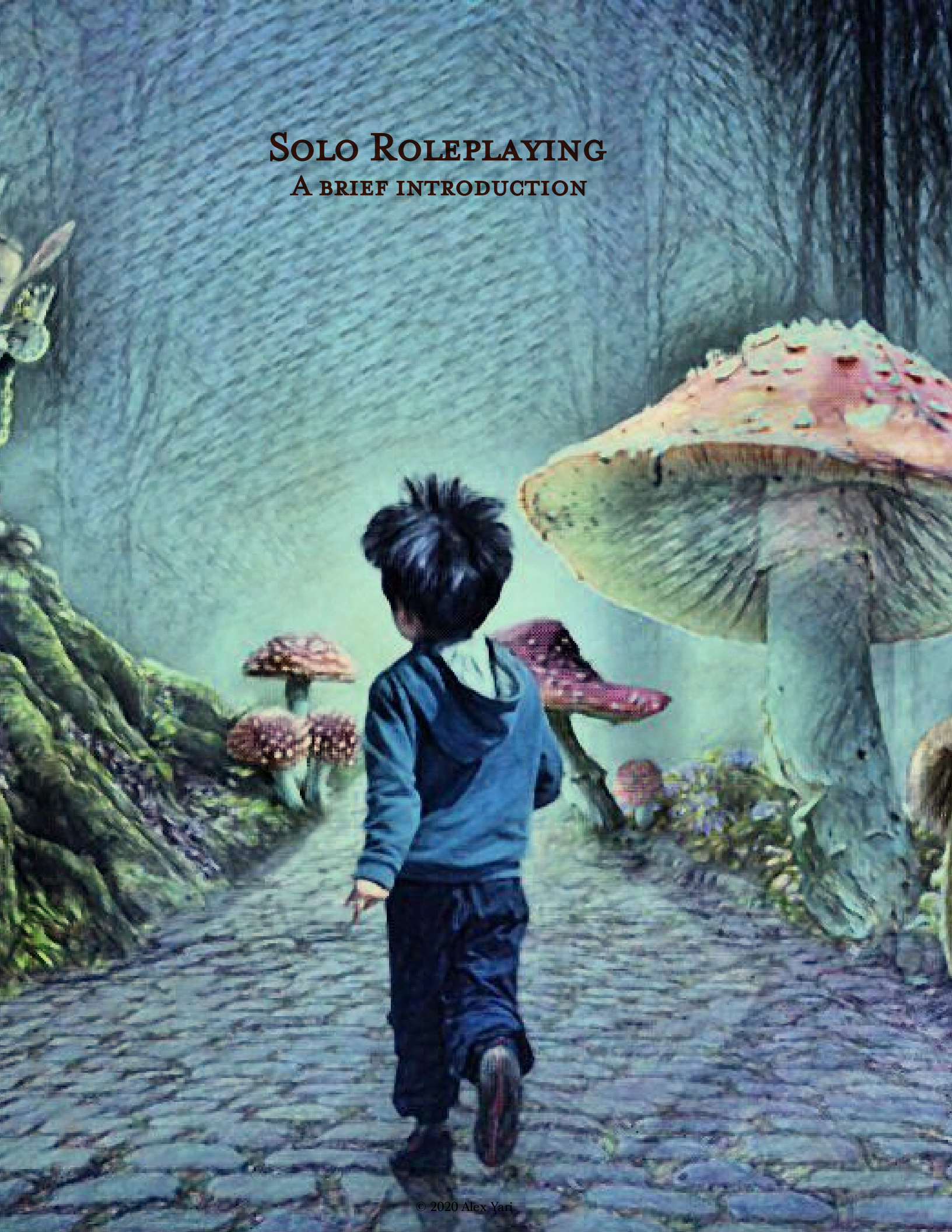


# SOLO ROLEPLAYING

## A BRIEF INTRODUCTION



## REASONS FOR PLAYING BY YOURSELF

The most common reason tends to be not being able to find a suitable group to play with. While it's true there are numerous online platforms and channels that make it easier to find people, it's not a panacea. You can't always find the kind of game and the kind of group you want, so you often end up compromising. Online games are also notorious for falling apart due to flaky attendance.

