

MacGuffin & Co. presents

TWISTED RAILS

A micro-setting

Content Notes: *Altered reality, Violence, Piracy, Human remains, Body horror, Transformation, Imperialism, Colonialism, Corruption, Murder, Self-harm, Blood, Environmental disaster, Oppressive regimes, Isolation, Unethical science, Cloning, Hostile animals.*

This is a system-neutral setting! It gives you all the details on the world, the player characters' role within it, and contains a suggested mini-campaign and adventure ideas. However, you won't find any rules, character sheets, or instructions to "Roll your Diplomacy", "Take 2 Wounds" or similar. This is intended to be a playground where you can use whatever system you and your group feels most comfortable with. This may mean it requires some extra preparation in terms of working out the necessary numbers, especially if you're using a more stats-focused system, but we promise, even if you just jump right in and make it up on the fly, you'll have a great time.



No-one knows how it started or what went wrong, but a generation ago something broke in reality. The world stopped making sense, replaced by a swirling chaos where nothing is anything without straining to be something else. The Twist. The best way to survive is to stay in the bubbles: tiny pockets of stability where humanity just about hangs on. And there's only one way to travel between bubbles: you ride the turning, shifting rail-lines in heavily-modified trains, designed to push through the worst the Twist has to offer. Trains like yours.

Background

It's been 30 years since the chaos started. No one remembers where it hit first, but most survivors remember when the world around them stopped working as it should. The changes spread from town to city, to country, to continent. Churning waters became rivers of ash. Cliff faces eroded as millenia passed for them in an hour. Grass turned to ice, then to clay, then to rolling fields of smoke. The Twist was born.

There's no consensus on why the laws of reality have held on in some places, but they have. Bubbles of stability emerge and collapse constantly, but there are some that have held on and remained stable since the break. Their inhabitants have long searched for the reason these small bastions of order have lasted, but all they've found are a few common features that seem to keep the Twist at bay: a dense presence of complex life and scenery or architecture that is colourful, diverse and irregular. After the change hit, these places became a beacon for wandering survivors and are now the centres of human existence.

Wander too far from the centre of any bubble and you'll find yourself in the Twist, a

constantly changing dreamscape where you can't rely on anything to remain itself from one moment to the next. In the thin band between a bubble and the Twist itself, the changes are slower and more predictable, gradually turning anything that stays there to a single material: glass, wood or, in one memorable case, music. These edges are known as beaches and, though dangerous, they can often be beautiful or provide a useful resource. But while plenty of people might enjoy a short trip to the beach, if you want to venture further and survive, you'll need to ride the rails.

That's where you come in. You're a crew of Twist-riders: brave, foolish or desperate souls who make their living on the huge, armoured steam trains that travel through the Twist. Your life is loud, messy and dangerous, but trains like yours are the only way communities limited by the confines of their bubble can trade with one another, or communicate outside the unreliable radio signals. You usually transport goods but there's always extra money to be made by carrying private letters, trinkets and even the occasional passenger on your cargo routes.

Crews live in close quarters and get to know each other quickly, which is just as well when your survival often relies on knowing each other's rhythms and quirks. The amount of money you make from each Twist run depends on how much cargo makes it to the other end in the state it left, and not even the most foolhardy captain heads out into the Twist without a fully stocked armoury. Living space is generally kept small, with beds taken in shifts and little space for personal belongings. Navigating in the Twist is imprecise and while journeys have fixed start and end points, and maybe even a few common landmarks, the precise route is constantly changing.

The effects of the Twist itself aren't the only dangers when riding the rails. Few animals remain unchanged outside of the bubbles and most are now broadly classified neo-

fauna - living beings changed by the Twist or inanimate things turned into living ones. The most aggressive and hostile of these are colloquially called 'screamers,' named for the noise they tend to make when assaulting passing trains. There's also the danger posed by railway pirates, who manipulate the tracks into convergence and attack freight trains. Between all these dangers, and the fact that the ground beneath you could turn from melting plastic into the colour orange, Twist-riding has a steep learning curve and successful riders gain skills quickly, if they want to survive.

Riding the Rails

The basic metaphysics of the the railway are relatively simple: a pair of rails are forged together, then cut into neat halves. The severing must be clean, as the neater the cut, the stronger the connection between the rails. One half of each is fitted to sleepers to form a departure track in one bubble and the other halves will be used for an arrival track at the destination bubble. When a train leaves a bubble touching one half of the rails, the track will remain beneath them as they travel through the twist, arcing them towards to the other half at their destination. The exact course of the track is changeable, and the time the journey takes can vary wildly, even without the Twist's tendency to mess with time. Most stations will have a separate track for leaving and arriving on the same route to avoid confusion and possible collisions. Large stations in major hubs will often have direct rail connections to upwards of a dozen other bubbles, but smaller "one-track" bubbles may only have a single connection, which is their lifeline to the outside world. The complexities of the rail network make an up-to-date map or experienced conductor an absolute necessity.

One odd wrinkle of riding the rails is that if two trains are travelling towards the same bubble at roughly the same time (even from different departure points) their tracks will be distorted and drawn together, appearing

parallel to each other in the Twist. This is how the majority of piracy takes place, with marauding trains using stolen schedules and hijacked stations to travel towards the same destination as their prey, attacking en route. In some cases pirates have even been known to steal one of a station's arrival tracks and set it up in a small bubble they control, allowing them to ambush and capture the misdirected trains.

While all travel has to have a locked in start and end point, traveling new routes is still possible. There are hundreds of bubbles and, while most have well-established connections to other nearby stations, there are plenty of new routes yet to be tried. Placing new track to connect an as-yet untravelled direct route will result in a journey that crosses new areas of the Twist and, occasionally, previously undiscovered bubbles. A few trains specialise in this, installing temporary tracks between stations that have never before been connected in the hopes of finding new bubbles. Stopping in such a place and laying an arrival track will connect it to the network, and could stand to make the right crew very rich.

The weather in the Twist is constantly changing but, most of the time, you can trust you're safe within the train. Very occasionally, Twist-riders can even stand outside - the changes you see during these 'lulls' tend to be breathtakingly beautiful and riders are more likely to see singing glass flowers than to encounter tides of flame lapping at their feet. Just as likely as a lull, though, is encountering a 'bad patch' when the Twist is strong enough to penetrate the train itself and start to affect the crew. The first signs of a bad patch will be changes to the train's spikes and the smokestack trail, and most crewmembers will take shifts to monitor them for warning signs. If it continues long enough, the effects may reach the walls of the train, the wheels, floor, couplings or even the crew.

