Alone in the Loop

Solo Roleplaying Mysteries

INTRODUCTION. This booklet gives you a set of add on tools to Tales From The Loop that allow you to play without a Game Master, in a genuine solo game.

by Peter Rudin-Burgess

FREE LEAGUE WORKSHOP
WORKSHOP TALES FROM THE LOOP

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SOLO ROLEPLAYING 01

You cannot play a roleplaying game on your own! That is probably one of the most common responses when the topic of solo roleplay comes up. The second is, isn't that just daydreaming, or isn't that just telling a story? Isn't all roleplaying just telling a story? That is an argument for another day.

Solo roleplaying is not just sitting there, writing a story set in your favorite game setting. There is a lot more to it than that.

I am going to split the idea of solo play into two spheres. The first is the rules side of it. The second is the playing or running the mystery side.

SOLO RULES 02

When you are solo playing, most of the time, you are going to use the standard rules from Tales From The Loop. You use the **skills**, you can use your **Pride** just as if you were playing normally. Where things differ is when you would normally ask the Game Master a question about a location or scene. When you start asking questions, special rules come into play. These are designed to prompt your imagination. You then use the prompt and apply it to your current situation to create the answer. Some questions are simple yes-no questions; others are more open-ended. These rules introduce an element to your mysteries that is out of your control, just like it would be with a Game Master trying to put you in trouble.

Once you start your investigation, a new game technique will control the count downs in each location or scene. This puts the drama and tension in the lap of the gods.

But first, you need to be able to ask and answer questions.

QUESTION TIME 03

Asking questions is not too dissimilar to using the magic 8-ball kid's toy. Inside the eight ball was a twenty-sided die, with a suitably vague answer on each face. When you shook the ball, one face would be left showing in the window. You could then try and apply the answer to your question.

YES-NO QUESTIONS

Answering a question is essentially the same as overcoming trouble. You are going to roll a dice pool, and a single success means that the answer was **yes**. No successes mean that the answer was **no**. The more successes you roll, the more emphatic the yes result becomes.

Not all **no** answers are the same. Some are simple, absolute **no**. For example, there is a light on, or there isn't. There are no shades of grey in that question.

How many successes you roll changes the quality of the **yes**, result.

Imagine your kid feels upset, scared, and exhausted. All you want is to get home. Looking up and down the road, you ask if there is a police car in sight. A **no** would indicate there are no police in sight. One success would put a police car there, maybe on the other side of the road, and heading away, but you can still work it into your story. Two successes could put the police on the street heading towards you. Three or more successes mean that it is being driven by Salmon, your father's friend. Salmon is more than willing to drive you home and not ask any more questions, this time.
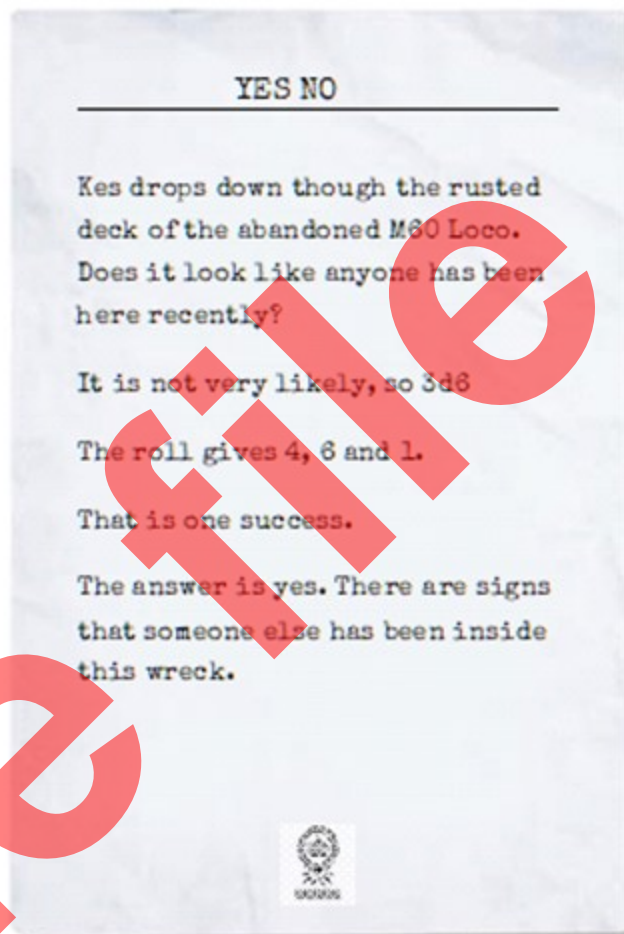
Likelihood

