



# *Sphynx*

A roleplaying game  
of fantastic archeology

Fabien Hildwein

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of fantastic  
archeology



## Summary

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### Cover

*Temple à la Pensée, dédié à Beethoven, visions du temple, clair de lune*

François Garas (1866 – ~1925)  
~1900 – Musée d'Orsay, Paris

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## Creating explorers

*Sphynx* invites you to tell the story of an archaeological expedition from our day, delving into ancient ruins. Its members will explore not only the secret past of humanity, but also discover themselves.

*Sphynx* is played with three to five participants. One participant – likely the one who handles the role of “game master” – must have read this book entirely. They will be responsible for transmitting its content to the other participants, the “players”.

In order to play *Sphynx*, you need a sheet of paper per participant, as many pencils, an eraser, some tokens (glass beads, wooden discs, coins, beer caps...) and something to mark a progression from 1 to 8 of an in-game value (an 8-, 10-, 12- or 20-sided dice if you have one; otherwise a piece of paper on which you will write the numbers). To help the players, you may also print for each of them a character sheet and a summary of the rules (which you can find at the end of the book).

The characters are distinguished members of an archeological expedition on its way to investigate a set of recently discovered ruins which are full of secrets to unveil and of dangers to face. The treasures and mysteries they held, however, are still hidden deep within and will not be easily reached.

Each explorer has been chosen and sent on the expedition by Alma Mater due to their archeological knowledge and their expertise in one particular field. Alma Mater is an organization with obscure goals that funds projects of all kinds. It generously sponsors intellectuals and artists of utmost eccentricity. The explorers can come from any intellectual field: sciences, history, and archeology, of course; but also pseudosciences or disciplines of even greater unorthodoxy. The one and only criterion Alma Mater considers is skill. Gender, race, religion and class are of no interest to the occult society, so explorers can come from any background.

In addition to the explorers themselves, the expedition comprises many other members in charge of logistics, maintenance, and safety, and numerous junior researchers. The players' explorers are still the group's leaders. They also have access to basically any scientific or even esoteric equipment they might need: Alma Mater is wealthy enough to provide them with cutting-edge technology for every field of knowledge.

## *Field of expertise*

To create their explorer, each player will need either a copy of the character sheet (found at the end of the book) or a blank sheet of paper. They will write down various pieces of information as well as any change that will happen to their explorer during the course of the game, especially the Journey points they will receive.

First, each player decides on their explorer's main discipline:

- either by selecting one from the list below; they are invited to choose a specialty to this discipline (history of religions, analytic philosophy, linguistics of dead languages, etc.);
- or by choosing a discipline not mentioned below, either in the realm of sciences or pseudosciences; there exist an incredible number of realms for intellectual adventures and many of them are still unknown.

Alchemy | Anatomy | Anthropology | Archeology | Architecture  
| Astrology | Astronomy | Bibliophilia | Biology | Botany |  
Chemistry | Cryptozoology | Ecology | Genetics | Geology |  
History | Literature | Linguistics | Mathematics | Medicine  
| Metaphysics | Mythology | Numerology | Occultism |  
Paleontology | Parapsychology | Philosophy | Poetics |  
Psychology | Sociology | Theology | Ufology | Urbanism |  
Zoology

In any case, a character's field of expertise is not a limitation: each explorer is a scholar and has access to all knowledge. Their discipline in one particular domain is an open door, not a constraint. It only means that the explorer is especially good in this discipline.

Each player is encouraged to choose a discipline in which they have some knowledge — either by occupation or hobby — or that is close to one they know. They can thus benefit from their own expertise during the game and are able to impart believability to their assertions.

### *Metaphysical question*

Each explorer searches the ruins neither for glory nor wealth but because they are looking for answers to questions that affect them at a fundamental level. These interrogations are condensed into one metaphysical question for each explorer. This metaphysical question concerns the nature of reality, life, soul and any other subject that transcends human condition.

Each player invents one metaphysical question or selects it from the list below (they are, of course, free to modify or refine it). Each player is invited to choose a question that makes sense to them, that concerns them personally. Bear in mind that a metaphysical question can be about transcending one's human condition by obtaining a superior control over reality.

### **EXAMPLES OF METAPHYSICAL QUESTIONS**

- What is truly important in life and in the world?
- What meaning does my life have? Does it even have one? What is the best use for my life?
- What is there after death? What implications does it have on the way we should conduct our lives?
- Can I overcome mortality? Can we rejuvenate?
- What is the soul? Does it exist? What does it become after life ends?
- What is consciousness? What connection does it have to the body? Can we separate them? Can we move our consciousness or transfer it into another body at will? What power can we hope to have upon our conscience?
- Why do death, evil and pain exist? Can we soothe them, or even eradicate them?
- Does God exist? What is God's form?
- What is time? Can I alter it at will?
- What is the link between language and the material world? Do words shape reality, or is it the other way around?
- Does freedom actually exist, or are we doomed to determinism? Can freedom be obtained? How?
- What is a human being? Does humankind have some sort of fate?

- What is the difference between a human and an animal? Is this boundary fluid?
- Why is there something instead of nothing? What is the origin of the world? What is the fate of the world?
- Where does the sacred come from? What should we actually worship?
- What is beauty? How can we create it?

## *The expedition*

Finally, it is important to flesh out the explorers and the expedition some more. You can use the following questions as a basis to build your character.

What is your explorer's name?

What are the relationships between the player's explorers? A professional competition? A friendship? A sincere affection? Some passionate nights? A master-and-disciple relation? How are these relationships affected by the differences in the disciplines they each study?

Is there someone in the expedition your character is especially attached to? A PhD student under their tutelage? A researcher? A technician, a member of the security staff? What kinds of relationships (familial, affective, intimate...) do you have with one another?

## *Facing the Abyss*

Some player may wonder why characters are not more developed from the start. The reason is that this will happen during the game, as the rules promote developing relationships between the characters and exploring their respective motivations.

But more importantly, *Sphinx*'s characters are mere specks compared to the ruins, barely even figures shadowgraphed against the derelict cyclopean structures they investigate. What *Sphinx* proposes is fundamentally a meditation on the insignificance of each individual. The only meaningful activity we can pursue during the short time that is our lifespan is to strive for incomplete answers to the mysteries of the universe, and thus maybe find a sense to our existences.