The trains that travel the Twist are almost universally steam-powered. The surreal

effects of the place affect electricity in unpredictable ways, even within the protection of a locomotive, and the steam and smoke are very useful, acting as both lighting rod and warning system. The Twist tends to change things from the outside in and alters small things before larger ones, so the water droplets and smoke coming out of the train attract and diffuse much of its effects. An experienced Twist-rider knows to keep an eye on the smokestack and see what's emerging: if it's something strange but safe, like rainbows or gravel, everything's good; if it's something more alarming, like bone fragments or rubies, then the train is likely to be entering a bad patch. Most train crews see windows as a vulnerability and instead keep interiors dark and reliant on yellow, artificial lighting. Crews often also cover their trains in long spikes, both to deter pirates from boarding, and because they can get a good indication of how bad the Twist is by checking how much of the spike is still metal.

Between these precautions and the fact the living flesh is slower to be affected by the Twist, a crew can usually travel in relative safety, with the strangeness usually remaining outside. During a bad patch however, the Twist will often affect the inside of the train and its occupants, imposing its surreal reality. Colours may become so vivid they burn, time may run backwards, shadows may begin to pull the crew to the floor, bones may begin to steel, or something even weirder. These effects are rarely fatal for any but the most unlucky or unwise Twist-riders, but crews need time to recover after such an encounter, as those most affected wait for their body to become their body again. Living tissue has a remarkable way of healing from the twist, but if any part of a person is entirely transformed (a whole bone, a tooth, an eyeball) it will never change back. Hair and nails, being dead cells, do not recover unless entirely removed and regrown, and Twist-riders are often marked by stone or wooden fingernails, and hair of glass or tipped with strange-coloured metals.

Train-to-Train Combat

All valuable goods moving between one bubble to the others have to go via the rails, and that makes piracy lucrative enough to outweigh the dangers of fighting in the Twist. Beyond that, Twist-riders can be a temperamental lot, and more than one vendetta has been ended for good out in that warped and shifting landscape, far from any law-enforcement. It's dangerous out there, and even civilian trains tend to go armed.

Common weapons include:

Cannons: Generally used in an attempt to derail or destroy a train, or sever the track. Effective, but inelegant, with a high likelihood of collateral damage.

Machine guns: Usually targeting any exposed crewmembers, or used to pepper the boiler with holes, causing the water to leak.

Grappling hooks: Often the precursor to boarding attempts, or used in an attempt to merge tracks (see 'railjacking' below).

Sprayers: Recently, pirate crews have come up with a interesting, if unpredictable, weapon. It's no more nor less than a crude spray hose throwing water at their target at high pressure. In most situations this is simply an annoyance, but when the Twist is strong, the water will usually have changed into something else by the time it hits its target, and an unsuspecting crew may find themselves being hosed in fire, choking dust or worse. In the heat of battle, even being surrounded by a swarm of beautiful butterflies can be a real problem.

In addition to the standard to-and-fro of violence, there are several specific maneuvers rail warriors have developed.

Railjacking: Due to certain metaphysical oddities of the Twist, if a train can get a direct hit with a hook and chain on the other train's rail, the two parallel tracks will begin to merge. Depending on whether the train merges the track behind or in front of its target, this

can confer several tactical advantages. Care needs to be taken, though, as, if the chain hits directly beneath the other train, the merging tracks can lead to a devastating collision.

Cratering: If a well-placed cannon shot can destroy the track directly in front of a train, it cuts the connection with the destination and the track below it vanishes, usually causing the train to derail. While an effective way of winning a fight, it often makes looting difficult, unless the crash occurs during a lull in the Twist.

Freighthopping: The most profitable way to attack a train is not to damage it at all. If attacks are confined to the crew, there's no danger of damaging potentially valuable cargo. Jumping from one train to another is extremely risky, however, especially if the Twist is bad. Some pirate crews favour ramps, poles and ladders, while others prefer to pull themselves over via grappling hook or zipline down a rope or cable.

Breakneck Stop: Escaping an attack is often a difficult proposition, especially as a skilled driver will be adept at matching the speed of their target. But if timed right, when the attacker has a good head of steam, slamming on the brakes can put enough distance between the trains to break the track parallel, and send the other train on to their destination alone. It's a desperate maneuver with a high risk of derailment, and the driver should be sure the train will be in a state to start moving again once they've come to a stop.

Character Suggestions

The Twist is a dangerous and unpredictable place, but riding the rails is one of the only ways people can make their fortune or escape the bubble they were born into. Those who choose it tend towards the ambitious, the foolhardy and the plain weird.

Old Driver

You remember the world before the Twist, and you're not too impressed with what's happened since. Railways used to go in straight lines, and things knew what they were meant to be. You can't get used to this new world, so you might as well dive into it, and use the engineering skills you developed in a life that made sense. The others may dismiss you as grumpy, but they can't deny you're skilled.

Savvy Merchant

Economics aren't what they once were. The value of gold has plummeted since they found that bubble with the golden beach, and apparently the safe money's in beans. This new trading landscape requires someone with a sharp eye and smooth tongue to make the best of it, someone willing to endure the horrors of the Twist because they know there's a fortune at the other end of it. That someone is you.

Rail Warrior

Force is a language you've always understood, and it's been your profession for a long time. Maybe you used to be a Commonwealth Peacekeeper, or worked as a leg-breaker in one of the smaller bubbles. Maybe you were a pirate. Even though you're trying to leave it behind, the only thing your past ever taught you was violence, and that's a skill needed all too often out in the Twist.

Twist Touched

The Twist changes things. Changes people. Physically, sure, yeah, there's no-one who'd look at you and not see what's different. You've got hardly any of your original teeth and it's rare that your skin is entirely skin. But that's not the real change: the real change

is in your mind, your soul. You know the Twist like few others, and it's the only place you can feel truly alive. Someday it'll take you, sure, but until then you'll ride those rails to the end.

