# REBMA

## REVISED BASIC MECHANICS FOR AMBER

Olivier Legrand (2006)

Based on Erick Wujcik's AMBER DICELESS Roleplaying Game

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## Foreword

This small e-book is a collection of variants, additions and alternate rules developed over several years of *Amber* campaigning.

They do not form a stand-alone set of rules and certainly do not cover every aspect of the game. ReBMA should not be interpreted as an attempt to 'fix' or 'improve' the basic rules of the game, but rather as a set of possibilities, ideas and options that may appeal to the tastes of some gaming groups.

In the end, this book only reflects a single person's vision of the game and the Amber universe in general – my own Shadow reflection of the *Amber Diceless* reality…

Olivier Legrand

## REBMA

(**RE**vised **B**asic **M**echanics for **A**mber)

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For use with the **Amber Diceless** RPG written by Erick Wujcik.

Special Amber Thanks to their Royal Highnesses : **Maeve**, Queen of Llyonesse and Daughter of Llyr, **Horatio**, son of Corwin, Wanderer, Keeper and King, **Melvin**, Captain of the Odysseus and King of Mythika, and, last but not least, **Seann Cyn,** Heroic Metamorph and Reluctant Prince.

Dedicated to the memory of **Roger Zelazny**, the Bard of Amber.

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# I : CHARACTERS

## Ranks Revisited

Character creation is conducted exactly as in the standard *Amber Diceless* system, with one big difference : there is no attribute auction.

Players still get to spend points on attribute ranks, but with a more traditional points-per-rank system. Obviously, this may result in two characters having similar ranks, but this is not a problem under these alternate rules.

As in the standard Amber rules, the three basic ranks of attributes are Human, Chaos and Amber. Any attribute higher than the Amber rank is simply measured as a roman numeral, the higher the better : thus, rank I is better than Amber rank, rank II is better than rank I and so on.

At character creation, each rank above Amber costs 10 points and no attribute may be increased over rank III (for a total of 30 points).

Players may also consider lowering one or more attributes to Chaos or even Human ranks to get extra points, with the same benefits and consequences as in the original rules.

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### What, No Auction ?

Aside from its enjoyment value as a game within the game, the main merit of the auction system is the way it creates competition between player-characters right from the start, which works especially well with large groups or at game conventions.

But what if you want to use the game with a small group (2-3 players) or even with a single player ? Or if you don't want your players to know each other character's strengths and weaknesses beforehand ?

Sure, competition and rivalry are very strong aspects of Amberite (or Chaotic) culture – but so are secrets and hidden agendas.

Moreover, the attribute ranks created by the auction system are a relative measurement : they only work in comparison with each other and make things quite complicated as soon as you bring NPCs, especially powerful ones like the Elder Princes of Amber.

For all these reasons, some gaming groups may feel more comfortable with an alternative ranking system like the one described above.

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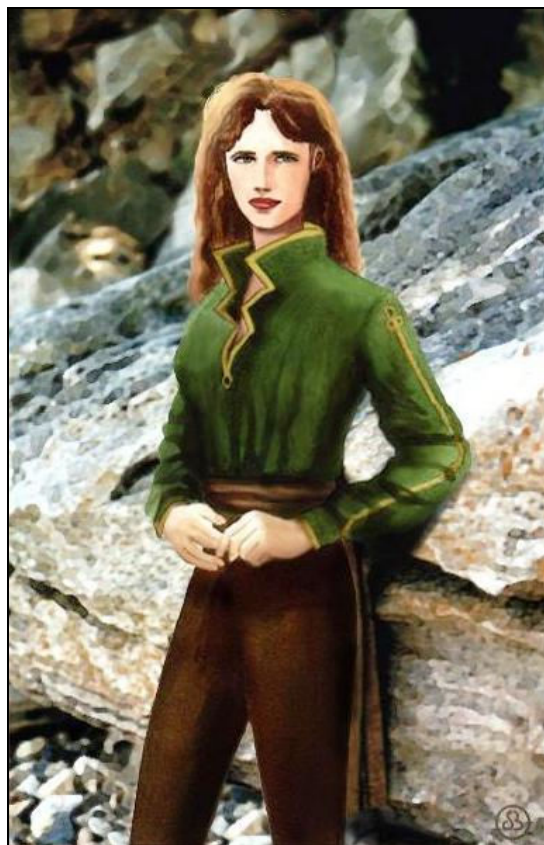
## Power Requirements

Most powers now require a minimum rank in one or two attributes.

