

# **RED ROCK**



## **A POST-APOCALYPTIC GAME OF MEMORY AND FANTASY**

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## Introduction

No one knew what drew the handful of survivors to the abandoned industrial town, but when they reached Red Rock they found the Vicar waiting for them. As they work to build a new world the residents of the small community must face questions about the mysterious town as well as their own forgotten pasts.

## Characters

The residents of Red Rock drifted to the town one by one, haunted by images of disaster and clinging desperately to fragmentary memories and glimpses of their lives beyond the secluded town. Players assign five points to abilities that give an idea of the new character's strengths and skills, choosing no more than three traits. Depending on the tone of the campaign, abilities could include mutations or powers such as being able to see in the dark or phase through objects.

*Rook is the Red Rock's handyman. Even though he is generally personable, he lives in a small cabin on a mountain overlooking the town. His core abilities are*  
*fixing things 3*  
*keen memory 1*  
*sense of humor 1*



At the end of each adventure the player can roll for advancement. The player picks an ability and rolls one die for each current level. If all of the numbers are even the ability bumps up one level (up to a maximum of seven). If the player misses the roll, she gains an advancement point that can be used to replace an odd number during a future roll. Advancement points accumulate over time, but at least one of the dice rolled must show an even number for the player to use the points.

Instead of advancing existing abilities, players can opt to use a successful advancement roll to gain a new, narrower ability.

*Rook spent a week investigating a strange stone column rising above the hills south of Red Rock. After the adventure the player successfully rolls to improve keen memory but uses the point to gain trailblazing 1.*

In addition to basic abilities, each player character has story elements that help flesh out her background. Story elements are memories, dreams, places, or non-player characters that are significant to the PC. They provide a bonus to ability scores during actions.



PCs can have up to three story elements, but begin the game with a single element rated one. As the character adjusts to life in Red Rock and begins to remember her past she gains two more elements, one rated two and another rated three.

*Rook has a vivid recollection of drinking coffee at a diner (1). During an adventure, he is helping Saul look for any differences between two books that appeared in the library. Late at night he heads to the small cafe adjacent the ticket office and settles at the counter to read as fluorescent lights flicker and hum overhead. Connecting the job to the memory lets Rook add the diner score to his memory level, giving him a total ability score of two.*

There's no set mechanism for adding the remaining elements. The GM and player can use them to reflect the PC's relation to Red Rock and its residents or memories of pre-catastrophe life.

*A tile floor in an abandoned grocery store brings to mind playing chess with a young boy—possibly Rook's son. The player decides to use this as Rook's +3 story element.*

## Actions

When the outcome of an action is unclear, the player compares her ability score (plus any story element bonus) to a difficulty number from zero to ten determined by the GM. If the character's score is equal to or less than the difficulty number, the player rolls one die. An even number means that the action succeeds in some way. An odd number represents a setback ranging from outright failure to success with an unforeseen complication. The GM interprets the roll in light of the relative difficulty of the action and the needs of the story.

If the character's score is greater than the difficulty rating, the player rolls two dice. Any even results count as a success, while the GM interprets two odd numbers as a setback.

## The Setting

Red Rock is a small industrial town nestled between steep hills. A stream connects whitewashed houses and a general store to the wreckage of an old mill and the gloomy shop where locomotives still creak and sigh. A large school sits on a hillside overlooking the town.

The wreckage around the town hints at the area's past without giving definite answers. The mouth of a mine gapes from a hillside, while the old sawmill connects the community to logging. The twenty-three survivors have learned that most of the buildings—while appearing quite old—are actually in pristine condition and that the antique furnishings still function perfectly. More importantly, they discovered that whatever they needed always appeared in the town. The manifestations were subtle at first and often overlooked as the residents struggled with their experiences, but it soon became impossible to ignore or explain away the timely provisions of food and fuel or the appearance of lost mementoes.



The survivors who found their way to Red Rock don't know if anyone else remains on earth, and they have been unable to come up with a clear picture of exactly what happened—or even when the cataclysm struck. Player characters can have the skills and memories of people who led modern lives before the apocalypse or they can be wanderers who grew up many years after the cataclysm with memories of foraging for food and warring bands in the wastelands. PCs can also have conflicting memories of the disaster itself. Their impressions of arriving in the town are even more vague than their memories of life before Red Rock: a sense of urgency and flight, stumbling through forests at night or tumbling exhausted down a hillside, then awakening to see the Vicar's welcoming face.

The Vicar seems to have a clearer understanding of her life before Red Rock. She grew up in southern England near Brighton, and her rare references to her early life place her childhood a little before the First World War. The Vicar has an almost empathic understanding of the needs of the people who have found the town, although her knowledge of their past lives doesn't extend much beyond the glimpses and vague memories the survivors bring with them. She uses her abilities to help people settle into their new lives and as a leader relies on consensus building.

