RPG REVIEW
Issue #19, March 2013

The Apocalypse!

Apocalypse Games Reviewed (Gamma World, The Morrow Project, Aftermath!, Heaven & Hell, The Apocalypse Stone) … Twilight 2000 Revisited … Comprehensive Damage System … End of the World Gaming … After The Fall T&T Campaign … Oriental Millenarianism … Interview with Tim Westhaven … The Imposter and Iron Man III Movie Reviews … Lord Orcus Returns! … Industry News

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ADMINISTRIVIA

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Cover image is a photo is of the "Baker" explosion, part of Operation Crossroads at Bikini Island, 25 July 1946

EDITORIAL

In the interests in calling a space a bloody shovel, this is the latest issue of RPG Review that has come out to date, mea culpa, & etc. Part of the reason however is just a plain lack of articles that have been accumulated, which is unfortunate. I mean with over two thousand readers, I would have thought the Apocalypse was an awesome subject with plenty of potential articles. Apparently not.

One particularly special inclusion in this issue of RPG Review is the lyrics for R.E.M.'s "It's the End of the World As We Know It (and I Feel Fine)". Now, in this day and age of everything you want (and a few things you don't) being readily available online, it may seem to be a bit out of place, even a filler. But of course, it was not the case when the song came out and certainly there were quite a few individuals who struggled at an attempt to work out the very fast lyrics. It is in this retrospective spirit and appropriate to the theme that they are reprinted now.

In any case yours truly does give a run of some of the major apocalypse RPGs varying across the post-nuclear, the supernatural, and the fantastic. The most well-known post-apocalyptic game, Twilight 2000, receives a special article largely based on a more probably WWWIII (which thankfully, didn't happen). Michael Cole provides a comprehenisve damage system for a whole range of new ways of saying "ouch!", and Karl Brown has a look at a fantasy version of end times.

Basing themselves on real-world myths, Tobie Abad provides a brilliant article on treating 2012 as if all the crazy stories were true, and Gianni Vacci turns our eyes eastwards to illustrate that it's not just European culture that's had its own concerns with end of it all. This are both truly superb insights on the sort of conclusions people with apocalyptic thinking end up with.

RPG Review can be very pleased to have Tim Westhaven interviewed in this issue. Tim has just released a new fantasy-apocalpyse RPG, Shattered Moon, and in the interview we go into some detail unearthing the fascinating motivations and design choices that he had made with this acclaimed game and future projects.

In lieu of a computer game review this issue, we have a reprint (and some additional information) by James Moore who famously posted on Reddit his experience of a Civilization II game that he'd played for ten years – and where diplomacy of any level had completely broken down. It was interesting how many people immediately picked up on this quite Orwellian scenario of three mega-countries in constant war – except this time it's nuclear. We have always been at war with Eurasia,

But where would the apocalypse be without Lord Orcus, our lord and master. Yes, Lord Orcus has returned to explain to us mere mortals where have gone terribly, terribly wrong in his own infernal manner. It is quite wonderful to have the great goat-headed one grace our virtual pages once again.

Finally, our regular contributors Andrew Moshos and Mingshi Wu both give their very unique reviews of contemporary film (The Imposter, Iron Man III) and of rumours and developments in the RPG industry.

Now here's a question: how many people realise that "The Apocalypse" actually means an uncovering, especially a disclosure of knowledge? Probably not that many. The usual association is with widespread destruction, that is, the events that occur after the uncovering. Few games make the connection between the uncovering and the destruction, because of course, most people associate knowledge as a progressive, rather than destructive force.

Some exceptions that come to mind are Earthdawn and especially Call of Cthulhu ("things that we were not meant to know"). But even that favourite sub-genre, the nuclear post-apocalypse, required the development of nuclear weapons in order for that event to occur. Although permanently tainted with his association with the Nazis, the German phenomenological philosopher, Heidegger, must have surely known the connection between the apocalyptic and the uncovering when he wrote his essay on technology.

In my more pessimistic moments, I do wonder whether the human species is capable of surviving. The apocalypse is no mere fancy, but a careful calculation. Technological capacity increases each generation, and indeed in modern times accelerates. Moral reasoning however, the wisdom to use that technology, may indeed be based on a cyclical development that needs to be re-generated over and over again. All that is required for something to go terribly wrong is for a knuckle-dragging ideology to have in its hands a weapon of enormous destructive potential.

Yet, we stubborn humans hypothesize such events in play and in our games and we create stories of this most terrible actuality. But is not expressed as complete doom, even as it bad as it may be. Like Pandora's Box, the one knowledge that remains trapped is that of prescience, so we can live with hope regardless of any circumstances. Untoward destruction and yet we still tell stories of how the species survives, and indeed overcomes such terrible loses.

It is perhaps just as well nobody has done the "I Have No Mouth, And I Must Scream" roleplaying game. Matter of fact, there's probably a good reason why it hasn't been made in to a movie yet as well.

It is minutes to midnight. Sleep well, fellow dreamers.

Lev Lafayette (lev@rpgreview.net)

HOT GOSSIP: INDUSTRY NEWS
by Wu Mingshi

Hosei bo, Mr. Lev... no need to say, but you late again!

News from my island home Tourism Board, special gahmen style. Now we no longer care about Louis Vuittons and Chanels, yes we care about Hansel and Ong Shunmugam. You want authentic experience? Jiak chao! No Louis Vuittons or Ong Shunmugam, no minimum wage, worst income inequality, but we all equal in HDB tower!

Sorry Mr. Lev, sometime Minshi go psycho at gahmen, and I la sai. This is new games column, nice and distract from evil real world. When I play Dragon Warriors sometimes I think that the zombies are business man, and vampire is boss man. I feel better when my character chop head!

Of chopping head, now Hasbro have deal with Warner Bros for new Dungeons & Dragons movie. But Hasbro already have deal with Universal. So who is going to make movie? It seem to Mingshi that Hasbro chop Universal head! Chop, mati! Chop, mati! Chop, mati!

But all upside down for Star Wars, now with Disney because they have right to publish all electronic games. What that mean if they do PDF roleplaying, lah? Will we see Fantasy Flight versus Disney? May the ewok win, lah!

Still in space, Margaret Weis Productions will soon realease new Firefly RPG, but only limited edition available only through the MWP Website. But this after Marvel Heroic Roleplaying end after only one year! What happen? Also, MWP say they release two new books for Leverage RPG, but that TV series cancel now. So this spoil too?

But I say one thing about my island home. We have many people try cheat my money, sometimes they pretend to have God on side too. But we have no Pat Robertson... I leave with from *The 700 Club*.

Q: "Is it safe for a Christian to enjoy video games that have magic in them if the person playing the games is not practicing the magic?"

Pat Robertson: "The idea is not how close can I get to danger but how far away can I stay from it. I don't know what game you're talking about. I know there's one called Dungeons and Dragons that literally destroyed people's lives. They got into this thing and it was like demonic. I don't know what game you're talking about it. If it's based on magic, or the occult, stay away from it. There are other games you can play. But don't get into that. Is it wrong, or not wrong? I just think that we should flee from evil, period."

I flee from Pat Roberston, you go have sex with ducks with you kuku bird, suku man!

OK, that's all from me this quartering!

Love Mingshi! Xox

END OF THE WORLD (AS WE KNOW IT)
by R.E.M.

That's great, it starts with an earthquake, birds and snakes, an aeroplane and Lenny Bruce is not afraid. Eye of a hurricane, listen to yourself churn – world serves its own needs, dummy serve your own needs.

Feed it off an aux speak, grunt, no, strength, the Ladder start to clatter with fear fight down height.   Wire in a fire, representing seven games, and a government for hire at a combat site.   Left of west and coming in a hurry with the furies breathing down your neck.   Team by team reporters baffled, trumped, tethered cropped. Look at that low playing. Fine, then.

Uh oh, overflow, population, common food, but it'll do to save yourself, serve yourself. World serves its own needs, listen to your heart bleed dummy with the rapture and the revered and the right, right.

 You vitriolic, patriotic, slam, fight, bright light, feeling pretty psyched. It's the end of the world as we know it. It's the end of the world as we know it. It's the end of the world as we know it and I feel fine.

Six o'clock - TV hour. Don't get caught in foreign towers. Slash and burn, return, listen to yourself churn. Lock it in, uniforming, book burning, blood letting. Every motive escalate. Automotive incinerate. Light a candle, light a motive. Step down, step down. Watch your heel crush, crushed, uh-oh, this means no fear cavalier. Renegade steer clear! A tournament, tournament, a tournament of lies. Offer me solutions, offer me alternatives and I decline.

It's the end of the world as we know it. It's the end of the world as we know it. It's the end of the world as we know it and I feel fine.

The other night I dreamt of knives, continental drift divide. Mountains sit in a line, Leonard Bernstein. Leonid Brezhnev, Lenny Bruce and Lester Bangs. Birthday party, cheesecake, jelly bean, boom! You symbiotic, patriotic, slam bug net, right? Right.

It's the end of the world as we know it. It's the end of the world as we know it. It's the end of the world as we know it and I feel fine...fine...
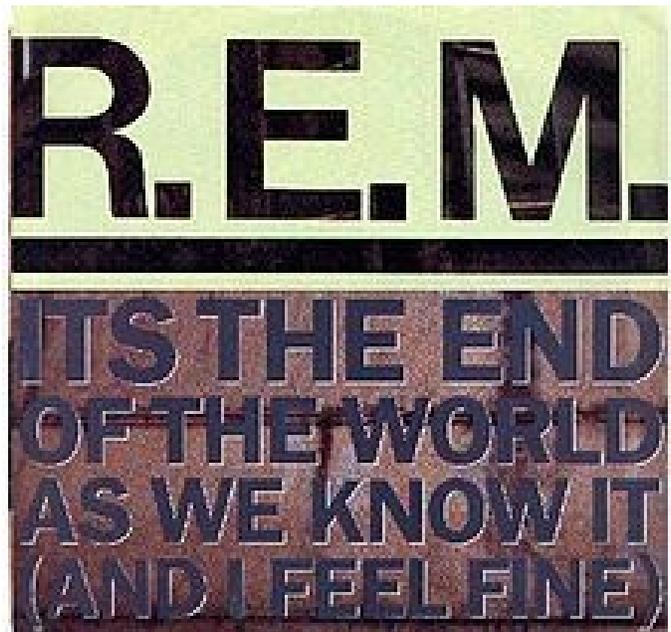
REVIEW OF APOCALYPSE GAMES

by Lev Lafayette

As a setting genre of roleplaying games, the apocalyptic has done moderately well. Indeed, the sheer number of games that have been realeased which can be considered "apocalyptic" is extremely large, although many of these are either small, independent publications that have not gained significant market traction or, as will be revealed, have a tenuous association with the genre. In terms of real history, the term used to mean a revelation. It is certainly the case that the scenarios described in biblical book of Revelations that has led to a contemporary association of the Apocalypse as meaning "End Time". It is this association that people understand the term, and therefore that is what will be used in these descriptions.

One of the primary categorical descriptions is that the apocalyptic roleplaying game is not an entirely independent setting genre in its own right. The apocalypse has to occur at some point in time. In the late 1970s and 1980s the post-nuclear war scenario was the most common starting with Gamma World (1978), The Morrow Project (1980) Aftermath (1981), Paranoia (1984), and Twilight 2000 (1984) as the most well known. Others that can be mentioned in this setting is the small press games Age of Ruin (1990) and Afterwars (1991) and, somewhat more unusually, After The Bomb (2001), a spinoff from Teenaged Mutant Ninja Turtles, which became a stand-alone game, and D20 Apocalypse (2005), and, in a related manner the D20-based Darwin's World (2001). An interest trajectory include the popular video game Fallout (1997), which was originally planned as a GURPS adventure.

It is perhaps unsurprising to discover that Europeans, quite sensitive to prospect of nuclear war, produced quite a few games on the subject. From France there was Bitume (1985), from Germany Degenesis (2001), from Italy Figli Dell'Olocausto (1990) and Il Gioco Di Ruolo Di Ken Il Guerriero (1995), from Finland Taiga (1998), and Sweden Tellus (2001). In the Swedish RPG, Mutant (1984), the PCs are (mutated) human survivors in a world that's been pushed to medieval levels. Other companies were not so fond of the genre; I recall receiving writer's guidelines in the early 1990s from The Chaosium which categorically stated that they would not entertain a post-nuclear roleplaying game, which clear implications that this was political position.

An apocalypse from devastating warfare is, of course, not the only means that the End Times for a society can occur. Shadowrun (1989) introduced an apocalypse of sorts from the reintroduction of magic into the world, in accord to the change in the Mesoamerican Long Count calendar. It is unknown whether the designers considered the possibility that the game would still be in print after the date of the transformation. From the same company, Earthdawn (1993) posited end times in a fantasy world due to the cyclical introduction of "the horrors". Other fantasy post-apocalyptic games include Talislanta (1986), Albion (2002), Midnight (2003), The Shadow of Yesterday (2005), Desolation (2008), and the well-known science fantasy setting, Hawkmoon (1986). In a hard science-fiction style, Traveller: The New Era (1993) made very radical changes to the previously established setting through a massive AI computer virus effectively ruining the technologically-dependent societies, a theme which makes a reappearance in GURPS Reign of Steel (1997) and Eclipse Phase (2009). In a more contemporary setting, Systems Failure (1999) introduced the apocalypse through the introduction of energy-eating "bugs" which render electrical systems suspect and dangerous.

One of the few games to explicitly include 'apocalypse' appropriately in its title, Werewolf : The Apocalypse (1992), expressed a two-pronged destruction of a society, the encroaching urbanisation into the wilderness, and supernatural forces. Making the supernatural very explicit, Rapture (1995) was a game which set itself firmly in the perspective of the biblical end-times - somewhat related is In Nomine (1989), which wasn't apocalyptic as such, but certainly entertained the prospect. The End (1987) for those who didn't join the rapture is another example, along with The

Seventh Seal (2005), where the PCs, as guardians of humanity, try to prevent the scourge of demonic power. Deadlands: Hell on Earth (1998) likewise posits a sort of demonic invasion. Unsurprisingly the Lovecraft mythos receives an inclusion with Yellow Dawn: The Age of Hastur (2005). Alpha Omega (2008) has the interesting combination of the end-times being caused by biological and nuclear war and resulting with a magical rediscovering with the Nephilim and Grigori representing alien species engaged in a conflict (with demonic and angelic appearances). Also having multiple bites of apocalyptic cherry, All Flesh Must Be Eaten (1999) offers a variety of zombie-based apocalyptic scenarios, including. Other transdimensional and alien apolypse events can be witnessed in games like Rifts (1990), Torg (1990), and Bliss Stage (2009).

The fact that roleplaying games confront the social issues of the time should be no surprise; the prevalence of the post-nuclear settings in the late 1970s/early 1980s was matched by games such as Blue Planet (1997) whose apocalypse was environmental, although notably climate literature as a contemporary genre has not been as strongly expressed in the RPG community. Natural disasters are a minor staple of the genre, such as with The World of Tank Girl (1995) where a comet strike causes mass devastation. A very interesting alternative is Summerland (2008) where the enviroment performs a psychic attraction against humanity, like a perverse J.G. Ballard novel.

Most post-apocalytic roleplaying games to use the destructive event to justify the introduction of a lawless setting and as a setting-changer, such as with the introduction of new powers (technological, alien, psychic, etc). Whilst the latter is optional, the former is absolutely requisite. Indeed, perhaps the single most defining quality of an apocalyptic roleplaying game as a matter of genre is that the previous society had undergone a level of destruction from which there is no return.

Whilst those of a more mature ilk express the changes with a tension of nostalgic sadness but also with opportunity, there is also a number of games which seem to take an unhealthy delight in simply wiping ninety percent or so of the human population off the map in a Thanatos-driven masturbatory fantasy. It is difficult to genuinely describe these as apocalyptic games as that is not really the core theme - it's an excuse. Rifts could arguably fall into this notorious list along with games such as Rhand (1984), the predecessor of Living Steel (1987), The World of Synnibar (1993), Blood Dawn (1996), and Chaos 6010 A.D. (2008). In a forum defending his creation the author of the latter made the following illustrative comment:

"As for some of you who say this is a shit RPG, you've never played it so how can make this assumption? Have you ever blown someone's brains out with a .45 at point blank range and watched their brain fragments splatter on the wall behind them? So how do you know you wouldn't enjoy that?"

This does not suggest of course that an apocalyptic event should not be part of the background narrative of RPGs; of course they should be. However such an terrible event should provide a driving force to the setting and a core motivation to the characters. A game such as Mutazoids (1989), which is certainly not low-powered or afraid of massive levels of destruction, does explicitly tie the events this with the characterisation. A game such as Mutazoids (1989), which is certainly not low-powered or afraid of massive levels of destruction, does explicitly tie the events this with the characterisation. Consider also games such as Jeremiah (2005) and Kidworld (2009). In both these games the adult population has either died or rendered useless due to a biological apocalypse and pre-pubescent children are in the position of having recreate the world. In Liquid Crystal (2006) robots were the cause of the apocalypse which left only a handful of human survivors. Tthe PCs are utility robots who have had their memories wiped. As should be evident, the driving plot is the discovery of their genocidal past and their reaction to it.

Another feature that is part of the classification of apocalyptic roleplaying games and which, by necessity, cannot be part those not genuinely of the genre, is the temporal association with the apocalyptic event. For those non-genuine games, there is no actual direct association with the event and indeed there cannot be. In other games, the association may be distant, but the implications are always present. Earthdawn, as an obvious example, is set some time after the apocalypse, as the characters participate in the building of a new world. At least in theory it would be possible to actually hold the game during the time of The Horrors - indeed each dungeon-delve is a step back in such times. Twilight 2000 of course occurs in the immediate future of the nuclear devastation, in Tribe 8 (1998) the apocalypse is drawn out to be both in the past and contemporary to the setting, and in the fascinatingly flawed AD&D scenario, The Apocalypse Stone (2000) it is entirely concurrent. In The Morrow Project, the PCs are accidentally awakened one hundred and fifty years after plan. One game which is uniquely anti-climatic to the apocalypse is Covenant (2006) which posits a PC group who are part of an apocalyptic conspiracy which never actually happens.

The apocalyptic roleplaying game provides a destructive point in time which player-characters should have nostalgic tie with. It also provides an opportunity for a relatively uncontrolled and often dangerous situation which generates a sense of adventure. Whether based in the highly realistic or the fantastic the popularity of the genre requires these associations and challenges. When GMing such games both nostalgic associations of the past should be placed in tension with the risks of the current situation and future possibilities, as a means to generate meaningful opportunities. How this is done obviously has varied with the game system in question. An unusual means for such a tension to be introduced is evident in Buck Rogers in the XXVth Century (1990), where the main character comes from the past.

Let's look at some examples in more detail.

Gamma World (1978)

As far as I can tell there were at least *seven* editions of Gamma World in yesteryear. The 1978 and 1981 versions are, I believe, sufficiently similar that they can be reviewed as one (this is a review 1981 print of the 1st edition released in 1978). A latter edition followed with a stronger thematic on what is described as a "science fantasy role-playing game". The box set features a colour drawing by Trampier on a group of four suited individuals approaching the ruins of a clump of skyscrapers. The image is repeated in black and white on the cover of the 46 page rulebook and the box also contains a large hex map of a somewhat geographically altered United States region. Dice were also included.

The artwork by Trampier and Sutherland throughout is of varying quality and is often has a contextual appropriateness. There is some humour involved, such as the image of the obviously sapient venus-fly trap reading a book (p4), a mutant hippo with wings leaping over a wall (p11) and, shades of Bunnies & Burrows, a group of human-sized bipedal rabbits carrying rifles and pistols (p21). In contrast however, the writing style is quite serious and condensed; the dense sans-serif font is presented in two-column justified throughout. The various chapters (How To Use This Book, Designing Gamma World Areas, Creating Characters, Mutations, Play of the Game, Example of Play) are not separated by page breaks. There is a good table of contents, but not index.

The rulebook starts with a hypothesized history where results with a small demonstration of the a political faction called League of Free Men being attacked by a "small neutron bomb" allegedly dropped by the Autonomists, another faction. Over the next several months several hundred of the latter were assassinated, ultimately resulting in vigilante warfare which governments were unable to suppress. As these actions grew a mysterious group called The Apocalypse demanded that the various groups end their violence or they would destroy civilization. The various governments, factions etc united against this new threat and launched an attack against the base of The Apocalypse who responded with a destructive power that, as they predicted, destroyed civilization. The Gamma World campaign is set 150 years

later where pockets of humanity have survived on a planet rife with strange mutations and where working artifacts of the ancients are treated with awe.

The first step in character creation is selecting a type; Pure-Strain Human, Humanoid or Mutated Animal. Basic attributes are determined on 3d6 (optionally 4d6, drop lowest) for Mental Strength, Intelligence, Dexterity, Charisma, Constitution and Physical Strength, with varying bonuses and penalties for high and low values. Mental Strength is used for offensive and defensive values with mind mutations, Intelligence can be used to figure out artifacts, Dexterity determines initiative and gives bonuses or penalties on attacks, Charisma affects the quantity and loyalty of followers and reaction adjustments, Constitution determines the number of d6 rolled for hit points (yes, you read that right), ad Physical Strength gives bonuses or penalties for damage. Note that these bonuses and penalties often have a large neutral zone; with Physical Strength the bonus to damage is +1 per point over 15 and -1 per point below 6 and no modifier for values between those.

Mutations are determined in quantity either by 1d4 mental and 1d4 physical and rolling on the appropriate table or with the number chosen and selected by the player. Defective mutations are determined (in an extremely poorly written paragraph) by the quantity of mutations the character has. Pure Strain Human characters possess no mutations which would seem to make them weak characters; however they are able to by-pass many security checks in cities of the ancients as well as being recognised as such by robotic security guards etc. Evidently, they make good followers.

The mutations themselves are fantastic in style and effect rather than being mutations in the scientific sense. They can include potentially game-unbalancing powers such as Density Control (instantaneously shrinking to 1/8 size or up to 2x normal size), Gas Generation (including poison), Shapechange, Death-Field Generation (reducing everyone to 1 hit point within 20 metre radius), Dual Brain, Planar Travel, Teleportation etc. Delightfully silly is the ability to fire 3d6 radiation bursts from the eyes. Plants too have a special mutation chart although it is recommended that PCs do not play mutant plants. Plant mutations include Aromatic Powers, Explosive Seeds, Mobility and the like.

The game is played in turns which vary according to activity; route movement, search movement and combat melee rounds. Route movement is based on four-hour turns during which a character can move 1km per turn in swampy environs to a maximum of 8km per hour over clear terrain, which includes a modicum of searching. Search movement is conducted in 10-second rounds during which characters may move 6m per turn outdoors and a 1m per turn indoors, however this can quickly altered up to 72m per turn if necessary. Combat turns are also 10 seconds in duration and assume a rate of 12 metres per turn and 24 metres per turn for charging actions.

