

here.
me.
now.

A GAME OF EMPATHY

by Venn Wylde

2-4 players
60-90 min





SPECIAL
SNOWFLAKE
GAMES

here. me. now.

Quick start: do as described in first paragraph of Phase 0 on page 4, then go right into reading aloud in Phase 1.


WELCOME!

 Have you ever relived a traumatic moment of your life? Have you ever thought your perspective had been ignored or overrun? Was there ever a time when you thought no-one understood or cared about you? Have you had one of those moments flash up around you so powerfully that you froze, lashed out, silenced yourself, or ran away? Have you wished that moment had gone differently, or wondered who you might be without that experience? This game's for you.

 **Here. Me. Now.** is a freeform game that builds empathy between its players. One player tells a story of a challenging moment in their life, and the others listen with their whole bodies, using theatrical movement and interpretive dance to express the story and their emotional experience of it. At the end, storytellers have an opportunity to recast their story, and integrate and embody this new version. Content may be visionary, innocuous, and/or violent, and descriptions abstract and/or vivid. While it can be played with lighter topics, it is designed for use with challenging material, and with a high degree of attention to allowing the players to choose their level of engagement.

This game takes 60 to 90 minutes, including warmups. Some groups choose to repeat with a new storyteller, adding ten to twenty minutes to their playtime with each iteration.

WHY WE PLAY

 We play this game to connect with each other. We play to make new discoveries about ourselves and each other, and to celebrate them. We play to build empathy for each of our unique experiences of challenges in life, and to heal any of those experiences that may be lingering. We are here to witness each other, and be witnessed, as we generate new friendly stories about our own unkenning (however minor or extreme that may have been) and thereby integrate, reframe, and transform those experiences and ourselves.

GAMEPLAY SYNOPSIS

After establishing safety mechanics and warming up, we will define some boundaries on our stories and select a storyteller. That player will then tell a story of a challenging moment in their life. Other players physically (and quietly) act out the story through theatrical movement, interpretive dance, etc. Responding to the story through movement, self-touch, and attention to feelings and physical sensations, players and storyteller create a mutual flow of empathy. At their option, the storyteller might ask one player to support them in generating creative flow by taking on the role of Flow Coach. After the story, the players debrief by sharing what they discovered through play, appreciating each other's contributions to their experience, and naming some of the new choices they might make on the basis of what they've learned. Then, the storyteller may choose to tell an alternate history of that same scene or set of scenes — showing what it might have been like if it had gone as they had wished. Players then debrief again and conclude.

This game is designed to be co-facilitated by the players, though it can also be augmented by a skilled facilitator who is familiar with the processes. Expect to take about an hour to 90 minutes. If you've already done the warmups, established safety mechanisms, and selected a storyteller, you may be able to play through in half an hour.

GAMEPLAY PHASES

PHASE 0: PREP & SETUP — directions for pre-game set-up

PHASE 1: WELCOMING & INTRODUCTION — establishing the purpose

PHASE 2: SAFETY & WARMUPS — context-setting activities

The door is closed • The door is open • Move as you are moved • Touch • Creative Joint Play • Art Appreciation • Commitments

PHASE 3: CHOOSING ROLES — roles, choosing, and boundaries

Review the roles • Palette {mini-game} • Appreciative choosing {mini-game}

PHASE 4: STORYTELLING & DEBRIEF — the heart of the game

PHASE 5: RE-TELLING & DEBRIEF {optional} — “do-overs”

PHASE 6: CONCLUSION AND GAME FEEDBACK — wrap

PLAY!

PHASE 0 PREP & SETUP

Gather supplies: scrap paper & colored pens for **Art Appreciation**, note cards for **Appreciative Choosing**, and big paper & markers for **Palette** and **Debrief**. Write the debriefing sentence stems (pg 9), large enough for everyone to read, on a wall chart, and post another wall chart with “OK” and “no” on it for **Palette**. Make copies of the **Commitments** and **Roles** pages (pp 13-14) for each player.

If you are hosting, read at least the **Welcome** (pg 2), the **Roles** (pg 14), and **Gameplay Synopsis** (pg 3).

Though the game is written for co-facilitation by the players, it is possible for one player to take on additional responsibilities as a facilitator. If you are doing that, familiarize yourself with the **Appreciative Choosing** exercise (pg 16) and the **Debrief** process (pg 9).

