Kobold Guide to Magic

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Edited by Ray Vallese

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First Edition

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KOBOLD GUIDE TO MAGIC

Introduction

HOARY HOSTS

Monte Cook

Magic is, quite simply, the best and worst thing about fantasy gaming.

My very first convention game session was a D&D 1st edition game run by a guy I didn't know. Our player characters wandered through some wizard's maze while buckets of dung appeared above us and fell on our heads. When the players said things like "What?" or "How?" or perhaps best of all, "Why?" the Dungeon Master just shrugged and said, "Magic," with a little laugh.

The experience made me angry and actually kind of embarrassed. Embarrassed to love a concept like fantasy magic that allowed that DM not only to do that, but to feel that it was OK. That magic is just this silly thing without rules that empowers pranks and juvenile goofiness. Embarrassed that this thing that I had loved was little more than giggling leprechauns, baby unicorns, and fairies with wands with stars on the end of them, trailing sparkles. Magic in so many eyes was little more than a Saturday morning cartoon (and not the good kind, with robots and lasers).

But I couldn't help it. I loved fantasy and magic because it could be something so much greater. Unlike the dude at the convention, magic gave my gaming sessions islands floating in the clouds, massive golems fused from the bones of a thousand corpses, demon lords that existed in multiple dimensions at once, and wizards that could conjure castles of glass with a wave of their staff. Magic gave my RPG sessions grandeur and majesty and made players *ooh* and *aah* or—more accurately—say things like "coooool" or "awesome." Which is really what every gamemaster craves, in the end.

Magic is about ideas, imagery, and the stuff that makes everyone stand up and notice.

Although you'll read a lot of things in this book about Tolkien and Vance and Harry Potter and other great inspirations, well, can we just talk about the Doctor a moment? No, not that Doctor.

I'm talking about Doctor Strange, of course. In my formative years, running fantasy games with my friends, the biggest influence on magic was always clearly Dr. Strange.

And I mean Dr. Strange in all his Clea-loving, Shuma-Gorath-fighting, huge-collared-cowl-wearing, bald-manservant-having, funky-facial-haired glory. That's the way we saw magic—enchanted orb in one hand, bolts of bedevilment coming out of the other. Travels to trippy, abstract, Steve Ditko-inspired astral realms with crazy melting walkways that came out of giant mouths were a big part of our adventures. Oaths sworn to bizarre otherworldly beings like the Vishanti were, too. And the best villains were giant Dormammu-like demonic entities.

The great thing about magic in the Dr. Strange comics was that it was both quantifiable (you knew what the Crimson Bands of Cyttorak did when Doc loosed them) and unquantifiable. Dr. Strange was Sorcerer Supreme and Master of the Mystic Arts, and it could still surprise him, confound him, and overcome him. As much as he learned (and as much as we learned as we watched), there was always something new and weird and dangerous and mind-bending around the next corner.

My players grew to expect just that. Magic was both science and utterly beyond science. In my early games, when the players encountered the Living Tribunal (because *of course* they encountered the Living Tribunal), they knew it wouldn't just be a matter of AC and hit points. Magic was more than that.

We took magic seriously and found our fun in that, rather than in making it silly or goofy. It was dangerous, frightening, and wildly powerful, and that's an outlook I took with me as I went forward and became a game designer.

So it's no coincidence that when I started my own game company in 2001, the first product we did was called *The Book of Eldritch Might*. That was a tip of the hat to Dr. Strange, who continually tossed Lovecraftian words like "eldritch" left and right. It's no coincidence, in fact, that a lot of my work has been characterized by the existence of a lot of magic, and lots of different treatments of magic.

So now I find myself, years later, lucky enough to write the introduction to this book of fabulous essays about my favorite topic. In these pages, you'll find Clinton Boomer describing the difference between explicable and inexplicable magic. Tim Pratt rightfully encourages GMs to make magic weird in order to make it fun and interesting. Both Zeb Cook and Jeff Grubb talk about how to inject wonder into your games through magic. It's a great book, and readers should heed every word. The rulebooks and rules lawyers will tell you that magic in roleplaying games is all about stats and dice and precise measurements, and that's OK. Dr. Strange knew how far the Winds of Watoomb would blow. But that's only half the story. This book will fill your head (and your game) with glorious ideas, and ideas are the other half of the story. Unquantifiable, strange magic makes fantasy fantastic.

Take it all to heart. Put it all in your game. But by the hoary hosts of Hoggoth, make it grand and majestic.

Colors of Magic

Imbuing a Sense of Wonder in RPG Spellcasting

Jeff Grubb

Here's what magic in games should be like:

When I was very young, I went to see the Disney version of *The Sword in the Stone* (loosely based on the T. H. White versions of the legend) at the King's Court Theater. One of the high points of the film was a wizard's duel between Merlin and the evil witch Mim. Mim cheats right off the bat by going invisible, then both she and Merlin transform into a variety of creatures (Mim becomes a crocodile, Merlin becomes a turtle to bite the crocodile and then a rabbit to escape, Mim becomes a fox, Merlin becomes a worm, Mim becomes a chicken, Merlin becomes a walrus, etc.). The battle ends with Mim becoming a dragon and Merlin becoming a bacterium of a nasty disease that lays the dragon low.

And that was cool because magic was all about the potential possibilities.

Years later, I caught the Roger Corman version of *The Raven* (only related in title to the original poem by Poe) on Pittsburgh's late-night horror movie, *Chiller Theater*. And this movie culminated with a wizard's duel between Boris Karloff and Vincent Price. The spells cast were precursors of those found in the early D&D books—*levitation, magic missile*, and *shield*. This was cool because we knew that both men were supposedly wizards, but we didn't know what spells they were throwing around. How they challenged and counter-challenged one another.

And that was what magic was all about—the sense of unexpected wonder.

And yet, when we get down to replicating magic in games, we don't have much of either potential possibilities or wonder. Magic in RPGs is just one more tool in the box, one more resource that, when turned to the proper setting, produces a specific result, no more and no less.

Part of the problem is the nature of the different media. Books and movies can seek to delight through opening the door to wonders as yet unseen. For the resident

wizard to pull a rabbit (or a dragon) out of her hat is expected within the genre, and we are not to demand an explanation. Wizards are supposed to be filled with secrets, which we are not privy to, and which can be revealed when needed.

J.R.R. Tolkien himself addressed the issue in his essay "On Fairy-Stories": "Faerie itself may perhaps most nearly be translated by Magic—but it is magic of a peculiar mood and power, at the furthest pole from the vulgar devices of the laborious, scientific, magician. There is one proviso: if there is any satire present in the tale, one thing must not be made fun of, the magic itself. That must in that story be taken seriously, neither laughed at nor explained away."

Magic, then, has a sense of wonder and mystery, of variety and the unexpected. Here is something new. Here is something you haven't seen before. Here is something that looks cool.

Games, on the other hand, in particular roleplaying games, are all about empowering the player, and in that respect we need as much information as possible as to what magic does, how it works, and most important, how it can be repeated at will. A spellcaster in *Dungeons & Dragons* and most of that game's descendants (which will be the main but not sole thrust of this chapter) would prefer his or her spells to do the same thing every time they are cast.

A great deal of this comes from the game's original heritage in tabletop miniatures games, in which the spellcaster is a mere component of a larger force. If a wizard or cleric is offered great power but with a high chance of sudden elimination (or as the Wargames Research group put it in 1973, "Magician vanishes in piff of blue smoke, leaving strong smell of sulphur, and does not return"), the usability of that wizard on the battlefield, while risky, is still acceptable as one unit among many. Once that wizard is the sole entity under the control of the player and becomes that player's avatar within the game, that sort of limitation becomes unacceptable. In short, a player character is too important to risk casting random spells.

So the spells become more controllable, less hazardous for the user, and more consistent in form and function. Casting a *lightning bolt* spell creates a certain expected response, as does casting *charm person* or *sleep* or *magic missile*. But in making everything fit more neatly in the moment-to-moment play, some part of the sense of wonder is lost. The question then becomes, how does one get it back? How can one regain the feeling of excitement of magic in a system that seeks to make it as usable and as repeatable as possible? Can the very mechanics of the game that demands reproducible results in spellcasting be used to restore a sense of wonder? What options are available for the gamemaster?

Option 1: Random Effectiveness and Fumbles

One of the obvious ways to vary results is through random factors. For example, a *fireball* spell cast by a 6th-level wizard does not inflict 21 points of damage—it inflicts 6d6 points of damage. But while this provides some level of variability in the results, it does little for the sense of wonder. A player can remember an excellent result (a 30 on six dice!) or a particularly horrible roll (an 8 when we were fighting a troll!), but the great bulk of castings are unremarkable beyond an application of damage.

Saving throws have the same effect, often in a binary sense—the *charm person* spell is either effective or shrugged off without incident. Again, this can create a different flow of battle in the game but does little for the sense of magic itself. It is a binary result that does not get to our core challenge.

On the other hand, systems that use a spell fumble or misfire table may be amusing the first time it occurs, but unless carefully balanced, this approach has the same problem as the aforementioned tabletop miniature battle games. Who would want to run a spellcaster if any casting had a chance (even an outside chance) of getting a frustrating or near-fatal result?

All of these concepts in design can create a different flow of combat in the moment-to-moment play, but they are ultimately playing with numbers, something that Merlin and Mim, or Price and Karloff, seemed to be completely unconcerned with. How then, to evoke a sense of wonder and variation when casting a spell, and, just as important, when someone is casting a spell against you?

Option 2: A Very Large Spellbook

One solution that has been used to great effect is to "flood the zone"—to provide so many spells available that it becomes very difficult to determine what spell is being cast, only to witness its many results. Instead of one spell that creates a ball of fire, there are a plethora of such spells. Some of them create rolling balls; some different shapes like walls or bolts, with different results; some with additional effects. Most of the various editions have some framework for adding new spells to the repertoire, and there are players and GMs who enjoy the potential of spells for every shape and season.

Expanding the spellbooks creates several challenges. One is the limitations of the players and GMs as far as how much information can be stored and processed. Scattering spells among a collection of sources (or even one big source) makes it hard to access that information in a timely fashion. Anyone who has had to look up a spell description in the middle of a combat knows this problem, which has been reduced but not eliminated in a computer age of apps, PDFs, and wikis. But a greater challenge is balance, of trying to figure out what versions of which spells belong at which levels, and how they stack up against each other—particularly for spells that do the same thing but have different results.

As an example, I look to my work on the *Spell Compendium* for 3rd edition D&D, which gathered years of spells that had been added to the game in various adventure modules and sourcebooks. While doing the research, I found about five spells that involved turning a target's bones to liquid. All were at different levels. Some were used as offensive spells intent on doing damage. Some were used as control spells, intended to limit the movement and ability of the target. One was used simply to cause pain in the target. And one was a positive spell that turned the caster's bones to liquid (painlessly, and without damage) to allow the character to seep through small openings.

The end result was that several of the spells went away entirely, while the remainder standardized their effects regarding whether the target could control its liquid/deboned form. We still had a roster of bone-melting spells, but in making them all fit, we lost a bit of the previous wonder.

A similar case can be made for the metamagic feats of 3rd edition D&D, where spells could be extended, expanded, silenced, or cast without material components entirely. This was a suitable if bulky system, and while it could create visible variants of spells, the cost (usually posting the spell at one or two additional levels, putting it in the realm of more effective spells) kept its uses to a minimum—with a few notable exceptions: a *magic missile* spell that always did maximum damage was a pure joy, and I saw this one a lot.

Option 3: Building Your Own Spells

Another option to create variety is to build your own magic system. I have a friend who did this for his own campaign back in the late 1970s, attempting to distill the possibilities of the 1st edition D&D magic system into a set of formulas. It was not an easy set of formulas, as it entailed such matters as timing (*Corpus Buffrum*) and proximity (*Corpus Contactum*), and the end result was as arcane as learning real magic, such that "Let me tell you about my magic system" was our group's version of "Let me tell you about my character" for being an entry into a long, dry, painful conversation.

Our taunting was meant in good fun, but in play the system had the problem of being overly complex. A mage in that system would bring the game to a halt when trying to create a spell "on the fly." A later system with a similar construction system, *Ars Magica*, got around the unbalancing effects by making all the characters primarily spellcasters. For our own game, while the system's intent was to allow spell creation on the fly, the result was such that would-be mages (and I was one) instead had two or three go-to spells that they had put together early in the process, and they rarely turned to any other concepts. Instead of creating variety, it created a small uniformity of trusted spells.

Option 4: Spells of Many Things

So perhaps a purely mechanical solution is not the best for creating a vibrant world of spells, though each approach above has merit. There is also potential for "large grouping" of spells, which live at opposite ends of the spectrum of magical power. At the highest level, we have the D&D *wish* spell, which, in a strictest reading of its original intent, was merely intended to be an all-purpose duplicate of any spell not otherwise available. Of course, in play it evolved quickly into a cosmic cube of a spell where the players parsed out their desires with lawyerly precision while the GM sought loopholes with a diabolical intent. All players have stories of wishes gone wrong or, worse yet, wishes that gave exactly what was desired, to the detriment of all.

At the opposite end the spectrum we have cantrips, which are underutilized all-purpose spells. Originally encountered in *Unearthed Arcana* as "mini-spells" living just below the radar of the spell list, they were still memorized as any other spells. In 3rd edition, they continued their life as a host of minor magics that, in general, were judged too weak to deserve a full spell (though in particular situations could be quite useful). By the 4th edition, cantrips had been folded into minor at-will abilities belonging to the wizard class and uses of the Arcana skill. Indeed, any bit of "minor magic" could be considered a cantrip—just a bit of showing off by the wizard.

But filling in the spell lists between these two poles is a bit more challenging in that not all spells within a particular level are of the same power and utility. A damage-dealing spell is always welcome in a combat situation, for example, but one that detects the invisible is of use only in cases where the invisible may be encountered. It is possible to determine on the fly what magical ability is usable at which time, but given the diverse nature of the spells, this can break down into a lot of situational negotiation.

But the existence of these broad-category skills is of interest in that it provides alternatives to casting. The question may be how to create a wide appearance of different spell types without the overwhelming requirement of creating (and keeping track of) hundreds of spells.

Option 5: Creating Wonder Through Description

Within my own early campaigns (in the era of the little books in the woodgrain box) before the introduction of the *identify* spell, my players found out what magic items did by a trial and error method. It was easy enough to give a clue for a *potion of levitation* or *telepathy* ("You feel a little lighter" or "You hear a low buzzing from the warrior's head"), but healing? Particularly if the team was already back to full health, which made sense if you were figuring out magic items by trial and error? What then?

I had a *potion of healing* taste like peppermint. There was nothing in the rules that sent me in that direction, but it became a standard within my world—healing tasted like peppermint. *Potion of extra-healing*? That would be strong peppermint.

The idea of describing the magic spread from there, from items to casting itself. In my campaign, healing spells tended to radiate blue energy (most likely because of the packaging of peppermint Life Savers). Abjurations tended to white, necromancies to green and black. Certain spells already had particular color analogues (red for *fireballs* and other flame spells, blue-white for *shocking grasp* and *lightning bolt*), but the sudden addition of color to the proceedings added some depth to the particulars.

Indeed, there is no stopping there. The early Forgotten Realms campaign setting was deep with wizard sigils and signature spells, a version of "flooding the zone" mentioned above where the differences were ascribed to particular mages. Over time, as spells moved into other campaigns, they lost their original creator's names, but when the spell had a particular visible effect, that stayed.

So if magic can be personalized in look and feel, the question does not become how to make spells different, but how to make spells interesting and unique in appearance. This does not have to be used for every spell in the book but can be worked in as an opportunity for roleplaying, firing the imagination, and giving the players the ability to contribute to the larger world. The bog-standard, off-the-rack *fireball* may be a big ball of flame of set dimensions, but ask your player to describe it. She may go with a traditional description, or she can add her own elements—sounds, smells, and colors. In doing this, the players bring their own imagination and a sense of wonder to the spells.

Of course, there are rules. We are talking about a game, after all. Whatever additions one makes to a spell cannot increase its power or usability, for example. No invisible *fireballs* that do unseen damage or silent *magic missiles* that strike without warning.

But a *magic missile* that hisses like a serpent as it spirals toward its detonation point, or one that explodes in blue flames tinged with green, or one that smells of burnt cinnamon creates its own sense of wonder.

Encouraging the players to create their own visible variants of spells, their own "skins" of magic, gives the world depth. Suddenly, not every spellcaster is casting the same assembly-line spell. We're seeing some difference and variance, and even if your standard NPC spellcaster still uses *fireball* within the traditional confines, the players get to be different, creative, and more than a little bit superior.

And this is not just the province of the player. The DM can use this variance among common magics to his own ends, with a touch of personalization. A particular wizard can use her own seal when casting a spell, effectively signing her work, or even cast a *magic missile* that creates greenish-tinged knives or screaming flame-skulls instead of shards of mystic energy. Use this idea for recurring enemies, and you have the makings of a long-standing, identifiable foe (and if said wizard falls, she may have students who not only cast screaming flame-skulls but also have a taste for vengeance on the murderers of their mentor).

This color should not be used in every case—just to add depth to the game. It is not intended to slow down the game but to highlight it and let the players reinforce the reality of the shared world. The next time a player has his magic user cast a charm, ask him what people see when he casts it (bells around the target's forehead? Stars in their eyes? A few soft words to the target, followed by a slack-jawed response?). In particular, when a new player uses *magic missile*, *charm person*, or any spell for the first time, give it a strong description of the hand held out toward the target, fingers splayed, as triangular yellow darts dance briefly at the fingertips before racing unerringly to their foes. That becomes a memory that sticks.

Full Sense of Wonder

In the end, mechanics can carry us only so far in the study of magic. They do very well defining it but not well enough for bringing it to life, for making it exciting, and for creating a sense of wonder. That is the province of imagination, which is something that roleplaying does very, very well, and we should be encouraged to imbue spellcasting with a full sense of wonder.

Explicable vs. Inexplicable Magic

Regarding intuitive and counter-intuitive spell systems in fantasy - or - "What the hell was that? A wizard or something?"

Clinton J. Boomer

I don't know how Gandalf's magic works.

I have some theories, I suppose, but at the end of the day I don't really understand what his powers are capable of, or why—or what special limitations there are to those self-same magical powers, or why. I most definitely don't know how.

Gandalf's magic is *inexplicable* to me.

OK, sure. I get that Gandalf spoke words of power and used his staff (and maybe an enchanted ring?) and that he stopped the balrog. All that is plainly self-evident; there's no question whether he *did* it. The thing is, I really have no earthly clue *how* his magic stopped the balrog and "cast it down"—and if I'm being totally honest, I'm not sure I know exactly what a balrog *is*, precisely.

Yes, I know. It's a big fiery demon-looking thing, sure. In fact, I even know that balrogs were once Valaraukar—a type of Maiar—that were "scourges of fire," seduced by Vala Melkor, who corrupted them to his service in the days of his splendor before the making of Arda. Anybody with access to Wikipedia knows *that*.

But beyond that, I don't *really* know where balrogs come from, or how, or what they want, or what they're doing. They are mysterious. I know much more about ducks, for example, than I know about balrogs, and I am no expert on ducks. I used Google to look up the question "Can balrogs fly?" and it seems that the Internet is unclear on whether balrogs even have *wings*.

Evidently, my confusion is not unique to me. Same goes, I suspect, for the majority of the magic of Middle-earth.

I don't know what would happen if Gandalf wore the One Ring, either, or how precisely Gandalf became the White. And I don't know if Smaug would have been capable of using the One Ring, and I also don't know why Gandalf didn't use more of his powers on Smaug in the first place, and I'm not exactly sure why Samwise was afraid to wield the One Ring, either; nor am I entirely certain that I even understand why Sauron made all the rings to begin with.

Again, I have fan theories, but not much more. I'll bet you anything that there are intense Internet-based and real-world discussions about all of those topics, with very little broad consensus among readers.

And that's OK.

I need to understand exactly *one* thing to enjoy *The Lord of the Rings*, and that's this:

"*You cannot pass,*" he said. … *"I am a servant of the Secret Fire, wielder of the flame of Anor. You cannot pass. The dark fire will not avail you, flame of Udûn. Go back to the Shadow! You cannot pass.*"

— *The Fellowship of the Ring* book 2, chapter 5: "The Bridge of Khazad-dûm"

That is, in my opinion, *awesome*. That is an opinion shared by tens of thousands (of millions?) of fans, of course; I get no credit for noticing it.

It's epic and storybook, strange and poetic, deep and echoing.

And wonderful.

The Feeling of Not Knowing

I would be fine with a roleplaying game that said, in the introduction, "Magic is powerful and can apparently do anything, but you cannot comprehend it, and you will never, ever be master over it no matter what petty powers you think you wield. Sod off."

The rules of magic in *The Lord of the Rings* are like that—simply inexplicable. Meant to be analyzed and subsequently comprehended, they are not.

Good. There's actually a certain joy in that. Some readers—myself included, and maybe you—delight in the feeling of *not knowing*, but of discovering something huge and alien, uncovering it layer by layer, accepting that we might never truly comprehend the full shape of the titanic, unknowable form beneath.

Let *inexplicable magic* then be defined, for our purposes, as "magic that isn't keen to be understood; magic that doesn't necessarily make either internal or external sense, and doesn't particularly attempt to." In addition, these magic systems are often counter-intuitive or fully oblique, mysterious and incomprehensible to the reader; if there are rules to how magic works, we aren't told what those rules are, and we are not expected to figure them out to enjoy the story.

Inexplicable magic doesn't have to explain itself to you, and that can be both intriguing and captivating.

A lot of mythology is inexplicable to me; most non-Western creation myths, for example, are quite incomprehensible from my point of view, and that's fine. They're

dreamlike and allegorical, densely wrapped and defying explanation, each connected to a specific vast, interwoven memeplex I'm not inculcated within. Across the context of modern, more Western storytelling, I don't know how Wonderland or Oz or Narnia or the asteroids of *The Little Prince* function, either. Nor do I know how Lovecraft's Great Old Ones became so great in the first place, nor why.

And I don't have to.

Inexplicable magic fascinates.

Vampires, Werewolves, and Kryptonians

So what do I mean by "explicable magic"?

If you were watching a vampire movie, how would you react if the vampire villain suddenly time-traveled, or shot rainbow lasers from his eyes that froze things in midair, or burst and flew around as a swarm of white barn owls and then reformed?

You would probably be momentarily confused, to put it mildly, because those are not generally accepted magical abilities of a vampire. Or of a werewolf, might I add. Or even a Kryptonian.

It would break my suspension of disbelief, personally. I, the viewer, would demand some element of explanation and satisfaction from the narrative, sooner rather than later. I would expect a character to make some observation or comment about what had just occurred and whether we could expect to see it happen again.

I would want an answer to the question, "What the living hell is going on here?"

Because I think I know how vampires and werewolves work. They are explicable and understandable to me, even if they *are* magical. There are rules to these things, dammit!

Funnily enough, I would be fine with the answer "That particular vampire (or werewolf) has a magic amulet that lets him do that" because I generally accept that magic amulets give people powers that they don't already have. Magic amulets are also explicable to me, in the broader sense, just like Kryptonians, even if the exact underlying functions of "magic amulet-ness" or "space-alien-ness" are poorly understood at best.

I would like someone to tell me how the amulet works, though, at least in broad strokes. Does it have limitations? Who made it? Can it be stolen or destroyed?

However, I would also be fine with the answer "That's what actual vampires are like; all the stuff you heard before was just superstitious folklore. Welcome to the real horror story, kid. So, here's how it is ..."

Explicable Magic Defined

Let "explicable magic" then be defined, for our purposes, as "magic keen to make itself understood; magic as something akin to science, which strives to obey some amount of both internal and external sense." In addition, these magic systems are often intuitive to the reader or viewer—or, if counter-intuitive, are expected to be comprehensible (although perhaps still slightly mysterious) when explained. Not only are there rules to how magic works, we are most likely *directly told* what those

rules are or are expected to figure them out in order to enjoy the story.

It's fun for the whole family to figure out what makes a walker—and how to stop them!—on *The Walking Dead*.

Either explicable magic works exactly like it says on the box, or it comes with a set of satisfying instructions.

It can *also* be used to great effect in fantasy storytelling. If you've enjoyed *The Name of the Wind*, the Mistborn books, the *Methods of Rationality*, the Dresden Files books, or anything else that makes you say, "Oh, that's quite a clever use of that spell, actually," you're broadly familiar with the tropes and idioms of good explicable magic. Modern-day fantasy fiction tends to showcase a lot more "explicable magic" than "inexplicable magic," I've noticed, which has advantages and disadvantages.

I blame gaming for this, insofar as any blame ought to be assigned.

Explicable magic is, after all, a very useful storytelling tool in fantasy fiction: when the reader is intended to identify strongly with a magic-using main character (like Harry Potter, for example, or Neo or Luke Skywalker), it's often quite advantageous to have a magic system that is both intuitive and comprehensible. When our boy Harry shouts "*Expecto Patronum*" at the end of *Harry Potter & the Prisoner of Azkaban* [SPOILER ALERT] and waves his wand in that certain special way, we the readers are not abjectly, mind-bogglingly baffled about what is going to happen next.

Instead, we are able to predict the results of his spell use; we would be startled and befuddled if this magic suddenly caused him to burst into purple flame and metamorphose into Hitler. We are not confused by the results of the Patronus Charm. Although we are delighted at seeing our hero use such powerful magic in service to the story, this is no more confusing than a vampire burning in sunlight, laser blasts shooting from a laser blaster, or a kung-fu expert recalling the teachings of her dead master while locked in a life-or-death revenge struggle. Furthermore, if our point-of-view magic-using character, like Harry, were to face off against a vampire or werewolf or Kryptonian, we could probably make reasonable guesses as to what might occur next.

We know how this stuff works, after all.

On the other hand, I can't even begin to guess what would happen if Gandalf faced off against *any* of those foes because I *know* that I don't understand how Gandalf's magic really functions. Not deep down, anyway. He might win, or lose, or seem to lose but actually win, or pull a weird surprise twist out from under his hat, or give a speech and then win by what looks like *deus ex machina*, or die and be replaced by another character, or do something even *more* mysterious.

Rules for Magic in Gaming

That inexplicable approach to magic has certain flaws, from a gaming perspective.

In the vast majority of fantasy *gaming*, be it tabletop role-play or competitive collectible card games or massively multiplayer videogames, explicable magic is even more necessary than in fantasy fiction: the magic-using character isn't a guy in a story you're reading. He is *you*, or your valued party member, or a major part of a story you're telling for (and with) your friends.

We simply *must* understand how magic works; playing well with others requires it.

As an aside: of course, there *are* those weird, fun instances wherein characters might use magic that even the players don't fully understand. And when you're at the gaming table, spinning an epic tale in the grand tradition of cooperative storytelling, you can dive into those moments if you so choose.

But the point is this: it's helpful, in character, to be able to guess what will happen if the wizard PC casts a specific spell from her spell list on a vampire. But the fact of the matter is that out of character, everyone involved needs to be able to tell, quite specifically and empirically, *exactly* what happened when the wizard cast that spell on that vampire.

Gaming kinda requires rules for magic and for those rules to be *knowable*.

You can see why I blame gaming for the rise in explicable magic systems.

Of course, some of our favorite fiction straddles the line, magic-wise, between explicable and inexplicable. How does the Force work? Why does it work, and what does it work on? What can it do, or not do? Why? What are its limitations? Can the rules be bent or broken? Depending on what you read, play, and watch, and what you consider canon (see the *Kobold Guide to Worldbuilding* for more on that topic), the answers to these and other questions might be wildly different.

Hard sci-fi—and a lot of action, adventure, mystery, and urban fantasy—totally demands answers. What makes vampires work? What makes the Enterprise on *Star Trek* go? Well, there's a chart for that, and a switchboard and schematic, and blueprints and notes, and dozens of nested theories and counter-arguments, and several characters willing to discuss, over the course of many pages, complex engineering problems and elegant, formulaic workarounds.

Fairy tales—and a lot of mythology, horror, "new weird," and magical realism stories—do not demand answers, and answers given may not make sense. What makes fairies be fairies? What makes the X-Wings in *Star Wars* go? The stuff that they put in them that makes them do that, presumably. Nameless monstrosities are weird and inhuman because that's what monsters are like. Sometimes, due to the needs of the plot, a ghost arrives and speaks to Hamlet or Simba or Luke, and that just *happens*, and then it stops. There's no lever for it.

Practical Applications

So we broadly understand "explicable" vs. "inexplicable." Let's now talk "applicable," especially in regard to your writing, your reading, and your games. How can you use these distinctions to make your own fantasy storytelling adventures more fun?

Well, there was a time when explicable magic just wasn't really a thing.

How, precisely, magic was used—that was fundamentally mysterious. By charting the evolution of our expectations of magic in the fantasy genre, we can choose where on the great, strange spectrum from explicable to inexplicable we want to set our stories.

To illustrate: I love, love, *love* that the spells *floating disk* and *transformation* are from two completely different schools of magic (evocation and transmutation, respectively) and of wildly different spell levels.

The thing about them, for me, is that—as unconnected as they are—they still feel like two spells that were created by the same guy: a wizard with a bone-deep desire to be physically stronger. These are spells created by someone who wanted to be able to carry more stuff, early in his career, and who finally figured out—years later, once he had truly mastered spellcraft—how to turn himself into a hulking barbarian rage-monster so he could beat his enemies to death with a rock rather than set them on fire with his mind.

These two spells feel like relics of a living history.

They feel like a marker point somewhere along the spectrum from unknowable, free-form mysticism to codified, scholarly arcane effects.

Because they *are*.

In addition, I love that the spells *freezing sphere* and *resilient sphere* are absolutely, totally and utterly different effects that do completely different things despite being part of the exact same school: evocation. If you tried to intuit what *freezing sphere* did, based solely on the precedents of *resilient sphere* and *telekinetic sphere*, you would be wrong.

Again, this feels organic: these are the creations of a mage who just really likes spheres, as a general abstract concept, and who is slowly turning "raw, incomprehensible power that can do anything" into "a list of predetermined spell abilities my character can call upon by name, within the parameters of the rules."

Even more than those, however, I love that *secure shelter* is a conjuration effect that does something very different, mechanically, than the spell *tiny hut*—an evocation effect with a distinctly similar purpose.

Without looking, few people could probably remember which one is the more powerful effect, by spell level. They're very close, level-wise. Both magics feel like discrete but contiguous parts of an organic experimentation process, with the same overriding goal—again, because they *are*. And yet, the final and greatest approach to solving the same problem—*mage's magnificent mansion*—was created by a different guy.

As an aside, what is the great theme behind the "mage's" spells? It's not conjuration or force: *mage's private sanctum* is an abjuration effect, as is *mage's disjunction*; *mage's lucubration* is, uniquely, a transmutation effect; *mage's sword* and *mage's faithful hound* seem pretty similar, since they both create useful, invisible, autonomous helpers, but they're from two different schools. Who can remember which one is which?

The theme of those spells, as far as I can tell, is that they're all *excellent*. A really good adventuring mage should definitely figure out how to cast all of them; if they did not exist, it would be necessary to create them.

The point is this: those spells come from a time when all magic was basically inexplicable—a time of Fafhrd and the Gray Mouser, of Conan, of *The Sorcerer's Apprentice*. Every single decision by a player or storyteller in those heady, wild early days permanently fused the grand, amorphous confusion of the arcane into comprehensible, building-block shapes it literally never had before.

The way that spells work (or don't work) in the modern era is the direct result of hundreds of thousands of people working together, year after year and compromise by compromise, one innovation and edition-change and retcon after another, to reach a functional, fair consensus so that everyone can play in a world together.

Mix It Up

The awesome thing is that today, you can choose to mix things up if you want to recapture that inexplicability of "ye olde skool" magic. It's as simple as putting yourself back in the mindset of another age and an elder era of sorcery, mixing spell lists and effects in ways that will surprise your readers and players.

Call it wild magic or deep magic or outer magic, or don't explain it at all. Grab your favorite list of Force powers or psionic abilities or divine spells, peel the labels off, mix them, and divide them randomly among five (or three or seven) different groups. Once you have these completely alien assortments, try reimagining what each set represents. Go crazy with it. Dare yourself not to make sense.

Or you can choose to stand firmly on the shoulders of more modern giants, using codified systems drawn from years of refinement, sure of balance and instant familiarity to a fantasy-loving audience.

Or, most delightful of all, you can find your own happy medium.

That's magical.

Staff and Moon

Gender-Based Magic in Fantasy

Amber E. Scott

Coming up with a title for this essay was tricky, because how do you convince people that reading about gender influences in magic will be a rip-roaring good time? An academic piece on gender sensitivity in magic would put my readers to sleep.

So let's skip the politics and dive into the fun part: magic. Magic differentiates fantasy from all other genres (and if you ever find gender-issues debates too tame for your tastes, try reading genre-classification debates, but for the moment go with me and grant that magic and fantasy are inextricably linked). In designing a magic system for a game or a novel, the question of how magic works plays a prominent role. How do practitioners access magical energy? What effects can they create? What price is paid?

Considering gender when contemplating these questions can strengthen, deepen, or possibly damage your creation.

The very term "gendered magic" prompts a reaction, even before we examine what gender is and what it means in a fantasy world. When we consider the volatile history of gender politics in our society, it might seem easier to ignore design questions of gender completely. However, our real-world lenses of ethics, morals, politics, religion, and society can all add depth and realism to fantasy settings, and gender considerations can, too.

It would be easy to sink straight into a complex discussion of the role of gender in a setting. You could start by deciding how many genders exist in your world—for inspiration, read Ursula Le Guin's excellent *The Left Hand of Darkness* for an example of androgynous aliens that assume both male and female forms over the course of their lives. In order to narrow the scope of the discussion to a manageable level, though, let's start with a general definition of gender. Then we'll take a look at examples of existing templates that mix gender and magic before considering the benefits and disadvantages of these templates.

What Is Gender?

"Gender" can be thought of as a social construct that defines a set of accepted behaviors and attitudes for a group of individuals, usually (but not always) based on biological sex. Defining gender categories in a world setting is a task unto itself. A world may have more than two biological sexes and strict gender roles for each, or it may have two sexes but flexible gender roles based on physical characteristics, social class, ethnicity, age, or any other characteristic you can imagine.

Once gender categories are defined, though, you can start to brainstorm how magic and gender might be related. Let's examine four distinct possibilities.

Template 1:

Different genders use the same magic the same way

In this template, all genders have access to the same type of magic, and the magic works the same for everyone. This is not to say that everyone in the world has the same level of proficiency with magic, but anyone who can learn to use magic—regardless of gender—accesses and uses magic in the same way.

The world of Harry Potter by J.K. Rowling is a good example of this setting. Men and women study and practice magic in the same manner. Not all schools are coed (the Durmstrang Institute and Beauxbatons Academy of Magic are gender segregated), but this is due to social convention, not the manner in which magic is practiced or learned. Both men and women serve in the Ministry of Magic and hold academic positions at Hogwarts.

This is the default template for most roleplaying games. There are good reasons to use this model in a game: it's less complicated, requires no extra rules, and probably won't offend any players. Other templates, however, can more robustly define a world.

Template 2:

Different genders use different magic differently

In this template, the different genders have access to completely different types of magic. At the deepest level, all magic might spring from the same source, but by the time it reaches a level of study and practice, the magic of one gender is distinctly different from that of another.

In the Discworld series by Terry Pratchett, men who use magic generally study at Unseen University and are granted the title of wizard (or in certain special cases, "Wizzard"). Wizardly magic exists in books and can be studied and learned. By comparison, women who use magic are called witches and their magic is much more intuitive. Granny Weatherwax, a prominent witch in the series, often refers to magic as "headology" and implies it may not be more than cultivating a certain attitude and appearance, combined with knowledge of human behavior.

The division between wizards and witches in Discworld is much sharper than at Hogwarts. The magic of each gender is specific and consistent and easily recognized as one or the other. Pratchett's book *Equal Rites* details the issues that arise when a woman attempts to enter Unseen University and study as a wizard. The title alone

shows Pratchett's attention to the fact that women and men use magic differently in his world, and the book is a hilarious exploration of what those gender distinctions mean.

The Discworld setting is also an example of gendered titles (men are wizards, women are witches) and magical inheritance (magic being passed down through bloodlines). In a world where magic is gender-segregated, titles may arise to define people able to use the magic specific to their gender.

Template 3:

Different genders use the same magic differently

Here we enter a more complicated setting, where all genders access the same magic but the results differ profoundly. One gender may be attuned to the magic and use it more easily, while other genders struggle to master even the most basic incantations. Men and women may only manipulate certain facets of the same magical energy, such as if men have access to damage-dealing spells and women have access to healing spells. Or the use of magic may affect one gender differently than another.

We can see this last effect in Robert Jordan's Wheel of Time series. The One Power illustrated in the series operates through a complex series of rules, many of which are gender specific. Most notably, the Dark One's corruption of the One Power caused men to become cursed and go mad if they attempted to channel power. Women were immune from this curse, leading to a female-centric faction that tracked down and "gentled" male channelers.

Template 4:

Different genders use the same magic the same way, but are treated differently

This setting takes the focus away from the how and why of magic and focuses instead on the societal repercussions. In the real world, men and women have historically been banned from certain occupations. So it makes sense that in some fantasy settings, magical occupations might be limited to one gender or another.

Designing settings where gender politics come into play for spellcasters can be a difficult process, and the results can be volatile with players. Being barred from a class because of your character's gender can be annoying to some players and downright offensive to others. When gender politics are so real and present to so many people, encountering the same politics in-game can suck the fun right out of a session.

However, these settings can also offer a lot of depth and story potential to players. In many settings where societal constructs restrict magical use, stories focus on the ways in which people get around those constructs. For example, in Ursula Le Guin's Earthsea books, the magical school of Roke bans women from studying magic. As the series progresses, however, the societal pressures behind this ban are revealed and discredited and women's magic grows in power. Le Guin's short story "Dragonfly" tells the tale of a woman who attempts to gain access to the school of Roke—the same central concept as Pratchett's *Equal Rites.*

A more subtle version of this dynamic can be seen in some of the religions in the Forgotten Realms campaign setting for the *Dungeons & Dragons* game. Divine magic

works the same for all divine spellcasters: you worship a god, receive spells and special powers, and increase in proficiency as you gain experience. Specific religions exclude particular genders, though, depending on the focus of their deity. For example, in drow society, clergy of Lolth have historically been female, while clergy of Vhaeraun have historically been male. There is no mechanical reason why male drow can't worship Lolth, only a strong social taboo against the act. The worship of drow deities has undergone significant upheaval in recent iterations of the Realms, which shows the potential in this template. When gender-based social constraints interact with a magic system, story opportunities arise.

Benefits and Drawbacks

Each template has its own set of benefits and drawbacks, of course, and these boil down mainly to the issue of choice.

