

Jay Frothingham and Zephyr Steiner Present

YIDDISHLAND: Perhaps it has Use



JUD 260 Final Project
Spring 2022

Character creation

Pick an archetype and a subtype of your archetype from the left column of the table.

Archetype	High attribute (+) Do whatever Low attribute (-)
WIFE (subtypes: mean, abandoned, scholarly)	Heartiness Urgency, Education, Wit, Luck Social
SCHOLAR (subtypes: rabbi, student)	Education Wit, Urgency, Social, Luck Heartiness
WRITER (subtypes: poet, author of this tale)	Wit Education, Urgency, Social, Heartiness Luck
SPEAKER (subtypes: mother-in-law, radical, jester)	Social Education, Heartiness, Wit, Luck Urgency
TRAVELER (subtypes: feminine man, clueless hopeful, distant relative)	Luck Heartiness, Urgency, Education, Social Wit
MYSTIC (subtypes: demon, ghost)	Urgency Heartiness, Social, Wit, Luck Education

ATTRIBUTES

Heartiness. How unlikely are you to collapse in a faint?

Urgency. Do you approach things with purpose or lollygag?

Education. How much have you studied Talmud?

Wit. How fast and deep is your intellect?

Luck. Schlemiel? Schlemazel? Somewhere in between?

Social. How much weight does your word carry, and how good are you at using it?

Assign modifiers from -3 to +3 to each of the six attributes. The High Attribute for your class must be positive and the Low Attribute must be negative. All of the modifiers must sum to a total of positive three. Higher modifiers mean your character is better at that attribute.

Example:

Benjamin the 3rd. Traveler archetype, clueless hopeful subtype.

- Traveler means that Luck modifier must be positive and Wit modifier must be negative -

each other modifier can be anything from -3 to +3, as long as all modifiers sum to +3 -
 Luck +3, Wit -2, Heartiness -1, Urgency +1, Education +1, Social +1 - summing modifiers:
 $3 + (-2) + (-1) + 1 + 1 + 1 = 3$

Gameplay

Every game starts in the marketplace, which is where the gossip circulates. At this point, the day's problems reveal themselves. (A "Thematic" problem is determined either randomly or by group decision. The GM chooses 1d6 "Symptomatic" problems facing the group and writes them down for the group.)

Your goal is to solve the day's problems as a group.

Big thematic conflict	Examples of smaller symptomatic conflicts
Gender and Sexuality	Angry spouse. Missing spouse. Barred from study. Promiscuity. A divide between you and your lover. One of the men wants to write a novel in Yiddish. Husband is too focused on study to notice family poverty. Wife is too busy nagging husband to let him study. Death of a spouse. A wedding doesn't go according to plan. Sensory overload! at the wedding. Your daughter is having "unnatural" relations with women.

Urbanization and Modernity	Get rich quick scheme! Factory being built. A loved one is leaving for the city. Imported fabrics. Something in the village is changing. Traditions are being left behind. A traveler arrives in the shtetl. Forcibly conscripted into the army with Gentiles. The rules are different in the city.
Generational differences	Your daughter doesn't want a traditional marriage. Your son thinks about G-d differently than you do. You think about G-d differently than your father. Your neighbors are fighting. It is time to find a match for your daughter. Your child/loved one is converting to Christianity/living like a Gentile. The Distant Relative comes to visit and they bring advice.
Journey	One member of the party is drowning. You are lost in the woods. You encounter a group of people who don't speak Yiddish. You run out of food. You become ill. Hostile inn. Praying in a snowstorm. The road is too muddy. A tree has fallen. Your traveling companion got drunk last night and sleeps through the day.
Disaster (natural or otherwise)	The dead arise. There is a storm. You eat some non-kosher beef. Risky pregnancy. One of the young men was possessed by a demon. Someone is spreading lies. A turkey smiles at you and you hallucinate the queen of Sheba. Tempted by a demon (or an Evil Inclination). You've been swindled. Mildly disturbing prophetic or symbolic dream. Your chicken is refusing to lay an egg. Thievery. Your horse dies. Stricken with illness (one person). Stricken with illness (everyone). Cantor lost his voice. Several of the men smoke their cigars (or otherwise work) on Shabbat. An evil Gentile has murdered a child and put the corpse and bottles of his blood in a Jew's house.
Classism	Your cousin stole a goat to mess with you. The neighboring town

	thinks YOU guys are STUPID. You aren't respected in synagogue. Your neighbor brags about feeding her children milk. You aren't paid what you're owed. You have a revelation that is not taken seriously by your peers. Can't afford to pay dowry/matchmaker. A dishonest and slighted merchant tries to arrange the murder of his clerk's son.
--	--

The larger "thematic" conflicts aren't solvable. The game is a window into slice-of-life and how these issues leak into day-to-day life and are dealt with.

