

Once Upon a Full Moon

What Is This Game About?

In classical Japan, mythological shape-shifting animals help reattach the red string of fate between people who were meant to be together.

Red String Of Fate

In Japanese folklore, it is believed that the gods tie a red string to the pinky fingers of people who are meant to be together. The red string may get entangled, contracted or stretched, but the lovers will always find each other. In rare cases, however, the obstacles are of such unsurmountable magnitude that the string may get cut.

Wishing Upon A Full Moon

As the game starts, two people are forlornly contemplating the full moon. They feel broken hearted, but don't know why. Unbeknownst to them, their red string of fate was recently cut. Feeling a deep sorrow, they ask a favor of Tsukuyomi, the good of the Moon. They beg of the god that he may fix whatever it is that gnaws at their heart, that he helps them find what is meant to fill the emptiness they have recently started feeling so acutely.

Tsukuyomi listens to their prayers. The god gathers a group of *henge*, shape-shifting animals, and gives them a mission to help those people find each other, thus reattaching the red string of fate.

Player Characters

The players take on the role of the *henge*, mythical creatures meant to carry on the mission from Tsukuyomi.

There are five types of *henge* to choose from: cat (*neko*), badger (*mujina*), fox (*kitsune*), racoon dog (*tanuki*), and rat (*nezumi*).

Henge Powers And Borders

All *henge* have an animal form and can shape-shift into humans. Many stories also tell of the *henge* possessing a variety of powers that go beyond shape-shifting, given the right conditions.

The *henge* are themselves liminal creatures. They are neither animal nor man; neither flesh nor *kami* - they are in between all of those, occupying the border of the mundane and the spiritual world. As such, their powers draw potency from liminality, from situations, locations and times at the borders of one another. Those who encounter *henge*, usually report the event taking place at dusk or dawn, in the border between day and night, for example, or as an echo or vision in smoke that is in between being there and not there.

Life In Heian Japan

This game takes place in 10th century Japan, during the so-called Heian Period. During this time, the capital of Japan is Heian-kyo (literally “tranquillity and peace capital”), later known as Kyoto. This is a time before the military rule of the Shogun and their daimyo vassals. There are samurai, but they are mainly mounted archers who only use a sword as a last resort, and regard honor and loyalty as more of a suggestion rather than the ironclad principles of later centuries.

Rice lands are nationalised, in principle, and allotted to families. The once-strong central army has been disbanded. Aristocrats collect taxes from peasants and keep some of those before handing over the bulk to the Emperor. They often hire bands of strong men to do the actual tax collecting, so they don't have to leave the capital and get their hands dirty. As long as the taxes keep coming and there is no challenge to the Emperor's power, the imperial court does not much care what happens in the countryside.

The Status Of Women

Unlike most other periods of Japanese history, women have a high degree of control over their lives and can own property. Female children are prized, as only a female child can advance her family's position in society by becoming a concubine to high rank aristocrats or marrying into a rich family, thereby winning titles or wealth for her family. A man, on the other hand, can only expect to ever become as high-ranking as his father.

Marriages are easily formed and broken. Polygamy is common. No property changes hands at marriage. Married couples usually live at the wife's family residence, or sometimes they live separately.

Education for the upper class women is a priority, and they are supposed to know 1000 poems by heart. A woman's elegance is determined by her ability to quote the perfect verse for any occasion. A well-turned pun is the height of sophistication.

High Culture And Social Rank

This is a golden age of Japanese culture, bolstered by the patronage of an imperial court at the height of its power. Aristocrats consider the arts to be the most important of human accomplishments, with poetry being the greatest of art forms. It is at this time that many of the greatest works of Japanese literature were written, mainly by women. Moon viewing parties, where poetry is recited under the full moon, are important social events.

One clear visual distinction between those of high class and commoners is that the rich blacken their teeth by applying a sticky black dye. A white smile is considered most distasteful among the rich and powerful.

What You Need To Play

To play this game you will need:

- A number of six-sided dice, at least ten of those
- A stack of index cards, or pieces of paper of similar size
- A standard deck of playing cards
- Red yarn, about 50 cm long (20 inches)
- Pencils or pens
- A computer or smartphone with internet (although you can prepare the cards with poems in advance)

You will also need a few friends. The group size should be between three and five people in total.

Character Creation

Step 1. Choose henge type

Each player chooses what type of henge they want to play as. There should be only one henge of each type in the group.

