The Game Designer's TAROT
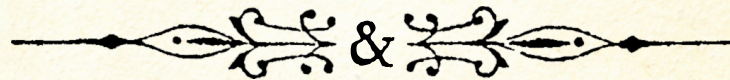
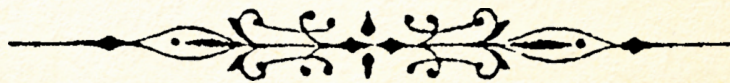## Using Tarot Cards for Narrative Design

THE MAGICIAN

by Jessica Lee

A
Guide for

Gamemasters
&
Storytellers

to using *Tarot Cards*
for the conjuration of BRAINSTORMS
and the summoning of *Stories*

&

with a Manual on the History and use of

Cartomancy

the interpretations of *Cards*
& the *Cards* themselves for visual reference

written and cover art drawn by *Jessica Lee*, *Witch*,
and *Gamemaster* of many Games for twenty-five years,
created for the #WitchJam on itch.io.

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Introduction

What are Tarot Cards?

Tarot cards are playing cards for the game of Tarot, also known as Tarocchi, or Tarock, introduced to Europe in the 14th century. French and English occultists of the 18th century onward have also used Tarot cards to gain insights or tell fortunes, and have designed special cards decorated with esoteric and allegorical imagery. Most Tarot decks for occult use contain 78 cards; 56 cards in four suits, similar to standard playing cards, known as Minor Arcana, and 22 Major Arcana cards depicting virtues, or metaphysical concepts. Cards are typically laid out in patterns and interpreted to give insight into a question or problem.

How can we use them?

Tarot cards are full of symbolism, imagery, and esoteric meaning. This book uses the classic Waite-Smith-Rider deck, conceived by the occultist A.E. Waite and illustrated by Pamela Colman Smith, originally published by William Rider & Son in 1909, now in the public domain. You can use the cards included with this book, or any other Tarot cards in print or online, preferably ones with lots of symbolic details and evocative imagery. There's no right deck, just the one that's right for you.

Tarot cards are valuable tools for brainstorming because you can apply the images or meanings of the cards to elements of your story. There are no right or wrong interpretations. Be as abstract or concrete as you wish with how you use them. These are tools, not rules. Just pick a card, and let it stimulate your imagination.

Let's begin with a simple example!

Single-Card Design

First, we shuffle our cards and consider the concept we want to flesh out. Let's say we want to come up with an antagonist for a story or game adventure. Draw a single card, and lay it face up.

I drew the Seven of Wands, also known as Rods, Staves, or Clubs in standard playing cards. The interpretation of the card (see pg. 62), is competition, perseverance, standing your ground. The suit of Wands represents the classical element of Fire, or creativity. Any Seven represents faith. The card depicts a staff-wielding figure fighting off other staves.

Is our antagonist a rival in a competition? Or are they competing with others for their position? Are they resilient, self-assured, religious? Do they wield a staff, or a wand of fire? Are they creative with tactics? Do they look like the person on the card? Do they have seven minions?

Any of these features can flesh out our antagonist. Let's have another example. Let's think of a location where our heroes meet this character.
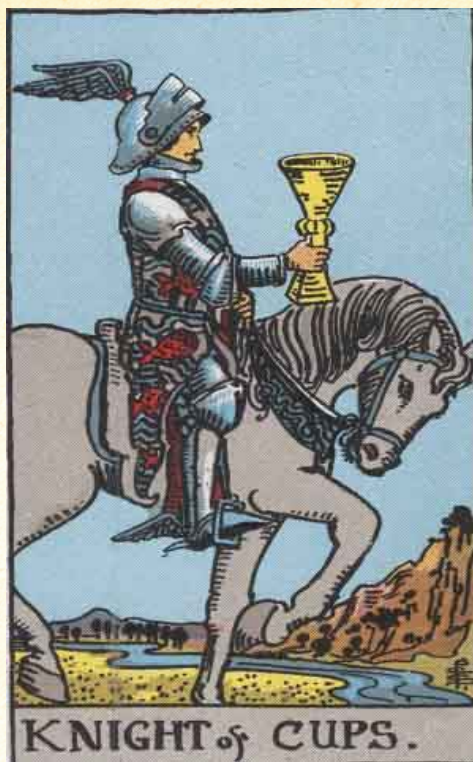
KNIGHT of CUPS.

I drew the Knight of Cups (or Hearts). This card represents romance, charm, and invitations. The suit of Cups represents Water, and emotion. Any Knight card also represents movement. There is an armored horse-rider on the card, bearing a golden cup.

Perhaps our location is associated with romance, like a wedding or gala ball, a floral garden, an ivy-covered bridge under a starry sky, or a secluded cliffside with a scenic view. Were our heroes invited there? Is there water such as a waterfall or fountain, or a pool reflecting the moon? Is the place protected by armored guards? Does it require a long ride to get there? Is there an actual knight or a cup involved?

Putting this together with the previous card, we can imagine our heroes receiving an invitation from a wealthy knight to a competition for the chance to win a great reward. Competitors must travel to the knight's lovely cliffside manor by a waterfall. The fiery antagonist is keen to win!

Let's draw one final card to represent the nature of the conflict.

XIV

TEMPERANCE.

I drew the Temperance card, the 14th card of the 22 Major Arcana. It obviously represents temperance, and balance, patience, and moderation. The card depicts an angel pouring water between two vessels.

Maybe the conflict requires patience to resolve, or resistance to the temptations of excess. Is there a celestial being or holy power involved? When there is a person on the card, is that a character in the story?

So our heroes travel to Waterfall Manor to win the blessed Golden Chalice, and arrive at a reception with other competitors, full of flowers, music, and plenty of food & drink. If the heroes can resist temptations before the competition, they'll compete in tests of balance, like walking a tightrope, carrying vessels without spilling them, and finally knocking an opponent off a narrow bridge. The pious antagonist won't cheat in the competition, but may find creative ways to sabotage the heroes' chances.

You see we have a few ideas, and we've only drawn 3 cards!

Designing a Story

Game Narrative & Storytelling

This book focuses on creating adventures, campaigns, and one-shot stories for tabletop roleplaying games, but its concepts work for generating ideas for use in video game stories and creative fiction as well.

Most stories have a beginning that establishes the characters, setting, and tone, as well as an "inciting incident" or what we call in games an "adventure hook" to create a goal or purpose, and drive the action of the plot forward. The middle of a story contains the obstacles, revelations, and tribulations the heroes overcome and experience, the escalating slings and arrows of outrageous fortune on the way to a final confrontation. The end of the story usually requires the heroes to use everything they've learned, and call upon all their physical and emotional reserves to face a climactic confrontation, triumph over a great obstacle, or defeat a terrible foe, before they receive their final, meaningful reward.

There are as many variations on that formula as there are stories to tell, but those elements are common to most narrative storytelling.

Stories in games are different in an important way. They are played. Players choose their own path, and make their own decisions about how to use their abilities, what to say, and how to proceed. A game world may contain enough interesting content to allow players to do whatever they wish in an unstructured sandbox. Offering a narrative, however, provides players with a context, purpose, or justification for gameplay actions, and "prompts" for the story they can create from the elements you provide.

Running a game's story for players involves a lot of improvisation, and the willingness to abandon any story you thought you were going to tell.

The story belongs to the players, and serves them. It should provide them with opportunities to do interesting things, visit interesting places, meet and interact with interesting people, overcome interesting obstacles, and to use the abilities and resources they have available. How they do all this should be up to them, but it's up to you to create ways for the players to interact with the parts of the story you've designed. A game story must allow players to drive it in new directions, and react to their input.

In designing for an adventuring party, look for ways to include each player, and opportunities for each of them to do something cool and be in the spotlight. Remember to also let them rest with calm, light-hearted, or scenic moments, and time to roleplay with each other or non-player characters. Tension and escalation can be exciting, but constant tension and escalation can turn into frustration, or even confusion when there is a break, and the next game session is a week away.

A deep, rich, and complex storyline with lots of twists and turns, many non-player characters with conflicting and hidden agendas, or long and arcane histories and lore can be fun to write, and fun to read, but if it's not fun to play, and easy to remember over week-to-week sessions of gameplay, players may not engage with it or enjoy the story you create.

The ultimate goal of most games is to provide a fun experience for the players, and participating in and interacting with the game's story is a part of that fun. It's your job to keep the story interactive, responsive to their choices, complex enough to be interesting, but not so complex that it's hard for players to remember what's going on or what to do next.

Using the rules and features of the game is also a part of the fun, and you should find ways to do both. Translate points or qualities of the story into gameplay, and find ways for gameplay elements to affect and advance the story. We'll talk more about how to do that later on.

What to Design

It can be difficult to balance the needs of players, the rules of the game, and a storyline. The good news is that you don't have to be perfect, or prepare for every possibility. Your notes about any one story element should be minimal enough to fit on a card you could read at arms length. More than that could be too much to remember during gameplay, and you should consider boiling it down to the essentials.

Key non-player characters who are relevant to the story should get some detail, for example a few sentences of clear description, a note on their motivations or ambitions, fears or secrets, resources, special contacts, or anything that might become important during the game, and a dash of their backstory. If it's fun for you to write a 20,000 word history of their entire family, please do. But only use that to inform and inspire what you write for the game. You'll rarely need it in during play.

Secondary and background characters who are not significant to the story need a sentence of description, a note on their relevant game abilities or skills, and maybe one noteworthy trait. For example, the shopkeeper always had dogs. Since their dog died they're trying ferrets instead. The mayor's husband loves the color red, and red flowers but is comedically, mildly allergic to roses. The lighthouse keeper carries guilt over the death of their child and gets angry at people who take unnecessary risks.

Locations should have a similar treatment. Places relevant to the story, or where the players will spend a lot of time, or return to often, can benefit from more description and detail, as above, and possibly a map. Minor locations could use a little description and maybe one quirk, like an odd detail, event, or interesting fact about the inhabitants.

It's useful to create extra background characters and minor locations, in case the players go somewhere unexpected. They will, so create plenty!

Since the actual plot of the story in a game involves so much player participation and decision, there are only five key elements you absolutely need. The first is the adventure hook. This is the promise of intrigue that involves the players and lures them into the plot. The second is the nature of the conflict or disturbance, or if there is no strong conflict in the adventure, the nature of the events at present. The third is the agenda or agendas of the people involved, such as the motivation of a key antagonist or ally. The fourth is the nature of the obstacles or escalations the players must resolve to conclude the story. The fifth is how the heroes will be rewarded, or how they will grow or progress.

There are other considerations that we can examine, like the origins of the conflict, a climactic centerpiece scene, a central moral dilemma, how the plot twists or new revelations change what the players understand about the situation as they learn more, lore or history of the setting and its cultures, and the use of theme, symbolism, or motif in the setting and in the telling of the story. I'll address some of those in more detail later.

In designing a story for a game, you can go as shallow or deep as you wish, and it's fine to "overplan" in the sense that you gain a deeper insight into how to tell the story for your players. But the final game notes and preparations need not contain every detail. Necessary elements of story and gameplay should be visible at a glance, as much as possible.

In the end, there's more advice than I could ever write, and once play begins, it could all go out the window anyway. The players may decide to ignore the person offering them a quest, steal a ship and spend several months at sea instead of participating in the story you prepared. "No plan survives first contact with the enemy." But that's okay. The players are not your enemy. They're your friends, playing a game to have fun. The goal of a game narrative is not to tell your story, it's to tell theirs.

Tarot Spreads for Story Elements

Three-Card Design

Tarot cards are rarely drawn and interpreted one at a time. Tarot readings are more often done with a spread of some number of cards, anywhere from three to thirteen, and the position of the cards affects how they are interpreted. We started with examples where we used single cards for single concepts, but we could read that as a three-card design:

1. Antagonist – 2. Setting – 3. Conflict

I find that it's more useful to draw three cards for each important element, so that there are plenty of images and ideas to work with, and sometimes juxtapositions or conflicting traits. Write down the results concisely, and work from there. Some special meanings may come up as the cards combine with the readings of other concepts, while some ideas may get dropped entirely. In our first example, where did the seven minions go? I didn't end up using them. Use what you like.

The Three-Card Spread I like for design, because it requires the most lateral thinking to make it work, and sends the mind wandering the widest, is:

Relevance – Lesson – Application

Why is it here? What can you get out of it? What do you do or experience to get that? I'll explain these in more detail, momentarily. Some other useful, and easier three-card spreads include:

Past – Present – Future

Problem – Cause – Solution

Nature of: Option 1 – Option 2 – Option 3

For a non-player character, like our antagonist, a key ally, or some other person or faction involved in the plot, we can ask the following questions for the three cards:

First: What is their role in the story? How do they affect the players, the world, or the plot? Or how do they arrive into the story?

Second: What are they trying to get? What is their agenda? Focus on them and ask what lesson they need to learn to resolve their nature? Alternatively, turn this back on the players and ask what can they learn or get by interacting with them, defeating them, helping them, et cetera?

Third: What do they do to pursue their agenda? Or conversely, what must the players do or what will they experience in dealing with them?

Let's bring it to life with another example:

I've drawn the Six of Swords (Spades), The Moon (Major Arcana), and the Eight of Pentacles (Diamonds). We'll define each card first.

The Six of Swords represents transition, a path, or a rite of passage. The suit of Swords represents elemental Air, and reason. Any Six reflects growth. The card depicts a person punting a small boat, with a cloaked figure and a child aboard, possibly refugees. Six swords pierce the boat.

The Moon is the 18th Major Arcana. It represents hidden danger, fear, or illusion. The card depicts a stern moon shining in the sky between two pillars. It is observed by a pair of wild dogs on either side of a path. They don't notice a lobster crawling out of a pond onto the path, into danger.

The Eight of Pentacles represents education, employment, and skill or craftsmanship. The suit of Pentacles represents money or material things, and elemental Earth. Any Eight represents change. The card depicts a worker in a smock, sitting at a workbench, etching a pentacle disk. Completed pentacles hang on the wall in an orderly line.

What is their role in the story or how do they affect the players? The answer is the Six of Swords. Perhaps they are the guardian of a rite of passage, one based on reason and wit? Or swordplay? Maybe their six swords are the consequences of failure. Maybe they can offer a boat ride.

What is their agenda, their path to resolution, or what can the players learn from them? The answer is The Moon. Perhaps they are not what they seem, a more powerful and dangerous being disguised as a simple ferry pilot? Maybe dealing with them is unsettling or spooky, or maybe the path they offer is frightening. Maybe they have two dogs or wolves, or there are dangerous dogs nearby who react strongly to them. Is a lobster involved? Maybe they are not a ferry pilot but a lobster trapper.

What do they do? Or what will the players do or experience? The Eight of Pentacles. They take pride in their work at lobster fishing. To earn their help the players must demonstrate skill, wits... or pay a price.

Illustration. "Fairy Islands" by Ida Rentoul Outhwaite, from Elves and Fairies (1916).

Remember to let your imagination run far and wide. There are many types of boat, many types of passage, many types of danger. There are many ways an enemy can become a friend, a trickster can reveal valuable truths, or an ally can stand in the way of progress.

If you find yourself falling back on tropes, try turning things around a little more. When I thought of a "lobster trapper" I admit I pictured a grizzled fisherman with a fishing boat. But imagine a team of tiny fairies in flower boats luring lobsters to capture and train as mounts.

You could draw the same cards as me, and get totally different ideas, as it should be! What matters is what the cards mean to you.

We could do this for any number of characters, but let's try another example where we create a key location.

QUEEN of PENTACLES.   ACE of CUPS.   THE TOWER.
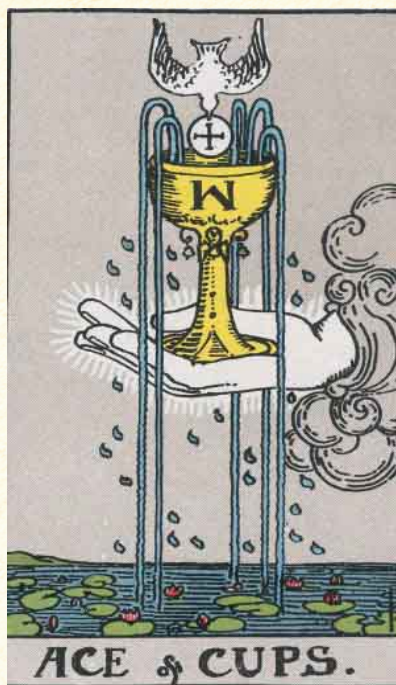
I drew the Queen of Pentacles, the Ace of Cups, and The Tower. The Queen of Pentacles represents down-to-earth practicality, a practical parent, generosity. Queens represent influence, and as discussed the suit of Pentacles represents material concerns or money, and elemental Earth. The card depicts a queen enthroned in an earthy setting, looking down at a pentacle in her hands. The Ace of Cups represents compassion, love, a new relationship. Any Ace represents potential, and Cups represent Water, and emotion. The card depicts a cup overflowing with fountains, held up by a floating magical hand, with a dove delivering a holy wafer into it. The Tower is the 16th Major Arcana, representing disaster, upheaval, and unexpected or unwanted change. The card depicts lightning striking and breaking a tower, with a crown and two people falling from the tower.

