

*Estimated Prophet /
The Stress of Her Regard*
(plagiarized working titles)

Alpha game idea
By Ron Edwards / Adept Press
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... sexual imprinting on a red trait leads to a preference only for another novel red trait due to transference of a preference for the colour red. Michael Plenge, Eberhard Curio, and Klaudia Witte, 2000. *Behaviour* 137(6):741-758.

It might be a mess, but here goes.

Fair warning

This game includes cutting and gluing a collage or arts-and-craft oddments onto a piece of paper, which is kind of odd for a role-playing game. I'm still iffy on whether that will be fun, but the idea is growing on me.

Earliest playtesting should be “for love,” meaning, we aren't here to break the game. The plan is to discover whether the vision of the game and basics of play are actually as fun as we hope. I especially ask that we merely play and save discussion for later, and also that this text be treated only as a playtesting draft and not subjected to writing critique.

What it's about

Play concerns characters who begin as ordinary people with ordinary lives, but who have recently encountered powerful and perhaps transformative experiences. They must cope with the hassles of life in the light of their extraordinary perceptions. They discover that they are newly empowered to act.

As life transforms or disintegrates, the insights (and powers) become more coherent and effective. Which matters more? What parts of ordinary life survive, or become important?

They may become visionaries and prophets, perceiving that the world's nature and dynamics are symbolically powerful and morally critical. They may become driven to act in significant, perhaps even public ways. They may become monsters. They may try to avoid any of these things. The line between what is true and what is insane is no longer clear. What does it all mean?

Each character begins alone, but their new lives converge in difficult ways. What will they do about that?

The perceptions and visions are beautiful on their own, but also the ideals and goals that may come to pass, or should come to pass from the new perspective. This beauty should inform all of play.

- Mystical actions, and effects should be described as stunningly beautiful in addition to whatever else they might be, including violence and the grotesque.
- The character's developing, articulated metaphysical models and views should themselves be beautifully consistent constructs, however schizophrenic or bizarre.
- Play will bring a great deal of gluing artsy stuff onto this sheet, and one of the goals of play is to arrive at a visually pleasing or at least affecting physical composition. Merely sticking stuff on there at random is missing part of the presumed fun.
- The fictional items on the sheet near or covered by glued-on additions become beautiful in some fashion, whether the character's own appearance and charisma, or a fascination experienced by others.

Whatever they might become or do, the characters' lives have become genuinely beautiful. Is that good?

What play is like

I want this to be purely character-driven: no over-arching plot, no designated phases of the story arc, no endgame, and no starting in-situation conflicts. It's only what characters feel and know, what they run into, and how they deal with it. What happens is utterly emergent and only to be dealt with in the moment when the moment arrives, and that goes double for theme and meaning.

The procedures strongly emphasize who is speaking, and therefore contributing chatter should be kept to a minimum. At any given time, one person is the Guide and another is the Player, and what they say, and about what, is clearly designated. They should wait and listen to one another, and everyone else should do their best to listen to them except for those times when they too are called in to contribute.

My hope is that play is enhanced by giving space to others, for each person to enjoy raw imagination without social editing, unleashing in-the-moment creativity. It also means everyone must roll a little with the punches provided by one another's input, as much can change with each turn. There is no group-based planning or set-up, nor consultation about what might happen or what any particular character might do.

Preparing

The organizer brings a number of copies of a single image of a beautiful woman which includes red as a primary color component, as well as a whole class' worth of arts-and-crafts materials, again, mostly if not all red. It's up to you to decide whether non-paper materials are included, but everything should be glue-able. Bring scissors and glue, as well as sturdy backing for the character sheets.

Everyone makes a character, whose surname must either be literally a statement of power ("Bob Strong") or be the same as a historical figure associated with power ("Bob MacArthur"). Any walk of life is acceptable, as long as the character is fully adult. Younger, older; male, female; anywhere in the social and economic range; any ethnicity; any sexual preference; and so on. For convenience' sake, although it's not entirely necessary, place each character into the same general

location. Again, simply because it's easy and it works, use the same city or community in which you are playing the game.

Do not embed dramatic conflict into the initial character concept. Use familiarity and a bit of sympathy as your guides, not the kind of instant engagement associated with a main character in a film whose problems seem to be on the boil.

Filling out the sheet

The starting character sheet is absurdly rich in details of the characters' abilities and lifestyles. Here's what to do, in order.

