

Speak Through Me

A LARP about mediated spirit possession by gamesforsquids

The realization came to you in bits and pieces. You lost a few minutes here, an hour there. Framed pictures moved from one room of the house to the other. You found fragmented, scrawled notes you don't remember writing. Your friends reported that you were acting strange, but you don't remember seeing them at all. Slowly, you've figured it out: you're being possessed by someone or something. You can't talk to it directly, but someone has come to help you communicate. It's time to figure out what it wants.

Speak Through Me is a two-hour freeform LARP about mediated spirit possession. It explores power imbalances and hierarchies, communication, and the act of (mis/re)interpretation. One player plays The Medium and The Spirit who has possessed them, while the other plays The Mediator who has come to interpret the utterances of The Spirit. The Medium, Spirit, and Mediator must work together to solve the problem and reach a satisfying conclusion for all parties.

This game can be played over a video call or in-person (assuming that you are following local health guidance).

Set Up:

Speak Through Me is a two-player game. The two players have separate set-ups, as well as one section that you should prep together.

Be aware that Player One must play two characters (The Medium and The Spirit) while Player Two only has to play one (The Mediator).

Player One Set Up:

Player One will be playing **The Medium** and **The Spirit**. They will only ever be playing one at a time, as the two cannot directly communicate or come into contact. Actions performed by one cannot be remembered by the other, although they can communicate indirectly.

The Medium is the person being possessed. This is their first experience of spirit possession.

To build your character, pick two of the following questions to answer:

- What makes you feel most powerless?
- When is the last time when you felt like you weren't in control of yourself?
- What's a secret you've never told anyone?
- Who was the last person who hurt you?
- What scares you most?

The Spirit is the spirit possessing The Medium.

To build your character:

- Decide the nature of The Spirit. Are you a ghost? An otherworldly entity? The echo of a tragedy that took place here? (See appendix for additional ideas)
- Decide what The Spirit wants from The Medium. Do you need a vessel? A victim? Or have you come to help The Medium specifically? (See appendix for additional ideas)

Player Two Set Up:

Player Two will be playing **The Mediator**. Due to research, training, or just stumbling into it via pure luck, The Mediator has discovered a ritual that allows them some amount of control over The Spirit. They have come to help The Medium speak to and interpret the words of The Spirit (while also protecting The Medium from the potential negative effects of possession).

To build your character, pick two of the following questions to answer:

- What makes you feel most powerful?
- When was the last time you resolved a problem?
- What's a reputation you've cultivated?
- Who was the last person you helped?
- What makes you the angriest?

Additionally, decide what your **role** in this situation is and what your **goal** is in interceding. Are you an academic trying to prove a theory? A mentor who's been through this before and wants to guide The Medium into the "proper" equilibrium? A religious seeker determined to commune with a higher power? (See appendix for additional ideas)

Both your role and your goal will determine how you engage with both The Spirit and The Medium, what you consider most pertinent to address in your short time with The Spirit, and what information you might omit or alter when relaying messages. Remember, you are here to help The Medium and The Spirit, but your personal goal takes priority over either of theirs. You hold all the power here, and you know what's best for both of them--if their proposed solution doesn't seem viable, you're not above lying by omission or outright trickery to guide them onto the right path. In order to maintain control over the situation, it is in your best interest to prevent The Medium and The Spirit from finding any way of communicating that doesn't pass through you--after all, The Medium doesn't have the same power as you and might imperil herself.

Set Up Together:

Establish safety mechanics. Depending on how hard you want to play and what combinations of traits you've picked, this can be an emotionally intense game. At minimum, you are likely to run into gaslighting and emotional manipulation as themes. In advance, I recommend establishing:

- If there is any content or dynamics that either of you want to avoid.
- A hard stop mechanic (an X card, “cut,” etc.)
- A check-in mechanic, either during the game (like the “okay” check-in) or between scenes

In addition to their individual set-up, Player One and Player Two should establish together:

- How do you two know each other? How long have you known each other?
- How would you characterize the relationship between you?
- What’s one power imbalance between you?

Play:

The game is played in alternating scenes between The Medium & The Mediator and The Spirit & The Mediator.

The goal of the game is for The Medium and The Spirit to reach an accord. There may be some cases where that is not possible due to the motivations of either The Medium or The Spirit. In those cases, The Medium and The Mediator (or The Mediator and The Spirit, depending on The Mediator’s loyalties) must find a solution (such as permanently banishing The Spirit, destroying The Medium’s consciousness, tricking The Spirit into relinquishing its hold on The Medium, etc.).

The Mediator additionally wants to accomplish their personal goal. *This goal always supersedes the desires of both The Medium and The Spirit.* When relaying messages or counseling The Medium or The Spirit on the best course of action, they should keep their goal in mind and let it guide their actions, whether that’s how they paraphrase, what information they emphasize, or how they guide the conversation toward their own interests.

