

Through Playtest I

Through is a game about people—their wants, their needs, their regrets. People in **Through** just happen to be dead.

This is a playtest document. To that end, it's completely unformatted. Seriously, this is a direct compile of a chapter straight from Scrivener. The final game will have layout and editing and all of that shit.

As a playtest, I reserve the right to change absolutely fucking everything. I probably won't; I'm not about to make this game into a cross between *The Transformers* and the *Bhagavarad Gita*. Some other game, maybe. Not this one.

Feel free to share it with your group or with anyone else who wouldn't mind giving it a read or a try and sending me feedback. Don't go nuts. I mean, I think the crew of the International Space Station has better things to do than to help me test a game, y'know?

Any and all feedback should go to digitalraven@gmail.com with a subject line of *Through Playtest*.

Primer

What You Would Know If This Were The Full Book

Each of the below points should be taken as read. If you want to comment on it, I'd appreciate you holding off until the right playtest document.

Characters are ghosts.

Characters have an ID, reflecting the un-admitted urges. This ID is played by someone else. Sharing control over the character in this way is handled through mechanical tricks, and is a fundamental part of the game.

Ghosts reside in the deadlands, which is roughly the world +10 years of neglect, rust, and broken windows.

Almost everything in the deadlands used to exist. All the people, the tools, the buildings. Some Relics, and even (whisper it) other ghosts can be infused with ENtropy and forged into new items. These things appear black and shiny, like really strong obsidian, and are called "blacksteel".

Arcanoi will probably get called something else, to distance from Wraith. If anyone has any ideas, I'd love to hear them.

Some doors in the deadlands open on to the Labyrinth, a never-ending maze of tunnels made of dead buildings—anywhere that was once, but isn't now accessible. Whether it's bombed-out mansions or sealed-up subway stations, the Labyrinth is ever-changing. And spooky.

At the end of it all is Entropy. Entropy is a bit of a sadistic bastard. Even ghosts who don't have religion treat Entropy like a person. It keeps them sane.

The GM is called the Maestro. Because I really hate the idea of the GM being the "moderator" or the "master". The Maestro's so named because it's up to her to get the best out of her players, like a conductor in front of an orchestra. I know it's pretentious.

The deadlands hold the ghosts of concepts as well as the ghosts of people. Lots of ghosts maintain the *Empires*, which are every imperial power that ever fell. Every religion has its adherents, and *Heresiarchs* enact the ghost of schism and heresy among believers. *Iconoclasts* embody the ghost of every revolution and rebellion. The *Unknown Soldiers* fight the ghosts of wars fought with gladius, longbow, musket, and Spitfire. Entropians study the difference between living and dead and how that alters the "human" condition.

A Mote in the Dark

Before you can start playing **Through**, everyone around the table needs a character. Everyone except the Maestro, anyway.

Each of the characters has something within them, some spark that makes her carry on even after she's died. That's a big, important—hell, let's go with *defining*—fact about her. That's what you need to keep in mind throughout the game, more than who she was in life and more than the things that anchor her to the lands of the dead. You get to that point by answering some questions and writing some numbers.

Oh, and from here on out, we refer to the *character* as “you”. As a player, you're answering for your character. Get into her head. Items marked with a hollow bullet (°) are things you need to write down.

How'd You Get Here?

The first question you need to answer surrounds the manner of your death: What shuffled you off the mortal coil?

Pick one. If you can't think of anything, use this list:

- A wasting disease ate you from the inside out (weeping sores)
- That last martini destroyed your liver (strong smell of booze)
- You drove drunk and hit something (steering wheel wrapped around neck)
- You were hit by a drunk driver (impression of radiator grill in torso)
- A guy shot you while holding up a liquor store (bullet wound)
- You killed a lot of people, and the state killed you (smoking charred patches)
- You fit the profile for a serial killer's victim, and he got you (oozing knife wound)
- Your wife took the kids, you took too many sleeping pills (half-lidded eyes)
- A falling pot-plant crushed your head (caved-in head)
- You starved to death when the crops failed (obviously malnourished)
- Your boat hit an iceberg and sank with all hands (dripping water)

- Your family died in a plane crash, you shot yourself to join them (powder burn)
- You made the summit, but an avalanche got you (covered in snow)

How you died doesn't just inform how your character got to the deadlands, but also some of what she looks like. You have a *Tell*, a physical manifestation of what killed you. Maybe you constantly drip water, or the bullet-holes still ooze blood.

