

Character Story/Characterization tips.

On May 24, 2008, I made a contest where I asked my readers to suggest a series of short easy-to-implement tricks to help poor, story-handicapped gaming groups develop better stories and characterization.

I have brought together those tips in one document and edited them to be distributed as a free PDF.

If you liked this PDF be sure to check back at <http://chattydm.net> for more tips and other RPG themed articles.

Happyturtle's tip

During character generation, give your players a bonus for inventing links that bind them together.

Two players decide that their characters are brother and sister—they each get a bonus. A third player decides his character was their family's former combat instructor, so all three characters get a bonus. A fourth player decides that his character went to school with the third character, so the two of them get bonuses. The fifth player wants to play a loner, with no ties to anyone. He gets no bonuses, but he gets to roleplay his part better because he's joining a group where the other four have close ties already and he's the outsider

The bonus can be character generation points, XP, action points, starting wealth—whatever seems to fit best for your game system.

Asmor's tip

The idea is you take a bunch of Magic the Gathering cards, and use them to make your character. You must use an element of each card you get in your character, but it can be from anywhere. Pull inspiration from the artwork, the name, the flavor text, the rules text, etc. Just pull it from somewhere.

One of the ways they talked about doing it was to lay out a few cards face up on the table, have people take turns drafting them. Do that until everyone has, maybe, 3-5 cards. Then give a turn or two for everyone to give cards to other people, forcing them to incorporate something unexpected into their character

Sage's tips

Taken from Burning Wheel, one of my favorite RPGs: have each player list three goals or causes. They get some in-game reward (maybe bonus XP or Action Points or some such) for taking actions to further their goals, or guided by their causes. For example, in a post-arthurian England game my character had:

Arthur was the last good king
Good people work with their hands
If I gain power, I will be able to help people better

Another tip from Burning Wheel: Have each player list three 'always' or 'never' clauses. These have the benefit of giving easy ways to characterize the PCs. So maybe you never talk longer than a minute without bringing up one of your causes, or never leaves home without a cloak, or always carries a picture of your missing wife. I was surprised how much depth they added, especially if they are tied to other facets of the character.

One of my own: have each character list 2 or 3 NPCs they are somehow related to (blood relatives, business partners, childhood friends, whatever) and how they are related. This gives the player some ties, and gives you ready-made NPCs that will instantly get someone's attention. If players don't seem to care, give them a +2 bonus for any checks to get stuff done with that NPC, or let them name one skill that the NPC has at the PCs level (just bend the rules to the first level commoner can have a dozen ranks in Knowledge(History) or whatever), just to give some mechanical benefit to having the NPC around.

Another idea that I found during a recent gaming session was to have each character have some distinctive trait that's easy to roleplay. It makes it easy to separate 'in character' from 'narration' from 'out-of-character' and can be really entertaining to boot.

The session that lead to this idea was a one-shot game of My Life With Master. Each of the minions (characters) ended up with a distinctive trait that was easy to roleplay, making the characters really come alive (the game also has mechanics that force the players to have important NPCs). One minion had a strong East European accent, one was a snively whiner, and one (my guy) had an over-the-top lisp. This style of play certainly isn't for everybody, but it can work fantastically. In fact, when I think about my coolest characters, it seems like they all had some roleplaying trait that was easy to pick up, like a drawl or a stupid orc voice.

A more crunch-oriented option is to have each PC list the class powers that define the character. These can be things they have or plan on taking. Then have the player find a few adjectives that could describe the ability and apply them to the player. So a wizard who's all about Fireball might be 'explosive' and 'bombastic', and a druid who's defined by wild shape might be 'feral' or 'beastly' or 'wild.' If the player can play the character to the adjectives they define, you've got a character who's roleplay is based on the crunch.

Daniel Schorr's tips

I found that requiring players to give input into other player's character very valuable. One player says that they want to play a paladin while another wants to play a necromancer. The two players hash out their story together at the table with feedback from the other players. I found this approach works best for both developing party unity (everyone has input into what everyone else is playing) and developing party story (getting the paladin and necromancer to work together requires the players agreeing with each other's choice and how it's not going to interfere with the others character concept). Characters developed in unison often workout well together.

