Using Rand to Generate Character Background

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Regarding the sin of dithering[1], I must confess that I'm especially guilty of it. As a regular GM, I am often confronted with the harrowing fact that I am nowhere near as prepared as I ought to be. However, this problem may be somewhat peculiar to my style of gaming, as I think it is more difficult to properly prepare a highly political campaign than it is to prepare a series of combats. After all, a political game is character-driven, and hence requires a vast quantity of background material on the characters themselves in order to achieve a critical depth (the point at which "immersion" may occur).

Last issue I talked about how to develop a political matrix for your campaign, and though I believe this is an essential first step, it is by no means the whole task. It is important not only to define character relationships but also to (at least briefly) sketch each character's personal history. What forces shaped their personalities? Why are they the way they are?

Through undertaking this process, otherwise bland NPCs are brought to life, and the players will begin to feel that these characters have some sort of substance, an authenticity which can only be achieved by really thinking about where these characters came from, what impacted their lives, and where (at least in their own hopes and dreams) they are going.

To this end, I wrote an msdos program a few years ago called *rand* [2] which is a *random stuff generator*. The basic idea is that you create your own random tables, plug them into the program, and let the good times roll.[3] Easier said than done, as random tables are a pain to create, but the nice part is that once you've done the work, they're available to you as a functioning idea-generator which you can tap whenever you need a spark of inspiration to speed along the imaginative process.

One of the projects included with the program is a fantasy character background generator, and it's a cinch to operate. You basically just tell it you want it to create a character background. It obligingly spits out some output.

Before I get to the process of interpreting this output, I want to make a disclaimer that I didn't work at creating the tables as long as I probably should have, but expanding them is relatively easy, and I'd encourage anyone who is interested to do so. If you do create random tables for use with this program, please email them to me, as I'd love to see your work and would be interested in distributing it with future releases.

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[1] Dithering, of course, is this issue's igtheme, and since I am so experienced at doing it (alas, if only there was such a job as professional ditherer, or perhaps an Olympic sport… I'm quite confident that I could bring home the gold), I feel that I'm in a unique position to comment about it. From my perspective, dithering is a result of not knowing (or not caring about) what happens next, which is itself a result of poor characterization. As usual and in summary, *people* are the problem. The solution: know thy characters!

[2] Find *Rand* at http://www.elektrasystems.net/~jimv/rand.htm

[3] Heh heh… a little pun there. Good times *roll*. Oh, never mind!

Example 1: Crabby

Program Output:

```
Ten Names: Crosby, Berlay, Morag, Parr,
   Econometrica, Idinck, Martis, Merle, Cindy,
   Shayera
Social Status: Poor
Primary Caregivers: Unrelated Guardian or
   Orphanage
Possible Personalities of Caregivers: greedy,
   greedy
Brothers & Sisters: No siblings
Possible Personalities of Siblings: friendly,
   organized, violent
Event: Character learns a skill
 Skill: Musical Instrument
Event: Natural Disaster
 Type of Disaster: Earthquake
Event: Character is hired
 Skill: Stonemasonry
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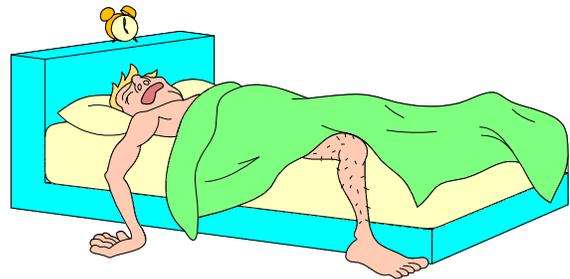

Interpretation:

Crabby doesn't know who his parents were. As far as he's concerned, he doesn't have any. Somehow, years ago, he was left as the doorstep of St. Berlay's, an orphanage for young ragamuffins. Though existing in large part on donations from the community and the crown, the orphanage also made a small amount of money by putting the children to work, although, of course, money wasn't their primary objective (or so they say). The children of St. Berlay's were made to work sixteen hour days more to instill in them a strong work ethic in preparation for their future lives.

Crabby, of course, didn't understand any of this at the time, and earned his nickname by being the most irritable morning person in the orphanage's history, going so far as to feign death on more than one occasion.

Though he has no brothers or sisters, he did make some friends at the orphanage, namely Morag, Parr, and Eck. Morag, despite being a dwarf, was perhaps the happiest of the children at St. Berlay's. He had no problem working sixteen-hour days and often remarked that he'd be perfectly happy working more if only someone would pay him. Parr, the half-elf, was strangely the most organized, trying to play leader of the workgang when their grownups weren't paying attention. And then there was Eck, the half-orc bully, who spent his earlier years beating on everyone until finally, at some point,

he got it into his head that they could all gang up on his and really kick his ass if they wanted to, at which point he began directing his testosterone outside the group rather than within it.

Crabby eventually took up playing *sticks & stones*, a form of street drumming, during their midday break. Of course, street drumming not only for entertainment, but also for communication among thieves and beggars, and so Crabby and his gang of orphans eventually began serving as lookouts for the local thieves guild, earning small favors as well as a little bit of coin on the side.

Late in the fall of last year, however, the city was nearly reduced to rubble by a major earthquake caused by a local mage who took his experiments too far (and was promptly lynched for his trouble). As a result, Crabby's entire gang have been moved outside the city and into the quarries where they all work as stonecutters. Word has it that the orphanage administrators are making out like bandits off their labor, and Crabby has an idea where they're keeping all the money. Very soon he and his gang will be discharged and cut loose since they are nearly of age, and when that happens, he worries about what they'll do to survive. Pulling off a heist against his own orphanage is looking like a better idea every day that he thinks about it.

Example 2: Yorick

Program Output:

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Ten Names: Melisandre, Abrstin,
   Pronos, Tammany, Pagetti, Knik,
   Dubhthach, Yorick, Huggins, Harq
Social Status: Wealthy
Primary Caregivers: Mother & Father
Possible Personalities of
   Caregivers: alcoholic, diplomatic
Brothers & Sisters: 4 siblings
Possible Personalities of
   Siblings: courageous,
   courageous, trusting
Event: Character is hired
 Skill: Weaponsmithing
Event: Character becomes a
   criminal
 Crimes: Mugging
 Results: Character goes to prison
 Type of Prison: Magical
 Prison Event: Injured
Event: Natural Disaster
 Type of Disaster: Fire
```

