

HOUSE OF CARDS

A ROLE-PLAYING GAME

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VERSION 2.2 – SEPTEMBER 7, 2009

THIS WORLD IS A HOUSE OF CARDS, AND IT IS ABOUT TO COME TUMBLING DOWN AROUND YOUR HEAD.

That woman down the street who always gives you the funny look when you walk past her house? The one who always has her sprinklers on, with the yappy little dog? You always think you know her from somewhere, even though you've never spoken.

Tonight, when you dream, she will be a queen with skin of beaten gold. She will invite you to her palace behind the mirror in your room, plying your heart with wine-sweet words. Can you trust her?

A different postman comes to your house every day, yet he greets you in exactly the same way. At first, you thought you'd ask about that, but it just kept slipping your mind, and now it's so commonplace you think nothing of it.

As you slumber, he emerges with inky eyes from your shadows, bearing nine swords. He steals your dreams, and delivers them like so many letters to others who would use them against you. Can you defeat him?



Symbols are not merely ephemera: they hold together the fabric of the world. The scaffolding of the material world is held together by cotter pins of analogies. But something has gone terribly wrong, there on the Other Side of the looking glass.

YOU STAND IN THE BREACH BETWEEN ORDER AND CHAOS TO RENEW THE WORLD.



About Cards

Players are encouraged to use a tarot deck for play; the author feels the premise of the game is reinforced by the symbolism of the tarot deck. As you read, you will no doubt see the tarot deck's influence on the design of the game itself.

That said, for convenience, a standard deck of playing cards (using the "French" suits) are perfectly suitable substitutes for the minor arcana, which are used in the conflict resolution rules. (Jokers will serve as knights; an unmarked red and black joker as Cups and Swords, and an additional marked red and black joker as Pentacles and Wands, respectively.)

The major arcana serve as narrative tools and character status trackers, ultimately, and players can track those elements just as easily on a sheet of paper or a note card as necessary.

For reference purposes, here are the suit correspondences between the two decks:

Tarot Suit – French Suit

Swords - Spades
Wands - Clubs
Cups - Hearts
Pentacles - Diamonds

What You Are

Some people merely walk on one side of the mirror, and what they refer to as fantasy resides in their place elsewhere. Others, though, exist on both sides. These people, blessed (or cursed) with this surfeit of reality embody the Archetypes. Their existence helps glue the disparate layers of the cosmos together.

Archetypes come in many forms, dependent on cultural and personal experience, but certain traits are universal. Jung's theory that Archetypes spring from a collective unconscious is only partially true; the deeper reason for their universality is a matter of extra-sensory perception. While the vast majority of people are mired in the material realm, and rarely even come close to interacting with an Archetype, the echoes of Archetypal actions register far and wide, noticed by a yet-unexplored part of the human mind, like wavelengths of light just infinitesimally outside of the normal visible range.

Most people refer to these as dreams. Others know better.

Actions taken by an Archetype move the world in fundamental ways. The coherence of both realms, Here and Beyond, relies on them, as does the flow of quintessential energy. Ideally, an Archetype acts in ways which make energy flow healthily for the universe, from one concept to another as the circumstances dictate. Dreams, then, are the tracks left behind when these energy flows occur, like the parallel lines of sand left by riverbank eddies. A dream contains traces of the energy that passed.

Those Beyond have for whatever reason – or perhaps for no reason at all – become greedy. They seek to steal those leftover traces of energy from the dreams on this side of the divide. If their hunger is not checked, the void left by the devoured dreams festers with a metaphysical disease called the Megrin – the horrible madness of dream-emptiness. These predations threaten to disrupt the careful balance between the two realms, and the only beings capable of intervening are the Archetypes themselves.

You are now the bearer of an Archetype.



The Archetypes – Major Arcana

There are countless variations on how the Archetypes manifest, but humans have made several attempts to codify the Archetypes' core essences throughout the ages. One of these is the Tarot: the Major Arcana encapsulate the known Archetypes in a way that many different onlookers grudgingly accept.

To begin creating your character, you may draw one of the Arcana face-down at random, or you may simply choose one. While you may elect to decide consciously which Archetype you are, your character never did: Archetypes pass from person to person as the whims of cosmic chance dictate.

