



The Best Thing

*“Among the thirty six thousand things
in the universe, longevity is the best.”*

The Best Thing

Game by
Mark Vallianatos

Character sheet by
Stefan Koch

Designed for the reverse
engineering challenge, august
to september 2006, ran by
Kevin Allen Jr.

cover shows the
famous immortal
Wangtzu Chhiao
playing the shêng
while riding through
the clouds on the
back of a crane. image
from the Lieh Hsien
Chhüan Chuan.

quotation on cover is from the *Thai Phing Ching*, quoted in Needham, *Science and Civilization in China*, Volume 5, part 2, pg. 109.

Contents

The Emperor is dying	3
The Empire and the lands beyond	5
Making characters	7
The Emperor's maladies ...	11
Seeking knowledge in the lands beyond	15
Gaining influence in the imperial capital	23
Treating the Emperor	25
Character sheet	28

The Emperor is Dying

The Emperor is ill. Beneath his power and his titles he is a sick old man and he is dying.

He might perhaps take comfort in his long reign. Yes, he recalls many triumphs, but honors and achievements are not the best thing. He might be soothed knowing that his many heirs will carry on his legacy. Yes, he is proud of his heirs, fond of his other sons and daughters, and the wives that produced them, but his children are not the best thing. He might find solace considering that he will soon rest in a beautiful tomb next to his father's and ancestors'. Yes, he supervised construction and is pleased by of the tall white stone, but his elegant tomb is not the best thing. He might forget his ailments and focus on the rituals that will honor his memory and placate his spirit when his eyes close for the last time. Yes, he finds it proper that the traditions will be upheld and the rites intoned, but these remembrances are not the best thing.

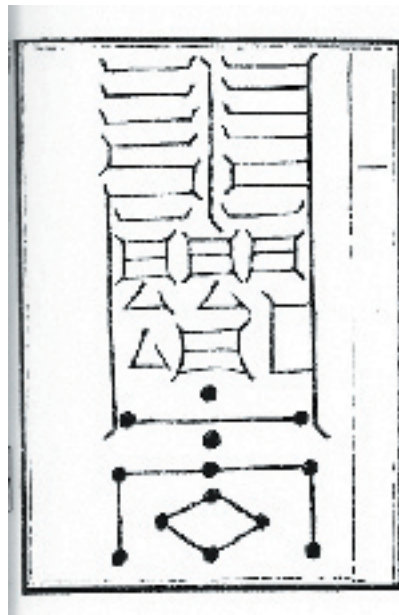
The best thing is longevity, is more life, is not dying now, is never dying.

Scholars and healers speak of techniques that can dramatically extend the human lifespan. The annals name dozens of famous immortals who mastered the principles of eternal life and now dwell without worries in their abodes in the Eastern Isles or atop isolate mountain crags. Surely in his vast Empire there is some naturalist or holy man or alchemist who can unlock the secrets of the immortals and defeat death.

Players take the role of such healers and scholars, perhaps charlatans, perhaps learned and wise, perhaps both, seeking the secrets of material immortality. Racing against the progression of the Emperor's ailments, characters travel to the half-legendary Lands Beyond to expand their knowledge of life-extension techniques. They return to the Imperial Capital to gain influence, earn an audience, and save – or slay – his Majesty.

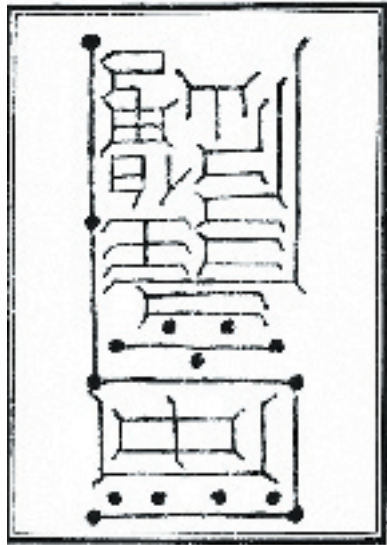
The best thing is a game created for the reversed engineer game design challenge run by Kevin Allen Jr in August and September of 2006. The game uses and was inspired by a character sheet created by Stefan Koch. Thanks to Stefan and Kevin. The game's premise draws heavily from materials on Taoist conceptions of material immortality and early Chinese alchemy in Joseph Needham's magisterial *Science and Civilization in Ancient China*.

To play the best thing you'll each need a copy of the character sheet and a pencil. You'll also collectively need 20 or 30 6-sided dice and approximately the same number of small tokens.



one of a series of talismanic cards that life extension researchers would carry to their huts in the wilderness for protection against wolves, snakes, brigands, spirits and other hostile beasts

another of the cards



The Empire and the Lands Beyond

The game takes place in an unspecified Empire ruled by an unnamed Emperor. You may invent names to give the setting more specificity if you desire.

The Emperor resides in a vast palace in the Imperial Capital. A complex hierarchy of bureaucrats based in the Capital administer the Empire's expansive and fertile provinces.

The Empire is its own universe. Most subjects know nothing of the lands beyond its borders. The Imperial court itself has few dealings with the outside world, so even highly placed officials view the four Lands Beyond mainly through the lens of myth. The few travelers' and envoys' accounts that reach the court have been warped and amplified by dozens of retellings.

The North, so it is said, is a land of soaring mountains, plunging ravines, and glaciers striated emerald green and blue-black. Fierce creatures stalk the lofty peaks, but wise hermits and ancient monasteries also dot the slopes. It is rarely wise to visit the north during the winter snows.

