

WHEN IN DOUBT



by Sarah Jane Murdock

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Preview

What happens when you lose faith in the only world you know? In this highly collaborative and introspective scenario, you become storytellers of one person's journey out of a secluded religion and into the wild world. How will they reconcile what they were taught with what they observe with their own eyes? What will they explore now that they're no longer confined to the teachings they were given at birth? What will they miss from their old life?

Players will take turns playing the Protagonist in partly-scripted scenes from childhood, through crisis of belief as an adolescent, then adulthood. The players will create the religion and the protagonist through workshops. During the game they will fill out the scenes, establish and define ancillary characters, and use monologues to explore the themes.

It begins with outlining one protagonist that they will take turns playing, along with their community and religion. Then, by acting out a series of scenes, the players share moments in the protagonist's life, starting at the beginning where they feel warm and safe in their environment, then growing gradually more and more disillusioned until they reach a crisis point and decide to throw off the paradigm they were born with. Life outside of the community is then explored, touching on feelings of disorientation, anger, desire, and beyond.

At a Glance

Facilitators: 1. This game requires at least one facilitator who allows players some creative freedom but also feels comfortable to step in and steer or end scenes if necessary. The facilitator can also step into to play ancillary characters in scenes if needed.

Players: 4

Time: 4 hours

Genre: This game is meant to be serious in tone and explore identity and the psychology of belief.

Content warnings: existential and personal crisis, loss of community, isolation, alienation, rebellion, anger.

Things you will need

- these instructions
- Tenet Sheet, printed (included at the end of this document)
- Protagonist Sheet, printed (included at the end of this document)
- several sheets of blank paper
- pencils or pens
- marker
- tape

Timeline

This game should take about four hours:

- Concept, Overview, and Safety (10 minutes)
- Warm-Up Exercise (5 minutes)
- Workshop 1: Guide the Players into Making the Religion (20 minutes)
- Workshop 2: Guide the Players into Creating the Protagonist (20 minutes)
- Explain the Monologue Metatechnique (10 minutes)
- Bio Break (10 minutes)
- Act 1 Scenes (1 hr)
- Break (5 min)
- Act 2 Scenes (1 hr)
- Debrief (30 Minutes)

Concept and Overview

(Read this section to the players.) Your religion is your life. You were born into it. It's everything you know. The things you've been taught were your absolute truth and unquestioned... until now. When in Doubt is a highly collaborative larp that tells the story of one person who begins to question reality itself to the point where all their illusions are shattered, and they start their life anew.

This larp is reflective and intellectual but with the potential for strong emotions, depending on the steering and comfort level of the players. It's good for players who are interested in meditating on the meaning of existence and what dictates people's life choices. For non-religious players, it may give insight into the mindset of religious individuals. For players with a religious background, it may help them examine their own personal beliefs and why they believe what they believe.

Players will first create a religion by establishing three tenets—or doctrines—the believers of this religion follow. The three tenets are then written down on a piece of paper to be displayed prominently.

Next they will create a character that they will be sharing amongst themselves and take turns playing in each scene. They will develop one Protagonist by choosing three distinctive characteristics. At least one of the characteristics should be in direct tension with one of the earlier-established tenets. Each player will rotate playing the Protagonist in the scenes to follow, with the others playing ancillary characters.

They will then play through a series of scenes which will take them through this Protagonist's life, starting with early childhood, through adolescence and into adulthood. The scenes are designed in such a way as to trigger an existential crisis. Taking turns playing the Protagonist allows each player a taste of experiencing that crisis, while playing the ancillary characters allows players to examine that crisis from many different angles.

A Note about James W. Fowler

The design for this scenario was inspired by the work of a theologian named James W. Fowler, who studied individuals who had experienced faith crises. He wondered if there was a commonality of experience among people who had left their various faith traditions and came to discover a universalization of experience. These individuals would experience essentially the same feelings of cognitive dissonance, loss, disorientation, anger, and finally closure. He mapped these various feelings into stages paralleling general stages of human development fostered by psychologists like Jean Piaget and Erik Erickson. Further reading can be found in his book *Stages of Faith: The Psychology of Human Development and the Quest for Meaning*.

Safety and Touch

Discuss with the players what they're comfortable with as far as touch with the group. Start with a boundary of hands and forearms. If they want to touch more than that during the game, tell them to do a quick check in with the other players, such as, "Are you OK with hugging?" Tell them to keep in mind that those boundaries can change at any time, and that players don't need to justify their boundaries.

