

this is a game called The Drifter's Escape

it's American role-playing game

Game text (c) 2005 Ben Lehman in Nostalgia Studio

Story text (c) 2003-2005 Jake Lehman

The title is from a dylan song.

hey, ron: it's pain and fight

The game is set in contemporary America, or maybe not contemporary, but any time when men still wander the old highways and byways, seeking something or fleeing something else.

Here's the way it works.

FOLKS

My traveling companions are an old yellow dog with the devil's own farts and about a dozen loose and lonesome men we picked up somewhere. There are a few old soldiers less some of their body parts, a skin and bones mountaineer with a beard down to his rotting buckskin belt, a merchant marine with a terrible cough, a dready white girl with eyes like punched-out aces of spades, and some old hoboes who just won't die.

--NORFOLK AND SOUTHERN

First, you get together with some folks that you want to tell a story with. You'll need at least two others, and probably more like three or four.

You'll also need a deck of cards with two jokers, and some poker chips.

You're gonna tell a story.

THE MAN AND THE DEVIL

So finally I went ahead and poured some water into that black swirlin' mouth, and you probably know this already, but you should never ever ever pour water into boilin' hot tar, let me tell you. After it quit burnin' through my skin and flesh I could still kinda see out of one eye but they wouldn't let me back on the job...

--GHOST RIDE

Two of the folks are going to take a special role in the story. One of them is going to be THE MAN, and he's going to represent all the forces of conformity and society and most especially the cops. The other one is going to be THE DEVIL, and he's going to represent rebellion, outlaw living, and most especially the secrets that are visible only to those who can see beneath the surface of society.

Both THE MAN and THE DEVIL build up DEBT. DEBT for THE MAN is represented by white chips, 'cause that's the color of his skin. DEBT for the DEVIL is represented by red chips, 'cause that's the color of his place of business.

In the end, both THE DEVIL and THE MAN want the same thing -- they want the Drifter's soul.

DRIFTERS

But the strangest thing of all was when I was hitchhiking west over the pass on account of bein' disgusted with the life I'd always know. I got picked up by a skeleton drivin' a triple tanker truck.

--GHOST RIDE

Everyone who isn't THE MAN or THE DEVIL is a drifter, a man who just floats from place to place taking what life gives'em and trying to get by as best they can.

Drifters have PAIN, which is whatever drives them out on the road. Perhaps the Drifter is hunted by the law, perhaps they are fleeing their no-good family, perhaps they are looking for a place to be at peace after the war. Whatever causes them to take to the road, that's their PAIN.

Drifters have DRIVES, as many as 5 of 'em at a time. Drifters have DRIVE, as many as 5 of 'em at a time. These are things that the Drifters want. They shouldn't be things like "a job" or "power." Those are means to an end. "Love," "survive the winter," "make it out to California," or "a plot of land to call my own," are totally appropriate DRIVES. You

can change your drives whenever you like, except that you can never have a DRIVE that resolves your PAIN totally.

Drifters also have DREAM, which they get for resolving DRIVES. Drifters can start with two DREAM, in which case they must divide three DEBT between THE MAN and THE DEVIL. Drifters can also start with four DREAM, in which case they must divide seven DEBT between THE MAN and THE DEVIL.

DREAM is marked with blue chips, as blue as the summer sky.

STARTING OUT

There was a time when some bandits ate all the cheese we had been saving for winter, so we had to go to town and work on the road crew just for the sack lunch they give out. I can still taste those fucked up pudding cups.

--GHOST RIDE

To start out, everyone makes their Drifters and names them, while THE MAN and THE DEVIL conspire together to make one or more situations that the Drifters will find themselves involved in. They should draw a little diagram and mark which of the folks in the situation will be played by THE MAN, and which ones by THE DEVIL.

DECENT FOLK

A thick old woman stands on the porch with her fists planted in her hips.

"You boys hungry?" she asks.

--NORFOLK AND SOUTHERN

Any time during play, any Drifter can spend a chip of DREAM to either change one of the folks in the situation into a decent person, or bring a decent person into the situation. Decent people aren't played by THE DEVIL nor THE MAN, so pick someone else to play that person.

