

Grackle Teeth

An Apocalyptic Keepsake Game by Marc Majcher

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Safety

CW: Death, injury, starvation, sickness, isolation, despair, suicide, being eaten by animals

This is addressed to you, the player, the person reading this right now. This is a game about survival, fear, and loss of hope. You are the only human alive, and the birds are hungry. You will most likely die, surrounded and devoured by predators. Or perhaps alone, slowly wasting away from starvation, exposure, disease. Or by your own merciful hand.

This is a solo game—you are the only one able to say what works for you. If these topics cross a boundary for you or make you too uncomfortable to proceed, that's totally fine. Take a break, use only the parts that you like, or stop entirely—even right here—and go do something else. Your safety and well-being are more important than playing this (or any) game.

Setting

You are the last survivor of a human extinction event, an apocalypse on a massive scale. Buildings still stand, the sun still rises, and vegetation has reclaimed the works of humanity. Few animals roam the empty streets, and those that do are feral, ravenous, and relentless.

This is Austin, Texas, USA.

Date unknown—the only time that matters is that between now and the next time you must go out to scavenge for supplies.

You have survived this long, but not for much longer.

Food is scarce and terrible.

Streams and rivers are clogged and poisoned.

And the birds hunger for your flesh.

Nevertheless, you persist.

You endure, because that's what humans do.

Setup

You will need the following:

- A deck of cards
- Six six-sided dice
- A copy of the map in this book
- A journal and something to write with

Set the dice in front of you with the sixes facing up. These represent your Resources—food, clean water, medicine, shelter, and the will to go on.

When you've exhausted all the Resources on a die, or it's been discarded to a card, it's gone.

When you've exhausted or discarded your last die, you have given up all hope. Add a final journal entry if you wish, then the game is over.

Shuffle the deck and deal out four cards in a row, face-up, placing the deck face down at the left end. This is the River, its cards representing the four actions you may choose to take during a day.

Drop your journal in the water. Get it dirty, muddy, grimy. Step on it. Let it dry enough to write on. Make a copy of the map from this book in your journal. Mark your shelter under the bridge with an X.



Keep your journal safe. This is the only thing that will remain once you are gone.

The River

The game is broken into turns, each representing a week. At the beginning of every week, spend one Resource in order to survive. If you do not have a Resource to spend, the game ends. You starve, die from dehydration or exposure, or quietly give up.

During the week, you may choose up to four cards from the River and perform the actions assigned to them. The last one, the rightmost, is always free to play, but you must spend one Resource each for the middle two, and two Resources for the leftmost card, the one closest to the deck.

You *must* play at least one card every week. If you cannot pay for a card, you may not take that action.

Some cards have one  or two  Resource markers in their description. If you spent Resources to buy the card from the first three spots in the river, follow those instructions along with the rest.

Play the cards as you choose them—look up the card on the following tables, and do what it tells you to do. Mark a spot on your map where the action took place.

After each card is resolved, write an entry in your journal, beginning with “Day 1” and going on from there. Scrawl a picture of what it was.

When you have completed the action, discard the card.

At the end of the week, replenish the River by shifting any unplayed cards to the right and drawing cards to refill it from the left.

Repeat until you can go on no longer.

Clubs

Clubs represent your resources—food, water, tools, shelter, and anything else used to keep yourself safe and alive. When you draw a club, you are interacting with your stuff—foraging, processing, organizing, or repairing all of your vital bits and pieces.

Ace.

After countless weeks of searching, you finally discover a solar-charged battery pack in an alley dumpster between two office buildings downtown. This may very well be the thing that ultimately saves you.

Do not discard this card. Put it to the side, next to the deck. Any time you buy a card for one or two Resources, you may place it beneath this card after performing its action. The strength of the battery is determined by adding together the values of the cards beneath it. (Aces count for 1, face cards count as 10.) When the battery charge reaches 100, you may use it to power one item.

Two.

You find a crate of canned goods. Not your favorite, though—what are they? There's no expiration date, and you have to bash the cans open, but it's probably still fine.

Re-roll one Resource die.

