

DULSE

A game by Jason Morningstar

This version of Dulse was an entry in Game Chef 2008, using the art set of Donna K. Fitch

This game is dedicated to my friends in the nordic countries.

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INTRODUCTION

Dulse is a game about relationships, ideals, and the choices we make to preserve or destroy them.

In addition to being the name of the game, Dulse is also a character - one who is literally central. The events that inform play, and the other three characters, revolve around Dulse.

Across five life-changing events, you and your friends will explore the sacrifices and betrayals of four people who've known each other their entire lives, and who have deep-seated needs that they can't fill alone. Along the way you'll make hard choices between competing ideals, and have more choices made for you. In the end, you will face an uncertain future guided only by a shared past.

To play you'll need:

- ✦ Three friends (although the game will work with more or less, four is the ideal number of players).
- ✦ A deck of playing cards, sorted into a red pile and a black pile (You'll need 20 from each pile ultimately).
- ✦ A single sheet of paper, or a pre-made relationship diagram, and a pencil.
- ✦ Depending on your play style, anywhere from one to three hours. Call it two hours on average, probably less.
- ✦ A comfortable place where you can relax, stretch out, and chew the scenery.

Here's what you'll do:

- ♦ Choose a general setting and tone for your game.
- ♦ Pick characters, and build relationships between them.
- ♦ Choose a set of mutually incompatible ideals that will inform play.
- ♦ Play out a series of events that will apply tension to characters, answer questions about their relationships, and illustrate their commitment (or abandonment!) to the ideals you've chosen.
- ♦ Discover, through an epilogue, how the character's choices impacted the rest of their lives.



CHARACTERS

There are four characters in Dulse, adults who have known each other since they were very young. No other named characters should appear “on stage” in the game - don’t introduce handmaidens, errant fathers, mysterious swordsmen, or capricious officials if you can avoid it, and if you must, don’t name them. The characters are:

- ✦ *Arras, a Duke*
- ✦ *Baston, a Captain*
- ✦ *Calla, a Sorceress*
- ✦ *Dulse, a Princess*

Thoughts On Characters

Feel free to change the character’s genders - Arra the Duchess; Basia the Corsair, and Caul the Magician, along with Prince Dulse. You can experiment with changing the gender ratio, also. Two and two is a well-balanced set-up for a variety of reasons, not the least of which is a close correspondence to the tropes of classical romance. Three and one (make Dulse the one) will result in a strongly sex-and-gender focused game, and four and none will be deliciously gay and completely up in the air.

Although the default assumption is an amorphous sort of fantasy setting, there’s no reason not to set the game wherever you like. Duke Alfred, Captain Bastion, Reverend Curtain and Lady Diedre would serve nicely for a regency romance. Aisha the sorority sister, Baby Girl the gangster, Conrad the

shop clerk, and Dulse the college boy would also work. The only requirement is that the characters must have known each other all their lives - their complex interrelationships form a map, in fact.

If you wind up with three or five players, leave all the turn-taking and rotation in place and simply share a character. The game won't suffer too much. Remember that the four characters should be the entire scope of the game's named universe.

The Relationship Map

Before the game begins, tie characters together in a web of emotion and obligation with a relationship map. Here's how:

Each character has a relationship, defined by a verb, with every other character.

Every character's relationship with Dulse is reciprocal - if Arras supports Dulse, Dulse by necessity supports Arras. Arras, Baston, and Calla all have non-reciprocal relationships with one another - Baston may adore Calla, but Calla can't adore him back.

Put more plainly, each character's relationships follow this template: "I X you, but you Y me, and Dulse and I Z each other." Each letter is replaced by a verb.

There are a total of eight verbs; assign one to each relationship in rotation, starting with Dulse's player and rotating through the players of Arras, Baston, Calla, and then back to Dulse. On your turn you can assign any relationship, including one between characters you do not control. The person who is last

in the rotation (Dulse's player again) chooses any of the eight to re-use for the ninth, and final, relationship. The verbs are:

Adore, Loathe, Desire, Deceive, Support, Frustrate, Envy, and Fear

For the purposes of Game Chef, imagine a shared sheet with Arras, Baston and Calla at three equidistant points on a wheel, each with an arrow pointing at the other two characters. Dulse is in the center of this wheel, with two-way arrows radiating like spokes to the other three characters. Each arrow has a space for writing a verb on it.

Example

Scott, Mike, Monica, and Val are playing a game of Dulse. Scott is chosen to play the titular character. Mike is Arras, Monica is Baston, and Val will play Calla.

Scott wants a love relationship for sure. He chooses "Dulse and Baston adore each other."

Mike, who revels in the tragic and the creepy, adds "Arras fears Calla."

Monica likes that mood and adds "Baston loathes Calla."

