

An example of world and game making for Powered By the Apocalypse¹

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¹ Inspired by the amazing SimpleWorld of Avery Alder

This document describes some ways to make a Powered By the Apocalypse game. It should support reskins, GM's looking for setting ideas, and help building a custom class. It also supports deep hacks that play with the fundamentals of the game. If you were hoping for Skeleton World, the PBTA rpg, it's at the end.

There's three ways to use this document. One is around a table and build the game the table wants to play together. Another is to pick and choose bits from it to help you explore an idea. I like to pick randomly at each stage, forcing just the right amount of constraints that there can only be one solution for each thing from stat to archetype to individual move, taking me outside where I can get normally.

Size

Choose one:

Tight game: one themed additional mechanic²

Balanced tension game: two themed additional mechanics³

Focused big game: one themed additional mechanic, second theme present as a stat.⁴

You need a fast, nuanced strong hit / weak hit / fail generator⁵ and a theme and a genre. This will give you an Agenda and Principles. These will give you GM moves.

Choose at least two and normally four or five: Stats, Basic Moves, Playbooks, Development, Scenario Moves, Inserts, Tags.

² An example is Apocalypse World, which ties everything to destruction

³ An example is Urban Shadows, which introduces Debts and Corruption

⁴ An example is the Sprawl, which adds synth as a stat for cyberwear

⁵ The standard method is two six-sided dice with margins set at -6, 7-9 and 10+. This can be easily mapped to other types of dice. Cards are slower but can work. Dream Askew used tokens. I'm intrigued by rock/paper/scissors but there are game flow implications

Genre

What genre (or mashup) do you all want to play in? You may know, if not pick one or two from each below:

ancient legends	steampunk	cold war
high fantasy	Victoriana	diesel punk
low fantasy	colonial	urban fantasy
grim fantasy	1920s pulp	slice-of-life
age of sail	superhero comic	alternate history
mediaeval	weird world war	dystopia
pike and musket	biopunk	hard sci fi

solarpunk	post-apocalypse
cyberpunk	space opera

(Optional) Party is

circus	smugglers	operatives
first responders	traders	rebels
mercenaries	investigators	police
city gaurds	boarding school	refugees
criminal gang	university dept	outsiders
merchant convoy	neighbours	beaurecrats
monster hunters	village	

Theme

What feeling or thing is this game about? Choose one or two, eg
 "What would you do for X" or "Is X more important then Y?"

balance	friendship	pain
belief	glory	revenge
change	honour	unity
comfort	hunger	survival
destruction	justice	violence
corruption	knowledge	wealth
family	law/tradition
freedom	love

If you aren't sure, take a read of the Theme Deconstruction Section at the end of the document.

Stats

Aim for the fewest number you need. Keep them simple, memorable, and immediately highlighting the difference in how different characters approach challenges. A good example is Versed, Young, Gendered, Wyrd from Sagas of the Icelanders. It clearly spells out what is the important differences between two characters.

Choose one set and rename for your genre, or mix and match between sets:

1. Fighter, Thief, Wizard
2. Social Circles, Danger Triangles, True Squares, Stitched Crosses
3. Assertive, Persuasive, Curious, Methodical, Confident⁶

Or choose them by Genre, either on skills, common environments or to support basic skills you expect all players to need:

⁶ this one is loosely based on the Big Five Personality model

- a. Space, Robots, Lasers, Feelings
- b. Honour, Rice, Ki
- c. Fate, Power, Control

Allocating stats

WIP

If no stats

If you are not having stats, there's three ways to handle it

1. Just roll and rely on the nature of the moves for variety.
2. Mark each move for basic/good/advanced. Basically treat each move as it's own stat, similar to a skill based game engine. Example Exo-adventurers or the John Harper hack that isn't called Blades in the Portals
3. Use ephemeral stats like Roll+bodies searched or Roll+Hands free. Be careful with this. If it is going to be tracked from scene to scene (like number of eyes) just make it a stat and let them write it on their character sheet.

Basic Moves

Ideally start players with seven or less moves to remember. I tend to split it as five basic moves, two playbook moves. I tend to have one basic move per stat. The core of a basic move should be "Take thematic action"⁷. Examples of thematic basic moves are offered in the Theme deconstruction sections. All Basic moves should be thematic. They should also support play. Often a player character will want a genre (not generic) version of:

- a. Get information
- b. Persuade/seduce
- c. Help/Interfere with another player
- d. Buy/get things
- e. Mortal peril ⁸

⁷ EG Apocalypse World "Open your brain" to the maelstrom to shift the status quo, while Urban Shadows has you "let it out", risking probable corruption in return for supernatural power

⁸ well, they might not want it, but they may need it

Get information

This is often in the format of roll+stat and get hold, spend hold to ask questions. The use of hold allows players to develop lines of inquiry as more information becomes available in the scene, rather than the distraction of forcing rerolling many times. The questions available to be asked are often listed and the choice of what can be asked is important, it tells the player what their character thinks is important about the genre. The Sprawl, (mission based cyber-punk),

has "Read A Situation", Urban Shadows (political urban fantasy) has "Figure Someone Out". Players will act on the information they get. If you make them ask thematic questions they often end up taking thematic action.

Persuade/Seduce

The challenge with this move is balancing the requirements of the genre/theme (in a Noir game, the Femme Fatale must be able to manipulate the other archetypes) and , zooming out a little, balance the social contract of the table and the expectation that players have of their own agency. Storyteller-type players might be happy to sacrifice character agency in return for the ability to add plot twists or elements of world building. Actor-type players might be happy to give up all power outside their character's internal thoughts and decisions, but will hate anything that intrudes on the territory that they do control.

There are a few options:

- 1) Make the move apply to NPCs only. Get players to negotiate if their characters act on each other. This is only going to be ok in games where the player characters are supposed to be aligned team-workers and where persuasion isn't a big thing in genre, like Fellowship⁹.
- 2) Make two moves, one for manipulating NPCs and one for manipulating PCs. This is typically set as a standard move for NPCs and offers an extra carrot/stick for PC players to go along with your plan. This can work well for cinematic games where the player may want to get their character into thematic trouble. The Regiment has a move called "Impose Will" which uses only stick, but who the hell plays an Army themed game and doesn't expect to need to take orders?
- 3) Make one move, ignore PC agency. This will earn you some hate-mail, but can work well in games where players have other ways to influence the story then just their player actions.

