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The Oracle

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If you played this game, drop me a line at
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Introduction

The Oracle is a result of a self-imposed challenge to design a game which uses a book – *any book* – as a plot building tool. To play it, you'll need a novel, a 1d4, 1d100, 3-6 people, some paper and a pencil.

The Oracle

The players' characters are priests running a temple in which the Holy Oracle offers counsel and wisdom to chosen pilgrims. Your job is as important as it is prestigious, serving as the interface between the devout querents and the reclusive Oracle. Travellers from all around the world gather and wait patiently for you, the revered hierophants, to present their questions to the Oracle and pass her advice on to them.

However, it's not all that easy. Maybe it's the overpowering voices of the divine or the fungi she eats to hear them, but the prophetic words of the Oracle are never clear or even sensible. It therefore falls to you, a council of devout priests, to interpret Oracle's words and deliver the final counsel in a form that's comprehensible to laymen. Problem is, even with decades of experience, you rarely agree what the divine guidance actually says.

This time it's the king himself who visits the temple, seeking counsel on matters of grave importance. While he waits impatiently for you to reach consensus, the following questions need to be answered:

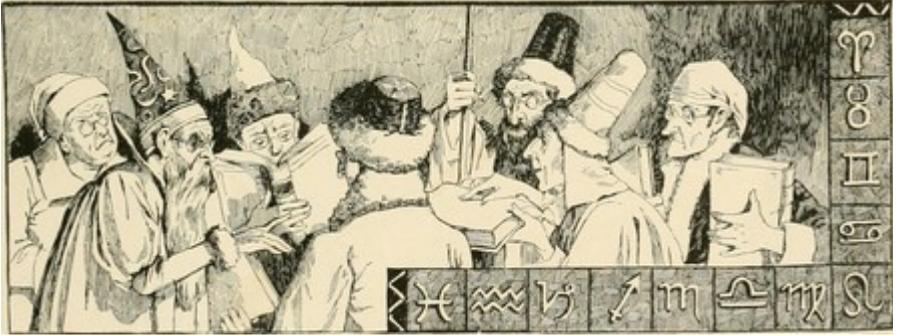
- Should we go to war with the Empire?
- How am I going to die?
- Will my brother betray me?
- Are the years ahead lean or plentiful?
- Is my firstborn fit to be king?
- Will I be rewarded in the afterlife?

Player characters

Before you start, each pick an Agenda and a Perk – no two players can share either. Agenda explains what you'd rather have the divine advice say and explains under what conditions you can try to Take Over – demand that the current prophecy interpretation is rejected in favour of yours. Your Perk defines your sacred duty as a priest and gives you a special bonus.

Agendas

- **Loyalist.** You want to tell the king exactly what he wants to hear in an attempt to gain his favour. You can Take Over if the current interpretation would upset the king.
- **Rebel.** You are unhappy about the King's reign and would like him to radically change his policies. Take Over if the current interpretation praises the king or encourages status quo.
- **Realist.** You don't want to get you into any trouble, whatever the prophecy says. Take Over if the current interpretation is verifiable to be right or wrong within your lifetime.



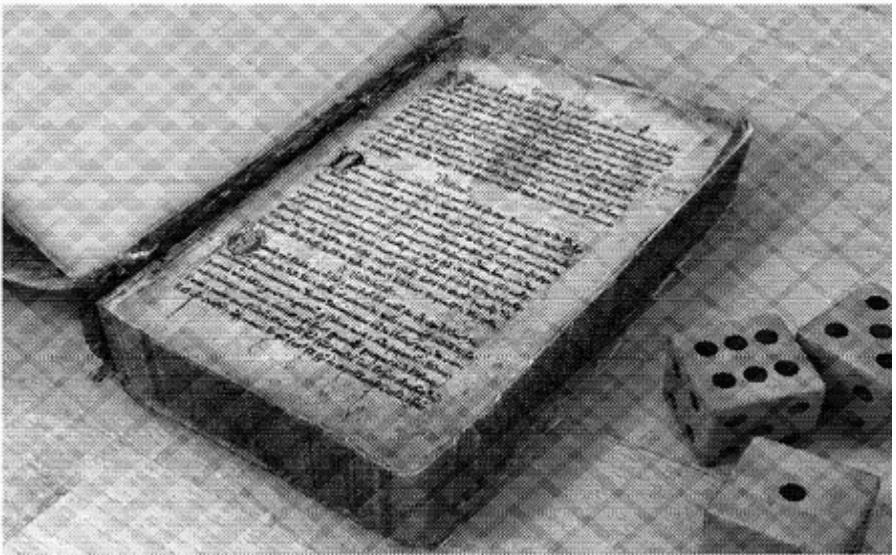
- **Zealot.** You think the interpretations must follow the tenets of your faith. Take Over if the current interpretation suggests the words of prophecy are fallible or imperfect.
- **Glory Hound.** You dream to see the realm gain greatness through conquest and consolidation of power. Take Over if the current interpretation advises patience and caution.
- **People's Tribune.** You desire greater freedoms and prosperity for the common folk. Take Over if the current interpretation advocates making decisions that put commoners in peril.

