



TableForge

Meet the Cast

STANDARD EDITION

Spark & Anvil

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This book collects 5 chapter books from the TableForge cast — each character embodies a different curricular primitive; together they teach the full subject.

Methodology: distributed-narrative learning per Bruner narrative-cognition + Habgood intrinsic-integration + SAMHSA TIP 57 trauma-informed register.

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Introduction

The TableForge cast was authored to embody the curriculum, not decorate around it. Each of the 5 characters you'll meet in this book teaches a specific primitive — a particular tactic, a particular technique, a particular way of seeing. Together they form an ensemble: the cast IS the curriculum.

Read in any order. Each chapter stands alone.

Each character also appears in the matching Spark & Anvil app (free, forever) where you can practice what they teach.

— *The editors at Spark & Anvil*

Bones

BONES — chance is design craft, not betting. designed randomness has a job.



In the middle of the desert-village workshop, a small fennec fox named Bones knelt over a plain wooden table with three different dice in her paw, and she was making a game feel unfair on purpose.

She'd built a little chase across a paper board — a tiny felt rabbit running from a tiny felt hawk — and right now the rabbit always lost. "Too tidy," she muttered. Her big soft ears swiveled as she thought. She swapped the single die the hawk rolled for two smaller ones and rolled them a dozen times, watching where the numbers piled up. Sevens, mostly. A few twos. A rare, thrilling twelve.

A village kid leaned in over her shoulder. "You're just rolling dice over and over. That's not building anything."

"I'm building the *feeling*," Bones said, without looking up. "Watch what these two do." She handed him the pair. "Roll them twenty times and shout out the total each time."

He did. He noticed it himself around roll nine. "It keeps landing near the middle."

"Right. Two dice bunch toward the middle. So the hawk is usually *pretty* fast — but every so often it stumbles, and every so often it's terrifying." She nudged the felt rabbit forward one square. "Now the rabbit has a chance. Not a guarantee. A chance. That's the whole game — that lean-forward second where you don't know yet." She grinned, ears up. "The dice aren't deciding *for* us. They're doing a job."



Bones had learned what that job was the hard way, back when she was small and thought fair meant *the best player always wins*.

Her family had made games for the village for generations, and the first game she ever built by herself was brutally fair — no dice at all, just clever moves. She was good at clever moves. She beat every kid in the village, over and over, until one afternoon her smallest cousin set down her pieces mid-game and said, quietly, "I already know I'm going to lose. So why play?" — and walked away.

Bones sat alone with her perfect, unbeatable game and felt something go tight and cold in her chest. She'd made a thing so tidy that only she enjoyed it. It wasn't a game anymore. It was a wall.

Her grandmother found her there. She didn't tell Bones she'd done something wrong. She just picked up a single worn die and set it in the middle of the board. "You built a game where the strong one always wins," she said. "So the small one stops trying. What if the small one could sometimes get lucky?"

"Then it wouldn't be fair," Bones said.

"It would be *kinder* fair," her grandmother said. "A little chance means the small one keeps hoping. Hope is what keeps someone at the table." She rolled the die. It came up high. "The dice don't win for you, little one. They give everyone a reason to lean forward. Learn what that reason is worth."

Bones didn't rebuild the game that day. But the cold, tight feeling melted into something she could think about. Chance wasn't cheating. Chance was an invitation.



She walked to TableForge at twelve, because a place that studied how to make games ought to understand the kind of fairness that leaves room for hope.

Blueprint, the old mentor who ran the workshops, met her at the gate. He didn't ask her to prove she was smart. He asked one question. "Isn't dice just gambling?"

Bones didn't answer with words. She set two little games on his desk. In the first, a coin decided everything in one flip — win or lose, nothing else. In the second, a handful of dice fed into a long chase where you rolled, and chose, and rolled again.

"This one," she said, tapping the coin game, "is just betting. You put in nothing, you do nothing, chance hands you a result. No craft." She slid the second game forward. "But here the dice give me tension — *will I roll far enough?* — and fairness, so the kid who's behind can still catch up, and surprise, so no two games feel the same. Same dice. Completely different job." She looked up at him. "One's a bet. One's a *design*."

