

RODRIGO VASQUES CHARACTER CREATION NOTES

The next notes were taken from my exchange of emails with Balbinus. I thank him for having corresponded to my call for a playtest of the character creation rules. The end result was Rodrigo Vasques.

It all started at a forum for the TToMP column and moved to an email exchange. To facilitate the reading, I broke it up into different issues and turned it into something like a dialogue (**B** means Balbinus and **S** means Sergio):

1ST ROUND OF CHARACTER CREATION

B - Ok, I started creating Rodrigo Vasques. Initial comments. Very atmospheric, overall I really like where this is going.

S - Good! It means I'm in the right path (or, to be more precise, in one of the right paths).

B - It's not there yet though...

S - Certainly not. And your experience points to the weaknesses I'll have to cover. Basically your questions point to something I'll have to explain better: How do social backgrounds, occupations and abilities relate. How does it all translate into mechanics. These two issues have directly to do (or are raised) from the POV of the player that wants to know what he can do with his character. I'll address it from this POV.

General description:

B - Rodrigo spent his childhood as a groom in a noble household. On growing older he gained a position inside the house and eventually became secretary to the Fidalgo himself.

S - So, he learned everything that's required from a noble groom and a noble's secretary. He certainly knows how to read and write, etc. as you mention in your description. He will also know about the social relationships of his master, how to behave in the high society, about the politics of nobility. He most likely learned some military skills (or para-military skills like the ones connected with hunting, at the time considered a preparatory exercise for war). It's important to mention in his abilities section that he knows a little Latin and some Spanish. His riding abilities need mention if they are anything more than riding to the church in a tame horse.

B - Following a scandalous liaison with the Fidalgo's daughter. Rodrigo lost his position and was forced to join a company of soldiers as a scribe.

S - Let's concentrate on the first part. The liaison was of which nature? For lust or for love? This may help define his personality.

B - The Fidalgo's youngest daughter was a late arrival in the household, long after the other children. As a child she therefore had few companions and Rodrigo, her groom, became a regular playmate. Seeing his native intelligence the Fidalgo's daughter convinced her father to take Rodrigo on as a house servant from which he rose rapidly to become a scribe and eventually the Fidalgo's own secretary.

As all this time passed, Rodrigo came increasingly to regard himself with approval. He developed feelings for the daughter, which were reciprocated. As much of his feelings stemmed from his own unrecognised ambition however as from romantic sources. The relationship blossomed and continued under the Fidalgo's nose to his ignorance (though to no-one else's) until the time came when the daughter became evidently pregnant. The Fidalgo reacted with fury, his daughter was dispatched to a convent and Rodrigo was dismissed, after a vicious beating to teach him his place.

B - As I said, the result was that Rodrigo lost his position and was forced to join a company of soldiers as a scribe.

S - Under his true name or under a disguise? How powerful was his master? Could his revenge go too far after Rodrigo? Who was his captain? Here we have more questions that help to fine tune his social relationships.

In continental Portugal - not much action - in the overseas, maybe North Africa - more action - or in a foreign country, maybe Spain? The question is: did he gain more experience in these two fields? What experience? Maybe being the scribe of a military company allowed him to learn all the tricks of "creative" accounting that sum into the captain's wealth at the cost of the soldiers (and the Royal treasury). Did he face military action? How did he perform? Was him in a foot-mounted or other company?

B - Rodrigo fled under his true name, his master satisfied his need for revenge by putting out word that Rodrigo had stolen from him, but that from Christian charity he had contented himself merely by dismissing Rodrigo from his position. This ruined Rodrigo's prospects while still protecting the family name from scandal. Rodrigo has no knowledge of the fate of his child.

Rodrigo had difficulty finding work with a reputation as a thief. He signed on with a company led by a drunken captain leading men little better than brigands. He saw brief action in Spain, where he did not distinguish himself and spent much time in Portugal on foraged rations and little pay.

B - His reason for going to India is necessity, he doesn't like soldiering and he'll never work in a noble household again.

S - That's fine.

Backgrounds and abilities:

B - How many backgrounds are appropriate? I made that three backgrounds, groom, secretary and scribe/soldier. Is that broadly right?