Let's see how our questions and answers are different for a location.

What is its role in the story? How is it a place of " - "? Is it the place itself or the people in it who represent that quality? If it is a place of Earth, or a down-to-earth place of generosity, perhaps it is a farm that produces an abundance, or a place where people are cared for in a natural setting like a retreat or spa. It may be run by a practical and magnanimous woman like the Queen of Pentacles, with influence and wealth.

What can be learned about its history, its current state or function, the people of the place, or its likely future? It has been a compassionate and protective place, where people find emotional support and some even find love. There may be a magical or spiritual quality to the place.

How do its qualities or people help or hinder, teach, challenge, or entertain the players? Maybe the players must help protect this place from a catastrophe that will destroy it. It could be a natural disaster, corruption of the healing waters, a great war, or something more personal like the influential woman who keeps the place safe and operational being in danger of being deposed (as shown by the falling crown).

We can imagine a tower, surrounded by gardens, lily ponds, and well-tended forests. It's a magical place of comfort, rest, and compassion, far removed from the troubles of the world. It is run by a wealthy and influential mother who only wants to care for others as she cares for her own children. But there is a disaster looming. The players must appeal to her wisdom and practicality, and help protect the place. Hiding away from the world is not the answer. The people of the Garden Tower are kind and good, but they must face the trouble that is coming for them, or everything they've built will be destroyed.

Relevance – Lesson – Application may not be the exact format of the questions we asked, but it's close enough for generating some new ideas!

There are so many ways to use Three-Card Spreads that I could fill a whole book with examples and never move on to other things. Instead, I'll just briefly explain some of the ones that apply to the story elements we've discussed. Try drawing a few cards and applying these yourself.

Conflict: Problem – Cause – Solution

What is going on, or what is someone trying to bring about, or to prevent? What is the origin or motivation of the conflict, or what concept is at stake or desired? What must the heroes do or focus on, or what will they endure in trying to resolve the conflict? Some of these questions can go either way, but you can find the ambiguities in any card. If a card represents "mercy", do the heroes need to be merciful? Was the conflict begun by a protector showing mercy to a villain, and the villain's victims felt betrayed and are now in conflict with the protector?

The best note I can give about using conflict is to put a wall around it. If the conflict can be resolved by people just sitting down and talking it out, it's not a "strong" conflict – which is fine for a secondary conflict in a story, or if you prefer low-conflict storytelling, like tender, light-hearted, or slice-of-life stories. "Talking it out" can be a great roleplaying experience. But if you want to strengthen a primary conflict, find ways to add barriers and complicating factors that prevent a single heart-to-heart conversation from ending the story.

Complications & Escalations: Relevance – Lesson – Application

What is the difficulty of the complication, how does it complicate the story or present an obstacle? What can it reveal, advance, or reflect about the larger story? What must the heroes do, overcome, contend with or engage with in order to proceed or succeed?

Agenda: Relevance – Lesson – Application

If you haven't figured out an atagonist's or key story character's agenda already, based on what you already know about them try asking the following: What does it do for them or what are they trying to get? How are their plans or activities revealed to the heroes, or what must the heroes learn or uncover to understand the agenda behind the activities? How is the agenda carried out, what is the character doing to get what they want, or possibly, what clues are they leaving behind?

Adventure Hook: Relevance – Lesson – Application

How does the situation present itself or involve the players? How will pursuing the hook reveal a larger storyline? How does the scenario hook the players with personal stakes, emotional appeals, enticing rewards, or railroading? By "railroading" I don't mean telling the players "this is what you're doing", because players should have choice and control over their actions. But if they're in the town below the big mountain and the mountaintop explodes and liquid magma begins pouring into the town, that's an adventure hook, and it's "railroading". They didn't get to choose to start this event, but they can choose what to do about it. Much, much more can be written about good adventure hooks for games, or good inciting incidents for fiction, and it already has. There are great resources out there to look up for further study.

Key Item, Clue, or Reward: Relevance – Lesson – Application

How is it encountered and why, or simply what is the look, feel, or type of item? What is its origin or how is that revealed, or what clues can it reveal about the story? What does it offer the players, a clue, the ability to " - ", protection from " - ", or how do the players use or decipher it?

Multi-Card Design

There are many Tarot spreads using more than three cards, but the most popular is known as the Celtic Cross. The earliest known proponents of this method were Florence Farr and A.E. Waite of the late 19th century occult society, the Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn, who claimed it had ancient Celtic origins. It depicts a central cross read in a circular pattern, supported by a "staff" on the side.
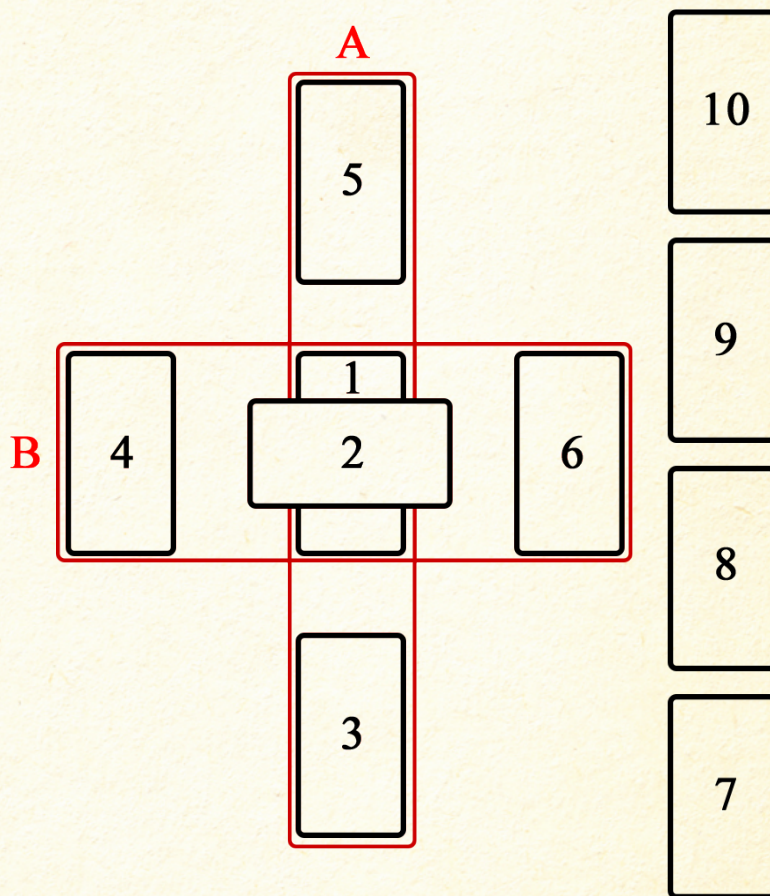
The order of reading, and the interpretation of the card positions varies widely, but this is the order I'll be using in this book. If you prefer another layout, please feel free to adapt this method as you see fit.

This is obviously a much more complex reading and can give us a lot more to work with. I'll talk about how to use this spread to generate ideas for an overall story, and then how to use it for a setting or society.

For a story, these are the positions, and the questions we'll ask:

I. First is the current situation. Where are the players or how is the scenario introduced? What events are going on right now?

II. The Crossing Card is the obstacle, block, or challenge. What needs to be overcome? How is it revealed? This may be the conflict or villain.

III. The third card is the root or uncurrent of the scenario. How did this become a problem? What is the hidden agenda or emotion?

IV. The fourth card is the past. What is the backstory of the problem? Or how do players' or other key characters' past stories or past actions affect the current story or scenario?

V. The fifth card is a conscious revelation or future possibilities. What should the players do about all this, or what should they focus on?

VI. Sixth is the future, which contributes to the outcome. How would the situation develop or progress if the heroes were not involved, or how would the "villain" or threat proceed?

VII. The seventh card is the emotional state. What is the tone; scary, funny, tense? How should the players feel, what are the personal stakes to them?

VIII. Eight is the outside or environmental influences. How do other people or the environment influence or complicate the scenario?

IX. Nine is the hopes, fears, or lessons. What kind of help or obstacles await the players? What will draw their focus, worry, or endanger them?

X. Last is the outcome. What kind of rewards will the heroes receive for success, what does success look like? Or what will the consequences or losses be for failure, or what is at stake overall?

A. is a path from bottom to top, from Three to One, to Five. It is the shift from subconscious to conscious. It is a "push-and-pull" between what the "villain" does versus what the players learn and do.

B. is a path from left to right, starting with card Four, through card Two to Six. It is the general "narrative" from beginning to end.

Now let's do an example. Here's my draw. You don't need to consider all cards together at once. Keep them face down and reveal each one as you build the narrative and add to your reading.

THE WORLD.

THE HERMIT.

KNIGHT of WANDS.

THE LOVERS.

WHEEL of FORTUNE.
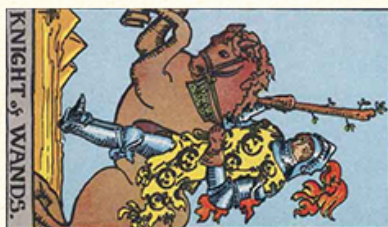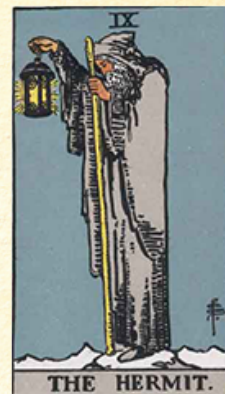
The **current situation** is represented by the Two of Pentacles, balance, adaptability, or making ends meet. Pentacles represent Earth, or money, and a Two represents adaptability. The figure on the card is a juggler with two pentacles connected by an infinity symbol. Perhaps the players are just looking for work or recently out of money, or they are in the area looking for a new opportunity for some odd jobs. Maybe adventure finds them at a place where adventurers look for jobs. Or maybe they encounter a juggler.

The **crossing card** is the Knight of Wands, energy, lust, a voyage. A Knight is for motion, and Wands are for Fire or creativity. The card shows a questing knight in a rough tunic festooned with lizards, wielding a staff or club. This could be a foreign traveler, or the story could call for travel to a foreign land. Perhaps a zealous adventurer is seeking hirelings for what they claim is a grand and mighty quest, but really their attitudes or misconceptions are the problem. They are the "villain" only by accident.

The **root of the problem** is the Five of Cups, loss, disappointment, or bereavement. Any Five is adversity, and Cups represent Water or emotion. The card depicts a black-cloaked figure mourning over spilled cups. This is very interesting! Maybe our questing knight has suffered a great loss and believes the completion of the quest will honor or return someone, or they have lost status or glory that could be restored by completing a quest. But they won't admit this. This is a hidden emotional turmoil the heroes must discover as the story goes on.

In the **past**, we have The Lovers card. Oh come on, this is too easy! The Lovers is the 6th Major Arcana, representing love, union, or a life-changing turning point. The card depicts biblical Adam & Eve being watched over by a celestial being. The backstory of the problem must be a heavenly love, an angelic union, a time when our passionate knight's life was complete... until a life-changing turning point.

The **conscious revelation** is The World, the 21st and final Major Arcana representing the completion of the journey through the Major Arcana, travel, accomplishment, the end of one journey, ready to begin the next. The card depicts an enlightened figure with two wands, flying in the sky, encircled by a wreath, and watched by celestial creatures that represent the four elements and power or harmony with all of nature. So what should the players do or focus on? Completing the journey, bringing harmony or enlightenment to everyone involved. There should be travel, and the players should try to aid their questing friend, and bring them to an emotionally complete resolution.

In the **future,** is the Wheel of Fortune, the 10th Major Arcana, which represents destiny, luck, changing fortunes, or the inevitability of change. The card depicts a celestial wheel with alchemical symbols representing the elements, topped by a sphinx, with a demon and a serpent moving along the wheel, observed by four celestial creatures also representing the four elements showing that all the world is subject to Fate. How would the situation develop or how would the villain proceed? The questing knight believes they are pursuing their destiny, and if they succeed they will change their fortune, reversing their loss. Maybe they want to win back a lost love, but in fact must come to accept that change is inevitable.

The **emotional state** is the Four of Wands, which represents harmony, prosperity, a marriage. We have Fire and creativity from the suit and stability from the number Four. The card depicts a flowered garland held aloft by four staves, with a group of revelers and a celebrating couple waving bouquets of flowers. This seems like a happy or even a friendly romantic tone, possibly a romantic comedy. The lovelorn knight could be a bumbling romantic, quick to ride for glory, but not the best at adventures! Thematic elements and secondary plotlines could support the tone, like

the players pass through a town as a happy wedding celebration is being thrown, other key characters, allies or adversaries in the story could be happy couples or families, and so on. Romance could find the players with light-hearted, harmlessly inept flirting from a non-player character.

The **outside influences** are shown by the Nine of Cups, representing satisfaction, happiness, emotional comfort. A Nine stands for fruition, and there is Water, and emotion from the suit of Cups. The card has a seated figure wearing fine clothes and a smile, in front of a draped shelf holding nine golden cups. Here is our inept flirt, perhaps an aristocrat who may be happy to help (or thwart) the players' aims. Keep their romantic interests clean, idle, and silly, or this could descend into uncomfortable territory for players. Their help is not conditional upon players accepting any of their advances, they are happy and satisfied with life.

Hopes, fears, or lessons are the Nine of Swords, representing anxiety, depression, and nightmares. Nine is something coming to fruition, and the suit of Swords has elemental Air, and reason or thought. The card depicts a figure sitting up in bed clutching their face as if just having awoken from a nightmare, with nine swords in the darkness behind them. In a magical setting, a being who can communicate through dreams could be a danger here. Again, keep it aboveboard, and remember the lighter tone, but a few spooky scares, or a mysterious nighttime haunting could work.

The **outcome** will be The Hermit, the 9th Major Arcana, representing introspection, solitude, self-knowledge, and wisdom. The card shows a bearded, robed figure standing on a mountaintop, leaning on a staff and holding aloft a lantern glowing with starlight. The obvious reward for the players could be a magic lantern, in a magical story. In any case, after the rambunctious and romantic energy of this story, the players might enjoy some peace and quiet, a retreat to a quiet peak where they can look out

over all they've done from a peaceful distance. What is at stake could be loneliness, but the lesson is that solitude is healthy sometimes, to contemplate and renew yourself.

The **path from root to revelation** takes us from the loss of the Five of Cups, through adaptability and balance in the Two of Pentacles, to the completion and enlightenment of The World. How does this path describe the push and pull between the antagonist's actions and the players'? To me, it seems the fiery knight follows their heart and pursues their quest with vigor because of the painful loss of love. The players will help complete the quest, while becoming enlightened to the real issues. Keeping the knight safe from overt dangers on the way, or keeping the knight's lust for questing glory from causing destruction might be a juggling act! They need to help bring their fiery friend into balance, to complete the journey.

The **path from past to future** takes us from the loving union of The Lovers card, through the zeal and voyage of the Knight of Wands, to the changing fortunes of the Wheel of Fortune. How does this reflect how the story progresses from beginning to end? It started with a beautiful love affair, a love that was lost. A lover has gone far away, so far that it would take near obsessive dedication and dangerous voyages to reach them. And it ends with a change of fortune, a lesson that in fact, all things change.

SO, our heroes arrive in a town decorated with flowers and garlands, and set up for a celebration, a much-anticipated wedding. They need work, but they probably won't turn down free food. At the celebration (where there are jugglers) is a foreign traveler looking for help with a bold quest to find a great treasure in a far-off land, all-expenses-paid.

