

Equinox Retreat

A low drama larp about impactful relationships, mid-life and acceptance



Short description

In an alternative reality, the turning point of your life is exactly in the middle of it. At the equinox of your life, a symbiotic creature appears. It is an external representation of your emotions and your relations, and you find yourself in a retreat to learn how to behave with your companion, so you can face the second half of your life.

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Before the game

Setting (long description)

In an alternative present-day world, where the average life expectancy is about 90-100 years old, the turning point of your life is exactly in the middle of it.

At the equinox of your life, or your mid-life (of your natural lifespan), a symbiotic creature, known as a companion, appears. It is a part of you just as much as your internal organs, and is an external representation of your emotions and relations. As the appearance of this companion is a given in this world, retreats are organized for people to familiarize themselves with their companion once it appears.

You find yourself in such a retreat, along with a group of people that have been indicated as touching points in your life, as people you share some sort of connection with. All of you are here to learn how to behave with your companion so you can face the second half of your life.

Practical details

Number of participants: 6-12

Duration: 4-5 hours

Room set-up:

Very simple: circle with chairs (same number as participants, plus one extra chair for facilitator during workshops), have some chairs and a table with drinks and snacks outside of the circle.

The circle of chairs is where each act starts, as this is the circle for the group therapy each act starts with. The rest of the space, with chairs and tables and whatever you have available, is the rest of the retreat, which players can move into after the end of each therapy session.

If you have professional lighting, you can play with the light and have some warm light centered on the circle of chairs.

Content warnings

Themes that are unavoidable

Mid-life, knowing your exact natural age of death, change, relationship changes and potential conflicts.

You will be creating your own characters so you will be able to avoid other possible triggers in your own background, however, these may still be present in other characters and be talked about in-game.

Materials used

Brought along by organizer:

- 10-12 Companion blobs with tokens
- small paper slips with names, age and pronouns for each participant
- 3 playlists for each act, according to stages of grief
- sound files for diegetic announcements
- 1 one pager character sheet per participant
- Optional: ball of yarn for debrief

Needed:

- Speaker/sound system with Bluetooth connection
- Name tags to slide the names etc into
- Pens for all participants

Note

See annexes at end of document for explanation about how to craft the blobs, materials for the paper slips and character sheets and links to all the sound files.

Game

Part 1: pre-game workshops

1. Welcome (10')

Welcome

Getting to know each other

Everyone states their name and pronouns and their expectations (in 1 phrase/3 words) for the game (facilitator goes first)

Agenda

As a facilitator, take your time to describe the following: state what we will be doing during the workshops and run through the structure of the game.

- First framework and setting
- Then character creation with a 'yes, and' mindset
- Next we will choose our companion blobs
- Next will be relationship creation
- After that, we will familiarize ourselves with our companions and how to play with them
- Last, we will tackle emotional safety

- The game itself will consist of three acts, each one longer than the previous, with another short relationship workshop in between acts 1 and 2.
- Each act consists of a group therapy session and free time. Each act starts with everyone sitting in the circle, starting the group therapy session. The therapy sessions, free time and end of the act will be announced diegetically, through audio clips.
- In the last act, there will be time scheduled for in character goodbyes, which will be announced diegetically.
- There will be plenty of sanitary breaks in between the workshops and the game itself

Creating a framework

Talk briefly about the setting & the why:

Setting (read out loud):

In an alternative present-day world, where the average life expectancy is about 90-100 years old, the turning point of your life is exactly in the middle of it.

At the equinox of your life, or your mid-life (of your natural lifespan), a symbiotic creature, known as a companion, appears. It is a part of you just as well as your internal organs, and is an external representation of your emotions and relations. As the appearance of this companion is a given in this world, retreats are organized for people to familiarize themselves with their companion once it appears.

You find yourself in such a two week long retreat, along with a group of people that have been indicated as touching points in your life, as people you share some sort of connection with. All of you are here to learn how to behave with your companion so you can face the second half of your life.

