

Last Breath

*a game of survival
in an empty world*

by
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Outbreak



Introduction

It's the end of the world. Or it sure as hell feels like it.

You sometimes wish you knew what white-coated expert tucked away in some biological warfare lab had come up with the idea of the superplague. But it doesn't really matter much; he's probably dead, like the rest. Once the superplague broke out of the Level Four facility, it spread too fast for anyone to ask for a government investigation.

No one will be asking for one now; there's no government anymore, either.

Some people survived. You and a handful of others seem to be immune, or at least you aren't showing symptoms yet. You can count the survivors on one hand. You hope there are more.

But maybe there's no hope anymore, either. Or maybe you have to fight for it.

Overview

Last Breath is a post-apocalyptic game of survival. The players take the roles of the last few people on Earth; their goal is to survive. But to do that, you can't lose all hope, can't lose your will-to-live, even though every day, something happens that threatens to drain the last bit of fight from your soul.

Other survivors give you more reason to fight, to survive. Seeing everything die around you increases your emotional pain. Somehow, you have to keep the pain from overwhelming you, keep struggling, search for new meaning.

Day One



Equipment

Last Breath is a game for 2 to 5 players, one of whom is the GM. The GM in this case is mainly an adversary, but not the kind you can fight directly; there are no radioactive mutants or bands of gasoline-hungry brigands in this apocalypse. The GM's task in this game is to introduce doubts about survival and threaten your will to live.

Aside from players, you will also need the following:

- character sheets
- many six-sided dice
- index cards, or scratch paper
- lots of counters or tokens (such as pennies)

Character Creation

The first few scenes of the game help establish your characters. Start out by writing down your character's name, your gender, your background (job or training before the outbreak of the superplague,) one hobby (or something you received superficial training in,) and two scores: Fight and Pain. Everyone's scores begin the same: Fight is 5, Pain is 1.

FIGHT: is your will to live. Certain types of scenes will require you to roll dice equal to your Fight score.

Whenever you roll dice in any scene, if you get no successes, you lose one point of Fight. If your Fight drops to zero, you are too depressed to act further; you can't roll dice or take action in any scene until someone helps you restore your Fight score in a Meaning Scene.

PAIN: is your despair over the loss of everything you love. Painful memories, triggered by objects that remind you of your loss, can force you to fight back against the Pain.

Pain starts at 1 and increases every time you lose another Attachment. You can decrease Pain by 1 every time you add an Attachment during a Meaning Scene. If Pain is greater than Fight, you can't do anything else except search for a new Attachment or sacrifice yourself in the next Survival Scene.

Attachments

The rest of the character sheet is space to record Attachments. These are living, breathing beings that give you a reason to live; whenever the despair seems too much, you think to yourself: at least these people are still alive.

If you are related to one of the other player's characters, or otherwise knew them before the outbreak, write that character's name down now. Then, play

The Plague Begins

You hear about the superplague first on the news; massive deaths, everywhere in the world. There are no symptoms at first, but it seems to be infectious during the incubation period. When the symptoms strike, they are sudden: the victims become paler and weaken over a couple hours, then collapse in seizures and die. It strikes so many people so quickly that authorities can't respond to it. New outbreaks happen every day. It's obvious in the first week that this is the end.

Then, it happens in your neighborhood.

Everyone can throw in dramatic descriptions of how rapid and terrifying the outbreak is. The city should be wiped out before the end of the day. The night is

Don't spend too much time working on your character's background; it can be pretty random. You're just an ordinary person who survived a rapid outbreak of a superplague, remember. Most of the details of who you are as a person will develop during play.

out a few scenes describing the outbreak of the superplague. The first few scenes don't involve rolling the dice. There's the preface, where the GM describes the superplague to the players (if they haven't read the game themselves.) Afterwards, there is one scene where any characters who haven't met each other meet for the first time. Normal play begins after that.

spent praying, crying, or doing something – anything – to feel useful, or to avoid thinking about the inevitable. Players should be as creative and as richly detailed about this as possible.

On the next day, or however many days of despair you feel are appropriate, the characters realize that they aren't dead yet. They survived. Maybe someone else survived, too. Play out a few scenes where any characters who haven't met yet meet for the first time. As you meet each character, write that character's name on your character sheet as a new Attachment. Once all characters are introduced, it's time for your first die rolls.