⁹ citation needed

Help/Interfere with another player

The basic form is "When you help someone or hinder them, roll your relationship stat with that person. On a 10+ add or subtract 2 from their roll. On a 7-9, the MC will name a cost, if you accept this cost, then add or subtract two from their roll.

The exact nature of the relationship stat shifts between games, normally plugging into other mechanics. In Apocalypse World the Hx stat is constantly changing and is a source of character advancement. In the Sprawl the Links stat is mostly static, but sets up the initial threat clocks of different mega-corps. In Urban Shadows it is faction

based, but also driven by the powerful Debt moves.

In a PBTA game, I think it is best to avoid allowing players to 'defend' against each other by making opposing rolls. It makes the format of moves break down and some complex snarls in the fiction to develop which distract from moving the story forwards. It's like the tennis ball hitting the net instead of being passed back and forth in a volley. Instead, the help/interfere move of the second player alters the chance of the first player changing the fiction the way they want to.

Buy/get things

I have included it here, because most PBTA rulebooks do address it, but as story driven themed games, shopping and equipment and gear tends to be of secondary importance. Examples of thematically addressing it are The Sprawl's move for getting additional cyberware installed where you have to choose between dangerous back alley docs or villainous megacorps. Apocalypse World has a barter move to cover sourcing 'some particular thing where it's not obvious you should be able to go buy it just like that', as a way to convey the Scarcity theme of the world, but allowing the players to perhaps drive the story further than a blanket 'no, you can't buy that.'. Both moves are all about giving players what they want, perhaps at a cost, and giving the GM some more hooks or levers to pull to put the characters into more interesting situations.

Mortal Peril

There are two branches to this move. The first is a catch-all "Take action under pressure" move that can be the main point of weakness in a game if the GM is forced to rely on it too much. The second branch is the move that kicks in should a player character actually die. It tends not to be something that comes up often in pbta games but when it does it should be important to the story, and the rules often support a gm making a big deal of it. Urban Shadows gives each playbook it's own 'in case of death' move. Dungeon World gives the player the option to become 'Death's Own', accepting that that character WILL die, but at the climax of a particular narrative arc. The common basic move for 'running out of health' allows you to choose between taking a new character, changing playbook or taking a permanent hit to your character (normally a stat reduction).

Agenda

The GM Agenda is always:

- Play to find out what happens
- Don't waste your players time
- Deliver the world according to the genre setting
- Deliver action in line with the theme

In other words, don't railroad your players but do respect the logic of the story world, the fiction. Don't pre-write a story that ignores them effecting the world and don't space out or make them grind for the cool moments 'just because it feels like they haven't worked hard enough.' It can be a weird temptation as a GM, perhaps because the creativity required can feel tiring and you just want them to roll grinding dice checks for 15 min while you take a break. We'll cover techniques to help avoid that tiring feeling in the GM principles section.

GM Principles

- |— sprinkle evocative details everywhere
- |— make the world seem real
- |— name everyone, make everyone human
- |— build a bigger world through play
- |— create interesting dilemmas not interesting plots
- |— address yourself to the characters not players
- |— be a fan of the players characters
- |— destroy your creations, don't protect them.
- |— make your move but misdirect
- |— make your move, but never speak its name
- |— ask provocative questions and build on the answers
- |— sometimes, reflect a question back upon the players
- |— think off screen too
- |— + Additional from the theme (see Theme Deconstruction section)

Rewrite these to suit your genre. An example is "Barf Forth Apocalyptica" replacing "sprinkle evocative details everywhere." The word choice isn't critical, but you want to tone of the writing to help get the GM in the mood.¹⁰

¹⁰ "getting you in the mood" is why I think Apocalypse World calls the Games Master the Master Of Ceremonies. You are not about controlling the situation. You are about introducing each player character as an act that gets their own time in the spotlight and keeping the show moving.

It may seem weak that the GM principles are so similar between different genre games and experiences, but that's because the first four are about world building, the next four are about managing your ego (MC, not GM!) and the last five are about ways to improvise that aren't as tiring as thinking up a plausible monster biology every five minutes. The final one of course, will vary with theme.

I am not going to go into a deep explanation of them all here, as I am kind of assuming you've played a few PBTA games before trying to write one. If you really need help, buy and read *Apocalypse World* as it has a strong guide with many examples of getting it right, or how to correct if you feel you have got it wrong.

GM moves

- | put the spotlight on someone
- | separate them
- | put them together
- | make their lives complicated now
- | give them a difficult decision to make
- | offer an opportunity, with or without a cost
- | offer stuff that's painfully expensive but good
- | tell them the possible consequences and ask
- | turn a failed move back on them
- | use up their resources
- | activate stuff's bad side
- | use a front or threat move
- | + Additional from the theme (see Theme Deconstruction section)

In the same way, I am not going into detail the GM moves or how to use the standard ones. The first four moves are about ways to move player characters about. There's no reason to have them all in the same place or working in perfect agreement all the time. Think of the beautiful jump-cuts of a heist movie where a separated team work together versus the intimate squabbling of a sitcom or the rolling partial scenes of a Shakespearean Play. It's something that many players have been trained out of or picked from cultural osmosis (never split the party!), and the onus is on you to shuffle them

around to keep their characters uncomfortable and the players grinning. The next four moves are all about giving your player's agency, opportunities to make meaningful decisions. My favourite one I ever managed was a cyberpunk game where the player was hanging off a crashed skyrail. "You see someone tumbling towards you, that punk with a hook for a hand. You can try to grab him as he goes past, but you can't quite be sure which of his flailing hands you'll get. Otherwise he's a deadman. What do you do?"