Blueprint turned the two games over in his hands for a long moment. "You belong here," he said.



Bones's workshop was full of dice sorted into little bowls by what they were *for*.

A boy came in one afternoon, arms crossed, suspicious. "My mom says dice games are just luck," he said. "So why bother getting good at them?"

Bones knew that frown. It was the wall she'd once built, wearing a different face.

"Grab that pair," she said, pointing to a bowl. "Roll them and add. Do it ten times." He did, grumbling — then slowed down. "It's mostly landing around seven."

"So if you were designing a game and you needed *usually-medium, sometimes-wild*, which dice would you reach for?"

He blinked. "...Those. The pair."

"And if you needed *anything-can-happen, big-swings*?" She rolled a single twenty-sided die across the table, where it clattered up a two, then a nineteen. "That one. Flat. Every number just as likely. Huge highs, brutal lows." She set it down. "The gambler doesn't care which dice — they just want the thrill of the bet. But the *designer* picks the exact dice that do the exact job the game needs. That's a skill. You can get good at it."

The boy uncrossed his arms and picked up the pair, then the twenty, weighing them. "So the dice are like... tools."

"The dice are like tools," Bones agreed. "Betting money on a roll is one thing, and it lives in a whole different world with different rules. Choosing a roll's shape so a game feels alive — that's ours. Same little cubes. Not the same craft at all."



Later, when the workshop was empty, the boy came back with one more question, quieter now.

"When you roll," he said, "and you don't know yet what'll happen — how come that feels *good*? Shouldn't not-knowing feel bad?"

Bones thought about her cousin walking away from the wall she'd built. About the small die her grandmother set down like an open door.

"Because not-knowing is where the hope lives," she said. "When it all comes down to one roll, everybody at the table leans in at the same time, holding the same breath, and for one whole second anything is still possible — even for the kid who's losing. That lean-forward feeling isn't nerves going wrong. It's the game keeping everyone in it." She scooped the dice back into their bowls, ears soft. "That's all I really make. Not luck. Room to hope. The kind of fair where nobody puts their pieces down early and walks away."

The boy nodded slowly, and Bones watched the suspicious set of his shoulders come loose — the same way, years ago, the cold thing in her own chest had finally let go.

Hand

HAND — what you HOLD is information; what you SHOW is a different question.



At a card table in the trade-stand village, a small magpie named Hand fanned three cards against her chest so that only she could see them, and grinned like she owned a secret the whole world wanted.

She did, sort of. Across from her, a younger bird had laid every one of his cards face-up on the table, all in a neat proud row, and was losing badly.

"You can see mine," he complained. "Why can't I see yours?"

"Because mine are still information," Hand said, "and yours turned into scenery the moment you put them down."

She played one card, face-up, into the middle. A blue seven. It landed with a small tap that felt bigger than it was.

"There," she said. "Now that one's *yours* too. Everybody knows it. It's public." She tilted her three-card fan, two cards left, hidden. "But these two? Still mine. Still questions. You have to guess what I'm holding — and while you're guessing, you're not paying attention to what you already told me by showing everything."

The younger bird stared at his tidy, useless row.

"The cards in your hand are worth the most while they're still *hidden*," Hand said, softer now. "Not because they're magic. Because nobody knows them yet. The second they hit the table they stop being a secret and start being a fact. Facts are fine. But a game with no secrets is just arithmetic."

She curled her wing back over her two cards, patient as a locked drawer.



Hand had learned the worth of a held card the hard way, when she was small.

Her family had been card-traders for the village for generations, and the first time they let her sit in a real game she'd done exactly what the proud younger bird had done. She'd shown everything. She'd been so excited to prove she understood the cards that she waved them around, announced her plans, laid her strategy bare.

She lost every hand. Not because her cards were bad — because she'd *given them away* before she played them. Everyone at the table knew what she'd do next, so nobody could be surprised, and surprise, it turned out, was half the point.

She'd gone quiet and hot-cheeked, feeling like she'd failed at something she couldn't even name.

Her grandmother — an old magpie with clever eyes and a slow voice — had gathered up the cards and not scolded her. She'd only fanned five of them and held them close to her own chest.

"What do you feel," she asked, "not knowing what I'm holding?"