(One hopes) they set out on the quest, and encounter a few dangers along the journey. They learn that their questing companion is not the

experienced knight they were hoping for but is, if anything a little too eager to prove themselves. As the players get to know this would-be hero, or search through their belongings, overhear conversations, etc. they learn that they've had family trouble, a formerly high and wealthy station, that has been disrupted and something was stolen. So, they are seeking glory and a return to status, by the recovery of a family treasure?

No, really they are seeking their lost lover. It was an affair with someone of "low station" and their highborn family was scandalized, and their reputation suffered. It wasn't just that, they were to be married but their lover was "stolen" by some agent of a rival family... or secretly their own family hoping to prevent the wedding?

Along the journey, they have a daring battle with pirates, because that's exciting. The pirates are more robbers than killers, but their pirate captain is an old softy who is moved by their romantic friend fighting for true love. Along with some ample but non-threatening flirting, the pirate captain offers to help escort the players' ship, and knows where to find the aforementioned "agent". The quest takes a turn toward a different port than the foreign traveler thought they must go to.

Eventually they arrive in the far-off land, and begin having strange dreams, especially as they get closer to their goal, a castle visible in the distance but up some treacherous mountains. The dreams are romantic but spooky, flowers, rose petals, goblets, a wedding feast, but everything is in darkness, covered in dust, the goblets spill blood. Villagers believe the castle is haunted, because they've seen a ghostly figure in the craggy hills, watching from a distance at village weddings or other celebrations, for the past year or so. Players may suspect that the lost Lover is dead.

The passionate Traveler will not want to hear of this, but may begin to suspect as well, and concoct a story of kidnapping and betrayal, with

their lost love brought to the castle by the Agent, and then thrown off the tallest tower onto the rocks below. Villagers & pirates love ghost stories so they'll be happy to speculate and invent origins for the ghostly watcher.

These stories will drive the Traveler to desperation. Revenge must be taken, and the Agent must be defeated! But the castle is guarded by some horrid minions, like skeletons or dark entities. The party may be captured or flee, to either sneak out or sneak into the castle instead of trying the frontal assault. This would be a good time to separate the players from the Traveler, knowing that their desperation for revenge is still a problem.

The players may have a chance to meet the lost Lover, or the Agent of the castle who works for the castle's owner. The owner of the castle is a vampire, who can only go out at night. The ghostly watcher who appears during the day is in fact the lost Lover, who lives in the castle and will soon be married to the vampire. The dreams are caused by the vampire's powerful will broadcasting thoughts of their upcoming wedding day.

Really, the Lover and the Vampire are happily in love. The Lover enjoyed their affair with the Traveler, but passion and clueless zeal got old. When the Traveler set up a wedding, the Lover knew it wouldn't work, and tried to leave but the Traveler wouldn't listen, called it "cold feet". Finally with the help of the Traveler's family, they arranged to be escorted out by the Agent, a mercenary who also did work for a vampire, doing daylight stuff on the side, "Daylighting" you might say. Since the Lover needed a place to stay while pursuing a new life, they went to the castle where they met the Vampire, who was romantic but in a much more mature and patient way than the fiery Traveler. In time they fell in love, and have been planning a wedding in the darkness of the Vampire's castle. The dreams are just an accidental manifestation of the Vampire's excitement, and the Lover has appeared pale and ghostly because of mostly spending

time at night in the castle, away from the sunlight. They've been watching village weddings to get some ideas for their wedding scrapbook.

In the end, the players might choose to fight against the Vampire, the Agent, and possibly even the Lover, or to stand in the way of the questing Traveler, fight and stop them, or to convince them of the truth, and help them see that they must move on. If it goes badly, many hearts could be broken. But if all works out for the best, they can attend another wedding, and see everyone happy, then escort the Traveler to a nice, peaceful hermit house, to think about what love really means, kiss their old wedding ring goodbye, and contemplate what their next great quest in life will be.

It might take polishing to make it playable, add obstacles, locations, and side characters as we've done before, and to consider how and when clues are revealed. But it's a good start for dropping a few cards! Next, I'll describe a way to use the same card layout for places and cultures.


Detail from an illustration by Arthur Rackham, from Siegfried and the Twilight of the Gods (1924).

For a setting or culture, here are the positions and questions:

I. First is the location, or home of the culture. What type of place is it? A place of " - "? What happens there? Or what is the land like?

II. The Crossing Card disturbs the peace. If there is a conflict what is it? If not, what makes life more difficult or challenging here, for these people?

III. The third card is attitudes. What are the attitudes or beliefs of people, what do they value or fear? Or what do people believe about the place?

IV. The fourth card is the past. What's the history of the setting or people, what are the layers of that history, and how are those layers revealed?

V. The fifth card is the focus. What is the focus of the players' adventures or experiences with the place or culture? What can they do, or learn?

VI. Sixth is the future, which contributes to the outcome. Where are the currents of history flowing for this culture, or this place?

VII. The seventh card is the emotion. What is the feel of this setting, or what is the mood of the people who live there?

VIII. Eight is the outside or environmental influences. What is this culture's or place's relationship with other groups, factions, cultures, or connection to other locations? What is the people's relationship to the land? Or how does this land affect the people?

IX. Nine is the ambitions. What good or bad changes do the people want to achieve, or what does an outsider want from them, or this place?

X. Last is the outcome. What will happen in the central disturbance or conflict, how will it play out? Will this be the result with intervention or without? Otherwise, in what way will the people or place flourish?

A. is a path from bottom to top, from Three to One, to Five. It is the shift from cultural to personal. What does it tell you about how the inhabitants engage with public life or politics, subcultures, or counterculture?

B. is a path from left to right, starting with card Four, through card Two to Six, from past to future. What does it say about the relationship of the place or culture to the passage of time, the calendar, holidays, or death?

Remember the Celtic Cross spread from before. Shuffle and lay out the cards and take your time interpreting them how you like. You can do this for multiple settings, lands, cultures, or significant factions. Single locations or individuals within may still be defined by single or three-card readings. Use, remove, or modify results as you prefer, to fit your story.

A

5

1

B   4   2   6

3

10

9

8

7
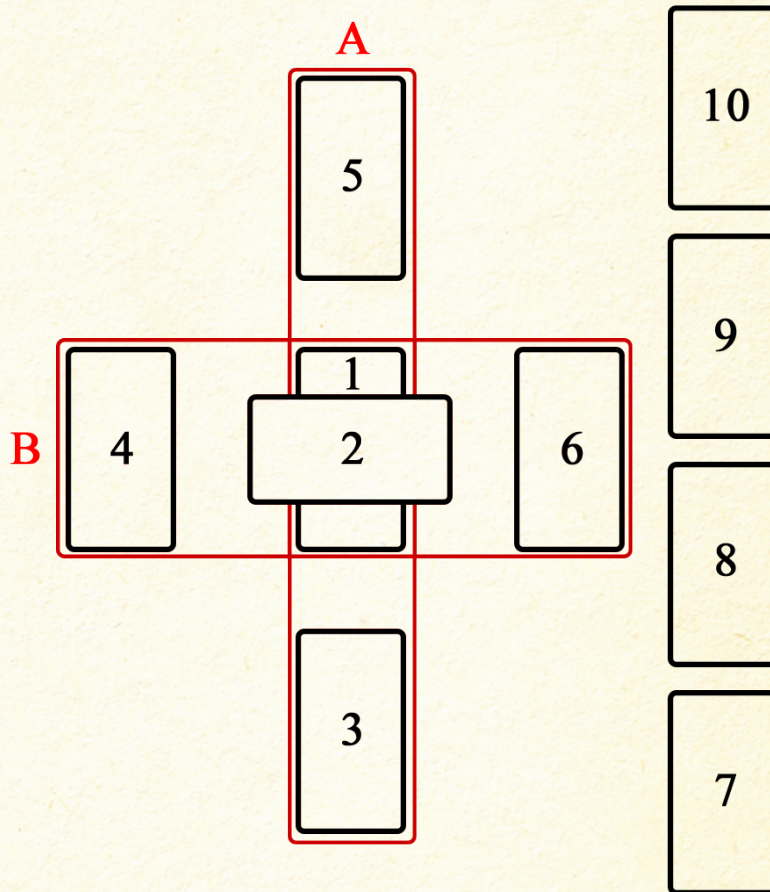
Another way to create a setting, a town, or even a world, is to make a map or at least imagine the area, and select key points in the area, and then draw single cards or three-card spreads for each of those to add detail or depth. For example, a town may have a center of government, a market, a residential district, an artisan's district, a construction site, etc. Each of those spots on the map can be represented by one card, and the imagery, symbolism, the interpretation, number, or any other quality can be used to add interest or character to the place or its inhabitants.

The Art of the Game

Turning a Story into a Game

You have the tools to come up with lots of ideas to work with, and it may be all you need. This section will focus on how to turn those ideas into a game that can be played. That means finding ways for the players to interact with your story whenever possible. It also means translating story elements into gameplay components, and using game elements to support and reveal the story.

Let's talk about some of the mechanics of the "game". The specifics depend very much on what game you're playing, but a lot of games have the following features:

Characters: The allies, antagonists, supporters, victims, waitstaff, minions, and comic relief non-player characters who move through the story and its locations pursuing agendas or doing jobs.

Abilities: Things players or non-player characters can do to interact with the world and each other, whether through skills, magic spells, using equipment, special senses, or resistances.

Locations: The places, descriptions, maps, mazes, tactical features, scenic views, traps, hazards, and theaters where the story plays out.

Combat: Fighting, chasing, or wrestling with enemies, monsters, or vehicles, using attacks, defense, tactics, damage, and status effects.

Clues: Data points that move the story forward, from scrawled notes to ancient stone carvings in a ruin, to whispers in the halls of power.

Rewards: Money, treasure, magical equipment, favors, reputation, contacts, and character improvements awarded for a job well done.

Players: The characters played by the players, with their personalities, personal traits, backstories, goals, and tactical or social roles.

We've already created the story elements for some of these, such as characters and locations. Let's talk about uniting them with game-play elements.

Characters: We talked about adding details and agendas. Look for ways to make their game abilities reflect their personality or role in the story, or if you have game abilities in mind for a character look for ways their personality, traits, or description might reflect those. For example, if you want to have a villain use poison, do they know all about plants, or keep unusual flowers? Are they good at cooking or chemistry? If you've created an ally based on the Eight of Wands which represents travel, change, movement, do they have greater agility or movement speed? If they are in combat do they tend to move around the battlefield more? Are their skills focused on movement? An enemy minion based on the Two of Swords which is choice, indecision, stalemate, might actually use two swords, might switch targets in combat, or may be easy to confuse in conversation with a well-placed ultimatum or a persuasive negotiation.

It's important to consider the story effects and gameplay effects of how characters pursue their agendas as well. Do they use persuasive charm abilities or money, intimidation, hirelings and minions, sneaking around, or magic? Also consider what they know about the events or people of the story, and how players can find out what they know, such as asking them, following them, overhearing their conversations, searching their home, etc. If there are game rules for how to do those things, difficulty, dice rolls, and so on, indicate those in the character notes.

The best advice I can give, that I sometimes still fail to remember, is to give the players opportunities to talk to and ask questions of characters. Don't write scenes that involve lots of non-player characters talking to each other. It's hard to perform, and doesn't keep players involved.

Abilities: Things like magic spells or superpowers should definitely align with the nature, personality, or emotional state of the character, but it doesn't have to be obvious. The icy baroness with chilling words might use ice powers, sure, but what about wind instead?. Someone with a key trait of "curiosity" might have game abilities related to their senses and perception, and might wear a stylized eye or question mark on a pendant, or a pin, but not all over their costume like the Riddler.

The most important thing with Abilities is to create opportunities for the players to use theirs. When asking the chambermaid about the icy baroness, is it pure roleplay? Or can they use game abilities for charming, intimidating, or tricking, or abilities to sense whether they are lying or know more than they are letting on? When searching the conservatory for clues is it purely players asking questions and you reading the descriptions you've created? Or is there a searching skill, or a research skill? Is there a hidden crawlspace for a perceptive player to find and a nimble player to squeeze through? Is there a slippery floor, or a ledge to climb?

Locations: The description, mood, and traits of a location should suit their role in the story, but also the thematic traits you created earlier, and it's okay for those to contrast. An inn with soft beds and warm meals with a trait like "comfort" might be simple, but one with "visionary" might have a fantastic view, or a barkeep with big dreams, one with the trait "strife" might be run by a bickering family struggling to pay the bills. One based on a Fire card might have a roaring, sparking fire, one with Air may be drafty, and creak and groan in the wind.

When preparing a location, consider who will be there and what they are doing. Make note of what the players can do there beyond just talking to people, such as searching, listening at or unlocking doors, using a knowledge check to learn who built the place, sneaking on creaky floors,

avoiding traps, climbing up a wall to reach a broken window, and so on.

I like to organize stories and rosters of characters around locations, with a list of what there is to see and do there, who is there, what they do and what they know, what intended scenes of the story may happen there, what relevant "stuff" is there like treasure or clues that advance the story or reveal something the players didn't know, and what actions can be done in the location that require player abilities. If the location is intended to have danger and hazards, tactical features like cover or rough terrain, or combat, I usually make a map and mark those spots and the difficulty of navigating them, skill checks required, or other relevant game rules.

I might have a general overview of my story or key characters noted separately, but often my game notes are structured as a series of locations, loosely corresponding to the intended series of events of the story.

Combat: In tabletop roleplaying games that include combat, it's often a whole game mode of its own, and much has been written about how to do it well. I can only give a little overall advice:

Keep it moving! Don't take too much time to look up rules in rulebooks, keep any of the unusual or uncommon rules you'll need written right into your notes – "on a roll of 7 or 12 this enemy's Eye Beams shoot everyone who fails a hard dodge roll." That kind of thing.

Keep it varied! Have some combat that features interesting movement complications like rough terrain, cover, or environmental hazards, and some that doesn't. Have some that features big tough tanks, and some that features quick dodgy enemies, or magical enemies. Create unusual team ups, like the dragon cult is not working with a dragon like you'd expect, but a political figure and their goons; the shifty innkeeper isn't having an illicit affair with a vampire, but a troll; common crooks have domesticated a yeti. As long as you can explain it if anyone asks, you can do it.

Keep it cinematic! Describe the battleground, the enemies and their weapons and moves. Describe the players' attacks or powers. Make sure the location has some interesting things about it, even if there is no game effect, like the sky is blood red, or the ground trembles slightly as the volcano in the background threatens to erupt, or the festival crowd has parted for the battle but the band keeps playing as people cheer and jeer the combatants. Make it a centerpiece, especially if it's a climactic battle.

Keep it optional! Hey, remember there are other options than a battle to the death. Tricks or negotiation, using environmental hazards against enemies, sneaking around, intimidation, showing mercy, surrendering, capturing, bribing, befriending, are all possibilities. But remember to make note of them, because players of combat-focused action games won't always know to try anything else. Not all enemies deserve to die. But if your only tool is a mega-blaster, every problem looks like target practice.

Keep it on target! Make sure there is a point to adding a fight. That can be in terms of gameplay, or story which I'll get back to in a moment. Anything less than the big climactic battle with the big villain, such as a minion battle can serve a few purposes. It can provide some experience and advancement or useful rewards or items to the players. Conversely, it can deplete their resources making the next combat harder and more tense. It can deplete their resources even more and force a retreat to recuperate — you may want this if you need time to pass or for players to return to a previous area and make contact with an ally. Note that in a lot of combat-focused action games players won't know that retreat is an option and they'll fight to the death, so that may need to be signposted heavily. But if they do get defeated, the minions could capture them and take them to the big villain's big villain lair because the big villain wanted them alive.

The best function for minions is to foreshadow what fighting their

boss will be like. If minions have less dangerous but similar abilities, strengths, or weaknesses to their boss, the players get some practice dealing with them before their lives are on the line in a climactic battle.

More important than any of that, for our purposes in this book, is how story and thematic traits are revealed through combat. Look for ways to connect the enemies or combat encounters to parts of the story. The simplest is that an attack is an attempt to stop the players from thwarting the antagonist's plans. Enemies could make reference to who they work for or what they're trying to accomplish, e.g. "You'll never stop the baroness!"

The nature of the enemies or their abilities could provide a clue to the story, like, the volcano beasts attacking because the volcano is about to erupt, or searching the politician's estate reveals a barn full of zombies, so the secret necromancer must be the politician! The enemies might also drop clues or useful items, like the key to the secret lair, the symbol of a secret society, or a message with plans to assassinate an ally, and so on.

