Estimated Prophet

Playtest (beta)
By Ron Edwards / Adept Press
Updated April 2017

... sexual imprinting on a red trait leads to a preference only for another novel red trait due to transference of a preference for the colour red. Michael Plenge, Eberhard Curio, and Klaudia Witte, 2000. Behaviour 137(6):741-758.

Introduction

This game includes cutting and gluing a collage or arts-and-craft oddments onto a piece of paper, which is kind of odd for a role-playing game. Even odder, it seems to work.

I suggest allowing a few hours' uninterrupted, dedicated time for play, as the game is intended to build and generate a specific set of aesthetic features. It might be played in several sessions.

Earliest playtesting should be "for love," meaning, we aren't here to break the game. The plan is to discover whether the vision of the game and basics of play are actually as fun as we hope. I especially ask that we merely play and save discussion for later, and that this text be treated only as a playtesting guide, not a game text draft, and not be subjected to writing critique.

What it's about

Play concerns characters who begin as ordinary people with ordinary lives, but who have recently encountered powerful and perhaps transformative experiences. They must cope with the hassles of life in the light of their extraordinary perceptions. They discover that they are newly empowered to act.

As their lives transform or disintegrate, their insights (and powers) become more coherent and effective. Which matters more? What parts of ordinary life survive, or become important?

They may become visionaries and prophets, perceiving that the world's nature and dynamics are symbolically powerful and morally critical. They may become driven to act in significant, perhaps even public ways. They may become monsters. They may try to avoid any of these things. The line between what is true and what is insane is no longer clear. What does it all mean?

Each character begins alone, but their new lives converge in difficult ways. What will they do about that?

The concept of beauty, initially experienced in visions, informs all of play.

- Mystical actions, and effects are described as stunningly beautiful in addition to whatever else they might be, including violence and the grotesque.
- The character's developing, articulated metaphysical models and views are themselves be beautifully consistent constructs, however schizophrenic or bizarre.
- Play will bring a great deal of gluing artsy stuff onto this sheet, to arrive at a visually pleasing or at least affecting physical composition. Merely sticking stuff on there at random is missing part of the presumed fun.
- The fictional items on the sheet near or covered by glued-on additions become beautiful in some fashion, whether as the character's own appearance and charisma, or as a fascination experienced by others.

Whatever they might become or do, the characters' lives have become genuinely beautiful. Is that good?

What play is like
This is purely character-driven: no over-arching plot, no designated phases of the story arc, and no starting in-situation conflicts. There is no pre-game preparation. Play in the moment of what characters feel and know, what they run into, and how they deal with it.

At any given time, one person is the Player, another is the Guide, and the other or others are the Other, and the way anyone talks, and about what, is clearly designated. But the real art to do so lies in listening.

Enhance play by giving space to others, for each person to enjoy raw imagination without social editing. Everyone must roll a little with the punches provided by one another's input, as much can change with each turn, but there is no consultation or vetting about what might happen or about what any particular character might do.

Preparing
Play is for three or four people. The organizer brings four copies of a single image which includes a beautiful woman and red as a primary color component, as well as a whole class' worth of arts-and-crafts materials. It's up to you to decide whether non-paper materials are included, but everything should be glue-able. Bring scissors and glue, as well as sturdy backing for the character sheets. Shape templates are recommended.

Everyone takes a character sheet either by choice or at random. Consider each character to be in the same general location. Because it's easy and it works, use the same city or community in which you are playing the game.

Here are a couple of thoughts about playing your character, probably best considered now.

You should play your character as an advocate, so round out the sheet to make up someone you like. If it should so happen that, in play, you feel as if he or she is telling you what to say, listen to it. Try to arrive at someone who you think might have something to say, even if the notion is vague – in fact, better if it is.

Do not embed dramatic conflict into the initial character concept. Use familiarity and a bit of sympathy as your guides, not the kind of instant engagement associated with a main character in a film whose problems begin on the boil.

Filling out the sheet

The starting character sheet is absurdly rich in details of the characters' abilities and lifestyles. Here's what to do, in order.

- Find a sheet you like or take one at random. It includes a name and specific descriptions for many of the items. Scribble descriptions for all or nearly all of the others, as fast as they appear to be obvious. If you leave a few blank, fill them in later during play.
- Each item includes a score from 1 to 6. If you want, transfer any full score to another as an addition, leaving the donor at 0. Do this as much as you like, but not more than once per receiving item. Therefore scores range from 0 to 12.

Example: Harry Strong is a working white-collar professional about one paycheck from disaster, like many of us.

Birth name 6 **Harold Micah Strong**	Professional name 4 **Harold M. Strong**	First impression 0 **Mild, attentive**	Stressed personality 8 **Competent**
Casual name 4 **Harry**	Nickname 2 **Har, the Hulk**	Prof. personality 1 **Social, easy-going**	Unguarded pers. 1 **Aloof, taciturn**
Aliases 6 **Never occurred to him**	Online ID 5 **Har766**	Social hobby 6 **Wine tasting**	Private hobby 6 **Old magazines**
Citizenship 3 **United States of America**	Birthplace 4 **Cincinnatti, Ohio**	Designated ethnicity 1 **Caucasian/White**	Ethnic background 2 **Polish, a little Mexican**
Apparent age 2 **Early 30s**	Physical health 6 **Falling out of shape**	Mortgages/lease 3 **$310,000 house**	Major loan 1 **$55,000 SUV**
Physiological age 1 **39**	Emotional health 5 **Trouble relaxing**	Minor loan 5 **$18,000 Visa**	Business loan 4 **Tried for one once**
Actual age 2 **30**	Mental health 6 **Am I depressed?**	Legal suit 1 **Scared to try**	Contract obligation 2 **6-year job**

… and so on throughout the sheet. The First Impressions was initially rated at 6, but I moved it over to improve Stressed Personality from 2 to 8.

