



CHAPTER ONE: MISE-EN-SCÈNE

Now that we've gotten through the initial few pages, let me officially welcome you to *A Tragedy in Five Acts*. In this chapter, we'll discuss not only what this game is and why it works, but how it's different from other roleplaying games. We'll cover what expectations *Tragedy* meets and what it doesn't, and how to make the most of that with your troupe.

WHAT IS A ROLEPLAYING GAME?

A roleplaying game is a game where people get together socially (whether through acting and improvisation, talk, or text) to tell a cooperative story. As participants, you play roles and decide what those characters would do in an imagined situation. Whether you're talking about cowboys and Indians or pirates vs. ninjas, you're still acting out a role to whatever degree you feel comfortable, and seeing where that role takes you.

What, then, is the difference between roleplaying and acting, improv, or storytelling? Roleplaying is distinguished by the following characteristics:

- There is no script to follow - both dialog and plot are determined by the people at the table as they go. Problem solving on the part of the characters and players can be a big part of the fun of roleplaying.
- There is a cooperative goal: to tell a story together, specifically the story of the characters or roles being played. Character actions and motivations tend to take precedence over plot or setting concerns. Narrative or authorial voice is distributed rather than concentrated. In less academic terms, what that means is that no

one person is responsible for telling the story and determining its course. The plot is a collaborative effort.

- The stories are more like histories than fiction, in that their beginning and end points may feel unfinished - they are regularly portrayed as open-ended rather than tightly plotted. Games may end quickly, over the space of a single evening, or carry on in serial form for many years, telling the life stories of the characters.

A roleplaying game has a bit of all three, then: cooperative storytelling, character immersion, and improvisation. It's a game where

What Is Mise-en-scène, Anyway?

The best answer is that it's storytelling, but that's a really incomplete definition. More specifically, it's all the things that go into telling a story - technique, set design, point-of-view, narration style, composition, actors, costumes - all the details. In film studies, it's effectively everything that happens in front of the camera or, in this case, on the stage.

Within *Tragedy*, mise-en-scène is all about the play/story you decide to tell and how you set that up. Gamers regularly sit at a plain table (just as actors take their places on a bare stage) and pretend they're in a dark and mysterious fortress, but deciding on the fortress and exactly how dark and mysterious it is? That's mise-en-scène. And that's what this chapter is about.



everyone wins, where everyone gets to be the author, where everyone takes part in something no one of them could have made on their own. And, at its most basic, it's a pleasant social encounter with friends for a few hours' time.

When you pick up *A Tragedy in Five Acts*, you may already have played roleplaying games before and have these expectations in place. If so, we're looking forward to introducing you to the unique aspects of our game, and how it can expand on your previous roleplaying experience.

If *Tragedy* is your first RPG, then welcome! Don't worry, you'll find everything you need to know to get started. And we think you're in for a really unique introduction to roleplaying games.

Either way, something new and exciting lies in store.

Differences and Similarities

A Tragedy in Five Acts is definitely a roleplaying game, but it goes about its function differently from many mainstream RPGs.

- First, there is no game master. Instead, all five players work together to tell the story, with directorial duties shifting from player to player over the course of the game. Everyone gets to shine; everyone gets to be in charge.

- Second, there is a set story arc that should be followed. The goal of *Tragedy* is to create a Shakespearean-esque tragic five-act "play." You don't have to have Shakespearean dialogue (unless that's really everyone's thing), but there are ways to bring out the Shakespeare tragedy in nearly any story - we do it all the time. This game shows you how. Plots, settings, characters, and actions are all up to you, but the form is what we urge you to follow.

- Third, the focus is on character action and interaction rather than environmental challenges. Envisioning the story you're telling set on a stage rather than in a movie may help you to think in terms of characters rather than outside plot or special effects.

- Fourth, the game/play occurs in a single five-act play, preferably played in a single eve-

ning. This is not designed to be a multi-session game. My recommendation is that everyone should come over, have dinner, follow up with the evening's tragic entertainment, and then go home with all the characters suitably sent to their Final Fates.

- Finally, despite its cooperative style, there is a competitive element to *A Tragedy in Five Acts*. The primary mechanic of the game is establishing narrative control among the players and accruing Tragedy Points. The player who finishes Act V, Scene iii with the most Tragedy Points becomes the winner and gets to name the play.

There are, of course, a number of RPGs that feature one or more of the aspects above. If you enjoy *A Tragedy in Five Acts*, I encourage you to seek out other examples of similar game design.

WHAT IS A TRAGEDY?

According to the *Oxford English Dictionary* (and really, where better to go for a definition for our purposes), the word "tragedy" is defined as follows:

A play or other literary work of a serious or sorrowful character, with a fatal or disastrous conclusion: opp. to comedy.

It's a good beginning for our definition, certainly. The goal for *A Tragedy in Five Acts* is to create a tragic story or play. Humor can be present, but your creation will have an overall serious tone and end on a disastrous or catastrophic note.

For all that the basic definition of a tragedy gives us a place to work from, though, it's not the best definition for us to use. While it generally defines what a tragedy is, it doesn't deal with Shakespeare's take on tragedy, and that's what we're setting out to recreate.

