SCRIPT – ADVANCED GAMEMASTERY: SPECTACULAR SIDEKICKS

by Justin Alexander – April 2nd, 2021

In the *Infinity* roleplaying game I designed for Modiphius Entertainment, which takes place in a space opera future, geists are pseudo-AIs who act as companions and assistants. They're also referred to as domotic partners, domotica, hantu, QPAs, virtual personal guides, and a wide variety of cute nicknames.

Basically everyone in the Human Sphere has one. In fact, most people have had the same geist since they were very young children. Over time, a geist learns your habits and preferences, becoming so familiar with you that they can seamlessly predict what you want (sometimes before you even realize it yourself). They become invisible extensions of their partner's will. Their persistent presence and collaboration in every facet of a person's life is a transformative experience. Life without your geist – without your oldest and most constant friend – would be difficult for most people to imagine.

Now you're the Game Master. You have five players at the table. And every single one of them has a companion character who is with them in every single scene. These characters should be constantly interacting with, at the very least, their companion, and more likely everyone in the group.

How do you juggle that many balls? How do you keep them in the air? How do you make all of those companions memorable characters who are actively participating in every moment of the game without losing your mind or upstaging your players?

The answer?

You don't.

[TITLE SEQUENCE]

This is a technique that works equally well for familiars, hirelings, AI assistants, golems, and even the demon who possessed you and now lurks as a whisper trapped in your hippocampus.

When thinking about how to handle companion characters, we tend to think of our options as a binary choice: Either the PC's player can control their companion. Or the Game Master can control them.

The disadvantage of having the GM do it is the cognitive load. They're already juggling a lot of other stuff, and it's easy for the companion character to slip through the cracks. It can also be tough for the GM to roleplay the companion without the other players assuming that they're speaking with the Voice of the GM.

For example, if the companion suggests in character that they'd like to check out the Old Mine, the other players may assume that this is actually the Game Master telling them out of character that this is what they NEED to do.

The result is that the companion characters can become bland non-entities: Incapable of truly participating in scenes like fully realized individuals, and yet technically omnipresent in the campaign. Always there, but never participating.

On the other hand, the disadvantage of having the player play their own companion is that the PC the companion is most likely to interact with is, in fact, the player's character. And this means that the player will need to frequently talk to themselves, and this is NOT an easy thing to do!

Because it's not easy, it generally won't happen. And because it's not happening, the result, once again, is that the companion becomes a flat non-entity. A character more in theory than in practice.

And this is too bad!

Because when these companion characters are truly brought to life – when they're genuinely part of the world with fully developed personalities capable of forging meaningful relationships – a lot of really amazing stuff can happen in play: Moments of sweetness and sorrow; laughter and tragedy; love and despair; sacrifice and friendship.

These companions are not the protagonists of your game – those are the PCs, of course. And this is great. In their role as secondary characters, companions have a unique utility and offer a distinct window into the game world and also an insight into the relationship of the protagonists to the game world.

So how can we make this happen in actual play?

Well, the somewhat useless answer is to, you know, just… get better. Its not impossible as a GM to develop the skills necessary to run multiple NPCs in every scene while simultaneously building trust with your players so that they implicitly understand those NPCs are not speaking with the voice of your authority.

The hard truth, though, is that there's no simple trick or shortcut to achieving that level of skill. It just takes lots and lots and lots of practice. And, in my experience, even once you have these skills, implementing them in this way is nevertheless a trade-off: The limited mental resources you are devoting to running those companions are not available to juggle other aspects of the campaign that are also important and add value.

So what's the other solution?

The key is to realize that what we perceived as a binary choice is, in fact, a false dilemma.

If we don't want the Game Master running the companion and we don't want the player playing their own companion and needing to talk to themselves, who is available to play the companion?

The answer, of course, is one of the other players at the table.

In the case of *Infinity*, where every single PC has their own geist, I simply established that your character's geist is always being played by the player to your left. Which, of course, means that you're playing the geist of the player to your right.

This does mean that every player is responsible for two characters – a protagonist and a companion – and that is trickier than playing just one character. But it's generally okay if these characters rarely talk directly to each other, and, in my experience, that makes it fairly easy to swap between characters.

In many groups, there also won't be a one-to-one correspondence between PCs and companions – for example, you might have a group where the only companion is the wizard's familiar. So only players who are comfortable taking on the challenge of a second character will need to do so.

You'll also discover that there are a lot of surprising advantages to this approach beyond the wizard simply getting to have a more meaningful relationship with their familiar.

For example, it becomes easier to split the party. Even when you're not deliberately attempting to do so, you'll often find that a player's primary character and secondary character will end up in different groups, which means that the player is able to participate in both sets of scenes.

These fully developed secondary characters can also be super useful if a PC ends up needing to leave the campaign: If they die or retire or are elected the Speaker of Good Mead, for example. The player can

simply adopt one of the secondary characters – quite possibly the one they were already playing – and promote them to being their new PC.

This kind of internal promotion makes it a lot easier to maintain continuity in the campaign and also means that the player doesn't have to sit out until their new character can be introduced to the group.

In the end, that's it: Hirelings, familiars, geists, baby brothers, Jimmy Olsen. Whatever companion you might have, just ask the player to your left if they'd be willing to tackle the role. And if you're a GM with a player whose character has a companion, help them to cast the role with one of their fellow players.

While you're helping people out, it would also be a big help to me if you would like, comment, subscribe, and do all that other stuff that earns me XP to level up with the Youtube Algorithm. Tell me about your favorite familiar, or let me know what topics you'd like to see me tackle in the future for Advanced Gamemastery.

Good gaming! This is Justin Alexander, and I hope to see you at the table!