

Breaking the Rule of Three

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The Thousand-Year Game Design Challenge has a 1000-word limit, which forced me to cut a lot of what I wanted to say about the Rule of Three.

This booklet is meant to be read alongside my game, or at least after you've played a few games. It goes into more detail about the history and rationale of the game and how to interpret and extend it.

The Rule of Three and this booklet, *Breaking the Rule of Three*, were written by Chris Sakkas in 2011 for the Thousand-Year Game Design Challenge from Daniel Solis.¹

Inspired by Archipelago II; Love in the Time of Seïð; Death Takes a Holiday; Fiasco; Three Black Crows, Three Dead Men and In a Wicked Age.



¹ <<http://www.thousandyeargame.com>>.

More details

Open content

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Which means ...

Anyone can share and adapt this work for any purpose (including commercial ones) provided they

- (1) give me credit and
- (2) put their adaptations under the Creative Commons Attribution-ShareAlike licence too.

Art and font

Typeset in OpenOffice.org Writer with the Linux Libertine O and Matrix typesets.

The art in both booklets is from public domain books scanned and hosted on Liam's Pictures from Old Books, <<http://www.fromoldbooks.org/>>.

The rationale

My inspiration to write this game was a recent court decision against the playing of *Dungeons & Dragons* in prison.²

The case had turned on a number of points, including the power held by the Dungeon Master. I know other prisoners have had trouble because dice, writing tools or hardcover books were confiscated.

Outside of prison, I've been wary to talk about my roleplaying or roleplay in a public place because of the stigma that comes with dice, rulebooks and titles like 'Dungeon Master'.

Finally, roleplaying can be expensive. I know some people who played for years and still refused to buy an \$11 packet of dice.

So I attempted to design a roleplaying game which could be playable in prison. I made several attempts at a game I called *Storystory* and a spin-off of that game called *Hearth & Hunt* (which you can still find online).

However, it never quite coalesced into a workable game. I think the Rule of Three, however, is a success.

² 'No D&D for US prison inmate serving life', *Boingboing*, 25 January 2011. <<http://www.boingboing.net/2010/01/25/no-dd-for-us-prison.html>>.

Why the game works

The Rule of Three has a number of features which I think make it playable in prison and in public, with beginners and experienced players.

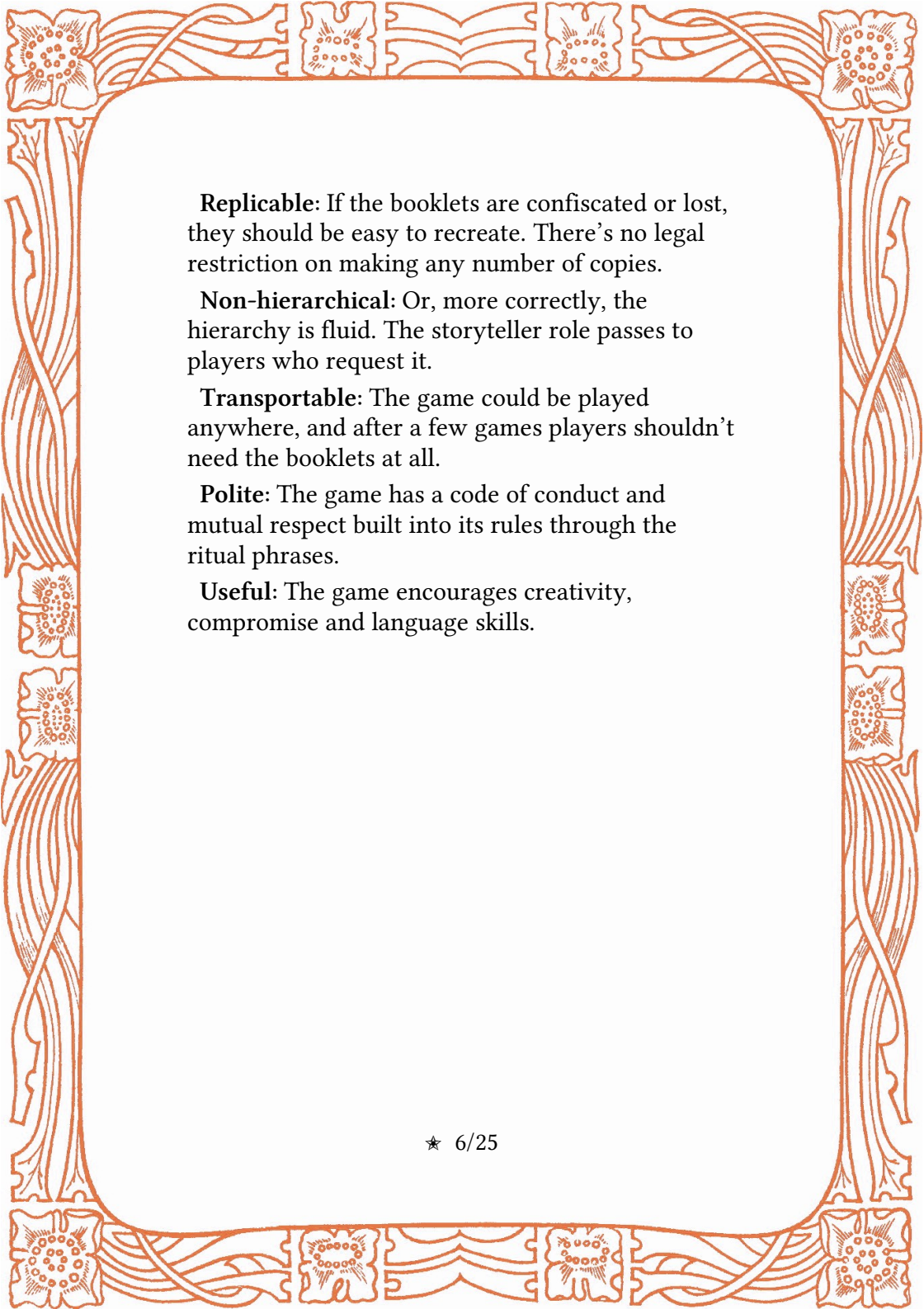
Simplicity: The game is simple to play and to set up. However, it has two different roles allowing some players to take on greater responsibility.

