

Shadows

A roleplaying game for all ages, by Zak Arntson

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Introduction

Preface

My niece and nephew wanted a roleplaying game, and in a mad inspirational dash, I designed Shadows. Children are not all smiles and kindness, but rather innocence and curiosity. And with this curiosity comes their desire to explore, to push boundaries and, consequently, get in trouble. Often, a child feels blameless. To quote my youngest brother, my mind made me do it! From these memories and the children now in my life, the driving concept behind Shadows was made clear.

Materials

This game is intended for any age that can read and compare numbers. There is a single Game Moderator (GM) who sets up the narration, provides encouragement and ideas, and generally keeps the game moving. Each Player needs two dice, of the same number of sides but different colours. Play tokens (coins, beads, etc) are also required, three per Player. Lastly, you should find some drawing materials, like paper and crayons. Social Contract

Creating a social contract is a way to get everyone's expectations on the same level. Before the game begins, your group should discuss what is reasonable and not. Unless the Players wish, a Game Moderator does not rule the game, and you are encouraged to invent your own ways of resolving disputes (most often, this can be done with a simple vote). If you are an adult playing with children you may act with more authority, but be careful to harness their creativity rather than stifle it. As an adult, it should be your role more to keep the children focused than to tell them how to pretend.

Playing Shadows

Setup

1. You will play yourself in the game. Draw a picture of yourself.
2. Now you draw your Shadow. This is an invisible person or monster who always wants you to get in trouble.
3. Decide which of your die is your Good Die and which one is the Shadow Die. Draw a picture of each die and write "Good" next to the Good Die and "Shadow" next to the Shadow Die.

4. Give yourself three tokens. You may draw a space for holding tokens on your paper, if you wish.

Amber sits down and draws herself, her dice and her Shadow. Amber's Shadow is a ghostly woman with glowing eyes.

Estavio also draws himself, his dice and his Shadow. His Shadow is a scary monster made of fire.

Playing the Game

The game always starts with the Players' Characters asleep somewhere. They are all then startled by a sound. What happens after that is up to the Players, and helped along by the GM. At certain points, the GM will pause the game and ask for a Player to make a Shadow Roll. This may not sound like enough, but trouble happens far more often than anyone will want!

Our game begins with the two Players' Characters asleep at their Auntie's house. A strange sound from downstairs wakes them both. They sneak out of bed to investigate without waking up Auntie and Uncle ...

The Shadow Roll

If you have been asked to make a Shadow Roll, you need to:

1. Grab both your Good Die and your Shadow Die.
2. Tell the GM what you want to have happen.
3. Tell your GM what your Shadow wants to have happen. Remember that your Shadow always tries to get you in trouble.
4. Roll both dice. If your Good Die is equal to or higher than your Shadow Die, what you want to happen, happens. If your Shadow Die is higher than your Good Die, your Shadow wins! The Good Die always wins ties.

Uncle wanders downstairs in his pyjamas, hoping for a midnight snack. Amber is hiding behind a stool in the kitchen, hoping Uncle doesn't spot her. The GM announces it is time to roll the dice. Amber tells the GM she wants Uncle to not notice her, and that her Shadow wants the stool to fall on Uncle's toe.

Amber then rolls her dice. The Good Die shows 5 while the Shadow Die shows 2. Phew! Uncle fishes some leftovers and orange juice from the fridge and sits down to eat.

If Amber's Shadow Die was higher than her Good Die, the stool would have mashed Uncle's toe!

Your Tokens

Don't forget your Tokens! After somebody rolls her dice and before things are narrated, you can force that Player to reroll either the Good Die or the Shadow Die (your choice). If you do this,

you must give the Player one of your Tokens. You can only give Tokens to another Player, never to yourself. If you have given someone a Token, and you don't like the reroll, you can keep giving the Player Tokens and forcing rerolls as many times as you want (or you run out of Tokens).

If you run out of Tokens, you cannot force anyone to reroll dice. You can, however, beg, convince or bribe another Player into forcing you to reroll by giving you a Token.

Estavio is trying to open a door the two children have found in the basement. Instead of simply opening, the GM has Estavio roll his dice. Estavio wants the door to open easily, and his Shadow wants the doorknob to fall off. Estavio rolls, his Good Die is 3 and his Shadow Die is 4.

Amber really wants to know what is behind the door, so she gives Estavio one of her Tokens and tells him to reroll his Shadow Die. Estavio rerolls and this time it is a 2. Since his Good Die (3) is now greater than his Shadow Die (2), the door slowly creaks open ...

Behind the door, the pair find a mysterious library. One book in particular is glowing brightly, but it's on the very top shelf and hard to reach! Amber reaches up to grab it and the GM has her roll. Amber wants to climb up the bookcase and fetch the book; her Shadow would rather see the book turn to dust when she touches it. Amber rolls, her Good Die is 5 and her Shadow Die is 4.

Estavio is more interested in the glass case with a mummified bird in the corner, and doesn't want to be distracted by the book. He gives Amber one of his Tokens and tells her to reroll her Good Die. Amber's new Good Die is a (1) and she is now covered in glowing dust.

Game Moderators

As the Game Moderator, it is your role to keep the story moving along and to call for Shadow Rolls when you want to increase tension. This is not limited to typical conflicts, like combat or obstacles. When you announce a Shadow Roll, you are handing the story to a Player and asking her to outline two possible outcomes. Where you place the tension goes a long way towards the feeling of the game. Calling for Shadow Rolls at unexpected times will surprise the Players and force them to improvise interesting situations. On the other hand, asking for a Shadow Roll consistently, such as whenever the Players are doing something naughty, provides an expecting excitement like that found in a well-known story.

You may help your Players with their Good and Shadow outcomes, especially if they are too similar. Try not to give too heavy a hand, because your goal is to encourage creativity and exploration of the outcomes. Forcing your Players into directions you want will result in passive Players who could be reading a book or watching a movie with nearly the same effect.

The Players are in a room where a book is lying atop a pedestal, protected by some unseen force. Estavio is going to reach for the book, and the Game Moderator asks for a Shadow Roll. Estavio explains that the Good outcome would be for him to find a switch to turn off the force, and his Shadow wants him to get a nasty shock that turns off the force.

The Game Moderator tells Estavio that these have the same result, and perhaps the Shadow wants him to get a nasty shock that sounds an alarm. Estavio thinks about it, and revises his Shadow outcome: He would be shocked and the book's guardian would show up. He doesn't describe the guardian and instead suggests that if the guardian shows up, Amber can make a Shadow Roll to describe it.

Afterword

Designer Words

Shadows is a simple game with simple rules. It shows that a roleplaying game doesn't require buckets of dice or a thick manual. Currently, most roleplaying games are designed to emulate, in some part, the existing commercial games, which causes many good ideas to be thrown away or not even considered. As a designer, I try as many ideas as I can, and the results are always somewhere on the spectrum of truly awful and pretty good. I like to think Shadows is one of the good ones.

Thanks

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