

Last Steps On Mars

We went to Mars. We were told we won't go back.

A roleplay game by Julian Blechner, inspired by and adapted from "One Small Step" by Adam Flynn

Last Steps On Mars is a near-future speculative hopepunk sci-fi game about a rescue mission to Mars whose primary objective failed. Players take on roles of the mission crew and explore their connections as they grapple with what happened on the mission. The game is framed as mission briefings, played chronologically in reverse. It starts with a debriefing fresh out of stasis pods after arriving back on Earth, memories clouded with short-term amnesia of the entire mission and training. Scenes play out backwards as players improvise characters recalling their memories, progressing all the way back to the initial mission briefing. During this time, characters will rediscover the bonds they formed during the training and mission.

SETUP

Players: 4-6, one of which should be the facilitator. The facilitator will play the role of Ship Psychologist. They will also be in charge of timekeeping and leading the reading of pages 1 and 2 of this document.

Time: 10-20 minutes for prep, 60-120 minutes for play

Content Warnings: Death (including one player), Isolation, Confined Spaces

Materials (if in-person): Name badges and a marker. Print and cut out the character sheets. Use numbers 1 through however many players.

Prop ideas (optional): A helmet or two, a one-ear headset, flexible dryer tubing, a broom handle, pillows, round objects of varying sizes, tin cans, a small stepladder, personal objects for each character.

Playspace: This can be played in-person or online.

This game is best done in a non-brightly-lit room. Players can opt to keep the room cooler than room temperature (and wear appropriate clothing) to suggest the loneliness of the void and the fragility of one's protection against it. If you'd like music, Brian Eno's album *Apollo* is recommended during play - in reverse track order.

In-person: Chairs for each player, angled towards each other, and an additional open space for reenactments.

Online: Video conference for players to meet together. Provide a copy of page 5 - character sheets - to players. As needed, you may share these game materials, but do not read ahead past "POINT OF NO RETURN"!

Scenes Occur in Reverse Chronological Order.

This game will play out in reverse chronological order: Return / Group Debrief, Landing, Journey, Takeoff, Training, Mission brief. Characters will start out with a sort of temporary amnesia about the mission and its training, due to coming out of status pods. As the game progresses, players will learn and improvise the remaining details of what happened. Characters do not retain knowledge from chronologically future scenes.

Safety: Please remember that players are always more important than the game! Any player can pause the game anytime by saying "CUT!", and crossing their arms in an "X" in front of them.

As a group, discuss comfort levels, any desired content limits, other safety needs, and accessibility needs players may have before play.

SETTING

It's 2030. Our rescue/salvage mission to Mars was deemed "a failure". In spite of that, nothing takes away the memories and bonds we formed. Together, we trained, journeyed, and experienced something truly special and awe-inspiring. Real-life space missions are highly documented, though there are always anomalous events, unmentioned moments, and closely-kept secrets. These memories can be related to the mission itself, or more personal ones between crew members. We will tell these stories.

It started with the *Big Enterprise 1*, or "BE-1". It's the most ambitious project in human history. BE-1 now sits idle, silent, lifeless, on the surface of Mars as a public disaster. The project was funded by Earth's most egocentric billionaires and their investors/followers, and BE-1 assembled in Earth Orbit docked with the International Space Station (ISS). Soon, it would dwarf it, with luxuries like private sleeping nooks and a common area just for meetings and recreation. It also has all the needed pieces for the 6 months of travel to Mars and 3 months of mission time in orbit. There's a cockpit, propulsion, extra radiation shielding, a small science lab, exercise equipment, hygiene and medical rooms, life support, and a cargo bay that can fit an food-truck-sized lander

officially named "Victory" but many still call it by the winning name of the Internet poll: "Poddy McPodFace". It has thrusters to return to BE-1 in orbit.

Then there's the proprietary energy core (PEC). No one on your mission knows what it really is. News about BE-1's development hinted at rapid return to Earth, cold fusion, quantum fields, nanotech, and other wild theory. Even your Mission Specialist is kept in the dark, just learning enough to retrieve it.

