

THE DEEP FOREST



A map game of post-colonial weird fantasy.
A re-imagining of The Quiet Year.
Mark Diaz Truman and Avery Alder Mcdaldno
Art by Jules Silver

Chapter One: Gather

As the facilitator, read this entire book and complete the tasks outlined in this chapter prior to inviting others to join you at the table.

What This Is

This is a map-drawing game. You collectively explore the struggles of a community of monsters, trying to rebuild and heal after driving off the human occupiers. It's a game about community, difficult choices, and decolonization. When you play, you make decisions about the community, decisions that get recorded on a map that is constantly evolving. Parts of the map are literal cartography, while other parts are symbolic. Players work together to create and steer this community, but they also play devil's advocate and introduce problems and tensions into the game.

Supplies

The Deep Forest requires 2-4 players and 2-4 hours.

In addition, it requires:

- A blank piece of letter-sized paper
- Pencils, erasers, and several index cards
- Six dice (smaller is better)
- 20 Contempt Tokens (possibly stones or glass beads)
- A deck of regular playing cards
- **The Oracle** (which includes a page of reference cards)

Preparing Your Space

Some preparation is required before you are ready to teach The Deep Forest to others. Begin by clearing your table or play space of any unnecessary objects. Aim for a minimal environment.

Separate the deck into the four suits (representing four seasons). Place each in a separate stack. Place the blank piece of paper in the centre of the table - it will become the map of your area. Around it, array the remaining supplies: the pencils, dice, Contempt tokens, summary cards, and index cards.

On one index card, write two column headings - Adoptions and Taboos. On a second index card, write the heading Names.

A Fleeting Year

A full-length game of The Deep Forest tends to run 3-4 hours including teaching time. If you'd prefer to play a shorter game, you can do so with this adjustment: before play, remove 4 cards from each of the suits (which represent seasons). Make sure to remove the Queen of Diamonds (Summer), and make sure to keep the King of Spades (Winter) in the cards you play with.

Chapter Two: Survey

As the facilitator, you will read the regular text of this chapter aloud to the group, following the instructions written in italics.

The Opening Story

Read aloud.

For a long time, our monstrous home was occupied by invading humans. Now, finally, we've driven them off, and we're left with this: a year of relative peace. One quiet year, with which to dismantle their settlements and reclaim our lands. Come Winter, a band of heroes will arrive and we might not survive the encounter. This is when the game will end. But we don't know about that yet. What we know is that right now, in this moment, we monsters have an opportunity for healing and self-discovery in our deep forest, away from human eyes.

Explaining the Tools

Let's start by familiarizing ourselves with our tools.

Point to the blank page. This is our map. Before playing, we'll establish some of the landscape and the monsters who live here. As we play, we'll update the map to reflect new discoveries, conflicts, and opportunities. Parts of the map will be literal cartography and other parts will be symbolic. We'll try to avoid writing words on it, though common symbols are fine.

Throughout the game, we'll all be responsible for drawing on this map. It's fine to draw poorly or crudely, but all of us are going to draw.

Point to the dice. These are project dice. When a monster starts a project, we'll place one on the map to note how many weeks it will take to finish. Each week, they tick down by one. When a die reaches zero, the project is complete.

Point to the Contempt Tokens. These are Contempt Tokens. They represent any tension and frustration that might arise between our monsters.

Point to the summary card. This is a summary card. It'll remind us what to do each week of The Deep Forest, and in what order.

Explaining the Deck



Spring



Summer



Autumn



Winter

Point to the four suits in turn, and explain that they correspond to the four seasons. Taking the stack of spades, show everyone the King of Spades.

When this card is drawn, the game will be over. It could come at any time during Winter.

Shuffle the spades, and place them face-down on the table. Shuffle the clubs, and place them on top. Repeat with diamonds, and finally with hearts. As you shuffle each suit, remind the group of its season.

Who We Are

We all have two roles to play in this game. The first is to speak for the members of this community, and to care about their individual and collective fates.. The second is to dispassionately introduce dilemmas, to provoke difficult situations and see what comes of them. The Deep Forest asks us to move in between these two roles.

The game will ask us to speak as various monsters in the community, and take actions on their behalf. Each time we do so, we'll indicate which monster we are speaking or acting as. For the purposes of this text, "monster" can be either a single monster or a clutch of smaller monsters who live together. When you introduce a monster to the map, remember that it must be able to communicate and act, albeit perhaps unclearly or through some sort of magical means.

