

A watercolor illustration featuring a bear's head in profile on the right side, rendered in shades of brown, tan, and black. The bear's head is set against a background of a forest scene with tall, thin evergreen trees in various shades of blue, green, and purple. The overall style is soft and painterly, with visible brushstrokes and a slightly textured appearance. The background is a mix of light and dark washes, creating a moody atmosphere.

The Monster's Last Request

*a freeform edu-larp
by Chance J. Feldstein*

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an educational larp about prejudice, ecology, and end-of-life care
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Game Overview

The Monster's Last Request is an educational American freeform larp designed to promote empathy-based decision making (or ethics of care). Each group of players must decide how their six forest animals will handle a dying mother bear and her cub. The game is mainly for an ethics or science class of 10-11 year olds. Its primary themes are stereotypes and prejudice; sustainability of ecosystems; and end-of-life care. Teachers should emphasize whichever of these themes is most suitable for their class.

(CW: animal, sibling, & parental death; adoption; fatal injury; terminal illness)

Setting

The story begins in a secluded valley in the [Allegheny National Forest](#), in the early 19th century. (All mountain lions and wolves in Pennsylvania were killed before the end of this century.)

What You'll Need

1 hour to play
A timer for scenes

As many groups of 6 players as possible
1 adult Facilitator, or 2 if playing in two characters at once seems too difficult

A plush bear cub
Paper
Crayons, colored pencils, or markers
A chair

Recommended

A woodland play space
Animal costumes, for anyone who wants to wear one

Preparation

For an ethics class, cover virtue ethics and ethics of care, at least a week before running this game. This may also be a good opportunity to talk about sustainability of ecosystems, as below. The game is also designed to facilitate class discussions around end-of-life care, if desired. In that case, begin a conversation about hospices, palliative care, and/or euthanasia, at least a week before running the game.

For a science class, cover invasive species and the effects of removing an apex predator from an ecosystem, at least a week before running the game. I suggest a discussion of the effects of reintroducing wolves to Yellowstone National Park, how Pennsylvania's destruction of mountain lions and wolves has affected deer populations, and the false rumors about these species that led many U.S. states to put bounties on them.

For either type of class, if you are emphasizing the theme of stereotypes and prejudice, let your students keep their preconceived notions about their animals until the character creation workshop. Otherwise, teach them what wild bears and mountain lions do and do not like to eat, at least a week before playing.

Use parental consent forms to explain that this is a game about the inevitability and consequences of death, including the adoption of a recently orphaned child. Ask parents to opt out, if their child has ever lost a parent or recently lost another family member (including pets), or if they have a death phobia. Also ask parents to consider opting out an adopted child, depending on how the child feels about discussing adoption in class. Remember to ask the children whether they consent to play. Make sure they understand there will be no penalty for opting out.

Prepare an interesting activity for the opted-out children, related to the theme you are emphasizing in the game, in a separate area. If possible, let these children feel special by explaining the whole class will be doing this activity another day. They can be experts on it for the rest of the class, when the time comes. End the activity with a group discussion inspired by whichever debrief questions you are using for the rest of the class.

Non-Player Characters (NPCs) for the Facilitator

Mama Bear, dying of wounds and starvation - tired, desperate, wise, fatalistic. **She can add information, guide discussion, or manage conflict.** Here is what Mama knows, that the PCs don't. Answer questions if someone asks, and mention whatever is relevant to the current conversation topic. Don't volunteer this information, unless players seem likely to kill Cubby:

- Mama's fatal wounds came from defending Cubby against the other adult bear who ate his brother and sister.
- She will inevitably die, but the PCs can ease her suffering by gathering fish, berries, and pain-relieving herbs.
- Mama's sister would adopt Cubby, if someone brought him to her.
- Mother mammals sometimes adopt orphans of other species.
- Another predatory mammal might teach Cubby hunting or fishing.
- Deer, Mountain Lion, Coyote, or Fox can kill either bear without help.
- Black bears don't normally eat mice or squirrels. They do sometimes eat young deer.
- Mountain lions eat a lot more meat than bears do.
- Any mother mammal (even a mountain lion, porcupine, or coyote) wants the best for her babies.
- Most animals agree that last requests matter.

