
ACORN

A MAP-MAKING LARP ABOUT
SQUIRRELS



BY JENNIFER ADCOCK

What is Acorn?

Acorn is a map-making LARP about squirrels for up to six players. Let's break that down!

A map-making game is a game that includes cartography as a game element. In this game, you and the other players will be drawing on a map that starts as a blank piece of paper - don't worry about being a good or a bad artist. Together, you will be creating a beautiful forest, no matter how skilled you are with a pencil or crayon.

A LARP, or live-action roleplaying game, is a game that involves interacting in the physical space as well as the imaginary space. This game includes phases of using props and walking around and interacting with the room in which you are playing, while still playing your role. In this game, there are also phases of sitting at a table with your paper and pencil, just like in a "tabletop" roleplaying game.

A squirrel is a small rodent that usually lives in trees and buries food such as acorns, nuts, and seeds for later consumption. They have adapted well to urban areas, are often desensitized to human interaction, and are common enough in North America and Europe to be considered a pest by some, despite being generally charming. In this game, everyone is going to be playing a squirrel as their role.

Wait, What?

That's right! This is a game about, on one level, being a squirrel, hiding food for winter, and growing the forest through the seeds you forget to recover. On another level, it is also about being a squirrel mastermind, carefully pulling the strings of growth, development, and nature itself to exert your will over the forest and all its denizens.

Gameplay takes place across four rounds of four phases (seasons). In the autumn phase, you'll hide small items around the area in which you're playing, as though you were squirrels burying seeds to prepare for the harsh winter. In the winter phase, you'll dig up some of the items that were buried last round - but not all of them. In the spring phase, the things that were left buried will start to grow on your map. In the summer phase, you'll develop the landscape and prepare for the next round.

Okay, I'm Interested - What Do I Need to Play?

Not much! First of all, you'll need yourself and up to five other players, but even just one other player is enough. Since you're the one reading these rules, you're probably going to be the facilitator of the other players, but don't worry! You get to be a player too.

You'll also want to gather up some supplies ahead of time: a sheet or a couple sheets of blank paper, depending on how big you want your map to be. Enough pens, pencils, crayons, markers, or other writing implements for each player to have one. Index cards, at least one for each player. Some kind of timer - you can use your phone or a stopwatch or an egg timer or a pomodoro or the timer on your oven or microwave, as long as you can set it for about five minutes.

You'll also need a variety of different tokens - each player will need their own type, easily distinguishable from the others. For example, if you have four players, one could use pennies, one could use poker chips, one could use playing cards, and one could use marbles.

Last but not least, you'll need a place to play in. We recommend a home setting for this game -

most public places and businesses aren't thrilled about people wandering around and hiding objects and digging them back up again. Someone's home is easiest for this, especially if you want to let out a wily cackle like the mastermind you are. If you're hosting, don't worry too much about making sure the place is spotless before you play. A reasonable amount of clutter can make lots of nice little hidey-holes for your tokens!

Rules of Play

The game is played in four rounds of four seasons. The game starts with autumn, then progresses through the seasons just like in a year. Review the rules of each season with everyone before beginning play.

Set up

Give each player six tokens of their type. Make sure everyone is able to distinguish between the different types. Give them an index card as well. Lay out the map paper on a table, pin it up to the wall, or otherwise put it somewhere where everyone can easily access it.

Each player will write three words on their index card, pertaining to something you would find in a natural environment. You can discuss ahead of time what kind of environment you want to build, or you can let it be a surprise. For example, you might write the words "stream", "nest", and "berries", while another player might write "cave", "sand", and "snow". Each player will put one of their tokens on their index card, as a marker of who added those words.

Autumn

Set a timer for five minutes. When the timer starts, each player should start hiding their tokens around the house. They have until the timer goes off to hide all five of their remaining tokens. Once

you've hidden all of your tokens, return to the starting area, usually wherever the timer is located.

Try to think like a squirrel - you'll want to hide the tokens well enough that they won't be found immediately by other squirrels, but in obvious enough places that you won't forget where you put them!

In the first round, you will hide all five of your tokens. In future rounds, you will be re-hiding all of your tokens that were dug up by other players.

Winter

Once the timer has gone off and everyone has returned to the starting area, take a short break. Then set another five minute timer. Now, everyone must scatter around the house again and try to find tokens that have been hidden by the other players. In a small area, this might be quite easy, but in a large house this can be a real challenge!

Once you have found four tokens that are not your own, return to the starting area. If everyone returns early, feel free to stop the timer. If the timer goes off before you have found four tokens, that's okay too, just bring whatever you have found back to the starting area.

In the first round, you will be finding four tokens. In the second round, you will find three. In the third round you'll find two. And in the fourth and final round, you'll only find one.

