

# Hardship River

by Ricardo Tavares

POWERED BY THE  
APOCALYPSE



Hardship River was designed by Ricardo Tavares. Photos are from beautiful tiles in the Pinhão train station in Portugal. The fonts used are Unlucky and Constantia.

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Thank you to all the #pbta fans on Twitter, in the rpgportugal.com Discord server and in the itch.io community.



This is a one-page, one-move Powered by the Apocalypse Role-Playing Game without an MC. You can play it as a one-shot or to kick-start a campaign for another RPG. In it, you and your traveling companions sail in the Little Tail boat down a very dangerous river, hoping to reach the great Unconquered City by the seashore. As you overcome each stretch of wild rapids, you discover why you're traveling, what's your cargo or how much do you really care for your companions. But trust between strangers isn't found without navigating around lies and misunderstandings. And not all of your companions may be willing or able to face whatever hardship to reach the end of the river.

Hardship River is inspired by pieces from my hometown History and you may learn more about them if you consult what the web has to offer about the Douro River, Rabelo Boats or the city of Oporto. You may imagine it within any setting, just before a time where dams and dynamite made rivers much safer. The Little Tail is a wooden cargo boat with a flat-bottom, a square sail and a long steering paddle at the stern.

To play, you will need to print a sheet for each player, have some writing materials and a deck of cards per every couple of players. So, a 3 or 4-player game requires two decks, 5 or 6 players will need three of them. Like most RPGs, the recommended number of players is around 3 to 5. You will also need to use the timer function in the clock app of your smartphone or have a one-minute hourglass available.

To setup the game, separate all the cards by suit into four face down piles. Each companion draws one card from each pile for a starting hand. They also have this sheet that can be folded in to choose their moments in secret.

The game flows between players talking as traveling companions stuck in a small boat and the only move they have, Hardship River. They talk as real people, no mentioning of what cards they have or any other game elements. They can however coordinate on who does what to keep the Little Tail boat sailing ahead. And, as they do, the move activates. Players step up from their characters a bit to make some choices, imagine where the story might be going and then dive back into the increasing drama of their characters.

After the first move is played, when new cards are drawn in preparation for another move, a one-minute timer needs to be set for every other sequence of talking about who does what and choosing cards/moments. If time runs out and a companion has not chosen a card, this person is unable to join in the effort, the situation is just too chaotic for them. As the river currents shift between fast and slow, the timer does not run when companions live through their moments and describe any hardships.

### Hardship

You may only describe one of these options happening once:

- the river harms you
- you harm yourself against the boat or a companion
- you lose something important
- force a companion who has a bond with you to describe hardship
- you are unable or unwilling to sail anymore, no longer joining in with your companions

Card Ranks ♠ ♣ ♥ ♦  
(highest to lowest) A K D J 10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2

fold here

When you **join in the effort to sail down river through a perilous stretch of water**, put one of your cards face down in front of you and choose one of the following moments in secret. When cards and moments are revealed, companions live through their moments from the lowest card to the highest. If several companions chose the same moment, the lowest card wins. If no one chooses the same moment as you, you win it without contest. If your moment has already been won, you do not get to live through it and instead take some part in the winner's moment. The moments are:

#### 1) Claim ownership of the Little Tail Boat

This moment may be won once per game. Tell your companions who have not claimed it that they can no longer choose this option. Let everyone know what you have sacrificed to gain possession of this treasure. You trust your boat and it gives you strength. After meeting the river's challenges, take back into your hand this card you have revealed.

#### 2) Tell the truth about why you go to the Unconquered City

This moment may be won once per player per game. Let everyone know the reason why you travel to the Unconquered City by the seashore. The truth pushes you beyond your limits. Reveal an extra card from your hand.

#### 3) Tell a lie about why you must reach the Unconquered City

This moment may be won once per player per game and you can only choose it while you have not told the truth. Let everyone know one deceitful reason why you must reach the Unconquered City. The lie gives you easy comfort amongst your travel companions. After meeting the river's challenges, take into your hand one card revealed by another companion.

#### 4) Describe some of the cargo in the Little Tail Boat

This moment may be won once per player per game. Let everyone know what cargo is important to you and why. Keeping it safe drives you to make sure that even the most difficult challenges can be met. Choose a suit for this stretch and any winner who matches against that challenge meets it no matter what card they have.

#### 5) Create a bond with one of your companions

This moment may be won once per companion and you cannot choose it as your first one. Let everyone know that you care for the safety of another companion and what has been said that justifies this bond for you. Having this person traveling with you warms your heart. Take into your hand any card from a previous stretch.

#### 6) Recall knowledge that you have on the Hardship River

You may win this moment as many times as you want. If you don't mark down your choice, assume this was the chosen moment. Let everyone know some useful information on the next stretch of water you'll be navigating through. This knowledge gives you hope you'll be ready to face any challenge. When you play the next card from the top of the pile of each suit, play also the following set of cards so that everyone can see what's coming.

The Little Tail Boat tries to meet the four challenges presented by the Hardship River: spades is keeping the sail facing the wind, clubs is steering through the rapids, hearts is maintaining the inside of the boat as dry as possible and diamonds is spotting for sharp turns, rocks, wild currents or other dangers. The winners of each moment have to meet a challenge by comparing their card to the one of the same suit played from one of the four piles. If their card is higher, they describe how they fulfill a particular task to meet that challenge. If not, they describe what goes wrong and their chosen hardship. As the river flows, set aside the cards revealed by each companion. If every winner has met every challenge, also discard the cards from each suit, otherwise put them under each pile face down. If the Little Tail Boat still has companions willing and able to sail, play the next card from the top of the pile of each suit and each companion draws a card from each pile. You reach the end of the river and arrive to the Unconquered City when there are no more cards left.

record the number for your chosen moments here in secret