This has obvious overlaps too with the next four items: setting up clear consequences. Generally, players won't mind horrific consequences if they knew the risk going in. "you fail to close the portal, in fact it rips wide open, it's now far too wide for just the three of you to stop anyone coming out." In this vein, reminding them that stuff has a bad side makes it seem less arbitrary when you activate it. "If you use grenades here, you risk destabilising the whole reactor." This also blurs back into "Tell the consequences and ask". The level of overlap here is your friend, don't get too worried about the specific move. Just stab your finger on the list somewhere and do that.

The last two items are going to be more specific to your story, genre, setting and theme. They are in fact your primary ways as a GM (rather than game designer) to bring the theme out. Even if the enemy is as simple as a Giant Rat, the threat move it comes with should be different in a cyberpunk game and a low-fantasy one. What should each be?

Playbooks

I normally aim for 6 to 12 playbooks, or do without them altogether. If you do that, then you can either let players pick from a common list of moves (Class Warfare for Dungeon World), have only shared basic moves (World of Dungeons), or use only custom moves awarded in response to player actions in that session or the previous session (Experimental, but could work?).

Generally speaking I advise using playbooks. As a designer they make it easier to balance characters and helps keep the game more genre aligned and thus produce stories that feel like the table is working together to tell it. For the player, a playbook lessens the amount of information to process before making those first choices and gives you an easy to understand initial role in the story. Confident players make moves. Why six to twelve? You want to give the last player to choose some choice, especially if they (or you) don't like two or more of the same playbook. I suggest you aim for everyone to have different playbooks as it feels more 'special' for the player to have something no-one else can do. That connection is the start of the

dice rolls meaning stakes. If you are making playbooks then there's a bunch of ways you can space them out. The first is by writing down archetypes of the genre (so in Film Noir we have the Detective, the Mobster, the Suit, the Femme, the Rival Cop, and then, playing on the genre time period and theme of guilt, maybe the Priest, the War Hero, the Waif, the Outsider).

Next I'll start sketching out the character creation bits before getting too hung up on moves. As a player, I like the choose an option list approach in playbooks, as they tend to keep me on theme and provide seeds to get started quickly. My current recipe for these is five finished options, three rule based options and one blank to allow those who really want to fill it in themselves (giving them a sense of ownership).¹¹ The type of things chosen don't have to match between playbooks. Generally speaking I recommend following Vincent and Megeuy Baker's approach in *Apocalypse World* and basing phraseology around 'appearance' and not 'actuality'.

Give people some starting equipment, and questions to ask other players. It helps tell those other players a lot about this one, and the answers can be used to get things moving from the start.

modular playbooks

The *Dungeon World* online content ecosystem approaches modularity with Compendium Classes. These are stripped back, single focus playbook addons that offer a couple of moves and/or a unique mechanic. This makes them ideal to cover situations like what happens after being bitten by a werewolf or the assembled effects of an artefact suit of armour. The *Dungeon World* add-on book, *Class Warfare*, allows you to build a playbook from multiple compendium classes.

One example of a game that uses modular playbooks from the start is the *Urban Modern Fantasy* hack of *Dungeon World*. There you build a character from a stat focused module and a urban fantasy focused module (eg a Genius+Ghost or an Athlete+Medusa). The *Happiest Apocalypse in the World* takes this even further. In this game of razor blades in candyfloss and themeparks with madness bubbling beneath, you build your character by stitching together three modules: personality type + professional background+guest/staff.

Modularity suggests the potential for adding Traveller style life-paths to character creation, but I've not seen that done yet. Modularity presents a challenge for the production of useful character sheets or print-and-fold playbooks. From a table-top perspective, you do not want to slow the game down by adding a minute of page flicking to every interaction, it really pulls people out of the game. Try to at

¹¹ For example. Choose a Name: Fizzok, Hardcrust, Bluebell, Edbanger, Sappo, a flowery name, a punky name, a stolen name, _____

least consider balance between the combinations.¹² An option that is completely outclassed should be removed or rewritten.

sketching playbooks mechanically

When I'm making a new hack, I like to do the following as a first sketch. If I am using stats I'll write down a list of primary and secondary stats (eg Aa Ab Ac, Ba, Bb, Bc, Ca Cb Cc) and try to fix archetypes to it and fill the gaps. If you treat them as primary and secondary, then for N stats you get N squared slots (three stats is nine playbooks, four stats is sixteen). If you drop doubles that takes you to six and twelve respectively. If you keep doubles but instead treat Ab and Ba as the same then you get six and ten playbooks respectively (4+3+2+1). It's satisfying lonely fun.

If I have other mechanics live in the game I might do the first sketch list with that. Cyber_peripherals, for example, is about Gangs, Holdings, Favours and Cybermods, and each of those things is important enough to be in the core rules. I wasn't going to have sixteen playbooks. So the list started Gangs-gangs, Gangs-Holdings (the goon), Gangs-favours (the charity worker)ect, but I didn't fill in all the slots, just enough to represent everything in most four player games.

Then I'll will assign the playbook a GM prompt from the list below. These are things the playbook brings to the table that provide, prompts, hooks, buttons or leashes that help the GM keep the story moving. They are a good thing to ask provocative questions about.

- start of session momentum triggers eg resource shortages
- Cast of NPCs eg regular customers
- catalyser of conflict eg Gunlugger
- expand map eg Driver
- Instigate threat eg Vampire Hunter
- fixed point to defend/orbit eg Hardholder, king ¹³
- need for supplies eg Savvyhead
- supports risky play eg healing
- countdown urgency eg Vampire
- broadcast npc motivations eg observant¹⁴
- Mostly obedient entity eg Beast-master.

¹² I have seen one GM complaining that one of their players had used Class Warfare to build a heavily buffed character with only one fiction changing move (beyond the basic moves). For me, that's not a problem, but I can see how it might constrain the levers a GM has to play with to deliver a satisfying experience

¹³ this goes against classic dungeon crawling where the party must stay together and so anything like this is an impediment to the story.

¹⁴ broadcasting motivations even to a single player normally means all other players hear it, and it helps bring the world to life a little more for everyone

Why go to this effort? It makes writing moves easier. If I know this playbook is about the Detective archetype, that the playbook's primary stat is Street and secondary is Smarts and it engages with the Clue mechanic but not the Guilt or Resources mechanics, and brings the Start of Session prompt for the GM, then I've got a good lead. You can do the same spacing out exercise inside the playbook too.

