

Dirty Laundry By Jason Louis Feldstein

A melodramatic game about the surrealness of family

Ever think about how people sometimes call friends “the family you choose”? That’s because, save your significant other(s) and any adopted children, your “actual” family is a bunch of people you *didn’t* choose. And most people have those “special” times of year when the whole family gets together, whether they want to or not. It’s why some people feel dread when holidays roll around. “Conventional wisdom” says the best way to these obligatory gatherings is to smile, keep your head down, and ignore Uncle Bill’s MAGA hat and xenophobic comments about the Latino weatherman. But where’s the fun in that? Sometimes, some over-the-top family drama can really get the blood pumping.

Dirty Laundry is an alchemical (in the Jungian sense), collaborative storytelling game, for players who want to get in touch with their inner creative voice and break on through to the other side of limiting behavior patterns and assumptions. It’s about smashing old expectations for holiday gatherings, so that new ones are free to take root. Sooner or later, whether deliberately or accidentally, our lives become the stories that we weave. It’s also about telling the story of a family no reasonable person would ever want to be part of. This game pokes fun at common tropes and stereotypes of “that one family member nobody really likes” by building a family in which each person has their own particular brand of obnoxious.

This game does require being comfortable with heated in-character conflict, or at minimum, a willingness to speak your character’s mind freely. It is equally suited to both experienced gamers, and any new player willing to commit to being a jerk for a while. A good game session should leave the players feeling refreshed, inspired, amused, and/or thinking about their real-world family members in a new way.

What You Will Need:

- Four to ten players.** If you have more than eight who want to play, consider splitting into two groups, or creating a kids’ table and an adults’ table at the same gathering.
- A large table, and some chairs for everyone to sit in.**
- A tablecloth.** The uglier the fabric, the better.
- Note cards or half-sheets of paper, and pens,** to write down details about your character’s personality and relationships.
- Adhesive name tags** to write character names.
- Some plates, cups, and utensils.**
- Food and drink.** No need to be super-fancy. Just be sure to include protein, carbs, and something to wash them down. This is a family dinner, and arguing can be hungry work.

How To Play:

- 1. Set up the table with food and drink (or empty plates, cups, and utensils).** If your plates and cups are left empty, use a pen to write on each plate what kind of food it represents.
- 2. Give everyone a pen, and two note cards or half-sheets of paper.** Keep one note card handy for writing down character details later. Use the other note card to write down any specific topics or situations that you would prefer to avoid in this game. Leave out your name. Collect these cards from each player, shuffle them up, and pass them around for everyone to read. This sets the list of topics that violate the group content standards for this game session. Topics that many people prefer not to joke about - sexual assault, child abuse, or animal abuse, for example - should normally be on this list, whether specifically mentioned by someone or not.
- 2. Choose a character from the sample characters, or write your own.** Some players will prefer to play someone similar either to themselves, or a person (or type of person) they know all too well. Others may enjoy the challenge of playing someone totally unfamiliar.

With the exception of Yenta, all sample characters have gender-neutral names. Feel free to change them if you like. (You don’t have to keep any of them Jewish, either. That’s just my family.)

If you want to make your own character, all you need to keep in mind is exactly *how* and *why* they are awful to be around, and how that horribleness differs from the other family members’. Write your character’s name on a name tag, and put it on your chest or lapel.

At least one person should play a “straight man” or “voice of reason” character such as Casey or Mel (each marked with a *). This is a type of character who tries to talk a little sense into the rest of the family, becoming more upset, outraged, or frustrated when it inevitably fails. This gives everyone a viewpoint character with a more reasonable sensibility, to empathize and contrast with.

3. Choose a host, and figure out your family tree. This is how it will become clear which relative might have ruined your childhood, stolen your spouse, stuck your parents in that musty nursing home, let your dog run away, crashed their car into your house, etc.

