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Save My Game

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Diplomacy

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This column provides advice for DMs whose campaigns are in trouble. Do your players constantly bicker or complain about issues both inside and outside of the main campaign action? Do your best ideas fall flat? Have you set up a situation that you now wish you hadn't? Worry no more, because Jason Nelson-Brown has the answers to save your game!

How Can NPCs Use Diplomacy?

What's a DM to do when it comes time to roleplay NPCs? How can the NPCs act diplomatic toward the characters, when the players are already so suspicious of them?

Problem: Diplomacy

I am running a high roleplaying/less combat game and am confused about how to adjudicate Diplomacy as performed by an NPC toward the PCs. Should it come up I don't want to step on their toes and necessarily force them to like someone, but I don't want to penalize an NPC for doing fantastically well on a Diplomacy roll. How do I adjudicate this? -- Archknot, from Wizards message boards

Poor Charisma. It has always been the weak sister, the proverbial red-headed stepchild, the—well, the dump stat of stats; even when 3rd Edition tied in many more skills and game effects, we still end up trying to stick it to the lowly Charisma-based skills.

For more information on Diplomacy, be sure to consult the *PHB*, pg. 71, including the Influencing NPC Attitudes sidebar. Also be sure to check the *DMG*, pg. 128 regarding NPC Attitudes.

Diplomacy is a tricky skill to use in any situation, because to the people sitting at the table it feels like a free, at-will *charm* effect. The real question is this: Is that a bad thing? Say a character has put a decent stat in Charisma and a bunch of skill points into Diplomacy. The effect is language-dependent, it takes time to use (a full round even if you take a hefty –10 penalty), its difficulty is greatly dependent on situational modifiers over which the user has no control (like the starting attitude of other creatures). It's not like Diplomacy is an automatically easy thing to do. So why are you penalizing their choice to use the rules? Do you stick it to them when they try to use Hide or Spot or Spellcraft? Of course not. So why choose this one skill for persecution?

Players vs. Player Characters

Ah yes, roleplaying. That's the sticky wicket to all Charisma-based skills. They're supposed to be a game-mechanical representation of your character's personality and interpersonal skills. Too often, we conflate this with our *player's* personality, and that's hardly ever a fair comparison, any more than a player has to be athletic in order for her character to use Climb or Jump or Swim, or brilliantly smart to have a character with high Knowledge skills.

Now I will say this: It is perfectly fair to compel a player to make at least a token effort at roleplaying to use their skills. Don't just say "I use Diplomacy" (or "I Bluff him"); you don't need to come up with an eloquent speech or subtle deception on the spur of the moment, but at least give the DM something to work with. For another thing, the person doing the Diplomacy should be the one doing the talking; if they are just being a mouthpiece to repeat what other characters are saying, it is quite reasonable that those to whom they're speaking would view them with suspicion or contempt. Maybe your house rule should be that the person doing the most talking has to make the Diplomacy roll, or maybe everyone who speaks up needs to make one, and you average all rolls together.



Still, we're getting a little far from your original question, because what you have is an *NPC* who wants to lay the Diplomacy on your party. To that I say that what's good for the goose is good for the gander. If you have PCs who are good at Diplomacy, **then let them be good at Diplomacy!** The same goes for *NPCs*. What Diplomacy does is make you friendlier or more inclined to help. It doesn't ever compel you to a certain course of action. You are always at your discretion as to exactly how you will help; if asked to do a certain thing, you may go along with it or you may not.

But the PCs know it's the bad guy just tricking them, right? No, actually the *players* may strongly suspect this to be the case, but their characters do not necessarily have the same metagame instincts as the players sitting around the table.

NPCs' Diplomatic Efforts

Now, let's make one thing perfectly clear; just look at pg. 128 of the *DMG*, regarding NPC Attitudes: "Should it come up, an NPC can use a Diplomacy or Charisma check to influence another NPC. However, NPCs can never influence PC attitudes. The players always make their characters' decisions."

That said, even in the context of the game system, it seems arbitrary and unfair to me to allow PCs to just ignore highly charismatic *NPCs* as they ply their skills. So for your game, you might consider the following approaches.

If you don't want *NPCs* to automatically affect PCs, perhaps you should adopt a mechanic from the Bluff or Intimidate skills. In the case of Bluff, you could make NPC Diplomacy something you can oppose with a Sense Motive check; if you win the check, you see through all that smooth talk and are unmoved by Diplomacy just as you would by seeing through the flim-flam of a Bluff attempt. For Intimidate, you make a skill check opposed by a level check with bonuses equal to level or hit dice, Wisdom modifier, and save bonuses vs. fear; if you replace 'fear' with 'charm' or 'compulsions,' you have a perfectly tailored mechanic with which to resist NPC Diplomacy. It also makes sense given that a successful Intimidate check has a similar effect to successful Diplomacy—it makes the target friendly.



Heck, you could even allow a PC with Diplomacy to 'counter-Diplomacy' an *NPC*, engaging them in their artful speech and trying to beat them at their own game; a higher Diplomacy check could either negate the Diplomacy attempt by the opponent or grant bonuses to allies to their own opposed checks to resist Diplomacy. In any event, you are giving the PC a chance to evade the effect with an opposed check.

In either case, remember that you are not stepping on the PCs toes by forcing them to react to the world around them. You aren't stepping on their toes when their character gets roasted by a *fireball* when they have a bad Reflex save or they get chopped up by the slaughterstone eviscerator because they have a crummy Armor Class. You aren't stepping on their toes when you allow them to get Bluffed by someone who's good at Bluffing (even if the *player* is highly suspicious of the lie being told), or Intimidated by someone who's good at Intimidating (even though the *player* isn't afraid of the imaginary monster), or made friendlier by someone who's good at Diplomacy (even if the *player* doesn't want to be friendly to that *NPC*). Different obstacles in the campaign have different capabilities, and changing PC behavior is one of those.

Combat vs. Roleplaying

Rules are rules, the non-combat rules no less so than the combat rules. Characters can't be prepared for everything, but they need to realize that every threat to their character doesn't come in the form of pointy objects. Again, Diplomacy doesn't allow anyone to give direct commands, leaving players a great deal of discretion in how they interpret suggestions or requests made by an *NPC* with good Diplomacy, but it does put you well within your rights to disallow PC actions that would not be in keeping with a friendly attitude established by NPC Diplomacy. You can certainly give players the opportunity to set their own starting attitudes, but be sure to take note of players who claim to be taking a hostile or suspicious attitude on a regular basis in order to make their reactions harder to change with Diplomacy. Such attitudes will surely be noted and reciprocated when it comes time for them to deal with *NPCs*!

About the Author

Jason Nelson-Brown lives in Seattle with his wife Kelle, daughters Meshia and Indigo, son Allen, and dog Bear. He is an active and committed born-again Christian who began playing **D&D** in 1981 and currently runs one weekly campaign while playing intermittently in two others.

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