# Under the Serpent Sun Radek Drozdalski and Luke Crane, Burning Wheel

This is the most experimental BW concept, written by two twentysomethings in a feverish "fuck them, go all the way" haze in their Brooklyn apartment, probably living on Ramen and tap water, and listening over and over to a Swedish death-metal band called At the Gates.







Web of corruption thick with deceit
The language of destruction, the slaughter of the meek
Under a serpent sun we shall all live as one
No rest for the wicked, the children of God
The final retribution, the final curtain torn
Within us the flames of the end
Survival of the fittest, the hunt for the sacred game
Sweetfleshed, hell bent creature
Artist of the fevered soul
Heavenly venomous rapture
Stricken numb by fear I fall

So it's all about suicide, as if you hadn't figured that out already, along with suburban anomie, biker nihilism, haunted insight-angst, Sartre-ian nausea, and something called an "Angel of Genocide."

Excess aside, they do nail it. This is existentialism without the romantic posing. The game is utterly uncompromising and offers a genuinely gonzo set of mechanics if we can do this without getting parodic or ironic.

### The Meek / The Wasteland / The Holocaust Seed

The human world has been destroyed, perhaps by nuclear warfare, or invasion by horrific alien predators. No one remembers, and more importantly, few even realize it. The majority of people, the Meek, live in tame, quotidian neighborhoods, living lives much like you or me although probably less diverse or wide-ranging. They are clerks and laborers, parents and children, unaware of the devastated landscape and collapse of humanity, all subtly addicted to a variety of media, sedatives, and practices which they call "happiness." They typically die by suicide, overdosing on barbiturates or by similarly passive means.

Inhabitants of the Wasteland, or rather those who come to perceive the Wasteland, are scavengers, wanderers, serial killers, and weird old men, plus some really mutated and

psychically shattered freaks. Many are motivated only by their willingness to commit more active suicide in reaction to the horrific reality they've come to understand, but not just yet. Some of them live among the Meek without being duped, as homeless babblers, mysterious bikers, and perverted predators, and some of them even revert to the Meek.

The Holocaust Seed are humanity's overlords, themselves barely human any more. Effectively, they shepherd the Meeks' delusions and keep them breeding in order to gain power from the steady flow of suicide deaths. They wield Questions, a kind of philosophical-psychic magic. They are brainwashers, minders, torturers, assassins, and Lovecraftian-level warped adepts, who maintain control over their flock by suppressing the few who figure out something's wrong. They also battle the Swarm, although it's unclear whether that's because they value humanity or because they want to feed from the trough without competition.

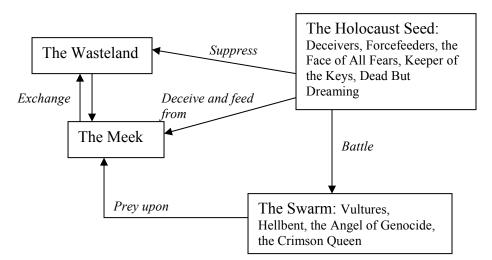
And if all that isn't enough for one's inner Kierkegaard, at the end of the text, there's a toss-up between the authors regarding whether the Meeks' life is genuinely some kind of suburban enclave or is itself wholly imposed as a delusion by their exploiters.

Play focuses on characters facing the challenges of life as they know it, in whichever of the three groups they belong to, but also confronting in part or in full the levels of horrific truth and lies defining that perceived reality. Or to put it more viscerally, from the text:

It's a vicious circle. Abusive, raw, desperate and violent. It's a middle finger flung at hope and redemption. There is none. Revel in your death – at least it's you who'll pull the trigger, right?

Enjoy!

#### To summarize:



I was puzzled about a key setting issue: how exactly do the Holocaust Seed combat the Swarm? Luke told me:

The Answered, ostensibly, use their new found power to physically combat the Swarm. They are meant to take their Face of All Fears and their Scar Suits into war against the alien invader. The Gates allows them the hope and chance to take the war from Earth to the Swarm's very home. So that this isn't just a hopeless battle of survival for them – it's a desperate gamble that could result in total victory. Of course, the counterweight to that possibility is that it's much easier for the Answered to simply use their powers to exploit humanity as its chattel -- doing only the bare minimum required to stave off the Swarm.

## Burning Wheel rules overview

Each new publication or setting using Burning Wheel rules presents specific modifications tailored to that exact setting.

To understand the following comparison fully, you should know that Under the Serpent Sun was written primarily in the context of the original Burning Wheel, which was later succeeded by the Revised version, and Burning Empires is a stand-alone version of the Revised rules. Therefore Serpent Sun lacks the Duel of Wits rules because they hadn't been written yet, and only through play has Luke decided those mechanics aren't appropriate for that setting.

	Core books (revised)	Serpent Sun	<b>Burning Empires</b>
Lifepaths	Specified jump points	Specified jump points with deeper structure	"Open" jumps
Emotional Traits/Attributes	Faith, Hate, Greed, Grief	Need, Despair, Answered	Absent
Beliefs & Instincts	3 of each	Briefly mentioned*	Central focus
Circles	Present	Not mentioned (probably as in core)	Important
Scripted combat	Present	As in core, but recommended to be simplified	Absent
Scene/chapters framing mechanic	Absent	Absent**	Present, required
<b>Duel of Wits</b>	Present	Absent and specifically not recommended	Present
Emotional Trait advancement	Present	Accelerated	Absent
Artha	Fate, Persona, Deeds	Fate and Persona only	Fate, Persona, Deeds

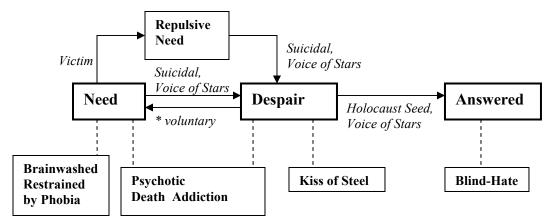
<sup>\*</sup> Beliefs and Instincts were relatively small-scale in the original Burning Wheel, but ramped up and integrated with the reward mechanics (themselves also more elaborate) for the Revised version. Luke suggests that they be used, but staying with the minimum requirement of only one Belief and one Instinct per character.

