

The Bureau

An adventure game for children of all ages
powered by the Apocalypse

by Paul Taliesin

INTRODUCTION

The Bureau.

You've never heard of it.

You've never heard of us.

And, if we do our job right, you never will.

We are a secret organization hiding in plain sight behind all the major governments on this Earth.

Our mission?

Protecting the world from threats you will never know even exist... unless we fail.

Aliens. Ghosts. Demons. Monsters. Area 51. The Loch Ness monster.

You think they aren't real?

They live among us, they hide in our sewers, our cemeteries, our asylums. They sleep for centuries, buried under the ocean floor. They watch us from beyond the stars.

And the very worst? They sit behind the desks of our major corporations. They masquerade as influential politicians. They feed on the weak and prey on the powerful, alike.

We are the Agents of the Bureau.

We have top-secret technology, international passports, and the best training the Bureau has to offer.

We are the only thing protecting the citizens of the Earth from these threats.

It is our work that allows you to sleep safe at night.

THE PLAYERS

The Bureau is best played by someone experienced with roleplaying games (and particularly Vincent Baker's *Apocalypse World*), who will be "the Master of Ceremonies" (or "MC", for short). Two to four other players take on the roles of Agents of the Bureau.

THE AGENTS

Every Agent has a name. In the old days, Agents were simply referred to by letter, like this: "Agent J." However, that's not always the case anymore. Write down your Agent's name and draw a little portrait.

An Agent is defined by her "Terms". *Terms* are adjectives, verbs, and nouns. On each Agent's sheet, make three lists of Terms, as follows:

1. *I am...*

In this section, list Adjectives that describe the Agent. All Agents of the Bureau are competent and talented professionals: they are *Clever*, *Nimble*, *Tough*, *Charming*, and *Savvy*.

2. *I know how to...*

In the second section, list up to five Verbs which describe things the Agent knows how to do well. For instance, many Agents know how to do things like *Drive Any Vehicle*, *Lie Believably*, or *Hack Computers*. (There is a good list of Verbs on the second to last page of these rules, if you need some suggestions.)

3. *To help me, I have...*

In the third section, list up to five Nouns. These are people, places, or things which help your Agent in the field. Some good examples might include:

- An unusual companion
- A well-placed friend
- A keen sense of observation
- A useful weapon
- A great outfit or piece of clothing
- A high-tech device
- A kit of useful tools

- A fantastic vehicle
- A secret laboratory
- A great source of information
- A collection of disguises
- An important document
- Invent your own. If you chose something from this generic list, add some detail.

TERMS AND DICE

Each Term (Adjective, Verb, or Noun) will be associated with a die type (d4, d6, d8, or d10). To complete the creation of your Agent, you will assign a die type to each Term on your sheet. The bigger the die type, the more useful that Term will be to your Agent.

Begin by picking three Terms in each category (Adjectives, Verbs, and Nouns) to be your most important Terms. Underline these nine Terms.

Now: pick one underlined Noun or Verb to be your most important asset. Assign a d10 to this Term.

Next, pick one underlined Adjective and assign it a d8.

Finally, pick one other underlined Term (from any category) and assign it a d8, as well.

Every remaining underlined Term receives a d6.

Every other Term (which hasn't yet been assigned a die type) receives a d4, by default.

TIP: When deciding which Terms receive the highest dice, try not to concentrate all your high dice. If your d10 and d8 Terms are all likely to be used together, your Agent will be a one-trick pony, only good at one thing. Instead, try to assign your d10 and d8s to Terms that are likely to come into play in different situations.

ROLLING THE DICE

When your character tries to accomplish something (or avoid a threat) in a tense or dangerous situation, the MC will ask you to roll the dice.

First, tell everyone what your Agent is doing, and what you're trying to accomplish.

Second, take a look at your Agent's list of Terms. Do any of them apply to what's going on? Do you any of them help you in this situation? Are you being [Adjective], doing [Verb], and are any of your [Nouns] helping you?

Gather dice for your character's action in three steps;

1. First, pick up one die for the most relevant Adjective on your list.

Clever is rolled when you are using your wits to outsmart an opponent or solve a problem.

Nimble comes into play when you must move fast, and your reflexes, alertness, or agility matter most.

Tough is for when your brute strength, determination, or resilience is tested.

Charming is rolled when your Agent relies on their charisma to get someone to do what they want.

