

A Plaguing Provocation

· Hyphae's Spring Season

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Introduction

It was a mere five years ago that most of us around the world were told to remain in our homes and not go outdoors except for essential purposes. For many of us, this would have been the first truly global shock we'd ever experienced: not just a crisis happening on the news over there to people far away (but which was global in that we all knew about it) but a crisis happening to us, right now, in and around our homes.

At the time this felt like an irrevocable change; indeed, at the time we didn't know if we would make it out alive. I know this because I spent the summer of 2020 writing [Pelican Stairs](#), an AI-assisted multimedia art project containing real diary extracts that I wrote at the time paired with surreal, familiar-yet-strange images generated from a dataset of the photos I took of my surroundings all that spring and summer - photos I sent to my parents daily to let them know I was still living.

Victoria Ward, Hyphae's co-founder, and I, were at the time collaborating on a project for a tiny think-tank inside a large global technology firm, trying to help companies grapple with the sudden reality of change they were facing. They all kept asking us when we would go back to normal.

"There is no 'back to normal,'"

we'd gleefully admonish them,

"only the NEXT normal that we're stepping into all of the time!"

But five years on, reviewing the world in the state it is now, it has not changed as much as I thought it might - or perhaps more accurately, not in the ways that I thought it would. International travel is back in a big way, with the chancellor of the university where I work part time facing recent criticism for spending over £30K on flights and a further £11K on taxis in eight months. We have regular flu and covid jabs now, but I don't see a majority of people where I live wearing masks on public transportation in the height of cold and flu season (I know this is different elsewhere, but it was different before.) Disaster preparedness, which you might have thought would be the darling subject on everyone's lips in the wake of 2020, has not really been a policy priority for most nations - with some exceptions, but in recent years those have largely been driven by the rising risk of international conflict, rather than other disasters.

Have we, in essence, learned nothing?

This was the question I wanted to explore in the 2025 Hyphae spring and summer creative thread, *Plague Season*. Our previous creative thread was Autumn 2024's [MPC3000AD](#), exploring how sound contributes to futures and foresight practice, and what foresight can tell us about the future of sound.

Building on some of the sensory and imaginative work introduced through MPC3000AD, with the help of my intrepid disasterologist Hyphae colleagues, I devised a series of whimsical interventions to help people think through what they would need to ensure their own survival through various types of plagues: not bare-bones actual physical survival techniques like having sufficient clean water, medications and a supply of canned food; there are plenty of much better places to get advice for that.

What I wanted to know was what people feel they need to hold onto the essence of themselves when the entire world around them changes.

What is in your personal plague survival pack? When the world goes topsy-turvy, what (and who) do you want to have with you? What keeps you holding on to yourself? We needed the prompts to be whimsical enough to get people thinking and ideating rapidly in a one-hour "huddle" around the "Campfire of Safety" with a bunch of strangers. But they also needed to be serious enough to acknowledge that when we talk about plagues, we are really talking about existential threats to our way of life, whether that is actual death or a more metaphorical death of the spirit, or death of the rules by which we thought society operated.

To explore this, we ran a session on the anniversary of the day that the Coronavirus Act 2020 came into force, repeating it a few times on later dates with different groups of people. The examples in this artefact are drawn from that first session.

We used a combination of pre-seeded prompt ideas, a semi-illusory sense of structure, and a little randomness to get people brainstorming about the possible impacts of plagues (see the facilitator's guide for in-detail steps.) We opened with a shared reflection on what people actually did in 2020 to keep their senses of sanity and humanity during a turbulent time - a gentle priming of the pump for what came later, and a nice icebreaker introduction activity to help people get to know one another in a humanizing way. Then, we asked a few spokespeople (our "riders of the apocalypse") to devise a custom plague based on a few prompts drawn from whimsical plague cards that the Hyphae team had previously dreamed up. By combining a few of our pre-drawn prompts (or they could add their own), we came up with a unique scenario that forced people to think about how the elements of each plague would interact. Finally, after participants had thought both deeply and broadly about what the impacts of this new mega-plague would be and were saturated in visions of what it would be like to live through and grapple with the aftermath of such a plague, we gave each of them an individual "plague backpack" to fill up with the items they thought would be necessary to preserving their individual and precious humanity through trying times.

The following document contains:

- A list of items from everyone's plague backpacks, for your inspiration and edification as you prepare your own Plague Backpack.
- A list of possible plagues in the form of an acrostic (our faux-structured means to help people navigate such a long list of possibilities).
- A short story incorporating the broader scenario devised during the original plague huddle ("The Brume") and the plague kits people created there.
- A broader description of the way we envisioned this scenario playing out, and other possible versions.
- A facilitator's how-to guide for running your own Plague Huddle.
- Forthcoming: Wendy Schultz and I will be writing this into a proper academic-style futures methods paper in the autumn which we will circulate widely when available.

We love hearing from our community about how you're applying our materials; what's resonating for you; what made you think; what you'd like to see more of. Please do write to us and let us know how you're using this Plague Survival Kit, as we all brace for whatever shocks the world has in store for us throughout 2025 and beyond.