Interpretation:

Yorick was born to a wealthy family in the free city of Abrstin, situated between the borders of the Kingdom of Dubthach and the lands of the Knik. His father, Sir Andre the Wise, was an ambassador to the city, sent by King Pronos of Dubthach. His were a warrior folk who had colonized the western marches long before Abrstin was ever founded, and it was only with the protection of he and his family that Abrstin was able to grow and prosper despite being on the edge of territory claimed by the Knik hordes.

Yorick's mother, Melisa, raised Yorick as well as his two older brothers and two younger sisters in their tower along the city's west wall, however, in a trip to see her dying father, her caravan was raided by Knik barbarians, and she was slain, along with the two oldest sons, leaving Yorick, the middle child, successor to his father's title.

Unfortunately, with the loss of his wife and his two eldest boys, Sir Andre the Wise began taking to the bottle and was soon known as Sir Andre the Drunk. His antics eventually became an embarrassment to King Pronos, and he was stripped of his title and forced to abandon his tower to make room for the new Ambassador.

By this point, Yorick had already begun training as a knight, but the change in his father's status forced him to abandon this goal and instead work as an apprentice weaponsmith. During this time, Andre returned to Dubthach with his two daughters, Tami and Paige, to petition King Pronos for reinstatement, as well as to try to get the daughters married into good families. Alone for the first time in his life and angry at his father, Yorick fell in with the wrong sorts of people, and soon, after his workday, he would spend the night with his new friends, raising hell and occasionally mugging people.

It wasn't too long, however, before he tried mugging the wrong person. This resulted in him getting beaten nearly to the point of death. He woke up in Abrstin's dungeon, and in his weakened condition there, he could scarcely defend himself against the other prisoners, some of whom he had mugged during his recent life of crime. Hence, beatings became a daily ritual which he learned to endure. Breaking out, after all was not an option, as aside from stone and mortar, there were also magical wards placed about, making escape completely impossible. Furthermore, while they were in work gangs outside the prison, they were completely chained and well-guarded.

It was only during a massive assault upon Abrstin by the Knik, during which half the city was set ablaze, that the opportunity to escape was literally handed to him. It was on that day that the prison itself came under attack, and when the Knik warriors came in, rather than letting the prisoners be slain, the guards simply opened the cells and allowed the prisoners to take up weapons. In this way over a hundred prisoners, including Yorick, managed to escape during the ensuing chaos.

Now Yorick journeys to Dubthach to find his father and see what has become of his sisters. Unfortunately, he realizes that word of his incarceration may have preceded him, and due to long-standing treaties, he may be forced to return to Abrstin to finish his prison sentence if he is ever caught. Hence, he travels under an assumed name, keeping to himself and resorting to odd jobs as well as thievery and mugging to earn his way.

