

TANKERS - an isolation game

By Sarah Cook, based on work for *LIGHTBRINGER 1045* with Izzy Trevellian
With thanks to my first pilots: Charlie Holdway (SHUKRA), Peter Green (EVE), Jenni Hill (REAPER), Tom Mc Nulty (BOX), Lily Moss (SOLO) and Tal Younis (JUNO).

About this game

The game is about exploring the emotionally fraught relationships of characters fighting a terrible war in the far future, deep in space. Themes include: isolation, dissociation, disability, personal horror, camaraderie, dreams, reality, selfhood, identity, control, freedom, war, power and what it means to be human.

The story centres on a group of characters (TANKERS) who are pilots for FATES, large, rare, expensive and complicated spaceships. FATES are cutting edge technology, recently created to win the war. The GM takes the role of a central AI on the mothership.

The TANKERS are suspended in techno-goop filled vats. Characters are physically isolated from each other, from the world and from their own bodies. They can only communicate via voice. Their entire universe is sound, darkness and space.

The game has no rules. No dice. No stats. Just roleplay. TANKERS needs a voice-only channel you can all access, we used Discord. Players play by connecting to the voice channel and lying down in a dark room, ideally wearing a blindfold. In this document, I've used examples from the game I ran. Don't feel bound by what we did - if something feels better for your group, do that.

Turn Order, chaos, silence and tech Issues

The game is played using a structured speaking order (turn order) and simplified [radio protocol](#) so people are not talking over each other. Each session, the GM will set a turn order, the order in which you speak. The GM (as the AI) calls a character's handle to prompt.

There are moments when jettisoning turn order is the right dramatic call. Everyone shouting into their mic creates choral chaos, which is exactly right for a dog-fight in space. Play this out. Return to the order when you can. Similarly, do not fear silence. Let long pauses expand into space and build tension. Allow the game to breathe.

Tech issues should be handled in-character. Make these into features and plot devices rather than bugs. The threat of being cut off from everyone is a terrifying prospect for these characters, so use these real-life issues creatively and embed them in the story.

Setting design

Our setting was based on a LARP design which was postponed due to COVID.

Over a thousand years from now, after the supposed death of Earth, humanity is in a long-running, losing war against an unknown alien force. The player characters are the only thing standing between humanity and annihilation. Our setting also had a mystery religion based on a dying mother goddess (Earth) who sent her children to find a new home, blessing them with gifts and the guidance of her daughters (the AIs).

Any future sci fi setting can be used. You can co-create it together, lift from another source or use a combination. The key element is a terrifying apocalypse style threat that the characters must confront together, somehow. This is the background tension for the interpersonal drama. The setting can start very broad brush-strokes and become more detailed the more games you play as characters add information to the world.

Character Creation

This is done together in a group call hosted by the GM. Use this time to check tech set up, practice turn order and any other protocol you have decided on. We did character creation as an in-character session themed as a psychiatric evaluation, pausing and moving out of character where we needed to. Like the setting, characters should start off loosely defined. Part of the game is finding out who they are.

1. Pick an [archetype](#) - you can use other archetype lists, or tarot cards etc
2. Pick [an appropriate handle](#) that reflects something interesting about the character
3. Define positive and negative relationships with the other character
4. Define briefly in a few words what each character fears, what makes them angry and what makes them act as their best self
5. Give space for questions or anything else they want the other players to know about their character. For example: EVE was a genetically engineered TANKER and had no recognisable body. SOLO has an illness that cannot be cured.

Relationships

Each character should begin play with at least two connections to another character. One positive and one negative. These are emotional links to generate drama. Keep connections simple, obvious and allow the drama to play out in game.

SHUKRA hates JUNO (negative) for her crimes. JUNO idolises war hero REAPER (positive). REAPER hates that her younger brother BOX followed her into the programme, but he loves her (positive). SOLO believes genetically engineered humans like EVE are heretical and EVE remembers the young soldier (BOX) who talked to her in the lab long ago.

Safety

Before you play, agree what themes you are, and are not interested in playing. Write them down. Anyone can veto anything at any time. No-one needs to give a reason. We discussed this together on a group call, and in private messages to the GM. Sometimes, a check-in

might be needed. This is done by addressing the player by their name, rather than their character handle. We also used private messages. Each game begins with an out of character check-in, to review how everyone is feeling.

The Game Session

A game session is a mission with a fixed structure, running 2-4 hours. It has a fixed structure outlined below. Alternatively, a session can be group therapy. Any character can call for one of these to happen at the next session. Sometimes the AI may decide that one is needed. Therapy sessions are like extended debriefs and opportunities to dig deeper into the characters. Missions and Group Therapy are frames for interpersonal drama between characters. They should include hooks that encourage characters to reveal things about themselves.

Mission Structure

- *Out of Character* - go round the group and check in with everyone
- *Pre-flight check in* - AI lists the handles in their turn-order for the session
- *Systems cycling, powering up* - A short narrative from the AI setting the mood of the session and gets people into character. Music is also good here.
- *Dreaming* - Each character narrates a sentence or two about what they are thinking or feeling or a memory - this is something just they know about
- *Fate units are fully online* - the game starts
- *Briefing* - The AI will issue the mission briefing and field questions 30mins
- *Mission Plan* (approx 30mins) - characters discuss what to do and agree a plan
- *Mission Execution* (approx 2hrs) - characters carry out the mission, the players describe what they do, the GM describes what the world / NPCs do
- *Mission Debrief* (approx 30mins) - characters talk about what went well and what didn't.