- *Caitlin McDonald,*
Hyphae Research and Innovation Strategist

Plague Pack Contents

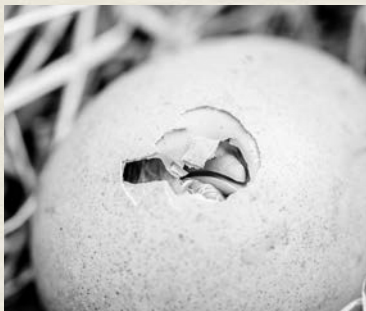
This list is drawn from the first session we ran in 2025. In the 'Backpacks in the Brume' story which follows you can see how these items were grouped in people's specific backpacks; this is a list of every single item that anyone included in a backpack.



Books



Cat



Chick hatching from an egg



Chocolate



Coffee



[David Bowie's Low](#)



Dice



Dog



Fairy lights in the shape of a star



Flying saucer



Glass teacup



Guitar



Headphones



Hiking boots



Ice cream



Long opera-style gloves



Loudhailer/megaphone



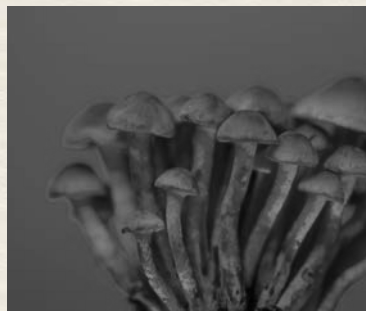
Lute



Makeup



Microphone



Mushrooms (magic?)



Oboe (and musical group practicing via Zoom during lockdown)



Pen



Pills



Pizza



Sack of
bicarbonate
of soda



Sack of flour



Shovel



Small potted
cactus



Telescope



[The painting
"Landscape from a
Dream" by Paul Nash](#)



Trophy



[Vernacular Architecture
in the Pre-Columbian
Americas](#)



Water pistol



Whisky



Wide-brimmed hat

Possible Plagues

The Hyphae team brainstormed this list of possible plagues, ranging from literal actual plagues (e.g. avian flu) to things that metaphorically plague us (e.g. a plague of 'groupthink that leads to paralysis.')

We did this in the form of an acrostic spelling out PLAGUE to make our Miro board more interesting to look at than simply a giant list of plagues, but if you are planning to run this activity yourself you don't need to stick to that format - we've presented the list here alphabetically.

For the first session we ever ran, the three chosen plagues from which to build our combined mega-plague scenario were "erupting volcanoes," "acrostic gives illusion of structure to random ideas," and "guardians of the wealthy lock out the 99.9% from access to resources."

(The) people choose

A pox on both your houses
(a plague of rage & revenge).

Abortion is no longer a human
right (see assholes, plague of).

Accelerating change makes it
impossible to see, hear, make
sense of things.

Acrostic gives illusion of
structure to random ideas.

AI bots take over the world.

Apathy - suppressing our
natural responses to disasters.

Assets are revalued at zero.

Assholes (a plague of).

Autonomy, loss of bodily.

Avian plague [H5N1] -
viruses jump species.

Egos dominate decision making.

Endemic monocultures leads
to fragile systems.

Ennui saps responsiveness.

Erupting volcanoes.

Experts are no longer trusted:
a failure of authority and
through the cracks leaks
authoritarianism.

Extractive behaviours around time.

Extremities turn black
(Bubonic Plague).

Extroverts drown out introverts.

Geiger counters clicking with
rising radioactivity.

Glowing embers are all that
is left of my house.

God(s) punishing us.

Gremlins (the danger of
apparently cute things
proliferating and then
turning on us).

Grenfell: a plague of failed
responsibility and shuffling
off the blame.

Grieving our stolen imaginations.

Group think to paralysis.

Guardians of the wealthy lock out
the 99.9% from access to resources.

Gutting climate change funding
& resources.

Land falls into disuse and
desert as drought and chemical
run off destroys its fertility.

Landslides crush villages,
homes and schools - pests
threaten public health in the
aftermath, public institutions
are not held accountable.

Lawsuits to save the planet
from extinction lost in the
high court.

Living systems fall silent
as they become extinct.

Looksmaxxing makes for
extreme body dysmorphia.

Loss of connection to land.

Loss of trust in science &
engineering; fiddling while
Rome burns.

Pandemic infects masses.

Performative busyness.

Persistent viral misinformation.

Pine beetle infestation.

Poems and self publishing proliferate.

Poison of measurement.

Pompeii.

Porn and viral deepfakes destroy
lives and reputations in pursuit
of dark satisfactions.

Preventable disasters not prevented.

Prevention creates new plagues
(DEET, chemical deterrents etc).

Pushing buttons is easier
than thinking about what to
do next.

Unchained authoritarianism.

Undoing of memory and identity.

Undying (zombies; the ennui
of eternal life).

Unravelling mental health in
the overwhelm.

Unstable systems.

Untameable wildfires.

Urban blight.

Backpacks in the Brume

A Plague Season Short Story

Day 16, Cycle 38

Wendy and I went exploring the Surface Route for the first time in a long time, 9 or 10 cycles at least. Although my cycles are less reliable these days; whether this is from the stresses of things as they are now or just the natural irregularities of aging I can't really tell.