In a roleplaying game, the players are the heroes. They possess the power and liberty to effect change in the world. While some people enjoy roleplaying disenfranchised groups or willingly play systems that restrict their character-generation opportunities, it's safe to say that most prefer choice. Witness the slew of character-option books available on the market in any game system. Restricting certain character classes or abilities based on gender can be seen as arbitrary, demeaning, or simply weird.

Games with modern fantasy settings may acknowledge social gender differences without restricting character ability. In the *World of Darkness*, for example, modern social conventions exist, but there are no restrictions on playing vampires of one gender or another. Particular factions within a setting may be gender specific, such as the church of Lolth, but the implication is that players are free to create a character from any faction they wish.

PCs don't necessarily have to follow the rules by which most of society operates. Social restrictions on magic could apply to lower-class or disenfranchised groups in society, not "exceptions" like adventurers. Certain organizations could also maintain such restrictions, particularly temples in worlds where divine magic exists. These types of restrictions aren't truly drawbacks to the PCs unless they choose to play characters who would be subject to social conventions.

In fiction, the main character is the hero because of his or her ability but also because of the challenges the character must overcome. Free choice and unrestricted ability can be detrimental to fiction; it removes some of the most obvious barriers a character can face. A story where Dragonfly saunters into the school of Roke and the wizards readily grant her admission would be no story at all.

In general, then, a template that allows the most freedom to characters is more suitable for games, while a template that restricts ability is more suitable for fiction.

In general.

Turning Things Around

The popularity of game settings can overwhelm the popularity of game systems. A rich and nuanced world draws in players and sparks creative generation of characters.

A ruleset with unlimited flexibility must by definition lack a setting entirely, such as with the GURPS system. Setting books released by GURPS necessarily limit character options—you just can't play a drow in a *GURPS Star Trek* game. Defining a world means defining the generalities of the world: races, languages, ethnicities, histories, and social constructs including gender roles.

A richly detailed world that *generally* limits character options can also *specifically* allow them. One gender may be barred from a social role in general, but characters of that gender can break past and rise above these restrictions. As long as the players understand and agree ahead of time, a game that restricts character abilities can provide a rewarding experience. As previously mentioned, certain subclasses within society can be restricted from certain magical paths without limiting the PCs' options.

Certain types of challenges may be apparent only in a world with gender-based restrictions on magic. In a setting where using magic slowly corrupts women but not men, choosing to play a female magic user can create serious challenges (and potential storylines) for the group. When the party is all male, getting into the female wizard school to talk to the headmistress might be a challenge. Thoughtfully using gender-based magic restrictions in this way can create plot opportunities and a setting that seems more real.

Fiction may acknowledge gender differences but bypass them, choosing to focus on other conflicts. Harry Potter exists in a modern setting with established gender roles, but wizards don't incorporate those roles into their society. If J.K. Rowling had drawn a line between the genders in her book, readers could expect conflict to arise based on those lines. She didn't, though, and the lack of gender conflict in the book is a nonissue. Including gender conflict would have been distracting and incongruous.

The easiest or most obvious template can simplify worldbuilding, but turning around expectations can open up exciting avenues for storytelling.

Gender-Magic Stereotypes

All right, you've decided to experiment with linking gender and magic. One gender can't access the same powers as another.

Now what?

It seems easy to characterize some magic as "masculine" or "feminine." What is masculine magic? Fireballs, lightning bolts, powerful physical transformations, incantations, and enchanted staves. What is feminine magic? Healing, mental control, fortunetelling, trickery, potions, and curses. I chose those characteristics of masculine/feminine magic based on the fiction I've been exposed to and the culture in which I grew up, not because of any academic research on fantasy magic. "Masculine" magic to me is Gandalf, Raistlin, Merlin, Dresden, or Dumbledore. "Feminine" magic to me is Morgan le Fay, Maleficent, the Wicked Queen, Circe, or Cassandra from *The Scorpion King*.

We could go on listing examples of these characterizations. A few problems exist with trying to categorize magical stereotypes, though.

First, to defend the definition of a stereotype, you have to provide examples to show the presence and pervasiveness of the category. Examples rarely transcend cultures,

however. Even the examples I've used throughout this article—J.K. Rowling, Ursula Le Guin, Terry Pratchett—are common to English-speaking countries and represent a certain type of fantasy fiction. I haven't used examples from Asian literature or film, for instance, because I'm not as familiar with it.

Next, examples can always be met with counter-examples. For every slinky Cassandra, there's a butt-kicking Professor McGonagall to contend with.

Finally, even counter-examples can be counter-exampled. I can think of half a dozen powerful women magic users in under a minute, but men who use "female" magic are harder to name. Gender studies examine the phenomenon where women can aspire to be like men, are even encouraged to do so, while men are discouraged to be more like women (for example, when women can wear pants but men wear dresses only as a joke or a costume). Men in literature who use subtle magic are often portrayed as villains, such as the mind-controlling trickster Loki, or they play a comedic role, such as the healer Miracle Max from *The Princess Bride*.

In any case, exhaustively detailing magical gender stereotypes will take more time and trouble than it's worth and won't add much to your creation. A better method would be for you, the creator of your magic system, to ask yourself what your first instinct is in delineating gender-based magic, and play with those assumptions. What rules on using magic exist in the games and fiction you like best? You may find a system that inspires you instantly, or you could combine elements to come up with something unique. Either way, you'll have examined some of the options available to you and become more aware of how magic and gender can interact to create powerful stories or open up character options in your world.

Why I Hate Teleport Spells

Wolfgang Baur

For as long as I can remember, I've found the spell lists in *Dungeons & Dragons* (and now the *Pathfinder* RPG) a mix of joy (whee, *fireball*!), indifference (*Nystul's magic aura*), and rage-inducing madness (*teleport* as the primary target). This spell has ruined some games and simply made me want to drop others as unfulfilling, to the point where I always house-rule it in some fashion or ban it outright in favor of other options that I much prefer (*shadow walk* and other options).

It's rare for a single spell to get my goat like this, so let's look at the pros and cons of the hideous thing, and see what the case is for removing it from D&D and tabletop RPGs generally. There are a few things that—I grudgingly admit—it does for the game.

Why Players Love Teleportation

The primary love of *teleport* comes from three misdirected urges. One is the urge for speed of play. One is that thrill of power and mastery. The third is an enhanced power of exploration, especially for settings with continental distances.

With respect to speed: sure, fine, certainly it is easier to skip over long, dull stretches of travel and meaningless random encounters. Time spent trudging along on foot, riding on horseback or even soaring on dragonback is time that could be spent dashing through the dungeon and doing heroic deeds. Travel is a time sink. Travel is bad for the game because it takes the focus off heroics and puts it on scenery and rations and making camp. Travel is boring, boring, boring!

As a child, I went on many family vacations traveling continental distances in an air-cooled VW minibus. I can see the downside of simulations designed to recreate the experience of any long-distance traveler, heroic or no. The idea of watching tall grass roll by for 10 hours a day is not exactly thrilling adventure. A lot of travel is motion, camp, meal, motion, camp, meal.

"But it's more than that!" say teleportation lovers. "Teleporting is fun! You have more options!" And it is true that collapsing physical distances gives players a great

sense of power and mastery and control. That's a point that any player identifies with (and an argument that it might be overpowered). Once you are a 9th-level wizard and have mastered *teleport*, it no longer matters how long the road or how many monsters lurk on it. What matters is the endpoints of the journey, the starting place and—bamf!—the destination. The rest is removed from the game, to the better enjoyment of the important stuff.

The third reason that players love to teleport is the great ability to explore a big, wide world. Players can control how and where their heroes go, and all the world is theirs to visit as they choose. That's real power, and real magic, and a dream fulfilled. Imagine spending your days in the tropics of Hawaii or the Amazon, your nights in London, and your mornings always atop Mount Kilimanjaro to greet the dawn.

The collapse of distance means that players can explore more of the world, more efficiently, and at their own pace. Questions of supplies, timing, and weather are more or less meaningless because the heroic characters are always in the right place (though perhaps not at the right time).

Why Teleportation Is Bad for Games

All of these pro-*teleport* arguments are sort of half true, and certainly being able to jump from locale to locale quickly can and should be part of video games, and to a lesser extent, part of tabletop gaming. But I'd argue that using magic is a horrible way to achieve this effect, and that what you lose is previous experiences that make fantasy gaming poorer. Banning *teleport* does not mean you cannot have some of the best elements of what players love while still enabling better games, richer worlds, and better player choices.

I'd go further on this point: the spell is taken from science fiction tropes and really belongs in that genre more than in fantasy. But even there, I'd argue, it was a convenient device to avoid the need to devote screen time to getting out of orbit and down to planetary surfaces, a shorthand familiar to TV viewers of *Star Trek*. It's present almost nowhere outside of SF and fantasy. You don't find *teleport* as a standard device in romantic comedies or world mythology. Moving through distances is a difficult thing even in the far future, it seems.

Here's a rundown of four things you lose by allowing teleportation magic in a tabletop game world.

The Heroic Journey

Sure, it's a cliché to say that one plucky little hobbit or a ragtag band of heroes can somehow get through the Empire's defenses and save the world. But it's a story of travel and the journey, of obstacles on a grand scale over miles. Maybe that story is easier to tell in film or in novels than it is in tabletop games or video games. But I like having the option to say, "You need to get this princess to that tower before the winter solstice or the Lord of the North Wind will be most displeased with your kingdom" and not have the party just teleport and call it done. There are volumes of wilderness rules and wilderness character types who are denied a chance to shine. Aragorn and rangers generally should be a little put out that a wizard eliminates their role in tales of high adventure. Eliminating time required eliminates the conquest of

distance, the raw heroism of getting over the mountains, across the trackless desert, through the badlands, and past the volcano. The physical effort required to get where you are going and be heroic in the Marco Polo mold is gone.

To a certain extent, the *teleport* spell also reduces the possibilities for exotic travel. Many tales of adventure feature magical travel to the dreamlands, into the afterlife, to the heavens, in spirit form, or in animal form. But these methods are still travel. Teleportation deletes the sense of motion because it is easier and more efficient than any of these others. Why travel anywhere in crow form if you can skip all that with one poorly designed spell?

The Passage of Time

The sheer time required to get from place A to place B marks something as a heroic journey. Part of the glory of Alexander the Great is not just that he conquered the known world, but also that he explored it over years. If he had hopped around from battle to battle, he would have had time for a lot more conquering, perhaps, but he also would never have visited midpoints. If the US pioneers had not spent months on the Oregon Trail to travel west, the legends and history of that migration would surely have been very different.

This isn't to say that you need to spend a lot of table time modeling long journeys. I'm perfectly happy to say, "The journey takes six weeks, and you arrive in high summer," and move on. However, even if you compress the time at the table—and you certainly should!—I think it's important to the continuity of a game that players can feel that time has passed, that the journey has turned the wheel of seasons.

This is time compression, which can be as simple as "You spend two weeks on horseback and cover the Rothenian Plains, avoiding raiders and driving off a band of centaurs." Time compression is a nod to a big world and reinforces the sense of scale. Time elimination destroys that sense of scale, making all places equally distant (which is terribly convenient on the phone and in real life, but terribly mundane in gaming). Spending time on a journey is a way of showing its importance. It's a bit of a ticking clock that generates challenges of its own. Eliminating time means eliminating seasonal cutoffs, such as "We must get there before snows close the pass!" or "The prevailing winds make the return voyage impossible except in spring. You're stuck here for the winter, o Great Druid."

Note that spending time to travel need not be a heroic challenge for every journey. If the PCs want to travel back and forth on fine roads between well-ruled and enlightened kingdoms, they certainly can and should do it without monstrous dangers. But time will keep ticking, and that passage of time is an opportunity for their enemies—which brings us to the third element lost in teleportation magic.

Dilemmas and Trade-Offs

Making it possible to circumvent distance means that players rarely have to make hard choices about where to go, how to split forces, and so forth. Instead, they can fight in the distant demon shrine, teleport, and then fight in their hometown. There's no need to struggle with a dilemma imposed by distance.

This is similar to the problem of cell phones in films and TV. Until recently, it was possible to have storylines that included information differentials between

characters because communication was so difficult. The arrival of cell phones and texting in the 1990s made it increasingly difficult to say that two characters would be unable to share vital information. Part of the appeal of medieval fantasy, of course, is that modern communications, medicine, travel and so on are not part of the setting. So why would you want to give characters the opportunity to freely hop around the world rather than forcing them to choose their path with care? The lack of teleportation leads to greater planning, greater care, and greater caution. The dilemma of presence favors characters who can think and act decisively and correctly. Teleportation allows for lazier, sloppier thinking because the price of movement is so low.

Exploration

I admit this last point is entirely a matter of taste, and tastes differ. However, I prefer my RPGs to have large dollops of exploration and encountering new creatures and new civilizations. I've found wilderness exploration congenial to this goal, while instant-transport spells largely remove the urge to meet anyone or anything on the road, in the clouds, on the mountaintops, or in the deepest deserts. The ability to get lost or take a detour is largely absent when your primary mode of travel is instantaneous magical transport. You lose a certain element of "We met *what*?" when you don't, in fact, meet anyone or anything at all.

But then, I find adventure in the exploration mode deeply satisfying, and Jason and the Argonauts and the voyages of Sinbad are models that I think are well suited to the picaresque, episodic nature of RPG campaigns. I think that it's OK to trust the GM to make travel interesting and related to the story and adventure rather than a chore. A poor GM will struggle with this issue; an excellent GM will make anything entertaining.

The Limits of Teleportation

"Hold on," you ask. "Is teleporting *really* that easy?" Well, almost. Yes, it's possible that you won't arrive on target if you don't know the destination well (but you still arrive, and being off target a little is no more risky than a journey of 1,000 miles of demons and bad roads).True, you can't necessarily bring the whole party along until you're of a high-enough level, but if you have a large party of adventurers, you either have two wizards, or you could make a few scrolls of *teleport*. And yes, it can be used a limited number of times per day, but a party rarely needs to teleport more than twice a day, and once is often sufficient.

The real limit of the *teleport* spell is that it requires a conscious, functioning wizard to cast it. Smart monsters and smart villains knock out the wizard first because—among other reasons—it means that the party doesn't have an easy escape.

Generally speaking, though, once you have the power to teleport, these limitations are all relatively minor annoyances. It's the difference between going from New York to LA via jet and going by wagon train. Sure, the jet might require passing through annoying and intrusive security checks and obeying a baggage limit and restrictions on firearms and explosives (important to adventurers, I grant you). But really, there's just no comparison.

Possible Fixes and the Best of Movement Magic

Assuming that you agree with at least some of the downsides mentioned above, let's look at solutions that might make *teleport* better or restore some of the elements lost by instantaneous transport. I think there are at least four possible solutions, and perhaps more. They are gates, magical travel, teleportation costs, and tactical teleportation.

Gates

The easiest way to allow for instant transport without destroying the potential for wilderness and overland adventures is to make *teleport* a location-dependent spell in some fashion. This might mean that it works only at certain gates or special nexus points, using whatever set of criteria suit a particular setting. Such gates might be at the whim of the moon goddess, they might be found only in the center of druidic stone circles, or they might be where the roots of Yggdrasil touch the earth of the mortal world, connecting its distant lands with each other and the realm of the gods.

No matter how they are described and delimited, such hot spots are limited in number, they might require short travel to reach, and they are not available in distant, provincial backwaters—or in the heart of a villain's lair, generally. This allows for super-fast continental or national travel but makes the last few days of travel an opportunity to see the terrain and territory. It is, frankly, a bit like jet travel today: you can zip from New York to London. Getting from Ithaca to Bath, though, takes a little more work on each end, though a New York to London "gate" is almost certainly part of the trip.

Magical Travel

The shadow roads and ley lines of the Midgard campaign setting are the classic example here, but the idea exists in fiction as well. It is possible to turn *teleport* into something much more like *shadow walk* or *overland flight*—an accelerator for travel rather than a replacement. In Midgard, there's no *teleport* spell in my home games; the shadow roads replace it entirely. These shadow roads are 10 or 50 times faster than ordinary travel, but the one or two monsters met in the Shadow Realm that connects the starting point and destination are almost always dark, fey, and memorable.

This has two effects. First, it returns a sense of cost to travel, in that there's some risk to going anywhere. Second, it creates a small bit of wonder in the trip because traveling on a magical road is an invitation to adventure: the shadow fey or various demons might be traveling the road for reasons of their own. A magical road is a resource and a destination for special creatures and characters, so it becomes a location conducive to adventure, where wondrous, strange, and fey things happen. It is one of my favorite elements of the setting because while it is a huge convenience for players to move swifter than an eagle's flight, it is also hugely convenient to a gamemaster who wants to introduce a dangerous NPC or put a bit of a fright into a party that might otherwise grow blasé about such speed. And it is hugely convenient for, say, a cave dragon who wants to move his army of dragonkin in preparation for a spring assault.

A magical shadow road provokes conflicts and drama, in other words, instead of avoiding it.

Teleportation Costs

One of the problems with *teleport* is simply that it is too cheap. As a 5th-level spell in most of the d20 flavors, any 9th-level wizard can cast it, and it doesn't cost diamonds, XP, or any other truly valuable currency of the game. I'd argue that the arrival of *teleport* as a player spell at that level is one of the reasons that the D&D or *Pathfinder* "sweet spot" for adventures ends at 9th or 10th level. That is the point at which distance collapses and travel dies, so adventures beyond that level become increasingly disjointed and implausible. The spell's power is so great that it warps the perception of heroic action.

Three possible fixes come to mind. First, you can increase the spell to 7th level or so (essentially, removing *teleport* and just leaving *greater teleport* in place). This delays the problem to higher levels. Second, you can add a substantial gold piece cost in the form of a significant material component. This option may or may not help with the problem, depending on wealth distribution in the campaign.

Third, you can add a physical, mental, or spiritual toll that fatigues the caster and limits the spell's use to dire need, or at least to a one-way trip that then requires a recovery period. This option is in some ways the most interesting, as it means that teleporting into a bad place leaves the wizard weakened. It might even lead to a complete disaster if the party has overestimated its own strength or if the villain has prepared a trap. Such snares are especially likely at gates, of course (and one more reason to use that solution).

Tactical Teleportation

The last solution is to restrict the spell's range from 100 miles per caster level down to 5 or 10 miles per level. This eliminates all those thousand-mile cross-continental leaps, but it remains very useful to escape a combat, enter a keep by surprise, or skip over a mountain range or moderately sized inland sea.

Teleport, then, becomes a tactical tool used in the last leg of a journey, after the mounts are stabled and the characters have readied their best spells, weapons, and magical defenses. If you keep in mind that a person on foot or on horseback would rarely cover more than 20 to 30 miles in a day, the ability to instantly move 50 or 100 miles is still quite magical (and indeed, would be enough to cover 99% of all commuters' daily travel from home to work). In other words, it's still good but it doesn't warp the fabric of everyday life quite as much. The Pony Express riders covered 80 miles a day by using relays, and it was certainly a marvel in its time. Restricting teleportation to that range means that wizards might not outrun extremely determined pursuit.

If the odds of *teleport* errors into unknown territory go up as well, the spell might remain the preferred tool of retreat, but it would no longer allow for huge jaunts as routine. Indeed, the higher the error rate climbs, the more entertaining the teleportation becomes. An article on the Kobold Press blog points out that teleportation errors are a golden opportunity for a GM to unleash dimensional

terrors, fiends, or simply elements of horror such as, "You're lost in the woods and keep hearing *things* out there." (See "The Creepy GM: Dark Teleportation and Other Horrors," posted on October 31, 2013.) Raising the risk reduces the sense that the spell is a utility; it's the difference between owning a Bic lighter and being able to call down white phosphorus barrages. Both are forms of fire with clear uses, but only one gets a daily workout for most people.

Goodbye, Dear Teleport

From the perspective of a game that values exploration and heroic journeys, I would submit that nerfing *teleport* is one of the best moves a GM can make. It increases the enjoyment of the trip rather than the destination, and it allows long stretches of campaign time to pass quickly.

Most of all, though, it restores exploration, wonder, and a sense of scale to a campaign world, instead of collapsing it into a series of hub-and-spoke destinations akin to a set of fantasy airports with lounges and departure gates. Leave the airport style of travel behind, go visit the countryside, and trust your players to enjoy at least occasional forays into the deep wilderness without that magical escape.

Making Magic Believable

Ken Scholes

I think we've all had the experience of going to a movie or reading a book where we were swept up into the story and carried by it. We sat on the edge of our seats, we bit our nails, and when it was over, we were amazed by the ride. It had stopped being a story someone else was telling us and became a vicarious experience that we participated in.

Conversely, we've also all had the experience where the story was moving along for us and then it happened. It doesn't matter what it was—a bit of bad science, a bit of cheesy dialogue, or a character acting in a way that was, well, out of character for them. We leave an experience differently when we're pulled out of the story once, twice, three times—or when we never even got fully strapped in. We knew in the midst of the storytelling that we were being told a story and because we knew it, we couldn't experience it vicariously.

The reason for that? When we immerse ourselves in a story, we exercise our suspension-of-disbelief muscle. Though all of us have different tastes and tolerances, when we are able to suspend that disbelief—to lay aside and forget that we are being told a story—we can then experience it.

The term *suspension of disbelief* was first coined by the poet Samuel Taylor Coleridge, known best for "The Rime of the Ancient Mariner" and "Kubla Khan." He was defending the use of the supernatural in poetry when he wrote "[M]y endeavours should be directed to persons and characters supernatural … so as to transfer from our inward nature a human interest and a semblance of truth sufficient to procure for these shadows of imagination that willing suspension of disbelief for the moment, which constitutes poetic faith."

Coleridge understood, I think, that working harder to make things realistic and believable was especially critical if the supernatural were part of the story. It seems a strange irony, but it's true. Because we know, in this present day, that there are no wizards, dragons, and elves running about, storytellers have to work all the harder to

make them seem real and believable when employed in a story. Of course, most of us who love the speculative genres come to the stories we crave already knowing we don't have things like rings of power and faster-than-light travel, and we're willing, if the storyteller does their part, to suspend that disbelief and extend "poetic faith" in exchange for a good story experience.

So how does the storyteller do their part? How do we make magic believable?

I've brought together three of my colleagues—Aliette de Bodard, J.A. Pitts, and David Anthony Durham— to talk about this. Each of us has a series out showcasing a slightly different variety of magic, though truth be told, my own magic system in *The Psalms of Isaak* has a lot more to do with Clarke's Third Law than anything supernatural. My characters, all the usual suspects in an epic fantasy—the dashing prince, the dangerous courtesan, the orphan of prophecy, the hidden king—believe they're using magic, but in reality, it's forgotten technology. Thus, I thought it would be helpful to bring in some friends who are using various types of magic in their fantasy series and hear a bit from them on how they make their magic believable.

Rooting Magic in Mythology

One quick way to lend your magic system some instant credibility is to root it in an already existing tradition that readers are familiar with. For instance, Nebula award-winning author Aliette de Bodard's trilogy *Obsidian and Blood* is a noir set in the 16th-century Aztec Empire and draws from the Mexica tradition of blood sacrifice. "It's a religious magic," says de Bodard. "People use it by calling on the power of gods who choose to grant favors to them. This is done through living blood: either the sacrifice of an animal or a human, or blood drawn from the practitioner as penance."

J.A. Pitts grounds his award-winning Sarah Beauhall series in Norse mythology, with the catch that his stories take place in the modern-day Pacific Northwest. "Magic falls into three major categories: the use of runes, music, and astral projection," Pitts says. "These are all used by various characters. The witch, Qindra, is a master of manipulating the world through the use of incantations, magical artifacts, and runes. Sarah Beauhall is a maker, which gives her the ability to imbue objects with magical properties. Katie Cornett is a bard or skald and makes magic through music."

These two series draw from existing mythologies, adapted as needed, and in doing so the authors can employ what already lives in the imagination of any reader familiar with those mythologies. There is also cause for caution here because if readers are more familiar with the mythology than the author is, they run the risk of falling out of the story if they discover something that isn't in keeping with what they know.

John W. Campbell-award-winner David Anthony Durham takes a similar approach in the magic used in his *Acacia* trilogy, though he founded it in Judeo-Christian mythology. "It was one quite specific thing that influenced me," says Durham. "The opening of the Bible and the notion that God created the world with language. He said, 'Let there be light' and, sure enough, there was light." Durham modified the mythology and applied it to his own world's creation. "In *Acacia*, the story became that their creator god walked the earth singing things into existence. Apparently, it took him a lot longer than six days to create everything. The problem was that one

of the cheeky humans he created began to follow him, listening to the song and memorizing the language. When he thought he'd learned enough, he secretly tried singing himself. He became the first sorcerer and was soon passing the knowledge on to others."

Certainly, there are other approaches, but many expressions of magic in fantasy today are grounded in or adapted from some form of mythology that humans at one point in time actually believed. Wizards, witches, spells, wands, rings, zombies—these fill our folklore. And our familiarity lends credibility, engages that childlike part of us that wants to be told a story, and we can suspend disbelief.

Magic With Real Cost and Limits

Another important aspect in making magic believable is to give it a real cost and real limitations. In my series, the technology is broken into two categories—the lighter magicks that come from the earth and are combined to create their effects, and the mightier blood magicks that involve a mix of human blood and the blood of the earth, sometimes augmented by bargains struck in the Beneath Places with mysterious beings. Both types have cost associated with them, the blood magicks more so, though they are also more powerful. Overuse can kill the user. Bargains can go wrong.

Pitts agrees and applies the same principle to Sarah Beauhall's world. "Magic has a cost. If you misuse it, bad things happen," he says. "It doesn't always work as expected and can fail you in a critical moment or work in unexpected ways. My world has lost most of its understanding of magic, so learning it new is a catastrophe in the making." From that position, not only does the cost reinforce that there are rules in play, making the magic more believable, but by having magic as a complicating force, it becomes intertwined in the story and that further reinforces the suspension of disbelief.

The reintroduction of lost magic is central to the storyline in Durham's series, and he cites a lack of understanding the consequences of its use as that magic's greatest cost and highest stake in his world. "The Song is the language of gods. Ultimately it can create or destroy anything," he says. "But people aren't gods. Inherently, they can't speak the language as well as a god. They mangle it. They mispronounce. Fail to comprehend. And of course they're most likely to use it for smaller, pettier things than the creation of beauty and life. So the greatest limitation is that of human imperfection." And not all of the cost of Durham's magic made it into the book, but it was something he carefully thought out and may return to with future stories in that universe. "I always thought that when magic was used to manifest something in Acacia, it was actually taken from somewhere else. It's the other flaw of being a human speaking the gods' language. They can't actually create. Instead they steal, shift, without even knowing they're doing it. So if a sorcerer makes a desert into an oasis flowing with water, well, chances are they've made a fertile land on the other side of the globe into a desert."

The cost and limits of de Bodard's magic, based on Aztec blood sacrifice, is more straightforward. "The limits to the magic in my world are twofold," she says. "The god has to be willing to grant the favor asked of them, which is more likely if it's

a small favor like protection, less likely if it involves, say, striking down an entire battalion. Second, the offering has to be sufficient, which means that the practitioner must have access to lots of blood."

By giving the magic cost and limits, it prevents the storyteller from taking the easy way out and opens up opportunities to use the drawbacks of magic as a part of the story. That makes it more than a one-dimensional means to an end. Instead of a quick and easy fix, magic becomes a multidimensional aspect of the story with its own history and mythology, contributing to complications along the way, creating conflict between characters.

Magic's Place in the World

Like any other aspect of a world, magic's place should be clear in the mind of the worldbuilder. It should have a history and a mythology of its own, and whatever rules it follows should be understood by the storyteller. Is magic rare or common? Is it shrouded in mystery or relatively well understood? Can it be practiced by anyone or only by a chosen caste? What about its reputation? Is it feared or longed for? Good or evil?

You may never need to reveal everything you know about the magic in your world. Often, revealing too much can bump people out of the story just as quickly as revealing too little. But having it in the back of your mind as you create the story that plays out in that world—whether it's in a novel or a game campaign—will be a rich source of material you can draw from to make your world and your magic more believable.

Don't be afraid to let things go dreadfully wrong. Magic has to be fallible to be believable, which means sometimes the rules are going to have curve balls thrown at them. "I think of magic as something wild, uncontrollable and untamable," de Bodard says. "Though there can be rules established, there is no guarantee those rules will always work." The element of uncertainty and unreliability from that gives it more believability because in our world, under the laws of our universe, we understand uncertainty and unreliability and things going wrong. Our empathy can help suspend disbelief.

And at the end of it all, remember that magic is about wonder and potential and risk. When that is conveyed well in storytelling, it earns you miles on the suspension of disbelief highway. We want the incantations. We want the bits of backstory mixed in with the action. Because, to quote songwriter Michael Rosenberg, "We long for journeys and the roadside. We long for starlight and the low tide. We long for fairy tales and firesides."

We come to fantasy, both as storytellers and story participants, because we want to believe. We want to be caught in the story; we want the magic to be real. We want to take a break from the day-to-day problems we face in this world and spend time in a world that makes more sense to us: one with wizards and dragons and old gods craving blood.

The Quest for Great Lost Magic

Ed Greenwood

If there's one thing that makes good fantasy gaming storytelling different from other good storytelling, it's magic. After all, stories in every genre should have vivid characters, intrigue, titanic struggles, and moments of great emotion. It's magic, properly handled, that makes fantasy roleplaying shine.

Part of that "properly handled" is that magic should be *special*. It's one of the elements in a fantasy RPG that makes it more exciting than and markedly different from real life. When magic becomes humdrum and mundane, something vital is lost—and boredom is gained.

In fiction, it's easy to keep magic mysterious by not revealing anything more than a spectacular minimum, but in fantasy gaming, where complex imaginary concepts pitted against each other in combat demand specific rules, all the vitally necessary explaining invites both clarity and matters becoming familiar and humdrum.

One way to make sure there's mystery is to posit powerful but lost magic—that is, magic from earlier times that's been partially forgotten. Players will feel fairness if the magic of their here-and-now that they customarily wield has coherent rules and structure, so they can readily assume that when they find and experiment with elements of this great lost magic, it might be strikingly different, but it too will have consistency. Yet until they master it, in the time where it's mostly legendary but demonstrably powerful, the awe and mystery remain.

Rare and Precious—and Limited

Rarity can make most things special. Unless a constant "hurled spells exploding everywhere" brawl is the desired tone for a campaign, magic shouldn't be something within easy reach of everyone. Because spellcaster PCs are so popular, sharply limiting how many wizards can be active in play will not please the majority of players. Moreover, logic visits clear implications of magical rarity on any setting.

If wizards are scarce, won't rulers want to lock them up and control them with inducements or drugs or blackmail involving the confinement and possible maiming of dear ones? All of these considerations mean that rarity alone shouldn't be what makes magic special.

Moreover, such an approach misses out on the sense of awe and wonder that magic can convey; rationing out small amounts of available magic is akin to buying a fast and expensive sports car but using it only to putter along at very slow speeds to local supermarkets to buy groceries. Rather than players being excited by what they know magic can do, or eager to experiment with the results of multiple spells clashing in a given area (a room where hostile monsters are gathered, for instance), they tend to think of magic as too scarce a resource to be risked, so any excitement at the thought of smiting foes with a big blasting sphere gets replaced by the anxiety of resource management. The players spend their time wondering whether they should use their single big blasting sphere right away, or hoard it for a greater need.

Yet all magic must have inherent drawbacks and limitations because if it's the waving wand that cures all ills, the need for adventure is over in a hurry, and wizards become nigh-unbeatable foes. Similarly, if the use of magic has known prices (such as draining life force from users, or other odd or damaging side effects), then magic becomes a wand that won't be waved thoughtlessly or too often. It's a wand whose use will be a grave matter, a special matter. The trick is to keep the resource part of things, yet not allow it to overwhelm the excitement.

Golden Olden Days

One of the best ways of making magic special is to postulate that its use was once far more widespread and powerful than it is today. From those mightier olden days—a golden time perhaps ended by spectacular wars or self-inflicted cataclysms—legends have survived of truly mighty arch-wizards, societies in which magic was versatile, ever-present, and seemingly limitless. Rumors abound of lost and hidden magical gauntlets, lances, crowns, flying thrones, and other doodads that have survived from that day to this and await those lucky—or daring—enough to find them.

Perhaps these enchanted items of yesteryear now lie hidden in coffins where the undead remains of the wizards who once wielded them lurk, now insane and swift to attack the living but not so mad that they've forgotten how to use their magic to deadliest effect. Perhaps the items have been forgotten in a secret passage or hidden inside a wall or under a floor and are slowly leaking magical vitality that animates other items to become perils, causes nearby dead to rise in undeath, or twists and augments guardian spells or automatons in strange, unforeseen ways.

Tales of the legendary spells, magic items, and artifacts of mightier olden days that may yet survive could circulate among, and motivate, the wizards and adventurers of today—with some of the former hiring the latter to face the dangers of the search and perhaps double-crossing them when they bring back magical treasures. In times of war, wizards might become desperate to recover the lost spells of vanished kingdoms to use against foes.

Moreover, if magic was stronger in the old days, perhaps it's less understood in the here and now, so any enchanted items left behind are somewhat mysterious. Their use may involve potentially deadly experimentation, or inadvertently awaken long-sleeping monsters or automatons tasked with recovering the relics of the past from whoever is now using them. Hunters move inexorably across the landscape from distant crypts and ruins, perhaps "hiding" as immobile stone statues when alert adventurers are near and stalking closer when they think themselves unseen, closing in on the items under orders to destroy the thieves and return the objects to their proper storage. (And perhaps doing so will in turn awaken powerful undead who were the former wielders of the items, handing everyone in the here-and-now a larger problem.)

Quests for Power

In any campaign, rumors of magical finds could spark a "gold rush." Classic *Dungeons & Dragons* lore featured the Rod of Seven Parts, an example of a concept that a century and more earlier was a stock element of fairy tales, folklore, and the chivalrous "romances" of Victorian writing. It's a magic item made long ago to fulfill a destiny that was deliberately or through misadventure split up into component parts that have minor magical powers (brief invisibility, the ability to fly, the power to open locks, and so on), but that gain additional powers when assembled and combined, so that the whole is greater than the sum of its parts—and the final, complete item is mighty indeed.

A roleplaying campaign intended to give PCs challenges, decisions, and fun that lasts as long as possible (as opposed to a tight-word-count piece of fiction trying to tell a linear, coherent story) will probably have various parts of such an item in the hands of long-term foes of the PCs—perhaps several groups of antagonists who hate each other. Some of the items will be at the bottom of a dungeon, and most will be very well hidden, to instill a feeling of mystery in the campaign by slowly feeding persistent PCs fragmentary "teaser" lore in scraps that are maddeningly inadequate or easily misinterpreted. In such matters, a little knowledge—or for that matter, a partial new spell incantation or component list—can become the most precious of treasure.

The enigmatic item might be a crown or gem full of the ancient memories of others, or one that imparts visions of unknown origin and motivations to someone handling it, or it might be a sword or ring that possesses a sentience of its own and may tartly comment, audibly or telepathically, to those who carry it. Such an item has an allure all its own, particularly if its motives and aims are mysterious and sinister.

And any gamemasters worth their salt can craft political situations where rival kingdoms, priesthoods, guilds, or neighboring barons hunger to destroy each other, yet are so evenly matched that they dare not go to war and have slid into an uneasy stalemate of skirmishes and brooding readiness. A balance daily tested by bands of adventurers from afar, hired or manipulated to attack the rival—but a balance that tilts spectacularly if one side or the other gains powerful magic items and figures out how to use them.

The Problem of Destiny

In the divine lore, local folklore, and magical lore of any fantasy setting, it's important to consider the wording of legends or prophecies. "Whosoever draws this sword from this stone shall henceforth be rightful king of all England" is fine, because it speaks of status, not performance. (History and fiction are both full of "rightful kings" who rule nothing and no one but spend their days shoeing horses or baking bread or shingling cottages, some in ignorance of their heritage, others hiding in fear of losing their heads, and still others shunning a role they don't want or know they're horribly suited for.) "Henceforth be rightful king" is just vague enough, and it works; "henceforth rule over" does not.

Why? Well, when a roleplaying setting has firm, clear destinies along the lines of "The one who bathes me in the blood of a dragon shall know eternal life, shall smite and throw down all foes, and shall reign in the Castle Tall forevermore," that setting also has a big problem. If a PC is just following a script (if you do X, then Y shall assuredly follow because the gods, or the hidden gods above the gods, decided as much, eons ago), where's your heroism? Where are the moral choices that give any life, real or imagined, value? The weight of pride behind stories about "When my character went up against the Great Galadorn Dragon, and slew him"?

Nowhere, that's where. Free choice and action are gone, predestination governs everything, and heroism is out the window; the best one can hope for is "how much style did you bring to your role as you followed the script exactly?" The escapism, the fulfillment, the creativity that roleplaying games are supposed to offer—as opposed to other sorts of games defined by long and detailed rules—have been lost and sacrificed. (See also the "Divination and Prophecies" chapter, page 105.)

Of course, none of this stops legends from being exaggerated or out-and-out wrong. Yet it's so much better when they're weasel-worded just enough that they seem to imply one thing but promise something different.

"When the unhooded one reigns in Caer Florivel, the dragon lies beheaded on Stone Mountain, and Rorvar Redhanded has won his lady love, then shall fair Poincedonea know a new golden age" is fine. It sets forth three conditions that must come to pass (three quests that don't sound like they'll be all that easy, nor alike each other in their achievement), and it proclaims a warm, fuzzy, and vague result. What's a "new golden age," exactly? Well, what was the "old golden age" of Poincedonea like? No one can remember or agree? Good! (At least for ongoing roleplaying campaign purposes. If I were writing a novel that ended with the apparent achievement of this "new golden age," the last paragraph or two would reveal that there were still unfolding problems, and that the unhooded one had vanished from Caer Florivel, and Rorvar quarreled with his lady love, and the onstage characters would look at each other, groan, and say something like "Of course," or "What else?" or "Somehow, I expected no less.")

So always leave a little elbow room. Be vague enough to let a new subplot wriggle out.

Fantasy literature—and fantasy gaming sourcebooks that detail settings—tend to be dominated by troublesome destiny regarding the gods, but the same problems apply to kingdoms and magic items. If Feldarr the NPC wizard can cast a spell and destroy the Door That Cannot Be Breached, but when Glavren the PC wizard casts

the same spell it doesn't even shake or scratch the Door, or if the gamemaster tells Glavren's player that he "just can't" use the spell no matter how hard he studies or how powerful he becomes, the feeling of unfairness ruins the fun.

Yes, life is unfair, but surely one of the reasons to engage in fantasy roleplaying at all is to kick at unfairness and do in make-believe what we can't in real life. So predestination should touch the casting of spells and the wielding of magic items as little as possible or not at all.

