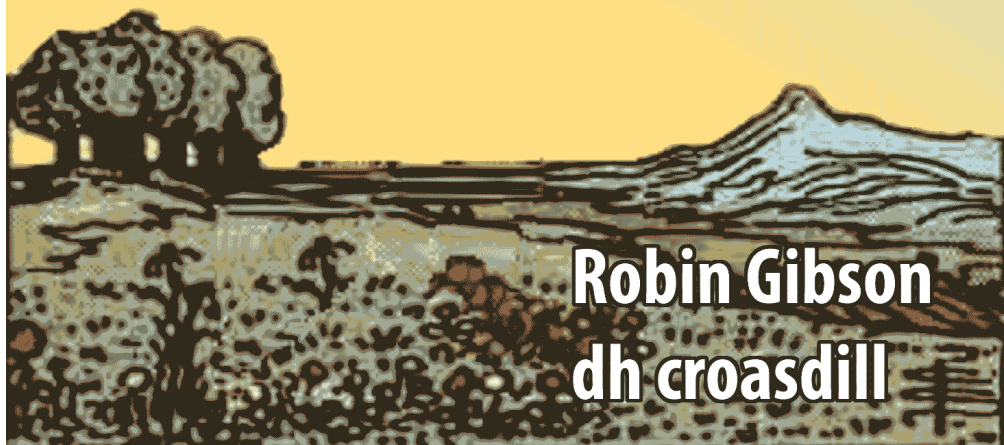




SIGNS & WONDERS



Robin Gibson
dh croasdill

signs & wonders

a cataclysm generator by Robin Gibson &
dh croasdill



This game is indebted to Pamela Colman Smith, who illustrated the classic Rider-Waite-Smith tarot deck. Her interpretation & depiction of the tarot has been invaluable to our work. Her colleague, Arthur Waite, paid her a flat commission rate for the illustrations in the RWS deck, & she spent many years unattributed. She died at home in 1951, with violets in her lap.

All illustration in this book are collages from her work.

playtesting provided by:

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Hello

Signs & Wonders is a story game for 2–5 players who enjoy spending their spare time thinking about bad & weird & stunning & overwhelming & destructive & miraculous things happening. A single game usually takes 1–2 hours to finish, but can go up to 3–4 hours with more players.

This is a game about environments & symptoms. It's a structure for imagining all of the steps leading up to a cataclysm, the square dance from cause to effect.

The cataclysm you & the other players will narrate is likely some sort of violent event or action. Imagining the trauma of things falling apart can be difficult or even impossible. Signs & Wonders emphasizes the experiences around a traumatic event (even if one such moment

doesn't quite exist in your cataclysm), & the monuments it leaves behind.

Materials

To play, all you need is a 78 card tarot deck.

You can attempt to play with less-conventional materials. Keep in mind, we designed the hand sizes & pacing with a full tarot deck in mind.



Setup

Separate the major arcana (the 22 cards which do not belong to any suit, beginning “The Fool” & ending “The World”). Shuffle these cards into a secondary deck, called the DECISIONS deck. Set the DECISIONS aside for now.

Shuffle the remaining cards into a RESPONSE deck, & deal 7 of them facedown in a row where everyone can see them. These are the 7 cards which represent the PORTENTS of your cataclysm. As you reveal these cards, changes will be happening in your narrative. It is up to you & the other players to determine what those changes are.

Deal a hand of 4 cards to each player from the DECISIONS deck. It's not especially important to keep your hand secret from the other players, but doing so can make

for fun surprises during gameplay.

If at any point the RESPONSE deck runs out of cards, shuffle the discard pile into the RESPONSE deck & continue play.

Making a Cataclysm

Before play begins, decide how it all ends. Discuss with the other players what you think a fitting cataclysm might be.

Ideally, because all of the players are deciding on a cataclysm together, it will be something which is suitably tragic, but which none of the players are especially uncomfortable thinking about for a few hours. Always make sure to be mindful of the other players' comfort levels, but be especially mindful during this step.

Cataclysmic things are

dramatic, turbulent, & often disastrous—they cause damage, which means there must be *something to cause damage to*. Try to answer some of the following questions about your cataclysm:

- What is it?
- Why is it a cataclysm?
- Where or when does it strike?
- Who does it affect?

The objective of the game is to discover *how the cataclysm affects the people who weather it*. You'll do this by narrating the events & relations which build up to a climactic moment.

As you play & learn new information, the particulars of your cataclysm might shift, but you cannot change its nature. There is no avoiding your cataclysm, it will arrive



every time you play.

Gameplay

Decide at the beginning of the game who will be the dealer. Don't sweat who or how, this role rotates among the players—we all have to look God in his hollow eyes sooner or later.

