

Four Houses in Amber

by Todd Zircher (CC BY-NC)

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Four Houses in Amber is designed to enhance the play of my favorite diceless role playing game and no challenge is intended or implied to any author or owner of such games. I have no affiliation with Phage Press, Diceless by Design, the Roger Zelazny estate, or the Erick Wujcik estate. This document is intended as a solo/GM-less framework to facilitate play of the game.

Special thanks to Sovem over on Reddit for feedback and ideas on character creation.

Introduction

Four Houses in Amber is my humble attempt to combine my love of the Amber Diceless RPG with my love of solo gaming. Solo gaming can mean different things to different people. For me, it is using tools such as oracles, image generators, and GM engines such as the Mythic Game Master Emulator or Conjectural Roleplaying GM Emulator. These tools allow me to tell a story without needing a dedicated game master since they can inspire scene details, answer questions, drive a plot, or throw curve balls at it. It allows the player to wear multiple hats as their character, as NPCs, and as the game master and still be challenged as a storyteller.

If you're not a solo gamer, what does that lingo mean? Oracles are random event tables, the first ones were called wandering monster tables. Image generators provide inspiration; a picture of a bee might spark an idea such as busy as a bee, sweet as honey, buzzing sounds, or even an NPC dressed in black and yellow. Rory's Story Cubes, tarot cards, and my own Zero Dice or Zero Tarot web pages are examples of this. Game engines such as the GME or CRGE provide a number of functions. They are used to answer binary questions that are not handled by the game rules. Like 'Is the door guarded?' or 'Is there a wizard in the king's court?' Most game engines also have the ability to alter the scene either to advance the plot or perhaps add a twist to it.

At first, randomness might seem to be anathema to a diceless game like Amber, but what we are really doing is changing from one form of incomplete information (the GM) to another (Fate.) Part of play is to interact with the world and try put the clues together and figure out what's really going on. This is true if you get your (seemingly) random and conflicting information from the GM or from a random generator. Fortunately, there is a very thematically appropriate randomizer available for Amber, Tarot cards. Trumps, besides being a power unto themselves, are literally used by the characters in the setting as a means of divination. So, we can take advantage of that and even leverage it to do more to help us tell a story.

Another reason for tarot cards is that the four suites mirror the four elements and the four attributes that define a challenge or threat. Wands are fire and strength. Swords are air and warfare. Cups define water and endurance. And, Pentacles define earth and psyche. So, it is easy to use a card draw to inform an encounter and color its location. Of course, the major arcana don't have suites, but they do act as their own source for meaning and inspiration.

The tools and techniques presented here are not only for solo game play. GMs pressed for time or looking for a framework or inspiration can use Four Houses as well.

Deck Handling

While any tarot deck will do, I'm going to specifically suggest the Cosmic Tarot deck for a couple of reasons. One, the artistic style is wonderful and has a great 80's vibe to it. Two, it refers to the Knight and Page cards as Prince and Princess. This plays nicely into using these as specific oracle values. Three, it is much more available and affordable than the Le Tarot Ambre deck. Also, the Amber deck is 'loaded' with heavy hitters from the Order side of the universe and may not fit a more low powered or Chaos oriented story.

One note on shuffling tarot cards: Unlike a standard playing card deck, tarot cards place significance on orientation. Frequently, an inverted card has an opposed or a negative meaning. Meeting an inverted Prince will often result in miscommunication, bad timing, or bad blood taken a step further. To make this happen in a non-predictable manner, you literally have to add a twist to how you shuffle. When shuffling a tarot deck, you want to cut the deck, rotate one stack 180 degrees, shuffle and repeat several times. That way you not only mix up the cards, but you also randomize their orientation.

As you play the game and build up a discard pile you'll need to shuffle the cards back in from time to time. When? Well, obviously if your deck is getting low. Perhaps at the end of a session when you need to tidy things up. Perhaps right before a divination so you have all the possibilities on the table. The decision to shuffle or not shuffle is actually a story telling decision. Not shuffling is like saying, 'Show me more, I'm exploring.' When you shuffle, you're telling Fate, "Time to reincorporate story elements. How does the plot evolve?" There a certain joy to card handling, shuffle when it feels right.

