



Campfire Memories

**FAMILIAL BONDING THROUGH
RECREATIONAL HARDSHIP**

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Familial Bonding Through Recreational Hardship

A game by Matt Bohnhoff



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Playtested by Amamlie McKee, Daniel Gamacorta, James Probasco, Jason Slanga, Nick Hopkins, and Phil Lewis.

Send questions or comments to wastelandofenchantment@gmail.com.

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Campfire Memories is dedicated to my parents, who took me on countless terrible camping trips, all of which I remember fondly today.



The streets shimmer with heat. The incessant drone of cicadas mingles with the engines and sirens of nearby traffic.

The car is loaded. Your family is eager to escape the city, each one envisioning the rewarding experiences that await.

It's time to go camping!

Introduction

This first section contains important information about what to expect from this game, and what the game expects from you. Read the italicized text aloud with the people you're going to play with, taking turns reading paragraphs. This helps to align everyone's expectations and ensure a more enjoyable experience. The other sections do not need to be read aloud, but do need to be understood by at least one player so that they can guide the rest of the players through the game.

To play this story game, we'll need between two and five players, a couple of six-sided dice, four colors of pens (red, green, blue, and black are used in the examples), and a stack of index cards. A complete game should last between two and three hours.

The characters in this game go on a camping trip together. As well as gear and skills, they'll bring their own expectations and goals.

But things never go as planned in the wild outdoors, and the characters will surely encounter some surprises along the way! They may have the resources to deal with some of these, and for others, they may not. They may delight in pulling a glistening trout from a stream. They may end up cold, wet, and hungry.

When they return home, it's not with their actual experiences, but instead with memories of those experiences colored by their desires. Regardless of whether the trip is a resounding success or an abject disaster, they may smile when thinking back on it.

The game takes place in three distinct phases. First there is a set-up phase, where the characters are developed and the camping trip planned. Next is the longest part of the game, the camping phase, during which the characters go on their trip. Finally, the game concludes with a reflection phase, where the characters look back on their experiences.

Each of us will take on the role of a character. All the characters in this game are mundane, normal people, such as might exist in the real world, with the exception of the dog, who is a mundane, normal dog. They are all socially and emotionally related in some way, forming a family.

All the characters are genuinely excited for the camping trip and for each others' company. Nature will throw enough obstacles at them, so we don't need to inject interpersonal drama at the start of the game.



The story takes place in the modern developed world. Our characters can have cellphones and credit cards, though they might not do us much good in the wilderness.

The problems the characters encounter over the course of the story are also mundane, like those we might experience on a real camping trip. They may be slightly exaggerated, but are within the realm of the possible. That means bug bites and missing gear rather than werewolves and alien abductions.

This is not the kind of game where a character can die. Characters may become hurt but all injuries should be survivable. At the very worst, a character might break a bone, but even that should be reserved for special and appropriately climactic situations.

Lastly, the emotional safety of all the players at the table is important. Characters may become upset, but players should always be having fun. To ensure this is the case, Campfire Memories uses a safety system called the Luxton Technique.



Safety Tools

Campfire Memories is typically a light-hearted, feel-good game. However one of the things that makes it work is that it can closely mirror real experiences that the players may have had. Usually this is a good thing, helping players connect emotionally with characters and lending authenticity to the story, but it could unintentionally bring up unpleasant memories in some players.

To help handle these situations, the game incorporates a system of safety tools called the Luxton Technique by P.H. Lee. This technique is broken down into 3 steps that are incorporated throughout the game.

1. Pre-game Discussion.

The first tool is a proactive discussion of potentially problematic content. At the start of the game, players are encouraged to share any elements that they know would ruin their fun. Anything brought up at this point is avoided in the rest of the game.

Players are under no obligation to explain why these elements are troubling for them. If someone says they don't want the characters caught in the thunderstorm, it simply will not happen. However, if they wish to share a personal story or otherwise explain what about that element is problematic for them, they may do so and the rest of the players should respectfully listen.

