

Tales

from the

Floodplain

A Rude Mechanicals adventure
By Matthew Tyler-Jones

Tomorrow.

The oil has run out.

Well, not quite, but it became such an expensive resource that only national governments can afford it. People made adjustments, they forswore more and more of the luxuries that they had gotten used to, international travel went first, then imported goods, then supermarkets and shopping malls. National energy grids broke down for want of repair, and we learned to rely on locally generated power, turbines, solar panels, clockwork, livestock, and man-power.

Life became more local, more people began to grow their own food, in yards and gardens, on rooftops and in window boxes. Maybe, as we all learned to eat less, we reached a point where society might have survived.

But then the floods came, ruining crops in the north, while further south, soil turned to sand for want of water. People starved, and those who survived headed north to the drowned lands. Countries, cities, towns and communities become more protectionist.

War broke out in Russia and then, across the world, cities burned as neighbour turned on neighbour, millions died, and refugees sought sustenance in the countryside.

Introduction

Welcome to Tales from the Floodplain. This game was written during Game Chef 2011, for which the theme was William Shakespeare. I chose not to be inspired by any of his plots, but rather by the journey of self-discovery that his characters make in almost all his plays. The first part of these rules therefore sets out the *Rude Mechanicals*, a game system wherein each player discovers the inner nature of their character as the story plays out. The second section sets out a story of exiles seeking refuge in a society that has forsworn much of what we take for granted today, where a gypsy's daughter may be the spark that sets the community aflame. This story was inspired not by Shakespeare, but another poet, English folk musician and singer-songwriter [Jon Boden](#), whose album *Songs from the Floodplain* is a recommended purchase and offers a great soundtrack for play.

Part one: *Rude Mechanicals*

"Men at some time are masters of their fates: The fault dear Brutus is not in our stars, But in ourselves, that we are underlings."

William Shakespeare, Julius Caesar

This is not a game that uses dice. We are not after all Fortune's fools. Instead all that may be is in the cards, how it plays out is up to us. To this end, play involves a deck of cards: the Play Deck, available formatted to print on DECAdry business card paper, or cut out from any other still card. The Play Deck is comprised of three sorts of card: Prologue Cards, Nature Cards, and Story Cards. Prologue and Nature Cards used by each player to develop and define their character as the story progresses, the Story Cards describe objects, non-player characters (NPCs), incidents, atmospheres and places, and a subset of the Story Cards help resolve actions. Some of the Story Cards are marked with Act and Scene numbers, which will to an extent determine when they come into play.

Preparation for Play

The game was designed to be played by a Game Master (GM) and two to six players. Before play begins the GM should shuffle the Prologue and Nature cards together. Sort out all the Story Cards with are marked with Act and Scene numbers into one pile for each Act (don't worry about getting the scenes in order) and put them to one side. In *Tales from the Floodplain*, there are three Acts. All the other Story Cards, including Action Cards can then be shuffled into the play deck with the Prologue and Nature Cards.

Once shuffled, the Play Deck should be cut into as many piles as there are acts. To begin play, the GM takes the first pile, shuffles the Act 1 cards into it, and deals out seven cards to each player and him/herself. If there are too many players for everyone to get seven cards out of the Act 1 pile, then deal out the cards equally, with the GM retaining any odd cards.

While the players look at their starting hand, the GM can shuffle the other Acts into their respective piles, and put them together to make the Play

Deck, with the acts in order so that the pile containing the last Act (Act 3 in *Tales from the Floodplain*) on the bottom and Act 2 on the top. Finally place any remaining cards from the Act 1 pile on the top of everything else and the deck is ready for play.

The order of play

Players should begin by laying any red and blue Nature Cards face up on the table in front of them for everyone to see. The GM should ask for anyone holding Act 1 Scene 1 cards to declare them and put them into the center of the table to create a loose story / discard pile. (Remember at this point, if anyone is holding Act 2 cards, something has gone wrong.)

