

GURPS

Fourth Edition

THAUMATOLOGY™

Age of Gold™



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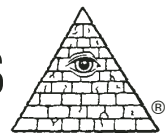
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STEVE JACKSON GAMES

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*It is the spirit and not the form
of law that keeps justice alive.*
– Earl Warren

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INTRODUCTION

It was when he saw two winged demons come howling down Fifth Avenue that Professor Blake realized that the Secret Kingdom was deadly serious about its threats.

He had received a series of demands, first subtle, then increasingly sinister, from that clandestine organization, but he had laughed at all of them. He was a man who still doubted all those claims that he had heard about magic – even though some of them came from respectable scholars these days – and the so-called Secret Pharaoh seemed to him a joke in very poor taste. But on the night before his great discoveries were due to be unveiled to the public, he left the Metropolitan Museum of Art just in time to hear the screaming start, and what he saw swooping toward him banished his doubts completely.

Blake had served in the Great War, and he had spent most of the 15 years since it ended on expeditions to remote areas of Egypt; he was used to danger. He instantly turned on his heel and fled, without the hesitation that would have killed other men. But he could hear great wings behind him. At any moment, he expected to feel barbed claws in his flesh. Someone stepped out into his path, and he veered around the person, shouting at him to flee. But the other man stood his ground, hefting something in both hands . . .

Professor Blake heard a dull thud behind him – and the leading demon's cry was cut short. Blake risked a glance backward, and then he spun around in astonishment. He was just in time to see the second demon struck square in the ribs with a great two-handed mace. The creature lurched to the ground, but it was still fighting, and it leaped for its opponent's throat. Its claws found no purchase, and a second mace-blow finished the fight. The demon vanished like a bad dream, leaving only a foul stench.

The newcomer turned to Professor Blake, who recognized a description from stories in the press. "Doc Mudra!" he exclaimed.

The masked mystery man nodded. "Professor Blake?" he inquired, and Blake nodded in turn. "I'm pleased that I found you in time. The Secret Pharaoh evidently believes that you discovered a new form of the Philosopher's Stone in Karnak last year, and this won't be his last attempt to get hold of it."

Age of Gold is a **GURPS** game setting that showcases many of the options and rules in **GURPS Thaumatology**. Specifically, it is a world based on the 1930s of our own history – but it's a version of that past era in which magic of several kinds *works* and is being exploited with increasing enthusiasm by those few gifted folk who can get it to function or who've been imbued with supernatural power by destiny or blind chance.

The 1930s correspond to the latter part of the "pulp era" and the very early days of the "Golden Age" of superhero comics, and that's very relevant here. *Age of Gold* is an age of pulp magic and arcane superheroics. Adventurers in this setting may be two-fisted pulp-style heroes – battling evil masterminds with grit, skill, and scholarship – or masked "mystery men" – alchemically transformed into something more than human. Most of the background will be familiar to anyone who knows the history of our own world in the era, but foreground characters and plots should be wildly dramatic and melodramatic. Magic, it seems, does this to those who encounter it. Some of this magic is ritualistic or alchemical and stylish, while some of it is focused and powerful; the rules from *Thaumatology* allow it to be represented in all its diversity.

About GURPS

Steve Jackson Games is committed to full support of **GURPS** players. Our address is SJ Games, P.O. Box 18957, Austin, TX 78760. Please include a self-addressed, stamped envelope (SASE) any time you write us! We can also be reached by e-mail: info@sjgames.com. Resources include:

Pyramid (www.sjgames.com/pyramid). Our online magazine includes new **GURPS** rules and articles. It also covers the *d20* system, *Ars Magica*, *BESM*, *Call of Cthulhu*, and many more top games – and other Steve Jackson Games releases like *Illuminati*, *Car Wars*, *Tran-shuman Space*, and more. *Pyramid* subscribers also get opportunities to playtest new **GURPS** books!

New supplements and adventures. **GURPS** continues to grow, and we'll be happy to let you know what's new. For a current catalog, send us a legal-sized SASE, or just visit www.warehouse23.com.

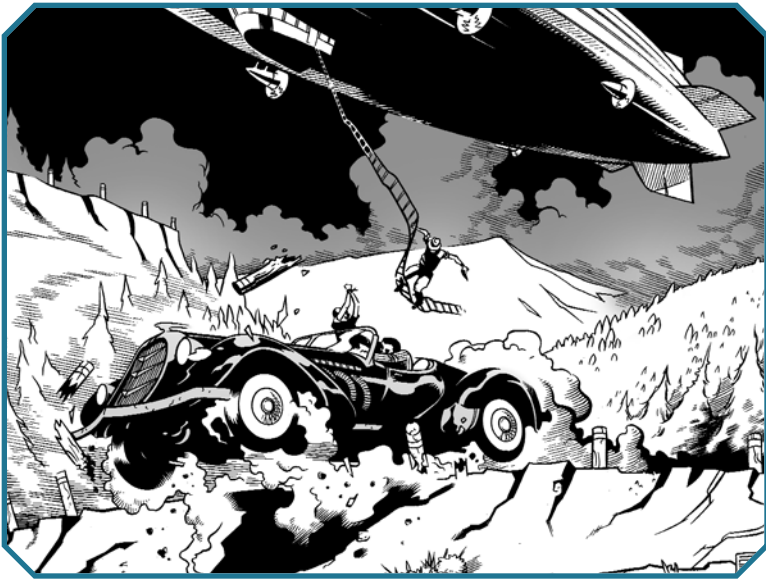
e23. Our e-publishing division offers **GURPS** adventures, play aids, and support not available anywhere else! Just head over to e23.sjgames.com.

Errata. Everyone makes mistakes, including us – but we do our best to fix our errors. Up-to-date errata sheets for all **GURPS** releases, including this book, are available on our website – see below.

Internet. Visit us on the World Wide Web at www.sjgames.com for errata, updates, Q&A, and much more. To discuss **GURPS** with SJ Games staff and fellow gamers, come to our forums at forums.sjgames.com. The web page for *GURPS Thaumatology: Age of Gold* is at www.sjgames.com/gurps/books/ageofgold.

Bibliographies. Many of our books have extensive bibliographies, and we're putting them online – with links to let you buy the books that interest you! Go to the book's web page and look for the "Bibliography" link.

Rules and statistics in this book are specifically for the **GURPS Basic Set, Fourth Edition**. Page references that begin with B refer to that book, not this one.



Why “*Age of Gold*”? What better name for a setting that not only draws on the Golden Age of comics, but features alchemists seeking to transform lead into precious metal?

USEFUL GURPS SUPPLEMENTS

This supplement is linked to *GURPS Thaumatology*; games will need that in addition to the *Basic Set*. Some GMs and players may find *GURPS Magic* worth referencing, although “spell-based” wizardry and the sort of alchemy that produces handy potions are only small parts of the setting. They can easily enough be downplayed, ignored altogether, or restricted to those spells described in the *GURPS Basic Set*. Likewise, *GURPS Powers* and *GURPS Supers* may be useful when designing and playing high-powered “mystery men,” but they aren’t mandatory.

In addition, other *GURPS* books may help, although they’re strictly optional. *GURPS High-Tech* includes information on the sort of TL6 equipment that adventurers may well want, including especially a range of firearms. *GURPS Martial Arts* may be useful for *Age of Gold* campaigns featuring lots of melee combat (see p. 31). *GURPS Infinite Worlds* could provide a wider context for all this (see p. 43).

Some e23 *GURPS* products contain highly relevant information. *GURPS Martial Arts: Fairbairn Close Combat Systems* describes fighting styles that developed in the 1930s and that were used in Shanghai in particular (see p. 13); it also discusses their creator (himself something of a real-life pulp hero figure). The two volumes of *GURPS High-Tech: Pulp Guns* provide many more options for adventurer firepower (or for their opponents’ weaponry). Meanwhile, *GURPS Lands Out of Time* could be useful for a “lost world” setting and its monsters. Visit the e23 site often to discover more handy material.

There are also a number of older *Third Edition* books that may be relevant. Some of these are still available in paper form, and some can be obtained as PDFs from e23. They *definitely* include *GURPS Cliffhangers*, which contains extensive information on the world in the 1930s, and more on the pulp mode of adventure. *GURPS WWII* and its accompanying line of books mostly cover the next decade, of course, but they provide quite a bit on the 1930s by way of context – and World War II is where the world is headed in *Age of Gold*, unless things diverge radically from our history. *GURPS WWII: Weird War II* is especially useful for its coverage of the lead-up to the war from a weird history/conspiracy theory point of view. Furthermore, some of the equipment and military information in these books may be significant. Lastly, *GURPS China* and *GURPS Egypt* can offer cultural context for some *Age of Gold* games, *GURPS Places of Mystery* can exist as a source of stylish scenario locations, and the *GURPS Magic Items* series might suggest a few interesting artifacts for mystery men to employ.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Phil Masters, the author of this book and *GURPS Thaumatology*, is also the author or co-author of such *GURPS* products as *Places of Mystery*, *Atlantis*, *Dragons*, and *Banestorm*, along with the *Discworld Roleplaying Game* and the *Hellboy Sourcebook and Roleplaying Game*. He likewise edited some recent pulp-era-related products for the line. In his hilltop lair far across the ocean, he plots further arcane contortions in the universe of roleplaying games, *even as you read these words*.

We are living in what the Greeks called the right time for a “metamorphosis of the gods,” i.e., of the fundamental principles and symbols. This peculiarity of our time, which is certainly not of our conscious choosing, is the expression of the unconscious man within us who is changing.

– Carl Jung

CHAPTER ONE

THE SETTING

Vultures were circling high in the cloudless African sky. But when a shadow fell on them from even higher, they scattered nervously. The pride of lions far below would take its time about its kill, after all.

Aboard the amazing helix-plane, its inventor and pilot adjusted the controls and turned to his passenger. "So, monsieur le commandant – this is the land where you served in the past unpleasantness, n'est-pas?"

Major George Gregory, late of the British Army, nodded briefly. "I had a colonial posting out here in '14," he confirmed, "and they kept me here while we chased that old fox Lettow-Vorbeck for next four years."

"So this is a place with many ghosts for you . . . ah, I am sorry, my friend – that was a jest of a poor sort."

"No offense taken, old chap. Yes, this is a land with a lot of ghosts, going a very long way back. But they aren't as unhappy as the ones you'd find in Flanders."

"I can comprehend that, I think. How does India compare, though? Or China?"

Gregory frowned and gazed out of the helix-plane's windscreen. "Every nation's ghosts are a little different, in my experience . . ."

But before he could explain further, his eyes widened. "Look out!" he barked. Pierre de Rocheford understood his comrade's superhuman awareness too well to question the warning. He cut power to one rotor, and the helix-plane slipped sharply down and sideways – just in time to avoid the claws of a great winged monster that had appeared seemingly from nowhere.

"Sacrebleu!" exclaimed the Frenchman.

"Just so," murmured Gregory, as he swiftly extracted his hunting rifle from its traveling case. "Now, hold this thing steady a moment, old chap. It looks like we'll have a little shooting today!"

Age of Gold is a world-wide game setting – and with 20th-century transport technology and the adventurous pulp ethos both very much to the fore, PCs should know that they have a whole world to play with. Nonetheless, mystery, drama, and deadly threats fill this world. Not everything is known as yet, and some of the unknown regions of the planet are stuffed full of strangeness and deathtraps. Supernatural power exists and can very definitely be used for evil as much as for good. Meanwhile, even in the most "civilized" corners of the known world, utterly mundane evils are emerging that threaten to drag the planet down into darkness.

BACKGROUND

The 1930s are a time of instability and widespread public uncertainty. Since the Wall Street Crash of 1929, the world plunged into the Great Depression – a period of economic decline and mass unemployment. With the democratic capitalist system seemingly in crisis, rival political systems – totalitarian mass movements such as Fascism, Nazism, and Soviet Communism – appear to offer powerful alternatives. Meanwhile, new scientific and medical ideas such as Einsteinian relativity and Freudian psychology shake the very foundations of human belief, while astronomers discover just how huge the universe really is.

This much echoes our own history. In the world of **Age of Gold**, though, another, older challenge to conventional thinking is also on the rise: the power of the supernatural.

MAGIC

Magic, it seems, has existed throughout history, and many of the usual suspects (Merlin, Michael Scot, John Dee, Faust, Cagliostro, etc.) were probably genuine wizards – but magic was often unreliable, and wizards tended to be autodidactic loners, so its effects on history were limited at best. Events transpired much as in our past, and indeed, many sensible pundits could and did deny the very existence of magic.

However, the Victorian age, with its global European-dominated empires and increasing ease of travel, saw a lot of communication between different magical traditions, each with small fragments of useful knowledge and power. This led to scholarly cross-fertilization, while the growth of scientific archaeology brought important ancient material to the attention of intellectuals. This process peaked with the discovery of a sample of the Philosopher's Stone in an Egyptian New Kingdom tomb by noted archaeologist Flinders Petrie in 1919.

With the key to alchemy, the most scientific of the magical arts, now available, broad-minded scientists began to probe the truth behind the old wives' tales and superstitions. Marie Curie investigated the relationship between the elements in the light of alchemical theory, and Albert Einstein theorized about the nature of alchemical forces. Unfortunately, despite the best efforts of such geniuses, magic still keeps many of its secrets, driving investigators crazy with its elusiveness – but a few researchers have achieved useful results, mostly by not trying too hard to work out *why* magic works, but just *using* it; the fusion of alchemy and modern science sometimes produces especially dramatic effects. In game terms, the results of applied alchemy, as it were, tend to take the form of seriously weird, pulpy "superscience," which sometimes only works for the crazy genius who invented it.

But alchemy – which in this setting is defined broadly as the science of magical transformations – is just one branch of magic and not even the most common. Perhaps the most widespread form, which can work for a lot of people without special gifts or insights, involves ritual procedures – usually lengthy processes with a lot of chanting, gesturing, and special ingredients, leading to subtle but useful effects. Because ritual magic takes so long, and sometimes (though not always) involves multiple participants, such magicians often form subtle conspiratorial groups or build cults of personality. They then either hire people with or learn mundane skills to back up their supernatural power.

The world also contains a surprisingly large number of magical artifacts and devices, apparently created by past magicians who may have used now-lost arts. Many of these items are powerful and versatile enough to make their current wielders quite formidable. Furthermore, there exist potent spiritual beings of at best uncertain temperament, some of whom are willing to lend power to compliant mortals.

In fact, because all these forms of magic take complex variant forms, it sometimes seems that *anything* is possible with magic. That's not quite true, but the limits are certainly vague.

Mana Levels

As spell-based magic isn't the norm in this setting, "mana levels" don't have as much significance as in some campaigns, but broadly, for practical purposes, most or all of the Earth in *Age of Gold* can be classed as normal to high mana; magical procedures can be conducted by anyone, but people with Magery often have an advantage. Most magical artifacts and devices can be used by anyone who knows how they're designed to function, and anybody can perform alchemical lab work. Only mages can reliably perform Path/Book rituals, although non-mages can study this type of magic and attempt to cast it at -5; see p. 126 of *Thaumatology*. Spirit-assisted magic permits non-mages to cast spells, as discussed on p. 91 of *Thaumatology*.

There *may* be some small areas with differing mana levels, or even aspected or variant mana (see pp. 58-60 of *Thaumatology*), at the GM's option – small magical "hot spots" or "dead zones," either general or "aspected" in some way. Wizards might fight for control of small high-mana "places of power," while larger ones might be the location of "lost cities of sorcery." Cunning adepts might exploit low or no-mana zones to hide themselves from supernatural detection or assault. Magic in the setting is certainly strange and unpredictable, but such variations should be kept as rare plot devices or points of interest, and not cheapened by overuse.