If appropriate the first combat round is based on surprise with only one side action. After that it is taken initiative is used with each side rolling 1d6 with a +1 bonus is they have a member with a Dexterity of 17 or 18. Actions occur in order of initiative however "dying strokes" are allowed if an opponent does not receive more than twice the remaining hit points of the target. Attack chances are determined by cross-referencing an Armor Class (10 = none, 9 = shield, 8 = fur or skins ... 1 = Powers Attack Armor) against Weapon Class (1 = Clubs, 2 = Axes, 3 = Swords ... 8 = Grenades ... 14 = Mark V Blaster Pistol etc) or Hit Dice of the Animal or Plant. It does not always correlate that a higher weapon class equates with a greater chance to hit - the table goes up to Class 16 weapons, but the one with the best general chance to hit is Class 13 (laser pistols and rifles). Damage is based on D&D-like values for archaic weapons (e.g., a two-handed sword does 1d10 or 3d6 versus large creatures) with sci-fi weapons being typically described as more powerful (e.g., a laser rifle does 6d6 damage). There is an interesting Fatigue system were the armour and type of weapon used causes a drop in weapon class according to the number of combat turns that have passed, modified by strength. As previously mentioned this may include the chance to hit improving.

A few pages are dedicated to random encounters which vary according to terrain (clear, mountains, forest, desert, water, ruins, radioactive). The creatures, as can imagined, are somewhat exotic in the flavour of the game and are typically described with a handful of statistics and a paragraph of notes, including personality quirks. For example, the Ark are humanoid bipedal dogs with the powers of telekinesis, weather manipulation and life leech. They fear winged creatures and consider human hands a delicacy. The game even has its own version of the orc; the "badder", a humanoid badger with evil disposition which has formed societies and reached a medieval level of technology. Perhaps to be expected there are a significant number of mutant plants and various sci-fi monsters; giant insects, walking fish and the like. Also described are the various 'cryptic alliances' such as the Knights of Genetic Purity, Restorationists, Archivists etc.

Other hazards in Gamma World include poisons and radiation which relative danger is determined by a strength or intensity cross-referenced against the character's constitution. Artifacts and Equipment are presented in random tables, rather like the treasure tables of D&D. Working out how to use an artifact is not necessarily easy and is possibly dangerous as several random rolls (modified by Intelligence) on different flow-charts representing complexity. This may result in damage to the character doing the analysis or the item itself and may take several hours to complete. The charts themselves are mind-numbing boring to use in actual play.
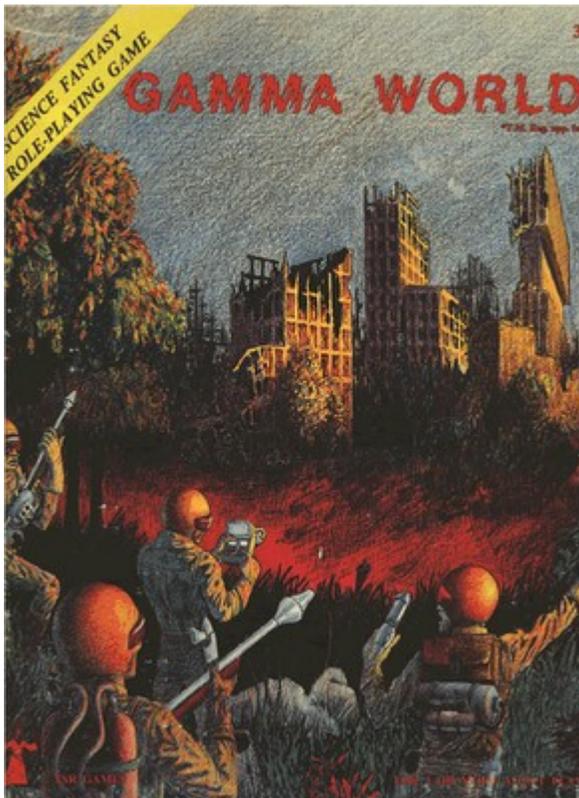
There are five pages of equipment descriptions before moving on to character trade, value and exchange with the monetary unit of the pre-apocalypse amazingly still being in common use (transferable to gold at a rate of 5 to 1). Other miscellaneous rules make up the last few pages; healing is achieved at 1 hit point per day; everyone speaks a language called 'Common' following the prevalence of telepathy and computers, robots etc can recognise it; two pages of robot design follows and finally, rules for experience based on (go on, guess) killing monsters and taking their stuff (1 experience point per hit point caused plus 1 experience point per gold piece of equipment). As characters gain in experience (3K, 6K, 12K, 25K) they roll a 1d10 which will give a bonus to a Basic Attribute or 'to hit' rolls or damage. The book concludes with a three page example of play.

In all honesty, there isn't too much to recommend here and part of the reason is that the game doesn't really know what it wants to be and the notion of balanced design is seriously lacking. The dry writing explaining small groups of humanity and their friends trying to rebuild civilization and search for the wisdom of the ancients sits poorly with the comic and wild mutations available and a combat system where an average starting PC starts with the capacity to take several blows from a two-handed sword. The range of potential activity within the game system is extremely limited (search for artifacts, kill monsters) and the background plot and setting are unlikely to say the least. I understand that in latter editions of the game and variants GammaMauraders that there was a better focus on

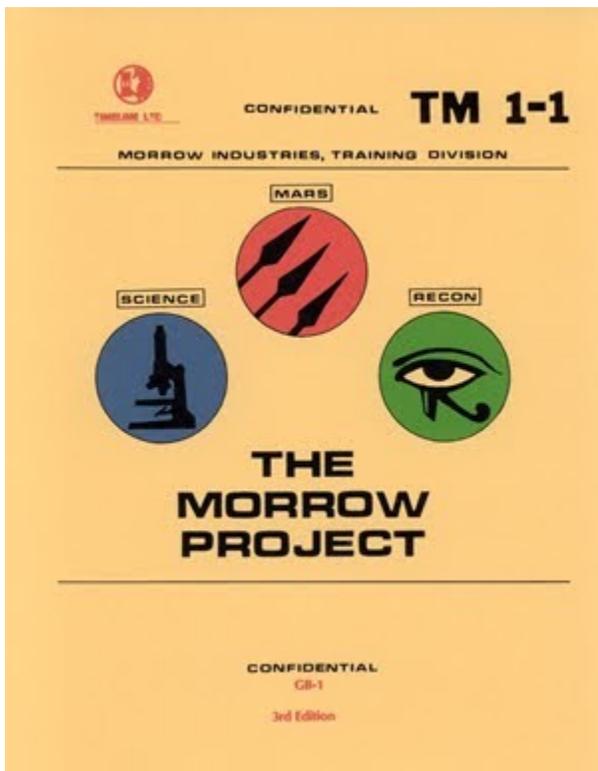sci-if comic humour. At this stage however, there is still much wanting.

Style: 1 + .3 (layout) + .5 (art) + .3 (coolness) + .2 (readability) + .3 (product) = 2.7

Substance: 1 + .2 (content) + .4 (text) + .6 (fun) + .2 (workmanship) + .3 (system) = 2.7

The Morrow Project (1980)

Introduction and Setting

Special notification is given for the conclusion of a successful kickstarter campaign for a fourth edition of The Morrow Project, initiated in November last year and concluded on January 3. This review is of the second edition, produced in the same as the first. At a mere sixty-six pages, three-hole drilled and softbound, "The Morrow Project" is representative of a number of small press roleplaying games after the dawn of the hobby. Presented in two-column sans-serif justified font, there is quite an impressive table of contents, but no index. There are no chapters as such, but the text is broken up into main headings with sub-headings. The book is presented as confidential manual with symbolic representations of the three of the four Morrow Project teams; Science, Mars (both an acronym and representation of the war god), and Recon (the fourth team is "Speciality"). The internal black and white line drawings by William Wardrop are not always quite up to professional standard, but often show a good degree of creativity and humour, and are usually appropriate for the context. At times photostated pictures of various weapons contemporary to the time are used in the equipment list, which do seem a little out of place. The writing style is formal throughout with occassional informalities in the examples; there are a few spelling mistakes.

Certainly the great strength of The Morrow Project is the basic game setting; the idea that a wealthy group led by a prescient Bruce Morrow agreed to prepare for an apocalyptic nuclear war by means of cyrogenically frozen special forces to rebuild the United States after the war. However the Prime Base which was supposed to coordinate the revival program was sabotaged and as a result the damaged Prime Base computer system sent the wake-up signal somewhat late - one hundred and fifty years after the war. One cannot help but be impressed by said computer system's extraordinary physical resilence, although the software than runs the filesystem checks and the routing protocol could possibly be improved. Of course, one cannot be too picky about a silght implausibility necessary to get a plot moving, and certainly this one has some narrative charm to it.

The game starts with the background scenario; the United States launched a first strike against the Soviet Union in 1989 following the mistaken inclusion of a training program into NORAD. The devastation was impressive to the point of being unlikely, a 95% fatality rate, worldwide. The game provides a list of the U.S. cities targets, and the Soviet missile used, the various impact effects of the various warheads (crater diameters are provided in precise meters). There is also a charts to account for some 150 random missiles, with random warheads and variable accuracy which the GM can engage in a dice-rolling excersise of questionable motivation. As an example gives; "A GM decides to aim a missile at Hazeltown, Pennsylvania (he received a speeding ticket there once)". Having worked out where the bombs hit, further tables are provided for nuclear and biological contamination, shielding, damage (derived from rads). Rather 'creatively' the game starts with a description of how radioactive mutations are nearly always harmful, despite popular culture literature, and then speculates how a combination of mutations could create the equivalent of vampires and ogres.

Character Generation

Characters in The Morrow Project are initially defined by six attributes; Strength, Constitution, Dexterity, Accuracy, Charisma, and Luck. Players are meant to supply their own mental and emotional attributes "as to more readily identify with their character", which is a fairly explicit statement of the alter-ego school of thought in RPGs. Attributes are determined on 4d6-4, giving a range of 0-20. The first calculated values are Structure Points and Blood Points, initially calculated from (Str x Con) + 100. Sp represents the maximum damage the character can receive, whilst Bp represents the blood in the character's body. The overall value is equivalent to the character's mass. Body percentages are given "for more realism", although this seems based more on area rather than, for example, distribution of blood (e.g,. the head is a mere 6%). Characters also randomly determine their blood type and Rh factor.

As an optional attribute characters may also generate a PSI score, although there is an earlier hint that this score is a superset of Luck. In either case, the higher scores allow for the possibility of psionic powers, determined randomly (empathy, healing, telepathy, pyrokinetics). Characters also receive "Movements" (from 1 to 5) based on Dexterity with an associated cost of actions per movement and variable movement rates, with normal movement providing 27m per combat turn. Endurance is calculated from Constition times Dexterity, with a reduction of one point per combat turn, with variable gains from different types of resting and use of stimulants.

Characters are assigned to teams, as briefly mentioned. These teams means that the characters also have particular jobs to do, but even more importantly at least in terms of the campaign narrative, different teams are scattered all over the country. In these distributed bunkers there is a cache of equipment that the PCs are able to start with. This includes several pages of personal weapons (pistols, rifles, machine guns, grenades and launchers, etc) of various shapes and sizes, a couple of pages of ammunitions, and then a few pages of general personal equipment such a communicators, CBR detection kits, various viewers, medkits and, to give a bit more of a science fiction feel, a handful of energy weapons. Concluding this list is four pages of mainly rugged terrain vehicles. Personal encumbrance is Str*3.5 in kilograms, before any Dexterity loss. After this every 3.5 kilograms is a loss of one point of Dex. Various collections of equipment are offered as standard kits with weights pre-calculated, a handy design decision.

Combat System

The combat system, like the weapons in the equipment list, makes up a substantial proprtion the game rules. The core procedure is a d20 against the character's Accuracy, modified for range, visibility, weapon type, target movement and size, and terrain. There is also an abnormally high chance of a hit based on pure Luck (about 25% on average) if all other factors fail, which should be reduced to simply a more modest modifier for unusual values. Automatic fire is

simply managed by rolling for the number of bullets that hit in each short round. For example, all submachine guns fire a four round short-burst. To determine how many bullets hit, roll 1d4. A random roll is applied for grenades and other indirect fire to work out actual landing points relative to the target.

If a hit is score damage the penetration of the projectile is determined. A formula, based on projectile diameter (in thousandths of an inch) is multiplied by the muzzle velocity in feet per second, and then divided by fifty. This provides an E (efficiency) factor. This E factor is reduced per centimeter (note the mixuture of metric and imperial measurements) of various materials that are abstracted as an armour class and cross-references. For example, Skin provides no protection, but .34 centimetres of steel, 10.16 cm of wood, 1.02 cm of concrete, or 7.62cm of stone provides an armour class of 4. For example, a Browning HP35 has an E-factor of 9. If a bullet strikes a person behind 3mm of armour steel plate, one would cross reference EF9 with AC4. The result is 5 Damage Points to the target. Damage points of 8 or more completely penetrate the body, and and 11 or more has a 25% chance of decapitation. A d100 roll is then made on a thirty party hit location table. Depending on the loacation hit and the Dps received, there is a percentage chance of automatic death, unconsciousness, or shock. These values are summed, rather than rolled independently, with multiple hits. Blood loss is a multiplier of the type of wound and the damage received. With this level of realism in detail, the question of why the E-factor isn't reduced with range and why hit location is rolled after determining Dps is justly raised. Other options include whole body damage for events like electric shock, and damage points for burns are determined by cross-referencing a chart with temperature and exposure time in seconds on its axes. Poisons are reference virulence (poison type) against Constitution. Diseases are, surprisingly, described in three short paragraphs which basically mention the medical miracle of the "universal antibody".

Hand-to-hand combat is treated in a similar manner. Whilst combat is simultaneous, declaration of actions occurs in order of Dexterity. Hit location is seemingly largely irrelevant, except for head blows which may cause unconsciouness or death. A strike, based on the character's accuracy, is contested with the opponent's block (Dp of the blocking weapon subtracted from the attacking weapon). Damage points are related to Strength, but vary according to the type of attack (e.g., a kick does 1/2 Strength, a punch 1/4 Stength), with simple modiers applied to various weapons (e.g., a small rock is 1/2 Strength +2, a large machete is 1/2 Strength +5 etc). Armour classes determine the a reduction in the Damage points applied (e.g., Leather is AC3).

To tidy up the combat system, a section of vehicular damage compares a weapon class against a vehicle type, providing a percentage change of the weapon damaging the vehicle. If successful, then a random roll determines the type of damage and location (with a 1 in 4 change of "no effect"!) following by determination of crew casualties, based on a simple "killed" or wounded (1d6 Dps) alternative.

The Environment

A weather table is provided for basic conditions, wind direction, speed, but oddly not temperature or precipitation. The most interesting possiblity is the "special weather" which includes various forms of tornadoes, electrical storms, and the like. These are not, however described in detail. This does however set the scene for a number of descriptive overviews of communications systems, energy systems, weapon systems, and construction technology. These are presented at a very high level with virtually nothing that can be used in actual play. Indeed, it's pretty much a case of "things will be great in 1989 - but then there's a war and nothing works afterwards". The construction technology is somewhat of an exception, as the possibility of buildings surviving over a period of 150 years is quite high if the basic material suits the environment.

The proposect of people (meaning, non-members of the Project) as player characters is discussed, but more emphasis is naturally given in their role as NPCs, and the abbreviated statistical form. NPCs also have an early version of the mook rule and randomly determined basic personalities, described appropriately by their "Hostility and Motivational Characteristics". Relations can be modified according to these classification and PC Charisma. NPC group technology levels are also determined with the average falling in the late steam age. A collection of encounters is also provided over a few pages, small groups with varying technology levels and motivations, some of whom (e.g., the Ballooners, the eugenicist Breeders) are quite imaginative. Encounter possibilities are randomly determined according to terrain type. Various fauna, meaning small and large mammals expressed in summary statistical form with short descriptions. Mutant species however receive their own encounter table, far more extensive descriptions and statistical elaboration and from a greater variety of sources. This includes half-metre long black flies, "the blue undead" (i.e., radioactive zombies), fifteen metre long rattlesnakes etc. In general the mutants are imaginative whilst just being on the plausible side.

The concluding pages of the book provide a very short set of suggestions for a GM running The Morrow Project consisting of a separation of player and GM maps, a standard introductory briefing, and a simple experience system (attribute improvements over time with characteristic maxima). The game concludes with a glossary, metric to imperial conversions, a character sheet, and a mainly military bibliography,

Overall

The Morrow Project is certainly a product of its time, and an small-press product in an era where such pubilshers were (unless they had very deep products) were simply not able to produce physical goods of exceptional quality. What is less helpful is the extremely narrow focus of the game providing very little of a skill system, having an obsessive focus with weaponry and combat, and even then providing a strange combination between the realistic and the strangely neglected. Even when taking into account its admirable short page count, if they game had focussed on a greater variety of issues appropriate to the setting. The core system (roll under d20) is fair enough, but the game is screaming for elaboration – and as this is not provided, rules-as-writ, the game is not as enjoyable as it should be.

Where The Morrow Project succeeds exceeds, and this is why despite the grades given, it will always be a classic in the history of roleplaying, is the backstory, setting, and in-built narrative tension. Indeed, it is hard to think of anything that has done better. Not only is there an opportunity to explore a new world, and the PCs are provided with a little boost at the start, there is the possibility of investigating the cause of their situation, and to make contact with allies. For this reason, the game (and quite probably more contemporary editions) are deserving of having a copy on the shelves.

Style: 1 + .3 (layout) + .4 (art) + 1.0 (coolness) + .3 (readability) + .3 (product) = 3.4

Substance: 1 + .3 (content) + .4 (text) + .5 (fun) + .3 (workmanship) + .4 (system) = 2.9

Aftermath! Review (1981)

Introduction and Product

Aftermath is correctly considered to be the first serious complete post-apocalypse roleplaying game. True, games like Metamorphosis Alpha (1976) preceded it by several years, but that was neither complete nor serious. Gamma World (1978) was a possible contender in terms of completeness but it still in the design throes of whether it was going to be deep or comic. In due course it chose the latter. Which for the early 80s gamer left Aftermath, appearing in a large box with a sombre cover with three yellow-and-black books inside, the traditional radioactive colour scheme. The books were "Basic Rules" (57p), "Survivors of the Aftermath" (the player's handbook, 81p), and "The World of the Aftermath (the gamemaster's handbook, 85p). Each book came with a table of contents but no index, and was written in a tight sans-serif font, justified. In addition there was a short (6p) introductory adventure, some character and object counters, a six-panel cardstock collection of charts, and a cardstock character sheet. Artwork by co-designer Bob Charrette tended towards the diagrammatic rather than the aesthetic, but where it did exist it was of fair quality and contextually appropriate.

Character Generation and Task Resolution

The Basic Rules start off with a fairly traditional but comprehensive introduction to roleplaying games, the participants, and the game components. By page 4 one is struck by an initial design problem - the Basic Rules are descriptive. So whilst all the attributes (Wit, Will, Strength, Deftness, Speed, Health) are described in detail and what effects they have in the game (e.g., learning rate, weapon damage, maximum number of actions), actual character generation is in the second book. Age of course has some effect on Attributes. Referring to that book, one discovers that the first item of character generation is actually Age Group, which varies from 0 (13+2d5) to 5 (58+2d5). A character's Age Group determines starting skills, equipment, possible mutations (if used), and bonus attribute points. The latter start at 75, which among six, comes to an average of 12.5 before modifications. Characters also randomly determine their Origins (Wilds, Tribal, etc), Development Points to purchase skills or Attribute increases, and an initial psychological profile for Talents (2d6+15). Jumping back to Book 1 these are the character's ability in broad areas, including Charismatic, Combative, Communicative, Esthetic, Mechanical, Natural, Scientific. Effectively, they are broad skill categories, and can be substituted for skill checks ("Raw Talent Use") in many cases.

In addition to these there's a range of abilities; which include skills (below), damage resistance total (derived from Health, plus half Strength, plus half Will, with wound levels reducing abilities), Combat Dodge Ability ((Deftness + Speed)/20, subtracted form attack chances), encumbrance capacity (3 times Strength plus Deftness in kilogrammes with graduated reductions), Off-Hand Dexterity, and the character's Recognition Factor. There is also an interesting characteristic entitled Phases Consumed in Action (Base Action/Maximum Number of Phases). Essentially, all actions take different periods of time for different characters.s

Base level skills are purchased with skill points, both of which vary. A typical character should start with several, and they can start with double the base level for double the cost. The usual starting level is derived from three values from Attributes or Talents. For example, the Architecture skill is based on WT + Scientific + Mechanical, whereas a Grenade Launcher is WT + DFT + Combative. Some skills have prerequisites, and expertise levels. The base chance of success is typically the skill rating (1-100 range in most cases) divided by 5 for a d20, roll-under system. In some cases these can be averaged when attempting to combine one skill with another (e.g., combat from horseback). There is approximately 150 skills, plus specialisations, described in Book 2 each. Whilst there is an excellent balance between combat and non-combat skills, quite advanced for the time (i.e., the former are in a significant minority), descriptive effort and rules modifications is heavy on the combat skills. For example, the skill description for Crossbow takes up half a page; for the Nutritionist skill, which certainly is of some importance in this game environment, there is two short sentences. Character improvement of skills occurs by either study or learning-by-doing. The latter requires a roll

under the associated Talent to increase the skill by one. Study is achieved with the a variety of situational modifiers depending on the availability of teaching and material resources. Improvement of Attributes, Talents, and even Off-Hand Dexterity is possible.

Returning to Book 2 the next table is to randomly determine what clothing and initial equipment the character possesses. The worst case situation is to be a youngster with only a pair of shorts, sandals, a shirt, and a few of utility items (3d6 matches, snares, jackknife etc). Enjoy that winter kid, at least you'll start with a 'space blanket'. In more fortunate cases, add armour to the 36 hit locations on the character sheet (the groin being the most commonly struck part!), and note other equipment and encumbrance. At this point the players are also introduced to the interesting system of Utility Numbers on equipment, representing the grade, ranging from 0 to 4.

Scale and Combat

A fairly hefty degree of the rules is dedicated to matters of combat, such is the nature of the setting and of game design in the period. The initial distinction is made between strategic time (2 turns; day and night), and tactical time (from 10 minutes to 1 hour, depending on circumstances). The combat-based time rate however is called Detailed Action Time (DAT) of six second turns, which is further broken up into action phases. The number of action phases varies according to each character. There is a Base Action Phase (BAP, Speed/2), the previously mentioned Phases Consumed in Action (PCA), the Maximum Number of Actions (MNA), and a Base Movement Allowance (BMA). Normally action phases begin at the BAP of the character with the highest score in that ability, except in the case of surprise.

The game uses hex-based movement with 1 meter per hex. This allows for some fairly detailed tactical displays, such as weapon reach, movement limitations, running speed (and, a table for stopping forward motion), charging, movement through occupied hexes, treacherous ground (chance of slipping), climbing (movement allowance based on method or surface), and zones of influence. A modest list of potential actions are provided which are, of course, subject to the Phases Consumes in Action and the Maximum Number of Actions. In addition there are rules for a "last shot" option, and for communication during DAT.

