



Gabardine: A Game for One to Six Assholes at a Party
by Jonathan G Cook

Acknowledgements

This game owes a great deal to other people. First, Avery McDaldno. The main mechanic of the game is stolen from his brilliant map-making game, The Quiet Year, where it works much better. It would be fair to call this game a hack of The Quiet Year, that is how much it owes that game. Second, and similarly, Ben Robbins. The *Light* version of the game steals a lot of ideas and advice from his equally brilliant Microscope. As these are my two favorite games at the moment, this is probably not surprising. Gabardine, for better or worse, would not exist with out those two predecessors (and the whole gaming tradition they are a part of, of course).

Also thanks to Tiffany Parrott and Ronald Russ for their suggestions and advice on an earlier draft, and thanks to the encouragement of Elizabeth Delaere, Emily Owens, Mark Ulissi, and everyone from the Mercurial Society and my incredible family. Y'all are awesome.

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(Shh, don't tell anyone, but there are two super-secret bonus playsets on pages 29 and 33, respectively.)

Introduction

This is a game about imagining the lives of other people: specifically, the other people who are surrounding us, wherever we are. The text of this game presumes we are at a party, but we might be at a restaurant or a board game convention or a conference on Cold Fusion. It doesn't matter, they are them and we are us. Or maybe we are just you. But probably me, too.

The way this game works is that you draw a card from a specially prepared deck and use it to look up a question on a list (the list is called a playset). You then look around at "them," and you answer the question as best you can. Maybe one of our fellow assholes will add a detail or two. Eventually we will have made a few little stories about the strangers around us, and then the game will push you into their stories and it will all dissolve into a puff of smoke.

Because you can't be an asshole forever.

To play this game, you'll need a deck of cards. You'll need at least one person who has read the rules all the way through, and between zero and five other people. And you'll need a copy of a playset. This game comes with a couple different sample playsets for you to print out. Either the person who convinces everyone else to play should choose the playset, or the group as a whole should decide. There is a little discussion at the end about how to write your own playset, as well as a couple alternate rules and ways to play.

How to Play

Before play begins, separate your cards into four different decks by suit. Take out the jokers, if there are any. Shuffle those four smaller decks, and lay them somewhere face-down, side-by-side, in this order: Diamonds, Spades, Clubs, Hearts.

If some of you don't know how to play, someone who does should say something like this:

"This is a game about imagining we know what the fuck is going on with all these assholes." (Here you might gesture at all the fuckers surrounding you, if you can do it without drawing attention.) "We will take turns drawing cards from this deck, looking up the questions that correspond with that card and then look around and answer the question out loud. Each turn should take one or two minutes. At the end of the turn we put our card on the discard pile.

"You can, and should, try to add a little humanizing detail to other asshole's answers when they have finished talking. If you do it at least once but no more than twice in a go-round, you can draw two cards and pick the one you like best on your next turn. Put the one you don't pick on the bottom of the deck.

"We'll go around twice for each deck, so that we will each answer two questions from the suit of Diamonds, two from Clubs, and so on.

"The questions from Hearts aren't really questions, but challenges. We will each draw two immediately and pick the one we like best. You have to do that one, but you can do both. Once we understand our challenges we disperse to do them. Maybe later we'll talk about what happened. After the party."

That's all the rules, really. You could probably tighten it up a bit.

Oh, and if you're the only one playing: draw four cards instead of two from Diamonds, Clubs and Spades. And maybe keep your answers to yourself.

Advice

Don't be too loud or obvious. We aren't bullies and we aren't the popular kids, passing down judgment from on high. We are the assholes hanging out by the stairs, or hiding in the kitchen, pretending that we belong. You don't think you really do, though. Maybe with the assholes you're playing the game with, kind of. But you don't belong at this party.

You are, however, actually curious. What are these people like? What's their real story? How do they move so effortlessly from one room to another, or if they don't, why not?

Don't rely on stereotypes, or cheap and easy inversions of those stereotypes (tropes and cliches are probably okay, tho). Look deeper. Watch their eyes, the way they move their hands, their shoulders, their feet. Who they laugh with, who they laugh at, who they move close to, who they avoid. Don't only look at people you would like to have sex with. Don't only look at people you wouldn't. Don't think about having sex with these people at all. Don't stare. Stop.

Always remember that they might be looking back at you. Be careful, lest her bowtie is really a camera.

Most of the heart challenges ask you to go and interact with "them." Be alert to their body language and their actual language, as well as the context. This is a part of the game that might not work so well at a restaurant, for example. People might have lots of different reasons for not wanting to interact with you. Don't take it personal, and respect their desires, okay?

At the same time, don't let fear keep you from reaching out. Be gentle and kind- yes, but be brave too. You should probably say something like that previous paragraph when you're explaining the rules, come to think of it.

Another thing: it's perfectly legal, even recommended to enlist one of your fellow assholes to help you complete your heart challenge. Two or three people can paradoxically be less scary or intimidating than just one, and the challenges that require you to act out a conversation or a scene are assuming you have someone help. Though, if you're by yourself, you can always have a pretend phone conversation.