From this point on, play continues as in any roleplaying game, with players describing their character's actions in reaction to the incidents and personalities revealed in the cards. Players can take turns around the table, or work collaboratively when appropriate.

A player can pre-empt his/her turn by playing a Story Card at any time, as long as its not marked with a Act/Scene number that has not yet been called by the GM. When a player plays a Story Card she should take a prompt from what the card says to improvise a scene, with the help of the GM (who knows the background story) and, as appropriate, other players. During the course of story, players will also play Nature and Prologue Cards.

Any Story, Nature, or Prologue Card that is played and then discarded, is replaced by a card from the top of the Play Deck. The GM will also play cards from his or her hand, to help the story along, and discard and replace their cards just as the players do.

When the play slows for any reason, the GM will announce a new turn by dealing everybody (including him or herself) a new card from the top of the Play Deck. The GM may also reward good roleplaying by dealing an extra card to any deserving player. After the first hand is dealt, there is no requirement that every player has an equal amount of cards, nor any limit on the number of cards any player keeps in their hand.

When all of the first scene is played out, the GM announces Scene 2 and any player holding Act 1

Scene 2 cards in the hand must declare and play them. When the last scene in the Act is played, the GM will announce Act 2, Scene 1 and so on...

If the Play Deck runs out before your players have finished, gather up and shuffle the story / discard pile, and without sorting it, turn it into a new Play Deck.

Task resolution

As there are no dice task resolution is relatively simple, with a presumption towards success. If a player proposes a reasonable action that is easy, then it will succeed, unless the GM has in his or her an appropriate Nature or Prologue card than can thwart the action if it adds to the story. Example: A player might try to steal a kiss from a drunken NPC, but the GM has a *Vain* card which says the NPC thinks him or herself too good for the player's character.

More difficult actions require that the player's hand includes a Prologue Card that explains the character's ability to succeed in the task. Again, the task might be thwarted if the GM chooses to play appropriate Prologue or Nature Cards. The rule of thumb is that if the GM plays more cards than the player, the task fails.

Combat resolution

To make a hand to hand combat action against another character (Player or NPC) each combatant must play up to two Action Cards, and may improve his or her chances of success by playing an appropriate Nature or Prologue Card. Action cards can be offensive (Example: *Strike*) or defensive (Example: *Block*), some may be played as either offensive or defensive (Example: A *Move* card played with a *Strike* may be described as a charge, or as a dodge and replete). Each opposed player selects their two Action Cards and any supporting Nature and Prologue Card at the same time, and plays them face down. When both opponents have selected their cards, they turn them over and together tell the story that resolves the combat.

Example: A player character and an NPC face off. The GM selects two *Strike* cards and an *Angry* Nature Card, the player chooses a *Block* card and a *Strike* card. When the opponents turn their cards over they agree that the ferocity of the NPCs attack beats the elegance of the player character's planned

parry and counterattack so in this case the player character is winded.

When Action Cards are discarded, they don't go into the main story / discard pile, but rather a separate combat pool. Players replace their Action cards from the pool generated during the *previous* combat, unless there are none, in which case they are dealt card from the Play Deck. This has the effect of limiting the duration and ferocity of early combats, while ensuring there is plenty of "stamina" for any climactic fights later in the play

Projectile combat may be opposed (if the target is actively running and dodging) but is more likely to be unopposed. Whether the shot is easy or difficult will be defined by circumstance (range, cover etc.) In the limited resource world of *Tales from the Floodplain* however, each bullet or arrow is a precious card that must be discarded into the main story / discard pile when played.

Nature Cards

"Oh! That you could turn your eyes towards the napes of your necks, and make but an interior survey of your good selves"

William Shakespeare, *Coriolanus*

There are twenty cards. Each describing an excess or deficiency of an *Aristotelean* Virtue. When a player draws one from the Play deck s/he must place it face up on the table in front of them, for everyone to see. If you roleplaying your character well, according to the Nature cards in front of you they you may be rewarded with extra cards from the play Deck.

