

HOUSE OF REEDS

a storygame for 2-6 players by Sam Kabo Ashwell

This is a role-playing game about a home. In this home lives a family, or a succession of families. You'll draw the home and watch as it changes with the family over the years.

You will need a good-sized sheet of paper to draw on, pencils, and something on which to record characters (index cards are good). A big pile of 10-sided dice is helpful but not necessary. You'll also need to print and cut out the game cards, or transcribe them onto something.

SETUP

ESTABLISH SETTING

Decide together on a few basic features of your setting:

- Is this set in the real world, or a speculative one?
- What approximate era? (Depending on setting, you may want to choose a particular start year.)
- Archetypal social unit: what's the prevailing ideal of a family unit or a household?
- Location: urban, rural or something in between; region; the social class and character of the neighbourhood.
- Architecture: What's the general shape of the home? Is this a townhouse, an apartment, a mansion, a space colony?
- Climate: what are the seasons? In which season does the year end?

(What counts as a home? For that matter, what counts as a family?)

You'll have to answer for yourself. Try settings that explore this kind of question.

Mechanically, homes are places in which the family spend a lot of time, and might stay indefinitely. An orphanage or frathouse is difficult, because you've got limited time there.

CHOOSE FLAVOUR CARDS

Some of the cards have titles in ALL CAPS; these form the *basic deck*, which will be in every game. The remaining cards, with lowercase titles, are *flavour cards*; they tweak the themes of your story. Choose about 1-3 flavour cards to add to the deck. (A good method is process of elimination: lay out all the flavour cards, and have players take turns to remove one card until you're left with a set that's acceptable to everyone.) Shuffle the deck.

BUILD ROOMS

Going around the table, each player draws a room on the map, and names it. If there are 2-3 players and that many rooms feels like too few, go around twice. As you draw, explain what the room is normally used for. Include big, built-in details like windows and doors, and maybe one or two smaller features, like furniture. (The assumption is that it's a top-down map, but a side-on cutaway could work too.) In the case of exterior windows and doors, don't say what they overlook yet.

Don't worry too much about rooms joining up perfectly. Houses can be pretty strange. Multi-floor houses are fine; so are houses where none of the rooms join one another directly.

The rooms on the map are not necessarily all the rooms in the house, just where scenes will happen. You don't need a bathroom just because there would be one in the house – unless you want bathroom scenes. Choose rooms that you think would be interesting to set scenes in.

Gardens, porches, sheds, outbuildings, even fields can be rooms, as long as they are within the domain of the family's regular life, and are part of the same site: if a nearby field or forest is in some sense a well-used, familiar family space, it can be on the map. Distant workplaces and holiday homes can't be rooms.

Decide what the viewshed is like.

If there are doors and windows to the exterior, continue around the table. Pick a facing, and say what it opens onto or overlooks. Make a note on the map.

CREATE CHARACTERS

In turn, each player creates a character. (It doesn't matter if not every player does so.) Keep going until you have 2-5 characters; you can decide how many in advance, or decide when the house feels occupied enough.

When you create a character, give them a name, an age in years, and a brief description of who they are. Declare what their relation is to existing characters. It's easiest to write characters on individual index cards, so they can be shuffled about.

Creating a character does not make it *yours*; put them out in the middle of the table. All players have equal responsibility for all characters.

Cards will refer to *family members*. That means a character who has been created during setup or with the Arrival card. Other people may visit or even inhabit the home - feel free to feature them in scenes - but they don't count as family members. (You could upgrade them to family members with an Arrival card.) What counts as 'a character' is up to you.

PLAY

Play goes around the table, with each player dictating a scene that takes place at some point of the year.

To create a scene, a player draws a tone card from the deck. In no particular order, they do the following:

- State the season and which room the scene is set in. Say who is in the scene, and reiterate their ages.
- Tell us something about the room that is different. This might be a big, semi-permanent repurposing (the study is now a nursery) or fleeting and temporary (the golden morning light is caught in clouds of steam from the bathtub). If the change is enduring enough to pass into future scenes, draw it on the map.
- Narrate a short scene with one or more characters in the room. They can interact, speak to one another, or act alone, but it needs to reflect the text on the tone card.