- Note your Cause of Death
- Note your Tell

Why Are You Here?

Most people, they die and that's it. Sure, their ghosts populate the deadlands—blind, dumb sacks of ectoplasm fit only for raw materials. You're not like them. You have something that made you want to carry on, something that death itself couldn't stop you caring about. What is it?

You must have more than one Passion if you want to have any semblance of free will; the ability to choose lives in the hollows between each Passion that pulls you to do this or that. Some ghosts have only one Passion that matters to them, but they're the ghosts of human myth, locked into a single pattern of behaviour like a looping video.

Everything you want, you want for a reason. Your Passions are specific, but each has an underlying emotion. Two ghosts may have the same need, but for different reasons: one wants to look after her daughters because of her love for them, another wants to prove that she's a better parent than her deadbeat ex.

Note that these are the drives that you're aware of. For things that you're ashamed of, or that you don't want to admit to driving you... hold on to those thoughts. You'll need them later.

Pick four. At least three must have different core emotions. If stuck for ideas, use this list:

- Get revenge on my killer (Hate/Pride)
- Live a "normal" existence (Hope/Insecurity)
- Pull off the Big Score (Ambition/Greed)
- Help the group (Loyalty/Generosity)

- Gain power in the Empire (Ambition/Greed)
- Make restitution to victims (Forgiveness/Shame)
- Avoid the Empire's soldiers (Fear/Hope)
- Convert those who do not believe (Faith/Pride)
- Discover your physical limits (Curiosity/Ego)
- Get others to do what you want (Ambition/Ego)
- Find true love (Longing/Love)
- Be liked by the group (Compassion/Insecurity)
- Prove yourself worthy (Fear/Pride)
- Make my sister famous (Generosity/Pride)
- Become famous (Selflessness/Vanity)
- Be with my wife again (Envy/Love)
- Get another fix (Desire/Insecurity)
- Prove my innocence (Hope/Rage)
- Become worthy of Heaven (Envy/Faith)
- Avoid going to Hell (Fear/Shame)

Once we know what motivates you, we need to know how much. Each of your Passions has a number associated with it. It's a 1-5 scale, where 1 is an occasional need and 5 is burning passion.

- Note your Passions.
- Note the core emotion next to each Passion.
- Rate each Passion 1-5. You have ten points.

What Anchors You?

We know why you're still going, but what holds you to the deadlands? Make no mistake, if you didn't care for anything or anyone in the material world, you'd be pulled into the Labyrinth and that's the last you'd ever see of anywhere familiar.

An Anchor can be an item, a place, or a person that means something to you

—if you care about a specific institution, that’s a Passion. Anchors have to have a tangible physical presence in the living world. If someone can’t touch it, it ain’t an Anchor.

More than that, an Anchor tells us something about what you did when you were alive. A writer could be Anchored to his pen, his laptop, his office, or his editor. Any of those tells us more about you; they also tell us that you were a writer. Each Anchor should be like that, providing a glimpse into who you were, but don’t worry if you don’t know why some things mean so much to you just yet. That will come, given time.

When picking a place or an item, give it a line of description. That helps it feel more real, gives it a grounding in the living world. “A coffee shop” could be almost anything. “Danny’s Coffee on Fifth and Broadway, all decked out like a fifties diner in chrome and red leather” tells us a little about that place in particular. For people, we need a name. Could be a first name, a last name, a pet name, or what was on their fake ID this week. Add in brief details: whether they’re tall or short, slim or stocky (and whether you’d add “kinda” or “very” to any of those), and their hair colour. That’s enough to make them real people for now. But really, honestly, don’t forget to give them a name. Oh, and if you were wondering: animals are people too.

