It's Complicated.

A game about messy lives and messy relationships
by Elizabeth Shoemaker
Introduction

Or, the Fine Art of Dramedy

*It's Complicated* is a roleplaying game designed to facilitate play in the style of movies like *The Royal Tenenbaums*, and television shows like *Ugly Betty* and *Pushing Daisies*. It's setting-neutral, genre-specific, good clean fun. At its core, *It's Complicated* is a game about personality quirks, secrets both dark and embarrassing, but most of all, about convoluted, messy, compelling, and occasionally one-sided relationships.

There is no fodder which is more ripe for laughter or tears than the way we interact with the people around us. It's the job of dramedy to take out the boring bits and polish up the awesome bits by amplifying the emotions, situations, and actions that put our relationships on display.

Character Creation

Or, How to Make a Mess

Since this game supports a myriad of settings and game styles, the rules are pretty free with what you’re capable of. As a result, character creation is always a group activity! The first part of character creation is setting discussion. Again, *It's Complicated* is setting-neutral, so it is up to the players to decide what sort of world the characters live in.

There are two stats in this game: Oddities and Dysfunctions. *Oddities* are personal issues, secrets, abilities, or other, typically hidden traits which make your character quirky and unique. “Can bring people back from the dead for a brief time” is just as valid an Oddity as “Secretly collects marionettes.” As a result, it’s vitally important that everyone is on the same page when it comes to what restrictions, if any, you would like to place on Oddity selection. Other example oddities include: bursting into song when overcome with emotion, born as a member of the opposite sex, strange hobbies, turning things into gold when you touch them, having spent time in prison, a secret gypsy curse. Truly, the sky is the limit here.

You can’t have oddities and be perfectly well-adjusted, however; that’s why there are dysfunctions, too. *Dysfunctions* are social issues—things which create problems or friction within interpersonal interactions—based on your Oddities. The relationship between Oddity and Dysfunction is best described thusly: “Due to [Oddity], I [Dysfunction].” Using examples above, someone who was born a member of the opposite sex may have problems with intimacy, and someone with a substantial collection of creepy puppets may never want to invite friends into their home.

Think about which Oddities and Dysfunctions appeal to you, but do not share them with the people around you. Then, as a group, decide how everyone knows each other—whether you’re a family, a workgroup, a close circle of friends, or something else entirely. Define the things which bring a character to life—name, personal history, general personality. Then, once those things have been established, it’s time to get out the game board!
Dysfunction

Oddity
Playing the Game

Or, take off your shoes, it’s time for emotional Twister!

Decide on a basic plot for the session; remember, one session of game play is one turn of scenes. The player who goes first also plays the last turn of the session. Then, the next session, the player who went second the session before is now the first player. Remember, the plot of your session does not have to be overly complex; it is essentially a backdrop for character growth and the revelation of Oddities and Dysfunctions. If you need ideas, the last page includes a “random catalyst” table. Then decide in what order players will take their turns; you can go around the table, or roll a die and go in order from highest to lowest. Every player should have a marker or crayon in a different color. Write your character names below the board in the appropriate color.

Now it’s time for the first character to take his turn. Every turn is one scene long. The first player claims a square in Oddity, and a square in dysfunction. Then, he fills in one quadrant in each of those squares with his color. Now, those entire squares are dedicated to his particular issues; other players may not claim a quadrant in that square unless they share the Oddity or Dysfunction which it now represents.

The first player then has a scene in which this Oddity and Dysfunction are revealed; he can invite any or all of the other PCs into this scene, but no one else is allowed to reveal an Oddity or Dysfunction until their turn. Any players without characters in this scene are welcome to play NPCs. Additionally, since this is the first scene, it also sets the tone for the plot of the session.

Draw a line between the two squares in the color appropriate to the character. These lines will be important for later turns, since they drive relationship and conflict. When all of the information slated to be revealed in a scene has come to light, then the scene comes to a natural conclusion.

The second player now gets to declare a Dysfunction and an Oddity; however, he has an additional task. Every move, you must interact with another player on the board. One of the ways you can do this is by Crossing a character; when your line crosses that of someone else, you declare your character’s feelings for that character. Only declare your side of the relationship! Then, have a scene where your Oddity and Dysfunction are revealed, along with your feelings for the other character.