\*\* This is probably the biggest lack in Serpent Sun – how to construct plain old Situation in GMing and play terms, once characters are made, and how to continue constructing it as play proceeds. This was also an issue for the original Burning Wheel but it could be compensated for relatively easily (and is now made explicit in the Adventure Burner); here, it's much harder.

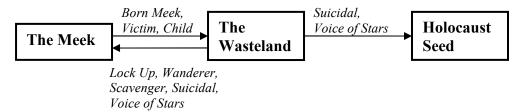
To summarize, Serpent Sun decreases the tactical precision of the combat system but retains its structure, focuses on the Emotional Traits rather than Beliefs and Instincts, removes the setting-enhancing elements of the reward system, and does not use the Duel of Wits. In other words, character actions are extremely "free" but with significant, even devastating personal consequences, achieving setting-level results is not rewarded, combat is an in-your-face affair, and characters' opinions and behavior cannot be altered through the mechanics. It is profoundly existential in every detail of these tweaks and especially in how they interact.

#### Emotional Traits/Attributes in detail

The Traits are in the bold boxes, with reinforcing or transitional Traits in subordinate boxes. The arrows indicates how the Traits are acquired through pre-play Lifepath choices. However, be aware that in-play mechanics can result in the transitions as well.



There are a few other wrinkles as well. First, all of the above transitions are related to, but *not identical to*, the three sub-settings. These are the leads which permit transitions from setting to setting during character creation.



To belabor this crucial point, one does not gain Despair simply by transitioning to the Wasteland setting; either you take the Suicidal Lifepath within that setting before play, or you turn your Need to Despair through play events and mechanics regardless of where you are. Even the single seeming exception, that Answered = Holocaust Seed, is contravened by the Voice of Stars Lifepath, which includes the option of being Answered without being Holocaust Seed, and perhaps even while living among the Meek (!).

Second, there are a few other Traits and consequences of Traits which are almost as significant as the big three.

- Terminal Spirit Disease, suffered by the Haunted if and when they use the Silencer Question, and also by their surviving victims. See the book for details.
- Psychosis and Death Addiction, suffered by Psychotics but also gained through actions by anyone. See the book for details.
- The Questions skills, availabled to Answered, Nausea-ridden, or Grotesque characters, which are effectively existential, reality-cracking magic. At the Gates and The Key are particularly important. The Swarm also wields Questions of its own.

Third, each of the main three Emotional Traits provides significant mechanical options.

- Need
  - Add dice on a one by one basis to a failed roll, either up to one's Need, or until you succeed.

- Spend a Persona point to add dice equal to one's Need prior to any roll.
- Changing Need to Despair can be attempted at any value, requiring a challenging Need test.
- o At Need 10, the character commits suicide usually by overdosing on sedatives.

#### Despair

- O Add dice on a one by one basis to a failed roll, either up to one's Despair, or until you succeed.
- Spend a Persona point to add dice equal to one's Despair prior to a roll for any physical test.
- Changing Despair back to Need is instantly successful, but it's a one-way trip. At
  Despair 10, the character either commits suicide (usually violently) or has the
  chance to convert Despair to Answered.

#### Answered

- o In the presence of Need or Despair, the character gains considerable bonuses to Ouestion tests.
- o In the presence of an act of suicide, the character gains the dead character's Will and Perception as a dice pool, to be used as bonus(-es) to Question tests.

Fourth, according to the rules, Need and Despair advance much faster than Emotional Traits in the core book due to tweaking the rules. I suspect that this was designed in order to experience the Trait advancement to some extent before the characters get killed in any number of gruesome ways.

- "If any of the exponent requirements are filled, the players needs only one test in either of the other two categories to advance." I'll have to check the core rules to see what that means.
- Routine tests count for checking the chance to increase the Trait score. At present Luke does *not* think this is a good idea, but I'm still inclined to try it.

# Starting situations and characters

The "ultimate" scenario, according to the text, is to begin as Meek and effectively evolve the characters to the point where their loyalties (and defiance) must face climactic challenges. They might try to re-enter the Meek communities to rescue their loved ones who are sliding into torpid suicide, or they might confront either Holocaust Seed or Swarm directly, or play the two off against one another somehow. All of this in full knowledge, eventually, that the setting and possibly humanity itself are effectively a write-off, and their only triumph can be to die on their feet rather than on their knees.

Some subsets are also listed, from basically a band of deranged Wasteland types hunting Hellbent for their edible guts, to an isolated "there's a wounded Angel of Genocide in your basement" situation, all of which lack a certain depth as I see it unless you get to them through play.

My thinking is to start in the Meek setting, but allow lifepath choices which "step into" the other settings as long as the characters remain deeply committed to the location itself for some reason. I might even go so far as to prep the community in some detail, and we might draw on the Circles rules extensively for a supporting cast. It might be interesting to permit everyone to use as many lifepaths as they'd like for their characters. In Serpent Sun, plain effectiveness is less important than current Emotional status, and some diversity in those scores seems like it would be more fun than everyone being in Despair or whatever.