Playsets

Here are a few playsets. They are provisionally titled "Eleanor Rigby," "More and Less Than Human" (which is about monsters), and "A Tryst In The Greenery" (which is about spies and conspiracies). Print one out to play with. They follow a pretty simple formula, so when you're ready, read the sections about how to write your own, or even better, how to come up with one on the fly with your asshole friends.

Eleanor Rigby



Diamonds

Everyone is only stardust, sure, but that doesn't mean they aren't special. Give them names, give them lives. Imagine what it's like to be them.

Ace- Find the loneliest person in the room. What is their name? Where do they come from?

Two- Find a professional. What is their name? What is their job? Are they good or bad at it?

Three- Find someone who has a difficult relationship with a family member. What is their name? Why is the relationship difficult?

Four- Find someone who is not supposed to be here. What is their name? Where should they be and/or why not here?

Five- Find someone who is waiting. What is their name? What are they waiting for?

Six- Find someone who wants to leave. What is their name? Why can't they just go?

Seven- Find two people with a strained or problematic relationship. What are their names? What happened between them?

Eight- Find someone who seems to belong here. What is their name? What is their secret ambition?

Nine- Find a couple. What are their names? How long have they been together? How did they meet? What is their relationship like?

Ten- Find two people in conversation out of earshot. You and one of the assholes next to you re-imagine their conversation. Give each other names and spell out the nature of your relationship.

Jack- Find someone who is silently judging the people they are with. What is their name? What do they think about their companions? Are they wrong?

Queen- Find someone who everyone respects. What is their name? What do they wish everyone else would do or know?

King- Find someone who is no longer welcome. What is their name? Who did they betray?



Dig a little deeper. Wherever you can, apply these questions to the Diamonds you named, bringing in others as needed.

Ace- The loneliest one is working up their nerve to talk to someone. Who, and what is the conversation they are imagining?

Two- One or more of them is having a conversation. You and as many others as there are- what are they saying?

Three- One of them seems lonely. Who do they wish was here?

Four- One of them seems happy. What are they trying to hide?

Five- One of them seems sad. What do they miss?

Six- Which two are secretly in love?

Seven- Which two despise each other?

Eight- Which of them is scared? Why?

Nine- Which one of them wants something from which other one? Why can't they have it?

Ten- One of them is thinking very differently from how they are acting. Narrate their internal monologue.

Jack- One of them has had just about enough. What would push them over the edge, and what would they do?

Queen- One of them is guilty. What did they do, and how do they hope to fix it?

King- One of them knows a secret and is dying to let it out. Who is revealing it going to hurt the worst?



Clubs

When the chips are down, what's gonna happen? How do their stories end?

Ace- Where are they going to go after they leave?

Two- Who could get what they want easier than they think?

Three- What are the unexpected consequences of their plan?

Four- Who is gonna get hurt?

Five- Who is gonna hurt someone else?

Six- Who deserves better than what they'll get?

Seven- Who deserves worse than what they'll get?

Eight- Who is gonna get exactly what they deserve?

Nine- What is coming that no-one is expecting?

Ten- Who's gonna change their mind?

Jack- What is gonna come back to haunt them?

Queen- Who is going to come to their rescue?

King- Who is never going to be able to say the thing they need to say?



Hearts

You can fall in love easier with an imagined someone than a real person, but you can only actually love someone who is flesh and blood and snot and arrogance and foolishness and resentment.

Ace- Talk to someone who seems out of place or uncomfortable. Without being pushy or patronizing, try to make them feel safe and interesting.

Two- Take on roles implied but not assigned to any of them. Have a conversation where "interested" parties could overhear you.

Three- Do something dumb or silly that you think might make a "sad" person smile.

Four- Engage at least two of them in conversation. Find out at least two facts that contradict the stories you made up about them.

Five- Engage at least one of them in conversation. Find out something that they have in common with the person you pretended they were.

Six- Tell one of them a story from the game, in any context that's comfortable to you.

Seven- Confess to at least one of them about the game you played.

Eight- Engage at least one of them in conversation. Find out two things you have in common with them.

Nine- Engage at least one of them in conversation. Find out something about them that you admire or envy.

Ten- Take on the roles of one or more of them. Without mocking or doing an impression, have a conversation as "them" where they could overhear you.

Jack- Talk to one of them that you think won't like you. Try to make them laugh.

Queen- Give someone you don't know a gift of some sort.

King- Tell someone you don't know a secret, and without being weird or pushy, try to get them to tell you one, too. If they do, keep it.

More and Less Than Human



Diamonds

All humans are basically alike, but every monster is monstrous in its own particular fashion.

Ace- Find the vampire. What is their name? How old are they? Why are they here?

Two- Find a monster hunter. What is their name? What are they hunting? Are they good or bad at it?

