

Welcome to the New America



DOWNTRODDEN is a tabletop roleplaying game of personal horror that takes place in an alternate version of our world... a version in which cisgender women and nonbinary people have had many of their basic human rights removed as the result of a wave of paranoia, propaganda and desperation in the United States. It is no longer the land of the free.

It is into this tumultuous landscape that the characters are thrust. Who are these characters? Are they members of the oppressed? Allies of the oppressed? Are their goals to put an end to the madness or simply to survive? How has the Traditional Values Act affected their lives or the lives of their loved ones? Do they have ties to any of the underground resistance groups or are they on their own?

The answers to these questions are all dependent upon the stories you and the other participants want to collaboratively tell. There's no right or wrong answer. That's the beauty of roleplaying games. Does your group want to tell stories about rising up and attempting to topple the tyrants by force? Or are they more interested in deeply personal stories about learning to exist in a society that has stripped them of their status as full-fledged citizens? Perhaps they're intrigued by a more clandestine form of resistance that involves covert operations, hacking and other subtle means of restoring their rights? Are games involving riveting legal battles something they would enjoy?



SETTING OVERVIEW

Fear and uncertainty are terrible and hideous things, for those who are inundated by them are prone to manipulation of the highest magnitude. The fearful and uncertain are desperate souls looking for a way out of the shadows, scrabbling to find their way back to normalcy, stability and security. Many of them will cling to ideas and notions that—no matter how despicable—might put them back on the path to get there.

Few things have the capacity to sew fear and uncertainty like the threat of losing everything. That threat came in the form of a disastrous Presidential administration that brought the United States to the brink of total economic collapse through a perfect storm of sabotage, political maneuvering and bad timing.

It just so happened that the President of that administration was a woman — former movie star turned politician Marlowe Hall. The Second Great Depression was hardly her fault. A relatively new political movement known as the PatriarQs had targeted her, using her as a scapegoat to further their own misogynistic agenda. They orchestrated almost everything that caused the economic collapse.

Until this point in history, the PatriarQs had largely been scoffed at, even though their members had maneuvered themselves into positions of great influence. Using this influence, they spearheaded a campaign based on fear mongering that placed the blame solely on President Hall and the other females in her administration, all the while exonerating the male politicians and lauding them as heroes who fought against Hall and her supposed incompetence.

In the end, women became the scapegoat.

Propaganda — often employing the use of 1950s-era “nuclear family” imagery — circulated at a frightening pace. It was a media blitz, the likes of which had never been seen before. Memes flooded social media. News programs trotted out scientists extolling the inferiority of females and the superiority of males. Religious leaders encouraged their congregations to return to “traditional gender roles”. Psychologists claimed that women were too emotional and child-like to inhabit important positions of leadership. The LGBTQ community was also blamed for much of the “degeneration” of American society. “Nobody even knows what or who they are anymore,” is something the PatriarQs loved to spew out.

Amidst all this, Lucas Whitlock—one of the founding members of the PatriarQs—rode the wave of propaganda all the way to the Oval Office during the following election. He wasted no time surrounding himself with those of similar beliefs.

And so the stage was set.

The first barrage was a series of unprecedented executive orders that barred women from politics, restricted them to certain jobs, forced them to wear overtly feminine clothes, and gave men — particularly husbands — a small measure of authority over them. This, as it turned out, would be a case of simply dipping their toes in the water. The worst was yet to come.

Then it happened.

One event. One event that changed the nation forever.

That event was the Traditional Values Act, a set of laws that turned women into little more than property for men and formalized the previous executive orders. According to the TVA, a woman was under the “guardianship” of her father or oldest brother until she was married, at which point, the guardianship would pass to the husband. A guardian was free to set rules and even discipline the woman if they thought it necessary. There were some protections put in place, but they were vague and easily worked around by those who took a mind to do so.

Cisgender women weren’t the only ones affected. Non-binary individuals were also caught in the cross-fire, as they were forced to detransition back to their birth-assigned sex and abide by the strict laws that enforced gender roles.

Despite rabid protests from folks of all sides of the gender spectrum, President Whitlock signed them into law.

