

# Deadline

## Visceral role playing @ 1000 ppm/ rpm

Art by Mike Weber

Written by Skram for the 2008 game chef design challenge

### **The scent of tomorrow**

Life was moving so fast you could smell it in the air.

Remember the concern – it probably peaked sometime in the late 1980s - that every juicy hamburger consumed somehow embodied a 1.2 acre tract of Amazonian rainforest cleared for cattle grazing? Well close your eyes and imagine for a second that it all were true. Think of how an ordinary forest feels and smells on a humid summer morning. Then imagine all the biomass of a tropical canopy collapsing in on itself at the moment of clearance. The moisture suspended in the crashing broad-leafed giants scintillates in the air as rivulets rain down, droplets burst like a million stop action explosions, vapor rises as the sun strikes places that have been shaded for a thousand years. Add in the sap of slashed vines and blue plumes of exhaust from screaming chainsaws and a haze of smoke from nearby plots that had already been cut and dried long enough to be burnt to clean the land- we're starting to achieve the right effect. Layer in the methane from cow shit and the warm herd odor of a holding pen on a ranch, plus the odor of thick black blood gushing at the slaughterhouse from throats still warm, beginning to congeal, then beef patties assembled from bits of hundreds of animal carcasses sizzling on a grill with liquefied fat from some of same carcasses bubbling in a fry vat inches away. All of these scents concentrated together and piped into the open windows of your car from the exhaust of the truck in front of you (carrying perhaps, frozen patties or trash or whatever to close the loop) so you got a full lungful spiced with diesel particulates.

It's like that: what the whole world smells like in the future, when concentrations of carbon dioxide in the atmosphere approach a thousand parts per million and semi-autonomous vehicles of all kinds suck in the hot, high-carbon currents like runners pacing themselves from water bottles because all that life hanging in the air is pheromones to cars and planes and ships, is an aphrodisiac.

Most people are used to the smell. It's the price of mobility, of keeping things moving.

### **Summary**

In *Deadline*, characters resist a future that elevates mobility and machines over people and the planet. An autonomous transportation network has tapped into run-away climate change to power the cars, planes, and ships of tomorrow. Biofuels from farms, from weedy subtropical forests springing up in the margins of an ever expanding road grid, from corpses rendered soylent green style, allow goods and good consumers to continue to circulate even as CO<sub>2</sub> levels mount higher and higher. Players control characters who have stepped back from the whirl of circulation to realize that the cycle of life on their over-paved world has gone wrong. They try to withdraw and subvert. Players gain dice during scenes by referencing characters' personal reasons for rebelling and topics players are interested. The most valuable dice are earned by introducing visceral, at-the-table play aids, sound effects, and the like that reinforce the sense of a future that is even hotter, louder, faster, and more redolent of hydrocarbons and pollution than our own time. Success at player defined scenes lowers the level of CO<sub>2</sub> in the atmosphere, but background CO<sub>2</sub> elevates between stages, making the game a race against an unalterable climate catastrophe.

### **Credit and inspirations**

*Deadline* was written for the 2008 game chef contest. It was inspired, per the rules, by three pieces of art by Mike Weber. The first, the burger-car, shows the fixings of a cheeseburger as they fall into place with the roof and chassis of a car reinforcing the top and bottom buns, as if some fry-cook/ mechanic were fixing up a mutant delight. The second portrays an omniscient seeming machine or robot or remote control with an omniscient-seeming single eye and the enigmatic word *Plazo* inscribed on its front. The final piece is of a sphere of intertwined roads and cars and airplanes, the world reduced to - or overwhelmed by - a transportation schematic. This third picture was easiest to imagine into a game theme: sprawl and a world overrun by roads. Since 'Plazo' can mean in-a-moment, on time, or deadline in Spanish, it confirmed for me that the robot picture could be a representation of a computerized transportation management system, the mastermind behind an autopian future. I also liked how *deadline* had a dual meaning if you split the word into dead + line: an over-paved planet crisscrossed by dead lines of asphalt and concrete. Hence the game's title. The car burger image was a little harder to incorporate because it is so surreal. There was a nice fit in terms of fast food and drive through chain restaurants and strip malls and sprawl connecting to the transport themes. Taking it one step further and seeing the car 'swallowing' the beef and lettuce etc, being made of and powered by organic matter, allowed me to tie in climate change issues, with carbon as part of the game system and operating metaphor. With those concepts in place, the game was further inspired by a mix of today's headlines – expensive gasoline, global warming, traffic congestion, containerized shipping, the indebted American consumer as the shopper of last resort in the global economy, newly constructed exurbs half-abandoned by sub-prime mortgage borrowers – flavored with an over-the-top style stolen from dystopian, eco-catastrophe film, fiction, and predictions, especially 1970s style. The fine rpg *Paranoia* as well as a number of fine indie rpgs I've had the pleasure of playing also contributed flavor and structure to this game. As a disclaimer, *Deadline* is not meant to be an accurate reflection of climate science, traffic engineering, or anything really

