

SHADES
Remembered suffering and the
building of trust

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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?



When playing *Shades*, you and one or two others will try to construct a haunting tale of tragedy and forgiveness from scratch. You will take turns narrating a piece of the story from the point of view of your character, and you will try to make these pieces into a coherent whole. But the rules of the game don't make it all that easy for you to succeed: *Shades* is meant as a challenging cooperative game. The challenge is for you and the other player or players to together tell a coherent, emotional tale; and to do it just by telling the tale, without any prior agreement and without talking *about* the story during the game. Sounds hard?

It's easier than you may think, once you've learned to trust the other players and be sensitive to their wishes and ideas.

And the rules of *Shades* are specifically designed to help you build up that trust and that sensitivity. They will help you get to know what kind of stories the other players like, and how they try to signal their ideas to you. They will help you to learn to relinquish control over the story to others when that is called for, without taking a posture of deference. Not only will you be telling great stories and having fun doing it, you may also become better friends.

Chapter 2

The challenge

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 six coins or tokens (three black ones and three white ones) for each player.

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 your goal while playing *Shades*: telling a gripping, emotional story on the theme of forgiveness. You should think of this as a challenge, and the only way to rise up to the challenge is by developing an atmosphere of trust and sensitivity between the players. What *Shades* gives you are rules and advice that will help you create that atmosphere and achieve the goal of the game.

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 explains why *Shades* needs you to be sensitive to the wishes of other 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*, and I'll tell you how to raise the bar once you've managed to master the game.

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 maybe 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 at the location 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. It is absolutely forbidden to say anything *about* the game before it has ended. You can ask clarifications of the rules, or state that you want to have a bathroom break, but you can *not* say anything about the story that is being told. “Wouldn’t it be cool if, ...”, “No, you misremember what I said, because ...” or “I don’t think this is going anywhere, maybe we should ...” are all *forbidden*. The whole challenge of *Shades* is to tell a story

without any explicit discussion. You'll have to tune in on each other simply by telling the story, and by the informed use of tokens, which will be explained in chapter 3.

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. The next chapter is dedicated to those.

Chapter 3

Spinning the story

3.1 Pre-game preparation

Preparing for a game of *Shades* is very easy. You need two or three players, and for each player three black tokens and three white tokens – Go pieces work perfectly, but really anything with these colours will do. These tokens should be placed where everyone can clearly see them and easily reach them. Make yourselves comfortable. Open a bottle of wine and put on non-intrusive background music, if you like that kind of thing. Done? Then you are ready to play.

3.2 Three stages

A game of *Shades* always has 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 are in the possession of at least one white token. Once this condition is realised, the narrative enters the third and final stage – resolution.

The purpose of the first stage is to lay a foundation for the characters that you will play, the setting in which you will play, the remembered tragedy and the general colour of the game. It is almost certain that you will not be able to say who your character is and where the action is taking place at the end of the awakening, but you'll probably have your first vague ideas – maybe that you are male, or that the tragedy was about love, or that you are playing in an ancient castle or a sunken submarine.

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. When it ends, it will not be the case that every single detail about this tragedy has been narrated, but it should have 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. Both the pain and the villainy of all the characters have been at least partially revealed.

The purpose of the third stage of the game, the resolution, is to work towards a dramatic climax where the shades can either forgive each other and get the peace they have been craving, or harden their hearts and be doomed to haunt the earth forever.

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 separately 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 talk about these three kinds of scenes.

3.3 Scenes: the awakening

During the first three scenes of each game, the shade slowly regains consciousness. 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, words 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. 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 monastery, 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 of his or her former life. 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 separates 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. 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 embellishments 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: what you are telling may not actually have happened the way you tell it!)

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.



Memory scenes are also the only scenes in which you can earn *black tokens* and *white tokens*. Here is how it works. Whenever you narrate something that doesn't fit in with what another player has narrated, and that player thinks this difference in memory between the shades is important to the story, the player can give you a black token. If one shade remember a door being black, and the other remember the door being brown, that is probably not an important difference. But if one shade remembers that her child died in a car accident because her husband was driving too fast, whereas the other shade remembers that his child died in a car accident because his wife was making a terrible row with him that distracted him from driving – that probably *is* a difference that is important to the unfolding story.

Only the player whose statements have been contradicted can give a black token to the current narrator, but it's never compulsory to do so. A player cannot receive more than one token (black or white) in any scene, and no player can receive more than three black tokens during the entire game. You may still narrate important differences after you've received your third black token, you just won't get any new tokens for this.

