



CEREBOS

THE CRYSTAL CITY

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INTRODUCTION

Cerebos, The Crystal City is a tragicomic roleplaying game about exploration and self-actualization. It's also about riding the rails, visiting improbable cities, and experiencing uncommon vistas. It's about homesickness and lumpy beds and brand new stew and finding a satisfying coda for the broken song in your heart.

Cerebos is farther from the City by the Sea than the maps say. No roads lead there. Not from the sea. It is across the desert, past the common delights of glass and spice. In the City by the Sea, aged mothers by their hearths quarrel with the horn-knuckled fisherfolk on many particulars. In this they agree: there is no stopping those who search for Cerebos. They are pilgrims on an alchemical timetable. Only by testing themselves in the world's crucible can these desperate travelers transform their memories into something greater.

Each traveler carries physical touchstones, fleeting moments trapped within shards of eternity. Who pities the youth bound by the scent of an undying gardenia? What of the stranger chained to a pocketwatch promise? We can only watch as they drift further from humanity and disappear into the past. They travel in the only direction they're able: toward Cerebos, the Crystal City.

The journey begins at a railway terminus in the middle of the desert. The travelers are headed to the Crystal City, where they learn the truth about what drives them. Along the way, they experience flashbacks, overcome unexpected events, and disembark from the train to encounter surreal stops.

Over their journeys, the travelers confront their connections to the past. They learn who they were and who they wish to be.

SUMMARY

The concept of “strange lands” (like that of “home ground”) has some holes in it, presents new questions. Are “strange lands” an objective geographic reality, or a mental construct in constant flux?

Robert Bolaño, “Exiles”

Every journey to Cerebos takes a different route, but the underlying structure is similar. There is a desert. There are travelers. They may or may not get along. There is a train. The story ties these elements together, while the rules of the game drive the story. They promote change and provide a fate to challenge. And just as a train demands rails, a story demands a summary.

1. SETUP.

Determine who you are and where you've been. These steps can happen before the session begins. If you're planning an Adventure! or a Musical Journey Through Space, pre-planning helps prepare for the conductor's particular quirks.

- a. Determine if you're playing with a gamemaster (GM). The GM is the story's engineer: a player without a traveler of their own, who keeps the narrative going without railroading the other players.
- b. Select a [conductor](#) (p. 13). Discuss the story's scale, tone, and weirdness.
- c. Each player selects three touchstones for their character. Each of these objects begins with a single rank 1 [Trait](#) (p. 20). (e.g. Failed Novelist, Feared by Children, Military Surgeon)
- d. Name your character. This name is a temporary convenience that may change along with you. Many travelers prefer descriptions like the Duke of Maps, the nervous woman, or the Umbrella Dowager. Maybe another traveler selects one for you.
- e. All players receive a [secret goal](#) (p. 21) – the reason they left the City by the Sea – from the player to their right. Display the goal on a folded piece of paper so all players except for the one it describes can read it.
- f. Work with your group or ask the GM to create [an Almanac and an Atlas](#) (p. 37).

2. THE FIRST LEG.

The travelers meet at a train station after crossing an interminable desert. This phase ends after any traveler has three flashbacks. Reality is fluid here.

- a. Introduce your character and set the scene. Each player decides one or more set of details. Divide them up as evenly as possible.
 - i. What are the train and the station like? The Azure Line, the Zodiac Express 108, and the Desolation Line all serve different clientele and have different amenities.
 - ii. Which of the travelers have a chance encounter at the station? How does it start?
 - iii. Is there a price to ride? Maybe the travelers have prepaid tickets, but some lines only accept stranger fares. If a passenger is unwilling (or unable) to pay, going bindlestiff may be the only option.
 - iv. Does the train have any other passengers? What are they doing?
- b. The train departs. Roll for one [Event](#) (p. 27) to start with a bang.
- c. Players take turns selecting [Train Actions](#) (p. 22).
- d. At Stops, everyone gets one [Stop Action](#) (p. 30).
- e. Roll for an Event each time two travelers experience [flashbacks](#) (p. 26).

3. THE SECOND LEG.

One player becomes [the Seeker](#) (p. 42). Their story's momentum draws in the other players, who become Saints or Demons.