Scenes from the End of the World



Basic Resolution

Last Breath uses three types of scenes: Survival Scenes, Search Scenes, and Meaning Scenes. Each scene uses the same basic dice roll to resolve the conflict in the scene, but the player and GM goals are different for each type of scene; plus, each type of scene has special rules that can affect the outcome.

The basic resolution in all scenes is the same: roll some dice, throw out the evens. For every die remaining, you get

one success. Spend each success on a fact, a counterfact, a resource, a goal, or a block.

The GM rolls dice, too, and gets successes to spend. Exactly what the GM does with those successes will change with each type of scene. The GM's job is to keep life just grim enough to make the characters struggle.

First Survival Scene

Your first dice-rolling scene is a Survival Scene. It's a little different from later Survival Scenes, because at this point you are just establishing your resources. Future Survival Scenes will build on those resources or establish new ones; Survival Scenes are also used when trying to save an NPC survivor (the game begins with no other known survivors, however.) The first scene will teach you the rules for Survival in general.

Get four index cards to begin with. Write one of each of the following words on each card: FOOD, WATER, SHELTER, and CLEAN. These are your primary resources; depending on what else you try to do, you may have others, like FUEL for a generator or MEDICINE to fight infections.

The descriptions of the primary resources are:

FOOD: at the beginning of the game, this will mainly be canned goods and anything else edible on hand; whatever is in the characters' cupboards. At the end of every hour of real time, Food resources drop by one.

After a while, the characters will need to restock; this will most likely be canned goods raided from abandoned buildings, since other foods will probably be moldy or rotten. Eventually, characters will need to grow their own food.

WATER: tap water will probably last a day or two. With no one running the water treatment plant or repairing the city's pumps, it won't last forever; at the end of every hour of real time, Water resources drop by one.

You can scavenge bottles of distilled water from grocery stores, find wells or streams, or set up equipment to catch and purify rainwater to replenish this.

SHELTER: your protection from the elements. It might be a house or shack, might be a cave, might be a tent. Shelter won't drop as often as Food or Water; it will only be lowered by GM actions. You can replenish Shelter resources through repairs and upkeep.

CLEAN: when the superplague hits, it leaves a lot of dead bodies in the streets and countryside. This can spread other diseases unless you clear away the bodies. Clean doesn't decrease unless you leave dead bodies lying around.

Normally, players begin a Survival Scene by describing what they will be doing to

ensure their continued survival. For this first Survival Scene, it's "we're taking stock of our resources". If players really want to begin the game with another resource, they can add "and we're looking for a car and some fuel" or something similar. For a group of new players, don't worry about this; you can find other resources later.

Everyone rolls dice, including the GM. For the first Survival Scene ever, each player rolls five dice, for basic survival. In future survival scenes, the number of dice rolled will depend on what you're doing and what preparations you've made.

Check your dice. If you have rolled any even numbers, discard them. Count the number of odd numbers rolled; you get one penny or token for every odd number. If you do not earn any pennies at all, your Fight score drops by one.

You spend pennies on facts or resources. For the first Survival Scene, of course, you will spend them mainly on your existing resources of Food, Water, Shelter and Clean. You don't have to use facts to bring them into existence; you just put pennies on each index card and describe how you gathered that resource.

The GM also rolls five dice and earns pennies (successes) the same way the players do. The GM can spend pennies on **facts** which introduce something new to the scene: a crisis, an NPC, or an object. Each fact gets its own index card, the same as a resource does. The GM can also put pennies on each index card to make it more effective.

The kinds of facts and their effects are:

NPC: the players just found another person or animal that survived the plague, but the new character is initially suspicious or even hostile, or perhaps is about to die. An NPC begins with an effectiveness of zero for a cost of 1 penny.

If the GM places pennies on NPCs after introducing them, this increases their effectiveness and they can then be used as GM resources to attack. The GM writes the NPC's name on an index card when the NPC is added to the scene, then places pennies on the card, if desired.

CRISIS: a danger that isn't an NPC. A building starts to collapse, a fire breaks out, it starts to hail... anything the characters have to react to. Even though they are not NPCs, they are handled the same way mechanically: one penny introduces the crisis, plus pennies can be spent to increase the effectiveness of the crisis.

Unlike NPCs, a crisis begins with 1 point of effectiveness. There's no need to write anything on an index card, since a crisis is temporary in nature; the GM just stacks some pennies on the table and says "the sewers back up and sewage fills the streets."