Basic **Pattern Imprint** requires an Endurance and Psyche of at least Amber level. This requirement rises to rank I for the advanced level.

Basic **Logrus Mastery** and **Trump Artistry** both require a Psyche of at least Chaos level. This rises to rank I for the advanced level.

Basic **Shapeshifting** requires an Endurance of at least Chaos level. This rises to rank I for the advanced level of the power.

**Power Words** do not have minimum attribute requirement, but their efficiency directly depends on the user's Psyche. As a higher form of Magic, **Sorcery** requires a Psyche of Chaos or better.

Similar requirements could also be extended to other powers used in the context of a specific campaign. As a general rule, consider that magical, mystic or psychic powers have a Psyche requirement, while physical powers have an Endurance requirement. These may be combined in the (rare) case of powers which (like Pattern Imprint) are both physical and psychic in nature.

## Revised Power Costs

**Pattern Imprint** costs 50 points at basic level and 25 more at advanced level (for a total of 75).

**Trump Artistry** costs 40 points at basic level and 20 more at advanced level (for a total of 60).

**Shapeshifting** costs 40 points at basic level and 20 more at advanced level (for a total of 60).

**Logrus Mastery** costs 50 points at basic level and 25 more at advanced level (for a total of 75).

The same structure may be used when defining new Powers, with the extra cost of the advanced level being equal to one-half the cost of the basic version. The only exception to this rule is **Magic**. In these alternate rules, basic Magic corresponds to **Power Words** (which cost 10 points, as in the standard rules) while advanced Magic is actually **Sorcery** (which now costs 20 points, for a total of 30). This reflects the fact that Sorcery, more than any other power, require arduous and constant study (which may explain why it's not *that* popular with Amberites).

Also note that in these variant rules, **Conjuration** simply does not exist as a separate power, since its existence in the novels is dubious at best and most of its effects can be duplicated by Pattern Imprint or Logrus Mastery.

## Character Improvement

As far as attributes and powers are concerned, handlng experience points after every session is a sure way to cause an unmanageable power escalation in your campaign. Gaining a single rank in an attribute represents a tremendous achievement, far beyond the possibilities offered by regular training or normal experience. It has taken centuries for Benedict to get his amazing Warfare rank and you certainly don't want your player-characters to reach a similar degree of skill after a dozen sessions. Likewise, simply toying with Pattern and Trump for a few years will not make you the equal of Brand or Fiona.

But time is not really of the essence here : in a game where most player-characters can easily hop at will between Shadows with varying time-flows (not to mention the Courts of Chaos !), basing attribute and power improvement on some objective measurement of time will only result in system abuse, endless disputes and useless headaches for the gamemaster.

One of the easiest ways to handle character improvement in a long-term Amber campaign is to use the seasonal format of television series and other continuing fictions.

Most campaigns regularly come to temporary halts, as old problems are resolved and new issues are introduced : these moments of transition between two narrative seasons are the ideal time to update a character's abilities.

In game terms, this could give each player 5 or 10 extra creation points to distribute between his character's attributes and powers. In most cases, this gain will not be enough to actually upgrade a power from basic to advanced level, reflecting the progressive nature of experience.

### Elder Amberites & Attributes

The variant ranking system described in this chapter also allows the gamemaster to directly translate the attribute levels of the various Elder Amberites, as detailed in the Amber rulesbook : every 10 points (or fraction) beyond Amber rank simply translates as one attribute rank.

