

SHAPESHIFTER PROBLEMS

A digital LARP for 3-6 players, written by [Moss Bosch](#) for the 2022 [Golden Cobra Challenge](#)

ELEVATOR PITCH:

A shapeshifter hangs out with their online friends for emotional/logistical support as they prepare to go through a big change at midnight.

This is a digital/online LARP (Live Action Role-Playing) game about those middle-of-the-night moments when you hop into a call or a chat with a friend who's going through a lot. Offer advice, provide distractions, be a listening ear, sneak into side chats to detangle details that confuse you, and generally try to be there for your friend (even when you're not sure if you'll be much help). Explore the awkwardness, tenderness, resentment, care, and many other assorted expressed and suppressed emotions of a friend group of characters who are doing their best in the face of mundane and supernatural stressors.

In our world, late night support chats might be about life changes like mental and physical health, sexuality and identity, gender transition processes, quitting or starting jobs, breaking up or beginning relationships, moving into or out of exciting or stressful living situations, and all kinds of other topics. In this game, *being a shapeshifter* is the change that's caused one friend to seek out someone to talk to. Their relationship to shapeshifting may share tonal elements with one or many of the real world topics listed above, a factor that requires creativity and care to play out together via LARP. The setup for this game includes safety tools to help you tell a story that's interestingly messy, but also kind to its players.

GAME SEQUENCE QUICK REFERENCE LIST:

- Choose who will play the Shapeshifter, they choose their Type of Change.
- All other players are Friends, they choose their Friend Roles.
- Go over Lines and Veils and the X Card together.
- Discuss/decide on your specific Group Chat Tech Options.
- Add Friend Connections between the Shapeshifter and each Friend, and Distractions to all Friends.
- Take a 5 minute (or longer) "bio break!" Get water or snacks, use the bathroom, do stretches, etc.
- Play via your chosen combination of video/audio/text chat for 1 hour.
- When the hour ends, the Shapeshifter signals the cutoff of gameplay by leaving the chat.
- Bio break again, then return to the chat for a debrief.

TYPES OF CHANGE:

If you are playing the Shapeshifter, pick one. You may choose to highlight one or more elements from the Pros and Cons lists as focal points in your experience, and/or write in additional Pros/Cons of your own. Be as interpretive as you wish with what this change entails for your character - folklore is a creative reference point here, not a detailed mandate.

Werefolk - your upcoming change will be physical, feral, painful, and animal

- Pros: strength, energy, a different way to engage with your senses
- Cons: lowered impulse control, new hungers/desires, plays hell with your schedule

Possession - you are going to summon something otherworldly into you

- Pros: an exciting new connection, relationship with another dimension, loss of stifling inhibitions
- Cons: a shifted sense of self and possibly also personal agency, the complexity of a new partnership

Chrysalis - you've been frozen in one state for a long time - you're about to break out of it into something new

- Pros: a long rest before a blossoming into a new state, physically and emotionally stretching and shaking off old norms and expectations
- Cons: the vulnerability of newness, sensory overload, a feeling of having been out of the loop in relation to your own body

Limb - you are preparing to grow wings, or a horn, or gills, etc. - a single new thing that will shift your experience of your body and the world in a major way

- Pros: power, aesthetics, new sensory tools
- Cons: pain, shaky adjustment, physically and emotionally bumping into things

Selkie - you've been stuck in a human form and you're about to reclaim your old form

- Pros: claiming agency, connecting to culture, embracing positive forms of nostalgia
- Cons: coming out of a stuck place, impostor syndrome, grief for lost time, the impossibility of perfectly recreating who you once were

Phoenix - this change is going to kill you, and then you will be reborn

- Pros: intensity, passion, a fresh start
- Cons: sacrifice, confronting (im)mortality, relearning how to be yourself

FRIEND ROLES:

Each player who is not the Shapeshifter is a Friend. Each Friend picks a different role, then picks one element from the role's prompt list to guide their portrayal of their character.

