

Cards as inspiration for game story design

This document suggests methods and ideas to use tarot or standard playing cards as creative aid for story elements, based on traditional meanings and imagery, with focus on tabletop roleplaying games.

For **standard playing cards**, you can read Jacks as Knights, and Jokers as The Fool. If you want to use reversed meanings, you might want to mark the cards. Some tarot decks differ from the common Rider-Waite deck, due to various traditions and preferences. Your deck might have a manual to consult, but just relying on intuition is more than fine, as it is a creative endeavor after all.

Comments on using cards in game mechanics:

While this document focuses on story, story and game “crunch” are often connected. It is easy to link game mechanics to cards, and some types of plots might be particularly good fits, but you must consider the scenario and possible outcomes carefully to prevent frustrating or anticlimactic scenarios.

Example 1: In a game about collecting four rare, legendary artifacts, the party draws a card every time they find a treasure, and the artifacts correspond to one of the Aces. But if the party finds treasure frequently and draw a card every time, they might collect the artifacts very soon, and this doesn't seem suitable for the supposed rarity of the artifacts, maybe only specific treasure types allow drawing cards. Do the Aces get removed after being drawn? Is there a discard pile? If the Ace is shuffled back into the deck (for some reason), what would happen if the card gets drawn again?

Example 2: In a game about warring factions, the GM draws a card (secretly?) whenever the party meets someone new. The card's suit is the person's faction and Kings are faction leaders. Do all characters belong to exactly one faction?

Card Spreads

Single-Card: Consider a story element such as an antagonist, location, conflict, or question and draw one card. Refer to the card's listed meaning, the suit, the number, or the image to flesh out that element or to answer that question.

Multiple options of the same type: If you have a set number of options, such as three possible locations to go, or five possible people to chat to in the local tavern, draw that many cards and interpret each as the nature of said option.

Three-Cards: Draw three cards, place them left to right, interpret and connect them according to one of the following suggestions.

Antagonist - Setting - Conflict: A quick quest generator.

Past - Present - Future: For a topic, visualize its past influences, its present situation and its possible future. **This spread can be extended** with a top card representing a challenge or obstacle, and a bottom card representing a hidden aspect or opportunity.

Problem - Cause - Solution: Define a problem, its origin, and hints to solve it.

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

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 an **obstacle**, block, or challenge. What needs to be overcome? How is it revealed? Possibly a conflict or villain.

III. The third card is the **root or uncurrent of the scenario**. How did it become a problem? Is there a hidden agenda or emotion?

IV. The fourth card is the **past**. What is the backstory of the problem? How do players' or key characters' past stories actions affect the current 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?

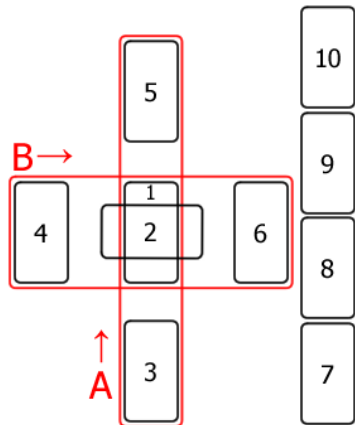
VIII. Eight is the **outside or environmental influences**. How do other people or the environment influence or complicate the scenario?

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?

Path A goes from Three, to One, to Five. It is the shift from subconscious to conscious, a "push-and-pull" between the actions of "enemy" and the player do.

Path B goes from Four, to Two, to Six. It is a narrative from start 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 the people?

III. The third card is **attitudes**. What are the attitudes or beliefs of people, what do they value or fear? Beliefs 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 others or their connection to other locations? What is the people's relationship to the land? 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?

Path A goes from Three, to One, to Five. It is the shift from cultural to personal. It may tell how people engage with public life, politics, subcultures, or counterculture.

Path B goes from Four, to Two, to Six, from past to future. What does it say about the relationship of the setting to time, the calendar, holidays, or death?

Some questions to use as guidance:

- **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, hinder, teach, challenge, or entertain the players?

- **For an ADVENTURE HOOK:**

1. How does the situation present itself or involve the players?
2. How will pursuing the hook reveal a larger storyline?
3. How does the scenario hook the players with personal stakes, emotional appeals, enticing rewards, or railroading?

- **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 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? Why cannot this conflict be solved through communication?

- **For a COMPLICATION or ESCALATION:**

1. What is the difficulty of the complication? How does it complicate the story?
2. What can it reveal, advance, or reflect about the larger story?
3. What must the heroes do, overcome, contend with or engage with to proceed?

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

1. How is it encountered and why, or what is the look, feel, or type of item?
2. What is its origin or how is it revealed? What clues can it give about the plot?
3. What does it offer the players, the ability to " - ", protection from " - ", a clue, or how do the players use or decipher it?





