

Way Back

by Rebecca Slitt

“We were at the edge of the precipice. Too many people had died; too much had been destroyed; too much of society had broken down. We knew that there was no way to turn back now. But we also knew that there was a time before it all started, when the situation wasn’t so dire – when the crisis could still be averted. When was the tipping point? And what could we have done to change it? I had to find out. So I went looking for answers – and found myself talking to the past.”

“Some of us knew that something was wrong. The world was changing – but so slowly and gradually that it was barely perceptible. Many people could still live their lives in peace and comfort just as they had before. I thought that I could too – until I got a message from the future, telling me that I had to take action, or all would be lost.”

Way Back is an online freeform larp for two players about resistance, history, and human connection.

One character is near the breaking point of a crisis of apocalyptic proportions. In researching its historical origins, they somehow manage to communicate with the other character: a person living in the past, near the beginning of the crisis. The person in the Future must use their knowledge to help the person in the Past take action to stop each stage of the growing disaster.

Can they work together across history to stop the crisis before it starts?

What You Need

2 hours

2 players, each of whom has

- a copy of these rules
- a stable internet connection
- Skype, FaceTime, Google Hangouts, or some other way to conduct a video chat
 - o Depending on technical and accessibility needs, this game can also be played through voice-only chat or text chat.

Preparation

1. Discuss safety

Because Way Back focuses on moments of historical crisis, it is important to establish safe parameters for play, especially if your co-player is someone that you don’t know well. One person’s abstraction may be another’s lived experience; and one person’s historical event may be another’s family story. Here are some tools to help manage the risks of play:

- Before play:
 - o *Lines and Veils.* A *line* is a topic that you will not include in your game at all: ie, a line that you will not cross. A *veil* is a topic that you may reference but not discuss in detail: ie, a veil that you draw across the scene. For more information:

<https://rpg.stackexchange.com/questions/30906/what-do-the-terms-lines-and-veils-mean>

- During play:
 - o *Cut and Brake*. If there is a physical or emotional emergency – a trauma trigger, phobia, etc – or if the scene scares, confuses, or upsets you, say *Cut*, and/or cross your arms in an X. Play stops immediately, and does not continue until the emergency has been resolved. If the scene is escalating in a way that you feel is about to become uncomfortable or too intense, say *Brake*. The scene continues, but its intensity must decrease. For more information:
<https://playwithintent.files.wordpress.com/2015/04/pwi03042015.pdf>
 - o *OK Check-in*. If you're in the middle of an intense scene and you're not sure if the other player's emotional reaction is in-character or out-of-character, or if you have just de-escalated because of a *Brake* and want to make sure that you've found the right calibration, use the OK check-in:
<https://participationsafety.wordpress.com/2016/09/09/toolkit-the-ok-check-in/>
- For more resources, check out the TTRPG Safety Toolkit; many of its tools can be adapted to larp. The TTRPG Safety Toolkit is a resource created by Kienna Shaw and Lauren Bryant-Monk. The TTRPG Safety Toolkit is a compilation of safety tools that have been designed by members of the tabletop roleplaying games community for use by players and GMs at the table. You can find it at bit.ly/ttrpgsafetytoolkit

2. Define a Setting

Way Back can take place in any setting: the real world, a fantasy realm, the present day, the far future, etc. When choosing a setting, consider:

- the situation in both the future and the past
- how far apart the two time periods are: 10 years? 50? 100?
- how the setting affects the way Future and Past are communicating (eg, in the near-future and near-past in the real world, they could make contact through an anomaly in the internet; in a fantasy realm, they could communicate through a magic mirror)

If you want, you can put on a few costume pieces appropriate to your part of the setting, and/or arrange the space around you that will be visible to the other player to further establish the atmosphere.

3. Define the Crisis

The core of this game is the *crisis* that both Future and Past are dealing with. In Past's time, the crisis is just beginning. In Future's time, the crisis has become an emergency. The crisis should be something that progresses slowly and gradually, but that also has clear warning signs in retrospect: it was allowed to go unchecked because Past and their contemporaries did not recognize the severity of the situation until it was too late.

