



THE EYE IN THE PYRAMID

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A game of creating and revealing conspiracies

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Pitch: A good conspiracy hunt is one in which connections keep appearing, as analogies and patterns suggest an awesome and terrible scope to secretive machinations. *“What? The United States was founded to further a secret plan of the Rosicrucians? You can see it in the layout of Philadelphia?”* Let’s do that!

Note: This rules text is written assuming 4 players. Every mechanical quantity in the game is based on that. To add or subtract players, basically add or subtract that amount from every number in the game.

Step 1: Intro

This is a game about piecing together disparate fragments to envision threatening conspiracies. The characters are vehicles for turning this process of creation and revelation into a narrative. The tone of that narrative is up to the group. My biggest influences are *Illuminatus!* and *Foucault’s Pendulum*, but feel free to draw inspiration from other far-reaching conspiracy fiction. The following movies come to mind: *Indiana Jones (Raiders & Last Crusade)*, *The Da Vinci Code*, *Stigmata*, and the 2009 *Sherlock Holmes*.

Discuss this as a group and agree on roughly how much action, comedy, horror, and creepiness you want in your game.

You can do this before, during, or after reading the following aloud:

“Your four characters are the foremost experts in your fields of knowledge. Their expertise has given them the perspective to see what others do not; that the bad things happening in the world today are related, and intentional.

“Example bad things: Earthquakes in Haiti. Bombings in the Middle East. Rigged elections worldwide. Religious predictions. Omissions in the nightly news. Articles about the odd rituals of a local gang or cult. Inscrutable investments of the ultra-wealthy. Unexplained troop deployments and government helicopter flights.

“Each character believes in a secret organization which they suspect is responsible. Each character has probed into this, and each character has paid a price.

“Now they have found each other, and determined to get to the bottom of this plot. Though they suspect different culprits, they all agree that the threat is dire – manipulation, domination or destruction on a truly grand scale. It’s time to go hunt down the truth.”

Which conspiracies will turn out to be bumbled, small fries, pawns, or heroes, and which conspiracy will turn out to be the mastermind of the current threat?

Step 2: Brainstorm Conspiracy Origins

Each player chooses an **era** from the following options, so that all 4 are covered:

Ancient – before the fall of Rome (453 AD)

Distant – the 5th through 19th Centuries (between 453 and 1899)

Recent – the 20th century

Current – 2011

Each player then comes up with:

- A time and place for the **origin** or heart of their conspiracy.
- An identity for the organization responsible.

These first details are shared among the players, and are subject to group approval. The two relevant standards are (1) whether it fits with the group’s chosen tone, and (2) whether each conspiracy’s **controller** thinks they can quickly churn out fiction based on it. The most important point is to *choose something that inspires you!*

You will basically be the GM of the game when the conspiracy you control is being investigated.

Examples: The Atlanteans, the Cult of Pythagoras, a Shaolin heretic sect, the Knights Templar, the Freemasons, Ford Motor Company, Monsanto bioengineering company, Pfizer pharmaceuticals.

Step 3: Flesh Out Conspiracies

Once the broad strokes are settled, each player should then secretly define and jot down the following for their conspiracy:

The organization’s **name**

Three scales of their plan:

- Their **general aim** and reason for being (e.g. control North America for the glory of Loki)

- The **large sub-goal** they're working on **now** (e.g. take over the United States government)
- **The next item on their to-do list** toward this goal (e.g. popularize new political party)

2 locations where their secrets can be pursued in play (sewers, museums, Antarctica, etc.)

2 attacks they use to thwart their opponents (dogs or thugs or snipers to injure you; computer networks to delete your records; media or law enforcement to frame you; etc.)

Optional (if you finish before other players and are inspired):

- Their mask or **front** -- who they pretend to be (bank, mafia, scholars, church, delivery svc., etc.)
- Their **symbol** or hallmark (eye in pyramid, sextant, raven, the number 12, etc.)
- Additional ideas for **to-do, locations** and **attacks**

Step 4: Create Characters

Each player creates a character who is an **expert on a given conspiracy**. This must be **different** than the conspiracy you **control**, and all four conspiracies must be accounted for.

