

“Ab-“ *prefix*, a formal element occurring in loanwords from Latin, where it meant “away from”, “absent”, “separate from”, or “departure”.

“Nature“ *noun*, the material world, especially as surrounding humankind and existing independently of human activities.

“Abnatural“ *adjective*, inexplicable, uncanny, unreal, the result of unknown forces, laws, or intent beyond human understanding.

“Arcane“ *adjective*, understood by few; mysterious or secret.

ARCANE ENGINES

Our world is passing through an invisible storm of snarls in the fabric of reality. Attracted by consciousness thought, these anomalies grant abnatural power to the minds capable of harnessing them. Minds like yours.

Through the anomalies you can perceive glimpses of higher dimensions, gain understanding and control of the principle forces of our reality, reshape your surroundings, and conceive of impossible creations.

The priceless secrets tearing through your mind grant the power to make your deepest desires reality, but at a cost. If you channel this power, use it, you can do **anything** but you will lose your connection to the world you've remade to suit you. And you are not alone in this power.

There are others, grappling as you are with what to do next, and none of you have time to waste. Corporations, religious fanatics, cold-eyed moguls, bright-eyed ideologues, and a whole Scrabble-set's worth of acronymed government agencies will do anything to chain you to their purposes, and shape you into tools fit for use before you burn out or go mad.

You are a living arcane engine. What will you make of your world?

Arcane Engines is a tabletop roleplaying game blending fantasy, science fiction, and a touch of horror for three or more players. The players share responsibility for portraying ordinary people suddenly infected with the power to bend and break the laws of reality, organizations and individuals determined to capture and control them, and the inexplicable vagaries of the anomalies themselves.

To begin the game, each player will create an Engine (a person infected by an anomaly whom they will portray), one or more Organizations who are interested in Engines (who can be used by anyone), and one posited change abnormalities have caused to society in general (to create the setting).

ENGINES

While they come from all over the world, all ages, and all walks of life, Engines all have a few common required elements that describe them.

3 Facets: Three memorable things about their personality or physical form, things that other people will distinctly remember about them, and things the other players can target to encourage character development. At least one facet should be very obvious, visible or discoverable without getting to know the character very well, such as a nasty scar or a short temper. The other two can be a little more cryptic or personal, but be something that anyone who's close to them or known them for a year or more would know. Facets typically do not change, they are the defining aspects of your character. If the narrative or a Goal achievement causes your fundamental character to change, strike out the least applicable facet and choose a new one.

3 Connections: people, places, organizations, or objects that the character cares about. These do not have to be something the character loves, just something they feel immensely strongly about. Their father's watch, the woman who murdered their sibling, their school playground, or the college faculty who ignored them until they harnessed an abnormality. Basically, pick anything you want to ensure is included in the story.

3 Skills: knowledge, areas of expertise, practice, training, talent or experience, what the character was especially good at before they were infected. Divide 10 points between these skills: when they're relevant to a conflict, add the skill's value to your result. *'When all you have is a hammer, everything looks like a nail.'* Your skills define how you tend to perceive and resolve problems, your 'go to' solutions. Pick anything you want, you'll just need to convince the other players how it applies to the challenge at hand.

3 Goals: whether short-, medium-, or long-term, these are the fundamental wants and needs of the character. Goals drive the plot: if your character doesn't face an immediate challenge, they should default to pursuing one of their goals until the world around them pushes back. Write these in pencil! They should grow and shift over the course of the game, change them when it feels appropriate, and let the other players know what's changed and why. A recommended starting balance is one goal of each term length.

and 3 Anomaly Aspects:

As an Engine you can twist reality, instinctively manipulating the laws of space, time, physics, and causality, just by narrating how you do so. But not all Engines are created equal; performing certain manipulations is easier for some and harder for others.

Pick one of these distributions: [+1 / +1 / -2] or [+2 / -1 / -1] and three of the Anomaly Aspects listed below. Your Engine can perform any or all of these, but you'll either be slightly better at two and bad at one, or really good at one and slightly bad at two others. Consider your skills and how their bonuses may apply when selecting your Aspects.