# Telling a story of *Sphynx*

## *Overview of a game*

During a game of *Sphynx*, participants tell the story together of an expedition exploring extremely ancient ruins. These ruins have never been excavated so far and may contain unknown dangers. By exploring them, characters will unearth knowledge of a lost civilization having transcended human limits.

To achieve this, participants employ a set of rules and some preparations. There are two kinds of participants: the players and the game master. Players tell mostly actions of the main characters, the explorers, including their efforts to penetrate the ruins' enigmas. Both try to understand the secret coherency of the ruins. The game master prepares a description of those ruins, and present this description to the players as the explorers penetrate the ruins and gradually uncover its mysteries All of this is structured by the rules. The game master determines at each moment who can say what and they help par-



ticipants to reach the best possible gaming experience. The game ends when the explorers have uncovered all the ruins' secrets and understood enough of them.

In *Sphinx*, the game master has a great power, but, unlike other roleplaying games, they are *not* above the rules and cannot change them at will during the game. They are not the one who alone decides the turn of the story, neither by their preparation, nor by forcing scenes as they wish. In *Sphinx* the game master is considered as a participant like the others - even if they have a different position than the players. They must go along with the story of the players, not impose their own, even if they can direct it to by means of their Revelations. The gaming experience is better for everyone this way.

Before the game, the game master prepares a description of the ruins (see the chapter about the creation of ruins) and each player creates an explorer who will be their character during the whole game. Usually, it is the game master who knows and shares the rules with new players. It is imperative that the preparation of the ruins by the game master remains unknown by the players at the beginning, in order to keep all secrets intact. On the other hand, players create their explorers together, generally at the beginning of the first game: in this way the game master can guide players in their decisions, and the players can exchange ideas and talk about their choices

with each other.

During the game, players narrate the efforts of their characters to penetrate the secrets of the ruins. Those efforts are both physical (to enter the ruins) and intellectual (to understand what happened here). The game master describes the ruins and accompanies players in the unveiling of the successive Revelations, which they prepared before the game.

Participants call on rules in different situations, mostly to agree on the evolution of the game and to highlight the central issues of the story.

## *Starting*

At the beginning of the game, once players have created their explorers, the game master follows a short procedure:

1. Write seven numbers on a sheet of paper (see Choosing the difficulty, below);
2. Place a counter which can go from 1 to 8 (ideally an 8-faced dice) at the center of the table, set to 1;
3. Tell the players how their explorers reached the ruins and describe the immediate area;
4. To start the game, reveal to the players the mission order and the first images of the ruins discovered by their characters.

The mission order summarizes what is known at the beginning, in other words, not so much: where the ruins are, what they look like and the first hypotheses about them. The game master also describes the first approach: how characters reach the first site (in a boat, on foot, aboard a helicopter...) and part of the installations which have already been set up (some members of the expedition are probably already there).

As soon as possible, the game master gives the first Revelation of the game to get the story going. The players do not need to spend exploration token for this one (see later the part about exploration).

### *Choosing the difficulty*

At the top of the game master's sheet, they have written seven numbers that represent the growing difficulty in exploring the ruins. Depending on the duration and the level of the desired difficulty of the game, the game master can adjust those numbers:

- for a fairly quick game: 2, 2, 3, 3, 5, 5 and 6
- for a standard game: 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8 and 9
- for a long and challenging game: 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 9 and 10

Which values you choose should also depend on the players' capacity to easily imagine and elaborate. If they are not used to creating and to improvising, it may be more comfortable for them to start with a lower difficulty. An experienced game master can determine their own list of numbers according to their own preferences.

### *Exploring the ruins*

Most of the time, players are going to describe how their characters explore the place and make minor discoveries. The game master contributes to this dynamic by developing the general environment around the characters based on the preparation of the ruins that they made – although they should be vigilant not to make any Revelation by accident.

Each player has a reserve of exploration tokens at their disposal that they can use to discover elements of the place or to protect himself or herself against its dangers. To **fill their reserve of tokens**, they can describe:

- how their explorer makes suppositions about the place, formulates a theory about what happened here or constructs hypotheses; the player can lean on the game master's descriptions and on their explorer's knowledge;
- their relationship with another character (a member of the expedition, another player's character or an inhabitant of the ruins), including how it is affected by the ruins;
- feelings and emotions experienced by their explorer in front of the spectacle of the ruins or discoveries.

Whenever a player makes such a description, the game master gives them an exploration token. However, descriptions of hypotheses are a bit different since the latter are both riskier and more interesting.

### **MAKING HYPOTHESES**

- If this hypothesis goes against the preparation of the game master and contradicts it directly, the game master gives no exploration token and narrates in the fiction why this hypothesis is not true or alters it to make it correspond with their preparation – the player knows at least that they are not going in the right direction.
- If this hypothesis agrees with the preparation, the game master gives an exploration token and can give clarifying hints.
- If the hypothesis agrees with the preparation and is particularly accurate or interesting – or even adds a whole extra dimension – the game master gives two exploration tokens and can also complete it.
- If the hypothesis made by a player through their explorer corresponds enough with a Revelation of the preparation, the game master can decide to increase the value of Awakening (see [Awakening and Journey](#)) without making a search (see [Searches](#) below), indicating to players that the hypothesis is true. They complete players' descriptions with their own information. The game master gives no exploration token. Their reward is the increased value of Awakening from uncovering a Revelation.

A variant of this system is to let players take exploration tokens themselves (except for hypotheses which need a judgment from the game master), giving the game master more freedom to concentrate on other aspects of the game. It may be particularly relevant when players are already familiar with the game and know how to take advantage of it.

Contradictions between hypothesis and the preparation are quite simple to explain: those ruins are extremely old (the first homo sapiens appeared more than 200 000 years ago!) and a lot of things could have happened. Furthermore the small story does not always follow the big one to the letter and a lot of events could have been forgotten over centuries without leaving any marks in the ruins.

To let everyone participate to the story and express their hypotheses, the game master must ensure that each player has enough room to express themselves, especially if one player doesn't share the spotlight or if a player is shy.



## *Searches*

When an explorer tries to understand a secret of the ruins, they can do it in different ways:

- physically – by crossing or eliminating an obstacle, for example, or by driving out an inhabitant of the area;
- intellectually – by testing one of their hypotheses and their theories on the ruin's past, by trying to decipher ancient texts, by obtaining information from a distant heir of the civilization or also by trying to turn a technique or an item from the past back on;
- spiritually – by trying to contact local spirits, by searching in their previous lives or by trying to revive ancestral rituals through meditation, ancient rituals, unusual drugs, etc.