Three- Find someone who has a difficult relationship with a family member. What is their name? Why is the relationship difficult?

Four- Find someone who is not allowed to be here. What is their name? Where should they be and/or why not here?

Five- Find someone who is biding their time. What is their name? What are they waiting for?

Six- Find someone who wants to escape. What is their name? Why can't they just go?

Seven- Find two people with a strained or problematic past. What are their names? What is their shared trauma?

Eight- Find someone who seems to belong here. What is their name? What is their secret ambition?

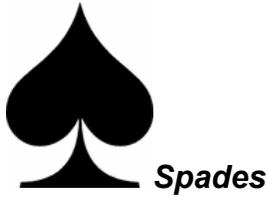
Nine- Find a couple. What are their names? How long have they been together? How did they meet? What is their relationship like?

Ten- Find two people in conversation out of earshot. You and one of the assholes next to you re-imagine their conversation. Give each other names and spell out the nature of your relationship.

Jack- Find the were-creature. What is their name? What is their bestial form? How did they become what they are?

Queen- Find the magic-user. What is their name? How did they acquire their powers? What is their aim?

King- Find the ghost. What is their name? Who are they haunting? What unfinished business do they have?



Uncover what's buried. Wherever you can, apply these questions to the Diamonds you named, bringing in others as needed.

Ace- Who does the vampire want?

Two- One or more of them is having a conversation. You and as many others as there are- what are they saying?

Three- One of them seems lonely. Who do they wish was here?

Four- One of them seems happy. What are they trying to hide?

Five- One of them seems sad. What do they miss?

Six- Which two are secretly in love?

Seven- Which two despise each other?

Eight- Which of them is scared? Why?

Nine- Which one of them wants something from which other one? Why can't they have it?

Ten- One of them is thinking very differently from how they are acting. Narrate their internal monologue.

Jack- Who is attracted to the Beast?

Queen- What sort of a deal are they contemplating, and with who?

King- Why can't they help the ghost move on?



Clubs

Pitchforks and flames.

Ace- How can they break the pattern?

Two- Who could get what they want easier than they think?

Three- What are the unexpected consequences of their plan?

Four- Who is gonna get hurt?

Five- Who is gonna hurt someone else?

Six- Who deserves better than what they'll get?

Seven- Who deserves worse than what they'll get?

Eight- Who is gonna get exactly what they deserve?

Nine- What is coming that no-one is expecting?

Ten- Who's gonna change their mind?

Jack- How can they reconcile the two parts of themselves?

Queen- What will it cost?

King- How will it finally get fixed?



Hearts

They're only human, after all.

Ace- Confess an addiction, and try to get one of them to confess theirs.

Two- Make yourself a perfect victim. Have a conversation where "interested" parties could overhear you.

Three- Do something dumb or silly that you think might make a "serious" person smile.

Four- Engage at least two of them in conversation. Find out at least two facts that contradict the stories you made up about them.

Five- Engage at least one of them in conversation. Find out something that they have in common with the person you pretended they were.

Six- Tell one of them a story from the game, in any context that's comfortable to you.

Seven- Confess to at least one of them about the game you played.

Eight- Engage at least one of them in conversation. Find out two things you have in common with them.

Nine- Engage at least one of them in conversation. Find out something about them that you admire or envy.

Ten- Take on the roles of one or more of the monsters. Without mocking or doing an impression, have a conversation as "them" where they could overhear you.

Jack- Do something you want to do, but would normally be too embarrassed to try.

Queen- Ask someone you don't know to do you a favor.

King- Forgive someone who has wronged you, and tell someone about it.

A Tryst In The Greenery



Diamonds

Who are the people who are keeping the secrets?

Ace- Find someone with a license to kill. What is their name? Who should be afraid of them?

Two- Find someone with a responsibility. What is their name? What is their responsibility? Who or what is trying to get them to not keep it?

Three- Find someone who has a difficult relationship with a family member. What is their name? Why is the relationship difficult?

Four- Find someone who is pretending to be someone they are not. What is their real and fake names? Who are they trying to fool?

Five- Find someone who is waiting. What is their name? What are they waiting for?

Six- Find someone who is here under duress. What is their name? Why can't they just go?

Seven- Find two people with a strained history. What are their names? Which one of them screwed up?

Eight- Find someone who seems to belong here. What is their name? What is their secret ambition?

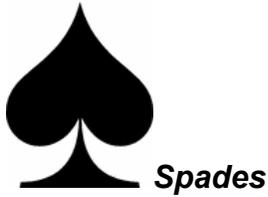
Nine- Find a couple. What are their names? How long have they been together? How did they meet? What is their relationship like?

Ten- Find two people in conversation out of earshot. You and one of the assholes next to you re-imagine their conversation. Give each other names and spell out the nature of your relationship.

Jack- Find the person with the most power. What is their name? What form does their power take, and what are its limitations?

Queen- Find the person with the most to lose. What is their name? What should they be on the look out for?

