



Thermophiles in Love

Created by Samara Hayley Steele, Cathy Podeswa, Mark Marino, and Rob Wittig.

Keywords

Gender Playability, Gender Performativity, Queering Gender Normativity

Number of Players:

10-50

Introduction

Welcome to *Thermophiles in Love*, the five-gender dating game for microorganisms! Learn your *true* thermophile gender and find your “special three someones” in a world where everyone longs to become part of the perfect *quadruple!* (rhymes with “couple”) The thermophile genders are **Hype, Obi, Fac, Acido,** and **Meso**. This game may be run in a little over an hour and requires no player preparation.

Facilitators' Information

Thermophiles in Love was created by Samara Hayley Steele, Cathy Podeswa, Mark Marino, and Rob Wittig. The larp script was written by Samara Hayley Steele. You can contact the larpwright at genderabolitionists@gmail.com.

Background Information / Significance

Thermophiles in Love explores rituals of gendering and social norms surrounding gender in a surrealist/absurdist setting. This game is very much a pop-up demonstration of what it looks like to incorporate gender playability in interactive narrative media, and it is also a radical act of queering hegemonic and colonial gender paradigms.

Inspired by Judith Butler's theory of gender performativity, players are not simply prompted to perform their game genders, but also reinforce each other's game genders during gameplay, allowing a subtle glimpse into a society that goes beyond simply having binary or non/anti-binary gender, but rather has the pervasive social buy-in for a third, fourth, and fifth gender to be able to be recognized.

Foucault's theory of normalizing judgment is also a subtle but key ingredient, as the gamerunner models the “ew, gross!” reactions players are to use to reinforce the norms of this society. Readers of Althusser will enjoy the interplay between social apparatuses and ideology as emerges during gameplay.

Scenario Setting

The entirety of this game takes place in the Thermal Vent Lounge, where the Meso of Ceremonies (the lead gamerunner) guides everyone through the evening's “quadruopling,” or matchmaking ritual.

Thermophiles have very different modes of perception than humans. They don't even have the same sensory organs—they are single-celled organisms with organelles! Because of this, different thermophiles might have totally different and valid ideas of what's going on and where they are. Perhaps one thermophile sees the Thermal Vent Lounge as a swank disco hall and another sees it as a pool of bubbling mud—these are both equal and valid perceptions.

Likewise, Thermophile society is a very flexible place. According to some thermophiles, it is very advanced society, with schools, hospitals, and amazing public transportation. According to other thermophiles, theirs is a world where everyone spends all day clinging to a rock in very hot mud. Both versions are simultaneously valid and true, as are any other visions other players may have, whether they vocalize them for others to share, or not.

Thermophiles are single-celled creatures—they reproduce through cell division – so their reasons then for wanting to be in a *quadruple* must be more nuanced than reproduction.

In thermophile society there is one 2nd person pronoun. That pronoun is “they.”

Overview of Play

In the first few minutes, as players arrive, you'll be passing out the player handout and prompting everyone to think of a gender-neutral noun. Then, for about 5-10 minutes, you'll be orientating everyone to the game they about to play and various mechanics.

After that comes the liminal space of the gendering ritual. This is done before gameplay starts, but it is during this ritual that elements of the game's storyworld begin to emerge. The players then get their character names, and make a presentation of their genders to each other, and the gamerunner models normalizing judgment of the game's gender norms, then the pre-game workshop comes to an end.

Next you'll initiate the game by introducing yourself as the Meso of Ceremonies and welcoming everyone to the Thermal Vent Lounge. You'll then divide everyone into groups, making sure there is one Meso in each group, and everyone will start getting to know each other. You'll walk around the room, nudging quieter groups towards conversation. Every few minutes, you'll shuffle things, making sure there's always one Meso in each group.