Sometimes you can play a card to modify a relevant action. For example, if you play the *Unassuming* card when trying to sneak past a guard you are more likely to succeed. There are no hard and fast rules on what works and what doesn't - the player should roleplay why the card will help his or her action, and if the GM / other players thinks its justified, then it works.

If you acquire two complementary Nature cards, you must pair them and display the resulting Virtue in your roleplaying choices. You may also use a Virtue to modify a relevant action as above.

As you are using two cards, they will have twice the effect, **but** once used you must discard both cards back into the story / discard pile.

You can also use a Nature card when you don't want to discard a Prologue Card (see below).

Prologue Cards

"And one man in his time plays many parts" - William Shakespeare, *The Tempest*

The green Prologue cards replace the skills, assets, traits etc of other RPGs. As described previously they can be played to improve your chances of success in any given action. When you play one(or more), describe (for example) how the situation you face is informed by a past experience and use it to modify an action, then discard it into the story / discard pile.

If it feels right for your character, you may choose to retain some Prologue Cards, and make them part of your character's archetype (example, the *Tough, Military, Marksman*). Every time you play a Prologue Card you want to keep, hand a Nature Card of your choice to another player. They must keep it, and have the right to play it at any point to modify one or **your** future roleplaying choices or actions.

If you don't have any Nature Cards to hand over, then you have a stark choice: lose the card and succeed in your action, or retain your Prologue, but don't play it, and maybe fail in what you wanted to do.

Part two: *Tales from the Floodplain*

The set up

The players are exiled wanderers long too long after our time of plenty. They meet as vagabonds do, on the road. All seeking the basics of life: food and shelter in the main, and if they are lucky, some little comfort. No-one can ask for more than that. No-one knows each other well, they keep their past to themselves. A hard winter is not yet turned to spring

The suggested location is a fictional village called Bradwell, in the Peak District in the North of England. But you can set it anywhere you like.

Act 1

The first fleeting encounter is designed to set up the world, and our character's place in it. The hardly driven motorway has become a pedestrian walkway, but by chance the players see a procession of government cars flash by. The don't stop. The government is so distant from the affairs to ordinary people that these cars might as well be chariots of the gods.

We meet the Gypsy band, Rex Fitzwilliam it's leader, and his pretty, self-assured daughter Angel. Now the infrastructure of transport has collapsed, and communities have become more insular and self-sufficient, Gypsies have become defacto Kings of trade. If our players play their cards right, their characters could accompany or follow the Gypsies to the village.

Act 2

In the village we meet a hostile reception. Gypsies are essential for trade but not trusted. Exiles are neither trusted or wanted. Ahab Smith will make this very clear. Sarah James doesn't want anybody disturbing her lonely widow's life. The simple Abraham Brown is more friendly, as is the Preacher, Canon Davies, who demonstrates Christian hospitality. He will allow the characters to work for food, but not to outstay their welcome.

As they go about their work they will notice a lack of men of working age. Boys of five and under yes, and men past their prime like the old Blind Storyteller, who sings songs of days of plenty. But no fit young men or teenage boys.

They may also discover, hidden away deep in the woods, a strange shrine, made of bits of rubbish from times past, sweet wrappers, plastic bags wrapped around sticks and rusted cans. But despite the crudity of materials, its remarkably representative and looks just like Angel, the Gypsy's daughter.

The situation

The village is effectively ruled by Canon Davies. Ironically, just as the Government has become a distant god, so the Church has become the effective government. Boys aged five and over are taken away from their families and brought up in a disused factory, (an eighteenth century watermill in the next valley, if you retain the Bradwell setting) which has become a sort of monastery, or perhaps more properly a sort of Christian madrasah. The water wheel now generates a modicum of electricity. The students devote their time to Bible studies, and enforcing Canon Davies' strict morality. In this respect they are a little like Afgani Taliban, today. Canon Davies also has a more prosaic power. He has a hoard of fertiliser, with which he can "bless" the villager's crops, just as long as they behave like good Christians.

