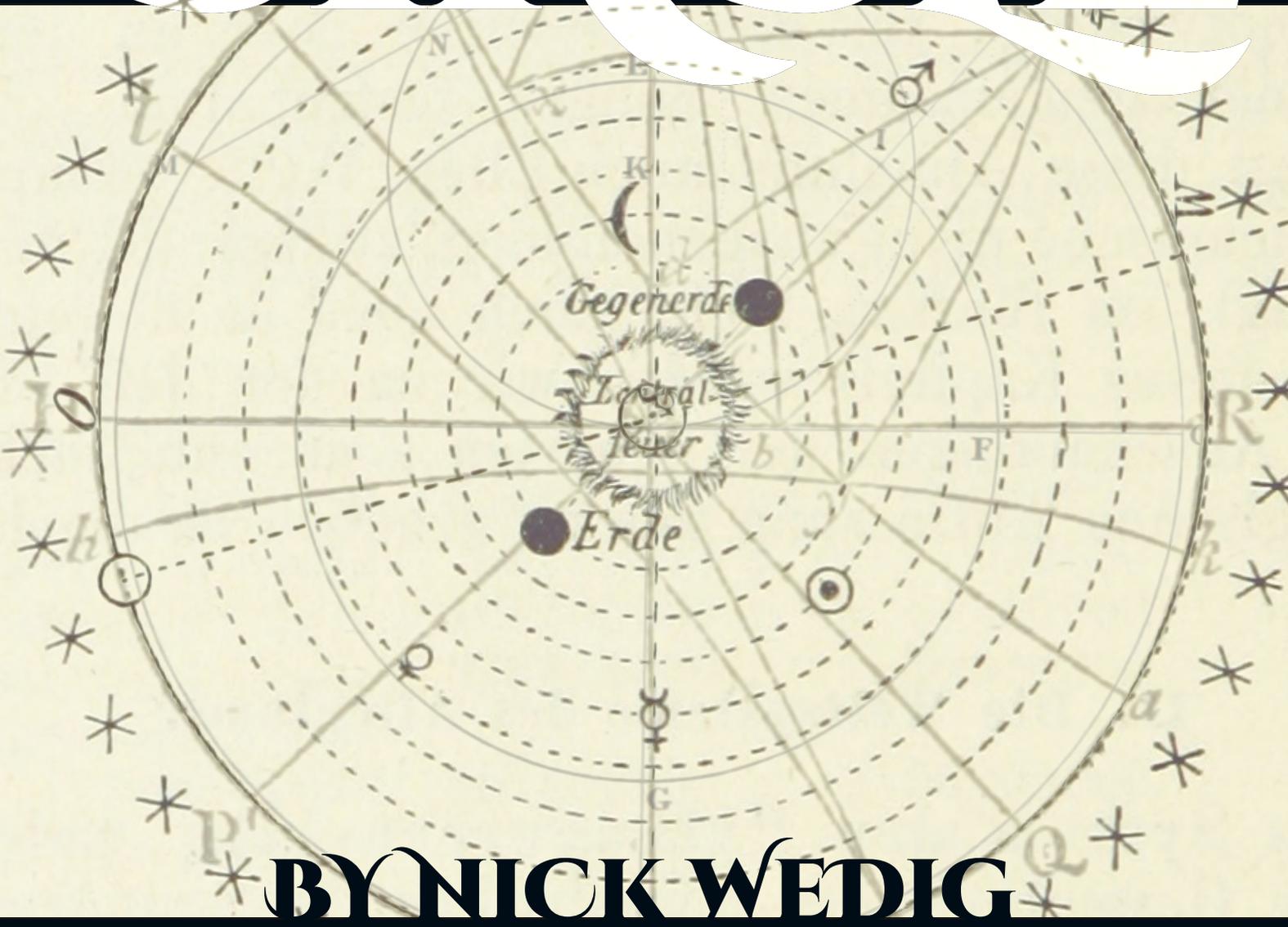


# THE UNBROKEN CIRCLE



BY NICK WEDIG

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After rebelling against the loathsome illithids, the First People were torn in twain by civil war. Through prolonged bloody conflict, the one people became two. The vengeful githyanki sought strongholds on the astral plane to continue their war against the mind flayers. The peaceful githzerai fled their home to seek a new home on one of the infinite planes of existence. *Can you imagine what it is like to leave behind everything? What have you abandoned in pursuit of your desired life?*

The journey across the multiverse would be difficult and dangerous. For their own protection, most githzerai encoded their thoughts into psionic crystals on their mindship. There, they would remain in a meditative trance until a new home was found for their people. They would see and hear nothing consciously, yet their subconsciouses would be psychically connected to all other githzerai on the voyage.