- a. After a traveler experiences three flashbacks, they become the Seeker.
- b. Everyone else determines whether they're a [Saint or a Demon](#) (p. 44).
- c. Players continue selecting [Train Actions](#) (p. 22).
- d. At Stops, everyone gets one [Stop Action](#) (p. 30).
- e. Roll for an Event after two travelers experience [flashbacks](#) (p. 26).
- f. Each Saint and Demon shares a [Revelation](#) (p. 45) or waives the chance.

4. FINAL STOP.

The train reaches the gates of Cerebos, where the travelers face [one final danger](#) (p. 48).

5. ENDGAME.

Make an [epilogue roll](#) (p. 49). Reflect on the journey and reveal the future.

CONDUCTORS

O my neighbor, indeed we are strangers in this place,
And every stranger to a stranger is kin.

Imru' al-Qays, Diwan Imri' al-Qays

Every train has a conductor. During your time riding the rails, the conductor may be a guide, chronicler, psychopomp, or agent of order – to say nothing of the dog. If you're playing with a GM, they're responsible for the conductor once the story begins.

The conductor sets the genre of the story. If the travelers are riding a train powered by gumdrops and stardust, the stops look different than if the engine is fired by human misery. In the first instance, a dream factory would most likely be a pleasant stop where the passengers could slide down rainbows and relieve the clambakes of their youth. In a more dire setting, the same dream factory could be the site where nightmarish drones render whimsy and passion into mass-market commodities.

In the real world, the conductor is responsible for every part of the journey that doesn't involve actually operating the train: checking tickets, keeping the schedule, and interacting with the passengers and the cargo. The engineer handles the mechanical side of the operation, assisted by an engine crew of fireman (also known as stokers or coal shovelers). In the world of Cerebos, any or all of these jobs can be combined into a single conductor. However, travelers who prefer a larger number of travel companions may find solace in a larger crew.

The engineer and the conductor may be rivals with differing opinions on how to run a train, an annoyingly effective comedy duo, or even the source of trainbound intrigue.

In addition to setting the journey's genre, the conductor modifies the rules of the trip. Each conductor has four Conductor Powers. The first Power automatically influences the journey. The second and third Powers provide additional Train Actions. The final Power is a Stop Action. The conductor's Train and Stop Actions are available to all travelers. See [Train Actions \(p. 23\)](#) and [Stop Actions \(p. 31\)](#) for more details.

When selecting a conductor, it's a good idea to discuss what sort of story everyone wants to tell. Will it emphasize quiet, gentle moments of personal reflection or episodes of bombastic strangeness? What sort of violence and emotional distress are on the table, and how explicit will they be? You have control over other travelers' pasts, so make sure to play within the boundaries they've created.

Adventure!

[...] Come, my friends
'Tis not too late to seek a newer world.
Push off, and sitting well in order smite
The sounding furrows; for my purpose holds
To sail beyond the sunset, and the baths
Of all the western stars, until I die.

Alfred, Lord Tennyson. "Ulysses"

This conductor to Adventure! is a quick-witted storyteller dressed in clothing unlike anything worn by his passengers. His cabin is festooned with mementos, most of which were won in games of chance. Some passengers say the train itself is part of these winnings.

Atlas Obscura (Automatic)

Before the journey begins, everyone works together to create a new Stop or Event table. It replaces one of the standard twelve tables for this journey. Keep a copy of the table in a journal. Trade journals with other *Cerebos* players when the opportunity arises.

Every Port in a Storm (Train)

As the Stop the Train action, but roll twice on the Atlas. Pick the Stop of your choice. An unexpected peril deals one Damage to a randomly determined traveler.

Easy Confidence (Train)

Share a story related to a fellow passenger or a previous Stop with a traveler. The next time you team up with this traveler to make a Trait check, receive a +1 bonus to your Trait check.

Naturalist's Pen (Stop)

Sketch a map or detail from the Stop in your journal. If anyone collects a Keepsake from this Stop, remove one Momentum from two different touchstones.

TOUCHSTONES AND TRAITS

Against all reason, you carry three touchstones. These objects define you and link you to your past. They may be ordinary or ornate, mass-produced or bespoke. No matter what your touchstone looks like or how it can be used, it's also a powerful totem. To lose this treasure is to lose yourself – at least for now.