Wendy had her wide-brimmed hat and long gloves with her - looking bizarrely Victorian from what I remember of films set in that era, and visiting the V&A collection when that was still a thing we could do. Ironically all those museum collections stored in mountains and disused mining tunnels for safekeeping are possibly still there, while everything on display when the Brume started is now choked by dust or eaten up with acid.

We are quite sporadic in our measurements and description of the Brume itself; we really should do it more regularly for it to be any use. But it's so unpleasant going up there and our protective gear, what little there is of it, won't stand too many trips. But it's the old dilemma: stay here in our relative safety with a dwindling store of supplies, or face the brutal elements and forage in hopes of finding better kit, new food sources or a hidden stash of medicine - even a person. To set forth in hope, somewhere out there, that there are other people trying to survive just as we are. We think sometimes that we come across recent debris from people, but we can never really be sure, and in all this time we've never yet met another living human soul.

Bodies, we have those in excess, choked in ash. We leave them where they are - they're fragile to touch and too numerous to move. But we lay what colourful plastic we find and can't otherwise use around them in rings, to mark their vitality and that they were once part of an interconnected web of people like us. How fragile that web was! We knew and yet we still carried on as though nothing bad would ever happen. But I've spent enough ink on that already.

So, there was Wendy in her hat and gloves, and me in my HAZMAT coveralls, salvaged from a university lab before we delved into the truly deep places for what passes for fresh air down here. I still remember the fresh and green smell of grass on a sunny day; all we get down here is liverwort, which smells of damp old caves because that's exactly where it grows!

But today, today we found something on the Surface Route. Something wondrous. At first I thought a rock-slide must have happened because part of the familiar contours of the mountain had changed; it looked like there was a new cave. But it wasn't totally new - someone had buttressed the entrance of the Long Cave, which we've been too nervous to explore, fearing for its stability. In the last 9 or 10 cycles since we were last up here, someone buttressed the entrance and walls.

I am shocked anyone knows how to do that anymore. Of course I remember people like architects and engineers existing from before, and the long complex lore about Freemasons keeping their secrets for hundreds of years, but I can barely remember how I used to repressurise the boiler in my flat, let alone fathom how one would keep alive such a specialised skill without tools, without diagrams, without help.

But the buttresses weren't the only thing - I think we could have convinced ourselves it had always been like that and we just hadn't remembered (memory is a funny thing without all the little social cues you're used to for backing it up; holidays and things to remind you when things happened.) We could have convinced ourselves of that, if it weren't for the backpacks.

Arranged in neat rows along the back wall of the Long Cave, hidden from the entrance, was a set of turquoise backpacks that looked like they'd been part of a bulk order before the Brume - for a group of summer campers or as promotional swag for a conference, or something like that.

They were worn, as I'd expect anything manufactured to be at this point, but had clearly been repaired after the Brume started. They looked very freshly present; no dust.

Wendy and I looked at the backpacks and then each other. Should we open them? Or leave them alone? After all, they clearly weren't ours. But also, whoever they belonged to might not come back and if we just left them here to rot they'd be doing nobody any good. It wasn't polite, before the Brume, to touch other people's things. But did that rule still apply?

In the end curiosity got the better of us and we opened the first backpack.

Inside we found a scuffed photo of a dog, clearly a beloved pet, faded with age and colours strangely off from the acidic air. We found a small cage that seemed to have chicken droppings fossilized to the bottom, a few feathers further suggesting avian life - but no sign of a chicken. A microphone, corroded and out of power. A pillbox full of colourful tablets. A t-shirt with a flying saucer on it. A fountain pen, but nothing to write on.

In the second backpack, we found a fragile glass teacup, a vinyl record of David Bowie's *Low*, and a mysterious abstract painting of a landscape that seemed to extend into more space than you'd expect from the size of the canvas.

The third backpack held a bag of plastic dice of varying colours, sizes and shapes, a trophy, metal dulled and pockmarked from the Brume, and a sharp folding spade.

The fourth backpack contained a worn copy of *Vernacular Architecture of the Pre-Columbian Americas*, a portable travel guitar, a small potted plant with soil held in a carefully sealed container, and a loudhailer.

The fifth backpack had a jar of instant coffee down to the last few spoonfuls, and a chocolate bar wrapper, empty but smooth carefully back into shape, the faintest whiff of the sweet bitter substance still clinging to it like a memory. Wendy and I spent some time smelling these things, the scents powerfully evoking everyday times from before the Brume. This backpack also had a massive plastic bag full of bicarbonate of soda.

The sixth backpack contained a small folding telescope, headphones, a string of fairy lights (but no batteries), a carefully folded handwritten recipe for pizza, and the tiny stub of what had once been an ice cream cone (long since melted or eaten).

The seventh backpack revealed a small music case containing an oboe, barely corroded inside its precious container, and some carefully preserved sheet music, sheltered from the acidic atmosphere by being folded very carefully into a tiny rectangle and wrapped in the remains of a chocolate bar wrapper.

The eighth backpack had a small stash of flour and a sieve, a plastic water pistol (empty), an old gummed up bottle of nail polish, another fountain pen, a pair of hiking boots, a wide-brimmed hat like Wendy's, and a small plastic container of dried mushrooms.

The ninth and final backpack had a little round plastic dome in it, like a window. The dome took on the sudden appearance of a spacesuit when a little face appeared in it! "Mew," said the face.