Solo roleplaying doesn't have any of those drawbacks. When you have total control of your game, many of the dissatisfactions that exist when other people are involved disappear. No longer do you have to compromise on the choice of game systems, settings, or stories you want to experience. No character concepts will be rejected by someone else. No conflicting schedules or personality clashes. You are the most important person, and the only one whose opinion matters. You'll also get to enjoy the aspects of roleplaying games that are generally the exclusive domain of game masters. Nothing is off limits to you.

Another characteristic of solo roleplaying many people enjoy is that it is a more personal, introspective, and even meditative experience. You'll get to spend as much time as you want exploring your character as a whole: their thoughts, their backstory, and their personality traits. The same is true of the setting and system you choose for your endeavors, since you can choose to focus on whatever aspects you find most interesting about them

## WHAT TO EXPECT FROM SOLO ROLEPLAYING

The most impactful difference between roleplaying in a group and roleplaying by yourself is the lack of a person to play the world for you as you focus on playing your character. What I mean by "playing the world" is the act of portraying non player characters, describing the surroundings and events that happen around player characters. As the only person, you will have to do both things, and it can be difficult to maintain a sense of interactivity, suspense and surprise.

Other unavoidable duties such as paperwork and organization that the game master usually handles will also be your responsibility as a solo roleplayer. Tracking NPCs, storylines, and other aspects of the game could feel overwhelming depending on the complexity of the roleplaying game in question.

On the bright side, many of the mechanisms that help game masters are also there to help the solo roleplayer. In particular, ideation tools like mission generators, non player characters generators, random encounter tables, and others assist with the task of making the fictional world feel more alive in your imagination. There are also some specialized tools coined with the name "Oracles" that are meant to help with the gap left by the lack of other people.

### NOTHING EXISTS UNTIL YOU THINK OF IT

*One of the fundamental properties of playing alone is that your conscious focus almost single handedly influences whether something remains in the imaginary background or becomes salient. If you don't think about it, it doesn't really exist in the imaginary world until your conscious mind brings it forth.*

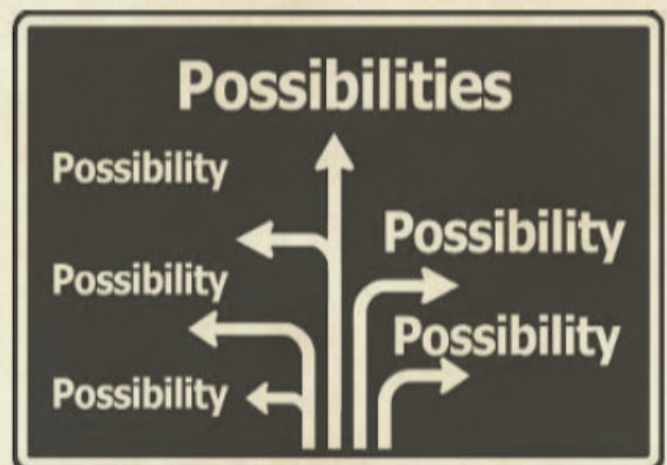
*Ideation tools can help here by introducing ideas that you may not otherwise think of.*

## ORACLES

Since everything is being created by you as you play, it can be hard to sustain a feeling of surprise or tension. Random generators can help with this, but it isn't likely that you'll find a generator for every possible situation (how do you generate a conversation about the weather, for example?). Somehow, you need to leverage your own imagination and maintain a sense of suspense simultaneously.