Players may read the descriptions of all types (next page) and pick the type they want. Alternatively, you could write the henge types on the top of the index cards and hand them randomly to players.

The exact details about how the powers work, their scope and limitations, is left for players to decide. Don't get hung up on the minutiae - just go with whatever is fun and feels right for the story.

Step 2. Choose henge powers

Each player has a number of points to distribute among the henge's four powers. The number of points indicates how many dice the player rolls when using that power.

3 players: 9 points

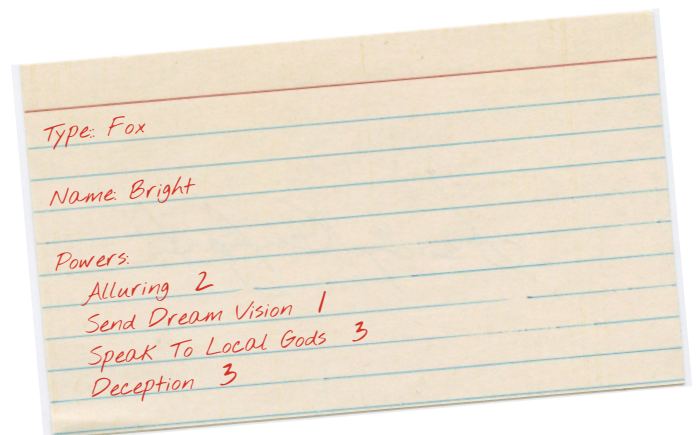
4 players: 7 points

5 players: 6 points

Points may be assigned in any way the player wants. Powers with zero points assigned cannot be used.

Step 3. Choose your name

Henge names are simply an adjective pointing at their strongest personality trait. Each player picks a name from the list provided.



Henge Types, Powers and Names

Cat (Neko)

Human Form: slender and extremely agile men and women, with their animal coloring carrying through to their physical appearance

Names: Slender, Agile, Quick-Witted, Perceptive, Adventurous, Impulsive

Powers: 1. Travel Through Shadows
2. Bestow Curse/Luck
3. Cat Burglary
4. Acrobatics

Badger (Mujina)

Human Form: a monk or priest, or temple maiden

Names: Shy, Lazy, Crafty, Cunning, Surly, Keen

Powers: 1. Impersonate
2. Mesmerising Singing
3. Cause Panic
4. Shift Earth

Fox (Kitsune)

Human Form: a beautiful woman or man

Names: Pretty, Sly, Bright, Devious, Charming, Exuberant

Powers: 1. Alluring
2. Send Dream Vision
3. Speak To Local Gods
4. Deception

Raccoon-Dog (Tanuki)

Human Form: low-life drunkard or thief

Names: Mischievous, Lucky, Friendly, Fearless, Sneaky, Unruly

Powers: 1. Monstrous Form
2. Change Into Any Shape
3. Become Massive
4. Create Illusion

Rat (nezumi)

Human Form: small and wiry in stature, and stoop when they move

Names: Vicious, Spiteful, Slouchy, Loner, Proud, Risk-Taker

Powers: 1. Acute Senses
2. Call Rat Friends
3. Know A Secret
4. Find A Way In

Game Setup

Broken Hearts

The “Broken Hearts” are the two people whose red string of fate the group will try to reattach during the game.

Use two index cards. Write a name on top of each card, along with occupation and a personality trait.

Surnames are the prerogative of the aristocracy. Commoners do not bear surnames. When used, family names are written first, with given names last.

Common Male Given Names:

Kazuki, Kenta, Naoki, Riku, Ryuu, Shouta, Takahiro, Takumi, Tatsuya, Yuuta

Common Female Given Names:

Ai, Asuka, Chihiro, Kana, Mai, Misaki, Natsuki, Riko, Sakura, Shizuka

Family Names Of The Aristocracy:

Fujiwara, Isonokami, Minamoto, Tachibana, Taira

Male occupations (roll a D6 or choose one):

Aristocrat, Artisan, Merchant, Monk, Peasant, Samurai

Female occupations (roll a D6 or choose one):

Aristocrat, Concubine, Entertainer, House Servant, Peasant, Shrine maiden

Roll two dice and add them together:

2: Risk-taker; 3: Quick-witted; 4: Romantic; 5: Altruistic;
6: Observant; 7: Logical; 8: Charming; 9: Short-Tempered;
10: Brave; 11: Resourceful; 12: Honorable

A completed “Broken Heart” card looks like this:



Stages of Fate and Obstacles

The Japanese of the Heian period believed in love at first sight, and that the proper way to win someone's heart is through poetry. The instructions and game mechanics described in this chapter aim to bring these elements to the game table.

