SHADES
A game of remembered suffering
and the building of trust

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Contents

Chapter 1

Introduction

In the darkness where there is no thought, the smallest flicker of consciousness is a momentous event. First comes perception - vaguely, distorted, but unmistakably the awareness of an outer reality. Then ideas emerge, slowly, unfocused fragments appearing and winking out of existence again in a twisted resemblance of thought. Suddenly your sense of individuality, lost for what may have been a few seconds or an eternity, returns. You are a person. An I. You can think and you can feel, and you know that once you lived a real life. But who are you? And what? In the depths of your mind, you feel memories stirring, waiting to be awakened. The painful remembrances of a tragic past.

In Shades, every player takes control of a fictional character caught in a bizarre parody of life. Your body died, possibly long ago, but your mind merely retreated in a temporary unconsciousness. Now you have returned as a shade, a being without corporeal form, invisible to living human beings, but able to perceive the material world. You have little sense of self, and no idea of who you are, why you are dead, in what place you find yourself. But many memories lurk beneath the surface of your mind, waiting only for the most tiny of prods before vehemently bursting forth. These memories tell the tragic tale of your terrible fate, of the pain you suffered and inflicted; yet they may also contain the key to appeasement and redemption.

The stories of all the shades' lives are inextricably entwined. You were the authors of each other's destinies; your choices, conflicts and actions led to the unhappy, and perhaps untimely, end of all. You have inflicted so much pain upon each other that the wounds have never healed. They keep you tied to this existence. Can you resolve your differences, forgive each other, redeem your mistakes? Or is the impasse of hate and accusation to remain forever?

Chapter 2

Tales of pain and forgiveness

2.1 Collaborative storytelling

Shades is a member of the large and diverse family of roleplaying games. Each player takes on the role of a character in a story, and together, collaboratively, the players tell a story. All you need are two or three people, about as many hours of your time as there are people, an active imagination, and four coins or tokens for each player. You may also take notes if you wish, but this is not necessary.

Together, you will sit and talk, each player telling a small part of the story before giving the turn to the next one. As the narrative progresses, a dreadful past is revealed even as the stage is set for a dramatic final scene of forgiveness and release – or of hate, anger and eternal imprisonment. This is the first goal of *Shades*: telling a gripping, emotional story on the theme of forgiveness. The second goal of *Shades* is developing the atmosphere of trust and sensitivity between the players which is necessary for such an endeavour to be maximally successful. The rest of this document contains rules and advice that will help you achieve these goals.

In this chapter, we will first look a little closer at the type of story which the players of *Shades* are meant to put together. Then, I will sketch what playing *Shades* actually looks like. The next three chapters flesh out this sketch. In chapter 3, the rules of *Shades* are explained, including the different kinds of scene, the stages of the game, the use of coins and the mandatory narrative techniques. Chapter 4 is all about the social situation, and tells you why *Shades* needs you to be sensitive to the wishes of toher players, and trust them – more so than in most roleplaying games. More importantly, it also explains how the rules have been designed to allow you reach this level of sensitivity and trust without too much trouble. Finally, in chapter 5, I will give some miscellaneous advice about telling a successful story of *Shades*.

Have fun.

2.2   Of bondage and release

You start in the darkness.

Unlike most roleplaying games, *Shades* does not have a phase of character creation that precedes play. You start in the darkness, as a tiny flicker of consciousness, and the successive narrations will slowly reveal the character you are playing. At the beginning of the game, you do not know the name, the gender, the age, or the emotional make-up of your character. But you do know some things.

All the player characters are 'shades', incorporeal beings which can observe the external world but can influence it only with great strain. Once they were human beings, but they died and their minds receded into a darkness where there was no thought. Now – seconds, years, or mayhap centuries later – they find consciousness stirring again. They hardly know what it is to be an individual, to think, to feel; they no longer know who they were, how they lived their lives, and so forth. We – the players – know that they were all part of a tragic series of events which took place in the place they are now destined to haunt. The stories of their lives form a twisted tale of pain and grief, which they visited upon each other and themselves. The past is tragedy.

Bound to this world because of the unhealed wounds the past has left in their souls, and starting without knowing even their own name and sex, the shades' predicament seems grim indeed. But as they explore the world, they find places and objects, perhaps people, which stir memories deep within. As these memories slowly accumulate, their own self is reconstructed, they remember the others, and the tragic tale becomes clear for all to see. The processes of discovery for the shades and for the players are, in a sense, one and the same. Once the story has been made clear, the shades can try and find a way to escape their present fate by resolving the past tragedy in the present. Whether they will succeed or not is held in suspense until the last moment, as the *possibility* of a release is formulated, and eventually chosen or rejected by the shades in a dramatic final scene.

