You are walking through the desert. The land itself clings to you, sapping your strength, heat and sand urging you to lay down and join them.

In the distance is a city. It shines like a jewel, more solid than the shifting sands. It is the only evidence that you are not alone in this world.

But perhaps the desert isn't truly a desert. Perhaps you are merely trapped in a nightmare, searching for a way out. Perhaps you walk through the wilderness of your own mind, seeking a way back to reality. Perhaps you're dead.

Will you make it?

Desert Journey

Setup

Desert Journey requires at least 2 players, a Journeyer and a Guide. Other players, if there are any, make up The Voices (the game is better with at least a couple of Voices).

Some 6-sided dice will be required. It may help if a few are of a different color.

The Journeyer must have a character to portray, and in fact this character is also referred to as "the Journeyer". It is entirely possible to adapt an existing character, such as a character from another roleplaying game, but it is equally possible to create one for *Desert Journey*.

The Guide does not need a character, nor do The Voices. As such, "you" in this game refers to the Journeyer.

Creating a Journeyer Character

The Journeyer is defined by a collection of Traits, 2 Traits to begin with. (There will be ample opportunity to add more Traits during play.) Each Trait has a type (City, Desert), a sentence and a value.

First, choose one City trait. This represents the Journeyer's drive to escape the Desert. It must start with "I want to". This Trait has a starting value of 3. Examples: "I want to see my family", "I want to get revenge", "I want to do all the things I haven't done yet".

Next, choose one Desert trait. This represents the forces holding the Journeyer back. It must start with "I don't want to face". It will most likely be dependent on the incident that brought the Journeyer to the Desert, but it could be mysterious. This Trait has a starting value of 1. Examples: "I don't want to face any more pain", "I don't want to face judgement", "I don't want to face her again".

You start with 0 Edge Points, and there are no Traits associated with them. More on Edge Points later.

In terms of mechanics, the character is now complete. You may add additional details if you wish, but these details do not have gameplay effects until they become Traits.

Play

Starting with the Journeyer, the Journeyer and Guide alternately narrate scenes dealing with incidents that happened in the Journeyer's previous life...or that might have, or that shouldn't have. The Journeyer starts their scenes with "I remember when I". The Guide starts theirs with "You recall that". When the Guide feels the time is appropriate, they call for a Challenge by saying "Then you realize something". Whoever started the scene chooses the type of Challenge from the list below; Journeyers can only choose Journeyer Challenges, and Guides can only choose Guide Challenges. Once the Challenge is resolved, if the game is not over, the Guide says "And the knowledge stays with you". Then the scene is complete and the other player starts a scene.

Challenges

All the rules are to be read by the Journeyer. For example, "Choose a City Trait" means that the Journeyer chooses one.

The Challenges are given as one number vs. another number. For each number, roll that many 6-sided dice; any showing more than 3 are successes. The side accumulating more successes wins; Journeyer decides who wins in ties.

Edge Points can give you bonuses to Challenges, but they're risky if you accumulate too many. **To use Edge on a roll:** Roll an additional number of dice equal to your Edge Points (not less than, equal!). If any of these "Edge Dice" come up 1, run an Edge Challenge after resolving the current Challenge. Edge may be used on any Challenge except Edge Challenges; it is always the Journeyer's decision whether or not to use it, and it always works in the Journeyer's favor. Edge represents the border and interface between City and Desert, where they become something more, where the Journeyer comes to understand their condition in a supernatural manner.

Journeyer Challenges

Journey Challenge: Choose a City Trait vs. Guide chooses a Desert Trait. Win, get 1 new City Trait. Lose, the Guide increases chosen Desert Trait's value by 1.

Introspection Challenge: Number of City Traits vs. number of Desert Traits. Increase 1 City Trait by 1 (whatever the outcome). Win, get 1 Edge Point; Lose, the Guide creates 1 new Desert Trait.

Humanity Challenge: Choose a City Trait + Edge Points vs. Guide chooses a Desert Trait. Win, lose 1 Edge Point and the Guide increases one Desert Trait by 1. Lose, gain 1 Edge Point and an Edge Challenge is triggered.

Guide Challenges

Desert Challenge: Number of Desert Traits vs. number of City Traits. Guide wins, get a new Desert Trait. Lose, get 1 Edge Point.

Nightmare Challenge: Choose a City Trait vs. Guide chooses a Desert Trait. Guide increases one Desert Trait by 1 (whatever the outcome). Guide wins, get 1 Edge Point. Lose, increase one City Trait by 1.

Entropy Challenge: Guide chooses a Desert Trait + Edge Points vs. choosea City Trait. Win, lose 1 Edge Point and increase a City Trait by 1. Lose, gain 1 Edge Point and an Edge Challenge is triggered.

Edge Challenges

Choose a City Trait + Guide chooses a Desert Trait, vs. Edge Points. If the Edge wins, the game ends.

The Voices

The Voices are free to discuss and offer any suggestions they wish. At any time, the Journeyer may ask The Voices to be quiet. This request lasts until the next "Then you realize something" or "The knowledge stays with you".

For any Challenge, The Voices may add their weight to one side or the other. This results in a +1 bonus to the chosen side. The Voices must vote on which side to give a bonus to; if at least one member of The Voices wishes to give a bonus, one is given; if all abstain, there is no bonus. Ties are decided by the Journeyer.

Endgame

When the Journeyer has at least three City Traits, they may call for an Endgame Challenge. When the Journeyer has at least five Desert Traits, the Guide may call for an Endgame Challenge.

Endgame Challenge: Sum of all City Traits + number of City Traits vs. sum of all Desert Traits + number of Desert Traits. The Journeyer may add Edge for a bonus to *either side*.

If whoever called for the Challenge wins, the game ends in their favor. A Journeyer makes it back home; a Guide escorts the Journeyer into the wastes for eternity. If the player who called for the scene did not win, the other player increases 1 of appropriate Trait (City for Journeyer

win, Desert for Guide win). *However*, if the player calling for the scene did not win **and** a 1 showed up on an Edge die (which must have been called for by the Journeyer), an Edge Endgame occurs.

Edge Endgame: If the Edge wins an Edge Challenge, or if Edge dice were activated during a failed Endgame Challenge, the Journeyer is stuck between the City and the Desert. They exist in some combination of dream and waking, of life and death.

Variants

More Journeyers

It's possible for each player to have a Journeyer and be each others' Guides. Just be sure that each *character* alternates between Journeyer and Guide scenes. It's also possible to have more complicated arrangements if there are more than two players. If you try it, let me know how it works.

Using *Desert Journey* With Other Games

Desert Journey can be a good way to spice up a journey between life and death. In some games, life is cheap and resurrection is plentiful, but that doesn't mean it has to go smoothly every time. Find one desire that motivates the character to come back to life, add "I don't want to face any more pain" and you're set. A resurrectee who makes it to the City comes back with a renewed vigor for life. Being escorted into the Desert may mean the spell failed, but in that type of game players may get upset by "wasted resources"; perhaps a "failed" *Desert Journey* simply means the player is marked by the trauma of returning from death.

And if the Edge wins? Any character aware of resurrection spells probably lives in a world with beings stuck between life and death...

[John Evans](#)

[For Game Chef 2010](#)

Sources (also known as much better games that I tried to imitate): [Polaris: Chivalric Tragedy of the Utmost North](#) and [My Life With Master](#)