



Author's Note

octaNe, like many other creations, started as something else entirely. I was researching the "road geek" phenomenon for a possible Unknown Armies school of magic (I was churning out a half dozen schools at the time) and on a whim (and as an excuse to put off the road-geek research) drew up a quickie-logo. The word "*octaNe*" sounded good, so I went with it, along with the subtitle: "Put your pedal to the metal" (the capitalized "N" just looked cool...).

I got to thinking more and more about the role of cars in modern America. Later on, that began to coalesce into something much bigger than what I had initially thought up. I've always liked the Mad Max films (as well as the low-budget cult movie *Six-String Samurai*), and I thought to myself: "I need to make a post-apocalyptic RPG." Not some grim world of desolation and survival... but a weird collection of elements from pulp sci-fi, rock n' roll, and trash culture in general. Johnny Cash, Elvis, and Dick Dale get together with Rob Zombie and Judas Priest and form a band.

Hmmm. Had potential.

What ended up happening was that I pulled two old design concerns (less-is-more and genre-blending) and spot-welded them to the frame of an existing game that I had already co-written (Pulp Era). The setting for *octaNe* became just a playground for weird adventures – I dismissed any thought to the reasons for the apocalypse (timelines, geopolitical climates, and all of that alternate history shit) and just went with my oft-asked question: "What would be cool?"

Kung fu monkeys, cars that talk, mutants, guitar-slinging wizards & warriors, masked wrestlers, and funky aliens.

Kinda cool.

The Former United States of America became "The West" – a mythic Oz of rust and dust where just about anything could happen. Travel all the way west, and you hit the remnants of California. Travel east, and you won't hit anything – ever. Who



knows why, but everything east of the Mississippi is just plain gone ... miles and miles of empty road. Hell, I designed this game, and I don't know what happened.

The system was originally the same as Pulp Era (with a few adjustments and some input from the people at Gaming Outpost). But looking back on that system, I became less than thrilled. It was striving too hard to be a realistic game, despite all the freewheeling excesses I had built into it. I mean, why have attributes? Does anyone really need to be told that Doc Savage has a strength rating of 8? What does that mean, anyway? Nope... you just need to be told that he's the daring and ingenious Man of Bronze and let your imagination fill in the blanks.

So I chopped up the lumbering vehicle of a game system and had the boys in the garage whip up this sleek little beauty. It's made for one thing, really – it's not great off-road, and it's not street-legal, but boy, is it fast. It's tailored for scene-based cinematic storytelling... which is what a pulp game should be (well, at least that's what I think!).

So, will you like this game? I guess that's the main question, huh?

It's weird, it's wacky, and it's over-the-top. It's completely unrealistic. It's concerned with story over everything else. It's not for everyone.

But if you wanna race your custom-built roadster across the wasteland with your only companions being a talking monkey and some guy from another planet who wears a wrestling mask... well, now's your chance.

Have fun.

- Jared, the day after the end of the 20th century



Introduction

octaNe is a roller coaster ride through the trailer parks and strip malls of a post-apocalyptic, trash-culture America. A garish B movie brought to life in living Glam-O-Vision. A funkadelic, no-holds barred steel cage match of... well, you get the picture.

octaNe shares a kinship with the B-movie action of *Feng Shui*, the PoMo gestalt of *Over the Edge*, and the weird western vibe of *Deadlands* (and its post-apocalyptic follow-up, *Hell on Earth*). But unlike some of those games, it's not a grim, cautionary tale of the apocalypse or a gritty slice of urban street life. It's a ridiculous world gone out of control, where the Mythic West meets Hollywood, where the clichés of film noir collide with the excesses of pulp comic books.

Playing in the Band

Ron Edwards (author of *Sorcerer*, *Elfs*, and *Trollbabe*), a kick-ass game designer you should be familiar with, compares playing role-playing games with playing musical instruments in a band. Everyone gets together, comes up with a cool riff (their character), the Game Moderator lays down a groove (the story's outline), and the players all jam.

Sometimes, there's a solo, sometimes there's a section of freeform improvisation, and sometimes you fall back on pure rhythm. It's all good! Just remember to work with everyone else "in the band," and you'll be busting out some slick tunes in no time flat.

The Rule of Rock n' Roll: Put your Pedal to the Metal

Before we even get started, I need to make one thing perfectly clear: the Rule of Rock n' Roll states that when playing *octaNe*, you **MUST** be playing rock n' roll music* of some kind. Consider it The Law, and disregard it at your own peril.

*Defined as any music that your parents wouldn't approve of, right? You can't go wrong with any of the bands mentioned in the Inspirado section:



heavy metal, surf rock, rockabilly, delta blues, honky tonk...even 70's funk and soul will get the job done. But please...no "nu-metal" or anything else made after 1990 (the year I graduated high school).