How many abilities are appropriate? I gave him reading and writing portugese, latin and a small amount of spanish. He can also ride and has learnt basic soldiering. How many skills is appropriate though?

S - We may say that occupations are at the core of the issue. An initial note: I used the word occupation instead of the word profession. The meaning in this context is the same but profession does not fit within the setting (at the time there was not the idea of a profession and a professional, specially in the case of the upper classes). An occupation refers to a set of things you do in your daily life; things connected with a position in society; in terms of relationships to other people; under a more or less contractual base.

How do occupations relate to social status? Basically social status puts restrains on the occupations one can perform. One cannot expect to become a captain if one is not a noble or close to the nobility. A noble will never accept to be downgraded to a crafter by assuming such an occupation.

How do occupations relate to abilities? Any occupation requires the person to perform some activities so the person needs to be able to do it. Occupations are more or less focuzed in those abilities. For instance, each craft defines a core ability (a smith's key ability is to know how to smith). But not even in this case the occupation can be equated with the ability only because the occupation requires other abilities. For instance a smith also needs to know something about trading. And the occupation defines social relationships, etc.

Abilities are what one knows or what one knows how to do. They are strictly functional. One learns abilities because of our social background (being a noble or being raised with a noble child allows one to learn things like Latin, read and write, formal training in combat, etc.), because of our occupations or because of our life experience.

So, social status and occupations have to do with abilities. They define what a character can do to a certain extent. Because of this the player does not even need to mention it. ("You're a noble? You know how to read and write. You are a fisherman? You know how to fish - at least in Portugal.)

Other traits:

B - I was a little unsure with other traits as to whether I had to pick from your lists or make up my own.

S - Simple. A new player is better off by picking from the lists. An experienced player with a good understanding of the setting and how the game operates can give wings to his creativity. As you can see, I don't frame this in terms of "I had to". It's not about having to do things in a certain way but about how it makes things easier for the player and his playing experience. But the important issue relates to how the experience in playing TToMP develops: Novice players, with a poor knowledge of the setting, will not ask themselves these questions [like the ones asked in the course of the dialogue between Balbinus and me]. They will stick to the basics. Experienced players will ask themselves these questions. My purpose is to have a game where the knowledge of the setting improves the system.

2ND ROUND OF CHARACTER CREATION

B - I'm still struggling slightly to create my basic character though. Could you write up Rodrigo as you see him from my description? I don't mean to make you work but I'd be very interested to see the result.

S - Here goes the rewrite of the character but first some preliminary thoughts.

1. I worked it out like if I was the GM and you a player.
2. I assumed that, being the GM, I have a much deeper and better understanding of the setting than you. That means that my changes are based on that knowledge. Now, this is obviously true:

Would a GM have that level of knowledge about the setting? The assumption is that the GM resources would provide for the level of knowledge required for him to direct the players. What I've done below works on this assumption.

A complete rewrite of the character:

S - Now, for Rodrigo Vasques:

Let's start at the turning point in his life when he was 14 and rework a little your description of Rodrigo. First, let's give some more substance to the noble family he lives with. You mention that this family comprises the fidalgo and his youngest daughter, a late arrival long after the other children. Ummm...

D. Eduardo da Silva a provincial nobleman from Cartaxo (a locality to the north of Lisbon) with a long lineage had five children: The elder, D. Afonso da Silva; a second son that died in North Africa on the service of the king; D. Ana de Figueiredo, a daughter married into the Figueiredo family; Antão de S. Maria, a priest that now lives in Italy; and Aida, his youngest daughter from his second wife. He saw his two wives die from sickness.

D. Eduardo is a good natured man in his early 60s. When his son D. João got married, D. Eduardo decided to retire to his estates in Cartaxo where he lives since then with his youngest daughter a more or less reclusive life.

D. Afonso is a haughty and cold man in his forties. He lives in Lisbon where he has fulfilled several appointments by the king. He is cold, hot tempered, and very protective of his good name and honour.

Aida is a 24 year old, bright and spirited young lady. If her mother was alive she would have been sent to a nunnery but his father kept her with him for the company.