Explain to the players that we will be using the techniques of "X arms" and "cut" for this game. If there is content they don't want played, hold their arms up in an "X" in front of them and state the content they want excluded. They can use this technique out of character while negotiating the content of scenes as well as during the scene. They can also say "cut" to stop the play for any reason. Give them a moment to practice holding their arms up in an X pattern and saying "cut" to be sure they are clear on the technique.

A Note about Setting

Tell the players that the setting takes place in an isolated community in the present day, where your way of life is very much in the minority from the rest of the world. The details, such as geography, are not important for the purposes of this game. That said, players will have the opportunity to set details as needed during the course of play as they negotiate scenes.

Because play begins with the Protagonist as a young child, nothing will be known about the "outside world" at that point. As play progresses, however, outside elements will be introduced as scenes are discussed, which is when players will have the opportunity to flesh out the environment.

Warm-Up Exercise

Tell the players an important aspect of this game is creative collaboration. Players will come up with ideas on what to play, and other players should be open to building off of those ideas. Tell them to go with their first instincts and don't overthink. Suggestions don't need to be perfect to be playable.

Tell them that in order to get them more comfortable with collaborating and building on each other's ideas, you are going to play a little exercise called "yes and." Have the players sit in a circle. Tell them they will be telling a story one sentence at a time. You, the facilitator, will start the story with "One day I was walking through the woods."

The next person will continue the story by saying, "Yes, and." For example, "Yes, and it started to rain." And so on.

Have them go around the circle twice, then stop the story on the second round, and move on to creating the religion.

Create a Religion

Pass out the blank paper and writing utensils.

Tell the players that religions are created to answer these questions: Where did we come from? What gives our lives meaning? Where do we go after we die? These questions can be used as a jumping off point as players discuss what tenets they would like to establish. They can make the answers as realistic or fantastical as they would like. However, the tone of the larp is meant to be serious, so if a player makes a suggestion that will be hard to take seriously in the course of play, steer them in another direction.

What is a tenet? A tenet is an opinion, belief, or principle that is held as absolute truth.

For example

- “Green eyes are especially holy.” (or conversely, “Green eyes are unclean.”)
- “A song must be sung as the sun rises and sets each day.”
- “We were all born from swirling ether.”
- “Bananas are forbidden to eat.”

The content of the tenets doesn't matter so long as the players are comfortable roleplaying them in the scenes to follow. Players can play close to an existing religion but not use a religion that actually exists in the real world. Avoid actually playing real religions. Remember that players can use “X arms” for any content they don't want to play.

Players can use the extra paper for brainstorming purposes. In order to keep the pace going, listen in. When it sounds like the players are coming close to a consensus on a tenet, point that out to them then move on to the next one.

Once the tenets are decided, a player with strong handwriting will then carefully write them down (preferably in marker) on the Tenet page at the end of this document.

Hold the page up and tell the players to stand and face the page. You will start by saying “These are the tenets,” pause for the players to repeat in unison, then recite each tenet one by one, pausing for the players to repeat it in unison again before moving onto the next one, and so on.

For example

- Facilitator: “These are the tenets” (pause for them to repeat)
- Players: “These are the tenets”
- Facilitator: “Green eyes are unclean.” (pause for them to repeat)
- Players: “Green eyes are unclean.”

Continue with the other two tenets. Once they are done reciting, tape the page somewhere prominent on a wall, window, or piece of furniture, so long as it is easily visible to the players during play.

Create The Protagonist You Will Take Turns Playing

Tell the players that next they will develop three characteristics of the Protagonist that they will take turns to play. These three characteristics are to start; the rest will emerge during play. Questions to consider as they discuss these characteristics: What is their personality? What physical characteristics do they have? What are their likes and dislikes?

At least one of the characteristics must be in tension with one of the tenets. For example, if there is a tenet that states that green eyes are “unclean,” the Protagonist could have green eyes. Or if bananas are forbidden to eat, your character might have a proclivity towards bananas. You can even just say that your character is naturally curious or questioning.

Reiterate that they’ll be taking turns playing through this person’s life starting with early childhood. If they pick a characteristic that doesn’t apply in childhood, that’s fine. It will just come into play in later scenes. Remember they only need three to start playing. The rest of the characteristics can emerge in play.

Pick a name for your Protagonist. Don’t get too hung up on this step. One suggestion is to pick something abstract that relates to one of the tenets or characteristics. For example, if you have decided that “birds are sacred,” think of a bird name for your Protagonist. The name could be a nickname and not their real name. It’s also possible that the Protagonist will want to change their name in the course of play. If players really can’t think of a name, suggest the name “Proto.”

