Alignment Creator's Kit

A Basic Fantasy RPG Supplement

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Introduction

Alignment is a way of describing the moral code of a creature. This supplement is intended to help the Game Master create a system of alignments for their own game world. These rules are for use with the **Basic Fantasy RPG Core Rules**. If you do not already have a copy of them, please visit the website and download a copy.

Alignment, in a role-playing game, refers to a system of defining ethics and morality in the campaign world. The very first role-playing game possessed an alignment system, basically defining "sides" to which the heroes and monsters belonged. Later games have expanded on this concept in several details. How alignments are defined, judged, and applied in the game world has long been a point of contention.

The Basic Fantasy Role-Playing Game rules do not define (or require) any rules for alignments. This article is intended for the Game Master who is considering the use of alignment in their world. The author has spent many, many years playing and running role-playing games, and has heard or read most of the arguments about alignment. I hope that the following may be of use to you.

A Note About Moral Relativism

Wikipedia says this: "Moral relativists hold that no universal standard exists by which to assess an ethical proposition's truth." Thus, what is "good" to one group is "evil" to another. In the author's opinion, attempting to apply an alignment system in a world of moral relativism is useless. What is the point of defining your character's alignment when other characters in the game world may, with complete confidence, define your character's alignment entirely differently?

In most fantasy game worlds, there are gods who define morality and ethics. They are the "universal standard" mentioned above, defining what the alignments of the world mean. Thus, in this document, all discussion of alignment is based on the concepts of moral absolutism (the opposite of moral relativism).

I advise Game Masters wishing to run worlds where moral relativism is "in force" to stop reading now and give up on using alignment rules in their games, for that way lies madness.

Law vs. Chaos

The most classic alignment system assigned characters to one of three alignments: Lawful, Neutral, or Chaotic. In general, a character is Lawful if they believe in the importance of the group over the individual; laws and customs dictate how individuals within the group interact, and the Lawful character believes that obedience to law and custom is important.

The Chaotic character is a stark contrast, believing that the individual's importance is primary. A Chaotic character will be suspicious of any Lawful organization (if not outwardly hostile to such an institution).

Neutral characters straddle this line, obeying the laws of the land most of the time but having no real devotion to them, and violating the rules whenever they feel the risk is worth it (particularly if there is little chance of being found out by any authorities).

Good vs. Evil

Another axis of alignment involves good and evil. Early games made the assumption that all Lawful characters were "good" and all Chaotic characters were "evil," but a careful consideration of people in real life shows that this is overly simplistic. Just because a character believes in anarchy (Chaos) does not mean that they are evil; and likewise, a character may be Lawful and be devoted to a system of law which encourages torture of prisoners or the oppression of the poor.

Good characters believe in the value of sentient life. All thinking, feeling creatures are considered to have value, and slaying such a creature is only acceptable when allowing it to live will bring significant harm to other sentients. Good characters will almost never participate in torture or other abuses of prisoners.

Evil characters consider all beings other than themselves to be of no intrinsic value. Evil characters freely (and often joyfully) participate in murder, torture, and any other such things that bring harm to other sentients.

Characters who are Neutral with respect to Good and Evil may be truly amoral, or they may consider that only some (but not all) sentients have value. A common form of ethical neutrality is the belief that one's own family, tribe, or nation are the only true "people" in existence, while all others are little more than animals and thus deserve little or no consideration.

Other Axes

I have seen alignment systems employing other measures than the above, but I must admit that I find none of those alternatives compelling, so they are not discussed herein. There is no reason that you, the Game Master, cannot or should not employ one or more alternative alignment axis if you wish.

Constructing An Alignment System

You as Game Master must decide what sort of alignment system applies in your world. It is entirely reasonable that the gods of your milieu care little about Law or Chaos but consider questions of Good and Evil paramount. Or, the opposite might be true, with Law and Chaos being the only significant factor. Some campaigns might apply both measures, calling characters Lawful Evil, Chaotic Neutral, or Neutral Good. Some suggested alignment systems are described below.

Three Alignments

This is the most basic system. The GM simply selects one of the axes described above (Good vs. Evil or Law vs. Chaos) and ignores the other.

