

# Joy Division

making sure the Future needs us ✖

a game by mark vallianator



## Abstract

In the near future, clandestine agents try to prevent 'transformative' technologies such as genetic engineering, nanotechnology and artificial intelligence from irrevocably harming humanity.

## the Change

In 1924 the writer Virginia Woolf noted that 'on or about December 1910 human character changed.' \*\* She was at least a century premature. With apologies to Ms. Woolf, who chose that date due to a provocative modernist art exhibit and expansion of the suffrage, you haven't experienced change in character until your only daughter has her brain pulped and her personality embedded in an AI platform. Your values aren't tested until you and your kind are viewed as expendable animals by a hypercaste of fantastically enhanced and ferociously careless hybrid machine-humans. And you can't fully appreciate post-impressionist painting until you see the blue of the eastern horizon ripped to a congealing mass of doughy gray by invisible chains of poorly-programmed nanobots feasting on atmospheric gases, perforating the sky like termites crossbred with neutron bombs. I can't tell you exactly when this change will come – February 2029 or June 2038 or thereabouts – because when it does there will be no one left to care, at least nothing that will concern itself with calendars or human character... Which is why we have to stop it.

By the late 20th century a number of futurists projected that accelerating technological developments would converge in the not too distant future in a Singularity – an exponential, explosive transformation of machines, society, and human nature. \*\*\* Some celebrated the possibility that artificial intelligences and related transhumanist innovations would free mankind from the limits of human biology. Others doubted that these predictions were anything more than wishful thinking or science fiction – techno-optimism run amok. Meanwhile a subset of the world's business, scientific, and political elites grew concerned. They noted trends in robotics, artificial intelligence, biotechnology, nanotechnology and related fields, that, while intriguing and potentially profitable in the short term, were socially problematic when extrapolated along a curve of accelerating innovation.

Doubting that nation states or intergovernmental organizations were willing or able to track and regulate the coming singularity/transhumanist revolution, in 2011 a group of the concerned convened a session on 'Transformative Technologies' on the sidelines of the annual World Economic Forum in Davos Switzerland. Participants drafted a declaration calling for a balance between innovation and regulation. They chartered a new organization, the Coalition on the Responsible use of Transformative Technologies (CRTT), to carry out public education, research and advocacy. Behind the scenes, conference organizers consulted with several highly-placed sympathizers who were unable or unwilling to sign the declaration. This inner circle provided funding for an Immediate Response Division (IRD). The IRD was designed as the clandestine arm of the CRTT. IRD agents would intervene surreptitiously but aggressively to stop or delay the launch of problematic technologies. And that's what the IRD did. Although no one inside or out of the CRTT-IRD, except possibly the most unflinching bureaucrat, used that designation... They all called it the Joy Division.

## the Characters

Characters are agents of the Joy Division, a small but well-funded transnational espionage agency concerned with advanced, destabilizing technologies. Its mission is to neutralize major threats that might arise from transformative technologies, including planetary-scale biocide, genocide and related crimes against humanity, nonconsensual alterations of the human genome, and, where necessary, consensual but radical transformations of human identity. Characters will use a range of quasi-legal and illegal means – targeted investments, blackmail, commercial espionage, misinformation campaigns, kidnappings -- to neutralize or limit technological threats. One participant will be the moderator. The moderator chooses a starting year for the game (say between 2011 and 2099) and summarizes any big geo-political changes that would make the setting significantly different than our world of 2006. The remaining players each create one character.

1. **Name and Cover:** what is your character's public identity and occupation? Their real name?
2. **Nationality:** where was your character born? What nation are they a citizen of? Where do they reside?
3. **Specialty:** what primary expertise does your character bring to the Joy Division? (Finance, lobbying, hacking, etc.)
4. **Contacts:** List two contacts (personal or professional relationships) that your character has that may be useful to Joy Division missions. Also list two important personal contacts, the relationships that mean the most to your character.
5. **Cool v Repugnant:** list two types or aspects of transformative technology that your character thinks are 'cool' and interesting. Also choose two technologies that your character finds to be repugnant or chilling. You can pick from the following list or invent your own.

