

LIKE SKYSCRAPERS

BLOTTING OUT THE SUN

A 2-player writing game by Speak the Sky,
for my Patreon supporters

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This is a game about a **Writer** and a **Translator** who have every reason to be the dearest of friends or most vicious of enemies. Writer left their home¹ under great duress, bound for a foreign land; Translator, out of pity and admiration, supported them² in their time of need. Now, Writer is working on their grand magnum opus³; Translator is appending their lines with footnotes to relay its deeper meanings... or so they think.

The two are set on an inevitable collision course: like hands reaching elbows in ocular embrace⁴; like armies marching grimly from their battle lines⁵; like skyscrapers⁶ blotting out the sun.

Section 1: Creating Your Characters

Choose which roles you both play. Writer, your job is to write your story and judge whether Translator's footnotes are true, or at least pleasing. Translator, your job is to use footnotes to explain the deeper meanings of Writer's story and create their past and culture.

Writer, pick three hardships you faced leaving the old country for the new: *I didn't speak the language; I had no home or possessions; Nobody knew me; I was hounded by enemies; I'd been traumatised.*

Translator, explain how you helped Writer get through each hardship. For example: *I introduced my literary contacts; I taught you my language; I gave you dear friendship; I housed you; I provided amanuensis...*

Writer, describe your written work in three words, e.g. *religious, speculative, magical-realist, rambling, odd, cut-up, classical, abstract, meticulous...*

Translator, tell them what you admire about their work in three words, e.g. *evocative, fresh, revolutionary, gripping, honest, patient, lyrical, mysterious, direct...*

Writer, summarise your magnum opus in one sentence, e.g. *A woman returns home to find that everyone from her childhood believes she's dead.*

Write all these things down, then sit opposite one another over a writing table. You are ready to begin.

Section 2: Telling Your/Their Story

Place an empty page between you, with more nearby. Each page represents a chapter of Writer's magnum opus. From now on, avoid speaking where possible. Take turns to play.

Writer, on your turn write the next line of your story from the top of the page from your perspective. Stop at the end of the line, even if you're in the middle of a sentence. Don't worry about philosophical or lyrical depth – write what comes to mind, line by line.

Translator, on your turn choose a word or phrase from what Writer has just written as the target of your next footnote. Write starting from the top of the page from your perspective, where your last footnote ended. Use as many lines as you need.

Both of you, continue like this until your lines and footnotes collide, then end the page.

Translator, sum up the rest of the chapter in a single sentence based on what's written here so far. The rest is... lost in translation. Set up a new page.

Writer, if you feel Translator has made serious mistakes or overstepped themselves, then from the next page on take an extra turn between their turns. For example, after the first time you do this, you write two lines between their footnotes from then on. After the second time, you write three lines, and so on.

Both of you, if their words change how you feel, tell them so through your story or clarifications.

Continue until the magnum opus is complete. Each of you, give it a name. How do you feel now?

Section 3: Inspiration for Footnotes

Translator: Shuffle a deck of playing cards (without jokers). Place it face-down beside you. When writing a new footnote, draw a card and check below for inspiration. Use either, both, or neither aspects.

The suit determines the focus. The target is at...

- ♥ a **subject, verb, and/or object**¹¹.
- ♦ the **most or least complicated**¹² word.
- ♣ one or more **proper nouns**¹³ or **pronouns**¹⁴.
- ♠ the **dominant clause**¹⁵ of a sentence.

The value determines the form. The target is...

- A** a **historic or cultural reference**. To who or what? How is it analogous to the target?
- 2** a **double entendre**¹⁶. What does it refer to? What does this say about Writer's private life?
- 3** a **veiled insult or compliment about a peer**. Who? What does wider society think of them?
- 4** a **reference to a previous work by Writer**. Which one? What does the call-back mean?
- 5** an **onomatopoeia**¹⁷. How is it pronounced? What meaning does the sound itself have?
- 6** a **metonym**¹⁸ or **synecdoche**¹⁹. What idea or institution does it refer to? How does it relate?
- 7** **antonymous with a prior target/footnote**. How is it effectively the opposite? Why?
- 8** **synonymous with a prior target/footnote**. How is it effectively the same? Why?
- 9** a **contronym**²⁰ in **Writer's old tongue**. What are its two meanings? How are both relevant?
- 10** a **code to avoid censorship**. Who wants to suppress Writer? Why? What do they encode?
- J** a **fictionalisation of part of Writer's life**. When from? How do they portray themselves?
- Q** **mostly untranslatable**. Why was this word or phrase the best available substitute?
- K** **untranslatable**. Explain as imperfectly and as well as you can what meaning has been lost.

Appendix A: How to play online

To play online, use a digital text editor (e.g. a shared GoogleDocs file). Translator starts writing on the first line, Writer starts on the second, both writing downwards. End each page when the combined text reaches the bottom.

