

(First, I'm not exactly sure where the preferred forum is for this post. Any moderator is free to move it wherever they decide is best. This seemed appropriate to this Bearpit Noob.)

Ok, so I'm just tooling around with a first test of changing the Backgrounds.xml along with also changing a bit of a test merc, Flo, in the MercProfiles.xml. But this post will be about some things I wondered about and some noted possible inconsistencies in the Backgrounds.xml.

Let's take a look at two entries, fields, or tags -- I guess you could call it one of those.

1) <ap_swimming>

Description in file: <ap_swimming>0</ap_swimming> <!-- +- % APs needed for task, -40 to 40 -->

Now, the explanation does not say if a positive number makes you have more APs to swim, or if that means each swim task takes more APs each tile you swim. The first case would mean that a positive value gives you more total APS so your character can swim better if they have that background. The second interpretation would mean a positive value actually increased the COST to swim per tile.

So, to answer the question, I looked at several of the already built backgrounds. Here is what I found:

All of The Natives, like Elio and Wahan have negative values. I'd assume that Natives of the island would be natural swimmers as they would often need to navigate the various terrains and fishing (perhaps even spear fishing) might be something they would do, as for example is or was common in Guam. In addition, they seem to have positive River and Jungle AP boni, while having negative Polar boni, suggesting to me that their total AP was higher when entering that region. (But you can already see the confusion with plus and minus values and whether they are beneficial or not, as both start with ap_) The Tuareq Background says those people are nomads in the Sahara, so they'd be expected to rarely get a chance to practice swimming and so not be good at it. That Tuareq Background has a positive ap_swimming value, so a positive value seems to mean you swim less well. So far the swimming values seem consistent. Same goes with the Background for Ivan, who is said to have an excruciating physical regimen. His ap_swimming is a negative value, just like the Metaviran Natives and Metavira had a lot of jungle and water. So far, so good.

But now we run into a problem. Let's look at the Extreme Athlete background. It says that extreme athletes take great risks, we know they must be very fit. But the ap_swimming value is a +20, and you'd expect Extreme Athletes to be in peak condition (unless the joke here is they are badly injured all the time). 20 is a huge value in the backgrounds, you usually see 5 or 10. So is the +20 beneficial or are the negative values beneficial to the character from a background? Inconsistent.

My assumption for the above is that negative ap_swimming bonus is beneficial. It probably is a percentage modifier to cost per tile when swimming, so negative was the rationale. The metaviran natives, Ivan get the negative but beneficial values, while the Tuareg gets the positive value which is actually a malus, since it adds to the cost of each tile requiring swimming. But if so, then there is an error in the Extreme Athlete background since it uses a huge positive value of 20. I would consider that a Surfer, a Scuba Diver, a Water Skier, Parasailing enthusiasts, all those would be akin to extreme athletes, and they would be good swimmers. So note the inconsistency, which is it?

Ok. Let's look at another value in the Backgrounds.xml instead.

2) <croucheddefense>

Description in file: <croucheddefense>0</croucheddefense> <!-- +- enemy cth if we are crouched against thick cover in their direction, -30 to 30-->

This time we will look at croucheddefense. Again, my goal here is to add a beneficial bonus to Flo. Why? Well, she's an experienced office person. She knows how to avoid the Boss when it is break time or to avoid more tasks when already busy. She also was M.E.R.C.'s Swimsuit Model for the Watch, if you recall. MERC has a lot of oddballs. So to avoid the MERC fans (something you could understand would be desirable) she became skilled at hiding behind cover. But do we use a positive value or a negative value to create a beneficial crouched defense?

No way to be certain, so we examine other backgrounds already in the file. Once again, we find inconsistencies.

Meltdown has -5 as part of the Merc (for Mercenary for Hire) background. Numb has -5 as part of the Punk background, whose descriptor says that making the Urban Environment into a Jungle is a tough job, but somebody has to do it. A Punk is a streetwise, low-level criminal type. The idea here would seem to be that Punks are good at hiding from pursuit, reasonable enough assumption. So far, negative values for croucheddefense seem to be the beneficial choice or intent. Miguel and Dimitri have -5 as part of the Rebel background, they must be good survivors, and Omerta was often shelled. Also consistent.

Veteran Mercenaries, like Mike, Stogie, and Biggins likewise get -5 or -7. This probably means that they know how to survive and this is mentioned in the Veteran Mercenary Background Description text, as it was in Rebel background. But one could pretend it also means, old and arthritic. That's unlikely, but hey, there is an inconsistency about to hit us in the face.

Grace <croucheddefense>10 -- a positive value which should be interpreted from the above as a MALUS.

Grace is that inconsistency. Her background is Circus Artist. Here's the Description: "Let's hope you are as good evading bullets as you are evading knives while tied to a board". Nimble, graceful, acrobatic, evasive enough to avoid knives. Such a person ought to be able to find cover easily. She can probably force herself into a magician's box, she may be a contortionist. So crouching behind cover should be as easy for her to do as a rodent. But she has a large positive value which should indicate a malus if our above interpretation is true.