Roleplaying storytellers: Rather than playing 'their' characters directly, players take the role of storytellers and audience members who narrate the story. I think this 'story within a story' makes it easier to challenge and contradict other players without feeling self-conscious or confrontational.

Story gaming devices: The game introduces some story gaming concepts which should carry over to games like *Dungeons & Dragons*. I sometimes think of ritual phrases as nothing more than story gaming techniques in written form.

Doesn't look like a role-playing game: The 'seed' for the game looks like a Mad Lib or those word magnets you rearrange into poems on your fridge. The actual play resembles Theatresports as much as a game of *Vampire: the Masquerade*. There are no dice or character sheets.

Adaptable: The game is easy to hack or add to. This booklet has some examples, in fact.



Replicable: If the booklets are confiscated or lost, they should be easy to recreate. There's no legal restriction on making any number of copies.

Non-hierarchical: Or, more correctly, the hierarchy is fluid. The storyteller role passes to players who request it.

Transportable: The game could be played anywhere, and after a few games players shouldn't need the booklets at all.

Polite: The game has a code of conduct and mutual respect built into its rules through the ritual phrases.

Useful: The game encourages creativity, compromise and language skills.

Explaining parts of the game

Here, I go into more detail about why the game is written the way it is.

Storytellers and audience

The gap between storyteller and audience member is artificial. If you feel it's more effective to give them the same duties and ritual phrases, you should do so.

However, it's a good divide to have at the beginning because it lets people choose how much responsibility they want to take for the story. An audience member is allowed to be shy, to leave halfway through and to lose track of the plot. A storyteller is not.

By all means swap characters between players if you like.

There's a reason each character's name should reflect their personality. It's so that when they're at a loss as to which direction they should take the story, they have a default. If you're Hagar Grimfaced, make the plot miserable. Johnny Rotten should bring in sordid elements. Anna the Softhearted will try to make everything turn out for the best.

Ritual phrases

Although ritual phrases are only explained in stage three (and this is where they'll be most widely used), they may be used at any stage to (for example) indicate that you're unhappy with an element, a fact or an exploration of a fact.

The ritual phrases help enforce the manners of the game, clear communication and make sure each player has power. They're also a way of stepping outside the storytellers and audience: 'I'm not talking in character: I have something important to say.'

Noun and addition

The basic building block of the game is the noun with an adjective, other noun, situation or something else added to it. That is because almost any adjective will make a noun interesting.

For example, 'ogre' is not particularly interesting. But add even the most common and hackneyed adjectives and that changes:³ 'new ogre', 'good ogre', 'rich ogre', 'safe ogre', 'delicious ogre'.

The same works with other nouns too: 'New communist', 'good thief', 'rich politician', 'safe refugee', 'delicious car' and 'clean house'.

³ These examples are from a page of the most common adjectives used in advertising: <<http://www.frankwbaker.com/Most%20Common%20Adj%20Verbs.htm>>

The driving verb

A conflict also requires conflict. Verbs are conflicts in the making. Some have obvious conflict – ‘attacks’, ‘hated’, ‘fears’, ‘will destroy’ – but even the nice ones – ‘loves’, ‘helps’, ‘admires’ – have implied conflicts. How far will you go for love? What do you give up to help another? What if the admiration isn’t mutual?

That’s why this game uses nouns, additions and verbs: to place interesting things into conflict.

An example premise

[Small] [Ogre] [Loves] [Farmer] [Woman].

Will love ever triumph over prejudice?

Will the Ogre ever end the curse which shrank him to his absurd size?

- The Ogre lost his leg to a bear trap *no but* it was mangled and scarred.
- The Ogre has the strength of a hundred men *yes and* he cannot be gentle with that strength.
- The Woman does not love the Ogre in return.

Ritual phrases in detail

'I struggle to remember'

Role: Storyteller.

Gesture: Hold your hands out with shrugged shoulders.

Effect: You ask a question to be answered by the audience members. For example, 'What was this man's involvement with the Imperial Fleet?'

This is an important tool for storytellers to get the audience involved.

'I know not the rest'

Role: Storyteller.

Gesture: You point to yourself.

Effect: You want to give up the storyteller role when a new storyteller is ready.

