

Life As It Was

Trigger Warning: Children in a brutally dangerous, ugly post-apocalyptic worlds

A bunch of us live in the school now. We've got blankets and clothes and food and water and guns and stuff. We can burn up wood to keep warm at night, and the doors lock so animals and gangs can't get in. It's not as good as home, but it wouldn't be safe at home any more. This is our new family, and the older kids say we should stop crying about making it all go back the way it was because that isn't gonna happen.

Everyone else got sick. It happened really fast, and the news people on the TV said it was all around the world. There's no more TV now, because there's no people to make it work. And no electricity anyway. All the parents got sick, all the babies and little kids got sick, all the teenagers and all the adults. One of the older kids just turned 13. She's the oldest person we know, and we were scared she might die, but she didn't. I guess the sickness is gone now.

We all work together to make sure we stay alive and maybe even we'll make some things work again like TV and hot water and electricity. Some day, maybe.

Game Overview:

"Life as it Was" is a story-game for three to five players, one of whom will play as the GM. The game follows a group of survivors, all children. The world has just suffered a cataclysmic pandemic which has left only children between the ages of roughly 8 and 12. We will see if the group can survive the next several weeks, and withstand an attack by a roving gang. After the attack, we have a brief epilogue and then the game ends.

Boundaries:

Because the game deals with kids struggling to survive in a harsh world, it is important to discuss the boundaries that all the players will find acceptable. Firstly, introduce John Stavropoulos's concept of the "X" card to the group: <http://tinyurl.com/x-card-rpg> Secondly, have a conversation to find out if there are any topics or types of content that any player does not want included in play. Simply make a note of these so everyone knows what types of content to steer clear of during play.

Roles and Authority:

One of the players will serve as a GM. From here on, the term "player" will refer only to the non-GM players.

The GM is the authority on the facts about the world, is in charge of coming up with situations for the survivors to deal with, portrays NPCs, and adjudicates the outcomes of Risk Rolls. The players portray various members of the group of survivors. At any given time, each player will be in charge of a single survivor, and is in charge of deciding what that character thinks, feels, and tries to do. No player can make something happen to another player's character without their permission.

Structure of Play

- Set-up
- Introductory Vignettes
- Roughly Eight Chapters
- Final Chapter
- Epilogue

Set-Up

You'll need a bunch of six-sided dice, in two different colors: light and dark. Copies of the character sheets, things to write with, and three to five players, one of whom is the GM. Give an overview of the game concept, then go through the Boundaries section.

Introductory Vignettes

The GM establishes the state of the school and what the survivors know about the world. It's been only two weeks. Kids left their homes in order to scavenge food and supplies, find safety, and get away from the dead bodies and bad memories. The school was nearby, had food and supplies, and could be barricaded and locked up for safety.

Give some broad details of everyday life for the survivors. What is the school like? What is the surrounding area like? What have they seen so far outside the school?

Put all the character sheets in the center of the table. These are the acknowledged leaders of the survivors. Have each player pick one of the character sheets that seems the most interesting to them. Over the course of the game, the players will be picking multiple players from the center pool of leaders. Each time they do this, there is Character Setup that needs to be done, which is covered in a later section of the rules. Since the players have just selected characters, have each of them do Character Setup for their chosen character.

Ask each player to describe some part of the school, and what the survivors use that space for. Ask for a brief vignette of the player's chosen leader interacting with some of the survivors. It's fine for the other players' characters to appear in these vignettes as a natural consequence of the description.

Once the introductory vignettes have been done, you are ready to begin the first Chapter.

Players "Own" Leaders

Each player now "owns" one leader (the one they just named.) Through the course of play, players will gain ownership of multiple leaders. Once a player owns a particular leader, no other player can portray that leader. While a particular player will often own multiple characters at once, they should only portray a single character within the scope of a given vignette or scene. When appropriate, the others can be there in the background, as NPCs controlled by the GM. The GM should tread lightly when doing this, respecting the player ownership of the character.

Character Setup

First, roll a die to randomly determine the gender of the character (even = female, odd = male), and then give the character a name, which might be a nickname. Preferably, the name will have some association with the broad character archetype so that the connection between name and character is strong.

Aspects

Next, look over the three white-shaded phrases on the character sheet. These describe the natural aspects of the character. The three grey-shaded phrases are “darker” takes on these aspects, and are not yet active parts of the character’s personality. They represent what the character can become due to the stress of dealing with this harsh world.

The horrors of the past two weeks have already caused some changes, however. Choose one of the dark aspects to circle. This aspect is now part of the character’s personality as well as the three white-shaded aspects. Give a short description of an event that caused this dark aspect to come to the forefront of the character’s nature.