- ◆ A human skull inside a leather case
- ◆ A smart orchestra-skin jacket
- ◆ A bottle holding two pills
- ◆ Half of a delicate work of art
- ◆ A sealed locket
- ◆ A battered coffin
- ◆ A sack of seeds
- ◆ An old-fashioned key
- ◆ A single, ornate chess piece
- ◆ A comic magazine
- ◆ A stained religious icon
- ◆ An ordinary pocket knife
- ◆ An officer's boots
- ◆ A letter from a forgotten friend
- ◆ A large bag of money
- ◆ A flower that has only started to wilt
- ◆ An iron puzzle box
- ◆ A gun containing a single bullet
- ◆ The word "Corinth" on a paper scrap
- ◆ A fragment of lewd pottery
- ◆ A faded photograph of a man wearing a feathered hat
- ◆ A feathered hat
- ◆ An unidentifiable scale or feather
- ◆ A knife forged from a rail spike
- ◆ A knot of frog jasper
- ◆ A quiche recipe

Feel free to use strange sculptures or unexpected teeth you've discovered on your own journeys as inspiration.

Each of your three touchstones begins with a rank 1 Trait. A Trait is an element of your personality that is demonstrated by the touchstone. It can be a skill, attitude, relationship, ideology, or anything else that suggests how your traveler solves problems.

There is no conclusive list of Traits or Trait categories, since they are generated during play. Some rules refer to Trait categories like "skill-focused" Traits. These ad hoc descriptions differentiate Traits that refer to one element of a character (such as their skills) from another (such as their emotional connections).

Traits may gain and lose ranks during play. A trait that loses all its ranks still exists, but its narrative potential has been tapped. For more information on how Traits are used, see [Trait Checks](#) (p. 38).

STOPS AND EVENTS

The catalog of forms is infinite. For as long as forms have yet to find their city, new cities will continue to be born. The end of the city begins at the point where forms exhaust their variety and come apart.

Italo Calvino, *Invisible Cities*

You cannot step twice into the same desert. The wind is always in flux and travelers change. Like sands in the hourglass, so are the days of our lives. On the plus side, every trip to Cerebos comes with the opportunity to encounter new lands. Make the most of it!

At the start of each game, work with your group to create an Almanac of six Event tables and an Atlas of six Stop tables. **Handout #1**, which was distributed with this book, contains several. Additional tables can be downloaded from the Penguin King Games website at penguinking.com.

For example, if you have access to six Stop tables and six Event tables you don't have a lot of choice when creating your Atlas and your Almanac. However, if your conductor has the Atlas Obscura ability, replace one of these Stop or Event tables with one you created with your fellow travelers.

Once the journey begins, you will occasionally be directed to roll on the Almanac or Atlas. First roll 1d6 to determine which table to roll. Then roll another 1d6 to see which entry you encounter.

TRAIT CHECKS

As invisible as all theatrical machinery, the locomotive organizes from afar all the echoes of its work. Even if it is discreet and indirect, its orchestra indicates what makes history, and, like a rumor, guarantees that there is still some history. There is also an accidental element in it. Jolts, brakings, surprises arise from this motor of the system.

It not only divides spectators and beings, but also connects them; it is a mobile symbol between them, a tireless shifter, producing changes in the relationships between immobile elements.

Michel de Certeau, "Railway Navigation and Incarceration"

When conflict occurs, roll 2d6 and consult the Trait Check table. You can permanently spend a rank in a Trait to reroll one die. As long as a Trait still has ranks, it can be drawn upon multiple times per Trait check. You can also draw on multiple different Traits to diversify your approach. If a Trait's rank is reduced to zero in this way, don't remove it. Traits without any ranks still exist. They're just resting their eyes.

2-5	Setback	You do not succeed. Take one Damage (p. 41) .
6-8	Partial Success	Not everything you hope for happens. Either you give it 60% effort, or you get what you want but something unfortunate also happens. It's a "yes, but..." or "no, but..." situation. Gain two Momentum or one Damage. It's your choice – but you can't choose to gain Momentum if the Trait is attached to a keepsake, if you've given away the related touchstone, or if you roll without using a Trait. The GM (or your group) may decide that narrative consequences replace the Damage or Momentum gain.
9-10	Success	Nothing fancy here. You did it! The Danger decreases by 1.
11-12	Inspired Success!	You have a resounding success. Something in the way that you accomplished this reminds you of your past life, strengthening the ties between who you were and who you are. The Danger decreases by 2.

