NEW YORK NOIR TTRPG: HANDBOOK

V1.3 6/3/25

Introduction

New York Noir TTRPG is the Tabletop Roleplaying Game spinoff of the deductive mystery game
New York Noir
`(https://boardgamegeek.com/boardgame/418459/new-york-noir-mysteries-high-and-low)`.

How does New York Noir TTRPG differ from New York Noir?

In New York Noir TTRPG, one player takes on the role of a GM (game master), and essentially "runs" the game. The GM knows the solution to the case and helps guide the players as they investigate it.

The goal for players remains the same in the TTRPG version of New York Noir -- to figure out the mystery and solve the case. But instead of READING entries, players choose locations to visit and the GM improvises an interactive scene with the players set at the location of choice. Typically this takes the form of the GM acting out the role of a non-player character that the players visit and talk to.

In addition to acting out improvised dialogs, the GM is responsible for keeping track of game state and time, and advancing players through a sequence of game days. The GM is also responsible for nudging players away from unproductive rabbit holes, and towards more productive leads, and towards solving the case when they have seen enough.

How does New York Noir TTPG differ from other Roleplaying Games?

A key element in most roleplaying games is the creation of player characters with different skills and attributes, and the performing of skill tests (typically by rolling dice) to accomplish tasks which may fail or succeed.

These elements are **not** present in New York Noir TTRPG, which is an extremely minimalist roleplaying game. There are no player attributes, no skill tests, and no dice, and players do not create elaborate characters with different attribute values.

New York Noir TTRPG is also much more structured and less open-ended than traditional role playing games. Players may only visit locations available in the directories, and cannot perform arbitrary actions.

Does the TTRPG use standard New York Noir cases or custom scenarios?

The goal of the TTRPG rule set is to let you as a GM run cases(games) written for the standard New York Noir system. There may eventually be custom scenarios written specifically for the TTRPG which provide a more concise outline and guidelines for running the TTRPG, and which might make your life as a GM easier, with specific notes on how scenes should be improvised, etc. But this rule document holds whether you play a custom TTRPG scenario or adapt a standard New York Noir case.

GM Guide

Philosophy of New York Noir TTRPG

In many TTRPGs, a GM aims to create an open world for players to do as they please, go where they want, and control the pacing of the game. Not so in New York Noir TTRPG.

New York Noir TTRPG aims to be a much more curated, focused experience, where the GM actively helps to keep players focused and on track to solve a pre-scripted mystery.

As a GM, pacing should be important to you. In New York Noir TTRPG, we think of the game as a movie, and the GM is the director, helping to nudge players between scenes. You don't want players to spend an hour talking with an NPC that is not important to the case, or 5 minutes talking to a key NPC.

Game Modes

As a GM, you can run a New York Noir TTRPG session in different modes. You can run it in a very minimal mode that requires nothing more of the GM other than to be the narrator, reading the case book aloud to the players and do the bookkeeping that a normal New York Noir game would entail. Or you can run it in an advanced mode with full scene improvisation and where you facilitate improvised side stories with players that span multiple game sessions. The following sections go into more detail on these different "modes" of GM'ing.

Game Mode: GM as Narrator

There are more advanced features of the TTRPG game to describe, but before doing so let's describe the simplest, most minimalistic New York Noir TTRPG you could facilitate as a GM.

- Before the play session, you (the GM) will choose a New York Noir case to play, and read through the New York Noir case book in its entirety until you understand all details of it.
- Read the introduction to the players from the case book.
- Players will choose locations to visit from the directories, just as they normally would when playing the New York Noir board game. But instead of players reading looking up and reading entries from the case book, YOU will read the entry out loud, and without trying to do any improvisation. All you do is read the entry out loud.
- If players need help thinking where to go, you can give them hints.
- You will manage the players case log (time sheet) and list of required markers, tracking the time of day, and any markers that they find, advancing them through game days as they find their required markers.
- Essentially your job in this version of the game is simply to lookup and read entries for the players, and provide some help when they ask for it.