Here are some examples of crises and their warning signs:

- the rise of fascism: <https://washingtonmonthly.com/2017/01/31/the-12-early-warning-signs-of-fascism/>
- climate change: <https://www.ucsusa.org/resources/ten-signs-global-warming>

4. Define Characters

- Choose which player will be the Future character and which will be the Past.
- Establish the *personalities* of each character

- Each character has six *traits* that shape their personality. Three of these traits are shared with the other character; the other three are different. Examples of traits: Impulsive, Compassionate, Goal-oriented, Cynical, Curious, Fearful
 - Each character has six *core beliefs* that shape their outlook on the world and the way they take action to address the crisis. Three of these core beliefs are shared with the other character; the other three are different. These core beliefs should be relevant to the setting and have the potential to be challenged and/or questioned by events. Examples of core beliefs:
 - Human beings are inherently good
 - In certain circumstances, it is okay to lie
 - People have an obligation to preserve the environment
 - Violence should never be condoned
 - A person's primary responsibility is to take care of themselves
 - A person's primary responsibility is to take care of their family
 - Elders should be respected
 - It is worth sacrificing a little freedom in order to maintain security.
 - Core beliefs should *not* directly endorse fascism. Core beliefs should also not endorse racism, misogyny, homophobia, anti-Semitism, Islamophobia, or other forms of bigotry.
- Establish the *relationship* between the two characters. Some potential relationships:
 - Future didn't intend to contact Past; they did it by accident.
 - Over the course of the game, Future and Past fall in love.
 - Future is Past's descendant. How does Future feel about their ancestor? Why?
 - Past is a historical figure that Future admires. Why?
 - Past is a historical figure that Future *doesn't* admire. Why?

Playing the Game

The game consists of five scenes, each lasting about 10-15 minutes. Each scene has several questions for each character to ask, in any order, to help guide play.

1. **First contact:** Future and Past meet for the first time, and Future asks Past for help.
 - Choose one early stage of the crisis that is taking place during Past's time. (See above, under Define the Crisis, for some potential warning signs for crises.)

During this scene, the following questions should be asked:

By Future

- "What can I do to convince you that I'm really from the future?"
- [about one of the core beliefs that is not shared between the characters] "What happened that first made you realize that you believed this?"
- "What can I do to help you prepare to counteract this stage of the crisis?"

By Past

- "Why did you want to talk to *me* in particular?"
- "What is one concrete action that I can take to counteract this stage of the crisis?"

2. **Escalation:** The situation in the Future worsens, and Future contacts Past a second time.
 - Choose a second early stage of the crisis that is taking place during Past's time. (See above, under Define the Crisis, for some potential warning signs for crises.)

During this scene, the following questions should be asked:

By Future

- “What was the best response that you got to the action you took after we last talked?”
- “Who have you told about me? What did they think?”
- “There’s an object near you that I’ve never seen before. What is that?”

By Past

- “What is something that you have in your time that you think would surprise me?”
- [about one of the core beliefs that is not shared between the characters] “What happened that made you doubt this belief?”
- “How should my approach to counteracting this stage of the crisis be different from the last one?”

3. **Unexpected Catastrophe:** The situation in the Past abruptly worsens.

- Choose one early stage of the crisis that is taking place during Past’s time. (See above, under Define the Crisis, for some potential warning signs for crises.) Decide why this stage is more severe than the one in Scene 1 and Scene 2.

During this scene, the following questions should be asked:

By Future

- “What do you do to give yourself hope when things look dark?”
- [about a shared core belief] “Do you still feel as strongly as you did before?”
- “What has changed about the place where you live?”

By Past

- “Being in the middle of a disaster – is this what it feels like for you, living in your time?”
- “How can I get through to people who still don’t believe that the crisis is getting worse?”

At the end of this scene, each character should change one of their core beliefs. They can change one of their shared core beliefs so that it is now different; they can change a non-shared core belief so that it is now shared; they can change a non-shared core belief to a different non-shared core belief.

4. **The Deciding Moment.**

Based on the events of the previous scenes, decide whether Past has succeeded enough to prevent Future’s crisis from turning into catastrophe. Some factors to consider:

- How well have Past and Future worked together?
- How much has Past succeeded in previous scenes?
- What would make the more interesting story?

At the end of this scene, the means of communication between Future and Past will be cut off. Decide why this is happening, and whether the characters are aware that it is coming.

During this scene, the following questions should be asked:

By Future:

- [about a shared core belief] “What is it about this belief that gives you strength?”
- [about Past’s core belief that changed in the previous scene] “How will this shape your life as you move forward?”

By Past:

- [about a shared core belief] “How does this belief feel different to you now than it did when we first met?”
- [about Future’s core belief that changed in the previous scene] “What would you have done differently if you had felt this way all along?”

5. Epilogue

Each character sends one final message to the other, describing where they ended up and what their world is like. Be sure to mention:

- at least one long-term effect of the crisis
- at least one shared core belief and how it has shaped the character’s life since the last time they spoke to the other.

Inspirations:

- *Star Crossed*, by Alex Roberts
- *This Is How You Lose The Time War*, by Amal El-Mohtar and Max Gladstone
- the TV shows *Travelers* and *Timeless*

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