Poet

Sometimes you feel like the only one who sees the beauty in this new world. The lush colours of a flowering vine curling around a sprawling residential block in a bubble desperately clinging to life, the birth of a fiery mountain erupting down from the sky, the shadow of a melting jungle turning to obsidian dust and simply floating away. Travel broadens the mind, broadens your work, and these days the railway is the only way to travel.

Locations

Because travel between the bubbles is difficult and unreliable, bubbles themselves have developed distinct, autonomous cultures in their 30 years of relative isolation. Most people will live and die in the same bubble, too poor or too scared to try their luck travelling through the Twist, but a veteran train crew might see hundreds of bubbles across their career.

Coalshore

The largest and best-connected is Coalshore, a bustling city surrounded by a broad beach of coal, an immensely valuable resource in a world that relies on heavy steam trains for any travel or trade. At about five miles in diameter, it's easily the biggest of the known bubbles and is well aware of it. Their beach is composed of a technicolour coal, which they mine to supply the railways, making them the wealthy backbone of the whole system. With their wealth has come a desire for expansion, and the city's government has recently annexed a dozen or so nearby bubbles "for their security and development". They emphasise no bubbles have been taken by force, instead convincing their leaders to sign over control in exchange for "protection", and Coalshore has plenty of vocal defenders propping up any local bar. Even so, most struggle to see expansion of "The Commonwealth" as anything other than a threat.

Grand Central

There are a good dozen or so major hubs: bubbles with sufficient size, population or resources to become a centre for trade. These hubs invariably have lots of connections, and tend to link together the smaller nearby bubbles. Grand central is in many ways the exception to this: it's relatively small, barely a mile across, and its beach is a wondrous garden of beautiful, but extremely toxic flowers. Despite its lack of size or resources, Grand Central has somehow become the biggest marketplace around, with almost forty receiving tracks coming in from all

sorts of bubbles, large and small. It's got the best connections and the best bazaars, and if a train crew needs something odd, they can probably find it here.

One-Track Bubbles

Most smaller bubbles will only have a single arrival track and a single departure track, both linked to the nearest hub. These bubbles vary massively in character and with limited contact from outside they tend towards the weird, insular and idiosyncratic. Some may have a thriving export industry if their beach is lucky enough to produce something useful like edible fungus. But many have dangerous or useless beaches (monochrome, mucus, on fire) and have to make do with subsistence farming and whatever they can get imported. Some of these bubbles become sinister or oppressive, but most just tend towards the strange.

Coastal Bubbles

These bubbles may just be the most important places left. Because the deeper parts of the ocean are unaffected by the Twist, almost all of them now house large-scale desalination plants which supply water to the other bubbles and, crucially, the trains. These days, the water-producing bubbles are run more or less collectively by the Hydro Operatives Union, who set water costs, determine targets and organise the infrastructure. The HOU has its main offices in Grand Central.

Rogue Stations

Piracy in the Twist relies on matching a train's route to that of its quarry. This means that railways schedules are a vital commodity for any would-be marauder, but a raiding locomotive also needs somewhere to depart from. There are persistent rumours of rogue stations: small bubbles completely ruled by corrupt and murderous pirates, using unattended or hidden tracks to time their travels for the perfect attack. Even more dangerous are those rogue stations that steal the arrival tracks from more common destinations, detouring unsuspecting crews

and ambushing them on arrival. Reaching a rogue station without its occupants knowing is difficult, as they are fiercely protective of any rails that might lead there.

The Stone Tree

Despite the ever-changing nature of the Twist, there are a few well-known landmarks that inexplicably seem to remain consistent. One of these is known as the Stone Tree. Only ever glanced from a distance, it is said to have once been a mountain that became the skeleton of an oak, and never changed back. It is truly colossal, and no train has ever gotten close to it (at least none that reported back), but it's considered a bad omen to see it on the horizon during a journey.

The sections from this point on contain secrets, NPCs and campaign/adventure information that are intended for the GM's eyes only. If you're planning to play through Twisted Rails in any other role, do not read any further.

Secrets

The creation of the Twist was the result of a failed experiment: an attempt to open a portal between dimensions. But instead of opening a hole in the walls of reality, they collapsed entirely the moment the device was switched on. The most extreme wave of the Twist ripped through the lab and the surrounding city in an instant. This undiscovered ruin is one of the most beautiful and horrifying sights a Twist-rider could find. A stable bubble formed a few moments after the wave spread, but it was already too late for the city's inhabitants. The city and the lab still remain, silent and undisturbed, waiting to be found by a daring or lucky crew. The device that started everything is still there, but it works slightly differently in this new reality: it can be used to deliberately create or collapse bubbles, and its discovery could radically upset the balance of power. The mini-campaign **Working on the Railroad** deals with the the hunt for, and discovery of, this hidden ruin and the power that waits inside it.

Everyone has their own theories about exactly how bubbles are formed and why they sometimes collapse. Like anything in the Twist, hard rules are tricky, but there are a few guidelines that hold broadly true. Out in the Twist, small bubbles of a few dozen yards across appear pretty regularly, but almost all of them collapse again within a couple of hours. Larger bubbles tend to be more stable, and if one manages to last a day, it could last indefinitely. Life and biodiversity act as a stabilising factor, but more important is the absence of rigid order. The Twist reflexively reaches for hard angles, standardisation and

stagnation, and more than one bubble has collapsed after a petty tyrant tried to impose their will on its inhabitants.

This may be bad news for the Commonwealth, as their aggressive expansion is only getting started, and many in their government dream of an actual empire.. What no-one in Coalshore realises, however, is that, by the very act of imposing their order on another bubble, they weaken its defences against the Twist. Many of the smaller bubbles they've conquered are already starting to collapse as their beaches - and the Twist itself - press inward. Unless, that is, they could get their hands on a certain device...

Threats

The Twist

Things in the Twist change on a metaphysical rather than molecular level. What matters most to how something is affected is how it's conceptualised and defined, rather than how it's atomically constructed. What this means for you as a GM is that you shouldn't focus too much on how things are changing, or on the physical implications of any change, but on how it appears or affects the players (the Twist is more of a poet than a scientist).

Weather

Weather still occurs in the Twist, but it's usually only a particular threat in a Bad Patch, where it can result in some of the most immediately dangerous environments in the whole Twist. Heavy rain becomes far more lethal when the water is replaced by thorns, wind becomes much more than an inconvenience when it sets the air on fire, and the less said about lightning the better.

