

Apocalypse: Emergence

by Paul Taliesin

Apocalypse: Emergence is a mutation (or hack) of Vincent Baker's *Apocalypse World*. It's half a scenario of sorts and half a group playbook you all share.

The player characters are people emerging from a Vault and exploring the post-apocalyptic world for the first time. They have lived their entire lives underground, shut off from the outside world, fretting about what was happening on the Outside. One day, the Vault opens and they taste the wind and see the open sky for the first time. Having absolutely no information about how the world has changed, they're unequipped and unprepared to deal with what they are bound to encounter. What will they discover when the door of their Vault opens? What new world awaits their sheltered eyes and unguarded brains? How will their confrontation with what's *out there* transform their relationships to each other?

Apocalypse: Emergence can also serve as a great way for an experienced MC to introduce new players to *Apocalypse World*. The players do not need to be familiar with the rules or content of *Apocalypse World*, and can just jump in and learn, one step at a time, alongside their characters.

ORIGIN

All the characters start the game locked up in the Vault: a fallout shelter designed to save a large family from nuclear war. They have lived in the Vault, completely sealed off from the outside world, for about 50 years. Most likely, the characters were born and raised in the Vault and have never seen the sun. If some of the characters are very old, however, they may remember something of the outside world from their early childhood.

First: As a group, answer these questions:

- Where was our Vault built? In what part of the world? What kind of landscape surrounded it?
- Was it built in a city park, a suburb, under an office building, in an old castle, Egyptian pyramid, or in a remote place, far from civilization?
- Is it underground, in the old subway system, a parking garage, on a mountaintop, on an island, floating free, underwater?
- Why did we (or our parents/elders) seek shelter in the Vault? Was nuclear war imminent, or did something else scare us into climbing inside and sealing our fate from the outside world?

Second: What was the world your group remembers like?

Tell the MC about the surroundings of the Vault, what life was like there before you had to seek refuge from the world's destruction.

These are stories from the "before time": you heard them growing up in the Vault. You've heard about green meadows, or tall office buildings that scraped the sky; playgrounds, shopping malls, forested hills, maybe a beach with a resort where children frolicked in the waves. Maybe there was a military outpost nearby, or a factory... an amusement park; a deep valley with a waterfall. Did you hear your parents tell you about the new 3-D Mega-Cinema which was opening during the last few weeks of the Golden Age?

As mentioned earlier, if you're one of the Elders, maybe you have some childhood memories of your own.

MC, ask questions and listen to the players. This is their part of the story.

Third: The players' map.

Make a map together: this is your sketch of what you think is outside, based on your memories and what you have heard. You'll use it as your guide to explore the surroundings of the Vault when you emerge. It's not much of a plan - things might have changed quite a lot since the "before time". But it's all you've got: your best bet for finding food, shelter, and other survivors.

Draw in streets, parks, geographical features, subway tunnels, shopping malls, hospitals, islands... whatever surrounded the Vault at the time when it was sealed.

MC, keep asking questions. Point at some places on the map: "Who lived there? What kind of people would frequent this place? Where did your parents go for fun on a Friday night?"

Fourth: Finally, decide why you, as a group, have decided to open the Vault and explore the Outside.

Choose one:

- The Vault's computer has decided that the conditions are right: the radiation and other environmental hazards have subsided enough to break the Vault's seal, or the estimated "safe" time has elapsed.
- You're completely out of food and supplies, and will starve to death if you don't do something *now*: your time's run out.
- You, the brave new generation, are tired of living a pointless life without ever seeing the stars. You've taken a vote and decided that you need to see what's out there.
- Some kind of new plague has killed off most of the Vault-dwellers. Living in cramped quarters with the sick and dying, you're terrified that you're next: you've decided to escape before it gets you, too.
- A *Voice* has been calling you in your dreams, beckoning you to the Outside world, saying "it" is ready for you to emerge, as though newborn, into its arms.

Additional Questions

Are you the only survivors left? Or are you leaving some others behind in the Vault?

If so, why? Are they infirm, elderly, sick, wounded, pregnant, in some kind of stasis, or too young?

CHARACTERS

Each player except the MC creates a character: your Vault-dweller. Choose a name, look, stats, possessions, and Bonds.

Name

an old-fashioned name, a regular citizen's name, a "New Age" name with a ring of hope and truth to it, a new nickname for the new world

Look

Pick as many of the following as apply:

scrawny, thin-boned, pudgy, overweight, gym rat, well-manicured, perfect skin, shining white teeth, pale skin, fake tan, thick glasses, malnourished, unshaven, sickly, bearded, stunted growth, curved spine, dark shades (for overly-sensitive eyes), growth-hormone-fueled giant, albino

Stats

You don't know how to navigate the world very well just yet: don't worry, you'll learn quickly with experience. You'll swim or die trying.

