



# CELESTIAL BODIES

By Nicolas Hornyak

2015 Golden Cobra Challenge

# ABOUT THE GAME

*“This is what we call love. When you are loved, you can do anything in creation. When you are loved, there’s no need at all to understand what’s happening, because everything happens within you.”*

– Paulo Coelho, *The Alchemist*

*Celestial Bodies* is a game about intimate relationships, both platonic and romantic, and inevitable loss, set against the context of astronomical objects and structures, i.e. the titular celestial bodies of the heavens. It is a freeform larp designed for the 2015 Golden Cobra Challenge.

Over the course of thirty minutes to an hour of play, up to four players will roleplay various astronomical objects, ranging from comets and asteroids to nebulas and galaxies, although nobody will quite be on the same scale. Like all massive things with gravity, each player will either move in orbit or pause in place to offer a point around which to orbit. It is in these subtle shifts that everybody will gradually change roles, adjusting what they are and who they know in an extended motion of dance.

## CREDITS

Thank you to the judges and curators of this year’s Golden Cobra Challenge for continuing a great thing. I would’ve hated to see it happen only once.

Additional thanks go out to my family and friends, all of whom have encouraged and supported my strange love for gaming and game design.

Cover Illustration: A piece I put together. The original images are “Silhouette Woman And Man” by George Hodan, and images of the Pillars of Creation (left silhouette) and the Carina Nebula (right silhouette) published by NASA. All three images exist within the public domain.

Design: Nicolas Hornyak, October 2015

## MOOD

*Celestial Bodies* is a game that is highly romantic in nature. However, romance is a word that has not only encompassed humanity’s consensual rituals of courtship, but the appeal of what is both heroic and idealized. As a result, this game plays around with these themes as they apply to freeform larp. It offers a residual peace in play, but an impactful motion to the soul with every action you commit to. All is a metaphor, even if the metaphor goes unshared.

During the game, a series of ambient pieces will be heard in the play pace. All of these sounds are normally associated with the cosmos and inner peace, and used to offer a series of gentle movements to the overall game, similar to how a composer might put together several pieces and call each one a movement of the symphony. I encourage you to meditate through your motions, and invite other players to join you in the cosmos you craft.

# SETTING UP

*“[Ganymede] was the loveliest born of the race of mortals, and therefore the gods caught him away to themselves, to be Zeus’ wine-pourer, for the sake of his beauty, so he might be among the immortals.”*

- Homer, *Iliad*, Book XX, lines 233-235

To run a game of *Celestial Bodies*, you will need the following supplies:

- A 30-60 minute playlist of ambient music, suited to the thought of space and meditations.
- Speakers through which you can play the music.
- A play space you can adjust the lighting in.

As a recommendation, Stellardrone is an artist on Bandcamp known for his ambient tracks and albums, and offers them on a pay-what-you-want basis. Consider downloading his albums *Light Years* and *Invent the Universe*, with which you can assemble a custom playlist. Keep in mind that harsher sounds may jerk players out of the moment, but also spur them to new drama in their roleplay as astronomical objects.

You can find Stellardrone’s albums here: <https://stellardrone.bandcamp.com/>

You may also choose to utilize an ambient track on Youtube, which can be anywhere from thirty to sixty minutes long. However, you should only do this if your internet connection is stable, as there is nothing more jarring than for the music to cut out in the middle of an important moment.

Prep your playlist before everyone meets for game. Additionally, clear your play space of chairs and tables. Set up a few in separate corners of the room in case a player needs to sit and rest during the motions of game.

Once you have assembled your players, invite them all to sit in a circle together on the floor of your play space. Encourage them to lie down and relax if they want to. Reinforce that they are currently in a safe space.

Facilitate this by discussing safety techniques. Inform them that if they need an action to ease up for any reason, they can say “Brake” to communicate this, and all players involved should back off. The Narrator (that’s you) will be over to check on them.

Also inform them that if they need all play to stop for safety concerns or their mental health and well-being, they can say “Cut” and everybody must stop playing. This is not the word to use if you need to leave for something or go to the bathroom. You can do so without interrupting everybody’s game.

Finally, ask everybody if they’re clear on all safety terms. Clarify any misunderstandings, discuss any concerns, and then tell them that they will all spend half-an-hour or so workshopping before the larp. After that, you will tell them the story of Ganymede.

# WORKSHOP: THE TALE OF GANYMEDE

*This is the easiest workshop, because you can quite literally read this story off the page. However, it is very important, because not only does this help a baseline metaphor for the larp, but it encourages those who share the same gender to partake in a communal sense of intimacy and romance with each other. The next two workshops will help along the comfort levels behind doing so, but for now, read the following out loud:*

“Once, long ago, in the Heroic Age of ancient Greece, back when legends became gods, and gods transcended myth to become faith, there was a kingdom, far to the east, that was called Phrygia. And in Phrygia, a day’s march off from the famous city of Troy, there was a mountain that they called Mount Ida.

