

apocalypse girl
a roleplaying game

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it's not like it's the end of the world

"...and then the professor goes, 'but what if you knew the person would do something terrible if you didn't stop them? What if you met Hitler as a kid?'" He snorted. "Little Hitler. In a college philosophy class. Please."

She didn't answer, immediately, but stared for a while at the falling leaves. "It's not an interesting question?" she asked at last.

"You shoot the kid. Of course. It's stupid."

"You'd just shoot him?"

"Duh."

"You wouldn't hesitate? You wouldn't grieve?"

"Bang!" He grinned. She looked pained. He looked puzzled. "What's wrong with you, lately?" he asked.

"I'm never going to change you," she said, smiling slightly.

"Nope."

"I'm sorry."

"It's not like it's the end of the world," he said, laughing.

"No," she said. "I won't let it be."

Then she shot him. Five times: gut; chest; grazing wound to the shoulder as he went down, eyes enormous with surprise; face; face again.

He stopped shaking long before she did.

Who are you in this story?

If you're the Girl...

God chose you to save the world. Congrats.

Here's the thing: Nobody gave you any superpowers. You get no Slayer strength, no kung-fu grip, no costume. You're just you. Except, of course, for the Super 3-D Saint John of Patmos Vision (tm) where you pass someone in the street and you see the numbers on their forehead, or a lamb standing as if slain, or that goddamned dragon again, and you know what their destiny will be.

If you don't change them.

Convert them? Seduce them? Shoot them in the head? That's up to you.

If you're the Dragon...

God chose you, too.

They threw you out of heaven and you bounced. Now you're everywhere at once, with seven heads and ten horns and seven crowns, whispering inside people's ears, helping them be the bastards that they really are. Let the Big Guy send all the saints He wants: They are delicious. This world is yours.

Rule it? End it? Or be a good guy for a change, just to screw them all?

If you're the World...

You don't want to end. Duh.

Powers, principalities, please: Leave us alone. You are every ordinary person just trying to get along -- get home, get a job, get laid, get an SUV. You're busy. Armageddon's going to have to wait. Okay?

It's not okay. Because Heaven and Hell have grown insistent, the End Time's ticking down, and the Girl's definition of "save the world" looks just as uncomfortable as the Dragon's. You don't like uncomfortable. But you're hardly powerless. You can tie them up and wear them down. And maybe, if you work it right, you can give the crusaders something to care about they aren't willing to sacrifice on their altars.

Then there's the Gun....

It is the only real superpower in the world.

It is the only superpower you need.

It is there, waiting, whenever you decide to reach for it.

But the thing you shoot at is never the only thing that's hurt.

Choose your Core

You need three people: one to play the Girl; one to play the Dragon; one to play the World. (The Gun is not a player; it's a tool). Decide who plays which however.

If you have more than three people, it's better to have two Worlds than two Dragons or two Girls. If you only have two people, well, play *Trollbabe*.

Once you know your role, take an index card -- the 3"x5" kind. Write down your Core: the one sentence, one phrase, one word that sums up what this role is about, for you.

You don't have to believe your Core; the fictional character (or characters) you portray doesn't even have to believe it, necessarily; or it may turn out, in the course of the game, that your Core isn't really true, or that it means something different than you thought when you first wrote it down. That's fine. That's great, actually.

The Core doesn't even have to follow logically from the descriptions of the three roles above. In fact, if there's a tension between Core and Role, all the better.

The one requirement is that the Core should be something you care about, and that the other players care about. So, absolutely, talk with each other about your Cores; revise them; negotiate. But, in the end, choose what matters to you.

In the game, you have two jobs:

- 1) Fight for your Core.
- 2) Challenge the other players' Cores.

Example Cores

These are just examples, now. You can use one verbatim if you like, but I bet you can do better. Remember, it has to matter to you.

For the Girl...

I am chosen by God
I am chosen by God, oh crap
Vengeance is mine, saith the Lord
Make me an instrument of your peace
I am a virgin pure
I think I'm pregnant
I love you
I love you, even if I have to kill you

For the Dragon...