Stages of Fate

Separate one suit out of the deck of playing cards; all of the thirteen cards. The suit of Hearts would be most fitting for this game. Put the rest of the card deck away.

Lay down the thirteen cards face down on the table in four lines of three cards each, and the final card at the bottom below the middle card of the fourth line. Each of the five rows of cards represents a "Stages of Fate" (or "stage" for simplicity) that must be completed.

The five Stages of Fate

First stage (*top row of cards*): Distance

Second stage (*second row of cards*): First Sight

Third stage (*third row of cards*): Meeting and Talking

Fourth stage (*fourth row of cards*): Poem Writing

Fifth stage (*bottom row with one card*): Winning Their Heart

Assigning Obstacle Poems

Poems of the traditional style of Heian Japan, known as *waka*, are used to generate the obstacles for each of the Stages of Fate.

Steps to generate obstacles:

1. Pick five random classical poems from the 100 found online here: <http://jti.lib.virginia.edu/japanese/hyakunin/hyakub.html>

(You can type "random number between 1 and 100" into Google to get a random number)

2. Copy each of the five poems, one on each index card.

3. Shuffle the index cards with the poems, then lay them down, one by one, by the side of each row of playing cards.

Establishing Obstacles

Starting with the top row of cards, the one representing "Distance", players read the poem and discuss what obstacle could be established from the poem, within the context of this Stage of Fate. Underline the words on the poem that relate directly to the obstacle.

Repeat this step with the remaining four Stages of Fate.

Broken Heart Cards And Yarn

Put the "Broken Heart Card" describing the person the player characters are helping at the top, above the first row of playing cards. Put the tip of the red yarn on top of that card - this represents the red string of fate.

The second "Broken Heart Card" goes below the card at the bottom row of playing cards.

Obstacle Examples

First Stage of Fate (*top row*): Distance

In the early dawn

When the mists on Uji River

Slowly lift and clear,

From the shallows to the deep,

The stakes of fishing nets appear.

From the poem above, the players decide that the "Distance" obstacle is "Uji River" - the river is what is keeping the two people physically separated.

Second Stage of Fate (*second row*): First Sight

At the break of day,

Just as though the morning moon

Lightened the dim scene,

Yoshino's village lay

In a haze of falling snow.

The players decide that "Yoshino's village" and "falling snow" define the obstacle for the First Sight stage. This means the two people will never meet unless the player characters can somehow get them to spot each other amid the busy streets of the village and through the falling snow.

Third Stage of Fate (*third row*): Meeting and Talking

Though I know indeed

That the night will come again

After day has dawned,

Still, in truth, I hate the sight

Of the morning's coming light.

By this stage, the two people would have caught each other's eye, but have not spoken yet. The players establish that the best chance for the two people to meet is during a religious festival taking place at *night*, but unless the player characters can do something, the light of *dawn* will come and people will go away, and the two will miss the chance to talk and get to know one another.

Fourth Stage of Fate (*fourth row*): Poem Writing

*In the mountain depths,
Treading through the crimson leaves,
The wandering stag calls.
When I hear the lonely cry,
Sad--how sad!--the autumn is.*

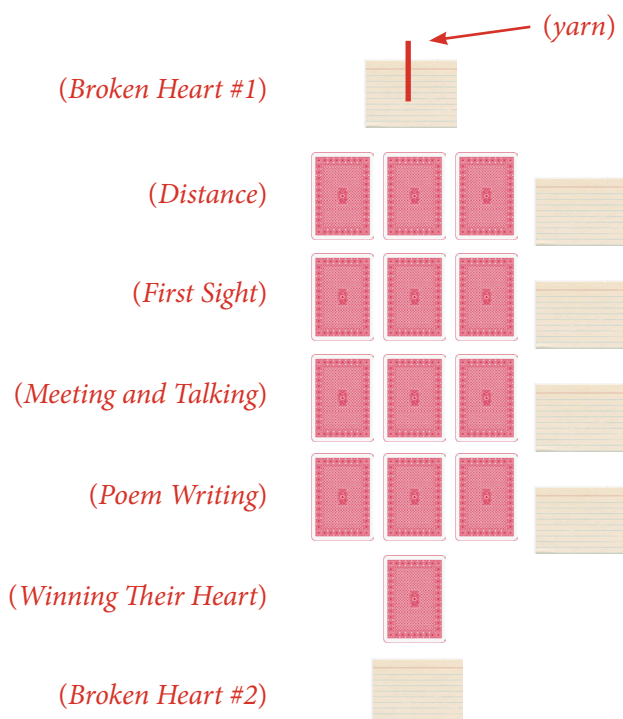
The reason the person is having problems coming up with a love poem, the players decide, is because they have been forced to take on work hunting deer ("*stag*") in the mountains ("*mountain depths*") and have no time for poetry. The player characters must help them finding time and inspiration for the poem, and make sure it gets delivered to the right person.