What are the Four Houses?

The name of the game is Four Houses in Amber for a reason. There are four suites in a deck; representing four families that will be your friends and rivals, each family has a King, a Queen, a Prince (Knight), and a Princess (Page.) It's perfectly fine if you want the siblings to both be brothers or sisters. Could this also be Four Houses in the Courts of Chaos? Absolutely. The purpose of the four houses framework is to provide structure to our relationships and potential background material that would be a normal part of a game.

Your character starts out as one of these Princes or Princesses; you'll have siblings, rivals, and friends enough to go around. Loyalty or support? Well, that's another matter. The timeline is not set in stone. You can go with an alternate story set in the past where Oberon is on the throne or much later with Random at the helm. The timeline for the Courts is even more flexible. It is a period where things initially appear to be more stable and safe? Perhaps a Lord's (or Lady's) children are not immediate targets as pawn for plots on the throne since that option is not on the table. Well, at least not at the start of play. [insert evil grin here]

What I have in mind is that each of the four houses are tied to kingdoms in the Golden Circle or the Black Zone as that would make for interesting politics and duties. Another setting could be the lands surrounding the Keep of the Four Worlds. Both Amber and Chaos would be keen on not having that power fall into the 'wrong' hands. You could even run with Corwin's Pattern and have everything new but similar.

Character Creation

Character generation follows the tradition of the blind auction. You spend your points and the GM will tell you what your rank is. To simulate that, take out all the cards from Ace to Eight and shuffle them. For every five character points you spend, you get to draw a card. You might get lucky and end up first in rank for cheap, but the odds are you'll need to spend more to get a better position. Repeat for each attribute you wish to spend points on.

As an example, Rydak bid/spent 10 points in each attribute and got two draws each. He ended up with 2nd in Strength, 1st in Warfare, 7th in Endurance, and 6th in Psyche. You can infer from there where the other princes and princesses might have spent some of their points. A few of the others spent points on strength, no one outbid Rydak on warfare (which he got for dirt cheap), everyone else loaded up on endurance, and most spent some points on psyche.

To simulate more of the auction feel, Sovem suggests this take on the system:

Say you want first rank in Strength, so you spend 10 points and draw a 6 and a 4, giving you 4th rank. You want to be higher than that, so you spend another 5 points and draw an 8. Oh no, someone out bid you, you're still in 4th! You spend another 10 points and draw a 7 and a 2; now you're 2nd rank having spent 25 points. You decide you're happy with that, and settle with 2nd rank Strength.

Buying powers, shadows, and items is a straight up process as well as allocating points to good stuff and bad stuff. Player contributions are still a thing. Due to the nature of solo play, you can easily get 10 points for having a game log since most solo players keep a journal of their game. The 10 points for a diary or trumps requires the typical investment in writing or drawing. However, the Other category has some great new potential. In this day, you can quickly share your adventures with other readers in places like the Amber or the solo gamer communities on MeWe, Reddit, and Facebook, you could pepper your sessions with inspirational images (and give proper credit), and you can even use tools like Jeff Hebert's HeroMachine to create 'Trumps' without a lick of actual artistic ability. Of course, the max is still 20 points for contributions.



We need to take a closer look at Character Allies. In the standard game, you spend your points and you get a mysterious benefactor of a given power level. It is up to the GM to determine who that is. With Four Houses in Amber, you'll know a lot more up front. But, knowing your parent doesn't mean they're devoted to you unless you spend the points. Their appearance in the story will be controlled by the character's actions and Fate.

Let's flesh out Rydak a bit. He spent 40 points in attributes. We'll give him 10 points for the game log and another 10 for community sharing and creating trumps. Fifty points for Pattern Imprint and ten for Power Words. Let's make him sociable with an Amber devotee, a Court Devotee, an ally in Amber, demon friends, house support (in this case, his own house), and a Court friend. Which leaves him with three points of good stuff.

