

THE FIELD GUIDE / AN ANTI-LEADERBOARD EXPERIMENT

THE NOTHING- TO-WIN PLAYBOOK.



Six printable play cards, seven games, creative variations, and permission to make something that does not need to win.

DESIGNED FOR CURIOUS HUMANS, NOT LEADERBOARDS.

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MAIN HOME <https://sahiltayal.com/>

FROM <https://nothingtowin.sahiltayal.online/>

A printable companion. No sign-in, no scores, no private data submitted.

An invitation, not an exam

There are plenty of activities worth doing without needing to get better at them. This little book makes space for a few.

A normal game tends to tell us what counts as progress: gain the point, reach the exit, finish the puzzle. Those games can be wonderful. This book is not arguing against skill, sport, competition, effort or ambitious projects. It merely offers a different arrangement: an activity that can be enjoyed from the inside, with no outside judge of whether it was performed correctly.

Each toy on the companion website can be played in a browser with mouse, touch, or keyboard. The six cut-out cards that follow translate that spirit into paper games. Cut them out, keep the whole book intact, or adapt them freely. If a prompt feels dull, change it. If you feel an urge to manufacture a score, try noticing what the score would replace: curiosity, surprise, patience, pleasure, or even a useful little boredom.

A VERY GENTLE AGREEMENT

Try this: Give a game a short, unmeasured visit. Notice one detail you had not seen. Change the rules once. Stop when you want to. Do not turn that stopping point into a grade, streak, or proof of discipline.

A note on evidence: This is a designed invitation, not a claim that scoreless play produces a specific mental-health outcome or makes people objectively more creative. Some people love competitive games; others find open play easier to enter. Both preferences are legitimate. The Smithsonian documents a wide range of toy and game forms, while philosophical accounts of aesthetic experience debate what makes an experience valuable. Neither source proves a universal rule about play.

Accessibility first: No prompt requires speed. You can write a description instead of drawing, point instead of cutting, or simply imagine a move. Turning a proposed exercise into a conversation counts. There is no secret premium version of participation.

Make a constellation

Seven dots do not arrive with seven meanings. They begin as positions. The story comes later, when someone notices a curve, a cluster, or a gap. A constellation can be a way of looking together at the same night and telling different stories.

On a blank page, mark seven points wherever your hand wants to put them. Connect a few, but leave at least one unconnected. Look for something ordinary in the arrangement: a folded towel, a kettle, an argument that ended well. Name it in one word, then show somebody who may see something entirely different.

CUT-OUT PLAY CARD 01 · MAKE A CONSTELLATION

START HERE. Draw seven points and join some of them. No image is required.

CHANGE THE RULE. Pretend the empty space between two dots is the central character.

TAKE WITH YOU. What changed when you named the pattern?

For example, one person might see a spoon where another sees a shelter. Both explanations are interpretive choices, not mistakes. We often talk as if a pattern existed fully formed before anyone attended to it. Sometimes the act of choosing what to connect makes the form more visible.

The companion site lets you move the seven dots directly. On paper, move them by crossing out and drawing again. An imperfect crossing-out may become part of the artwork. If the thought of drawing feels unpleasant, dictate the locations to a friend as a set of directions.

Keep in mind: Remember: a sky belongs to nobody. Your small drawing is not a scientific star chart, and no real astronomical claim is being made here.

Weave the almost-pattern

A repeated mark gives the eye a place to rest. The tiny disruption inside it gives the eye something else to ask about. This game investigates what a pattern can carry without asking its maker to be perfectly consistent.

Draw an eight-by-eight grid, or use the grid on the website. Select two colours, marks or textures. Fill the first row with any repeated sequence. For the second row, echo it but let one tile wander. Keep following until you can see your own rules emerging. You are allowed to change them halfway through.

CUT-OUT PLAY CARD 02 · WEAWE THE ALMOST-PATTERN

START HERE. Make a tiny grid; repeat two marks; interrupt one.

CHANGE THE RULE. Remove a square and treat the blank as a third colour.

TAKE WITH YOU. Which imperfection makes the design more interesting?

Try a loom made from words instead of colours: write “here / there” in alternating boxes. Place “perhaps” wherever you like. Or make a textile with simple taps on a tabletop: one tap, one pause, two taps, one pause. The game is about noticing relations, not acquiring craft mastery.