King- Find the person who knows the most about what's really happening. What is their name? What developments are they keeping an eye on?



Once you've stolen the microfilm, you need to find a microfilm reader. Wherever you can, apply these questions to the Diamonds you named, bringing in others as needed.

Ace- What could make them kill, right here, right now? Who is in the most danger?

Two- One or more of them is having a conversation. You and as many others as there are- what are they saying?

Three- One of them seems lonely. Who is preying on them?

Four- One of them seems happy. What are they trying to hide?

Five- One of them seems sad. What do they miss?

Six- Which two are secretly in love?

Seven- Which two despise each other?

Eight- Which of them is the most scared? Why?

Nine- Which one of them wants something from which other one? Why can't they convince them?

Ten- One of them is thinking very differently from how they are acting. Narrate their internal monologue.

Jack- What isn't going according to plan?

Queen- Whose plan is working perfectly?

King- Who just put it all together?



Clubs

Escape, or the gulag?

Ace- Who is going to die that shouldn't?

Two- Who could get what they want easier than they think?

Three- What are the unexpected consequences of their plan?

Four- Who is gonna get hurt?

Five- Who is gonna hurt someone else?

Six- Who deserves better than what they'll get?

Seven- Who deserves worse than what they'll get?

Eight- Who is gonna get exactly what they deserve?

Nine- What is coming that no-one is expecting?

Ten- Who's gonna change their mind?

Jack- What will they do when they lose everything?

Queen- How can they avoid the danger?

King- What important thing did they miss?



Hearts

Say hello to Valerie Plame.

Ace- Talk about something that makes you angry with someone you don't know, but keep your temper.

Two- Make up a secret their pretend selves would want to know. Talk about it where "they" could overhear you.

Three- Do something dumb or silly that you think might make a "serious" person smile.

Four- Engage at least two of them in conversation. Find out at least two facts that contradict the stories you made up about them.

Five- Engage at least one of them in conversation. Find out something that they have in common with the person you pretended they were.

Six- Tell one of them a story from the game, in any context that's comfortable to you.

Seven- Confess to at least one of them about the game you played.

Eight- Engage at least one of them in conversation. Find out two things you have in common with them.

Nine- Engage at least one of them in conversation. Find out something about them that you admire or envy.

Ten- Take on the roles of one or more of them. Without mocking or doing an impression, have a conversation as "them" where they or their enemies could overhear you.

Jack- Tell a secret to a stranger, and without being obnoxious, try to get them to tell you one.

Queen- Engage at least two of them in conversation. Try to find out something about them that surprises you.

King- Engage at least two of them in conversation, and introduce them (either to each other or to someone else you know and think they might like).

Alternate Rules Suggestion # 1- Gabardine Light

So we are at a party with at least a couple other assholes and we want to play Gabardine, but we don't have a deck of cards, or a playset? Here's a procedure to see us through.

Choose a start player. They will pick out somebody, signify who they have picked out through subtle gestures or description and ask the player to their left: "What's their name?"

Player to the left answers and asks the player to *their* left a follow-up question, something like "What's their job?" or "Why do they hate their brother?". Any of the questions you might have seen in a Diamond oracle would work, but feel free to introduce new elements in your question, to ask extremely leading questions, or to try to stump the next player.

One good strategy is to introduce contrasts, paradoxes, or complexities. A good question format is "Why [this] despite [that]?" For example, "Why is she so afraid since she acquired the gem of invulnerability?," "Why does he still want to be a librarian despite the fact he spends his weekends burning books?," or "Why is he so happy since his husband left, his dog died and he got fired from his job?"

When there are no more players to the left, the question is posed to the start player. If, after answering, they are interested in asking more questions, they can pose a follow-up question to the player on their left, and the whole thing can go around once more, ending on the start player. The player to their left then becomes the new start player and the process begins anew.

Every player should be the start player at least once. Every one of "them" who gets a second round of questions (at the start player's discretion) must be linked to one or more of the previous subjects. That means at some point during a second round, someone is required to ask something like "Why did they break up with the librarian?" or "Who are they blackmailing?" or "What do they think about Flannel Guy?" You want to create a web of relationships and connections between "them."

When every player has been the start player one or two times (decide before you begin the game), then each of us will ask a crisis question to the player on their right, starting with the last player to be "Start" and ending with the original "Start" player.

Crisis questions look like the kinds of questions in the Clubs oracles, and are about how "their" stories should or could end. Things like "What are they gonna do when the wolf comes home?" or "Will they be able to give up the thing they love?" or "What is gonna change their clothes?"

After the crisis questions are answered, then go talk to some of them. Find out ways they are and aren't like the stories you made up, and then find out what's really cool about them. Enjoy the party.

Alternate Rules Suggestions #2- Four Feathering Out of Heart Challenges

There are definitely times and places where Heart challenges won't really work. If we're laughing on the bus, playing games with the faces, it's probably not socially acceptable for us to disperse and strike up conversations with the other riders. And for some players coping with certain kinds of social anxieties, Heart challenges are simply not gonna be fun or edifying, but merely an exercise in frustration. So here are some options:

First, the Darwinian option: Only assholes who complete a heart challenge have won Gabardine. Everyone else loses. But who cares? It's just a game.