You are much more likely to find a police patrol in Stenhamra than in Färentuna. The town is simply much bigger. To reflect this, if you were asking about the police, you would roll five dice when the chances are very likely to be a **yes**, only three dice when the odds are not very likely, and four dice when the odds lie between this two extremes.

Every die showing 6 counts as one success. Any more than three successes count as the maximum three.

A **no** result should never mean that nothing happens. If you looked up and down the street for a police patrol and did not roll any successes, you don't see a patrol car, but did the NPCs you are trying to get away from gain on you? Did you see, or were you seen by someone you would rather avoid?

It is useful to think of **no** answers as **no because**... and that second part is important. Think of it as **no until you overcome trouble**.

YES NO

Kes drops down though the rusted deck of the abandoned M60 Loco. Does it look like anyone has been here recently?

It is not very likely, so 3d6

The roll gives 4, 6 and 1.

That is one success.

The answer is yes. There are signs that someone else has been inside this wreck.

OPEN-ENDED QUESTIONS

Open-ended questions are those that cannot be answered with a simple yes or no answer. They can be anything from what are two teachers talking about, what is written in a diary, what does someone really wants, or how they are feeling.

These questions are answered using a pair of d66 rolls.

D66

A d66 is two normal six-sided dice, normally of two different colors. One is treated as the 10s and the other as the units. The dice roll for the example in the box out looks like this. The dice with numbers are the tens, dice with pips are the units. Anything that allows you to tell one dice from the other is fine.
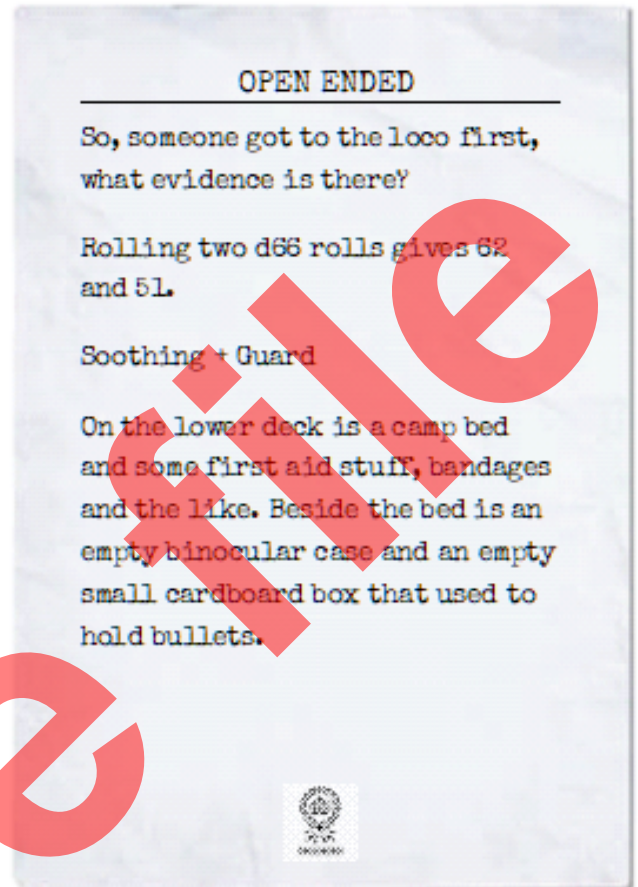
To answer your open-ended question, you roll two dice and get the number. Look up the answer on the Action table.

Ask yourself, does the word you have rolled immediately give you an idea to the answer?