Game Mode: Standard

In the standard New York Noir TTRPG game mode a few things are different:

- You still read aloud to the players the full introduction to the case and the introduction to each new day, and the final epilogue.
- However, when it comes to location visits, rather than reading entries from the casebook, you will improvise dialogs with the players. Your job in such cases is to convey the information described in the case book, being careful not to reveal too much or too little of the case as laid out in the case book. Cases that have been designed explicitly for New York Noir TTRPG will have notes for you at each location scene to advise you.
- You will also no longer provide hints and answer questions from players out of character. In the normal game, such advice will have to be provided in the context of the game by non-player characters within the game, typically delivered by the NPCs from the list of player Contacts (friends).

The Basic Turn Structure and Communicating Expectations to Players

It's important to set expectations for players when playing New York Noir TTRPG, as it is not a traditional roleplaying experience. You should communicate to them that their primary job is to solve a mystery by the end of the session, and that there will be no dice rolling or skill tests, or character building.

A game turn consists simply of players choosing a place to go from the directories, and then engaging in an improvised scene at that location.

Furthermore, scenes are not completely open ended. Players will either be searching a location or having a dialog with someone. As GM you will guide scenes to an end when there is nothing more to be learned at a location.

Improvising Scenes

This section goes into more detail about improvising scenes, and what to do when players want to leave early before you tell them what they need to know, or don't want to leave when you have nothing more to give them.

There are two main kinds of scenes that you will be improvising:

Dialog scenes. These are scenes where the players are speaking with a character at a location (interviewing or interrogating them). In such a case, the players may not take other actions other than to talk with a character. As the GM it is your job to reveal information as needed to be consistent with the written case scene, and not more. When you have revealed all you have to reveal and if players linger substantially, you may display a player aid (see below) to encourage them to move on, or simply have your NPC at the scene make clear that they are done talking. As the GM, you are the director of the movie, and you are responsible for controlling the pace. When you need the scene to end, just declare it over.

Search scenes: In some scenes you will want the players to look around to discover some information. Do not hesitate to provide hints to suggest there is more to be found, or nothing more to be found. In a search scene, you should generally steer players away from trying to talk to anyone, as that may send them down a rabbit hole.

Requiring a lead interviewer for Dialog Scenes

One of your jobs as the GM is to ensure that all players get the spotlight occasionally. A good way to do this is by always having one player "lead" an interview. For any dialog scene, ask the players who is going to lead the interview, and always frame the dialog as the NPC talking to one specific player, the one leading the interview. Other players will still discuss and decide what to ask the NPC, but the NPC will always be responding to the lead interviewer.

Communicating When it's Time to Move On

If players seem reluctant to move along from a scene (or want to leave before too soon), you might actually consider occasionally speaking as a kind of background narrator of a movie and speaking in a dramatic voice things like: "It was at this point that you realized you had nothing more to gain from talking to Mr. X" and then ending the scene. Don't be afraid to nudge players along when they are lingering, and either not having fun or harming the pace of the game.

In-game Hints

One of the major differences in the experience of playing New York Noir TTRPG compared to the standard New York Noir boardgame, is that in the TTRPG, the GM can act as a kind of in-game hint system.

Establishing Ground Rules for Getting Assistance (Hints)

Unlike an adventure game, in New York Noir games there are real mysteries to be solved, which will frequently result in players feeling stuck or unsure of where to go next. They may want to ask you as the GM for a hint about what to do or what they are missing.