Now, let's look at Rodrigo. He is the son of soldier that served D. Eduardo until death took him when his son was 7 years old. Rodrigo's mother was a maid of the Silva's house. She died too when Rodrigo was 10. Both of them were trusted servants of D. Rodrigo that had a lot affection for them. That affection was extended to their only son. D. Eduardo enjoyed teaching the boy soldiering skills that remind him of the days of his youth. For the last 7 years, after the death of his father, Rodrigo learned from his master all the crafts and arts of war.

Aida, deprived of young company in a house inhabited by her father's aging servants, became close the boy since his childhood. She taught him how to read and write Portuguese.

D. Eduardo relied on his old priest for his scribe needs. Eventually arthritis made this task too painful to Fr. Luis. Three years ago the aged priest started to use the 11 years old Rodrigo to do the writing under his instructions. That continued for the next 2 years. In the mean time he taught Rodrigo some Latin (enough to say simple sentences and aphorisms and to read basic texts). When the priest died a year ago D. Eduardo entrusted all his scribe needs to Rodrigo. At 14 Rodrigo seemed to be 16. That summer, years of a childish close relationship with Aida turned into something new, something that none of them had tasted before. It was a brief and guiltless explosion of juvenile lust and desire. The carelessness of youth brought it into the attention of indiscrete eyes and years and the whole affair was reported to D. Eduardo. The aging nobleman was devastated. Two of his most trusted and loved ones had betrayed his confidence beyond repair. Prostrated with grief, unknowing what to do, he called on his son, D. Afonso. Aida, knowing all too well the moods of her brother, ordered Rodrigo to flee at once. The reclusive ways of the Silvas allowed the coverage of the whole affair and protected Rodrigo in his flight. He sailed in a boat down the Tejo (leaving Cartaxo for the first time in his life) claiming he had to go to Lisbon because of some business of his master. Nobody discussed it. When D. Afonso reached Cartaxo his rage was unbounded. He wanted his sister sent to a nunnery right away. He wanted Rodrigo hunted and killed. His father and his wife barely were able to contain him. After many arguments they were able to convince him that killing Rodrigo would only bring more suspicion and could put him under the reach of the king's justice. On what concerns Aida, it was too early to send her to a nunnery.

The latter was a wise decision. Soon the signs of a pregnancy became all too evident. Aida was officially declared hill. She lived the life of a recluse under the watching eye of D. Afonso's wife's most trusted maid. Five months later a shield was born. Only the maid, D. Afonso, his

willing to see his daughter in the rest of his days, was never informed about it. The child was taken by the servant and put into the wheel of an undisclosed convent, his or her destiny the service of the Lord.

Two months later Aida was declared cured. According to the story told by her brother and step-sister, this was a God's miracle that she wanted to thank for the rest of her days by living in a nunnery.

That winter D. Eduardo died of a cold.

Rodrigo never knew neither about his child (even if Aida had confided to him about her worries that something like a pregnancy could be happening) nor about what happened to D. Eduardo or D. Aida (even if he could guess).

What about Rodrigo? He went to Lisbon where he got lost, not knowing how to go about in such a big city. It was not hard for D. Afonso's men to hunt him. D. Afonso anticipated the moment he would be able to get his revenge. Yes, he would spare the life of the youth. But he planned to leave him maimed and disfigured, wretched for the rest of his days.

Rodrigo was lucky. D. Afonso was called by the king for an unavoidable meeting. He privately ordered his trusted servant to do the job. This man had been a good friend of Rodrigo's father. In private he made Rodrigo swear that he would never speak about what had happened and had him thrown into the sewer in Almada south of Lisbon after a vicious beating - but without serious maiming or disfigurement. Rodrigo was taken to an hospital for poor where he claimed he had been assaulted and robbed. In three weeks he was on his feet heading south.

Months later Rodrigo was in Sines, a town in the south-west coast of Portugal, penniless. He heard by chance that a local nobleman wanted to hire soldiers for his caravelas. He got onboard after lying about his age (he was 15 and said he was 18). For the next four years he lived a mix of sailing, privateering, and misery due to the unscrupulous mores of his new master. His read and write skills made him into the scribe of the nobleman.