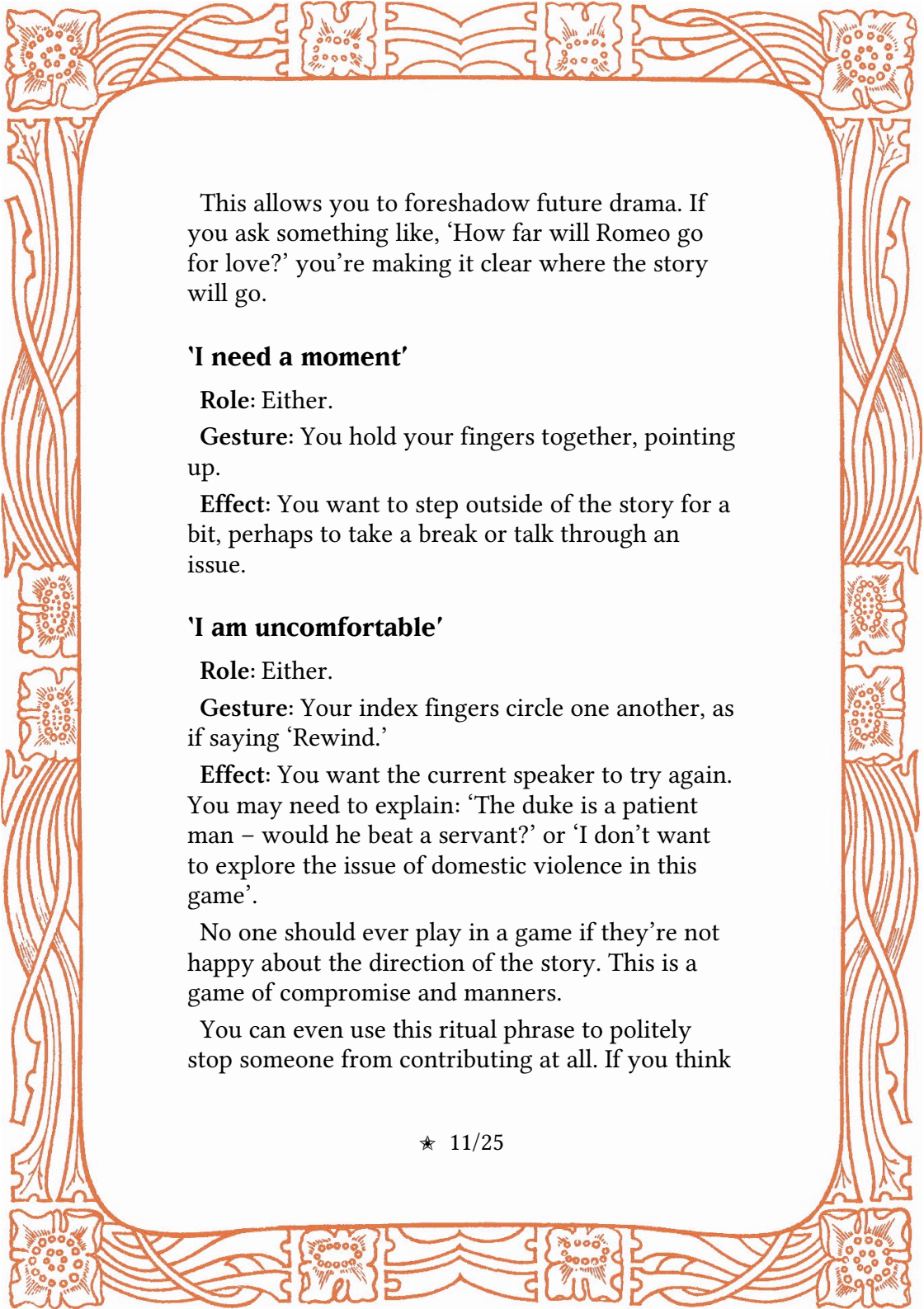
When you do so, the cards in front of you are placed in front of the new storyteller.

'It will become known'

Role: Either.

Gesture: None.

Effect: You ask a question to be answered in the course of play.



This allows you to foreshadow future drama. If you ask something like, ‘How far will Romeo go for love?’ you’re making it clear where the story will go.

‘I need a moment’

Role: Either.

Gesture: You hold your fingers together, pointing up.

Effect: You want to step outside of the story for a bit, perhaps to take a break or talk through an issue.

‘I am uncomfortable’

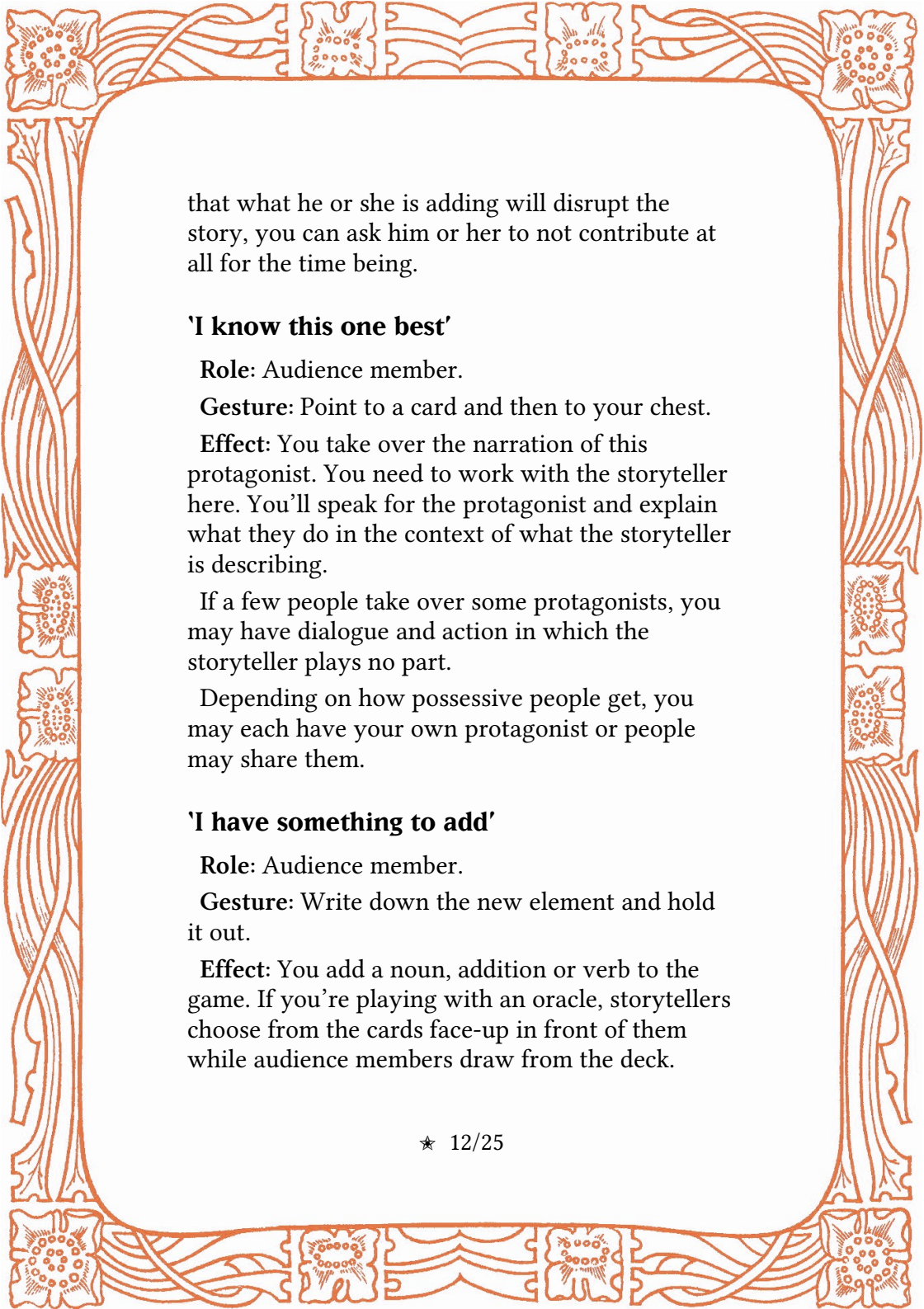
Role: Either.