With your character created, choose a prince or princess card from one of the four suites and add in friends, allies, devotees, etc. You don't have to reveal everything (or anything), but laying out who stands behind each card can be helpful.

Four Houses in Amber

House _____	House _____	House _____	House _____
Swords/Air	Wands/Fire	Cups/Water	Pentacles/Earth
King _____	King _____	King _____	King _____
Queen _____	Queen _____	Queen _____	Queen _____
Prince _____	Prince _____	Prince _____	Prince _____
Princess _____	Princess _____	Princess _____	Princess _____
Allies, Friends, etc.	Allies, Friends, etc.	Allies, Friends, etc.	Allies, Friends, etc.

Following our example character, Rydak. Let's go with the Prince of Swords since he is ranked first in Warfare. For the setting, I like Random as King in Amber and he has 'ordered' his siblings to settle down and try to stabilize the Golden Circle after the war, in the name of Amber, to curb some ambitious neighbors, and all that jazz.

Begma and Kashfa are named kingdoms with disputed land. I'll shameless borrow from a map I saw on the web and go with Stang and Galazon as two other shadows that have disputed land between them. Where did I get all other names? I pulled them from the books or out of thin air, but I could just have easily use an online name generator.

Four Houses in Gold

House __ Begma __	House __ Kashfa __	House __ Stang __	House __ Galazon __
Swords/Air	Wands/Fire	Cups/Water	Pentacles/Earth
King __ Lyonus __	King __ Rinaldo __	King __ Gérard __	King __ Justin __
Queen __ Florimel __	Queen __ Shashana __	Queen __ Norn __	Queen __ Fiona __
Prince __ Rydak __	Prince __ Paul __	Prince __ Flynn __	Princess* __ Justina __
Princess __ Ryan __	Princess __ Mariel __	Prince* __ Hermes __	Princess __ Dierdre __
Rydak is in good standing with House Begma and has their support.	Allies, Friends, etc.	Flynn and Rydak are drinking buddies and have gone on several adventures together.	Justina and Rydak tried to hit it off, but the chemistry wasn't there and they just bickered. Perhaps they are too much alike.

Given the nature of the setup, we can choose Rydak's Amber devotee. Flora works for me. He gets a 'free' friend and a rival. Rydak (RYE - dack) also has a younger sibling, Princess Ryan (RYE - an.) For a Court Devotee, we could go with Lyonus, but I prefer for that to be unknown at this time. His ally in Amber is a merchant prince by the name of Minos Centauri. Flora insisted that Rydak have a well-rounded education and he spent time in the Courts. Being Rydak, he (of course) made friends. Szlfritz and Lady Herona Castaway are his demon and court friends.

* Hermes' card is the Page/Princess of Cups. Justina's card is the Knight/Prince of Pentacles.

With a character created, a support cast, and some relationships in place, we're ready to get down to some mechanics for storytelling.

The Tarot as an Oracle

At any time, you can draw one or more cards to help set a scene or color an NPC's reaction. This is based on a purely visual interpretation of the card although orientation of the card can play into it. For example, drawing The Fool might lead to the discovery of someone acting foolish as in "Hold my beer!" or an inverted card might inform you that you have been played the fool.

Because each tarot deck is different, there is not a hard and fast rule. In the Cosmic Tarot the nine of wands shows a person staring intently with the spirit of a lion behind them. But, in the Rider-Waite Tarot, that same card has a person clinging to a staff with a wall of wands behind them. One can easily be read as a challenger steps forward while the other may reveal that someone is running and stops to take refuge. If you draw a house card (King, Queen, Prince/Knight, Princess/Page), try to integrate the associated character into the scene or at least some clues to that person. Perhaps something as subtle as a House crest or the colors and symbol of a specific person if you do not want that person to directly intervene.

French style tarot decks such as Le Ambre Tarot use pips (like poker suites) for the minor arcana. You can draw classic meanings from tarot books or you can use this table to help set the scene. If you have a specific theme in mind, feel free to edit this table to your desires.

