



The Dream Merchants

Game Chef 2007 Entry

Unicron Group

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by Chris Bennett

Using the ingredients: Memory, Currency, Drug

Back Cover Blurb: In the future...memory is currency. The players take the role of Dream Merchants who trade in forbidden and special memories in a world where strong emotions are punished. Will these memories hold the key to save their souls? Or will they end up like the rest of the Fallen; drained of their memories and forced to live in squalor?

"I remember now. The night of true passion and understanding, until our worlds came crashing down. The Judgment say that to feel too much is a sin. But the feelings inside of me cannot simply be turned off. I remember too much. It courses through me like steam through a vent, powering my brain and awakening my soul. I can't let it go...I won't let it go!!"

"Citizen, welcome to the Contentment Center. You have been selected for a MemWipe because of your troubled thoughts. We are here to guide you."

"But I don't want to be wiped. I need to remember!"

"No, citizen. None of us need to remember. What we need is to be Contented. That is what we..."

"...No!! Those are my memories...our memories! Please stop!!!"

"There...now isn't that better? Feel the MemDrain moving through your veins. It's already freeing your pain. Let it go...let it go...let it go...Okay, he's out. Drain the last two weeks. That should do it. Is the girl ready yet?"

Introduction

The Dream Merchants is a story game for 4-6 players. One player will take the role of the Game Master (GM) and help guide the game along. The others will take the role of characters in this frightening dystopia called Alcor-VII. All that is required to play are paper, pencils, 20 or so note cards (3x5 inch cards work great) and 30-40 tokens of some sort. Glass beads or coins will work fine. There should be as least as many different types or colors of tokens as there are players in the game.

This game was designed for the Game Chef 2007 Competition and was completed in two weeks using the following ingredients; memory, drug and currency. It is meant to be played in one or two sessions. The situations and endings are varied enough that groups may want to play it several times to explore all of the possibilities. It is designed for maximum player interaction and gives a lot of the narrative control to the players to let them guide the actions of their characters.

This is a game of exploring memories and what they mean to us. It also explores other interesting subjects like personal self vs. a more global view, one's body vs. their soul, and especially what freedom and oppression really mean. This game is meant for an adult audience, so take a little time to talk over the subject matter with your group before playing. If you choose to play it lightly or for comedic value, you will find it difficult to unlock the true potential of the subject matter.

World Creation

The players and the GM should talk for a few minutes about the world of Alcor-VII. Perhaps describe what the technology or daily life of the citizens is like. The GM will take notes during this part of the game and make those available to the players as they create their scenes during play.

Talk about the four types of people who live in Alcor-VII:

The Judgment: the "Chosen Few" of a theocracy who govern the world and enforce the laws.

The Watchful: privileged citizens who are empowered by the Judgment to report any citizens who break the laws.

The Contented: an amorphous mass of citizens living in the cloudscrapers who work to provide for the common good.

The Fallen: the ex-citizens who have had their memories totally erased and are forced to live on the unyielding planet surface.

The players should describe the Council of Three who rule over Alcor-VII. What are their names and what are they like? A few traits for each will help set the mood of the game.

Ex: Leila thinks that Alcor-VII is really a Manhattan of the future that has been isolated from the rest of the ruined world and continues to build straight up into the clouds. Chad says that is a great idea and adds that climate change and a lack of fossil fuels have forced the people there to build these cloudscrapers that harvest the water vapor high up in the air. Ronnie (the GM) wonders if the Judgment are just holy men who took over after a cataclysm when all was thought to be lost. Kat riffs on that by talking about The Council of Three as the original rulers of Alcor-VII who are kept alive with age-defying drugs. The group is really getting somewhere now!

Memory Creation

Each player should take four blank note cards from the stack and write an evocative memory on each one. The rules are:

1. Only one memory to a card.
2. Each should fit into a single sentence that starts with "I remember..."
3. These should NOT be actual memories that the player has had. This is very important.
4. The things or places or people in these memories should be generic rather than something that ties them to a certain time or place in the real world.

Players should also add the word 'Value' to each Memory Card and put the number '1' or '2' next to it depending on how valuable the memory seems to be. There should be a good mix of Value 1 and 2 memories in the game to make it flow better.

Later when the players are creating their characters, the GM should go through the entire list of memory cards and secretly add one emotion to each by writing on the front of the card. Then the GM should take each card and write 1-2 additional emotions on the back. These additional emotions may fit in with what players would expect based on the memory, or occasionally one might take the memory in another direction. But the GM should be careful not to move too many of the memories in directions that the players might not necessarily understand or agree with.