2. Pause and Modify.

Every player has the authority to stop the game and make any changes necessary for their safety during play. This allows them to reactively handle anything unexpected that arises.

This could take the form of avoiding an element, like saying there will be no bear attacks from this point forward. It could also be a limit on detail, such as saying that a character can be injured but the spilling of blood will not be described at all. A player could require that a situation play out in a certain way, like saying that a character needs to find their way back to camp by the end of the scene. It might also involve something outside the story, such as a brief break for a player to collect themselves.

As in the pre-game discussion, players don't need to disclose why something bothers them but they can if it helps. The other players will listen and help steer the story in a direction that everyone enjoys.

3. Check-in.

Players are not just responsible for their own safety but for the safety of everyone in the group. If players see another player struggling, they should ask them if they need any help.

There is a specific moment in each scene where check-ins are called for. This is to remind players of their responsibility, but check-ins can occur at any point.



Set-Up

Setting up the game involves 10 steps broken up into 3 parts. First is the safety discussion, where every player has a chance to specify narrative elements they do not want in the game. Next, in character generation, the players develop the characters they will play as for the rest of the game. Finally comes setting creation, where players decide what kind of trip the characters are going on.

Step 1. Pre-game Safety Discussion

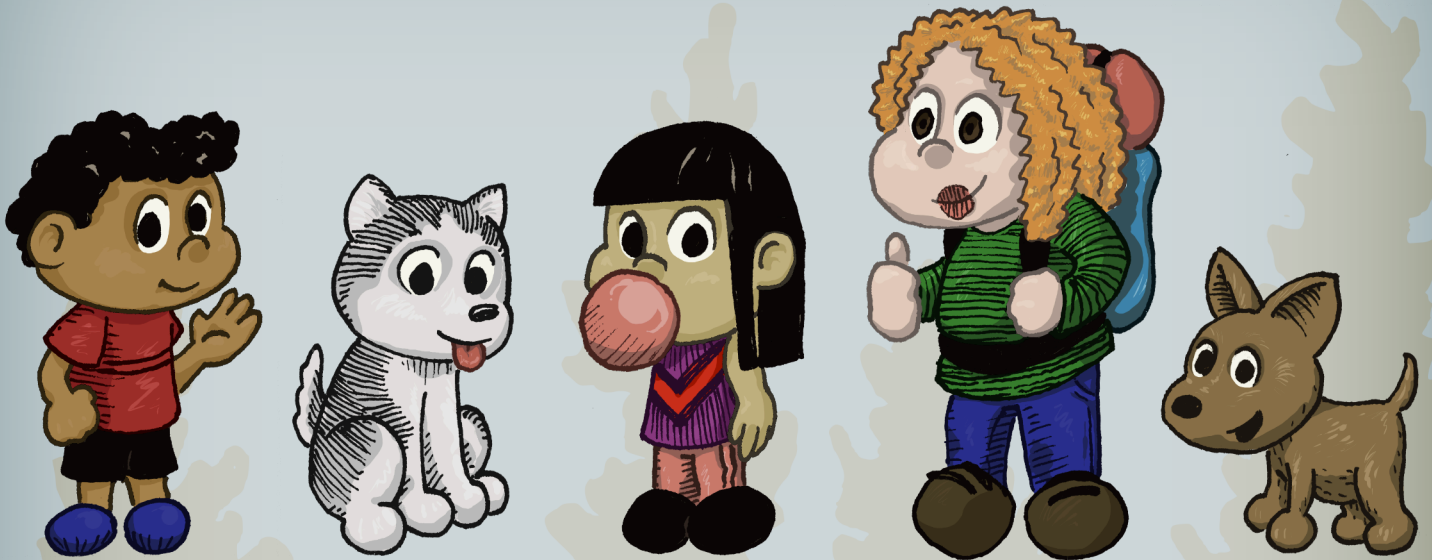
Start by sharing camping experiences that you have had. If a player hasn't been camping, they will likely have gone on a road trip or have another similar travel experience. Talk about what went wrong and what was difficult in these trips. Some people enjoy sharing camping horror stories and this can be a fun part of the game. It's a chance for players to get to know each other.

