

Transient Murmurations

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This game is inspired by J Li's *Keymaster* (Golden Cobra 2014), *Still Life* by Wendy Gorman, David Hertz, and Heather Silsbee (Golden Cobra 2014), and the wordless digital games made by Thatgamecompany, particularly *Journey* (2012) and *Sky* (2019).

This game is designed for a minimum of 10 players, with a maximum of how many you can reasonably fit in the play space.

This game is to be played while masked, outdoors and/or indoors, with minimal talking. Instead of verbal communication, players silently and collaboratively position their bodies to represent the game's fictional environment and to engage in environmental storytelling.

Choose 1-2 players to be the protagonists or PCs. These players should be distinguished from each other in some way that simultaneously obscures their individuality. Perhaps they could both wear similar masks, similar scarfs, or similar clothing. These players cannot talk, but can make some quiet verbal humming noises to each other as they explore the narrative environments created by the other players' bodies.

There are five stages or scenes of play:

1. On the Beach
2. The Deserted Ruins
3. The Factory Tunnels
4. The Ascent
5. The Apotheosis

Before each stage begins, the non-PC players should be given a few minutes to arrange their bodies (and perhaps other things in the play space, such as easily movable furniture) in such a way as to physically depict the environment described (below) in the account of the stage. This environment can be as small as a single room or as large as an entire house or large outdoor space, depending on the number of players available to create the environment.

The place the PCs begin or enter the stage should be marked somehow, as well as the place that they leave this stage for the next stage. If playing indoors, a pair of throw pillows may make for good markers. If playing outdoors, consider starting and ending with significant landmarks in the space, such as trees or shelters.

Then, the PCs should be given time to explore and potentially interact with the environment, in character – as the fictional characters who are journeying through this narrative environment. As the characters are exploring, journeying, and interacting, the non-PC environmental players should feel free to hum or murmur quiet sounds, words, or evocative phrases as the PCs approach them. These offer some hints as to the possible meanings or significance of the environmental features that the non-PC players are physically representing, but are not necessarily “the truth.” Ultimately, the true meaning of everything depicted in this game is beyond the determination of any one player.

Once both the players have reached or touched the exit marker, the stage/scene ends, and the non-PC players work together to set up the next stage.

The five stages are described as follows, in descriptions that can be read aloud to the non-PC players (or, really, all the players) before the environment is created. Or, alternately, they can be distributed in another way – silently – via text messages or emails to player phones, so that the environments can be constructed wordlessly, without talking or discussion.

1. ON THE BEACH

Environment: Waves lap against a stretch of rocky shore, but there are patches of sand & pebbles where the Travelers periodically emerge from the sea and step onto the land to begin their journeys. The shore itself is covered in dunes and tall grasses, a few dry & twisted trees, crumbling stone outcroppings, large chunks of driftwood, the ruins of ancient watchtowers or lighthouses, and some stones that once showed where the paths led inland. Position yourselves to show this, but choose poses or positions that you can hold for several minutes.

Travelers: Emerge from out of the sea, step onto the land, shake the water from your hair and clothes, and take your first exploratory steps through this new world that awaits you. Get your bearings and then proceed inland.

2. THE DESERTED RUINS

Environment: Moving inland, the dunes give way to a mixture of scrub and desert, flatlands and canyons, sometimes with mesas or walls of rock rising up on the sides. Here are sprinkled the ruins of past communities, with only portions of the most significant buildings left standing – temples, platforms, fountains, towers, central plazas. There are stairs and pathways that link things together, but others go nowhere, to empty spaces that were once places. Everything else has crumbled to piles of stones or even back into the dirt and sand. Occasionally you can find a statue with outstretched hands or a kneeling posture, offering a glimpse of times past. But only the occasional scavenger bird makes its home here now. Position yourselves to show this, but choose poses or positions that you can hold for several minutes.

Travelers: Proceed through the ruined remnants of your ancestors' homes and sacred sites, stopping here and there to appreciate a few things or try to remember the stories you were once told about these places. You wish you could linger here and really take things in, but you know you must keep moving deeper in.

3. THE FACTORY TUNNELS

Environment: The ruins pull Travelers toward the entrances to tunnels or pits that lead deep underground, into the vaults below the old cities. Down in the depths, things are more industrial, full of the pipes, cisterns, gears, and machines – the infrastructure that remains hidden beneath. These tunnels and chambers are also now home to silent, creepy creatures, perhaps experiments created by ancient people, perhaps distorted remnants of the ancients themselves. They are few in number and are often scared of Travelers, but they blend into the strange machines and propaganda statuary that populate the tunnels. Position yourselves to show this, but choose poses or positions that you can hold for several minutes. SPECIAL: Non-PC players who choose to portray silent, creepy creatures can move around occasionally, but often hold their positions to hide and watch the Travelers, who may not be able to distinguish them from parts of the environment.

Travelers: Down here, you must be cautious and careful, for you've been told of the dangers lurking in the deep and dark. Ensure you make it to the other side without harm.

4. THE ASCENT

Environment: At the far end of the factory tunnels, everything emerges out onto the surface once more and heads beyond that toward the sky. An immense ruined spire of fantastical materials rises into the heavens like the mythic Tower of Babel, a testimony to human hubris covered in statues that celebrate everything that has now been abandoned and destroyed. The pathway to the summit feels increasingly ornate and yet somehow twisted and wrong. It is glorious but also clearly monstrous, something human-made but also something that should not exist. Position yourselves to show this, but choose poses or positions that you can hold for several minutes.

Travelers: As you head up and out, the arrogance and folly of those who came before you become more evident. You are unsettled and disturbed by what you see around you, but yet you must press on until the end.

5. THE APOTHEOSIS

Environment: At the pinnacle of the spire is a place of annihilation and rebirth, where the old world is destroyed to make way for the new. It is shocking and surprising and terrible and wonderful all at the same time. Bits and pieces of every stage of the journey return to be present here, but tossed about and rearranged in new ways. After all the terrors of the last two stages, it feels like things here are slowly beginning to heal. Or, at the very least, the wickedness is being pulled out and the wounds can now begin to close, although everything here is still raw and messy. Also, this is the place where the Travelers themselves will be remade and sent back to the beginning. Position yourselves to show this, but choose poses or positions that you can hold for several minutes. **SPECIAL:** Unlike the other stages, the environs in this stage should all move subtly, adding an element of the surreal and the changeable to this place.

Travelers: Congratulations, you have reached the goal of your journey. Let yourselves be torn apart and put back together – emotionally, spiritually, perhaps even physically, in this place. When you are ready to depart, proceed to the exit.

6. THE END

Environment: Encircle the travelers in one or more rings, murmuring together. When the Travelers join your murmuring, slowly build in intensity until you reach a climax. When the Travelers clap their hands, go silent for a moment. The game is then over.

Travelers: Emerge from out of the sea once more, shake the water from your hair and clothes, and join the other players in murmuring together. Building in intensity until it reaches a climax, then clap your hands together to make everything go silent. The game is then over.

DEBRIEF

After the game is over. Take a brief break. And then sit together in large or small groups and discuss your experience of play, perhaps while listening to some chill music.