Choosing an Archetype is the major step in character creation; the rest of your character's identity is up to you. Some other things you must know:

The Major Arcana
I. The Magician
II. The High Priestess
III. The Empress
IV. The Emperor
V. The Hierophant
VI. The Lovers
VII. The Chariot
VIII. Strength/Fortitude
IX. The Hermit
X. Wheel of Fortune
XI. Justice
XII. The Hanged Man
XIII. Death
XIV. Temperance
XV. The Devil
XVI. The Tower
XVII. The Star
XVIII. The Moon
XIX. The Sun
XX. The Last Judgment
XXI. The World
The Fool

Characters have no numerical statistics or health levels. Archetypes are empowered to channel the flows of concepts through the universe, and this improves one's mortal capacities to superhuman levels – but only when dealing with something associated with one's Archetype. The bearer of the Lovers, for instance, cannot focus his energies into an action involving childish or playful behavior, because one of the traditional associations with the Lovers is growth into maturity. That Archetype could, however, deliver a preternaturally convincing argument causing a person to make a choice and behave in a more adult way. When there is no reason to doubt success, an Archetype simply succeeds. When acting outside their purview, though, or when contested by another like being, conflict resolution occurs. (See "On Interpretation", page 5.)

Archetypes cannot die, either – their bearers may change, but this is nearly always a matter of great import. So long as a mortal bears an Archetype and has power to channel through it, he or she is immortal. This does not exempt them from pain, of course... far from it. But it takes phenomenal effort, or a supernatural force, to cause harm to a bearer. Instead, enemies of the Archetypes primarily attempt to deplete the flow of energy at their disposal. A horror from Beyond may attempt to warp the mortal dreams of a neighborhood into nightmares devoid of some crucial element the Archetype normally employs, sapping the local flows and crippling their power.



Conflict Resolution – Minor Arcana

Each player holds a hand of five cards representing the ever-changing flow of energies at their disposal. Unlike most role-playing games, these cards represent at once a character's status and ability to perform tasks. In a sense, think of them as serving simultaneously as die rolls and health levels. When a character wishes to perform an action that has some chance of failure, the player plays one or more cards from hand to accomplish them. When an Archetype is harmed in some way (usually through hampering concepts with which they are associated), the player discards cards to represent the damage.

♠ **Swords/Spades** key to physical combat, use of force or intimidation, the nobility and military, the intellect and the element of air.

♣ **Wands/Clubs** key to creativity, will, the peasantry and the element of fire.

♥ **Cups/Hearts** key to interpersonal relationships, empathy, communication, the clergy and the element of water.

♦ **Pentacles/Diamonds** key to commerce and merchants, protection, the body, physical or material things, and the element of earth.

Whenever an Archetype takes an action that requires the expenditure of energy, the player discards a card in an attempt to match or beat the difficulty of the action, as determined by the referee. The form always mirrors some aspect of the card, which may not be readily apparent at first. Archetypes are gifted at shaping cosmic forces to suit their needs, however, so if the action is somehow applicable to the core associations of their Archetype, the action succeeds regardless of suit correspondences if the number is sufficient to meet the difficulty.

A bearer may also attempt to twist the forces involved with the suit of the card played to assist in a different task. Let's say an Archetype is in a situation in which she needs to impress some mortals (under the influence of mental magic) by appearing to be a prestigious individual worthy of respect. While the five of Spades is typically only useful when played for a fighting action, for instance, our savvy Archetype could use it to relate tales of martial prowess so convincing and properly tailored to the audience that her standing in their eyes improves.

When an Archetype uses a card for a purpose to which it is suited, or when an action directly aids the Archetype's core associations, that card is replaced in hand immediately. The universe rewards right action. In other cases, an Archetype must behave in ways appropriate to their correspondences for an entire scene to replenish cards to hand. This goes for cards lost in combat, as well (unless the Archetype is Reversed or all cards are depleted – see below).

On Interpretation

An exhaustive guide to Tarot symbolism, or even a quick primer, is beyond the scope of this text. The author refers interested readers to A.E. Waite's *Pictorial Key to the Tarot* as a starting point; the Rider-Waite-Smith deck and correspondences are treated as default in this text.

Archetypes wield far-reaching power; it is entirely appropriate to add new interpretations of their symbolic portfolios based on personal preference.

The Shuffle

The cosmos operates in spirals, circular patterns that never quite return to their original point. Any time a character draws the last card in the deck, a Shuffle occurs. Besides reshuffling the discarded cards and starting a new deck, this event signals a dramatic shift in the game. Some climactic event occurs with every Shuffle: a secret is revealed, a new foe appears, a character has a fundamental change in perspective, et cetera.

