from a random megacorp and are now leaving via a stolen helicopter on the roof. As they leave a detachment of fifteen corporate soldiers pour onto the roof, weapons deployed, yet hold their fire because they have been ordered not to harm the scientist. The runner piloting the helicopter decides to react to the sudden appearance of troops by launching a salvo of APMs at the roof. Fifteen killed, no survivors.

Now let's review the scenario. Granted, the runners had no idea the guards were not going to open fire so the response was at least partially reasonable. Had the guards opened fire the helicopter probably would have been destroyed. The runner eliminated the enemy, thus removing the threat. Or did he? Let's do some math: 15 guards. I'll assume five had no family or friends. That leaves 10. I'll give half of them a spouse, a kid and two friends. The remaining five I'll give two friends as well. That leaves behind 30 people who are going to be very upset at what the runners did. Odds are at least a few of them are going to want to get even. And that's not to mention how pissed the company is. The company is probably the least of the runner's worries, however. When a corp seeks revenge it tends to utilize methods the runners have seen before and thus can prepare for. But normal

people aren't so systematic. Some may hire runners, some may charge at them with a knife, some may try to blow up their cars, etc. Through the runner's action he has unleashed a Pandora's box of threat. If the runners did this on a regular basis, the whole world would soon be after them.

So what should the runners have done? I don't know. Fire one missile and take out a sacrifice guard. Maybe just point the missile tubes at them, that alone would make most of them seek cover. The point is that the runners must realize that every action they take is not without consequence. Some consequences are petty..some are down right deadly.

Shadowrun 101 - A Basic Run (And How To Not Screw It Up)

A simple sample:

Joe samurai is hired to break into a corp's office and steal the CPU from his desktop computer. They need the hardware within three hours. It is now one in the afternoon. The name of the corporation is Corp Inc. It is located in an A section of downtown Seattle. The office of Mr. Coogle, the corp, is located on the tenth floor in room 12.

Possible courses of action, can you guess which one's the best?

A. Joe samurai walks into the lobby of Corp Inc. with a panther cannon and a LAW screaming, "Is there a Mr. Coogle here? I'm looking for a Mr. Coogle..."

B. Joe samurai drives his heavily armed and recently stolen City Master into the lobby, pops open the hatch, and screams "Is there a Mr. Coogle here? I'm looking for a Mr. Coogle..."

C. Joe samurai hooks up with Joan Decker and Jack Shaman and they drive to the location, Joan in a separate car. They drive past the building once and pull into a nearby parking lot, five new yen an hour. Joan had noticed two security cameras on the outside of the building and a guard in the lobby. Jack Shaman tells everybody he'll be right back, pops into astral space and discovers that astral security, if any, is out to lunch. He also spots a guard and a camera by the elevator of each floor. Before being frightened back into his body by a pissed off Spirit Of Man he takes a quick look at the target room, discovering no security systems and what could possibly be Mr. Coogle happily singing to himself on the can. He returns to find Joan gone and Joe buck naked in the back of the Brumby, changing into a suit. Jack briefs Joe on the corporation's