Temporal, Fast	You can speed up your physical movement, mental processes, the healing and/or aging processes in yourself or others, cause plants to grow, food & drink to go bad, or create 'bullet-time' during a fight allowing you to react to events that you or others normally couldn't. Think Quicksilver, the Flash, and Neo.
Temporal, Slow	You can slow down physical processes to limit the effects of drugs or poison, prevent injuries from getting worse, or stop the aging process. You can mire someone in place as if they were in a nightmare, dull the wits or reaction time of a security guard, or slow falling debris to allow you to escape.
Temporal, Skip	Forwards or backwards you can send yourself or others from one time to another. The strength of your result limits how far you can move, and how much control you have over your arrival. 1-4: <1 minute, 5-7: <10 minutes, 8-10: <1 hour. A failure still means you've moved, just not when you wanted.
Create, Physical	You can call objects and/or living creatures into being: you always have the right tool for the job, a key to open any lock, an army of goblins at your beck and call, or the object of anyone's desire to dangle before them. These are not transported *from* anywhere, and will persist after you leave, die or go mad.
Create, Mental	You can plague others with phantoms and illusions which exist only in their minds, inspire great works of art and ingenuity, or instill crippling phobias or irrational bias. People are puppets to dance to your tune! Or you can heal and strengthen people's minds. Think Professor X, Scarlet witch, or trickster gods.
Create, Abnatural	You can create devices or rituals that operate on alien principles of physics. These produce set abnormal effects lingering over time, trigger-able by anyone or only the individual you choose. Shrink rays, giant robots, homunculi servants, magic wands, etc. Think mad science, sorcerers, gadgetters, or steampunk.

Forces, Project	You can hurl lightning, control magnetism, project pure kinetic force, excite the very molecules of the air to burst into flame, or concentrate gravity to crush those who would oppose you. You cannot project 'cold' since it is the absence of energy.
Forces, Absorb	You can negate gravity to fly, levitate, or lift heavy things. You can dissolve chemical bonds disintegrating your opposition. You can absorb the kinetic force of bullets or a speeding car, extinguish flame, chill the air, and freeze liquids solid.
Reshape, Physical	You can mold steel with your hands or mind, alter your appearance or that of others, alter the physical properties of matter transmuting lead into gold or turning concrete transparent as glass while retaining its strength.
Reshape, Mental	You can alter thoughts, opinions, memories, turn sorrow into joy, change apathy into purpose...or the reverse. Where Mental Creations are apparent to those who receive them, Mental Reshaping is subtle and can escape notice, when done well.
Reshape, Abnatural	Weave flying carpets, forge magic swords, you can "enchant" objects, places, or people with abnormal effects, unleash "cursed" objects on the unsuspecting, or "bless" those who are worthy in your eyes, imbuing them with abnatural might.
Dimensional, Distort	You can shrink a house to fit in your pocket, make a phone booth large enough inside to park a semi, stretch a hallway for miles, or compress a lake until you can step across it. These changes are typically temporary or require your attention to maintain, but a high enough result might make it permanent.
Dimensional, Connect	You can teleport from one place to another without crossing the distance between them, create 'portals' connecting two places, or traps that send pursuers miles into the air. You can reach into someone's chest and pull out their still-beating heart, divert a raging river or speeding car.
Dimensional, Abnatural	You can open the way to our universe for denizens of the higher dimensions glimpsed through the anomaly, travel there yourself, exile enemies to whatever alternate-dimensional hell in which your whim strikes you to place them, or retire to your own personal paradise with those you deem worthy companions.

The effects you desire might be achieved using several different aspects, or a blend of several. Pick one that fits your Engine or the situation and don't sweat it unless you're trying to gain or avoid an Aspect adjustment, then let the group decide and move on.

ORGANIZATIONS

Organizations vary, but they all have one thing in common: they want to use Engines for their own ends. There are three core elements of an organization: write the Organization's name and core elements on a notecard, and place them in a pool in the center of the table. More Organizations are better than fewer, and Factions of larger Organizations can pursue complementary or conflicting goals.

Domain: the source of the organization's authority, resources, territory, and influence. Are they a global corporate conglomerate? Religious sect? Governmental agency? Political movement? Where are they powerful, and why?

Expertise: what they do best, their core competency, measured in points from one to ten depending on how dangerous you think they are. Feel free to be broad. Add the organization's expertise to your roll whenever you roll for them, and reduce it by one if you lose. If reduced to zero, the organization is destroyed: narrate how!

Face: a representative of the organization who Engines are likely to come into conflict with, and who shows the best and worst the organization is capable of. Feel free to add more faces in play if necessary.

INSTABILITY

Organizations differ on the true nature of abnormalities: are they a weapon intended to tear societies apart? Perhaps they are tools abandoned by an alien race? Others believe them to be quasi-living entities using human minds to replicate. What is known for sure is that the minds of Engines become less and less stable as they exert changes upon reality. Developing patterns of dementia and psychoses alienate the Engine from conventional reality and human concerns until the capacity for rational thought is lost.