About 10-15 minutes into the game, you'll count up the number of non-mesos to see if you have a multiple of four at that point (the game has an open door policy, so the number of may have changed from the beginning). Then you'll call the Mesos to the middle of the room, encouraging everyone else to keep getting to know each other. If there isn't a multiple of four of non-Mesos, you'll either have a Meso or two swap genders or you might decide instead to have a Non-Meso or two become honorary Mesos for the evening.

Once you have a multiple of four of the romance genders, let everyone know that the Mesos will now be moving through the room, swapping people around, creating groups of four. Everyone will continue to mingle and get to know their group while this is happening. After about 10 minutes – or once the Mesos seem almost done – give a one-minute warning. It's fun if you count down the last 10 seconds, almost like New Years Eve.

Everyone has now been successfully quadrupled! Encourage everyone to enjoy their special night with their quadruple. Help the Mesos join the quadruples, so they can hang out with them as “Meso best friends.” After a few minutes of this, call the game.

The experience ends with a short debrief (10-15 min), in which players are with each other parts of their game play experience that others may have not been able to see, while acknowledging the moments they created together. Be sure to avoid design feedback until after the debrief, and rather hold this time to unpack emotional experiences of the narrative everyone just created.

While it is possible to run the game within an hour, it is nice to allocate an extra 15-30 minutes of time beyond that for the game if possible, so you have some wiggle room to extend certain segments. Educators who are strapped for time may wish to hold the debrief during the following class, and to also use the debrief questions as a writing assignment to help guide that discussion.

Calibration.

Nordic Larp Style calibration mechanics are used in this game to help make sure everyone is excited about the intensity of in-character interactions and feels comfortable softening the intensity.

"Largo, Largo, Largo." If someone says this to you while making a flat-palmed downward gestures with their hands, it means slow down and soften the emotional intensity. It's a way of asking another player to turn the volume down on their performance. Try using this mechanic at least once per game, just to stay in the practice of using and responding to it.

Rather than having a volume up mechanic for this game, read each other's body language. If someone is looking at you with engagement and they seem entertained by what you're doing, that's a good sign.

Okay Check-in. Use the standard Okay Check-In mechanic (thumbs up, thumbs down, flat hand) to check in with other players. Can be used from across the room or to check in with the person in front of you that you're interacting with. Here's a how-to: goo.gl/GBmmf8

Safety

"Hold." Saying this while raising one's hand means everyone should raise their hands and hold them up, stop talking, and look at the person who said "Hold." This is a way of pausing or stopping the game. It should be used for emergencies.

Touching. During this game, the only body parts that may touch are hands. Always ask first. "May I touch your hand?" If the person hesitates or would rather not, see if you can work out an alternative with them that is hands-free.

Door's Always Open. Players may leave at any moment. They may also come back, but will need to check in with the gamerunner before reentering the game. To leave, hold one hand over your eyes and look at the ground and walk away.

No sexual violence. It isn't a part of this game world, so don't put it in the story.

Designated helper(s). If someone isn't behaving in a way that you feel is up to the safety standards, immediately talk to [Name] or [Name], who are ready to help out in that way for this game. (Be sure the helpers raise their hands, and all players can see them.)

Game Prep

Practice Using the Genderator: Before running the game, testing out the website is a good idea (genderator.xyz), and it's also probably a good idea to try practicing the full ritual of gendering people a few times to get the hang of it before running the game. This can be a fun thing to do at a party or festival. It's fun to develop your own style of gender divination!

Practice the 5 dances. Be sure you know the five gender dances so you are ready to demo all five of them to the players during the warm up. Here is a link to a video of the thermophile dances we've used in the past: samarasteele.com/genderdances

Make enough copies of the Player Handout for everyone. It's great if you can make color copies—it's a nice souvenir!

Mentally prepare yourself not to help the Mesos: Sometimes players of the Meso gender will anxiously ask the gamerunner for help in their task during the last 15 or so minutes of the game. Prepare yourself to graciously let them know, once the game is running, that tonight you are the Meso of Ceremonies and cannot take any part in the matchmaking decisions.