If you are trying to become deeply familiar with the game, or evaluate it in some way, it may help you to read through as if you were following the sequence described in the **Game Phases** section. On the other hand, insight follows experience. Or, as playtesters said, “the point is discovered in the playing of it.” You will get a deeper understanding of the game if you can find a friend with whom to play through it together. It can be quite powerful with two players, and playtesters say it has high replay value.

PHASE 1 GATHERING & INTRODUCTION

To begin play, read the following text aloud:

This is a game that can be played by reading through the game text together and following instructions as they arise. To make things clearer, instructions that are italicized are meant for the reader to do without reading them aloud. ***For example, show this text to the other players and point to it.*** We will now take turns reading aloud from **Welcome** and **Why We Play (pg 2)**. This symbol (📄) will indicate to pass the instructions.

*When you’ve done reading those sections aloud, proceed to **Phase 2**. As before, pass the game text to the next reader each time you encounter the symbol.*

Continue to take turns reading aloud, and follow the instructions.

PHASE 2

SAFETY & WARM-UPS



THE DOOR IS CLOSED {no more players}

Remember: Read aloud (non-italics). *Do the things (italics).*

These are all the players for this session. No additional players may join us at this point.



THE DOOR IS OPEN {you are free to go}

You don't have to be here. Take care of yourself. The door is open for each of us to leave as soon as we are ready; we need no excuse or explanation.



MOVE AS YOU ARE MOVED {make your own choices}

During play, you'll be asked to move. Allow that movement to come from within you. You are not required to do any particular thing that someone says, even if you have chosen to play out a role that the storyteller describes as doing that thing.



TOUCH {not between players}

This game sets touch-between-players outside the scope of play, and uses self-touch to draw awareness to places in ourselves where we may be doing what we notice others doing. This is intentional, in light of the sensitive nature of some of the stories that we may share, and all of our unique relationships with touch and with each other. Individual players and play-groups may of course make their own agreements about touch with each other; please do so with care.



CREATIVE JOINT PLAY {an experience of **FLOW**}

In this game, we will all be asked to make new movements with our bodies, and our storyteller will be telling a potentially challenging story. This warmup will help us with all of that by giving us an experience of flowing positive feeling that supports creativity.

This exercise will call for even more creativity from those of us with limited mobility. If the game text calls for you to move in a way that doesn't fit your body, imagine it's asking for another movement that does.

Start wiggling your toes. *Do this yourself, and watch for others to do likewise. Wait for them to wiggle enough that their feet are moving.* Notice that your feet are moving now too. Allow that, play with moving your feet and your

PHASE 2

SAFETY &

WARM-UPS

(CONTINUED)

toes. Notice how your feet are connected to your ankles, and you're moving those too now.

Wait for each set of movements to move the next joint before proceeding.

Notice how moving your ankles gets your knees involved. Embrace and expand on that.

Wait for it... Notice how that's got your hips into the game. Wiggle your hips, too, as you continue moving your toes, ankles, and knees in new ways.

Let the wiggling continue. Notice how that gets your vertebrae moving in new relationships with each other, and bring your whole spine into your constantly shifting wiggle. The idea here is to create new relationships between the bones of us, opening new space for possibilities within us. *You're still wiggling, right?* As you move your spine, you'll notice that your ribcage is moving too. Accept that. Make it bigger. Move your scapulae too, and notice how that gets your arms moving. *Move your arms!* And now your elbows. Let your wrists play back and forth with your ankles. Let the movement of your spine play all the way up into your head, and *(let your larynx move around in different ways; this may make your voice sound funny — that's good, go with it)* allow your jaw and larynx to move as you continue wiggling your whole body. If you start to notice that you're doing something familiar, change it up — going slow? try fast; switch straight-line movements for curves, light movements for strong ones, controlled movement for looser movement. *Demonstrate by doing!*

At some point, when you're feeling good and you can see that others are into the movement, let it continue ... then settle into subtle movement and say: This feeling *(describe the feeling in your body — many people experience warmth, expansion, space, and movement)* is what this game refers to as “**flow**.” It coincides with a mental state that supports creativity and discovery.

(There's more information about these warmups in notes at the end of the game text.)

