

Together We Write Private Cathedrals

A Together Game by Ben Auden Roswell

Based on the work of Takuma Okada

To be queer and look for yourself in history is an exercise in reading what was left unsaid in what was able to pass uncensored. It is an exercise in understanding the words people use for themselves and in making room for the imprecise, the ephemeral, the numinous. There are love stories there if you know where to look, and there are love stories to be written between the pages.

This is a game about writing queer histories. It is also a game about existing under censorship and loving when your love is not always safe. This is a game for two players. You will take on the role of lovers and of the friends, family, and community that is touched by your relationship.

It requires 1 six-sided die, a deck of standard playing cards, and physical or digital tools to write with.

A Note on Queerness in History

People consistently push back against queer readings of history by saying “Gayness, Transsexuality, Queerness, did not exist then as they do now, so we cannot talk about people in these terms.” Or people say, “They never said, we cannot know for sure. We do not want to assign things to people.”

What they are really saying is that only the most explicit and definitive forms of queerness can be interpreted as valid. That only the stories of queerness that escaped censorship, homophobic historians, fascist regimes, colonialism, and or a thousand other forms of erasure are true stories. Queerness has always existed in the margins and in-betweens, in closets of many shapes and sizes, without clear definitions or boundaries. Sometimes all we can see of ourselves in history is what lies between the letters.

Before you Begin, Read this

This game deals explicitly with homophobia and transphobia in the form of censorship, love, and sexuality. Additionally, any time you tell stories of historical queerness it is possible that you could touch on subjects such as personal and

state violence, homophobia and transphobia, depression, and abuse. It is possible but you do not have to.

Talk to your partner in play about what topics are off limits and which are okay only if they are explored non explicitly. Also agree on a level of romantic and sexual detail that you are both fully comfortable writing. As the game progresses check in with each other regularly. If you need to change the tone or level of detail at any time do so. If you need to walk away from the story you tell do so. Your health is always more important than a game.

How to Play

Begin by agreeing on some vague details—such as time period and location, just enough to get you situated--and each naming your lover. Do not define more than the basics of your shared story. Do not strictly define your character's identities or sexualities. Instead explore these things, and let them evolve, in play. The game requires only two things about your characters: They are queer and they are in love.

Take turns writing bits of the historical record that tells your characters' stories, sharing what you wrote with your partner. As the game progresses you will build a private archive for your characters to be remembered by.

When it's your turn draw a card and roll the six-sided die. What kind of document you write is determined by the suit of the card, and the subject is determined by the number. The die roll determines how safe and explicit you can be talking about your characters queerness. Refer to the Oracle on the next page for details.

Be inventive and free with what kinds of documents you write. Letters are of course the bread and butter of queer longing, but so are memoirs, household notes, stories told friends and so on.

Notes on Play

This game is asynchronous; sometimes one person is writing and the other is not. This gives the game a particular freedom from time and place. Try playing it over extended periods of time, meeting each other when it's time to share but otherwise living your life. Or write at the same time, trading what you created when you both are finished.

Distance should be no object; this game works wonderfully in a shared document, over email, or over messaging service. Anywhere you can both see the writing. These places are just new versions of the same object you will be writing so feel free to embrace technology and its form. *Private Cathedrals* works just as well played about characters on a 90s internet form as it does about people in 1909.

Themes and Variations:

- *Private Cathedrals* was written with two players in mind but it can easily be played solo with just one half of the correspondence surviving.
- It can also be played with several people telling the story of a queer community instead of a single relationship.
- You can play this game as an oral history project. Telling each other stories about your two characters on turn and stepping into the roles of other people as needed.
- If you feel comfortable consider adding art, collage, poetry, sketches, or photography into your archive either by describing it or creating it yourself.
- Play this game with fictional characters instead of original ones. Understand that this does not diminish the nature of censorship but simply changes it. Hateful relatives become the comics board or broadcast regulations. There are many people in fiction who have loved each other but who's love could only exist in the spaces between letters or through innuendo and coding.

- The Oracle

On A:

6 – You are assured of your privacy. You may write about yourself and love plainly.

4 or 5 – This is somewhat safe. You may not be completely truthful—there is always a risk after all—so you speak in coded phrases and touch each other lightly.

3 or 2 – This writing is public. Your love will be evident to those who know where to look, but it cannot be obvious.

1 – A censor burns your letter. A researcher ignores it. Your family hides it in shame. Complete your turn as you would normally, share it with your partner, then destroy what you made. This bit of your love does not become history.

Numbers and Letters:

Ace – A Moment of Grief or of Joy

2 – Family, whatever that Means

3 – Promises, Secrets

4 – Self-discovery, Confessions,

5 – Firsts, Lasts

6 – Separation, Longing

7 – Desire, Fulfillment

8 – Intimacy in any form

9 – Anger, Fear

10 – A Fight

J – Routine

Q – Special occasions

K – Meaning, Magic, Love

Card Suits:

Spades ♠: You are writing something personal. A diary entry, a memoir, a

note in your planner, a draft of a poem. This writing is for you.

Hearts ♥: This is writing between you and your lover. Private correspondence, a note left on your shared kitchen table, a paragraph of prose you wrote for them. This writing is for them.

Diamonds ♦: This is writing between you and someone else. A story told a friend, a draft manuscript, a letter to a dear friend, a post on a queer message board. It is meant for the world but it is about the two of you.

Clubs ♣: This is writing by someone close to you. A description of your wedding, a letter between your parents, a speech made in your honor. It is meant for you, or is about your story.