Normality

A guide for prospective GMs

Indoctrination:

Normality is a new kind of roleplaying. At its best, it has allowed a near-telepathic level of communication between players – to the point where group goals were decided and furthered by the whole group without recourse to discussion. As the text itself can be intimidating to a GM unversed in the multiple layers of meaning contained in it, this guide presents a couple of ways to operate the game.

Part Juan: Fist Principals

The goal of Normality is to strip away all of the fluff that ordinarily separates players from the actions and interactions of their characters. The "fluff" I refer to is a layer built up of flippant player interaction, one-upmanship in conversation, digressions and jokes at the expense of the game. In many games this is not inappropriate, but it does allow players to have their characters do, say and experience repellent things, without any compunction or consequences.

Normality avoids this by having players as far as possible identify totally with their characters. This goal informs much of what seems to be random or incoherent about the game. By scrupulously avoiding a coherent setting and/or meta-plot for the game, we have forced people into using their subjective impressions of the characters they are to play.

Moreover, there are no blacks or whites in Normality – all is uniformly murky grey. It is inevitable that in the course of the game each of the characters will at least be party to some act ordinarily considered unforgivable. And they will not be forgiven.

Past Dues: Creationism

* **Characters** are created by taking words and sentences randomly from books in order to fill the headings written on a character sheet. You may use the same headings as we did, you may not. Players use the character sheet by scanning it for words and phrases which seem meaningful to them. These ideas are the ones they should use to construct their characters. The purpose of this exercise is to form an emotional bond between the player and their character.

  The process of creating a playable character for **Normality** can be compared to the process an actor goes through when they observe a mask they will be wearing. The actor must study the mask carefully before they put it on, so that they understand the character they are about to channel. Each character has an extra piece of paper labelled "Scars". This records physical and mental damage to the character in the form of the enduring marks it leaves them with, and serves in lieu of "hit points" or some other abstract mechanic.

* **The World** is created by the GM in the same way that the players create their characters – except that the GM uses the text of **Normality** rather than books chosen at random. Scan the text. Then read it from cover to cover (as far as possible) then scan it again, then sleep with it under your pillow for a couple of weeks. Once the resonance has built up in your soul to the point where you begin to get strong feelings of self-loathing you are ready to run the game. This may be done with or without artificial stimulants. If you have correctly conceived of the world, it should be impossible for the players to imagine their relationship to it in any terms other than violent opposition. Realism is not a viable option – aim for expressionism instead.

* **The initial situation** should be such that the players are forced to take dramatic action to escape. Moreover that action should rule out positive outcomes (at least as far as out-group social interactions) for the remainder of the game – i.e. they should be put into a situation where murder or some other similarly heinous crime is necessary for the survival of the group.

Parrot Tree: Run piggies run

Once you've got things rolling by forcing the characters to finally take some kind of decisive action, keeping it moving along is quite simple. The action you forced the players into initially should have created some impetus to leave wherever they started out, and other goals will invent themselves quite naturally as the rampage continues.

This is the point at which you start lying to the players – subtly at first, but slowly start telling bigger and bigger lies, with a straight face. Don't bother to correct any misapprehensions the players may have come into:

1. Misapprehensions will correct themselves – the same way that your delusion of having direct mental control of your molecular substructure will be corrected by an attempt to walk through a solid object.

2. Your end goal is a state where all of the players are becoming confused as to where the line is between fantasy and reality.

The best way to foster delusions in your players is to build on a theme, and always reinforce the rightness of their opinions – for example, say one of your players stabs a man in the throat with a shard of plexiglass during a robbery. You tell him that the other players now owe him their lives, because his **decisive action** saved the day.

Reward him every time he takes decisive or rash or violent action by intensifying the feeling of power he gets. You might even tell him he's developing superpowers related to speed and predatory violence. On the other hand, a player who correctly guessed when someone was lying to the group might develop more along the lines of increasing insight into the minds and hearts of others, and eventually become a psychic or some such. Be creative in fostering delusions of grandeur.

With five or six players going off the rails simultaneously things will go horribly wrong very fast. Always make it worse – never forgive and never forget.

Parched Fief: The end of days

When someone dies this is no reason to have them sit out the remainder of the game. Have them become a voice in players' heads, or haunt the group. One option is to buddy up your players (secretly) beforehand so you know who's going to end up in whose head if they die another would be to make them a "chorus" in the ancient Greek sense – able to comment on but not to affect events. A third option would be to have them as a delusion contained within the mind of one or more of the players – unable to reveal anything they do not already know, but perhaps able to further explain facts they've been exposed to.

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To bring the whole to a satisfying conclusion you have two options. I shall call these (for the sake of convenience) the "Pessimistic Version" and the "Darkly Optimistic" version. It is worth deciding on which of these versions you intend to present your players with at the outset.

* **The Pessimistic Version:** the players are deluded and doomed. All of the things you have been telling them about superpowers, psychic abilities, preternatural awareness etc. are lies without any sort of basis in truth. The players will undertake more and more drastically deranged and obscene actions until they are eventually cornered and put down like rabid dogs.

* **The Darkly Optimistic Version:** the players are actually able to affect reality. Something about the fallen and crippled state of the world has made it mutable, meaning that as players pursue a particular course of action a resonance is built up that changes them. Characters will in fact slowly mutate over the course of the game, and some kind of redemption either of the characters or (more likely) of the world is possible. The process may be fatal to one or more of them.

Park Sex: Factoids and exemplars

Some explanations as to what happened to make things the way that they are (mostly lies):

* The Maori Jesus was in fact the Messiah – when he was lobotomized, the slide into kleen barbarism began.

* Psychedelic/Psychic warfare has performed the same operation to the world's mental space as nuclear weapons did to Hiroshima.

* The G. W. Bush administration never left power and became a dynastic military regime.

* Magic, having been suppressed by scientific/capitalistic materialism and religious bigotry has begun seeping back into the world, but has turned septic in the interim.

* Things are heading that way right now if you're of a particularly cynical and fatalistic bent.

But really, there are plenty of alternative ideas you could come up with, up to and including the characters being taunted by demons for the sake of a thing they call a "roleplaying game".

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Techniques for mental deformation/brainwashing:

* Place two CD players at opposite sides of the room and play different CDs on each simultaneously.

* Do not allow Out Of Character interaction – treat everything a player says as a statement from their character at all times.

* Forbid out-of-gender roleplaying. Write the words "GENDER NAZI" on some portion of your body.

* Answer questions you consider foolish with nonsense.

* Have no mercy.

Things which have genuinely happened:

* A girl was raped by her teacher. She and her classmates dealt with this by murdering him and were later shot by police after their eventual killing spree expanded to include several innocent people.

* The pure magic of mythology was returned to the world in the form of a phoenix hatched from a cue ball.

* A woman was kidnapped from the street, rechristened and installed (singing her soul out) in a radio station as a sort of psychic beacon. This was what she was born to do.

* Several schoolchildren lost the ability to think independently of one another – becoming a primitive (and barely functional) group mind.

* A girl gained psychic abilities after following the telepathic instructions she was given by river dolphins. She had never seen dolphins or, for that matter, a river.

Afterward:

Normality is not a game to be feared. Embrace it and it will reward you with untold insight into the world and the people who fill it. You as yet do not comprehend what they will do, but you will learn and that is the way that science is.

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