



MARS COLONY

By Tim C Koppang



"We have changed the face of Mars, but we have not changed ourselves."

— First Deputy Mayor of Mars, REBECA COLLINS,
in a diary entry shortly before leaving office

MARS COLONY

A roleplaying game for two players about
personal failure and government.

TIM C KOPPANG



TCK • Roleplaying
Westmont, Illinois

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Photographs of Mars are public domain by NASA, and were taken during the various rover and orbiter missions. I hope that these images will instill in you the same sense of wonder and awe as they do in me.

Playtesting by Kat Adams, Keith Amling, Lambert Behnke, Ben Bernard, Darcy Burgess, Ron Edwards, Caroline Gibson, Mike Hewner, Gregor Hutton, Bertha Jorkins, Mike Kimmel, Diana Koppang, Ben Lehman, Ching-Ping Lin, Willow Palecek, Ben Robbins, Susan Taylor, Ben Thomson, Glenn Wardrop, and Mike Wass. Thanks to all.

Thank you to my family and friends for your curiosity and encouragement. Thank you to my wife, Diana, for listening to me and bragging to others.

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“From all of you, I have asked patience in the hard task of securing America, which you have granted in good measure. Our country has accepted obligations that are difficult to fulfil, and would be dishonorable to abandon. Yet because we have acted in the great liberating tradition of this nation, tens of millions have achieved their freedom.”

– President GEORGE W. BUSH
2nd Inaugural Address, 2005

“That we are in the midst of a crisis is now well understood. Our nation is at war against a far-reaching network of violence and hatred. Our economy is badly weakened, a consequence of greed and irresponsibility. Today I say to you that the challenges we face are real, they are serious and they are many. They will not be met easily or in a short span of time. But know this America: they will be met.”

– President BARACK OBAMA
Inaugural Address, 2009

M

A

R

S

4th Planet from the Sun

Min. Distance to Earth

Orbital Period

Daily Rotation Period

Atmosphere

Surface Pressure

Surface Gravity

Surface Temperature

Surface Radiation

Highest Peak

Misc. Weather Threat

35 million miles

1.88 Earth years

24.62 hours

96% carbon dioxide

1% of Earth's

38% of Earth's

-220° to 68° fahrenheit

10 to 20 rems per year

Olympus Mons, 16.8 miles

Large-scale dust storms



OVERVIEW

- 6 Mars Colony began as a playground in space. It was created by a coalition of Earth governments that advertised the project as a multi-national utopia. They sent the best scientists in the world to create the basic infrastructure. When the scientists finished their job, the Coalition sent in businessmen and architects to construct a resort city under a great dome. The plan worked, and thousands of citizens signed up to emigrate. The truth about Mars Colony, however, is less than ideal.

Mars Colony is dying, torn apart by environmental hazards, shoddy infrastructure, and social unrest. The Earth Coalition is keeping the Colony's failures a secret, and has instead decided to hire an expert to turn the Colony around. You, Kelly Perkins, are that expert. Based on your many achievements on Earth, you have been selected to act as grand consultant to the Colony.

Upon arrival, the people of Mars greeted you as a savior. But now you fear that your abilities have waned. Perhaps you are overwhelmed or under-qualified; regardless, your shortcomings are still a secret. The people love you, you're famous, you're the Colony's last great hope – and you are tasked with the impossible.

INTRODUCTION

8 *Mars Colony* is designed for two players. One player (called the “Savior”) takes on the role of the story’s main character, Kelly Perkins. Kelly can be male or female, and is tasked with saving the Colony from collapse. In addition, Kelly must cope with the fact that he (or she) is not necessarily the best man (or woman) for the job, despite enormous expectations.

The other player (called the “Governor”) is in charge of all other characters. These may include government officials, Colony citizens, criminals, freedom fighters, Earth visitors, etc.

Both players may invoke elements of the setting, including the Martian landscape, weather, Colony technology, and political climate.

