



INTO THE FLAMES

a storygame by Adam Dixon

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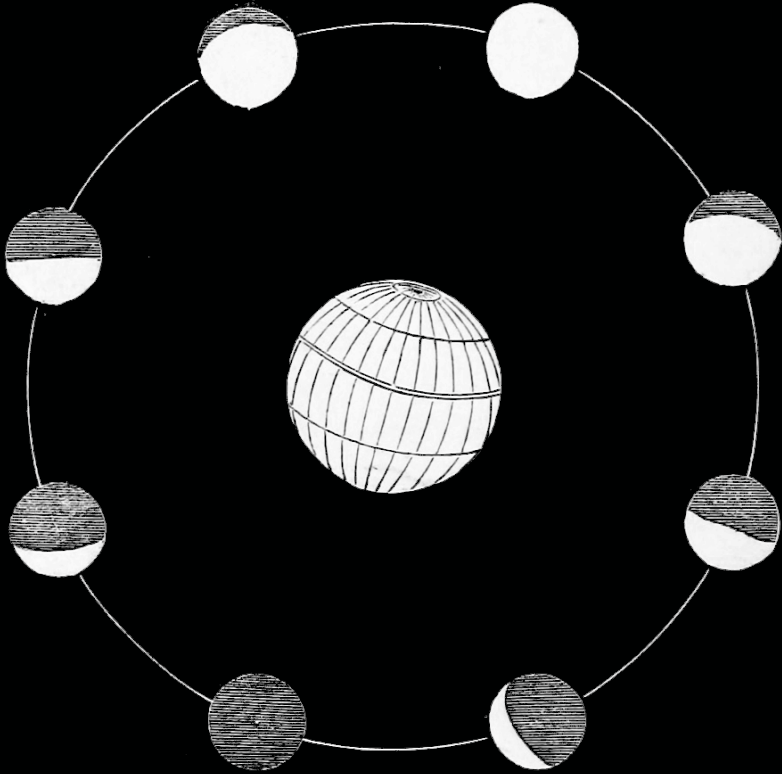
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One day on the road and your feet are already starting to blister. You're not used to this much walking. Til now your life had been led away from the roads that snake the country. They brought you luxury - art from a continent away, furs from a frozen north, fish from the coast - but you rarely traveled on them, and, when you did, you sat in cushioned carriage, walls between you and the landscape.



Now, you're forced to take notice. Forced to feel the sun burn at your neck, lips cracking in the dry air, muscles tightening with every step. This is not what you were made for. You were never prepared to sacrifice comfort for the frugality of pilgrimage. But, if what they say about the thing at the end of the road is true, it will the sacrifice will be worth it.



GATHER

One person should read through this book before you play—this will help you to understand the game's rules and the set up it needs. This chapter outlines the kind of game this is and what you'll need to play.

WHAT IS THIS?

Into the Flames is a storytelling game. We work together to tell the tale of a pilgrimage on a strange and accursed road. Think horror film version of *Canterbury Tales*.

Most of us will play as a pilgrim, someone who has decided to undertake an arduous journey. We will each have our own motivation for taking to the road - faith, wanderlust, exile, a flight from persecution. We play to find out what happens to our pilgrims; to see which one of us survives to reach the end of the road.

One of us will play as the spirits—the fickle ghosts that tug at cloaks and snap at heels, who whisper doubts and suspicions into our ears. Over our journey we will attempt to appease them by offering tribute, if our offerings are found wanting we may be dragged into their ranks.

THE FLAMES

This game is designed to be played in front of a fire. Ideally this would be a firepit or bonfire, but a fireplace, barbeque or circle of candles works just as well. The game involves “burning” tokens and objects—depending on your set-up this might be literal or metaphorical.

WHAT YOU NEED

The game is designed for four or more players, six to ten is ideal. It plays over a couple of hours. To play the game you'll need:

- Trinkets for each player (about 5-10 each)
- A fire to gather around
- A stone or piece of paper, marked with an "X"
- Food and drink
- A copy of these rules

TRINKETS

Each player should have a collection of trinkets. They are used to represent things important to their character, whether objects, memories or ideals. During the game players will cast them into the fire as offerings to appease the ghosts.

Each player should have a number of objects roughly equivalent to the number of players in the game. You might get players to bring objects with them, or spend some time foraging for them together - at a local market, forest or beach. You can also use the *Into the Flames* trinket cards.