When the game master feels that an action from an explorer could lead to a Revelation, they should suggest to them that it corresponds to searches and that they can spend some exploration tokens as a consequence.

The player then spends a number of exploration tokens. The number of tokens spent plus their Journey must equal the current difficulty (see Awakening and Journey). The current difficulty level is not hidden,



players can have access to it at any time by asking the game master or by looking at the top of the game master's sheet. Each other player can add one or more exploration tokens by explaining how their character helps the first one in their search.

The game master must describe to players a Revelation that they has not yet revealed. Then, cross off the smallest difficulty number on the sheet of paper. Finally, increase the Awakening counter in the center of the table by 1.

If the player cannot spend the amount of exploration tokens required, then they cannot obtain the Revelation, and their search does not succeed – unless if the game master wishes it to.

The game master chooses the Revelation, and thus picks the one which is the most relevant to the current story. They can also follow the order which seems the more interesting – some Revelations should happen after others. The game master can also invent a Revelation on the go, including from players' creations and hypotheses.

The game master can decide to provide a Revelation without asking for exploration tokens from players at any time; they can also choose to stay quiet and to draw the mystery out. It is only when a player spends exploration tokens that the game master is forced to make a Revelation.

Additionally, the game master can make a Revelation without asking for a search from the players (and without increasing the value of Awakening) in order to inspire the players' imagination if they are struggling or if the Revelation is appropriate to the story.

Note that there are only eight Revelations to do while the game master's preparation will have ten. This gives flexibility to the game master, who can ignore a Revelation if it is no longer relevant to the story.

### *Dangers from the ruins*

At any moment, the game master can decide to have a threat suddenly appear. Threats can be natural disasters (collapse, wild animals...), supernatural ones (ghosts, cracks in the reality...) or inhabitants of the place who do not look on external invaders with a favorable eye. The game master can mention such threats early in their descriptions or imply that they exist through marks left on the place.

The game master describes the threat and how it lashes out at an explorer, at the expedition as a whole or at a character linked to an explorer. A threat can only target a character who is able to defend themselves against it. The player describes how their explorer defends themselves, the expedition or the other characters.

The game master then takes and secretly hides a number of exploration tokens from the common pool (or writes a number on a piece of paper). This number must be between 1 and the number of tokens owned by the targeted player. That player then tries to guess how many tokens the game master chose, by taking and hiding a number of their own tokens. They may also forfeit by choosing 0 tokens. The game master reveals the number of tokens:

- If the number of token the player chose exactly equals the number the game master chose, the player narrates how the threat is avoided and what their explorer learnt from this event. They gain a point of Journey (ignoring the current Awakening value, see below) and discard all involved exploration tokens.
- If the numbers are different, the game master narrates how the threat hurts the expedition or the character. The player discards half of their tokens (rounded down, to a minimum of 1).

The game master can attack a character even if their player has no exploration tokens. In this case the game master automatically wins the encounter and the threat inflicts damages. The game master should be careful to not abuse this ability. Therefore, possessing at least one token allows a character to protect themselves.



The game master can choose to hurt a character, to separate them from the expedition, or to make their progression harder by a variety of means in the fiction, but they may not make the character unplayable (death, madness, maiming, permanent physical removal...). They can subject the expedition (especially secondary characters linked to the defending explorer) and the ruins however they want. In any case, the fallout of the conflict must follow logically from the previous description of the threat.

## *Awakening and Journey*

As the explorers enter the ruins, they disturb them and slowly wake them up from their immemorial slumber, thus rousing them back to their full power, step by step. Along with this awakening, the characters will pursue the path to their own greatness.

The ruins' progressive awakening is reflected by the value of Awakening, from 1 to 8. It is indicated by an item at the center of the table: a die (of 8-, 10-, 12-, or 20-sided depending on what is available) or a sheet of paper. The value of Journey indicates the progression of an explorer on their path to reaching osmosis with the ruins and their capacity to penetrate their secrets. The value of Awakening starts at 1: the simple presence of reincarnated explorers starts to take the old stones back to life. A player cannot have a Journey value higher than the current Awakening number.

The Journey value of each explorer starts at 0. A player can increase their Journey value by 1 by performing one of the following events. The chosen event must correspond to what is happening in the fiction.

### **INCREASING THE JOURNEY VALUE**

- Their explorer explains why their metaphysical question is important to him. This question is far from being trivial for the character; they seek to answer it for private reasons, events from their private past (death of a close one, particular period of their life, singular experiences...). Players are encouraged to use this event at the start of the game, as it is a way of introducing the character and developing it from game to game.
- Their explorer lives an outlandish experience, that reveals this events of their prior lives or puts them in contact with dimensions and beings unknown from humankind.
- Their explorer bonds with an inhabitant or a being of the place, falls in love, tames an animal, makes a pact with a fantastic being, etc.
- Their explorer finds and appropriates an important item of the place whose power they can – at the player's will – manage to master.
- Their explorer finds an element of the answer – never the definitive answer – to their metaphysical question.

An adequate description can grant both an exploration token and an increase in Journey, for example when a character explores their relation to another one while bringing forth – with elegance – their character’s motivations to explore the ruins.

As we have seen before, it is also possible to increase one’s Journey value by overcoming the dangers of the ruins. A daring player can seek to increase their Journey this way – especially since this increase in Journey is not limited by the current Awakening value.

### *End of the game*

The game ends once the ruins’ Awakening value reaches 8 and the game master narrates the last Revelation. The place becomes fully alive once again, even though it still looks like ruins. Members of the lost civilization agree to answer all the explorers’ questions if they can. Each explorer now has access to the ruins’ deep wisdom that the game master reveals, by filling in missing information to allow players to understand the secret coherence of the ruins.

The game can also end if explorers choose to give up on excavating the ruins before reaching the last Revelation, generally because they are exhausted by their quest or because they fear that the last Revelations are too horrible to bear – that they are things that are better left

unknown. In this case, the ruins will keep their mysteries.

In both cases, each player tells an epilogue for their character, taking care to answer those three questions:

1. What has the character learnt in this place? What do they keep? A piece of knowledge, a new relation, a power, an item?
2. Has the character found an adequate answer to their metaphysical question? In that case, what impact does it have on their life?
3. Does the character manage to leave this place? If they stay there willingly, what are their motivations?