Pirates

Because pirates will often end a raid by arriving in a public station, most pirate trains take great pains not to appear as such, and will often take registration documents from those they prey on, so they can pose as their victims on arrival. Unless a pirate captain

is very clever or meticulous, the majority of their forays will not find a train to waylay, and so pirate crews tend to spend far more time in the Twist than others. They tend to end up severely Twist-touched, leading many to distrust even those honest travellers who display obvious marks of their travels.

Screamers

The Twist, by its nature, creates life almost as often as it ends it, and sometimes switches something back and forth more than once. “Neo-fauna”, as it’s officially known, tends to be either things that should be inanimate that have been changed into something living (a boulder now made of crawling hands) or a living creature that has been changed without dying (a bear made of glass). On rare occasions two sorts of creatures may have changed together into something else entirely (an eagle made of rainbow spiders). In most cases, Neo-fauna is not hostile, content to live whatever weird existence it finds in the Twist, but some things, whether due to some lingering predator’s instinct or driven to fury by their unnatural form, instead become incredibly violent. These are known as “screamers” due to the noises they tend to make, and are the greatest fear of most train drivers.

The Commonwealth

While the Commonwealth prides itself on its “peaceful” expansion, many of its representatives and soldiers don’t seem to have got the message, throwing their weight around and often treating the bubbles under their control (which they refer to among themselves as “the colonies”) as their own private kingdoms. A few seem to genuinely believe themselves to be helping the places they’ve annexed, but most are drunk on whatever power they have been given, and can create real problems for any train crew that doesn’t show them the proper respect.

NPCs

Moira Walsh - Merchant

Moira used to ride the rails, and some people even say she was once a pirate. Whatever the truth, her days as a driver are long since over. A horrendous patch of the Twist turned the bones in her legs to magma and, while her crew made adjustments for her wheelchair, the event was the spur she needed to move on. The Twist also stripped her hair of its gravity, leaving it floating around her in odd, flitting arcs. Since then, Moira has thrown herself into a very successful trading career, and always has her finger on the pulse of what’s currently in demand and where it might be found. She has a small stall in whichever bubble the players visit most often, tended by a constantly-changing string of partners.

Constance Washington - Grand Central Gardener

The beach around Grand Central is full of gorgeous, but very poisonous, flowers. Only one person regularly goes there, and that’s Constance. Through a combination of natural resistance and careful study, Constance is able to move through the beach safely, and has turned the section of it behind her small tea shop into a stunning botanical garden. Constance is a trans woman whose hair now sprouts colourful flowers (she’s always careful to prune them before they become toxic), and she runs the shop with her husband David. The pair of them have a soft-spot for Twist-riders, and their tea shop is full of gossip.

Mayor Dillon Creek - Blossom Grove

Blossom Grove is a tiny bubble on the edge of the network, with a population barely in triple-figures. None of that is going to stop Dillon Creek getting every ounce of respect he believes he’s owed. A pompous, officious man, Dillon takes an instant dislike to anyone who ignores his title, and insists on personally greeting arriving trains. The beach turns everything into a foul-tasting but technically edible black grain, and Mayor Dillon is sure it’s a booming export waiting to happen.

Mags Wiremu - Coalshore Engineer

Mags does not do politics. She's not interested in the comings and goings of the Commonwealth, she just wants to work on trains, and nowhere has the resources to do it like Coalshore. She's a competent engineer but an amazing inventor, and it's rare that she'll repair a train without throwing in "a little bit extra". Currently she's working on the idea of moss as a protective coating for locomotives (it's living tissue, after all), but she's having trouble with the heat the engines reach. Mags purposely ignores the oppressions of the Commonwealth but if directly confronted about it, could be talked round to abandoning them.

Abdan Baqri - Blueport Station Master

Abdan is a member in good standing of the HOU and is in charge of the station for the coastal bubble of Blueport, usually water exports. He is a towering presence who is happy to loom over anyone he perceives as making trouble in his station. While he accepts that the trains keep the world alive at the moment, he does not like them, reasoning that, by putting steam and water out into the Twist, it's lost forever, and will talk at length at the dangers of losing water from a closed system. Everyone assumes there's plenty of ocean but, as far as Abdan is concerned there's no actual evidence of that, and desalination is a far more costly process than people realise.

Mini-Campaign***Working on the Railroad***

These adventures cover the hunt for the lost city at the heart of the Twist. *[If playing adventure one, it should be the first adventure of the campaign, as it begins them with a captain who quickly dies.]* Adventures two to four deal with the hunt itself, which we recommend breaking into three parts, though this can be extended with adventure seeds or condensed into fewer sessions as best fits the group and the timeframe. As long as the crew somehow finds their way to the lost bubble and have made enemies of at least one rival crew, adventure five should work just fine.

Adventure One***The Green Man***

The crew have been hired to transport freight cars of food from the bubble of Orchard to Coalshore. They begin under the command of Captain Lila Myles, a capable but impulsive woman who always has as much soot on her hands as her crew do on theirs.

Orchard itself is a fairly well-off bubble that's now under Commonwealth "protection", and is named for its beach of trees that can produce multiple types of fruit on the same branch. Inside the bubble, they've further protected themselves from the Twist by carving creeping vines and branches into an irregular pattern covering most of their buildings.

The pick-up from Orchard goes fine, but on the return journey anyone watching the smokestack trail will quickly notice trouble approaching. The tips of the spikes over the engine start to flicker and writhe and the smoke trail begins to crystallise and fall in small, clear shards of ice. Something around the train starts emitting a low, imposing wail.

The bad patch hits before the crew have much chance to prepare. The wail gets louder and it becomes clear that the noise is coming from the walls of the train itself. The longer the bad patch lasts, the louder the noise becomes,

and the walls eventually begin to pulsate softly. The wailing and the moving walls will make it very difficult for the crew to focus on whatever actions they're taking and may even cause them harm.

Captain Myles orders the crew to increase speed to get through the bad patch quickly, doing all she can to keep the train moving and the crew as safe as possible. The air in both the living quarters and the engine room becomes exceptionally cold, making it a challenge to keep the furnace burning high enough. The crew may notice the captain's fingers, hair and skin begin to show signs of frosting, with patches turning to ice. As the crew comes to the end of the bad patch, observant characters may spot a small bubble on the track ahead. The Captain will order them to stop once they reach it so the crew can regroup.