To put it another way, if a PC finds a ring lying in a ruin and dares to put it on, she should be able to use at least some of its magical powers, especially if all the NPCs could make use of the ring if it fell into their hands. Players should think of magic as a possible great equalizer, not something that will forever oppress their characters. Magic shouldn't be special because only certain preordained entities can make use of it.

Old Magic Is Different

Ideally, old golden magic should work differently from the magic the player characters are accustomed to. If everyday PC spells are cast with incantations and gestures and physical ingredients that fade away (consumed in the casting), old golden magic should be clearly different. Perhaps it requires touching one's forehead or heart and intoning a Word of Power while the unleashed magic evokes a corona of crackling radiance around the caster's brow, or using a single ingredient to draw a rune in the air that burns with illusory fire while an incantation changes its hue and configuration into something specific for a particular spell, and then sends the rune scooting to the target, there to suddenly become the spell effect. The old golden magic might involve tiny floating shrunken heads or cast brazen heads (or, for that matter, human skulls), each one becoming a vehicle that explodes as it delivers a desired effect. Perhaps all magic of this old and golden sort manifests with a singing sound and a particular purple shimmering radiance. And so on; the possibilities are literally endless.

This helps keeps magical details, processes, and purposes mysterious, allowing room for experimentation and outright guessing. This in turn provides maximum latitude for disastrous mistakes, for creative uses of magic, and for players to feel a real sense of achievement when they have their characters try something—and it works.

Which brings us to something very fulfilling in roleplaying that is fraught with danger for campaign stability and longevity: advancing technology. If things turn into an arms race of too-swiftly-improving magic, industry, or innovation, there will be plenty of chaos and adventure possibilities, but all too often, the PCs will wind up controlling something too powerful and become the nigh-unbeatable colossi of the setting.

Yet if the gamemaster uses the unpredictability and mystery of half-understood magic to keep matters perilous and unreliable, PCs will be reluctant to unleash it too frivolously or as a first rather than a last resort. Imbalance problems can be avoided or delayed indefinitely, and the fun of "getting just a little better, a step at a time" can be enjoyed to the fullest.

Just as building a real-world sports team into a contender and then a champion, or growing a startup firm into a walking-a-fiscal-tightrope success and then a powerhouse, players in a campaign can derive intense enjoyment from the long

process of having their PCs harness and then master old magic. Literal years can pass as characters learn this or that tidbit of lore about the magic they possess, and seek still more, finding and piecing together what they learn so that knowledge becomes a treasure greater than gold and gems.

Not that their mastery should be untested. As rumors spread that these particular adventurers have something that can blast foes or fuse stone blocks into mighty walls or burn holes through mountains, ambitious monsters, rival adventurers, and well-armed authorities (the SWAT teams of the local king or ruling high vizier) should come out of the proverbial woodwork to try to seize this new source of power. Eliminating the adventurers will usually be an intended side effect—unless their knowledge is crucial to using the magic, in which case the PCs will be seized, too, becoming captives who have to be rescued, or who must rescue themselves by using the old magic in ways their captors haven't anticipated (quite likely becoming hunted outlaws in the process). And all of this fun is derived from the "different" nature of the old magic.

Assembling more heavy mounted cavalry than the other guy is, in a strictly roleplaying sense, pretty boring. Trying to control a poorly understood but powerful "X factor" in times of impending war or when the rulers of the place are paranoid can get tensely exciting, fast. After all, paranoid rulers will probably have secret police, some of whom aren't just thugs but pretty competent James Bond equivalents or nasty wizards wielding their own arsenals of magic items.

Anything different that's also powerful is a threat to the status quo, so those on top will seek to control it—or eliminate it.

The Cracked Helm

Herewith, a sample magic item, found by PCs among old coins and gems: a war-helm of unknown metal and an odd appearance (perhaps a spired top and flaring in smoothly flowing curves down to a wide, shoulder-covering lower edge) that bears an obvious crack across its front.

When worn, the edges of this crack glow in tiny points of light that coalesce out of the metal, to cluster ever more abundantly along the jagged break. At the same time, daggers and other tools rise out of the heaped coins and gems in apparent response to the movements of the helm.

If the wearer is not so alarmed by the increasing light motes that he hastily removes the thing, he finds that his thoughts influence the movements of the floating, flying tools and weapons (not all daggers—just a handful found in the treasure, though perhaps others will turn up in later), and that the longer he wears the helm, the more he is granted strange visions—brief glimpses, no more—of unfamiliar places and people, doing dramatic things like murdering each other or unleashing mighty magic. He also hears whispered messages in a language he understands but in words that are cryptic indeed, yet exciting and even sinister.

Then one vision recurs: a snake-headed, cowled being staring directly and coldly at him, seeming very displeased that the helm is being worn.

And so it begins: who made this helm, and what powers does it have, and what were they intended for? Who is the snake-headed being? What do the messages mean?

Perhaps long-locked crypt doors open at the approach of the helm when it's worn, but they stand firmly shut when it is merely carried near. Perhaps snakes or other creatures of a particular sort seem attracted to the helm, or shun it. Perhaps sustained wearing of the helm enables a PC to direct the flying daggers and tools found with it in a deadly barrage at foes.

Mysteries deepen. Additional powers of the helm are hinted at. And the gamemaster sits down and starts tailoring its abilities to the increasing challenges it is handing the PCs.

Onward

So where does this leave us?

Well, we have the magic of today, more or less understood by PCs. And in the background, dramatic and desirable because of its power or at least what legends claim it can do, we have lost magic of the past.

Magic that is scarce, different from the magic of today, and incompletely understood. Magic that is powerful (and perhaps pressingly needed) and therefore attractive to PCs, but they must hunt for it, undertaking adventures—*lots* of adventures—and experiment with it when they get it.

All of that mystery encourages mistakes and problem-solving for PCs and is itself attractive. Other power-seekers will also hunt this magic and try to eliminate rivals; dragons and other mighty monsters may have done so already and jealously guard tidbits of it. Tantalizing legends hint at but also mislead the heroes about the whereabouts, uses, side effects, and perils of this magic. The uncertainty surrounding it encourages roleplaying because memorizing rulebooks won't work.

Potentially endless fun—and in life and roleplaying, you can never have too much fun.

Myth and Magic of the Gaels of Ireland

Willie Walsh

Druids. Wands. Merrow. Fairies. The island of Ireland has a long and colorful history that includes a thread of magic in its mythology, its poetry, its monuments, and its people. This chapter offers a broad primer on Irish culture and magic, with many details that you can adapt for your roleplaying campaign—and some specific suggestions for adventure or story ideas.

The relationship between magic and the Irish has changed over centuries. At first the preserve of otherworldly beings, magic became the business of a druidic caste. Another caste, the poetic bards, learned the magic and power of words. In time, the druids and bards shared the stage with monks and missionaries whose feats of faith rivalled the powers of the old ways and whose writings preserved some of the ancient history and myths.

The people themselves had access to folklore and knowledge of everyday magicks to help explain the inexplicable and to protect from (or cause) harm. Today, some modern Irish still maintain a modicum of magical knowledge in the "superstitions" or *pishogues* they observe, sometimes unknowingly.

Prehistory

Two important sources describe the ancient mythologies of the Irish: *The Annals of the Four Masters* and *The Book of Invasions*.[1] According to these the first seafarers to land in Ireland arrived 40 days before Noah's biblical flood. Noah's granddaughter, Cesair, and her husband, Fintan, led the settlers though all, but Fintan later perished in the deluge.

The Partholons[2], some thousand strong, came and prospered until plague struck. They battled Fomorians, a giantish race of seafaring beings. More invaders, the Nemedians[3] would later unsuccessfully challenge the Fomorians. The Fir Bolg

eventually established kingships here until defeated by their familial cousins, the Tuatha Dé Dannan[4]. Finally the Milesians[5] defeated the Tuatha Dé Dannan and divided the country between them by treaty: the surface world to be ruled by Milesians, and the underworld to be the preserve of the Tuatha Dé, whom later generations would know as the sidhe[6], or fairy folk.

Gaelic Society

The human population would call themselves Gaels[7] and their descendants developed and preserved a civilization into historic times. Ireland did not join the Roman Empire, but its several territories traded with Britain and other European lands. Africa was also not unknown to ancient Irish seafarers, nor, perhaps, was Iceland or North America.

When the Roman Empire fell, there was a Christian presence in Ireland, developed with the patronage of local chiefs. In the sixth century, mythology hitherto preserved strictly by an oral tradition began to be written down. Some claim the content may have been altered to suit the sensibilities of Christian readers, but references to biblical themes and classical mythologies may have been naturally assimilated[8]. Some themes such as the deluge and invasions are universal in human cultures and possibly based on collective memory.

Around the time Christianity was making inroads into Ireland, an inscribed script named Ogham (sometimes called Beith-Luis-Nin)[9] was used. Ogham's 20 characters were named for trees beloved by the Gaels. However, Christianity demonstrated the practicalities of the written word with Irish monks inventing both a half-uncial formal script and a cursive (joined writing) script that we use today in Western writing.

The mythology of the Gaels included a great deal on war and battle, subjects in which the listeners had a particular interest. Their tribes, or septs[10], were interconnected by marriage, bound by oath and hostage taking. Though gold, silver, tin, and copper were valued, real wealth lay in cattle and the number of clients one sponsored as a result of one's power and prestige. The powerful protected the lower classes, whose lives maintained the basis of wealth: the cow. In this society, the cow-man, pig-herder, or maidservant could feature in a tale as readily as any hero. Heroes, though, were usually of the warrior class, soldiers trained to war and cattle raiding that kept them busy in the "off season."

A chieftain was elected from suitable candidates, and good leadership was bound to the prosperity of the land. He effectively "married" the *tuath*, or country, of which there were many geographical territories. (Tuath also meant "people.") If the territory prospered, it was a sign that a kingship was good. The chieftain must be of sound mind and body, and becoming unable to perform any of his sacred duties due to old age, injury, impotency, or disease disqualified him.

The chieftain resided in a fortress whose doors were closed at night and whose walls were guarded. The household consisted of his wife, immediate family, and servants and slaves. Hospitality was of paramount importance, for it impacted on reputation. Without a "good name," even the richest figure was ruined and could lose his chieftainship. Nonetheless, a visitor arriving at the gate after dark was treated with suspicion. It was

sometimes in the guise of a beggar or other lowly figure that a disguised Tuatha Dé might visit an unsuspecting chieftain to test his mettle or deliver a message.

The Gaelic Gods

The Gaels, as an offshoot of the Celtic races who spoke (and still speak) the Goidelic[11] development of the proto-Celtic language, doubtless shared religious beliefs similar to other tribes recorded by classical sources. However, there is no overt mention of pagan deities in the semihistorical written record of the monks. Instead, one must draw the conclusion that the Tuatha Dé Dannan figures are, by their magical prowess and recurrent appearance across various stories, the "missing" deities of the Irish pantheon.

The Tuatha Dé Dannan were each capable of great feats of arms, but they were also associated with particular influences such as nature, industry, war, the arts, and so on. They could appear in person during a crisis to offer advice or bestow practical aid and seem to have had an interest in humankind. But their motives could be obscure.

Druids, Wands, and the Role of Magic

Magic was practiced through the casting of spells by druids. Witches also existed, but in greater variety than our modern image of the Halloween witch. There was a magical quality in the power of words learned and recited by bards, who themselves were an offshoot of the druidic class. Magic could be employed by people with access to wands or wondrous magical devices.

What's known about the druids in Ireland is relatively little. The Romans wrote about British druids, and one assumes that the Irish followed similar practices. Druids consulted the stars and advised on omens and rituals. They had their own society, where long apprenticeships were followed and whose hierarchy doubtless had a good grasp and practice of politics as well as religion. They presided over the provision of offerings—treasure, foodstuffs, and human sacrifices[12] were given to the gods from time to time—and would have accompanied the war band on any major expedition.

Shape-shifting is a primary magical power attributed to the first settlers and the Tuatha Dé Dannan. It appears to be associated with longevity, but also with loss and regret. Fintan is saved from Noah's flood by being turned into a salmon, but all his people drown. The salmon, perhaps because of its life cycle, is symbolic of knowledge and wisdom. Fintan takes several forms before becoming human again. He becomes an adviser to kings and dies aged 5,500 years.

The power to change a person's form is either elemental in origin (somehow the universe works its magic, without any further explanation of the matter), caused by the Tuatha Dé, or accomplished through the work of a human or monstrous spellcaster.

Many spellcasters, druidic or not, employed wands. Wooden wands had varying powers depending on the tree from which they were cut.[13]

A wand of hazel could transform a victim into an animal or protect the bearer against evil spirits and "worms"[14] of all kinds. Hazelnuts falling into the water imparted knowledge and wisdom to the salmon of knowledge.

The Whitebeam ("white hazel") was a symbol of royal authority, a wand of which was carried by a king or someone on his authority.

The Dagda, the paternal figure of male potency of the Tuatha Dé Dannan, used a wooden club in battle. The business end could kill nine men at a time; the handle could restore life. His living oaken harp changed the seasons with its music of sorrow, joy, and dreaming.

The oak was revered for longevity, strength, and endurance. It may have represented the tribe itself—literally the family tree—and an especially revered specimen, a *bile*, would be reserved and a center of ceremony. A *bile* was commonly an oak, but other special trees might gain the title.

Rowan wood, burned in the fire, was used by druids to prognosticate the outcome of battles in its smoke and flames.

Honor Magic

A *geas* was either a powerful taboo or prohibition whose breaking would lead to dishonor or death, or a compulsion (again based on honor) that if broken would bring woe. The hero Cúchulainn was under a *geas* to not eat the flesh of a dog (his name means "the hound of Culann," so he would have been eating his spiritual kin), but also to not refuse food given to him by a woman. When a woman offered him dog to eat, he had to choose which taboo to break, and his strength was diminished, contributing to his death.

In another tale, the betrothal of Fionn Mac Cumhaill to the unwilling Gráinne was thrown into chaos when she placed a *geas* on the handsome hero, Diarmuid, to carry her away. Unable to disobey, the hero became a fugitive and was pursued with Gráinne across the country by Fionn's men.

Magical Creatures

There are also stories of sea creatures who can take human form. A not-uncommon one is that of a fisherman who catches a merrow maiden in his nets, or who otherwise falls in love with and marries her. It's said that the merrow has a skin or cape that, if seized from her, traps her on land. If she finds it, however, she abandons her land family and returns forever to the sea.

Certain coastal-dwelling families in Ireland claim descent from seals. Seal hunting and eating seal flesh may have been undeveloped in Gaelic culture as a result.

Ireland's lakes also have legends of water-dwelling monsters. Often a "*péist*," or serpent, lives there, usually until a hero or a Christian saint appears to slay or tame it.

Historical Times

According to folklore, when Christian missionaries came they were challenged to contest the position of the new religion against the druids in ritual combat: miracle versus magic. Although the implication is that "magic" is inferior to "miracle," in Irish tales the missionary typically displays superior cunning or guile in using powers to defeat an opponent, usually a druid, but sometimes a monster.

Although the druidic influence eventually faded from society, being replaced by the monk or priest, for a time both religions were represented at important Gaelic ceremonies. The druids as a class died out. Their offshoot, the bards, survived into historical times.

The Gaelic Breton Laws continued in a modified version, too. They marked out those who followed the Gaelic ways from those of Viking, Norman, or English subjects. There was an attempt to ban their usage in 1366 in the Statutes of Kilkenny, but it is popularly believed that the flight of the earls in 1607 marked the final ending of Gaelic lordship in Ireland.

Nevertheless, some laws and customs continued in use, including the custom of Tanistry, where kings and chieftains nominated successors, not always of their blood kin. The genealogical knowledge of bards proved useful here, and the caste survived for many centuries as a result.

The belief in the magic of the Tuatha Dé Dannan—personified as the sidhe—survived the centuries, even after the bards died out. Country people explained the prehistoric monuments of hill-forts and megalithic tombs as entrances to the land of the fairies. These were portals to the world into which the Tuatha Dé had gone after the victory of the Milesians.

The fairies (or "wee folk") visited the mortal world from time to time, and it was a bad idea to be abroad after dark when fairy music or fairy sports could lure the unwary traveler away, perhaps forever. Likewise, fairies could be jealous, especially of beautiful children, and might steal them. The changeling, a fairy replacement for a stolen human child, was a common fear.

Although the Continental-style witch trial didn't take hold in Ireland, there were a number of instances of magic-related activity prosecuted by the authorities. The last recognizable "witch trial" was in County Antrim in 1711[15].

In 1826, a woman was indicted for murder (but found not guilty) in the case of the drowning of a four-year-old child the family believed was "fairy struck."

The most recent magic-related trial took place as recently as 1895, when Michael Cleary and nine others were prosecuted for gruesome events leading to the discovery of the corpse of his wife, Bridget Cleary. Evidence indicated that Cleary believed his wife was a changeling and that in attempting to prove this by various folk remedies—including the use of fire—he caused her death.[16]

In modern Ireland, much of the overtly superstitious activity of the past has been discarded, such as sacrificing the first milking of a cow that has calved, blaming a lack of butter in a churn to the malevolence of the evil eye, or turning back from a journey on which you meet a red-haired woman. Other beliefs remain difficult to abandon. Farmers continue to plough around lone trees—especially hawthorn—in case it proves unlucky. (The hawthorn was associated with death and fairies.)

There are certain holy trees growing by saintly wells where cures are sought by taking the waters. These continue to attract visitors who leave ribbons or beads tied to the branches (or coins wedged in the bark), as has been traditional since time immemorial.

The mountain called Croagh Patrick, after the famous missionary, hosts pilgrims on the last Sunday in July, when thousands ascend, many of them barefoot. Patrick is said to have fasted and battled demons on the mountain. It was a site of summer solstice gatherings for thousands of years before him.

"Celtic Christianity," as it is sometimes called, developed a particular form of worship that included a pattern or series of prayers said in ritually repeated processions around holy wells or on certain small islands. The pattern of numbers of prayers said, circuits completed, stone tokens left, and so on may hark back to pre-Christian rites.

Pishogues are another magical survivor. Considered trivial superstitions, they nonetheless offer a glimpse into past beliefs. Some are international, like touching wood to stave off bad luck, or hanging a horseshoe outside a barn or house to bring good luck. Others are a little more local: at one time, girls could get rid of freckles by washing their face with the dew of a May Day morning.

Today in Ireland, it is customary to burn bonfires on Halloween and to provide food and drink for the fairies (who visit in disguise, as in some other countries). Halloween coincides with the Celtic *Samhain* festival, marking the end of harvest and the darker half of winter. At the end of December, some areas continue the tradition of Wren Boys: locals dress up in elaborate straw masks to "hunt the wren," a practice thought to originate in the ending of the Celtic old year, represented by the bird.

Irish Magic in RPGs

There are a number of possibilities for designing or using a pre-existing Celtic or Gaelic setting to locate a series of RPG adventures. However, it is also possible to have characters visit or dip into the milieu.

At lower levels, the characters could be foot soldiers of a reconnaissance-in-force of a newly discovered island, whose countryside is ruled over by magical beings with wondrous powers and treasures waiting to be plundered.

Characters may lead a diplomatic mission to the fortress of a powerful chieftain. His prestige may be based on the shape-shifting champion of his household, the mysterious druid who advises him, or a clever device gifted him by a disguised Tuatha Dé.

An adventure may be devised where an elusive and dangerous lake creature must be tricked into revealing a secret that holds power over the reputation of a great leader.

Adventurers may be needed to negotiate the terms of a land grant for a monastery of a new religion in the territory of a politically astute chief, whose traditional advisers are hostile to the proposal.

Characters researching materials for a new spell or magical item may discover that they've trespassed into a sacred grove and suffer a powerful geas in punishment. The resulting quest into the dark corridors of an abandoned hill fort leads them to the land of the sidhe.

In a modern RPG, a series of strange occurrences in an isolated mountain village may be traced to a surviving sect of druidic origin. What rites and spells remain and how they affect the locality, its people, and its officials wait to be discovered. Technology may offer access to the parallel world of the sidhe, whose advanced but capricious denizens resent intruders and whose innate magic can play havoc with the best-laid plans of science.

Notes

1. A modern translation of the *Annals* is at **www.ucc.ie/celt/online/T100005A/.** Information on the *Book of Invasions* can be seen at **www.ria.ie/library/special-collections/manuscripts/leabhar-gabhala.aspx.**
2. According to Wikipedia, Partholón was the son of Sera, son of Sru, a descendant of Magog, son of Japheth, son of Noah.
3. Nemed was the son of Agnoman of Scythia, Agnoman being the son of Piamp, son of Tait, son of Sera, son of Sru, son of Esru, son of Friamaint, son of Fathochta, son of Magog.
4. The people of the goddess, Dana.
5. These were the sons of Míl Espáine (the "Soldier of Hispania").
6. "The people of the mounds."
7. Gaels also lived in Scotland and on the Isle of Man.
8. Wikipedia has an article on Gaelic Ireland at **http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Gaelic_Ireland.**
9. As "alphabet" is derived from "alpha" and "beta" of the Greek alphabet, so Beith-Luis-Nin is named after the letter names of the first letters in Ogham.
10. Sometimes known as *derbfine*, or family group, although this had a narrower meaning under the law.
11. Check out Wikipedia at **http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Goidelic_languages.**
12. Victims of such sacrifices are found from time to time in peat bogs across Europe.
13. *Irish Trees: Myths, Legends & Folklore* by Niall Mac Coitir (The Collins Press, 2003).
14. The notion of ailments being caused by "worms" predates the knowledge of germs. The phrase "the worm has turned" comes to us from this time, when a fever reaching its crisis was thought to be a sign that the pestilent worm had changed its course in the victim's body and spared the patient's life.
15. Irish Independent article: **http://www.independent.ie/lifestyle/the-witches-of-antrim-26737807.html**.
16. Old Moore's Almanac article: **http://oldmooresalmanac.com/news-topics/paranormal-ireland/the-last-irish-witch.html.**

More Than a Tool

David Chart

Any sufficiently advanced technology is indistinguishable from magic.

— Clarke's Third Law

What is the difference between magic and technology? In a game, the important difference is the way that they feel to the players. Magic should feel like magic, and technology like technology. This chapter looks at some ways in which you can make magic feel different from technology, with advice on how to apply them in world creation.

The first question, however, is "What is technology?" That is the side of the pair with which we are all familiar in our daily lives. We know how technology feels, and the way that magic feels should be different.

Technology makes it easier, or possible, for people to do things. In addition, it typically takes the form of objects, like cars and computers. These objects are normally mass produced, and anyone can learn to use them. Technology does not understand what people want and only responds to physical features of the world; you must press the right buttons to make it work, and pressing the wrong buttons with good intentions is ineffective. It does exactly what it is told, without concern for right and wrong. Some people in a society develop new technology, either to address new problems or to provide a better solution for old problems.

Magic also makes it easier, or possible, for people to do things. This central commonality means that it is very easy for magic, in a game, to feel like technology. The description of the device does not much matter. *Ars Magica* is a game centered on wizards, called magi, who invent spells and items to solve their problems, and it is common for magi to create small items of enchanted jewelry that allow two people to hold a conversation no matter how far apart they may be. No matter how the jewelry is described, players tend to think of these items as the characters' cell phones. Indeed, some sagas have house rules banning such devices precisely because they

believe that players thinking of them as cell phones breaks the mood. This is why the problem is not as simple as saying "But this is *Magick*!" Not even capital letters and unconventional spellings help; if it works like technology, players start treating it like technology. Magic that doesn't make it easier to do things is pointless, so a distinct feel must be achieved by changing the other features of technology.

Craft, Not Industry

Magic might not be suitable for mass production. Every enchanted item is crafted individually by a wizard, and spells are cast by wizards who are actually present. This approach means that enchanted items are rare and expensive because they are created by skilled crafters, and it provides an explanation for why the game world is not full of enchanted items serving as telephones or intensive care units. As far as worldbuilding is concerned, it is very effective. However, experience in *Ars Magica* shows that it does not maintain the feel of magic if the player characters are themselves wizards, capable of creating and developing these items.

Spells, Not Items

Since technology normally comes in the form of items, magic might not come in that form at all. All magic might have to come from a spell, cast by a person who is present. This works well with the idea that magic is a special gift that most people cannot learn to use. Only wizards have access to magic, and wizards are rare.

This way of making the distinction loses some of its effectiveness if all the player characters can use magic. While there are no physical items, the players have a menu of effects that they can reliably produce, and all the PCs can learn to use them. (While it is possible to have one magic system per player character, that is a lot of work.)

On the other hand, if only some of the player characters can use magic, those who cannot may be marginalized. This problem can be solved at the game table, but the group needs to be aware of it.

Inaccessible and Incomprehensible

That brings us to another option. Magic might not be accessible to most people, including player characters. This is quite a radical approach. In *Pathfinder* RPG terms, it means banning not only all spellcasting classes but also all magic items and any class with a supernatural ability. If you are planning to play a high fantasy game, this is probably not the way to go.

On the other hand, it can be highly appropriate for other genres: horror and pulp spring to mind. If the characters have no access to magic, it is relatively easy to make it feel strange when encountered. Magic should be unpredictable and have requirements that make no sense. The people who wield it can do specific things with it, but strange actions on the part of the characters can stop it. Many of the classic tropes of magic fit here, such as the need for virgin sacrifices. Why should magic care about someone's sexual history? When magic is inaccessible, you do not need an answer.

This allows you to put the spotlight on characters who tend to be marginalized at your table. In a pulp game, for example, a scholarly character might normally be overshadowed by the two-fisted fighter. If a magical binding can be broken

(or remade) only by someone who has never failed an examination, the scholarly character suddenly comes into her own.

However, this does not work if the PCs can use magic because players need to understand what their characters can do, and they will think of ways to exploit loopholes in the strange conditions you impose. If you want magical player characters, you need to do something else.

Unpredictable

Unpredictable magic is a step down from incomprehensible magic. It does not always do the same thing, nor does it always do quite what the caster expects, but the results do not change completely from one use to another. A spell that creates a fireball one day will not create a pigeon the next, but the size or color of the fireball might vary.

The practical problem here is deciding how magic varies, and how often. If it varies every time it is used, and there are magic-using player characters, the game will constantly be slowed down by the need to check to see what happens each time. If magic varies only occasionally, it may not be any different from the occasional unexpected results produced by technology.

If, however, player characters have access to a very limited amount of magic, such as a single device that they can use only once per day, unpredictability can be effective in making sure that the device is never treated as a simple piece of technology. The characters use the device rarely and save it for dramatic moments, so the time spent to see what it does each time builds tension rather than slowing things down.

Ancient and Fixed

One of the features of technology in our lives is that it is new and constantly developing. Inverting that can make magic feel different. Magic is ancient, and it is all but impossible to create new forms. In this kind of magic, characters must learn individual spells because they cannot improvise magic. They may be able to create items, but, if so, there is a fixed list of items. Creating new spells is difficult, impossible, or just not something that characters would ever do.

This, of course, is very close to the approach found in the *Dungeons & Dragons* tradition, including *Pathfinder*. Spellcasting characters learn spells off a list, and although there are rules for creating new spells, it is not well supported or encouraged. Wizards search for ancient spellbooks rather than creating their own new spells.

In this approach, it is often the case that ancient magic was much more powerful than contemporary magic, and thus characters quest for ancient artifacts for the sake of their power. This means that magic is not ideally adapted to contemporary problems, and emphasizing this makes magic feel even less technological. For example, an item created by a sea-faring race might work only within the borders of their ocean and need to be dipped in salt water to recharge. Now that their ocean is a great desert, the item is much harder to use.

This sort of magic should not be incomprehensible because player characters must be able to use it, but the only magic they can use is that which they have found, no matter how inconvenient.

The issue that undermines this approach is that characters will rely on the bits of magic that they have. After a few game sessions, those spells and items can cease to feel magical and turn into nothing more than a bonus on die rolls. Another problem is that some players really want to have characters create their own magical effects. Fortunately, there are more options.

Personal

Technology does not literally have emotions or a personality. Magic might. The classic example is magic that works by summoning and controlling spirits. Wizards produce their effects by convincing spirits to use their inherent abilities.

However, the personality need not be tied to continuing entities, like spirits. Spells themselves could have consistent personalities, appearing whenever they are cast and disappearing when the spell ends. For example, a teleportation spell might be allergic to dwarves, so that attempts to teleport a dwarf always result in an off-target arrival as the spell "sneezes." The spell might even get annoyed if asked to teleport dwarves a lot and simply refuse to work—until being mollified when the characters use it to teleport kittens a few times. (The spell really likes kittens.)

This approach lends itself well to both comedy and horror. A teleportation spell that likes kittens is funny, while one that demands to teleport people into volcanoes is horrific. Spell personality could also work well in a world with an epic conflict where all spells are on one side or the other, and wizards must find spells that are on their side.

The biggest problem with this approach is the sheer number of personalities it introduces to the game. This might be best managed by having a limited number of spirits or familiars for each wizard, rather than one personality per spell. Even so, if some characters do not use magic, they might find that the debates between the wizard and her spirits take up too much of the spotlight.

Ethical

Another possibility is related to having magic take sides in an epic conflict. Magic might care about good and evil. That is, using magic for good might have clearly different results from using it for evil, even though the magic is the same.

For example, consider a wizard using a fireball to kill a group of orcs. If the fireball is just technology, the orcs die, and that is the end of it. The same is true if warriors use their swords. If magic cares about good and evil, things are different. If the wizard killed the orcs in self-defense, there might be no further consequences—self-defense is not absolutely good, but it certainly isn't evil.

On the other hand, suppose that the wizard killed the orcs to intimidate their allies into giving him treasure. That is evil, even if the orcs themselves are evil. A wizard using morally aware magic might wake up one night to find his bed engulfed in flames. On the other hand, a wizard who kills the orcs to save a group of children has done a good deed. Later, when he finds himself lost in the snow and freezing to death, a rock bursts into flames in front of him, warming him and saving his life. These consequences come directly from the wizard's own magic, not from the judgment of a deity. The wizard cannot escape them, and they apply only if magic is used to perform the action.

In such a world, using magic to do good or evil is a bigger decision than using technology for the same purposes. A wizard unsure of the virtue of his cause might be reluctant to risk using magic but perfectly happy to use a sword.

In a game, it probably would not be practical to keep track of every use of magic. The gamemaster should pick noteworthy incidents and weave the payback into the story later on.

The form of ethical magic described above gives a great advantage to the forces of good, but this is not the only way it could work. Magic might punish good acts and reward evil with personal gain. A single world could have two forms of magic, one good and one evil, or even one for each alignment.

Ethical magic also works well with the idea that magic carries a special stigma or confers a special honor. If magic rewards good actions, magicians will tend to be good and honored, while magic that rewards evil will make magicians reviled. The latter type can still be used for good purposes by characters who are willing to suffer the consequences, and this is great material for stories.

Meaningful

The next possibility is a generalization of ethical magic. Magic might care about the significance or meaning of an action rather than the simple description of what happens. The ethical meaning of an action is only one possibility.

For example, magic might care about whether it looks cool. Using magic in a cool way makes it more effective, while boring uses are less effective or fail entirely. A character who uses *invisibility* to sneak into a celebration held by the evil army and turn the revelers against one another might find that the magic also makes her quieter, while a character who simply scouts an area while invisible might find that the spell does not make her shadow disappear.

Alternatively, magic might be more effective when the spellcaster is on her home ground. In this case, there is no sharp boundary to "home ground." The wizard might get the bonus at a spot when she is being driven out of her tower by invaders, but not at the same spot when she is racing home to drive invaders out. In the first case, she is on her home ground because the invaders have not yet driven her away. In the second, she is racing home but not yet there.

Meaning can also determine the effects of a spell. For example, a spell that affects the caster's allies is based on meaning, while one that affects a 30-foot-diameter circle centered 100 feet away is not. A spell based on meaning could target the leader of a group even if the caster did not know who the leader was. Some players might wonder how the spell knows, but the answer is obvious: it's magic!

Combinations

The options given in this chapter can also be combined. For example, magic might be ancient and fixed but also ethical. It might work better for loyal servants of a royal line that has, as far as anyone knows, been extinct for millennia. Magic with a personality will normally care about meaning and may care about ethics. Combining too many elements, in magic as in anything else, risks producing something that is simply confusing, but two or three elements are likely to work well.

Magic Is Technology

Finally, you might have good reasons for not wanting to make the distinction. In *Ars Magica*, magic very often feels like technology. It does not care about right or wrong, it responds only to objective features of the world, and characters often develop new magic to solve their problems. Despite this, the game is a great deal of fun.

Nevertheless, some players complain that magic does not feel "magical," and this is understandable. Most of us do not understand how the technology we use every day works, so if, in a game, the characters use a wand that the players do not understand but that does the same job as a gun, we do not feel that the characters are doing anything very different from us. True, the game says that it is "magic," but it feels like the technology we use every day.

Why might you want to do this? One reason is that you want a game in which player characters can develop "technology" to solve their problems, but you do not want to have to learn real-world engineering to design it or deal with players who know more about it than you do. You might also want a system that preserves game balance to a certain extent, and real-world technology does not. No system that allows a single missile to wipe out a city with no saving throw is even remotely balanced. Calling the technology "magic" allows you to avoid these drawbacks and still have a game in which the player characters invent solutions to their problems.

All of these options for the feel of magic are independent of your choices about the range of things magic can do, its power, or the mechanical details. Some of them are even independent of choices about how common magic is. They give magic very different flavors, and you should choose the one that is right for your game.

Do Not Call Up What You Cannot Put Down

James Jacobs

"I tell you, I have struck depths that your little brain can't picture. I have seen beyond the bounds of infinity and drawn down demons from the stars... I have harnessed the shadows that stride from world to world to sow death and madness... Space belongs to me, do you hear? Things are hunting me now—the things that devour and dissolve—but I know how to elude them. It is you they will get... My pets are not pretty, for they come out of places where aesthetic standards are—very different... don't worry, my friend, for they are coming... Look, look, curse you, look... it's just over your left shoulder..."

—H. P. Lovecraft, "From Beyond"

Fiction is replete with examples of the summoning of monsters, particularly in the genre of demon summoning. The methods of summoning monsters vary as widely as the monsters themselves.

In some tales, the conjurations are of a classical nature, such as the use of ancient spells to summon a demon in M. R. James's short story "Casting the Runes" (brought to life on the silver screen as *Night of the Demon*), or as seen in the 2011 film *The Devil's Rock* (wherein the Nazis summon more than they bargained for in an attempt to develop a supernatural weapon). In Stan Winston's *Pumpkinhead*, the conjuration of the titular monster is linked to ancient swamp magic and a burning need for revenge, while in movies like *The Gate or The Evil Dead*, demons and fiends are drawn into this world by accidental recitations of ancient spells. Stephen King's short story "The Mangler" has a demon conjured into a machine by accident as well after a chance combination of ancient magical components happen to mix in just the right proportions, while in Clive Barker's *Hellraiser*, a machine (in this case an iconic puzzlebox) is the sole means of opening the gates to Hell. Lovecraft himself,

quoted at the start of this chapter, used the summoning of monsters, fiends, and evil spirits in numerous ways, ranging from methods bordering on science fiction (as seen in the use of a strange device in "From Beyond") to the outright supernatural and alchemy (such as the magical methods of conjuring back the dead in *The Case of Charles Dexter Ward*).

In these stories, the conjuration of supernatural spirits, monsters, and demons are usually the actions of the story's villains—or at best, the results of accidents or misunderstandings. The monsters themselves are rarely friendly and usually end up causing quite a bit of mayhem before the tale is finished. In cases where the protagonist knowingly and deliberately conjures the demon, as seen in Stephen King's "Sometimes They Come Back," they are pushed to such ends by extremes, and even then the protagonist typically pays a dire price involving the loss of body parts (or worse).

Summoning in RPGs

In roleplaying games, the conjuration of monsters has traditionally played a much different part. Here, the summoning of such creatures is often presented as an option for player characters (be they wizards, priests, or something in between) to gain power or fight their enemies. Entire categories of spells devoted to the summoning of monsters exist in most fantasy RPGs, while in others, the conjuration of spirits is key to the creation of and augmentation of magical gear and equipment. Some games, such as *Pathfinder*, have entire character concepts (such as the summoner) based on the concept of summoning and controlling monsters, while others, such as the video game *Pokémon*, are based fundamentally on the concept.

Being able to conjure and control monsters can certainly add an entertaining new element to a roleplaying game. In most fantasy-based RPGs, the assumption is that the character you're playing is human or relatively so. When you play a character capable of summoning monsters, you get to delve into a realm normally ruled solely by the gamemaster—you as the player actually get to play the monster. Yet the fundamental appeal of monsters is lessened when they are reduced to being just another weapon in a character's arsenal. If you're looking to add a new dimension to monster summoning in your game, one akin to those represented in film and fiction, the following tips and ideas can help. Of course, before you try any of the suggestions below, be sure to let players of monster-summoning characters know if you're changing the rules.

Collecting Monsters

While some old-fashioned gamers might scoff at some elements of a game like *Pokémon*, it didn't become super popular by accident. Many elements exist to make the monster-summoning element of *Pokémon* quite engaging, but the concept of having to "catch" your monster first has great potential in a traditional tabletop RPG.

Consider: in *Pathfinder*, the *summon monster* spells present a large number of monsters you can call, yet many of them are limited in their availability. It's awkward for a good priest to conjure an evil monster, for example, just as it's conceptually strange for a wizard who specializes in fire magic to summon a water-based creature. So while the lists may look large at first, the deeper into your character's themes and

personality you go, the smaller that list becomes. Adding new monsters to the list as additional options are introduced in new *Bestiaries* isn't a great solution, either, since bloating these lists can lead to "option paralysis," in which the sheer number of choices offered can bring gameplay to a crawl as the conjurer struggles to pick just the right monster for the encounter.

To a certain extent, this design is intentional. The *summon monster* spells were never really intended to be constantly expanding lists, if only because the notion of "pay more to play more" is a dangerous road to walk.

By instituting a collection element to the game, though, you can open up the versatility of the summoning spells while still limiting their overall versatility. With this option, a character must seek out and "capture" a monster before he can summon it. The easiest way to do this is to allow the conjurer the opportunity to study a defeated monster's remains after a battle, and in so doing add it to the list of creatures he can summon. The use of a magic wand, crystal, or other magical focus can give this a bit more physicality as well, especially if each wand or crystal has a limited number of monster types it can store. By restricting the number of monsters a conjurer can access, but allowing him to adjust the exact mix of monsters, you give the character a constantly changing and never-ending quest to collect more creatures for his summoning repertoire.

