



Episode Two: The Return of Jefferson Carter

It's time to set the record straight. You see, me and a friend of mine have been getting some bad press lately, and while I don't mind if people talk trash about me (not that much, anyway), my buddy does care. What's worse, he usually does something about it. Something rather violent. And so, the purpose of this second episode of Play Dirty is devoted to explaining the often misunderstood actions of one of my oldest friends, Jefferson Carter.

In many ways, I am responsible for all the talk people have been spreading about Carter. After all, it was my own article on gamingoutpost.com that introduced many people to Jefferson and his methods. So, in order to move forward, in order to give you a complete understanding of the Man, let's take a couple of steps back. Then, and only then, can you fully understand. (If you haven't read the article yet, don't. Not just yet. Wait for a moment or two. I'll tell you when you should go read it. Be patient, all will be revealed in time.)

Let's start in 1988, when I first started college at the University of Minnesota. I was a game master, running a regular *Call of Cthulhu* game on Thursday nights (*CoC* being my first love, the first game I ever bought and the first game I ever played - - well, ran). The game gained quite a reputation. Everyone else was running games that were far more forgiving of PC error. I did everything I could to make the game legendary at the campus, including using every single last suggestion the rulebook threw at me. I even used a few suggestions from other games, most notably *Paranoia*, to keep the players on their toes. After all, if the mortality rate stayed high, people would know I meant business.

Soon enough, surviving John's *Call of Cthulhu* game became a kind of badge of honor. People wore buttons to the weekly meetings with numbers on them, indicating how many sessions they survived through so far. The highest number (I believe) was a young fellow who boasted a 17. He never read a single book, never cast a single spell, and always had three sticks of dynamite on his body every moment of every day. He also had a "panic button" that detonated the dynamite - - just in case.

Well, after a year and a half, I wanted to run a different game. After all, I was "the

guy who ran *Cthulhu*," and that kind of reputation didn't settle with me. I didn't want to get stuck in a genre, I wanted to be "the guy who ran damn good games." So I announced I was capping off my *Cthulhu* game and would run a new campaign in a completely different genre. Something that no-one would suspect.

The next week, I brought *Champions* to the table.

Now, keep in mind the reputation I already earned around the club: John Wick chews up characters and spits them out like juiceless jerky. I liked that reputation; it served two very important purposes. First, like I said above, it meant that people knew I meant business. You screw up in John's game, it costs you. Second, it meant that people were very careful in my games. They were afraid for their characters' lives. (I still practice that strategy to this day. At every con I attend, I run the "I kill 'em, I keep 'em" game. People bring their *Legend of the Five Rings* characters to the game, and if a character dies, I keep the character sheet. That way, folks know that they're playing for keeps. It works well in a samurai game, with the players knowing that they're always four feet away from death. Final. Permanent. Death.)

I was faced with a difficult decision. I could maintain the same strategy for the *Champions* game, or I could adopt a much more heroic mentality. I decided to do both. Inspired by Frank Miller's *Born Again* series (a book that every superhero fan should read), I decided to keep the rules the way they were (meaning characters were very difficult to kill) while hitting them in places they never knew they could be hurt. But I wouldn't kill them.

I wouldn't kill a single character.

In a few weeks, it became obvious that mortality in Wick's superhero game was not an issue. It was now all about Willpower. (This is the point you should go read "Hit 'Em Where It Hurts" over at the Gaming Outpost. Even if you've read it before, you may want to freshen up. You can find it at http://www.gamingoutpost.com/features/listen_up/john_wick.shtml (Do it now, then come back here. We'll talk about it when you're done.)

(And, speaking of Willpower, it is very difficult for me not to spend the rest of this column defending that article. I might slip once or twice. If I do, I apologize. If I'm human - - rather than divine - - for a moment or two, I hope you'll forgive me. Us game designers gotta get forgiveness whenever we can.)

(And, one last parenthetical statement. Instead of saying "players" as if I understand the totality of gaming, I should say, "in my experience, the players I've game mastered for." However, just saying "players" is a bit easier on my fingers and on your eyes. Sorry for the confusion.)

