

The Iä! Iä! Ph'iles

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1 Introduction

The Iä! Iä! Ph'iles is a game for 3 players or more that will take you about 3 to 4 hours to play. Perfect for an evening after a nice meal with your friends!

In this game you take turns in telling a mystery story. First you decide on a crime that sets off the investigation, then you each start developing characters together while you add the clues to the mix. From there, you will deduce possible motives, which will be refined from questioning each others characters, until you finally find the criminal(s) lurking amongst you!

Of course, nobody knows the truth about the mystery till the end, you make it all up as you go along. These rules are here to help you make it work!

I've been inspired quite a bit by H.P. Lovecraft's short stories, in fact the major inspiration came from playing the *Call of Cthulhu* game which is based upon the work of Lovecraft *et al.*, and the *X-Files* show by Chris Carter, but in actual play, we played in settings very close to what one might encounter in one of Agatha Christie's books. Any setting and situation that start off your creative juices are perfect!

To play this game, you will need a number of paper sheets, tokens of two kinds (I use colored beads) and a different coloured pen for each player.

Throughout the game, I will write technical terms in SMALLCAPS when they appear in paragraphs, so that you always know when I'm talking about the rules or not.

1.1 Limits

Before you get into the action, remember that some topics can hurt or annoy people. This is especially a good thing to think about when you play with people you don't know very well, but even with your closest friends, having a quick talk about those topics is a good idea.

Discuss the levels of violence, paranormal, humor, eroticism, vulgarity, sadness, etc. that are okay in your game to come.

If anything disturbing or lame arises during the game, anyone must feel free to bring attention to it.

1.2 Structure

Improvising is a delicate matter. This is why I present you with a narrative structure that will help you keep focused, as you add to the bare skeleton with your creative imagination.

The Iä! Iä! Ph'iles is divided into the following stages:

† Crime scene

† Investigation

† Deduction

† Interrogation

† Revelation

† Epilogue

2 Crime scene

A mystery is all about resolving what I'll call a CRIME SCENE, even if you'd rather not have an actual crime start out the story. However, it must be a very strong event in which the story will take its roots.

The CRIME SCENE is further divided into CONTEXT, TRIGGER and CHARACTERS.

I will also introduce you to DRAMA POINTS, one of two resources you use in this game.

2.1 Context

This requires all of you to be ready at the table or wherever you decided to play. Take a nice blank sheet of paper and, all together, agree and write down a few words about the time and setting of the story: be it tracking down in contemporary Berlin, an investigation in the 70s San Francisco, the crossing of the Mediterranean Sea on a steamer in the 20s, etc.

When starting out, do not hesitate to clearly restrict the space of your story: playing *in camera* yields more than enough opportunities for stories to arise, lessening at the same time the risk of drowning in an ocean of possibilities.

For more advanced players, you might consider playing in multiple locales, or even multiple time-periods using techniques of flashback and foreshadowing.

This will give you the framework on which you will weave the characters and situations throughout play.

2.2 Trigger

What started this mystery? An unexplained murder? Frightening apparitions scaring the neighborhood? A rare natural phenomenon?

You want a gripping, open-ended situation to get everybody's hearts racing!

This is the seed from which all the characters will grow throughout the story.

2.3 Characters

The investigation is going to gravitate around a number of characters. Each player must create a character before you start exploring the story. At least one of those characters will be revealed as being a major actor in the crime, but nobody will know till the end who it was and what their exact role was!

Take a sheet, and in just a few words, describe your character's appearance, job and other such details. Do not yet describe social or psychological aspects of your character, you will do that as play unravels, just as you discover a character when reading a novel.

What you do need to write down is your character's link to the TRIGGER. Without it, your character has no reason of being in the story! Don't worry, if for example you're playing a detective, "I was commissioned to track down the assassin" will do just fine!

You are not allowed, however, to state that your character is part of the crime (it would be okay to say she *thinks* she is).

In technical terms, this is your first TRAIT. This will be explained in a moment.

As play will develop, you can freely decide what your character knows, can do or how rich he is, as long as it makes sense to you.

2.4 Drama points

Throughout all of play, each time you describe a scene in which you put your character in a risky situation, you may gain one DRAMA POINT. The more of those you have, the greater the chance that something really bad happens to your character in the end (including being revealed as the criminal!) becomes. In exchange, the more such points you have, the likelier it will be that you can narrate your character's EPILOGUE.

