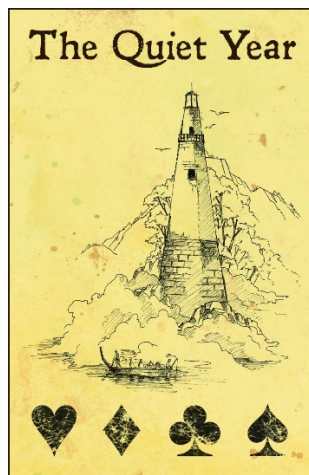


# REVIEW: THE QUIET YEAR

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by [Justin Alexander](#) – May 30<sup>th</sup>, 2020



*The Quiet Year* is a map-making storytelling game by Avery Alder. The group will collectively tell the story of a community which, after a long war, has finally succeeded in driving off the Jackals. The community doesn't know it, but they will have one quiet year — a time to come together, to rebuild, to prepare for the future — before the Frost Shepherds arrive and the game comes to an end.

The central focus of play is the map itself: We begin with a blank sheet in the middle of the table and a brief setup phase will see the group quickly sketch in the broad strokes of their community. We will also determine which Resources are important to our community, and which *one* of those Resources is in abundance (with all others being in scarcity).

(The Resources section of the setup phase is subtly brilliant: There are no predefined Resources. Instead, each player creates a Resource and adds it to the list. This, all by itself, radically alters the game each time you play it. A community in which Transportation, Solar Power, and Food are the key Resources is a completely different community than one in which Clean Water, Steel, and Mana are the key Resources.)

Once the setup phase is complete, the game proceeds in turns. On their turn a player will:

- Draw a card
- Advance active projects
- Take an action

**CARDS:** The game is played with a deck of standard playing cards. There are fifty-two weeks in a year and fifty-two cards in a deck, and thus each turn represents a week of time. Each suit of cards represents one season (hearts are Spring, diamonds are Summer, etc.), and each season of cards is randomized.

Generally speaking, each card you draw will offer you an option between two questions. The active player has to answer the question, which will also often mean adding to the map or updating the map. For example, if you draw the 10 of Hearts you must choose between:

- There's another community somewhere on the map. Where are they? What sets them apart from you?
- What belief or practice helps to unify your community?

Whereas the 5 of Spades offers a choice of:

- Winter elements destroy a food source. If this was your only food source, **add a Scarcity**.
- Winter elements leave everyone cold, tired, and miserable. **Project dice are not reduced this week.**

The game ends immediately when the King of Spades is drawn (and the Frost Shepherds arrive). This can happen at any point in the last season of thirteen cards (even the very first week of winter), so as the year continues more and more uncertainty about how much time you have left will begin to creep in. (And this will naturally influence the group's predilection towards breaking ground on new projects vs. other options.)

**ACTIVE PROJECTS:** Various cards and actions will establish projects. Most projects are entirely the creation of the player initiating them and will be given a timeline of 1-6 weeks (i.e., turns). These projects are tracked on the map using six-sided dice, and the dice count down one pip each week.

**TAKE AN ACTION:** Finally, a player can choose one of three actions. They can Start a Project; they can Discover Something New; or they can Hold a Discussion. Each of these influences the story of the community in different ways.

## THINGS I DON'T LIKE

There's one other "significant" mechanic in the game: Contempt tokens. I'll let the rulebook explain them:

*If you ever feel like you weren't consulted or honoured in a decision-making process, you can take a piece of Contempt and place it in front of you. This is your outlet for expressing disagreement or tension.*

(...)

*If you ever want to act selfishly, to the known detriment of the community, you can discard a Contempt token to justify your behaviour. You decide whether your behaviour requires justification. This will often trigger others taking Contempt tokens in response.*

And that's it. As a mechanic, Contempt tokens are empty and meaningless. They're also somewhat incoherent: The beginning of the rulebook specifically points out that, as players, have two roles in the game: To represent the community itself and care about its fate and ALSO to "dispassionately introduce dilemmas ... create tension and make the community's successes feel real." So how is acting to "the known detriment of the community" something that needs to be "justified"? Furthermore, there IS no "decision-making process" in which you can be consulted; the game explicitly tells you NOT to discuss the decisions you have to make in the game.

