



A STORY GAME ABOUT PAST LIVES,
LEGACY, AND REGRET

BY BRIAN SHOURD

You are a powerful ruler whose vices have gained you a terrible reputation. Now, contemplating the legacy you will leave behind, you want to set things right.

You've begun the legendary ritual to contact your Shardselves: past lives from ages long gone. Were they able to escape the fate you see for yourself? If so, how? And if not, can there be any hope for you?

In Shardself, 2-4 players will play the various past lives of a ruler who is reflecting on their reign. They will discover how they earned the dreadful epithets that haunt their thoughts, and learn whether or not they will be able to change their legacy.

*"No man ever steps in the same river twice, for it's
not the same river and he's not the same man."
- Heraclitus*

THE INCANTATION

O Spirits of the Wheel, through which all mortals
live and die, and live again, in endless cycles, I,

NAME,

come to begin the Shardselves Ritual. As

RULER OF DOMAIN,

I have power beyond the dreams of common
men, but I have not the power to change the
legacy I have wrought for myself.

I confess! I am VICE, and I am VICE,

but most of all I am

PRIMARY VICE,

and by my deeds have gained the epithet

EPITHET.

I beseech thee, O Spirits of the Wheel - is this my
fate? Since the beginning of my reign, I have ruled
over a domain of

SITUATION,

performing deeds no peer could hope to match.

Who, then, can council me? Who, then, can know
my fate?

Only me.

And so, O Spirits of the Wheel, grant me a chance
to commune with my Shardselves, those
reflections of my life from ages long past and
from ages yet to come. I seek their council and
their knowledge.

How might I leave a better legacy?

MATERIALS

To play Shardself, you'll need

- 2-4 players
- A couple of hours
- A copy of the Incantation form ([page 13](#)) for each player
- The four Primary Vice cards ([page 15](#))
- Some tokens in two different colors and a bag/hat/box to draw them from. You can use poker chips, go stones, or little scraps of paper with an X drawn on some. You'll need about 10 of each color. Make a note that one of the two kinds of tokens represents a Bad token, and the other represents a Good token.
- Something to place the tokens in, and draw them out of. Place this in the center of the play area, in reach to all players.
- (Optional) A copy of the [Quick Reference](#) page
- (Optional) An extra copy or two of the [Random Tables](#) page

*"All things are parts of one single system, which is called nature; the individual life is good when it is in harmony with nature."
- Zeno of Citium*

OVERVIEW

The game is broken up into 3 stages.

SETUP

Players create their characters and worlds by filling out their Incantations, then read them aloud. This begins the Shardself Ritual.

PLAY

Each player takes a turn performing the three steps of the Ritual:

1. CONFESS
2. REMEMBER
3. COMMIT (OR DON'T)

EPILOGUES

The Ritual is complete, and each player tells the final story of whether or not their character was able to rid themselves of the Epithet and change their legacy.

*“Think of yourself as dead. You have lived your life. Now, take what’s left and live it properly.”
- Marcus Aurelius*

SETUP

The goal of the Setup stage is for each player to determine the details of the world that their character inhabits. They do this by filling in the blanks on a copy of the Incantation sheet.

1. Deal out a Primary Vice card at random to each player
2. Each player should choose (or make up) the details for their Incantation. Use the Primary Vice card that was dealt, along with the random tables on [page 14](#). This is a great time for collaboration between players! Brainstorm ideas with each other, and reuse portions of each others' settings, reincorporated into your own setting with new context. The world is bigger than what is on the Incantation sheet, so imagine it, and take notes as necessary.
3. Once everyone is ready to move on to play, each player should read aloud their Incantation, to begin the Shardself Ritual

*"Gaze steadfastly at things which, though
far away, are yet present to the mind."
- Parmenides*

PLAY

Most of the game is spent during the Play stage, primarily roleplaying scenes. Each player will take a turn doing all three of the following steps.

CONFESS

REMEMBER

COMMIT (OR DON'T)

During these phases, players will gradually add tokens into the central bag. These tokens will be drawn during the Epilogues phase.

*“Lead me, Zeus, and you too, Destiny,
To wherever your decrees have assigned me.
I follow readily, but if I choose not,
Wretched though I am, I must follow still.
Fate guides the willing, but drags the unwilling.”
- Cleanthes*

CONFESS

During the Confess step of the Ritual, the active player will set up a scene: their character's memory of the first time that they heard anyone call them by the Epithet for their Primary Vice.

To set the scene, provide any background details that are necessary, and declare any other characters that would have been there. Collaborate with the other players as much as you like. Ask other players to play these secondary characters for this scene (they will not play their Shardself characters during this scene), then kick the scene off with a bang. The scene ends as soon as someone calls the player by their Epithet, so make sure that everyone knows what it is before you start.