When you narrate a memory that shows how your shade is coming around to the point of view of one of the other shades, the player of that shade may give you a white token. Again, tokens should only be given for important parts of the narration. If the shade remembers that the door was, after all, black, this is probably too unimportant to be worthy of a token. But if the shade remembers that, yes, he *was* prone to driving too fast – that might net the player a white token.

You do not have to return to an already established contradiction in order to get a white token. If the general narrative has shown that the first shade believes the second to have been very cruel to her, whereas the second shade believes that he has always acted for the first shade's benefit, a white token might be earned for the first shade remembering the second to be nice to her, or for the second to remember streaks of cruelty in his own behaviour.

Only the player whose statements have been contradicted can give a white token to the current narrator, but it's never compulsory to do so. A player cannot receive more than one token (black or white) in any scene. In addition, you can only get a white token by removing a black token from your pile. If you have no black tokens, you cannot earn a white token. (Since you can only earn three black tokens during the game, you can also earn at most three white tokens.) You may still narrate reconciliations if you have no black tokens; it just won't earn you a white one.

3.5 Scenes: actions

Action scenes only become possible in the final stage of the game. To start an action scene, the narrating player must use a single white token, removing it from her pile. Any other player can enter the action scene by paying a white token of his own. In each action scene, every player participating thus pays one and only one white 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 a white token signifies the spending of willpower which the immaterial shade needs to become material, manipulate objects and communicate. In an action scene, the shades may open doors, 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, hug, kiss or hit each other.

The final climax of the story *must* be an action scene, or several 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 third white 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 again. Such a shade 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. Or actually, success is measured through answering several questions.

3.6 Wrapping up

Once you have either narrated how the shades have reconciled, or how they have doomed themselves forever, the game ends. Speaking about the story is now allowed, encouraged, and even called for. Together, you should decide how well you have addressed the challenge presented by *Shades*. Specifically, you should make sure that the following three questions are answered by all the players:

1. Was the tale coherent and compelling?
2. Did it follow the narrative structure called for by the rules of the game?
3. Did all the players influence the story equally?

The more compelling the tale, the closer it followed the structure laid down by the rules and the more balanced the input of all the players was, the better

you have succeeded. The latter condition is especially important: if one of the players made all the substantial contributions and the others just followed him, you have failed. The story should be made in a truly collaborative fashion.

Make sure to discuss what worked and didn't work for you. Where there any misunderstandings? Did you get the feeling that one of the players didn't want to use your ideas? Did you feel pushed around, or did you feel like you were pushing others? Lay all of this in the open, and talk about it! It will help you all to understand each other better, and improve your chances of success at playing *Shades*. If you play *Shades* several times with the same people, you'll quickly notice that you become better and better at it! Why? Because you've become more sensitive to the other players, and you've learnt to trust them. The next chapter will look into that more closely.

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. That, after all, is what is *real*.

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, oftentimes 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 even 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 friendly rivalry and self-assertion, *Shades* plays very differently from games that are propelled by the latter.

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 unconsciously 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. And since telling contradicting stories is the only way to earn black tokens, and since earning black tokens is the only way to ever get the game to a conclusion, it is even *required* that you use the unreliability of the shades' memories.

This makes it easy to narrate significant events in the past without taking the story into directions the other players would rather avoid. 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.

At least as important as avoiding directions the others do not like to go, the unreliable memories are a great tool in avoiding that one player makes all the decisions about the past tragedy. You can propose story elements without forcing them onto other people: they can always contradict you if they wish. In the same way, you can contradict them when you think they take too much control over the story. In this way, you can keep each other in line and make sure that everyone contributes equally.

To do this effectively, it is of the utmost importance that you understand what *black tokens* mean. They do *not* mean: you have contradicted me! They mean: you have contradicted me, and this contradiction between the memories of our shades is going to be important for the story. So, by giving a black token you are saying that what the other person said is an important part of the narrative. Consequently, by *not* giving a black token when somebody contradicts you on what could easily be seen as an important issue, you are saying that you do not want to focus on this difference; that, in fact, you'd like to leave open the possibility that his shade is simply and unambiguously *wrong* about this event. Both giving and not giving a black token are important signals – use them to your advantage!

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 starts giving you *white tokens* or trying to earn them at a time you cannot see a tragedy having formed in the narrative at all. The scenes where you earn white tokens are those where the shades start reassessing the tragedy. As a narrative necessity, this can only happen once at least the basic outlines of the tragedy have been made clear. Giving a white token to another player, or recounting a memory in such a way that it is clear you are asking for a white token, is a way of saying that you think the tragedy is mostly in place.