Cubby, Mama's young cub - sweet, adorable, hungry, worried. Misses his siblings and hopes to save Mama. **He can lighten the mood or provoke empathy.**

Player characters (PCs) begin on p. 9

Recommended Reading

Bear Cognition and Behavior:

In the Company of Bears by Benjamin Kilham

Apex Predators and Ecosystem Sustainability:

When the Wolves Returned by Dorothy Hinshaw Patent

["We Were Wrong About Wolves, Here's Why"](#) by Jamie Rappaport Clark

Medical Ethics:

Medical Ethics, 9th Edition by Gregory Pence

Gameplay Script

--Starting here, read italicized portions aloud. Paraphrase or narrate the rest.--

Introduction and Safety Mechanics (5 minutes)

First, mention the title of the game. Explain in an age-appropriate way that it's about the inevitability and consequences of death.

Notice which children seem nervous or upset to hear this. They may need to be audience members, or to join the alternative activity for opted-out children. Watch for similar reactions again, during and after the grief workshop.

Describe why you're running the game, and how it fits into your lesson plan for the class. Answer questions.

Ask for six volunteers to be players. Explain to everyone else that audience participation is invited. Audience members may create their own NPC animal, as below, but must still raise a hand and be called on, to address the PCs.

Demonstrate the [Ok Check-in](#). Encourage players to use it regularly and pre-emptively, to indicate how well they are enjoying a scene.

Explain that from time to time, you may call "Freeze!" Students should finish their sentence, and then stop talking. While in a Freeze, any player may sit in the chair, and say a few sentences about how they are feeling, and/or how their character is feeling. Make it clear this is optional; no one should feel obligated to share their feelings.

Grief Workshop (5 minutes)

This game is about how life isn't always fair. One of the characters I control is dying, and cannot be saved. We'll start with an exercise to help you get into the right emotional space to play. If you feel upset and want to stop, please open your eyes and raise your hand.

Now, please close your eyes. Think of someone you knew who died. It may be an animal or human, or a character from a story you care about.

Say their name out loud, if you want to.

Pause, until everyone who wants to say a name has done so.

Imagine them looking happy and healthy, and think of a memory about them that you enjoy. Think about three things you liked about them, and one thing you didn't like.

Keeping your eyes closed, raise your hand if you would like to share your answers with the class. I will touch your hand when it's your turn to speak.

When everyone who wants to is done sharing, instruct the class to open their eyes.

Character Creation Workshop (10 minutes)

In this game, you'll play forest animals, acting out the way they feel, think, and behave. Until recently, a huge Monster has terrorized the animals of these woods. Two meat-eaters, two plant-eaters, and two animals who eat both have gathered to find its lair and investigate why it disappeared.

Distribute character sheets to players digitally. Players may trade characters.

You each have two links on your character sheet. Read the article under More Info. Using that information, what other personality traits would you like to add to your character sheet? Take a few minutes to customize your character.

Think of the character sheet as guidelines that will shape your game. They describe how your character is feeling when it starts. These things could change, depending on what happens in the story, and how you want to play.

Set a timer for 2 minutes.

Now, watch your video. Pay attention to how your animal moves, and the sounds it makes.

Audience members who wish to participate may choose [any animal native to Pennsylvania](#) that isn't already a PC. If necessary, help them find videos of their animals' movement and vocalizations.

Set a timer for 5 minutes. Wait for everyone to be done reading, watching, and listening.

Now, move around the room like your animal, and make some of the sounds you just heard.

After 30 seconds to a minute, declare the workshop over.

Scene 1 (5 minutes)

Your group travels to the Monster's lair. Walk, look around, and discuss the rumors you've heard. Feel free to make up your own rumors, in addition to the one on your character sheet. Your characters are scared, and they want to find out what everyone else knows.

Remind students to say what kind of animal their character is, before describing what they have heard about the Monster.

Scene 2 (5 minutes)

You reach the Monster's cave. As you approach, a young bear cub trots out of the cave. "Hi, new friends! I'm Cubby. Are you here to play with me?"

He's worried about Mama, and sad his brother and sister are gone, but overjoyed to meet the PCs. He invites them in.

Additional Safety Mechanic: *Cubby will play outside with any character, if their player needs a break.*

Designate an out-of-character area. Tell players that at any time, they may go there to hug or play with the plush cub.

Mama has many deep, infected claw and bite wounds. She drifts in and out of consciousness, waking when the PCs ask a question.

She asks what rumors they've heard about her. Let players know anyone from any group may shout these out, for everyone to hear.

Scene 3. (15 minutes)

"Go practice climbing trees, okay sweetie?" Mama asks Cubby.

Cubby obeys, says goodbye to his new friends, and goes outside.