Let's take the example of Corwin. In his 300 point incarnation as *The Champion of Amber*, Corwin has been given the following attribute points : Psyche 21 points, Strength 16 points, Endurance 81 points and Warfare 85 points. Using the ReBMA ranking system, these figures would translate as : Psyche rank III, Strength rank II, Endurance rank IX and Warfare rank IX.

The only way to go from basic to advanced (or even from advanced to exalted) in a power is to use it extensively – not only a lot, but in ways that push the limits of the character's mastery and bring him closer to new possibilities and unexplored paths. The only exception to this rule is Magic (as Power Words or Sorcery), which can be improved by study and personal research – see the *Magic* chapter for more details.

Obviously, this system will make power advancement very slow – but it also works quite well with the *partial powers* approach used by a lot of Amber groups, allowing a step-by-step developement of powers.

But what about acquiring new powers ? There is no general rule here, since each power has its own specific conditions and requirements. The only way to gain basic Pattern Imprint, for instance, is to walk (and survive) the Pattern.

Thus, point costs for basic powers only apply to character creation. Again, Magic is an exception here, since Power Words and Sorcery can be learned by study (at least as far as Amberites or Lords of Chaos are concerned). Even Trump Artistry requires some form of innate (artistic) gift or talent that should prevent characters from developing its basic level once a campaign has begun. Of course, as with almost anything in *Amber*, exceptions are always possible (and left to the discretion of the individual game master).

## Goals and Drive

When Corwin returns to Amber and fights his sword duel against Eric, his anger and desire for revenge obviously act as key elements of the scene and probably affect its very outcome. In a game like *Amber*, goals and ambitions should also be allowed to influence the outcome of some scenes, since they define a character's drive – what he fights, stands or lives for.

At character creation or at any time between game sessions, a player may define up to four goals for his character. These goals can be anything the player wants, as long as they have a specific object : goals like *« stay alive »* or *« defeat all my enemies »* are just too general to qualify. Here are a few examples from my own Amber chronicle : *Defend Rebma, Protect my loved ones, Preserve the legacy of Llyr, Defend Corwin's Pattern, Kill Desmond, Serve the Crown of Amber, Avenge my father's death, Recover the spikards, Get even with my brothers, Show my father I am worthy of his attention ...*

Some goals may be life-long objectives, while others only reflect temporary preoccupations. A player may freely modify his character's list of goals between sessions, reflecting his character's evolution (or transformations).

In addition to their obvious application as roleplaying tools, such goals may also have a more direct impact on play, as an expression of a character's determination : sometimes, victory or survival might just depend on how bad you want to win - or live to fight another day. See the rules on *Conflicts* in chapter II for more details.

# II : CONFLICTS

## Basic Concepts

In a game like *Amber Diceless*, the only situations that really need a resolution system (no matter how freeform) are conflicts.

Conflicts can be defined in game terms as any situation in which two or more characters oppose each other through the use of one of their attributes : depending on the situation, this may represent wrestling (Strength), sword duels and other forms of armed combat (Warfare) or psychic duels (Psyche). Endurance is rarely used as the active attribute of a conflict but plays a crucial part in all forms of extended conflict, since it does not only represent physical stamina but also reflects a character's ability to push his own limits, be they physical, mental or psychic.

Conflicts are either basic or extended. Basic conflicts correspond to sudden, make-or-break oppositions, while extended conflicts tend to be longer and more uncertain and are usually more taxing for a character's inner reserves.

Sword battles (Warfare), wrestling matches (Strength) and psychic duels (Psyche) are typical examples of extended conflicts ; examples of basic conflicts include arm-wrestling (Strength), or trying to gain psychic superiority when using Power Words or Sorcery spell (Psyche).

## Conflict Resolution

Basic conflicts are resolved by comparing the attribute ranks of the contestants or antagonists : all other things being equal, victory goes to the one with the higher attribute rank.

So that's it – but keep in mind that « all other things » are rarely « equal » in reality. There are actually many factors and circumstances that may influence the outcome of a conflict. In game terms, such factors can be abstracted as a temporary addition to the character's attribute rank : in practice, each notable 'edge' should translate as the equivalent of one extra rank.

