



CAGE OF SAND

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CW: violence, murder

INTRODUCTION

Cage of Sand is a time loop horror game for 1-4 players. You will need a deck of tarot cards, some paper and something to write with.

MODES OF PLAY

Cage of Sand can either be played solo or as a collaborative game where each player takes turns drawing cards. All players contribute to the Act 4 discussion and may propose responses to prompts. A few additional modes of play are included under "Game Variants" at the end of the text.

CARD INTERPRETATION

Cage of Sand uses tarot cards as story prompts. When you are instructed to draw and interpret a card, you may use either the card's meaning (if you know it), its name, its image or even just its general mood or colours.

REWRITING THE RULES

The instructions are there to help you craft your story. If you find at any stage that they conflict with the story you wish to tell, ignore or change them as you please.

SETUP

Select or draw a card to represent your Avatar in the game world. Decide on their name, pronouns and personality if they differ from your own.

Draw three cards to determine the setting: one for the place, one for the time of year and one for the circumstances that bring the characters together.

Draw ten more cards and check them over. These represent the entire cast of named characters present in your story. If any card dissatisfies you, remove and replace it.

Finally, set aside a sheet of paper for your Revelations and your tally sheet.



54321

Take a scrap of paper, label it "54321" and place it at the centre of the table. At the end of any particularly intense moment in the game, search your real-life surroundings for the following:

- 5 things you can see
- 4 things you can touch
- 3 things you can hear
- 2 things you can smell
- 1 thing you can taste

If you or any other player is feeling distressed, take a tea break.

MULTI-PLAYER SAFETY TOOLS

If you are playing as a group, begin with a frank discussion of the themes of the game. Allow players to nominate subjects that they would like to be entirely off-limits (lines) as well as any that can be present but not detailed in the game (veils).

Take a piece of paper, write an "X" on it and place it at the centre of the table. If any player taps on the X-Card, whatever subject led to the card being used is immediately removed from the game. Other players may ask for clarification but are not entitled to an explanation.

To learn more about safe gaming, check out the TTRPG Safety Toolkit: http://bit.ly/ttrpgsafetytoolkit



THE TIME LOOP

Begin with Act 1 and work your way through the instructions below.

ACT 1: INTRODUCTION

If this is the first loop:

- Your Avatar wakes from a nightmare that they cannot recall. Decide what they perceive in their surroundings on their awakening. These details are the same with each loop.
- Draw 3 cards to determine the inconsequential events of their morning routine. Set these aside.

If this is not the first loop:

- Consult your previous cards and notes to replay your Avatar's morning routine.
- Your Avatar wakes with a strong sense of déjà vu. Decide which vague memory of the previous loop haunts them, and for each tally mark choose one unremarkable element of their surroundings or morning activities that disturbs them with its familiarity.
- If desired, at the start of each Act 2 or 3, set aside any characters you wish to be excluded.





If many loops have occurred:

- Your Avatar changes their morning routine. Replace a card and decide what happens instead.
- You may choose to impart any of the following upon your Avatar:
    a) One of your Revelations.
    b) Full or partial memories of a previous loop.
    c) Awareness that time is repeating itself.
- Decide how this changes your Avatar's actions and/or the rules of the game.

ACT 2: INTERACTIONS

During Act 2, your Avatar interacts with the other characters. Write down the details of each new character including the name of the card that represents them.

Minor Interactions: draw three character cards. For each, draw a card from your tarot deck to decide the topic of the conversation.

Major Interactions: draw two character cards. For each, draw a card from your tarot deck and refer to the prompts below. Decide what happens and how your Avatar reacts.

- ***Swords:*** the character makes an unreasonable request for your Avatar's help.
- ***Wands:*** the character makes a sacrifice for your Avatar's sake.
- ***Cups:*** your Avatar learns something about another relationship this character has.
- ***Pentacles:*** the character gives your Avatar a gift, or your Avatar gives them a gift.
- ***Major Arcana:*** a secret about the character is revealed.

PRELUDE

If this is the first loop, draw a card to determine the event that heralds the beginning of Act 3. This same event occurs in every loop.

- ***Swords:*** an argument.
- ***Wands:*** a letter or phone call.
- ***Cups:*** a weather event.
- ***Pentacles:*** discovery of a strange item.
- ***Major Arcana:*** a festival, ceremony or party.

ACT 3: THE TURN

Shuffle and draw six character cards for the corpses that your Avatar discovers. Reveal 1-3 cards at a time and for each discovery draw from your tarot deck to decide what your Avatar perceives and the conclusions they draw:

- ***Swords:*** the killer leaves obvious signs of the cause or time of death.
- ***Wands:*** the time or cause of death or the identity of the victim(s) is hidden.
- ***Cups:*** another character reacts strangely to the murder.
- ***Pentacles:*** something has been stolen from or left with the victim(s).
- ***Major Arcana:*** the murder is unusually gruesome, showy or ritualistic.

Time passes between each discovery. Decide how the characters spend this time.

ACT 4: CONCLUSION

At the end of the loop all remaining characters, including your Avatar, die mysteriously. Decide how this event is reported in the news. This is largely the same each time, with any minor variations you choose.

At the end of each time loop, reflect on the events that occurred and any patterns that have begun to emerge. Revisit the 54321 exercise and then record one or more Revelations, as follows:

- Select a character. What do they know that your Avatar doesn't?
- Select 2-3 characters. Describe a bond they share which doesn't involve your Avatar.
- Who or what is responsible for the murders?
- Who or what is responsible for the time loop?
- Do any other characters perceive the time loop?
- What is the true nature of the disaster at the end of the time loop?
- Is it possible to end the time loop? What would it take?

Clear your space and shuffle your character cards. Make a new mark on your tally sheet and return to Act 1.

ENDING THE GAME

You can decide whether the time loop closes or if you simply abandon your Avatar to their fate. Write the conclusion of your story and shuffle all cards back into your tarot deck. If you wish to keep your notes, fold them and place them somewhere safe. If not, burn them and erase these events from your mind.







GAME VARIANTS

This section provides a few alternate ways to play the game. Each involves some extra complexity, so you are encouraged to play the standard mode at least once before trying these options.

MULTIPLE AVATARS

Draw two or more cards during the Setup phase, each to represent a separate Avatar. Either respond to prompts by playing both/all Avatars at once, or switch between Avatars as you please.

SWITCHING PERSPECTIVES

At the beginning of each Act 1, draw a card from your deck of characters and tell the story from their perspective.

OBSERVER CHARACTERS

Each player takes on two roles: that of the Avatar(s) and that of an Observer. An Observer exists outside of the time loop but can influence the events that occur as if they were a player. Draw a card to represent the world the Observer(s) inhabit and a card to represent the Observer themself (one per player). Decide on their name, pronouns and personality. Optionally, give them a title.

GAME MASTER AND AVATAR CONTROLLER

One player acts as the Game Master (GM) and at least one player acts as an Avatar Controller (AC). Each AC has sole control over their own Avatar, and, optionally, their own Observer. They respond to prompts during Act 1 and decide on their Avatar's reactions to Acts 2 and 3. The GM responds to all other prompts and decides on the actions of the other characters. During Act 4, the GM writes Revelations which they do not share with the AC, instead hinting at them through the actions and words of the characters in the game world.



CREDITS

Cage of Sand is copyright Luciella Elisabeth Scarlett, 2020. The hourglass graphics were created by Olha Turchenko and sourced from CreativeMarket.com. The Lines and Veils system was created by Ron Edwards and the X-Card was created by John Stavropoulos.

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