



game requirements

2-5 players (10 with extension)

20 minutes (40 mins first time with explanation)

any location where you can strike poses and speak out clearly, ideally someplace awesome

prologue

[a 30 second video clip for inspiration #1](#)

[a 30 second video clip for inspiration #2](#)

what, why, when, and where to play

the purpose of *keymaster* is to collectively build dramatic fictional identities for each of a group of players and showcase them in a stylized, expressive sequence set in an inspiring environment.

keymaster is *only* about identity: there is no storytelling, describing events, or character actions.

keymaster is fundamentally a game about acting creatively on those moments when you're in an inspiring place and want to do, become, or portray something just as awesome.

keymaster is designed to be playable as a spontaneous activity while going about life.

it can also be arranged as an explicit social activity, especially with the *advance prep* extension.

play while hiking, traveling, strolling, waiting, vacationing, visiting a cool building.

or, use the *abstract key* extension to play anywhere, like on a plane or bus, in a restaurant, or at home

how to play the details

gameplay overview

everyone together chooses the *master key*

each player chooses a *personal key*

everyone together clarifies *parameters*

each player chooses their *poses*

players begin play, creating a *sequence* by making *declarations* until they reach a *final line*

players take a breath while still holding their poses, then conclude

what am i doing?

in this game, you will be developing two things:

- all players together will collaboratively shape a dramatic fictional identity for their group
- each player will shape their own individual dramatic fictional identity, as a unique member of the group

your goal is to shape *identity*, nothing more.

you are not trying to tell a story, describe events, or simulate character actions.

you have succeeded if you got to feel really cool and a part of something dramatic for a while.

what is a key and why am i the master of it?

a *key* is an inspiration point, a concrete component used to ground and inform the identity you develop.

you're the master of it in an almost philosophical sense: the fundamental fiction that we assume in this game is that you are the most interesting route through which the key can be approached or expressed.

this is why you're important enough to be featured so dramatically.

the master key

begin the game by collectively choosing the master key.

the *master key* is the central, unifying inspiration that all players share. it informs the group's identity. in most cases, the master key will be the location and atmosphere the game is played in.

(see the *abstract key* extension for alternative master keys when playing in unremarkable locations.)

assume as a part of the fiction that the master key represents the world, or an important piece of it.

assume that all players are deeply in touch with the pulse of that piece of the world.

this could be because you are mystically connected, you exemplify it, or just because your group is the most important thing going on, often all three. the details are worked out during play.

assume the nature of that pulse is how the master key makes you feel. that's why it's an inspiration.

for example, if you're playing in a forest, you could all be spirits of the forest.

if you're playing in a nighttime city, you could be cyberpunk agents representing the city's underbelly.

parameters

collectively select parameters immediately after identifying the master key.

the *parameters* of the game are large-scale assumptions about the fictional universe about which it would be jarring if everyone were not on the same page.

parameters about the setting:

- is there magic or mysticism?
- does the supernatural exist?
- is there major industry or technology?

parameters about the group:

- what is the scope? is it just you, are you leaders, representative members, something else?
- are you great, weak, or just special? do you dominate the setting? does it dominate you?

quite often, the answers will be extremely obvious based on the nature of the master key.

the personal key

next, each individual player chooses a personal key, making sure to avoid overlap.

a *personal key* works exactly like a master key, except that it acts as the core inspiration for an individual player's fictional identity, instead of the group's identity.

each personal key should be a component element of the master key.

for example, it could be an object or type of object, a quality of light or sound, a building or tree in the larger environment.

the inspiration derived from a personal key can be either concrete or abstract.

the personal key can either inform the content of your fictional identity, or just the feel of it.

for example, you could be flexible like the stream, perform shadow magic, or just command a fleet of motorcycles like those ones over there.

you don't need to know how you plan to use your personal key at the time you select it.

poses

lastly before play, each player chooses two poses.

a *pose* is an expressive physical position that a player holds, unmoving, during the course of play.

a pose freezes position from the neck down: players can freely move their heads and change facial expressions.

because poses are expressive, they actually serve as additional lesser personal keys that inspire content.

each player only gets three poses. by default, these are:

- one sitting pose chosen in advance
- one standing pose chosen in advance
- one *wild* pose that can be chosen during the course of play

at all times during play, all players must be in one of their poses, or transitioning quickly between them. plan ahead for smooth, fast, and easy ways to transition between your poses.

when selecting poses:

- make sure the pose is something you can comfortably hold for several minutes at a time.
- if using the *2 teams* extension, poses are often held for up to 5-8 minutes at once, though it's fine to do things like putting arms down during long pauses.
- make sure that you can easily see all other players

players should choose poses at the same time, and share them with each other, to make sure that there is some amount of variation.