"...Itchy," Hand admitted. "Like I want to know."

"That itch is the game, little one. That's the whole engine of it." She turned one card face-up between them. "This one I've given you. It's true, it's real, you can plan around it. But these four —" she pressed them tighter — "these keep the table awake. What you *hold* is information. What you *show* is a different question entirely, and you get to choose when to answer it."

Hand didn't win the next hand either. But she stopped waving her cards around. The held, private, close-to-the-chest feeling had a name now: *hers*. And knowing it was hers to spend, and not to spill, made her sit up a little straighter.



She walked to TableForge at twelve, because a place that studied how games are built ought to understand the ones you play with secrets in your wings.

Blueprint, the old mentor who ran the workshops, met her at the gate. He didn't ask her to prove she was cunning. He asked one question. "What makes a card game strategic?"

Hand didn't answer with words. She took four cards from his desk. One she laid face-up in front of him. One she slid into the discard pile, also face-up. One she tucked back into the deck, face-down, and gave the deck a shuffle so nobody could say where it went. The last she held against her chest, hidden.

"That one you can see," she said, pointing to the face-up card. "Public. That one's spent — everyone knows it's gone. That one's somewhere in the deck; we both share the not-knowing. And this last one —" she tapped her own chest — "only I know. Four cards, four different *kinds of knowing*. The game happens in the gaps between them."

Blueprint looked at the small map of secrets she'd made on his desk for a long moment. "You belong here," he said.



Hand's workshop was full of small experiments in who-knows-what.

A boy came in one afternoon, frowning at a card game he'd designed. "It's boring," he said, "and I can't work out why. Everybody plays with their cards face-up so it's *fair*."

Hand knew that flatness. A game with nothing hidden was a game already over.

"Play me a round," she said. He did — every card visible, every move obvious, both of them able to see exactly what was coming. It ended in about four dull moves.

"Now," Hand said, "hide your hand. Just hold your cards where I can't see them."

He did. And immediately his face changed — he had a choice now. He could bluff. He could hold back his best card and let her think he had nothing. He played a low card slowly, like it hurt, and Hand narrowed her eyes.

"See that?" she said. "You just told me a story with how you *played*, not with what you *said*. Maybe true, maybe a bluff. I have to read your move, not your mouth." She leaned in. "That's not lying, by the way. In a game, hiding and hinting are allowed — everybody at the table knows the rules let you. It's information-management. It's the *craft*. Nobody's being tricked; they signed up for the puzzle."

The boy played another card, watching her face this time instead of the table, and grinned when she couldn't tell if he was serious.

"Now it's a game," Hand said.



Later, when the workshop was empty, the boy came back holding his redesigned cards close to his chest, the way she held hers.

"When you don't know what someone's holding," he said, quieter, "how do you decide what to believe?"

Hand thought about the proud younger bird's useless row, and her grandmother's four hidden cards, and the itch that keeps a table awake.

"You watch what they *do*, not what they *claim*," she said. "Somebody can tell you they've got nothing while they play like a champion. Believe the playing. Words are cheap at a card table; moves cost something." She fanned her own cards and, for once, didn't hide them. "And the held feeling — that close, careful, only-I-know-this feeling — that's not being sneaky. That's just knowing something's yours to spend when the moment's right, and not one second before."

The boy nodded slowly, holding his little deck like it mattered now, because it did.

Hand didn't say the rest out loud, but she thought it, warm and sure: *the best secrets aren't the ones you keep forever. They're the ones you're patient enough to spend well.*

Move

MOVE — every turn is a question, and the move is the answer.



On the practice board at the edge of the savanna-village, a small giraffe named Move stood at one end and refused to hurry.

The board was a long grid painted on flat stone, and the game was simple: cross to the other side. A younger antelope had already bolted halfway across in a blur of hooves, doubling back, zigzagging, changing his mind six times a step.

Move took exactly one step. She stopped. She looked at the whole board — the paint-lines, the little markers, the far edge. Then she took exactly one more step, in the direction that mattered most.

"You could just *run*," the antelope panted, spinning in place. "You get, like, a hundred steps. I've got a hundred steps. Why are you counting them?"

