Avert the Apocalypse

A Powered by the Apocalypse Game
about Dancing With the Singularity

Setting

In the year 120 of the Interstellar Era (120 I.E) the Earth was consumed by a runaway technological singularity. The news propagated across interstellar gulfs between human colonies, carried by slower-than-light vehicles. Within fifty years, the news shook every human alive, creating a pall of dread and lurking panic in every human culture.

At Sol System, interstellar vehicles, newly arrived from several colonies, studied the disaster. The science of Teleotics, invented 140 years earlier, provided a projection of the future. Every world was at risk of a Singularity implosion. In addition, any given Singularity might produce "spores" that could travel interstellar distances to infect other worlds. The best estimates gave human civilization a 3,000 years before the Singularity Plague broke out of some planet and consumed all. The ragtag collection of interstellar travellers, hanging at the edge of the solar system beyond the reach of the infected Earth, formed the Quarantine Coalition (QC). The QC set out to control the threat of singularity implosion throughout the human colonies scattered among nearby stars.

Teleotics offered a means of managing sociotechnological development. With such guidance, the doom might be delayed, perhaps indefinitely.

Interstellar vehicles returned to their home colonies carrying the message of the QC: control technology or face the total destruction. Each world responded in its own quixotic way: some enacted Draconian anti-technology laws, others fell into denial, and still others channeled their fear into backbiting and blaming their neighbors.

Frustrated, QC teams attempted the first experiments in Teleotic manipulation. As these succeeded in changing the attitudes of whole worlds, the new science was proved and refined.

Through the next century, the QC established covert "Institutes" on many worlds, connected by a small fleet of interstellar vehicles. These "Mobile" teams traveled from star to star, on a set circuit of worlds. Their long periods of isolation and low investment in local culture and politics, proved invaluable in maintaining the outside perspective necessary to effective Teleotic analysis.

Because most colonies could detect the incoming flare of a decelerating Interstellar Vehicle, Mobile Teams began to pose as trading vessels to maintain their anonymity. The QC's confidence in its mission grew.

It is year 602 of the Interstellar Era. You are a member of an Intervention Team preparing to make landfall on a world you have not visited for decades. Frequent travel near light speed and stays in suspended animation mean that only a handful of years have passed for you.

Setting Fundamentals

This setting is designed to emphasize the themes such as: How do we retain our humanity as technology gives us greater and greater power? What do we do about technology that may change our very nature? What does it mean to be human? What do we want to become?

To turn the players toward these themes, the setting has been designed with certain constraints. These provide pressures that create a unique set of thematic questions and dramatic tension. Be warned: if you change one of these constraints, you will be playing a whole new story.

The Long Jump. One of the features of this setting is the lack of faster-than-light travel. Interstellar Vehicles traverse the distance between stellar colonies at near light speed but cannot exceed it. This means: 1) Interstellar empires don't exist--it just takes too many years to send supplies and reinforcements to an occupation fleet. 2) Teleotics teams, travelling between stars, are often cut off in time. They experience jumps into the future without experiencing the intervening day-to-day evolution of a given planet. 3) Knowledge, technology, passengers, genetic material, works of art, and extreme luxury goods are the cost-effective trade goods. No-one ships thousands of tonnes of grain or oil for the decades-long jumps between stars.

Singularity Implosion. High technology, unchecked and unguided, always reaches a tipping point where it hurtles into a singularity. So far, the outcome of this has been bad, destroying Earth--and perhaps one or two other major colonies, if your group wants to add that to the backstory. Highly abstract Teleotics analysis indicates that there should be a way to "transcend" without imploding, but the path to achieve "the stable configuration" remains obscure--and the object of *very* cautious research and experimentation by Teloticians.

The exact nature each implosion is up to your group: was the planet consumed by grey goo? Is there an electromagnetic field that assimilates all consciousness? Did sudden war break out between uploaded, enhanced, super-intelligences, leading to obliteration of all life on the planet in a nuclear firestorm? It's up to you.

Teleotics Interventions. Game sessions will focus around interventions (and, sometimes, research experiments) in the development of a planet's culture, social organization, and technology. Teleotics (like Asimov's psychohistory) works best when the subjects don't know they are being manipulated--so remaining covert is essential.

Player Characters are Dedicated to the Goal. Teleotics teams only recruit individuals dedicated to the goal of heading off singularity implosions and/or finding the path to a stable transition beyond the singularity. Characters that don't live up to these expectations will be left at the next habitable planet, or placed in indefinite hypersleep if they prove dangerous to the

cause. In the field, any and all means may be used to curtail the actions of rogue team members.

It's a Human Universe. Humans have to deal with their own problems. Wise and/or powerful aliens and alien entities do not appear. On the other hand, aliens weaker than humanity may appear as a way of exploring how we treat those with less power than ourselves.

