

MY LIFE MINUS
From *SappyForever Volume One* (2014)

The game is called *My Life Minus*. First, you call to mind a person, place, or thing. Then, you ask yourself the question, “What would my life be like minus whatever-it-is?”

According to the instructions, *My Life Minus* is a Sappy game. The object is to affirm “life with Sappy” by way of gently contemplating life without it. Players can select multiple variables at once, move forward and backward, and are encouraged to keep the following in mind as they traverse along the board:

- 1) Evolution is forward moving, but has no goal.
- 2) The present is the future of the past.
- 3) Instinct is the spontaneous remembering of forgotten experience.
- 4) Time travel exists, but cannot be explained.
- 5) Nowhere is worth double points, and can mean anywhere.

My Life Minus came out in 2006 after the inaugural SappyFest/second rebirth of Sappy Records. The circumstances of the first-ever game are not precisely known (some cite a conversation in a diner, others allude to a band practice, one obscure account references a civilized debate in a kaleidoscope-painted bedroom about the relationship between “reminiscing and aspiring”), but knowing its exact origins is certainly not crucial to one’s enjoyment of the game. In fact, people all over Canada have reported an incessant urge to discover *My Life Minus* following even the briefest brush with SappyFest. Players like that they can make their own cards based on their own favourite memories. They like that they can trade cards and add to the deck at any time. They like moving their pieces from Bandstand to Legion to Chapel, Owens to Cranewood to Larry’s, main stage to music hall to Vogue—and they love all the accessories that have been added to the game over the years. The Bridge Street expansion pack, for example, lets players correspond with each other via City Mail, and buy miniature records, t-shirts, books, zines, pottery, produce—that, at the end of the day, all go

into a miniature SappyFest tote bag that looks just like the real thing, and gets safely stored for you in the merch tent so you don't have to hold it while you're dancing.

My Life Minus is a reflective game that arose from an ambitious time. After the festival in 2006, Julie Doiron, Jon Claytor and Paul Henderson were all, individually and together, contemplating the evolution of their co-created Sappiness—from one-woman label in 1990, to co-run venture in 1995, to collective vision in 2006—and it is out of their accumulated Sappy reveries that the game *My Life Minus* is thought to have developed. When asked to comment on the game, each said they played it, none claimed to have invented it—and interestingly, all three Sappy players admitted to having their own private take on the game.

Julie, for example, said she liked the basic premise—to affirm life with Sappy by way of gently contemplating life without it—but found the name misleadingly negative.

“If it's a Sappy game, it should be called *My Life Plus*. Why be sneaky about it? It's confusing. It's *dangerous*.”

Her main concern was that people who played *My Life Minus* without reading the instructions first would misunderstand the minus operation, and accidentally end up playing the not-for-beginners “psychologically heavy” version of the game.

“All I'm saying is that I'm an experienced player, but with some games...?” She shook her head disbelievingly, “Even I can end up feeling like the baby at the end of *Space Odyssey*, you know?” Paul and Jon considered the image as Julie pulled a carrot out of her purse and, with unintended authority, snapped it in half.

Jon also expressed concerns about the name *My Life Minus*, and in 2008, devised his own “Mysterioversion” called *My Life Point Three Repeating*. In just two years, the ambition and scope of SappyFest had significantly increased, and with each new twist, Jon fell into further contemplation about the possibilities that get both activated and excluded anytime anyone decides to make a new thing.

“Like in time travel,” he said to Paul, who at the time was helping Jon wheel a six-and-a-half-foot freestanding painting of a dancing bear out of The Little Armadillo. “Where even though you're

somewhere, there are other possible versions of you somewhere else. Other versions of the universe just... out there.”

“Out where?” Paul asked from behind the painting. It was a simple reply that felt substantial, since from Jon’s point of view, it appeared the bear had posed the question. Jon stopped wheeling and mulled it over. Out where? The location was impossible to describe, but intriguing to picture: time’s endless remainder, hanging in the air at all times, like a finished painting proclaiming itself a blank canvas.

“I think Sappy needs a roller derby,” Jon said to Paul, cutting his tangent short. Jon liked the meditative aspect of *My Life Minus/My Life Point Three Repeating*, but found it tiring at times. He said that every once in a while, he swapped his board out for the John Cougar Band Camp kids edition, just to mellow out.