So, what to do when the other player thinks this is the case, and you do not? Well, it is important that you are both on the same page, so there is more work to be done. The tragedy has to become clear to you, and moving towards resolution must be delayed. Luckily, there is an easy way to say so: do not give the other player any white tokens. 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 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, or that he has to work with you to create something that both of you find tragic.

Never, ever, put forward a white 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.

4.5 The end

The end may well be the hardest part of the game. Here you will have to choose between redemption or eternal hate; but it is emphatically not the idea that one player makes this choice and the others conform. So how do you make such a choice together? Here is how: drop any idea you have of what would be the preferable and simply play the scenes out together. See where your shared ideas take you. Let the shades interact with each other, let them talk, abandon yourself to the story – and who knows?, perhaps both of you are surprised at the outcome.

In any case, good luck!

Chapter 5

The greater challenge

If you have mastered *Shades*, you can add new requirements to the story that make the game more challenging and hopefully more rewarding. This chapter gives you some options.

5.1 Bigger groups

When you play with more people, it becomes harder to keep track of what everybody has said; it becomes harder to weave all the narratives together into a greater whole; and it might become harder to ensure that everyone has the same amount of influence over the story. One way of increasing the challenge is therefore to play with a bigger group. I played it successfully with four people, and I know that fun has been had with as many as five. You might try to do that, or get even more of your friends together – who knows what *Shades* with eight people will look like?!

5.2 Past causes, present effects

You can also make the game harder by deciding to make the present important in your story. There should be real people living in the here and now, and the shades should observe their actions. In order to make these people relevant, their situation should be the result of the shades' feud.

Implement this challenge by adding a new question to the list of questions that are to be asked at the end of the game:

Did it become clear what the present effects of the shades' past action were?

5.3 The mirroring present

Perhaps the most interesting way to raise the challenge posed by the game is by adding the following requirement on the story:

The tragedy that unfolded in the past is somehow mirrored by events taking place in the present. There are people alive in the present that

are locked in a situation much like that of the shades in their lives, but just before it got really out of hand. Establish this situation, and have the shades' possibility of release be dependent upon whether or not they succeed in defusing this present situation.

Why does this make the game harder? First, it adds a whole new bunch of characters and events to the mix, making the tale to be told simply more complicated. But more importantly: in the present, you have neither unreliable narration, nor can Black or White Tokens be giving or withheld. So you'll have to establish the situation and the events without the safety nets and communicative possibilities that are available for the past tragedy. This is a real challenge, and if you can create a successful tale of this kind, you and your fellow players deserve an award for being one hell of a well-tuned and sensitive group!

5.4 Experimental art

And then... there is the radical possibility of deciding on the fly that you will break out of the constraints imposed by *Shades*. What happened to me in one of the first games of *Shades* I ever played was that it turned out that I and my fellow player were both playing the same character! Of course, that made it rather difficult to go on playing the game as intended, and we just ran with it and did something else. If something similar happens to you, and the result is satisfying, that is great.

I suggest you indicate that in such a situation you are no longer playing *Shades* by shoving all the Tokens off the table. Good luck!

Chapter 6

Example of play

This chapter shows how a game of *Shades* might play out. The game I present here is perhaps shorter than typical, but in all other respects a perfectly good, complete game of *Shades*, in accordance with all the rules. The narration of the first player is given in normal type, that of the second player in italics. Between brackets are game-actions that take place during narration; indented passages are my commentary on the game as it progresses.

Darkness.... And silence, broken only by a soft melody, sweet, yearning, full of love and sorrow. It goes on and on and on. Time passes, but it is not counted, does not matter. There are only darkness and bitter-sweet song.



‘Cold’. The sensation must have lasted an eternity, but only now its name returns. Cold, yes. Beyond measure. Beyond comprehension.



Suddenly the harmony is broken. Two discords fill the void and my soul fills with pain. My soul - yes!, for that is what I had forgotten – in the darkness and the song I forgot myself. I was aware, but never of me. Now the pain has awakened me.



Her face, with the cold blue eyes that froze my words and chilled the core of my being. Her skin white as snow, her words sharp as ice... the eyes, the eyes... they never left me.



Where is this? Where am I? These... ‘walls’, yes, that is what they were called – these grey-plastered walls return to haunt me after all these years? Please, let the music returns; please, not this pain anew!



All these years I dreamed, it seems, and her eyes stared at me and froze time. But now there is light, and it is the light of the sun. Heat creeps back into my soul... am I then returned? If so... to torment or to bliss?