Some evidence actually indicates that general mana levels have risen in recent years – that the Age of Gold was initiated, not by a few archaeological discoveries, but by a shift in the paranormal dynamics of the whole world that restored things to a state unknown since ancient times. However, as thaumatologists aren't used to thinking in terms of mana levels, they haven't really addressed this idea yet. In any case, it's hard to say what might have triggered such a huge change, and how

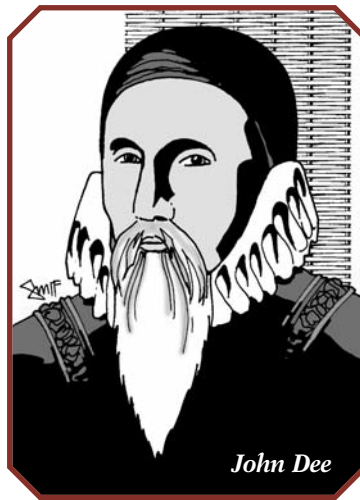
it might relate to the known academic discoveries of the last couple of decades. Perhaps some archaeologist or treasure hunter opened a sealed tomb and exposed a particularly potent and volatile form of the Philosopher's Stone to the atmosphere, or unknowingly released a trapped horde of magical spirits. Perhaps it was something to do with the confused state of the collective unconscious in the modern age. This would imply that Petrie didn't find any more of the Philosopher's Stone than many other searchers of the last couple of thousand years; he just chanced across some after an environment developed in which it could work properly.

The Philosopher's Stone

The single most significant magical phenomenon in *Age of Gold* is the substance or object known as the Philosopher's Stone, which countless alchemists throughout history have sought to create or "accomplish" through processes of research and purification. In its pure form, this can allegedly catalyze the transformation of other metals into gold. It may also grant human immortality in some way. However, the details are unclear, if only because the truly pure form has rarely been achieved. The pure form may, according to some modern theories, even represent some kind of unattainable perfection. The Philosopher's Stone appears to equate to what Chinese alchemists call "nine-crucible cinnabar" or "drinkable gold," a potion of immortality.

What is notable in *Age of Gold*, however, is that imperfect or impure forms of the Philosopher's Stone have been fairly frequently produced. These actually produce lesser but still impressive results, including temporary elemental transmutations. They also impart dramatically flawed immortality or other superhuman powers to anyone who consumes them. Tiny quantities of these "imperfect perfections" are often important in the production of alchemical elixirs. They may have been employed in the manufacture of many magical artifacts in the past. Certainly, such artifacts often grant superhuman powers to their users. The forms that the impure Philosopher's Stones take are as varied as the effects they produce; they may be liquid or solid, metallic, crystalline, or seemingly organic, sweet-scented or toxic.

So far as broad-minded scientists can determine from the few samples they've managed to obtain in the face of determined competition from alchemists and wizards, the "Philosopher's Stone" is more a state of matter than a substance as such. Matter in the "Philosopher's Stone" state acts as a matrix that can hold and store paranormal forces, perhaps as a sort of "standing wave." This is one property that all "Stones" have in common. Research continues to determine whether the different forms that the "Stone" takes all include microcrystalline particles with the appropriate structure, or all in fact be completely different in their chemical composition and form. What is known is that these substances can have enormously powerful transformational effects on other substances, living beings, and intelligent minds in the vicinity – which of course makes research much more difficult. Some researchers also think that matter can only become the Stone if a nearby living mind is exerting trained willpower to that end, guiding the all-important psychic forces into the part-formed matrix – which would explain the huge difficulty in reproducing important results.



MAGICAL WORLD HISTORY

Most of this setting's history mirrors our own, at least until the 1920s or so; when in doubt, GMs can treat anything in an ordinary history book about the 1920s and 1930s as just as true here, too – although any references to the supernatural are more likely (though not certain!) to be literally correct. However, a few historical topics do merit some special attention.

ANCIENT EGYPT

Although supernatural phenomena had been known since prehistoric times, Old Kingdom Egypt appears to have been the first civilization to produce any kind of “science of magic,” largely independent of the influence of self-interested spirits. In particular, Egypt was the birthplace of alchemy and the location of the first attempts to purify the Philosopher's Stone. It's not clear whether the Egyptians were *really* better at magic and alchemy than other cultures, or whether they just spent longer trying, but over many centuries, they certainly produced a lot of evidence. Furthermore, their habit of storing much of it in tombs and pyramids means that quite a lot has survived to the modern era. It's also unclear quite what the gods of that society really were, but at the very least, some of them seem to have been powerful spirits – and some of them are still around.

The various regional cults of Early Dynastic Egypt were apparently in touch with these beings, but formal magic is traditionally supposed to have been invented by the Third Dynasty genius Imhotep, who also invented the pyramid, which can focus supernatural energies and preserve and contain unstable magical materials. The Fourth Dynasty pharaoh Cheops suppressed many spirit-cults while building the biggest pyramid of all, and his reign may have represented the pinnacle of early Egyptian magical insight. After that, Egyptian power (of all kinds) waxed and waned repeatedly. Many secrets were lost or forgotten, for significant periods if not forever.

Sometimes, magical devices or weapons were buried alongside their royal owners. On other occasions, royal tombs were fitted with magical traps. In still others, what seemed to be tombs were actually “containment facilities” for items that were seen as better lost. Egyptian archaeology can be uniquely exciting and tricky in *Age of Gold*.

The Decline

Eventually, too many supernatural secrets were lost – or spread to the rest of the world – for Egypt to preserve its dominant position in its region through magic, and the nation grew too weak to survive otherwise. In the sixth century B.C., the newer Persian Empire conquered Egypt, although the subjugated country remained rebellious for many years thereafter, and it was sometimes more or less independent, often in alliance with Greece. In the fourth century B.C., Persia fell to Alexander the Great, who was welcomed in Egypt as a liberator. After Alexander's death, the country was ruled by the Ptolemaic dynasty, descended from one of Alexander's generals.

The Ptolemies tried to restore Egypt's magical power, establishing a great library in the new city of Alexandria as a center of learning. However, too much had been forgotten. The last of the dynasty, Queen Cleopatra, attempted to use a combination

of political cleverness, feminine wiles, and great magical rituals to preserve independence from Rome and restore Egyptian power, but she ultimately failed: Egypt became a province of the Roman Empire.

However, Egypt has been seen as the source of magical power ever since. In particular, along with their alchemical lore, the Egyptians are thought to have known many crucial words and “true names” that can augment rituals and other workings. Even if they don't find mystical devices or Philosopher's Stone samples, magical researchers can sometimes learn a lot from ancient Egyptian scrolls and inscriptions. Some *Age of Gold* occultists claim that the science of magic *truly* returned to the world in the early 19th century, when Champollion decoded the ancient hieroglyphic script using the Rosetta Stone; the world merely took a century or so to notice.

CHINA

Egypt has at least one rival claimant to the title of birthplace of magical science, though, and that is ancient China. The roots of this civilization vanish into prehistory and myth, but it's clear that ancient China saw a great deal of ritualistic spirit magic, conducted by shamans, or *Wu*, who originally wielded great social power. However, with the rise of the Chou dynasty, around 1000 B.C., the new rulers crushed the old religion in order to establish their own dominance. The Wu were driven underground, becoming oracles, freelance wizards, and leaders of local cults and secret societies; this remains the general situation in *Age of Gold*. The Chou and their successors wanted to be seen as cultured, and they encouraged philosophers and thinkers. Hence, China produced a profusion of schools of thought, including not only the orderly ideals of Confucianism but also the more spontaneous, anti-authoritarian Taoism. The latter – a mixture of philosophy, religion, and mysticism – was heavily entangled with the traditions of Chinese magic. Thus, most Chinese magicians and alchemists are scholars of Taoism, if not full-time Taoists.

China was only truly united under Ch'in Shih-Huang-Ti, in 221 B.C.. The First Emperor was a formidable ruler, but he became obsessed with the quest for immortality, which his alchemists failed to provide – perhaps because he had oppressed the Taoists so heavily-handedly. Distracted by this desire, Ch'in Shih-Huang-Ti left his empire weakened, and his dynasty was rapidly replaced after his death, which may have been caused by a failed immortality potion.

This set a pattern for much of Chinese history: Many emperors would be killed by treatments that were supposed to allow them to live forever. Magic thus remained on the fringes, in the hands of eccentric Taoists and secret shamans. The most respectable scholars, who might have turned magic into a science and recorded the details in writing, were at odds with the people who actually knew how to get it to work. In *Age of Gold*, however, Chinese magic is enjoying a resurgence, albeit still largely in remote areas and in the underworld. The rise of European power, complete with technologies that can threaten even Chinese imperial power, has led to disruption and social fragmentation – and wizards and Wu are taking advantage of the situation.

Chinese magical ideas have been influential throughout much of eastern Asia, although they often take on a particular local “flavor.” Nations who take a pride in their unique cultures, such as Japan and Korea, often insist that their own traditions were entirely local developments. They even suggest that they originated ideas that then spread to China and beyond – in magic as in much else.

INDIA

The third great, ancient Old World civilization with a vast mystical tradition is of course India, which has even more of a hazy and uncertain past to modern eyes. Its history can be traced back to the Bronze Age, but its melange of empires, cultures, religions, and philosophies seems to make anything possible and nothing certain. *Age of Gold* occultists say that every known form of magic, mysticism, and alchemy is represented somewhere in Indian tradition, along with hints of many unknown forms and styles.

It is wrong to make broad statements about the nature of “Indian magic.” However, one common feature of the subcontinent’s traditions is an emphasis on the power of words that is at least as strong as that in Egypt – with a particular focus on the importance of correct pronunciation when using ritual incantations, “mantras,” and verbal charms. Other styles of Indian magic emphasize meditation and spiritual insight, while still others concentrate on the use of *mudras* – “spiritual gestures.” All this makes it difficult to master magic from texts; anyone who wants to learn Indian magic must find a *guru*, an expert teacher. Hence, in *Age of Gold*, Indian ports see a steady procession of Western “seekers after truth” arriving in search of magical instruction.

THE VICTORIAN AGE

As has already been noted, the 19th-century “Age of Empires” had the unexpected side effect of bringing long-separated magical traditions into contact, enabling scholars to integrate them and extract whatever worked. It also brought magical artifacts and other discoveries back to Europe. Britain, having the



largest empire, received the most, but other nations weren’t far behind. In addition, the period saw the first developments of new sciences that appear to open the door to the possibility of “paranormal” phenomena, while the worst aspects of the Industrial Revolution produced a psychological reaction, a backward-looking romanticism that welcomed “spiritual” ideas. Europeans had gained access to Indian mystical texts thanks to the study of Sanskrit in the previous century; with the decoding of Egyptian hieroglyphics, Western occultists had two important points of reference. Then, the Opium Wars gave some of researchers – especially some amoral plunderers – a chance to get hold of a third set of texts.

However, the supernatural didn’t become quite as *flagrant* in that period as it is in the 1930s. Its appearances were largely limited to “ghost stories” set in the dark shadows of the world, and to hints of functional magic among those devotees who pursued the subject most diligently. Part of the problem was that the secret of the Philosopher’s Stone had been lost, and part of it was simply that a lot of groundwork was needed to get such things working again. It took the boom in scientific archaeology, late in the period and at the start of the 20th century, to provide a complete set of tools and a lot of solid evidence.

Then, of course, the Great War came along and distracted everyone from what still seemed a rather abstract topic.

THE GREAT DEPRESSION

In the wake of the World War I, the world looked for new possibilities, sometimes with a cautious sense of optimism, more often with an air of desperation. The universe seemed a darker place in the aftermath of that great slaughter, and early news of strange discoveries in Egypt didn’t seem especially reassuring. The “Roaring Twenties” meant Prohibition and gangsters in America, communists in Russia, and signs of decline among the European empires; evidence that magic might actually work just sounded like more trouble. The Wall Street Crash of 1929 merely confirmed many people’s worst suspicions.

Indeed, the first sign that some people were finally taking all this talk of “the paranormal” seriously was that they tried to blame the Crash on master villains and evil secret societies. The Secret Pharaoh (pp. 32-35) in particular had already gained enough of a reputation for his (perfectly genuine) desire to bring down the governments of the world; the idea of him engineering such a disaster seemed perfectly reasonable. This wasn’t a *very* popular theory – at least as many people blamed “the communists,” and professional economists and financiers were equally disdainful of both ideas. However, there was no denying that some master criminals were happy enough to take advantage of the world economic situation, buying up whole companies cheap to use as fronts, recruiting the dispossessed and disaffected as foot soldiers, or just reveling in the public mood as they spread anarchy.

Fortunately, they met opposition. Newspaper readers and newsreel watchers had long been thrilling to stories of bold explorers and adventurers such as Richard E. Byrd, Charles Lindbergh, and Roy Chapman Andrews. Now, the category expanded to include freelance crime fighters and some urban vigilantes. There were at least hints that some of these people had uncanny abilities somewhere beyond the human norm, and that explorers were bringing back some very *strange* discoveries. These hints simply made the news much more fascinating at a time when many folk found most of it depressing.

The Gold Standard

Meanwhile, economics has been further confused and disrupted by the total collapse of the long-standing “gold standard” – the principle that currencies should be backed by the nation’s holdings of gold bullion. In fact, this had been widely abandoned during the World War I by nations that needed more flexibility in order to pay for the war, but attempts to restore it subsequently were few and abortive, as supplies of the metal seemed to have become erratic and unpredictable.

It’s an open secret, at least among those people broad-minded enough to admit the existence and proven effectiveness of magic, that certain alchemists are *manufacturing* gold, of variable but sometimes adequate reliability, destroying the metal’s precious status. Some free-thinking economists declare bluntly that this is a good thing: The gold standard was an unsustainable straightjacket on economic policy, which would have had to be abandoned anyway. Others disagree, and mutter that, whatever the cause, the result is a terrible mess. Alchemy is a very dirty word in some political circles.

THE STATE OF THE WORLD

Given that the world in *Age of Gold* is much like that of our own 1930s, sources such as *GURPS Cliffhangers* and *GURPS WWII* can provide a much more comprehensive and generally applicable outline than there is room for here. The following is a brief summary of the state of affairs in the setting, focusing on those elements that differ from our own history.

EUROPE

Doubly battered, first by war and then by economic depression, Europe suffers from deep uncertainties. It is the testing ground where radical political systems such as Communism and Fascism are instituted and confront both each other and democracy; it is the heartland for great empires in decline. However, it is equally a continent of considerable industrial power and wealth, and of great cultural richness and diversity. Local and visiting adventurers can always find plenty to do here.

Europe is also an epicenter of magical activity. It has its own magical traditions and has an extensive academic and intellectual system. European scholars can wander European-run empires, acquiring ideas and artifacts, while researchers freely exchange ideas through long-established academic networks, leading to profitable (and, in the magical world, sometimes dangerous) cross-fertilization.

The United Kingdom

At the center of history’s greatest empire, and having avoided combat on its own soil in the World War I, Britain is in a better position than many European nations – but it has its problems. The cost of fighting the Great War left the country deep in debt, an aging industrial base isn’t doing as much to restore prosperity as might be hoped, and political power keeps shifting hands. Nor has the recent loss of Ireland done much for British confidence. Still, the British didn’t get where they are today by letting a few problems keep them down.