PHASE 2

SAFETY & WARM-UPS (CONTINUED)



ART APPRECIATION {generating mutual positive regard}

Our next warmup is about creating a context of appreciation. Two key definitions of appreciation for this game are “sensitive awareness” and “focusing primarily on positive aspects.” We’ll explore that now by appreciating each other. First, please get a piece of paper and the colored pen of your choice; let me know you’ve got that by resting into silence. *Wait.* Now, please find a partner, and face each other. *Wait.* The person in front of you has spent their entire life creating themselves exactly as they are now. They are an exquisite creative expression, a work of art. Use the next five minutes to notice and **silently** appreciate them — the details of them and the whole of them — and capture what you notice on your paper to share with them. Feel free to use what you notice to make up stories about who they are; we all do that all the time anyway, and this is a great opportunity to do that in an appreciative way. Afterward, you’ll have a minute to share your appreciations with your partner; meanwhile, drop the words out of your interaction.

Set a five-minute timer for the noticing phase; when it goes off, say “Okay, now please shift into expressing your appreciations to each other,” and then set a one-minute timer for the expressing phase. When the one-minute timer goes off, say, “That’s one minute. Please wrap it up and come back to the group.”



COMMITMENTS {declaring how we will behave during this game}

Most games have some structure that tells us how to play. In support of our creating safety for ourselves together, this game asks us to affirmatively declare how we intend to behave.

Walk around the space saying aloud the commitments on your Commitments sheet (pg 13). As you do, play with moving faster and slower through the space; use creative joint play to generate flow. Notice how you feel as you speak these commitments aloud. Try them on. You might speak over each other; that’s okay. After three minutes, or as the room becomes quiet, make a choice — embrace these commitments, at least for the duration of play, or go find something else to do that isn’t this game. *Set a three-minute timer, and start doing this exercise.*

PHASE 3

CHOOSING ROLES



REVIEW THE ROLES

The **Roles** form the core mechanics of the game. It's particularly important to understand the roles before doing the following two exercises, **Palette** and **Appreciative Choosing**.

Everyone get out your **Roles** sheet (pg 14). We'll take turns reading them aloud, and answer any questions about them before we move on. In particular, pay attention to the prompts given to the storyteller.

Have one player read each role aloud. Check that everyone understands the roles, how they work, and how they interact. Continue below.



PALETTE

Keeping in mind the prompts given to the storyteller and the purpose of our play together, it's important that we get clear as to which themes or topics we want to put out of bounds, if any. The **Palette** mechanism will help us do that. It is described on page 15; we will play it now.

Play the Palette game, and then continue below.



APPRECIATIVE CHOOSING

Now it is time for us to select our storyteller, but we want to do that carefully. We want each player's voice to carry equal weight, so that we gain the benefit of all our perspectives. And we want to do this in a way that brings us together, building on our growing sense of mutual appreciation. The **Appreciative Choosing** game (pp 16-17) is designed for exactly this purpose.

*Go play it now, and then continue with **Phase 4**.*

PHASE 4

STORYTELLING & DEBRIEF



STORYTELLING

This is the heart of the game, and we will create it together. Here our storyteller will tell us their story. Here we will witness them, expressing the story and our feelings through movement that's friendly to our bodies. [Storyteller], please let us know when to begin. I'll set a five minute timer for your story. It's extremely rare for a story to go that long. *When the storyteller starts telling their story, start a five-minute timer.*



DEBRIEF

Remember: Read aloud (non-italics). *Do the things (italics).*

We debrief now to share what we've discovered, how we're feeling now, any "aha!" moments of discovery, and appreciation for each other's contributions to our experience. We might also be making new choices, to try out things we haven't before; we will share those too. If these concepts don't capture something you're burning to share, say that thing instead. Let's go around, with each of us adding one thing at a time. These sentence stems are here as prompts. *If the sentence stems remain unclear, read aloud these questions:*

- What sensations do you notice in your body?
(“I feel _____ in my _____.”)
- Did you have any “Aha!” moments? Discoveries. Realizations?
(“I discovered _____.”)
- Did someone contribute significantly to your experience? How?
(“I appreciate _____ for _____.”)
- Do you plan to try something new or different from before?
(“I will _____.”)

When the debrief feels complete, or after you've gone around four times, read the following: That concludes our debrief. Now, the storyteller has an option.



The mind doesn't know the difference between memory and imagination, and traumatic experiences are troublesome precisely because they remain as unintegrated parts of ourselves that repeat verbatim. As a result, new stories and perspectives that we supply for ourselves can often be supportive for healing. They do not erase these experiences, but can ease our

relationships with them. Now, the storyteller may create an alternate history for the players to act out, retelling the story as they might sometimes wish it had been; if they do, we will then debrief again.