Turn order is determined by rolling a Social check. Everyone rolls 2d6 and adds their Social

modifier. Higher results go first. In the case of a tie, the player with the higher Social modifier goes first.

To tackle problems, you can take one of three actions. Explain what you do to kick off a scene, and roll one of the following checks. The scene is then roleplayed, with solutions or failures occurring based on the roll and the ability used.

ARGUE.

- Education
- Wit

SEEK AID.

- Social
- Luck

STAND YOUR GROUND.

- Heartiness
- Urgency

When a problem hits three Xs, it poses a serious or permanent loss.

When a problem hits three stars, it creates a serious resolution or benefit.

Roll 2d6 and add relevant modifier

-1-1 → Erase a star

2-3 → Sizeable failure, mark two X

4-8 → Standard failure, mark one X

9-10 → Success at a cost, mark one star but GM introduces a complicating problem

11-14 → Full success, mark one star

15 → Erase an X

An alternative play option is to allow for players to purposely try for the X-outcome on some turns instead of the star outcome. When players choose on a turn to aim to make the problem worse, allow for them to roll to try and achieve an X instead of a star. If they achieve success, they have made the problem worse.

Artist's Statement

Why a TTRPG?

We chose to make our final project a table-top roleplaying game because TTRPGs are, at their core, a form of collective storytelling. Folktales are also a form of collective storytelling, and thus an excellent representation of this aspect of a literary culture is a role-playing game. And like a TTRPG, we learned that Yiddish folktales can take dramatically unpredictable turns into both the emotional and the absurd. We also consulted a thorough source that discussed the value of TTRPG use in classroom settings, especially the goal of both creative and complex

engagement with a world, whether that world be the body of work one is studying or a magic continent called Exandria. This translation of Yiddish folklore into a new format is consistent with its history and cultural functions, as cultural views and associations towards Yiddish itself have shifted over time.

One function of folktales discussed extensively by Aya Elyada in the *Journal of Modern Jewish Studies* is the use of folktales (and adaptations thereof) as a way to connect to one's past. Elyada speaks specifically of a set of translations from the mid-1800s into German that served as a way for German Jews to connect to their past while assimilating into the broader German culture. Folktales translated into German and written in the Latin alphabet were a way to remember the past while maintaining some cultural distance. This concept of adaptation of folklore inspired the idea for our game. In developing our TTRPG, we drew from both direct translations of folktales and later literary works that made use of material from folklore. Our TTRPG draws from the literary tradition of Yiddish folktales as a whole. The engagement with these tales is part of the tradition and so modern adaptation is something that must be acknowledged.

Taking this class has been a way to learn about cultural touchstones that we did not have as children, so we acknowledge that there is a degree of sentimentality within our adaptation. We chose to apply our knowledge by adapting aspects of folklore to connect to this element of the Ashkenazi Jewish past, similar to how the 19th-century German Jews of the aforementioned article did.

This TTRPG serves as a way to learn about the literary tradition of folktales as players engage with the tales in an organic and lighthearted way. Rather than retelling any particular tale, students incorporate many different elements into a new, collaborative story. Weaving the structural elements of the game (specific skills, character types, conflicts, etc.) and random chances of success or failure into a coherent narrative requires players to apply their knowledge and fosters connections and analysis of the themes presented. It can be useful to play at the

beginning of a semester, to gauge existing conceptions of Yiddish culture and folklore, then again at the end of a semester, to see how those conceptions may have grown or changed. After playtesting the game, several classmates stated that it felt almost like a summary of the semester's work, and others expressed interest in playing again and sharing it with different groups of people. We believe that sparking that enthusiasm for Yiddish literature is the most important pedagogical aspect of this TTRPG.

Example Game

Jacob, Noah, Elijah, Miriam, and Naomi sit down to play a game of *Yidishland*. Each player pulls out their favorite two six-sided dice (referred to as d6s), a piece of paper, and a pencil. The group selects Jacob to run the game, so he is the Game Master, or GM. The other four are players.