If you decided to use paranormal activities in your play, being confronted in some way with such elements would perfectly entail you to DRAMA POINTS, if you desire.

3 Investigation

This stage of the game is played in three turns. On each turn, each player gets to tell one of the starting scenes of the story. You'll need a new sheet of paper for this stage.

After the TRIGGER, your characters will find or stumble upon CLUES that will help them advance their investigation. One after the other, you will describe how your character finds a CLUE and write it down on the sheet, with your own color.

In addition to the finding of a CLUE, you will also learn something about your character, which I call a TRAIT in mechanical terms.

3.1 Breaking down investigation

On the first turn, you introduce your character. During the scene you will invent one (and only one) CLUE and say something that speaks to the social or psychological nature of your character. This you write down on your character sheet as a TRAIT.

The two following turns, you continue to tell your friends which CLUES your characters finds. However, you must choose another player that will reveal a new TRAIT about your character.

Of course they will tend to make your character look suspicious, but that's just what we need to make a very tense closure for the story!

It doesn't really matter in which order you play, as long as everyone played once before going on to the next turn. It is perfectly okay to play flashbacks or older scenes *after* newer ones. In fact, you will probably never even care to find out in which chronological order the scenes happened at this stage.

3.2 More about clues

A CLUE can be just about anything, fictionwise. For example: a blood-stained knife, interviewing a witness, noticing a person's habit of always checking under a specific mailbox or even being told that one of the suspects fled from jail.

So as to assure a solid basis for the next stages of play, it is very important to respect two golden rules:

- † Each CLUE must be unrelated to any other clues already found. For instance, it is forbidden that a new CLUE rest on the existence of a previous one or the bring more information to an already existing one. You may find more than one CLUE on a crime scene of course. For example: one character finds a watch and then the next one finds something written on the back of it. Expanding on the CLUES is what DEDUCTION (the next stage) is all about.
- † Characters involved in the scene must remain interchangeable with any other character. This sounds a bit tricky, but what it really means is that the existence of the CLUE must not depend on that of a character. For example: a character who writes murder stories cannot have their work inspire the assassin (for the while being).

At this point in play it is of course utterly impossible to judge of the importance of a given CLUE, only subsequent play will decide that. A CLUE might reveal itself as a red herring, while a seemingly unimportant detail could become the pivotal element in the whole enquiry!

You do not need to take care and avoid what would appear to be conflicting evidences. Again, such things will be covered later in play. However, you cannot add a CLUE that would directly *exclude* another one, as per the first golden rule.

3.3 Expanding on traits

A TRAIT must reveal something which is important to the character, something which is deeply embedded in him or something that could make him look suspicious. This can be represented by a personality streak, a relation to another character (belonging to a player or not), a goal or a passion.

It is recommended to tie TRAITS together with CLUES or other story elements so as to color them as much as possible. Examples include: “This vase used to belong to my character’s friend!”, “My character would like to retire after the investigation” or “Because of his political career, Robert Powell must always take care of his image”.

The closer a TRAIT is related to the story at hand, the better are its odds of having a good effect later on. Consider: “Helena knows everyone in town” and “Helena, the portmaster’s secretary, knows the dockers well”. The latter catches the attention much better, because it relates to specific elements in the fiction.

The secret in TRAITS is that they are used to create conflicts for the character in the midst of the enquiry, tying various interests into its outcome.

3.4 An example scene

Inspector Stokes is Jonas’ character (and Jonas is the player whose turn it is) and Eric is another player. This example could be taken from either second or third turn:

Jonas:

The police had been searching the forest’s boundary since the early afternoon. The humid fog did not make the task easier of course and all the men where in a bad mood.

At last, at the fall of night, patrolman Reeves finds a pocketwatch in the thicket. Judging by its good state, it must have fallen not too long ago. On its back, a symbol is engraved, perhaps a coat of arms. The policeman puts the watch into a sachet and hands it over to inspector Stokes.

Eric:

“Good work, Reeves!”, cries out the inspector. He looks at the mysterious symbol and his look darkens briefly.

The CLUE is of course the pocketwatch lost by the forest, whereas the TRAIT could be written down as “a mysterious link to whatever the symbol stands for”.

Only further play will reveal exactly what is going on. Maybe Stokes is acquainted with some kind of sect, or perhaps did he just recognize an old friend’s watch, but as of yet, nobody knows. . .