Thanks to its empire; the countless artifacts and ideas brought home by soldiers, administrators, and explorers; and a substantial tradition of archeology and sometimes whimsical scholarship, Britain is something of a center of magical activity. In the great British Museum and the attached library, in the private collections of aristocratic amateurs and the libraries of ancient universities, scholars tease out ages-old secrets, while crazy would-be mages found strange cults and fraternities to

promote their own power. In 1936, the new King Edward VIII abdicates the throne in order to marry the woman he loves; it’s a sign of how things are going in the *Age of Gold* world that a few people suggest that he has been magically controlled by *someone* to do this, although that theory is mostly treated as a joke in very poor taste.

The archetypal British hero in this period is a tough, soldierly, middle-to-upper-class sort, moderately shrewd but no intellectual, happy to punch out any foreigners, radicals, or other dubious sorts who seem to be threatening the Empire. (In *Age of Gold*, heroes throughout the world often veer strikingly close to local archetypes, thanks perhaps to the magical power of symbolism.) However, there’s a fair amount of variation possible and visible. Even the stereotyped “clubland heroes” often have a less-posh ally or two. One of them might be a former batman or sergeant from their military days, now employed as a manservant. Another might be a more academic friend or acquaintance giving advice, which can be essential when dealing with magical problems. Other stereotypes exist, such as the thoughtful amateur detective, the bluff Scotland Yard copper, and the daredevil gentleman thief.

In *Age of Gold*, the country has also produced some completely “atypical” heroes and adventuring groups, from the enigmatic working-class alchemically transformed speedster who fights crime in the cities of northern England, to the Glasgow-based circle of radical left-wing ritual magicians with an eclectic self-taught style, to the three different mysterious swordsmen who all claim to wield Excalibur.

Russia

Russia took a severe battering in the World War I, leading to revolution and the collapse of its old imperial government. In the ensuing chaos, the “Bolshevik” Communist Party seized power and defeated an ill-coordinated military counterstrike by its opponents. By 1922, it established itself as the first of the great totalitarian powers of the era – leaving anti-Bolshevik “White Russian” exiles scattered across the globe, plotting, making deals, or drinking to forget, and numerous capitalist and imperialist governments running scared of communist plots and violent revolutionaries. In 1924, the triumphant revolutionary leader Lenin died, to be replaced by the lethally paranoid Josef Stalin. While Western idealist sympathizers watch Stalin’s “reforms” through rose-tinted lenses, those policies actually kill millions through malice or ideological incompetence.

Stalin's Soviet Union is a formidable power by sheer weight of numbers, with the largest army on Earth. However, Stalin regards the officer corps with deep suspicion, periodically purging it of anyone he suspects of threatening his status, leaving the army ill-led. Russia generally replaces subtlety or judgment with raw numbers and dictatorial ruthlessness – but those are powerful enough.

The Communist Party is officially dedicated to principles of scientific materialism, and it rejects all talk of magic as “bourgeois obfuscation” and “archaic superstition formulated to maintain the proletariat in a state of ignorance and subjugation.” Hence, the rulers of Russia don't pursue magical power as such. Traditional supernatural phenomena within the Soviet Union are likely to be independent forces, often related to dark and dangerous figures out of local folklore (see **GURPS Russia**). They are generally just as much of a threat to blundering commissars and willfully blind officials as to everyone else. However, the Communist belief in “science” verges on blind faith, which provides huge scope for one type of actually supernatural activity: “superscience,” of the maddest and most dangerous sort.

A crazy Russian weird scientist who can find a senior Party official prepared to protect and support him can often acquire considerable resources, especially if he can present his theories in terms of “dialectical materialism” in opposition to “bourgeois convention.” Such scientists rarely have to worry about any sort of ethical constraints. They may also be

able to divert Communist spy rings elsewhere in the world to acquiring them any secrets or resources they may feel they need. Of course, if they carry on for too long without delivering something useful, they may be sacrificed in an attempt to save their sponsor's hide from even more powerful officials, or just punished brutally for their failure. These threats merely make them increasingly obsessive and willing to cut procedural and ethical corners as time goes by.

Russian weird science appears to be especially advanced in biology and “materialist psychic research.” Researchers may come up with “metapsychic manifestation machines” (which summon demons at the push of a button) or “organic macro-munitions” (semi-controllable giant mutant animals), and then be sent to field-test them in ideological conflicts around the world.

Germany

In *Age of Gold* as in our 1930s, the Nazi Party rules Germany from 1933 onward. Battered first by severe reparations demands in the wake of the World War I, and then by the Great Depression, Germany has polarized and fragmented. The Nazis exploited the social near-collapse, playing politics skillfully enough to grab control from a position of minority support. With the levers of power in their hands, the Nazis develop their rabble-rousing style into a whole system of propaganda and enforced conformity, even murdering those of

their own supporters who seem to threaten the leadership. They also bring their demented racist attitudes ever more to the fore.

See **GURPS WWII: Iron Cross** for more on pre-war Germany and its weird and deadly internal politics, and **GURPS WWII: Weird War II** for ideas on how to use this material in a high-weirdness game of occult conspiracy.

THE AMERICAS

As the location of the world's greatest growing nation and also of some of its most troubled states, the New World is fully as diverse as the Old. It escaped the devastation of the Great War, but parts of it have plenty of blood in their own history.

The New World lacks the complex magical history of the Old. Although various pre-Columbian civilizations had access to forms of ritual magic, they never seem to have mastered much in the way of alchemy. However, colonists from the Old World have brought all their traditions with them, and these bustling new societies have often merged diverse ideas and followed them up with more enthusiasm than caution, leading to whole new magical styles and methodologies. European-style Satanists attempt to summon bloody-handed Aztec gods, Voodoo priests merge invocations of African loa with prayers to Catholic saints, and eccentric Boston academics seek the “lost secrets of Lemuria and Mu” under the intellectual influence of exiled Russian visionaries.

Occult Nazis

As in our history, the Nazis in this setting propound more or less mystical theories that make some leading figures in the Party very interested in sources of supernatural power. However, they aren't quite as formidable a force in the supernatural world as some readers may expect.

There are several reasons for this. Primarily, it turns out that the specific magical traditions that they find so fascinating don't actually work very well. Their biggest single problem is their tendency to reject any source of knowledge with a Jewish author and to focus on a narrow range of ill-documented and often imaginary northern European magical ideas. In addition, the leadership periodically purges certain weirder elements from the Party, finding them politically embarrassing or suspecting them (rightly or wrongly) of being a threat to the leaders themselves. The would-be magicians might be safer if they could demonstrate actual, useful power – but mostly, they can't.

Nonetheless, there are a few effective ritual magicians, at least on the fringes of the Nazi Party. More dangerously, quite a few more mystically inclined Nazis have developed an intense interest in magical *artifacts*, which they see as a relatively reliable shortcut to power, without the messy complications of ritual theory with all its “non-Aryan” inclusions.

Hence, the type of Nazi antagonist that heroes will most likely to be encountered away from Germany is a determined, obsessive, and well-resourced adventurer-archaeologist, backed by a squad or two of fanatical stormtroopers. Such an opponent is unlikely to have powers of his own, unless he's actually located and acquired some functional artifact – but fanaticism and mundane firepower could make him a deadly foe nonetheless.

PCs should also be very worried by the prospect of Nazi occultists ever getting spells to work. Potentially, they could become true masters of “Mass Magic” (see **GURPS Thaumatology**, p. 51).

The United States of America

The Great Depression notwithstanding, the United States is now clearly the world's leading national power. Spanning the continent with a network of railroads, rich in natural resources and human ingenuity, proud of its democracy (if sometimes suspicious of foreign ways of thinking), the United States sees itself as forging a path to the future.

But current troubles do sometimes give its more thoughtful citizens pause. U.S. free enterprise had done very well, but the system somehow managed to fall in the Wall Street Crash, and it's taking a while to scramble out again. As the 1930s progress, drought and poor management (and perhaps a little miscalculation) transform vast areas of farmland into the Dust Bowl, leaving countless farmers impoverished and homeless. The great social experiment of the Prohibition has proven less than completely successful, creating an environment in which organized crime can thrive; it seems that America's cities are swarming with gangsters. Prohibition falls in 1933, but by then, the gangsters have acquired outlaw glamour; ground down by the Depression, many ordinary people feel a sneaking admiration for those gun-toting criminals who at least go out fighting.

These dynamic but troubled times throw up a variety of other heroes, too, even disregarding the possibility of magic. Crime-busting G-men, hard-bitten private eyes, fearless reporters, daredevil "barnstormer" pilots, and war veterans who've become wandering soldiers of fortune all fit the mood of the era. For a more cerebral style of play, they can be joined by thoughtful New England professors or resourceful Edisonian inventors.

Meanwhile, this being the *Age of Gold*, wealthy and energetic archaeologists and museums have imported a large number of ancient artifacts from digs all around the world, a proportion of which have turned out to be magical. Can-do, try-anything inventors and scientists probe the far edges of science, where they sometimes intersect with the paranormal. There are good reasons why the United States is the world's epicenter of super-powered "mystery man" activity!

South and Central America

Widely seen by denizens of Europe and the United States as a vast region of trackless jungle and backward peasants, the more southerly parts of the Americas are in fact diverse and socially complex. In the 1930s, they are also often troubled, with revolutions, coups, and dictatorships all too often exacerbated by interference from foreign governments and multinational companies. More than one promising democracy slips into military dictatorship in the 1930s, and South America witnesses at least one major international conflict in the period – the Chaco War of 1932-1935, between Bolivia and Paraguay. Meanwhile, the Great Depression mauls the export-based economy of Argentina, the United States withdraws its troops from bases in Nicaragua in 1933 but continues to take an interest in the violent local politics, and the Communist International foments revolution along the length of the Andes.

Occult investigations in this region mostly concentrate on searches for Mayan ruins in the jungles of Central America and lost Inca cities in the mountains of Peru. Unfortunately, such quests rarely find useful artifacts, and they all too often lead to encounters with dark spirits or deranged undead. Nonetheless, enough hints spring up about truly *ancient* arcane lore in

incompletely translated texts and inscriptions to keep optimistic treasure hunters coming back.

Alchemical researchers occasionally look for new ingredients in the Amazon rain forest, either interrogating or fighting with the local tribes. There are also the occasional stories of revolutionary cultists hiding in the jungles and using strange and sinister rituals – but that often seems to be propaganda used by ruthless rulers to alienate their opponents from support among the peasantry. For that matter, the rulers themselves aren't always averse to calling on dark powers. In other places again, especially where Voodoo is a popular religion, all sides may quite openly look for a little supernatural assistance.

AFRICA

In the 1930s, the ancient ancestral homeland of humanity is largely under the sway of various colonial powers – although parts of the interior still remain only lightly explored, making them interesting for the purposes of *Age of Gold* games. The Muslim nations of the northern coasts are an established part of the Mediterranean cultural world, albeit currently often under the thumb of one European power or another. South of the Sahara and away from the handful of colonial cities, things can get much stranger for Western visitors. While well-armed safaris or more-than-human mystery men *should* have relatively little difficulty with ordinary wildlife or the occasional pulp-style hostile native tribe, either can display enough cunning and knowledge of the local terrain to give visitors an unpleasant shock. Meanwhile, scheming masterminds seeking to build private empires around gold or diamond mines deep in the interior, dedicated local revolutionaries who see all unknown foreigners as hated colonial oppressors, and the occasional outburst of local paranormal weirdness can all make visits the "Dark Continent" both necessary and seriously risky.

One possibility in *Age of Gold* is that the recent resurgence of magic in the world is more than just a combination of lucky archaeology and scholarly synthesis. It may actually be the visible sign of a disruption in the "fabric of reality," a relaxation in the rules of rationality itself. The disruption may have been triggered by mass human confusion at the rapidity of change in the world in recent decades (and not least the trauma of the World War I), perhaps caused by some external force. See p. B534 for some ideas as to what all this could involve. In that case, Africa is a good location for signs of this "reality quake." For example, "lost cities" suddenly discovered in the heart of the jungle may actually be gigantic reality shards, fallen into this world from very different histories, while monstrous creatures may appear through temporary nexus portals from other times or realities.

Egypt

As one of the ancient sources of magical learning (see p. 7), Egypt is important in *Age of Gold* games. It's also important to the British Empire, as it controls the Suez Canal, a crucial part of the main sea route from Europe to India. Egypt is a British protectorate until 1936, when a new king signs a treaty under which British troops are withdrawn from the country, except for those guarding the Canal. Egyptian nationalists resent British domination enough that anyone offering a credible chance to get rid of these foreigners could probably acquire a useful following.

Cairo, on the banks of the Nile, is the capital of Egypt. In the 1930s, it is a bubbling stew of modernity and ancient traditions, government power and revolutionary intrigue, Muslim faith and criminal enterprise. It is also close to Giza, where the Great Pyramid and the Sphinx are located, and in *Age of Gold*, magical researchers, occult schemers, and the odd enterprising charlatan add extra ingredients to the mix. Other ancient remains lie much further up the Nile, in the Valley of the Kings and beyond. (See *GURPS Egypt* and *GURPS Places of Mystery* for details.) However, some foreign visitors never get beyond the great port-city of Alexandria, a multinational melting-pot with its own share of ages-old artifacts and buried secrets.

AUSTRALIA

The world's biggest island – or smallest continent, depending how you classify things – starts the 1930s as a Dominion of the British Empire, but in 1931, it becomes a functionally independent nation within the Commonwealth – although it hasn't fully claimed that status as yet. (In our history, it did so in 1942.) Australia may be huge, but its population is relatively small, mostly dwelling in a handful of cities in more fertile coastal regions. Much of the vast “outback” is near desert, scattered with small sheep-farming communities or still occupied by nomadic Aborigines.

Many Australians see themselves as rugged, independent-minded frontier types – natural pulp-hero material. However, the strange outback wilderness may be a source of something weirder. Magical adepts who've traveled there report that the local “magical field” is somehow *distorted*, giving workings all sorts of unpredictable side effects, often related to space and time. At the very least, there may be a lot of zones of aspected, wild, or twisted mana (see *GURPS Thaumatology*, pp. 58-60) – or this may all involve something even stranger. Occasional reports of strange supernatural creatures have also emerged. These beings may be related to the odd mana zones, but it's hard to determine the truth of the stories, given the strangeness of Australia's *natural* wildlife and the Australian love of exaggeration and tall tales.

A few Aboriginal wizards are said to have a useful comprehension of some aspects of all this. Visiting scholars sometimes approach them for advice, but the lack of shared technical vocabulary makes things difficult. It also seems that the trickiness of magic in the area may make local mages very cautious and subtle.

The low-tech Aborigines produce very few significant magical artifacts. They have no tradition of scientific alchemy, although they may have some interesting herbal lore.

ASIA

In the 1930s, Earth's largest continent, home to some of its most ancient and complex civilizations, is rapidly becoming a cockpit of conflict. For the last couple of centuries, European powers have been jockeying for control of different regions, although Britain currently has a firm grip on the great prize of India, seemingly threatened more by independence movements than by foreign rivals. Meanwhile, Russia spent much of the previous century seeking ways to expand southward in

order to claim a share of India's resources and a port on the Indian Ocean; this danger faded during the Great War and the ensuing Russian Civil War, but now, the Communist regime may be looking south again.

First, though, they have to consolidate their grip on Central Asia. During the Civil War, this region was infested with renegade armies, some of them lead by legendarily insane warlords who were certainly superstitious enough to recruit any magical aid they could find. In *Age of Gold*, some of these individuals may return as bloody-handed conquering masterminds with strange resources. The Russians are also meddling in the Chinese civil wars (see below), in order to solidify their southern borders. Meanwhile, those eastern Asian powers who've avoided coming under Western control are trying to establish and reinforce their own positions, and European explorers are looking to fill in the last blanks on the maps of Asia – and sometimes suffering lethal surprises in the process.