"A cat!" Wendy and I gasped at the same time. We opened the backpack and released the cat, cooing and fussing over this type of creature neither of us had seen since before the Brume.

The cat magnanimously deigned to allow us to stroke it, meowing loudly the whole time. We barely noticed the bottle of whisky also contained in the backpack, and the plectrums and capo suggesting another guitarist.

"But if they left the cat," I suddenly looked up at Wendy, "Then that means..." I trailed off, overwhelmed by the thoughts racing through my head.

"Hello?" we heard a tentative voice addressing us for the first time in approximately 40 cycles - a little over three years, when solar years still meant anything.

Somehow when we were petting the cat a group of people - actual human people! - had walked up behind us without our noticing. The cat, with a trilling little delighted noise, returned to its person, who collected it and perched it on one shoulder.

Here, then, were the owners of the backpacks. We stared with undisguised curiosity at each other for several long heartbeats.

"It's times like these," one of their group said thoughtfully, "that I wish I *had* brought along the complete works of Shakespeare after all."

"Don't exert yourself," one of the others interrupted, "You're on clock duty; we need a steady heartbeat."

The first speaker waved this concern away. "If I may," he said, "I'll rely on memory, and a little imagination. Shakespeare was a great borrower himself; I'm sure he won't mind a bit of alteration: 'O brave new world, that has such people from the old world in it.' Please, join us - I expect we have much to discuss."

Among other things in our many hours of conversation, they explained to us that the backpacks we found were all the items they'd collected when they were getting ready for what they knew was coming - not the usual essentials; the sewing kits and stockpiles of food, but the things that would keep them human through whatever they would need to face after The Brume started. The things that mattered most for keeping them themselves.

My candle is guttering and the others are long asleep now - probably a few kept awake by my scratchings. I'll leave it for today, precious diary, my long faithful companion. You and Wendy have been my only friends for so, so many cycles - but now we have new ones.

Plague Huddle Scenario Sketches

For our first Plague Huddle, the three Riders of the Apocalypse chose the plagues "erupting volcanoes", "acrostics give the illusion of structure to random ideas," and "guardians of the wealthy lock out the 99.9% from access to resources." In our short story above, I've titled this mega-plague "The Brume" an archaic word for fog and wintry weather. This refers not only to the volcanic ash clouds that would obscure the sun from most of the earth (as happened in the "year without a summer," 1816, following the eruption of Mount Tambora) but also to the sense of confusion and anxiety which would precipitate by a lack of reliable information, either through a breakdown in prior communication systems or through deliberate obfuscation and withholding of facts. In such an environment, is it any wonder that people turn to superstitions or mythical rituals (in this case, acrostics) to develop a sense of meaning and agency?



In this section, we sketch out the possible implications of each individual plague chosen from the prompts followed by the added layers of nuance which interact and reverberate in unexpected ways when all three plagues are combined.

Participants’ Brainstorm During Plague Huddle

Sub-plague of acid rain.

Built environment erodes,
melts due to acid rains.

Acid rain causing
infrastructure failures.

Food system failure.

Volcanos scrambling existing
centers of power.

Reshaping geopolitical power:
Indonesia and Japan dominant.

Disruption: planes diverted,
satellites obscured.

Geothermal energy becomes
surprisingly easy.

Indoor life akin to space exploration.

Volcano plague causing global
cooling, fossil fuel use rockets.

Post-apocalypse scenario
with frozen atmosphere.

Living on volcano slopes.

Pompeii Parties.

Thermal springs and sulphur
baths for health benefits.

Great skin and terrific tomatoes.

It had been a tough decade in North America, what with the polarized tsunamis of political craziness sweeping east and west and north and south, so the eruption of the great Yellowstone Supercaldera seemed less of a surprise and more of a judgment. The resulting plague of eruptions generated earthquakes that shattered mountains and towns, spread lakes of lava down valleys - and ejected millions of tons of ash and pumice into the air. Skies darkened, temperatures fell, and a volcano winter stopped global warming in its tracks. Vast swaths of North American crops were covered in ash, contaminating fields and collapsing the food chain. Farther south, acid rain melted power lines, bridge supports, rails, and pitted roads and runways. Planes were diverted, satellite connectivity obscured, cell towers destroyed. But the Yellowstone eruption was only the first among many, as volcanoes around the Chain of Fire in the Pacific and across Europe followed like a string of firecrackers.

The US federal government, already fractured by ideological wars, shattered completely due to unsustainable demands on emergency services - as did many other governments around the world. Geopolitical power re-centered. "Volcanic nations" like Indonesia and Japan fared best in responding to the crisis - elsewhere governance devolved down to regions and communities doing their best to help residents survive.

A spirit of fin de siècle erupted, a brittle hilarious hysteria to cope with inconceivable reality. The volcanic winter gave permission to 'burn baby burn' the existing fossil fuel stocks to keep people warm, to run machinery to rebuild, to keep civilization's lights on. "Pompeii Parties" celebrated the upside of living on the slopes of volcanoes, with relaxing sulphur springs spa sessions and

thermal mud baths. As one wit proclaimed, "It is the time of great skin and terrific tomatoes."