This option doesn't need to be a literal hunt through the wilds for a specific type of monster. The "hunt" could take place entirely in an immense library, and the creature being sought could be represented by a well-hidden entry in an obscure grimoire. This method has the advantage of not forcing a spellcaster to resort to a method of dealing with danger that he might not be suited for (such as physical combat), and it can be handled much more quickly with a few appropriate skill checks to track down clues. Of course, searching for monsters via old tomes should take time as well. If there's a time limit, failed checks can mean something when they occur.

Adding Some Danger

One element that exists in most tales about monster summoning is the danger involved. As Lovecraft's story *The Case of Charles Dexter Ward* implores, "...do not calle up That which you can not put downe...." In other words, take care of what you summon, for if you can't control it, you may need to kill it—and if you can't kill it, it will surely kill you!

Some spells account for this danger. For example, the various planar binding spells in *Pathfinder* require bribes of gold and contests of will and magical traps to prevent a conjured demon from attacking its caller. And Chaosium's *Call of Cthulhu* separates the summoning spells from the binding spells, allowing a foolish spellcaster the opportunity to summon a monster he won't be able to control if he doesn't know the right spell.

As a variant of the "collecting monsters" option above, you can require that a conjurer who wishes to master a particular type of creature must subdue it in a contest the first time it is summoned. This could be a trial by combat, or it could be a Tolkien-inspired battle of riddles or a challenge of skill (in which the conjurer and the monster vie to complete a task, build a weapon, or destroy a complex machine).

Whatever the challenge, there should be some risk to the conjurer—if not death, then at minimum the loss of that monster as a summoning option.

You can combine this idea with the collection option by requiring a spellcaster to use a grimoire, a scroll, or an old tablet when first conjuring a new monster. If the spellcaster wins the resulting conflict of will or might against the beast, she can add the defeated creature to her list of choices. By making a spellcaster work for her summoned monsters, she will be more proud of her collection.

Another way to add danger to the practice of summoning monsters is to include a repercussion effect in the magic. With this option, a conjured creature gains the opportunity to seek revenge on the conjurer if it fails in its mission. This could be as simple as being banished to its home plane after being defeated in combat (allowing the creature to plot its revenge at its leisure), or it could be more complex. A conjured demon might follow its orders to the letter, and a knowledgeable enemy who learns the nature of those orders can twist them to his use, turning the creature back upon the conjurer.

For example, in M. R. James's "Casting the Runes," a demon summoned for murderous intent will slay only the person who carries a special strip of paper, and when that paper is smuggled into the possession of the original conjurer, things turn out very poorly indeed for him! This type of element is an excellent adventure seed. The PCs learn of a plot to assassinate an ally or even themselves, and they have only a limited amount of time to turn the rules of the conjured demon (which is too powerful to face directly in combat) back on the conjurer—but it can be turned back on the characters just as easily, given the right circumstances.

Giving Monsters Personality

Even if you decide not to allow spellcasters in your game to expand their summoning options, you can still individualize the monsters that they can summon. Don't just assume that a spellcaster conjures a generic monster to do her bidding. Instead, consider the value of building a unique version of the creature. Most roleplaying games today include a robust number of skills, feats, traits, spells, and other options that can be easily swapped out for others to make a creature specialized in one particular form of problem solving. Thus, a demon normally specialized in battle might pick up a skill in some form of unusual knowledge or the ability to craft magical items. By giving monsters more versatility other than merely serving as combat options, you not only help to make the abilities of a summoner more variable, but you also make the monsters more interesting.

An even more intensive option is to not treat the monsters as mindless slaves of the summoner. Feel free to let the player roll the monster's attacks and make tactical choices for the creature in battle (which involves the player more and lessens the GM's workload), but retain control of all other aspects of the creature—you roleplay the monster. This allows you to maintain control of the world and its creatures as a whole (ensuring that the personalities of summoned monsters are portrayed accurately for your game), and it also works on a subtle psychological level against the player. While the player doesn't lose any of the advantages of having a summoned monster in combat, the fact that he doesn't directly control the decisions made by the creature can add an exciting level of interaction between them.

Tempting the Character *and* the Player

Many summoned creatures have special and often powerful abilities that go above and beyond what might help in combat. Some have potent healing abilities that can help a group recover after a fight. Others can travel quickly, bash down barricades, craft magic items, disable traps, detect magical auras, and more. The best conjurers keep a large list of specialized creatures they can call upon for a wide variety of tasks.

But often, the most powerful boons granted by conjured creatures come with strings attached. For example, succubi in *Pathfinder* have the ability to grant a profane gift to those who allow such blasphemous contact. The gift enhances one of the character's ability scores, but at a price—the succubus gets to establish a mental link to him and can use her mind-controlling powers on him from afar if she wishes. Genies are, of course, notorious for granting wishes but twisting the results to their liking, while some devils can grant incredible rewards if you simply sign a contract (for a discussion of the dangers and benefits of such a transaction, see "Selling Your Soul: A Guide," page 117).

When a player character summons a monster like a succubus, devil, or genie to take advantage of its gift, you as the GM should try to convince the *player*, not the character, to accept the offer. Know what your players want, be it additional magic items, increased ability scores, or various metagame elements. The succubus's profane gift ability is an excellent example of this. In the game world, the seductive promise of a beautiful companion might tempt a character to agree to a succubus's demands, but for players who don't get into their characters, it's easy to simply ignore such roleplaying temptations. Just as it's poor game design to balance a power by imposing a nebulous roleplaying restriction, it's not always effective to rely on pure roleplaying to tempt a character. Thus, the succubus's profane gift ability offers something other than companionship—by granting a specific rules benefit (in this case, an increase to one of the PC's ability scores), the player is tempted as much as the character. In this way, you can get players who normally don't roleplay suboptimal choices for their characters to make some possibly bad choices all the same.

As an example of how temptation can affect the flow of play, in a game I ran for some friends, the party was fighting through a series of increasingly difficult battles in a bloodsport arena. In the last battle against a treachery demon, things took a turn for the worse due to some unlucky die rolls, general battlefield attrition, and unfortunate tactics (keep the cleric conscious, folks). I had the treachery demon telepathically contact one of the last PCs standing and offer that character a chance to use a wish to save his fellow party members. And as the demon tempted the character in the game, I tempted the player by pointing out that accepting the wish would not only save the entire party but also prevent him from "wasting" one of the hero points he was saving to use at a later date. Of course, the fact that I knew the player in question was the most likely one at the table to agree to the wish was also a factor. Long story short, that PC is now chaotic evil, has become an assassin, and serves the demon (if partially unknowingly) as a pawn.

He saved the group from a TPK, though.

Know When to Stop

Although monster summoning and conjuration comes from a long tradition in fiction, and while it can give players a chance to try parts of the game that are normally only the purview of the GM, keep in mind that it can be easy to overdo. Each monster conjured into a battle is another set of options to consider and choices to make for that player when his turn comes up. Since your game session won't lengthen to accommodate the addition of what are essentially new characters, each conjured monster robs "screen time" from the rest of the group because the player whose character summoned the monster will take longer to resolve his turns. For this reason, characters who specialize in monster summoning work best with smaller groups that have fewer players overall.

Of course, each table's tolerance for how summoned monsters adjust and change the flow of turns in the game will vary. Keep an eye on how the other players feel if your game has frequent monster summonings, and if you see frustration or impatience growing, take time after the session to talk to the player of the conjuring PC. Work out an agreement to perhaps limit his summoning spells to one at a time. Many of the options discussed in this chapter can help as well, such as having a conjurer keep a small list of "caught monsters" to cut down on option paralysis during play, or driving home the point that sometimes, summoning monsters isn't the safest option. Juggling player satisfaction at the table can be one of the GM's most difficult tasks, and keeping an open dialogue with players between sessions is a great way to keep problems from growing.

After all, you don't want all those summoned monsters causing problems in the real world, do you?

A Glint in the Eye, a Blaze in the Soul

The Secrets of Divine Magic

Colin McComb

Author's note: Defining the scope of divine magic is a sucker's game: too many gods, too many belief systems, too many exceptions to make any particular authoritative statement. Unfortunately, I've always been a sucker for talking about subjects like this, with the hope that you'll find inspiration for your own games somewhere in these words. In order to lay out a functional explanation of how divine magic might work—that is, where gods derive their power, where priests derive theirs, and what's in it for the deities—I've made some basic assumptions: a poly-pantheistic, high-fantasy world, with an array of extraplanar delights and torments that await the souls of the dead. Feel free to accept and integrate anything I've said in here that works for your game, and ignore the hell out of everything that doesn't.

Priests have always been the guardians of knowledge, keepers of the sacred flame. Before the rise of scholars, it was priests who lifted humanity from the darkness, who kept safe the teachings of men, who carried the secrets of language and thought.

And their devotion comes with privilege: god-kings summon the sun to walk among their people. Ancient soldiers shout down the walls of enemy cities. Plagues rise and vanish with a word, with the favor of the divine, and foes lie scattered at the feet of the faithful. The dead stir in their tombs at the command of priests, whether to rise again and walk among the living—or to feed on them.

One of the great mysteries of the faithful is that they have *faith*; in the absence of proof, they believe, and it is from the circle of this belief that their power wells. But what lies beyond the circle?

Set aside for a moment the notion that this is a psionic ability or a channel into the priests' innermost selves. Look deeper.

The Source

Some priests might suggest that their strength stems from an ideal of Law, or Evil, or Death, or Life—a domain, in other words, that encompasses all things within it, that somehow expresses a will based on the strength of its concept, a shifting field of energies that jostle for dominance in a metaplane unknowable to mortals.

But this is, perhaps, too esoteric for this discussion. Let's step back from that particular edge. Let's talk instead about the gods—or the powers, if you will. And then we can talk about their servants.

To define a god is to define a supernatural or transcendent being, some creature with the ability to represent and tap into that esoteric power we mentioned above (whether the god is a natural outgrowth of that domain—a being that chooses to draw from its power—or a function of the human mind anthropomorphizing these ideals is beyond the scope of this chapter). This entity exists beyond the realm of the knowledge of mortals, though it is at least partially knowable, but remains interested and involved in the affairs of the material plane.

More simply: gods represent certain fundamental concepts of existence. They are a way to explain and apprehend the physical, mental, and spiritual aspects of the world, and their followers revere them because the gods help mortals make sense of their own lives. We can call them gods, extra-mortals, divinities, deities—but the fact remains that they exist on a plane that is as far beyond our own as our lives are beyond those of the insects we barely notice.

Some of the beings we call deities advance their interests on the game boards of mortal worlds (and beyond), working through their chosen to play a game that spans centuries, millennia, and epochs. You might call it a war of belief, attrition, or anything else you like. Regardless, they play by a specific set of rules that have been at least partially formulated by mortals, and the gods must expend the energies of their faithful wisely.

Their Purpose

The game (or war) is deadly serious for most deities, their existences at stake should they lose. Gods rise and fall all the time, from demigods to the great powers of the beyond. It is said that there is a class beyond the latter, metapowers to whom death is an abstract, but their followers generally command no divine powers. These metapowers are no longer involved on the spiritual stage and require no human adoration to survive. Yet their existence still echoes throughout the fabric of human understanding, and even the gods fear them. Perhaps the end goal of the divine duel is to achieve a further transcendence that will place the greatest powers among the names that sleep beyond the gulf of existence's edge.

But to reach this stage, all the gods of mortal experience require adulation, worship, and praise. It is the thought and prayers of their chosen people that nourish them and keep them alive, and it is the collection of the souls of the faithful that build their strength and their estimation in the eyes of their compatriots in the planes beyond

the material. To bring in these souls, to summon this adoration, they need to be in the game of harvesting souls. Somehow, this energy brings them the strength they need to continue. Perhaps in the ineffable realm of thought and soul, the combined force of so much focused belief creates power beyond the imaginings of any mortal.

In order to play this harvesting game, the gods need representatives. Many places have stories of deities interacting directly with mortals or taking part in the affairs of the living, but as knowledge of the world expands, the hands of the gods withdraw, and they're forced to interact through proxies. In part, this is because the nature of divine power is such that too much, focused too closely, fractures the material structure of a world, turning it from solidity into the more rarefied realm of belief. When the gods struggle on Earth in their own persons, they risk tainting the world permanently and irrevocably with their presence, transfiguring it and forever losing hope of claiming the souls who do not believe in them. If they are to draw the energies they need from the world, they must have a relatively pristine landscape. And so they make a compact among themselves to withdraw from the world, to act through mortals, to allow the mortals the choice of their beliefs (the specifics of your worlds, naturally, will differ). But whatever the case, the gods must act through agents if they are not to betray this compact. Those who do betray it suffer more than they gain; the gods who do not trespass upon the compact brook no deviation that might harm their own efforts.

Messengers of the Gods

On occasion, those messengers are direct representatives of the gods: angels, devas, demons, devils, and more. But these creatures threaten the delicate balance of the compact, and their appearances evince a certain desperation on the part of the deity involved. After all, these powerful beings are generally more useful closer to the deity's home, administering to the borders of the realm, and the presence of the god's servants might tip rivals to what the deity plans next. Because each divinity catalogs the agents of their rivals, the messengers are known to be close to particular deities. And since the messengers do not have free will, the god will have no justification should her angels be exposed on the material plane.

More often than not, the messengers are mortals, chosen from among the ranks of the faithful (though occasionally the outsiders hear that call as well). But whether they are well born and true blooded or plucked at random from the meanest huts and hovels, men, women, and children feel the call of particular deities and flock to their churches.

And in return, they gain powers that are truly not of this world.

Divine Powers (or "What's That Like?")

It's difficult to explain what it's like for a would-be priest to begin the journey toward her ultimate goal: salvation, in one form or another. Most priests begin merely as hopeful worshippers, perhaps with a little more devotion than their fellow congregants. One day, though (or perhaps one night), they encounter something that triggers them, an event that forces them to examine their faith. This might be their gods reaching out to them, testing them; it might be random happenstance—we are all forced to test ourselves against our morals and our ethics daily, after all—but those

with a priestly inclination are more likely than others to see the hands of the gods in everyday activity. What some might call coincidence, priests claim as providence.

Most people ignore that trigger. Even most would-be priests ignore it. But for those who don't, taking action in that situation opens something deep in their spirit. Now, it's important to note that not all priestly powers derive from the gods. Low-level priests *do* create a channel of strength from their innermost selves, a reservoir of might they stamp with their personal beliefs. At this point, they're learning to understand the untapped joys or hatreds in their hearts, and they attribute the attendant strengths to their specific deities. And as they exercise their fledgling powers, they open the channel wider.

In the meantime, they proselytize for their gods. They provide examples of the way of life their gods demand, stirring love, fear, or hatred in the hearts of their audience. Whatever the priest thinks the god demands, he seeks in the hearts of mortals, and the type of worship colors the flavor of the belief that flows to the god. If they drive enough worship through that channel, it becomes wider still. And their faith touches the god with their belief, and at some point, if they are strong enough and pure enough, the priests open the channel of belief widely enough to bring the *actual* power of their gods through.

Each deity provides its power differently, expressed in a way that represents its area of interest. A plant god's presence is felt through vibrant, leafy channels; a goddess of light infuses every interaction with her followers with a blaze, a shining clarity; a demigod of death whispers through the quiet of the grave and a rustle of maggots.

Then, the priests are no longer merely the agents of a church on the material plane. They become the mouthpieces of their deities. Their magic becomes truly infused with the divine, the priest moving more in accordance with the desires of her chosen god, acting in its name and with its knowledge of her actions. She can call on greater, more fearsome magics, until at last her strength can shake the very walls of reality. Her power now is the power of true belief, of certain knowledge in the potency of her god.

At this point, though, is her expression of power really an expression of faith? I mentioned earlier that one of the great mysteries of the faithful is that they have faith. Faith is a belief in something unseen. It is the golden standard around which the deities congregate, for it is the strongest form of belief, and it is therefore faith that defines them. Yet in a world where the evidence of the gods is clear and unquestionable, where deities manifest themselves in ways that erase any doubt of their existence, where is room for faith?

However, belief is not so weak in itself. Though it does not blaze forth like faith, it is a solid and dependable bedrock. Once one *knows* a truth, doubt holds no sway. Faith can be shaken, destroyed, questioned—but belief? True belief is a foundation that cannot be moved. And for the strength of that belief, the gods grant tremendous powers indeed.

Excommunication

What happens when priests step out of line? What do the gods do when their people betray their ideals? Obviously, the priest faces the possibility of his master's divine

wrath, and the more his actions deviate from the god's teachings, the more likely he is to receive a holy punishment. In some cases, this means merely that his access to his chosen god snaps shut, and for some priests this is enough to send them spiraling into madness, despair, or worse.

But some priests—especially those of gods of evil or vengeance—do not simply lose the connection on which they have come to rely. Sometimes their gods send a more direct punishment. A blast of sacred power shrieks down the channel, for instance, burning out the mind of the offending priest, or an angel or devil comes to snatch him away for judgment, or the earth simply swallows him whole.

Priests who survive such an excommunication might turn to other avenues for their daily sustenance: civilian jobs or other types of adventuring. Some—those who have not received the ultimate punishment—may even explore a new faith, using their experience as low-level faithful to develop a strong connection to a new god, one who might have a better connection to the intricacies of the priest's soul.

Alternatively, the gods might declare fallen priests anathema to each other. But the story is the important part, and it's up to you to decide what fits your world best.

The Power Is Yours

Obviously, not everything here will work in your game. Perhaps you have a monotheistic culture, and your priests receive their calling from sudden epiphanies and their earlier powers from angels or devils. Or perhaps your setting is relatively low in magic, or the power of the gods is thought to be psychic in nature. In each of these cases, the priest will have another layer of skepticism to battle, a new block to her belief. Is she actually communing with the gods, or does she draw the power from within herself? Are the angels with whom she speaks truly servants, or are they a race of deceivers and charlatans?

As the gamemaster, you have a great deal of power to make the faiths of your world come alive. You can simply assume that the priests and druids have a relatively humdrum existence and come to their work as a farmer tends to her fields or a blacksmith to his forge, a boring path to a dull life in a standard medieval occupation. Or you can bring the mysteries of faith alive in all their glory, imbuing your world with a rich and mystical energy that defies explanation but is somehow the essence of the human experience. Give the priests something to do besides tend to the wounded. Give them a crisis of faith, and reward those who persevere. The priests' players will remember it, and they'll praise you.

Probably not enough to make you a god—at least, not yet. But you've got to start somewhere, right?

Invisible Colleges

Magical Societies, Secret and Otherwise

Kenneth Hite

"These three men were all of an age to have lived through the excitements of the Rosicrucian furore and its rumours of universal reformation and advancement of learning, and they may well have understood better than we do the mystery of the R.C. Brothers and their Invisible College. They were men whom the disasters of 1620 and the following years had uprooted from their countries and turned into wandering refugees."

— *Frances Yates, The Rosicrucian Enlightenment*

In other words, the three men in the quotation above were player characters. "The Three Foreigners," as they were known, provided the intellectual heft for Cromwell's Puritan revolution—and also laid the foundation of Charles II's Royal Society. That kind of contradiction seems to manifest when you hunt for invisible colleges, for secret societies of magicians shaping or remaking the world with occult force. On such a hunt, you can start anywhere and find nothing, or start nowhere and find anything. Let's start with the Three Foreigners and the first-ever "invisible college," which they might have started.

The Three Foreigners were Samuel Hartlib (1600–1662), "The Great Intelligencer of Europe" and human search engine (born in Prussia), Jan Comenius (1592–1670), mystical devotee of Pansophism (born in Moravia), and John Dury (1596–1680), crusader for Protestant unity and alchemical experimenter (born in Scotland). A sage-spy, a sorcerer (Comenius engaged in the odd spot of angelic magic and kabbalism), and a cleric-alchemist, in gamified terms.

All three were passionate devotees of Francis Bacon, interested in the full scope of human knowledge and how best to unify and promulgate it. The Three Foreigners "met" in virtual space; in the 1630s Hartlib brought Dury and Comenius into his vast network of correspondents throughout Europe. The "Hartlib Circle" discussed everything from magnets to agronomy, helped with each others' research, published

and sponsored each others' work, and gave Hartlib tips on politics, bibliophilic gossip, and up-and-coming geniuses to invite into the Circle. If anyone had said "information wants to be free" in the 17th century, it would have been Samuel Hartlib.

Hartlib was obsessed with the notion of Bacon's "Salomonic House," an institution of scholars who accumulated advanced knowledge and disseminated it freely. Bacon placed the House in his "New Atlantis," where it combined superior technology and mystical insights. Likely from Comenius, Hartlib got the notion that Bacon was concealing a secret truth: something like the House really existed, descended from the "Fraternity of the Rosy Cross" or "Rosicrucian Brotherhood." This mystical secret society had suddenly become less secret earlier that century through a series of arcane pamphlets likely published by one Johann Valentin Andreae. Hartlib pestered his Circle for tips on this mysterious group, sending Dury to interview the philosopher-mathematician René Descartes, who had been accused of Rosicrucian membership during an uproar in Paris in 1623. All to no avail, apparently.

But if Hartlib couldn't find the Salomonic House, he resolved to build one in his own New Atlantis, which he called "Macaria." He and Dury turned his Circle to political lobbying and traded favors to bring Comenius to Bacon's England. For nine months (from September 1641 to June 1642) the Three Foreigners were together in the flesh, trying to establish a "Pansophical college" or "encyclopedic school" in Chelsea until the English Civil War broke out and ended the project. Or did it? If someone successfully built an invisible college, how would we know? And what would it look like?

Magical Societies: A Two-Axis Schema

Let's back up and look at the problem the way Bacon might have: analytically. A magical society has two components, by definition: the magic and the society. The metaphysics of the magic and the specifics of the society drop out at this level of analysis, although the GM should keep them in mind as she designs things closer to the ground game. What we're looking for is the interface, the place where our magical society meets the rest of the world. Or where, perhaps, it hides from the rest of the world.

Although magic and secrecy don't necessarily go hand in hand, they strongly correlate in our imagination and perhaps in our experience. Note the preponderance of phrases implying a closer connection: "invisible college" or "secret society" or "Hermetic brotherhood" or "mystery cult." The very word "occult" literally means "hidden." Logically, either the magic or the society (or both or neither) may be occult or invisible. By making "invisibility" our key term, we can construct a four-part matrix of the possible magic societies:

Overt Magic, Overt Society (OM/OS): The society openly claims to work magic and admits its own existence.

Covert Magic, Overt Society (CM/OS): The society works magic secretly but exists in the open.

Overt Magic, Covert Society (OM/CS): Wizards or the equivalent are known to exist and work magic, but they keep their societies hidden.

Covert Magic, Covert Society (CM/CS): The society conceals both its magic and its existence.

Like any basic analytic tool, you can get caught up in the weeds of detail and perspective. Obviously, the larger community is unlikely to be monolithic: some people or classes will have a better idea of where to find either magic or the society than others. In other words, the question remains, "Covert to whom?"

In Samuel Hartlib's 17th century, for example, a group of witches in Friuli in northern Italy protected the local peasantry from curses, mostly by engaging in magical combat with the evil witches surrounding them. These "Good Walkers" or "Benandanti" were covert, invisible, to city folk and faraway authorities like the Inquisition, who didn't even hear of their existence until 1575. To the villagers and country folk of Friuli, however, the Benandanti were well-known neighbors performing a valuable service; the Society of the Benandanti was overt, visible.

Recognizing that the question exists, we can put it in the GM's to-do pile with the other details of the setting. For now, our classification depends on the standard nonmagical player character. Let's see how far we can take it. For each quadrant of the matrix, we'll bring our Baconian best to the general principles and specific examples. How does it work in the world? How does it hide from the world? A case study closes off each quadrant as a worked example.

Overt Magic, Overt Society

This quadrant is the easy one, the "gimme." Every magicians' guild in fantasy works this way. In RPGs, the classic examples include the Order of Hermes in *Ars Magica*, the Wizards of High Sorcery in *Dragonlance*, or the Red Wizards of Thay in the Forgotten Realms. You can even have sub-societies within a larger magical or supernatural order, such as the Traditions in *Mage* or (more generally) the thaumaturgical Tremere clan within the Camarilla in *Vampire*. Like other guilds, mages' guilds work first to achieve political goals (or at least to control fees for magic use) and, usually, to maintain craft standards (for example, "white magic," not "black magic"). Even if the society of magicians is less guildlike or less coherent, magi might maintain institutions in common, such as the school for wizards in Ursula K. Le Guin's *Earthsea*.

In actual history, the most common example of OM/OS structure is the "state cult," which existed in almost every ancient kingdom and in many medieval states, from the Roman Empire to Angkor Wat. The heads of the state cult carry out specific rituals to keep the kingdom correctly aligned with the supernatural or numinous universe, often personified as a god or gods. Usually, we call such magic-workers "high priests" and assign state cults to the same box as religion. Of course, a socially powerful group working openly accepted magic has, historically, turned itself into a religion—or vice versa! Your "mages' guild" or its patron might be worshipped by peasants or even by other clergy. At the very least, the local clerics need a good reason why people shouldn't worship magic users.

Some of this tension extends across time. Under its earliest kings, ancient Rome had fifteen state cults, each led by an official called a *flamen*. By the time of Augustus, 600 years later, at least two of the flamens were carrying out rituals for gods that literally nobody remembered anymore. Ancient religion becomes contemporary magic. Religion also becomes magic across space or political rivalries. The Magi were the priestly caste of ancient Persia, and we get the word "magic" from the Greek *magika*,

meaning "the arts of the Magi." To the Greeks, only their priests were truly priests—the other guys' priests were magicians.

Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn

The less common version of the OM/OS society is perhaps more influential on fantasy gaming. This is the self-proclaimed "magical society" active in a culture that either disbelieves in magic or has a confident priestly monopoly that can afford to allow supernatural competition for attention. In the Victorian era, both of these conditions were in place. The increasingly logical, industrial, regimented intellectual environment of the era also provoked a mystical, poetic, unorthodox reaction. The result: a plethora of mystical, quasimagical, and outright sorcerous societies, of which the most famous was the Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn.

Founded in 1888 by two doctors with police connections and a striving lower-middle-class occultist, the Golden Dawn remained a primarily middle-class organization despite welcoming actors, poets, writers, and similar layabouts. Its goals were to advance the study and art of magick and perhaps (in some cases) to create an inspirational environment. It came apart in 1900 over the initiation of the self-proclaimed Antichrist Aleister Crowley; its splinter groups mostly faded by the 1930s. Without a pre-existing social order to depend on or to enforce group loyalty, a magical society is vulnerable to rivalries between vainglorious egotists—in other words, between typical magician personality types. These tensions provide GMs with plenty of story hooks and player characters with levers to destroy, enter, or manipulate such a society.

Covert Magic, Overt Society

In this quadrant fall magical societies disguised as some other sort of society. Magic is illegal, disreputable, or involves acts of those sorts—or perhaps it provides an advantage the group prefers to keep hidden. The prototypical example of such groups in gaming are the various *Call of Cthulhu* and kindred cults following Lovecraft's models: the Esoteric Order of Dagon (magic disguised as neo-pagan Freemasonry) and the Church of Starry Wisdom (magic disguised as religion). In many settings with these sorts of societies, magic is considered bunk—except, of course, by the player characters and their peers.

Following Heinrich Himmler's bizarre lead, the SS provided another CM/OS model: its "Ancestral Research Society," or Ahnenerbe. The Ahnenerbe openly researched a myriad of topics, from Bronze Age musical instruments to Aryan runes to speleology, often from a heterodox or even an occult perspective. In games and media from Indiana Jones on down, the Ahnenerbe become a magical think-tank behind the SS, searching out powerful artifacts and studying ancient Norse ritual spells. In the real world, they did both of those things, but if they actually attempted to use magic, they kept it secret. (In fact, the only attested magic use in the Third Reich was by the German Navy, which dowsed with pendulums on a map to find ships.) At any rate, the existence of the Ahnenerbe is overt, as are its occult interests. What remains covert is the degree of progress it has made unlocking those occult powers.

Knights Templar

The "murdered magicians" of the Knights Templar have typified the secretly magical society ever since King Philip IV of France arranged the order's arrest and trial for idolatry (among other charges) in 1307. No historical evidence exists that the Templars worshiped a head or an idol of any kind, much less engaged in rituals with it. However, the mythical Templars of the modern imagination are a different matter. According to the legend, the knights uncovered magical texts in Solomon's Temple while on Crusade; the Order rapidly grew a sorcerous inner core that manipulated kings and popes for unknown (and likely heretical) ends. Betrayed by an expelled brother, they evacuated the core of their magical treasure and knowledge to a hidden refuge before burning at the stake.

Such a society lasts only as long as its cover identity holds up, not just against normal scrutiny, but against rumors spread by enemies or covetous monarchs. The hidden Templars may have re-established their magical society behind a new cover identity such as Freemasonry, the Knights of Malta, or the St. John Ambulance Association; magical societies might have taken a whole series of overt identities down the centuries.

Overt Magic, Covert Society

This quadrant is slightly trickier to define: the culture as a whole knows that someone is working magic, but they don't know specifically whom. Magic is out in the open, or at least commonly accepted by spiritual and temporal authorities, but it remains criminal or at least suspicious. This might be because magic actually involves criminal activity: the La Voisin ring of witches and Satanists in 17th-century France used their arts for poisonings, alongside the love potions and horoscopes they provided to the Paris aristocracy.

Even if some magical groups are overt, their rivals might be covert, such as the Sect Rouge in Haitian voudun or Obeah workers in Jamaica. In the Jamaican case, the Obeah movement was also associated with anti-British rebellion, yet another reason to keep a society covert. The Triad societies in China began as mystical martial arts groups, became anti-Manchu subversives in the 1760s, then went underground where they became (also covert) criminal societies.

A final reason for keeping the society covert is simply to avoid spoiling the experience or to keep the study of the art exclusive. This seems to have been the reason the Greek "mystery cults" swore their members to secrecy, for example.

The more relevant modern parallel might be espionage. Everybody knows spies exist, but they don't know which generic import-export company or fringe airline is actually a spy-agency front group. This kinship becomes explicit for the magical spy agencies in Charles Stross's Laundry Files series, close cousins to the "wainscot" settings in which an open magical community exists hidden from the world as a whole. Following that logic, the wizarding world of Harry Potter, the White Council in the Dresden Files series, and the raft of Courts and Academies in urban fantasy all seem like OM/CS examples. Magic is overt within the secret world, but the secret world is hidden—even if you know that magic exists, you still have to know who's doing it. Obviously, if all the PCs are within the fantastic world—no former

Muggles—such groups become more traditional mages' guilds or governing councils. But given that the entire point of the wainscot world is its occult nature (otherwise it would be a straight fantasy setting), even the Ministry of Magic remains covert on the larger scale.

The Witch-Cult in Western Europe

Again, our example is a historical fiction. It began with the *Malleus Maleficarum*, the witch-hunter's handbook of 1486, which postulated that all of Europe's accused witches were leagued together in an anti-Church. Mostly abandoned by 1700, the "witch-cult" theory returned in the works of Jules Michelet, Matilda Joslyn Gage, and most notably the Egyptologist Margaret Murray. Her thesis, laid out in *The Witch-Cult in Western Europe* (1921), *The God of the Witches* (1933), and *The Divine King in Europe* (1954) was that the Inquisition was right: European witchcraft in the later Middle Ages was, in fact, a pagan, anti-Catholic religion dating back to the Stone Age. The congregations of this religion were witches' covens, which held secret ceremonies on holy days such as Walpurgisnacht and Halloween. Indeed, some of England's kings were secret witches, and such knightly orders as the Order of the Garter were concealed covens.

Needless to say, this was all nonsense, but it makes an excellent example of an immense, powerful OM/CS group. For Murray's witch-cult, social belief and interest in magic (especially fertility and healing magic) keeps the society going, while elite persecution keeps it from splintering or evolving in the same way a normal religion (or other large social group) does. The legendary Scholomance, or wizards' school, becomes the cult's Hogwarts; the pagan world of the European countryside even becomes a "wainscot" setting in the hands of Charles Leland and other "witchcraft survival" theorists (or Katherine Kurtz and other "witchcraft survival" novelists). Note that this witch-cult also contains nodes of CM/OS, covens concealed within overtly nonmagical societies; with a realistic setting, quadrant boundaries are rarely fixed.

Covert Magic, Covert Society

The final quadrant covers truly secret societies: magical groups that keep their very existence hidden as best they can from the conventional world, especially from law and religion. It combines the reasoning surrounding CM/OS and OM/CS groups: magic is dubious or illegal, and groups that practice it are inherently suspicious. The Knights Templar might embody the first rationale after their suppression; to avoid compromising their educational work, the Rosicrucian Brotherhood yield to the second rationale until Andreae blows their cover in 1607. With a really effective secret society, even the group's membership may not be sure whether or not they practice magic!

Such secret societies can also use a nested cover system: hiding a magical society inside some other kind of conspiracy. Those who joined the infamous Hell-Fire Club, for example, found a society of political radicals who enjoyed blasphemous orgies. It's only an unnamed inner group within that society that experimented with magic, if it did.

The best example of the "double cover" in gaming is the Technocracy from *Mage*: the secret conspiracy that runs the mortal world while hunting mages. Its inner

secret, meanwhile, is that its own technological miracles are magical rites designed in part to bolster just that skepticism of magic that keeps its rivals underground. The Technocracy understands that it's easiest to have a CM/CS group in a setting where magic is considered impossible superstition. Nothing helps keep you covert like mass skepticism about your reason for existence!

The School of Night

Appropriately, historians disagree whether the School of Night existed at all. There is some evidence of a "school of atheism" around Sir Walter Raleigh, Christopher Marlowe, and perhaps Henry Percy, the "Wizard Earl of Northumberland." Northumberland was a devotee of alchemy, astrology, and other arts. Marlowe wrote a play about a magician and was arraigned for atheism, but he died before he could stand trial. Northumberland knew and patronized Britain's great magus John Dee, who trained Raleigh's protégé Thomas Hariot in navigation. It's all very coincidental and tenuous; even the group's name comes from a Shakespeare allusion rather than from the group itself—if there was such a group.

The School of Night illustrates the great advantage of CM/CS groups: they are infinitely adaptable. Anyone might be a magus; anyone might be pulling conspiratorial strings behind the scenes. Anything might be their fault; anything might be magical. They might have hidden sorcerous rituals in Marlowe's or Shakespeare's plays, or buried Templar treasure at Roanoke.

All of the Above

These distinctions lead us by Baconian logic into the natural conclusion: everything might be connected. A single magical society might straddle two, three, or even four quadrants simultaneously. It depends on where you stand to observe it, and how long you watch.

If Hartlib and Comenius were right, the Invisible College began as CM/CS: a secret Rosicrucian brotherhood of magi, doing good in secret. Once the Rosicrucians had reached a critical mass of lore and charity, esoteric symbolism and alchemy percolated out into Europe in drama and experimentation; the Invisible College was now OM/CS. Then Andreae releases his pamphlets, setting off the "Rosicrucian furor" and switching the College's polarity to CM/OS. Everyone from the Queen of Bohemia on down is accused of being a Rosicrucian front, even as the College's actual goals and teachings fade into the chaff of propaganda and confused exempli. The Three Foreigners wanted to restore the Rosy Cross to its rightful place as a lamp to all nations, creating an encyclopedic college of savants. In other words, an OM/OS "mages' guild," teaching the Great Art.

But even then, the Invisible College disguised itself. Comenius looked at it and saw a mystical incarnation of Sophia, of a divine yet natural wisdom that saves and protects all men. Dury also looked for a mystical College, but he dreamed of using it as a weapon against the Antichrist and as the key to Jewish-Protestant unity against the Pope. (To this end, they talked Cromwell into allowing the Jews to return to England.) No less devoted to Sophia and Protestantism, Hartlib still saw the Invisible College as a think-tank, a super-library devoted to unifying natural

philosophy, magic, and alchemy. In the end, Hartlib's vision came closest: his Circle of correspondents became the core of the Royal Society in 1660, dedicated to the promulgation of scientific inquiry and the improvement of natural knowledge. Hartlib died two years later; he had been at the center of the Invisible College the whole time.

Cost Determines Value

Aaron Rosenberg

It's an interesting fact that, when you're presented with something free, at least a part of your brain asks, "But if it's any good, why is it free?" We can't help but look a gift horse in the mouth, and although we all love a good bargain, we see it as such only if the thing we got is worth more than we paid for it. If it's worth less, we feel we were scammed—and if it's free, it may feel like it doesn't have any value at all.

This applies to magic just as much as anything else, if not more so. Magic has no value if it's free because everyone has it, everyone can use it, and it's everywhere, which means it loses its luster. Magic is exciting for two reasons—it lets you do things you couldn't do otherwise, and it isn't cheap or easy or readily available. Saying you have two hands isn't all that interesting or impressive because most people have two hands. Saying you have two hands and one of them is made of solid silver? That's impressive! But you can't just have been born with a silver hand—you had to buy it or pay for it in some way. There had to be a cost.

Paying the Price

Cost can mean different things, however. It can be strictly financial, of course. In Scott Lynch's *The Lies of Locke Lamora*, the main character is shocked when a Bondsmage appears because hiring one of those sorcerers costs thousands of crowns a day, and even kings would have trouble throwing that sort of money around. The Bondsmagi are the only sorcerers in the world (because they ruthlessly absorbed or killed all competition), and they charge exorbitant prices for their services, so if one appears, it is a momentous occasion.

Magic can also have a personal cost. In many stories, magic takes its toll, physically and mentally. A magic wielder can wear himself out, even to the point of dying. (David Eddings writes about this risk in *The Belgariad* and *The Malloreon*—wizards can draw energy from themselves, and if they're not careful, they can literally become

so exhausted they can no longer take a breath.) He can also go insane because he has taxed his mind beyond its limits; the classic example for this is H.P. Lovecraft's Cthulhu mythos, where magic usually means calling upon the Great Old Ones, and even a glimpse of them can overwhelm a mortal's mind. Magic can age its wielder or leave him disfigured or otherwise altered—the character of Enas Yorl from *Thieves' World* comes to mind, a wizard who lost a duel and has been cursed ever since with constant, involuntary shapechanging. Such a change could have been self-inflicted as well, especially if the character tried something truly monumental or screwed up while casting.

Of course, many wizards pay with their lives if they make a mistake, particularly during the tricky art of summoning and binding demons—the shamanistic duels in the books of David Eddings are excellent examples of that. Even success can cost, however, in energy and concentration, if nothing else. Think of magic like running a race: even if you "win," you're exhausted, worn out, and probably in pain, but that just lets you know you were really working for it. If you ran the race and weren't even out of breath by the end, you'd feel cheated.

Spell Costs

So what does this mean for your game?

