Dark Fantasy

MAGIC

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What is this book about?

This book is a collection of tables about the supernatural. Sorcery, spells, rituals, talismans, and so on. It deals with wizards, witches, sorcerers… whatever you want to call them. It is mostly a collection of ideas and reflections about magic to be used with your game of choice. You can also use this book to generate ideas for stories, comic books, etc.

The focus is on dark fantasy tropes: flawed heroes, terrible villains, corrupting magic, ominous ruins and damned wastelands.

Although this is mostly a system-less book, it is especially suited for medieval dark fantasy games, such as my own (**Dark Fantasy Basic**). It contains a few concepts that are present in "classic" or "traditional" role-playing games: hit points, ability scores, etc. However, these tables are a minority and can be easily "translated" to different systems.

Chapters

This book is divided in two sections. The first section, "wizards", allows you to quickly create a wizard (usually a non-player character) on the fly. Just roll a few dice and you are ready to go. The second section is about magic systems; it contains lots of thoughts on the matter and a few tables. This is only useful if you want to explore the creation of an entire magic system for your game, setting or character. If you don't, I added an explanation on how magic works in my own game, Dark Fantasy Basic.

Credits

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You can find more of my work in my blog: methodsetmadness.blogspot.com.

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Wizards

Appearance

Some wizards dress in exotic clothes on purpose. Maybe it is all part of an elaborate act to mesmerize the unwary, or maybe there is real power to be gained by displaying arcane signs in the open, channeling the archetype of a true magician. Other wizards are more discreet, preferring to keep the element of surprise or avoid unwanted attention. There are also those that use secret symbols, only identifiable by other magic-users.

Wizards are traditionally depicted like old, thin men, with a pointed hat (or hood) and staff, wearing flowing robes or capes that do not restrict their movements, instead of armor. The depiction has some grounding on reality, but not all wizards look the same. A young wizard might have white hair despite his age, and even a strong wizard can look unnaturally thin. In addition to these traditional elements, dark fantasy wizards usually carry scars, mutations, menacing eyes or some form of insanity. In any case, there will usually be some signs of arcane power, no matter how small (roll one to three times in the following table).

d20	Appearance	d20	Appearance
1	Hood or headcloth	11	Revealing clothes
2	Cloak, cape	12	Patterns (runes, skulls, stars, etc.)
3	Large necklace (talismans, chains, etc.)	13	Ornate staff or weapon
4	Exposed tattoos, body paint	14	Carries books and scrolls
5	Long hair or bead	15	Deep unnatural eyes
6	Colorful	16	Aquiline nose
7	Big hat	17	Lots of jewelry
8	Mask	18	Dark clothing
9	Unique hairstyle or hair color	19	Bracelets
10	Very thin	20	Marks of corruption (see below)

Familiars

Wizards often have small entities to assist them in their works. These spirits (or demons, fairies, etc.) are called familiars. They often disguise themselves in the body (or only the appearance) of a common animal to avoid attraction attention from the superstitious folk. Cats are especially common. Sometimes, they appear as they really are – shadowy ghosts, faeries or demons – or use inanimate objects as bodies. It is possible that these experiences affect the familiars somehow – making them more like cats, for example.

Wizards use familiars to cast spells, keep watch, see through their eyes, fetch small ingredients, etc. They can also hunt mice!

d20	Familiar	d20	Familiar
1	Cat	11	Imp
2	Raven	12	Homunculus
3	Owl	13	Pixie
4	Bat	14	Ghost
5	Snake	15	Faerie dragon
6	Rat	16	Shadow
7	Dog	17	Flying skull
8	Lizard	18	Doll
9	Monkey	19	Small elemental
10	Frog	20	Misshapen humanoid

Spell themes

In classic role-playing games, wizards have multiple unrelated spells. For example, they might have the ability to cast fireballs, charm weak enemies, move objects from afar, and summon demons. However, in many modern works (including dark fantasy), magic is more thematic, even if the effects are varied. For example, an Ice Witch may be able to freeze her enemies, throw shards of ice and even create monstrous snowmen. Even if you prefer all wizards to be able to master all spells, some wizards can be specialists, preferring one kind of magic to another.

The table below contain entries that can be used as themes, effects, or both. If you want to create a thematic caster, try sticking to the first entry you pick, even if you roll multiple times. For example, a wizard that controls shadows can shape light to produce illusions, move from one shadow to another (portals), etc. You can also roll two or three times to combine the results: a magic user with control over plants, animals and healing is obviously some kind of benevolent druid or herbalist with mastery over nature or organic matter in general.

