

Love

ASHCAN
EDITION

& BARBED
WIRE



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France

Ashcan Edition

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This edition doesn't have final editing or layout. It is a free early edition.

Introduction

This is a letter writing game for two players which represents the correspondence between a soldier in world war 1 and their loved one back home. A deck of cards is used to guide the direction of your feelings that you express in the letters.

Background

The number of letters that flowed back and forth between the home front and the trenches is astonishing. In 1914 the British post office erected the largest wooden structure in the world as a mail depot. It covered five acres and employed thousands of post office workers. The fixed nature of trench warfare made it possible to efficiently deliver parcels and post.

The Game

In this game one player is the soldier in the trenches and the other is their lover, their wife or fiancé back home. Each player draws a set of five cards from a deck of playing cards. These are going to be used one at a time as prompts for each letter you write during the game. Hearts means a letter focuses on expressions of love. Diamonds means a letter focuses on things. Clubs means a letter focuses on fears and Spades means a letter focuses on death. The way this focus works will be described later.

Safety

I think that games which can help you feel emotions are powerful and engaging. However, it is important that the experience is fun for both people involved, and not upsetting. At any point, either of the players can choose to pause the game and take a break for any reason.

There are a number of other 'safety tools' which you could consider using, especially if you are playing with someone you don't know well. You may wish to check out the free "Consent in Gaming" resource by Monte Cook games <https://www.montecookgames.com/consent-in-gaming/> to help with this.

How To Play

Chose your nationality and name the lover and the soldier.

You may find it useful to decide how old they are, how long they have known each other, whether they are married or not, whether they have children or not.

Draw five cards each, and place them face down beside you. Look at the next card at the start of each chapter, but keep it private - don't show it to your partner until after they have read the letter (by which time it should be obvious).

There are five chapters. In each chapter you have five minutes to write a short letter to your loved one. You can use an egg timer or your phone. The time limit reflects the sense of urgency that existed and also keeps the span of the game manageable. You can refer to parcels of food or goods which are sent from the home front, and drawings which are sent from the front line or children back home.

Each letter should be informed by three things - the general theme of the chapter, the last letter you received from your lover and the playing card which you have drawn.

When both letters are written, they are exchanged and read out loud. You should read the letter sent from the lover before the letter sent by the soldier. You may wish to have the letter writer read the letter out loud, or have the letter receiver read it out loud.

Because you are writing simultaneously it is expected that letters may end up at cross purposes. Especially because each letter is simultaneously a response to the previous letter and influenced by the playing cards secretly drawn by the letter writer. The war was brutal and threw up terrible challenges to people on all sides.

Terminology

At the time of the war it was common for letter writers to use diminutives for each other that might seem infantilising to modern ears, but I encourage you to enter into the spirit of the times. It was common for men to call their lover names like kid, baby, baby girl, little wife, wifey, little thing, and so on. The women might call their lover names like my own darling, Darling Thing, old man, Sweetheart, Lovey, Little Husband, my only love, my life.

It was a very religious time, and people unashamedly referred to God and to prayers in their letters.

Chapters

Goodbye and good luck!

The enlisted men were sent for training and then shipped off to France. You probably said goodbye to each other at the train station. It was exciting with laughter as well as tears. After all, they would all be home by Christmas, or so they thought.

General theme: Optimism. The war isn't going to last long, all is going to be well.

Somewhere in France

It was forbidden to reveal your location, so it was common for soldiers to say that they were 'somewhere in France'. They might be on the front line, or behind the front line.

General theme: Settling in to the war in a foreign country. The letters tended to be a little upbeat or cheery, and thankfulness for presents or tokens that have been sent back and forth.

Separation and longing

As the war dragged on, the sense of longing grew more intense. Sometimes this led to more impassioned letters, at other times it led to more of a sense of desperation or sadness.

General theme: more intense emotions.

After the war we shall...

Sometimes the correspondents are daring to think about what the future might hold for them beyond the war. Are they hoping for marriage or children or just reunion? Or is one of them perhaps breaking things off because they see their future going in a different direction?

General theme: looking forward to the future.

Darkest days

For some reason the usual flow of letters have slowed. There is a big military push taking place, like Gallipoli, Passchendaele, Verdun or the Somme. This is the most dangerous time for the soldier. If they draw *any* black card, then they died in battle and the letter that comes back is a terse "killed in action" telegram or form letter. The story ends.

There is no specific theme. Allow yourself to be guided by the tenor of your letters up to this point.

The Lover's Cards

♥ **Hearts.** Write of love. Of how much you miss them. Of the features that you most adore and long for of their body or personality.

♦ **Diamonds.** Write of how wonderful they are, how much you approve of them and their choices and how they are holding up.