Ex: Leila creates a Memory Card by writing “I remember when I found out that he never really loved me” and “Value: 1” on the front of the card. Ronnie the GM takes the card and adds the emotion “Betrayal” to the front. Then Ronnie smiles as he turns the card over and adds the emotion “Empowerment” on the back. They won’t expect that one.

Character Creation

Each player should take a character sheet or a piece of paper and answer the following questions to breath live into their character:

- ❖ Name: what is the character’s full name?
- ❖ Position: what is the character’s role in society?
- ❖ Source: where does the character get the money they use to buy memories?
- ❖ Motivation: why is the character trading in memories?
- ❖ Goal: what the character really want to accomplish with their life?

Ex: Chad decides to name his character “Jon Mathas”. His position is “Senior Vapor Tech”. And he gets the money to buy memories by letting others illegally tap into the water vapor. He trades in memories because he wants to feel what it was like to have a mother again. His goal is to be part of a real family. The rest of the group thinks that is great!

After all players are done creating their characters, they each take three tokens of a different color or type and place them in the middle of the Star Chart. These are the Character Tokens that will be moved on the different axis of the Star Chart. These Character Tokens are not a currency in the game and are not used for auctions or conflicts.

Game Structure

After creating the world, the characters and the memories, the game will be played in a series of rounds that continue until one character reached a Breaking Point, which is described later in the rules.

- ❖ Start a new round
 - ❖ Auction scene
 - ❖ Color scenes (if desired)
 - ❖ Dream scenes (for those with at least one Memory Card)
 - ❖ Conflict scenes (one per character)
 - ❖ Resolution
 - ❖ Repeat from the beginning until a Breaking Point is reached

At the Start of a Round

The game starts with all tokens in a single Game Pool and all Memory Cards in a stack next to the GM.

- ❖ Each player takes five tokens from the Game Pool to add to their Personal Pool.
- ❖ The GM takes a number of tokens equal to the number of characters in the game from the Game Pool to add to the GM Pool.

Auction Scenes

These scenes are where the players get to deal with others to buy the memories that will hopefully move their characters towards the destinies they desire. But sometimes memories have a way of turning things around.

- ❖ The players decide together where the Auction scene is taking place and how each of their characters are “giving the slip” in order to secretly attend the auction. No two auctions should take place in the same location.
- ❖ The GM names and plays the role of the MemSifter who is running the auction and describes a personal trait or two to flesh out that character. In subsequent Auction scenes, the GM can choose to use existing MemSifters or create new ones.
- ❖ The GM selects a number of Memory Cards equal to the number of characters in the game minus one.
- ❖ The GM puts the first Memory Card to be auctioned face up in front of the players and describes in the MemSifter’s voice what the memory is and why they want to buy it. No one may look under the card to see the secret traits of the Memory Card
- ❖ Each player secretly takes any number of tokens (including zero) from their Personal Pool and puts them in their closed fist, while also hiding how many tokens they have left in their pool.
- ❖ When all players have their closed fists facing down over the middle of the table, the GM announces, “Okay, let’s see what bids we have”. Which is the cue for each player to rotate their fist to face up and open their hand to show everyone how many tokens they are bidding.
- ❖ The player with the most tokens wins the auction. The winning player takes the tokens they bid from their hand and adds them to the GM Pool. Then the GM hands the winning player the Memory Card to put next to their character sheet. All other players return the tokens they used for bidding back to their Personal Pools.
- ❖ If there are two or more players with the same amount of tokens in their hand, the losing players return their tokens to their own Personal Pools.

The GM then asks all tied players if they want to Raise or Give. By raising, all tied players must add another token to their hand. If a tied player chooses instead to Give, they empty the tokens from their hand back into their own Personal Pool. The GM continues asking all tied players to Raise or Give until there is only one player left in the auction. That player then wins the auction and pays for the Memory Card as described above.

- ❖ Players cannot turn a Memory Card over and look at the back until asked to do so by the GM during a Dream Scene.
- ❖ If no players bid tokens on a Memory Card, it is assumed to have no value to the characters, and the GM literally rips the card up and puts the pieces in a separate pile on the table.