Look again at the tile you thought was wrong. Maybe it is the most honest square on the page. Maybe you erase it because you prefer the rhythm of repetition. Both are decisions with aesthetic consequences; neither earns a point.

Keep in mind: If careful grids are inaccessible or irritating, tear strips of scrap paper and stack them. A repeated physical arrangement can express the same question.

Grow a sentence

Not everything we say must be clear on the first try. In a greenhouse, different things can grow side by side before anyone knows what the result will look like. Give language a similarly forgiving patch of ground.

Write ten words on individual scraps of paper. Include a place, a small object, an action, a feeling, and one surprising word. Shuffle them and choose five. Lay the words in a row. You may add a connector such as “and” or “because”, but you do not have to make the sentence behave.

CUT-OUT PLAY CARD 03 • GROW A SENTENCE

START HERE. Gather five unrelated words. Give them a shared line.

CHANGE THE RULE. Remove the verb and see if the fragment still has a mood.

TAKE WITH YOU. Does the sentence feel like a fact, a question or a dream?

A worked fragment: “the blue window remembered yesterday.” It is not an empirical proposition about windows. It is a small invented scene. If “remembered” becomes “borrowed,” the window acquires a different personality. If “blue” becomes “tired,” the colour becomes a feeling. Tiny substitutions can open surprisingly different interpretations.

Read it slowly, out loud or silently. Change only one word, then notice how the rest of the sentence seems to shift. Keep the fragment you like, even if it cannot pass an ordinary grammar test. It may be the beginning of a poem, a private joke, or nothing more.

Keep in mind: You can use a screen reader, voice dictation, or a list of spoken words; the game does not depend on handwriting.

Fold a visual poem

A folded page holds two ideas in the same small territory. The fold is a constraint: you cannot see every possibility at once. That temporary limit is what makes a new pairing feel unexpected.

Fold a sheet into a top half and a bottom half. Write four beginnings on one side and four endings on the other. For example: “The house learned to listen” and “until silence grew some leaves.” Turn the fold so that a new opening meets a different ending.

CUT-OUT PLAY CARD 04 · FOLD A VISUAL POEM

START HERE. Write four openings and four endings. Mix freely.

CHANGE THE RULE. Fold again to hide the centre of each line.

TAKE WITH YOU. What became possible because part of the poem was hidden?

A visual poem does not need an exact rhyme or even a stable meaning. You can replace text with doodles, symbols, or little photographs from a magazine. A line of tiny circles above a drawing of a doorway can be a poem if you choose to experience it that way.

Notice when a pair seems funny, serious, mysterious, or slightly wrong. Change the order without trying to select the single best combination. If you are playing with a friend, ask each person to write one half without seeing the other. Afterwards, ask what the lines suggest rather than who wrote the stronger one.

Keep in mind: On the website the fold changes perspective, not the words themselves; the arrow controls choose which two lines meet.

Compose a quiet beat

Rhythm belongs to more than music. A sequence of windows in a building, the cadence of walking, and the spaces between breaths can all make repetition noticeable. This particular game is deliberately silent: pattern becomes something you can see.

Draw three rows of twelve boxes. Name them Glow, Pause and Spark. Place a dot in some boxes of the first row, a slash in the second, and a small star in the third. Run one finger along the rows, left to right, at a pace you enjoy. Your marks are visual events, not musical notes you must read.

CUT-OUT PLAY CARD 05 · COMPOSE A QUIET BEAT

START HERE. Fill three rows with any arrangement of marks.

CHANGE THE RULE. Begin by adding pauses rather than events.

TAKE WITH YOU. How does a visible silence change the overall pattern?

Imagine a pattern with a mark in the first box and the final box, with nothing between. That long interval may feel suspenseful or peaceful. Such descriptions are subjective experiences, not measurements. Another viewer may sense something else entirely.

Repeat the scan at a different speed, or make the first and last boxes especially sparse. Notice which rhythm feels busy and which feels spacious. You need not measure beats per minute or decide which pattern is more sophisticated. You can stop the scan at any moment.

Keep in mind: If movement or flashing is uncomfortable, leave the pattern still. The web toy never makes audio, and the playhead begins only after you choose to start it.

Draw the long way around

In a conventional route-finding problem, the shortest path can be an advantage. Here, arriving is not the goal, so taking a detour cannot count against you. The line matters because of what happens along it.