Shambhala

Tibetan Buddhist legend tells of Shambhala, an Earthly Paradise that may be hidden somewhere in the Himalayas. In our history, the legend became the basis of stories of “Shangri-La”; in *Age of Gold*, some scholars have come to suspect that Shambhala may really exist. It is said to be the home of the “Nine Unknown Sages” (enlightened mystic masters) and to oppose the plots of another secret Asian city, Agarthia.

Whether Shambhala is good and Agarthia is evil, or vice versa, seems to depend who you ask – and the true motives and objectives of the Nine Unknown Sages are, well, unknown. Cautious heroes may prefer to reserve judgment, at least until they figure out who is allied with the Black Dragon Society (p. 14), and how some people define “paradise.”

Civil War China

In this game world, China is the region that diverges most spectacularly from its situation in our world's history. As in our past, it is suffering from a civil war; but in *Age of Gold*, there are even more factions involved than in our 1930s.

The series of conflicts began when the Ch'ing dynasty fell in 1911. China initially came under the control of a number of warlords. There was a central government, controlled by the Nationalist Kuomintang (KMT) Party, but its hold on the north of the country was weak at best. While the World War I kept the European powers distracted, Japan made a play for local control. The KMT fragmented, and the country was divided for a while between north and south. In the 1920s, radicals founded the Communist Party of China, which grew through the decade to become a major faction. The Russians hedged their bets, supporting both the KMT and the Communists, and for a while, the two groups allied to try to reunite the country.

However, there were any number of local warlords and breakaway groups with their own ideas on all this, and in a world where magic was returning, quite a few of them had some command of supernatural power. Magical factions range all over. At one end, solitary sorcerers simply wanted to avoid disturbances and ensure themselves adequate mundane resources while they pursued a quest for immortality.

Shanghai

Lying on the central eastern coast of China, on the mouth of the great Yangtze river, the city of Shanghai is many Westerners' gateway to the country. At the start of the 1930s, it is divided into two sections, one Chinese-governed, and the other made up of the International Settlement and the adjacent French Concession, under the control of various European powers plus Japan, thanks to treaties imposed on China after military defeats. The Chinese city is crowded and poor; the international section, being the focus of foreign trade with China, is wealthy enough to import new urban technologies (such as electricity and trams) soon after they first appear. Most of its inhabitants are Chinese, but they are barred from some public spaces in the city.

Nonetheless, Shanghai has plenty of wealthy Chinese inhabitants as well as wealthy foreigners. Like many international ports, it's a place where any vice may be indulged. Crime is often controlled by Chinese triads and secret societies such as the "Green Gang." (The Green Gang was originally founded by a Shaolin kung fu master but which has become corrupt, lending its muscle to political factions and breaking Communist-inspired strikes with extreme violence.) The tough, British-run, multinational Shanghai Municipal Police endeavor to keep the international city

under control, despite corruption in its ranks resulting from the sheer profitability of crimes such as opium smuggling and illegal gambling. Needless to say, some factions dabble in magic.

The situation changes in 1937, when Japan takes over Shanghai after defeating a Chinese army. Although the international sections preserve legal independence, the Japanese are increasingly clearly in control, and much of the city's industry is damaged or moves elsewhere.

Shanghai is a natural adventure venue, and certainly somewhere that PCs might visit, to buy guns, negotiate with factions, or just have fun. Any amount of occult activity may take place under the noses of the arrogant foreign powers – and less oblivious foreigners, from European scholars to Black Dragon occult spies (see p. 14), may take an informed interest. A campaign based around the Shanghai Municipal Police can include enough pulp-style action for anybody, with characters of a dozen nationalities, gang warfare, political subversion, advanced martial arts, and prototypical SWAT team tactics. In *Age of Gold*, the SMP will also need advice on occult matters.

See *GURPS Martial Arts: Fairbairn Close Combat Systems* for details and ideas.

At the other end, full-scale local armies, descended from Ch'ing period militias, found a way to use magical advisers to enhance their intelligence and logistics, multiplying their strategic power considerably. Some groups espoused strange mystical doctrines, backed with demonstrable magical power, ensuring that their followers would often be motivated to the point of fanaticism, and making their objectives hard for outsiders to grasp.

Hence, the country was far from fully unified by 1926, when the KMT launched the "Northern Expedition," an attempt to suppress the power of the warlords. In our history, this was moderately successful, but it left quite a few warlords active with functioning armies. In the *Age of Gold* world, it was less effective, especially against small-scale magically enhanced factions. Then, in 1927, relations between the KMT and the Communists broke down, and the KMT launched an attack, massacring a number of Communists in Shanghai and elsewhere. The Communists retaliated with a series of uprisings; although these were largely unsuccessful, the Communist Party survived, withdrawing into areas where it could find support.

This started 10 years of civil war, with the Communists and left and right wing elements of the KMT as the main factions, and numerous warlords and local leaders also playing a part. By now, the dominant right-wing KMT faction was under the leadership of Chiang Kai-shek, while the Communists eventually came to be dominated by Mao Zedong. (In our history, these two would remain key figures in China for decades.) The KMT-Communist conflict is eventually suspended in 1937, when enough leaders on all sides

decide that the Japanese, who have continued to occupy Chinese territory and to meddle in Chinese affairs, are the greater threat. In *Age of Gold*, local sorcerer-lords mostly stay out of this fight, though some join the alliance against Japan; others prove to be well under the thumb of Japan's formidable Black Dragon Society (p. 14).

Adventurers will find plenty to do in China at any date, from straight-out gunfights to multi-sided espionage to high magical weirdness. This is the obvious location for scenarios resembling conventional fantasy RPG sessions, albeit with more firearms. While ostentatious superhumans are quite rare here, there are plenty of ritual magicians, most using the well-developed local style of sorcery (see pp. 17-18), and some operating quite openly. Chinese alchemists mostly focus obsessively on the quest for immortality, sometimes quite successfully, although their potions may have minor flaws or side effects, such as failing to prevent the visible appearance of aging. Although they rarely produce alchemically transformed individuals with powers such as strength or energy control, there is no shortage of ageless (but sometimes hideous) sorcerers and masterminds.

India

India is widely seen as the jewel in the crown of the British Empire – although some Indians are working to change that. An incredibly diverse land, it has hundreds of languages and thousands of gods. Although the British viceroy in New Delhi is firmly in control for now, much of the country is divided into states nominally under the rule of local princes, some of them fabulously wealthy.

Still, many Europeans in India hardly ever meet a native, except as a servant. This means that those occultist visitors who arrive with the explicit intention of talking to natives and exploring the subtleties of Indian culture (see p. 8) are sometimes treated as disreputable by the governing class – they’re seen as letting the side down. However, a long tradition of “Orientalist” scholarship exists among more broad-minded Europeans in India, so researchers aren’t regarded as completely mad. Even so, as Indian activists become increasingly hostile to British rule, and short-tempered administrators or military officers sometimes respond with increasingly brutal repression, the position of those who seek to move between the two cultures can become tricky.

India is also a land of geographical diversity, especially in this period when the name covers what will later be called Pakistan and Bangladesh in our world. It ranges from the jungles of the south to the Himalayas in the north and the arid plains of the Northwest Frontier. India also can be used as a venue for supernaturally themed pulp adventures, including any number of temples of doom and resurgent thuggee cults, as well as attempts by Nazi occult researchers to infiltrate the Himalayas, or efforts by mad scientist Theosophists to “salvage ancient Lemurian devices” from the treasure vaults of maharajahs.

Japan

Since being opened to the outside world in 1853, Japan has made a determined attempt to modernize and match the

technological advantages of the West while retaining a distinctive national culture. This is paralleled by an increasingly aggressive foreign policy, backed up by increasingly sophisticated weapons. Yet even in the World War I, Japanese troops were noted for their restraint.

However, during the Great Depression, Japan’s economy suffers badly, while Japan feels that it is being treated unfairly on the international stage. This gives the ever more radical military the excuse they need to seize effective control; democratic politicians are bullied into silence or assassinated. The war in China is merely the first step in a program of Japanese expansion, pursuing both natural resources and national pride.

Western adventurers might find cause to visit Japan, but they will have difficulty operating there. In *GURPS* terms, Japan has its own unique Cultural Familiarity at this time, which few outsiders may possess – and Japanese government agencies view foreigners with suspicion. With a nationalist leadership inculcating the population with a twisted form of the traditional bushido code and fanatical emperor-worship, Japan is becoming a serious threat.

Japan doesn’t *appear* to have any high-powered mystery men of its own. However, persistent rumors in the occult underworld suggest that the Japanese government controls a number of ancient and powerful magical weapons, presumably stockpiled against emergencies or future grand plans. Furthermore, the Black Dragon Society (see the boxed text) aggressively pursues both artifacts and magical lore. There are almost certainly a number of very capable magicians in the country, many of them happy to work with the government.

The Black Dragon Society

The Black Dragon Society is a Japanese secret society – not *very* secret, in truth – dedicated to the creation of a Japanese-dominated Asian power. It was founded in 1901, although it’s descended from older ultra-nationalist societies. Its stated objective then was to drive Russia out of eastern Asia. The perceived threat from Russia has since waxed and waned, and in *Age of Gold*, the Society’s real goals have expanded vastly. It acts openly as a political pressure group and spreads overt propaganda. It more or less admits its heavy involvement in espionage and assassination throughout Asia. Its supernatural operations are kept more secret, although informed observers have some idea of its capabilities. Although it tries to preserve a facade of respectability in Japanese society, it often uses the most “efficient” methods to acquire resources or recruits. In many places, it functions as an organized crime group, albeit an unusually disciplined and politicized one. Most members are willing to use anything that *works*, magical or mundane, legal or not.

The Black Dragons are probably the most dangerous arcane conspiracy in this setting, by some way. With connections extending to the highest levels of the militaristic Japanese government as well as through the Asian underworld, and considerable skill in espionage, martial arts, and propaganda, its mundane resources are formidable

enough. When it throws in magic, it seems capable of almost anything. However, PCs working their way up an Asian conspiracy and expecting a traditional silk-robed “Yellow Peril” mastermind at the top may be wrong-footed by the Black Dragons’ combination of samurai cool, militaristic efficiency, and sophisticated modern intelligence-gathering and propaganda skills.

The society is perfectly willing to make alliances with other factions, anywhere in the world. Some of these are blatantly pragmatic, enemy-of-my-enemy arrangements, trading assistance and information with any group that might annoy an enemy or rival of Japan. Others, within Asia, are linked to its “pan-Asian” ideology. In negotiations with such contacts, the Black Dragons are careful not to emphasize that the united Asia that they seek would have Japan very firmly in charge.

They have links with obscure Buddhist sects, some of which espouse distinctly unorthodox, even sinister beliefs. By trading information, the Black Dragons have accumulated a formidable knowledge of ritual magic.

Still, a few of their allies may be manipulating the Dragons right back. Their agents are known to be operating as far afield as Ethiopia, Turkey, and Morocco, and some of them are looking out for magical artifacts; the group may have a few powerful “mystery men” of its own.

CHAPTER TWO

THE MAGIC

Doc Mudra and the Uncanny Four were too late!

With a roar from its powerful V8 engine, the big sedan sped out of the airfield hangar and off into the night. With a howl of defiance, Redmond, the mad alchemist, hurled one of his flasks of strange chemicals out of the departing car's window. It burst as it struck the ground, and the two nearest biplanes instantly caught fire! Worse, the flames began to spread at unnatural speed, threatening everything else in the building!

"The fuel tanks!" cried Tsai Wu Tsi – and the rest of the heroic group saw instantly what she meant. If the alchemical flames reached the tankers standing close by, they would explode like gigantic bombs. Immediately, Doc Mudra performed the arcane gestures that made his skin stronger than steel; he might be able to survive the fire, and he might be able to move the tankers away before disaster could ensue . . .

Then . . . the fire simply stopped in its path. With gasps of surprise, the heroes looked around – and saw one of their own number, Irina Fedorevna, standing with hands outstretched, murmuring strange invocations. With another gesture, the enigmatic White Russian exile quenched the blaze entirely.

"Good work, Irina" said the Doc. "We may need your powers again, now that Redmond has his Purified Phlogiston."

"I hope not," replied the Russian. "I had to ask the Ice Spirit for considerable aid to control so much fire, and such assistance comes with a great cost."

"Then best to find Master Redmond swiftly," murmured Tsai Wu Tsi, "before he can distill more of his fire potions. Fortunately, there are certain rituals which may determine his present location and course. Should those be performed?"

Doc Mudra nodded assent. "No time to lose," he said, "Redmond has vowed to destroy Boston tonight!"

Magic, of several of the types described in **GURPS *Thaumatology***, definitely exists in **Age of Gold** and appears to be somewhat susceptible to logical analysis – but it is still fundamentally *mysterious*, as of the 1930s. Even the most optimistic rationalists admit that the "science of magic" is still in its infancy, with much groundwork still needed before anyone can make progress with theory. Furthermore, there is considerable evidence that more types of magical operation are *possible*, and indeed have existed in the past, than are currently in use. The problem with this is that some of the "lost arts" left artifacts or phenomena behind; fitting these into logical frameworks based on currently known traditions can be a problem.

Several advantages and skills are central to magic-working in this setting; see pp. 27-31.

PATH/BOOK MAGIC

Path/Book magic (see Chapter 5 of **GURPS *Thaumatology***), always using the "Energy Accumulating" model, is important in the **Age of Gold** setting. It doesn't generally involve working with sentient spirits, although some rituals may summon such beings or call on them for aid. There are several traditions of Path/Book magic, each based on a distinct mandatory specialty of Ritual Magic skill. There are *no* defaults between different specialties of the skill in this setting (although the GM may relax this rule if he creates two new traditions that are closely historically related), and the Extended Rule of 20 (**GURPS *Thaumatology***, p. 125) applies.

The usual time for each stage in a ritual is five minutes. The GM can modify the latter in really exceptional circumstances,

Using words to describe magic is like using a screwdriver to cut roast beef.

– Tom Robbins

such as workings in *very* special locations, but this should be very rare; mostly, workings simply follow the standard rules for ritual space.

Significant Characteristics

See **GURPS *Thaumatology***, pp. 123-124, for more on the following concepts.

Magery Advantage: Use the rules for "Limited Non-Mage Ceremonies" (i.e., non-mages are at -5 to all ritual rolls), with and "Magery Adds to Rituals." However, "fractional" Magery 0 is *not* available.

Path/Book Adept Advantage: No known wizard in **Age of Gold** has this advantage, and it is certainly prohibited to PCs. Some occultists believe that a few great figures had this sort of ability in ancient times. If so, either no one has attained a sufficient level of magical insight in the debased modern age, or the magical "environment" is too unfriendly these days. The irreducible need for time, effort, and preparation when performing their workings drives many magicians to search for shortcuts and artifacts.

Talents: Aside from Magery, no Talents give any bonuses to Path/Book workings.

Use of Symbol Drawing: In this setting, the Symbol Drawing skill does *not* give a bonus to ritual workings, nor is it absolutely required for any normal ritual. However, it *is* often useful when preparing ritual spaces (see below). It can also help with preparing some material or symbolic components, creating items suitable for enchantment, and so on. The GM can require a roll against the skill in the course of any sufficiently complex procedure where it feels appropriate, though normal failures on the skill usually only mean a delay of a few minutes and another try.

Elements

See *GURPS Thaumatology*, pp. 128-129, for more on the following:

Ritual Space: Path/Book magic requires ritual space as per the standard rules; in this setting, that usually means an area that has been attuned to the correct magical forces and cleansed of “interference effects,” rather than favored by any particular spirits. A space prepared for or attuned to magic of one Path/Book tradition counts as unprepared for any other tradition, although it doesn’t generate any special penalties.