“At the foot of this mountain, there flocked a herd of sheep, and these animals were fortunate and blessed, for they were tended to by a young man known as Ganymede. And though no living person possessed the sight to see it yet, Ganymede was the most beautiful of mortals.

“Now, back in those days, a god was not necessarily all-knowing. They had other gods to contend with in many matters, and humans seemed to them such whimsy creatures to entrance. Perhaps this was why, when his former cupbearer departed Mount Olympus to marry the greatest of heroes, the king of the gods, Zeus, set out to find a new one, and to do so, he took on the form of a great eagle and flew east.

“But alas, the body of an eagle must feed and drink, and one day, he descended upon the foot of Mount Ida, near where Ganymede lay, resting at high noon from the work of that long morning. As he feasted upon the prey he just caught, the eagle Zeus craved water, but not knowing where to find it on Mount Ida, approached the young man.

“Now, Ganymede had never been this close to an eagle, much less an eagle of this size. But he’d grown up tending to animals all his life, and so he recognized the thirst in Zeus’ eyes. From his canteen, he poured water into a bowl he carried with him and offered it to the great bird as he approached.

“And Zeus, he drank from the bowl, saw the beauty which offered it to him, and snatched up Ganymede in his talons, carrying the young man all the way back to Mount Olympus. And it was there that the young man finally saw the god he had served, and when Zeus proclaimed him to be his new cup-bearer, he accepted with a smile. That smile was so beautiful and so entrancing that Zeus couldn’t imagine the rest of existence without it, and so granted Ganymede immortality and eternal youth on the spot.

“Now, in the great scheme of the universe, gods do not merely die or go out of fashion. They ascend, in new ways and to new heights. As surely as faith turns to myth in time, Zeus became Jupiter, and became myth all the same. But on the wish of one final breath, he rose into the skies, taking with him the gods and the immortals, along with the legends and the tales.

“There, he joined with the largest planet near ours, and Ganymede joined him as his largest moon. And as eagle and mortal, their reflections were cast into the stars as constellations—as Aquila and Aquarius. And so they remain, to this day, until the fate of the cosmos will do them part.”

# WORKSHOP: ARS SOLIS

*“Never regret thy fall,  
O Icarus of the fearless flight  
For the greatest tragedy of them all  
Is never to feel the burning light.”*  
- Oscar Wilde

In Nordic larp, there have been various instances where larpers have desired to convey sexual activity without partaking in actual sexual activity, ranging from something as small as a kiss to something as significant as intercourse. However, a very important technique has arisen to help fill this niche, known as Ars Amandi. In Ars Amandi, you agree on safe zones upon the arms and shoulders with which to convey different forms of intimacy. This can be done with something as simple as a brush or as complicated as a grab, and everything in between.

If you're curious, you can learn more here, although it's not required to play this larp:  
<http://www.ars-amandi.se/resources/the-ars-amandi-method/>

Ars Solis is similar, but only in purpose. In *Celestial Bodies*, it is used to convey intimacy among players who are not allowed to touch in such ways. This is because, for the most part, the players will be roleplaying giant, astronomical bodies, not the gods they're traditionally named after. Most impacts on Earth, for example, have not transpired so well, and those were mostly meteorites.

To begin this workshop, invite everyone in the circle to take their hand and spread their fingers. Face the palm up towards the face. Then, with the middle finger, trace the center line of your face, from the forehead to the chin, without actually touching your face.

This is not the easiest maneuver. Players might accidentally touch their nose or their chin as they practice this. Try not to linger on it for more than a couple minutes. This is only to emphasize that although they cannot touch, they can still curve their fingers as though they did.

After this, demonstrate how the arms are a sliding scale for this technique. Explain how, in the cosmos, tracing somebody's fingers without touching them is kind of like a soothing gesture of companionship. Show how much more intimacy is involved as you move up your own arm, always tracing but never touching. Ask everyone to try it with a partner a few times, just to get a feel for it.

Discuss how comfortable everyone is with the technique. Due to the nature of Ars Solis, players should clarify their permissions before game, ala how far up the arm they will permit.

If you're playing with a group of close friends, you might wish to expand the range of Ars Solis to areas such as the back or torso. But the default mode of this technique is restricted to the arms, and you shouldn't exceed these limits without the group's permission as a whole.

Finally, present the only exception to this mechanic. Take a finger on each hand and touch their tips together. This is what represents a stable orbit of communion, and you should tell the players that. But you should also tell them that this is a mode of touch, and so it's the most intimate thing you can partake in. The rest of Ars Solis is non-touch and no speaking is allowed during the game itself.

# WORKSHOP: THE GUIDING PALM

*“They meet. And ere they’ve seen each other’s face  
They fall into each other’s arms, upon  
The Broadway cable car—and this is Fate!”*  
- Carolyn Wells, “Fate”

This workshop is centered on one mechanic in particular, but is designed to segue into play by easing everybody into the main motions of the game as well.

