



What memories I have hurt me
more than any fiend

Apocalyze

There's you ... and well, that's just about it.

Apocalyze



A roleplaying system
By Malik Hyltoft

Apocalyze

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Apologia

If you never dreamt yourself alone in the world, if you never fantasized about the stripping away of the rest of human kind, this game may shock you. On the other hand, if you never had those thoughts, the experience of playing Apocalyze will be that much more acute to you.

Personally, I tore through **The day of the Triffids**, **I am Legend** and **The Stand** for the weird feeling of an earth forsaken by mankind that they gave. I marvelled at **Q the quiet earth** and even endured **Dawn of the dead** and **Day of the dead** in spite of my fear of zombies.



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The production of **Apocalyze** has been long under way. It began in a series of rare crisp Danish winter night walks in the mid nineties. It condensed into an actual project on a visit to Isola Bella on Lago di Como in the fall of 2004. And then suddenly the ways and means revealed themselves during a read of **Dogs in the Vineyard** in January 2007.



Now I've probably mentioned titles of no interest and places of no consequence to you, but rest assured that these are exactly the features that will render **Apocalyze** playable for you.

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The Game

You need to be at least 3 people to play **Apocalyze**. It may sound strange since the game is about being alone in the world – so a player and a director would seem enough. But since the game is not about you being alone, but your



character being alone, you as a person will need someone to cooperate with in telling the stories and compare your experiences with.

Actually, what we are going to do in **Apocalyze** is to tell the stories of two or more people left over by the apocalypse, who may eventually be destined to meet.

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When the story is about your character, naturally you play the main role. You decide the focus of the story and the director sets the scene, provides information and inspiration and gently steers events so that a potential greater plan is not obstructed unless you are clearly not interested in working in that direction.

What do the other players do?

I can see the frustration rising at sitting passively for hours while somebody else plays. Doable with 2 characters, disastrous with 5. Well 5 players is a bit over the top for **Apocalyze** – but no matter what, the players are not inactive while one of the others is the protagonist. They play family and friends, angels and demons of the past, present and future in the inside monologue of the player.



Peter is playing Marianne, a very matter-of-fact 24 year

old Danish mechanic from a smallish town on the coast.

Marianne has set up base in the local church. It is conveniently situated on the top of a small hill, so she can scout for other survivors from the church tower and leave a beacon to be seen at night. The

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thick medieval masonry has stood safely for centuries, and will keep her stocks safe and dry for an eternity.

A few days after moving into the church, however, Marianne starts hearing the voice of her four year older sister Jeanette (played by Pia). "If you hold your breath while passing the graveyard, the ghosts can't touch you!" Peter decides that Marianne shrugs it off as superstition, and explains it as her subconscious acting up, because she never found out if Jeanette perished in the disaster.

Next time, when it's Peter's turn to play Marianne as a protagonist again, the director (Kurt) has prepared a small flash back for Marianne.

Peter plays Marianne as an 8 year old girl, Pia plays her older sister Jeanette, then 12.

Erik the third and last player gets the role of their beloved and long gone grandfather Georg who is taking them for a Sunday walk.

The director hardly interferes and nothing really important happens unless Peter himself helps to steer the story in the direction of for instance a graveyard. But exactly because the most exhilarating part of the flash back is planned to be the choosing of Danish at the local bakery the director (Kurt) can expect to get an effective counterpoint when he finishes the scene:

"The heavy oaken door booms shut behind you as you stagger in with the last crate of supplies. You must have been lost in thoughts while you were unloading the Land Rover. And now, somehow, you are strangely short of breath – almost faint."

We are each other's ghosts – taking on roles of people gone but not forgotten.

The story of **Apocalyze** goes back and forth, back and forth, from early childhood through the actual apocalypse to the deserted planet. For every player, the other players will have to take on a number of supporting roles as ghosts. The actual number of roles depends on the back ground story of the player and the plans of the director. But remember that less is more. If you can reuse a ghost that the player has played before for a scene that player can build on and add onto her earlier experience and the story of the protagonist hopefully becomes more rounded and consistent.