Next, the Substitution option: Anyone who doesn't complete a Heart challenge is expected to complete a good deed in the next week. Good deeds might be baking some cookies for your coworkers, helping a buddy move their couch, volunteering at a soup kitchen for a couple hours, giving a stranger an unexpected gift, or politely telling someone who is talking in a theater to shut up.

Finally, the civilized option: Just agree, as a group, that we get the fucking point of the exercise and are adults and we don't actually have to go through with it to understand that people are richer and more interesting and complex and awful and real than the stories we come up with. Cowards.

How to Write or Improvise Your Own Playset

If you wasted the time to read all of the playsets from before, you may have noticed a pattern. The deuce through ten of each suit stay basically consistent from set to set, with only the face cards changing to suit the premise of the set, and maybe a few detail questions added to the numerical cards.

This makes it easy to write your own. Just take the Default playset provided below, fill in the blank spaces, and maybe add some details to a few of the others.

You could even start the game by passing around the blank oracles, taking turns filling in the blanks or altering the numerical questions, until everything is filled out and everyone is satisfied.

Questions should have enough specifics to give the answerer something to riff on, but be open enough to apply to a wide variety of people and be interpreted in many different ways. They should not proscribe answers. Rule of Thumb: *Who* and *What* and *Where* and *When* are best in Diamonds, *Why* is best in Spades, *Why* and *How* are best in Clubs. Remember that Heart challenges are not meant to embarrass or humiliate (either the asshole doing it or "them"), but are all about the fiction (and fictional themes) intersecting with reality and either making friends, being kind, or sating curiosity.

Default Playset



Diamonds

I need names, people! Also problems, pasts, secrets, desires!

Ace-

Two- Find a professional. What is their name? What is their job? Are they good or bad at it?

Three- Find someone who has a difficult relationship with a family member. What is their name? Why is the relationship difficult?

Four- Find someone who is not supposed to be here. What is their name? Where should they be and/or why not here?

Five- Find someone who is waiting. What is their name? What are they waiting for?

Six- Find someone who wants to leave. What is their name? Why can't they just go?

Seven- Find two people with a strained or problematic relationship. What are their names? What happened between them?

Eight- Find someone who seems to belong here. What is their name? What is their secret ambition?

Nine- Find a couple. What are their names? How long have they been together? How did they meet? What is their relationship like?

Ten- Find two people in conversation out of earshot. You and one of the assholes next to you re-imagine their conversation. Give each other names and spell out the nature of your relationship.

Jack-

Queen-

King-



Dig a little deeper. Wherever you can, apply these questions to the Diamonds you named, bringing in others as needed.

Ace-

Two- One or more of them is having a conversation. You and as many others as there are- what are they saying?

Three- One of them seems lonely. Who do they wish was here?

Four- One of them seems happy. What are they trying to hide?

Five- One of them seems sad. What do they miss?

Six- Which two are secretly in love?

Seven- Which two despise each other?

Eight- Which of them is scared? Why?

Nine- Which one of them wants something from which other one? Why can't they have it?

Ten- One of them is thinking very differently from how they are acting. Narrate their internal monologue.

Jack-

Queen-

King-



Clubs

Move rapidly to crisis. How do the stories end?

Ace-

Two- Who could get what they want easier than they think?

Three- What are the unexpected consequences of their plan?

Four- Who is gonna get hurt?

Five- Who is gonna hurt someone else?

Six- Who deserves better than what they'll get?

Seven- Who deserves worse than what they'll get?

Eight- Who is gonna get exactly what they deserve?

Nine- What is coming that no-one is expecting?

Ten- Who's gonna change their mind?

Jack-

Queen-

King-



Hearts

The difference between a cow and a bean is a bean can begin an adventure!

Ace-

Two- Take on roles implied but not assigned to any of them. Have a conversation where "interested" parties could overhear you.

Three- Do something dumb or silly that you think might make a "sad" person smile.

Four- Engage at least two of them in conversation. Find out at least two facts that contradict the stories you made up about them.

Five- Engage at least one of them in conversation. Find out something that they have in common with the person you pretended they were.

Six- Tell one of them a story from the game, in any context that's comfortable to you.

Seven- Confess to at least one of them about the game you played.

Eight- Engage at least one of them in conversation. Find out two things you have in common with them.

Nine- Engage at least one of them in conversation. Find out something about them that you admire or envy.

Ten- Take on the roles of one or more of them. Without mocking or doing an impression, have a conversation as "them" where they could overhear you.

Jack-

Queen-

King-

A Brief Example of Play

Andy, Sam, and Kris are at a big party. They don't know many people there and are mostly hanging by themselves on a couch in a corner. Kris remembers that she has Gabardine with her, and suggests they play. Andy and Sam are up for it, and Kris explains the rules. They decide to play the Eleanor Rigby playset.