If the card tells you to do so, reshuffle the deck.

Only things that are narrated in scenes are true. Players can talk about what might be happening or how they see a character, but nothing is real until it appears in a narrated scene.

When the current player declares their scene complete, it's the turn of the next player. After play has gone around the table, a year has passed. Every character is now a year older: update their card to reflect this. (If you have a bunch of ten-sided dice, using them to track ages can be easier than crossing out and rewriting all the time.)

Within a year, scenes do not have to be in chronological order: you can jump back from autumn to a scene in spring. (When characters depart, don't tidy away their cards until the year ends.)

THE DEPARTURE CARD

When a character departs the house, mark them as departed. (If you're writing characters on index cards, move them to a different part of the table.) Decide after the scene whether it's possible that they will ever return - maybe they're in prison, or on a long journey, or in this world the dead have a tendency to return. If so, continue to update their age.

THE BUILD CARD

Build is always optional; you can just draw the second card and ignore the Build action. Build might mean a literal construction project, or it might just be that a room that was always there has moved into the spotlight. (Good for when you realise that you have ideas for scenes that don't work in existing rooms.)

THE MOVE CARD

When a player draws Move, there is a chance that the family will leave the home and be replaced by a new family.

When you draw Move, introduce a scene as normal: show a reason why the family *might* leave.

After the scene, the group as a whole decides whether the move takes place: vote whether to leave or stay, in turn order, current player last.

When making your vote, you should consider:

- Is the reason given for the move *likely*? Given what you know, does it make sense?
- Do you *want* the family to move out, or do you want to continue following their story?

The family will stay *unless* the Leave vote total is equal to or greater than the number of players. The Move vote for a given family, then, must be unanimous for them to leave. However, if at least one person votes to leave, all future Leave votes for that family get a cumulative +1 modifier. (This is *not* a +1 modifier for every person voting to leave.) So in a 4-player game that has already had 3 split votes, the next Move only needs one Leave vote to succeed. The modifier resets to zero when the family leaves.

If a Move vote succeeds and you want to continue play, make a new family as before (the next player in sequence goes first) and continue play. (A good time for major renovations.)

Characters taken away with Move never return. Don't update their cards.

ENDING THE GAME

The game concludes when you want it to, but a final Move is a good breaking-point.

VARIANTS

- Fast Cadence - every player's scene is a new year.
- Slow Cadence - instead of years, the game advances in months.
- Attrition - add one extra Departure and one Arrival card. Take out Move. (Use for settings with built-in turnover rates, like a boarding school, orphanage, or frathouse.)
- No Exit - if a Move vote succeeds, the game is over. Departure always means a death. (Fallout shelter, generation ship, ark.)



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A grateful descendant of, among other things, *i8 Cadence* by Aaron Reed, which can be found at <http://i8cadence.textories.com/home.html>

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SETTING PROMPTS

- A cave – each Move might represent a gap of hundreds or thousands of years.
- Wagons, tents or yurts in a nomad caravan.
- A tribal longhouse, second home to everyone in the village.
- A Roman country villa, with family and slaves.
- Medieval monastery. (Possibly the kind with martial arts.)
- Guildhouse.
- The court of a noble or monarch.
- The house/workshop of a master craftsman, shared by family and apprentices.
- Wild West brothel.
- Little House on the Great Frontier.
- Sanatorium: wealthy long-term patients and staff. (Or despised exiles.)
- Missionary compound.
- A Victorian manor, with family and servants.
- A Victorian workhouse.
- A Bohemian artist colony.
- ‘Oh, the castle? It’s virtually a ruin. Got sold off to some weird Americans.’
- The Residence of the President. (Not term-limited. Possibly President for Life.)
- Housemates. Overly close housemates. ‘Co-dependent’ is such a strong word, but...
- McMansion in a volatile market.
- Ground floor, a pub: upstairs, the innkeep’s home.
- Squat.
- Deserted-island settlement, inhabited by whoever survived the crash.
- Back-to-nature commune. (Or is it more of a cult compound?)
- A semi-permanent tent camp of the displaced or homeless.
- The headquarters of a Resistance cell, under a long occupation.
- A remote farmhouse, fortified by survivors of *The Things That Come at Night*.
- A city-vast, mostly-deserted Gothic castle, inhabited by remnants of a faded line.
- The witch in the woods takes in outcasts and horrors.
- ‘It’s always the same house in the dream. I don’t know what’s outside, but it’s bad.’
- A house of doors and stairways, at a crossroads of the multiverse.
- A farm is shared with the spirits of the house, barn and field.
- The *Homo sapiens* habitat in the Galactic Zoo.
- The crew of a small freelance spaceship.
- Colonists in the ruins of a long-dead alien culture.
- A res-cluster assigned to the Special Projects Commandant and registered dependents.