In situations that are directly related to one of his goals (see chapter I), a character's determination may give him such an edge, but many other factors can be taken into account : in combat, this includes the effects of terrain, surprise, superior weaponry, tactical choices etc.

But what about ties ?  What happens if, despite all these factors and circumstances, two conflicting characters end up with exactly the same rank and nothing can seem to tip the scales in either one's favor ?

In such cases, the situation of conflict becomes a situation of status quo.

In an extended conflict, a situation of status quo will be broken by comparing the conflicting character's Endurance.

But what if the conflict is not an extended one or if both contestants happen to have the same Endurance rank ?

In practice, such cases of enduring status quo will occur very rarely – but when they do, they can only be resolved by the intervention of Fate… which is entirely in the hands of the GM, who may use anything from a *deus ex machina* to an arbitrary decision to break the status quo.

Of course, this 'rule' may seem very arbitrary – and it is… like so many elements of the *Amber Diceless* game. It also encourages players to use every possible advantage (or dirty trick) that may give their characters that extra edge they need to win a conflict – especially if their opponent's abilities are close to their own.

## Fate and the Game

Like any fast-paced, action-packed story, the *Amber* novels are full of deus ex machina, cliffhanger escapes and unexpected twists of fate… and in a lot of cases, these manifestations of destiny tend to play in the favor of the heroes, simply because they are the focus of the story. In keeping with the style and spirit of the Amber stories, Fate in the game should not be used as just another element of reality to simulate, but as an essential component of drama.

The main idea behind this treatment of Fate is to replace the arbitrary predestination of Good or Bad Stuff with an equally arbitrary form of dramatic balance – also remember that Fate should only manifest itself when no other action or factor seems to apply, as the GM's last resort and should never take precedence over a character's abilities or a player's ingenuity.

Furthermore, Fate does not always have to manifest itself in an all-out, win-or-lose manner : defeating an opponent thanks to a *deus ex machina* or some other favor of fate may create all sorts of equally unexpected complications. Conversely, losing a conflict because of Fate does not have to mean utter and irremediable defeat – it could also create new complications with interesting consequences in the long run…



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### The Sniper Situation

As an example of how this concept of « dramatic Fate » might work in practice, let's consider the way Merlin cheats death in *Trumps of Doom* when he is missed by the bullet of a a mysterious unseen sniper…

If Merlin had been a player-character, it would seem only fair to allow him at least one chance of escape from this situation of certain death. On the other hand, if the *sniper* had been a player-character, it would seem rather odd to tell the player that his expert marksman has just missed a sure hit just because his intended target has been saved by the forces of Fate.

Also consider how Caine was killed by a similar bullet – this did not occur because Caine was weaker or less alert or even inherently less lucky than Merlin, but because unlike Merlin, Caine is not the hero of the Merlin chronicles…

Another example of dramatic Fate at work is the way Corwin survived his car accident in the first place… In this case and many others, the main character of the story obviously enjoys a certain degree of good fortune and plot immunity, regardless of his actual abilities or powers.
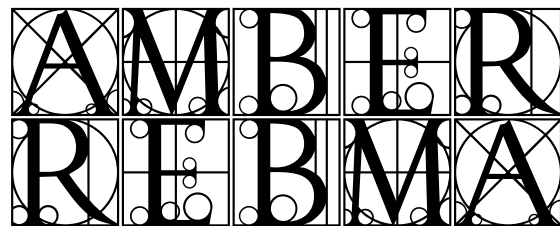
### Afterword

So that's it : five pages of rules… with large illustrations and lots of general comments. But these are supposed to be *basic* mechanics, remember : that's what he B in ReBMA stands for.

In the future, I intend to add several thematic mini-supplements to these rules – currently in the works are expanded or alternate rules for Chaos characters, additional abilities for Master Trump Artists, a variant system for Sorcery… and various other things based on my ongoing *Amber Diceless* campaign.

So stay tuned to the ReBMA trump channel !

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