"security" and Joe laughs so hard that he almost drops his fake ID. Joe in turn informs Jack that while he was gone Joan phoned a friend who gave her some access codes and a floor plan which she printed out before leaving to find a nice isolated place to jack in. Jack says "neato" and flips a coin as he cannot decide whether to stun someone as a diversion, or blow something up. It comes up tails and Jack begins to look around for a nice Electrocar he can wreck. Jack puts on his head set and Joe thinks his into action as he exits the vehicle and merges with the rush of corporate foot traffic. After stopping for a soy wiener at a small cart across the street from Corp Inc. the security cameras begin to nod. Everything is clear. As Joe crosses the street he notices that there is a patrol car in the area and informs Jack that he should not blow up anything just yet. He enters the building and is promptly intercepted by a big, burly security guard named Alf who requests to see his ID. Joe produced the fake and holds his breath. Alf's expression turns to that of a smile as he compliments Mr. Shurbert's new hair cut and allows him to proceed. Joe runner enters an elevator, notices that the one and three buttons are flashing in rapid sequence, and quickly gets off. Apparently Joan thinks it better that he take the stairs. Hoping that nobody noticed the trip up he briskly enters a stairwell and begins the climb to the tenth floor. On the way up he notices that one of the security cameras is nodding, smiles, and continues on his way. Once at the tenth floor he walks at a business person speed past the guard and over to office twelve. He knocks. Nobody answers. Apparently Mr. Coogle is out getting lunch, or else unconscious on the toilet. Joe figures it is possibility one and comes to the realization that he's been standing in front of the office door for a good ten seconds and the guard is beginning to take notice. Quickly he enters a security code and, with a loud obnoxious yelp, the device rejects it. He tries another and the same thing occurs. Joe runner is beginning to get worried, even more so as the guard approaches with a quizzical look on his skinny elven face. This would be a good time for Joe to panic, were he not a professional. He quickly surveys the situation. Guard at four meters, two business types in the vicinity as well. He hears Jack's headset hit the van floor. The guard is in Joe's face now. Jack has a Manhunter in his belt. He decides to wait. A call on the guard's radio. A seemingly possessed troll has barged into the lobby and has commenced with urinating on everything. All available guards to the lobby. The camera behind the guard begins to nod and the door lock snaps open. Joe runner says something witty as he and the guard part and Joe enters the office. Jack is back on

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his head set and explains that the troll was his idea as Joe breaks out his electronics kit and removes Mr. Coogles CPU. Joan's voice startles him as it suddenly emerges from an intercom box and she informs him that the print scanners on the elevator buttons are now deactivated. On the way down Joe decides to be safe and take the stairs anyway. He exits onto the street after wading through a crowd of business types and security personnel who have gathered to watch the now hog tied troll roll around on the floor and attempt to figure out what the hell is going on. Joe stops for another hot dog before meeting up with Jack and Joan and heading to the drop off location.

Which option's best? If you guessed C, you get a cookie.

This run is probably one of the simplest out there. No assault cannons or Wasps or dragons or Black IC or demons with your name on them. A simple in and out. Joe samurai's scenario went off fairly well. Here are some points I felt were important.

*The GM didn't do anything to bail Joe out of a tough situation, his fellow runners did. Had Jack just sat around doing nothing the events on the tenth floor could have turned ugly. Had Joan done the same he never would have made it off the ground floor. Joan had a constant eye on Joe's progress and made sure his path was clear. Jack was ready to jump in at a moment's notice, which he did without putting himself or the rest of the team in further risk.

*Joe kept his cool. He could have started blasting when cornered on the tenth's floor and may have succeeded in his mission using methods of that type. But he didn't have to, and probably didn't want to. Blowing away a messed up ex-runner with a vendetta against children is one thing. Taking out a security guard for walking down the hallway is another.

It is doubtful that any actual run would ever go down this smoothly. Usually the group is lacking either the necessary equipment or personnel required to do the job perfectly. Had Joan not existed the entire approach to the situation would have been different. This team used what they had to their utmost potential and that is what made the difference.

This story also represents my own personal bias against what I deem unnecessary violence. The group could have pumped the building full of cyanide and then blown it up after taking the loot. They could have gone in with silent APDS flinging assault rifles and taken everybody out. And as a GM I should tolerate their actions without bias. But I normally won't. This doesn't mean you can't snipe off guards around a compound or HMG a gang headquarters. Sometimes you almost have to. But think first: Is this what my

character would really do? And if he would, make sure you can justify it to yourself in several ways just to be sure. Sometimes you have to do really terrible things to live, just make sure you're not living to do really terrible things. Unless that's what your character is all about.

In which case he won't even make it through one of my gaming sessions.