

The Suburban Crucible (Alpha 1.0)

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You still remember when your dad taught you to play football. The respect you had for him was only increased when, upon your declaration that you didn't want to try out for the team, he just clapped you on the back and smiled.

Everyone knows that your mom makes the best pot roast around, but you still think of her as the woman who sat by your bed with a brave smile after the surgery. Sometimes as you drift off to sleep at night you can still hear her quiet tears of fear of losing her son.

You've always looked up to your big brother. Somehow he managed to be cool with his friends and still find the time to hang out with you. There are too many memories: the time he stomped Will Mathison for you, the way he could make trigonometry make sense, when he set you up with Sarah James for homecoming, and the way he just sat with you when you realized she wasn't actually going to return your calls the next week.

Your little sister is going places. She's smart and talented and you won't let anyone tell her different. And if some schmuck broker her heart? Well, you'd just have to break his face.

Your best friend. Well, what can you say? You're bound by a pact of shared secrets. Like that time you both forged notes from your parents to skip school. You never told anyone about his crushes... unless it was to surreptitiously hook him up, and he returned the favor.

And now you've met this girl. She's sexy and funny, she's witty and caring and tremendously talented. In your wildest dreams you never imagined that someone could be this amazing, and you still can't quite understand what she sees in you.

Your family loves you and supports you and are eager to meet the girl who has you so completely enthralled. There's only one problem: she's black.

Yes, this is a game about racial prejudice. But it's not about violent, hate-filled prejudice, it's about subtle and insidious prejudice. It's also a game about relationship friction: how do you reconcile the relationships you have with the one's you're building. Finally, it's a game about choice: when it comes down to him or her, who gets the ax?

Ideally this is a game about difficult choices. It turns out that it does not take much to make the choices easy, and it takes quite a bit of work to make them hard.

I didn't realize this until I was deep into structural design on the game, but it's basically an experimental piece in which all but one player has as a primary goal the provision of

adversity for the protagonist player.

Character Creation

One player will be the protagonist, in this version of the text the protagonist is always the boyfriend. One player will play the girlfriend. The rest of the players will share the family and best friend.

There are some basic assumptions that underly play. The protagonist is from a middle-class white family. He spent his entire life in the suburbs, and while this does not actually preclude exposure to black people, it does tend to (and for the game it assume to) preclude experience with them. This next part is key: your friends and family *are not bad people*.

They aren't intentionally malicious, and they really are acting from the best intentions. I'll go into this in more detail in a separate section.

Now that you've got the basic assumptions, there are a couple of things you'll need to decide for yourself. These are important, and they deserve careful consideration. First, you need to decide on an age for your protagonist. The implications of this scenario are vastly different for teenager of 16 years than for a young man at 24. This will also impact the ages of the other characters. A younger protagonist implies younger family and a younger best friend. This isn't necessarily the case, but there is a very strong tendency towards it.

So you've got an age. Now it's time to make sure everyone is invested in play because if you don't care then all the decisions become easy, and we don't want that.

Now you're going to need to get some note cards to keep track of your characters. You'll need a total of six: one for the girlfriend, one for the best friend, and one for each family member. Decide what you want to name the characters. Make sure that everyone is on board with this. It may seem silly, but getting people invested in the character from the naming process forward can greatly assist play. To that end, make sure that each player suggests at least one name. When assigning traits to the characters (see below) you should record each one on the appropriate card.

To foster investment we, strangely enough, get everyone to invest in the characters. Going in a circle starting with the protagonist each player assigns one descriptive attribute to one of the friends or family members. Continue doing this until each member of the family, and the best friend, each have five traits. During this process no one is allowed to pass their turn, when you're up you *must* assign a trait to someone with fewer than five traits.