- a. Starting with the host, everyone announces their character's name and tells a little about their personality. Write down these names on a note card or half-sheet of paper, one per line, with the words "is my _____" after each one.
- b. Each player declares how they are related to either the host, or someone else at the table. Any kind of relationship is fine - parent, grandparent, child, aunt, uncle, child, spouse, ex-spouse - as long as the other player agrees.
- c. As the relationships are decided, fill in the blanks in next to "[Name] is my _____" on your sheet or card. Some of these may be several words ("Quinn is my sister's ex-husband" or "Mel is my stepfather's aunt").

Example: Casey's and Sandy's players agree Casey will be Sandy's daughter.

Casey's player writes "Sandy is my father", and Sandy's player writes "Casey is my daughter".

Later, Casey's and Jamie's players agree Jamie is Casey's son. Casey's player writes "Jamie is my son", Jamie's writes "Casey is my mother" and "Sandy is my grandmother", and Sandy's writes "Jamie is my grandson."

- d. Create a visual family tree and place it in the middle of the table, if the players prefer to have one.

4. Choose a holiday for the gathering. I suggest Thanksgiving, Christmas, or Passover, but use any holiday the players are familiar with.

5. Bicker, complain, snipe, and be generally awful to each other. Interrupting others, or talking over them, can be normal, but some groups may be more reserved or subtle with their arguments and accusations. Side conversations also tend to happen with larger groups. These interactions should flow naturally from the characters' personalities and family relationships. If players feel stuck or prefer a little more direction, the following rules may be helpful:

The Rules:

1. Respect and abide by the group content standards. After they are set (step 1 in How To Play, above), write them down on one side of a note card. These standards are an agreement between all the players. They should be respected and followed, whether or not they seem logical to you personally. If you find you have accidentally strayed into one of these topics, stop talking and either place a hand over your mouth, or excuse yourself from the table to use the bathroom. Other players may flash a "C" shaped hand signal to alert you.

2. If someone else says something happened, then it happened... but maybe not exactly the way they remember. "Yes, and..." or "yes, but..." open doors. "No" closes them. Every character in this game is a horrible person, so there's no need to defend their honor. They don't have any. Feel free to disagree about as many of the details as you want, because that creates drama. But some version of the event the other character mentioned did happen. Otherwise, the two of you have nothing to argue about.

Gameplay tips:

Choose your relationships for drama. The New Age loser could be a good rebellious child for the pushy zealot. The busybody and the sassy septuagenarian might be siblings... or spouses. The best family ties usually start with, "Hey, wouldn't it be fun if...?"

Be obnoxious. Accuse others of lying, cheating, stealing, neglect, or other sleazy behavior. Whine. Complain. Manipulate. Betray. Interrupting, shouting, or talking over others can add to the fun, as long as quieter players are still able to get a word in. Side conversations can help with that.

Let your imagination guide you. Use free association. While staying within the content standards, use whatever ideas pop into your head. This keeps the story flowing, so that everyone can add details.

Usually it's best to blame someone else (for whatever!), unless taking responsibility makes you look even worse. Likewise, being polite or friendly usually makes the most sense if you're trying to make someone else jealous, or otherwise use your "friend" against them.

No need to try to be funny. Like a TV sitcom or comedic play, the humor in *Dirty Laundry* comes from the interplay and tension between the characters' desires, annoying habits, and personality quirks. Focus on portraying your character and relationships, and the humor will come.

How to End the Game:

Ending 1: The game ends when everyone is done eating, and/or the host decides to kick them out. (Usually no more than about 100 minutes.)

Ending 2: The game ends when everyone is tired of fighting, or (hopefully) can't breathe from too much laughter.

Sample Characters

Yenta the Busybody

Bio: She's all up in your business, and she always has been. Yenta is the family gossip queen. She has absolutely zero shame about it. In fact, she's proud of her ability to figure out secrets nobody wants her to know.

Motivations: To appear a good listener, so she can uncover whatever you don't want her to know. To judge people while seeming sweet and concerned..

