way the new rule works. If you decide to use an optional or variant rule, make sure you apply it in every appropriate situation. Keep special cases and exceptions to a minimum.

Also, remember that NPCs are not omniscient; they should not know everything the gamemaster knows, such as the player characters' skills, weapons, spells, and so on. The gamemaster controls the NPCs, but should not allow them to act or plan based on knowledge that would not reasonably be available to them.

Be Realistic!

Like the player characters, the NPCs played by the gamemaster are people, with individual fears, needs, hopes, and desires. By giving them life, the gamemaster can make the stories that come out of the game more memorable for everybody involved. Give your NPCs personalities, motives, likes, and dislikes. For example, maybe the heartless corporate Johnson who's planning on double-crossing the player characters has a soft spot for kids because he grew up as an orphan in the Seattle Barrens. Or the toxic shaman your player characters are facing has a grudge against a particular person that warped him, rather than simply hating humanity.

Critters should likewise act out of realistic motives. Most animals do not kill for no reason or for pleasure. They fight out of necessity—out of hunger, or pain, or to protect their young. Keep in mind also that wild animals live wherever they can find food and shelter—so your player characters shouldn't run into a pack of hell hounds in the Barrens unless someone put them there.

Be Flexible!

If a player wants to do something not explicitly covered in the rules, don't just refuse on principle. You can always find a skill or attribute rating of some kind that the player can use for a test. Tell the player what skill or attribute applies to the situation and whether her chances of pulling off the intended action are good, indifferent or terrible.

If your group creates a new rule to cover a special situation during a game, decide later what to do with it. The middle of a shadowrun is no place to discuss the fine points of game mechanics. (The rule might become a new "house rule" that will always apply in future, or a one-shot solution you may or may not use again.)

More generally, most players are good at coming up with new and innovative ways to wreck a gamemaster's carefully laid-out adventure plans. When that happens, the gamemaster has two choices: resisting the players' direction or going along with it. The latter is by far the better choice; players forced into situations they are trying to avoid are likely to have less fun, and may even end up resenting the gamemaster for not letting them play out the adventure their way. A gamemaster who can adjust his own plans to account for the players' unexpected actions not only lets the players tell the story, but may also gain inspiration for future events and plot lines.

Be Tough!

Challenge the players. If they don't sweat for every Karma point and nuyen they earned, then you're not pushing them hard enough. *Shadowrun* is an adventure game and the players are the "stars" of the adventure, so their characters should face dangerous opponents and survive harrowing escapes in order to achieve their goals. That top-secret corporate research lab is likely to be guarded by a force a lot more lethal than two goons armed with baseball bats, and the local Yakuza boss won't keep his organization's main database on a home computer.

The Professional rating and prime runner systems (see p. 272 and p. 276) are excellent ways to fine-tune the threat that a given opponent poses to player characters. For gamemasters just starting out, keep in mind that on a really rough run, the player characters should ideally win only by the skin of their teeth, if at all.

Be Kind!

Technically, a gamemaster has incredible power over the player characters. He can throw enormous risks at them until their luck runs out and they fail a test, resulting in serious injury or even death. But only cheap bullies do that. Gamemasters who measure their success in trashed character sheets soon find themselves without players.

When player characters get in over their heads, remember that bad guys like to take prisoners. Prisoners can be made to talk or used as hostages. Prisoners can also pay ransom. Most important, prisoners have a chance to escape and live to fight another day.

Sometimes, the gamemaster has to cheat to keep characters alive. If a player makes an unlucky dice roll or an NPC gets off a lucky shot, the character doesn't have to die. Instead, the gamemaster can fudge the dice roll to keep the character alive. Knock the character out, or stick him in the hospital. Don't let a well-developed character die just because the player rolled only 2 hits when the character needed 3. The gamemaster can and should decide that she stays alive long enough to get to a hospital.

The same goes for good NPCs. If the villain the gamemaster spent hours designing gets hit by a lucky shot, her body can always be buried under a collapsing building or suffer some other disaster that "no one could possibly survive." A few months later, the villain can show up, held together by glue and cyberware, ready for revenge against the player characters.

Don't let your characters off easy all of the time, though. There should be a real risk of death now and then—don't be afraid to kil a character off if they asked for it, or if their time has simply come. It will make the others realize how close their own characters are to an unplanned horizontal retirement, and thus heighten the drama and tension.

Being kind also means listening to what your players want out of the game and trying to include their interests in the story. If they want to explore the metaplanes, play special forces characters, or create their own gang in East L.A., let them.