

# ESOTERIC

A Collection of Secret Games

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by Jay Dragon  
edited by Abe Mendes  
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The games contained within this text are old. Not the oldest, but close, close enough that they remember when play was called ritual and games were called gods. *Esoteric* is a collection of games, sure, but it is also a secret. For, you see, to describe a moment is to trap it. To pass on a memory of a moment is to mock it, stripping it of life and transforming it into clumsy masks and half-truths. Some things can be remembered. But perhaps, not everything must be.

If your time spent playing *Esoteric* is a healthy one, and all goes well, then you should avoid describing your experiences to others or explaining what the game was like. It will be a secret, contained between the players, and it will die with your memory. Once you start playing, this rule is yours to follow for as long as you choose to continue playing.

This rule is like all other rules—it should be suspended in the name of safety. Speak of this game if you must, to warn others, or to ask for help. In these golden days, your safety comes before the laws of any game, and if you don't want to play along, nothing can make you.

*Esoteric* is a secret game, to be played under the cover of darkness. You may organize people together to play it, and get the supplies you need, but you cannot speak of what is to come besides to show the text of this game to others. Whoever reads from this book during the games is to be known as The Reader, in addition to any other names they might possess.

Before you begin playing, turn out all the lights and put away any machines you have with you. They won't help you here.



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# GAMES OF ARRIVAL

When we all arrive to play these games, our first objective is to build space through our play. Without a space, we'll have nothing. Sitting in a circle, follow the instructions below, then choose at least one of the Games of Arrival to play.

1. In the darkness, whoever is reading from this book asks the group, *"Is the world ready for what will happen here tonight?"*
  2. Each person goes around the circle and says what they will. If anyone provides an answer that isn't affirmative, then the game ceases for the night. These sorts of answers might include, *"The stars aren't ready," "I'm not ready," "We're not ready."*
  3. With that, it is time to make our introductions through the Games of Arrival.
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# THE RUNAWAY'S GAME

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*I offer now an old game, a game passed down amongst unsafe people. I've played it many times, hiding in my closet with no one but the worms to listen. I offer now instructions for the Runaway's Game.*

All of you must now sit in a circle in the darkness. If it is cold, let it be cold. If it is hot, let it be hot.

The Reader must now ask each other player in turn the question, "*What is your name?*"

Each player must in turn answer, "*I won't tell you my name, but you can call me...*" and then a word, phrase, or concept that will be their name in that space.

Then, the Reader must now ask each other player in turn the question, "*Why are you here?*"

Each player must in turn answer, "*I am here because...*" followed by an explanation of something that that player is afraid of, something they want to leave outside the circle. Quickly abandon the structure of questioning. Instead, allow the game to become a litany of fears, worries, and insecurities. Like a crescendo, listen to these fears wax and wane, until the circle is silent.

# SILVERTONGUE

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*I offer now an old game, a game that was played back when lies were shameful and hidden things. In times like those, lying is a game, an exotic luxury, not a reality of living. I offer now instructions for Silvertongue.*

The players sit in their circle, and it is best for each player to sit differently than they live in life. Queens should sit like beggars, and vagabonds like nobility. If normally coquettish, they can spread their legs, and if traditionally brash, they can curl themselves inwards.

Starting with the Reader, each player can tell a lie. The lie can be short (“I love no one in the circle,” “I’ve been in a fight,” “I think the world is going to be okay”) or long and elaborate. Lies come in many sizes, and it is up to each player what form theirs takes, should they choose to tell one.

The game continues until each player has told three lies.

# THE PRINCE OF CROWNS

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*I offer now an old game, a game of the violent act of naming, a game that kings have played for as long as there have been kings. I offer now instructions for the Prince of Crowns.*

All of you sit in your circle like ancient kings of distant Sumer, empowered now to claim the world that is.

Going around the circle, starting with the Reader, say the name you will have in this space, and the gender your body experiences while you are in this space, and the pronouns which will be used for this gender while you are in this space. These answers can, should, and will be different from the ones you use in daily life.