So, now you know the devious plot of Mister Jefferson Carter. You know his motives and you know his methods. A serious bastard, that Carter fellow. Evil down to the core.

In other words, an evil worth fighting. What would you give up to eliminate the Carters of the world? What sacrifice is too great?

Let's pretend for a moment. We're roleplayers, we can do that. Let's pretend that God Himself comes down from Heaven with a list of Carters. He tells you, "Pick one, and I'll remove him from the planet, erase him forever from Existence." Then, the

Lord looks you in the eye and says, "But you have to give something up. Something precious."

Would you do it?

Would you give up your life to make sure that no such person as Jefferson Carter ever existed in our world? How about a limb? How about a loved one? How about your sight or hearing or touch or taste or smell?

What price is too high to erase evil?

There's a few of you out there who are saying, "No price is too high." (I agree with you, at least, in theory. But I have to be honest; I don't know if I could give up my wife to get rid of Carter. I don't know if I have that much courage in my heart.)

How about . . . your Aunt May?

(Was that a low blow? I can't tell anymore.)

The point here should be obvious. Heroes, real heroes, are willing to pay any cost to rid the world of its Jefferson Carters. Any cost at all. I only told you about the characters who failed, who lost resolve.

You see, Carter and I were partners in crime. However, I wasn't completely honest with him. (This is where the apology starts.) While he believed we were crushing characters, I had a secret agenda.

I was testing them. Pushing them. Pushing them beyond any limits they had set for themselves. Because a hero isn't measured by how many times he gets knocked down, he's measured by how many times he gets back up. When Carter arranged for that villain to "crash" Malice's little party (sorry about the pun), I was watching her closely. When her grandmother died, she had a choice. She could hang up her cape and cowl, or she could fight through the grief, fight through the pain and keep going. She failed. She gave up.

So many of them failed. So many of them gave up.

But they weren't heroes. They were quitters.

There was one hero in the campaign, but we'll talk about him at the end. After all, it was his death that started me and Carter's downfall. Time and time again, players kept redesigning new characters, thinking they created the ultimate "anti-Wick" character. "Let's see him kill this one!" they'd say.

But they kept missing the point. I never killed anyone. I just pushed them. Pushed them as hard as I could, as far as I could. Some kept fighting the good fight. Others gave up and left, disgruntled that they'd been "Wick-ed" (a term someone on the *Pyramid* discussion boards just recently invented). I never killed them. But they always - - always - - gave up.

Soon, my *Champions* game became as legendary as my *Cthulhu* game. "Just try and survive in any Wick campaign" was the battle cry around the club. "He'll screw you seven ways to Sunday."

But a few stuck it out. A few of them found themselves on the Short End of the Wick Stick (the term from school; the one I prefer - - for those of you who care) and kept on going, no matter what the cost to their characters.

Those are the ones who were the real heroes.

And those are the ones who brought down Carter/Wick Demolition Inc. Remember Mister Fabulous? Remember his sad death? The people in that *Champions* game do. In fact, we held a wake. A live-action wake. People wore name tags ("Hi! I'm Stupendous Lass!") and my buddy who played the Fabulous One lay perfectly still through the whole three hour event. He was a trooper. Everyone who ever played in the game came in character and said something about him.

I played Carter. I was the last to speak at the ceremony. I was the one who sponsored his heroic exploits for so many years. I remembered him fondly. I also laid a bunch of verbal clues on them at the wake. Some of those clues resonated with people who no longer played in the game. That meant if they walked away, they walked away with the key to identifying the man who really pulled the trigger on Fabulous's life and career.

After the wake was over, many of the players who no longer played in the game came to me privately. They said they wanted back in. I told them that the game only had room for five . . . but they could make cameo appearances if they wanted.