if you are in a situation of limited mobility, either because you are playing in an environment where everyone is seated or have a physical disability, just ignore the standing/sitting requirement. instead choose two different poses appropriate to the limitations: for example, two seated poses with distinct arm positions.

if you have a physical disability that disallows remaining immobile, choose simple, expressive, and distinctive ranges of movement instead of frozen poses.

sequence

at this point, actual gameplay commences. this portion is known as the *sequence*.

during the sequence:

- players must always be in one of their three poses, or transitioning quickly between them.
- players can only speak in *declarations*, which are explained below.
- players should avoid taking any actions outside of the fiction unless absolutely necessary.

think of the sequence like a combination of the two clips in the prologue:

it's a combination of tv show intro, character feature speech, and meandering summary.

imagine if someone decided to characterize your group by making a 15 minute video that spliced many scene clips from a full movie for the express purpose of showcasing who are you and what you are like:

- the sequence focuses chiefly on your identity, not on plot events, except to illustrate identity
- players are not in dialogue with one another because there are splices between lines

- however, it makes sense for consecutive declarations to touch on the same themes or topics because such a hypothetical editor might have chosen to place them together

when speaking, players can make declarations in any order, without expressly taking turns.

pauses to think are common and expected, but don't let silences stretch too long.

assume as a part of the fiction that everything anyone says is true.

however, players can easily disagree on philosophies, opinions, judgments, and interpretations.

avoid belaboring disagreements: consider disagreement simply as a feature added to to group identity.

the sequence usually runs for 10-20 minutes, depending on number of players and length of pauses.

it concludes when players feel satisfied that enough has been said, and perform the *closing ritual*.

declarations

declarations are the core of *keymaster*, the statements that make up most of the content of gameplay.

a *declaration* is a short, dramatic line that goes toward expressing the identity of yourself or the group.

it can be about what you think, what you do, who you are, or how you fit into the wider world.

a declaration only expresses a single idea a time, and should be about 1-2 sentences long.

a declaration always has one of two *topics*: it is either about yourself or about the group.

you may only make up to two declarations about the same topic in a row before you must switch to the other topic.

when making a declaration, there is no such thing as too dramatic.

cliches and poetry are welcome.

below are some suggestions for the content of declarations:

ideas for declarations, self:

- what are you prone to doing?
- in what way are you in touch with the world?
- what do you believe?
- what effect do you have on people?
- what is remarkable about you?
- what situations do you encounter?
- how do you look?

ideas for declarations, group:

- who are you?
- what do you stand for?
- what have you done? what effect have you had in the past?
- what effect will you have in the future?
- what goes on among you?

- what is said about you?
- what is remarkable about you?
- what opinion or position do you have on various elements of the world?
- what challenges do you face?

final line & closing ritual

the sequence concludes when players go through the closing ritual by declaring the final line together.

a *final line* is the last declaration of the sequence.

it must be a declaration that each player individually stands behind.

it also becomes the title of the piece just performed.

the final line is generated when the following *closing ritual* is successfully completed:

- one player makes a declaration
- every other player makes the same declaration in immediate succession
- once each player has delivered the line once, all players make eye contact to coordinate timing
- all players deliver the final line in unison

when a player feels satisfied and ready to approach conclusion, they can try to begin the closing ritual.

to do this, they simply repeat a declaration they like immediately after it was made

if other players agree with both the conclusion and the declaration, they can immediately repeat it
if they disagree, they can interrupt the ritual by making a different declaration.

if the closing ritual isn't completed, play will continue until it succeeds on a different declaration.

it is not uncommon for a sequence to go through a few abortive closing rituals before actually completing: this is a desired effect that adds to a climactic sense of pacing.

it is also not uncommon for a player to propose a final line by repeating a recently delivered declaration by another player, because they did not have time to react immediately after it was said.

in such a case, everyone, including the declaration's originator, must still go through the entire ritual.

tips

make sure everyone gets an equal chance to talk.

take everything incredibly seriously.

don't try to roleplay or do live-time narrative pacing; don't tell a story or respond to dialogue.

be specific: an occasional vague hint is good, but avoiding continually adding color without details.

feel free to repeat a declaration that someone else has made in the past.