But one of the women has a secret. When her child was born, a boy called Ben, she couldn't stand the thought that he would one day be taken away. So she faked a still birth, and managed to keep his existence a secret as he grew. With her cottage on the outskirts of the village she managed to allow the boy some freedom, and he grew up knowing it was important to win the biggest ever game of hide and seek.

Ben himself has a secret though. Last year, when the Gypsies last passed through the village, Angel and Ben discovered each other. He was a growing young teenager, she a pretty red-head, a few years older and wise enough in the ways of the world. So he ... you know. He fell in love. He is besotted with her, even though she treated it as bit of fun. It was Ben who built the April Queen in the woods. Now he is reckless, and if he gets caught ...

Act 3

How much of the situation our players uncover, and what happens when they do, and how they react to what happens, is what will be played out in Act 3.

Will Ben be discovered? Will there be a Summoning, where Ben is taken to the factory? Will his mother will be punished? If Canon Davies discovers the April Queen, will he accuse the Gypsies or the villagers of witchcraft? Or can the players break Canon Davies' hold over the villagers? Or do they even want to?

Post Script

This was only meant to be a one-off tale. But my play testers enjoyed themselves enough to ask about Character Progression. So, we said a player could keep as many Prologue cards as they have Nature cards remaining. A new set of Story Cards would be required, but players could retain the objects they had collected. We also discussed creating a few more Prologue Cards which would be based on the Cards each player had retained, allowing characters to cascade their previous experiences, into more specialist skills and knowledge.

Story

A precious bullet

Bullets are hard to make, and easy to waste in the time of the Floods. Hoard this and use it wisely.

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Story

Story

Angel

“A ragged girl of twenty-one sits laughing in the sun and we’re the figures of her fun”
Jon Boden Beating the Bounds

Story

Story

Act 1 Scene 1

The Motorway

“Lying on the motorway this morning, i thought I heard a distant thunder roaring”
Jon Boden Days Gone By

Story

Story

Act 1 Scene 1

The Government Cavalcade

“And what were they doing, those people from the government, burning sacrificial gasoline to keep the dogs at bay?”
Jon Boden Days Gone By

Story

Story

Act 1 Scene 1

The sweet perfume of petrol like a lover’s parting kiss

Story

Storj
The old
factory

“And all that I can think about,
is woodsmoke in the valley,
kisses in the fall-out shelter and
dancing in the factory,
that closed so long ago”

Storj Jon Boden Days Gone By

Act 1 Scene 2

Storj
The
Boundstone

This is one of the marks that define
the boundary of the parish.

Storj

Storj
Distant
figures on
the mountain

Storj

Storj
Precious
seeds

“Take the seeds out to the garden
Sow them in the Soil
Split the wood we gather
Happy when we toil”

Storj Jon Boden We do what we can

Storj
Wild Dogs

PLAY THIS CARD NOW!
We had no food for ourselves, let
alone our pets, so we let them
go, and they survived, hunted,
multiplied, and now we fear them.

Storj

Storj
Wild Dogs

PLAY THIS CARD NOW!
We had no food for ourselves, let
alone our pets, so we let them
go, and they survived, hunted,
multiplied, and now we fear them.

Storj

Storj
Rex
Fitzwilliam

The leader of the gypsy band. He
has a daughter called Angel.

Storj

Storj
The Gypsies

With no fuel for transport, these
travelers have reverted to their
ponies and caravans and become
vital, if distrusted, traders.

Storj

Storj
And the
rain is
coming down

“... forming silver ribbons on the
sodden ground. People say you
can see blood in the puddles, blood
in the puddles, but I only see the
rain.”

Storj Jon Boden Has Been Cavalry

Storj
Out beyond
the by-pass,
overgrown
with weeds

Storj

Act 2 Scene 1

Story

Ahab Smith

“Pause a while by Nine Elms Reach
For Ahab Smith to make his speech
Fuel the hatred, stoke the fear
Same as he does every year”

Jon Boden

Beating the Bounds

Story

Act 1 Scene 2

Story

The Boundstone

This is one of the marks that define
the boundary of the parish.

