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GAMEMASTER'S WORKSHOP

The Pyramid Scheme: A Mastermind's Forces

By Chris Gottschalk

So the thrill of slapping down rogue goblins and orcs has worn off. Your players have participated in multiple dungeon crawls, dodged hundreds of traps, and looted scores of tombs and temples. Even raiding a dragon's lair has become passé. You want to kick things up a notch, and give your players a real threat to their world. You want a villain whose plans are so grandiose, so world-shattering, that he simply cannot do all the grunt work by himself. You want that omnipresent threat in the background. You want a mastermind.

For a GM, however, establishing an evil mastermind presents something of a logistical challenge – who and what does the mastermind use to further his goals? Does he rely on an army, or does he sacrifice quantity for quality and have some high-level living weapons do his dirty work for him? This overview of what the mastermind may have at his disposal should help the GM decide on the Mastermind's forces. In this article I will be covering what I call the "six levels" of a mastermind's forces, from the most general and least skilled, all the way up to encountering the mastermind personally! Before we begin, though, there are three points that should be made. First, these levels form a pyramid – at the lowest and least powerful levels the forces will be more numerous, while there will be fewer numbers at the higher levels, no matter how cool that might be. This leads directly to the second point: this structure naturally lends itself to the PCs' rise in levels. As they gain power, they'll attract the attention of the more powerful forces of the mastermind, and thus will be challenged continually. Thirdly, a mastermind is by no means required to use all these forces. While reading this article, treat it like a smorgasbord. Take what you want to use, and leave the rest for another time. Having said that, let's start in, shall we?

LEVEL 1: THUGS

The first and lowest level would be thugs and grunts. These guys can take pretty much any form, from armies in fantasy games to street gangs in the cyberpunk realm. Other types of thugs could include low-level criminal organizations, mercenary guilds, and pirates. The function of forces at this level is pretty simple – they are used to do the general dirty work for the mastermind. Be it stealing materials or goods, kidnapping people for slave labor, or eliminating

those folks who have gotten too nosy for their own good, the thugs will be the ones who are called in. They may not be the most skilled of lackeys, but then, they don't have to be. They serve to keep the general populace in line, or in game terms, the NPCs. As such, there are going to be lots of them. Think in terms of hundreds, if not thousands, of these faceless goons that the mastermind commands. Also, they will probably fall like dominoes once the players start fighting them.

Two exceptionally fine examples of thugs in popular media are the stormtroopers in *Star Wars*, and the orcs/Uruk-Hai of *The Fellowship of the Ring*. Both are numerous and more than easily hold their own against NPCs, but simply cannot stand up to the higher-level heroes. They may be weak, but their numbers can somewhat counter this disadvantage. Even the bravest hero is going to take some hits when confronted with 30-40 orcs, stormtroopers, or gang members. Remember – enemies at this level are numerous and disposable.

LEVEL 2: SPIES

The next level is just a notch above the first, and is differentiated primarily because of its usefulness. It contains the spies and informants a mastermind has under his control. While not as straightforward as the thugs and not as powerful as minions at higher levels, this group can be devastating if used properly. After all, Han Solo's flight from Tatooine would have been a lot less eventful if that long-nosed alien hadn't alerted the stormtroopers to his presence, right? And what about Grima Wormtongue's corrupting influence in *The Two Towers* or the countless thugs that are in the right place at the right time and happen to see that particularly troublesome superhero removing his or her mask? Sometimes the most damaging enemies are the ones that specialize in information rather than combat. I want to caution all the GMs out there, though, to use some serious consideration when role-playing this level – it's altogether too easy to use the excuse of a spy to make players' lives miserable. If you're going to have a spy or informant, create a darned convincing back story, and at least give your players a chance at discovering the spy *before* he trashes their plans.

LEVEL 3: ALLIES

The third level is composed of the allies of the mastermind. These are groups of individuals that offer their services to the mastermind, and are on equal footing with him, at least initially. Saruman from the *Lord of the Rings* trilogy is one example. Others are fairly common, particularly in *Dungeons & Dragons' Forgotten Realms*, where so many powerful masterminds exist that roughly half the GM's campaign preparation must be spent establishing what agreements will be worked out with which other forces so that no villain's toes are inadvertently stepped on. While one can argue that, in terms of power and skill, allies should be higher up on this scale, the problem with these "forces" is simple – they are not under the control of the mastermind. Anyone whose power is comparable to your mastermind's is going to more than likely also have a will of his own, and not be entirely trustworthy. He may help the mastermind, but he can also betray him. Masterminds with allies usually have to watch their backs to make sure a knife hasn't been planted there, thus diverting at least some of their attention from their goals.

