



Make Your Game A Disaster Area

by Kenneth Hite

"The whole matter began, so far as I am concerned, with the historic and unprecedented Vermont floods of November 3, 1927."

- - H.P. Lovecraft, *The Whisperer in Darkness*

The late unpleasantness with Hurricane Georges was the topic of conversation on a recent train ride to a library sale. As sensitive, mature individuals, my friend and I were discussing how extremely cool it would be for roleplaying purposes if Georges did, in fact, destroy New Orleans much as Hurricane Camille almost did on August 17, 1969. But how to use it? How to treat the bursting of the Mississippi from its Army Corps of Engineers-created bonds, the flooding of Bourbon Street, Paul Morphy's grave blown into a million chess-board shards, trees ancient with moss that saw De Soto land flung into the box seats of the Superdome? Besides make excellent scenery, what would such a big disaster do for a game?

Would the hurricane be a symptom of some Greater Disturbance in the Force, much as the storms in Gothic novels always indicate threats to the heroine's virtue? Would it be a sacred cleansing by the sea-loa Agwe and La Sirene? The angry awakening of the Big Muddy rivergod? Would it be the culmination of some Vile Plan plotted afar off in the Bermuda Triangle's warm waters? Would it, on the other hand, be the kind of spoke in the Vile Plan that allows the heroes a glimpse of its workings amid the floodwaters (as Wilmarth saw in the Vermont floods of Lovecraft's tale) or forces the villains to use a more obvious hideout? Would it be the terrific climax to the story, backdrop for the titanic struggle between good and evil in the flooding French Quarter as the mausoleums vomit forth their soaked dead? Or would it simply serve to wipe the slate clean and begin the campaign in the ruins?

One thing to keep in mind: unless you've got the best roleplayers in the world, or describe the scenery so well the players would rather listen than roll dice, man vs. Nature gaming (as distinct from man vs. Wild Animals) gets old about as fast as that fifth or sixth check against Swimming or Dodge Tornadoic Wreckage or Professional Equipment (Firehose). And if the disaster doesn't challenge the PCs (because they're gods or superheroes or nanotech-sprinkling AIs), then it's anticlimactic, which is to say boring in a whole different way. Use the disaster as a part of the story; as a backdrop or an effect or a cause or a magical happening or something. Forces of nature make lousy villains, unless you anthropomorphize them. They make great tools for excellent villains, however. Keep that in mind, and suddenly describing the little girl pinned under the wreckage becomes not just ghoulish scene-setting (not that there's anything wrong with that) but yet more motivation for the PCs to find out what's going on and put the kibosh on it.

"This is the last public address that will be delivered within these walls! A terrible calamity is impending over the City of Chicago! More I cannot say, more I dare not utter!"

- - lecturer George Francis Train, in Farwell Hall, Chicago, Oct 7 1871

With that caveat in mind, here's a brace of gameworthy disasters throughout history, and where you might take games from them. (Check out Jay Robert Nash's unreliable but interesting compendium *Darkest Hours* for many, many more.) Any of them can be the setting for a [GURPS Time Travel](#) scenario, of course; it might even be a requirement of the time machine that some sort of horrendous lightning storm (such as is found in your better hurricanes) or, better, a "discharge of telluric energies" (which can crop up from any big horrible mess) has to send the heroes back home. Or, the temporal bad guys might be drawn to scenes of mass death (psychic vampires? soul-stealing demons?), which can include not only your properly historical wars and battles but plenty of these things as well.

Port Royal Earthquake

On June 7, 1692, the "wickedest city in the world," the pirate capital of Port Royal, Jamaica, ceased to exist. A powerful earthquake ripped violent fissures through the whole town, and the resulting tidal waves drowned 1,600 people. 1,300 of the city's 2,000 buildings were leveled in the cataclysm, and for months (some say years) the city's site gave off "offensive odors." From [GURPS Swashbucklers](#) to [GURPS Voodoo](#), there's potential here for everything from looting the wrecked ships to zombie armies of the drowned. Could those witches in Salem have been up to something? Did somebody loot the wrong lost Aztec temple?

The Fire of 1871

Not just the three-mile area immediately surrounding a certain Irishwoman's barn on North Dekoven Street in Chicago burned to a cinder on October 8, 1871. Peshtigo, Wisconsin was wiped off the map by a fire in the lumberyard there which killed 1,152 people (the Chicago Fire, by contrast, only killed about 300 people), and huge infernos rose up in nine towns across 400 miles including Manistee and Glen Haven, Wisconsin. These towns suffered for weeks in obscurity; Chicago got all the attention and all the relief supplies. Ignatius Donnelly (the rediscoverer of Atlantis) blamed the fires on a comet; although that sounds unlikely, another glowing orb in the sky might have been testing a heat ray, or deploying one to cover up some particularly reptilian tracks....