Now, there are two likely explanations for this. One is that she's a performing artist, used to the high-wire or being visible to a crowd, not hiding behind cover. True, but when your life is on the line in war, you don't perform visibly for people trying to kill you. You perform your skill to evade them. Still evasion is not quite crouching behind cover, it's dodging or not even being known to be there. Unlikely explanation but one possible view, she likes to show-off maybe in the open.

The more likely explication for this inconsistency is a more simple one of process. Grace is a late addition to the AIM list, she's not an original. So the person who created her background believed that a positive croucheddefense value was a bonus and not a malus, therefore beneficial to Grace. This seems the most likely reason for the inconsistency. But I have no idea if it is true or not. So is a positive value or a negative value beneficial to the character as pertains to croucheddefense? For now I'm going to presume negative is beneficial, but I won't be able to tell with such a small value in the game, honestly.

So this brings up a suggestion. The header of this file where the various tags and values are described require for each value something like "Positive is beneficial" or "Negative is beneficial" added after each descriptor.

Then again, another option is to create a consistency among all values, but this will mean adjusting all the lines of code where the values are used which is a ton of makework. In other words, all Background Values would use, let's say, positive values are beneficial, while negative values are always a malus. But that's a lot more make-work, so I believe that would not be the preferred choice by the coders.

Perhaps this explanation of what is beneficial for each value in the Backgrounds.xml , a positive or a negative value for each field or tag, has already been done. If so, perhaps someone can direct me to where I can find it? If not we sorely need someone who knows the code or the formulae and their effects to provide us with this knowledge, and preferably then it can be added to the file in the header describing the various variables, tags, values.

The inconsistencies in the already provided backgrounds suggest that experienced modders, far more knowledgeable than a mere noob fan like myself, have made errors of inconsistency in the usage of these values in creating these backgrounds already. Plus, I just looked at two of these values. There are about 100 variables available to provide a bonus or malus to something via the Backgrounds.xml . I wonder how many more inconsistencies or misuse of the values we could find in the already created backgrounds, let alone in those players create in the attempt to customize their characters using backgrounds.

Anyway, I just thought I'd mention this and see if someone could help out here. Thanks ahead of time to all the modders and the community. The Bearpit has certainly added to my enjoyment of this great JA2 game over the years, mostly because of all of you posting about this game we love.

Subject: Re: Backgrounds.xml Questions and Oddities
Posted by [silversurfer](#) on Thu, 25 Jan 2018 13:04:48 GMT
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1) ap_swimming is a modifier for the AP and BP needed to swim. That means that a negative value will lower the amount of AP and BP that is used for every tile moved. The character can swim more easily.

2) croucheddefense modifies the enemy CTH value. A negative value will lower it. The description of the tag in Backgrounds.xml reflects that. I guess that the circus artist background is more or less a joke. The character is not good at hiding behind cover as that wasn't his profession. He was exposed to danger (therefore the fear resistance) but cover was never his thing.

Subject: Re: Backgrounds.xml Questions and Oddities
Posted by [grim](#) on Thu, 25 Jan 2018 13:09:31 GMT
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The comments are self explanatory to me.

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<!-- +- % APs needed for task, -40 to 40 -->
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Replace +- with your value and you have a full sentence, ie -10 :

-10% APs needed for task

A negative value is beneficial here.

For your 1) and 2) it's a problem of human mistakes, extreme athletes and grace seem to have the wrong sign. It happens

Thanks for noticing.

Subject: Re: Backgrounds.xml Questions and Oddities
Posted by [ZedJA2](#) on Fri, 26 Jan 2018 10:11:00 GMT
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Thanks for the replies. I'm sure you both are more familiar with the nomenclature than I am. I know that SilverSurfer definitely is.

When read on the in-game mouseover many of these become slightly more clear.

See, the confusion comes when you look at things like the APs for various Terrain. There a positive value is seemingly beneficial. I guess there the AP is talking about total APs available, and so adds to a total or adds a percentage when you are in that terrain. That's contra the concept of -10 % needed for a task.

I guess the question comes up if it is talking about what is needed or what is available. As you say, Grim, if it says needed for task, then that is pretty clear.

And as you say, mistakes happen. However, this means that anybody using the characters such

as Grace or the Extreme Athletes Background, which seem to be having the wrong intuitive value, are stuck with a legacy mistake. Glad you found my noticing that of some value. I noticed just by accident as I was double-checking that I understood the Backgrounds and how the values worked. Obviously -- some before me had similar confusion. Somebody more informed than me might want to do a complete scan of the backgrounds.xml file provided to see if it works with whatever was intended.

Thanks to both of you for the clarification. I'll just add those to my personal log file for JA2 v1.13. Much obliged, very helpful for me. I was lucky and had guessed at the correct values. Now I have to try and figure out the 2 different fortification values, but I don't intend to modify those anyway.