This world is mine
This world is doomed
I am the Antichrist
I am the only friend you've got
Nobody loves you
You know you want to

For the World...

Can't we all just get along?
Money, money, money
I want my MTV
Conform & consume
The mass of men live lives of quiet desperation
And God saw what He had made, and it was good

Dice and Cards

Everything that matters in the game is represented by words and numbers on an index card. If it's not written down, that doesn't mean it doesn't exist, it just means it doesn't matter to the story, now. If you decide that something matters and it's missing, you try to get a card about it into play. If you decide that something matters and it's a problem, you try to get its card out of play, or change it, or get it under your control.

Engines

Engines are enduring features of the world that drive the story - until someone destroys them, of course. An Engine gives the player who controls it dice to roll, every turn. These dice are stacked in a Ready Pile *next* to the card (next to it! Not on it! That means something different!) until you use them.

A Engine can be anything: a person; a personality trait; a temptation; a danger; an object; a place; an idea. A fictional character in the game may be represented as a single Engine or by several Engines all defining different and possibly contradictory aspects of their personality -- and possibly controlled by different players.

A Engine is defined by three Aspects, which are one phrase and two numbers written on the card:

Meaning is what the Engine is all about: a word, phrase, or short sentence. (Yes, just like your Core, only for this one particular thing).

Power is the number of dice that Engine gives you to roll. At the beginning of each new round of play, put that many dice next to the card in a Ready Pile for that Engine (any dice left over from last turn don't carry over; they're discarded, so use them or lose them). The higher the Power, the stronger the Engine. You can increase a Engine's Power over time, or decrease it; so can the other players. When a Engine's Power is reduced to zero, throw the card away: It's out of the game.

Loyalty is the number of dice any *other* player has to commit to taking the Engine from you. The higher the Loyalty, the less likely the Engine is to be turned against you. An Engine's Loyalty can never be reduced to zero; the lowest it can go is one.

Leave enough space around each Aspect to stack "Conflict Piles" of dice on it: In play, the Conflict Piles will grow and shrink as you and the other players contend to change or capture the card.

Charges

A Charge is the consequence, delayed or immediate, or something that happened earlier in the story. Charges are called "Charges" because they give a player who controls them a bunch of dice to roll, but once a die from a Charge is rolled, that die is gone: Charges drain, they don't refill.

A Charge is defined only by Meaning and its Ready Pile:

Meaning is whatever event created the Charge, described in a word, phrase or short sentence, in the way that sums up what it meant to you.

The size of a Charge's Ready Pile is determined by the event that created it (see below). A Charge's Ready Pile starts with that many dice and never increases. Whenever you use die from a charge, that die

is not replaced, so Charges decline irreversibly with use until they are out of the game.

Charges don't have Power: They don't generate new dice. They don't have a Loyalty number: They can't be turned against you.

There are no Charges at the start of the game.

Your Core is a special Engine

Before you begin playing, take the card you wrote your Core down on and write on it, "Power 5," "Loyalty 10." That's your first Engine, and the only one you start with. If you want more, you have to make or take them.

If your Core is reduced to zero Power, or if it's taken by another player, it's out of the game, and so are you. If you're the only person playing your role (Girl, Dragon, or World) -- which is always the case in a three-player game -- then the game is over, too.

The Gun is a special Engine, too

Before you begin playing, take another index card and write on it, "The Gun" and "Power 1."

The Gun's not like other Engines, in three ways:

1) Anyone can use the Gun -- that is, anyone can take a die from the Gun to roll on their turn, if there are any left. No one controls it; no one can take it, which is why it doesn't have a Loyalty number.

2) The Gun's Power increases by one at the end of each round of play. There is no other way for the Gun's Power to increase, and no way for its Power to decrease at all.

3) The Gun's dice have special effects when rolled -- see below.

Starting the game

Each player should place their Core in front of them, with five dice next to the card in a Ready Pile (not on the card! Next to it!). Place the Gun in the middle of the table, with one die next to it in the Gun's Ready Pile (next, not on).

Choose who takes the first turn at random.

