

Metaphorphosis

a game about queer language and legacy
by Gabe Sopocy



Before Playing

Introduction

Metaphorphosis is a 90-minute freeform virtual or in-person game for four players and one facilitator, who can also be a player.

Aunt Dorian, a well-known elder in the queer community, has passed away, leaving behind a cryptic poem. Players depict the four people closest to Dorian translating the poem's metaphors into biographical prose. Translating Dorian's final message, players will explore what it's like to undergo a profound transformation, to experience rejection and acceptance, and to survive by redefining the meaning of family on one's own terms.

Content Warning

Death, grieving, transphobia, homophobia, self-harm. These themes could be latent rather than explicit, but players should be aware they may emerge.

Game Setup and Materials

- This game is for four players. One person should facilitate; they don't have to be a player character, but they can be. The facilitator will read all the instructions out loud, keep the players on track, and send the translated poem to the players once the game has ended.
- The game will run 75 - 90 minutes and can be played virtually or in person.
- For virtual games, every player must have editor access to the Google Slides presentation and a collaboration tool with a camera that lets players change their names on-screen, such as Zoom or Discord.
 - You can [make a copy of the Google Slides presentation](#) for your own use here.

In person, the game should take place seated around a table.

- You'll need a printed copy of the game, two index cards per player—one for their names & pronouns, one for their X card*—and pens.
- Print out [page 12 in the appendix](#) instead of page 8 for your translation exercise.
- It helps to print the translation document on long paper, so players have more room to write.

Safety

Before the game, review this content warning and make sure you're okay to play: *Death, grieving, transphobia, homophobia, bullying, self-harm*. While some of these themes are latent rather than explicit, players should still be aware they may emerge in gameplay.

Document player boundaries.

- What are your **lines**? These are hard boundaries—themes players do not want to mention or explore during the game under any circumstances.
- What should happen behind **veils**? These are themes players feel are acceptable to mention as though they are happening offscreen, but do not want to explore in depth.
- Which **roads** are we excited to travel? These are themes players want to lean into and explore in depth.

Lines	Veils	Roads

During the game, if a player feels a boundary has been violated and they wish the game to change direction, they can use the [X card](#). If playing virtually, they may simulate this by turning off their camera then using the “hand raise” function on Zoom, in lieu of a physical X card. When this happens, other players will stop and reroute the topic with no questions asked (unless clarification is required).

*Lines and Veils was created by Ron Edwards. Roads, the invitation to share what players want to explore, is a recent addition by Jacqueline Bryk. The X-Card is the invention of John Stavropoulos.

Workshop

Workshop Activity (5-7 minutes)

This workshop is optional, but recommended. It will help players imagine what it feels like to be rejected by a family of origin and accepted by a family of choice, a common experience for many queer people.

Players count off from 1 to 4. In the Rejection phase, paired players take turns exchanging the same two lines, but each powerfully expressing a different set of emotions. Acceptance is similar, except the line exchange differs in small ways each time, so pay attention to the words.

It might feel silly at first, but players should try to feel and channel the emotion as they recite their lines. The facilitator calls out the numbers and the emotions before the players say their lines:

Facilitator:

“One, Anxious. Two, Betrayed.”
[Player pairs exchange their lines.]

Facilitator:

“Two, Hopeful, Three, Encouraging.”
[Player pairs exchange their lines.]

Conclusion

When finished, players should take a moment to themselves to quietly reflect on how they are feeling now. Encourage them to carry those feelings into the scenario exercise.

Phase 1: Rejection Start here and proceed down.	Phase 2: Acceptance Proceed down to finish.
<p style="text-align: center;">1</p> <p style="text-align: center;">Player 1, Anxious. “I’m going to become a butterfly.”</p> <p style="text-align: center;">Player 2, Betrayed. “You’ll never be a butterfly.”</p>	<p style="text-align: center;">1</p> <p style="text-align: center;">Player 1, Astonished. “I am a butterfly.”</p> <p style="text-align: center;">Player 2, Warm. “I am also a butterfly.”</p>
<p style="text-align: center;">2</p> <p style="text-align: center;">Player 2, Ashamed. “I’m going to become a butterfly.”</p> <p style="text-align: center;">Player 3, Cruel. “You’ll never be a butterfly.”</p>	<p style="text-align: center;">2</p> <p style="text-align: center;">Player 2, Hopeful. “I am a butterfly.”</p> <p style="text-align: center;">Player 3, Encouraging. “You can be a butterfly.”</p>
<p style="text-align: center;">3</p> <p style="text-align: center;">Player 3, Defiant. “I’m going to become a butterfly.”</p> <p style="text-align: center;">Player 4, Disgusted. “You’ll never be a butterfly.”</p>	<p style="text-align: center;">3</p> <p style="text-align: center;">Player 3, Brave. “I am a butterfly.”</p> <p style="text-align: center;">Player 4, Passionate. “You have always been my butterfly.”</p>
<p style="text-align: center;">4</p> <p style="text-align: center;">Player 4, Depressed. “I’m going to become a butterfly.”</p> <p style="text-align: center;">Player 1, Scared. “You’ll never be a butterfly.”</p>	<p style="text-align: center;">4</p> <p style="text-align: center;">Player 4, Proud. “I am a butterfly.”</p> <p style="text-align: center;">Player 1, Proud. “We are butterflies.”</p>

