

AS ABOVE,  
a role playing game of stories and wonder

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*They came in the night and took you from your bed. The smell of sandalwood and the touch of your mother's hand calmed you. Hushed voices followed, accompanying the slap of soft leather on stone as she carried you up the stairs. Rising with each step, the warmth fled. Emerging into the parched, cold air of night in the high desert, you blinked away the darkness. Your mother wrapped a blanket close about you and settled down with you on her lap. Above you, now, the heavens opened. The wanderers shone, blue, red, green. The sickle wheeled around the diamond, the hunter chasing the great dragon.*

*Around you your cousins, sisters, uncles, grandmothers and their neighbors looked up to the stars filling the sky. Then, each in turn, they began where the story always began, in our world. But soon a door opened and the story moved down deep, deep, deep in the underdeep. Where the dragons turn and twist in the roots of the mountain. Where the water slides silent into the earth, seeking its way back to the end and the source, the mother ocean. And as the water climbs back into the sky, on wing of bird, by rainbow, to cloud, so too did the stories that night. Each leading, spiraling round to the mystery of the heavens above.*

## ABOUT THE GAME

*As Above* is a storytelling and role playing game for two to six players. The stories of the game are inspired by fairy tales, myths and legends. They take place in a fictional world, inspired by but not meant to represent any particular place or tradition on Earth. *As Above* is inspired by Russian Matryoshka dolls. These beautifully painted dolls nest one inside another, as the stories are intended to do in *As Above*.

Each story in *As Above*, is the tale of person or being from this world who has an encounter that takes them beyond the world that they know, to discover the realms Above and Below where they live, Between. The stories take a spiral path. Each one leading to the next.

In *As Above*, we follow the winding paths of the deep magic of imagination and see where each turn will take us. From the depths, to the stars.

### The World

Read these descriptions of the levels of the world out loud. Answer the questions asked about the Above and Below to learn more about the world your stories will take place within.

Have each player answer at least one question. Each question must be answered at least once, but can have multiple answers.

### Above

The sky is a realm of spirits and imagination. Humans can travel there through their dreams and

visions, to learn and explore ideas about what the world could be. Or they may be carried aloft by wind, birds or reach Above from a mountain top or tall tree, or other fantastical means. The above world is grand, magical, shifting and always changing like the wind and the clouds. Beings and places continually move, just as the stars wheel about the sky. The creatures there are luminous and ethereal as well as vibrant, and full of power and energy.

Above changes as the day and night change, the Sun rules the Day and Moon and Stars rule the Night. Movement here is at the speed of thought, flight is possible for everyone and in all ways you are bounded only by the limits of your imagination.

*Who lives in the Above Realms?*

*What can you (that is, the people in the world gain) from visiting?*

*What may you lose?*

Below

The world Below is the land of the ancestors and deep spirits upon which all we live and do Between is founded. Granda's Stone and Fire live in the Caverns of Below, and they sometimes speak with beings from Between or Above who travel down to speak with them, and seek their wisdom. Other creatures live in Below, some who were from the other Realms but who are now lost and forgotten. Some who are dreaming dreams inspired by the imaginings of Above that will be born into Between. The other side of Below is the Ocean Depths. Few from Between or Above travel there, but if you do, it is a world full of life, action, celebration and danger.

Water and caves can bring you below. Beings from Between also sometimes travel below when they are dreaming. Movement Below is slow, stately and full of thought. Many beings never move. Beings in the Caverns or the Ocean respond best to silence, listening, and gesture. There is power here, but it is deep, quiet power, which when stirred can turn the world upside down like the storm or earthquake.

*Who lives in the Below Realms?*

*What can you gain from visiting?*

*What may you lose?*

Between

The world between is our world, the natural realm of earth, plant and animal. It is a world of mountains, forest, and desert. Humans live there side by side with plant and animals who may talk. All who live there are generally trying to live their lives and pursue their goals. The Between world is a practical world. Beings here are focused on living, and accomplishing the things that help keep their communities flourishing. Movement here takes the time that it takes. One step at a time. Here you are limited by what you can do, though that can be changed sometimes with help from those of the worlds Above and Below.

The Between World is described when play begins. The players start play by using the Painting a Picture rules to start the story there.

## PLAY

When you are playing *As Above* you work together to describe the world, think about its aspects and history, and play out what happens to the characters who move about in it. The group will do these things by following steps that help them collaborate and build upon each others' ideas.

The steps take the form of three different modes of play. Each mode has a different pace and feel. Take time to understand how each works, and how the players will signal that they are moving from one to the next. Specific cues are used to help everyone understand what is needed to be done at any given time.

Signals are also given for when one story, or part of a story, is interrupted by another tale. Disparate parts of the same tale may circle back to the original once tale more.