Soon, folks began showing up to the game for 15 minutes or so, just to relay the information they gained at the wake. One particularly powerful Empath (who I nailed with a Psychic Vampire chick who leeches away almost every ounce of emotion he ever had) told them that Carter lied to him about where he was the night Fabulous was murdered. Another - - an accountant whose mathematical genius was destroyed by an endless math loop devised by Carter and was now working for the IRS - - told them that Carter Inc. owned a company that owned a company that owned a company that was run by a local Mob boss who sold the gun to the kid that shot Fabulous. Another character - - a superstrong, supertough, supernasty rotorooter with teeth who had his bones turned to jelly and now worked in a physical rehab clinic for war veterans - - told them that the kid who pulled the trigger did volunteer work for him every once in a while and loved Mister Fabulous. It didn't make any sense he should shoot good ol' cap.

Over months, the pieces were coming together. And as they got closer, Carter got meaner. They knew they were looking in the right direction when The Executioner - - a thug that Carter hired to keep people off the right track - - stopped using rubber bullets and started using real ones. They knew they were looking in the right direction when Carter started giving them too many assignments, and all of them deadly.

Then, when they got close enough to discover the truth, he pulled their funding. They found themselves audited by the IRS. They found out their rent checks for the last six months were never cashed, and they were thrown out on the street. Their friends disappeared. Their families disappeared. One of them was busted for cocaine possession, even though cocaine was poison to his alien system (nice Disadvantage, that one). One of them was charged with rape. Another with child abuse. For six weeks running, one of the characters was in jail. Every four-hour session, he'd sit at the corner of the table - - in jail - - and watch as his friends struggled to maintain their lives.

("What do you do this turn, Roger?" "I imagine the look on Carter's face when I rip off his ears.")

Six weeks.

But he didn't give up. Even though he had a life sentence and no chance of parole and no chance his buddies would get him out of the most advanced prison ever designed for meta-humans, he stuck it out. ("What do you do this turn, Roger?" "I imagine the look on Carter's face when I make earrings out of his . . ." "Okay, Roger. I get the point.")

But break him out, they did. In one of the most exciting sessions in any of my games. And when he got out, he looked at me and said, "I'm still here."

I smiled. "Yes. Yes you are."

He mimicked the motion of putting his cowl over his head and whispered, "And Carter is %\$#ed."

That was the response I was looking for. For 19 months I'd run that game, knowing what Carter was doing to them. Nineteen months of preparing for that very moment, when they'd know the truth and had the gumption to go after him.

That very moment, I was proud. Proud like a papa. Nineteen months of screwing players every way I could. Nineteen months of pushing them beyond the limits of their bodies, their patience, their dignity and their resolve. Nineteen months of giving them pain that no point configuration could protect them from.

Nineteen months were about to pay off.

It took them a whole month to get to Carter. The man protected himself well. But when it was all over, they finally had the man who arranged for the death of Malice's grandmother, the man who broke Tristan's heart, the man who shot Mister Fabulous through the head, in their hands.

And that's when they proved they were heroes.

They didn't kill him. They didn't maim him. They didn't cause a single point of Stun or Body. Instead, they turned him over to the authorities with all the necessary evidence to convict him for 17 life sentences. The prosecuting attorney was a young woman who used to be known as Malice, making a special appearance for that night only. We did the whole trial, the same way we did Fabulous's wake. The room was filled with almost every member of the gaming club. We selected jurors (folks who were playing in the three-year long Palladium game that might still be going for all I know) and they turned in a verdict of guilty on all but one count. Jefferson Carter would spend the rest of his life in prison. If he lived to be 2,017 years old, he'd still have 500 years left on his sentence.

The good guys won. The bad guy was behind bars. The campaign was over. I ran a couple more one-shot games of *Cthulhu* then moved to California where the name "Jefferson Carter" has popped up a couple of times, but not in the way it did in that 19-month long *Champions* campaign.

* * *

Had to take a break there. Wrote that entire piece in an hour. Cool down. Cool down.

This should have been my first column here at *Pyramid*. I say that because in that first essay about Carter, I forgot to mention the most important part of Playing Dirty: the payoff.

Catching and convicting Carter took them nearly two years of real time. In that time, they watched nearly a dozen heroes go down under Carter's heel (second pun for the evening; sorry), never knowing that someone was actually behind the whole thing. For the most part, they thought it was just me being nasty.