Gameplay

I. Background (read aloud, 2-3 minutes)

Aunt Dorian, a beloved queer elder, has just passed away. Though their own past was mysterious, Dorian had a large chosen family and many relationships within the queer community. Still, few people seem to know much about their life before they came out as queer and became Aunt Dorian.

Dorian did leave behind one clue, though. Enclosed in their last wishes was a poem—Dorian’s story of coming out and embracing their queer identity, using the extended metaphor of the life cycle of a moth. Or perhaps a butterfly?

Four people from Dorian’s life have come together to puzzle out the poem they left behind, translating the poetic language into a biographical description. What do these metaphors mean? To whom do they refer? What events took place, and how did Dorian feel about them? They will combine what they knew of Dorian to translate the poem in an attempt to gain a sense of closure and understanding.

II. Choose your characters. (2-3 minutes)

Players will now become their characters. Players, you may choose to keep your number from the workshop activity and play the corresponding character during the game, or choose a new character based on your own interests.

You may play characters as any gender identity you like. Document your character’s name and pronouns so other players can see—in your camera window, or on your index card.

A note on steering.

Some players may be interested in *steering* their game experience—leaning into certain themes with intention. This could mean choosing to play a character whose experience is close to your own, or basing a character’s relationships and backstory on your own. Or, you may want to understand a character’s life that has been quite different from yours. You might base your character on your own stories, those of someone you know, or even a fictional character.

Read the character descriptions. Take a moment and ask yourself, what might I want to learn?

Character Descriptions

1. **Orlando:** Adult younger sibling. Though they were close as children, the siblings’ turbulent teenage years created a rift between them. Estranged, they reconnected only six months before Dorian passed away.
2. **Sylvie:** Former bandmate, best friend. As young adults, a shared taste for rebellion and experimental music initially brought Sylvie and Dorian together. As they grew older, however, they strengthened their friendship through mutual hobbies and taking recreational classes together.
3. **Randi:** Roommate, ex-partner. Randi and Dorian’s relationship has been through many phases: a torrid romance, a dramatic breakup, and a warm friendship. They eventually figured out their similarities made them terrible partners, but excellent roommates.
4. **Tolliver:** Adopted ward. Kicked out of their home as a queer and neurodivergent teenager, Tolliver heard Dorian had taken in other queer young people in similar situations. They showed up on their doorstep one night. Dorian gave Tolliver a home and took them under their wing.

III. Set the Scene. (1-3 minutes)

Dorian has passed away. As the four people who were closest to Dorian, you have gathered in their apartment to translate the poem they left behind.

- (Optional) Decide on a large city where the story takes place.
- Agree on Dorian's pronouns: they/them, they/she, they/he, he/him, she/her, or ze/zir

IV. Ask each other questions to connect. (10-15 minutes)

Your characters all knew Dorian at different times in their lives. Take turns interviewing each to develop a better sense of everyone's connections to Dorian before translating the poem. Each exchange should take no more than a few minutes.

1. Randi, ask Orlando about a hard lesson Dorian learned growing up in their household.
2. Sylvie, ask Randi about how they were able to become close friends after they broke up.
3. Tolliver, ask Sylvie about what Dorian was trying to say with their music that their words could not express.
4. Orlando, ask Tolliver about how Dorian made them feel safe.

V. Read the poem. (1-3 minutes)

Turn to the next page and read the poem aloud. You can choose one reader or take turns reading. You can use an [English language dictionary](#) to translate any unfamiliar words.

If you wish, you can choose instead to [listen to a recording of the poem being read](#).

Imago

1

A coruscant egg among a clutch,
underneath a leaf, I weep.
Hatching, retching, I erupt.
The sound of wings drowns me out.

2

I am a Larval Supervillain
With toxic tines and terrible teeth.
The brood colluded to conclude me
And so I snap, erasing half.

3

Triple in size, I metastasize,
I split my blistering skin.
I pupate with purpose; I harden my armor.
While inside, I die and liquefy.