Having played with Contempt several times, I'm simply going to be dropping them from future sessions. They don't add anything to the game and, worse yet, simply confuse new players due to their incoherence and lack of point.

## THINGS I DO LIKE

Everything else.

*The Quiet Year* is a beautiful game that creates beautiful stories. The choices presented in each season are elegantly balanced to push play in particular directions without drowning out the creative input and interests of the players.

The storytelling engine is specific enough to push interesting events into the narrative, but general enough to never constrain you: You can set *The Quiet Year* in a post-apocalyptic wasteland, a Martian colony, the African savannah, or a Middle Ages village just after it's been scourged by the Black Death and never hit a discordant prompt.

You can learn *The Quiet Year* in about 15 minutes, you'll get 3-4 hours of play before the Frost Shepherds arrive, and then – if you're anything like the people I've played with – you'll immediately begin trying to figure out when you can play it again.

(There's also an alternate setup you can use for a shorter game if you'd like.)

## A FEW OTHER DETAILS

The game is designed for 2-4 players, but I found that it expanded well to 5 or 6. (I did not play with only two players, although I am curious what that experience would look like.) The designer has noted in online discussions that the primary problem with a larger player count is the down time between turns, so this will be at least somewhat dependent on how much your group is entertained in the audience stance. (Players also often have narrative input on other players' turns.)

In addition to [an \\$8 PDF](#), The game is also available in [a \\$50 bag that contains everything you need to play](#): Rulebook, custom cards (with the text printed on them so you don't have to consult the tables in the rulebook), dice, and counters. I, personally, don't think the experience offered by *The Quiet Year* is worth that much, but your mileage may vary.

## A QUIET YEAR

I wasn't sure how well *The Quiet Year* would play online in the Era of COVID-19, but it was actually a spectacular experience. You'll obviously need some form of shared whiteboard for the group (I found that one built into Zoom worked just fine). You can try to get fancy with the playing cards, but I found it easy enough to just act as a facilitator with a physical deck of cards to one side of my keyboard.

The one thing I will say, is that I think post-apocalyptic narratives have a completely different feel when you're playing them during an actual apocalypse. And this impact is particularly substantial if it's an interactive medium.

To give you some sense of what *The Quiet Year* is capable of, this is the narrative of one game that I played: Our community collapsed completely and murdered each other in internecine warfare. (So the year was perhaps not as quiet as it might have been...)

Our village was located in a valley. At sunrise and sunset we all stopped and collectively meditated upon the passing of the days.

Some among us even went so far as to worship the Sun.

Expeditions beyond the mountains to the west returned with members horribly burned by a "bright light." Clearly they had found the place where the Sun sets and been burned for their hubris.

The Sun Sect grew.

To the southeast there was a horrible Pit; a bottomless black void. It was surrounded by skulls and strange runes. No one had placed them there; no one dared to touch them.

One day a woman named Petra climbed naked out of the Pit and came to the village.

Other outsiders came who wore Moons on their clothes. They were ostracized.

Petra and another girl named Sibyl convinced many young members of the village to enter the Pit and learn its mysteries.

They did not return.

We reclaimed the mine to the southwest. Our supply of metal was abundant! But we discovered that those working at the site contracted a strange disease that made them incredibly pale. They were referred to by the slur of "moon-facers," and this term was soon being used to also refer to those who wore the symbol of the Moon.

Around this time, a flood destroyed our food stores. Tensions grew between the Sun Sect and the Followers of the Moon.

