

Tales of Italia

Game Design Document

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1. Vision Statement

1.1. Game Logline

Tales of Italia is a tabletop roleplaying game inspired by the Commedia Dell'Arte of the Italian Renaissance in which players assume the role of the Commedia's stock characters and use Tarot Cards to determine their successes and failures, as well as to create randomized plot beats throughout the session.

1.2. Game Genre(s)

The game is a TTRPG using Tarot Cards in place of where other games would use dice.

1.3. Gameplay Synopsis

Before the game, players should separate the major and minor arcana of the Tarot deck as well as the individual suits and the GM/Storyteller draws six cards from the major arcana. The players will have selected one of the stock characters of the Commedia Dell'Arte to assume the role of. The GM/Storyteller describes a scenario to the players, who in turn describe the actions they take in response. Each of their characters has a set of abilities that correspond to the suits of the minor arcana of a Tarot deck. When they use an ability, they draw a card of that suit and use its value to determine their success or failure. Each card is placed in a discard pile once it is used, and when a suit runs out the GM plays one of their cards, triggering a narrative-altering effect (ex. A character succeeds where they otherwise would have failed, a past decision comes back to haunt the players, etc.). This continues until all six of the GM's cards have been used and the story is resolved.

1.4. Uniqueness

This game is unique in that it maximizes the inherent improv of TTRPGs by essentially randomly generating the plot points for the session for the GM, as well as in that it adapts the characters and

the overall narrative style of Commedia Dell'Arte. In addition to this, basing the core systems in Tarot Cards further separates it from the vast majority of TTRPGs.

1.5. Look and Feel

Tales of Italia visually reflects the style of the Renaissance art which inspired it; such as the sketches of Da Vinci, painting of Michelangelo, etc. The game should have an aesthetic that is primarily steeped in history and the beauty of Renaissance, with a small underpinning of mysticism and the strange magical allure of Tarot. Almost all of the visuals are Renaissance-era (or similar style) painting and illustrations.

2. Audience

2.1. Target Audience

This game is primarily aimed at fans of TTRPGs ages 16+, who ideally have some kind of knowledge of Tarot Cards and/or the Commedia Dell'Arte though it is not required to play. Fans of rules-light games such as those in the style of *Apocalypse World* or *Fate* would particularly enjoy it.

3. Gameplay

3.1. Objectives

The primary objective of the game for the GM is to weave together the six cards of the Hand of Fate into a story, whilst the players make choices and successfully take action to reach the end of that story. The game is completed when all six cards of the Hand of Fate have been played and the story is resolved.

3.2. Rules

Playing the Game:

Before the start of the session, separate the major and minor arcana of the Tarot Deck, as well as further separating the minor arcana into each of the individual suits. Shuffle each of these smaller decks. Without revealing them to the players, the Storyteller will draw 6 cards from the Major Arcana to serve as the Hand of Fate. The various decks of cards from the Minor Arcana are placed on the table between all of the players. The session begins with the Storyteller providing opening narration for the scenario and setting the scene. The players describe the actions of their characters within the world in response to descriptions provided by the Storyteller. This back-and-forth between Storyteller and players continues until a player chooses to use an ability. They then draw from the corresponding minor arcana suit as determined by the ability description, and the Storyteller describes the outcome of this action based on the result. The ace is a critical failure, the numeric cards 2-7 are failures, cards 8-10 along with the page, knight, and queen are successes, and the King is a critical success. The card is discarded after the ability is used. Once all of a minor arcana deck has been used, the Storyteller chooses a card from the Hand of Fate to activate and that minor arcana deck is reshuffled and put back into play. Whichever player triggered the Hand of Fate receives a plus one boost to the value of all future draws in the session.

The Players and the Troupe:

In Tales of Italia a group of players known as “The Troupe” take on the roles of various stock characters in the tradition of Commedia Dell’Arte. Each character has their own set of actions and abilities for the player to take advantage of, and utilize in unique ways. While these are stock characters, each player can provide their own take on the archetype with their playstyle. All characters are equipped with five basic actions: Persuade, Attack, Investigate, Meditate, and Tempt Fate.

The Storyteller and Scenarios:

It is the responsibility of the Storyteller to tell the story of the scenario and set the stage. To do this, they should prepare a location and a few non-player characters to populate the world. These do not have to be fully prepared like the player characters, merely defined and named. *Shadows of Italia* highly encourages the storyteller to embrace the improvisational spirit of the *Commedia Dell'Arte* and mold the actual plot of the scenario around the cards drawn for the Hand of Fate, though the setting should be prepared in advance. It is also the responsibility of the Storyteller to act as a referee, and decide how to best translate the choices of the characters into actions. Almost every decision the players make should result in drawing a card. If the action they are taking does not seem to cleanly fit into one of the presented actions, use the following guide:

Draw Swords for challenges of the mind and logic

Draw Wands for challenges of physical strength

Draw Cups for emotional challenges of the heart

Draw Pentacles for challenges of the spirit, health, or resources

Character Pairs:

Each of the stock characters for this game is designed to function in relation to the others, especially when paired with their foils. This means that the game can be played with a Troupe of 2, 4, or 6. If playing with 2, use Flavio and Isabella. If playing with 4, add Pantalone and Il Dottore. If playing with 6, add Arlecchino and Columbina.