The bubble they find is newly formed and not entirely stable, but for now it offers safe haven and a place to recuperate. The grass on the ground may be pink, and the trees have grown their roots above the ground rather than their branches, but the environment isn't actively hostile. There's space for the crew to sit outdoors while the train thaws and the effects of the Twist on the crew slowly begin to fade.

Captain Myles is not so lucky. Some vital part of her has turned completely and irreversibly to ice and, whatever they do, the crew cannot get her to a survivable temperature. She dies within a few hours of making it to the bubble.

At some point during their recuperation, the crew realises they're not alone. A heavily Twist-touched man watches them from nearby tree. He has forest vines where his hair once was, his skin is apple-green and his eyes are the shifting hue of a reed-filled river. He introduces himself as Maurice Evergreen, and doesn't seem to see the joke. His voice, though perfectly audible, sounds as though he's speaking underwater. He's very excited to see other people and, assuming they're not explicitly hostile, quickly gets to talking.

He says he was the navigator of a wrecked exploration train, and has been wandering the twist as its sole survivor for somewhere between one and ten years. Maurice credits his survival to an undiscovered bubble he found filled with infrastructure and old-world tech. The place was entirely abandoned, save for the thousands of skeletons that litter the buildings and streets, and eventually Maurice decided he'd rather risk the Twist than stay any longer in the city of the dead. He's been staggering from bubble to bubble for some time, desperately trying to find somewhere on the network, and is incredibly happy to meet the crew. Maurice can be hard to understand and is clearly not used to human company, but he's earnest and friendly and begs the crew to take him with them to Coalshore.

Unfortunately, their troubles aren't over yet, and Maurice isn't their only company. Shortly after meeting him they're attacked by a screamer: a shark that both breathes and swims through air. Its experience of time is erratic: sometimes it moves like mud and sometimes it strikes before they can blink. When cut it bleeds a blinding light. If Maurice is badly injured by the shark, or if the crew at any point attacks him, he runs screaming into the Twist. If they refuse to give him a ride, he tries to sneak onto a freight car in the chaos.

Once the shark is dealt with, the rest of the journey to Coalshore passes smoothly. If Maurice is with them, he's clearly delighted to be returned to human society, disappearing soon after they arrive. It soon becomes clear, however, almost all of the food in their cargo has been ruined by ice. This wouldn't be a problem if the crew's insurance was up to date, but a quick trip to the company's offices reveals their policy was due for renewal a month ago and it look like Captain Myles hadn't got round to it. Not only are the crew and their train in real need of rest and repair, they're now out of pocket for a full delivery of food, leaving them in a pretty desperate situation.

Intermission

On the Right Track

The rest of the campaign covers the hunt for the lost city. If the crew are not inclined to chase it up on their own, they may be hired by Moira Walsh [see *NPCs*], who smells profit. They'll find getting other decent work tricky, as their recent misfortunes have dealt a blow to their reputation. Any jobs they get are low-paid and shady, barely covering their expenses. They also begin to hear other crews gossiping about a potentially stable bubble full of valuable old tech - it seems Maurice has been running his mouth. If they do get more lucrative jobs, it's because (as clients will complain) many of the more reliable crews are heading off on "some nonsense treasure hunt."

If the crew are on good terms with Maurice, he'll soon make contact. He's no less Twist-touched than before, but does seem much fresher. Several crews have asked for his help in searching for the lost bubble and, out of gratitude, he wants to offer his services to the players first. He doesn't ask for any reward beyond being accepted as part of the crew, and a share in any loot that they find.

In his former life, Maurice was a navigator on the rails and, while finding your way through the Twist is far from an exact science, he recalls three landmarks he passed in the days after leaving the bubble: a meadow that moved in waves like the sea, where shadows stretched from the ground to the sky; a large, Hanging Moon that could only be seen from one side and emitted a magnetic shade of purple; and the Stone Tree itself, a skeletal oak the size and hue of a mountain. If they can locate all three and take a few measurements from each, a decent navigator could calculate which bubbles would need to be connected for the route to pass through the lost city. Maurice has not been in any way secretive about this information, and if he's working with another train, the crew can still find out about the landmarks through gossip and rumour.

If Maurice is with them, he suggests stocking up on some pre-forged pairs of rail lines so they can lay new direct routes as they go. New rail lines are generally seen a good thing, and they should easily be able to obtain a license to do so from any town large enough to have a rail office.

However the crew prepare for the trip, the *NPCs* they interact with will mention that they've had several other crews making the same enquiries or after the same equipment. There will be three rival crews that are also searching for the lost bubble. Depending on how your campaign runs, any one of them may become the main antagonists for your player characters.

The Bold Spirit: Captained by Jenna Hart, *The Bold Spirit* is a light but deceptively dangerous train, with long alloy spikes that are strong enough to use as weapons in a pinch. Captain Hart and her crew are motivated by one thing: profit. They're daring, but not foolhardy, and are always willing to take calculated risks. Captain Hart herself is an energetic and charismatic leader and she's rarely seen without her imposing engineer and second-in-command, Sang.

Liberty: Captain Zheng Min and his crew present themselves as explorers and, while that's not strictly untrue, their primary income source is piracy. Captain Zheng is careful to allow his crew plenty of time to recover between trips so they don't have the Twist-touched look that many associate with pirates. *Liberty* is an exceptionally fast train with heavy guns and sprayers. Captain Zheng and his crew will usually try to crater an enemy train but they're also skilled freighthoppers when looking for loot. Captain Zheng is fiercely loyal to his crew and particularly protective of Uri, a teenage orphan from the coastal bubble of Blueport, and the youngest of his crew.

Progress: All of this crew, led by Captain Johann Watts, are citizens of the Commonwealth

and are firm believers in its expansion. The *Progress* itself is huge - almost double the size of the player's train - and heavily armoured. It isn't as fast as the other engines but there's little it can't push through. Watts is supported directly by the Commonwealth, and if Maurice is not with the players, he signs up with the *Progress*.

Adventure Two

The Hanging Moon

Asking around Coalshore or Grand Central about the landmarks yields limited results. Everyone knows the Stone Tree, but it's only ever glanced in the far distance and no-one wants to actually *find* it. The best lead the crew can find is that a few Twist-riders have seen the Meadow Sea from afar on the route between Orchard and Sandblow, a small bubble named for its subtly shifting desert beach.