We are also each other's demons and angels – commonly called spirits.

In order to tell the story of the protagonist when that person acts, all alone in the world the other players support the protagonist player as spirits. These spirits continually comment both actions and thoughts of the protagonist, and they sometimes make suggestions for future actions. They are in many ways the internal monologue.



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A spirit is built up over a general aspect of life, if you are only 2 players build a spirit over 2 aspects to avoid monotonous input. Each player should choose an aspect that their specific character would generally not expect to hear any input from.

Aspects could be: beauty, comfort, health, practicality, sanity, security and a number of other factors that we carry with us and evaluate our lives by. Do not choose solitude or company that is the prerogative of the director.



Peter who is playing the practically minded Marianne has chosen to play a spirit of

beauty since he did not want Marianne to be considering that aspect of her survival.

Pia, Kurt and Erik were of course in on the decision, but saw no reason to protest.

Pia, on the other hand, chose to play a spirit of health, since her character lived on a diet of cola and crisps before and during the apocalypse.

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The spirits can be both demons and angels. At the beginning of each scene each player rolls a die (not d3) in secrecy: on an even roll, the spirit is an angel. On an odd roll the spirit is a demon. The roll counts for one scene – if the director cuts significantly forward in time, re-rolls may be called for.

Angels try to be of help. If the character is attempting to complete some project, they give advice to the best of their ability and offer encouragement on a regular basis. If the character is in some kind of a crisis, they are consoling and try to administer just a flicker of hope. Angels are never insistent and as a rule do not raise their voice. **They do not speak to or of demons.**

Demons are a bother. They love to give false advice, to put down the character's actions and generally quell his or her spirit. On a few occasions a demon can be downright dangerous, however. If it can convince the protagonist, that it is actually an angel, and make him or her follow its' advice the situation can become very dangerous. Demons can be very insistent but only seldom raise their voice. They do not speak to angels, but often off them.

Erik plays a spirit of practicality signifying, that his own character is anything but that. Actually, in spite of having been alone for almost two months, Martin, Erik's character, is still living in his



flat in the centre of town amidst the stinking bodies and without electricity, heating or running water.

By taking on this spirit Erik has ensured that Martin will not be forced to take a practical view of things at any time before he personally chooses that line of action.

No one survives unscathed.

With the notion of never meeting the spirit, you have chosen, also comes the realization that all characters are dysfunctional.

It is, in fact, logical. No one goes through the apocalypse unscathed. But since it can be a source of great conflict and frustration not to agree on how many weaknesses each player's character should have, this is only marginally up to the player.

The player chooses the life aspect that will never touch her character; the other players manage all the various ways that other aspects do.

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Directing Apocalyze

It is tempting to make this a game of survival. But survive the players must. If they die – so does the story. Survival really isn't interesting role-playing stuff.

Can you rig up a generator or keep a windmill going?

Can you harvest seeds from modern vegetables?

Will you shoot the rabid dog before it reaches you?

The decisions on the above questions are touch and go survival wise, and they may be very interesting to the player at the time they are decided on, but what will you do as a director, if the answer is no? You might be able to invent an extra survivor once, but not continually.

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As director and players in *Apocalyze* you have to ensure above all, that the story is about the character – not the project. Surviving is just the job the character is performing while the story is told. If your character in a fantasy story is a blacksmith it will colour the events, but we will not spend many seconds each session contemplating how many horseshoes, nails or plows have been made in the smithy.

Keep shifting the focus and keep telling the story. We know, that the character survived the actual apocalypse,



but sometime after the story has started, when everybody knows each other a little better may be the right time to tell the story. Begin to elaborate on what wiped out mankind.

A campaign of **Apocalyze** can be as short as a session or up to a dozen sessions. It is not advisable to plan an interminable campaign as you possibly know them from fantasy roleplaying. As director you should set out a plan for the campaign answering at least the following questions.