One special form of crisis is killing an NPC, breaking an object, or otherwise removing facts from play. The GM places a penny next to any index card that

doesn't have pennies stacked on top of it and describes what's going wrong. Any index card without pennies is vulnerable; the GM even uses this technique to kill hostile NPCs, or cause them to flee..

On the next die roll, the players can spend one penny to counter that penny, removing it; they might want to invest some pennies in it as well, to prevent further GM attempts to remove the NPC or object. If the crisis penny is still unchallenged at the end of the second roll, the NPC dies or escapes, or the object is broken; the index card is removed from play. If the NPC is dead, turn the index card over to represent a dead body in the area; dead bodies must be removed to prevent Clean resource loss.

OBJECT: not a danger in itself, but can lead to danger, sometimes subtly, or can be useful. The GM spends a penny to add the object to the scene. If no pennies are added to its effectiveness, it is simply "there", maybe to be used on a future roll, maybe as a temptation to the players to spend their own pennies to take the object over as a resource, if it seems useful.

If the GM adds pennies to the object, it can be used as a resource by hostile NPCS – or by the players, if there are no hostile NPCs left. However, an object still in the GM's control can use its pennies to trigger a memory; this is a kind of emotional attack, which will be described later.

Continuing the scene

A Survival Scene can continue beyond the first roll under certain conditions. The main criteria is unfinished business; if the GM introduced a card into play during the scene, the scene isn't over until that card is either removed from play or the players convert the card into their own resource.

Another criteria is the original intent of the scene; if the players announce “we are searching for gas for our generator”, the scene isn't over until they either give up, announce a different intent, or finish the turn with pennies stacked on the index card for that goal.

Every scene is divided into one or more turns. Every turn begins with a player announcement of how they are going to achieve their intent this turn, followed by rolling the dice. The players spend their pennies on facts or building up the effectiveness of resources, or possibly by countering a GM crisis (one penny from a player counteracting one penny of the crisis.)

The players describe their actions in any order desired, whatever seems dramatically effective; if they can't agree who goes first and can't accept simultaneous actions, whoever rolled more dice goes first, or whoever won the most successes. After the players take their turn, the GM takes a turn, spends

pennies on facts, then checks for special effects, such as Fight loss, painful memories, or Pain increase.

Except for the very first turn of the very first Survival Scene (which has already been described,) players determine how many dice to roll based on what they are going to do. Roll dice equal to Fight, plus more dice if you've had training in the kind of action you are going to try: one extra die for hobby training, two extra dice for pre-outbreak background.

You can also take pennies from any of your resources to spend on extra dice for the roll, but you must describe how you are using that resource to improve your chances. You can even spend pennies from NPCs you control, if they are present in the scene and you can describe how they assist you in the scene.

The GM rolls dice equal to the total Pain of the player characters, but can spend pennies from NPCs, objects, or a crisis to add dice to the pool. If the GM begins the turn with NPCs or other facts on the table, these can be used to attack player resources, again by spending a penny from the attacking fact. Thus, a hostile NPC might shoot out the player characters' windows, reducing Shelter by 1 point, or a flood (crisis) might seep into their food storage, reducing Food by 1 point.

Painful Memories

One special attack the GM can perform is to spend a penny from an object to remind a player of a painful memory. This can be anything; the object might be a family photograph that reminds the player's character of a lost family member, or it might be a stuffed toy from a carnival, which reminds the character that there won't be any carnivals ever again. The player has to immediately roll

a number of dice equal to Fight, plus any Attachments currently present, while the GM rolls dice equal to the character's Pain; if the player's number of successes is more than the GM's successes, Fight drops by 1 point, otherwise there is no effect. Each object can only trigger one painful memory per player.

Ending the Turn

Once the GM's actions are finished, the GM checks for special conditions:

NO SUCCESSES: as mentioned, if a player rolls all even numbers on the dice, that player's character loses 1 point of Fight. This does not end the scene, unless the player decides a Meaning Scene to rebuild Fight is more important than the original intention of the scene.

PRIMARY RESOURCES: if any of the primary resources (Food, Water, Shelter, Clean) ends the turn with no pennies stacked on it, the scene ends, unless the intention of the scene was to replenish any of the primary resources.

The next scene needs to be a Survival Scene aimed at refilling that resource. If the turn begins and ends with no pennies on one of the primary resources, every character's Fight is reduced by 1 point. This only ends the scene if the intention was something other than “restock our primary resources”.