The journey to Orchard can be as smooth or difficult as you like, and the bubble remains unchanged from adventure one. The time spent changing tracks towards Sandblow is a perfect point to introduce *The Bold Spirit* as rivals. The crew may or may not glimpse the Meadow Sea in the distance after leaving Orchard.

The beach that gives Sandblow its name looks almost like a normal sandy beach, except that it shifts to form constantly changing figures in the wind. If the winds are bad, some of the sand may interfere with the train, clogging mechanisms and slowing them down until it can be cleaned. The town itself is small and irregular. Disparate cottages jostle for space beyond the end of the rail lines. There's limited space in the station so crews will have to take their trains to the sheds beyond. Whether or not the crew glimpsed the Meadow Sea on the way, they're unable to see anything from the station itself. They're greeted by the station master, Armond, a gruff but fair man with an impressive moustache. He's very protective of the town and will keep a close eye on anyone who gives him reason to be suspicious.

Asking around the town, most people are aware of the Meadow Sea, though they have no idea how to actually reach it. None of them know anything about a sphere, but if anyone mentions a purple glow or magnetism, any of the residents of Sandblow can help. Standing at the boundary between the town and the beach, in precisely the opposite corner of town from the station, the crew can see a large hanging stone circle emitting a faint purple glow. From this angle it's not obvious it's a sphere, but if Maurice is with them he can confirm that's it.

Seeing it is one thing, reaching it is quite another. The changing nature of the Twist means that passing near a landmark is never guaranteed and apparent proximity means very little. Experienced Twist-riders might be familiar with the idea of a wayfinder - a sort of sympathetic homing device that helps bend the course of the tracks towards a specific place. In the case of the Hanging Moon, any standard compass will point towards it, changing the course of any track leaving Sandblow to pass directly below it. If the train stops there, Maurice (or any other navigator) can take the measurements they need. As they are looking directly underneath it, it's clearly three-dimensional and has a rough stone surface. From any other direction, it is a faint purple glow that grows and wavers in exact rhythm with a magnetic field.

The difficulty is in finding a compass, something that the Twist has rendered entirely useless over the last thirty years. Armond has one, but whether he's willing to hand it over depends on how good an impression the crew have made. This is a good opportunity to run any of the **Adventure Seeds** for Sandblow.

During their enquiries, the player characters will come across the crew of *Progress*. Hearing they've come in from Orchard, the *Progress* crew will assume that the player characters are also from the Commonwealth and discuss things with them openly. Although they say they're here to open new trade routes, the

Progress is actually in Sandblow to put pressure on the town to join the Commonwealth, something the residents of Sandblow have so far resisted, not allowing them to lay the other half of a route to Coalshore. Openly resisting the *Progress* crew is a good way to get the residents to trust the crew, however, it will lead to the *Progress* following them when they leave and confronting them below the sphere, possibly violently.

If they've won him over, Armond may also suggest searching for the Meadow Sea in Drywater, which used to be due south of Sandblow, "when there was such a thing as south." Alternatively, the crew might see the *Liberty* steam through Sandblow, clearly heading towards Drywater with a clear purpose.

If the crew don't learn about Drywater immediately, they might begin checking other the other rail lines out from Sandblow (Redbeach, Windmoor and Burrow) or encounter other **Adventure Seeds**. Captain Hart and the *Progress* will be travelling back to Coalshore whether or not they were able to lay a direct route and will be attempting to figure things out from there. Whenever you're ready to move the campaign on, the next new route they travel brings them across the Meadow Sea and on to Drywater.

Adventure Three

The Meadow Sea

Drywater was once a large port city that sprawled from the ocean to the hills miles inland. When the Twist first hit, the bubble that was created around Drywater didn't match the boundaries of the city. The coastal districts and the bay are now safe inside the bubble, while the outer areas of the former city were lost. The beach around Drywater resembles a swamp with unmoving water, that can be walked and built on in safety - as long as you don't mind your bricks and mortar slowly turning into ferns and rushes. The residents of Drywater spend more time at their beach than other towns and this has

led to rumours among neighbouring towns that Drywater folk are a little more 'Twist-touched' than most.

Drywater is a member of the Hydro Operatives Union and is well-linked to other coastal towns but has few routes inland. Apart from Sandblow, the only other inland bubble it's linked to is Grand Central. Its residents are loyal to each other and to the union, but tend to be wary of inlanders, who they often suspect are trying to fleece them. As Captain Zheng, Uri and the rest of the *Liberty* crew are from coastal bubbles themselves, they have a natural advantage in Drywater - as long as nobody realises they're pirates!

The Meadow Sea is well known to local Twist-riders. It's rare not to pass near the area on the way to the coastal bubble of Archarbour. The rails near Archarbour are known to be particularly dangerous and the crew might also hear rumours that many Twist-riders travelling to or from Archarbour have been known to get a bit too close to the Stone Tree.

The wayfinder that will lead them to the Meadow Sea is a jar of saltwater, which will gradually tilt toward the tide of the Meadow Sea and take the tracks with it. It's common knowledge within the town, and Twist-riders from Drywater often head out there to relax. The difficulty is in getting the residents comfortable enough to share. Completing any of the **Adventure Seeds** for Drywater should be enough to manage it.

With the saltwater jar, they pass through the Meadow Sea on their next journey. It is a beautiful garden of rolling waves and shadows that move like shifting pillars connecting the ground to the sky. It's significantly larger than might be expected, however, and takes a while to leave once the measurements have been taken. It's a great spot for the crew to find themselves in a bad patch of the Twist, facing a screamer or attacked by pirates (such as the *Liberty*). They might fight alongside the rival crews or against them. At the edge

they can find a stable bubble where they can rest. It's too small for anyone to call it home, but passing Twist-riders have left their mark. There's a hut with some basic beds and cooking facilities, a small garden with a sign saying "tend me" and even a small bookshelf.

The crew's next stop on the trail is Archarbour, and any inquiries about the Stone Tree eventually point them in that direction. Some say on a bad day you can even see it from inside the bubble.

Adventure Four

The Stone Tree

The journey from Drywater to Archarbour is a long one and the crew should be prepared to spend days on the rails. To reach the bubble itself, the train must ride through the dangerous beach of crackling electricity. Most trains are at least partially insulated but any electrical equipment they bring with them might end up fried.