Been there before - someone who's already gone through the same type of change

- I am full of joy and excitement for you, and don't totally understand your anxieties about transforming, sometimes to the point of being dismissive
- My transformation was stressful/painful in a very specific way, and I am intensely focused on making your experience better than mine was
- I'm not used to being treated like an authority on much of anything, being treated like the expert on this transformation makes me nervous and I qualify my advice a lot
- I'm quietly resentful that your process of self discovery and change has been swifter or simpler than mine was in some way (at least in my eyes), and am trying to hide that

Informed accomplice - someone who's worked hard to help you do research and prepare, even though it's not something they're likely to experience themselves. They may have an experience that parallels your own, but isn't quite the same.

- I'm fascinated by your upcoming transformation, and sometimes I provide more detail on the process than is actually useful or reassuring, which can compound your (and/or others') anxieties
- I've been helping you deal with someone else in your life who's been mean/inconsiderate about your transformation, and I take this role seriously even if it's stressing me out
- I keep reassuring others and myself that I'm doing this to support you, but I'm increasingly finding I wish I could also go through this transformation myself
- I've been pouring myself into the concrete logistics of your transformation (food, clothes, scheduling, safety plans, etc.) to feel useful without having to talk about anyone's feelings

Anxious ally - someone who's trying their best to be supportive, but is mainly nervous for you and confused about the change

- I'm worried about overstepping my bounds on the topic of transformation, and reflexively apologize a lot
- There's someone in my life who thinks I should distance myself from you because of your imminent transformation, and I've been having trouble standing up to them directly
- Some things about this transformation are... kinda hot? And I have no idea how to address that without coming across as creepy
- I've picked up a piece of misinformation about transformation somewhere and am freaking out about it

Lifelong friend - someone who knows you really well but is reticent about the change *because* they know you so well. How long have you even known them?

- I'm scared this transformation will make it harder to engage in a shared interest/passion from our youth
- I'm excited for the new ways that this transformation will allow us to experience and express our friendship, but that may not totally align with what you want/hope for from this experience

- You seem like you've made some new friendships through the context of this transformation and I resent one or more of them as interlopers in our lives
- I've always been a little bit in love with you and I've been meaning to tell you for a while, but that seems unfair to do while you're in the middle of such a major life change

Unflappable - someone who's being impressively chill about this whole thing. This player role is good for someone who wants to just facilitate/timekeep, or to engage mainly as an audience member/silent participant.

LINES AND VEILS:

Lines and Veils is a tool for setting boundaries around topics that players do not want included in gameplay. In a group chat or a shared document all players can access, make a space to list Lines and Veils, and give everyone in the group a turn to share what they'd like added to each list. You can do this for multiple rounds if needed - continue until all players have said that they've added all they want to add. The list is also a living document - you can return to it/add to it during gameplay by communicating that with your fellow players.

- **Lines** are topics or themes that will not appear in the game. For example, if a player doesn't want self harm to appear anywhere in the shared narrative, that would go under Lines.
- **Veils** are topics or themes players agree to "draw a veil" on - they can occur/affect the game's story, but they won't be acted out or described in detail. They could appear in a backstory, or occur in a "fade to black" moment, for example. If a player doesn't want to hear long descriptions of body horror but is okay with it being implied as part of the shapeshifter's transformation, body horror would go under Veils.

THE X CARD:

[The X Card](#) is a tool used to pause gameplay and fully, permanently remove something (a topic, an interaction, an object, etc.) from the LARP that is causing you discomfort. To X something out, make an X with your arms, say "X" out loud, and/or type an X in the chat, then specify what element you want removed.

There are a number of safety tools and resources beyond those listed in the text of this game that you are also free to draw from if they better suit your group's needs. You can explore a list of such tools [here](#) in the TTRPG Safety Toolkit, a compilation project by Kienna Shaw and Lauren Bryant-Monk.