COMPLICATE

Reveal something unexpected about a family member.

set scene; narrate; change room

DISASTER

Something bad happens that affects everyone strongly.

Reshuffle.

set scene; narrate; change room

PROGRESS

Something good happens that benefits the family as a whole.

set scene; narrate; change room

CHANGE

The outside world is changing. Show how family members experience this.

Reshuffle.

set scene; narrate; change room

TRADITION

Show how family members are shaped by the past.

set scene; narrate; change room

ARRIVAL

A new member joins the family. Includes birth.

set scene; narrate; change room

DEPARTURE

One or more family members leaves or dies.

set scene; narrate; change room

AGE

A family member is growing up, maturing or growing old.

set scene; narrate; change room

JOY

Show how family members share happiness.

set scene; narrate; change room

PAIN

Show how one family member causes another suffering.

set scene; narrate; change room

CONFLICT

Show how the needs and desires of family members are at odds.

set scene; narrate; change room

SUPPORT

Show how family members support one another against adversity.

set scene; narrate; change room

MOVE

Suggest a reason why the family might have to move out, then vote on it. (See rules.)

Reshuffle.

faith

Show the influence of religion, magic, spirituality or superstition on family members.

set scene; narrate; change room

shame

A family member does something that makes them ashamed, or avoids doing something out of shame.

set scene; narrate; change room

triumph

A family member has a great personal success. How does this affect the others?

set scene; narrate; change room

BUILD

Draw a new card. Optionally, add a room to the map and place the scene there.

set scene; narrate; change room

eros

Something new happens: lust, romance, sex.

set scene; narrate; change room

ritual

Certain acts are always done in a special way, and carry special significance. Show us one.

set scene; narrate; change room

hierarchy

Show how social institutions give one family member power over another.

set scene; narrate; change room

violence

Violent events affect the family. Who is hurt? Who escapes?

set scene; narrate; change room

nature

Show how the natural world affects a family member's life.

set scene; narrate; change room

community

Show how the family is tied to a wider community, and how they are in tension with it.

set scene; narrate; change room

scarcity

Something vital is in short supply. How does the family cope? What damage is done?

set scene; narrate; change room

ancestors

A family member remembers the dead. How was their life shaped by that person?

set scene; narrate; change room

discovery

A family member finds something or learns something new.

set scene; narrate; change room

story

One family member tells a story to another. What does it mean to the teller? What does the listener get from it?

set scene; narrate; change room

aspire

A family member has distant hopes and ambitions. How do they deal with or displace this?

set scene; narrate; change room

food

The family eat. How and what? Do they eat together? Do any foods hold special meaning?

set scene; narrate; change room

craft

A family member has a special skill not possessed by others. (Yet.) What is it used for?

set scene; narrate; change room

lies

One family member lies to others. Is the lie believed?

set scene; narrate; change room

difference

One of the family members is unlike the others in an important way. How does this affect them? How do the others react to it?

set scene; narrate; change room

humour

What is the family's sense of humour like? Who makes jokes? Who laughs? What function does humour serve?

set scene; narrate; change room

ridicule

A family member mocks something. Do others join in? Why is that thing a threat?

set scene; narrate; change room

disappoint

One family member disappoints another. What was expected? How does this change expectations?

set scene; narrate; change room

example

A family member does something; another observes, and will come to emulate it.

set scene; narrate; change room