When each player has narrated three scenes, the Awakening is automatically ended and the second phase of the game begins. What has been established so far? Not very much, which is good – the Awakening is meant to plant the first seeds, not to reveal the flowers. We know that the location the first shade awakes to has grey-plastered walls; that doesn't say a lot, but it gives us something to work with. Then, there are the music and the cold, symbols that may return during the rest of the game, and perhaps get a more definite meaning. There has also been talk of a woman with cold eyes – perhaps she is the first shade, frightening the second even in death? Or perhaps not. Only playing on will tell.



The shade hangs there, still at first, in the middle of small room. It is mostly bare: no paintings grace its walls, no curtains adorn its windows. Only a large bed, lacking a mattress, remains. It is to this piece of furniture that the shade floats, staring at it intently.

“I lay here for days at a time with nothing to do but listen to the maid as she busied herself in some other part of the house – not that she ever appeared to be very busy – and hoping for his footsteps to come to my door. But he no longer loved me and almost never came; and when he did, hate alone shone brightly forth from his hard grey eyes. How I suffered here! How I pined away! And yet I kept loving him.”

The claims are almost stumbling over each other in this short narration. There is a man (will it be the second shade?) who supposedly grew to hate the shade, whereas the shade her/himself remained faithful in his/her love. If the second player takes the bait and identifies his shade as this man, these claims will make excellent stuff to disagree about.



Once, this must have been a beautiful garden, with flowerbeds, a clear pond and a well-kept lwan all around the big Victorian house. But the grass has grown waist-high, weeds have conquered the flowerbeds, and the pool has turned into a reeking swamp. Nevertheless – the sun shines and the birds sing just as the shade remembers it.

“Here I went and sat on the wooden bench – I think it was green, a dark green that reminded me of the needles of the spruce. The sun would shine on my face, and I would relish its warmth. The birds would sing their lovely songs, so musically, and for a few moments I could forget my misery, could forget the drunken cries of hate and anger that she hurled at me whenever I was in the house.”



The shade attempts to touch the bed, but her insubstantial hand goes right through the material.

“Although I suffered much, I kept my peace. Not a complaint ever came over my lips. [Player 2 hands a Black Token to player 1.] But both my loves had deserted me, and with them all joy had left my soul. I languished. I became ill. But did he repent and come back to me, as my illness grew worse and I needed him more? No. No, he never did.”

The second player, assuming that his shade is the ‘he’ in the first player’s story and her shade the ‘she’ in his, judges the claim that the first player’s shade never complained to be in direct contradiction with his own claim that she constantly threw around drunken cries of hate and anger. Because he thinks this will make for an interesting difference, he hands out a Black Token, silently.



The house seems empty but intact, a foreboding presence shaped of brick and mortar. As the shade turns towards it, his feelings sink.

“I kept visiting her, up in the bedroom, right to the bitter end. [Player 1 hands a Black Token to player 2.] God know I could not save her, though I tries. Even when she was sober she could not be reasoned with. She just kept accusing me, demanding in ever shriller tones that I acknowledge my guilt. But it was she and her drinking that caused all our woe, not me! I had done nothing wrong!”

With these last words, player 2 sets the door wide open for player 1 to contradict him. This is always a good strategy: you should not only contradict the other player, but also make it easy for her to contradict you.



“How different had it all been, but a year earlier... together, hand in hand, strolling through the garden... reading poetry to each other: Wordsworth, Keats, that ‘In Memoriam’ book he was so fond of... and of course my belly gently swelling, already nourishing the new life that in the end *he* ended...” [Player 2 gives player 1 a black token.]



Slowly the shade walks towards the house, as if pulled towards it by an unrelenting force. The door is closed, but being immaterial, the shade has no problem walking right through it. He regards the entrance hall, his gaze lingering on the broad stone stairway leading upwards.

“Nothing was wrong with her or the baby. Any fool could see that. If only she had behaved as a proper mother everything would have turned out alright. But no – no, she had to act like a willful, spoilt child, locking herself into her room for days, refusing to eat, refusing to see anyone. And drinking, drinking all the time. Yes, yes, it was all her fault that the baby was stillborn. [Player 1 hands a Black Token to player 2.] All her fault!”



Floating away from the bed and into the hallway, the shade suddenly comes to the top of a large marble stairway. She winces.

Taking her shade to the location already described by player 2, player 1 sets the scene for telling memories about the same event. This is one of the ways the surroundings can help you tell the story of the tragedy.

“Here we had the fight. Strange, how I cannot even remember what it was about. I was angry, that I remember distinctly, very angry. Screamed at him at the top of my lungs. And then – it all went so fast – he hit me, and the next thing I knew was that I was tumbling down the stairs... I was so shocked... and God, no...”