A few psionic warrior-monks known as **zerths** would remain conscious in order to seek out a suitable new homeland. You are these zerths. You have been chosen to be the living embodiment of your people. You must scout each plane of existence and decide which would be a suitable new home. *Can you feel the burden of responsibility placed upon you? The future of an entire civilization rests on your decisions.*

In this endeavor, you have forged a psychic connection to the meditating souls aboard the mindship. In times of need, you can call upon the knowledge and power of the unconscious minds. As you grow and learn and change, so will githzerai society. As you adapt to new conditions, so will all githzerai. The choices you make will decide not only where the githzerai live, but who they become. Make your decisions carefully, with full knowledge of the responsibility you bear.

Endure. In enduring, grow stronger.

*The Unbroken Circle* is a GMless RPG for 2-6 players. It should be playable in 2-4 hours or so. You'll need 50 or more tokens to represent resolve—poker chips work nicely. In addition, you will also need one standard Tarot deck for the group. (The Rider-Waite-Smith deck works. Any Tarot deck with different art will work just as well so long as it has the same set of 78 cards.) You will also need paper, note cards and writing utensils, or other methods of keeping notes, to keep track of cultural practices and the player characters.

## SETUP

Discuss briefly with your fellow players what sort of game you want to have and any fictional content that would ruin your experience of the game. The goal of the game is to bring pleasure to the players, so do what is necessary to make sure they don't have an unpleasant time. You may want to implement a simple tool to guarantee emotional safety for the players of the game, such as John Stavropolous's *X-Card* or Brie Sheldon's *Script Change* tools. These are useful any time you have potentially emotionally hazardous material in the fiction, especially if you are playing with people you may not know very well.

Before beginning play, all the players must collectively choose a difficulty setting for the game. Difficulty ranges from 1 (*Easy*) to 4 (*Very Difficult*). The higher the difficulty you choose, the more hardship the zerths will encounter on their journey.

Take the deck of Tarot cards. Separate the cards into three decks:

- the major arcana
- the Aces through Pages
- the Kings, Queens and Knights

Shuffle each deck.

## CREATE CULTURAL PRACTICES

The githzerai are united by their shared culture. You must know the heart of a society before you can know the hearts of its people. Githzerai society is defined by its cultural practices. A cultural practice is anything you do that is learned from society that could potentially set the githzerai apart from other people they encounter. This could cover many different activities or ideas, such as a religious belief, customary behavior, ritual, law, artistic expressions, cultural institutions, dietary preferences, power relationships, political structures, methods of childcare, ancient legends, etc. Cultural practices tell us about how the githzerai address specific needs, whether those are simple physical needs or abstract desires for self-realization.

Deal all the Kings, Queens and Knights to each player. It's okay if not everyone gets the same number of cards, as long as the numbers are roughly even.

Whoever has the King of Cups goes first, revealing that card and defining a cultural practice related to it. Go around in a circle from there, each player defining a cultural practice of the githzerai people based on a card from their hand.

**Each suit is related to a cultural need:**

- **Cups** are basic physical needs like air, food, shelter and clothing.
- **Pentacles** are mystical, psionic or magical needs, such as mana sources, enchanted crystals, psionic connections, or ghosts of beloved ancestors
- **Swords** cover outside dangers and how the githzerai deal with those threats
- **Wands** cover personal desires, self-actualization, freedoms, self-esteem, personal happiness, cultural flourishing, beauty and tranquility

**Each card rank is how the culture relates to that need:**

- **Kings** are laws, rules, rituals and orders that everyone must follow for society to function
- **Queens** are moral beliefs, mystical teachings, philosophical schools of thought and spiritual traditions that are common but not universal
- **Knights** are controversial opinions that divide the githzerai. Githzerai split into factions and swears harsh oaths that govern their behavior. Knight cards represent factional disputes or behaviors you have forsworn

By combining the suit and rank of a card, that should give you some idea what practice it describes. Think about what cultural practice might address that need and tell everyone what it means.

After you define a cultural practice, lay its card on the table where everyone can see it. Write a brief note summarizing the cultural practice, on a note card or sheet of paper. Place one resolve token on the card.

Then the player on your left will play a card from their hand, define a practice and place a token on the card in the same manner. Repeat until all the face cards have been played.