To the East, so it is said, lies a vast sea and an archipelago of islands large and small. Pirates and sea creatures abound while the islands are home to castaways and exiles long isolated from civilization. Many of the famed immortals of past eras are rumored to live on the isles of the eastern Sea. Sailors warn against voyaging to the east during the Spring season when the waves are magnified by typhoons and waterspouts.

To the South, so it is said, past harsh deserts, eerie wind-worn plateaus and crumbling ruins, there are Trading Cities with bustling markets where merchants from a hundred nations do business. Anything can be bought or sold, but visitors must be savvy or you will find that you have unwittingly sold your freedom or purchased a heavy obligation. Avoid these cities during the summer season when the sweltering heat empties the streets.

Barbarian tribes, so it is said, rule the dark forests and rolling hills to the West. Their customs are strange, with the one constant being a love for battle, and their gods are stranger still. Most tribes will welcome visitors warmly but woe to the newcomer who unwittingly breaks a taboo. Seasoned travelers stay away from the West during the Autumn harvest when the Barbarians drink too deeply of grapes and rampage tenfold.

* Characters from the western barbarians, eastern isles, northern mountains, or southern cities are probably lying about their origins. They most likely grew up in the teeming slums of the capital or as peasants or minor functionaries in the provinces. Claiming to be from a far off locale lends them a certain aura of exoticism. It promises mystic awareness, coaxing a few extra coins from clients. Don't worry if your character is a fraud – they still get the origins bonus.

“Thus during the Yuan-Ting and Yuan-Feng reign-periods there were thousands of magician-technicians in the regions of Yen and Chhi who glared around and slapped their thighs, swearing that they were the real experts in the arts of achieving the lives of the holy immortals..”

Chhien Han Shu to the Emperor Chheng Ti, quoted in Needham, Science and Civilization in China, Volume 5, part 2 at 103.

¹ a player writes down: ‘Puchai from the Southern Cities’

Making Characters

Each player will create and control a character who is a purported expert in life extension.

Name and Origins

Choose your character's name.¹ In the name space of the character sheet, write down “I am [name] from [choose one of the following]

the Imperial Capital. Characters from the imperial capital start the game with 1 extra influence.

the Fertile Provinces. Characters from the fertile provinces start the game with 1 extra asset rated at 2 boxes.

the Barbarians to the West.* Characters from the west can move one extra space per sweep during fire tests.

the Isles of the Eastern Sea.* Characters from the east can move one extra space per sweep during water tests.

the Northern Mountains.* Characters from the north can move one extra space per sweep during earth tests.

the trading cities to the South.* Characters from the south can move one extra space per sweep during air tests.

Knowledge areas

Write down four areas of knowledge on the line below the top four knowledge grids.² These areas of knowledge will all involve life extension techniques. Choose four of the classic knowledge areas listed below, or choose three of these areas and invent one additional area that your character has expertise in.

After writing down four knowledge areas, note down how proficient your character is at each. Knowledge areas are measured along two dimensions: width and depth. These dimensions are rated between 1 to 4. Character's knowledge rating will therefore range from 1,1 to 4,4. On the character sheet, width and depth are marked down in the grid of small boxes by each knowledge area.

Low width and depth ratings mean that a character is just starting to learn about the knowledge area. A high width rating combined with a low depth rating indicates that a character is familiar with all the different aspects and 'schools' of a given technique but is not an expert at any of them. A high depth rating and low width means that a character has focused on and gained expertise in one segment of a knowledge area while remaining ignorant of the rest of the field. High ratings in width and depth show that a character has mastered an entire knowledge area.

Fill in four boxes in each of your character's knowledge areas.³ For each area, you can choose between a 2x2 square, 4x1 rectangle or 1x4 rectangle.

² *Puchai knows Alchemy, Diet, Heliotherapy, and one invented knowledge area: Therapeutic Portraiture (the artist/healer paints a likeness of the patient, burns the portrait, then paints a picture with the patient looking slightly healthier and younger, burns it, and continues to repeat, with the patient hopefully follows the pictures in becoming more youthful.*

³ *Puchai's Alchemy and Heliotherapy are rated as 2x2. Diet is rated a shallow but broad 4x1 while Portraiture is rated a narrow/deep 1x4.*

The eight classic knowledge areas

Respiration involves breathing exercises with the ultimate aim of mimicking the embryonic respiration and thereby reversing the aging process.

Heliotherapy involves sunbathing for men, moon-bathing for women, with the expert guiding when and for how long patients stray exposed and what parts of the bodies are bathed in solar/lunar rays.

Gymnastics involves various forms of therapeutic movement, including stretching and martial arts.

Sex involves sexual practices that stimulate the life force, for example, men attempting to retain semen for as long as possible during intercourse.

Alchemy involves the purification and mixture of elixirs crafted from cinnabar, gold, mercury and other minerals.

Pharmacology involves the preparation of medicines from plants, fungi, and lichens.

Diet involves regulating intake of other foods and beverages.

Hagiography involves analyzing and memorizing the biographies and writings of those famous ancients who achieved immortality.

⁴ Puchai possesses a stout wagon drawn by a team of 8 oxen. He also owns a tattered diploma from an academy to the far south that grants him the title “Professor Puchai.”

