

# The Play's The Thing

A Game of Shakespearean Playwrights and Actors

By Mark Truman of Magpie Games

*We are such stuff  
As dreams are made on; and our little life  
Is rounded with a sleep.*  
– Prospero, The Tempest, Act 4, Scene 1

# Welcome to *The Play's The Thing*

Hello! My name is Mark, and this is my entry to Game Chef 2011.

## What is my game about?

*The Play's The Thing* is about the dramatic conflict between the Playwright and Actors.

In my game, the players portray Actors who have been called by the Playwright to rehearse a Play. The Actors must follow the plot laid out by the Playwright, but will attempt to “improve” the play by offering their own suggestions.

## How does my game do that?

My game captures the divine art of the theater by focusing on the contest of wills between the Playwright and the Actors.

At the start, The Playwright lays out the general plot of each Act of the play and casts the Actors. The Actors may make changes to the story as it is being told, adding new conflicts and characters to make the play more interesting and their roles more important, even if the Playwright had other plans.

## What behaviors does my game punish or reward?

My game rewards players for playing in keeping with the Playwright's script...at first. Each joke in a Comedy or misunderstanding in a Tragedy will earn "story points" from the Playwright that can be used to make changes to the narrative. Thus, those who play along with the Playwright will find that they can influence the story later.

## What's Included Here

To help you play *The Play's the Thing*, I've included:

- the core rules,
- a list of Parts, Plots, and Places (although you are free to construct your own),
- blank character sheets and cast list
- a sample cast list
- nameplate templates

# Creating an Actor

To start, each player creates an Actor to portray for the session. Players should write their Actors' names on the front of their nameplates and their real names on the back.

The Actors have three stats, ranging from one to three, which represent their Acting Chops: Logos, Pathos, and Ethos. Each player has a total pool of six points to place in Acting Chops.

**Logos** represents verbal acumen and control over the events of the Play.

**Pathos** represents emotional resonance and control over the other characters in the Play.

**Ethos** represents narrative understanding and control over the setting of the Play

In addition to Chops, Actors also have a Type. While no two Actors are identical, Types represent the kind of character the Actor is often cast to play. Someone who is usually cast as a Villain may try to play a Hero, but old habits die hard. Each Type has two abilities, one "onstage" and one "offstage." Each player should choose one Type for his or her Actor.

## Direction

Each Type also has a Direction, an action that the Actor must take when the Playwright directs them to do so. No matter the cost, the Actors must follow Direction when the Playwright calls for it.

# Casting the Play

Once the players have built their Actors, the Playwright then describes the overall plot of the Play and casts the major characters. The Playwright may choose to produce a known Shakespearean play, but can also choose to produce a new work. Regardless, he should give a short synopsis that summarizes the Play and hand out the Cast List and five story points to each player.

The Playwright casts the play by offering up a Name for one of the characters, a Part (King, Exile, etc), and a Plot (Daughter, Forsworn, etc) with a story point reward for the Actor who accepts the role. The Actors then bid up that reward by assigning additional Parts and Plots to the character, claim the character to get the story points, or pass to the next Actor.

To determine the order of bids and claims, all the players roll a single d6. The highest roll goes first, then bidding/claiming/passing continues in a clockwise order. Ties go to the youngest player. Players may either claim the part or bid on the part and cannot do both. If Players have already claimed a part, they cannot claim another.

## Plots

Plots represent relationships, containing both an aspect (Betrayal, Forsworn, Daughter) and a focus on another character. The focus of a Plot must actually be in the Play; players cannot use a Plot centered on a character who will not ever appear onstage.

Keep in mind that Plots are not mutual unless both characters have the Plot on their sheets. If a Plot is one-sided, it merely indicates that one character is unaware of the relationship, or purposefully ignores it.

Sample Plot: *Forsworn to Puck*

## Parts

Parts are the formal roles that the Actors embody on the stage. They represent the jobs and titles that the characters possess, and are usually the focus of the Play.

Sample Part: *The Exile*

## Places

Places are aspects given to a Set in order to add details about a location in the Play. Players and Playwrights should feel free to create custom Places.

Sample Place: *Den of Thieves*

Since all of Shakespeare's works were adapted from well-known sources, the Actors add to characters by spending a story point and saying "I know this story!" Using the story point, they can attach a new Part or Plot to the character. For example, an Actor may say "I know this story! The Ruler is also a Magician!"