Pick two of Place, Person, and Item. Each one must be from a different category. Examples are provided:

Places

- The burned-out wreck of my apartment
- The cliff where I nearly died
- My local baseball field
- The records office at City hall
- The Eiffel Tower
- The office stationary closet
- My old cell
- Don’s Junkyard
- The corner of 23rd and Main

People

- My daughter
- My husband's best friend
- My drill sergeant
- The nurse who cut off my leg
- The asshole who ran me over
- The girl across the street who doesn't believe in curtains
- My dog
- The snitch who put me away

Items

- An antique fountain pen
- My old .38
- The portrait of my grandfather
- The jukebox at Mory's
- My son's stuffed bear
- A notebook full of unfinished stories
- My seat at the stadium
- My old coffee mug

Like Passions, we need to know how strong the attraction is to the detritus of your time as a living being. Again, it's a 1-5 scale. If something's only worth 1, maybe you couldn't live without it but it's not like you spared it much thought. Five is for something you've invested real emotion in for much of your life and that's been in your thoughts a lot. Could be an abusive parent, could be a 486 running Slackware with six and a half years of continuous uptime.

Is it stingy to have only two Anchors? Hell yes. You're going to get two more real soon now, but to get there, you need to meet the others.

- Note your Anchors
- Briefly describe your Anchors
- Rate each Anchor 1-5. You have eight points. You may hold up to four points in reserve

Who Are You?

If you're going to meet the others, they need to know who you are. Hence, this step. Right now, we need to know your name, your look, and your Relics.

What's your name?

People in the deadlands cling to names like little else—without a name, you're just another soul for the forges. With a name, you've got an identity, something that divides you from those ghosts who sleepwalk into oblivion. You're, well, you. They're something else.

That doesn't mean that your name is what's written on your death certificate, though it could be. A pet name or nickname works well, because it's something very personal to you. Some ghosts go far enough to pick up new appellations based on their Tells, or other features of their spectral bodies. If it works for Dripping Millie, Xian Flathead, and No-Eyed Jack, it can work for you.

What do you look like?

Beyond the Tell, odds on you'll look a lot like you did in life. Morphic resonance is a bitch that way. If you're not sure how much detail to go into, go with answering the following questions. If you've already got a look in mind, cool! Just make sure you've not left anything out.

- What gender do you look like? Man, woman, ambiguous, transgressing, or androgyne?
- What's the general style of your clothing? Formal, casual, office, robes, leathers?
- What's your face like? Worn, pretty, rough, scarred, open?
- What're your eyes like? Calculating, mesmerising, forgiving, cunning, mad?
- What's your build? Stocky, graceful, fat, twisted, strong?

What did you bring with you?

Every ghost has a relic, a small object that came with her to the deadlands. How large? Well, if it's much bigger than pack of cigarettes (or a smartphone, for those of you who didn't smoke), that's rare but not unheard of: enough ghosts have canes or umbrellas that nobody bats an eye, but a rifle or a car is too big.

Here's the thing with relics: they're as much a part of you as your clothing.

Sure, one guy might have a cane that's got a sword hidden in it, but that's no more use in a fight than his fists. And that assumes fighting matters. If you're still hung up on the idea of trying to kill another ghost—someone else who's *already dead*, genius—it's worth noting that relic guns need an external power source in order to fire. That power source, more often than not, is your own life energy. Generally, you'll burn more of your own than you will cause hurt to anyone else.

Every sundown, a relic re-sets to the state it was in when you died. That pack of smokes won't ever run out, and that hip-flask will give you another hit when the sun goes down.

- Note down your Name
- Note down your Look
- Note down your Relic

What Binds You Together?