Since she knows the game the best, Kris decides to go first.

Kris draws the Five of Diamonds. She looks around and sees a guy with a mohawk who glances anxiously down at his cell phone every couple minutes. She nods slightly in his direction and the others glance (making an effort not to stare).

K: His name is Charles Finney the Third. He is expecting a telephone call from his father's business partner. His dad is a successful manufacturer, who everyone calls Junior. He manufactures, um, a couple parts that are used in most modern washing machines. His dad wanted him to go into the family business, but he wants to be, uh....

Sam notices Kris is having trouble and makes a suggestion.

S: A sculptor?

K: Yes, exactly. He makes huge conceptual works like Christo. His dad is refusing to fund his planned major debut, a gigantic one-way mirror along an old section of the Berlin Wall. Junior's unscrupulous business partner, Jill Sucrose, heard about it and offered to bankroll the project if Charles would exercise his voting rights on the shares that his Dad put in his name partly as a tax dodge and partly as incentive to get involved in the business. Jill is working with Maytag to do a hostile takeover. He signed over his proxy vote to her, and he's waiting to find out what happened at the board meeting when Junior finds out.

A: Ha, awesome. Also, Jill is having an affair with Junior's third wife. Charles just found out, and isn't sure what to do about it.

K: Damn. Yeah. That Jill, shoo.

Because Andy offered that detail and Kris accepted it, she will be able to draw two cards on her next turn and choose the one she likes best.

It's Sam's turn next. He draws the King of Diamonds. He looks around and sees an older lady who is dominating a conversation with three other people.

S: The lady over there, with the red jacket. Her name is Maria Century. She is an art dealer, and she got famous for working with an artist named Franklin Charm. Her dedicated advocacy for his work propelled him to fame and made them both a lot of money. She's now something

of a gate-keeper in the gallery world, a taste-maker. But Franklin got addicted to heroin, and was busted a couple days ago by the police. Everyone knows it was Maria who informed on him. What they don't know is that she's been pleading with him to get help for months, that she knows he owes some money to some dangerous people, that this was the only way she could see to get him safe. As safe as she could manage, anyway. She loves him like a son, she is genuinely moved by his genius. But it's soured a lot of artists on her. Tonight, she can feel the mood in the room, she can feel her power slipping. A lot of the top guys in here are snubbing her, and the up-and-comers aren't sucking up to her as hard as they usually would.

K: Poor Maria. I think she has some of the new stuff that Frank was working on before he got busted, that he's asked her to show it to raise money for him. She knows it's his best work, but she has misgivings about appearing to profit from his incarceration and about how he'll spend the money if he gets out.

A: Yeah, and she is talking to Charles over there about putting on his first showing, but only if he gets the funding from his Dad or whoever. But Charles is being courted by some other players.

S: Poor Maria.

Kris and Andy both will get to draw two cards on their next turns, but Andy doesn't get to draw a third. And if there was another player before her and Andy added a detail after their story, she would void her right to draw that second card, because you can only add details twice per round.

It's now Andy's turn. She draws the Ten of Diamonds and the Ace of Diamonds. She sees a woman in her late thirties, talking with a younger man who appears to be her husband over by the finger food, and decides the Ten would be fun. She places the Ace on the bottom of the deck.

A: The hungry couple. Kris, will you be the guy?

K: Sure. "Why did we come to this party again, Amelia?"

A: "Oh, Bernard. The food is excellent. Just have a good time."

K: *(noticing "Bernard" gesturing to a bald man with glasses)* "Wait, Terry is here? Your old agent? Is that why you insisted we come see all these tedious people? I thought you said you were done with acting."

A: "God, Bernie, you're so paranoid. I had no idea that Terrence was going to come to this. But, listen, the business is taking off, you could afford to hire a real accountant now. And I heard that there is this hip new soap opera that's gonna be filming in town, it's about like, betrayal in the age of social media, all very up-to-date modern of-the-now stuff."

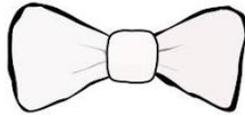
K: "Yeah, clearly I'm being paranoid about this. Whatever, I'm sure they want to hire a 39-year-old for the part of some pretty kid getting catfished."

A: (*gasps, pauses*) "You're a real asshole, Bernie."

S: Yeesh. I hope Bernie's not normally like that. I think he's just under a lot of stress. Oh! He just found out that Maytag is passing on his new washing machine control system, because they're buying their old supplier.

A: Awesome. That's why he's being all sulky and weird, he hasn't had the guts to tell Amelia yet.

It's now Kris' turn again. They will each draw one more card from Diamonds before moving on to spades, clubs and hearts.



