

'LIKE A CIRCLE IN A SPIRAL'

BY DORIAN CRANE

'LIKE A CIRCLE IN A SPIRAL' GOLDEN COBRA 2024

'LIKE A CIRCLE IN A SPIRAL' IS A GAME OF PERSONAL EXPLORATION INSPIRED BY 1960'S COUNTERCULTURE, PSYCHEDELIC DRUGS AND A BITTER SENSE OF LONGING TO KNOW HOW LIFE COULD HAVE BEEN DIFFERENT IF YOU'D MADE DIFFERENT CHOICES.

THE GAME IS SET IN A SHARED COMMUNE IN SAN FRANCISCO IN JULY 1967. THE SUMMER OF LOVE IS IN FULL SWING - IT'S SIX MONTHS SINCE THE HUMAN BE-IN WHERE TIMOTHY LEARY ENCOURAGED THE YOUTH OF THE WORLD TO 'TURN ON, TUNE IN AND DROP OUT' AND THOUSANDS OF PEOPLE HAVE DESCENDED ON SAN FRANCISCO WITH FLOWERS IN THEIR HAIR AND A DREAM OF A NEW WORLD; ONE THAT IS A MILLION MILES FROM THE ONE THEIR PARENTS GREW UP IN. THE WORLD IS HEAVY WITH POTENTIAL - THIS COULD BE THE MOMENT WHERE EVERYTHING CHANGES, WHERE THE OLD ORDERS COLLAPSE AND NEW ONES RISE TO TAKE THEIR PLACE. PLAYERS WILL TAKE ON THE ROLE OF ONE OF THESE DREAMERS, DRAWN FROM WHO-KNOWS-WHERE WITH NOTHING MORE THAN A SENSE OF ADVENTURE AND A DESIRE TO EXPAND THEIR MINDS TO GUIDE THEM.

BEFORE WE GET INTO THE EXCITING BUSINESS OF OUR MINDS AND EXPLORING THE NATURE OF CONSCIOUSNESS, WE HAVE TO DISCUSS SOME ADMINISTRATIVE DETAILS. I PROMISE THE AUTHOR WILL BE BRIEF.

The Game

It is aimed at a group of between 6 and 12 players, though an experienced game runner could scale it much higher¹. The workshop can be guided by a single person² who will then control the environment to shape the experience for the players - for larger runs, they may wish to find a partner to share the work. It does not require any NPC crew, though storytellers are free to add them if they wish.

The Venue

Realistically, due to the setting of the event, 'Like a Circle in a Spiral' can be run anywhere from a youth hostel to an organisers home to an isolated clearing in the woods. The only real requirement is that all players feel safe playing there and the space can be reasonably assumed to be private.

Props and other items

The Storyteller will need to provide the following:

- Pens
- Six slips of paper of around 15cm by 5cm per player. Label three of 'Memory' and three of them 'Passion'
- Three black beads and three white beads per player
- Several extra beads of each colour and their associated pieces of paper
- A small pouch for each player to keep the beads and papers in
- A way to play music (A suggested playlist of music can be found [here](#)³ and the opening/closing track can be found [here](#)⁴)
- A selection of art supplies such as paints or coloured pencils and paper

¹ **'LIKE A CIRCLE IN A SPIRAL' IS LOOSELY BASED ON A PLAYER EVENT FOR EMPIRE LARP CALLED 'EVERYTHING IS MUTABLE' THAT RAN OVER A WEEKEND IN NOVEMBER 2023 FOR AROUND 45 PLAYERS AND 8 CREW. THANKS, CO-CREDIT AND MANY HORSE GIFTS GO TO DR HAZEL DIXON FOR THEIR PART IN DESIGNING AND RUNNING THIS EVENT**

² The author prefers the term Storyteller for this role. **THE HERALD COULDN'T CARE LESS WHAT YOU CALL YOURSELF**

³ Playlist produced by the Johns Hopkins Center for Psychedelic and Consciousness Research

⁴ 'Windmills of your Mind' by Dusty Springfield remixed by Autumn Bailey and Lee Holder

Other than these basics, the game is designed to be run with minimal props and set dressing, though if players and organisers have access to more elaborate set dressing this will not harm the experience. The same with costume - players are welcome to dress in period fashion⁵ though if they don't have access to it or don't want to, stage blacks or other plain clothing is fine. The experience is enhanced by being able to dim the lights of the IC areas or light the space with lamps rather than harsh overhead lights or natural light - the initial run used several of [these](#) devices to provide atmospheric lighting.

STILL WITH ME? I TOLD YOU WE'D BE BRIEF. NOW WE GET INTO THE JUICY BITS.