Simply put, if your game has magic in it, you have to make sure that magic costs something. The original *Dungeons & Dragons* took this literally, assigning material costs for each spell—the 1st-level spell *dancing lights*, for example, required the caster to use a bit of phosphorus or wytchwood or a glowworm, and the material component was always destroyed in the act of casting. Some spells had more expensive components, like *Bigby's clenched fist*, which needed a leather glove and a small device made of four interlocking metal rings, or *trap the soul*, which involved a gem worth 1,000 gp for every hit die or level of experience the targeted creature possessed. Of course, having to stop and hunt for a glowworm or a bit of gold dust or whatever every time you wanted to cast a particular spell could become tedious, so characters could buy spell component pouches that contained the basic elements, thus covering the cost of most spells all at once. Any special items or particularly expensive components still had to be purchased separately.

Is buying some raw materials really enough, though? A lot of game groups ignore things like material costs and even verbal and somatic components because they feel that having to worry about those concerns can slow down the flow of a game. Who wants to pause a combat so the wizard can fumble a bit of powdered iron from his belt pouch or craft a tiny clay simulacra of an attacking warrior, and then go through a whole series of words and gestures? It's a lot faster and easier to say, "I cast *shocking grasp.*"

The problem with this approach is that magic stops seeming very important because it's so easy. There is no real cost to it, no consequence for using it, and so it becomes blasé. Every adventuring group has at least one spellcaster, and most have two—one divine and one arcane—plus, possibly, a character who can cast a little and fight a little (like a paladin or a ranger), and that seems completely normal. Why shouldn't you run into several wizards, clerics, druids, or sorcerers on the road or in the tavern?

The answer to that is: for the same reason you wouldn't randomly find precious gems lying about everywhere or run into expert swordsmen every time you stepped out in public. Lots of people might carry a sword, but how many of them really know what they're doing? In *The Princess Bride*, the Dread Pirate Roberts tells Inigo Montoya, "I would sooner destroy a stained glass window than an artist like yourself," acknowledging that the man is an amazing swordsman and a true rarity. Magic should be just as rare, if not more so.

The Magical Elite

Think of Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings*. Gandalf the Grey is a wizard, known throughout the land—sometimes honored, sometimes hated, but always respected and, yes, usually at least a little feared as well. How many other wizards can you name in Middle-earth? There's Gandalf's superior among the Istari, Saruman the White. There's Radagast the Brown, another member. There are two others, Alatar and Pallando, but they are never seen or even mentioned in that story. Five wizards in the entire world. That explains why everyone knows who Gandalf is and why they fear him—he is one of a literal handful of people in the world to possess such power.

And what exactly can Gandalf do? There have been lots of arguments about that, especially since many of his apparent abilities can be attributed to the Ring of Power he wears. Ultimately, most of his power seems to come down to knowing a great deal, being widely traveled, and having a way with animals (from giant eagles to the horses of the Rohirrim). In a world like Greyhawk, where wizards abound, that would make Gandalf weaker than most first-level apprentices. But in Middle-earth it makes him a mighty force that even kings cannot help but acknowledge.

Middle-earth is one extreme, of course. Does your game world have to have only five wizards? Not if you want there to be more. Are there spellcasters everywhere? If that's what you'd like. But you need to make that decision when you start to picture the setting. What do you want to be important? If you want magic to have value, you must limit it. Make it expensive. Give it to only a handful of people, have those who possess it charge a great deal for its use, make it cost its users in some intensely personal way, or implement some combination thereof.

Think of the Adepts of the Blue Star from the *Thieves' World* books. Each Adept had a secret, something he had renounced in order to attain his power, and if that secret were ever discovered, the Adept would become powerless. That means each Adept has a cost unique to him and his personality, upbringing, circumstances, and so on. It makes each spellcaster different and makes the use of magic a very personal thing. Similarly, in *The Belgariad*, Belgarath the Sorcerer tells young Garion at one point that every wizard goes about things differently. Each sorcerer has different strengths and weaknesses, different ways of approaching a problem, so no two of them would deal with a situation the same way.

Compare that to a game like D&D or *Pathfinder*, where spellcasters all use the same spells and even share them around so when you run into another wizard, you know she just used *meteor strike* on you or *charm person* on the guy at the tavern. Neither is necessarily a bad thing, but they have very different feels. Do you want people in your game to see magic as a tool that anyone can pick up, as a tool customized to

their hand, or as an expression and concentration of their soul? Do you want magic to be commonplace and barely noticed, virtually unknown and practically mythical, or somewhere in between?

If you decide that magic should be everywhere and easily accessible, that's fine. But don't be surprised or disappointed if characters aren't impressed when they meet a wizard—and aren't as enthused about becoming one themselves. If everyone wears vests, you may decide to wear one too, just to fit in, but you won't get too excited about it. You can use that disinterest to your advantage, of course. For example, your game world might have a great deal of magic—until suddenly it doesn't, and people have to learn for the first time how to survive without it. Then magic becomes rare and valuable, and people start to appreciate it, seek it out, and sacrifice time, effort, concentration, and maybe a great deal more just to find it again. And those few who did manage to retain their magic through the transition suddenly hold something that is extremely valuable to themselves and to everyone else.

And what happened to make the magic disappear? Did someone close a portal to the source? Did the god of magic die or abdicate or simply get sick of catering to mortal whims? Did a massive spell go horribly awry and burn up most of the world's magic in the process? Did someone create an object that could disperse—or capture—the world's free magic to take it away from the wizards? If you know what happened to the magic, you know who was responsible, what they hoped to gain from the change, what happened to them afterward, and whether the situation could be reversed.

On the other hand, if you make magic incredibly rare and expensive, it can completely overwhelm the characters when it appears. In a world where no one can cast so much as a cantrip, how terrifying is a stranger who can hurl fireballs? It would be like a dragon appearing in a world that's never had any animal bigger than a horse or more magical than a common house cat. That's certainly thrilling and dramatic, but it will be challenging and could prove to be more than the characters can handle.

A Land of Plenty

This is why you have to settle certain questions about magic in your world before you can begin to tell stories there—or, for a game, before you can invite others to create stories there with you. First, you need to decide how plentiful magic is. Then you need to figure out how costly it is to use. Those two things can tell you how many people have access to it, which will give you ideas on how they use it, how they control it, and how they disperse it to others.

Let's say, for example, that everyone in the world can do magic, but that every time you do, even for something minor, it takes a year off your life. Not many people will use magic after they find that out. You'd save it for something really big, something worth that high a cost. Now you have a world where there's plenty of magic, and no one is regulating it, yet it's almost never used. And when someone does use it, they're either an idiot or in desperate need, so every time magic appears, everyone nearby stops to see what's going on. That's powerful stuff, narratively speaking.

Another element that will help determine the cost is whether magic is endless or finite. If it's endless, it will be worth less, even if only a few people know how to access

or control it. There's always a chance that someone else will stumble upon a better way to use it or grant it to others, which would dilute its value.

If the magic is finite, it will cost more because it's a limited commodity. Even if more people know how to use it, there will probably be stricter controls in place and most likely a governing body; otherwise, the magic would have been used up already, and no one would have any. This raises the question of why the magic is finite. Is it the last vestige of a dead god? Does it come from a magical wellspring that is now running dry (or has been capped)? Is it the remains of an almost-extinct race, like dragons? Does it stem from the faith and beliefs of a particular society or race?

In addition, you can create all sorts of interesting possibilities in a game or story when you start thinking about the politics of magic, of people jockeying for control over something that powerful, and of people holding something they're leery of using. After all, in a magic-rich world, mages might duel for supremacy. In a magic-poor world, however, they'll use every other method—diplomacy, blackmail, money, physical violence, peer pressure, and so on—before tapping into and using up any of that precious power.

What's Best for Your World

Magic has value, whether it's a high value or a low one. How much value you place upon it—which is at least partially determined by the strictures and conditions you apply in terms of availability, accessibility, and renewability—will allow you to determine its cost. That cost can be monetary, mental, physical, spiritual, something else, or some combination. The greater the cost, the more careful people will be when deciding to use magic. That will help determine what sort of role magic can play in the stories you create and the games you play.

Don't worry if you're doing something different with magic, making it more common or more rare or more expensive or more uncontrollable or more regulated or whatever. Don't worry if no one has ever required the sort of costs you've assigned to magic in your setting. Just use it in the way you think will work best for your world. Then sit back and let the stories unfold. That, in and of itself, is a kind of magic—and utterly priceless.

Magic in Tolkien

John D. Rateliff

J. R. R. Tolkien is the most influential author in the field of modern fantasy, a genre he did much to create. Certainly there was fantasy before Tolkien—Morris's *The Well at the World's End* (1896), Dunsany's *The Book of Wonder* (1912), Eddison's *The Worm Ouroboros* (1922), Dunsany's *The King of Elfland's Daughter* (1924), Mirrlees's *Lud-in-the-Mist* (1926)—many of them with their own unique approaches to magic.[1] But it was *The Lord of the Rings* that proved such a success that it transformed the works that came before into precursors in what in hindsight came to be seen as a clearly defined tradition. Tolkien's book became the paradigm of a fantasy novel, much imitated by those who followed, often right down to incidental details like being published in three volumes[2] with a map of the world in the back. Nor was Tolkien's example limited to fantasy novels: his influence was felt just as strongly in fantasy games, in particular in *Dungeons & Dragons*.

Magic

A good working definition of fantasy would be a work of fiction that includes elements of the impossible[3] as a fundamental part of its imagined world—for example, a ring that makes you invisible, sentient beings who are functionally immortal, a world where trees walk and the unquiet dead stalk the living. It can even be argued that, without magic, it's not fantasy; Tolkien is emphatic in his essay "On Fairy-Stories" that the fantasy elements not be explained away.[4] Thus a work in which seemingly magical effects are in fact the result of advanced technology, such as Heinlein's *Sixth Column* (1949), is science fiction, not fantasy.[5] Clarke's Third Law ("Any sufficiently advanced technology is indistinguishable from magic") would seek to reduce every fantasy to science fiction, but at its core science fiction deals in the possible (or, more accurately, an extrapolation of what a future technology might one day hypothetically be capable of accomplishing). Fantasy, by contrast, deliberately stands in opposition to the possible and embraces the impossible.

And there's nothing more impossible than magic.

The Three Magics

One of the elements that made Tolkien's presentation of his fantasy world so satisfying is the comprehensiveness with which he drew on so many earlier traditions when trying to replace the lost mythology and forgotten folklore of his homeland: history and pseudo-history, medieval romance, fairy tales, mythology, and the work of earlier fantasy writers, particularly Morris. When it comes to his use of magic, he clearly draws on the literary tradition of the preceding centuries.

At first glance, this tradition looks to be chaotic: a bewildering array of conflicting presentations and contradictory ideas. But closer scrutiny reveals patterns and commonalities that allow us to distinguish all literary treatments of magic as falling into three distinct groups, each distinguished by its theory about the *source* of magic. A person who thinks all spellcasters derive their power from a pact with the devil views magic, and those who demonstrate their ability to do magic, far differently from someone who thinks magic is just an ability some people are born with, like being left-handed or having an affinity for music. Similarly, someone who believes that magic is a birthright—you either have it or you don't, and nothing can change that fact—is worlds apart from someone who thinks magic is a craft or profession, knowledge anyone can acquire through proper training, study, and practice.

With that in mind, a quick survey of the three types of magic (all three of which found expression in *Dungeons & Dragons*) and a few examples of each will help illuminate the ways Tolkien draws on this lore.

Learned Magic

According to this theory, magic is something learned: an art, a craft. Anyone who's smart enough can read the grimoires and spellbooks and learn how to cast spells from them—it's all a matter of knowing the right times, chanting the right words, and drawing the right runes, sigils, and circles. Probably the most famous example of this kind of magic is the old story of "The Sorcerer's Apprentice" (originally by Goethe [1797], but better known today through the Disney cartoon [1940]), which clearly shows how anyone who can read can pick up a grimoire and cast a spell—even if he or she can't control the results of what happens next.[6] This depiction of magic as a science, albeit an arcane science, probably owes a lot to real-world alchemists in the medieval and renaissance eras, and the legends that accrued around them.

In any case, this theory goes back at least to the Renaissance and is richly represented in literature: Shakespeare's Prospero in *The Tempest* (1611), Friar Roger Bacon in Greene's *Friar Bacon and Friar Bungay* (1592), and Spenser's Archimago in *The Faerie Queene* (1590) all fit this paradigm, which descends right down to the present day. The supreme modern example of this paradigm can be found in John Bellairs's *The Face in the Frost* (1969).

Interestingly enough, Tolkien strongly rejected this tradition and anything else that he felt smacked of the occult; he would have been deeply distressed to know that there are now not one but two Tolkien Tarot decks. When speaking of elven enchantments in his essay "On Fairy-Stories," he goes out of his way to distinguish between the elves' preternatural powers, which are part of their very nature, and "the vulgar devices of the laborious, scientific, magician" (p. 15). For Tolkien, magic was not something humans

were meant to have, and accordingly he viewed their attempts to gain such power with great suspicion. He sees such magic as "not an art but a technique; its desire is *power* in this world, domination of things and wills" ("On Fairy-Stories," pp. 49–50; emphasis Tolkien's).[7] In the draft version of this passage he went even further, saying of this kind of magic that "its desire is power in this world, and its tendency … inevitably evil" (*Tolkien on Fairy-stories* [2008], p. 143). This is all the more ironic, since we now know that one of his friends and fellow Inklings, the poet, novelist, and playwright Charles Williams, was secretly a practicing ritual magician who founded his own offshoot of the Golden Dawn; Williams was careful to keep his occult activities from his fellow Inklings, who only learned of it years after his death.

As every gamer will know, this concept became the dominant form of magic in *Dungeons & Dragons*, where it underlies the wizard class (earlier simply known as "magic-users"). This is made explicit in the 1st edition *Dungeon Master's Guide*, where it explains that "players who have opted for the magic-user profession . . . have just completed a course of apprenticeship with a master" (DMG, p. 39). This master prepares a simple spellbook as a final gift to the former apprentice now going out to seek his or her fortune as a journeyman spellcaster; further spells must be gained by research or by copying into this private book spells found in grimoires and scrolls encountered while adventuring.

Channeled Magic

Here the force powering the spells is not a neutral power mastered by knowledge and practice but an external force with a will of its own, as well as an agenda. The source of magic is thus a personality, divine or malefic, with whom the would-be spellcaster must strike a bargain or at the very least have some special relationship. Typically he or she serves as a representative, in the mortal world, of some greater power; the caster is their agent, and the ability to use such magic often comes with a price—at the very least of being subservient to a higher (or lower) power and at worst of being expendable for the greater good (or triumph of evil, depending).

The classic literary figure representing this tradition is the title character in Marlowe's *Doctor Faustus* (circa 1604), who sells his soul in order to gain power, knowledge, and forbidden pleasures (like experiencing the love of women long dead), largely through granting him a magical servant (the devil Mephistopheles) able to grant his wishes.

The traditional understanding of witchcraft also depicts it as channeled (satanic) power, also typically accompanied by a magical companion (a familiar). And any number of saint's lives has shown the saint in question as a wonder-worker, able to perform all kinds of (divine) magic, here called miracles. In either case the power is not that of the person performing the magic but of the entity who granted the gift.

This type of magic appears in Tolkien, where it is overwhelmingly associated with the powers of evil: the Nazgûl (whose leader, revealingly, is called the Witch-king), as dangerous as they are, are feared not so much in themselves but for the way in which Sauron's power tends to manifest in their vicinity. It is suggested that the Ringwraiths have little personality left, having been almost wholly consumed by the power that dominates them. Simply being in their proximity is dangerous, since they have the power to draw others into their own shadow-world.[8]

On a more positive note, the Phial of Galadriel offers an example of holy magic at work. This magical item contains light from a Silmaril that has been captured (by a circuitous route) and placed inside the phial, from which the hobbits are able to awaken and evoke it when faced with a force of primordial darkness, the Daughter of Ungoliant.

In *Dungeons & Dragons*, this type of magic provides the underpinnings of clerical magic, in which the spells a member of the cleric class prays for each day are granted by his or her deity. We're even told in the classic form of the game, 1st edition AD&D, that the deity may withhold a specific spell or grant the character a spell he or she did not request.[9]

Innate Magic

In this conception, magic is a gift; you're either born with it or you're not (see the world of Harry Potter, forever divided between wizards and Muggles). Someone born with a talent for magic may still need training, just as someone with a facility for languages still must learn to read and write, but the innate ability has to be there first.

The exemplar of this theory of magic is Merlin, the greatest of all magicians and wizards of legend (and the most popular, too, ever since Geoffrey of Monmouth introduced him back in 1136), who was born half human, half demon. Merlin can do magic because he is himself a magical creature. Similarly, although Thomas Malory says that Morgan le Fay "was put to school in a nunnery" where "she learned so much that she was a great clerk of necromancy" (*Le Morte d'Arthur* [1485], Book I, Chapter 2), this is clearly a later rationalization, as revealed by Morgan's by-name *le Fay*: i.e., the Fay-woman, Elf, Faerie.[10]

This is the tradition that Tolkien overwhelmingly favors. As he says in a draft letter from 1954, written at the time of the book's first publication,

> a difference in the use of 'magic' in this story is that it is not to be come by by 'lore' or spells; but is in an *inherent power not possessed or attainable by Men* as such. (*The Letters of J.R.R. Tolkien*, p. 200; emphasis mine).

In Tolkien's world, then, there are no wizards' academies, no magicians' guilds, no temples for training clerics: like religion, magic is subsumed into the fantasy world. Instead, there are many different sentient races (humans, elves, dwarves, hobbits, etc.), each of which has powers unique to it that would seem magical if used by members of any other race.

Thus Gandalf, the most iconic of modern fantasy wizards, can cast a wide array of spells because of who, or rather what, he is: a supernatural being. In Tolkien's conception, Gandalf the Grey is nothing less than an angel incarnated into human form for a specific mission, as is Saruman (who goes bad) and Radagast (who goes native). Sauron himself is a fallen angel, a being of the same type as Gandalf and his fellow wizards but far more powerful. So too the balrog, a demon of the ancient world more dire than any dragon.

Equal in power to the wizards are the elf-lords, who combine a longevity that, Tolkien said, roughly corresponds with the inhabitability of this planet with a control over their environment impossible in any shorter-lived race. They can establish enclaves

(Doriath, Lorien, Rivendell) that become enchanted realms and even control who can and cannot enter. Beyond this, even a fairly typical elf like Legolas simply transcends human limits: in lifespan, in the ability to walk on snow or go for days without sleep or rest, and in preternaturally keen senses (especially hearing and sight).

The same could be said of the other, seemingly less magical creatures. Aside from being long-lived and durable beyond human norms, dwarves excel in curses to protect their treasure against thieves, as when they "[put] a great many spells" on the treasure they have taken from the troll-lair (*The Hobbit*, p. 83). They also create a wide array of magical items, from the small and portable (the mithril coat) to the monumental (the magical doors to Erebor and to Moria). In keeping with Tolkien's ideas about magic, cited above, humans are almost never shown casting spells; the major exception, Aragorn, is able to control the palantir and to use athelas to heal because of his nonhuman heritage. Even hobbits, the most nonmagical creatures in the story, possess "the art of disappearing swiftly and silently," which they have developed into a skill that to the Big People (us) "seem[s] magical" (Prologue to *The Lord of the Rings*, p. 13).

This concept of magic was adopted wholesale into the early D&D game, where "elf" and "dwarf" and "halfling" are all character classes, alongside fighting men, magic-users, clerics, and thieves (see the 2nd edition of the *Dungeons & Dragons* game by Eric Holmes [1978]).[11] Each of these race-based classes has special magical or magiclike abilities deriving from the character's race, such as being able to see in total darkness, immunity to some forms of magic, or disappearing from view when in certain surroundings (D&D, 2nd [Holmes] edition, pp. 6–7).

Within the main line of the game's development, in AD&D, this theory of magic found expression, oddly enough, in the psionics system. Originally not a class at all but an attribute that characters of any class could have—an extra added ability—it was relegated to an appendix of the 1st edition *Player's Handbook* (pp. 110–117). Not until 2nd edition AD&D did this third distinct magic system become the form of magic practiced by its own class, the psionicist[12]. In more recent editions, innate spellcasters have been incorporated into the game proper, beginning with the sorcerer class in 3rd edition (2000).

A Magical Realm

Somehow the idea has grown up that Tolkien's is a low-magic setting.[13] Such a misapprehension no doubt arose partly because Tolkien has become the default against which others are judged, so that we are less struck by his achievement and innovations than they deserve. And partly because of simple inflation: the idea that a book with ten dragons in it is somehow more impressive than one with a single dragon falls to pieces if that one dragon is impressive enough—e.g., Smaug the Chiefest and Greatest of Calamities.

Make no mistake: this is a world whose fate rests upon possession of a magical ring—who has it, and what use they make of it. A world that was originally a Flat Earth, made round at the time of Atlantis's sinking, with a "straight road" that can still be found by the fortunate few, allowing them to physically leave the world behind. A world in which the evening star is a magical ship literally sailing through

a sea of stars, lit by a magical jewel. A world filled with both cursed lands (the Dead Marshes, Mordor) and enchanted kingdoms (Lorien), where trees walk and an evil being can turn the sky dark for days at a time, where hidden magical doors open only under the right conditions or (shades of Ali Baba) when the right word is spoken, where people can live for thousands of years, being immortal in a special limited sense (another of Tolkien's innovations), and stone towers fall when a piece of jewelry is tossed into a volcano.

The magic may not always be obvious—many read *The Lord of the Rings* without realizing that Bombadil is anything other than an odd fellow who sings a lot (to be fair, the same is true of the hobbits themselves), never quite taking in that here the hobbits talk to someone who remembers a time before rain, before the first sprout of the first plant, before evil itself entered the world. And this brief listing does not begin to cover the many races, magical items, and enchanted places encountered at one time or another in the Middle-earth stories.

In short, it is a world filled with magic.

Notes

1. See the dramatic demon-summoning scene in Chapter IV of *The Worm* ("Conjuring in the Iron Tower"), and the drastic consequences of a subsequent failed summoning vividly shown in an illustration titled "The Last Conjuring in Carcë" (appearing in Chapter XXXII: "The Latter End of All the Lords of Witchland").
2. Although *The Lord of the Rings* is often wrongly called a "trilogy," it is in fact a single novel published in three parts. As Tolkien scholars are fond of saying, the fantasy trilogy has been a recognized literary form ever since Tolkien didn't write one.
3. It may be objected that what the author and the reader consider impossible may not be one and the same. For example, the late Marion Zimmer Bradley considered her Darkover novels to be science fiction, not fantasy, because she believed that she herself possessed psychic powers similar to those she bestowed upon her characters, albeit greatly enhanced in the fictions. In such cases, the overall consensus of the culture (what may be called Modern Western Mindset) generally determines whether or not a work would generally be considered fantasy.
4. "the magic itself . . . must . . . be taken seriously, neither laughed at nor explained away" (On Fairy-Stories, p. 15).
5. The same is true of McCaffrey's *Dragonriders of Pern* series (beginning in 1968), which used fantasy tropes like fire-breathing dragons but has science fiction underpinnings (its "dragons" are alien creatures on another planet genetically modified to resemble the dragons of Earth legend).
6. This latter tradition is very much kept alive in the *Call of Cthulhu* roleplaying game, where all the summoning spells contain severe penalties if they go awry or are cast by someone insufficiently powerful to control what may arrive in answer to the summons (see the *Call of Cthulhu* 20th Anniversary edition rulebook, p. 245).
7. By "not an art but a technique," I take Tolkien to mean that for elves, magic is an art (i.e., the expression of an innate talent), whereas for humans, lacking such talent, it is a mechanism for asserting control over the outside world. This is borne out by one of the few examples in Tolkien of humans attempting magic, in references to Numenoreans and some of their descendants seeking elixirs to prolong life for as long as possible—in short, to change their condition from that of "Mortal Men, doomed to die" (as the Ring-verse puts it) to a pseudo-elven longevity (*The Lord of the Rings*, p. 704; *The Silmarillion*, p. 266). And of course it is the Numenoreans' attempt to seize an enchanted land by force that leads to their destruction (*LotR*, p. 1074; *Silm*., pp. 278–279).
8. This may have been inspired by Mephistopheles's famous statement about carrying hell around with him wherever he goes:

   Faust: *Where are you damned?*

   Mephistopheles: *In hell.*

   Faust: *How comes it then that thou art out of hell?*

   Mephistopheles: *Why, this is hell, nor am I out of it.*

   (Act I, Scene iii, lines 71–74; emphasis mine)

9. "Clerical spells . . . are bestowed by the gods. . . First, second, third, and even fourth level spells are granted . . . by the lesser servants of the cleric's deity. Fifth, sixth, and seventh level spells can be given to the cleric ONLY by the cleric's deity directly … The deity might . . . ignore a specific spell request and give the cleric some other spell (or none at all)" (1st edition *Player's Handbook*, p. 40; emphasis in original).

10. *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, written about a century before, clearly preserves an older tradition in identifying her as "Morgan the goddess" (stanza 98/line 2452).

11. This use of races as character classes endured all the way to D&D fifth edition (1991), the last major presentation of that line of the game's development, as presented in the *D&D Rules Cyclopedia* (see especially pp. 23–27). And it could be argued that the concept lasted much longer, all the way to AD&D 3rd Edition (2000), when applied to monsters, all of which were at that point assigned player-character classes.

12. Introduced not in the core rulebook but in *The Complete Psionics Handbook* by Steve Winter (1991).

13. A view first, I think, propounded in the article "Gandalf Was Only a Fifth-Level Magic-User" by Bill Seligman (*The Dragon*, issue 5, March 1977, page 27).

Putting the Magic Back Into Magic

Spice up Your Gaming With Unique Fictional Magic Systems

Thomas M. Reid

The concept of magic has existed since the beginning of recorded history. Every culture has, at least on some level, attributed to magic what could not otherwise be explained. Early man "reasoned" that such unknowable forces were the providence of beings much more powerful and mysterious than himself: gods, spirits, and demons that remained hidden and apart from the earth.

Once the ancient storyteller imagined that such power could be possessed and manipulated, his next thought naturally became, "Can man not control such power, too?" And, since man does not like to share his toys, the ancient storyteller envisioned the ensuing struggles—political subterfuge, great battles, and everything in between—for control of such wonders. Thus was born the art of fantasy fiction.

Magic, and the conflicts to control it, are as ubiquitous a part of fantasy storytelling as are heroes and villains. Mystical powers, arcane weapons, and world-sundering energies wielded by mysterious recluses, young progenies, and diabolical practitioners are a staple of countless plots and form the very essence of the genre. Taking its cues from those earliest myths and legends of real-world history, magic permeates every facet of fantasy storytelling, from the ancient fables of Homer's *Odyssey*, through the classic prose of Tolkien's Middle-earth or Le Guin's Earthsea, to the modern imaginings of Gaiman, Mieville, and Butcher.

It is not so large a leap, then, for magic to make the jump from fantasy fiction to fantasy roleplaying and for it to become just as inextricably intertwined. While the prevalence and pervasiveness of magic in roleplaying is fun and engaging, there comes a point where all of it starts to feel a bit . . . similar. Magic is often portrayed

in RPG systems as a tool, a means to accomplish tasks, part of the mechanics that govern the game at large. This has the unintended side effect of making magic feel a bit too familiar, or perhaps normal.

A Fresh Alternative

I think there are ways to improve this phenomenon. I'd like to share a fresh alternative. I present below two fairly common concepts of magic found in fiction, coupled with a handful of what I consider to be the most unusual examples of each. My intention is to remain system-agnostic, but depending on the rules set you prefer, you might have to work a bit more to let my suggestions mesh with your existing campaign.

Two caveats: First, you must be careful that you don't make the unusual magic system too hero-centric. For example, making one of the characters in the campaign "The Hero," the one who has been Chosen™ or who bears The Power™ that can save the world, forces the player responsible for that character to be the center of attention all the time, and the other participants are relegated to sidekick status. This *might* work, *if* everyone in the group is mature enough to handle it, understand that's how it will play out, and agree to it beforehand, but that set of conditions is a pretty tall order for some gaming groups.

The other pitfall is the one where all the meaningful action taken by "The Hero" happens offstage, and the players are given other duties. At that point, much of the purpose of (and interest in) the unusual magic system is lost. This isn't to say it can't be done; anyone who has ever successfully run a campaign set in Tolkien's Middle-earth during the War of the Ring knows that there are plenty of other things going on besides Frodo's quest. But if you're going to build a campaign around a framework of unusual magic, don't you want the players to be in the thick of things, instead of playing second team?

With those warnings out of the way, let's take a look at two main concepts of magic in fiction and a selection of books that really give these ideas a twist.

Object Magic

Object magic is perhaps one of the most common magical elements in fantasy fiction. Typically, this term refers to the unique plot element that is the central focus of a story—the ancient and powerful sword that belonged to a great king and that the hero must find to fulfill his destiny, or the malevolent artifact that must be kept from the enemy's hands lest it doom the world. Object magic can also mean a system whereby an otherwise ordinary commodity becomes the focus of the magic. Finding truly unusual examples of object magic requires only a little digging.

One such case in point is the mirror magic found in Mordant's Need, a two-book series from Stephen R. Donaldson (of *The Chronicles of Thomas Covenant* fame). Mirror magic is a popular trope in fiction, but the ways in which Donaldson features it are unique. In the land of Mordant, Imagers possess the power to use magic suspended within mirrors. There is a debate among them over whether the mirrors act as mere gates between places, or if the energy the Imagers are manipulating actually creates the beings and beasts that come forth. In addition, it is dangerous

to see one's own reflection in a mirror in Mordant, as it creates a sort of psychic feedback loop that may drive the viewer insane.

Another good example of unique object magic in fiction is Brandon Sanderson's metal-based magic from the Mistborn series. In Sanderson's work, magical effects are created through the manipulation of different alloys—in some cases, the metals are burned and consumed, while in others, they are worn and must touch the skin to be effective, similar to a magical battery or conduit system. Some practitioners even use certain metals as weapons that can harness or steal magic from targets.

Object magic also features prominently in Brent Weeks's Lightbringer series, which uses light and color in a similar fashion to Sanderson's alloys. In this case, Drafters can manipulate light into a substance called luxin, which can take different forms and consistencies, depending on the hue of light used to create it. The inhabitants of Weeks's world use varieties of luxin to craft everything from structures to weapons. Those who are capable of drafting in more than one color are highly valuable in the world, as they prove to be versatile as well as powerful. In every case, though, the effort slowly consumes the Drafters.

Using It in Your Game

With those three examples in mind (as well as any others you might be fond of), how could we put object magic to good use in a fantasy roleplaying game? Pulling ideas about object magic from fiction can be a lot of fun. We could spend hours constructing a system, refining details in a myriad of ways to make a rich, highly complex, magical methodology. We could even combine elements from a number of different sources. You want to infuse color or alloy magic into your mirror idea? Great! Suddenly, mirrors with tinted glass or constructed of specific metals have a huge influence on how the magic works. Still, devising a magic system that allows some type of object or commodity to hold unusual properties, and developing a powerful group of practitioners who harness such a commodity in fantastic ways, is pretty standard fare.

We need to go a little deeper. We could, and should, create an entire economy around the commodity. What if owning and manufacturing the material were regulated or heavily restricted? What if doing so untrained was so dangerous— potentially causing great havoc, even to the point of altering reality—that to even attempt it was punishable by death? Suddenly, we open up all sorts of possibilities. Perhaps characters in our game work to hunt down and secure rogue elements illegally using this type of magic. Alternatively, the characters could be those rogue elements, struggling to free society from the iron-fisted grip of individuals in power who covet the magic solely for themselves. The characters could be drawn through to this magical realm from our own world (much as the heroine of Donaldson's work was drawn through a mirror into Mordant), bringing the highly dangerous commodity with them, all while completely ignorant of their true power.

Tainted Magic

Magic that is somehow impure or poisoned is another prevalent mechanism added as a twist to fantasy fiction. I want to mention two examples here, but many others can be found relatively easily. The first, of course, is the late Robert Jordan's Wheel

of Time series. Unless you've been living under a rock, you're probably aware of this series, finished recently by Brandon Sanderson. Granted, this set of books falls into the category of The Hero with The Power, but let's set that aside in favor of looking at exactly what that power offers us in the way of rich campaign fodder. In essence, drawing on magic leaves a residue of impurity that slowly drives men who can channel the One Power insane. The effect of the taint in this instance becomes a major plot point in the story—namely, the tool that the hero must use to save the world will at the same time destroy him (and possibly the very world he is trying to rescue). It becomes the classic double-edged sword, where the hero is damned if he does and damned if he doesn't.

Another terrific example of tainted magic, albeit for different reasons, is the world-eating magic taken from *The Alchemist* and *The Executioness*. These two titles are a pair of novellas written by two different authors—Tobias Buckell (*Sly Mongoose*) and Paolo Bacigalupi (*The Windup Girl*)—that are set in the same fictional universe. In Khaim, the magic that once drove all manner of conveniences and mercantile enterprises has been outlawed due to its negative effect on the lands—namely, the Bramble, a nasty, highly poisonous mass of thorny weed that is taking over cultivated lands, growing ever larger each time magic is used. Now, with the Bramble posing such a problem, people must learn to cope with a much-reduced dependence on magic, and the hardships this creates are interesting all on their own. Beyond that, though, are the politics surrounding this crisis. The reality is that not all magic has been banned; those in positions of power have underlings who can use magical energies, and the leaders get to decide whether a project or emergency is worthy of its use, weighing the needs (and the political expediency) against the harm the Bramble will cause. Not everyone is happy with the decisions.

Using It in Your Game

The crucial element here is to go further than just conceptualizing the nature of the magic and examine the fallout from it. Using Jordan's idea of tainted magic, we could place our characters in a position to fight against those affected by the curse. Perhaps indiscriminate use of the tainted magic is causing dangerous side effects that ripple through the land. To add more depth to the situation, those afflicted by or causing the taint don't have to be adversaries; they could be normal, good-hearted folk who just got unlucky. They could even be associates or family members of some of the characters.

We could assume that the afflicted are rare and often quickly hunted and caught, or we could allow for a full-blown civil war between those who suffer from the taint and those who wish to eliminate it. Maybe there are places in the world where the afflicted retreat, where the taint of magic roils from them regularly but stays confined geographically, and the characters must journey there. Maybe they just need to pass through, or maybe they must find someone who has disappeared within.

We could also shift gears and put the onus on the characters to find a cure or solution to the problem. What if the king (or his son or daughter), beloved by the people, suffers from the tainted magic? What if the effect is limited—so far—to the royal court and the castle? Alternatively, what if it is spreading like a plague or virus across the land?

In contrast to the taint in the Wheel of Time series, which is directly connected to and influences the people using it, the world-eating magic of *The Alchemist* and *The Executioness* is focused more on the land. These stories and the setting they so richly detail are just begging to be put into play as a roleplaying backdrop. What better way to make use of magic as a contested and dangerous commodity than to have the aftereffects be devastating and to politicize it? Characters in a game facing this catastrophe might work for the decision makers, ruthlessly persecuting anyone who "steals" a bit of magic for unauthorized purposes, or they could covertly use (or aid others in using) such magic to assist the very needy, despite the law breathing down their necks. They might also combat the Bramble directly, seeking a way to drive it back or ultimately destroy it—and would the authorities be all that eager to see a source of their power given back to the populace? For this type of taint, the campaign's focus is turned more toward the politics of control of the magic than on the magical effects themselves.

The power of this approach is that, unlike standard game magic, the results of the taint can be pretty much any story element we wish to play with. Want to cause a major earthquake? Done. How about turning the drinking water to blood? Transforming common people into demons? Featuring visual ripples of reality changing? Snap your fingers and it is so (perhaps with a *little* forethought and planning). The point is, this kind of major plot element needs to function outside the rules of the game. Otherwise, if we define such magic within the framework of the rules system, we also by necessity establish its limits and the means by which the characters in the game can stop or usurp it. (It's the same reason why you should never provide game statistics for deities in your setting, lest you want your heroic characters trying to defeat them in combat.) Keeping the players off balance because they don't know what might happen returns that sense of wonder and apprehension to the process.

Other Forms of Magic

Object magic and tainted magic are far from the only types of magic systems found in fiction that can be ported over to a roleplaying campaign to bring new life and pizzazz. For example, the concept of the horcruxes from J. K. Rowling's Harry Potter series lends itself well to gaming (essentially taking the concept of a lich's phylactery to its logical extreme). Truthfully, we aren't limited to fantasy or even printed literature. In *Dinner at Deviant's Palace* by Tim Powers, the main villain of the tale is a puppet, controlled by a psychic, intelligent, interstellar gem with a malevolent agenda. In the film version of Frank Herbert's *Dune*, words have great power, as does language in Blake Charlton's *Spellwright*, to the extent that misspeaking could cause a person to literally choke on their own words. In Hanna Peach's Dark Angel series (a collection of ebooks found only online), tattoos made with angel blood convey magical properties to the wearer.

Return to the Roots

In every example, the magic itself—while unique in its form and operation—works best when it is coupled with dynamic plot elements tied to it. In the fiction, it's the politics and the aftereffects of manipulating such power that really make a story

gripping: who stands to gain, who suffers, and who decides the outcome. *That's* what we want to inject into our gaming.

If you feel like your game has grown stale, that the magic of your campaign has started to feel a bit too mundane, consider returning to the roots of the genre and pulling out some fantastic variations from the fiction that inspired roleplaying games. Weave a little magic of your own, sprinkle in a bit of politics and subterfuge, and you'll see the wonder and excitement return in no time.

Divination and Prophecies

Wolfgang Baur

In human history, the use of magic is deeply intertwined with the oracles and fortunetellers, wise crones and seers who advised great rulers and who claimed to know what was to come. In gaming and in fiction, this tradition still exists, but in a sadly truncated form called "divination spells" in fantasy RPGs such as *Pathfinder* or *Dungeons & Dragons*.

This is a shame, because the magic of the fates and fortunes holds great potential for story-driven gaming and exploration-flavored gaming alike. Think of *Macbeth's* witches, or the Norns of Scandinavian sagas, or even the classic Oracle of Delphi. They make pronouncements, and the world changes. Nations shake, and adventure is everywhere.

In gaming terms, there are fewer examples to choose from: the Clockwork Oracle of the Midgard campaign setting, the Tarokka deck in *Ravenloft*, and (if you stretch the point into science fiction) even the all-seeing Computer of *Paranoia*. There are few others, for that's just the point: human legends are full of seers and oracles and prophets, and our gaming isn't. Primarily, this seems to be because prophecy requires a certain amount of narrative planning, guile, and setting trickery to work. It doesn't work very well off the cuff because of the way prophecy depends on the setting and context to carry through over a longer period.

While divination and prophecy pose real problems for gameplay, they are not insurmountable. Considering the issues and finding ways to resolve them offers both gamers and novelists some real tools for better tales.