Savvy is a catch-all Adjective for your Agent's training: roll Savvy when your experience in the field would make the difference. If you're not sure which Adjective applies, you'll generally use **Savvy**.

(There may be situations where no Adjectives apply, but they should be pretty rare.)

2. Second, if you have a Verb relevant to what you're doing, pick up its die as well.

3. Third, add the dice for any Nouns which you're using, or which help you with this action.

For most rolls, you'll be rolling two or three dice. On rare occasions, you may roll four dice, but two or three dice is typical.

If you ever find yourself rolling only one die, you can ask the MC to give you a second one. The MC will say one of the following (and hand you the appropriate die):

- "This is not too hard. Here's a d8."
- "This is challenging. Here's a d6."
- "This is extremely difficult. Here's a d4."

Sometimes, the MC might ask you if you have another applicable Term on your sheet (even a second Adjective or Verb) and ask you to include that, instead.

Finally, if you wish, you may add any number of **Action dice** (if you have some). Action dice are special d6's you can get by playing to your Character Traits (more on these later). When you use an Action die, however, it's gone for good.

EXAMPLE

Agent D wants to hack into the Police Mainframe to find the name of a scientist who's gone missing. She's Savvy, of course, like all Agents are (d6), she knows how to Hack into Computers (d8), and she has a high-tech portable computer tablet (d4). She'll be rolling three dice: a d8, a d6, and a d4. She could add in an Action die (d6), but she chooses to save it for later instead.

NOTE: MC, in assisting with die choices, you should generally err in the favour of the players. When it's not clear which Term applies to a certain roll, they can usually just take the better die, no problem. This game isn't about screwing over the players.

READING THE ROLL

Roll all the dice at the same time. Add together the two highest numbers showing. What is your total?

If it's 10+ You've pulled it off, congratulations!

If it's 7-9 Things are good but not perfect. The MC will tell you one of the following, and explain:

- "You've done it, but there's also a complication..."
- "You've got to make a difficult choice between two things. You can only choose one..."

If it's 6 or less, there's a mishap. The MC will tell you what happens. Usually it'll be bad news. However, you earn an experience token from your trouble. (More on those later.)

EXAMPLE

Agent D's player throws the dice, rolling a 6 (d8), a 3 (d4), and a 1 (d6). The 6 and the 3, added together, make a total of 9. The MC says, "Great, you hack into the system and you're looking at the scientist's profile - his name, picture, address, and Social Security number are all there - but just then the alarm goes off. Looks like their security program knows you got into their system. What do you do?"

HELPING ANOTHER AGENT

When you want to help someone with a roll, say what you're doing to help and roll all your applicable dice, as described above. Choose one die to pass on to them (don't reroll it, just slide it over with the result showing).

The person you're helping will roll their own dice and add your die (without rerolling it) to their rolled results.

Now look at your own dice: the two highest remaining results in front of you are your roll for this action, with the same outcomes as outlined above.

ACTION DICE

Action Dice are a handy thing to have when your Agent is in trouble. At the beginning of the game, set out a bowl of six-sided dice of a distinct colour: these will be the Action Dice for your game.

Your Agent will have some Character Traits (see next page), which will help him collect Action Dice. You can add any number of Action Dice to any roll you make. However, you must decide how many Action Dice to use before making your roll. These are single-use: when you use an Action Die, return it to the bowl.

CHARACTER TRAITS

Choose two of these for your Agent. Don't choose the same Trait as another Agent unless you absolutely have to. Character Traits help your Agent collect Action dice.

Noble Heart

When you go out of your way to help someone who's in real trouble, take an Action die.

Competitive

When you try to prove that you're better than someone else, take one Action die.

Kleptomaniac

When you take something valuable or important that shouldn't belong to you, take an Action die.

Curious as a Cat

When your curiosity gets the best of you and you throw caution to the wind to investigate further than is wise, take an Action die.

Loyal to the Bureau

When you place the mission and the needs of your Bureau above the needs of your friends or loved ones, take an Action die.

Natural Leader

When you make a plan and the other Agents agree to follow it, take an Action die.

Angry

When you do something to scare the living daylights out of someone, take an Action die.

Devoted

You care a great deal about someone. Write down their name. When you make a sacrifice for them, take an Action die.

Strong Conscience

When you take the time to right a wrongdoing and improve someone's life, take an Action die.

Trickster

When you pass yourself off as someone you're not, or when you convince someone important of something entirely untrue, take an Action die.

