

Apocalypse World

Three New Harm Moves

by Paul Taliesin

This minor hack presents a different, more visceral way to approach physical damage for Vincent Baker's *Apocalypse World*. Under these rules, harm is a properly player-facing move, ready for those times when your character is on the receiving end of some bad news.

When a player character suffers some bodily harm, pick the most relevant move from three moves below. When you make the move, you will be instructed to choose one or more harm effects from the two lists on the following page. These describe how your character is hurt and the extent of the damage.

These moves and effects replace the current rules for harm and countdown clocks. The characters retain the basic “plot immunity” they would normally have under *Apocalypse World* rules (that is, the first gunshot is never lethal), and, generally, cannot be killed without their player’s permission. But getting hurt is a big deal: it’s a scary thing.

In every other sense, these rules should feel as close to the regular harm rules as I could get.

THE MOVES

When you take a beating or a nasty scratch, roll+armor.*

[On a 13+, you don't give a shit.]

- **On a 10+**, no big deal. Choose one from *pain* and keep on going.
- **On a 7-9**, it kinda stings. You choose one from *pain*, and the MC will choose another.
- **On a miss**, that came out of nowhere. Choose one from *pain*. The MC can choose two more from *pain* or ask you to choose one from *serious shit*, as she likes.

When you're hit by something that could kill you, roll+armor.*

[On a 13+, somehow you shrug it off. Choose one from *pain* and keep on going.]

- **On a 10+**, it hurts like a motherfucker, but no serious harm done. You choose one from *pain*, the MC will choose another.
- **On a 7-9**, you've been hit pretty bad, but it looks like you'll live. Choose one from *serious shit*, the MC will choose one or two from *pain*.
- **On a miss**, you're torn open like a can. Choose two from *serious shit*, the MC will choose one from *pain*.

When some seriously scary shit hits you and you're probably dead meat, roll+armor.*

[On a 13+, it hurts like a motherfucker, but you got really lucky. Choose one from *pain*, the MC will choose another.]

- **On a 10+**, somehow you avoided the brunt of the damage. Choose one from *serious shit*, the MC will choose one from *pain*.
- **On a 7-9**, you're in a world of hurt, but at least you're still here. Choose two from *serious shit*, the MC will choose one from *pain*.
- **On a miss**, you're really fucked up, if you even survive this. Choose one from *serious shit*. The MC will choose another *and* add one or two effects from *pain* on top of that.

*: Roll+armor if whatever you're wearing seems like it would help in the current situation. Otherwise, just roll, don't add anything.

HARM EFFECTS

pain

- You're a mess: bruised, swollen, bleeding
- You lose your footing or position
- You lose your grip on whatever you're holding
- You're dazed: you can't be sure of the events of the last few moments
- You're stunned, pinned, or trapped: you're acting under fire until you can shake it off
- You lose track of, or miss noticing, something important [usually MC's choice only]

serious shit

- Bleeding heavily: your condition will deteriorate rapidly without medical care
- This wound won't heal: it will develop complications instead
- A limb is broken, maimed, cut off, or disabled
- You're out of action: unconscious, incoherent, useless
- Total system shock: cardiac arrest, your heart stops beating
- You're blinded: your eyes are gone or no longer work. Add 1 to your **weird** (max **weird+3**).

Recording Harm Effects

When you choose an effect, write it on your character sheet. Once you've written down or checked off a certain condition or effect, you usually can't choose it again until its effects have healed or worn off.

In some cases, you may be able to choose the same effect several times, however: if it makes sense in the fiction, then no problem. For instance, you might choose "a limb is disabled" once when you get shot in the arm, but you can choose it again when the crocodile is chewing on your leg, why not. Most minor effects don't last long: get back on your feet and you can get knocked over again, as you might imagine.

Erasing Effects

When do your wounds heal? Simply enough, when you've dealt with them. For each effect, erase it when it no longer applies to your character.

If you're ever not sure, just ask the MC: "Hey, am I still bleeding?" If the MC says yes, well, you are. If the MC says no, erase that effect from your sheet.

Death

If you suffer **total system shock**, you're basically dead (at least to anyone inspecting you). If you're **bleeding heavily** and you don't do anything about it in time, same deal.

When you're basically dead, you can choose to call it quits, or you can cling stubbornly to life. If you cling on to life, you'll come to later. The MC will tell you when.

It's better for you, though, if someone finds your body and gets you some much-needed medical care. More on this later (see **Death and Recovery**, last page).

USING THE MOVES

The harm you suffer doesn't (just) depend on the weapon the attacker is using. It depends far more on what is happening in the fiction. Instead, pick the move that is the most appropriate: getting sprayed by shotgun pellets at long range might just be like ***taking a beating or nasty scratch***, but if someone's got the very same shotgun pressed against your stomach and it goes off, that's ***some seriously scary shit and you're probably dead meat***.

In comparison to standard *Apocalypse World* rules, the first move is for things that generally deal 0-harm or 1-harm, like getting into a fight or incidental fire.

The second move is the one you'll usually make if you're in a more serious situation: stuff like knives, guns, machetes, or someone hitting you in the forehead with a claw hammer. It's more or less like 2-harm or 3-harm. If you're not sure, use this one.