Buddies

Lastly, each player should pick one of the two Buddy phrases, and choose a character that is owned by one of the other players to be their Buddy. Describe an event from the pre-pandemic past that fits the Buddy phrase and that makes your character consider that other player’s character to be their buddy. Write the name of that Buddy down next to the phrase you chose. Buddy is a one-directional relationship. You might consider another player to be your Buddy, but they don’t feel the same way unless they spend their Buddy phrase on you.

Chapters

There are roughly eight chapters to the game, followed by a final chapter where the school gets attacked by a hostile gang of kids bent on taking over the school and the supplies inside. Each chapter follows the same order.

- Situation
- Council
- Home
- Mission Leaders
- Mission Scene
- Chapter End

Situation

At the beginning of each chapter, the GM gives a rundown of the various situations currently facing the survivors at the school. The situations are threats, problems, complications, and looming crises that threaten the peaceful survival of the kids living at the school.

Examples:

- Food is running low, or is spoiling
- Some kids are suffering from illness that would be routine if there were doctors
- The water supply is running low
- They need some kind of illumination for nighttime
- They need repairs to the school because of security or weather
- An outside gang wants to negotiate
- A message has been delivered from some outside group
- An outside gang has issued a threat
- Someone has been injured
- Someone is causing trouble inside the school
- There are factions inside the school that strongly disagree on something

It's best to start off small and let things build naturally. If the players don't adequately address a situation from a previous chapter, decide how it should escalate. The GM should consistently look to frame the Situation so that one or more aspects involve the outside world, and slant things so that venturing out is the natural solution to those aspects. We don't want the players turtling up inside the school all game.

Council

The leaders of the survivors get together periodically to decide what should be done. Once the Situation has been spelled out by the GM, the players will discuss the Situation and what they think should be done about it. For each player in turn, the GM should pick one of that player's owned characters and ask the player what that leader thinks of some aspect of the Situation. For example, "Victoria, please tell us what Greg thinks should be done about the six kids who are coughing and feverish." Once each player has spoken their mind about some aspect, have the players discuss the overall Situation as the characters who were just selected for them. The players must decide whether there will be a Mission to go outside the school, and what that Mission is trying to accomplish.

Home Scenes

In general, the GM should be looking for ways to offer Missions as the best way to resolve aspects of the Situation. But some aspects are naturally addressed at home. If there are aspects of the situation which should be dealt with here at the survivors' home, do one or more short Scenes to deal with those aspects. Handling Scenes is covered in its own section of the rules.

Home Vignettes

If there are no Home Scenes for this chapter, describe some mundane complication or disagreement that has arisen and let the players roleplay their handling of that mundane situation in the character of one of their owned leaders. Remind the players to only use one of their owned characters per vignette. The vignette fleshes out the game world, and lets us explore the nature of the leaders and their relationships. As GM, let the mundane problem reach a positive resolution just through roleplay. You may decide to introduce multiple vignettes in order to give every player a chance to flesh out the world and define their characters. You can also use these vignettes as a way to foreshadow possible future complications.

Mission Leaders

If there is a Mission this chapter, the players decide which leaders will go out on the Mission to the outside. Each player selects either one of their already-owned characters, or one of the ones still available in the middle of the table. These are the leaders who will go out on the Mission. As part of the fiction, other survivors can go as well, but each player will only portray their one chosen leader during the Mission. All others are NPCs under GM control.

Mission Scene

Missions will tend to be extended Scenes which place the survivors in grave peril. The outside is dangerous. There are gangs and wild animals. There are scary places with bad memories. There are places where nobody has moved the dead bodies out. But there's also stuff out there, and other groups and kids who might become allies. Handling the Scene itself is covered in its own section of the rules.

Final Chapter

The final chapter should feature only one Scene, at the school, where an outside gang tries to invade the school and take it over. As the GM, you want to foreshadow this threat in prior Chapters. This should be a challenging scene, and the survivors might be quite decimated from prior Missions. It's even possible the survivors will fail.

Each player starts with one selected character, as usual. But if their character is hurt or dies during the scene, they can switch off to another of their owned characters.

Epilogue

Fast-forward twenty years. Survivors are now middle-aged, and many of them have children of their own. Life has changed considerably as they have slowly started to learn how to piece bits of civilization together. What sort of civilization it is should be informed by the result of the Final Chapter, and aspects of the fiction that unfolded during the course of the game. Go around to each player and have them tell the tale of their favorite owned character in this new environment.

Handling Scenes

During a Scene, the GM should aggressively frame scenes, moving the action to interesting events and decision points.

