

THIS IS  
SKEW  
IT IS A ROLE-PLAYING GAME  
BY BEN LEHMAN

when we play this game we will create  
a science fiction short story  
a protagonist is struggling to understand  
a world that is beyond understanding

SKEW is played in six phases

phase zero

phase one

phase two



phase three

phase four

phase five

also thanks to isabel kunkle, raffaele manzo,  
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Ben Lehman  
2011-2013

this is our game  
the fonts are  
gill sans  
SYNCHRO LET  
for Joshua

**THESE ARE MY PATRONS**

Alissa Mortenson Tyka  
Vincent Baker  
Michael Wight  
Jessica Hammer  
Chris Hall  
Gregor Hutton  
Cheryl Trooskin-Zoller  
James Graham  
Theo Clarke  
Epidiah Ravachol  
Ben Bernard  
Eduardo Baruzzo  
...among others

# THIS IS PHASE 0

## THIS IS RULE 0

start play at PHASE 0.  
start all phases at **RULE 0**.

## THIS IS RULE 1

stay in a phase until directed to go to another phase or the game ends.

## THIS IS RULE 3

Pick yourself to be Master of Ceremonies (henceforth: MC). It is your job as MC to introduce the game's rules, make sure everyone gets a chance to speak, and ensure the game runs smoothly. It's like being a referee, although you will still can play the game.

## THIS IS RULE 4

MC, distribute the six tokens as evenly as possible amongst all the players. Give extras to your favorites, but never to yourself.

## THIS IS RULE 5

Our story will have a single protagonist. To invent the protagonist, go around the table, we start with the player to the MC's left, and share, in order, the following traits about ourselves: if disclosing would make you uncomfortable, lie plausibly.

Name  
Sex and Gender  
Age  
Profession and Social Class  
Race and Appearance  
Relationship Status

## THIS IS AN EXAMPLE

Ben, Cis-Female, 37, White Collar Computer Freelancer, White and Blonde, Single

## THIS IS RULE SIX

MC, you should give us all a talk about the world and our expectations of play. The setting of the game is the real world, starting tomorrow morning. The world is exceptionally ordinary and mundane, except as we alter it through play. In general, when playing, we should try to do the most obvious thing, rather than being clever, interesting, or weird.

When you're done, enter **PHASE 1**.



# THIS IS PHASE 1

## THIS IS RULE 0

MC, you must start all scenes. Start the first scene by describing the first moments of an ordinary morning for our protagonist: what their bedroom is like, what their basic circumstances are. Keep it brief, if possible.

## THIS IS RULE 1

Give each of us a chance to speak, adding a bit of the protagonist's actions, or dialogue, or a bit of detail about the rest of the world. Our turns are short: one or two sentences at most. We remember to keep it as normal as possible.

If it helps us, we can start from the MC and go around clockwise. MC, if one of us jumps ahead, that's okay, but make sure we all get a turn eventually.

## THIS ARE BOTH EXAMPLES

"She puts on her jeans and worries a bit about how tight they are, then worries about having body image issues."

"When she picks up the phone it's her boss. 'How much longer is the project going to take?' he asks."

## THIS IS RULE 2

Once we've all had a turn, weirdness can be introduced. MC, you should take a moment to explain to us how this works. While you're at it, explain **RULE 6** in **PHASE ONE** as well. It is important.

We're going to keep going around the table taking ordinary turns. But, on my turn, I can also decide to introduce weirdness into the game. To do this, push I push my token into the middle of the table and describe something at a disjoint to our protagonist's normal reality. Like a normal go, I'll keep it short: one or two sentences.

When I introduce weirdness, I make sure it's mysterious and strange, not explained and ordinary. I make sure to show it off, and not to just tell us what happened.

When I introduce weirdness, MC, note it down on a card if you have one handy.

If I choose to spend a token after the first player has gone, I can either introduce new weirdness, or intensify and escalate existing weirdness.

# THIS IS ALSO PHASE 1

## THESE ARE ALL EXAMPLES

When she looks into the other cube she sees an egret where her manager used to sit. It eyes her suspiciously.

He goes into the bathroom and turns on the shower before noticing the tub is full of starfish, squirming and still alive.

She looks into the mirror, and then, acting almost by instinct, pulls out her right eye. Inside is a tiny computer chip, and a flashing red LED.

This otherwise standard freelance contract has a souls, afterlife, and redemption clause.

## THIS IS RULE 3

The weirdness we introduce is a shock to our protagonist's life. She should react to it and interact with it with fear, wonder, shock, respect, denial. It is not ordinary, it is not something she's ever seen before. Keep the weirdness weird; don't make it ordinary.

## THESE ARE ALL EXAMPLES

She looks at the egret, not sure what to do. "Can I get you some coffee?" The egret eyes her again, and yawns.

He jumps back from the bathtub, shrieking, turns to the toilet and throws up.

She screams and drops the eye in shock. It rolls into the sink and lies there, staring up at her.

"Is this a joke? Where's the real contract? This is completely unprofessional!"

## THIS IS RULE 4

MC, when the scene has reached a natural end, you should end it. Then, start a new scene immediately on the tail of the previous one (so if our protagonist was leaving for work, maybe at work. Maybe stuck in traffic.) Each time, take your first turn to describe the environment and circumstances of our protagonist.



