

# *The Lost Years*

*by Matthew Nielsen*

Greetings Sir or Madam,

We suspect you are more than a little disoriented and at least wondering where you are. What you should actually be wondering, however, is when you are, what you are. This letter will brief you on the answers to the latter questions.

It may be difficult for your ancient mind to comprehend, but in the distant future, we have learned how to travel through time. Do not fret too much about it. We have legions of philosophers doing that for you. All you need to know is that individuals from the future can travel to the past to change it, but these changes only affect the future if their results are recorded. We, the Wardens of Ages, exist to correct these changes; however, sometimes doing so generates anomalies. You are one of these.

More specifically, you are a character from a play written by William Shakespeare, the 16<sup>th</sup> century English playwright, in an alternate history which no longer exists. Shakespeare's writings are among the most enduring in all of time and thus have a profound influence on humanity's future. This makes him a prime target for individuals seeking to alter history. To complicate matters, no direct record exists of the seven years in Shakespeare's life before he began writing, what some fancifully call his "lost years." This prevents our efficient and direct correction of alterations within this period and makes it an excessively popular destination for time-criminals. The frequent change back and forth of this time period means that individuals like you are relatively common, for anomalies.

Since we cannot directly observe these "lost years," we require you to do everything within your power to prevent these time travelers from changing what Shakespeare writes. Being a character from a play, you may experience confusion at times and a strong desire to act out your original role. We advise you to resist these urges and focus on your mission. As a temporal anomaly, your existence is unstable such that extensive change to recorded history will erase you entirely. Therefore, it is in your own best interest to prevent these changes as well.

Reality may bear little resemblance to the play you come from, but worry not as you will instinctively recognize your creator William Shakespeare and likewise you should also possess a basic understanding of his cultural norms and knowledge.

Given the difficulty of directly monitoring the period of time in which you are located, we will be unable to directly contact or aid you, but we have full confidence in your abilities.

We hope this has clarified the situation and wish you the best of luck!

Sincerely,  
The Wardens of Ages

P.S. As this letter in itself constitutes written material, thus capable of profoundly altering the course of history, please do not leave it lying around.

The Lost Years is a game of time travel and Shakespeare, with 3-5 players and one game-master telling the story of characters from alternate versions of Shakespeare's plays, cast out of them into reality and assigned to protect William Shakespeare during his "Lost years" from the machinations of time travelers. It ultimately focuses on out-of-place characters having to choose between a mission essential to their existence and more personal desires.

#### Creating and Playing Lost Characters:

The players in The Lost Years will take on the roles of characters from alternate versions of Shakespeare's plays, cast out of them into reality. They could include anything from altered versions of characters that already exist (a Romeo who never loved Juliet or a King Lear that trusted Cordelia) to characters that could have existed in one of Shakespeare's plays but didn't (Macbeth's jester or Prospero's wife). Another option for the especially ambitious would be to create characters from non-existent Shakespeare plays, such as the lost play Love's Labor's Won. Regardless of the source, players should have a basic idea of not only what the character is like, but also what their version of the play is like.

Regardless of the source, characters are represented by three styles: Comedy, Tragedy, and History which players can divide 10 points between, with a minimum of one in each category. These styles represent what kind of play the character's actions contribute to, both in the fictive play they came from and the actual gameplay. Characters will often resemble their play of origin, but they may not necessarily, such as comic relief in a tragedy or the antagonist of a comedy. For example, Falstaff would have high Comedy despite being in a History. The three styles are defined as follows:

Comedy: comedic characters work towards a happy ending, and thus comedy is used for actions that benefit the recipient and improve their situation. This can also include actions, such as witty banter, that more are intended amusement of others than the actual degradation of their target. Comedy is good for characters which desire to help others, readily fall in love, or are mischievous, but not malevolent.

Tragedy: tragic characters work towards their own and others destruction, and thus tragedy is used for actions that harm their recipient, physically or in any other way, and thus worsen things for them. This can also include beneficial seeming actions whose primary purpose is to hurt a third party, such as kind words towards someone's fiancé to incite jealousy. Tragedy is good for characters seeking vengeance, power at the expense of others, or just those who tend to have bad things happen to them.

History: historic characters work towards protecting what exists, and thus history is used

for actions which prevent a situation from changing. The key distinction between history and the other two stats is that Comedy and Tragedy are used to change a situation, whereas history is used to keep things the way they are. It works best for more conservative characters, characters who are likely to go along with their assigned mission of protecting Shakespeare, or characters from actual history.