*The Unbroken Circle is a roleplaying game by Nick Wedig. Githzerai, githyanki and illithids are owned by Wizards of the Coast, used without permission. I'm not making any money off this game, so feel free to share this game with other people.*

## PLAYER CHARACTERS

Zerth PCs are defined by their relationship to their cultural practices. Every practice is binary: a zerth can either follow a cultural practice or deny it. You cannot follow a practice partially. Cultural practice are an all-or-nothing proposition.

Each zerth takes part in all four King rank cultural practices. Note those four on your sheet. If you want, you can describe briefly how your character relates to those practices. You may or may not like all the rituals and rules of githzerai society, but you must follow them. *How do you feel about the strictures society places upon you?*

Take one resolve token for each of the four King cultural practices.

Each zerth follows three of the Queen ranked cultural practices. These are common beliefs about philosophy, spirituality and morality, but they are not universal. Choose which three your zerth partakes of. If you want, briefly talk about how you relate to those beliefs. You might also describe why you don't follow other cultural practices. *How has the society of your birth determined your personal beliefs?*

Take one resolve token for each of the three Queen cultural practices that you follow.

Each zerth follows two of the Knight ranked cultural practices. These are divisive factional disputes that people disagree about and get worked up over. For githzerai, these factional disputes often take the form of extreme oaths or specific actions you swear to never perform, to show devotion to a particular sub-cultural group. Choose which two your zerth partakes of. If you want, briefly talk about how you relate to those beliefs. You might also describe why you don't follow other cultural practices. *What divisive ideals are you willing to fight for?*

Take one resolve token for each of the Knight cultural practices that you follow.

## GITHZERAI NAMES

Nearly all githzerai names are gender-neutral. Githzerai names are assembled out of guttural, savage sounding phonemes, such as Z, TH, G, K and R sounds. But you're not trying to make monstrous sounding orc names here: githzerai names should be as fluid and melodious as those harsh sounds allow. For example: Izera, Rivek, Vilquar, Zerchai, Greth, Klavya, Parakk, Adaak, Patholien, An'dratat, Leggis, Henok, Thrakiar, Fetha, Nagast, Vrollen.

Githzerai also enjoy flowery, elaborate titles for their mystical traditions, their factions, their psionic techniques, societal roles or anything else they feel is important. When the zerths discover or invent something worth naming, give it a poetic name that reflects its place in githzerai society. E.g., the Pronouncement of Two Skies, Disciple of the Hidden Flame, Champion of the Three Worlds, Procession of the Sun and Moon, Death's Quivering Shadow, Assassin Tornado of the Ebon Blessing, etc.

## BOOKKEEPING

Once your zerth characters have been defined, there are a few remaining steps of setup to perform before the main section of the game begins.

Draw 19 minor arcana cards. Sort them by suit and order. Place the cards faceup with the lowest valued of each suit on the bottom of the stack, and the highest of the suit of the top. These will be potential encounters the githzerai will deal with on their journey. If a Page is drawn, set it to the side next to the stack of other cards in that suit. Pages follow special rules.

Place each of the cultural practice cards on the table where everyone can reach them.

If there is a cultural practice that no player character has a connection to, remove that practice's card from the game.

Determine who will act first when the githzerai arrive on their first plane of existence. If someone is explaining the rules of the game, then they should go first. Otherwise, you can have the person farthest from home go first. Or you can use any other method you choose.

## PLANAR TRAVEL

There is an infinite multiverse out there to explore. Existence is divided into countless planes: worlds that exist independently of one another, each infinitely large and accessible to the others only through the use of magic. The planes are infinitely varied in their nature. Every plane has its own physical and magical laws. Some planes are the abode of gods or demons, afterlives of the righteous or the unjust, planes of elemental matter or abstract concepts made concrete.

Some planes are beautiful. Some are mysterious. Many are strange. Most are dangerous. All are unknown to you.

The job of the zerths is to travel from plane to plane, to see what each holds. After some exploration, the zerths must decide whether they will create a new settlement on that world or whether they will move on and seek a place better suited to their way of life. Once they leave, though, the githzerai cannot return to prior planes of existence.

## GAME STRUCTURE

The majority of the game will consist of visiting a series of different worlds. You will take turns having the game focus briefly on you and your PC. Starting with the first player, each player takes a turn. When it is your turn, you can have your character have an encounter, or you can create a new cultural practice (both described below). When their turn is complete, the player on their left takes a turn.

