

IT'S NEVER OVER

PLOT SEEDS FOR THE END OF THE WORLD

IN CONVENTIONAL FANTASY ROLEPLAYING, IT'S OFTEN that the heroes must inevitably confront a world-shattering threat; as is the case with such scenarios, the threat is usually defeated and the heroes consequently receive their just rewards. This stands true especially for high-level characters, whose power and influence affect the fate of potentially millions of lives.

Few games, however, would dare allow for characters to fail in their quest to save the world, especially after all they may have been through to get to that point. When the heroes do fail to thwart the grand destruction that would befall the world they have sworn to protect, it stands to reason that their story ends there and then (and the grim repercussions never perhaps to be spoken of ever again); the game, to put it bluntly, is over.

Of course, it doesn't have to be. What if the heroes fail to save the world, yet the story continues?

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GAME MASTERS: EMPHASIZING THE END

The first question that a Game Master may ask is, “Why go on? What’s the point of saving a world that’s already met its end?” Keep in mind that the world is not dead yet; certain factors still keep it from collapsing into total oblivion. This small window of opportunity, from the start of the campaign to total global annihilation, is when the heroes must act and turn things around; it’s quite literally their last chance to save the world.

Begin the game with player characters exploring their new reality, but emphasize that the world as it once was is gone. If the player characters had lived before the End, describe the extreme contrasts between what was then and what is now: where proud cities and endless forests may have once stood, there now remain only salt-encrusted ruins and a toxic jungle that poisons anything wherever it spreads. Food, water and shelter most likely would be scant, while commerce and industry would be rudimentary (or nonexistent). Among other survivors, there may be an acute sense of resignation and despair. The player characters, who may very well have caused the End, might even be confronted with spite.

As they explore, drop subtle hints that the world can be revived, and that only they possess the abilities to do so. Anomalous time rifts might allow them brief yet insightful glimpses into the past, or legends of the childlike avatar of a long-dead god wandering the wastes may make their rounds. Perhaps rumors of a nomadic tribe immune to the Great Contagion are passed on from one dying town to another, holding the key to ending this punishment from the gods. Meanwhile, the effects of the End begin to accelerate and spread faster than before; if you chose one of the possible game effects presented below, you may combine it with another (or increase the magnitude of the first one) and then add more as the story progresses to its climax.

HOW DID THE END ARRIVE?

Below are some ideas on how to set the backdrop for a world after the End, as well as certain game effects that would drive home the point; you may use them at will or modify them as is necessary.

The Omnipotent Tyrant

The easiest way for the latter days to have been ushered in is to introduce a seemingly unstoppable villain wielding immense power: a wrathful god bearing a twisted decree of final judgment; an Elder Evil that has risen from the dark depths, rampaging across the land leaving madness and desolation in its wake; or a vengeful demon lord who has brought along his infernal legions for the ultimate conquest. Maybe a mere mortal has consolidated vast resources to subjugate nations and exterminate entire peoples in his quest for power. The impact of a single being successfully imposing its all-powerful will upon the world is no doubt fertile ground for testing the mettle of what heroes are capable of, especially if that being has already achieved victory.

Possible Game Effects

- ▶ Ever since the Darkblight, magical healing from spells and magic items no longer work.
- ▶ All children born after the Global Annexation possess telepathy (30 ft.) but are unswervingly beholden to the overlords.
- ▶ The New Order has long since outlawed reading and writing, and characters start the game illiterate and without solid lexical resources (no scrolls, books, journals, etc.).

The Destabilization of the World

The world’s position in the cosmos may have been thrown off-balance. Perhaps the fabled Heart of Creation has ceased beating, and as a consequence has stopped the flow of live-giving energies across the world’s system; or the Crystal Sphere that protects the world from the dark void of space

has cracked open, and strange cosmic forces have seeped inward. The effects are catastrophic: volcanoes erupt all at once, land and sea exchange places, giant winter storms blanket entire continents. Without a tangible “villain” to face, heroes caught in the middle of a fundamental shift in the order of all things may have found themselves unable to stave off nature’s rage.

Possible Game Effects

- ▶ Due to shifts in the day-night cycle, long rests now take 50% more time to finish.
- ▶ The world is constantly pummelled with starstuff. Once a day at a certain time, there is a 10% chance of a fiery meteor strike (as the spell *meteor swarm*) occurring wherever the characters are.
- ▶ Stranded on the Material Plane by the sudden upheavals, the souls of the dead seek revenge against the living, and any contact with them is met with open hostility.

Unknown Powers Unleashed

Mortal hubris could have sealed the fate of the world. Perhaps a cabal of sorcerers created a complex magical artifact to benefit the world, but were overwhelmed by its colossal power. Or their motives might have been malevolent, and they created a doomsday device that, when finally used, annihilated entire cities in the blink of an eye. Planar rangers* exploring the Outer Planes may have returned with a strange disease, resulting in a pandemic with no known cure; or a fanatical death cult may have torn open the fabric of reality to the Plane of Shadows, causing corpses all across the world to instantaneously rise from their graves. Such scenarios may not even have a prophetic precedent: they could have happened without warning, and characters caught in a sudden unleashing of otherworldly forces would almost certainly have suffered the dire effects as much as everyone else.