Each player then selects an archetype and a subtype. Naomi wants to play a Writer and is drawn to the meta-narrative of the Writer of This Tale subtype, so she selects that. Miriam wishes to play a Traveler and likes the idea of a Distant Relative coming to town. Elijah wants to explore some generational divides, so he selects the Wife archetype with the Scholarly subtype.

Finally, Noah likes ghosts so he wants to be a Mystic archetype with the Ghost subtype. The players then assign stats to each of their characters. As a Writer, Naomi's character must have strong skills in Wit and low skills in Luck. She decides to assign a modifier of +3 to her Writer of This Tale's Wit attribute and a modifier of -2 to the Luck attribute. Three plus negative two is one, so the sum of her remaining attributes must be two so that the total sum is three.

She assigns +2 to Education, -1 to Urgency, +0 to Social, and -1 to Heartiness for a well-educated writer with no sense of urgency, moderate persuasive skills, and little physical fortitude. Miriam, Elijah, and Noah assign stats to their characters in a similar manner.

The last pre-game decision that must be made is which conflict is to explore. Noah built his character with the Generational Differences conflict in mind, so he voices support for that conflict. The rest of the group has no strong opinions and think they could work with that conflict,

so Jacob writes down “Generational Differences” on a piece of paper and rolls a d6 to determine how many smaller conflicts the group must reckon with. He rolls a three and picks three conflicts: “The Distant Relative comes to visit and they bring advice”, “You think about G-d differently than your father”, and “It is time to find a match for your daughter”. He picks these conflicts because they fit in well with the characters that Miriam and Noah built. Jacob writes them down on the paper and places it in the center of the table.

The game then begins. The characters are in the marketplace, and Jacob goes around the table and asks each player to talk about their character a bit and explain what they are doing in the marketplace. Then, each player makes a Social check, which consists of rolling 2d6 and adding their Social modifier to the result. Miriam rolls a ten and has a Social modifier of +2, totalling to twelve. This is higher than everyone else, so Miriam goes first. They decide they want to tackle the problem about the Distant Relative coming to town. However, they are playing as the Distant Relative and therefore don’t want to cause the relative to leave, since that would be contrary to their character’s desires, so they choose to sabotage it. They want to seek aid from Noah to encourage the Relative to stay in town, so they make a Social check as their action and have thus involved Noah’s character. They get a 9, which is success at a cost and introduces a new conflict to the game. They then mark an X down next to the Distant Relative conflict on the center of the page. However, Jacob and Noah decide that Noah’s character is unhappy with Miriam’s character and so they get into an argument about whatever advice Miriam has brought to Noah. Jacob then writes down “Your neighbors are fighting” to introduce a new problem to the group, which is represented by the way that Noah and Miriam’s characters interacted with each other. The player with the next highest Social check from the beginning of the game goes next, which is Noah. He decides to keep working on the Distant Relative problem, but he wants to resolve the problem instead of making it worse. He elects to take the Argue action but only rolls a 6 on his Wit check, so he also marks down an X next to the Distant Relative problem.

Gameplay continues in this manner until all of the problems have either three stars or

three Xs next to them.

Basis in Folktales and Yiddish Culture

Character archetypes in folktales are a way to quickly and consistently introduce broad themes. The studious small-town rabbi represents tradition, while the wealthy city Jew represents modernization, and so on. These figures, though their exact names and identities vary from story to story, are consistent elements in how folktales are structured and framed. Many TTRPGs, such as *Dungeons and Dragons*, utilize character archetypes to guide players in their choices of skills, strengths, and weaknesses. We found that the character archetypes of Yiddish folklore lent themselves to TTRPG character creation.

While reading older folktales, we found over and over again a structure that followed a problem's introduction and the resolution (whether good or bad) of said problem. This is in contrast to more modern Yiddish literature drawing from folklore, in which problems do not always have neat resolutions. Though our work is also a modern adaptation of folklore, our game mechanic centralizes around the problem-resolution structure.

We also found that many of the aforementioned problems seemed to centralize around larger themes and so, as a way to represent these larger themes and to focus each individual game session on a more cohesive line of thought, we sorted the small problems into large categories. This way, the game also unpacks the idea of unsolvable, thematic problems and traces how those can manifest in day-to-day life.