Agendas and Principles

What are we playing for? Why are we here?

We play the game…
1. To make the players' characters' lives not boring.
2. To find out what happens.
3. To explore themes of societal shifts and social engineering

What do we seek to do whenever we speak?
- Make every place feel lived on and alive
- Make the universe seem real and plausible
- Build a bigger universe through play
- Create interesting dilemmas, not interesting plots
- Address yourself to the characters, not the players
- Make your move, but never speak its name
- Look at your NPCs and ideas through crosshairs
- Name everyone, make everyone human
- Ask provocative questions and build on the answers
- Respond with challenging circumstances and occasional rewards
- Be a fan of the players' characters
- Think offscreen, too
- Sometimes, reflect a question back upon the players
- Make engineering the future both risky and necessary
- Acknowledge both the infinite possibility and harsh reality of the universe

Character Creation

To create a character, make the following decisions.

1. Choose a **name**.
2. Choose a **background** - a planet of origin and a reason why you are no longer on that planet. You should think about the level of technology you're familiar with, your customs and ways, and anything else that will flesh out your character as a real person.
3. Assign values to your five **stats**.
4. For each stat, pick five **conditions** that you can take when things go badly for you.
5. Pick three **qualities** that describe your character's competencies. If you want a character to have different qualities, work with the MC to define them.
6. Mark an **Affinity** of +1 with one PC, and -1 with another PC. Your Affinity with all other PCs starts at +0.

Stats

Your five stats are **Move**, **Talk**, **Act**, **Think**, and **Find**.

When the game begins, assign a value of +2 to one stat, a value of +1 to any two stats, a value of +0 to one stat, and a value of -1 to your remaining stat. When a rule tells you "roll +stat", roll 2d6 and add the value of the stat to the roll.

- **Move** is your ability to be graceful or dextrous. It's speed, reflexes, and timing.
- **Talk** is your ability to be persuasive, assertive, or influential. It's presence, diplomacy, and deceit.
- **Act** is your ability to be aggressive or forceful. It's getting things done, deeds not words, and muscle (not necessarily physical).
- **Think** is your ability to be calculating or methodical. It's reasoning, wits, and cleverness.
- **Find** is your ability to be inquisitive or exploratory. It's observation, discretion, and awareness.

Conditions

For each stat (Move, Talk, Act, Think, Find), define a **condition**. A condition is a freeform description of how your character is injured, indisposed, or otherwise harmed by events in the game, paired with a description for how that condition can be cleared.

Conditions should speak to the character's role in the game and help develop the character. For example, it's common in fiction for a soldier or secret agent to come back from a mission bruised, battered, and bleeding, but not the wise-cracking hacker or the gentle medic. That soldier might have a condition tied to Act, described as "bloodied and hurting", which is cleared after a suitable application of medical aid.

When you are inflicted with a condition, you take a -2 penalty on all rolls with the associated stat until the condition is cleared.

The specifics of a condition are not binding. If you write "leg hurt and limping" for a Move Condition, you don't have to take leg damage to take a penalty to Move, and a Move-related condition doesn't necessarily mean your legs are hurt. Instead, conditions signal to the rest of the group the sorts of injuries and problems your character ought to typically face.

Qualities

If you are **barbaric**, add +1 when you pit cunning and primitive tricks against high-tech opposition. Mark XP when your ignorance causes a loss or setback to your cause.

If you are **dangerous**, add +1 whenever you violently engage in combat with somebody. Mark XP if you brutally kill somebody who would have been a useful prisoner or ally.

If you are **diplomatic**, add +1 whenever you use smooth persuasion to negotiate a situation. Mark XP if you get the party into hot water by trusting the opposition to talk in good faith.

If you are **jacked in**, add +1 whenever you are hacking a computer system. Mark XP if you trip an alarm and get an infiltration team into hot water.

If you are **logical**, you can use +Think instead of +Talk when persuading someone, as long as you use well-reasoned arguments instead of appeals to emotion. Mark XP if you alienate someone through your cold attitude.

If you are **robotic**, you can be harmed by EMP and anti-robot weapons but not by stun weapons. You can be healed through gadgeteering and repair actions, but not through medical aid. Mark XP if your nature is discovered and alienates allies.

If you are **scientific**, you can use +Think instead of +Find to notice something if your science training would be useful. Mark XP if you stand around analyzing instead of acting when necessary.

If you are **sneaky**, add +1 when you are actively trying to avoid detection and have a way to do so. Mark XP if you can't be found at a crucial moment.

If you are **technical**, add +1 whenever you are working with high-tech systems. Mark XP if you over-engineer something that subsequently fails.

Writing New Qualities

To write a new quality for your character, figure out the benefit:

- When you do something relating to [specialty], add +1.
- You have the ability to [do some sort of active special power]. It counts as a basic move using [stat].
- You have [some passive special power that has a constant effect].
- You have a [thing]. When applicable, it adds +1 to [stat] and [stat].