Why (explain/read out loud):

This is a larp about the impact our relationships and interactions with others can have on us. It is a larp about mid-life, about the life already lived and the life that's still ahead. It's also a larp about acceptance.

This larp has been written with the hopes of plunging you into these emotions and feelings, without them becoming overly big or world-altering. It's a story about how an inner world can be rocked and shaken and changed without there being much else influencing this other than the people around you and the natural state of the world. It's a larp in which the world of your characters will be changed profoundly while the larger world around them remains unchanged. It's an intimate larp that will allow you to explore the deep feelings and relationships of a person and how they can influence them at a tipping point in their life. This larp is designed to be a deep feelgood larp that goes beyond the obvious, superficial positivity and delves in deeper layers, and in bittersweet, complex and realistic feelgood.

This is also a larp designed for a 'yes and' mindset. You will not be creating detailed, fully fleshed out characters or stories with intricate details beforehand, but rather, you will create your stories and characters during play. This larp is one to be played with an open mindset, with a 'yes, and' attitude to create meaningful, emotional stories together.

2. Character creation (20-25')

Hand out the printed character sheets

With numbers already filled out on them - these numbers are only there for the character creation workshops, they have no special meaning.

The players shouldn't start with filling everything out already: they will do that as they go through the workshops.

Ask: does anyone want to play on being very young or very old

Only one character for each option.

If yes, if people can agree on who (or on the fact that no one wants to play on this), these players get their age tag already (if too many people want to play on age, either no one does, or ages are drawn at random, depending on what the majority of the players prefer)

Character basics

Facilitator spreads out the age, name and pronoun tags in the middle of the circle of chairs, on the floor

- Everyone picks an age (printed age tags provided with various ages between 43-53 years old)
- Everyone picks a name and the pronouns for their characters (printed tags are provided for each)

Fleshing out more details

Everyone gets 5 minutes to think about some more details for their character:

- First of all, everyone can take some time to come up with 4 adjectives/traits for their character: 2 positive, 1 negative, and 1 neutral/positive/negative/...
- If they still have some time, they can already think about some more details: maybe they have an idea for the job they want their character to have, the kind of figure they want them to be, etc.

Hot seat ('yes, and') technique

This is a collaborative character creation technique, it's a technique in which you surrender to the group. There are no rights or wrongs here, it's about getting into the flow, into giving quick replies that immediately come to mind instead of overthinking things. If afterwards, you aren't happy with certain replies you gave, you can, of course, change them, as nothing is set in stone yet. It's about the joy of creating together.

- Form groups of 3-4 players
- The facilitator moves around and keeps the time
- Everyone takes turns in facing the other participants. First, you state your character name and age, and you tell the others the adjectives/traits you came up with for your character. Next, everyone has 1,5-2 minutes during which you are bombarded with questions which you have to answer fast, like 'what's their favorite color', 'what's their hobby', 'which sport do they like', 'what's their guilty pleasure' etc. You can

choose whether you answer these questions in the third person (out of character) or in the first person (already in character)

3. Choice of companion blobs (5-10')

First, ask whether anyone has any sensory issues with touch,

as these participants would have first pick of the companions, so they can feel them all and choose the one that feels most comfortable to them

Afterwards, all (remaining) participants can choose their companions.

Ask everyone (in turns or at the same time, depending on what feels safe, everyone's own timing etc) to approach the table with companions and pick the one that feels right to them and their character. Ask them to take their time here: don't rush to the companion blob that you, as a person, noticed first when you walked in, but rather take the time to observe them, to take them in, to think about which would fit the character you just created. Maybe it's the color, or the shape, or the pattern, or anything else that feels just right for your character, rather than you, the player. Everyone can return to their seat in the circle when they have chosen a companion.

Ask everyone to explain in one or two phrases how they feel their companion fits/represents their character.

Announce & explain first interactions with the companions.