If uncertain about how to assign points to a given style consider what kinds of goals your character has in their play and what kind of actions the character is most likely to take and use them to guide you. Also consider that stats also determine what your character is bad at, so for example Romeo and Juliet have high Tragedy, despite not attempting to hurt others that often, because their attempts to make things better typically work out poorly.

When necessary, checks are made by rolling a number of six-sided die equal to the relevant style, with one success for each that comes up 4 or 6. For an ordinary task, only one success should be required, but more difficult tasks should require 2 or 3 successes, or even 4 for the most difficult and risky. Successes beyond the regular number reflect exceptional success as appropriate. Checks should only be made when both success and failure would be both possible and, more importantly, interesting. If success is easy or unimportant, let the character succeed. After a check has been made, a player may spend up to two points in the style used, using them for use in future checks, but rolling an additional two dice for each in this check.

Points in a style may be spent in one more way. Because they are temporal anomalies, PCs have a strange awareness of time which can sometimes be quite fortuitous. One point of a style may be spent for a player to specify an aspect of the current scene that has not yet been detailed, except for those directly relating to another PC or time-traveler, and their character will be aware of this detail. The style spent determines what part of time can be specified. History specifies aspects of the past, Comedy the present, and Tragedy the future. (With proper phrasing, a given effect can be achieved by nearly any of the three, which is okay, but the style used should at least affect the feel of the detail). Points spent in this way no longer contribute to the player's dice pool for checks.

Points can only be regained (up to their starting maximum) by working towards a character's goals and ending. The character's goal is the main task they tried to accomplish in their play (it is by no means their sole goal, just their most notable), so for Juliet this might be eloping with Romeo and for Hamlet avenging his father's death. The ending is what pursuit of this goal resulted in for the character at the end of the play, be it a happy wedding or death after having killed their beloved. A good goal and ending will create tension with their mission of protecting Shakespeare and these two different intentions should at least sometimes run counter to each other. To fully follow either the mission or the personal goal should require giving up the other, and attempting to balance both should risk achieving neither. Whenever a player can describe how a check they make contributes significantly to reaching their goal, they can regain a spent point in that style before they make the check. If the action also interferes with their mission to protect Shakespeare, they can regain an additional point in any style.

A goal can be difficult to follow when a character in relates to exists only in the play and not in reality, causing initial disorientation for theatrical characters new to reality. This is usually resolved by the character equating some character in reality (PC or NPC) with the character from the play, so Juliet might designate a young man she meets as "her Romeo" and then work towards the goal of eloping with him. As a player works towards their goal, the same actions should also contribute towards reaching the character's ending. So as Juliet works

towards convincing “Romeo” to elope with her, she should also be setting up the situations that will ultimately lead them each committing suicide.

Regardless of whether goals and endings incorporate specific characters or not, a GM should pay special attention to them and work towards incorporating parallel situations in the game. In any situation, the GM may want to incorporate some NPCs similar to characters from each character’s appropriate play. For example, Hamlet could be provided with an usurping uncle that he can equate with his own uncle and work towards helping the rightful heir seek vengeance. Players can help work goals into the game by spending style points to create details which they think will contribute towards their ending. This also makes it easy to regain those points.

In addition to the styles, each character has two identities. These are phrases which describe who the character is. They need not be contradictory, and are unlikely to encapsulate all of the character, but should capture the main aspects the character. For example, Othello could have the identities of “Moor,” “Venetian general,” or “jealous husband.” When a character does something associated with at least one of their identities they receive a bonus two dice on the check. Othello, the Venetian general would receive a bonus in sword fighting, while Othello, the jealous husband, would receive a bonus investigating infidelity. If the GM rules an identity would interfere with a check, they may penalize you 1-2 dice.

#### Time travel and the faeries:

Few, if any, understand the exact mechanisms of time travel, even those who do it. On the other hand, how to change history is much more widely known. Time travelers maintain complete free will; however, history contains a certain degree of elasticity and unless a time traveler impacts a written, recorded event the future will remain unchanged. The larger and more well read the written work altered, the larger the change. Time travel creates a form of stasis around the traveler and anything they brought with them, so upon returning to the future the traveler will be the only one aware of any changes.