- Write in specific descriptions for all the items. Start with the easy ones first, scribbling them in as fast as they appear to be obvious.
- Then go back for the rest.
- Roll a handful of d6, and distribute their values into the items of the sheet essentially at random, putting the values closest to you at the top of the sheet and working your way down. When you run out of dice, roll again, until you're done.
- If you want, transfer any full score to another as an addition, leaving the donor at 0. This cannot be done more than once per receiving item. Therefore scores range from 0 to 12.

Example: Harry Strong is a working white-collar professional about one paycheck from disaster, like many of us.

<i>Birth name 6</i> Harold Micah Strong	<i>Professional name 4</i> Harold M. Strong	<i>First impression 0</i> Mild, attentive	<i>Stressed personality 8</i> Competent
<i>Casual name 4</i> Harry	<i>Nickname 2</i> Har, the Hulk	<i>Prof. personality 1</i> Social, easy-going	<i>Unguarded pers. 1</i> Aloof, taciturn
<i>Aliases 6</i> Never occurred to him	<i>Online ID 5</i> Har766	<i>Social hobby 6</i> Wine tasting	<i>Private hobby 6</i> Old magazines
<i>Citizenship 3</i> United States of America	<i>Birthplace 4</i> Cincinnati, Ohio	<i>Designated ethnicity 1</i> Caucasian/White	<i>Ethnic background 2</i> Polish, a little Mexican
<i>Apparent age 2</i> Early 30s	<i>Physical health 6</i> Falling out of shape	<i>Mortgages/lease 3</i> \$310,000 house	<i>Major loan 1</i> \$55,000 SUV
<i>Physiological age 1</i> 35	<i>Emotional health 5</i> Trouble relaxing	<i>Minor loan 5</i> \$18,000 Visa	<i>Business loan 4</i> Tried for one once

... and so on throughout the sheet. The First Impressions was initially rated at 6, but I moved it over to improve Stressed Personality from 2 to 8.

The art part

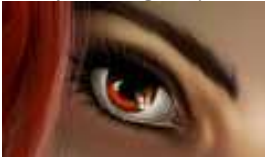
Choose one of the images and glue it, or part of it, onto your sheet wherever you want. This represents the beginning of your character's visions, hallucinations, moments of clarity, and revelations. Whatever it touches is transformed in the character's perceptions: a message, a miracle, or whatever. Whatever it completely covers, if anything, is eliminated from your character's life and competence in some mysterious or mystical way, most especially insofar as it does not cause problems.

How did this happen? Whatever happened, it was very red. It was also surreal. And it involved the content of the image itself.

This is where the drama begins, to greater or lesser degree. Consider the implications of covering your character's name. Or a family member. Or a job, or some financial situation. It's ... gone!

The character may or may not remember the lost item(s) or believe he or she can still do or use it. Whatever is contiguous to the artistic addition is also affected and transformed in your character's perceptions at least, and perhaps objectively as well.

Example: the person playing Harry takes one of the larger images of the woman and makes a cut-out of her right eye:



He glues it directly onto the "Mortgages/lease" item on the sheet, angled counter-clockwise so the eye is horizontal, slightly overlapping all eight items surrounding it.

Harry found himself walking through his house, noting all its little ways and idiosyncrasies, seeing things he'd forgotten or never known, and he decided he loved it. It seemed to him that the house loved him in return, and their shared emotion suffused the experience with rich, red, light. And to his astonishment, that light was seen by some entity, too vast or important for him to comprehend, but he knew that it was watching him, and that it approved.

After this admittedly odd but perhaps merely imaginative experience, Harry discovers that somehow, he no longer owes money on his house. There's no record that there ever was a mortgage. It's free and clear. Upon reviewing his finances in general, he finds that all of them have subtly improved, and his various required payments are decreased. And when he relaxes alone in his house, he glimpses or feels the color again.

Other things seem a little off-kilter after that point too, and Harry isn't sure whether his memory was affected by the experience, or reality itself. He understands a little Spanish that he didn't before, especially Mexican-American slang. Someone even addresses him casually on the street as if he were in that subculture, perceiving that he must have been born in northern Mexico. He feels good about this, as if he had a more developed sense of "place" in general ... and strangely, physically better too. He feels as if, once in the regard of a benign and attentive being, he has entered a better "space" of existence.

