

# *House of Usher: Descent into Madness*

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\* Both humans and the house should read this!

## **Materials:**

- Game boards
- Scenario cards
- Dice
- Character cards
- Game pieces (to move across the board)

## **Setup:**

- 2 - 4 people to play
- Humans have one collective game piece
- House (game master(s)) has the scenario cards and dice
- Each human picks which character they want to be (Roderick Usher, Madeline Usher, or the Traveler (Narrator in the story))

## **Characters:**

- Roderick Usher
  - 6 Intelligence (INT)
  - 4 Arcane (ARC)
  - 3 Dexterity (DEX)
- Madeline Usher
  - 3 Intelligence (INT)
  - 6 Arcane (ARC)
  - 4 Dexterity (DEX)
- The Traveler
  - 3 Intelligence (INT)
  - 4 Arcane (ARC)
  - 6 Dexterity (DEX)

**Objective:** The humans must collect items throughout each board to get the chance to escape. After the items are found it is up to the players' decisions to see which path they must take to escape the House of Usher.

## **Rules**

- **NOTE:** Each player has 10 points of sanity (SAN) and if you reach 0, you lose and are stuck in the house forever.

- Humans pick a space on the board to start.
- Wait for the house (game master) to give you a scenario for you to choose. Once the scenario has been read aloud, players get to choose which option they want to go with.
- Each option requires a specific number of stats, so choose carefully.
- After you choose an option, the house will tell you if it was a success or a failure.
- The goal is to collect the items necessary to move to the next room.
- Once the players are able to trigger the scenario to move on from the normal board, they will then move on to the blood moon board, which is necessary to have a chance to escape:
  - **Normal board**
    - There are 2 necessary items which are the key from the study and the acid from the brewery. Once you get those items you can move to the cellar and after that you move onto the blood moon board.
  - **Blood moon board**
    - There are 3 necessary items to collect which are the enchanted dagger hilt, the enchanted dagger blade and the spellbook. Once you collect those items, you have a chance to escape by going through the front door.
- **COMBAT MECHANICS!**
  - Combat scenarios involve 1 enemy. Their health will scale using a flat multiplier depending on the number of alive human players. Each character has their own abilities. At the start of combat, all of the humans go, then the monster goes.
  - Human turn:
    - Attacking: Each human uses a different stat to attack: Traveller uses DEX, Roderick uses INT, and Madeline uses ARC. To attack, they roll a d20. They add their main stat to this number and do that much damage to the enemy. The House is responsible for keeping track of the enemy's health.
    - Dodging: When a human or monster is attacked, they must roll a d6. If they roll at most a 2, They take a quarter of the damage from the attack, rounded up.
    - Human abilities: Each character has a special ability they can during a fight, which lasts for the entire fight:
      - Traveler: The enemy must roll a 1 to dodge, instead of at most a 2. Can be used once per fight.
      - Roderick: Choose 1 person to affect: next instance of damage is nullified. Can be used twice per fight.
      - Madeline: Choose 1 person to affect: heal for 20 hp. Can be used three times per fight.
    - Health: each character has 100 health. If they reach 0 Health, they die and can no longer play.
  - Monster turn: After the humans go, the monster goes
    - Attacking: At the beginning of the monster's turn, the house chooses a human to attack. They deal damage based on the enemy type. This attack can be dodged.

- Special attack: once per battle, the house can choose to use a special attack, which differs based on the monster.

### Winning Conditions

- If you are a human: If you escape the house at the end of the game, you win.
- If you don't end up escaping: The house wins at the end of the game.