The object of the game is to tell a meaningful story about Kelly Perkins’ attempt to save Mars Colony and cope with her own sense of self-worth. The story takes place as a series of

scenes during which Kelly learns of impending or ongoing problems with the Colony and then implements a plan to try to solve those problems. The other characters in the story exist to help or hinder Kelly. They all have their own agendas, and may not have the good of the Colony at heart.

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When Kelly's plans work, she will help to lift the Colony into self-sufficiency. When they fail, she will have to choose between facing the consequences of her failure or deceiving the people. Too many deceptions, however, will lead to political scandal.

The players will take turns setting scenes. During each scene, the players will move the story forward by describing any action, conflict, or dialogue that is taking place. When one scene ends, another will begin.

After nine attempts to turn the Colony around, the game ends. The players take stock of what Kelly has accomplished and decide if the Colony is more likely to flourish or flounder. They also decide if Kelly exits honorably or in disgrace.



PREPARATION

To play, you will need:

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- 9 small tokens (preferably “Martian Red” in color)
- 2 six-sided dice (also red)
- 6 small index cards
- A copy of the Political Party List, Organization Map, and Character Worksheet (all included at the end of this book)
- A pencil for each player

STAGE 1

The players each generate three Fear Cards. Taking three index cards, each player secretly writes one thing on each card that he fears about his real-life government. For inspiration, the players may (but are not required to) use any of the following templates:

- The [political party] members anger me when they [...]
- My government always makes things worse when it [...]
- The [recent news story] is another example of my government letting people down.

Other free-form examples include “lobbying as a form of legalized bribery,” “hatred of immigrants,” “abusive police power,” and “over-legislating lifestyle choices.”

The players each randomly turn one card face-up in the middle of the table. They shuffle the remaining cards together and set the combined stack next to the two face-up cards.

STAGE 2

The players collaboratively choose 2–4 political parties from modern times. These political parties will form the bases for the fictional political parties within Mars Colony. Choosing more parties will result in a more complicated political situation. Play-

ers may choose any political party from around the globe, but should make sure that both players are familiar with the policies and personality of each party they choose.

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One player records each of the chosen parties on the Political Party List as the “Guide” to one of the four fictional parties (Red, Blue, Yellow, or Green).

The players then fill in a single bubble for each party, choosing from Fringe, Minority, or Dominant. The players need not choose the bubble that accurately describes the dominance of the corresponding modern political party. They should only concern themselves with how they wish to portray the fictional party on Mars.

STAGE 3

The Governor chooses one character from each of the four major Organizations listed on the Organization Map. For each

character, the Governor chooses a fictional political party and records the party name underneath the character's name.

THE MAYOR'S OFFICE. The Mayor's Office is the executive branch of the Colony government. Mayor Yang is the first Mayor elected by the Colony citizens. Yang's predecessor was installed by the Earth Coalition. Yang maintains a full staff, including Chief of Staff Spaniel and Chief of Security Lloyds.

THE COLONY COUNCIL. The Council is the Colony's legislative branch, responsible for passing local laws and ordinances. There are five council members: Stuart, Hadar, Tanya, Jiang, and Robert. Each member is elected to represent one of the five Colony Districts. The Colony Districts are officially known by their number only, but residents often refer to them by nickname.

NEWS NETWORK CORP. The Network is the Colony's only major news source. While the Network has many employees, the most well known are Network Chief Serena Panin, feed writer Evan Bao, beat reporter Sydney Fane, and head anchor Jase Williams.

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THE EARTH COALITION. The Earth Coalition is a multi-member group of Earth nations that sponsored the construction of Mars Colony. These nations all claim an interest in how the Colony is run. In order to provide a conduit between the Colony and the people of Earth, and in order to administer Coalition directives, the Earth Coalition sent a committee to Mars. Its president is Arnold Fletcher. Underneath the President are numerous representatives from member countries, including Rep. Cecil Flanders, Rep. Ela Verma, Rep. Hoshi Inoue, and Rep. Mariana Melo.

STAGE 4

The Savior places all nine tokens in the circle labeled “Admiration” on the Character Worksheet. The Contempt and Deception circles are empty at the start of the game. Together, these three circles represent Kelly’s reputation with the people.