Your character will always be able to pursue conspiracies in play. Beyond that, the active **controller** can do anything they want to your character. Defining your character is 100% an exercise in color. Pick the most fun way for you to interface with a conspiracy hunt, and play that. If you're most psyched to play some raving nutjob who's fixated on their object of expertise for no apparent reason, go for it. Defining your **compulsion** and what you've **lost** is meant solely as inspiration for roleplay.

Write down your character's **expertise**.

Give them a **name**.

Give them a **job**, or some other sort of life context.

Pick one thing they've **lost** which they blame on the conspiracy:

- colleague(s)
- contact(s)
- support for studies (e.g. funding)
- your work on the conspiracy (books, files, hard drives, papers)
- proof or information on the conspiracy (papers, letters, photos, artifacts)
- security (home invasion, property destruction, threats)
- friend
- spouse
- child

Finally, pick the nature of their **compulsion** to pursue the conspiracy:

- eliminate a threat
- revenge
- save someone or something the conspiracy has corrupted
- find and recover something the conspiracy has stolen

Sample character:

Expert on: the Knights Templar

Name: Morris Blackburn

Lost: the conspiracy broke my legs to end my athletic career and remove me from the spotlight

Compulsion: revenge

Step 5: Choose Patterns

Roll randomly on the following table 4 times to generate 4 patterns of recurring themes across the 4 conspiracies. Write each chosen pattern on a scrap of paper where everyone can see it.

- | | |
|----|---------------------|
| 1 | the color turquoise |
| 2 | police |
| 3 | the number 3 |
| 4 | city planning |
| 5 | the number 5 |
| 6 | signals from space |
| 7 | the number 7 |
| 8 | the U.S. govt |
| 9 | the Chinese govt |
| 10 | the N. Korean govt |
| 11 | the Iranian govt |
| 12 | the Israeli govt |
| 13 | Hamas |
| 14 | Al Qaeda |
| 15 | drug culture |
| 16 | rock music |
| 17 | TV news |
| 18 | media corporations |
| 19 | advertising firms |
| 20 | science fiction |
| 21 | houses of worship |
| 22 | religious texts |
| 23 | the number 23 |
| 24 | tarot |

25	astrology
26	hallucinations
27	natural disasters
28	global warming
29	cancer
30	ritual sacrifice
31	power plants
32	gold
33	birth
34	burning
35	purification
36	metamorphosis

Step 6: Create Elements

Guided by your discussions on tone and the conspiracy origins, create one **element** inspired by **each** of the four **patterns** on the table. Each such element should be written **legibly** on a note card (or scrap of paper) and put into a bowl. When finished, the elements should be mixed together randomly.

When this is done, remove the four patterns from the table.

Example elements:

- an Aztec sacrificial dagger
- an explosion of turquoise mist
- unexplained deaths of birds in Arizona

The first is an **object** the characters can find while exploring. The second is an **event** the controller can spring on them. The third is a **news item** (a **headline**, really) that they can be made aware of through TV, newspaper, internet, or maybe a phone call. Those requirements may make a controller work a bit harder to frame scenes toward playing such elements (“Gotta get them out of this underground maze and into a place with a TV!”), but too bad! It’s worth it for the ability to add the kinds of world events that really get conspiracy theories humming.

Step 7: Put out Tokens and Tally Sheet

16 tokens go in the middle of the table where everyone can reach them.

Also place a sheet of paper with each player’s name on it, for tallying up the tokens earned over the course of several investigations.

Step 8: Play the First Scene

Pick one tragic or ominous event that was **in the news** recently. Write it on a note card and place it on the table where everyone can see it. Establish how the characters have decided to meet, possibly spurred by this event.

Then, start talking in-character. Introduce yourself and the conspiracy that you're the expert on. Start with the player with the earliest birth month and go clockwise.

After every character has shared their theories, it is obvious that an investigation is necessary. But where to start? Pick a **controller** at random. Their conspiracy is the characters' first object of pursuit.