Almost immediately, several resistance groups formed, each with its own approach and methods. The Women’s Emancipation Force is the most radical of the lot, taking the fight directly to those who oppress women. They aren’t afraid to utilize violence and terror if it means ending the madness of the new laws. The opposite end of the spectrum is occupied by Women Against Subjugation and Tyranny. Its members live in accordance with the laws while attempting to make changes using legal methods. Somewhere in between the two groups lies The Network, a clandestine organization that stays deep in the shadows, implementing stealth, manipulation and technology as their weapons of war. There are others as well, with new ones popping up every day.

The aforementioned groups consisted of individuals from all walks of life, from the destitute to the wealthy, bound together by the goal of restoring sanity to a nation that desperately needs it. The government has done its best to squash their efforts, but have been unsuccessful in their attempts thus far.

As it stands, the United States of America is a land of inequality, a country plagued by dissonance. This is not the nation’s proudest moment and it’s going to be a long, hard road to get back to anything resembling normalcy and decency.

The fight begins *now*.



PLEASE READ BEFORE GOING FORWARD

Equality.

Equality is something I'm passionate about. It very much defines who I am and how I view the world around me. As a transgender woman, I have experienced my fair share of discrimination over the years, from being denied employment to dealing with social workers who didn't feel trans folks should have custody of their children. It has been a struggle, to say the least. And I'm not alone. Many others have faced bigotry; far worse bigotry, in fact, than I ever have – discrimination because of their skin color, because of being anything other than straight, because of their sex, because of their gender identity and just about every other reason imaginable. They have been ostracized, sneered at, threatened, rejected, attacked and even killed. And for what?

I hate that people can't be who they are without fear of hate crimes or at the very least intolerance. I hate that so many people can't seem to live and let live. And I hate that we are often judged by factors we have no control over rather than by our actions and behavior. I hate it.

So, why design, write and publish a game that deals with discrimination on a large scale?

The answer is awareness.

While the level of discrimination and indignity women and non-binary individuals face in the *Downtrodden* setting is certainly far more drastic and widespread than what they face in reality, it's not impossible for things to take a turn for the worse. Not long ago in the United States, many crucial rights were lost, from revocation of the The Fair Pay and Safe Workplaces Executive Order to making it legal for healthcare providers to refuse service to non-binary people. And that's just a couple of examples. These rights weren't removed a hundred years ago. They weren't removed fifty years ago. No, they were removed in the 2010s!

So, at its heart, *Downtrodden* is meant to be a cautionary tale.

The details of the setting may be unpleasant. They may be disturbing. They may be uncomfortable. But in order to serve as a cautionary tale, I felt they had to be that way. They had to pack an emotional punch. I wanted to give a glimpse into a world that could be our own if we aren't careful and don't address equality issues before things get out of hand.

Downtrodden has also given me a chance to tackle mental health awareness, specifically as it relates to oppression. How does being tyrannized influence self esteem? Is it possible to function efficiently? How can one find a semblance of happiness? How many times can one face degradation before they just give up? How does desperation to be free motivate someone to break the bonds?

These questions and so many others are worth exploring in a roleplaying game. To these ends, the game system was designed to facilitate and enhance that exploration.

The upshot of all this is that *Downtrodden* is not a "feel good" game. It's not a game you play if you want some light, breezy fun with lots of laughs and an ending that's perfectly wrapped up with a nice, pretty bow on top. It just isn't that game. *Downtrodden* is meant to be an examination of what it would be like to have your rights taken away and viewed as mere property after a lifetime of being treated as an equal. It's ugly and it's cruel and it's heart wrenching. It is a game of dark, personal horror.

But not everything is necessarily doom and gloom. The future may seem bleak, but perhaps something better is around the corner. Will your character play a part in that? Or will they be lost in the chaos? The story is yours to shape.

ABOUT THE GAME

A roleplaying game (or RPG) is a collaborative storytelling experience. A group of people gathers around a table—real or virtual—and tells a story together, with each participant taking on a specific role in how that story unfolds.

PARTICIPANTS

There are two main types of participants:

Players, who each control a Player Character (PC)—a fictional person they've created, complete with their own personality, stats and relationships. In *Downtrodden*, these characters are the Affected, people adversely touched by the new laws that now plague the United States.

The Game Master (GM), who runs the world around the PCs. The GM sets up the situations, plays all the other characters the players meet (these are called Game Master Characters or GMCs) and describes what's happening in the world. They also handle the rules, decide when a roll is needed and keep the story moving forward.