When Kelly arrives on Mars, she is loved by all. As the game progresses, Kelly may lose her flawless reputation. To represent this loss, the Savior will move tokens from Admiration over to Contempt or Deception.

STAGE 5

The Savior chooses a fictional political party for Kelly Perkins. He records the party name on the Character Worksheet in the box labeled “Affiliation.”

STAGE 6

The Savior generates a Sympathy for Kelly Perkins. A Sympathy is another character, located on Mars, with whom Kelly has a strong connection. The Savior either chooses or rolls for a random element from both of the following columns:

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Relationship		Complication	
1	Spouse	1	Severe Illness
2	Parent	2	Major Deceit
3	Sibling	3	Substantial Debt or Wealth
4	Child	4	Outcast
5	Friend or Enemy	5	Politically Powerful
6	Lover	6	Addict

Using the elements selected, both players flesh out Kelly’s Sympathy. The players should define the Sympathy’s name, situa-

tion, and location on Mars. The Savior records a few key details on the Character Worksheet in the section labeled “Sympathy.”

STAGE 7

The players collaboratively choose three Colony Health Markers from the following list. Each Marker represents a serious threat to the Colony’s stability, which Kelly will be expected to neutralize. The Savior should record each choice on the Character Worksheet underneath the “Colony Health Marker” header.

atmosphere, dust, gravity, radiation, “others”
energy, water, materials, funding, population
disease, nutrition, sanitation, healthcare
education, crime, terrorism, social unrest
communication, corruption, labor, transportation

The Health Markers are intentionally vague. Therefore, the players should briefly discuss how they plan to interpret each choice in play. The players may also wish to choose Health Markers that touch on some of the themes suggested by the political parties and Fear Cards they created.



PLAY

The Savior opens play by narrating a vignette that introduces Kelly Perkins. The Savior should establish Kelly's background, qualifications, and relationship with the Earth Coalition. Remember that Kelly was chosen by the Earth Coalition above all other people on Earth to remedy the Colony's problems.

After the opening vignette, there are three types of scenes. These may occur in any order during play:

PERSONAL SCENES. Personal Scenes focus on Kelly Perkins' private life and personal struggles. They do not directly implicate Colony politics. For example, introducing Kelly's Sympathy would make a good Personal Scene. If Kelly's Sympathy becomes a political liability, though, an Opposition Scene will probably be more appropriate.

OPPOSITION SCENES (Governor Only). An Opposition Scene must involve Colony politics or the lead-up to a direct threat against Colony stability. Opposition Scenes only set the stage for Kelly to take action. As soon as the Savior begins to narrate what Kelly is doing to solve a Colony problem, the Opposition Scene should end and a Progress Scene should begin.

PROGRESS SCENES (Savior Only). During Progress Scenes, Kelly implements a plan to stabilize a threat to the Colony under one of the Colony Health Markers. The rules for Progress Scenes are formalized and drive the game forward. At most, there are nine Progress Scenes in a game. After the ninth Progress Scene, the game ends.

The players take turns framing scenes. The Governor goes first; he may only choose a Personal or an Opposition Scene. The Savior frames the next scene, and he may only choose a Personal or Progress Scene.

During each scene, the players should feel free to draw from any of the material generated during Preparation.

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STAGE 1

The active player names an appropriate scene type of his choice. He begins by describing the setting, the characters present, and the initial situation.

STAGE 2

If the scene-type is Personal or Opposition, the players collaborate to describe how the scene unfolds. Generally, the Savior narrates for Kelly Perkins, and the Governor narrates for all other characters. The players may narrate in the first or third person. If a conflict arises, the players reach an agreement about how the conflict is resolved. If the scene has served its purpose in the story, the players end the scene.

Any time the players introduce a new character from one of the four major Organizations, they choose a political party for that character and record it on the Map. Players should try to introduce characters listed on the Map, but may also invent new characters when appropriate.

If a player needs inspiration, he may introduce a fictional element derived from one of the face-up Fear Cards. When the players agree, they may turn over a new Fear Card. Older Fear Cards remain on the table throughout the game.