This scene represents a major turning point for the character, so fill it with drama. Ideas for a jumping off point: an argument with a close friend, a victory over an enemy, the pleas of your suffering people, a disaster, a riot in the streets, a betrayal.

*"I am sadly afraid that I must have
done some wicked thing."
- Antisthenes*

REMEMBER

The Remember step of the Ritual represents your character finally making contact with their Shardselves, and remembering their past lives. This is expressed in the form of a question. Ask each other player in turn:

“Why must we be this way?”

If that player’s Shardself has selected your Primary Vice as one of their own Vices, they must rationalize the Vice. They must explain why it isn’t so bad, or it is someone else’s fault, or why it is just the cost of greatness. Whenever this happens, they place a Bad token in the token draw bag.

On the other hand, if that player’s Shardself has **not** selected your Primary Vice as one of their own Vices, then they reply:

“We do not have to be. We can
choose another path.”

They then place a Good token in the token draw bag.

*“It is a royal privilege to do
good and be ill spoken of.”
- Antisthenes*

COMMIT (OR DON'T)

The Commit step represents the culmination of the Ritual. Your character has revealed their most hated memories, and communed with their Shardselves. Now they must decide whether to continue down the path to rid themselves of the dreaded Epithet, or to submit to fate and keep their vicious legacy.

If they choose to commit, explain what steps they will take. It is worth noting that your character may or may not be focused on actually **being** better, just on **appearing** better for future generations. It is up to you whether they actually want to change, or just want to posture.

Whatever you decide, have your character take an oath of your own devising, and outline what they plan to do. Add a token to the bag, in the color of your choice.

We'll see what happens with their oath and future in the next phase of play, during the Epilogues.

*"From this instant on, vow to stop
disappointing yourself."
- Epictetus*

EPILOGUES

Once everyone has completed the Ritual by playing out their character's Confess, Remember, and Commit steps, it is time to wrap up with Epilogues.

As before, players take turns, with each player telling the entire Epilogue of their character on their turn.

On your turn, draw a number of tokens equal to the number of players in the game. Set them in front of you in the order you drew them in.

These represent the Good and Bad turns of the rest of your character's life. Pick up one at a time, and narrate what is happening during this phase of your character's life. If your character took a vow during the Commit step, be sure to talk about whether or not they were able to keep it.

The final token is the most important, and determines whether or not your character was able to rid themselves of their Epithet.

When all players have completed this phase, the game is over! Take a break, relax, and discuss some of the highlights of the game.

*"People walk in wickedness all their lives or, at any rate, for the greater part of it. If they ever attain to virtue, it is late and at the very sunset of their days."
- Cleanthes*

PRINCIPLES

Helpful guidelines to follow while playing.

1. Reincorporate. When someone comes up with a detail for their character, imagine ways that it might reflect in your character's world. It might be a direct translation, or it might be wildly different! One player may be an iron age king whose legendary steed is named Thestrian. If you are playing the captain of a colony ship, you might incorporate an analogous Thestrian as your favorite hover-chair. Or you might re-contextualize Thestrian as your second-in-command, who makes all of the good decisions that you take credit for.
2. Collaborate. When setting up your character, or preparing a scene, ask the other players for help and ideas. The final decisions are yours, but building on each others' ideas is a great way to inject creativity and make something better than the sum of its parts.
3. Embrace flaws. You are playing a character who is flawed, and frankly has been a bad ruler. You don't have to make them better, and sometimes it can be fun to see how their lack of commitment causes their own problems.

*"Don't stumble over
something behind you."
- Seneca the Younger*

THANKS

This game was written for the February 2021 design contest on the rpg-talk.com Discord community. The theme was “ways to remember” beyond a single person’s lifespan.’

Themes of past lives, and the bit of the Incantation about wheels and “an Age yet to come, an Age long past” are from Robert Jordan’s Wheel of Time series.

The four vices used are inversions of the four classical virtues of Stoicism. The quotes on each page are from Stoic philosophers.

This game was inspired by a host of other storytelling games, especially Microscope by Ben Robbins and Fiasco by Jason Morningstar.

Special thanks to my partner Skyler, who suggested the theme of past lives, helped me to refine the ideas here, and came up with the name.

This game is licensed under a [Creative Commons CC-BY-SA 4.0 license](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/4.0/). If you liked it, send me a message at oakenboro.blog, I’d love to hear about your experience.

“If someone speaks badly of you, do not defend yourself against the accusations, but reply; ‘you obviously don’t know about my other vices, otherwise you would have mentioned these as well.’”
- Epictetus

Notes

THE INCANTATION

Notes

O Spirits of the Wheel, through which all mortals live and die, and
live again, in endless cycles, I,

..... ,
NAME

come to begin the Shardselves Ritual. As

..... ,
RULER OF DOMAIN

I have power beyond the dreams of common men, but I have not
the power to change the legacy I have wrought for myself.