When he was 18 he was sent as the under commander of a caravela in a mostly piracy mission to the strait of Gibraltar. That time luck ran out and the caravela was captured by the Spanish and taken to Cadiz. Rodrigo had to face two options: either to go to jail or enrol in the Spanish army that was going to Italy. He opted for Italy. In the months before embarking he became friend with a Spanish captain from Granada. That spared him the troubles of the wars in Italy. The life of a soldier in the south of Spain on foraged rations and little pay was not the most prosperous opportunity one can think of. Two years later, when his days in Cartaxo seemed to be more dream than real, Rodrigo decides to return to Portugal and sail to India. It was the year 1537.

Notes:

S - I changed or dropped some of the things you say:

1. I downplayed the scandal of the situation. Rodrigo would not be able to get out only with a serious beating after something like this went public.
2. I omitted his "unrecognized ambition". An illicit liaison with a nobleman's daughter would do nothing to fulfill an ambitious drive.
3. I ignored the reference to a military company. At the time there were no organized military companies in Portugal. Soldiers worked for captains under a personal relationship. The noble provided "mesa" (table) meaning that he accepted the soldier under his command and provided for his needs. But this only happened overseas, the places where there were more or less organized military commands. In Portugal the traditional feudal system remained in place.
4. I romanticized things a lot. I hope you like it. Most of this has no impact and only adds colour. But we never know. It's up to the GM to use it for the best effect. And for the player.

Filling the character sheet:

S - It is easy to record the first three items:

1. Sex = male.
2. Born in Cartaxo in 1537. Let's not lose time with the exact date of his birth.
3. His name is obviously Rodrigo Vasques. If you want you may give a name to his father and

His social standing is obviously of a commoner, one of those men that gravitate close to the nobility.

His occupations have been scribe, servant and groom under the Silvas, soldier and scribe in Sines, soldier in Granada.

When his nau sailed away from Lisbon Rodrigo had no one to leave back. The ones he had cared for in the past were either dead (his parents, D. Eduardo), unreachable (Aida) or unknown to him (his child). His only potential relationship is to D. Afonso, and it is not the most positive one. Should you record something about it? That depends entirely upon the impression those past events left on Rodrigo, and that's a decision you have to make as the player playing the character. I've recorded it just for example's sake, but you may decide Rodrigo only remembers D. Afonso as a distant memory, not as someone that may still influence his life. (Notice that what you record in the character sheet is the way the character perceives the other person. It is not what the other person thinks. Whether D. Afonso still has the drive to hit Rodrigo or not is a decision for the GM, not for the player. If D. Afonso is still an active enemy of Rodrigo it's up to the GM to record in the character sheet of this nobleman.)

Personality and values. This is up to you. Yet, since this is an experiment, I can suggest the next questions:

1. How does the memory of the kind treatment Rodrigo had in his childhood under D. Eduardo and D. Aida shape his feelings? Is he a kind person? May that memory drive his behaviour into other people?
2. Did his betrayal of D. Eduardo trust affect him? Did he repent from it? Does he dismiss it as a minor sin of immaturity? Does he want to pay back his sinful action to society, his conscience or his faith?
3. How does he look at those peaceful and happy days? As something of the past? As something he wants to get back?

I think that other issues are completely on your hand. Things like his relationship with money and riches (even if the reason for him to go to India may point to some materialistic interests), power, honour (even of this may be linked with the answer to question 2.), etc. You don't need to give too much thought to this right now. Pick a personality trait and a value and expect to develop it as you play.

Abilities. He is a good soldier, he know some Latin and some Spanish. He may know something about sailing. He is proficient with reading and writing Portuguese. He knows how to handle horses.

He has no mercies and privileges.

What are his goals? That's up to you. He wants to get a more comfortable life, probably meaning a better standard of living. So, he is looking at the riches of the Indies.

Does he expect to come back or not? That may be dependent on whether he still fears D.

Afonso. I considered that this is the case, so he wants to settle in India as a *casado* (a colon).

Equipment. Being a soldier he will have common cloths and his military equipment (sword, helmet, harquebus). He may have some money but most likely he spent most of this in his return to Portugal. I'll give him 10 Xs. plus a gold ring with an un-expensive gem valued at 20 Xs.

Now for the final details. His defining trait I'll leave for you. You may leave this empty.