The standard AW stats are: *hard*, *cool*, *hot*, *sharp*, and *weird*.

Pick two stats and set them to +1. Pick one stat and set it to -1. The remaining two default to 0.

Optional: Choose one stat and raise it by one point. If you choose to do so, you must lower another stat by one point.

It would be very strange for a Vault-dweller to have a high *weird* score. If you chose *weird* to be one of your +1 stats, the psychic maelstrom must have somehow made contact with your brain. This means the integrity of your Vault has been breached. How? Was there a leak of some kind from day one, or has the maelstrom battered its way in gradually over the years?

(If your players are unfamiliar with Apocalypse World, now might be a good opportunity to explain the concept of the psychic maelstrom.)

Possessions

Possessions are very important to someone exploring a new world for the first time.

1. Decide with the group what useful supplies you have on hand. What did your elders/parents have time to secure before sealing the Vault, all those years ago? What's survived the weight of 50 years' rot and remains in working condition?

Choose two:

- A good stock of portable sources of food and water: energy bars, canned goods, vitamin drinks, and so on
- Exploration gear and extreme weather clothing, as appropriate to the setting of the Vault: winter coats, tents, rope, pitons, a compass, mountaineering equipment, maybe scuba equipment
- Some hunting gear: a few rifles, hunting knives, fishing poles, a net, lures, and snares
- A good store of medical equipment: antibiotics, other drugs, ointments, bandages, crutches, a stretcher, a defibrillator
- Scientific equipment useful for surveying and navigation: binoculars, a GPS, a laser rangefinder, a compass, a chemical analysis kit, a Geiger counter
- A functioning vehicle: a Jeep, a flatbed truck, a four-wheeler (ATV), an inflatable boat with an outboard engine, or maybe even a one-man helicopter, small submarine, or something more experimental

Take a quick stock of what you have before setting out. You can be generous but should also be reasonable: storage space in the Vault was precious, there wasn't much time when the Apocalypse hit, and many things have been used up or rotted away over the years.

There's only so much you can carry, anyway.

2. Very few belongings inside the Vault weren't shared with the whole community. What are your two most important *personal* possessions?

You get:

- One valuable or practical item: a weapon, a tool, an electronic device, something else
- One item of great sentimental or historical value: something you keep close to your heart

Your personal possessions have great significance. For each item, choose one of the following (don't choose the same option for both items):

- This item symbolizes my *loss*: it reminds me of my sorrow for what is gone from this world forever. (What loss do you mourn most?)
- This item symbolizes my *hope*: it is a token of what I seek to find or rebuild in this brave new world, what I hope the world will hold for future generations. (What is your greatest hope?)
- This item symbolizes my *fear*: it is my preparation against what frightens me most about the collapse of civilization. (What is it you fear most?)

Now tell us a little about each item and how you relate to it, how you hope it will prepare you for your journey into the new world.

MC, pay particular attention here: this is really important fuel for the game to come.

The first time you use your personal possessions you might *mark experience* (more on that later).

Bonds

In the Vault, there was no such thing as privacy. You learned to hide your feelings from each other for the good of the group. Leaving the claustrophobic, restrictive life of the Vault means all kinds of passions and feelings can run unbridled for the first time.

Choose up to four Bonds from the list below, and decide which other character each applies to by filling in the blank with their name:

- I've secretly desired (_____) for a long time, but I was never brave enough to act on it while we were in the Vault.
- I can't stand (____); I despise every little thing about them. Leaving the Vault means that for the first time I can truly push them away.
- (____) and I managed to share a rare private, intimate moment while in the Vault, and kept it secret, too: a nearly unthinkable accomplishment.
- I once had a glimpse of (____)'s innermost self, and I believe their secret heart harbours some truly twisted impulses. I would never follow this person.
- I believe (____) is a noble heart, and the most likely of all of us to maintain their humanity. I will lean on them when hard choices come my way.
- (____) is a soft soul, far more vulnerable than they let on. I will do everything I can to look after them and guard them from the dangers ahead.

You can have more than one Bond with any given Vault-dweller. Whenever you roll to aid or interfere against

another PC, roll +the number of Bonds you have with that character.

At the end of a session, you can resolve a Bond. If you do so, mark experience.