☐ *Re-roll two Resource dice.*

☐☐ *Re-roll two Resource dice. Set both dice to the higher value.*

Three.

Occasionally, something beautiful interrupts the desperation and constant fear of attack by winged predators. What do you see that captures your attention long enough to forget altogether where you are for a too-long moment?

Go for a walk outside, and pick up the first small perfect or unusual thing that you encounter. Put it in your journal, pressing it between the pages, if possible.

Four.

In a bout of hunger and caprice, you attempt to catch a fish—or whatever else might still live in the sluggish, nacreous waters. Will you eat it, or the other way around?

Draw the next card from the deck. If it is black, lose two Resources. If it is red, gain three Resources. Reshuffle the card back into the deck.

☐ *Do not shuffle the card back into the deck.*

☐☐ *Do not draw a card. Gain one Resource.*

Five.

The last food you ate (if you can call it that) was rotten, spoiled, poisonous, or otherwise unfit for human consumption. How did you keep yourself alive while you recuperated?

Spend one Resource to stay alive. Spend another Resource to avoid becoming Sick.

Six.

A natural spring bubbles up from the rocks! You scoop fresh, cold water into your mouth with your hands before filling up some containers to add to your stash.

Add two Resources.

Refill one active Resource die

Return and refill one discarded (not exhausted) Resource die

Seven.

While foraging, you discover the bones of some kind of animal, but you cannot fathom what it could possibly have been. You make a quick sketch, then leave quickly before marrow-sucking scavengers arrive.

Eight.

Jackpot! In an abandoned campsite near the river, in a pile of refuse, an old radio. There are no batteries, but you imagine that you'd definitely be able to use this to listen for other survivors if you can only get it working.

Do not discard this card. Put it somewhere safe. If you have a fully charged battery, roll your remaining Resource dice. If any come up 6, you receive a broadcast and follow it to safety. Otherwise, the battery dies as you listen to the static fade.

Nine.

You come across a discarded wallet or purse containing several thousand dollars in cash. It's useless now, of course, but imagine what you could have done with all this money before everything went south. What do you do with it now?

Ten.

You uncover a stash of antibiotics and painkillers, most not too long expired. These will come in handy someday soon, one way or another.

Do not discard this card. Put it somewhere safe. Discard it to avoid becoming Sick, or to cure yourself of a current Sickness.

Jack.

You've found something that makes a perfect weapon for you. Describe it, and imagine what it would be like to feel powerful again, even for a moment.

Do not discard this card. Put it somewhere safe. You may discard it to ignore the damage from one Attack.

Queen.

There, where you least expected it to be, you find a personal item that you'd feared lost forever. What is it, and what makes it so special to you?

King.

You return to your hole under the bridge only to find your belongings torn apart, strewn about, and otherwise violated. What item of great sentimental value is missing?

Do not discard this card. Set it in front of you, and discard one resource die to it. If this is the fourth King you have drawn, whoever or whatever vandalized your camp strikes from behind, killing you. Do not record an entry—the game is over.

Diamonds

Diamonds represent your environment—the bridge you live under, the shelter you’ve carved out for yourself, the familiar yet unknown city around you. When you draw a diamond, you are exploring or interacting with the world around you, for better or worse.

Ace.

You climb countless stairs around and around before emerging onto the roof of an office tower. Not the tallest, but enough to get a clear view of the empty beauty of the city. You duck back inside before the grackles spot you.

Do not discard this card. Put it somewhere safe. Discard this card at any time to “lock” a card in place in the River by placing a Resource die on top of it. You may remove the die at any time, re-rolling it and unlocking the card beneath.

Two.

You don’t know what came over you, but you’ve given in to a sudden impulse, the irresistible urge to kneel next to the river and drink deeply. It is simultaneously revolting and intoxicating, and you drink your fill before tearing yourself away, retching and convulsing with incoherent hysterics.

Draw the top card from the deck and resolve it immediately. Shuffle it back into the deck when you have finished.

☐ *As above, but draw the top two and choose one. Shuffle them both back into the deck.*

☐☐ *As above, but draw the top three.*

Three.