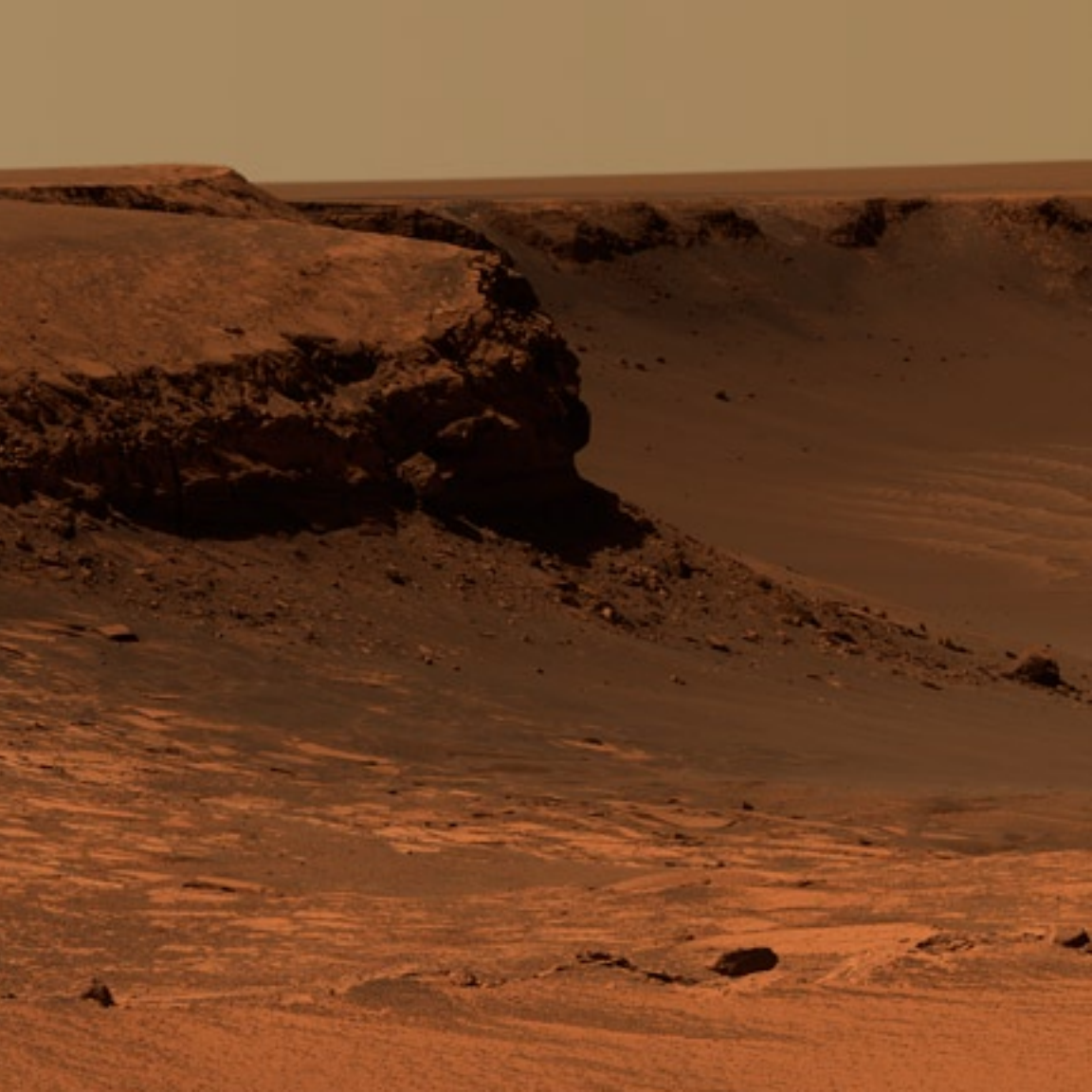
If the scene-type is Progress, then Stage 2 follows an expanded path, described in the next chapter. The Savior will roll dice. Kelly will be tested. Mars Colony will begin to stabilize or sink deeper into chaos.