They can use the extra paper for notes, then have a player write the name and the three characteristics on the Characteristics sheet at the end of this document in the form of “I” statements.

Once the characteristics and name are chosen, hold the paper up and recite each piece on the page, pausing to have the players repeat in unison.

For example

- Facilitator: “My name is [Protagonist Name].” (pause for them to repeat)
- Facilitator: “I have green eyes.” (pause for them to repeat).
- (Continue with the other two sentences.)

Meta Technique: Monologue

Explain the following: Players will be asked to narrate the inner thoughts of the Protagonist during scenes. Monologues can be called for by anyone in the game, including the player playing the Protagonist, the other players in the scene, the players watching the scene, and the facilitator.

The person calling for a monologue does so by pointing to the person playing the protagonist and saying the word “monologue.” The action pauses, then the Protagonist stands (if seated), turns away from the scene and vocalizes the thoughts of the character. The other characters are frozen in time during the monologue. When the Protagonist is done, they turn back to the scene and continue the action. If the player playing the Protagonist wants to call for a monologue, they simply say “monologue” then proceed as outlined.

Note: only the Protagonist can monologue.

“Directed” Monologue. When you call “monologue” you can give the player extra guidance, or ask them a specific question for them to address during their monologue.

For example

- “Monologue: how do you feel in this moment?”
- “Monologue: what does this remind you of?”
- “Monologue: what memory comes to mind?”
- “Monologue: what do you observe?”

Practice Scene

Tell the players that they will be practicing this technique in a very brief sample scene. One of them will play the protagonist as a young child and the rest will play family members. The family is sitting down to eat a normal, every day meal.

Tell them to begin the scene.

After about a minute or so, point to the one playing protagonist and say “monologue: how do you like what you are eating?”

Give the player a moment to respond, then end the scene.

Tell the players to start the scene again, but this time with a different player as the protagonist, and this time another player in the scene will call “monologue: how do you like what you are eating?”

If they are still unclear on the technique, have them do the scene a third time.

Break

Tell the players to take a ten minute bio break.

The Game

Tell the players: You are about to embark on a journey through [names]’s life through a series of scenes. Before each scene, you will be given a brief prompt of what each scene should contain.

Each player will take turns playing the Protagonist in a regular rotation. (Set the order now.) When it’s their turn, the player has the option to “pass,” at which point the Protagonist role will go to the next person in the rotation, and so on.

The person who is about to play the Protagonist establishes and has final say over the details . If they need help, they can solicit suggestions from the other players. Players will have about 5 minutes to deliberate, then enact the scene. The other players will play other characters or watch. If a secondary character is established—for example a friend or parental figure—they don’t need to be played by the same player every time. Each scene should take about five to ten minutes. Either the players or you decide when the scene ends by saying “scene.”

A note about contentious characters: In order for this game to work, players must be willing to play characters in authority who are very rigid in their thinking, such as religious leaders with no mercy towards deviance in their followers. If you find players to be too uncomfortable playing such a role, as a facilitator you may step in and play the role yourself in order to keep the game on the right trajectory.

Remind them to use the monologuing technique.

For a taste of what’s to come, tell them the titles of each scene:

- Instruction
- Test
- Encounter
- Curiosity
- Doubt
- Confrontation
- Crisis
- Disorientation
- Exploration
- Reflection
- Legacy

Now let’s begin!

Act 1

Scene 1: Instruction

You are very young and receiving instruction from someone older and wiser than you. The things they are telling you are the only things you know and they fill you with peace and love. You know no other way to live or think, as your entire community shares these beliefs.

Location: a place where students congregate to receive instruction. It doesn't need to be a literal classroom. It could be in your home, or in nature.

Characters: religious instructor, other students

(Facilitator: pause and allow players to deliberate, enact the scene, then describe the next scene.)

Scene 2: Test

You are slightly older now and ready to demonstrate the knowledge you've studied. You struggle with one of the pieces, either because of the core tension within you or because something just seems a little off about the teachings.

Location: a place where others in the community congregate.

Characters: religious leader or parental figure there to test you, siblings or friends, other students being tested, parents watching the test

(Facilitator: use the monologue technique at some point during this scene if one hasn't been called for yet.)

Scene 3: Encounter

You encounter an idea, object, or person that exists outside of your religion, that contradicts what you've been taught. How is such a thing possible? This is the first moment in your life where you discover that there is belief and way of living that exists outside of your community. How does this make you feel?