Then give the quality a downside. If that downside comes into play, mark XP.

For example, a player wants to create a Machiavellian manipulator, and creates the following quality:

If you are **scheming**, add +1 to attempts at memetic engineering within a faction. Mark XP if you doom or harm the faction through your plotting.

Advancement

Your character grows and changes during play.

When a rule tells you to mark XP, make a hash mark or record it somewhere on your character sheet. You always mark XP when you roll a 6 or less on a roll. Your qualities also provide ways for you to gain XP.

When you accumulate 6 XP, choose an option from the following list.

- Add a new quality from the list - you can take this at most two times
- Replace one of your qualities with another one
- Raise one of your stats by +1 (maximum of +2) - you can take this at most three times

If a stat is raised, you can optionally change the condition associated with that stat.

Angles

At the beginning of every new mission or story arc, each character may declare an **angle**. Angles represent the character's own goals coming to the forefront, and might conflict with the overall team's objectives.

An angle can be one of the following:

- A specific side goal, or a specific way of accomplishing the mission, that comes at substantial cost or extra difficulty. You don't have to declare this sort of angle until you know enough about the mission to do so.
- A personal ambition, such as a change in relationship with a specific PC or NPC, or the spread of a preferred meme.
- Anything else that goes over and above the team's main mission, comes at a cost, and develops your character's personality, story, or goals.

Upon completing the story arc (whether the mission was successful or not), mark XP for each other PC whose angle you either actively aided or actively opposed, and raise your affinity with that PC by 1.

Moves

Moves are **mandatory**. If you describe something in the fiction that triggers a move, resolve the move using the rules provided.

Moves are **fiction-first**. You cannot invoke a move's rules without narrating something that would trigger the move.

When you roll 6 or lower on a Move, mark XP. The MC gets to make a hard move against you.

MC Moves

- Separate the characters
- Bring the characters together
- Put someone in a high-stakes situation
- Trade harm for harm
- Deal conditions or other harm
- Announce off-screen badness
- Announce future badness
- Give them a difficult decision to make
- Tell them the possible consequences and ask
- Turn their move back on them
- Alter their relationship with a faction
- Reveal the purpose or a key truth of a faction
- Engage in political or social shenanigans within or with a faction
- Make a move from one of your factions or existential threats
- Explore the ramifications of a meme
- Complicate their use of high technology
- Introduce some surprising or game-changing tech

Basic Moves

When you…
...do something requiring coordination, deftness, reflexes, timing, or grace, roll +Move.
...persuade, intimidate, deceive, or otherwise influence someone, roll +Talk.
...act aggressively, forcefully, forwardly, or decisively, such as in combat, roll +Act.
...think, reason, or employ logic and rationality to a situation, roll +Think.
...seek, inquire, discover, notice, or otherwise learn more about a situation, roll +Find.
On 10+, you succeed at your stated goal. As appropriate, the MC might award a resource point, harm dealt to the opposition, or a bonus to carry forward. On a 7-9, the MC will offer you a hard bargain or a cost. If you agree to that hard bargain or cost, you succeed at your goal (and as appropriate, the MC might award you resource points, harm dealt, or a bonus to carry forward).

When you help or hinder a fellow PC, roll +Affinity with that person. On a 10+, hold three. On a 7-9, hold one. Spend hold to let the other PC take +1 forward on a roll for the duration of your assistance. If the other PC makes a move that comes at a cost, you share in that cost. Spend 1 hold to keep out of harm's way and avoid this cost.

When you help or hinder an NPC, roll your +Affinity with that person or their faction. On a 10+, they either succeed or fail – your choice. On a 7-9, the MC will name a cost; if you accept the cost, they either succeed or fail – your choice.

Action Moves

When you engage a direct threat in close combat, roll +Act and trade blows. On a 10+, choose two of the following; on a 7-9, choose 1.
- You avoid harm from your opponent
- You put your opponent in a bad situation; take +1 forward on the next attack against them
- You obtain some specific advantage or achieve some specific goal (disarm the opponent, steal something from them, etc.)

When you engage someone at range with ranged weapons or maneuvering, roll +Move and inflict harm. On a 10+, you choose one of the following options; on a 7-9, the MC picks one.
- You take return fire
- You expend more than you expected (ammunition, energy cells, time, etc.)
- You are forced into an unfavorable circumstance or position

When you engage in vehicular conflict with someone else, roll +Move (when dodging, flying nimbly, or doing tricky maneuvers) or +Act (when using the vehicle's power or mass to your advantage). On a 10+, choose one of the following options. On a 7-9, the MC will offer you a complication or cost; if you accept, choose an option.
- Increase or decrease range to another vehicle
- Obtain concealment or cover from another vehicle
- Wipe out one of several weaker pursuing vehicles, or damage a larger one
- Achieve some specific goal (moving personnel from one vehicle to another, etc.)