On your turn: Pass or roll

On your turn, you can do one of two things: take a die from the Ready Piles next to your Engines or Charges, or from the Gun, and roll it; or do nothing and pass to the next player.

Passing, and refueling your Engines

When you pass, nothing happens in the story on your turn.

If you have no dice left you can use (including the Gun's), you have to pass.

If everyone passes in a row, that's a round of play. Immediately, do three things in this order (the order matters):

1) first, increase the Gun's Power by one

2) second, discard any dice still piled *next to* any and all Engines: If their controlling player didn't use 'em, now they lose 'em. Do *not* discard any dice piled *on* any Engine: Those dice represent an ongoing struggle to change some Aspect of that Engine.

3) third, pile dice next to every Engine (including the Gun) until each Engine has a pile of dice next to it equal to its Power.

Rolling: Three things you can try

If you want to roll, take one die (just one at a time) from any of the piles next to your Engines and Charges. (Or the Gun, but that's

special; see below). Don't roll it, yet. First, say clearly where the die is going to go and what you're trying to do with it:

Create a new Engine for yourself. Discard the die without rolling it. Take a blank card and write up a new Engine with whatever Meaning you want, with Power and Loyalty both equal to one.

Take an existing Engine that belongs to someone else for yourself. Roll the die. Place it *on top of* the card you want to take, right on top of the Meaning (yes, this is where you finally get to stack dice on top of cards instead of next to them).

Change the Power or Loyalty of an existing Engine, whoever it belongs to. Roll the die. Place it *on top of* the card you want to change (not next to!), right on top of the Aspect you want to increase or decrease, either Power or Loyalty.

If you already placed a die on top of a particular Aspect of a particular Engine in an earlier turn, stack your new die on top of it: That's your Conflict Pile. Each Conflict Pile is tied to one and only one Aspect of one and only one Engine -- so each player can have up to three Conflict Piles on a single Engine, each of which is totally independent of the others.

When your Conflict Pile is high enough, you've succeeded (see below). But other players can try to grind your Conflict Pile down (again, see below).

Rolling: Rival Conflict Piles, and Capturing and Canceling Dice

Players build up to capturing or changing a Engine one die at a time, building up their Conflict Piles. You can try to stop changes that you don't like by rolling on the same Aspect of the same Engine (Meaning, Loyalty, or Power) and building up a rival Conflict Pile of your own.

If your Conflict Pile gets high enough, you can change the disputed Engine in the opposite way from your opponent -- decreasing what they want to increase, increasing what they what to decrease. That doesn't stop them from building up their Conflict Pile, though.

But when you first roll a die on an Aspect that somebody else already has already rolled on, you may be able to take dice from *their* Conflict pile in one or two ways:

1) *Cancel.* You can Cancel dice in your opponent's Conflict Pile whose value totals to less than the value of the die you just rolled. (If you roll a 1, you can't Cancel anything; if you roll a 2, you can only cancel a single 1; if you roll a 6, you can cancel a 5, or two 2's, or a 3 and a 1, but not a 3 and a 2). Discard the dice you cancelled. Discard your die that just rolled and Cancelled with, too.

2) *Capture.* If any of the dice in your opponent's Conflict Pile show the exact same value as the die you just rolled, you have captured those dice: Move them from your opponent's pile to yours. None of the dice is discarded, neither yours or theirs.

Succeeding: Changing Engines

At the end of your turn, if a particular Conflict Pile of yours is high enough, you succeed in your objective.

- You succeed in *taking* an Engine when the number of dice in your Conflict Pile exceeds that Engine's *Loyalty*. Take the card for yourself and rewrite the Meaning appropriately (which may mean, not at all).

- You succeed in changing an Engine's *Loyalty* when the number of dice in your Conflict Pile exceeds that Engine's *Power*. Erase the Engine's current *Loyalty* and increase or decrease it by one.

Change the Power of an existing Engine. You succeed in changing an Engine's *Power* when the number of dice in your Conflict Pile exceeds that Engine's *Loyalty*. Erase the Engine's current *Power* and increase or decrease it by one.