Location: Slightly outside the borders of the immediate community. Perhaps you are running an errand, collecting supplies, or simply got lost on a walk.

Characters: a friend or sibling who encounters this with you, an "outsider" demonstrating or representing this outside idea

(Facilitator: remind them that the repeating characters don't need to be played by the same players every time)

Scene 4: Curiosity

More time has passed, perhaps years. You are in adolescence now. This time you are deliberately seeking an outside person, behavior or idea. How do you go about doing it? Is anyone from your community with you or do you seek it alone? What draws you to this thing? How long have you been seeking this?

Location: You can return to the same location you visited in scene 3, or decide that you have ventured even further outside of the confines of your community.

Characters: the same “outsider” from scene three (have they become a friend or even love interest?) or someone related to that person or idea, the same or different friend or sibling from the community who witnesses your curiosity seeking. Or perhaps you want no one from your community with you this time.

Scene 5: Doubt

You vocalize your doubts more forcefully. Do you vocalize them to yourself? If not, who do you tell them to? Someone you trust in your community? Someone from the outside?

Location: Anywhere—a room inside the community, somewhere in nature, a location outside the community that you visit regularly

Characters: either a friend/friends (perhaps from one of the prior scenes), or an outside individual/individuals whom you have grown to trust

Scene 6: Confrontation

Time lapses. You are an older adolescent now or perhaps even a young adult. Your community discovers your exploration and doubts and confronts you with them. Did someone betray you? Or was something forbidden found and you are the one betraying your people? The scene ends with either you leaving, or the community banishing you.

Location: the public area in the community, (use the same one that was established previously, if one was established)

Characters: religious leaders, family members, friends, betrayers (players must be comfortable with portraying anger, despair, etc.)

Scene 7: CRISIS

This is a meta scene where each player takes on the role of the Protagonist simultaneously, voicing all questions and doubts out loud. Make sure players are all standing before they begin.

Players can converse with each other as well as vocalize to themselves. Tell them that when each player is ready, they will turn to the Tenets and begin to say “no more” over and over.

Note only for you, the facilitator (don't tell the players as this will be a surprise for them): Once everyone is chanting “no more” simultaneously and in unison, you will grab the paper from the wall and dramatically rip it in pieces, scattering the pieces onto the floor. Chanting will abruptly stop naturally.

Brief Break (5 min)

Act 2

Scene 8: Disorientation

More time has passed. You live completely outside of your community now. What does your life look like? You discover new and potentially frightening aspects of the world. In this scene you choose one aspect of this new world that is particularly disorienting.

Location: somewhere you have never been before, that may seem normal for an “outsider” but to you is an entirely new experience

Characters: this could be a scene in a public place amongst strangers, perhaps a stranger tries to engage with you and you’re not sure how to react, or a friend you’ve made from the outside world tries to introduce you to something more strange than anything you’ve encountered before.

Scene 9: Exploration

You’ve grown more accustomed to this new way of life. Now that you no longer abide by the tenets and instructions you were given, nothing is forbidden to you anymore. What do you choose to experience that you couldn’t before?

Location: It could be something you’re experiencing in your new home, or it could be an entirely new place you learned about and always wanted to see

Characters: current friends on the outside, a love interest, if one hasn’t been introduced or developed before now, or new friends you’ve made

Scene 10: Reflection

You encounter a person, object, or idea from your past life and you see it with new eyes. How does it feel to you now?

Location: Perhaps a place where it could be more likely to encounter someone from your past life.

Suggested Characters: one of the established characters from the early scenes, such as the religious leader, a family member, or an old friend from your old life (did they leave too?). Maybe one of your outside friends or love interests are with you as you encounter them.

Scene 11: Legacy

Time has passed, and you are much older. You are the instructor now, either to progeny of your own or in another instructional context. How have your experiences shaped your worldview? What do you choose to pass on?

Suggested characters: love interest, friend, children of your own, or students you are instructing

Bio Break

Debrief

Ask each player: What tenet would you add to take the place of the tenets that were discarded? They can respond as the Protagonist they just played or as themselves.

Have everyone sit in a circle. Have each player take turns saying “I once was [Protagonist Name] and now I’m [own name].”

Ask each player to name one thing to keep from this experience.

Ask each player one thing to discard from this experience.

Ask each player if they would like to talk about their own religious background. Stress that they are under no obligation to do so.

THESE ARE THE TENETS

TENET

1

TENET

2

TENET

3

MY NAME IS

Pronouns (optional)

1 ^I

2 ^I

3 ^I