Hastily preparing a space may involve a roll against Symbol Drawing or Thaumatology rather than Ritual Magic skill, with GM permission. Properly preparing a space always dictates Symbol Drawing skill at 12+, although no skill roll is required – the time taken allows for plenty of repeated attempts and double-checking.

Unfortunately for magicians, very few spaces have been (correctly) used by any tradition or stylist group for more than a couple of years. One or two cliques and secret societies *claim* to have ritual spaces that have enough of a history to give +1 or +2 bonuses or even more; this may or may not be true.

Choosing the Moment: Different traditions attach different levels of significance to date or time of day; see the individual tradition notes.

Material and Symbolic Components: Almost any working with this sort of magic absolutely requires some kind of symbolic representation of the target, although this can be as

minimal as a common name, a simple sketch, or a moderately detailed verbal description. If the magician can physically touch the target, saying “this person” or “this thing” is enough. Better representations can give bonuses to effective skill using the rules for *Sympathy* (*GURPS Thaumatology*, p. 243-5), at the GM’s option. A description of the target in a suitably magical language, written with a successful Symbol Drawing roll, may be very suitable as a symbolic representation – again, GM’s preference.

In addition, every tradition requires that a caster carry a number of standard magical symbols, tools, etc.; these cost around \$20-\$50 and weigh 1-2 lbs. They can be acquired in any large town with a community with the right cultural background. Most magicians have lots of spares lying around their sanctums. Using improvised replacements (made in 1d+2 hours, using the GM’s choice of craft skill) gives a -2 penalty to workings; attempting magic without any such general symbols means a -5. Sacrifices and Acolytes help with some traditions, but not with others; see the specific notes.

Multiple Simultaneous Effects

Path/Book magicians in this setting have enough difficulty getting the occasional amulet or fetish to work; mass-producing such things is quite beyond them. Apparently, this “stretches their magic too thin.” Although they don’t have to concentrate to maintain magical effects placed on objects or people, each such effect currently active gives them -2 to skill for new workings – *twice* the penalty suggested on p. 132 of *GURPS Thaumatology*. Furthermore, they can’t just turn an amulet, curse, blessing, etc., off once they’ve worked it – they’ve got to wait for it to be triggered or to expire. This creates a definite disincentive to casual creation of amulets and the like!

WIDESPREAD TRADITIONS

The following are the most common Path/Book traditions in *Age of Gold*. There may be others, but if so, they are rare enough to surprise even expert occultists; characters may need an Unusual Background to learn them.

Conversion Between Traditions

All Path/Book magic in this setting apparently shares some basic principles, but the details vary enormously – witness the different views of the energy gathered. Hence, transferring ideas or techniques between traditions should be *extremely* difficult, though not quite impossible. Such a project may imply converting a whole Path or Book to use the techniques and “attuned energy” of the other tradition, which would be a major research project in itself. It would also involve performing more study to determine how each individual ritual fits in the new framework. Obviously, the magicians would have to include experts in each tradition (with appropriate Ritual Magic specialties at 18+) and advanced students of Thaumatology and Occultism (skills

at 15+). Some of the people involved would have to know something useful about *both* traditions.

In practice, *very* few magicians study more than one area of magical study, even casually. Most groups of magicians are snobbish about their tradition at best, downright fanatical, even religious on the subject at worst. The idea of learning so much as a ritual from “outsiders” may not even occur to them. Even the broadest-minded tend to be intensely aware of the risks, to the point of paranoia – misjudged magic is indeed prone to explosions, both literal and metaphorical. There have been perhaps three or four successful cross-tradition research projects of some kind in living memory, and none on the scale of a full Path adaptation.

Ritual Witchcraft

This is a relatively “low end” variety of Path-based magic. It can be treated as a single tradition, although the modern version combines techniques from many parts of the world, thanks to the diligent efforts of practitioners over the last couple of centuries. It mostly draws on Western ritual traditions. It encompasses rural witchcraft, a bit of Caribbean Voudoun, a bit of “Christian Thaumaturgy,” and fragments of the less subtle forms of Jewish Qabalistic practice. It doesn’t grant access to quite as many effects as some traditions, but its has one big advantage: It treats all energy as non-aspected. The required skill to use it is Ritual Magic (Witchcraft); very few practitioners have this at better than IQ+1 – developing it further necessitate a 10-point Unusual Background in some parts of the world. Critical failures while working this type of magic normally dictates rolls on the *Celtic Table* (*GURPS Thaumatology*, p. 256), although the GM can use something different at whim.

Choosing the Moment

Ritual witches have a number of favored dates and times for certain categories of working, all of them traditional magical dates (see *GURPS Thaumatology*, p. 246). Should a magician time a ritual to match one of these, the GM should decide if it is appropriate to earn a +1 to +3 bonus (or sufficiently inappropriate to take a -1 to -3 penalty). For example, fertility workings on Imbolc, darker magics on Walpurgisnacht or Samhain, love spells on Beltane, marriage blessings on Lughnasadh, or magical gift-giving on Yule are all acceptable, while curses and similar unbalancing magics take penalties on Ostara or Mabon.

Sacrifices and Acolytes

Sacrifices of food, tobacco, etc., can give a +1 bonus at the GM’s option – mostly when performing very Voudoun-flavored rituals. Self-sacrifice works as on p. 246 of *GURPS Thaumatology*, requiring a two-minute additional ritual that induces exhaustion and anemia. It can give up to +2 to effective skill (costing 40% of HP). Other sacrifices don’t help. Acolytes can give a bonus, up to +2 (for six assistants), provided that they are completely cooperative and know something about the nature and intent of the ritual, but they are never required.

Available Paths

This tradition offers a handful of fairly subtle paths, but it can still be quite powerful, given a little ingenuity. (Page numbers refer to sections in *GURPS Thaumatology*.)

- *The Path of Health* (pp. 148-151)
- *The Path of Luck* (pp. 152-155)
- *The Path of Nature* (pp. 155-157)
- *The Path of Protection* (pp. 157-159)

Invocationism

This is the primary tradition of ritual magic practiced in eastern Asia in general and China in particular, drawing heavily on local philosophies. It is a highly formalized Path-based tradition that treats energy as strongly aspected. The required skill to use it is Ritual Magic (Invocationist), and the tradition recognizes five aspects of magical energy: Fire, Wood, Earth,

Metal, and Water. Critical failures normally require rolls on the *Oriental Table* (*GURPS Thaumatology*, p. 259).

Choosing the Moment

Invocationism has a complex if underdeveloped body of underlying theory, which suggests that date or time of day may *occasionally* have some effect on a working. However, this isn’t usually a major concern for Invocationist magicians. Someone looking for every possible advantage for a specific ritual might attempt Ritual Magic and Astronomy (Observational) skill rolls; if both are successful, the caster determines that the best available time will come in 1d-1 weeks plus 1d days and will grant a bonus of 1d-2 (minimum +1).

Sacrifices and Acolytes

This is a very academic tradition, with no significant religious overtones. Sacrificing several hundred dollars’ worth of carefully chosen and prepared ingredients (not usually living things) may give a +1 bonus, at the GM’s option – a Ritual Magic roll at -2 will determine what would help – but few magicians bother. Self-sacrifices or Acolytes never give any bonuses.

Appropriate Energy Aspects

The GM must decide which aspect of energy is appropriate for any given working depending on its primary effect. For some rituals, this is easy – Command the Waves will always use Water energy (as in fact will many “weather” effects, such as Calm the Winds or Inexorable Breeze), while Firecalm will use Fire, as will violent acts of elemental destruction such as Thunderbolt. For others, much depends on the intent of the ritual: Wood is required for effects that create anything new, for anything strongly visual, and for emotional sensitivity. Fire is necessary for those that cause something or someone to grow or strengthen, for speech, and for intellectual creativity. Earth is used for physical stabilizing or immobilizing effects, for the sense of taste, and for clarity of thought. Metal is suitable for contraction or reduction, for strength of will, or for odors. Water is best for long-term preservation, for mental stability, and for hearing.

Example: Aura Reading uses Wood energy as it converts emotional information into visual effects, although magicians employing many other Path of Knowledge rituals must choose what sense they will receive information through and rely on the appropriate type of energy. (They possibly suffer confusing “overtones” if they make do with incorrectly aspected energy. Unfortunately, that doesn’t usually provide a devious way to receive useful multi-sensory results!) Doom, a “cutting” exercise of raw will, depends on Metal energy. Protection rituals require either Earth (for robust short-term barriers) or Water (for long-term preservation). Astral Projection, which strengthens the mind to work outside the body, necessitates Fire. Lay to Rest is a Water-related long-term preservative effect.

GMs will often have to be rather arbitrary in their rulings as to what energy is needed, but then, magic can be a very arbitrary thing.

Available Paths

This tradition offers a relatively limited set of paths, but with a variety of effects, from the subtle to the dramatic. (Page numbers refer to sections in *GURPS Thaumatology*.)

- *The Path of the Elements* (pp. 143-144)
- *The Path of Knowledge* (pp. 151-152)
- *The Path of Luck* (pp. 152-155)
- *The Path of Protection* (pp. 157-159)
- *The Path of Spirit* (pp. 159-162)

Diabolism

The third major tradition of ritual magic in this setting is far and away the least respectable, although it may not be *quite* as evil as its name suggests. Diabolism is Book-based magic leaning heavily on the conjuration of *very* dubious spirits. In the 20th century, some dedicated and (at best!) amoral scholars have integrated a range of “left-hand path” magical traditions and hammered out a reasonably effective system – at unknowable cost to themselves.

The required skill to use with this tradition is Ritual Magic (Diabolism), and the system treats magical energy as having three aspects; see below. Critical failures with rituals normally require rolls on the *Reality-Warping Table*, but GMs can use the *Diabolic/Horrific Table* any time they feel that things should turn nasty (*GURPS Thaumatology*, pp. 258-259).

Choosing the Moment

Diabolists find that a few dates and times are auspicious or inauspicious for their work. May Eve (April 30) and Halloween (October 31) give +2 bonuses to all rituals after nightfall. Good

Friday, Easter Sunday, the Summer Solstice, and Christmas Day all give -3 all day and the following night. GMs may add other dates, probably with only +1 or -1 effects, to taste.

Sacrifices and Acolytes

Diabolistic rituals are predictably prone to include sacrifices, many of them messy, unpleasant, or illegal, although they aren’t actually mandatory. (Some occultists say that any diabolist has already sacrificed more than enough.) Mere food and drink or cash are ineffective; the tradition demands an element of transgression, although this can just mean burning valuable and beautiful artworks. Self-sacrifice works as on p. 246 of *GURPS Thaumatology*, too, in the form of self-inflicted wounds with edged weapons. It has no upper limit apart from the obvious problem of the harm done to the magician. Lastly, Acolytes can give up to +3 (for 12 assistants), provided that they are cooperative and committed to the business, but they are never required.

Appropriate Energy Aspects

The energy aspects known to this tradition are the Power of Mastery, relating to spirits that grant power over human society; the Power of Force, relating to elementals and raw energy; and the Power of Conjuration, relating to direct dealings with powerful, fully sapient spirits and demons. The aspect required by any ritual is determined by the book from which it comes.

Known Diabolism Books

Each of these books includes a number of rituals drawn from the Path system as defined in *GURPS Thaumatology*; the relevant page there is listed in each case.

The Hierarchy

Energy Required: Conjuration.

Ritual	Page
Bind	p. 160
Empower	p. 160
Fetish	p. 161
Summon	p. 162

The Lineaments of Purity

Energy Required: Mastery.

Ritual	Page
Impotence	p. 164
Liar’s Charm	p. 141
Loyal Item	p. 154
Lust	p. 141
Scry	p. 152
Spirit Slave	p. 162
Virility	p. 164



The Razor’s Edge

Energy Required: Force.

Ritual	Page
Doom	p. 152
Evil Eye	p. 149
Ghost Shirt	p. 158
Malaise	p. 149
Weapon Blessing	p. 155
Weatherworking	p. 156

The Record of the Embassy

Energy Required: Conjuration.

Ritual	Page
Banish	p. 160
Command the Bodies of the Dead	p. 163
Curse Mirror	p. 157
Curse Sanctum	p. 157
Exorcise	p. 161
Spirit Trap	p. 162
Ward	p. 158

The Seventh Text of Misdirection

Energy Required: Mastery.

Ritual	Page
Guise	p. 140
Hallucination	p. 140
Hand of Glory	p. 141
Veil	p. 152

The Way of Perfect Conquest

Energy Required: Mastery.

Ritual	Page
Chaperone	p. 152
Command Beast	p. 155
Sterility	p. 150
Suggestion	p. 141
Warrior’s Blessing	p. 150



ALCHEMY

In this setting, alchemy is very much the “science of magic” – or, to be more precise, the science of magical *transformations*, in every sense. This includes but is not restricted to the transformation of mundane substances, correctly mixed and treated, to produce magical effects, which themselves often involve further transformations. It centers on the search for the true Philosopher’s Stone (in the form of “drinkable gold” for alchemists with a Chinese background); even the recipes for very minor, seemingly unrelated elixirs often require a small quantity of some impure form of the Stone.

In general, it is recommended that alchemy should be kept as a background feature of *Age of Gold* campaigns – mostly the concern of NPCs. To start with, it is very much a laboratory science, mostly involving long hours of nitpicking experimentation in pursuit of rather abstract results – none of which is terribly appropriate to high-action pulp-adventure gaming. Furthermore, alchemy can’t do *very* much as of *Age of Gold* 1930s; even if countless great secrets were understood and results achieved in the past (which is much debated by occultists), that lore has been largely lost. Even where recipes for useful repeatable results are known for certain, they tend to demand very expensive ingredients, often including the elusive Philosopher’s Stone – which is frankly too valuable to use as an adventurers’ weapon, when it’s available at all. Some PCs may have Alchemy skill, but that will mostly serve to help recognize alchemical phenomena, perform the odd analysis, or just act as character color.

Nonetheless, alchemy *is* important as part of the setting background, and can produce some interesting plot effects.

LABORATORY ALCHEMY

As alchemy is mostly a crazy sort of off-stage magical science, the creation of potions and research into subjects such as the Philosopher’s Stone is mostly the concern of wild-eyed eccentrics, aging scholars, and the occasional secret society with long-term plans. These people may commission expeditions in search of ancient texts or rare ingredients, and they may issue trusted employees with a potion or two if there seems to be a very specific need, but they aren’t really in the business of “field alchemy.”

These alchemical scientists are more likely to work from well-secured and carefully equipped home bases. For the important parts of these, use the rules for laboratories from p. 102 of *GURPS Thaumatology* or p. 211 of *GURPS Magic*, but treat the local TL as being 3 for this purpose (see p. 31 for the reason); hence, an “excellent” lab would give no more benefit than one that’s merely “professional grade,” so that category can be ignored. Nonetheless, many alchemists have much bigger laboratories than the “excellent” standard, either so that they can accommodate assistants, or because they have to store large quantities of ingredients.

Most such laboratories have a distinctly archaic, stone-and-oak-panels aesthetic, although there may be some modern glassware and Bunsen burners lying around. Alchemists may be quite dementedly old-fashioned, but they can usually appreciate convenience.

The Philosopher’s Stone

In *Age of Gold*, the Philosopher’s Stone is a slightly more varied and unpredictable thing than the version discussed in *GURPS Magic*; gamers who require details should use the following rules instead.

Creating a Stone is a task necessitating 52 weeks, an alchemical laboratory, and a roll against Alchemy-10. This can be treated as a Hard technique, but characters can only buy it up from default if they have Unusual Background (Insightful Alchemist) (see p. 28). It also requires ingredients worth at least \$10,000. Treat this as making an elixir according to the rules in *GURPS Magic*, including the option to create multiple doses by using extra ingredients and taking -1 to skill per extra dose.