## THIS IS RULE 5

If I start talking a lot, or if I interrupt others, or if I try to introduce weirdness without spending a token, MC, it is your job to interrupt me and gently remind of the rules.

Thank you for that. I know I speak out of turn sometimes. I get too excited.

# THIS IS STILL PHASE 1

## THIS IS RULE 6 ; IT IS IMPORTANT

When at least three tokens have been spent, any one of us may end PHASE ONE by saying “it all fits together.” It does not have to be their turn. Any of us can do this, including you, MC.

In order to say this, I must have a conclusive explanation for all of the bits of weirdness that have been introduced so far. I do not explain this to the rest of you. I simply ask you to trust me in this. To me, this all makes sense.

This explanation is not “it’s all a dream” or a similar cop out, because I am a good player and I don’t want the rest of you to hit me.

When I do this, PHASE ONE ends and we move to PHASE TWO.

## THESE ARE ALL EXAMPLES

Our protagonist is a robot duplicate of herself, created by her mourning husband.

Managers are turning into birds of prey and employees into fish, rendering the corporate hierarchy into a food chain.

Intergalactic gene burglars have opened an escape portal which happened to appear in our protagonist’s apartment.

You are, in fact, contracting for God.

## THIS IS RULE 7

If we have spent all six of our tokens, and none of us has ended PHASE ONE by saying “it all fits together,” we will wrap up the scene by describing our protagonist either being subsumed and destroyed by the weirdness or the weirdness going away and our protagonist continuing her ordinary life, disrupted by it.

The game is now over.



# THIS IS PHASE TWO

## THIS IS RULE 0

After I say “it all fits together,” I gather all the spent tokens from the center of the table and place them in front of me. All other players discard their unspent tokens. I am now the Game Master (henceforth, GM).

MC, explain what a GM is and how the role can move, from **RULE 1** and **RULE 2**.

## THIS IS RULE 1

We continue to play as in **PHASE ONE**, with all of us taking turns making short statements about our protagonist and her world, administered by you, the MC. You will begin and end scenes, etc.

As the GM, I have absolute authority over the weirdness. I must say what it does and how it interacts with our protagonist and her world. This means I might end up taking more than my share of turns: every time the protagonist deals with, reacts to, or even ignores the weirdness

I might have something to say. That’s okay. MC, you should keep it in mind.

Whenever I, as the GM, escalate the weirdness, either personally for our protagonist or its effects on her world, I spend a token to the center of the table.

When I, as the GM, act as or escalate the weirdness, I do so in accordance with my personal theory of what the weirdness is.

When I, as the GM, have spent all my tokens we now enter **PHASE THREE**.

## THIS IS RULE 2

Any time after I have spent at least one token as the GM, any of the rest of you can say “it all fits together.” Like before, you must have a means to explain all of the weirdness so far, and it is not some cop-out explanation like “it was all a dream.” Like before, don’t tell us what it is, we trust you.

If you do this, you take over as GM for me. Take all the tokens in front of me as your own, and continue play with you as the GM.

## THIS IS RULE 3

If two of us say “it all fits together” at once, we go off and discuss with each other. If we have the same explanation, the game immediately ends. Whatever our explanation was, we do not tell anyone else. If our explanations are different, the present GM remains as the GM and no one may say “it all fits together” until he has spent another token.

# THIS IS PHASE THREE

## THIS IS RULE 0

As GM, I distribute the tokens at the center of the table (the ones I have spent) to the rest of the players, giving preference to those who have not previously been GMs.

## THIS IS RULE 2

Continue play as usual, with the last GM remaining as now permanent GM.

As GM, I have no tokens left, so I cannot escalate and expand the weirdness. Rather, I will maintain the weirdness at its current level, still having it act and react in accordance with my personal theories of what's behind the weirdness.

## THIS IS RULE 3

We no longer spend tokens to escalate the weirdness. Now, instead of taking an ordinary turn, any one of us can spend a token to ask me, the GM, questions about the weirdness. I have to answer these questions truthfully and to the best of my ability. However, I'm going to try my best not to reveal any more than that.

## THIS IS RULE 4

When any of us, except me as the GM, figures out what's going on, they can say "it all fits together." Unlike previous times, they now tell the rest of us their theory for all the weirdness.

If their explanation matches my theory, as the GM, I say "yes that's it."

If their explanation doesn't match my theory, as the GM, I say "I hadn't thought of that" but I don't explain my own theory.

If their explanation is missing or doesn't explain some element of the weirdness, we should be annoyed, but forgiving.

## THIS IS RULE 5

If all tokens have been spent, and no one has figured it out, we end the game with the weirdness unexplained.

If their explanation is "it's all a dream" or something similar, we should be annoyed and unforgiving.

Regardless of the results, we as a group take this explanation as true and enter PHASE FOUR.



# THIS IS PHASE 4

## **THIS IS THE ONLY RULE**

We take one turn each, describing what happens to our protagonist at the end of our story. The conditions of the ending depend on the results of PHASE THREE.

If the offered explanation agreed with the GM's explanation, we describe our protagonist gaining understanding of and mastery over the weirdness.

If the explanations did not match, we describe our protagonist being subsumed or destroyed by the weirdness.

If any element of the weirdness was passed over or missed in the explanation at the end of PHASE THREE, it should reappear significantly during PHASE FOUR, but we do not explain or dismiss it.