I'll put him sailing with Alvaro Pires.

You are to draw his portrait.

And you can make some minor changes. For instance, did he keep his name after the events of 1531? He might have changed his name to avoid D. Afonso's persecution. And things like this.

And that's for Rodrigo Vasques. I hope you like it.

B - This is looking good, but one detail I'd change is Rodrigo not knowing that he has a son. The point of that background detail is that he knows he has lost his son and does not know what became of him. It is something which will haunt him. Ultimately, as a player, if Rodrigo doesn't know he has a son what does it matter? It has no effect on the character unless he is aware of it.

S - Yes, I think your are right. Maybe in the future of Rodrigo Vasques there's a small boy of cloudy origin sent to Asia by D. Afonso da Silva...

At a meta level there are many alternatives. Like...

The player knows about the child and wants to get back to Portugal to find him. But he knows that he will need to return with (to buy protection) and to get the patronage of important people in India (for the same reason).

Or else, the GM might not tell the player creating the character about the pregnancy and the child. He could keep this on hold so that it could introduce this information later. For instance, the child is sent to Asia by his uncle with a male servant that knows about truth; for some reason the servant and the child are separated; the servant eventually crosses his path with Rodrigo and, before dying, tells him the whole affair.

B - Part of Rodrigo's motivation is to be able to return to Portugal with enough money and influence to live openly in his homeland with his son, to be the equal of those he had to flee.

Impossible of course, he'll never be nobility. But money and powerful friends do smooth many obstacles.

S - One can always dream. And one can be a little nuts. Besides, there was a saying (in the 17th century at least; I don't know if this was already true in the 16th century) that even carpenters became Dons when they crossed the Equador...

B - So, that seemed to expand the character a bit. How does all this fit onto the sheet?

S - It doesn't. Not according to the standard character creation rules. But it will do according to the advanced character creation rules. These rules (inspired by Hero Wars) will allow for the type of character creation we are playing with our conversation. One will only need to place down a narrative of the life of the character. Next, one abstracts from that narrative the data to fill the character sheet (if one wants to). A little like I have done with Mendes Pinto.

CHARACTER CREATION AND THE GAME SYSTEM:

B - Also, how do I assess in all this which things Rodrigo is good at in game mechanics terms and which he is weak at?

S - You have to understand a critical concept of TToMP game system: your character is setting sensitive, not system sensitive. What does this mean? The capabilities of the character as expressed in the system are stable. They are expressed in a single term: Basic Die. Whatever the action, whatever you do, the moment you have to act, in system terms you basically have the Basic Die (a 1d10, by the way).

So, everybody is equal?! Not at all. In the concrete circumstances you will want to unbalance things in your favour either by tilting the balance to your side (adding more weight to your position) or by tilting the balance against the opposition (lifting weight from his side).

This is what I mean by setting sensitive: in the situation you identify what works in favour of you. This can be character traits, things, other people, circumstantial factors, etc.

In system terms, that means you will try to put into play issues that benefit your dice-pool and to avoid those that prejudice it.

To use game parlance: In TToMP's system you don't have set values. You only have modifiers. Modifiers derived from setting elements relevant in the particular circumstances the character is facing.

Needless to say, the more developed a character is, the more "items" the player has to work with in the definition of the dice-pool, the more modifiers he can use.

So the answer to your question is... you don't. You don't assess what he is good at in game mechanics.

You assess what he is good at in setting terms. If he is good at in setting terms, the game mechanics will adapt to reflect this. If he is weak, the same will happen.

Because of this, the player doesn't need to say everything. For instance, does Rodrigo Vasques know something about carpentry? Cooking? First aid? He will certainly know a little of all of these, but not to the level of a "professional".

This points to something I'll have to make explicit, a feature of the setting: the 16th century is a period where most people could do most things at a basic level. And where there were no advanced specializations. It's very hard to find a character that says "I can't do that". Unless it is a skill that's out of his basic cultural pattern (like foreign languages) or something the character really never had an interest in. I'll provide examples of these situations (plus the cases of real specialization) taken from the sources. Because, as I said, the game is setting sensitive. So the best way to present the game is to provide examples taken from the sources and demonstrate how they translate into gaming situations.