

# Symbiosis

by Sarah Lynne Bowman and Dani Higgins

**Requirements:** 1 game master (The Gardener), 4-11 players (The Adolescents), pens, scissors, index cards, badges, 3-4 hours, 1 copy of these instructions for the Gardener and an extra copy of the relationships to cut out.

**Optional:** Several sheets of gold star stickers; non-toxic pens or body paints; ball of yarn/string.

*Symbiosis* explores the quest to learn healthier coping and communication skills in relationships. The characters are an alien species on the planet Saturn who subsist on stardust. In adolescence, this species is Parasitic, meaning that in order to acquire stardust, they can only extract it from their loved ones through dysfunctional strategies. As they mature, this species learns Symbiotic traits, which allow them to create new stardust together through mutual exchange and interdependency. In this scenario, a group of adolescents are sequestered at a retreat guided by the Gardener, a fully adult Symbiote, who facilitates their development through structured exercises. Each adolescent starts with one Parasitic and one Symbiotic trait. If adolescents are able to learn two additional Symbiotic traits by the end of the larp -- for a total of three -- they may leave the retreat. Otherwise, the Gardener asks them to stay and continue to learn.

## Stardust Rules

Stardust is the sustenance of this species. All players start with 5 stardust in their pool. The Gardener may choose to read the following rules all at once in the beginning or introduce them when relevant to each Act.

- 1) During Acts 1 and 2, adolescents cannot use Symbiotic traits and must use their Parasitic actions at least once.
- 2) Parasitic actions require adolescents to drain two (2) stardust from another person, while only receiving one (1). The extra stardust is destroyed.
- 3) Adolescents can spend one (1) stardust to end a conversation, calm someone down, or pacify them.
- 4) In Acts 3-5, adolescents can perform Symbiotic actions, which allow them to exchange stardust without depleting their pool.
- 5) If an adolescent uses multiple Symbiotic actions at once, all parties grow one (1) new stardust together, represented by adding additional stars to their pools.
- 6) Adolescents can also grow Stardust together if each participant uses one (1) Symbiotic action in the same conversation.
- 7) If their stardust pool is depleted at any point, adolescents can only use their Parasitic trait.
- 8) Teaching Symbiotic traits takes place during Acts 3-5 and costs one (1) stardust from the instructor. The Gardener does not teach traits, but directs adolescents to others in the group who can help. Players must role-play out teaching these skills.
- 9) Players should flash their index cards to others to make clear when they use Parasitic or Symbiotic traits (see below).

Stardust can be drawn on the body, placed as gold sticker stars on the face or hands, or drawn on a badge or index card. Any exchange of stardust is represented physically through the act of placing a sticker on one's self, or drawing a star on their body, badge, or card. Parasitic actions against a character require them losing stardust stickers or crossing out a star. The physical embodiment emphasizes the resource exchange occurring.

## Larp Structure

### **Workshop (30 min):**

- a) Read the above description aloud and present an overview of the acts.
  - b) Cut out characters descriptions and have players choose a character. Keep the clusters together: the two dyads, the triad, and the quadrad. If you have 10 players, remove a character from one of the two dyads and combine the rest in a triad.
  - c) Ask the players to write their character names and pronouns on their badge. Everyone reads their character sheets aloud and greets their partners.
  - d) Hand out index cards to each player. Players will write Parasitic in large letters on one side and Symbiotic in large letters on the other. Ask players to write down each of their character traits on the corresponding card side. Leave space on the Symbiotic side to write new skills.
  - e) *Ball of Yarn:* Each person establishes a relationship fact with another person in the larp by passing a ball of yarn to them, holding onto their own piece. The result is an interconnected web of facts linking all characters. Relationships can be lovers, siblings, parents, friends, or creative partners.
- NOTE:** This setting can range in intensity. For a higher intensity game, increase the number of romantic relationships in the larp.
- f) The Gardener hands out a sheet of stickers, pens, and/or paints as needed for Stardust.
  - g) Explain safety rules of Cut and Break: <http://leavingmundania.com/2014/02/27/primer-safety-in-roleplaying-games/>  
Then explain the Okay Check-in Symbol: <https://www.patreon.com/posts/diy-toolkit-ok-6722878>
  - h) Explain that players proactively can request higher intensity play by signaling to one another with two thumbs up.
  - i) *"Yes, and" exercise:* Ask each person in the circle to make up one fact about life on Saturn. After a player establishes a fact, the next player responds with "Yes, and..." adding another element that builds upon the last. Perform this exercise 2-3 times.
  - j) Explain that players are responsible for improvising the fictional aspects of the world and their relationships during play, so they should play actively and avoid blocking one another. Even though the characters are adolescents, they should try to broadcast their feelings and thoughts when possible to create play for others.
  - k) *Countdown Meditation:* Players close their eyes and the facilitator counts from 10 to 1, narrating themes or sensations from the setting in between the numbers as everyone gently shifts into character.