Naming and understanding the scores

No item should be defined as "None." If the character is not married, then describe the situation to illuminate why not. Consider the differences among "Dating frantically," "Gave up on that nonsense long ago," "Dumped at the altar," and "Single and lovin' it." In the case of the example character, Harry, note his description for Business Loan.

The score's number always means the character's competence and confidence in using its features. Roughly, the scale goes:
- 0: The character flails and has to improvise when relying upon or dealing with this item
- 1: The character can see problems ahead if he or she has to rely upon or deal with this item

- 2-6: The character sees this item as a typical asset or feature of his or her life, which means it is perfectly capable of being a pain in the ass when in use or when it acts up
- 7-12: The character turns to this item as a way to deal with problems and with other people

If you want, feel free to identify a score's magnitude with its quantitative fictional identity, as with defining residence as "homeless" for a 0 and 12 for a mansion, or even to take it literally when appropriate, as defining Children 2 as "two kids."

However, you don't have to be so literal. A Marriage defined as "Bad divorce from Beth" scored at 10 means the character still gets good advice from Beth or maybe uses contacts from the long legal battle to his advantage, but a Marriage defined as "Married to Joan for twelve years" at 0 means the character flails when adverse situations require calling upon his wife.

Diversity among characters

Characters may be of any social class or wealth level, with the necessary information and any commentary or perspective being delivered through naming the scores. Regarding the information, one character may have Residence described as a mansion, whereas another has it described as "Homeless." Either description could have any numerical rating, because the value indicates how well the character deals with problems in which his residence, or lack of it, is a primary feature. Regarding the commentary or perspective, certain twists of phrasing allow for more depth.

Vehicles	Clothes	Art/entertainment	Weapons
City trains on a bummed pass	*Several layers*	*Cast-off TV, no cable*	*Half a brick in a nylon sock*
Knickknacks	Residence location	Residence value	Residence appearance
Wire, ties, string, cords	*Cousin's garage, most of the time*	*A lot if you don't have it*	*Beat-up and unused-looking*
Active project	Abandoned project	Failed project	Planned project
Find a good non-shopping cart	*College, long ago*	*My life*	*No more junk*

The art part

Take one of the images and glue some part of it, onto your sheet wherever you want. This represents the beginning of your character's visions, hallucinations, moments of clarity, and revelations. Whatever it touches is transformed in the character's perceptions: a message, a miracle, or whatever.

- Whatever it completely covers, if anything, is eliminated from your character's life in some mysterious or mystical way that causes him or her no problems.
- Whatever is contiguous to the artistic addition is also affected and transformed in your character's perceptions at least, and perhaps objectively as well.

How did this happen? Whatever happened, it was very red. It was also surreal. And it involved the content of the image itself.

This is where the drama begins, to greater or lesser degree. Consider the implications of covering your character's name. Or a family member. Or a job, or some financial situation. It's … gone! The character may or may not remember the lost item(s). He or she may or may not think of the changed situation as a problem.

Example: the person playing Harry takes one of the images of the woman and makes a cut-out of her right eye:

He glues it directly onto the "Mortgages/lease" item on the sheet, angled counter-clockwise so the eye is horizontal, slightly overlapping all eight items surrounding it.

Harry found himself walking through his house, noting all its little ways and idiosyncrasies, seeing things he'd forgotten or never known, and he decided he loved it. It seemed to him that the house loved him in return, and their shared emotion suffused the experience with rich, red, light. And to his astonishment, that light was seen by some entity, too vast or important for him to comprehend, but he knew that it was watching him, and that it approved.

After this admittedly odd but perhaps merely imaginative experience, Harry discovers that somehow, he no longer owes money on his house. There's no record that there ever was a mortgage. It's free and clear. Upon reviewing his finances in general, he finds that all of them have subtly improved, and his various required payments are decreased. And when he relaxes alone in his house, he glimpses or feels the color again.

Other things seem a little off-kilter after that point too, and Harry isn't sure whether his memory was affected by the experience, or reality itself. He understands a little Spanish that he didn't before, especially Mexican-American slang. Someone even addresses him casually on the street as if he were in that subculture, perceiving that he must have been born in northern Mexico. He feels good about this, as if he had a more developed sense of "place" in general ... and strangely, physically better too. He feels as if, once in the regard of a benign and attentive being, he has entered a better "space" of existence.

Play: Dice pools, guiding, and turn order

Everyone rolls six d6 and places the dice as rolled to the left of his or her character sheet. Whoever has the lowest total is the current Guide, and whoever has the highest is the current Player. Everyone else has an auxiliary role.

Example: Harry's Player's roll is
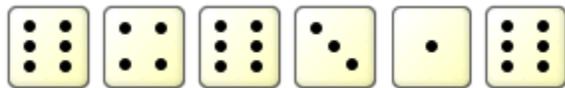
= 26, which happens to be the highest at the table. Harry's up first.