Val, injecting some positivity, adds "Calla and Dulse support each other."

Scott, Mike, and Monica then add "Arras envies Baston", "Baston frustrates Arras" and "Calla deceives Arras" respectively.

For her final turn, Val decides to get some romance for Calla, too. She adds "Calla desires Baston."

Scott, liking the love/hate symmetry he's imagining, re-uses loathe with "Dulse and Arras loathe each other."

So the final relationships look like this:

Arras envies Baston, but Baston frustrates Arras. Dulse and Arras loathe each other.

Baston loathes Calla, but Calla desires Baston. Dulse and Baston adore each other.

Calla deceives Arras, and Arras fears Calla. Dulse and Calla support each other.

So what does this all mean?

For Baston, it means that he and Dulse are in love. He drives his friend Arras crazy, though, because he refuses to act on those feelings. He knows Calla is in love with him, and he hates her for it.

For Arras, it means he and Dulse can't stand each other - but that animosity is predicated on sexual tension. He wishes he had love, like his friend Baston has found, but with Dulse? That's just crazy. And Calla - well, Calla has Arras fooled into thinking she knows his deepest secret, and he's terrified of her.

For Calla, it means she and Dulse are loyal friends. She desperately lusts after Dulse's beloved, Baston, and that's a painful secret. Calla knows that deep down, Arras wants Dulse despite his venom toward her, and she delights in cruelly stringing him along, blackmailing him with lies and falsehoods.

As for Dulse, well, she's in love with one man, hates another, and has her good friend by her side through thick and thin. For now.

Changing Relationships

When an event is concluded, relationships will probably have changed. It may be tempting to re-author them (changing “Support” to “Frustrate”, for example) but don’t bother. It’s more useful to retain a baseline than it is to keep updating them. Relationships exist primarily to guide initial play and serve as a sort of flag for purposes of framing scenes, but they are not sacrosanct. If you play a scene in the distant past where Dulse and Calla frustrate each other rather than support each other, that’s fine.

Thoughts On The Relationship Map

It’s possible to arrive at some awkward constructions, but it is unlikely that any combination will be too implausible. Interpret the relationships creatively and drive toward intensity and dramatic associations. Remember that these characters have known each other all their lives. Just because they hate or fear each other doesn’t mean they don’t also love each other, deep down.

Unless one of them is Dulse, two characters normally can’t have reciprocal relationships. The only exception to this is a reciprocal relationship formed by the last person in the selection rotation, which would be interesting and fine. It’s the only way a game will start with Baston frustrating Calla and Calla frustrating Baston, for example. If that happens, the weird parallelism that is a hallmark of relationships with Dulse has bled out into the wider world, and that’s great.



IDEALS

Relationships in a game of Dulse are informed by, and changed by, a set of conflicting ideals.

The default conflict is between love and honor, but others are certainly possible and encouraged - this, more than anything, colors the game. Players will make decisions at the end of each event that are directly related to their appreciation of, and observations about, these ideals. In the context of the game, these two ideals are mutually exclusive.

Before play, place two sets of tokens somewhere easily accessible - in bowls, on the table, or whatever is practical. These should be divided into two easily-identifiable groups of twenty - use different colored beads or coins or playing cards. Each set represents one ideal - love or honor.

Thoughts On Ideals

Someone's character might be dead, but their goals, hopes, and dreams aren't. The things the missing character cares about may be realized by another character, or by the weight of memory on all the characters.

After you've played a few games of Dulse, freshen it up by using new ideals - mercy and justice, or peace and freedom, or any tantalizing pair of desirable, mutually exclusive terms. You'll need to calibrate outcomes to the seven-point scale, but that's fun, too. There's an example for peace and freedom below.

Ideals should be central to events. A game with the ideals of freedom and peace should have a very different tone from a game with the ideals of justice and mercy. When uncertain

about how to frame an event, ask yourself how to make it about the choice between the two ideals.

Final Preparations

Once you've chosen characters and created the relationship map, talk about the situation a bit. Which characters are at odds? Which are fast friends? What is their shared history? How are they poised for change? With the possibilities fresh in your minds, you are ready to play. Arrange the two sets of tokens to represent ideals. Playing cards (20 red for one ideal, 20 black for the other) work great.

Once everyone is poised for action, let Dulse's player choose an event and begin.



EVENTS

The five events may occur in any order, and each occurs only once. Each includes a question that must be answered and some characters who must appear in it. Dulse's player chooses and frames the first and last events; everyone else gets one in the middle - decide however you like who chooses the next event.

The Wedding (Everyone)

The ring was silver, with a topaz stone in it the color of her eyes. He didn't slip it on her finger but rather held it out for her in his palm, the very act asking a question. She made her choice.

Who opposes the marriage - and why?