Finally, the wizard's appearance often indicates the wizard's theme, unless he is trying to conceal it. A pyromancer may have fiery eyes or reed tattoos representing flames, for example.

d20	Theme	d20	Theme
1	Fire	11	Shape-shifting
2	Shadow	12	Portals
3	Summoning	13	Charming
4	Healing	14	Illusions
5	Plants	15	Anti-magic
6	Raise the dead	16	Animals
7	Clairvoyance	17	Body control
8	Protection	18	Weather
9	Cold	19	Time
10	Telepathy	20	Telekinesis

Origins

Studying old grimoires is the most traditional way of becoming a wizard. It is up to you to decide if that is the only way in your setting. Here are a few different options.

d10	Origin
1	Studied ancient books
2	Taken as an apprentice (willfully or not)
3	Made a bargain with a powerful entity
4	Found a magic artifact by accident
5	Worship a deity that grants supernatural powers
6	Born when the starts were right
7	Descended from a line of wizards
8	Son of a faery, demon, etc.
9	Half-possessed by a wizard's spirit
10	Drank from a dying well of arcane power

Marks of corruption

Contact with dark magic, cursed locations, evil forces, and alien entities can warp one's body and mind (not to mention the soul). These are the most obvious marks of corruption. In the early stages, they might be hidden or disguised, but continued exposure can turn a man into a monster.

(This table appeared first in **Dark Fantasy Characters**; it is included here for completeness' sake).

d20	Mark
1	**Tongue**. Bifurcated, long, or purple.
2	**Teeth**. Sharp, fangs, or horse-like.
3	**Hands**. Crooked, clawed, or tentacled.
4	**Skin**. Hairy, pale, or wet.
5	**Eyes**. Glowing, feline, or dilated pupils.
6	**Wounds**. Scars, open sores, or bleeding.
7	**Feet**. Cloven, inverted, or webbed.
8	**Organs**. Dilated, twinned, or pulsating.
9	**Belly**. Bulging, moving, or negative.
10	**Additional parts (human)**. Arms, misplaced eyes, or misplaced mouths.
11	**Additional parts (other)**. Tentacles, tail, or horns.
12	**Bones**. Deformed, apparent, or malleable.
13	**Smell**. Sulfur, death, or spice.
14	**Mind**. Hallucinations, rage, or despair.
15	**Missing**. Mouth, eyes, hair.
16	**Surrounded**. By insects, smoke, or worms.
17	**Scary**. To small animals, children, or horses.
18	**Rotting**. Sours milk, ages plants, or spoils wine.
19	**Limbs**. Too long, too articulated, or too thick.
20	**Torso**. Too fat, too thin, or too muscular.

Magic systems

A "magic system" is a set of fictional rules for casting spells, performing rituals, etc. The most popular system in RPGs is Vancian Magic. Inspired by the works of Jack Vance, it includes spell levels, spell slots, spell memorization, and so on. The creator of the first RPGs thought Vance's writing to be particularly inspirational and this system to be clearly well-suited for the game. However, there are many other possibilities you may try, and even other awesome ideas in the works of Vance himself, such as spell mishaps.

When choosing a magic system, one will often face a dilemma: magic must have more or less strict rules to avoid stalling the game with endless interpretation; on the other hand, strict rules do not fell "magic" at all. One way to deal with this is randomness. For example, a spell gone wrong could accidentally summon a demon or turn against the caster, depending on the result of the dice. The rules can still be very objective (for example, 5% chance of summoning a demon), but the increased number of outcomes makes them less predictable and more "magical".

Another thing to consider is that any magic system must be more or less coherent. Otherwise, it stops being magical and starts becoming arbitrary and confusing. It doesn't have to adhere to the laws of physics, but it must follow some internal logic, even if it is fairy tale logic. For example, you might decide that only people with wizard ancestors can wield magic, which would make some sense within a modern view of genetics, but you could chose instead that only a seventh son can wield magic – which is a bit arbitrary but still perfectly comprehensible.

Finally, you can have more than one magic system at the same time. Maybe wizards study spells in ancient tomes, while sorcerers are born with magic in their veins, clerics pray their gods for miracles, and witches can only negotiate with evil spirits to cast spells for them. Even in the Bible has sorcerers trying to reproduce the effects of true miracles by turning sticks to snakes. This is somewhat popular in modern games, because it allows for a greater number of character concepts within the same game. If that is what you want, you can have each character deal with magic their own way. However, unless you keep some coherence between different systems, the whole thing can become implausible.