Lets say for the initial draft the Detective starts with one Street move and one start of session Clue move, and has options to learn another two Street moves (three total for primary), two Smarts moves and one more Clue move. That's seven moves which is a good set. ¹⁵

What are three characters that this playbook should be able to build? The crumpled, world weary but insightful genius, the hard-boiled ex cop simmering with anger, the flawed but charming (and patient) interrogator. The crow, the bull and the spider.

Lets give the Crow archetype the second Clue move (something to do with last minute insight?) and give the Bull and the Spider aspects one move each for Street and Smarts. Of course a player might mix those up and decide to focus on all the Smarts moves, or even, if you allow the option, learn a move from the Femme book and specialise in uncovering details in relationships. Building in a way to allow a move to be learnt from a different playbook goes a long way to allowing players to explore the exact character they are playing. It works as long as the playbooks are spaced enough to prevent 'obvious' choices.

The trick with this of approach is to constrain it just enough that as designer you can only see one obvious answer, not to give you a headache trying to fit some arbitrary, impossibly difficult combination together. When writing some hacks, I might generate each move for the play book randomly, trusting to statistical clumpiness to give each playbook an emergent theme. I'll give examples of that in the next section.

Anatomy of a move

If you write a custom move, roll+WIS On a 10+ it is thematic, useful and short

On a 7-9 it is two of the above but not the third.

On a 6- it is a failure. Rely on the GM to try and salvage it.

Sometimes I will have an idea for a particular move for a playbook I will make sure is there. I also like the depth you can get from a wider range of slightly conflicting moves. Randomly rolling them can work for me.

Choose one from each list:

¹⁵ Often more than Apocalypse World playbooks get, although they engage heavy specific to playbook mechanics. Dungeon World by contrast, will often hit fifteen or more simpler moves since frequent levelling up is a core part of the Hero's Journey theme.

Trigger and move shape.

- when you do something related to (speciality) Roll for bonus
- when you do (speciality) roll for/get hold. spend hold for bonus
- you have the ability to (active power). it counts as base move using (stat)
- you have (passive power with constant effect)¹⁶
- you have a (thing). when applicable it adds two bonuses
- Straight bonus
- When you interact with another player, bonus

¹⁶ by 'power' I mean something that changes the fiction - cast light or walk through walls for example

Bonus is

- bonus of +1 to stat ¹⁷
- bonus of reroll a fail
- power of springboard fiction (eg cast light)
- power of mechanical fiction (eg healing, clue mechanic)
- get knowledge
- juicy list
- juicy complications ¹⁸
- oddball juicy list ¹⁹

¹⁷ some people disapprove of straight +1 to stat bonus moves, but they have a role for a player who doesn't want more complexity to manage just yet

¹⁸ normally choose two of three that don't happen.

¹⁹ the favoured move shape of Urban Shadows. Choose three options out of four, where one of the four options is an oddball.

Prompts

These may look familiar from before. They can work well for individual moves to ensure the story moves forward. Prompts may be part of the 7-9 complications, -6 consequences or even +10 bonuses!

- start of session momentum triggers
- cast of NPCs
- catalyser of conflict
- expand map
- Instigate threat
- fixed point to defend/orbit
- need for supplies

- supports risky play
- countdown urgency
- broadcast npc motivations
- mostly obedient entity

Let's look at that Detective starting Street Move. I roll on the lists above randomly: When you do something related to (speciality) bonus. Bonus is juicy list. Prompt is Countdown Urgency. I interpret that as:

When you take on a new case, Roll+Street On a 10+ choose two, On a 7-9 choose two, but one will be lost soon.

- | you know you have an informant good for this
- | you get a cash down payment up front
- | you see a link to another case

Lets roll again for the Clue starting move²⁰

You have a (thing). when applicable it adds two bonuses. Bonus of reroll a fail, Prompt of catalyser of conflict . Extra bonus of get knowledge.

You have a stained, run-down office you can barely afford. Choose one thing it has: Fire-escape to alley; loyal secretary called Dolores, filing cabinet with years of neat notes and newspaper clippings. When you spend the night there, you can anyone ask one question for each Clue token you hold, as though you are back there at the scene. When you act aggressively on the answers, you can reroll the first failed roll. ²¹

In the example above I decided which moves had a roll and which didn't. In my experience so far, about one in ten of the moves won't survive initial playtesting and will be replaced by something else entirely. This is an initial draft to get you to the table as fast as possible. Again, while I like the rolling method to get me beyond the obvious and avoid playbooks with 14 moves keyed to tiny moments of violence. It's a device to help, not block you completely. If a combination feels truly unworkable, or Lady Luck has given you nothing but information gathering moves, adjust them! The random generators can be pushed further too - write down the dozen or so player character archetypes, write down four specialities and two 'things' of each archetype, assign each playbook a mix of two archetypes and roll up a speciality or a thing if the move uses it.

²⁰ my initial thought before rolling was "If there is a clue token at stake in this scene, you have a hunch it is available.

It is short and engages the theme, but feels like it'd result in a frustrated player as much as a frustrated detective character."

²¹ it's certainly thematic, might need editing to be a little shorter and tighter, and will need play testing to ensure it's not a spotlight hog

Development

Development is the mechanic and rules system that governs how players can develop their characters.²² The general design principle I advocate for this is that most games don't last more than a few sessions, levels, so make sure the characters can do cool stuff from the start. It is a mechanic that changes often between different PBTA hacks, indicating that no-one has found a solution that everyone else is happy with. It's a perennial favourite topic for discussion, perhaps because it ties so closely into the hopes, desires and sense of entitlement of players.

²² If you are writing a one shot game, you probably don't need this.