A RITUAL FOR PLAY

Gather together, somewhere wild



Walk together to discover your spot



Gather your pilgrim's trinkets as you travel



Share food, drink and stories while your fire grows



Read through the rules together

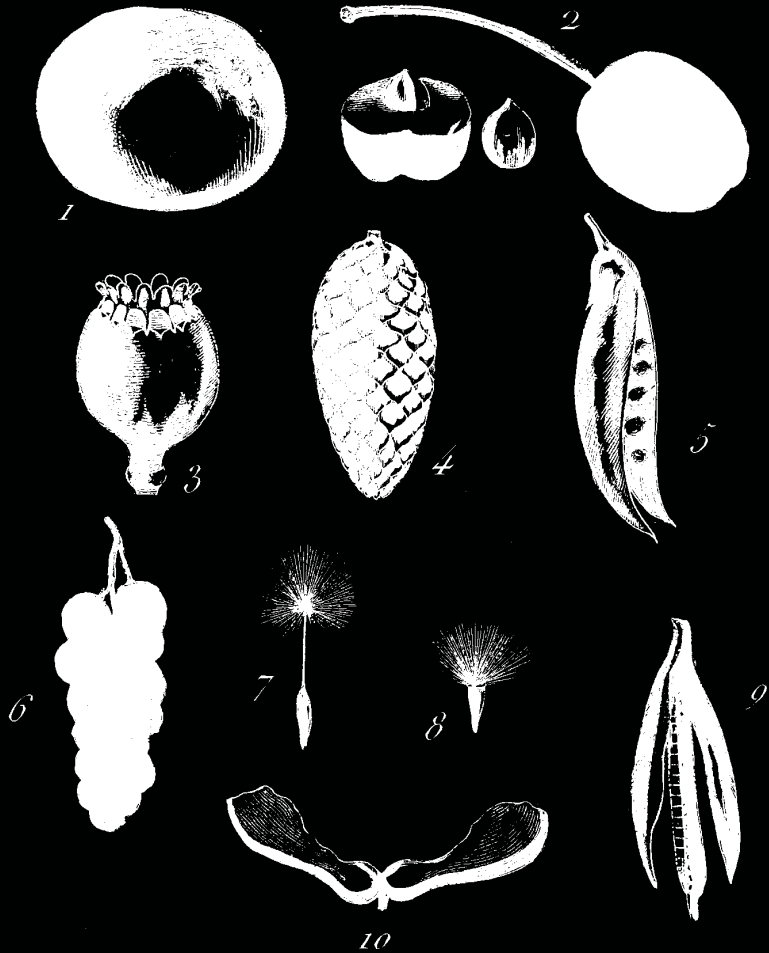


Begin

There are others making this journey with you. By day you stick mostly to yourself, but in the evening the suns disappearance robs the land of heat. You're forced to gather together, close to the fire.



You pass your evenings talking with the others. You share stories about the journey so far, about your lives, about each of your reasons for leaving them behind. You listen to their stories and keep your own reasons close to your chest.



SCOUTING THE PATH

Read this part together, passing the book between you.

THE STORY

They say that salvation lies at the end of the road. Or riches, or power, or safety, or... Or one of a thousand other things worth risking your life for. We are all travelers on that road.

We each have different reasons for traveling, different hopes, different motivations for leaving our lives behind. We might be the heretic, hoping to find justification for their beliefs; or the disguised rebel, looking for the artifact that will help them overthrow the throne; or the child fleeing a fractured family, hoping for shelter at journey's end. Whatever our backgrounds, on the road we are forced together. We are all pilgrims.

We have heard stories about the strange things we will face on your journey. The spirits that will hound our every step. Know that not all of us will make it. And know, that even if we reach the end, we may not be worthy of what we find there.

THE GAME

This is a storytelling game about travelling on an accursed road to reach a mythical destination. We all play as characters journeying on this road, banded together out of necessity.

For an hour or two we'll take on their personality and voice, we'll make the decisions we think they would make. We'll collaborate with each other to tell the story of their journey.

THE ROLES

There are two roles in this game, pilgrims and spirits. Most of us will start the game as pilgrims. We play as people brought together by the road. We will each have different reasons for travelling, which we will explore through play.