HOW IT WORKS

If this all sounds a bit like improv theater with dice, you're not entirely wrong—but don't worry, you don't need to be an actor or a rules expert to enjoy it. Here's how it works in practice:

The GM sets the scene. They describe what the PCs see, hear and experience. This might be something like, "As you observe the detention center from the treeline with your binoculars, you see a bus unloading a fresh batch of captured resistance fighters. One of them makes a break for it, but is beaten down by five guards with stun batons."

The players respond. Each player says what their character does in response to the situation. Maybe the characters bide their time. Or maybe they decide to take action immediately. Or maybe they disagree about the best course of action and talk it out in character. There's no script—just natural decisions based on who their character is and what's going on.

The GM reacts and keeps the story going. They might reveal a twist ("One of the guards is actually your friend who you thought was an ally.") or ask for a roll of the dice to see how well a character pulls off a tricky action, such as stealthily advancing toward the detention center). The back-and-forth continues from there, with the players and GM shaping the story together as it unfolds.

There's no winning or losing, no scoreboard to track. The goal isn't to "beat" the game or each other—it's to explore your character, have compelling scenes and create memorable moments with your group.

Sometimes, that means saving the day. Other times, it means crying on your best friend's shoulder after a particularly tough day of humiliation at the hands of your father. Both are equally valid.

Roleplaying games are a space to explore "what if" in a shared story, and *Downtrodden* is all about the deeply personal, emotional kinds of stories that happen when the oppressed are forced to survive in or overcome a nation gone mad.

So if you're new to this? Welcome. You don't have to get it all right away. You just have to bring a character, some imagination and a willingness to jump into the drama.

THE FLOW OF THE GAME

Greg is the GM, running a game for Mason and Libby. Mason is playing Martin Anderson, a former military man who is sympathetic to the plight of women and LGBTQ folks to the point of running a small resistance cell. Libby is playing Allison Baker, a cisgender woman who has escaped her domineering father and older brother with Martin's help.

We pick the scene up with Martin trying to sneak Allison across the Canadian border... and to freedom. He procured high quality fake documentation for both of them, posing as husband and wife. They are at the border in his car, where half a dozen armed guards are positioned.

GREG: Two of the guards approach the car, signaling for Martin to roll his window down.

MASON: I roll the window down, forcing a smile. "Good evening."

GREG: The guard ignores the pleasantries. His tone is firm and authoritative. "What's your business in Canada?"

MASON: "Visiting my uncle up in Toronto. I'll be there for a week and don't trust the Missus enough to leave her at home that long. She's still kind of... stubborn."

LIBBY: I play my part perfectly, having discussed it earlier. "Excuse the fuck out of me for not wanting to be enslaved, you prick!"

MASON: I smile wryly. "See what I mean?"

GREG: The guard nods. "I'll need to see your documentation."

MASON: "Of course." I hand him the fake documents and both of our fake IDs.

GREG: You'll need to make a test to see if the guard buys your banter and the fake documentation. [At this point, Greg would tell them the details of what they need to roll, but since you, the reader, haven't yet been introduced to the game rules, it wouldn't help to include it here.]

[Greg rolls the dice. Needless to say, the dice roll very, very poorly.]

GREG: The guard looks at the documents for a few minutes before whispering something to the other guard. "I'm going to have to ask you both to step out of the car and accompany me to the station over here."

LIBBY: I slowly get out of the car, but get ready to draw my pistol.

MASON: I get out too, but I don't make a move toward my gun yet, because the guards are closer to me and have a better line of sight to me.

GREG: Libby, make a test to keep the guards from seeing you getting ready to draw your pistol.

[Libby rolls the dice and gets good results, prompting her to let out a breath of relief.]

GREG: The guard doesn't seem to notice your hand moving into position. They motion for you two to walk toward a small metal building just off the left side of the road.

LIBBY: Two questions: How far from the actual border are we? And is there any cover we could take between here and the border?

GREG: You are about fifty yards from the border, from what you can tell. It's nighttime, so it's a bit hard to tell for sure. There are two Jeep-like vehicles parked in the parking lot of the small metal building, but that's about twenty yards from where you're standing now. To the right of the road is some very light woods. The treeline is about ten yards from where Allison stands and about fifteen yards from Martin. The woods stretch into Canada, but there is a chain link fence on the border itself. It looks like razor wire is on top of it. [Greg draws a quick map on

scratch paper to give them a visual reference.]

