

The GameMaster's Apprentice Universal Instructions Document

by Nathan Rockwood



The GameMaster's Apprentice

Universal Instructions Document

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INTRODUCTION

What this deck is

The GameMaster's Apprentice decks are tools for Game Masters, storytellers, and solo-gamers. Each card contains over a dozen randomizers that can be combined to generate characters, encounters, or even whole adventures--which the deck itself can also be used to run for one or more players, without a human Game Master.

While each randomizer has a specific purpose for which it was designed, I did my best to make the cards as flexible as possible. How the deck is used, be it during adventure prep or for on-the-fly content creation, depends entirely upon the needs of the group, Game Master, or player using them.

I made these cards for two reasons. First, I wanted to make it easier (as a GM) to access random tables, and I find a deck of cards faster than hunting through books and comparing them to the results of dice rolls. Second, as my group's usual GM, I wanted a system that could let me play a solo game with the 'fairness' of an outside arbiter, while avoiding the limited options found in most computer- and game-book-based RPGs.

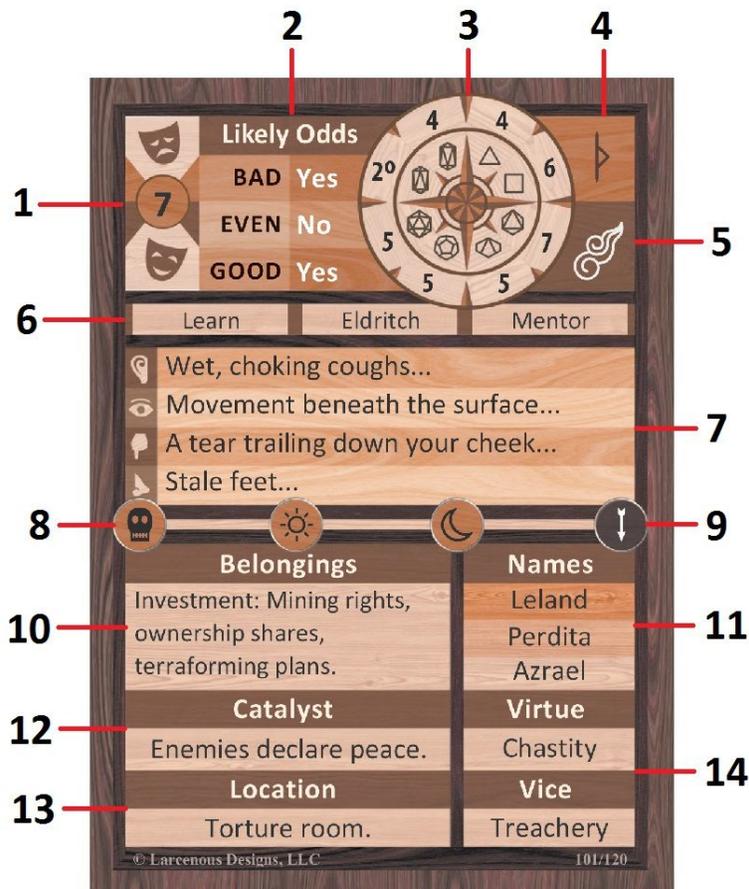
Hopefully, with a bit of imagination, a sense of fun, and maybe a character sheet from a game system of your choice, you'll find that they work for you as well as they work for me!

What these instructions are

Because the GameMaster's Apprentice (GMA) is meant to be flexible, there isn't a right or wrong way to use the cards. While these instructions describe their contents, I could never include all the possible uses they have. I'll give you some examples and explain my thinking, but if you're the sort of gamer who is interested in randomizer cards at all, chances are that you're already thinking of ways they might be helpful. I suggest skimming the rest of this Introduction, and then only referring to the rest if you want to see how I do things in my games.

What is on the cards: The Randomizer Breakdown

Here is a brief overview of the GMA's randomizers, with a few suggestions for use. Please note that while the art varies, the systems are the same on all of the decks, except for Demon Hunters (which replaces two icon sets) and Fantasy (which adds one); for the differences, see the Appendix at the end of this document.



1) Difficulty Generator

2) Likely Odds

3) Dice

4) Norse Runes

5) Elemental Symbols

6) Random Event Generator

7) Sensory Snippets

8) Tag Symbols

9) Scatter Die

10) Belongings

11) Names

12) Catalyst

13) Location

14) Virtue and Vice

1) Difficulty Generator

The Difficulty Generator is named for its original purpose, but it can do many things. This field is a bell-curved 1-10 number generator. This is great for anything which is probably going to be “average:” the relative difficulty of picking a given lock, how friendly a random stranger is to the PCs, or even how powerful that random stranger happens to be. Most results will fall in the 5-6 or 4-7 range, and there is a less-than-1% chance of a 1 or 10.

2) Likely Odds

When you need the answer to a Yes/No question, you can draw here for a “fair” random result. Yes, you could just roll a die and use the ‘evens or odds’ method, but that actually takes longer--and for me, at least, after I roll I can never remember what which one meant ‘yes.’

Also, the possible answers here include critical or ‘emphatic’ results; the range is: YES!/Yes/No/NO!

The three sub-categories (Bad, Even, and Good) stand for how likely the answer is to be positive (YES! or Yes). ‘Bad’ means there is only a 25% chance of a positive answer; ‘Even’ gives a 50% chance; and ‘Good’ indicates a 75% chance of positive results.

This field can literally be treated like an ‘apprentice’ Game Master. Ask leading questions that seem appropriate (Is there an orc in the room? Do sensor sweeps detect any life signs on the derelict spacecraft?) and your adventure will unfold practically on its own.

3) Dice

The results of dice rolls, starting with a d4, as marked by the triangle symbol in the 1 o’clock position, followed by d6, d8, d10, d12, d20, and finished with a d00 and d10 pair, for percentile rolls. These are handy for a quick number without revealing what dice you are rolling, or when dice are inconvenient for some reason. However, they have one major flaw: dice pools. Unless you shuffle and redraw for each die, the draw isn't going to be as random as it should be; for one to three cards it should be fine, but don’t draw too many more before you reshuffle. This is partly why there are effectively three d10s, if you count the percentile pair, on each card; it makes it easier to play a game with a d10-pool system, since each card can be three dice.

4) Norse Runes

The 24 runes of Elder Futhark, commonly represented in fiction and fortune-telling as ‘the’ Norse runes, are here for when you feel like some symbolic interpretation. Like the more commonly-seen Tarot deck, these runes can serve to suggest ideas and concepts. Their presence is inspired by classic games like *Everway*, which use Tarot-like interpretation as a primary resolution mechanic. See the Icon Systems section, below, for more details. Also, the Demon Hunters deck replaces this system.