Rolling doubles after using a Trait to reroll earns one Momentum on the attached touchstone. Drawing too heavily on who you were limits who you can become.

If you've already given away a touchstone, you can use its attached Traits with no risk of gaining further Momentum. Your memories blossom as you explore new applications for old talents.

The player who rolls the dice narrates the results of their Trait check, but other players are welcome to make suggestions. Many groups prefer to have a GM narrate their Setbacks and Partial Successes to add an extra element of surprise to the story.

Working together is possible in a narrative sense, but there aren't any rules to govern team-ups. No matter how many friends you make on your journey, there's a point where you're going to be alone. This isn't necessarily the cold, unconnected loneliness of the miser in his tilted garret. It's also the unencumbered responsibility for one's actions.

Working together helps in some situations. Everyone may agree in a realistic game that one person, no matter how dedicated, cannot lift a sandstone obelisk. Two people trying the same task have a chance, but only one of them makes the Trait check.

The Lepidopterist and the Hapless Oaf have become separated from their travel companions while pursuing a limner's moth through a stained glass maze, a Stop with Danger 4. In the distance they hear the Flying Manta's return whistle. Jenn, the Lepidopterist's player, uses her Stop Action for an Opportunity to reduce the Stop's Danger.

Jenn rolls 2d6 and gets a 1 and a 2. A result of 3 means she's set herself up for a setback. That won't do! She spends one rank of Sensitive Antennae, a Trait of her brass headgear, to reroll the 1. Her new results are a 2 and a 2. That's still a setback. Worse, since she rolled doubles as part of a reroll, she gains a point of Momentum on her headgear. The Oaf has a laugh.

Jenn tries one more reroll. She spends one rank of Suffers Fools Poorly, a Trait of her butterfly machete. Bristling at the Hapless Oaf's crude jests, she rushes deeper into the maze. Her new results are a 2 and a 6, a partial success. She decides to succeed at reducing the Stop's Danger to 3, but also gain two Momentum on her machete. Old habits die hard, and the pair make their way back to the Flying Manta.

RELEASING TOUCHSTONES

If you ever drop your keys into a river of molten lava, let 'em go, because man, they're gone.

Jack Handy, *Deeper Thoughts: All New, All Crispy*

Sacrificing a touchstone is a moment of personal transformation. Giving up such an important talisman requires a roll, which cannot be affected by Traits. Every two points of Momentum on the item (round down) forces a reroll of the lowest die:

2–6	Change	You break the shackles of your past and do what needs to be done. Give the touchstone to someone who needs it or rid yourself of it in another way that brings closure. Gain Contemplation, remove all Momentum from the item, and reduce all attached Traits by one rank.
7–9	Ugly Break	You get rid of the touchstone as above, but gain one Momentum on a different touchstone. If this is your final touchstone, get rid of it and take one Damage.
10–12	Stasis	The path is prepared, but you are not ready. The touchstone gains one Momentum.

This roll cannot be made until after a meaningful scene with the touchstone. This doesn't have to be anything as mechanical as a flashback, but there should be narrative weight behind the decision to huck that bust of your beloved off a cliff.

You can take one Damage to reroll one die, as long as another traveler steps in to help. This action doesn't need to be an act of kindness, as long as you're conflicted about giving up the item. Wrestling over a cursed amulet is fair game.

DAMAGE

How many travellers have I known? I cannot count.

How many corners of the earth? I cannot tell.