LEVEL 4: ELITES

The fourth level consists of what I like to refer to as the "Elite Assassins." These are the people the mastermind will use specifically to take out the heroes once they set themselves against him or foil his schemes one too many times. For you anime fans out there, think of the gung-ho guns in *Trigun* or the Anten Seven in *Outlaw Star*. For the rest of you, the best references would be the various super-villain teams in comic books, or some elite mercenary or assassin's guild that is hired to destroy the PCs. Usually, each of the elite assassins is trouble enough. Combine even two of them, though, and your heroes have a serious problem on

their hands.

The forces at this level should be significantly tougher than your average thug, and perhaps have a reputation themselves to add to the mastermind's. Nothing instills fear into the hearts of players more than learning that the villain that nearly killed them answers to a higher power! The traditional way these groups have been used in stories and RPG campaigns is to give each member a distinguishing feature, weapon, or means of attack, and have the heroes fight them from the weakest member to the most powerful. While it may be a bit cliché, it does work, and will constantly have your players on their toes. Other variations can be "task forces" of two or more assassins, as mentioned above, and having one of the elite fit into our next category: the right-hand man.

LEVEL 5: THE RIGHT-HAND MAN

The right-hand man is almost a given when it comes to masterminds. The most infamous example would be Darth Vader, who we all thought was the main bad guy in *Star Wars* until we found out he answered to the Emperor. Other great examples come from the James Bond films. Who doesn't remember such heavies as Oddjob and Jaws?

When designing a right-hand man, there are two important points to remember – they should be powerful and they should be straightforward. By powerful, I mean that they should be able to take on all the heroes at once and have a good chance of winning. They should be able to trounce lesser heroes, and the mere thought that your players could have to face off against this person someday should make your group collectively break out in a cold sweat.

To add to the mystique of the right-hand man's strength, have the players encounter him in a couple of situations where the party doesn't take him on. Perhaps they are simply observers, and have to watch. Perhaps they see him dueling with a higher-level NPC – and winning. For example, who didn't have a sense of fear and awe when Darth Vader lifted that Rebel soldier off his feet and strangled him? Or when he killed Obi-Wan Kenobi? Imagine what the effect would be on a right-hand man's reputation and the psyches of your players if you stage some similar events. What if your players walk into a fortress, find it ransacked, and the lone survivor dies with the name of the right-hand man on his lips? Or if the players' 16th level Paladin mentor confronts the right-hand man, and loses? Variations on a theme, to be sure, but they are effective. The right-hand man doesn't actually have to fight your PCs in order to be frightening. If you do want to go that route, however, you can always have the players encounter him early on and get trounced, being left alive because the right-hand man doesn't think they're worth the effort to kill. Either way, you will instill in your players the fear of God, or more accurately, the right-hand man.

As far as the "straightforward" requirement, the reason for this is simple: unlike the mastermind, the right-hand man will actually be out there in the thick of the action. He is the one who will be leading attacks against resistance/strongholds, interrogating important prisoners, retrieving lost items essential to the mastermind's plan, and in general being the one the heroes see whenever things get really bad, whether in combat or otherwise. Of course, at this level of the pyramid, the players will encounter some of the lower-level help as well. Be it one or two elite assassins, a few grunt squadrons, or an entire army, the right-hand man confronting the heroes entirely on his own will be a rare occurrence. After all, while he may be direct, it is highly unlikely