PLAYING THE GAME

Outside the town of Belleville, there's a frame farmhouse standing alone. With one body, almost like a flock of birds, the men step down from the tracks and wade toward it through a fallow field. The yellow dog weaves patterns around us and snorts into gopher holes. From a big oak in the dooryard of the hose, a raven big enough to wear pants sends a statement of amusement or warning floating down.

--NORFOLK AND SOUTHERN

THE MAN starts each scene by describing the immediate situation and how the Drifter is involved, except if the place where the scene takes place somewhere that the cops can't ever reach, in which case THE DEVIL starts the scene. The Drifter says what he does, and THE MAN and THE DEVIL play their characters, and anyone playing a decent person plays that person.

Eventually, there'll come a time when the Drifter wants to get something, or to avoid something, and we don't really know whether he can or not. That's when we start THE DEAL.

You can have more than one DEAL in a scene, or none at all.

THE DEAL

"Son," said the skeleton. "I thought I tol' you to quit askin' questions." He turned his skull around clear sideway and stared at me with them empty holes. "Don't you know this is an evil load?" He wasn't looking at the road at all. But then, he didn't have no eyes. So I guess it didn't matter.

--GHOST RIDE

First, the Drifter says "What I want is..." and says what he wants. That's the STAKES. If both THE DEVIL and THE MAN agree, they can make the Drifter revise the STAKES to make them smaller, but if either one of them accepts the STAKES, that's it.

Second, the Drifter deals a 5-card poker hand to both THE DEVIL and THE MAN. If the STAKES have to do with the Drifter's PAIN, then THE DEVIL counts Jokers wild, and THE MAN counts them dead. If the STAKES don't have to do with the Drifter's PAIN, then THE MAN counts Jokers wild, and THE DEVIL counts them dead.

After looking at their hands, both THE DEVIL and THE MAN offer their DEALS to the Drifter -- something that the Drifter must do to get their help. THE MAN might say "I'll help you if you shave off that

beard" and THE DEVIL might say "I'll help you but only if you kill a cat for me." They can ask for things as large or as small as they like, even nothing at all. They can change their DEAL in response to the other one's DEAL, but in the end they have to settle on offering one DEAL. They have to keep their cards hidden.

The Drifter decides who he's going to side with, THE MAN, THE DEVIL, or neither.

If he chooses neither, he fails the STAKES. Cards are reshuffled and not revealed, and play continues, with whoever holds the most DEBT having the final say in how the Drifter failed.

If he chooses one side, cards are revealed. The highest hand wins. If the Drifter sided with the winner, he gains the STAKES. Regardless of whether or not he gets the STAKES, he has to fulfill the DEAL that he agreed on. Further, whoever he sided with gets a point of DEBT.

The winning side has final say on how it goes down.

If the Drifter won, check if any of the Drifter's DRIVES apply. For each one that applies, note it down if he won.

FIGHTING A RAW DEAL

I went ahead and opened up the glove box, thinkin' that somebody who rode in this cab before mighta stowed some packs of ketchup or non-dairy creamer, or a centipede mighta crawled in there and died. Instead there was a short piece of bailing wire bent into a hook, and a pack of cards that were mostly jokers, and a little grey spider that crawled up my arm.

"Grandmother," I said to the spider, real quiet so the skeleton wouldn't hear. "I don't believe we've met before."

"Oh, yes we have, honey," said the spider. "I know you from your dreams."

--GHOST RIDE

Any time before he decides who to side with, the Drifter can FIGHT A RAW DEAL by deal himself into the game. This costs 1 DREAM if he does it when he deals the cards to the other players, or 2 DREAM if he does it after they've looked at their cards. Jokers aren't wild for the Drifter, ever, but he can pay another DREAM to throw back as many cards as he likes and redraw them. If the Drifter's PAIN applies, he can do this twice, at the cost of another DREAM for the second time.

FINISHING DRIVES

She lays her long farm table with fried chicken, ham, applesauce, mashed potatoes, bean salad, corn fritters, biscuits, coleslaw, deviled eggs, sliced tomatoes, peach, apple and rhubarb pies and big glasses of iced tea. We put it away like we had steamer trunks for stomachs. The yellow dog slides between the legs of the table and the legs of the men, vacuuming up the dropped food. She slaps the floor with her tail and presses her nose against our filthy knees.