Set up

Readying the space: If there are chairs, line the edges of the play space with them, dancehall-style. This will create a nice, big open space for game play. If you're playing in a classroom and desks can't be easily removed, try adjusting them (if possible), to allow people to sit in 5-6 person clusters. Or, if you want do a super fancy run, you can use an actual café or lounge (with permission from the staff of course), or rent out in a banquet hall and furnish with 3-10 tall tables that groups can stand around like at a wedding reception.

Music (optional): If you have access to a portable speaker or sound system, a little lounge music can go a long way. Lo-fi hiphop works very well. Here is a Spotify playlist I've used in past runs: goo.gl/A1jpnT. I like to have it playing softly during the welcome and warm up, and then I turn it up once the game starts.

Food and Beverages (optional): It can be nice to have a table at the edge of the room with snack foods and water and other beverages.

Game Structure & Detailed Walkthrough

WELCOME AND MECHANICS - 7 min

- As players arrive and settle into the space, give them each a copy of the Player Handout, and ask them to write a gender-neutral noun on the top left corner of their handout. They can mingle while they do this.
- Gather the players into a semi-circle facing you and introduce yourself and the game. (1-2 min) (note: if you put the players into a full circle, the people behind you can't hear you.)
- **Setting Speech #1:**
 - "Thermophiles have very different modes of perception than humans. They don't have the same sensory organs—they are single-celled organisms with organelles. Because of this, different thermophiles might have totally different and valid ideas of what's going on and where they are. Perhaps one thermophile sees the place we are in, the Thermal Vent Lounge, as a super cool disco hall and another sees it as a bubbling pool of mud—both are totally equal and valid perceptions."
 - "Also, Thermophile society is a very flexible place. According to some thermophiles, it has schools and hospitals and amazing public transportation and it is a very modern place. According to other thermophiles, everyone spends all day clinging to a rock in muddy hot water. Both versions are simultaneously true. That's just how thermophiles are."
 - So, during the game, if one player says something about how they work at a doctor's office, you might decide to run with that vision of thermophile society, or you might say, "Gosh, in the parts where I come from, we just cling to rocks all day and try not to get fried..." or maybe your thermophile has a totally different vision of what thermophile society is and what's going on."
- Introduce and demo the Calibration Mechanics. Have players practice **Largo** in pairs. Encourage them to try it at least once early on in the game, just to help everyone practice. Using largo is no big deal. (~2 minutes)
- Introduce and demo safety Mechanics. Practice **Hold** together, so new players can see what it looks like. (~2 minutes)
- **Game Pronouns:** "In Thermophile society there is just one pronoun, and that pronoun is "they.""

THE GENDERING - 5-7 min

(If there's no internet connectivity, see notes for alternative ritual)

- To start this segment of the pre-game workshop, I usually give a silly, over-the-top speech like: "I must warn you all, you are about to receive your *true* thermophile gender. Once you've been gendered, you can never go back. Gender, you see, is a very serious thing..."
- Ask everyone who has a cellphone that can connect to the Internet to raise their hands. "Those objects you have in your hands, those aren't cellphones anymore—they are now portable genderators!" Ask if someone with a cellphone will volunteer to assist you in gendering someone. Also ask, "Who would like to be the first volunteer to receive your *true* thermophile gender?"
- **Gendering speech (something along the lines of):** "It always takes two people to divine someone's gender. *This is a very scientific process.* One person scans the subject's body to pick up the gender rays, while the other person pushes the genderator button at the exact right moment."
- Ask the subject to stand with *both feet on the floor*. Have the person with the cellphone open up a browser and type Genderator.xyz. "But don't hit enter yet!"
- Hold one hand under the cellphone that the other person is holding. Wave your other hand as if it's a scanner—or if you made a genderator prop, you can wave that around. Wave the prop (or your hand) up and down like a metal detector, scanning the subject's whole body while holding your other hand as if you're channeling the gender rays into the cellphone the other person is holding. Keep your eyes on the subject, and to the person who is holding the cellphone say, "When I say "NOW" hit enter—but not yet, not until we've picked up all their gender rays..."
- o Once you feel you've picked up all the person's gender rays, you might say: "I can feel it, getting close—NOW! Push the button! Hit Enter!" Once they hit enter, the person's thermophile gender will appear on the cellphone screen. Show the

subject the phone so they can see it, and be sure to congratulate them. "Congratulations! We have an Obli here everyone!" Lead everyone in applause.