Ex: The group decides to have the first auction in a maintenance corridor inside of one of the cloudscrapers. The CCTV cameras in this section aren't currently working so they feel relatively safe. Leila describes how her character tells her Mom she is going to check up on her friend's baby to cover for her absence. The others give cover stories as well. Ronnie describes Roman Elonin the MemSifter as being cagey and OCD. When the group finds Roman, he is sitting on the floor of the corridor, arranging and rearranging the biochips on a blanket.

Color Scenes

These should be simple and entertaining scenes that add flavor to the world. Anything deeper should happen within a Dream or Conflict scene.

- ❖ After an Auction scene, any player may request a Color scene. This is an opportunity for the player to describe things about the world such as personal connections to their character, technology relevant to the game, or just to describe what is going on in the character's mind.
- ❖ The rules for Color scenes are:
 - They may not involve another character unless that player has given their consent.
 - They may not evoke any change in the character or the world that would affect the Star Map (which can be found at the end of these rules) in any way. But they can describe what is happening on the Star Map.

Color scenes should be short and not break the flow of the game. When a player is done with a Color scene, they pass narration back to the GM to continue with the round.

Dream Scenes

These are particularly exciting scenes because players get involved in the actual experiences of the other characters in the game. It's a true collaborative effort.

- ❖ During each round, the GM will go around the table and ask each player who has at least one memory if they wish to experience one of them as a Dream scene.
- ❖ The player who goes first will pick one of their Memory Cards and read the following on the front of the card (without turning it over):
 - The memory as it was written down
 - The power of the memory (1 or 2)
 - The emotion on the front of the card
- ❖ Then the player will describe what they think the memory is actually about.
- ❖ The player who is "taking" this memory will experience it as a dream, so let the player describe how they are finding a safe space in the world to experience this memory and whether anyone else is around.
- ❖ Then the experiencing player hands the Memory Card to the player on their right, who is known for this scene as the Dream.
- ❖ The Dream turns the Memory Card over and reads the emotions that are on the back of the card, Then the Dream narrates what the memory is really about, which can sometimes be different than how the experiencing player was expecting it.
- ❖ The players then decide as a group which axis on the Star Chart this memory will affect and which point the player wants to move towards. Any ties should be decided by the GM.

Deciding the axis on the Star Chart as a group is important because a player shouldn't be allowed to simply twist a memory to suit the goals of their own character.

Conflict Scenes

These scenes can be difficult because this is where a lot of the fiction happens in the game. But players should not hesitate to ask other players and the GM to help out when they are having trouble coming up with a conflict.

- ❖ Next the Memory Card is handed to the player on the experiencing player's left, who is known for this scene as the Change.
- ❖ The Change will frame a scene that takes place after the experiencing player wakes up from the dream. It will usually be based on interactions with others and should include the types of strong emotional responses that are frowned on in this society.

- ❖ It's important that this scene has a real conflict in it and that this conflict is related to the change that occurred in the character after experiencing the memory as a dream.
- ❖ As soon as the scene comes to a head, the experiencing player and the GM will bid to see who wins the conflict.
- ❖ The GM will secretly take a number of tokens from the GM Pool and hide them in their hand. They must select at least as many tokens as the value of the Memory Card.
- ❖ Then the experiencing player will push any number of tokens from their Player Pool forward to try and beat the tokens that the GM has hidden. The experiencing player may ask other players to jump into the scene and help by giving their own tokens. But any player who does this needs to narrate how their character is helping with the conflict.
- ❖ Once the player is done, the GM uncovers their Conflict Pool and the two pools are compared. The larger pool wins and ties go to the GM side.
- ❖ All tokens that were used in the conflict are returned to the Game Pool.
- ❖ If the player side wins, they move one of their Character Tokens on the Star Chart towards the end of the axis that they noted before the conflict started. The token should be moved a number of spaces equal to the Power on the Memory Card.
- ❖ If the GM wins, they move one of that player's Character Tokens on the Star Chart away from the end of the axis that the player noted.
- ❖ Multiple Character Tokens may occupy the same space on the Star Map.
- ❖ Once a Character Token is moved on an axis from the center of the Star Map, it may not move back to the center. If a Character Token moves one space towards Body for instance, moving it one space towards Soul would automatically bypass the center of the Star Chart and move it one space into the Soul side. Once a character stopped being Contented, there is no going back.
- ❖ If a Character Token would be in the center of the Star Map, it is simply removed from the map until it is moved to a different space.
- ❖ After the token on the Star Chart has moved, the GM takes the Memory Card and rips it up into pieces and places it on a pile on the table. The memory is then considered used up.
- ❖ After each Conflict Scene, the GM will go on to have a Dream Scene with the next player until all players who have a Memory Card have had a chance to go.