DEAD OR MISSING PEOPLE: if any NPC begins and ends the turn with a penny next to its index card (no pennies

stacked on the card,) the penny and the card are removed. If the GM describes this as a death, the card is turned over to indicate a corpse in the scene; otherwise, the NPC runs away or is otherwise lost.

If one of the players had an Attachment to that NPC, Pain increases by 1 point; the player must cross off the Attachment if the NPC is dead.

CORPSES: if the last turn of the scene begins and ends with a corpse present, remove one penny from Clean. The corpse stays on the table until the characters relocate either themselves or the corpse.

SWITCH SIDES: if the players remove all the pennies from a hostile NPC during play and place their own pennies on the index card, at the end of the turn, the NPC switches control to the players. This means the NPC may later become an Attachment for one or more characters.

CAPTURE RESOURCES: if the turn ends with no GM-controlled NPCs or crisis on the table and the GM has already made one painful memory attack against each character, any objects, including their pennies, become player resources.

If the current turn doesn't end the scene, begin another turn.



Searching for Meaning



Search Scenes

The player characters are the only survivors, at first. Discovering more survivors is important for survival – and for emotional well-being. Some of the other survivors will be introduced as hostile NPCs, which the players may be able to win over, but there's no need to wait for the GM to introduce characters. Anytime after the first Survival Scene, the players can call for a Search Scene to find survivors.

Search Scenes work differently than Survival Scenes. You can't find new resources during a Search Scene, nor can the GM attack your resources. Also, although the players as a group describe what they are doing to search, only one person will roll, using the sum of the lowest and highest Fight scores as a base to determine how many dice to roll.

The first step is the description. How are you searching? Are you roaming the deserted streets? Are you climbing to a high vantage point and looking for distant signs of movement? Do you have a shortwave radio?

Next, the players as a whole agree whether to spend any resources or not. If you found a car earlier, you can spend a penny from that car to drive around looking for survivors; it improves your chances because you can cover a wider area.

The GM may require that you use certain resources for certain kinds of actions. For example, if you are listening on the shortwave radio, you need a generator or batteries, so the GM can require that you use a resource point from the generator (or the radio, if it has batteries.) The GM can't tell you how much to spend, only that you will have to spend at least one penny from each required resource.

The GM then lays down some index cards and tells the players what obstacles might prevent the search from succeeding. For example, searching by shortwave might be blocked by: radio interference, language barriers, mistaking an automated message for a live person, temporary equipment failure. Each

obstacle gets its own index card. These are “unpowered” obstacles at the moment; no one knows how much radio interference will prevent the search.

The GM gets five dice, plus one die for every point of Pain the players currently have. The GM divides the dice and assigns them to each index card. Thus, “radio interference” might get two dice, “language barrier” might get three, and so on, until all the dice are assigned.

The players now decide if it's worth the risk to spend resource pennies on the search. If all the players agree to spend the pennies, the search continues. Figure out the number of dice the players will roll: the lowest Fight score, plus the highest Fight score, plus the number of pennies spent, equals the total number of dice. Roll the dice and discard the evens, as usual. This is how many pennies the players get to split up and assign to each index card.

Once the players are happy with their assignments, the GM rolls the dice next to the first index card and counts the odd results. If the results are more than the pennies placed on the index card, that

obstacle was too strong; if the results are less than the number of pennies on the card, the obstacle is overcome.

The GM rolls each set of dice in turn, then interprets the results. For example, the radio interference may be too strong, but the players may overcome the language barrier, so they hear a few fragments of words they can understand.

Any obstacle the players overcome is removed from the table. The others remain. All the pennies are removed from the index cards. The players can now decide whether to continue the search, repeating the previous steps, or to wait until later, perhaps to refresh resources. If the players wait until later, the GM can add one new obstacle to the Search Scene when they return.

Once all of the obstacles for a particular search have been overcome, the players add one new fact to the table: an index card representing the NPC they have found. They may now play out a Survival Scene to bring the NPC into their community. During the Survival Scene, of course, the GM may introduce the usual complications.

Meaning Scenes

If you need to recover Fight or lower Pain, the only way to do this is through a Meaning Scene. In a Meaning Scene, players earn pennies in conversation or shared experience. The players describe what they are doing: sharing a moment with a pet dog (Attachment,) asking for advice, venting feelings, and so on. The characters share this moment of meaning with either another player character or with one of their Attachments; other

Attachments may also be present in the scene.

Each player rolls a number of dice equal to the Fight score, plus one die for every Attachment present in the scene. If the character is sharing with another player character, the GM rolls dice equal to the second player character's Pain; otherwise, the GM rolls dice equal to the first player character's Pain.