Hearts	Emotional trouble, endurance challenges, house of cups, water
Clubs	Obstacles get in the way, strength challenges, house of wands, fire
Diamonds	The focus is an object, psyche challenges, house of pentacles, earth
Spades	Adversaries block or pursue, warfare challenges, house of swords, air
Ace	Authority, the influence of your elders and those you respect
Two	Meetings, you stumble upon a meeting between two others
Three	Personal dynamics, arguments, love triangles, and stand-offs
Four	Motives, you uncover or get embroiled in the plans of others
Five	Repercussions, acts come back to haunt you or a folly is revealed
Six	Acquisitions, merchants, thieves, a mugging/hold up in progress
Seven	Luck, things work out your way or someone is making it happen
Eight	Bad luck/chaos, yeah - more likely someone is messing with you
Nine	Threats, hunters, and plots come forward with you in the cross hairs
Ten	Treasure/goals are within reach if you're willing to pay the price

For example, the two of hearts (cups) could be a forbidden meeting between lovers, a two of diamonds (pentacles) might be a secret transaction of stolen goods or information. You can also use this table with traditional tarot cards to get a combination of meanings. In the Cosmic Tarot, the ten of pentacles shows a finely dressed man holding a dove. Perhaps it is a diplomat bearing news that peace can be arranged between warring factions, but only if a certain object is returned to its rightful owner.

The Tarot as Divination

Amber Diceless has rules for setting up a six card spread. It also implies that it is something exclusively done by characters in-game using a freshly shuffled deck. With Four Houses, we want to be more flexible. We can start by using a faster spread that uses less cards. This also works better with a Rider-Waite style deck due to the imagery on the minor arcana. Draw three cards. The first card is placed in the center. It is the present and represents the forces that are seeking to influence the character. This can include things that the character does not know about. After all, it is a divination backed up by shadow, magic, and power. The next card is played to the left and is the past. It represents people and events that have put the current course in motion. The last card is played to the right and it represents the future. Typically, this is the future that will be if the character takes no action. It is often a warning as much as a prediction.

One way that this divination differs from the style used in Amber Diceless is that it can be performed by the player (rather than the character) to help determine which direction to take the plot or inform them of unseen agents that are in play. Like all card readings, it is the player's interpretation and inspiration that matters. Just look at the Wonderland scenes to see that shadows can go in many strange directions.

The Tarot as Game Master

Sometimes the player needs a black and white answer to a question. They can easily ask the deck. If the odds are straight up 50/50, draw a card and 1-5 the answer is No or 6-10 and the answer is Yes. If the question is not strictly binary, a 1 is an emphatic "No, and it's worse" and 10 is a resounding "Yes, and it's even better". If the card is between 2-9 and it is inverted, feel free to apply a "No, but..." or a "Yes, but..." to that answer. For example, the player asks the deck, "Is the door locked?" and draws an inverted six of pentacles. Yes, it is locked but perhaps there is a key nearby or there is an open window on the third floor.

So, what happens if you draw a house card or the major arcana when you ask this kind of question? That's Fate messing with you, maybe a rival or family member shows up. Perhaps major clues drop into your lap or those assassins pop up before can open that door. Interpret the interrupt like an oracle event and leave the original question hanging if it makes sense.

Is Solo really Role Playing?

The answer to that is a definite yes, but there is going to be a serious play by post or creative writing slant to it. That's why a game log is almost a free contribution since writing down your game play is a natural thing to do. Solo gives you the power to be as talkative or descriptive as you want on your own time. That makes it very convenient for those of us that have to do things like pay bills and interact with non-gamers. Is it just daydreaming on steroids? Kind of, it's natural to go through a bunch of ideas and what if scenarios, it is the process of writing down your game play and card draws that nails down the 'what is' from the 'could have been' ideas. It is those plot twists and surprise reveals that keep you guessing. It is the challenge of taking random elements and combining them in a coherent story. So, the game actually plays out on several levels between in-game and the meta elements that make it up.

Thank you for reading this and I hope it gets you playing even if you don't have a group handy.

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