I liked this screenshot from *Journey* because their visuals are simple but effective. Sand is almost always present in the game but changes dramatically based on the lighting and setting. In this case, the player character is an underground ruin and the sand turns blue as opposed to it's usual pink or gold.

The effects here look like they're coming from three major sources: the reflectivity of the sand, the atmospheric fog, and the rays of light. The light rays could be visible because of the atmospheric fog (without something to reflect off of, we wouldn't be able to see the distinct beams) or potentially a particle system for dust.

The sand appears to be one piece of geometry with a texture and not something like a particle system. However, because of the varying reflectivity of the texture, there is likely another system at work. If the sand were a texture alone, the granular texture would be equally visible across the geometry but instead it is well lit at the peak of the hill with higher areas of reflectivity coming towards the viewer and towards the left and right. Therefore, the shader might randomize the degree of reflectivity or the light normals of the fragment in different degrees depending on the angle of the viewer and normals of the geometry.

Because this is just a screenshot, it is hard to determine what the sand does when the camera moves but would likely maintain a "channel" of reflectivity going from the camera towards the light source. The peaks of the sand would also be more reflective since the peaks are convex (and reflect light towards the camera) and the valleys are concave (with light bouncing back into the valleys).