

Play Extempore

A Shakespearean role-playing game

by

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Table of Contents

Introduction.....	I
Game mechanics.....	2
What you need to play.....	3
Beginning the game.....	4
Monologues and asides.....	5
Entrances.....	6
Genres	7
Settings and locations.....	8
Fights.....	9
Character creation system.....	10
Class.....	10
Characteristics.....	11
Humours.....	13
Genre modifiers.....I.....	14
Cross-dressing and disguise.....	15
Minor Characters.....	16
Playing an existing Shakespeare character.....	16
Goals.....	17
Final suggestions.....	18

Separate documents:

Dramatis Persona chart

The Plot

Point Sheet

Introduction

To the great Variety of Gamers.

“What, shall we be merry? shall we haue a Play extempory?” (1H4 2.4.)

The purpose of most role-playing games (RPGs) is to construct an open-ended fictional world in which *Players* can perform characters that have adventures and generate communal narratives. *Players* sit around a table, act out their characters, and roll dice to determine the outcomes of actions they imagine within the world of the story they are creating. A gamemaster supervises the game, setting up the narrative, playing minor characters, and adjudicating the outcomes of actions proposed in the narrative. *This* game owes much to such traditional RPGs and is probably best suited to *Players* who have some experience with them. The purpose here, however, is not to sustain a fictional world through an on-going narrative, but to have fun with your knowledge of Shakespeare by attempting to create a Shakespearean play extemporaneously. The game does not take itself seriously and neither should people who play it. I’ve tried to make the game as flexible as possible – offering different levels of possible involvement for the gamemaster (here called the *Playwright*) and the *Players*.

I am interested in all and any feedback that you may have about the game. Please send your comments to budra@sfu.ca

Play on,



Paul Budra, *philosophiae doctor*

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Game mechanics

To play this game you will need someone to act as the *Playwright*, or gamemaster, and at least four *Players*. The *Playwright* runs the game. He chooses the genre that will be played or rolls for it (see *Genres*) and gives the play a title. He chooses the game's setting or rolls for it (see *Setting*), performs the non-playing characters (NPCs—see *Minor Characters*), and sets the storyline according to the genre being played. He can also act as a Chorus to move the action forward in time or geographically. He can add extra-game information. He assigns *Goals* (see *Goals*) for the individual scenes or characters. He can assign characters, or let the *Players* create their own, or use the game's *Character Creation System*. In short, the *Playwright* can fully craft the game narrative, allow the *Players* to generate much of it, allow rolls of the die to determine virtually every aspect of the game, or strike a compromise somewhere between these possibilities.

The *Playwright* also keeps score. In a formal game, the *Playwright* assigns a point to a *Player* under the following circumstances (using the *Character Point* sheet):

- *A point is given every time a *Player* uses an appropriate pun, witticism, or malapropism while in character.
- *A point is given every time a *Player* incorporates a line from Shakespeare or other Renaissance dramatist or poet in his character's dialogue.
- *A point is given every time a *Player* speaks in blank verse or, if occasion merits, rhyming couplets or sonnets that *are not* authentically Shakespearean but sound like they could be.
- *A point is given every time a *Player* employs a Renaissance or classical allusion in his character's dialogue.
- *A point is given every time a *Player* wins a battle of wits (see *Fights*).
- *Two points are given every time a *Player* sings, three points if the song contains the words "hey nonny nonny."

In a less formal game, the *Players* themselves vote at the end of the game on who was the most Shakespearean. A *Player* cannot vote for himself. In this type of game the *Playwright* does not get a vote unless the score is tied.

The *Players* must complete a *Dramatis Persona* sheet (unless the *Playwright* has done this for them) and, while they are playing the game, try to remain “in character,” that is, speaking and reacting to the narrative they are generating as a character with the qualities listed on their *Dramatis Persona* sheet would. They must follow the instructions of the *Playwright* and use *The Plot* for their entrances and monologues or asides. They must roll the die to determine the outcome of fights by applying the *total modifier* number on their *Dramatis Persona* sheet. Above all they must have fun, attempt to speak in blank verse (or at least pseudo Elizabethan English), and dazzle their fellows with quotations, allusions, song, and wit.