### Design Statement

1. Our game, "House of Usher: Descent into Madness," was inspired by the game Dungeons and Dragons. The use of stats like Dexterity, Intelligence, and Arcane, along with dice rolls to determine outcomes of encounters and combat, closely mirrors traditional RPG mechanics. The sanity mechanic introduces a psychological element, where characters risk losing their minds if they encounter too much horror, adding a unique layer of tension. Instead of traditional combat-focused gameplay, our game emphasizes item collection and escape, with a narrative-driven progression across two game boards (the normal board and the blood moon board). The shift away from pure combat to exploration is the twist that makes our game different from D&D.
2. The design of "House of Usher: Descent into Madness" was substantially modified by our own experiences as playtesters. First, we established the fundamental mechanics by incorporating a narrative-driven, psychological twist while still referencing classic RPG components. We soon realized that there were a number of things we might have done better when we played our own game, such as improving the fighting mechanics and streamlining the item gathering procedure. In order to improve gameplay and clarify objectives, we implemented special character skills and modified the game's progression based on input from our play sessions. We were able to directly experience the dynamics of the game through this self-testing, which made sure that the finished product successfully balanced atmosphere, storyline, and strategy.
3. Something that was challenging was having a solid idea on the combat system. Some people wanted it to be more intricate, while others felt it should be simplified for the purpose of the people playing. If the system is too hard to understand, players will be less inclined to use it. We eventually came to a compromise on how the combat mechanics should work.
4. We overcame this challenge by looking at and experimenting with the combat systems from other TTRPG games, like Dungeons & Dragons. We tested them and saw what we liked and what could be cut for the sake of simplicity. We liked the idea of the saving throw to add depth and tension to a fight, but simplified it by making it a dodge that relied on a d6 instead of a d20 and a stat. We also didn't want players to get confused by a bloat of stats, so we only included the core 3 (DEX, INT, and ARC), health, and sanity.

This provided a nice nuance to the gameplay without having players spend hours poring over the rulebook.

# HOUSE OF USHER: DESCENT INTO MADNESS

## HOUSE RULES

**Only read if you are playing as the house!**

**Objective:** Kill as many humans as you can before they kill Father Usher and escape the house.

### **Setup:**

- Place the board containing **the Cellar (The Normal Board)** in front of humans, ask them to choose a character and then give them their respective character sheet. Give the humans the party game piece.
- Grab the normal scenario cards, sort them by location and put them aside for later.
- Read players the **opening script**:
  - A mysterious illness has possessed the House of Usher, and darkness has settled around the estate. The once thriving family has slowly withered over the years, the terror gripping the house has caused not only the walls to crumble, but its residents to crumble as well, in both body and mind. The sole remaining patriarch of the family, Roderick Usher has summoned his childhood friend, the Traveler, for his assistance in dealing with this accursed matter. Accompanying them is Roderick's sister Madeline, who can feel the effects of the curse growing in her very soul. You will venture into the depths of the House of Usher and uncover its secrets, lest the curse swallow you and the house whole once and for all.
- Ask players where they want to go first, beginning the main portion of the game.

### **Gameplay:**

- When players choose an area, grab the scenario cards associated with that area and progress through them one at a time, from top to bottom.

#### **NON-COMBAT ENCOUNTERS:**

- Firstly, roll a d6 to decide who the encounter is for, with numbers 1&2, 3&4, and 5&6 corresponding to the Traveller, Roderick, and Madeline respectively. If you roll a character who isn't playing, reroll.

- Once a player is chosen, read the scenario out loud to them, presenting them with the choices given on the card. Do not read out the stat requirements.
- Once they choose an option, check if they have the necessary stats to succeed, and read them the result. Grant them stats or subtract sanity based on if the player succeeded or not.

### **COMBAT ENCOUNTERS:**

- Combat encounters involve the entire party, so no roll is necessary.

### **MECHANICS:**

- Combat is turn based, with Humans going first, then enemies. As the house, you control the enemies, and narrate the combat. Start combat by announcing the name of who the humans are fighting.
- **Human turn:**
  - **Attacking:** Each human takes their turn in any order. The relevant details for combat for humans is detailed in the general rules. You will want to keep track of the monster's health.
    - When a human chooses to attack the monster, roll a d6. If it lands on at most 2, the attack is dodged, and damage is quartered, rounded up. Announce any damage done to the monster, and its current health.
- **Monster turn:** After the humans go, the monster goes. The monster's health scales based on the number of alive human players.
  - **Attacking:** At the beginning of the monster's turn, the house chooses a human to attack. They deal damage based on the type of monster. This attack can be dodged if the human rolls a d6 and gets at least a 2. After the human rolls for a dodge, tell them how much total damage they take.
  - **Special attack:** once per battle, the house can choose to use a special attack instead of a normal attack, which differs based on the monster. The effects of these special attacks are detailed in the monster cards. The house must announce these effects to the targeted player(s).
  - **Say these lines when using the monster's special attack:**
    - **Barrage (Crazed patient):** The mad patient charges at you, his arms flailing wildly!
    - **Life Drain (Ghost of a Mistress):** The ghastly figure sticks a hand out at <player>, weakening them!
    - **Heavy Chop (Suit of Armor):** The suit raises its sword arm up, and delivers a heavy blow!