other than entertainment with dice + eco themes (well, that a 70s style WARNING you poor doomed dupes!).

All credit to Mike Weber for his delicious pictures, to the organizers and judges of game chef and to those participants who commented on my initial fumbling concept. Oh, and since I picked the art I would use and came up with an initial brainstorm on Earth Day 2008, credit to the IPCC for their work, a big F-U to all the energy and auto and shipping execs and prostituting deniers, and a smaller one to the rest of us, myself included, who went along, so that my daughter's generation will be undoing your/our greed & miscalculations for the rest of their lives. Watch your rear-view mirrors closely, you SOBs, they're finally gaining on you...

## **The Future**

The Plazo (always.on.time) proprietary transportation flow management system was built by a Chinese company under contract with the Mexican state of Baja California and Hutchinson Whampoa Limited, to facilitate the flow of trucks and trains from a new container port on the pacific coast. The deal was in some ways a sideline, a hastily assigned subcontract designed to reassure investors concerned with dredging and infrastructure delays. But the success of the system in moving goods north and the release of a MarkII variant with open source capacity around urban traffic flows led to its wider adoption in North and South America, Asia, and Europe. From the time the MarkV variant was released with a stable inter-regional coordination protocol and enhanced autonomous analytics, the Plazo network began to transform global transportation. Or rather, since transform implies change, the network allowed the continuation and expansion of trends that had previously seemed unsustainable in the long term.

>>> Insert Picture 2: the Plazo machine <<<

The transportation networks that Plazo inherited were under triple threat. Poor planning and inadequate infrastructure had led to a near universal gridlock – so Plazo needed to figure out how to keep traffic from grinding to a halt. Rising fuel costs in an era of peak oil was another worry. What good was an efficient traffic grid if the average person couldn't afford to get where they needed to go? Finally, concerns about global warming had led to a consensus on the need to eliminate CO<sub>2</sub> emissions from transportation (and other sectors) by the mid 21<sup>st</sup> century. The dilemmas were clear. Promoting mobility while also stabilizing and reducing concentrations of greenhouse gases in the atmosphere. Investing in infrastructure while keeping travel costs affordable.

Plazo's analytics considered the rapid depletion of fossil fuel – dead life become part of the crust of the earth then burned into the air. From this ghost story its attention turned to still available sources of life, the nascent use of biofuels like ethanol. It considered that life requires circulation almost by definition, and that using life for life was a natural trade off in this broader perspective. The solution to its challenges became clear: A greenhouse world seen not as a risk but as a necessary condition for the production of fuel. Leveraged as it was at the center of the world's economy and the travel of billions of

people, the network was able to shape flows and policies and build the global transportation grid past the tipping point of cascading climate change. People were grateful that Plazo kept them going to work, kept products in the stores, kept tourism and trade humming along. The strength of the system was its capacity to plan and adapt so that the contours of daily life remained much the same even as society and the atmosphere and the natural and built environments shifted. People adapted; the world kept moving.

## **People and Machines**

Deadline's future is not a totalitarian dictatorship with mankind slaves to machine overlords or of constant surveillance by a pervasive electronic brain. Plazo has succeeded in maintaining and enhancing traditional forms of mechanized mobility for people and products. There are more and bigger roads. More and bigger ports. More and bigger airports. More and bigger suburbs and strip malls and entertainment destinations. With these- the mores and the biggers -- come mobility's significant benefits: freedom and speed, albeit with the variety of choices and destinations somewhat constrained by the encompassing scale and monotony of the transport grid and economic infrastructure. There is still money in this future but mobility obligations and credits (MOs and MCs) have to some extent supplanted cash and credit in determining how and when people make big purchases and life changes. To keep the economy churning, consumers are required to switch vehicles, houses, and jobs every two years. Individuals or families can trade in and up more frequently if they work hard and earn additional mobility credits, which are also used to buy package tours and relocation rights.