The third move is for when you're really in trouble: someone opens up on you in close quarters with a machine gun, you're caught in an explosion, hit by a truck at full speed, or caught in the jaws of the Ten-mile crocodile. If it seems unlikely that a person would survive this kind of damage, that's when you use this move. This is like 4-harm or 5-harm in the regular rules.

The "13+" option is there specifically so that it's only available to characters wearing armor. If you don't like the idea of adding a new "13+" category to a move, just ignore it and use the usual three categories, no problem.

You can make custom moves, too, for certain weapons or threats:

- "The bike gang from out West got their hands on some heavy-caliber ex-military rifles. If you get shot by one, take -1 forward to your harm move."
- "The Ten-Mile crocodile is a freak of nature. If it gets you, any harm move you make is at -2."

Here's a more generic custom move for harm:

- "For each concrete unusual threat or danger the weapon or source of damage carries beyond what you'd normally expect, take -1 forward."

So, getting shot by a rifle bullet is being **hit by something that could kill you**. Getting shot by a *high-powered military rifle*, though, you'll roll at -1. Getting shot by a high-powered military rifle when the fuckers are using *depleted uranium rounds*? That'll be at -2. This where most 3-harm effects in Apocalypse World will fall: they tend to be guns with a little more punch or hand weapons that are oversized and unusually nasty. For these sources of damage, roll the second move (they can kill you, after all) at -1, sometimes -2.

EXAMPLES

A nasty brute throws a machete at Bish the Angel. Bish rolls the second harm move—this is clearly **something that could kill him**. He hits the roll on a 7-9. That means he's hit pretty bad, but it looks like he'll live. He chooses one effect from *serious shit* ("a limb is disabled"): the machete hits him in the leg, going straight through his thigh. The MC can also choose one from *pain*, so he says Bish loses his footing (duh).

Another time, Bish gets into a fight with Carson, a huge, nasty dude. When he misses a roll, Carson slugs him in the face as hard as he can. Carson's a freak, about seven feet tall and as broad, so the MC tells Bish's player he'll be rolling for harm at -1. (If Carson was also wearing brass knuckles, or hitting him with a chair, that might be have been worth *another* -1.) Clearly this is bad news, but not life-threatening: this is the first harm move ("**when you take a beating...**").

Bish's player rolls poorly this time, missing the roll. That means he must choose one *pain*, and the MC can choose two more effects from *pain* or ask him to choose one from *serious shit*. The MC decides to make Bish choose one effect from *serious shit*. Bish's player chooses "you're a mess: bruised, swollen, bleeding" from the *pain* list, and "out of action: unconscious" from *serious shit*. Bish is lying on the floor, out cold.

EXTENDED EXAMPLE

Keeler is running from a gang of bikers in hot pursuit, with the box of stolen electronics she needs to fix the reactor under her arm. A few shots are fired, she fails a roll, and the MC tells her to make the harm move: this is ***something that could kill her***.

Keeler rolls and adds 1 for her 1-armor flak jacket. Her result is a 10+: no serious harm done. But she and the MC must each pick one *pain*. Keeler's player says a bullet must have grazed her scalp: her head's ringing and she's suddenly on her knees (she "loses her footing"). The MC chooses "you lose your grip on whatever you're holding"—the box of electronics tumbles into the tall grass.

Keeler's still fine, however. She got lucky on that one. She picks up the box, hoping everything inside is still intact, and starts running again. A little later, she misses another roll and stumbles into a dead end. Her pursuers open fire on her. Time to make the harm move again: she's exposed to targeted fire from multiple gang members, so the MC tells her to roll at -1. The dice aren't as good this time, but she still hits on a 7-9.

She must pick one from *serious shit*: she's "bleeding heavily", which means she will be in trouble if she can't get any medical help soon. The MC chooses one from *pain*, telling her she's also stunned and will be acting under fire for her next action. A few moments later, she's taken captive and hauled back to the hideout.

Unfortunately (and for the sake of this example), the gang leader, Carson, doesn't care if she lives or not. He just wants those electronics back. He walks up to her while his goons hold her still and unloads both barrels of his sawn-off shotgun into her face. Keeler must now roll the worst harm move: ***this is some seriously scary shit***. She rolls the dice without adding her armor (it's been established earlier that the jacket doesn't cover her neck and face), and hits the roll with a 7-9. She's in a world of pain, but somehow she's still here.

Keeler must now pick two effects from *serious shit*. She can't choose "bleeding heavily" again, because she's already written that one down. She says she's "out of action" for her first choice and suffers "total system shock: cardiac arrest" for her second choice. The MC chooses one effect from the *pain* list: she loses track of something important. She has no memory of what happened to the box, or who left with it. Keeler's face is mangled, there's blood everywhere, and she's left for dead. Hopefully someone will find her before it's too late.

Interactions with the Standard Rules

NPCs and gangs

How do you handle harm to NPCs and gangs? Anytime you, the MC, are called on to describe what's going on, you can use the usual harm ratings and modifiers and use these to guide your narration. This is no different from what you've always done in *Apocalypse World*: you make a judgement call case-by-case, with the harm numbers as a general guideline.

