THE STORY ENGINE

DECK OF WORLDS™

GUIDEBOOK

For a tutorial with video, visit
deckofworlds.com/tutorial

Introduction

The Story Engine®: Deck of Worlds™ is a set of 240 cards for creating imagined lands, local lore, and story-driven world maps you can write or roleplay in. It is ideal for worldbuilders, writers, loremasters, storytellers, DMs, GMs, and RPG groups.

> ## The only "rule" for using *Deck of Worlds* is this:
> ## The goal of the deck is to help you create.
> ## Ignore any guideline that does not serve this purpose.

These guidelines can help you get as much mileage out of your deck as possible, but the deck is designed to be open-ended and creator-driven. Feel free to adapt it to suit your creative goals.

How the Deck Works

Deck of Worlds contains six types of cards you can combine to create unique fictional settings. Each card features one or more *cues*, which are optional worldbuilding elements or ideas you can include in your setting.

When you combine all six types of cards together, the resulting cluster is called a *microsetting*. Microsettings are distinct areas in your world with their own past, present, and future lore. You can create microsettings as standalone locations, or assemble several into a *world map*.

Depending on the scale you set for your world map, you can create anything from a city full of unique districts and landmarks to a sprawling land of diverse terrain types, ecosystems, and cultures.

The Six Card Types

The six card types provide cues that weave together geography, lore, and details from the area's past, present, and future to create ideas for unique storytelling settings.
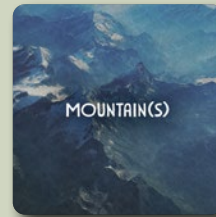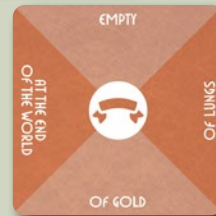
Regions establish a microsetting's main terrain type and act as a hub for arranging other cards.*
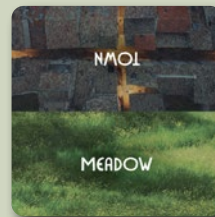
Landmarks add geographical sites and points of interest.*

*These card types may feature duplicate cues with alternate artwork for recurring map features such as cities and towns.

Namesakes combine with Regions or Landmarks to create in-world nicknames.

Origins record significant events of the area's past.

Attributes highlight present-day features of the area and its people.

Advents introduce events that may change the area's future. Each cue provides optional interpretation suggestions in smaller text.

Creating Microsettings

To create your microsetting, you will draw and arrange cards into a cluster around a 🌳 **Region** card. There are three ways of arranging cards:

1) **Place:** Put a card on the table faceup.
2) **Tuck:** Place a card faceup under another card so that one cue from the bottom card is showing.
3) **Rotate:** Turn a placed or tucked card so a new cue is visible or facing you.

When creating a prompt, you may be instructed to draw more cards than you need. Choose the cards you want to keep and place the extras aside. These extras are called your *discards*.

You may rotate cards to use different cues at any time. You may also exchange cards from your microsetting with your discards whenever you want.

Creating a Simple Microsetting

Step A: Draw 🌳 (1 **Region** card). Place it anywhere on the table. This provides the underlying environment type of your microsetting.

Step B: Draw ⦿ (1 **Landmark** card) and tuck it under any edge of the 🌳 **Region** so only one cue is showing. This expands the area of your microsetting and provides a point of interest.
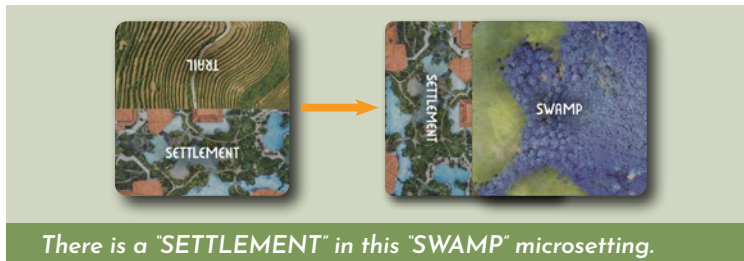

There is a "SETTLEMENT" in this "SWAMP" microsetting.