♣ **Clubs.** Write of your fears for them, and how you hope they will be kept safe.

♠ **Spades.** This is death of relationship. You are falling out of love with them. The second time it occurs you write your goodbye letter. The soldier will continue to write to you, but you no longer correspond.

The Soldier's Cards

♥ **Hearts.** Write of love. Of how much you miss them. Of the features that you most adore and long for of their body or personality

♦ **Diamonds.** Write of how wonderful your lover is, how much you approve of them and their choices and how they are holding up

♣ **Clubs.** Write of the horrors of war. The grimness, the sounds, the smells

♠ **Spades.** This is injury and death. If you are in darkest days, you are dead. Otherwise the first time you draw one you are seriously injured and write from hospital. The second time you draw one, you have died. If you die, pretend to write as normal to disguise the fact but you actually provide a terse 'killed in action' telegram or form letter.

Epilogue

This game can turn out very differently, depending upon how the cards fall out. The characters may have a reunion after the war and all that they hope of from 'after the war...' comes true. Or the soldier might have died, or the relationship might have ended.

Take a bit of time after the game to think about the characters which you have played. Talk together about some of the things you liked about the correspondence and some of the things that made you sad or gave you other feelings. Give yourselves an opportunity to step back from the characters.

Variants

Correspondence Play

The game can be played as actual correspondence, by email or on an internet discussion board or in some other way. In this case you don't need to have a time limit on writing. There will normally be a longer period between sending a letter and receiving a response.

In a correspondence game you will not normally be writing letters simultaneously, but you will be taking turns. In each chapter the lover should write first. The soldier upon receiving the letter draws their playing card and then writes their response. When the soldier's response has been read, the lover starts the next chapter.

In the situation where the lover has drawn their second spade, if there are any further chapters the soldier should still write but the lover just sends the phrase "no message" as a signal that the soldier should proceed again.

Spoken letters

When playing face to face (or over videoconferencing) you may wish to speak your letters rather than write them and then read them. Some people find that they can express things better with their voice than when writing. Additionally it gives the opportunity to put emotion and tone expressively in your spoken letter, which can be helpful.

If you play the game with spoken letters, then the game is sequential rather than simultaneous like Play by email above. In each chapter first the lover goes, and then the soldier replies. In order to maintain the cadence of letter writing the person who is speaking should not be interrupted; the responding letter should not be started until after the first speaker has 'signed off' their letter.

Alternative pairings

The rules are set out with the most common situation in mind — a male soldier and a woman lover back home. However, many women served in the Great War in non-combat roles near the front line as mechanics, nurses and doctors. On the Russian front many women served in combat roles too. So it is perfectly reasonable to have the 'front line' role played as a woman. It is also certainly the case that there were people in same-sex relationships; all letters were read by censors so they would have to be particularly careful about how they expressed their feelings.

Alternative death notes

In the standard game, a death at the front results in a terse telegram announcing the death. Sometimes there would be a personal letter sent from a commanding officer or colleague, and you may wish to additionally write a letter as of one of those people. Some soldiers wrote and kept on their body the letter that should be sent back should they die in combat. That is another appropriate variant which you can use.

Historical Information

World War 1 had some terribly bloody battles resulting from the technological advances in killing machines and the wartime strategies. If you want set your 'Darkest Days' letters at one of the most lethal battles, the following had some of the most terrible casualty figures.

Gorlice-Tarnów Offensive

2 May – June 1915 – 1,087,000 casualties

A major offensive by the Central Powers which caused the collapse of the Russian lines. The superior German artillery is credited as the major cause of victory.

First Battle of the Somme

1 July – 18 November 1916 – 1,113,000 casualties

A costly and largely unsuccessful Allied offensive on the Western Front.

Brusilov Offensive

June 4 – September 20, 1916 – 2,317,800 casualties

The largest and most successful Allied offensive of World War 1, at least partly as a response to French pleas during the siege of Verdun.

Primarily involved the Russian army against the Austro-Hungarian forces.

Third Battle of Ypres

31 July – 10 November 1917 – 857,100 casualties

Commonly known as Passchendaele.

Spring Offensive

21 March – 18 July 1918 – 1,539,715 casualties

Also known as the Kaiserschlacht/Ludendorff Offensive. A series of German attacks along the western front, in an attempt to defeat the allies before the United States could fully deploy their forces. The German forces gained ground through their stormtroopers, but it was of little strategic value and they suffered terrible losses.

Hundred Days Offensive

8 August – 11 November 1918 – 1,855,369 Casualties

The series of massive Allied offensives which ended the First World War. Beginning with the Battle of Amiens, the Allies pushed the Central Powers back, undoing their gains from the Spring Offensive.

Reading References

Love Letters of the Great War edited by Mandy Kirkby
(Others to come)