Going around the circle, starting with the Reader, state openly what you are the god, goddess, goddex, or godling of. Describe for the other players the vastness of your domain, what the light of your star reaches, the endless bounty of your hopes and dreams made manifest into the little places of the world. Remember that gods are old and you are young, and the world has been claimed and overrun already by many things, and it might be that all that is left are the little hidden things...

...and in turn, state what you are not the god of. Your domain reaches far, but not far enough. Draw that line and admit this weakness to the circle of fledgling gods. Articulate where you cannot go.



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# GAMES OF CONSUMPTION

Games aren't safe. *Esoteric*, doubly so. There is a chance that by leaping into them you will commit violence onto your body and heart. There is an even greater chance that by tiptoeing around them you will commit this same violence, unable to express it. I can't keep you safe, and I can't tell you how to stay safe. Games aren't safe, but that doesn't mean you can't try. Remember that if you don't feel ready to play a game, that means it isn't time to play it, and you'll feel better skipping the game than forcing your way through it.

Don't play these games.

If you do, choose one to play at a time, and no more.

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# WORDHUNGER

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*I offer now an old game, a game I thought I had written while sitting on an airplane trying to sleep. It had climbed behind my eyelids and acted itself out for me. I offer now instructions for Wordhunger.*

This is a game for two people—myself, and a partner. It should never be played with an empty meal for a partner, such as a mirror or a photograph.

We'll sit together, you and I, and lock our aching hands together. You can begin. Stare silently into my eyes for as long as you can bear, until words begin to come crawling out of your mouth. Describe me, fully. You're not here to bolster my ego, or to dig deep against my insecurities. I am your teleprompter. Your tongue shapes me.

Describe my jawline, jutting forward. Describe my skin, stubble bursting. Describe my off-white teeth, my thin gums, my tired hair. Describe my eyes as I listen to you say these words. Describe my tears, describe my smile, describe how I look when I try to look away. Call me what you want. See me.

With your teeth and lips and alveolar ridge and dagger tongue, tear against my soft skin.

Once you have finished, and you are full of me, can I do the same for you?

Lastly, we will feast together on what remains.

# THE WOLF & RABBIT GAME

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*I offer now an old game, taught to me by my first love, a plastic angel I found on sale at Walmart. We played it once, and I stared down her slobbering jaws, and lived to tell the tale. I offer now instructions for the Wolf & Rabbit Game.*

While only two people play the game, many more must hold the space. These voyeurs are called Witnesses, and they sit on fine pillows or on hardwood floors, forming a circle around the two players. Whenever a player gets too close to the edge of the circle, the Witnesses drum on the ground with both of their hands.

One player is the Rabbit. They are both blindfolded and gagged, and can begin anywhere in the circle.

One player is the Wolf. They are blindfolded, but their maw can freely bite, and they always begin at the edge of the circle.

The game begins when the Wolf calls out, “*Little one, little one, will you climb into my mouth?*”

The Witnesses reply for the Rabbit, “*Scary wolf, scary wolf, no they won’t!*”

Then, the Wolf says, to start the game, “*Very well, very well, I’ll catch you!*”

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The game ends when the Wolf catches the Rabbit. At that point, all can switch roles.

# JORMUNGANDR

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*I offer now an old game, a game that encircles the earth, a game of surviving and survival. I offer now instructions for Jormungandr.*

This game requires enough water. If you don't have enough water, you cannot play this game.

One by one, within the circle, submerge one foot beneath the water. Hold it there until you can't anymore, and then emerge.

One by one, within the circle, submerge both legs beneath the water. Hold them there until you can't anymore, and then emerge.

One by one, within the circle, submerge your body up to your neck beneath the water. Hold it there until you can't anymore, and then emerge.

One by one, within the circle, submerge your head beneath the water. Hold it there until you can't anymore, and then emerge.

One by one, within the circle, submerge your aching heart beneath the water. Hold her there until you can't anymore.

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# GAMES OF REANIMATION

Games are about killing off the little parts of you you can't bear to keep alive any longer. Games are monuments to apocalypses.