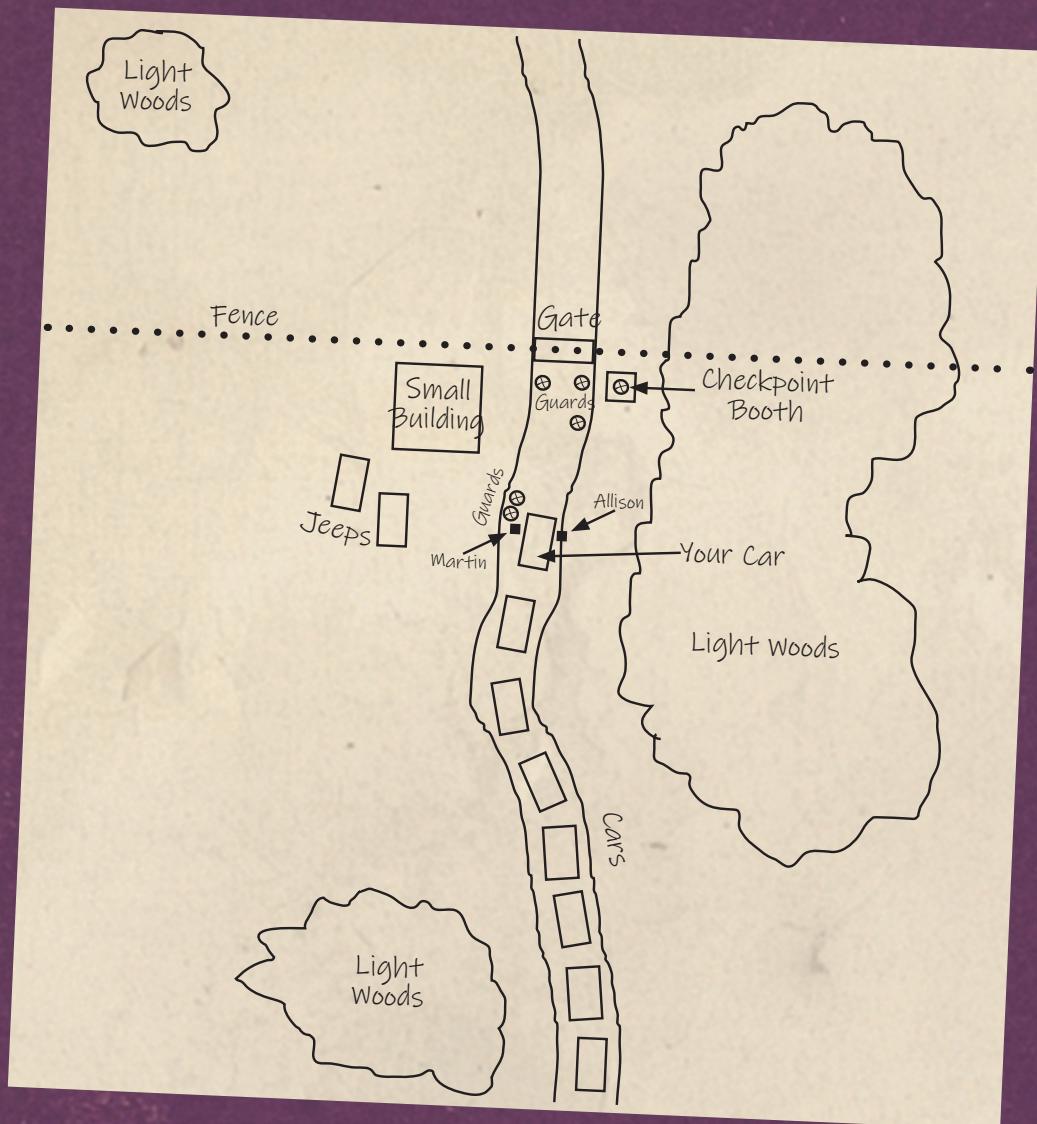
LIBBY: I quickly pull my pistol out and shoot one of the guards before making a break for the woods.

MASON: Holy crap! I guess I'll follow her lead and shoot the other guard. Then I'll head for the woods too. "I hope you have a plan to bypass the fence!"

LIBBY: "Of course I do. Sort of."

GREG: Okay, it's time for combat. Get ready to do some serious dice rolling.

[The scene continues in the same fashion.]



BUILDING BLOCKS

Downtrodden utilizes numerous segmentations and formats to keep everything easily understandable.