The Betrayal (Calla and Dulse)

A perilous boundary was crossed; sacred oaths were abandoned in haste. But no one dared pass judgment, not in those times. Many had walked that path, and they waited to see what choices would be made.

Will the shame be forgotten - or avenged?

The Birth (Arras and Baston)

The baby didn't come easily, and there was nothing for it but to boil water and wait and listen to the screams - first one and then, thankfully, two. The baby's physiognomy favored the father.

Who is the baby's father?

The Secret (Baston and Dulse)

The sea chest was full of odds and ends - a tarnished foreign medal, a used-up bottle of patent medicine - and a locked box. A friend took the key and swore never to open it.

What is in the box, and how does it change everything?

The Killing (Arras and Calla)

Know one knew where the sword came from. It was a shabby thing, little more than a sharpened iron rod, its pommel unfinished and unadorned, but it sliced through bone and viscera well enough.

Who will die?

Framing Events

What does framing an event entail? Well, you and your friends can decide for yourselves, but here are some ideas:

Each event has a tiny bit of back story. How does that come to pass?

Four of the events focus on certain character pairs. Why those two? Will the others be involved?

Where? Maybe a little scene painting exercise is in order.

When? What's the point of attack? Is the event occurring in sequence, or are we flashing back to an earlier time?

How is the question going to be posed, and how is it going to be answered?

How do the paired ideals come into play, and what is the tension between them?

There aren't any right answers, but your group will reach a consensus on what's fun and what's necessary. Remember that,

while the person who has claimed the event has the privilege of setting it up, nothing should happen in a vacuum. Share ideas, offer suggestions, and get involved in every event. I suggest digging deeply in your arsenal of gamer tricks and techniques, allowing everyone to help set the stage and contribute ideas. Character ownership is only as rigid as your preference, and things like time, space, and causality are equally malleable. Most of all, drive toward revelation.

You may have conflicts - fantastic! There's no system for resolving them in these pages, very deliberately. Some suggestions: Seek consensus on what's most interesting for the unfolding story, drive toward revelation, favor the four named characters, favor the characters named in the scene more, favor Dulse most.

An event can end once the question associated with it has been answered. Once the answer is clear, any player can call for a new event. That said, enjoy them! It's not a race. If there's some juicy character interaction going on, see where it takes you.

The game ends, and the epilogue begins, once every event has been played.

Example

Mike, playing Arras, takes his turn framing an event, and chooses the Birth. It will include both Arras and Baston, played by Monica.

All the players discuss what the event could be about. Mike says he'd like it to take place in the future, and Scott suggests that maybe Dulse is having a baby. Val interjects that a tense scene as the two named characters, both men, wait outside the bedroom door would be fun. Mike and Val play out the scene,

and at some point we learn that despite all expectations, the baby's father is Arras. The scene continues for a few moments, but the big revelation is a satisfying stopping point.

Thoughts On Events

Check out how the relationship map ties in with the five events - Arras and Calla appear in *The Killing*, and for the group in the example above, it's pretty well established that Arras lives in misplaced terror of Calla. Dulse and Calla are in a scene about betrayal, and we already know she's a low-down sneak. How low down? Low enough to dishonor her best friend, who she loves? The events, relationship map, and ideals all work together to drive play.

Events should revolve around the two named characters. For example, it'd be interesting to have Baston slain by Dulse in *The Killing*, leaving Arras and Calla to seek her out for an explanation or revenge.

None of these events presuppose particular answers. Obviously a woman is going to give birth, but who she is and who fathered her child are entirely up in the air. Two people are getting married, but the players will decide who. It's entirely acceptable to have "off-stage" characters assume some of these roles - Baston's nameless sister gives birth to Arras' child; Calla murders her nameless lover while Arras watches from a tower window. These nameless characters are furniture provided for the use of the four named characters. If that's how it works out, don't worry about it - but a game where every action is sharply delimited by the four named characters is likely to be more interesting.

It's possible (likely, even) that a character will end up written out of the story early. If it's time for a character to die or leave for greener pastures, don't resist the urge. If your character has

departed, perhaps you will re-appear in later events in flash-back, or as a ghost, or merely as a looming memory. Maybe your character won't reappear at all and you can enjoy the rest of the game as a spectator. Regardless of what your group decides, events in which your character is a named participant should still revolve around you in some way.

After Each Event

At the conclusion of every event, every player allocates a pair of cards - one red for love, and one black for honor - to the players of the two named characters in the event (The Wedding is a special case; see below). Both of the named scene partners get one card from every player, including themselves. To clarify, if you are playing a named character in a scene, you keep one card and give the other to your scene partner.