The game closes on those epilogues.



## *Keeping the same characters*

A player can keep their character to play in several games, even with different game masters.

In this case, between each game:

- The explorer's field of expertise stays the same, but the player can choose to either:
  - add a field of expertise to their explorer,
  - add or modify the specialty of an existing field of expertise the explorer has.
- Their metaphysical question does not change.

Mechanically, the explorer is remains unchanged or nearly so. However in the fiction, they progressively grow in depth. This reflects the experience gained within different ruins. The metaphysical question will be thus treated in a more complex and subtle way – always through the symbolic answers of the ruins.

If the game master already knows an explorer of the next game, it may be interesting to create ruins whose transcendent knowledge will be a possible answer to that explorer's metaphysical. If the game master wants to create consistency between their different games, they can also create several ruins about similar themes or linked together by Revelations of the highest scale.

We encourage players to keep a notebook for several

games in a row. It will be used to write information about their explorers, to take notes and to draw sketches during the game. After several games, the players will have created mementos.





## Using the rules

*Sphinx* offers numerous possibilities and gives room for creativity. Its rules may seem unusual and there is great leeway in using them, but they should not be ignored: they are here to help you make the best out of this game.

### *The players and the game master*

To clarify the rules, this section summarizes the roles that the players and game master will take on during the game.

**Players** are encouraged to use their creativity and their imagination to its maximum. They should take every opportunity to gain a token for their reserve by building hypotheses, by describing their emotions, or by exploring the relationships between their characters. They should work hard to increase their Journey value by narrating important events. It is also interesting to use other players' ideas and build on them. Finally, players are incited to react to each other's creations by asking questions and by making propositions about them. With this in mind, players

are free to have their character act however they want.

The **game master** has a wider set of tasks to fulfill.

- They have to pass on the rules to the players and explain how they work.
- They have to react on the fly to the players' creations, both by asking questions in return and also by handing them Exploration tokens and increasing the Awakening value when one of them makes a supposition close enough to a Revelation. When an explorer does so, they should fully describe the Revelation. They thus progressively give away clues about their preparation to the players.
- One of their most difficult tasks is to choose the most relevant Revelation to make when a player is researching. This requires making the right choice and sometimes showing flexibility and creativity to explain how the characters managed to uncover it.
- They may have to encourage introverted players to express themselves, and be careful that each one of them has time to speak.
- In any case, the game master is free to provide the group with many descriptions and to support the players' inventions by narrating what the explorers see and encounter.

Generally speaking, the game master describes the places in broad strokes, then the players can ask for details on some elements that the game master will then describe, and so on.

## *Arbitrary decisions and credibility*

You may have noticed that rules often use phrases such as “When the game master deems it relevant...” or “When a player wishes...” This arbitrariness is a design choice. The idea is to allow each participant to choose the moment their intervention will be the most beautiful and the most powerful in the context. For example, a player can follow up a minor discovery with research: by uncovering something seemingly inconsequential the explorer goes forward to learn even more. A minor discovery can happen at the same time that the player gains a Journey point. Using the rules in this way is entirely legitimate.

However, this arbitrariness is tempered by a rule of credibility: if even one participant feels that the use of a rule by another participant hurts the story's credibility, they must express themselves. For example, if a character's actions contradicts their stated personality without a good reason. The other participant must then either rephrase their proposition until everyone accepts it, or withdraw it altogether. It is the role of the game master to ensure that every player is comfortable with everyone's propositions, especially by paying attention to body language.

Alongside this rule of credibility, all participants are encouraged to share their enthusiasm and enjoyment when they find another player's creation pleasing, for example by asking its author to keep on going and to add and enrich their creation.

## *Pauses*

In my experience, *Sphinx* is a demanding game that asks a lot from its participants, especially in terms of creativity.

Consequently, participants are invited to take regular breaks to revitalize, around once an hour. Taking some rest allows for better concentration during the game itself. Pauses are part of the games, as they let the players' minds settle down and let them continue the game with a fresh eye.

On a related note, silence during the game is not an issue. Players can take some time to breathe before engaging in a new series of suppositions or actions for their explorer.

## *Drawing Maps*

Drawing maps to better figure and illustrate the different locations is both useful and fun. The game gains in clarity and the map can also serve as inspiration for the players.

## *Music*

It can be a good idea to add some musical background to the game, as long as two conditions are fulfilled.

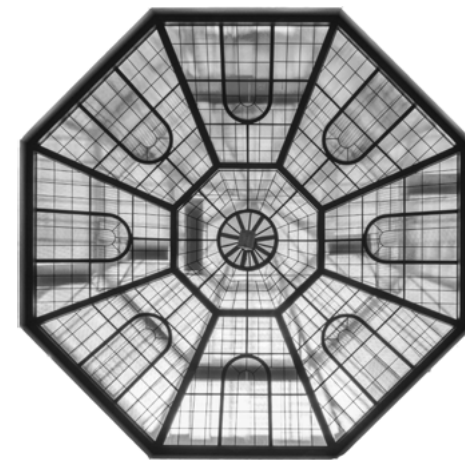
First, the music should be compatible with the ruins atmosphere: reminding of natural sounds when they are set in a forest; quiet when they and their Revelations are

positive; oppressing when they are dark and terrifying.

Generally speaking, strive to avoid famous songs that will take the players' attention off the ruins and into another, completely different one. Also avoid violent pieces and abrupt changes of tone that only rarely fit *Sphinx*'s muffled atmosphere.

Second, the music should not require any attention from the game master. Ideally, the game master launches their playlist at the beginning of the game, and then does not touch it afterwards. The music is only here to provide sound background and should not distract anyone during the game. Its purpose is to serve the game, not invade it.

My personal recommendation is natural music, such as whale songs or forest sounds, and music dedicated to meditation in general (singing bowls, religious choirs).







## Creating ruins

The ruins that the characters explore in *Sphinx* originate from civilizations long forgotten, that had thrived and disappeared long before the first cities of antiquity were even a mere draft. They are human communities, often cities, built with techniques beyond our comprehension and by a culture most foreign. Although in some aspects these civilizations may not appear as advanced as ours, they have made miracles that will always stay beyond our understanding.