Ex: Kat's character (named Rook Sampa) experiences a memory with a Value of 2 that is on the Body side of the Body/Soul axis. Rook already has a Character Token slightly into the Body side on space 41. So Kat knows that by winning this conflict her character will reach their Breaking Point. Kat pushes forward all three of her tokens. She also gets Chad to push one forward as well, and he narrates how his character is helping. But Ronnie knew this was a key conflict and uncovers the four tokens he had bid on the outcome. Ties go to the GM side and Ronnie moves Rook's Body/Soul token

two spaces away from Body. Since the center of the Star Chart is skipped, the token ends up on 12, well into the Soul end of the axis. Kat is already planning a Color scene for the next round to talk about how Rook changed as a result of this conflict.

Resolution

At the end of each round, the group as a whole checks to see what has changed and whether the End Game has been triggered.

- ❖ If after a round is over one or more Character Tokens have reached the end of an axis on the Star Map, that character has reached a Breaking Point and the End Game is triggered instead of a new round.
- ❖ If a Breaking Point was not reached yet, each player who has had a Character Token move on the Star Chart that round gets a chance to narrate a color scene describing how their character has been changed.
- ❖ Then the GM calls for another round and starts at the top with an Auction Scene.

End Game

This is the climax of the story and where something life-changing happens to every character in the game.

- ❖ When a character's Breaking Point is reached, that player narrates a climatic scene where their Character Token positions on the Star Map are acted out. The dominance of the different axis depends on how far towards one end or the other the token has moved.
- ❖ The player takes the sides of the three axis that their Character Tokens were moving towards and references them on the Epilogue Chart to find the result which will be the basis of their last scene.
- ❖ The scene should be heavily weighted towards the axis that caused the Breaking Point for the character.
- ❖ Please refer to the Epilogue Matrix at the end of these rules for guidance on how to narrate the ending for each character.

Ex: Chad's character Jon has reached the Breaking Point in Freedom (53), is well on his way towards Soul (12) and is slightly Personal (01). Chad looks at the Epilogue Matrix and sees that his character is to 'Transcend'. Chad describes how Jon has become a highly respected scholar in Alcor-VII and retains the position of 'Minister of Memories', responsible for cataloging the important memories of the society for use by The Judgment at a later time.

He is now considered to be part of The Watchful and by law would be subject to the Containment Center only due to capital crimes. Leila asks, "But is Jon's mind troubled now that he remembers everything?" Chad answers, "Yes, especially after he has to experience these memories everyday while he organizes them for The Judgment."

Reverberations

The actions of one can affect the lives of many. And thus the Breaking Point of one character will set off a chain of events that can affect not only the other Dream Merchants, but society as a whole.

- ❖ When the first player whose character has reached their Breaking Point (known as the Agent of Change) has described what happened after, that player gets to push each of the other characters towards their Breaking Point as well.
- ❖ The Agent of Change looks at the Star Chart and moves one token belonging to each character straight to the end of the axis that it is on. The token must not cross the middle of the Star Chart on its way to the end of the axis.
- ❖ This is the only place in the game where one player will decide the actions of another player's character. This can be seen either as a reward or a responsibility.

Ex: Chad's character has reached the Breaking Point first and is thus the Agent of Change. Chad looks on the Star Chart and sees that Kat is tending towards Soul, Shared and Oppression. After thinking about how Kat played her character during the game, Chad decides to push that character towards Oppression. All of Kat's other tokens stay in the same place. So Kat will be narrating the 'Exposed' epilogue with an emphasis on 'Oppression'. She thinks hard about what that may mean for her character and waits for her turn to narrate her epilogue.