The humans of the far future who created time travel seem strange by modern standards. They most closely resemble the faeries of Shakespeare’s own works (coincidence?), if sometimes more malevolent. All of their “technology” involves close ties to nature and would even be described by themselves as “magic.” Many faeries choose to travel through time, but humans from those times rarely meet them because faeries spend most of their time in regions of wilderness. This is due not only to their reliance on nature for magic, but also because they are unlikely to disrupt recorded history while holding their revels away from humanity. What records they do appear in are generally dismissed as myths and folk tales.

Within the relatively free, unstructured faerie society, there exists one major exception: the Wardens of the Ages. This highly disciplined, rather bureaucratic organization has the self charged mission of protecting history from alteration by any of a wide range of time-criminals. They maintain the largest collection of historical records ever which they continually monitor for anachronisms and other signs of time traveler intervention. So long as they can find where the intervention occurred, they can then send agents back to intercept the time criminal before their actions, preventing any change to the record and restoring history to its previous course. This has forced time revisionists to act subtly and choose creatively what events they change. Somewhat surprisingly, and to the great chagrin of many time-manipulators, the existence of the Wardens appears to be an inevitability as no change to time no matter how great has yet prevented their creation.

### Shakespeare's Lost Years and his antagonists:

The last record of Shakespeare before he became a playwright was the birth of his twins, Hamnet and Judith, in Stratford-upon-Avon when Shakespeare himself was 21. For the next seven years, no record of Shakespeare exists, and by the time he is next mentioned he is an established playwright in London. The route he took from Stratford-upon-Avon to London is unknown, and could include anything from the sitting around in Stratford, to time as an English spy in Rome, to life as a pirate.

Both due to the flexibility of this setting and the character's styles, The Lost Years can reflect a range of genres, from comedy to tragedy to heroic adventure, and the whole play-group should discuss what style of game they want to play before beginning. What high stats characters have and their chosen goals and endings will likely have the greatest impact on the type of game. High tragedy scores and the appropriate endings will, unsurprisingly, create a tragic game, as could a large mix of scores. Higher history scores with their ability to preserve things may help focus on a game oriented toward the mission of protecting Shakespeare, regardless of character goals. Choosing where the Lost Years take place also sets part of the tone, so everyone should take part in discussing the setting.

Regardless of the details of what happened during the lost years, these years have become the prime target for time criminals of all sorts because despite Shakespeare's huge historic significance, it is impossible for the Wardens of Time to directly observe interaction with him during this period. This also makes it harder for the time criminals to change things, but they are a creative lot and will often find ways to change Shakespeare while only leaving the slightest traces in records with no noticeable connection to Shakespeare. Most plots against Shakespeare will hinge on subtly altering records which do not explicitly mention Shakespeare, be they local news, birth records, or a person's diary. Less subtle villains may simply kill him in an out of the way place, requiring the Wardens to search the entire world over a seven year span for the body.

This is why the players, and their mission, are so important. By providing Shakespeare with a guard familiar with the time period, the Wardens of Ages hope to prevent these changes to Shakespeare from ever happening so they do not need to perform the arduous task of fixing this part of history. Of course, for the players, this is rarely easy as time travelers come in a myriad of forms with a huge range of motives. They range from anti-English time-terrorists seeking to kill one of the language's most famous speakers to anachronistic reformers seeking to use Shakespeare's way with words to promote a social change that never occurred to the more hedonistic and malevolent faeries seeking merely to have fun and sow chaos (these individuals often provide the others with access to time travel). They could also include other anomalous characters cast out of Shakespeare's plays seeking a way back into their comedy or vengeance for the tragedy they were made to suffer.

For the more subtle, elaborate plots (i.e. revising Shakespeare's work rather than killing him), the GM should try to think of two or three events that could change Shakespeare's perspective on the world, many of which he may merely be observing. Success with a single event may not be enough to derail history, so players have a little wiggle room, but many more failures and the past will be altered, erasing them. The players may not know the correct outcome of the event, but so long as they have an idea what the plot is, they should be able to figure out the outcome the antagonist wants and prevent it. Creative villains, especially those who have met the party before, may even try to set up situations which will play to the characters goals, offering them what they seek to distract them from protecting Shakespeare.

While plots against Shakespeare vary widely, there are some common features that players can take advantage of when trying to prevent them. Even the best disguised time travelers are unaffected when a character specifies a detail about them, tagging them as potential threats. Also, the altered events must be recorded in some way, so players should always be alert for any indication of someone writing events down. Regardless of how they do it, when the players successfully foil a plot against Shakespeare, they may increase the maximum of any style by one.