Simple models

The simplest model of all is no mechanical development. In that case players start with a 'complete' character, and any development occurs in the fiction (acquiring contacts, loot, relationships, exotic pets etc). An example (outside PBTA) is Traveller - where the genre setting of you all playing crusty middle aged 'professionals' with a ship sized mortgage to feed means that 'static' character skill sets fit the genre. Using this method focuses player development urges into the fiction and reduces mechanical complexity. It reduces how complex a playbook can be (since you don't want to overwhelm someone with a dozen things to memorise right at the start) and doesn't give a player an escape route to develop the playbook more into their style.

The next simplest is session levelling, where you get an upgrade at the end of every session or every two sessions. This can feel arbitrary and unsatisfying because you don't have to 'work for it'. It is easy to implement, and to be honest most games try and calibrate for this speed of development anyway.

Milestone levelling is another option, where you 'level up' after hitting some longer term arc/project. The Savvyhead in Apocalypse World kind of does this by default - as they complete projects, the MC will often give them a custom move that ties into that gear. The limits with this method is that it suits a team game with a shared goal much more than players at cross purposes. You really don't want to put the gm in a position where they have to make calls that will let one player milestone up and block another. That kind of bleed does not feel like a good thing at the end of the session. I think Nightwitches uses Milestone levelling as it suits the mission based, team based nature of the setting.

XP models

Most PBTA games use XP points, with normally a few different things feeding into your XP total. I am fairly neutral on these. Pick whatever drives thematic behaviour.

Dungeon World and Monster of the Week gives you XP on a 'failed' roll. They both give you 'top up' xp if you can successfully answer three thematic questions at the end of session²³. The Happiest Apocalypse of Earth allows the MC to offer players XP in return for increasing the madness of their situation. The Sprawl plays against the team dynamic, and offers XP when you follow personal directives that put the group at risk. Apocalypse World gives you XP when you max out and reset your relationship stat with someone. Dungeon World does something similar with bonds. World of Adventure has adopted Keys - which give small XP when triggered and big XP when completed and replaced²⁴. Apocalypse World also gives you XP when you roll with a highlighted stat. Twist is that other players choose the highlight as a hint what they'd like to see at the table.

²³ ie did you find treasure, explore the world, learn something new ect

²⁴ Ie Key of the Merchant

Gain 1Xp when you negotiate a trade that makes profit by the end of session

Buyoff: 3xp and change key When you refuse to part with something at any price

Scenario Moves

This is a way of bulking out the basic moves to keep them from getting boring, without asking your players to memorise a ton of moves right at the very start of the game. The Sprawl uses these to cover less commonly occurring, but thematically very important situations in the cyberpunk stories - getting the job, dying and getting cybermods. Sometimes in that order. Apocalypse World uses them to cover complicated motorcade warfare without relying on a single basic move all the time. Dungeon World could perhaps benefit from a 'Scouting mission' scenario move set covering falling, sneaking, climbing, drowning ect. Stanberg has produced a nice set.

Inserts

These are a different way of handling complex 'modules' of rules that are not moves. Dungeon World uses them for Pet Familiars. Apocalypse World uses them for gangs and vehicles. They are literally a self contained page of rules that you can append to a playbook to handle something special. You know the Driver starts with a special vehicle, but it is easy to see how many player characters may acquire one during play and need to insert the rules for their whiskey powered motorbike into their play book.

If you want to free a specific thing from a playbook archetype, or

in playtesting people keep insisting on owning a particular thing/gang/pet - an insert may be the way forward! Like a playbook, I suggest a mix of fixed options and thematic rules for name, appearance, personality traits or predictable behaviour of the insert when the player rolls a fail.²⁵ A few explicit ways for the player to upgrade the insert are also good.

Tags

. How do you separate a sharp knife, and a *sharp* knife? Most, if not all, PBTA games use tags. Most of the time they are a 'this special rule applies' reminder. An example might be a weapon with the tags: (3-harm far area loud reload). In expanded form, this weapon does 3 standard harm; it has a range of 'far' only, so cannot be used closer; the 3-harm is done to an area (good prompt for the GM); using the weapon is loud; and it needs time to reload between uses (more prompts for the GM).

The challenge of tags is two fold. The first is that they can range from extremely specific (3-harm) to intuitive but fuzzy (loud) to wooly (reload). How loud is loud? How long does it take to reload, can it be reloaded in a firefight or is that tag more about counting down limited and rare ammunition? Reloading an RPG launcher has different constraints to reloading a taser, and if it's actually the spells Summon Meteor vs Spiders Embrace, the different people at the table may have very different expectations about how long it takes to cast again. One solution is to make all tags very specific, preferably without bogging the game down, another is to differentiate between explicit rule tags and guidance tags. The intent on this is to avoid people needing to look things up if they aren't really covered in the rules.

The second challenge of tags for the game designer is that they add a lot more semi-intuitive, semi-formal words to the vocabulary a player needs to be aware of. Since they are very easy to add to a game, and easily flow between wooly and formal between design drafts, you can end up with a lot of mildly inconsistent words being used. Be doubly careful they don't overlap with the flavour words you've used elsewhere. In a Space-Cowboy game perhaps +boring is used to tag challenges that are high risk but quite hard to concentrate on, like the day of calculations before a warp-jump, but the move "Relativistic Dreamer" has the trigger: when you daydream a new invention while doing some boring mundane chore, roll+Fusion". It seems fair that all +boring tasks are boring, but also something that is not high risk, like mopping the cargo bay is boring but not +boring. Why would you include the +boring rule in the game?

²⁵ Apocalypse World requires you to assign a custom vehicle a personality. This is not to suggest that the vehicle is alive, but in situations where the dice take over, it does help the GM be fast and consistent.

Perhaps it's on theme and you are looking to capture that Space-Trucker working stiff vibe, or perhaps because you already included the +concentration tag and you wanted a mechanic to make it worth taking. Tags and rule interactions and complexity scale rapidly. They will probably cause you the most headaches in the 'almost finished' drafts of the game. As with everything, they should support thematic play. The more of them on the sheet, the less impact each one will have on the game.²⁶

They do have some great uses. The Veil, a cyberpunk rpg, embraces tags to separate types of damage, types of special implant effects and types of disadvantages. This vocabulary supports the players in crafting their own implants/items, something that is very on theme. Apocalypse World does something similar to build strengths and weaknesses into gangs and hardholding, but mixes explicit rule type tags with evocative fictions ones that I, personally, find confusing at times.