As turns go by, whoever just finished being the Player becomes the new Guide, and anyone can speak up to be the new Player. The only constraints are that no one is Player again until everyone has done it once, but the order of Players within any such "round" doesn't need to be kept fixed. Therefore you might have different Guides for different characters throughout play. If two people really want to be the next Player at the same time, the one with the higher dice total gets it.

Play: A given turn

The Player states what his or her character is doing "today," defined either as the next day from previous events or as a continuation of the previous events in the same day. The Guide plays by

asking questions about both the character and the immediate environment, which both introduces new material and details as well as draws more of these from the Player. The other person or persons play other characters the Player character comes into contact with.

- The Player takes on more of a traditional GMing role than it may seem. He or she is the one to shift the locations of play, to state the character's priorities at any time, and to move time forward.
- The Guide can "intrude" to a very great extent in terms of both the character's internal state and of the external circumstances. Note that "guide" does not imply "direction."
- The other two people do not introduce any new material regarding the past or present; their role is primarily thespian.

Adversity arises through the shared properties of these three roles.

Good Playing
As the Player, begin your turn by saying where your character is, where he or she is going if anywhere, what he or she is currently doing, and what for. At this point, you are more like a traditional Game Master and player combined. Remember, the Guide can only ask questions, and the Other(s) can only play characters.

As play proceeds, your input will probably focus more on "I do this" and "I do that," but you'll keep that GM-type content to a lesser extent, as what your character does is up to you, and you're still in charge of changing locations and describing new circumstances. You do not need to ask "can I" of anyone else.

When the Guide asks questions, answer as intuitively as possible, and extend your answer to work with the implications of yes or no. Bring in content for things external to your character as well. For example, if the Guide asks, "Is it raining" think of answers like these.

- Yes. It's drizzling and cold. I didn't bring my jacket, and now I'm pissed off.
- No. It's a perfect day, shining and warm, and people act cheerful toward strangers.

This especially applies to questions concerning people. This is where you really play "out of my character." Answer direct questions about them to clarify their situations, appearances, and emotional states, which the Other player(s) can use to prompt their contributions.

A lot of the Guide's questions may end up being answered "no," but that's good too, because it establishes the conceptual territory you'd prefer to emphasize, and the questioning and answering quickly become less exploratory and more synergistic – you'll see. The more you extend the answers as described above, the more the noes actually turn out to be yes's of their own.

Working with an Other is an art of its own as well, as he or she essentially takes over a character you've either created or implied to exist. These characters might be incidental, providing detail to a situation, or they might be more proactive, depending on how the Other feels about it. When an Other becomes assertive with a character, consider whether this is actually pretty interesting and worth sticking with.

That illustrates your most important power: you can shift your character to other locations and forward in time, as long as continuity is established by relevant actions. To keep it easier on others for their turns, stay within the range of a fictional day.

Good Guiding

As the Guide, your job is to find out how things are, what they mean, what it's like for the current Player's character, and what's going on. You can do one thing: ask yes-or-no questions, but you can raise any topic or suggest any detail about the current situation that you'd like.

To show how non-trivial this may be, say the Player begins with, "I wake up in my bed in the morning."

- Are you alone?

If the opening statement or the answer to your question seems pretty mundane or free of implications, ask to clarify anything visual or experiential, like, "I'm on the bus, going to work."

- Are you almost there?
- Are you sitting or standing?

As the basics become clear, focus on the potential inconveniences or small troubles of life. Riff off what the Player just said, off what the Other(s) just had characters say and do, and especially off the described items on the Player's character sheet.

- Was the bus late?
- [The Player's sheet includes a beat-up old car] Is your car in the shop?
- [The Player said that the character is standing] Is the bus crowded?
- [The Player mentions kids on the bus] Is a kid crying?
- [An Other plays a stressed-out mom] Do you help her?

Don't worry about finishing the bus ride or getting the character to work. The Player will take care of all that. If he or she isn't interested in what you're asking about, the solution is easy – just to move the character into his or her intended action, or to new circumstances – and you don't have to provide it.

You have more of a traditional Game Master role than it might appear, as your questions provide a lot of the raw material that the other players shape into the spoken, established fiction. It's kind of nice to have this creative power without being so responsible for it in play. You don't have to ratify anything, to call for the resolution mechanics to come into play, or to handle scene shifts and closures. You might even have to remind a Player that this stuff isn't your job, that you are *merely* the Guide, not the traveler, so to speak.

You'll find that the Player and Other(s) sometimes fill in tons of content about a situation, in which case you can focus on internal issues like "Does that make you sad?" and sometimes he or she leaves it wide open, just stating basics or abstracts like "I'm going home," in which you can ask as much as possible about the immediate circumstances.

Throughout play, concern yourself with ordinary and understandable things, and this applies double for the hassles and circumstances of the moment. Don't ask questions which establish urgency or threaten any aspect of the character's life in a crucial sense: firings, blowing-up houses or spouses, ninja attacks, arrest on framed-up drug charges, being run over by a bus ... no one is out for the character's blood or determined to ruin his or her life. Instead, think in terms of

staying afloat, coping with tension, keeping one's temper, reaching out to others, and bending the system, the way most of us live our real lives.

The Other(s) will determine whether one of their characters is in the situation. Don't ask an Other any questions; any content about that character is his or her job. Your character cannot be included at all.

Good Other-ing
When you're the Other, play any character you'd like in the fictional situation aside from the Player's. No one will turn to you and ask or direct you to do it – just jump right in.