Further Reading

- [The year without a summer](#)
- [Hidden magma cap discovered under Yellowstone National Park](#)
- [What would happen if a supervolcano eruption occurred again in Yellowstone?](#)

Acrostics Give the Illusion of Structure to Random Ideas

PLAGUE 2

Participants’ Brainstorm During Plague Huddle

Acrostics generate misinfo tsunamis.

Acrostic readers gain status and wealth.

Emergence of new folk heroes like 'next slide please' Chris Whitty.

Unrelenting greed, selfishness, and fear.

Worshipping acrostics and modern plagues.

Acrostic power leading to heresy and banishment.

Acrostic-tellers as powerful mediums.

Comfort from acrostic structures like rune reading.

Worshipping acrostics.

Role of the I Ching in narratives.

I Ching tapping into true reality.

Resurgence in astrology soothing the 99%.

Conspiracy theories about underground aliens coordinating volcano eruptions.

TikTok challenges causing loss of self.

Self-immolation TikTok trends.

TV and TikTok effect: reduced thinking.

In an age of anxiety - political, economic, climate - people turned to games for brief respite. Wordle! Scrabble! Crosswords! Acrostics! Everyone's leisure attention bounced back and forth between games and social media feeds. Was it any wonder the currents of misinformation began bleeding into the construction of puzzles and games? That people looked for deeper meaning wherever they could find it?

New folk heroes arose, claiming to read the portents in patterns of acrostics across the world. As leaders looked to them for hints of order in the chaos, and people listened to them for any sign of sense within tsunamis of disinformation, the acrostic prophets became the new celebrities, and acrostic readings the new gold rush. The soothing sense they provided of patterns amidst the disorder revived interest in more ancient human rituals of pattern sensing: astrology, the I Ching, reading the runes. Parents demanded the skills be embedded in the curriculum, that acrostic reading was the hot new career skill their children needed.

The proliferation of portents sparked disagreements, schisms, and cries of heresy as interpretations clashed between facts, misinformation, disinformation, and conspiracy theories. When the age of volcanoes erupted, the social ecosphere was primed for the ultimate conspiracy theory: in the acrostics of the last remaining editions of online newspapers - the New York Times, Le Monde, Bild, the Financial Times, Asahi Shinbun - *aliens hidden underground had revealed their intent to destroy human civilization by triggering volcanoes.*

- [Did you spot the hidden message?](#)
- [Identifying conspiracy theories: the EU's response to fighting COVID-19 disinformation](#)
- [Poetry prompt: a hidden acrostic](#)
- [Ancient Codes, Modern Crimes: The History of Acrostics in Literature and Cryptography](#)

Guardians of the Wealthy
Lock out the 99% from
Access to Resources

PLAGUE 3

Participants’ Brainstorm During Plague Huddle

Tribes banded together, guardians
of wealth locked in high castles.

Ultra-rich building fancy
subterranean bunkers due to
loss of sunlight.

Make a million renovating
those atomic bunker silos!

Pestilence of the 99.1 percent
locked out of safety so seeking
mindless mind-numbing thrills.

Oil barons imposing
authoritarian popularism.

Tribes of the 99.9% scrabbling
over 0.01% of resources.

Spirit of survival as a
resource for the 99.9%.

Self-sufficiency is becoming
popular and powerful.

SurvivalistCore.

Configuration of abundance for
the 99+ percent.

The world's ultra-rich were already building underground pools and garages and game rooms and media rooms beneath their mansions in Kensington and Chelsea and other oligarch playgrounds, as well as buying up islands and mountains to isolate themselves from any unpleasantness experienced by the 99% - and the pestilence of the 99% themselves. The plague of volcanoes was just one more inconvenience from which their wealth could insulate them. It was a minor adjustment to task architects, contractors, landscapers, and security consultants with building air-purifying, grow-light equipped, water-filtering bunkers to protect them, their families and entourages, and their belongings from the worst of the volcanic fall-out. Many simply adapted their atomic bunker silos.

Those oil barons put their resources to good use fuelling their own retreats and supplying their friends with gas and kerosene and jet A. The global arms and security oligarchs created a loose coalition of their private intelligence and military services to impose order on the roving tribes of survivors scrabbling over the remaining bits of working infrastructure and supplies to be found in the ruined landscape.

Any spirit of rebellion among the 99% against this authoritarianism transmuted to a spirit of survival. That spirit, the spirit of 'the New Blitz' as some called it, emerged as a slowly coalescing movement of cooperative self-sufficiency, the self-sufficiency of the extended self, the eco-community-self, the self as embedded in community and nature. The New Blitz led to a new abundance for the 99%, an abundance of connection, and the new fashion was all 'SurvivialistCore' - an elegance of sufficiency.

- [A look inside some of London's most outrageous 'Iceberg' homes](#)
- [London's luxurious underworld](#)
- [The super-rich preppers planning to save themselves from the apocalypse](#)
- [Billionaires' survivalist bunkers go absolutely bonkers with fiery moats and water cannons](#)

Participants' Brainstorm During Plague Huddle

Living with the plague.

Global coordination vs.
national silos.

Nations as plague-free safe
havens for a fee.

Managing migration during national
or global plagues.

Question of plague duration
and modeling predictions.