Before the game, the game master has to prepare a description of the ruins the characters will explore. They can either write one down created from the following questions (they can for example use the back of their game master sheet), or just use one of the examples provided at the end.

## *The foundations*

To create their own ruins, the game master first answers these three questions:

1. *What is the **transcendent knowledge** that this civilization has discovered?*

It can be a metaphysical truth, a technique beyond human nature or one of this society's fundamental beliefs. This transcendent knowledge echoes the metaphysical questions that were suggested for character creation: any bold and creative answer to one of those questions can be used as a transcendent knowledge.

2. *Why did this civilization disappear?*

Some examples: it diluted into the budding civilizations of antiquity; it fell to an epidemic, to a conflict against supernatural creatures, or to religious or civil warring; its own transcendent knowledge destroyed it; its members all died in a mass suicide; or it has set forth for new places.

3. *Where are these ruins?*

It has to be in a deserted place, still mostly unexplored by mankind. For example: the heart of a desert — including beneath the sand; in the frozen lands of Siberia; at the North Pole; at the bottom of the ocean; at the bottom of a mountain lake; in the antique tunnels underneath

a megalopolis; in the Amazonian rainforest; on an atoll, lost in the middle of the Pacific Ocean; in subterranean caves; on the highest plateaus of the Himalaya mountain range; on a comet that only visits Earth once every century; in a cavern on the Moon; in the Martian wastelands; in an asteroid far removed from the Solar System.

I am only giving examples of human civilizations, mainly because I feel it makes the game more intense: all humankind shares similar metaphysical questions, and this continuity is striking. It is, however, possible to set the game in the ruins of some non-human civilization (extra-terrestrial, animal, supernatural, etc.) as long as it shares those questions.



## *Revelations*

Once the game master has defined the ruin foundations, they must decide on ten Revelations to be used during the game. Revelations can take a variety of forms: places, past events, artifacts, myths of the civilization that built the ruins or even members of this civilization, human beings or creatures, who managed to defy death. Revelations are described in a few lines, a paragraph at most. The game master should think of a Revelation with which they would like to begin the game.

In any case, Revelations should have some link — even far-fetched — with the transcendent knowledge chosen at the beginning. This knowledge is so consequential it necessarily had huge repercussions on society as a whole, in its cities' structures as well as in its beliefs. The answers to questions 1 and 2 above (transcendent knowledge and the reason for the civilization's disappearance) may be used as (final) Revelations.

The different **places** in the ruins were used to produce and stock food, to transport merchandise or people, to bring water, to teach and to learn, to conduct research and store their results, to dispense justice, to worship gods and divinities, to produce and distribute energy, to sleep, to rest and enjoy some leisure, to take political decisions, to fight off nature and other peoples, to keep the city clean, to take care of the deceased, to have some

pleasure, to flirt, to raise youth, to look after the elderly, etc. A place can be furnished with the most bizarre artifacts and house the descendant of the civilization, supernatural creatures or other inhabitants.

**Past events** represent great changes in relation to the transcendent knowledge that the civilization has undergone at some points during its history. An event can be discovered through the vestiges it left behind. Crises are especially easy to use as they leave behind spectacular evidence: epidemic, revolt, civil war, natural disaster, etc. Periods of abundance and joyful events can nonetheless leave deep marks on a civilization and the ruins thereof: prosperity, cultural Golden Age, scientific developments, etc.

**Artifacts** depend on human activities and the various consequences of the transcendent knowledge. They can be purely symbolic, or imbued with some antique technique or piece of knowledge. In any case, they are connected to the transcendent knowledge just as any Revelation.

**Myths** cover visions of the world, techniques or beliefs shared by members of the civilization. They too can be linked to human activities such as listed above. An explorer can discover one by deciphering pieces of knowledge (books, tablets, walls, computers, etc.), subtly grasping an idea after hours or even days spent thinking about it, finding an obvious artifact or hearing one of the ruins inhabitants talk about it.

**Descendants** are members of the civilizations who are still alive today, including those who have found a way to overcome death. Those who are still sane have access to great knowledge, but also have a vision of the world which is utterly alien to modern humans. Approaching them can thus prove a challenge, as can bcommunication with them. Descendants can also be guardians of the place, or supernatural creatures born from the transcendent knowledge.

Revelations should be as striking as possible: they must extend the scope of possibilities for the players as much as for the characters, giving them new places to explore and new themes to broach.

To reinforce the ruins' sublime beauty, the game master is encouraged to think of spectacular Revelations, far greater than the human scale — in size or in anything else. In addition, they should try to take into account the passing of the millennia and the way time has affected the buildings, eroding them, covering them with vegetation, etc. Water, in the form of rivers, lakes, seas or even glaciers, is another important part of the ruins' magnificence.

The game master is advised to write down the Revelations in the order they would like to tell them, as some may have a stronger impact if they come after others.





## *The finishing touches*

Once the Revelations are done, there are a few last elements left to decide that will help the game master improvise seamlessly during the game, in regard to threats or exploration. The game master answers these questions:

### *1. Who are the ruins' current inhabitants?*

There may be humans who settled in the ruins or are the descendants of the original founders. They may have built a new civilization in this ancient place, or they may have built their society on the same model as the ancient one. The ruins can also be haunted by antique mechanical or mystical guardians that still fulfill their intended task despite the millennia. Finally, animals and supernatural creatures of all sorts may have found a home in the ruins.

### *2. What was the civilization's most important symbol?*

What recurring image would summarize it best? It could be a number, a flower, an animal, a color, a fantastic creature, an artifact, an architectural feature, etc. The symbol can be used in many different ways in the ruins to mean different ideas.

### *3. What dangers lie in the ruins?*

What could threaten the explorers during the expedition? Feral beasts, local hazards, supernatural dangers

and malevolent beings... Natural disasters, especially spectacular ones (earthquakes, tsunamis, volcanic eruptions, etc.) are also welcome.

### *4. What were the consequences of the passing of time?*

The ravages of time show themselves differently depending on location. In forests, buildings get gradually buried beneath dead leaves, trees burst the roads and animals take possession of places that used to belong to humans. In deserts, the wind eats away at the stones and scrapes them smooth as human skin. Rivers and lakes form where there were none, creating drowned, serene landscapes.