Once you've got the family and friend stocked with attributes you need to step back for a second and think about the girlfriend. She's the catalyst for your story, so make her interesting. As a group, spend some time brainstorming what makes her special. What are her interests, her talents, her passions, her hatreds? But don't forget that she's merely human. Talk about her odd habits, her phobias, her infuriating personality quirks, and her flaws. Once you're satisfied that everyone is on the same page, go around in a circle with

each player assigning a positive trait to the girlfriend. Then go around the circle again with each player assigning a linked negative trait. Linked negative traits should be related to the trait they are linked with, they can be as simple as the dark side of the original trait (“Self confidence” can become “arrogance” pretty easily), exceptions to the trait (“fearless”, “except for being terrified of snakes” comes to mind), or anything else your group agrees is appropriate.

The boyfriend doesn't get any stats or anything. In fact, the boyfriend isn't represented mechanically in the game at all.

You should now have six cards. Each one should have a name and a series of traits written down. One last set of stuff to put down: on each card write down “Relationship: 5”, on the girlfriend’s card also write down “Intimacy: 5”, and on everyone else’s card write down “Antagonism: 5”. These numbers will change in play, so it’s probably not a bad idea to use a pencil.

Framing Scenes

Each and every scene in the game will be framed by a player with the express intension of ratcheting up the tension. Each scene will have one and only one conflict in it. The conflict will always have the same stakes and will always concern the same thing: whether the antagonist moves a step closer to accepting the girlfriend or not.

This is a game about relationships in a crucible. All scenes are going to take place within the space of a day or two, a weekend visit. Framing scenes close together temporally is probably a good idea.

Anyone may frame a scene except for the player of the protagonist. The framing player picks a location for the scene to take place in and an activity to backdrop the scene. The activity could be anything from unloading the car after a long drive to a family dinner to shoveling snow on the driveway. Once a location and activity have been determined the framing player may choose any number of antagonist characters to take part in the scene. The protagonist character is in *every scene*, there are no exceptions. The player of the protagonist may also, at his discretion, include the girlfriend in any scene.

If the girlfriend is included in the scene then increase her Intimacy value by 1, she wants to spend time with the protagonist. If the girlfriend is not included in a scene then reduce her Intimacy value by 1. The girlfriend's Intimacy can reach 0 with no long term repercussions, but if you are required to reduce her Intimacy and it is at 0, reduce her Relationship instead.

Conflicts

The purpose of each scene is to drive toward conflict. Take as much time as you need to make the conflict powerful, but don't waste time dawdling. This is a skill that improves with time. So if you aren't a master at it at the beginning, don't worry, just keep trying.

The stakes of every conflict of the game are the same: do the antagonists come closer to realizing that they are in the wrong?

Mechanically, whenever the conflict comes up the antagonistic character will be rolling a number of d10s equal to their Antagonism. The protagonist will be rolling a number of dice equal to number of that character's traits that he is able to appeal to via narration (or any traits that are narrated by the antagonist player) used in this scene. This includes traits that are invoked once you start counting up the dice, but not traits that are brought into narration after the roll has been made. Utilizing traits is indicative of making a human connection with the antagonist; the protagonist is calling on the humanity of the antagonist to recognize that the girlfriend is human too.

If the girlfriend is also present in the scene then the protagonist may also utilize and of her positive traits that she exhibits to add dice, but the antagonist gets to use any of the girlfriend's negative traits to *subtract* dice from the protagonist's side. Both players roll their dice at the same time and then look at their highest die. Whoever has the highest value showing wins the conflict.

If the highest value is a tie, then compare the two next highest values. If those two are also a tie, check the next two. If all the values showing are ties, but one side rolled more dice than the other the side with the most dice wins. If both sides rolled the same number of dice and they are fully identical, roll again. Every conflict has an outcome, there are no ties.