* Anthony Jennings, “Explorers of the Multiverse,” EN World ENsider, <https://www.patreon.com/posts/explorers-of-3910056>

Possible Game Effects

- ▶ When a spellcaster casts a spell of a particular school, all plant life smaller than the caster within a radius in feet equal to $5 \times$ the spellcaster’s level turns into an inorganic substance such as chalk or bismuth.
- ▶ The air is tainted by toxic spores or arcane gases; special equipment or magical items are needed to breathe it.
- ▶ Any corpse that isn’t cremated within ten minutes after death rises as a ghoul or another undead horror.

PLAYERS: SURVIVORS AND REDEEMERS

Your character begins at a significant disadvantage. In this doomed world, resources are scarce. People keep only to themselves, struggling against what they see as the inevitable dissolution of all existence.

Allow your character to explore this brave new world at will, but be aware that the dangers around her are magnified: the gods—if they still live—no longer care about their spoiled creation, and whatever forces have taken their place are, at best, indifferent to whoever’s left.

Did your character cause this misery? If so, she might be the focus of all the blame, especially if the reason is that she failed in her world-saving duty. Chances are, her fellow survivors might pour out their scorn on her every chance they get. How would she react to this, and how could she right the wrongs of the past?

To answer these questions, your character might need to search for ways on how to turn things around. The more she discovers that hope still exists, the greater her resolve must be into proving others wrong. Redeeming the world, as it is, may require her to divest preconceived notions of defeat. In a way, it also means redeeming herself.

The following background can hopefully assist you in creating a more fleshed-out character finding her way in a dying world.

SURVIVOR

You bore witness to the end of the world and lived. You have experienced the shock of seeing everything you know and love collapse into ruination in mere instants.

Alternatively, you may have been born within the first tumultuous year after the apocalypse wracked the land, giving lie to the premise that there is no hope in a world fated to die. Either way, as you eke out a way to survive in this new reality, the fallen world beckons to you through forlorn memories or stories told by your elders.

Skill Proficiencies: History, Survival

Tool Proficiencies: One type of artisan's tools.

Equipment: Backpack, waterskin, a cheap trinket that serves as a memento from the old world, a set of traveler's clothes, and a rat-skin pouch containing 5 gp.

Feature: Hideaway

You possess a secret space unknown perhaps even by your loved ones. Away from the tumult of a world in its death throes, this place serves as a sanctuary which you could use as you see fit. It could be a small stone chamber beneath the ruins of a building, an abandoned stone circle overgrown by thick bush, or maybe a spacious air pocket beneath the waters of a newly-formed lake. Having a secluded space of your own is no guarantee against it being discovered by adversaries later on, or even of the structure's integrity.

Suggested Characteristics

If an apocalypse could spare a survivor (or give birth to one), then they are proof that the desolate world could still be returned to life. This may give hope to other survivors, but it may anger those who sought the world's end in the first place. A survivor may feel otherwise if the arrival of the end times was in part his doing; the guilt that he may feel is a burden that he may never overcome.

d8 Personality Trait

- 1 I talk less and observe more.
- 2 Alone in the wilderness, I gain emotional strength.
- 3 I find little value in material possessions and wealth.
- 4 Mementos from the world-that-was fascinate me, and I collect them wherever I find them.
- 5 I am quite stingy with food and water.
- 6 There's nothing I hate more than people living sinful, wasteful lives.
- 7 I feel uncomfortable around strangers.
- 8 I often feel that the spirits of the old world speak to me, and I respond when I can.

d6 Ideal

- 1 **Final Judgment.** When the time comes, you are either with me or against me. (Evil)
- 2 **Completion.** Every beginning has an end. Nothing lasts forever. (Neutral)
- 3 **New World.** The old ways have passed, and all has been made new. (Chaotic)
- 4 **Fellowship.** We face our fates together. (Good)
- 5 **Revival.** This world will be reclaimed, one step at a time. (Any)
- 6 **Prophecy.** These latter days must run their course, as was planned by the gods. (Lawful)

d6 Bond

- 1 Legends tell of an artifact that may reverse the world's devastation and I must find it.
- 2 Friend or foe, I vow to offer aid to whoever needs it.
- 3 My adopted tribe is dearer to me than blood.
- 4 I made a promise to someone who died in the apocalypse; I intend to keep it.
- 5 Someone I love is out there, alive in the wastes. I know it.
- 6 This relic from the old world is the last thing we as a dying people can call our own.

d6 Flaw

- 1 My lack of proper hygiene should be the least of anyone's worries.
- 2 Resources are precious. Do not waste them, or bad things will happen.
- 3 The guilt I feel for failing to thwart the End often keeps me (and others) up at night.
- 4 Delving too much in the past sometimes makes me ignore what's happening now.
- 5 My mind becomes jumbled when disaster strikes.
- 6 The apocalypse left me damaged, and I'm physically unable to do certain things.