For example, if you were talking to the new girl at school and you wanted to know if she is telling the truth, you could either ask a yes-no question, or you could ask a more leading open-ended question. Then I rolled a 24 and that said Deceiving. For me, that was enough to work with. I did not need anything else. If, on the other hand, I wanted to know more, I can roll the second d66, and that gives me 56 – Junk. It is not just that what she is saying is not true, but she is not a good liar either. Her untruths are obvious for all to see.

These tables give 36 actions and 36 subjects. You do not need to use the prompts as written. One option is to play "Word Association."

You say Deceiving, I say Misleading, you say Junk, I say Collectable. Now the prompt becomes Misleading Collectable. The girl at school has an autograph book, but it looks to me like the autographs could be fake, but maybe she does know Morten Harket?

OPEN ENDED

So, someone got to the loco first, what evidence is there?

Rolling two d66 rolls gives 62 and 51.

Soothing + Guard

On the lower deck is a camp bed and some first aid stuff, bandages and the like. Beside the bed is an empty binocular case and an empty small cardboard box that used to hold bullets.

Action

11 Exposing	21 Compelling	31 Dispelling
12 Hiding	22 Concealing	32 Emboldening
13 Convincing	23 Deafening	33 Expanding
14 Blinding	24 Deceiving	34 Energising
15 Charming	25 Deciphering	35 Enlightening
16 Communicating	26 Disguising	36 Enraging

41 Excruciating	51 Hindering	61 Silencing
42 Foreseeing	52 Paralyzing	62 Soothing
43 Intoxicating	53 Revealing	63 Calling
44 Imprisoning	54 Revolting	64 Terrifying
45 Maddening	55 Screaming	65 Empowering
46 Mesmerizing	56 Shielding	66 Wearying

Subject

11 Bookworm	21 Weirdo	31 Contact
12 Geek	22 Pride	32 Leader
13 Hick	23 Problem	33 Trouble
14 Jock	24 Sneak	34 Adult
15 Popular Kid	25 Force	35 Cheat
16 Trouble Maker	26 Move	36 Help

41 Program	51 Guard	61 Wreck
42 Experiment	52 Intruder	62 Machine
43 Relationship	53 Alarm	63 Robot
44 Fire	54 Garage	64 Cyborg
45 Lake	55 Hospital	65 Mystery
46 Body	56 Junk	66 Murderer

This tool is probably the single hardest skill in all of solo play. This style of table was created with the Mythic Game Master Emulator. The original tables were 200 entries over two tables, giving 10,000 possible combinations, but there was no sense of theme to them. These tables are tailored to the Tales from the Loop settings.

It is a useful exercise to imagine a simple scene, like first entering a locomotive hulk and rolling several pairs of words and seeing how you could interpret different prompts in the same situation to give completely different answers.

It is equally useful to imagine your kid from about 5m away, so you have a movie director's view of the location, characters, and action. This helps you to imagine all the senses and detail of the scene.

BRINGING IT TOGETHER 04

If you are strict with thinking through how you use your skills, and how you attempt to overcome trouble and use the question tools above, you now have the bare bones of how to solo play. This toolset is better suited to the **mystery lands** than to a published mystery. The following tool will start to focus on mysteries and how to play them.

Drama Dice

There is a danger that a solo game could proceed very much like writing a story, where you are thinking too far ahead, and events follow are plan you have created, even unwittingly.

There will be situations and events that may happen because of your actions or even because of your lack of action. In a Mystery, there is usually a **Countdown**. The Drama Dice is are going to drive the steps of that countdown, but also control smaller, specific events that are almost out of your control.

Drama dice use a dice pool. Typically three to five dice. For a countdown or retribution count down, use as many dice as there are steps in the countdown.

Countdowns

When the events that should or could trigger the countdown start. Roll the dice pool. If you get a success, the first event on the list happens.

Discard one die from the countdown.

From this point on, each time your story advances, either find a clue, you visit a different location or overcome trouble, or you hit the event that could trigger a new step on a retribution countdown, you re-roll the dice pool. If you get a success, you proceed to the next step on the countdown.

Dramatic Scenes

A dramatic scene is one where something bad may happen. Sneaking around the school at night may or may not alert the caretaker. Breaking into the scrap yard may wake the guard dog.