Problems With Divination and Fates

In stories, of course, the hero often is the subject of prophecy at birth or upon reaching adulthood. He or she is the chosen one, the one who must conquer some great evil, right some wrong, or simply conquer and enslave all those evil neighboring nations (hey, the old legends are full of genocides and barbarities—you wouldn't want to live in those days, but they do make for compelling heroic tales). This early mark of the fates is a magical sign of divine favor, a sign that Your Character is the Greatest Ever.

This is absolutely-goddamn-perfect for fantasy heroes, and I don't know why relatively few games make it an option to be the Chosen of Wotan or the Blessed Shieldmaiden Who Shall Wipe Clean the Wastelands. I mean, seriously, players aspire to greatness, to divinity, to archmage-ness and to Lord of All Upper and Lower Egypt all the time. Why not just grab the mantle of prophecy from the start and make it a defining character trait?

One obvious problem, of course, is that if you are the Chosen One, you can't fail—or at least, the entire campaign may become about that one character, to the detriment of all others. You are a source of magical miracles and wonders. Everyone else is just your henchman, hireling, or follower. In a game where the usual social structure is a group of ragtag murdering tomb robbers or a motley crew of misfits, putting one of the misfits on a path to greatness while sidelining the rest will make one player very happy and the rest very unhappy. Most gamers do not sign up to be the Messiah's secretary or guide.

And there's another problem, which is bigger than (but related to) the "can't fail" problem and broader than the "chosen by fate" problem. Many if not all divinations require some form of foreknowledge or perfect knowledge—that is, knowing what's going to happen before it does, and knowing how to solve any obstacles that might arise. Joan of Arc, to choose a historical example, believed that she had knowledge of the peril of France and its Dauphin, and she believed that she was the instrument of God in resolving it. If that's not divine magic at work, I'm not sure what is.

Joan of Arc may have been wrong or deluded (the Catholic Church certainly thought so for hundreds of years), but at least from a fantasy gaming perspective, that's what we're dealing with. If your characters, like Joan of Arc, think they are chosen, divinely wise, and fated to win, how the heck do you generate a game full of setbacks, obstacles, and real challenges?

In other words, there's no fun in always being the Chosen One and always winning. If magic makes you so powerful that nothing can stop your inevitable rise and triumph, what's the point of playing?

Solutions to the Divination Problem

The usual solution to the problems of fate and future in divination magic is to disallow most of it by hamstringing the magical effects in a game. D&D offers some yes/no auguries, some consultation with divine beings, and some ability to see and hear things at a distance. Those are certainly useful, but they are hardly wondrous. Call this the tactical side of divination: just enough magic to see around the corner or over the hill, but not much more.

The thing about divinations and prophecies in a game is that if they don't come true, a little of their magic and wonder fades. But if the prophecy comes true too easily, well, there's no sense of reward and struggle. In a very real sense, the GM's authority is at risk if a prophecy is poorly handled. Either a player feels cheated ("But I was the Orcslayer, as foretold under the mountain!") or the party is bored ("There he goes, chasing orcs *again*…")

Here some ways around those issues, as well as suggestions for dealing with the problem of a single-most-important character, the fated figure.

Making the Foretold Fate Actually Happen

The biggest obstacle that GMs and game designers often see is the one that's actually the least daunting, I think. That is, the danger that a prophecy is given and it fails to materialize. I consider this a minor nuisance at best, primarily because a prophecy need not come true to be interesting in a game. Let's look at that.

Gamemasters and adventure designers sometimes reach for the magical hook I call "visions of doom." It's a classic of pulp storytelling, it's all over the Cthulhu mythos, and it's beloved of race-against-the-clock scenarios. The basic idea is certainly familiar, as it comes in a form such as "The commander of your order of paladins has had a disturbing vision" or "The archmage has gazed into the Eye of the World and seen great danger." This classic warning of impending doom comes in many forms, but the result is always clear: a call to action for heroes. Get out of the tavern, boyos, there's doom afoot!

There's nothing really wrong with this approach, as it does the job and it can keep a group of sometimes chaotic or easily distracted PCs focused. They have a job to do, and if things go right, they do it. The dire fates have been avoided, the threat is dealt with, and the ominous prophecy didn't come to pass. No problem there.

Positive Fates

The bigger problem, I think, is not in avoiding a bad fate, but in ensuring that a good one happens in an interesting way.

Now, there are several pitfalls here. I recommend that you sometimes enlist players to make such fates happen in interesting ways. In particular, the nature of the prophecy should be such that over time it may become a burden, even a deadly one requiring sacrifices never expected at the start. This could be a matter of how the prophecy is interpreted, but I think it is even better if there's a sequence of visions and magical insights that happens over time.

For instance, the hero is fated to rule an empire, then he learns that he must fight a civil war to seize the throne, then he learns that one of his friends or lovers is on the opposite side, then this rival becomes a leader of the opposition, and then the rival must be slain or imprisoned to ensure peace. Either the prophecy can be fulfilled or the friend's life can be saved. Planning for a dilemma like this works to make a fated figure more interesting over time.

The main thing is that the meaning or intent of the prophecy changes at some level. Joan of Arc thought that sharing her voices and vision for France would win her allies in the Church and elsewhere. In fact, the establishment turned against her and burned her at the stake—but her wider goal was met. That is a bit of an extreme example, but if you have a player who is going to play a fated figure, talk to them about what they want out of it. Some might like a theme of sacrifice. Others just want a straightforward conquest. Still others won't mind puzzles and confusion as long as things resolve a story point.

Finally, note that a prophecy need not be kingdom-shaking to be interesting. Saying that Glorvig the Axe-maker is the one fated to slay a notorious dragon is interesting, especially if another player character seems much more like the physical, dragon-slaying type. Will the party let Glorvig the crafting ring-mage strike the final blow? Will that lead to another twist that awakens the ring-mage's magic? Maybe. But it will certainly make the combat more difficult. Hmm… another dilemma!

The Wrath of Fated Peers and Nemeses

The thing about being a magically empowered character of mythic resonance is that you draw attention from beings, powers, and dominions that do not wish to see your fate come to pass. The son of Thor is likely to have magical foes (the many daughters of Loki, perhaps?). We see this in stories and sagas all the time. While some of the gods gave magical help to the Greeks, others aided Achilles and the Trojans. The world may hang in the balance, but that doesn't mean you don't have to fight hard to win.

As a result, the fated character can easily be treated as a punching bag for the villains of the campaign. Everyone knows the prophecy, and the Dark Lord has offered a huge reward for the death or capture of that rebellious miscreant—or at least, that's what everyone hears. Propaganda can be a powerful tool against prophecy, and so can simple greed. Think of the way the White Witch in Narnia turns all the animals against the Sons of Adam and Daughters of Eve. Fear of the evil and powerful means that spies, informers, and traitors will oppose the fated figure. Even in the case of Joan of Arc, many of the rich and powerful clergy and nobles were set against her cause. Now imagine that for every mythic fated figure, there is an anti-fate, or a nemesis.

The nemesis might be entirely unknown at first. Because a fated figure is so often recognized, everyone wants to aid or oppose their cause. The peer or nemesis takes this to a peer level—an NPC with just as much power and great magical resources, just as dangerous as any heroic adventurer. The nemesis may believe that he or she is the true figure of prophecy and the PC is a rank imposter. The nemesis might be a blood relative, former lover, or twin, which makes them emotionally and socially more dangerous—they know all the character's secrets and weaknesses.

Alternately, the nemesis may be supernatural and inhumanly malignant, a demon foretold by a lesser prophecy that requires arcane knowledge to defeat permanently. It can be killed but keeps returning again and again, a rotting revenant set against fate. No matter how you build a nemesis, both the arrival of the nemesis and its eventual defeat will take the focus off the fated figure to a degree, and it can make the idea of a fated figure both more interesting and much more complicated.

Prophecy in Error

Prophets can be wrong. Oracles can be bribed to lie. The gods can change their minds, and a magical shield can be stolen, corrupted, or subverted. With great power come great enemies.

In other words, even the greatest fate is mutable, and not every prophecy is fulfilled. Even when it *is* fulfilled, the price may be incredibly high. Joan of Arc was successful in restoring French power, but the price she paid was death at the stake. Your hero may learn that his fate requires sacrificing himself, or may learn that (much worse) he must sacrifice loved ones (think of the seer Calchas who prophesied that the Greek leader Agamemnon would need to sacrifice his daughter, Iphigenia, to appease the goddess Artemis and get a wind to carry his fleet to Troy). The prophecy may require destroying one great thing—a kingdom, an entire family, a city—to save another. No one said greatness comes cheap.

Clockwork Oracle and Troupe-Style Play

To avoid the focus of gameplay on a single character, there are two rather opposite solutions. One is the introduction of troupe-style play; the other is fated fellowship.

Troupe-Style Play

The Chosen One character hears a lot of voices and is besieged on all sides (rather like the Saint's mythic path in the *Deep Magic* collection, temptation is everywhere). And being torn in so many directions for a world-changing figure like this might mean that you could adapt troupe-style play in the *Ars Magica* mold into a troupe that surrounds this fated figure. (If you're not familiar with *Ars Magica*, it's a European fantasy RPG where everyone has a wizard character and a handful of "grog" characters—all those who cannot use magic. Every game session, one or at most two of the wizard characters go on an adventure with some group of grogs.)

To put a more traditional spin on this, it could be that the special hero of the sagas is a character that each player gets to play only some of the time. He could be a saintly paladin who demands much of his followers. He could get a lot of notes from the GM about visions, secret lore, and intuition about the right path. He could be a complete fool who happens to have the power of the land, but who is really sort of hapless in combat. The player who gets that character in any given session puts his regular character aside for that session in one way or another: the special hero might possess the regular character, the regular character might fall into a magical slumber when the hero appears, or it might be all coincidence, but the big spotlight does require full attention to play.

The important thing is that no one player has control of that character all the time. In fact, it's possible that two players have different visions of what a prophecy means, and the same character pursues two different goals, haunted or ridden by conflicting visions. While seeing different ways to achieve the same goal keeps all the players moving in the same direction, working at cross-purposes or with entirely different interpretations is something best left for advanced players. It would need to be handled carefully, as it might easily become frustrating for players not used to this style of collaborative plot-spinning. It is more common in indie games and LARP-influenced games like *Vampire: The Masquerade* than in mainline fantasy RPGs, but it's an interesting change to see for a short arc.

The rest of the party is mostly along for the ride, but everyone gets to hold the raw power of truth every so often.

The Fated Fellowship

This option for a campaign or novel turns the usual relationships inside out because the divination is unclear about which character is the one around whom all revolves. Someone in the adventuring band will be the hero who prevents an apocalypse, restores the one true king to the throne, or cleanses the nation of the demonic cult that has overtaken it. But who? No one is sure, least of all the oracle who gave the prophecy. All the adventurers must work together, and all are a team of rivals working toward the same goal. I'm sure every GM can see how this might work.

And we might take it one step further. The first character to gain mythic status or certain power points or a particular artifact might seem to be the fated one of the fellowship. The key figure might be the physically weakest and least magical of all the characters or (sudden twist!) a henchman with a draconic bloodline whom the others swear to serve.

To take this to an extreme, the status of "most likely to save the world" might even be passed around the table from player to player every week, granting some magical power that amounts to an action-point or hero-point sort of mechanic. But it also means that NPC gypsies refer to that character as the fated one—or that NPC villains recognize something about the character and strive to destroy her!

This approach requires some foreknowledge of a campaign arc or storyboard, a set of plot points to come. These are easy enough in a campaign planned out tightly, but most GMs don't nail down every plot turn (the adventure path format is the big exception). This is a commitment of time and resources that can easily be undone if the players decide that the prophecy storyline isn't compelling, isn't solvable, or isn't their highest priority. You should make sure your players are on board with this role for fate and prophecy before you write a 20-page story outline for it.

What We Gain From Magical Divination in Fantasy Games

As gamemasters, designers, and players, we gain a lot from making use of magical divination. We gain some easy and compelling plot hooks and inciting incidents for clerics, paladins, druids, and so forth. We gain a very interesting "voice of the GM" cat's paw if a single oracle becomes a fixture in a medium- or long-term campaign. And if the prophecies are known to more than a few people, we gain a potentially very interesting tool as villains and NPCs are likely to be motivated to act along with the heroes.

If you make "the future is known" work for your game, you'll find that this corner of the magical tradition offers a GM huge leverage for moving a campaign in the directions you and the players enjoy most, without making it all too easy or letting it revolve around a single player. The fate of the world rests on someone's shoulders, surely, but whose? And are they up to the challenge? We have no fate until our fate is written.

A Spectrum of Sorcerers

From Gandalf the White to Walter White

James Enge

You can see the wizard in your mind as soon as you read the word "wizard." He's tall and thin, with a gray beard and hair. He has a wide-brimmed hat on his head and a staff in his hand. In his clear, wise, kindly eyes you can see a power: the power to bore people to death.

It hasn't always been this way. Tolkien's irascible Gandalf and T.H. White's prankish Merlin are different, nonboring iterations of this archetype. But if you say "archetype" a thousand times fast, it starts to sound like "cliché." How can we avoid the story-killing boredom that is likely to arise in the audience's mind when they read or hear the word "wizard"?

Avoiding Boredom

You might make the boredom work for you and tell the tale of the bad guys instead: the enemy of boredom is the storyteller's friend. This has been done well (and not so well) over the years. Ari Marmell's *The Goblin Corps* is a brilliant recent example, with a Gandalfy/Merliny wizard leading the opposition to the hero-villains of the title. But this "Oh, yeah?" response runs the risk of becoming a cliché in its own right.

You might just avoid the word. James Blish, in his classic science fiction criticism from the 1950s, deplored the tendency of lazy writers to "call a rabbit a smeerp" instead of doing real worldbuilding. But when a word makes the wrong sort of emotional impact, smart storytellers stop using that word. No one uses "ejaculated" as a verb of saying anymore unless they're trying for a laugh. ("'Don't point that thing at me!' he ejaculated loudly.") Similarly, we might prefer to call our magic users "makers" or "demiurges" or "metaphysical effectuators" or some other word (borrowed or made-up) and avoid distracting our audience with unintended and overfamiliar images.

If you tell a tale about Merlin or his analogues, one way to avoid triteness and reader boredom is to reach back to the medieval source material. Merlin, in the first tales told about him, is a much more interesting figure than he later becomes. He's a crazy kid screaming about two different colors of dragon; he's a cunning shape-shifter who is not above arranging a sexual liaison for his king; he likes to assume disguises and

play tricks. And he's a ridiculous old goat who throws away everything because he falls in love. Gandalf of any hue he is not.

But if we're looking back at older material, there's no need to limit ourselves to Merlin. The ancient, medieval, and modern worlds are rich in cultural material that we can snatch and grab for our purpose. In mentioning this stuff, I'm not suggesting that there is some standard of accuracy we have to meet. We have the liberty to shape our worlds as we like; sorcerers act the way we say they do. But it can be a heavy burden to make up every single thing in a universe. That's why I recommend furnishing an empty world with a rich and diverse range of cultural thefts.

I see at least three different wizard types: the scientific sorcerer (who is in essence a scientist operating in a universe where the physical laws are different from ours), the spirit-user (who persuades or compels gods or demons to perform miracles), and the sonic spellcaster (whose spoken or sung magic somehow interacts with the universe itself). The list isn't intended to be exhaustive, just suggestive, and the types tend to blend into each other.

Scientific Sorcerer

The astrologer, the alchemist, the herbalist, or what have you: this type of wizard pursues a field of knowledge that grants power (in a universe where the laws of nature are different from ours). These guys might not be exciting to watch at work, and there might be a tendency to use them as mere magic boxes, out of which miracles come. But astrologers in ancient Rome, for instance, were considered dangerous enough that they were periodically expelled from the city, along with actors and other such scum. If astrology actually worked, for instance, you couldn't possibly have any state secrets: competent astrologers would know what the Empire of Nehwon was going to do before the emperor did.

But would perceiving the future change it, in a temporal equivalent of Heisenbergian uncertainty? In that case, to be accurate, the astrologer's prediction would be caused, in part, by itself. Perhaps it will have to be untrue to be true. Robert Graves has a sneaky astrologer who plays a minor but important role in *I, Claudius*: Thrasyllus, a cunning little bastard who's always on the winning side because he always knows who's going to win.

Looping that temporal loop often enough might drive anyone crazy. Crazy prophets abound in Greco-Roman mythology and religion. The Pythia, Apollo's prophet at Delphi, wasn't believed to be speaking for the god if what she said didn't *sound* crazy.

A crazy person who tells you things you don't want to hear that lead you to do things you might not want to do is a very inconvenient character indeed—for Oedipus. But that's a very useful character for someone telling Oedipus's story.

The Romans had a specialized sort of prophet who inspected the innards of sacrificial animals. He's not crazy, probably, but do you want to sit next to him at dinner? People are also animals. Does that gleam in his eye mean that he thinks you're a suitable sacrifice, and that he wants to examine your liver—or does he just want you to pass him the mustard?

In American fantasy, the classic scientific sorcerers go back to John W. Campbell's *Unknown*, sister-zine to *Astounding Science Fiction*, the premium SF magazine of

the day. Wizardry in *Unknown's* fantasies tended to be organized on some rational speculative principle, like the prayer-powered gods of Van Vogt's *Book of Ptath* or Campbell's own heroic fantasy *The Elder Gods*. The apex of the scientific sorcerer is probably seen in the Harold Shea stories of Pratt & De Camp, especially the second story in the series, "The Mathematics of Magic." But even their collaboration *Land of Unreason* (a non-Shea story) belied its name with a wonderfully bizarre display of reason unhinged from realism. And Larry Niven has played this game very effectively in his sword-and-sorcery, especially his first two stories of the Warlock ("Not Long Before the End" and "What Good Is a Glass Dagger?").

Spirit-users

Then there are wizards (or magic users, anyway) who achieve their effects through some sort of god or ghost or demon. (The categories blend together.)

There are priests who more or less help you interface with the god. For instance, at cult-centers of Asclepius, the god of healing, you would go to the priests and arrange to sleep in the temple. Then the god might appear to you in a dream and tell you how to cure your sore elbow or hearing loss, or whatever was bothering you enough to make the pilgrimage to that temple. Maybe the priests slipped something in your drink or elicited a dream by suggestion. Or, for all I know, they actually could get Asclepius to appear on cue. If so, it's a kind of magic.

Then there's the sage or saint who can work miracles because of his sheer wonderfulness. Apollonius of Tyana was one such wonderworker. He traveled around preaching to people and enacting miracles of physical and moral healing; he accumulated an entourage of disciples; he eventually fell afoul of the Roman government; in the end, he ascended into heaven. At least one other ancient example of this type of sage will no doubt occur to you.

We may seem to be far from the topic of wizards here, but this is really the kind of wizard Gandalf seems to be. *He* didn't get any letter from Hogwarts; whatever education he received in his long life, his powers to summon fire and transcend death seem to be religious in origin. Personally, I would shy away from this kind of wizard in storytelling because it's hard to say what they can't do. A little mystery in magic is a good thing but, as H.G. Wells is supposed to have said, "Nothing remains interesting if anything can happen." (If Wells didn't say it, someone should have.)

The magicians in Jack Vance's later fantasy seem to be spirit-users of a less elevated type: they mostly achieve their effects through the agency of spirits called sandestins. Some of the conversations Vance's wizards have with these awkward immaterial creatures are kind of amusing, but I never seem to find them as amusing as Vance does. I guess that's a useful word of warning to the storyteller: your magic systems should serve a storytelling end, never become an end in themselves.

Then, several steps lower on the social scale, there's the criminal god-user: the wizard who uses spirits to bind the will of other people or otherwise harm them. That's a death penalty offense in the original Roman legal code, the Twelve Tables. But, year after year, century after century, we know people kept committing this crime. We have the curse tablets and spellbooks to prove it.

Whereas priests pray and hope the gods listen, these sorcerers compel the gods to obey them with threats and tricks. They may pretend to be a more powerful god, or they may somehow threaten a god or ghost to do their will.

Erichtho, the corpse-chewing witch from Lucan's epic poem *The Civil War*, is so horrible that she can force the gods of heaven to obey her commands: "They concede every evil thing when she demands it," Lucan says of Erichtho. "They fear to hear her spell a second time."

And she is pretty bad. She defiles altars, robs graves, and murders children, all in the furtherance of her dark art. Not even a god would want to get a second call from this person.

> *She sinks her fingers in the eye-sockets*
>
> *and likes to pluck out the empty eyes,*
>
> *and gnaw on the nails of hearse-cold hands.*
>
> *She tears with her own teeth at the noose of the self-slayer;*
>
> *she clutched on corpses dangling from the cross,*
>
> *opened their innards to the uncaring clouds*
>
> *sent sunlight into the gleaming guts;*
>
> *she seized the dark spike driven through the hands*
>
> *and collected the corruption oozing from the corpse,*
>
> *fondling it with her own fingers as she swung from a sinew*
>
> *clenched in her teeth.*

Lucan goes on with a few pages of this stuff, and he's only getting started. The gods of hell are made of sterner stuff than the gods of the sky—a little corpse-chewing won't bother *them*. But Erichtho can master even the gods of hell by threatening them with the power deeper than all infernal gods: Demogorgon. Remember that name for emergencies, I guess.

Sonic Spellcaster

This type of sorcerer somehow directly affects the universe through an intimate contact with musical/mathematical reality: he sings and the universe obeys him, or she thinks her way around corners that others don't know are there. Orpheus is the classic example, whose singing was so powerful that rocks and plants and birds and things would hover around to listen to him. Another figure like this from ancient myth is Amphion, who sung the stones into place in the massive walls of seven-gated Thebes. And Pythagoras and the other philosophers of his school fall into this category, too. When they aren't inventing the Pythagorean theorem or calculating the music of the spheres, they have the ability to bilocate—to be in two places at once. Any mathematician that advanced is indistinguishable from a magician (to paraphrase Clarke's Third Law).

Vance's earlier (and, to me, more appealing) fantasy seems to abound in characters of this sort. Even though a spell-user may not understand the words of a spell, if he

or she can memorize them and speak the "space-twisting syllables," their sounds will cause the world to change.

Where Do Wizards Come From?

Your wizard may come preassembled, batteries and all, ready to work as soon as you take him out of the box. And sometimes it'll be best that way: not every character can be allowed to bend the audience's ear by telling the long, complicated story of his life. We have things to do; those monsters won't fight themselves.

Still, how a wizard gets his powers matters for the kind of wizard he is. Was he just born that way, different from the rest of us? The original Merlin was: the son of a devil, according to one version. For a creepy, un-Gandalfy Merlin, have a look at the one in James Branch Cabell's book *Jurgen*. The wizard has an evil shadow that does his bidding when it's not flying off to dangle from church steeples or other phallic symbols. Imagery like that got Cabell's book banned for obscenity, by the way: a brilliant career move if you can manage it. Nothing sells better than a banned book.

The Latin poet Catullus mentions the rumor that a Persian *magus* was supposed to be born from incest between a mother and her son. It's one way to explain the rarity and oddness of magicians (although Catullus is just using it to slander one of his numerous frenemies).

The born-that-way wizard appeals to the audience's impulse to be special without working much for it. (Anyway, that appeals to me.) But it can verge on racism, and issues like that (Muggle vs. magically gifted) do come up from time to time in the Harry Potter books, for instance. They are well handled, I think, because Rowling takes the issues head on. But someone who treats magical ability as an innate gift, especially one attached to certain bloodlines, runs the risk of being an accidental racist. That's not something you'd want to put on the blurb page of your paperback.

Plus, in a way, the born-wizard just doesn't make sense intuitively. Certain talents are innate, sure, but that doesn't mean they necessarily pass down a bloodline. My father was a CPA, but that didn't guarantee me an ability to handle numbers (as my high-school math grades will attest).

Most skills have to be acquired by hard labor, and usually our wizards will have gone through a grueling process of training and studying the nuts and bolts—the "lines, circles, scenes, characters," in the words of Marlowe's Doctor Faustus, who goes so far as selling his soul to complete his skill set (the ultimate student loan). He does end up damned eternally a little bit, but his journey has more emotional impact because he is responsible for his success or failure: he's not the Chosen One acting out his inborn Destiny.

A Navajo legend or slander says that sorcerers get their magical power from killing someone in their family. And it has to be someone close to you, not a seventh cousin who never even comes to the family reunions. That's a powerful and disturbing notion, too. It's convincing because people have a conviction that things have to be paid for. And the price tag for overriding the laws of nature would have to be pretty high.

Why Are Wizards So Disgusting?

The easy answer is that they're not. Pythagoras thinking about math so hard that he appears in two different places, or Orpheus singing his sweetheart out of Hell, or Prospero bending heaven and earth to ensure a happy marriage for his daughter—these aren't repulsive figures.

Still, there are figures like Erichtho, or the witches in Apuleius's *Metamorphoses* or Petronius's *Satyricon* (executive summary: more corpse-chewing is involved, as well as some inappropriate urination), or the horrible degraded little image-makers from Cabell's *Figures of Earth*. Magicians in legend and myth often are horrible or creepy figures, and it's worth wondering why.

Maybe this is just an ancient version of the geek stereotype. It's certainly true that someone who has his mind constantly on something other than the here-and-now can be pretty hard to take right here and right now. (So people are constantly telling me, anyway.)

Still, I think the truest answer lies in the appeal of magic itself, which is the longing for the impossible: the ability to fly, to master the weather, to live forever—whatever you can't do and want to do.

Some things are not physically impossible, but socially or psychologically impossible. People *can* kill their fathers and marry their mothers, but they are not supposed to. If they wanted to do these or other sorts of antisocial things and get away with it in antiquity, they might well have consulted a wizard of some kind. And the wizard might take their money and cheat them (which is bad enough) or help them in their criminal or immoral pursuits (which might be worse). So the ancient wizard occupies the same sort of ecological niche that drug dealers do nowadays—less like Gandalf the White, more like Walter White.

Maybe, as worldbuilders, we should be asking ourselves: are our wizards disgusting *enough*? And the answer depends on what they are there for—what impossible desires their abilities represent in our invented worlds. But whether or not we make our wizards people who we'd want to sit next to on the bus, we should be wary of making them the kind of wizards people expect to see. Every boring cut-and-paste version of Merlin is a lost opportunity to catch the reader's interest. It doesn't matter so much if the audience's first reaction is "Ick!" as long as their second one is "Tell me more!"

Selling Your Soul: A Guide

F. Wesley Schneider

Few miracles lay outside the reach of those achieving the highest echelons of magical mastery. Yet as one climbs, so does perspective change. The power to obliterate foes, to manifest incredible wealth, to reshape the world to a whim, all once-supreme desires gradually reveal themselves as trivialities amid the immeasurable milieu of planes, divinities, and immortal secrets. Limited by their natures, even the greatest mortal magic users hardly compare to the godlike inhabitants of otherworldly realms. But for those of especial daring, even the power of divinities is not out of reach. When fate and ambition conspire to bring a mortal to the threshold of her every unspoken wish, there is but one secret she must know: how to effectively sell her soul.

What Is a Soul?

Countless tales warn of monsters snatching away mortal souls, of devils offering damning wishes to ensnare one's vital essence. But rarely do such stories consider the root of such soul-stealers' desire or cast the spiritually imperiled mortals as more than just victims. While most religions would call it blasphemy to even consider, the truth of the matter is that every mortal possesses a bargaining chip capable of attracting the envy of godlike beings, a bartering piece that might be spent to fulfill any dream imaginable.

For most mortals, a soul is nothing more than wasted potential, an unacknowledged mystery. To truly know what a soul is, one must look past himself to those who desire souls the most. For the traders, collectors, researchers, and gourmands of the realms beyond, souls are primal energy, fuel for the impossible, the touch of the gods, the secret of life. But simpler and truer than all of that: souls are fantastically valuable.

Yet if every one of the countless mortals on all the countless mortal worlds has a soul, how can they be so precious? It's the same as asking how someone can die of thirst when oceans exist. Despite vast supply, access to souls is fundamentally limited by two agents: mortals and the divine—the former insignificant, the latter quite the opposite.

Every useful soul begins in the possession of a sentient mortal being, though living creatures are usually no more aware of their soul than a sparrow is of its own kidney. Most mortals become aware of their souls only when they are released and their perspectives shift, swinging from the confines of moist flesh to a state of ethereal freedom. Many mortals go half mad at the moment of this fundamental change, but others realize that they're not merely a collection of dusts and salts, that they're something more.

At that point, it might seem that souls would be no more difficult to collect than minnows in a net, but they certainly aren't left to their own devices. Upon being loosed, souls begin a spiritual migration, an innate transcendence toward the realms of the divine. Faiths and philosophies dress this transition as all manner of rewards and damnations, but ultimately the metaphysical polarities a soul achieves during life dictate where it gravitates after the body's death. To these varied corners of reality the souls travel, joining with like essences in an eternal process minded by the gods themselves. There, through eons of gradual discorporation and loss of being, souls become the ideals, dreams, and inspirations that eventually influence new souls, continuing the timeless cycle of life, thought, and spirit. The gods place great importance on this endless repetition, going so far as to defend it with burning-winged angels and ravenous demons. As such, the opportunities for poaching souls prove both limited and dangerous.

Through the study of age-old texts and by communing with unearthly visitants, the most ambitious mortals might gain an understanding of a soul's necessity and the desires of otherworldly beings. Among these revelations is the basic truth that mortals need their souls—to a degree. Removing a soul from its body terminates a mortal's consciousness and, soon after, her life. As such, it's rarely in a mortal's best interest to allow the immediate collection of her sold soul—imminent death aside, she wouldn't have an opportunity to enjoy the negotiated payment. Fortunately, extraplanar beings rarely approach mortals and attempt to swindle them. Rather it's typically up to mortals to make the first step in the process of selling their souls.

Even among accomplished mages, few immediately realize that the power to conjure beings from other existences or to magically travel to impossible realities holds greater potential than just magical relocation. Such magic puts mortals into contact with the dream makers of the planes, and opens the door for possibilities untold. Once a mortal masters the magic to force open reality's gates, she has only one question worth considering: what can she get for her soul?

A Soul's Price

As with any commodity, a soul's value fluctuates with the market and access to potential buyers, but in most scenarios a seller can expect three things: luxury, attention, and finality.

Luxury encompasses the broad spectrum of mortal desires made available through the sale of one's soul. Worldly power, influence, wealth, pleasure, knowledge—nothing less than a genie's wish or a god's intervention is within the power of various soul-buyers to grant. If a mortal can imagine it, there's likely some entity willing to grant that wish for a soul. As such, what might be considered a fair price for a soul

is a highly subjective, personal matter. The more outlandish or unique one's desire, though, the more vulnerable one becomes to forgery, illusion, and other con-artistry. When deciding what one might sell their soul for, the most attainable luxuries are those that are appropriately decadent, but aren't necessarily unique or the possession of another powerful being. Fabulous wealth, victory in battle, or the resurrection of a loved one might be granted by eager soul traders, but the weapon of an arch-devil, the true adoration of a divine muse, or the replacement of a deity are all likely outside an extraplanar merchant's ability to grant.

Something most soul sellers don't consider is the attention their desire to sell can attract. Among those who desire souls are beings that make a living trading such precious commodities, creatures responsible for safeguarding the passage of spirits, and merciless things that subsist on mortal essence. Overzealous soul sellers have the potential to attract a variety of these aggressive and highly competitive interests. Many otherworldly traders view the collection of souls as mundane business, but a subset of dealers straddle the line between merchant and criminal, thinking nothing of resorting to threats, lies, or extortion to force a deal.

Then there are also predators, horrors of reality that don't require a mortal's consent to collect a soul. While such entities usually find discrete corners of the planes to prey upon the lost and ignorant, many act like sharks following trade ships, snatching up those who flaunt their merchandise.

Sellers should also be aware of beings who hold the natural constants of life, death, and existence as immutable laws, and so consider the trade of souls abomination. Some might intervene upon a soul seller's business in an attempt to sternly counsel her away from her chosen course, but others would rather openly murder a mortal, hastening her soul's passing to its fated end, than see it go to some unnatural use.

Finally, one wishing to sell her soul can trust in a certain finality. The questions of the afterlife with all its promises and condemnations might be utterly circumvented for an end of the seller's choosing. While most goodly, gods-fearing folk believe they have nothing to dread in their passing, such isn't the case for the less morally scrupulous. When every philosophy agrees that, upon a villain's death, her soul faces eternal punishment, why would a villain accept her damnation? Wouldn't it be preferable to set the terms of her predestination rather than submit to fate's dictate—even if such an end means oblivion? And even if one were forced to choose between bargains that all end in eternal torment, at least a bargain brings with it the promise of compensation—a comfort the natural order makes no overture toward. Ultimately, the fate of one who sells her soul might not be appealing, but it allows her to remain the director of her destiny and bargain for comforts the afterlife would deny.

Finding the Right Buyer

Once a person decides to sell her soul, the question becomes one of who to sell it to. The prospects vary, as do the challenges. To begin with, deities are typically not an option. With reality itself shaped to channel souls to the domains of the divine, the gods rarely have any interest in a single soul and won't bargain for one. Those with the magic to contact gods should avoid the topic altogether, as mentioning the possibility courts their disapproval or wrath. With these overwhelming powers out

of consideration, soul traders might be divided into three categories: mortals, agents, and fiends.

Mortals

With their interests in magic, experimentation, and amassing power, it's not terribly uncommon for mortals to seek souls—other than their own—to fuel some arcane or metaphysical design. Bargaining with mortals has the lowest risk, as they typically aren't experienced enough with handling souls to attempt any complex fraud. However, being mortals, they lack the world-altering powers of more ancient and experienced traders, being able to offer only relatively modest luxuries to a seller—often ends the seller herself might achieve through less costly labors. Due to their inexperience, mortals exhibit a measure of unreliability, as their efforts are prone to accidents and imperfect understandings. With such traders, it's not unheard of for a soul to be purchased, paid for, and still inadvertently released to its natural end or condemned to a more unexpected fate. Mortals who might have an interest in souls include arcane merchants, cultists, necromancers, seers, witches, bereaved lovers, and victims of potent curses.

Agents

Agents typically live among the planes and survive by purchasing and selling souls. This encompasses a wide variety of interplanar entrepreneurs that might be conjured into a magic user's presence or that a spellcaster might seek out in her planar travels. Most distain being magically summoned without prior permission, as doing so can interrupt their other unfathomable dealings. Agents can be dangerous to deal with—some having no qualms with duping soul sellers—but are typically merchants first and foremost. If a soul seller can find a reliable agent or convince one to serve as a middleman with another buyer (making the agent's compensation requisite to a beneficial deal), they can prove exceedingly useful in getting a mortal the most for her soul.

Most agents fulfill mortal desires as part of their business, having ready access to the means to quickly fulfill luxurious mortal desires. However, agents are ultimately middlemen, having little influence on or particular interest in a soul's final situation—who buys the soul, what a buyer's intentions are, and so on. Unless the terms of an arrangement obligate them otherwise, most agents will prioritize their own profits and reputations over their employers' safety or longevity. The most common agents include dragons, ferrymen, genies, hags, interplanar travelers, shadow beings, and merchants in planar metropolises.

Fiends

At a glance, fiends appear to be agents, but these traders seek to bilk mortals out of their souls or cause torment as part of their crooked business. Eager to be contacted, either in their hellish planar realms or by being magically summoned to mortal planes, they cultivate reputations as wish granters and mortal advocates within divine systems. Ultimately, though, fiends actively direct sellers toward bad deals, use a seller's greed to entrap those close to her, inveigle a mortal into committing offenses to prove her soul's worth, seek out sellers who promise to inflict the greatest evils with the proceeds of her soul's sale, or dupe those not interested in selling their souls

into doing so. Fiends are the group most likely to be affiliated with deities, purchasing souls—preferably virtuous ones—and directing them on toward the realms of evil gods. Many subtly advertise their efforts, weaving their names and contact methods into the grimoires and esoterica that novice soul sellers gravitate toward.

For all of the dangers and likely damnations intrinsic to dealing with fiends, they prove the most indulgent of mortal desires and provide some of the most lavish payments. However, fiends have no interest in purchasing what they can get for free, and so they rarely have dealings with sellers whose souls are already stained and set upon the path to damnation. Aside from literal fiends, like devils and demons, other planar natives who operate like fiends include agents of sinister gods, amoral dragons, evil genies, soul eaters, undead, unscrupulous planar merchants, would-be immortals, and aspiring deities.

Getting the Most for Your Soul

Even with a price in mind and a sense of who's willing to buy, most soul sellers still face unsatisfactory—and sometimes lethal—outcomes. Those rewarded with the greatest successes and compensations for their soul's sale adhere to four watchwords: humility, anonymity, peculiarity, and immortality.

Humility

Mortals face a crippling disadvantage when it comes to any agreement with extraplanar beings: they're mortal. Not only does this mean the sellers can be killed outright—often with relative ease—but they don't have the ages of experience drawn upon by most immortal merchants. Centuries-old soul traders are not inclined to deal fairly with beings that are their inferiors in nearly every conceivable way. Additionally, few mortals can expect to gain the understanding of extraplanar commerce and metaphysics that most immortal beings hold as second nature. Careful soul sellers should immediately put aside any thought of bilking otherworldly traders or using their valuable soul to tempt godlike beings. Soul sellers must never forget that they are inexpert dealers likely being taken advantage of—and if that ever appears to change, they are certainly being conned.

Anonymity

A mortal selling her own soul is like a miner openly bearing a giant diamond through a crowded marketplace. She becomes a target for every greedy and unscrupulous being who takes notice. The more that one can mitigate the attention that inevitably comes with selling her soul, the less personal danger she faces. Magical disguises and spells allowing anonymous communications can help, but they still put a caster in direct contact with dangerous elements. If a seller can find a middleman to act on her behalf—preferably an extraplanar native—her soul is less vulnerable to theft, and bargaining becomes a more businesslike exchange. As not all otherworldly beings are interested in souls, an investment of wealth or other favors might win a planar native's reliable service.

Peculiarity

At any given time there are countless mortal souls being purchased and sold. A seller must always consider what makes her soul remarkable and thus worthy of a

remarkable price. Many soul buyers consider themselves specialists of a sort and have all manner of specific requirements for any soul they would purchase. The more a seller can classify their personal experience and thus their soul's vintage, the more singular a commodity it becomes. The souls of nobles, royals, virgins, martyrs, tyrants, innocents, deviants, artists, mages, priests, the redeemed, the condemned, and countless other pedigrees all might attract the attention of a buyer willing to pay a premium price for an extraordinary prize.

Immortality

One sells her soul to reap the benefits of that sale. This means that a mortal should never agree to any bargain that hinges on her soul's immediate collection—and, thus, her immediate death. On the contrary, a seller should attempt to enjoy her payment for the longest possible period. While this certainly means securing a lavish price, a significant quantity of that payment should be valued in years. Extraplanar traders willingly pay mortals extravagant prices in part because they recover their investments after only a brief period. In comparison to the lifespans of most immortal merchants, a few decades of mortal life are inconsequential. By that token, double or triple that time is almost equally inconsequential. With this viewpoint in mind, a seller should always bargain for a longer lifespan, reaching into thousands of years—if not longer, if they can convince a buyer of their soul's especial value. Most traders won't balk at granting a mortal a few more years of life, a trifle that alone might tempt many to sell their souls.