We shouldn't feel that any single viewpoint belongs to any one of us, and are invited to speak for different monsters throughout the course of the game. By explicitly calling out the actors and perspectives of the monsters, The Deep Forest allows us to explore how individuals shape communities, as well as how individuals cope with the scars of occupation.

We'll also be presented with opportunities to introduce issues for the community to deal with in the wake of the occupation. This will often happen when we draw cards or use the Uncover Something Old action. By dispassionately introducing dilemmas, and then returning to our other role as members of the community, we create tension and make the community's struggles feel real. If there's an issue you struggle with in real life (like whether a space can be truly safe), introduce situations that call it into question.

Sketching Occupation

Before the game begins, we must establish the nature of the occupation and the lingering impact it has had on the area. We begin with a brief discussion (taking four minutes at most) about what the humans built here during the occupation. This can be as simple as someone saying, “how about a military outpost and barracks?” and everyone else nodding in agreement.

Once the general nature of the occupation has been decided, we choose a player to draw a notable landmark that the humans left behind. This might be a lighthouse, giant statue, or adobe church. It is best to keep this drawing small and simple. Next, the remaining players demarcate the borders of the occupation. This might mean drawing several rectangles to represent fenced-in fields, or a wide trapezoidal shape to represent a human village. These borders aren't an exhaustive inventory of the occupation, but rather a starting point for understanding its impact.

One player should introduce a landmark, and then the rest of the players should demarcate the borders of the occupation, before proceeding.

Introducing Monsters

At this point, each of us should introduce one monster and tell us briefly about its nest or dwelling. When we introduce our monster and its home, we then sketch our contribution onto the map. These sketches should be rough and simple, leaving lots of blank space for additions during play. We each introduce one monster this way, but it is understood that there are additional monsters in our community, perhaps a half dozen that are as-yet unnamed.

As an example, a group might decide to set their game in the shadow of a wizard's tower. The first player introduces a monster: “Alright, a clutch of kobolds, the Eidoo, has taken up residence in the old stables.” The next player adds, “A hill ogre, Tezog, lives in the quarry a short distance away from the tower.” The third player adds, “A clutch of tree sprites called the Wisps has carved out several trees at the edge of the clearing as a nest.” The final player says, “A ball of radiant light has taken up residence at the bottom floor of the tower. It communicates with feelings, but the other monsters call it Sol.” As details are added, the players draw them on the map. Record the names on your index card.

Everyone should introduce a monster and add it to the map before proceeding.

Adoptions and Taboos

Next, we each declare an important remnant left behind by the humans, something which we might have either adopted as our own or declared taboo after the occupation.

Some examples are:

- aqueducts and canals
- a dark orb of farsight
- a human memorial
- domesticated animals
- crops and fields

Identifying a human remnant makes it both alien and important. If you pick “alloy metals,” you’re indicating that monsters didn’t have access to that technology before the occupation and that there might be some usefulness for that remnant now.

As a group, we now choose one of those remnants to be an Adoption. It gets listed on the index card under Adoption, and whoever called it now draws something on the map to represent how the monsters have adopted that human remnant into their lives. The other remnants get listed as Taboos, and the players who called them draw something on the map to represent the community’s fear and distrust of those resources. Remember that symbols and symbolic representations are fine, but words should be avoided.

Have everyone declare a human remnant and decide which one has been Adopted. Update the map to reflect before proceeding.

Chapter Three: Rules

Pass the book around the table, letting everyone take turns reading these sections aloud to the group. Once you have finished this chapter, begin play.

The Week

The basic unit of play in *The Deep Forest* is the week. Each week is a turn taken by one player, with play proceeding clockwise around the table. Weeks should take an average of 2-3 minutes to complete.

During each week, the following things happen:

- The active player draws a card, reads the relevant text aloud, and resolves it. They follow all bold text.
- Project dice are reduced by 1, and any finished projects are updated.
- The active player chooses and takes an action (Uncover Something Old, Agree on Something, or Start a Project).

Drawing Cards

As there are 52 cards, there are 52 weeks. We won't necessarily get to play all of them - the heroes could arrive any time during Winter to interrupt our community's progress.