City of Mists uses tags instead of stats. To punch someone you use the 'Hit with all you've got move', and roll two dice and add all tags that you have relevant to punching someone. Some GMs have reported this drives players to spend a lot of time trying to justify why as many stats as possible apply to every single role. I worry (but have not experienced) that the consideration, and potential negotiation pulls on the wrong mind set, pulling you out of the game a little. A comparison can be drawn to the cerebral thrill of a good Fate game with many levels of story awareness humming at once instead of Apocalypse World style deep immersion in cinematic events. If you avoid this by pinning the tags to moves to explicitly, you recreate stats, just in a slightly more fiddly wordy way.

City of Mists also allows negative tags (or, to be more precise, tags that are negative in that situation) to reduce your rolled total by one. This is compared to most PBTA games where negative tags are guidance for the GM in the event of a failure, but have no affect on the chance of failure occurring. As such accruing negative tags tends to have weak story impact.

²⁶ of course that might make them useful 'small change' currency for player development. Much less powerful than a new move or stat boost, but more directly useful than an XP point

Theme Deconstruction

balance

+ GM Principle: meaningful player character decisions shift the balance + GM Move: Worst imbalance reduces but new

imbalance develops. Possible mechanic: split playbook experience and moves into balance/imbalance tracks

belief

+ GM Principle: not all belief is true. sometimes the players are right + GM Move trade loss for benefit (in accordance with belief) + Possible mechanic: ritual elements to reinforce character will or add details to world

change

+ GM Principle: What has changed since the player's last visited. What hasn't? + GM Move: Change one constraint on the situation, people or landscape + Possible Mechanic: push your luck for directed change of landscape or yourself ?

comfort

+ GM Principle: agree with players what comfort means. check in occasionally. +GM Move: Throw a feast, party or concert + Possible Mechanic: meet npcs comfort level to gain ally

destruction

+ GM Principle: First consider destroying npcs and your MC ideas + GM Move: "trade harm for harm (as established) or deal harm (as established)" + Possible mechanic: Detailed harm tags (messy, knockback, seige ect)

corruption

+GM Principle: corruption requires the player's character to feel guilt over their actions +GM Move: offer a conflict of interest.

both good + Possible Mechanic: Corruption moves that can be activated on a specific trigger

family

+GM Principle: every parent was once a child +GM Move: announce a flashback + Possible Mechanic: inheritance of soft moves

freedom

+GM Principle: There is always another place to run to +GM Move: ask a silent player to describe location ahead. + Possible Mechanic: expansion of vehicles into mobile bases

friendship

+GM Principle: friendship spreads through interlocking circles cemented by favours +GM Move: an npc calls in a favour. reputation cost to say no + Possible Mechanic: do favours, receive debts. call in for favours

glory

+GM Principle: wherever they go, PCs should hear of great adventurers. sometimes, it might even be them +GM Move: create a competition for the players + Possible Mechanic: gained by beating more difficult challenges and spent to create more difficult challenges

honour

+GM Principle: always ask if an npc action is honourable. justify it +GM Move: deal harm to players honour, justified or sneaky + Possible Mechanic: honour only applies to certain ranks. it means that oaths carry weight but only for those ranks.

hunger

+GM Principle: always describe food, fatness, health first +GM Move: reveal an upcoming scarcity + Possible Mechanic: needs and consequences tag system

justice

+GM Principle: What typifies this situation: the scales, the blindfold or the sword? +GM Move: trade judgemet, compassion or violence (as established) + Possible Mechanic: ask the abyss "is this just?" Mark bonuses at end of session

knowledge

+GM Principle: knowledge is the lever that player characters can use to magnify their actions +GM Move: trade knowledge for knowledge (as established) + Possible Mechanic: cash in knowledge for bonuses on quadratic scale

law/tradition

+GM Principle: everybody, everything has a couple of freely

known behaviours +GM Move: Invoke tradition to create a new threat + Possible Mechanic: two polar stats to make quadrant block between four traditions.

love

+GM Principle: love is steadily rising level of intimacy +GM Move: spotlight a connection or triangle + Possible Mechanic: intimacy moves: "i'd like to X, may I?", "yes but"

pain

+GM Principle: Scars are not just physical. Damage is not just permanent +GM Move: deal pain, as established + Possible Mechanic: memory/pain as addiction

revenge

+GM Principle: NPCs will always be avenged by someone +GM Move: offer vendetta, offer ritual peace at cost + Possible Mechanic: detailed followers and bonds rules. fail to avenge one, loose others due to disgrace.

unity

+GM Principle: always introduce someone by their unit/faction/clan before any other detail +GM Move: create player-npc-unit triangle over a resource + Possible Mechanic: Faction tags on all players and NPCs that can be used as PC move triggers

survival

+GM Principle: respond with fuckery and intermittent rewards
 +GM Move: offer something, but make them roll the dice + Possible Mechanic: Crafting guidelines for making better stuff from crappy parts

violence

+GM Principle: Sometimes the direct solution is the correct

one +GM Move: add violence not directed at pcs + Possible Mechanic: conflict escalation mechanic. disagreement to posturing to threats to violence

wealth

+GM Principle: currency is liquid. where does it flow? +GM Move: replace a source of wealth with another + possible Mechanic: investment schemes as missions

Skeleton World - the (example) game.

Decisions:

SCALE: Simplicity. I want a simple game, scaled back where I can. ²⁷

KEY IMAGERY: Coffins 'poofing' into existence in the sky and falling into a bone white desert in cloud of dust. A sword wielding skeleton emerging from the ground; cartoon skeleton's in a danse macarbe (or a grim fandango); a burning skeleton throwing fireballs, a knight in armour made from hundred of ribs; a mishapen skeletal beast with too many limbs and joints that bend backwards, a screaming skull floating, a skeleton in a suit backing away in horror as plants consume another.