SET AND SETTING

AS I SAID BEFORE, WE'RE IN SAN FRAN, IT'S JULY 1967. THE AIR IS FILLED WITH THE SCENT OF FLOWERS AND THE SOUND OF YOUNG PEOPLE ENJOYING THEMSELVES AWAY FROM THE SQUARES WITH THEIR WHITE PICKET FENCES AND OFFICE JOBS. THE COMMUNE STINKS OF MOROCCAN HASH AND YOU CAN STILL SEE FRACTALS FROM LAST NIGHT'S ACID TRIP ON THE EDGE OF YOUR VISION. IT'S AN EXCITING TIME TO BE ALIVE - NOT ONLY ARE YOU FREE FROM YOUR PARENTS' CONTROL AT LAST, YOU'VE COME TO A MELTING POT OF NEW IDEAS AND MET PEOPLE THAT THE FOLKS BACK HOME COULDN'T FATHOM. OF COURSE IT'S NOT JUST DRUGS - FREE LOVE IS IN THE AIR. ACID ISN'T THE ONLY THING CHANGING THE WORLD - IT'S BEEN 7 YEARS SINCE ENOVID CAME ONTO THE MARKET AND PEOPLE ARE ENJOYING THEIR NEW FOUND FREEDOM. BUT THE DRUGS AND THE FUCKING AREN'T THE POINT OF THIS - WE ARE GOING TO CHANGE THE WORLD BUT FIRST WE HAVE TO CHANGE OURSELVES.

A note on the setting and characters. Players are strongly encouraged to approach this seriously. This isn't a game for Shaggy-esque comic stoners or Austin Powers inspired shagadelic swingers. Drugs and free love are the main things we associate with this period - but, at least in some corners, it was all in service of something bigger. And these are the ideas we are interested in exploring in 'Like a Circle in a Spiral'.

CHARACTER AND COMMUNE CREATION

RIGHT, LET'S TALK ABOUT CHARACTERS. WE WANT TO KEEP THIS SIMPLE, SO DON'T OVERTHINK THIS BIT TOO MUCH. THE STORYTELLER SHOULD GET EVERYONE TOGETHER SOMEWHERE COMFORTABLE, IDEALLY WITH SNACKS. GIVE EVERYONE A FEW PIECES OF A4 PAPER AND A PEN.

TO START, RUN A GROUP BRAINSTORM ABOUT THE COMMUNE. HOW LONG HAS EVERYONE BEEN HERE? WHAT ARE ITS SHARED IDEALS? WHAT DOES IT ENCOURAGE AND WHAT DOES IT NOT ALLOW?⁶ ONCE YOU HAVE AN IDEA OF THE SHARED SPACE, YOU CAN THINK ABOUT THE PEOPLE WHO MIGHT INHABIT IT. THROW AROUND A FEW SUGGESTIONS, DON'T GET CAUGHT UP IN WHAT YOU MIGHT PLAY, SHARE YOUR THOUGHTS AND FEELINGS. THEN GIVE EVERYONE 10 MINUTES TO START BRAINSTORMING WHO THEY ARE IN THIS GAME. PLAYERS ARE ENCOURAGED TO FOCUS ON THE FOLLOWING:

- **WHERE DID YOU COME FROM AND WHAT BROUGHT YOU TO SAN FRANCISCO?**
- **WHAT WAS YOUR EARLY LIFE LIKE? WHAT EVENTS SHAPED IT? WHAT WERE THE KEY THINGS THAT HAVE HAPPENED TO YOU, BOTH POSITIVE AND NEGATIVE, BEFORE AND AFTER MOVING**

⁵ **THOUGH WE ARE BOTH IN AGREEMENT THAT ANYONE TURNING UP A SMIFFY HIPPIE COSTUME SHOULD BE THROWN OUT**

⁶ This can be a good time for players to raise subjects that they don't want to include in the game. Also, agree some safety calls - the author recommends Lines and Veils or Traffic Lights but you can use whatever works for you.

- **WHAT DRIVES YOU? WHAT ARE YOU PASSIONATE ABOUT? WHAT DO YOU REALLY CARE ABOUT? TRY TO THINK ABOUT THE PASSIONS AND DRIVE THAT REALLY SHAPE YOUR CHARACTER**
- **A NAME AND A ROUGH AGE PROBABLY HELPS TOO. SOME PLAYERS MIGHT WANT TO THINK ABOUT GENDER AND SEXUALITY TOO. TRY NOT TO RULE OUT EXPERIENCES THOUGH, PART OF THIS GAME IS EXPLORING THINGS⁷.**

AFTER 10 MINUTES IS UP, TALK THROUGH YOUR CHARACTER WITH THE GROUP. TRY TO FOCUS ON BUILDING LINKS TO THE OTHER CHARACTERS – THE GAME WORKS BEST WHEN THE CHARACTERS ARE A CLOSE KNIT GROUP. ALL PLAYERS SHOULD AIM TO HAVE SHARED AT LEAST TWO EVENTS WITH OTHER PLAYERS. YOU WANT TO SPREAD YOURSELF ABOUT BUT YOU DON'T NEED TO HAVE PLAYED A PART IN EVERY SIGNIFICANT EVENT, YOU WANT SOME GAPS TO EXPLORE DURING PLAY. TRY TO ENSURE THAT THERE ARE SOME CONFLICTS AMONGST THE PARTY – SEEING THE OTHER SIDE OF DISAGREEMENTS HELPS US UNDERSTAND AND QUESTION OURSELVES AND OUR IDEALS.