Most cards have two options to choose from, separated by an 'or...' divider. Pick the option that you find the most interesting and fitting, and read the text aloud. The card might ask you a question, bring bad news, or create new opportunities. Many cards have specific rules attached to them, which are written in bold text. If you drew the card, it's up to you to make the decisions that the card requires.

If a card asks you a question, think about whether your answer could be represented on the map somehow. If it fits, update the map to reflect this new information. For example, if the card asks you about the feeding habits of the community, you might end up drawing a hunting ground in the nearby woods.

Working on Projects

Unless your card specifically told you otherwise (in bold text), the next step is to reduce each project die on the map by 1. If a project reaches 0, the die gets removed and the project is completed. Whoever started the project gets to tell everyone how it turns out, and update the map to reflect its completion.

If a project finishes early (because a card says that “a project finishes early” in bold text), it is instead the responsibility of the active player to tell everyone how it turns out and to update the map.

If your card’s bold text had you place a project die on the map just a moment ago, that die doesn’t reduce during this week. It’s just now getting under way.

When a project gets completed, it is assumed that it went successfully and is beneficial to the community. In some cases, it might make sense to have an investigative project end with a hope dispelled. Even in these cases, the completion of a project should always feel like a step forward, not backward. This doesn’t always mean that the whole community is happy with the results, though.

Uncover Something Old

One of the action types is Uncover Something Old. Reveal something from before or during the occupation. It might present a problem, offer an opportunity, or a bit of both. Draw it on the map. Drawings should be small and simple: smaller than an inch, finished within thirty seconds.

We can use this action to introduce unresolved issues and dilemmas, resurfacing the history of the community. It might even be something that is familiar to the community members but surprising to us as players. When individual monsters get introduced through this action, we’ll give them names, and record those names on our index card.

Some example situations:

- A mass grave is found north of the community.
- A pack of werebeasts emerges from the woods.
- Forgotten tales of the end times start to circulate.
- An ancient rite is completed for the first time since the occupation.
- An archaic religious symbol appears in the sky.

Agree on Something

Another of the action types is Agree on Something. Open with a statement about a problem or issue in the community. Going clockwise, everyone else then gets to weigh in once, sharing their agreement with your statement or describing what their silence looks like. Remember to indicate which monster is speaking... or not speaking.

Agreeing on Something never results in a concrete decision. Everyone weighs in (or stays silent), and then it's over. This is how conversations work in communities: there is much left unsaid to preserve the peace.

Each agreement should be tied to a situation on the map. When an agreement ends, mark the situation it is attached to with a small dot.

As an example, a community might agree on how to punish the ball of light for failing to warn the community about problems at the wizard's tower. The first player says "The Eidoo say 'We should punish Sol by locking him into the tower.'" The second player says "Tezog sits in silence, picking something from his ear and then eating it, disinterested." The third player says "The Wisps buzz around and say 'Yes! Sol is dangerous.'" The fourth player says "Sol radiates grief, but stays silent."

It's important that we stay concise. If any of us feel like we have more to say on a topic, we can always Agree on Something about it at a later point.

Start a Project

The final action type is Start a Project. You choose a situation on the map, and tell us how some of the monsters address it. It doesn't matter if the entire community supports the project or not - work begins. Projects might focus on decolonization efforts, the restoration of old customs or edifices, or new endeavors that will move the community forward.

Some example projects:

- The mud wurms & Rothwen begin dismantling the fences that the humans built.
- We're teaching the draken tongue to our village young.
- Sordid leads several others in restoring the runic arches.

As a group, quickly decide how many weeks the project would reasonably take to complete (minimum 1 and maximum 6). Remember that you are a community in recovery. Many of your powers have lain dormant, and your traditions acquired stigma. Is your community prepared to tackle this project? Must healing and practice transpire first? Be generous with your assumptions, but do remember that your community needs to build capacity slowly.

Place a die on the map wherever the project is taking place, with the die face matching the number of weeks it will take to complete.

Updating Remnants

At the start of the game, we'll have Adopted one remnant and declared at least that many to be Taboo. These lists serve as guides for interpreting the community's ongoing discourse about the occupation. Throughout play, we'll update these lists to reflect changes in our perspective, whenever we feel that it is appropriate to do so. Maybe the completion of a project induces an Adoption or sparks a Taboo. Some weekly cards will alter these lists as well.