Make the skill roll at the end of the year; a critical failure gets a roll on the same table as for elixirs, and a normal failure wastes all the ingredients. On a normal success, if the character didn’t have Unusual Background (Insightful Alchemist) before, he gains it; otherwise, he gets one bonus character point that must be applied to the technique. He also creates *some kind* of Philosopher’s Stone – but this is only somewhat similar to the “perfect” Stone on a critical success. Even then, it might not grant perfect immortality or transform any other metal to gold. In fact, the nature of the stone created is entirely up to the GM; its effects can include one or more of the following – usually two or three options, but sometimes more, especially after a critical success.

1. Provide perfect protection against either aging, disease, or poison while worn next to the skin.
2. If consumed, make a person 10 years younger and eliminate all diseases from their body. Alternatively or additionally, at the GM’s option, it removes any and all physical disadvantages, reverses the effects of past diseases, and so on.
3. Transform 10 lbs. of any metal to the same weight of gold on contact, permanently. The Stone then crumbles to dust and vanishes.
4. Transform 1 lb. of any metal to the same weight of gold on contact, but only for 2d×4 hours, once per day.

Magical “Herbalism”

Generally, in *Age of Gold*, “alchemy” means use of the *GURPS* Alchemy skill as such. Some beneficial magical results *might* be achieved using herbal ingredients and ancient herbal lore, but these are rare at best and generally come within the ambit of Alchemy skill. Hence, GMs are free to simply prohibit the Herb Lore skill.

On the other hand, there may be the occasional traditional rural herb-wife or witch-doctor with a few interesting tricks to hand. GMs who want to include such characters can allow them to learn Herb Lore, usually at TL4 or below (whatever their own general TL), and use it for one or two potions or elixirs. It should be subject to all the restrictions discussed on pp. 104-105 of *GURPS Thaumatology*, however.

5. Act as a useful ingredient for the manufacture of up to 10 doses of any lesser elixir from one category (Combat Abilities, Hostile Elixirs, etc.). For elixirs that are possible without some of the Stone, halve the cost of other required ingredients and the time taken and give +8 to the skill roll. The Stone may also make it possible to create some elixirs that the GM rules are otherwise impossible.

Weird Science

In the world of *Age of Gold*, Weird Science – a set of practices that definitely require the skill of that name (p. B228) – is basically the place where technology meets alchemy. Some weird scientists are aware that their research has moved beyond the limits of conventional science and started to incorporate supernatural elements. Others are militant materialists, who insist that there's no such thing as the supernatural and that they are simply exploring previously obscure areas of physics even as they contact spirits or transform lead to gold. Still others don't really care about the question, simply using "It's science!" as a catch-phrase and muttering about how people laughed at them at university.

In game terms, the main application for the Weird Science skill is justifying possession of the Gadgeteer advantage (usually at the 25-point level) and perhaps Unusual Background (Invention) (see p. B477) or some Gizmos. (However, if the GM wants the occasional really strange 50-point Gadgeteer, that's fine – though he'll probably have a long list of mental disadvantages, and his gadgets may well only work for himself.)

All Weird Science creations are at least TL6⁺, and the character may be allowed to take a level or two of High TL and build gadgets and conduct research at TL(6+1)⁺ or TL(6+2)⁺. GMs can decide what's possible at these divergent tech levels, but they should think in terms of 1930s science fiction with a definite weird twist – medical "serums" and "infusions" with a quasi-alchemical aspect, "lightning pistols" throwing electrical bolts with something like the power of a TL8 gun but a lower rate of fire, giant airships filled with "aetheric vapors," vertical take-off aircraft akin to helicopters ("the amazing helix-plane!"), and so on.

At a more prosaic level, the Weird Science skill can be used to analyze supernatural phenomena, giving some useful clues as to how to deal with them while putting a 1930s pseudoscience gloss on the discussion. References to "orgone energy," "etheric resonance," or "electro-spiritual science" are almost mandatory.

A few weird scientists have actually learned some Alchemy skill as such in addition to more conventional sciences, and they can even create the occasional elixir. These individuals have the advantage over other alchemists in that they can employ modern scientific thinking. They may even be able to learn Alchemy at an effective TL higher than 3, the notes on p. 31 notwithstanding, and gain the benefit of bonuses for excellent-grade high-TL laboratories. Their disadvantage is that they are generally self-taught, don't get along with true alchemists, and can't understand old-fashioned alchemical terminology very well – so they don't tend to be very good at the skill, rarely having more than one or two points in it.

6. Imbue a character with magical abilities. This can be as "minor" as 50-100 points in attributes and secondary characteristics, or as spectacular as a full set of super-powers. The Stone must be consumed for this, or it vanishes or crumbles away after imparting the powers. The powers are *usually* permanent, but they may have strange conditions.

Other effects are perfectly possible! Creating a Philosopher's Stone hands the GM the chance to throw in a big, juicy plot device, up to and including the appearance of a new mystery man. The GM should be properly grateful for this, and not abuse all that effort; the Stone is *never* useless to its maker. A day or so of testing and an unmodified Alchemy roll can determine what any Stone will do – although the details will be unclear with power-granting Stones.

A sample of the Philosopher's Stone always sells for *at least* \$20,000 on the secretive international occult market, even if its powers appear minor; there are always eccentrics and collectors. A stone that looks likely to grant useful super-powers can go for *millions*, even in 1930s money. Of course, there are also fakes around.

Known Elixirs

GMs who want alchemists to be handy item makers rather than just crazy academic lab rats can permit them to create elixirs as in Chapter 28 of *GURPS Magic*. However, as mentioned above, there are very few reliable recipes around. The nearest thing to a formula for any given elixir may be a sheaf of notes and inscription rubbings, in two or three dead languages, which seem to be contradictory when translated . . .

Characters with Unusual Background (Insightful Alchemist) may attempt Endurance, Healing, Health, Magic Resistance, Universal Antidote, or Wisdom elixirs, and they can improve the relevant techniques from default. Apart from this, being able to attempt any given single elixir and to raise the relevant technique requires Unusual Background (Elixir Knowledge) (see p. 28).

Even given all of this, the GM is free to prohibit any or most elixirs, in order to preserve the campaign flavor. Some elixirs even may require a quantity of the Philosopher's Stone as an ingredient – especially for powerful medical effects such as Resurrection or Youth. Thanks to such difficulties, elixir prices are always as for rare magic campaigns, and they will often be even higher.

Paut

Paut (see *GURPS Thaumatology*, p. 52) exists in this setting as a relatively well-understood form of "lesser stone" that may stand as a substitute for the Philosopher's Stone in some potion recipes, at the GM's option, as well as having its other listed benefits. However, the recipe is something of a secret; an alchemist needs Unusual Background (Paut Knowledge) (see p. 28) to know how to make it. The cost of ingredients is \$300 per dose, and the finished potion costs \$1,000 per one-ounce dose. Locating such an NPC alchemist, or any other vendor, should be an adventure in itself. Most paut is used as material by well-financed researchers.

PERSONAL TRANSFORMATION

Note that, legends notwithstanding, physical immortality is simply one form or aspect of the virtue of the Philosopher's Stone – and other benefits are more likely. “Internalizing” the Stone in some form (which can mean something more than just swallowing it!) can have all manner of effects, generally beneficial.

It's also possible for alchemy or related supernatural forces to transform people without the Stone being directly involved; see p. 22. Idealistic alchemists say that their objective is always to *transcend* “base humanity” in some way, but it must be said that the results are sometimes a very strange sort of

transcendence. Fanatical alchemists and magicians, who spend their lives exposed to arcane forces, sometimes transform into something distinctly other than human, if the mercury fumes don't get to them first.

Some alchemists, along with some other mystics, pursue personal transformation without seeking to use the Philosopher's Stone as a catalyst. The GM should mainly treat this as a plot device, but broadly speaking, someone with Alchemy and Meditation both at 15+, who spends some days every week in study and research, may be allowed to spend character points on exotic or supernatural character advantages, or on mundane mental or physical advantages that the GM wouldn't normally allow to be purchased after character creation.

MAGICAL “SUPERS”

With the almost explosive spread of magic in the last few years, a number of especially powerful exponents have adopted flashy costumed personas, often with masks or concealed identities. The press has been quick to notice and latch on to this; it makes for great stories, especially when two or more masked supermen engage in public combat. In other words, this setting is in the process of becoming a world of superheroes.

These “mystery men,” great heroes and terrifying masterminds of the *Age of Gold* – the true superhumans – are all the product and wielders of magic, in one form or another. This is wild magic, too, not cautious, indirect rituals (although some mystery men are *also* competent ritual practitioners). Their power can derive from years of study, careful use of arcane discipline, or the benevolent gift of a powerful item – or from blind chance or accident. Nor are the results always especially pleasant.

“Superheroes” or “Mystery Men”?

Note that the word “superhero” itself isn't really in keeping with this period; in our world, it appeared with the comic-book advent of Superman in 1938. Still, GMs and players may choose to talk about “supers” as a familiar term and even let “superhero” creep into character speech without great harm to the atmosphere of the game.

Nonetheless, a more appropriate term is “mystery men” – the mysteries in question arising from the fact that these individuals often go masked and sometimes demonstrate amazing abilities that conventional science is hard pressed to explain. That's what the press usually calls them, even if there doesn't seem to be much mystery in a particular case. In the academic-occult world, where the truth behind these mysteries is slightly better understood, they are often referred to by such terms as “men of gold,” indicating their apparent superiority to the mundane world, and the idea that they have been alchemically transformed just as alchemists dream of transforming lead to gold.

There are slightly more “heroic” – that is, high-minded and adventurous – mystery men than there are masked-and-costumed villains, but this is balanced by the number of wealthy, influential, or amazingly subtle master villains lurking in the shadows. Most of these *aren't* downright superhuman, although some are competent ritual magicians, and few wear masks or especially flashy costumes. They may have odd nicknames, but they don't often bother with the fancy “codenames” so often used by the mystery men. Still, they can make formidable antagonists for the most powerful masked heroes.

Appearances

The costumes worn by most mystery men aren't much like the skintight garb favored by “supers” in our world's comics. The tendency is much more toward vaguely military-style but highly colored gear, including bulky tunics, baggy riding pants, and knee-length boots – with the occasional safari suit, “magician's robes,” or trenchcoat-and-fedora ensemble for variety. Most “mystery women” wear something fairly modest, including a knee-length or longer skirt, although there are some truly outrageous exceptions.

What only a few people understand is that the fancy costumes, like the codenames, aren't just a matter of vanity or show. A supernaturally transformed human actually comes to exemplify the specific arcane forces and resonances that enhance him; his whole being becomes a focus. In short, the symbolic name and costume are a small but important part of the magic that empowers the superhuman being. Very few of the mystery men themselves understand this; they simply feel that it's only reasonable to put on a bit of a show, perhaps to help preserve a secret identity that protects their loved ones, or to intimidate evildoers. A very few scholars suspect that, in the long term, a transformed individual may become something less as well as more than human – a walking manifestation of some arcane force, his personality burnt away in the heat of arcane power – but it seems impossible to convince the possible victims of this danger.



THE ALCHEMICALLY TRANSFORMED

As described above, magical-alchemical forces occasionally transform ordinary humans into something different and perhaps *more*. While these people vary vastly, they include some of the most startling mystery men of the Age.

However, not all great magical personal transformations result from alchemy as such. Indeed, in some cases, people may not realize at first that they've been in contact with the supernatural. Accidental or uncontrolled transformations generally involve a combination of the presence of supernatural phenomena or energies, plus an extremely *intense* personal experience of some kind. It appears that radical, life-changing experiences can unlock the deeper capabilities of the human mind, allowing it to absorb and transmute any surrounding supernatural energies into personal power.

In a few cases, this transformation is reflected in physical changes to the individual's body; in others, the intense experience may be of the unpleasant sort that leaves very visible scars or mutilations. Hence, while most mystery men look human, and will probably check out as such to TL6 medical tests, a few are distinctly otherwise.

Unfortunately, while some magicians, occultists, and weird scientists understand a little about this principle, and some mystics have had a clue on the subject for millennia, no one has ever managed to really control these transformational processes, let alone make them reliably repeatable. The nearest thing would be certain systems of spiritual and mystical training, which expose the subject to magical forces (in the form of rituals, strange procedures performed by the teacher, alchemical drugs, or whatever) while imposing a rigorous mental and physical training regime. This can be cumulatively stressful enough while hopefully teaching the student's mind to handle any new powers he acquires. But even these procedures will only transform perhaps one carefully chosen student in a hundred, maybe one in a thousand; the "failures" may end up as competent ritual magicians or martial artists, as twisted figures who likely spend the rest of their lives pursuing further "enlightenment," or just as "normals" with a few strange skills. In *Age of Gold*, completely accidental transformations have come to outnumber the trained super-mystics by a large margin.

Transformation Through Death

In very rare cases, it seems, humans can be magically or alchemically transformed by the most intense experience of all – that of *dying*. As ever, this works best in the presence of intense magical forces, sometimes meaning significant quantities of a Philosopher's Stone, but those forces may actually be obscure or subtle. Unfortunately, the transformation hardly ever involves a return to actual *life*. Thus, the setting includes a number of undead beings of various sorts – mummies, zombies, ghouls, ghosts, and so on – kept active by magical power.

The list definitely includes vampires and similar creatures from various cultural backgrounds, who vary considerably in their exact powers and strengths, often matching peculiar local beliefs quite closely. One thing that they (and other undead) can never do as easily or reliably as stories may claim, though, is create others of their own kind. The experience of being killed by a vampire is certainly intense, and by definition takes place in the presence of a considerable magical force, but it's

no more certain to achieve this result than any other attempt at deliberate personal transformation. Efforts by the "parent" vampire to reinforce the effect by, say, feeding the victim the parent's own blood, sometimes work, but not always. Some vampires promise vampiric immortality to human prospective minions; they're lying.

Not all undead are evil, but most are unpleasant at best. In many cases, the transformation experience seems to drive the victim insane, with violent psychosis being especially common. Popular beliefs about the undead may be part of the problem; someone who has been raised to think the worst of "undead monsters" may almost feel obliged to adopt the role upon becoming one, or he may take it as an excuse to act on his worst impulses. A raging thirst for blood or spinal fluid may not help, and undead tend to be excluded from human society for understandable reasons. Loneliness and anger can drive them to seek revenge or relief of their angst in destruction. Some, though, preserve a moral sense – although this may merely mean that they seek to avenge their own deaths, or to punish "evildoers" in general. A few heroic "mystery men" are in fact undead; the public at large doesn't suspect it about most of them.

ANCIENT ARTIFACTS

Another source of supernatural powers that appears quite often in this setting is the use of magical devices – typically, extranormal artifacts created by great magicians or supernatural beings in past ages, using techniques seemingly lost today. These powers can vary widely, including swords that provide modest advantages in combat; belts or amulets that boost one or two attributes to the limits of human potential; and major artifacts that grant vast magical powers through the aid of associated spirits. (In game terms, such items may have been created by almost any of the methods discussed in Chapter 4 of *GURPS Thaumatology*, but the exact methods are largely irrelevant.) Some such artifacts show up in archaeological digs; a few are family heirlooms or otherwise passed down through many generations of users.

Many have missions, *gesa*, or curses associated with them, perhaps set to strike the first person to touch them, or anyone who uses them. Those that are "supervised" by powerful spirits are generally supposed to be used for some purpose that the spirit enforces. Hence, many users are driven toward some goal or behavior pattern, including heroism, defense of some nation or group, or megalomaniacal world conquest.