The Rule of Snacks: White Trash Picnic

An important rule, but not quite as hardcore as the Rule of Rock n' Roll, the Rule of Snacks states that everyone playing *octaNe* should bring something that everyone can snack upon while the game is being played. Junk food is optimal. Carbonated beverages are practically required. Chili-dogs, Spam, nachos, mac n' cheese, Jell-O salad, and (if you can get it) ostrich burgers are also tasty and quite in-theme. To drink? Ice tea, Coca-Cola (in glass bottles, natch!) and if y'all wanna get liquored up, tequila shots, Pabst Blue Ribbon, and a bottle of Jack Daniels. PS – Don't drink and drive. That is most assuredly not cool.

Theatrical Modes

Originally, *octaNe* was going to be a very specific kind of game – campy and weird, like a 1930s pulp movie melded with the modern sensibilities of the 1980s. But over time, the emphasis shifted from one style to another... and with so many cool kinds of stories to tell, it became too hard to pin down just one. Thus, we have several **modes of play**.

These aren't optional rules or anything like that. Instead, think of them as content guidelines. If one player in your game is craving Saturday matinee-style thrills and spills, while another wants cheap exploitation fare, and you're looking forward to grand themes and a mythic sense of scale, well, nobody is going to wind up very happy.

Each mode is based upon a distinct sub-genre of post-apocalyptic action film (or just types of sci-fi/action film in general). Each mode has several "dials" controlling the amount of realism, explicit content, and what I'll just refer to as "big ideas"



appearing in the game. At the start of your game, make sure everyone knows what mode you'll be using. And unless you're going for a disjointed effect, be sure to keep within one mode throughout the entire game session.

Psychotronic: Retro-Kool Kitsch

An online book review by John Grant (<http://www.hometown.aol.com/thogatthog/>) of Michael J. Weldon's Psychotronic Video Guide has the following quote:

There are some movies you watch because they're good, improving stuff, and there are some you watch because they're crap. They may be good crap (they're well made and you really enjoy them) or bad crap (they're badly made but still you may enjoy them, if not always for the reason intended by their makers). Both categories of crap seem to fit into Weldon's definition of "Psychotronic."

In an article called "'B' Movie Madness!" (found online at <http://net4tv.com/voice/Story.cfm?storyID=83>) Uncle Bob explains the term psychotronic:

This is a term generally credited to Michael Weldon, who wrote The Psychotronic Encyclopedia of Film. He notes in the introduction that:

Critics searching for art condemn most of these features for the very reasons that millions continue to enjoy them: violence, sex, noise, and often mindless escapism.

It's a loose definition but the common traits of these films seem to be low budgets and "bad taste." They tend to cover subject matter that mainstream film makers ignore or mishandle, and they are as likely to contain serious social commentary as utter trash. And because they usually skirt the conventional corporate Hollywood methods of moviemaking, they are often



wildly original.

Think of atomic monsters, drag racing teens, Mystery Science Theater 3000, women in prison or Mexican horror-wrestling-vampire movies and you've got the idea.

You see where we're going with this? *octaNe* is most definitely a Psychotronic game. We got drag racing robots, Mexican wrestlers, sexy bikini babes, and biker gangs. Movies like *Buckaroo Banzai*, *Repo Man*, *Wild Zero*, and *Six-String Samurai* are all awesome examples of modern Psychotronica. *Tremors* is **required** viewing, as is virtually any of the films shown on MST3K. Despite the inherent sleaziness in Psychotronic film, it's all in good fun – nothing too extreme, just lots of trashy fun.

Psychotronic Mode Rules:

- ♣ No character death
- ♣ No graphic sex or violence
- ♣ Games should be quick, fun and zany (2-3 hours, tops).
- ♣ Inspired wackiness is encouraged with Plot Point rewards
- ♣ The characters should work together – no "inter-party conflict"
- ♣ The characters should be solid, dependable and heroic
- ♣ Men and women are treated as equals; outré racism doesn't exist
- ♣ The entire setting is wide open for use and should be garish, colorful, bizarre, and all the other synonyms for "weird"
- ♣ Players are free to include lots of pop culture references, bad puns and the standard complement of geeky behaviors
- ♣ Take a gander at the RPG's *Deadlands*, *Over the Edge*, *Feng Shui*, and *Gamma World* (that old chestnut) for game-related inspiration



Grindhouse: Cheap Exploitation

Grindhouse films are full of **sex** and **violence**. Not a whole lot of plot, or budget, or talent... but gosh darn it, sex and violence aplenty. Although they started rather innocently enough with nudist pictures and lurid but ultimately cheesy "kitten with a whip" style potboilers, the Grindhouse circuit soon became jam-packed with burlesque loops, splatter films, and sleazy exploitation fare like *Mondo Cane* and *The Terror of Tiny Town* (the first and only all-midget western). We're talking Lots of blood, nudity, freaks, geeks, and nuts, sluts, and pre-verts (as my old college sociology professor used to say).