A player wants to play a secretive rogue while another wants to play a blunt fighter. The fighter player knows that the rogue is going to annoy his character during the campaign and be a distract. Both players hash out how their character get along. Maybe the rogue decides that the fighter is his only confidant and tells him everything. Or maybe the fighter is the rogues older brother and accepts his secretive nature, while defending him against all accusers. Getting the party to agree on each other's character choice makes game play much easier down the road.

DM honesty also goes a long way to helping players make characters that work. If you campaign is about fighting the evil warlord before he takes over the world, then tell the players that and ask how their character fits into the story.

Nothing beats a good conversation. Story and characters developed in a vacuum (by yourself, alone, without feedback) tend to be loners and not work well with others.

I always get inspired by watching the episode of FireFly - Out of Gas. A good retrospect on how the crew of Serenity got together. Have your players share their characters back story and then have each player recall their initial reactions when they first met them.

Just a few ideas to create party unity and back story

Johnn's tips

Roll for it. Create or use random tables to develop relationships, connections, and characterization. There's a few d20 books that have such tables, and Central Casting books are great too.

Hit every character at least once a session with something that progresses their personal story. It can be planned or impromptu. Example: paladin finds a holy symbol for a strange god that has similar elements to his own god's symbolism. Later, the party discovers an ancient religious book, which the pally scoops up and reads for a free, permanent +2 skill bonus on knowledge(religion). Pally discovers the holy symbol is for his own god! The thing is so ancient it depicts how the god was represented 2000 years ago. Combat erupts. Off the cuff, you describe how, with the killing blow, the evil creature spurts blood all over pally's relic holy symbol. He asks, "does it need to be purified now?" What a great idea! You reply yes, as if you planned it all along....

Create surprise connections between 2 characters about every 4 sessions. The classic is PCs discover they are distantly related. This is great for getting two players who don't have much to riff off each other with to bond better.

- Opposing or common goals.
- Combo magic items requiring multiple-PCs to operate.
- Common history.
- Two PCs catch the same, incurable disease.

Do a recounting of the previous session before each session, but as a story teller, not as a "minutes recorder." Great practice for your own storytelling skills. This exercise frames things into an ongoing saga, not just a bunch of dice rolls, and you can inject new meanings or points of view on what's happened to help foster story, plant clues, change a PC's thinking, etc. Record your narrative each time and put them together as an MP3 file your group can listen to anytime

Tommi's tips

1. Let every player tell how they would like others to react to their character. That is, if someone wants to play a mysterious wizard or a scary assassin, those should be made public.

Every session every player has 2 or 3 hero points/luck points/other nice things that they can't use, but can give to other players when they roleplay their character reacting as defined above. That is, when the assassin appears out of shadows and some other player has his character act surprised, the assassin's player could and should give one foo point to the relevant player.

The theory behind this is that players will be more confident playing their characters and doing cheesy acting when the other players reinforce that acting. Inspiration: Pritetime adventures by Matt Wilson (IIRC).

2. Have each player define three goals the character wants to achieve. One should be possible to complete in very short a time, one should be idealistic and possibly impossible, and one should be about another player character. Group chargen is advised, though not technically necessary.

3. I am assuming characters with personal goals created by any suitable method. Definitions: A driven character is one who has very focused goals; conflicted character has (easily) conflicting goals.

As a GM, for every driven character, challenge and attack the goals in interesting ways, which means that the player must be able to do something about the attacks.

In case of conflicted character emphasise the inherent conflicts so that circumstances force the player to compromise some of them.

4. An organizational tip: Have a list with characters and whatever juicy story potential they happen to have. Put a checkmark next to a story seed when it is addressed in play in some significant way. Try to balance the checkmarks so that every character or story seed has roughly the same amount (by Tommi).

The_Gun_Nut's tips

My little trick doesn't have a handy, easy-to-read table, and it seems like common sense that you probably already have, but it does seem to work. I get a notebook with some divisions in it (currently, I have 5 players in a new Earthdawn game, so I'm getting a 5 course notebook). Each section of the notebook is devoted to a particular PC. I keep some basic notes on the PC such as defenses and attack totals. I also ask each player what they would like to see for their character, whether it is something their character wants or just something they would like their character to do. A half or a whole page can be set aside for each idea. I can place notes within each entry regarding how the goal affects each player in turn and also put a note under each players section referring to the idea. When that idea is played out, I cross it out and leave a note on what happened to everyone and the effect on the general population. The notes don't need to be incredibly detailed, perhaps just a sentence with a tag to "See Suchandsuch PC" for other information.