Spring

Take stock of the four items each player found. For example, you might have found two poker chips, a penny, and a marble. Look at the corresponding words on the card related to those items. Each player will take turns drawing on the

map based on the words on the index cards. For example, if you found a penny, and the penny player included the word “stream”, you might draw a lovely babbling brook on the map, or a thin trickle of snow-melt, or a gushing waterfall that floods the newly-founded Vole Colony.

Make sure everyone gets a turn to draw before starting the second round of drawing turns. Take care not to draw too large if you’re working on just one sheet of paper, or you may choose to add more paper if you wish.

Again, try to think like squirrels! You can tell the whole story of this forest, or mountain, or city, whatever your environment is. Discuss what happens in the forest; talk to the other players about where your squirrels might live on this map. Everyone knows that squirrels control the whole forest and maybe even the whole world, so don’t be afraid to flex your power. If you want to divert a river to thwart the Squirrel Empire’s greatest enemy, the Principality of Salmon, that is within your domain.

In the first round, you should add something new to the map for each token that you found. In future rounds, you can choose to either add to the map, or make a change to something that already exists on the map.

Summer

Give each player back their type of token. For example, if your token was marbles, you’ll want to make sure that you have all the marbles that were found by other players during winter.

Each player should also add a word to their index card, or remove and replace a word. For example, if you included the word “snow” on your index card in the first round and you think there’s enough snow on the map right now, you might

want to erase it and replace it with something else, like “mushroom” or “dam”. Or you could leave “snow” and just add something else, like “hill” or “beach”. It’s up to you!

Then, make sure everyone understands what is needed for the next round. Summer is the end of the round, and you’ll start back up with the next round in autumn.

End of Game

At the end of the game, gather up all your tokens from their hiding places. Take some time and admire your map! You may not be world-class artists (or maybe you are!) but you’ve created a beautiful landscape regardless. The Sovereignty of Squirrels shall truly last an eon.

Variant Rules

We’ve included two types of variant rules in this game: two for players who love an extra challenge, or have played Acorn once and want a more squirrely experience; and one for outdoor play that involves cleaning up litter from your local environment. They can all be combined, as well.

Variant 1: Sneaky Squirrels

For an extra challenge, add the option of moving tokens that have already been placed. In fall, if you come across someone else’s hiding place, you can move their token somewhere else. In winter, you can relocate your own tokens to new hiding spots. It really helps to think like squirrels here: sometimes they’ll pretend to bury a particularly tasty acorn if they think another squirrel is watching, but they’ll actually still have it with them to hide somewhere else!

Variation 2: Squirrels! In! Space!

Instead of controlling one humble forest, these squirrels control a galactic empire. Don't limit your words to just things in Earth's nature; think on a planetary scale. Instead of things like "bushes", "boulders", and "rivers", choose words like "nebula", "black hole", "laser beams", "space station", and "alien monsters from beyond the stars".

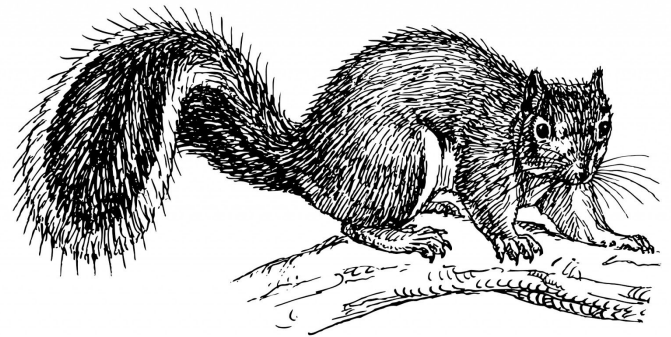
Variation 3: The Great Litter Clean-Up

In this variation, you'll play outside in a park, at the waterfront, by a roadside, anywhere that there might be lots of litter that needs picking up.

At the start of the game, each player will pick a particular type of litter to be theirs - for example, one player might pick aluminum cans, one might pick fast food trash, one might pick cardboard boxes, and one might pick plastic bags.

In this variation, you will skip the autumn phase of the game; please don't increase the litter in your environment! Instead you will skip right to winter and try to find as much other litter as you can. Don't limit yourself to four or three items; bring back as much as you can find each round!

You'll still have index cards of words and you'll still add locations to your map; you could even choose to add based on things you see during your clean-up. During summer, you won't return the items to their original players. Simply sort them into trash bags or recycling bins as appropriate.



Credits

Game Text and Development by Jennifer Adcock

Inspired by the #EarthEmpathyJam by Kira Magrann and Jenn Martin

Game Cover by Jennifer Adcock, using free elements from Canva

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With special thanks to my very own balcony-visiting squirrels, for the hours of entertainment