The "I know this story!" process results in characters who will have more than one Part or Plot, but are undeniably Shakespearean creations. A few examples:

Earl of Kent: The Knight, The Exile, The Hero, Forsworn to Lear

King Lear: The King, Father to Cordelia

Cordelia: The Maiden, Friend to The Fool, Daughter to Lear

The first actor to take a character gets the story points bid by the Playwright and other Actors for that role. If no Actor wants a specific Part/Plot combination (i.e. you go around the circle twice), the Playwright claims that role, and all the story points are lost to the Actors.

# Setting the Act

Once the Actors have all been assigned Parts and Plots, the Playwright sets forward the setting of Act I. The Playwright establishes three things:

- 1) The Set and Place where the Act takes place
- 2) At least two characters who will start the Act
- 3) The general narrative of the Act

For example:

"Act 1 takes place in The Palace at a Formal Court. King Lear has summoned his daughters to announce that he will step down from his throne. In this Act, Cordelia will anger him, and she will be exiled."

Keep in mind that this is not exactly how the Play will proceed. The Actors still have a chance to change the Play as it happens, perhaps saving a beloved character from an unfortunate fate or making the tragedy even more heartbreaking.

## Selecting Parts and Plots

Before playing the Act, the Actors must decide which Parts and Plots they will bring with them. While a character may have five different Parts and five different Plots, such complexity would be beyond any actor's skill.

Instead, an Actor's Logos or Pathos limits each category. An Actor may never play more Parts than his Logos or more Plots than his Pathos.

If an Actor does not bring a Part or Plot to a scene, it means he or she cannot benefit from invoking that aspect, but may still be compelled by it. In addition, the other characters still act as if the aspect is true (i.e. people don't forget that The Ruler is the King).

## Playing the Act

Once all the pieces are in place, the Actors portray the Act as "written" as their characters. They may narrate movements, deliver lines, and plot and plan within the limits of the narrative described by the Playwright.

## Adding Elements to the Play

Actors may gain Parts and Plots as the play progresses. The Playwright can assign new Parts and Plots by spending a story point or Actors may suggest such changes as a Major Edit.

An unlimited number of Places may be added to Sets during play. The Playwright can add a new Place by spending a story point or Actors may suggest such changes as a Major Edit.

## Joining the Act

If a character is not onstage, they may join the Act if called by another character. For example, The Ruler may ask for his Fool, or a Lover may call out to a Knight from her open window. These summons are free.

If not summoned, Actors may instead pay three story points to the Playwright to join the scene, forcing their way onto the stage.

As long as the Actors follow the instructions from the Playwright, there are no mechanics needed. The Actors are allowed to act within the instructions, and the Playwright can sit back and watch.

Unfortunately, Actors have a nasty habit of trying to improve the story.

## Trivial, Minor, and Major Edits

If an Actor wishes to propose a change to the Play, he or she must spend a story point and yell "Cut!" The Actor suggests an Edit to the Playwright and the Playwright can choose to deny or accept the change.

If the Playwright immediately accepts the Edit, the Actor receives a story point.

If the Playwright rejects the Edit, the Actor may use dice to try to Force the Edit.

## Forcing an Edit:

To resolve an Edit, the Playwright determines the difficulty and type of the Edit:

**Trivial Edit (Target Number 10)** - Small changes that matter only to one or two characters, such as the location of a servant or the name of a city.

**Minor Edit (Target Number 15)** - Moderate changes that affect the narrative, such as the Wounding of a character or a change to the Set.

**Major Edit (Target Number 20)** - Serious changes that greatly determine the course of the Play, such as the death of a character or the addition of a Plot or Part.

The Actor states an intention and gathers any dice that would be appropriate for the roll, including additional dice from Parts, Plots, and Places, narrating each addition. Plots and Parts add two dice at the cost of one story point each, and Places add one die for free.

An Actor may only call upon one Part, one Plot, and one Place at one time. For example:

## Invoke + Compel

All of the Parts and Plots function as aspects for characters, similar to any other FATE-based game.

Players may invoke a Plot or Part to gain dice from it during an edit at the cost of one story point.

The Playwright can compel a character to act in accordance with a Part or Plot by giving that player a story point. The player may refuse, but must spend two story points to cancel the compel.