5) Elemental Symbols

The four elements (at least, those most often seen in fantasy fiction) of Earth, Fire, Air, and Water have been imbued with cultural and cross-cultural connotations over the years. While you will probably not draw for them on their own very often, I use them to color my interpretations of the other randomizers, suggesting mood or style; "Disaster Strikes/City Suburbs" can mean something very different if flavored by Earth (an earthquake) rather than Fire (...a fire), for example. Like the Norse Runes, this system is replaced in the Demon Hunters deck.

6) Random Event Generator

Generating random situations is at the heart of the GMA. These three keywords (a verb, adjective, and noun) combine into one of 1.7+ million (if you draw a new card for each word) possible phrases; with the phrase and the current in-game situation in mind, you decide what the cards are suggesting happens next. For example, "Discover/Obscure/Sanctuary" could suggest the players just stumbled into either a lost temple or a hidden panic-room, depending on your genre.

7) Sensory Snippets

From top to bottom, these four descriptions are something to hear, see, feel (physically or otherwise), or smell/taste. A simple way to use these is to draw one card when the players do anything related to observation (searching a room, keeping watch at night, etc) and consider if any of the snippets apply. However, these are also useful when generating random content; what a person or place smells like can tell you a lot about them!

8) Tag Symbols

Here you find three out of ten images that exist in a different combination on each card ('10 choose 3' is the mathematical operation). These symbols can tell you a lot if you want to use them, but they are best when you have created a list for what they mean in a given situation.

For example, in an investigative game, each symbol might represent a different kind of discovery during a search for clues; in a fantasy dungeon crawl, they could be used with multiple tables to first populate a room with baddies (each symbol suggesting a monster, trap, or dungeon feature), and then their treasure trove (another table could show what value, type, or power level of loot is found for each symbol). Of course, you can have that list entirely in your head or come from interpretation of the images, to avoid table-searching.

9) Scatter Die

This shows 8 directional arrows, a direct hit (an explosion or star), and a miss (a single "-" dash line). Traditionally used for the direction a grenade misses in, it can also be used to map out random dungeons (showing the direction of the next door, with hits and misses being dead ends, staircases, or similar), tell you where that screaming sound is coming from, or anything else directional. This makes it useful in a solo dungeon-crawl scenario.

10) Belongings

Initially conceived of as a way to make pickpocketing and looting more interesting, the Belongings field can also be used as part of the random character generator. Each card has a different category listed first; the three examples that follow the category are just meant to help clarify the intent and give you some ideas.

11) Names

One of the simplest generators, and the one that started it all. Each card has three names, intended to represent a variety of real and fantastical naming conventions and cultures; and while the cultural setting of a game does indeed play a role in what names will be associated with what genders, the names are meant to include one probably-masculine, one probably-feminine, and one potentially-gender-neutral name per card.

12) Catalysts

The random event generator mentioned above is something I love, but it is intentionally vague and relies on interpretation. The Catalyst box is meant to be a much more specific (but, of course, more limited) way to trigger ideas for story seeds and random encounters. While there are only 120 different Catalysts, if you combine one with a Location, a Sensory Snippet, or a Tag Symbol draw, you can still create millions of variations.

13) Locations

Best used during prep or when the players hear about a distant location (because the one you draw may not mesh with the current location of the party), these can help you come up with places to adventure that you wouldn't have immediately thought of.

Because the Locations are specific enough to sometimes clash with an ongoing game's needs, consider modifying the drawn location with an adjective from the Random Event Generator, or a sensory snippet, to give it a fresh tone or further detail. "Orphanage" plus the adjective "Mystical" might become a home for wayward fey children, a place a young sorcerer has been hidden away, or simply fairy-tale-like in how awesome it is (perhaps being run by a fairy godmother turned to public service).

14) Virtue and Vice

These are primarily to help flesh out character personality, but any time you want to suggest a motivation (for a villain, hero, or random NPC), you can draw for one or the other (or both). For example, if someone hires the party to go clear out the nearby goblin camp, they might be motivated by revenge (Wrath), or desire for a particular treasure the goblins have (Envy), and the difference can be significant to your ongoing story if the players try to figure it out.

However, there is one mechanical issue here: while each individual Virtue and Vice appears equally throughout the deck, the combinations on the cards are not equally distributed, which is why

they are on the cards in separate fields. What this means, practically speaking, is that if you draw one card for both the Virtue AND the Vice, you wind up with a result that slightly favors certain combinations--for true randomness, draw one card for each.

HOW TO USE THESE CARDS

However you want. Seriously, go to town. But if you want to hear how *I* use these cards, here are my thoughts.

"Fairness"

First, a note on fairness. Whether you are using the cards to generate a story for an upcoming session, randomizing answers on the fly, or running a solo game for yourself, you may sometimes be tempted to replace a card you draw with a second one. Or a third. Or a fourth...

Is this 'cheating?'

That depends.

The golden rule in these cases is that the cards should keep things fun and interesting, and should NEVER spoil your enjoyment of your game.

For some people, this will mean that redrawing the occasional card is totally fine, if the results would otherwise drag the story down. To help reduce the likelihood of this (since it still takes up time), I strongly recommend this guideline: If there is a possible result or option that will ruin the game, eliminate it BEFORE rolling a die or drawing a card. If character death would spoil your fun, replace that outcome with capture, maiming, loss of gear, or some other consequence, and THEN roll or draw. That way, you won't have to retcon anything.

However, for some people, the "real" danger of losing a character, or being sometimes unable to alter the outcome of an event, is important to the experience. If you fall into this category, I suggest you set a specific rule beforehand. Some games already include a karma/fate/plot/benny point system that lets players make rerolls, change the story, and so on; if your game does, make rules for how those points can or cannot let you redraw cards (or simply alter the results without redrawing). If your game doesn't have anything like that, perhaps consider allowing one redraw of one card per game session, in-game night, or chapter of a story.

Genre and Tone

The GameMaster's Apprentice Base Deck is intended to be a genre-neutral, tone-neutral aid, and while the variant decks each have a genre, they are still meant to cover a wide variety of tones and settings. Regardless of the exact world of your game, the decks should be able to support your play.

However, the curse of neutrality is that it is, by nature, sometimes going to be too generic for your tastes. Alternatively, it may present something badly-tuned for what you wanted.

There are two fairly obvious solutions: either draw again, or reinterpret the card you drew.

Drawing again can be frustrating, and while I sometimes go that route, I suggest the second option as the better of the two.

The GMA is designed to give you direction and guidance, but it relies on you to at least fill in the gaps. If you draw a result that is inappropriate for a reason of genre or tone, but you want to 'play fair' and keep the card, simply go with the most similar, but appropriate, idea you can think of.