Which answers the following question: **how many tables to use, and when to use them**? You can roll on a random table every time a spell goes wrong, but the results will be baffling and often humorous. You can roll (or choose) once, at character creation, to determine the cost of magic to that one particular wizard. Or you can roll when deciding the magic system – or magic systems - that exist in your world. For example, you might have clerical magic which requires long rituals, blood magic that requires human sacrifice, and fairy magic that can only be used by those with elven blood (and creates bad luck to his friends). You can have black magic and white magic (or even other colors of magic), or one type of magic for each of the four (or five, six, seven…) elements. Maybe all magic is provided by the gods, and each deity has different rules, or maybe all magic comes from within, and even clerics are only using their own faith in uncaring deities to fuel their miracles.

It's all up to you really, with one important caveat: magic has a cost.

The cost of magic

The cost of magic is one of the most important aspect of any magic system, and it is particularly important in dark fantasy games, where magic is often dangerous, corrupting or downright evil. If magic doesn't have a cost, it becomes simply a supernatural skill or superpower. Anyone with a modicum of talent will become a wizard, and magic becomes commonplace and indistinguishable from technology, with magic missiles replacing artillery and portals replacing airplanes.

In game terms, magic without a cost (other than training, etc.) creates other issues. If anyone that is sufficiently smart can become a wizard, all the best scribes, doctors, tacticians and mathematicians will be wizards. If you use charisma instead of intelligence, for example, there will be no swindlers or mundane leaders – anyone with that kind of charisma would easily become a real magician! A world so full of wizards might be very interesting, but it is not often found in the dark fantasy works that inspire this book.

The price of magic cannot be simple gold, either, or it becomes a commodity (although that might be interesting on its own). It must be something significant – maybe it requires complete devotion, madness, human sacrifice, great risks to the wizard's body or soul, or maybe it poses an existential risk to the world itself. The options are many… fortunately, we have some random tables for that! Of course, you might prefer tamer options – maybe the wizard get exhausted or temporally forgets a spell. We have tables for that too.

Costs, great and small

Here are some possibilities about the cost of casting a spell.

No cost. You can cast spells "for free". It becomes just a useful tool, or a bow with infinite arrows. While it is reasonable to think that a powerful sorcerer would be able to cast simple spells with impunity, this does not fit the dark fantasy tone we are looking for. Use it with great care, or magic will become mundane quick.

Small cost. Casting any spell has a small cost. Maybe it is spell slots, a few hit points, some gold or material components, or just a small penalty you get when casting more spells in the same day. The wizard is fine after casting a spell and, even if she cannot cast it repeatedly, she can probably do it again tomorrow.

Moderate cost. You need to spend a significant time of wealth, time or energy to cast a spell. It will affect not only your ability to perform cast more spells, but may temporarily affect your health, memory, etc., hurt your friends, or ruin the environment.

Severe cost. The cost to cast a spell is great – maybe too great. Human sacrifice is not uncommon amongst evil wizards, but human life is cheap in dark fantasy, and magic can be much more expensive. Maybe this spell requires the destruction of a rare gem or magic item; the blood of a king or the bones of a dragon; the life of a loved one; the permanent maiming of the wizard's body, mind or soul.

In general, the cost of magic will be somewhat analogous to the effects of a spell, i.e., an impressive spell will have a significant cost. Role-playing games traditionally use "spell levels" to measure the potency of a spell; when spell levels are used, the cost should be adequate to spell level, as seem below.

Notice that some costs (especially severe costs) may be relative to the magic user. For example, destroying a loved possession or a loved one is always more powerful than sacrificing a stranger. Giving away pieces of your soul becomes diminishingly effective as it becomes corrupted. And so on.

Needless to say, the cost of magic should not be easily circumvented. If spells cost hit points, you cannot replenish these hit point by using another spell!

Risk & randomness

In addition to the expected costs, magic creates risks. The most obvious risk is that spells can go wrong – missing the target, giving false (or dubious) information, etc. There can also be a possibility of spell mishaps. Maybe the spell blows up in your face, hits an ally, or calls the attention of evil forces. While risky magic adds mystery to the system, making things too random will generate wacky results, as discussed above. To avoid this, it is useful to make the risks either fixed (for example, a failed spell will always cause exhaustion, or turn against the caster, etc.) or reasonably well suited to that one particular spell (for example, a failed fire spell will hit an ally, but a failed portal spell will send you to the wrong place).

Small costs – slots, points, etc.