Here are some ground rules for such assistance:

- As the GM, never offer advice or hints **outside** of the game narrative. Keep everything in the narrative context of the game. If the players need a "hint" then they should visit an NPC player (one of their friend contacts) and ask THAT NPC for help.
- It's important that you not give hints and help to players **before** they really need it or want it. In other words, it's very important that you as the GM understand when players truly need help and not give them more than they need. It may be tempting to try to avoid the players ever feeling stuck or confused, but this is a mystery game and it's ok for players to spend some time unsure of what to do next and have to stop and talk it out for 10 or 15 minutes before settling on where to go next.
- As the GM you should not be in a rush to give unsolicited help/advice/hints.
- You also need to differentiate between a situation where players press an NPC during an interview to give up information, and a situation where players visit an ally NPC and explicitly ask for help because they are stuck.
- Once players make clear that they are asking an ally NPC for help in figuring out where to go, you should endeavor to give them just as much information as they need to get back on track.
- You can use the hints section in a New York Noir casebook as a guide to what kind of information you might provide.
- And, like the hint section, when players visit an Ally and get assistance, you should explicitly indicate that they have gained some demerits (lost some reputation), and you should track this. In this way, players can feel the cost of explicitly getting help, as opposed to simply talking to characters in game.
- Every play group is different. Your job as a GM is to figure out what level of help and assistance the group you are running really wants. Some groups may care more about

the narrative and not want to waste time trying to figure out how to advance the story. Others may enjoy the feeling of being stuck and lost for a prolonged period before having an "ah ha" moment.

Contacts and End of Day Briefings:
There are two main opportunities for players to ask for help/hints. The first is during the start or end of each day. After you narrate the beginning of the case introduction or narrate the start and end of each day, you may allow players to talk with their boss or associates, and ask for help. The second way is during the day, where players can visit friends from their Contacts list to ask for help.

You can engage in light conversation with players on behalf of the NPC ally, but In all cases, you should, on behalf of the NPC ally the players are asking, clarify that they really want help, at the cost of some reputation (demerits) before actually giving them significant guidance.

Ending Days and Required Markers for the Day
In New York Noir cases, games are broken into days, and days may have required markers that need to be found on each day. As the GM you will be tracking when such markers are discovered (either sharing this info with players or not, as you see fit).

Only when players find all the required markers for a day may they end the day. It's up to you as the GM, to decide how strongly you want to suggest that they end the day once they do. You can share with them the current time of day that you will be tracking, and follow the standard rules for the case regarding when the current day must end, etc.

When a new day starts, you should narrate any new day events, and give players a chance to talk to any NPC present at the start of the new day.

Game Mode: Advanced

The advanced New York Noir TTRPG game works like the normal TTRPG game, but adds some additional elements that require some skill and experience from the GM to manage.

Campaign Side Stories

Most cases in New York Noir are standalone cases. But in the advanced game you may want to occasionally facilitate players having side story encounters that develop relationships with NPCs. These encounters will not necessarily lead to mysteries that need to be solved, but will allow players to flesh out their back stories and relationships with other NPCs.

Your goal when improvising such side stories should be to force players to make tough psychological/moral/ethical narrative choices that make sense in the context of the world.

Encounters should be short, periodical, compartmentalized episodes tailored for a specific player, which force the player to make a tough choice. Think of these scenes as a way to shine the spotlight on an individual player briefly, either forcing them to make a tough choice, or giving them some narrative time with a favorite NPC.

Side stories are the one place where players act individually, rather than deciding as a group. Think of these scenes as cutscenes in a video game, where each player occasionally has a custom scene designed for their character.

> *Note: If you are an advanced GM and your group strongly desires skill tests and character building, the resolution of side stories might be one place where you could add skill trees and skill tests -- even borrowing from existing narrative heavy RPGs for character creation and skill tests.*

To help balance side stories and give players more agency over them, see the section below on **Fate as a Resource**.

Remember also that side stories should focus on one player at a time, and be brief and meaningful. They need to be brief because other players will not play a primary role in them (though players are free to ask others for advice). In the end it should be clear to each player when they have the responsibility to make the final decision about a side story scene.

You as the GM will have to create these side storylines and encounters -- you won't find them as part of a standard New York Noir case.