Author's Notes

You probably've already played a version of this game before, if you've ever even once sat and watched people. Formalizing the rules of this almost universal game was partly inspired by misremembering the movie *Wonder Boys*. The title was inspired by the song "America" by Paul Simon. As stated in the acknowledgements, most of the mechanics are stolen from Avery McDaldno's amazing *The Quiet Year* or Ben Robbin's magnificent *Microscope*.

I don't know of any other formalized rules working in this space. I say this not as a claim of originality, but a plea of ignorance. If you know of other, similar games, please let me know about them.

There are a few easy ways to make the game better, probably. The most obvious is custom decks, so you don't have to refer back to the playsets. Ideally the cards could be modified with dry-erase markers, so you could make a default deck with blank face cards.

I haven't done nearly enough playtesting to know if this set of questions is really a good one. I'm worried there is too much overlap, or not enough. Trying out different questions is where I'd focus initial development if I took it any further. Maybe doing a choice of questions for most cards, *Quiet Year*-style.

I doubt there are a lot of conceivable contexts for actually playing this game with other people. I have found myself in at least a few situations and groups where I could imagine playing, but I wouldn't generally have the game at hand. I'm also not sure it really works for groups as big as six. Two or three is probably more comfortable, less attention-grabbing.

I don't think the game fits comfortably in the Freeform tradition as described in the rules of the Golden Cobra contest, mostly because of the lack of a strong starting situation, which typifies many of the designs in the tradition. I was obviously inspired by the competition and it meets the technical requirements. But I wouldn't blame the judges for disqualifying it on those grounds.

I have a few squicky feelings, worries even, about the game, as unlikely as it is to be played. Does it encourage voyeurism, distance, assholery, and projection? Probably. Hopefully, it also promotes empathy, imagination, kindness, and interaction. I guess it's mostly up to you now. Play responsibly, by which I mean: with love.

<3 -J

contact me at [amphigorist at gmail dot com](mailto:amphigorist@gmail.com) ***Dr. Light's Solution***



Diamonds

This is an after-party to a scientific conference, where Dr. Light has just announced a major scientific breakthrough. Find out what it is and how it affects the attendees.

Ace- Find Dr. Light. Why is he or she so frightened and depressed on this, their eve of triumph?

Two- Find a talented young scientist. What is their name? What have they been working on? How does the announcement affect them?

Three- Find someone who is related to Dr. Light. What is their name? Why is the relationship difficult?

Four- Find a journalist who is covering the announcement. What is their name? What big unanswered question are they snooping for the answer to?

Five- Find someone who is waiting. What is their name? What are they waiting for?

Six- Find Dr. Light's lab assistant. What is their name? Why don't they want to be here?

Seven- Find two people with a difficult or strained relationship. What are their names? What happened between them?

Eight- Find the person who organized this event. What is their name? What is their secret ambition?

Nine- Find a couple. What are their names? How long have they been together? How did they meet? What is their relationship like?

Ten- Find two people in conversation out of earshot. You and one of the assholes next to you re-imagine their conversation. Give each other names and spell out the nature of your relationship.

Jack- Find someone who is skeptical of Dr. Light's findings. What is their name? What do they suspect? Are they right or wrong?

Queen- Find someone who is going to benefit in a big way from this breakthrough. What is their name? How are they hoping to benefit? What are they worried about?

King- Find Dr. Light's lover. What is their name? What secret are they contemplating telling?



Mixed feelings all around. Wherever you can, apply these questions to the Diamonds you named, bringing in others as needed.

Ace- Who loses the most from this announcement?

Two- One or more of them is having a conversation. You and as many others as there are- what are they saying?

Three- One of them seems lonely. Who do they wish was here?

Four- One of them seems especially satisfied. What are they trying to hide?

Five- One of them seems confused. What do they see that no-one else is seeing?

Six- Which two are secretly in love?

Seven- Which two despise each other?

Eight- Which of them is scared? Why?

Nine- Which one of them wants something from which other one? Why can't they have it?

Ten- One of them is thinking very differently from how they are acting. Narrate their internal monologue.

Jack- Who cares the most about Dr. Light and why?

Queen- Who hates Dr. Light the most and why?

King- Who does Dr. Light care about the most and why?



Clubs

The Solution Revealed. How do the stories end?

Ace- What problem does Dr. Light believe he has the solution to? How is it different from the problem he actually has the solution to?

Two- Who could get what they want easier than they think?

Three- What are the unexpected consequences of their plan?

Four- Who is gonna get hurt?

Five- Who is gonna hurt someone else?

Six- Who deserves better than what they'll get?

Seven- Who deserves worse than what they'll get?

Eight- Who is gonna get exactly what they deserve?

Nine- What is coming that no-one is expecting?

Ten- Who's gonna change their mind?

Jack- Where and with who is Dr. Light going to end up?

Queen- Why won't this announcement be remembered in ten years?

King- Why will this announcement be remembered in ten years?



Hearts

Be the change you want to see in the world!

Ace- Have a conversation about technology with strangers. Find at least one person who is more optimistic about the future than you, and another who is less.

Two- Have a conversation about Dr. Light's research where "Dr. Light" could overhear you.