"Ordinary" uses of magic always carry a small cost. Here are some examples; there are suited to "traditional" or "old school" games, but adaptable to other systems. You are not supposed to use all of them in the same setting, or roll randomly every time. Instead, chose one (or a few) to decide how magic works in your setting.

Although these ideas deal with game mechanics, flavor is also important. For example, spell slots will give you a "Vancian" feel, while using hit points to fuel magic will bring many other associations. This loss of hit points may represent a wizard cutting himself when casting spells, a loss of vital essence, a simple expenditure of calories, etc. In addition, it will require wizards to be more resilient than common people. Chose the explanation that best suits you game.

Here are a few alternatives to spell slots.

Hit points. You can use HP to fuel your spells. It costs 1 HP per spell level, for example; a decent die roll should reduce this cost by half (or other amount).

Magic points. You have a separate pool of magic points. It works similarly to HP, but can only be used for spells. Magic points are especially interesting because you could fill this pool with sacrifices, rituals, etc. (see moderate costs and severe costs below). Using a term such as "ka", "mana", "essence", or "souls" instead of the mundane "magic points" is a good idea to make magic sound less prosaic.

Alternatively, you can have a "resolve" or "luck" pool that can be used for magic AND other adequate activities, so even non-casters can use it.

Penalties. Every time you cast a spell, you get a penalty to cast the same spell in the same day (for example, -1 per spell level). This forces the wizard to rely on different spells instead of always using the same one.

Material components. Casting spell requires special ingredients. These might be expensive, heavy, consumable or hard to find. For example, if you require diamonds to cast spells, the cost rises with spell level (maybe exponentially so, if characters have a lot of money). Some ingredients are just impractical - even if the sacrifice of a single chicken is required, adventuring magicians will have a hard time traversing dungeons while carrying lots of live birds in their backpacks!

Moderate costs – pain and destruction

Here is a list of catastrophes that magic can cause. I use it for spell "fumbles", which means a bad die roll when attempting to cast a difficult spell. You can rule, instead, that every spell has a small chance (maybe 5% per spell level) to cause these results – even if the spell is successful. Once again, this shouldn't be easily circumvented – if you get a result that would harm you allies but you have no allies nearby, a distant loved one may get hurt.

The effects that affect the spellcaster directly are not permanent, but should last for at least a day.

d20	Cost
1	**Desolation**. Flora and small fauna wither and die around the spellcaster.
2	**Destruction**. The spellcaster's allies or friends suffer lose a total of 4 hit points per spell level.
3	**Retribution**. The spell turns against the caster. No save is possible.
4	**Confusion**. The spell gets out of control and affects another random target.
5	**Inversion**. The spell's effect is the opposite of the intended.
6	**Oblivion**. The spellcaster temporarily loses one point of Intelligence per spell level.
7	**Exhaustion**. The spellcaster temporarily loses one point of Constitution per spell level.
8	**Exsanguination**. The spellcaster loses 4 hit points per spell level.
9	**Mutation**. The spellcaster's body becomes warped (check the "marks of corruption" table).
10	**Provocation**. The spellcaster draws hostility from animals, monsters and unfriendly people.
11	**Suspicion**. The spellcaster becomes suspicious to everyone, even when silent.
12	**Activation**. Hybernating creatures awake, the half-dead rise, old spells become active.
13	**Demolition**. Structures fail and objects fall around the spellcaster.
14	**Deprivation**. The spellcaster's clothes and mundane items become useless.
15	**Ruination**. One magic item from the spellcaster gets destroyed.
16	**Putrefaction**. Food and water all around are ruined.
17	**Distraction**. The spellcaster is unable to cast spells for the day.
18	**Stigmatization**. The spellcaster gains a terrible mark on the face.
19	**Convocation**. A demon or other supernatural entity is summoned or takes interest on the spellcaster.
20	**Debilitation**. The spellcaster becomes harder to heal, resurrect, etc. (-2 to the healer per spell level).

Severe costs - sacrifice

Severe costs make powerful rituals possible. Earth-shattering spells, magic items, invocation of elder demons, permanent changes to the world… The sky is the limit (or, maybe, the Abyss). Here are some terrible costs (or severe limitations) to fuel your spells. It often requires the sacrifice of something incredibly valuable.

d10	Cost
1	**Human sacrifice**. Self-explanatory, but see "Costs, great and small" (above).
2	**Animal sacrifice**. Only powerful animals or nearly extinct species.
3	**Mutilation**. The spellcaster must give up a finger, eye, etc., permanently.
4	**Destruction**. The spell requires the destruction of an artifact or magic item.
5	**The stars are right**. The spell can only be cast in rare circumstances.
6	**Deicide**. You need a deities' blood or parts to cast the spell.
7	**Time**. Casting this spell requires a lot of time of work and isolation – maybe years.
8	**Cataclysm**. The entire place (castle, village, valley, etc.) becomes wasted and damned for centuries.
9	**Damnation**. Casting this spell requires a willing soul to be given away.
10	**Impotence**. This is the last spell the wizard will ever cast.