⁵ Because of Puchai’s unique artistic healing technique, the player designing Puchai decides Puchai’s influence will be an assistant Gilder of the Royal Statuary.

Assets

Assets are possessions or capacities that help characters gain influence in the capital and/or help them gain knowledge in the lands beyond the Empire. Sample assets include a strong, projecting voice, a retinue of cooks, an observation kite, 600 amusing anecdotes committed to memory, etc. Characters each start with two assets. Write the assets’ names on the blanks on your character sheet, and mark down two boxes next to each asset.⁴ Assets are either ‘deep’ or ‘wide’ in that they will enhance either the depth or width of knowledge areas. Note down a D next to one of your starting assets and a W next to the other. If your character originated in the Fertile Provinces then they start with a bonus 3rd assets, also rated at two boxes (and your choice of W or D).

Influence

Influence measures clout and connections with members of the Imperial bureaucracy and court who can help your character gain an appointment with the Emperor. Characters start the game with one influence. Write the name and title of a contact or ally on one of the lines on the lowest influence level.⁵ Contacts on the lowest influence level should not be particularly high up in the Imperial hierarchy. Characters originating in the Imperial Capital start with two influence on the lower level.

Playing the Game

Your characters are healers, seekers after knowledge and Imperial patronage. Alas, they have yet to distinguish themselves from the swarm of life extension experts practicing in the Imperial Capital.

For your characters to gain reputation and receive a chance to treat the Emperor, they will have to increase their expertise while also cultivating allies who can grant an audience with his Majesty. To gain knowledge and distinction, your characters will travel to the four corners of the world to learn secret techniques and gather potent life-extending ingredients. To open the gates of the Imperial citadel, characters will curry favor with Imperial Bureaucrats, impress noted scholars, and seek the ears of highly placed courtiers and favorite wives and princelings.

The game is played in seasons corresponding to the four seasons of the year. Each season, players will decide where their characters are located. You have a choice of voyaging to the West, East, North, or South or staying in the Imperial Capital. Each season, move a small token or marker to the appropriate space on the season space on your character sheet. Also move a token to the W,E,N, or S area on the compass diagram on the character sheet to show your character's location- or place the token at the intersection of the compass lines to represent the Capital.

The Emperor's Maladies

The game always starts in Wintertime in the Imperial Capital. Characters are all meeting and talking. They could be huddled in their flimsy market stall, voices hoarse from shouting promises of eternal wellbeing to passers by. They could be sharing a meal, bemoaning their fortunes and spinning schemes for the upcoming new year. Or they could be clustered in a small waiting room, all coincidentally seeking appointments with the same minor functionary. However you set the first scene, your characters get to gossiping about the Emperor's health. That his Majesty is elderly and ailing is well known, a preoccupation of the entire Empire. The exact nature of his maladies and the specifics of his treatments are however state secrets. Still, your characters have their contacts and enough expertise to make educated guesses and, when all else fails, imaginations active enough to fuel wild speculations. Each character insists that he or she knows precisely what illnesses are troubling the Emperor and bemoans the tragic circumstances – nay the perfidy of underlings – that has placed his Majesty's care in the hands of base quacks when learned experts in the arts of achieving the immortality of the holy ancients – this last phrase accompanied by a flourish of the hands to generously encompass all characters present – stand ready to cure His Most Noble if we were only allowed a single appointment...

You will roleplay your characters as they take turns suggesting the Emperor's illnesses. Each player will name three maladies, which will be recorded on your character sheet and those of your neighbors around the room. Start by handing your character sheet to the player to your left. Take turns in making a short speech giving a speculative diagnosis of His Majesty. Describe symptoms that subtract from the patient (weight loss, hair falling out, organ failures, etc.) Write these down on the upper left line next to the circular diagram on the bottom of the character sheet that has been handed to you. Then pass the sheet back to its owner, who hands it to the right. Now make a second round of medical diagnoses, this time stating symptoms that add to the patient (through rashes, tumors, etc). Write down the malady on the upper right line of the circular diagram on the sheet you hold. Pass the sheet back to its original owner. Make a final round of diagnosing speeches. This time create symptoms with transformative effects (mood shifts, altered appearance or physiology, etc.) Write them down on the lower line on the circular diagram of your own character sheet. Once all three symptoms are chosen,⁶ write the letter S in the segment of the outer circle linked to the subtracting symptom, the letter A in the segment linked to the adding symptom, and T in the segment next to the transforming symptom. It's best to use pencil, as these letters will be moving around the circle.

⁶ after Puchai's character sheet has been passed back and forth, "fingernails, toenails, and teeth rotting to paste" is written in the subtracting line to the left. "Grapefruit-sized goiter" is noted down in the adding line to the right. "Legs fusing into merman-like tail" is marked in the transformation line below the diagram.

Every character sheet will have a different set of symptoms listed on it. So which ones actually afflict the Emperor? At this point, all – and none – do. They represent rumors about His Majesty’s health. Over the course of the game some of these symptoms will emerge as real threats to the Emperor’s life. At the end of each season (after the first spring phase) choose one of the three symptoms to advance in severity. Erase or cross out the symptom’s letter (S, A, or T) and rewrite in the next segment of the circle in a clockwise direction.