For example, if a card suggests that a character exploring a new planet smells 'Fresh Popcorn,' you could say to them, "You smell something rich, almost buttery, in the air." On the other hand, if the character is in a medieval marketplace and you don't think popcorn would be available, simply saying "The delicious smell of buttery treats fills market square" covers the same idea.

Primary Systems

These are the things I most often use the cards for. They can be used on the fly, before play, or in any combination. Though they are all vital to using the deck as a solo game engine, that situation gets its own section, further below.

Generally, these systems require the use of more than one field from the cards, and not all fields are used equally (or at all) in the systems I describe. All of the systems are meant to work together, though, and you can combine and interweave them with any of the fields in any way you wish.

Answering Yes/No Questions

If you need the answer to a Yes/No question, draw a card for the answer and look at the 'Even' Likely Odds field.

That's the easiest version, but it can get a bit more complicated if you want it to; you can decide that the critical results of YES! and NO! have particularly spectacular results, and you can refer to the 'Bad' Likely Odds if there's only a 25% chance of the answer being 'yes,' or to the 'Good' odds for a 75% chance of 'yes.'

There are many situations that might call for a draw here; let's talk about a few of them.

The first is pure player curiosity. If the players want to know the details of something you haven't planned, but which isn't critical to the game, consider drawing for it with whatever odds you think would make the game most fun for the players. Is the bartender bald? Is it a nice day out? Can I find a four-leaf clover?

A little more important are questions about suddenly-crucial details. If the question has a potential impact on the game, but making the decision yourself would feel like you were cheating or biasing the result, you need to be a little more careful. Don't word the question in a way that ruins the game if you get the 'wrong' result, and carefully consider whether you should have Bad, Even, or Good odds of drawing a 'yes.' Does the guard happen to be looking in this direction? Is the backup generator fully fueled when the power gets cut? Is there a real doctor in this village?

In terms of helping the game move forward, you can also ask questions about modifying cards: If you've just drawn for something else, and you have an idea that sounds a bit too implausible, or you have more than one strong idea of what could happen, then you can draw for an answer to clarify things. I do this a lot when building important NPCs or story seeds ahead of time. Does being Charitable and Fraudulent mean that this character is like Robin Hood? Does 'Destroy/Nearby/Government' mean the city government, as opposed to the kingdom, is overthrown? Does combining the Catalyst 'Naked Man' with the Location 'Museum' mean that there is one of those performance-art installations? If **No**, then I guess a patron is just VERY drunk....

Even in a planned game, using a pre-written adventure, I find plenty of opportunity to draw for Yes/No answers. Sometimes players are curious about details that would never have occurred to a GM to prepare for; sometimes they pursue a line of reasoning before the GM has a chance to sort it out; and, of course, sometimes the GM simply won't have prepared enough adventure for ambitious players.

Creating NPCs

Many GMs are accustomed to creating the NPCs they need for an adventure, but I find that I tend to fall into easy patterns and reuse tropes more often than not when my players decide to encounter an NPC I *didn't* need for the game, and thus did not spend time thinking about. There are a few standard barkeeps, stealthy rangers, and slightly-mad wizards that my adventuring parties just seem to keep running into....

So, to mix things up a bit (either when planning a game or when the party approaches someone for whom you have little detail), I use this quick method.

First, draw a card for a Virtue and Vice combination (draw one card for each if you want to be truly random). This tells you a little about their basic motivations, but will have to be tempered by context.

Second, draw a card for Belongings, to see what sort of thing they either have on them or are strongly associated with (for example, a Military Weapon suggests the character may be a soldier, but if you encounter them as a prisoner in a dungeon, they probably don't have that weapon on them right now).

Third, draw a card for names, and pick one to go with the character; sometimes names can add to the picture, if they are particularly meaningful.

Try to fit the draws together in context, and you're done! Unless you want to make things more complicated, of course.

You can flesh out details of personality and appearance by drawing for Sensory Snippets, and considering all four on one card; pick one that calls out to you as appropriate. Often, the way someone smells or looks, or a sound or feeling you associate with them, will be extremely telling. Similarly, you could draw for an adjective (from the verb/adjective/noun trio of words in the Random Event Generator), and apply it to the character.

If you want to randomly decide how the NPC reacts to the party, in the style of old-school RPG 'Reaction Rolls,' draw and look at the Difficulty and Reaction Generator; 5-6 is neutral, 1 is love at first sight, and 10 is a fight to the death--of course, the specific reaction at high or low levels should be adjusted to fit your situation, but you get the idea.

And, likewise, if you don't know how strong this NPC should be, you could again draw from the Difficulty Generator, though you have to decide first if this is an absolute or relative comparison. In a relative draw, 5-6 means they are about the same strength as the PCs, while 10 represents a massively more powerful character, and 1 someone much weaker. In an absolute draw, 1 might represent a starting-level character, 5-6 a mid-level, and 10 a demigod, regardless of the players' current status.

Creating Random Events

I love writing plot-heavy adventures and stories for my players, but sometimes I get stuck, or I find myself unintentionally copying a pattern I know well, from fiction or previous games. I created this Random Event Generator as a way to solve those issues, as well as to help me run solo-games.

I've gone through several different iterations of the generator, experimenting with different combinations of randomizers, and the current version (a verb, adjective, and noun on each card) is the simplest and most effective I've come up with. Which isn't to say it is perfect--I'm always looking for the next, better idea--but it works well enough that between it and some of the decks' other fields, I've run complete solo campaigns without feeling either bored or that the story was incoherent (which is more than I can say for some campaigns I've planned out entirely on my own).

To begin, I draw two cards, first for a verb, and then a noun. This produces results like "Discover Plan" or "Heal Treasure." Consider the results in context. Any flashes of insight? In a game with an important artifact already broken, "Heal Treasure" could indicate the first clue in how to repair it; alternatively, it could indicate the discovery of some vast source of healing, like a fountain of regenerative water. If nothing occurs to you, draw a third card for the adjective and apply it to the noun ("Discover Ancient Plan" or "Heal Terrifying Treasure"). You can draw for all three right away, of course, but I find that sometimes the extra information actually diverts me from a more sensible idea.

Once you have a rough idea, work the suggested event into the story in a way that makes sense--it doesn't have to occur instantaneously, or immediately nearby. "Destroy Government" could indicate a coup in the nearest city or kingdom, which would have an impact on the players only when they hear about it--they could return home to find it occupied, or encounter deserting soldiers on the road, or similar. If I have an idea that I'm not sure about (usually because I think it might be either too unlikely, or it would be too helpful to my character in a solo game and I don't want to feel like I'm cheating), I draw for a Yes/No answer to let the deck decide.