Obviously, mystery men who depend on such devices are rather more vulnerable to loss of their powers than many others – although it can be quite hard to take anything away from a determined superhuman! Those items that are lost may be found and used by other people; a few "mystery men" are actually holders of some artifact-based title that changes hands almost weekly.

A few artifacts actually induce personal transformations on contact in the right situation, producing a character who *does not* depend on the artifact for his power from then on. If he continues to hold onto the item subsequently, for sentimental reasons or as a simple weapon, opponents may think that it's worth taking the trouble to steal it – and suffer an unpleasant surprise as a result. Generally, such artifacts lose their power after transforming one person, although they *might* regain it after a generation, say, or a century – or when the last person so transformed dies.

GAME MECHANICS

Age of Gold “mystery men” possess definite superhuman powers, and they don’t generally have to use spells or rituals to control them. Hence, they should be defined using the rules for advantages and powers. Chapter 7 of *GURPS Thaumatology* goes into detail on this subject; *GURPS Powers* and *GURPS Supers* provide further ideas.

Obviously, many characters have full-scale powers in *GURPS* terms, but this isn’t mandatory; enhanced attributes and perhaps one or two advantages can be more than enough. Even some artifacts can grant powers, with both power and gadget limitations. In *Age of Gold* games, all powers have Magical as their source; the modifier for this is -10%, made up of -5% for “special countermeasures” and -5% for “channeled energy,” exactly as discussed on p. 202 of *GURPS Thaumatology* and p. 27 of *GURPS Powers*, and equivalent to the Mana Sensitive limitation (p. B34). Most personal magical abilities

take this modifier, even if they aren’t defined as part of a power as such.

Optionally, GMs who want to run “magic vs. fists” games, probably set in *Age of Gold* Asia, can also allow Chi powers, as described on p. 26 of *Powers*. However, in this setting, even those should verge on magic and might take the Magical modifier in addition to or instead of the Chi modifier. Some individual powers may also include modifiers associated with other sources, such as Elemental, Nature, or Spirit. “Magic” encompasses a broad range of phenomena in this setting.

Note that, although mystery men are capable of a wide range of feats and effects, they *can’t* usually buy Super-Strength, that is, ST with the Super-Effort enhancement, as discussed on pp. 24-25 of *GURPS Supers*. Although their strength may well be at or some way beyond normal human capacities, they are one notch closer to realism and can’t match the feats of all-out four-color “supers.”

SPIRIT-ASSISTED SPELL MAGIC

There’s only one way to get “spell magic” in the *GURPS* sense in *Age of Gold*, and that’s in the form of spirit-assisted magic; see p. 90-94 of *GURPS Thaumatology*. Even though this sort of magic does work, there’s not actually much of it around, and of course it all comes with a heavy price. Nonetheless this approach *can* represent a shortcut to lots of power.

“COOPERATIVE” SPIRITS

Unfortunately, powerful and cooperative spirits are not only relatively rare, they’re prone to demand especially stringent prices for their aid. They aren’t all diabolical or otherwise evil, but no spirit finds it very convenient to provide spells to importunate mortals, and those who do demand significant payment in return. There may well be some “nice” spirits out there, but most of them would rather find ways to assist mortals that don’t involve becoming entangled with human needs, affairs, and destinies. PCs may use this sort of magic, with explicit GM permission, but players should understand that it’s *troublesome*.

Whenever the subject arises, the GM should decide the nature and focus of the spirit that will be assisting the mortal. This determines both the sort of price it charges and the type of magic it provides. A player whose character starts play with such magic can decide the general nature of its source, but even there, the GM determines specific details. These beings have agendas and strong personalities that come out in the sort of magic they grant. Demons want to make trouble and thus offer destructive spells. Nature spirits can grant power over narrow aspects of the natural world in return for diligent efforts to protect their domain. Spirits linked to emotional states grant control over that emotion in exchange for its being promoted by magical or mundane means, and so on.

Contacting such spirits is mostly a matter of luck, secret knowledge, and being in the right place at the right time; it’s not something that a PC can easily arrange. Someone seeking to gain spirit-assisted spells in the course of play will need to

conduct a lot of research, possibly travel long distances, and negotiate carefully. The attempt will be an adventure in itself, with no guarantee of success.

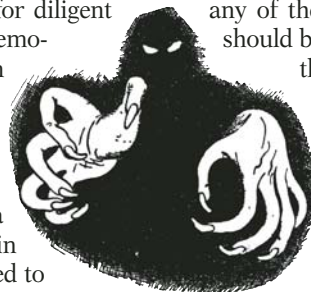
SPELLS GRANTED AND CAST

In *Age of Gold*, any spells that a spirit-assisted caster acquires *must* be learned through the Easy Spell Access option (*GURPS Thaumatology*, p. 91), at reduced (Easy or Average) difficulty. However, the “Completely Free Spells” option *is not* available; spirits can’t (or won’t) work that closely with mortals, and don’t tend to have that large a repertoire of spells.

Despite this caution, perhaps there *are* a few spirits around with that much power, and a few mortals with the ability to talk a great spirit into providing unlimited spell-based assistance. Obviously, this could make the character frighteningly powerful; it should generally be limited to formidable NPCs, if it happens at all. Any spirit willing to grant that much aid should demand more in return than most PCs would be willing to give. If the GM needs game mechanics, require a 50-point Unusual Background and a very large Duty disadvantage.

The GM has complete control over the spells available from any given spirit. Not only should these match its character and general capabilities, there should be a certain amount of whimsy in the mix. Remember also that the spirit providing the spells should logically be able to cast them itself; if it’s likely to appear in play “in person,” those spells will be among its capabilities. (Also, it should have them at the highest skill of any of the humans to whom it grants them – no human should be able to learn a spell to a higher level than that of the aiding spirit.) The simplest approach is to list a small set of colleges that the spirit can provide.

However, some spells may have other spells out of their own college as prerequisites, and some may be highly unsuitable for a particular spirit despite lying within an apparently appropriate college. Taking the time to make up a specific list can be worth the effort.



Lastly, spell casting works as described in *GURPS Thaumatology*, including the minimum casting time of two seconds for any spell, and the requirement to only work spells for purposes of which the spirit approves. All failures rolled when casting spirit-assisted spells in this setting require a roll

on a critical failure table (usually the *Spirit-Oriented Magic Table*, *GURPS Thaumatology*, p. 260, or the *Diabolic/Horrific Table*, p. 258, for demon-assisted castings). The GM may choose to treat any critical failure on the spell-casting roll as producing the effects of an 18 on the critical failure table.

DEMONS

Creatures that can with justice be labeled “demons” certainly exist in the *Age of Gold* setting. Most of them are every bit as dangerous as the tag implies. However, while conventional churchmen and other religious believers have no doubt as to their nature and origins, other observers have noted some oddities and peculiarities in their powers, natures, and behavior. Some scientists are determined to find a rational explanation for the whole phenomenon.

The best guess, suggested by a number of radical psychologists, is that these are “physical manifestations of the id,” creatures of raw magical energy, given shape and personality by human belief – perhaps even denizens of the “collective unconscious.” This would explain why they seemingly tend to take forms dictated by local beliefs – which in turn explains why, to some eyes, they may end up looking faintly (and deceptively) silly. Western demons often appear with scarlet skins, short horns, and pitchforks; Far Eastern and Indian manifestations tend to be more stylish, but even those include the likes of Japanese *kappa* with beaked faces and water-filled depressions on their heads, and Indian *rakshasas* with excessive numbers of heads and arms.

Demons may be physical manifestations of the id, given shape and personality by belief.

However, all demons are genuinely *very* dangerous; if the scientific idea is correct, they manifest all the darkest sociopathic tendencies of the id, with no superego to restrain them. They glory in destruction and corruption, and they love using humans as pawns. They tend to be instinctively cunning rather than really bright, but only the least of them are actually stupid. Human “demonists” who rely on spirit-assisted magic granted by powerful demons always pay for the mistake.

Some demons seem to have access to extradimensional “sub-realms” or “pocket hells,” where they take physical form; moving between these and Earth requires either Jumper or appropriate magic. It’s not clear whether demons actually want human souls as such, and whether they can set up binding contracts with that as the price. Some *say* that they do, but some modern occultists suspect that this is clever use of symbolism to bind gullible humans to their wills. What is clear is that demons desire violence, pain, and destruction, and revel in wielding physical power. Those with access to extradimensional “sub-realms” sometimes take slaves or drag prisoners back there physically. Many also enjoy drinking the blood of mortals or have other unpleasant habits.

Although demons don’t have to eat to survive as humans do, they *can* nevertheless eat, and many seem to have a strong taste for specific substances such as blood or raw flesh. They may suffer some loss of powers if forced to go without such things for long enough (a limitation on their abilities). They might even lose physical cohesion if deprived for a very long time (a low-level Dependency). Some may actually feed on human emotions such as hate or misery.

Demons are at the most garish and four-color end of the scale of opposition, even for *Age of Gold* campaigns. They are best suited as opponents for flashy and explicitly supernatural mystery men. GMs who prefer to keep things subtle can avoid including them in campaigns, or keep them as enigmatic off-stage threats – something that power-crazed magicians have to be prevented from summoning – while keeping their visible villains entirely human, with human motives and vices.

Theories Regarding Other Spirits

Other spirits exist who seem to share some of the attributes of demons without being as overtly evil. Some, indeed, can be quite helpful, at least to people who share their goals. If they are manifestations of the human subconscious, these come from its more complex and subtle areas; some scholars even believe that some of them are shaped by the minds of non-human animals. However, they are rarely entirely safe to deal with, and their goals tend to be less comprehensible than those of straightforwardly evil demons. If and when they grant spirit-assisted spells, they offer odd mixtures of effects and abilities, and they set seemingly arbitrary conditions on their use.

Petty Demon

This is a fairly minor demon – a suitable opponent for a mystery man or a small group of normal-human heroes. It’s sneaky and strong, but it’s not especially bright. It’s enough of a coward to be driven away for good by a beating. Unfortunately, its ability to shift to an intangible spirit form makes it hard to pin down or finish off completely, and it may be smart enough to use this to pull off sneak attacks. Its precise appearance is up to the GM; a lot of demons of seemingly different types actually have similar abilities.

A demon like this may be summoned and bound by a magician, and it will aid a mortal relatively willingly in exchange for some kind of payment – blood is almost always acceptable. It prefers to drive a hard bargain. However, it lacks the power and flexibility to provide “assisted magic” spells.

It will act grudging and threatening if somehow compelled to serve, but it actually quite likes this situation. Anyone who seeks the aid of a demon is probably either evil or deeply stupid, which means that whatever he does will suit a demon’s tastes and desires eventually, if not straight away.

ST 16; DX 11; IQ 9; HT 12.

Damage 1d+1/2d+2; BL 51 lbs.; HP 16; Will 11; Per 11; FP 50. Basic Speed 5.75; Basic Move 5; Dodge 8; Parry 9 (Brawling). SM 0; 250 lbs.

Advantages/Disadvantages: Appearance (Monstrous); Attentive; Bad Temper (9); Berserk (9); Bully (9); Callous; Claws (Sharp); Clueless; Damage Resistance 5; Discriminatory Smell; Dread (Sacred Ground); Frightens Animals; Night Vision 5; Sadism (6); Spirit*; Teeth (Sharp); Temperature Tolerance 30; Vulnerable to True Faith, spirit-binding magic, etc.

Skills: Brawling-12; Spear-11; Stealth-13.

* As per Spirit racial template, but Insubstantiality has Can Carry Objects Up to No Encumbrance, rather than Affect Substantial.

Arch-Demon

This is a powerful “demon lord” – a formidable opponent for a group of mystery men, or the ultimate behind-the-scenes mastermind for a whole campaign’s worth of battles with darkness and corruption. It’s dangerous in a fight, but it prefers to manipulate, tempt, and corrupt humans from the shadows, and then let them do any serious fighting that’s necessary.

An arch-demon may rule a “pocket hell” with a whole army of petty demons as enforcers and yes-men; it will almost certainly have access to vast material resources if it needs them. It looks blatantly demonic and non-human, but its facade is more bizarre than disgusting and may be quite stylish. Many such demons have the Shapeshifting ability or spells with the same effect, and they often adopt the appearance of handsome, suave human men (or sometimes glamorous, alluring women). Some can sprout wings at will and use them to fly while substantial. Most can speak many human languages fluently; they may actually have universal “mind speech” abilities and merely *appear* to be speaking.

Like the petty demon, this creature can vanish (probably in a puff of brimstone-reeking smoke) at whim, which makes it immensely hard to defeat, because it’s smart enough to perform tactical withdrawals and return at inconvenient moments. However, it’s vulnerable to spirit-binding and spirit-destroying magic. It may also be induced to abandon its schemes in some area by sufficiently determined, persistent, and effective opposition that eliminates enough of the basis of its schemes. Some stories claim that, even if such demons are “destroyed,” they are really just sent back to Hell for a few decades or centuries – something debated by modern occultists.

This sort of demon may be summoned by magic, and it is sometimes said to come when invited, even without actual spells or rituals. This could be treated as a form of Warp with vastly enhanced range and some peculiar limitations – but mostly, it’s a matter of game special effects. The demon may also be able to grant “assisted magic” spells from its own repertoire, which would be a complex ability to detail in character terms, especially given its ability to supervise uses of the magic – but again, that’s mostly a plot device. PCs aren’t expected to be demons, or to display high-end demonic abilities, after all. However, a demon should be able to fully cast any spell that it grants, to the same skill level as any human it aids.

True Faith

The True Faith advantage (p. B94) is available to characters in *Age of Gold*, including PCs, but it should be rare; this is mostly an age of science and wonder, not religious devotion. It can repel demons, which after all, if modern theories are correct, are themselves creatures of belief, in their way; apparently, a sufficiently strong conscious individual mind can match and overcome the collective power of many subconscious beliefs. Or perhaps it’s simply that the beliefs that shape demons include the firm belief that True Faith should work against them. Many of them certainly avoid religious symbols and holy ground, even when these aren’t being wielded by a believer; combining the faith and the symbol can be lethal for them.

Thus, the power of faith resides in the believer, not in the belief; characters of almost any religious background may possess the advantage. If they’re actually channeling real divine power, it appears that the divinity is prepared to accept and honor many different forms of worship. Most characters with True Faith in this setting behave in a *very* conventionally devout way for their particular religion, although some may be a little eccentric by mainstream standards.

ST 13; DX 14; IQ 13; HT 13.

Damage 1d/2d-1; BL 34 lbs.; HP 18; Will 13; Per 13; FP 75. Basic Speed 6.75; Basic Move 6; Dodge 10; Parry 11 (Spear). SM 0; 160 lbs.

Advantages/Disadvantages: Bad Temper (9); Bully (12); Callous; Claws (Sharp); Combat Reflexes; Cowardice (15); Damage Resistance 5; Dark Vision; Dread (Sacred Ground); Frightens Animals; Indomitable; Magery 2; Magic Resistance 3 (Improved); Rapid Healing; Sadism (12); Selfish (12); Spirit*; Temperature Tolerance 30; Vulnerable to True Faith, spirit-binding magic, etc.

Skills: Accounting-14; Acting-13; Alchemy-10; Carousing-13; Fast-Talk-13; Gambling-12; Intimidation-13; Mental Strength-16; Merchant-13; Observation-13; Politics-16; Savoir-Faire (High Society)-14; Spear-14; Stealth-14; Thaumatology-12.