(a repeated declaration may or may not become a final line.)

remember that you have the option to move between poses.

don't forget the 2-declarations-per-topic rule.

a final line is formed when the closing ritual is successfully completed: each player repeats the same declaration in immediate succession, then everyone makes eye contact and delivers it together.

if playing in high-traffic environment, consider setting up signage to inform potential spectators that you are engaged in a performative exercise. if playing in a sensitive location like an airport or school, exercise common sense about making declarations.

when learning the game, print out the *cheat sheet* at the end for reference.

example of play

the best explanation is an example

the master key

in the woods, at a cold autumn sunset, a sense of quiet peace mixed with sharp chill

parameters

mystical, no heavy industry or technology

just the four of us

we are unique and relatively dominant

personal keys

grace: the evergreens

marco: the sunset

james: the woods as a whole, their smell of soil and pine

rani: the sky, the quiet and intermittent sounds of wind and birds

poses

grace:

balanced even stance, one hand on hip, the other held up in an arrogant gesture
on the ground propped up on elbows, hands clasped thoughtfully below her chin

marco:

wide stanced, bold, one hand extended almost angrily out to the sun
lounging with one knee bent, one hand resting on it and the other propping him up

james:

leaning cockily, one hand braced against a tree, the the other gesticulating
crouched and sitting on heels, almost hiding, hands wrapped around knees

rani:

standing straight, hands at sides, looking down solemnly
on one knee, hands on knee, back arched, looking at the sky

the sequence

(g) refers to a statement about the group, (s) refers to a statement about the self.

note that an actual run is will go longer than this example.

everyone except marco chooses to begin in their standing pose.

rani (g): these woods remember all that has happened in them.

grace (s): in my youth i would catch a deer and eat it raw with my own hands.
marco (g): we've really made a mess of the world outside, the four of us.
james (g): but the years will pass us by, unchanging.
grace (s): i have forgotten what it is to walk among mortal men
marco, changing to standing (g): we gave them our laws, they worshiped us as gods.
rani (g): we bid them war with one another, each worshipping one of us.
james (s): my followers brought me endless piles of riches; i laughed at them.
rani (s): i laughed when they languished in winter and burned their huts for warmth.
grace, changing to propped (g): we brothers and sisters.
james, changing to crouched (g): our parents told us *never to give up this land*.
marco (s): when the foreigners came, i led armies to destroy them with fire. their screams filled these
woods for nine days before they returned to their distant lands. i was exalted for my victory.
rani (s): everything that is done in these woods, i hear. in every silence, on every breath of wind, i am
there.
grace (g): in the years that come, what if they forget us?
rani, changing to a third pose, standing palms up, face upturned to the sky (g): in holding this patch of
land, what if we lose touch with the rest of the earth?
james (s): my roots run deep here, as the roots of mountains
marco (g): everything we need lies within the woods. we are immortals here.
grace, returning to standing (s): i regret nothing
james (s): once i said that our family must remain strong, but that was centuries ago.
rani, changing to kneeling (s): one day a traveler came through, carrying with him a soup that his
family had made. its smell found me and i and yearned for it with all of my soul, but could
not take it, for it was a mortal thing.
grace (s): i am the oldest and know the truth. the years will pass by as they have always passed.
rani (g): we will never give up this land.
marco, changing to a third pose as though paused in the middle of walking (s): it remembers all of my
footsteps throughout all of time.
james (g): the land remembers us as long as we remain here.
marco (g): and the sun shines down upon us, year after year, generation after generation.
james, returning to standing: year after year, generation after generation.
grace: year after year, generation after generation.
rani: year after year, generation after generation.
all, making eye contact: year after year, generation after generation.

everyone pauses for a moment, all except rani are standing.

year after year, generation after generation

is now the title of this piece that the four of them have created.

fin.

extensions

optional variations to be used in any combination

shadows (play yourself)

use *keymaster* as a ritual to express alternative inner possibilities of drama and identity

this extension is actually the original intended and recommended use for keymaster.

imagine that all players speak as themselves, but three things are different about each of you:
the first is that you have a deep, intrinsic connection with the master key. your life is changed thusly.
the second is that you belong to a group with one another around this master key.
the third is that your personal key represents something concretely different about you.
it could be a mystical power you hold, a lifestyle you have, a personality trait you exhibit.

then select fictional setting and group parameters together.

play the game, speaking as an alternative version of yourself.

do not worry about accurate self-representation: make whatever declarations come to mind.

there is no such thing as too dramatic or unrealistic.

it's especially important to avoid teasing or judging one another's choices during or after the game.

it's not truly you, merely a very, very specialized shadow of you.

abstract key

allow for unremarkable locations, needs an extra 10 minutes of prior preparation with a computer

instead of picking a live location as a master key, pick a representation to be the central inspiration.

this is known as an *abstract master key*.

it can be an image, song, item, anything that all players can draw inspiration from.

it should have a physical form (ie, not just a memory). it should not be a representation of a person.

we recommend browsing *pinterest* and *deviantart* for evocative visual images.