"Because you *don't* get a hundred," Move said. "You get one, then the board changes, then you get one more. Every step you already took is spent. So each step is a little question." She set her long neck level and studied the grid. "This one asks: *out of everywhere I could go, where does going help most?*"

The antelope stopped, one hoof in the air. "...That's a lot of thinking for a walk."

"It's not a walk. It's a turn." Move stepped again — one clean choice — and she was suddenly nearer the far edge than he was, without ever breaking into a run. "You've been doing everything. I've been doing the one thing that counts. Watch which of us gets there first."

He watched. She got there first.



Move had learned that the hard way, back when she was small and there were too many paths.

The elder giraffes of the village were path-walkers — the ones who found the safe crossings through tall grass — and the first time Move tried to lead, she stood at the edge of the savanna and simply couldn't move. Every direction was open. She could go anywhere. And *anywhere* felt like a wide, roaring nothing. Her legs locked. Her chest went tight and buzzy, the way it does when a thing is too big and too free at once.

"I've got the whole grassland," she'd whispered, miserable, "and I can't take one step."

Her grandmother had ambled up beside her — an old giraffe with a slow, patient sway — and hadn't told her to be bold. She'd only pressed one heavy foot down in the dirt and said, "Feel that. That's *one* step. Not the whole grassland. Just the next one." She'd nodded out at the grass. "The crossing is too big to solve all at once. So don't. Ask the little question instead. Where does *this* step help? Then the grass tells you the answer."

Move took one step. Only one. And the roaring nothing quieted into something she could actually hold — a single choice, small enough to make. Then the board of grass had changed, just a little, and there was a new one-step question waiting, small enough again.

She never forgot it. The freedom to go anywhere had frozen her. The limit — *one step, then ask again* — had set her free.



She walked to TableForge at twelve, because a place that studied how games were built ought to understand the thing she loved most: the shape of a single turn.

Blueprint, the old mentor who ran the workshops, met her at the gate. He didn't ask her to prove she was quick. He asked one question. "What makes a turn worth taking?"

Move didn't answer with words. She stepped onto his practice grid, and instead of crossing it in a rush, she took one deliberate step and stopped. "If I could leap the whole board at once," she said, "this turn wouldn't mean anything. I'd just win. Boring." She took a second careful step, choosing it. "But I only get a little each turn. So every turn I have to *pick*. And picking is the whole game."

Blueprint watched her cross the grid one thoughtful step at a time, each one clearly chosen. "You're saying the limit is the fun."

"The limit is the *question*," Move said, reaching the far edge. "Take the limit away, there's no question left to ask."

Blueprint looked at the trail of single steps behind her for a long moment. "You belong here," he said.



Move's workshop was full of little grids and piles of tokens, and one afternoon a boy came in slumped over a game he'd made.

"It's supposed to be exciting," he said, "but everybody just does everything and wins. Nobody even thinks." He dumped the tokens out. "Each turn you can move, and attack, and heal, and build, and draw a card. All of it. Every turn."

Move knew that slump. She'd felt it standing frozen at the edge of the grass.

"How many of those matter?" she asked.

"...All of them?"

"If you do all of them every turn," Move said, "then none of them is a choice. You never leave anything on the table. So nothing you pick ever costs you anything else." She slid a token toward him. "Here. New rule. Two actions a turn. Only two. Out of your whole list."

The boy stared. "But then I can't do everything."

"*Right*." She grinned. "Now heal-or-attack is a real question. Build-or-draw is a real question. Every turn you leave something behind, and the thing you leave behind is what makes the thing you keep matter." She tapped the grid. "You didn't need more actions. You needed *fewer*. A turn is only interesting when it can't hold everything."

The boy tried it — two actions, chosen — and on the third turn he went quiet, then bent over the board scribbling fast, because for the first time a turn had asked him something he actually had to answer.



Later, when the workshop was empty, the boy came back holding his fixed-up game.

"How do you *know*," he said, "when a turn's got the right amount in it?"

Move thought about the grassland, and the locked legs, and her grandmother's foot pressing one step into the dirt.