Naming and understanding the scores

The score's number does not necessarily mean success or value in an external scale, but rather the character's competence and comfort in using its features. Therefore a Marriage defined as "Bad divorce from Beth" scored at 10 means the character still gets good advice from Beth or maybe uses contacts from the long legal battle to his advantage, but a Marriage defined as "Married to Joan for twelve years" at 0 means the character flails when adverse situations require calling upon his wife.

Roughly, the scale goes:

- 0: The character flails and has to improvise when relying upon or dealing with this item
- 1: The character can see problems ahead if he or she has to rely upon or deal with this item

- 2-6: The character sees this item as a typical asset or feature of his or her life, which means it is perfectly capable of being a pain in the ass when in use or when it acts up
- 7-12: The character turns to this item as a way to deal with problems and with other people

No item should be defined as “None.” If the character is not married, then describe the situation in such a way which illuminates why not. Consider the differences among “Dating frantically,” “Gave up on that nonsense long ago,” “Dumped at the altar,” and “Single and lovin’ it.” In the case of the example character, Harry, note his description for Business Loan.

Diversity among characters

Characters may be of any social class or wealth level, with the necessary information and any commentary or perspective being delivered through naming the scores. Regarding the information, one character may have Residence described as a mansion, whereas another has it described as “Homeless.” Either description could have any numerical rating, because the value indicates how well the character deals with problems in which his residence, or lack of it, is a primary feature. Regarding the commentary or perspective, certain twists of phrasing allow for more depth.

Example: homeless character

Vehicles <i>City trains on a bummed pass</i>	Clothes <i>Several layers</i>	Art/entertainment <i>Cast-off TV, no cable</i>	Weapons <i>Half a brick in a nylon sock</i>
Knickknacks <i>Wire, ties, string, cords</i>	Residence location <i>Cousin’s garage, most of the time</i>	Residence value <i>A <u>lot</u> if you don’t have it</i>	Residence appearance <i>Beat-up and unused-looking</i>
Active project <i>Find a good non-shopping cart</i>	Abandoned project <i>College, long ago</i>	Failed project <i>My life</i>	Planned project <i>No more junk</i>

Play: Dice pools, guiding, and turn order

Everyone rolls ten d6 and places the dice as rolled to the left of his or her character sheet. Whoever has the lowest total is the current Guide, and whoever has the highest is the current Player. Everyone else has an auxiliary role.

Example: Harry’s Player’s roll is



= 38, which happens to be the highest at the table. Harry’s up first.

As turns go by, whoever just finished being the Player becomes the new Guide, and anyone can speak up to be the new Player. The only constraints are that no one is Player again until everyone has done it once, and the order of Players within any “round” should not be kept fixed.

Play: A given turn

The Player states what his or her character is doing “today,” defined either as the next day from previous events or as a continuation of the previous events in the same day. The Guide introduces

adversity through playing other characters and describing the circumstances by which the Player character comes into contact with them.

Remember, anything covered by the artsy stuff is neither a problem nor a resource for the character; it is conspicuous only in its absence. The Guide does best to work from items on the sheet which are still entirely or mostly uncovered, if possible.

The adversity should be ordinary: work hassles, personality conflicts, circumstances of the moment, financial struggles, or similar. There is no reason to make it urgent or to threaten any aspect of the character's life in a crucial sense: firings, blowing-up houses or spouses, ninja attacks, arrest on framed-up drug charges, being run over by a bus ... Instead, the Guide should think in terms of staying afloat, coping with tension, keeping one's temper, reaching out to others, and bending the system, the way most of us live our real lives.

Example: Harry is dealing with an aggravating misunderstanding at work, in which he is receiving disciplinary memos intended for someone else, but the reprimands for ignoring them are in fact being applied to him..

Good Guiding

Always ask, "What do you do?" and "What does that look like?" in response to the Player's contributions, until you feel grounded in what's going on. Don't guess what the Player or anyone else might want you to do; discover what interests you most. On that basis, choose or create a character to do something, and describe it as visually and straightforwardly as possible based on the Player's character's perceptions.

The Guide really is the world-player, in the sense that he or she makes up anything external to the character and describes how the character comes to perceive it. However, the Guide doesn't need to construct any *social* past or context, either for the character or for anyone else. That content may be left to the Player clarifying and working with the character's abilities.

At first glance, it may seem tricky to provide adversity for certain items when they are described missing in some way, such as Harry's Aliases. The way to do it is to provide adversity in which someone either thinks he has an alias and has some kind of problem with that, or in which an alias really would have been useful. If you prefer, avoid those items until you get the hang of the more intuitive ones.

