

The Long Drive Back from Busan

A game about ambition, sacrifice, found family, and k-pop. Created by Clio Yun-su Davis.

Players: 5 - 7 who play band members and 1 facilitator who plays their manager.

Materials: Name tags, markers, one four-sided die, a bottle, a phone that can record video, paper, a pen, as many seats as there are players.

Space: If using chairs, arrange them so that they resemble the inside of a van, with pairs of seats in two rows and an aisle between them. If available furniture doesn't allow for this, try to arrange things so that the seating resembles the L-shaped interior of a limousine. When it's time for the mini scenes that take place at the festival to play out, the playing area should be cleared.

CW: Emotional abuse, eating disorders, body shaming, depression.

INTRODUCTION

The Korean entertainment industry is worth billions of dollars, but only a small fraction of aspiring k-pop stars in the trainee system become idols. In order to achieve their dreams of stardom, trainees must leave their families behind and live their lives according to the strict rules their agencies set for them.

CHORD5 (or CHORD6, or 7 depending on how many people are playing members of the group), a male idol group, debuted three years ago and were an instant success after two years of nonstop training together. A product of Diamond Entertainment, a famous talent and entertainment agency, CHORD has enjoyed praise and attention from fans and critics alike for their wild and energetic image and sound. The price they have paid for it is high - as is common, it is in their contracts that they must maintain a certain weight and appearance, and they are not allowed to date. They are trained in how to speak to the media and fans, which requires revealing just enough information to be relatable without really showing their private lives. It also requires never speaking poorly of their agency.

The group has hit a rough patch. Their last mini album sold poorly, and they haven't been ranking as well in the charts as they used to. If things continue on like this, Diamond Entertainment may very well force them to disband. They have been invited to perform at Busan Music Forever Festival which will be broadcast across the nation, and the hope is that they will win the fans over again with an explosive performance.

Notes on Playing a Korean If You Are Not Korean

This game was written for players of all ethnicities and genders. The characters are all young Korean men, with one of them, Max, being Korean American. Knowledge of the Korean entertainment industry, Korean culture, and the Korean language beyond what is covered in this document is not required. In fact, tidbits of cultural information that are irrelevant to a scene should not be brought up, and the use of Korean vocabulary is discouraged. This is in order to both keep the game friendly to those who are less familiar with Korean entertainment, and to try to prevent anything insensitive from being said. The focus should be on playing people whose dedication to this band binds them together for better or worse, not on how to best show that they are Korean.

Here are some examples of appropriate and inappropriate ways to incorporate Korean cultural knowledge into the game:

Appropriate: "I'm nervous because Shinee are going to be there and last time I tried to talk to them, I choked up."

Inappropriate: "Aigoo, our hyungs from Shinee are going to be there and last time I tried to talk to them I was like 'Omo! Otoke???'"

Appropriate: "That one crazy fan was at my family's restaurant again when I just wanted to eat dinner with my mom."

Inappropriate: "That sasaeng was at my family's restaurant again when I just wanted to eat bulgogi and kimchi with my omma."

This is not a win or lose game, but if any player says the word “kimchi,” they automatically lose. Additionally, please do not incorporate bowing as a greeting or a sign of respect, as this is a gesture that is commonly overdone when “playing Korean” and can come off as a parody.

SAFETY

This game uses the cut, brake, and OK check-in mechanics. Call “cut” if you need the scene to stop immediately for your emotional safety, or if you see that somebody else is in distress. Call “brake” to signal to people to de-escalate a scene so you can easily role-play your exit from it. Touch boundaries should be negotiated before the start of the game, though consent for physical contact can always be withdrawn during the game. Description of the OK check-in mechanic can be found here: <https://participationsafety.wordpress.com/2016/09/09/toolkit-the-ok-check-in/>

CHARACTERS

Minsoo (Essential) - The dutiful leader of the group. 24 years old. Strengths: singing/dancing. Minsoo is the most responsible member of group and takes his role as leader very seriously, doing his best to check in on everyone and keep them out of trouble. CHORD’s fans always joke that he is the father of the band. After turning 24, he has started to worry about what he will do when he ages out of the industry. He does own a successful restaurant that his family helps run, but it is expected that as he ages and his popularity fades, so will that of the restaurant. His desire is to break into the business side of the entertainment industry as a producer so he can one day be the one truly in charge. His fear is that he will not be able to branch out into another profession and will have no meaningful existence after his career as an idol is over.

T-Rex (Essential) - The most loved. 23 years old. Strengths: rapping/looks. He writes all his own rap sections for CHORD’s songs and is the fan favorite, which he pretends to be modest about. Though it’s against the rules, he has a secret girlfriend, Mina of the hit group Summer Girls. They will also be performing at the Busan Music Forever Festival. His relationship with Mina started as a casual flirtation that grew into a meaningful attachment when they bonded over their passion for and frustration with their careers. His bandmates know about this relationship, but Manager Seongmin only suspects. It would be a disaster if it was exposed, as a huge part of any idol’s appeal is their perceived availability to the fans. T-Rex’s desire is to be well-liked by everyone, especially the guys from the more established and successful groups. His fear is that Diamond Entertainment and/or the press will find out about his girlfriend and it will destroy both his career and their relationship.