Gesture: Your index fingers circle one another, as if saying ‘Rewind.’

Effect: You want the current speaker to try again. You may need to explain: ‘The duke is a patient man – would he beat a servant?’ or ‘I don’t want to explore the issue of domestic violence in this game’.

No one should ever play in a game if they’re not happy about the direction of the story. This is a game of compromise and manners.

You can even use this ritual phrase to politely stop someone from contributing at all. If you think



that what he or she is adding will disrupt the story, you can ask him or her to not contribute at all for the time being.

'I know this one best'

Role: Audience member.

Gesture: Point to a card and then to your chest.

Effect: You take over the narration of this protagonist. You need to work with the storyteller here. You'll speak for the protagonist and explain what they do in the context of what the storyteller is describing.

If a few people take over some protagonists, you may have dialogue and action in which the storyteller plays no part.

Depending on how possessive people get, you may each have your own protagonist or people may share them.

'I have something to add'

Role: Audience member.

Gesture: Write down the new element and hold it out.

Effect: You add a noun, addition or verb to the game. If you're playing with an oracle, storytellers choose from the cards face-up in front of them while audience members draw from the deck.

The new element gets added to the scene.

This is not the only way to introduce new elements – you can just narrate them into existence. However, it's a good way to make the element lasting and interesting.

After you add the element, it can be read just like in the second stage.

'I know the rest'

Role: Audience member.

Gesture: You point to yourself.

Effect: You want to take over the storyteller role when the current storyteller is ready.

'It was not that simple'

Role: Audience member.


Gesture: You hold out your hand in a fist.

Effect: You add 'Yes and ...', 'Yes but ...' or 'No but ...' to something the storyteller just said.

For example, the storyteller says, 'John chats up the lawyer and she tells him the details of the case.'

'It was not that simple.'

Depending on which of the three options you choose, you might say 'She tells him the details of the case, and about her abusive boyfriend' or 'She



doesn't tell him about the details of the case, but does invite him back to her place' or 'She tells him about the details of the case, but her client really is innocent.'

You're allowed to elaborate and even control the story for a bit as you describe how not-simple things were. But pretty soon, the storyteller should resume telling most of the story.

'I want to hear more about ... '

Role: Audience member.

Gesture: You hold your hands together and then move them apart.

Effect: You state something you want to hear more about – a character, a moment, an action, anything.

The storyteller should try to expand on that, perhaps with suggestions and input from you.

'And then ... '

Role: Audience member.

Gesture: Hold the complication out.

Effect: You describe how the story becomes complicated by an event, moment or other occurrence. It could be the arrival of a stranger, a weather event, a sudden realisation and so on.