If you were trying to create a random event on the fly, but nothing at all leaps out at you from the cards (or the only things you can think of would break the game/the story/your enjoyment), either redraw one or more cards or, officially, nothing happens--no random event occurs! Don't waste time agonizing over it.

And, as with characters, you can get even more detail if you want to draw more cards. If you want guidance about how important the event should be, draw for the Difficulty Generator. 5-6 indicate the event is as serious as a level-appropriate combat encounter (even if it isn't dangerous itself); higher numbers indicate more serious, game-changing results, while lower numbers indicate fluff, window-dressing, or minor descriptive vignettes.

Sometimes, the event's key words make more sense if you have a concrete description of something to start with. Draw a card and read all four Sensory Snippets to see if they spark any ideas; incorporate one or more of them into the event. You could also use the Catalysts, Locations, or Belongings to add flavor.

Creating Story Seeds

The difference between a random event and a story seed is one of scale, rather than necessarily one of technique. A random event is usually something you try to work into an ongoing story in a way that doesn't completely change it (because you don't want to *randomly* disrupt the plot); a story seed is where you can have more important, world-or-game-changing results, since you are launching a new tale, adventure, or even campaign.

I suggest two possibilities:

First, you could use the exact method as the Random Event Generator, above, but also draw for a Location and work it into the story (usually as either a starting place or a place the players must go to right away). Don't be afraid to let your imagination really run wild, since you don't have to work the event into an ongoing story!

Second, if that doesn't work and you want some more particular information without drawing a ton of cards, I suggest that you draw three cards and set them in a row. Read all three sets of Catalysts and Locations. Pick one of each, in whatever combination seems best (even if they are both on the same card). This describes the kicking-off point for the story, and may tell you a good deal about what is to come.

Next, read the Sensory Snippets on the first card; pick one or more to use and apply them to the Catalyst/Location combo. This should help you add some detail to what is going on.

Then look at the Virtue and Vice combinations on each card; pick one set to represent the character who first gets the players involved (they could be a victim, antagonist, or quest-giver); also pick a Belongings set and a Name for them from within the options presented, and use the Sensory Snippets on the second card to flesh them out a little more.

If that tells you what you need to know, jot down the details and go with it! If you want more specifics, with these things in mind, ask Yes/No questions and draw for answers, or use the Tag Symbols (symbolically, or with a table!) to flesh the seed out a bit.

For more ground to work with, you could draw additional cards to create more NPCs until you have a villain, a victim, and a 'visitor' (a friend or acquaintance for the PCs). This gives you a lot more randomness and can launch a story rich with detail.

Oh, and if you find yourself always creating the same kinds of adventures, consider drawing an Elemental symbol and plan on the first part of the game having a play-style focus based on the result: Fire = Combat, Water = Intrigue, Earth = Mystery, Air = Exploration.

The Little Engine: Running NPCs or encounters on the fly

In order to keep things moving, sometimes I use the cards to make decisions quickly, even when I could make them myself just as easily. If you want to use the cards to run an NPC or make decisions about how an encounter plays out, I suggest you can use the Difficulty Generator and Likely Odds fields to sort out many issues very quickly.

Because you are acting as the GM and just drawing cards for some additional support, this is probably the easiest way to use them. You can veto any nonsensical results, redraw if you wish, and just move on whenever you need to, so I actually find myself drawing for 'suggestions' practically every time a player asks a question, just to see if the results are more interesting than whatever I had planned.

However, one important tip is to let common sense reign. If you are starting with a blank-slate NPC, almost any action or decision of theirs can be explained; but once they have an established personality and goals, answers usually suggest themselves, and you won't need to draw any more.

A few other tips for deciding what happens when you have an unplanned NPC or encounter on the field: Naturally, you can start by drawing Difficulties for how powerful or hostile the NPC or situation is, and Likely Odds to answer questions about them. If you have no idea where to start, draw a card and look at the Sensory Snippets; use at least one of them to generate something (the sound of chains might indicate an arrest being made). And if you want more general inspiration, draw for the Tag Symbols (see the next section, on the icon systems) and use the results to indicate what is going on; the example table in that section could work for this.

As an example, let's say the party camps in a forest, and you want to have something happen that night, but you can only think of the same things you've done before: They are startled awake by something that turns out to be harmless; bandits or other monsters attack; or a weary traveler shows up. So, instead, you draw the Tag Symbols, and get a Skull (Impending loss), Shield (Protection), and Target (A distant goal).

If you can't think of any other 'impending loss,' to me that often reads as danger of some kind (because danger begets loss). So some kind of danger, plus protection and a distant goal... while you could interpret this in many other ways, my mind goes to a sudden change in the weather that indicates an onrushing storm (possibly even a hurricane, tornado, or magical disaster). The party senses the weather changing, and they know that the only safe haven within miles is a distant... cave? Or perhaps they can see a run-down mansion at the top of that distant hill, and they just might be able to make it there in time to shelter safely....

That sounds much more interesting than another bandit attack.

Icon Systems

While the text fields of the cards are relatively simple to interpret, the images in the icon fields might take a little more practice, at least in some cases. If you find that the images and symbols are unhelpful, just remember: There is no wrong way to use the cards, so do what you want--and that includes skipping parts of them entirely.

Norse Runes

I usually bring these into the game when I want yet another, different way to randomize the details, tone, or direction of something. They aren't necessary for any of the core systems of the GameMaster's Apprentice, but you could use them in any game to give you suggestions, or you could base a narrative game system entirely around them as a primary mechanic.

To modify or enhance your content the way I usually do, draw one card and apply its meaning to the current situation as sensibly as you can. If you want to do more with them, you'll need to treat them like Tarot cards: a set of symbols that need to be interpreted in combination with each other and the current situation.

The Elder Futhark alphabet is itself very old, but (as far as I can learn) other than one or two runes and words that poems and inscriptions indicate had symbolic uses (such as carving them onto amulets or swords), there isn't actually any solid evidence for their original use being fortune telling in the modern manner (which is basically an invention of the late 20th century, and was intentionally based on Tarot-style interpretations).

So, because there is no 'original meaning' to draw on, and to avoid violating anyone's copyright, the version I give here is my own, and is based loosely on versions I've been introduced to by those better versed in those modern runic systems than I am. If you prefer to give the symbols different interpretations, that is entirely up to you!