The Final Challenge

With these considerations attended to, a mortal must then employ her magical mastery to broach the extraplanar marketplace. This might mean using gateways to travel to otherworldly metropolises, infiltrating terrestrial dens of taboo commodities, or magically identifying and communicating with interested parties.

The path laid bare, the final challenge is one of nerve. Once one has committed herself to selling her soul and made contact with an extraplanar dealer, there's little hope for returning to a mundane life. The seller should expect ambush and deception in all dealings, and take redundant measures to magically guard her life and learn all she can about her would-be partners.

Once negotiations have begun, caution, specificity, and a willingness to walk away from an uninviting deal number among the seller's greatest weapons. This can mean inviting and then spurning the advances of interested parties, potentially creating dangerous rivals—highlighting the preciousness of personal security, anonymity, and intermediates. But if a soul seller can retain her nerve and bring her magical skills to bear in navigating the strange and dangerous waters of extraplanar trade, the reward is nothing short of the fulfillment of her every dream—all for a price she'll likely never have the opportunity to regret.

A Life Less Ordinary

The Environment, Magic Systems, and Nonhumans

Martha Wells

If you have skin, scales, or fur, if you have two arms and ten fingers or four arms and twenty-eight fingers, if you're a giant or so tiny you can hide under a mushroom, if you can fly, if you can breathe underwater, all these factors affect not only who you are as an individual but every aspect of how you live. This includes what you eat, where you sleep, what weapons you make and tools you use, how you treat strangers who are different from you, how you treat your friends, and every other part of your everyday life.

But one of the things that can affect a species' magic the most is their environment. In the same way that environment governs the development of physical appearance and affects the culture of a species, it will have a huge impact on what methods of magic a species can use, as well as how and why they use magic. And whether magic is an inherent ability or a learned skill, it should be tailored for a nonhuman species the same way their weapons are tailored for them.

In this chapter, we'll look at nonhuman species that live in three different environments and what to consider when creating a magic system for them.

How to Start

Think about the natural environment of the species of the characters, how the characters have adapted to it, and the advantages and disadvantages it gives them. This will affect their physical appearance and abilities—their weaknesses, strengths, and the advantages and disadvantages that these attributes might give them under different circumstances. It will also affect their culture and level of technology, and how it shapes their behavior, including their daily life, how they fight, and what they love or fear. Even if not all members of your nonhuman species are magic users, magic still will be a factor in their lives.

One thing you need to consider is the attitude of the species' culture toward magic and magic users. Are they comfortable with magic as an everyday tool? Do they look on it as an esoteric science or a sacred calling? Are they afraid of it? Have the magic users of their species given them good reasons to be afraid of it? Determining the attitude toward magic in your culture will help you decide how prevalent and important magic is to your characters.

To begin developing your magic system, you can start with three simple ways that magic can be used, and add to it as needed:

- As a weapon for attack and defense
- For healing injuries and illnesses
- For discovering hidden knowledge, such as hunting or locating objects, people, or animals, or foretelling the future through divination or augury

The idea is to take the environmental, physical, and cultural aspects created for your nonhuman characters and determine how they would influence the practice of magic.

Different methods for performing magic (for example, charms, divination, amulets, talismans, astral magic, alchemy, rituals, and incantations) can all be adapted to fit different species. Incantations may work much the same for every species that communicates verbally. But a nonhuman species that lives on the ocean floor can't use spells that require them to make a fire and concoct a potion, at least not in the conventional way. We need to think about how the environment would affect the practice and development of the species' magic.

The key is to see the world through the perspective of your nonhuman characters. Think about what it would be like to live their lives. Consider what special magical powers or attributes they would have—something specific to how they interact with their environment and their physical appearance.

Let's look at some examples of nonhuman species in three environments and what their uses of magic might be like.

Underwater

Oceans, lakes, and rivers are home to a huge variety of life and can provide endless inspiration for nonhumans who might live in those environments. Water also provides excellent opportunities for creating unique magical abilities for them.

Natural Environment

The characters live on the bottom of the sea floor.

Physical Appearance

Our characters are merpeople. They have scales, gills, and fins instead of feet and are adapted to pressure and saltwater. Their natural defenses are retractable claws and very sharp teeth.

Culture

Their everyday life is concerned with catching fish and other sea creatures for food and defending or hiding themselves from predators. (Luring sailors to their deaths

is optional.) They have a low level of technology, mostly carving wood and working with shell and bones to build weapons and tools.

Magic

Magic users living underwater would have to work around new limitations, and their magic might gain some new advantages. Their ceremonial magic and rituals wouldn't involve heating or boiling potion ingredients in the same way that humans and other land-dwellers would because they can't light a fire underwater. Instead, they might have access to a geothermal heat source, like an underwater hot spring, to use for heating ingredients for a magical chemical reaction. They might also have the ability to create heat through magic itself.

They would have access to a great deal of material that might serve as magical components, like different varieties of seaweed or other plants that could be used to create potions, and they would have shell and driftwood that could be shaped into charms, wands, or more complex magical devices. The water itself could be a huge source of magical energy. Magic-using merpeople could draw power from the constant motion of currents, the power of the waves breaking against the shore, and storms. Magical power could be generated from the intense pressure in the depths of the ocean and used to perform large-scale spells. The merpeople might be able to cast certain spells only by diving down to the submarine rivers, which are deep ocean basin currents. They could also use an ocean current to affect climate on the surface by changing the current's direction and temperature.

When using magic for attack and defense, merpeople would have a lot of options. They could manipulate water to use as a highly effective weapon. They could create a current to drag their opponents away or to trap foes and bring them closer. They could raise sand from the ocean bottom and conceal themselves or confuse attackers. They could use magic to take control of large schools of fish or other sea creatures and use them to distract enemies or confuse pursuit. A giant shark or squid commanded by a merperson would make for an interesting undersea battle.

For healing injuries and illnesses, again we have a lot of options in the plants and other materials on the ocean floor. Charms could be made from shells and driftwood or coral, and medicines or potions from water plants. Water from special thermal springs has long been thought to have healing properties. The merpeople could use certain currents or underwater springs for such purposes.

Divination methods that would work for merpeople might involve reading and interpreting patterns in their environment. They might scatter fish bones and interpret them the way that an ancient Roman haruspex would read the entrails of sacrificial animals. They might read the patterns in sand shifted along the ocean floor by the currents, or the portents signaled by the color, shape, and frequency of waves. They might see patterns in large schools of fish or find omens in the sighting of a rare sea creature.

An underwater environment also gives us a large number of options for special magical attributes of the merpeople, and we're limited only by our imagination. Perhaps they have a spell to make coral grow rapidly. They could cultivate it and shape it to build fabulous cities or cause it to rise up out of the waves and trap ships.

Earth and Fire

Many different types of fantasy nonhumans are adapted to live underground, and their magic would reflect their individual abilities, advantages, and disadvantages.

Natural environment

The characters live in underground tunnels and cavern systems.

Physical appearance

Our characters are tunnel-dwelling molepeople covered with short, soft fur. They have large, scooplike hands and feet for digging, powerful jaws, and prominent, flat front teeth for gnawing through roots. They are effectively blind and navigate by echolocation. They don't communicate verbally but use telepathy to interact with one another.

Culture

They spend most of their time mining or cultivating moss, molds, and mushrooms in their agricultural caverns. They don't have natural predators, but they must be careful of attacks by goblinlike species that sometimes break through into their tunnels. They have a fairly high level of technology for making tools, and they use metalworking and ceramics.

Magic

In general, they might use magic to more easily tunnel through rock or dirt as well as to control geothermal heat or water. They could heat ingredients for potions and ritual magic, but they'd have to memorize spells or transmit them using a tactile system similar to Braille. The molepeople might have archivists who inscribe tactile spells onto special stones so they can be carried and passed on to magic users. Since they communicate telepathically, they might have spells that aren't words at all but are composed of a series of scents, emotions, or sensations.

Stones and precious gems that the molepeople have access to might have inherent magical properties. In medieval Europe, lapidaries listed what were believed to be the magical uses of precious stones, which could be employed in spells for healing diseases, defending against wild animals, making clothing fireproof, aiding in theft, prophecy, and many other uses. Magic that uses minerals or precious stones would be ideal for any nonhuman species adapted to living underground.

With their access to minerals and geothermal heat, the molepeople could also be experts in alchemy, skilled in combining elements and chemicals into other materials. While the goal of historical alchemy was usually to transmute base metals like lead into silver or gold, the molepeople probably wouldn't be as interested in that unless they had a gold-based economy. They might have their own system of alchemy to create materials that are not easily found underground. Alchemical reactions could transform minerals into plant fiber for making cloth or create artificial sunlight for growing plants.

As a weapon for attack and defense, geothermal heat or underground rivers would come in very handy. If attackers attempted to enter a tunnel, breaking through the rock to allow an underground river to flood it would be devastating. Bringing lava

up from the depths of the earth, allowing geysers to break through the surface, and causing seismic disruptions could make the molepeople deadly opponents in any magical battle. On a smaller scale, tunneling under foes on the surface and causing the ground to open under their feet would be hard to combat.

For healing injuries and illnesses, the molepeople could use precious stones the same way that surface-dwelling species use plants. They could grind the stones and mix the powders or chips to make potions. They could also make potions and medicines from molds and other vegetation they grow in their caverns.

Divination methods could be used for detecting veins of ore, discovering what was happening on the surface, finding hidden caves or underground water sources, or deciding the best routes for digging tunnels. Though sightless, the molepeople could cast stones into patterns and interpret them by touch. Oracles could transmit knowledge from spirits or godly powers inhabiting the depths of the earth.

Special sorcerers might have a unique magical attribute that lets them dematerialize to move rapidly through the earth. This ability could be limited by the types of rock; for example, they might be able to pass through dirt or porous elements, but not more dense materials.

Air

The sky wouldn't be an easy environment to inhabit even for a species adapted to it, but it could provide interesting situations for magical nonhumans.

Natural Environment

The characters live in the sky.

Physical Appearance

Our characters are dragons. They have eight legs and wings, but while they can move and lift things with the claws on their powerful front forelegs, they have no fine motor control and no opposable thumbs.

Culture

The dragons live in groups and can communicate over long distances by high-pitched calls that humans can't hear. They don't use tools or collect material objects, and they sometimes make lairs out of mountaintops that are inaccessible from the ground. The dragons have few natural predators and avoid eating other sentient beings. Unless attacked, they are generally peaceful.

Magic

Nonhumans who live in the air would have little access to physical materials, but they might take advantage of some forces and elements that could fuel powerful magics.

As a weapon for attack and defense, the dragons could manipulate the wind, rain, or lightning. Attackers who tried to climb to a mountaintop lair would be easy prey for a dragon wizard who could call down thunderstorms. Wind is already a power source in the real world, and it could be a source of magical energy as well. Different spells could be cast depending on the wind's speed, direction, and duration, by the

Coriolis effect, or even by planetary wind (the loss of atmospheric gases into space).

This species doesn't have humanlike hands, so they probably wouldn't have developed magic potions that need ingredients that require fine motor control to process. More likely, their healing spells would take the form of spoken enchantments and rituals. They could scratch runes on rock faces to create magical circles and talismans or shape clouds to form magical symbols. This would allow them to manipulate astral magic, which uses images of constellations and planets to draw down and concentrate the power of those objects for use in magical formulas.

Divination methods could include reading cloud formations and weather patterns, as well as interpreting the constellations through astrology.

A magical attribute unique to their species might be a spell that turns natural cloud formations solid so the dragons can rest on them during long flights.

Worldbuilding

A magic system is an important part of the worldbuilding for your nonhuman species, and that system should be in some part dependent on the species' native environment. It should be intertwined with the development of their culture, technology, and physical attributes. Now let your imagination run wild, and create some fascinatingly complex and original nonhuman characters!

The Perils, Profits, and Process of Cabal Magic

The Much-Feared and Obscure Art of the Multiple-Caster Spell

Richard Pett

Spellcasters make interesting villains, but in many cases they appear on their own or are accompanied by acolytes and servants, familiars and understudies. Why spellcasters are often alone—the jaded wizard, the worldly-wise benefactor, the angry tyrant in his tower of stone—is a subject that could form another chapter in this book in its own right, but the opportunities presented by a group of wizards, a cabal of sorcerers, or a coven of witches are considerable. Alone they are powerful, flinging fearful spells and mighty illusions, but together—what might they achieve together?

Forming a cabal of spellcasters offers you options to bring together a number of casters in one location. It also affords you a deeper option: to expand and enhance the spells cast with a number of different variations that embellish and increase the powers of such spells.

Brewer's Dictionary of Phrase and Fable describes a cabal as "A junta; a council of intriguers…" while a cabbala is "A Jewish mystical system of theology and metaphysics, dating from the 11th and 12th centuries…" The cabbalist is described thus: "…the main occupation of the cabbalist lay in the devising of charms, mystical anagrams and the like…in searching for the Philosopher's Stone, in prognostications with the dead and similar fantasies."

Groups of spellcasters or arcane researchers give you several useful tools in your adventures and campaigns; they operate secretly, enabling the knowledge they have

to be something new for you and your players, or perhaps even to the entire setting. They also let you introduce secrets that can allow some flexibility in explaining unforeseen effects and enable you to apply the wonderful backbone of many a successful campaign or adventure path—the recurring enemy.

Cabals come in all shapes and sizes; some may be helpful (but almost certainly in a worrying way), many will be enemies, and some may have unclear motives, enabling you to play them as a double-edged sword—sometimes helping, sometimes opposing. Your options for their backstories are limitless: the mad cult, the secret philosophers who ensnare demons to learn secrets best forgotten, the gentle but misguided alchemists who dabble in things they shouldn't and unleash horrors beyond mortal words.

The sections below give you a few suggestions for backgrounds for these groups, along with a fleshed-out example.

The Secret Cabal

Together we are more than men; the individual must be sacrificed for the good of all.

This cabal is obsessive about its secrecy and does everything in its power to remain so—including expecting its members to take their own lives if discovered. The Closed School, a sample secret cabal, may be exclusive, or it may be constantly on the lookout for certain triggers that draw their attention, such as unexpected power in youthful casters, a phrase or line of research, or the slow and careful recruitment of like-minded individuals. Once their attention is drawn, there can be only two outcomes—recruitment or death.

These cabals could have predictable reasons to exist, such as unlocking a doorway to another world, ensnaring a demon lord, or learning and using secrets to become gods. They could also have much more obscure reasons to dabble. Does the cult have understandable motives that have become lost in monstrous obsession? The desire to know all things and their actions to do so might draw attention to the cabal or perhaps even to the whole city, land, or world where they live. What is lurking on the other side holding the secrets? What unspeakable thing is even now scrutinizing these fickle and foolish mortals? Might a whole campaign be spent chasing a cult to culminate in a final adventure in which the player characters help them thwart the arrival of these things from beyond?

Fantasy is full of groups and individuals that dabbled in things they should not. Use these examples as inspiration for your campaign. Do foolish spellcasters create their own rulers of men, Prometheans of incredible power, and are the lessons of the novel *Frankenstein* used to inspire such a campaign? Do people seek to uncover holy artifacts for their own use, only to learn the penalty for those who do so? Does trying to become a god unravel the very world the characters live in, or lay it low with plagues or undead hordes?

The Misguided Club or Other Innocent Facade

Keep your secrets in the palm of your hand.

This secret society is open about its secret but not about its motives. As an example, the Society for the Study of Enlightenment might contain physicians, clerics, alchemists, and wizards engaged in what seems like an admirable pursuit of enlightenment, the purity of mind, and the discovery of wisdom.

Unfortunately, the group has become obsessed with its quest to the point where nothing else matters. At first, such a group used convicts as guinea pigs to test their ideas, but soon there were not enough convicts. Some group members became misguided and used their power to bring in other subjects—orcs and kobolds to start with, but eventually other races. The cabal experimented with combinations of spells that eventually became new spells held only by the cult. The result of many of these tests was madness, and inevitably a few subjects escaped.

One of these subjects was an orc who now rules an army bent on enslaving the home city or kingdom in your campaign. This incredibly intelligent orc is using some of the cabal's spells to warp and twist the minds of the people in the city, driving them mad and causing a cancer that is unraveling society. Perhaps the killer is more mundane, a madwoman who charms her victims before taking them apart and stealing their memories to use against her victims' loved ones.

Do other such secret groups wish to gain eternal life, to call creatures that unite enemies in fighting them, or to bring gods into the world to restore order, teach humility, or make enemies see each other as potential friends? This type of cabal gives you a more thoughtful and motivated society, more fools than villains, and offers you an avenue where some members may see the wrong they have done and help to stop it.

The Iron School of Religious Enlightenment

He who is wise uses his enemies' weapons against him.

This cabal starts its members young, hiding behind religious doctrine or study. Their brutal measures ensure secrecy and loyalty at all costs. Pupils are trained with lash and cruelty and coldness to trust no one, to see evil in everything and to sneer at the frailties of humans and their kind.

The pupils are taught in the ways of evil and soon possess many of the weapons held by demons and devils, in some way almost becoming those creatures. Those who survive their terrible childhood become part of a cabal that is determined to wipe evil from every corner of every place. Their definition of evil becomes blurred, and soon innocent people—the player characters, for example—unknowingly cross this fearful brotherhood, which is able to call upon the powers of Hell and the Abyss in its battle for purity.

This cabal gives you an option to bring your characters into a more blurred setting; do they work for these sponsors, or are they at the edges of your adventures? Do the characters learn of their atrocities and end up opposing them? A society-controlling enemy is always an interesting option in roleplaying games, the characters becoming fugitives against a monstrous tyranny that hides behind a façade of honor, faith, and tradition.

The motivations of NPCs in this scenario are easy. They regard everyone with even the vaguest notion of nonconformity as the enemy, and the stain or sickness must be hunted down and lanced, cut out, or otherwise removed.

The Strong Rule the Weak

He who rules has power.

This version has the cabals working openly for the glory of the country, leader, or philosophy. Membership in such groups is a great honor, and their goals and aims become a national obsession; wars are waged and people are kidnapped or sacrificed for the good of the leader and his wishes.

This type of cabal is one of the most dangerous to deal with. It shrouds itself in might, right, and power, and its members are heroes (at least superficially). Those who oppose it are traitors, the worst kind of spies and treasonists who must be caught and punished.

Similar to the Iron School example, this group uses respectability to hide its human traits and weaknesses—or perhaps something even darker. Could it be that this cabal is merely a front for a monstrous group of inhuman things, or shape-shifters bent upon destruction, enslavement, or worse? This group has the respect (or would that be fear?) of the populace and thus countless agents, eyes, and ears scouring their homeland for treason and wickedness. The cabal inspires paranoia; who can be trusted? Can anyone be trusted? Do those who commence the adventures as friends become enemies through fear, and are the characters cast in the role of evil?

Sample Cabal: The Sisterhood of the Flesh of Angels

We who are pure.

The sisters of the Nunnery of Saint Angelica seem so pure that they cannot even view a man in their lives, for to do so means being cast from the holy order as soiled, impure. The sisters operate right behind society and are open in their veils of honor; theirs is the face of faith, joy, and respect, and their secrecy is a thing of honor, not mystery or suspicion. Their choirs sing from behind specially screened areas of cathedrals, regaling royalty at birth, marriage, and death, and they are always on hand at times of catastrophe and plague. These sisters are saintly, beatific, godly, their reputation above reproach and their nunnery shielded behind an army of custom and power.

Yet in the shadows of their impressively guarded convents, the nuns openly cavort with devils. They lurk by night in skins the cabal has learned to wear and seek new members to enhance their power.

This sisterhood has human agents to do its work—the Regal Paladins of the Order—who stop at nothing to execute the group's commands, particularly if a command is to remove an abomination from the world and closet it in the sanctity of purity until its evil withers and dies. Even the paladins' darkest dreams do not hint at the true reason such objects are brought to the convent: to be used by the sisters behind closed doors for their dark desires.

The sisterhood is incredibly powerful, not only as individuals but as a cabal. They have access to spells that enable them to change their flesh and other secret spells that few have ever dreamed of. They also sit behind an iron portcullis of respectability, guarded by fanatics who regard them as angels on earth.

What might their plans entail next? Bringing evil to the world? Cleansing the skins of all the impure so they can be worn by the sisterhood throughout eternity? Or does the order simply wish to remain secret to indulge in its members' depravity, sin, and lust?

Cabal Mechanics

The cabal gives you a fantastic mechanic to throw the unexpected at your players, and variations keep players on their toes. Having a seemingly mundane encounter suddenly explode into something horrific lends an air of shock to your game. This twist will inevitably enhance other situations, since unpredictability is the spice of many great adventures. As with any new or altered situation, use it wisely; don't allow the unexpected to become mundane. If every adventure has a twist in its tail or every spell has an odd effect, the very strangeness of those effects will become lost in repetition.

Here are a few suggestions to consider.

Cabals Enhance Power

Many systems use power as an important component of magic. One of the better known of such systems—Chaosium's *Call of Cthulhu*—describes spells as having more success the more power that is expended. Take the horrifyingly dangerous spell *Call/Dismiss Shub-Niggurath*. The success of calling this abomination, and others in the setting, is increased by the expenditure of such power. Cabals could have access to variant spells or arcane secrets that enable the multiplication of power expended by its members in ceremonies, or they could command incredible power in their own right, with dozens, perhaps hundreds of members hidden in the very society where the characters live.

Cabals Enhance Levels

In spells where magic is detailed by level, the cabal can be used to enhance the caster level of such spells or to grant multiple casters access to higher-level spells. In this version, extra power would be granted by a certain number of casters, perhaps multiplying the effects, duration, or damage of a spell by sharing it as a group.

Be wary when dealing with levels. The collective must be more powerful than the individual, but don't go overboard. Take something mundane like a *fireball* spell—when cast by a cabal, its range might be greatly enhanced, making the spell quite memorable. A fireball that delivers more than a single set of damage is a startling and new use of a well-known spell, and it adds something to your gaming table. A fireball that does as much damage as several smaller fireballs does not. Always try to think a little out of the box; using cabals to give something familiar a new twist is sure to add a new dimension to your adventures.

A more radical use of leveled spells would be to consider whether lesser spellcasters could add to the damage delivered by such spells even if they don't have the ability to

cast them. For example, a number of lesser wizards could sacrifice their own spells to assist a single powerful caster in causing greater damage.

Be careful with this and all tweaks of rules. Be prepared to rationalize how it is done and whether the PCs can capitalize on it afterward.

Cabals Bring Magic

Occasionally, you might want to introduce magic into a traditionally nonmagical situation or setting. For example, while running a semihistorical campaign, you wish to introduce a rarely seen element of magic—perhaps a mysterious mist into an Arthurian-style medieval fantasy campaign, a curious and unfathomable effect into a circus at the time of the French Revolution, or a magic effect into your pulp adventures.

Cabals and groups that bind together (whether to share secrets or powers) give you an option to introduce such effects as very rare but feasible. These cabals might be formed around a secret codex, or their spells are brought about by sacrifice or dangerous pacts, or perhaps they are unique effects such as calling a particular monster to the world. Does possession of a magic codex confer the ability to cast a spell, or does the casting require an extra—perhaps unsavory or unsettling—component?

Making magic very rare, or perhaps even unexplained, enables you to weave an unknown or mysterious effect into your adventures. Perhaps such effects are never explained, and the superstitious characters put the acts down to magic. In such settings, magic—even very mundane magic—can seem powerful, amazing, and mysterious.

Cabal Flavors

The cabal is a wonderful way to introduce an endless stream of flavor. The sinister member carries a warning from his associates to the player characters, bears a scar or tattoo, or uses recurring spells or tactics. Others are drawn to magnificent secret libraries, hidden temples, and opulence to study and steal the very objects the characters are seeking. Here are a few ideas to use as starting points.

Cabals as Friends

Literature is full of mysterious benefactors, Merlin being a wonderful immediate example. The PCs may have been brought up with, are ruled by, or are friends with a cabal whose motives are clear. The group uses magic to defend the weak, to improve lives, and to assist the characters in ensuring this.

This cabal could be nothing more than a benevolent group of spellcasters who give the PCs spells when the time comes, or a kindly group of eccentrics in a historical campaign or more realistic setting. They act as a focal point for belief and information, perhaps as the backbone to a whole series of adventures, or even a campaign or adventure path. Their motives are clear, but they are blessed with a number of memorably eccentric NPCs, such as the kindly but misguided mother figure, the forgetful ancient who everyone reveres, and the sour, blunt zealot who sees nothing funny or playful in the cabal's quest to rid the world of whatever menace threatens it.

Cabals as Enemies

Cabals make for beautiful enemies, giving you the recurring-foe option time and time again; the people may be different, but the motives and philosophy are the same. They also offer a diverse and escalating group of opponents. Do lesser members speak of those above them (and of course to come in future adventures) in hushed and fearful tones? Do the powers of members escalate into horrible physical deformities?

The cabal invariably has a few calling cards that identify its hand—a desire to steal ancient secrets, a wish for power that leads the members to interact in the upper echelons of society, or the repeated use of certain spells, poisons, or tactics. They also give your adventures focus, and the worse their actions, the more rewarding it will be to ultimately destroy them.

Such cabals provide options for open enemies. Lesser members are expendable enough to use as messengers, and more powerful members are untouchable, operating in influential social circles and openly opposing the upstart player characters.

Cabals as Mysterious Benefactors and Unforeseen Enemies

This two-edged option gives you a group that may seem friendly at certain stages of the campaign—perhaps providing information, equipment, or support—but whose motives are misty or secret.

Things happen too conveniently around them. Perhaps they know too much, or maybe they intend to get the characters to carry out a certain action and then reap the rewards by killing the PCs afterward. The whole campaign could be a bait and switch, drawing the characters in with gifts and assistance to secure a final act that was the true reason all along.

The shady group is one of the hardest to run in adventures. Make it too helpful, and it may fade. Make it too mysterious, and the characters in your campaign might take actions into their own hands. Get the cabal just right, however, and you'll have the core of a memorable group of adventures, particularly if the betrayal or payoff is totally unexpected.

Use Your Cabals Wisely

Whenever you use cabals, covens, or societies of spellcasters, be very clear on your justifications for these groups and their actions. Make sure that any powers they wield are in keeping with the levels of your game, and that if the PCs were to gain those powers, the game would not become unbalanced. And above all, make them believable.

Impractical Magic

David "Zeb" Cook

Transcript of Magus Fantast's Final Lecture to the Hyborean Academy of Exploration

This lecture is taken from the Atlantean Crystals (discovered by Gygax, Stafford, et al.) and is one from a series by the individual identified as Magus Ludus Fantast. In the earliest dated works, he appears as L. Fantast, Scribe of the Second Rank. In later references he is Scribe of the First Rank and then Magus. For unknown reasons, his frequent appearances and mentions vanish from later crystals. It has been conjectured by L. Williams that static heard in distinct bursts throughout later crystals was a deliberate attempt to excise references to Fantast. Perhaps once additional crystals are transcribed, this mystery will be fully answered.

Welcomes and greetings, worthies of the Academy, and especial greetings to our newly enrobed Master Magus Gnosin, truly a man who understands men of pure scholarship over those self-named "adventurers" who profess to only respect the applied knowledge, treating the magical arts like mere mechanicians of the Great Lighthouse …

My pardons, I digress. Let me refrain myself to my notes. Today I address a serious misapprehension in the understanding of magic, especially among the current cohort of explorers, those self-named "adventurers." These logically minded fellows, better suited to be jurists in the public courts, come to one or two of my lectures and hear us speak of the rules of magic and from this deduce that magic is a quotidian business of simply waggling one's fingers a particular way while pointing at their hapless victim. Perhaps if they attended my full series of lectures they would understand the "rules" of magic are the rules of the impossible and the inexplicable. Magic is many things; it is wonderful, amazing, even contradictory, but is it not "fireball to the face."

Instead they rely on nothing but collections of bestowed knowledge! Worthies, I fear we have trained a generation of copyists, better suited to the Royal Library.

[Several minor exclamations from the audience. "Not my students" can be distinctly heard.]

I say magic is wonder. Consider our neighbors to the north, the Aesir. When they were faced with the threat from the great wolf Fenrir, what did they do? They created the great chain Gleipnir. Did it use iron and coal? No, of course not! It was made from a cat's footfall, the breath of a fish, the roots of a mountain —oh, I could go on but my point is great magic, true magic, needs impossible ingredients, not simple recipes from a book. No "practical" mage looking in his books could ever find the formula to make Gleipnir. Such a thing demands vision and art.

To those who doubt, I ask you this: which of you has made a true wonder? True magic requires more than a piece of fluff, some muttering, and a fancy pirouette. It is not science. It is not logic puzzles. It is not jurisprudence. It is art, instinct, knowledge, and temperament!

What's that, you disagree? And loudly, I will note. You demand proof? Are you so blind you do not understand the truth? Of course, yes, truly you are. All of you have been raised on "practical" magic, codified in your spellbooks and grimoires, barely able to see the supernatural world beyond the edges of the page. Very well, I shall provide examples to help you understand.

Let me demonstrate the impossible, magic created beyond your simple imaginations—you there, Magus Benno, look closely now…

[At this point, the recording becomes garbled with what appear to be multiple voices and the roaring of a massive beast. While this might be mere static, it is the Translator's opinion that recording was undamaged and these are last moments of Magus Fantast's lecture.]

The Impractical in Practice

Whatever happened in Magus Fantast's final lecture, his lesson has application to modern roleplaying situations. Where the Magus railed against those who saw only practical applications for their magic, RPGs are plagued by a player of a similar sort—the infamous rules lawyer.

Rules lawyers fall into two general groups. There are those who have memorized every bit of the rulebook (especially as pertains to their class) so they can capture every bonus, every modifier, and every precise application. They often seize on suggestions as absolutes. An example of how something could be done becomes the only way it can be done. Their weaponry is encyclopedic knowledge and stubborn inflexibility. The goal is absolute consistency: A will always lead to B, but never C.

The second type of rules lawyer is more aggressive. They are the barristers who argue every loophole and vague interpretation. Sometimes they are consistent in their arguments, but often the argument is simply what will serve them best at that moment. Their goal is not to remove uncertainties but to exploit inconsistencies to their favor. A may lead to B in this case, but next time it might be C if the argument can be made.

Managing the rules lawyer is not an easy task. It is true that in the right conditions, such a player can be an aid and ally. The first type can help remember the rules and acknowledge when the rules work against the players. The second can be harnessed to serve the story if their interpretations can further the dramatic moment of an encounter. Both uses require finesse and confidence on the part of the gamemaster.

It is easy to blame the rules lawyer for all sorts of woes, but that's not wholly true. After all, games are rules—there are charts, die rolls, and cut-and-dried descriptions of each spell and magic item. Whatever the game, magic is codified into a system, and systems can be memorized and manipulated.

Ultimately, the true problem is that a system is the enemy of wonder. It is the battle between logic and allegory. It's hard to roleplay allegory, but it's not impossible. So if a rules lawyer starts to dominate a game, some things can be done to bring the wonder back into the game from the small to the great.

Messy Uncertainty

Magic systems are collections of specifics. Most have carefully defined values—casting ranges, areas of effect, and durations, to name a few. These are red meat for a rules lawyer, absolutes to be seized upon. Spells get cast 38 feet to perfectly target the villain. Plans are made to the beat of rounds and turns, fireball volumes are rigorously calculated, and descriptions are carefully parsed for every advantage.

However, as should be apparent from Magus Fantast's lecture, magic is a messy and uncertain business. Little, if anything, is absolute. In actuality, distances can only be eyeballed, and volumes vary with unforeseen obstructions. Neither the intention nor the letter survives the collision with the real world.

In a game, some of this is simulated with die rolls and other variables, but it does not have to stop there. The goal is to put the rules lawyer in a position where he or she must make judgments, not dictates. One of the simplest solutions takes a cue from old-fashioned naval miniatures games—get rid of the grid. It's easy to cast a spell perfectly when the distances are displayed to everyone, but if there are no squares to count, the question, "How far do you cast your fireball?" becomes a challenge in judgment. Make the player estimate his range. Be fair—give a spread from short to long (but don't get predictable) and one that is not outrageously broad. Encourage "ranging shots"—anything from lesser spells to thrown rocks that will help the player estimate the distance. Each effort will yield information. Then let him make the call. If the spell is called true, good for him, but if he flubs the range he has only himself to blame.

Some players may claim this is unfair. If challenged, ask the player to estimate the distance in real life—is that tree outside the window 50 feet, 65 feet, or 100 feet away? The PC in the game is probably starting from a better estimate than the player can make in real life.

Variables and Interpretation

Imprecision can work in other ways. Is a spell description open to debate? Fine—it doesn't have to be a case of A but never B. It could be equally A or B. Let both sides be right, and dice off the possible interpretations every time it is used. Of course, wishes

are the ultimate candidate for interpretation, but more prosaic spells are similarly argumentative. Illusion spells are especially notorious in this regard. What constitutes a good illusion? The absolutist will argue that believability has no role, only dice and mechanics count. Another example is the infamous expansion of fireballs. Some treat this as a precise geometric exercise, but real life doesn't work that way. Volumes are imprecise, different materials may absorb some of the effect, and more. These unknowns mean that even the most precise plans are inherently imprecise.

This is where the GM must rise to the challenge, allowing for variation and randomness without being arbitrary. Explain the basic variables so the player understands the unknowns. Knowing that multiple outcomes are likely may drive some rules lawyers crazy, but the good ones will rise to the challenge, playing the odds or looking for situations where either result will still be good. After all, the goal is not to discourage creativity, just harness it for the cause of fun.

If the game is one where spell components matter, quality of ingredients becomes a wonderful source of imprecision. Suppose the spell calls for ground bone. What creature? Which bone? Would the ground bone of a virtuous man be more (or less) effective than that of a hanged thief? What if it's adulterated with a little talc or refined to greater purity by the local alchemist? Again, it is important not to be arbitrary. A player shouldn't discover he has cheap dust at the moment of casting. Instead, the possibilities should be implied when he gathers ingredients. Leave the decision (and the consequences) in the player's hands. Don't be afraid to give minor bonuses for sourcing exceptional ingredients or give penalties for trying to get by on the cheap. Even better, reward creative interpretations with unexpected effects. What would be the differences between using unicorn horn, narwhal horn, and demon horn? Keep track of these effects and encourage players to experiment with this aspect of their spells. Soon they will have a customized collection all their own.

Artistic Flourishes

Although game systems make magic seem like a science, it is much more accurate (and fun) to remember that it is an art. All the elements of creating and casting must be done with a flourish. A magus is a creature of acute sensibilities and refinement. He may live in a filthy cave, surrounded by bat guano and rat bones, but he sees what others cannot. Depending on the storyteller, it may be the essence of serene nature, the twisting perfection of madness, the seductive power, or the vile beauty of darkness. Whatever it is, there is an artistic element to it.

One of the most effective ways to unravel a rules lawyer is to have him embrace the artistic side of magic. Make casting a spell more than just saying, "I cast *magic missile*." Let it be a performance, if just a simple one. Have your players recite from great writers to power their spells. Challenge them to find a line from Shakespeare that matches their spell. The more thrilling the line, the more effective the spell. "I will speak daggers to her, but use none," makes a mighty *magic missile*. Encourage them to create colorful descriptions of what needs to be done to cast that spell—lines recited, gestures, and whatever they wish to add. ("I eloquently recite the verse while flinging a pinch of dust at them.") They don't have to do it every time, though that can be fun with the right group. It is the act of creating the description that matters. Have them make it personal, unique to their wizard and no other. And again, don't

be afraid to reward their effort with minor tweaks that reduce the overall uncertainty of the spell. A good flourish can result in greater precision when estimating range; a pithy quote is worthy of rerolling 1s when dealing damage. Rewarding the effort will encourage more creativity.

Finding a Way

Most important, magic is wonder. With games and magic systems, this is the most difficult aspect to capture because wonder is about creating and doing the impossible. Clearly, this can't happen in every game session. It would be exhausting for the gamemaster and ultimately unsatisfying for the players. If everything is amazingly impossible, the game quickly becomes frustrating. If everything is amazing and possible, then the amazing no longer amazes and the game becomes predictable. Instead, the GM should carefully pick and choose moments best suited to the task—times when the stakes are high and rewards are great.

But how? It is one thing to say magic should feel impossible and quite another to make it happen. So break it down into manageable bits.

First and foremost, introducing wonder should always be an opportunity for a story. On a small scale, a player may want to create a new spell or make her own unique magic item. A grander endeavor may be killing an unkillable arch-lich. In either case, approach the problem the same way as creating an adventure. The player has defined the goal, so the next step is to create a challenge to reach that goal.

In fantastic magic (as opposed to dungeon spell-slinging), this is usually a task or an item with an inherent contradiction. It can be big or small, as appropriate to the end goal. Fairy tales are full of these—spin straw into gold, sew a shirt without seams, make a rope of ash, create the chicken before the egg, or make a chain of air. The challenge for the players is to find a way to accomplish (or outwit) this conundrum.

Of course, once presented with the task, their first question almost certainly will be "How?" That is the mystery and the true element of wonder. The answer should not be something they can find in the rulebooks. Here is where the GM must be ready to create or improvise answers to all questions. No matter what the challenge, there has to be some way to solve it. That's part of the planning, so the GM should prepare one or several ways to succeed. How does one kill the unkillable? Discover the weapon made for the task (Loki's mistletoe dart) or learn the secret of their immortality (Koschei's hidden heart), to use two examples.

Fortunately, it is not absolutely necessary to have all the answers planned out in advance. In fact, that is almost impossible. While the GM should have a solution in mind, he should be flexible to player ingenuity. After all, it is on them to work out the puzzle of doing the impossible. If the GM's solution is inflexible, most likely the players will be pushed to those answers. This is not good; it's important to have the players discover and create. Instead, having one solution ready as a backup gives the GM space to accommodate the ideas and experiments of the players.

Finally, there is the task of doing—the core of the adventure. Suppose the players must kill the deathless arch-lich. The possible answers to "How?" have been planned. But knowing how to do it and actually doing it are two different things. If the Great Oracle reveals that the unkillable lich can be undone by a weapon imbued

with a vermillion cat's stare, the players have to find a way to make such a weapon or find the one smith who can fashion it. Though the goal is to be big, dramatic, and mythic, the whole has to make sense. An unkillable foe can be killed only by a weapon that can't exist, at least in the normal world. Koschei hides his heart in a needle's eye, inside an egg, swallowed by a duck, stuffed into a rabbit, bound in an iron box, buried on a far distant island. It's a crazy hiding place, but one that's far more interesting than the local safe deposit box. Remember, magic is outside the real world. It is meant to amaze and inspire in the same way that surrealist artists and great poets do.