Technologies

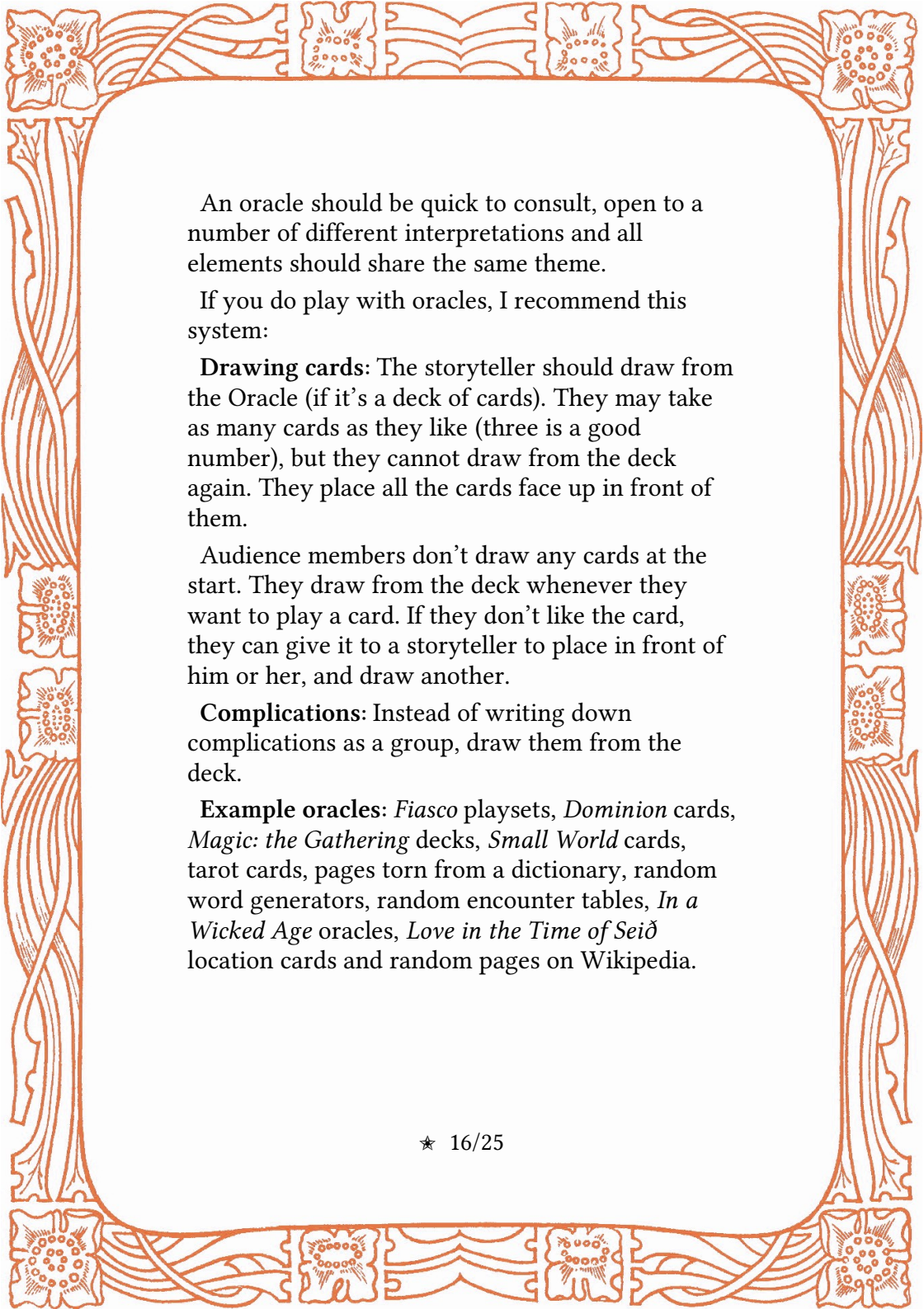
This is my term for rules, additions and techniques which could improve the Rule of Three. These are some which have occurred to me (some of them were originally part of the core rules of the game) but I'd love to hear what others have come up with.

Oracles

For most of the writing of this game, players didn't fill out the pattern from their imagination. Instead, they drew from a deck of cards and interpreted the results by fitting them into the pattern.

These decks of cards would have interesting entries on each card. I imagined people using the Major Arcana from the tarot, *Magic: the Gathering* cards or even flicking through the dictionary to find interesting words.

I ran out of space to include oracles in the core rules of the game, but I think they're a useful addition to any game. They provide you with ideas, surprise you and reinforce the type of story you've chosen. *The Life Domestic* is an example oracle deck.



An oracle should be quick to consult, open to a number of different interpretations and all elements should share the same theme.

If you do play with oracles, I recommend this system:

Drawing cards: The storyteller should draw from the Oracle (if it's a deck of cards). They may take as many cards as they like (three is a good number), but they cannot draw from the deck again. They place all the cards face up in front of them.

Audience members don't draw any cards at the start. They draw from the deck whenever they want to play a card. If they don't like the card, they can give it to a storyteller to place in front of him or her, and draw another.

Complications: Instead of writing down complications as a group, draw them from the deck.

Example oracles: *Fiasco* playsets, *Dominion* cards, *Magic: the Gathering* decks, *Small World* cards, tarot cards, pages torn from a dictionary, random word generators, random encounter tables, *In a Wicked Age* oracles, *Love in the Time of Seid* location cards and random pages on Wikipedia.

Ritual

To make people think seriously about the story, and to clearly divide the game from the rest of the world, you may wish to develop some rituals.

A good one to start with is a candle. Lighting it indicates that the game has begun; extinguishing it indicates that the game is over.

I call people who play the Rule of Three ‘threers’ (rhyming with ‘seers’ or ‘fivers’).

Different Patterns

The basic pattern is that of five elements in a seed, going ‘addition-noun-verb-addition-noun’. However, another structure I considered is the web, where nouns are placed adjacent to a foundation noun (around which the story revolves) and then additions are placed adjacent to one or more nouns.

The advantage of this pattern is that it’s more complex than the five elements but doesn’t create sideplots and irrelevant characters. The disadvantage is that not every character has a clear and explicit motivation.

The Tangled Web

The foundation: A storyteller writes the first word in the middle of the table. They then explain what the word represents and state a fact about it.

For example, if playing *The Life Domestic* I might place a Pizza card face up and explain it represents the new pizza joint opening at the end of the street.

The elements: After the first word is written and the first fact stated (and hopefully written down somewhere), storytellers and audience members can write more words and state facts.