## Which Chops Do I Use?

**Logos** - Alteration of the events of the Play, such as reversing the outcome of a duel.

**Pathos** - Alterations of the characters in the Play, such as adding a Part to a character.

**Ethos** - Alterations of the setting of the Play, such as adding a detail to a room or a Place to a Set.

The Earl of Kent: "I will change the King's mind so that he does not banish Cordelia (+2 Pathos). It is only right that I do so, as I am his Knight (+2) and his Friend (+2). I will call upon the Formal Court, as I am making my plea formally known (+1)."

If the Actor's total roll is at least equal to the Target, the Edit is approved, and the play moves on with the change; the Actor has convinced the Playwright!

If not, the Play proceeds as written.

After the Edit has been resolved, the Playwright says "Action," the Play continues on, and the Actors return to portraying their characters.

## **The Next Act:**

At the end of each Act, the Playwright describes the setting and action of the next Act, casting new characters if needed. Just as before, anything the Playwright says is still open to Edits from the Actors once the scene starts.

The Actors may choose to take different Parts and Plots, but cannot change their Types or Chops.

## **Ending the Play:**

Once the fifth Act has been reached, the Playwright should describe not only about the setting and action, but also the ending of the play. Once the ending comes to pass, the play is over, regardless of what other business has yet to be resolved.

Changing the end of the Play is a Major Edit, and should not be undertaken lightly...

## **More Than One Actor**

If another Actor opposes a change (or has a different idea), he or she also gathers dice in a similar manner and rolls at the same time. The highest successful roll determines the outcome of the Edit.

## **Wounded! Poisoned!**

Characters can be Wounded or Mortally Wounded. Wounded characters heal after one Act, but Mortally Wounded characters die at the end of the current Act. The same is true for Poisoned or Mortally Poisoned.

Wounding or Poisoning a character is a Minor Edit, and Mortally Wounding or Poisoning a character is a Major Edit. The Playwright can do either by spending a story point.

## Actor Types

**The Lead:** You are the professional actor, the thespian most likely to win awards and draw crowds. You may be a diva, but the Troupe respects your talent.

Onstage - The Lead knows how to act with subtle skill. You may spend a story point to bring an additional Part to a scene beyond the limits of your Logos.

Offstage - The Lead knows how to bolster morale. You may spend story points on behalf of another Actor who has run out.

Direction - At the Playwright's request, the Lead must stand and face a threat.

**The Ham:** While some would describe you as clumsy, you are often exciting and interesting. You know how to turn a phrase, get the laugh, and move the crowd.

Onstage - The Ham knows how to play up his part. You may yell "Cut" without spending a story point.

Offstage - The Ham knows how to get on stage. You may spend a story point to compel another Actor to call for his character.

Direction - At the Playwright's request, The Ham must perform a Soliloquy.

**The Villain:** You reek of villainy and deceit. On the other hand, no one is unfamiliar with your wicked ways...

Onstage - The Villain knows how to destroy other characters. You may spend a story point to Poison or Wound another character without a roll.

Offstage - The Villain knows the cruel potential of a whispered word. You may spend a story point to add a nasty rumor to an ongoing scene.

Direction - At the Playwright's request, The Villain must deny a plea for mercy or justice, turning a cold heart to even the most reasonable of requests.

**The Ingenue:** Virginal and naive, you have the unforced heart of a child. Others wish to shield you from the world, but know that your innocence is fleeting.

Onstage - The Ingenue knows how to win hearts. You may spend a story point to reroll a failed Pathos roll.

Offstage - The Ingenue can inspire greatness. You may spend a story point to allow another character to reroll a failed Logos roll.

Direction - At the Playwright's request, The Ingenue must place herself in danger.

## List of Parts:

### **The Ruler**

You are lord of a kingdom. Others respect your rule, but may want to unseat you to claim power.

*Invoke:* Gain two dice when you are performing your kingly duties.

*Compel:* You cannot conceal your true identity.

### **The Exile**

You have been cast from your home. You may wish to go home, but either cannot find your way or are forbidden to return.

*Invoke:* Gain two dice when acting against those who caused your exile.

*Compel:* You are alien to this place. Act like it.

### **The Maiden**

You are the prize to be won. You may be poised to inherit a kingdom or be blessed with extraordinary beauty. Regardless, others seek your hand.