- Non-dangerous events that provide an opportunity to flesh out the world and characters
- Critical decisions that will affect the future course or the final outcome of the mission
- Dangerous situations where the well-being of the survivors are at risk

Whenever a player has their character attempt to do something risky, influence NPCs, or anything with a potentially interesting aspect of uncertainty, have them make a Risk Roll. Make sure the player understands the magnitude of risk they are undertaking before they commit to their attempt. This will be a natural extension of the game fiction. The potential risk of trying to fashion a rain collector is much much less dire than the potential risk of trying to talk that angry gang member into putting their gun away.

Risk Rolls

Once the GM has established a Risk Roll is to be made, the character who is making the roll determines which dice shall be rolled.

- The character automatically gets one light-colored and one dark-colored die to start
- Add one light-colored die for every white-shaded aspect that would help the character succeed in this situation.
- Add one dark-colored die for every grey-shaded aspect that would help the character succeed in this situation.
- Add one die if another character can use one of their aspects to help you in this situation. Use the appropriate colored die to suit the aspect used. A maximum of only one die can be collected in this way per roll. Even if multiple buddies are there to help, only get one die.

The GM should be generous in accepting creative applications of the aspects, but don't strain logic completely. Gently veto any aspect that stretches too far. Also remember that Buddy is a one-sided relationship. A character can only give a helping die if they have the character making the roll written on their character sheet as a Buddy.

Risk Roll Resolution

Roll all the dice you get for the Risk Roll. Then pick two dice from the roll and add them together to see the result. You want higher-numbered dice, but there are consequences for using dark-colored dice, so you may have a non-trivial decision to make.

11 or 12: The outcome is entirely favorable for the character. The player narrates their complete success. The GM can veto, edit, or add details, but keep in mind the player has earned a glowing success.

9 or 10: A mixed result. Below is a list of ideas for how to construct a good mixed result.

- Success at a price
- Partial success with lingering complications
- Success, but spawns a new complication

- Player chooses: back off or succeed at a price

8 or lower: Something bad happens. Either the attempt irrevocably fails and changes the course of the mission, or it succeeds at a terrible price. Always fail forward.

Dark Dice

If the player used one or two dark-colored dice to make their total, their character will slip a bit into darkness. If you have an active light aspect where the dark-side of that aspect has been circled, cross out the light aspect. The character can no longer use that aspect for additional dice. Otherwise, circle one of your dark aspects.

If all of your dark aspects have already been circled, and your light aspects have been crossed out, you snap. From here on out, that character is interested primarily in personal survival, and then only secondarily in the good of the other survivors. Outsiders are of no import whatsoever.

Wounds

As part of paying a price, a character might be dealt wounds. Each character sheet has a wound track for keeping track of the state of their health.

- Apply one wound for a minor injury
- Being shot or falling from a scary height or stabbed by someone competent can do 2 wounds.

A character who is Scraped is in pain, has some impairment, bleeding, etc. But it doesn't have any mechanical effect on them. If the character spends the next Chapter resting and not going on a Mission or doing anything strenuous at home, they will fully recover to Healthy at the end of next Chapter.

Being Hurt is a major deal. The survivor will be effectively useless for the rest of the mission, has to be helped back to the school, and may very well die over time. The GM will decide how the course of a hurt character unfolds, depending upon the logic of the fictional event. A Hurt character who took two 1-severity wounds may heal back to Scraped after resting for a Chapter or two. A Hurt character who took a gunshot wound to the shoulder will stay Hurt for the rest of the game, and could very well die unless they come up with some medical help.

Inspirations and Thanks

"The Girl Who Owned a City" by O.T. Nelson

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The Brave One

Name:

Age: 10

I'm not afraid of anything	I will destroy what I fear
I know how to seize an opportunity	I act impulsively
My buddies look up to me	I can't fail or my buddies will hate me

Buddies:

You were being picked on by bullies in school....

We found something in the woods....

Healthy	Scraped	Hurt	Dead
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The Quiet One

Name:

Age: 9

I notice details and remember them	I remember every time I've failed
I've got a small blade I keep hidden	When cornered, I'll fly into a frenzy
I provide silent support for my buddies	I'm willing to die for my buddies

Buddies:

You included me in your group that once....

We told each other a secret....

Healthy	Scraped	Hurt	Dead
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The Smart One

Name:

Age: 11

I know a lot of things from books	I'm the only one I trust to do things correctly
I can reason with people	I can trick people into doing what I want
My buddies turn to me for advice	I can verbally bully my buddies

Buddies:

You showed me something new once....

We used to get together on the weekends....