The basic combat procedure is relatively simple, like the skill system - roll d20, modified according to situational modifiers etc, determine damage, roll location, subtract armour, apply wounds and effects. The notorious two-page combat flow chart really does make sure that various edge situations are dealt with, rather than the simple shot or strike. If a hit is successful damage is determined by the effect die of the character's Strength modified by the Weapon Damage Multiplier (a reproduction sword in the hands of an average character will do 2d6). Gun damage is determined by the Bullet Damage Group (BDG) divided by 10 (round up) in d10s plus the BDG/10 (e.g., a .44 Magnum with a BDG of 21 does 3d10+2). Armour subtracts from such damage (e.g., hardened leather armour, 5 points). Weapon damage is categorised as lethal, subdual, crushing, or combination with different healing rates and effects for each. There is possibility of impaling, special effects of missiles, critical hist and misses, along with a variety of special actions such as attacks on weapons, bashes, grappling, fighting in water, on vehicles, mounts, and so forth.

Damage is generally distinguished between lethal and subdual. Excess damage to the character's Damage Resistance Total causes unconsciousness, double the number is death. Wound effects also kick in at 50% DRT and 75% DRT. Lethal damage generally is significantly slower in healing, although healing as a whole is modified by the usual situations (rest, availability of care etc). Lethal and critical damage may result in infection, which provides a lead-in to diseases and poisons with specific rules for various types of each.

As with other things related to Aftermath, this summary does not give due justice to the degree of detail and complexity

that exists however. A separate chart exists for the level of entanglement caused by the use of flexible weapons. Striking and throwing techniques vary with the use of the Unarmed Combat skill. Over a page is spent on the skill for the combination of weapon and shield in refused position, and a further page on range/pull/strength group factors for Muscle-Powered Missile Weapons. There are extensive rules for support weapons (e.g., machine guns), mortars, grenade launchers, and even black-powder weapons. Explosives are considered important enough to warrant an entire chapter of their own, with distinction between concussion and fragmentation for effects and demolitions, various explosive types with variable blast ratings, primers and fuses, and various triggers.

Setting and Environment

In Book 1 the classic environmental factors of barriers, doors, locks, and the effects of fire and acid are discussed. In the second book the main setting and environmental consideration, concentrates on equipment and barter. The game system assumes that the monetary system has collapsed and has not been replaced by rare metals. Goods are evaluated according to their utility according to the setting with modifications according to the commerce skill of the character. The equipment list however is surprisingly short, especially given - once again - the heavy emphasis on the weapons of various styles. Vehicles receive a short but dense chapter as well, with recognition of various fuel systems (even electric!), speeds - conversion into DAT, accidents and crashes, and the various explosive, barrier, and combat relationships. A few pages are also spent of survival issues, concentrating on hunting, starvation, water, and touching

upon cannibalism. Interesting the game states that weather is not discussed in much detail, a strange oversight.

Much greater consideration of setting and environment issues is covered in the third book. At the very beginning the book maps various scenarios that could have caused "the fall", ranging from the very plausible (war, natural disaster) to the quite fantastic (aliens). Detailed searching and foraging rules are provided with evaluations based on party size, ability, and randomness. Caches vary in utility and type with the occasional deliberately amusing result. Random encounter charts differentiate between men, beasts, and phenomenon. The beasts include (as appropriate) some rather fantastical creatures including several variety of the giant intelligent rat. Other common beasts described include the various forms bear, big cats, dogs, reptiles, and game animals. One of most memorable charts refers to the food value, which emphasis the importance of the cockroach with a high edibility/mass ratio along with a low chance of contamination due to divergent cell structure.

A longer technology chapter gives an excellent overview of electricity and electrical sources, in a non-abstract manner. The brief section on computers is far less comprehensive, although there is a good amount of material on cybernetics, robotics, and "animatrons" (shades of Westworld!). However, once again, the bulk of the material is on a multitude of high-tech and exotic weaponry, including nuclear weapons and their effects along with various lethal and non-lethal gases, military issue armour, high-tech clothes (e.g., fire protection suits etc), and various medical equipment and drugs. Following this technology chapter the game also gives several pages on running large-scale battles and logistics etc., in a military campaign. The final major chapter of the book describes "the changed", a variety of neutral and positive mutations which essentially provide benefits and reductions on various attributes. More radically, a description of psionic powers cover the telepathic, precognitive, and psychokinetic.

Throughout the game there's also various short chapters on player and GM advice. Most of this a fairly good contribution and helpful for both types of participant in the game. The very short introductory scenario, Survive!, starts off more than a bar-room brawl but expands into a fairly simple linear adventure. It does provide the opportunity to act as a seed for further adventures and establishing setting relationships, but is not so good as an introduction to the game system.

Overall

Aftermath is one of a number of serious RPGs that were produced by FGU and with a system that has more than a passing similarity with other products from the same company and authors (e.g., Bushido). Its seriousness is certainly appreciated for those who wanted a "role playing simulation", as it says on the book covers. Yet, in both design and style, the game certainly shows its age. The rule system is unnecessarily complex, with highly abstracted language, although by no means unplayable as is sometimes claimed. The secret of running an Aftermath involves a great deal of simplification of the case-specific alterations that the game recommends and concentrating instead on the core game system, using the other material as a resource. Another issue however is the enormous detail that is provided to combat situations in lieu of other aspects of survivability in the post-holocaust world. Rules as writ however, the game really is hard work and as a result lot less enjoyable than both the setting and the resources would otherwise suggest.

Style: 1 + .3 (layout) + .4 (art) + .4 (coolness) + .2 (readability) + .5 (product) = 2.8

Substance: 1 + .7 (content) + .5 (text) + .3 (fun) + .4 (workmanship) + .5 (system) = 3.6

Heaven and Earth (1999)

Heaven and Earth is a pre-apocalypse roleplaying game set in a small town which forms the locus of a supernatural, indeed, metaphysical conspiratorial conflict in a manner that combines <i>Dogma</i> with <i>Twin Peaks</i>. The four authors have a variety of RPG credits between them, although the primary author is John Phythyon, Jr. The 306p softback is fairly well-glued, although I have my suspicions on how a book of this size would last under heavy use. The tight binding has meant that over time my copy has become a little distorted and creaky. The text is mainly written in two-column ragged with a serif font with indented paragraphs. Somewhat more difficult is the use of the text over various black-and-white photographic images in the narrative breaks between chapters. The artwork, such as it is, is usually grey-scaled photographs with some amateur distortions applied. The writing style is extremely verbose and extremely informal; with a minimal table of contents and index this does not make it particularly easy to find relevant sections. The chapter breakdown (Systems, Characters, Productions, Setting) does not make for easy reading; one is introduced to the character generation system, in abstract, before actually generating a character. The narrative between the chapters however is evocative and brings to the fore the combination of challenging moral positions and ethical decisions and gradually revealing the surreal and other-worldly. Whilst the same cannot be said for the poetry, the literary quotes are both well-chosen and contextually right.

The introductory text opens with the foundation of the setting [spoilers follow, avert ye eyes & etc]; God and Lucifer engage in a competition over souls. Lucifer is apparently winning, so God sends his Son to balance the odds, which went quite well. As the number of souls in the mix declines, the competition draws to a close. But the Son of God is troubled. On one hand if Satan wins, then it's hell on earth. If God wins however, it's the end of time and humanity comes to a close. Now this is fine enough, even if I were to make a number of modifications to suit my own views concerning Unitarian Adoptionism and the Lucifer-Satan distinction, but that's just par for the course for my own weird theological speculative interpretations. I would even be tempted to make a syncretic approach that includes other religious traditions. But the main issue is that it sets up a very interesting triad of potential conflict, with PC motivations certainly biased to the one who shares their common heritage [spoilers end].

Character Generation and Task Resolution

For character generation, players have multiple characters graduated as a Tier 1, Tier 2, and Tier 3. Each player should have at least one Tier 1 and a Tier 2 character; the GM handles all NPCs. Characters are defined by their "Spheres", which consist of Body, Mind, Heart (emotions), and Soul (personality) which act as the core attributes. A player selects one sphere to be dominant, which puts its paired opposite (Mind-Heart, Soul-Body) as subordinate and the others as neutral. Each sphere governs three traits each: Body (Agility, Endurance, Strength), Mind (Psyche, Reason, Wit), Heart (Empathy, Faith, Passion), Soul (Enlightenment, Transcendence, Will). With a character point system, 30 Destiny is available to spent among the traits, with the caveat the the point value of any sphere cannot exceed that of the dominant sphere. "Life" is a calculated attributed is Body + ((Mind+Spirit+Heart)/3)). In addition there are 30 Destiny points for Characteristics, although they can be used on a 2:1 basis for Traits. Characteristics include skills, knowledges, trait modifiers and social positions, but with an assumption of "core knowledges and skills" appropriate to the setting. Characteristics are positive (e.g.,Notice) or negative (e.g., Clumsy) with the latter adding points to the Destiny pool. Traits and Characteristics have a range is 1-5, with the human average of 2 for the former. For the latter the default value is, of course, 0. Just over eighty characteristics are described with systematic and in-game activity, from a few paragraphs to a page. A number of the negative characteristics can only be purchased at levels 3 or 5.

The task resolution system (called an "Action Resolution" system) consists of a Trait + Characteristic versus target

number, defined by a difficulty description (Easy (2), Average (3), Challenging (5), Hard (7), Nearly Impossible (9)). Tasks that require use of the character's dominant sphere are one difficulty level less, and those with the subordinate sphere are one difficulty level more (easy becomes automatic, nearly impossible becomes impossible). If the character's AR total is equal or greater than the target number, they succeed. If not, they fail. Whilst this is initially a diceless system, characters can call upon Destiny to improve their Fate. By spending Destiny based on the related Trait (1 if dominant, 2 neutral, 3 subordinate), the character may draw from a card deck and, if the number is less than their current AR, they can add the value to their AR. If it still falls short they can continue to spend Destiny for Fate, until they select a card which is above their AR. It's a fairly simply mechanic that is quite pleasant to play out, both evocative (Destiny for Fate), and familiar (draw until bust).

The same system is used for combat. Initiative is based on Wits+Alertness, with declarations occurring in reverse order to actions (a terribly slow way of doing things), characters may act multiple times for a penalty of -2 AR per action; essentially sacrificing ability for speed. Some weapons (e.g., assault rifles) allow for multiple attacks per turn, plus they have a high rate of fire. Actions are based on Attribute + Characteristic (e.g., Agility + Fighting Unarmed) with the opponents Agility as the target number, modified if defending against multiple attacks and multiple opponents. A short list of various weapons is provided, which suggests some deadliness of firearms, although the +1 damage per bullet for rapid-fire weapons is painfully low (pun not intended). Melee weapons do damage according to Strength + a bonus, although these are mostly very inappropriate to the setting. Damage is defined as blunt or lethal, with a conversion rating of 2:1. A character is unconscious at zero, and dead at any negative value. Fight until you drop! In addition there are rules for falling (but not drowning!), and terror. Attacks of madness are against Psyche with failures adding 1 to a Madness characteristic.

At the start of each session the GM draws three cards face up to represent what Fate is in force for the session. If the first card is red, it represents Fate, if it is black it represents Destiny. A Fate card indicates an essentially random result in the session. A Destiny card will be tied into the overall plot. The second card determines which sphere will be affected in the session; spades (Body), clubs (mind), diamonds (soul), hearts (Heart). The third card determines a specific result. Then a card is dealt to each player; the one with the highest face value, will be effected by the result that session. For example, if the card drawn is the four of spades, one character will suffer illness in the session, and all AR checks will be one level harder. Players can, however, change these cards with the expenditure of Destiny points, and even challenge the GM in a stakes-based Fate game.

As should be evident Destiny Points are the currency of the game. At the end of each session characters are awarded Destiny for participation, advancing the plot, completing a goal, correctly interpreting a vision, discovering a truth, surviving a deadly encounter, or reaching the end of a story. The number of Destiny points that can be awarded per session are actually quite high - ten to twenty is quite plausible. Expenditure of Destiny requires the same number of points as the new level sought.

Productions and Setting

Running the game and describing the setting takes up about half the book of Heaven & Earth. The first chapter on in this broad description is Game Mastering, which contains some fairly sensible advice for what is given but misses out on a great deal. There is surprisingly little on critical metagaming matters (choice and handling of players, creating the environment for the game etc), the chapter concentrating almost entirely in in-game activities. The "Building Productions" chapter however is somewhat better, discussing narrative flow, story arcs, and subplots. There is a good discussion of theme, but characterisation and especially stylistic matters could have received more attention.

Implementation issues are primarily discussed in a chapter in their own "Injecting the Supernatural", which describes how to introduce irrational and inexplicable plot elements as central to the story's development. However this becomes more of a description of what is available (ghosts, magicians, paranormals, spirits, angels and demons) and the various societies that gravitate to these issues rather than their implementation. There's a hefty section on surrealism, with some in-game proposals such as the use dreams, visions, visitations, and the implementation of the Fate, Destiny, and Gambling with the GM options.

The next five chapters describe the aforementioned denizens, notably it should be mentioned that these are available as PCs. Ghosts are defined as souls that have not gone to heaven or hell on account to such a strong attachment that they have refused to die. As a result they need to Focus on their goals, rather than be distracted by their suffering. They come with a number of special abilities to assist their interactions, all governed by the Heart. Likewise magicians, using free will over creation, "are linked to Lucifer's machinations". Magicians have a special ability entitled Paradigm, based the cultural tradition. Spell-casting itself is deliberately broad but with use of their own Fate deck to create specific circumstance difficulties, and with some interesting failure results based on Sphere. Paranormals are humans who have psychic powers; their special abilities are the Power of their abilities and the Control they have over them. Spirits are personifications of universal forces prone to possession. Their special characteristics for these abilities are governed by Power and Awareness. The final beings described are angels and demons, both of whom are soul collectors and, unlike the others, are not available as PCs. Both have their own methods to get souls onside, and their not necessarily "good" on either side. Angels and Demons, whilst having varying abilities, also have some in common (e.g., Flight, Immortality, Teleport, etc).

The final two chapters provide an overview of the setting (Potter's Lake) and an adventure scenario (Frankenstein's Apprentice). The overview, based in conversation with/by Gareth-Michael Skara, is an excellent piece of work, providing just the sort of overview needed with the right style and density. Most importantly, one certainly derives the strong sense that the town is both thoroughly normal on the surface with enough surreal, absurd, and paranormal activity to create the sort of atmosphere necessary for the game. It would however, be nice to include a map at the end of the chapter - especially given that there's almost an entire page of white-space. The sample scenario is a murder mystery (aren't they always?). Although relatively simple, there's a great deal of attention paid to initial characterisation, the various subplots, and running the story in a fairly non-linear way.

Overall

Heaven and Earth provides an excellent overall setting, and quite a well-thought out metaplot, but with insufficient development in the latter. It provides a good basic game system, with some attention to detail in the characteristics, but isn't quite what it says on the tin (calling is "a diceless, deterministic action resolution system" when cards are a random element instead is a bit of a cheat). It integrates the key themes (Destiny and Fate) admirably within the game system, although the dominant and subordinate sphere do come across as a bit of a unnecessary kludge.

There's many weak points in the workmanship of the system which, at its core, is actually very good. For example, the combat system in particular really needs some serious reconsideration. Reverse declarations in initiative, single point damage per bullet in rapid fire, anachronistic weapons, and "fight until you drop" damage systems are really not positive features. The weakest point however is actually the production quality and the writing. The layout, artwork, and general readability are not just unimpressive (which would gather average grades), that are actually quite poor.

Overall however - and despite the overall scores given - there is much to recommend in Heaven & Earth. It's just that it could do with a really thorough rewrite - say to provide twice as much information in half the page count - and for a really serious re-working of the aesthetic presentation. Essentially this game seriously needs to have new editions produced. Which is, of course, exactly what happened.

Style: 1 + .3 (layout) + .3 (art) + .6 (coolness) + .3 (readability) + .5 (product) = 3.0

Substance: 1 + .4 (content) + .2 (text) + .6 (fun) + .4 (workmanship) + .7 (system) = 3.3

The Apocalypse Stone (2000)

The Apocalypse Stone is high-level campaign that simulates end times for a fantasy environment. Designed as a high-level Advanced Dungeons & Dragons (2nd edition) campaign it is fairly adaptable to any number of other game systems due to the thematic strength of the product. The well-glued softback book itself is to the style of the latter set of products of that line an emphasis on black and red colouration on the cover and a very evocative cover of cage gibbets and a rain of fire upon a castle. The internal layout is two column ragged with a fairly clear serif font with plenty of boxed and shaded sections that highlight relevant parts of the text, along with a fairly detailed table of contents. Less impressive is the knotwork filler art which takes up far too much space on the top of most pages. Internal art and diagrams is fair-good and contextually appropriate but nothing special.

The scenario itself starts off with the striking warning that "This adventure will end your campaign and destroy your world!", providing several reasons why a DM might want to do this and, in particular, engaging in appropriate degrees of metagaming to create a unexpected narrative that which sets the wheels in motion for the countdown to destruction - which in itself does provide an interesting question of RPG game theory that the DM, in the storyteller role, should engage in a bit of metagaming whilst for players, in their actor roles, should avoid it. But this is not the place for elaboration on that point.

One of the interesting and impressively executed design elements of scenario as presented is that the specifics don't matter that much. For example, replacing the petulant villain who initially acts in the background and engages in a glorious act of entrapment against the PCs, is a relatively trivial task. Indeed, as written the back-story is even slightly underpowered and some events quite contrived for what occurs. But without giving too much away - because so much of this story does depend on initial deception towards the players - the foundation of the story begins with what appears to be an quest, suitably orientated towards the capability and probable objectives of high-level characters. There are also very sound recommendations on how to integrate opponents of the PCs, certainly appropriate from years of game-time, into the story as well.

The second part of the story involves the actual quest itself, which involves a trek to a location, defeating the inhabitants of a said location, and gaining the reward - a very simple narrative. However, a sidebar which suggests appropriate locations in various D&D gameworlds (Forgotten Realms, Greyhawk, Dragonlance, Mystara) strengthened the destructive value of what is about to occur. Whilst the task at hand is of an appropriate level of difficulty and should challenge the PCs sufficiently without causing fatalities. Like D&D modules of old, there is a bit of funhouse variation in the situation and perhaps also like said modules, the maps could be redesigned to be more "realistic" and interesting. Another particularly weak point in the plot at this point requires the PCs to come to a certain agreement; in actual play this proved a little more difficult as characters of this level are both powerful and players of this experience are suspicious! Whilst such a possibility is discussed in the text itself, the solutions are not nearly as convincing or

appropriate to the narrative.

The third part of the adventure involves a supposed lull in the plot development and even suggestions for running alternate adventures as a stop-gap measure. What is actually case is that the lull is only in the direct storyline; there is plenty happening indirectly which is revealed in this period. The primary discovery will be that the connection between the prime material plane or gameworld has been cut off from the rest of the multiverse. This means that outer extraplanar magics of any sort don't work, various clerical spells are unavailable (e.g., Raise Dead!), and the undead are weakened. Any outer-plane entities that were on the prime material are trapped. Timing of discovery and events are critical here, but the information provided ("Twelve Steps to Armageddon") doesn't really encourage this. For example, the introduction of plague and pestilence, of delightful styles (e.g., exploding heads), whilst certainly thematically appropriate at this stage of the story is probably best delayed. In actual play, the best method was to treat the collapse of the world from the outer planes inwards; start with a failure to connect with the outer planes, then the inner planes (i.e., elemental and energy planes), then apply results of that disconnection.

By this stage the world is literally falling apart, and the PCs may have even realised that they have something to do with it (an "oops!" moment of Biblical proportions). If they haven't received the hint, an encounter with an very annoyed exiled arch-devil who was just planning his triumphant return to Hell when the PCs inadvertently ruined his plans should make it obvious. Following this, as a rather blunt plot device of dubious consistency, the PCs are teleported by an avatar of the God of Justice to engage in several tests of their ethical character. The tests themselves should be varied by the DM according to the group in question; as writ they're a little on the obvious side, but as a narrative device they are indeed opportune. Assuming success in a scene somewhat reminiscent of the Arthurian Fisher-King story, the PCs acquire the necessary powers to locate their adversary.

This should lead to the conclusion of the story, whereby the PCs have the opportunity to confront the villain and event possibly prevent the destruction of the Prime Material Plane. The scenario is very much dependent on a requisite personality characteristic of the villain as a plot device, but one which is more plausible than contrived. The sensible suggestion is made to add a few favourite nemeses of yesterday into this final act, and PCs will find that they are facing an immediate and extremely challenging collection of opponents who stand in their way. The conclusion is deliberately left open for the DM to decide the ultimate fate of the game world, even if the PCs are successful. The most satisfying being the world anew, the surviving PCs thoroughly retired. The conclusion of the book has a few notes on running the apocalyptic campaign and some statistics for an potential interesting fate of the the PCs and that of a magic item.

As a whole, The Apocalypse Stone is certainly one the grandest scenarios ever produced for AD&D. Despite a number of criticism elaborated in this review with a bit of work a DM (and far more than what should be necessary for a setting of this quality) can run a truly epic end-times campaign that will be well remembered, not just for the scale of effects, nor for the degree of challenge, but for the unfolding of the narrative itself.

Style: 1 + .5 (layout) + .5 (art) + 0.8 (coolness) + .7 (readability) + .7 (product) = 4.2

Substance: 1 + .7 (content) + .7 (text) + .7 (fun) + .8 (workmanship) + .7 (system) = 4.6

TWILIGHT 2000 REVISITED

by Lev Lafayette

The following articles consists of three parts. The first is a review of Twilight 2000 second edition, recently published on RPG.net and on the RPG Review website. The second part is an attempt to construct a more realistic post-nuclear war setting, in terms of causes and effects, including references to the major Twilight 2000 "Poland campaign" . The third part consists of a set of rules modifications found to be necessary in actual play.

Twlight 2000: Second Edition Review
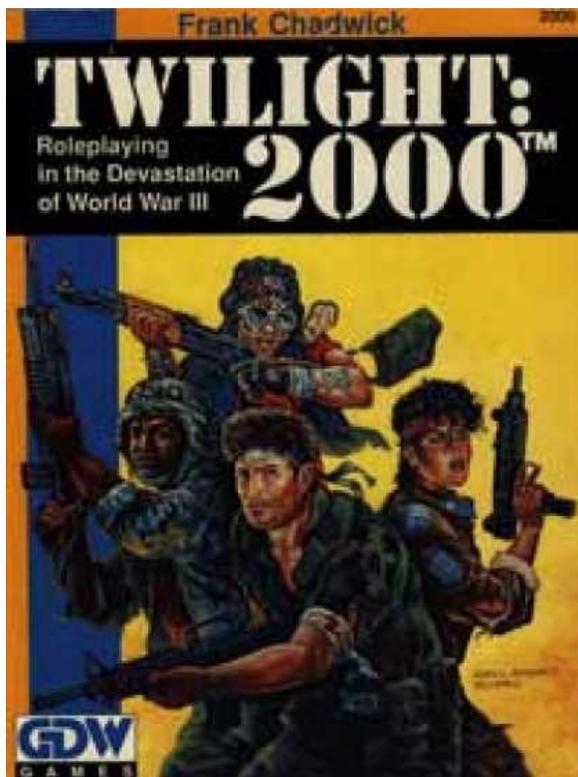
"Few may recall today, but in the early 1980s, the world was fatalistic and paranoid about the prospects of nuclear war."
(http://cominganarchy.com/2009/06/17/early-1980s-nuclear-armageddon-films/)

Introduction and Product

It was in this milieu that GDW released the first edition of Twilight 2000 in 1984. The PCs took the role of U.S. soldiers left in Poland after a brief limited nuclear war between NATO and the Warsaw Pact. The first edition came in two notably slim books with an equally slim game system which, whilst with its problems, was usable, and perhaps most memorable for the "Coolness Under Fire", which represented how many phases in a combat turn a character would effectively hesitate whilst bullets were flying around. The game was quite a success with a run of scenarios, although the real world engaged in its typical habit of interrupting the assumed history. By the time the second edition was released in 1990, the eastern bloc and the Soviet Union was on the way out. Nevertheless, the second edition looked representative of the game's popularity.