Shifting to a more serious tone, ask if anyone has had any experiences they don't want showing up in the game. For instance, if someone got lost in the woods as a child and now stories with lost children make them feel panicky, they may not want any children to get lost in the game.

Players don't need to justify why they don't want an element in the game. If someone doesn't want leeches, they don't have to share a reason.

Once everyone has had a chance to share what they need to, move on to setting creation.

Character Creation



These next seven steps help you figure out who your characters are, and what they're capable of. Follow them in order, talking as a group as you go.

Step 2. Choose whether your character is an adult, a child, or a dog.

If you prefer, you may roll a six-sided die. On a 1-3, you're a child. On a 4 or 5, you're an adult. On a 6, you're a dog.

There should be at least one adult in every game. If everyone ended up with a child or a dog, consider choosing again.

There should be one dog in each game at most.

Make a note of this on an index card. This is your character card, which will contain your character information. Orient it horizontally and use a black pen to distinguish it from the other types of cards that will be on the table.



Step 3. Collect your resources.

Adults receive 1 gear and 2 skills.

Children receive 1 gear, 1 skill, and 1 wonder.

Dogs receive 1 skill and 2 wonder.

Take an index card for each resource your character has and, orienting the card vertically, note the type of resource along the top, using a red pen for gear cards, a blue pen for skill cards and a green pen for wonder cards.

Pile gear cards in the center of the table where everyone can reach them. Keep skill and wonder cards by your character card.

Step 4. Define skills.

Gear and wonder aren't considered again until they are used in play, but skills need to be declared now, before the game begins.

Think of any knowledge that your character has that might be useful in the wild. As a guide for scope, think of something that might be covered by a Scouting merit badge, or that you could be taught in a single day; something like Military Survival Training is too broad. Examples: fishing, signaling, fire-building, plant identification. You can use skills as tools to develop your character. What might lead a child to be skilled in archery? What kind of adult is going to have experience in trapping?

It can be particularly difficult to assign skills to dog characters. What things can a dog do that might be useful? Examples: tracking, digging, running.

Write down each skill that you decide upon on an individual skill card.



Step 5. Write a goal for your character.

Goals reflect the kinds of memories that the characters want to come home with. Think of broad goals that fulfill an emotional need the character might have. Consider where the character is in their life for the kinds of goals they might have.

For example, an adult might be camping with the hope of bonding with their family or letting go of the stress and responsibilities of their job. These goals reflect the reality of being a grown-up.

A child, by contrast, might want to prove their maturity to another character. Or, perhaps, to discover something, if they are a wide-eyed youth.

Dogs can have fun goals that can get them into trouble like encountering wildlife or rolling in something stinky. They could also have a more serious goal like protecting their humans, depending on the kind of dog being played.

Goals come into effect during the reflection phase, when they dictate which memory your character will reminisce about, but you can use them to guide your character's actions during the camping phase.

Write your goal on your character card.



Step 6. Come up with relationships.

The characters in this game are part of a family, but families can come in a wide variety of shapes. To afford the most possible variety, this game defines a family as any group of people, and sometimes a dog, who love each other.

For example, two characters are an adult woman and a young girl. This could be a single mother and her daughter, or they could be sisters, older and younger. The adult could be a more distant relative, such as a grandmother or aunt. They could be unrelated, like a scout leader and the only scout who showed up for the trip.

If there are adult characters, they could be romantic partners, as a couple or a polycule, depending on their number. They could also be a parent and adult child, siblings, or close friends.

Romantic relations bear some extra attention. This is not a romance game; there are no mechanics for building these kinds of relationships. But having romantic relationships between characters can add an interesting facet to the narrative. However, not everyone is comfortable roleplaying these deep and personal feelings. Make sure it's something everyone at the table wants.

You may also want to bear in mind that there is some flexibility in the character types. An older teen might be categorized as a child or an adult, depending on the individual character's role in the group.