Weather here has always been fickle, but it’s become an order of magnitude worse in These Unprecedented Times. The torrential rains came as quickly as they left, flooding your encampment and drenching your belongings. Where do you temporarily (hopefully) hole up while everything dries out?

Lose one Resource.

Four.

There’s a place downtown, a building that you did not feel welcome in, that you always fantasized about breaking into. Not because you wanted or needed anything in there, but purely to transgress that boundary. Tonight is the night! How do you force your way in? What’s it like inside? What do you take?

Gain one Resource.

Five.

You can make out a distant landmark—it's always profoundly intriguing to you, but you've never found the courage to make the journey. Is it because of the constant danger, or the fear of leaving your familiar surroundings? What is it about this prominence that attracts your attention, and how do you know that you will die before ever seeing it up close?

Six.

There's one place in the city where the birds refuse to go. You don't fully understand why, and you're not sure if they will ever return to that spot. How does that location make you feel when you pause for a long moment's peace there? What makes it impossible for you to stay there forever?

Seven.

The river is clogged with debris, urban runoff, and other putrid effluvia. You complete a small raft and, lying prone and hoping to avoid detection, carefully paddle out to a small island you'd spotted to the east. What did you hope to find out there, and what do you find instead? Is it safe? How do you make it back?

Eight.

One of your greatest regrets is that you were never able to travel to as many other places as you would have liked. Even without the ever-present threat of screeching death, it would be nearly impossible to visit those places now. Describe your top three dream destinations, and choose one that you could make it to on foot, if you had all the time in the world.

Nine.

There's something special about your private space under the bridge that makes it completely safe from the predations of the birds. (So far...) Was it like this when you found it, or did you create this defense yourself? What are you afraid might happen to weaken its protection?

Ten.

While foraging, you happen across a long-forgotten venue, a place that you once loved to visit, before everything happened. Describe what made this place so special to you, and what happened that caused you to never return.

Jack.

Your small haven under the bridge almost feels like home now, but it's important to always have a backup plan. In your explorations, you've noted a half dozen other spots that might potentially make decent shelters, should you have to abandon this one. Where are they, and why are they slightly less desirable than your current makeshift home?

Queen.

You stop at a place that is so beautiful, so utterly breathtaking and arresting, that for one timeless instant, you think that this may be it—this may be the perfect place and time to end your struggles, just give in and enjoy your last moments fully. *Do you?* If not, describe this place in as much detail as you can remember—it will not be there when you try to return.

King.

You've lost track of time, and find yourself in a parking lot full of abandoned cars, just as the sun is beginning to set. Hundreds of ravenous screeching birds alight on every surface—are you able to sneak away without disturbing them, or are you forced to flee for your life?

Do not discard this card. Set it in front of you, and discard one Resource die to it. If this is the fourth King you have drawn, your camp has been destroyed, and you find no other place of safety. Do not record an entry—the game is over.

Hearts

Hearts represent your memories, or lack thereof. When you draw a heart, you are reminded of the world before the fall, before the swooping, the pecking, the unending cackles. It must have been a better life—or was it? Exhaustion and desperation can play havoc with recall.

Ace.

One possession that you keep on your person at all times, no matter what, is a washed-out photograph of yourself with one or more people that were truly important to you. Add this photo to your journal, and describe the people in the photo and why they meant so much to you. If you wish to talk or speculate about what may have happened to them, feel free to do so.

Do not discard this card. Put it somewhere safe. Discard this card at any time to shuffle a card back into the deck immediately after drawing it from the River and resolving it.

Two.

You had plans, more than mere dreams, for what you would do when you grew older. What were they? Do you still believe that they were good ideas, or does the very concept of planning seem ridiculous to you now?

Three.

There were more survivors before, of course. A group, then a few, and now, just you. Do you remember their names? Can you picture their faces? Do you know how they died, or did you leave before the worst befell them? (Or did they leave you?)

Four.

You catch a rare glimpse of yourself in a broken window, and barely recognize the tattered creature you've become. Besides the obvious, what strikes you as most different about the way you look now? Before all of this, how did you dress? How much of that style remains now?

Five.