## Examples of ruins

### *The Eternal Gardens*

1. **Transcendent knowledge:** This civilization succeeded in blurring the barrier between the vegetal and the human.
2. **Extinction:** All the members of this civilization voluntarily transformed into trees.
3. **Location:** Deep in a forest of the Indian sub-continent.

### **Revelations**

- Viewed from the sky, the ruins are arranged to look like a tree, the most important buildings taking the forms of large flowers.
- Numerous human figures carved in trees, in the many different positions.
- A cave with a sweet and damp smell of decomposition, in which giant Venus flytraps bloom among semi-digested skeletons. The inhabitants of the ruins are still using this place for

their funeral ceremonies, placing the corpses in the lobes of the carnivorous plants.

- During the last ages of this civilization, a religion was born, refusing the action and suffering of the world and inviting slow suicide by starvation or lack of movement.
- A buried laboratory, on the ground, many roots emerge from the walls; glass retorts contain half-animal, half-vegetal embryos, diagrams show the secret ties between the animal and the vegetable kingdoms.
- At sunrise, at moonrise, the forest can be heard singing softly millennial tunes.
- A war of religion took place between the grass-eaters and the meat-eaters, the latter lost.
- The technique to produce the drug allowing to pass from a human state to a plant state.
- All the members of this civilization have voluntarily transformed themselves into trees, after ingesting the drug for several years; they now form the trees that grow on the ruins.
- Some members have not completed the transformation into a plant, they are now immense trees with slow and majestic movements – the last vestiges of their human origin are hidden deep within

their foliage.

**Inhabitants:** In addition to the descendants (the trees), two tribes live on the ruins: those who inherited the wisdom of the ruins, living in great respect with the forest, and the descendants of meat-eaters, very aggressive, hunting in groups all the animals they can find, including humans, burning and felling trees when they can.

**Symbol:** A blooming flower.

**Dangers:** Meat-eaters live always hidden in this forest and devour each other as much as they hunt any living being that ventures into their territory. Moreover, the trees may have protective reflexes against invaders – choking lianas, toxic sap, carnivorous plants...

**Passage of time:** The vegetation has invaded everything, broke the walls and opened the roads. Water forms large lakes which cover entire districts of the city.



## *In the Highest Heavens*

1. **Transcendent knowledge:** This civilization discovered that the breath of a human remains after their death. Death is intimately associated to breath and air movements.
2. **Extinction:** This civilization disappeared when one after the other its members passed away or left to spread their wisdom to the world.
3. **Location:** An isolated Himalayan peak.

### **Revelations**

- A extremely long staircase of stone goes to the mountain's top and ends in a pier above the void.
- This civilization had a huge respect for the dead and their secrets – not only their ancestors, but the dead from all civilizations.
- This civilization drew its energy from the high altitude winds, through large windmills, thus making it possible to raise water to the summit's habitations and to operate the elevators inside the mountain.
- Scholars spent their days riding large kites listening to the wisdom of the dead in the wind. Some kites are still flying around, the skeletons of their pilots rocked by the wind in the sky.
- A flute to speak to the dead. Playing it allows

connecting with the deceased through one's breath.

- Those who die here, at high altitudes, become high winds, free and serene.
- To achieve this state, there is a whole ordeal to get rid of anything that makes us heavy: our possessions, our ego, our relationships, our emotions, and finally our own body.
- A crystal block containing many winds: criminals condemned to remain locked up for their faults.
- An observatory equipped with a strange telescope, directed towards the sky and the moon, to talk to the dead who dwell among the stars.
- This civilization has left these places to spread their spirituality in the world.

**Inhabitants:** Large birds live in the region, hovering slowly in the sky. Old legends claim they are the guardians of the dead.

**Symbol:** A bird, wings spread

**Dangers:** Guardians birds of prey are not the biggest threats of these places: gusts of wind and humidity make movements particularly difficult and perilous.

**Passage of time:** Wind erosion offers curved and elegant shapes to buildings, but weakens them. Water has formed large translucent stalactites among the buildings

## *Cocoons*

- 1. Transcendent knowledge:** This civilization was at the heart of the cradle of humanity. It was in contact with Angels, extra-dimensional creatures that had given consciousness to primates to make cocoons of their offspring.
- 2. Extinction:** After a fratricidal war to try to eradicate the human species and thus to prevent the Angels from perpetuating themselves, inhabitants of this civilization committed mass suicide. They only succeeded in temporarily expelling them from our dimension and in forgetting the way to give birth to them.
- 3. Location:** Ethiopian plateaus

### **Revelations**

- This civilization is extremely old, even in comparison to other civilizations already studied by explorers. It is older than the first known signs of humanity.
- This civilization built itself on a religion of spiritual elevation in defiance of the corporeal vessel. It claimed that everyone could become an Angel with enough faith.
- Angels created human beings by breathing a

consciousness into primates.

- A religious war happened, during which the old religion was overthrown and disappeared.
- There were a series of extremely violent wars against nearby civilizations attempting to exterminate their neighbors.
- The civilization committed mass suicide within a few weeks.
- A room buried deep beneath the ground, closed by numerous seals, traps and strengthen doors. In this enormous cave, an Angel is held enchained. This room is covered by burn marks, broken chains and puddles of chilled gold and silver.
- A central room contains a wide bas-relief describing precisely the ascetic exercises needed to achieve awakening.
- When a human achieves maturity - after a long process of purification - its skull cracks while a mass of incandescent organs emerges: a newborn Angel.
- There is a room deeper than the Angel's cell: an enormous door in shape of a diaphragm was installed. It allows creating a link to the Angel's dimension. Countless corpses dwell here, remains of the sacrifice needed to close it again.



**Inhabitants:** Besides the Angel, the region is deserted, with the exception of a small local sect who has sought for years to hatch a new Angel to bring them back to Earth. The ruin's awakening by the coming of the explorers is an unexpected opportunity for them.

**Symbol:** The butterfly

**Dangers:** The sect itself and the Angel detained prisoner represent the greatest dangers, intelligent and ready for anything.

Seismic collapses can also happen regularly.

**Passage of time:** Some parts are collapsed or threaten to do so. Some of the buildings or tunnels are overrun by vermin, insects and bats.



## *Until the last one*

- 1. Transcendent knowledge:** This civilization believed until its self-destruction that power could only come from devouring other beings alive, in order to absorb their strength and their remaining life, allowing them to reach immortality.
- 2. Extinction:** All the members of this civilization ate one another entirely, except for an ogre continuing to devour living beings and survivors in the underground.
- 3. Location:** A deep forest lost in Europe.

