

# ONE SMALL STEP

By Adam Flynn

*We went to the moon once. We don't go there anymore.*

*This game is about exploring what happened, how we got there, what it was like, and why we did it in the first place.*

## SETUP

**Players:** 2-9 players (1-8 plus one documentarian/facilitator)

**Time to play:** 10-20 minutes for preparation, 45-90 minutes for play

**Suggested materials:** Name badges or index cards, and a marker.<sup>1</sup> Optional: 1 large and 2 small tokens (like dice, beads, or challenge coins) per player.

**Playspace setup:** At least two chairs angled towards each other, and an additional open space for re-enactments.

This game is best done wearing warm sweaters in a room that's a bit colder than room temperature, to suggest the loneliness of the void and the fragility of one's protection against it. If you have the means to put on music, Brian Eno's album *Apollo* is highly recommended once play begins.

## THINGS THAT ARE TRUE IN THIS GAME

[Read this out loud:]

- *Within living history, a civilization mounted an ambitious, decade-long effort to send a small, highly-trained team to the nearest celestial body and back. It was an immensely complicated undertaking, representing an unprecedented commitment of resources and brainpower.*
- *The nearby celestial body (which for the purposes of this game shall be called THE MOON) holds a longtime mythic resonance, and the events of the mission were followed by the entire species. It was a generational event; everyone remembers where they were when they heard about it.*
- *After some time, missions ceased, and the capacity to visit the moon has since atrophied and withered.*
- *The characters are former participants in the venture, now in the autumn of their years. (If playing as humans, assume 20-40 years since the events in question.) They have agreed to speak to a documentarian to record their experiences and memories.*

Everything else is up for collective creation (See SETTINGS below.)

While the mission(s) were highly documented, there are always anomalous events, unmentioned moments, and closely-kept secrets that it's finally time to break silence on. While it's entirely possible that different people will have different memories of "how it happened," try to observe the improv principles of "yes and" while working to build out your story. The one exception to this is that **it can't ALL have been faked**. There may have been secret failed missions, or certain embellishments made by the powers that be, but at least some of you really did go somewhere, and experience something truly special.

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<sup>1</sup> The game should work as a blackbox experience, but if you want props, here are some suggestions: A full-headed helmet or two, a headset, flexible dryer tubing, a broom handle, pillows, round objects of varying sizes, tin cans, a small stepladder.

## SETTINGS

This game is meant to be flexible, as able to depict the techno-modernist triumph of Apollo (or Soyuz) as it might the steampunk exploits of the Baltimore Gun Club or a legendary shamanic journeying undertaken by a confederation of nomadic horse tribes. Here's a default to get started with. You can take it as-is, selectively replace parts of it, or scrap it completely. Aim for some contrast or tension between your two tones.

**The effort was made by** *[a rich, militarily powerful country with a stated ethos of freedom and invention]* **in order to** *[demonstrate superiority over its rival superpower (which also pursued space exploration) through a truly monumental feat]*. **The tone of this story was** *[high modernist with extreme confidence in science and technology]* **but also** *[liberatory and holistic, as images of "the whole earth" inspired psychedelic visions of one-ness.]*

If you're creating your own setting, identify **1-3 things that are true about your moon.** *(Does it have breathable atmosphere? Did it represent a certain god in our mythology? What did it look like in our sky? Etc.)*

## CREATING YOUR CHARACTER

Read this paragraph out loud:

*You were part of a very special set of people. Selected from a vast field of applicants, you spent years preparing for something you only ever got to do once, and it was an arresting, profound experience. This was a life defining event. Taking part in it is a bond you share with the others who went, one that cannot be fully understood by others. People probably know who you are, and it changes how they treat you. Some of the stories you'll be telling in this game, you have told many, many times before. Other things you talk about might be elements of the experience that you've never shared before, or details that didn't fit the official narrative. Take a moment to think about who you were, and what you did.*

Pick **an archetype or a detail** to flesh out your character. Here are some examples to get started:

- Barely survived an accident during the early days of the program
- Had to stay in a secondary role during the mission, and never got to touch its surface
- First on the moon, one of the best known living figures
- Second on the moon, far less remembered
- Known for being on "the one that went wrong."
- Had a very different background from the others
- Averted an unexpected disaster with quick thinking
- Didn't follow instructions, or had to take matters into their own hands
- Transitioned to the support/control staff ("Houston") after their mission
- Known as a practical joker, who had some fun during the mission
- Known for being exceptionally disciplined and tightly wound
- Known as an exceptional pilot
- Personally changed by the experience, even moreso than the others.
- Has never felt at home since returning
- Last to set foot on the moon

Write your **name** (and the thing you're known for, if any) on your nametag. If there are more than 3 players, identify which players were on the same missions together, (and any pertinent details about those missions.) If there's room on your nametags, add your **mission designation**.