One of us will play as the spirits—the greedy ghosts that demand ever more valuable tribute. Over the course of the game most of us will join their ranks, as we run out of things to give.

We should choose a player to begin the game as the spirits now. Everyone else plays as pilgrims.

THE STRUCTURE

This game has a structure. As we play we split things up into days and, on each of these days, we play a few different kind of scenes.

First we play the gathering, a scene of our pilgrims coming together in the evening, sat before their campfire. We use it as an opportunity to look back over their day, telling the story of what happened on the road. We might discuss things that our characters saw, people they met or hardships they faced, “*Remember that strange man we met by Whistler’s Yew?*” We might also play out conversation and moments shared by our characters in front of the fire, “*Could you pass me that hipflask?*”, “*Why are you on the road?*”.

After we’ve all had our say we play the tribute. Each pilgrim offers one of their trinkets to the flames, describing the meaning it has to their character.

Finally, we play the harrowing. The spirit(s) decide whose tribute was worthy. If our offering is found wanting we may be claimed into their ranks.

We repeat these scenes, playing out the length of our journey, until there is only one of us left. When that happens we play out one final scene.

THEMES

Before we start playing we should talk about the themes of the game and some tools we can use to make sure everyone is as comfortable as possible while playing.

Firstly, this is a horror game; it features supernatural themes and death. If anyone isn't comfortable with that, even if just in this moment, we can stop the game and do something else.

Agreeing to play now doesn't mean that you are locked in for the whole game. If things get to much we can pause or stop the game at any time. This is important for every game of *Into the Flames*, but especially so if we're playing outdoors where the environment can become too much.

If there's anything we particularly don't want to see in the game we can state them now. They might be things you don't want to see at all, or things you want to have passed over without details when they occur.

THE X-CARD

Not everyone's idea of what constitutes a good story is the same. Everyone has different lines and boundaries. To help manage that we play with the X card, a tool created by John Stavropoulos. Here's how it works for *Into the Flames*:

This game should be fun for everyone. If anything makes anyone uncomfortable in any way during play, we have the X card. This might be a single card or rock with an X drawn on it, or several objects if there is a fire between you. It might even be a gesture such as raising something above your head; whatever it is it should be clearly visible in low light [we should decide now what object or move is our X card, the organiser might have already provided them].

If we feel uncomfortable during play, lift or simply tap the card. You don't have to explain why. It doesn't matter why. When we lift up or tap the card, we simply stop, edit out anything we have X-Carded, then return to the story without it. If there is ever an issue, anyone can call for a break and we can talk privately. It can sound kind of funny, but it will help keep the game enjoyable for everyone.

The description above is adapted from Stavropoulos' version. You can read more about the X card and use it in your games at tinyurl.com/x-card-rpg.

THE ROAD

The first thing we need to do is create the road. Working together we imagine the world we're playing in and the place we're travelling.

To do this we answer some questions. We should take it in turns to be the first to respond to each question, though once we've said our piece others should feel free to chip in.

Keep things short, we can fill in a lot of the details as we play.

How is this world unlike ours?



Whose power makes lives in this area dangerous?



What things are rumoured to be at the end of the road?



What hardships will you have to steel yourself against to reach its end?



What is the most beautiful thing on the road?

If you want, add your own questions to the list. If people haven't had the chance to answer to a question first, they might elect to add a detail to the world - to describe a custom, place or myth.

At the end of this process you should have a shared understanding of what the world is like, and have a rough sketch of the road and its features.

THE PILGRIMS

Next we define our pilgrims, the characters that each of us plays. The person playing the spirits should take this book and leave the comfort of the flames, lurking behind the pilgrims. They might stand beyond the edge of the light if you're playing around a firepit, or simply stand apart from everyone else if you're around a table.

The pilgrims lower their heads and look into the fire. The spirit reads aloud:

Pilgrims, I see you and know you. While you may appear to be united as you travel together on this road, I know this as myth. I see the divides between you, fractures caused by difference of dream and ambition. In your split intents I see your downfall, in the ungathered direction of your hearts your doom.

Know that as you walk this path, we follow. That with every step there will be more of us.

Know that if you falter we will be ready to claim what is ours. To bring you into the cold.

Now, ask these questions in turn to each pilgrim. They should answer out loud.

What did you leave behind, to go on this journey?



What do you hope awaits you at the end of this road?