What you need to play

- ⊙The *Players* will need a twenty-sided die. These are available at any store that sells gaming supplies. Electronic versions can be found on the web: search “online dice roller d20.”
- ⊙Each *Player* will need a completed *Dramatis Persona* sheet. *Players* who perform more than one major character will need a *Dramatis Persona* sheet for each character.
- ⊙The *Playwright* and each *Player* will need access to *The Plot* (sometimes called *The Plat*).
- ⊙The *Playwright* will need the *Character Point Sheet* for keeping score.



Beginning the game

The *Playwright* announces the title and genre of the play to be performed. If this is done ahead of the time, all the better, because the *Players* will have more time to set their characters. The *Playwright* explains the story of the play. Once the title, genre, and story are known, either

<<The *Playwright* assigns characters he has created (these can be actual Shakespearean characters) and distributes filled-in *Dramatis Persona* sheets.

<<The *Players* perform characters they have chosen (again, these can be actual characters) using their filled-in *Dramatis Persona* sheets.

<<The *Players* create their characters using the *Character Creation System* and fill in their *Dramatis Persona* sheets.

<<The *Players* use some combination of the above.

(Please note, the *Playwright* has ultimate authority over the characters: if he finds too many *Players* are performing the same type of character, he may ask *Players* to create new characters or to roll for characters -- see the *Character Creation System*. Some genres have different character needs. See *Genre*).

The *Playwright* explains the story of the play. He then assigns *Goals* in one of two ways: either by scene or by character (see *Goals*).

Each *Player* will need to have his *Dramatis Persona* sheet in front of him when he plays the game.

Each *Player* must be able to see *The Plot*.

If the *Playwright* has not pre-assigned monologues, it is now time to roll for monologues (see *Monologues and Asides*). They are written into *The Plot*.

If the *Playwright* has not pre-assigned entrances, it is now time to roll for them (see *Entrances*). They are entered into *The Plot*.

If the *Playwright* has not pre-assigned settings and locations, they are rolled for and

entered into *The Plot* (see *Setting and Locations*).

Once the entrances are filled into *The Plot*, the play begins. Barring a Chorus by the *Playwright*, the first character to enter speaks the first lines of the play.

When the action of the scene has achieved its narrative *Goal* (or the *Players* have run out of steam) the *Playwright* announces the next scene. Nota bene: *a scene, nay an act, can be quite short.*

The play progresses through the scenes while the *Playwright* keeps score. At the end, the *Playwright* tallies the points on the *Character Point Sheet* in *The Reckoning* column. Whoever has the most wins.

Monologues and asides

All major characters get one monologue each in the play, though the monologue can be quite short and can be taken as an aside. There are two exceptions. Characters with a total modifier in the *Battle of the Wits* category of over 20 get three monologues; tragic protagonists in eponymous plays get one monologue *per act*. The *Playwright* assigns monologue slots on *The Plot* chart and ensures that the characters are alone (or believe they are alone) in the scene when it is their turn to deliver a monologue. If other characters are present, the *Player* may opt for an aside.

Monologue scenes for average, as opposed to witty or eponymous, characters are determined by roll of the die. Each *Player* rolls a d20. There are 20 scenes in the standard *Plot*. The number rolled signifies the scene in which the *Player* has a monologue, as follows:



d20 rolls 1 = 1.1	d20 rolls 5 = 2.1	d20 rolls 9 = 3.1	d20 rolls 13 = 4.1	d20 rolls 17 = 5.1
d20 rolls 2 = 1.2	d20 rolls 6 = 2.2	d20 rolls 10 = 3.2	d20 rolls 14 = 4.2	d20 rolls 18 = 5.2
d20 rolls 3 = 1.3	d20 rolls 7 = 2.3	d20 rolls 11 = 3.3	d20 rolls 15 = 4.3	d20 rolls 19 = 5.3
d20 rolls 4 = 1.4	d20 rolls 8 = 2.4	d20 rolls 12 = 3.4	d20 rolls 16 = 4.5	d20 rolls 20 = 5.4

Once the characters have been assigned the scenes in which they have monologues, these are marked into *The Plot* in the “Mono” column. So, if a character named Florio rolls and is assigned a monologue in 1.1, then “Flo” is written in the *Monologue* column for that scene.

Remember: characters with wit scores of over 20 roll the d20 three times and take monologues in every scene rolled; tragic protagonists get one monologue per act.

Nota bene: All Players are allowed a long speech when their character is dying.