- **Poison Scratch (Reanimated corpse):** The corpse lunges forward and scratches <player>, causing a nasty infection!
- **Usher's Ruin (Father Usher):** Father Usher looks at <player> and mumbles strange words. You can feel your mind slip.

# NARRATION

## THE AREAS (NORMAL MAP):

- **Two areas are blocked off and require special items to enter:**
  - **Normal Map:** The Cellar is blocked and requires acid from the brewery and a key from the study.
  - **Blood Moon Map:** The exit (Marked ESCAPE!) is blocked off and requires a dagger hilt from the bedroom, a dagger blade from the armory, and a book from the library.
- **When the humans choose to enter an area, narrate the lines provided.**
  - **Brewery:** As you open up the old wooden door, a stench of pungent alcohol fills your noses. Inside the dimly lit room are various barrels of different shapes and sizes, and tables covered in dusty distillation equipment. Perhaps you can find something useful here.
    - **Upon finishing all scenarios:** You use a bottle to scoop up the mysterious bubbling acid. Perhaps this could dissolve the material blocking the cellar? (Give players acid piece)
  - **Study:** Upon opening the ornate wooden door to the study, the smell of old books hits your nostrils. Volumes of unknown lore are strewn about the room, and chests of drawers full of who knows what line what little wall space isn't covered by bookshelves.
    - **Upon finishing all scenarios:** Shadows dispelled, you grab the large iron key. It looks like it could fit into the keyhole of the cellar. (Give players key piece)
  - **Kitchen:** You enter the kitchen, and take note of the conspicuous lack of conventional cooking equipment. In their places lie a mess of strange alchemical equipment, dried herbs, and jars of liquid marked with faded labels.
    - **Upon finishing all scenarios:** In a cupboard, you find another bottle of that strange medicine. You don't know what it is, but you

know that it's useful. You decide to save it until you need it. (Give players potion piece)

- **Cellar:**

- **If they lack the required equipment:** You come upon the dark wooden cellar door, or what you think is the cellar door anyhow. It's locked, and through the iron bars of the door you can see a tough tendon-like substance on the other side that cannot be pierced by any of your weapons. It seems you will have to find a way to remove this curious substance if you want access to the cellar.
- **If they have the required equipment:** Roderick grabs the vial of acid from the brewery, and pours it through the bars directly onto the fleshy mass. Immediately, it begins to convulse and thrash, steam coming off its surface as it dissolves into a slimy substance. You swear you can hear a shrieking in a distant part of the house, but you chalk it up to your mind playing tricks on you. Roderick takes the key from the study out of his coat pocket and inserts it into the keyhole. The latch clicks and you step inside the dark stairway into the basement. After walking for an unnaturally long time, the staircase ends and you come upon a long corridor with a door at the end. From under the door comes a deep red glow, which unsettles you deeply. What could be producing such a strange light? You brace yourselves and open the door. Inside, in the center of the room is a massive, pulsing heart, with veins and arteries stretching into the far corners of the house, connecting the entire property to this vile thing. Madeline shrieks, and starts running back upstairs. You figure it wise to do the same. Howls can be heard from distant places, and the air seems to grow heavy. Upon making it to the entrance hall, you notice the windows and exterior doors are covered in an ethereal forcefield that cannot be broken by conventional means. Standing at the front door is the ghostly figure of an old man. "Father?!" Roderick exclaims. Upon hearing this, the man narrows his icy eyes. He begins to speak, in an echoey voice not entirely from this world. "As part of my duty, I cannot let you leave. You are part of this house now, and soon your ghosts will haunt these walls eternally! The secret of our family dies with you all!" Roderick tries to run at



Father Usher, but is blasted back by an incorporeal force. It seems you'll have to find another way to escape this house of death.