What one thing do you carry that you can least afford to lose?



What name do you wear?

Once everyone has answered these questions, answer this one in silence.

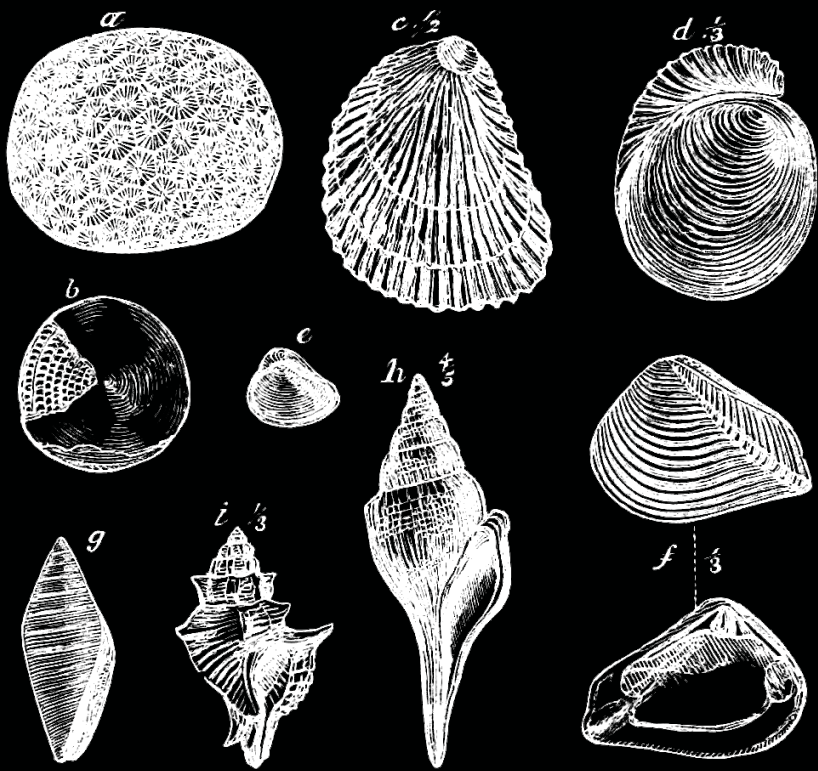
What secret do you carry?

THE SPIRITS

Finally, we define the nature of the spirits. Together we should agree on how they manifest in the world. Are they literal creatures, with desire and agency? Are they manifestations of our own doubt and fear? Are they the echoes of those who travelled this path before us, now used to turn away the unworthy.

Each of us should offer a detail about the spirits. This could be a rumour you've heard about them, a guise they wear or a weapon that they are said to use against unwary travellers.

The spirit player can utilise these details as they wish, as they portray the creatures that haunt the road.



WALKING THE ROAD

The spirit should pass the book back into the circle. Continue taking turns reading as we learn how to play.

REFLECTION

As mentioned, when we play we split time into days. Each day we explore three scenes—GATHERING, TRIBUTE and HARROWING.

Before we begin each day, we should allow ourselves a moment to breathe. Sit in silence around the fire, listen to the crackle of flames, get into your character's way of thinking, imagine the world they live in.

GATHERING

After enough time has passed, the spirits select one of the pilgrims to begin the day's narration. To do this they touch the selected pilgrim with both hands, one on each of their shoulders.

Is everybody comfortable with being touched in this way? If not, we can do it differently. There are alternatives we can use on page 35, we can discuss them and see what works best for our group.

Check how everyone feels. If anyone is unsure about being touched read the PHYSICAL CONTACT section on page 35, and find something that works for everyone.

The selected pilgrim starts the gathering scene. They should let their voice fill the silence, covering the crackling of the fire.

Speaking from their pilgrim's perspective, they should describe some of the things that happened on the road today. They might discuss places passed, people met and hazards overcome.

When it's our turn we might decide to start with a summary of the whole day, *"I didn't think things would be so tough when we set out from Elgary this morning. First, the broken bridge, then climbing those bloody hills and, now, nowhere to camp but marshy ground."* or they might narrow in on one point, *"Velgree, who the hell was that man I saw you talking to?"*

The other pilgrims should give the chosen narrator time to have their say, before slowly beginning to join in with their own perspectives and thoughts.