Clues: Clues are things like that, items, descriptions, or dialogue bits that reveal parts of the story or move the story forward. They should give players a direction to travel next or something they can do, or they could simply remind players of things they may already know, to keep them on track if they have forgotten something, or are heading the wrong way.

Keep track of where your clues are or who has them, how they are hidden (if they are hidden), how the players can obtain them and if it requires any game abilities to do so, and how they affect the story.

Rewards: Things the players get for completing an adventure, or that they receive along the way for their progress, or for defeating enemies, can contain clues or access to useful abilities that will affect the story, or even the ability of the players to improve themselves to face a more challenging foe. Allies may grant favors or boons in accordance with their nature or

their role in the story, or become useful contacts the players can visit later. Enemies may have "loot" that suits their theme, or relates to their abilities. Rather than giving the players a pile of money or power-ups, consider how you can make rewards more unique to this story.

Consider also how you can connect rewards for one story to future adventures, or the larger story of a campaign. For example, an ally with a travel theme may give the players tickets for free travel to a distant land, or the coins used to bribe the politician come from one particular country whose agents were also seen in a previous adventure, indicating some kind of intrigue brewing there. Or the players find a lost artifact that was previously only mentioned in the lore and histories they've heard, and they should take it to the wise folks of Wisdom Tower to find out more.

Players: Most games have players! And as I said before, they are the stars of the story, and you are there to make sure they have interesting things to do, chances to use their game abilities beyond just combat, and opportunities to learn what to do and where they need to go next.

Maybe the game allows them to do "anything" but they still need a reason to do anything. It's okay for players to get misdirected or pursue a red herring sometimes, but generally they should have an idea of where to go, what they're supposed to be doing, and if they don't know those things, how to find out. Player choice and freedom is important in games, but it's okay to have a non-player character suggest a course of action or to prompt a discussion in the right direction, especially if players are getting a little lost in the weeds.

Consider how players may progress through the story, such as the locations they will pass through along the way or who they'll meet. Keep in mind any information "choke points", places where you've only created one clue or skill check or path forward to an important part of the story.

If the players miss it because they were looking through their spells or ordering a pizza, or because they failed one check, they might not be able to proceed. If you find any choke points, find a way to create a workaround, another way to find the information players need, another way to get into the location, another time to overhear the evil baroness talking about the secret ritual chamber, or whatever it is.

You could either repeat the same clue elsewhere, or find a different way of guiding the players in the same direction. For example, if they need to know that the cult is meeting at midnight in the overgrown hedge maze, one defeated cultist may drop a note with directions to get to the maze. If the players don't defeat that cultist they don't get that note! But a beggar taking shelter in the church could tell of robed figures stalking around the old hedge maze. An entry in the missing cousin's diary could be a map of the hedge maze and a word, "Midnight", and if the players still don't get it, a non-player companion could suggest, "Hey that looks like the overgrown hedge maze over in the dark alley district!"

It's better to have too many options than too few. Even if they're not necessarily the "right" options, it's better for players to feel like they can do something, than to stand around not knowing what to do next, not knowing where to go, or not knowing what is written on the mysterious stone tablet they found. As I said, if players don't know something, they should know how to find out. That may be a knowledgeable or resourceful non-player character they've met early in the story, world-building that mentioned a great research library, or whatever they need. Try to make sure there are ways for players to keep moving, when they want to.

The important thing is to keep players interacting with the STORY, and not just with the GAME. Keep both elements unified in your design.

Enriching the Experience

I've already talked about using the variety of activities and the pacing of moments of tension and calm in the story to keep players engaged. But there are plenty of other ways to add depth and interest to your game narrative. This section will cover a few that I find useful, but you should always search for ways to improve the experience you provide.

I'll start with subtle elements that may help you as a storyteller in your writing and performance in ways the players may not overtly notice, but can add a more meaningful tone or rich complexity. Then I'll return to our overall focus on the players at the end of this section.

The first and simplest enhancement is **The Unexpected**. A clue or item that fits in seamlessly with the theme and expectations of the story, or a character whose personality, looks, and abilities are all in harmony is always good, but a detail that seems out-of-place will definitely catch the player's attention and keep them asking more questions and wondering how the story ahead of them will unfold. Contrast stands out.

Imagine a beautiful field of wildflowers at the edge of a sun-dappled forest, with birds chirping and bugs singing in the sunshine and the gentle breeze. Just visible beneath a clump of pale blue chicory flowers are some bones. They're human bones, an arm and a hand. Tangled in roots, the hand is holding a rusted metal billet that was once a sword. Long ago, this place was a battlefield.

It may still be a beautiful place to rest or have a picnic, but the emotional tone has shifted, even if only a little. Players may want to dig further and uncover the history of this place. It may be relevant to the story or the world-building, or it might just be one small moment of unsettled calm that stands out in an otherwise exciting adventure.

Imagine instead a crook, one of the ones collaborating with that yeti we mentioned earlier. They're not a terrifying villain, more of a nuisance, uncouth, unwashed, scrawny, and mean. The players have just defeated the crook and one other who lies dead nearby. Now they're interrogating the survivor for clues about who their boss is, why all that yak meat has been stolen, and whether their crew was involved in the robbery at the Snowshoes and Lassos shop (I said you have to explain the yeti).

The crook is difficult, evasive, but has answers to their questions. In a lull in the conversation they look over at their dead friend and say:

> "One flies the morning, and one lulls the night:
> Only the nightingale, poor fond soul,
> Sings like the fool through darkness and light.
>
> ...always loved a song, Sam did."

The wretched, spiteful crook has a poetic soul. Those two crooks had a life together, criminal though it may have been. If only for a moment the players may see the character in a new light.

It's interesting to use **Poetry,** but best to use it sparingly. That bit of a verse was from Percy Shelley's poem "A Widow Bird Sate Mourning". Think of King Theoden in The Two Towers, dressing for a hopeless battle and quietly intoning, "Where is the horse and the rider? Where is the horn that was blowing? They have passed like rain on the mountains, like wind in the meadow." It added so much more atmosphere and emotional weight to the moment. Compare that to, "Okay let's get our armor on guys, this is gonna be a tough one!" It turned preparations for a "combat encounter" into literature.

If you're not a poet who can write your own verse, you can look for

poetry that fits the mood of a scene you want to include it in, there is even an app from the Poetry Foundation to search for poems by mood. If I use it, I tend to stick to 19th century writers or earlier for a more "timeless" or archaic feel to the language, at least for a fantasy or historical setting. Beware of using famous lines though, as that may break the immersion.

Another way I like to use poetry is to find a thematic poem for the overall story, one that captures the mood in some way. I don't recite it for the players, although I might copy it into my own notes just to keep that feeling in mind. For an old story in a sort of dying culture in a fantasy world, I kept in mind "The House of Caesar" by Viola Garvin, which is very bleak. For a superhero story with some incorporeal supervillains I drew inspiration from T.S. Eliot's "The Hollow Men" – in particular "rat's coat, crow's skin, crossed staves in a field" metaphorically were the three supervillains – and for the impending doom they represented I thought of "The Second Coming" by W.B. Yeats. Those poems were the sort of undercurrents or anchors that informed my writing. At the end of that storyline the players applauded, so it must have gone well enough.

I have yet to use this gem of an excerpt from Percy Shelley's "Epipsychidion", as an example of a more cheerful yet tender feel. Imagine the sea-faring adventure you could create with this in mind:

> "The halcyons brood around the foamless isles;
>
> The treacherous Ocean has forsworn its wiles;
>
> The merry mariners are bold and free:
>
> Say, my heart's sister, wilt thou sail with me?"

"Epipsychidion" and Christina Rossetti's "Goblin Market" are both favorites of mine for their luscious imagery, T.S. Eliot and Walt Whitman are both great inspirations for writing. Just find poets you like. You don't need to put it into a game, but get some poetry in you!

Theme can mean a lot of things, and I've used that word a few times in this book. Here I'll define it as the "moral of the story", an emotional or intellectual thrust of the story toward a certain thesis. You could create a theme by drawing on the meanings of certain cards you've already chosen in creating the story, or you could draw another one. Let's do that:

I drew the Three of Cups representing friendship, community, and celebration. A Three is for communication, and Cups are Water or emotion as we know. The card depicts three figures joyously raising cups together. Let's focus on "community" as a theme, and a "thematic argument" that's as simple as the idea that "community is a good thing".

The story doesn't need any character to come out and say, "Hey, listen everybody, community is a good thing." But we can demonstrate that it's a good thing through story, and maybe even gameplay. So that we demonstrate it correctly, we should think about what makes community a good thing. A community is a place of support, belonging, affirmation, and shared purpose, that allows people to grow and thrive together, to

find each other and to find a place to call home, and to be safe from alienation, isolation, and loneliness.

We demonstrate this good thing in the story by including examples of it working, examples of the positive impact it has on people. We can also contrast it with examples where it doesn't work, such as in a toxic community that is missing one of the key elements we described, like support or affirmation, or examples where community is absent and the negative impact that alienation and lack of support has on people.

For example, going back to our questing knight story from earlier, we could play up the elements of community in the town at the beginning that is holding a wedding, showing not just a healthy community, but someone who is newly welcomed into that community and how good that is for them. Conversely the isolation and loneliness of the Traveler could be seen as a lack of community, where what they need is not an individual love but to be supported and affirmed by a community – so instead of taking them to the hermitage, they are delivered back to the port village and the pirates. The pirates could be another example of a healthy and supportive community, and their ship is the place they call home. A villain or enemy in the story could be hurting and lashing out because alienation has turned them selfish and dark, or the sense of involvement in the community could be what the Vampire and the Lover are missing that would make their lives more complete, and in the end they could invite the whole village to the vampire castle for their wedding celebration.

Again, these are not things we say to the players, although someone might say it obliquely, like "Oh it's a good life if you've got friends about you, eh?" We could even include gameplay elements, like allies who work really well as a team, whose abilities lift each other up, or challenges that require the players to help each other and use teamwork.

Remember the **Rule of Threes**. If you've got at least three good thematic examples, that's probably enough to reinforce the story with a sense of the theme, to add a little extra depth and emotion.

Consider the Cumulative Three, which is just three examples of the thing, the Contrasting Three, where there are similar but contrasting examples culminating in the final "perfect" version, the Dialectical Three, where one example is wrong in some way, the next example is wrong in the opposite way, and the final example is "just right", and the Ascending Three, which are better and better examples, like bronze, silver, and gold. You could use any of those but the Cumulative Three is fine.

The Rule of Threes is good to keep in mind for using the related concepts of symbolism and motif as well.

Symbolism & Motif are similar concepts, at least the way I'll be using them here. Symbolism is when an image, sound, action, or object connotes a concept through indirect or abstract representation, like how Cups represent Emotion. Motif is an image, sound, action, or object that is what it is, and its only connotation is what the viewer reads into it. A Symbol has a meaning, a Motif is a decoration that may acquire meaning from the context in which it is seen – in this specific usage of these terms, at least.

For example, if we chose to have a bluebird motif, the players might notice a bluebird singing in a tree and then flying away. Later they may see a small painting of a bluebird. Later still someone is wearing a hat with blue feathers in it. What does it mean? Nothing necessarily. It may just add some texture to the setting. The players might decide that it means something, but it's up to them.

If we chose to use the bluebird as a symbol, and historically it is used as a symbol for happiness, so we could use it that way, we might show one

or more bluebirds during happy scenes, but during sad or tragic scenes we might have no bluebirds, or someone has a painting of a bluebird but it's ragged, ripped, or dusty – suggesting deterioration of their happiness, or the blue feathers in a hat are worn by a character who has stolen and destroyed someone else's happiness.

You can also create your own symbol by using a recurring item or action, for example, and attaching your own meaning to it. Like, two characters cross arms with each other as a sign of their loyalty to each other. Crossed arms appear elsewhere at times when "loyalty" is being demonstrated somehow, even a coat of arms with crossed weapons could reflect the same meaning. Or say a falcon represents ambition. A political climber has falcon statues and loves and polishes them – symbolically nurturing their ambitions. The real political power person has pet falcons – a symbol that their ambition has been made real. They let the players watch their falcon hunt and catch a mouse, representing how ambitions can lead to harming the weak or innocent. Later when the players are trying to thwart someone's ambitions, they are attacked by griffons, a falcon-like mythical beast.

As with the theme, these are not things we point out to the players, or require players to know and observe in order to progress. Players might not even notice any of it. But it may still reach them on a sub-conscious level, and give them the feeling that they are participating in a more meaningful story.

You can engage the players more directly by using **Moral Dilemmas** in your story, but tread carefully. Moral Dilemmas are thought experiments where participants are asked to consider situations like having enough bread to feed one starving child while letting another go hungry, or being

able to alter the path of a runaway trolley headed dangerously toward five people, only by pushing a stranger onto the tracks to derail it, killing one instead of letting five die. These are miserable choices to have to make, and the thought experiment of moral dilemmas is not a fun game to play.

A big part of roleplaying is the fantasy of being a heroic character whose actions make a difference, and the escapism of a world of obvious Good & Evil, where Good triumphs. Not everyone wants to play a dark story about suffering and grey morality, especially if they experience both in real life. Not everyone wants to roleplay a character forced to commit an act that is the lesser of two evils. It's not a fun or comfortable time at the table, especially when one of the players reveals themselves to be amoral and finds everyone else's emotional struggle hilarious.

Moral Dilemmas tend to lock the participant into just a small number of choices, all terrible, to explore the nuances of their personal morals as they decide which is worse, and which to do. I've said earlier that player choice is very important, and by nature such dilemmas are very limiting. So why introduce this kind of emotional turmoil to your game?

First, if you're uncertain, don't. But I think the way to make it a rewarding experience is to let the players win if they can. I'll give an example of a Moral Dilemma I presented in the Star Wars Roleplaying Game. The young apprentice Jedi player was captured by a dark Jedi, who wanted to corrupt them to the Dark Side of the Force. They were shackled and forced to either watch a gentle great ape alien be tortured, or use a Dark Force-amplifying crystal to engage Force powers that would save the creature but would turn the player to the Dark Side.

The player chose to break their own hands to get free of the shackles, and rescued the ape creature. Winning an unwinnable scenario was one of the highlights of the story. The player got to be a Hero.

Returning to our focus on the players, remember that I said the goal of a game is to be fun for the players. I've already talked about looking for ways to keep each player involved, and how important it is to use variety in activities, combat, and tone. The point is to include something for every player to enjoy, even if they have different tastes or find different kinds of things fun. Ludology, the study of games, can help us here by defining eight Types of Fun available in roleplaying games.

Certain games attract players whose tastes align with what that game has to offer, and you may already know the tastes of the players in your game group. If not, you can just ask. But if you're writing for strangers, a new group, or for publication, you can tailor your work's appeal by either offering a broad range of experiences, or conversely, by focusing on a particular type of experience you can deliver well.

So if there are eight types of fun – and that may not be strictly true but we can use it as a framework for our brainstorming – what are they?

1. **Sensation** – pleasure of the senses, aesthetics, music, dice and cards and miniatures and tokens, hand-outs and maps, things to look at and touch, and sensory details within the game.

2. **Fantasy** – make-believe, escape from reality's complexities and consequences, having power and agency, and the ability to make a difference, and of course magic, monsters, and spaceships.

3. **Narrative** – the pleasure of a well-told story, the thrill of a plot twist, non-player characters that seem alive and interesting, and a lot of what we've been focusing on in this book.

4. **Challenge** – overcoming difficult obstacles, having or gaining the tools to overcome challenges, chases, competitions, accomplishing goals.

5. **Fellowship** – the social experience of playing together with a

group, roleplaying and interacting, teamwork, or just having fun spending time with friends.

6. **Discovery** – exploration of new place, seeing something new, uncovering mysteries and histories, finding solutions to puzzles, learning secrets, or even gaining self-knowledge.

7. **Expression** – creating something unique to you, creating your character, expressing yourself, having an effect on the story and the world, crafting, spending, choosing, having options.

8. **Submission** – the ability to relax and unwind, to switch off and lose yourself in a task, simple and straightforward rules and goals, not having to think too much.

Obviously most games include some or even all of these experiences in varying amounts, along with others that don't fit neatly into the above categories, like comedy and silliness, the thrill of danger, gentleness and comfort, emotional catharsis, or receiving rewards and advancement.