As your creativity makes the imaginary world come alive, you will end up with many competing ideas as to what happens when you "play the world". Often these ideas are all plausible, and consciously making a choice kills any sense of suspense or surprise you might have. You feel just like an author deciding on the next plot point.

An oracle allows you to disavow decision making by delegating this power to it. Much like when a person might toss a coin when deciding whether to eat Chinese or Italian, oracles randomly decide from the choices you present. Since you don't know what option it will pick for you, this helps facilitate that sense of surprise and suspense any player wants.



While this figurative coin toss may seem like a simplistic solution, you may also find yourself surprised at the unexpected destinations an oracle can take you in. Every detour it throws at you will lead you to situations you might not otherwise have considered if you were deciding on your own. Add in some ideation tools like random generators, and you've got a powerful combination in your hands.

### YOU ARE IN A TAVERN

*You're wondering what happens next. You think to yourself, "These places always have rumours of possible adventures. Are there any rumours?" Then you flip a coin. Heads is **Yes**; Tails is **No**, and you get Tails. Well, you figure maybe someone offers to sell you a map, so you ask:*

"Does a shady man offer to sell me a map?"

*Flip the coin; you get Heads. So, **Yes**, someone is trying to sell you a map.*



*Your mind then fills in the details of what this person looks like, or maybe you use the help of a non player character generator to give you an idea of their appearance. You may even use the oracle once again to decide all these details. Once you have them, perhaps a conversation happens in your head, or you may decide to write it down.*

*Eventually, with this hook, you will have more questions. Maybe you'll be wondering about the contents of the map, or something else. Either way, you'll keep using the coin to answer **Yes** or **No**. Soon you'll find yourself off on a treasure hunt. This is solo roleplaying boiled down to its bare essentials.*

## TWO ORACLE STRAINS

There are two different Oracles strains and they follow two basic templates: prompt based and odds based. Odds based first require that you decide the chances of an affirmative answer before you ask the question. Prompt based oracles don't give you that choice, but have a gradient of answers that include the possibility of partial results.

### YES/NO/BUT/AND BASED

For this type of oracle you have a spread of answers like:

d6	Result	Extent
1	No, and	Ultimate No
2	No	
3	No, but	Partial No
4	Yes, but	Partial Yes
5	Yes	
6	Yes, and	Ultimate yes

For each question you roll a 1d6 and check what the number means. The "but" and the "and" after the 1, 3, 4, and 6 results is a prompt inviting you to add a statement after the main answer. There are some variations on these prompts, but they all mean to evoke some brainstorming on your part. The basic idea of normal, partial, and ultimate Yes or No also tends to be the same across this type of oracle.

### ODDS BASED

As mentioned, this type of oracle requires you to estimate and specify the chances of an affirmative answer for any given question. These odds determine the target number to beat for a **Yes** answer. This oracle doesn't have any built in prompts, or the idea of a partial Yes or No.

Take, for example, this simple roll under 1d10 Oracle on the next page. (Roll-under means that you have to roll under the chosen target number).

d10 (roll under)	Probability	Extent
1	10%	Ultimate Yes
2	20%	
3	30%	
4	40%	
5	50%	
6	60%	
7	70%	
8	80%	
9	90%	
10	100%	Ultimate No

You pick your odds based on the percentage, so picking a 20% probability for your odds means you have to roll under 2 to get a Yes answer. Picking a 90% probability for your odds would mean having to roll under 9

## CHASING A SUSPECT (ODDS ORACLE EXAMPLE)

Suppose your character is an undercover cop and he is chasing a suspect into the subway station. You wonder if the station is busy or not, so you ask:

“Is the subway station busy?”

You think about the context of the adventure at that point and come away with the facts that you are in a big city, in a busy part of town and it is morning rush hour on a normal Monday. You estimate that the chances of the subway station being busy are extremely high so you decide there is a **90%** probability of a **Yes** answer.



