

Behind the Shield: On Alignment, or "I'm not EVIL!"

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I can't begin to count the number of players who've whined to me about their problems with alignment. I constantly encounter lesser gamers who complain about the "limitations" of "arbitrary" categorizations of behavior. They mince about and split hairs over the distinctions between law and good or what have you. Well, I'm sick of it! So is every GM you've ever met. Therefore, as much as I am allowed to by the GM's Oath, I am about to reveal to you players the secrets of playing WITHIN the alignment system!

Understanding Morality and Ethics

The first key to understanding alignment is to understand what the different components actually mean. Many people assume that the alignment descriptions in the PHB are the end-all and be-all of alignment in HackMaster. Not so! Those write-ups are a simple, quick-and-dirty way of touching on the grand complexity of the world's greatest alignment system.

Obviously, the major portion of your character's alignment is his morality, i.e.- his tendencies towards good or evil. We put this portion of the alignment second because it sounds better, but it's really the most important. How often do you see clerics casting a protection spell against lawful creatures? It happens all the time in lesser game systems, but not in a real game like HackMaster!

MORALITY

So, what does it mean to be "good" or "evil"? Well, in a proper system like HackMaster, morality is outlined by life-and-death choices. For this is the quality of right or wrong in an action. Morality is defined by the choices that the character that goes against his Gawd's mores!

Good represents qualities like mercy, justice, and charity. Evil, on the other hand, is shown through cruelty, vengeance, and avarice. Good characters believe in the inherent value of all good and natural creatures, while evil characters believe only in the value of the self and those who are important to him. It's worth noting

that good characters need not believe in equality or "sharing", depending on the ethical portion of their alignment.

Okay, fine. You don't understand what mercy or vengeance means. I'll define them for you.

Avarice: The quality of pursuing personal gains regardless of the suffering and loss it causes to others. An avaricious person need not be merely greedy or obsessed. He just places his own goals above the life, liberty, and happiness of other people. He will quite cheerfully steal every last copper from his peasants or befoul a town's water supply with his mine tailings if it suits his purposes.

Charity: The quality of giving aid to those less fortunate than oneself. It does not necessarily mean that a charitable character must beggar himself to feed the poor. It does mean that the sight of starving children or sick people motivates the character to want to help them.

Cruelty: The quality of inflicting unnecessary pain and suffering on others. A cruel person doesn't usually want to torture every person he meets, but he will certainly torment his enemies if he's given the chance. A cruel person doesn't just want to steal from his victims, he wants to destroy them- to burn their homes, slay their livestock, and salt their farmland.

Justice: The quality of seeking balance in a dispute between persons. A just character wants to restore a "proper" relationship between the parties involved, regardless of whether the conflict was a crime or an argument over grazing rights. While restoring said balance might require violence to be done, the just person strives to avoid excessive force. Likewise, he tries to be fair in his business and personal relationships.

Mercy: The quality of avoiding the infliction of pain and preventing or easing the suffering of others. The merciful character will kill what he must, but he doesn't like to do so unnecessarily. Creatures that are not a threat to him or to the innocent will likely be spared, or forgiven, unless justice demands some chastisement. Likewise, a merciful character will seek to end suffering when he can. Mercy differs from charity in that it can include seemingly harsh measures like slitting the throat of a mortally wounded person to end his pain.

Vengeance: The quality of demanding personal satisfaction in a conflict, regardless of

EXCERPT

Management: The quality of being guided, restricted, or shepherded in one's actions. The managed character prefers to have his options clear-cut and simple to understand. He craves guidance from those above him and seeks to please them. Likewise, a managed character will generally try to understand and follow the law because he values its leadership and predictability.

Spontaneity: The quality of being unpredictable and acting based on conditions at the time. Spontaneous characters like to wait until the last minute to make up their mind. Even when they have "decided", they feel free to reverse themselves if the plan turns out to be a bad idea. While this trait can be maddening to consistent characters, it does not necessarily indicate that a person is insane or unreliable.

As always, an ethically neutral character may have some mix of lawful and chaotic traits, or he might simply hover somewhere between the two sets of features depending on his mood and the circumstances.

STAYING WITHIN YOUR CHARACTER'S ALIGNMENT

Now that we have a better understanding of what the different parts of a person's alignment mean, let's work on eradicating the other source of anti-GM whining- adherence. Many unskilled players believe that alignment restricts roleplaying and prevents their characters from "being who they really are". Face it, this is not the case! If you are a good roleplayer, alignment is just a tool like any other. Use it correctly and you will hone your character to a razor's edge. Use it poorly and you'll slice your hapless PC into hemorrhagic ribbons.

One thing that many players don't understand about alignment is that it represents an average. PCs rack up Alignment Infraction Points (AIPs) when they act outside their professed alignment. Thankfully (for you), AIPs that go in opposite directions cancel each other out. You need to consider this when you create your character. How? Well, first you should think about your character's beliefs, methods, motivations, and actions:

Beliefs represent the character's ideal for the world. Does he want his country to be a peaceful, bountiful haven or a smoking wasteland? This vision guides how your PC acts in a normal situation that has no deeply personal

consequences. This is one part of who your character is. Use your knowledge of alignments to assign an alignment to this vision. Now plot it on the twin axes of good-evil and law-chaos.