- > Androids and cyborgs: human machine hybrids
- > Artificial intelligence: smart computers and robots
- > End of Nature: control over physical ecosystems, from climate control to conversion of remaining wilderness
- > Faster, Stronger: genetic modification to enhance human physical capacities
- > Final Frontiers: engineering people & society to live in space or undersea
- > Happy pills: genetic engineering and designer medicines to eliminate stress and angst
- > Hyperspace: probing multiple dimensions of space-time
- > Immortality: life extension
- > Manimals: human animal hybrids
- > Nanotechnology: tiny machines
- > Robots: machines doing more and more work
- > Sexnology: sex droids and plug-in orgasms
- > Smarter: genetic modification to enhance human intelligence
- > Super food: bioengineered and modified food (nutrient pills, headless & legless meat animals, etc.)
- > Superhumans: neo-eugenics and social stratification with the most highly modified people as the elite
- > Transhuman rights: legal status and rights for smart machines, hybrids and modified animals
- > Virtual life: loading human memories and thought onto networks
- > War Games: hi-tech warfare with specially modified supersoldiers and robot weapons

✖

Bill Joy, "Why the Future Doesn't Need Us," *Wired* 8.04, April 2000. Needless to say, this game is not endorsed by or affiliated with Mr. Joy (nor with the late 70s band Joy Division).

\*\* Virginia Woolf, "Mr. Bennett and Mrs. Brown," 1924.

\*\*\* See, for example, Vernor Vinge, "The Coming Technological Singularity," 1993; Ray Kurzweil, *The Age of Spiritual Machines*, Viking 1999.

## the Credits

I first thought of the Joy Division concept while commenting on Colin Fredericks' fascinating far future game *Sufficiently Advanced*. Joy Division was improved immensely by suggestions made by Judson Lester and Joshua BishopRody during the game's first play test.

## Sample character

1. Sasha Leon (she hasn't needed a pseudonym) works for the European Commission directorate on the Environment.
2. Spanish birth and citizenship, lives in Brussels.
3. lobbying and risk assessment.
4. Dr. Cantori, the Environment Commissioner; Mr. X, an anonymous mole in a biotech company; her sister Rita and boyfriend Claude.
5. Cool: smarter, AI. Repugnant: end of nature, super food.

## the Menace

The moderator chooses a technological menace for the characters to confront. The menace can revolve around a single type of transformative technology, or it can be a combination, sequence or hybrid of two or more technologies. In devising a menace, try to use technology(ies) that one or more players have listed as their cools and/or repugnants. Write down three terrible consequences that the menace could have: one comparatively minor consequence, one major consequence, and one catastrophic consequence. These consequences can be different stages in the one overall effect, different quantities of the same impact (100 people die, 10,000 people die, 100 million people die), or three separate but related consequences.

Based on your menace concept and how difficult a challenge you want this menace to be, rate the menace in two categories: Risk and Adaptability. Risk measures the harm and horror that the menace could potentially inflict on the world. Adaptability measures the menace's ability to 'mutate' and thereby avoid efforts to stamp it out.

> Risk = number of dice initially rolled by moderator. Menaces are rated between 5-15 in Risk.

> Adaptability = maximum number of dice that can be raised (turned to a one higher value) each turn. Menaces are rated between 1-5 in Adaptability.

## the Conflict

During the conflict, you will roll dice and narrate different phases of the character's efforts to neutralize the menace. Conflicts consist of a rotating cycle of 8 phases: Menace, Split, **Neutralize**, Corrupt, **Quarantine**, Adapt, **Capture**, **Transform**. The four phases written in bold are taken by players; the other phases are taken by the moderator.

1. **Menace**: all conflicts start with the moderator rolling the menace's risk dice. After rolling, describe the nature of the menace. If you prefer, roleplay this as a briefing to the characters by some higher-ranking administrator of the Joy Division. Be sure to hint at at least one terrible consequence that the menace could unleash on the world. Also narrate what stage of development/ release/ use the technology is in. If any of the dice show a 6, then the menace has been released and is beginning to be used; otherwise it is still in the research and planning stages. Leave the dice on the table to be adapted, split, or captured. The first time that a number of menace dice on the table equal to half the starting menace dice show 6s, the minor consequence has occurred; when dice equal to or greater than the starting menace dice show 6s then the major consequence happens; and dice equal to at least one and a half times the starting menace rating show 6s then the catastrophic consequence occurs and the game ends.

2. **Split**: if any of the menace dice on the table are 6s, the moderator may split and re-roll these dice. Pick up the dice to be split, add in one new dice from off the board, and roll both. Narrate how the technology is being adopted or impacting society more widely.

3. **Neutralize**: players all start with two neutralize dice, which should be a different color or size than the menace dice. Players roll all of their neutralize dice (plus any captured menace dice kept in a player's neutralize pile) each turn. 6s rolled by players can be first used to remove one of the menace dice from the game, then are taken back into the players' hands. Once neutralize dice are rolled and menace dice removed, players narrate what actions their characters are taking to counter the menace. If all menace dice are removed from the table, the characters have successfully completed their mission and can jointly narrate their success.