You start with three dice in your dice pool. Every time you either do something that could raise the alarm, be discovered, or wake the dog, you roll the dice pool. If you fail a **sneak** test when trying to move silently or a **tinker** test when trying to open a lock, you roll your dice pool.

Each time you roll a success, you discard the dice. As you move around, look for clues, and search for evidence, every failure or slip may diminish your dice pool.

When there are no dice left, the thing you hoped would not happen, has happened. The dog wakes up, the caretaker saw you turn on a light, or heard a floorboard creak, or the police patrol saw a gate that should have been locked swing open.

With the dice pool, you never know when that will happen, so every failure could be the one. As your pool shrinks, the chances of discovery or disaster increase.

RUNNING A MYSTERY 05

Mysteries are a combination of locations, scenes, clues, NPCs, and countdowns. If you are going to run a campaign like The Four Seasons of Mad Science you should treat each mystery in the campaign as a separate entity.

PREPARING A MYSTERY

Each mystery comes with a small mind map of locations and routes to the showdown. Write a post-it note or index card for each location, so you can rearrange them if needed.

Make sure to note and highlight specific **Trouble** that is mentioned in the text.

Now create a note or card for each NPC. These are separate, so you can move NPCs around as necessary.

You are going to play each scene, with intervening scenes as you move through the mystery. The additional scenes can be a mix of everyday life and scenes suggested by questions and answers, and your own need to visit your hideout, for example.

Additional NPCs.

You may want to create one or two additional kids as NPCs. It is useful to have someone that your kid can turn to. No kid can do everything, and it could be that if you have a bookworm friend, they could go and do some research for you while you are doing something else.

Your Hideout

Create three additional kids who have different skillsets to yourself. These are your support network. Make them kids you would quite like to play. If your central kid gets caught or kidnapped, you can play one of these kids to mount a rescue. Label them Kid A to C and give them a post-it note or index card.

When you visit your hideout roll on the table below.

D6	Who is there
1	Kid A
2	Kid B
3	Kid C
4	Kids A & B
5	Kids B & C
6	Kids A & C

There will always be someone there when you get to your hideout, but never everyone. You can always ask a Geek friend to take a look at a strange piece of tech that you have found, or maybe talk about your feelings until you are less upset.

Read the Mystery

You must read through the Mystery before you start to play. Only read the first mystery in the campaign. This preserves some of the surprises for later. You have to have a working knowledge of the truth and the locations so you can play the scenes correctly.

Avoid Railroading

A common worry with investigative games is that with only one truth and a series of clues that need to be found, that the investigation becomes a railroad, leading you from one clue to the next and a procession of scenes in a predetermined sequence.

All the preparation of sticky notes or index cards means that you can re-order the scenes and locations as you need. If you absolutely have to achieve something or know something, you can move it so that it falls into your path again.

Playing the Scenes/Locations

You can now roleplay your way through each scene. Use the Drama Dice and Countdown Pools to put events outside your direct control.

Use your knowledge of the NPC, their abilities, skills, and motivations to inform questions about their actions.

For example, **Mats TingBlad**'s paranoia will color his behavior. Use that as a modifier to yes-no questions about how he acts. If he becomes suspicious and reluctant, that will be a source of trouble for your kid to get information out of him. As you move from location to location, and make progress in solving the mystery, roll for progress on the Countdown dice pool.

Everyday Scenes

There are no index cards for everyday scenes, but make sure you play them out. Play as many as you need, and then a few more. The boring everyday life of your kid is an important element of Tales, and it should not be left out.

MYSTERY LANDSCAPE 06

The Mystery Landscape is, in some ways, easier to play. Start out with an everyday scene or two, just to get into stride with your kid. Once you are in character, start to use the yes-no question tool. Simple questions at the start of the scene and set your Mystery rolling. Use questions like "Is everything as it seems?" or "Is anything strange or out of place?" It will not take long for you to throw up something odd. Use an open-ended question to get an idea for what is not as it seems, or what is out of place.

