some sort of "game" by Rob Northrup

If humanity had been enslaved by robots, as depicted in the movie Robot Holocaust, why do we see a robot pickpocket stealing from humans in the first scene? They can take over the world but they can't eradicate poverty or kleptomania from their own people? Wouldn't it be nice if the hero just called bullshit on that and started the movie over with a setting that won't fall apart in the first five minutes?

Now you can!

Robot Hobocaust is a fast beer-and-pretzels game with a little role-playing. It can be scaled down to almost no prep time, or it can be used as a meta-game on top of other existing tabletop rpg systems. Players create worlds[1] and characters, then battle for control of the setting.

**What You Need To Play**
- one VCR or DVD player with a time elapsed counter, capable of fast forward.
- one videotape or DVD to fuel your machine.
- three to six players would be ideal.

**Creation**
Each player writes three sentences describing the setting of his world. Could be sci-fi or fantasy or anything really, cartoons, soap operas, the latest entry in Oprah's Book Club[2], although picturing the titles that crawl down at the start of a movie is optimal. For example:

"The last city still stood.
The remaining home of what was
left of the civilization of New Terra.
The society had been all but destroyed by the
Robot Rebellion of '33. When the Robots had turned
on their masters by the billions, the ensuing chaos led
to a radiation spill, far more deadly than any nuclear warfare.
The World had been brought to its knees by the --
ROBOT HOLOCAUST.[3]"

The poor example above uses more than three sentences, but it also shows why that's a good limit. Your fellow players would be snoring by the time you mention the Robot Rebellion of '33.

If you can't think of something original, use a movie or story you like, or combine a couple of stories. How 'bout The Highlander fighting to bring down SkyNet?

The fun of this game (if any) is jumping between different settings and situations, so it will be more fun if everyone picks a different world or setting or situation. Compare notes, discuss and argue if you have to. Or have everyone use the same setting, see how boring that game turns out, and maybe you'll listen to me next time.

Add flavor to your title crawl by using jargon unique to your setting:

"... a being virtually identical to a human -- known as a *Replicant* or *Skinjob.*"

"The last hope for *Middle Earth* is a group of small, hairy-footed humanoids known as *Hobbits*."

After you've built an entire world in three sentences, describe the conflict: what groups or individuals are fighting for control of this world?

Examples:
*Robots vs. humans.*
*Zombies vs. ninjas.*[4]
*Mutants vs. Atlanteans.*
*Big Brother vs. The Resistance.*
*Zed the Enforcer vs. The Eternals of Zardoz.*
*Emperor Palpatine vs. Rainbow Brite and friends.*


**Characters**
Next write a line or two describing the faction that holds power and the rebel faction trying to overturn it. This could be expressed in terms of individuals on either side. Is it the Rebel Alliance versus the Empire, or Luke versus Darth? Seems simpler to play an individual. On the other hand, it seems more epic if you're in control of an army or nation or galactic federation.

Examples:
*"The City" is run by a computer which orders Sandmen and other loyal human operatives to eliminate dissidents and escapees.*

*Strawbonnet Sheetrock, my she's looking butch! Powerful and fragrant with drywall dust on her flowered bib overalls, she throws her beefy physique into the fight against Replicants from the Tyrell Corporation.*

Heroes aren't for everybody, so your characters could be one evil faction trying to wrestle control from some other evil faction. The faction in power could be good guys and the rebels could be evil, although it gets weird if the players haven't all decided to play bad guy rebels. You may end up with Rainbow Brite, James Bond, Darth Vader and the Three Musketeers teaming up to overthrow the Jedi Council.

The personality details of your characters have no effect on whether you win or lose. Their function is only to sound cool or funny and help you stay in character, if that's the kind of thing you enjoy doing.

**Secret**
The faction who controls your world has some secret that will make it vulnerable, easier for the rebels to bring them down. Or it if doesn't help topple the dominant regime, the Secret should at least be shocking and awesome. Keep the Secret hidden from all other players until the time is ripe.

Examples:
*Soylent Green is people!* After everyone learns the secret, more of them will fight back.