You don't need a checklist of what kinds of fun to have, but it never hurts to consider what kind of experience you're offering, and how you could choose to either diversify or focus the experience in your writing. So ignore this list if it doesn't help you, or take it to heart as tenderly as you would your players' "Love Languages", whatever works for you.

I've also seen ludologists define different **Types of Player**, and that information might be useful to think about. There is a matrix with two axes, used to explain why multiplayer online games are cesspools. The first axis is Action - Interaction, and the second is Players - World. There are players who enjoy acting against other players (Killers), and players who prefer interacting with other players (Socializers), players who enjoy acting upon or against the World (Achievers), and those who enjoy interacting

with the world (Explorers). I think the first axis is really about winning or domination (over players or the world), rather than just taking action.

We've covered three of these types pretty well already. Achievers like to have an effect on the world and gain mastery. Socializers like to talk and roleplay, and Explorers like to find new things and discover the game's mysteries. Players might drift between these play-styles throughout the game, or fall into one particular pattern.

You may notice that Killers are the only ones there to ruin it for everybody else, and they're a big problem in multiplayer online roleplaying games where there are few, if any social consequences for bad behavior. That type of player can be a lot of trouble in a tabletop roleplaying game as well, but keep in mind that what they enjoy is to have an effect on the other players. That's not inherently bad.

Some players with this play-style are great at support and assistance to other players, if they get something out of it as well. There can be mechanical issues here in the game's design, like if you're playing a game that doesn't allow players to assist each other, but does allow them to hurt each other, that's all they'll be able to do. Try to find ways for players to assist others, and to reward and acknowledge the ones doing it.

You can consider rules, scenarios, and even magical effects that limit the potential for players to harm each other, and you can punish bad behavior, but it's not very fun for one player to keep getting punished for just doing what they enjoy, or for every other player to keep getting their fun time in the game ruined. In the end, if a player is not compatible with your game, or especially if ANY PLAYER is harming others or consistently ruining their fun, they should be removed from the game and not invited back. All your players have a right to feel safe and comfortable at the table, and to have fun.

This is especially important when running a game, but even if your only goal is design, it is good to encourage **Good Gameplay** and find ways to support or incorporate ideas for good gameplay in the way your game is written, presented, and prepared.

Some concepts we've already covered are keeping the game moving, keeping players informed and empowered to know what to do and how to achieve their goals, making sure there is content in the game to appeal to and involve each player, and giving each player a chance at the spotlight.

Good communication is important. Listen to each player, if someone is getting talked over, stop and ask to hear what they have to say. In a prepared adventure, you could note that during a planning session with non-player character allies, an ally makes sure to pause and ask a quiet player what they think, or passes a baton around to signify each person's turn to speak. Encourage players to listen to each other, support and share the spotlight with each other, and respect each other's decisions and point of view. Don't force interactions on players who are quiet, new, or uncomfortable being on-the-spot, or who prefer to just go along for the ride, but give them opportunities to participate, and listen and respect their contribution when they do.

Take breaks, and try to limit out-of-game activities and distractions to break times, whether it's ordering pizza, texting home, or using the bathroom. Don't be strict about this, as not everyone can plan when they'll receive a phone call, have to go to the toilet, or need to step away from the table for some fresh air if the game gets frustrating or uncomfortable.

Safety and emotional comfort are very important for everyone going to a game session to have fun. There are a number of ways to help make sure that players feel safe and welcome at your game table.

Note that this doesn't mean there won't be danger or peril, or even difficult emotional situations in your story. It means the peril is inside the story, and the players in the real world are safe to enjoy the experience.

First, in writing and preparing game stories, consider very carefully whether to include intensely negative content at all. Things like sexual violence, child abuse, racism, suicide, homophobia, sexism, other forms of discrimination, eating disorders, emotional abuse, torture, animal abuse, stalking behavior, unpleasant depiction or harm to people with disabilities or mental illness, particularly gruesome forms of violence and death, or overtly sexual content of any kind, might have no place in your story. Many players have had bad experiences with these things, even if they don't show it, and may not have a good time being reminded of them in a fantasy game they want to play for fun.

Some people like to play games that allow them to confront negative things from their own lives and triumph over them, but it's not for you to make that choice for them. If your written content contains any of the above or similarly intense content, include a clear **Content Warning** visible to anyone who might play or purchase it. If you're running a game and intend to incorporate such content, talk to your players about it, and allow any of them to say, "No, we're not playing that", and modify the content you have created to remove it. If you can't come up with villains who threaten the safety of your game world, without being so gruesome that you threaten the safety of your players in the real world, you still have more work to do in brainstorming and writing.

Content Warnings are the easiest safety tool, but there are others, like the **X-Card**, which can be a card on the table players can tap if the story is veering into uncomfortable territory – a signal to back off or skip whatever is going on. It can be a card each player has, to hold up or throw

down on the table to give that signal, or it could be as simple as typing **X** in the chat during online play. The **X-Card** is the "Nope Button" that lets players "nope out" of a scene with content that is too traumatic, personal, or involves a phobia of theirs. Even a cheerful game world might end up having snakes, bugs, spiders, or something else many people are intensely afraid of, and players shouldn't have to suffer to play a game, just because they have a phobia.

You can reduce the need for this by using a **Session Zero**, which is either a game session that happens before the first game of a long-running storyline, or a preparation period before a game begins. This may be when players are creating and introducing their characters. Use the time to set expectations for what may happen in the story and the type of content you intend to include, and to introduce important concepts about the rules (including the use of safety tools) and about the game's world.

During a Session Zero or at any time, allow players to set limits on content they don't want to experience in the game. This can be done with **Lines & Veils**. Lines are absolute limits, lines that should not be crossed by the storyteller or other players, and Veils are soft limits, things the players would rather not experience, but could be in the game "behind a veil". If the content is present, the game "fades to black" and moves on, rather than describing or engaging with it in detail. Make sure players are free to set any limit they wish, without explanation, without hassle, and to add or change limits whenever they feel the need. When running the game, always respect a player's limits, whether you agree with them or not.

I recommend looking up the free **TTRPG Safety Toolkit** for more information. It's important make sure that every player can feel safe and comfortable playing, engaging, and getting lost in your beautiful story.

Book Two
Tarot Cards

Origins of Tarot & Cartomancy

The History of Tarot Cards

Tarot Cards were originally created for playing a card game known as Trionfi (Triumph) in Italy in the 14th century, later known as Tarot in France, Tarocchi in Italy, or Tarock in Germany. It is still played in some places, with regional rules and decks that have evolved over time and distance, and by the late 17th century had also been simplified into the standard playing cards we know today for games like Poker and Blackjack.

Trionfi was probably introduced to Europe from the Mamluk Sultanate of Egypt, where card games had been played since the 11th century. The earliest appearance of playing cards in any form was in China in the 9th century during the Tang Dynasy, where printed slips of paper were used as a component in board games, drinking games, and for gambling. The method of dividing playing cards into suits was done by several cultures around the 11th to 13th centuries, so it's hard to be any more exact, but Medieval Egypt, Persia, and other parts of the Middle-East used the familiar suits of Swords, Cups, Coins, and Staves – originally Polo sticks, but the game of polo wasn't known in Europe when the cards arrived.

Some of the earliest mentions of card games in European history are found in laws outlawing them, and sermons decrying gambling and the frivolity of playing games. The oldest favorable depiction comes from Johannes Teuto, a Dominican Friar who may have been responding to outcry against card games when he wrote a treatise in 1377 including a description of card games, as well as how to use the cards and their symbolism to give good moral advice to nobles using the court or "face" cards, to use the number cards to give advice to peasants and professions or to teach arithmetic, and even how to use the suits as kingdoms to teach war strategy.

For the explicitly esoteric uses of Tarot cards, we must skip ahead another four centuries. French occultist Antoine Court de Gébelin was the first one known to write about Tarot cards as objects of mystical power in the late 18th century. He believed that the Tarot had its origins in the fabled Book of Thoth, an ancient Egyptian tome said to have been written by the God of Knowledge himself. He also believed that Tarot cards were brought to Europe by Romani people, who at the time were believed to have come from Egypt. None of these things are true, but Court de Gébelin inspired other French occultists to continue working with Tarot cards.

Jean-Baptiste Alliette, known by the pseudonym Etteilla was the first to assign divinatory meanings to the cards, in the 1780s & 90s, linked the suits to the classical elements, and popularized the use of Tarot as a divinatory tool. Marie-Anne Lenormand used the classic Tarot of Marseilles deck to tell fortunes for wealthy and powerful individuals such as Emperor Napoleon and Empress Josephine of France. Jean-Baptiste Pitois, writing under the name Paul Christian, coined the terms Major Arcana and Minor Arcana, using ideas derived from Eliphas Lévi.

Famed occultist Eliphas Lévi carried the Tarot over into mysticism and ceremonial magic. He and Helena P. Blavatsky (also known as H.P. Blavatsky or "Madame Blavatsky", names you may have heard if you have studied the occult) were influential predecessors to the Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn, the late 19th century occult society that we have to thank for the cards we've been using. Their members included occultists Aleister Crowley, A.E. Waite, Florence Farr, and Pamela Colman Smith, and possibly authors such as Sir Arthur Conan Doyle, Bram Stoker, W.B. Yeats, and Algernon Blackwood. Later offshoots of the Order included influential occultists Dion Fortune, and Israel Regardie. Their influence on modern occult methods and ideas really can't be overstated.

The "Celtic Cross" layout for Tarot Cards was first known to be used by Florence Farr, actress, socialite, and leader of the Golden Dawn in England, who claimed the layout had an ancient Celtic origin, though there is no further evidence of that. It was first published by A.E. Waite, in his guide "The Key to the Tarot" in 1909, alongside the set of cards conceived by Waite and illustrated by fellow Golden Dawn member Pamela Colman Smith. Later "The Pictorial Key to the Tarot" reiterated the work with Smith's illustrations included in the book.

The Waite-Smith deck was one of the only sets of Tarot up to that time to include full illustrations on every card including the number cards. Most decks only used illustrations on the Major Arcana cards. The deck is an iconic classic and has been reprinted, updated, edited, and used as inspiration for other decks countless times, around the world.

The original artwork depicted here has been in the Public Domain since 2012, seventy years after Waite's death. Notably, if Smith's death was used as the basis for expiration of copyright, the artwork wouldn't be in the public domain until 2021, but the Waite-Smith deck is generally recognized to be in the Public Domain.

Since publication of Waite's Key to the Tarot, many different decks have been produced, some which reproduce the symbolism and meanings used by the Golden Dawn, and others which change the meanings, the imagery, even the suits, to represent other ideas. Some are linked to cultures, religions, or histories, others are abstract, and still others only exist to showcase beautiful artwork. As such, if you have shopped for Tarot cards, or studied their use, you'll have seen many different versions and interpretations.

As I said earlier, there is no right deck, and no right interpretation. Print out the cards in the included PDF, or find a deck you like.

Using Tarot Cards for Insight

    All the card layouts and interpretations we've talked about in this book can be used to perform Tarot readings the way they're generally intended. Personally, I don't think Tarot cards can really tell the future, but I find the mental exercise of figuring out how the symbols and meanings could possibly apply to an idea or problem I'm having helps me look at a problem more fully or from a different perspective. Sometimes something that feels like help is all the help you need.

    Since this book is all about Tarot cards, I thought I should include an explanation for how to do that. It's all about using yourself, or the idea, dream, worry, or problem you're thinking about, as the basis for asking the kind of questions we asked before. Since single and three-card layouts should be clear enough to you at this point, I'll just discuss the classic Celtic Cross.

A

5

B 4 1 6

2

3

10

9

8

7
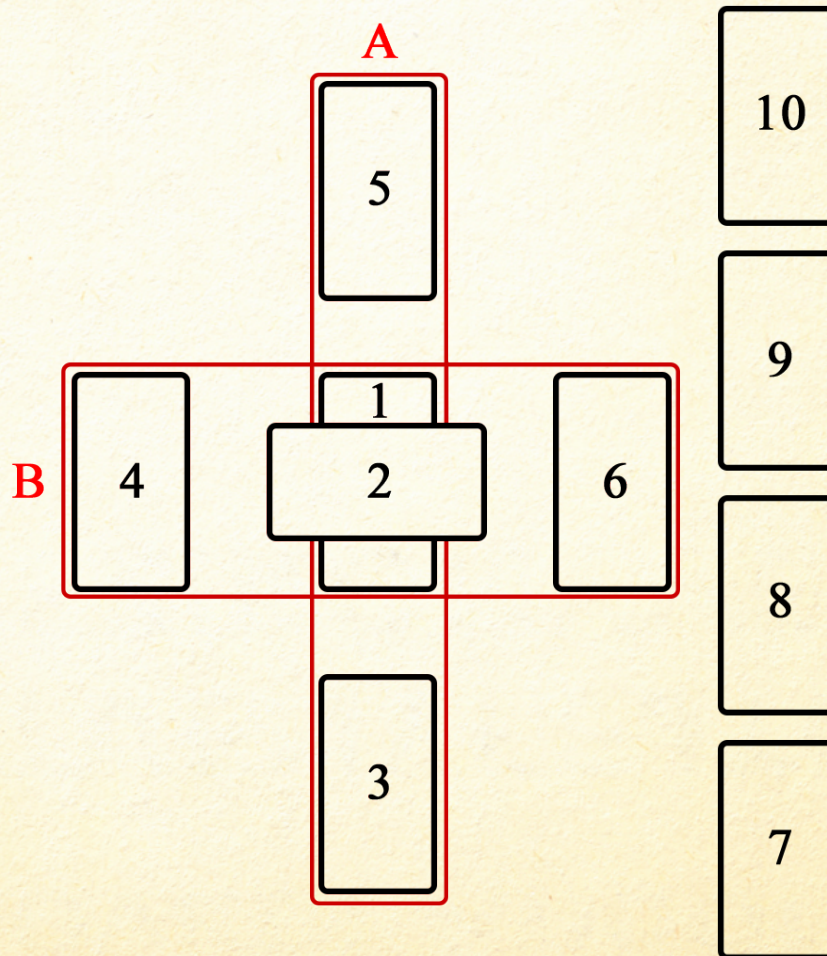
For a problem, these are the positions, and the questions:

I. First is the current situation. What situation are you in? How are you doing, what are you doing? Just, what's up?

II. The Crossing Card is the obstacle, block, or challenge. This could be the nature of your problem. How does this card apply to what's going on?

III. The third card is the root or uncurrent of the scenario. How did this become a problem? What is the hidden agenda or emotion?

IV. The fourth card is the past. Think of the past, related to the problem, how does the past or your past actions affect the current situation?

V. The fifth card is a conscious revelation or future possibilities. What should you focus on moving forward, or what should you do about it?

VI. Sixth is the future, which contributes to the outcome. How would the situation develop or progress if you did nothing? How would it work out if it went the way you hope? What can you do to reach that future?

VII. The seventh card is the emotional state. How are you feeling about all this, or how would you like to be feeling? What thoughts or feelings do you find yourself dwelling on?

VIII. Eight is the outside or environmental influences. How do other people or the environment influence, or complicate the scenario?

IX. Nine is the hopes, fears, or lessons. What kind of help or obstacles can you expect, or should you seek out, or avoid? What can you learn?

X. Last is the outcome. How will this all work out? What will be the outcome of you following your current path? What can you do to change the path if you don't like this result?

A. is a path from bottom to top, from Three to One, to Five. It is the shift from subconscious to conscious. It is a "push-and-pull" between your subconscious desires and habits, and your conscious decisions and will.

B. is a path from left to right, starting with card Four, through card Two to Six. It is the "narrative" from what has happened to what will happen.

Meanings & Interpretations of Cards

The Major Arcana

0. The **Fool** – beginnings, innocence, taking a risk without worry.

1. The **Magician** – power, confidence, having the tools you need to succeed, taking action.

2. The **High Priestess** – intuition, inner knowledge, mystery.

3. The **Empress** – Mother Nature, compassion, beauty, fertility.

4. The **Emperor** – structure, organization, rules, solidity, a ruler.

5. The **Hierophant** – tradition, belief, spirituality, a mentor.

6. The **Lovers** – love, union, a life-changing turning point.

7. The **Chariot** – determination, drive, autonomy, control, victory.

8. **Strength** – strength, courage, inner strength, self-care.

9. The **Hermit** – introspection, solitude, self-knowledge, wisdom.

10. The **Wheel of Fortune** – destiny, luck, changing fortunes, the inevitability of change.

11. **Justice** – truth, justice, a deserved fate, fairness, legal issues.