*Invoke:* Gain two dice when dealing with those who want you.

*Compel:* Your position is weak. You must not trust others.

### **The Magician**

You have studied forgotten magic. You are not to be trusted.

*Invoke:* Gain two dice when utilizing your occult skills.

*Compel:* You are bound by secret contracts. Honor them.

### **The Fool**

You are a source of amusement for Lords and Ladies. Only you have the ability to safely opine in the presence of the powerful.

*Invoke:* Gain two dice when you speak truth to power.

*Compel:* You must make lords laugh to keep your head.

## List of Plots:

### **Family (Daughter, Father, Brother)**

You are related to another character. Your relationship may be complicated, but cannot be disregarded.

*Invoke:* Gain two dice when dealing with your kin.

*Compel:* They are your family. Obey them. Love them. Hurt them.

### **In Love**

You are madly, insanely, truly in love. There are no words to express the depth of your emotions.

*Invoke:* Gain two dice when pursuing your true love.

*Compel:* Love lost burns like a fire in your heart. Act the fool for it.

### **Forsworn**

You have sworn an oath of service to another character. This oath may compel your constant servitude or merely keep you from a particular course of action.

*Invoke:* Gain two dice when obeying the oath you swore.

*Compel:* Your loyalty goes beyond your oath. Follow your liege even when dismissed from your service.

### **Betrayer**

You have turned against a character who trusts you deeply. Your betrayal has already gone too far to be forgiven.

*Invoke:* Gain two dice when hurting the one who trusts you.

*Compel:* You want your victim to know what you've done.

### **Enemy**

You hate another character for crimes, injustices, and betrayals that have gone on too long to be rectified. You seek nothing less than complete and total victory.

*Invoke:* Gain two dice when attempting to destroy your enemy.

*Compel:* You cannot see the forest for the trees. Strike without forethought.

## List of Sets

### **Nature**

Cloaked in mystery, Nature is the wild darkness hovering just outside the city.

*Potential Places:* Fairie Glade, Dense Woods, Scottish Moor

### **Palace**

Humming with politics, the Palace is the focal point for rulers and nobles.

*Potential Places:* Formal Court, Extravagant Party, Solemn Coronation

**Street** - Grimy and dark, the Street is home to unwashed masses and criminals alike.

*Potential Places:* Den of Thieves, Open Market, Back Alley

## The Play's The Thing

Player: \_\_\_\_\_

Actor's Name: \_\_\_\_\_

Actor's Type: \_\_\_\_\_

Onstage:                      Offstage:

Logos: ○○○ Pathos: ○○○ Ethos: ○○○

Character's Name: \_\_\_\_\_

Plots:

Parts:

## The Play's The Thing

Player: \_\_\_\_\_

Actor's Name: \_\_\_\_\_

Actor's Type: \_\_\_\_\_

Onstage:                      Offstage:

Logos: ○○○ Pathos: ○○○ Ethos: ○○○

Character's Name: \_\_\_\_\_

Plots:

Parts:

## The Play's The Thing

Player: \_\_\_\_\_

Actor's Name: \_\_\_\_\_

Actor's Type: \_\_\_\_\_

Onstage:                      Offstage:

Logos: ○○○ Pathos: ○○○ Ethos: ○○○

Character's Name: \_\_\_\_\_

Plots:

Parts:

## The Play's The Thing

Player: \_\_\_\_\_

Actor's Name: \_\_\_\_\_

Actor's Type: \_\_\_\_\_

Onstage:                      Offstage:

Logos: ○○○ Pathos: ○○○ Ethos: ○○○

Character's Name: \_\_\_\_\_

Plots:

Parts:

The Player

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The Actor

as

The Character

The Player

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The Actor

as

The Character

The Player

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The Actor

as

The Character



## *The Play's The Thing Sample Cast List*

Cast List for King Lear by The Bard

Character	Parts	Plots
King Lear	The Ruler	Father to Cordelia Father to Reg/ Gon
Earl of Kent	The Knight The Exile	Forsworn to Lear
Cordelia	The Maiden	Daughter to Lear
Reagan	The Maiden	Enemy of Goneril
Goneril	The Maiden	Enemy of Reagan
Edgar	The Knight The Exile	Brother to Edmund
Edmund	The Knight	Betrayer of Edmund
The Fool	The Fool	In Love with Cordelia