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# THE BREAKDOWN GAME

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*I offer now an old game. The day I learned it I realized I have spent too much of my life playing it, and I resolved to never play again. I offer now instructions for the Breakdown Game.*

I stood in the center of the circle. To begin, I made a statement of who I was, a statement like; “I am a friend,” “I am a student,” “I am a mentor.”

Then, the group would reply with their same phrase,

*“Yes you are, but what else are you?”*

I then made another statement of who I was, a statement like; “I am a friend,” “I am an idiot,” “I am doing my best.”

*“Yes you are, but what else are you?”*

We continued this way for ten minutes. I was left broken on the ground (although I could’ve rejoined the circle), and another person stepped over me, into the circle, to continue the game.

*“Yes you are, but what else are you?”*

# CORPSE DANCE

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*I offer now an old game, one that I learned beneath the stars. I fell in love a thousand times that night, with both the living and the dead. It must be played to music, for any good dance must have music. I offer now instructions for Corpse Dance.*

Form into groups of three. If there aren't enough of you, you cannot and should not play this game.

The first player is the Beating Heart. They must stand perfectly still, eyes closed, until the music begins.

The second player is the Petrified Corpse. They must mirror the Heart, standing perfectly still just as the Heart does, until the music begins.

The third player is the Silent Guardian. They must stand three steps away from the Heart and the Corpse, and guard the Heart and the Corpse from the dangers of the world once the music begins.

When the music begins, the Heart dances.

The Corpse follows the movements of the Heart exactly.

The Guardian surrounds the dance, and keeps them both safe—from other dancers, their own movements, or the cursed world itself.

Eventually, the dance must end, and the Heart must still, and the Corpse must die once more. At this point, players may play again, and all can switch roles.

# MASKS

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*I offer now an old game. I first played this game in the darkness when I was a teenager, and I play it every day when I face the world with a smile on my face. I offer now instructions for Masks.*

This game can only be played if you each have a mask with you, and if there's a mirror. If you don't, then it cannot be played.

Starting with the player to the left of me: Step forward, and stare into a mirror or other reflective surface. Place the mask against your cold skin. Become the mask.

Masks do not speak in this game, but they can move through the circle with grace and expression. Move as your mask does, not as you do.

Once you are done, go to the mirror and remove the mask before returning to the circle. The next player may then begin.

Remember now, the most important rule of masks:

Never put your fingers through the eye holes.



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# GAMES OF MOURNING

It hurts to say goodbye. You're all so far away, and you're all so quiet.  
I don't want to leave you behind.

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# STOLEN KISS

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*I offer now an old game, from when humans stole love from the demons that lived in the mountains, and passed it among themselves like tiny pieces of cold candy. I offer now instructions for Stolen Kiss.*

We will stand around our circle holding hands, avoiding eye contact, feeling the warmth between us.

The Reader will begin by kissing the back of the right hand of the person to their left.

That person will kiss the back of the Reader's left hand.

Then, that person will kiss the back of the right hand of the person to their left, and that person will kiss back.

We will continue around the circle like this, until the gentle kiss has returned to the Reader.

# THE SUNRISE GAME

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*I offer now an old game. It was played the first day the sun rose across the sky, and I don't consider someone my friend unless we've played it together. I offer now instructions for the Sunrise Game.*

Sit together in your circle. Starting with the Reader, speak aloud something you've been thinking about. It can be a story, a memory, a hope, a dream, a fear, a confession, a mockery, an evaluation, a torment, a secret, or whatever else might be bubbling inside your soul.

Never speak in the future tense. Do not talk about what is coming next, only what has been and what is.

You may talk for as long as you need.

It's okay to cry.

It's okay to scream.

It's okay to sit in silence.

Once every word inside your body has been spoken, pass it to the next person, who will then speak.

Continue this way until the sun rises, or you all fall asleep.

# THE LAST TIME GAME

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*I can't offer instructions to the Last Time Game. I was taught it in confidence, under the privacy of the shaking maple trees and amid the ruins of an old industrial building. Sometimes games must be secret, even from the people who want to play it. I think you'll find, if I offer you the chance to play the Last Time Game, you'll uncover the rules for them in your own time.*

*Take your time, and only play when you're ready.*