Entrances

Obviously, characters have to be in the scenes in which they make monologues, so monologue assignments are also, *de facto*, entrance assignments. In our example, as Florio has a monologue in 1.1, he is automatically assigned an entrance in 1.1. And since characters should be alone when they deliver a monologue, it makes sense to have Florio enter the scene *solus*.

The other entrances can be assigned in one of two ways. First, the *Playwright* can simply make the assignments. Second, the *Players* can roll the die and use the *Scene Assignment* chart above. The *Playwright* specifies how many rolls, and therefore entrances, each character gets. Major characters need more entrances than minor. The *Playwright* may need to adjust entrances if the rolls put too many characters in specific scenes or prevent certain characters

from meeting. The *Playwright* also decides which characters make entrances together based on the logic of their relationship or the *Goal* of the scene.

The final scene of the play, 5.4, should contain all the characters. If some have died before 5.4, they can still appear: someone may order their bodies to be brought forth.

Characters are listed in *The Plot* in the order that they enter the scene. If more than one enters at a time, then “+” is used. For example, if, under *The Plot’s Character & Entrances* column for 1.1 of our play, the *Playwright* inserts “Flo, Ant, Mal + Oph,” then Florio enters first, followed by Antonio. Malvolio and Ophelia then enter together.

Genres

The *Playwright* may choose the genre, or roll the die to select as follows:

1-5	History
6-10	Comedy
11-15	Tragedy
16-20	Romance

The genre will determine the narrative of the play as a whole.

History play	Dynastic struggle and/or war, civil or foreign
Comedy	Young lovers’ desires are thwarted but eventually consummated
Tragedy	A crime must be revenged, or a bad decision has consequences
Romance	Long-separated family members are improbably reunited

The genre also has an impact on characters. For a comedy, the *Playwright* may insist that two of the characters are lovers. In a history play, he may insist that one character is a pretender to the throne, etc.

Setting and Locations

The *Playwright* may choose the setting for his play, or roll the die to select as follows:

1-5	England
6-9	Italy
10-13	France
14-17	Ancient world, especially Rome but also Greece
18-20	Fictitious or improbable settings: magical island, the coast of Bohemia

Specific locations, that is scene settings, within the play are not strictly necessary. They can, however, be interesting in spurring the action of the play. If the *Playwright* wants to specify locations, he can either choose or roll for them. No play needs a different setting for each scene, so the *Playwright* should roll a d20 5 times, note the settings, then put them into *The Plot* as he sees fit. Nb. It's always nice if the last scene takes place in the location of the first scene.

1 = royal court	2 = forest	3 = tavern	4 = graveyard
5 = party or masque	6 ship	7 = heath or moor	8 = closet
9 = ramparts	10 = prison	11 = street	12 = garden
13 = battlefield	14 = nunnery	15 = house	16 = country home
17 = hovel	18 = shore	19 = sheepshearing festival	20 = tomb

Fights

There are two types of fights: *Duels* and *Battles of Wit*. Any fight that takes place on the battlefield is treated as a *Duel*. *Duels* are only allowed in history plays and tragedies. If a *Duel* is set in a comedy, it must be scuttled at the last minute by some comic device. *Battles of Wit* are allowed in any type of play.

Fights can be adjudicated in one of three ways. The method you are going to use should be decided before the play begins.

¶First, the *Playwright* may decide the outcome based on the arc of the play's narrative. It may be necessary for a character to die for the story to continue.

¶Second, the *Players* may vote amongst themselves. If they feel that a certain character should die or that one character was a clear victor in a *Battle of Wits*, they can vote. The characters participating in the fight should not vote.

¶Third, the *Players* can roll to determine the outcome. They take turns rolling a d20. They then add or subtract numbers according to their character's *Duel* or *Battle of Wits* modifier. Whoever has the highest number after the calculation wins. If there is a tie, the process is repeated.

In practice, let us say that the *Player* performing Florio pulls a sword on Maltese. He may shout, "Have at you, thou cream-faced loon!" Maltese may run, or try to wheedle his way out of the fight, in which case it doesn't happen. But if he shouts back, "Lay on!" they fight. Both characters roll a die. Florio rolls an 8 and Maltese an 18. But Florio, as a paragon of virtue has a +10 quality modifier. He has also has a -5 modifier for being excessively sanguine, but another +10 for being a lover. This gives him a total fight modification of +15 bringing his score to 23. Maltese, on the other hand, is roguish which means -8 to his score, bringing it down to 11. Maltese dies.