Also note that “scene” should be interpreted broadly. The players do not need to limit themselves to a single location or a single group of characters. Instead, a scene should be a cohesive segment of action within the story.

STAGE 3

The scene ends. The active player becomes the inactive player. Another round begins with a new scene at Stage 1. Scenes do not have to follow one another chronologically. The players may frame flashbacks or jump ahead in time. They should choose to frame whatever is most powerful in the context of the story.

The players repeat Stages 1–3 until they have completed nine Progress Scenes, or until there are five tokens in the Contempt circle and the people of Mars Colony prematurely remove Kelly Perkins from office. The more Kelly is able to accomplish during her time as consultant, the more likely Mars Colony is to succeed.



PROGRESS

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During a Progress Scene, the Savior will try to generate as many Health Points as possible in one of the Colony Health Markers. Health Points measure Kelly's progress.

If the Savior can generate 20 total Health Points in one Marker, then Kelly has made "significant progress" towards stabilizing that part of the Colony. If the Savior can generate 40 Health Points in a Marker, then Kelly has "stabilized" that area of the Colony. Additional Health Points represent prosperity.

Progress Scenes take place during Stage 2 of Play, as follows:

PART A

The Savior crosses off the next highest number listed on the Character Worksheet's "Timeline," starting with 9 and moving

down to 1. If the Savior crosses off the 1, then the current Progress Scene will be the last full scene of the game.

PART B

The Savior declares which of the Colony Health Markers Kelly Perkins will be trying to improve. He then describes Kelly's goal and plan. The plan is a basic outline of how Kelly is going to attempt to solve at least one problem associated with the chosen Health Marker. Goals may be large in scale. Plans may take hours, days, or even months to complete.

The goal and plan are what Kelly *hopes* will happen, not necessarily what *will* happen. The Savior should not pre-narrate any of the action to come.

PART C

The Savior rolls both dice and adds up the results. This total is the number of Health Points that the Savior has generated so far.

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PART D

The Savior chooses:

- (A) Roll again and attempt to garner additional Health Points, or
- (B) Quit and keep his current total.

The Savior may continue to roll as many times as he likes. There is a catch, though. On any roll (including the initial roll), if one or both of the dice show a 1, then the entire plan is a failure and the Savior earns no Health Points for the scene.

After each roll, the players narrate Kelly's progress. The players do not need to narrate long descriptions, but should establish what Kelly has accomplished and what she still needs to do.

PART E (SUCCESS)

If the Savior quits, then Kelly's plan is considered a success. She may not have accomplished everything she set out to do, but, more importantly, she hasn't failed. The Savior adds all of the Health Points he has generated to the appropriate Health Marker on the Character Worksheet.

When a Health Marker's total reaches 40 points, the related area of the Colony is considered stabilized. The people may congratulate Kelly, but ultimately the Colony will continue to develop new problems. The Savior moves one token from Contempt to Admiration. The players then choose a new Colony

Health Marker from the list contained on page 18 and record it on the Character Worksheet. The maximum number of Health Markers for any game is five.

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Finally, the players narrate the conclusion of the scene and the ultimate outcome of the plan.

PART E (FAILURE)

If the Savior rolls a 1 – disaster. Kelly’s plan is a complete failure. Unless the Savior chooses to create a Deception, he generates no Health Points for the scene. The players narrate Kelly’s failure and how the Colony continues to collapse.

When the Savior rolls a failure, he must move one token from Admiration to Contempt. The only way to avoid this loss of reputation is to create a Deception.

As Kelly gains additional Contempt, the people of Mars Colony will begin to petition for her removal. If there are ever

five tokens in Contempt, the people will successfully remove her as consultant. Kelly's removal triggers endgame.

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A roll of double 1s is even worse. Kelly's plan is not only a complete failure, but it is also a personal Humiliation for Kelly. The players narrate the failure normally, but must also include details about how Kelly is forced to take public responsibility for the failure. The Savior may never cover up a Humiliation with a Deception.