Of course, why build just 1 ship when one can get investors to pay for 2, for twice the cost? Your ship is nearly identical to BE-1, but with a small nuclear fission reactor instead of the PEC. Your ship was "BE-2", but when world governments got together to salvage the disaster and forcefully took over, the new ship name, "Triumph", was quickly painted on the bow. Players will be acting every scene out in Triumph, or a 1:1 training replica in Nevada, USA, Earth. If players like, the group can draw a diagram of Triumph on paper.

Triumph is officially a "rescue" mission for BE-1, which its Earth-based Mission Control lost contact during Martian atmospheric entry of the Victory lander. BE-1 lost communication moments later, as well, and neither was heard from again. Mars Satellite photos taken hours later show Victory landed intact, but no one exited. Officially, the world was told to not give up hope. Privately, BE-1 legal team relayed to Triumph mission planners that energy and life support supplies were insufficient for the 6 months it would take for Triumph to arrive to find survivors. There was never a possibility of rescue. It was *always* a salvage mission about retrieving the PEC.

CHARACTER BUILDING

We'll be building out and creating the story of Triumph's mission collaboratively. While it's entirely possible that different crewmembers will have different memories of "how it happened," players should observe the improv principles of "yes, and ..." building on others' ideas.

You were part of a very special set of people. Selected from a vast field of applicants, you spent years preparing for something you only ever got to do once, and it was an arresting, profound experience. This was a life-defining event. Taking part in it is a bond you share with the crew, one that cannot be fully understood by others.

Using characters #1 through the number of players, choose characters. Optionally, choose countries of origin. (You speak the same language.)

Choose a name and pronouns.

Pick an archetype or a detail to expand your character. Some examples:

- Barely survived an accident during mission training
- Averted an unexpected disaster with quick thinking
- Didn't follow instructions or had to take matters into their own hands
- Practical joker who had some fun during the mission
- Reputation as exceptionally disciplined and tightly wound
- Deeply changed by the experience, even more so than the other crew
- Last to set foot on Mars (last on ship)
- Spoke the first words on Mars
- Or come up with your own, based on your character

As a group, form the additional character connection to another crew.

Next, choose a personal item or two that you brought from Earth.

Finally, take a minute as a group to introduce your characters.

Now that you've finished characters, decide as a group on one crew member who will die on the return trip home. This player will still play in all of the scenes, and in the first scene roleplay a pre-recorded video message.

MODES OF PLAY

Last Steps on Mars takes place as crew briefings over six scenes with flashbacks roleplayed within these scenes. Crew members will start game with short-term amnesia of the entire mission and the training. Characters recover memories by players collaboratively improvising what occurred, in reverse chronological order. Scenes are: Debriefing, Landing on Mars, The Journey, Takeoff, Training, and finally the First Mission Briefing. Players will collaboratively create the story by inventing recalled memories during the game. This is done through two modes of play: group briefings and reenacting memories as flashback scenes.

Briefings: During the briefings, crew have gathered in the common area of the ship (or the 1:1 replica in Nevada) for discussion. The Psychologist will lead discussion, and will have a series of questions provided by Mission Control for each scene. The first and last questions are required, and the remainder are at the discretion of the player / Psychologist. During briefings, a particularly vivid or important memory may come up. Each player, once per game, may request a flashback-style reenactment of that memory. They do so by saying, "That was a particularly vivid memory!" For game flow, no more than 2 reenactments per briefing. Each briefing scene should be about 10 - 15 minutes.

Memory Reenactments: These reenactments are flashback scenes. They may be performed in fragmentary and evocative ways, and pick up on each other's statements in the style of a montage. Each reenactment should last 1-2 minutes. When a memory reenactment comes up, choose 2 or 3 players to get up and reenact that scene. (Note: Players do not necessarily have to play their own character for this.) The other players should remain seated, but will add narration to the scene; reenactors also may speak. The narrators are encouraged to take inspiration from what they're seeing from reenactors - and vice versa.