At the end of each round, the dealer hands the RESPONSE deck to the player to their left, which should always be clockwise unless something about tables has changed between publication & now. The player in possession of the RESPONSE deck becomes the new dealer for that round.

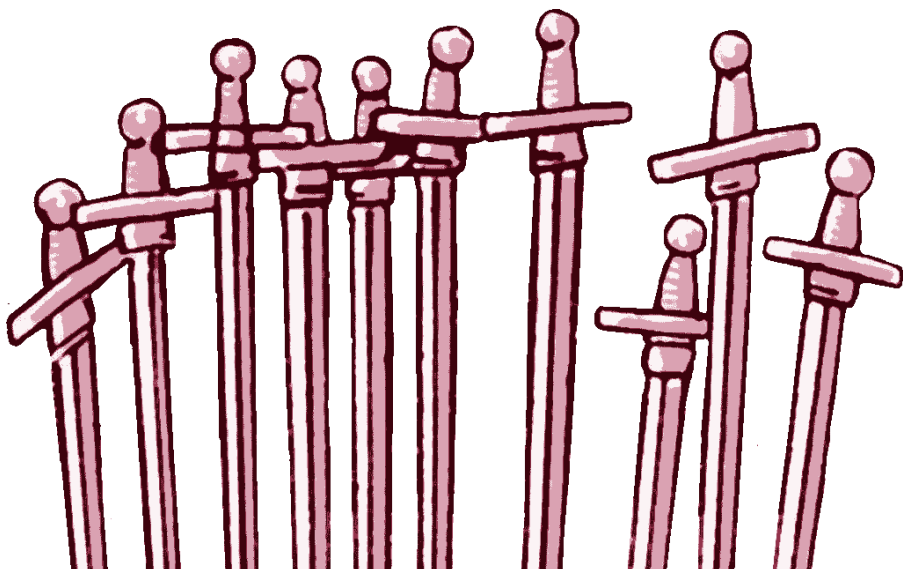
At the beginning of each round, flip over & reveal

one of the PORTENTS. Discuss with the other players what this card depicts in the narrative you are building (if you have trouble with interpreting the cards, consult the “interpretative work” sidebar on page 9). Once you have settled on a mutually agreeable interpretation, take a moment to consider how the cards in your hand might resolve, complicate, or relate to the PORTENT. Pick whichever card you think might make the best story, & place it face down beside the PORTENT card. Once each player has done this, reveal the cards

you have just played, & let each player take a turn describing how their card changes the situation, starting with the dealer.

Discuss these cards with the other players, & decide together which cards most interestingly resolve, complicate, or relate to the PORTENT. Keep at least one of the most interesting cards beside the PORTENT, & discard any which you don’t use.

At the end of each round, the dealer deals 1 card to every player so that their hand is refreshed to 4 cards.



SCENARIOS

Here are a few possible cataclysms, ranked from “vague & provocative” to “this is probably a metaphor for a very specific thing which you often think of,” each presenting unique ways for a world to whimper shut. Cataclysms don’t always have to occur on a grand scale, you might consider telling a story about a small town tragedy, or even the apocalypse-for-two of romantic love.

- Everything splits.
- Cicadas are different now.
- The great lakes give up.
- The Earth & the moon have loved each other for a thousand thousand centuries, & they are no longer content to be apart.
- Seattle is slowly being consumed by a pernicious frost which crawled out of the Puget Sound. The outlying cities remain untouched by the hoary doom, but they swell past capacity with fleeing Seattlites.
- An angel separated from his chariot falls in love with a man from Michigan. After a single passionate night just outside of Escanaba, the man never calls the angel back. God’s love is never withheld, & so the angel, never having known this loss, razes the Gwinn State Forest in search of his beloved.

Ending Things

When the 7th PORTENT is revealed, the cataclysm has come. Play a round with the 7th PORTENT the same way as before, keeping in mind that this card represents some event within or directly preceding the cataclysm.

After the 7th PORTENT is resolved, each player discards their remaining hand. Deal each player a new hand of 3 cards from the DECISIONS deck. Choose a player to go first (whoever wants it most), & have that player play 1 card from their hand face up. That player describes how their card depicts some or all of the aftermath—specific events, general attitudes taken by the community, etc. Proceeding clockwise around the table, each other player does the same, with the additional option that the card

which they play can also elaborate on another player's card.

After each player has played 1 card from their new hand, the game has ended



FACING THE CATACLYSM

At this point, you might want to take some time to revisit the questions you answered about yourr cataclysm at the beginning of the game:

- What is it?
- Why is it a cataclysm?
- Where or when does it strike?
- Who does it affect?

Have your answers changed?