While you will now be talking and walking around, feel free to play around with your companions already. In the game reality, your companions are not able to talk to you, your understanding is on an unspoken level, you 'sense' or 'feel' your companion out, and the way you act with your companion, the way you cradle it and hold it close or hide it and hold it at a distance will speak about your own emotions and your relationship to your companion and what they represent. Try to already encompass how your character feels about their companion in how you walk around with them from here on, experiment a little and feel out what's right.

Short sanitary break (5')

Not needed if included in relationship creation.

Depending on number of players - see relationship creation grid in annexes.

4. Relationship creation (10-15')

Ask players to check the number on their character creation sheets, as it will now be of use for relationship creation.

Creation of 2 stable relationships

Players will create 2 relationships in this round of relationship creation: both of them are 'stable', 'established' relationships, which means that they are not bound/inclined to change straight away at the start of the larp. These can also be any kind of relationships, stable does not mean positive. It can be a neutral relationship with this stranger you always meet on your morning commute, and you always nod to each other, but that's it. It can be someone you used to have a friendship with, but you fell out with each other and you both still blame the other for what happened, but when you come across each other, you always put on a friendly facade. Or it can equally be your chosen family, someone who has always been there for you and you always have each other's back. Anything goes, but the idea is that the relationship is not bound to head into a crisis straight away at the start of the game.

Who creates a relationship with whom? Facilitator reads this from the relationship creation grid (see appendix).

Players get 3-5 minutes with each relationship to work out some details; discuss what you want to play on, what kind of relationship you will have, and how your characters will interact initially when they meet at the retreat. Facilitator keeps track of time (and decides how much time they get, depending on how general timing is going).

5. Interacting and emoting with each other and with companions - non verbal exercise (15-20')

Play some gentle music in the background

Show and tell how to emote with the companions

Now, we will briefly just move around in the room, and when you come across someone else, invite each other to play a little together: sit or stand together, look into each other's eyes or move away from each other, threaten each other, be mad or be happy, and have your companions interact along with how you as players interact.

The idea is that you start feeling out how you can incorporate your companions in your interactions with each other, how they can help show emotions.

As facilitator, don't just explain the below examples, but show them to the players by demonstrating a more positive and a more negative interaction with another player (use one of the companion blobs at your disposal, worst case that of a player).

Examples: angrily poking at each other's companions, allowing each other to softly touch or even cuddle each other's companions, having your companions sit next to each other while you're still too shy to do so, having the companions reluctantly seek out connection with each other, maybe have them shy away from each other, etc.

When you allow the players to start trying out these interactions, make it clear that there's no way to do this wrong. We're all still trying things out here, and it will be awkward, especially as we are also doing this without words, without speaking. Be respectful and mindful of each other, give each other room to try out things.

Show and tell how to exchange tokens

Next, explain how the exchange of tokens works:

When you feel an exchange and/or a relationship is impactful to your character, the idea is that you offer one of the tokens attached to your companion to the other person.

As you can see, the tokens have different shapes, so you can choose which one, to you, fits the type of interaction or relationship this is.

While explaining, also take care to demonstrate how this works again by showing one or two examples, like a very soft and intimate interaction that makes your character dream, so you hand over the cloud token, or an angry interaction where you push the other away, and maybe you even turn around and walk away, and you hand/throw them the lightning token (and take care to demonstrate how you also still wait for the other to give a token in return by delaying your moving away, or by not moving away too far), etc.

Explain that we will take some time to practice this again, so feel free to move around the room once again, have brief interactions with each other that you try to make impactful (give some examples), and exchange tokens.

Explain that obviously, in game, you can sometimes also choose not to give a token, or to give a completely different one in return. In later stages, you can also equally decide to return a token, though this would be very exceptional, and is not to be taken lightly - which the facilitator needs to emphasize as well.

6. Emotional safety (15')

Return to sit in the circle again

Setting the baseline for safety

Explain that we are all creating a safe space here and now, during this time we spend together.

State clearly that **people are always more important than play.**

In case the event didn't already communicate rules about what is not tolerated, make it clear that in-game realities are never an excuse to be an off-game douche, and that -isms and hate speech (racism, ableism, queerphobia, etc.) will not be tolerated.