Appendix B: How to play solo

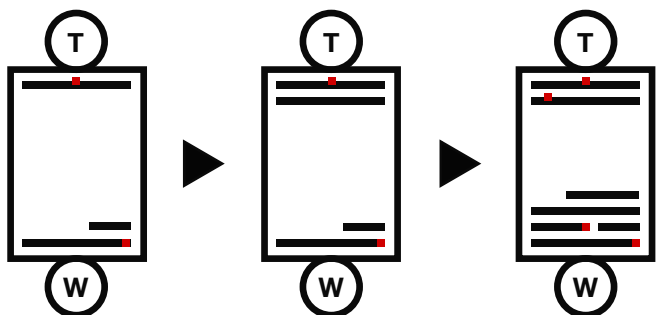
To play a solo variant, first find a text (excerpt from a novel, book of poetry, screenplay, etc.) that you're willing and able to edit. Pretend that it's Writer's magnum opus; you are Translator. Write your footnotes over the original text. End each page when you read through the original text up to the current end of the footnotes, then write a single sentence to bridge the gap between the end of the current page and the start of the next page. Repeat with each page until you've finished the excerpt.

Appendix C: Diagrams of play

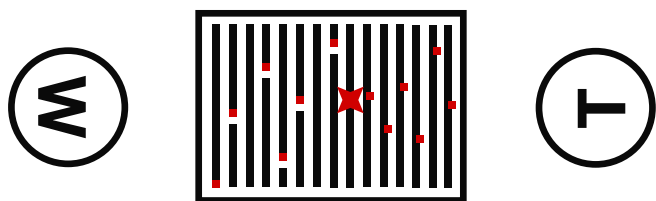
Setup and Writer's first turn: The players sit opposite each other with the first page between them. Writer starts writing from the top-left of the page from their perspective (if writing in English) and continues to the end of the line, even if the current sentence they're writing is incomplete.



Continuing play: Translator starts writing from the top-left from their perspective (if writing in English) and continues until they've finished the footnote, no matter the length. Then Writer takes their second turn, writing another line, and Translator takes *their* second turn, writing another footnote, and so on.



Collision: After both have written numerous lines and footnotes, Writer's next line runs into Translator's last footnote, triggering the end of the page.



Footnotes

- 1, "left their home", the introduction is a fictionalisation of the author Vladimir Nabokov's complex emigration from Russia to the U.S.A. from 1917 to 1940.
- 2, "supported them", referring to the U.S. literary critic Edmund "Bunny" Wilson, who became fast friends with Nabokov and helped him find work.
- 3, "magnum opus", meaning 'great work', an enduring masterpiece that aims for or receives critical praise.
- 4, "jocular embrace", referring to an entry in Nabokov's dream journal after his and Wilson's bitter falling-out over his translation of Pushkin's *Eugene Onegin*: "somebody on the stairs behind me takes me by the elbows. E. W. Jocular reconciliation."
- 5, "battle lines", a double meaning referring to lines of text as well as military formations.
- 6, "like skyscrapers", referring to Nabokov's demand for "translations with ... footnotes reaching up like skyscrapers to the top of this or that page" while arguing for direct translations with notes rather than 'localised' translations that change the writer's original meaning to something familiar to the new audience.
- 7, "amanuensis", to write down someone's dictation.
- 8, "speculative", referring to speculative fiction, which contains non-realistic elements (e.g. science fiction).
- 9, "magical-realist", a literary style that blends realism and fantasy, often without direct explanation.
- 10, "cut-up", a technique in which a text is literally cut up into words and re-arranged to form a new text.
- 11, "subject, verb, and/or object", the word in a clause that's taking action, its action, and its target.
- 12, "most or least complicated word", a clarification: if unsure, use the longest word.
- 13, "proper noun", a noun that refers to a specific entity or group, e.g. your name, 'Roaring Twenties', 'Earth'.
- 14, "pronoun", a word used in place of a noun, e.g. 'I/my', 'it/its', 'they/their'.
- 15, "dominant clause", part of a sentence that is a complete sentence by itself.
- 16, "double entendre", a word or phrase with a clear inoffensive meaning and a subtle risqué or absurd one. For an extensive display of double entendres, see *Foxtrot Uniform Charlie Kilo* by Bloodhound Gang.
- 17, "onomatopoeia", a word whose spoken sound imitates or resembles what it describes, e.g. 'boom'. 'drip', 'meow'. More complex forms include sibilance (hissing or hushing repetition of 's' sounds) and the poet Alexander Pushkin's use of words containing 'ooh' sounds to represent the background drone of urban life in his verse novel *Eugene Onegin*.
- 18, "metonym", a word that refers to a related concept, e.g. 'lend me your ears' (to ask people to listen) or 'the crown' (meaning a royal family).
- 19, "synecdoche", a form of metonymy in which part of something is used to refer to the whole (e.g. 'wheels' to mean a car) or the whole is used to refer to part (e.g. 'the public' to mean the voting public).
- 20, "contranym", a word with multiple contrasting meanings, e.g. 'cleave' (to cut apart or bind together).