A small set of notecards in a card holder can also work, and is easier to organize, but takes up a bit of non-book standard space. This, of course, requires one to have at least SOME organization skills, but entire adventures and campaigns can spring out of them

Longcoat000's tips

I've got two ideas cribbed from different sources:

1) (From Ars Ludi) Have everyone describe their character in a single broad stroke using the following structure: A (personality trait) (profession) is (personal goal). For example:

- A forlorn air pirate is seeking the lost City of Gold.
- A vengeful princess is engineering the downfall of the empire.
- A forgetful biochemist is trying to cure his son.
- A ruthless sellsword is butchering his way to the man who betrayed him.
- An angst-ridden goth is hunting for the perfect torn fishnets.
- An office prankster is obsessed with the perfect practical joke.
- A meglomaniacal mule is seeking divinity.
- A dimwitted sales clerk wants to find his way back to his own time.

2) (from Vampire: the Masquerade) Allow the players to vote for the person who best role-played their character (based on whatever concept & personality they've already come up with), and the person with the most votes gets some bonus XP. The only rule is that they can't vote for themselves

Patriarch917's tips

The Hot Seat Question

Here's a technique our group uses. Sometime during the week before our game session, he emails everyone a "Hot Seat" question. Every game session begins with us going around the table taking turns answering the Hot Seat question. The question is answered "in character," but the answer is usually not "in character" knowledge for the other players. It's a great way to mark the beginning of the session, to encourage everyone to think about their character, and to get everyone in character at the start of the game.

Some of our recent Hot Seat questions:

- *You have mostly very useful equipment, and little that does not have at least some practical use. What two or three items do you have that are purely comforts, or ego building, or frivolous? Why?*
- *Describe a moment from your childhood. What memory of your father stands out most for you, and how has it influenced your current self (if at all)? (orphans may pick a suitable alternate memory.)*
- *What kind of dreams do you normally have when you sleep (or what goes through your mind when you meditate - damn elves) - nightmares or normal dreams?*
- *What is the most common dream? And which one has made the most impact on your life?*
- *During the upcoming festival, each of you are expected to make a statement (sermon?). Give us a short excerpt.*
- *What, if anything, would you be willing to give up your life for?*
- *What offer, or threat, would be irresistible enough to make you betray your crewmates?*
- *How would your parents describe you? Would they be proud, or ashamed? Have you lived up to their expectations and dreams, or have you been disowned?*
- *What physical characteristics does your character have that the rest of the party does not (or would not) know? Hidden tattoos, scars, tremors, tics, mannerisms, etc.*
- *What little thing adds to your characters history and personality, and why is it important?*

Our group has gotten increasingly creative with the answers. Answers have been given in the form of speeches, soliloquys, songs, poems, drawings, and props

Martin Ralya's tips

My tips flow into one another more or less in order.

- Have an idea of the macro story in mind before your players start creating their PCs. This will help you help them make fun story-related choices during character creation.

- Have a group character creation session. This will ensure that everyone creates a character that's appropriate for the campaign and the overall theme, that works well with the others and — most importantly — that includes hooks related to the macro story.

- Ask for a few specific background hooks from each player. Make this part of group CC and encourage folks to tie their hooks together. Just asking for really long backgrounds won't do it — some players hate writing long backgrounds, and not all long backgrounds are created equal.

If you ask for, say, three living NPCs (enemies, allies, whatever) and a paragraph about what each PC did during the Great War, you'll get back four things you can put to immediate use in your game — and that will help tie the PCs to the world.

- If you're specifically after characterization tools, request a personal detail or two about each PC that relies on improvisation. I did this as a warmup after a long break recently, and asked my players to describe their character's bedrooms. We all had fun with it, and it seemed to help ground them in their characters.

- At the end of group CC, work with your players to tie everyone together in a way that works for your group. Try to keep suspension of disbelief to a minimum. Because you've been brainstorming together for a couple of hours already, hopefully you'll already have some good connections to work with.