Safety techniques

The door is always open

Basically, this means that anyone can leave the game at any time for any reason.

It means that everyone contributes to an environment in which people feel OK about leaving. It means not socially pressuring others to play or stay in a game they don't want to stay in, even if that means the game won't run. It means not bad-mouthing those who leave. It means trying to defuse the attitude that the best hardcore players stick around for that harsh, emotionally intense scene.

It means you are at all times welcome to go, as a game is never more important than your personal well-being and it's not a big deal to stop play, because it's relatively easy to regain immersion.

Cut

To be used as a personal safety mechanic if you feel unable to continue the game at that point.

Can be used at any given point by saying CUT out loud.

This mechanic will temporarily stop the game.

We will not question why the game was cut and give you the time you need to process.

We will ask whether you want to step back into the game or whether you prefer to spend the remainder of the time off game

Off-game

To be used as a calibration mechanic if at any point, for any reason, you need to calibrate.

This can be used as a personal safety tool eg. to calibrate if you noticed a subject has become a trigger to you and you want to steer away from it, or if you want to ask your co-player to lower the emotional intensity of a scene.

Off-game can equally be used for quick check-ins with your co-players, eg. to ask them whether they are off-game doing ok, or to check whether they would be up to play a certain specific (violent, romantic, etc.) scene with you.

Quick recap of the safety techniques

For example: "so remember: the door is always open, CUT stops the game when you need to step out of it, off-game is a calibration and check-in tool") for memory.

Lines and veils

Explain lines and veils

A **LINE** is a topic that you don't want to be included in the game at all. Perhaps because it's painfully triggering for you, perhaps because you think it's generally inappropriate for a game such as this, or for any other reason: you don't have to explain or defend it. So, for example, you may not want to deal with the idea of suicide in any way at all: this would be declared as a 'line' and so will not appear in the game. You might not want the game to involve cruelty to animals. You might not want violent racism to play a part.

A **VEIL** is a topic that you're OK to have included in the game, but you'd like a veil to be drawn over its actual enaction, ie. play shouldn't go into blow-by-blow detail. Again this can be for any reason. A common one is in-game sex – if two characters want to have sex in the game, it can just be declared that they have done so, without them having to play it out. Or in a game which involves injury and/or death, you might prefer to not have the nature of injuries described in detail. Or if someone finds a spider, you don't want it described or have it brandished about. And so on.

Share lines and veils

If you have received any lines or veils beforehand, take a moment to state them.

Next, ask everyone to take turns to state their lines and veils, and write them down.

Finally, at the end, repeat the full list of lines and veils for all the players.

Break before play (10')

Part 2: game & workshops

Remarks for the facilitator

As a facilitator, during the game, you don't interfere. You sit at the side and control the audio during the acts, and you facilitate the remaining workshops in between the acts.

For each act, there's an audio clip with a welcome at the start, an audio clip for free play in the middle, and one for the end of each act. For the third act, there's an additional voice clip before the start of the last 5 minutes of play, so that the characters can say their in-game goodbyes to each other.

For each act, there's a separate playlist linked to emotions that could be tied to that specific act. Play the music of this act in the background during play, slightly more quiet during the therapy session and slightly louder during free play, so people can interact with it if they wish (diegetically, but also, by allowing their emotions to be influenced by the music).

The in-game duration of the retreat is two weeks. Act 1 takes place at the start of the retreat, the second act is in the middle of the retreat (so after the first week), and the last act takes place after two weeks, on the last day of the retreat.

Optional: as facilitator, if you feel like it, you can start up each act by asking the players to close their eyes and by doing a short mood setting description of the situation before starting up the Welcome audio clip for each act.

Act 1 (15')

10' therapy session

5' free play

Workshops (20')

Existing relationships becoming unstable (6')

Everyone gets 2 minutes for each relationship to discuss how they would want to escalate, how they want the relationship to change/become unstable. Players can feel free to improvise/come up with new secrets if needed/wanted.