If you don't happen to roll a **10** (an ultimate no), your answer will be some sort of **Yes** (normal or ultimate), and you will have established that the subway station is busy. If you happened to roll an ultimate **No**, you would have to figure out how something so unexpected is the case (idea: maybe it's closed for repairs?).

In either case, you can ask the Oracle as many follow up questions as you need until you've got as clear a picture of the situation as possible.

## BEST PRACTICES

These are suggestions to make your games more enjoyable. These are not laws written in stone, however. You are free to ignore those that don't work for you.

### ESTABLISH A BASELINE

As soon as you start a situation, establish an understanding of its baseline. What can you expect in this kind of situation normally? What would fall outside of its normal parameters? This will be your guideline for generating questions and answers that flesh its more mundane details, and the feel of the content.

Knowing the baseline also allows you to ask when something stands out in dissonant manner. After you've got enough baseline details, if you wish, you can open the door to contrasting elements. These are usually things that are somehow jarring in the context of the situation, and demand your attention. For example, a clean and bright bedroom in an old, dark and dilapidated house. That might get you wondering about the difference.

### ASK REASONABLE QUESTIONS

Once you have an idea for a question, make a sanity check to make sure it is not at odds with what you wanted to explore in the first place. Doing so has the potential to deflate your fun if the answers deviate you too far away from what drew you initially to a setting or premise. Questions should be congruent with the parameters you chose for your game, and if you choose to stray outside of them, do so consciously.

Questions and potential answers should also generally be consonant with the facts you've established through play, unless you are open to generating twists. Twists can be fun, but you may find that you only like them in small doses or in limited situations. Always make sure that if you allow twists you evaluate whether a potential reversal of a fact would be interesting to you.

### AN UNREASONABLE QUESTION?

“Do I see an alien with two antennae walking down the street?” *will likely not be a reasonable fact in a real world setting, but it may not be out of place in a sci-fi adventure with many alien races assumed to exist in the setting.*

Likewise, don't bother with questions when the answers are intrinsic to the parameters you've chosen beforehand, particularly setting and adventure premise. For example, if the premise is a bog standard high fantasy adventure with dragons, it probably doesn't make sense to ask if dragons exist, unless their existence is a deliberate open question of the adventure premise or setting (i.e. Dragons are thought to be folklore or extinct).

## GAMING THE ORACLE

*Many people worry that they can “cheat” by setting “unfair” odds or asking “biased” questions to make things go their way. The reality is that no tool can force you to make sure your questions are “fair”. The solution will always be:*

### **“Be honest with yourself.”**

*Keeping your questions within the limits of what is plausible for your setting, premise and character will help you stay honest.*

*Sometimes it may be difficult to tell if a question is plausible or reasonable for a setting, adventure premise and character. This can happen if there are gaps in knowledge regarding these things, so research will help here.*

*One trick I've found which helps me keep things “reasonable” is to use myself and the real world around me as a starting point of measurement. For example, I might ask myself first what the real me could reasonably do in the situation, and gauge how much better or worse my character might perform.*

*I will likewise use the real world as a starting point by contrasting it with my understanding of how the imaginary setting that I'm playing in works. Where the imaginary world and the real world work the same way, I will use the real world as a measure of what is plausible. Where they diverge, I will use my understanding of the setting or research to the best of my ability.*

## TO ASK OR NOT TO ASK, THAT IS THE QUESTION

Common wisdom in solo circles often says that players should refrain from asking too many questions of the oracle. After a few answers, it is said, the rest of the picture will reveal itself to you through reasoning or inspiration. Some guidelines will suggest a literal limit on the number of questions you ask (e.g. “you shouldn't ask more than three questions”). Other advice will be less prescriptive, but the common expectation is that you won't always be consulting the oracle.

On the other hand, there are no real guidelines for how long you should “play the world” without consulting the oracle. Usually, the advice boils down to going back to the oracle when your inspiration runs dry or you're otherwise not certain of what happens next.