### **Revelations**

- Rotting cut-up carcasses, in layers by chronological order, the deepest being the oldest and almost dust.
- Buried slaughterhouses-temples, several kilometers long.
- A descendant of this civilization, an ogre muscled to the extreme, haunting these places to devour any animal he can find.
- An arena fallen into ruins, where skeletons of gladiators with broken bones are still lying, their choppers rusting into the dust.
- Ancient underground warehouses, partially collapsed. Sheep, boars and cannibals cows fight each

other since time immemorial and then serve themselves as food.

- A cleaver planted in a chopping block, covered with rust, but having killed millions of times; a sacred and decorated object.
- All this civilization disappeared in an enormous religious ceremony where all its members killed and ate one another to the last one.
- Mutilated cannibal survivors crawl in underground caves to escape the ogre.
- The belief that life as much as power pass on by devouring the others.
- A necropolis in shape of a buried tower where very long friezes are sculpted, sinking in a spiral to the ground: each generation is carved there, devouring the previous, until a sudden stop.

**Inhabitants:** These ruins are inhabited by the ogre as well as descendants of his victims who are hiding underground.

**Symbol:** The open maw, full of teeth.

**Dangers:** The ogre, the descendants of its victims and the captive animals.

**Passage of time:** Carcasses and skeletons fill the area with a rich and powerful smell of decomposition. Mushrooms and molds proliferate there.

## *In the beginning was the Word*

- 1. Transcendent knowledge:** This civilization discovered a way to act directly on reality through language.
- 2. Extinction:** Desires and passions of each and everyone, added to this power over reality, drove these people to its ruin.
- 3. Location:** The desert of Iraq.

### **Revelations**

- Remains of a huge buried tower broken in the middle, similar to the Tower of Babel.
- This civilization apparently did not need farms, tools or waste disposal.
- Bas-reliefs evoke an astounding war, confrontations moving mountains and clearing out entire regions from their inhabitants. It left no survivors.
- A vast library with thick doors, like those of a bunker. It is packed with works of linguistics, literature, translations, pronunciations, written in a more complex version of the cuneiform writing.
- A prison in the middle of debris of the broken tower, under the sand. Human corpses are enchained there, with torn tongues and broken jaws.
- A laboratory with aborted attempts to create ani-

mals using the Word. It is here that most of the domestic animals were created to feed people or to entertain them.

- A map showing the region upside down, as if the world, in the meantime, had been shattered.
- Remains of mass graves, of massacres, without a single weapon. Mummified corpses are intact, neither sick, nor starved, nor destroyed in any way. They were killed by the Word.
- A language allowing affecting reality directly like the divine Word, as told by the Bible.
- Research to pronounce the symbol of the civilization. It is said that the one who will pronounce it will be able to remodel the Creation and will get the powers of God.

**Inhabitants:** There are no survivors, the places are empty and bleak.

**Symbol:** A strange unique word, representing the world, the whole, the indivisible universe.

**Dangers:** Some glyphs still have power, but have become corrupted and can be particularly dangerous to read, summoning creatures which should not exist or driving mad those who read them.

**Passage of time:** Whitened by the sun, buildings are invaded by sand and gradually eroded by the wind.

## *Proteus's children*

- 1. Transcendent knowledge:** To abolish every war, every need, every catastrophe, the members of this civilization transformed into animals.
- 2. Extinction:** All this civilization's members became animals on an island; their descendants still live there.
- 3. Location:** A lost island in the far east of Siberia.

### **Revelations**

- The island is particularly abundant in fauna: pacific bears, herds of boars, flocks of birds, deer...
- Buildings carved in the rock and obviously maintained despite the absence of human beings on the island.
- A room reserved to mating where many animals of different species get together frequently, for example a deer mating with a bear.
- Works of art in the wood carved directly into the trees. Many styles. Oldest trees still represent human beings.
- A maternity ward for newborns of different species. A female boar giving birth to rabbits, bear cubs and nestlings.
- A deep and vast necropolis. Its carvings tell of the

numerous deaths due to wars and famines.

- A cult to animals, to their simplicity and their innocence – in opposition to the slyness of humans.
- A laboratory where the genetic codes of all species of mammals are stored, from the existing *Homo sapiens* to species unknown to Western civilization.
- A large central room, where a strange machine transfers irreversibly a human mind into the improved body of an animal. A charnel house nearby contains thousands of skeletons.
- Animals talking together or screaming in pain with a human voice under the fangs of a predator, to which they offer themselves willingly.

**Inhabitants:** The descendants of this civilization are the animals of the island, but they do not particularly wish to talk or reveal the secrets of their existence to untransformed humans.

**Symbol:** A hybrid of different animals (mostly mammals), feathers, furs, fangs, paws.

**Dangers:** An old and territorial bear, crippled, protects the island. He dislikes humans. More generally, any explorer too invasive is likely to be attacked by animals.

**Passage of time:** Time leaves surprisingly few scars here. Buildings and monuments are maintained and plants do not invade those places.

## *A green hollow*

1. **Transcendent knowledge:** After a very long evolution this civilization arrived at the conclusion that nature is deeply kind, as long as human beings do not thwart it.
2. **Extinction:** The members of this civilization did not disappear: they abandoned their human form and entered into complete symbiosis with the forest in which they lived and where their descendants still live.
3. **Location:** A flourishing forest of Latin America, on the Pacific Coast.

### **Revelations**

- An extremely fertile land filled with a lot of friendly animals; an absolute absence of predators.
- Mountains of abandoned waste, devoured by vegetation.
- The gigantic trees whose interior was carved and sculpted to welcome magnificent and natural palaces, growing and changing slowly.
- Strange creatures, like giant insects, gently hum peaceful and kind songs.
- Remains of industrial civilization; elegant factories, but destroyed by vegetation.

- Many hives of the size of menhirs, erected in a clearing and overflowing with honey.
- The emergence of a philosophy refusing destruction and competition, founded on a discipline tending toward a soft hedonism.
- An heir of the civilization, living in the forest and on whose body lives a humming hive.
- Trees in which are embedded human beings, living in symbiosis with plants.
- Ghosts of inhabitants of the region, being immersed in the vital energy of the forest, happy and quiet.

