

so hard to beat

so hard to beat was written for a challenge by Graham Walmsley to write a game based on a song. *Teenage Kicks* by the Undertones has an interesting and influential recording history in the UK, but the song's very simple lyrics only hint at the appeal and awkwardness and ease and strictures of sexuality during the teenage years.

So I've used the tune primarily as a jumping off point, focusing on the question in the first line: "are teenage dreams so hard to beat?"

so hard to beat uses playing cards and the game truth or dare – that loaded weapon which I thankfully haven't played since I was a teen – as a kind of pseudo-sociological filter to see which characters will hook up with whom. The cards of the paired-off characters then inform players what the psychological tone and memories of the encounter or relationship will be like.

Any game about teen sex written by and/or meant to be played by adults has the potential to be or to become creepy. If you're going to try *so hard to beat*, talk with the rest of the players to see what kind of game experience you are all comfortable with. A game about sex doesn't have to be sexually explicit. A game with some truth or dare moments doesn't have to be about your personal truths. A game with characters who are teens exploring their sexuality doesn't require players to closely identify with the characters, to speak as them, to relive your own teen dreams to provide authenticity. Or it can, whatever you prefer...

Setting up

To play *so hard to beat*, you'll need two or more participants, paper and writing implements and two packs of ordinary playing cards.

Each player puts three note cards, sticky notes or pieces of paper in front of them. These cards represent characters- teenagers who all attend the same school and/or live in the same area.

Characters

Each player decides whether they will have two male characters and one female character or vice versa.

Write the gender of the characters on the cards: 2 Fs and one M, or vice versa.

The suits of randomly drawn playing cards will determine which cliques or social sets the characters belong to. Before picking cards, decide as a group what four social groupings your teens will be part of. The groups can be four cliques in a school; four different

schools in a city; four different neighborhoods in a town; four favored genres of music, etc. Characters can sometimes switch between groups so do not pick ethnicity/race or any other immutable characteristic as the cliques.

Whatever you pick, two of the groups will be larger; two will be smaller in number. Decide which two of the four cliques/ groups tend to have more members in your chosen setting and which two tend to have fewer members.

Take two decks of cards. Remove all the diamonds and spades from one deck. Combine the remaining whole and half deck, shuffling all the cards together. Jokers are kept in the decks and will be wild cards.

Decide which groupings correspond to each of the four suits. Your two larger groupings will be represented by the hearts and clubs. Your two smaller groupings will be linked to the diamonds and spades.

Deal each character one face up card and two face down playing cards.

The suit of the face up card shows what clique the character is part of. The numerical value of the card represents the character's status and desirability. Characters will usually date/ hook up with characters of the same clique and with a value near their own.

The face down cards represents the character's interest in and availability for dating and sex as follows:

Hearts – desire for sex

Clubs – internally or externally generated qualms about sex & obstacles to dating

Diamonds – special circumstances (overcomes barriers and allows atypical pairings- each diamond eliminates one barrier)

Spades – logistical availability for sex (has a car, parents away, can get birth control, etc)

Knowing the gender, clique, status, and starting cards of characters, players can now write characters' names down on their papers. Also write down a phrase that describes something memorable about the character's appearance, reputation, behavior, etc.

After filling in these very basic bios, players describe their characters to the other participants.

Truth or Dare

so hard to beat is played like the game truth or dare. Players decide if they want truth (to answer a question about one of their character) or to accept a dare (to try and hook one of their characters up with another specified character.)

Because characters can only pair up if there are certain 'matches' between their face up cards and between the characters' hidden cards, players will need to use truth questions to

discover which characters might be able to hook up. Sometimes suggesting a coupling that will probably fail though use of an early dare is also good strategy because the cards of the two characters involved will be revealed to their players. Once players figure out which characters can get together, they can use dares to make those hooks up happen.

Character can only have sex under if the five following conditions all apply:

- The characters are in the same clique
- Characters' face cards are within 3 values of each other (for example a character with a 6 face card could hook up with characters with ace cards ranging from 3 to 9).
- The characters are different genders
- At least one of the characters has a spade card face down
- At least one of the characters has a heart card in their face down cards that is higher in value than the other character's highest value face down clubs card

Each diamond held by either character in their face down cards can eliminate one of these conditions.

So, for example, if the characters have three diamond cards between them, they can date and have sex even if they are in different cliques, are of the same gender, and lack a spade card (don't ordinarily have the physical opportunity to be together alone).

Every turn, play starts with the player with the character with the lowest value face up card, then proceeds clockwise around the table. Players can request a truth or dare, to be posed to them by another player. The first turn, the person to your left will provide the truth or dare; the next turn the player two spots to your left will ask, and so on.

Truth

Truths in this game consist of two questions. A question is asked 'to a character' and answered by the player controlling that character. That player is also asked if their character has one of the four suits in their face down cards. When you get asked a question, answers for your character, then tell (everyone) if there is at least one of that suit of card in the character's face down set of cards. You don't reveal how many of that type of cards are face down. But you do say the value of the highest heart or club card, if you get asked about those suits and your character has one or more of them.

or Dare

A dare is phrased as a challenge to have a character held by the active player hit on one of your characters or a character controlled by a third player. You cannot dare a player to have two of their own characters get together. When the dare is made, the two players controlling the characters involved look at the face down cards of both characters. If the match is possible, then the two character have a sexual encounter and the players narrate a psychology/ memory scene. (see below) If the pairing works, both players whose

characters connected get to draw a card from the deck and place it in the face down pile of their choice of one of their three characters.