Step C: Draw 😶 (1 **Namesake** card) and tuck it under the 🌳 **Region** or ⦿ **Landmark** so only one cue is showing. This provides an in-world nickname. The top cue of the 😶 **Namesake** is designed to be tucked at the top edge of a 🌳 **Region** and read as though it begins the nickname. Each of the three lower cues can be tucked under a 🌳 **Region** or ⦿ **Landmark** and read as though it ends the name.


The "SWAMP" is nicknamed "The Swamp Where No Bird Sings." For an example using a top cue, see "The Meandering Desert" on p. 4.

Step D: Draw 📖 (1 **Origin** card) and tuck it under any edge of the 🌳 **Region** or ⦿ **Landmark** so that only one cue is showing. The 📖 **Origin** provides a lore-based backstory.
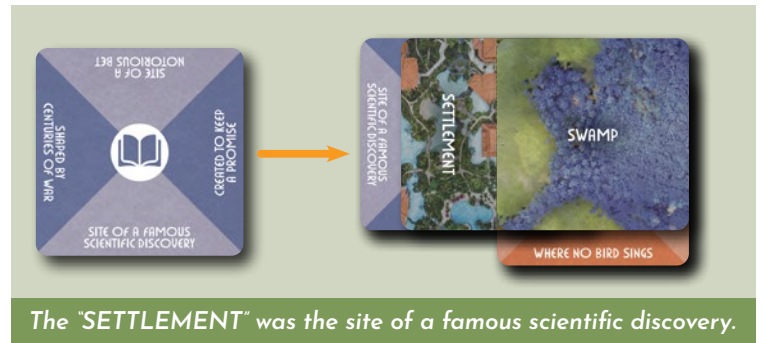

The "SETTLEMENT" was the site of a famous scientific discovery.

Step E: Draw 🏅 (1 **Attribute** card) and tuck it under any edge of the 🌳 **Region** or ⦿ **Landmark** so that only one cue is showing. The 🏅 **Attribute** provides a present-day detail about the area or its people.
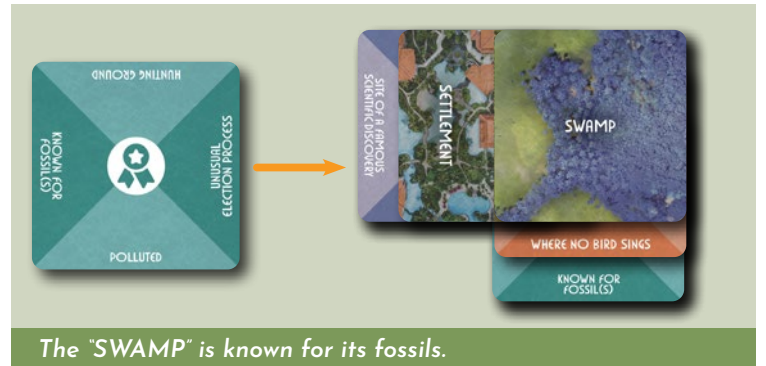
The "SWAMP" is known for its fossils.

Step F: Draw 🎭 (1 **Advent** card) and tuck it under any edge of the 🌳 **Region** or ⦿ **Landmark** so that only one cue is showing. The 🎭 **Advent** provides an event that could change the future of the area and/or serve as a story hook.
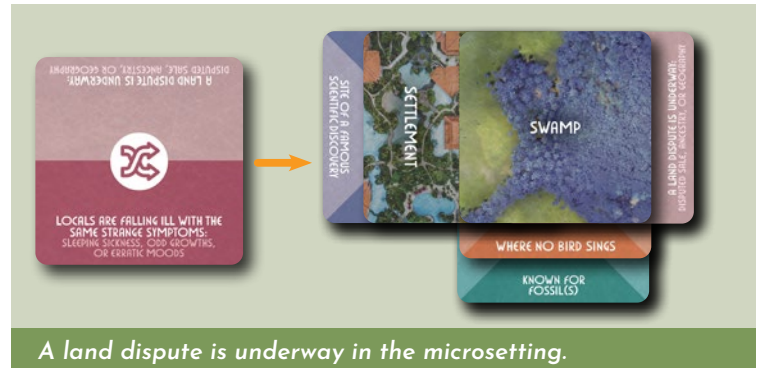
A land dispute is underway in the microsetting.