After details have been selected, Read this paragraph out loud:

*Finally, take a moment to decide how the years since then have gone. How did you use your fame? How did it affect you? How do you feel about the state of things now? Perhaps you feel a deep need to make sure we go again. Perhaps you feel like it was important to go once, but there are bigger and grander efforts to pursue. Perhaps you feel the resources are better put towards other ends. Finally, think about age, memory, and the future. Like everyone else, you've grown old. Likely your thoughts are turning towards your legacy, how you will be remembered, and the long-term outlook for your species. Take a deep breath, feel your feet on the ground in 1-g, and prepare for play.*

## **ORDER OF PLAY**

The game is meant to capture the feeling of a documentary film (or its technologically appropriate counterpoint in your setting) over five phases: **Training, Takeoff, the Journey, the Landing, and the Return**. This is done through two modes of play: **interviewing** and **re-enactment**.

Interviewing: The facilitator-documentarian will interview the members of the mission group, asking questions. As this is meant to feel more like a documentary than a panel discussion, mission crew are free to answer in fragmentary and evocative ways, and pick up on each other's statements in the style of a montage. The facilitator will have a list of questions for each phase.

If ever your character is **saying something untrue**, signal it by **crossing your arms**, in a T or X shape.

*Optional rule for managing spotlight*: Each player of the mission crew gets two large tokens and one small token (Challenge coins would be ideal), representing one long answer and two short answers. Players toss in their token to give an answer. Short answer tokens are refreshed each phase, while long answer tokens are refreshed once everyone has spoken.

Re-enactment: These are like the visuals we see in the documentary. Once per phase, the facilitator can call for a re-enactment by using the phrase "**Let's roll the tape,**" and quickly setting the scene. One or two players continue in interview-mode, talking about the events in question, while the others act out what happened (this can include speech). This could be archival footage, or flashbacks, but the key point is that no matter what any of the team say, **what we see in the re-enactments is an accurate reflection of what actually happened**. Re-enactors do not have to play their character during the sequence; they could be other NPCs or the mission crew being interviewed. The interviewees are encouraged to take inspiration from what they're seeing, and vice versa. The facilitator may whisper suggestions in any player's ear during the re-enactment, and decides when to end the sequence with the phrase "**That's all we need for now.**"

## SAMPLE QUESTIONS FOR THE FACILITATOR

**Training:** *A civilization bends its collective will towards a goal, and a group of its chosen prepare.*

- How did all this get started? When do you remember first hearing about the effort?
- It took a lot of resources to do all that. Why do you think we committed to it?
- Why did you decide to apply? What was your life like before?
- What was the testing process like? What were they looking for?
- Why do you think you were selected?
- How much competition was there among the group? How much cooperation?
- Everyone knows how intensive the training was. What was that like?

**Takeoff:** *This time it's real, this time you're really going out there.*

- The moment arrived for takeoff. What was going through your head?
- What was it like being part of something so complex?
- One of the mottos we always heard was, "It won't fail because of me." Tell us about that spirit.
- Were you ever afraid?

**The Journey:** *Farther than anyone had gone before, across the void.*

- What was it like to see everything you've ever known, so far away?
- What's something most people don't realize about the journey?
- Tell us about some of the personal items you brought with you.
- How did it compare to what was expected? Were there any surprises on the way?

**Landing:** *A moment etched in memory, and exploration of another world.*

- How was the approach? How different was it from training?
- Everyone remembers those famous words you spoke when you first stepped onto the moon. How much of that was planned?
- What did you do on the surface? What was it like moving around there?
- Did you discover anything you weren't expecting?
- What did you take back?
- What did you leave behind?

**The Return:** *Re-entry and re-integration.*

- When you returned home, did it feel different than it had before you left?
- Did you learn anything about your home? About yourself?
- Think about why we began the effort in the first place. In your opinion, did we succeed in that goal?
- What were the other effects? Was there anything you didn't expect?
- Looking back on it, what do you think it all meant? What do you think they'll say about it in the future?
- Why do you think we stopped going?
- Do you think we'll go again?