The dog, of course, is probably someone's pet, but it could be more! A dog could be a service animal for a human character, or might be trained as a hunting dog of some kind.

If you like, you can note any relationships on your character card.



Step 7. Finalize character details.

Your character needs a name and pronouns. Specifying an age might be useful, especially for a child. If you feel it's important for your character, you may want to discuss culture, heritage, gender, or other details.

If your character is a dog you might want to specify a breed or age. A Golden Retriever puppy will be very different from an older Chihuahua!

Make notes as needed on your character card.

Step 8. Make name tents.

Fold a card in half in such a way that it stands up. Write your character's name and pronouns on both sides so it can be easily read by everyone at the table. This will help other players have dialogue with your character.



Setting Creation

Where are your characters going, and what do they plan on doing while they're there? The following steps will guide the conversation as you figure this out, ensuring that everyone is excited to play through the upcoming camping trip.

Step 9. Decide as a group where your characters are going and what they might see while they're there.

For instance, a trip to Cool Ripple Lake might feature scenes that take place on a pebbly beach, in a reedy marsh, or beside a roaring waterfall. When things go wrong they might involve mosquitoes, mud, or rain.

By contrast, characters exploring Dark Sky Desert might find a cool bat cave, a scrubby slot canyon, or wind-swept dunes. They might face cactus, heat, and scorpions. Make sure every player is interested in and at least vaguely familiar with the destination. If you're more comfortable with camping at the seaside, on a rolling plain, or somewhere else, feel free to try it!

A good gauge is to think up at least three sights and three hazards that might be found at your destination. If you can collectively come up with that much, you have enough to play an interesting game there!



Step 10. Discuss setting details.

Where are you staying, and how do you get there? Are you pitching a tent in a cozy campground, rolling into a popular National Park in an RV, or backpacking into the wilderness? Perhaps you're portaging a canoe, or maybe you're touring on bicycles.

What activities might you do while you're there? Is someone excited to try fishing, stargazing, or foraging for wild food? Maybe someone arranged for white water rafting, a horseback trail ride, or spelunking? Where does the best hiking trail in the area go? This is a great opportunity to think of things that could show off a character's skills or fulfill their goal.



Picklists

Campfire Memories is a somewhat flexible game that can accommodate a variety of camping trips and character types. But sometimes the sheer number of possibilities can be overwhelming or the process of making all those decisions can be too time consuming. For those instances, options from the following lists can be selected to get a game going quickly and easily.

Families

3 Player:

- Ommer (aunt or uncle), their dog, and nibling (niece or nephew)
- Parent, their grown-up child, and a younger child
- Adult roommates and a dog

4 Player:

- Grandparent, parent, child, and dog
- Parent, child, child's friend, and the friend's dog
- Adult friends and their single children

5 Player:

- Adult couple, their step kids, and someone's dog
- Scout leader, 3 scouts, and someone's dog
- Parents and their 3 kids

Adult Characters

Identity: House-spouse, Aging hippy, Businessperson

Skills: First-aid, Meteorology, Fire-building

Goal: Bond with your family, Let go of real life responsibilities, Prove your competence

Child Characters

Identity: Wide-eyed toddler, Excitable youth, Idealistic teenager

Skills: Plant identification, Rope use, Whittling

Goal: Discover something, Make a family member happy, Prove your maturity

Dog Characters

Identity: Old family pet, Service animal, Brand new fur-baby

Skills: Tracking, Running, Digging

Goal: Befriend other animals, Protect your humans, Roll in something smelly

Setting

Location:

Cool Ripple Lake

Sights: pebbly beach, reedy marsh, roaring waterfall

Activities: canoeing, fishing, swimming

Hazards: mosquitoes, mud, rain

Dark Sky Desert

Sights: cool bat cave, scrubby slot canyon, wind-swept dunes

Activities: rock-hounding, spelunking, star-gazing

Hazards: cactus, heat, scorpions

Whispering Pines Mountains

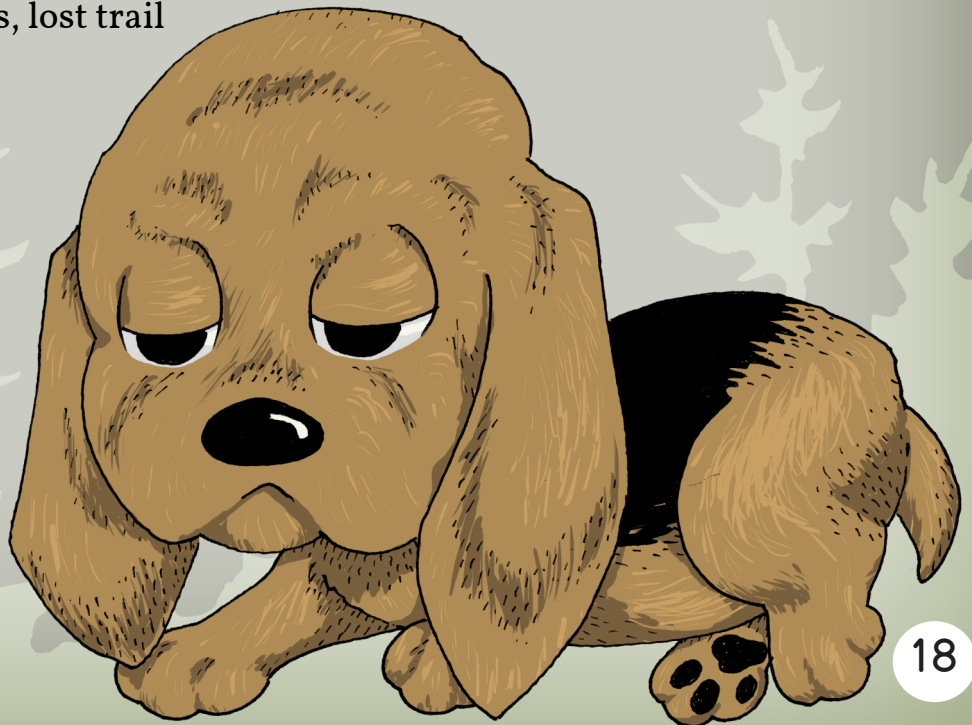
Sights: alpine peak, steaming hot spring, sun-dappled glade

Activities: bird-watching, hiking, mountain-biking

Hazards: poison ivy, raccoons, lost trail

Accommodation:

- Backpacking tent
- RV
- Cabin



Resources

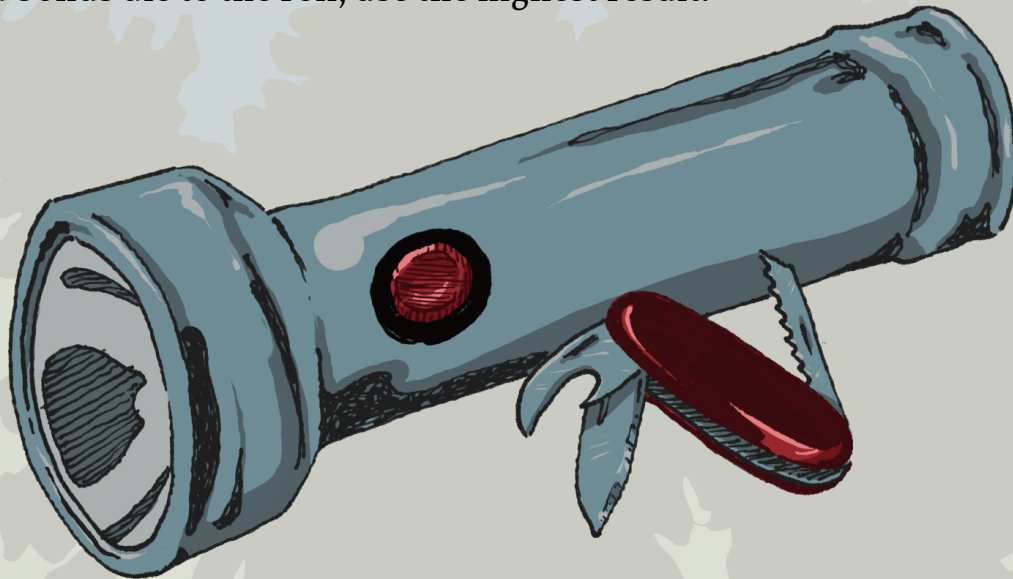
Skills are techniques and knowledge that are useful in the wilderness. Think of things like fire building, trail finding, plant identification, etc. These can be great tools for characterization. You define skills at the beginning of the game, writing down the specific skill on the card.