Fifth Stage of Fate (*bottom row with single card*): Winning Their Heart

*Even when the gods
Held sway in the ancient days,
I have never heard
That water gleamed with autumn red
As it does in Tatta's stream*

From the poem above, the players conclude that the perfect setting for the two people to declare their love to each other, thus reattaching their red string of fate, is at a local stream ("*Tatta's stream*"), by its clear waters ("*water gleamed with autumn red*"). Can they arrange for the two to meet at the stream? Even better if they can make the tree leaves turn a shade of autumn red!

**At the start of the game,
the play area looks like this:**



Playing The Game

Summary Of Play

Players take on the Stages of Fate, one at a time, and their associated obstacles. As they succeed and forge a path between the broken hearts, a red yarn is stretched over the cards, marking a path and symbolizing the red string of fate that the player characters are working to reattach.

Resolving a Stage of Fate

Starting with the first Stage of Fate, players read again the obstacle and remind themselves of what this stage is about.

1. Establish the number of border elements

The powers of the henge player characters are limited by the number of border or liminal elements around them.

Working together, the group must establish which border elements are present during the current Stage of Fate. The narrative of the scene must match those elements. *Example: If "dawn" and "lip of a volcanic crater" have been chosen as the border elements, the scene must occur at that time and place, and not during a formal dinner at the imperial palace.*

The total number of border elements will act as a cap to the number of dice counted during resolution.

There is no hard limit to this number, but the situation must be accepted by everyone as credible.

Examples of border elements:

- Dawn or dusk - in between day or night
- The threshold of a house - neither inside or outside
- Crossroads - not completely part of either road
- Echoes - voices from someone who is in between being there and not there
- Vision through smoke or on flames - an image in between being there or just being someone's imagination
- Torii gate - marks the border between the profane and the sacred
- The point where the sea touches the shore

2. Play scenes

Players play out a scene or series of scenes, roleplaying as their characters, acting to resolve the obstacle by means of using their powers. Any character who is present in a scene but who is not controlled by a player (usually called a "Non-Player Character, or NPC") can be roleplayed by a player who is not using any of their powers in this scene.

Each stage may be resolved as one scene, or a series of scenes. Any number of players may participate and use their powers in any scene, but only one power per player can be used per stage.

When a player character uses one of their four powers, they cross out that power from the character card. Each power can only be used once per game.

The number of points assigned to each power during character creation indicates the number of dice rolled.

EXAMPLE: The group decides that the best way to get the broken hearted person to cross the Uji river (the obstacle of this stage) is to have him hired as a guard to a travelling merchant. Two of the player characters have powers that help with persuasion, so they go talk to the merchant, hoping to get him to hire the man they are helping. In this scene, another player, other than those two, plays the merchant, all talking in-character. In a second scene, still as part of this same Stage of Fate, another player takes on the job of stealing money from the man, as a way to motivate him to seek a paying job and so take on the guard position with the merchant. That way, three powers have been used in this stage.

"I do this" vs. 1st person

If players are more comfortable with describing their actions in third person rather than roleplaying in first person, that is absolutely fine. Establish and play scenes in whatever way everyone feels most comfortable with.

Why low value cards under the yarn modify the value of cards?

Musubi-no-Kami, the god of love and matchmaking, will only allow the red string of fate to be re-attached when the person has proven themselves worthy by overcoming truly challenging obstacles. That is why overcoming weak obstacles (low card values) on the path to reattach the string will make future obstacles harder. (This also introduces an interesting tactical element when choosing a card to play against)

Resolution

Once the scene or scenes that are part of a Stage of Fate have been played out, it's time to find out if those efforts were successful. The group will choose one of the three cards in that stage, and play against it using their powers.