[Storyteller], do you want to retell that story, with key people making different choices than they did in the memory you told us about just now? This is an opportunity to fit the details together differently, or to craft entirely new details and say how you wish that moment had gone. This won't erase your experience, but it may give you additional choices in how you relate with your history—and it may help the rest of us learn more too.

If the storyteller says no to a retelling: proceed to **Phase 6**



If the storyteller says yes:

Great! If you like, in this retelling, you may play as yourself among the players while you are narrating the story; otherwise, narrate without acting out the story. Either way, choose a new place in the room from which to start, and move your body in a new way. Also, please let us know when to begin.

Set a five-minute timer.

When the storyteller is complete, debrief a second time, as before.

Thanks everyone — that's the end of the game.

Note that some groups choose to play again at this point with a new storyteller, bypassing the warmups and adding 10-20 minutes of additional playtime. Please check for affirmative and enthusiastic consent from your fellow players.

If it feels right, please invite players to send feedback to the designer: venn@specialsnowflakegames.com. If you're running a playtest, this would be the time to transition into your meta-game debrief; some suggested questions are included on page 21.

PHASE 5 RETELLING & DEBRIEF (OPTIONAL)

PHASE 6 CONCLUSION & GAME FEEDBACK

VARIANTS

CHANGING THE PROMPT

While this game was written and designed to draw out a particular kind of story, it's possible to change the experience of the game significantly by changing the prompts given to the storyteller. For example, if the prompt is changed to “tell a story of a time when someone ignored or took advantage of those who could not advocate for themselves,” players might explore stories about the natural world. This is not my preference as a designer, however, as it also makes space for people to project whatever stories they wish on other beings (and in the process possibly ignore real signals from those others) rather than acknowledging, owning, and expressing their own biases and perspectives. It is essential to this game that the stories be told from the narrator's perspective, and to acknowledge that whatever perspective the storyteller is sharing is in some way their own.

That said, the **Palette** mechanism can be expanded by adding a “yes” column or list for themes that players specifically hope for. As with the “OK” list, items on the “yes” list may be moved to the “no” list by any player after they're clarified.

CHANGING THE NUMBER OF PLAYERS

The game experience is very different with larger groups, not only because some of the mechanics take longer, but also because people tend to limit what stories they'll share—how intimate and personal those stories are—based on the strength of their existing relationships with the other players. Repeated play can help with this, as can playing in smaller groups. With larger groups of players, you may get more out of splitting into twos, threes, and fours, and sharing out any particularly salient discoveries from the debriefings.

CHANGING OTHER THINGS

The **Appreciative Choosing** minigame can be easily extended to facilitate other choices. Most directly and easily, it can be used to select people for roles—that's the context from which the process was taken. It can equally be used to select among any array of options, provided that the group doing the selecting has a clear goal that they want their selection to help them accomplish. For example, it can be used to redesign a game (choos-

ing among mechanics, with fun or positive playtest feedback as a goal), to distribute proceeds from an event (choosing among profit-sharing schema, with a goal of rewarding those who made it successful and motivating future such contributions), or to adopt a governance model (choosing among models, with whatever goals your organization has). Your game designer has used it for all of those, with groups from two to 40.

CHANGING THE GAME

This is the game-improvement metagame. Write up your play experience. Suggest changes, including how others would know your changes had achieved your intentions. Post them, link back to where you found this game, and send them as feedback. Submit changes on github once the game is posted there. Make this game amazing-er. Let your perspective be known. Help us all know each other better.

COMMITMENTS

Try saying these aloud as you walk around the space. Notice how you feel.

I commit to taking responsibility for myself and for being with how I feel about what's going on.

How you'd know: check if you're aware of any of the many thousands of things happening in your body at any given moment, and whether you feel happy with yourself as the source of those feelings; if you're blaming someone or something for how you feel, including blaming yourself, you've missed the boat. Just notice that you're off the boat, and get back on. Or decide you're going to swim around in blame and criticism for some period of time, declare your choice, and notice the results.

I commit to expressing how I feel and what I notice, free of blame, criticism, argument, and defensiveness.

