An example of world and game making for Powered By the Apocalypse[1]

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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.

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 mechanic[2]

Balanced tension game: two themed additional mechanics[3]

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

You need a fast, nuanced strong hit / weak hit / fail generator[5] 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.

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	colonial	alternate history
high fantasy	1920s pulp	dystopia
low fantasy	superhero comic	hard sci fi
grim fantasy	weird world war	solarpunk
age of sail	biopunk	cyberpunk
medieaval	cold war	post-apocalypse
pike and musket	diesel punk	space opera
steampunk	urban fantasy	
victorina	slice-of-life	

(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	beaureucrats
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	....

Stats

Aim for the fewest number you need. Keep them simple, memorable,
and immeadetly highlting the difference in how different characters
approach challenges. A good example is Versed, Young, Gendered,
Wyrd from Sagas of the Icelanders.

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

Fighter, Thief, Wizard

Social Circles, Danger Triangles, True Squares, Stitched Crosses

Assertive, Persuasive, Curious, Methodical, Confident[6]

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

Space, Robots, Lasers, Feelings

Honour, Rice, Ki

Fate, Power, Control

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

If no stats

If you 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.

Basic Moves

Ideally start players with seven or less moves to track. I tend to split it five basic, two playbook. 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 Apocalyse 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 enquiry as more information becomes available in the scene, rather then 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, which is 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. Storytellers might be happy to sacrifice character agency in return for the ability to add plot twists or elements of

world building. Actors might be happy to give up all power outside their character's eyes, 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 teamworkers and where persuasion isn't a big thing in genre, like Fellowship.

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 works well in games where players have other ways to influence the story then just their player actions.

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.

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 villanous 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'. 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.

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 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. The common basic move allows you to choose between take a permanent hit to you character, normally to a stat, to come back or choose a new playbook.

Agenda

The GM Agenda is:

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 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)

GM moves

give them a difficult decision to make tell them the possible consequences and ask Use a front or threat move Offer an opportunity, with or without a cost Turn a failed move back on them Offer Stuff that's painfully expensive but good Put the spotlight on someone seperate them Put them together make thier lives complicated now

use up their resources activate stuff's bad side + Additional from the theme (see Theme Deconstruction section)

Playbooks

Development

Scenario Moves

Inserts

Tags

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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
spefific 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 ce-
mented 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 adven-
turers. sometimes, it might even be them +GM Move: create a com-
petition 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

Page Layout

Headings

This style provides A- and B-heads (that is, \section and \subsection), demonstrated above.

The Tufte-LATEX classes will emit an error if you try to use \subsubsection and smaller headings.

IN HIS LATER BOOKS,[9] Tufte   9

References