

WordTrails: Game Design & Dynamics

Game Elements and Design

WordTrails is a table top game consisting of:

300 chips
50 Action cards
12 Trinkets
1 spinner

Players move forward building trails together step by step, taking time to consider what is happening in real time, giving information and taking action, in the absence of any worry about judgment.

The chips each carry a single word. They are organized into 17 color groups. Each group gives possible answers to the question they are color coded to. The actual colored question cards do not become part of play - they are organizational.

The Premise

We are heading out on an adventure together, into uncharted territory.

This is a new experience for each of us, without exception.

Starting from right here, we'll be moving forward together, placing chips and cards, and staying attuned for resonance.

None of us has been in this place before, in these conditions. None of us knows what we will create together. It is yet to be seen, yet to be done.

All possibilities and actions are freely available for the choosing.

Right here at the trailhead, we have what we have, inside and out. The table, the game, and whatever is inside or between us.

We will be moving through shifting and changing conditions a step at a time, sharing what is true as we go along, marking points of shared resonance with our trinkets.

When all the trinkets have been placed, we will have gathered enough resonant information to move to phase two. In phase two, we will each be given the chance to work with what we have agreed to bring back with us, to the campfire. Here, each player distills and captures their own personal meaning from the experience.

Player Modes

WordTrails can be played alone or in a group. There is a document on the WordTrails website that covers the distinctions between these modes, and suggestions for working in them.

Solo play mode
Two-player mode
Group mode
Guided mode

Group Size

In the proposed introductory game, the optimal group size is 2 - 4, in order for each player to have ample trinkets.

In actual play, larger groups often demonstrate a high level of creative capacity to figure out interesting ways to play with WordTrails together.

In one group, for example, a player spontaneously began by stacking a few chips they wanted to offer a fellow player. As those were passed around the table, other players built on what was being offered to the chosen recipient.

This grew into everyone in the group being the recipient of information from the others.

The elements available can truly be worked with in any way imaginable.

Player Ages

WordTrails has been played successfully by children as young as seven. With the younger children, we find it is best to let the child lead, rather than holding them to any specific game structure. Children tend to be in their element, great at inventing interesting ways to play, and easily letting others see what is true in their world. Really all that is needed from the adults is to offer the guidance of no explanations, and then step back. As 7 year old Presley said, *"I like this game. I can tell people how I feel without having to say it."*

Crossing The Threshold

Much like its metaphorical storyline, at the actual moment of taking the first step embarking on a true adventure, WordTrails offers an interesting threshold experience.

The fluid, unscripted nature of play with so many options can be unfamiliar and intimidating. Please know that this is totally natural, certainly not something to be afraid or ashamed of, or put off by.

The crossing of the threshold is a very personal experience. For some folks, this feels like a big leap - their system senses this might shift some things, and that's completely normal. For others, it's more of a leap of faith into something they don't fully understand yet. They are trusting and stepping in. And for some people, it just feels like an easy next natural step. All of those are perfectly fine. It'll be whatever it is for you.

Also, it may well surprise you, and feel different on different days in different conditions.

To help people feel more comfortable entering and playing for the first few times, we offer a specific game structure, below.

At any point you feel comfortable, you are invited and encouraged to make this game your own, however you do. With trusted friends you might move more quickly, stop taking turns, lay down multiple chips, move chips around on the table, add any words or actions you want (blank chips are provided). If you find a way to play that seems especially fun and innovative, share it with us!

Reports we have received:

People feel more connected, the team is now functioning as a team, time is spent more effectively, there is less energy wasted on guardedness, and more open sharing, assumptions are being replaced by clarifying questions, the actual respect of asking, listening, hearing, clarifying and resolving is happening.

- Feelings of joy, connection, euphoria, awe, triumph, relief and growing empathy.
- Conversations after game play are very different than conversations before playing. Deeper, more open, vulnerable, real and effective.
- The team now organically touches back to and uses the game principles in everyday interactions, whether the game itself is accessed or not.

The Structure

The four simple rules create a radically safe and level playing field oriented towards finding and identifying resonance. The unusual level of safety is based on these facts:

- The rules apply across the board; no one can explain their way out of a rule or agreement;
- There are no take-backs, the truth of everyone's choices are right there on the table, and everyone deals with them equally.
- Interestingly, judgment, guilt, shame and blame turn out to naturally vaporize in the absence of explaining, justifying or defending.
- There is an interesting experience of sufficiency built into the structure. One trinket on any given chip is sufficient to bring that chip forward into phase two. It mattered enough to two people, one to play it, one to agree. It belongs. It stays.

The game offers a chance to explore what happens, what becomes true personally and interpersonally, in the condition of radical safety.

Specific differences in conversations before and after playing WordTrails

- More clarifying questions, fewer assumptions
- More giving the benefit of the doubt, less defensiveness and taking things personally
- More willingness to accept responsibility without feeling judged or blamed
- More willingness to be direct in communication, less “speaking in code” or tiptoeing around hard subjects.
- More desire and ability/willingness to stay in the question, listen and wonder, less knee-jerk impulse to jump in with an answer.

Greater ability to admit and own one’s personal effect on the situation. It becomes easier and easier to say things like:

- I was leaping to conclusions
- I was taking it personally
- I was making it personal
- I was not yet seeing the full picture
- I was getting carried away
- Or any other example of “I was getting it wrong”

Greater ability to allow:

- Change
- Surprise
- Difference of opinion
- Difference of values
- Difference of desires
- Difference of perspective
- Difference of orientation

It feels as if these results could be attributed to the synergy that happens in a high level team, deeply committed and bringing 100% for the entire team and the project at hand.

We welcome reports from the field and further study that might lead to a greater understanding of, and application for, this synergistic effect.