It's usually incidental: provide momentary reaction shots, zoom into examine a personal touch or detail concerning a character glimpsed only briefly – any time a Guide's question and a Player's answer suggest to you that some other person in the situation may have an interior life.

Sometimes it's on a necessary and obvious cue: the Player's character addresses some other character directly or otherwise gets right into their sphere of operation. If he or she goes into the boss' office and wants to negotiate a pay raise, then play the boss.

Play the people in the situation with some sympathy. The ex-wife need not be a shrieking harpy, the boss doesn't have to be a sadistic drone, the literary agent isn't entirely a scum-sucking bottom-feeder, the aggressive guy in the bar isn't a doltish brute … The character may not like or want to help the Player's character, or they may have strong emotions, and they may not always make the best decisions. But you aren't forced to make them stereotypes or malevolent toward the character, even when the situation is turning against his or her interests.

Also, be proactive, on cues perceived only by yourself. Provide dialogue or action even from someone whose presence is merely implied by phrases like "the bus is packed." The Guide may pick up on it and ask the Player questions. Listen to the answers carefully, role-play the character further based on them; the most casual improvisations can evolve into powerful components of a Player's experience.

Naming the characters is also your job. The best method is to have quite a long, almost-random list available to you, so you can grab names from it as needed.

You might be working with another Other, too, which requires building a system of interaction, who gets to go, who takes on which character, yes or no, on the fly. Naming becomes easier this way, as the Other who takes up a character's role can let the other Other provide a name.

You may also bring your own character into another Player's turn. Only one Other may do this on a given turn, and don't do it on any Player's first turn. Play your character explicitly to show whether his or her presence is merely incidental or opposed to the character in some way. If two Others are playing when this occurs, the one without his or her character in play takes over all responsibilities for "everyone else" play for the rest of the turn.

Emergent adversity
The point of any and all turns, for each person as the Player, is to arrive at situations of adversity for his or her character. But no one person does this alone, or all at once, or according to a plan at the start of a turn. Instead, it arises synergistically from the good play described above.

- The Player's character is necessarily either trying to do something or trying to relax in some way.
- The Guide discovers what is going wrong or becomes difficult about that, internally or externally.
- The Other gives voice and vividness to the human side of the situation, emphasizing and giving direction to potential conflicts, allowing the Player to see why the character cannot simply be reasonable and get along to solve it.

Through interactions between the Player and Guide, Harry is dealing with a misunderstanding at work, in which he is receiving disciplinary memos intended for someone else, but the reprimands for ignoring them are in fact being applied to him. The Other is playing Harry's immediate boss as helpfully encouraging him to consult the ombudsman, which in effect would mean admitting that the subject of the memos do in fact pertain to him, which they don't.

The moment arrives when someone at the table realizes that the character, no matter what his or her basic personality is like, and no matter how he's trying to handle this, is getting aggravated. It doesn't matter who the someone is – all he or she does is say, "Let's do it." Then play moves into resolution.

Resolution
Problems are resolved either by Living Life or by Immersion, unless either is interrupted and superceded by a Clash.

Living Life to its full
The Player or the Guide chooses one item on the Player's sheet to express how the character will try to solve the problem. This item must be agreed upon, by the Guide or Player respectively, or else another must be chosen. The value of the chosen item is applied toward a target number, which for all characters, begins at 15.

The Player may add the values of one or more of the rolled dice sitting at the left of his or her sheet to the score being used. If the total equals or exceeds the target number (excess dice are not permitted), then the character deals successfully with the adversity. If the total does not, then the situation resolves negatively for the character's interests. Everyone continues to describe and narrate what happens using the usual rules for speaking

Harry starts alerting everyone in the office to his problem, calling in markers and favors in order to goose the grapevine into action. The Player and Guide agree that Harry's Coworkers, defined as "The nicest guy here" and scored at 5, is most relevant for the scene.

Example: Harry is using Coworkers at 5, so that leaves 10 to go.

Example: the Player chooses the 6 and 4 from Harry's Pool, which in addition to the score of 5 brings the total to equal the target number of 15. Further play and narration establish that Harry is able to generate enough office scuttlebutt about his problem that the next administrative level has no choice except to resolve the problem without hassling him further.

If the score being used is contiguous to any glued-on additions to the character sheet, consider how its use is affected by the character's altered experience of reality, up to and including the manifestation of mystical power, whether noticeable to anyone besides the character or not.

The resolved situation must necessarily problematize the life of another player's character whether directly or indirectly; no order is mandated but everyone should get hit by this eventually. The Player narrates how this happens.

Example: The Player explains that the office worker who had in fact been targeted by the memos has a very bad day, as the accumulated disfavor of several weeks arrives all at once, and he is on the verge of losing his job. He leaves the workplace that day in a foul mood, and is rude to a homeless man standing on the plaza by the exit doors, to the extent that he knocks some of the guy's possessions into the gutter, where some are lost. The homeless man is another person's character.

The dice used lose their values and are set to the right of the character sheet. The remaining dice stay where they are, untouched, as originally rolled.

Example: One of the dice showing a6s and the die showing the 4 are moved to the right of Harry's sheet. The remaining four dice to the left of his sheet look like this,
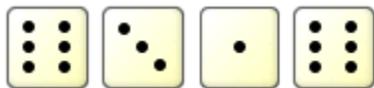
The two dice sitting to the right of the sheet are not pictured here because they have no designated values..

