

In the Box

A Roleplaying Game Inspired by the Sestina
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Playing a Poem

There are many ways to describe what roleplaying is. In one sense it is performance art, where the actors are also the audience. But if this is so, why do you need rules to do it? After all theater doesn't have character sheets. In another sense it is a cooperative illusion built by each participant forming some unreachable vision. But if this is the case why do we place this within a game? Or perhaps it is a contest of skill and creativity. But then, does it matter who wins? Roleplaying games are not one thing or another, they are their own type, just as music isn't just painting with sound and physics isn't just biology with particles and forces.

Every time a group of players sits down to play a roleplaying game they are performing an experiment in social dynamics. Each of us acts in roles, dreams of new things, and confronts challenges in our own lives, but during the roleplaying game the players do all these things together. If they contribute and cooperate they will synergize and create something deeply fulfilling, if they cannot, things will probably be less enjoyable. Conflict does not detract from this synergy, in fact the conflict between player roles often builds the game, as long as the conflict aids the players and enhances everyone's enjoyment of the game. Cooperative play takes work and takes skill, it's not easy, but neither is it unattainable.

If a roleplaying group is a chorus, then the game I am presenting is a new song, a strange one perhaps, but if the voices work for you I hope you enjoy it.

The Same and Yet Different

Many roleplaying games are likened to novels. The structure of the play is intended to be a series of connected adventures or chapters, building into larger campaigns or books. These games also tend to lean heavily on prose conventions, with descriptions and narrative summaries of uninteresting or unimportant action.

Other games have a structure more like theater or cinema, layering the play into scenes and acts, following a tight structure without need for superfluous scenes or continuation. Other games resemble television, with a theatrical structure within a larger series.

In the Box is a game designed to follow a poetic structure, rather than a theatrical or literary one. Poetry is a form that is based on symbolism and imagery, rather than explanation or action. Conflict in literary or theatrical settings is largely situational, while conflict in poetry is from juxtaposition of opposing elements. Poetry is also closer to music, with

its focus on the sound of words, as well as their meaning. Poetry is also more focused than other genres, rather than covering multiple themes, there is a simplicity of meaning within a poem, which ties everything together. This tightness of purpose is the Box within which the poem is crafted.

The Sestina

Different poetic forms have different rules and constraints, rather than attempting to incorporate all possible forms of poetry, In the Box uses a particular medieval form of poetry, the sestina.

The sestina is a strict ordered form of poetry, dating back to twelfth century French troubadours. It consists of six six-line (sestets) stanzas followed by a three-line envoy. Rather than use a rhyme scheme, the six ending words of the first stanza are repeated as the ending words of the other five stanzas in a set pattern. The envoy uses two of the ending words per line, again in a set pattern.

First stanza, ..1 ..2 ..3 ..4 ..5 ..6
Second stanza, ..6 ..1 ..5 .. 2 ..4 ..3
Third stanza, ..3 ..6 ..4 ..1 ..2 ..5
Fourth stanza, ..5 ..3 ..2 ..6 ..1 ..4
Fifth stanza, ..4 ..5 ..1
..3 ..6 ..2
Sixth stanza, ..2 ..4 ..6 ..5 ..3 ..1

Concluding tercet: middle of first line
..2, end of first line ..5 middle of second
line ..4, end of second line..3 middle if
third line ..6, end of third line ..1 [1]

The Dialog of Action

Most sestinas, like many other forms of poetry follow a roughly iambic pattern of syllables. Each line of the poem will have successive pairs of rising and falling tones, eventually culminating in a final falling tone, with the last word of the line. This dialogue of sound gives structure and can be used to emphasize some parts of the poem, by violating this pattern.

In the Box takes a different approach to the iambic pattern. At each point in completing a line, the players can add new Tones to the poem, adding new elements to the box. Some of these are concrete, Rising Tones, such as introducing a character or heightening a conflict. Others are Falling Tones, such as adding interpretations or resolving a conflict. In the natural use of these tones, each line will have successive pairs of rising and falling tones.

Coming to a Close

While the sestina is built with seven stanzas, including the envoy, and six lines per stanza, this is an artifact of the use of exactly six ending words. Using any even number of words this pattern can be extended. Because of this, In the Box adds two endings for each player in the game. These endings are Closing tones, which resolve the final conflict in a line and bring the line to a close.

Each player brings two closing tones to the game, giving the foundation for what will happen during play. Each of these endings is put onto a card, and placed in the center of the table. When a player closes a line, that closing tone is removed, until none remain. Then a new stanza is begun.

Once all the main stanzas occur (equal to the number of endings), the envoy begins, where up to two closing tones can be used by the players.

Building the Box

Boxes are the setting for each poem of the game. Unlike most roleplaying games, boxes are not fully fleshed out or described settings, rather they are a simple framework with a basic location and constraints on what can occur within the poem (called Walls). Within these walls the players take the parts of different forces, building and releasing pressure to tell the story of the box.