The new book was more than ten times the size of the first edition, suggesting that significant effort had been spent in elaboration and development. Consisting of some eleven sections, the game is presented with realist shaded ink-pencil drawings and a three column justified sans-serif font throughout. It looks attractive, but is actually quite difficult to get past the wall-of-text in actual play. Page numbers are clearly marked, but not sections. There is a good two-page table of contents and an index of equivalent length. The cover art by Dell Harris is but fair in technique and creativity, suggesting a certain wildness of behaviour by the mixed-force band of PCs represented, although the ugly yellow background is distracting. I will readily admit having preference to the cover art by Steve Vetners in the first edition. Notable is the "vehicle cards" and "weapon cards", the former consisting of on average half A4 sections and the latter quarter A4. Each provides an image and summary of the relevant item. Taking up some 65 of the new pages, they are nominally designed to be photocopied and distributed to players when they have such equipment, but this use in

play is marginal at best. The book itself is softback and excellently bound with a strong glue.

The game begins with an official "countdown to armageddon", which shows a fair knowledge of the international geographical and politics. The cause of the official war is tensions between the Soviet Union and the People's Republic of China, and is followed up a year later by conflicts between a re-united Germany and Poland eventually leading to a NATO and Warsaw Pact conflict (yes, once again Germany re-negotiates the Polish border). You may be very surprised to discover in the game history it is the Soviets that launch the nukes first, initially tactically against the NATO forces, but with far less restraint against China. There is much I find questionable about the official history, especially the notion of a "limited nuclear war" (more on that later) but the game is only weakly tied to the official history and it does provide sufficient detail for those who want an "out-of-the-box" back story.

Character Generation, and Equipment

Players determine the nationality, gender, and name of their character, followed by either point allocation or random rolls for the six attributes; Strength, Agility, Constitution, Charisma, and Education, which are rated from 1 to 10. The point allocation is 32 distributed among the characteristics; the random method is 2d6-2, rerolling results of 0, and adding if the total is less than 30. Overall, this gives a slightly unbalanced advantage to the random method. Attributes are used to generate derived values such as hit points (allocated on a per location basis), carrying capacity, throwing range, and as core influence on unarmed combat damage.

For their initial background, characters choose 4 skills at level 2 from a short hobbyist list. They are now considered 17 years old. Following this there is a range of 4-year term careers in civilian and military occupations with a notable, and acceptable, emphasis on the latter, although an "Athlete" civilian profession would have been nice. Characters pick up skills in each profession and term, with military careers varying slightly according to nationality. Soviet soldiers receive less basic training to their U.S. counterparts, but the British receive even more! Nationality also determines the possibility of a character having multiple languages; by default each character receives a native language at skill rank 10 (effectively 100%), but with a d10 roll for other languages also starting at rank 10. U.S. soldiers, for example, have a 2 in 10 chance of all speaking Spanish as native, and if that fails, a 1 in 10 chance for German, or Italian, or Polish, or Yiddish. With the exception of the Ukrainians and Byelorussians who also speak Russian, other Soviet nationalities speak their native language alone. Skill ranks bought in a related language count double, but Europeans count all other European languages at double value as well. Let's face it, the British are *the* multilingual killing machines in this game.

In each professional term characters have the opportunity to gain skills, promotions, contacts, and pick up a secondary skill. The skill list itself has somewhat of an action rather than knowledge focus, with around fifty skills plus specialisations. Despite being allocated in groups with an attribute, skills levels show no attribute influence. At the end of each term a die roll determines whether war has broken out, resulting in one more term under such conditions. This does mean that starting characters will start anywhere from a minimum 21 to a theoretical starting age of 53; most will be in their early to late 30s. Characters have the potential to lose attribute ratings due to age from the 33 (Agility) onwards. Military PCs start with a number of background rads equal to the terms served (in peacetime or otherwise) in d6s. Civilians start with a significantly higher 1d6*1d10. Characters, in groups of three, can also pool together to acquire a vehicle or an equivalent number of animals. One very interesting rule is the ability for players to use contacts as plot devices, an early example of narrativist thinking. Finally, Initiative is based on service; regulars receive 1d6, reservists 1d6/2 (round up), draftees 1d6/2 (round down), +1 for some military professions, -1 for others. This will determine the order and actions per combat turn; it is very extremely important.

Starting equipment is tied to government issues (so the French are likely to have an FA-MAS, the Soviets an AK-74, U.S. troops an M16, etc). There is, as can be expected, quite an emphasis on guns, bullets, military vehicles, and heavy rounds, but there is also a modest collection of related travelling equipment such as stills (very important for fuel), generators, heaters and coolers, tools, range finders, medical supplies, and personal gear. Character's starting gear is based on the number of military terms they have served, with even nominal civilians picking up one term. Something that is quite notable in the equipment list, especially in the 'cards', is the number of abbreviations most of which is quite unnecessary given the availability of white space.

Skill Resolution, Setting, and Combat

If it seems a little odd to discuss setting information at the point that's because this is what the game does, as part of The Referee chapter, immediately after heavy weapons equipment. The recommendations for describing the world are very sound, as is the advice for game structure and novices. The skill and task resolution system on the other hand could have been subject to some more careful consideration. The method is simple enough; a d10 roll under the appropriate "asset" (skill or attribute), with difficulty levels acting as a multiplier or a divider to the asset score. This effectively means that characters with a low skill level, even with an easy task have very little chance of success, whereas characters of average skill will find the tasks increasingly trivial. There is some sense of degrees of success with critical levels at plus or minus four. About two pages describes default skills challenge examples, which is useful.

The game then moves to some more setting information, specifically non-player characters, with a small number of stock NPCs (militiaman, hermit, refugee, farmer, soldier, marauder), some examples of contacts, and an NPC motivation system based on card draws. Time and Travel makes up a chapter, with the game days split into four hour periods, with environment and encounter tables, food requirements and fatigue issues. The encounter tables distinguish by terrain with three broad categories; human groups, major items, and animals. The group encounter statistics table slips into first edition notation with Observation skills being listed at ten times what is normal for this edition! Each potential encounter is given around a paragraph or more of description, and there are over twenty pages of detailed floorplans for encounter locations (.eg., a farmhouse, a subway station, etc), although these are somewhat heavy on the white-space.

Combat is carried out on an interior 2 metre grid or an external 8 metre grid with diagonal modifiers. The thirty second combat turn in broken up into six phases of five seconds each. A character's Initiative determines on which phase they initially act and all subsequent phases; so an Initiative 6 character acts on all phases, whereas an Initiative 1 character only acts on the last phase. Characters with a lower initiative act first in the phase, with Agility minus weapon bulk determining ties. Wounds also effect initiative. Regardless of Initiative, characters may repeat actions in continuing phases. Characters who are surprised or suffer particular combat effects may also Panic, if a 1d6 roll is greater than their Initiative. If it is, they freeze then go prone for a number of combat phases that the roll is greater than their Initiative. Overall, the system gives very significant advantages to characters with a higher initiative.

Armed and unarmed combat is based on a d10 roll under the relevant skill, with the option for the opponent to block and abort an action in a later phase. Attacks may be aimed for specific locations with a Difficult skill divisor. Armour subtracts from damage. Grappling cannot be blocked, nor does armour protect, instead the damage is applied to the opponent's Strength; when this is exceeded the opponent is "controlled". One particular rule which stood out was automatic hits for armed and unarmed melee with automatic choice of location.

Fire combat is differentiated into direct and indirect, with indirect fire having hit chances based on attacker and

observer. Guns have a reload and rate-of-fire rating which determines the number of shots per phase, although every shot after the first counts as a "quick shot" with a divisor. Semiautomatic weapons may be fired up to five times per phase. Automatic weapons fire with a typical rate-of-fire per burst, noted on the weapon card (for example, the M16A2 can fire either five shots per phase or five three-round bursts). For automatic fire, roll a pool of d6s equal to the number of rounds in the burst, with each 6 indicating a hit. It's a good way to waste ammunition and roll a huge number of dice, taking up time. Range is defined as close. medium, long, and extreme for each weapons with an easy multiplier at close and difficulty divisors at long and extreme (e.g., the M16A2 is considered "close" at 55 metres of less). Weapons also have a recoil number which, when exceeding Strength from single-shots or bursts, reduces hit chances. Explosive damage declines from point of contact.

Damage is based on a number of d6 dice. Weapons have a penetration value which may bypass armour; multiply the target's armour protection by the weapon's penetration value and subtract the result from the the weapon's damage value. Aimed shots which hit the chest or head may kill, based on a d10 roll under the weapon's modified damage value. A character is stunned if they receive more damage that their agility, and stunned if hit to the head. Wounds are considered slight if hit points are still positive, serious if greater that than the hit points, and critical if twice the location's hit points. Critical wounds are immediately fatal if scored to the head, and usually so otherwise. Characters without medical assistance will recover from slight wounds in three days, serious wounds in several, and assuming it is stabilised, critical wounds in two.

GDW presents a new concept in roleplaying. World War III began five years ago. It's still going on, but that's the least of your problems. A few days ago, you were soldiers in the U.S. 5th Division. Now you're just fighting to survive   while the world falls apart around you.

TWILIGHT: 2000™
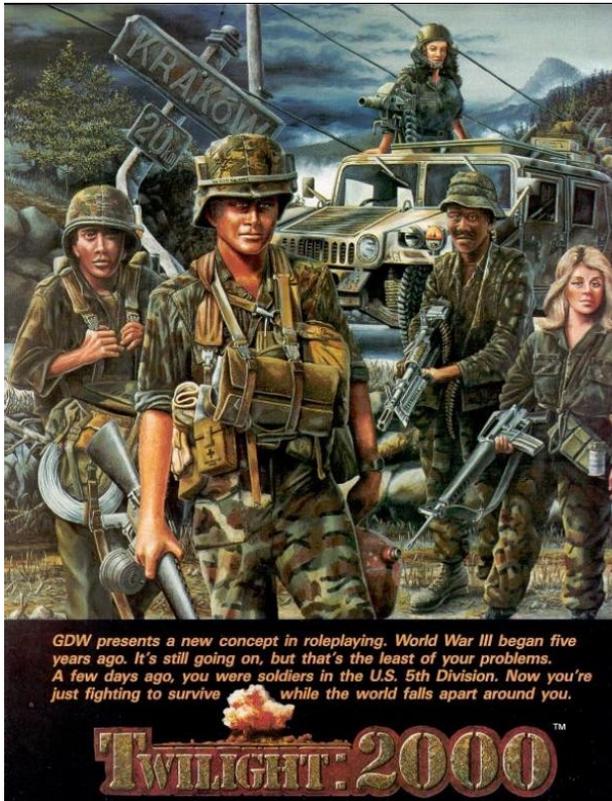
There are fairly extensive rules for various forms of chemical munitions, mines, infections,, and tactical visibility, all of which are presented in a manner that is both case-specific and realistic. Several pages is dedicated to vehicles, maintenance, vehicular combat, animals and boats. Of particular note is the consumption rate of fuel per four-hour period with various multipliers for the types of fuel. After a very quick experience with ethanol, characters will quickly realise that this is only for emergencies and will actively seek out petrol instead. The example of the M1 is illustrative; it has a fuel capacity of 1920 l, and a consumption rate of 550 l per four hour period. Petrol has consumption multiplier of 1, methanol of 3.5 . In other words, a tank of methanol will last less than four hours; a tank of petrol almost fourteen. An average person can gather one hundred kilograms of vegetable matter to make methanol per four hours; this will produce about 44 litres of fuel, requiring the equivalent of five and half days of collection for a single four-hours worth of capacity.

The text then jumps back to setting, providing a description of the world in 2000, albeit with a heavy emphasis on Poland where the default campaign is set. Following the collapse of government currencies the general medium of exchange is gold in city environs, barter outside of that. The limited scale of the nuclear exchange is evident by the fact that significant cities are still in operation, notably Lodz and Krakow (the second and third largest cities). There is a detailed listing of the U.S., Canadian, British, and Soviet nuclear targets, along with a description of the effects of radiation illness and a delightfully realistic listing of diseases. Concluding the game is a price list, twenty pages of

charts and tables, and four pages of designer's notes summarising the major rules changes from first edition and their reasons.

Overall

Twilight 2000 (2nd edition) comes with a tolerably bad set of rules in a tolerably bad setting. Major candidates for reform in terms of rules include professions (scope and content), skill modifiers, influence of attributes, initiative, automatic fire, and armour. Whilst this does make a substantial section of the game, a GM who wishes to run this game should give serious consideration to making tweaks and modifications to the rules-as-written for these sections; but with a little bit of consideration they will find that a little bit of effort will create rules that are more streamlined, more realistic, and with greater consistency.

Major candidates in terms of setting includes the effects of a limited nuclear war. It must be said, like many U.S. assessments of such a conflict, it is seriously underrated; if you have the stomach for it compare Threads (UK) to The Day After (US). An unlikely limited nuclear war, which means that large areas of industry are still in operation and very significant areas of the globe is relatively untouched. The claim that these circumstances leads to a political and communications cantonment system using gold as currency is far less likely than commonly supposed.

What is more difficult to fix is the presentation of the game. The ordering of the book, the font choice, the chapter notations - all represented by the "layout" score - is a major drawback. The context-free artwork is good in terms of technique, but lacklustre in terms of creativity. Where the game does shine is in the strength of physical product itself, but more so in the scope of the material that game presents. (For evaluation purposes I have considered the equipment cards to be just that, rather than part of the rules as such - otherwise the "text" rating would be less). Overall however this is a slightly below average game for the reasons provided.

Style: 1 + 0.2 (layout) + 0.5 (art) + 0.3 (coolness) + 0.4 (readability) + 0.7 (product) = 2.9

Substance: 1 + 0.8 (content) + 0.4 (text) + 0.3 (fun) + 0.3 (workmanship) + 0.3 (system) = 3.1

World War III for Twilight 2K: How It Could Have Occurred

The background assumption is that the 1991 coup [1] in the Soviet Union was a lot more aggressive and successful than the historical version (which lasted two days and led to the breakup of the Soviet Union). In this alternate history a much wider section of the KGB and the Soviet Army backed the coup, and the State Committee on the State of Emergency was able to reunite the Soviet Union with force of arms following a demands by Helmet Kohl (and an increasing military presence) to renegotiate the Polish border from the Oder-Neisse line [2]. Moving rapidly, insurrections also occurred among hardline communists in the former Warsaw pact (such as Intermovement [3] in the Baltics), calling for Soviet intervention. Ignoring international protests, in 1992 the Soviets retook their former territories in the Eastern bloc, despite majority civilian opposition.

As Soviet forces reached the borders of Germany, NATO responded with a counter-offensive which was devastating on both sides. Salients were won and lost with a speed reminiscent of Napoleonic cavalry movements but on a scale of hundreds of kilometers rather than metres. When a particularly aggressive Soviet salient pushed through Erfurt then

Frankfurt and Saarland, the French acted to protect their territorial integrity - by using tactical nuclear weapons, specifically Pluton missiles [4] from Oberhoffen-sur-Moder and Belfort.

The Soviet response was immediate. President Gennady Yanayev stepped down to manage public affairs, Marshall Dmitry Yazov was replaced by the younger and more competent Yevgeny Shaposhnikov and interior minister Boris Pugo became President. In a strategic move, the Soviets launched attacks on U.S. military satellites, severely weakening NATO intelligence.

A massive nuclear counterstrike is launched against the U.S. and its NATO allies, including large numbers of nuclear-armed Soviet satellites, generating global electromagnetic pulses [5], destroying most unshielded equipment. From the oceans, Soviet submarine-launched ballistic missile (SLBM) warheads strike against nuclear facilities in the United

States. For their own part, the United States responds with intercontinental ballistic missiles (ICBMs) against the U.S.S.R and attacks from B52 strategic nuclear bombers.

The nuclear conflict brings the rest of the world into the action; India and Pakistan, long in opposition, engage in a conflict with the use of nuclear weapons and Israel takes the opportunity to create several glass sculptures in capitals that were potential threats. China, hitherto staying out of the conflict, comes on the side of the Soviet Union following the French attack, and in particular with North Korea as that government comes into conflict with South Korea, Japan, and the United States (and eventually Indonesia and Australia). The United States takes the opportunity to use a number

of tactical nuclear weapons against Cuba to destroy any possibility of a deep counter from that source.

The effects of the war were already predicted and well-known in the scientific community [6]. Following the initial devastation that destroys almost all major urban centres globally, followed by massive radiation poisoning, followed by a nuclear winter that lasts two years, and then a complete collapse in economic productivity and infrastructure. The only semblance of government that is left behind is small local authorities, jealously guarding their resources. Technically, the war continued and certainly there is a great deal of behaviour that suggests this, although over time such things as rank and seniority fell into complete disregard, By 1996 the war had exhausted itself as an organised command-and-control practice on a strategic level, with no central government really being capable of engaging in command and control.

By 2000, the global population has been reduced by fifty percent and eighty percent in urbanised Europe and the United States. GDP has been reduced by well over ninety percent; as predicted it was a new dark ages. There is very little in terms of electronics that operate at all. Working vehicles and fuel are, of course, in very high demand, although wrecks are common. There is some small scale agriculture. Currency exists where governments exist, but in the main they have been replaced by local script and items of utility. For the past four years, the player-characters have eked out an existence of sorts in war-devastated Poland. Like so many others, they now represent a small band for hire, made up of mixed forces, trading their military abilities and equipment for food and fuel.

Suffering shortages however, word has reached the PCs of a city to the south which has managed to organise itself and is serving a central point for trade where there is a local government that strictly enforces a public peace. It is calling itself the "Free, Independent, and Strictly Neutral City of Kraków with its Territory" [7].

[1] http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/1991_Soviet_coup_d%27%C3%A9tat_attempt

[2] http://www.csmonitor.com/1990/0305/mt.html

[3] http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Intermovement

[4] http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Pluton_%28missile%29

[5] http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Electromagnetic_pulse

[6] http://www.foundationwebsite.org/CANAMoptions.htm

[7] http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Free_City_of_Krak%C3%B3w

Twilight 2000 (2nd Edition) Rules Patches

Twilight 2000 (2nd edition) is a system that is in serious need of a number of substantial rules patches. As written, it is not quite unplayable, but certainly is problematic in a large number of areas. The following is a number of changes covering character generation and combat, two of the main parts of the game system. The objective in the rules patches is to make significant changes in the playability and realism of the game, whilst making minimal changes to the expression of the game rules itself, thus reducing a large number of effects that a referee must engage in when translating scenario modules etc.

Character Generation

Choose sex and nationality. Receive EDU+INT skill levels in native language (the rules suggest just 10 ranks) and any other languages that they may have access to. Assign 32 points to Attributes; Strength, Agility, Constitution, Charisma, Intelligence, Education. Select 4 background skills and receive level 2 in each. Background skills: Language, Swimming, Wheeled Vehicle, Computing, Melee Unarmed, Horsemanship, Fishing, Small Boat, Motorcycle, Tracking, Farming, and Athletics (new skill, it does what it sounds like). The character is now 17.

Following this the characters can engage in a number of four-year career paths in civilian or military occupations, which provides skills, ranks, and contacts. At the end of each term, roll 1d10. If this roll is equal or lower than twice your term number, the war has started. Using the setting described above, this follows with two terms "under fire", as everyone is drafted into a military career. Characters over the age of 33 will start suffering effects of ageing.

The second edition rules had a new Initiative system, which is just terrible and is largely ignored. Instead a variant of the first edition Initiative (aka, Coolness Under Fire) is used instead. Combat is carried out in 30-second turns, divided into six phases of five seconds each. Every character can act once per phase, however they must spend a number of rounds hesitating or repeating a non-combat action (e.g., crawling) when in fire combat. This number is 6 - the character's Coolness Under Fire. Everybody starts with one level of CuF. For a civilian term in war or non-war military term gain +1, and for a military term in combat gain +2 CuF. Again, using the setting described previously, starting PCs will have at least 5 CuF as a result (one base, plus 4 from two terms of fire combat). Even peasants and refugees will have a CuF of at least 3. Apart this, actions are carried out in order of Agility.

Characters received 1d6 each for vehicles, which can be pooled up to 3d6.

Combat

Rate of Fire: In terms of Rate of Fire the rules say that weapons are either:

SS (single shot), fire then reload

BA (bolt action), or LA (lever action), fire once per phase.

SA (semi-automatic), fire five single shots per phase.

Automatic, up to five bursts per phase equal to the RoF. For the AKM assault rifle this is up to 25 bullets per phase - however they have a recoil of 8 per burst and 3 per single shot.

Burst Fire: For the official rules, for evey bullet in a burst roll a d6; each 6 hits, with a minimum of 1 hit. This means the player will be rolling lots of dice, and with end result being an additional 1 in 6 bullets hitting. Burst fire simply isn't worth it under these rules. Burst fire is actually somewhat more accurate than this; but rather than all bullets in a burst hitting play one plus 20% hit per point of success - so a burst that hits by 5 would mean that *all* bullets hit; roll locations individually. If there is more than 10 rounds in the burst, then roll in groups of 2, if more than 20, in groups of 3 and so forth.

Armour: As written the game rules are; multiply the target's armour protection by the weapon's penetration value and subtract the result from the the weapon's damage value. If this sounds complex, it's because it is. Basically, it means

that a kevlar vest will protect for 1d6 against most assault rifles at close and medium range, and beyond that bullets won't penetrate at all.

Wounds: In the last session we had one character take a *lot* of damage to their leg. Rules as writ, they'll be walking around again in two weeks, or eight days if under medical care. This is pretty optimistic, largely based on the upper limits of multipliers. So with additional multiplier levels, effects and recovery looks more like the following:

Slight Wounds: Any damage less than hit points in a location, -1 Strength, -1 to Coolness, 3 days recovery basic, 1 day recovery with medical care.

Serious Wounds: Greater than hit points, -3 Strength, -3 Coolness, roll CON*2 as a percentage or lose consciousness, 5 days recovery to slight, 3 days recovery with medical care.

Critical Wounds: Greater than twice hit points. Head is dead. Automatic unconscious otherwise. Dead if no medical attention within 10 minutes. When revived, -5 Strength, -5 Coolness. 7 days recovery to serious, 5 days with medical care.

Second Degree Critical: Greater than thrice hit points. Head or chest is dead. Automatic unconscious otherwise. Dead if no medical attention in 5 minutes. When revived -7 Strength, -7 Coolness, 9 days recover to critical, 7 with medical care.