4

I emerge to purge my biology.
To test these salt and peppered wings.
And by and by, the sky is mine.
Drowned out, but never pinned down.

VI. Translate the poem. (20-30 minutes)

Read each stanza and take turns translating line by line in this order: 1 Orlando, 2 Sylvie, 3 Randi, 4 Tolliver. The character most familiar with that era of Dorian's life will act as the recorder, acting as the final say on the translation and replacing the text on the black card with their own words. Translate the title of the poem last.

[Use this version](#) for in-person games.

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Imago

1

Orlando documents. Each character translates one line into a truth about Dorian's childhood.

1. A coruscant egg among a clutch,
2. underneath a leaf, I weep.
3. Hatching, retching, I erupt.
4. The sound of wings drowns me out.

2

Sylvie documents. Each character translates one line into a truth about Dorian's young adulthood.

1. I am a Larval Supervillain
2. With toxic tines and terrible teeth.
3. The brood colludes to conclude me
4. And so I snap, erasing half.

3

Randi documents. Each character translates one line into a truth about how Dorian struggled with their queer identity.

1. Triple in size, I metastasize,
2. I split my blistering skin.
3. I pupate with purpose; I harden my armor.
4. While inside, I die and liquefy.

4

Tolliver documents. Each character translates one line into a truth about how Dorian embraced their queer identity.

1. I emerge to purge my biology.
2. To test these salt and peppered wings.
3. And by and by, the sky is mine.
4. Drowned out, but never pinned down.

Epilogue

VII. Consider Dorian's legacy. (5 minutes)

What do the friends decide to do with the poem?

Do they publish it? Where?

- If so, do they decide to share their translation along with it?
- If they decide to keep the poem private, what do they do with the physical artifact?

VIII. Debrief (10-15 minutes)

Everyone should take a moment to take a deep breath. Ask players to change their Zoom character names back to their own names. Take turns saying "I was [character name]. I am [player name]."

(If your group chose to skip the workshop, skip this and go to the reflections below.) In our workshop, we each expressed and witnessed multiple emotions.

- Return to the page of the workshop and review the list of emotions from that exercise. Choose any one emotion from Rejection and another one from Acceptance. Which pairing of emotions do you think best describe your character's relationship with Dorian, and why?

Reflect for a moment on the prompt below. If you are comfortable sharing, discuss.

- Do you have an Aunt Dorian in your life? Who are they and what gift of enduring value, physical or symbolic, have they given you?
- Have you ever been a mentor, protector, or role model to someone to whom you were not biologically related? Who, and what valuable gift have you given them?
- Previous players have shared that Aunt Dorian's metamorphosis feels similar to stories they have experienced or heard of within queer communities. Have you had experiences similar to the ones described in your translated poem, or do you know anyone who has?
 - What role did family of origin (family one grows up in) play in this story?
 - What role did chosen family play in this story?

IX. The next chapter

Facilitator, take a photo or screenshot of the translated poem. Players should share their email addresses with the facilitator so the facilitator can collect your translation and send it to you. Your translated poem is an artifact for reflection. It can carry the memory of the act of your translation, sharpening your impressions of your character, the connections you made with other players, or any other insights from this shared experience.

Appendix

Sample Translation Artifact

Facilitators can use this as a template or inspiration to create the translated poem document they will send to group members after gameplay concludes.

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Translation

1

Translated line 1
Translated line 2
Translated line 3
Translated line 4

2

Translated line 1
Translated line 2
Translated line 3
Translated line 4

3

Translated line 1
Translated line 2
Translated line 3
Translated line 4

4

Translated line 1
Translated line 2
Translated line 3
Translated line 4

For in-person games: use this to translate the poem. (20-30 minutes)

Read each stanza and take turns translating line by line in this order: 1 Orlando, 2 Sylvie, 3 Randi, 4 Tolliver. The character most familiar with that era of Dorian's life will be the writer and recorder, acting as the final say on the translation on the gray side of the document. After each stanza, pass the sheet to the next recorder. Translate the title of the poem last.

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Translated Title:

1

Orlando documents. Each character translates one line into a truth about Dorian's childhood.

1

2

3

4

2

Sylvie documents. Each character translates one line into a truth about Dorian's young adulthood.

1

2

3

4

3

Randi documents. Each character translates one line into a truth about how Dorian struggled with their queer identity.

1

2

3

4

4

Tolliver documents. Each character translates one line into a truth about how Dorian embraced their queer identity.

1

2

3

4

Acknowledgements

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<https://gamesandsociety.speldesign.uu.se/certificate-track/>

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