I confess! I am , and I am ,
VICE VICE

but most of all I am

..... ,
PRIMARY VICE

and by my deeds have gained the epithet

..... .
EPITHET

I beseech thee, O Spirits of the Wheel - is this my fate? Since the
beginning of my reign, I have ruled over a domain of

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performing deeds no peer could hope to match.

Who, then, can council me? Who, then, can know my fate?

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And so, O Spirits of the Wheel, grant me a chance to commune
with my Shardselves, those reflections of my life from ages long
past and from ages yet to come. I seek their council and their
knowledge.

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RANDOM TABLES

Use these as inspiration when filling in your Incantation, or when setting up scenes, or when telling your Epilogue. These aren't restrictive - you are always welcome to make up your own!

	VICE		
Imprudent	Unjust	Cowardly	Intemperate
	SITUATION		
Famine	Upheaval	War	Prosperity
Decline	Growth	Peace	Innovation
Revolution	Unrest	Enlightenment	Conquest

NAME		RULER OF DOMAIN		NATURAL LOCATION		CHARACTERS	
Juliano	Ayuub	King - Kingdom		Mountain	Archipelago	Mentor	Noble
Marsibil	Bekka	President - Republic		Delta	Dunes	Supporter	Old Friend
Aimee	Sanneke	Representative - Region		Mesa	Desert	Cousin	Rival
Lucas	Wallace	Headmaster - School		Pond	Fjords	Grandparent	Elder
Loa	Nadine	Emperor - Empire		Lake	Sea	Peon	Past Love
Sacripant	Marie	Mayor - Town		Island	Woods	Enemy	Parent
Joran	Mirjana	CEO - Corporation		Scrubland	Tundra	Knight	Friend
Elizabeth	Olga	Captain - Ship/Starship		Plains	Ice fields	Grandchild	Favored
James	Eric	Leader - Expedition		Cliffs	Tundra	Ruler	Sibling
Miroslav	Miluse	Head - Family		Peninsula	River	Subordinate	Lover
Idris	Kat	Organizer - Revolution		Tropical coast	Foothills	Vassal	Adviser
Karolina	Sara	Elder - Village		Forest	Jungle	Supplicant	Child
		PLACE NAME		UNNATURAL LOCATION		ACTIONS	
Ermias	Vitoria	Everin	Halen	Port	Castle	Plotting	Falling
Sheshy	Arridano	Atterrun	Ilburg	Tunnel	Mansion	Drawing	Reciting
Pavel	Marija	Harsener	Kamuraia	Vehicle	Stadium	Singing	Meeting
Zdenek	Brun	Eastbarrow	Guie	Farm	Restaurant	Fighting	Building
Hjortur	Jiri	Ardorm	Finnbridge	Colony	Gate	Eating	Laughing
Carlos	Gladys	Qualet	Troah	College	Ship	Writing	Voting
Marina	Yasmin	Walfurt	Ekvale	Bunker	Shipyard	Traveling	Hiding
Marta	Julieta	Belagrove	Newfield	Tower	Bridge	Crying	Sneaking
Tihomil	Gebre	[Name]-Mount	Yirin	City	Park	Arguing	Flying
Isaias	Arthur	Millcoast	Darcroft	Market	Crypt	Whispering	Breaking
Anne	Albert	Vali-tur	Taydael	Wall	Village	Running	Lying
Julia	Michal	Isheim	Matora	Temple	Inn	Dying	Searching

QUICK REFERENCE

SETUP

Give a copy of the Incantation to each player. Deal out a Primary Vice card to each player. Fill out the Incantation, then read it aloud to begin the Ritual.

PLAY

1. **CONFESS** - Set up a scene of the first time your character heard their Epithet. Play to find out what happens.
2. **REMEMBER** - Ask each other character "why must we be this way?". When answering, place a token in the bag.
3. **COMMIT (OR DON'T)** - Make an oath to change, or don't. Place a token in the bag.

EPILOGUES

Draw tokens from the bag to determine the shape of your character's epilogue. Describe what happens.

PRINCIPLES

Reincorporate the other players' ideas.

Collaborate with the other players whenever you like.

Embrace the flaws of the characters you play.

VICES

Imprudent Unjust Cowardly Intemperate

Primary Vice

IMPRUDENT

EPITHETS

The Ignorant

The Fool

The Unthinking

The Negligent

The Mad

Primary Vice

UNJUST

EPITHETS

The Corrupt

The Liar

The Lawless

The Cruel

The Tyrant

Primary Vice

COWARDLY

EPITHETS

The Apathetic

The Craven

The Lazy

The Helpless

The Timid

Primary Vice

INTEMPERATE

EPITHETS

The Rash

The Indulgent

The Careless

The Excessive

The Raging