ONCE THIS IS DONE, GIVE EVERYONE THEIR SIX PAPERS AND TOKENS. ON EACH PIECE LABELLED 'MEMORY' A PLAYER SHOULD WRITE A SIGNIFICANT EXPERIENCE THEY HAVE HAD, TRY TO FOCUS ON MEMORIES OF TIMES THAT WERE SIGNIFICANT DECISION POINTS – FORKS IN THE ROAD THAT SHAPED THE CHARACTER INTO WHO THEY ARE TODAY. IT WORKS BEST WHEN THESE MEMORIES LINK TO AT LEAST ONE OTHER CHARACTER, TRY TO ENSURE TWO OF THEM ARE SHARED EXPERIENCES. ON EACH PIECE LABELLED 'PASSION' PLAYERS SHOULD DESCRIBE A DRIVING PASSION – SOMETHING THAT GIVES THEIR LIFE PURPOSE OR MEANING, SOMETHING THEY WOULD BE UNRECOGNISABLE WITHOUT. MEMORIES ARE ASSOCIATED WITH BLACK BEADS AND PASSIONS WITH WHITE BEADS. PLACE ALL YOUR BEADS AND PIECES OF PAPER IN THE POUCH PROVIDED

WHILE THIS IS HAPPENING, THE STORYTELLER SHOULD TAKE THE OPPORTUNITY TO WRITE FURTHER PASSIONS AND MEMORIES THAT THEY FEEL WILL CHALLENGE THE BELIEFS OF THE COMMUNE. THESE SHOULD BE PLACED AROUND THE VENUE BEFORE PLAY STARTS.

THE TRIP

ONCE PLAYERS HAVE CREATED THE COMMUNE AND THEIR CHARACTERS, YOU ARE READY TO PLAY! THE EXPERIENCE RUNS FOR AS LONG AS IT'S FUN – SOME RUNS MIGHT BE OVER IN AN HOUR, ORGANISERS WHO WANT TO PROVIDE A MORE DETAILED EXPERIENCE COULD RUN FOR MUCH LONGER. LIKE ANY GOOD TRIP, YOU WON'T KNOW HOW LONG IT LASTS UNTIL YOU TRY IT.

THE STORYTELLER SHOULD DIM THE LIGHTS AND GATHER THE PLAYERS IN A CIRCLE THEN ASK THEM TO CLOSE THEIR EYES. AFTER A DESCRIPTIVE MONOLOGUE DESCRIBING HOW THEY HAVE GATHERED IN THEIR LIVING SPACE AND DROPPED ACID, THEY SHOULD PLAY THE OPENING/CLOSING TRACK. THE TRACK LASTS AROUND TWO MINUTES, DURING WHICH TIME PLAYERS SHOULD CONCENTRATE ON GETTING INTO CHARACTER AND MOVING TO THE SPACE THEY WISH TO TIME IN FROM. ONCE THE TRACK ENDS, THE GAME BEGINS⁸.

AT THIS POINT CHARACTERS WILL BECOME AWARE THAT KEY MEMORIES AND PASSIONS HAVE CRYSTALISED INTO THE TOKENS THEY ARE CARRYING. SLOWLY, THEY WILL REALISE THAT WHEN THEY HANDLE THESE STONES, THEY MORE STRONGLY FEEL THE PASSION IT RELATES TO OR EXPERIENCE A FLASHBACK OF THE MEMORY THEY ARE ASSOCIATED

⁷ That said, know your limits and stay safe. **ANYONE USING THE GAME TO PUSH YOUR LIMITS IS A WANKER AND SHOULD BE REPORTED TO THE STORYTELLER SO THEY CAN BE REMOVED FROM YOUR GAME. THEN SHUNNED.**

⁸ The Storyteller should wait a few minutes before gently fading in the background music from the supplied playlist

WITH. MORE STRANGELY, THEY REALISE THAT THEY CAN SWAP THESE PASSIONS AND MEMORIES WITH THE PEOPLE AROUND THEM⁹.