Resolving a Bond means it no longer accurately describes your relationship with that person: it's no longer an issue, the question has been resolved, or your relationship has changed. When you resolve a Bond, erase it and write a new Bond. The new Bond can be with the same character or another character of your choice.

Hx

If you don't want to use Bonds, you can use *Hx* instead. Go through the procedure above as written, then count up the Bonds you have with each other character and write down that number as your *Hx* with them. Once that's done, follow the usual *Apocalypse World* rules for *Hx* going forward.

Moves

You start with all the basic moves.

(If your players are unfamiliar with Apocalypse World, at this point you should tell the players about the basic moves and how each one is triggered in play. Also explain that "to do it, you must do it, and if you do it, do it". That's all they need to know for now.)

Vault-dweller Special

If your character has sex with another Vault-dweller, you both open up in a way you were never able to in the Vault. Ask them any one question about (choose one):

- ...what they have experienced since leaving the Vault.
- ...how they have changed since emerging from the Vault.
- ...their hopes and dreams for the future.

Afterwards, write a new Bond with that character.

If your character has sex with someone from the Outside, you get a new insight into the new world and how it works. Ask them one question about the history of the world as they know it. They will tell you a tale, as best they're able.

Hold 1. The MC will choose one move (from any playbook not currently in play) which reflects your understanding of their tale. You may spend your hold to use this move, just once, anytime you want. (MC: If the player has a good idea for what the move should be, then sure, go with that.)

In either case, ask yourself:

Do you give yourself to the moment fully, passionately, without restraint? If you do: in the throes of passion, *open your brain* to the psychic maelstrom. You haven't learned how to guard your brain from the rage of the maelstrom yet.

Or do you control yourself, hold back, all dispassionate and distant? If so, cool, but your lover sure feels it, clear as day.

THE FIRST SESSION

In a normal first session of *Apocalypse World*, the MC does a bunch of things, like *barf forth apocalyptica*, follow the characters around, and *ask provocative questions*. In this version of the game, it's not too different. However, the characters don't know anything about the world they're about to encounter, so you can't, say, ask the Gunlugger where she gets her ammo. Instead, do this:

- **Everywhere they turn, ask the players what they think *was once there*.**

So, when they open the doors of the Vault, ask them what they *expect to see*, based on what they heard about the outside world (and their map, of course). Did the Vault's doors once open on a long winding road through a forest? The backyard of a large suburban apartment building? A parking lot outside a shopping mall? What was it like? Who might you have found there on a Tuesday afternoon?

As they explore the world further, keep asking them to look at their map and tell you what they know *was once there*, every step of the way.

AN EXAMPLE

Walking further down the shattered highway, the characters crest a small hill. The MC asks them, "What did your elders tell you was over the hill?" The players tell the MC that there used to be a small diner there, run by a single father and his family...

When they give you an answer and some good detail, take one of the following themes and look at their answer through the lens of that theme. Whatever twisted, bizarre, or stark vision you come up with, give their answer right back to them: there's something there, all right. But it's certainly not *quite like that* anymore, oh no.

When the players give you a description of what once was,
choose one theme (or roll a die):

1. ***Corruption***: The mind-rotting decay that eats through everything, steel and souls alike. Sometimes the mind is still human, but the body is not; sometimes it's the other way around.
2. ***Domination***: Might makes right. Anything that be taken by force, controlled, suppressed, subjugated... has been. The weak stand no chance here.
3. ***Perversion***: Some desires, some relationships, some businesses are still human, recognizable, but not in any way you could have imagined. Now they're just *wrong*, plain and simple. (If a part of the world still remembers the "before time", even with love, it fits under this theme. Perversion doesn't always lie at the immediate surface.)
4. ***Nature's wrath***: In the presence of cataclysmic forces, everything *mutates*. Sometimes that means Mother Nature rebels, and returns to claim her own. She's got deadly winds, storms, viruses, and hungry children everywhere.
5. ***Devastation***: Fire, rubble, broken bones, twisted metal. Not much is left here that isn't just a great scar on the face of the Earth. Everything that can be destroyed has been.
6. ***Scarcity***: There is no food, no drink, no shelter from the biting wind, no respite from the smoke and the dust. For those who remain, suffering is a way of life.

You can choose to make some of your own themes, too, to give your game a different focus or to give your apocalypse a different feel. Sticking to a small list of themes can give your vision of the new world a unique and coherent look and feel.

BACK TO THE EXAMPLE...

Walking further down the road, the characters crest a small hill. The MC asks them, "What did the elders tell you was over the hill?" The players tell the MC that there used to be a small corner store there, run by a single father and his family...