Third Degree Critical: Greater than four times hit points. Head, chest, or abdomen is dead. Automatic unconscious otherise. Limb lost. Dead is no medical attention within 3 minutes. When revived -9 Strength, -9 Coolness. 11 days to recover, 9 with medical care.

Fourth Degree Critical: Character is dead.

Aiming and Scope: Rules as writ, aiming does nothing except give a chance for an instant kill if the head or chest is hit. As per the last comments, I'll rule that a phase of aiming gives an additional +3 to hit. Further, aiming means that scopes will gain an additional benefit (they have no benefit otherwise). For each level of magnification (3 times is the default, 6 is the normal maximum), the scope adds an addition 15 yards to the close range of the weapon. A character who aims may also select location, at -5 to hit.

Time: Combat is carried out in five second phases. Every character can act once per phase. When they are first under fire or take a serious wound from fire they must make a Coolness Under Fire roll (d6 roll under or equal to Initiative). If they fail they have lost their cool. Either drop prone, or repeat a non-combat out-of-fire action (e.g., crawl for cover), for a number of turns equal to how much they failed the roll. For vehicles bail out and run, or run if being charged.

Hit Capacity: Hit capaciy is derived from Constitution. A character has a number of hit points in their head and arms equal to the CON*2, equal to their CON*3 for legs, chest, and abdomen.

Unarmed Damage: Keep at (Strength*Skill)/10)

Actions per Phase: Aim (+3), Crawl, Fire, Go Prone/Stand Up, Melee, Mount/Dismount, Ready/Change Equipment, Reload, Run, Take Cover, Talk, Trot, Walk. Note that *every* character can act on every phase. Having characters act up to six times as often as other is *ridiculous*. Opportunity fire still applies (it has an effective Initiative of 7, if you like).

Unarmed Combat: Attack on Initiative (Melee Combat, normal). Block to respond (normal skill, abort next action). Aimed blows are at -3 for a specific location. Armor is applied accordingto a new Body Armor and Protection chart. Grappling is applied as normal.

Armed Combat: Attacks, blocks, aiming, and armour are as per unarmed combat.

Fire combat: Weapons have different range modifiers; +6 for point-blank, +3 for close, - for medium, -3 for long, and -6 for extreme. Aimed shots for a location is a -3 modifier (you often can aim as an action and aim for a location, for a net modifier of +0, but one extra phase). Damage is also modified for range, +2D6 per bullet for point blank, +1D6 per bullet for close, - for medium, -1d6 per bullet for long, -2d6 per bullet for extreme.

Rate of Fire: Weapons are either SS/BA/LA (single shot, one per phase then reload)., PA/DAR (three shots per phase)., SA (five shots per phase)., Automatic, (either five single shots or five bursts). Each point below to-hit number is an extra bullet.

Recoil: As per rules, each shot (not bullet) comes with a recoil number. Once that is exceeded by characters STR reduce by that amount.

COMPREHENSIVE DAMAGE SYSTEM
by Michael Cole

Intent

With most RPGs, the damage is rather amorphous, characters take damage until they get to a certain level, and then they stop working. This is not how it works in real life. The intent behind this system was to produce more realistic, and thus more dangerous, combat results. I wanted players to be scared of their characters getting hurt, not because it would automatically kill them, but because the effects of even a single injury may have consequences. It's particularly intended for firearm combat. Taking several rounds which do flesh damage, and then one additional round that kills you is particularly obnoxious from a realism point of view. This isn't perfect, but hopefully it can at least serve as something to think about.

Usage

First, the attacker chooses their general aiming area - Body, Head, Arms or Legs. For standard combat, Body is default, and the negatives listed are the penalties (using a d20 or 3d6 system) to hit. Note that for punching, the Head column should be used, and for kicking, the Legs column should be used.
You then roll percentile to see what is hit - note the use of optional wings - disregard this for those who are wingless - those hits instead go into the lung.

Then figure out the weapon type, and multiply the damage by the multiplier listed.

For the remainder of the columns, I have references to HT - this is from GURPS. This should be read as either Constitution, or Hit Points, or whatever corresponds in the system that you are using. The next columns are checked in sequence. Roll means to roll against a stat such as willpower, constitution, health or the like. Auto means that if the listed situation is met, then the event is automatic

Blow Though - certain body parts can only take so much damage. If the total damage exceeds the listed amount, then damage over that blows through, and is lost. Note that for some areas, the Blow Though is listed as more than the total - this is for use in systems such as GURPS where loss of all damage equals incapacitation and a chance of death, rather than death. Obviously, this may need to be modified for systems where the hit point total is total until death.

Stunning implies that the attack has dazed the victim, it means that the victim will effectively not be able to take offensive actions the following round, or until they are no longer stunned.

Stunning is checked before Knockout - only if the victim is stunned should the victim be checked for Knockout. Note that any automatic KO includes automatic Stun.

For GURPS, anyone who is Stunned will only be able to defend the following round, and all active defenses will be at -4. For each subsequent round, they will need to make an Initiative roll to act normally again. You will need to translate this into whatever system that you use.

A KO does not necessarily imply unconsciousness, but simply means that the victim is out of play - they can take no actions, and will generally be lying on the ground. I.e., a knee to the groin can leave the victim curled up in the fetal position, but they will generally be awake. A solid blow to the stomach can knock the wind out and cause a collapse, but the victim will still be awake. The type of weapon and the hit location will define the result - the GM is the final arbiter. Generally, recovery takes about one minute per point of damage done, assuming that the average victim has around 10 hit points.

For the additional damage, the rolls are only made if the damage is greater than what is listed. If so, cross-check the weapon type, and roll the percentage change that the additional damage could occur. Some areas may have multiple possible additional effects - check them all going down the page.

Note that for the wrist/hand, you use one of the other of the broken wrist lines depending on whether the hand was broken. The same with ankle/foot.

Also note that results that start with three dashes can only occur if the additional damage above occurred - paralysis requires a broken neck or spine, deafness requires a fractured skull.

Consequences are listed to the right - obviously from a GURPS point of view. DPR - Damage Per Round. Translate for your own system. The effects of broken bones is listed below the table.

Sources

This wasn't original - it was cobbled together from various other sources. The ones that I can remember, as best I can, are:

The percentage to hit locations - from the Blackmoor D&D Suppliment (yes, that old) and from Chivalry and Sorcery (I think, it's been a while…)

Weapon Types, Damage Multipliers and Additional damage - from a system for Damage originally written for Traveller and published in an issue of White Dwarf.

Blow Through, Stun and KO – GURPS.

TABLES

	Body	Head (-4)	Arms (-3)	Legs (-1)	Bullet	Energy	Pellet	Cut	Imp.	Crush	Hand	Teeth	Claws	Exp.	Blow Through	Stun	KO	Result	Min Dam	Bullet	Energy	Pellet	Cut	Imp.	Crush	Hand	Teeth	Claws	Exp.	Consequences (Note that any broken bone is an auto stun)
HEAD																														
Skull (DR2)	01-07	01-18	01-03		3	3	2	4	3	3	2	3	2	4	HTx3	Roll, HT/3 Auto	Roll, HT/2 Auto	Broken Skull	HT/2	50%	65%	10%	34%	30%	50%	1%	12%	9%	68%	
Ear	08-09	19-22	04-05		3	3	2	4	3	2	2	3	2	4	HTx3	Auto	Roll, HT/2 Auto	Broken Skull	HT/2	20%	35%	10%	60%	20%	40%	2%	8%	3%	45%	
																		-- Deafness		18%	19%	4%	7%	26%			6%	1%	14%	
Eye	10-11	23-28			4	6	2	4	6	2	2	3	2	4	HTx3	Auto		Blindness	2	99%	100%	92%	87%	100%	23%	6%	58%	67%	99%	
Cheek/Nose	12-13	29-32	06		3	4	2	3	4	2	2	3	2	4	HTx3	Roll, 3+ Auto	Roll	Broken Nose/Cheek	HT/2	69%	74%	18%	38%	85%	45%	15%	12%	20%	90%	
																		-- Amnosmia		50%	12%	7%	9%	11%	1%		8%	14%	20%	
Mouth/Jaw	14-15	33-40	07-08		3	4	2	3	4	2	2	3	2	5	HTx3	Roll	Roll	Broken Jaw	HT/2	40%	48%	10%	24%	34%	16%	2%	14%	18%	65%	
Neck	16-18	41-55	09-11		3	3	5	6	4	3	2	6	5	5	HT	Roll, HT/3 Auto		Damaged Windpipe	HT/3	35%	55%	70%	30%	50%	50%	15%	45%	35%	45%	1d6 DPR till HT Roll, 1DPR till Medic Roll
																		Broken Neck	HT	20%	30%	10%	60%	20%	22%	5%	8%	3%	45%	
																		- Paralysis		20%	30%	7%	20%	27%	26%	2%	19%	1%	54%	(Subtract Medical Success roll x 4% from chance of paralysis)
ARMS																														
Shoulder	19-26	56-77	12-23			1.5		1.5		0.5			1.5		HT			Broken Shoulder	HT/2	86%	89%	23%	68%	76%	76%		53%	21%	93%	
Upper Arm	27-34	78-81	24-35							0.5	0.5				HT/2			Broken Upper Arm	HT/2	72%	75%	16%	64%	65%	21%	1%	23%	9%	84%	
Elbow	35-38	82-83	36-41								0.5				HT/2			Broken Elbow	HT/2	94%	97%	43%	89%	96%	62%	5%	85%	32%	99%	
Forearm	39-42	84-87	42-71								0.25				HT/2			Broken Forearm	HT/2	75%	86%	21%	54%	62%	30%	4%	64%	21%	87%	
Wrist/Hand	43-44	88-91	72-91	01-02						0.5	0.25				HT/3			Broken Hand	HT/3	87%	91%	34%	20%	87%	16%	3%	21%	12%	98%	
																		Broken Wrist		86%	91%	21%	58%	92%	42%	5%	75%	12%	98%	
																		Broken Wrist w/ Hand		2%	3%	34%	11%	9%	12%	1%	16%		67%	
Wing (or Lungs)	(45-50)	(92-95)	(92-94)	(03-04)			2	1.5	0.75	0.5	0.25		1.5	3	(HT/3)															
CHEST																		1-3 Broken Ribs	HT/2	30%	42%	25%	60%	35%	42%	10%	70%	20%	85%	
Lungs	(46) 51-62 (92) 96-00		(92) 95-97 (03) 05		3	4	4	4	4	1.5	1.5	3	3	5	HTx3			Punctured Lung	HT	100%	100%	75%	100%	100%	30%	10%	78%	100%	100%	1d6 DPR till HT Roll, 1DPR till Medic Roll, -0.2 from ST, DX and HT
Heart/Arterial	63-67				6	6	5	5	6	2	1.5	3.5	3		HTx3	Roll, HT/3 Auto	Roll	Internal Bleeding	HT/2	100%	100%	84%	100%	100%	20%	9%	70%	40%	100%	2d6 DPR till HT Roll, 1d6 DPR till Medic Roll, -0.2 from ST, DX and HT
																		Broken Spine	HT	85%	90%	20%	82%	90%	65%	5%	89%	25%	99%	
																		- Paralysis		20%	30%	7%	20%	27%	26%	2%	19%	1%	54%	(Subtract Medical Success roll x 4% from chance of paralysis)
ABDOMEN																														
Stomach/Digestive	68-76		06		3	2	3	3	3	1.5			0.5	3	HT	Roll, HT/3 Auto	Roll													30% Chance of death in 1d6 days unless hospitalised. Also check for Broken Spine and Paralysis as per above
Lower Organs	77-80		98	07-09	3	2	3	3	3	1.5			0.5	3	HT	Roll, HT/3 Auto	Roll													10% Chance of -0.2 from ST, DX and HT
LOWER TORSO																														
Hips/Buttocks	81-89	99-00		10-31	1.5	1.5			2		1.25	1.25			HT			Broken Hip	HT	92%	90%	35%	85%	95%	28%	12%	20%	10%	98%	
Groin	90			32-33	1.5		2	1.5	1.5		0.5	2	2	2.5	HT	Roll, 3+ Auto	Roll, HT/2 Auto	Sterility	HT/2	28%	40%	50%	60%	55%	15%	12%	20%	35%	98%	No more children
LEGS																														
Thigh	91-95		34-63		0.5		0.5			0.5	0.5				HT			Broken Thighbone	HT/2	79%	86%	48%	40%	85%	5%	1%	47%	12%	90%	
Knee	96-97		64-75		1.5	1.5		2	2	1.25	2	1.5	1.5	2.5	HT/2			Broken Kneecap	HT/2	98%	97%	38%	65%	89%	26%	5%	52%	19%	99%	
Calf	98-99		76-89				0.5			0.5	0.5				HT/2			Broken Shinbone	HT/2	98%	99%	45%	89%	96%	40%	6%	53%	32%	99%	
Foot	00		90-00							0.75	0.75				HT/3			Broken Foot	HT/3	87%	90%	65%	86%	95%	30%	10%	60%	28%	98%	
																		Broken Ankle		98%	97%	54%	89%	96%	38%	24%	72%	13%	99%	
																		Broken Ankle w/ Foot		5%	65%	75%					17%		73%	

Weapon Types
1: Bullet   Projectiles more than 3mm in diameter that only do kinetic damage

2: Energy   Both thermal and kinetic damage, e.g., laser or plasma.
3: Pellet   Large number of projectiles all less than 3mm in diameter
4: Cut   Anything with an edge, sharp or otherwise, designed to penetrate
5: Impale   Anything with a point, sharp or otherwise, designed to penetrate
6: Crush   Anything solid without an edge, not designed to penetrate
7: Hands   "Soft Blunt", E.g., hand or foot combat, or sand-bags or billy clubs
8: Teeth   Natural weaponry used in a biting action
9: Claws   Natural weaponry used in a slashing action
10: Explosive   Missile weapons that explode in a body location (not bombs).

Hospitalisation

Broken Bones	Min. Hospitalisation
(hrs)	Min. Resting (days)
1 - Finger	1
	3
2 - Nose, rib	2
	7
3 - Ankle, hand, wrist	4
	20
4 - Forearm	6
	20
5 - Jaw, foot, elbow, upper arm	12
	60
6 - Lower leg	24
	60
7 - Knee, shoulder	36
	90
8 - Upper leg	48
	90
9 - Hip	60
	120
10 - Neck, skull, spine	72
	180

Gunshot wound from the University of Utah medical library.

AFTER THE FALL : A CAMPAIGN SEED FOR TUNNELS & TROLLS

by Karl David Brown

The Empire has fallen the Fortresses of the Dwarven Legions are overrun with trolls, the shattered rule of law is pieced together by petty warlords, the wilds have claimed many great cities and the Fey Folk have abandoned the world.

This 'Campaign Seed' is not a detailed world but a starting point for building one of your own bit by bit. It is a short description of a world consistent with and inspired by the Tunnels and Trolls core rules. The Seed's contents include mostly items that are implied by the rules but a few other details inspired by the published material have been added to round out the world.

With the name Tunnels and Trolls the campaign should have a lot of both of these. Imagine long ago there was an Empire of the Dwarves that built numerous mines and cities under the earth with troll slave labour. The Empire fell long ago but the chambers and corridors are still the home to many trolls. The trolls themselves are very long lived and grow throughout their lives. Young trolls are a challenge for novice adventurers, while gigantic ancient trolls can only be beaten by true heroes.

One legacy of the Dwarven Empire is the distrust between the kin of the world. As the juggernaut of the empire rolled over the land humans became second-class citizens, goblins and other monsters were hunted, and hobbit villages saw dwarven administrators ship surplus crops to the mines. Elves, fairies, and leprechauns retreated to the fey realms and locked the 'gates' remaining free but isolated. The use of troll slaves spread during the era of Dwarf Empire even today trolls can even be found working for other kindred. However, most cities are reluctant to let dangerous, 'untamed' looking, or unsupervised trolls within their gates. Centuries after the Empires fall kinist attitudes are common and for the most part various peoples of the world live apart from each other. The monster races, which could be held in check by an alliance of the good kindred, multiply and make war on the divided petty kingdoms and warlords of the dwarves, halflings, and humans.

Fey Realms are places separated from the rest of the world, pinched off by magic. The most commonly these hidden places have been created and inhabited by elves, fairies and leprechauns. Elf Mounds are low hills with doors or archways in the side. Within the hill can be palaces or even whole countries much larger than the hill itself. The elf magic that pinches off the lands within is said to cause the land on the borders to pucker up into a mound like sewing together the edges of a hole in cloth.

A Wizard's Guild was established during the reign of the dwarves to control the training of wizards and therefore the threat of rebel wizards to the stability of the Empire. This first Wizards Guild was primarily driven by controlling the use of magic rather than the spread and advancement of the craft. When the empire fell the lands descended into chaos. Cities burned, roads were not maintained and petty warlords of bandit hordes ruled. Like other organisations initiated by the dwarves the first Wizard's Guild struggled to survive the fall of the Empire. The elves looked out from their Fey Realm on the chaos and sought some way to stop the suffering. They sent forth emissaries to settle disputes, preserve knowledge and help re-establish civilisation. The emissaries went to all settlements of kin and monster they could reach hoping to promote peace and the rule of law. These emissaries often were attracted to the libraries and other remnants of the old guild and it was not long before the Wizards' Guild was reborn as a steadfastly neutral but powerful force for civilisation (something like the church of medieval Europe). Since the Guild wishes to be seen as neutral and has members of all kinds of kin, over the centuries the Guild has become independent from the elf realms that founded it. Elves and dwarves argue often over who really started the Wizard's Guild.

Slavery is an acceptable part of most societies, without the cheap labour of slaves the economies of most nations would crumble. In the real world the empires of the ancient world based were made possible by cheap slave labour. Criminals, prisoners of war, conquered peoples, monsters, and the descendants of slaves are classes of people for which slavery is acceptable. Troll slaves are another common legacy of the Dwarf Empire. Foreigners are a grey area. Under the law of many nations outsiders have no legal standing and those from nations too weak or too distant to help their citizen are often enslaved. The treatment of slaves varies greatly. In enlightened nations there are legal and cultural limits on how harshly slaves can be treated. In other places owners can treat their property how they wish. While society may not consider slavery evil some slaves resent the loss of their freedom and some adventurers rally against it.

Use of poison in battle is not considered dishonourable, probably a pragmatic reaction to the might of some of the world's heroes and monsters.

The world is a largely pragmatic place where religion is often given only lip service. After 'The Fall' religion was too disorganised to fill the power gap and in those times of darkness people came to doubt the providence of their gods and put faith in steel and mana. For the most part the gods do not directly intervene in the world (there is no character type based on god given powers or spells). Numerous faiths co-exist uneasily within the world none ever attaining the power of the Christian church in real medieval Europe.

Technology in most areas is best described as a mix of the best the Roman Empire and Middle Ages of our Europe had to offer. There are huge buildings and aqueducts, giant mobile siege towers and trebuchet, huge galleys and armoured war horses, crossbows and plate armour. The principle source of power and industry remains the muscle of slaves. However, with trolls and other non-humans as slaves harnessed to pulleys and huge gears slave powered technology can be very impressive.

2012 END OF THE WORLD GAMING
by Toby Abad

With all the rumors and misinformation and fears about this being the very last year of the world [*ED: This article originally written in 2012*], why not capitalize on this potential energy and use it to enhance your games? Let's face it, when playing games like World of Darkness or In Nomine where the setting is very close to the real world (compared to say Dungeons and Dragons or Shadowrun where the world ultimately has to be this fantastic place of magic and danger), it is not uncommon for recent news items or historical events to be utilized into a game session.   Whether it be using something as far back as the Crusades or the Black Plague as a major event in the game's historical timeline, or something more recent such as the 9/11 terrorist attacks or the Millennium bug scare, having fictional representations of such events in one's game can allow a group to explore the many facets of the event beyond just seeing it as a tragic or frightening event in the past. With the use of such events in one's games comes the need to consider the sensitivity required for events that may just be too traumatic or fresh for others. In my games, for instance, I always check with any new players if there are "unacceptable scenes" that I should be aware of. If there was a player who experienced a real trauma, for example, such as having survived a rape or lost a child, I make it a point to avoid having similar themes or events in the game.   This same sensitivity, therefore, should apply when using any real-world events in one's game. Every group has to set its own sensitivity limits.

But on the other hand, when it comes to supposed "coming" events like the end of the world, I feel one can capitalize on these events to push the excitement of the game to a new level and to draw inspiration from the events that may be occurring around the world. White Wolf Gaming Studios wonderfully executed this back when they were releasing their Time of Judgment books with support from an online "News Tickler" of weird and strange events that were happening all over the world. While most of the news items were just fictional (http://tojmirror.blogspot.com.au/), the articles were written in a manner that made it easy to envision them as happening in the world. I was inspired by it enough to come up with my own additional news items (http://rpg-memento.blogspot.com/) for my game.

But with all the craziness that's to come forward, who's to say you can't use all these "facts" to your advantage in giving a great thrilling game session? Even better, why not draw inspiration from these end of the world scenarios and apply them to your game, regardless of where or when they are based!   While some may seem to be better inserted into similar genre games (such as the Mayan calendar misquoted prediction being applied to Pulp games, or the supposed Nibiru collision to be inserted into science fiction games) explore the possibilities of interweaving the concept/ideas to a setting that doesn't readily match up. Maybe Nibiru is actually a Great Old One returning from a long journey? Maybe the Mayan Calendar is actually the deadline of when a quantum locked prison finally opens to release the megalomaniac psychic terrorist?

So let's try tackling them now, one at a time, shall we?

The Mayan Calendar

Lots of fear of 2012 relate to how the time runs out on the current era of the Long Count calendar. Many mistakenly believe that this means come December 2012, the world will undergo a massive change, which many jump into interpreting as the end of the world as we know it. Some even consider the translations to suggest a spiritual renewal is what is coming.
Why not make this a "truth" in your game? Maybe 2012 does mark when things change worldwide. In Aberrant, this could be the day when Aberrants worldwide discover that their powers have exponentially grown. For Vampire the Masquerade, maybe this marks when mankind learns of their existence unquestionably, and the Masquerade falls. Maybe in Dungeons and Dragons, when the year turns, they realize it is the year when the Gods pull away from the world and all Divine Magic is lost!   Save for that group that saw the calendar and believed. And made arrangements to survive, one way or another.
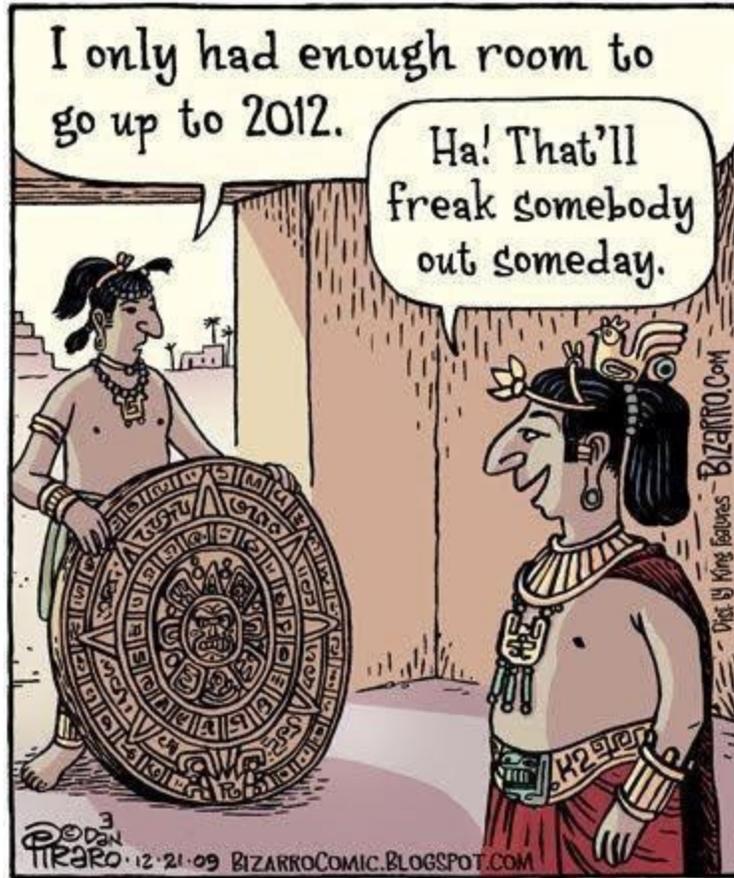
Nibiru is Coming

In this story, a planet called Nibiru which was discovered by the Sumerians is headed towards Earth after its very long orbit around the Sun. The Annunaki, supposed ancient astronauts, came to Earth and may be related to this coming planet. Originally predicted to strike the Earth last May 2003, the date was moved forward to 2012 when nothing happened. On a related thread, the Infrared Astronomy Satellite of NASA once released images they gathered back in 1983, with images that many claimed to be proof of Nibiru.