Obviously, this character history section of the program, at least as it stands currently, seems to have a tendency to generate characters from the seedier side of fantasy. Or perhaps that's just my own tendency during the interpretative process, as using the same output, you could conceivably come up with a somewhat more heroic backstory.

I'm eventually going to try to expand the program's character history tables and perhaps even create some which are geared specifically toward the Jinx campaign. I mention

this because it occurs to me that all of our campaigns are so different that some level of customization would probably be useful regardless of what type of game you're running.

It's probably worth mentioning that shortly after I started work on Rand's character generation tables, I got the idea in my head that the Central Casting series of books by Paul Jaquays would be particularly well-suited to the task, and that I could conceivably copy the tables from these books into the program. I contacted Jaquays for permission, but he predictably said no, so I ended up doing a somewhat half-assed job, basically making something that, although perfectly usable, is a long way from being ideal for even the so-called "generic" fantasy campaign.

Of course, while borrowing from one source is clearly plagiarism, borrowing from many is research, so herein follows a list of articles which you may find useful. These were culled from a couple of searches I ran using my yet-to-be-released RPG magazine/fanzine article index, yet another program on which I need to do a great deal of additional work before I'll be able to proclaim it seaworthy. Some of these articles will hopefully prove useful to you with respect to some aspect of character background generation. Others may prove useful in terms of giving you ideas on how to effectively use NPCs in your games. Whichever your preference, I hope you can get some mileage from this list.

Abyss:
Ab-002: random magical powers table
Ab-050: gming advice for running npcs as real people

Adventurers Club:
AC-021: foes with character: reasons & ways to replace monsters w/ npcs
AC-022: weaving characters (character creation/development)
AC-027: the advantage of disadvantages (characterization)

Adventurer:
Adv-004: close encounters w/ character & alignment/personality (gming advice)

Alarums & Excursions:
AE-304: freedom & limitation in character creation (opinion) [pm][4]

All of the Above:
AA-013: list of character quirks (gp)

Apprentice:
App-005: he's wearing what? (random possession tables)

Arcane:
Arc-003: strangeness & charm (how to make your character come alive)
Arc-004: the heart of the matter (roleplaying vs storytelling, character vs plot)
Arc-008: do it yourself, pt3: character generation (rpg design)
Arc-008: heading in the right direction: keeping characters simple
Arc-009: do it yourself, pt4: character generation (rpg design)
Arc-009: pull yourself together (characterization, players advice)

Arc-019: nobody's perfect (character creation)
Arc-020: heroes on the edge (character types & gming advice)

Arduin Grimoire:
Ard-001: random personality quirks/special abilities
Ard-003: starting character legacy, wealth, equipment charts
Ard-007: random special abilities/traits for nasty characters

Challenge:
Ch-025: on the use of npcs (gming advice)

Different Worlds:
DW-005: developing a character's appearance
DW-008: talent tables (random abilities for rpg characters)
DW-014: character personality profile (keeping track of npc traits & attitudes)

Dragon:
Dr-003: birth tables for d&d (social class, parents, character generation)
Dr-011: the play's the thing (player's advice on roleplaying & characterization)
Dr-015: random events for towns, cities, or countries (urban)
Dr-018: npc stats (random personality)
Dr-021: random title generation (names)
Dr-026: putting together a party of the spur of the moment (random npcs)
Dr-029: npcs have feelings too (random personality quirks)
Dr-070: social status and birth tables
Dr-096: what good pcs are made of (character background)
Dr-136: fifty ways to foil your players (ideas for npcs)
Dr-145: random events for castle lords
Dr-156: characterization made easy
Dr-184: the seven-sentence npc
Dr-208: get motivated: another approach to character creation
Dr-225: modeling characters on fictional or real-life characters
Dr-225: secret origins and motivations of player characters (character design)
Dr-225: skills & powers in eight easy steps: designing unique characters
Dr-226: off-the-cuff npcs
Dr-229: creating vivid npcs (with appearance, attitude, and aspiration)
Dr-262: dungeoncraft (effective use of npcs, gming advice)
Dr-263: dungeoncraft (designing npcs, gming advice)
Dr-268: what do you know?: basic skills for every character
Dr-271: dungeoncraft: prep for character creation (adventure design, gming advice)
Dr-279: dungeoncraft (gming advice for character creation sessions)
Dr-280: art of persuasion/interrogation (players advice, npc personalities)
Dr-280: your sorcerous life (random background generation for sorcerers)
Dr-A2: talk of the town (random city/urban events)

Dungeoneer:
Dgr-006: idiosyncracies in d&d (random character flaws, characterization)

Dungeoneer Journal:
DJ-025: the thespian judge (playing npcs & providing background, gming advice)

Game News:
GN-005: characters are people too (players advice)

Gateways:
Gat-004: the finer art of character generation, pt1
Gat-005: the finer art of character generation, pt2

[4]   I've barely begun the long process of indexing A&E (or any of the APAs for that matter), but this particular article, interestingly, came up on the computerized search, so I thought I'd include it. [pm] stands for Paul Mason, of course, who is among my favorite contributors, and (as always) he makes several very good points, bringing the notion of customizing characters to a particularly campaign to the very forefront of the discussion.