Harvard Business Review as the
plague newspaper of record.

As volcanoes erupt all over the globe, massive ash clouds obscure the sky, plunging large regions into darkness. The ultra-rich retreat to elaborate subterranean bunkers, wedging the door shut with the Complete Works of Shakespeare. The rest of the population, locked out of the plentiful resources amassed by the super-rich, forms tribal groups to scavenge the scarce resources left on the surface. As the physical impacts of the volcanic ash cloud grow ever-more pronounced, physical infrastructures and established trade routes fail. Our fragile global digital infrastructure is wiped out as ash clouds obscure connections to satellites: whatever assets you cannot physically produce are now functionally non-existent: world gone analogue. Tribes roam mountains and plains or shelter in post-apocalyptic cities in a constant search for food and shelter, creating a new, fractured society structured by necessity and survival.

Conspiracy theories flourish, suggesting that underground aliens are behind the volcanic activity. These ideas spread rapidly, fuelled by a subculture that clings to the comfort of anything that gives a sense of structure in such turbulent times - acrostics become increasingly popular as a means for divining wisdom from the chaos. "Acrostic-tellers" rise to prominence as guides, offering solace to those seeking meaning in the randomness of disaster. Those who do not accept these new epistemological paradigms are shunned, exacerbating already fractious societal divides and contributing to the further breakdown of any remaining social order.

Geopolitical power shifts dramatically as regions less impacted by volcanic landscapes become increas-

ingly desirable places to live - for a fee, and a high one, you can escape the mayhem. Yet volcanic regions, though difficult and dangerous places to live even for short periods, also have their uses through increasingly abundant geothermal energy. Survivors with experience with volcanic activity become invaluable, positioning them as leaders in the new world order. Some regions benefit through promoting the healing power of geothermal hot springs and nutrient-rich volcanic ash. Bicarbonate of soda becomes an increasingly valuable commodity to counteract the effects of acid rain - 'Bicarb barons' become new titans of industry, using pithy slogans to further their interests and wage an information war on the general populace. Rigorously guarded adaptations, like renovating atomic bunker silos for the use of the super-rich, become lucrative ventures, further entrenching inequality as those with resources profit from disaster readiness.

Misleading information spreads like wildfire, amplified by story chains and letter-rings that pass from tribe to tribe, TikTok morphed to TribeTalks, where trends such as self-immolation underscore growing despair and nihilism among the 99%. 'Pompeii parties' become fashionable among a population for whom long-term thinking is simply no longer feasible; people embrace whatever meagre abundance makes them feel alive, not in a carefully considered bid for survival, but in a last hurrah before the ash cloud claims them.

And yet, for those who can withstand these extreme forces, there is also hope. An emergent folk culture celebrates heroes who navigate these crises with gravity and grace, reminiscent of figures like "next slide please" Chris Whitty during the COVID-19 pandemic. Both the 99% and the 1% seek new ideologies and lifeways, from embracing geothermal health benefits to adopting survivalist practices. SurvivalistCore becomes

a hugely important subculture, and those with practical skills of any sort are highly valued members in any part of this fractious society. As global interconnectedness breaks down, there is a resumption in 'local time' and locally-mediated activities: the world beyond one's own walking distance recedes rapidly and people do find freedom of a sort in the very simple, survival-based choices of day-to-day life, where time becomes a much more notional and flexible framework. Acrostics, astrology, rune-reading and other illusory structures provide solace, offering all who survive a semblance of control in a world reshaped by overwhelming forces.

Further Reading

- [A walk through time - the evolution of time measurement through the ages](#)
- [Amish 'circle letters' explained](#)
- [Lebanon wartime festivals: tone-deaf hedonism or coping strategy?](#)
- [Co-opting cottagecore: pastoral aesthetics in reactionary and extremist movements](#)

Facilitator's Plague Huddle Guide

Now that you've seen the outcomes of one of our Plague Huddles, you may wish to run one for yourself. Ideally this is run with two or more facilitators; it is possible to run it with just one.

This guide does not include timings: the activities could be expanded or contracted to suit your purposes. I would suggest the longest time chunks are spent on talking through the mega-plague scenario once it is devised and on filling up the 'plague packs'.

A Miro board template which you are welcome to view, copy and use for your own activities is available here:

https://miro.com/app/boarduXjVIH9GtmM=/?share_link_id=393901775836

Pre-Work

A word on psychological safety: in order to do our best work, particularly around challenging or distressing subjects, we need to feel psychologically safe. Although we have devised this workshop in whimsical terms, the subjects we wish to address are serious ones, and participants will be able to go more deeply on them if they know there are resources they can turn to if difficult or triggering topics come up for them. Figure out how you are planning to handle this for your session in advance – for example, giving people permission to turn off their cameras or leave if they need to; offering a space afterwards for private discussion; having a list of resources where people can go for self-help should difficult topics arise. When we ran our sessions in spring of 2025, one of the facilitators was a trained Mental Health First Aider and we made sure participants knew that she would be available for discussion and signposting towards further resources for anything that might arise during this

session. In a very light-touch way, psychological safety is the scaffolding on which this entire set of activities rests. Find your own way to build a foundation of psychological safety when you run this.