12. The **Hanged Man** – sacrifice, being stuck, suffering from not letting go or giving up something.

13. **Death** – transformation, transition, endings leading to beginnings.

14. **Temperance** – temperance, balance, patience, moderation.

15. The **Devil** – addiction, bondage, bad habits, materialism.

16. The **Tower** – disaster, upheaval, unexpected or unwanted change.

17. The **Star** – hope, renewal, serenity.

18. The **Moon** – fear, illusion, hidden danger.

19. The **Sun** – improvement, growth, joy, vitality.

20. **Judgment** – absolution, rebirth, a higher calling, forgiveness.

21. The **World** – completion of the journey, travel, accomplishment.

The Minor Arcana – The **numbers** of Minor Arcana suggest the following:

Ace – Potential	Two – Duality
Three – Communication	Four – Stability
Five – Adversity	Six – Growth
Seven – Faith	Eight – Change
Nine – Fruition	Ten – Completion
Page – Message	Knight – Motion
Queen – Influence	King – Authority

The **Suit of Wands** represents elemental Fire, and creativity.

1. Ace of Wands – inspiration, creativity, creation.
2. Two of Wands – planning, decisions, discovery, delays.
3. Three of Wands – preparation, foresight, new enterprise, opportunity.
4. Four of Wands – harmony, prosperity, a marriage.
5. Five of Wands – disagreements, strife, competition.
6. Six of Wands – confidence, progress, achievement or acknowledgment.
7. Seven of Wands – competition, perseverance, standing your ground.
8. Eight of Wands – travel, movement, things changing.
9. Nine of Wands – resilience, persistence, determination.
10. Ten of Wands – burdens, responsibilities, stress.
11. Page of Wands – enthusiasm, discovery, not tied down, a messenger.
12. Knight of Wands – energy, lust, a voyage.
13. Queen of Wands – exuberance, vibrancy, warmth, sex appeal.
14. King of Wands – visionary, leader, entrepreneur, egotistical.

The **Suit of Cups** represents elemental Water, and emotion.

1. Ace of Cups – compassion, love, a new relationship.
2. Two of Cups – partnership, attraction, commitment.
3. Three of Cups – friendship, community, celebration.

4. Four of Cups – contemplation, meditation, inward focus.
5. Five of Cups – loss, disappointment, or bereavement.
6. Six of Cups – innocence, nostalgia, childhood or children.
7. Seven of Cups – fantasy, imagination, illusion, too many choices.
8. Eight of Cups – escapism, leaving home, parting, an emotional choice.
9. Nine of Cups – satisfaction, happiness, emotional comfort.
10. Ten of Cups – fulfillment, people aligning, harmony.
11. Page of Cups – creative, exploring feelings, serendipity.
12. Knight of Cups – romance, charm, invitations.
13. Queen of Cups – calm, intuitive, compassionate, a good friend.
14. King of Cups – friendly, emotional balance, emotional support.

The **Suit of Swords** represents elemental Air, and reason.
1. Ace of Swords – clarity, power, a decision made, a truth revealed.
2. Two of Swords – choice, indecision, stalemate.
3. Three of Swords – heartbreak, rejection, hurtful words, grief.
4. Four of Swords – recuperation, withdrawing, resting the mind.
5. Five of Swords – conflict, tension, bullying, defeat.
6. Six of Swords – transition, a path, a rite of passage.
7. Seven of Swords – betrayal, deception, stealth, reclaiming what was lost or stolen, thievery.
8. Eight of Swords – isolation, imprisonment, self-entrapment.
9. Nine of Swords – anxiety, depression, nightmares.
10. Ten of Swords – defeat, ending, death, crisis.
11. Page of Swords – curious, energetic or restless, quick-thinking.
12. Knight of Swords – impulsive, opinionated, fight for the underdogs.
13. Queen of Swords – quick-thinker, perceptive, tells it like it is.
14. King of Swords – intellectual, direct, authoritative, truthful.

The **Suit of Pentacles** represents elemental Earth, and material concerns.

1. Ace of Pentacles – manifestation, prosperity, a gift or new project.
2. Two of Pentacles – balance, adaptability, making ends meet.
3. Three of Pentacles – teamwork, collaboration, pooling resources.
4. Four of Pentacles – stability, security, holding on to resources.
5. Five of Pentacles – poverty, material losses, financial worries.
6. Six of Pentacles – generosity, charity, giving or receiving support.
7. Seven of Pentacles – investment, profit, missed out on opportunities.
8. Eight of Pentacles – education, employment, skill or craftsmanship.
9. Nine of Pentacles – self-sufficiency, appreciation, luxury.
10. Ten of Pentacles – wealth, establishment, family business.
11. Page of Pentacles – student, curiosity, focus, new enterprise.
12. Knight of Pentacles – efficient, routine, reliability, hard-worker.
13. Queen of Pentacles – down-to-earth practicality, a practical parent, generosity.
14. King of Pentacles – business magnate, disciplined, self-educated.

These are standard definitions for the cards when they appear in any layout. Some Tarot methods also use reversed cards, when a card appears upside-down. The meaning of a card when it is reversed varies greatly, from the exact opposite of the stated definition, to a similar definition but applied differently, for example referring to a friend rather than a foe. Reversed cards usually cover the same topic as the suit and the number of the card suggest, but with a different implication. I don't tend to use reversed cards, but if you wish to, just keep in mind what the card is about, and use your intuition.

You now have all the tools I can give you.
What you build with them is in your hands!
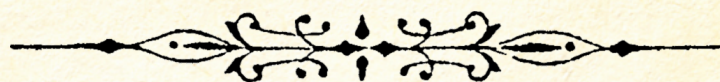
Catalog of Tarot Cards

Please note:
These cards are NOT FOR PRINT.
These cards are included for visual reference only.

View the separate PDF document of Printable Cards
if you wish to print your own Tarot deck.
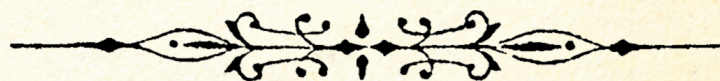
THE FOOL.

THE MAGICIAN.

THE HIGH PRIESTESS

THE EMPRESS.

IV	V
THE EMPEROR.	**THE HIEROPHANT**
VI	VII
THE LOVERS.	**THE CHARIOT.**

VIII

STRENGTH.

IX
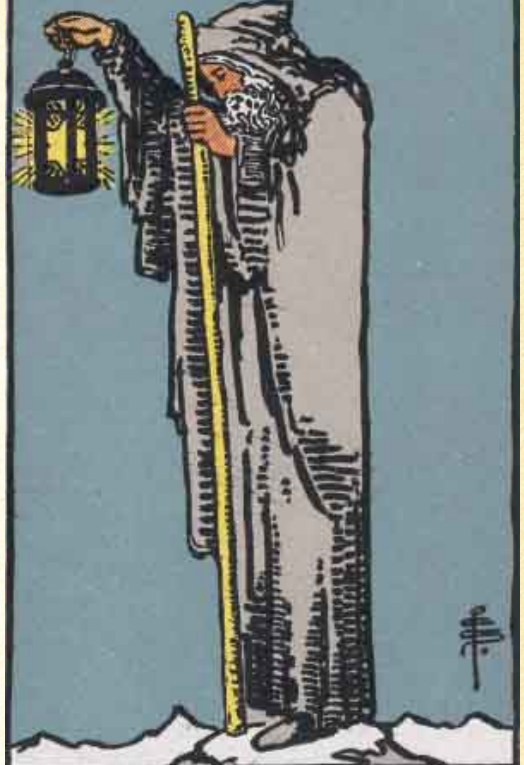
THE HERMIT.

X
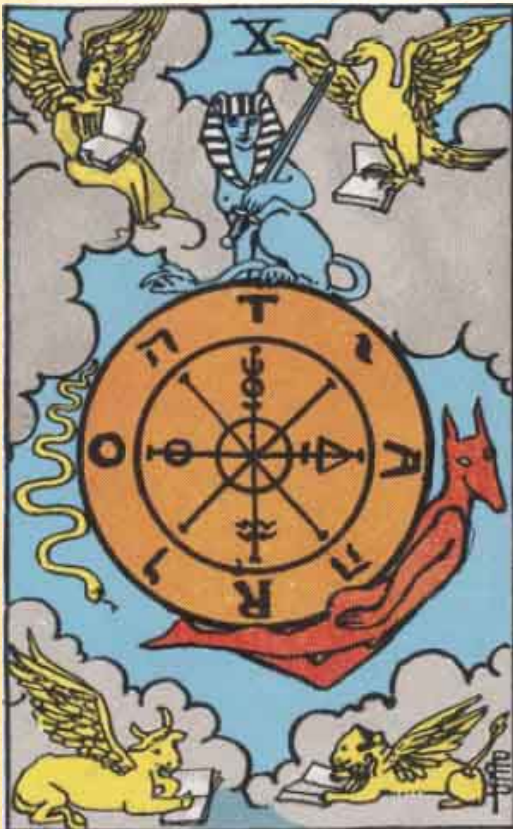
WHEEL of FORTUNE.

XI

JUSTICE.
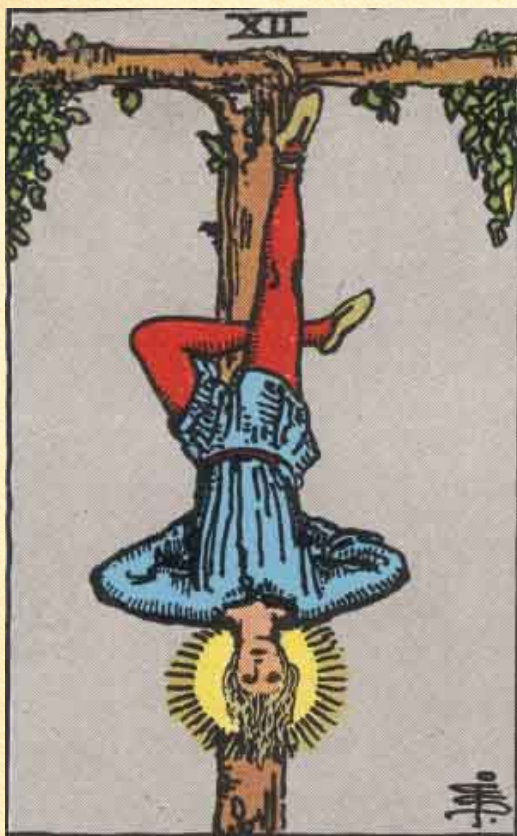
THE HANGED MAN.

DEATH.

TEMPERANCE.

THE DEVIL.

THE TOWER.

THE STAR.

THE MOON.
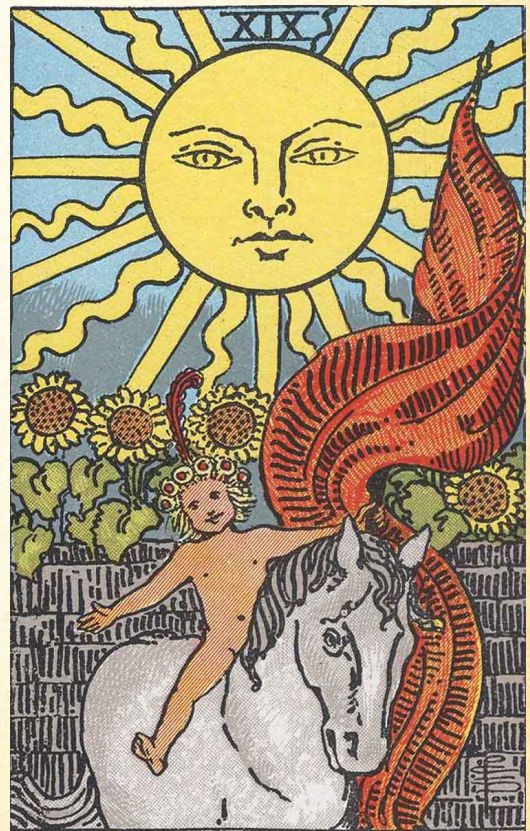
THE SUN.

JUDGEMENT.