The progression of the symptoms around the outer ring tracks the Emperor’s illnesses. When a letter symbolizing a symptom completes a full circle and is moved back to the segment it started in it automatically moves down to the middle layer of the circle. The symptom continues to move clockwise in this second layer. When it returns to where it started, facing its original location, it descends to the heart of the circular diagram. When this happens, the Emperor enters the last, fatal throes of the malady. If the Emperor is not successfully treated during that season, He succumbs and dies. The game is over.

Choose Destination

Starting with the Spring season, you will decide whether your character will spend the season in the Capital cultivating influence with various contacts, or voyage to one of the four lands beyond the Empire to expand their knowledge.⁷ In order to gain an audience with the Emperor, characters will need to have entirely filled in the 6 influence slots and increased at least one of their knowledge areas to dimensions of 3x3 or greater. Using one hand as cover, move the directional token on your character sheet to W,E,N,S or the intersection (which represents the Capital). After all players have chosen destinations, lift your hand and announce your choice.

Starting with the oldest player and then moving clockwise, take turns playing your character's efforts for the season. If your character is visiting one of the four lands beyond, follow the procedures in the seeking knowledge in the lands beyond section. If your character stays in the capital, follow the procedures in the gaining influence in the imperial capital section.

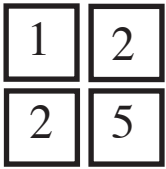
⁷ *Puchai will return to his roots in the Southern trading cities.*

* **proles lunatica**: a fetus that waxes and wanes with phases of moon so the pregnancy is prolonged and prolonged, never quite coming to term.

⁸ Puchai's voyage to the southern cities is intended to increase his expertise in alchemy. Puchai's player explains that 'every wonder' under the heavens can be found in the markets of the cities to the south – for the right price.

⁹ Puchai is looking for a woman carrying a *proles lunatica*. * Fluid from such wombs is considered a potent catalyst for alchemical formulas.

¹⁰ Puchai's Alchemy knowledge area is rated 2x2 so Puchai's player rolls four dice, then pushes them together into a two by two square. After forming a square pattern with the dice, the player looks more closely and sees that the pattern consists of a 1 and a 2 on the top row and a 2 and a 5 on the lower row.



Seeking Knowledge in the Lands Beyond

Choose knowledge area

Choose and announce what Knowledge area your character is trying to learn more about.⁸ Each season your character will focus on a single area of knowledge. Also state the goal of their expedition.⁹ What is your character planning to find or accomplish that will expand their knowledge?

Roll knowledge dice and arrange diagram

Roll a number of six sided dice equal to the number of boxes marked off in the knowledge area your character is pursuing this season. After rolling, quickly push the dice together to form the shape shown on the knowledge area's grid.¹⁰ When you move the dice to form the proper shape, be careful not to knock any dice so that they re-roll. Also be sure not to intentionally create any patterns. Without paying attention to the numbers showing on individual dice, just slide the dice into the desired shape.

Set Portent Die

After shaping your knowledge diagram, take a single 6 sided die and place it with the 6 face up in the square at the center of the elements diagram on your character sheet. The 1 face is hidden; the remaining faces each point towards an element (fire, earth, air, and water).¹¹ The numbers 2 through 5 pointing at the elements represent how fate will smile upon your character when you face a challenge of that elemental nature. (See the list below for an explanation of the four challenge elements). Low numbers indicate that your character will face that type of challenge soon. The numbers next to the elements determine the order that your character will face various challenges. Characters always come across the challenge elements showing 2 earliest in their expedition, then the 3, 4, and finally the 5 element. Higher numbers indicate that a challenge type will be more difficult to overcome, with a higher target number, but also can yield the most rewards.

As player, you get to place and turn the portent die in any direction you desire (always keeping the 6 on top). If you want a surprise, close your eyes and turn it randomly – or ask another player to place the die for you.

While setting the portent die you may optionally narrate how your character takes a portent at the start of their voyage.¹² Your character can use any kind of fortune telling or predictive ritual.

¹¹ *Puchai's player sets the portent die so that the 5 faces Air, 3 faces Fire, 2 faces Earth, and 4 faces Water.*

¹² *when his expedition reaches the Empire's southern border, Puchai cracks a rooster's egg and lets the yolk and white dribble onto the dirt. He crouches down and studies the patterns congealing in the dust and announces that the expedition's success will hinge on his ability to striking a deal [reflecting the fact that Air/communication challenges are rated 5, the most onerous but also potentially the most rewarding]. Standing again, he frowns and moves to double check the harnesses on his prized oxen, worried from the portents that travel will grow difficult soon. [Earth/exploration challenge of 2].*

Fire challenges involve conflict and danger. Perhaps the expedition is ambushed by brigands, entwined by carnivorous plants, or infiltrated by a petulant ghost.

Earth challenges involve difficulties in exploration and travel. Perhaps the expedition loses their bearings on a vast sea or desert, is stopped in their tracks by a steep precipice, or is hard pressed to locate ruins swallowed decades ago by a mist forest.

Water challenges involve secrets. Perhaps the expedition must translate a dead language, identify a rare mushroom from among dozens of species sprouting atop a grave mound, or perfect the tricky 9th motion of the dance of the exfoliating serpent.

Air challenges involve communication. Perhaps the expedition must bribe a meddlesome border guard, persuade a holy hermit to take a character on as a disciple, or negotiate the purchase price of a slave with hair the color of lemons.