Interpretation

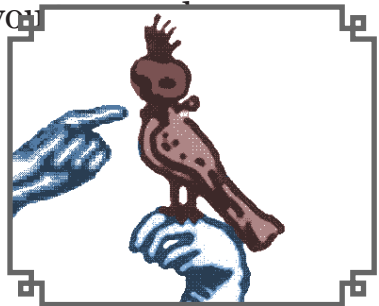
The core mechanic of Signs & Wonders is interpretation in the broadest sense of the word.

When you have to interpret a card, take a moment to look over the image on it. The illustrations on Tarot cards are typically dense with elements intended to be *read as a narrative*. For the purposes of this game, you can focus in on any number of these elements or just one to help build your own narrative.

There is no method of interpretation which works better than others for the purpose of this game. If you have previous experience reading tarot cards, all the better. However, this shouldn't exclude other ways of readings of the cards, especially with

more unique decks. A player with no tarot experience can still interpret the cards based on what is immediately obvious to them—what they think might be happening in the illustration, how the colors make them feel, what they think of the characters the card features, or word associations with the images.

On pages 10–11, we've included a short list of possible ways to interpret every card in a tarot deck. These are intended to be more like prompts than rules or guidelines; just something to get you going if you're stuck. Don't let them restrict you.



INTERPRETATIVE WORK

Here are a few questions you might ask yourself to jumpstart the interpretation of a card you're having trouble reading.

- Does this card establish something new, or iterate on something old?
- What characters are featured on this card? Have they appeared before in your game?
- What is the overall tone of the card? Does it seem positive or negative? Is it miraculous or mundane?
- Does this card describe a change? Is it a large or a little change?
- Does this card describe something active or something passive?



Major Arcana

the decisions

Fool — beginnings,

recklessness, naivete

Magician — planning, power,
mastery

High Priestess — silence,
potential, intuition

Empress — connectivity,
abundance, sensuality

Emperor — domination,
order, moderation

Hierophant — learning,
belief, culture

Lovers — romance, harmony,
home

Chariot — triumph, force of
will, tenacity

Strength — patience,
gentleness, self-control

Hermit — introspection,
isolation, guidance

Wheel of Fortune — chance,
interpretation, manifold

Justice — responsibility,
revenge, vindication

Hanged Man — sacrifice,
restriction, reversals

Death — endings,
transformation, pruning

Temperance — vitality,
moderation, balance

Devil — bindings, materialism,
horniness

Tower — downfalls,
revelations, cataclysms

Star — inspiration, hope,
horizons

Moon — illusions, wonder,
ominousness

Sun — illumination, excess,
charisma

Judgment — retrieval,
rebirth, morality

World — integration,
culmination, cycles

Swords

activity, consciousness, air

Ace — truth, virtue, clarity

2 — repression, avoidance,
stalemate

3 — betrayal, entanglement,
heartbreak

4 — rest, woe, quietness

5 — self-interest, chaos,
dishonor

6 — trials, travel, depression

7 — excess, ill-intent,
furtiveness

8 — confusion, powerlessness,
binding

9 — regret, anxiety, repulsion

10 — martyrdom, self-
destruction, anguish

Page — truth, justice, fortitude

Knight — logic, knowledge,
abandon

Queen — honesty, wit,
experience

King — analysis, justice, ethics

Wands

creativity, enthusiasm, fire

Ace — creation, courage,
confidence

2 — foresight, tactics,
dominion

- 3** — exploration, initiative, movement
4 — excitement, joviality, celebration
5 — disagreement, tumult, struggle
6 — fragility, triumph, fame
7 — aggression, defiance, individualism
8 — ruin, endings, upheaval
9 — defensiveness, stubbornness, courage
10 — overexertion, fatigue, burdens