- Make it clear to your players that you WILL work their backgrounds into the game, and then follow through on that promise.

- Follow through by tweaking, augmenting, fleshing out and (sometimes) outright changing major elements of the macro story you first came up with to work in PC background elements.

- With this basic framework, any story you create will be about the PCs, will use their backgrounds regularly and will automatically get them into character — because it's all about their characters.

- Lastly, in your very first session mention that you want to focus on characterization — and ask that whenever possible, everyone speak in character. Don't penalize players who don't do it (some just don't enjoy it). Nothing gets you into character like speaking in character, and asking for it is a simple step

Scotticus' tips

At a minimum have each player define two things:

– What the character values most. This could range anywhere from a possession to a concept or ideal to a person. Example's "my grandfather's axe", "freedom!", or "the red-headed bartender at the Thirsty Whistle".

– A secret with negative consequences and who knows about the secret. The secret should be at least embarrassing ("My fighter was banished from his home town for being a coward"), or even damaging ("SuperDuperMan is really Dirk Kent! Let's kill his friends"). Obviously it should not just be something for personal gain ("My character secretly knows where 100,000 gold pieces are buried."). The person who knows about it can be either a fellow PC or an NPC. The NPC might not necessarily try to use the secret as leverage against the character, and could just be a loose-end in the matter

Michael Phillips' tips

You have to have players who are, if not friendly, at least not hostile to the idea of adding more story to their game. The below won't magically add more story depth, but it can help make those who are interested branch out.

At the beginning of each session, you have each player draw a chit out of a bag. (You could use some of those magic life counter marble things that are sitting around gathering dust since the innovation of using dice to count things in magic came to the forefront.)

You'll need four colors of chit (or more. this is an extensible system.)

For our purposes lets say:

30 white chits

15 Black chits

5 Blue chits

and

1 gold chit.

White chits work sort of like the granted power of the luck domain. By turning in your chit you can reroll any one die roll. Unlike the luck domain's power, this can be done after success or failure is determined. Not a lot of RP potential here.

Black Chits can be used to grant a one time +5 bonus to any d20 roll or to allow you to make an untrained skill check as if you were trained in that skill (so you have a chance to make a check on a trained only skill, and you can do better than a dc 10 success on a skill that can usually be used untrained.) Here we start getting into things with serious rp and story considerations. A properly used black chit will let a character do something that she would not have usually been capable of. This lets them pull off one time feats of inspiration.)

Blue chits let you do something extraordinary. You can spend it in one of two ways. The first is to allow a player one additional use of any one limited time per day power. Second they can spend it to enable some unlikely feat. "I toss my towel over my head. The beast, being particularly stupid, thinks that if I can't see it, then it can't see me and wanders off" or Eight Imperial Guards? Hum... I point at the ground at their feet and say 'Hey, you dropped your pocket!' When they look down, I use over run to bull them all over and escape" or really, making any plan that would not be out of place in a caper movie or novel have a reasonable chance of succeeding.

The second one opens up all sorts of neat story possibilities, but only if the players are interested.

The lone gold chit is the only pure story one. You turn in the gold chit in order to get your own story line. It can't be anything major like "I want the ultimate sword of ultimateness!!1!!" more akin to "I'd like a rival" or "I want a romantic interest" or I want to become the mayor of (Town X)" or even better "I want my friend (NPC) to become the mayor of (Town X)" These don't happen immediately, and their initialization should be handled between sessions.

You can also use the bag-o-chits to encourage role playing by using it instead of the bonus experience points a lot of gms hand out for exceptional rp or things that make them have to stop so they can quit laughing long enough to breathe

Will's tip

It's only a small tip, but at character generation I ask who the character knows well outside of the adventuring community, how they know them and what they think of the character leading the life he/she is.

It can be as simple as 'My Mum, who's called Marge and she worries every time I leave home', but I find it enough to give a little character depth at least

Nik's tips

My first campaign as a GM was at the start of the year, and the whole group of us were still pretty new to the the whole pen and paper experience. Our first campaign was run by another guy in the group, and while he encouraged group interaction as we went along, none of our characters really had much background. I wanted to find some way to correct that.

Even though my first campaign was a published adventure, I wanted to somehow find a way to forge the group before they launched into the core adventure. To accomplish this, I did a couple of things.