DECEPTION

- 34 As long as the Savior avoids Humiliation or Scandal, he may turn any failure into an apparent success through Deception. The Savior adds the points he would have generated if he hadn't rolled a 1 to the Colony Health Marker under the column marked "Lies." The Savior gains no points from the roll that actually included the 1.

Example : Kelly's first Health Marker is labeled "crime." The Marker currently holds 11 Health Points. While attempting to reduce crime in the Colony by instituting a mandatory service program, the Savior rolls: [3,4], [2,6], and finally [1,5]. The last roll includes a 1, and, therefore, turns the entire series into a failure. But the Savior decides to create a Deception. If he had quit before rolling the 1, the

first two rolls would have generated 15 Health Points. The Savior writes 15 next to his legitimate total of 11, and records the total of 26 in the last column on the Character Worksheet.

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To complete the Deception, the Savior moves one token from Admiration to Deception. The players then narrate how Kelly deceives the people into believing that her plan succeeded even though it failed.

Mechanically, Lies are no different from Health Points. When the total Health plus Lies reaches 40 points, the Marker is still considered “stable” (at least publicly), and the Savior still moves a token from Contempt back to Admiration.

Note that the Savior may create a Deception even after rolling a 1 on the first roll of a Progress Scene. He does not generate any Lie Points, but does avoid additional Contempt.



SCANDAL

After the Savior creates Kelly's first Deception, the possibility for Scandal arises. The more Deception tokens the Savior accumulates, the easier it is for him to cause a Scandal.

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With a single Deception token, a Scandal occurs whenever the Savior rolls double 1s. With two Deception tokens, a Scandal occurs when the Savior rolls [1,1] or [1,2]. This pattern continues all the way to six Deception tokens, when a Scandal will occur on any of the following rolls: [1,1], [1,2], [1,3], [1,4], [1,5], or [1,6].

When a Scandal occurs, as with any other failure, the Savior moves one token from Admiration to Contempt. Kelly then loses all Lie Points from all Colony Health Markers. In addition, Kelly is shamed. The Savior must move all of his current Deception tokens to Contempt.

The players narrate a Scandal as an intense failure. They should reference past cover-ups, and emphasize Kelly's role in the Colony's problems. A Scandal can cripple the Colony and ruin Kelly's career.

ENDGAME

After nine Progress Scenes, or a forced removal, Kelly's tenure as consultant to the Colony ends. The players may define why Kelly is no longer wanted or needed, or they may leave the question open-ended.

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The players do not narrate an extended epilogue. Instead, they each narrate a final vignette.