The microsetting is complete!

Interpreting a Microsetting

You may rotate and tuck cards in any orientation that helps you read the active cues and remember which card each cue applies to. You may tuck multiple 🔄 **Namesake**, 📖 **Origin**, ⓧ **Attribute**, and ✳ **Advent** cards in a stack together or tuck them under different cards or different edges of the same card.

The physical arrangement of cards represents the approximate geographical shape of your microsetting on a map. You may rearrange cards to adjust or expand the shape of the microsetting.

Then, take as much time as you need to decide what each cue means in the context of your world. You may interpret cues as open-endedly or as literally as you wish. Feel free to make notes and adjust the rotation and arrangement of cards as you go.

For ✳ **Advents**, you may interpret or ignore the small pink text, which provides optional suggestions for elaborating on or remixing the main cue.

Example microsetting interpretation notes:
• Called "The Swamp Where No Bird Sings" due to an extinct bird species that used to be abundant.
• Contains a settlement founded on the site where the bird fossils were first discovered. Biologists now occupy it, exhuming fossils and specimens preserved by the swamp.
• The land belongs to a nearby kingdom, which just sold it to a foreign power with plans to develop it. The biologists are protesting the sale.

Creating a Complex Microsetting

To create a more complicated microsetting, follow the instructions for "Creating a Simple Microsetting," (p. 3) but with the following adjustments:
• During Step B, draw 🟠🟠 instead of 🟠. You may tuck both of them, or choose and tuck 1 of them (discarding the other).
• During Step C, draw 🔄🔄 instead of 🔄. You may tuck both of them, or choose and tuck 1 of them (discarding the other).
• During Step E, draw ⓧⓧ instead of ⓧ. You may tuck both of them, or choose and tuck 1 of them (discarding the other).

Example microsetting interpretation notes:
• Called "The Meandering Desert" due to its winding trails and long, dry growing season.
• A farmer started a vineyard using a stolen inheritance (despite the arid climate). Has worked the land for generations, but their breed of vine is going extinct. Disease? Drought? Curse? Characters can investigate.
• Also home to a commune of stained glass artists called "The Workshop That Will Never Die." Their kilns run all day, every day, because they believe in "keeping the flame of eternity" What do they use for fuel? Is pollution affecting the vineyard?

Custom Microsetting Creation

As you become familiar with microsetting creation, you may wish to ignore the guided steps and instead draw and choose cards of each type in ratios and sequences according to your preference.

Creating a World Map

To make a world map, create multiple microsettings and arrange them next to each other with small gaps between. You may wish to alternate between creating simple and complex microsettings to ensure your world has areas of varying complexity. As you add microsettings to your world map, you may want to:
• **Reposition other cards and/or microsettings** to make room for new ones.
• **Swap cards** between microsettings.
• **Interpret connections between different microsettings** through their cues. One microsetting's pollution might explain another's ecological upheaval. A land dispute could be tied to a corrupt politician's decisions on the other side of the map. It may help to make note of the connections, or cut up string to lay across the map to link the two cards.

Interpreting Your Map's Scale

You have the freedom to interpret the scale of your world map. You can even surround a world map with

secondary maps exploring individual areas in detail. While the artwork on the cards is not to scale, you can space microsetting clusters to reflect a consistent scale of distance. You can also reposition tucked cards and shift how much of each tucked card is showing to expand or contract areas, or place facedown cards in a microsetting to expand its occupied area.

The deck is designed to create non-gridded maps with interesting, irregular shapes. Depending on the size of the world you want to build, we recommend the following guidelines.
- For a large continent-sized map, assemble 14-20 microsettings in a 30" x 25" space. Treat 1" as approximately 50 miles (80 km).
- For a medium country-sized map, assemble 9-14 microsettings in a 25" x 20" space. Treat 1" as approximately 20 miles (32 km).
- For a small city-sized detail map, assemble 5-7 microsettings in a 20" x 15" space. Treat 1" as approximately 1 mile (1.6 km).