While the Vicar focuses most of her time and energy on building the community helping the survivors heal she is not opposed to the idea of exploring the world beyond Red Rock. Leah coordinates most of the expeditions beyond the hills surrounding the town. A nurse haunted by a dream children playing in a ruined schoolyard, Leah is convinced that other groups of survivors exist and that the people of Red Rock need to discover the nature of the apocalypse. She queries refugees for any information about their experiences before arriving in town and encourages survivors to explore the surrounding area.



Leah's efforts to explore the area have met with limited success. A single railroad runs out of town to the east. About a half mile outside of town the line becomes clogged with abandoned stock ranging from old Pullmans to graffiti-covered tankers from the late twentieth century. The townsfolk have scavenged supplies from the old cars, but have never been able to start any of the engines found in the town's shop or on the old railway. Trees and underbrush have grown through the rails beyond the abandoned cars, blocking the path.

A cracked two-lane highway leads out of town to the west. Isolated houses and gas stations appear occasionally along the road, and about ten miles outside of town a radio telescope rises from one of the hills. Parties have made it about fifty miles down the old highway, but have found no other survivors or even any other abandoned towns.



Narrow paths wind through the forested hills around the town. The survivors who currently live in the town made their way there through the woods, although it's been over three months since the last person appeared in the forest. The trails lead to old storage sheds and hunting cabins, broad lanes cleared as utility right of ways, and a couple of small ponds. Even though travel through the woods is slow, the townspeople have had more luck exploring the hills than the old highway. The contents of the old sheds seem to shift on a regular basis (Leah feels that someone has been using them), and strange spires of smoke sometimes drift above the trees.

No one from Red Rock has seen any animals in the area, although they can hear birdsongs when they are out of sight of the town. The Vicar has warned explorers to avoid following the songs—especially at night—but refuses to explain her concerns.

## GM Notes

Red Rock was created with a “sand box” style of play in mind. Player characters will have definite goals and adventures, but the most interesting parts of the game should come from fleshing out the world and working together to create a mysterious environment for the party to explore. Expeditions outside of the town to examine bizarre phenomena, scavenge supplies, and look for other survivors can provide frameworks for adventures along with helping NPCs trace their pasts.

You need to consider how the otherworldly characteristics of the town fit into the campaign. The appearances of supplies could be a way that the town itself is trying to nurture survivors, and the equipment gained this way a minor part of the game (e.g., food and candles). The manifestations could be more dramatic, although still beyond the control of the PCs. On the other hand, the survivors could be playing a role in the creation of the provisions. Perhaps the appearances are a strange power of the Vicar, or maybe they are outgrowths of the survivors dreams. The PCs might learn to control this ability, or find themselves facing a world shaped by their nightmares.

In addition to mystery and exploration, conflict can inspire scenarios in the shattered world of Red Rock. Leah and the Vicar’s differing visions of how Red Rock should evolve could move from disagreement to open tension, survivors who grew up before the apocalypse and those from post-apocalyptic background could form competing cliques, and misinterpreted memories could lead to conflict. Even though the setting is fairly stable at the beginning of the campaign, external forces could come into play as well. New arrivals could disrupt the order of the town, or hostile creatures could appear in the misty woods.

Story elements hint at the backgrounds of the characters and shape how the player interprets the PC. In the Red Rock setting, it’s generally better if the elements in a new party don’t overlap. This gives each player more room to flesh out her character, and also creates a more varied world.

Story elements can change and evolve although in a different way than abilities. If a story arc leads to a PC gaining a better grasp of a memory, learning the significance of a dream, or making her peace with the loss of a loved one, then you can work with the player to create a new element of the same level to replace the old one. This is different than adding the +2 and +3 elements as the player defines the character.

Players can use survivor NPCs and locations in Red Rock as story elements. Alternately, the GM and players could collaborate when introducing the setting before the first session of the campaign. After creating characters the players could describe one or two places in the town: an old post office with a soot-covered mural, a gutted police station, a cemetery with graves dating back to the American Revolution, etc.

## Inspirations

An internship at a museum in the former logging town of Cass, West Virginia, provided the initial inspiration for Red Rock. Many years later the 2013 National Game Design Month competition found me playing around with the idea of characters with lost memories that are regained over the course of the adventure. The post-apocalyptic exploration of memory in Chris Marker's short science fiction movie *La Jetée* was a huge influence, but Red Rock also owes debts to the Genesis song "Stagnation" and Hawkwind's "Ten Seconds of Forever."



Red Rock owes a special debt to Johanna Haas for her general benevolent influence, good humor, and her musings on how to stat story elements.

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