Skills add +1 to the result of a roll.

Gear is the tools and equipment that you bring with you, such as blankets, first aid kits, knives, sunscreen, water purifiers, and so forth. Your gear cards don't represent all the gear that your characters brought, just the bits that are narratively important.

At the beginning of the game, all the gear cards are blank and are placed in a pile in the center of the table. Gear is communal: any player can grab a gear card and define it in order to use it in a scene, allowing them to roll an additional die and use the highest result. Gear can also be lost during play.

Gear grants a bonus die to the roll; use the highest result.



Wonder is an inexplicable moment of connection between you and nature. When you spend it before the die roll in a scene, something wondrous and fortuitous will happen to your character. For example, imagine a scene where the characters have lost their tent and are stuck in a raging storm. One player opts to spend one point of their wonder, and describes lightning striking a tree with a terrifying crash. Part of the splintered trunk creates a bridge across the river to a previously unnoticed cave where the characters can take shelter. After the scene that wonder is lost and can't be used again for the remainder of the game.

Wonder is an automatic success.

Camping



The camping trip consists of three rounds of play. Each round is composed of one scene for each character. Each scene is established by one player and complicated by another, a die roll determines how events play out, and the players get to roleplay their character's reactions to the scene's events.

If a player needs to engage with the safety tools at any point during a scene, they can call for a pause and discuss what they need from the game in order to feel safe and continue having fun.

Players take turns setting scenes. When it's your turn, describe the location in which all the characters find themselves and what your character is doing. In this moment, you have narrative authority: the other players can make suggestions about what might happen in the scene but the final decision is yours. Other players may keep their characters out of any given scene if they like.

After setting up the scene, the player to your left will describe a complication, obstacle, or danger that arises in the scene. This complication needs to introduce a conflict between the characters and their environment. Weather and wildlife are good starting points.

A good complication should feel surprising but believable. It should have immediate consequences so that the characters can react to it in interesting ways, but the extent of the consequences shouldn't be defined until after the dice have been rolled. For example, it's fine to say that the characters discover that all their supplies have been scattered about the forest, but it shouldn't be stated that the food is actually missing until after the die roll.

To see where the scene goes, you will roll some dice.

Any player with a character in the scene can use resources (skills, gear, or wonder) to modify the roll.

Gear: Gear that is helpful in the situation adds an extra die to the roll. The die with the highest result will be used.

Skills: A skill that might be useful in the situation grants a +1 bonus to the roll's result.

Wonder: Wonder counts as an automatic success. Only 1 wonder can be spent in each scene.

Roll dice (1 die + any dice from gear), use the highest result, and add any skill bonuses.

If the total is 1-2, the scene goes from bad to worse. The situation gets well out of control. Any gear used in the scene will be ruined or lost. Characters may get hurt.

If the total is 3-5, the scene is a real struggle for everyone involved. Used gear may be lost if it makes sense. Some characters are likely to be upset.

If the total is 6+, the scene goes well for the characters. Two or more characters work together and accomplish something.

Injuries don't have a mechanical impact on the game but they should have a narrative impact. They make excellent inspiration for future complications!



If wonder was spent, dice don't need to be rolled. The character belonging to the player who spent the wonder really shines in the scene. Something good and almost magical occurs for that character. Wonder cannot be used after the dice have been rolled.