Now, throw in some ideas on what Nibiru could be. Is it a space ark that actually contains an alien race that once seeded the Earth with homo sapiens? Is it a continent-scale asteroid which was once the City of Atlantis before it was torn from the Earth by the uncontrolled release of super-science power? Maybe it is deity of all Beholders coming to bring death upon all? This is a chance to push your game to an epic level that was never expected.

Polar Shift leads to the Continents Breaking

Magneto tried to do it, but failed. But lots of talk still go around about how the magnetic poles may be affected by anything ranging from Solar Storms to Galactic Alignments, and these in turn lead to the continents shifting rapidly in relation to one another. Countries submerge, land forms move, tidal waves crush cities.

Cthulhu rises. Or maybe the great sleeping Earth Dragon emerges and reshapes Creation to the world we know. Or maybe we can even flip out and have it instead affect magic instead of science! As the shift occurs, all Divine magic becomes Infernal and all Infernal magic becomes Divine!

Armageddon. Judgment Day.

Always fun to see how you can reinterpret this to the game you use. Just keep in mind you can either "prove them right" and have it happen as the religion said it would, or prove them wrong, by having it unfold in a way that was not expected. Maybe the second coming has less to do with winged angels, golden trumpets and dragons and more to do with a city-sized mother-ship questioning why we have evolved in the direction we have chosen. Or perhaps the spiritual cleansing does happen, but happens so quietly, we simply awaken to discover most of the people are already gone. Where they have gone, why and why not the rest of us can be material for a whole new chronicle to explore.

The Aftermath of The End

And that brings us to this. Any game can be enriched with an exploration of surviving the end. Whether it be surviving tremendously horrid environmental threats, monstrous and inhuman dangers that suddenly emerge, or the primal needs of a starving fearful man to survive, any game out there can be given an injection of more story potentials with a post-apocalyptic end-of-the-world closing. How do the Covenants in Vampire the Requiem change their practices after a massive third world war cloaks the entire planet in Nuclear clouds?   Do the street shamans of Shadowrun gain greater power when the world practically loses the ability to use technology? In what ways do your Superheroes try to remake the world a better place after the magnetic poles shift, the water levels rise, and solar flares burn the land?

It is 2012, the big year when everything ends.   So why not explore that theme in your game? What was that, you're afraid the world really WILL end this year? Then what are you doing surfing the net and playing role-playing games. Go find your shelter and stock up on supplies. Me? I'm gonna keep chucking the dice and crafting stories. Cause I can tell an "End of the world module" when I see one.

MAITREYA, MILLENARIANISM & MÒFĂ

by Gianni Vacca

Millenarianism and Apocalyptic Sects in Imperial China

Millenarianism and Apocalypticism are often equated with Christian eschatology and the Book of Revelation, or with a post-WWIII Europe or at least a 'Western' post-apocalyptic setting. Yet both Millenarianism and Apocalypticism can be the basis of an East Asian role-playing game set in the past.

Although the hope for the advent of a new era that brings upon mankind vast upheavals believed to lead to a better life than one's current are much more mainstream in Western religions than in Eastern religions, the latter also have their share of millenarian sects, most notably Buddhism and Daoism.

As the author of *The Celestial Empire* RPG, I am much more familiar with Imperial China than with other East Asian cultures, so I'll concentrate on ideas for Imperial China.

BUDDHISM

Original Buddhism (before it became corrupted by folk religion and devotional practices) did not contemplate any deities, but only enlightened beings, whose role was to lead mankind to enlightenment, and not to be worshiped. In Buddhism, each cosmic era is hence supposed to have its own Buddha who leads mankind to salvation. Shakyamuni is the Buddha of the present cosmic era. Maitreya is the Buddha of the next era. Theoretically, people of our era should be following Shakyamuni's teachings, Maitreya's are for the future. However, Mahayana Buddhism has introduced the notion of mofa (in Chinese)/mappô (in Japanese): with the passing of time, people do not understand Shakyamuni's teachings any longer and hence cannot attain enlightenment. As a result, Mahayana Buddhists have turned to other Buddhas for salvation: Amitabha [aka Emituofo or Amida], through devotional practices, or Maitreya, under the guise of a millenarian cult that expects the imminent advent of the future Buddha Maitreya to start a new era of universal salvation.

The cult of Maitreya starts in North India and spreads to China and Japan through Central Asia where it is extremely widespread before the rise of Islam. In China, Maitreya's cult is popular under the Tang and the Song; after those dynasties, Amitabha and Avalokiteshvara (Guanyin) become more popular, and Maitreya's millenarian influences become the sole province of syncretic sects, secret societies, and even rebellions.

In terms of syncretic sects and secret societies, the most influential and well-known ones are the White Lotus Society and all the other short-lived syncretic Buddhist/Manichæan sects, and the various secret societies that have branched off the White Lotus Society. There are countless Hong Kong films where the White Lotus are the 'evil guys' that the heroes must defeat, e.g., Intruder at White Lotus Temple (1971), Clan of the White Lotus (1980), Once Upon a Time in China II (1992), White Lotus Cult (1993)...

Back to real history. The White Lotus Society was the cause of many rebellions in Imperial China, first and foremost the Red Turban Rebellion (1351-1368) under the Yuan, eventually leading to its overthrowing by Zhu Yuanzhang, the founder and first emperor of the Ming Dynasty of China. It is rumoured that Zhu Yuanzhang himself was a member of the White Lotus Society, although he later suppressed it upon becoming the new emperor.

Under the Ming, in the 16th century, a rebellion of the local ethnic minorities took place in Sichuan. It was led by the millenarian leader Pu Fa'e.

Under the Qing (1644–1910, the last dynasty of Imperial China), there were two White Lotus-inspired rebellions. The

first one took place between 1796 and 1805, in Sichuan again, but this time amongst the Han colonists. Resentment against the foreign Qing, officials' corruption, the heavy burden of taxation, and a resurgence of the cult of Maitreya coalesced into a large-scale rebellion, which contributed to the weakening of the Qing dynasty by damaging its prestige and depleting its treasury.

The second White Lotus-inspired rebellion was the famous Boxer Uprising (famous in the West, because it targeted Christian missionaries and foreigners living in the Beijing Legation Quarter, see the 1963 film *55 Days at Peking*). This time, the rebellion, which lasted from 1899 to 1901, was instrumental in bringing down the Qing dynasty, but also, involuntarily, the old Chinese imperial order; it even almost brought down Chinese culture: the Boxer Uprising put in motion a string of events that would lead to the Republic, to the People's Republic, to Maoism, and eventually to the Cultural Revolution, quite an apocalypse in itself. But this would definitely be the subject of quite another article...

DAOISM
Messianic beliefs were central to much of Daoism in Imperial times, and Daoism had its share of sects and secret societies. However, paradoxically enough, these millenarian Daoist sects caused less trouble than the White Lotus Society. The largest Daoist rebellion that can be compared to any of the Maitreyan rebellions mentioned in the previous section is the Yellow Turban Rebellion (184-205 AD) under the Han. The rebels were followers of the Daoist sect of the Way of Supreme Peace; they believed in an apocalyptic change in the order of the world and expected a new era of heavenly government by the deity Huang-Lao. This heavenly rule was of course to be expressed on Earth through the leaders of the sect.

Other millenarian Daoist sects simply constituted communities that moved to remote areas of China and lived amongst themselves in communes of a kind, without causing any particular disturbances, e.g., the Way of Five Bushels of Rice, or kept their activities underground to avoid repression by both the government and orthodox Daoist leaders.

INTERVIEW WITH TIM WESTHAVEN

with Tim Westhaven

Hi Tim, and welcome to RPG Review. Let's start off with a standard question. What's your own background, how did you become involved in role playing games, and what games have you preferred over the years?

Hi Lev, thanks for having me here.

My background is pretty diverse, I have studied writing and illustration, design and animation; I was in the army reserves serving in the infantry and used to have the time for some martial arts. I've worked in graphic design, publishing and, more recently, in visual effects for film and games.

My older brother is to blame for getting me into gaming, at the age of 6, I was playing D&D and then progressed to Traveller and from there to pretty much any RPG I could get my hands on. By the age of 12 I was designing my own systems. As I started feeling constrained by the limitations of the dice systems I looked at everything from using cards, rune stones, or schematic maps to determine action outcomes.

I think over the years my favourite games would have to be Ars Magica, Shadowrun and Cyberpunk 2020. I deeply admire Everway, Vampire the Masquerade, and more recently Fiasco, for the real 'game-changing' ideas they bought to the art form.

You have recently released a fantasy apocalyptic role playing game, Shattered Moon. Can you tell us what that's all about, and what are the major features that would make it different to other fantasy/apocalypse games that are on the market?

I was really frustrated with most fantasy/apocalypse and even future-fantasy games, which more often than not just port in Tolkienesque fantasy to a world war III cliché or load up elves and dwarves with guns, spells and cyberpunk clothing and call it good. What about the actual nature of these fantasy races? What about the mythology and magic that should be inherent not only in the races but in the stories that surround them? And so, in designing Shattered Moon, I set out to address some of these issues. I didn't want the players stalking across an irradiated wasteland, scrounging and acting like a bunch of human post-apocalypse survivors in dwarf, elf, troll, goblin, ogre costumes. I wanted a game that looked at the heart and soul of who these beings were in an environment that pitted them not only against survival, but also against their own natures (and sometimes each other).

The greatest games I've played have always been the ones that have forced me to make hard decisions, have made me look not only at the nature of my character but

at the nature of myself through their eyes – and this is often an unconscious thing – that in looking back on the story you realise that you made decisions, you took actions and risks that show something of yourself in there; that pulled you into the game where it wasn't just a matter of your character vanquishing the foe, or grabbing the best treasure, it was about the bond you had with the other characters, the truth of who your character developed into and the legacy your characters actions had on the world around them. These things were all important to me when I was designing Shattered Moon, building in the tools for this sort of deep playing style. That type of play isn't going to appeal to everyone, and it isn't necessary to play the game that way, but the tools are there if you want them.

So Shattered Moon is about pushing the players beyond the edge of what it is to be human and to do this I divorced the players from being human, yet with a human legacy. Most post-apocalyptic games have aspects of inhumanity to them, they have horror, evil, non-human races, and explore the possibilities of what atrocities, and virtues, humans are capable of in the face of adversity. But in Shattered Moon, the players' characters (avatars) are nuoSidhe–newly transmogrified Sidhe: dwarves, elves, goblins, ogres and trolls, previously trapped in human form. And they remember all too well what it was to be human. these memories are what keep them connected to the world of Shattered Moon; creating a link that they can deny, but cannot remove.

In Shattered Moon, humans do not have the magical nature to withstand the new horrors of the world, and their social and cultural structures have all but disappeared since the breaking of the moon. And so the nuoSidhe see the humans failing, they see the destruction of the human race, of the earth as they know it and all links to their human past on the brink of extinction. The question the players have to answer is will their avatars gladly see humans gone and with them their past human experience or will they step up and stand between humanity and Lilith; in a war that is only theirs if they choose, and between two sides that have no love or loyalty to the Sidhe the truth being that many humans are as terrified of the nuoSidhe as they are of the lilim.

As nuoSidhe, the players have access to a broad range of innate magical abilities that can make them seem almost like superheroes: goblins can polymorph, ogres can create magical servants, trolls can become walking tanks, dwarves can command the elements and elves can weave powerful charms and illusions. These are just a few examples, and these abilities are linked to the dual nature of the Sidhe – the Seelie and Unseelie courts. Every Sidhe has these two parts to their nature, but they can gravitate towards one or other depending on which abilities they use the most and the actions they take. These 'court' abilities come at a price, a tithe that has to be paid. The tithe could be favours, treasures, and other payments such as fresh blood, flesh, skin, and bones of their enemies. This means that the actions the players take and also how they play has a very visceral impact on the strengths their avatar can bring to bear in the game. Many of the ways in which tithe is gained and empowered are barbaric and so dealing with human survivors is always a delicate negotiation (how would you feel as a human shop keeper watching an elf, walking into your store thinking that at any moment he could entrance you and drink all your blood, or charm you to sell him whatever he wanted without paying you a gram of gold?). Add to this the laws of the fey, working to an alien set of rules, and the duality of the seelie and unseelie courts; and the players' avatars are forced to make some tough decisions or, throw caution to the wind and, find themselves on an accelerating path towards either their seelie or unseelie natures that will bring benefits and limitations.

This is all in front of a backdrop resembling a Grimm fairytale in a MadMax jacket. Sure the avatars will have to scrounge spare parts for their beat-up Land Rover, and ammunition to keep their firearms from becoming just wall ornaments, but the real struggle for survival and resolution will be an internal one first and an external one second.

There is also a new game system FateStorm and a core rulebook Ascendancy, which claims to be influenced by "Jung, Joseph Campbell, tarot and astrology". This is a rather high objective - can you explain how these features are incorporated into the game system?

Ascendancy was the first game using the FateStorm system and a setting all on its own. It is a dark-fantasy with overtones of 16th century renaissance and Lovecraftian or Poe style horror. Shattered Moon is the second setting to use the FateStorm system and a stand alone rule book with everything in it needed to play.

When you look at combined human culture, mythology, symbolism and parapsychology, including magical and religious traditions, you begin to see major overlaps in how these beliefs are expressed and represented. When looking at Jung and Campbell archetypes, it is possible to see immediate links to the tarot. Through the tarot you approach the idea of the cardinal elements; air, fire, earth and water – and then these also relate to many magical traditions and pseudo-divination practices such as I-ching and astrology.

So I took these overlapping factors and distilled them down into interlinked aspects that can oppose or reinforce each other. Each of these factors has traits and what can be described as personalities and these inform avatar generation, story development and even social interactions
between avatar and story cast (NPC). In system terms, there are three main aspects: Archetypes, Ruling signs and Favoured elements.

Archetypes are the embodiment of spiritual templates/entities and are the reason that the player characters are referred to as avatars. In FateStorm, an avatar is the physical embodiment of a spiritual entity – 'touched' with special virtues and flaws and abilities that raise them above the norm, they are strongly linked to their archetype in such a way that for brief periods of time they can become that archetype. In most cases an avatar will not know that they are special, but their lives are dominated by drama and challenges.

The Ruling sign is the equivalent of an in-game zodiac, where the idea that the changing cosmology can influence the physical reality. So each avatar has a ruling sign and this informs who they are in connection with the cosmos, granting them further benefits and flaws and a strong link to one of the cardinal elements.

And then you have the avatar's favoured element – the element that most reflects their personality, whether it is lofty and intellectual (air), energetic and aggressive (fire), grounded and nurtured (earth) or emotional
and fluid (water).

The tools that bring these aspects together form the strength of the FateStorm system: the FateDeck, FateSphere and HeroCycle.

The FateDeck is a set of 22 cards that show the 22 Archetypes used in the game, the cards also describe a favoured element, elemental state and numerical values for attributes. The FateDeck can be used in a way that many would see familiar to reading a traditional tarot deck, and it would have been great to make use of a standard tarot deck, but because the tarot does not explore the necessary archetypes that I wanted in the game and
also is a sacred tool to some people and I didn't want to use it as a game aid.

The FateSphere is a two-dimensional representation of the Ruling signs and elements; how they overlap, oppose, and are linked through what are called elemental leylines in the game. It is a wheel around which are arrayed the 12 ruling signs, divided into their associated elements. Using the FateSphere, the Fate (GM) can see story links, come to a judgement on an outcome and create a depth of detail regarding a given situation on the fly – and relate this directly back to the avatars involved.

We've all experienced those times in our lives when things just go our way, and those other time when nothing we do seems to go right; this is what the HeroCycle was designed to emulate. The HeroCycle was an idea that grew out of the Joseph Campbell theory on the hero's path as well as the ideas of astrology and destiny. In using the HeroCycle, the avatars undergo periods of increased and decreased ability, determined by their ruling sign. Because this is cyclic there will be times during a campaign when every avatar has periods of great potential and opposing times of struggle. It is perhaps one of the best tools of the FateStorm system, creating a very concrete rise and fall of drama and tension. And it is an optional tool so can be ignored without breaking the system. But it's a great game dynamic to see the juxtaposition when the party warrior is down on his luck and the party bookworm has to step up and take on the dominant role, or the party socialite goes through a phase of low self-esteem or antisocial behaviour and the normally

taciturn or brusque avatar has to play through all the social scenes. It really forces avatars (and some players) to break out of their comfort zones, if only for a short while.

One of the selling points of FateStorm is that character decisions are very much in the hands of player decisions rather than arbitrary results from die rolls. Can you elaborate how this is carried out in actual play?
Is the system diceless?

I started moving away from dice-heavy systems a long time ago, I just got sick of a bad roll being the reason that my character couldn't accomplish a task that would/should have been a cake walk – without any real reason. And in real life, we learn skills, we practice and we take an educated risk in all we do – on the understanding of who we are in and of ourselves. That's what I wanted in a system – I wanted my character to be the one who chose the level of risk –based on my knowledge of how good my character was at a given task.

In looking at, and playing, other systems that tried to move away from dice, the game mechanics were really weighted against the GM. The GM was forced to not only keep the story going, but also to replace the dice as
the final arbiter of what constituted a success or failure and the pressure was relentless. If you think about every die roll made in an average session of Pathfinder or D&D and then place the responsibility for the outcome solely on the GM you can start to see the consequences. It meant
that more often than not players directed any resentment for failure onto the GM as well as having a sense that they were on a train track when it came to story resolution. I wanted something that gave the freedom and momentum of a dice-based system without placing the duty of care heavily on the GM. And so FateStorm was born. It took me ten years to bring it together, but after nearly another ten years of playing with the system it's holding its own.

It is a fairly straightforward system; not taking into account the narrative tools, such as the FateSphere and FateDeck. It takes the avatar's natural ability (descriptor), adds an attribute which is more of a physical or social trait the avatar possesses and finally any knowledge or trained skill (aptitude) that the avatar knows to give a total. This total can be modified by special abilities, talents, a prowess or two, spells or equipment. The final result is compared against an activity rating (AR) that is worked out by the Fate and typically based on known factors. So, whereas in other games the GM gives a rating of difficulty that needs to be overcome with a modified die roll, in FateStorm the die roll is redundant. However, the player does not know the AR that needs to be reached and therefore they must make an educated guess as to whether they will succeed or make an attempt. In some cases the AR is not a hard mark, and scoring beneath the AR could result in a partial success. But the result is squarely on the shoulders of the player and their avatar, if they were capable of success then they would have succeeded, so when they don't there is no doubt who is at fault.

Combat is a slightly different matter. Then, opponents have activity pools (AP) that are equivalent to their gathered resources to overcome an AR in the above example, but instead of it being a simple matter of overcoming a single AR, the opponents wager against each other, placing a number of pips from their AP which then must be matched, or out-matched by their opponent, till one or the other gains an advantage at which point damage is worked out – so it's a very fast, fluid and tactical way of fighting, where the smallest advantage (such as higher ground or knowing a special combat technique) can mean the difference between life and death. This is perhaps one of the most noticeable differences with FateStorm – combat is fast, brutal and can easily go from a winning scenario into a real battle of will and wits in the blink of an eye. The fluid mechanic is what keeps the tension high without the need for arbitrary dice rolls. This is not a system where one fighter could hope to hold off four opponents at once, let alone a hundred. That's not to say it couldn't be done, but that fighter would have to be an exceptional warrior, not just lucky at rolling dice. They would not only have to have the martial skill in the use of their weapons and armour, but also special combat techniques and tactics that they could call upon to outwit their opponents. If the avatar needs a bit of luck, they can call on the universe to intervene – they are blessed by an archetype after all.

To date this has been mostly a labour of love of one person; what sort of licensing are you going to use with FateStorm, and can one produce different campaign packs, scenarios, etc? On that topic, what publication plans are in the works for the future?

I honestly haven't gotten that far. I've been so busy, first with Ascendancy-Rogue Marshal and then with Shattered Moon, I've had precious little time to think beyond my own schedule. I think if there were people interested in taking the FateStorm system and creating their own settings and scenarios I would love to hear from them to work out a deal. I could easily see an open licence agreement working, but at this stage I haven't looked into setting out the details.

As for future publications I've got an ever-growing list. So far I've already released the first supplement for Ascendancy – *Steam and Steel* as well as the first supplement for Shattered Moon: *Ogre Pledged and Devout*. Looking forward, I am committed to developing these two settings with more products.

A second edition of Ascendancy-Rogue Marshal is in the works, which will be full colour, in the same way that Shattered Moon is, and like Shattered Moon will be made available both as a hard copy book and a PDF download. There are also a number of supplementary titles for Ascendancy in the mix, one focusing on magical traditions and the other on martial techniques. There are also a number of stories I'm hoping to bring out in the future and probably a few supplements focusing on industrial cabals and enemies of the state.

As far as Shattered Moon is concerned, there will be a number of supplements coming out over the year, first those dealing with racial vocations, similar to the Ogre Pledged and Devout supplement, as well as a number of creature profiles (including titans and giants) and a few stories I've got in the making. Getting stories out there is very important as it gives would be Fates something to benchmark their own stories by, so that is certainly a priority for me. I'd also like to get a detailed book on the seelie and unseelie courts done as a story aid for Fates.

Finally, where do you see the future of tabletop roleplaying games? Is there still a possible growth market for such games? How will new and innovative games (such as your own) break through into what appears to be an already saturated environment?

It's a real dilemma in the hobby as to how these questions are being dealt with, by indie designers, GMs and players. I've been in a number of discussions on various forums looking at the future of the hobby and where people think it is going. There is a lot of debate over the incursion of computer games and moving games on to tablet and touch-screen platforms, but I think the two forms are fundamentally different and, without a true AI approach, computer and computer-assisted gaming is never going to be as good as a well-played TT game. There is not the same level of social interaction, the same freedom or the same organic development of the story that you get in the TT environment, I just don't see that computer gaming can compare.