In a *Battle of Wits*, two characters verbally spar with each other. The *Players* may chose to actually insult each other and make outrageous puns. In that case, the *Playwright* may chose the winner of the exchange or the other *Players* can vote. If *Players* are not feeling up to producing Shakespearean verbal fireworks *ex tempore*, one can challenge the other to a *Battle of Wits*, produce as many insults as he can, then roll the die to determine the winner using the appropriate *Battle of Wits* modifiers for their characters. The winner receives one point.

Character Creation System

If the *Playwright* does not create or choose characters for the *Players*, and the *Players* opt not to use existng Shakespeare characters, they can use the following system for creating characters.

Class

The most important facet of your character is his or her social class. Selection of class is partially determined by game genre. History plays and tragedies require more upper-class characters than a comedy. Indeed you can play a history play or tragedy with *only* upper-class characters. A comedy, however, requires characters from a broad range of social classes. With this in mind, *Players* may choose their own social class, allow the *Playwright* to assign them classes, or they may roll the die for them. You may add an additional “trade” if you like.

If you choose to roll for social class, use a d20 and the following chart.



20 = monarch or monarch's spouse	18-19 = significant nobility, lords, etc.
16-17 = knight or knight's spouse	15 = magistrate
13-14 = gentleman or gentleman's spouse	12 = cleric
11 = scholar or teacher	9-10 = gentry
7-8 = freeman, business owner	6 = soldier
5 = yeoman	4 = labourer
3 = rustic clown	1-2 = servant

Characteristics

Players creating new characters roll a d20 five times, once for each of the five characteristics in the chart below--virtue, learning, wit, wealth, and appearance--in order to set the qualities of their characters. These can be circled on their individual *Dramatis Persona* sheets. Some of the qualities modify outcomes in fights. “Duel” is the *Duel* modifier; “BW” is the *Battle of Wits* modifier.



Characteristic	d20	Your quality	Duel	BW
Virtue	18-20	Pure	+10	+5
	11-17	Good	+8	+2
	7-10	Practical	0	0
	4-6	Roguish	-8	+5
	1-3	Machiavellian	-10	+10
Learning	17-20	Scholarly	-10	+8
	13-16	Educated	-10	+5
	9-12	Literate	0	0
	5-8	Foolish	0	-5
	1-4	Ignorant	-5	-10
Wit	17-20	Dazzling	0	+10
	13-16	Courtly	0	+8
	9-12	Average	0	0
	5-8	Slow	0	-5
	1-4	Dull	0	-10
Wealth	18-20	Rich	+5	+2
	11-17	Well off	0	0
	7-10	Comfortable	0	0
	4-6	Poor	0	+5
	1-3	Destitute	0	0
Appearance	18-20	Beautiful	+10	+5
	11-17	Pleasant	+5	+5
	7-10	Plain	0	0
	4-6	Ill-favoured	0	0
	1-3	Monstrous	+10	+10
		Total Modifier		

Humours

Shakespeare did not use the theory of the four bodily humours with the thoroughness of his contemporary Ben Jonson, but it is a useful tool for the creation of characters. Use it if you choose.

To set your character's humour, roll a d20 and take note of the humour.

Roll	Humour	Description
16-20	Sanguine	Amorous, happy, generous
7-15	Choleric	Violent, vengeful
6-10	Phlegmatic	Dull, cowardly
1-5	Melancholic	Gluttonous, lazy, sentimental, sad

Now roll a d20 again for intensity. The higher the number rolled, the more intense the humour. So, for example, a roll of 1 means your character has no discernible evidence of the humour. A roll of 10 means a moderate level of the humour. A roll of 20 means the character is dominated by the humour. Jacques clearly rolled 20 for the Melancholic humour.

Humours have an impact on *Duels* and *Battles of Wit* but only if you roll a 13 or higher for the intensity of the humour. Use the chart below for humour modifiers.

Humour	Duel	BW
Sanguine	-5	+10
Choleric	+10	-5
Phlegmatic	-10	-5
Melancholic	-5	+5

Genre modifiers

Comedies require at least one pair of lovers. The *Playwright* or *Players* can decide which characters will be the lovers and those *Players* should roll the die and apply the modifiers in this chart.