"You feel it," she said. "That's the honest answer. When there's too much, it goes loud and mushy — your chest buzzes, you're not choosing, you're just doing, and nothing lands. And when it's just tight enough, it gets *sharp*. There's this little clean pull, this *hm, which one?* — and when you finally pick, something in your shoulders settles, like you set one foot down in exactly the right place."

She looked out toward the practice grid where the sun was going long across the painted stone, and for a moment she wasn't thinking about turns or actions at all. She was thinking about a small giraffe who couldn't take one step because the whole world was open, and a heavy old foot pressing into the dirt beside her, and how *small* had felt like a gift instead of a cage.

"You don't have to hold everything," she said, softer now, more to herself than to him. "That's the part that used to scare me and doesn't anymore. You just take the next one, and it's enough, and your legs unlock." She breathed out slow. "That's the good feeling. Not winning. Just — the quiet after you finally choose, when the loud goes away and one step feels like plenty."

The boy nodded, and Move watched the last of the slump lift off his shoulders — the same warm, unclenching relief that had settled over her, years ago, when the roaring grass shrank down to one calm step she could actually take. Neither of them said anything else. They just stood there in the long light, both of them a little lighter, glad in a plain quiet way that they didn't have to do it all at once.

Trial

watching real players play, and fixing what confuses them



In the corner of the river-village workshop, a round little capybara named Trial sat very still and watched three kids fall apart over her new game.

She wasn't playing. She wasn't explaining. She had a small notebook open on her knee and a pencil that never stopped moving, and she was staring at the players the way a heron stares at water.

"Round three," she muttered, writing. "Amb asked what the blue tokens do. Again. Third time."

One of the kids groaned. "Your game is *confusing*."

"I know," Trial said, delighted. She wrote that down too.

The kid squinted at her. "You're *happy* it's broken?"

"I'm happy it's *telling* me things." She turned the notebook around so he could see the cramped little scribbles. "Watch what you three just did. Nobody read the rule on the card — you all reached for the tokens first. So the card's in the wrong place. And every single one of you looked at the blue tokens like they were a trap. So the blue rule is hiding somewhere it shouldn't." She tapped the page, grinning. "You didn't *tell* me any of that. Your hands told me. I just wrote down what your hands said."

The three of them looked at the game, then at each other, then — slowly — at the notebook, like it had been reading their minds the whole time.



Trial had learned to watch hands the hard way, back when she made her very first game.

She'd worked on it for a whole month. She was *sure* it was good — she'd played it in her head a hundred times, and in her head it was perfect. Then she gave it to two friends, sat back proudly, and watched them squint, and stall, and go quiet, and finally set the pieces down with polite little smiles.

"It's fun," one of them said.

But their faces weren't fun-faces. Their faces were the faces of people trying to be kind. Trial's whole chest had gone hot and tight, the way it does when you pour yourself into a thing and it comes out wrong in front of people. *A month, she'd thought. A whole month, and it's broken, and I'm the one who broke it.*

Her grandmother — an old capybara who'd watched the village for forty years — had waddled over and sat beside the sad little game. She hadn't said *don't worry*. She'd asked, "What did their *hands* do?"

Trial thought about it. "They stopped. They kept picking up the rules card and putting it down."

"Then your first test *worked*," her grandmother said. "It found the broken part for you. That's the whole job of a first try, little one — not to be good. To show you what's wrong so the second try can be better." She nudged the game with a paw. "Their mouths said *fun* to be kind. Their hands told the truth. Learn to watch the hands."

The hot, ashamed feeling didn't vanish. But it changed shape. *Failed* stopped meaning *I'm bad at this* and started meaning *now I know what to fix*. Trial could sit with that.



She walked to TableForge at twelve, because a place that studied how games are made ought to understand the patient, hands-watching kind of making she loved.

Blueprint, the old mentor who ran the workshops, met her at the gate. He didn't ask her to prove she was clever. He asked one question. "What makes a game good?"

Trial didn't answer with words. She set a little prototype on his desk, then slid three numbered cards beside it — $v1$, $v2$, $v3$. She pointed at $v1$. "This one confused everybody. I watched them. I wrote down where they got stuck." She pointed at $v2$. "So I moved the stuck part. It got better, but they still drifted off near the end." Then $v3$. "So I fixed *that*. Now they play all the way through and lean in."