The Guide never includes his or her own character in someone else's scene, but may include characters of other participants upon request, in which case they become secondary Players in the scene. They have no formal adversity of their own to resolve, but may deal with the central character and/or his or her adversity as their players describe.

Good Playing

The Player describes how the character is coping with the situation, possibly alternating with the Guide to round out the current situation. The Player should speak in terms of (i) what the character says and does, and then (ii) what immediate consequence that has in the fiction, for about five or ten seconds beyond the action. The latter narration includes physical consequences, "reaction shots," verbal responses, and similar brief results. You can shift the character forwards in time and elsewhere in space, as long as continuity is established by relevant actions. As a rule of thumb, it's probably best to stay within a fictional day's range, although no such formal limit needs to be treated as fixed.

The idea is to develop the current situation to the point of identifying a single score on the sheet to represent what the character is doing, as opposed to merely what might be involved or affected. You may not use a given score on the sheet twice in a row. This is regardless of how many scenes might have ensued between the two uses of dice.

Example: through some time playing out scenes and interactions, we find that his immediate boss is helpfully encouraging him to consult the ombudsman, which in effect would mean admitting that the subject of the memos do in fact pertain to him, which they don't. Harry gets a little annoyed and starts alerting everyone in the office to his problem, calling in markers and favors in order to goose the grapevine into action. The Player and Guide agree that Harry's Coworkers, defined as "The nicest guy here" and scored at 5, is most relevant for the scene.

During the Turn: Resolution

Problems are resolved in one of three ways: allotting dice, choosing to fail, or Immersion.

The starting target number for a character is 20. The value of the most relevant score, as established through play, is applied toward that number.

Example: Harry is using Coworkers at 5, so that leaves 15 to go.

Living life to its full

The Player may allot one or more rolled dice toward the target number's total in addition to the score being used. If the total equals or exceeds the target number (excess dice are not permitted), then those dice are set aside, and the Guide and Player continue to describe and narrate how the character deals successfully with the adversity. If the total does not, then the situation resolves negatively for the character's interests.

Example: the Player chooses a 6, a 4, a 3, and a 2 from Harry's Pool, which in addition to the score of 5 brings the total to equal the target number of 20. Further play and narration establish that Harry is able to generate enough office scuttlebutt about his problem that the next administrative level has no choice except to resolve the problem without hassling him further.

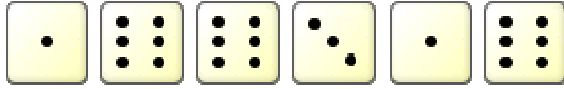
The other participants may add auxiliary narration and description during the above dialogue, representing the influence of the character's visions, hallucinations, moments of clarity, and revelations upon his or her perceptions. If the score being used is contiguous to any glued-on additions to the character sheet, they describe how its use is changed by the character's altered experience of reality, up to and including the manifestation of mystical power, whether noticeable to anyone besides the character or not.

The transformed situation must necessarily problematize the life of another player's character whether directly or indirectly; no order is mandated but everyone should get hit by this eventually. The Player narrates how this happens.

Example: The Player explains that the office worker who had in fact been targeted by the memos has a very bad day, as the accumulated disfavor of several weeks arrives all at once, and he is on the verge of losing his job. He leaves the workplace that day in a foul mood, and is rude to a homeless man standing on the plaza by the exit doors, to the extent that he knocks some of the guy's possessions into the gutter, where some are lost. The homeless man is another person's character.

The dice used lose their values and are set to the right of the character sheet. The remaining dice stay where they are, untouched, as originally rolled.

Example: Harry's remaining dice to the left of his sheet look like this,



And four dice are now sitting to the right of the sheet. They're not pictured here because they have no designated values..

In a later scene, if this resolution option is employed again, then after you choose your dice from the group at the left, the dice to the right are rolled and the highest value is momentarily added to the target number. In other words, your character may fail to achieve his or her goals if the new target number exceeds the current total of score + chosen dice. The target number is only increased for purposes of this comparison and then reverts to its ordinary value.

Whatever dice were chosen from the left this time now join those at the right.