You will repeat that process until five PCs have had an encounter on this world. Then the githzerai have learned enough about the world and it is time to vote. The players will decide to stay here (and end the game) or move on (and begin a series of encounters on a new world).

Each world is defined by one of the major arcana. Encounters are defined by the minor arcana. As you journey on, you will have different encounters on each world, and your relationship to cultural practices will change.

## ARRIVAL

Each time the githzerai come to a new plane, you draw a card from the major arcana deck. Each major arcana card has two pieces of information: a question and a plane of existence.

The question relates to how you leave the previous plane of existence: what the githzerai learned, how they grew, or what effects they had on the people that they met there. It is a moment to wrap up or reflect on the story of that world. The players should briefly discuss the question and as a group come up with an answer to the question.

Sometimes, the answer will be obvious. Sometimes, you'll have to add a brief vignette as you exit the planet to answer the question. Sometimes, the question will be different for each PC. Sometimes the answer will be shared and universal. Answer each question in the way that makes the most sense for your specific situation.

When you draw your first major arcana card, the question refers to how you left your homeland. The githzerai were driven from their home by their centuries-long wars with the githyanki and illithids. Use the initial question to describe that conflict and the beginning of your voyage.

The second thing each major arcana does is identify a new plane of existence that the githzerai mindship has traveled to. Each card give you a brief bit of detail about the world you've come to, which is then fleshed out by the players as they describe encounters on that plane. Use the major arcana card to inspire new and different inds of encounters on each world.

## ENCOUNTERS

The githzerai will have 5 encounters on each plane of existence. Player will work together using cards to invent details the world and what the githzerai find there. After the fifth encounter, the zerths will vote on whether to stay or whether to move on. Players take turns acting on each plane. When it is your turn, you can have the player on your right frame an encounter for you, or you can purchase a new cultural practice (if there is a face up Page available). Most of the time you'll have another player frame an encounter.

An encounter could be any interaction between the zerths and the plane they are on: tasting potential food sources, negotiating with local people, performing rituals to assess the psychic energy of the place, etc.

### FRAMING AN ENCOUNTER

When you frame an encounter, you select one of the four available face up minor arcana cards. The suit and numerical rank of the card you choose symbolize the encounter, and will guide you in the description of the encounter.

The difficulty level you set at the beginning of play influences which encounter cards you can choose. If you selected a difficulty of 4, then each world you visit must have all four suits in it. Thus, if other players already selected Swords twice and Cups once, you must choose Wands or Pentacles instead, or else there won't be a chance to play them on this plane. Similarly, a difficulty of 3 means you must have at least three suits played for encounters on this plane. You could have all 4 or you might focus on a few suits. A difficulty of 2 means that players are only required to have two suits per world, which greatly expands their options. And a difficulty of 1 means that you must have at least one suit played over 5 encounters, which is impossible to not achieve.

Higher numbered cards are more dangerous or troubling aspects of the world: dangerous animals, unbreathable atmosphere, extremely hot or cold temperatures, hostile populations already present in the land, deadly magical feedback loops, etc. Lower numbered cards are encounters that are more pleasant or more easily dealt with: food that

is plentiful, helpful spirits of the forest, crystals that amplify psionic capability, etc.

The suit of the card tells you what sort of encounter it is. The four suits are the same as with cultural practice: Cups relates to physical needs, Swords relates to external dangers, Pentacles to magical and psionic issues, and Wands to personal happiness and cultural flourishing.

When you describe an encounter, think about the plane of existence the githzerai are currently on, the numerical value of the card and the suit of the card. Those three factors together should give you some ideas what the encounter is like. If you're playing with a Tarot deck that has illustrations on the minor arcana, then you can also use those illustrations as inspiration for details in your description.

### FACING AN ENCOUNTER

When the player on your right describes an encounter for your character, your character must deal with the situation described. You can freely roleplay your reaction to what was discovered, and introduce small details to the encounter to flesh out the narration. But you also have to choose whether to spend resolve tokens to overcome the encounter, or not to spend any resolve and fail to overcome the encounter.

To successfully deal with an encounter in a positive manner, you must spend resolve equal to its numerical rank. If you do so, you can then narrate how your zerth resolves that situation in a way that is beneficial to the githzerai.

If you do not have enough resolve, you may call upon one of your cultural practices. You describe how that cultural practice influences your character's action. Then you can take some or all the resolve tokens off that practice's card. You can only call upon those you define as practicing yourself: you must have a tie to a cultural practice to use it. If the cultural practice matches the suit of the encounter, you can add an additional token to the card as you do so. (You can't add a free token unless you're taking at least one token.)