Three Modes of Play:

- Painting a Picture (As Above)
- Being in the World (As Between)
- Reflecting on the World (As Below)

Painting a Picture (SEE, DO, LOVE FEAR)

When playing in the Painting style (which is analogous to the Above part of the world), the players sit in a circle and each in turn add brief descriptions of a scene. This is Painting A Picture with their words. The game always starts with a Painting a Picture phase.

Going in turn around the circle, each person adds a short statement that contains just a single or perhaps two new aspects to what is present. Each person should build on what was added by the last person (in other words, each succeeding statement cannot negate what has already been said.

The Painting a Picture statements should each add the following:

- Something to See.
- Something someone can Do.
- Something inspiring Love.
- Something inspiring Fear.

Players go in a circle and add things quickly, passing an object with their turn, ( for those familiar with it, this is similar to building to Flashpoint in Spione by Ron Edwards). Crosstalk among the players and having people give suggestions are just fine. The phase ends when something is described that someone wants to know more about. At this point the players shift to another tale, or another part of the tale.

This mode of play is inspired by the illustrations of children's fairy tale books, such as those by Ivan Bilibin and others. The picture you draw will contain strong, simply but strongly realized characters, with glimpses into the world that surrounds them. Think of your descriptions as Pictures that children reading would peer at, think long on and imagine deeply into.

End this phase by asking a Question about something that has just been introduced. The person asking

the Question says whether the group moves on into Being in the World or Reflecting on the World.

For example:

*Five people are playing As Above. They begin Painting a Picture:*

*Alice: In this picture, we SEE a girl, Elysée..(passes object to Bao-yu)*

*Bao-yu: she has black hair; cinnamon skin and brown eyes..(passes object to Celine)*

*Celine: she lives on a mountain with wild trees bent by the wind... (pass object to Dan)*

*Dan: every day she has to DO chores...*

*Alice: (commenting on Dan's contribution) for her family?*

*Dan: Yes, she does chores for her family...(passes object)*

*Etienne: one of which was to gather water from the deep, deep well...*

*Bao-yu: (Interrupting before the object is passed on)Hold on—that's a connection to Below. Let's Reflect on it. I have questions about the well: Who lives in it? Why do they want the girl to talk to them?*

*They move on to a Reflecting on the World phase, as described below.*

Reflecting on the World (WHAT, WHY, WHO, TOUCH, HEAR)

When you play in the style of Reflecting (which corresponds with the Below part of the World), the players take long slow moments to think about what to add. There is a turn token that is used to indicate who is allowed to talk. Place the turn token in the center of the group. People pick it up and take a turn to speak as they are moved. No suggestions or cross talk is allowed. All wait in silence until they have their turn.

When the token has been returned to its resting place, all should wait a few moments before thinking about picking it up again. Look around to see if anyone else is reaching for the token. There will always be time for you to speak, there is no need to rush or hurry to get the token.

The Reflecting on the World contributions would add the following:

- Explain What – what has happened, what does this mean to the characters, to the world, to the players?
- Explain Why – why are things as they are? Why does this happen?
- Explain Who – who is there? Who are they?

After someone speaks, your group may acknowledge this by making polite tapping noises.

No one can pick up the token twice in a row, except at the end of this phase\*.

End the Reflection phase when:

- The Question or Questions are answered *and*
- No one has more to add

\*If a player has spoken, waits for others, then realizes they have something more to add but there is no one else to speak. They may choose to speak again. The phase ends immediately after they speak.

The last person who spoke says whether the group moves on to Being in the World or Painting a

Picture.

Example:

*The turn token is placed between the players. Celine has brought a ganzá rattle to be used as the token. This allows Bao-yu, who is blind, to be able to easily tell when it has been picked up. Alice, who is sitting next to him volunteers to get it for him if he signals that he'd like to speak.*

*Etienne: (takes the token) The person wants company from Elysée (What)*

*Bao-yu: (signals and is handed token by Alice) The being at the bottom of the well is a vodnik.*

The Reflection phase can end when the question or questions have been answered.

Being in the World (NAME, QUESTION)

In the Being style of play (which corresponds with the Between part of the world), you play characters experiencing the story. When you are Being in the World, you step into the role of the beings in the world, as though you are stepping into a costume for a role in a play. The costume here is provided by our imagination, but you speak for the character and make decisions as an actor does—but in this game, there is no script, you get to decide what choices the characters make.

To play a character:

- Pick a Name
- Ask a question – something you want to know about what the character wants, may accomplish or that may happen to it.

The questions should reflect a practical need or want the character has that they are working towards fulfilling or achieving.