The Joy of Wonder

In the end, embrace the teachings of Magus Fantast. Set illogical, artistic, and amazing goals for your players. Force them out of their comfortable dependence on rules, and wean them away from what Fantast calls "collections of bestowed knowledge." If challenged to be more than just walking artillery, players may roleplay their way into fully fledged legendary mages, the kind who have crooked towers, spells, and artifacts named after them.

Imagine the stories the players will tell about how they finally defeated Koschei the Deathless in last week's game. And that, in turn, will make a campaign legendary, one that is more than just "We killed another monster last night."

Conjuration and Punishment

Steve Winter

One of the attractions of roleplaying games seems to be the opportunity to misbehave. Put a group of player characters into a town and before long, they'll disturb the peace. Wizards in all their varieties are a particular problem in this regard—not because they break the law any more than other characters do, but because they can be so much more difficult to arrest.

If we assume our typical fantasy campaign is a setting similar to Western Europe after the fall of Rome, it helps to understand how law worked in Medieval Europe.

Anyone who hopes to enforce the law must grapple with one fundamental fact: you can police only what you have the power to police. That was true when Rome was at its height, it was true during the Middle Ages, and it's still true today.

In a medieval society, the power to enforce the law requires men-at-arms, weapons, armor, and horses. If a lawbreaker comes along with more of those than you have, or enough of them to make policing prohibitively expensive or dangerous, that lawbreaker doesn't get policed.

Low and High Justice

Medieval justice was divided into two categories, depending on who was being policed: low justice and high justice.

In casual terms, low justice was what the peasants faced. In more political terms, low justice was applied by those who had the tools of force (the ruling class with its knights and men-at-arms) on those who didn't (peasants). Because peasants lacked the power to do anything other than complain, the offenses brought against them could be quite trivial, such as being drunk and disruptive in public, failing to show up to plow the baron's field on the appointed day, or brewing ale without permission. Fortunately, most low-justice punishments were as minor as the crimes: the common penalty was a fine of a few copper pieces, which went straight into the baron's coffer.

High justice was the realm of nobles or royalty enforcing the law on other members of the nobility. Here you had the tools of force being turned against others who also had the tools of force. Then as now, trying to arrest someone who was well armed,

forted up, and determined to resist was difficult, expensive, and dangerous. Because of that, high justice was never concerned with trivial matters. It was reserved for significant crimes such as treason or really outrageous brigandage.

Seen from this perspective, wizards (and all adventurers, really) are like nobles: when the Man comes looking for them, they have the means to resist. When law enforcers look at the activities of rogue wizards, they're more likely to see the problem from the perspective of high justice rather than low.

So what can keepers of the peace do when wizards step out of line? That gem of a question has four facets: foreseeing trouble, the arrest, the trial, and punishment.

Before Trouble Develops

Ask any law enforcer and they'll tell you that the best way to deal with a crime is to prevent it from happening in the first place. The big question is, how?

The Guild

Society's first line of defense is the wizards' guild, if one exists in your setting. Every guild is concerned about its reputation. Ensuring that its members handle their power responsibly is a big part of what a wizard's guild does. No one will have kind feelings toward a guild that trains people to wield great power without also teaching them restraint.

Depending on how dark your setting is, however, you might have regions or whole continents where the guild system has broken down. The only way to learn magic would be by apprenticing to a cult where power is everything, where masters jealously clutch their secrets and constantly guard against being usurped or assassinated by up-and-coming students, and where students constantly guard against appearing too ambitious lest they become the cult's next sacrifice to its bloodthirsty god. No one is going to learn restraint or responsibility under that system.

Preemptive Strikes

An important talent among all leaders, from kings and queens down to local sheriffs and mayors, is recognizing who is a threat before they actually do something destructive. If you show that you can't be trusted, you won't be trusted. In modern times, we put those people on watch lists, issue restraining orders, and make them check in with probation officers or outreach workers. In less genteel times and regions, people like that (including wizards) are found in ditches with their throats cut, or tied up in abandoned barns with their eyes burned out, before they reach a high-enough level to be truly dangerous.

Unless a player character is being an impossible nuisance, such a reaction from the DM would be awfully harsh. Instead, consider the possibility of a cautionary tale. A PC wizard comes to town and causes a ruckus; at the same time, the characters see or hear about another wizard causing a bigger ruckus nearby. The next morning, the town awakes to find the NPC wizard floating in the fountain with a note tacked to his robes declaring, "This is how we deal with enchanters."

Alternatively, the town might ignore both troublemaking wizards—for the moment. But the next day, when the NPC wizard returns to the tavern, the bartender slips

a sleeping draught into his drink. The problem wizard passes out and the militia picks him up, hog-ties him, stages a quick kangaroo trial, and hangs him in the town square before he even wakes up.

In both cases, a harsh lesson on power and authority has been delivered to the player characters without raising a finger against them.

My Word Is My Bond

Feudal rulers routinely called on their subjects to swear oaths of loyalty and obedience and to renew those oaths regularly. They didn't demand this from all their subjects—only those with the power or the potential to become rivals. They sometimes demanded a similar vow from powerful visitors to their realm or court. Historically, social pressure was enough to make this an important event. No one wanted a reputation as an oath-breaker. In a setting with curses, geases, and other forms of magical compulsion, a vow like this can carry built-in enforcement. In Midgard, a vow to "honor the peace of the realm lest the earth split open and swallow me whole" might be magically empowered such that if you break it, the earth might literally split open and swallow you whole.

Hostages

Along with oaths, rulers could demand hostages from their subordinate nobles. A baron would send a son or daughter to the king's court to serve as a page or as a lady in waiting, but along with that honor came the role of hostage. The son or daughter's well-being depended on the parent's good behavior.

A local ruler could demand the same thing from a traveling wizard or group of adventurers. No player should be forced into the role of the hostage, compelled to spend the evening watching the queen embroider tapestries while everyone else has a rollicking adventure, but this custom opens intriguing possibilities for nights when one of the players can't make it to the game. That character could be commanded to appear as a "temporary guest of the court" to ensure everyone else's good behavior. This has the side benefit of encouraging all players to be sure their characters are well-liked within the group.

Cash

An alternative to a living hostage is a monetary hostage. If wizards are known to cause damage when they loosen up in town, they might not be let in without making a large cash deposit into the baron's coffer or the town bank. Like a safety deposit on an apartment, the money will be returned when the character leaves town, with the cost of damage, reparations, and any other expenses related to the wizard's visit deducted. In a fantasy setting with magical communication between towns, wizards might even be told to pick up their refunds in the next town down the road to prevent spiteful parting shots after the money has been returned.

When Trouble Comes

The local measures to prevent wizards from stepping out of line have failed, and now Emirikol the Chaotic is blasting townsfolk from horseback as he races up the cobbled streets. What can be done?

Militia

First and foremost, remember that your fantasy setting is a world of immediate threats and distant help. When the enemy bangs at the gate, townsfolk can't depend on the baron and his handful of men-at-arms to arrive in time to save the day.

In such a setting, everyone participates in defense. The village militia is not something that other folks do; everyone is a member, everyone has weapons, and everyone turns out for drill at least a few times each year. This is a common trait of frontier regions throughout history, whether you're talking about the Roman frontier with Germania, the English coast during the Viking era, pre-Revolutionary American colonies, or the Old West.

In fact, the Old West is a decent example for guiding your thoughts on this subject. It's not a perfect model, but it's fine for gaming. Odds are high that everyone around the table is familiar with how sheriffs, posses, and citizens' committees worked—at least in the movies if not in real life, and the movies are close enough in this case.

The Priesthood

Most fantasy RPG settings are the domains of living gods and goddesses with active priesthoods. Even if the wizards who cause trouble don't pay much heed to the deities, many other people do, and condemnation from the church can be a huge handicap when a character must interact with important NPCs. No one wants to be associated with a denounced heretic; it's bad for business and bad for the reputation.

Besides this, a respected priesthood traditionally enjoys more than the usual degree of freedom to speak its mind to those in power. If the bishop says that a particular character is a problem that will need to be dealt with eventually and advises that the problem can be "fixed" more easily now than later, most barons will give that advice serious consideration.

The Baron

Which brings us to the person who ultimately must deal with any lawbreaker at the high-justice level. A powerful wizard stepping out of line in the barony is not much different from a powerful knight waylaying the baron's tax collectors or seizing a portion of his land. When you're the regional strongman and someone disrespects your authority, you need to take action or you will cease to be the regional strongman.

An NPC baron or governor has a high chance to be an ex-adventurer or an experienced warrior with some class levels. In this situation, the levels, hit points, and attack bonus of one person aren't that significant. What's important is that this NPC leader has learned in countless dungeons or on dozens of battlefields that when facing a stronger foe, you must strike that foe's weak point.

Good advice, but it begs the question, what is a wizard's weak spot? Any of the following are potential weaknesses.

- Wizards frequently travel alone or in small groups, so they are easily outnumbered.
- Their magical abilities are often restricted to a certain number of uses per day and can't be used again until after a long rest period, or they depend on magic items that can be stolen by pickpockets.

- Some of their power can be neutralized with relatively simple clerical spells such as *silence* and *hold person*.
- They are vulnerable to poison and knockout drops.
- They might have friends and family members who can be threatened or captured and used as hostages.
- They need to sleep, eat, drink, and use the latrine.

Every one of those is a potential avenue of attack.

Witch Hunters

Where there are problems, there are professional problem solvers. Like gunfighters in the Old West, mercenary-minded adventurers and wizards will hire out their services to towns and nobles that are plagued by rogue spellcasters. A few will be phonies or confidence tricksters out to grift a fat purse, and a few others will be brash young bravoes looking to make names for themselves. The rest will be the genuine article—tough, experienced, no-nonsense manhunters who have brought down foes much worse than truculent sorcerers and warlocks with impulse-control issues. The best ones won't come cheap, but the mercenary business is one where you get the quality you pay for.

Once the Problem Is Caught

Assuming the troublemaker was caught and not just killed outright, the captors face the immediate problem of how to keep an angry wizard locked up.

It all depends on how your magic works. If casting a spell requires uttering incantations and weaving mystical motions with the hands (like Dr. Strange), simply binding the wizard's hands and mouth should prevent any shenanigans. If wizards can't cast spells while distracted, tying a sack full of bees around her head should do the trick; this is no time for gentility. In other settings, the key might be shackles made of special antimagical material (cold iron, bronze, bone) or a Hannibal Lecter-style straitjacket and hood.

If all else fails, knocking the prisoner unconscious is almost foolproof. The key is making sure she doesn't wake up anytime soon.

In high fantasy settings, there's another, more extreme option: a dangerous, high-value prisoner can be killed and stored safely as a corpse, to be revived in time for the trial.

In all of this, remember that our modern notions of prisoner's rights are very young. Before the Age of Reason, being arrested for any crime was a nasty experience, and doubly so if the crime stirred up popular anger. The general feeling was that innocent people didn't get themselves arrested.

While keeping an indignant wizard under lock and key could be difficult, it wouldn't be difficult for long. The delay between arrest and trial would be a few days at most, or as little as a few hours if the prisoner was a clear danger.

You Have Been Found Guilty

If the situation goes this far—that is, a wizard has been arrested and placed on trial—then it's reasonable to expect a guilty verdict. It bears repeating that most

folks believe innocent people don't get themselves arrested. Add to that the fact that strangers stand out and are easy to blame for anything unusual or unsavory that happens while they're around. There will be no shortage of witnesses to point accusing fingers at the defendant's box once the havoc-causing wizard is safely trussed up and disarmed. No one wants to be left out of the biggest show in years.

Which brings us finally to the question of punishment.

Like trials, sentences are carried out quickly. A defendant such as a wizard is likely to receive a sentence that is either surprisingly light or very harsh. There is some middle ground, but not much.

At the light end of the scale are fines. Most fines go directly to the baron, the governor, or the judge. Peasants, townfolk, and other non-noble victims who were actually injured by a wizard's rampage would be lucky to receive any damages. The fact that the people in charge get to pocket most of the money is a strong reason for them to levy fines; other forms of punishment don't pay as well.

If a more severe punishment is called for, it could be severe indeed. While pain and suffering could be inflicted in a purely punitive manner, another goal of corporal punishment is to prevent the guilty party from committing the crime again. A culture that would cut off a thief's hand to prevent him from stealing wouldn't balk at cutting off a wizard's hands, slicing out his tongue, or burning out his eyes to prevent him from misusing magic anymore.

In a world filled with magic, however, even these harsh measures might be reversed, and a mutilated wizard who gets restored to his former power could come looking for revenge. The only way to guarantee that a rabble-rousing wizard can't cause more trouble is to kill him and take steps to ensure that his body can't be raised or resurrected.

Between these extremes are a handful of other options. Historically, they were used infrequently compared to the alternatives, but they are very useful for DMs who need to pass sentence on convicted player characters.

Banishment

Banishment is the most common intermediate punishment because it gets the problem out of the kingdom and has at least some chance of keeping it out. Banishment is a horrible sentence for normal people with families and property, but an adventuring wizard who lives on the road might be perfectly content never to come back to an irksome town.

Exclusion

Similar to banishment is exclusion from the wizards' guild. A wizard without the backing of the guild could be cut off from training, supplies of material components, shelter, and local information. Exclusion probably comes with some form of branding or tattooing to prevent any question about status.

Pilgrimage

Less severe than banishment or exclusion is being sentenced to a pilgrimage. The pilgrim must travel a long road, visiting shrines along the route and making penance

at each. A world with powerful, active, feared gods is most likely to see pilgrimages used this way, especially when crimes are committed against a church. If your game of choice includes geases, pilgrimages may be even more common.

Confiscation

If a magic item such as a *wand of fireballs* was used during the wizard's crime, the item probably will be confiscated. If anyone was killed, then probably becomes definitely.

Outlawry

Finally, there is the declaration of outlawry. This is seldom used as the sentence for a crime; more often, it is the punishment for failing to live up to the conditions of a sentence. For example, if a wizard is banished from a region, the sentence comes with the understanding that if he ever returns, he will be labeled an outlaw.

In medieval systems, "outlaw" had a different meaning from its modern sense of "someone who doesn't follow the rules." Then, an outlaw was literally "outside the law"—the law did not protect an outlaw. Anyone could break into the outlaw's home, steal his belongings, take over his land, hunt him, and kill him without breaking any law. If the baron offered a price for your head—which might simply be everything you own—you were fair game for every poacher and bounty hunter in the region, and there would be many. Being declared an outlaw is a death sentence with no set date for execution. This is especially true in a fantasy setting where there is always a more powerful adventurer somewhere whose career revolves around killing monsters and taking their stuff, where anyone can be located with magic, and where invisible stalkers always get their prey.

An Escape Clause

There's one historical precedent that works for player characters instead of against them, and it was called "benefit of clergy." Being able to read and write was a rare and special talent in the Middle Ages. Anyone who could demonstrate this skill, usually by reading a passage of scripture, could ask to be tried in a church court instead of a royal or manorial court. While a church court was every bit as likely to arrive at a guilty verdict, it could not condemn a person to death. Pilgrimages and penance were common sentences. If PCs get into frequent trouble, your fantasy world might need an equivalent to benefit of clergy, substituting magical ability for literacy and arcane courts for religious ones.

Make It Weird

Tim Pratt

I like a good *fireball* or *magic missile* as much as anyone. *Chain lightning*? Absolutely. Murderous leapfrogging electricity is great stuff. But ultimately, such familiar feats of magic become a bit expected, and as a gamer (and a fiction writer), I always prefer to be surprised. Give me the weird stuff.

To be fair, that weird stuff has been present in fantasy roleplaying games from the beginning—the whole system of magic in which wizards memorize spells, then forget them once the spell is cast, is drawn from Jack Vance's profoundly strange science fantasy setting, the Dying Earth. (Some D&D spells, like *prismatic spray*, are explicitly borrowed from Vance, too.) In one of the recent roleplaying game tie-in novels I wrote, I had a ton of fun with the oddball spells available to sorcerers of the aberrant bloodline—wild spellcasters who get magic from a nasty twist in the bloodline that comes from an ancestor who got a little too friendly with a creature from a plane of madness. Alas, even things with bizarre roots can become humdrum and familiar through overuse, so it's good to keep yourself attuned to the joys of novelty.

Back when I was a DM, running fantasy games in a homebrew setting, I stole from—sorry, was *inspired by*—all sorts of sources, ranging from Russian folk tales about Baba Yaga to superpowered mutants in comic books. At the same time, I was eager to inject my own flavors of weirdness, to create a world that evoked the same kind of majestic strangeness, the same frisson of the bizarre juxtaposed with the familiar, that I got as a teenager reading H.P. Lovecraft or Fritz Leiber or Michael Moorcock for the first time (to name three more people whose work contributed a lot, explicitly and implicitly, to fantasy RPGs). Sure, I wanted to give my players compelling adventure, difficult problems to think or hack their way out of, and impressive loot to pillage, but I also wanted them to widen their eyes and say, "That's so cool." I created a world full of clockwork cyborgs and demihuman trickster kings and lakes of living fire and embodied archetypes, and I tried to make it strange.

Eventually, I figured out that running games used the same part of my brain I needed for writing stories and books, and since writing stories and books paid a lot better

and didn't require coordinating my schedule with other humans, I moved away from creating campaigns in college and focused on exploring fictional worlds in prose instead. Even with that transition, I never lost my focus on what I have always (rather inelegantly) called the "weird shit" factor —compellingly bizarre tiny details or huge spectacles that try to show readers something they haven't seen before, or at least give them a new angle from which to view something familiar. Not just eyeball kicks—*brain stem* kicks.

I often make things up from whole cloth, sure, but I also scavenge and repurpose from the mythologies of the world, attempting the ancient art of collage—combining unrelated objects and, through their juxtaposition, creating an original effect. (That's the idea, anyway.) A lot of the ways I approach magic in my fiction could be used to add spice and color and, yes, delightfully weird shit to fantasy RPGs.

The Art of Getting Results

Gerald Gardner, founder of modern Wicca, famously said "Magic is the art of getting results." Now, I have some issues with Gardner—he was a self-aggrandizing, self-mythologizing misogynist who made up a lot of his "ancient wisdom" on the spot and stole the rest from sources ranging from Aleister Crowley to the Masons to Celtic folklore. (With that kind of syncretic approach to appropriation and recombination, he could've invented something like *Dungeons & Dragons* instead of setting himself up as a revered wise man, though I guess the latter pays better.) Those issues aside, I've always loved the simplicity and power of that one great insight: that magic is the art of getting results. Magic is the thing that works when you do it. The point of being a magician—or sorcerer, or adept, or choose your nomenclature—is to impose your will upon the world, and it doesn't matter how you do it; all that matters is whether or not it *works*.

I read once that Aleister Crowley (who had a million issues of his own, but bear with me) had a trick where he'd walk behind someone, matching the rhythm of his footsteps to theirs exactly, and then he'd intentionally stumble, tripping over his own feet. More often than not, the person he mimicked would stumble, too. Is that magic? Or just manipulating human psychology?

Who says there has to be a difference?

Under the name "T.A. Pratt" I've written eight books (so far) in a contemporary fantasy series set in a modern world where sorcerers operate in secret, fighting private wars and manipulating "ordinaries"—you know, people like us—for their personal gain or to further their personal philosophies. One of the guiding principles of that fictional universe is that *any* kind of magic can work . . . assuming you can figure out how to do it correctly. In theory, anyone can do magic. Just like, in theory, anyone can be an Olympic athlete or a concert pianist or a neurosurgeon. You just need the physical ability, the mental capacity, the training, the dedication, and the ambition. Most of all, though, you need the will. What makes sorcerers different from ordinaries is that sorcerers have immense willpower, such profound force of will that they can convince reality to change *just because they say so*. Of course, it's not always as simple as making demands and having the world answer. Usually, there's some ritual involved.

The point of ritual magic isn't the ritual itself, not typically—it's more about the directing of will and concentration. A way of entering the necessary state of heightened consciousness and hyper-focus that allows great feats to be made possible.

Specialty Sorcerers

My broad-spectrum approach to magic gives me a lot of opportunities to do fun weird stuff in my books, sometimes drawing on existing magic systems, sometimes just making up my own. Most sorcerers in my fictional world specialize, and that's where a lot of the amusement comes in—creating areas of excellence and limitation. Limitations are crucial in roleplaying games, too, of course. Characters love getting godlike powers, but then the person running the game has to throw problems at them that even godlike powers can't trivially solve, and then you're stuck in a loop of power inflation. It's much better, and more fun, to have great magics come paired with terrible costs.

Technomancers

Among the specialties I've played with in my fiction are technomancers, who use magic as a way to bridge the gap between real science and science-fantasy—mad-scientist types who don't let things like the limitations of physics stop them from accomplishing amazing feats. One technomancer in my novel *Blood Engines* believes that our entire world is basically a computer simulation—as the philosopher Nick Bostrom has proposed—being run in the far future by our own descendants, who are interested in watching our history develop. We were real people, once, long ago, but now we're just emulations of those long-dead originals, running in a simulated world so realistic we can't tell the difference. Since the world is just a program, my technomancer believes he can alter reality by hacking the simulation, and he does ritual magic to achieve those effects. The simulation theory is the only explanation for "magic" that he'll accept, and he utterly rejects any notion of the supernatural. Whether he's right or not doesn't matter, ultimately. He believes in his worldview utterly, his will is strong, and he works his magic accordingly. He also gets results.

Pornomancers

There are also a few pornomancers in my books: sorcerers who get their power from sexual energy. That's hardly an original idea, from Tantra to Crowley, but there's still fun stuff to be done with it. One of my sorcerers hosts elaborate sex parties, filling the house with magical aphrodisiacs and stimulants to build everyone up to a frenzy, funneling all the energy his guests release up via architectural magic to the attic room of his house, where the power gathers to be tapped and used as he desires. Another pornomancer goes in the opposite direction, making his own penis disappear—*a la* the persistent superstition in some African nations about wicked magical penis thieves—and surrounding himself with sexual imagery and situations, gaining power from his own frustration and repression. Sitting in a strip club, frustrated beyond endurance, he turns all those energies inward and uses them to power his magic. (Every professional athlete who's refused sex before a big game to keep from "spending his energy" was trying to work the same kind of ritual.)

Cannibal Subway Witches

I once wrote about a witch who ran a secret subway train on a closed loop deep underground, the tracks laid out in a pattern of occult significance so the train endlessly traced out a sigil of power, the energy of its motion serving to intensify the magical effects. That same witch was a consensual cannibal, luring people to her lair, where they agreed willingly to be consumed, convinced they were worthless compared to her majesty, and that their greatest service to the world would be to render themselves human sacrifices for her glory. Eating other humans turned that witch into an ultimate apex predator—so badass she could eat humans, the creatures that eat everything else—and she didn't even have to bother to hunt them, just win them over with the strength of personality and will. Exercising her power gave her *more* power.

If It Seems Cool . . .

I've written about poltergeisters, individuals possessed of barely controlled telekinetic abilities that let them wreak terrible havoc, though they tend to be led around on leashes by people with enough psychic ability to keep their deadly pets mind-controlled. Wave-mages who draw power from the endless cycle of the sea's rhythms, their abilities waxing and waning with the tides, who use magic the way surfers ride the swells: not trying to force things, but simply waiting for the right opportunities. Biomancers who've discovered the secret of creating life or imbuing objects with a semblance of life, whether through complex chemical reactions or by leaching the life-force from other creatures to feed their golems and automatons. Mushroom-mages who can poison with a touch, go into berserker rages granted by ingesting fly agaric, or simply make your flesh explode with a thousand toadstools. Chaos magicians who create elaborate plans and then deliberately sabotage them, drawing power from the collapse of order into entropy, growing more powerful with every disaster. Spatial magicians who can turn a closet into a mansion, and vice-versa. Nihilomancers who generate waves of exothermic despair. Serial reincarnators, who live immortally through their own family line, maintaining continuity of consciousness.

Basically, if it seems cool, and if I think it can cause trouble for my main characters, I do it.

Why not do the same thing with your roleplaying games? Sure, there's a lot of fun to be had with old standards like praying to a deity and getting spells, studying dusty old tomes, or just exploiting a supernatural quirk in your bloodline, but it can be so much more satisfying and mind-blowing to push things in new (or at least less well-traveled) directions.

Have a phage-mage, a character who collects magic items and literally eats them, taking the power into her own body, gaining temporary feats of magic at the cost of physical mutation. Create oracle generators who can summon ghosts or gods or demons to answer the party's questions—at a price. Skinshifters who can impersonate others so perfectly they forget it's an impersonation, believing themselves to be the original individual, until a confederate says the code word embedded deep in their psyche to snap them back to their own personality.

A Game to Remember

Fantasy roleplaying games, from D&D to *Pathfinder* and on and on, draw liberally from all sorts of literature and mythology, and there's plenty of strange stuff in the source books, but there are always things you can bring in yourself, or adapt to fit your needs, or combine for comedic or dramatic effect. The weird shit can just be decoration, a deviation from the usual fare of orcs and dragons and trolls, thrown in to keep your players off balance (and to keep them from dozing off), but you can also take it deeper and make the strangeness central to a campaign.

Let your players be the first to explore a new magical discipline or the few remaining adepts of a system long thought extinct. Give them adversaries with abilities they've never encountered before, ones that defy obvious attacks and require real lateral thinking and improvisation to overcome. Tempt them with powers and capabilities that offer innovative and oddball solutions to problems they're used to just punching or talking their way out of.

Make it weird, and make it a game to remember.

Contributor Bios

WOLFGANG BAUR is the founder of Kobold Press, its publisher, and its general go-to kobold. He enjoys Gothic architecture, Turkish candies, and Seattle coffee to an alarming degree. Wolfgang is the author of the *Midgard* and *Dark*Matter* campaign settings, and the first contributor to the *Kobold Guides to Game Design*. He lives in an impenetrable set of warrens near Kirkland, Washington, with his wife and two daughters.

CLINTON J. BOOMER, known to his friends as "Booms," resides in the quaint, leafy, idyllic paradise of Macomb, Illinois, where he attended fourth grade through college. He began writing before the time of his own recollection, predominantly dictating stories to his ever-patient mother about fire monsters and ice monsters throwing children into garbage cans. He began gaming with the 1994 release of the *Planescape* campaign setting, which shaped his junior high school years, and he was first published professionally in the ENnie-Award-winning *Pathfinder Chronicles Campaign Setting* from Paizo Publishing after placing in the Final Four of Paizo's inaugural RPG Superstar Competition.

He currently devotes a full 99.9% of his waking hours to thinking about fantasy-adventure in general—or ninjas, more specifically. Boomer is a writer, filmmaker, gamer, and bartender; his short comedic films, the "D&D PHB PSAs," have over 3,600 subscribers on YouTube and have been viewed more than 1.5 million times. A member of the WereCabbages creative guild, a frequent freelance contributor to Rite Publishing, Legendary Games, Sean K. Reynolds Games, Paizo Publishing, Reality Deviants Press, Zombie Sky Press, and the Hellcrashers setting, his debut novel *The Hole Behind Midnight* was released in 2011; Daniel O'Brien called it " … Raymond Chandler meets Douglas Adams by way of a fantasy nerd's fever dream. And it's AWESOME." Boomer is currently the happiest he has ever been in his whole life.

DAVID CHART has been working in the RPG industry for 20 years and has written for *Dungeons & Dragons, GURPS, Warhammer Fantasy Roleplay*, and many other systems. Most of his work, however, has been for *Ars Magica*, which he has been in charge of for over ten years. He lives in Japan and is currently working on *Kannagara*, a contemporary fantasy game of creation and growth set in Japan. Learn more at www.mimusubi.com.

DAVID "ZEB" COOK has been designing games and adventures for a long time—a really long time. For many years he worked at TSR, where he produced *Planescape*, AD&D 2nd Edition, the *Conan RPG*, the Bullwinkle and Rocky Party Game, and (who could forget?) the *Escape From New York* board game. For the past 15 years he has designed videogames, including *Fallout 2* and (as lead designer) *City of Villains*. He is currently at Zenimax Online, working on the *Elder Scrolls Online* game.

MONTE COOK is a 25-year veteran of the tabletop game industry. He was one of the authors of *Dungeons & Dragons* 3rd Edition while with Wizards of the Coast. Today he runs Monte Cook Games, producing new RPGs like *Numenera* and *The Strange*.

JAMES ENGE's first novel, *Blood of Ambrose* (Pyr, 2009) was a finalist for the World Fantasy Award in 2010. His latest is *Wrath-Bearing Tree* (Pyr, 2013). His short

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ED GREENWOOD is an amiable, white-bearded Canadian writer, game designer, and librarian who created the Forgotten Realms fantasy world. Since the publication of his first fiction at age six, Ed has produced more than 200 books that have sold millions of copies worldwide in more than two dozen languages. Ed writes fantasy, science fiction, horror, steampunk, pulp adventure, comic books, and scripts for radio, television, films, and computer games. He has won dozens of writing and gaming awards, including multiple Origins Awards and ENnies, and he was elected to the Academy of Adventure Gaming Art & Design Hall of Fame in 2003.

Ed has judged the World Fantasy Awards and the Sunburst Awards, hosted radio shows, acted onstage, explored caves, jousted, and been Santa Claus—but not all on the same day. His most recent novel is *The Wizard's Mask* from Paizo, and his upcoming books include *The Herald* from Wizards of the Coast (the concluding tome in the Sundering saga) and *The Iron Assassin*, a steampunk novel from Tor Books.

JEFF GRUBB is a game designer and author who has helped build a great number of worlds over the years, including Faerûn, Krynn, and Tyria. He lives in Seattle with his wife and two cats.

Multiple Origins, Golden Geek, and ENnie Award winner **KENNETH HITE** has designed, written, or coauthored over 80 roleplaying games and supplements, including *Mage: The Sorcerers Crusade, GURPS Infinite Worlds, GURPS Horror, The Day After Ragnarok, Trail of Cthulhu, Qelong,* and *Night's Black Agents*. Outside gaming, his works include *Tour de Lovecraft: The Tales, Cthulhu 101, The Complete Idiot's Guide to U.S. History: Graphic Illustrated, The Nazi Occult*, the "Lost in Lovecraft" column for *Weird Tales*, and a series of Lovecraftian children's books. Half of the podcasting team behind *Ken and Robin Talk About Stuff*, he lives in Chicago with two Lovecraftian cats and his non-Lovecraftian wife, Sheila.

JAMES JACOBS has been "researching" monsters for most of his life, thanks to his grandmother introducing him to Stephen King and several other horror authors at the impressionable age of nine. The 1st Edition AD&D *Monster Manual* was his first RPG book and remains one of his favorites to this day. Today, James splits his time between working as Paizo Publishing's Creative Director and hoping that one of these days he'll catch sight of Bigfoot out in the woods. Because what's better than spotting a real-world monster?

COLIN McCOMB has been doing this writing thing for a good couple of decades. He co-created the *Birthright* campaign setting, developed the *Planescape* campaign setting, and was one of the designers on the classic computer RPG *Planescape: Torment*. He's currently the creative lead for *Torment: Tides of Numenera* and is a co-owner of 3lb Games LLC.

RICHARD PETT is an odd person who delights in throwing spanners into works and players into unexpected situations. Whether fighting ghouls at great heights, dealing with love-crazed NPCs, or simply trying to make sure a wedding isn't

consummated, his adventures are notoriously unpredictable. His novel *Crooked* is available now at Amazon and other booksellers. He hopes you'll delve into its pages and be suitably shocked, and that your cabals will always be troublesome ones.

TIM PRATT has won a Hugo Award for his short fiction, and he's been a finalist for Sturgeon, Stoker, World Fantasy, Mythopoeic, and Nebula awards, among others. His books include three story collections, most recently *Antiquities and Tangibles and Other Stories*; a volume of poems; contemporary fantasy novels *The Strange Adventures of Rangergirl, Briarpatch*, and the forthcoming *Heirs of Grace*; science fantasy *The Nex*; steampunk novel *The Constantine Affliction* (as T. Aaron Payton); various roleplaying game tie-in fantasy novels; and, as T.A. Pratt, eight books (and counting) in an urban fantasy series about sorcerer Marla Mason. He edited the anthology *Sympathy for the Devil* and coedited *Rags & Bones: New Twists on Timeless Tales* with Melissa Marr. He works as a senior editor for *Locus Magazine* and lives in Berkeley, California, with his wife Heather Shaw and their son River. Find him online at timpratt.org.

JOHN D. RATELIFF multiclasses between being a Tolkien scholar and a game designer/editor. Among his scholarly works are *The History of the Hobbit* (an edition of the original manuscript drafts of J. R. R. Tolkien's *The Hobbit* with extensive commentary), a dissertation on the short stories of the great Irish fantasist Lord Dunsany, and a contribution to Christopher Tolkien's festschrift (*Tolkien's Legendarium*). Among his more than sixty RPG credits are *Night Below, Return to the Tomb of Horrors, d20 Cthulhu*, the adventures *Return to the Keep on the Borderlands* and *Standing Stone*, and (as coeditor) the 3rd Edition *Player's Handbook* and *Dungeon Master's Guide*, the core works of the d20 system. He lives in the Seattle area with his wife and three cats.

THOMAS M. REID's lifelong dream was to be a professional couch flopper, but those plans were dashed when his father announced that he was "no longer on the payroll" after he graduated from the University of Texas with a degree in swing-set construction (also known as a BA in history). Thomas was instead forced into a nomadic lifestyle, gathering berries and catching fish with his bare hands in such places as Indiana, Wisconsin, and Washington state. Today, he pretends to be a freelance author and editor in the Texas Hill Country, living on a quarter-acre cat ranch along with his beautiful (and patient) wife Teresa and their three boys, Aidan, Galen, and Quinton. To his great delight, he has rediscovered the joys of the couch when he's supposed to be working.

AARON ROSENBERG is an award-winning novelist, children's book author, and game designer. His novels include the best-selling DuckBob series (consisting of *No Small Bills, Too Small for Tall*, and the forthcoming *Three Small Coinkydinks*), the Dread Remora space-opera series and, with David Niall Wilson, the O.C.L.T. occult thriller series. His tie-in work contains novels for Star Trek, Warhammer, WarCraft, and Eureka. He has written children's books, including the original series *Pete and Penny's Pizza Puzzles,* the award-winning *Bandslam: The Novel*, and the best-selling *42: The Jackie Robinson Story*. Aaron has also written educational books on a variety of topics and over seventy roleplaying games, such as the original games *Asylum, Spookshow*, and *Chosen*, including work for White Wolf, Wizards of the Coast, Fantasy Flight, Pinnacle, and many others, and both the

Origins Award-winning *Gamemastering Secrets* and the Gold ENnie-winning *Lure of the Lich Lord*. He is the co-creator of the ReDeus series and one of the founders of Crazy 8 Press. Aaron lives in New York with his family. You can follow him online at gryphonrose.com, on Facebook at facebook.com/gryphonrose, and on Twitter @gryphonrose.

Editor-in-chief at Paizo Publishing, **F. WESLEY SCHNEIDER** is a co-designer of the *Pathfinder* Roleplaying Game, co-creator of the *Pathfinder* campaign setting, and author of numerous adventures, game accessories, and works of fiction. He spends his free time writing about terrible things, designing rules to kill heroes, and reading things that scare him.

KEN SCHOLES is a renegade GM turned writer. After nearly a decade of worldbuilding through short stories, he's now wrapping up his five-volume series, The Psalms of Isaak, critically acclaimed as "a towering storytelling tour de force" by Publishers Weekly. Ken cut his teeth on the TSR gaming craze of the early '80s, creating diverse campaigns for the *Dungeons & Dragons, Gamma World, Top Secret,* and *Boot Hill* RPGs. Ken's eclectic background includes time spent as a label gun repairman, a sailor who never sailed, a soldier who commanded a desk, a preacher (he got better), a nonprofit executive, a musician, and a government procurement analyst. He has a degree in history from Western Washington University and is a winner of France's Prix Imaginales for best foreign novel and of the Writers of the Future contest.

Ken is a native of the Pacific Northwest and makes his home in Saint Helens, Oregon, where he lives with his wife and twin daughters. You can learn more about Ken by following him on Facebook or visiting www.kenscholes.com.

AMBER E. SCOTT began her career as a freelancer for *Dragon* magazine in 2004. Now she happily and frequently adds to her favorite game system, *Pathfinder*. Her most recent work includes *The Worldwound Incursion* and *Chronicle of the Righteous* from Paizo Publishing. Amber posts writing news, thoughts on the roleplaying industry, and pictures of her cats on her professional Facebook page, "Amber E. Scott."

RAY VALLESE got his start in the games industry at TSR in the mid-1990s, editing and designing for the *Planescape* campaign setting. He has since worked as an editor or designer for Wizards of the Coast, Paizo Publishing, Malhavoc Press, Monte Cook Games, and more. His recent editing work includes *Numenera* (Monte Cook Games) and fiction for the *Torment: Tides of Numenera* and *Wasteland 2* computer games. Learn more at www.rayvallese.com.

WILLIE WALSH lives in Dublin, Ireland, where he works for a public service organization. He has been published in the pages of *Kobold Quarterly* and *Dungeon Adventures* and has contributed to the *Complete Kobold Guide to Game Design*.

MARTHA WELLS is the author of more than a dozen fantasy novels, including *The Cloud Roads, The Wizard Hunters*, and the Nebula-nominated *The Death of the Necromancer. The Siren Depths*, published in December 2012 by Night Shade Books, is the third in the Books of the Raksura series. Her YA fantasy, *Emilie and the Hollow World*, was published by Angry Robot in April 2013. She has had

short stories in *Black Gate, Realms of Fantasy, Stargate Magazine*, and *Lightspeed Magazine*, and in the anthologies *Elemental, The Year's Best Fantasy #7, Tales of the Emerald Serpent*, and *The Other Half of the Sky*. She has essays in the nonfiction anthologies *Farscape Forever, Mapping the World of Harry Potter*, and *Chicks Unravel Time*. She has also written the media tie-in novels *Stargate Atlantis: Reliquary* and *Stargate Atlantis: Entanglement*, and a *Star Wars* novel, *Empire and Rebellion: Razor's Edge*. She played a lot of RPGs in college and afterward, and her favorites were *Call of Cthulhu* and *Cthulhu by Gaslight*.

STEVE WINTER got paid for his first roleplaying-related article in 1980, landed a job at TSR, Inc. in 1981, and has been clinging to the RPG industry ever since. He has worked as an editor, developer, designer, fiction author, creative director for AD&D, and managing editor of *Dragon* and *Dungeon* magazines. More of his RPG-themed thoughts are posted at HowlingTower.com and on Twitter @StvWinter.

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