Kickstarter and other crowdfunding sources are creating great marketing and funding opportunities for new games, but a game like Shattered Moon will succeed or fail based on word of mouth from players; and I'm relying on FateStorm's many unique features, such as the player-controlled advancement system, to drive this grassroots support. Trying to compete against the large publishers is a real struggle, but what is worse is that more often than not a new system is looked on with suspicion from within the community. I feel the market is saturated with D20 clone products, but for the experienced gamer, who is looking for more, there are some real alternative gems out there and FateStorm is definitely in that category.

FateStorm has been a real labour of love for me, not something that I saw as a money-making scheme, but I think there is still room for growth in the RPG market. OGL is not the pinnacle of RPG development. As a hobby, RPG is still in relative infancy, so I can't help but think there are going to be new developments and paradigm shifts both in how we play and the style of games we play. I'd like to think FateStorm pushes the hobby forward, even if just a little, moving system and setting into a more homogenous state and putting the onus on the characters to succeed or fail on their own merit.

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THE ETERNAL WAR

by James Moore

Just under a year ago James Moore (who, by the way, does table-top RPGs as well, announced to the good people at Reddit that he'd been playing the same game of Civilization II for ten years. In this scenario diplomacy had completely broken down and world had collapsed into a permanent state of war. Many noted this Orwellian horror and offered advice on how he could complete the game, one solution which is provided at the end of this article. The article attracted enormous attention leading to its own subforum and coverage on sites like Cracked, The Escapist, and the Huffington Post.

James has also told RPG Review that in on June 12th or so, he'll be doing a follow-up article on what is now known as "The Eternal War". We present his original article as a sort of retrospective computer game review with an apocalyptic theme.

I've been playing the same game of Civ II for 10 years. Though long outdated, I grew fascinated with this particular game because by the time Civ III was released, I was already well into the distant future. I then thought that it might be interesting to see just how far into the future I could get and see what the ramifications would be. Naturally I play other games and have a life, but I often return to this game when I'm not doing anything and carry on. The results are as follows.

The world is a hellish nightmare of suffering and devastation.

There are 3 remaining super nations in the year 3991 A.D, each competing for the scant resources left on the planet after dozens of nuclear wars have rendered vast swaths of the world uninhabitable wastelands.

This is all that's left of Japan, Greece, and the Sioux Nation. A few small towns spread across a vast wasteland of swamps, nuclear fallout, and old roads. Most cities have dissapeared all together.

-The ice caps have melted over 20 times (somehow) due primarily to the many nuclear wars. As a result, every inch of land in the world that isn't a mountain is inundated swamp land, useless to farming. Most of which is irradiated anyway.

-As a result, big cities are a thing of the distant past. Roughly 90% of the worlds population (at it's peak 2000 years ago) has died either from nuclear annihilation or famine caused by the global warming that has left absolutely zero arable land to farm. Engineers (late game worker units) are always busy continuously building roads so that new armies can reach the front lines. Roads that are destroyed the very next turn when the enemy goes. So there isn't any time to clear swamps or clean up the nuclear fallout.

-Only 3 super massive nations are left. The Celts (me), The Vikings, And the Americans. Between the three of us, we have conquered all the other nations that have ever existed and assimilated them into our respective empires.

-You've heard of the 100 year war? Try the 1700 year war. The three remaining nations have been locked in an eternal death struggle for almost 2000 years. Peace seems to be impossible. Every time a cease fire is signed, the Vikings will surprise attack me or the Americans the very next turn, often with nuclear weapons. Even when the U.N forces a peace treaty. So I can only assume that peace will come only when they're wiped out. It is this that perpetuates the war ad infinitum. Have any of you old Civ II players out there ever had this problem in the post-late game?

-Because of SDI, ICBMS are usually only used against armies outside of cities. Instead, cities are constantly attacked by spies who plant nuclear devices which then detonate (something I greatly miss from later civ games). Usually the down side to this is that every nation in the world declares war on you. But this is already the case so its no longer a deterrent to anyone. My self included.

-The only governments left are two theocracies and myself, a communist state. I wanted to stay a democracy, but the Senate would always over-rule me when I wanted to declare war before the Vikings did. This would delay my attack and render my turn and often my plans useless. And of course the Vikings would then break the cease fire like clockwork the very next turn. Something I also miss in later civ games is a little internal politics. Anyway, I was forced to do away with democracy roughly a thousand years ago because it was endangering my empire. But of course the people hate me now and every few years since then, there are massive guerrilla (late game barbarians) uprisings in the heart of my empire that I have to deal with which saps resources from the war effort.

-The military stalemate is air tight. The post-late game in civ II is perfectly balanced because all remaining nations already have all the technologies so there is no advantage. And there are so many units at once on the map that you could lose 20 tank units and not have your lines dented because you have a constant stream moving to the front. This also means that cities are not only tiny towns full of starving people, but that you can never improve the city. "So you want a granary so you can eat? Sorry; I have to build another tank instead. Maybe next time."

-My goal for the next few years is to try and end the war and thus use the engineers to clear swamps and fallout so that farming may resume. I want to rebuild the world. But I'm not sure how. If any of you old Civ II players have any advice, I'm listening.

Originally posted at www.reddit.com/r/gaming/comments/uxpil/ive_been_playing_the_same_game_of_civilization_ii

Buy Your Way To Victory: With Celtic Communism and Spies
by peyechart

It didn't take long for me to realize I could not win this game by force. Armored warfare was useless. After losing several tanks in the first turn I realized that was a dead end. Jets and bombers were equally useless against quadruple

Aeriel defense (SDI + SAM) in virtually all cities. So I decided to try a different angle: to buy my way in.

Somehow, the starting treasury was about .5000 gold, which was enough to get me started. I first bought up the entirety of the Sioux continent, in about two turns. Didn't cont that much, neither. The Vikings proved to be more of a challenge. The great thing about buying cities is that you often gain control of sizable numbers of enemy troops. I quickly learned it was best to simply fortify these troops and wait until taxes raised enough money to buy more cities.

From here on out it was like a game of monopoly, buying the smaller towns first, and then poisoning the water supplies of larger cities in order to make them smaller and thus more affordable. It took about a turn or two to raise enough money to buy the larger cities, but I had soon created a momentum the Vikings were not going to come back from.

Once the Vikings were all bought out, it was now time to deal with the Americans. Our alliance had ended, but I decided I would keep the peace religiously. That was because by this time (after 40-50 years of my war with the Vikings) they had amassed roughly 430 units: an army I could never defeat in open combat. So I kept the peace: and instead again went on a shopping spree, this time subverting cities instead of inciting revolt which costs twice as much but keeps the peace.

By now I had become quite adept at raising money: revenue came from several streams: raising taxes at the expense of research, selling costly and unnecessary improvements, and then and building and selling improvements for cash. By the end of the game I had sold off everything that was not essential for making more money, including missile and nuke defenses: no use in preparing for a war that isn't going to happen. The more cities I bought, the more taxes I could raise, the more improvements I could sell, and the less maintenance I would pay.

Life under Celtic communism was grim: all work and no play for both me and my citizens. But we had peace, we had security, and we we're winning the game.

Slowly but surely I had driven the Americans from our lands, and now set my sights on their final ten cities, including their capital which I could not subvert. However, as these were all large cities and close to their capital, This meant they were prohibitively expensive, costing upwards of 10000 gold to incite, and double that to subvert. It would take me ten turns per city, at least. This is when I just said fuck it and nuked the remaining cities using spies. I nuked all remaining cities in one turn, conquered them and then had a nice long think about where my life is going.

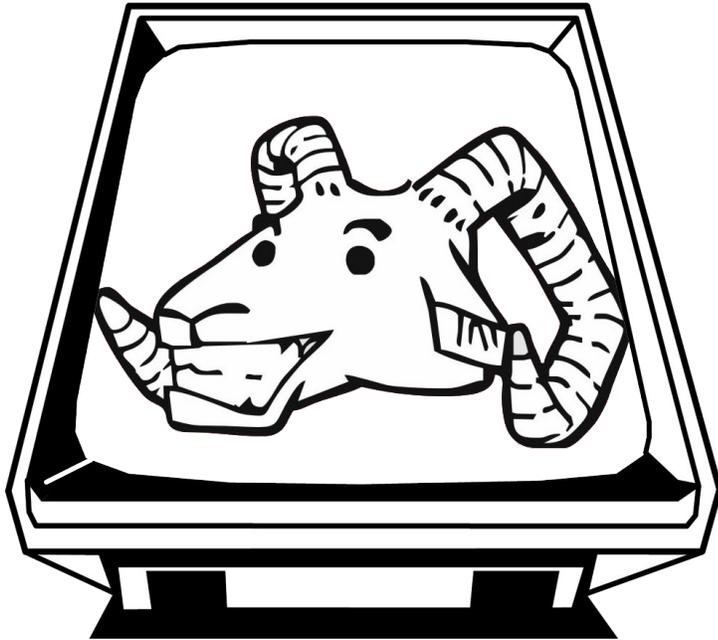TL;DR I bought up all enemy cities in about 100 years.

Originally from
http://www.reddit.com/r/theeternalwar/comments/1ajg7w/my_solution_about_100_years_buying_my_way_in_celts/

LORD ORCUS RETURNS!

by Steve Saunders

Adding the Post-Apocalypse to Your Games for Fun and Evil's Profit

Hi there, petty mortals. I'm Orcus, Lord of the Underworld, Punisher of Broken Oaths, Reaper of Disgust, Harbinger of Foul Tacos, Dirty Mascot for Some Role-Playing Game Company, Cheap Gimmick for the Pile of Meat to Whom I Dictate Things, and something else that has to do with the world's most popular RPG. Other than *World of Synnibarr*, of course.

But you can just call me Lord Orcus.

Anyway, Lev contacted me about writing for the RPG Review again, and since he sweetened the deal with the souls of 67 children, 3 kittens, and one Albanian toaster repairman, how could I say no? He suggested I write about something to do with the Post-Apocalypse, which is one of my most cherished subjects; so I have decided on talking about my preferred inspirations for RPG adventure, flavor, and setting ideas.

Buckle up, human scum-- 'ere we go.

By the by, the criteria of this piece is "whatever the heck I want". So please keep these strict standards in mind. And this is by no means an exhaustive list. I'm a busy demon god, you know.

For starters: *Why game the Post-Apocalypse*? Because it's fun. It's exciting and it more than provides enough material to murder-- er, challenge your players with.

Now that we have dispensed with silly questions. Or question. One is good enough... I might have a talon for quick thinking, but I do not suffer this sort of suffering.

On with the suffering!

Gamma World and Mutant Future: Your Post-Apoc RPG Grandparents
Nothing quite beats the original post-apoc setting full of mutants, old high-tech, pure-strain humans, and mayhem. 3rd and 4th editions are my choices, but the d20 and brand-new one with the funny cards also rank high on my list. Gamma World is *Mad Max D&D*, and *Mutant Future* is the retro-clone of said *Mad Max D&D*. These days I focus more on *Mutant Future*, mainly due to it being more shapeable and lean. One day my meat-slave will finish writing its adventure idea, *Ice Station Zunicorn*.

Dark Sun: Get Your Roadwarden Warriors In Gear

Speaking of *Mad Max* D&D, the makers of *Advanced Dungeons & Dragons* decided to put that cruelly phallic looking wand I'd given them at a *Ravenloft* themed orgy to good use. *Dark Sun* is quite impressive, and I still have my original boxed set, complete with those irritating spiral-bound contraptions surely made from painfully distilled bastards. This rather interesting setting takes place in what I consider to be one of the best final outcomes of any fantasy setting: Pure post-magic-apocalypse. Bug people and man-eating Halflings abound. They even make elves look cool (nearly impossible, mind).

Rifts: A Brutal Blender Laden with Madness and Glee

Perhaps the most glorious example of all the best elements thrown into a mix along with the proverbial kitchen sink... except it's saddled with one of the most antediluvian and un-updated rules-systems ever. Not that I care about rules. Rifts also has the distinct problem of quickly becoming teen angst power fantasy with many a group. Before you know it, everyone is a magic-slinging Glitter Boy wearing the Four Horsemen as decorative neck ornaments. I do enjoy mining the World Books for ideas, though. Not much more of my time can be spent on something that you are no doubt familiar with. I like to tell my doomed players that I enjoy pulling random items from Rifts for ideas.

Why, yes, *Triax and the NGR* is a perennial darling of mine. How did you ever guess?

Wasteland and Fallout: Let the Modern Classics Inspire a Very SPECIAL You.

I feel it''s very important to point out the Grand Emperor of CRPG game series, *Fallout*, as well as its spiritual predecessor, Wasteland early on in this piece. Yes, I am aware *Fallout* went on to anger many a dewy-eyed fan-nerd and become a first-person perspective game under a new Overseer, Bethesda; but I love those games, too. Whether the games are being more tongue-in-cheek and over-the-top (*Wasteland*, *Fallout 1* and *2*; even *Fallout Tactics*), or more of a Serious / Funny kinda vibe (*Fallout 3* and *Fallout New Vegas*) they seem to capture a post-apoc setting with all the necessary trappings very, very well. Indeed, this particular Lord Orcus looks forward to playing *Wasteland 2*.

The Fallout series really did capture the feel of what it is like to live out your fleshy existence in the sumphole of one possible future for mankind. Fallout 3, however, really nailed it. Oh, I know some of you purists out there are scoffing and naysaying, but the immersive quality of Fallout 3 combined with Bethesda's OCD-like need to add tons of details really added to the overall flavor of the Fallout franchise. Though I will concede that the earlier Fallouts had a much more quirky and hee-larious aspect to them which is impossible to replicate.

I will admit that I wanted to title this part "Pip, Pip, Hooray!"

Arx Fatalis and Metro 2033: Go Underground, Mutantsuckers

The idea behind the grimly excellent homage to computer game legend *Ultima Underworld*, *Arx Fatalis*, is that it's set after a fantasy world's sun has failed and died. While this PC and Xbox game is eleven years old as of this writing, it can still pack quite the punch. I could go on about the gameplay and mechanics, but that isn't my point. Gentlemortals, my point is that Arx Fatalis sparks a most interesting post-apocalyptic scenario in which one can set roleplaying game high-- or rather, low-- adventure. You see, everyone has gone underground. They are preserved somehow... through some magickal or quasi/pseudo scientific means. It really doesn't matter. What matters is the environment. Underground. With all kinds of nasty races the humans, elves, or whomever must now share valuable space with. Naturally, horrifying (but endearing) cults will emerge and all hell will break loose in this Underworld playland of terror and fun.

While you are researching or reacquainting yourself with Arx Fatalis, it would be criminal to not investigate *Metro 2033*, which is a book series, a game series, and would most probably make great comic book and tabletop game fodder, too. Firstly, it's Russian. Many of my worshipers reside in the grimdarkly quaint region known as Russia, so Russians as a whole get two talons up in my book. *Metro 2033* (and related material) takes place after a nuclear war, with the surviving human population taking refuge in Russia's vast network of subterranean transportation, or metro, stations. You mine *Metro 2033* for ideas, but where it really comes in handy is for mood. Watch a few clips through the

crack mediums at Youtube or something, and you'll see what I mean.

Zardoz, The Road, and Some Guy Named Max: Get Your Sin-Enema On
Movies. I <3 moves. Who doesn't? You get to see all kinds of cool stuff living and breathing and screaming and dying RIGHT THERE in front of your VERY HORNS. It's impressive, this technology. In the olden days, we had to sacrifice vestal virgins, forge golden skull trumpets, and gamble our very reputations to see if any of the crazy shit we were doing would work. In the end, we'd have plays, usually... which are fine. If you hate anything fun. This is where movies come in, and thank badness, because having to watch, say, a Michael Bay film as a play already makes me want to kill myself.

What's that? My soft, malleable slave is making some sort of gesture at me-- oh, yes. I am digressing. Fine. But you still receive a few slaps anyway, slave worm.

Zardoz is one of the most absurdly regal and fantastically damaged films of all time. The gun is good; the penis is evil; Sir Sean Connery in a sexy red nappy. I suppose there are deeper subtexts (and, uh, dom-texts?) to the film, but really, if you want to see sexy-nappy-Sean-Connery fight a bunch of knobs who have something to do with a giant head-thing-Pez-dispenser and also violence, I highly recommend this film. It will provide ample nightmarish creative fuel for all sorts of game ideas. I am also aware that The Warstore has Zardoz minis, which is delightfully wrong... and deliciously delightful.

Escape From New York... well, you've seen this film. Oh, yes you have. Yes, you even thought Plisken was dead, too. Mine the Stygian Abysscuits out of this one. Mainly for ways to screw your players over. Usually with a sickness: "Surprise! It was all a ruse-- you really have grub snakes growing inside of you!"

The Road is a film that I find better than its source material, which is apparently a terribly edited book. However, said book has baby-eating in it (as opposed to the film adaptation which-- *be warned*-- HAS NO BABY EATING) and it's rather bleak. But the film is incredibly bleak itself and provides all sorts of wonderful inspiration for what I term "Teambuilding Party Kindness". Let's call it TPK for short. In my superior mind, the best way to achieve the cold-hearted, heavy-handed mood needed to incinerate hope right before your players eyes before you chuck them into the unforgiving reaches of post-apoc-awesomeness.

And we cannot talk post-apocalyptic movie mining without mentioning *Mad Max* and its sequels *The Road Warrior* and *Mad Max Beyond Thunderdome*. I would detail these classics, but if you haven't seen them already, you may be too far gone to help in any way, shape, or hideous form. I like to watch *The Road Warrior* and *Excalibur* back to back before running, say, *Gamma World*.

Actually, now that I think on it, *Doomsday*, a modern classic, is perfect in covering those bases.

There are many, many other fantastic films to provide you hellish inspiration, like *Death Race 2000*, *A Boy and His Dog*, *Dredd*, *Damnation Alley*, *The Omega Man*, *28 Days* and *28 Weeks Later*-- oh my self the Dark Lord, there are simply too damned many to list. It would warrant a whole column unto its own.

I was going to list books you could read, but let's face it, we'll be here all day. You can always read the books that are associated to the above suggestions. *The Prism Pentad* for the *Dark Sun* setting kept me entertained as I occupied the Unholy Water Closet (aka John the Unholy).

Execute This: A Devilish Seed for You and Your Players
I won't bore you anymore with seed and adventure ideas, so I would like to plant the following notion inside of your brain-- you know, like happy Gehennanian worms.

AHEM

In a world where much of the surface life has perished due to a specifically unknown catastrophe, and where the weather has become too hot or too cold to survive, the survivors have taken underground. To make matters worse, their former surface homeland is now populated with hordes of undead, dead alien gods, virulent plagues, and many other unspeakable horrors. All and any hope that is left lies within the old Dwarven networks, the ones they had used to traverse vast distances for millennia. Sadly, most of the Dwarves are now gone, what few remain living in the underground cities with other refugee races. These races have either banded together in homogeneous groups, choosing to continue their bloodthirsty feuds on the peoples they hate, whilst many others have simply banded together for survival. And survival is paramount.

One such place is the city of Vabasthold, where all races try to live in harmony in a former ancient Dwarven trade center. Vabasthold is where several underground river meet, and is in the middle of a large underground lake, called the Poshte Sea. The characters might have been raised through the apocalypse, having grown up and reached adulthood in or around Vabasthold. Or perhaps they are dimensional travellers, happening upon this incredibly grim subterranean world of most deadly adventuring fare.

Whether the PCs hail from some other realm, like a fantasy version of (say it with me now) *Sliders*, or they're born and raised in this burgeoning hell, the possibilities are endless. I pull these crazy ideas directly from sources like *Metro 2033* and *Arx Fatalis*. Throw in a bit of *The Road*, *Mad Max*, and *28 Weeks Later* (with just a pinch of *Zardoz*), and you have a recipe for disastrous success.

Lots of questions remain for you to fill in: Is there a primary antagonist race? If we are using standard fantasy gaming tropes-- would this race be the Dark Elves? What about the Dwarves? Their vast network must hold many secrets-- and many more have to be known by what's left of the dwarven race? What's a party with a kobold, human, halfling, goblin, and High Elf like? What happens when the young kobold wants to become a shining paladin? What awful and terrifying gods do the new underground cults worship? And what about the old cults? Could one of those gods be me, Orcus? Who runs Vabastholdtown? What happens when someone comes back with news that fabulous relics and important information can be found in the Dead and Dying World Above? What happens when something from that direful place finds its way Below?

As you can see, the possibilities are endless. Wait. I've said that already. Regardless of my lack of focus-ticks, this sort of world scenario allows for you to have one gigantic dungeon crawl. I mean, the whole world has become a dungeon crawl! It's a land of tunnels and passages and caves. You can throw whatever in and see what sticks... and whatever doesn't work you can bury by pressing the "ROCKS FALL" button.

You get it. I'm positive you do. And have at it, puny mortals. Drop me a line and tell me how it goes.

You'll notice that I didn't mentioned *Warhammer Fantasy* and *40,000* or *Tunnels & Trolls*, some of my fave games, but now I am. Feel free to mine the squigshit out of those, too. *Warhammer Fantasy Roleplay* 1st and 2nd editions are some of the best things for getting the True Grimdark feel, and picking up *Warhammer 40,000: Dark Heresy* might be the best thing you ever do. You could even run a fantasy game with the world-idea I gave you and say you like using the WFRP or DH rules sets and actually make it the starting point of a *Dark Heresy* campaign. Not only would this be wickedly terrific, but you would score serious evil points with me (and it would make Demogorgon eat his hat).

Oh, yes, and since I mentioned *Warhammer*, one cannot forget the small unit and semi-RPG tactical miniatures game, *Mordheim*. As one of my most ardent priests, Sean Demory, has pointed out, *Mordheim* is "proof that postapocalyptic fantasy works". Good man, grovelling worship machine Demory. Your promotion is en route... and I apologize for any mess.

Implements of Torture and Execution: Rules

Really, any old rules will work. It's whatever you want to use. There are plenty of outstanding roleplaying games out there, like the aforementioned *Gamma World* and *Mutant Future*. Another one worth every drop of blood pumped into it is *The Mutant Epoch*. For reals, mortals, do not pass *The Mutant Epoch* up. IT HAS SPIDER PEOPLE. Then we have *Abandon All Hope*, which is basically post-apoc in a spaaaaace ship and throws together all the best elements of Metamorphosis Alpha, the severely underrated film-gem Pandorum and other tasty tasty treats. Ultimately, your game is up to you and you can use just about any ruleset to suit your evil purposes (as well as your evil porpoises... and weevil porpoises, which should REALLY mess with 'em). Heck, Swords & Wizardry will do the job nicely, as will GORE. As I have said: Anything.

This brings us to the end of our little adventure here. It has been nice putting my writing pants on; and by that I mean "pants made from writers". I truly hope this has been some sort of use to you, if even as a little time waster. In the meantime, I shall endeavour to get my Everslave to assist me with new Orcusville strips and more content for this here RPG Review.