Catchphrase: "Your secret's safe with me, dear. Who would I tell?"

Quote: "Wait till you hear the latest dirt from synagogue. So juicy... 'scandal' doesn't even cover it. By the way, are you still living in sin with that plumber? I know a nice doctor I can set you up with."

"Not Prejudiced" Frankie

Bio: Frankie isn't racist or homophobic. Honest. Frankie claims to have many friends who are gay, trans, or people of color... but no one in the family has ever seen or talked to them.

Motivations: To say bigoted things in a "nice" way. To seem open-minded, without actually changing your mind..

Catchphrases: "I'm not racist, but..." "Oh, come on. You know I didn't mean it *that* way. Lighten up, will ya?" "Some of my best friends are _____."

Quote: "It's great to see you after so long! Great news: I've decided to forgive you for voting for the Kenyan Muslim pinko fairy. Let me hang up that coat for you."

Quinn the Party Animal

Bio: Quinn is so chill and laid-back, the rest of the family could almost forgive a perpetual lifestyle of booze, cruising for casual sex partners, and then never calling any of them back. Also, Quinn calls everyone "bro" or "dude". All the time.

Motivations: To relax. To get drunk. To get laid by someone hot (or anyone, if drunk enough). To convince others to do the same.

Catchphrase: "Which way is the keg?", "Let's go back to my room and 'study'", "Spring break, woohoo!!!!!"

Quote: "Hey, bro! I'm wearing this sweater you knitted for me, bro! Best grandma ever. Nah, I'm still not married. Not done playing the field, y'know? It is what it is."

Sandy the Sassy Septuagenarian

Bio: To Sandy, being old means getting to tell you exactly what's wrong with you and your choices, and expecting you to be grateful for the service. Sandy is known for backhanded compliments.

Motivations: To be witty at everyone else's expense. To tell you all of your flaws and how you need to fix them. To throw as much shade as she can.

Catchphrase: "Oh, come on. Stop crying already. You should appreciate having one person willing to tell you the ugly truth."

Quote: "Those clothes are stylish, but they make you look fat. You really should cover those arms until you lose a few more pounds. Here, wrap this towel around your shoulders. Much better."

Leslie the Pusy Zealot

Bio: Leslie is pious to a fault, where "pious" is defined as "obligated by God to condemn everyone who isn't exactly like me, all the time". Leslie insists on saying grace . . . and making it long and preachy..

Motivations: To be literally holier than thou. To act kind and charitable without actually sacrificing anything. To be devout enough that God will shower him with riches.

Catchphrases: "Love the sinner, hate the sin", "Forgive them, Lord, for they know not what they do", "I'll pray for you."

Quote: "Of course I don't judge your lifestyle. But God does want me to remind you that you're going to burn in hell for all eternity."

Jamie the Corporate Stooge

Bio: Jamie is driven, determined, and a textbook workaholic, obsessed with efficiency and effectiveness. Jamie likes to use corporate buzzwords, whether or not they are appropriate.

Motivations: To become filthy rich. To be the best, most valued member of any group, by any means necessary. To fill up every waking hour with work and convince others to do the same.

Catchphrases: "synergy", "strategize", "liaise", "project management", or anything else you might find on www.cipsum.com

Quote: "That's a nice story, but cut to the chase. Time is money, and I have somewhere to be later. Ugh, nobody here has any ambition."

Morgan the New Age Loser

Bio: Morgan is a smelly, burned-out stoner who tries to seem profound. Morgan likes to insult other people for not being "enlightened", whatever that term happens to mean today.

Motivations: To cover up how much of a loser you are, by regurgitating fluffy truisms. To seem like the most spiritual person in the room. To get others to let you smoke their weed or eat their acid.

Catchphrases: "sheeple", "raw vegan", "energy", "vibrations", "chakras", or almost anything from <http://sebpearce.com/bullshit/>.