Sessions, Scenarios and Campaigns

Each time you play the game, you engage in a *session*. It lasts from the time the game actually begins until the time it ends for the day.

A *scenario* is a storyline or “adventure” with a definitive beginning, middle and end. It can last for one session or it can span many sessions. It’s entirely possible for several scenarios to be going simultaneously, creating a layered experience. The GM can also run the game without scenarios, opting for a more slice-of-life experience in which the characters’ lives are played out without structured “plots”.

A *campaign* is an ongoing series of sessions that follows the life and times of a set group of characters. The characters grow and change over the course of a campaign, adding greater depth to the entire experience.

Scenes, Action Scenes, Rounds and Turns

A *scenario* consists of any number of scenes, just as a movie or television show is. A *scene* is a focused slice of play that centers on a specific moment, place or interaction. It begins when attention turns to a particular situation and ends once that situation has meaningfully changed.

Scenes tend to play out very loosely, with the GM and players casually moving the game forward. However, once some manner of action involving two or more separate “sides” breaks out, that loosey-goosey gameplay goes out the window as the scene becomes an *action scene*. At this point, it becomes important to know who acts first, second, third and so on. This

is handled through rounds. During a round, every character present gets to—in a specific order—take a turn in which they perform one or more actions, such as making an attack, running for cover, creating a diversion, move to the high ground and so on.

SENSITIVE SUBJECT MATTER

By the time you’re done reading this book, you’re going to be sick of these warnings, but it’s important for us to include them. The fact of the matter is that *Downtrodden* delves into some of the darkest, most depraved topics ever brought forth into a tabletop roleplaying game.

But it’s absolutely critical to realize that these topics should never be glorified or portrayed as being “okay.” They are atrocities, plain and simple, and should always be treated as such at the game table.

The atrocities stem from the actions of the game’s antagonists. Simply put, they’re activities the bad guys allow, make legal or engage in. Keep that in mind. The bad guys.

The sensitive subject matter is only included in the game to shine a spotlight on the barbarity the human race is capable of when a segment of it gets their way on everything. Absolute power corrupts absolutely.

As we’ll discuss in great detail later in the book, it’s important that everyone in the group is comfortable with the various aspects that are brought to your table. The game should be tailored to your group.

WHAT YOU NEED

Ideally, each player (and the GM) should have access to the following dice:

- Two 4-sided dice (called d4) (*each one should look different from the other*)
- Two 6-sided dice (called d6) (*each one should look different from the other*)
- One 8-sided die (called d8)
- One 10-sided die (called d10)
- One 12-sided die (called d12)

Additionally, each player will need the character sheet and the reference sheets (all of these can be found in the Appendix).

A pool of tokens such as poker chips or glass beads are handy as well, but certainly not mandatory. They make tracking various spendable resources much easier during gameplay.

Finally, a pencil and an eraser are worth their weight in gold. The rulebook is also necessary.

THE SIDEBARS OF DOWNTRODDEN

It's a Fact!

About These Sidebars

This type of sidebar presents “in universe” random facts that may or may not be related to the text near it in the book. It’s material that adds to the setting, but that doesn’t really warrant a full section.

GAME NOTICE

About These Sidebars

This type of sidebar is something of a catch-all dedicated to information that isn’t “in universe”, but that offers critical or at least helpful details nonetheless.