Establishing conspiracy facts and theories

Each conspiracy's controller maintains authority over their conspiracy at all times. That looks like this:

John (speaking in-character): *Wu Tang, huh? Weren't they rumored to have been destroyed or something?*

Terry (speaking in-character): *As the world's foremost Wu Tang scholar, I am not interested in rumors!* (Switching to out-of-character) *Were they destroyed at some point?*

Mendez (controller of Wu Tang conspiracy): *They were mostly destroyed a hundred years ago.*

Terry (speaking in-character): *They merely feigned destruction, to hide their presence!*

Mendez has established a **fact** and Terry has established a **theory** (basically, anything a character suggests or claims which is not also a fact).

Use the first scene to practice this dynamic. It will work exactly the same in subsequent scenes, even when the active controller (effectively the GM) is someone other than Mendez.

Note: Establish a way to distinguish **character speech** from **asking questions to controllers**, so that you can hop quickly between them.

Step 9: Playing Investigations

The **controller** of the active conspiracy randomly grabs four **elements** from the bowl, then takes a moment to consult their conspiracy notes, choose a **location**, and ponder introducing elements and an **attack**. (They can also ask the other players what their characters have been up to since the last scene if they care.)

When ready, the controller frames the scene, including how and why the characters got here if that wasn't obvious from the previous scene. (This is often a good place to reincorporate the chosen connection from the previous investigation. See Step 10.)

The controller then **chooses one element** and narrates it into the characters' awareness however they see fit. The controller **places the element** face-up next to the other elements already in play (so, at the start of the first investigation scene, that will just be the "bad news" element).

The players roleplay their characters exploring this location, by asking the controller questions, announcing actions, and having dialogue with the other characters. Their goal is to invent **connections** (see below).

Being the Active Controller:

Narrate anything you want, as long as the characters aren't stopped from pursuing new information (so, no deaths, lobotomies, or boring prisons). Just try to respect the initial group agreement on tone.

The controller will play four elements during the course of each investigation. Pacing and cuts are up to the controller. You can bring out a new element the second the characters have finished analyzing the last one, or you can show off your creepy location, say, "You find nothing else before leaving, but five years later..." That said, the easiest solution is likely the best: follow the other players' lead.

The players need a chance to process each new element, so whenever you play one, stop talking for a bit. Accordingly, you generally don't want to play a new element during an action sequence.

You should launch your **attack** whenever seems most dramatically satisfying. You can use an attack with your 4th element to create a cliffhanger ending to your turn.

After the 4th **element** has been played, the controller will **count to ten** and then end the scene and their turn. That's it for the investigation of this particular conspiracy! Anyone who has not yet proposed a connection during this investigation may do so now. (Anyone who has already made one or more connections cannot add new ones.)

Connections

A connection is narration which (a) relates two or more previously-introduced elements, facts, or theories to each other, and (b) connects this relationship to the (possible) aims of a given conspiracy.

Bad connection: "Maybe the banana peel dealer was killed by an injection of nanites! I blame Monsanto, because they have the technology!"

Good connection: "Maybe smoked banana peels are the only thing that can kill nanites! And Monsanto doesn't want this info getting out, because they want to control people with nanites! So they silenced the dealer!"

The second example is good because it builds onto the conspiracy theory of what Monsanto is up to. They want to control someone, and nanites are their tool. This is both satisfying ("Aha! It fits!") and ripe

for investigation. “Who will they control? To what end? How will they get the nanites into their victim(s)?”

How to narrate a connection

Connections must always be shared with all players, but which characters know them is up to the connection’s narrator. That means that all of the following are permitted:

- 1) **My character tells** all the characters his theory. He says...
- 2) **My character forms a theory**, but doesn’t say anything. His theory is...
- 3) **Meanwhile, elsewhere**, a man in a Monsanto uniform emerges from a lab marked “nanotech research” and crosses “banana peel smoke” of a list marked “control inhibitors”.

It’s tough to do this last without stepping on the given controller’s toes, but it can be done. “A man in a Monsanto uniform” allows some ambiguity (disguised? part of a front?) whereas “the president of Monsanto” would not. “A guy in a lab coat” might be better still in this regard, as long as “lab coat” connotes one or more of the conspiracies.

There’s nothing wrong with using option #1 exclusively.

The only other connection narration requirement is: don’t monopolize it. **Don’t try to finish someone else’s connection** for them (at least, until it’s clear they’ve given up). And, to accommodate that, **don’t grab attention for too long** trying to finish a connection that isn’t coming to you.