How do I want to open each character's play?

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What is going to be the central theme of the campaign?
How am I going to wrap up the stories?

You can choose to open all stories in corresponding ways (*the farewell to the last loved one, the moment when the power finally fails*). But you may also choose to let each character begin their stories in succession, so that in the first session you and the players are actually telling a continued story from a number of different perspectives.

Depending on how long the campaign is going to be, you will have to prepare a number of themes. You cannot control how the survivor will want to organize his or her survival. That is of course up to the player to decide. But that is exactly why you have to prepare the themes. Again, the themes do not have to be identical for all characters, but especially in longer campaigns, you might find it helpful to simply have a toolbox to choose from. The characters do not have to go through them in the same order.

Themes can be more or less anything (*loss, ambition, identity...*). The fact that you as a director decide on the themes rather than the actual actions gives you a much

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greater chance for improvising, when the player suddenly does something unexpected.



Eventually you have to end the story. All post apocalyptic stories long for a happy ending. You want the last survivors to meet, become a new Adam and Eve. A chance to do better than we did last. But you do not have to end the story that way.



You do not have to end it with the last survivor succumbing to post apocalyptic dangers either.

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You just have to end it in a way that is satisfactory to you and hopefully your players as well.

Final scene:

*After a deep crisis where
Marianne has barely dared to
sleep and only narrowly
escaped death when she
collapsed from exhaustion
behind the wheel of her car,
she has returned to the church
and her meticulously
assembled base.*

*She climbs the steps of the
church tower as so many times
before, but this time to
contemplate the sunset – if
there are any survivors left,
they will have to find her.
Marianne is done surviving; it
is time to start living.*

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Endings

So, what did actually wipe out mankind? It's all up to you.

Epidemics are a very good bet.

Most diseases are not nearly contagious and deadly enough to lay waste to the earth, but some come close enough to threaten comfort, and it is relatively easy to envision, what will happen if one did reach that level.



For an epidemic to kill the vast majority of a population, it has to be voraciously contagious at the level of the flu or the common cold. Almost every human is in contact with these

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two types of virus every year. Luckily our immune system is relatively well prepared to receive them.

The reason the disease has to be so contagious to be usable in Apocalyze is that it has to spread automatically every time two people meet or be very effectively transmitted through air. Otherwise it will spread too slowly and a cure will either be found or societies will manage to isolate themselves (this may of course be a twist you want to play on ...).

In addition to being very contagious, the incubation time cannot be too short. With a brief incubation time, it is easy to track the disease and isolate it. The Bubonic Plague was a real killer in this respect with a 40 day incubation time (hence quarantine from French for 40). In 40 days a modern virus can traverse the globe several times.

If humanity was wiped out by a disease, most survivors will have lived through the trauma of burying almost everybody they loved. They will have seen the lights go out on civilization one by one.

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Perhaps one joined a group of staunch survivors bent on rebuilding society. Until they started falling ill and the player survivor finally had to bury the last one of them.

Maybe one retracted into catatonia at the death of some loved one. Just to realize that every body else were gone, when hunger drove him back to sanity.

In any event it is a slow agonizing process, which will leave at least 10% of the population unburied and drag out for anything between a fortnight and three months.

For inspiration, you can use Stephen King, **The Stand** or the old BBC series **The Survivors**.

Rapture will take care of almost anything.

The rapture is technically the point, where God takes mankind from the earth to join him in heaven. But it might as well be used about any action, that conveniently wriths the Earth of almost all its' human populace, be it religious, mystical or technological.



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The rapture does not need to have any explanation since the people left behind probably will not have a clue about what happened anyway. Their continued speculation might actually become a central theme for some of them.

The rapture would usually be next to instantaneous – although a gradual process where people simply fade away in relatively rapid succession might be quite fascinating. There would be no bodies to deal with and all fixed structures would be left intact. Roads, however, would be a mess, since drivers would be leaving their vehicles while they were in motion, causing an avalanche of traffic accidents.