Faced with this persecution, some of the Followers of the Moon assassinated three of the four Elders who led our village. They then fled to the northern end of the valley, leaving the last remaining Elder – a man named Jonas – in charge.

Jonas was a member of the Sun Sect. He took control of the citizen's militia and reforged it as the Swords of Dawn.

A few weeks later, foresters heard the voices of Petra and Sibyl among the trees of the forest. Their words could not be understood, but they seemed filled with portent.

A beam of purple energy shot out of the Pit. The faces of the others who had gone down into the Pit could be seen writhing within it. Petra herself emerged from the beam and declared herself a Priestess of the Moon.

Jonas died in his bed, pale as if moon-touched. The community was left leaderless. (Elders could only be nominated by existing Elders, Jonas had refrained from doing that, and now all the Elders were dead.) The Sun Sect moved into the power vacuum and the Swords of Dawn enforced order.

The Sun Sect declared that the Pit had grown ascendant because we had turned our backs on the Sun. They decreed that a child must be taken to the highest mountain in the east and sacrificed to the rising sun.

This was done. Almost the entire Sun Sect marched up to the mountain peak.

But as the sacrifice was about to be performed, a huge avalanche wiped out the entire expedition.

Petra and the moon-facers took control of the village. A string of murders followed, leaving mutilated bodies in the woods. Then the beam of energy from the Pit washed across the sky, blotting out the Sun.

One of the last surviving members of the Sun Sect – angry, vindictive, and driven mad by this last divine sign – set fire to the forest! Our stores of lumber and the entire northern forest was destroyed.

When the envoys from the south arrived to trade their grain for our lumber, we were unable to pay them. Trade collapsed. The famine worsened.

But the morning after the fire, a beam of golden energy shot up into the sky from the site of the child sacrifice.

So there was a golden beam to the northeast and a purple-black beam to the southeast.

A new religious leader emerged: Wren argued that we had strayed too far from the Way of the Sun and we needed to sacrifice MORE children into the Sun's golden beam, to at least match the number who had passed into the Pit.

Wren led a pilgrimage up into the mountains and they did, in fact, cast many children into the golden beam. The energy of the golden beam spread, blotting out the black dome that had shaded the valley and replacing it with a golden dome of sun-like light.

But the light shone 24/7.

Many in the village suffered from sleep deprivation as the eternal light shone on.

The valley was then hit with a plague, which further decimated the population. Then a massive thunderstorm rolled in. It rained for days and days and days. The river flooded, wiping out our village and forcing the population to scatter into the hills, creating a number of small, scattered "niche" communities.

As the waters receded in the valley below, we saw – in the burnt fields of the forest – what we at first thought were new trees. New trees that grew rapidly with the blessing of the Sun's eternal light!

But what actually grew was strange: Purple-pink growths that fruited large, pear-shaped fruits that glowed with a bluish light.

Strange goliaths, of whose existence we had seen hints on our earlier expeditions, came from the west and settled among the strange trees, somehow feeding upon the glowing fruits.

An entire niche community vanished mysteriously overnight. When people from a neighboring community arrived, they found food still cooking over open fires. The only clue was the word RELLIK scratched into the dirt.

At the opposite end of the valley, it was discovered that the skulls and bones of the children sacrificed to the golden beam had appeared in the bone ring around the Pit. This connection between the two beams raised metaphysical questions that our desperate community had no time to properly consider.

A children's crusade led almost all of our remaining children back down to the floor of the valley. There they ate of the glowing fruits.

Petra was badly beaten. She was forced into hiding, circulating from one family to another to hide her from the Sun Sect.

One of these families, seemingly driven mad, killed and ate her.

Other incidents of cannibalism forced the niche communities into armed compounds that no longer spoke to each other.

Strange changes were seen among the children eating of the purple pears.

The Swords of Dawn marched on the mine to wipe out that source of the "moon-faced plague."

As the mine burned, the Frost Shepherds arrived.

#### A QUIET YEAR.

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