As this method of resolution is re-used, the character's dice pool on the left is diminished each time. The only way to refresh the pool to ten dice is to play enough Living Life resolutions to bring all the dice to the right – which means in at least the final one, the character may well fail.

Let's say that this scene is occurring later in play, that Harry has expended all the dice but the 1 and the 6, and that he is using a score valued at 7 ... he cannot meet the target number of 15. In this case, the Player describes how Harry takes his boss' advice, essentially throwing himself at the mercy of the administrative system.

Rather than make the boss an idiot, the Other describes him submitting a formal appeal to help Harry out, but the fact is, the administration already has the black marks against Harry in its records, and there's really no way to get them out. Harry finds himself blocked for his next scheduled pay raise and removed from a committee he cares about a lot, and the boss doesn't get a budget review he'd been shooting for either. The two of them go out together for a beer and gnash their teeth.

After clearing the dice pool on the left, the Player re-rolls all six dice and sets them to the left of the sheet as before, and also permanently raises the character's Target Number by 5.

New dice pool:

= 18. In Harry's next scene, his target number will be 20.

Immersion into the essence

The Player describes how the character experiences a mystic insight, roughly classifiable as:

- *I Know This Now*, which changes the adversity into something different and manageable;
- *I See My Path*, which identifies an action which decisively solves the problem;
- *I Know Who You Are*, which identifies a character involved in the adversity as having a special mystical identity which can be addressed to solve the problem; and
- *The Crack Between the Worlds*, in which the character displays a radical manifestation of mystical power.

The character takes action based on this insight and deals with the adversity such that, as currently stated and understood, it no longer threatens the character.

Example: Harry uses "I know who you are," regarding a woman at work, whom he now realizes is an agent of the "regarding presence," whom he is beginning to call 'la Alma Carmesí,' or the crimson soul. He engages in a covert information blitz toward her, including flooding her email with spam, all with red backgrounds regardless of content, stealthily painting a complex eye-like symbol on her office door, and wearing red apparel, all intended to alert her to his plight and seek help. And what do you know! The administration figures out the glitch, clears Harry's official work records, and sends him a nice apology.

The dice pool and target number remain unchanged.

The Player selects any of the available arts-and-crafts material, up to the size of his or her open palm, to glue onto his or her character sheet in any single location. He or she may cut up whatever is chosen, as desired. At first Immersion, the sheet is glued onto backing as well.

Example: the Player chooses a black curlicue, placing it vertically above the eye already on the sheet, to occupy but not fully cover the items "Professional personality" and "First impression."

If something is completely covered by the new addition, then it undergoes the same weird transformation and elimination described in character creation. This will certainly require some distinct narration of its own when the character's turn comes around again.

Immersed actions are always effective, but they may or may not be legal, nice, or even apparently rational. "Seeing red" reactions and actions are viscerally undeniable and unavoidably transitional in the "perceived story of one's life. To you, it's an act of transcendental selfhood and mystical insight, but to others, you've gone batshit crazy. Or even if it's not that extreme, it is at the very least mysterious and possibly frightening. The Guide describes other characters' reactions and what they do, although reserving any further concrete adversity for later scenes.

Example: The Guide notes that Harry's co-workers are puzzled by his recent fashion choices, and some of the custodial staff are eyeing him suspiciously while cleaning up the defaced door. The woman, however, outwardly responds to the whole thing with magnificent indifference.

No further narration is required from the Player at this point; his or her notions for the content implied by the addition are left to later play. However, the other people describe how their characters are alerted to or affected by the "ripples" in the metaphysical spaces or interstices, using as starting points the chosen artistic materials as well as the actions described in the scene so far.

Immersion resolutions cover a wide range of extreme, psychic, mystical, or even super-powers types of effects. The above example stayed on the end of the spectrum characterized by weird behavior and effects which may or may not be coincidental.

Alternate ways to play this resolution option include more direct action, especially with the Crack Between the Worlds.

Example:Harry puts one hand on his computer keyboard and one on the screen, then unleashes a psychic blast into the system. He can actually see all the streams and tributaries of information throughout the building and the network, as well as out of all the screens into the various offices. All those screens glow bright red for a moment, then the system undergoes a radical crash. His black-marked records vanish into the ether along with about a million other tidbits of administrative information.

In this case, the Guide follows up by describing the variety of excuses and rationalizations for the event, none of which involve Harry.

Clash of vision

An Other may have brought his or her character into a situation for many reasons, sometimes strictly for an incidental appearance. However, either the Other or the Player may state that his or her character challenges, opposes, or even harms the other's. In this case, play focuses directly upon that conflict using the Clash rules.

First make sure that the current fictional situation is well-established for everyone at the table. The characters need to be understood to be doing specific things, not merely having goals, and those specific things will have effects which the respective other character is trying to stop. (That is a very fancy way of saying, "I hit you!" "Not if I hit you first!" but it also covers a myriad of different attempted actions and counter-actions which may be more complicated.)

Then, for each character, with any necessary judgment calls being made by the Guide,

- If you're being nice, pick up the dice to the left of your character sheet
- If you're not, pick up the dice to the right of your character sheet

Play Blackjack dice. Each person rolls one die openly, and simultaneously, a secret one. Keep their sum in mind. See if anyone calls. Then, beginning with the Player, take turns to keep adding simultaneous secret rolls of a single die. At the end of your turn, you may call if you want to, and you must call if you run out of dice, or if you bust by exceeding your current target number. Going bust loses; if no one is busted, then the higher total wins. Ties are won by the Player.