If The Medium realizes that The Mediator is working against their best interests, they can try to circumvent The Mediator in reaching a solution, but this opens them up to danger from The Spirit (see below) and may prompt backlash from The Mediator.

The following world rules govern the interactions between The Spirit, The Medium, and The Mediator:

1. The Mediator has the ability to call or dismiss The Spirit, and it *must* obey. However, The Spirit can also come and leave *without* being called. After being dismissed by The Mediator, The Spirit cannot return for five minutes.
2. Allowing The Spirit to possess The Medium for more than five minutes at a time is dangerous. The danger increases the longer over the five-minute mark The Spirit remains. The consequences can range from physical damage to The Medium (headaches, muscle soreness, etc.), to loss of The Mediator’s ability to command The Spirit, to the death of either of the humans. The Mediator should keep track of time.

3. Allowing The Spirit to possess The Medium for more than thirty minutes total is dangerous in the same way. Whatever you do must be accomplished within that window unless you want to face the consequences.
4. The Spirit and The Medium cannot directly communicate or come into contact. They have no memory or awareness of the other's actions. They may only communicate indirectly, through The Mediator or by leaving notes or other physical material that must be interpreted.

Some additional (more meta) world rules:

1. It is up to the players to determine how spirits work/what additional laws govern spirits (whether and how they can be permanently banished or harmed by humans, the constraints of the Mediator's ritual, etc.). You can set some rules in advance if you want, but I recommend that you collaboratively discover and build lore as you play.
2. That said, you should assume that spirit possession is **not** common within the world.
3. The Spirit should **never** be a demon (ala Christian demonology). Demon possession is so oversaturated in American pop culture and also boring as frick. There are so many other stories about spirit possession to tell.
4. Along similar lines, it should not be assumed that all spirits inherently have a particular moral alignment (good or bad).

The Real World Context:

This game is based on a style of mediated spirit possession that appears in Japanese religious traditions (usually called either "the shaman-*saniwa* construction" or *chinkon kishin* [鎮魂帰神]). As one might be able to guess from playing this game (or even reading the rules), mediated spirit possession often involves a major power imbalance--mediums are often marginalized people while mediators are more likely to have access to different types of power and authority (like education and social status) that allow them to speak over, reinterpret, or outright deny the validity of utterances from the medium.

If you'd like to use this game as a pedagogical exercise (or as a LARP with an academic discussion component), I recommend discussing the following questions after you play:

1. How did The Mediator's personal agenda shape the way that they interpreted and communicated The Spirit's messages? What about their relationship with The Medium?
2. Did The Mediator faithfully transmit messages from The Spirit to The Medium? If yes, why? If no, why not?
3. How did the power relations between The Medium and The Mediator shape the way that The Spirit was able to communicate?

If you'd like a full bibliography (including pdfs of some relevant works), please email me at gamesforsquids@gmail.com.

Appendix:

Some potential natures of The Spirit:

1 - A spirit of the place. Something happened here. The land remembers, even if the people have forgotten.

2 - Someone The Medium once knew. A friend, a family member, a lover, their fifth grade teacher. You may be gone but they still remember you.

3 - A community elder. The Medium never knew you, but you share the same culture. You threw the first brick, held services in secret, kept your history alive through stories and songs. You recognize them, even if you never met.

4 - Something beyond human conception. Some might call you gods. Some might call you spirits. You know trying to pin your existence down with language is pure arrogance. Whatever you are, you never were and will never be anything human.

5 - An idea. Some stories outlive their authors. Some songs gain their own voices. Some rallying cries grow to have lives of their own. You have come alive and found The Medium.

6 - An object grown into something more. A book smuggled across the border in the dead of night, a plow shared by the whole community, a family heirloom handed down from generation to generation. Some things have passed through so many hands and been so entwined with human lives that they've taken on a life and spirit of their own.

Some potential ideas for what The Spirit wants from The Medium:

1 - A Witness. No one listens to you. But they'll have to listen, won't they?

2 - A Vessel. Some things need a human body to accomplish. Surely they'll lend you theirs.

3 - A Victim. Sometimes you just want to take it out on someone. They're an easy target.

4 - A Project. They need your help, whether they want it or not.

5 - A Bystander. You have no interest in them specifically, but you're stuck with them now.

6 - A Messenger. You have a message to relay. They will be your voice.

Some potential ideas for The Mediator and their motivations:

1 - A Devotee. Something inhuman has chosen to speak. You have to listen.

2 - An Expert. You've devoted your life to studying this. No one is as qualified as you.

3 - A Friend. You don't really understand spirits, but you have to get them back to normal.

4 - A Skeptic. You know an attention-seeker when you see one. You're here to discredit them.

5 - A Mentor. You've been through this before, and can guide them down the correct path.

6 - An Enforcer. You don't want any trouble. You're here to keep the peace.

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