2.3   Scenes and turns

The basic concept of play is extremely simple. One player starts narrating a scene. When she has finished, the player to her left narrates the next scene. If there is a third player, he takes the next turn; and then the cycle starts again. The game ends when the players decide it does, which is normally right after the climax has taken place.

A scene should last no longer than five minutes, and the first few scenes especially may be much shorter. Every player should narrate the scene with his own shade as the main character; you cannot tell a scene about someone else, or set at a time and place where your shade is not present. We will talk more about narrative techniques in the next chapter.

During a scene narrated by one player, the other players must be silent. Everything the narrated player says is added to the story; there can be no objections or arguments. The game works best if discourse that is not narration is kept to an absolute minimum. Sometimes, two players are active in the same scene: this possibility is discussed in the next chapter.

That is it. You take turns telling scenes in which your character is the protagonist, and while narrating you have absolute authority over the story. But there are several constraints on your narration, as well as several material tools to shape the story, which will make this turn-based story-telling into a game of *Shades*. We will turn to them now.

Chapter 3

Spinning the story

3.1 Pre-game preparation

Preparing for a game of *Shades* is very easy. Each players need to have four tokens, three of which are designated *Action Tokens*, and one of which is called the *Tragedy Token*. *Action Tokens* and *Tragedy Tokens* should be clearly distinguishable. You could use two different colours of Go pieces, dice of different colours or sizes, different types of coins, or anything else that tickles your fancy. During play, the players may put these tokens in the middle of the group – there should be a table or some other surface on which the tokens can be placed. Placing a token has more dramatic impact when it is done silently, so make sure everybody can see what is going on.

3.2 Three stages

A game of *Shades* always thas three stages: awakening, revelation, and resolution. During the first stage, the Shades slowly regain consciousness. During the second, the tragedy in their past is revealed – both to the shades and to the players. Then, in the final stage, the tragic conflict is resolved, either for good or for ill.

The progression from one stage to the next happens in the following way:

- The first stage, the awakening, lasts for three rounds of scenes. When each player has narrated three scenes, the second stage – revelation – commences.

- The second stage, revelation, lasts until all players have placed their *Tragedy Token* in the middle of the group. Players can do this at any time. Once all players have done it, the narrative enters the third and final stage – resolution.

When are the players supposed to play out their *Tragedy Token*? The purpose of the second stage of the game is to reveal the tragedy that has bound all the shades to this existence. It is a terrible story in which all characters suffered greatly, and in which all characters inflicted great suffering on other characters. You play your *Tragedy Token* at the moment you think the tragedy has been

revealed. This is not the moment when every single detail has been narrated, but the moment when it has become clear in broad strokes how the characters suffered and inflicted suffering on each other. There may still be tensions in the story, unresolved conflicts between memories, but enough of the story must be known to start working towards a resolution. And remember, you should not play your *Tragedy Token* until both the pain and the villainy of all the characters has been revealed.

The functional difference between the three stages is that different kinds of scenes occur in them. There are three kinds of scenes: awakening scenes, memory scenes and action scenes. We will talk about each of them seperately in the next three sections, but first the following table shows which kinds of scenes can occur at which stages of the game:

- During the awakening, only awakening scenes are allowed.

- During revelation, only memory scenes are allowed.

- During resolution, both memory and action scenes are allowed.

We will now move on to characterising these three kinds of scenes.

3.3 Scenes: the awakening

During the first three scenes of each game, the shade slowly regains consciouness. This process is played out in awakening scenes. An awakening scene is set in the present, and should be narrated as a stream-of-consciousness: the little snippets and fragments of thought that constitute the consciousness of the shade as she pulls herself together. Elements you may wish to use are: the darkness from which the shade emerges, her raw emotions, vague and incoherent perceptions of external reality and memories of pain and suffering. During these scenes, the thoughts of the shade are quite incoherent, and do not have the form of clear perceptions, or vivid memories. It is probably best to leave the gender and name of the shade indeterminate during the awakening.