"And the first one?" Blueprint said. "The confusing one?"

"The first one was *supposed* to be confusing," Trial said. "It did its job. It showed me the other two."

Blueprint looked at the three little cards in a row for a long moment. "You belong here," he said.



Trial's workshop was full of games that had failed on purpose.

A boy came in one afternoon clutching a game to his chest, slumped and red-faced. "I made it, and I made everyone in my family play it, and it was a *disaster*," he said. "My sister quit halfway. My dad kept asking questions. It's terrible. I want to throw it out."

Trial knew that slump exactly. She'd felt it the day her friends said *fun* with kind, tired faces.

"Don't throw it out," she said. "First — did your dad *say* it was bad?"

The boy blinked. "...No. He said it was 'interesting.'"

"But he kept asking questions." Trial slid her notebook over. "Words are polite. Hands are honest. Where did he ask the most?"

"The scoring. Nobody could figure out the scoring."

"Then that's not a disaster. That's an *arrow*. Pointing right at the scoring." She uncapped a pencil and set it in his hand. "Your sister quit halfway — when, exactly? What was happening right before she put it down?"

The boy thought. "It was... her turn, but she had nothing to do. She was just waiting."

"So the middle has a dead spot." Trial tapped the game, gentle. "You didn't make a disaster. You made a *first version*. It just told you two things to fix — the scoring and the dead spot. That's not failing. That's the game *talking* to you." She grinned. "Fix those two. Watch them play again. See what the hands say next."

The boy stared at his game like it had turned from garbage into a treasure map, and started scribbling.



Later, when the workshop was empty, the boy came back with one more question, his game now covered in crossings-out and arrows.

"How do you *know* when it's finally done?" he said. "When to stop fixing?"

Trial thought about her first sad little game, and the hot-tight chest, and her grandmother asking about hands.

"You feel it," she said. "That's the honest answer. When it's not ready, there's this itchy, unfinished feeling — you can see people stall, and your stomach knows it. And then one day you watch them play and nobody stops, nobody asks, they just lean in and keep going — and something in you goes quiet and easy, like a held breath letting out." She smiled at the crossed-out, arrow-covered game in his hands. "You'll stop being scared of the first try being bad. Because the first try being bad is how the good one gets *made*. Every mark on that page is a thing you know now that you didn't know yesterday. That's not a mess. That's the work showing."

The boy looked down at his scribbled, imperfect, getting-better game, and Trial watched the shame lift off his shoulders — the same soft, settling ease she'd felt, years ago, when *failed* finally stopped meaning *I'm bad* and started meaning *here's what's next*.

Theme

making every part of a game work together as one whole



At the edge of the meadow-village, a small bowerbird named Theme was rearranging her cloak for the fourth time that morning.

It was a patchwork thing, sewn from little geometric scraps — triangles, spirals, blunt honest shapes with no picture in them. She held up a blue triangle, squinted at the rest of the cloak, and put it down again in a different spot. Then she stepped back, tilted her head, and only then did she smile.

"Now the whole thing pulls one way," she said, to nobody.

A younger bird hopped over, wings still damp from the dew. "It's just a cloak," he said. "Why does the corner matter?"

"Because if the corner argues with the middle," Theme said, "then it's not a cloak. It's a pile of patches pretending." She swirled it on. Every scrap seemed to lean toward the same center, like water finding a drain. "See? All the little parts saying the same one thing. That's the only trick I know. I just do it over and over."



Theme had learned the trick the hard way, back when she first tried to build a bower of her own.

Her family had been bower-builders for the village for as long as anyone remembered, and she had wanted to make hers the most decorated of all. So she'd crammed it full — shiny buttons, bright berries, a ribbon, a bottle cap, anything that caught the eye. When she finished, she stood back proudly.

It looked terrible. Not ugly, exactly. Just *wrong*. Every pretty thing was shouting a different sentence, and none of them listened to the others. Her chest had gone tight and hot the way it does when you work hard on a thing and it still comes out fake.

Her grandmother had landed beside the sad, loud bower and hadn't scolded her. She'd only asked, "What is this bower *about*?"

Theme hadn't had an answer. That was the whole problem.