First, as everyone was discussing their new characters, I tried to get a feel for what everyone wanted to create for their new PCs. I suggested that they maybe should try to create a group template before they started rolling up their characters (thanks Fear the Boot).

Another thing I noticed from the prior campaign was that a number of the players were lewt happy. Using this knowledge, I devised a carrot—each player could get one magical item (approved by the GM) *if* they wrote out a detailed background of their character before the start of the first session. I wasn't sure if it was going to work, but the gang all came through with excellent characterizations just to get a nymph cloak or ring of resistance. Unlike the previous session, everyone kept to their characterizations through this campaign. I don't know that I would want to do this for every campaign, but it worked out well in part because we were all still relatively new.

Finally, while we had a rough group template, the group of pc's didn't know each other prior to the adventure. The published adventure I was going to GM had a few hooks for getting parties together, but I wanted something a little bigger, something that would help the group gel a little more. While my written solution was a little predictable, the players thankfully threw me for a couple of loops during this prelude, forcing me to improv. This loose session really helped out the campaign. I think that it helped them as players by showing them it was a more open game, which really is the joy of the tabletop (all of them are big videogame players). It helped me by forcing me to learn to do things on the fly. Something about that loose session really worked, and it's something that has really worked over later campaigns, although obviously the GM has to be able to guide this open session into the real core of the campaign.

I don't have a lot of GM experience, but with my little group, this combination of preparation and chaos has been a good mix

David Reese's Tip

I wonder if you might get some good characterization by having every starting player list some community or group that they have some relationship with, either beneficial or antagonistic.

One of my players wanted his bard to have proto-bag pipes, but I reckoned that these would be pretty expensive. So, his bard is always on the run from the goons the instrument crafter hired to collect payments on the pipes.

My own character is a gnomish liberationist, and she's always running around with her gnome power friends. (Led by Gnome Chomsky, naturally.)

These were nice hooks both into the characters and their backstories, and also into the world in which they live.

One could even suggest that a character have an antagonistic relationship with one group/community/entity, and a positive relationship with another

Ben's tips.

I offer xp/gold/skill point awards for:

Background– usually 1000xp/page up to about 3 pages, asking the player to look at birthday, family, childhood, education, and how the character arrived at the current class/level. There was a nearly three-page questionnaire I found online that covered all sorts of personality aspects of a character. I ask them to look over that questionnaire and take the questions into account when writing that background. Based on how the background is written, I might award a few skill points of a knowledge skill or an appropriate skill.

Surrounding Area– I ask the player to write a short blurb describing a NPC in the area and the setting in which their character knows the NPC. I'll offer 250xp per establishment/proprietor combination. This gives me characters in the area that the players know individually and little details to grow stories around those NPCs. Examples are shopkeepers, bartenders, priests, harlots, bards, soldiers, and the place in town where the NPC is found. For every four of these, I'll also offer a point of the Knowledge(Local) skill. I usually cap this at about 12.

Using these two methods, I can create connections between characters if I have to, and they've increased the setting. By allowing a bullet point format for material, I keep them concise. The xp/gold/skill rewards are a great stick/carrot for drawing out stories, because it means that starting characters who provide me a detailed background and investment in the society are more powerful– and that drives the powergamers to generate material. By capping the benefits I don't end up with 15 page backgrounds, something I've seen happen.

I also highly encourage character sketches, giving another small xp award for the image.

We also have a deck of 50 cards that we draw at the beginning of each session– some have things like "+10% to the next critical" or "I don't fumble," but there are ones like:

"Big nothing here" (once used to obviate a trapped chest)
"I cry like a little girl" (once used to get past gate guards)
"I sneeze at an inopportune moment."
"I am cranky with a terrible headache today."
"I make a new friend today."
"I am sick to my stomach today."
"I find a small item worth no more than 25gp."

Each has a small xp award, and no one shares their card with anyone, even me. This adds an element of surprise to the session. I sometimes give a card to an important NPC, usually a critical or fumble based one. These cards give the players something that keeps me on my toes, forcing a lot of spontaneity in sessions.