Because the shade has not yet formed a sense of self, you should at first avoid using the words 'I' and 'me'; but because the thoughts *do* constitute the consciousness of the shade, ywords like 'he' and 'her' are inappropriate as well. For example:

> Darkness. A silent eternity. Rest. And yet – yet, something is stirring. Something is amiss. A vague unrest pervades the Nothing; clouds of red lights swirl chaotically through the night. And then the pain returns, like a dagger through the heart.

The three subsequent scenes should progressively make the shade more of an individual, and more of a perceiver. You might wish to enter a notion of the 'I' during the second scene, and a perception of the external world in the third; or the other way around. Both should be present in the third scene. For example:

> Like unimaginable horrors, the memories return – but they recede into the darkness as I flee towards a small light in the distance. I. Me. Once, I was... but no. Stop thinking. The light grows bigger,

it is a wreathing mass of red and yellow tendrils. It is a fire. In a hearth, a stone hearth. It angrily consumes a large piles of wood – so why can't I feel the heat?

To repeat, an awakening scene is set in the present, and is narrated as a stream-of-consciousness. Other players are not allowed to enter an awakening scene. Once every player has narrated three awakening scenes, the second stage of the game commences.

3.4   Scenes: memories

Memory scenes form the lion's share of a game of *Shades*. Each memory scene starts in the present, where the shade roams about, exploring the location she finds herself in. This can be anything: an ancient castle, a sunken ship, a monastry, a house, a school, a private hell, a small town. By slowly introducing elements of the scenery, it will soon become clear what kind of locale the shades are destined to haunt.

While exploring in the present, the shade encounters an object, a place, a person or an event that triggers a memory. At this point, the narrating player switches from the present to the past, and starts narrating the memory. Once the memory ends, the player can either end the scene immediately, or add a few more sentences that are set in the present.

There are different rules concerning narrating the part of a memory scene that is set in the present, and the part that is set in the past. In the present, you must speak in the third person about your shade: 'he floats towards the huge doors', 'Maria walks through the wall that seperates the kitchen from the garden'. You are telling the story from the point of view of an all-knowing narrator, who is also reliable: everything which is stated is true. You may choose whether you tell everything from the point of view of the shade – whether the shade is the 'eyes and ears' of the listener – or whether you also speak about events the shade cannot perceive. Narration should proceed in present tense. Other players are not allowed to contribute to the scene. And since the shades are insubstantial, they cannot influence the external world. They cannot even speak to humans or each other.

In the past, in contrast, you must speak in the first person – you are narrating a memory of your shade from his or her own point of view: 'I walked across the garden path to Peter, carrying one of the red roses in my hands.' You may only talk in the past tense. Most importantly, the shades are unreliable narrators: their memories of the past have been twisted and deformed by wishful thinking, conscious or unconscious repression, and all kinds of embelishments to justify their own behaviour. Therefore, the memories may not be accurate representations of the past. The memories of different shades, and even those of the same shade, may be inconsistent.

You are allowed to have the characters of other players enter the memory you are narrating. In fact, you can tell anything you wish about these characters, and the other player has no veto right; he does not even have the right to protest. (But remember: the memories may not correspond to the truth,) You *may* ask another player to play his own character in the scene you are telling, for example for dialogue, but you are under no obligation to do so. Nor is it

especially recommended. You can tell the other player that you wish to retake control over his character at any time you please.

To summarise: each memory scene starts in the present, then moves to the past, and may or may not briefly return to the present. In the present, narration is reliable, but the shades cannot influence the world. In the past, narration is unreliable, but the characters – not yet shades at that point – can do anything normal humans can.

3.5   Scenes: actions

Action scenes only become possible in the final stage of the game. In order to start an action scene, the narrating player must pay a single *Action Token*. Any other player can enter the action scene by paying an *Action Token* of his own. In each action scene, every player participating thus pays one and only one *Action Token*.

Action scenes take place in the present. Each player narrates in first person, from the point of view of his own character, in the present tense. This narration is reliable: whatever is narrated actually happens. When more than one player is active in the scene, they should take turns narrating; often, they will be involved in dialogue.

In an action scene, the shades can influence the world. The spending of an *Action Token* signifies the spending of will power which the immaterial shade needs to become material, manipulate objects and communicate. In an action scene, the shades may open door, play the piano, pluck roses. They also become visible to, and may speak with, living beings. Perhaps most importantly, they are able to talk to each other, and hug, kiss or hit each other.

