White Elephant: a complete three-steal house ruleset

This is Beacon & Barrel's house version, not an official universal standard. A numbered turn includes any chain of steals it causes. A gift is frozen after its third steal across the whole game; opening a gift does not count as a steal. Mark gifts A, B, C and so on, then give each a three-box tally card.

1. Before starting, match participants to gifts. Resolve forgotten gifts and late arrivals before drawing unique numbers. Keep a spare gift only if the host wants to; do not promise one.

2. Player 1 chooses a wrapped gift, opens it and shows the room.

3. In numerical order, each new player either opens a wrapped gift or takes an eligible opened gift. Mark one steal on that gift's tally.

4. A person whose gift is taken immediately chooses a wrapped gift or steals an eligible opened gift. Continue until someone opens a wrapped gift; that ends this numbered turn.

5. An opened gift may be stolen only once within a numbered turn. This prevents immediate steal-backs and longer loops. Clear the turn markers when a wrapped gift is opened; keep the cumulative tallies.

6. A gift freezes with its holder on the third cumulative steal. It cannot move again. The displaced player still chooses; freezing alone does not end the turn.

7. After the last wrapped gift opens, Player 1 may keep their gift or make one direct swap with another unfrozen gift. Both gifts must be unfrozen. No new chain starts, and that swap ends the game.

8. If Player 1 holds a frozen gift, there is no final swap. Everyone keeps one gift. Any later trade happens only if both people freely agree.

What the steal limit means in practice

Suppose gift A is opened by Player 1. Player 2 steals A: its tally is now one, and Player 1 opens B to finish that numbered turn. Later, Player 3 steals A: its tally becomes two. The displaced player cannot take A again in that turn, but may choose another eligible gift or open a new one. On A's third steal in a later numbered turn, it freezes with the new holder.

Use two different marks: permanent ticks for the gift's total steals and a removable marker for "already stolen this turn." A tally of three means frozen for the rest of the game. The final direct swap may move an unfrozen gift that has two ticks; it does not restart the stealing phase. If you want a different ending, agree to it before play rather than changing this version mid-game.

Gift steal tally

Gift / current holder: _____

Total steals: [ ] 1 [ ] 2 [ ] 3 FROZEN

Temporary "stolen this numbered turn" marker: [ ]

Copy one tally per gift. Keep total ticks; clear only the temporary marker when a wrapped gift opens.

Dice gift exchange with an ending everyone understands

Use this separate house game from beginning to end; do not combine it with White Elephant freezing. Each participant starts with one wrapped gift from the central pile. Everyone sits in a circle. The host announces two complete circuits of the die, so every participant gets exactly two rolls. Unwrap after the first circuit. After the second circuit, everyone keeps what they hold.

There is no elimination, extra prize, or second gift to obtain. Every action below preserves one gift per person. One die can be passed by a helper, and an accessible digital die can be used if agreed.

Beacon & Barrel two-circuit dice exchange

Roll	Action
1	Keep your gift; pass the die.
2	Swap your gift with the person on your left.
3	Swap your gift with the person on your right.
4	Swap with any one other willing participant; if nobody wants to swap, keep.
5	Everyone passes their gift one seat to the left at the same time.
6	Everyone passes their gift one seat to the right at the same time.

No-steal draw: the simplest alternative

1. Everyone participating brings one wrapped gift under the agreed cap.

2. Draw unique numbers. In order, choose one wrapped gift, open it and keep it.

3. There are no steals and no forced final swap. The exchange ends when every participant has opened one gift.

4. Allow voluntary trades afterward, with no pressure to accept. Guests can stay seated while a willing helper brings the gifts.

Left/right story: how to play

Give every participant one wrapped gift and seat them in a circle. The reader does not need to join the exchange; if they do, pause so they can pass too. Read the story slowly. Pass only when the reader says an uppercase LEFT or RIGHT cue in the text below, and wait until everyone holds one gift before continuing. At the end, unwrap what you hold.

This is a passing game, not a guarantee that every gift goes to a new person. Depending on the number of participants, someone may finish with the gift they started with. If that matters to your group, choose the no-steal numbered draw instead.

An original holiday story: The Missing Place Card

At the holiday supper, Morgan put the last place card on the LEFT of the centerpiece. It looked RIGHT there, beside the tiny paper star. Then a gust from the opening door sent the card sliding out of sight.

Morgan checked the shelf on the RIGHT. No card. There was only a bowl, three oranges and a ribbon that somebody had LEFT behind. Across the room, Jo called, "I think I saw it by the window on the LEFT!"

They walked to the window. The card was not there, but a stack of napkins leaned to the RIGHT. Morgan straightened them and found a note: "The missing thing is where you LEFT the dessert plates."

The dessert plates were on the RIGHT side of the kitchen counter. On top sat a folded paper star. Jo turned it to the LEFT and discovered another note: "You were RIGHT to look here. Now ask the person with the sparkly sweater."

That was Sam, standing to the RIGHT of the doorway with an empty serving tray. "I LEFT something for you beside the water pitcher," Sam said. Morgan went back to the table and moved the pitcher to the LEFT.

There was the place card, tucked under a coaster! Morgan set it RIGHT beside the paper star again. Everyone took a seat, passed the bread to the LEFT, and agreed that the best holiday mystery was one solved before dinner.

Put the budget and rules in the invitation

Choose one spending cap everyone can manage. State whether tax and shipping count, whether used or regifted items are welcome, and whether the gifts should be useful, silly or themed. Avoid a vague instruction to bring something "good." Leave alcohol, adult humor and food allergens out of a general exchange unless the group explicitly agrees.

Copy and fill in: Join us for [gathering] on [date] at [time/place]. The optional gift exchange is [format]. Bring one wrapped [theme/useful/silly] gift costing no more than [cap and what it includes]. [Regift policy]. Please RSVP by [date] and tell me if you need an accommodation. We will use the linked rules, including [steal limit/final rule]. No purchase or participation is required to enjoy the gathering.

Host's final checks

[ ] Format: _____

[ ] Spending cap and regift policy: _____

[ ] Participants: _____ Usable gifts: _____ Match before drawing.

[ ] Read the chosen rules aloud and allow questions before starting.

[ ] Arrange seated participation, readable labels and a helper as needed.

[ ] Use one complete format; do not combine dice actions with freezing.

[ ] Keep participation optional and any later trades voluntary.

Story note

Pass only at the uppercase LEFT and RIGHT cues. In passing games, the final holder depends on the story and circle. Choose the no-steal numbered draw if the group prefers that format.

About these rules

These are complete Beacon & Barrel house formats, not universal official rules. Groups use different versions of White Elephant, Yankee Swap and Dirty Santa. Read the full online guide for Secret Santa, choosing a format and source links illustrating regional and household variation.