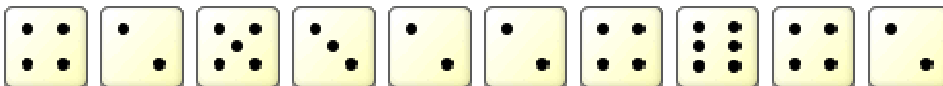
If you grind out your dice to the bitter end through multiple situations, after the final die is used and the character most likely fails, then the player rolls ten d6 to set a new pool, and the target number remains unchanged. This may result in failing more than one adverse situation before all the dice are gone.

Punting

The player may bypass allocating the dice and state that the character fails at the situation, which resolves against the character's interests as described by the Guide, regardless of the current dice total's value. Your dice pool clears entirely and you roll ten d6 again for a new pool, re-setting your total value. Your target number increases by 5 every time you do this.

Example: The Player punts, and the Guide describes how Harry takes his boss' advice, essentially throwing himself at the mercy of the administrative system. Rather than make the boss an idiot, the Guide describes him submitting a formal appeal to help Harry out, but the fact is, the administration already has the black marks against Harry in its records, and there's really no way to get them out. Harry finds himself blocked for his next scheduled pay raise and removed from a committee he cares about a lot, and the boss doesn't get a budget review he'd been shooting for either. The two of them go out together for a beer and gnash their teeth.

New dice pool:



= 34. In Harry's next scene, his target number will be 25.

Typically this option will be used when one's oppositional dice pool, as built up through the option described above, is becoming inconvenient.

Immersion

The Player describes how the character experiences a mystic insight, roughly classifiable as:

- *I Know This Now*, which changes the adversity into something different and manageable;
- *I See My Path*, which identifies an action which decisively solves the problem;
- *I Know What You Are*, which identifies a character involved in the adversity as having a special mystical identity which can be addressed to solve the problem; and
- *The Crack Between the Worlds*, in which the character displays a radical manifestation of mystical power.

The character takes action based on this insight and deals with the adversity such that, as currently stated and understood, it no longer threatens the character.

Example: Harry uses “I know what you are,” regarding a woman at work, whom he now realizes is an agent of the “regarding presence,” whom he is beginning to call ‘la Alma Carmesi,’ or the crimson soul. He engages in a covert information blitz toward her, including flooding her email with spam, all with red backgrounds regardless of content, stealthily painting a complex eye-like symbol on her office door, and wearing red apparel, all intended to alert her to his plight and seek help. And what do you know! The administration figures out the glitch, clears Harry’s official work records, and sends him a nice apology.

Immersed actions are always effective, but they may or may not be legal or even apparently rational. “Seeing red” reactions and actions are viscerally undeniable, voluntary/involuntary being indistinguishable, and unavoidably transitional in one’s character and in the “story” of one’s life. To you, it’s an act of transcendental selfhood and mystical insight, but to others, you’ve gone batshit crazy. Or even if it’s not that extreme, it is at the very least mysterious and possibly frightening. The Guide describes other characters’ reactions and what they do, although reserving any further concrete adversity for later scenes.

Example: The Guide notes that Harry’s co-workers are puzzled by his recent fashion choices, and some of the custodial staff are eyeing him suspiciously while cleaning up the defaced door. The woman, however, outwardly responds to the whole thing with magnificent indifference.

Immersion resolutions cover a wide range of extreme, psychic, mystical, or even super-powers types of effects. The above example stayed on the end of the spectrum characterized by weird behavior and effects which may or may not be coincidental. Alternate ways to play this resolution option include far more direct action.

Example: Harry puts one hand on his computer keyboard and one on the screen, then unleashes a psychic blast into the system. He can actually see all the streams and tributaries of information throughout the building and the network, as well as out of all the screens into the various offices. All those screens glow bright red for a moment, then the system undergoes a radical crash. His black-marked records vanish into the ether along with about a million other tidbits of administrative information.

In this case, the Guide follows up by describing the variety of excuses and rationalizations for the event, none of which involve Harry.

The Player selects any of the available arts-and-crafts material, up to the size of his or her open palm, to glue onto his or her character sheet in any single location. He or she may cut up whatever is chosen, as desired. At first Immersion, the sheet is glued onto backing as well.

Example: the Player chooses a black curlicue, placing it vertically above the eye already on the sheet, to occupy but not fully cover the items “Professional personality” and “First impression.”

No further narration is required from the Player at this point; his or her notions for the content implied by the addition are left to later play. However, the other people describe how their characters are alerted to or affected by the “ripples” in the metaphysical spaces or interstices, using as starting points the chosen artistic materials as well as the actions described in the scene so far.