Epilogues

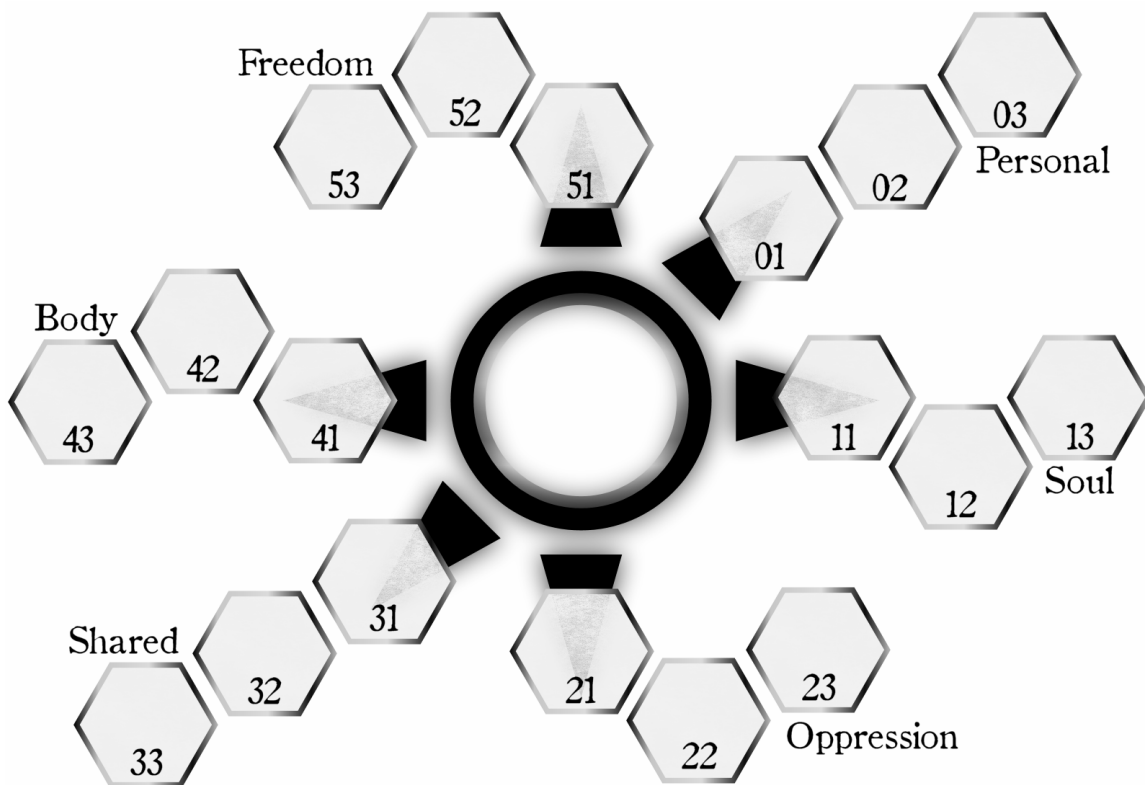
Every player in the game gets a chance to describe what happens to their character as a result of their actions. Epilogues aren't necessarily "good" or "bad", but they should all affect the character in major ways.

- ❖ After the Agent of Change is done triggering the Breaking Points of the other characters, the remaining players will then one-by-one use the same

techniques described in the End Game section above to narrate the epilogue of their character arc.

- ❖ These epilogues should all describe life-changing experiences that deeply affect the character and possibly the people around them.
- ❖ When all players are done describing the epilogue of their characters, the group (including the GM) as a whole should look at what occurred and decide what happens to the population of Alcor-VII as a whole. Did the Council of Three fall? Was there any lasting change to speak of? And how will their characters be remembered? Or will all memory of these days be lost to the Contentment Center?

The Star Chart



Design by Chris Bennett
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Epilogue Matrix

Personal + Soul + Oppression = Contentment

Your memory is erased of its unnecessary thoughts. Can you remember?

Personal + Soul + Freedom = Transcend

You find a greater purpose in life. Is it better to be troubled than to be contented?

Personal + Body + Oppression = Captured

You are imprisoned only to protect you from yourself. Will you make amends to be released back into society?

Personal + Body + Freedom = Escape

You find a way out of Alcor-VII. Is this the freedom you wished?

Shared + Soul + Oppression = Exposed

You and your friends are publicly revealed as dangerous citizens. Will others look up or turn away?

Shared + Soul + Freedom = Lead Revolt

Your leadership empowers others to rise up against the Judgment. Will the change you affect be a lasting one?

Shared + Body + Oppression = Cell Punishment

You and your fellow conspirators are shown what it means to ignore the Judgment. Will others break before you do?

Shared + Body + Freedom = Mass Breakout

You lead a daring escape to greener pastures and endless memories. But what will happen to you now?

Influences:

Movies: Metropolis (1928), Soylent Green (1973), Logan's Run (1976), Total Recall (1990)

Books: The works of Ayn Rand

Music: 2112 by Rush, Fight for Your Mind by Ben Harper

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If you enjoyed reading this game, have any questions about it or especially if you played it, I would love to hear from you. I can be reached at:

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==End Transmission==