Wonder has the side-effect of stealing the scene from the active player. They no longer get to roll dice. To make up for that, if the player who spent the wonder was not the player who set up the scene, allow them to set another scene immediately after the current one.

After the die roll but before the scene is resolved, take a moment to check in with the other players. Are any of them looking anxious or withdrawn? If so, ask them if they need to engage with the safety tools.

As the scene progresses, let players talk with each other as their characters would, reacting to the scene and letting them declare what their characters are doing. If you set the scene, you have control over the world around them. Ultimately, it's you who gets to decide on any consequences and outcomes, but incorporate the suggestions of other players so that everyone has fun.

It can be tempting to wrap up a scene quickly after the roll, as the outcome is already known. But the real core of the scene can be found in the roleplaying after the roll! Whilst the characters can't alter the direction set by the dice, give ample time for the players to explore their reactions to the situation.

Once it feels like the scene is winding down, call it to a close.

After the scene has concluded, summarize it on an index card. Use a black pen and a vertical orientation to designate these memory cards. Use single words or short phrases to remind you of the facts. Avoid too many details and language that conveys the emotions of the characters. Place the Memory card in the center of the table.

The next player, going clockwise around the table, get to set up the next scene.

As you take turns setting scenes, think about where the current scene falls in relation to the total number of scenes. If the goal of the trip was to hike to the top of a mountain peak and back, your group should aim to reach the peak around the middle of the game.

Reflection

Once all the players' scenes have concluded, the camping trip ends and the characters return home.

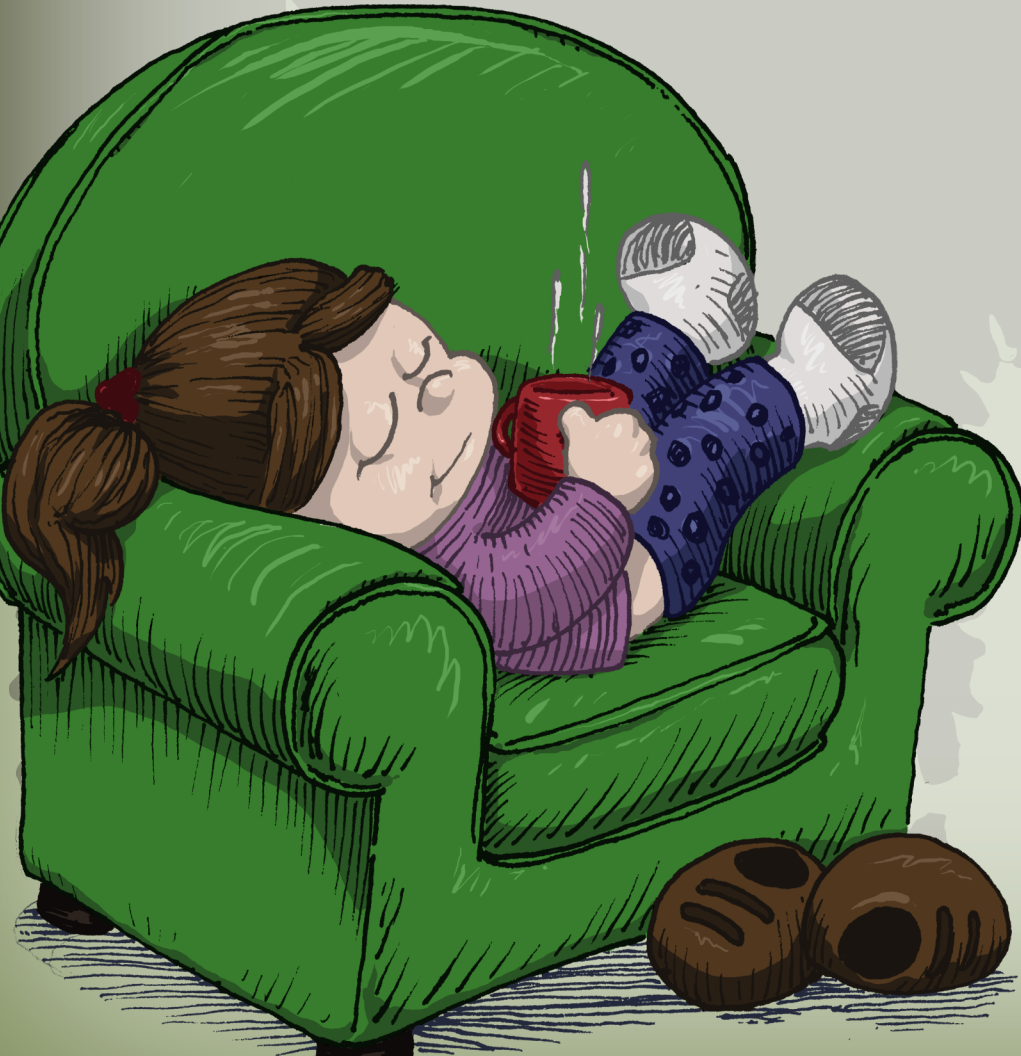
This is a good time to take a brief break. Tell the players that they have a few minutes to stretch, grab a drink, or use the restroom as needed.