If something is completely covered by the new addition, then it undergoes the same weird transformation and elimination described in character creation. This will certainly require some distinct narration of its own when the character’s turn comes around again.

The dice pool and target number remain unchanged.

When visions clash

It is possible that one or another character may seek directly to challenge, oppose, or even harm another. This situation arises in any of three ways.

- If a character is dealing with Guided adversity, and if another character was already placed into the scene by the Guide, then the other character may act against the primary character as part of the adversity, as that player describes. (This is optional; the secondary character does not necessarily have to be a negative presence.) In this case, the ordinary rules of resolution are employed and the secondary character imposes no special mechanics into the procedure.
- In some cases, a secondary character may be in a scene, and his or her actions as described by that player may be deemed by the Guide to supercede the adversity in progress. Or to put it simply, the main character was doing something-or-other, but then this other fellow appears and demands special attention in some way. In this case, the ordinary rules of resolution are suspended and the Clash rules are employed (see below).
- If a character ignores the Guided adversity and instead seeks to harm, challenge, or oppose another character, then the targeted character is drawn into the scene willy-nilly if he or she were not already present, permitting narration among the Guide and both players. If and when events seem to have reached a point of irreconcilable tension, then the ordinary rules of resolution are suspended and the Clash rules are employed (see below).

The Clash procedure is carried out as follows. First make sure that the current fictional situation is well-established and understood by everyone at the table. It is necessary for the conflict to be oppositional; in other words, one character is doing something and the other is stopping them directly or indirectly, up to and including doing it instead.

Then, for each character, with any judgment calls being made by the Guide,

- If you’re being nice, pick up the dice to the left of your character sheet
- If you’re not, pick up the dice to the right of your character sheet

Finally, effectively, play Blackjack dice. Roll one die openly, and simultaneously, a secret one. Keep their sum in mind. See if anyone calls. Then keep adding simultaneous secret rolls of a single die. Call when you want, or if you run out of dice, or if you bust by exceeding your current target number. Going bust loses; if no one is busted, then the higher total wins. Ties go to the current Player.

The players may talk and narrate as much as they like during back-and-forth dice rolling. They may be as extravagant as they can possibly imagine, with all manner of cosmic expansions or content at one end, or nothing at all at the other.

The winner describes what happens, especially to the loser; again, being as crazy and wild and extreme as the player desires. Here's the part I'm hoping is the fun bit, though: the loser describes how much of what just happens is real, as opposed to the stuff that occurred only in the perceptions of the characters.

At the end of the Clash, all dice are placed to the right of the sheet. Uniquely, the players do not re-roll them for a new 10d6 total, and their current values are zero going into the following turns. Re-rolls will occur later when and if the appropriate resolutions are used.

(These Clash rules are merely a first pass. I'm hoping it will evoke samurai dueling, without simply being an annoying subroutine. I really don't know whether it should include narrational requirements, although my suspicion is "not." I'm hoping the connections to the dice pools will produce fun effects, and that the loser's narrations work as a dial for how "real-world crazy" the story is permitted to become. However, all of that awaits playtest. Alternate notions include focusing on automatic immersion and the art project.)

Ending the turn

Decrease the value of the designated score by 1 as well as those of any and all scores that are relevant to the situation, according to the Guide. It doesn't matter what resolution method was used, or how the situation was resolved.

Example: No matter which of the three methods described above was actually used, Harry's Coworkers score is decreased by 1, for a new value of 4. The Guide decides that the scores for Employer, Professional Reputation, and Professional Personality are each decreased by 1 as well.

If a score's value drops to 0, the item remains on the sheet, and its content is rewritten into a painful or tragic form.

Harry's Professional Personality has just dropped from 1 to 0. Apparently, no matter how the problems worked out in the short-term, this experience really shook up his understanding of his own workplace, to the degree that it affects his demeanor there. The Player rewrites the description, deciding upon Disgruntled. (For extra fun, notice that if the Immersion option was used as described above, then this item happens to be "reddened" as well.)

Regarding the ordering of turns, again, the player whose character was just Guided always becomes the new Guide. The only stipulations for who becomes the new Player are (i) everyone gets to be the Player before anyone can do it again, and (ii) if possible, try to keep the same order of Players from repeating itself too mechanically as play continues.

Exegesis

More or less at the point when all the characters have been featured in Turns, the group conducts a special combination of discussions and scenes in which no adversity appears, although the events played may well generate material for later Turns. During this phase or step, the characters grapple with making sense of their experiences, either indulging in coping mechanisms or articulating and developing personal models of reality, or both.