The Shuffle always creates a dramatic change for the player who caused the Shuffle. When a Shuffle occurs, players have the option of keeping their hands as they stand, or discarding and drawing a new full hand of five cards. If the player opts to discard, the Shuffle's effects will extend to his or her character as well as the instigating character.

Complications – Losing Cards

Archetypes can expend even a trivial amount of energy to preserve a mortal bearer from even the most grievous harm. When a bearer would suffer damage that would significantly injure or even kill them, discarding a card averts all damage. This is only an immediate and momentary effect, so players are encouraged to find more effective ways of

dealing with lingering damage sources like fire, radiation, having one's bone marrow turned into locusts, and so on. If the action to prevent the damage is appropriate to the Archetype, the card is replenished immediately.

An Archetype can be caught having expended all its energy, and thus vulnerable to harm. As a result, when a bearer needs to use a card from hand and has none, one of the following events occurs:



↳ Archetypes are cosmic forces, and cannot truly be destroyed. Instead, when pushed to the brink, an Archetype sometimes becomes Reversed. When this occurs, a Shuffle happens, and the character's hand is refilled to five. Reversal means that the Archetype becomes a mirror of itself, associated with contrary elements generally opposing its former self. This is a traumatic and dramatic occurrence (hence the Shuffle), and should not be taken lightly. The bearer of a Reversed Archetype has gone

through the equivalent of a divorce or unforeseen catastrophe, and is now apparently beholden to a greater power which fundamentally contradicts his former role. This cannot be undone until either the character is forced to Reverse a second time (a truly spectacular dramatic instance like this should be undertaken once a campaign at most), or until the character has had an entire session in seclusion and meditation to realign the Archetype.

↩ Reversal only occurs when the Archetype faces a dramatic situation and is forced to persevere in order to achieve a crucial task. In other situations, the fate of the bearer is less secure. Significant harm will impair or incapacitate the bearer. If the bearer is in a lethal situation with no cards available, the bearer dies, no longer protected by the universe's graces. (Incidentally, this is often how the character came to bear the Archetype to begin with.)

An Archetype bereft of a host will find a new one at the next sunrise or moonrise (whichever occurs first). The new bearer will somehow attract the Archetype through some action resonant with the Archetype's correspondences.



Advancement

Archetypes channel almost limitless power through the patterns of their symbolic correspondences, but the practical limit of this ability rests with the mortal bearer.

Fortunately, a canny mortal can become more adept over time. Each time a character completes a story arc, that character's hand size increases by one. After the first story arc, therefore, an Archetype's bearer has six cards in hand at the start of the next session to reflect an increase in confidence and familiarity with the flows of power at an Archetype's disposal. Any time an Archetype becomes Reversed or a bearer changes Archetypes (see below), that character's hand size returns to five.

Paradigm Shifts

Archetypes drive their bearers to action through cryptic visions, waking dreams, and sudden urges. Fortunately, an Archetype always selects a person with fundamental inclinations towards its nature as a host, but mortals and Archetypes are both complex, multi-faceted beings. Either party may change their focus over time; for mortals, this is a change of heart, while Archetypes sometimes shift emphasis from one part of their domain to another. Between sessions, a bearer may adopt another Archetype, provided that the referee has not already designated the new Archetype as having a host. This is a dramatic shift on the level of a Shuffle, but takes place off-stage, so to speak, so the player and the referee should discuss the repercussions for the story.

The Realm Beyond

Mirrors serve as gateways between the two halves of the universe, linking the shadow and the light, the sane with the incomprehensible. Lewis Carroll may or not have been a bearer, but many agree that he had a relatively accurate (if incomplete) view of Beyond.

Those traveling from Here are warned that the best case scenario is that the laws of nature are simply inverted, such that water flows upward, fire burns cold, and so forth: in other cases, particularly in the mad courts of the Comtes and Comtesses, the local laws are whatever those alien beings see fit at the moment. In the court of the Masked Prince of Luthiers, a dismal place shrouded in gloom, a laugh causes rubies to rain from the sky - which is punishable by death.

Archetypes can use any mirror to travel from one realm to the other, with the expenditure of any card (which returns at the end of the scene - wise travelers may want to step through cautiously, as danger may be waiting across the threshold). If the character wishes to simply peer through the mirror into the other side without crossing, this costs a card as well, but the card replenishes immediately.