Humanist

When you place a human civilian's rights above those of an alien or unnatural creature even though your friends or allies disagree, take an Action die.

Daredevil

When you jump headfirst into a dangerous situation without caution or preparation, take an Action die.

Blabbermouth

When you spill some important secret because you just can't keep your mouth shut, take an Action die.

Coward

When you take action to avoid or prevent a dangerous situation (like a scary leap or a fight), take an Action die.

Braggart

When you take credit for an important deed (whether you accomplished that deed or someone else did!) and make sure your name is heard by all, take an Action die.

Honourable

When keeping a promise or vow you made puts you in a tight spot or gets those you care about in trouble, take an Action die.

THE CENTRAL INTELLIGENCE BOARD

This is for the MC:

At the beginning of each session, ask each player for one piece of frightening news or a bizarre clue they've heard about through their web of contacts. Have each player write one strange event, clue, or lead on a sticky note and place it on the "Central Intelligence Board" (ideally, up on the wall). Write one yourself, as well. Let's call these clues or rumours "leads".

Now give it a little thought: what could tie these leads together? If you can group them all together, great. If not, group them in twos and threes.

For each grouping, think about a menace behind the scenes, the underlying cause for this group of leads. Decide what terrible thing the menace will accomplish if it is not stopped. These dangers are usually pretty major (with a whole city, or even the survival of humanity, at stake).

For each menace, write down at least three steps along the way to its ultimate goal. For each step, make a note to yourself about how that event might impact the Agents. Any time the Agents dawdle, waste time, or pursue other things during the game, you will be able to put one of these steps into action.

The "leads" you write, as a group, will determine the shape of the game to come (or at least the form each menace takes). Consider the difference between these three options, for example:

- Your leads are all about strange events in the local city. The Agents will need to step in and resolve the developing situation before the local Police screws everything up.
- Your leads are all about mysterious finds in the distant Himalayas or other exotic locations. The Agents will need to travel the globe as international men and women of mystery!
- Your leads are all about rumours within the Bureau itself. The Agents will need to investigate their own colleagues to find out who or what has infiltrated the ranks of their beloved organization.

These categories can help you group leads together when creating a particular menace. Make sure grouped leads are all connected to *each other* as well as to the underlying menace! These connections will allow the Agents to move from one lead to another easily.

PERSONALIZING EACH MENACE

It's very important to take a look at your basic sketch of each menace, and then add some detail to customize it for the particular Agents in your group. There are a few tools you can use:

1. Pay attention to which players are particularly interested in certain leads. If possible, add some detail to each lead which makes it specifically relevant to those Agents.
2. If any Agents have really unusual skills (Verbs), tools, or resources (Nouns), write a brief note about how each skill or resource is particularly well-suited to dealing with this menace.

For example, if one of your Agents has a secret laboratory, you might include some kind of strange chemical sample into your write-up of the crime scene mentioned in one of your leads. Something bizarre, exotic: something the local authorities just can't figure out on their own.

3. Look over each Agent's *Character Traits* and, for each Trait, add something to the situation which offers the Agent a chance to take an Action die.

The best way to do this is to create a character or some other important story element related to that Character Trait, and then tie it closely to the menace. (One fun way to do this is to ask each player to do this themselves: have them write a sentence or two about a person, place, or thing which is related to each of their Character Traits. This gives you a bunch of story elements to play with.)

For example, if an Agent has the *Coward* Trait, you'll definitely want to include a scary monster or a gang of rough-and-tumble hooligans. Ask the player what kinds of things they've been scared by in the past, and use that as inspiration for this particular detail.

If a character has the *Humanist* or *Loyal to the Bureau* Trait, try to set them up against the other Agents: make getting that Action die a complicated decision, not an easy one.

This final category (adding details based on Character Traits) gives you the most ammunition for the game. Here's a quick example of what adding details based on Character Traits looks like:

EXAMPLE

One of the leads on your Central Intelligence Board is: "The Bank Manager at the local branch hasn't turned up for work in three days."

Agent D has the Character Trait "Devoted", and she's named her uncle as the person she cares about. The MC decides that the uncle and the Bank Manager are romantically involved with each other, and have disappeared together. Or maybe the uncle has gone searching for the Bank Manager, but gotten into trouble well over his head and will now need bailing out.