If there are multiple antagonists in a scene they will all roll dice equal to their Antagonism and the protagonist will have to appeal to their traits separately. The protagonist player will then roll each set of dice separately against each set of dice from the different antagonists. If the girlfriend is present, the protagonist may allocate dice gained from her traits to use against whichever antagonist(s) he wishes, but each trait only provides a single die against a single antagonist. Further, any antagonist can utilize the girlfriend's negative traits to reduce dice allocated against them, and each antagonist can use each trait once. This means that two antagonists can utilize the same negative trait in the same scene.

Roll all the mini-conflicts at once time, keeping them separate, and then calculate the winners normally, re-rolling ties as needed.

If the protagonist wins the conflict then he has moved the antagonist in question one step closer to accepting the girlfriend and you reduce the antagonist's Antagonism by 1. If the antagonist wins the conflict then the protagonist has two choices: refuse to back down and maintain that he is correct even if he didn't convince the antagonist of that fact, or

back down from his defense of his girlfriend. If the protagonist doesn't back down then you reduce the antagonist's Relationship by 1.

If the protagonist backs down and the girlfriend is presenting the scene, then roll the current value of the girlfriend's relationship against 7 dice. If the 7 dice win then nothing happens, but if the girlfriend's relationship dice have the high die reduce the value of that relationship by 1.

As soon as a character's Relationship value (OR Antagonism value for antagonists) is reduced to zero set that character's card aside for evaluation during the endgame. If you remove an antagonist card from play, and don't trigger the endgame, then that character still exists, but can no longer have a mechanical impact on the game. The antagonist is free to participate in scenes, but doesn't get any dice. A change in behavior is usually appropriate for the antagonist based on whether they ran out of Relationship or Antagonism.

As soon as the either the girlfriend or all five antagonists are set aside for endgame in this way regular play stops and Endgame begins.

Endgame

Evaluating endgame: This is one of the most important steps of the game. You're almost done, but rather than skimp you need to finish with something powerful. Endgame consists of one last scene between the protagonist and each other character. While it is recommended that all scenes during regular play take place within a few days of each other, endgame scenes often benefit from the passage of years, or even decades from the events of regular play. The scenes can be played in any order and are intended to provide a sense of closure and consequences. This is important to play because you want to impress upon the protagonist how much power his choices had, and because you want to impress on the playgroup how powerful an issue racism can be.

One final important note about endgame: anything that survives the crucible of play survives it completely. This is a stressful time in all the characters' lives, and if they are able to retain even a scrap of their relationship then, given time, they can rebuild it. However, the reverse is also true. If the value of a relationship is reduced to 0, it is over forever. That bridge has been burned, and there are consequences for that.

Endgame is about pointing those consequences out. (For more on specific Endgame advice see the detailed character sections.)

The Characters

Each of the characters has a very specific role. Some details concerning thematic content and advice concerning playing each role effectively is provided below, separated by character. The important thing to remember about all that follows is that it is merely a set of guidelines. The purpose is to get your creative juices flowing so that the story you tell is powerful *for you*.

The Girlfriend

The role of the girlfriend is one loaded with thematic content: the outsider, justice, equality, and humanity are all a big part of her. The girlfriend is the world *as it should be*.

When you play the girlfriend you must play her *hard*. She genuinely loves the protagonist and really wants to make a good impression on his friends and family. Sure she's flawed, she's only human, but she *is* human. And as the girlfriend, that's the quality to emphasize: humanity.

As the story kicks off, the girlfriend just wants to be liked and accepted, but that can't last. The essence of the subtle, pervasive racism of the friends and family is, at its core, a form of dehumanization. Consciously or not, everyone is telling the girlfriend, to her face, that she is not fully human. No matter how your group ends up defining her personality, the girlfriend *will not stand for this*.

Keep an eye on your Intimacy. While the girlfriend wants to be liked by the protagonist's friends and family for his sake, what she really wants is his love and support. If your intimacy is consistently on its way down do something to make your displeasure known. A little honest discussion never hurt anyone, especially if it's terribly emotional.