Whereas Here the dream energies are intangible and flow behind the curtains of physical matter, Beyond is dream-stuff made manifest. As such, it is readily malleable to Archetypes (and to the inhabitants there, if they possess the energy). Landscapes can consist of impossible features which shift seamlessly as the story dictates: an Archetype wandering through a forest of clockwork trees

expends the three of Cups to suddenly find herself at the end of the path, before the carved emerald portcullis of her enemy's castle where the Castellan accepts parley. Unfortunately, an alert native can also expend energy to reshape the scene as well - and they almost always regain their card immediately.

The Megrim

When those Beyond intrude upon our world, it is to harvest dreams, the purest form of energy. Why they have decided to do this remains a mystery, for it threatens the natural equilibrium between Here and There.

Any mortal (human or otherwise) subject to dream-theft awakens feeling a deep-seated privation and ennui. If the theft continues over several nights, the victim begins to hallucinate - a sign that the mortal's innate dream energy is beginning to sublimate to fill the void. This is particularly the case if the thief chooses to enter the dream and mold it to a more "palatable" form before stealing it; all denizens of Beyond are composed primarily of dream essence, and can slip into dreams as easily as we would enter a room, but such dream-shaping takes time and can be detected by a nearby Archetype willing to spend an action to sense it.

A few more nights, and the target's dreams are sucked completely dry, a condition known as the Megrim. Insomnia is only the most outward sign of this malady: the sufferer is a black hole for dream energy, siphoning it away vainly from others without realizing it. This psychic vampirism can cause terrible destruction in a community, as hallucinatory madness begins to take hold on entire groups of neighbors, friends, relatives or co-workers. Those afflicted

wander in a daze through their lives, interacting with figments and unable to muster the simplest emotion.

The Enemy – Chimerae, Commoners, Castellans, and Comtesses



Many of the interlopers from Beyond are little more than beasts – but what passes for a beast in the mirror-lands is threat enough.

The general term “chimera” applies to all manner of creatures native to

the Other Side; some are amalgams of recognizable animals (called ‘hybrids’ by scholars interested in such things), while others are analogues of familiar creatures with exaggerated features (dubbed ‘reflections’). The final category, and in some ways the most dangerous, are the ‘imagoi’, dream-monsters formed from humanity’s myths.

An imago can be a dragon, a vampire, a goblin, or any other figure from lore, possessing many of the powers attributed to them by untold generations of accumulated dream-essence. Fortunately, imagoi are the least likely to leave Beyond, as they are too dream-like to survive Here for long periods.

The most common Chimerae are barely more than nuisances, having only a hand of two cards; such creatures have little energy for more than one or two special actions, and are easily dispatched by a determined bearer or

group. They typically manifest spontaneously only when a mirror or other portal between Here and Beyond is nearby. Older Chimerae, such as imagoi, or those which have had a chance to absorb dreams from several dreamers, may have more, up to five – a capable match for an Archetype one-on-one. They may lay dormant immaterially for long periods of time and make their homes in places thought haunted or otherwise charged with supernatural resonance.



Sometimes, victims of dream-theft become

susceptible to control by a being from Beyond. The emptiness in them weakens their will, and a capable entity can lure them into service either by magical persuasion or by feeding them a fleeting taste of replenished dream energy and promising more in exchange for fealty. These subverted mortals become Commoners of the realm Beyond, enslaved to serve their predators. Unable to naturally generate dream essence themselves, their dangerous ability to absorb it from others makes them an unlikely

threat to bearers.

Depending on circumstances, a Commoner may be encountered with up to three cards in hand (their maximum). These cards never replenish naturally, being stolen from their surroundings. When an Archetype directly acts against a Commoner by playing a card, the Commoner may steal that card and put it into their hand so long as the Commoner does not already have three cards. A Commoner’s mien and attitude will be influenced by the most recent



card stolen, which may provide alert bearers with clues to their whereabouts and recent activities.



Theories abound among the sages as to the origin of the servants of Beyond christened “Castellans”. It is known that they are powerful but subordinate to the Comtes and Comtesses, which leads some to believe that they are younger versions of those mysterious lords; others suggest that Commoners can glut themselves on stolen dreams and develop power such as the Castellans demonstrate. Some Castellans are seneschals in the courts of their superiors, while others seem to manage portions of their masters’ mirror-fiefs. In either case, a Castellan has a forceful personality and idiosyncratic appearance that reflects their niche as a significant inhabitant of the dream-world, though metaphysically less powerful than an Archetype.