> **Travel speed:** Some tabletop RPGs estimate that the average person can travel 24 miles in a day. Some historical sources estimate the speed of foot travel in the Middle Ages at 9-14 miles per day.

Developing a World Meta

As you create microsettings, you may find cues you want to interpret not just as a local microsetting feature, but as a feature that applies to your entire world. A worldbuilding concept that applies to your entire world is called a *meta*.

For example, you might draw the "NO WRITTEN LANGUAGE" 🧑 **Attribute**, and decide that your entire world has developed without the need to write anything down. Or you might draw the "OF GLASS" 😮 **Namesake** and decide to name your world "The Continent of Glass."

At any time during the development of your world map, you may place any 😮 **Namesake**, 📖 **Origin**, 🧑 **Attribute**, or ✳ **Advent** in a row beside your map to designate it as a meta. This is called your *meta row*. Rotate that card so the cue you wish to use as a meta is facing you. Then draw a new

card to continue creating the microsetting. To keep your world concept focused, we recommend keeping no more than 1 😮 **Namesake**, 1 📖 **Origin**, 1 🧑 **Attribute**, and 1 ✳ **Advent** in the meta row. 🕐 **Landmarks** can generally be ignored as metas. 🌳 **Regions** can sometimes provide inspiration for monoclimate worlds.

> **Starting with the meta:** You can also draw cards to determine your meta before world creation. Draw 😮😮 + 📖📖 + 🧑🧑 + ✳✳ and choose one of each card type to place in your meta row. Discard the rest.

Building Nuanced Worlds

Deck of Worlds provides a simple, fast way to spark ideas, but the cards are only a starting point. The job of interpreting cues and building a world full of thoughtful representation and cultural nuance is up to you. To that end, we recommend asking a few key questions as you create your setting:
- **What is your baseline?** Many cues focus on what makes an area unique or different. Worldbuilders often subconsciously measure this difference from their own baseline cultural norms. Always consider the biases that may accompany your baseline.
- **What associations are you making?** Cues help spark ideas quickly, but you are always encouraged to question your first response. Rapid association can lead to uninspired tropes or harmful stereotypes. Consider slowing down to review and revise creative choices as you go.
- **Whose perspective are you taking?** A cue provides one perspective of an area, but whose? When you interpret a cue, consider who would agree or disagree, and if those perspectives come from inside or outside the area and its culture.
- **What are the exceptions?** A cue is a descriptive headline of an area, but it may not be the whole truth. Consider what exceptions exist.
- **Whose story are you telling?** Worldbuilders often draw inspiration from real-world cultures or explore social issues through stories about inequality, oppression, prejudice, and personhood. Use extra care when representing or creating stand-ins for real cultures and groups, especially

Meta Row   World Map   Sideboard (*see* p. 6)

those fighting for equity and recognition in a world that already questions, misrepresents, or invalidates their history, culture, or experiences.

- **Who is your audience?** Settings and stories can provoke a range of powerful emotions and responses. Consider who you are intending to share your world with and what their response might be, especially to your handling of real-world issues like abuse, bigotry, and violence.

Using a Sideboard

Some worldbuilders prefer a slower, more intentional process than randomly drawn cards allow. For a more choice-driven worldbuilding experience, consider using a sideboard.

A sideboard is a set of six faceup cards you may choose to draw from at any time instead of using a randomly drawn card. See the world map diagram on p. 5.

When you begin building your world, create your sideboard by drawing a card of each type and placing it faceup in an area beside your deck. Build your world using the usual guidelines, but whenever you draw a card that you do not wish to use, you may instead discard that card and replace it with the card of the same type from the sideboard.

Whenever you draw a card from your sideboard, draw another card of the same type from the main deck and place it faceup to refill your sideboard.

Using a sideboard will slow down world creation, but may help build more thoughtfully integrated worlds. This is especially helpful when mixing one or more sets of expansion cards into the *Deck of Worlds*.

> **Sideboards on a small surface:** For small spaces, play with the top card of each deck faceup as your sideboard. Draw from the facedown cards below each sideboard card as your main deck.

Multiplayer Rules

Two or more players can use *Deck of Worlds* to collaboratively create a world.