Choosing Locations

The first step in building the box is to decide what the location of the game will be. This need not be a physical location, but rather describes the central content of the game, whether in time and space or in a more ephemeral sense. The following are some example locations:

- A Large Mansion during the Battle of Britain
- The Rise and Fall of the First Interplanetary Corporation
- The Mythic Stories Forming the Foundation of a New Religion
- The Scientific Development of Cold Fusion
- The Fall of Corinth
- The Last Journey of an 80's Punk Band
- The Creation of the Next Bestselling Mystery
- The History of an Old Coat

When building the box, the choice of location should be something on which all the players can agree. If agreement is difficult to come by, players may trade walls or make other concessions so that everyone is willing to give the location a try. If there isn't any agreement, the game is more than likely doomed at the onset.

Adding the Walls

Every media has its limitations and its freedoms, and often the limitations provide as much or more creative inspiration than the freedoms. Poetic forms can have many severe limitations, but rather than subtracting from the creative process, they provide a structure and instill creativity.

Boxes also contain limits on what can occur and be placed within them. These limits are called Walls. Each player may choose up to two walls, and walls may also be exchanged as bargaining chips, both in choosing forces and locations. Walls should all be written as a list, and kept accessible to all players. Walls cannot prohibit the location of the box, but may restrict it in interesting ways. Here are some possible walls:

- Every line must contain a servant before it can close.
- No scenes are set outside.
- Everything must be kept PG.
- No character death.
- Everyone must fall in love.
- No excessive gore.
- Only three people in a line.
- Everything must have a scientific explanation.
- No amphibians.

Walls can be chosen for a variety of reasons, aesthetic interest, comfort levels, the desire to shake things up, or simply to make the location more definite. By adding the walls, the players arrive at a box which will help them play the poem they want to play.

Finding the Forces

The last step in building the box is for each player to define their force. A force is a potent influence on the location of the box. It has access to a variety of resources, and can incarnate in numerous ways, as people or events related to that force. The crux of In the Box is the interaction, both conflicting and cooperative, between these forces. When a player chooses a force, two endings should also be chosen. These closing tones should relate to the theme of the force. These endings will be placed in the center of the table on index cards or pieces of paper, to be selected during each stanza as the game progresses. The following are some example forces and their endings:

- Romance
 - Lovers Are Revealed
 - A Betrothal
- Andrew Mathony, CFO
 - Money Changes Hands
 - Someone Loses Their Job
- The Sky
 - Contemplating What Happened
 - In the Eye of the Storm
- Inspiration
 - A Blind Leap, for Good or Ill
 - A Revelation
- The Spartan Army
 - Stand or Fall
 - Honor Upheld
- Clyde, Bass Player
 - Problems Smoothed Out
 - Technical Difficulties
- Suspense
 - Someone is Missing
 - Cliffhanger
- Heat
 - The Coat is Removed
 - Tempers Flare

Words in the Air

At the beginning of each game of In the Box, each player gets three pressure. This pressure are the resources available to a force. By spending pressure on different tones, the forces interact and build the poem. Pressure should be tracked by tokens of some sort.

As the play begins, the players take turns around the table. During your turn you may either pass or add a tone. If you pass, you gain an additional pressure. Playing tones often costs some pressure, but never gives pressure back. If a force ever has ten or more pressure they must add a tone during their next turn.

When a player adds a closing tone, the next line begins with all the players keeping their pressure, and the next player taking a turn.

Tones of the Poem

There are eight tones which can be added to the poem. The first four of these are rising tones, which add or enhance the action of the poem. The later four are falling tones which resolve or diminish the action of the poem. Rising and falling tones naturally alternate in the playing of the poem.

Rising Tones:

- *Set the Scene* - initiates a major setting element into the current line, essentially starts the location of the scene. The pressure of this tone gives the setting the ability to enforce its effects, either in terms of consistency or opposition.
- *Incarnate* - brings in a character or persistent element (such as a device or effect) which extends from the acting player's force. The pressure of this tone gives the potency of the incarnation, measuring it's ability and immunity to external manipulation.
- *Engage* - introduces a conflict between two elements, incarnations or setting elements. The pressure of this builds the stakes of the conflict, indicating how much effect victory or defeat incurs.
- *Heighten* - adds to an unresolved conflict, enhances a setting element or an incarnation. The half the pressure of this tone adds to the conflict or element.

Passive Atoms:

- *Extend* - expands the description of an element or conflict, possibly adding or removing an element to either side of the conflict. No pressure is spent on this atom, although pressure is not gained either.
- *Interpret* - gives a deeper meaning to a conflict or element. This can be used to merge two elements or conflicts, respectively, combining their pressure, as they are reflections of the same thing. This can also be used to add pressure to one of the resolutions in the communal pot, which will then be added to any closing tone which uses that resolution.
- *React* - reduces the pressure of the conflict or a participating element. The pressure spent on this atom determines how much is subtracted.
- *Resolve* - ends a conflict and levies the results as determined by the winning (highest pressure side) element's player. Pressure spent on this resolution can add to either side before this is done. Conflicts cannot be tied, and this tone cannot be used to resolve a tied conflict, unless pressure is spent to avoid the tie. If this is the only conflict unresolved, a closing tone from the pot may be used to end the conflict, if so the results are based on that resolution and the conflict pressure. Any pressure on that closing tone is added to the amount used for this atom, to determine victory.