Major arcana:

Note that “R:” denotes the meaning for a reversal (card drawn upside down).

<p>0. The Fool / Joker: New beginnings, risk-taking, innocence, optimism. R: Recklessness, being unprepared.</p>	<p>XI. Justice: Fairness, truth, cause and effect, deserved fate, legal issues. R: Injustice, dishonesty, imbalance.</p>
<p>I. The Magician: Skill, having the needed tools, power, resourcefulness. R: Manipulation, poor planning, trickery, untapped potential.</p>	<p>XII. The Hanged Man: Suspension, letting go, new perspectives, surrender, sacrifice, being stuck. R: Resistance, indecision, stalling.</p>
<p>II. The High Priestess: Intuition, mystery, subconscious, inner wisdom. R: Lack of insight, hidden agendas.</p>	<p>XIII. Death: Endings, transformation, renewal, ending leads to a beginning. R: Fear of change, stagnation.</p>
<p>III. The Empress: Abundance, nurturing, fertility, beauty, nature. R: Dependence, smothering, neglect.</p>	<p>XIV. Temperance: Balance, patience, self-restraint, moderation. R: Imbalance, excess, overindulgence.</p>
<p>IV. The Emperor: Authority, structure, stability, organization, solidity, a ruler. R: Tyranny, rigidity, power struggles.</p>	<p>XV. The Devil: Addition, temptation, materialism, bad habits, bondage. R: Freedom, release, detachment.</p>
<p>V. The Hierophant: Tradition, belief, spirituality, guidance, conformity. R: Rebellion, unconventionality.</p>	<p>XVI. The Tower: Upheaval, unwanted change, revelation, chaos. R: Avoiding disaster, fear of change.</p>
<p>VI. The Lovers: Relationships, love, choices, alignment of values, major decisions, a life changing turning point. R: Disharmony, imbalance, separation.</p>	<p>XVII. The Star: Hope, inspiration, serenity, healing, spirituality, purpose, renewal. R: Despair, lack of faith, disconnection.</p>
<p>VII. The Chariot: Determination, drive, autonomy, an earned victory. R: Lost control, aggression, giving up.</p>	<p>XVIII. The Moon: Illusion, fear, dreams, intuition, hidden danger. R: Clarity, release of fear.</p>
<p>VIII. Strength: Courage, strength in all forms, inner strength, self-care. R: Self-doubt, weakness, raw emotion.</p>	<p>XIX. The Sun: Success, improvement, growth, positivity, vitality, joy. R: Negativity, sadness, setbacks.</p>
<p>IX. The Hermit: Solitude, introspection, inner guide, self-knowledge, wisdom. R: Isolation, withdrawal, reject help.</p>	<p>XX. Judgement: Rebirth, inner calling, a higher calling, forgiveness, absolution. R: Self-doubt, ignoring a calling.</p>
<p>X. Wheel of Fortune: Luck, fate, cycles, change, inevitability of fate. R: Bad luck, resist change, bad cycles.</p>	<p>XXI. The World: Completion of the journey, accomplishment, travel, unity. R: Incompletion, lack of closure.</p>

Minor arcana, summary:

To interpret a card’s meaning, consider the number/face and the suit together. Read reversals as the opposite or as an unexpected twist of the upright meaning.

A – Potential	5 - Adversity	9 - Fruition	Kn/J - Action
2 – Duality	6 - Support	10 - Completion	Q – Influence
3 - Growth	7 - Faith	Pg - Message	K - Authority
4 - Stability	8 - Movement		
 Wands/Batons - Willpower, creativity. Fire. Artisans.		 Swords/Blades - Intellect, logic. Air. Nobles and military.	
 Cups/Chalices - Emotion, relationships. Water. Clergy.		 Pentacles/Coins - Possessions, career. Earth. Merchants.	

Minor arcana, expanded:

	Wands ♣ - Creativity, passion, action, willpower		Cups ♥ - Emotions, relationships, spiritual matters	
	Element: Fire	Class: Artisans	Element: Water	Class: Clergy
A	Inspiration, new opportunities, potential for action. R: Lack of energy, missed chances.		Emotional fulfillment, new relationships, spiritual insight, love. R: Blocked emotions, repressed feelings, emptiness.	
2	Planning, making decisions. R: Fear of the unknown, playing it safe.		Partnership, harmony, attraction. R: Imbalance, disconnection, breakups, misunderstandings.	
3	Progress, expansion. R: Delays, lack of foresight, obstacles.		Celebration, friendship. R: Overindulgence, isolation.	
4	Celebration, harmony. R: Conflict, lack of support, instability, cancelled plans.		Apathy, contemplation, boredom, missed opportunities. R: New outlook, seizing opportunities.	
5	Conflict, competition. R: Avoiding conflict by compromise, tension, inner conflict.		Loss, regret, disappointment. R: Acceptance, moving on, forgiveness.	
6	Success, public recognition. R: Lack of recognition, fall from grace, ego issues, self-doubt.		Nostalgia, childhood memories, innocence, playfulness. R: Stuck in the past, moving forward.	
7	Standing ground, perseverance. R: Giving up, being overwhelmed, being too defensive, feeling attacked.		Choices, illusions, fantasies. R: Clarity, overwhelm by options, action.	
8	Swift movement, progress. R: Delays, frustration, chaos, miscommunication.		Walking away, seeking deep meaning. R: Fear of change, staying in a bad situation, emotional stagnation.	
9	Resilience, persistence, boundaries. R: Exhaustion, defensiveness, paranoia.		Contentment, emotional satisfaction, a wish fulfilled. R: Dissatisfaction, materialism, greed.	
10	Burden, responsibility, hard work. R: Overwhelm, avoiding responsibility.		Happiness, fulfillment, harmony. R: Misalignment, broken relationships.	
Pg	Enthusiasm, discovery. R: Lack of direction, setbacks, procrastination, lack of follow-through.		Creative opportunities, emotional expression, intuition. R: Emotional immaturity, insecurity.	
Kn / J	Adventure, action, passion, drive. R: Impulsiveness, recklessness, lack of direction, delays in action.		Romance, charm, idealism. R: Moodiness, unrealistic expectations.	
Q	Confidence, independence. R: Insecurity, jealousy, demanding too much, controlling behaviour.		Compassion, emotional security. R: Emotional insecurity, codependency.	
K	Leadership, vision, honour. R: Impulsiveness, overbearing nature, ruthlessness, arrogance.		Emotional balance, diplomacy. R: Emotional manipulation, volatility.	

Swords ♠ - reason, logic, wisdom, and intellect		Pentacles ♦ - possessions, career, finances, the body, material matters	
Element: Air	Class: Nobles, military	Element: Earth	Class: Merchants
A	Clarity, new ideas, breakthrough. R: Confusion, lack of communication, miscommunication, chaos.	New opportunity, prosperity. R: Lost opportunity, financial delay, scarcity.	
2	Indecision, stalemate, difficult choices, avoidance. R: Confusion, information overload.	Balance, multitasking, adaptability. R: Overwhelm, disorganization, financial instability, over-commitment.	
3	Heartbreak, betrayal, grief. R: Healing, overcoming sadness.	Teamwork, skill development. R: Lack of teamwork, poor quality, misalignment, lack of effort.	
4	Rest, recovery, solitude. R: Burnout, stagnation, restlessness.	Security, control, saving money. R: Greed, possessiveness, fear of loss.	
5	Conflict, betrayal. R: Reconciliation, unresolved conflict, lingering resentment, self-sabotage.	Hardship, poverty, isolation. R: Recovery, relief, end of hardship.	
6	Transition, moving on, progress. R: Resistance to change, unresolved issues, emotional baggage.	Generosity, charity, sharing wealth. R: Selfishness, debt, inequality, exploitation, strings attached to help.	
7	Deception, strategy, stealth. R: Caught out, making amends, imposter syndrome, guilt.	Long-term investment, patience, assessment, hard work paying off. R: Impatience, wasted effort.	
8	Restriction, feeling trapped, victim mentality, powerlessness. R: Freedom, releasing fears.	Mastery, skill development, focus. R: Perfectionism, lack of focus, unrewarding work, cutting corners.	
9	Anxiety, nightmares, guilt, despair. R: Overcoming fears, healing, self-compassion, letting go of worry.	Independence, self-sufficiency. R: Overinvestment, financial setbacks, overindulgence.	
10	Betrayal, painful endings, collapse. R: Recovery, regeneration, survival.	Wealth, legacy, family success. R: Financial failure, instability, family conflict, loss of security.	
Pg	Curiosity, mental agility, restless. R: Gossipy, all talk no action.	Ambition, financial opportunity. R: Laziness, missed chances.	
Kn / J	Ambition, action, focus, drive. R: Recklessness, impatience, not thinking before action.	Hard work, routine, reliability. R: Stubbornness, lack of progress.	
Q	Independent thought, clear boundaries, direct communication. R: Cold, overly critical, harsh, distant.	Nurturing, practical, security, care. R: Work-life imbalance, financial dependence, neglect.	
K	Authority, truth, discipline, integrity. R: Manipulation, tyrannical behaviour, abuse of power, rigid thinking.	Wealth, discipline, leadership. R: Corruption, greed, indulgence, financial mismanagement.	