

Dark Reflections

A Game for Two by Acata Felton

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It's midnight, or thereabouts. You've slept poorly, worried about something happening tomorrow. And now you're awake, and restless. You stumble out of bed, bleary eyed, and with no particular plan, but anything is better than lying there, staring at the ceiling. You catch sight of your reflection in the mirror. You approach it, even though it is almost too dark to see. You talk to yourself quietly, giving voice to your fears in the darkest hour of the night. As you watch your reflection, your eyelids flutter...
What was that? Surely you're just tired.
Surely your reflection didn't just move on its own?

Introduction

"Dark Reflections" is a 30 minute game for 2 players about someone meeting their reflection in the middle of the night, and the dawning existential horror of finding it is not just a reflection. This game makes use of the screen on your device as if it were a mirror, and the other player as embodying the reflection. The actual game play is only 15 minutes, with very specific pacing guidelines to direct the player experience.

Content Warnings

This game is about the uncanny valley, things that go bump in the night, and fears made manifest. The thing in the mirror is not kind, possibly so far as to say it feeds on misery, and is therefore invested in creating as much misery as possible. With the consent of both participants, this game can go as dark as contemplating and encouraging suicide. This game uses "lines and veils" and "X-Card" to help players calibrate the intensity of the experience.

This game has a high cognitive load. Both players need to mirror motions from the other, and one will need to repeat back verbal statements accurately or intentionally modified from the other.

Requirements to Play

- 2 players - one to play the person ("The Real"), the other to play their reflection. ("The Reflection"). Together these two make up "The Character".
- Allocate about 30 minutes to play. - Ideally both players should read the entire game document before starting.
- Your video chat program of choice.
- Play this game at night, or someplace dark like a room without windows.
- **If possible:** Wear the same color shirt as the other player (e.g. both in black) to aid the illusion of being a person and their reflection.
- **Optional:** You can wear similar makeup or face paint, and/or wear similar accessories.
- **Optional:** Video Filter for red eyes, unsettling background image, and/or a translucent cloth/fabric (like tulle) you can drape over your camera.

Preparing to Play (~10 minutes)

Start with the lights on in the room where you are playing.

1. Start the video call with your partner on your platform of choice (zoom, discord, etc.)
2. Decide who will play The Real, and who will play The Reflection.

What **IS** The Reflection? It could be a fae creature. It could be an alien. The whole thing could be a dream. The details are left up to the player of The Reflection specifically because the uncertainty contributes to the feeling of apprehension in The Real. The player of The Reflection can decide on an answer now, or later. Just as long as they have some sort of answer by the end of the game. Don't share it with The Real yet.

3. Establish any necessary **lines and veils**.
4. Answer the following questions to help define "The Character". Have 1 person answer the first question, and have the second person elaborate on it or a related topic with the follow up question. Alternate who answers the first question and who elaborates. If you prefer, you can collaborate on the answers instead.

Q: What is your name? Follow Up: Who picked that name, and why?	Q: What are your pronouns? Follow Up: What affirms your gender identity?
Q: How old are you? Follow Up: What does society expect you to be striving for right now?	Q: What is your relationship to your family? Follow Up: Do you share your house/apt with anyone? A bedroom? A bed?
Q: What do you do for a living? Follow Up: Is what you do satisfying to you?	Q: What are you afraid of? Follow Up: What gives you hope/brings you joy?
Ask each other at least 1 more question about "The Character's" life or world.	

5. Decide **together** on something The Real is worried about that is happening tomorrow. This can be as mundane or as fantastical as you want.

Examples: GMing their first TTRPG; presenting to the high council of wizards.

6. Review your lines and veils and update them if necessary. This is particularly important around the ways in which, and topics upon which, The Reflection can attempt to elicit despair in The Real.

Practice Mirroring (~5 minutes)

Physical and auditory mirroring is the main mechanic of the game. The purpose of practicing this technique is to get a feel for how it works best for you and your partner. Every pair of people will settle into a slightly different cadence. Take your time with this; it is important for establishing the fiction of the game.

1. Have one player move slowly in the frame of the video. E.g.: tilting their head, waving their hand, etc. Have the other player copy the movements. You may need to reverse your actions to make it look like a reflection to the other person. It is okay that the movements from the follower will be delayed (this actively contributes to the story), but if the leader telegraphs their movements, moves slowly, and pauses between movements, it will help the other get as close as possible. Do this until the follower feels comfortable. **Switch roles** and have the other person practice the copying.
2. Practice speaking and repeating words next. Stick to short phrases or pause in the middle of longer ones so the other person has time to respond. The auditory "mirroring" will have a delay due to the practicalities of players needing to hear and process before repeating back. Make sure both people get a chance to practice repeating the other's words.