Quote: "No need to get all aggro just because I called you a sheeple. You gotta chill and try to raise that vibration. Here, take some deep breaths and have one of my famous 'special' brownies."

Taylor the Bratty Genius

Bio: Taylor is the smartest kid in school, and needs to remind everyone of it as often as possible. Taylor is best known for talking down to just about everyone.

Motivations: To insult people with words too big for them to understand. To make everyone else in the room feel like an idiot. To use intelligence to draw others into mind games.

Catchphrases: "We can't talk about this until you read [philosopher's name]", "Everyone over 25 is a mindless drone." "I want a 3D printer for my birthday. Do you hear me?!?"

Quote: "I'm only fourteen, and even I know what you said was stupid. I bet I'm the only one here who even edits Wikipedia at all."

Casey the Pushover *	Mel the Out-of-Touch Parent *
<p>Bio: Casey is by far the nicest of the bunch, but that's only of rampant insecurity that leaves little room for an actual personality. Casey is a sycophant, a people pleaser, and a natural enabler.</p> <p>Motivations: To get everyone to like you, no matter how impossible that might seem. To agree with any opinion the other person states or implies. To get everyone to be nice to each other . . . somehow.</p> <p>Catchphrases: "You are so right." "I never thought about it that way before. How insightful." "My favorite color has always been [whatever color the other person is wearing the most of]."</p> <p>Quote: "Um, excuse me. Somebody? I hate to be a pest, but nobody has given me permission to use the bathroom in two days. I'm about to burst over here. Sorry to interrupt."</p>	<p>Bio: Mel is a well-meaning but selfish parent and spouse: bar on Friday nights, country club on Saturday, TV all day Sunday. Mel's sole contribution to the family is putting food on the table.</p> <p>Motivations: To get others to acknowledge that you know best. To shut down the hogwash everyone else is spewing. To make everyone groan with your sense of humor.</p> <p>Catchphrases: "Stop _____. Act like an adult!" "Lemme tell you something, lady / mister..." "Back in my day..." "Nobody in their right mind would ever..." Also, bad puns and cheesy jokes.</p> <p>Quote: "You kids today have got no respect for your elders. Back in my day, we had to walk three miles in ankle-deep snow to get to school. Uphill. Both ways... Hey, why are you all smirking?!?"</p>

Additional Character Ideas

Angsty Teenaged Goth or Emo Kid	Old-Fashioned Grandparent (<i>bubbe, abuelo, yiayia, etc.</i>)
Tin-Foil-Hat Conspiracy Theorist	Shocking Deviant Weirdo
Overbearing "Helicopter" Parent	Passive-Aggressive In-Law(s)
Uncontrollable Toddler	Health / Fitness Fanatic
Shallow, Vacuous Arm-Candy	Heartless, Stuck-up Rich Person
Tyrannical Spoiled Child	Celebrity-Obsessed Fanboy / Fangirl

Variations on Gameplay

Random Acts of Awfulness - Cut up the sample character cards, shuffle them, and deal them out to the players at random.

Passive-Aggressive Secret Santa - Everyone brings a small but insulting gift. Give someone soap instead of calling them smelly. Or give them a pocket dictionary, instead of questioning their intelligence. How about a nice stick for the corporate tool to shove you-know-where...?

Pants On Fire - When everyone else at the table should know your character is lying, place a hand on your head in the shape of an "L".

Bored Game - If everyone's done eating but not done playing, consider playing a board game such as Monopoly, Clue, or The Game of Life as a family. Just like you have every year for the past five... or ten... or more. Everyone is so over it, but they play because it's tradition.

Alternate Universe - Select your characters from a fictional family or group. Perhaps they are all Skywalkers (Star Wars), Lannisters (Game of Thrones), Weasleys (Harry Potter), registered companions (Firefly), or X-Men (Marvel). Be sure to exaggerate their existing personality flaws.

Backyard Brawl - Bring contact-safe weapons, such as foam swords or Nerf guns. After dinner, settle your differences the old-fashioned way.

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