**Inhabitants:** Inhabitants of these places are the descendants of this civilization. They are terribly afraid of being discovered by “underdeveloped” humans, still entangled in the industrial society. They camouflage themselves extremely well.

**Symbol:** The sprouting seed

**Dangers:** The main threats that the explorers will have to face in these ruins are the wastes of this civilization: still-moving carcasses of robots, abandoned toxic or radioactive landfills... Ghosts do not want to talk to humans and could try to drive them back.

**Passage of time:** This place is abandoned: buildings did not suffer any violence. Furthermore, vegetation and trees absorbed plastic or glass, integrated them to their trunks and imprisoned them to their roots.





## *The End*

- 1. Transcendent knowledge:** While researching means for the colonization of the galaxy this civilization created a black hole at the edge of the Solar System by accident. Although they managed to confine it before they disappeared, this confinement is not eternal and the black hole will eventually swallow the Solar System and put an end to all of humanity.
- 2. Extinction:** This civilization tried to leave the Solar System – and failed.
- 3. Location:** On the surface of Pluto.

### **Revelations**

- The colossal entrance of an underground facility, surrounded by diverse debris: habitations, strange transport vehicles, metal fragments fallen from the sky.
- Behind the entrance, kilometers of corridors and laboratories from all types: space conquest, genetic engineering, off-soil cultures, human hibernation...
- A series of silos full of colossal, but unfinished spaceships.
- An impetus of paradox religiosity manifests itself in habitations and laboratories, with many shrines to unknown gods. A buried cathedral. A recurring pattern: a worshipped black angel, the final destroyer and father of all nihilism.

- Several structures can be found in orbit, made to travel to distant stars. They exploded manifestly and are unusable.
- A whole laboratory is full of withered corpses of scientists, who killed themselves by hanging, by poisoning or by shooting themselves. Their corpses were conserved because of a bullet which pierced a porthole creating a vacuum.
- A silo several kilometers in diameter leads to the heart of Pluto. It is closed by many particularly thick doors and several barriers of high security. Rust and the erosion of time devour the facility.
- At the last level of this silo, security is even more reinforced. The final room is colossal and in a vacuum. Strange devices spread on the walls and hold in the middle the black hole that was born from failed experiences from those laboratories.
- Those devices are of the same kind as the engines of the spaceships: the black hole was created by research on interstellar travels.
- Those devices will not last for long and scientists in charge of the creation and containment of the black hole knew it. This technology being lost, the Earth is condemned in the not too distant future.

**Inhabitants:** These places seem empty, but some descendants were mysteriously conserved in the hibernating chambers. Ghosts full of guilt still haunt their old installations.

**Symbol:** The annihilating black angel.

**Dangers:** Guardians were posted here a long time ago in order to prevent the expansion of the black hole: androids traveling between dimensions and wielding terrible weapons.

**Passage of time:** The passage of time is rather invisible on the surface without an atmosphere like Pluto. However, the pressurized underground is eroded by dust and infiltration.





# Inspirations and acknowledgments

## *Role-playing games*

*Sphinx* owes a great debt to Christoph Boeckle's *Innommable* (at least to development versions 007, 008 and 009) for mechanics, game preparation and general themes all at once. *Sphinx* can be described as an attempt to draw from *Innommable* a more positive kind of aesthetic experience. *Innommable* can be found at [www.silentdrift.net/innommable](http://www.silentdrift.net/innommable)

Two other games had a considerable influence on *Sphinx: Sens Néant* by Romaric Briand ([sens-hexalogie.fr](http://sens-hexalogie.fr)) and *Prosopopée* by Frédéric Sintès ([www.limbicsystemsldr.com](http://www.limbicsystemsldr.com)). Both authors managed to show how powerful aesthetics can be in a role-playing game.

*Sphinx* was born from Frédéric Sintès's theoretical reflexions on roleplaying games, especially his article titled "La Résistance asymétrique" which can be found at [www.limbicsystemsldr.com/la-resistance-asymetrique](http://www.limbicsystemsldr.com/la-resistance-asymetrique)

“La Réification” by Romaric Briand is another article that gives a greater insight into *Sphynx*’s core mechanics. It can be found in his theoretical compilation *Le Maels-trom* (2014).

### *Inspirations for the ruins*

Numerous world-renowned archeological sites have roused the imagination of their visitors throughout the ages: Easter Island’s statues, the Giza pyramid complex, Nazca lines... This fascination led to countless works of fiction about unknown artefacts, ruins to explore or mysteries to unveil. The following are examples to use as inspiration to create your own ruins.

*The Rats in the Walls*, short story by H.P. Lovecraft (1924)

*At the Mountains of Madness*, novella by H.P. Lovecraft (1936)

*The Ice People*, novel by René Barjavel (1968)

*2001: A Space Odyssey*, movie by Stanley Kubrick (1968)

*Rendezvous with Rama*, novel by Arthur C. Clarke (1973)

*Sphere*, novel by Michael Crichton (1987)

*The Hyperion Cantos*, series of novels by Dan Simmons (1987-1997)

*The Ruins*, movie by Carter Smith (2008)

*Prometheus*, movie by Ridley Scott (2012)

*Sphynx* also draws inspiration from authors such as Jorge Luis Borges, Jacques Abeille or Jean-Marie Blas de Roblès, as well as from comics by Schuiten & Peeters.

Finally, as an antidote against any pseudo-archeological temptation that could feed dangerous beliefs, I recommend the collection of articles *Des Martiens au Sahara* (2009), by Jean-Loïc Le Quellec.







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**Explorer's name**

**Field of expertise**

**Metaphysical question**

**Links within the expedition**

**Journey**

*Sphynx*

## **SUMMARY OF THE RULES**

### **Exploration**

A player can receive exploration tokens from the game master through different ways:

- by telling how their explorer make an hypothesis about the ruins;
- by developing their relationship with another character;
- by expressing the feelings and the emotions of their explorer, when confronted with the ruins

### **Journey value**

When it is relevant in the story, a player can increase their Journey by one point. It cannot exceed the Awaken value. They can achieve it by telling:

- why their Metaphysical question is important to their explorer;
- how their explorer bonds with an inhabitant or being from the ruins;
- how their explorer has an outlandish experience;
- how their explorer finds and appropriate an important object in the ruins;
- how their explorer finds part of an answer – but never the definitive answer – to their Metaphysical question.