The MC chooses "Domination" as the theme, thinks about their description for a moment, and then turns it back on them:

"There's a small concrete shack by the blasted remains of the highway, with plastic tarps for a roof, and a big tin chimney spewing black smoke. A large, meaty man by the name of Dremmer lives here with his 'children', eight or nine small, scrawny, underfed boys and girls. They walk around with their eyes turned to the ground and their backs hunched, and won't meet your eyes. One is nursing a broken hand, another is bleeding from his cheek. A young girl lies dead by the middle of the road: someone or something has snapped her neck. Several of the 'children' appear to be hard at work digging her a grave. It seems unlikely they're actually Dremmer's children, though: at least two of them are only a few years younger than he is, by the looks of it."

So that's how the first session goes. The players explore the new world; you ask them about what *was once there*, then you tell them what *they actually find*.

In all other respects, follow the usual agenda and principles for the first session. Leap forward with named, human NPCs. Maybe have a fight. And so on.

However, you might consider keeping things a little smaller in scale than you would in a typical game of *Apocalypse World*. These characters aren't as prepared to deal with the inevitable as the badass, hardened veterans you normally see in play. So, show them a family with a few guns instead of an armed gang, two dozen strong. Have a few feral dogs sniffing around on their trail, not a whole *tribe* that can track them via the psychic maelstrom. Start a little smaller in scale: you can build up the scope of the game later.

Ask questions, take notes, and after the session prepare your Fronts, as usual.

However, you also have one new tool at your disposal: take note of the hopes, sorrows, and fears the players described when they spoke of their characters' personal possessions. Make sure you weave those things – those hopes, sorrows, and fears – into the coming game. That's a gold mine of material for you.

EXPERIENCE AND IMPROVEMENT

The characters will face many challenges and often find themselves unprepared to deal with them. However, they will adapt quickly, learning the ways of the world facing them. They will change the world; the world will change them, too.

At first, they will mark experience more often. Here are three modifications to the standard Apocalypse World rules which increase the rate at which characters improve. Pick two or use all three, depending on the pace of improvement you want for the early game:

- Do not highlight stats in the first session. You mark experience every time you make a move (and roll the dice) instead.
- At the end of every session, you can choose to resolve a Bond which no longer accurately describes your relationship to another character. If you do so, rewrite this Bond (the new Bond can be with the same character or a different one) and mark experience.
- The very first time you use each of your personal possessions, mark experience.

Here are the improvement options available to the Vault-dwellers:

- Add one to a stat of your choice (to a maximum of +2)
- Add one to a stat of your choice (to a maximum of +2)
- Take a move from any playbook
- Take a move from any playbook
- Recover an important item or resource you desperately need from the Vault

That last option can be used when you really need something you can't find in the outside world. If you can make your way back to the Vault, take this improvement to recover an important piece of equipment or resource (e.g. ammunition, gasoline, water, medicine). The list of resources from the "Possessions" section could be of use here.

A note on improving stats: If you want to be faithful to the original Apocalypse World rules, advancing a second stat to +2 should force you to lower another stat by one point.

After the first session, show the players the playbooks, let them flip through them, have them check out a few of the moves, so they can start thinking about which ones to take. Here's why: they're looking at what they could become.

Tell them it's something like this:

Eventually your character will take on a new identity. This new identity reflects how the *Apocalypse World* has changed her, and how she has come to grips with her new self. Perhaps it is simply your character coming into her own, grown stronger from hardship; perhaps it is the psychic maelstrom which has twisted her mind and body into a shape it finds more pleasing...

A NEW IDENTITY

When you take a move from an existing playbook, a new improvement option becomes available to you:

- Change your character type to an official playbook: become the [name of the playbook you took a move from]

For example, when you take the move *Visions of death* (a Battlebabe move), the Battlebabe playbook becomes available to you. You can now choose to become the Battlebabe as your next improvement.

If you spend your next improvement to take the move *Eye on the door* (one of the Operator's moves), instead, then the Operator playbook also becomes available to you. You could now choose to become the Battlebabe or the Operator (but, of course, you can't become both).

One point of advice:

Take a look at a playbook's regular stat lines before choosing it. You'll want your stats to match that playbook's profiles, at least more or less. Being a Hardholder with a negative *hard*, for example, could be frustrating. The playbooks are designed to work well with certain stat ranges, so take that into account when taking your first move or two and improving your stats.

If you want to make a rule about it, you could: your stats must fall within the ranges of the stat lines given for that playbook – no greater than the maximum value possible, and no smaller than the minimum value possible, for any given stat in that playbook's stat lines. But, probably? No need.