The final climax of the story *must* be an action scene, or a set of action scenes. The shades can only forgive each other, or fail to forgive each other, by communicating in the present – and this can only be done in action scenes. Also note that any action scene in which one of the players spends his final *Action Token* is automatically a climactic scene: if the tragedy is not resolved in this scene, the shade will never again be able to gather the willpower necessary to try and resolve it again. Any shade left without *Action Tokens* is fated to haunt the earth forever in a nightmare of hate, anger and pain. The player of such a shade is allowed one final stream-of-consciousness scene to show the predicament of the lost character.

But if the shades *are* reconciled, you can narrate a different ending. Perhaps they ascend to Heaven; perhaps they find their final rest; perhaps the scene simply fades to black.

Neither of the two finales is the right one; both can be dramatic, beautiful end emotional. Success is measured in tears or other signs of genuine pathos.

3.6   Summary of the scenes

Awakenings

   Time: Present

   Cost: None

Narration: Stream-of-consciousness, indefinite person

Focalisation: Internal

Reliablity: Not applicable

Other players: Not allowed

Memories

Time: Present, past, [present]

Cost: None

Narration: Third person (present); first person (past)

Focalisation: External or internal (present); internal (past)

Reliablity: Reliable (present); unreliable (past)

Other players: Not allowed (present); only by invitation (past)

Actions

Time: Present

Cost: One *Action Token*

Narration: First person

Focalisation: Internal

Reliablity: Reliable

Other players: By paying an *Action Token*

Chapter 4

Trust and sensitivity

4.1 The social level

Shades is a game of pain and forgiveness. That is what the stories are about. But is also a game of trust and sensitivity. That is what playing it is about. In this chapter we are going to look beyond the story and the means of its generation, and focus exclusively on the social situation of play. Roleplaying games do this, alas, only too rarely.

In general, roleplaying games allow negotiating about the statements that get added to the narration. Traditional games with a strong GameMaster invest one person with the authority to be the judge in all conflicts, but players are almost always allowed to argue their case. Other games have more democratic ways of argument, ofttimes even explicitly formulated in the rules. Many games use the friendly conflicts that arise during play as the main motor of the game. The result of these arrangements is that no statement a player makes is automatically added to the official narration of the game: it first goes through a stage of negotiation, even though this is most often silent and implicit acceptance.

In *Shades*, the situation is very different. The rules explicitly disallow any form of negotiation: whatever the narrating player says is added to the narration. Within the confines of the game, the narrating player has absolute power over the story. This is frightening: it is frightening that other players have such power, but it is vastly more frightening to have this power yourself. You want to have fun together, but anything you say might spoil the story for the other players. It is your heavy responsibility to say only things which everyone can accept in good cheer. To assuage the first fear, you must learn to trust the other players; in order to assuage the second, you must become sensitive to their tastes and wishes.

Luckily, *Shades* does not leave you without the tools to be successful. In the following sections, I will explain how you can use the narrative techniques that are the heart of the game to gently prod and poke and find out what the other players like. Based on trust and sensitivity, instead of on friendly rivalry and self-assertion, you will find that *Shades* playes very differently from many other games.

So, let us get to the techniques.

4.2   Using the awakening

Two elements of the fictional world which in the vast majority of games are already in place before game commences, are the characters and – in broad outline – the world they live in. In *Shades*, however, both characters and settings are constructed from scratch during the game. It is important to realise that not all characters appeal to all people, and the same goes for settings. So you should try and find a setting and a cast of characters that appeal to all players. The way to achieve this effect is by piecemeal narration, and ambiguity.

If you say 'Anna floats through the abandoned castle', the setting has been established in one fell stroke. If you say, instead, 'Anna looks down the stone spiral staircase, that winds its way into the depths', you have only added a small element to the setting. A long stone spiral staircase certainly invokes imagery of ancient buildings, of castles and tumbledown towers – but alone, it is insufficient to determine the setting. If your fellow players do not like the idea of playing in an ancient castle, they can add new elements to the setting that pull the imagination in different directions. Thus, by piecemeal narration, you can work towards a setting and a cast of characters everyone is happy with.

A game of *Shades* always starts with three rounds of the fragmentary stream-of-consciousness narration: the awakening scenes in which each shade pulls itself together. The first facts about the setting and the characters are thus, by virtue of the system, established in a piecemeal way, as vague references to the setting and the identity of the protagonists pop up in the consciousness of the shades. The awakening also sets the stage for a few memory scenes in which the attention of the shade is not yet very well focused, allowing the players to continue piecemeal narration without awkwardness for quite a while.