- **After narrating this part, switch the normal board for the blood moon board.**

### **THE AREAS (BLOOD MOON MAP):**

- **Library:** You open the red door to the Usher family library, and step into a vast, cavernous room lined with tens of thousands of volumes. Upon closer examination, you notice that many of them are written in a language far removed from any creation of humanity. Perhaps this room will contain the secret to dispelling the forcefield that surrounds the house.
  - **Upon finishing all scenarios:** On a desk in a corner is a book labeled "Arcane Defense Volume XIV." Roderick thumbs through the pages until he comes across a spell called "Ward Reversal." He tears out the page and puts it in his coat pocket. (Give players the spellbook piece)
- **Armory:** You step into the dark hall, and the smell of rust fills your nostrils. Swords, clubs, and everything in between line the walls of this room, some still caked with blood from wars past. These weapons, no matter how sharp they may be, will be ineffective against Father Usher. As you search around the room, you hear distant clinks of metal, and you realize you might not be as alone as you think.
  - **Upon finishing all scenarios:** As the suit of armor falls apart and clatters on the stone floor, you look to see what he was guarding. In a glass case is the gleaming blade of an ornate dagger. It seems to shine with an otherworldly force. Perhaps this could be used against Father Usher? (Give players the dagger blade piece)
- **Attic:** Your party ascends the creaky ladder up to the attic, and you look around the dark and damp room for any signs of treasure. The walls are worn and cracked, and the room is dimly

illuminated by a single window at the end. You swear you can hear boxes shifting around in the room, but you know this place holds secrets that may be instrumental in your escape.

- **Upon finishing all scenarios:** Rummaging through the bins and boxes, you come across an unlocked strongbox. You open it and find a strange silver amulet set with a blue gem. The Traveler puts it on, and your entire party feels stronger. (Give players talisman piece, and add 2 to everyone's DEX, INT, and ARC)
- **Bedroom:** This lavish room is painted a deep red by the moonlight from outside, but even without it you wouldn't feel safe. This is the bedroom of the patriarch of the Usher House, the man whose spirit stands between you and safety. He held many secrets, some of which may be unearthed in the drawers and shelves of his sleeping quarters.
  - **Upon finishing all scenarios:** On a dusty nightstand, you find a small leather pouch. Inside is the silver hilt of a dagger, with many intricate designs engraved on its surface. (Give players dagger hilt piece)
- **ESCAPE!**
  - **If the humans lack required items (spellbook, dagger hilt, dagger blade):** You can't get past Father Usher, and even if you could, a ward blocks all the exits.
  - **If the humans have the required items:** You're ready. In the central hall, Roderick pulls out the spell he saved from the library and begins chanting the words. You feel the house shake, and thunder begins to crash outside. The glow around all the windows and doors seems to weaken and fade. "What are you doing?!" Father Usher asks, the rage in his voice growing. The Traveler responds by unsheathing the now assembled enchanted dagger, and plunging it into the shoulder of the ghostly man. He lets out a scream, and his translucent form becomes corporeal. Now vulnerable, he pushes the Traveler away and pulls the dagger out of his shoulder, brandishing it against you.

- Now is the time to begin the final fight against Father Usher. Pull out his combat card and narrate like you would any other fight.
- **Upon killing Father Usher:** With a final cry, Father Usher falls to his knees, the silver dagger clattering to the floor. "The House of Usher may have fallen, but I will yet live!" He raises his hands to the sky and dissolves into a pile of ash. The house rumbles viciously, and you can hear ethereal screeches coming from the cellar. Sensing imminent collapse, you rush out of the now unblocked doors into the front yard. The red moon, rising far above the house, is visible through the growing cracks in the walls. You hear a final, deafening screech, and the house completely crumbles in on itself, leaving behind a ruined pile of wood and stone. You breathe a sigh of relief, knowing that you managed to escape the Fall of the House of Usher.
- **If all humans die:** As the last of your party fades into darkness, you hear muffled laughter. Despite your best efforts, you could not escape the Madness of the House of Usher.