¹³ *with the 2 on the portent die facing earth, Puchai's expedition will run up against a travel challenge as their first test. The player to the left describes how flash floods the prior winter have shifted the course of the dry river beds that caravans to and from the south traditionally use as navigational aids. Thrown off by the altered landscape, Puchai's expedition is at risk of becoming lost.*

¹⁴ *Note that the challenging player could not state ... 'and if Puchai can't find his way the entire expedition perishes in the boundless wastes and their bones are picked clean by wild dogs and ants.*

¹⁵ *the shifting river beds challenge is the first faced by Puchai's expedition so the target number is 6.*

Player to left sets first challenge

After the knowledge pattern and portent die are set, the player to the left describes the first challenge faced by the expedition.¹³ There will be up to four challenges, one for each element (earth, water, air, fire). Challenges are obstacles that could prevent a character from reaching the goal of their expedition. Challenges may not be phrased so a failure to overcome the challenge results in a character being killed or removed from the game.¹⁴ The first challenge will fall under the elemental category that faces the 2 on the portent die.

Determine target number

Each season, an expedition to one of the lands beyond faces up to four challenges, the order determined by the portent die. To overcome the first challenge, you will need to generate a result on your knowledge pattern equal to or greater than 6. The target number for the second challenge rises to 12; it is 18 for the third challenge, and 24 for the fourth and final challenge.¹⁵

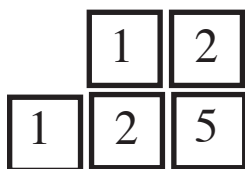
Use and place asset

Every time your character faces a challenge you will know the target number and the possible directions and distance of your efforts (see below). This will give you a strong sense of whether you can meet the target number using your knowledge diagram alone. If you estimate that you will fall short of the target number you have the choice of using one or more of your assets. Each asset used will temporarily make your knowledge diagram larger. For each asset used, first pick which side of the knowledge diagram an asset will attach to. Then roll the asset dice. Place the asset dice adjacent to dice on the chosen side of the diagram.¹⁶ You may intentionally place the dice (as opposed to quickly scooting them into place as you did the knowledge dice). While placing the asset dice, narrate how the asset(s) helps your character face the challenge.¹⁷ You can only use each asset on one challenge per season.

¹⁶ An asset isn't really required for Puchai's first and easiest challenge, but for the sake of example, assume that Puchai's player decides to use the oxen & wagon asset. Because this asset is a Depth asset, it may be placed at the left or right side of the knowledge diagram. The player rolls a 6 and a 1 and places the 6 on the top left side and the 1 on the lower left side.

¹⁷ Puchai's player narrates how the oxen have successfully made this trek numerous times and have instinctually absorbed the correct directions into their slow steady stride. The eight oxen help guide the expedition past the maze of altered river beds.

6	1	2
1	2	5



¹⁸ another player who has already faced challenges this season and earned tokens decides to intervene to hinder Puchai. The player discards one token and removes the 6 die derived from the oxen & wagon asset.

¹⁹ the meddling player narrates how her expedition crossed the same terrain earlier in the season and that the camels in her caravan cropped most of the spring grasses along the way. Without adequate fodder, Puchai's vaunted oxen are weakening by the day.

Intervene to help or hinder

Before you sweep across your diagram, any player whose character is in the same location as your character, and who has unspent tokens, may intervene in the challenge. Intervening players may help or hinder you. To intervene, discard one or more tokens. For each token spent an intervening player may add one new dice to the knowledge diagram of the player facing a challenge. Roll a new die (or dice) and place it next to any die on any side of the diagram. The active player can now use this die, but only during this specific challenge – the added die or dice are removed after the challenge is resolved. To hinder another player, spend one or more tokens and remove one die for each token discarded.¹⁸ You can only remove dice on the outside layer of the diagram. (To remove the center die in a 3x3 diagram, spend two tokens, use the first to remove a die in the outer layer, then remove the center die which is newly exposed.) Removed dice are replaced after the challenge is resolved. While adding or removing dice, narrate how your character is helping or hindering the character facing the challenge.¹⁹

Start sweep

The first sweep always starts on the side of your knowledge diagram corresponding to the type of element challenge your character is facing. Choose which die on the appropriate side of the diagram you will start on.²⁰

Pick direction

The first sweep moves in a direction determined by the location that the expedition is visiting. Move in or towards the compass direction of your expedition.²¹ Sometimes ‘in or towards’ will be the same. For example, if you started your sweep on the top side of your diagram and are exploring the South then you will move straight down. But if you start on top and are exploring the West then you have a choice to move straight to the left or to move diagonally down and to the left.

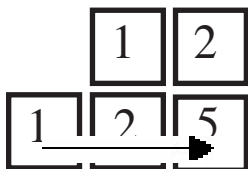
Set distance

You may sweep far enough so as to touch a number of dice equal to the number indicated by the portent die for the current challenge element.²² You count the die the sweep starts on. You also count empty spaces within or off the edge of the knowledge diagram. (Sometimes it is advantageous to move outside the diagram on your first sweep then come back on in a diagonal direction for your second). You can also choose to move less than this number, or to not move at all.

²⁰ Puchai’s Earth challenge starts on the left side of the diagram. Because of the intervention that removed the 6 die from the left column, there is only one die on the leftmost side. Puchai’s player starts the sweep on the 1 die.

²¹ Puchai’s expedition is to the Cities of the South so Puchai’s player can move the sweep straight down or diagonally down and to the right.