Taehan (Essential) - The charming baby of the group. 19 years old. Strengths: singing/composing. Taehan became a trainee with Diamond Entertainment at the age of 10. Perhaps the most ambitious of the group, Taehan practices the choreography and his singing in the studio after hours almost every day and writes many of CHORD’s songs. Part of the reason he practices so much, however, is because his dancing still leaves something to be desired. He injured his ankle a month ago by pushing himself (and being pushed) too hard, which has put a further strain on his ability to dance. He is beloved by fans for his cuteness and naiveté, both which are at least somewhat manufactured, as he can be incredibly sassy and competitive when the cameras are off. His desire is to start on the path to becoming a solo artist. His fear is that no amount of practice will make his dancing good enough for him to break away from the group and have the spotlight to himself.

N.O.V.A (Essential) - The troublemaker. 21 years old. Strengths: rapping/dancing. N.O.V.A is the goofy rebel of the group and has a hard time following instructions. He is sometimes accused of being a slacker. It’s a wonder that he hasn’t been kicked out by Diamond Entertainment yet. N.O.V.A misses his family terribly, especially his grandmother who helped raise him and is now very sick. Because of their busy schedule, he has not been allowed to visit her since she became ill, which has exacerbated his depression. He occasionally treats his depression with marijuana, which would be a huge career-jeopardizing scandal if it were found out by Diamond Entertainment or the press. His desire is to be accepted and loved by his bandmates just as he is, not by becoming more serious and rule-abiding. His fear is that his grandmother will pass away without him being able to visit her and say goodbye.

Max (Essential) - The beautiful jerk. 23 years old. Strengths: singing/looks. Max is widely considered the most attractive member of the group, as well as the most aloof. He was street cast in Los Angeles at the age of twelve, and his family moved back to Seoul to support his goal of becoming an idol. He was mostly working as a model before joining CHORD, and is painfully aware of how visually appealing he is. Out of everyone in the group, he is the most judgmental and critical, even surpassing Manager Seongmin at times. He has more obsessive fans who stalk him than the other members, and has difficulty tolerating them because he highly values his privacy. Recently there was an incident in which he

shouted at a fan in public for stalking him. His desire is to break into acting in Korean dramas to prove he can do anything. His fear is that one of his temper tantrums will be seen/recorded by the wrong people and his fans will be outraged.

Heewon - The quiet one. 20 years old. Strengths: singing/composing. Heewon is extremely talented and dedicated, but has a hard time getting attention when so many others are competing for the limelight. He is also known as “the chubby one” of the group, and Diamond Entertainment has him on a strict diet which Manager Seongmin enforces. He consistently apologizes for any perceived faults of his and promises he will do better. Heewon is passionate about songwriting and is very good at it, but several of his songs have been rejected by the producers because they are too sweet and don’t fit the mature and rebellious image the group is going for currently. He calls home for support a lot. His desire is to have his songwriting abilities recognized and to have his songs used in CHORD’s next mini album. His fear is that the stress of constant practicing, dieting, and exercise will take its toll and he will be unable to meet the expectations set for him, therefore disappointing his bandmates, the company, his family, and his fans.

Sangbin - The sycophant. 22 years old. Strengths: singing/dancing. Sangbin has loved performing ever since he was little and has fought hard to become an idol. He failed several auditions as a kid until he finally made it into Diamond Entertainment at the age of 15. He is always trying to make himself look good, even if it means throwing the other members of CHORD under the bus. He has a history of tattling on his bandmates to Manager Seongmin and trying to one-up everybody. Much to his despair, he has always had a tendency to blend into the background and get ignored during interviews and fan meets. As he sees it, being an idol is the only option for him, as there is nothing else he would want to do. His desire is to get recognition from the fans and to hear he is somebody’s favorite. His fear is that it wouldn’t matter to the group, the agency, or the fans if he decided he was going to leave CHORD.

Manager Seongmin - The overseer. 29 years old. Manager Seongmin is very business-focused and sees it as his personal responsibility to make sure the boys of CHORD are constantly performing at their best, whether that’s on stage or off. He loves his job, but is constantly worried that his bosses at Diamond Entertainment will blame him for CHORD’s weaknesses. Because of South Korea’s conscription laws, he will have to enlist in the army in a couple months and serve for two years. He is not looking forward to this and may be taking out some of his frustration on the boys. The boys may be looking forward to his departure or anxious about who his replacement might be.

PLAYING THE GAME

Intro, Character Selection, and Relationship Building (25 minutes suggested)

After the facilitator reads the introduction, notes on playing a Korean, and safety instructions aloud, the players choose their characters. The first five characters must be cast, and the others are available if there are more players. Make sure to use name tags!