The real key here is to turn up the pressure on the protagonist. From the girlfriend he needs to feel constant, and rising, pressure to defend her from his family and friends. Hurt looks, angry words, private tears, and anything else you can think of to impress on the protagonist that what his friends and family are doing is a terrible, terrible thing are all to the good.

If the girlfriend's Relationship value is driven to 0 then endgame is triggered immediately. This happens when the protagonist gives in one too many times to the pressure of his friends and family. He let's them dehumanize her without lifting a hand to stop it, without rushing to her defense. Ultimately, he approves through inaction their claim that she's not as much of a person as they are. There's only one response the girlfriend can make to such continued inaction: she leaves. Forever. She's gone from his life, never to return.

Use the girlfriend's falling relationship value as a good way to gauge how betrayed she feels by the protagonist. She's willing to make some allowances to try to keep trouble to a minimum, but she can only be pushed so far.

Endgame scene suggestions:

If the relationship survives then this scene can range across a huge number of options. A peaceful amicable breakup months later, a disintegration of the relationship from simple personality incompatibilities, or even marriage years down the line (weddings can make great endgame scenes).

If the relationship is destroyed then the obvious, and often most powerful, endgame scene is the one in which the girlfriend confronts the protagonist with his shortcoming and storms of hurt, possibly in tears, possibly in fury, possibly both. If you can come up with some other scene that illustrates the sheer *wrongness* of treating a human like something less, have at it.

The Antagonists

This section is about playing the antagonists in general, for more detailed treatments of the five antagonist characters see the following section.

It's important to play the antagonists as human. They're not bad people. In fact, for the most part, they're the best of people. They're kind, they're caring, and they certainly don't think that they are racist. Ask any of them on the street whether there's any real difference between black people and white people and they'd answer "no" without hesitation.

The problem with their racism is that it is subtle. It takes the form of cultural norms and a vague sense of discomfort. In order to avoid calling it racism the antagonists come up with other reasons for their discomfort. Some of these reasons are valid, even if they are wrong. They might raise the social difficulties of inter-racial marriage, they might suggest that children of inter-racial couples have a tough time as kids socially, they might raise potential problems of incompatible backgrounds.

These are all actually valid points. They wouldn't be in a just world, but they are in the world we live in. The antagonists represent the world *as it is*. That is, they represent the status quo, and they outnumber their opposition.

The key to the antagonists is their humanity. It takes care not to fall into the trap of playing the antagonists as pure bigots. The problem is that while racism is a fairly straightforward issue morally, it's a complex issue socially. The antagonists are earnest in their concerns, and if you give into the temptation to turn them into caricatures and straw men you severely weaken the theme of the whole game.

With that warning in place you must also remember that the antagonists *are* racist. They are, with no good justification, simply uncomfortable around the girlfriend. It is important that you convey this because it adds that much-needed edge of tension, that bite of human imperfection, to the game.

Playing the antagonists may be the most difficult part of the game. In addition to demonstrating the humanity of these people you also have to find a way to make the protagonist *care* about the consequences of his actions. From a semi-sterile seat at the game table it's easy to stick to your principles and face down your entire "family". Destroying those relationships has no real-world consequence so the player of the antagonist is challenged with making the in-game consequences seem real. Make the protagonist sweat, make it *painful* to realize that he's alienated his father, his mother, his brother, his sister, or his best friend *forever*.

By the same token, if the protagonist manages to destroy someone's antagonism play it up for all it's worth. He has managed to make someone a better human being, and that's no mean feat.

The different antagonists will tend to react differently to different endgame outcomes (these are covered below), but all of them have similar reactions to one of them. Specifically, if the antagonist makes it to endgame with both Antagonism and Relationship left (which requires the girlfriend to have run out of Relationship), the antagonist will continue on with the status quo. He or she has "convinced" the protagonist of the rightness of his or her position (whether this actually happens or not is beside the point, the antagonist believes it is so). This is a terribly tragic outcome as it indicates that the antagonist *did not grow as a character*. They gained nothing from their time in the crucible.