The First Eight (Freyja's Aett)

	Fehu	Livestock/Wealth: Property, prosperity, fertility, increase, social success. In-Game: Treasure found, quest rewards doled out, or a great opportunity for success (meeting or helping someone powerful, an easy quest, etc).
	Uruz	Auroch/Wild Ox: Energy, health, strength, tenacity, and courage. In-Game: A character of great physical prowess; a situation that requires strength or courage; an ability that boosts health, energy, or strength.
	Thurisaz	Thor/Giant: Reactionary, defensive destruction. Instinct, willpower, and regeneration; lightning, electricity. In-Game: A powerful but protective force or character; lightning or electrical power; an actual giant; thorns, or armor that damages attackers.
	Ansuz	Ancestral Spirit/A God: Revelation, insight, communication, truth, power of words and names; divine intervention. In-Game: Contact from a spirit or god; priest or cleric; temple; holy relic.
	Raido	Wagon/Journey: Travel, evolution, moving forward, gaining perspective. In-Game: A quest! A journey for the sake of some greater objective, leveling up or gaining power, learning an important secret, or other forms of evolution.
	Kenaz	Beacon/Torch: Creativity, inspiration, harnessed power, world-changing ability. In-Game: Gaining powers, creating new technology, discovering or researching something powerful. Artifacts, ancient forces, etc.
	Gebo	Gift/Exchanges: Generosity, balance, contracts, relationships, partnerships. In-Game: A good deal, a boon in exchange for fair work, the beginning of a new team, relationship, or business venture; charity.
	Wunjo	Joy/Happiness: Harmony, spiritual reward, pleasure, comfort, glory. In-Game: A reward in the form of a spiritual boon, the gaining of fame and glory, or luxuries and pleasures, as opposed to treasure or power.

The Second Eight (Heimdall's Aett)

	Hagalaz	<p>Hail/Weather: Uncontrollable forces, such as nature, the unconscious mind; crisis that comes before harmony.</p> <p>In-Game: Terrible weather or other natural (or unnatural) disaster strikes; powers or abilities are blown out of control; devices or artifacts malfunction.</p>
	Naudiz	<p>Need/Distress: Resistance, requirements to be met, endurance, patience, survival, a trial or test.</p> <p>In-Game: A random encounter or other situation that delays the quest; being forced to deal with bureaucracy or red-tape; the discovery that your almost-complete quest requires an extra step, waiting, or backtracking.</p>
	Isaz	<p>Ice/Frustration: Mental blocks; confusion needing to be unravelled; cannot progress until more knowledge is gained.</p> <p>In-Game: A puzzle, riddle, or confusing situation casts doubt on what the next step must be. A question must be answered, a guide must be found, or similar.</p>
	Jera	<p>Good Year/Harvest: Effort realized, fruitful results, an end to stagnancy, hope, earned success, cycles of time and life.</p> <p>In-Game: Some kind of recent effort pays off (or pays off MORE); the next step is made clear, or a roadblock is removed.</p>
	Eihwaz	<p>Yew Tree/Reliability: Dependability, trustworthiness; defense and protection; honesty; well-chosen goals that will be accomplished.</p> <p>In-Game: Something low-level in importance is accomplished easily or even automatically; friends and allies come through for you.</p>
	Perthro	<p>Dice Cup/Mystery: Chance, secrets, hidden things, the occult; initiation, sense of destiny; setting out on the path.</p> <p>In-Game: Discover of a mystery or a secret; magical or unknowable powers get involved; it seems the character(s) have a destiny that is yet to be realized, be it political, spiritual, or arcane.</p>
	Algiz	<p>Elk/Protection: Shield, shelter, defense, wards against evil, a guardian; connection to the gods or higher states of being.</p> <p>In-Game: A place of shelter is discovered, or a protector offers their services; rescued in the nick of time, or saved by what seems to be some kind of divine force.</p>
	Sowilo	<p>The Sun/Life-Force: Success, honor, life, positive changes, victory; cleansing fire, power.</p> <p>In-Game: Good triumphs over evil, either within a person's warring loyalties/psyche, or in terms of the quest itself; something evil is redeemed, or at least set on that path.</p>

The Third Eight (Tyr's Aett)

↑	Tiwaz	<p>Tyr/Leadership: Authority, justice, rationality, success in competition of all kinds, self-sacrifice.</p> <p>In-Game: A just authority gets involved, or the characters are granted authority; legal or competitive victory; or self-sacrifice is required, but will complete an epic quest.</p>
𐌖	Berkano	<p>Birch Tree/Birth: Fertility, birth, growth, liberation; renewal, new beginnings, love, family, connections.</p> <p>In-Game: Romantic or personal relationships are advanced, or second-chances are given, prisoners pardoned, or similar.</p>
𐌛	Ehwaz	<p>Horses/Travel: Physical transportation; slow but steady progress; teamwork, trust, ideal marriage or partnership.</p> <p>In-Game: Travel or vehicular problems are overcome; trust is built; an already-ongoing partnership or relationship proves to be more successful than first imagined.</p>
𐌞	Mannaz	<p>Mankind/The Self: The individual, intelligence, forethought, skill, ability; the human race, social order, friends and enemies.</p> <p>In-Game: Personal skill or cunning wins the day; one person is isolated and forced to work alone to solve a problem; or society gets involved, and status, nobility, and privilege come into play.</p>
𐌺	Laguz	<p>Water/Regeneration: Healing, rest, renewal; dreams, the underworld, the imagination.</p> <p>In-Game: Something allows the characters to heal and rest. Dreams and desires and ultimate goals might be unexpectedly advanced. It is even possible that someone is 'brought back from the dead' (literally or metaphorically).</p>
◊	Ingwaz	<p>Monarch/Seat of Power: Control and power, answering to nobody; authority without implying justice.</p> <p>In-Game: An absolute ruler gets involved, possibly causing problems (especially if the characters refuse to do what they want).</p>
𐌸	Dagaz	<p>Dawn/Day: Awakening, clarity, breakthrough; discovery, a new venture, transformation for the better; hope, security.</p> <p>In-Game: A new opportunity or quest, or the solution to an old problem is suddenly found. A mystery may be solved (or at least partially untangled).</p>
𐌶	Othala	<p>Birthright/Home: Inheritance, property passed down, house, home, spiritual heritage, fundamental rights, source of safety, that which is most important.</p> <p>In-Game: A character's bloodline, family, estate, or inheritance is brought into play. Alternately, these things may be threatened by a physical, legal, or spiritual force.</p>

Tag Symbols

My love of random lists should be pretty obvious, so the fact that the Tag Symbols are for using a random list to pick results from another random list should be unsurprising (List-ception? Yo dawg, I heard you liked tables? Wow, such random, so tables?). With 120 card faces, each card face shows a unique combination of symbols, and every possible combination is represented.