Once characters are chosen and their descriptions read out to the group, players take turns playing spin the bottle to select their confidants and rivals. Minsoo takes the first turn. The first person the bottle lands on is his confidant, the second one his rival. If it lands on the same person, spin again. The players should take a minute to determine the nature and origin of this confidant relationship, and then the rival relationship. For instance, Minsoo could be a mentor figure for Taehan because Taehan is the baby of the group and asked for help back when they were trainees, and have a rivalry with T-Rex because he’s grown to be the most loved even though he isn’t the leader. Minsoo then steps out of the circle because he has both his relationships established and passes the bottle to the next player.

When a player has both their confidant and rival relationships established, they step out of the circle even if they haven’t spun the bottle. If at the end of this process there are not enough people left to form the final relationships, all the players reform the circle so that everyone can get both of their relationships. It’s okay if a character has more than one confidant or rival.

The facilitator should keep notes on these relationships.

The Drive to Busan (15 minutes suggested)

This scene takes place in the van or limousine on the way to the Busan Music Forever Festival. The boys would be taking the train, except they are trying to avoid Max’s obsessive fans after an incident where he yelled at one of them in public for stalking him. The drive from Seoul to Busan is four and a half hours long.

This is when the boys get to show how invested (or how not invested) they are in their careers, and talk amongst themselves about their anxieties and hopes.

Everyone arranges themselves in the van (or limo), then play begins with Manager Seongmin telling everyone that he needs to take a short video of them talking to their fans about how excited they are for the festival to post on social

media. After the video is done, Manager Seongmin informs the group that they need to practice their responses to interview questions about the state of their career so that they don't slip up. Manager Seongmin pretends to interview them by grilling the boys on their new music video and their hopes for the future, correcting them if they don't sound confident, happy, or cool enough. He then decides to take a nap, leaving the boys to talk amongst themselves (the facilitator should exit the scene and observe). The facilitator ends the scene (and future scenes) by calling for last lines and then cut.

Busan Music Forever Festival (40 minutes suggested)

This section is composed of a series of mini scenes depicting the events of the festival. The facilitator and players can call for a monologue from anyone during these scenes.

To determine how CHORD's performance goes, Minsoo's player rolls the four-sided die. If they roll a 1, their performance was amazing and got a very enthusiastic reaction. If they roll a 2, their performance was pretty good and got a positive reaction. If they roll a 3, their performance was all right and got a tepid reaction. If they roll a 4, their performance was a disaster and got a polite but pitying reaction. The players determine the details of how their performance played out.

Each player then rolls the four-sided die to determine what happens to them at the festival, with 1 resulting in the best outcome and 4 resulting in the worst. If they roll a 1, they play a scene in which their desire is realized in some way. If they roll a 2, they play a scene in which they come closer to having that desire realized. If they roll a three, they play a scene in which their fear is reinforced. If they roll a 4, they play a scene in which their fear is realized in some way. These scenes can take place before or after their performance.

For example, if T-Rex (who wants to be liked by famous people and is afraid of having his secret relationship found out) rolls a 1, he can play a scene in which a couple members from an even more famous group approach him to talk to him about how great his performance at the festival was and to invite him to hang out sometime. If he rolls a 2, he can play a scene in which he crosses paths with someone from that group who tells him they liked CHORD's new music video. If he rolls a 3, he can play a scene in which he meets up with his girlfriend in secret and their intimate conversation is overheard, but they convince the eavesdropper not to say anything. If he rolls a 4, he can play a scene in which he and his girlfriend are found out and pictures of them start showing up online.

Each scene should only have 2 - 4 people in it. Other players can play their own characters or other characters depending on what the scene calls for and what the facilitator and players decide. It is encouraged that confidants and/or rivals be included where appropriate.

The Drive Back from Busan (15 minutes suggested)

This scene takes place back in the van the day after the festival. This is when the boys brag about their experiences and lament their misfortunes, support each other and call each other out on bad behavior, make plans for the future and question the decisions they've made.

The scene starts with a disappointed Manager Seongmin asking the boys how they think they did. No matter how well things went, he will insist they could and should have been much better. He may point out the flaws of each of the boys. He then interrupts this scolding to take another cheerful video for social media, telling the boys to thank their fans for coming and supporting them.

Manager Seongmin then announces he is taking a nap and that the boys should discuss whose fault their failure was and what they are going to do differently to ensure the future success of the group. The facilitator exits the scene to observe and calls for monologues as they see fit.

The facilitator ends the scene by calling for last lines and then cut.

Closing Monologues (5 - 10 minutes suggested)

At the end of the game, each of the characters gives a short monologue about whether they believe getting to be an idol is worth it despite everything they've sacrificed.

DEBRIEF (15 minutes suggested)

The debrief is optional but players are strongly encouraged to participate. There are three steps to the debrief:

1. De-roleing Part I: Players go around in a circle removing their name tag, stating their character name and then their real name, and sharing a fun real life fact about themselves.
2. Reflecting: Players share the moment that was most meaningful to them, a piece of advice they think their character would give them, and a piece of advice they would give their character.
3. De-roleing Part II: Players share something they're looking forward to doing in the next few days.