Examples:

*Wolf named No Tooth, Question: Will I feed my cubs?*

*Hedgehog named Hedgie, Question: Will I make it to the sheltering tree house the girl invited me to join her in?*

In addition to playing the character you may also say:

- What the characters may Touch or feel
- What the characters Hear

Each player picks a character from those created in the other Modes of play. If you are playing at a table, you may wish to fold a note card in half to make a small tent. On both sides, write the name and question for the character. Place it in front of you as a reminder to yourself and the others.

Describe your characters' actions and move toward answering your question.

End the scene and move to another mode when:

- Someone answers their question
- Someone has a question about the world
- Someone does something risky or dangerous
- Characters come into conflict with one another

Let the player whose character was most involved choose whether the mode chosen is Painting a Picture or Reflecting on the World.

Example:

*Dan: The walls of the well are covered with a damp, spongy moss (TOUCH)*

*Celine: (picks up token) Elysée is singing at the top of the well, her voice echoes downward so it sounds much louder at the bottom than it should. (HEAR)*

Telling the Tale, Telling Different Tales

When you move from one mode to another, you may continue telling the same story, or it may become a new and different story all together. Either way is fine, and you don't have to know right away whether a story will re-connect again.

To continue a thread of a story from earlier, simply ask a question during a phase about earlier story. Move to a new Phase and see what develops about it.

Bring the Game to a close when the stories have come together and there are no more questions to ask.

*As Above* is a storytelling game written for the 2013 Game Chef contest. Many thanks to the game chef host, Joe McDaldno, and the other participants for their feedback and the inspiration provided by all the amazing games they created.

Theme:



*Icon 1: Person within double-sided, up and down arrow.*

Ingredients:



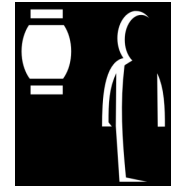
*Icon 2: Egg shaped object, striped at bottom, with two central dots and large snowflake in circle on upper half.*



*Icon 3: Apple with worm*



*Icon 4: Long tunic with diamonds; mail shirt.*



*Icon 5: Lit lantern and figure.*

*As Above* was inspired in particular by the Theme and the first Ingredient icon. The connection between worlds above and below, with the world of humanity in between is a metaphor used in the Norse tradition of the world tree, Yggdrasil, as well as shamanic and possession traditions such as forms of Siberian and Central Asian shamanism and Haitian Vodoun.



*Illustration 1: Central Asian shamanic drum depicts three levels of the world.*



*Illustration 2: Haitian Vodou ritual area, central pillar (potomitan) represents Legba who opens doorway between the worlds.*

As mentioned in the game text, the second image that inspired the game is that of a Russian Matryoshka Doll, which was suggested by the first ingredient (egg shaped figure with central snowflake). These beautifully painted dolls, nest one inside another, as the stories are intended to do in *As Above*.

The history of the Matryoshka itself provides an set of nested stories. The first set made by Vasily Zvyozdochkin, designed by Sergey Malyutin are said to have been inspired by a set of Japanese nesting Fukurama dolls. The Fukurama dolls would have been inspired by Fukurokuju, a hermit or old man

with a high forehead. He is one of the 7 Lucky Gods, a personification of the southern Pole Star Canopus, and is associated with wisdom and longevity. Figures of the 7 Lucky Gods in Japan are placed in a boat, the Treasure Ship, thought to bring wealth and prosperity at the New Year. Fukurokuju is thought to have arisen through a popular amalgamation of Fulushou, the Three Star Gods of China, who symbolize Good Fortune, Prosperity and Longevity. Fu is the planet Jupiter, said to be a governor who saved his people by suffering by making a risky appeal to the Emperor. Lu is Ursa Majoris, who was once a person who rose to great prominence in the government, and Shou is Canopus, who lived ten years in his mothers womb before being born and who carries the elixer of life and immortality.

Special thanks to Nick Wedig (Mr. Teapot) for his input during the contest. And for sharing about his gorgeous game *Baba Yaga's Dancing Hut*, which was an influence on the development on this game, and which I consider to be a cousin of *As Above*. You can find it at:

<http://nickwedig.libraryofhighmoon.com/wp-content/uploads/2012/12/baba-yaga1.pdf>

The icons appearing in this document and part of the Game Chef competition are made by Lorc, <http://lorcblog.blogspot.com>, and used under the Creative Commons 3.0 license. See more at <http://game-icons.net/>.

Game influences:

*Baba Yaga's Dancing Hut* by Nick Wedig

*1001 Nights* by Meguey Baker

*Spione* by Ron Edwards

*Swords without Master* by Epidiah Ravachol

*Apocalypse World* by Vincent Baker

*Story of the String* by Meguey Baker

*Happy Birthday Robot* by Daniel Solis

*Beloved* by Ben Lehman