The players talk and narrate as little or as much as they like during back-and-forth dice rolling. They may be as extravagant as they can possibly imagine, with all manner of cosmic expansions or content at one end, or entirely mundane at the other.

The winner describes what happens, especially to the loser; being as metaphysical and wild and extreme as the player desires. The loser describes how much of what just happened is real, as opposed to the stuff that occurred only in the perceptions of the characters. This final description cannot counteract the basic victory, however.

At the end of the Clash, both people place all their dice to the right of their respective sheets. Uniquely, the players do not re-roll them for a new 6d6 total, and their current values are zero

going into the following turns. If a person wants to re-roll and restore his or her dice pools on the left, he or she must choose Living Life on a later turn knowing that it's a dead loss.

Ending the turn

If the adversity was resolved either through Living Life or Immersion, continue play past the resolution, whether for the fallout that affects another character after a successful use of the dice, or to illustrate something the resolution implies. Seeing the character interact and do things after these experiences is an important part of his or her development.

However, if the turn included a Clash, it ends immediately upon the final narration of the Clash's outcome.

As the final mechanic of a turn, the Guide subtracts 1 from the score of all items on the Player's character sheet that he or she considers relevant to the situation. It doesn't matter what resolution method was used, or how the situation was resolved.

Example: No matter which of the methods described above was actually used, the Guide decides to subtract 1 from Harry's Coworkers, Employer, Professional Reputation, and Professional Personality.

If a score's value drops to 0, the Player may rewrite the item's content.

Harry's Professional Personality has just dropped from 1 to 0. Apparently, no matter how the problems worked out in the short-term, this experience really shook up his understanding of his own workplace, to the degree that it affects his demeanor there. The Player rewrites the description, deciding upon Disgruntled. (For extra fun, notice that if the Immersion option was used as described above, then this item happens to be "reddened" as well.)

Regarding the ordering of turns, again, the player whose character was just Guided always becomes the new Guide. The only stipulations for who becomes the new Player are (i) everyone gets to be the Player before anyone can do it again, and (ii) if possible, try to keep the same order of Players from repeating itself too mechanically as play continues.

Exegesis

More or less at the point when all the characters have been featured in Turns, the group conducts a special combination of discussions and scenes in which no adversity appears, although the events played may well generate material for later Turns. During this phase or step, the characters grapple with making sense of their experiences, either indulging in coping mechanisms or articulating and developing personal models of reality, or both.

Consider allowing some fictional time to pass, say weeks or months. It might be best handled by finding out from each participant how much time he or she would be willing to let go by, then using the shortest amount stated.

Each person describes what his or her character is doing. The behaviors may appear normal or entirely not normal. Sequences such as Roy Neary's mashed-potatoes sculpting in *Close Encounters of the Third Kind* or the protagonist's extreme drug experiences in *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas* might be considered, but ordinary if perhaps a bit obsessive behavior is also eligible, such as the protagonist's journal in *Valis*, from which this phase of play derives its name.

Each person then decides whether to conduct the next step entirely alone or to solicit input first. If you solicit input, then anyone else may provide commentary and suggestions based on the artwork you've created so far, including the listed items as well as the designs and appearance of the glued-on materials. Otherwise they let you alone.

Each person then describes his or her character's current best guess or construction concerning the world as they now know it. The perspectives might be wholly aesthetic, or spiritual, or political, or historical, or whatever, related somehow to the content and design of the artwork so far, at least as far as the person speaking is concerned.. Each character should somehow articulate what he or she decides, interprets, or realizes. Please feel free to draw upon whatever references you like, as baroque and arcane as you can manage and still find fun. Inventing names and terms is highly recommended.

The narrations and interpretations provided during Exegesis are certainly available for later play, whether as information or perceptions, as a basis for actions, as shared or contrasting motifs, or as targets for deconstruction.

Emergent play (possibly)

One possible, hoped-for emergent property of play is that the characters become motivated toward direct action in the world via their insights and abilities. Whether they are in agreement about that or not is left up to play.

Another is that interactions among characters strongly converge with a wide variety of emergent relationships and outcomes, ranging as far apart as collusion during visions to outright super-psychic battles.

Another is the degree to which the various interpretations of reality impinge upon one another, whether threatening or reinforcing.

And of course, the woman

Who is that, in the picture? I don't know. It's crucial to play that nobody knows, that this question *be* a question. It may become the linchpin of characters' speculation, effort, interpretation, and motivation during play.

- A focal entity of some kind? Is she symbolic, effectively invented by the characters, or is she really there? What does she want? Is she good or evil?
- What is she there for? To be worshipped? To be fought? To deliver or receive a message? To be emulated? Or is she a goal, something that a person can find or become? In what way?
- Is she an actual person in ordinary reality? Does that person know? Is she to be sought out, protected, killed, or what?

These questions are not answered – if they are answered at all – by any single person, or at any moment, but rather collectively and piecemeal, by Exegesis and a variety of minor narrations as play moves forward.

Where play goes and how it ends

Play includes no formal endgame, but instead merely continues until all of the characters have met a personal ending. It is unlikely that this will occur simultaneously for anyone, so think of play as slowly removing character after character until they're all gone.