Depending on how the dice fall, you can get most of the way through a school day before you notice anything odd. If you are in one of the locations listed in the Tales rules, read up on the location and NPCs and guild your drama dice and countdown pools. You are now ready to start trying to solve the mystery just as the NPCs are prepared to try and cover their tracks or scare you off.

With each new scene, you repeat the "Is everything as it seems?" or similar question. As you investigate, you use the drama dice to bring up trouble and the countdowns attached to each location from the Tales rulebook, as you visit each location.

Sometimes you will create an entirely new faction. Is that police officer looking at you oddly? Are they talking to someone on their radio? When you have created a faction, you can build a unique countdown just for them. You only have to know the next one or two steps. As your ideas consolidate, you can add new steps to the countdown. Most countdowns are only three to five staps.

Tilts can be allowed to play a much bigger role in the Mystery Landscape than during a campaign. In your campaigns, you would normally want the adventure to proceed more or less to play. The Mystery Landscape has no such foibles.

Location Cards

I still recommend using index cards, or sticky notes for each location visited. These are more important in the Mystery Landscape, as you will be creating elements of the mystery as you proceed. If you change something at a location, either by taking something away or leaving something behind, you can log it on the location's card.

Evolving NPCs

Open-ended questions can give you an insight into what an NPC really wants, but may not tell you much about how they look or are dressed. NPCs are not a cardboard cutout, flat characters, or at least they should not be. Try and reuse NPCs in different situations. A guard at the gate still has to shop for food, pick up their kid from school, or go bowling. Populating your world with fewer recurring NPCs helps to reinforce the idea of smaller communities, but also brings with it more trouble for your kid. You may have been trying to sneak through the fence when you first met **Hadar Svensson,** but if you are up to no good the next time, he is going to be a lot less tolerant.

Give each NPC an index card so note down where and when you meet.

SOLO PLAYING TIPS

- Tales From The Loop is the lightest ruleset of all the Zero Engine games. Take this on board and try not to ask too many questions. The questions are there just to prompt your improvisation. Not to pin down every fact.

- You will find clues where you look for them. You will also find the kind of evidence you look for. This means that your stories will evolve around the kid you decide to play.

- When you look for a clue, roll to overcome the trouble first, then ask the question if this is a clue. If you failed to comprehend the old book, it does not matter if it is a clue or not, you will never know. On the other hand, if you know that there are tracks that could lead you to the next location, but you fail to find them, there is a temptation to fudge the dice roll. Look first, then decide if there is something to be discovered.

- Create the adventures you want to play. If you want there to be dinosaurs, look at open-ended prompts in the context of how can you fit a dinosaur into that clue.

- If you don't have time to play, create an interesting NPC. How about a guard that is the sister of a scientist that died in an experiment? Now she wants to exact revenge against the facility director.

- Scenes are the basic building block of solo play. Try and play and complete a scene at a time. Make all the rolls for countdowns before you play the scene, so you can choose if the countdown stage has an impact.

- Because you are not playing in whole sessions, some Experience questions become more important than others. Working on a location by location basis, the questions about overcoming Trouble and your Pride are much more likely to generate Experience. Still, you should not give yourself experiences for turning up and playing.

- There is no harm in gaining Experience a little faster than the rules lay down. You are on your own, and a lone kid has fewer skills to call upon.

- 9+1d6 is a quick and easy way to set the age of any kids you have to create 'on the fly'.

- If you don't want to create an entire character sheet for an NPC kid, roll their age, that gives you how many skill points they have and their luck. Every time they use a skill, assume they have 2 skill, and their attributes are completely average for their age. For example, a 10-year-old would have two attributes at 2 and two at 3, as this is the best fit. The distribution would depend on how you see them, e.g. as a smart kid, or tough.

- Use up an NPC Kids' luck to buy success. Mysteries are better when the story is moving forward.

- If the dice are against you, every roll seems to come up with a **no** result, there is no reason not to give yourself a **Lucky Break**, to move the story on.

- It is a good idea to develop the **Lead** skill. If you employ other NPC kids in tackling a showdown, you can treat them as walking talking bags of skills, but as leader, the spotlight is on you. You can decide how to distribute the leader dicepool to make your plan come together.