Nearly all Castellans encountered by Archetypes prove worthy foes; they have four cards at their disposal, with one of those cards dictating the Castellan’s appearance and a single core correspondence like that of an Archetype. This correspondence gives the Castellan a unique supernatural power and forms the heart of their identity – a strength, to be sure, but also a weakness, for if this card is expended, the Castellan loses identity and fades from sight for an indeterminate time (until they can somehow replace their heart, at which point a new identity and power take shape).



Few Archetypes have encountered a Comte or Comtesse, and so little is known for certain of them. They are the most puissant known inhabitants of the lands Beyond, and thus are assumed to be the top of the hierarchy. The power of these creatures is such that entire swaths of dream-land are shaped by their presence and whim alone. If there is a guiding force behind the current conflict, it would have to be one of these mirror-lords. Each has a defined personality and title (which may not be indistinguishable – tales circulate suggesting that if a Comtesse were to be destroyed, another nearly identical one would take her mantle) which puts them in a position not unlike Archetypes.

A Comte never has fewer than five cards – and often more. They typically have a small set of core correspondences like Archetypes, through which they can act without leaving their hand depleted. Further, a Comte or Comtesse can use a card to perform special actions which encompass their entire fiefdom, often washing entire leagues of mirror-land in magic. Since it is rare indeed that a Comtesse leaves her domain willingly, even a group of concerted Archetypes may think twice about challenging one of these beings.



Glossary

Archetype: the powerful beings who exist both Here and Beyond, responsible for directing the proper flow of the universe's energies.

Bearer: the mortal who has become host to an Archetype.

Beyond: the counterpart to our physical reality; the mirror universe responsible for the Megrim.

Castellan: potent denizens of Beyond, underlings only to the Comtes and Comtesses.

Chimera: beasts of Beyond, with fantastic abilities and an evil cunning.

Clubs: the French suit keyed to creativity, will, the peasantry and the element of fire; equivalent to the Tarot suit of wands.

Commoner: either natives of Beyond who have crossed into Here, or mortals from our reality subjugated to do the bidding of those Beyond by the Megrim.

Comte/Comtesse: the supposed lords of Beyond, akin to shadow Archetypes; the energies stolen by the Megrim ultimately flow to them.

Cups: the Tarot suit keyed to emotions and empathy, the clergy and the element of water; equivalent to the Tarot suit of hearts.

Diamonds: the French suit keyed to the body, physical or material things, commerce and the merchant class, and the element of earth; equivalent to the Tarot suit of pentacles.

Hand: the cards held by a player, representing the character's health and stores of energy.

Hearts: the French suit keyed to emotions and empathy, the clergy and the element of water; equivalent to the Tarot suit of cups.

Here: our physical reality, as opposed to Beyond.

Hybrid: the variety of Chimera composed of parts from two or more disparate animals in amalgamation.

Imago: the most powerful of Chimerae; dream manifestations of legendary monsters.

Major Arcana: the Archetypes as codified by the Tarot; energy coalesced and at rest, as opposed to flowing freely.

Megrim: the infectious madness resulting from the complete exhaustion of a mortal's dreams, drained by one from Beyond (typically a Chimera or Commoner).

Minor Arcana: the Tarot cards corresponding to the flows of energy and chance in the universe.

Pentacles: sometimes called Coins, the Tarot suit keyed to the body, physical or material things, commerce and the merchant class, and the element of earth; equivalent to the Tarot suit of diamonds.

Reflection: the variety of Chimera based on a mundane creature from Here but sporting grotesque exaggerations.



Reversed: an Archetype that has inverted its basic nature to escape trauma, rather than seek a new host. The experience is traumatic for the bearer.

Shuffle: a dramatic interlude, occurring when the last card is drawn from the deck, and signaling a narrative climax for one or more characters.

Spades: the French suit keyed to physical force, reason, the military and aristocracy, and the element of air; equivalent to the Tarot suit of swords.

Swords: the Tarot suit keyed to physical force, reason, the military and aristocracy, and the element of air; equivalent to the French suit of spades.

Target: the difficulty of a contested action, as determined by the referee. Higher targets represent more difficult actions.

Wands: sometimes called Staves, the Tarot suit keyed to creativity, will, the peasantry and the element of fire; equivalent to the French suit of clubs.



Credits

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Printed in IM Fell Double Pica, IM Fell Double Pica SC, and IM Fell Flowers, recreated by Igino Marini