How you'd know: check if you're feeling happy and connected; if you find you're in an argument, blaming or criticising someone, or getting defensive, take responsibility for that — eg, "I notice that I'm arguing; I feel scared I'll be misunderstood, and I'd like to try again;" see if you can express yourself so clearly no-one argues. Or claim your choice aloud, eg, "I'm speaking arguably" or "I'm speaking to produce defensiveness," and see what happens next.

I commit to listening for underlying feelings, desires, and intentions.

How you'd know: say aloud what you think you're hearing them say about how they feel and what they want; if they nod and smile, you've got it — otherwise, ask them what you missed and try again. Or declare your intention to put on a Bad Listening Theater show; give your production a title, and invite whoever wants to participate to come join in. See what happens.

I commit to giving sensitive awareness to what I notice, and to focusing primarily on those aspects I want more of.

How you'd know: check to see if you can describe in detail what's happening in and around you, and whether more of the things you want are showing up in your awareness; if you're having a hard time with the details, or you're getting more of what you don't want, try saying clearly what you *do* want. Or declare a wallow-and-complain session.

I commit to making only agreements I intend to keep, and to changing them if or when they no longer work for me.

How you'd know: you feel happy about making, keeping, and changing agreements. If not, simply acknowledge how you feel about it, say what you'll do now, and ask whoever you made the agreement with to do the same. If you broke an agreement, acknowledge that to the people you made the agreement with and take responsibility for cleaning up whatever mess might have resulted from your choices.

If you embrace these commitments for yourself, you might enjoy the results of signing a printed copy of this page and keeping it for your own reference. Go ahead and sign it now, if you like.

ROLES

These roles are the backbone of the game. Everything else is set up to make these roles work better and to get more out of playing them. The storyteller is at the heart, and the flow coach (if you have one) is there to support the storyteller.



STORYTELLER

You will tell a story of your choice about a time when you believe your voice or perspective was unheard, overlooked, overrun, or otherwise ignored. Alternate prompts: any story you frequently or consistently recite to yourself with the same details; any story from your life that you wish had gone differently; any story from your life that has become a troubling and familiar pattern.

1. Pick a Flow Coach, if you like, from among the other participants.
2. Choose a place in the play area to stand, sit, or lie.
3. In that place, tell your story.
 - If you get stuck, change position: stand up, sit, or lie down.
 - If you chose a coach, try on what you notice them doing.
 - Notice how other players' movement expressions match your story.
 - *Advanced play: If you notice stillness in another player's body, gently touch that place on your own body and bring your attention to how you might be doing something similar there; play with generating a new movement from that place.*
4. When your turn ends, step out of the place where you told your story. Gather the players in a new place in the room for the debrief (pg 9).



FLOW COACH

You have been selected by the storyteller to help them generate flow while telling their story.

- Observe the storyteller. Position yourself so that they may observe you if they choose.
- Keep your own body moving, in friendly ways.
- Notice where & how the storyteller moves; try out those movements, and play with them.
- If you notice a place they're not moving, lightly touch that place on your own body, bring your awareness to that place, allow it to be still, and then generate movement from that place that feels good to you there.



THE PLAYERS

You will witness and play out the storyteller's story, using your own creative movements to express what you notice.

- Attend to the story, and play it out.
- Move through the space in whatever friendly ways occur to you to express the story.
- Do this free of vocalization, and free from any touching of the other players.
- Notice what's happening in your body as you play out this story. Can you bring that into your movement expression?
- Notice what the other players and the storyteller are doing with their bodies to express the story. Play with those movements, too, as a way of adding to your own expression.

PALETTE {MINI-GAME}

This is a minigame for describing what themes the players are willing to explore during this play-session. These will inform the player in the Storyteller role when they select what story to tell. Make two lists, labeled “OK” and “no,” where all the players can see them. A large piece of paper on a wall works well.

The “OK” list is for things that a player thinks the other players might not expect from the stories shared in this game, which they want to be sure is okay to include among the subjects and themes of the stories that are shared in this play-session. Some of the “OK” lists from playtesting included, for example, “good intentions with poor results,” “endearing friendship stories,” and “events from youth/childhood.”

The “no” list is for themes, subjects, etc, that a player thinks might be expected to show up among the stories that are told in this game, given the focus of the storyteller’s prompt, which they do not want to encounter during this play-session. Some items from the “no” lists generated for playtesting included “domestic abuse,” “nihilism,” and “sexual violence.”