When adding an element and stating its first fact, you must use that fact to connect it to the foundation or another word on the table. This connection has to affect the interests of the elements – it must be enough to move them to action.

For example, after I play the Pizza card Bob plays the Robot card. It represents the electronics store next to the pizza joint and my fact is that the store's employees leave work every few minutes to eat more delicious pizza.

Deck of ritual phrases

In this variant, storytellers and audience members have a hand of cards with ritual phrases

written on them, and they can only say the phrase if they place the card in the discard pile.

This variant would change the way the game works. I like the idea of restricted options, but ultimately the role of ritual phrases isn't to give players special powers or to adjudicate conflicts between players. It's to allow players to honestly and respectfully communicate with one another.

Roshambo

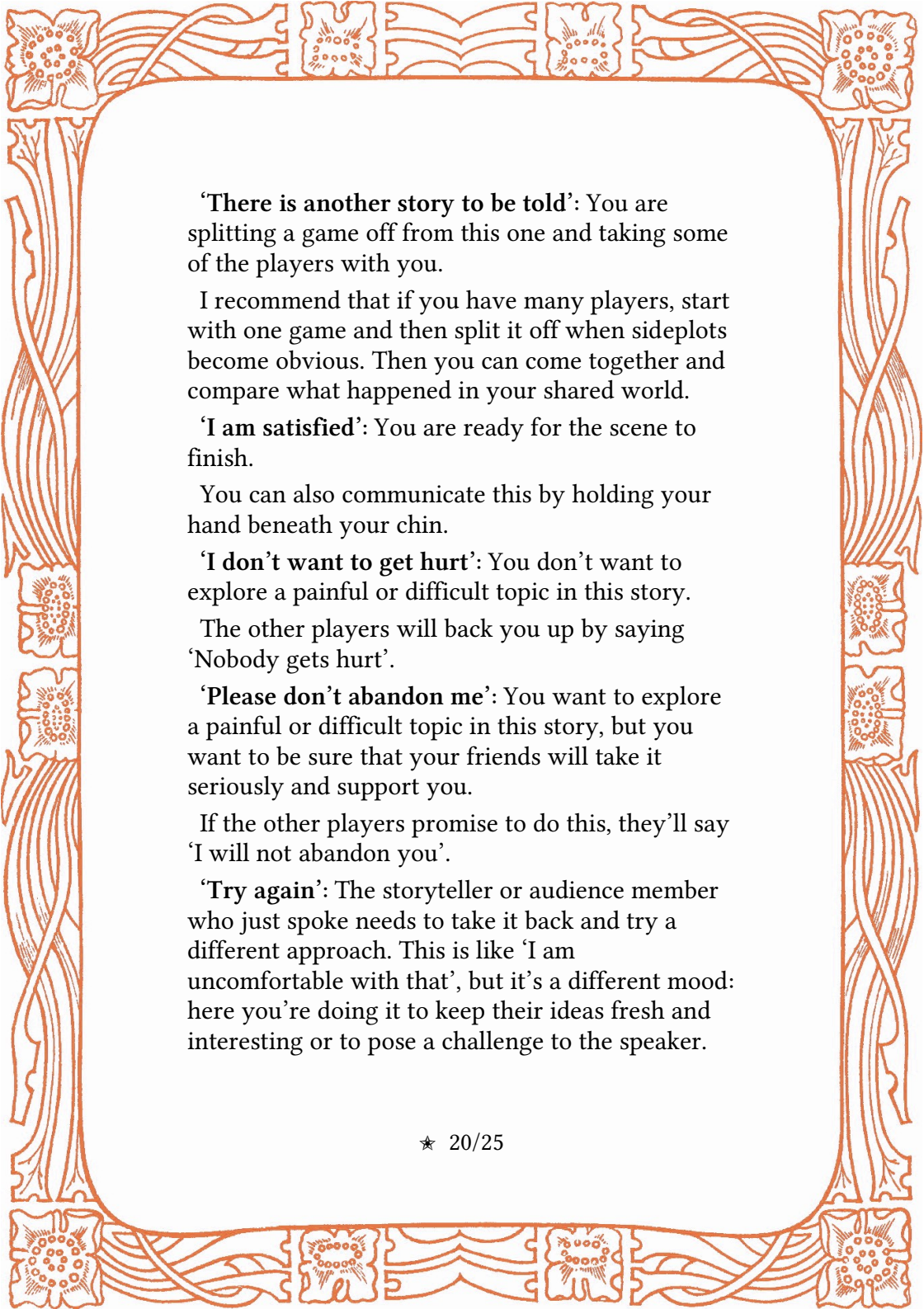
When an audience member uses the ritual phrase 'It was not that simple', they do not get to choose which words to add. Instead, the audience member plays roshambo with the storyteller. If the audience member wins, he or she says 'No but ...'; if they tie, the audience member says 'Yes but ...' and if the storyteller loses, the audience member says 'Yes and ...'.

Advanced ritual phrases

These are phrases which aren't essential and may never be used, but add something to the game.

Some of them are based on Theatresports techniques while others are implementations of ideas discussed at Story Games.⁴

⁴ <<http://www.story-games.com>>.



‘There is another story to be told’: You are splitting a game off from this one and taking some of the players with you.

I recommend that if you have many players, start with one game and then split it off when sideplots become obvious. Then you can come together and compare what happened in your shared world.

‘I am satisfied’: You are ready for the scene to finish.

You can also communicate this by holding your hand beneath your chin.

‘I don’t want to get hurt’: You don’t want to explore a painful or difficult topic in this story.

The other players will back you up by saying ‘Nobody gets hurt’.