## FAILURE

If you choose not to spend resolve to deal with an encounter, then your zerth does not overcome the encounter. Things go badly for them. All the players at the table collaborate to describe how the situation gets worse for you and/or the other githzerai. When your character fails an encounter, you must suffer: select one of your ties to a cultural practice and remove it. If no githzerai has a remaining connection to that cultural practice, then it is removed from the game. You are connected to the githzerai people, so if you abandon the past practices, so to will they.

As you lose connection to the old ways, there is a silver lining: whenever a character stops practicing a cultural practice, place a token on each page that has not yet been put into play. Those will be cheaper to purchase in the future.

## END YOUR TURN

Once you have resolved the encounter set before you, then your turn is over. If that was the fifth encounter on a plane, the players should go to voting on whether to stay or move on. Otherwise, it becomes the turn of the player on your left, and the cycle continues on.

## NEW CULTURAL PRACTICES

Instead of experiencing an encounter, you can instead use your action to create a new cultural practice. Over their journey through the multiverse, the githzerai grow and learn and change as people. The zerths experience most of this, but their development as individuals is psychically bound to the large population in slumber, so any change the zerths experience will also be reflected in the larger society. If you create a new custom, then the other githzerai will follow.

New cultural practices are represented by Pages, just as the established practices of the githzerai were represented by the Kings, Queens and Knights of the deck. You can only establish a new cultural practice if a Page has been drawn and is sitting unclaimed by the encounter decks.

To establish a new cultural practice, you must spend 10 resolve tokens. Each time a zerth breaks their bond with a cultural practice, place a token on each unclaimed Page card. These tokens reduce the cost of claiming the Page: if a Page card has three tokens on it, a player only has to spend seven tokens to establish the new cultural practice.

*(You can also spend tokens from existing cultural practices to buy new practices, just as when using practices to help with encounters. The new practice must grow out of, but be clearly distinct from, the prior practice. If someone could practice either without the other one, you're probably doing it right. If the cultural practice you're calling on for extra resolve matches the new practice in suit, then you get one free resolve token toward the cost, just the same as when dealing with an encounter.)*

When a player creates a new cultural practice, they define what that new tradition or belief is. As with other cultural practices, the suit governs what the practice is about: Cups are physical needs, Pentacles are magical or psionic needs, Swords are external threats, and Wands are personal happiness and cultural flourishing. Pages can represent any new cultural belief or ritual or behavior that the githzerai have developed over the course of their journey. Often this will be in response to previous events in the game. Consider what lessons you have learned in the voyage so far. What adaptations must you make to survive in these strange and foreign lands?

Move the Page card to be among the Kings, Queens and Knights of existing practices. Place the tokens the player spent (and the free tokens already provided) on the card. The player establishing the new practice automatically has a connection between their zerth and the practice.

Each other player can connect to the practice by paying a small fee: one resolve for each Page rank cultural practice you have agreed to follow (including this one). So if you previously have bought in to two other Page practices, a third newly created cultural practice would cost you three resolve. This resolve also goes onto the Page card and is available for people to purchase immediately.

## ENDING A ROUND

After the zerths deal with 5 encounters, it is time to decide if they will stay and start a new life on this plane.

*(To be clear: if a player uses their action to purchase a new a cultural practice, then that does not count as an encounter. You remain on one plane of existence until five encounter cards have been played.)*

Think briefly about what the githzerai experienced on this new plane of existence. Those five encounters are representative of the challenges and situations the githzerai will live with if they remain in this dimension.

Now the zerths have a choice: settle in this place or move on. All the players should discuss what they found on the plane and what was acceptable or unacceptable. Then you vote. Put out your hands and simultaneously give the plane a thumbs-up or thumbs-down. If all the players give a thumbs-up, then the githzerai choose this place as their new home. Move on to the endgame section below. If one or more players gives a thumbs-down, then there is no consensus. The githzerai move on to a new plane of existence in hope that it will be more suitable as a homeland.

## LEAVING THE PLANE

If the players do not reach consensus, then the githzerai move on to a new plane of existence. The mindship channels psionic energy of thousands of meditating minds to form an interplanar gateway to some alternate dimension. *Where will you go? What will you find there?*

As you leave this plane of existence, the githzerai learn from what they experienced there. Place one resolve token on each cultural practice card.