The Father

The father is the central figure of authority and discipline. He's also a major role-model figure. He's sort of the ideal suburban father. He takes the kids to the park on the weekends, he's there to help with homework, and he teaches important life lessons. In most games that's all going to be history due to the age of the characters, but it is important to keep in mind.

The father's endgame: If the relationship is destroyed we're talking about disowning. The protagonist may very well be written out of the will. The breaking of the relationship is perceived, by the father, as the ultimate act of rebellion. The protagonist refused to listen to the single most important piece of advice the father had ever given, and in so doing so forfeited the right to anything else the father has to offer. Play the father as a betrayed and grieving man, he never wanted any of this, it was all done against his will. Remember, make him human. This goes double if the girlfriend's relationship is also destroyed, but a great self-righteous "I told you so" is not enough to heal the damage. Nothing is.

If the antagonism is destroyed the blinders are off and the father realizes the truth of what he's been doing. Apologies are definitely called for. This is intensified because the father sees himself as a leader, and it's clear that his leadership has been in error. This can become heartbreaking if the girlfriend's relationship has also been destroyed. The father has realized the error of his ways too late to undo the terrible damage he's done, not only to his son, but also to an innocent woman.

The Mother

The mother is the nurturer. She embodies sacrifice and devotion. Playing her as a sort of real-life soccer mom can be productive as long as you manage to make her real and not a simple caricature. She's the one who stays home with the kids when they're sick, the one who reads stories to them, who teaches them to cook and clean and take care of themselves.

The mother's endgame: A destroyed relationship is a betrayal. All the tears and sweat and blood that she poured into her son have been for naught. He's learned nothing from her and has spurned her sacrifices.

Should the mother's antagonism be destroyed, a sort of revelation is appropriate. All the sacrifices she made have more than paid off. Her efforts have helped to raise up a man who is *better than she thought he was*.

The Big Brother

The brother is the primary role-model. He's the guy that every little brother wants to hang out with and to be like. He's also a protective kind of guy, subtly keeping an eye out for his little brother without becoming smothering.

The brother's endgame: the brother's endgame is much like that of the mother and father. Destroying the relationship is a form of betrayal, an expression that all that the brother did was unappreciated. Further, it's a spurning of the brother's friendship.

If the brother's antagonism is destroyed an interesting juxtaposition occurs. Where the brother had been the teacher before, he is the student now. He has been taught a valuable lesson, and he recognizes it as such.

The Little Sister

The sister is here to, among other things, provide an analog to the girlfriend. She's talented and, hopefully, engenders a sense of protectiveness in the protagonist. Playing her as an antagonist can be difficult because she doesn't seem to have any direct way of attacking the protagonist. And perhaps she doesn't, but that leaves all sorts of indirect ways. Some of the advice from the "girlfriend" section is applicable here too.

The sister's endgame: unlike the endgames of the father, mother, and brother, destruction of the sister's relationship is primarily focused on abandonment. The protagonist is supposed to be there to protect, guide, help, and support the sister and his failure to do so is devastating.

Destroying the sister's antagonism also presents us with a new sort of opportunity. The sister is able to approach the girlfriend directly as a new confidante and sort of step-sister. The sister's endgame can in this way be characterized as an extension of family.

The Best Friend

The best friend is a stand in for the relationships of childhood. The memories you share with those who inhabited your formative years are a powerful force. Those memories, and the sense of commitment that they engender is one of the most powerful tools in the friend's arsenal. Use the friend to recall the memories of all that has been, and try to evoke a sense that loss of the friend is symbolic of losing *all* of your childhood friendships.

One thing of special note is that the best friend is the only character without a specified gender or age relation. The gender you choose to assign to the best friend can have profound impact on the way your game plays out, as will the age (for example, the story in which the best friend is the 80 year old neighbor lady is far different than the story in which the best friend is the kid from down the street).