The harm rules for NPCs are already purely descriptive, if you think about it. The damage rules for gangs help you make a judgement call, just the same way: all these harm numbers and ratings are just cues for your descriptions, along with their tags. Use them if you like them—it doesn't change a thing for the players one way or another. Just tell them the fictional outcome and let them take it from there.

In other words: when inflicting harm on anything other than the PCs, just describe what happens in the fiction, and remember to look through crosshairs. *Apocalypse World* sure ain't pretty.

Armor

You can be a little more generous with armor under these rules. If the PCs can come up with some way to build really extreme, full-body armor, give it 3-armor, sure.

If you find none of your players want to take playbook moves which give a PC 1-armor (like **Divine Protection** or **Impossible Reflexes**) because they don't think they're worth it anymore, make the following change: they now give 2-armor (+2 to the harm move) when they apply on their own, or +1armor if they're stacking with other sources of armor. So someone wearing 2-armor and using the **Daredevil** move rolls their harm move at +3.

If that sounds too complicated to you, just use the armor numbers as is, no problem.

Additional Harm

If a move gives a character +1harm:

- Against PCs, it counts as interfering with their harm move. They roll at -2.
- Against NPCs, it applies descriptively, just as it would under the standard rules. +1harm increases the effect of the damage one step: for instance, what might normally be “occasionally fatal” now becomes “immediately fatal”.

...and seize by force

The same logic works for the harm options under the ***seize by force*** move:

- Choosing to *suffer little harm* means you take +2 forward to your own harm move.
- *Inflicting terrible harm* on a PC counts as interfering with their harm move: they roll at -2.
- *Inflicting terrible harm* on an NPC, it’s purely descriptive. The phrase “terrible harm” tells us so much more than “+1harm”, doesn’t it? Have fun.

In general, anytime the players take advantage of a +1harm move or effect, take it as a cue to step it up. Make it really worthwhile for them or make them regret it. Either way is good.

NOT TO BE FUCKED WITH

This is the only really tricky move. Talk it over with the player and agree to treat it descriptively rather than mechanically. If you’re the Gunlugger (or any other character) and you take this move, you’re so badass you can fight six bastards as easily as just one idiot. You can dish out harm and take harm on par with a small gang. If you are under attack from a group of people, it’s still just ***something that could kill you***, not ***seriously scary***. Enemy numbers don’t become a problem for you unless you’re trying to take on a gang that’s medium-sized or larger.

Cinematic Death Scenes

If you like this kind of thing, add the following option to the *serious shit* effects list:

○ Last breath: mortally wounded, you can keep fighting, but *these are your final moments*

Healing and Angel Moves

When the rules say you would heal a segment of harm, instead you:

- Erase any one effect of your choice (as long as it would make sense to do so: regaining your eyesight isn't so easy if you took a knife to the eyeball, and healing a broken hand takes time).

The Angel's moves for healing (c.f. "angel kit") make just as much sense descriptively as they do when counting segments of harm. Someone lightly wounded can choose to spend some time blissed out on chillstabs; someone bleeding heavily and nearly dead needs to be stabilized first; someone whose heart is no longer beating needs to be resuscitated.

In addition, when you're resuscitated by an Angel rolling a 10+, erase one effect of your choice.

Harm and Hx

When you heal someone, take +1Hx with them.

When you hurt someone, they get +1Hx with you.

If it's a life-or-death situation, make that +2Hx instead.

Death and Recovery

When you suffer **total system shock** or are left for dead and slowly bleed out, here's how it works:

- If someone finds you and can get you some serious medical help (like taking you to an infirmary) fucking *right away*, you'll recover, according to the usual rules for an infirmary/workspace.
- If an Angel finds you, uses a healing move, and hits the roll with a 10+, you'll recover just fine as well.

Otherwise:

- If no one finds you, you can choose to let go and pass on to the other side, or you can cling stubbornly to life but it will cost you. Choose the latter and you'll come to eventually (the MC will say when), but not without suffering some lasting damage: when you return to the land of the living, erase whatever harm effect almost killed you and replace it with a **debility** appropriate to your situation.
- If someone finds you but doesn't have access to high-tech medical care, or if an Angel finds you but can't roll a 10+, the same choice applies, except now the choice isn't in your hands anymore. Instead, it's in your caretaker's hands. Do they try to save you, knowing you'll never be the same as before, or do they let you go in peace?

If it makes sense to take a permanent effect from the *serious shit* list instead of a **debility**, that's cool too. Maybe your hand got cut off, or the medic had to amputate a foot to save you from infection.

EXTENDED EXAMPLE contd

Keeler took a shotgun blast to the face and was left for dead. Bish the Angel finds her and gets to work on her. He rolls the dice and hits on a 7-9. A tough choice: he can bring her back, sure, but not back to normal, not the way she was before. He can save her eyes, bringing her back with a new face ("Disfigured", -1Hot, an appropriate **debility**) or he can save her face but not her eyesight: she'll be permanently blind, wandering the wastes, but with **+1weird** to make up for it. Will she hate him for it, either way? Most probably.