If a player adds something to the “OK” list, the players may ask for clarification and, once all the players are satisfied that they understand the topic, any player may choose to place this topic on the “no” list. A player may add anything to the “no” list, and though other players may ask for clarification they may not remove the concept. It can be helpful for players clarifying items on the “no” list to have whoever added the “no” item add items to the “OK” list that are on the acceptable side of that theme for them.

Importantly, while players **may** choose to tell each other about what leads them to add something to one of the lists, and we might learn about each other in that way, “I choose because I choose” is all the explanation required for adding something to the list of your choice. For example, our playtester adding “domestic abuse” to the “no” list had been playtesting an intense game about domestic violence the previous evening, but we didn’t need to know that for it to be okay to rule those topics out for the session. No explanation is required.

We will go around by turns, with each player adding one thing to the list of their choice on each of their turns. A player may pass; if they do, this is the last round of additions.

APPRECIATIVE CHOOSING {MINI-GAME}

This minigame will ensure that all of our voices are valued equally as we choose who will be our storyteller. *If you object to facilitating, you may hand this to someone else.*

If one player has prepped as your facilitator for this session, hand this to them.

Read aloud the bold items, and do the italicized ones.

I will be our facilitator for this section.

1. *Check that the players understand the Storyteller role. Have the players form a circle.*
2. **Each player write their name on a scrap of paper, and underline it.** *Include yourself.*
3. **Each player write on their scrap of paper the name of the player they'd like to be the storyteller. Circle it.** *Do likewise.*
4. **Hand your cards to the facilitator.** *(Here, you're gathering creative input free of the groupthink tendency to clump up around the first suggestion anyone offers.)*
5. *Facilitator, randomize the order of the cards, then, for each card, ask: “[**underlined name**], why did you nominate [**circled name**]?” or “[**underlined name**], what is it about having [**circled name**] as our storyteller that you think will make this a better game for all of us?” Continue to include yourself each time you go around. (We get to learn here about each player's values and intentions, and how we regard each other.) You may wish to track these nominations, and the reasons for them — for example by taking notes on the backs of the cards and placing them in stacks for each nominated player.*
6. *Facilitator, choose one player across the circle from you. Starting with them, and going around the circle, ask each player: “**You nominated [name]; do you want to change your nomination? Why or why not?**” This gives the group an opportunity to align with each other's reasoning. Continue tracking these changes. Include yourself.*

CONTINUED ON NEXT PAGE...

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APPRECIATIVE CHOOSING CONTINUED...

7. *Facilitator, choose one player to suggest as the storyteller. Name that person aloud: “**I suggest that [name] be our storyteller,**” and ask a person beside them in the circle: “**Do you know any reason why having [name] as our storyteller would get in the way of our purpose in playing this game together today?**”*
 - a. *Continue around the circle away from the player you’re suggesting, asking each player that same question. Ask the suggested player last. If they express any hesitation about sharing their story with the group, treat that as a possible objection; invite them to consider sharing their stories another time. The concern here is that pressuring someone into revealing their vulnerable stories goes directly against the intention of this game to support people in their autonomy.*
 - b. *Note if any player says “yes” — you’ll come back to hear from them about it later.*
 - c. *After going all the way around the circle, ask the players who had objections: “**Can you describe your concern in terms of what we’re here together for today?**”*
8. *If there were concerns expressed in step 7, integrate them and repeat step 7 until you suggest a storyteller and get no objections. Then...*
9. **Congratulations! [Name] is our storyteller.**

END NOTES

DESIGNER'S NOTES

My initial goal in developing this game was to use conscious touch and expressive movement to bring attention to (and evoke empathy for) the experiences of people and groups whose voices and perspectives have been unheard, overlooked, or otherwise ignored. Being aware that my own stories and beliefs about those experiences would necessarily permeate anything I might make on the subject, and wishing (as is my bias) to both celebrate and make space for others' unique discoveries and expression in this area, I chose to make a game that invites people to reflect on the ways in which they've experienced these things themselves. At first I thought of this as being primarily a variant on Playback Theater and Theater of the Oppressed — which it definitely still is — but it has become much more than that. It has become a way to share some of the methods I've used (and continue to use) to heal my own experiences of childhood sexual, physical, and emotional abuse. In that spirit I intend to make a space in which we can reframe, and make new stories about, our own traumatic experiences. My hope is that the stories people make together with this game will be ones that help us all along the healing journey by connecting us with each other and opening us to our creative power.