Facilitator keeps time and tells players which number they should be talking to.

2 new stable relationships (9')

Everyone also gets to create 2 new relationships. They can discuss what kind of relationship would make sense for the two characters that are matched together, how they think the relationship shaped up in the past week, etc.

Facilitator keeps time and tells players which number they should be talking to.

Quick calibration with the group (5')

Ask: is there anything you need? How are you?

Act 2 (25')

10' therapy session

15' free play

Workshop + break (10')

Quick calibration with the group

Ask: is there anything you need? How are you?

Make it clear that this is a calibration before the last and longest act.

If people need help, if people want a moment to discuss their relationships, now is the time.

Short break

For the remaining time (discussions can also continue during this break).

Remark: sometimes I reverse the order of these two, if I sense the group needs the break first and the check-in later.

Act 3 (50')

15' therapy session

30' free play

5' goodbyes

Part 3: Debrief

Debrief (15-20')

After the last piece of audio, announce the game has ended, and thank the players for participating.

Announce that we will now be moving into a debrief, to slowly and softly land into reality again.

Ask people to come and sit in the circle again.

Web of compliments

Ideally with a ball of yarn

Framework for giving and receiving compliments

Inform the participants that you will be starting with a web of compliments.

Acknowledge that this may be difficult for some of them, and that's alright.

Giving and receiving compliments isn't always easy, and that's ok. Tell them that we are still in the safe space with openness and respect that we have also been playing in, so ask them to all be kind and patient with each other.

For receiving compliments, which is probably the most difficult part for everyone, a lot of people have a tendency to start explaining or minimizing compliments, or repaying them. However, for this exercise, you're asking everyone to not give in to that tendency. The idea is that everyone accepts the compliment, you can respond with body language or with a "thank you", but that's it. There's always opportunities for paying and repaying more compliments to each other after this game and this moment, too.

For giving compliments: try to be specific. Don't be vague and talk about the person in general, but compliment each other in how you affected each other's game. Talk about something they said, something they did as their character, a way in which their game had a positive influence on yours.

If you end up having to give a compliment to someone you didn't play much with: please don't panic and feel daunted. Take some time to think about how this player still had an impact: maybe their behavior helped in setting the mood. Maybe hearing about their story from a distance inspired you to do similar or different things, etc. Take time and care to still give that player a meaningful compliment, and realise that even talking about a small detail or an impact from a distance can be very meaningful for the receiver of the compliment.

Explain how the compliment web works

First of all, tell your players that this is more difficult to explain than to carry out, so if anything seems confusing right after coming out of the game, tell them not to worry, as you're there as the facilitator to help.

- One player starts by giving a compliment to someone they choose - the player can be chosen at random, usually someone will volunteer when

they have a compliment they really want to give. The player who starts, receives the ball of yarn.

- When this person decides to give someone a compliment, they throw/hand the ball of yarn to the person they are paying a compliment to, while holding on to the start of the thread.
- The person who received the compliment gets to choose someone else to compliment next. When they compliment the person they choose, they pass the ball of yarn again, while holding on to the thread.
- This way, a web will start shaping where you can trace the thread for who has given and received compliments from whom.
- When you give a compliment, you can only pay a compliment to someone who hasn't received one yet.
- The last person to receive a compliment has to give a compliment to the person who started giving that first compliment to "close the web".
- After the last compliment has been given, the thread is traced back to the beginning again, which means that the last person to have received a compliment, now gets to pay a compliment to the person who gave them that compliment. Next, this person repays a compliment to the person who gave them a compliment, and so on. Every time someone pays a compliment now, while tracing the thread back, they drop the thread. In the end, everyone actually gets to repay a compliment to whomever gave them a compliment, tracing the thread of the web all the way back to the start, and letting go.
- Thank everyone for sharing these compliments.