Either way, Agent D now has a personal connection to the developing menace and a chance to earn some Action Dice once the game begins.

BEGINNING THE GAME

Decide, as a group, whether the Agents have been assigned a mission by the Bureau or whether they've decided to look into something on their own. Ask them which lead they would like to pursue first, and how they would like to go about it.

That should give you plenty to work with. The Agents will pursue the leads, pretty quickly find out more and more about the menace, and you, the MC, will keep advancing the agenda of the menace as the game goes on.

GROWTH

As Agents grow older, their values change. This means discarding some Character Traits and adopting new ones. This can happen in the heat of play, or it can happen between sessions.

To grow out of a Character Trait, an Agent must do the opposite of whatever would normally give them an Action Die for that Trait. For instance, to discard the *Braggart* Trait, the Agent might give credit for one of their accomplishments to another Agent. An Agent with the Trait *Loyal to the Bureau* might betray the Bureau in some way. A *Kleptomaniac* might return something stolen to its rightful owner. And so on.

When you grow out of a Character Trait:

- Erase that Character Trait from your Agent's sheet.
- Immediately collect one special *d10 Action Die*. (It works just like a regular Action Die.)
- Pick a new Character Trait for your Agent. (You can do it now, or wait until later.)

Your Agent may never have that same Character Trait again.

EXPERIENCE

An Agent learns – and grows more *Savvy* – by making mistakes. Each time you roll a **6 or less**, collect one experience token. Cash in three experience tokens at any time to do one of the following:

- Add a new Adjective, Verb, or Noun to your Agent's descriptive Terms. Write "d4" beside it.
- Increase a current Term's die value by one step. (You may never have more than one Term rated "d10", and you may never have more than three Terms rated "d8".)
- Take any two Terms and switch their die values.
- Add a new Character Trait.

THE DICE OF FATE

MC, if you're ever at a loss as to what happens, how things turned out, or how to describe something, roll the Dice of Fate. The Dice of Fate are two Fudge die (six-sided dice marked [-],[0], and [+]).

Narrate according to the results, one at a time: if the die shows a [+], describe a positive detail. If the die shows a [0], your description is middle of the road—more or less what you would expect in this situation. If the die shows a [-], however, describe something negative or some bad news.

If the dice show opposite results (a [+] and a [-]), connect the two details with a "but..."

Two significant details should be enough to lend some colour to any situation that comes up.

EXAMPLES

The characters set out to infiltrate the Professor's island fortress in a little sailboat. The players want to know: what is the weather like? Is it favorable?

The MC has no particular vision for this, so she rolls the dice: [-] [+]

The first die is negative, so the MC says, "It is heavily overcast and raining heavily." However, the second die is positive, which means some good news: "But, fortunately, the wind is blowing in the right direction. You'll be soaked when you get there, but your trip will be much quicker than anticipated."

Later on, Agent C recovers his favourite sports car after gangsters used it as a getaway car. He's anxious to know: how is the car doing? Is it banged up? But he also needs to use it right now, so he also asks: is there any fuel left?

The MC chooses to disclaim decision-making and rolls the dice: [0] [+]

Since the first die is a [0], the MC describes more or less what you would expect: "The car's pretty banged up, not too surprisingly." (On a [-], this might have been much worse than expected!) However, the second die suggests something positive: "The good news is, the fuel tank is still half-full. The car starts without a hitch."

Later, Agent C wants to know: "How does my boss react to my proposal?" The MC rolls: [+] [+]

"Oh, she's very pleased. Not only that, but she decides to recommend you for a promotion as well..."

FIGHTS AND PHYSICAL HARM

In a violent or dangerous situation (like a fight or chase), you can use these rules if you need a guideline:

- The first time someone does something dangerous or hurtful to an Agent, just describe the effects. Maybe they're knocked off the bridge into the water, for example, but they can get right back up again if they want, no problem.
- The second time, describe the effects and add some bad news. Tell them they're stunned: they'll need to roll the dice just to get back on their feet. Or tell them something bad has happened (for example, maybe their enemy has accomplished something they were trying to stop them from doing).
- The third time, they are defeated, out of the action. Maybe knocked out, captured, or just lying on the ground wheezing, in great pain. They won't get to have much of a say in what happens next until someone helps them get back on their feet, or, if they're alone, until the MC offers them an opportunity to do that themselves.

Once they have a chance to catch their breath, this resets. The next time they're in a fight or kerfuffle, you'll start all over: there is no such thing as real lasting harm.