The reigning champs of Grindhouse film are people like Ed Wood, Jr. (whose '59 epic *Plan 9 from Outer Space* is regarded as the worst movie ever made), splatter-king Herschell Gordon Louis (*Blood Feast*, *10,000 Maniacs*) and breast-obsessed Russ Meyer (*Faster Pussycat, Kill Kill!*; *Beyond the Valley of the Dolls*). *From Dusk 'til Dawn* is a great example of modern Grindhouse – an unapologetic crime caper crossed with a gory, campy vampire film... and perfect for a blood-drenched *octaNe* session. See also: *Texas Chainsaw Massacre* (surprisingly effective and not nearly as gory as people make it out to be), *Dolemite* (for that Blaxploitation feel), *Roadhouse* (Patrick Swayze and Sam Elliot!), and anything by Team Troma (*Toxic Avenger*, *Surf Nazis Must Die*) or the T&E (tits and explosions) flicks of Andy Sidaris. Ooooh... and you cannot forget the Tarantino-penned *True Romance* or *Natural Born Killers*!

Because of its extreme content, Grindhouse is **not** for everyone. But if all the players are agreeable to this mode of play, it can be an awful lot of fun. Granted, you might need to take a shower afterwards...

Grindhouse Mode Rules:

- ♣ Character death can (and probably will) happen
- ♣ Lurid depictions of sex and violence are encouraged



- ♣ The games should be about sex, crime, violence and vengeance
- ♣ Female characters are objectified (tight pants, big hair, big boobs) and usually play the role of "man-hating killer lesbo" or "slutty bimbo victim"
- ♣ 70's racial stereotypes abound (the funk soul brother, the ass-kicking dragon lady, the gun-totin' redneck)
- ♣ Everyone drinks, smokes, and curses
- ♣ Characters are not necessarily the good guys, nor are they required to work together
- ♣ Heroism is not a given; it's something for which the characters will have to strive
- ♣ Bonus Plot Points can be earned by squicking the GM and other players
- ♣ *Nothing* is sacred. NOTHING. Nada. Zilch. Zero. Zip.
- ♣ The default setting can be used as written; just make everything a little grimmer and grimmer
- ♣ Games to check out that capture a Grindhouse mode are few and far between. *Unknown Armies* has a seedy feel to it... and *Macho Women with Guns* is a perennial favorite (If you like the sound of that game, you'll wanna play Grindhouse octaNe. Trrrrrust me.).

Do I even need to say that you can play a twisted character in Grindhouse mode without being a bad person? Well I shouldn't have to. Don't be a dumb-ass. If you act like a Grindhouse protagonist in day-to-day life, I really don't want you playing my game. In fact, I'd rather not ever meet you or get email in my Inbox from you, 'kay?

Arthouse: Mythic Storytelling

Do you want legendary heroes, surreal dream sequences, and powerful emotions straight out of *El Topo*, *A Fistful of Dollars*, or *Bring Me the Head of Alfredo Garcia*? Then go with the Arthouse model. Other good sources for inspiration are



Harlan Ellison's "A Boy and his Dog" and Stephen King's *The Gunslinger*. Stories in the mode can be graphic or tame, comic or serious, realistic or fantastic. The key is that the stories are about grand, mythic themes and big ideas (rather than existing only as cheap entertainment). Play up the more bizarre, surreal qualities of the setting, and downplay the camp trashiness. The characters are much more likely to be nouveau Western heroes than schlock B-movie protagonists.

Arthouse Mode Rules:

- ♣ Everything Should Mean Something
- ♣ Characters can die, but only in intense and dramatic scenes
- ♣ Use big, sweeping themes, soulful gazes out across the wasteland, and tons of symbolism (read *Hero with 1,000 Faces* by Joseph Campbell)
- ♣ Break up the narrative with flashbacks, dream sequences, fast-forwards, and other cinematic techniques
- ♣ Emotions should run strong and deep; characters should have equally strong ties to other people – no man is an island, even if he "walks alone"
- ♣ Reward players with bonus Plot Points for cool visuals and clever lines of dialogue
- ♣ Steer clear of the civilized areas of the setting (or better yet, you and the players should create your own on the fly)
- ♣ The game should have the feel of an epic saga (albeit one in a decidedly Western setting) – see Greg Stafford's game *Hero Wars* or Ron Edwards' *Sorcerer & Sword* RPG supplement for inspiration and advice.