We prepared a Miro board containing visual prompts around which to base the following activities. You could do this using paper drawings or collages around a big table, or talk through the steps and have participants 'draw along' collectively in the same room or separately wherever they are.

You will need to brainstorm a list of possible plagues for the Trouble Comes in Threes activity, or use the one from earlier in this document. It is not necessary, but can be visually pleasing, to arrange these in a Bingo-style acrostic card with all the starting letters spelling out PLAGUE, as we did on the Miro board when we ran our sessions. These are to remain secret from the whole group, so ensure you can keep them covered or somewhere separate so that only the Three Riders can see them when appropriate (the whole group can look at them at the end if they wish.)

It can be helpful to have a list of creative prompts for the possible things people want to put in their plague kits during the Backpack Building activity, to get beyond the practical and picayune things like "medication supply" and "canned food." We used emojis and pictures on our Miro board to encourage participants to think creatively; you could also use pictures cut out from magazines or simply stress in your instructions that these are meant to be personally meaningful, not merely practical. It can be helpful to have a little visual prompt (a worksheet with a backpack printed on it) to give participants an object around which to focus their energy during the session.

In the Session

Activity 1 Welcome & Intro



How-to

We begin at the Campfire of Safety. Set out intentions, introduce the visual tools you will be using (eg. a Miro board) run through the agenda and make any agreements which need making.

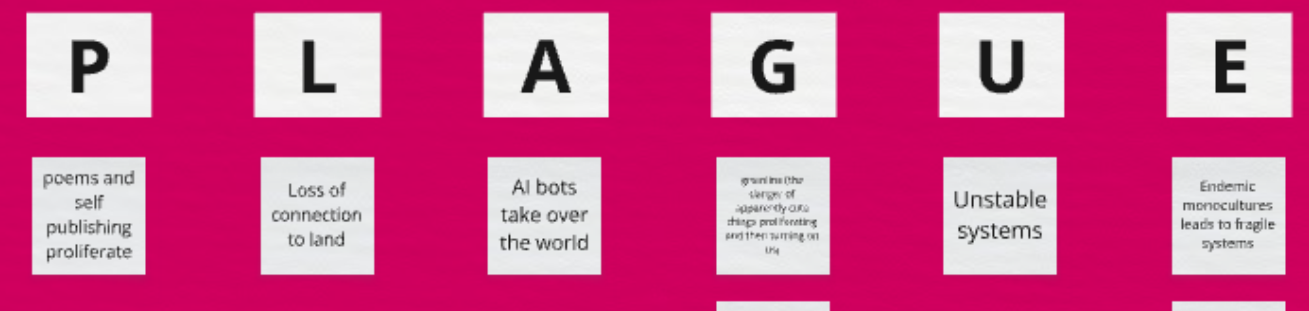
Introduce a brief icebreaker such as your name, where you are dialling in from, and your favourite plague. (You'd be surprised at how easily people can come up with a favourite plague, especially if they've been invited to this session in advance and had the opportunity to be plague-primed.)

Purpose

Familiarise participants with the workshop environment (physical or virtual.)

Ensure participants feel safe and capable enough to participate fully.

Activity 2 Three Riders and Ring Around the Rosie



How-to

The facilitator plus three (gender-neutral) Riders of the Apocalypse ride off from the Campfire of Safety to the list of plagues (as a breakout room or at a separate table or zone in a physical room.) Three riders because “trouble comes in threes” per the next activity. Each Rider chooses one plague to carry forward to the next activity. Riders or Facilitators carry the three choices into the next area where group work is taking place. (Where there is no physical setup, the Facilitator can just keep a list and write these on a board, large sheet of paper, or in the chat for the next exercise.)

If there is a second facilitator (or a friendly volunteer from the group who can read out the prompt), the remainder of the group stays around the Campfire, continuing general conversation around the prompt question: “Throughout history, people used posies of herbs to avoid noxious fumes and ‘bad air’ associated with the transition of illnesses – hence the long noses of plague doctors’ masks and the “pocket full of posies” in the children’s nursery rhyme Ring Around the Rosie. What are your “posies” that you use to ward off tough times?”

If it is not possible to break into groups (for example, if you are running this as a breakout group from a larger session) then everyone comes along for the Three Riders activity but only the Three Riders are allowed to speak or interact during that portion of the workshop: everyone else is under a “plague of silence” until moving on to the next activity. You do not run the “Ring Around the Rosie” activity, or you can run “Ring Around the Rosie” as your introductory icebreaker before moving to Three Riders.

Purpose

Choose the plague prompts for the next activity.

Keep choosing snappy and prevent getting bogged down by large-group discussion.

Keep a sense of mystery and confusion around the plagues, in keeping with the disruptive theme.

Build camaraderie around the campfire.

Activity 3 Trouble Comes in Threes

RIDER 1



RIDER 2



RIDER 3



How-to

All participants reconvene. Each Rider reads aloud the plague they have chosen. All participants discuss the ramifications for this distinct combination of plagues and what terrible forces this mega-plague might unleash. Hilarity (or possibly deep sorrow) ensues. Encourage participants to develop a rich, juicy picture of what this world would be like, and what it would be like to live in. Add as much sensory detail as possible and consider the ramifications – use PESTLE-V or other prompting frameworks to get participants thinking about the multiple domains of life which this mega-plague will impact. Facilitators capture as much of the discussion as possible for post-session scenario-building.