²² The portent die shows 2 as the distance for this Earth challenge. Puchai’s player started the sweep on the bottom left corner of the diagram, with a choice of moving down one additional die or down and to the right an additional die. Puchai’s player decides not to move for this first sweep since neither option would provide any points.



²³ Puchai's first sweep ended where it started, on the 1 die.

Puchai's player now has the choice of moving to the right (in the direction of Spring) or up and to the right (Towards Spring).

In either case this second sweep can move 2 new steps. Puchai's player decides to move to the right, touching the 2 and the 5 (rather than diagonally up and right which would touch a 1 and then move into empty space above the diagram).

²⁴ Puchai started on a 1 die, stayed there for his first sweep, then moved to touch a 2 and a 5 on the second sweep. The total is $1 + 2 + 5 = 8$. Since 8 is higher than the target number of 6, Puchai overcame the challenge. Puchai's player narrates how Puchai used his alchemical skills to brew energy supplements that gave his mighty oxen renewed vigor. The beasts pulled the expedition straight and true through the wastelands.

If your character originated in one of the lands beyond then you can move one extra space when facing the challenge type for which your character gets a bonus.

Make second sweep

Plot out and make a second sweep across the knowledge diagram. The second sweep starts where the first one ended - but does not include the first sweep's end point as part of the second sweep. Move in or towards the direction of the season you are in, moving a number of new dice equal to the number indicated by the portent die.²³

Sum the dice and narrate success or failure.

Add up the numbers on all the dice touched during your sweeps. This includes the die you started on, other dice touched during the first sweep, and all new dice touched by the second sweep. If the total is equal to or higher than the target number of the challenge, then your character successfully overcame the challenge. If the sum is lower than the target number, then your character was blocked by the challenge and forced to abandon the search for knowledge they were undertaking this season. Either way, narrate how your character tried to overcome the challenge and if and how they succeeded or failed.²⁴

Gain tokens

If your character succeeded at the challenge then you may earn tokens that you can spend later to enhance your character or to intervene in another player's challenge. The number of tokens gained is based on the difficulty of the challenge and on whether it took you one or both sweeps to equal or exceed the target number. For succeeding at the first challenge of a season, you gain 1 token if both of your sweeps independently totaled equal to or higher than the target number, and 0 tokens if the sum of both sweeps met the target. For the second challenge, the rewards rise to 2/1; you earn 4 or 2 tokens for overcoming the third challenge of a season; and 6 or 3 tokens for the fourth and final challenge.²⁵

Face next challenge

As long as you keep succeeding, you can face up to four challenges during a season, one for each of the four elements. The other players in the game will take turns creating the challenges you face. Repeat the steps described above for each challenge.²⁶

Proceed to next player

After the oldest player has completed four challenges or lost a challenge, the next player around the table launches their character's expedition. Follow the directions above and repeat until all players have faced up to four challenges or lost a challenge. At this point the season ends.

²⁵ it took Puchai both sweeps to beat the target number. Since this was the first challenge of the season, Puchai's player does not get any tokens.

²⁶ after overcoming the earth challenge, Puchai moves on to the **fire challenge** (because fire is next to the 3 on the portent die.) Another player (someone other than the player who devised the shifted river bed challenge) creates a challenge involving fire's themes of conflict and danger. The player narrates how Puchai arrives at a southern trading city and begins inquiring after any women who have experienced unusually long pregnancies. Even in the relaxed, wheeling-dealing atmosphere of the southern markets, Puchai's line of questions are considered offensive. Before long, a mob of monks, merchants, and midwives track Puchai down, label him a sexual deviant, an unlicensed abortionist, and a sinister warlock, and begin to pelt him and his oxen with vegetables and rocks. >>>

If Puchai wins the fire challenge, **water** would be next, so another player sets a challenge involving secrets. Puchai finally gets word of a local young woman who has carried a proles lunatica for 24 months. Still bruised from his encounter with the mob, Puchai decides he will not have time to leisurely examine the expectant mother and try out different operating techniques. He will have to figure out how to extract the desired fluid - without harming mother or fetus - before he even approaches the woman. >>>

If Puchai overcomes the water option the final challenge of the season will be an **Air challenge** involving communication. Another player states that Puchai will have to convince the expectant mother and her husband, a wholesaler of honey, to allow him to perform the extraction. (Puchai's tattered professorial credentials might prove to be an apt asset for this challenge.)

²⁷ *assume that Puchai succeeded at the second and third challenges, earning a total of 3 tokens. Puchai's players decides to add two boxes to Puchai's alchemical knowledge diagram, growing it from 2x2 to 3x2. The final token is spent increasing Puchai's oxen cart asset from 2 to 3 boxes.*

²⁸ *Puchai, back from the South, is keen to show off his enhanced alchemical knowledge.*

²⁹ *Puchai's player decides that Puchai will seek to befriend an apprentice embalmer working in the palace mortuary where the Emperor's illustrious ancestors are entombed.*

Expend tokens to strengthen character

Between seasons players who earned tokens in the Land Beyond may spend some or all of the tokens to enhance their characters. Each token can (1) add one additional box in the knowledge diagram that was active during the past season; (2) start a new knowledge area which can be bought up to a maximum of 4 boxes when created; (3) add one box to any asset; or (4) create a new asset that can be bought up to a maximum of 2 boxes when created.²⁷ You may also save tokens for future seasons, but you lose half of unspent tokens (rounding up) between seasons.