4 Deduction

Allright, what have we got so far? Take a look at the sheet with the CLUES on it and discuss it amongst you. As soon as everybody is on the same page, you can delve into the DEDUCTION stage.

Now that the initial situation is pretty well fleshed out, people will want to sort out the CLUES and see what they might find. These possible paths are called TRAILS in the rules of this game.

You need a new blank sheet of paper on which you will keep track of the TRAILS. Everybody must keep their personal colour as well, because the new ressource, INVESTIGATION POINTS, kick in based on what forensic elements are reused later on in the game!

The second important thing about this stage are the PERILS that are revealed by the TRAILS. These are things that are put at stake for your character, such as “George seems to be pretty familiar with the thugs, is he their boss?”

4.1 How to play this stage

There are going to be two turns of DEDUCTION and again you can play in any order you’d like as long as everybody played once before you start the second turn.

A player must choose at least two CLUES that he did not contribute and weave them together into a scene that implies a PERIL to another player character, based on his TRAITS. That’s a TRAIL. Additional CLUES may be selected, including one’s own, if desired. Only one PERIL though.

On the first turn, no TRAILS may contradict with one another. On the second turn, TRAILS must come into logical conflict with another from the first turn.

Write down the TRAIL on the sheet and then the next player may have his go!

It should be noted that in terms of fiction, a TRAIL could be just about anything. It could even be a clue to the characters, as long as the players clearly understand that it isn’t a CLUE by the rules.

The nice bit here is that whereas in the previous stage you had to let other players reveal disturbing things about your character's past, this time you get to insinuate stuff that is directly involved with the enquiry about the other characters!

4.2 What about those investigation points?

In this stage, every time you use a CLUE invented by *another* player to build a TRAIL, that player earns an INVESTIGATION POINT. This means that at least two of those points are given out each time a player has his go. It is perfectly possible for players to reap different amounts of points, but don't worry, you can get more later on or decide to take some risks with your character and go for the DRAMA POINTS!

These points will be used at the end of the game to reveal your findings on the inquiry. Of course, other players will have their own versions of the story, so you better get loads of INVESTIGATION POINTS, because you spend them to make your ideas "real".

4.3 Know the perils!

To make PERILS be effective in game, they should target just one character. You should also try creating them in such a way that the character's player is confronted by a dilemma. Also, since you cannot really affirm anything yet, you might just as well formulate PERILS in the form of hypotheses.

For instance: "It seems that Counselor Jean-Marie des Laveries is involved in major drug dealing". The dilemma for the player is the following: what is more important to des Laveries: his important profit from the dealing or his political image?

You will get to answer those nagging questions later on in the game. For the while being, the tension rises. . .

Choose the characters for which you invent PERILS in such a manner that all characters end up with two of them.

4.4 A possible trail

In this example, we assume that the story is about the death of a religious figure, the cardinal Salvetti, invited to the french royal court. Madame Mathilde is a naive noble woman (TRAIT), played by Julien.

It is Jérôme's turn to make up a TRAIL. He looks at the CLUES sheet and decides to use "An esoteric device was found in the cardinal's room the morning he was found dead" and "A mysterious italian lady whose presence is unsettling".

He suggests the following:

The cardinal used Madame Mathilde's curiosity for astrology to gain control over her and seduce her. The italian lady, his former lover, could not control her jealousy. . .

There, that's it! Both CLUES where invented by Christoph, so that's two INVESTIGATION POINTS for the lucky bugger.

This TRAIL will surely spark some serious reactions from Julien. To reduce the likeliness of such an embarrassing situation for his character, he can develop

a conflicting TRAIL involving another character, such that during the INTERROGATION one of them will have to be discarded thanks to additional information (one should also take care *how* one asks questions at that stage, but more on that when we get there). He can also choose to buy as much as possible into this suggestion, pushing Madame Mathilde even further into her tragedy by garnering more DRAMA POINTS and thus gaining the right to explain her exact motivations behind her acts.

5 Interrogation

You're nearing the end of the plot! But first, you will need to clear up a few things. See those TRAILS? They don't make sense with one another, right?

That's why you need to collect further evidence. In this game you do this by interrogating the characters.

Each player gets to ask another player a question concerning his character, which he will answer as he sees fit. This is a piece of evidence from the player's point of view. Of course, a player could have his character lie (and perhaps gain a DRAMA POINT for pushing the character further into potential problems), but this must be clear to all the players.