GROUP CHAT TECH OPTIONS:

To play this LARP, all players need to have access to a shared group chat of some kind. The chat can be solely text-based, or include options for audio or video connection as well. If you wish to play such that players can keep secrets from other players about their characters' feelings or actions, also ensure that all players have the ability to private message each other directly, outside of the full group. If you'd prefer to play such that characters can have secrets from each other but players are aware of the other players' underlying motivations, keep all communications in the group chat. If "no secrets" players want to simulate sending a private message between characters that all players can still see, type in the format (Recipient Name: Text of message).

FRIEND CONNECTIONS:

Each Friend picks a type of connection they have with the Shapeshifter. You may optionally choose to define connections to the other Friends as well, or assume that you all know each other to some degree through the Shapeshifter and play to find out the details.

- Intimate (partners, friends with benefits, amicable exes, confidantes)
- Familial (siblings, cousins, chosen family)
- Social (classmates, shared hobby, super similar, oddly different but work well together)
- Cultural (faith, background, region)
- Professional (current or former colleagues, work in related fields, mentor/mentee)
- Adversarial (bitter exes, longtime friend group member and newbie, miscommunicators, frenemies)

DISTRACTIONS:

Each Friend picks one Distraction from the list below that affects their ability to give their full attention to the group chat, or writes in a new Distraction of their own. Feel free to draw from your Distraction prompts whenever you aren't sure what to do next during gameplay. Awkward silences are allowed!

→ At work

- ◆ Drop out of chat suddenly, tense up, vent about work, get pulled into side conversations, switch up the location you're messaging from to avoid work tasks

→ At a party

- ◆ Insert non sequiturs, be oddly cheerful, share selfies, reference events others aren't involved in, overshare emotionally, embrace typos and miscommunications

→ Supporting someone else who's in crisis

- ◆ Apologize and leave chat periodically, send support messages to the wrong people, compare crisis situations whether or not the comparison fits, share cute, affirming, or darkly funny memes

→ Almost falling asleep

- ◆ Type gibberish, take long pauses, talk about what's tired you out, lament your upcoming responsibilities, extol the value of rest while continuing not to do it

→ Playing computer games

- ◆ Literally open another tab and play a game periodically, reference game themes or mechanics when attempting to give advice, share screenshots or game-related memes, lose the thread of the conversation and ask for clarification, read through and respond to older messages after conversation has moved on

→ Doing time sensitive chores

- ◆ Leave chat briefly when timers you've set go off, vent about why you need to get specific tasks done ASAP, ask whether others in the group need tips or support around handling their own chores, send pictures of the activities you're working on

ORDER OF PLAY:

Now that you have created your characters, take a 5 minute (or longer) "bio break." All players are encouraged to step away from their phones or computers, stretch, get water or snacks, use the bathroom, or do anything else that helps them relax and feel separate from the game for a moment. After the break, all players return to where they can see the group chat.

The Shapeshifter begins play by setting a 1 hour timer and speaking or directing a message to one specific Friend, reaching out for company/support related to the change they're going to experience at midnight. Other characters may enter chat whenever the Shapeshifter or a currently chatting Friend invites them to join in. All players engage with each other in character, drawing on their Roles, Connections, and Distractions to help guide their decisions. After 1 hour has passed, the Shapeshifter tells the other players that it is time for their change to begin, and leaves the chat. All players take another bio break, then return for a debrief.

To debrief, take turns completing the phrases "I was [character name], I am [player name]. Something I will leave behind is [game element/experience/feeling], something I want to keep is [a different game element/experience/feeling]. If you wish, you can also share favorite moments, quotes, and hopes or predictions for characters' futures. Affirm and appreciate your fellow players for sharing in the process of creation together.

This LARP owes a debt to multiple preexisting RPGs about shapeshifting, social intimacy, family, identity and change, particularly Avery Alder's [Monsterhearts 2](#), as well as my own previously published RPGs [This Party Sucks](#) and [As Soft As You Remember](#). Gratitude also goes out to an unwieldy-to-list number of shapeshifter-themed TV shows, movies, webcomics, and folktales.