I've also used cut-away sessions, where the players run premade characters for a short arc–two or three nights, and then introduced those same characters later as NPCs, sometimes foes, rivals, occasionally as help. This is even more effective if I allow one player to run a "younger" version of their character. It liberates that player, since they know they'll survive (they have to, to make it to the future), and everyone gets an opportunity to try a new personality for a bit. When you bring back these characters, it gets people energized to find the changes or differences from the short arc to the session we're in then.

The cut-away sessions themselves can help drive story, too, creating the situations that the characters might find later. For instance, I had an adventure where they'd rescued a character from a humanoid encampment. Later, we did the cut-away that ended with the character's capture.

There is also the entire section of story flaws in the Ars Magica 5th Edition main handbook. You can download the 4th Edition handbook pdf for free from the Atlas games site. (<http://www.atlas-games.com/arsmagica/index.php>)

These are meant to drive stories as a part of the system. But then, Ars suggests things like troupe storytelling and arcs that span years— which is not usually the modus operandi for most D&D games

Consonant Dude's

Company rules! This is something I have implemented in d20 and plan to give a full treatment if I ever finish my OGL fantasy game.

It follows a basic principle.

Wolverine, Storm, Cyclops and Rogue are not just Wolverine, Storm, Cyclops and Rogue.

Wolverine, Storm, Cyclops and Rogue are ALSO the X-Men. Which is a specific group, with specific goals, specific resources and intricate dynamics. If Cyclops abandons the X-Men, he still remains Cyclops but might lose "X-Men benefits". A cool mansion with cool toys. A wise patron to guide him. All the connections Xavier might have. The X-Men network and so on.

But in D&D, we create a bunch of individuals with no mechanics and incentives towards the group (the party, the company, the fellowship, whatever).

So have the group create the company (party) as some sort of identity. To be part of the company might give perks. It might also have drawbacks. And it might also have requirements.

Each company might have an "alignment". This doesn't mean necessarily a D&D alignment but it might be something like "guard the kingdom's frontier against the unnatural forces of the North".

A D&D entity should level up. So the company, as an organization, can grow. Each time a character(s) furthers the cause of his company or acts in accordance, add a percentage of his individual XPs earned to the Company's XPs. When a specific amount is reached, the organization levels up. As a DM, be creative. Give the company new feats. Perhaps it gains new informants, a better reputation with locals. The ear of the court. Perhaps the best weapon smith will now accept to be at their service. Perhaps the mayor of the independent city now allows members of the company to carry arms in ANY city building. Heck, they might even have privileges such as searching houses, making arrests or the like.

Of course, the company will also have enemies. Enemies who might not care about specific individuals but will want to hurt the company should it reach a certain level of importance.

By pumping XPs only when PCs act in accordance with the company, you let them dictate how important the company will become. That's the beauty of this. Optional: you can also keep track of which PCs pump XPs in the company and thus elect a company leader. Some D&D rules can also be plugged as-in in the entity. The leadership feat comes to mind. Followers not dedicated to the PCs but to the company.

In your post, you were talking about party cohesion: this helped, IME. You were also talking about characterization. This helps too. Because a character by himself is nothing. To reveal the character, you

need interaction. More interesting group dynamics lead to focused characterization and is usually revealing.

I've tested the rules loosely for three years and it seems to work. I usually make up perks as I go, taking suggestions from players. I follow the XP progression standard for a character in 3e. Recently, I gave the following XPs to the company entity:

Ultimate goal of company: 30%

On the company's agenda: 20%

Loosely related to the company: 10%

Optional: against the company's agenda: negative percentage subtracted

Example: Tordak kills unnatural creatures defending the northern frontier and earns 1000XP. The DM also adds 300xps to the company.

Don't be afraid to add things to the company's agenda. One of the advantages of the company is that its reputation will facilitate sending adventurers on quests. The villagers trying to get rid of a vampire miles away don't want just any adventurers to help them. They send for THIS COMPANY. Because presumably, the word gets out that they are honest and reliable (or alternatively for an evil campaign, they are cold-blooded, efficient murderers)

Hope that helps! Tweak the concept, it really works 😊

MAK's tip

There have been lots of character background ideas, but very few pointers to actually building the story... In our last campaign we (the main DM who likes to concentrate on actually running the game and making tactical planning and I, the plot consultant and setting continuity manager - a nice co-DM setup to try, BTW) tried to come up with a way to tie the plot to most characters in the group - some of which had excellent hook-filled backgrounds, and some nothing. A mostly accidental character-tied plot had emerged in our previous campaign, which had been a huge success, and we tried to analyze and repeat the process. Note that this time we gave the players a totally free hand in creating the characters (the notorious sandbox-illusion which eventually became a weak point in the campaign) But I digress...