Enemies of the agents are usually defeated by any single successful action. Unusually tough enemies could require two or more successful actions or rolls, however.

READING MOVES

Here's an optional rule your Agents can use: they can ask to roll the dice when they're trying to feel out a person or a situation. Try these "reading moves"; they get to ask questions and learn useful information.

When you try to "read" a person, roll one of *Charming*, *Clever*, *Savvy*, or two of those together. While you're interacting with them, ask their player questions from the list below. **On a 10+**, you can ask two questions, **on a 7-9**, ask just one:

- Is your character telling the truth?
- Is your character hiding something?
- What's your character really feeling?
- What does your character wish I'd do?
- How could I get your character to _____?

When you use your senses to feel out a dangerous situation, roll *Clever* and *Savvy*, or just one of those and ask the MC for a second die. Ask the MC questions from the list below: **on a 10+**, you can ask two questions, **on a 7-9**, ask just one:

- What's my best way in or way past?
- What's my best escape route?
- How is my opposition vulnerable to me?
- What should I be on the lookout for?
- Who's really in control here?

When you use your training and experience to study a scene closely, roll *Clever* and *Savvy*, or just one of those and ask the MC for a second die. Ask the MC questions from the list below: **on a 10+**, you can ask two questions, **on a 7-9**, ask just one:

- What happened here recently?
- What is about to happen?
- Who or what might have been here last?
- What here is useful or valuable to me?
- What here is not what it appears to be?

It pays to be informed: if you're acting on one of the answers to a "reading move" when you need to make a roll, roll an extra d4.

On a 6 or less, for any of these moves, you can still ask the MC one question. However, the answer will be some bad news or there will be a mishap, as well.

SAMPLE CHARACTER

Name: AGENT "D"

I am...

Clever - d6
Nimble - d4
Tough - d4
Charming - d8
Savvy - d6

I know how to...

Hack Computers - d8
Lie Believably - d6
Dance - d4
Perform Acrobatics - d4
Interrogate Someone - d6

To help me, I have...

An intelligent pet rat, Snickers - d6
Amazing all-terrain sneakers - d6
A roboscopic skateboard - d10
A high-tech portable computer tablet - d4

CHARACTER TRAITS

Strong Conscience

When you take the time to right a wrongdoing and improve someone's life, take an Action die.

Trickster

When you pass yourself off as someone you're not, or when you convince someone important of something entirely untrue, take an Action die.

Related story element: My uncle Steffan. Without my help, he would have lost his job at the laundromat.

Related story element: Police Chief Gonzales, who hates me ever since I made a fool of him in front of the Mayor.

Experience tokens and Action dice: Agent "D" starts the game with 0 experience tokens and 0 Action dice.

THINGS AGENTS KNOW HOW TO DO

Here is a list of skills that might be useful to your Agents. Feel free to invent your own, of course, but if your imagination fails you, this is a good list.

If a player has a Verb which seems to be fairly limited in scope, it's a good idea to allow them to use "and" to add a second Verb, or even a third. For an example, take a look at *Run, Jump, and Climb*, listed as a single Verb below.

- Break In (to a secure place)
- Dance
- Decode Encrypted Information
- Drive Any Vehicle
- Escape
- Fight With Weapons
- Forge Documents
- Hack Computers
- Impersonate Someone
- Interrogate Someone
- Intimidate Anyone
- Lie Believably
- Manipulate People
- Move Really Fast
- Notice Important Details
- Perform Acrobatic Stunts
- Perform Surgery
- Play Any Sport
- Repair Any Device
- Run, Jump, and Climb
- Shoot
- Sneak and Hide
- Steal and Pick Pockets
- Survive in any Environment
- Use Advanced Science
- Use Kung-Fu

DIFFERENT GENRES

There's nothing about this set of rules that prevents you from using them in an entirely different genre, so long as you have competent, heroic characters working together to prevent very bad things from happening in the world.

To use these rules in a different setting, all you need to do is to change the five default Adjectives. For a fantasy game, your Adjectives could be:

Cunning, for sharp wits, observation, and cleverness.

Deft, for quick fingers, steady hands, and nimble feet.

Mighty, for strength, skill-at-arms, and resilience.

Noble, for allure, good looks, magnetism, leadership, and a brave heart.

Seasoned, for experience, knowledge, worldliness, and street smarts.