Cinéma Vérité: Gritty Hyper-realism

The last mode is perhaps the toughest to get right. *Cinéma Vérité* (from the French for "cinema truth") attempts to capture a gritty hyperrealism in the lens of the camera. You're not looking



for low-budget entertainment, cheap thrills, or pretentious symbolism here. What you want is to feel the wind on your face, the dust in your throat, and the sun beating down upon you. These stories are about real human drama, no matter how "unrealistic" the setting. *Mad Max* is the definitive post-apocalyptic film in this style (although the second two movies in the *Mad Max* trilogy veer off into mythic western and futuristic sword & sorcery). Others like *Vanishing Point*, *Thelma & Louise*, and *Easy Rider* could also be used as sources of inspiration. Your stories will be those of desperate men and women living on the edge in an unforgiving landscape. We're talking terrible decisions, buried secrets, intense relationships and picking-the-bugs-out-of-your-teeth verisimilitude. Almost a southern gothic approach to it all... just transplanted from the lush, overgrown manors of the south to the tumbleweeds and dust of the American West.

Again, this mode is difficult because there are some serious limitations. You'll have to jettison much of the standard setting of *octaNe*, or modify it so the zaniness is leached out. There are some extra wrinkles in the game mechanics that make life much harder for the players and their characters (see the *Cinéma Vérité* Mode Rules below for these changes). Also, it's hard not to get bogged down in the grime and grim reality of it all because, well... let's face it, living in a post-apocalyptic wasteland would not be much fun in real life.

Cinéma Vérité Mode Rules:

- ♣ Characters are not immune to death and disaster just because they're PC's
- ♣ Radiation, disease, hunger, thirst, and exposure are all nasty realities – treat any situation where these come into play as having an automatic Hazard Rating of at least 1
- ♣ Character will only gain Plot Points with a Die Result of 6, and then only a number of Plot Points equal to their Style



- ♣ Characters cannot have more than 1 point in any Style (this means that your character will have three Styles at +1 and one Style at 0)
- ♣ The Might and Magic Styles may not be used or chosen by players
- ♣ Characters may not hoard Plot Points – the limit is 5 (you may still spend as many at one time as you wish)

To be honest, the primary appeal of *octaNe* is its balls-out style and a system based on protagonist-enabling mechanics, simple concepts, and shared powers of control and creation. If you're interested in gritty, post-apocalyptic realism, you may want to investigate other games (like *The End* or *Aftermath*) or create your own (using a generic RPG system like *GURPS* or *FUDGE*). You'll lose a lot of what makes *octaNe* so special, but you'll gain all kinds of crunchy details like radiation damage, blood loss, hit locations, carrying capacity, and oodles of vehicle creation and combat rules.

Inspirado: How the West was Fun

There are roughly one kajillion (that's metric, by the way) sources of inspiration for *octaNe*. Your best bets are B-movies, surf rock, heavy metal, old-school punk and rockabilly albums, and weird indie games and comics. A lot of *inspirado* in this game comes from other sources as well: low-brow art, hot rod culture, and kitsch of all kinds.

I can't possibly name them all... but I'll try to name some of them for ya.

Stories

Damnation Alley, "Devil Car," "Last of the Wild Ones," and "Auto de Fe" by Roger Zelazny
"Duel" by Richard Matheson



"Car Sinister," edited by Robert Silverberg
"A Boy and his Dog," and "Along the Scenic Route" by Harlan Ellison
"Killdozer" by Theodore Sturgeon
"Trucks" by Stephen King
...and just about anything by Howard Waldrop or Joe Landsdale

Film/TV

The Mad Max trilogy
Adventures of Buckaroo Banzai across the 8th Dimension
Blues Brothers
Bubba Ho-Tep
Deathrace 2000
From Dusk 'Til Dawn
Berry Gordy's The Last Dragon
Planet of the Apes
Pulp Fiction
Repo Man
Samurai Jack
Six-String Samurai
Son of Godzilla
Speed Racer
Tank Girl
Tremors

Miscellaneous Pop Culture Insanity

Archie MacPhee
The Art of COOP
"Big Daddy" Roth
Drag Racing and Kustom Kar Kulture
Mexican Wrestling (Viva la Lucha Libre!)
Anything with monkeys or zombies



Comics

Judge Dredd
Tank Girl
White Trash

RPGs

Over the Edge
Car Wars
Feng Shui
Macho Women with Guns

Video Games

Autoduel
Carmageddon
Full Throttle
Interstate '76
Twisted Metal

Music

Alien Sex Fiend
Aquabats
The Clash
DEVO
Dick Dale & the Deltones
Elvis Presley
Esquivel
James Brown
Johnny Cash
Judas Priest
Los Straitjackets
Man... or Astroman?
The Mermen
The Misfits
Parliament Funkadelic



The Red Elvises
Reverend Horton Heat
Sex Pistols
Social Distortion (and Mike Ness' solo work)
Southern Culture on the Skids
George Thoroughgood & the Destroyers
The Ventures
Rob Zombie (and White Zombie)

...And any other rockabilly, new wave, surf, metal, outlaw country, or punk bands that you dig which I've missed!