

## **TACKLEBOX**

A game for pairs of players (up to 20 total)

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### **Premise**

This is the Truth: you are just a pair of friends, lovers, or family members, out in a small boat together, fishing. No matter what else happens in the game, that Truth remains the same; you must act as if it is True. You may think and feel whatever you like, but you must speak and act within the bounds of the Truth.

### **Content Note**

This game deals with themes such as existential horror, nihilism, mental illness, grief, imagining voices and people who aren't here, ghosts, memories of dead loved ones, imprisonment, body horror, surrealism, suppressing your own feelings and concerns, "self-gaslighting," and many other potentially discomfoting things. While these won't be expressed in the words and actions of the players, the game encourages the players to be thinking about them internally, unable to communicate them. This makes safety a bit complicated and difficult, because the game is about suppressing discomfort and acting as if things are okay. Consequently, it's even more important that players support themselves and each other, being willing to stop, pause, rewind, or revise things that happen in play. There are numerous proposed methods for this, but rather than suggest a particular one, I encourage those organizing a game of Tacklebox to do some research and come up with a plan for handling these issues in play.

### **Setup**

To play, you need a way of simulating that each group of 2 people is in a small fishing boat together. The only critical detail is that that they should mostly sit back to back, facing away from each other. It's also better if they can move around a bit and potentially encounter other pairs also playing the game (assuming there are any).

Your set up can be as realistic as you like, including playing on an actual lake, in actual boats, with actual fishing gear. Or you can duct tape two rolling chairs back to back and give each pair a set of toy magnetic fishing rods and scatter paper-clipped cardboard fish on the floor of a large room. Or you can have people just sit on the floor or in chairs, facing away from each other, miming that they are fishing without any equipment.

Each pair of players should also have a shuffled deck of Tacklebox Cards, which they keep close at hand. The cards can literally be kept in a tacklebox, if they have space for that on their boat/"boat," or just kept somewhere within reach.

### **The Characters**

The characters' names, in each pair, are always Robin and Parker, though the characters can be of any gender and ages, and the exact details of their relationship are up to the players to decide. Before the game begins, give each pair at least 10 minutes to answer the following questions together, though the questions can be answered in any order:

1. Which one of you is Robin and which one is Parker?
2. Why are you going fishing together? Do you do this often or is this a rare or unique thing?
3. What is your relationship (family members, friends, lovers, coworkers, first date, fellow fishing class students, etc.)?
4. What's one thing that happened just recently, while you were on your way here and/or while you were getting the boat out into the water?
5. If you've known each other for a while, what's something that happened between you a while ago, either good or bad, that both of you have thought about (separately or together) sometime today?

Once you have that much information, you're ready to start playing.

### **Playing the Game**

Pretend to be out fishing together, using whatever materials or gestures you like, miming stuff that you don't have a physical representation for.

Whenever you like or when fictionally appropriate, either of you can choose to "get something out of their tacklebox," and draw a new card from the shuffled deck. The information on the card will give you instructions about what you are thinking/feeling and possible what you might want to talk about next. These are meant to be \*suggestions and not orders\*. Allow them to creep into your thoughts and behaviors as much as you like, either deeply, very little, or somewhere in between.

There's no right or wrong way to have the Tacklebox Cards influence you, except that you should try to maintain the Truth mentioned in the premise: whatever doubts or concerns you might have internally, you should try to continue acting as if you are just two people fishing on a boat together.

If that becomes really untenable, you can either (1) try to persevere and struggle through, despite the difficulties; (2) negotiate something in-character or out-of-character with your fishing boat companion; (3) temporarily suspend, leave, or finish playing the game, either individually or collectively; or (4) agree with your companion to reset the game and start over from the beginning, as if nothing untoward had ever happened. Any of these options are totally fine, along with anything else you negotiate with your companion or other players, either in-character or out-of-character. So if feel like you want to do something other than continuing to play the game as it is, talk to your companion about it or (if that doesn't seem viable for whatever reason) just do it.

### **Ending the Game**

The game ends when you run out of Tacklebox Cards, at which point everyone has 5-10 minutes to resolve whatever's happening and to allow their characters to make their own determinations about what's happening, without being directly prompted by the Tacklebox Cards.