4. **Corrupt**: when players roll captured menace dice as part of their neutralize roll, these dice can 'turn against' the characters. Each 1 rolled on captured menace dice allows the moderator to choose one of the character's contacts to eliminate. Describe how the character's use of the captured technology has alienated, harmed or even killed the former contact. If a character has all 4 of their contacts corrupted, then the character is eliminated from the game, and the character's player and the moderator jointly narrate how the character leaves the Joy Division. Each 2 rolled on captured menace dice escapes from the character's control and returns back to the menace. The moderator rolls escaped dice and places them with the menace's dice. The moderator also narrates how the character lost control over an aspect of the menace.

5. **Quarantine**: each turn, players may leave one or more of the neutralize dice they rolled that turn (and that did not show a 6) on the table as quarantine dice. Take the rest of your dice (including previous quarantine die) back into your neutralize pile. Players that leave quarantine dice narrate how their character is making plans, laying 'traps,' or otherwise anticipating how the menace will evolve.

6. **Adapt**: the moderator adapts a number of menace dice equal to the menace's adapt rating. Adapted dice are shifted one higher in number. So a die showing 3 would be turned so it shows 4. Narrate how the menace is changing and adapting to threats and opportunities.

7. **Capture**: if, after the adapt phase, any menace dice on the table are equal to one or more quarantine dice; or if during the adapt phase, any menace dice 'crossed over' a quarantine die (for example, raising from 2 to 4 when there is a quarantine die of 3), the player(s) with the quarantine dice have the choice of capturing the matching/crossing menace dice. Put all quarantine dice back in your neutralize pile, move any captured dice into your Capture pile, and narrate how you have identified and caught or fenced in part of the menace.

8. **Transform**: players may choose to transform captured dice, moving them from their captured pile to their neutralize pile. Players narrate how they have taken some control over part of the menace. Transformed dice will be rolled during the neutralize phase, giving characters more power to eliminate the menace. The transformed dice also carry the risk of corrupting characters (see the corrupt phase above). During the transform phase players may also dump one or more transformed dice from their neutralize pile to the menace. Narrate how your character was getting overwhelmed by the captured technology and was forced to let give up some control. Transformed dice can never be moved from neutralize piles back to the captured piles.

## between conflicts

In between conflicts players have a choice of how to 'advance' their character. They can give their character a new contact (contacts that are lost can never be regained, and characters can never have more than 4 contacts.) Or, if their character ends the game with any captured dice in the neutralize pile, you can keep one of those dice so that the character starts the next game with more than 2 dice.

## Sample menace

An alliance of oil-producing nations is developing an AI-guided automated climate intervention project to combat climate change through sequestering CO2 in the oceans and seeding the skies with nanotech carbon traps.  
> minor consequence: fish populations decline  
>major: onset of mini ice age  
> catastrophic: bezerk AI sterilizes ocean of all life to make way for robotic aqueous progeny  
Risk : 6 Adapt: 3

## sample opening turn of a conflict

- 1. Menace.** The moderator rolls 6 menace dice, getting 6,6,5,4,2,2 then describes how the ocean and atmospheric phases of the project are rolled out.
- 2. Split.** The two 6s become 4 dice that roll 6,5,2,1. The 8 dice on the table are 6,5,5,4,2,2,2,1. The moderator tells how the carbon traps multiply.
- 3. Neutralize.** The sample game will have 2 players who each roll 2 dice. Sasha's player gets 5,4 and narrates how she is working to have the EU ban nano carbon traps. The other player gets 6,1 and uses the 6 to remove the menace dice showing a 6.
- 4. Corrupt.** (Not relevant on the first turn)
- 5. Quarantine.** Sasha's player leaves the 5 and 4 on the table and states that she is researching the impacts of excessive carbon loss; the other player leaves a 1.
- 6. Adapt.** Since the menace has an adaptation score of 3, the moderator can turn 3 dice, and turns the two 5s to 6s a 6 and makes the 1 into a 2. Narration on how the carbon traps are linking into complex networks.
- 7. Capture.** The menace dice currently show 6,6,4,2,2,2,2 so Sasha's player captures the 4, narrating how she uses the cover of an EC inspection to steal schemata of carbon trap assemblers.
- 8. Transform.** Sasha's player puts the captured die into her neutralize pile and describes how she sends counter-programmed traps into the skies of the northern hemisphere.

## Joy Division character sheet

Name/ Cover:

Nationality:

Specialty:

Professional contacts: (1)

(2)

Personal contacts: (1)

(2)

Cools: (1)

(2)

Repugnants: (1)

(2)



Neutralize  
dice



Quarantine  
dice



Captured  
dice