Upon resuming, players take a single turn claiming a memory card from the pile in the middle of the table.

With each card claimed, they narrate a scene where their character remembers the events outlined on the memory card and, if possible, how it fulfills their goal. This scene can take place days or years after the camping trip takes place. Frame the scene with a description of where the character is as they reflect back on their camping experience. Talk about the memory entirely from your character's perspective, flavored by their personality and emotions.

After all is said and done, how does your character feel about the camping trip?

During the camping phase, scenes are intended to be collaborative. Players may have jumped in with suggestions or ideas, though they hopefully respected the player who had narrative authority at the time. During the reflection phase, however, scenes are more private and sentimental. Allow other players to have their scene, withholding comment unless invited.





Hacking

I did my best to write a game that I like and that works well. That said, there are an infinite number of possible alterations to this game that you might prefer. I encourage you to try them after playing it as written.

The simplest thing that you might change is the trip's duration, reflected in the number of rounds that the game lasts. To maintain the same resource distribution, adults alternate between a skill and a gear for each round of play, beginning with whichever they want. Children get a gear, then a wonder, then a skill for each round of play. Dogs alternate between a wonder and a skill for each round of play.

You might try altering the amount or type of starting resources, or the probabilities of the dice rolls. You could lengthen the reflection phase, continuing to draw memory cards till they've all been claimed. You could try playing as an unsupervised group of children, or as a pack of dogs.

You could also change the setting of the game. It might take place in your favorite fantasy world. Or maybe, instead of camping, it's about a road trip or the first week of college for a group of close friends.

However you play the game, whether as written or modified, I want to hear about it!

Rules Summary

Read Introduction

Set-up Phase

Discuss camping experiences.

Where are you going?

What are you doing there?

Are you an adult, a child, or a dog?

Adults get 1 gear and 2 skills

Children get 1 gear, 1 skill, and 1 wonder

Dogs get 1 skill and 2 wonder

Keep skill and wonder near your character card.

Pile gear in center of table.

Define skills.

Select a goal for your character.

Finalize relationships and character details.

Make a name tent.

Camping Phase

The game lasts for three scenes per player.

1 player sets the scene. The next player (clockwise) introduces a complication.

Form a dice pool, starting with 1 die.

Add resources

Gear grants a bonus die

Skills add a +1 bonus to roll

Wonder provides automatic success

Roll dice, use the highest, apply bonuses.

1-2: Scene goes from bad to worse

Gear ruined, characters hurt

3-5: Scene is a struggle

Gear lost, characters upset

6+: Scene goes well

Characters work together

Check on other players.

Roleplay scene.

Fill out memory card and place in the center.

Reflection Phase

Each player takes a memory card.

Describe your character remembering the events of that scene and how it meets their goal.