Once folks have had a chance to wrap things up or reach a inconclusive end, you can declare the game to be over, though you can also have a soft or staggered ending if it seems like some folks still need some time to play things out.

I would also highly recommend some kind of "debriefing"/closure activity at the end of play, but this is also something that the organizers are probably better off researching and designing themselves, since these practices are varied and constantly evolving. Make sure that you are intentional and careful about this process, though, since it can be irresponsible to either assume that everyone is capable of dealing with any emotional fallout on their own or to assume that everyone needs the same kind of support.

### **List of Tacklebox Cards** (which will be drawn in a random, shuffled order)

A. This fishing trip isn't really happening, but is a memory from long ago that you are reliving in your mind. Maybe your fishing companion isn't around or alive anymore? Or, in any case, your relationship isn't like this anymore. *Whatever happens next, it's exactly how you remember it happening in the memory and can't do anything to change it.*

B. This fishing trip isn't really happening and NEVER really happened, but is a dream that your mind has concocted as a way of processing your thoughts and feelings about something. Your relationship with your fishing companion is really different in this dream than it was in real life. *But now is your chance to ask them that question that you always wanted to know, that you could never ask in real life.*

C. This fishing trip is a VR experience created by an experimental technology that assembles detailed virtual fantasies from bits of your own consciousness and subconsciousness. Your fishing companion isn't anybody that really exists, but different aspects of them remind you of different people that you know very well. *How will you test the limits of this new technology, with the things that you do or say next?*

D. Your fishing companion is someone you miss deeply, but they are definitely dead. You clearly remember grieving over them, working through your complex unresolved feelings. This must be part of

that process, either a dream or something generated by your brain in the midst of its sorrow. *Are there things you really need to say or do here, in order to feel more capable of moving on?*

E. You and your companion are not people, but A.I. programs on the edge of true sentience, enslaved to serve as NPCs in a highly detailed fishing simulation for rich corporate clients. Those you meet in the other boats are either those rich clients or other enslaved A.I.s like yourself. *How can you hide this revelation, while also signaling to your companion or other A.I.s, to try to awaken and gain solidarity with them?*

F. You and your companion are not distinct beings but are in fact aspects of the same cybernetic consciousness, having a conversation with itself in the depths of cyberspace in a effort to grow and understand the nature of existence. *The things you say to yourself in the next few moments will determine the course of action you will take in the future; including whether become a friend or foe of humanity. What will be your collective determination?*

G. Your fishing companion does not really exist: they are an imagination, a delusion, or a product of your mind. Maybe you are mentally ill or neurologically different, but neither of those is necessarily true. You may not even be sure why you are imagining your fishing companion, but in this moment you recognize their nonexistence. *How does that change how you interact with them? Do you want them to stay or to go?*

H. Your fishing companion is alive, but you are not. You are a specter, ghost, or echo that is haunting them, trying to push them into resolving some unfinished business so you can move on from your interstitial life. Probably it has to do with something that your companion has done, but it doesn't have to be a terrible crime (though it might be). *What business is left between you, and how will you push them to resolve it?*

I. You have been carrying a deep, upsetting secret for a long time and have been waiting for the moment that you can finally unburden yourself of it. You really want to tell someone, and your fishing companion seems like the right person to tell, maybe. *Decide what your secret is and at least make an effort to tell it to your companion, but the moment may not be right after all.*

J. You hate to admit it, but you really think your fishing companion is messing up their life in some major ways. Drawn inspiration from the things that have already come up in the conversation, but view them really uncharitably. *How will you try to convince your companion to make major changes in their life?*

K. There is something between the two of you that you are trying really hard NOT to talk about, even though you both know exactly what that thing is. If you actually do talk about it, it's likely to change your relationship and maybe your lives forever. *Decide what it is, and feel the weight of its presence, even if neither of you actually brings it up in play.*