COMMUNITY VS PARTY: Adversarial. I want to chase out the bleak loneliness of death and the grim-darkness of being a skeleton, trapped in a timeless world, being slowly ground down against each other. ²⁸

KEY THEME: Change. The world and environment are unstable and shifting. ²⁹ SECONDARY THEME: Scarcity. The world is basically a wasteland with only a few key items belonging to the players.

This combined with Change suggest dunes blowing. What makes the sand? The ground down bones of ancient skeletons of course!

PALETTE: Emphasis on bones and the limited things the skeletons bring through from the living world.

STATISTICS: Lets go for a simple variant on mind, body, spirit as BONES, MEMORY, GLUE EXPERIENCE: Let's go for a simple method. At the start of each session, each player gives a brief recap of what they did and marks a new move. No experience is tracked.

PLAYBOOKS: The Key imagery suggests a few already. Two points spread across three stats gives six unique statlines, lets use them as the basis. Let's give each a unique glue to add a bit of imagery to split them up, and lets assign each playbook two of St John Ross's 12 RPG archetypes ³⁰, it will give the playbooks a bit more depth.

- BONES 0, MEMORY 2, GLUE 0

└ Splint+clothes – Persuading – Gadgeteer

- BONES 1, MEMORY 1, GLUE 0

└ Beast+wires –Wilderness survival – Intrusion

- BONES 0, MEMORY 1, GLUE 1

└ Mage+fire –Communication+Protocol– Scholarship

- BONES 2, MEMORY 0, GLUE 0

²⁷ This is because it is an example, so the less I have to write the better as it will make the decisions and structure of the example clear. There is also a thematic unity between playing as skeletons and a bare-bones game

²⁸ this was a key decision. A game about a special forces unit in a Necromancer's Army would be very different. And possibly more fun?

²⁹ this was chosen partly by default as none of my other examples in the Theme Deconstruction section seemed to fit.

³⁰ These are taken from the Risus Companion. I heavily recommend buying it, especially if you are curious about GMing tips for laughter-inducing, surprisingly deep games

└ Knuckles+scrimshaw –Athletics – Drive/Ride

- BONES 1, MEMORY 0, GLUE 1

└ Glom+guts – Medical – Combat

- BONES 0, MEMORY 0, GLUE 2

└ Skull+plant – Detection – Weird

Basic Moves

STRUGGLE When you struggle for control of something, roll+Bones.³¹

On a 10+ exchange damage and take control of the thing

On a 7-9 exchange damage, take control of the thing and give up a position, something valued or an honest answer to your attacker.³²

On a 6- the result is as 7-9 but you don't get control.

If you also roll a double on any result, don't take damage.

UNLEASH ³³ When you unleash a memory to try and shape something out of the dunes Roll+Memory

On a 10+ it is there and will not change, ask the MC how many letters to reduce your name by

On a 7-9 as 10+ but it is weak, temporary or wild

On a 6- something bad is unleashed instead. It will haunt you.

TAKE DAMAGE ³⁴ When you take damage, even zero damage after armour, Roll+Glue

On a 10+ it's not so bad, take the damage but reduce it by one or take the 7-9 option.

On a 7-9 take the damage OR ignore damage but reduce Glue to zero until you suitably repair it (see playbook)

On a 6- take the damage. Your armour fails to do anything. OR ignore damage but reduce Glue to zero until you suitably repair it (see playbook)

DECISION: No move for helping/hindering another player. It's a struggle out there.

So that is three stats that have led to three basic moves (and three little extra mechanisms - rolling doubles, reducing name length, repairing Glue). That is ok for now, but I hope to tighten that up with a bit of playtesting.

³¹ So many decisions here. First is that since there are only three stats I want to limit it to three thematic ways to take action, the trigger here covers combat, but also argument, intimidation and person versus an uncaring universe. Second is that struggling for control is dangerous, so damage is delivered on nearly all options. Third is that, for the basic moves at least, I'll prescribe a 6-result to help the players expectations stay in genre. Fourth is the introduction of a new mechanic, just adding a little extra spice to the dice roll. With only three moves I don't want them to feel too samey in their results.

³² you may feel that an 'honest answer' is the obvious least-cost choice, but it acts as a good way for the MC to inject loaded questions to draw out characters. The other options are protection for players who hate being put on the spot like that.

³³ can't have a limbo based game without good and bad memories showing up, and this is a great place for the change theme to be contrasted. Name reduction is a type of HP/mantra clock and seemed a thematic way to avoid memory spamming. At this point in the design I'm not sure if I will allow a way to recharge your name with fresh letters, or if the pacing should be to allow one use per session (on average) for a six session campaign.

³⁴ a little bit of randomisation which means that weapon descriptions can have fixed damage. It is primarily to cover the genre image of a skeleton pulling itself back together from a thousand pieces. The suitable repair is supposed to generate a hook/pressure for the player character to take action.

Playbook: Splint

BONES 0, MEMORY 2, GLUE 0 Name - six letters long

Glue - clothes . Repair by sewing, patching (if you can find the needle and thread) or replacing items of clothing (if you can take them). Your job in life is mixed up in your identity, such that some of your bones are replaced by items symbolic to you.

START MOVE: Start with two implements (choose anything from the equipment list)³⁵. Implements are always available, but cannot be removed or given to others. Say what body part they replace.

³⁵ Equipment list: Wrench, till recipet roll; typewriter; chef knife; teapot; stethoscope; pens pens pens; mop; hard hat and boots; camera; measuring tape; material shears; every car key; globe

- Junkyard: detail another implement that is now part of you
- Substitute: you can 'consume' a suitable item to heal three damage
- Donate (needs Substitute): Spend three health to give anyone a previously substituted item
- My Uniform: Increase Memory by +1 permanently
- Strangely Dishonest: When you lie to their face Roll+Memory.
 - └ On a 10+ they buy it, and it may even change the world.
 - └ On a 7-9 they buy it for now.
- Presence: When you unleash a memory, you can say who, if present, is unable to look away.
- Demagoue: When you try to lead a volatile crowd Roll+Memory
 - └ On a 10+ if you meet their needs, they'll meet yours
 - └ On a 7-9 as 10+, but strictly in that order!

