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"my battery is low and it's getting dark"

a mini-larp about darkness, cold and death

This game is inspired by the final message of MER-B "Opportunity", a NASA Mars Rover launched in 2003 who exceeded their planned mission duration of 90 days by a factor of 55 before finally succumbing to a dust storm. The last radio contact with Opportunity was on June 10, 2018. NASA declared end-of-mission on February 13, 2019 after over 800 failed attempts to re-establish contact.

For 5-8 players
Requires a dark-ish room and a five-ish minutes timer
Duration: roughly five-ish minutes per subsystem in play (?)

Setup: play in a darkened, but not necessarily pitch-black room, sitting on the ground. Keep a communal eye on the timer.

What&How: Each player will play one of the rover's subsystems, which are listed on the next page together with their respective personalities and a short description for non-technical players.
Unless player activity decides otherwise, the subsystems will fail bottom up, with EPS (Electrical Power System) failing last.
Subsystems can fail either by getting their respective plug pulled by EPS, which cuts them immediately, or by slowly running out of power. Running out can be signified by starting to stutter, sinking into oneself and/or lying down on the ground. A subsystem should fail every five-odd minutes, but feel free to take less time if it becomes a slog (especially once only EPS is left).
Powered down subsystems may stutter back to life for a few seconds at a time.

Get playing: The game starts with Opportunity just became aware that there is little power left, and the sun, usually feeding their solar panels, is getting darker and darker in the dust storm that is raging around you. Things are not looking good. TMTC ("Communications") opens the session by sending the titular message back to earth:
"My battery is low and it's getting dark."
Systems are free to talk about what's moving them: trying to find a way out, reminisce about the achievements of the past, and come to terms with the lingering end.

Debrief: Talk about the experience. Trade hugs, if you want to. Take care of each other.

Optional mechanic: Fighting the Cold
Mars is cold, and electronics don't like being cold. It's THM's (Thermal control system) job to keep everyone warm, but keeping warm draws precious power – but getting cold will incapacitate systems. THM keeping you close keeps you warm. THM can withdraw from anyone; however, as long as there was no major fallout, keeping the batteries working is the highest priority for THM, even if it's powered down. (Discuss physical contact beforehand!)

Optional mechanic: Battery Gauge
Find something that represents the power left to the rover. Something edible. Keep yourselves fed to actually do things; action, both physical and mental, will burn through more food than sitting silently. Distribution is handled by EPS, but feel free to cheat or fight them for it. (Discuss physical contact and Rules of Engagement beforehand!)
[This has obviously not been tested; if you do, please give me some feedback.]

 written by Sjut Brethauer
feedback: mbil@spacesjut.de constructive input by a lot of people – thank you <3
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Optional workshop: A Day In The Life…
Play a ten-ish minutes-session beforehand about a normal day on Mars. You can use this time to find character voices, establish inter-subsystem dynamics and generally get a feel for things. Drive around, do science, talk to mission control! If you don't have a player doing mission control, TMTC will just make things up: "Hey comrades, the humans want us to go forward and turn left a bit!"
In this, THM will still be worried about the others' wellbeing, and EPS will be generally angst-y about anything that might somehow interfere with power generation, e.g. dust, shadows and nights. OBDH is in overall control of Opportunity. Play in a well-lit room.
Afterwards you can either dim the light and fluently move into the actual game, or take a short break and start as described above.
If you play with the Fighting the Cold-rules, keep in mind that it is Martian day and everything is fine, and that working systems generate their own heat, so keep your temperatures balanced.

List of characters:

Electrical power system (EPS) *(rightfully) terrified about the situation*
The EPS controls the generation, storage and distribution of electric energy. It's the first to notice the sky darkening, and holds the ultimate decision which other systems are powered.

Thermal control system (THM) *worried about its comrades*
THM controls the heaters in the rover, making sure all components are within operational temperatures.

On-Board Data Handling (OBDH) *full of self-doubt, wants to be a good rover*
Central hub of all internal communication, and the Brain during normal operations, but liable to overrides during thermal- or power-related crises. When it shuts down, communication between the other subsystems is severely hampered.

Communication system (TMTC) *optimistic, chatty*
TMTC is in charge of talking with earth. In this game, the receiver might or might not work, the transmitter is either broken or offline due to power constraints.

Movement and navigation (MOV) *energetic, driven by intent*
Wheels and motors. Wants to keep moving, because it *wants to, has to* and because running the motors keeps the rover warm.

Optional: Science Equipment (SCI) *curious skeptic*
The eyes and ears and hands and nose and whatnot of Opportunity. Always curious but never convinced, always looking for some more data, and right now probably frantically searching for a way out of the current misery – or a last interesting rock, while there's still time.

Optional: Mission Control Team (MCT)
MCT regularly tries to contact Opportunity, but receives no answer. Whether or not Opportunity can hear MCT depends on the state of the receiver (see TMTC).

Optional: Mars
The embodied dust storm. May literally smother Opportunities systems one-by-one (discuss physical contact beforehand!) and generally serves as a reminder of the situation.

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“my battery is low and it’s getting dark” – Q&A

Q: Do we have to work together, or can we have fights?
A: Sure. I’m not your parent.

Q: Can we have a non-canonical ending?
A: Yes, but make sure that the groups expectations are properly managed.

Q: Can we have a deeper dive into the technical thingies?
A: Not in this document, as that would heavily impact accessibility for non-technical players, but feel free to do this as heavy or light as you want – it’s all about the misery.

Q: I don’t have five players. Can we still play?
A: I think so. Tell me how it worked.

Q: We need more time for all the drama! Can we have more than five minutes?
A: Death waits for no subsystem, but I’m not standing next to you with a stopwatch either.

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