Each person describes what his or her character is doing. The behaviors may appear normal or entirely not normal. Sequences such as Roy Neary's mashed-potatoes sculpting in *Close Encounters of the Third Kind* or the protagonist's extreme drug experiences in *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas* might be considered, but ordinary if perhaps a bit obsessive behavior is also eligible, such as the protagonist's journal in *Valis*, from which this phase of play derives its name.

Each person then decides whether to conduct the next step entirely alone or to solicit input first. If you solicit input, then anyone else at the table may provide commentary and suggestions based on the artwork you've created so far, including the listed items as well as the designs and appearance of the glued-on materials. Otherwise they let you alone.

Finally, each participant describes his or her character's current best guess or construction concerning the world as they now know it. The perspectives can vary; they might be wholly aesthetic, or spiritual, or political, or historical, or whatever. Each character should somehow articulate what he or she decides, interprets, or realizes. Please feel free to draw upon whatever references you like, as baroque and arcane as you can manage and still find fun. Inventing names and terms is highly recommended. Also, the content should be related somehow to the content and design of the artwork generated so far, at least as far as the person speaking is concerned.

The narrations and interpretations provided during Exegesis are certainly available for later play, whether as information or perceptions, as shared or contrasting motifs, or even as targets for deconstruction.

Emergent play (possibly)

One possible, hoped-for emergent property of play is that the characters become motivated toward direct action in the world via their insights and abilities. Whether they are in agreement about that or not is left up to play.

Another is that interactions among characters strongly converge with a wide variety of emergent relationships and outcomes, ranging as far apart as collusion during visions to outright super-psychic battles.

Another is the degree to which the various interpretations of reality impinge upon one another, whether threatening or reinforcing.

And of course, the woman

Who is that, in the picture? I don't know. It's crucial to play that nobody knows, that this question *be* a question. It may become the linchpin of characters' speculation, effort, interpretation, and motivation during play.

- A focal entity of some kind? Is she symbolic, effectively invented by the characters, or is she really there? What does she want? Is she good or evil?
- What is she there for? To be worshipped? To be fought? To deliver or receive a message? To be emulated? Or is she a goal, something that a person can find or become? In what way?
- Is she an actual person in ordinary reality? Does that person know? Is she to be sought out, protected, killed, or what?

These questions are not answered – if they are answered at all – by the Guide of the moment, or at any moment, but rather collectively and piecemeal, by contributions of the other participants as play moves forward.

Techniques to consider

For the Exegesis step, especially later in play, consider allowing some time to pass, say weeks or months. It might be best handled by finding out from each participant how much time he or she would be willing to let go by, then using the shortest amount stated.

When you're the Guide, play all your characters with some sympathy. The ex-wife need not be a shrieking harpy, the boss doesn't have to be a sadistic drone, the literary agent isn't entirely a scum-sucking bottom-feeder, the aggressive guy in the bar isn't a doltish brute ... This doesn't mean the characters are sympathetic to the Player's character, nor that they cannot have extreme emotions, nor that they always make the best decisions. It does mean that you should consider them to be people, not embodiments of stereotypes or (as they see it) present only to generate hassles for the character.

It is quite helpful for the Guide not to bother with naming characters that were not named already on the player's sheet. Instead, everyone else at the table should play "namer" when the Guide introduces a new character, but waiting for a little bit of description of action and dialogue before jumping. This is why I didn't name the boss or the woman at the office in the examples.

Where play goes and how it ends

Play includes no formal endgame, but instead merely continues until all of the characters have met a personal ending. It is unlikely that this will occur simultaneously for anyone, so think of play as slowly removing character after character until they're all gone.

If you have no character but play is still in progress, then all you do is act as namer and as a possible source of feedback during Exegesis. When the number of characters is reduced to two, then those two players will alternate acting as one another's Guide. When the number of characters is reduced to one, then everyone else simply takes turns acting as Guide.

Ways to go

1. Plot-driven. When and if you (the Player) decide that your character's actions and circumstances have reached a social, thematic, or psychological peak, then the current turn may be declared the character's last. The consequences and details depend on which method of resolution is chosen. In all cases, the details of the Player's and/or Guide's final narration should draw upon feedback provided by everyone in play.