The cars and planes and ships of this future are semi-autonomous. What exactly this means is left to participants to determine through play. Do cars talk to passengers? Do humans still steer? What failsafe systems exist, what is centralized, what left to local planning? Are there more accidents than before or fewer? Has human life been cheapened by the centrality of smart vehicles, or made more precious (well, at least until death & rendering) from being encased and escorted by veritable chariots of fire?

>>> insert picture 1: the burger car <<<

## **Cars and land**

The landscapes of the future are increasingly hardscapes, with more roads, wider freeways, roads stacked above roads, larger fractions of cities covered by parking lots, more complexly pretzeled cul-de-sacs in more subdivisions, new and much longer shopping corridors paralleling roads for miles and miles, buildings wedged in between roads at unusual angles to catch light and leave room for entrance and egress from suddenly looping ramps.

What un-paved land exists is mainly plantations for biofuels: towering hypercorn, stands of sugarcane, densely packed plantation forests. In the northern hemisphere, patches between roads and developments, what was once scrubland or secondary growth

suburban forest, is now dense, moist patches of sub-tropical rainforest, thriving (at least where there is water) from the heightened carbon cycles and elevated temperatures. These scraps too are cleared regularly for fuel.

Wild places, and quiet places, are few and far between.

### **Ships and sea**

Miles long container ships cross the oceans between massive port facilities. In their wakes, the great pacific garbage patch, that sargossa sea of discarded plastic bags and bottles that has expanded to the other oceans, parts like translucent slush before an icebreaker, then closes again. Coasts are mainly dedicated to handling goods movement: they are where ISO containers are shunted from ship to trucks and rail and then sent streaming inland to warehouses and more roads and the world's retail outlets. Mothballed container ships are moored gloomily at points along the coast like the semblance of a partly submerged jagged defense wall seen in ancient footage of D-Day. Some of the more recently decommissioned giants have been converted to casinos or floating megamarts. With plentiful fuel and rising temperatures, water desalinization is now the lynchpin of irrigated agriculture and human settlements; these factories also line the coasts and vast pipelines proliferate like a new superhighway system.

### **Planes and air**

From an expanded system of airports, enormous cargo planes carry goods that need to arrive in hours rather than days. Passenger planes carry tourists far far away to see what is still marginally different about other parts of the world. The air is hotter, more organic yet more polluted with particulates, and harder to breath. Fortunately treatments for asthma have advanced, with ubiquitous skin patches replacing inhalers, except for dire cases.

### **The Rules**

Deadline is a game for between 3 and 6 players. To play, you'll need a coin of any denomination and one each of the following 6 types of dice: d4, d6, d8, d10, d12, and d20. Each player makes a character. You will take turns running scenes: setting the context, describing the setting, controlling your character plus non player characters and obstacles, and rolling dice to determine whether or not the characters succeed at achieving their goal. When a player is not running a scene she will participate in it by controlling her character and adding to descriptions of the setting and the themes of the scene so as to earn dice for the lead player's roll.

### **How characters know each other**

To establish how characters are acquainted and to provide some context for their emerging rebellion, players first pick the starting context for the game. Three ways that

characters can know each other and be in the same place as a work unit, a family unit (at home, on vacation, moving into a new house etc), or as strangers thrust together by circumstances (a rare traffic jam, on the same package tour, eating at the same restaurant, etc). Here is a list of twenty work unit possibilities in case you want to randomly determine or choose an appropriate career opportunities:

1. **Subdivision assembly/ disassembly.** Houses and amenities like social spaces and pools are produced modularly in factories and shipped to sites for set up. To provide the public with the experience of moving, homes are disassembled every 1-2 years so that new styles or at least new facades can be reapplied.
2. **Plastic scooping.** The Texas-sized dead zone of plastic debris in the Pacific has grown extra-continental. Crews are sent out on boats or subs to plastic cut (clear a shipping lane) or to scoop up the bags and bottles to repurpose their increasingly scarce petroleum or corn plastic base.
3. **Repo.** Some people get too attached to their vehicles or houses and refuse to give them up when their mobility obligations come due. Then things need to be taken from angry or distraught folk.
4. **Plane crew.** Part steward/ stewardess, part tour guide on package air charters to the remaining exotic spots of the world.
5. **Road kill detail.** Valuable carbon to be scraped up and taken to the rendering plant. Includes human traffic fatalities.
6. **Sales.** Service with a smile in a restaurant, hypermarket, or stripstore (like a strip mall, but all the individual shops are connected by back passages and the staff rotate between them to avoid burnout and to match customer flow).
7. **Test driving.** New generations of motorized vehicles require testing by the best and the brightest to push engines and AI to the limits.
8. **Customs.** All kinds of products, legal and sometimes smuggled or gone bad during the long sea voyage, require inspection. Sometimes refugees or malcontents come to live in the containers...
9. **Farm labor.** Mountainous combines do most of the work but there is still hard labor to be done in the biofuel plantations and the smaller acreage still devoted to foodstuffs.
10. **Rendering.** Life = fuel and all the carcasses go somewhere and when they come out, they run the world.
11. **Homeowner association board.** Its tough keeping things neat and community minded when there are so many transfers- but that's what rules are for!
12. **Signage.** Even with automation, one likes to know where one is heading, so street signs need to be repaired and updated and new road names need to be assigned, which can get political.
13. **Incarceration and rehabilitation.** Malcontents exist at all times and places and keeping them, of all things, out of circulation, is a noble calling.
14. **Plazo engineering.** The system can usually repair its own kinks, but for extra safeguards, there are programmers who understand a portion of how Plazo communicates and plans across its nodes.
15. **Road construction.** It's strait forward- pour, pave, repair – but it's also the most important job in the world.

16. **MC brokerage.** Mobility obligations are assigned and non-transferable, but there is a robust market in tradeable mobility credits.
17. **Plant breeding.** More biofuel output per fertilizer input, that's the dream.
18. **Consumer psychology.** People today are busy and on the go and when they shop, they have so many choices. So, based on how humans tick, how do we design retail surroundings and marketing campaigns to get them to buy from us?
19. **Meteorology.** Some freaky weather is an unavoidable side effect of the system. Unless- we control the skies.
20. **Couriering.** Small important things need to get from one important person or machine to another. You carry them.

### **Individual characters**

Write down the name of your character on a sheet of paper or note card. Add in some basic biographical detail: gender, age, where they are from. Next write down some words or lines that describe your character's physical appearance. Write down a reason why your character **might** rebel against Plazo and the current social system. The reasons can be personality traits, habits, beliefs, histories or experiences, etc. Also write down a topic/issue related to the game that you as player are interested in touching on during play. Share characters by passing the sheets around or reading aloud from them.

>> sample: Mara Palomares is a 44 year old mother of two currently assigned to a rendering plant detail. She is on the short side with very pale skin and reddish tinged hair. She comes from a large family and is frustrated at being separated so frequently from her siblings and parents by mandated job and housing shifts. The issue that Mara's player is interested in exploring is what and how people eat in the future.

### **3F**

Characters – and the precious carbon load embedded in their flesh – are always in one of three states: foil, fool, or fuel. As foils, they are acting against the system. As fools, they are oblivious to the system or accepting of their places in it. As fuel, well, they are dead, their bodies repurposed to provide energy for the system. Characters always start the game as fools so write the three terms down on your character sheet and check off 'Fool' to begin.

### **900 ppm**

Finally, everyone writes the number 900 on their character sheet. This is the game's starting atmospheric CO<sub>2</sub> concentration. It will adjust up or down as play proceeds. The final tally will determine how successful the characters were in fighting Plazo and the system it represents.

## **Playing Deadline**

Deadline is played in scenes, each with a different lead player. A game includes at least three scenes, and at least one per player if your game includes more than three players. There is an opening Fool scene, in which characters begin to engage in rebellious and seditious behavior. Once players win a Fool scene, they proceed to one or more Foil scenes of continuing monkey-wrenching against the system. The game closes with a Fuel scene in which it is determined whether the characters' actions (as a symbol of the resistance of others like themselves) have reversed the dangerous build up of greenhouse gases. Before starting the game, decide as a group how many Foil scenes to shoot for (you can add or cut them as the game proceeds) and the order in which players will be lead player. You'll also note that character states as recorded on the character sheets and the scenes share the tripartite fool-foil-fuel nomenclature. While there is correspondence between the two – characters will start the fool scene as fools, will be foils through most of the foil scene(s), and their fate as potential fuel will be decided during the fuel scene – it isn't meant to be an automatic parallel. Characters may sink or rise from foil to fool or fuel during a foil stage- so don't worry if your character gets out of phase with the scene you're in.