--NORFOLK AND SOUTHERN

When a Drifter's DRIVE comes to resolution, he gets a reward -- a number of DREAM equal to the number of DEALS he had to win in order to resolve the DRIVE. The Drifter can abandon a DRIVE at any time, he just doesn't get the DREAM for it.

THE DEVIL'S FAVORS AND THE MAN'S DEMANDS

"County's takin' the place in September." She seems resolved not to say any more, but the words come out of her just the same. "And we paid off the bank a long time ago. It's what they call 'imminent domain.' Gonna be a whole bunch of house in here a year from now."

--NORFOLK AND SOUTHERN

At any time, THE DEVIL can ask for a FAVOR, and THE MAN can make a DEMAN. This is the same for both of them, it just has a different name. The player picks up a stack of their DEBT, and says what they want the Drifter to do, and throws the DEBT away. The FAVOR or DEMAND takes the place of one of the Drifter's DRIVES. It can't go away unless the Drifter either accomplishes it, or spends an amount of DREAM equal to the amount of DEBT to run away from it.

THE DEVIL can't ask for the same FAVOR twice. THE MAN can make the same DEMAND twice, but it costs half as much to run away each time.

ENDING

After a couple more miles on the railbed we can see the wavering heat of the city rising in the distance. A few notes from the old guitar hang between our footsteps and the merchant marine's coughing. He spits part of his lung out into the mud and asks, "Hey boss, we're we goin' to, anyway?"

--NORFOLK AND SOUTHERN

If the Drifter has 10 more DREAM than either side has DEBT, he can narrate how he finally deals with his PAIN and finds contentment.

If THE DEVIL ever has 10 more DEBT than the Drifter has DREAM or THE MAN has DEBT, he can narrate an ending where the Drifter solves his pain by violence and evil and power, and comes to an evil end himself.

If THE MAN ever has 10 more DEBT than the Drifter has DREAM or THE DEVIL has DEBT, he can narrate an ending where the Drifter has to pay the price for whatever his PAIN is, and cover it up and try to suffer like all the other average Joes.

MORE THAN ONE DRIFTER

Works just fine. Just make sure each scene focuses on one Drifter, and that you keep track of DEBT seperately for each one.

STUFF JAKE THINKS YOU SHOULD READ / LISTEN TO:

Ben hasn't read / listened to most of this stuff, 'cause he's not as cool as Jake.

Reccomended music, in no particular order

Tom Waits, esp. Beautiful Maladies

Bob Dylan, esp. his first alblum, Freewheelin' and World Gone Wrong, and random apocolyptic stuff, esp. I Will not go Down Under the Ground

Mere Haggard, all

Johnny Cash, esp. gospel alblums

Hank Williams Sr., especially Ramblin' Man and Lonesome Whistle Blues

The Be Good Tanyas, esp. The Littlest Birds, Waiting Around to Die, Lakes of Ponchatrain

Gillian Welch, gospel tracks

Gus Van Zant (who wrote Waiting Around to Die), White Freightliner Blues

Woody Guthrie, all but the silly stuff

Lead Belly, all

Whitey Ford, Whitey Ford Sings the Blues

Bruce Springsteen, The Ghost of Tom Joad (whole alblum)

Jimie Hendrix, esp. Highway Chile, Voodoo Chile, and Gypsy Eyes

Rev. Pearly Brown, all, esp. Say No to the Devil

Robert Johnson, all, esp. Stones in my Passway

Son House, all

Homesick James, esp. You Better Know What You're Running From

and a bunch of other old time blues players that I haven't discovered yet

Recomended reading:

Born to Win, by Woody Guthrie

In Dubious Battle, Of Mice and Men and The Grapes of Wrath, by John Steinbeck

On the Road, by Jack Keuroack

Down and Out in Paris and London, by George Orwell

You Can't Win, by Jack Black (Highly reccomended! But morally ambigious.)

The Odessey, by Homer (Robert Fagels is a good translation.)

The Bible (King James Version)