“Or was it? Was it all her fault? I remember that we had a row about, well, something stupid... the name of the child, perhaps. She was so angry... and her eyes, her mellow, tender eyes froze over like the pond in winter. They became so cold, I could not, could not bear it. I could not look at them, could not stand the icy stare where love should shine. And then I hit her and she fell. I was so afraid, by God, I was so afraid I had hurt her, had hurt the child, so wordlessly afraid. [Player 1 hands a White Token to player 2.]”

By narrating that his shade indeed hit the other shade, and was afraid of hurting her, player 2 has validated the memories of the first shade while casting doubt upon his own shade’s assertions that “it was all her fault”. Therefore, player 1 gives him a White Token, taking away one of his Black Tokens in the process. At this point, player 1 has two Black Tokens, and player 2 has one Black and one White Token.



In pain, the shade returns to her bedroom.

“They were not true though, his malicious accusations, those feeble attempts to rid himself of his guilt. I never drank; I had always been and still was a proper English lady. [Player 2 gives player 1 a black token.] No grief could bring me down.”

A glint from beneath the bed catches her eye. She stoops, and under layers of dust lie several empty bottles.

Having been given three Black Tokens during the game, player 1 can now no longer earn these. The last statement might have earned player 1 a White Token, but since she had already been given a Black Token and since you can only earn one token per turn, player 2 was not allowed to give her one.



“Those eyes – they haunted me. I saw them in my dreams. She screamed for me, but I dared not go to her, not after the incident. [] I was too afraid that I would again see the bitter, accusatory cold in the eyes of the woman I loved, the woman I needed to believe still loved me. I loved her too much to be able to accept her hate. By night I plugged my ears; by day I fled into the garden.”



Wondering, she stares at the bottles.

“Yes... yes, it is true. I was so scared and so alone I... I could not stop myself. Oh, why, why, why didn't he come to me? If only he had come to me! If only we could have talked, if only we... But what killed my child? Was it my fall or was it my drinking?” [Player 2 hands a White Token to player 1.]

Now every player has earned at least one White Token, and the last phase of the game begins. Memory scenes may still be told, and Black and White Tokens can be earned as normal; but from now on, it is also possible to narrate action scenes. Remember, each action scene costs one White Token.



Next to the entrance hall is a large room which is now empty but for a grand piano, a sole memory of days that were.

“When the child came, much too early, I could not express my mourning save here, behind the keys. In those few monthes that were left us I played every day, and in those hours even she was silent. Her wailing ceased. Mediated by music, these were our moments together.”

The shade slowly walks towards the piano.



“How I drank, and how I started wailing and screaming when I drank. [Player 2 hands player 1 another White Token.] The house must have reverberated with the sound of my voice! It is no wonder that e avoided me... though he shouldn't have. He had a duty as my husband, even if he no longer loved me. He had.”



[Player 2 pays a White Token, starting an action scene.] I get behind the piano, seating myself on the stool, which seems substantial enough. For a moment my fingers hover above the keys. Can I still play? I press the middle C and a clear tone fills the room. Without thinking I go on, and the tones weave themselves into the mournful melodies I used to play back whe she was still alive.

By paying a White Token and starting an action scene, the player has bought the right to have his shade influence the present. This is why the shade can play the piano, and have music fill the present house. Obviously, player 2 hopes that player 1 will have her shade hear the music. Remember that music played a large role in the first player's initial narrations!



Suddenly the music returns, the music that accompanied my conscious non-existence. But now I recognise it for what it is: my husband, on the piano, expressing in music what he could never, ever say in words – and I become aware of something I have not felt for ages. Love.

[Player 1 pays a White Token to indicate that this scene will go on with an action, not a memory.] As fast as my feet will take me I rush down the stairs, leaving the dolorous bedroom behind. I throw open the door to the parlour, and the he sits. “I love you,” I say.

Talking to each other in the present is an action which can only be taken in an action scene. Right now, player 1 still has one Black and one White Token; player 2 only has one White Token left, but can still earn a Black one. This will not be necessary.



In action scenes, the players can play out a dialogue between their shades. Note that this is not possible in memory scenes, where only the player whose turn it is is allowed to speak!

[Player 2 pays another White Token.] I cease playing and look up at my wife. “I love you too,” I whisper; and then I add: “It was my fault. I should not have pushed you.”

“It was my fault as well,” I answer, embracing hem. “Let’s not talk about it.”

I kiss her.

I kiss him back. “Just one question. When I killed myself, did you...”

[Player 2 interrupts player 1.] “Sh. That is the past. Let it be enough that I love you now.”

I embrace him anew, content, dizzy – and as I do so, we fade from view, leaving only silence.

And thus ends a game of *Shades*, this time quite happily.