Story

Act 2 Scene 1

Story

A hostile reception

Story

A hoard of sugar

Sealed tight and hidden away,
which sweet toothed idiot thought
sugar was the thing to hoard?

Story

The Church House

“The news was on the Church House
door, and all over the valley.
A storm cloud brewing in the East
and wild fire in the cities”

Jon Boden

Dancing in the Factory

Story

Act 2 Scene 1

Story

Abraham Brown

Abraham Brown is a harmless idiot
man in his forties. He works hard
when told what to do and is always
happily whistling.

Story

Act 2 Scene 1

Story

Sarah James

Sarah James is a widow of the
village who, it is said, lost her baby
son shortly after his birth. Though
she is a willing worker in the
community, at home she keeps
herself to herself

Story

Act 2 Scene 2

Story

Canon Davies

“The preacher is there for this
children
He will drive the dogs from the
wasteland
He remembers things we’ve forgotten
He will lead us to bread and water”

Jon Boden

Penny for the Preacher

Story

The blind Storyteller

This old man’s stories tell of a time
of plenty, long ago. When people
travelled well beyond the parish
boundaries, even to far off lands. He
will also tell stories of sadness and
loss, in time of the floods.

Story

Act 2 Scene 3

Story

Where have all the young men gone?

Story

Act 3 Scene 2

Storj

The Preacher's Men

Armed with sticks and knives, the Preacher's Men keep order in the Parish

Storj

Storj

Fertiliser

Canon Davies keeps secure in the Church House, a hoard of Nitrate Fertiliser, which which he blesses the Parish's crops.

Storj

Storj

An old and empty pistol

Storj

Storj

A Knife

Storj

Storj

A Stick

Storj

Act 2 Scene 3

Storj

The April Queen

Across the bypass, in the elm and ash woods, is a shrine. a goddess made of the litter of years past, that looks, to all that know her, like Angel, the gypsy's daughter.

Storj

Act 3 Scene 1

Storj

Ben Sarah James' only son

Sarah faked her baby's death because she couldn't bear to lose him. She has kept him hidden all these years, until his hormones made him reckless.

Storj

Storj

A Kevlar Jacket

Storj

Storj

A Key

Storj

Act 3 Scene 2

Storj

The summoning

Boys over the age of four are not allowed to stay with their mothers, but are taken by the Preacher's Men, for a good Cristian education, and to serve the community

Storj

Action

Story

A Strike

You may play up to two action cards in a round, unless your injuries preclude it. Actions can be modified by other story cards, as well as prologue and nature cards. Discard into the action pool once played.

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Story

Action

Story

A Strike

You may play up to two action cards in a round, unless your injuries preclude it. Actions can be modified by other story cards, as well as prologue and nature cards. Discard into the action pool once played.

Story

Action

Story

A Move

You may play up to two action cards in a round, unless your injuries preclude it. Actions can be modified by other story cards, as well as prologue and nature cards. Discard into the action pool once played.

Story

Action

Story

A feint

You may play up to two action cards in a round, unless your injuries preclude it. Actions can be modified by other story cards, as well as prologue and nature cards. Discard into the action pool once played.

Story

Action

Story

A Block

You may play up to two action cards in a round, unless your injuries preclude it. Actions can be modified by other story cards, as well as prologue and nature cards. Discard into the action pool once played.

Story

Action

Story

A Strike

You may play up to two action cards in a round, unless your injuries preclude it. Actions can be modified by other story cards, as well as prologue and nature cards. Discard into the action pool once played.

Story

Action

Story

A Hold

You may play up to two action cards in a round, unless your injuries preclude it. Actions can be modified by other story cards, as well as prologue and nature cards. Discard into the action pool once played.

Story

Action

Story

A Move

You may play up to two action cards in a round, unless your injuries preclude it. Actions can be modified by other story cards, as well as prologue and nature cards. Discard into the action pool once played.

Story

Action

Story

A feint

You may play up to two action cards in a round, unless your injuries preclude it. Actions can be modified by other story cards, as well as prologue and nature cards. Discard into the action pool once played.