The Objective:

Unlike many other RPGs that have you go on sprawling adventures, investigating nightmarish horrors, or fighting against the forces of evil, *Tales of Italia* is designed to embrace the romantic drama of the Renaissance. Your objective in the game is not to complete a quest or solve a mystery in the end of itself (though those can certainly be parts of the experience), but rather to create a compelling story from the beats provided by the Hand of Fate over the course of a session.

3.3. Gameplay and Loop

As gameplay continues and more cards are played, players must become more strategic in which actions and abilities they chose to use as a lower number of successes are available. This encourages them to attempt to count cards in order to coordinate their failure with less dangerous moments. Additionally, as more cards are played out of the Hand of Fate new elements and challenges are introduced to the game's plot.

Appendix I: Sample Character: Pantalone:

Pantalone, The Old Merchant

Who is Pantalone?:

Originally known as Magnifico, Pantalone is considered by many to be one of the most vital characters of the Commedia and the foil to Il Dottore. They are an old and powerful miser who is prone to outbursts, and is very stubborn and stuck in his old ways. They are the representation of money and ego in the world of the Commedia, impressed by their own intellect but often duped in all manner of tricks and deceptions.

Basic Actions:

Investigate - (Swords):

Examine the world around you, searching for hidden clues and details. On a critical success, you find complete information about what you are searching for. On a success, you find some important details. On a failure, you find nothing. On a critical failure, you find nothing and accidentally destroy an important detail.

Persuade - (Cups):

You wield your words as a weapon, manipulating those around you into obeying your commands. Whether through intimidation, cunning offers, or sly deceptions, you attempt to sway those around you. On a critical success, the target will obey your commands to the letter. On a success, they will do some of but not all of what you ask. On a failure, they will refuse you. On a critical failure, they will refuse you and grow agitated.

Attack - (Wands):

You resort to physical violence, attacking an opponent with either fisticuffs or a weapon. On a critical success, you severely injure them with no harm to yourself. On a success, you wound them with a cost to your own well being. On a failure, you completely fail to injure your target but they do not harm you either. On a critical failure, your opponent does not suffer harm of any kind but you do.

Meditate - (Pentacles):

You look within for spiritual guidance, attempting to achieve clarity or enlightenment about the predicament before you. On a critical success, the path you are meant to take is made clear. On a success, you receive a cryptic message that is equally helpful and confusing. On a failure, you receive no guidance. On a critical failure, you are discouraged by the silence within.

Character Actions:

Logic of the Ages - (Swords):

You put to use your mind that has been sharpened from years of experience as a merchant and tradesmen, crafting an elaborate plan to achieve your goals. On a critical success, you or another Troupe member may use your guidance to perform any action without needing to draw a card. On a success, you or another Troupe member under your guidance may perform any action and have the result be moved up one level of success (a critical failure is a failure, a failure is a success, etc.); if the draw is a critical success then you may use the effect on another action later. On a failure, you are unable to devise a solution to your problem. On a critical failure, you or another Troupe must perform another action and have it moved down one level of success due to your poor advice.

Wealth of Kings - (Pentacles):

You draw on the immense resources and wealth you have gathered over the years to influence the society around you. You can use this move to buy anything or anyone (both legally and otherwise), and influence them as you would with persuasion. Success and failures function the same as Persuade.

Rage of the Elder - (Wands):

You allow your anger to get the better of you, lashing out at those around you. You're pent up anger and disdain for those who you deem lesser is unleashed in full force as you hold nothing back. On a critical success, this display of anger can be used to achieve the critical success of either Persuade or Attack. On a success, you achieve the success effect of either Persuade or Attack. On a failure, your rage achieves nothing. On a critical failure, your rage draws negative attention from those around you.

Appendix II: "Hand of Fate" Card Effects:

The Fool: An NPC disrupts the Troupe's plans by acting on impulse

The Magician: A character discovers a new opportunity for success or makes a discovery about themselves

The High Priestess: A member of the Troupe receives a message from a spiritual power

The Empress: A natural beauty is discovered to be in danger

The Emperor: The Troupe draws the ire of a powerful authority figure

The Hierophant: The Troupe has broken an ancient tradition, and must figure out how to repair the damage (literal or social)

The Lovers- A spark of romance emerges amongst the Troupe, either with each other or with NPCs

The Chariot- A member of the Troupe discovers exactly what they need to overcome an obstacle they're facing

Strength- An NPC achieves one of their goals in secret, without this being revealed to the Troupe

The Hermit- A member of the Troupe has a revelation about a hidden truth

The Wheel of Fortune- All members of the Troupe swap characters in a clockwise direction around the table

Justice- Anyone who has wronged another character receives retribution, be they NPC or player

The Hanged Man- A solution to a current problem is revealed to a member of the Troupe

Death- When the Storyteller plays this card the Major Arcana is reshuffled and a new Hand of Fate is drawn

Temperance- A member of the Troupe feels compelled to pursue spiritual balance

The Devil- A member of the Troupe is faced with a temptation, to which they must either succumb or resist

The Tower- Past choices of the Troupe return to haunt them

The Star- An NPC feels inspired by the actions of the Troupe and tries to emulate them

The Moon- A member of the Troupe has a dream with hidden meaning

The Sun- A member of the Troupe succeeds where they would have otherwise failed, to be used at a time chosen by the Storyteller

Judgment- The Troupe must prove themselves to someone

The World- If this card is in the Hand of Fate, it must be used last. It results in the Troupe achieving a “happy ending” relative to the circumstances