bring a physical copy of the abstract master key to the game. this is very important.

advance prep

create a more performative sequence by bringing props and preparatory items

instead of playing spontaneously, choose a master key, parameters, and personal keys in advance.

or, choose multiple if you plan to make an activity of doing several *keymaster* runs in succession.

each player brings props and costumes.

these props and costumes will enhance personal keys or serve as additional minor personal keys.

the group can also choose other elements such as setting items or music.

if this is done, all such global elements are additional components of the master key.
a given player can still choose one such component to serve as their personal key.

light

play in under 10 minutes, with only 2-3 players, without moving

play as a short interlude, like when waiting for takeout.

stand close together so that you can hear one another at a normal conversational volume.

use only one pose.

choose a very vivid master key.

to focus the vividness, the master key can be a subset of the environment, such as just the biting wind or the street lights on the rain-soaked pavement.

choose a vivid personal key.

if the master key is very simple, the personal key can be an element of the environment related to the master key, instead of a component of it.

2 teams

expand to 6-10 players, needs a larger more controlled space, double play time

this extension allows more people to play the same *keymaster* game in twice the time.

to use it, you will need a larger space that you control.

everyone will be more spread out and need to speak in much louder voices.

this extension is also harder because it requires sensitivity to more things at once: don't begin with it.

form into two teams of approximately the same size.

each team is a group in the standard fashion.

all together, select two different but thematically related master keys, one for each group.

for example, one group can take the natural environment and one the built environment.

for another example, one group can take one section of a room and the other a second section.

think of the two master keys as complements or thematic opposites, not fundamental opposites.

all together, agree on parameters about the setting only, not the groups.

the groups will be two contrasting and occasionally interacting groups in the same world.

divide the space you share into two parts, one for each team.

only one group will be running their sequence at a time, while the other watches frozen in poses.

so the teams must be far enough to stay separate, but close enough to hear one another.

in separate teams, agree on parameters about the group without sharing with the other team.

choose personal keys and poses as normal, again without sharing with the other team.

pick a team to go first.

that group begins their sequence, while the other remains frozen in poses.
when a member of the other team hears a declaration that they would also like to give, they immediately deliver it.

this signifies the switching of the teams: the first team freezes and the second team runs.
again, this continues until a member of the first team chooses to repeat a declaration.

continue going back and forth until one group finishes by going through the closing ritual.
the finished group remains paused in their poses.

the other group then runs until they also reach a final line through the closing ritual.

then they, too, pause for a moment.

the final lines *must* be different from each other.

a repeated declaration used as a team transition cannot be a final line.

it's doubly important to make sure that everyone has a chance to speak when there are more players.
an additional important declaration question is, how does your group relate to the other group?
are they enemies? thematic counterpoints? two different pieces of a larger puzzle?

ritualized

create a more polished sequence, needs an additional 15 minutes of play time

after completing the sequence, players run through it a second time as follows:

all players are the same people, using the same keys, same poses, and have the same final line and title.
each player gives themselves a name or epithet: this is now an additional minor personal key.

repeat the sequence, with an eye toward greater clarity, expressiveness, and stylized intensity.

in essence, you are creating a ritual out of the sequence.

don't worry about remembering everything you did before; the second run will be quite different.

instead, focus on building a sense of shared intensity.

when you feel that the intensity has reached a climax, make eye contact with everyone.

if you get accord, everyone will deliver the final line together in unison (without each stating it first).

again, pause and hold poses for a moment before concluding.

expect this second run to be shorter than the first.

cheat sheet

print this out as a quick reference

gameplay overview

everyone together chooses the *master key*

each player chooses a *personal key*

everyone together clarifies *parameters*

each player chooses their *poses*

players begin play, creating a *sequence* by making *declarations* until they reach a *final line*

players take a breath while still holding their poses before concluding

reminders

make sure everyone gets an equal chance to talk.

don't try to roleplay or do live-time narrative pacing, don't tell a story or respond to dialogue.

when making declarations, be specific.

remember that you have the option to move between poses.

don't forget the max-2-declarations-per-self/group-topic rule.

a final line is formed when the closing ritual is successfully completed: each player repeats the same declaration in immediate succession, then everyone makes eye contact and delivers it together.

ideas for declarations, self:

- what are you prone to doing?
- in what way are you in touch with the world?
- what do you believe?
- what effect do you have on people?
- what is remarkable about you?
- what situations do you encounter?
- how do you look?

ideas for declarations, group:

- who are you?
- what do you stand for?
- what have you done? what effect have you had in the past?
- what effect will you have in the future?
- what goes on among you?
- what is said about you?
- what is remarkable about you?
- what position do you have on various things in the world?
- what challenges do you face?