TAKING ON A PLAYBOOK

When your character takes on a playbook, things change quite significantly for them. You have adopted a new identity, and that comes with a significant change in perspective.

You've *gone native*.

When your character changes their type to an official playbook:

- Take one more move from the new playbook (yes, in some cases this means you will not have all the moves a standard starting playbook character might have).
- If you were using any accelerated experience rules, revert to the regular *Apocalypse World* rules as far as this character is concerned.
- You keep everything that belongs to your intrinsic self (including stats, Hx/Bonds, and moves).
- You lose access to any old improvement options still available to you: from now on, use the ones listed in your playbook instead. (Same goes for your "Special".)
- If you are a new Battlebabe, add one to your *cool* and subtract one from your *hard*. (This is so the Battlebabe can have her *cool+3*.)

You also receive as much of the other "stuff" that comes along with the playbook (followers, gear, barter) as makes sense at that particular time. The rest will come along as your character acquires it. The MC will help you with that as much as he or she can without straining credibility, as described below.

MCing NEW PLAYBOOK CHARACTERS

MC, when a character takes on a playbook, add the following item to your agenda:

- *Help the character settle into their new identity*

This means a few different things:

- Show how the world and its denizens respond to the character differently. She's one of their own now, with newfound confidence and attitude, and everyone can feel that change about her.
- Have a thought about how the *psychic maelstrom* responds to the character differently. Is it less or more interested in her? How does her experience of, say, *opening her brain* differ? Does the *psychic maelstrom* want different things from the character now?
- As much as you can, help the character come into possession of the benefits, tools, and position that come with her new playbook.

That last one deserves some explanation: in whatever way you can manage, help those things that should belong to the character find their way to her. Let's say a character just became the *Battlebabe*, but she doesn't have any custom weapons. So maybe the local tinker has had his eye on her for a while, and offers her a selection of his experimental arms collection. Another character wants to become the *Hardholder*. So a faction within the settlement starts to follow him around, and they're talking about how maybe he should take down the current leader and take charge. And so on.

Within reason, the things that should be theirs according to the playbooks now become available for them in the fiction. However, remember your other agenda, too: you've got to make their lives interesting and get your bloody fingerprints on everything. That strange tinker who is offering the new Battlebabe some of his toys, he surely wants something in return: maybe a promise, maybe a job done, maybe a little somethin-somethin'. The Hardholder's new followers, they don't just want the current leader deposed, they want to watch him torn to pieces in the middle of the town's marketplace along with his whole family, and then they want his flesh fed to the dogs. And that ain't making them too many friends, either.

Some things might strain your suspension of disbelief: maybe you can't figure out any way your Brainer can believably get his hands on a violation glove, or maybe there's no way the Hardholder's fort can have all the options it should have, because you've already established that it's got no walls *and* no militia. If so, fine. The integrity of the fiction comes first.

But you should try, within reason, to make things fit. Work on it together with the player: in most cases it won't be too hard to figure things out. Just don't forget to *make Apocalypse World seem real*.

Think of it this way:

What's due to the characters comes to them, almost like the psychic maelstrom *wants* them to have it. But that doesn't mean it can't come with wicked strings attached.

AND BEYOND...

What next? Just play *Apocalypse World*, no different than how it's described in the book, and see where these cool, hot characters end up. They've got to take this new world by the horns, even as it gradually claims their souls.

I like to think that the psychic maelstrom is welcoming the characters with open arms, twisting them into forms it finds more pleasing. More weird, more hard, more brutal, yes, but also opening their eyes and brains to a vision of the ungiven future.

To what end? What does it want from them? Play and find out.

Let us know how it goes.*

*: The *barf forth apocalyptica* or *Story Games* forums are great for this purpose.

OPTIONAL: Reaction Rolls

How do these people react to you?

1. ...with hope or veneration. They're in awe, they worship you, they consider you a sign of a great future, they consider you a holy sacrifice.
2. ...with desperation or helplessness. They need you for protection, transportation, food & supplies, or medicine. Without your help, they're doomed.
3. ...with envy. They want your looks, your health, your belongings, or the information you may have.
4. ...with fear and/or ignorance. They want to experiment on you, chase you away, or send you somewhere they think you'll never come back from.
5. ...with ambition. They see you as an opportunity. They want to use you as bait, or as bargaining value, with whomever they fear.
6. ...with suspicion. They want to disarm you, probe you, drug you, interrogate you, cut you open. (May be combined with another type!)