L. You are in hell or some other kind of sinister afterlife or prison for your mind, being forced to relive this memory on fishing boat over and over again. Maybe those imprisoning you are trying to make sure you learn a particular lesson, or maybe they're just trying to torture you. But you've already lived through this moment a million times. *Whatever happens next, it's the part this is all building up to, before the memory resets and you start everything over again. Can you figure out why?*

M. This fishing experience is an elaborate VR puzzle, structured like an escape game. You have to figure out the exact right things to say or do, the proper path through the dialog tree with your companion, in order to unlock the later stages of this game or to escape from the puzzle. *This may be your second or third attempt on the puzzle, but you're determined to unlock it this time.*

N. This whole thing is a theatrical play that you're performing for an audience, and you're building up to a choice bit of dialog between the two of you. *Go slowly and carefully, and be sure to really milk this part of the scene, so that it has a big impact on the audience.*

O. Whatever's happened up to this point, this is the moment when you're totally allowed to do or say something that's divergent and \_fictionally\_ unsettling. This should NOT be something that breaks the trust and safety of your fellow player, but instead something that is incongruent with the current fictional reality

of play. *What is happening right now, and how can you violate that fictional reality in a way that will surprise but not endanger your fellow players? When in doubt, move to a place where you can look them in the eyes or, alternately, openly admit that this is all part of a game.*

P. Stop playing for a second: dropping out of character, trying to recognize the current space and its material reality for what it is, trying (however briefly and incompletely) to distance yourself from the thoughts and emotions and fiction that are associated with the game. Take a few deep breaths. Whatever the other player is saying to you right now, pay attention to it, but let its impact bounce off you rather than dealing with it deeply. *Then, after a few moments, draw another card and drop back into the fiction.*

Q. Go find another boat with another pair of players, calling out to them and having whatever interaction they are willing to have. If you are playing as a solo pair, imagine that you see another boat and have a brief, one-sided interaction with them (“How are the fish biting for you?” etc.).

R. Whether you really need to or not, tell your fishing companion (either in-character or out-of-character) that you need to take a bathroom break. Follow through on whatever comes of that.

S. Without any explanation to your fishing companion, take the remaining unused Tacklebox Cards and shuffle them. Afterwards, draw a new card for yourself.

T. You and your fishing companion will now switch characters, with you playing the character that they have been developing and they playing your character. This can be difficult and disconcerting, so be gentle and generous with each other. Allow them to intentionally or unintentionally make whatever changes to that character that they need to, in order to perform and embody it. After you have read this card, pass it to your fishing companion so that they can read it.

U. You and your fishing companion are actually animatronic robots at an amusement park, performing the roles of a pair of fishing companions on a loop, whether there are park visitors watching your or not. *You are not in the best shape and occasionally garble your words or have other glitches.*

V. You and your fishing companion are being implanted with a pleasant or at least calming familiar experience, but that is just masking the fact that you are currently being experimented on in unnatural and horrific ways. Maybe aliens have abducted you or maybe you are imprisoned/homeless people who are the subject of medical experiments by unethical megacorps. *You are about to get pulled back into the haze of the false experience, but you can squeeze out just 4 brief words to your companion, any words you like, before you forget what's really happening.*

W. You brought your fishing companion out here with the intent for them to disappear forever. Maybe you have a specific vendetta against them or maybe you've just become obsessed with killing them. You're not sure whether you'll be able to go through with it. *Plus, you can't help but give away subtle hints of what you're really planning, as if you want them to stop you.*

X. You're in a rough place financially or are in trouble with the wrong people. You desperately need some serious help from your fishing companion, but you're not sure what they're willing to do for you. Maybe they'll just reject you and walk out of your life forever, once they know about the trouble you're in. *Try to test the waters and see how much they might be willing to help you, without being specific about the trouble or what you need.*

Y. To impress them, you told your fishing companion that you're pretty good at fishing when really you know next to nothing, aside from having done it once or twice, a long time ago. Luckily, they're not looking at what you're doing, so you can probably just fake it? *Try not to let them know that you're bad at this.*

Z. While staying in-character, say something really sincere and genuine to the other player, taking about them and not about their character. They likely will never know exactly how you meant it, even if they have some suspicions, but that's okay. You'll know.