Healthy	Scraped	Hurt	Dead
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The Athletic One

Name:

Age: 12

I am a gifted athlete	I can tap my primal physical rage
I know the wilderness areas around here	I will purge our territory of intruders
I can physically assist my buddies	I will throw myself into danger for my buddies

Buddies:

You helped me that one time at school....

We were on the same team together....

Healthy	Scraped	Hurt	Dead
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The Creative One

Name:

Age: 10

My imaginary friend will help me through	My inner monsters will help me destroy
I have an interesting idea that might work	I have a stupid idea I dunno if I want to share
I can tell my buddies a story about hope	I can tell my buddies a story about fear

Buddies:

You once found out about my inner monster....

We played imagination together....

Healthy	Scraped	Hurt	Dead
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The Handy One

Name:

Age: 11

I know how things work	Humans just seem like broken machines
I have an item that can help me fix	I have an item that can help me kill
I can fashion crude equipment for buddies	I can make or modify weapons for buddies

Buddies:

You gave me a small gift once....

We got into trouble together that time....

Healthy	Scraped	Hurt	Dead
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The Big One

Name:

Age: 12

I am a natural leader	I can intimidate people
My physical size comes in handy	I can overpower people
I use my size to protect my buddies	I use my size to push my buddies around

Buddies:

You helped me learn something new...

We found common ground in an unusual hobby...

Healthy	Scraped	Hurt	Dead
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The Friendly One

Name:

Age: 10

I can negotiate with people very well	I can manipulate people through lies
I put people at ease	I can trick people into trusting me
I can inspire my buddies with kind words	I motivate my buddies by playing on fears

Buddies:

You helped me get out of an awkward social situation once....

We spent a weekend together with our families that one time....

Healthy	Scraped	Hurt	Dead
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The Hunter

Name:

Age: 11

I use my rifle safely and accurately	I am a killing machine with my gun
I can avoid hostile animals and read trails	I know how best to kill animals
My buddies rely on me for tactical advice	My buddies rely on me to lead the charge

Buddies:

You helped me get out of trouble that one time...

We share an uncomfortable secret...

Healthy	Scraped	Hurt	Dead
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The Sneaky One

Name:

Age: 9

I can sneak around and not be seen	I can hide an no-one will find me
I have explored unexpected places	I've found horrors in the unexpected places
I share my loot with my buddies.	I have an item I stole from a buddy

Buddies:

You caught me sneaking into someplace...

We snuck into that one place together...

Healthy	Scraped	Hurt	Dead
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The Caring One

Name:

Age: 9

I can calm the frightened	I can instill paranoia
I can ease tense situations	I can use tense situations to get my way
I watch out for the emotions of my buddies	I use my buddies emotions against them

Buddies:

You told me about something that was bothering you once....

We share a special secret place

Healthy	Scraped	Hurt	Dead
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The Little One

Name:

Age: 8

I can fit into places no-one else can	I can run and hide
I can tell what people are feeling	I can make people sorry for me
I can say something happy for my buddies	I can say something fearful for my buddies

Buddies:

You took care of me that one time....

We spent a whole day having fun....

Healthy	Scraped	Hurt	Dead
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The Stoic One

Name:

Age: 12

I have nerves of steel	I am burying all my anxieties
I am a rock for others in chaos	I am slowly crumbling from the strain
I bolster my buddies spirits with my unshakable nature	I belittle my buddies for expressing their uncertainties

Buddies:

You came to me for advice that one time..

We shared a terrifying escape....

Healthy	Scraped	Hurt	Dead
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The Shy One

Name:

Age: 10

I can insert myself into situations unnoticed	I am unknown and unseen.
I have a wealth of undiscovered knowledge	I am a knowledge hoarder
I will do anything for my buddies	I let my buddies walk all over me

Buddies:

You show me an unexpected kindness....

We shared a night of secret sharing

Healthy	Scraped	Hurt	Dead
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The Nostalgic One

Name:

Age: 13

I have knowledge of many old skills	My knowledge of the old skills is not as complete as I let on
I cheer others up with remembered stories	I depress others with tales of before
I use my memories to inspire my buddies	I use my memories to haunt my buddies

Buddies:

You caught me when I fell....

We shared many nights talking about the world....

Healthy	Scraped	Hurt	Dead
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The Surprising One

Name:

Age: 8

I act a lot older than my age	I am not as old as people think
I use my insight to find interesting solutions	I know best, and others need to listen
I inspire my buddies with happy surprises	I play practical jokes on my buddies

Buddies:

You helped me plan a surprise party for....

We share a love for

Healthy	Scraped	Hurt	Dead
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