



Review of Apocalypse Games

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As a setting genre of roleplaying games, the apocalyptic has done moderately well. Indeed, the sheer number of games that have been released 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 *Degeneration* (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-apocalyptic 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.

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