Magic in Dark Fantasy Basic

Here is an overview of the system I chose for **Dark Fantasy Basic**. This book doesn't assume you're necessarily using the same system, but it might be useful to understand this frame of mind.

The main unifying point is spells. Everyone that uses magic has spells, and they can learn these spells by any way they want. There is no inherent difference between "arcane" and "divine" spells. Moreover, once you memorize a spell, it is yours… for good or ill.

Spells are jealously protected. Forgotten tomes of forbidden lore are useful when studying magic, but their authors must guard them carefully, or such secrets might be turned against them. Magicians can also create "trap grimoires" to fool their rivals.

Clerics can pray their lawful deities to teach them spells (usually through dreams, revelation, etc.), but the deity may ask for a quest, proof of faith, or life-long adherence to certain principles. Chaotic deities, on the other hand, will be more flexible - they might even exchange spells for goods and services. Someone may become a powerful sorcerer by simply getting to know the right demons!

A paladin that falls from grace still keeps his powers - making fallen paladins the stuff of legend! What is worse, they can pledge loyalty to an evil, rival deity becoming more powerful in the process. There is always a high demand for turncoat healers in the Evil Lord's army! That is why lawful deities are so careful when granting spells.

However, spells are also living things, and magic has a will of its own.

Some magicians can use scrolls to cast spells they haven't learn yet, but this is always dangerous – the spell's will might be greater than the magician's, which causes all kinds of catastrophe.

Casting an unknown spell repeatedly will make it enter your memory whether you like it or not. While this has no apparent downsides, it occupies a chunk or your brain that might be better used for other stuff (or other spells) - which is why fighters and thieves usually shy away from magic unless they have some arcane ability themselves.

Ordinarily, you can cast any simple spell without a cost. However, there is always a risk. The more powerful the spell, the greater the risk.

Addendum: Living spells

Even if your magic system is completely different from the ones presented above, the idea of "spells as living entities" is worth considering. My main inspiration for this concept are the works of Jack Vance. Terry Pratchett uses it very effectively for comic effect. Our goal, however, is somewhat different from these authors, as we are trying to make magic a bit more grim and scary.

This idea can explain various parts of a spell system. For example, spells mishaps are just strong spells that the wizard was unable to control for a moment. Spells occupy a place in the wizard's mind. They can reproduce and be extinguished, like viruses or bacteria, and they can make the wizard sick in the brain. They can lie dormant in old grimoires and scrolls, or be trapped in talismans and wands. They can mutate with time, or generate funny interactions with one another. Magic items lose power after all spells store within are spent – leaving a single spell unused might prevent this in some cases, probably because some spell reproduce by parthenogenesis.

These things would ordinarily inhabit another planet, parallel to our own, where they roam free, only to be randomly picked by random wizards to fuel their actions. The most powerful ones could even take a physical form if they wish. Every wizard should have some grasp of this concept, even if only in a subconscious manner.

What kind of beings are spells, exactly? Well, that is up to you. They might be spirits, demons, angels, elementals, or beings of pure energy. Their minds are probably extremely simple or completely alien. They might be servants or parts of powerful beings (the god of fire, etc.). One would assume they do not mind being used by wizards, perhaps because they follow a higher order, or do not grasp the concept enough to organize a rebellion. They probably do not enjoy staying for too long in our plane, since most magic is temporary.

The truth, however, could be darker than the characters know. Maybe these beings can feel, and consider every casting a small torture, and repeated summoning a form of slavery. The screaming faces that appear every time you hurl an energy spell at your enemies are more than illusions. Magic artifacts may require the binding of a sentient spirit in a piece of metal or wood. Like trapping fireflies to make a lantern… or imprisoning Beethoven in a music box for your own amusement. The demon that lives in your sword is always willing to help you in your fights in exchange for some blood… but for how long? Maybe all wizards know this and keep it secret, or maybe they refuse to see it. Maybe it is only a theory, a legend, a hunch… an uneasy feeling in the back of their heads.

And maybe one day the wizards might find that these things want revenge.