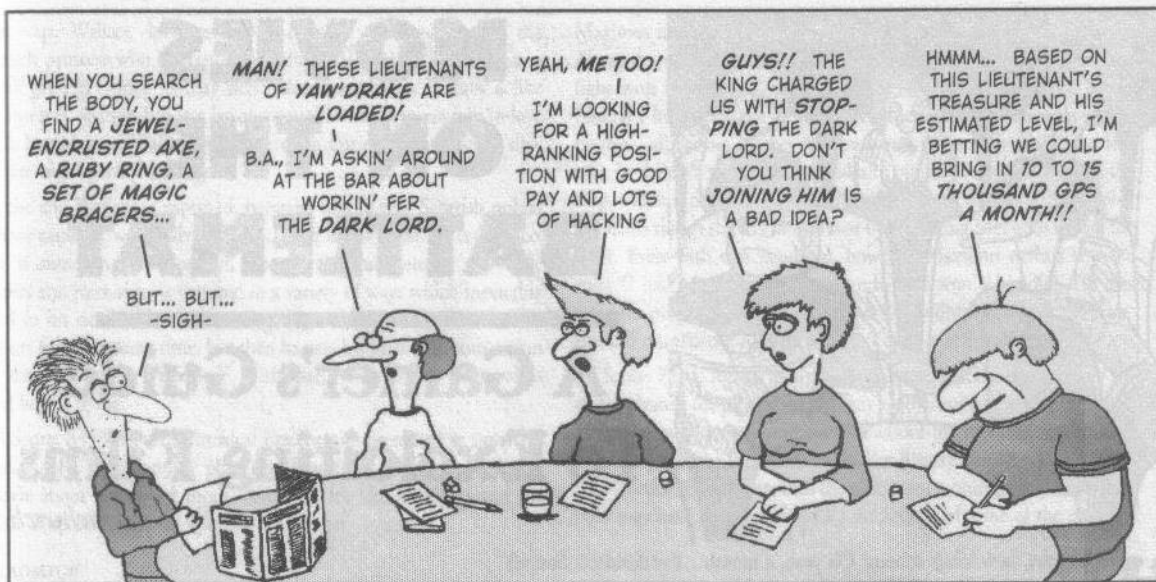
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that he's stupid. Players should get a sense that things have gotten "really bad" when they are trying to fend off attacks on multiple fronts – and then see the right hand man in the distance, closing in on them. He is usually also the last line of defense for the mastermind, and therefore probably the toughest, not to mention most loyal, underling the mastermind has. After all, this is probably the person that the mastermind trusts most, and probably serves as the mastermind's bodyguard in addition to his or her other duties.

The final level of the mastermind's forces is usually the mastermind himself. True, a mastermind's main assets are his cunning and intelligence, but there are a few that possess enough power that they can more than take care of themselves in combat. Sauron, from the film adaptation of *The Lord of the Rings*, is one such example. The Emperor from *Star Wars* is another. Going back to the *Forgotten Realms*, there are a number of powerhouses that work through their underlings and allies – Fzoul Chembryl, Manshoun, and even Elminster (masterminds don't have to be evil)! If the mastermind has the power of the previous examples, he or she might also fill the role of the right-hand man. After all, why bother with another layer of bureaucracy when you can take care of some of the work yourself? Of course, the Emperor did have Darth Vader, and the Emperor was obviously no slouch in the power department. So ultimately, the power your mastermind has is up to you. Is his main advantage his intellect, while the right hand man takes care of the physical labor? Does he have some magic item or doomsday device ready in case he is confronted directly? Or is he simply a powerhouse himself, with plans that are simply too grand to achieve without underlings and allies?

One other thing to consider: does your mastermind have an escape plan? It's practically a staple of comic-book villains – if there's no body, the mastermind can return with impunity. Just when all seems lost for the mastermind, he pushes a button and the one-use teleportation sphere or trapdoor reveals itself, leaving the heroes with nothing but the villain's mocking laughter. It's fun to pull on your players at least once, but be warned – after that first escape, your players will be *ticked*. When they encounter him again, you can bet they'll be sure to make the mastermind's defeat a bit more permanent – probably by making sure there is a body, and that it's in no shape to do anything ever again.

Finally, like in the other levels, it is possible that your group won't have to confront the mastermind directly, or even at all. While conventional RPG wisdom states that the climax to a campaign of this type is an x-on-one, all out battle between the players and the mastermind, consider these examples [spoiler alert]:

- The Emperor was defeated when Darth Vader betrayed him and flung him down a bottomless shaft
- Sauron died when the One Ring was tossed into the fires of Mount Doom
- The deaths of the Nazis at the climax of *Raiders of the Lost Ark* had nothing to do with the actions of Indiana Jones, while the real mastermind – Hitler – remained untouched

There are many ways the heroes can win without ever confronting their true opposition. The mastermind may have an Achilles heel, such as a lich's phylactery; they may actively seek something that will give them more power than they can handle; or they may be insulated from true retaliation by too many layers of subordinates. To quote the Kingpin, from the *Daredevil* comic book series, "He has foiled but one of my plans. I have others." Words for any true mastermind to live by.

So that is a look at the myriad forces a mastermind can bring to bear on any luckless player that happens to stumble across his or her plans. Admittedly, this may seem like it could completely overwhelm the players, but hey—what is heroism about if not overcoming impossible odds? Now get your villain out there and start wreaking havoc on the world!

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