Balancing the Actions

Uncover Something Old lets us introduce situations and dilemmas into the game, uncovering the time before and during the occupation. Agree on Something lets us all talk about the state of the map and the dominant opinions of the community. Start a Project lets us solve our problems and grow. By respecting this division of purpose, we make sure each week involves making important decisions.

It's important that we respect the purpose and balance of the three types of action. We shouldn't use Uncover Something Old to skirt our problems by conveniently encountering the very supplies we lacked. We shouldn't Agree on Something about situations we haven't even mentioned or introduced yet.

Contempt

If ever you feel like a particular monster wasn't consulted or honoured in a decision-making process, you can take a piece of Contempt and place it at the edge of the map, nearest the lair of the monster you feel was overlooked or ignored. If someone starts a project that you don't agree with, you don't get to voice your objections or speak out of turn. You are instead invited to place a piece of Contempt.

Contempt will generally remain on the map for the rest of the game. It will act as a reminder of past contentions and slights, signs of discord within a diverse community. In addition, you can discard it back into the centre of the table in two ways: by acting selfishly and by diffusing tensions.

If a monster ever wants to act selfishly, to the known detriment of the community, you can remove a Contempt token to justify the behaviour. You decide whether the behaviour requires justification. This will often trigger others placing Contempt tokens in response.

If someone else does something that you think a monster would greatly support, that would mend relationships and rebuild trust, you can remove a Contempt token to demonstrate how they have diffused past tensions.

Death

Every death has the potential to drastically change the community. When a monster dies, take a moment to think about the repercussions that might crop up.

If this was the last monster involved with a project, we can decide that the project is abandoned. If that's the case, we'll remove the project die from the map. If others continue to work on it, it continues as before. The death of a monster could also have an impact on our Taboos and Adoptions. If a superstitious monster dies, does something cease to be Taboo? If a knowledgeable monster dies, do we still know how to maintain an Adoption? We can modify these lists as needed.

Restraint

In playing *The Deep Forest*, we must refrain from free-wheeling discussion about what to do next. There are specific mechanics in the game for discussing community issues and demonstrating our displeasure. When we play, we won't speak out of turn or attempt to circumnavigate these mechanics. These rules work to demonstrate how difficult it is to engage the entire community in conversation, and how tensions and disagreements tend to linger across weeks or even months.

Pacing

At the beginning of the game, we'll only have a basic sketch of the landscape and scarce information about the monsters who live here. From this humble place, a rich tapestry will emerge. How, and at what pace?

The cards of Spring will prompt introspection, reminding us that the occupation left us forever changed. We should use Spring to become familiar with the mechanics and structure of the game. There won't necessarily be a lot of tension or conflict during Spring, and this is fine. In Summer, our community's unity will be tested. As the monsters who live here regain their footing, old conflicts resurface and new dramas emerge. In Autumn, the larger world will start to intrude upon our home, bringing with it hopes and dangers. In Winter, the community will continue its work and preparations, and as players we will contend with the dramatic irony of knowing that the heroes could arrive at any moment.

If ever the map feels lacking or the monsters seem to have resolved the issues already raised, we can introduce new dilemmas. What happens when a monster destroys a key resource? What happens when someone is accused of collaborating with the humans?

Chapter Four: More

As the facilitator, be familiar with these sections. During play, you may reference and read sections from it whenever they seem relevant or important.

Parsing

Should you feel that someone has misinterpreted the rules, pause them. Find the relevant section of the text and read it aloud. As much as possible, call attention to how the rules function, rather than why you think a specific player has misused them. Allow players to be the ultimate arbiters of their own contributions.

Immigration

When new monsters arrive to the community, it's best that they also comes as solitary individuals or small clutches. The Deep Forest takes on a radically different tone if suddenly three dozen orcs arrive in a community that may only have eight or nine monsters total. Make sure that your additions challenge the community, but don't unbalance it so completely that one set of monsters is the dominant group by numbers alone.

The Heroes Arrive

During play, it's best to leave the heroes an elusive mystery - perhaps hinting at what they might be, but never directly answering. The game ends abruptly when the King of Spades is drawn. The card is read aloud, and the game immediately concludes. Once the game is over, it is fine to talk about what the heroes might have been, what their arrival might have meant for the community, or any of the other situations that were faced throughout their year. With the game over, the limits placed on communication and discussion are suddenly lifted.