Playbook: Beast

BONES 1, MEMORY 1, GLUE 0 Name: Three letters long

Glue: Thin brass wires. Repair by scavenging the wires from broken or moving dune monsters. You've been here a long time, if time even passes here. There are many that have entered here before the 'humans', and you are cunning enough to have survived.

START WITH ONE OF: Big Teeth (+3 damage), Huge size (+2 armour), tattered wings (limited flight)

- Lamarkian: Take another starting thing. Duplication allowed.
- Reputation: Add four more letters to your name
- Cunning: When you hide in the dunes Roll+Mem
 - └ On a 10+ you are undetectable until you decide to act
 - └ On a 7-9 you are invisible to common appearances
- Shoving: When you struggle with another beast ritually over territory or similar, on a 6- you won't exchange damage.
- Cage Breaker: When you pick a lock with your long wire tounge, Roll+Glue
 - └ On a 10+ it is delicate and quick
 - └ On a 7-9 it is neither, but you get the lock open
- Call of the Wild: When faced with an constructed obstacle you break or bypass Roll+Bone
 - └ On a 10+ you succeed or the MC suggests an alternative good route
 - └ On a 7-9 you succeed. Enjoy your new situation! (ask the MC)

Playbook: Mage

BONES 0, MEMORY 1, GLUE 1 Name: five letters long

Glue: coloured fire. Repair by lighting and building a small fire, and bathing in it. Obsessed or just passionate, you can't see why everyone doesn't agree with you. **START WITH PROJECTION:** You scoop and throw a fireball of desire dealing 2 damage.

- Griefer: You pull a blinding cloud of ash and embers out of the ground around you.
- Furnace When you crush someone into your rib hollow Roll+Glue
 - └ On a 10+ do 10 damage to them
 - └ On a 7-9 as 10+ but you reduce Glue to zero until repaired
- Hatred: When you spit your fire on someone Roll+Glue:
 - └ On a 10+ it clings and continue to burn and damage them until you speak to them
 - └ On a 7-9 as 10+ but strangely, although it burns it doesn't actually damage them.
- Scholar: When you study something carefully Roll+Memory
 - └ On a 10+ you spot something no-one else would. Say or ask the GM
 - └ On a 7-9 you have an idea about it. Ask the GM
- Enlighten: When you are stifled by rules Roll+Glue
 - └ On a 10+ you guess who to challenge to unmake the system
 - └ On a 7-9 you guess where the power lies
- Flare: When you close your eyes you can appear as a small fiery image to anyone you have previously damaged. This power may reach over distance and through walls.

Playbook: Knuckles

BONES 2, MEMORY 0, GLUE 0 Name = eight letters

Fire: Scrimshaw. Repair by having an artist add scrimshaw to replacement clean bones. The simplest approach is often the most direct. START WITH: BRAWLER: Even unarmed you still do 3 damage

- Bullish: When you hit someone hard you can choose to knock them backwards
- Naturally Spiky: Reduce damage taken by 1. This does not stack with armour.
- Athlete: When you push to do something others can't Roll+Bones
 - └ On 10+ you do it.
 - └ On 7-9 you do it but take 1 damage.
- Artistic: As long as you have a working hand, you can record your feats in scrimshaw (counts for repair glue). Otherwise you must find an artist.
- Domination: When you wrestle a large dune monster into submission Roll+Bones ³⁶
 - └ On a 10+ it accepts you. Treat it well and it will let you ride it.
 - └ On a 7-9 as 10+ but it dislikes you and will use every opportunity to escape.
- Martial Dancer: When you prepare to fight Roll+Mem
 - └ On 10+ hold 3,
 - └ On 7-9 hold 1,
 - └ During the fight, spend hold one for one to - Move unstoppably; break a grip; block an attack

³⁶ struggle theme again - no easy loyal animal companions here!

Playbook: Glom

BONES 1, MEMORY 0, GLUE 1 Name: six letters

Glue: Guts. Repair by consuming fresh meat or funeral foods. You always blended in well, and bones are bones are bones right?

START WITH: AMALGAMATE: When you gut wrap sufficient new bones into any skeleton Roll+ Glue:

- | On a 10+ heal 3 or heal someone else 3
- | On a 7-9 as 10+ but reduce glue to zero until repaired
- Gall Stones: You develop a pot belly stuffed with bones and sand to digest even old bones. Consuming a full skeleton is enough for you to repair your glue.
- Blemeye: Your skull moves down inside your ribcage. Increase your base armour by 2. More armour stacks with this.
- Cage and Club: One arm ends in a ribcage shield, the other in another femur. You always count as armed with a Large Club, and the shield increases your base armour by 1.
- Gut Lasso: Needs Gall Stones or Cage and Club. When you throw (or spit) a lasso made of your guts, roll+Glue.
- | On a 10+ you get them. You can unbalance, disarm them or draw them closer.
- | On a 7-9 you get them but it's awkward. Choose as 10+ but then they choose an option to do to you.
- Double Jointed: Needs Cage and Club or Blemeye: You gain a second pair of arms. If this means you have four hands this allows you to duel wield Great weapons. Otherwise it just means you have hands free to carry things.

Playbook: Skull

BONES 0, MEMORY 0, GLUE 2 Name: eight letters

Glue: Plant. Repair by filling skull with water and staying in the sun for a short time. In a world of white sands, what is left of you brings the true death.

START WITH: MANIFEST: When you need to be more than a slowly floating skull Roll+Glue

On a 10+ you manifest a knotted viney body, as strong and fast as any skeleton.

On a 7-9 Choose one: you are small, limbless or slow

- Rooted: When you appear to remain motionless, you may push a limb out of the dust three body lengths away.
- Infectious growth. When you deal damage and roll doubles you can choose to ignore their damage or to infect them. Infected take one damage each turn ignoring armour.
- Tendrils: No-one can sneak up on you. Your attacks can entangle.
- Blossom: When you exert power through an infected, they blossom with large flowers. They become the focus of the attention of anyone around.
- Detection:
- Weird:

More work to be done here I'm afraid!

References