For our central gameplay mechanic, we wanted something that focused on the way that Yiddish communities interact with the wider world around them so we centralized our gameplay mechanics around unresolvable, large problems that have smaller, consequential concerns that are solvable.

Our large, thematic problems are based on our holistic review of Yiddish literature and folktales. The smaller, symptomatic problems are drawn directly from specific folktales we read. One example is from the disaster category, which is the "several of the men smoke their

cigars

(or otherwise work) on Shabbat” problem. This comes specifically from the story “In Heaven and Hell” from *Yiddish Folktales*. The story concerns a man who discovers that his deceased friend is in a form of Hell where you must continuously engage in your vices, as he smoked cigars on the Sabbath. Similarly, our character archetypes are our own broad categorizations of different figures we encountered in our readings, with certain works providing more influence. The Traveler archetype was heavily influenced by Abramovitch’s “The Brief Travels of Benjamin the Third.” The Speaker archetype comes from the works of I.L. Peretz, particularly *A Night in the Old Marketplace*, though the mother-in-law subtype is inspired by Sholem Aleichem’s *Letters of Menakhem-Mendl and Sheyne-Sheyndl*. The Mystic archetype draws generally on the supernatural category of folktale, as well as Ansky’s *The Dybbuk*.

We chose to implement an optional sabotage mechanic for two reasons. Firstly, it made gameplay much more dynamic and interesting during our in-class playtest and secondly, it felt more accurate to the way people would naturally interact with each other. People have conflicting desires, and arguments and disagreements are elements of Jewish culture we thought would be important to include, represented in literature by Chaim Grade’s *My Quarrel With Hersh Rasseynner*.

Works Consulted

- Elyada, Aya. “Bridges to a bygone Jewish past? Abraham Tendlau and the rewriting of Yiddish folktales in nineteenth-century Germany.” *Journal of Modern Jewish Studies*, vol. 16, no. 3, 2017, pp. 419-436, <https://doi.org/10.1080/14725886.2017.1350335>.
- Abramovitch, S.Y. “The Brief Travels of Benjamin the Third.” *Tales of Mendele the Book Peddler*, translated by Hillel Halkin, Schocken Books, 1996.
- Aleichem, Sholem. “The Haunted Tailor.” *The Dybbuk and the Yiddish Imagination: A Haunted Reader*, edited and translated by Joachim Neugroschel, Syracuse University Press, 2000.
- . *The Letters of Menakhem-Mendl and Sheyne-Sheyndl and Motl, the Cantor's Son*. Translated by Hillel Halkin, Yale University Press, 2002.

Ansky, S. *The Dybbuk and Other Writings*. Edited by David G. Roskies, translated by Golda Werman, Yale University Press, 2002.

Ben-Amos, Dan. "Old Yiddish and Middle Yiddish Folktales." *Jewish Folklore and Ethnology Review*, vol. 14, no. 1-2, 1992, pp. 5-6, https://repository.upenn.edu/nelc_papers/128.

Book of Fables. Translated and edited by Eli Katz, Wayne State University Press, 1994.

Nahman of Bratslav. *Nahman of Bratslav: The Tales*. Translated by Arnold J. Band, Paulist Press, 1978.

Nissan, Ephraim. "Frakes, Jerold C. (ed., trans.): *Early Yiddish Epic* (Judaic Traditions in Literature, Music, and Art). 2014." *Fabula*, vol. 58, no. 1-2, 2017, pp. 185-191. <https://doi.org/10.1515/fabula-2017-0019>.

Peretz, I.L. *The I. L. Peretz Reader*. Edited by Ruth Wisse, translated by Ruth Wisse et al., Yale University Press, 2002.

—. "A Night in the Old Marketplace." *Prooftexts*, translated by Hillel Halkin, vol. 12, no. 1, 1992, pp. 1-70, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/20689324>.

Yiddish Tales. Translated by Helena Frank, The Jewish Publication Society of America, 1912.

Yiddish Folktales. Edited by Beatrice Silverman Weinreich, translated by Leonard Wolf, Schocken Books, 1988.

Youakim, Gannon, "Dungeon Classroom Guide: Using Tabletop Role-Playing Games in the Classroom." *Honors Capstone Projects*, 12, 2019. <https://digitalcommons.morris.umn.edu/honors/12>