Multiplayer World-Weaving

In this mode, players weave the world together card by card. Follow the normal guidelines for creating microsettings, but take turns as steps are completed.

Player 1 completes Steps A and B, briefly explaining their choices and how they interpreted the cues. Player 2 does the same for Step C, building on what Player 1 created. Players continue taking turns until all steps are complete. The player who completes the microsetting places it in the world map. The next player begins creating the next microsetting.

Steps A and B should always be completed together by the same player, and this player decides if the new microsetting will be simple or complex. If desired,

players may offer each other suggestions, but final say always goes to the player whose turn it is.

World-weaving is the slowest and most collaborative form of multiplayer worldbuilding but tends to yield the most integrated worlds.

> **Nominating a meta:** On their turn, the acting player may nominate a cue from a card they drew as a meta, explaining how it would be interpreted. Players discuss and then vote on whether to adopt that meta. In the case of a tied vote, the meta is not adopted.
>
> If the meta is adopted, that player places it in the meta row and discards any remaining cards they drew. Their turn is over, and the next player goes, restarting the step the previous player was taking.
>
> If the meta is not adapted, the nominating player completes their turn as normal.

Multiplayer Mosaic-Making

In this mode, players assemble a world map as a mosaic of microsettings they created independently.

To begin, follow the instructions in the "Starting With the Meta" tip box on p. 5 to create your world's meta row. Have each player be responsible for choosing and interpreting one meta card type: 😀 **Namesake**, 🗺 **Origin**, 🧬 **Attribute**, or ⚗ **Advent**. For groups of five players or more, you may consider having players draw and choose additional 🧬 **Attributes** as metas.

Then each player independently creates their own microsetting. When all players are done, have each player present their microsetting and add it to the world map. Players may propose connections between the cues of their microsettings, and also explain how the meta applies to their microsettings.

> **Alternating multiplayer modes:** Players may also alternate between "World-Weaving" and "Mosaic-Making" modes within the creation of the same world map.

Multiplayer Drafting and Stashing

Both "Multiplayer World-Weaving" and "Multiplayer Mosaic-Making" can be preceded by players dividing the deck into individual *stashes* of cards. Players then draw from their stashes during microsetting creation instead of from a communal deck. This allows each player to create using a curated deck of cards that interest them.

Divide each card type into packets of 16 cards of the same type, discarding any excess cards. Then, each player picks up a packet of any card type, chooses two cards to add to their stash, and passes the packet of remaining cards to the next player to choose a card. Continue passing packets until there are no cards left in them. Then each player picks up a new packet and begins the process again. Every time players pick up new packets, reverse the direction of passing.

When there are not enough packets left for each player to pick up a full packet, halve each remaining packet of 16 cards into two packets of 8 cards. Then do a final round of drafting. Discard the remaining cards.

Follow the guidelines for "Multiplayer World-Weaving" or "Multiplayer Mosaic-Making," but have each player draw from their stash when it is their turn.

Multiplayer Pantheon

In this mode, players draft cards and create collaborative worlds as gods with individual personalities and priorities.

Begin by following the guidelines in the "Multiplayer Drafting" section. When all cards have been drafted, each player reviews their stash and selects 7 cues that represent their god's priorities. They should write down as many keywords as they want from these cues as their god's areas of influence, or *domains*. Each player should place the cards with these cues faceup in front of them to form their *domain row*. At any point during world creation, players may choose a card from their domain row to draw instead of drawing from their stash. Domains can range from the abstract (power,

beauty, nature, machination, health, secrets) to the concrete (food, fashion, temple, medicine, family, artisans, scavengers). Players can consider what themes these domains might have in common and what kind of god might embody these themes.

Next, follow the guidelines for "Multiplayer World-Weaving," but drawing cards from your stash or domain row. As you choose cues, do so from the perspective of your god trying to exert influence over the world. Focus on cues that incorporate your god's domains into the setting.