Purpose

Create a feedback loop of ideas that bounce off one another to spark creative thinking among participants.

Develop a rich sensory picture of this mega-plague to contextualise the following activity.

Activity 4 Backpack Building



How-to

This activity can be run individually, in pairs or small groups, or in plenary. Participants create a backpack (their own, or a shared one) full of the things they would want in their Plague Kit.

Facilitators emphasise that we assume everyone is already a good citizen familiar with the emergency kit instructions for their local municipality – participants already have a standard emergency kit! (See, for example, the [CDC's 'zombie pandemic' emergency prep document](#).) This plague preparedness kit, your backpack, is what the unique flower of yourself would bring

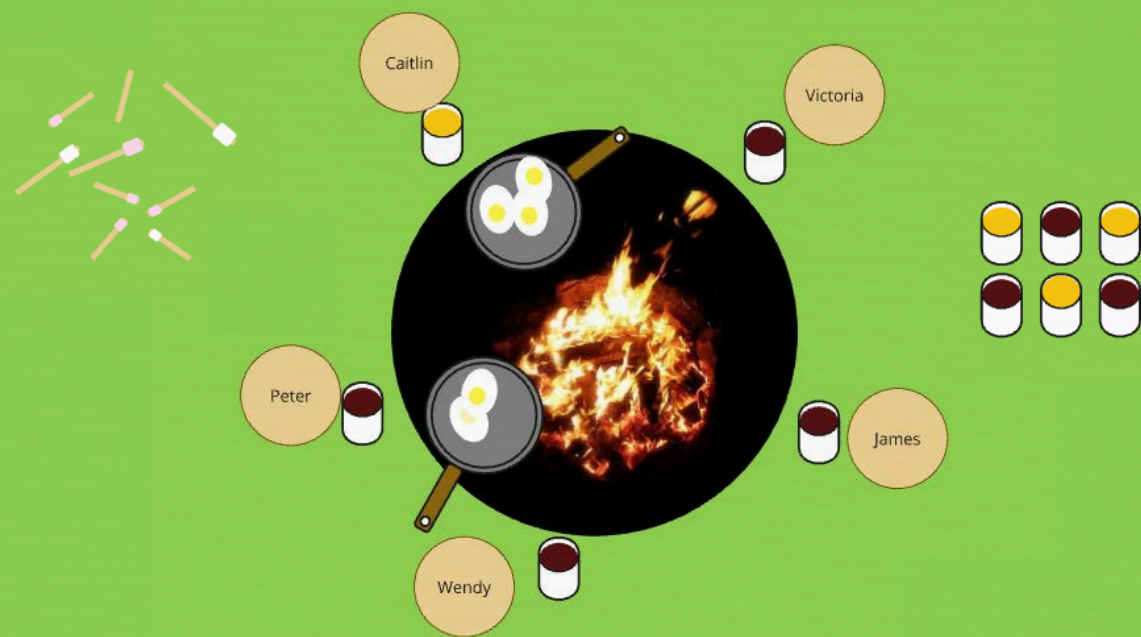
to a plague or shock – specifically, the mega-plague devised in the previous activity.

Facilitators capture as much of the discussion as possible for post-session scenario-building.

Purpose

Elicit items that have personal meaning for participants’ sense of humanity – and why! The why is very important: not only for writing a good scenario after, but to help participants process their own values and guiding principles which are emerging from the discussion.

Activity 5 Campfire Stories and Closing



How-to

We return to the Campfire of Safety. Facilitators share any close-out practicalities that need discussed (eg. where and how outputs from this meeting will be shared; reiterating any agreements made at the start like [Chatham House Rule](#) etc.) Thank everyone!

Participants share a brief word or phrase about what is resonating for them after the activity, and/or one item that they are taking back with them from their imaginary kit into the real world.

Where possible, facilitators stay on for an informal chat with anyone who wants to remain around the Campfire of Safety for a bit longer.

Purpose

Ensure participants are ready to step back into their everyday lives.
Maintain agreements made earlier to solidify a sense of safety and trust.

Consolidate participants’ learning and sense of magic from the session.

Make the learning applicable immediately.

After the Session

You may not need to offer any follow-up from your Plague Huddle. We find it useful and informative to capture and circulate narrative versions of the mega-plague scenario participants devised together, as well as the contents of their backpacks, to help consolidate their thinking and deepen their reflective practice. These are also useful artefacts to spark carry-forward conversations with people who weren't at the Huddle. This can be done through descriptive analysis, as in Wendy's scenario above, or through more narratively imaginative techniques, as in Caitlin's short story. Both are valid and can be used together – and these are only two of many possible ways to present the information generated during your session.

We hope this has been a thought-provoking and useful guide for you - we love to hear how people are using, remixing, and exploring our work.

If you've used it yourself, please drop us a line at hello@hyphae.world to let us know how you're using and adapting this work.

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Our gratitude to the imaginative plague-o-nauts who joined us for the first Plague Season Huddle on 25 March 2025, whose insightful contributions made this report possible.		
Hyphae is a futures and foresight consultancy equipped to help you solve problems from the personal to the planetary.		
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