Organizations also differ on how they address this issue, some burn through the "useful" stage and discard their Engines as they become uncontrollable. Others use their Engines as little as possible, spreading the changes they desire between their Engines to try to make them last as long as possible. Few Organizations are so altruistic as to seek out Engines to keep them from exercising their abilities.

On the character sheet you will find ten boxes for Instability. For each successful use of abnormal abilities the Engine marks a box with a "\ " indicating **light** instability. Boxes are marked from left to right. For each failed use the Engine marks a "/" for **medium** instability in the left-most box, or a "X" if they had no previous instability. If all boxes are filled with light instability, mark a medium. If all boxes are marked medium, fill in the box completely to indicate **permanent** instability.

Removing instability: When an Engine concludes a scene in which they interacted with one of their Connections in a meaningful way, they may reveal the top card of the deck and erase that much **light** instability. If the card revealed is a face card the Engine may choose to remove all light instability and gain a Quirk as described below. If they opt not to take the Quirk they do not lose any instability. When an Engine completes a Goal they may draw a card as above to erase some or all of their **medium** instability.

DESTABILIZATION

When an Engine becomes Destabilized, either by gaining ten boxes of permanent instability, or through acquiring six Quirks (see below) the Engine has lost all touch with reality. The player narrates what those present witness as the Engine burns out: do they become catatonic? Explode? Sublime into pure thought? Transform into some fantastic shape or mythical being? Perhaps they merely fade into another realm of being. It is up to the player to describe a satisfying ending for their Engine.

For the remainder of the game that player will only act as an Organization, stepping up the danger for the remaining Engines.

STARTING PLAY

Format: players alternate between calling scenes as their Engine and as one of the Organizations created at the start of play. This can be done as rigidly or as loosely as players desire. A formal structure is outlined below, but if you'd rather not worry about it just take turns and let people go as cool ideas come to them. Do read on to get an idea how the game is intended to play out, but you needn't feel limited to following it.

Round One: Take turns quickly describing where your Engine is at the start of the story, and what they are trying to do. Your Engines may know each other, be friends or rivals, or be completely separated as the narrative begins.

Once everyone's described where they are and what they're trying to do, someone other than the person who wrote it should pick up an Organization card and describe that Organization's Agenda and generally how they are seeking Engines to advance it. Other players may offer suggestions or ask for clarifications, but for now the player who selected the Organization is in control of it. The Organization could be hunting specific Engines (not the player's own Engine), or generally trying to woo them into joining.

Each other player also selects an Organization they did not create and goes through the same steps, describing their Agenda and efforts. As with Engines, Organizations can be allies or enemies, or their spheres of influence may be so different that they will only interact if they are both pursuing the same Engine.

If one or more Engines were targeted by an Organization, those interactions are resolved first. The Engine describes their response to the Organization's efforts, possibly interacting with the controlling player as the Face of the Organization or calling on other players to take the role of bystanders or the Engine's Connections if applicable. Any conflicts are resolved as described below.

When the narrative reaches an intriguing cut-away point or a natural stopping point, play rotates to a different Engine or group of Engines responding to an Organizational Agenda. An Engine who was not targeted by an Organization may instead call a scene working on one of their goals. (See Goal Achievement below)

Play continues in this fashion until all Engines have had a turn as the focus of attention, and all narratives have reached natural stopping points. e.g. If you cut away from Engine 1 in the middle of a scene, play can shift back to continue that scene in-between the other Engines, or switch back and forth as needed between two Engines to conclude their scenes, ending that "round" of play. Players return the Organization card they controlled to the pool in the center of the table at the end of the round.

Round Two: Time passes between rounds. Each Engine takes a moment describing where each Engine is "now", how they are feeling, and what they intend to do next. This can involve pursuing a goal, dealing with unintentional results of previous actions, courting or confronting an Organization, allying with or even attacking another Engine.

In this and future rounds, play shifts temporally: an Engine describing 'later that day' acts before one picking up 'the next morning' or 'a few days later'. If needed, mark a number of index cards "1" "2" "3" etc. and distribute them based on player turn order.

Combining narrative threads will make for easier storytelling, but is not required. If a scene extends "beyond" the time of the next Engine's focus, their scene is understood to happen in a flashback. Similarly, if one Engine's focus is significantly further out than the other Engines ('two months later' etc) it is viewed as a "flash forward" to keep the player engaged and their Engine's story progressing each round.

Each player chooses an Organization they have not previously controlled, and describes how its Agenda has changed (if it was active previously) and what it is doing. Other players may offer suggestions or ask for clarification as before.