Nine Alignments

This is the most advanced system. As described above, the two axes are crossed with each other to produce the following combinations:

Lawful Good: Adherents to this alignment believe that only through law and order can the benefits of good be brought to the greatest number.

Lawful Neutral: These characters believe that order is of paramount importance, and are not concerned with the happiness or unhappiness of others.

Lawful Evil: Characters of this alignment prefer to live in a society where the powerful rule over the weak.

Neutral Good: These characters are interested in promoting good, and uninterested in questions of law or chaos.

Absolute, or True, Neutral: This alignment can be interpreted in at least two different ways; see About Neutrality, below, for more details.

Neutral Evil: These characters revel in cruelty and hatred, generally working in small bands so as to inflict maximum suffering while still acting on a personal level.

Chaotic Good: Characters of this alignment believe that only true personal freedom can bring complete happiness.

Chaotic Neutral: These characters are entirely self-centered; they are neither friendly and merciful nor cruel and hateful.

Chaotic Evil: These characters are true psychopaths; they desire only to harm others for their own pleasure.

Five Alignments

This odd variation of Nine Alignment systems is favored by some. In this system, the four alignments Lawful Neutral, Neutral Good, Neutral Evil, and Chaotic Neutral are omitted from the list. It is otherwise much the same as the Nine Alignment system.

About Neutrality

There are two schools of thought about Neutral characters (particularly "True" Neutral characters, that is, those who are Neutral in both Law vs. Chaos and Good vs. Evil). The first school of thought holds that the Neutral character believes in the "cosmic balance." Such a character believes that neither Law nor Chaos, Good nor Evil should be allowed to become too powerful. If living in a mostly Lawful territory, the Neutral character will work in favor of Chaos; this may mean law-breaking, or it may mean attempting to undermine the government. On the other hand, a Neutral character in a Chaotic (i.e. lawless) land will work with those attempting to establish order.

The other school of thought is that the Neutral character is indifferent to the extremes, considering none of them important. Such a character living in a Lawful land will generally behave as if they are Lawful, but may engage in illegal behavior when they feel it safe to do so. If they find themselves in a lawless region, they will behave as if

Chaotic. This sort of Neutral character is only interested in the survival of himself and their family and friends. This is distinct from being Chaotic in that such Chaotic people cares for no one but themselves.

This second sort of Neutrality, incidentally, generally includes all creatures of animal intelligence regardless of which of the above interpretations the GM favors; creatures of such low cognitive ability cannot make judgments about balance.

I have been told, in emphatic terms, by some other Game Masters that the second definition of Neutrality is not possible for sentient beings. They assert that all Neutral sentients will automatically work in favor of the "cosmic balance." While I disagree, this is entirely an issue that you, the Game Master, must decide upon for your own game.

Alignment Tracking

In some old-school games, the Game Master was expected to monitor the actual behavior of each player character, and compare the behavior to the character's stated alignment. In cases where the GM felt it was warranted, they were expected to notify the player that the character's alignment had changed. Such involuntary alignment changes often included penalties in the form of lost experience points or even levels of ability.

I'll tell you honestly, I'm not sure what the point of this is. I don't see why a Fighter, or a Magic-User, or a Thief should suffer a loss of experience as a result of changing alignment. However, there is one case where I do see a point to tracking a character's alignment: the Cleric.

Religion and Alignment

If you are considering using an alignment system, you are probably planning to assign alignments to the gods of your campaign world. Generally, the gods in such a world will expect their mortal followers to be of the same alignment. Clerics, the official representatives of the gods, must maintain their alignment scrupulously. Failure to do so should be met with penalties.

Basic Fantasy RPG does not include alignment as an official rule. The gods of "standard" Basic Fantasy RPG worlds (such as the Western Lands, as seen in **BF1 Morgansfort**) expect their followers, especially Clerics, to obey their commandments. It is thus entirely possible to define the ethics and morality expected by the gods without the use of alignment. (In fact, one might say that's how it is done in real life.)

Building Your Alignment System

Alignments are often a point of contention. The most important thing you, the Game Master, should do if you plan to use alignments in your game is to make the rules clear to the players. Be sure that all players know how you define Neutrality. Make sure they know if you plan to track their character's alignments, and if so, what sort of penalties they can expect for transgressing. Fail to do this, and you run the risk of spending precious game time arguing with unhappy players.

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