Perks

- **Scribe.** Once per game you can replace one word from the Prophecy with another word of your choice. You can only do this the moment a player (including you) has just put a piece of Prophecy in writing.
- **Master of Ceremony.** Once per game, when you're interpreting, you can stop another player from Taking Over without going into a vote.
- **High Priest.** Once per game you can Take Over, even if it's not justified by your Agenda. You don't need the Council's support to do this.
- **Oracle's Caregiver.** When it's your turn selecting a Prophecy, you can roll twice and select a passage you prefer.
- **Court Chaplain.** Once per game you can demand the currently examined piece of prophecy is interpreted as an answer to any one question of your choice. Other players must oblige.
- **Keeper of Secrets.** Once per game when you vote for Council support for a Takeover, you can single-handedly decide what the result is.

Playing

You will play through as many turns as there are players. Every turn starts with a different player rolling for Prophecy and choosing a suitable passage. Then, that same player has a go at interpreting the passage and other players accept the interpretation or try to Take Over – this repeats until an interpretation is accepted. The goal for each player is to push an interpretation that is aligned with their Agenda as many times as possible. Before you start, take a clean piece of paper (A5 should be big enough) and divide it into three columns – for the number you rolled, the words of the prophecy and their final interpretation. Make some room to keep the score too.



Finally, grab a book – any book – it will be the source of your prophecies. One in a historical or fantasy genre would be best, but poetry, philosophy or fairy tales should be fine too. Now it's time to generate some prophecies – let the shortest player go first and then continue clockwise.

Rolling for Prophecy

Roll a d4, d100 and d20. The d4 shows the hundreds digit – if your book is too thin, roll 1d4-1 or 1d3-1 instead. d100 shows the tens and units digits, with "00" being "00". Open the book and turn to the page rolled, and then find a line shown by the d20. Take the words from that line, ignoring punctuation and capital letters, and write them down along with the number you rolled on the prepared page. You are now ready to start to interpret them.

Depending on the book you chose it might be unlikely, but it's possible that your roll guided you to a blank page, or one that has too little text on it. Lucky you! You get an additional use of your Perk and roll again. The same should happen in an unlikely event of a repeated roll.

Interpreting the Prophecy

You now have words of prophecy you will try to interpret in a way that answers one of the questions asked by the king. It's a tough job, but I'm sure you'll manage – the fact that the passage is a chaotic, out of context, incoherent mess will help! You can use flawed logic and alternative facts, stretch truth and reinvent language as much as you want until you reach an interpretation that fits your Agenda. Then, walk other members of the councils through your interpretation, clearly expressing each of these:

- which question does these words of prophecy answer,
- what exact guidance should be given to the king,
- how the words uttered by the Oracle justify the above guidance.
- finish by exclaiming "Praise The Oracle!"

Taking Over

As soon as a person finishes interpreting, others have a chance to Take Over. If you decide the current interpretation goes explicitly against your interests (see your Agenda to define what counts) you can voice your objection and try to Take Over. To start, exclaim "Fie!" - the first person to do so, gets the go.

You then need to explain why the interpretation is disagreeable, by pointing out flaws and perhaps appealing to other player's Agendas. When you're done, players other than yourself or the interpreter vote. You need at least half of the votes in favour of a Takeover to be successful (you win ties). If you are, you can Interpret the Prophecy using the same rules as your predecessor (and be Taken Over as well!). Otherwise, another player can exclaim "Fie!" and try to Take Over too.

Reaching consensus

Consensus is reached when there are no successful Takeover attempts after an interpretation has been finished. The current interpretation is then written down (in summary) on the page. Every player marks score – if the consensus interpretation fits your agenda, gain 2 points, if it is neutral gain 1, if it goes against you, gain none. Do it together, keeping scoring transparent.



Clarifications

The High Priest's perk (Takeover at will) can be stopped by the Master of the Ceremony perk (prevent Takeover) but NOT the Keeper of Secrets (decide a vote) perk. If that happens, the High Priest can try to Take Over again, using regular rules.

If Oracle's Caregiver rolls a repeat or a blank page, not only does he get a standard reroll but also another, to increase total passages to choose from by 1.

If it happens that two or more players are repeatedly trying to Take Over each other's interpretation, it is the responsibility of the voters to break this madness and scold them for their impious attitudes.

Alternative settings

While the game is written with priests, kings and oracles in mind, nothing can stop you from changing the genre. One possible idea is to play as Big Data Analysts, trying to make sense of their computers incomprehensible recommendations to advise a group of high-profile stock market investors. Another option would have the players take on a role of anime maids, eavesdropping on the master's bedroom, making wild guesses about what's happening inside. The game should work all the same, you just need to pick the right book for the genre and make up some interesting questions. Make sure that your characters are self-serving individuals, as trying to push personal views onto an interpretation that should be as objective as possible is the main source of conflict and tension. Let me know how it goes if you try, I'd be genuinely interested in how the game turns out!