Once during the world creation process, each player may designate one microsetting, ⊕ **Region**, or ⊘ **Landmark** as their god's *sanctum*. A sanctum is a location where their god holds the greatest power and influence. They may choose to designate a microsetting, ⊕ **Region**, or ⊘ **Landmark** that has already been placed, or one that is in the process of being placed. When they designate their sanctum, they may immediately draw ⊘⊜⊕⊞⊗⊛ and choose 1 or 2 cards to add to their sanctum.

Combining With *The Story Engine Deck*

The Story Engine® Deck (storyenginedeck.com) is a standalone deck system for creating story ideas, character prompts, magic items, and more. You can add the five card types of *The Story Engine Deck* to *Deck of Worlds* to create worlds full of interesting characters, motivations, artifacts, and conflicts.

You can use ☻ **Agent** cards for the following:
- To learn more about a person in a *Deck of Worlds* cue, such as a celebrity or historical figure.
- To inspire an idea for a microsetting's leader.
- As alternative ⊜ **Namesakes**. Draw ☻☻ and choose 1 for each ⊜ you would otherwise draw. Read ☻ **Agent** cues either as possessive (e.g. ⊛ "FOREST" + ☻ "A MERCHANT" = "The Merchant's Forest") or a plural (e.g. ⊘ "CITY" + ☻ "A TAILOR" = "The City of Tailors").

You can use ⊛ **Engine** cards for the following:
- To ascribe motivations and relationships to factions, people mentioned in *Deck of Worlds* cues, and added ☻ **Agents**.

You can use ⚓ **Anchor** cards for the following:
- To learn more about an object in a *Deck of Worlds* cue, such as an artifact or invention.
- To inspire an idea for an important cultural object, such as a relic or trade good.
- As alternative ⊘ **Landmarks**.
- As alternative ⊜ **Namesakes**. Draw ⚓⚓ and choose 1 for each ⊜ you would otherwise draw. Read ⚓ **Anchor** cues in plural (e.g. ⊛ "VALLEY" + ⚓ "A RUIN" = "The Valley of Ruins").
- As alternative ⊗ **Attributes**.

You can use ⊘ **Conflict** cards for the following:
- To add personal stakes or consequences for characters getting involved in ⊛ **Advents**.
- To create potential consequences for added ⊛ **Engines**.

You can use ⊜ **Aspect** cards for the following:
- To learn more about any person, object, location, or event in a *Deck of Worlds* cue, as well as added ☻ **Agents** and ⚓ **Anchors**.
- As alternative ⊜ **Namesakes** (e.g. ⊘ "RIVER" + ⊜ "GENTLE" = "The Gentle River").

Conversely, some *Deck of Worlds* cards can be used in prompts for *The Story Engine Deck*.

- Microsettings, ⊕ **Regions,** and ⊙ **Landmarks** can be used as alternative ⊕ **Anchors**. Draw ⊕⊙ and choose 1 for each ⊕ you would otherwise draw.
- ⊕ **Namesakes** can be used as alternative

⊕ **Aspects** to give nicknames or titles to important ⊕ **Agents** and ⊕ **Anchors**. Draw ⊕⊕ and choose 1 for each ⊕ you would otherwise draw.

- ⊕ **Attributes** can be used as alternative ⊕ **Aspects** when describing certain locations. Draw ⊕⊕ and choose 1 for each ⊕ you would otherwise draw.

Explore your world with expansion sets from
[DECKOFWORLDS.COM](http://deckofworlds.com)

There are three genre expansions for worldbuilding in different genres: *Worlds of Myth & Magic* Fantasy Expansion, *Worlds of Chrome & Starlight* Science Fiction Expansion, and *Worlds of Blight & Shadow* Horror Expansion.

There are three cartography expansions for worldbuilding in different biomes: *Worlds of Tide & Tidings* Coastlines Expansion, *Worlds of Sand & Story* Deserts Expansion, and *Worlds of Frost & Fable* Arctic Expansion.

There are three creative expansions for exploring your world in greater depth.

Fresh Ink & Ancient Song provides prompts for creating in-world lore and legends.

Shared Hearths & Common Creeds provides "keyhole" questions for unlocking deeper truths about your setting's cultures.

Heroes' Quests & Fools' Errands provides instant adventure prompts and story hooks that can be adapted to your world.

Credits