Put a dot anywhere on your page. Start a line from the dot and let it wander without lifting the pencil. Bend around an imaginary pond, pause beside a mysterious fence, circle an invented tree, and make a path that looks pleasant or peculiar to you.

CUT-OUT PLAY CARD 06 · DRAW THE LONG WAY AROUND

START HERE. Start at one point. Let the route invent the destination.

CHANGE THE RULE. Give three bends ridiculous street names.

TAKE WITH YOU. What would an efficiency-minded map leave out?

The website supports finger, mouse and arrow-key route making. For a no-drawing version, dictate turns: right, right, pause, a long curve left. A listener can sketch them or you can keep the route entirely in imagination.

Give the path a few place names: “The Corner of Almost,” “A Bench for Thinking,” or “The Station That Never Opened.” They need not describe real places. Tell a tiny story about one stop. If the path doubles back, let it. A return is still a journey.

Keep in mind: This is a toy map, not geographic advice. Please do not use it for real navigation, accessibility directions or emergency planning.

Make an unlikely connection

A lighthouse and a teacup: the first shows ships where the shore is, the second holds a small warm pause for someone. Perhaps both help us orient ourselves. That is one connection; it is neither inevitable nor objectively superior to another answer.

Choose two apparently unrelated objects. Describe each without making a metaphor yet. What does it do? What is its size? Who might care for it? Next, identify a shared property. Finally, invent a surprising difference: one stays fixed while the other travels, one offers public guidance and the other a private ritual.

ONE WORKED ASSOCIATION

Objects: an umbrella + a library card. **Ordinary overlap:** both help a person enter a place with some protection or permission. **Surprising difference:** the umbrella works by keeping the world out, whereas a library card works by inviting a world in. **Invented sentence:** "One shelters my body from weather; the other shelters my curiosity from boredom."

Now invent your own. Try: a doorbell and a stone; a balcony and a seashell; a recipe and a constellation. Do not race to the first clever answer. Allow the pair to remain unresolved. It may turn into a sketch, a joke, a conversation, or a reason to observe an ordinary object more carefully.

YOUR POCKET PROMPT

THING ONE: _____ THING TWO: _____

A connection I can defend:

An alternative someone else might see:

The practice is not evidence that all ideas are equally useful in every setting. In medicine, engineering and public policy, claims require tests that imagination alone cannot supply. Here imagination is the medium and ordinary stakes are absent. That distinction is part of playing responsibly.

An afternoon of detours

The seven games become more interesting when they lend each other their rules. Here is a little example you can repeat at home.

MOVEMENT 1 · BORROW A CONSTELLATION

Draw six dots with wide gaps. Join three into a shape that reminds you of a cup. Without erasing the others, name the shape “the patient cup.” Do not worry that someone else might see a table or a crab. Their interpretation would only add another layer.

MOVEMENT 2 · GIVE THE CUP A VOICE

Write: “the patient cup collected quiet mornings.” Replace “patient” with “unlucky” and read it again. The grammar barely moves but the mood does. Keep both sentences on the page. This is not an editing contest; it is a chance to hear what a single word can change.

MOVEMENT 3 · TURN THE SENTENCE INTO A ROUTE

Sketch a line that goes from the cup to an imagined morning. It must take at least three detours. At the first stop, draw a tiny window; at the second, write a word you nearly used; at the third, add a gap you deliberately leave blank. Finish when your attention says it is enough.

What this demonstrates. Different media make different features salient. Dots ask for spatial relations; words ask for associations; paths ask for sequence. Moving between them may reveal new possibilities to you, but this is a designed example, not evidence of a measurable increase in creativity.

Try another combination: Create an eight-square visual pattern, use it as a silent rhythm, then give a name to whichever empty square captures your attention. Or fold a poem and turn the two halves into strangers meeting in the Association Machine.

Design your own toy

A good scoreless game needs an invitation and enough structure to begin. It does not need a winner.

Start with one everyday material: paper, light, a sentence, a set of stones, a memory, or a small stretch of time. Ask what a person can change. Then remove the idea that more, faster, harder, or longer is automatically better. Write a rule that invites variation rather than mastery.

MY TOY IS CALLED

WHAT CAN A PERSON TOUCH, NOTICE, MOVE, OR IMAGINE?