Feel obligated to shoot me your thoughts, especially if they stab me like Nergal did at our last Sacrificing and You conference. I do plan to have another *Lord Orcus Listens!* column, so send your questions to me, whatever they are, but RPG related questions will be given priority.

Direct correspondence to: lordorcus@baconlich.com
If you wish to directly contact my slave boy, he can be whipped here: steve@baconlich.com

Until next time, fools, have at it until they're all dead... and have fun doing it.

MOVIE REVIEW: THE IMPOSTER

by Andrew Moshos

dir: Bart Layton

At their worst, documentaries cover something that happened in the most turgid, lifeless manner possible, sending the facts even further out of reach and serving the self-interests of people trying to impose their horrible view of humanity all over the rest of us. At their best, they illuminate the confusion that confronts all of us in the face of not what happened at particular points in time, but why. It's not the sole purpose of documentaries to answer questions, or to say "This, then this, then this". Sometimes they succeed best when they still leave us wondering "what the hell were these people thinking?"

The Imposter is a documentary about something that really happened, in which most of the facts are not in dispute. Let's say 99% of the facts are not disputed. With the family involved, and the imposter of the title, none of them are denying that any of this happened. What none of them can genuinely answer is the "why" of it all, and that doesn't detract from the experience in the slightest.
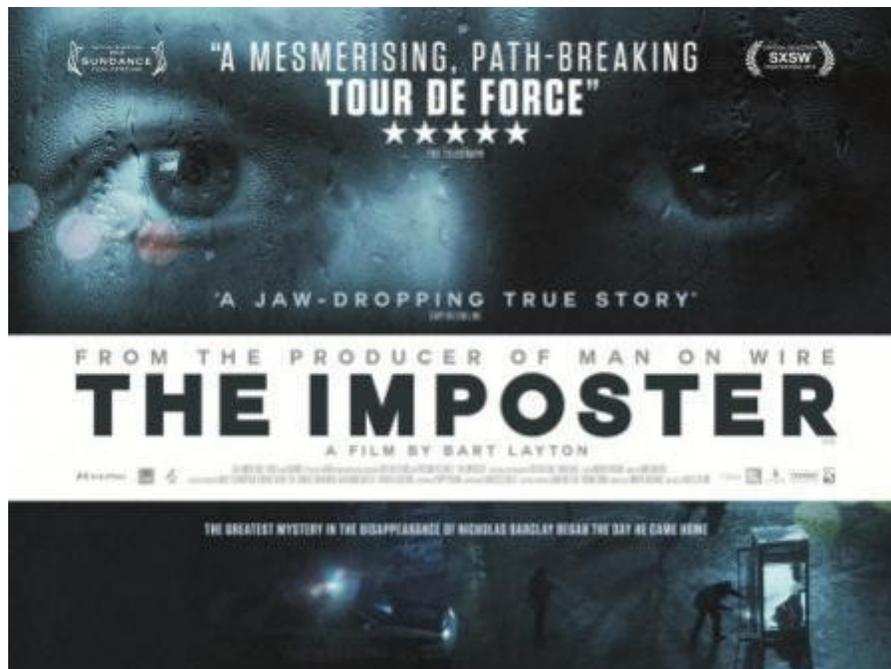
A boy goes missing in Texas, in the 1990s. A 'boy' in Spain is found by police, who claims, eventually, to be the missing Texan boy, Nicholas Barclay. How bizarre, eh? We're not under any confusion as to whether this chap was actually Nicholas Barclay. I mean, the documentary is called *The Imposter*. Also, this guy, who talks directly to the camera, has a strong French accent. He has brown eyes, whereas Nicholas has blue eyes. This guy's also clearly an

adult.

There are actors in this, in small recreated bits, but mostly we see the family of Nicholas Barclay, his sister and mother, the FBI agent who become involved, and, in the main, pseudo-Nicholas Barclay with his oily French non-charm, admitting what an unrepentant scumbag he was from the beginning to the end of this saga.

How he did it is fascinating, in terms of the number of elements that had to be overlooked by the US authorities for this to have gone ahead, and the incompetence of the Spanish authorities in allowing a conman access to their offices and phones in order to concoct this incredibly bizarre long con. Why the family overlooked all the obvious signals pointing to his identity is a whole other matter.

Of the family, it's the sister Carey Gibson who talks the most, and with the most embarrassment over what happened, and then there's the mother as well. Yes, you can feel their embarrassment wafting off of the screen, but I think it's to them that we listen the most keenly. Of all of the people involved, you'd think that they would have been the ones best place to know from the start that this fucker wasn't who he said he was.

And yet... and yet... It still doesn't make any sense.

I don't deal with liars every day. I don't work in the court system, or with people who have substance abuse problems, or with politicians. I would like to think that I can pick when someone's lying, like that guy Tim Roth used to play in that sometimes wonderful, often terrible show *Lie To Me*. I had no idea here. For the life of me I still can't figure out how this all happened, even as they explained to me, and everyone else who watched it, what happened.

I don't think it's even a matter of figuring out who's lying within all this. As previously blurted, everyone admits what happened, and we know the French fucker lied from birth onwards, his first 'waaaaaaahhh' being a lie. In the face of such a strange story, though, I can't help but approach it by taking it at face value. When you think about the fact that the cops should have figured out right from the start that it was a scam, you're not thinking something unfair or unreasonable. US Embassy staff and FBI agents getting involved and not seeing that it was a scam is even more embarrassing for all involved. It's something that would haunt your career evermore, you'd hope, as the prime example of how ill-suited you are to continue in it.

Is it unfair to say that, as someone who's never been in that position before, and likely never will be? A little bit, but the thing is, this guy, this Guy is clearly no criminal mastermind, he clearly had no gift of the gab in English, at least, doesn't really seem to have any charming looks or qualities to dazzle people with, and deflected reasonable questions with the most cack-handed, brutishly inelegant methods possible.

Don't look like the person you're claiming to be? Well, just wear your hoodie and baseball cap all the time. Eyes don't match those of the person you claim to be? Easy, just claim that you were kidnapped by an international ring of child abusers who somehow used Technology-laden needles to change your eye colour. Can't explain why you, as a native Texan now speak English with a thick French accent, and why you, a man in your twenties, no longer look like the teenage boy you're claiming to be? Piece of piss: it's because you're so traumatised, you see.

How does any of that explain why Nicholas Barclay's family bought that he was their son and brother? It doesn't. And they're the first to admit that hope blinded them so completely. Yet even that doesn't make any sense, really. This charade went on longer than you think possible, but it doesn't seem possible that it could have happened in the first place. The film doesn't want you to judge them, for most of its running length, because it spends most of its time focussed on the smarmy, shit-eating grin of the sociopath who perpetrated the hoax.

The film makes the wise decision to spend a lot of time filming him straight on as he talks to the camera, in the grand tradition of people telling you they just need a little bit of money to catch the train to Bairnsdale despite the fact that they're looking you straight in the eye and lying shamelessly to your face. He does the same to us. He's lying even when he's telling the truth. The facts of what he did, and even his reasons for it, sound more unbelievably than if he'd said he was doing it all under orders from the lizard people who secretly rule the world from the underground cathedral

Really, it's Carey who comes across the most believably because she's the one most sheepish about what happened. She and her mother are the first to admit that their fierce need to believe that Shlomo Finkelstein, sorry, Frederic Bourdin was Nicholas compelled them to let all these obvious niggling details slide. Whether it's true or not, it seemed genuine to me that Carey is intelligent enough to figure something like this out in time, but trusting enough and willing enough to suspend disbelief for something like this because the possibility that someone would lie about being her brother seems way more unlikely than the alternative.

I mean, I can joke about everyone involved having their heads stuck up their arses for believing any part of this elaborate and quite shaky charade, but does the reality of it seem any more likely? The 'resourcefulness' of Bourdin allows him to concoct a scenario to his temporary benefit, because why would anyone believe some guy elsewhere in the world would say they were Nicholas if they weren't?

I'm leaving out something crucial, something beyond spoilery, and yes, I'm going to keep it that way, because the 'theory' that Bourdin comes up with to explain why the family accepted him, a convicted liar and career conman, and the private detective who unmasked him called Charlie Parker (not *that* Charlie 'Bird' Parker) come up with isn't plausible. When I say it isn't plausible, I mean that if Frederic Bourdin told me that the sky was blue and that water was wet, I wouldn't ever believe him even if my own eyes and fingers told me it was so. It could very well be a reasonable explanation of what actually happened to Nicholas Barclay, but you know what? In the immortal words of Nicholas's sister Carey: "FUCK HIM!"

I found this documentary engrossing and utterly fascinating. It says a lot about people without having to ever whack us over the head with it or use sober, *Frontline*-like voiceovers to tell us what we're meant to be thinking at any stage.

Still, the thought we end up having is "People sure do suck."

8 times I don't believe that guy for a second, but I am definitely interested in buying a bridge he's selling out of 10

--
"A new identity was a real passport, an American passport, I could go to the US, go to the school there, live with that family and just being someone and don't never again to to worry about being identified." - why couldn't you just jump the Canadian border like everyone else - *The Imposter*

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MOVIE REVIEW: IRON MAN III

by Andrew Moshos

dir: Shane Black

Third-parters are almost never good. They never work out well, whether in comparison to the first two instalments, or compared to any other decent films in general. Aliens III? Matrix: Revolutions? Superman III? Can you think of a third parter at least as good as what came before it? The only one I can think of is Return of the King, which many callous people think of as being The Kiwi Flick with Three Hours of Endings. But I don't, since if one happy ending is a good thing, then lots of happy endings has got to be even more super amazing. You could argue that the difference is when the third part of a film trilogy is an organic part of the story, rather than a second sequel, whose purpose is just to capitalise on diminishing returns. Where Dark Knight Rises fits into this I couldn't tell you. Where some would argue 'necessity', others would argue 'doesn't say anything it hasn't already said twice before'. So whether it's Shrek the Third or Jaws III or Robocop III, or Spider-Man III, we're generally programmed to expect much more of 'more of the same' -ness to predominate, as well as a certain tiredness to the premise and mistakes particular to thirds that just have to be made. I would argue that Iron Man III is the best of the three Iron Man movies. I know it doesn't seem likely, but it gets everything right both inside and outside the context of 'super hero flick' that I could hope for. It was so hellishly entertaining, so clever in many of its aspects, and thoroughly satisfying on any comic-book level I could have desired that it really is quite surprising. A pleasant surprise, not a surprise like finding a nipple growing out of your elbow.

The other argument I generally make about third instalments is that they end up repeating the events of the first flick, just in a louder and more repetitive fashion. It goes beyond callbacks and references for the geeks. Basically, the screenwriting template for 3s is 'pretty much mirror the events of the first flick, but add stacks more villains'. That's not a formula for quality. It's a formula for printing money and sadness. Iron Man III is smarter than that. It's even subversive, for a summery blockbuster. Shane Black, infamous for giving the world the screenplays for such films as Lethal Weapon, The Long Kiss Goodnight and Last Action Hero, somehow managed to convince the people at Marvel that he should helm a film costing $200 million to make and probably half that to market. How did that happen, when he's only directed one film thus far, being Kiss Kiss Bang Bang, which didn't really make a bundle or work entirely well?

Well, Robert Downey Jnr, in some ways, is probably as powerful as Tony Stark is in his world. Downey Jnr said "hire my friend Shane Black to direct the 3rd one or I walk" and they said "yes sir, Mr Downey Jnr, sir, would you like some teenage groupies with your order, sir?" They worked together on Kiss Kiss Bang Bang, and from that alone I can easily guess it's through his desire that this came about. People might not remember, as well, that Kiss Kiss Bang Bang was one of the first steps in redeeming Robert Downey Jnr in Hollywood's eyes, because his intention at the time was convincing studios that he could be relied upon to turn up on time and perform without being coked out of his mind. Mid 2000s. It's only been since 2006-onwards that the world's love affair with him was rekindled, because he was poison before then. The early 2000s were not kind to him. They were great for me, the late 90s - early 2000s being a particularly great time in my life, but he was in and out of jail, in and out of rehab, in and out of people's houses.

How unreliable was he? Mel Gibson had to vouch for him, and pay the insurance on him, in order to get the US version of The Singing Detective done. When Mel Gibson is the one saying 'no, don't worry, he's fine now', you know you've gone beyond rock bottom and drilled through the centre of the world in terms of bringing oneself low. This guy has much to teach America about facial hairThis guy has much to teach America about facial hair
Now, he's king of the world. He could probably buy James Cameron's Titanic and set himself at the prow and bellow "I'm King of the World!" endlessly and no-one could dispute it. Iron Man, The Avengers and those darned Sherlock Holmes flicks have seen him become, ironically, probably the highest paid action star in the world.
How bizarre, what a bizarre world we live in. That quixotic charm, that capacity for arrogant self-effacement and rakish, fevered mania have all combined in the public's mind into the perfect combination of what they didn't know

they craved in an actor, but now want desperately. It's virtually impossible to separate how we see Robert Downey and how we see the characters he plays, especially Tony Stark, the hero of at least four films thus far.

As the film opens, he intones in full voiceover mode, that we create our own demons. They are not external to us, there's no interest in these kinds of stories for having the conflict come from a completely separate place. Whether it's Batman or Spider-Man or Iron Man, the crucial comic book hero dynamic is that the villain is created by the hero, and often vice versa. We don't and can't understand this yet, but when the story starts with a flashback that's all about what an arrogant, womanising prick Tony Stark used to be, and some poorly realised super technology that he should have taken more notice of, we know that both are probably going to play a significant part throughout the flick.

During this flashback to New Year's 1999, we see a few things: Tony's bodyguard had a mullet, Tony liked some thin, brunette, at least for a night, and the brunette was a botanist who somehow had a healing tech that also randomly exploded. And on this auspicious night, there's a guy with a limp, bad teeth and long stringy blonde hair, desperate to talk to Tony Stark. Sure, he's played by Australia's Own Guy Pearce, and has the highly awkward name of Aldrich Killian, a name I don't think even supervillians or serial killers would give their children, but really they should have just called him Syndrome (from The Incredibles), because that's essentially what he is. Snubbed by Stark, by this most Ironest of Men, Syndrome vows to use technology to become the superhero he always knew he should be.

A bunch of years later, and Syndrome isn't the fright-inducing name on the hearts and minds of children everywhere. The name that strikes terror into the hearts of middle America is The Mandarin (Sir Ben Kingsley), a terrorist whose purpose is to kill heaps of people, find a light beer that doesn't make him feel bloated, and to bring the mighty nation to its knees. He records these shadowy videos reminding us of a certain former leader of a freelance terror-inducing person-killing organisation who met his match a couple of years ago because, if the events of Kathryn Bigelow's film Zero Dark Thirty can be believed, he pissed off the wrong redhead. Wispy beard, contempt for the Great Satan, he has it all, and he is terrifying. Stuff happens, and Stark is brought into this conflict because of his arrogance. We are also given reason to believe that the events of the last Avengers film have him still reeling with some form of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder, which leads him to not sleep and to keep making Iron Man suits for all occasions that he can think of. Here we have Beach Iron Man, with SPF 50+ dispenser and frisbee catcher appendages; here we have Bar Mitzvah Iron Man, which can shoot gefillte fish and envelopes filled with money at kids who've reached that special age.

It's common for the hero to be brought low before he can Rise Up and save the day. We are not surprised when it happens here, because, frankly, he had it coming. Or, we saw the trailer, and that's pretty informative. What the trailer doesn't show us is how the technology of his invention is limited, but not his genius at its use. The suits can allow him to do something like save the life of the love of his life from harm, but they can't entirely save the day, because he still loses everything and seems like he's given up the ghost. This prehensile Mark 48 suit can magically go wherever he wants it to, and allow him to destroy a helicopter by throwing a piano at it, but it's apt to fall apart even as it's saving the day.

This happens throughout, and it's probably wise. There are limits to technology, and even in its manic, almost magical applicability in almost every circumstance, we're constantly being reminded that it's the Man behind the Iron that's the real superhero. As if the purpose of the flick was to reiterate Stark's response in The Avengers when queried by Captain America as to what he amounts to without the suit, the whole purpose of the third film is to remind us that it's his resourcefulness and mad engineering skills that make him formidable, more than the suit.

Sure, we can't get enough of engineers being superstars, because frankly they deserve it more than anyone else, but that's the way this flick is focussed. As such he spends the vast majority of the flick out of the suit. I'd say it's almost 3/4s of the flick. For those who were just desperately hoping for more and more of that metal guy blowing shit up, they're probably going to be disappointed. That's not to say that there isn't a bunch of action, there's heaps of it. Oodles of it. It's an action film, after all, but the makers of these flicks know that the real reason people like these flicks is because of Robert Downey Jnr motor-mouthing and cracking one-liners all over the place, not just watching a CGI guy

in a red and gold suit battle other CGI stuff.

The villains, the other ones apart from The Mandarin are a strange bunch. Mostly, and here's where the story gets somewhat subversive, the main villain and his entourage are war veterans who were grievously wounded in one of America's many recent wars with whoever. This strange technology / medical treatment makes them heal super fast, and get all hot and bothered when they want to, in surprising and painful-looking ways. It also makes them kind of evil, though that's never explained, nor does it have to be.

For his 'downtime', the time where Tony doesn't have a suit and has to lay low and regroup, he ends up in some small town, some small Tennessee town with some connection to the convoluted plot, which most people hopefully aren't going to care about. No-one pops Tony's spine back into place at the bottom of a prison which is just a hole in the ground, but he has been, we are meant to believe, humbled by recent experiences. To underline that fact, he's given a kid side-kick, which I would ordinarily grumble about, but it leads to one of the single greatest moments of Robert Downey Jnr's entire career, when he hurriedly intones, "Look, dad's leave, there's no need to be a pussy about it" to the poor kid. Yeah, I've spoiled it, but the whole dynamic between a manipulative kid and an abusive arsehole adult works beautifully. After spending time with the hicks, more than ever he has to prove he's still hot shit without the suit, but we're not fools for expecting that the suit, whichever version, will probably make it back in the nick of time during some action sequence at the very last possible second but also in the funniest way. He has a hilarious A-Team moment where he improvises a whole bunch of weapons from stuff he picks up at a hardware store. With this he leads a one-man attack on a compound which he believes will bring him closer to getting revenge, REVENGE! on that evil Mandarin.

Well, it turns out that, and you'll probably be amazed, that not everyone and everything is what it seems, and that the villains here, like the media-savvy villains in our 'real' world who pledged to destroy the forces of neatness and whiteness, were, in many senses, created by the forces of niceness and over-consumption. Throughout, he who puts the Junior in Robert Downey is grand: grandiloquent, grandiose, grandstanding. It's his film, no-one disputing that, he owns every scene, he comfortably acts or overacts as the situation demands. People who love him and his work will be thrilled with both him and his work here. He's great spitting dialogue, he's great in the action scenes where humans are involved, and he's got nice chemistry with everyone he needs to have chemistry, including, it's painful to say, that supreme business-woman of the future-present, Gwyneth Paltrow/Pepper Potts. She, too, finally gets to shine at the end, in a sequence where I couldn't help but wonder if they were tipping their hand as to the next villain in some future sequel.
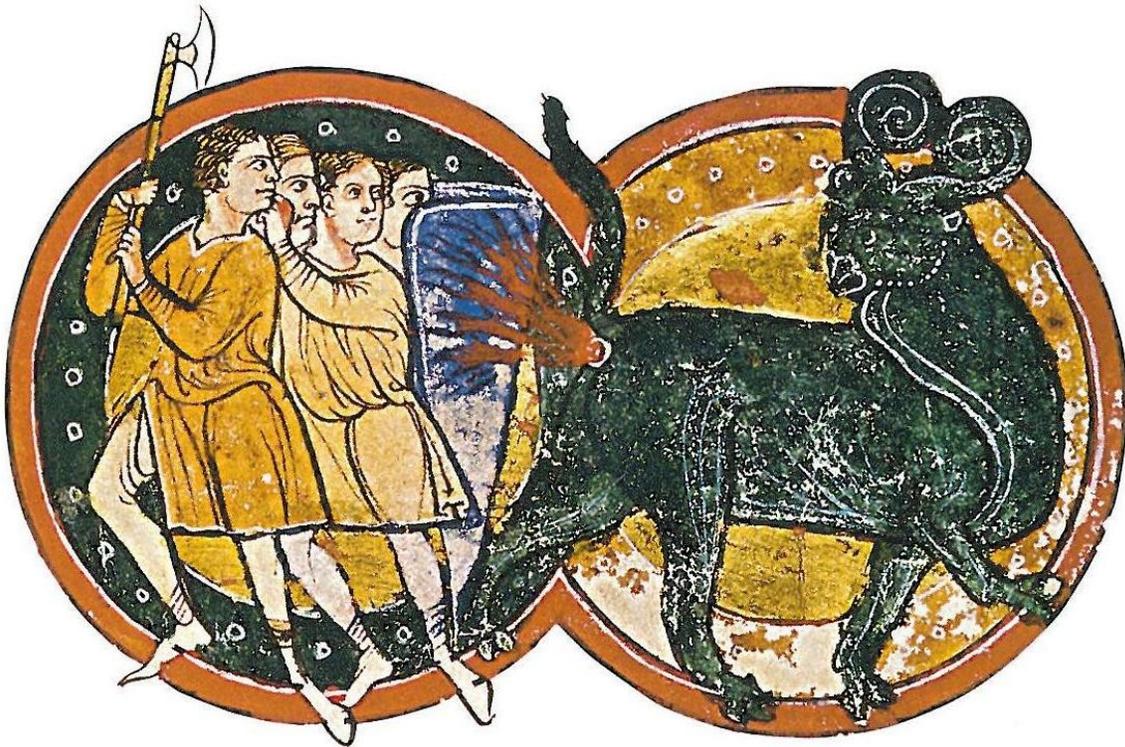
Of the action sequences, the destruction of Stark's Malibu pad; a barroom brawl that gets out of hand, the skydiving sequence and what happens immediately after, a sequence on Air Force One, the takedown at the drug-dealer-like mansion, the strange Iron Patriot stuff culminating in the battle at an oil platform, are all competently handled and look like they're making sense, even if they're not really making a lot of sense. The plot machinations at certain times confused me, but none of the action. It was all well thought out, well sequenced and well-realised. I have to say that 3D enhanced all these onscreen machinations not one bit. Nothing I saw looked any the better for being in 3D, so I'm guessing it was all done in post-production. At least the 3D didn't obscure what was going on.

It doesn't have the precise balancing-act type stuff going on like in The Avengers, and doesn't have the sturm und drang of the Nolan Batman flicks, but it works to a surprising and pleasing degree. I wouldn't want Shane Black directing an adaptation of a Philip Roth novel or writing the screenplay to a sequel to My Dinner with Andre, but he's a perfectly 80s natural when it comes to cheesy action flicks. Lives them, breathes them, expels them out into the world fully formed. He's like the non-evil offspring of Jerry Bruckheimer, Don Simpson, Joel Silver and Michael Bay, and that's the guy you want helming Iron Man III. And that's what we got in this flick, both Shane Black and Robert Downey Jnr at their witty best. As great as they are, Ben Kingsley almost steals the film from even a chattery ham like Jnr, with a performance that straddles the two furthest points on the acting spectrum of the possible. It's as good as we could have hoped for, and turns out it was a lot.

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