Each scene has a lead player who sets the context that will influence what kind of actions will happen and what kind of conflict the characters will unleash. Lead players control their characters and any non-player characters, resistance, or threats the characters face. Other players control their own characters and contribute to building the scene. The lead player rolls dice (earned by the contributions of all the players) to see if the characters win the scene and how much the scene disrupts the system and 'cools' the earth as measured by a reduction in CO<sub>2</sub> levels.

### **Earning dice: context, characters, topics, viscera**

Each scene opens with the lead player describing the context of the scene- the situation – where the characters are, what they observe, what they are initially doing. This initial set up can and should include obstacles or opportunities the characters face: frustrations of life under the system or symbolic targets in it. While the lead player can suggest or imply ways that characters might strike against or cope with these targets/obstacles, do not narrate how other players' characters act. Those decisions should be controlled by the individual players, negotiated as players, or negotiated through role-play.

For setting the context, the lead player earns the coin, which counts as a 2-sided die during the eventual roll. To earn more and larger dice, players will contribute elements to the scene as they role-play their characters and flesh out the setting and action in more detail. Once the context is established, any player can earn a 4-sided die (for the players collectively- to be rolled by the lead player) by introducing/referencing/ incorporating either the personal reason to rebel noted down on their character sheet or the topic listed on their sheet. After the 4-sider is claimed, any player can earn the 6 sider by introducing/referencing/ incorporating another personal reason or topic from their sheet. At this point, with the 8 sided die available, any player can earn it 'for the team' by

introducing a visceral element. Visceral in this context means an at the table action by a player or players that heightens one of the five senses and hopefully deepens the players shared sense of what the setting or the action of the scene is like. So visceral actions can involve sound effects (or enforced silences), props or visual aids, tastings or scents, or textures/ touch.

>> samples: Mara's player wants to emphasize the tallow-laden air in the rendering plant. She passes around the fries she had with her dinner, asking everyone to chew on one but let it linger in your mouth a while.

>> later another player, during a scene in which characters are trying to commandeer and reprogram agricultural machinery, puts a 6 sided die on the table. 'That's a six foot tall person.' Then he drops a large cardboard box filled with files right next to the die. 'That's a combine- perfect scale.'

Because they involve the players, any player can refuse to participate in any visceral action for any reason. Maybe they don't want to taste something or touch something or be touched- everyone has their own comfort level which will be respected. If some of the players other than the player who introduced the visceral action don't want to participate, the 8 sided die is still earned, but if everyone else vetoes the action then the die is not gained; the same player or another player can suggest an alternative visceral step.

If the 8 sider is earned, the ten sided die and then the 12 sided die can be earned (one after the other) by more visceral scenes or by scenes that reference or incorporate the two personal/topics that were already introduced. New personal reasons or topics may not be introduced at this point. The possible final addition to the scene, the 20-sided die, must be earned by the lead player, and by the introduction of a concluding visceral element.

Note that each scene does not need to progress to the point of earning all the dice. The lead player can end the scene at any point, although, as the next section explains, lead players will usually want to earn dice so the characters can succeed and to maximize the potential for CO<sub>2</sub> reduction. However, the more dice rolled, the higher the chance that characters are harmed, so lead players will need to weight the benefits and risks.

## **Rolling dice**

### **Success?**

When the scene is done being role-played and narrated, the lead player rolls all of the coins earned in the scene. For the flipped coin, tails counts as 1, heads as 2. Look at the results. First: look to see how many dice show above average results (for example, heads for the coin or 5-8 on the 8-sider. The number of above average results determine

whether the characters succeeded at whatever rebellious action they were trying to accomplish. For the Fool scene, if the lead player rolls at least 2 above average results, the characters succeed in launching their subversion. Players: change your characters' state to Foil. If the lead player fails to roll 2 or more above average results, the characters do not successfully strike against the system and in fact lose heart temporarily. They stay Fools and players have to try another Fool scene. In Foil scenes, the lead player has to earn at least 3 above average results for the action to succeed. In the concluding Fuel scene, at least four above average results are required.