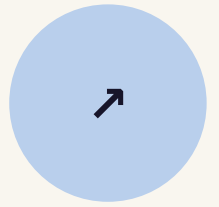
THE SIMPLEST POSSIBLE FIRST MOVE

ONE SURPRISING TWIST OR CONSTRAINT

AN ACCESSIBLE ALTERNATIVE WAY TO PLAY

HOW WILL SOMEONE KNOW THEY CAN STOP?

Gentle safety check: Does this activity require any personal data, money, competition, or public judgement? Can it be played slowly? Can it be described in words if someone cannot use the visual version? Remove obligations you do not actually need.



Many ways to play

An invitation is only useful if people can enter it in more than one way.

For limited movement: The digital constellation uses focusable stars and arrow keys rather than requiring drag gestures. The line-drawing toy also accepts arrow keys, and the other toys use native buttons or fields. On paper, describe an imagined motion or ask a collaborator to place a mark at your direction. Collaboration is not a lesser way to play.

For low vision or screen-reader use: Prefer the text-first games: building a sentence, pairing objects, or composing a folded poem. The rhythm cells and pattern squares have named states in the website. The sky and route are spatial activities, so a spoken interpretation may work better than the picture itself. Not every visual nuance can be reproduced in words; say what is lost rather than claiming perfect equivalence.

For sensitivity to motion: The website honours the browser preference for reduced motion. Decorative motion can be suppressed, and the quiet beat does not animate until invited to do so. On paper, there is no timer. If a movement feels stressful, keep the final arrangement still.

For limited time or energy: Choose one first move. Say one word. Draw one line. Make one connection without writing it down. You do not have to complete the prompt, return tomorrow, or transform a pleasant activity into a daily practice.

For playing with others: Ask before changing somebody else's work. Offer possibilities instead of evaluations. Try "What were you noticing?" rather than "How did you do?" If a person wants a competitive variation, acknowledge that preference while keeping this particular experiment non-competitive.

AN HONEST DESIGN LIMIT

The browser experience was built with keyboard and touch controls, descriptive labels, and visible focus states. That does not amount to a certified accessibility audit, and assistive technologies vary. If a toy behaves badly on a particular device, the paper cards are a separate route into the same idea, not a claim that the problem has been solved.



Leave the door open

You can keep the games, rewrite the rules, or forget the whole thing. The experience does not need to become evidence of progress.

We sometimes judge an afternoon by what we can show for it. A finished object, a new skill, a visible improvement, a story worth posting. Those can be satisfying, but they are not the only ways an afternoon can count. A few shapes on a page might matter only because they helped you notice how you felt while arranging them. An unresolved sentence may be enough.

The little exercises in this book are authored creative activities, not scientific interventions or instructions for treatment. They sit alongside a large history of play and a contested philosophical conversation about attention, pleasure, games, and aesthetic value. You may enjoy other forms of play more. The aim is not to replace them: it is to widen the permission slip.

FURTHER READING / CLAIM-SPECIFIC STARTING POINTS

- Smithsonian Institution, “Playtime: Toys, Games, and Puzzles.” A collection-based overview of the diversity of toys and games. [Open source ↗](#)
- Smithsonian National Museum of American History, “Sports and Leisure.” Historical context for different types of games and leisure practices. [Open source ↗](#)
- Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy, “Attention,” §4.1, “Attention in Aesthetics.” Philosophical perspectives connecting aesthetic attention and value. [Open source ↗](#)
- Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy, “Aesthetic Experience.” A survey of competing views; not evidence that one kind of play is always best. [Open source ↗](#)

For the interactive museum: nothingtowin.sahiltayal.online · **For the wider creative universe:** sahiltayal.com

THE EXIT BENCH

A moment. Not a metric.

Use this page after playing online, or with no screen at all. Nothing needs to become a lesson, accomplishment or beautiful result. A detail is enough.

THREE LITTLE INVITATIONS

Notice a shape that has no use.
Connect two objects that should not know each other.
Keep one ordinary detail without photographing it.

GREETINGS FROM THE MUSEUM OF USELESS WONDERS

Sahiltayal.com / A pocket-sized moment worth keeping

NAME THIS MOMENT (OPTIONAL)

WHAT DID YOU NOTICE?

NO GRADE. NO DEADLINE. NO AUDIENCE REQUIRED.

Keep it. Fold it. Give it away. Or recycle it. The choice is yours.