Ways to go

1. Art-driven. When and if you decide that your artistic creation is about as done as it can get, then during Exegesis, narrate how your character arrives at a final conclusion about the nature of reality, and what actions he or she takes as a final expression thereof. Everyone else at the table describes the consequences as they see fit. Your character's story is ended.

2. Plot-driven. When and if you (the Player) decide that your character's actions and circumstances have reached a social, thematic, or psychological peak, then declare your current turn to be the character's last. No one may declare a Clash during this turn. Its consequences and details depend on which method of resolution is chosen. Everyone may comment freely but the authoritative narration is provided by the Player.

- Living Life:
    - If the character successfully copes with the current adversity as determined by the dice and score, then he or she also now crashes and burns, reaching a personal limit that is expressed in physical disintegration or fatal injury.
    - If the character fails to deal with the current adversity as per the rules, then the event acts as a trigger to return him or her, slowly but inexorably, to ordinary life. Although the mysterious experiences may have changed things, perhaps considerably, they cease to occur and he or she becomes less interested in their nature. The character basically gets through it and moves on.
- Immersion: the character copes with the current adversity successfully as per the rules, but dies or disappears in an entirely mysterious and perhaps remarkable way.

When you have no character, play as usual, as Other, Guide (for one more turn, possibly), and a possible source of feedback during Exegesis. When the number of characters is reduced to one, then everyone else trades off acting as Guide.

Thoughts

The game intentionally leaves certain metaphysical or thematic issues dangling. The only question is whether the human side of the story or stories was compelling. Or to put it simply, I don't care a bit about about VALIS or whether the year is 138 or 1978 C.E. I do care, quite a lot, about Sherri suffocating to death from lymphatic cancer and self-hatred, and about Phil seeing his family disintegrate while grappling with multiple-personality disorder. In many ways, this game is an exercise in shared pain and honesty.

Original characters

New character sheets are recommended for later play. Each should begin with the organizer using handfuls of d6 to fill in all of the scores, and filling in the content for about thirty of the items in some way that seems at least partly consistent. The following constraints apply:
- The character must be old enough to be deemed legally responsible for his or her actions and decisions.
- Similarly, he or she cannot be so impaired as to be deemed incompetent in the legal sense.
- Fill in a continuous block on the sheet, not separated and scattered.
- Once you've filled in about ten things, in doing the rest, leave blank certain ones which strike you as obvious for this character.
- Do not provide any of the character's names.
- Do not front-load relations or interactions across character sheets.

The person who chooses or receives each sheet handles it as described in the rules.

Acknowledgments

Influences

Please investigate those you haven't encountered before, and draw upon them during your own play of the game.

Games

At this late stage, it seems like I've been influenced by every game ever. But more specifically, this one "felt like" Keith Senkowski's *untitled* and Steve Hickey's *Left Coast*, both contestants in the Ronnies contests in late 2005; the Misbegotten from Seth Ben Ezra's *Legends of Alyria*; and opening your mind to the maelstrom from Vincent Baker's *Apocalypse World*. For raw red color, you can't do better than Greg Saunders' *Ruby* and Tim Koppang's *Mars Colony*. The differing roles of play are influenced by Ben Lehman's *Polaris*. The Clash rules are modified from Tim Kleinert's *The Mountain Witch*. Kevin Allen Jr. introduced scissors to role-playing texts with *Sweet Agatha*. In the scene-situations turn structure, the discerning reader will spot the influence of *Universalis* by Ralph Mazza and Mike Holmes.

Literature

Philip K. Dick's *Valis,* first and foremost; see also Hunter S. Thompson's *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas*, especially Chapter 8 in Part 1, and Michael Bishop's *Count Geiger's Blues.*

Non-fiction

I am told that Robert Anton Wilson's *Cosmic Trigger* uses the term "Chapel Perilous" for the condition encountered by the characters in the game. The idea that red is a special color for humans and other animals due to sensory neurological biases has been discussed across several authors in behavioral science; its most interesting implication is that something new can be deemed important because it is red, regardless of any other value or dangers it presents, or conversely, how innocuous it may be.

Music

King Crimson in general but especially their album *Red* (1974); the song "Estimated Prophet" by the Grateful Dead on their *Terrapin Station* album (1977), which coincidentally also features a red cover; and the song "Twenty-Nine Palms" by Tangerine Dream on their *Lily on the Beach* album (1989).

Film

Visually: *Three Colors: Red* (1994), *Deep Red* (1975), *American Beauty* (1999), which also provides some thematic influence, and the "girl in the red coat" scenes in *Schindler's List* (1994). By contrast, *RED* (2010) is not especially relevant. *Altered States* (1980) and *Pi* (1998) address the overlap among insight, vision, and insanity.

The world around

Keep your eyes open for advertising which uses red as a primary device. Your characters might come to consider such things secret messages or sources of insight. Try not to be like your characters, though.