### **Fools, Foils and Fuel**

Second, with the dice still on the table as they were rolled, count the number of ones (and tails) showing. For each one rolled, one of the characters is reduced in state: from foil to fool or from fool to fuel. The lead player decides how to distribute these reductions among characters (her character and/or other players' characters). At this point, players have a choice of sacrificing part of their characters to help one of the other characters or the collective efforts of all. Any player can choose to erase their character's personal reason or topic, and by doing so, the player can re-roll their choice of any of the dice on the table (in hopes of eliminating a one and/or rolling above average on a die currently showing a below average result). Or a player can reduce their characters' state by one step and re-roll dice for this sacrifice. Bumping down from foil to fool allows a player to re-roll two dice; sliding from fool to fuel gets three re-rolls. All players must announce they are making sacrifices before any player re-rolls; players cannot wait to see how other players roll before deciding whether to sacrifice. Depending on the results of the re-rolls, players can prevent other characters from being reduced and/or turn a failed scene into a success. If the former, the re-rolling player (not the lead player) decides which character to help (by canceling a reduction in state). Also, if a re-roll has the effect of eliminating a one and therefore blocking a reduction, the player whose character was helped must replace either their character's personal reason or topic with the counterpart from the re-rolling player's characters sheet: out of gratitude the character has embraced their colleague's motivation.

>> sample: Mara's player is lead player. She rolls 7 dice. Unluckily, two of them come up ones. She knocks Mara and another character from foil to fool. Later another player sacrifices his character's personal motivation to re-roll a die. It's no longer a one, and the player chooses to bring back Mara up to Foil. As a side benefit, the other player has to write 'misses family' on his character sheet, so the character still has a (new) personal reason.

### **Counting Carbon**

After any re-rolls have occurred, see what the highest single number showing is. Multiply this by the number of dice earned (between 1-7). This gives the number of parts per million of carbon dioxide by which the concentrations in the earth's atmosphere is potentially reduced by the scene (between 1 and 140). However, because things keep moving despite the characters' efforts, the lead player rolls for the background increase in

carbon. For a Fool scene, roll a D6 and multiply by ten. For a Foil Scene, roll a d8 and multiply by ten. For the Fuel scene, roll a die 12 and multiply by ten. Subtract this background growth from the amount reduced by the characters' actions and you get the final change from the scene. Adjust the CO<sub>2</sub> level on character sheets accordingly.

>> sample: after her lead scene, Mara's player rolls seven dice. The 20-sider result is disappointingly low but she rolls an 11 on the 12-sider. 11 times 7 is 77. We'll say this was a foil scene, so Mara rolls a die 8 for the background climate change: a 4 times 10 is 40. 77 minus 40 is 37 so as a result of the scene, the earth's CO<sub>2</sub> concentrations are reduced by 37 ppm. Not bad.

### **Concluding a scene**

After all rolls have been made:

Players who sacrificed their characters get to narrate how they tried and possibly succeeded in helping.

Players whose characters are reduced get to narrate how their character became cowed, docile (or dead).

The lead player narrates how the scene turns out based on whether the characters succeeded or failed.

If a majority of players are in the fool state, players must do a fool scene even if they have previously succeeded at one.

If all players are fuel, the game ends with the characters dead and defeated.

### **Ending the game**

At the end of the fuel scene, after the final carbon calculation has taken place and the lead player has concluded narrating the success or failure of the scene, all players collaborate on figuring out how the entire system has been impacted. If the CO<sub>2</sub> level is below 900, the characters have succeeded, at least temporarily, in reversing the momentum of the Plazo system. Jointly narrate the ripple effect that has struck the world's transportation grid and or social system. If the final CO<sub>2</sub> level is between 900 and 1000, the character's efforts have slowed the system but not reversed it. Narrate accordingly, with glimmers of hope that more can be accomplished. If the final CO<sub>2</sub> level is 1000 or above, the earth has crossed another and perhaps irreversible plateau of climate chaos, and the last chance to impede the underlying system has failed? Narrate this depressing situation.

>>> Insert Picture 3: the transportation knot <<<

The end...