Now that my wanders east and west are done,

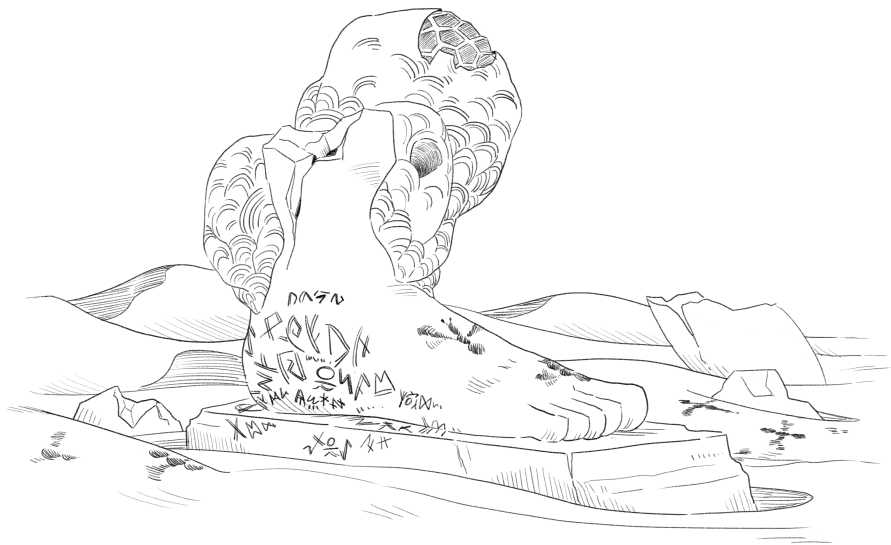
There is but one last corner left: my grave.

al-Humaydi (translated by Tim Mackintosh-Smith, *Landfalls*)

What happens if you fail at something during a stop? What's the risk? Mainly, it's in your heart. Sure, the body can falter and fall apart, but you've already shown yourself to be an engine of willpower. You can keep it together long enough to get where you're headed.

A traveler who receives their fourth Damage before the Final Stop decides whether to end their journey immediately or limp onward. Travelers who choose to continue are unable to enter Cerebos or take Actions, but can otherwise take part in the story. You're gonna carry that weight.

A [Seeker \(p. 43\)](#) who takes four Damage wasn't the true Seeker. Narrative is an imprecise science, after all. Each player rolls 1d6 and adds the number of flashbacks they've experienced. The player who rolls highest experiences a flashback and becomes the Seeker. Truly, the world works in mysterious ways.



SAINTS AND DEMONS

The monkey fiend was bold enough to rebel against Heaven,
But was subdued by the Tathagata's hand.
He endures the months and years, drinking molten copper for his thirst,
And blunts his hunger on iron pellets, serving his time.

Suffering the blows of Heaven, he undergoes torment,
Yet even in the bleakest time a happy fate awaits.
If some hero is ready to struggle for him,
One year he will go to the West in the service of the Buddha.

Wu Cheng'en, *Journey to the West* (translated by W. J. F. Jenner)

You will not find fulfillment in Cerebos. Maybe you're not ready to stop running; maybe the myth you set out to find was just that. Regardless, reaching your original goal just isn't in the cards for now. Doubt gnaws at you. It's even conceivable you're a metaphysical being intended to influence a decision of cosmic significance.

At this point your purpose (knowingly or not) is to guide the Seeker on their journey. If your assistance tips the scales, there may even be something in it for you – see [Endgame \(p. 48\)](#).

Travelers are free to determine whether they are a Saint or a Demon with the following restrictions:

1. The number of Saints and Demons is as even as possible.
2. Travelers who helped the Seeker get rid of a touchstone or disposed of more than two of their own touchstones are Demons unless they convince the players otherwise.
3. Travelers who provoked more than one flashback to the Seeker or dealt the Seeker Damage are Saints unless they convince the players otherwise.
4. Travelers who enjoy bitter tastes are Demons unless they provide an alternate reason.
5. Travelers who talk in their sleep are Saints unless they offer an alternate reason.

REVELATIONS

Here in Um-Helat there is no hunger: not among the people, and not for the migrating birds and butterflies when they dip down for a taste of savory nectar. And so farmers are particularly celebrated on the Day of Good Birds.

N.K. Jemisin, "The Ones Who Stay and Fight"

Saints and Demons can create a new Stop or Event that isn't on any random table. This is called a Revelation. These occurrences reflect the guide's worldview or shed further light on the Seeker's journey. As a result, Saints and Demons have a lot of influence over Cerebos itself.

Revelations cost Momentum. In other words, a Revelation gives you a chance to spend all of the Momentum you picked up earlier in your journey.