So what we did was deliberately NOT create a story arc for the campaign in the beginning, going instead to separate, unrelated single-to-few-session episodes, with different DM's even. The previous campaign had started the same way, not by design but because of limited DM planning time. We used some published material or total improvisation (like coming up with a hidden temple on the fly when one character declared searching for hidden doors)

Next came the fun part: after running what were basically one-shots for several months, we had a wagon-load of escaped bad guys, found locations and items, and emergent PC personality - the actual stuff, not anything written in a background but not actively shown in play. Now we put every loose thread in a pot together with the more meaningful character backgrounds (some players have a knack of making DM-friendly stuff up...) and cooked together a story arc. Totally random items became central for the plot, and made-up locations started to matter. We started to introduce more loose ends and hints on what the items and events actually meant for the bigger picture. A very rewarding process, and immensely enjoyable for us DM's.

But a note of warning... We did overdo it a bit, and tried to weave EVERYTHING into the plot which became a monster. And our clues were a tad too subtle for a group that plays quite infrequently and tends to forget the small details that had suddenly started to matter. But the concept of emergent story arc itself was a blast and we are going to try to do the same in the next campaign

Hella Tellah's tips

1) Have your players give you a set of things they care about, with the explicit understanding that these elements will be used to mess with their characters.

Nobilis, one of my favorite narrativist games, has a "Bonds" system by which a character can screw with another character by assaulting things they care about. When you write down a bond on your sheet, you're giving the Hollyhock God (GM) explicit permission to mess with you by way of these proxies because it will make a cool story. Without this agreement between the GM and players, some players might feel like they're being picked on. This system gets the GM and the players on the same page: in favor of a cool story, rife with personal conflict.

2) When a player gives you a hook to hang a story on, use it immediately. Don't wait until the perfect moment to bring in the NPC mentioned in their backstory, or to dangle something they care about over danger. Make every moment you possibly can relate to what the players have given you.

Think about some of the great, character-based TV shows you've seen. Did the pilot hold back, or did it give you a ton of interesting information and situations involving each of the characters? Okay, it's a leading question—but why not use that idea in your games? Don't make your players suffer through weeks of content that's not tied into their characters. Use that backstory from day one.

3) When the PCs are separated, cut between them quickly. Give each player no more than 3 minutes before moving on to the next player. The character should have just enough time to learn one vital piece of information, or to have one interesting conversation, or make one daring escape.

Watch for how writers in other media, like TV shows, deal with multiple character storylines, particularly for how they switch between characters. Often, each character has a scene lasting about a minute, and when the plot has advanced a little, they cut to another character. It keeps a dramatic momentum, and keeps every character at the forefront of the audience's mind. Use that! A dozen short, engaging situations each night makes for an incredible character-based gaming experience

Griffin's tips

My main idea for building better party cohesiveness and characterization is a simple one. Instead of having each player come up with a idea or hook for their character have them do it as a group. Not give ideas for other people's characters (thought that might be fun), but have them come up with shared hooks. My thought is have each hook be between two people. Examples: The two magic-users in the party went to the same arcane academy to learn magic. Or the two fighters, who have never met before and may have wildly different combat styles, are both seeking the same legendary weapon master for training. Maybe the cleric and the fighter fought together in a military unit at one point. Ideas like that. Then require each player to have two of these hooks, each with a seperate person. This means that the whole party will have connections with each other and by default any attempt on the DM's part will automatically include at least two of the PCs.

Another thing that I have run across in my playing is that you shouldn't aim too big for backstories and characterization. Whichever method you use it is best to start out with just a handful of 'bullet points' of hooks and ideas for a character and build on them while you play. So each concept or backstory idea should only be a few lines. Which then get built on as the campaign continues and the DM tosses more hooks into the story at the party. The major forming events of a PC's life shouldn't be in the backstory, they should be the moments you game out during sessions.