The Ship Psychologist is responsible for timekeeping and ending the scene with: "thank you for sharing that experience."

(Online play: Narrators can turn off cameras during reenactment)

SCENE TRANSITIONS AND GAME END

The Psychologist will signal an end of scene by saying "Thank you all for joining for our private group briefing session!" **The abruptness is intentional.** During the final scene, "First Mission Briefing", players will be given a choice as the final question from Mission Control. The group should talk it out, decide, and then game ends. Feel free to talk through an Epilogue as well.

Take a 5 minute restroom break and grab props or costume pieces if you like.

POINT OF NO RETURN: DO NOT READ PAST HERE UNTIL READY TO PLAY!

Once all players are ready, reads on:

(The deceased crew should sit back - if online, turn off your camera.)

Crew have just woken up minutes ago from their stasis pods, in what looks like the Triumph. You all feel very groggy. Try as you might, you cannot remember how you got here. The last thing you remember was arriving at the Mission Control facility on Earth before your very first briefing.

(Read aloud by Ship Psychologist): *Welcome back, brave crew! Your Ship Psychologist should be reading this statement. We at Mission Control know you just woke up a few minutes ago, and you likely are a bit brain-foggy, want a shower, a hot meal, and talk to your loved ones on Earth. Food is on the way, your vitals have been monitored from the stasis pods you just emerged from, and you'll talk to family very soon. In case anyone's forgotten, mission protocol is that you immediately begin your crew debrief, which the Ship Psychologist will lead once they're done with this statement. This debrief will help with the brain-fog and any temporarily missing memories. First, notice that you appear to still be in the your ship, Triumph - your stasis pods were successfully extracted from the lander during a smooth*

touchdown in the Pacific Ocean, and transferred to the 1:1 practice replica ship back in Nevada.

Let's not avoid the elephant in the room: Unfortunately, (DECEASED CREW MEMBER) made the ultimate sacrifice and did not emerge from stasis. During an attempted retrieval of Big Enterprise 1's Proprietary Energy Core - and if possible, crew remains - an unexpected factor was encountered. This led to failure of mission objectives, and future missions to Mars are indefinitely postponed. The factor also led to their body not adjusting to stasis, resulting in death. They will be celebrated as a hero, and family has already been notified. Due to protocols, we unfortunately cannot provide any additional information. Despite the mission failing to achieve its primary objectives, you all will be awarded medals and enjoy a full pension and benefits.

Which leads to the second big item: Please remain calm - you all may be experiencing some signs of short-term amnesia, and it may extend as far back as the mission, its training before it, and the initial mission briefing. You were briefed and agreed to the risk of potential memory loss as a consequence of stasis travel - done only on the return trip for safety precautions. The memories should return naturally, and your debrief will help them return more quickly and smoothly. As you debrief, focusing on building on each others' recollections will help jog your memory. You will start in the present, and then work your way backwards, all the way back to training. But first, take a moment to remember your departed crew, as a pre-recorded message from before the mission is played for you.

(end of reading aloud and player of Deceased Crew should spend a minute or two to roleplay the aforementioned "in case I don't make it" video.)

(Final game note: Each scene should be 10-15 minutes, the Ship Psychologist player keeping time and leading discussion with the list of suggested questions from Mission Control. You may skip any but the first and last. Try not to "remember" things you shouldn't remember!)

Scene 1: Waking Up / Debrief - in the 1:1 Triumph replica in Nevada. Confused.

- How's everyone feeling? Any unusual physical or mental symptoms?
- Stasis may have an effect on brain activity while asleep. Did you have any particularly vivid or unusual dreams?
- Did you learn anything about your home? About yourself?
- What's next for you after you finally return home?
- What's a thing you will remember about the deceased crew?

Scene 2: Landing on Mars - everyone back on Triumph, PEC destroyed. (Deceased crew rejoins and is in this and all remaining scenes.)