For inspiration a New Zealand film from 1985 might be interesting: **Q, the quiet Earth**.



War is a problematic solution.

In order to kill off enough people, the survivors continually have to and together and have to be quite active in the bloodshed.

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This may of course be the whole point of the story you wish to tell, but for the protagonists to become isolated, you need some extra twists.

This could be a continent ravaged by war, where the warring parties have withdrawn to their own home bases and forgotten about the desolate landscapes left behind. Occasionally an aircraft will pass high over head, but calling its' attention may be grievous.

This is not unlike the eerie scenario many Europeans saw of their continent, should the US and the Soviet Union decide to slug it out in the 80's.

Another solution using war can be found in Niels E. Nielsen, **Kains Arv**, (unfortunately only available in Danish) where the final confrontation between the rich and the poor world prods on a mass psychosis among the starved masses flooding the European continent so they march on beyond any meaningful human endurance and so finish the invasion in bodies unable to survive afterwards. The victors succumb to the means of their own victory.

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Monsters are always neat.

But be aware – any monster deadly enough to annihilate a nation are bound to be some challenge for a sole survivor. So, what this simply means is: If you want your characters to be killing zombies, dodging triffids or fighting aliens off, you should probably use another system.



For a monster apocalypse to work in **Apocalyze**, the characters will have to be able to put the monsters behind them for a sizeable portion of the time.

In **I am Legend** by Richard Matheson, the protagonist, Robert Neville, has lots of time for himself in the daytime because the vampires cannot go out in the daytime, and he is relatively safe in his house at night. In **Dawn of the Dead**, the protagonists create a bubble of normality inside the mall.

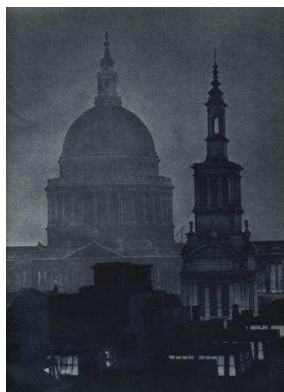
Settings like this will be able to host **Apocalyze**. Fighting scenarios generally will not. It may feel as if your players need action to spice up a gaming session, but in the real psychological game, it will take several hours of serious

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communicative play before the concentration on the character development and complex themes can be re-established.

On the other hand, your ghost stories can become rather gory, when you describe how loved ones and casual acquaintances have succumbed to the monsters.



The best inspiration for a monster solution is probably John Wyndhams, **Day of the Triffids**, where an astronomically inflicted blindness and subsequently poisonous semi-mobile flesh eating plants turn most of humanity into fertilizer.

Environment will surely kill us all off, eventually, in about a billion years. But it could also be an effective background for **Apocalyze**.

How about a Europe depopulated because of the onset of an ice age brought on by the turning of the Golf Stream? Or Florida turned into one gigantic mangrove swamp by rising sea levels.

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The survivors would of course be aware, that somewhere, there were other humans living more comfortably, carrying on with civilization, but for some reason these survivors chose to or were forced to stay behind. And now, when communications are broken they may not even be able to make it to more hospitable landscapes.

Cosmic disasters are jokers in this game.



A comet sends out radiation, that kills off, renders blind or insane 99,99% of the population. These people will quickly perish, and what is left?

Gigantic tsunamis following a meteor impact obliterates everyone and everything except for a mountain hiker or a solitary hang glider.

The real message is that the annihilation of the human race is up to you as the director. It should be only partly relevant, since the players are playing characters who will survive for a time span long enough for a campaign in the environment left behind.

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Maths

If you want the post-apocalyptic world to hold together logically, you have to do the maths. If you do not feel like it, and your players do not seem to bother either, maybe you should just skip these last paragraphs.



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Mortality rate:

In order for your character to be alone, you need to kill off an awful lot of people.

First: How alone do you want them to be?

A) I don't meet anyone in my daily routine alone. But someone might actually live 2 blocks from here, but just have another activity pattern – alone?