Setting Spotlight

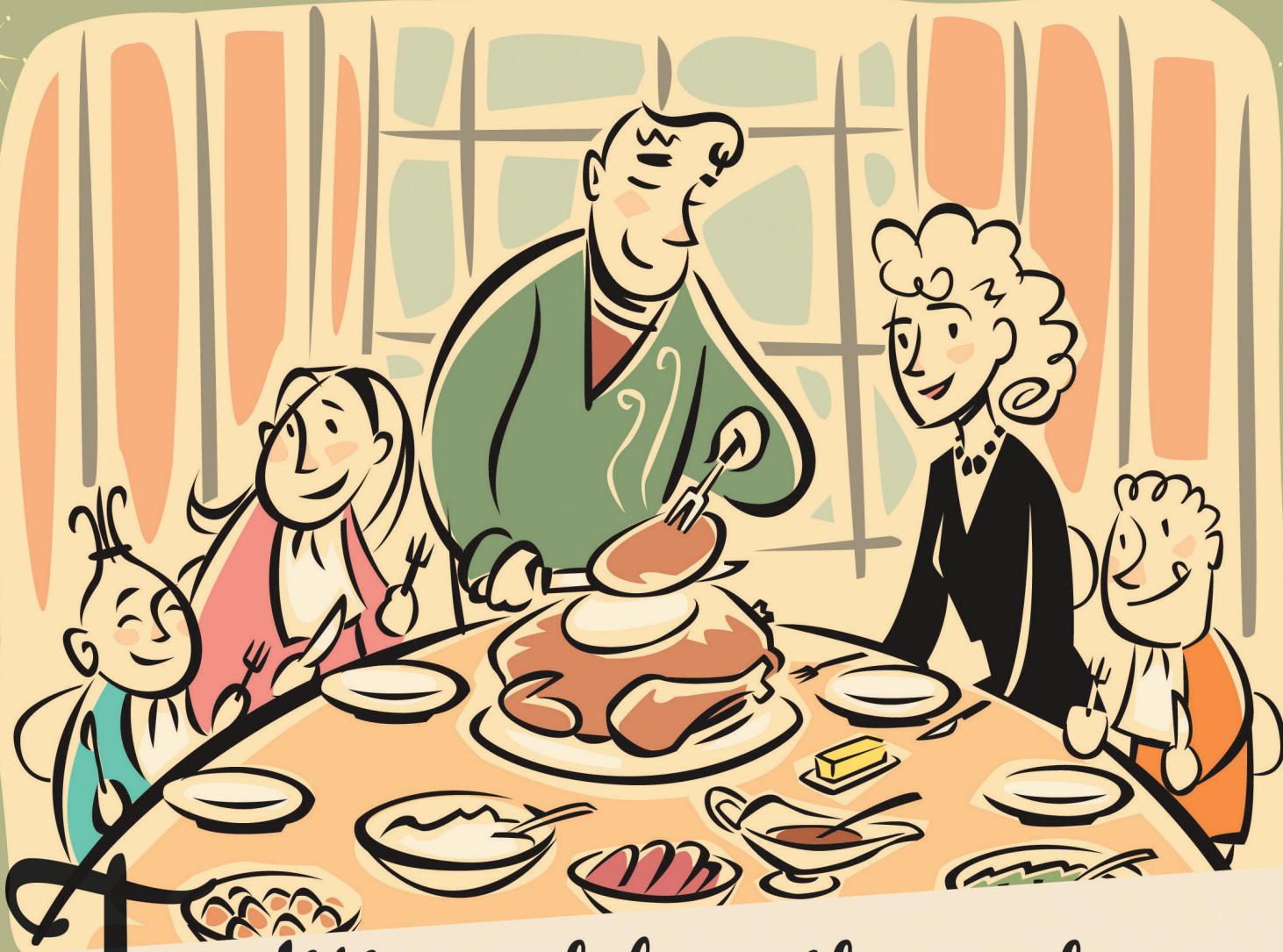
About These Sidebars

This type of sidebar is where you’ll find information about the setting, usually singling out a specific aspect of what’s being discussed in the main text. It lets us provide more detail than otherwise possible.

Example

About These Sidebars

This type of sidebar is reserved for showing examples of the game rules, thus giving you more clarity in how they work. Some examples contain visual aids, while others don’t. It simply depends on what we need to convey.



Traditional family values

Nothing says "prosperity" like a family adhering to proper roles. Dad comes home from work, hangs up his coat and ruffles Junior's hair, while Mom sets the dinner table with the enthusiastic help of Little Jillie. Everyone does their part to create a fully functioning household... a household they can all be proud to belong to! There is no confusion. There is no ambiguity. Each member of the family knows who they are and what is expected of them. This is the American Dream come true... and it has all been made possible by the Traditional Values Act!

Be a true American hero and support everything the Traditional Values Act stands for. With your help and the help of patriotic Americans from sea to shining sea, we can put the United States back on top again! Here's how you can do that:

Men! Show leadership, work hard, support your family and never be afraid to lay down the law to your children or adult women you have guardianship of. They'll be glad you did!

Women! Serve and obey your husband, keep a tidy house and always look your best to show your appreciation for all his hard work. After years of independence, being a docile wife may not be easy, but you'll find true happiness in the end!

Boys! Develop a strong work ethic, learn all you can in school and make sure to help keep your sisters in line!

Girls! Follow your mother's lead, learn to obey your brothers and be a lady at all times. The future depends on it!