First, if everyone isn’t standing already, invite them to stand up with you. Tell them the name of this technique, and ask for a volunteer to help demonstrate it. Tell your volunteer that you are going to place your hand on their back, have them face away from you, and place your open hand on their back, between their shoulder blades. Tell everyone that when they feel this, they should be inspired to move in or out of the play space in the center of the room.

Reinforce that you’ll probably only use this technique a few times, and ask if anyone is uncomfortable with it. If they are, don’t linger on it, just keep in mind that you shouldn’t place your hand on their back during play.

Now everyone is going to use this in practice. Tell everyone that when the music starts is when the larp is officially underway, but for now, everyone is going to practice going into orbit around you. Send everybody to opposite corners of the room. Point them out one at a time, asking them to circle the spot you’re standing in. As they do so, tell them to ‘mind their toes’ and ‘step lightly’ as though they’re dancing through space, not walking around a room.

When everybody is in orbit, tell them to keep circling as you leave your spot. One at a time, place your hand on every player’s back (unless they’ve requested that you don’t, of course) and ease them out of orbit. Then, tell everyone you’re going to ease them back into orbit, but that they should pair up, or circle each other as a triple as though they were a star system. Use the guiding palm and bring them into orbit.

Ask them to dance with each other, and envision the journey a star must take during its lifetime, carried by the waves of the galaxy. Remind them that *Ars Solis* does not permit actual touch. They must dance without touching. Encourage them to express themselves as though they were releasing geysers of liquid nitrogen, or solar flares—even catching their own rings. Ask if they would join a star as a planet, or join a planet as a moon. Express that through a slow, flexible dance.

Ease them out of orbit with the guiding palm after a little bit. Smile and tell them that was the final workshop, and that this is a good time to get some water or go to the bathroom. In five minutes, the music will start and they will enter orbit as though they could dance through the cosmos.

# PLAYING THE GAME

*“Unable are the loved to die, for love is immortality.”*

- Emily Dickinson

Once everyone reconvenes, inform them that one of the players may start out as an object around which to orbit, while the rest should start in the corners and join play when they wish. Ask them to change the person which they orbit around often, preferably with every new song that comes on, and remind them that they won't be speaking for the duration of the game.

When everyone is in position, dim down the lights. Remind everyone that although this is an extended dance, you may break away to sit in a chair, but alone, as objects in deep space never have company. If you're using a playlist as opposed to an extended track, inform the players that when the music stops, they should pause and contemplate new roles to play for the next song.

Then, start your playlist.

Don't use the guiding palm to ease anyone in at the start. If you have someone playing a central object around which to orbit, demonstrate by joining the dance and orbiting them temporarily, if only to inspire the other players to do so. If you don't have a central object, play as it until the next song, and depart during the pause or when someone else eases into the position.

Over the course of the game, wait a few songs until you use the guiding hand in any particularly manner. Let intimacy build, and demonstrate as an NPC comet how *Ars Solis* would work with a central star in such a minor passing.

Sometime in the middle, you want to start introducing drama in between your brief forays as one-orbit NPCs or temporarily captured moons. This is where the guiding palm becomes handy; abruptly, without warning, guide a player out of orbit. Gauge the reaction. See what happens if one player is a star with only one planet left. You yourself should contemplate your own metaphors for a situation, if only to do your best to contribute to the atmosphere.

If it seems as though a player you've guided out won't come back in, check in with them. They may simply think that they have to wait for you, and clarify with a whisper that they don't.

As you approach the end of your final track, you have two options: you may guide everyone out of orbit and leave a player in the center as a lonely object, or merge everyone together for a final, communal moment before the end of the game.

Once the music stops, thank everyone for playing. If they need to, they can take a brief water or bathroom break. There will be a small debriefing right after.

## **A Note on Music:**

Once you are more familiar with how to run this, consider looking for music with lyrics in them and use that instead of ambience. It will result in a more intense game, but a game upon which all the players can more easily build upon.

# AFTER THE GAME

*“I would give up the unessential; I would give up my money, I would give up my life for my children; but I wouldn't give myself. I can't make it more clear; it's only something I am beginning to comprehend, which is revealing itself to me.”*

- Kate Chopin, *The Awakening*

As people get their drinks of water or go to the bathroom, sit down on the floor to begin reassembling the circle. Once everyone returns, ask everyone to share one part of the larp they enjoyed and describe what they thought the scene was about. Ideally, they'll speak about things like comets or planets or stars in passing, but if they speak about other things, don't cut them off.

Thank everyone again for participating in this game once you do this.

If anybody seems exceptionally torn up after the debriefing, pull up some chairs and hold a secondary debriefing to talk through this with them. Maintain the safe space and be supportive, as this is the best thing you can do for them right now. Once they regain their composure, tell them that you're around to talk to as you pack up your things. If you're at a convention, tell them where they're most likely to find you if they ever need to talk, and if you're not available or easily accessible, let them know that this is something they should feel safe to talk to their friends about.

If they're uncertain after this, give them some contact information. Even a friend request on Facebook would help.