

Pets Aren't Toys

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Game Description

Love isn't automatic, it needs time. Pets don't depend on you. If you care for them, they grow healthy, smart, and happy. You may even adopt more. If you neglect them, however, they don't die... they just wait.

Each player will adopt pets, care for them, and maintain their emotions. Neglecting them will cause negative effects. There are time cards that affect your pets emotions, action cards that can be held or used immediately to boost your pets emotions, and pet cards that can be drawn if all of your current pets have at least two points in every stat, this is a conditional card. The player with the most status points at the end of the game wins.

Game Design Document

Core Concept:

Pets Aren't Toys is a 2–4 player strategy and resource-management board game where players care for multiple pets while navigating a shared map. Each pet has three core stats, Health, Intelligence, and Happiness, that must be carefully maintained. Players move between rooms, respond to random events, and use limited actions to keep their pets alive and thriving. The game blends planning, risk management, and prioritization under pressure.

Purpose:

The game's purpose is to highlight responsibility and the long-term commitment required when caring for living beings. It emphasizes that pets are not disposable or interchangeable, and that neglect, even unintentional, has consequences. Through gameplay, players experience how attention, balance, and consistency are necessary to maintain well-being. It also encourages thoughtful decision-making when taking on more responsibility, such as adopting additional pets.

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Core Rules:

Players start with 1 pet each, randomly assigned, and begin in the Bedroom.

All pets start with 2 Health, 2 Intelligence, and 2 Happiness (max 10 per stat).

Each turn, players:

Roll and move across the shared map (rooms = spaces).

May carry or switch one pet at a time.

Draw and resolve a Time Card (random event affecting stats).

Play one Action Card (then redraw to maintain a hand of 5).

Only one pet can be attended at the end of a turn (either moved with or shared space).

Pets left unattended lose stats over time and can deteriorate quickly.

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Key Mechanics:

1. Movement & Positioning

Players navigate a shared board of themed rooms. Movement determines which pets can be attended and which room bonuses can be used. Each room provides a different stat adjustment, encouraging strategic positioning.

2. Pet Management

Each pet has three stats that must be balanced. If any stat reaches 0, the pet is removed from the player unless it is their only pet. Pets must be actively managed, as unattended pets steadily degrade due to neglect.

3. Card Systems

Time Deck: Introduces unpredictable events that alter pet stats or game conditions.

Action Deck: Gives players strategic tools to repair, boost, or manipulate stats and movement.

4. Adoption System

Players may adopt additional pets only if all current pets have at least 5 in all stats. Adopting requires reducing one stat from an existing pet, creating a strategic cost to expansion.

5. Room Bonuses

At the end of each turn, players may apply one room effect to a single pet, reinforcing strategic placement and prioritization.

6. Neglect System

If a pet is unattended for 2 consecutive turns, it begins losing stats each turn until attended again. This creates urgency and forces consistent attention.

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Win Condition:

The game ends when the Time Deck runs out or all pets have been adopted. Players then total all stat points across their pets. The player with the highest combined score of Health, Intelligence, and Happiness wins, rewarding consistent care and efficient management rather than quantity of pets.

Iterative Design

Our first iteration of the game had a different game board and had different designs for our cards. Our second iteration is where we fixed the board and the cards. The board was pulled closer together so there were no longer gaps in between each room, the rooms were labeled, and we added each boost the room gives when a pet is in that room. The cards just had an overall different design.

Game Mechanics

The player mechanics in *Pets Aren't Toys* center on movement, prioritization, and managing multiple pets at once. Each turn, players roll a die and move around the board, choosing whether to use all their movement while deciding which pet to bring with them, since they can only move one at a time. Players can leave pets in different rooms, switch between them, or move alone, but a pet is only considered “attended” if it was moved with that turn or the player ends in the same room as it. Because only one pet can be attended at the end of each turn, players are constantly forced to decide which pet needs the most care. This ties directly into the neglect mechanic, if a pet is left unattended for too long, it begins losing stats every turn, so players must stay aware of all their pets’ locations and conditions.

Alongside movement, players manage resources through Time Cards, Action Cards, and pet adoption. Time Cards introduce random events that affect pet stats, while Action Cards give players some control, with one card played each turn and a constant hand of five. Players can also adopt new pets, but only if all their current pets have balanced stats, and doing so requires sacrificing a stat from an existing pet. This creates a trade-off between expanding and maintaining control. At the end of each turn, players apply a room bonus to one pet based on its location, adding another strategic layer to movement and positioning. Overall, the mechanics require players to balance risk, plan ahead, and continuously manage their pets’ well-being while adapting to both strategy and chance.

Player Goals

The main objective is to successfully manage and maintain a group of pets by keeping their Health, Intelligence, and Happiness as high as possible throughout the game. Since each pet starts with low stats and can only be improved through careful care and room bonuses, the overall goal is long-term maintenance rather than short-term gains. Players must also decide whether or not to adopt additional pets, knowing that more pets increase the difficulty of maintaining strong stats across all of them.