LUDOGRAPHY

This game started out as a simple variant of Playback Theater. I added simultaneous performance-and-narration (both to speed things up and to create another layer of feedback between the teller and the players), the flow coach (to help the storyteller be present in the moment of sharing potentially challenging material), and an element of touch (as a support for both presence and empathy). Then I added warmups (to set a context of playful movement and appreciation), safety mechanisms (for, y'know, safety), Palette (because some playtesters were surprised about the tone of the game), and the storyteller-selection process (because it helps us get to know each other better, share the spotlight, and encounter and resolve important concerns together that we might not otherwise). It may have been a fellow Game Gardener who suggested that people tell their stories as they wish they'd happened. I saw an opportunity to borrow from Theater of the Oppressed — but instead of having just anyone meddle with the story, I would focus on empowering the storyteller. And that's when I recognized that I'd just recapitulated my own healing process: when I've told enough alternate versions of a story, I draw out new lessons and elevate

them, reclaiming my power and putting the details of the past at my service rather than holding them above me. Which story is “real” is arguable; what matters to me is that we create stories that serve our liberation.

This game, and my whole development process, was strongly influenced by the games, exercises, and other playful work of my friends, mentors, and colleagues Drs Kathlyn and Gay Hendricks (www.hendricks.com). Two of the warmups (creative joint play, art appreciation) are drawn directly from their work. And my language, in this game as elsewhere, is strongly influenced by the years I’ve spent collaborating with them and with our larger community of conscious leaders, somatic psychotherapists, coaches, mentors, and facilitators.

This game borrows its Palette mechanism—one of my favorite tone-setting tools—directly from *Microscope* (pg 13), published by Lame Mage Productions (www.lamemage.com).

The Appreciative Choosing minigame is a variant of a process drawn directly from Sociocracy (www.sociocracy.com).

OTHER NOTES

You can learn more about Creative Joint Play from this video made by Kathlyn Hendricks at <http://www.hendricks.com/uncategorized/creative-joint-play-video/>.

ABOUT THE DESIGNER

An imaginative, queer, and socially awkward Quaker farmkid from Vermont, Venn “grew up” to become a systems geek and a game designer. Along the way: improv theater nerd, community organizer, Reddie mathematician, progressive political activist, Democratic Party Chair, chocolatier, business consultant, and angel investor.

THANKS

If my partner had not told me to go play games for a month, I might not have found Games to Gather, jumped into facilitating a game one night, and realized that I needed to turn my custom playset into a full-fledged game (still in progress; it got back-burner treatment when the Golden Cobra came to my attention). So thanks, Suz, for pushing me to pursue what gives me joy—and thanks to all the folks who joined in creating playful and welcoming space at Games to Gather, where I experienced such ease doing this thing I love.

Thanks again to the Games to Gather organizers, for pushing the Game Garden crew to participate in the 2015 Golden Cobra game design contest. I would not otherwise have known this beautiful thing existed, and probably wouldn't have made this particular game.

Thanks also to my fellow Game Gardeners, for designing, making, playtesting, and editing games together with me. It's been a fun ride this month, and I'm excited to think we'll keep on making games together.

Thanks again to Suz, for laying out and creating the visual design of this game and for providing your genius editorial insight. I consider myself fortunate that we play so well together in this way, crafting text that communicates effectively.

And of course, thanks to Nate, Henry, Charlie, and Gid. You motivate and inspire me.

PLAYTESTING & FEEDBACK

**Josi-Lyn Dulaney • Halley Farwood • Jason Giardino • Susan Gillespie • Tim Hutchings
Ben Kaser • Emily Lapham • Jefferson Lee • Jordan Marshak • Reno Nims • Jessie Rainbow
Michael Rude • Shawn Stokes • Tayler Stokes • Jay Sylvano • Nathaniel Whitestone**



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FOR ONGOING PLAYTESTS

PLAYTEST QUESTIONS FOR PLAYERS

- Do you feel more or less connected after playing? To yourself? To others?
- What else did you get out of playing?
- Was anything surprising to you?
- Would you want to play this game again? If so, with whom? If not, what would stop you?
- What variants would you be interested in trying? How might that be different?

PLAYTEST QUESTIONS FOR OBSERVER/DESIGNER/FACILITATOR

- What questions do people consistently have about the Storyteller? (Other roles?)
- What do players tend to find confusing, if anything? Where do they get stuck?