

# What How World!

## Improv Storytelling Activity

2+ players (or 1 player with some prep)

ages 8+ (or 4+ with adult supervision)

### **GETTING STARTED**

Let's practice our storytelling with some short scenes! With one or two players, the player(s) in the scene will have to decide when to end the scene with an Edit (see below). A fun scene may turn into a whole play, but most scenes can be 1-2 minutes or shorter. Practice taking turns Editing the scene. Some players may try to end each other's scenes early, which can lead to friction. In that case, use a 1-2 minute timer to keep things fair.

*The most important rule* when playing What How World is that real fights (chases, rough-housing, angry shouting, etc.) will always end the scene, no matter how much time has passed. Storytellers always respect their fellow artists and their bodies! Besides, change and new ideas are what make stories and improv scenes great, and players who are fighting aren't open to any of that!

There are four important steps to having scene after scene of fun. With practice, storytellers may start with a simple one word suggestion and let their imaginations fill in the rest, but for now, let's focus on these steps, so that we can all start on the same page.

- 1.) **Find your Setting:** Where does your story take place? When is it happening? When playing with a friend, you can each take turns picking out a setting, or add your ideas together to create an even more unusual setting (a cafe in outer space, a sewer in Paris).
- 2.) **Find your Character and/or Starting Idea:** Some of us like a lot of structure, while others are comfortable with little more than a character idea or what-if question. You might take turns starting off a story with a simple character idea (a talking dog) and then trying with a more complex what-if question (What if ice cream made you younger and toast made you older?) or a pair of suggestions.
- 3.) **“Yes, And” the ideas:** Treat every idea (even you own) as special and important, as long as it’s not wildly inappropriate. Accepting the idea is a great start, and adding a detail makes it even better, especially when that details helps the original idea fit into your make believe world! Find some examples below.
- 4.) **Edit and repeat:** All scenes end with an Edit, meaning a player declares “The End,” or “Scene.” Then you go back to step one! This is a great chance to build upon your story with a fresh idea, start a whole new short story, or even “What-if” a previous scene, seeing what would happen if you followed a different idea. This is also an opportunity to give other players their turns, or agree to end the activity with one final scene (or set of short scenes, so everyone gets a turn).

**“Yes, And” examples:** Tanveer says “Someone put hot sauce in my socks!” Mary wants to validate that idea, so she might say, “And someone put hot fudge in my socks, hooray!” or “Of course they did, it’s International Hot Sauce Socks Day!” or even “Actually, it’s just ketchup and jalapenos, I’m working on my recipe...” If Mary instead tries to deny or drastically change Tanveer’s idea (“You’re not wearing socks!” “That’s not hot sauce, that’s my pet unicorn”) it’s okay to edit the scene a little early and start again or get a new suggestion after talking about “Yes, And” for a minute.

**Making Callbacks:** Storytellers sometimes add too many great ideas, rather than exploring the good ideas they start out with. That's okay, as all of this takes lots of practice. After the scene, you might suggest revisiting one of those forgotten "Yes, And's" with a new scene. This is sometimes called a "Callback."

***Optional activity:* Suggestion Hat(s)**

Materials:

1 pencil per player

Several sheets of lined paper or index cards

1 or 2 hats, shoeboxes, etc.

1 pair of safety scissors per player (unless using index cards)

Each player spends 10 minutes writing out as many ideas as they can for the start of a scene. A what-if question is always acceptable. Then, have the players cut out their ideas (unless using index cards), fold them in half, and place them in the hat, box, etc. Finally, before you start each scene, a different player takes a turn drawing a suggestion from the hat to use for their improv.

Alternatively, each player spends 5 minutes writing out character ideas, followed by 5 minutes writing out possible settings. Then, each player can pick a character idea, and one player can take a turn choosing a new setting before each scene.

If you can preserve some of these pieces of paper, you can continue to use them the more you play this game, building a bigger collection of suggestions. If they get mixed up, part of the setup for players can be separating the ideas into their proper categories, Settings, Characters, and Scene Prompts/What-Ifs."

## **TIPS FOR GROWNUPS AND BIG KIDS**

Adult supervision is recommended when playing What How World for the first time, at least for a couple of scenes. The [companion episode](#) gives helpful tips and demonstrations, but grownup help will make for a much easier start. After a few rounds, kids 8 and up can try playing What How World on their own. Just make sure you're nearby in case things get rowdy.

For children under 8, try keeping the scenes shorter (as little as a minute, and setting a timer can help), and give the young ones a very specific suggestion. Then, an older player simply reacts to the young one's performance. For example, ask a 4 year old to play a frog stuck in a well (referencing familiar stories and characters can help). Then, you or another older player reacts to this talking frog. Do you try to save it to show to the world and make a fortune? Do you run screaming from this supernatural amphibian? Are you a fox in disguise trying to trick the frog into your pot of stew? If things get out of hand, Edit quickly.

Small groups may have an easier time getting started, but kids are natural born improvisers, and given a few suggestions (maybe a hat full of suggestions, as described in the optional activity), kids can practice solo scene-work and then demonstrate for the grownups later!

It's best to start scenes with two players. In groups of 3 or more, extra players can take turns sitting out the scene. Those players can stay involved by helping pick suggestions, timing or ending scenes, and/or applauding their fellow storytellers after a scene. When older groups (10+) have had a lot of practice with What How World, they can occasionally start scenes with 3 or more players, or have other players briefly walk on to support a scene. Group games are not the focus of this activity, but a quick hint is to remind players to be very patient, practice listening, and try not to leave the scene quickly, unless they're one of the main characters.

This activity was originally developed by Eric O'Keeffe as part of the [What If World](#) podcast.