B) No one is likely to react, if I set off fireworks every night, paint large arrows on the tarmac at all major intersections in my neighbourhood or put up a sign on the town hall, but eventually I might find evidence, that someone else is alive – alone?



C) It will take simultaneous and intelligent use of modern communication technology from me and another isolated survivor – and then still an awful lot of luck – to make contact to any living soul – alone?

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Each of the above situations demands an average distance between survivors. These distances should be calculated for urban areas unless you want a setting, where cities are the spawning point for tribes.

	Average distance	Area / person
A	1 km (0.65 mi)	1 km ² (0.4 sq mi)
B	10 km (6.5 mi)	100 km ² (40 sq mi)
C	100 km (65 mi)	10,000 km ² (4,000 sq mi)

What would this mean in my town?

Look at the following situations calculated for the capital of Denmark; Copenhagen and the archipelago it occupies.

Copenhagen has a densely populated city area of 100 km², and a population of just over 600,000 people. This information will dictate our calculations.



The suburban area covers an area of 2750 km² where the population

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density varies a lot, but doesn't exceed the inner city area. The population of the area is approximately 1,500,000.

The city is the only major city on an archipelago, that covers a further 6400 km^2 and houses a further 500,000 inhabitants.

Condition A:

Copenhagen itself would house $100/1 = 100$ survivors. This leads to a mortality rate of $1 - (100/600000) = 0.99983$. And the sought for area per person of 1 km^2 .

But since the suburban are less densely populated, there will be much farther between the survivors here.

A population of $1\frac{1}{2}$ million will leave 250 survivors covering an area of 2750 km^2 . This is 11 km^2 per person or an average distance between survivors of 3.65 km.

In the distinctly small-town and rural areas, there would be 85 people left with an average distance of 9.6 km.

This would still leave 435 survivors on the island of Zealand and surrounding islands, an area that you can cross

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on the widest point in two to three hours in a car. As a species we would still cover our globe quite densely.

Condition B:

If you want survivor density in cities to dip to condition B, you need a mortality rating of 0.9999983. This would leave 4 survivors in the Zealand area although the area would fit around 90 with the distance requirements held up.

The problem for calculations is simply that very few cities are large enough for the calculations to make sense. A mortality rate of this magnitude would leave 9600 people alive world wide and would leave even the greatest metropolis with only 40 people alive.

In order to solve the problem mathematically you can decide, how large a town should be allowed to be, before it could reasonably have 2 survivors. That is, it should have 1 on an average.

If you want 10 km between survivors as in condition B that would mean a cross distance of about 10 km, which in Danish geography translates into 100,000 inhabitants.

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Consequently a mortality rate of $1 - (1/100,000) = 0,99999$

So calculating this way, condition B would give:

Copenhagen: 6 survivors, 5 km average distance

Suburbs: 15 survivors, 15 km average distance

Rural areas: 5 survivors, 40 km average distance

Average distances between survivors in urban and rural areas, do not necessarily make sense anyway. The onset of an apocalypse might very well instigate migrations among the survivors or would be survivors. It could seem relevant to try and find a safe place in the country in case of epidemics and everybody might flock to a holy place in case of some sort of rapture.

Condition C:

For condition C, even city size considerations stop making sense.

To ensure a 100 km distance everywhere, you would have to consider areas as the Eastern American Megapolis,

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which can house 25,000,000 within 100 km without problems.

This would lead to a mortality of: 0.99999996 and about 240 survivors worldwide.

On the other hand, you could calculate on a national scene. If I, being ad Dane, wanted to play on a Danish scene, I should consider the area of Denmark ($42,000 \text{ km}^2$), which would leave me with 4 survivors well spaced out. But of course of those 4 survivors 2 would probably be on Zealand since it houses $\frac{1}{2}$ of the population, giving them an average distance of 75 km and given the uneven distribution of the population probably only 50 km.

Personally, however, I feel that is quite sufficient to feel absolutely alone.