Page — creativity, audacity, experimentation

Knight — cockiness, adventure, charm

Queen — cheer, self-assurance, groundedness

King — charisma, boldness, forcefulness

Cups

receptivity, intimacy, water

Ace — generosity, sensuality, love

2 — attraction, attachment, intimacy

3 — interweaving, excitement, collaboration

4 — stasis, isolation, contemplation

5 — loss, regret, mourning

6 — community, childhood, sincerity

7 — choice, hope, opulence

8 — recession, tribulation, fatigue

9 — desire, satisfaction, completion

10 — joy, peace, unity

Page — curiosity, surprise, forbearance

Knight — romance, artifice, refinement

Queen — boundaries, protection, secrecy

King — restraint, diplomacy, preparedness

Pentacles

passivity, labor, earth

Ace — prosperity, fruition, cultivation

2 — flexibility, revelry, balance

3 — competence, collaboration, foundations

4 — possessiveness, control, repression

5 — rejection, sickness, insincerity

6 — ups & downs, waxing & waning

7 — rewards, change, analysis

8 — diligence, scrutiny, specialization

9 — discipline, luxury, practice

10 — permanence, bias, convention

Page — trust, patience, practicality

Knight — cautious, realistic, stubborn

Queen — generosity, pastoralism, resourcefulness

King — reliability, constancy, experience

letters from the designers

hi there,

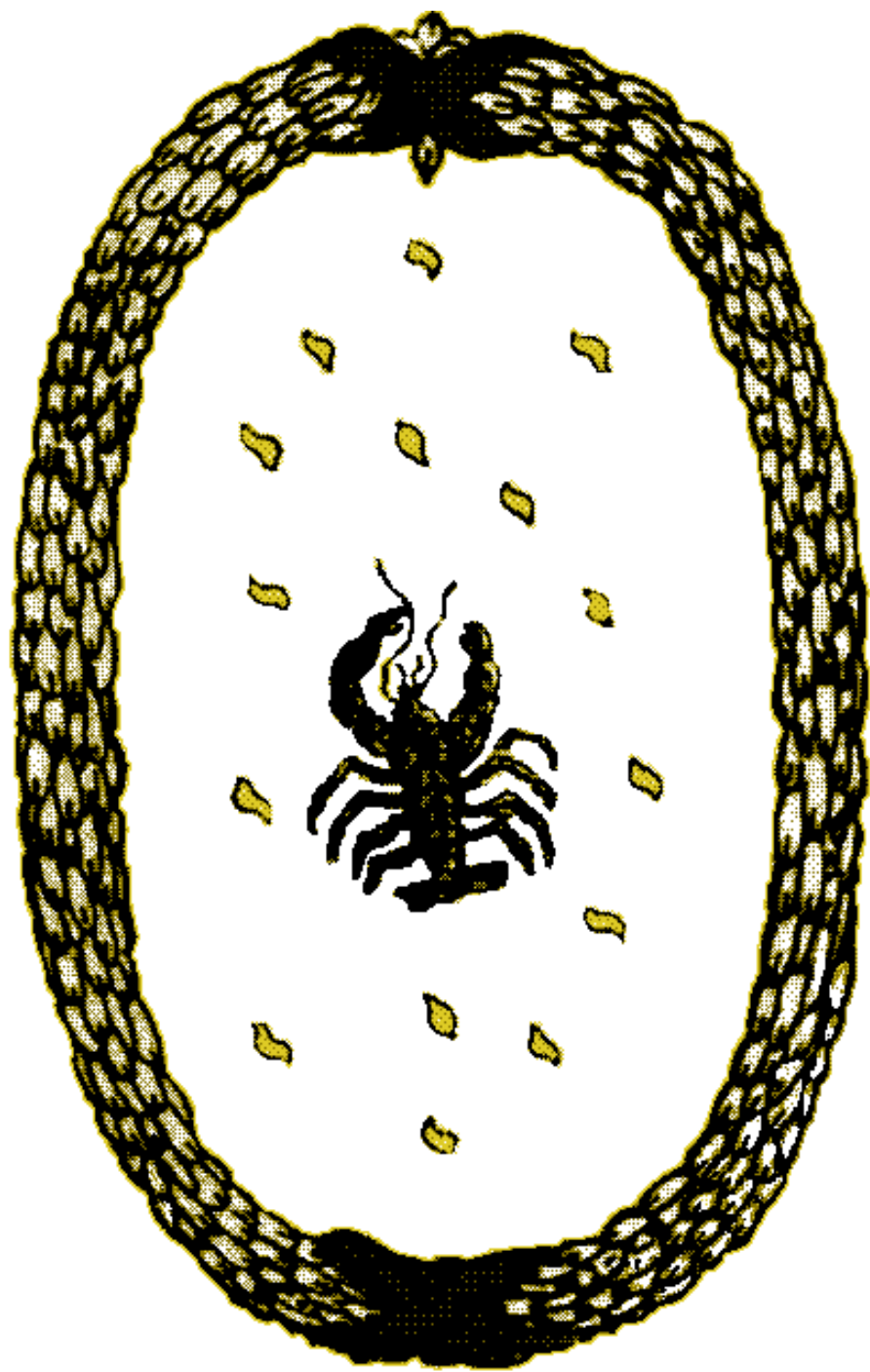
i harbor a gut-deep yearning to disappear into the New Mexico highlands and never speak to another human soul again, so instead of doing that, i wrote about the sorts of situations that might afford someone the oppotrtunity to reasonably disappear into the New Mexico highlands and never speak to another human soul again. in brief, i'm fascinated by cataclysms because something comes after them. i hope you like the game.

—Robin

hey there. it's me, d. you know, from the book?

anyways, i'm very anxious about the world—it's ended a few times over the course of my life & one of these times it's probably gonna stick. i wanted to make Signs & Wonders as a game where you might imagine that you can see all of the relevant buildup to a cataclysm, & that because of this you might have some agency in an otherwise unavoidable encounter. sort of a grim wish to fulfill with a game, huh? have fun.

—d



goodbye.