Once you feel you’ve finished narrating a connection, say “**Don’t you see?**” This is a reminder to the other players to give you a token if they do indeed see.

How to reward a connection

The moment that someone’s connection becomes clear to you, if no one has given them a token for it yet, grab a **token** from the central pile and hand it to them. “Clear” just means that you recognize it as a good connection, as defined above. It’s the moment when you go “Aha! It all fits!” or “Those creepy bastards must be stopped!”

If a narrated connection is hideously contrived or tone-inappropriate, say so instead of giving a token.

You can only earn **one token per connection**. If you can keep narrating from one connection directly into another, reincorporating **another** element, fact or theory, then you can get a second token (or third, etc.).

The active controller should keep an eye out for any connection that is obviously understood but not rewarded. Players can forget token-passing when ranting about conspiracies!

Controllers are encouraged to milk connections for inspiration or even use them wholesale.

Step 10: Between investigations

Each player counts the tokens they've earned in this investigation and adds that number to their total on the central tally sheet.

Each player then secretly decides how many tokens (from this round) they wish to bid on connection vs conspiracy. Before finalizing these decisions, the players should **remind each other** which connections were narrated during this investigation.

Each player hides the tokens they wish to bid on connection in their hand. After a countdown, all players reveal simultaneously. Whoever has the most tokens showing now chooses **which connection from this investigation will reappear in the next investigation**. (Ties are decided in favor of whoever has the most total points on the tally sheet. After that, losing players vote.)

All players then discard their connection tokens and display their remaining tokens. The winner gains the right to determine **which conspiracy will be pursued next**, and thus also which controller will GM the investigation. The controller who just finished their turn always has the option to decline, if selected.

Go in order from fewest conspiracy tokens bid to most, ending on the winner. Each player **narrates their character's revised theory** on how their conspiracy is responsible and what they're up to now, factoring in the events of the last investigation.

The final narrator (who won the conspiracy bid) then chooses the next investigation's conspiracy controller from among those players who haven't had a turn doing that yet.

Everyone returns any remaining tokens to the middle of the table.

The group then takes a 10-minute break (or less, if the next controller doesn't need 10) while the next investigation's controller prepares.

Step 11: The final revelation

The four Conspiracy Identities are shuffled and placed face down on the table. These are:

- Actually benevolent
- Ill-intentioned, but incompetent
- Evil, but small-time compared to the mastermind
- The mastermind

Whoever has the highest tally of points (including from the final investigation) gets to secretly look at the face-down identities and pick the one they want for their conspiracy.

The player who came in second then picks from the remaining three. The player who came in third chooses from the final two, and hands the last player the only remaining identity for their conspiracy.

Narrate in the order above. Benevolent goes first, Mastermind goes last. For each narration, the conspiracy controller declares their conspiracy's identity (benevolent, incompetent, etc.). They then narrate whether the conspiracy succeeds or fails in its current endeavor (on whichever scale they wish), using anything the characters accomplished during their investigations to help determine this. Finally, the controller suggests whether the relevant expert character ever discovered the truth.

That character's player then narrates their character's final fate.

Design notes:

- 1) Key phrases could cover "I'm working on a theory, don't interrupt!" and "I'm stalled now, feel free to talk!" I like the madhouse of proposals, but I'd also like to make it as easy as possible for someone to finish a thought.
- 2) Alternatives to "Don't you see?":
 - "do you see?"
 - "do you understand?"
 - "don't you see the truth?"
 - "right? Right?"
 - "what do you think?"
- 3) Maybe you get 1 point for narrating a connection between elements AND 1 point for narrating a theory attaching that connection to a particular conspiracy.

That way, when Donna goes, "Maybe music is used to activate the drugs!" and I say, "Which is why the I Live president was at the concert -- they're used it as a mass test of the drug!" then we each get 1 point.

Whereas if Donna says, "Maybe music is used to activate the drugs! Which is why the I Live president was at the concert -- they're used it as a mass test of the drug!" then she gets 2 points.

We'd also need a rule of "don't interrupt someone who's still talking" but that's simple enough

- 4) How best to remember connections? Write them down? Draw arrows between elements?