When you were a child, you would often play by yourself in a remote area, pretending to be a resistance fighter in enemy-occupied territory, or play at making forts and shelters in order to survive a nuclear winter. What was the best thing about pretending that you were all alone, when you had family and friends to return to afterward? What skill did you develop back then that serves you all too well now?

Six.

Occasionally you will come across a mangled sheet of newsprint, or the remains of a sodden book from the long-ravaged library—much of the remaining paper has been appropriated by feathered thieves to line their nests. This latest scrap of print, what special significance does it have for you?

Find a newspaper clipping, piece of mail, old receipt, or anything that you consider interesting. Wreck it. Crush and mutilate it, but not beyond recognition. Keep it safely in your journal.

Seven.

Like most people in the past, you were bound to the cycle of commerce, finding some way to survive in the relatively civil times before the end of everything. If you worked, what was your job, and how did you feel about it? Was it worth it? Were you taken care of, or did you slip through the cracks of society? Was it better or worse than the struggle you find yourself in now?

Eight.

You wouldn't say that you've gotten used to eating whatever you can scrape together from the detritus of society, or whatever sustenance you're able to forage from the local flora. But perhaps you've become inured to the bitterness, the filth, and the gnawing hunger. Do you remember what your favorite food used to be, when you could choose from almost literally anything in the world? Is there something you have now that even comes close to it?

You can't subsist on memories, but you might try going without for a bit. Don't spend a Resource at the beginning of next week.

Nine.

People—you miss some, but others, not so much. Who do you wish you'd said goodbye to properly, before it was too late? Who are you glad to never have to interact with again? If you were able to bring one person back to go through all of this with you, who would it be?

Ten.

Although your little nest under the bridge gives you some comfort, you realize that you haven't felt truly secure in a terribly long time. Do you remember when the last time you felt safe was? Where were you, who were you with? What would it take to feel like that again?

Jack.

There's a place that you don't go to often, not if you can help it, that houses the bones and bodies of a great number of people. It's horrible, and it's worse every time you go near, in every way imaginable. What do you think they were all doing together there? You can't stomach investigating, but you are acutely curious—how did they die? Was it all at once, or over the course of increasingly gruesome days, weeks, or months?

Queen.

You don't actually have many *possessions* any more, just a collection of items that you try to hold on to as long as they're useful, and leave behind as soon as they become a burden. You used to, though, like almost everyone. What's the one item that you owned before that you wish you could have with you right now? Would it help?

King.

You sit by the side of the river, bare feet dangling carelessly in the loathsome currents, daydreaming of better times. What has led you to this thoughtful—and entirely unsafe—moment of reverie?

Do not discard this card. Set it in front of you, and discard one Resource die to it. If this is the fourth King you have drawn, you have lost all hope, and leave yourself to nature. Record one final entry, and then the game is over.

Spades

Spades represent danger, threats to your health, well-being, and sanity. The ever-present birds. Unsafe architecture. The sound always, chattering against the inside of your skull.

Ace.

You awaken and step warily outside your shelter, as always. It takes a moment to register an enormous black bird perched not six feet away from you, the size of a large dog. You freeze as it considers you for a moment, and you swear that it nodded at you before strolling away. Was it trying to tell you something, or were you just lucky today?

If you have already drawn the King of Spades, you may shuffle that card back into the deck, recovering and rerolling the Resource die discarded to it.

Otherwise, the bird is a terrible omen—set this card in front of you as a reminder, and discard one Resource die to it.

Two.

The grackles are horribly mutated and twisted, unlike any birds you'd seen before. They come in all shapes and sizes, but they share a few common features that distinguish them from normal birds. What are they? What abnormality do they possess that almost makes you feel sorry for them?

Three.

A knot of medium-sized black birds swoop and screech, tearing at your hair and clothes. Do you think their squawking is the sign of a kind of collective intelligence, of actual communication? Do the birds share a group mind with which they coordinate their attacks, or is this organized aggression no more than the result of the combined hostility of these pests?

Lose one Resource from this Attack.

Four.

You've seen the violence they do to human flesh, but you still marvel at the way these monsters will tear a hole in the side of a building. Stone, steel, and brick seem to be no impediment to the birds nesting anywhere and everywhere they please, or pulling out any useful or shiny items they desire. Their beaks must be so hard, so strong. What would you do with that kind of strength?