Visualization/breathing exercise

This is an exercise designed to give everyone a soft landing. Take your time to slow down, to breathe and to slowly guide people back into reality, with a memory and a feeling to take with them into that reality.

First, ask everyone to close their eyes and make themselves comfortable.

State that if anyone does not feel comfortable with closing their eyes completely, they can also close them partially, leaving a small slit of their eyelids open, and they can stare at a fixed point about 1 meter in front of them (similar to meditation in martial arts and the likes).

Then, guide them through a visualization, while also paying attention to slowing down their breathing.

Here's a rough script:

Feel free to play around with the script and to adjust according to the group and according to what works for you - none of the visualizations I guide are ever the same.

1. **Breathing**
"Breathe in. Breathe out." *Repeat 2 or 3 times to ground everyone and slow down their breathing*
2. **Return to memory**
"While you're slowly breathing like this, I'm going to ask you to return to the game you just played. To the time we just spent together. And I am going to ask you to pick one moment that for you, as a player, felt impactful, in a positive way. Maybe you felt empowered. Maybe it made not just your character happy, but it also filled you, the player, with joy." *Continue to give examples of what kind of moment it could have been, you can even give some concrete examples if that works.* "Take your time to choose such a moment, and to think of this moment."
3. **Breathing**
"Breathe in. Breathe out."
4. **Senses**
"Now, while you're thinking back on that moment, I'm going to ask you to go a little deeper, to remember in a bit more detail. So please think back on that memory, and pay attention to the details. Maybe there was a color that stood out (*like the color of your companion, the shirt your co-player was wearing, etc.*). Maybe, there was a sound you noticed (*like the perfect song lyrics in the background, the sound of the voice of another player, comforting you, etc.*). Maybe there was a moment of touch you remember (*like holding on to your companion, gently brushing the hand of someone else, a heartfelt hug your character had with another character, etc.*). Think back on these details, really take them in again. Feel them, and cherish them;"
5. **Breathing**
"Breathe in. Breathe out."
6. **Emotions**
"While you're still in that moment, remembering the details, I'm going to ask you to also remember the emotions tied to that moment. Take your time to remember how your character felt, but also, and more importantly, how **you** felt. Remember the emotions, remember the positive feelings it brought you. (*Maybe you felt empowered, because you, as a player, managed to push your character to this point. Maybe you felt a sense of connection, a sense of safety. Maybe you felt happy, accomplished, to see your character evolve and grow towards acceptance. Maybe you felt supported by your co-players who lifted you immensely. Maybe your character felt ready to take on the world, and so did you, etc.*) Take some time to really remember these emotions, to feel them again, to allow yourself to experience these positive feelings again."
7. **Breathing**

"Breathe in. Breathe out." Repeat 2 or 3 times if the group needs it, to start wrapping up the visualization and to slow down and ground everyone again.

8. Invitation and end

"And now, while you're still holding on to that moment just for a little bit longer, I'm going to ask you to take those good feelings, to take those positive emotions, and to take them with you, and to carry them with you for the days and weeks to come. Whenever you're ready, you can open your eyes again. Thank you."

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Annexes

Audio files

Playlist act 1:

<https://open.spotify.com/playlist/71Ck2UU5SFubjv7AyS2tHg?si=Obe7MpPHRDQDqEzBI-Fdrw>

Playlist act 2:

<https://open.spotify.com/playlist/0LWJkqVBkr7XktA87sVdg3?si=MukiAQMTT4yY36pfjXLUSA>

Playlist act 3:

<https://open.spotify.com/playlist/4Z3zxtOaOYDofWCEzYAgJY?si=uuloqR9-QUuMWJsWMmFISg>

Song for the last 5 minutes (goodbyes):

<https://open.spotify.com/track/6bIXN4xCot0hiEfzl2xFZR?si=twuqNoVbRvGwDmkP9J1GDw>

Audio files for diegetic announcements:

included in public design document folder

Print materials

Name tags & player sheet:

included in public design document folder

Practicalities

Relationship creation grid & crafting guide for companion blobs:

included in public design document folder