## IS IT CREATIVE WRITING?

Some will compare this naked act of generating fiction to creative writing. The label might fit the written approach to authoring, but it misses the fact that some people don't write at all, opting to record their fiction as an audio or video log. Players may even opt not to have any record of their fiction at all, keeping it all inside their heads.

## JOURNALING GAMES

*Many popular solitaire games are built on creative writing as their core activity, which is usually described as “journaling”.*



Often, these games consist of writing prompts that are thematically connected and ask you to write from a first person perspective-- usually that of a fictional character writing a diary or journal. A good example of this type of game is [The Beast](#).

Regardless of what one calls “playing the world” without tools, people's experience with it varies from positive to negative. Some people find this process liberating and stimulating, since they may feel like consulting the oracle very often slows the game down for them.

Others, however, find that being in this mode of naked creation for long periods is too predictable for them. The lack of randomness in it diminishes any sense of interactivity, surprise and suspense for this type of player; their game suddenly comes to a grinding halt as a result of boredom.

## IS THERE A HAPPY MEDIUM?

Too little randomness can create problems, but sometimes there can be too much of a good thing. Perhaps there exists a balance between too much randomness and too little when “playing the world”, but you'll need to experiment in order to find it. Discovering the right mix of randomness and pure, unrestrained creation will noticeably increase your fun.

# IDEATION TOOLS

Image generators, random tables, cards, and other mechanisms can be very effective at helping you generate ideas on the fly. As mentioned earlier, these can be a powerful addition to any oracle, and most of them include some form of idea generation as a complement.

The most common format is two lists of single words that can be combined randomly into pairs. These are then interpreted by the players into something coherent by leveraging the brain's pattern recognition abilities. Much like a Rorschach blot, they are meant to evoke an idea in the player's imagination.



## RANDOM WORD LISTS

*The earliest oracle to feature word lists as an ideation tool is the venerable [Mythic Game Master Emulator](#). You are meant to take these two words, consider the fictional situation, and transform them into something coherent. It works surprisingly well.*

*For example, you might be about to start your first scene, and you are wondering what location your character will find herself in. You randomly roll two words that end up being:*

- garden / steel

*Depending on the situation in which you asked, you would interpret these two words differently. If you were playing in a science fiction setting, you might imagine your starting location as a dystopian industrial city of the future (a figurative steel garden). If you were in a fantasy setting, you would have to give your interpretation more latitude so perhaps it would be an eccentric mage's literal steel garden with steel of flora and such.*

## RANDOM WORD LISTS (CONT)

*The best implementations of these word lists, in my opinion, tailor the words to evoke a specific type of theme or feeling. [Ironsworn](#) and [Scarlet Heroes](#) are example of games whose ideation tools capture the particular flavor of their default settings.*

*This approach has served many solo role players well. However, some people find that too often they struggle to find meaning in the random combination of words they get.*

Combining ideation tools with an oracle can be a very fruitful mix indeed. Many Oracles include such mechanisms as part of their overall system for this very reason. Ideation tools will help evoke fresh content in your mind and create the right conditions for you to follow up with the oracle.

## EVERY JOURNEY BEGINS WITH THE FIRST STEP

This covers the fundamentals of how solo roleplaying works in practice. I hope that this has helped you attain a basic understanding of how most oracles and ideation tools work at their core. Armed with this knowledge, you should be able to start playing by yourself in no time.

I've included links to resources dedicated to the topic of solo roleplaying. Feel free to drop by the chatroom or forum any time and ask questions!

## RESOURCES

- [/R/SOLO\\_ROLEPLAYING on Reddit](#) - Discussion forum dedicated to everything about solitaire roleplaying.
- [SOLO\\_ROLEPLAYING on Discord](#) - chat room where you can talk about solo roleplaying and hang out.
- [SOLO\\_ROLEPLAYING WIKI](#) - Tons of other resources are available such as links to solo games, other basic guides, and more.