‘Please don’t abandon me’: You want to explore a painful or difficult topic in this story, but you want to be sure that your friends will take it seriously and support you.

If the other players promise to do this, they’ll say ‘I will not abandon you’.

‘Try again’: The storyteller or audience member who just spoke needs to take it back and try a different approach. This is like ‘I am uncomfortable with that’, but it’s a different mood: here you’re doing it to keep their ideas fresh and interesting or to pose a challenge to the speaker.

‘Change in status’: By the end of the scene, the powerful and high-status character will have lost that status and the low-status character will have acquired it.

‘Chekov’s gun’: Write a word or two on a slip of paper to reflect something merely mentioned in the story. In each scene which follows, those words should be mentioned or referred to. Before the story ends, they should play a major part in the story.

‘A man comes through the door with a gun in his hand’: If the plot is stalled, have a man come through the door with a gun in his hand (or through the gate with a spear in his hand, or through the window with a katana in his hand). You don’t need to know who the man is, why he has a gun or how he plans to use it yet. Just keep the story moving and these things will become clear in their proper time.

‘Say yes or make it complicated’: If someone proposes that a protagonist do something, either have the protagonist succeed outright or have an audience member contribute with ‘Yes and ...’, ‘Yes but ...’ or ‘No but ...’

‘Don’t make me look like a dick:’ I got this one from John Wick’s *Houses of the Blooded*. When you behave like an arsehole, you force me to criticise you, limit your options or even kick you out of the

game. All those things make me look like a dick.
So please, don't make me look like a dick.

The original rule of three

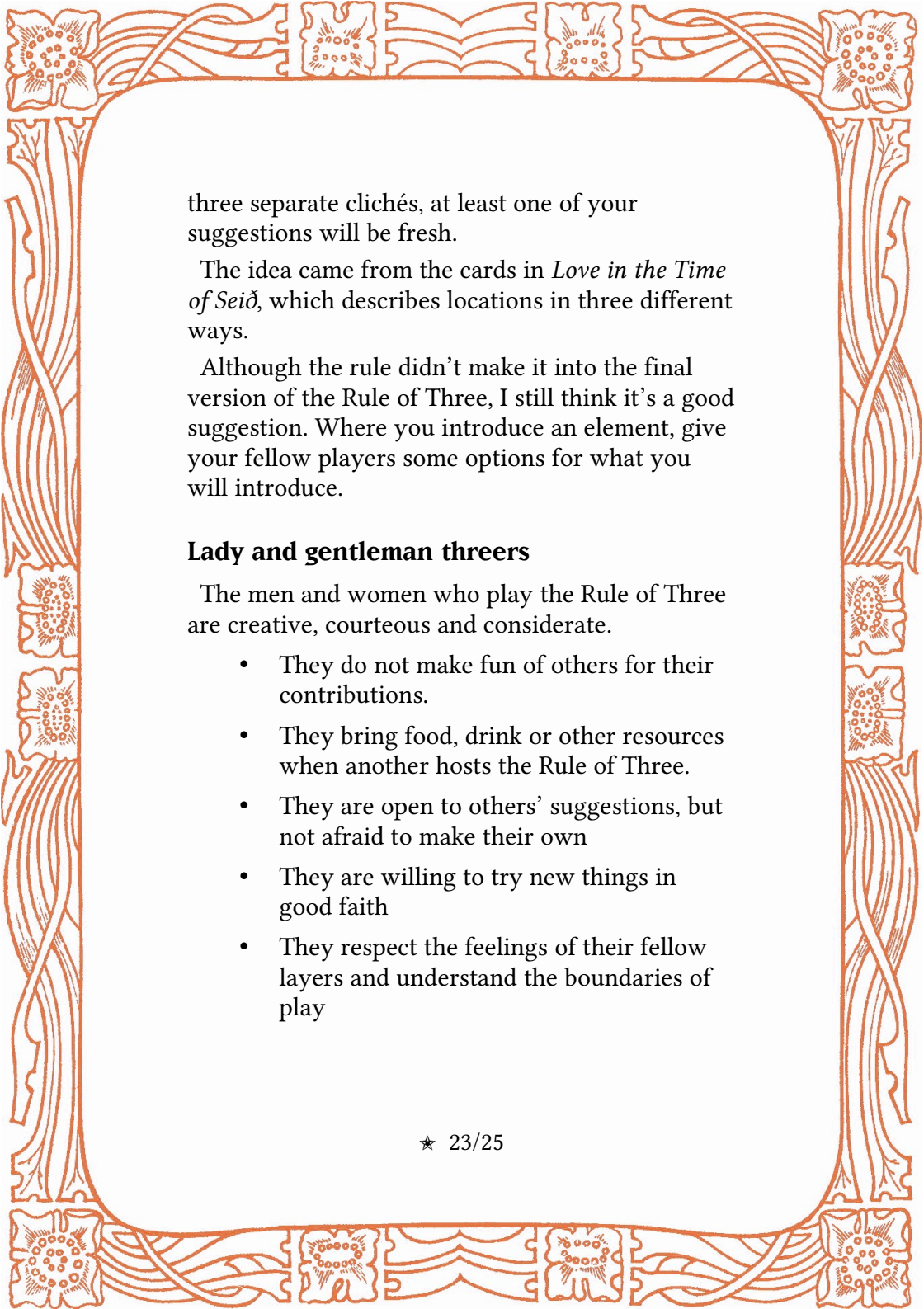
I originally used the phrase 'the rule of three' to refer to a guideline that every time someone introduced a new element into the game, they should give three options.

For example,

A genie gushes out of the lamp.

