

Masks

A game about how fictional characters are people too,
by Jason Feldstein

Oscar Wilde once said, “Man is least himself when he talks in his own person. Give him a mask, and he will tell you the truth.” Masks is a game about a support group for fictional characters, in which they share, discuss, and even argue about whatever is most difficult in their lives. For example, as Superman a player might talk about feeling like a refugee or an outsider, losing their family, having a potentially deadly allergy, or worrying about how exploitation of a planet’s natural resources can lead to an extinction event. Life can be dreary if we take our hardships too seriously. Sometimes it can be fun to complain about someone else’s drama for a change.

Players: 4 to 12.

Time: Five to ten minutes per player, so between 20 minutes and two hours.

What you will need: Name tags, permanent markers or pens, note cards, chairs arranged in a circle, and a token such as coin or stone to indicate whose turn it is to speak.

Optional items: Soothing mood music and a sound system to play it; basic refreshments such as cookies or punch.

The only rules:

- **Sharing is voluntary.** You have no obligation to speak, unless you feel there’s something you want to say. Simply choosing a character and being a part of the group is participation. Likewise, there’s no need to worry about jokes or punchlines. Most of the humor comes from the inherent absurdity of the situation.
- **Always add; never subtract.** “Yes, and...” or even “yes, but...” open doors in a scene. “No” closes them. You can give your own spin on, or interpretation of, the events in another character’s story, but saying “no, that didn’t happen, you’re a liar” is right out. This keeps communication flowing freely between everyone in the scene.
- **You must have the token in order to speak.** Excepting the facilitator, the only person with the token may speak. When the token is in the center of the circle, everyone is considered to have it. “Because my character would act that way” is not a valid excuse to interrupt the speaker. If you have something to say, raise your hand and wait until you have the token. When responding to someone else’s story, do your best to avoid long personal anecdotes unless they’re directly relevant to the topic. Remember, you’ll have another opportunity to share a full story of your own once the group is finished discussing this one.

How to play:

1. Choose a group facilitator: The facilitator helps to direct the conversations. As facilitator, you may either play a character who fits the chosen theme (step 3), or a regular volunteer or therapist who wants to help. Most of this role involves asking open-ended questions, or occasionally mediating arguments between characters.

2. Choose a topic for the support group: The topic could be as broad as “Why my life stinks”, as specific as “The worst experience I ever had with rejection”, or any level of specificity in between. The facilitator should make sure all players comment on the topic selection, in order to steer clear of topics that could be too serious for one or more players. If everyone feels it will be easier to pick a topic once they know where all the characters come from, choose the character theme first (step 3), and then come back to this step.

3. Choose a character theme: Perhaps all the characters are Greco-Roman deities, or characters from the same TV show or comic book universe, or restless ghosts from a particular time and place. (This list is just an example. Feel free to pick any character theme you can all enjoy.) The theme gives players a common world and set of experiences as a backdrop for their stories and responses. With enough role-playing experience, it may eventually become a crutch that’s no longer necessary.

4. Pick a format and name for the support group: Is this an inpatient treatment program for burned-out knights, mages, rogues, and other adventurers? A weekly 12-step meeting for compulsive eaters like Chester Cheetah, the Hamburglar, and Lucky the Leprechaun? Or it might be a once-a-month drop-in discussion for Smurfs to lament their losses from the war with Gargamel. Pick a name based on the theme and format. Assume the group has existed for at least a few months, and that everyone has seen each other there before.

5. Choose your character, and write their name on your nametag. Pick someone whose stories you know, and whose personal experiences you can relate to. The more you know about this character's history and adventures, the easier it will be to discuss their weaknesses and fears. Take a note card, and write down a few of your character's insecurities, problems, struggles, or repetitive behavior patterns. For the sake of sensitivity, it may be wisest to pick a character whose issues are somewhat similar to yours, or perhaps to those of a close friend or family member. This is especially true if you're new to this game, or to acting / role-playing in general. Playing someone whose challenges you haven't personally faced may help you to grow as a person and as a performer, but you'll also need to stay vigilant to avoid stereotyping or making insensitive assumptions.

6. Begin play. Once everyone has picked out their character and identified some of that character's personal challenges, the facilitator welcomes the characters and thanks them for coming. Then the facilitator begins the group with an open-ended question such as, "Who would like to begin?" or "Who has a recent experience to discuss?" Play then proceeds in the following way.

Sharing a story: The facilitator chooses one of the characters who offered to share a story, and passes them the token to signify that they have the floor. If you receive the token, introduce your character briefly in their own voice, and then share their tale of woe. Feel free to ham it up. Cry, curse, yell, tear at your hair, stomp your feet, or gnash those teeth. These amateur whiners need to know the truth: nobody's got it worse than you.

If you get stuck or seem to be out of ideas, the facilitator may ask you a follow-up question such as: "How did that make you feel?" "Do you know why this situation makes you feel this way?" "When did you first feel like that?" "How did you react to what happened?" "Did any friends or family members try to help, and how did that go?" "May other group members comment on that?"

Reacting to a story: If your character has a direct reaction to another character's story, raise your hand and wait for the facilitator or the storyteller to pass you the token. The storyteller may also open discussion to the whole group if desired, by placing the token in the center of the circle. When the token is in the center, anyone may speak, so long no one else is already speaking. The facilitator should actively moderate this process if discussion becomes heated. At any time, the storyteller may take back the token. Whichever character is currently speaking may complete their thought, and then the storyteller may continue or clarify uninterrupted.

If things get intense: In-character arguments between characters may happen, depending on the topic, the characters' personalities, or any pre-existing relationship the characters might have. This is expected and can be a one of the best parts of playing the game, but only if the players involved are comfortable with a certain level of intensity. If at any time you as a player feel attacked, triggered, or otherwise emotionally raw while sharing your character's story, you may hand the token back to the facilitator either silently or with the statement, "I would prefer not to discuss this any further."

Otherwise, discussion of the story ends when everyone who wants to comment or ask a question has done so. Whichever way the discussion ended, the group acknowledges the storyteller's courage, sense of humor, and/or acting skills by giving them a short round of applause. Then the facilitator chooses a new character to share a story and others may react to it, as above. The facilitator may also share a story at some point, if desired.

Wrapping up: Once everyone has had an opportunity to share their story, the facilitator ends the game with a summary of the issues discussed, or perhaps a light moral or lesson based on what everyone has shared. (Optional: Take turns going around the circle and, if you like, sharing a few sentences about how the game went for you, how you're feeling, and anything the game helped you to learn or realize.)