Oh no. There was method. There was also madness, but there was much more method. And in the end, when they pinched the bastard, it was all worth while. Even the folks who didn't survive Carter's meat grinder helped out in their own way. The players who walked away from the game, knowing they'd been crushed, said to newbies, "You'd better watch yourself. Wick's got it out for heroes." What they should have been saying was, "You'd better watch your buddy. Sticking together is the only way to survive."

* * *

If you don't mind, a brief, personal afterword.

Writing about all this again has reminded me of something, something I'd forgotten over the last three months.

For those 90 days, I've been unemployed. Southern California isn't too nice to folks who spent the last five years of their life at a "fake job." Yes, I've been an editor, a writer, a game designer, a product manager, and a layout assistant. I've written ad copy and I've done so many game demos, I think I've got more customer service and sales experience than most of the salesmen I know.

But it was all done at a "fake job." Tell someone you design games for a living and they say, "Wow. That's a neat job!" Ask them to hire you, and they turn away.

So, because I can't get a job in Southern California that pays any kind of salary, Jennifer and I have to move into a smaller place (losing our two bedroom, two and a half bath condo). In other words, for the last month, I haven't written anything. I've had my hands full looking for a new job and looking for a smaller place for me and my wife to move into. I've turned in over 150 applications. I haven't gotten a single phone call. I did get a phone interview for one job, but someone else got that one.

One job.

So, the guy who won the Origins Award for the Best Roleplaying Game of 1997, the guy who was on the design team for one of the top-selling CCGs in America that isn't *Magic* or *Pokemon*, has to get a retail job. I've won four Origins Awards. The games I designed and helped design have made millions of dollars.

For other people.

But when it's all said and done, I don't own a single piece of any of the games I've been involved with. Not *L5R*, not *7th Sea*. Not even a single point.

That's the game industry. You only make money here if you own the property, and I spent the last five years of my life developing properties for other people. The reason I left AEG was so I could develop my own properties, and make money in the game industry. Of course, in the meantime, I can't find a job in the real world that pays the bills.

As of Sunday night, I wrote a letter to a friend of mine telling him that I was done with the game industry. Finished. There's no money here. I could write an RPG that might reach 1,000 readers or I could write a novel or a screenplay that would reach hundreds of thousands. Of course, that kind of work would also pay my bills, rather than making new ones.

And, if you read the message boards, I ain't the most beloved individual in the game industry.

So. Why not just quit?

Then, I sat down to write what would be my very last thing for the gaming industry. This column. The one that earned me so much love on the *Pyramid* lists. I reread the Carter article. Read about Malice's grandma. Thought about why I did that to the poor girl.

I was pushing her. Pushing her.

She quit. Not because she didn't have her points allocated the right way, not because her Ego wasn't high enough or she didn't have enough ED or PD or Stun or Body. No, she quit because she didn't have the resolve to keep fighting.

Writing those words, those very words reminded me. Reminded me why I love this industry so much. Why I love roleplaying games so much. Because we are the only medium where the Author and the Audience are the same. Where we live the stories we tell as we tell them.

The whole point of mythology is to teach lessons that cannot be communicated any other way. Roleplaying is living myth. We aren't hearing the heroes' trials, we are the hero. We aren't walking in his footsteps, we're making the footsteps. And the game master/storyteller/dungeon master is the Dragon. He's Grendel. He's the Whale. Yes, he is God to our Jonah. ("Did you slay Leviathan? I did.")

And why does he send us pain? (Dangerously invoking Ellison.) Because pain is what pushes us. We don't grow without pain. We don't evolve without pain. We don't learn without pain. If nobody ever knocked us down, we wouldn't know the bliss of getting back up.

I've been knocked down. I've been hit harder than I ever have in my entire life. And just now - - right now, as I type these very words - - I know the bliss of getting back up.

All because of a gamer war story.

I said this when I won the Origins Award for *L5R* RPG. With a very slight modification, I'll say it again. Don't let anyone - - and I mean anyone - - tell you that gaming isn't important. Because right now, it means all the world to me.

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