Over the course of the scene our conversation should start folding inwards. This will usually happen naturally. We might start with a description of the day, which becomes a discussion about something specific on the road, before finally turning into a heated discussion about parts of our character's beliefs.

The game shines in those moments where things turn inwards and pilgrims share intimacies with each other, sat in front of the flames.

MOVES

This conversation may be easier for some of us than others. To help us out there are series of “moves” that we can call on when it is our turn to speak. Each is a way of responding to someone else’s narration. We can:

PROMPT, BY ASKING A QUESTION...

This allows us to find out more about the journey and focus the story on the things we find most interesting.

“Do we know who those people following us were?”

REINFORCE, BY SAYING YES, AND...

This allows us to add our pilgrim’s perspectives to the conversation, backing up what the other people are saying.

“I saw the Green Cloaks too. They were a few miles back, on the ridge we crossed yesterday.”

DOUBT, BY SAYING YES, BUT...

This allows us to change small details in the narration. We agree with most of what a character is saying, but add details or contradictions.

“Yes, I saw something, over on the ridge we crossed yesterday. I’m not sure they were Green Cloaks though. In fact I’m not sure they were human.”

CONTRADICT, BY SAYING NO AND OFFERING AN ALTERNATIVE

This allows us to refute something that another pilgrim has said and offer a completely different version of events.

“I don’t know what you’re talking about. I’ve not seen another soul on the road for days.”

It is important to note is that even when we’re contradicting or doubting, our additions do not supercede anyone else’s. These moves allow us to give our pilgrim’s perspective or challenge what a character has said, but they don’t overwrite another players additions. If one of us says, *“We lost the map in the marshes”*, and another says, *“No, I saw Olvus with the map long after that”*, we have to work out what our character believes.

When we make a move we might explicitly state its name (*“I’m going to doubt what you’ve just said...”*) or we might mask it (*“Oh, but I thought that was around twelve...”*). Either of these techniques is fine, use the one that feels most comfortable for you.

The moves are a tool, a way of understand the structure of play and make it easier for each of us to contribute.

ENDING THE SCENE

We end the scene when it feels right. This might be when words grow thin or the pilgrims start to turn in for the night. Once we're ready, we play the tribute phase.

This is a game about dwelling, it works best when we let things breathe. Spend quiet moments staring into flames mulling over words as heavy as rocks. Let scenes linger, allow silences, stumbles and hesitations.

TRIBUTE

At the end of each evening the pilgrims offer tribute to the spirits. Each of us chooses one of our trinkets and offers a few sentences about it. We should turn our trinket into something more than its physical meaning. The acorn we sacrifice might represent our heart's ability to grow new love. The stick is the sword that protects us on our journey. The torn journal page might be our childhood memories.

All that is offered is taken by the spirits. If it is safe, we should burn them. Otherwise we should break them, tear them up or otherwise remove them from the game.

A pilgrim may choose to not offer tribute. You might decide to do this if you've run out of things to offer, if what you have left is too precious to part with, or if you feel it's the right time for your pilgrim's journey to end.

What the tribute scene looks like depends on our world. How it ties to the fiction is up to us. Our pilgrims could be literally sat together offering things flames, spending time in private prayer and meditation, or bargaining with the spirits in dreams.

THE HARROWING

Not all tribute is equal or worthy. It is hard to know what the spirits desire. After all pilgrims have offered tribute, the harrowing commences.

The spirits consider the value of what has been offered. They mark those whose tribute is unworthy by placing one hand on their left shoulder. Those pilgrims have passed, pulled from life into the spirit's realm, they leave the campfire and join the spirits.

If you have decided to not use physical contact, decide on an alternative to touching here too, see page 35.

The spirits are free to decide how many of the pilgrims are culled each night. It could be several, it could be none.

SPIRITS

The spirits lurk at the edge of light, shadowy figures rendered invisible by the fire. They play an important role in the game.

THEY PACE THE GAME by deciding who is taken, and when. They can change the dynamics of our group with a simple touch on the shoulder. The rate pilgrims are claimed determines the length of our game.

THEY GIVE VOICE by deciding who leads the narration each day. They should make sure to vary this, as each of us can bring something new and interesting to the game.

THEY SOW CHAOS. While they cannot give their voice to scenes, they interfere by whispering suggestions and doubts behind us. They can sow rumours, build hubris, make us doubt our version of events.