If you have a pre-generated list that shows what each icon means in a given situation, drawing for the Tag Symbols is a good way to introduce a combination of elements to a scene, and it ensures that you always get three different results from your list. Whether you are creating the treasure horde for a dragon, deciding what sorts of things a detective finds while investigating a crime scene, or selecting plot elements to work into the Story Seed you are creating, the Tag Symbols can keep things interesting.

Of course, this all requires that you create a table ahead of time. Here's an example.

Tower 	Significant obstacle; probably static in nature.	Moon 	Confusion or misunderstanding.
Crown 	An important individual, with power over you.	Sword 	Conflict; not always physical.
Heart 	Family, friendship, or romance.	Shield 	Protection; not always physical.
Skull 	Impending loss, predictable but hard to avoid.	Target 	A new goal; a distant or dynamic objective.
Sun 	Clarity or revelation.	Wand 	Powerful technology or magic.

On the other hand, if you don't want a table at all, then you can still use the Tag Symbols; you just need to be quick on your mental feet. Acting as a relatively simple set of 10 runes, the Tag Symbols can be drawn for a symbolic interpretation; for example, if you want to spruce up a random event and draw a Skull, you might decide to add the undead, the discovery of a corpse, or a sudden sickness to the situation.

Elements

The 'classic' four elements, Air, Fire, Earth, and Water, are represented on the cards here; I was inspired to include them partly as a nod to old games like *Everway*, which boiled everything down to an interpretation of these ideas. I most often find use for them as modifiers to other things; an NPC who gets Fire might be energetic and aggressive, while one who gets Air could be curious and constantly moving. A random encounter flavored with Earth might indicate earth-associated themes (defense, nature) or a more literal idea (an earthquake, an earth elemental).

What I view as a 'standard' interpretation of the meanings of the four elements can be found below, but you can, as always, apply your own.

Air 	Movement, curiosity, exploration; life in its most dynamic form. Chaotic but friendly; social.
Fire 	Aggression, energy, destruction; empowered but unchecked. Chaotic and dangerous; combat.
Earth 	Survival, determination, defense; slow but steady and impervious. Orderly and unchanging; health.
Water 	Intelligence, knowledge, eloquence; adaptable and understanding. Orderly but shifting; intellect.

Scatter Die

The concept of a scatter die comes from wargaming, when a character throws a grenade or missile that has a strong chance of missing slightly. The die tells you if the missile lands in a given direction away from the target, or (at least in this case) in a complete miss or dead-on-target hit. The miss is indicated by a single dash ('-'), and the direct hit by a tiny explosion of arrows.

Other ways to use the Scatter Die might include: creating a dungeon or similar area (with directions indicating passages, and misses and hits indicating stairs, dead ends, or similar); mapping out a tactical set-up and indicating the disposition of enemy forces; selecting a random player to target with an effect (based the 'direction' they have from the GM, as if the card is placed down in the center of the table); to indicate time of day, treating the arrow as a the hour hand of a clock (a miss might indicate Midnight or Dusk and the hit might suggest Noon or Dawn).

THE DECK AS A GAME ENGINE

Taken together, the same systems I use to make decisions or randomize content in a traditional GM-and-party RPG can be used to run a GM-free game. This may not be everyone's cup of tea, but if you like choose-your-own-adventures or game books like the classic *Lone Wolf* series, these cards can help you build an adventure!

Of course, there are some big differences. Using the cards as a literal apprentice GM means that you have to supply questions for them to answer, add details to the direction the cards give you, and so on; but what you get in return is a game that not only continues well past when a game book would come to an end, but which can literally take you in any direction, on any quest, and to any result you can imagine.

I think the added effort is well worth the results.

Making "fair" decisions

I've already discussed what 'fair' means to the GameMaster's Apprentice, but this becomes even more important when dealing with a GM-free game. Whether you are running solo or with a group of friends, decide how to handle interpretations and redraws before you start play--even if that means you just shrug to yourself and think, "Meh, I think it's fine to redraw if I want to."

The real trick is to be sure that no one in the group will feel cheated or disappointed at any time; find out your preferences before you start, and plan accordingly!

Starting a Game

Step 0 is to begin with a character you will have fun playing. If you already have an adventure in mind (whether personally made up, or taken from a published module), be sure it fits that adventure; if not, make the character first, and then make an adventure that fits *them*! If necessary, use the Story Seed generator, above, and throw yourself into the game.

It really is as simple as that. Describe the setup, and then ask yourself, "***What do I do now? What happens next?***"

Playing a GM-Free Game: What Happens Next?

With the GameMaster's Apprentice as a GM, things work most smoothly if you treat the deck like it really is a new GM and you want to help them get the hang of things, while still having a fun time yourself: you **ask the deck 'leading questions' and then deal with the results.**

If you have no idea what should happen, you can always ask "***What happens next?***" and generate a story seed or random event.

On the other hand, if you walk into a 10'x10' square room in a dungeon, you can probably be more specific. "***Are there monsters guarding treasure here?***" works pretty well.

But what if you ask that and get a No?

Rather than try and ask question after question after question, I suggest you default to this rule: Ask a question about what you think is the most likely OR best-for-the-story result, and if the answer is 'no,' either go with the next most obvious/story-related option, or generate a random event and use it as guidance.

So, in this instance, if the cards say that No, there are no monsters guarding treasure in this 10'x10' square room, the next most obvious thing is for it to be simply empty--which could mean it is trapped. Roll perception!

Or, if there are indeed monsters, go with the most likely kind and use your game system's rules to determine how powerful they are and what loot they might have. If you are running a pre-written adventure, use their notes; if not, you can (for example) draw a Difficulty to decide how tough the combat should be, and have the monsters either act in the most obviously pragmatic way, or draw Yes/No answers to decide what they do.

Speaking of combat... in some parts of a game, dealing with a large group of players is fairly simple; most combat systems already use turn order and initiative to handle questions of who gets to act when. However, in situations where no GM exists to move the story forward, and yet no clear initiative order exists, the fact that the narrative control resides with the players could lead to some intra-party conflict. Consider these suggestions:

Everyone should either have equal say in what happens, or have agreed to another arrangement ahead of time. There is a big difference between **letting** someone ask all the leading questions, and **having** someone ask all the leading questions. The goal is to have fun, so while using the GameMaster's Apprentice as a GM, only ask questions that the whole group can accept its answers to. If you discover a need for rules to govern who asks questions and in what order, write them down and follow them until you agree to change them.