Three- Try to be the center of attention, just for a minute.

Four- Engage at least two of them in conversation. Find out at least two facts that contradict the stories you made up about them.

Five- Engage at least one of them in conversation. Find out something that they have in common with the person you pretended they were.

Six- Tell one of them a story from the game, in any context that's comfortable to you.

Seven- Confess to at least one of them about the game you played.

Eight- Engage at least one of them in conversation. Find out two things you have in common with them.

Nine- Engage at least one of them in conversation. Find out something about them that you admire or envy.

Ten- Take on the roles of one or more of them. Without mocking or doing an impression, have a conversation as "them" where they could overhear you.

Jack- Make a speech or a toast.

Queen- Find out something about a stranger that is worthy of congratulations, and congratulate them.

King- Find out someone's secret ambition and urge them to do it. Help them if you can.

One Bear, One Chord, One Minute



Diamonds

The Bear is coming, and soon. When he arrives, if the savage beast isn't soothed quickly, everyone is gonna pay the price.

Ace- Find the person who has the most to fear from the Bear. What is their name? Why should they be afraid?

Two- Find a musician. What is their name? What do they play? Are they good or bad at it?

Three- Find someone who has interacted with the Bear before. What is their name? What happened that time?

Four- Find someone who is not supposed to be here. What is their name? Where should they be and/or why not here?

Five- Find someone who is waiting for the Bear. What is their name? What are they hoping will happen?

Six- Find someone who wants to leave. What is their name? Why can't they just go?

Seven- Find two people with a strained or problematic relationship. What are their names? What happened between them?

Eight- Find someone who doesn't know the bear is coming. What is their name? Where will they run to?

Nine- Find a couple. What are their names? How long have they been together? How did they meet? What is their relationship like?

Ten- Find two people in conversation out of earshot. You and one of the assholes next to you re-imagine their conversation. Give each other names and spell out the nature of your relationship.

Jack- Find someone who could fight the Bear, if need be. What is their name? Why don't they want to?

Queen- Find someone who only wants to protect the Bear. What is their name? Why do they care?

King- Find the person most responsible for the Bear's imminent arrival. What is their name?



The minutes bind them as doom approaches in ursine form. Wherever you can, apply these questions to the Diamonds you named, bringing in others as needed.

Ace- One of them knows exactly what to do. Why will it be hard for them?

Two- One or more of them is having a conversation. You and as many others as there are- what are they saying?

Three- One of them seems lonely. Who do they wish was here?

Four- One of them seems happy. What are they trying to hide?

Five- One of them seems sad. What do they miss?

Six- Which two are secretly in love?

Seven- Which two despise each other?

Eight- Which of them is not scared? Why?

Nine- Which one of them wants something from which other one? Why can't they have it?

Ten- One of them is thinking very differently from how they are acting. Narrate their internal monologue.

Jack- Which of them is most likely to do the right thing for the wrong reasons?

Queen- Which of them is most likely to do the wrong thing for the right reasons?

King- What song could stop the Bear in his tracks?



Clubs

Mauling Time.

Ace- Who will the Bear kill before he can be stopped?

Two- Who could get what they want easier than they think?

Three- What are the unexpected consequences of their plan?

Four- Who is gonna get hurt?

Five- Who is gonna hurt someone else?

Six- Who deserves better than what they'll get?

Seven- Who deserves worse than what they'll get?

Eight- Who is gonna get exactly what they deserve?

Nine- What is coming that no-one is expecting?

Ten- Who's gonna change their mind?

Jack- Who is gonna step up?

Queen- How will the Bear get stopped for good?

King- What will happen to the Bear afterwards?



Hearts

Grin and Bear It!

Ace- Think about the person you would be least happy to see arrive here. Tell one of "them" a memory about that person, preferably a story that shows that person's good side.

Two- Drop the Bear's name in conversation with some of them. If questioned or challenged, raise your eyebrows and say nothing.

Three- Sing a kid's song where "they" can hear you. Preferably "The Bear In Tennis Shoes" or "The Ballad of Davy Crockett." Maybe "The Humphrey Hop" or "The Bear Necessities."

Four- Engage at least two of them in conversation. Find out at least two facts that contradict the stories you made up about them.

Five- Engage at least one of them in conversation. Find out something that they have in common with the person you pretended they were.

Six- Tell one of them a story from the game, in any context that's comfortable to you.

Seven- Confess to at least one of them about the game you played.

Eight- Engage at least one of them in conversation. Find out two things you have in common with them.

Nine- Engage at least one of them in conversation. Find out something about them that you admire or envy.

Ten- Take on the roles of one or more of them. Without mocking or doing an impression, have a conversation as "them" where they could overhear you.

Jack- Ask a couple of "them" if they've ever been in a fight, and what happened.

Queen- Without being obnoxious, try to get one of "them" to sing, either to you or with you.

King- Find the best hiding place here, and hide there for at least five minutes without being found.