PLAYERS ARE ENCOURAGED TO EXPLORE THE OPPORTUNITY TO CHANGE ELEMENTS OF THEIR CHARACTER BY SWAPPING OUT MEMORIES AND PASSIONS WITH OTHER PLAYERS, AND THE ONES THE STORYTELLER HAS HIDDEN AROUND THE VENUE.

WHEN THEY TRADE AWAY A MEMORY OR PASSION THEY WILL FEEL IT RISE WITHIN THEM AND... BOOM, IT'S OVER. LIKE AN ORGASM OR A SNEEZE. ALSO LIKE AN ORGASM, IT WILL LEAVE SOME AFTERSHOCKS, BUT THEY WILL PASS. WHEN THEY GAIN A NEW MEMORY OR PASSION, IT'S A SIMILAR EXPERIENCE GAINING A NEW ONE - INITIAL RUSH OF EXPERIENCE AND THEN THE NEW MEMORY OR PASSION SETTLES INTO THEIR MIND LIKE IT'S ALWAYS BEEN THERE.

THE PURPOSE OF THE GAME IS TO EXPLORE WHO AND WHAT CHARACTERS BECOME WHEN THEIR KEY MEMORIES AND PASSIONS ARE REMOVED OR ALTERED. CAN THEY SEE THEMSELVES FROM DIFFERENT PERSPECTIVES? HOW DO THEY VIEW THE PEOPLE AROUND THEM WHEN THESE THINGS CHANGE BOTH IN THEMSELVES AND OTHERS? CAN THE GOALS AND IDEALS OF THE COMMUNE SURVIVE THE CHANGES TO ITS MEMBERS? PLAYERS ARE ENCOURAGED TO USE THE ART SUPPLIES PROVIDED TO MAKE ART THAT EXPRESSES HOW THEY FEEL - ARTISTIC TALENT ISN'T IMPORTANT, IT'S ABOUT EXPRESSING THEMSELVES IN A WAY THAT CALLS TO THEM.

WHILE THIS IS HAPPENING THE STORYTELLER SHOULD RAISE AND LOWER THE VOLUME OF BACKGROUND SOUND AS WELL AS THE LEVELS AND COLOURS OF BACKGROUND LIGHTING. THE AIM IS TO SIMULATE THE MELTING, SHIFTING CHANGES IN PERCEPTION OF AN ACID TRIP, WHILE OBVIOUSLY DOING YOUR BEST NOT TO CAUSE SAFETY ISSUES FOR THE PLAYERS¹⁰.

THE STORYTELLER HAS FREE REIGN OVER HOW LONG THE GAME LASTS - IN FACT, THEIR KEY ROLE IS TO READ THE ROOM AND WHEN THE GAME STARTS TO FLAG, ANNOUNCE THAT THE TRIP WILL BE ENDING SOON. THEN, AS THE FINAL SHUDDERING CLIMAX OF THE GAME OCCURS... IT'S OVER. CALL THE PLAYERS INTO A CIRCLE AGAIN AND ASK THEM TO CLOSE THEIR EYES. DESCRIBE HOW TIME PASSES AND THE TRIP FADES. THEN PLAYING THE OPENING/CLOSING TRACK AGAIN. AS THE MUSIC PLAYS, THEY THANK THEIR CHARACTER FOR ALLOWING THEM TO PORTRAY THEM, AND RETURN TO REALITY. WHEN THE SONG ENDS, THE GAME IS OVER.

THE DREADED COMEDOWN

AFTER THIS, IF YOU CAN DO IT IN A WAY THAT ISN'T DEEPLY AWKWARD¹¹, RUN A DEBRIEFING SESSION WHERE THE PLAYERS TALK ABOUT THE EXPERIENCE OF THE GAME AND THE THOUGHTS IT BROUGHT UP. WHAT CHANGES DID THEIR CHARACTER EXPERIENCE? HOW DID IT CHANGE? WHAT LESSONS HAVE THEY LEARNT THAT THEY CAN APPLY TO THEIR OWN LIFE? WHAT IS THEIR HEAD CANON FOR WHAT HAPPENED TO THEIR CHARACTER AND THE COMMUNE AFTER THE EVENTS OF THE GAME?

⁹ When an exchange happens, players swap one bead and it's associated memory/passion between them. Make sure you always have the same number of white stones as passions and black stones as memories. You should never have more than six in total. If you find one on the floor - put a bead/paper of your down and pick up the one you find. It's yours now.

¹⁰ In this regard, the Storyteller is something of a trip sitter. They help shape the experience while focusing on keeping players safe

¹¹ The author is deeply entrenched in the UK LARP scene and, while they are trying their best, still finds some elements of nordic LARP deeply uncomfortable, especially the practice of debriefing. They accept that this is a Them Problem and do not anticipate that their audience will have the same hangups