Count the player's successes and subtract the GM's successes to determine how many pennies the player earns. If that player character is sharing with another player character, the second player also rolls Fight + Attachments and can share successes with the first character. If the player earns at least one penny, the character's Fight score increases by one point.

If the player character is sharing a meaningful moment with an NPC that has not been added as an Attachment yet, then instead of increasing Fight, the character adds the NPC as a new Attachment and also lowers Pain by one point.

Once that player has finished, the next player gets a turn, and so on until every player has had a chance to refresh Fight or add an Attachment.



Conclusion



Effects of High Pain

Meaning Scenes are important because they help refresh Fight and reduce Pain. If Pain is higher than Fight, the character is too overwhelmed by pain and loneliness to aid in a Survival Scene; if Fight is zero, the character can't even contribute to a Search Scene.

Even if Fight is higher than Pain, a high Pain is not good, since the GM gets more dice as the character's Pain increases.

There is one “benefit” to high Pain, however; the player can opt to kill the character in an act of self-sacrifice. When this happens, the player rolls dice equal to Fight plus Pain, then spends the pennies earned and describes the character's death.

Character Death

Players may lose characters during the game. If this happens, the player can take over one of the player-controlled NPCs or create a new character.

There is one difference between starting characters and replacement characters: instead of getting a Fight score of 5, the

player rolls five dice and counts the odd results; this is the new character's Fight score. Pain starts at 1, as usual.

If the player opts to create a new character instead of taking over an existing NPC, the characters have to find each other in a Search Scene.

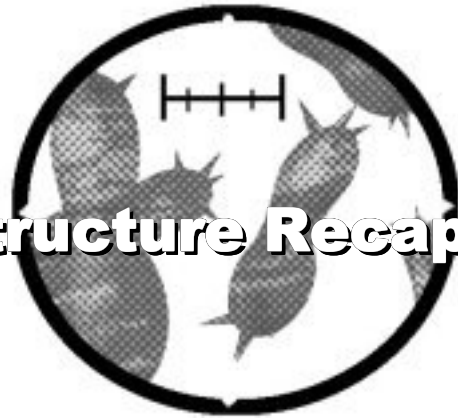
Ending the game

There is no set goal for Last Breath; the players can decide to end the game at any time. The players can even decide in advance what general goal to shoot for, such as starting a farm and supporting 20

people, or pushing Food, Water and Shelter to 20 each. The game also ends if all the characters drop to Fight 0 in the same scene.



Appendix: Play Structure Recap



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1. Opening Scene: describe the superplague outbreak and name the characters
 2. Record background, hobby, Fight 5, Pain 0
 3. Find each other, record first Attachments
 4. First Survival Scene: take stock of resources (fill Food, Water, Shelter, Clean)
 1. first turn: players roll 5 dice each, GM rolls total Pain
 2. later turns: players roll Fight + backgrounds/hobbies + spent resources
 5. Spend pennies on fact, increasing resources, countering a crisis, reducing a GM resource
 6. GM spends pennies on facts, resources, attacks
 7. Painful Memory: triggered by object in Survival Scene
 1. player rolls Fight + Attachments
 2. GM rolls dice equal to Pain
 8. Search Scene: describe how to search for survivors, obstacles in way
 1. split dice between obstacles
 2. players roll lowest Fight + highest Fight + spent resources
 3. GM rolls total Pain + 5 dice
 9. Meaning Scene: describe how character shares meaningful moment
 1. players roll Fight + Attachments
 2. GM rolls Pain of each character
 10. if Pain is higher than Fight, character can't act in Survival Scenes except self-sacrifice
 11. At the end of every hour of real-time, lower Food and Water by 1 penny

Acknowledgments



Last Breath was written as part of the October 2005 Ronnies, a 24-hour RPG challenge sponsored by Ron Edwards. Part of the challenge was to select two terms from the four provided and base an RPG around them. The terms used for Last Breath were Fight and Pain. For more information on the Ronnies, please see The Forge:

<http://www.indie-rpgs.com/forum/>

For more information on 24-hour RPG challenges in general, please see:

<http://24hourrpg.com/>

The game was inspired in part by Richard Matheson's "I Am Legend", the movie *On The Beach*, and the BBC miniseries *Day of the Trifids*. **Last Breath** does not include the more fantastical elements of these sources of inspiration, however.