- "Now I need everyone to break into groups of 3s and 4s and gender each other just like that! Please try to switch roles, so everyone gets a chance to do all the parts. Keep going until everyone's been gendered."
- While the players are gendering each other, walk around to the groups and help them if needed, while also congratulating everyone on their genders. "What gender did you get? Hype! Congratulations! Yeah!"
- Once everyone has been gendered, bring the group into a semi-circle facing you.

WARM UP: GENDER ORIENTATION & CHARACTER BUILDING - 12+ min

- **Name Reveal.** Let everyone know that the gender neutral noun they came up with at the beginning of the game is their character's name.
- **Gender Playability Reminder.** Remind everyone that it will be really important, once gameplay starts to reinforce each other's genders. That's what makes gender real. So everyone should be sure to pay attention during the next segment when the other genders will be teaching the rest of us about themselves.
- **Gender Showcase.** Ask all the Hypes to step forward and intro themselves to everyone using their character names, and to please tell everyone about their gender. Let them know it's okay to use the character sheet help then. If improv happens, run with it a bit, while keeping an eye on time. Repeat this with the other 4 genders, going down the Player Handout, ending with the Mesos.
- **The Gender Dances.** Teach everyone their gender's dance and explain that the dances help us remind each other of who we are. "Do your gender dance every minute or so, or when you're doing something that's super typical of your gender." For example, An Obli might do the Obli dance they are thinking, which is a very Obli thing to do. A Hype might do the Hype dance while they are taking a risk--it lets everyone know they are doing some risky hype behavior. An Acido might do the Acido dance because they want to acknowledge that everyone is paying attention to them, and a Meso might do their dance because they are engaging with the mysteries in a mysterious way that only makes sense to them. Facs are the only gender that can do other genders' dances—they will mirror the dances of the others around them. Facs also have their own dance--it is a very rare thing to see, the Fac dance...
- **Relationship Norms.** First ask the Mesos to read the relationship norms from the Player Handout to everyone. Then give a little speech in which you model normalizing judgment. Something like:
 - "To have a 3-person relationship? Ewww! No one would even think of such a thing!"
 - "Also, to decide who's in your quadruple? That idea is so weird, so foreign, you wouldn't even think of it! The Mesos are the ones who decide who you'll be in a relationship with. It's just... how the world works!"
- **Setting Speech #2:** "An important thing to remember about thermophiles is they are single-celled creatures. They don't need each other to reproduce—they can reproduce through cell division. So a thermophile's reasons for wanting to be in a quadruple have nothing to do with procreation. Their reasons for wanting to be in a relationship are, how say we say, far more nuanced."

THE QUADRUPLING (The Game) - 20-30 min

- Invite the players into game by doing the Meso dance and giving a little speech along the lines of, "Welcome tonight to the Thermal Vent Lounge! I am your Meso of Ceremonies, and I know why all of you are here: to become part of the perfect quadruple! Well, you're in luck because this group of amazing Mesos has travelled all the way here tonight facilitate a genuine, honest to gosh quadrupling. Let's give them a round of applause." ...blah blah blah... "...and remember: some quadruples last a night and others last a lifetime. Shall we begin?"
 - Note: if running the game with multiple facilitators, come up with weird titles for them too like "The Fac of Facilities," etc.
- Ask the Mesos to spread into a large circle with lots of space between each Meso. Count off the Mesos and have them lift their fingers to show which number they got. Now, count off the Thermophiles based on the number of Mesos there are. (So if there are four Mesos, count the thermophiles into 1s, 2s, 3s, and 4s.) Have each thermophile go stand with the Meso of their number.