The friend's endgame: this is the most flexible endgame because the friend represents such a broad set of concepts. In some ways the friend is a catch-all character. Use the best friend to emphasize specific themes. Abandonment, betrayal, and contempt all make sense given the proper context here.

Some final notes about the game (rather than for it)

The roles in the game are pretty rigid I must admit. This is notably true of the gender roles. To some degree I can attribute this to a desire to simulate the actual problem of subtle racial inequality as it tends to happen. It is often found within the context of these traditional gender roles. Feel free to chasten me for my ignorance via email.

If I'm feeling honest (and I am at the moment), I'll admit that the gender roles existing as they do is probably an artifact of my deep immersion in them myself. That said, there's a reason that the boyfriend is the protagonist of this story, and I don't think that *this particular* story can be told if you make the girlfriend the protagonist and the boyfriend a supporting role.

However, I'm sure that the girlfriend as a protagonist makes for something wonderful and beautiful in its own right, so if you want to play that way be my guest. Just toss out most of my advice on character relations and do things your own way.

From this point on is just me blathering, if you don't want to get inside my head stop now...

Sitting here in the bleary, early hours of September 13, 2005 I find myself pleased and unsatisfied. The framework is solid, I'm pleased with that. The mechanics *seem* solid, but almost surely need balance. I picked starting values for things at 5 because it seemed the thing to do at the time. I have no idea what the actual reward cycle looks like because I have no idea what impact the numbers I picked will have on play.

I'm also terribly disappointed with my prose. It strikes me (and struck me as I wrote it) as barely functional, but I'm okay with that because prose can be cleaned up later.

And my final gripe is that I don't have a clear enough grasp of my archetypes. I think I've got a solid handle on the girlfriend, and a descent one on the father, but for the rest... I've got almost nothing. A cursory read of the "advice" regarding the last four archetypes should make that pretty clear.

All that said, this was most definitely worth the effort. It let me get a bit of this latent racism out of myself and out on the table to poke at, and that's valuable in and of itself. I also, perhaps a bit arrogantly, think that the core of the game is actually a potentially powerful tool for exploring some of the subtler social problems. You know, the ones that we all know and agree are wrong intellectually, but find ourselves covertly supporting if the truth be told.

So, there are a number of things that aren't right here, but the thing itself, the point of it all, definitely just what I needed it to be.

And finally, some notes about the text itself

The concept for this game was conceived primarily due to the nefarious influence of Ron

Edwards. This game owes him two debts: First, it wouldn't exist without the "Ronnies" awards, and second, if you take a look at Ron's game *Sorcerer* you'll see the blueprint of the dice mechanic used in *Suburban Crucible*.

Interestingly enough, I had absolutely no intention of designing a 24hour RPG to enter for the Ronnies. I had other stuff to do with my time. However, I found the project interesting and spent some time and effort keeping up with it. The evening of September 11, 2005 I noticed a comment by Ron that none of the entries had so far combined the word choices of "suburb" and "girlfriend". I thought to myself "Ah, that's interesting" and went to bed with no plans to do anything about it.

As I lay there trying to sleep I found myself distracted by a series of seemingly random thoughts. Eventually the one that drifted up and caught my attention was that the most "obvious" compelling treatment of "suburb" and "girlfriend" is the problem of subtle discrimination.

That this topic was even on my mind at the moment I attribute to three things, and none of them are my standard awareness of the issue as I must admit that I'm as guilty as anyone else: the recent happenings in New Orleans, specifically the accusations of racism that have boiled up; ongoing conversations regarding social justice with a friend of mine; and, strangely enough, a paper I wrote for a philosophy class on the nature of philosophical color incompatibility which I thought was utterly abysmal.

Anyway, for this game you have Ron, my fevered brain, current events, the company I keep, and the philosophy department of Auburn University to thank.

Thank you.

Thomas Robertson

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