Stage of Fate resolution steps:

1. Reveal card or play blind

Players choose whether they want to reveal one of the three cards in the current stage/row.

Reveal cost for a card on the first stage/row: one power point

Reveal cost for remaining stages/rows: one power point, plus one more point for each card under the yarn that is lower or equal to the stage/row number. *Example: In stage four, these cards add to the reveal cost: ace, two, three, and four.*

Power points are paid by subtracting points from any unused power belonging to any character. Multiple players can contribute points to single reveal. Once spent, power points are gone. *Example: A player uses 1 power point from a power rated at 3 points to reveal a card. That power is now rated at 2.*

Players may choose to reveal none, one, two, or all three cards in a stage/row, paying the reveal cost for each of them.

2. Pick one of the cards

The group chooses which of the three cards in the current stage they will play against. It may be a card facing down, or facing up (if they chose to pay to reveal it in the previous step).

The one requirement is that the card be directly below, or diagonally below, the card resolved in the last stage. In the first stage players are free to pick any of the three cards.

3. Roll dice

Each player who is using a power in this stage rolls a number of dice equal to the rating of that power.

Once a power is used, cross it off your character card. It cannot be used again in this game.

The players now add together the numbers on all the dice rolled, choosing only a number of dice up to the number of border elements in this stage.

Example: Two players are using powers in this stage, one has power rating of two, and the other power rating of one. They roll 6, 4 and 3. There are only two border elements in this stage (dusk, speaking through echoes), and so they can only count two of the dice. The result is thus 10 (6+4).

4. Compare result with card

In order to succeed, the result of the sum of the dice rolled needs to be HIGHER than the card value. (*Ace = 1, Jack = 11, Queen = 12, King = 13*)

If the card is still face down, it's now time to turn it face up.

Red yarn effect: for each card under the yarn in the rows above that is of lower or equal value than the current stage/row, bump the value of the card by one. *Example: The card is a 6 in the third stage, and the yarn is over cards 2 and 10, so that means the card value for this stage is bumped by one to a value of 7.*

Results

Success (dice rolled are higher than card value): Pull the end of the yarn over this card, symbolizing the players having managed to extend the red string of fate closer to the broken heart at the bottom of the play area. The game progresses on to the next Stage of Fate (next row below).

Failure (dice rolled are less than or equal to card value): The group's plan did not work out as they intended. It is time for a new plan. The group must use different powers for a different effect, playing new scenes. Choose a directly adjacent card in the same stage/row and play against it.

Winning Or Losing The Game

WINNING: The players win the game when they resolve all obstacles in the five Stages of Fate, thus extending the yarn all the way down to the last card in the fifth row and beyond to the broken heart at the bottom of the play area. They have managed to reattach the red string of fate and the lovers have found each other.

LOSING: The game is lost if the players have failed against all cards that they can play against in the current Stage of Fate (those directly and diagonally below the card defeated in the last stage), or if they have run out of power points before defeating all cards to take the red string of fate all the way to the broken heart at the bottom of the play area. The lovers won't find each other, at least for now. Maybe Tsukuyomi will try again some other time.



Optional bonus activity: compose a waka poem

You may have noticed that *waka* poems have five lines. After playing the game, if you are feeling inspired, you could try to compose a new *waka* poem yourself with your friends. Each line in the poem could reference each Stage of Fate in the story you just created through play. The syllable count of *waka* poems is: 5-7-5-7-7 (Look up "*Waka (poetry)*" in Wikipedia for more info).

Game Notes

Inspirations

Golden Sky Stories, by Ryo Kamiya - henge and the concept of heart-warming roleplaying games

Your Name (*Kimi no Na wa*) animated movie, by Makoto Shinkai - red string of fate, Shinto cosmology, liminality

Cosmology of Kyoto (PC game) - Heian Japan and Kyoto

Useful References

Japanese Mythology A to Z, by Jeremy Roberts

Understanding Japan: A Cultural History, by Mark J. Ravina

Game Chef Theme and Ingredients

Theme: Borders - Player characters must act in liminal and border-like situations, where they have the most power.