**Act 1 (30 min): Seeding:** The Gardener asks the adolescents to recall difficult memories from their relationships, which the players act out as structured scenes. The Gardener helps them set the scenes by establishing a particular memory and ends them when appropriate by calling "Scene." Each core relationship group should play at least one scene, but additional scenes are possible. Adolescents should try to use their Parasitic traits at least once during this Act.

**Act 2 (30 min): Tending:** The Gardener asks the group to sit in a circle, then instructs each adolescent to voice their frustrations in their relationships in an uninterrupted and structured manner. The Gardener limits each adolescent's sharing to 3-5 minutes and asks them to focus on the way they feel about their partner's Parasitic impulses. Adolescents replenish 1 stardust through this process.

**Act 3 (30-45 min): Cultivating:** The Gardener asks everyone to practice learning and teaching new Symbiotic traits. During this phase, relationship groups should talk through their difficulties in turns while everyone listens. The Gardener advises them to seek help from others, who have Symbiotic traits that they can teach. Adolescents can offer to teach certain skills as desired. Adolescents should note any skills learned on their notecards.

**Act 4 (30 min): Sprouting:** The Gardener asks each group member to share the Symbiotic skills learned during Cultivation, evaluate how these skills aid communication, and identify ways in which their Parasitic impulses were not working as well. Adolescents replenish 1 stardust through this process.

**Act 5 (30 min): Flowering:** The Gardener guides the group through structured epilogue scenes, in which the characters fast forward to future moments. Some adolescents may stay in the retreat to continue to learn, while others become full Symbiotes by attaining three (3) total Symbiotic traits. The scenes should focus on how the relationships progress or dissolve after the retreat. Each core relationship group should play at least one scene, but additional scenes are possible.

**Debriefing (30 min):**

- a) The Gardener leads another guided meditation, this time counting from 1 to 10. Then, they explain that the debrief is optional, but players are encouraged to stay and speak if comfortable.
- b) Each player de-roles, taking off their name tag or other character item and placing it in the circle. Players state what aspects of the character that they want to take with them and what aspects that they wish to leave behind.
- c) The facilitator guides a structured debrief, asking each player in turn to describe three subjects: their most intense moment, their happiest/best moment, and what they learned from the scenario.

NAME	PARASITIC TRAIT	SYMBIOTIC TRAIT	RELATIONSHIP(S)
Nebula	<b>P:</b> Tell someone their feelings or perceptions are wrong	<b>S:</b> Ask directly, without demanding, for reassurance, accepting no as a possibility	<b>R:</b> Quasar
Quasar	<b>P:</b> Verbally harass someone when you feel scared, hurt, or threatened	<b>S:</b> Empathize with the feelings someone else expresses and provide support	<b>R:</b> Nebula
Parallax	<b>P:</b> Take responsibility for someone else's feelings	<b>S:</b> Make a direct request and say "thank you" to their response, even if your request is refused	<b>R:</b> Gibbous
Gibbous	<b>P:</b> Blame someone else for your behavior	<b>S:</b> Encourage and support people in standing up for themselves	<b>R:</b> Parallax
Supernova	<b>P:</b> Lash out or threaten to leave if you don't get your way	<b>S:</b> Express how much someone means to you without expecting reciprocity	<b>R:</b> Corona, Eclipse
Corona	<b>P:</b> Get someone to do something for you that you could do on your own, without asking directly	<b>S:</b> Share your feelings while taking responsibility for them	<b>R:</b> Eclipse, Supernova
Eclipse	<b>P:</b> Do something for someone else that they could do on their own	<b>S:</b> Take full responsibility for your problematic behavior and apologize	<b>R:</b> Supernova, Corona
Borealis	<b>P:</b> Make someone change their behavior by demanding or manipulating	<b>S:</b> Teach someone how to do something without doing it for them	<b>R:</b> Zenith, Apogee, Comet
Apogee	<b>P:</b> Push someone away from you by insulting them or yelling at them	<b>S:</b> Say no directly and respectfully to a request or demand	<b>R:</b> Borealis, Comet, Zenith
Zenith	<b>P:</b> Shut down conversation and refuse to talk about what you are feeling or why	<b>S:</b> Ask directly and compassionately for space and alone time, accepting no as a possibility	<b>R:</b> Borealis, Apogee, Comet
Comet	<b>P:</b> Distract 2+ people so that their attention is focused entirely on you	<b>S:</b> Listen to someone's feelings without trying to change or deny their experience	<b>R:</b> Borealis, Apogee, Zenith