- What were you feeling in the minutes before the lander separation?
- How were you feeling in the last hours leading to orbital insertion?
- Can the person who spoke the first words on Mars reiterate those first words? What did they mean to you? To others?
- How was the approach? How different was it from training?
- What was it like remaining on Triumph waiting for the ground crew?
- What happened on the surface during the few minutes communications were lost with the crew on Triumph?
- (Choose person) said you saw something they couldn't explain. Can you elaborate on what you saw, or think you saw?
- Was there any disagreement about the decision to destroy the PEC?

Scene 3: The Journey - 5 months in, a month before landing

- After Earth shrunk to look like a small blue star, what was it like to see everything you've ever known, so far away?
- Tell us about a personal item you brought that you may not have shared the personal meaning yet with the rest of the crew?
- We all had some interpersonal friction along the way. Is there one you've been holding onto, that you want to air before we focus on landing on Mars?
- A month from Mars, Triumph received a presumed pre-recorded message from BE-1. What was it? Why was it unusual?
- What's something people back home don't realize about the long journey?
- Did time seem to stretch out or pass quickly?

Scene 4: Takeoff - An hour after arriving on the International Space Station.

- While we're now on the way to Mars, what were you thinking when you were on the ISS and looking at the Triumph before we boarded?
- The moment arrived for takeoff. What was going through your head?
- What was it like being part of something so complex?
- One of the mottos we always heard was, "It won't fail because of me."

Share what that spirit means to you.

- (To eventually-dead crew) - During second thruster phase, we had anomalous readings, and you went mute for a minute. What happened there?

Scene 5: Training

(Psychologist read:) You all were chosen because each one of you was willing to take great risks for the potential to be on the first *successful* Mars mission.

- What were your impressions of the BE-1 disaster, before signing up?
- Why do you think you in particular were selected?
- How much rivalry was there among the group? How much cooperation?
- What was a way you stretched your abilities during training?

- Everyone knows how intensive the training was. What was that like?
- Why did you decide to apply and join the Triumph program?

Scene 6: First Mission Briefing - The Big Reveal

(This section read by Ship Psychologist, and then players given 5-10 minutes to roleplay and come to a decision.)

Hello, my name is Dr. (SURNAME HERE). I was a member of the small team that chose candidates, and I was asked to join as the ship's psychologist and morale officer. I look forward to forming a strong working relationship with you all and becoming your friend. We will be having regular check-ins, like this one, which I will lead, with suggested questions and topics provided by Mission Control. These meetings are for our own benefit for group cohesion, and will be kept confidential. I have confidential information I received yesterday from the Project Lead which I am about to share.

We are being given one final opportunity to gracefully decline this mission. As the mission is extraordinarily sensitive, if you choose to leave today, an 18-month severance pay will be awarded and a personal thanks from your country's leader in return for your lifelong discretion and the basic training you have done over the last month as the finalists were selected.

Brace yourselves. Big Enterprise One's "Proprietary Energy Core" isn't an energy source at all. It is a contained, stable black hole. No one's reproduced it since; and the scientists think it shouldn't have worked in the first place. It doesn't power the ship; it bends spacetime around it, effectively shrinking the distance it needs to travel by 98%. Especially given the billionaires died in Mars orbit using this thing, the governments behind Triumph want this back and in safe hands. And, all the studies around it show that it has unusual effects both on the human brain and how it experiences the passage of time. All studies with it show short-term amnesia, and your exposure means you will likely forget as far back as this briefing we're having right now. Fortunately, memories naturally return. Unfortunately, it's still very dangerous and while the containment unit is incredibly engineered to have survived a crash landing, there's always room for unexpected risk.

Let's talk it over. Because teams are chosen as a group, we will all need to decide to proceed, or none of us will go.