- He is three stories high, ebon-skinned and with glowering eyes. He booms angrily that someone will suffer for his eon of imprisonment.
- He is two feet tall, with bunny ears and a giant gemstone in his forehead. He giggles and offers you seven billion wishes.
- She is a wisp of smoke and two magnificent, hovering, kohl-rimmed eyes. She promises you power beyond your imagination, if only you will ...

The rationale was that if you provide three options for something, at least one of them is going to appeal to your fellow players. It's also an obligation to be creative – unless you can find



three separate clichés, at least one of your suggestions will be fresh.

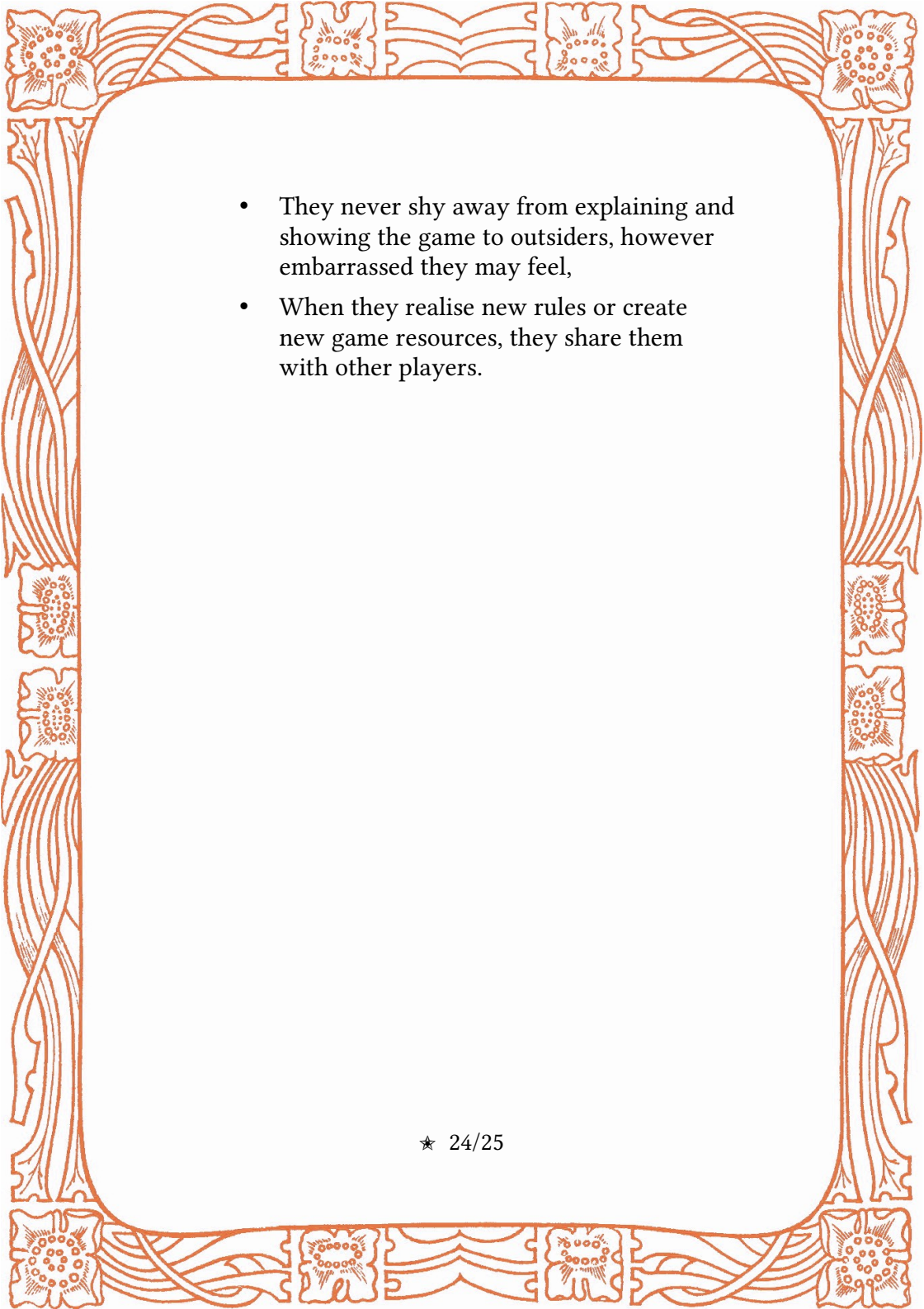
The idea came from the cards in *Love in the Time of Seið*, which describes locations in three different ways.

Although the rule didn't make it into the final version of the Rule of Three, I still think it's a good suggestion. Where you introduce an element, give your fellow players some options for what you will introduce.

Lady and gentleman threers

The men and women who play the Rule of Three are creative, courteous and considerate.

- They do not make fun of others for their contributions.
- They bring food, drink or other resources when another hosts the Rule of Three.
- They are open to others' suggestions, but not afraid to make their own
- They are willing to try new things in good faith
- They respect the feelings of their fellow layers and understand the boundaries of play

- 
- They never shy away from explaining and showing the game to outsiders, however embarrassed they may feel,
 - When they realise new rules or create new game resources, they share them with other players.



Fill in the Gaps

I'm not perfect.

At times, I'm terse or cryptic. Talk to your friends and interpret stuff!

At times, I'm forgetful. There's no 'No and ...' ritual phrase. Talk to your friends and add stuff!

At times, I'm boring. Talk to your friends and remove stuff!

At times, I'm just plain wrong. Talk to your friends and fix stuff!

And by all means share your interpretations, additions, removals and fixes with anyone and everyone.