

WHAT IS A CHARACTER?

“People become, in our minds, what we see them do.” (Card, 4)¹ The majority of what we know about characters (both player and non-player) is provided by the dialog and actions of the character. (Recent examples: Berina’s fiery temper and rash actions can be assumed to be from her long-term interaction with the fire element. Divlena’s frown and quick temper after seeing the shield with the griffon rampant indicates something bad in her past related to that heraldic device.)

“Motive is what gives moral value to a character’s acts.” (Card, 5) Since we have stated in the house rules that no player’s turn should include thoughts or internal statements that cannot be perceived by others, it seems there is no way to produce details about a character’s motives. However, by consistent descriptions of facial expressions (Herot says with a wry smile) and actions (Herot cringes in fear), others can gradually make their own assumptions on motives. (Recent examples: Berina’s dislike of Lady Harabor appears to be from her dissatisfaction with social classes or her place within them. Divlena’s light hearted flirting with no apparent intention for more serious affairs indicates that she does not take such things seriously.)

“Knowing a person’s past revises our understanding of who he is today.” (Card, 6) The “Character History Worksheet” is provided for each character as an aid to role-play. If you want to add or change something, let the GM know and something can be worked out. Do not, however, ask to just remove an item without something to replace it. This causes the character to become very bland and uninteresting. (Example uses: How does Tedezur feel about traveling by riverboat after his parents being killed in a shipwreck? When Tedezur is drawing a map is he more concerned about its artistic beauty – as he was taught – or with its accuracy – due to his loss of reputation from the faulty map he made while in training? How does Eleynian feel about families and home environments after being raised in a economically and emotionally poor household? Does Eleynian feel her vocation is just a job or is she happy to be a practicing priestess after her long penance?)

“Strangeness is always both attractive and repellent.” (Card, 8) How is your character like and unlike the stereotype groups they fit in (race, occupation, gender, social class, etc.)? How do they feel about being pre-judged by the stereotype groups they belong to? How does your character feel about those in other stereotype groups?

How does your character feel about their physical features (attributes) in relation to others? (How do Eleynian and Divlena feel about being shorter than everyone else? How does Berina feel about being taller than everyone?) Look at your character sheet and choose your best and worst attribute, and your best and worst skill? How does your character feel about those? Proud? Defensive? What types of interests does your character have that are not occupation related? (Dancing? Collecting? Poetry? Storytelling?)

WHAT MAKES A GOOD FICTIONAL CHARACTER?

“If you don’t care about a character, you can’t possibly write an interesting story about him. If you don’t believe in a character, there’s no chance that you can make your readers believe in him either.” (Card, 15) There are three things that it is most important for a player to ask about a character: Why should I care about this character? Do I believe in this character? Do the character’s actions make sense to me? This is what others will unconsciously ask about your character and you must answer them for yourself before you can successfully portray them to others.

First, what is it that you like about your character? Courage? Intelligence? Sensitivity to the feelings of others? How is your character important to others in the group?

Next, does your characters actions and dialog make sense? In this, it does not matter if it immediately makes sense to others – what is important is that they are believable and consistent to you.

Finally, do you know and understand what is happening around your character and the effects of culture and environment. If everyone shuns your character and treats them like dirt, can you relate that to the fact that you dress like a peasant? When you have waited for days to have an audience with the king, can you see that is the way all social inferiors are treated?

If at any time you want to develop something in the background (a subplot) to help define your character or you want some of the actions and motivations of the non-players explained, ask on the OOC list and the GM and players will do what they can to explain. However, two things should be kept in mind. First, you should not use things, your character does not know, back onto the IC list. Second, the GM and players are human and can make mistakes. (In example, there have been a couple of times I have duplicated actions or dialog among multiple characters by mistake. Sometimes this leads to interesting subplots such as the association between the priestess and the muggers. But if I cannot resolve the mistake in the story line, I reserve the right to acknowledge the mistake or to ignore it and move on.)

¹ Card, Orson Scott (1988) “Characters & Viewpoint” Cincinnati, OH: F&W Publications, Inc.