Gaining influence in the Imperial Capital

When you choose to keep your characters in the Imperial Capital for a season, your character is trying to curry favor with persons with clout in the Court. A season in the Capital is played using most of the same rules as a season in the Lands Beyond. You choose one knowledge area to focus on during the season.²⁸ While in the Capital you're not trying to grow this knowledge area. You're flaunting it, trying to make a name for yourself and to impress potential contacts with your skill at life extension. After identifying which knowledge area is in play, narrate one target person who you are cultivating influence with this season.²⁹

You must fill in the influence pyramid on your character sheet from the ground up. The three slots on the lowest level must be filled with fairly low level contacts and functionaries. Once you have three influences across the ground level you can move to the middle level. These influence slots must be taken up by persons who rate higher in the Court hierarchy than the three influences below. Each middle level influence must also be connected to at least one of your low level influences. Your character uses contacts as steps on a ladder aimed at the innermost sanctums of the Emperor's palace. In a similar manner, your single high level influence must derive from one or both of your mid level contacts.³⁰

Winning friends and influencing people

Characters' efforts to gain influence are played out in series of challenges.³¹ Follow the sequence and rules from the lands beyond section – with a couple of differences. First, since characters in the Capital are located at the center of the world, use the compass direction that your character was most recently in when setting the starting point of sweeps through your knowledge diagram. If your character starts the game with a season in the capital, use east as your starting point. Second, between seasons you can spend tokens on the following: (1) buying a new influence. You can only add up to two new influence each season: the person you were cultivating plus one other contact linked in some way to your target for the season.

³⁰ *Puchai's succeeds at gaining influence with an apprentice embalmer, then later gains the mortuary supervisor as a mid level influence. Puchai's high level influence could eventually be one of the Emperor's wives who is in a morbid phase and comes to sit for hours among the tombs.*

³¹ *Puchai's four challenges during his season of cultivating the apprentice embalmer will proceed from air to water to fire to earth. The air challenge might be to act chummy with a known grave robber to get a sense of the psychology of a person who consorts with corpses. The water challenge could be to recreate the formula used by royal embalmers so Puchai can impress his target. The fire challenge could be to be haunted by a gloomy spirit who resents that Puchai has taken to staking out the palace mortuary. The earth challenge might be to take the embalmer a lavish present that cements their friendship – without getting lost among the tombs inside the mazelike mortuary.*

³² Puchai will use the knowledge area of heliotherapy to treat the Emperor's prominent and expanding goiter. Puchai's player sets the portent die so that the fire challenge comes first, followed by water, air, and earth.

³³ A fire challenge might be a brawl with the Emperor's top religious advisors when the shocked and indignant monks rush out to the Palace courtyard where the Emperor lies completely naked, soaking in afternoon rays. A water challenge could be that pus and fluids that have congealed inside the goiter bake in the hot sun and begin to steam and hiss, interfering with the dignity of the Imperial tan, so Puchai must figure out how to keep the Emperor's goiter cool but sunned. An air challenge could be to convince the Emperor to keep lying out after he suffers from a painful sunburn. And the earth challenge could be Puchai scrambling over rooftops of the sprawling palace and setting out trays of flower to locate the precise spot where the sun fall is the purest.

It costs 3 tokens to add a low level influence, 6 tokens to add a mid level influence, and 9 tokens to add your high level influence. (2) adding to existing assets. (3) Creating new assets with one or two starting boxes.

Treating the Emperor

Once your character has gained a high level influence and has at least one knowledge area that is 9 or more boxes in size, you can spend seasons in the Capital treating the Emperor. Narrate how your character receives an audience with his Majesty. Choose one of your knowledge areas. (You cannot choose a knowledge area that another character already used to treat the emperor – unless the other player has since switched to a different treatment or was stripped of that knowledge area for failing – see below). Also choose one of the three ailments written on your character sheet. Your character will use the chosen knowledge area to treat this ailment. ³²

Play out and narrate a series of challenges involving the course of treatment. ³³ These challenges follow the basic challenge rules. Treating the emperor is more difficult than expanding your knowledge in the Lands Beyond or gaining influence. Target numbers for the four challenges during treatment are 10, 20, 30, and 40. You do not gain tokens when treating the Emperor. Instead, the further you advance through the four challenges, the more you will treat and minimize the Emperor's symptoms. If, however, you fail at an early challenge, your character's treatment will backfire and worsen the Emperor's ailment.

In the unlikely event that you fail entirely to reach the 10 target number during your first challenge, your character's bungling grievously harms the Emperor so that his symptom moves 6 steps forward (towards a fatal outcome). If your character reaches ten but does not hit ten with both sweeps, then the Emperor's symptom worsens by 4. If you hit ten on both sweeps then fail at your second challenge, the Emperor's symptom worsens by 2. In any of these cases, your character fails so miserably that you lose your high level contact; are permanently forbidden from ever practicing that form of treatment ever again (erase all the boxes in the knowledge area used and cross out the name of the knowledge area); and must spend the next season in one of the land beyond to avoid being further persecuted.

If your character reaches the second target number of 20 then fails at your third challenge, then the Emperor's symptom marginally worsens by one. Choose two of the three negative consequences listed above to happen to your character. If your character reaches 20 on both sweeps then fails at your third challenge, your treatment has no effect. Choose one of the three negative consequences to happen to your character. If, as a result of bungled treatment, any of the Emperor's symptoms reaches the center space, then the Emperor dies. The character responsible is unlikely to survive the Emperor by very long although his Majesty's torturers are renowned for their ability to drag out their own specialized treatments. In any case, the game is over.