Gat-006: the finer art of character generation, pt3
Gat-008: instant governments (random government generation)
Gat-013: creating believable characters (gming advice)

Guardsman:
Grd-004: does your character have character (random personality traits)

Haven Herald:
HH-005: heritage (tables for random character generation, race)

Imagine:
Img-011: social status & birth tables for ad&d (republished from dragon #70)
Img-011: the private lives of npcs (character development, gming advice)
Img-013: characterizing npcs (soapbox, gming advice)
Img-019: private lives of npcs, pt2

Imazine:
Imz-025: black box: problems of representing character personality in rpgs
Imz-034: the generation game (ideas on character generation methods)

Interactive Fantasy:
IF-004: design & use of characters

Interregnum:
IR-042: using allied supporting characters (use of npcs, gming advice) [jt]

Journal of the Travellers Aid Society:
JT-009: care and feeding of npcs (gming advice)
JT-026: stellar villains (npc design)

Journeys:
Jo-005: the thinking villain (npc/villain design, gming advice)

Judges Guild Journal:
JG-00Q: ancestry of an adventurer (random tables for family & social level)

Jumpspace/Voyages:
JV-002: every character is unique (random character traits)

Lejends:
Lej-002: xagig's fables (rules for random contacts and relationships)

Mythic Masters:
MM-v1n1: creating a great heroic persona (character creation)
MM-v1n1: personals plus (character creation steps)
MM-v1n1: socio-economic class & inheritance (character creation)
MM-v1n1: special quirks (character creation)

Pegasus:
Pe-003: physical descriptions (random physical traits for characters)

Polyhedron:
Po-063: living galaxy: flawed characters are funnest, pt1
Po-064: living galaxy: flawed characters are funnest, pt2
Po-073: steps toward character development
Po-137: mentors, patrons, and sponsors (using npcs, gming advice)

Rhiannon:
Rhi-002: heritage & social class (random tables for skill/occupation)

Rifter:
Rif-012: character creation 201 (characterization, gming advice/players advice)

Rolepaper:
Ro-001: engaging encounters (ideas for npc behavior/goals)
Ro-3/4: mindsets (personality archetypes for npcs)

Roleplayer:
RP-013: character design: where do you get those crazy characters?

Serendipity's Circle:
SC-002: gming advice on player-character motivation
SC-005: player's advice on roleplaying & creating a character persona
SC-016: tips for choosing & running npcs (gming advice)

Shadis:
Sh-017: npcs get a life (ideas for npcs)
Sh-020: cattle call: npc archtypes
Sh-022: personality building for characters (player's advice)
Sh-030: creating memorable npcs (gming advice)
Sh-031: a dozen loner npc types (npc design)
Sh-051: independent dependents: redefining the dependent npc

Sholari:
Sho-001: character generators (random tables for race & occupation)

Shred:
Shr-005: character histories, pt1 (random table for character background)
Shr-006: character histories, pt2 (random table for character background)

Traveller Digest:
TD-005: playing in character: effective roleplaying
TD-016: aspects of culture (random society generation)

Unspeakable Oath:
UO-010: quirk skills (giving some character to npcs)

Valkyrie:
Va-006: flock of personalities (random trait generator for creating npcs)
Va-021: the dark half (exploring a character's evil side, gming advice, horror)
Va-023: things just got even stranger (100 random fortean events)

VIP of Gaming:
VIP-002: let your npc live (gming advice)

White Dwarf:
WD-072: origins of the pcs (character generation)
WD-072: random events for ad&d campaigns
WD-077: cast of thousands (designing npcs w/ purpose, personality & potential)
WD-089: friends in high places (including important npcs in rpg campaigns)

White Wolf/Inphobia:
WW-053: interactive toolkit, pt3: characterization

Wild Hunt:
WH-001: gming advice: assigning characters a secret destiny/purpose [aa]

If you do happen to create any tables for use with Rand, please email me a copy of your work, not only so I can enjoy it but also so I can include it in future releases of the program.