Every scene is owned by the character whose turn it is; even if the character who owns the scene declares a relationship with another character, that character cannot reciprocate until her turn. As an example: if it is James’ turn, and he makes his feelings for Anna obvious, Anna cannot definitively accept or reject his advances until it is her turn. James might lean in to kiss Anna, therefore making his feelings known; however, the kiss cannot be accepted or rejected until Anna’s turn, when she can declare her feelings. Instead, it must be interrupted.
As the game gets more complex, crossing multiple lines at once is an inevitability. When this happens, the revelation of Oddities or Dysfunctions happens in more public, shocking ways, and demonstrates the feelings of the character who owns the scene.

Again, the other characters cannot make their feelings patently clear about the character owning the current scene. If they wish to declare their relationship to that character, they must wait until they each have their turn to own a scene, and even then, they are not required to do so.

On subsequent turns, new lines are created by connecting a currently-known Oddity or Dysfunction to a new trait of the opposite type. In the example to the left, the blue player has declined to declare his relationship to the red player, instead opting to reveal that they share an Oddity. The red player cannot react definitively to this information until her next turn, and even then, she is not required to do so.

All new interactions—whether they happen to be Crossing or Touching—cause the character to declare a change in their feelings for the other character(s). This can either be an intensification of their current feelings, a complete shift in opinion, or anything in between. If the character not owning the scene has already declared a relationship with the character who made the new line, that character is able to declare their own shift in feeling on the appropriate turn. However, if the character has not declared a relationship with the scene owner using an already-existing line, then the character loses the ability to declare via the previously existing line. Only the most recent unused line counts, in terms of relationship development.

When all characters have taken their turn, that is the end of a session. When there are no more open squares, Endgame begins; in normal turn order, players go back and definitively define relationships which have been left open in new scenes. If this is the end of the game for these characters, these relationships can be defined in a conclusionary way; if the players would like to continue with these characters and stories, the relationships can be defined in ways which are cliffhanger-esque. Instead of the end of the game, in that case, the completion of the board would indicate the completion of a plot arc; the next set of sessions would start on a new board, with only the last Oddity and Dysfunction for each character marked. When setting up the board for the new plot arc, none of the lines can cross; interaction and relationship declaration only happens once play has begun.

Happy Complexity!
It is James’ turn. James declares that he is going to move from the Oddity “Takes ballet lessons” to a new Dysfunction, “Sensitive about his masculinity.” He fills in a quadrant on a new Dysfunction square, and draws a line to it. In the process, he crosses Anna; he then declares that he has a crush on her. He decides he wants to reveal the new information in a scene with Michael and Anna; Julie, the fourth player, will take care of any NPCs, should any arrive. After quick discussion, the three players decide that Michael is entering a chili cookoff, and has invited James and Anna over as assistants and guinea pigs. With the elements of the scene established, play begins.

Michael offers Anna and James aprons; Anna takes one, and James refuses, insisting that cooking is girly, even if it’s for something like a chili cookoff. Anna giggles at James. The teasing continues until Michael leaves to go get more beer; Anna makes one last comment about James suffering from an overabundance of machismo. James grunts playfully, threatens to drag her off to his cave... And leans in for a kiss. Right before the kiss connects, Michael walks back in with the beer! Anna quickly moves away, blushing. She clears her throat and concentrates studiously on the chili; Michael and James exchange meaningful looks. That’s the end of the scene.

Now it is Michael’s turn. He has decided to move from the Dysfunction “highly competitive” to share James’ Oddity, “Takes ballet lessons.” In doing so, he crosses Julie; he declares that he is jealous of her. Michael decides that the only PC he wants in the scene is James; Julie and Anna will take care of the NPCs. With quick discussion, Michael and James decide that Michael recently switched ballet classes, and is astonished to discover that he is now in James’ class.

James is warming up at the barre when Michael walks in. Michael sees his friend, and then tries to bolt out of the class, but James stops him! After mockery and macho posturing, Michael admits that he’s been taking ballet classes in secret, because he can’t stand the way Julie always implies that she’s so much more cultured and refined than he is. James expresses his sympathy, and offers to help Michael with his moves, and perhaps even teach him a little about opera. Michael expresses enthusiasm for this idea; James reiterates that just because he likes opera and ballet, he’s totally not a sissy boy or anything. End scene.