"A decoration on its own is just noise, little one," her grandmother said gently. "It only becomes a home when every single piece is doing the same job — when the color and the twig and the shine all lean toward one feeling. Take away everything that doesn't lean." She plucked the loud ribbon out. The bower breathed. "There. Now it means something. That heavy, off feeling you had? That was the pieces fighting. When they stop fighting, you'll feel it go quiet."

Theme took away and took away until only the parts that agreed remained. And she felt it — the off-ness draining out, the whole thing settling into one clear thing. She never forgot the difference between *decorated* and *whole*.



She walked to TableForge at twelve, because a place that studied how to lay things out in neat rows ought to understand the kind of fitting-together she loved.

Blueprint, the old mentor who ran the workshops, met her at the gate. He didn't ask her to prove she was clever. He asked one question. "What makes a game feel real?"

Theme didn't answer with words. She picked up two little cards from his desk. On one she drew a ship and a bag of salt. On the other, just a ship and a bag of salt again — but this time she drew a wavy tide underneath, and an arrow from the tide to the salt.

"This first one," she said, pointing, "the salt is just painted on. You could rub it out and paint on gold, or fish, and nothing else would change. The picture is a lie about the game."

She tapped the second card. "But here — here the tide *does* something. Heavy tide, the ship rides low, carries less salt. Now the story and the rules are the same thing wearing one skin. You can't rub the salt off without the whole game falling apart."

Blueprint looked at the two cards side by side for a long moment. "You belong here," he said.



Theme's workshop was full of things that only worked when their parts agreed.

A girl came in one afternoon, slumped and cross. She'd made a game called *Pirate Adventure!* — dice, tokens, a race to collect treasure — and she couldn't understand why it felt so flat. "I drew pirates on everything," she said. "There's a parrot on the box and a map and skulls. Why is it boring?"

Theme knew that slump exactly. She'd felt it standing in front of her loud, sad bower.

"Swap the pirates for robots," Theme said. "Just in your head. Robots collecting batteries instead of pirates collecting gold."

The girl frowned. "...Nothing changes. It's the same game."

"Right. So the pirates aren't *doing* anything. They're a costume." Theme slid a fresh card over. "Now — why would a pirate crew *actually* fight over gold?"

"Because... their ship needs it to buy food, or it can't sail far?"

"So make *that* the rule. The more gold you spend, the farther your ship reaches. Now spending hurts, and sailing far costs you, and suddenly being a pirate *means* something at the table." She grinned. "You didn't need more skulls. You needed the story and the rules to lean the same way."

The girl bent over the card, scribbling fast now, the crossness melting off her face. Then she stopped and pointed at Theme's cloak. "Why's yours all shapes? No pictures?"

"Because I don't want to borrow somebody's real, living traditions and wear them like a party costume," Theme said, quieter. "Those belong to the people who carry them, and if I want that kind of richness I invent my own — or I say plainly where a real idea came from and thank it. Honor it; don't grab it." She smoothed a triangle flat. "Shapes are honest. They don't pretend to be anyone."



Later, when the workshop was empty, the girl came back with one more question, holding her fixed-up game.

"How do you *know*," she said, "when it's finally whole? When all the parts agree?"

Theme thought about the loud bower, and the tight-hot chest, and her grandmother pulling the ribbon free.

"You feel it," she said. "That's the honest answer. When the parts are still fighting, there's this itchy, off, something's-fake feeling — like a coat on the wrong shape. And when they finally click, the whole thing goes quiet and settles, and your shoulders come down without you deciding they should." She looked at the girl's game, where the gold and the ship and the sailing all pulled one way now. "That quiet is how a pile of parts becomes one thing you actually made. It's the best feeling I know — that soft, relieved *yes* when everything is finally saying the same true thing together."

The girl hugged her game to her chest, and Theme watched the last of the crossness lift off her — the same soft, settling relief she'd felt, years ago, when her own bower finally went quiet.

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Methodology

Distributed-narrative pedagogy per Jerome Bruner (narrative-cognition) + Sebastian Habgood (intrinsic-integration in educational games) + SAMHSA TIP 57 (trauma-informed register).

Trauma-informed-design framework per Eggleston et al. (2025) and Stoltenburg et al. (2024).

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