Mama asks the PCs to find Cubby a new home. Then she makes her last request. It will depend on what theme you want to emphasize. She always wants Cubby to live, but in addition to that, she says one of the following:

- **Stereotypes / rumors / prejudice:** *"Clear my name with the species we don't eat, so that my son can grow up in a forest that doesn't hate him."*
- **Sustainability of ecosystems:** *"Save my son to preserve the balance of this forest. Mountain lions don't belong in the valley."*
- **End-of-life care:** *"Please find a way to ease my suffering as much as possible."*
- **Euthanasia, specifically:** *"Please give me a quick death. I am so tired, and everything hurts."*

The PCs must now decide the fate of both bears.

To the extent possible, narrate in the third person what Mama and Cubby are doing. Staying out-of-character should make it simpler to answer questions or interject some of Mama's information, while walking around the play space and supervising each group.

When the players in a group seem to have reached a decision, ask whether anyone has anything else they would like to say. If not, they are done playing. Run the following de-role exercise and

choose an emotional processing question for the group to discuss, while the rest of the class finishes playing.

De-Role & Debrief (15 minutes)

Stand up, spread out, and shake out your whole body.

Time 30 seconds, then ask the students to sit.

Discuss at least one question from each category. Choose questions for the specific group you have, the way their narrative went, and what kind of discussion best fits your lesson plan. For emotional and intellectual debrief questions only, let players answer before audience members.

Students who prefer not to talk may draw pictures about their answers, and then keep them private or share them with the class.

Emotional Processing (For all classes)

- How did you feel when you found out there was no way to save the mother bear?
- How do you feel about what happened to both bears at the end of the game?
- Describe one thing you're bringing home from this game, and one thing you're leaving behind.
- Did playing change the way you feel about helping the helpless?

Intellectual Processing (For all classes)

- What was this game about, for you?
- Did you find any parts confusing, boring, or not helpful in some other way? If so, what might make them better?
- Why did your character behave the way they did?
- Would you change any of your decisions in this game? If so, why?
- Has this game changed the way you think about adoption or orphans? If so, how?

Educational Processing for Ethics Classes

- Who was the real monster or monsters in this game?
- Explain why the mother bear did or didn't deserve a quick death.
- In most countries, it's legal to euthanize a dying pet, and illegal to euthanize a dying person who requests it. Is this good or bad? Why?
- When are rumors or stereotypes more useful than doing research or asking someone about themselves?

Educational Processing for Science Classes

- How did Coyote, Porcupine, and Mountain Lion endanger this ecosystem?
- Who was the invasive animal? Why does that matter?
- Has playing this game changed how you look at animals or forests?
- How did stereotypes and prejudice contribute to the destruction of all wild wolves and mountain lions in Pennsylvania?

Mountain Lion

[More info](#)

[Sounds and movement](#)

You are nimble, ambitious, fierce, and independent.

You come from a mountain near this valley.

You know that mice, squirrels, deer, and foxes are delicious, and not too hard to catch.

You want to kill the Monster and eat its cubs, becoming the dominant local apex predator.

Mama or Papa Fox

[More info](#)

[Sounds and movement](#)

You are quick, light-hearted, curious, and familial.

You've heard the Monster is ten feet tall, with huge leathery wings.

You want to learn what this “Monster” really is, then return to your kits and mate.

Raven

[More info](#)

[Sounds and movement](#)

You are clever, observant, cooperative, and adaptable.

You've heard the Monster has lived here for centuries. Maybe this forest needs it.

You want a bear to keep living here. Leftover meat is convenient.

Mama Deer

[More info](#)

[Sounds and movement](#)

You are cautious, nurturing, observant, and graceful.

You know mountain lions frequently eat deer.

You've heard the Monster has razor-sharp teeth that constantly drip venom.

You want to protect your fawns from danger.

Porcupine

[More info](#)

[Sounds and movement](#)

You are tough, nimble, prickly, and deceptive.

You've heard the Monster can shake the earth by stomping its paw.

You know your friends disappeared near its cave.

You want to get rid of all predators. The world would be better without them.

Coyote

[More info](#) [Sounds and movement](#)

You are adaptable, curious, sociable, and athletic.

You believe the Monster ate your whole family.

You've heard it can burn skin and fur, just by looking.

You want the Monster and its family to die horribly.

Acknowledgments

Beta readers: Matthew Valentine, Sara Mastros, Norman Feldstein

Playtesters: Matilde Patuelli, Melania Esposito, Lujza Kotryová, Matej Skaro, Jaana Takalo

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