- Now everyone is in a small group. Encourage everyone to get to know each other in their groups. "You can dance, you can talk—the surface is the limit!"
- Walk around the room and help encourage the groups to talk and interact. Some groups may need more prompting than others. Some conversation prompts:
 - "Why don't you share with each other about your jobs? Or where you grew up?"
 - "Perhaps you'd like to talk about this amazing venue we're in..."
 - "Perhaps you'd like to discuss why you want to find your perfect quadruple..."
- After 2-5 minutes, ask the Mesos each to select two thermophiles from their group; those two thermophiles will be sent one group to the left. Once they've all shuffled thusly, encourage everyone to get back to getting to know each other. *Don't forget to do the Meso dance sometimes!*
- After 2-5 minutes, ask the Mesos to each select one Thermophile from their group. The two of them (the meso and therma) will move one group to the right. Once they've moved, encourage everyone to get back to mingling. By now, the Mesos will be starting to get a pretty good idea of how different Thermophiles are interacting with each other...
- In the meantime, count the number of people playing the romantic genders (non-Mesos)—(Note: this game has an open door policy, so don't count on having the same number of players you had at the opening). If there is not a multiple of four of non-Mesos, take a moment and think about whether you'd like to have 1-2 Mesos switch and become thermophiles, or if you'd like to have 1-2 thermophiles become honorary Mesos. There need to be at least 8 non-Mesos to allow for 2 quadruples. In a pinch, the gamerunner can swap genders and become a thermophile. Don't take over for the Mesos, though. It is better to have players, rather than the gamerunner, do the matchmaking.
- Once you have your count, ask the Mesos to come meet you in the center. Encourage the romantic genders to keep mingling with each other. **To the Mesos:** "It is an inspiration to have all of you here and to see you doing your fine work. As the Meso of Ceremonies, I obviously can't help you decide who is in the quadruples, but anyway, let's see..."
 - If there isn't a multiple of 4...
 - **Option #1:** "Would one (or two) of you like to volunteer to have your gender switched? You see, we don't have multiples of four..." If no one steps up, they'll have to draw straws. This might be an emotional moment—be ready to hold space for that. Use the generator to re-gender the designated Mesos—and be sure to congratulate them on their new gender!!—then send them to join one of the groups.
 - **Option #2:** Alternatively, if you don't have Mesos to spare, you can ask 1-2 of the romantic genders to become honorary Mesos. To do this, turn to the room and get everyone's attention: "We need one (or two) thermophiles to become an honorary Meso for the evening. This means you will get to learn some of the Meso secrets, but also, you will have to forgo being in a quadruple for tonight..." If there are no volunteers, draw straws. Once the honorary Mesos are chosen, be sure to connect them with a Meso-mentor, who they'll shadow for rest of the evening.
 - This should be done in less than 3 min.
- Once there are multiples of four of the romantic genders, draw everyone's attention to the center of the room. Let them know that for the next part of the Quadrupling, the Mesos will be moving through the room, drifting through the groups and swapping people around. "So, rather than tapping your shoulder (cuz we don't do touching in this game), if a Meso leans in front of you, makes eye contact, and waves like this, follow them, and they will move you to a different group."
- Let the Mesos get to shuffling people. If they seem to be hesitating, encourage them shuffle someone just to see what it feels like. "You can always move a person back to their old group letter."
- Over the next several minutes, keep an eye on things, and, if needed, offer little reminders to make sure the Mesos are working towards making groups of 4.
- When it seems like the Mesos are getting close, them a 1-minute warning. If they are really, really struggling, slyly give them a little more than a minute. When they seem to be about to wrap things up, look at your time piece and count down "10...9...8..." When you reach 1:
- "Congratulations everyone! Look at the three people you are with. You have been quadrupled! Tonight is your special night! Please enjoy yourselves here in the Thermal Vent Lounge, we have snacks and dancing! Get to know each other, and enjoy yourselves!"