And there is one more important detail to keep in mind, whether you are playing solo or with a party: If someone has an idea for what should happen, or they want to jump forward in time to move on, and it just sounds right to everyone involved, there is no reason to force a draw. Just say it happens, and move forward from there. Perhaps it costs an out-of-game resource, or you modify it with a draw just to see what happens, but there is no harm in moving the game in the direction the players want, or 'fast forwarding' time to skip the boring parts of the story. This is the equivalent of telling the GM, "I know it might change the game, but what if we'd rather skip this bit and spend play time on...?"

The Basic Loop: The Heart of the Engine

Once the game is started and you have a basic idea of how to use the deck as a GM, you can move ahead as the plot demands. You can follow a pre-written adventure, or you can make it up as you go along. But, either way, I like to mix things up with what I call 'the basic loop' of play.

A large part of playing a role playing game, for me, is the interaction between the shifting challenges and the player or players facing them. If the challenges become predictable or stale, they become boring... and even with the randomizers to make my 'random encounters' and plot twists more interesting, if I am the one deciding exactly when to draw for a random encounter or a plot twist, that doesn't exactly seem exciting to me.

So, in order to keep things interesting, I follow these rules:

- 1) At the beginning of a game (or scene, if you feel like changing it mid-game), select a method for Tension (see below)
- 2) Whenever you draw for a Likely Odds result to answer a Yes/No question, ALSO look at the Difficulty Generator.
- 3) If the Difficulty is lower than the current Tension, a Random Event occurs, and you have to draw for it and resolve it right away.

This way, the game changes in ways I as a player couldn't predict--BUT, because the Random Events still involve interpretation, I can avoid spoiling the fun of the game by preventing results that would be silly, stupid, or boring.

Tension Settings

I have three methods I bounce between.

The first is a static number. If I just want to keep things simple, I select a number based on how likely things are to go crazy in this scene (and then it changes at each scene break). A day of rest in a guarded temple might be a 1 or a 2, while if anyone says "I have a bad feeling about this..." it gets ramped up to a 7 or an 8.

My second method is a scene-by-scene build. Starting with a 1 for the first scene of a session, the number increases at each scene break until you have more than one random event in a given scene. At that point, it decreases back down to 1. This method makes it easy to start out 'safely' and keeps the rising level of chaos in check (though you can reset the Tension less often to keep things at a frenetic pace).

The third method I use is a draw-by-draw build. This is, in many ways, my favorite version. At the start of the session, the Tension is 1. After each draw for the Likely Odds that fails to trigger a random event, the Tension increases by 1; when a random event is triggered (at most every 11 draws), the Tension drops back to 1. This method may be the hardest to track mentally (so when I'm playing at a desk or table, I use a d10 to mark it), but for me is the most satisfying--it results in a fairly high number of random events, but if you give yourself the freedom to let some of them be helpful or merely cosmetic (adding flavor to the game, but not acting as disasters), then this high volume of them keeps things interesting without destroying the plot.

Tracking plot and character developments

When playing a GM-free game with the GameMaster's Apprentice, I suggest keeping written notes about the randomly-generated plot elements. These can help you not only remember what happened, but can make it much easier to tie the plot together (as we'll talk about in the next section).

If you generate an NPC, note down the details you create, even if at first they don't seem relevant in the long run. For settings, encounters, and similar, note descriptions and sensory information; perhaps they will combine to mean something more to you later on.

And if you really find your stories picking up in excitement, consider keeping a narrative journal for them. Fleshing out the tale both makes it more interesting, and also helps you keep track of possible hooks for continued adventures!

While this may seem more relevant in an intentionally plot-heavy game--mystery, investigation, or similar--keeping detailed notes can also serve hack-n-slash games very well. Who have you been hacking, and what about their friends? If you turned left at that last sewer junction, but then hit a dead end, can you just go back and take a right instead? Notes, maps, and drawings can add significantly to the thrill of a game.

Wrapping up a plot

Let's talk briefly about how to end a story.

The first rule is, of course, that no matter what the end actually is--whether the players 'win' or 'lose,' or just stop--it shouldn't ruin anyone's fun. Winning and losing can both ruin a game if handled badly. Just ask the teams responsible for triple-A video game trilogies that rely on story decisions and player choice to 'influence' the end result...

Which means: when creating the 'final encounter' or revealing the solution to a mystery, anything that would spoil the game is automatically off the table even before you draw a card. If a random event suggests betrayal, but the only possible traitor would be a silly choice in a serious game, skip it; if the draw indicates that the big bad in a gritty drama that has been building to an epic fight is actually a whiny little goblin with no real power, skip it unless you can make it fit the tone.

Also, importantly, if you find yourself already in possession of an idea for what should happen at the conclusion to a game, and you feel like anything else would be disappointing, then start there! Yes, I do mean that you should assume that you are right... but then ask: "And what **else** is going on?" Draw a random event or a set of tag symbols and use them to modify your assumptions.

This works for mysteries as well as hack-n-slash games. Take the clues generated over the course of the game and try to put them together ("We found scales, claw marks, and a smell of sulphur--it could be a dragon!"), decide how likely you are to be correct and also what the next most likely option is ("This is a fantasy world, so it probably is a dragon, yeah.... but it COULD be a demon!"), and then draw Yes/No. If you were right, great! If not, go with the second option.

And then, in either case, ask yourself, "But what **else** is going on?" and again draw a random event or a set of tag symbols to modify your situation, providing additional detail.

FINAL WORDS

Just a few things I haven't covered, or which bear repeating!

Adventure Guides

GMA Adventure Guides are short, targeted genre support supplements that are meant to work with the deck, to either get you started or to enrich your experience. They supply several basic things, including notes on the genre, suggestions for partially-built story seeds and characters, and tables to supplement the deck (including examples of the tag symbol charts and various uses for them). If you're having trouble figuring out how to use the cards in practice, these can be a help. At least one is included with each GMA deck, and the entire set is available from DriveThruRPG for \$0.99.

ALONE

An extension of the rules presented in this guide, ALONE: A Solo Game Engine is more complete and fleshed-out as a GM-replacement system. As the name suggests, it is specifically geared towards completely solo play, but most of the contents could just as easily be used to run a game for a group of players, as long as they are interested in mutual cooperation. It is available on DriveThruRPG.

Genre Mashups

I built the GameMaster's Apprentice Base Deck to be genre-neutral, but that doesn't necessarily mean it is always the best fit for a situation. Thanks to incredible Backer support during the initial Kickstarter campaign, there are several genre-specific decks and Adventure Guides available as well. These are naturally going to provide genre-tailored results, but you can also combine them in unusual ways! Combining the Sci-Fi deck with the Fantasy Adventure Guide could produce adventures suitable for a world of strange wonders and lost technology; combining the Age of Sail deck with the Sci-Fi Adventure Guide might lend itself to the adventures of a Star Navy.