Birth name 6 **Harold Micah Strong**	*Professional name 4* **Harold M. Strong**	*First impression 6* **Mild, attentive**	*Stressed personality 2* **Competent**
Casual name 4 **Harry**	*Nickname 2* **Har, the Hulk**	*Prof. personality 1* **Social, easy-going**	*Unguarded pers. 1* **Aloof, taciturn**
Aliases 6 **Never occurred to him**	*Online ID 5* **Har766**	*Social hobby 6* **Wine tasting**	*Private hobby 6* **Old magazines**
Citizenship 3 **United States of America**	*Birthplace 4* **Cincinnatti, Ohio**	*Designated ethnicity 1* **Caucasian/White**	*Ethnic background 2* **Polish, a little Mexican**
Apparent age 2 **Early 30s**	*Physical health 6* **Falling out of shape**	*Mortgages/lease 3* **$310,000 house**	*Major loan 1* **$55,000 SUV**
Physiological age 1 **35**	*Emotional health 5* **Trouble relaxing**	*Minor loan 5* **$18,000 Visa**	*Business loan 4* **Tried for one once**
Actual age 2 **30**	*Mental health 6* **Am I depressed?**	*Legal suit 1* **Scared to try**	*Contract obligation 2* **6-year job**
Profession (general) 3	Employment 3	Employer 5	Coworkers 5
Religious upbringing 4	Religious beliefs 4	Religious institution 4	Religious possessions 1
Earned degrees 5	School reputations 5	Academic scores 3	Ongoing studies 5
Stocks & bonds 3	Gratification fantasy 3	Professional reput. 4	Close friends 4
Retirement 6	Retribution fantasy 5	Personal reputation 4	Nominal friends 5
Personal investment 4	Achievement fantasy 3	Internet reputation 1	Old friends 3
Prof. appearance 5	Social appearance 3	Recreational app. 6	Private appearance 2
Vehicles 1	Clothes 2	Art/entertainment 6	Weapons 5
Knickknacks 3	Residence location 1	Residence value 3	Residence appearance 5
Active project 3	Abandoned project 4	Failed project 5	Planned project 3
Parents/grandparents 5	Siblings 1	Children 4	Cousins etc 3
Marriage 5	Sexual contacts 4	Former partners 4	Transportation 3
Ready cash 5	Tied-up funds 6	Required locations 6	Relaxation location 2

Birth name1	Professional name 5	First impression 3	Stressed personality 1
Casual name 6	Nickname 2	Prof. personality1	Unguarded pers.5
Aliases 5	Online ID 3	Social hobby1	Private hobby 3
Citizenship 2	Birthplace4	Designated ethnicity4	Ethnic background 5
Apparent age 2	Physical health 6	Mortgages/lease 6	Major loan 1
Physiological age 1	Emotional health 3	Minor loan 3	Business loan 4
Actual age 6	Mental health 4	Legal suit 2	Contract obligation 4
Profession (general) 2	Employment 2	Employer 6	Coworkers 5
Religious upbringing 2	Religious beliefs 4	Religious institution 3	Religious possessions 4
Earned degrees 1	School reputations 6	Academic scores 4	Ongoing studies 3
Stocks & bonds 3	Gratification fantasy 4	Professional reput. 4	Close friends 3
Retirement 4	Retribution fantasy 4	Personal reputation 3	Nominal friends 2
Personal investment 4	Achievement fantasy 5	Internet reputation 3	Old friends 5
Prof. appearance 5	Social appearance 5	Recreational app. 5	Private appearance 1
Vehicles 5 *City trains on a bummed pass*	Clothes 2 *Several layers*	Art/entertainment 6 *Cast-off TV, no cable*	Weapons 3 *Half a brick in a nylon sock*
Knickknacks 6 *Wire, ties, string, cords*	Residence location 3 *Cousin's garage, most of the time*	Residence value 5 *A <u>lot</u> if you don't have it*	Residence appearance 4 *Beat-up and unused-looking*
Active project 3 *Find a good non-shopping cart*	Abandoned project 4 *College, long ago*	Failed project 3 *My life*	Planned project 2 *No more junk*
Parents/grandparents 6	Siblings 5	Children 1	Cousins etc 6
Marriage 6	Sexual contacts 4	Former partners 2	Transportation 4
Ready cash 4	Tied-up funds 3	Required locations 2	Relaxation location 1

Birth name 5	Professional name 6	First impression 5	Stressed personality 4
Casual name 6	Nickname 6	Prof. personality 4	Unguarded pers. 3
Aliases 3	Online ID 1	Social hobby 4	Private hobby 6
Citizenship 6	Birthplace 2	Designated ethnicity 4	Ethnic background 4
Apparent age 4	Physical health 3	Mortgages/lease 6	Major loan 6
Physiological age 1	Emotional health 1	Minor loan 3	Business loan 2
Actual age 3	Mental health 5	Legal suit 2	Contract obligation 6
Profession (general) 3	Employment 3	Employer 3	Coworkers 5
Religious upbringing 3	Religious beliefs 4	Religious institution 6	Religious possessions 1
Earned degrees 4	School reputations 5	Academic scores 2	Ongoing studies 1
Stocks & bonds 1	Gratification fantasy 6	Professional reput. 1	Close friends 2
Retirement 5	Retribution fantasy 6	Personal reputation 5	Nominal friends 2
Personal investment 5	Achievement fantasy 5	Internet reputation 2	Old friends 1
Prof. appearance 6	Social appearance 2	Recreational app. 3	Private appearance 4
Vehicles 1	Clothes 6	Art/entertainment 2	Weapons 1
Knickknacks 2	Residence location 2	Residence value 6	Residence appearance 6
Active project 4	Abandoned project 1	Failed project 1	Planned project 3
Parents/grandparents 3	Siblings 3	Children 2	Cousins etc 4
Marriage 2	Sexual contacts 4	Former partners 6	Transportation 2
Ready cash 5	Tied-up funds 4	Required locations 6	Relaxation location 2