Getting new cards between turns

After every player has had a chance for a truth or dare, the character with the lowest value face up card gets a new face up card to replace the one they have (trying to reinvent themselves). All players can also give one of their characters a new face down card or replace the character's face up card with a new one.

Psychology/ memory

When a pairing occurs, the two players involved look at the cards of both characters. The suit of the highest card or set (pair or more) of cards among all cards of the two characters (face up and down) determines the dominant shared tone of the date.

The next highest suit, just counting the other character's cards (not combining with your characters' cards) feed into the pairing as a secondary, private memory of the date. (If the other character has only one suit of cards it is possible that your minor tone will be the same suit as the dominant tone).

Hearts – emotional high

Clubs – emotional weirdness or grief

Diamonds – physical pleasure

Spades – physical awkwardness or disappointment

The two players describe the date, without necessarily being graphic. First each touches on something that captures the dominant tone of the encounter. Then each player shares their character's private memory.

Ending the game

The game lasts at until each player has participated in least one psychology scene.

November 2008 Playtest comments:

Josh, Judson and play-tested so hard to beat, a game about teen sex that I wrote based on a song that Graham Walmsley had assigned me in his [songs for games challenge](#) We felt free to change the rules as we tried it. We kept the core of the game – using 'truth or dare' and seeing if a combination two characters' cards allow them to hook up – but altered the procedures and clarified how players narrate. With these changes, the game ... worked, better than I had anticipated for a game about the 'sociology and psychology' of teen sex - at least as far as one run-through could clarify.

Of course, three players of the same gender who are familiar with one another's gaming styles may not be the best test subjects for a game about a sensitive topic. As we started, Judson asked if it was a game for teens about sex or a game for adults about teen sex. The latter – although there is nothing system wise that limits it to teen characters. We never got explicit in narrating – there was usually build up then a couple of lines of post mortem of the encounter that implied how things went. This worked well, at least for us.

In the game players choose what 4 cliques the characters will be members of. We picked mormons, punks, LGBT, and PETA and drew cards to see what clique each of our 3 characters was part of and what their status would be (suit and value of face up card). Because of the LDS clique, Judson had two characters who were brothers and Josh had one of their cousins. The mormon + punk + teen sex tension was a good driver for the game as it led to some sibling rivalry, repressed homosexuality, young marriage proposals, switching cliques to LDS to go straight, etc.

Our set of nine characters then proceeded to ask each other awkward questions (truths) and dare one other to hit on other characters. To hook up, characters need to be:

- same clique
- within 3 status of each other
- opposite gender
- one char needs to have a higher heart card in hand than the other char's highest club card
- at least spade card (logistical opportunity) between the 2 chars
- a diamond card can overcome one obstacle

Our main rules trouble shooting challenge as we played was better incentives for players to choose truth over dare (or disincentives for dares). As written, dares provided more information about other players' cards and provided a stronger narrative outcome than did truth scenes. We eventually decided that truth scenes should be the only way to get rid of bad cards (high clubs, basically) and a way to draw a new card (looking for a spade, diamond, or high heart).

To support this change, characters will no longer get a free card after every character has had a turn. I'm also leaning towards three other suggestions that we didn't have a chance to try: not removing half of the spades and diamond cards before the game; having characters lose diamond cards (and maybe also spade cards) after they are used to successfully hook up with another character; and have diamonds only overcome the first three, visible, obstacles – not the need for spade cards and a heart card greater than opposing club.

Some changes we made early in play were to make all actions based on a specific character rather than a player and to play until every character has hooked up at least once (or 3-4 turns each- like the years of high school). We also decided that the card drawn by each player involved in a successful dare would determine their reaction to the encounter- and therefore color the narration. We figured out that successful dares are

narrated in alternating single sentences, started with the player whose character was dared (pursued the other character)- as if being written in a journal or told to a friend. I wish we had recorded some of these exchanges. They flowed naturally and were entertainingly awkward and biting and/or clueless, depending on the tone each player was going for.

Failed dares are narrated by the player whose character was asked out in a single or a few sentences like schoolyard gossip on why their character rejected the asking character.

A couple of options worth trying out next time:

- * number of characters. Draft has 3 per player but to avoid too many, maybe 4-6 players could have 2 chars each and 7 plus have one char each. Incidentally Judson suggested that the game could work as a werewolf/ mafia kind of game with a bunch of players standing around, holding their cards so everyone could only see the face card that indicates clique and status.

- * 'slumming.' A higher status char could ignore the need for a date to be within 3 status – but this would put their reputation at risk so if they hook up, the card they get would automatically become their new status/clique card if is the same suit or same value as their existing face card.

- * Encourage uncertain dares. The char who dares two other chars gets a free card if the pairing fails by just one obstacle (an incentive to encourage players not to always go for dares that they are sure will succeed or fail).