- Living life to its full: the character copes with the current adversity as determined by the dice and score, as usual, but he or she also now crashes and burns, reaching a personal limit that is expressed in physical disintegration or fatal injury.
- Punting: the character fails to deal with the current adversity as per the rules, but the event acts as a trigger to return him or her, slowly but inexorably, to ordinary life. Although the mysterious experiences may have changed things, perhaps considerably, they cease to occur and he or she becomes less interested in their nature. The character basically gets through it and moves on.
- Immersion: the character copes with the current adversity successfully as per the rules, but dies or disappears in an entirely mysterious and perhaps remarkable way.

2. Art-driven. When and if you decide that your artistic creation is about as done as it can get, then during Exegesis, narrate how your character arrives at a final conclusion about the nature of reality, and what actions he or she takes as a final expression thereof. Everyone else at the table describes the consequences. Going by the source inspirations, such a conclusion is generally synonymous with mental illness and a wide range of life-disasters, especially for other people.

Thoughts

The game leaves certain metaphysical or even thematic issues dangling. This is intentional. The only question is whether the human side of the story or stories was compelling. Or to put it simply, I don't care a bit about VALIS or whether the year is 138 or 1978 C.E. I do care, quite a lot, about Sherri suffocating to death from lymphatic cancer and self-hatred, and about Phil seeing his family disintegrate while grappling with multiple-personality disorder. In many ways, this game is an exercise in shared pain and honesty.

Influences

Please investigate those you haven't encountered before, and draw upon them during your own play of the game.

Games

At this late stage, it seems like I've been influenced by every game ever. But more specifically, this one "felt like" Keith Senkowski's *untitled* and Steve Hickey's *Left Coast*, both contestants in the Ronnies contests in late 2005; the Misbegotten from Seth Ben Ezra's *Legends of Alyria*; and the Faceless and the Hocus from Vincent Baker's *Apocalypse World*. For raw red color, you can't do better than Greg Saunders' *Ruby* and Tim Koppang's *Mars Colony*. The Clash rules are modified from Tim Kleinert's *The Mountain Witch*. Kevin Allen Jr. introduced scissors to role-playing texts with *Sweet Agatha*.

Literature

Philip K. Dick's *Valis*, first and foremost; see also Hunter S. Thompson's *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas*, especially Chapter 8 in Part 1, and Michael Bishop's *Count Geiger's Blues*.

Non-fiction

I am told that Robert Anton Wilson's *Cosmic Trigger* uses the term "Chapel Perilous" for the condition encountered by the characters in the game.

Music

King Crimson in general but especially their album *Red* (1974), and the song "Estimated Prophet" by the Grateful Dead on their *Terrapin Station* album (1977), which coincidentally also features a red cover.

Film

Visually: *Three Colors: Red* (1994), *Deep Red* (1975), and *American Beauty* (which also provides some thematic influence; 1999), and the striking "girl in the red coat" scenes in *Schindler's List* (1994). By contrast, *RED* (2010) is not especially relevant. *Altered States* (1980) and *Pi* (1998) address the overlap among insight, vision, and insanity.

The world around

Keep your eyes open for advertising which uses red as a primary device. Your characters might come to consider such things secret messages or sources of insight. Try not to be like your characters, though.

Birth name	Professional name	First impression	Stressed personality
Casual name	Nickname	Prof. personality	Unguarded pers.
Aliases	Online ID	Social hobby	Private hobby
Citizenship	Birthplace	Designated ethnicity	Ethnic background
Apparent age	Physical health	Mortgages/lease	Major loan
Physiological age	Emotional health	Minor loan	Business loan
Actual age	Mental health	Legal suit	Contract obligation
Profession (general)	Employment	Employer	Coworkers
Religious upbringing	Religious beliefs	Religious institution	Religious possessions
Earned degrees	School reputations	Academic scores	Ongoing studies
Stocks & bonds	Gratification fantasy	Professional reput.	Close friends
Retirement	Retribution fantasy	Personal reputation	Nominal friends
Personal investment	Achievement fantasy	Internet reputation	Old friends
Prof. appearance	Social appearance	Recreational app.	Private appearance
Vehicles	Clothes	Art/entertainment	Weapons
Knickknacks	Residence location	Residence value	Residence appearance
Active project	Abandoned project	Failed project	Planned project
Parents/grandparents	Siblings	Children	Cousins etc
Marriage	Sexual contacts	Former partners	Transportation
Ready cash	Tied-up funds	Required locations	Relaxation location