Take a quick break. Turn your camera off, get up and stretch, **adjust the brightness on the screen you are using to be as low as possible, and turn off the lights in the room where you are playing.**

Playing the Game (~15 min total)

Most transitions in the game have specific cues (noted below). The transition between part 2 and part 3 is much more fluid however, and players should allow it to happen organically, including possibly drifting back and forth a few times.

Safety During the Game

Both players have access to the “X-Card” at any time. If your fellow player brings up something that you are not okay with having in game, you can cross your arms in front of your face and/or say “X-card”. This rescinds the previous statement. Your partner should make a new statement, taking the narrative in a different direction than the previous statement. (e.g. if one player is unexpectedly activated by the mention of alcohol: “I want to grab ... the bottle of tequila...” “X-Card.” “I want to call... in sick tomorrow.”)

Part 1: Am I Awake? (~2 min)

Start: The Real turns their camera on first. They have just gotten out of bed in the middle of the night, noticed their reflection in the mirror, and come closer to look at themselves. They treat the screen like a mirror.

The Reflection turns their camera on too, and begins copying the movements of The Real.

After a few moments, since there is no one awake to hear them, The Real starts to speak. They muse on what they are worried about, sharing their fears with their reflection (e.g.: “I’m scared.” and “What if it’s a disaster?”).

The Reflection initially repeats back what is being said, as similarly as possible. (e.g.: “I’m scared.” and “What if it’s a disaster?”).

The player of The Real should suspend disbelief and pretend the auditory mirroring is simultaneous, or that The Real is too tired to notice the delay at this point.

Slowly, The Reflection starts to deviate from movements of The Real. Start out subtle - delay an extra heartbeat before taking the action, add an extra flourish, etc. If time drags, deviate more significantly. During this part they remain a faithful reflection of the words being said.

In the dark, and being half awake, it’s easy to miss details. Still, The Real must notice the discrepancies between their movements and that of The Reflection.

End: When The Real realizes that The Reflection is not a perfect mirror, they must start to ask: “what the...” and cut their video feed. Perhaps The Real has fallen asleep? Or did they just blink?

The Reflection cuts their video feed at this time too.

Part 2: Am I Dreaming? (~5 min)

Optional: At this time, The Reflection can set up a video filter to give themselves glowing, red eyes, add an unsettling background, and/or drape the translucent cloth over the camera.

Start: The Reflection turns their camera on first and begins to move.

The Real turns their camera on, and follows the movements of the Reflection. The Real continues to speak, sharing their concerns.

The Reflection no longer repeats the words back exactly. Instead, The Reflection twists the fears, reflecting them back as if they were reality, not speculation ("I should be scared." and "It is going to be a disaster").

The Real should become aware of the delay in the auditory mirroring. Perhaps they parse it as an echo? Eventually they must notice that the words being reflected are not the same.

End: Squishy, organic transition into Part 3.

Part 3: Is this a Nightmare? (~8 min)

Start: The Reflection stops mirroring the Real more and more, revealing themselves as a separate entity. The Real registers that the thing in the mirror is not their reflection. The two characters can now have a conversation.

The Reflection is dark and cruel and mocking. It uses words and gestures to draw The Real toward despair.

The Real can repeat back what The Reflection says sometimes, switching the auditory mirroring roles.

Eventually, The Real asks the question "What are you?"

End: The game ends when The Reflection gives their answer. Both players cut their video feed.

After the Game (~5 min)

1. Take a quick break. Get up and stretch, and maybe shake your body out a little. Turn on the lights in the room, and adjust the brightness of your device back to normal.
2. When you are ready, turn your video back on and see your partner. Take turns sharing a little bit about how the game felt. Did anything about the experience surprise you?
3. Observe one thought/trait you share with The Character and one way you differ.
4. Share a genuine compliment with your partner.
5. If one of you *is* worried about some upcoming event, take a little time to validate that worry, and reassure the other person that things will be okay. We want to reduce the probability of the experience of this game bleeding into their real life.

Some Possible Variations

- Play with audio only - maybe The Reflection is a voice in The Real's head...
- Play a supportive Reflection - this will remove most of the horror/dread aspect of this game. Players should still lean into the uncanny valley/weird-shit aspect of this however. Even if the thing in the mirror is being nice, it's still a simple reflection.
- Play the game twice, back-to-back, switching The Real and The Reflection roles.
- Play the game in person - use a dimly lit room and something to divide the space to represent the mirror (like a yardstick, a line of painters tape, or a translucent cloth).