When you bypass security to get access to something or somewhere, roll +Move (using stealth), +Talk (deceit or fast-talk), or +Think (electronic breakins). On a 10+, you gain some level of access; ask a question or proceed with your next action. On a 7-9, the MC offers you a cost or hard bargain; if you accept, you gain limited access.

When you work to obtain some useful device, roll +Move (for mechanical or fragile physical things), +Think (for complex high-tech or electronic systems), or +Find (to scavenge or locate an existing gadget from a likely location). On a 10+, you get a gadget which is functional for its intended purpose. On a 7-9, the MC declares a conditional cost to make the gadget work, or announces ways that it might fail; if you accept the cost, you have the gadget.

When you encounter a new faction, mark an Affinity with them at -1. Affinity cannot go below -1 or go above +2, regardless of instructions to raise or lower it.

When you spread a new meme or reinforce an existing meme within a faction, roll +Affinity. On a 10+, craft a new meme with two of the four tags listed below, or add one tag to an existing meme. On a 7-9, the MC can declare that the meme mutates, a formerly unknown factor intervenes, or some other drawback; if you accept this, treat as a 10+ result. Subsequent events can add or remove tags to the meme.
- **Transmissible**: the meme is easy to spread throughout the population
- **Novel**: the meme is both unique enough to spread on its own and not foreign enough to be rejected
- **Beneficial**: the meme provides some survival benefit to the population
- **Memorable**: the meme is stable and not prone to mutation or being forgotten

The MC determines the consequences of the meme's spread.

When you hinder an existing meme within a faction, roll +Affinity. On a 10+, remove two qualities from the target meme. On a 7-9, the MC can offer a bargain or cost; if you accept, remove two qualities, otherwise remove one. Memes with no active qualities quickly cease to spread.

When you ask a faction for assistance, roll +Affinity. On a 10+, hold three Aid. On a 7-9, hold one. Spend Aid to get any of the following:
- The faction comes to your assistance at a crucial moment
- The faction supplies important equipment, facilities, or expertise

Creating Factions

To create a faction, decide the following things:
- A **name**
- A **purpose** for existing
- Three **key truths** about the faction

When the characters learn a key truth about a faction, raise their Affinity with that faction by 1. Affinity cannot be raised past 2.

When the characters change a key truth or purpose through memetic engineering, lower Affinity by 1 for each key truth that was disrupted, or automatically to -1 if the purpose was disrupted. Affinity cannot fall below -1.

Sample Character

Name: D7

Background: Synthetic lifeform created by the Teleotics Institute for use on ships and during missions. Bound by programmed directives. May pass as a human being.

Stats: Move +1, Talk -1, Act +1, Think +2, Find +0

Conditions:

- ❏ **Move**: D7 has taken physical damage and moves in an uncoordinated, jerky fashion. Clear after a session of technical work in a well-equipped repair shop.
- ❏ **Talk**: D7 is a logical and inhuman machine and is unable to properly relate to human beings or effectively persuade them. Clear after the situation is clearly and rationally explained to him.
- ❏ **Act**: D7 is low on power or grievously injured physically. Innards may be showing. Clear after a session of technical work in a well-equipped repair shop.
- ❏ **Think**: D7's processor or sensors are damaged and he's not computing clearly. Clear after several hours of low-stimulus hibernation.
- ❏ **Find**: D7 becomes obsessed with the minutiae of a particular question and goes off on a tangent. Clear after being given a new problem to solve.

Qualities:

- ● **Logical**: you can use +Think instead of +Talk when persuading someone, as long as you use well-reasoned arguments instead of appeals to emotion. Mark XP if you alienate someone through your cold attitude.
- ● **Robotic**: you can be harmed by EMP and antirobot weapons but not by stun weapons. You can be healed through gadgeteering and repair actions, but not through medical aid. Mark XP if your nature is discovered and alienates allies.
- ● **Technical**: add +1 whenever you are working with hightech systems. Mark XP if you overengineer something that subsequently fails.

Sample Faction

Name: Kindisale Human Association ("Spacers")
Purpose: To survive the decline and fall of Peppermile.
Key Truths:

- **We're Doomed**. The ecology of Peppermile is threatened by politics, so we're trading in computing equipment and other resources to try and terraform Tenorvale. This might not work, but we'd take exodus from the star system aboard a trading vessel as a fallback plan.
- **Secret Origin**. We know about the origin of the colonists, but we don't want to tell anyone, for fear that somebody will travel there and bring the Mad Machine God to us.
- **Forbidden Supercomputer**. We are building the VETTE - the Virtual Earth Tenorvale Terraforming Engine - to solve the technical problems of making the new moon habitable. This computer system could lead to a runaway singularity, but we're willing to risk it.