Being part of the HOU, Archarbour shares similarities to Drywater in terms of infrastructure, industry and attitude, but its aesthetics and social structure are very different. The residents have learned to live with and take advantage of their beach, and it also gives them a certain amount of safety. Their distance from the Commonwealth also means they're relatively free from its influence. The buildings in Archarbour are industrial, labyrinthine and intertwined with each other like a metal ecosystem. The station is connected to Archarbour's unusual electric tram network, which connects every part of the small city.

The residents of the bubble are perfectly comfortable talking about the Stone Tree but they don't recommend trying to go there, and some don't believe it possible. At some point (perhaps after one of the Archarbour **Adventure Seeds**), their enquiries will attract the attention of Elspeth Mayflower. Elspeth works as an engineer in the station, but has been cultivating a growing obsession

with the Stone Tree. And she thinks she has a way to reach it: you follow the roots. "Like a normal tree drinks water, the roots of the stone tree drink blood. Blood is your wayfinder." If the train stops once every hour or so, and a different person spills their blood on the ground, Elspeth believes the tracks will eventually lead past the Stone Tree. She's right.

Riding up to the tree, it looks like a vast, petrified trunk and branches, stretching to the size of an inverted mountain. As the crew get close, however, they see it's actually made of scarred bone, which creaks as it slowly shifts and grows. Almost as soon as a crew stops there, they can see the ground move as roots shift and push to the surface. As they rise, they gradually form into figures until the crew are confronted with Twist-touched future versions of themselves. The alternate crew will attempt to overpower the player characters and take the train. Depending on how your campaign has gone so far, one of the rival crews may already have spoken to Elspeth and be fighting their own alternates, or they might arrive part way through the player characters' fight.

If your crew manage to defeat their alternate versions, it's a simple enough matter to take the necessary measurements. If the crew has been to all three of the landmarks, Maurice (or another navigator) can make the calculations necessary to determine that laying a direct route between Grand Central and the tiny settlement of Blossom Grove, right on the edge of the network, should lead to a route that passes right through the lost city.

Adventure Five

The Lost City

The finale of your campaign starts when the crew travel to the lost city. Laying the track out from Blossom Grove is a simple matter, with the mayor practically falling over himself to have the bubble connected to Grand Central. Depending on how the hunt played out, however, they may find the track already laid

and the crews of *The Bold Spirit*, the *Liberty* or the *Progress* already there. As soon as any crew lays the track, the bubble can be reached from Grand Central and it's effectively open season, and all remaining crews will attempt to retain control of the city while they search for valuables.

If the players are the first to arrive, they find the city as dead as Maurice described it, and more horrifying. The beach they must travel through is full of misshapen and disproportionate bones fused into the smooth glass ground. The effect is reminiscent of the Stone Tree, which looms nearby, as though skeletal plants were emerging from a still, dark sea. Entering the bubble itself is no better. Most streets or buildings the crew see are littered with warped human remains, though the vast majority of them are so twisted it takes a while to realise they were once people. Some skeletons are charred, others have turned to stone, a few are softly singing. Not one of the deaths was peaceful.

But while the effects of the Twist were intense, the changes have been stable for 30 years and the life that survived has been flourishing. The ruins are covered in technicolour plants and small, strange animals the size of insects that flit and crawl over everything. Many of the buildings are still intact but changed in some way. The crew might find halls made entirely of swirling, coloured wax or old homes with their rooms open to the outside world and their exteriors on the inside. After spending a few moments in one place, they might emerge to sudden nightfall, or they might stay in a particularly beautiful park until sunset only to find the sun is still high when they leave.

If another crew have arrived and had time to establish themselves in the bubble, the player characters will be facing a struggle as they search the ruins. The crew of *Progress* will use any surrounding rubble - and even the twisted skeletons themselves - to block off important routes while they work inwards, and will lay traps to create a deadly maze for

the player characters to navigate. Zheng and Hart are more direct, and *Liberty* and *The Bold Spirit* prefer to take the high ground and stay hidden as they pick off intruders from range. If the crew puts up a good fight, Capt. Hart may even offer to split the loot, though not on great terms.

Near the heart of the bubble the crew finds an area that looks almost unaffected by the Twist. It's a high-end corporate lab, though whether they recognise it as such is up to you. Give them a few moments to wander the glass halls and offices at the front of the building. By the time they reach the labs themselves, at least one of the other crews has caught up.

While the city so far has been full of valuable tech, the real prize is in the main lab, sitting at the very centre of the bubble. The edges of the room are dark. All the light in the room has been pulled towards the device that launched the Twist. It appears to be a heavy polymer box, smaller than a microwave, covered in readouts, dials and one large green button. Pieces of the floor and ceiling are irregularly suspended in a broken column around it, resting on each colour of the spectrum. Standing within the column feels as though you are standing in darkness, looking out at the light wallowing in the corners of the room. Two voices echo from the darkness beside you, repeating over and over:

"-eady for a new world?"

"I'm ready for all of th-"

The device has the power to create and collapse bubbles at the push of a button, though it takes a while to charge up between uses, with the dials being able to adjust the strength of the effect and thus the size of the bubble. This is not immediately clear on viewing it, though there are notes, lab reports and other clues that can reveal something of its origins and the lab's efforts to reach other dimensions. They won't have much time to investigate however, before one or more of the

rival crews arrives for the final confrontation. Each crew present will try to take the device for themselves and, in the ensuing fight, someone in a desperate position will turn the device on.

As soon as the button is pressed, the bubble collapses, plunging the characters into the worst of the Twist. Space distorts painfully and characters must walk or run for a great distance before they can press the button again, as razor-sharp colours fly around them. When they do, the bubble is immediately re-established, though the conflict continues. If any of the other crews are able to secure the device, they immediately try to flee with it.

If the crew of *Liberty* manage to escape with it, they rapidly become the most feared pirate crew in the Twist. They stop taking any measures to appear as legitimate, instead openly threatening to collapse bubbles unless the inhabitants pay their exorbitant ransoms. They're also the only crew that immediately betray the player characters if they've formed an alliance before this point.