Roll	Purity of your love	Duel	BW
1-5	Your love is pure and virtuous	+ 10	+5
6-10	Your love is strong	+5	+2
11-15	Your love is fickle	-5	0
16-20	Your love is left most base	-10	-2

Tragedies often require virtuous revengers. If your does, the *Playwright* may have the would-be revenger(s) roll for a modifiers.

Roll	Virtue of your cause	Duel	BW
1-5	Your cause is just and undeniable	+ 10	+5
6-10	Your cause is just, but tenuous	+5	+2
11-15	Your cause is suspect	-5	0
16-20	Your cause is unjust	-10	-2

Histories demonstrate God's hand at work in the world. God does not want every aspirant to a throne to succeed, nor does He want every monarch's reign to be blessed. The *Playwright* may have the monarchs and aspirants roll for *God's advantage*.

Roll	God's advantage	Duel	BW
1-5	You are God's instrument of destiny	+ 10	+5
6-10	God prefers you	+5	+2
11-15	You are not presently in God's good graces	-5	0
16-20	God hates you	-10	-2

Romances are driven by magic, miracles, and coincidences that beggar the imagination. At least one character in a Romance should roll the die to determine his or her *Propensity for the unlikely*.

Roll	Propensity for the unlikely	Duel	BW
1-5	You are, at some level, magical	+ 10	+5
6-10	You are subject to staggering coincidences	+5	+2
11-15	You are not especially lucky	-5	0
16-20	You are profoundly unlucky	-10	-2

Cross-dressing and disguise

This an additional and optional rule, especially useful for comedies.

Once all the major characters have been assigned, all the *Players* take turns rolling the d20. The first to roll 1-4 will have to spend at least 2 of the play's 5 acts in disguise or drag. The *Player* may choose in which scenes the costume will be donned.

Minor Characters

One or more *Players* may opt to play multiple minor characters rather than one major character. Just as the actors in Shakespeare's theatre often had to play two or three roles in any given play, so may a *Player* choose to be a soldier, a sarcastic servant, and a churlish priest at different times during the game. The *Player* may use the *Character Creation System* to create a new character for each of them or simply pick and choose from the *Minor Character* chart. In the latter case, the character is considered an NPC (non-playing character) and does not require a *Dramatis Persona* sheet. The *Playwright* may opt to play all the NPCs.

If you choose to roll for minor characters, use the following chart:

1 = logic-chopping messenger	2 = dim constable	3 = tavern keeper	4 = murderer or villain
5 = apothecary	6 = foppish courtier	7 = ostler	8 = courtesan
9 = gravedigger	10 = Frenchman	11 = jester	12 = musician
13 = eunuch	14 = executioner	15 = prisoner	16 = ghost
17 = shepherd	18 = nurse	19 = merry wife	20 = porter

A minor character is one that appears in no more than two scenes and may not need an entire *Dramatis Persona* sheet.

Playing an existing Shakespeare character

A *Player* may choose to act the part of an existing Shakespeare character. In this case *Characteristics* and *Modifiers* are assigned not by the roll of the die, but by rigorous scholarship and debate. Say, for example, a *Player* wants to be Hotspur. Where is this character on the

Characteristics chart? Is he Pure or Good or Practical? Let us say Good. On the Learning scale? Literate, obviously, but perhaps Learned. His Wit? Not Dazzling, but at least Courtly. He's clearly Well-off, if not Rich. As for his appearance? Certainly Pleasant. This gives him a +3 Duel modifier and a +20 Battle of Wits modifier. He is clearly choleric which gives him Humour modifiers of +10 for Duel and -5 for Battle of Wits. His total modifiers now stand at +13 for Duel and +15 for Battle of Wits. Finally, because he is in a History play, we apply the *God's advantage* modifier. Hotspur, of course, was on the losing side of History suggesting he is not in God's good graces. That takes another 5 off his Duel modifier. Hotspur's total modifiers are, then, +8 for *Duel* and +15 for *Battle of Wits*. They can be written into the *Dramatis Persona* sheet.

Goals

Perhaps the single most important thing that the *Playwright* does to ensure a compelling game is set *Goals*. *Goals* let the *Players* know what they should be accomplishing.