“Give it time,” Paul replied with characteristic poise, wiping his forehead and glancing into the shop at a painted man with birds perched on outstretched arms.

By 2010, there were several documented *My Life Minus* variations, including Julie and Jon’s versions (*My Life Plus* and *My Life Point Three Repeating* respectively), Ian “Max Harvey” Roy’s Writer’s Block version (*My Life Metaphorically Speaking*), Mike “Larry Snails” Feuerstack’s Retractable Extroversion version (*My Life Vice Versa*), and many others. Paul had started developing his own interpretation during preparation for Sappy V: *Swamp Magic*, but it wasn’t until 2012—after Sappy VI: *With Or Without You* and before Sappy VII: *Everybody Knows This Is Nowhere*—during an interview with *Sappy Times* writer Sean Michaels, that Paul revealed several key details about his own version of *My Life Minus*, which he called *My Life Countably Infinite*.

For years, Paul had viewed his Creative Director designation as an ongoing apprenticeship in the art of counting to infinity. He focused on measurable space and resources, with the goal of realizing unlimited, immeasurable potential: six months of mathematics that led to three days of music that led to an incomputable spread of magically charged metaphysics.¹ A favourite anecdote among

¹ “[M]usic, mathematics and metaphysics...” is a quote from the play *Glenn* by David Young, and has been combined here with a Sappy quote from Ian Kehoe (“Magically charged feelings”). The discussion of space, resources and potential is based on the article *A Nowhere*, written by Paul Henderson for the Sappy VII program.

Sappy interns describes a legendary performance at a Board of Directors Meeting & Budget Review, where Paul apparently started his presentation by standing on a table and declaring to the baffled trustees, “The *vibe*, ladies and gentlemen, is both quantifiable and unquantifiable.” Paul confirmed the story, but emphasized his subsequent use of spreadsheets and Excel Chart Wizard—and said the part about him wearing sunglasses and arranging to have XYZ blasted through his walkie-talkie as he exited the meeting had probably been added in for effect.

The addition of *My Life Countably Infinite* resonated with the Sappy community, and many *My Life Minus* players incorporated its Standard Form issued, foil-embossed “counting-to-infinity” wild cards into their own decks. A right-side-up infinity card helps you get to the festival by writing a successful grant proposal to the Canada Arts Council, which is definitely worth it, but involves a series of complicated and not-always-intuitive moves, as well as a shitload of paper. An upside down infinity card, on the other hand, is the one everyone tries to get because it lets you move your piece from the “living room on a rainy day” square to the “SappyFest of your choice watching your favourite band with three complimentary beer tokens in your pocket” square—in a single move.

Another feature of *My Life Countably Infinite* is the “day-after-the-festival” wild card, which isn’t as popular as the counting-to-infinity cards (probably because it means SappyFest is over and involves helping tear down the main stage), but seems to have a niche among *My Life Minus* players outside Sackville—particularly those who have never witnessed their own home towns undergo such an event-induced transformation. These players report feeling truly moved after using the day-after-the-festival wild card, delighted by the imagined experience of walking down a slowly exhaling Bridge Street on the Monday after Sappy, pondering the question most Sackville residents ask themselves after 2000-ish people roll through their town: “What the hell just happened?” It is, apparently, a point of view that many players covet because it allows them to occasionally see their own local surroundings the way they imagine all Sackville residents view “the home of SappyFest:” as both a familiar place that is what it is, as well as a generative space where you can safely freak out.

Swamp Magic, With Or Without You, Everybody Knows This Is Nowhere, Don't Get Your Hopes Up—tentativeness has always been a central theme of SappyFest, and *My Life Minus* players of all stripes and variations (including those mentioned above) agree that the game should honour this theme by remaining a fluid, open system. New versions are always welcome, so long as they stay roughly compatible with the original *My Life Minus* Sappy game instructions:

- 1) Evolution is forward moving, but has no goal.
- 2) The present is the future of the past.
- 3) Instinct is the spontaneous remembering of forgotten experience.
- 4) Time travel exists, but cannot be explained.
- 5) Nowhere is worth double points, and can mean anywhere.

These guidelines, as you no doubt already know, have been carefully designed to generate good memories, circulate good vibes, and perpetuate a spirit of mystery beyond the limits of time and space. A simple game serving an ancient purpose: play it, enjoy it—and good luck!