*The Planet of the Apes is really Earth!* Not really helpful, but *God damn them all to Hell* anyway.

*Gargamel had a bad childhood!* Convince his son or his mom to help him work through the trauma and he can be turned back to goodness.

*C3PO, I am your father!* It wouldn't have changed things much, but Vader could have truthfully announced that at any point in the original trilogy. Maker, creator, father -- close enough.

The Secret has no function in the game other than to be awesome or funny in itself, and to signal that the controlling faction is on its last legs.


**Fight**
Choose one player's world randomly as the starting setting. Read the appropriate title crawl description and conflict for that setting. There is no referee or game master, only the setting established in those few sentences, so don't let the creator of that world try to add more rules as you go.

The rebel characters from different worlds or settings have come to help topple the dominant faction. Perhaps they stumbled into a dimensional portal like Richard Hatch and Kay Lenz in [Prisoners of the Lost Universe](#). It matters not.

The way to determine who wins each round of fighting is to play War using the counter on your VCR or DVD player. Here's how:

Procure a video playing device that displays time elapsed down to the second, or fraction of a second. It should also be capable of fast forward. The movie could be related to one of the worlds described by players, but doesn't have to be. (When I say "player," I mean a person who plays this game, not a device that plays a movie.)

One player faces away from the display, or blindfolded. Any of the other players advances the movie to a spot in the middle or a few minutes into the movie. The player facing away hits fast-forward, waits a moment, then takes a guess at the best time to stop it, hoping for **the highest number in the lowest digit on the time counter**.

For example, if player Scaramouche stops the counter at 1 hour, 3 minutes, 59 seconds, you'd disregard all but the lowest digit. Scaramouche scored 9.

1:03:59 = score of 9
0:51:25 = score of 5
0:00:02 = score of 2
0:00:00.19 = score of 9

The point of this exercise is to generate a number that's almost random with no precise control

by the player. That's why the player has to turn away and why an opponent advances the movie to some unknown spot first. Just like with cards and dice and wheels of fortune, you get the illusion of exercising some control or influence on the outcome, but the result is practically random unless you have telekinesis or somehow rigged the game[5].

When using a remote control, be sure to hold it by your side like it's the hilt of your katana. Facing away from the machine and triggering the remote, gesture with it as if you're stabbing a ninja who came up behind you.

To further prevent the player from calculating how fast his machine goes and exactly where to stop it, the other players should engage in trash talk, but in character. *"The Power of Christ compels you! Father Karras is going to exorcise your storm-trooper ass!"*

Each player takes a turn. Highest number wins the round. In case the highest number is a tie, the players who tied take more turns until someone wins the round decisively.

If the player representing the starting world wins, then everyone stays in that world for another round. If any other player wins the round, the game moves on to the winner's world. Read aloud the title crawl description and conflict of the new world or setting.

**Victory Conditions**
After three rounds won by the same player, the secret of that player's world is revealed (read aloud), signaling the game is almost over in that world. After four rounds won by the same player, the game is over. It doesn't have to be three and four rounds won in a row, just three and four rounds total won by the same player.

The dominant power in that world has been overthrown by all the players, and the winning player was able to keep everyone's interest until the end of her story.

# The End

## DVD EXTRAS: Alternate Versions.

**The instant version**
You're watching a movie on some pausable medium (VHS, DVD, DVR, WMV?) with some friends. The movie is so bad, you'd rather play a game than watch it. Why not break into a game of **Robot Hobocaust**? Pause the movie. Everybody declare a character from a widely known movie or book or comic or story. If it's well-known, then the setting and conflict is implied by the character you choose. You're playing Inspector Gadget, so everybody knows that the world is cartoony espionage and the conflict is with Dr. Claw and M.A.D. Start a fight round using the movie you were watching. Setting changes to the winner's world. Play on. If you can't think of a big revelatory secret from the movie or story where your world is set, just yell "Soylent Green is people!" or "Uno!" or something after you win your third round.