At no time may the same player control both their Engine and the Organization the Engine is interacting with. Trade control of the Organization if necessary to avoid this, or if all Engines are working together, yield temporary control of your Engine to the other players during the scene.

If so many Organizations are destroyed, disbanded, or subsumed into other groups that there are insufficient cards for each player to have one, the player whose Engine has had the most "screen time" will go without an Organization that round.

If an Organization is targeting an Engine, determine where in the Turn Order that will fall. The Engine's response may alter or negate their intended action for the round, possibly pushing their stated intent to the next round of play. As before, narrative focus can shift between Engines, and the round ends when all scenes have hit a natural stopping point.

All Other Rounds: Continue playing through rounds of Engines giving quick check-ins, Organizations describing Agenda and Intent, then the Engine's responding or taking action, switching control of the Organizations each round. Repeat until everyone's satisfied with the end of their story, or until all Engines or Organizations are defunct.

CONFLICT RESOLUTION

You will need three regular decks of playing cards, minimum. For every two players beyond the first three, add another deck of cards. Remove the jokers and shuffle all the decks together, then each player draws a hand of six cards.

Whenever there is a conflict to resolve, the initiating player describes what they intend to do and chooses the suit they feel best matches the effect they are trying to achieve.

Clubs: any physical change affecting a living being.

Diamonds: any physical change affecting something other than a being.

Spades: any mental change affecting a living being.

Hearts: any mental change affecting a group or type of beings, or society in general.

All players select a card from their hand and play it face-down into a **Results Pile**. If an Engine is using a favored Arcane Aspect they may play one or two additional cards depending on their bonus. If the Engine has a -1 bonus to use the Aspect they contribute no cards to the Pile, and if they have a -2, they draw one card unseen from the top of the deck and added to the pile instead of playing a card from their hand. Players do not redraw to fill their hands until after the Results Pile has been resolved.

The Pile is turned face up and sorted by suit. Aces are low, 10s high, and face-cards resolved specially. If the acting Engine's Skill is deemed applicable by the group, add its value to the total for the chosen suit. If none of the other suits total higher than the chosen suit, the action was a success. If the acting Engine used their abnatural ability, mark one box of "light" instability.

If another suit total is higher than the chosen suit, the action failed. If the acting Engine used their abnatural ability, mark one box of "medium" instability. The other players propose narratively interesting results in keeping with the strongest suit, and the acting player chooses one proposal as what actually happened instead of what they intended.

If one or more face cards were put into the pile, the acting player chooses one as a **Quirk** they must roleplay. Quirks reduce a player's hand size by one. If a player's handsizes is reduced to zero their Engine has been Destabilized.

Quirks are decided by consensus of all players, including the one whose Engine will be affected. E.g. you can always refuse a Quirk you do not wish to roleplay and the group must decide on something else.

Kings: add an explicitly negative Facet to the Engine, in keeping with the card suit. The new Facet is a permanent aspect of the Engine. The King is discarded once the Facet has been chosen, but the Engine's hand size remains reduced. Write the negative Facet on an index card and keep it with the Engine's character sheet.

Queens: give a short- or medium-term Goal to the Engine. A short-term goal may be neutral, irritating, or embarrassing to the Engine, but need not be actually negative. A medium-term goal causes explicitly negative results for the Engine pursuing its resolution. Write the negative Goal on an index card and keep it and the Queen card with the Engine's character sheet. Once the Goal is completed, the Queen and index card can be discarded.

Jacks: saddle the Engine with a negative or irrational Connection. Write the negative Connection on an index card and keep it and the Jack with the Engine's character sheet. Once the Engine has concluded a scene including a meaningful interaction with the Connected person, place, thing, or group they may discard the cards.

COMPLETING GOALS

A short-term Goal is something an Engine should be able to resolve in 2-3 successful scenes. A medium-term goal would take 4-6 successful scenes. Long term Goals might not be completed unless your Engine is very dedicated, or survives several play sessions, building up 7-10 successful scenes.

The narrative may cause a Goal to shift, change, grow or even shrink in terms of scope. Make a tickmark for each successful scene in the box provided for each goal, or on the card for a Queen Quirk Goal.

When the player feels they have reached a satisfying resolution to their Goal they can reap the rewards; removing medium instability and discarding the Quirk if applicable. For character sheet Goals, erase it and write down a new Goal of whatever length you want to pursue.

NAME: _____

INSTABILITY:

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USE PENCIL

FACETS:

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SKILLS:

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CONNECTIONS:

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GOALS:

USE PENCIL	USE PENCIL	USE PENCIL
SUCCESSSES:	SUCCESSSES:	SUCCESSSES:

ASPECTS

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