You can decide which player gets which card however you like. It's probably best to let your decision be guided by the outcome of the event and how the scene partners portrayed their characters, but it's entirely up to you. Since a big part of the game is a commentary on these two ideals, look for how players exemplify (or abandon) them in their events.

The Wedding is a special case. Since all four characters are named as participants, after The Wedding each player gives a card to the player of the character whose name starts with the next higher letter of the alphabet in rotation - the player of Arras gives a token to the player of Baston, Baston to Calla, Calla to Dulse, and Dulse to Arras. The other card is retained. Thus, if you are playing Arras, you'll give the love or honor card to Baston and keep the other one for yourself. In turn, Dulse's player will be giving you a card and keeping one, too.

Each player should put their accumulated cards face down on the table and don't refer to them until the epilogue.

Example

After The Birth, Mike (playing Arras) and Monica (playing Baston) exchange cards. Monica reasons that, since discovering that Dulse's child is actually Arras', she cannot in good conscience give the (red) love card to Mike. Instead Arras wishes Baston well in the adventure of fatherhood, and Mike gets the (black) honor card. For his part, Mike is happy with this situation and keeps his own honor card, giving Monica the love card for the scene. Scott and Val, who watched the scene with interest, differ on the perceived outcome - Scott gives his love card to Monica and his honor card to Mike, and Val does the opposite.

The Birth, which was the second event in this particular game, ends. This immediately sets up an interesting dilemma for everybody, and Val insists that the next scene be the Betrayal!



THE EPILOGUE

At the end of the fifth event, each player will have ten cards. They may be evenly split, but they may lean toward one extreme or the other. You may end up with five love and five honor, or two love and eight honor, for example. The weight afforded to the two ideals dictates the general outcome for your character. If you look at the possible results, you'll see that aggressive - but not *too* aggressive - pursuit of one ideal or the other leads to the happiest result.

Each player should craft a fitting epilogue for their character and share it with the others, guided by the final disposition of cards. This can take the form of a short monologue, or a brief scene, or a simple description of events in the future.

Outcomes

Nine or Ten Love

All for love. You've sacrificed every shred of honor and decency, debasing yourself before the altar of Eros, becoming a slave to your passions. It is a terrible end.

Seven or Eight Love

Love before all. Your life is utterly scandalous, full of missteps and embarrassment. But it is a life rich in joy, and companionship, and laughter.

Six Love

Love, then honor. You'd abandon the people and things most dear to you in love's name. Despite keeping up appearances, you'll die in shame and want.

An Even Split

Measure for measure. Maintaining your precious balance makes you grind away in humiliating mediocrity, dishonored and unloved.

Six Honor

Honor, then love. Few could fault you for your courage, decency, and resolve. You are a hero of the people, but heroes die alone.

Seven or Eight Honor

Honor before all. This means that you are a paragon, and while thoughts of love are crushed beneath the burden of your duties, they are glorious and ennobling duties.

Nine or Ten Honor

All for honor. This means that, in the pursuit of an ideal all human feeling has been cleansed from your soul. You are irreproachably correct and unequivocally dead inside. It is a terrible end.

Example

At the end of the fifth event, Monica has six love and four honor - a sad, middling outcome for poor Baston. Running with the theme of shame and want, and guided by what transpired in the game (including Calla's death at Baston's hands), Monica speaks to her friends as an aged and frail old ship captain - Baston at some future date. He moans about his health, the failures of his life, his shame for the crime he committed

but for which he escaped punishment. His is an ignominious end and everyone is satisfied.

Thoughts on the Epilogue

The outcomes are just guideposts, and they are a little grim, but you should make your character's epilogue what you feel it should be. If you don't like dark fates, forge ahead and create your own. If your entire group doesn't like dark fates, re-write them!

Bonus Ideals: Peace and Freedom

Nine or Ten Peace

All for peace. You've abandoned every principle in the pursuit of peace, and become a slave in the process. It is a terrible end.

Seven or Eight Peace

Peace before all. It is the force of your convictions that bring you strength, and the mightiest armies quail before you. Your days are filled with happiness and tranquility.

Six Peace

Peace, then freedom. There are sacrifices that must be made, in the name of amity, and you gladly make them. Your end is beneath another's boot.

An Even Split

Measure for measure. Striking an impossible balance leaves

you both servant and man-at-arms, neither free or at peace. It is a melancholy end, a whimper rather than a shout.

Six Freedom

Freedom, then peace. You fight tyranny where you can, when you can. Half measures do no one any favors, and your end is consumed with bitter, fruitless strife.

Seven or Eight Freedom

Freedom before all. While holding the guttering flame of peace close to your bosom, you ride against oppression and become a legend - feared and respected.

Nine or Ten Freedom

All for freedom. To be truly free is to wage eternal bloody war with those who would take it from you. It is a terrible end.



Acta est fabula - plaudite!