THE WORLD.
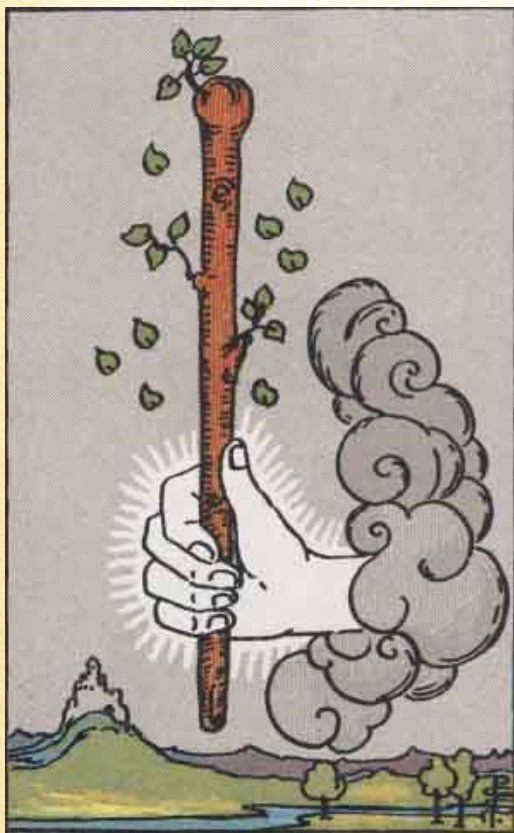
ACE of WANDS.
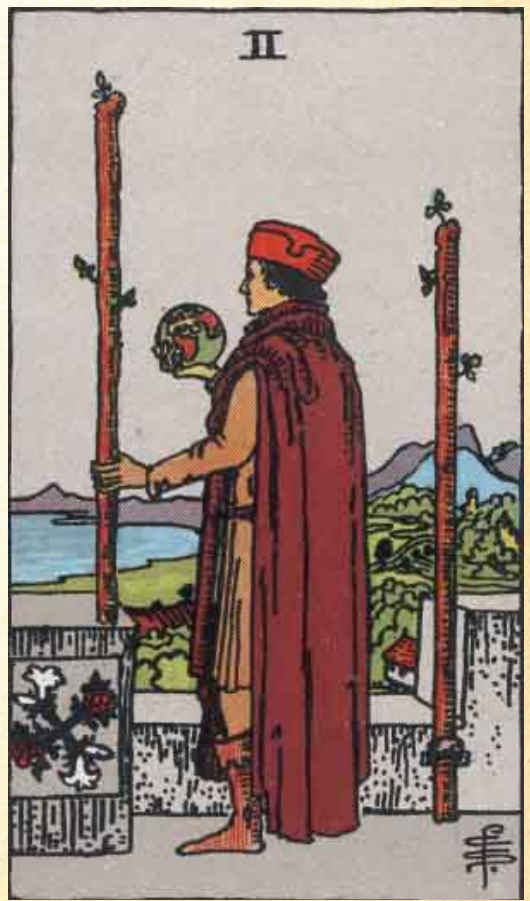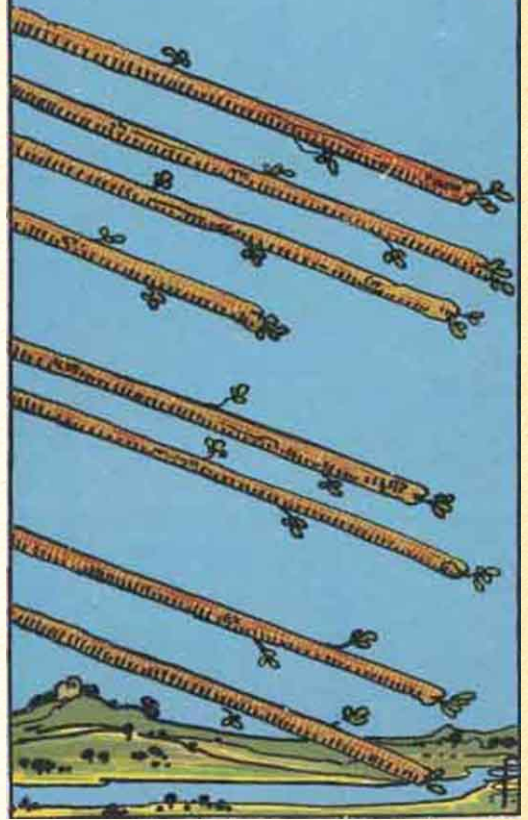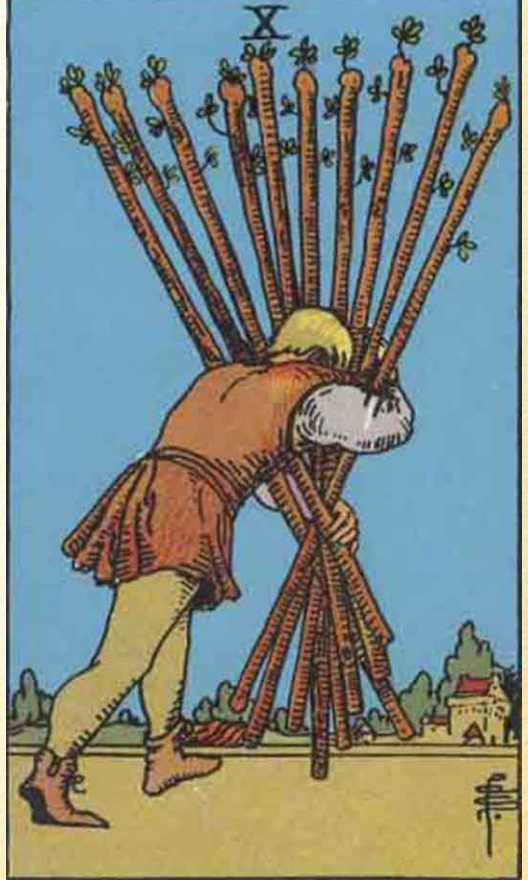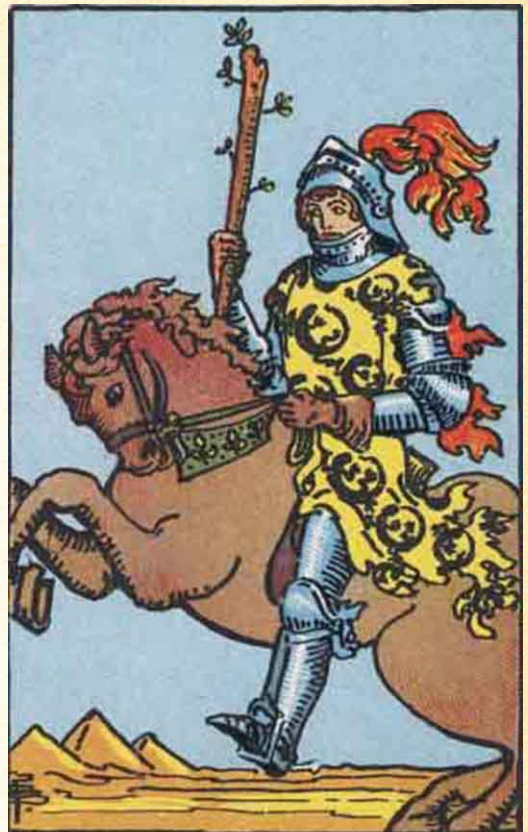
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KNIGHT of WANDS.
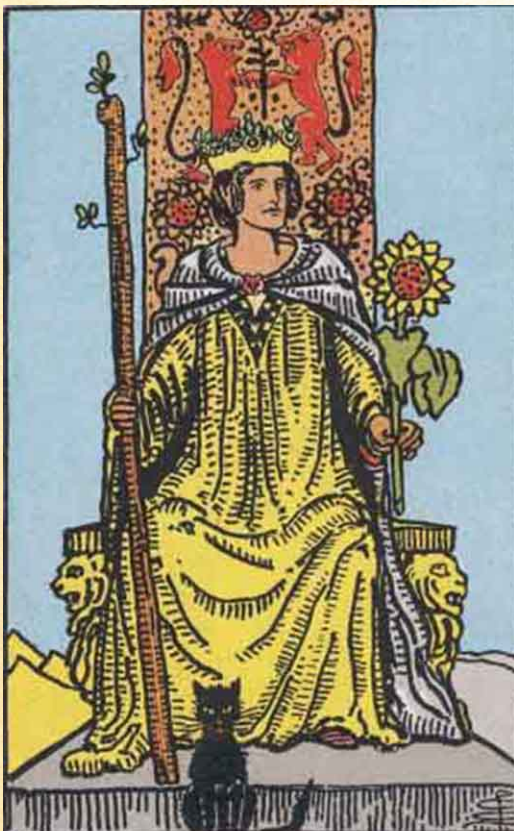
QUEEN of WANDS.

KING of WANDS

ACE of CUPS.

IX

X
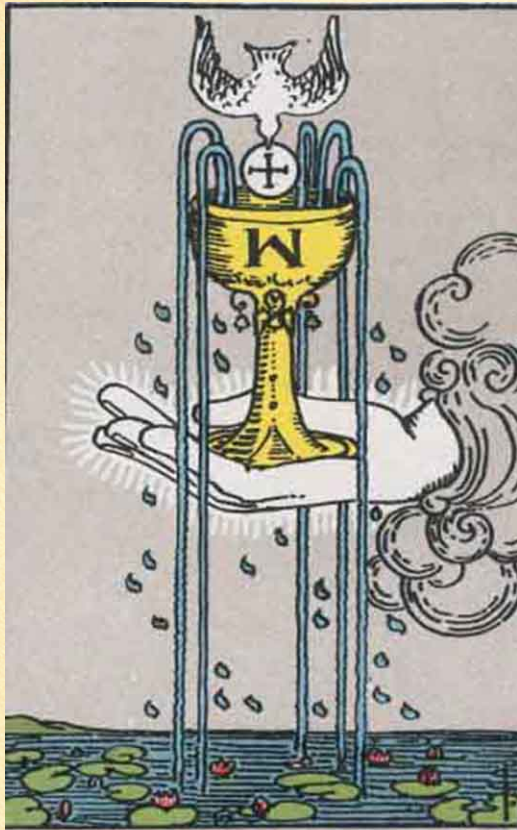
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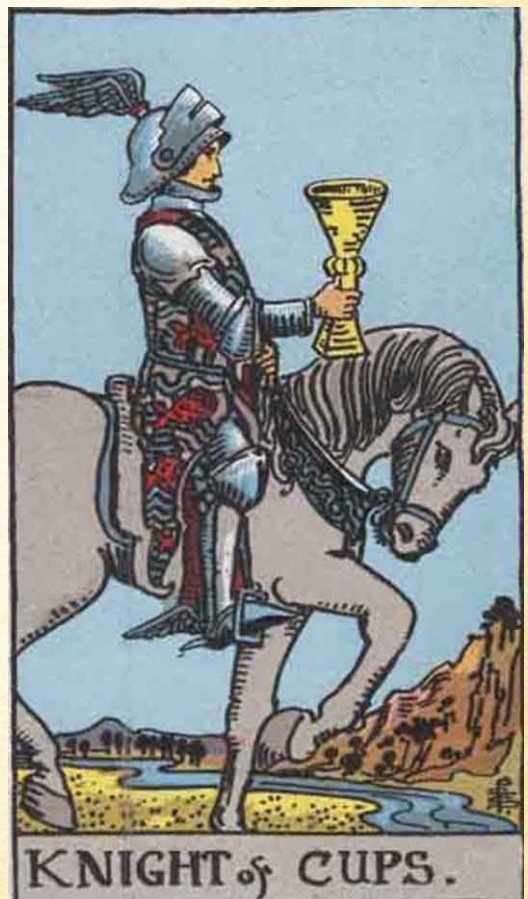
KNIGHT of CUPS.

QUEEN of CUPS.

KING of CUPS.

ACE of SWORDS.

II
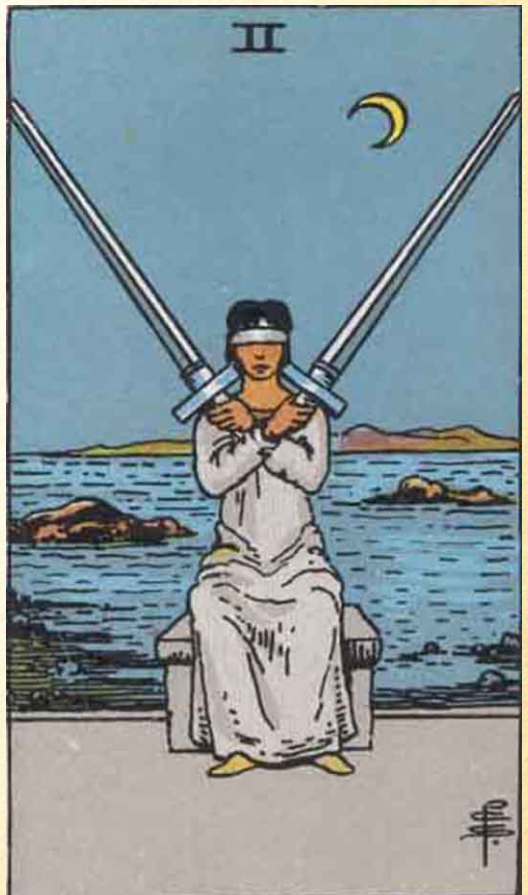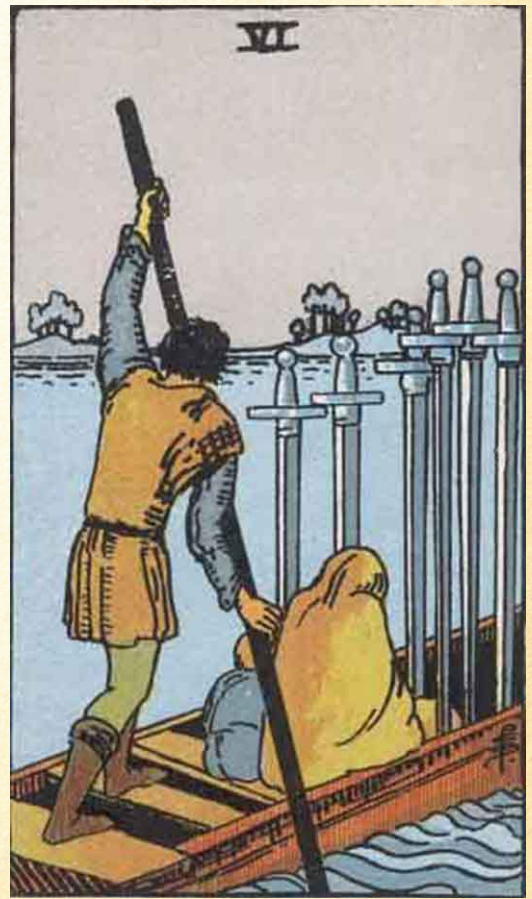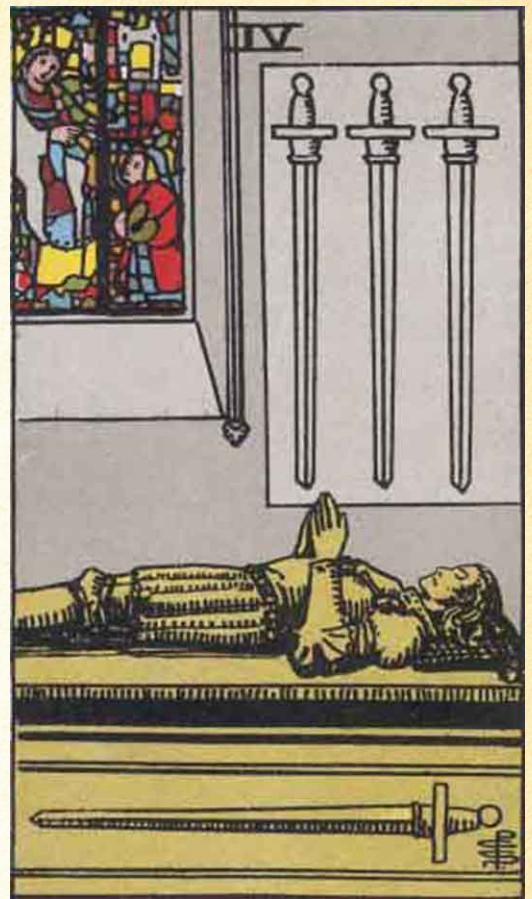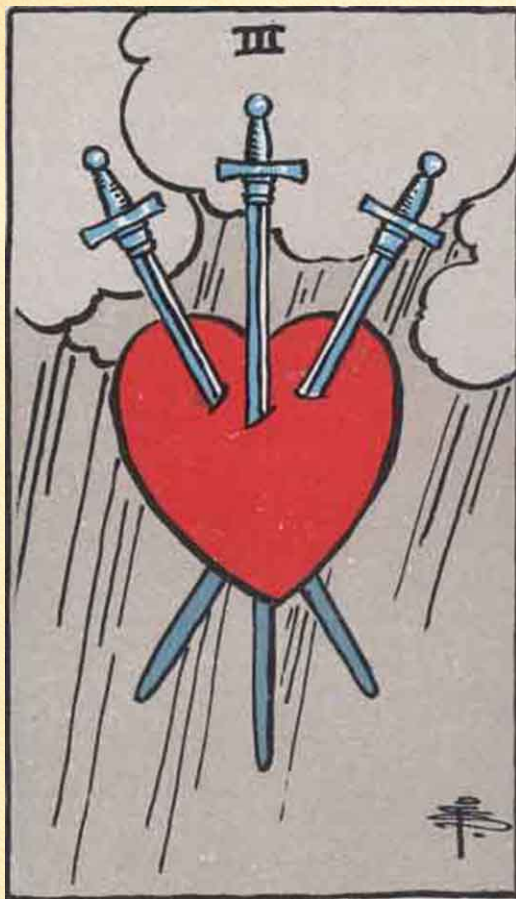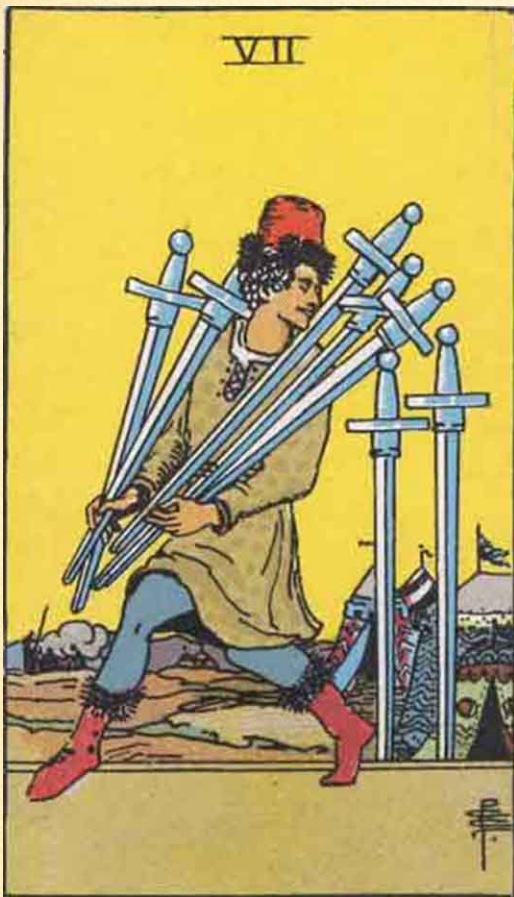
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KNIGHT of SWORDS.

QUEEN of SWORDS.

KING of SWORDS.

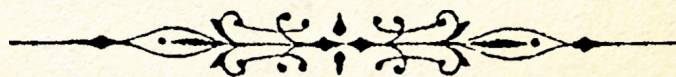ACE of PENTACLES.

PAGE of PENTACLES.

KNIGHT of PENTACLES.

QUEEN of PENTACLES

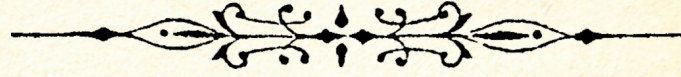KING of PENTACLES

A complete set of printable cards is available in the included PDF, with card backs, for two-sided printing.
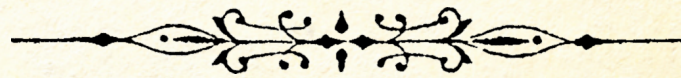
What follows is a set of quick-reference summaries, lists, and tables, based on the information and explanations in this book. A separate PDF is included for printing quick-reference sheets only, if you wish.

The Game Designer's
TAROT

Quick-Reference Sheets

Quick-Reference for Story Elements

Designing a Story

Game Narrative: A game's story may use traditional narrative structures, but also requires interactive elements. It is a framework and context for the players to tell the story through their actions and experience.