WHAT MAKES A TRAGEDY SHAKESPEAREAN?

Aside from being written by Shakespeare, of course, Shakespearean tragedy has some specific elements that make it unique.



- Shakespearean tragedies are driven by not only character interactions, but also by the social web that holds the characters together. Shakespearean tragic characters are often torn between duty (whether to ruler, church, country, or family) and personal preference. The web of community and culture that surrounds and binds them together is what suffers, though it's often the characters themselves who pay the price. For more on this, see *Setting*, p. 22.

- Characters tend to fall into specific social roles that play on the stress points of the social web mentioned previously. These social or cultural crisis points (in the form of primary characters) are placed under increasing stress during a tragedy until they start to fail. Individual failure then cascades into a complete loss of social order until everything is resolved at the end by whatever means are necessary. See *Roles*, p. 27, for more information on this.

- Characters often have one or more character aspects that contribute heavily to their motivations and the choices they make. Within

Tragedy, we refer to these as Fatal Flaws. These personality traits are neither good nor bad; they do impact the character's choices, however, and in certain situations could contribute to a tragic outcome. For more on Fatal Flaws, see p. 32.

- Characters have their own plans and motivations that may or may not coincide with those of the other characters. Shakespearean tragedies are rarely tightly focused on one individual and that one person's choices to the exclusion of all else; for example, *Doctor Faustus* was Marlowe, not Shakespeare. Shakespeare's characters are complicated, with their own loves and hates and ambitions and duties that propel them forward. They all want something, but few of them get it (and those that do rarely hold it for long). *Tragedy* replicates this by auctioning narrative control among the players. For more information on the central mechanic, see p. 38.

Now that we've gone over some of what a tragedy is, particularly a Shakespearean tragedy, let's take a look at a classic and see how it fits the pattern. Consider what happens when the

curtain opens on *Romeo and Juliet*. Most people experience *Romeo and Juliet* in the context of an English Lit or Language Arts class, but references to it are everywhere. Young star-crossed lovers who defy their families and die through misadventure as a result is a time-honored story, and we've seen it everything from TV shows to movies to novels to musicals. It's easy to recognize, even if you're not familiar with the original source material.

To begin with, *Romeo and Juliet* is portrayed as a serious play (albeit with some humor in the form of Nurse and Mercutio) that has a disastrous ending (the suicides of the two youngest members of the households). It definitely suits the basic definition of a tragedy, especially when you consider how many deaths occur along the way to the tomb at the end of Act V.

Applying the benchmarks above, however, we can examine it further. First, there is definitely a social and cultural web connecting the characters. The prologue does not introduce us to Romeo and Juliet, but rather to their families:

*Two households, both alike in dignity
In fair Verona where we lay our scene.
From ancient grudge break to new mutiny
Where civil blood makes civil hands unclean.
(Act I, Prologue)*

The first lines of the play show us two families, both important in the city of Verona. They hate each other due to an ancient feud, which periodically breaks out in new violence against one another, adding fuel to the fire. The Capulets hate the Montagues and vice versa. Both are ambitious and want to get an edge over the other in the Prince of Verona's favor. Two organizations claim ties of blood and loyalty over their members, fealty to a prince, and hatred to one another with no plans to stop - this is the web that binds our characters.

Who are our characters, though? Romeo, of course, is the son of Lord and Lady Montague, and Juliet, the only child of Lord and Lady Capulet, but those aren't the only characters present.

Why Is This Fun?

The answer is that it's fun for the same reason that going to see a Shakespeare tragedy on stage is fun, or watching a scary or sad movie is fun, only *Tragedy* has the added fun of you being in control of the story, and thus in control of what happens to the character you play. You might not see every choice you'd prefer come to pass, but everyone always has input in what happens. The story you tell might be sad or wistful or disastrous, but those stories can be just as much fun to experience as stories that are funny or cheerful. In the end, it's all just pretend - and that's not intended as a cop-out, but rather as a nod to the fundamental nature of drama.

Horrible things can be entertaining, or even uplifting, because they are imagined, not real. We can empathize with someone in a play who is suffering and wonder how we might feel in their place, yet all the while know that no one has actually suffered here. It is safe to imagine what we might feel in that situation without discounting the real suffering of others. Plays are not news stories; characters are not real people. Our ability to distinguish between the two situations is what enables us to gain enjoyment from pathos, and that's why *A Tragedy in Five Acts* works.

Tybalt is Juliet's older cousin and the leading heir to the Capulet household. Mercutio is Romeo's best friend and Montague-affiliated, but is kin to the Prince of Verona. Paris, also a cousin of the prince, becomes engaged to Juliet through an arrangement with her father. The Nurse has looked after Juliet since she was a child. Friar Laurence wants peace between the feuding families, as does the Prince.

Within these brief character descriptions, we can see the social roles and duties each character has, all pulling them in different directions. There are family loyalties, obviously, but not only those. The lords and ladies want to promote their families and secure the futures of their children, and these goals put them directly