Methods indicate the ways that your character seeks to make his worldview a reality. It is the way he imposes his beliefs on the world, when push comes to shove. For instance, a character who wants to create a hippy paradise (CG) might feel that harshly regimented cruelty (LE) is the only way to clear out the dead weight and free the people. Look at the Soviet Union. It happens. Assign an alignment to your PC's methods and plot it.

Motivations tell us about what the character wants out of his life. Does he want to become a king and rule an orderly realm or does he want to be a rugged mountaineer, hacking a living out of the cruel, uncaring wilderness? Motivations show us what kinds of things the PC is doing when he's relaxed or just mucking about. You should also assign this portion of your character's personality an alignment and plot it on your axes.

Actions show the techniques that your character uses to fulfill his personal goals and motivations when the chips are down. Is he selfless and kind, hoping that his actions will earn him a just reward, or does he viciously pursue his aims, regardless of who gets in the way? You should also assign an alignment to his actions and plot it on the axes.

Now that you've plotted all four alignments on the twin axes of good and evil, law and chaos, you should connect all the dots with lines. In some cases, your PC might live mostly in one alignment, so no connecting is necessary. If this happens, just choose that alignment. If instead you find that your alignments are scattered around the board, find the intersection of the lines. That intersection represents the alignment you should use for your character. Of course, you might wind up on an edge or a corner, and you'll have to make a judgment call based on how you view the character. Even so, you'll still be better off than the poor fool who just chooses an alignment because it sounds fun.

Why? Well, remember how I said that alignment is an average? The dots you plotted show us the likely types of AIPs your character might earn. By starting your character at a happy medium, you reduce the odds of a character wandering out of his professed alignment and

being forced into a new one. It's always better to have your PC's alignment shift **before** you start the game than after!

In general, a cleric (but not a druid, zealot, paladin, or the like) can start the game with an alignment that is within one step of his God's alignment on either the law-chaos axis or the good-evil axis (but not both). To do so, the character's Beliefs and at least one other alignment-related trait (Methods, Motivations, or Actions) must be the same alignment as the deity in question. GMs may determine that some churches have broader or narrower alignment restrictions, however.

This represents the philosophical differences inherent in any large organization. For instance, a LG church (like Benyar's) might include harsh LN inquisitors and independent NG evangelists. This also allows clerics who later change to another allowed alignment to regain their spell casting powers after atoning, but without reverting to their old alignment. Such characters still suffer any other consequences of the shift, however.

ANOMALIES

Another way that you can add depth to your character while keeping within his professed alignment is to establish behavioral anomalies. An anomaly is a narrow set of circumstances under which the character acts quite contrary to his alignment. Usually these are tied to the character's background, quirks and flaws. They can also be great ways to confuse your fellow players!

For instance, a CE thief might from time to time be unaccountably charitable to street urchins because they remind him of his dead kid brother. Likewise, a LG paladin who holds enmity towards Goblins might be unimaginably vengeful towards them, yet show great mercy towards Orcs and Kobolds. Further constraints within his alignment so long as he can justify it within the logic of his alignment and/or avoids taking it too far. Remember, evil characters can easily be kind to those they value and slaughtering the sick and suffering can at times be good. It's all about point of view and remaining true to the core of your alignment.

The important thing is that you work out the anomaly with your GM ahead of time. You may still get AIPs, but if you work with your GM to add flavor and interest to the game, he'll usually go easier on you. Just remember that anomalies are not a "get out of jail free" coupon.

Only knights errant and misguided PCs get off that easy. In fact, such characters have mastered anomalies to the point that their alignment is primarily composed of anomalies!

PERSONALITIES

Now that I've given you the tools to play a well-rounded character without suffering an alignment audit, I'd like to throw in a few examples of characters you can create by this method:

THE OPERATIVE

Alignment: N

Beliefs: LG

Methods: CE

Motivations: N

Actions: N

The Operative is deeply committed to a LG worldview. He wants to create a well-ordered paradise in which every person knows his role and can live it without interference from the forces of evil and chaos. He knows, however, that wickedness lurks in the shadows and underbelly of society. To better combat these threats, he has chosen to work and fight like the scum he hunts. Indeed, he is so obsessed with this mission that he has no personal goals and doesn't really care what happens to him so long as the cause succeeds. This same character with some generic goals of settling down in a community and raising a family (NG) would probably be NG instead.

THE LIBERATOR

Alignment: CG

Beliefs: CN

Methods: CN

Motivations: NG

Actions: CG

The Liberator is worried that ordered society is destroying the strength of her people (yes, I threw in a female...deal). While she personally wants to live in a happy little community with her family and children, she understands that this option is ultimately bad for the world at large. Only in a world without artificial constraints and protections can the best traits of humanity flower and grow. She doesn't want to live in that world, but she wants to create it nonetheless.

EXCERPT