Of course, the Adventure Guides aren't actually required to use one deck with a different genre of game; just tailor the results on your own initiative if you prefer. Personally, I try to avoid needing an extra set of reference tables, and so rely on the deck alone as much as possible!

Make your own materials!

Why stick with my tables? These are for **your** games! Whether you start with the Adventure Guide tables you have, or begin entirely from scratch, you can easily create a custom Adventure Guide suited for your setting and play-style. Grab one of the standard Adventure Guides to take a look at the outline, and then have at it!

Appendix

The Demon Hunters Deck

This deck is custom-tailored to reflect the world of The Dead Gentlemen's *Demon Hunters: A Comedy of Terrors*, a role playing game based on their *Demon Hunters* films. Find out more at <http://deadgentlemen.com/>

Source Material

See the table on the next page for these symbols!

Replacing the Norse Runes, this randomizer provides inspiration for material to include in your game. The world of the Brotherhood includes more things than could possibly go bump in the night in just *one* culture or mythology (and more heroes than could spring from just one, either).

I usually bring these into the game when I want yet another, different way to randomize the details, tone, or direction of something, but they also help me decide what to research next. They aren't necessary for any of the core systems of the GameMaster's Apprentice, but you could use them in any game to give you suggestions for quests, the nature or origin of an NPC (hero, villain, or civilian), or other specifics.

And that research I mentioned is important; the world of the Demon Hunters is intentionally irreverent in its humor, but good humor comes from punching up, not punching down. Represented here you will find icons meant to indicate faiths both ancient and modern, as well as entirely fictional sources of inspiration. If you don't know enough about a real-world faith to represent it accurately in your gaming, rather than rely on stereotypes or guesswork, take the opportunity to do some research. Your games will be better--since you will genuinely be bringing something new into your repertoire--and you can simultaneously avoid being what we in the business call 'a bag of Richards.'

	Brotherhood of the Celestial Torch	The Good Guys. Well, theoretically. Anyone or anything associated directly with the Brotherhood; this includes many individual supernats, Demon Hunters, and what might be called the ‘high ups’ of a number of religions.
	Order of the Infernal Scepter	The Bad Guys. The actual Order was destroyed a long time ago, but this category includes any individual, personal enemies of the Brotherhood, as well as the demons and dark gods of many different religions.
	Tentacled Horrors	Whether they sleep beneath the sea, travel from the darkness of space, or emerge from deep under the ground, they all have a few things in common: they are squamous, they are big, and they eat things. Like people.
	Urban Legends	Tall, thin men; bloody, mirror-based women; they crop up all over the place. Many modern monsters could fit this category, but feel free to create your own, similar creatures, or put a twist on an oldie-but-baddie.
	Ancient Greek Mythology	The labyrinth could indicate the minotaur itself quite nicely, but old gods, demigods, monsters, and immortal heroes can all make for a comeback in the modern day.
	Aztec Mythology	Native central-American mythology is rife with interesting stories, but also tends to be the focus of racist interpretations, so remember to do some research beyond your favorite archaeologist-adventurer 80’s movie.
	Jewish, Islamic, or Christian Mythology	These three mythologies are so widely known that we condensed them onto one marker--but being widely known and widely understood are two very different things. Before you use a golem, jinn, or angel in your game, consider that what you’ve seen on TV might not be the whole story!
	Japanese Mythology	Japanese mythology, including the Shinto faith indicated by the icon here, does not refer to an historically unified religion, and so covers a wide range of practices. I suggest researching what ‘kami’ are in order to add to your understanding something rather different from Western ‘spirits.’
	Chinese Mythology	While the yin yang symbol is actually tied to specific philosophies rather than Chinese mythology as a whole, we picked it because it is recognizable to Western players and GMs who would benefit from doing more research. Chinese mythology covers thousands of years of stories, heroes, gods, and monsters you can draw into your games.
	Norse Mythology	Represented by Yggdrasil, Norse myth has been popularized in modern culture in much the same way that Greek and Roman myth have been, but there is a lot more to it than many cinematically heroic retellings incorporate, whether you want to understand their take on undead, or their version of the end of the world.

Specialties

Replacing the symbols of the Elements, the four images (a beaker, a ninja mask, a pentagram, and a chat bubble) here can be used to select a specialty that applies to a character or encounter. Drawing the ninja mask when designing a character could indicate that they are a combat or stealth specialist. Similarly, drawing the chat bubble indicates social ability, the beaker suggests *Science!*, and the pentagram covers the arcane arts. If you're drawing for an encounter, decide first if the symbol indicates the source of conflict here, the skills needed to overcome it, or both.

<p>Ninja Mask</p> 	<p>Combat and stealth; a character who focuses on one of these, or an encounter that will involve either defeating or circumventing physical violence.</p>
<p>Beaker</p> 	<p>SCIENCE! A mad doctor, a research lab, an encounter requiring investigation or careful observation, or something like that.</p>
<p>Pentagram</p> 	<p>Magic and the arcane. Characters might be sorcerers or summoners, and encounters might include dealing with magical traps, curses, boons, blessings, or summoned creatures.</p>
<p>Chat Bubble</p> 	<p>Dialogue time. We could be looking at an unexpectedly social confrontation (can the group talk that bored demon into just letting them pass?), a new quest, or a phone call at an inopportune moment.</p>

The Fantasy Deck

While this deck includes all of the original systems of the GMA, it also includes one new field, found in the center of the wheel of dice, called Prompt Icons.

Prompt Icons

Inspired by things like pictographic dice and the same Tarot-based gaming that prompted me to include Futhark, the elemental runes, and the Tag Symbols, this new field contains one unique image on every card. With 120 images that you can interpret however you wish, I am not even going to attempt to include a description of what they might mean individually; instead, here are some general thoughts on using them in your games.

If you enjoy very free-form interpretation, you can draw three cards and combine the images into the inspiration for a random encounter, event, or NPC. Like the text-based generators, drawing three cards means you get one of 1.7 million possible results.

Or if you prefer the original text randomizers, you can add in an image to provide another variable. If, for example, you draw for a text-based Random Event or to create an NPC as described previously, the image from a fourth card means you now have one of 207.3 million unique situations!

Personally, I find the Prompt Icons extremely useful when I'm planning adventures in advance, and I want to add further detail to a location or scene. Once I've created an encounter that moves the story forward, a few extra ideas from these images help me make it more immersive by expanding the scope beyond the critical content. And, of course, you can ignore this field, or use it in completely different ways, as suits your needs!

Backer Names

Once again, thanks so much! Without these backers, and the approximately 250 others, The GameMaster's Apprentice would never have made it this far!

And, if you ever need even more names to draw upon, consider this list as a set of suggestions.

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