- As the quadruples start their dates, the Mesos will likely be standing in shock at having just accomplished a difficult task under pressure. Give them a few seconds to linger in that space before announcing to the thermophiles, "Please, let a Meso or two join your group--Everyone needs a Meso best friend!"
- Walk around to quads that don't have Mesos yet and usher a Meso or two over to join them.
- Once you've folded the mesos into quadruples, let the dates run for about 2-3 minutes before calling game.

Debrief & Closing

DEBRIEF & CLOSING - 15+ min

- Thank everyone for joining you in the Thermal Vent Lounge and announce that "The formal part of the game is now over, and we are going to close out with a short debrief."
- Circle up, with chairs if available.
- **Debrief questions:**
 - **How closely did you feel your thermophile gender fit you?** *If the first several people who speak up all say the same thing, be sure say something to indicate that the opposite might be true for some people. "In past runs, we've had some players say their game gender fit them better than their 'real' gender..." or "You know, in past runs, some players have totally felt like their game gender was not right for them..."*
 - **Can you think of one or two moments that really stood out to you during the game?** *The goal of this question is two-fold: Players will get to affirm each other for meaningful moments they made together. Also, this is a great moment for players who had quiet, internal moments, to voice those moments, helping everyone see how those moments were part of the story too.*
 - **Note:** Please keep the debrief time focused on de-rolling. If someone tries to veer things towards feedback, let them know "We're going to stay focused on character debrief right now, I'll explain how to do feedback at the end."
- **Inspirational Speech:**
 - What would it be like to live in a society with lots of genders rather than 2? As you may know, there are 5-gendered societies in many Native American tribes, in parts of Indonesia, and also, in India there are actually region-specific genders--isn't that cool??! So, depending on the city you're in in some parts of India, there might be 3 genders or 7. Isn't it wild to imagine what colonization must have been like for people of those cultures? To just have these people suddenly coming in and telling them all they have to confirm to only two genders?
 - A piece of homework I'd love for you to do is to design a 6th thermophile gender. And to think about what it would look like if we did a part 2 of this game where we launch that gender.
 - It's actually not that hard to keep track of lots of genders. It's like Pokemon, there could be 151 genders and what if everyone throughout society acknowledged them? What would that be like? To live in a society in perhaps 200 years where there are hundreds of officially recognized genders--with new genders being launched every year?!
 - **Super interesting factoid:** "When the game designers were working on this game, they noticed that in every real-world five gender society they looked at, there was always at least one non-dating matchmaking gender. And these five-gender societies were on different continents--what's all that about? So the Meso in this game was totally based on that real world gender found in these five-gender societies.
 - **And finally:** Now that you all have been trained in how to use the generator, its a super fun thing to do are parties! And festivals! To run around and gender people! The power is in your hands now.
- **Announcements (keep them short--some people have to leave exactly on time)**
 - How to give feedback / request a copy of the larpscript. (Send everyone an email with this link: <https://goo.gl/forms/VSoi715J7ANE1mHa2>)
- **Thank everyone for playing!**

Notes

- If playing in a location without internet connectivity, you can retool the gendering ritual to fit those circumstances. To do this, have everyone write the year they were born on the player handout, and ask them to circle the very last number of their birth year. Next, they should look at the Player Handout and find the gender that has that number as a "lucky number." That is their gender.
- This game may be extended to be a full afternoon's experience, or it may be run as a campaign game over the course of weeks or months. For information on how to do this, along with extra educational modules--such as thermophile births (i.e. cell division), thermophile weddings and divorces, thermophile trails for those who deviate from the norms, please visit samarasteele.com/thermophiles.