THEY HAUNT by lurking at the edge of the fire. They form barely seen figures, that howl into the night. They might crawl or dance, make strange noises in the darkness with their voices, banging logs or snapping twigs.

It is up to us to decide how the spirits' activities blend into the fiction. We can choose whether we want to work the noises and activities of the ghosts into our conversations. They can be a real threat in the world or a metaphor for the curse that lurks over us.

THE NEXT DAY

After the harrowing we begin a new day, playing through each scene. We spend time in reflection until the spirits choose a new narrator, placing their hands on one of our shoulders.

The selected pilgrim starts a new gathering scene, telling the story of that day's events. During the narration they should work in the deaths and disappearances of the pilgrims who were selected during the harrowing.

This might have happened during the night, the pilgrim discovered frozen in their sleeping bag. It might have happened on the road—a tragic accident, a run in with brigands, a pilgrim sitting down and refusing to go any further.

The pilgrim who was culled has no say in this, those who are left tell the story of how they passed (though they might choose to whisper suggestions in the pilgrims' ears).

YOU'RE READY TO PLAY NOW. AFTER A MOMENT'S REFLECTION THE SPIRIT SHOULD CHOOSE A PERSON TO LEAD THE FIRST GATHERING SCENE.

PLAY UNTIL THERE IS ONLY ONE PILGRIM REMAINING, THEN PICK UP THE BOOK AND READ THE END.

THE END

When there is only one pilgrim left everything changes, as we play one last scene. They approach the end of the road and we work together to determine their fate.

The lone pilgrim stays sat before the fire. The rest of us, the spirits, circle them asking questions and demanding answers (some suggestions are printed below). We should (if our space and agreed way of playing allows it) swarm around the player, leaning in close. Put the pilgrim on the spot, ask leading questions and demand better answers.

What pain do you carry with you?



Wouldn't it be easier to just stop?



Do you really think you're worthy enough to reach ____?



Who are you to survive when the others did not?

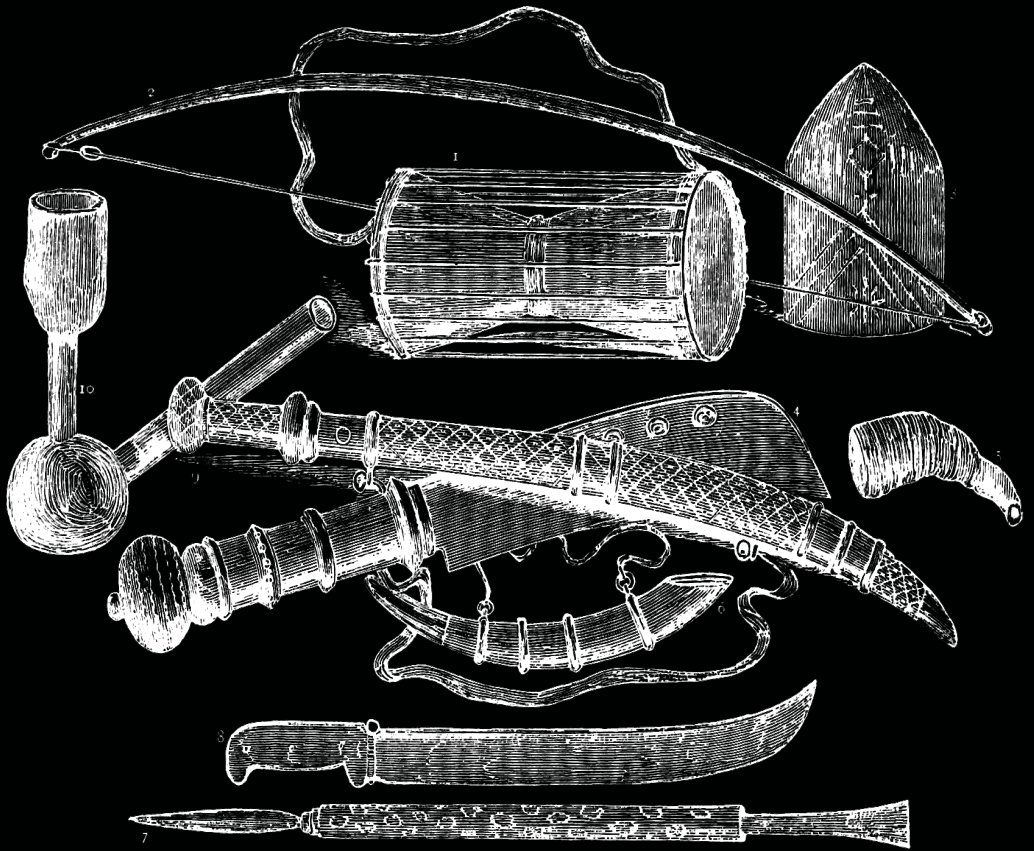


Do you even know why you're travelling?