What to Design: Create characters and locations with an amount of detail relative to how significant they are to the story, or how frequently appear. Create an adventure hook, a conflict or disturbance, the agenda or agendas of key characters, obstacles and escalations for players to overcome, and rewards for the players to receive.

The Art of the Game

Turning a Story into a Game: Unify your design of STORY and GAME by finding ways to make the story interactive and use game elements that support and reflect on the story.

Non-Player Characters: Reflect their thematic traits in their game abilities. Consider the gameplay effects of how they pursue their agenda.

Abilities: Create opportunities for players to use their game abilities to interact with elements of the story including characters and locations.

Locations: Use thematic traits in their description, function, inhabitants, and in-game tactical features. Consider what actions, including game actions, players can do there.

Combat: Keep it moving! Keep it varied! Keep it cinematic! Keep it optional! Keep it on target! Use lesser battles to encourage or frighten, prepare or wear down, or to train the players for the battles to come. Consider how story and thematic traits are revealed during combat, by the opponents' tactics or abilities, the tactical possibilities or hazards of the setting, words spoken by opponents, enemy type, or clues and rewards dropped.

Clues: Data points that reveal parts of the story or move the story forward, via items, descriptions, or bits of dialogue. keep track of where clues are and who has them, how they are hidden, how the players can obtain them and if it requires game abilities to do so, how they affect the story, and how they inform the players of what to do or where to go.

Rewards: Players receive money, useful objects, contacts, friendships or enemies, self-improvement, critical tools or secrets to help make progress, etc. Enemies may have "loot" that suits their theme or relates to their abilities. Consider how the rewards may connect to the story, or reveal a future story.

Players: Consider what it takes for the players to progress through the story, what they need to know or do at each point to get to the next stage. Resolve information choke points. Keep players interacting with the story, through roleplaying, and also using their game abilities in ways that reveal or change the story.

Enriching the Experience: try using the following methods to add depth to your story: **The Unexpected,** something out of place. **Poetry,** either short verses recited by characters in the story, or as a thematic inspiration and reminder. **Theme,** make a "thematic argument" by providing examples of the desired concept, how it is positive or negative, leading to the thesis of the argument. Use gameplay elements to support the theme if possible. **The Rule of Threes,** call back or provide examples of concepts at least three times. Examples can contrast, or get better over time, but the final example should support the concept. **Symbolism & Motif,** use recurring imagery, actions, objects, sounds, etc. Use motifs as recurring decor with or without a greater meaning. Use symbolism to represent a concept indirectly. **Moral Dilemmas,** situations that require a choice between two or more terrible options. Give players the chance to break the dilemma and find a good resolution.

Types of Fun: Sensation/Aesthetics, Fantasy, Narrative, Challenge, Fellowship, Discovery, Expression, Submission. Consider how your game may offer these types of fun, to broaden the appeal of your story, or to focus toward a specific type of experience.

Types of Player: Act against/dominate other Players (Killers), Interact with other Players (Socializers), Act upon/dominate the World (Achievers), Interact with World (Explorers). Consider how to cater to different types of players. Offer positive support roles for Killers to have an effect on other players. Consider effects or rules to minimize harm.

Good Gameplay: Communication, listen to players, encourage them to share the spotlight and to support and respect each other. Breaks, try to limit distractions to break times.

Safety Tools: Consider whether to include intensely negative content at all. Identify intense content and create **Content Warnings** for written material, or discuss content with players beforehand. **X-Card,** a card to tap or hold up allowing players to signal for the gamemaster to back off or skip intense content as it is coming up. **Session Zero,** use preparation time before gameplay begins to discuss expectations and content with the players. **Lines & Veils** allow players to set limits on what content is acceptable in the game. Look up the free **TTRPG Safety Toolkit** for more information.

Tarot Card Spreads

Single-Card Design: Consider a story element such as an antagonist, location, or conflict, and draw one card. Use the interpretation or meaning of the card, the suit, the number, or the image on the card to flesh out that element.

Three-Card Design
Antagonist – Setting – Conflict:
Use single cards and their interpretations and imagery to define each.
Past – Present – Future:
Use single cards to consider the events or currents of each time in the story.
Problem – Cause – Solution:
Define a problem, the origin of the problem, and what to focus on to solve it.
Nature of: Option 1 - Option 2 - Option 3:
Use one card to decide the nature of each of three available options or paths.

Relevance – Lesson – Application:
Why is it here? What can you get out of it? What do you do or experience to get that?

For a CHARACTER or FACTION:
1. What is their role in the story? How do they affect the players, the world, or the plot? Or how do they arrive into the story?
2. What are they trying to get? What is their agenda? What do they need to resolve their nature? Or what can players learn or get by interacting/defeating/helping them?
3. What do they do to pursue their agenda? Or what must the players do or what will they experience in dealing with them?

For a LOCATION:
1. What is its role in the story? How is it a place of " – "? Is it the place itself or the people in it who represent that quality?
2. What can be learned about its history, its current state or function, the people of the place, or its likely future?
3. How do its qualities or people help or hinder, teach, challenge, or entertain the players?

For a **CONFLICT**:

1. What is going on, or what is someone trying to bring about, or to prevent?

2. What is the origin or motivation of the conflict, or what concept is at stake or desired?

3. What must the heroes do or focus on, or what will they endure in trying to resolve the conflict?

Note: remember that a weak conflict could be resolved by all parties having a heart-to-heart conversation. For a stronger conflict, find barriers and complications that would prevent a conversation from resolving the conflict simply.

For a **COMPLICATION** or **ESCALATION**:

1. What is the difficulty of the complication? How does it complicate the story or present an obstacle?

2. What can it reveal, advance, or reflect about the larger story?

3. What must the heroes do, overcome, contend with or engage with in order to proceed or succeed?

For an **AGENDA**:

1. What does it do for the character or what are they trying to get?

2. How are their plans or activities revealed to the heroes, or what must the heroes learn or uncover to understand the agenda behind the activities?

3. How is the agenda carried out, what is the character doing to get what they want, or possibly, what clues are they leaving behind?

For an **ADVENTURE HOOK**:

How does the situation present itself or involve the players?
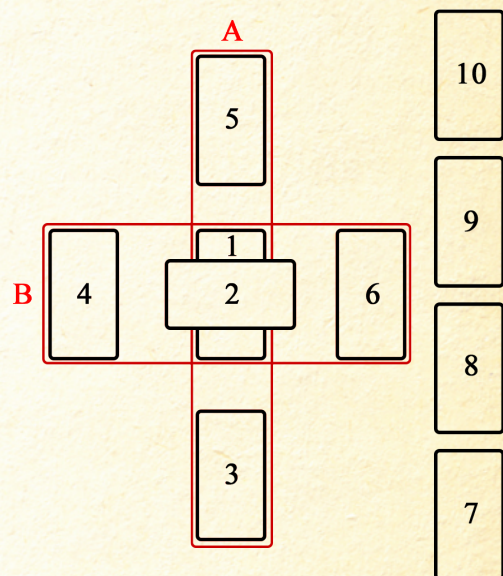
How will pursuing the hook reveal a larger storyline?

How does the scenario hook the players with personal stakes, emotional appeals, enticing rewards, or railroading?

For a **KEY ITEM, CLUE,** or **REWARD**:

1. How is it encountered and why, or simply what is the look, feel, or type of item?

2. What is its origin or how is that revealed, or what clues can it reveal about the story?

3. What does it offer the players, a clue, the ability to " - ", protection from " - ", or how do the players use or decipher it?

Ten-Card Celtic Cross for the Story:

I. First is the current situation. Where are the players or how is the scenario introduced? What events are going on right now?

II. The Crossing Card is the obstacle, block, or challenge. What needs to be overcome? How is it revealed? This may be the conflict or villain.

III. The third card is the root or uncurrent of the scenario. How did this become a problem? What is the hidden agenda or emotion?

IV. The fourth card is the past. What is the backstory of the problem? Or how do players' or other key characters' past stories or past actions affect the current story or scenario?

V. The fifth card is a conscious revelation or future possibilities. What should the players do about all this, or what should they focus on?

VI. Sixth is the future, which contributes to the outcome. How would the situation develop or progress if the heroes were not involved, or how would the "villain" or threat proceed?

VII. The seventh card is the emotional state. What is the tone; scary, funny, tense? How should the players feel, what are the personal stakes to them?

VIII. Eight is the outside or environmental influences. How do other people or the environment influence or complicate the scenario?

IX. Nine is the hopes, fears, or lessons. What kind of help or obstacles await the players? What will draw their focus, worry, or endanger them?

X. Last is the outcome. What kind of rewards will the heroes receive for success, what does success look like? Or what will the consequences or losses be for failure, or what is at stake overall?

    A. is a path from bottom to top, from Three to One, to Five. It is the shift from subconscious to conscious. It is a "push-and-pull" between what the "villain" does versus what the players learn and do.

    B. is a path from left to right, starting with card Four, through card Two to Six. It is the general "narrative" from beginning to end.

Ten-Card Celtic Cross for a Setting or Culture:

I. First is the location, or home of the culture. What type of place is it? How is it a place of " - "? What happens there? Or what is the land like?

II. The Crossing Card disturbs the peace. If there is a conflict what is it? If not, what makes life more difficult or challenging here, for these people?

III. The third card is attitudes. What are the attitudes or beliefs of people, what do they value or fear? Or what do people believe about the place?

IV. The fourth card is the past. What's the history of the setting or people, what are the layers of that history, and how are those layers revealed?

V. The fifth card is the focus. What is the focus of the players' adventures or experiences with the place or culture? What can they do, or learn?
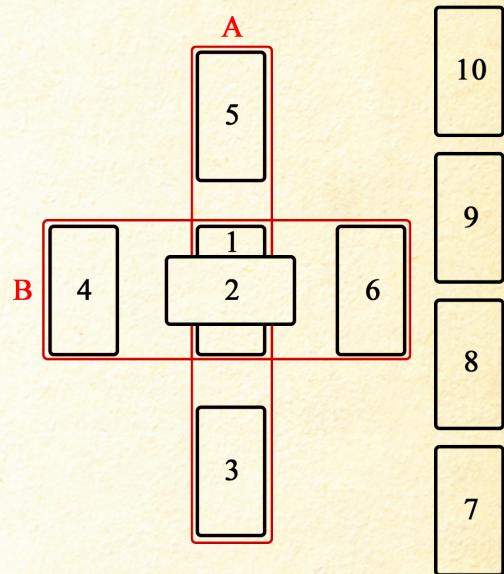
VI. Sixth is the future, which contributes to the outcome. Where are the currents of history flowing for this culture, or this place?

VII. The seventh card is the emotion. What is the feel of this setting, or what is the mood of the people who live there?

VIII. Eight is the outside or environmental influences. What is this culture's or place's relationship with other groups, factions, cultures, or connection to other locations? What is the people's relationship to the land? Or how does this land affect the people?

IX. Nine is the ambitions. What good or bad changes do the people want to achieve, or what does an outsider want from them, or this place?

X. Last is the outcome. What will happen in the central disturbance or conflict, how will it play out? Will this be the result with intervention or without? Otherwise, in what way will the people or place flourish?

    A. is a path from bottom to top, from Three to One, to Five. It is the shift from cultural to personal. What does it tell you about how the inhabitants engage with public life or politics, subcultures, or counterculture?

    B. is a path from left to right, starting with card Four, through card Two to Six, from past to future. What does it say about the relationship of the place or culture to the passage of time, the calendar, holidays, or death?

Alternate Multi-Card Design for a Setting: Draw Single-Card or Three-Card spreads for each point on a map, or each key location in the setting.

Meanings & Interpretations of the 78 Tarot Cards

The Major Arcana

0. The Fool – beginnings, innocence, taking a risk without worry.
1. The Magician – power, confidence, having the tools you need to succeed, taking action.
2. The High Priestess – intuition, inner knowledge, mystery.
3. The Empress – Mother Nature, compassion, beauty, fertility.
4. The Emperor – structure, organization, rules, solidity, a ruler.
5. The Hierophant – tradition, belief, spirituality, a mentor.
6. The Lovers – love, union, a life-changing turning point.
7. The Chariot – determination, drive, autonomy, control, victory.
8. Strength – strength, courage, inner strength, self-care.
9. The Hermit – introspection, solitude, self-knowledge, wisdom.
10. The Wheel of Fortune – destiny, luck, changing fortunes, the inevitability of change.
11. Justice – truth, justice, a deserved fate, fairness, legal issues.
12. The Hanged Man – sacrifice, being stuck, suffering by not letting go or giving up something.
13. Death – transformation, transition, endings leading to beginnings.
14. Temperance – temperance, balance, patience, moderation.
15. The Devil – addiction, bondage, bad habits, materialism.
16. The Tower – disaster, upheaval, unexpected or unwanted change.
17. The Star – hope, renewal, serenity.
18. The Moon – fear, illusion, hidden danger.
19. The Sun – improvement, growth, joy, vitality.
20. Judgment – absolution, rebirth, a higher calling, forgiveness.
21. The World – completion of the journey, travel, accomplishment.

The Minor Arcana – The Numbers of any Minor Arcana suggest the following meanings:

Ace – Potential	Two – Duality	Three – Communication
Four – Stability	Five – Adversity	Six – Growth
Seven – Faith	Eight – Change	Nine – Fruition
Ten – Completion	Page – Message	Knight – Motion
Queen – Influence	King – Authority	

Note: Reversed (upside-down) cards, if used, usually cover the same topic as the suit and the number of the card suggest, but with a different implication, or possibly the opposite meaning.

	Wands – elemental Fire, creativity	**Cups** – elemental Water, emotion
Ace	Inspiration, creativity, creation.	Compassion, love, a new relationship.
Two	Planning, decisions, discovery, delays.	Partnership, attraction, commitment.
Three	Preparation, foresight, new enterprise, opportunity.	Friendship, community, celebration.
Four	Harmony, prosperity, a marriage.	Contemplation, meditation, inward focus.
Five	Disagreements, strife, competition.	Loss, disappointment, bereavement.
Six	Confidence, progress, achievement or acknowledgment.	Innocence, nostalgia, childhood or children.
Seven	Competition, perseverance, stand your ground.	Fantasy, imagination, illusion, too many choices.
Eight	Travel, movement, things changing.	Escapism, leaving home, parting, an emotional choice.
Nine	Resilience, persistence, determination.	Satisfaction, happiness, emotional comfort.
Ten	Burdens, responsibilities, stress.	Fulfillment, people aligning, harmony.
Page	Enthusiasm, discovery, not tied down, messenger.	Creative, exploring feelings, serendipity.
Knight	Energy, lust, a voyage.	Romance, charm, invitations.
Queen	Exuberance, vibrancy, warmth, sex appeal.	Calm, intuitive, compassionate, a good friend.
King	Visionary, leader, entrepreneur, egotistical.	Friendly, emotional balance, emotional support.

	Swords – elemental Air, reason	**Pentacles** – elemental Earth, material
Ace	Clarity, power, a decision made, a truth revealed.	Manifestation, prosperity, a gift or new project.
Two	Choice, indecision, stalemate.	Balance, adaptability, making ends meet.
Three	Heartbreak, rejection, hurtful words, grief.	Teamwork, collaboration, pooling resources.
Four	Recuperation, withdrawing, resting the mind.	Stability, security, holding on to resources.
Five	Conflict, tension, bullying, defeat.	Poverty, material losses, financial worries.
Six	Transition, a path, a rite of passage.	Generosity, charity, giving or receiving support.
Seven	Betrayal, deception, stealth, reclaiming what was lost or stolen, thievery.	Investment, profit, missed out on opportunities.
Eight	Isolation, imprisonment, self-entrapment.	Education, employment, skill or craftsmanship.
Nine	Anxiety, depression, nightmares.	Self-sufficiency, appreciation, luxury.
Ten	Defeat, ending, death, crisis.	Wealth, establishment, family business.
Page	Curious, energetic or restless, quick-thinking.	Student, curiosity, focus, new enterprise.
Knight	Impulsive, opinionated, fight for the underdogs.	Efficient, routine, reliability, hard-worker.
Queen	Quick-thinker, perceptive, tells it like it is.	Down-to-earth practicality, a practical parent, generosity.
King	Intellectual, direct, authoritative, truthful.	Business magnate, disciplined, self-educated.