Design Notes

from Avery Alder Mcdaldno.

I grew up largely oblivious to my surroundings, and especially to the histories and oppressions that resided in them. I didn't really understand, growing up, that I was occupying Kootenay/Ktunaxa and Sinixt space. I moved to Vancouver without understanding that it was unceded Coast Salish territory, that it belonged to the Squamish, Musqueam, and Tsleil-Waluth people. And then I wrote *The Quiet Year* without understanding the ways that its design tacitly replicated colonial narratives of ownership and 'unclaimed' land.

Part of my desire to write *The Deep Forest* was to address that last one, to create a *Quiet Year* that centred upon decolonization. But I also wanted to explore something more familiar to me, queer and trans - the ways that otherness and monstrosity are sometimes reclaimed or leveraged in the process of coming to know ourselves.

Elena Rose wrote a piece called *on cartography and dissection*, touching on both colonialism and queerness, and words from it jump to mind now -

"You hear, across the water, those words: Here Be Monsters. You hear them inking it onto you, steering well clear of your borders or making a beeline for savage lands to tame and profit from. You know your insides are not navigable. You know that no matter how you say, look, I can tell you where you are, you're right here, all you will hear back is a new name given to you, the Undiscovered Country.

Wave your arms and shout, if you like. I'm doing it too. You'll still hear the question: What are you?

I'm not a what.

Yeah, but what are you?"

I wanted to write a game about the ways that collective recovery can shape a community - bringing people together or fracturing them, erasing difference or forcing us to see it more clearly.

Design Notes

from Mark Diaz Truman.

I didn't really think about being a Mexican-American game designer until after I had already written two games. It literally never occurred to me that I might have something to say about my own experience growing up as a Hispanic kid in New Mexico, the state famous for the Pueblo Revolt. My games were just like everyone else's games.

While designing *The Deep Forest*, Avery introduced me to a Junot Diaz quote that was particularly apt -

"You know, vampires have no reflections in a mirror? [...] And what I've always thought isn't that monsters don't have reflections in a mirror. It's that if you want to make a human being into a monster, deny them, at the cultural level, any reflection of themselves. And growing up, I felt like a monster in some ways. I didn't see myself reflected at all."

It's strange, I think, what a lack of mirrors does to a person. You know that you have a story, but since you can't see it outside of yourself, maybe you're just crazy? Maybe you should get on with the process of stamping out whatever Other is left inside you before everyone else realizes that you're something different.

I wanted to design a game that drew out decolonization as a process of recovery, a slow growth from one mindset to another. It's not what came before, largely because what came before was destroyed, but it holds the potential for a healing. Yet like many attempts at decolonization, we know it will be cut short long before it can truly finish.

My hope is that *The Deep Forest* is a mirror, one that reflects back what you bring to it, the roles you traditionally play and the conquests you traditionally attempt.

Due Credit

*This game is by Mark Diaz Truman and Avery Alder Mcdaldno.
You can see more of Mark's work at [Magpie Games](#).*

It is dedicated to Jeremy Zimmerman, a Patreon supporter.

*The cover art is by Jules Silver, a Mi'kmaq and Cree artist from Regina.
For more of her work, visit [Morningstar Artistic Creations](#).*

Titles in Leander, text in Minion Pro.

Buried Without
Ceremony

Special Thanks

Scott Foster, Philip Espi, Jeremy Zimmerman, James Stuart, Evan Silberman, Jeremy Tidwell, Joe Beason, Peter Woodworth, Aaron Friesen, Jesse Wolfe!, Simon Brunning, Sam Anderson, Penda Tomlinson, Andrew Cain, Ash, Ivan Dervisevic, Andrew Medeiros, Jane Friedhoff, Kit La Touche, Scott Underwood, Greg Sanders, Richard Greene, J. Walton, Hel Apocalypse, John Harper, Jess Downs, Julia, Brand Robins, Rob K., Emily Short, Rafael Rocha, Dylan Nix, Jason Pitre, William Lee, Sean Nittner, Brendan Adkins, Cheryl Trooskin-Zoller, Nathan Black, James Graham.

This game was made possible by a total of one hundred ninety-four patrons.
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