If *The Bold Spirit* crew have the device, they use it to create new bubbles, which they then sell on to communities or people that want to live there. Before long, it becomes clear that the creation of too many new bubbles close together is compromising the stability of some neighboring ones. The end result is that *The Bold Spirit* crew continue to create a small number of bubbles for the highest bidder. This benefits both the Commonwealth and the HOU, but massively distorts the power structure in the network, with many new bubbles being ruled by petty tyrants and oligarchs. Capt. Hart is happy to work with the player characters, as long as they go along with her decisions. If they oppose her, she'll turn on them.

If Capt. Watts and the *Progress* crew can take control of the device, they immediately take it to Coalshore, where they sell it on to the Commonwealth council. The Commonwealth

will first use the threat of collapse on the Hydro Operatives Union to coerce them into joining the Commonwealth and will then begin using the same tactic on any any other bubbles they don't already control. If the player characters have allied with Captain Watts during the campaign, he assumes they'll be happy to work under him to advance the Commonwealth, and will ditch them the moment they push back.

If the player character themselves manage to take the device, they can choose what they want to do with it. It's fairly sturdy but can be destroyed with reasonable force and functions like any other electrical item (it requires some form of power to work - when the players find it, it has a battery and a solar power generator, but its electricity is also very volatile in the Twist). If they take any of the same courses of action described above, the consequences are the same as if a rival crew took them. If they choose to keep the device for their own use, they quickly become some of the most powerful - and the most hunted - people in the Twist.

Adventure Seeds

Dead or Alive

An extremely lucrative bounty is put on the head of notorious train pirate Lucius Blane, and a daring but impetuous bounty hunter wants to hire the crew to help her hunt Blane down. Whether or not this is a trap is entirely up to you.

Destination Unknown

A network audit at Grand Central has unearthed what appears to be an active track that they have absolutely no record of. The station-masters have done some experiments, and it definitely seems to connect to another track somewhere, but they have no idea where. Now, they're looking for a brave crew to ride the line and see where it leads.

Smoke 'Em

While moving through a bad patch of Twist on a standard delivery, the coal in the train's fuel hopper begins to violently animate, forming into a murderous multi-limbed screamer. The crew must fight for their lives and, depending on how they defeat it, may find themselves out of fuel and stranded in the Twist.

Please Mind the Doors

The small bubble of Razorbrook has recently begun to destabilise, and trains are being called in from all over to evacuate the settlement before it collapses. The crew are one of the last trains to arrive, and the evacuation is complicated by the sheer number of townsfolk remaining and the rapid encoachment of the razor-sharp metal beach for which the town is named.

An Inspector Calls

The authorities at Grand Central have assigned a rail inspector to check up on the crew. The inspector is an unassuming individual in a black suit who calls himself Baxter, and the next adventure is undertaken to a backdrop of raised eyebrows, stopwatches and small notes jotted in an immaculate journal.

The Wanderer

While a full day away from any nearby bubble, the crew spy a person walking through the Twist nearby, to all appearances completely unaffected! The stranger is named John Melmoth and, if able, requests a lift to the next town. As far as anyone can determine he is utterly immune to the Twist, and if the Commonwealth discover this they will attempt to seize him for experimentation.

Roses are Rivers, Violets are Blood

Constance Washington wants to experiment with adding more varieties of Twist-touched flowers to her garden and is willing to pay very handsomely for any strange interesting vegetation the crew might find.

State of the Union

A dozen hydro workers book passage from Coalshore to the nearby coastal bubble of Saltwick. On the journey, however, it becomes apparent they are actually Commonwealth agents planning to agitate against the HOU as a vanguard for an attempt to make Saltwick a colony of the Commonwealth. If the crew want to get involved, things get real political.

From Hell's Heart I Stab at Thee

For years there have been rumours and sightings of the Ashmodai - a serpent the size of a train who bristles with searching quills and swims through the twist as though it were water, dragging silence in its wake. After a close encounter it marks the crew, and begins to attack them every few sessions, causing heavy damage and losses (maybe even taking a leg...) until after one fight it leaves behind a quill the size and shape of a rail... Whether the crew wish to hunt it to the end is up to them, but it's incredibly dangerous, as the silence the surrounds the Ashmodai means characters may not verbally communicate during any such battle.

Sandblow Adventure Seeds

Fueling Demand

Local Twist-riders need coal but Coalshore merchants are putting the price up ludicrously high and the *Progress* crew are blocking their attempts to find it elsewhere. Anyone able to supply the town would be very popular.

Recommended Dose

The local hospital is running out of a certain medicine. They usually get it from the Commonwealth but one of the medics, Rose, believes that a flower growing in a relatively stable patch of the Twist nearby might allow her to make her own.

Poetic Justice

Armond and his best friend Len have had a fight after Armond called Len's poetry "shallow". Armond wants to make amends.

Drywater Adventure Seeds

Spoiled Ballot

The head of the council, Elena Christova, is running for re-election and is worried her campaign is being sabotaged by outside influence. If the player characters investigate, they find her rival, Franklin Henderson, has hired the crew of *Liberty* to interfere, in exchange for information to help them on their hunt.

Random Encounter

Many of the local Twist-riders have been being attacked by a particularly vicious screamer: a huge, a crawling cactus made of bats with claws that can tear through metal.

Boiling Over

One of Drywater's longest-running eateries, the Florid Inn, has run into trouble after their star chef, Blake, quit in a rage. The owner, Jason, is desperate to get Blake back - or find another way to stay afloat!

Archarbour Adventure Seeds

Shocking Developments

Like all HOU bubbles, any pre-Twist tech has to be offered to the Union for first refusal. This has led to a large black market for pre-Twist tech in Archarbour, which *The Bold Spirit* crew try to exploit for money and information to help their hunt, selling unlicensed tech that could short out the whole grid.

The Twist Macabre

The crew are hired to try and find *The Errant Wind*, a water-train that appears to have gone missing between Blueport and Grand Central, and retrieve some vital documentation the the Captain possessed. *The Errant Wind* was cratered by pirates and, though easy to find, the corpses of the crew have been changed into aggressive screamers.

Ready to Rumble

There's a big night of HOU wrestling league matches between the Archarbour Chargers and the Drywater Gators. As the crew have just come in from Drywater, the Charger coach assumes they're attached to the Gators and either accuses them of sabotaging the Archarbour team or tries to hit them up for inside information.