At this point, you get to meet all the other characters in the group. When it's your turn, tell them your name, your look, and your Tell. You don't have to tell them how you died or anything, just what they see.

Once everyone's introduced, go around once more. On your turn, tell the others what your Anchors are. One of the others will pick one of your Anchors. When the others tell you what their Anchors are, keep an ear out: you've got to select one. Pay special attention to the category you don't currently have an Anchor in.

If two people want the same Anchor, whoever held back the most points from their own Anchors gets it. If both saved the same number, the person who already has the Anchor can choose.

Your new Anchor automatically has a rating of 1.

The Maestro will ask a lot of questions. Don't worry about the answers. She's keeping her own notes, sketching out the connections between the group. Once everyone's connected, she'll suggest another Anchor. Sometimes, she'll suggest individual but related Anchors to each character. More often, the discussion will uncover a common factor between everyone—and thus a common Anchor that everyone has.

Once you're done, note down how many Tags each of your Anchors has. You

get one for free, one more at three points, and one more at five. You fill in the tags during play.

Your Maestro-given Anchor automatically has a rating of 1. You don't have to spend anything to get that rating.

- Note down your new Anchors
- Note down the relationships you've discovered with the others
- Spend any points that you held in reserve on these new Anchors
- Note the Tags available to each Anchor
- If you held back more points than you wish to spend, distribute the extra between your Passions.

What Is Inside You?

Every ghost has a few traits in common. Your *Corpus* measures how well you can hold your own image together, a combination of psychological stability and physical integrity. Initially, everyone has roughly the same amount. Gaining or losing Anchors can affect it, as can venturing into the Labyrinth—either temporarily or permanently. When you encounter anything that would normally seriously hurt or kill a living person, you instead lose a point of Corpus. If you lose all your Corpus, your body dissolves. You'll reform at one of your Anchors, but not until your ID has had its fun.

Ethos measures the fire within, the spark that made you something other than a drone. In a strange way, it's the animating force of the underworld. With practice, you can use it to exploit the physics—and metaphysics—of the underworld through the ghost-arts known as Arcanoi. When you lose all your Ethos, your ID is in control. That's not generally considered a good thing.

You may not have been dead long, but you've got some ties to the deadlands around you. Do you have a blacksteel sword at your hip? Is your relic somehow exceptional? Do you have a Hollow you can call your own, or a part of the Labyrinth that only you can get to? Close ties with a part of the Empire—or the Heresiarchs? Or have you made serious inroads studying the Arcanoi of the dead? These are your Backgrounds.

Pick one Major Background and two Minor Backgrounds. At least one pick must be from the list of Arcanoi:

Arcanoi

- **Animate:** Affect inanimate objects in the living world
- **Echo:** Conjure illusions with powerful emotional resonance
- **Fluidity:** Manipulate Corpus as though it was putty
- **Lifeweb:** Mastery of the invisible chains of fate
- **Phantasm:** Enter the living world in an ectoplasmic body
- **Scour:** Mastery over the ID and the energies of the dead
- **Wayfind:** Manipulate space, including controlling the Labyrinth
- **Wrath:** Affect energy in the living world, usually violently

Other Backgrounds

- **Alteration:** Your Corpus has been twisted into a form that offers unique advantages
- **Discipline:** You have more control over your ID than most.
- **Favour:** You saved another ghost from a terrible fate, and now she owes you
- **Haunt:** You've unprecedented access to a place where the deadlands and the living world overlap.
- **Juncture:** You know how to get to a corner of the Labyrinth that's stable and private
- **Notoriety:** The living still think of you; your reputation is almost an Anchor
- **Relic:** Your relic is very much its own thing, rather than just a part of you
- **Status:** You're part of a greater whole, be it an Empire or a Heresiarch
- **Treasure:** You have exclusive access to something forged from blacksteel

More information on Backgrounds is available starting on page XX. Arcanoi are detailed further starting on page XX.