Money as a Resource

You may decide, after reading through and understanding a case thoroughly, to assign each player a certain amount of money each day (payment from their client?) and guide them to use it to gain information through various activities like bribery, or to advance their side stories. (Ideally you have prop money on hand to use).

As the GM you will have to figure out how much money players should get and how to let them use it. If playing a campaign, let players track and accumulate money over time. Look for opportunities to force them to make tough choices about spending their money.

Fate as a Resource

As a GM you might choose to handle side stories as unstructured, improvised stories. But if you wish to use a more formal mechanic, here is a suggested mechanic using a fate resource that each player can use:

- Each player has a **FATE** resource, which starts high and declines passively to zero over time, and over multiple sessions. You may choose to expose this Fate value to the players or you, as the GM, may choose to keep it private.
- When a player's FATE hits 0, they are due for a side story development/encounter.
- After a side story encounter, their FATE value will increase, essentially putting them on a delay before their next such encounter.
- So as the GM you use the FATE resource as a way of keeping time spent on side stories balanced between players, and reminding you when players are due for a side story event.
- This also naturally adapts to when side stories are rich and elaborate or short and are "declined" by a player who does not want to be distracted by it.
- A player can communicate to the GM when the outcome of a side story event is very important and enjoyable to them (which would increase their FATE track substantially, thus delaying their next side story event), or may display disinterest and avoid a long improvised scene, which would cause a much smaller increase in FATE, so they would have another different side story event sooner.

GM Props

Ideally you will have money and fate tokens to use as props; but you could also track these on paper.

One challenge for the players and the GM is how to nudge players to understand that there is more information to be gathered from a scene, or when there is no more information to be gathered. You might find it beneficial to use a set of cards/tokens/marbles in colors **Green, Yellow, Red**. When players are at a scene you can show them a card or token without saying anything. Green means there is important information still to be gained. Yellow means there might be more minor information available but it is not essential, or that players should consider leaving and returning later. Red means there is no more information available at this location and players should move along.

Use of the Directories and When the Players Don't Know Where to Go

In the non-TTRPG game of New York Noir, players must use directories to determine where they want to go, and it's often a major deductive challenge to figure out where to go next and how to use the directories to locate the next place of interest. When acting as a GM in the TTRPG game you need to encourage players to use the directories to figure out where they want to go next. You should not let them get into the bad habit of telling you as the GM something like "We go to Mr.X's place of work." You need to make them find the place they want to go to in a directory, and then give you the lead # to visit.

Remember, if they get stuck they can go to one of their contacts for help, or wait for an end-of-day briefing.

In New York Noir, you should not feel pressured to step in when players are briefly stuck or unsure of where to go, or confused about something. You need to create space for the players to struggle to figure out where to go next. When they want help they can explicitly choose to visit

and talk to an NPC and ask for help.   In a New York Noir TTRPG, the GM must be prepared to spend significant time in silence while players theorize amongst themselves about what's happening, and where to go.

What to do When Players visit an Unexpected Location?

In the normal (non-TTRPG) game of New York Noir, it is not uncommon for a player to think of a location to visit, only to discover it is not in the case book, and thus irrelevant to the case.

As a GM you have some flexibility on how to handle the situation when players want to go to a location that the case author did not anticipate:

- You might just tell the players something like "You visit the location but learn nothing"
- Or you might improvise a super short scene, letting them travel to the location, and have a very brief dialog with an NPC at that location, in which you make clear there is nothing to be gained.
- Or you might improvise a full scene using your understanding of the case to provide them with an appropriate dialog or search; you might even reveal clues that the original case author intended to be gained at a different location.

Share your Preparation and Experiences Playing Cases

The idea of a TTRPG built on top of New York Noir is untested and requires much from a GM. There is an active community of developers and authors associated with New York Noir. If you are one of the few people who try running a game of New York Noir TTRPG, I hope you will share with the community your experiences, advice, strategies, preparation, rule variants, etc.

New York Noir TTRPG discord: https://discord.gg/gJ5ckpruya