Ambiguity is another very useful tool, which is almost automatically at work in the stream-of-consciousness scenes that constitute the awakening. Here you can drop words and phrases which the other players can use as they see fit. For example:

> Images follow each other in rapid succession. Clouds over the moors.
> A castle. Laughing people. The taste of salt on my lips. And *her*.
> In her red dress... the ground gives way beneath me.

At this point, another player can either narrate her shade also remembering a woman in a red dress, or remembering herself wearing a red dress. You, by making the above narration, have made a suggestion to the other player: 'it might be cool if you play a woman in a red dress'. But the other player can easily reject the suggestion by forcing a different interpretation of the narration.

Thus, by adding information to the fictional world one small fact at a time, and by making your statements open to many interpretations, the process of building a setting and a cast can be streamlined. The narrative structure of *Shades*, with its slowly awakening protagonists, allows you to do this in a very natural way.

4.3   Using unreliable narration

An important part of *Shades* is the revelation of the tragedy that took place in the past. The resurfacing memories of the shades slowly reveal this tale. Once

again, you should strive to create a story that is appealing to all the players. Apart from the piecemeal and non-chronological nature of the memories, *Shades* furnishes you with another very useful tool: unreliable narration.

No memory of a shade is guaranteed to be reliable. In fact, most of them will be deformed by the wishful thinking, the selective recollection and the later rationalisations of the protagonists. If Maria remembers how John treated her with indifference and cruelty, it may very well be the case that she has unconcsciously reconstructed this episode to accord with her later hate of John. Thus, if a player narrates John mistreating Maria, it has not been established that John actually treated Maria that badly. The truth is always left unspecified.

This makes it easy to narrate significant events in the past without taking the story into directions the other players would rather avoid. For the other players are not forced to accept what you say as true; that is, they need not accept any element of a memory as veridical. If they dislike the way you take the story, they can use their next (or any later) scene to narrate a memory that contradicts your story.

Be very careful to notice these things. They are neon signs, saying: 'I don't want this to enter the fictional world. Please look at my suggestion, and let us find some middle ground where we can meet.' It is especially important to notice when a player is opposed to things you make his or her character do. You can accept the other's proposals, or work towards a new solution, by affirming or casting new light upon the issue in your next memory.

To summarise, you use unreliable narration to propose significant events, and rewrite them if they are not enjoyed by all. The narrative dynamics that result from it serve to raise sensitivity between the players and develop a story that everyone can identify with.

4.4   Trust and the tragedy

Sometimes you have been working towards this really painful memory, where two shades hurt each other out of pride or – worse – love, when one of the other players suddenly narrates a scene that takes the sting out of all you've previously implied. That is the moment you are tempted most to exclaim: 'No, please, why do you do *that*?!'

It is also the moment you have to take a deep breath, relax, and trust the other player. Both of you are working towards a tale of tragedy. Accept the momentary setback, and consider how the new situation could give rise to an even more heart-rending story than you originally envisioned.

The only time that something is amiss is when another player puts forward his of her *Tragedy Token* at a time you cannot see a tragedy at all. Somewhere, either of you is missing something. Luckily, there is a very easy way to say so: do not put forward your own token. This is a very clear statement to the effect that you cannot see a real tragedy in the story narrated so far. Then, start adding to the pain. Alerted by your non-commitment to the final stage of the game, the other player may retract his own token; at the very least, he will now know that he has to show you more clearly what he believes to be the tragic story implied by the narration so far.

Never, ever, put foward a *Tragedy Token* simply to conform to the other players. It is essential that you use it as a means of communication; a means of

saying: yes, I think we are in agreement about how all the strands of our tale together weave a tragic story.

Chapter 5

Advice on the art

5.1 Suitable characters

[Characters must be human: no innocents, no villains. No good versus evil: everything in *Shades* is morally grey, especially the player characters.]

5.2 Reinforcement and contrast

[Using the tales of different characters to highlight thematic elements of the tales of the others.]

5.3 Telling and re-telling

[The great and important technique of retelling the same scene several times, from different points of view; or from the same point of view, but in a memory less tainted by selective memory and unconscious editing.]

5.4 The material present

[Tips on using the present world to reinforce your narration in the past.]

5.5 The force of material tokens

[That *Shades* should have no out-of-narration discourse; how the *Tokens* are to be used for communication instead. The force of physical signs and physical contact.]

5.6 Experimental art

[Going over the edge, and throwing away your *Tragedy Token*.]