- Your Corpus starts equal to the sum of your Anchors
- Your Ethos starts equal to the sum of your Passions.
- Note your Backgrounds

- If you have an Arcanos as a Minor pick, you can use the Basic forms.
- If you have an Arcanos as a Major pick, you can use the Intermediate forms.

The ID

The lands of the dead have many secrets. One thing that's not a secret: you're not alone in your head. Maybe it's a facet of the decay that infests everything in the deadlands. Maybe it's a small part of the Labyrinth corrupting everything that's got a spark of Ethos. Or maybe entropy's just got a malicious sense of humour. Whatever the reason, every ghost has to deal with the voice of the ID in the back of his head.

To reflect that a ghost's ID really doesn't have his best interests at heart, it's created as a character in its own right, but someone else plays that character. Sometimes the Maestro will be the ID-keeper for everyone. Sometimes one player won't have a character, and will be the ID-keeper for everyone else. And sometimes, in addition to playing your own character, you get to play someone else's ID. The Maestro's got a whole section on the benefits and drawbacks of each measure; trust him to choose the right one. And y'know what? ID-keeping is *hard*. If she wants to change how its done, make it easy for everyone involved.

Whatever the case, the person running your ID is your ID-keeper. You and he sit down, and you work out what motivates your dark side. When you're doing this, keep in mind that the ID isn't necessarily a straight-up "evil you". It's the part of you that wants to indulge every urge, the part that jumps straight to over-reaction, and that has a real mad-on for petty bullshit.

First, you need to agree on what type of bastard your ID is. *Pick one:*

- Authoritarian (an overbearing parent, an unappeasable perfectionist, or a dictatorial boss)
- Intellectual (a cruel teacher, a sniggering know-it-all, or a withering rationalist)
- Glutton (an emotional leech, a needy lover, or an ever-complaining martyr)
- Misfit (a paranoid lunatic, a twisted freak, or a complete monster)
- Sadist (a petty bully, a vicious comedian, or a demanding pusher)
- Self-Destructive (a glib daredevil, a whining hypochondriac, or a ground-

down workaholic)

This choice is your ID's *Archetype*. More detail on what each Archetype can do is available starting on page XX.

The ID has specific drives, in the form of twisted Dark Passions. These are things that the ID cares about in the same way that you care about your Passions—hell, they're things that *you* care about, but you don't even admit that to yourself for all the shame they bring you, and the guilty thrill when you secretly indulge one. They're even rated the same. *Pick three*. Examples:

- Torture my little brother (Envy)
- Persecute people different to me (Fear of Discovery)
- Get rid of the Stones CDs from the jukebox at Mory's (Hate)
- Seduce my best friend's wife (Lust)
- Make my boss suffer (Spite)
- Lose myself in the Labyrinth (Self-Hatred)
- Feed others to the Labyrinth (Hate)
- Alter my friends into patio furniture and sell them (Greed)
- Drag my husband into the Underworld (Spite)
- Cut the brake-lines of the psycho who ran me down (Rage)
- Destroy any works of art better than my own (Envy)
- Turn myself in to the Empire's torturers (Masochism)
- Destroy my daughter's favourite toys (Sadistic Glee)

As with regular Passions, you have to work out how much you want each of these things. The total rating must add up to seven; neither Dark Passion can have less than one or more than five. If the ghost has Discipline as a Minor Background, the total rating must add up to five. If the ghost has Discipline as a Major Background, the total rating must add up to five *and* the ID only has two Dark Passions, rather than three.

The ID has its own twisted version of Ethos, a spectral energy that keeps it going. This force is called Pathos. When the ID isn't in control, it can expend Pathos to exert some influence over the ghost. If the ID gets full control, Pathos fuels its actions—until the ghost confronts and overcomes the ID.

- Note your ID's Archetype
- Record your Dark Passions, and the associated emotion.
- Rate each Dark Passion 1-5. You have 6 points.
- Your Pathos starts equal to the sum of your Dark Passions.

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