Five.

You stumble upon a clutch of large grackles nesting in the tall grass. They chase after you, but you're able to sprint away. Unfortunately, you stumble and drop the food and other items you'd been collecting all day. It's all ruined, but you're still alive.

Lose one Resource from this Attack. Drop your journal into the water again.

Six.

You have trouble finding food for yourself, scarcely enough to keep body and soul together. The birds, there are *so many* of them, and you know that resources in the area have dwindled to almost nothing. What could they possibly be eating? Do you think it may be suitable for human consumption, as well?

Seven.

The goddamn beasts are everywhere! In the trees, on the wires, in every open space with their chattering and clamoring and sharp little empty eyes. If you don't find food and water soon, you're going to be in a tight spot. It's incredibly dangerous to venture out right now, but you've done it before, and only regretted it a little.

Lose one Resource on each active Resource die from this Attack. If you can find some feathers on the ground, put those in your journal, and only lose one.

Eight.

What would it be like to find a nice open spot, lie down there, and just wait for them to take you? You already see them circling overhead any time you leave the shelter, seeking any opportunity to descend upon you and pull the soft bits out of your body. You know how painful their talons and beaks are, but it would only hurt for a moment, wouldn't it? *Do you?* If not, what changes your mind?

Nine.

Something happened to you after the last time the birds attacked you. Something about your body changed, you think, but it's difficult to tell. You don't feel like you've been hurt, but you feel *wrong* somehow. What could it be? Is this something to worry about, or is your mind playing tricks on you? You'd better stay in and give yourself a thorough examination, just to be sure.

Lose one Resource.

Ten.

Against your better judgment, and at senseless risk to your safety, you manage to capture and kill one of the horrendous grackles. Now that you see it up close, is it more or less terrible than you'd expected? What stands out the most to you, now that you're able to take an uninterrupted look at it up close?

Do you eat it? If so, gain one Resource. How disgusting is it?

Jack.

The bastards really got to you this time—one great bird perched on your chest, pecking at your face while another tore at your arm. You managed to drive them off, almost crushing one's skull with a rock, but you are badly wounded. What terrible mistake did you make, and why do you fear it will happen again?

Lose two Resources from this Attack. If you are Sick, this injury will kill you unless you spend another two Resources to hold yourself together.

Queen.

Occasionally, in the distance, you swear that you see one massive grackle circling the treetops and rooftops—it seems like it must be the size of a small truck, but that's impossible. It's difficult to gauge size at this distance, but what if you're right? What about it makes you certain that it's the same one every time? What do you most fear might happen if it spotted you?

Lose two resources from this Attack. Shuffle this card back into the deck.

▣ *Instead of shuffling this card into the deck, place it on the bottom of the deck.*

▣▣ *Instead of shuffling this card into the deck, discard it.*

King.

As you slumber, you dream of an immense black and blue bird, wearing a sapphire crown and a smile that reveals a frightful number of gleaming human teeth. What message does it bring you?

Do not discard this card. Set it in front of you, and discard one Resource die to it. If this is the fourth King you have drawn, you die screaming in your sleep. Do not record an entry—the game is over.

It's Over

Rest now.

Grackle Teeth is a tragedy—some people enjoy that, others don't. Although explicit in the setting, the expectations inherent in many role-playing games often imply that you will somehow succeed, despite all odds. This is not one of those games.

Although there is a faint sliver of hope presented with the radio and battery, it is extraordinarily unlikely that a safe exit from this bleak situation will ever be realized. Does it feel better or worse to try, knowing that there is some slim hope of success? Do you feel cheated, or disappointed? Did you enjoy the process—the journey to your inevitable end—for what it was, or did you struggle against your fate up to your final moment?

The physical artifact of your journal, battered and drowned, is a tangible reminder of your experience. Will you keep it to peruse some time in the future, discard it without a second thought, or perhaps leave it somewhere for another to find and wonder over? However you feel, it's my hope that you took away something worthwhile from the experience, and that you may return to explore another fate... when you're ready.