Upon resolution the pressure on the conflict can be subtracted from any elements involved. Any element which is reduced to zero pressure can be removed or defeated for one additional pressure also from the conflict. If this was a closing tone, then the scene depicted by that line ends. This removes the setting elements and their pressure, but any pressure possessed by a player or by a closing tone remains.

Moving to the Inevitable

As closing tones are played, lines end and closing tones are removed from the communal pot. When the last one is removed the next stanza begins with the closing tones being returned to the pot and the countdown to the envoy begins. After a set number of stanzas, usually one or two for each player, the envoy begins. This is the heightened finale of the game.

During the envoy everything is more potent, each player gains two pressure if they pass, and two closing tones must be used during each line before it will

end. The envoy is when loose ends are tied up and conclusions are reached. It caps and brings the poem to a close.

Advice to the Poet

Playing poetry requires a departure from the typical ways that people play roleplaying games. There are several important things to keep in mind.

Conflicts need not be violent: While conflicts indicate tension, they can be positive as well as negative. Dawn breaking in the night, lovers first meeting, and a discordant piece of statuary are all poetic conflicts. Violence can be a valid conflict, but there is room for much more.

A poem ebbs and flows: Until the envoy, play more calmly. Usually a player will want to add a tone every three or so turns, otherwise the tones added will be weaker, and less thought out. Once the envoy sets in, proceed at double time, but don't lose track of the flow of the poem, with rising and falling in sequence.

Let the inspiration strike: Don't plan too far ahead, the best ideas will occur suddenly, and you'll want to be able to make them happen. The tones are very adaptable, so choose when you use them, and how you want to describe the effect.

Don't make enemies: It's possible to make other players miserable, avoid the urge, it won't ever help the poem, and ultimately they'll just stop playing with you. Remember the forces are in conflict, but forces also don't hold grudges.

Choose an arbiter: Most games have a game master of some sort. If you feel you need that direction, make one of the players the arbiter. They will have authority to make decisions about disputes and interpretations in the game (essentially as first citizen). But let them play too, otherwise things get a bit boring for the arbiter.

Boxes of Ill-Repute

The following are some sample boxes, with walls and forces. For an easier time of things, you can use these, till you get the hang of things.

In the Beginning

Location: At the Dawn of the New Creation

Walls:

- Humans cannot be created until the envoy.
- No angels or demons.
- Each line must create something.

Forces and Endings:

- Water
 - Slow Growth.
 - Is Taken into the Sea.
- Fire
 - Energetic Growth.
 - As Numerous as the Stars.
- Void
 - It Is Lost to Creation.
 - Turning Back from the Edge.

The Republic of Etyr

Location: The fantasy medieval republic of Etyr, between the sands of Okren and the ocean.

Walls:

- No elves.
- Only one use of magic per line.
- The Senate cannot be destroyed.
- Keep everything PG-13.

Forces and Endings:

- Royalists
 - Honor is Upheld.
 - Gods Save the Queen.
- The Guilds
 - Everyone Has a Price.
 - Sorcery is Unleashed.
- The Peasants
 - Common Wisdom Shows the Way.
 - Freedom is Attained.

The Genius of Oberlain the Unready

Location: Oberlain is a great composer in the Laturian Era, the location is his music and operas.

Walls:

- No one may incarnate Oberlain.
- Oberlain is present in all lines.
- A piece of music must be incarnated each stanza.
- Oberlain cannot have a successful romance.
- Each line must contain something red.
- No mention of events beyond the city of Lake's End.

Forces and Endings:

- Id
 - Passions Unleashed.
 - Lusts Satiated.
- Ego
 - Talents Recognized.
 - Stalwart Refusal.
- Superego
 - Failures Hidden.
 - Wracked with Guilt.
- Genius
 - Sudden Inspiration.
 - Crushing Depression.

Dancing on the Edge of Forever

Location: In a Transhuman Conclave at the edge of human understanding.

Walls:

- Nothing can determine what is truly real.
- Each stanza must include an improvement in humanity.
- The envoy ends in post-humanism.
- No space travel.
- No destructive nanotechnology.

- Every human or transhuman has eyes.
- No magic.

Forces and Endings:

- Computation
 - Someone Is Uploaded.
 - Patterns Become a Prison.
- Genetics
 - A New Form Is Discovered.

- Loss of Control.

- Spiritual

- Enlightenment Glimpsed.
- Isolation Brings Madness.

- Humanity

- Frailty Brings One Low.
- Hope Springs Eternal.

References

- [1] Shadow Poetry (2004). *Shadow Poetry – Resources – Types of Poetry*, retrieved August 12th, 2004 from <http://www.shadowpoetry.com/resources/wip/types.html>