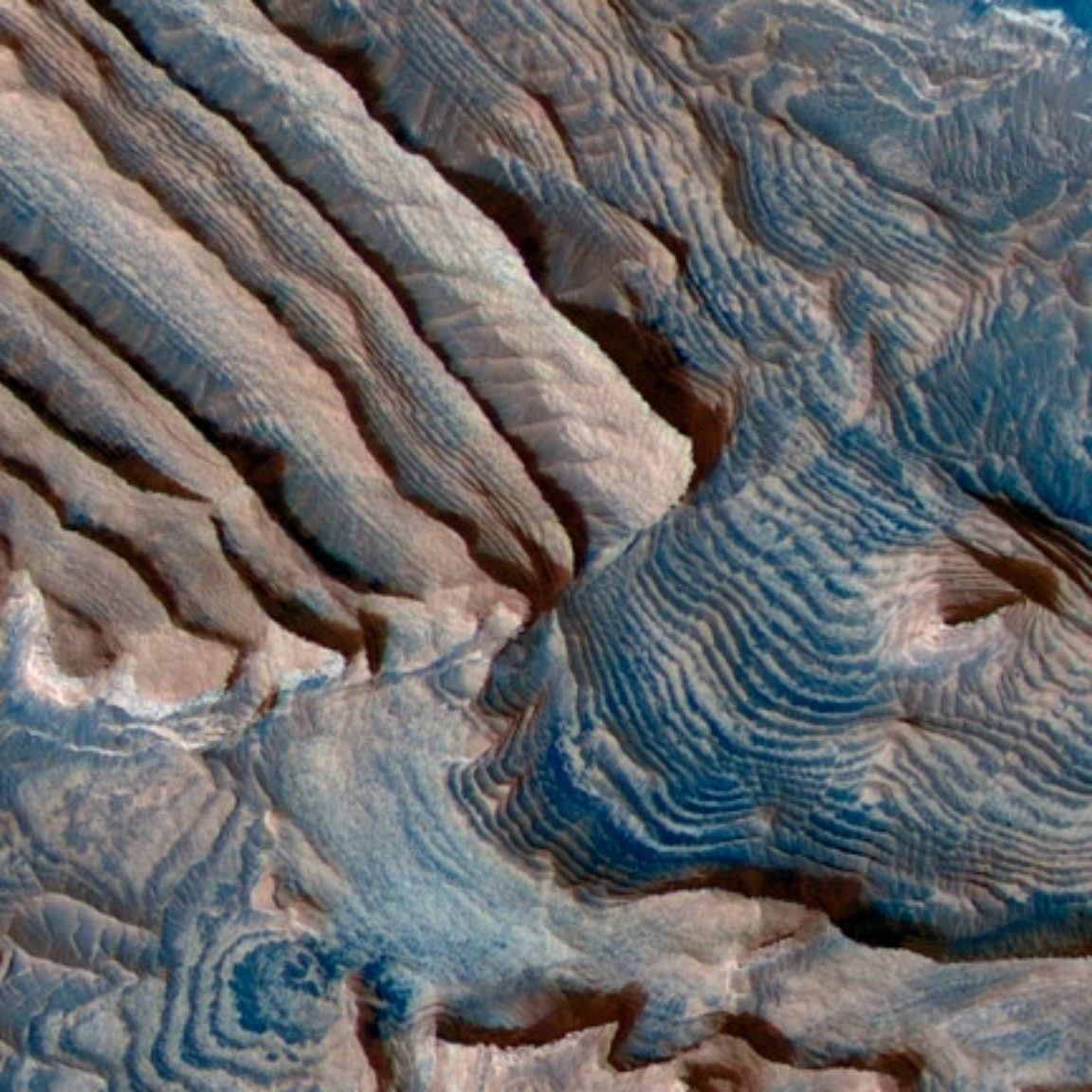
The Governor describes the state of the Colony at the end of Kelly's run. The Governor should decide whether the Colony is failing or succeeding.

The Savior narrates a similar picture, but from Kelly's point of view. The Savior should decide whether Kelly steps down as a respected leader or an unwanted bureaucrat.

There are few hard guidelines, but the players should consider the following:

For the Governor : If Kelly has stabilized at least three Health Markers, then the Colony has recovered into a prosperous outpost. If she hasn't stabilized any Health Markers, then the Colony is ripping itself apart. Everything in between is left to the players. The Governor may also consider the extent to which Kelly has relied on Deceptions and Lies; however, the Governor should not narrate the long-term effects of such things.

For the Savior : If Kelly has made significant progress (i.e., at least 20 points) towards stabilizing at least three Health Markers, then the people will tend to blame other leaders for any lingering problems within Mars Colony. The Savior should also consider the level of Admiration the people have for Kelly when describing a final snapshot of Kelly.



ADVICE

42 *Mars Colony* is not a game that demands the use of strategy; however, the dice mechanic can be unforgiving. It may help to have a basic understanding of the probabilities involved.

In order to stabilize three Colony Health Markers, and, therefore, the Colony, the Savior will need to generate a total of 120 Health Points. This means that, even using a conservative dice strategy, the Savior will need to generate 20 Health Points per Progress Scene. The average roll, assuming no 1s, will create 8 Health Points; and so it will typically take at least three rolls to generate the minimum number of Health Points per Progress Scene. An odds calculation shows that the Savior should be able to roll three times in a row 33% of the time.

Obviously, the Savior will roll a few 1s over the course of the game. To compensate, the Savior will have to either accept that Kelly will not stabilize the Colony, or push his luck and rely

on Deceptions. Even with Deceptions, it will be an uphill battle. There may be some Progress Scenes where the Savior cannot generate any Health Points at all.