Either of these disasters can, of course, serve as the setting of a scenario or, the climax (or the kickoff) to a campaign. They're big, dramatic and generally worth a visit in any game that has weather. A disaster on this scale can also make a nice challenge for a ultra-tech party from some advanced spaceship, or an interesting shift in social dynamics for a team of cyberscum - - after disasters, unlikely allies appear, and human nature briefly shows its good side. Then things get much, much worse as the guys selling access to filtered water, the looters and the insurance scam artists show up. Disasters also upset the local apple-cart; if one megakorp's skyscraper is trashed in the hurricane and the other one's isn't, or if the fire burned down the mages' guild library and left the temples intact, the balance of power alters. Allegiances shift, power changes, and 30-point Contacts suddenly drop to 10-pointers. In other words, disasters make ideal employment opportunities for parties of good or bad guys.

"And I beheld when he had opened the sixth seal, and, lo, there was a great earthquake; and the sun became black as sackcloth of hair, and the moon became as blood; and the stars of heaven fell unto the earth, even as a fig tree casteth her untimely figs, when she is shaken of a mighty wind. And the heaven departed as a scroll when it is rolled together; and every mountain and island were moved out of their places."

- - Revelation 6:12-14

Really Big Disasters, the world-beaters of eschatological scale, on the other hand, sort of take the game over. Either the game becomes the story of the battle to save something from the nightmare (a la [GURPS War Against The Chtorr](#), where the ecological disaster is actually only the opening gun of an alien invasion, itself a specialized type of world-smashing disaster) or it becomes the story of surviving in the wreckage the disaster leaves behind (a la [GURPS Reign of Steel](#), where the aliens are the kind we built ourselves). In short, it's apocalyptic gaming or post-apocalyptic gaming. Of course, the two can inform each other: if the PCs do very well in the disaster, for example, they have set themselves up far better at the beginning of the post-disaster phase of the campaign.

Most books of this ilk concentrate on destroying the Earth we know and love to see destroyed; a brief litany will give some good apocalyptic disasters and some places to look for more detail. For hurricanes, check out John Barnes' *Mother of Storms*. Hit by a comet? Larry Niven and Jerry Pournelle want to survive *Lucifer's Hammer*. John Wyndham's *Out of the Deeps* has a global flood after aliens melt the icecaps; and Michael Flynn's *Fallen Angels* has a global icecap after environmentalists stop the melting, although John Brunner looks at ecological smashola in *The Sheep Look Up* after too many people don't do much of anything. They die of the sniffles, though, in Stephen King's *The Stand*, or of thirst in J.G. Ballard's *The Burning World*. And mutant devil grass kills us all in Ward Moore's sardonic *Greener Than You Think*.

But why stick to our Earth as we know it? Destroying some innocent planet for the sake of an SF game might seem grandiose (but fun, especially if you let the PCs choose which 435 of the 10 billion natives to save), but destroying some other Earth is kinda cool, and usually deserved. Set a game *during* the sinking of Atlantis and Mu, or just after it, with the survivors struggling to retain magical civilization in the post-apocalyptic world of 9500 B.C. End a [GURPS Vikings](#) game with Ragnarok, or a [GURPS Aztecs](#) game with the end of the Fifth Sun and the return of a pissed-off Quetzalcoatl. Heck, run a [GURPS Middle Ages](#) game and unleash the Beast of Revelation on April 1, 1000 A.D. And if you're really sick of [GURPS Cyberworld](#) just let [GURPS Cthulhupunk](#) take its logical course once the Miskatonic University's stupidest hackers ever post the whole and unexpurgated *Necronomicon* on the Web.

"It is difficult to read the CIA report without wondering whether some of the climatic aberrations in recent years may not have been part of military experimental programs."

- - Unsigned editorial, *Saturday Review*, Feb. 5, 1977

As mentioned above, disasters alter power equations. Some scholars even attribute the fall of the Enlightenment and the rise of revolutionary Romanticism to the delayed effects of the Lisbon Earthquake of 1755. Do I notice the brighter of our conspiratological pupils perking up? Disasters alter power because disasters are power. For an excellent book on using a disaster as a kickoff and a backdrop, as

well as finding out what Certain Interests get out of other people's devastation, read Allen Steele's *The Jericho Iteration*, set in the aftermath of the St. Louis Earthquake.

Yet more paranoid thoughts portend. Is the Tesla research powering the HAARP projector in Alaska the real cause of the fall of the Soviet Union? Were the 70 straight years of "bad harvests" in Russia part of Someone's Plan, rather than the result of the Five-Year Plan? Should we thank them, or start paying more attention to the predictions of global warming - - and wonder what happened to all those predictions of global cooling from 20 years back? Are the Weather Controllers fighting among themselves, keeping score with volcanoes and earthquakes? Keep in mind that these secret wars have a nasty habit of escalating . . .

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