Once the flurry of questions ends, the spirits confer. Together they decide whether the lone pilgrim makes it to the end.

Gather back around the flames. If the pilgrim made it to the end, they describe what they found there. If they perished or gave up on their journey, they tell the story of how.

As the words end, let your eyes drift back onto the flames. Let silence settle for a moment. When you are ready, reflect on the game. Gradually fall back into discussing life. Let reality seep back in as the flames burn low.



MISCELLANEA

ROLEPLAYING

When we play *Into the Flames* we take on the character of a pilgrim on the road. We take on their voice, make decisions on their behalf, tell their story. It can be daunting, if you've never played this sort of game before—here are few things that might help.

SAY WHAT'S OBVIOUS. Sometimes you'll be listening to your friends add incredible details to the world, and worrying about what to say when it's your turn to speak. Here's a secret—say what's obvious. That simple thing in your head, that's good enough. It's much more important to keep things flowing than to say something clever, and the likelihood is that the obvious thing in your mind won't have crossed other peoples'.

ASK QUESTIONS. Ask questions of other players, work with them to establish the world and characters. Questions are your best way to shine the spotlight on other players, showing interest in what they have to say. Also, questions are a useful tool for when you don't know a thing. Not sure on a name of a place? What your character would do? What a thing looks like? Ask for other people's ideas.

Which also brings us to, **BUILD ON OTHERS CONTRIBUTIONS.** Listen to what other people have to say, fold their contributions into the world. It'll help everything seem more organic and lets your friends know their contributions sung with someone else.

DISCOVER THROUGH PLAY. Don't worry too much about knowing every detail of your character and the world up front. You can learn more about them through playing. In this game your character might only be around for a few scenes, don't get too attached—a piece of great advice paraphrased from Avery Alder is to “treat your character like a stolen car”. Leave them burnt out by the side of the road.

HAVE FUN. If there's any point where you're not feeling the game, pause it. Try and solve why or, if you need to, stop it. No big deal. Play something else, watch a film, burn this game in the fire. If it ain't your thing, it ain't your thing (even if just in the moment).

HORROR

This is a horror game, or at the very least horror-adjacent. Make sure that everyone is comfortable with playing a game that features the supernatural and death before you start. Tell everyone that they have veto power over anything that may be introduced into the game, no questions asked. Follow through.

There are very few tools for conflict resolution baked into the game. It's not really a game about inflicting *stuff* on other players. I'd recommend avoiding it, or if it comes up, focus on negotiating outcomes.

PHYSICAL CONTACT

The base version of the game features light physical contact. This includes touching on the shoulders from behind and whispering into ears. Ensure that everyone is comfortable with that before you start playing. If not, here are some other suggested solutions.

Instead of touching the backs of shoulders, the ghosts can call names. Instead of whispering, you might have the ghosts pass notes or symbolic objects.

You could also introduce breaks between scenes where ghosts can confer with the other players by inviting them to talk outside of the circle.

FIRE SAFETY

The game involves flames, fire and burning things. You might also decide to play it outdoors. Take the necessary precautions. Dress up warm. Have first aid equipment available. Have bags so you don't litter.

If you're playing with a fire, read up on fire safety and ensure you're doing it somewhere that actually allows fires. Make sure you have ways to put out the flames when you leave, or if you have to during play.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Into the Flames was first created for and played at *Furtive Shambles*, an event focused on playing small, experimental games. I'd like to thank everyone who played it for the first time there: Beck Michalak, Cel Davison, Eli Rainsberry, Hana Lee, Ian Salmons, Patrick Monaghan and Tine Nielsen.

Undying gratitude goes to Thryn Henderson for being my collaborator on *Furtive Shambles*, helping me to refine this game and book, and for supporting all my ideas, no matter how terrible.

All images courtesy of The British Library.