(Players should take 5-10 minutes to roleplay this out. If you choose not to go, then another team will go, the deceased crew will live, but everyone will have lingering dreams of the events that happened that they can't quite explain

<p>1. (Facilitator) Dr. _____ Ship Psychologist Pronouns _____ <i>Caring, Pragmatic, Observant.</i> You're in charge of crew morale. You lead the private group check-ins and report. Archetype / Detail:</p> <p>Connection 1: (Specialist) is a naturally quiet type, and you find them earnest, kind, and interesting. C. 2: Before being asked to join the mission, you were on a small panel that reviewed candidates. (Pilot) was not one of your top 3 choices. C. 3 (5+ players): (Microbiologist) grew up in the same hometown, and has very different ideas of science. Player-made connection:</p> <p>During Mars: Remained on Triumph (in orbit) Personal Item(s) from Earth:</p>	<p>2. Major _____ Mission Commander Pronouns _____ <i>Experienced, Confident, Charismatic.</i> You're in charge of crew and success of objectives from Mission Control. Archetype / Detail:</p> <p>Connection 1: Proudly served with (Pilot) on international peacekeeping tour prior to joining the space program. C. 2: Married to (Mission Specialist), and have a mix of feelings about you both being on this mission. C. 3 (6 players): You're strongly drawn to (Flight Engineer), but want to keep it professional and did so. Player-made connection:</p> <p>During Mars: First to step on Mars. After, your life will be smiling for crowds as a living figure of history. Personal Item(s) from Earth:</p>	<p>3. Pilot _____ Pilot, Air Force Cpt. Pronouns _____ <i>Cool-Headed, Clever, Realist.</i> You're a decorated Air Force pilot. This is your 1st mission in space; you earned it. You're determined it won't be your last. Archetype / Detail:</p> <p>Connection 1: (Specialist) has leaned on you and your perseverance since Training. It's satisfying to help. C. 2: Admire (Commander), served with them on a joint-nation peacekeeping tour prior to space program. C. 3 (5+ players): (Psychologist) could have done their job staying back on Earth. You're professional to them, but they'll have to prove themselves to you. Player-made connection:</p> <p>During Mars: Remained on Triumph (in orbit) Personal Item(s) from Earth:</p>
<p>4. Specialist _____ Mission Specialist Pronouns _____ <i>Pleasant, Detail-Oriented, Reserved.</i> You run science experiments and do ship maintenance and repair. Archetype / Detail:</p> <p>Connection 1: You always dreamed of going to space, and (Pilot) has been mentoring you since Training. C. 2: You're married to (Commander), and are excited and joyful that you both are on this mission. C. 3 (6 players): (Engineer) is naturally curious about the BE-1 PEC, but you don't know much. Player-made connection:</p> <p>During Mars: In charge of retrieving the BE-1 drive core, or destroying if not possible. You were not told how it works. Personal Item(s) from Earth:</p>	<p>5. Dr. _____ Microbiologist / Doctor Pronouns _____ <i>Accomplished, Inspired, Good-Humored.</i> You're a career cellular-life researcher and searching for it outside Earth; maybe this mission is it! Archetype / Detail:</p> <p>Connection 1: (Commander) is a great leader, but if you discover evidence for life on Mars, you wish it would C. 2: (Psychologist) is from your hometown, and has very different ideas about science. C. 3 (6 players): (Engineer) will listen to your biology theories all day. You've become good friends. Player-made connection:</p> <p>During Mars: Took soil samples, assisted (Specialist). Personal Item(s) from Earth:</p>	<p>6. Engineer _____ Flight Engineer Pronouns _____ <i>Inventive, Exacting, Curious.</i> You worked on the Earth-based support crew on BE-1 and know Triumph inside and out, except the energy-core, of course. Archetype / Detail:</p> <p>Connection 1: You liked (Commander) from the start. During your 1st weeks in space, it's greatly intensified. C. 2: (Microbiologist) looks at cellular life the same way you look at ship systems. You get along great. C. 3: (Specialist) served on the BE-1 support team on Earth but they only share some details. Player-made connection:</p> <p>During Mars: Remained on Triumph to monitor systems. Personal Item(s) from Earth:</p>