**The role-playing version.**
Robot Hobocaust could be played as a meta-game using other randomizing elements. Instead of using VCR or DVD, you could play a hand of Gin Rummy to determine who wins each round. Or

for tabletop gamers who like game mastering, you could pick a system, maybe RISUS or d20. Each player prepares one rebel character and one stock enforcer for the status quo powers. For example, you might be fighting to liberate Chile from Augusto Pinochet in 1974, but the dictator isn't going to fight you himself. He'll send soldiers or secret police to disappear you. Or if you want a powerful enemy like the Emperor of a galaxy far, far away, the enforcer character could be stats for him and for some of his henchmen who have similar powers.

Each player creates three game encounters for their world using the stock enforcer stats for various characters. In this version, each player serves as game master for his world. You'll have to work your own game mastering skills in deciding how difficult to make the enforcer characters in each encounter. I'd guess if the enforcer characters are the same level or equally matched to the rebel characters who are fighting them, then there should be as many enforcers across all three encounters as there are players. A game with four players might fight one enforcer in the first round, one enforcer in the second round, and two in the final round. That way they'd have some chance of surviving to the end.

This could still deplete characters fairly rapidly, since they might be fighting in different worlds. You might consider having characters fully healed between encounters, or fully healed when they jump to another world, or keep different stats for each world. For example, your character takes 4 points of damage fighting Nazi zombies, another 5 points of damage fighting orcs, and 7 points of damage fighting another round of Nazi zombies. She'd be down by 11 points in the Nazi zombie world, only down by 5 points in the orc-ruled world, and unharmed in the other worlds.

For games that spell out characters' health or hit points in detail, the round is won by the first player or faction to reduce one enemy by half their health or hit points. Either the characters disappear to another world before killing their opponents, or the successful enforcers cut off their attack and leave the injured rebel characters to face the next encounter.

For games that don't spell out characters' health or hit points in detail, where fights are resolved by a win-or-lose roll, then the first player or enforcer to win a fight wins the round. Not sure how this will work in a system without Initiative. Let me know if you come up with an idea.

To keep it from dragging across several game sessions, this version of Robot Hobocaust comes to The Secret after one player wins two rounds, and ends when one player wins three rounds.


**Footnotes.**
1. It would be a drastic overstatement to call Robot Hobocaust a "world-building" game. More like a *title crawl exposition dumping* game. Not a very enticing tagline, but it fits.
2. I'm trying to figure how *Love in the Time of Cholera* by Gabriel García Márquez could be spelled out as a conflict, but I can't quite capture it. The rebel protagonist is obviously dude trying to win the love of this woman. I'm not sure if the thing he's struggling against is the will of the woman or the family power structure and society that keeps them apart, or all of those things. Or we could do *One Hundred Years of Solitude* instead!
3. For some reason, these opening lines from *Robot Holocaust* were narrated, not written on the screen like *Star Wars* or *The Phantom Empire*.
4. Yeah, I know, you want the conflict to be *pirates vs. ninjas vs. zombies vs. robots vs. clowns*. Don't try to fit that all into one world. Convince the other players to go along with it and set one world as pirates vs. ninjas, another as zombies vs. robots, clowns vs. monkeys, etc. They'll all fight each when the game is on.
5. Your mileage may vary! Since machines differ, you may need to test a round or two to find out whether your Pause or Stop button works better for this game. Pick the one that has a more sensitive hair-trigger.

**Design notes.**
Would a "HOBOCAUST" involve hoboes as perpetrators or as targets? Would a "ROBOT HOBOCAUST" involve hoboes massacred by robots, or massacres carried out by robot hoboes? We may never know. Please drop me a line if you have an opinion, or any comments or questions or suggestions or torches or pitchforks to share. I'm at deidzoeb13@yahoo.com as well as http://evilbobdayjob.tripod.com.

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The "Robot Hobocaust" logo uses an image of Bela Lugosi struggling with his robot from The Phantom Creeps (public domain, I think). The logo background is a reddened version of "Landscape, dublin bay" by flickr user *razee*, some rights reserved under a Creative Commons Attribution 2.0 license.