Since individual *Goals* serve the total narrative of the play, it is best to work backwards from the conclusion of the play to set them. So, for example, in a comedy, lovers surmount obstacles to consummate their love (or at least get married). The *Playwright* should, then, think about the sort of obstacles that might interfere with the lovers' plans. Opposing families? Class difference? Or is there a fault in the lovers themselves? Perhaps they are procrastinators, philanderers, or simply ambivalent about making commitments. The *Playwright* must be creative. He must also consider how the characters around the lovers will help or hinder their cause. Are they the source of or solution to the obstacles?

Let us say that the *Playwright* decides that two lovers, Florio and Dorcas, have several obstacles. Florio is a scholar bent on achieving tenure and he barely looks up from his books to notice the love-besotted Dorcas. To achieve tenure he must please his thesis supervisor, Duftio, with a translation of Ovid's love poetry. To make matters worse, Dorcas comes from a noble family and her father (Hellbentio) is intent on her marrying the hunchbacked Earl of

Rutland who himself harbours a secret passion for Dorcas' lovely mother, Eleganzia. She, however, is both a faithful wife and melancholy recluse mourning the loss of her twin sister in a mysterious shipwreck years earlier. Unbeknownst to her, that sister, Charmilla, is in their city disguised as a young boy and recently employed by the Earl's drunken steward, Sam, himself a failed and bitter poet. A subplot concerns the city's impoverished printer, Quarto the Bastard, and his strained relationship with his mother, Octavo, who has never revealed the name of Quarto's father.

This is a simple plot with clear *Goals*: Florio must be introduced to Sam who will help him translate Ovid so well that he will achieve tenure *and* be moved by the *Roman Poet of Love* to open his eyes and heart to Dorcas. Charmilla will have to be revealed as Eleganzia's long-lost sister, preferably just before Hellbentio forces Dorcas to marry the Earl. The Earl, who has pined for Eleganzia, can instantly redirect his passion to her twin who, it turns out, has a thing for hunchbacks. Sam and Florio's translation of Ovid is purchased by Quarto who—after paying off his debts with the profitable publication--discovers that Duftio is his father. The play ends with a triple marriage -- Florio and Dorcas, the Earl and Charmilla, Duftio and Octavo -- the young, the middle-aged, and the old. There won't be a dry eye in the house.

Now, the *Playwright* has a couple of options for incorporating the *Goals* into game play. The easiest method, for the *Players* at least, is for the *Playwright* to map out each scene of the play beforehand, setting the *Goals* along with the characters' entrances and monologues. So, in our example, the Goal of 1.1 might be to introduce Florio and Dorcas and establish the one-sidedness of their relationship. The *Playwright* fills in *The Plot* thusly: under Entrances he writes "Flo, Duftio, Dorcas + Hellbent" (Florio has a monologue in this scene). Under *Goals* he writes, "Flo.'s writer's block; tenure clock; Dorcas' love for Flo." Then let the *Players* go from there.

A more challenging, and perhaps fun, way is for the *Playwright* to *tell* the *Players* the *Goals* beforehand, giving them a rough idea of what they must accomplish: Florio must meet Sam and write the translation while awakening to the possibilities of love; Duftio must explain why he did not marry Octavo originally; etc. Once everyone understands the *Goals*, the *Playwright* has them roll for *Monologues* and *Entrances*. The main characters, Florio and

Dorcas, get more rolls than the other *Players* and so will end up in more scenes. In this game, no *Goals* need be written in *The Plot*. It is up to the *Players* to remember their *Goals* in all their interactions with the other characters.

This method of game play is made all the more challenging when the *Players* roll for characters just before the game begins. They must improvise the play in accord with the class, characteristics, and humours of the characters they have been assigned.

Obviously, any combination of these approaches to *Goals* can be used. The group of *Players*, under the *Playwright's* supervision, may even elect to work on the *Goals* collectively before beginning the play.

Final Suggestions

Once you understand the basic mechanics of the game, you can experiment. Especially creative *Playwrights* may craft characters, storylines, and goals and then give them to *Players* as a sort of dramatic experiment. Especially creative groups of *Players* may roll for every aspect of the game and create something totally unexpected every time they play. Other things to try:

- *Place existing Shakespeare characters in new plays or genres.
- *Create new characters and put them in one of Shakespeare's storylines.
- *Bring together existing Shakespeare characters from different plays in a new story.

But above all, have fun; be merry.