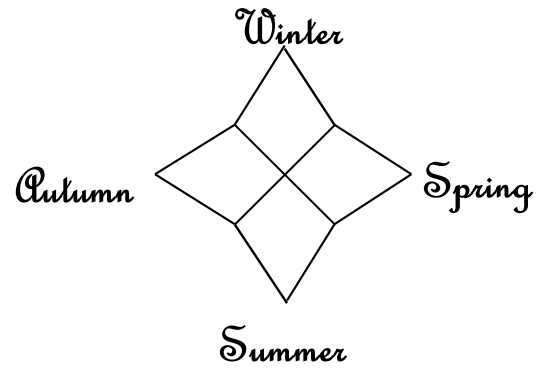
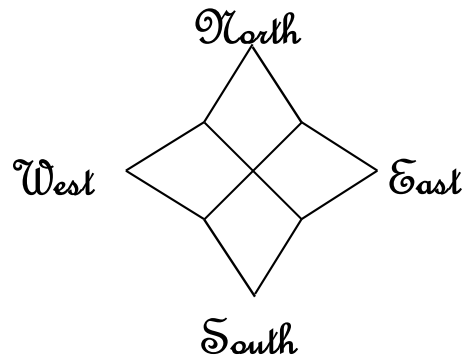
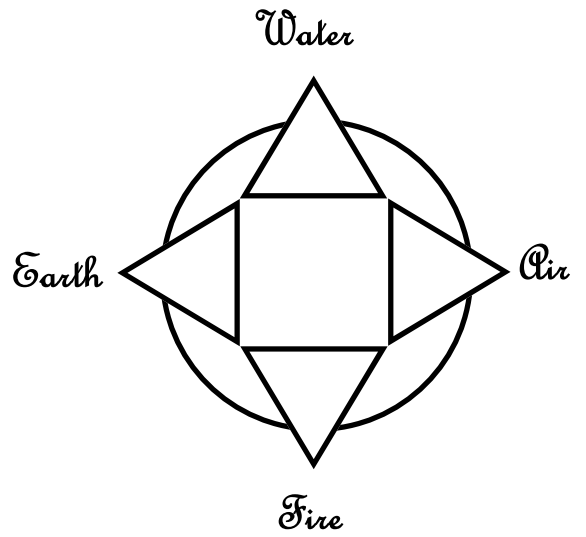
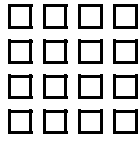
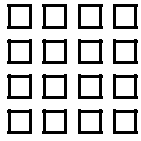
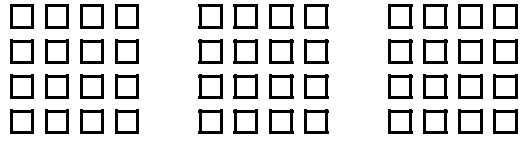
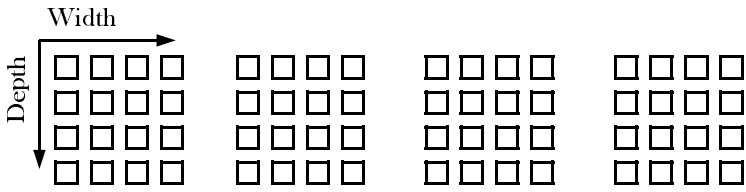
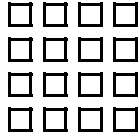
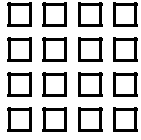
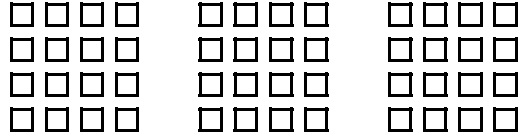
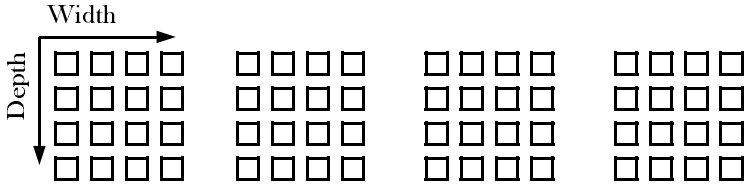
** As for the Emperor ... maybe he will reign for as far into the future as it is possible to foretell – or maybe he will immediately slough off his convalescence gown, step out of the window and fly to his own peaceful island in the Eastern Sea.*

If your character reaches the third challenge target of 30 then your treatment has a positive effect and reduces the Emperor's symptom by one space. If you meet the target of 30 on both sweeps then the symptom is reduced by 3 spaces. If your character reaches the fourth challenge target of 40 then you reduce the symptom by 5. If, as a result of successful treatment, any of the Emperor's symptoms is reduced back past its starting point, then the symptom is completely cured and is erased from your character sheet.

If you succeed in removing all three of the Emperor's symptoms then you have restored the Emperor to health and can narrate the rewards your character is showered with. The game ends. If, during a treatment challenge, you ever succeed at reaching the final target number of 40 with both sweeps, then all of the Emperor's symptoms immediately disappear and the Emperor is transformed into an Immortal before your eyes.* The game ends and your character's name will enter the annals of history as one of the greatest scholars and healers of the ages.

Name _____

Knowledge



Assets



Influence