Ingredients:

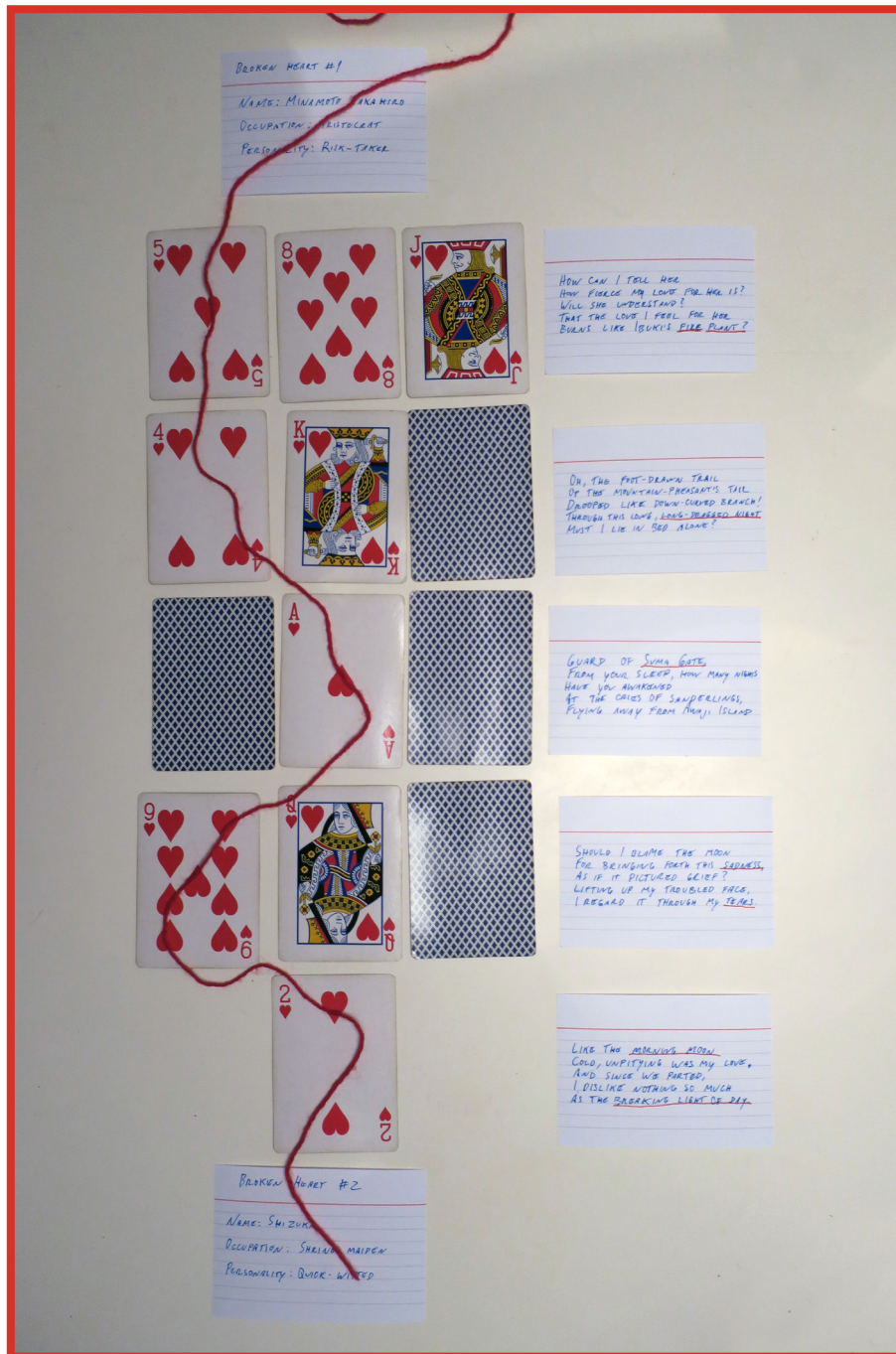
Yarn - The red string of fate that the player characters are working to reattach is a direct reference. Also, an actual length of red yarn is used as a physical component in the game.

Cut - The red string of fate between people that were meant to be together was cut by the weight of the obstacles in their path. This is the event that sets the game in motion.

Echo - Mentioned as a potential liminal element.

Smoke - Mentioned as a potential liminal element.

A Completed Game:



読んでくれてありがとう。

(Thank you for reading!)

Resources used in this document

Playing card images from freedesignfile.com

Torii gate image from Wikimedia Commons

Title fonts from freejapanesefont.com

Index card and fox mask images from Shutterstock

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