Story

Action

Story

A Block

You may play up to two action cards in a round, unless your injuries preclude it. Actions can be modified by other story cards, as well as prologue and nature cards. Discard into the action pool once played.

Story

Action

Story

A Strike

You may play up to two action cards in a round, unless your injuries preclude it. Actions can be modified by other story cards, as well as prologue and nature cards. Discard into the action pool once played.

Story

Action

Story

A Bite

You may play up to two action cards in a round, unless your injuries preclude it. Actions can be modified by other story cards, as well as prologue and nature cards. Discard into the action pool once played.

Story

Action

Story

A Move

You may play up to two action cards in a round, unless your injuries preclude it. Actions can be modified by other story cards, as well as prologue and nature cards. Discard into the action pool once played.

Story

Action

Story

A feint

You may play up to two action cards in a round, unless your injuries preclude it. Actions can be modified by other story cards, as well as prologue and nature cards. Discard into the action pool once played.

Story

Action

Story

A Block

You may play up to two action cards in a round, unless your injuries preclude it. Actions can be modified by other story cards, as well as prologue and nature cards. Discard into the action pool once played.

Story

Rash Cowardly Self-indulgent Apathetic Vulgar

Courageous

Temperate

Generous

Rash Cowardly Self-indulgent Apathetic Vulgar

Mean

Vain

Humble

Angry

Complacent

Generous

Ambitious

Patient

Mean

Vain

Humble

Angry

Complacent

Boastful Unassuming Annoying Coarse Obsequious

Truthful

Witty

Friendly

Boastful Unassuming Annoying Coarse Obsequious

Cantankerous Shameless Shy Envious Spiteful

Friendly

Modest

Righteous

Cantankerous Shameless Shy Envious Spiteful

Prologue

Animal husbandary

Prologue

Make do and mend

Prologue

Animal husbandary

Prologue

Make do and mend

Prologue

Ambidextrous

Prologue

Green thumb

Prologue

Ambidextrous

Prologue

Green thumb

Prologue

Knife fighter

Prologue

Fake ID

Prologue

Knife fighter

Prologue

Fake ID

Prologue

Marksman

Prologue

Attractive

Prologue

Marksman

Prologue

Attractive

Prologue

Fletcher

Prologue

Insignificant

Prologue

Fletcher

Prologue

Insignificant

Prologue

Contacts

Prologue

Mechanic

Mechanic

Prologue

Prologue

Aware

Aware

Prisoner

Prisoner

Prologue

Prologue

Prologue

Faithful

Faithful

Builder

Builder

Prologue

Prologue

Prologue

Prologue

Intruder

Intruder

Soldier

Soldier

Prologue

Prologue

Prologue

Prologue

Policeman

Policeman

Hairs on the
back of your neck

Hairs on the
back of your neck

Prologue

Prologue

Prologue

Prologue

Prologue

Prologue

Prologue

Excellent hearing

Prologue

Refined palette

Prologue

Excellent hearing

Prologue

Smells a rat

Prologue

Tough

Prologue

Smells a rat

Prologue

Tough

Prologue

Eagle eyes

Prologue

Numerate

Prologue

Eagle eyes

Prologue

Prologue

Athlete

Prologue

Hunter

Prologue

Athlete

Prologue

Prologue

Chemist

Prologue

Medic

Prologue

Chemist

Prologue

Medic

Prologue

Higher Education

Prologue

Higher Education

Prologue

Prologue

User

Prologue

User

Prologue

Prologue

Sure footed

Prologue

Sure footed

Prologue

Prologue

Calm

Prologue

Calm

Prologue

Prologue

Reputation

Prologue

Reputation

Prologue

Prologue

Lightning reflexes

Prologue

Lightning reflexes

Prologue

Rider

Prologue

Rider

Prologue

Electrician

Prologue

Electrician

Prologue

Bodger

Prologue

Bodger

Prologue

Lawyer

Prologue

Lawyer