Victory is determined at the end of the game, which occurs when either the Time Deck runs out or all pets have been adopted. At that point, players calculate their final score by adding together all Health, Intelligence, and Happiness points from every pet they own. The player with the highest total stat value wins. This means victory is not based on the number of pets a player has, but rather how well they were cared for throughout the game. A player with fewer pets but well-balanced stats can outperform someone with many poorly maintained pets, making efficient care and smart decision-making the key to winning.

Gameplay Sequence

This image demonstrates players who are in the middle of the game. Some players have obtained more than one pet while others are still on their first. You can see the pets and players are all in different rooms and have their action and time cards.



Rulebook Sample

Pets Aren't Toys

Players

2–4 players
⌚ 30–45 minutes

Goal

Keep your pets healthy, intelligent, and happy.

The player with the most total pet stat points at the end of the game wins.

Components

- 1 Game Board
- Player pieces (1 per player)
- Animal pieces
- Pet Meter Cards (Health, Intelligence, Happiness)
- Adoption Cards
- Time Deck
- Action Deck
- 1 Die

Setup

1. The player's all share 1 map
2. Each player randomly draws 1 animal to adopt.
3. Give each player 5 action cards

4. For the whole game, when you adopt a new pet, give them 2 in each stat to start (stats have a max of 10)

5. Shuffle the time and action decks separately and place them face down.
6. Place your player piece and your pet in the Bedroom.

Turn Structure

The youngest player starts, then the person to their left and so on

On your turn:

Roll & Move

- Roll the die, you may move that many spaces a turn (you do not have to use all of your moves)
- Moving from room to room is 1 space each

When moving, you control your character piece; your character piece can bring 1 pet with it at a time.

You may:

- Leave pets unattended in rooms.
- Switch pets if you enter a room with another pet.
- Move without a pet.

A pet is considered attended if:

- You moved with it this turn, OR
- You end your turn in the same room as it (YOU CAN ONLY ATTEND ONE PET AT A TIME AT THE END OF YOUR TURN)

Draw a Time Card

Draw 1 Time Card and follow its instructions.

Update all Pet Meter cards accordingly.

Action Cards

- You will have 5 action cards in your hand at one time, you must play 1 action card per hand. After you play your action card, draw another to keep your hand at 5.

Pet Cards (Conditional)

- You may draw a random pet to adopt only if ALL of your pets have at least 5 in every stat.

Adoption

If you draw an Adoption card and choose to adopt:

You must,

- Reduce 1 stat (your choice) from one of your existing pets by -1

Then:

- Place the new pet in your current room.
- Set its stats to 2 Health, 2 Intelligence, 2 Happiness.

You may adopt as many pets as you are able to.

End of Turn: Room Bonuses

At the end of your turn:

-  You may apply the room bonus to any ONE of your pets.

Choose which pet receives its room's effect based on its location.

(Other pets do not receive room bonuses this turn.)

Room Effects

Room	Effect
Kitchen	+1 Happiness, -1 Health

Bathroom +1 Health, -1 Happiness

Yard +1 Happiness

Bedroom +1 Happiness, -1 Intelligence

Park +1 Health

School +1 Intelligence, -1 Happiness

Clinic +1 Health, -1 Happiness

Neglect Rule

A pet is unattended when the player piece has no interaction with it (see above rules for how to attend)

If a pet is unattended for 2 turns in a row:

- It loses:
 - -1 Health
 - -1 Intelligence
 - -1 Happiness
- This loss happens every turn until they are attended.
- Use tokens to keep track of how many turns a pet has been unattended, when they are attended, remove all tokens.

If at the end of your turn a pet reaches 0 in any stat:

- Return that pet to the Adoption pile. (YOU MUST ALWAYS HAVE 1 PET. DO NOT RETURN IT TO THE PILE IF ITS YOUR ONLY PET)

End of Game

The game ends when:

- The Time Deck runs out
OR
- When all pets are adopted

Scoring

Add up every stat point from all your pets.

The player with the highest total wins.

Playtesting Notes

Players thought that it would be easier to have the rooms all connected because it was confusing if the space between the rooms was a move or not, so we pulled everything closer together. The players also thought having the rooms labeled and the room bonuses on the board made more sense so we added that. During the gameplay, the players decided it would make more sense to not get rid of your pet when it hits 0 but when it's your last pet. It was too easy to get the pet numbers high so we made it harder. It was hard to track the pets who were alone so we added lonely tokens to place on your pet card. Increased the cost of adoption because it was too easy to obtain a new pet like give something up instead of giving it for free. We also made it so you must have a pet at all times instead of having none when you would've lost one.

Game Reflections

Through developing *Pets Aren't Toys*, we learned how complex game design can be, especially when trying to balance multiple systems like movement, pet stats, and the neglect mechanic. It showed me that every rule impacts gameplay, and even small changes can make the game too easy or too difficult. We also realized how important it is to clearly explain rules so other players can understand them without confusion, and how game mechanics can reinforce a bigger message. In this case, responsibility and proper pet care. If I were to do it again, I would focus more on simplifying the game and playtesting earlier to make sure the mechanics aren't overwhelming and the gameplay flows smoothly, while still keeping the core idea intact.