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In other words, Mars favors only the bold and the lucky. Don't be surprised if your Kelly Perkins doesn't measure up. The goal of the game is not to "win," but rather to explore the themes emphasized by the players.

A few suggestions on scene creation may also help in playing the game. There is an abundance of source material generated during the Preparation phase. The players must balance what they have created against the constraints of the story they are telling. Both players should be aware that there is no need to integrate everything that has been created into the game.

The Fear Cards, Political Parties, Colony Organizations, Reputation tokens, and Sympathy serve merely to provide inspiration. Anything that does not fit into the scene at hand may be ignored until it becomes useful. It may happen that in one game

the players use the partisan politics of the Colony to comment on their own government, while in another the parties serve merely to generate rivalries among the characters. Both choices are legitimate.

Concentrate on what interests you the most. Allow the rest to fade into the background so as not to overwhelm yourself or your partner.

Finally, make use of Personal Scenes. The game will inevitably turn to politics and scandal. Personal Scenes are the players' opportunity to explore Kelly's humanity. Allow Kelly to become a more complex character. Allow her to be emotionally affected by her choices and the pressures placed on her by the people.



INFLUENCES

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Upon graduating law school and entering the workforce, I was suddenly faced with the fact that I was not as talented as I had been led to believe. My friends and family had high expectations for me based on my many academic accomplishments. What I faced, however, was not another classroom, but a world with very different rules. I was, in a sense, starting over.

Out of these feelings of personal failure came the original idea for *Mars Colony*. Science fiction and my frustration with American politics provided the remaining ingredients.

Influential books include *Red Mars*, by Kim Stanley Robinson (1993), *How to Live on Mars: A Trusty Guidebook to Surviving and Thriving on the Red Planet*, by Robert Zubrin (2008), *The Martian Chronicles*, by Ray Bradbury (1946), and *Postcards from Mars: The First Photographer on the Red Planet*, by Jim Bell (2006).

Many roleplaying games also paved the way for the mechanics and themes presented in *Mars Colony*. First among them is *Sweet Agatha*, by Kevin Allen Jr. (2008). If you enjoy the intimacy of two-player roleplaying, I cannot recommend this game enough. Other two-player games include *S/Lay w/Me* by Ron Edwards (2009), *Thy Vernal Chieftains* by Paul Czege (2009), *Tales of the Fisherman's Wife* by Julia B. Ellingboe (2008), *Showdown* by Seth Ben-Ezra (unpublished), and *Clover* by Ben Lehman (unpublished).

Mars Colony was also influenced by my experiences with *Grey Ranks*, by Jason Morningstar (2007), *Dirty Secrets*, by Seth Ben-Ezra (2007), and *Shock: Social Science Fiction*, by Joshua A.C. Newman (2006).

Political Parties

1

RED PARTY

Fringe ○
Minority ○
Dominant ○

Guide :

2

BLUE PARTY

Fringe ○
Minority ○
Dominant ○

Guide :

3

YELLOW PARTY

Fringe ○
Minority ○
Dominant ○

Guide :

4

GREEN PARTY

Fringe ○
Minority ○
Dominant ○

Guide :

Colony Organizations

[The Mayor's Office]

Mayor Yang

Chief of Staff
Spaniel

Chief of Security
Lloyds

Deputy Mayor Liao

[The Colony Council]

Council-Member
Stuart

Council-Member
Hadar

Council-Member
Tanya

Council-Member
Jiang

Council-Member
Robert

[News Network Corp.]

Network Chief
Serena Panin

Feed Writer
Evan Bao

Lead Anchor
Jase Williams

Beat Reporter
Sydney Fane

[The Earth Coalition]

President Arnold
Fletcher

Rep. Cecil Flanders

Rep. Ela Verma

Rep. Hoshi Inoue

Rep. Mariana Melo

Kelly Perkins			Affiliation :								
9	8	7	6	5	4	3	2	1	Timeline		
Sympathy :											
Deception Admiration Contempt MARS COLONY											
	Colony Health Marker				Health			Lies			Total
1											
2											
3											
4											
5											