Succeeding: Building Charges

When you succeed in *Increasing* the *Power* or *Loyalty* of an Engine, discard all the dice in your Conflict Pile.

When you succeed in *Decreasing* the *Power* or *Loyalty* of an Engine, however, or when you *take* an Engine from another player, the dice in your Conflict Pile create two new Charges:

- 1) All the *odd*-numbered dice go to *you*.
- 2) All the *even*-numbered dice go to *the other player*.

Each of you should take a new card, write up an appropriate *Meaning*, and stack the dice you just took from the successful Conflict Pile into the new Charge's Ready Pile.

The Gun: Random Damage

When you roll a die from the Gun, you can use it for any of the goals listed above, to capture or to cancel as appropriate. But when the guns come out, things get messier.

Whenever you roll a die from the Gun, before you do anything else with it, check the value you rolled -- then find *any* Engine, belonging to *any* player, including yourself, whose *Power* or *Loyalty* is *greater than* the value you just rolled. For each Engine whose *Power* is greater than the Gun's roll, *immediately* reduce its *Power* by one; for each Engine whose *Loyalty* is greater than the Gun's roll, *immediately* reduce its *Loyalty* by one.

Narration

As you do all this rolling and writing, narrate what's happening in the story -- the striving of the Girl, the seductions of the Dragon, the bustle of the world -- that your die roll represents. When you try to change the *Loyalty* of a Engine, or to capture it, describe something that that potentially reinforces or undermines the reliability of that Engine to its current owner; if you try to change the *Power* of a Engine, describe something that potentially reduces or increases its impact in the story. If you roll dice from a Engine you control, explain how that Engine is acting in the story; if you roll dice from one of your Charges, explain how the consequences of the event that created that Charge is now coming back to haunt or help everyone. When you use the Gun, describe the unexpected and chaotic repercussions. When an Engine is taken away from its owner by another player, or its *Loyalty* or *Power* changes, describe how the accumulated pressures finally break through the resistance and makes things change.

When you narrate, the other players can and should make suggestions, but you have the final say what's happening, even if it's just "yeah, cool, what you said."

This is the way the world ends

When any player's Core is taken by another player or removed from play, that player is out of the game. If that player is the last person playing their role (Girl, Dragon, or World) -- and in a three-player game, there's only one player in each role -- the game is over.

If the World was eliminated, it's (surprise) the end of the world. Compare the Dragon and the Girl: Whichever one has more dice left, right now, just won the battle of Armagedon.

If the Dragon was eliminated, then the diabolical is driven from this world. But what replaces it? Compare the World and the Girl. If the Girl has more dice, right now, the Millennium begins: The Messiah descends to rule the earth for a thousand years. If the World has more dice, right now, the world is free of gods and devils forever. "Imagine there's no Heaven; it isn't hard to do."

If the Girl is eliminated, then the divine is driven from this world. What replaces it? Compare the World and the Dragon. If the Dragon has more dice, right now, it's Hell on Earth. If the World has more dice, then, as above, ordinary people are free of transcendent demands forever.

Whichever way it ends, narrate it together. The player who won has the final word.

Qualification

apocalypse girl is a 24-hour RPG written starting at 11:22 am on Wednesday, November 16 and finished at 5:38 pm the same day, with time out in the middle to attend a conference, I kid you not. It does draw on ideas and half-formed systems I had in my head and various notebooks I can't actually find anyway, so while it does not qualify under the extreme "Iron Man" definition of a 24-hour RPG, I think it meets Ron Edwards's "don't make this ridiculously difficult" criterion.

This game was written as a submission for the November 2005 Ronnies. The chosen terms, just in case you missed them, were *gun* and *dragon*.

Acknowledgments

The core mechanic of this game is essentially the dice currency from Ron Edwards's *Sorcerer* on crack, and as such is probably broken in at least two important places. It also draws heavily on Tony Lower-Basch's *Capes*, most obviously in the Charges (which are Inspirations by another name) but also in the whole concept of encapsulating every element of the story on a 3"x5" index card. My ideas were also powerfully shaped by several conversations with Tony, and by the online discussions at the Forge (www.indie-rpgs.com).