Each player must ask and answer one question.

6 Revelation

Now comes the climax: who did what?

Based on the answers from the INTERROGATION and the remaining TRAILS, every player can make up his mind about what really happened.

Each participant may secretly divide his INVESTIGATION POINTS among the other players' characters, so as to wager for the right to tell his exact role in the affair.

When all players have decided on how to split up their points they reveal their "accusations". Then, the chief criminal amongst the characters will be designated as being the one who has the highest sum of all INVESTIGATION POINTS invested against him and the DRAMA POINTS garnered throughout the previous stages of play.

The true role of each character will be revealed in decreasing order of that sum. All except the first may be presented as being villains or victims.

Now, the interesting part: the player who wagered the most INVESTIGATION POINTS against a given character must narrate that role, except if that character's player had garnered at least half (rounded down) the number of DRAMA POINTS compared to the total of INVESTIGATION POINTS invested against him.

Ties are resolved in order of decreasing DRAMA POINTS, with further ties being sorted out according to the highest individual bid. After that, just toss a coin.

6.1 Illustrating the principle

Here is how, in the three player game used in the previous example, this stage turned out.

Jérôme, Julien and Christoph are playing respectively Henri Dubois, Madame Mathilde and Bishop Archibalde.

Based on the various informations on those characters garnered through play the players bet their INVESTIGATION POINTS like this:

Character	Inv. pts.	Drama pts.	Total
Henri Dubois	7 (3 Ju. + 4 Ch.)	0	7
Madame Mathilde	5 (3 Ch. + 2 Je.)	2	7
Bishop Archibalde	9 (4 Ju. + 5 Je.)	2	11

Thus, Jérôme will narrate Bishop Archibalde's role in the affair: it was he who had the cardinal Salvetti killed to hide the prevent him from revealing the huge fortune amassed by the bishop's heretic brotherhood!

Julien gets to narrate Madame Mathilde's role since he has at least half the DRAMA POINTS rounded down against the 5 INVESTIGATION POINTS wagered against his character. He reveals that the noble lady was the cardinal Salvetti's lover after she had fallen for his mysterious discussions about esoterism.

Christoph then goes on to explain what Henri Dubois' role was (he was the assassin payed by the bishop).

6.2 Epilogue

After all the roles have been exposed, the players tell what *happens* to their characters.

7 Miscellaneous

This section expands on the basic ideas of the game.

7.1 Game duration

You may of course change the number of INVESTIGATION and DEDUCTION turns, so as to increase the duration of the game.

For a seven player game I used two rounds of the former and just one of the latter, for a game roughly the same length as the four player variant with default stage lengths.

On a similar thought, you might find it interesting to use a character for another story. His relevant TRAITS regarding the new story might of course be completely different, so the character would start just like a fresh one, excepting the shared player awareness of his past (that will probably be used to develop interesting PERILS or appropriate TRAITS).

7.2 What is a character?

Throughout this text, a character was presented as one individual person. This must not be so. One might very well choose a whole group to represent a "character", albeit the group must have a strong internal coherence, so that meaningful PERILS may be devised (which would not be the case if rival members of the groups could actually gain clear benefit from such a thing).

In this way, individuals could easily die or otherwise be removed from play way before the end, as long as the groups's endeavor is not thwarted.

As a matter of fact, character death in the middle of play can even be nicely handed for classical individuals. His player could continue playing using flashbacks or having other characters step in and tell interesting information concerning the recently deceased. Using paranormal elements, the character death could very easily be overcome.

As long as the player character is not prevented from playing, your imagination is fair game.

So, what is a character in the context of this game? Well it's just *a means with vested interests in the mystery which allows the player to participate in the unfolding of the story.*

8 Credits

Thanks go to many people. In no particular order:

- † Julien Rebetez for his numerous ideas and advices to correct the system's bug! Jérôme Champion and Lionel Jeannerat also provided critical thought to the system.
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- † Paul Czege for teaching me scene framing and play structure through his *My Life with Master*⁴
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¹<http://www.indie-rpgs.com/>

²<http://www.randomordercreations.com>

³Worth of particular notice: <http://www.indie-rpgs.com/forum/index.php?topic=13089>

⁴<http://www.halfmeme.com>

⁵<http://www.lumpley.com/>