Then draw four new minor arcana cards from the draw deck. Place these cards into the four encounter decks. Place them in the deck that matches their suit, in the place that matches their rank, such that the cards proceed from highest card on top to the lowest card on the bottom.

If the encounter deck runs out, then the voyage has begun to weary the githzerai. *How does the toil of the journey leave its mark upon you?*

If there are still cards left in the encounter deck, then the githzerai are refreshed and invigorated, ready to move on to the next world. Give each zerth one resolve token for every encounter they faced (regardless of whether they successfully dealt with it or not).

## A NEW WORLD

Draw a new major arcana card to determine what new plane of existence you're traveling to. Each major arcana is associated with one question, about how the githzerai leave the prior plane, or what they learn from their experience there. Discuss with the group and answer the question, either collectively or individually. Sometimes, this answer will be clear and obvious from the preceding events. Sometimes, it will require inventing new details or a brief epilogue scene for that world. But this serves as a chance to pause and reflect on the actions you took and the experiences you had in that place. What have you learned in your brief time in that world?

Once the question is answered, the githzerai can arrive on a new world. Each major arcana card is also associated with a plane of existence. This acts as a brief fictional prompt for the players to come up with new encounters and details. Make sure every player knows what the new plane is. Then you can resume having encounters (or purchasing Pages) with the player to the left of the last player to have an encounter.

## ENDGAME

If all players choose to settle on this world, it becomes the new homeland for the githzerai. The zerths send their psychic signals back to the mindship, which lands upon the plane and begins to awaken the gith still in psionic stasis.

Your future on this plane will be determined by how suitable it is for githzerai life. Total up the numerical value of the five encounter cards played on this world. The lower your total, the better the future will be for the githzerai. Any score below 8 is very good. A score of 9-15 is pretty good, a mixed bag. A score of 16-25 or higher is a difficult life. Anything above 26 will be a bleak, horrible existence. Narrate an epilogue for your character based on your final score and one aspect about your new home plane.

# MAJOR ARCANA

## 0/22: THE FOOL

A plane of illusion, senses cannot be trusted.

*Who did you inadvertently harm as you left the previous plane?*

## I: THE MAGICIAN

A place of magical research, study and scholarship

*What did you learn from your time on the previous plane?*

## 2: THE HIGH PRIESTESS

The home of a cruel goddess

*How did you leave the previous plane better than you found it?*

## 3: THE EMPRESS

An elemental plane, ruled by the queen of the element

*What did you take with you from the previous world?*

## 4: THE EMPEROR

The halls of the mad King of the Giants

*What did you leave behind on the previous world?*

## 5: THE HIEROPHANT

A heaven to which you don't merit entry

*How did you leave the previous plane worse than you found it?*

## 6: THE LOVERS

The realms of the Faerie Lords, beautiful and cruel

*What could tempt you to abandon your duty as a zerth?*

## 7: THE CHARIOT

Another githzerai mindship, trapped between planes and beset upon by githyanki astral priates

*What valuable items did you obtain on the previous world?*

## 8: STRENGTH

A world riven by war

*Which of you most doubts their capabilities?*

## 9: THE HERMIT

An uninhabited rock floating in a starless void

*What do you fear you will encounter on this voyage?*

## 10: THE WHEEL OF FORTUNE

A plane of pure elemental chaos

*What do you quarrel with the other zerths about?*

## II: JUSTICE

An extradimensional prison

*What moral obligation must you fulfill as you voyage across the planes?*

## 12: THE HANGED MAN

The land of shadows, dreams and nightmares

*What do you regret about your previous actions?*

## 13: DEATH

The land of the dead

*Who did you love that was lost in the war against the illithids?*

## 14: TEMPERANCE

A plane of two opposing forces in unsteady balance

*How did you act too extremely on the previous world?*

## 15: THE DEVIL

The Nine Hells

*Why do you blame yourself for the loss of your home?*

## 16: THE TOWER

The ruins of a long dead civilization

*What destruction did you leave in your wake?*

## 17: THE STAR

A plane of silent tranquility, disrupted by your arrival

*Which of you is most ashamed of your behavior on the previous world?*

## 18: THE MOON

The hunting grounds of lycanthrope packs

*What lesson did you teach the people of the last world?*

## 19: THE SUN

A desolate desert world

*How do you bring hope to those you meet?*

## 20: JUDGEMENT

A world of rigid order and harsh punishments

*Why is time running out for your mission?*

## 21: THE WORLD

The squabbling kingdoms of mortal humans

*What enemy or threat pursues you from the previous world to this one?*