Spells: A typical *minimum* set of spells† would be Clumsiness-15; Counterspell-14; Create Fire-15; Deflect Energy-14; Detect Magic-18; Dispel Magic-16; Fireball-15; Hinder-15; Ignite Fire-15; Itch-14; Purify Air-14; Shape Fire-14; Spasm-15; and Stench-15.

* As per Spirit racial template, but Insubstantiality has Can Carry Objects up to Medium Encumbrance, rather than Affect Substantial and Usually On.

† Much longer spell lists and higher skill levels with any spell are perfectly possible! However, demons are highly unlikely to know any spell that helps people directly, preferring raw destructive effects. Some accounts suggest that they are completely unable to perform any sort of creative act or to actually control the minds of human beings in any way.

CHAPTER THREE

CHARACTERS

"So, what brought you to Shanghai, Mr. Williams?" inquired Jerome Chatford, as the two men shared a companionable drink in a small bar.

"With respect, old son – look at the dates." Williams contemplated his empty glass intently and then signaled for yet another whisky. "Who'd want to have to live with a dam' fool idea like Prohibition, if they had a choice?"

Chatford smiled thinly. "Just so. But Prohibition is over now."

"I suppose so. But I have friends here now, and work. Nobody back home wants to see my face again. In this city, people appreciate . . ."

The explanation went uncompleted. A third man had joined the conversation, a well-dressed Chinese man with a bland expression. "Mr. Williams?" he inquired, his English accent perfect. "Chiai Tiao sends her regards." As Williams stared in shock, the man drew a slender-bladed, evil-looking knife from a hidden sheathe.

But the knife never struck. With startling strength, Chatford swept Williams off his stool and safely clear of the assassin. The man turned his attention to Chatford, but before he could move, the American threw a straight right with sledgehammer force, ending the contest in one blow.

"Lord!" exclaimed Williams from the floor, as Chatford spun the stunned assassin around and frisked him for further weapons. "But Chiai Tiao . . . I thought she . . ."

"Local gang boss, isn't she?" Chatford asked in a light tone. "No offense, sport, but I'm not sure about your taste in friends."

"I thought that we were on reasonable terms. I sold her some Tibetan herbs only last month, after all. And she's not usually this crude," muttered Williams, and Chatford frowned.

"That so? Do you know, I wonder if someone might be telling untruths. Trying to make trouble." Chatford pulled the assassin's silk tie from his neck and used it to bind the man's hands. "You know, we should hand this fellow over to those excellent Municipal Police – but first, I think, there's some friends of mine might like to talk to him."

"Anyone I should know?" asked Williams, rising to his feet.

"Not for now," said Chatford, smilingly quietly as he placed the cost of the drinks on the bar in front of the gaping bartender. "We all have our little secrets, don't you know, for better or worse. But you might do well to tell my friends about those Tibetan herbs, eventually. Just now, though, you get yourself home – and take care on the way. I think that this fellow has to go see a Doctor."

The *Age of Gold* setting is intended as one for heroic PCs, whether gritty pulp-style adventurers or magically empowered "mystery men," and play should primarily be fast-moving and action-oriented. Character design, and the features appearing on character sheets, should reflect this.

STARTING POINTS

Age of Gold campaigns operate at one of two distinct levels, each with their own stylistic details and flavors. *Pulp Adventurer* games should feature "ordinary human" (if competent) PCs, built on 150-250 points; magical abilities may be banned altogether for PCs, or limited to Ritual Magic and a couple of Paths or Books or minor advantages such as Channeling or Medium. By contrast, *Mystery Man* games are about superhuman PCs, built on 300-500 points or even more (though remember, these aren't *quite* four-color heroes in the modern style), with magical abilities very much expected – indeed, non-magical PCs might actually be banned, as they're likely to be too frail in combat while potentially possessing game-distorting levels of skill. Weird costumes and secret identities are unusual at the *Pulp Adventurer* level but commonplace among mystery men.

BASIC CONDITIONS

The setting should be treated as standard TL6, with average starting wealth set at \$10,000. Note that these are abstract "GURPS dollars"; if you want to use *historical* U.S. dollars, divide *GURPS* values by 11 in the 1920s, 14 in the 1930s.

Hence, for example, average starting wealth in period money would be about 900 U.S. dollars in the 1920s, or 700 U.S. dollars in the 1930s.

Available Cultural Familiarities include Western (which covers Europe, most of North and South America, Australia, and most European colonies), Russian (the culture of the U.S.S.R., based on the old "Orthodox" pattern mutated through a few years of Communist rule), East Asian (covering China and many of its neighbors), Indian, and Japanese. Languages are much as in our present day. Military Rank is available for characters who are currently in the armed forces, although GMs may prefer that the PCs be independent operators. Much the same goes for Police Rank. Additionally, given how recent the World War I was, Courtesy Rank based on Military Rank is quite common among adventurers.

Status covers the usual range from -2 to 8, although the extremes are rare or unknown in some places. Nowhere actually rates as a real classless meritocracy (p. B28), but the GM may rule that citizens of democracies with no remnant formal aristocracy, such as the United States, can't buy more than, say, three levels of Status directly.

“LEADER AND ASSISTANTS” TEAMS

One possibility that maintains the pulp style well is for a PC group to consist of one Mystery Man-level character as the leader, and a group of assistants created at Pulp Adventurer level. Such a group is traditionally a tightly knit fellowship, probably known by the name of their leader, who provides them with a cause to follow or a philosophy. To keep things interesting for the players of the assistants, the characters should each be competent in at least one area in which the leader has no particular ability. (This is unlike the typical pulps, in which leaders were often omniscient, with assistants to serve only as extra hands and comic relief.) For example, the leader might be a night-stalking crime fighter and master of stealthy combat, with assistants who provide underworld contacts, legal advice, medical aid, driving and piloting skills, and so on. The leader is usually rich enough to furnish a base of operations, although he might instead have a wealthy faithful follower who provides the group with resources and a home (and probably also high society contacts).

GMs should only run “Leader and Assistants” campaigns if they’re confident that the other players won’t get jealous of the leader PC’s superior abilities and inevitable tendency to take a bit of extra spotlight time. Players should realize that leaders

tend to be paragons, and hence maybe slightly dull, whereas followers can be more flawed and hence more amusing to play. It’s also worth noting that followers have more scope to develop in unexpected and dramatic directions, whereas leaders may be a bit more static. The GM can even give followers a few additional bonus character points to reinforce this effect. However, unless the group decides to change its dynamics, the followers should not be allowed to approach the leader’s personal ability level in his key skills or advantages. The companions might, instead, surpass him in other areas.

A further possibility is a “Leader and Assistants” group with an NPC leader. All the PCs are built on the same point total, with no cause for jealousy, but none of them can match the superhuman figure who leads them. This requires some fine judgment, as the point is *not* for the GM’s godlike pet to have all the fun. Rather, the leader should act as a channel for GM suggestions to the PCs and a living weapon of last resort, while the PCs enable him to do his job properly and occasionally rescue him from the consequences of his natural but excessive self-confidence. The leader’s serious fights should mostly take place off stage, or be skimmed over with a quick description rather than being played out in detail. In any “Leader and Assistants” game, there may be a temptation to play the leader as a bit dim and too-direct when compared to his brains-over-brawn sidekicks; with an NPC leader, this potentially comic treatment can be played to the hilt without insulting a player.

Every valuable human being must be a radical and a rebel, for what he must aim at is to make things better than they are.

– Niels Bohr

CHARACTER TRAITS

PCs in *Age of Gold* can have a wide range of capabilities, though most of the more exotic options should have a blatant or subtle magical aspect.

ADVANTAGES

Pulp Adventurer-level heroes are limited to mundane mental, physical, or social advantages; mystery men are defined by one or more exotic or supernatural features. Of course, there can always be exceptions in both categories.

Note that *GURPS Powers* has a number of new modifiers for existing advantages, as well as several new advantages that can be helpful when depicting magical “supers” (especially Control, Create, and Illusion). *GURPS Supers* also has some useful additions in this line, although note that Super-Strength is not generally available in *Age of Gold* games (see p. 21 for why).

Channeling, Medium

see p. B41 and p. B68

There are enough spirits active in *Age of Gold* that these advantages are quite useful, and both are available to non-“super” characters. Some adventurers may also have Detect (Spirits or Spiritual Phenomena, either of which rates as Occasional) or See Invisible (Spirit Invisibility).

Extra Attack

see p. B53-54

Pulp heroes are fond of coming in with both guns blazing, so one level of Extra Attack is appropriate. Mystery men, who tackle whole gangs of thugs single-handedly, may look to purchase even more.

Gadgeteer, Gizmos, High TL

see p. B56-58 and p. B23

See p. 20, and note that “High TL” usually means TL(6+1) or TL(6+2), probably with some superscience.

Magery

see pp. B66-67

While anyone can *in theory* get some kind of magic to work in *Age of Gold*, Magery is an enormous advantage to most people involved in practical magic-crafting. The ability to sense magical energies and objects helps determine whether a technique or idea is working or not – and so levels of Magery certainly add to the Thaumatology skill, as per the *Basic Set* – and pretty well all magical activities in the setting involve a certain amount of experiment and analysis. Alchemists in a laboratory can afford to take the time to assess their results with instruments and material tests, but anyone “in the field” needs to eyeball things, at which point, the lack of actual magical sensitivity can be downright dangerous.

There is just one form of Magery in this setting, which can be used for any magical task that calls for the advantage, although in practice very few mages have any competence in more than one field. In fact, the obsessive focus and deep-seated assumptions involved in mastering one type of magic can make it very hard to learn another. The proportion of the world’s population with functional Magery is unclear, but most guesses put the numbers in the 1-10% range. If the higher estimates are correct, the vast majority of cases are strictly Magery 0. Magery 1-2 isn’t too rare, and Magery 3 is certainly known, but Magery 4+ is truly exceptional and requires an Unusual Background – see *Arch-Mage*, below.



Magery cannot be gained or increased in play except through *Unrealized Potential*, p. 29.

Limited Magery (*GURPS Thaumatology*, pp. 20-27) is rare; GMs who permit PCs to include it should make sure that any limitations taken relate to the type of magic that the character

will perform or encounter, and that they’ll actually be *limiting* in play. Magery may also act as a power Talent (see *GURPS Powers*) for any magical power, at the GM’s discretion.

Mystic Symbols: Some magicians find that a personal “mystic symbol” – an item such as an ankh, an ivory tablet marked with mystical inscriptions, a special ring, a staff, or a wand – helps a little with their Path/Book magic. This will always be a single, specific item, which will never work for anyone except the original owner; it can be represented by buying *one* level of Magery with gadget limitations. A few more powerful or versatile “mystic symbol” items exist, capable of being used by any magician (or at least any magician from a specific tradition), but these should always be treated much like ancient artifacts (see p. 22), being beyond the power of magical craftsmanship to create at this date.

Magic Resistance

see p. B67

The same advantage grants resistance to all forms of magic in this setting.

Mana Damper, Mana Enhancer

see p. B67-68

These advantages are currently unknown in this setting, where the concept of “mana” has limited meaning (see p. 6).

True Faith

see p. B94

See p. 25 on the nature of this advantage in this setting.

Unusual Background

see p. B96

The following Unusual Backgrounds are available in this setting.

Arch-Mage (30 points): You can purchase Magery to level 4 or higher. This is *rare*, and GMs should demand an interesting backstory for any character with this much potential.

Elixir Knowledge (5 points): This is only available if the GM chooses to allow alchemist characters who can manufacture a range of elixirs; see p. 20. If you have Alchemy skill, you can attempt to create one specific elixir (determined when you acquire the Unusual Background), and buy the relevant technique up from default.

Insightful Alchemist (15 points): You have a special comprehension of the nature and secrets of alchemy, and you can buy the technique for creating the Philosopher’s Stone up from default. Also, if the GM chooses to allow alchemist characters who can manufacture a range of elixirs, you can attempt to create Endurance, Healing, Health, Magic Resistance, Universal Antidote, or Wisdom elixirs, and buy the relevant techniques up from default. See pp. 19-20 regarding the creation of the Philosopher’s Stone.

Paut Knowledge (5 or 10 points): If you have Alchemy skill, you can attempt to create Paut, and buy the relevant technique up from default; see p. 20. This Unusual Background costs 5 points if you also have Unusual Background (Insightful Alchemist); otherwise, it costs 10 points.

Continuous effort – not strength or intelligence – is the key to unlocking our potential.

– Winston Churchill

PERKS

Several of the perks listed on pp. 30-31 of *GURPS Supers* and in *Power-Ups 2: Perks* are appropriate for *Age of Gold* mystery men; others are somewhat “out of period.” *Cloaked*, *Masked*, and *Nonprotective Clothing* fit quite well, for example, but *Skintight* doesn’t – mystery men tend to favor somewhat bulkier garb – while *Supersuit* would require some justification – a friendly chemist with High TL or Invention might be able to design such a costume, for example.

The following perks may well appear in *Age of Gold* campaigns. The first two relate to training in special schools of magic or combat; they may be associated with Unusual Backgrounds, Duties, interesting origin stories, and suchlike. (Perks marked with † require specialization.)

Magical School Familiarity†

You have studied at a specific formal school of magic, alchemy, or arcane arts, and you are a recognized student or graduate of that school. The perk gives these benefits:

- You understand the arcane principles that undergird the school’s magic, and you know at least the outlines of most of its teachings. You have +1 (or better, at the GM’s option) to skills such as Occultism or Thaumatology when using them to recognize or analyze magic performed by someone else using the school’s teachings. Also, you can always rely special countermeasures or defensive measures against that magic, and you don’t suffer any sort of familiarity penalty, even if you don’t know how to use the ritual, elixir, etc., you’re trying to defeat.

- You can acquire the school’s special rituals, techniques, etc., by spending earned points in play, without restriction.

- You’re acquainted with the school’s culture. When dealing with another wizard who has the same perk, neither of you ever suffers -3 for any lack of Cultural Familiarity when making Savoir-Faire rolls, Teaching rolls to pass along the school’s methods, or similar activities.

- You probably have the equivalent of a 1-point Claim to Hospitality (p. B41) with an academy, guild, or master mage. This mostly means that you have somewhere to stay while studying.

This perk first appeared in *GURPS Power-Ups 2: Perks*. It has been modified here to fit the *Age of Gold* setting.

Style Familiarity†

You’ve been trained in one particular formal martial arts style; for the full ramifications, see *GURPS Martial Arts* (p. 49) where this perk first appeared. In brief, it has the following benefits:

- You can acquire the style’s combat perks, learn its cinematic skills (provided that you also have Trained by a Master or Weapon Master), improve its techniques whenever you have

the points, and in some cases buy “optional traits” that are generally off-limits to PCs.

- You’re familiar with the style’s culture and never suffer the -3 for lack of Cultural Familiarity when using such skills as Games, Savoir-Faire (Dojo), or Teaching to interact with costylists.

- You probably have the equivalent of a 1-point Claim to Hospitality (p. B41) with a school or an instructor, giving you somewhere to stay while studying.

- If your opponent has studied one or more styles and you have Style Familiarity with them *all*, you may reduce the defense penalty from his feints and Deceptive Attacks by -1. You’re aware of his style’s tricks and tactics!

Unrealized Potential

You don’t start play with Magery, but you might find the gift within yourself later. This perk can only be taken at character creation, and it acts as a 1- point “deposit” toward Magery 0, which you can purchase later with bonus character points or training. You can take the perk multiple times to have the potential for further levels of Magery; for example, if you start by taking the perk three times, you can eventually develop Magery 2 (Magery 0 plus two further levels).

DISADVANTAGES

Adventurers in *Age of Gold* are in general colorful people but also, by nature, very capable. Hence, PCs should have enough disadvantages to make them distinctive, but not so many as to cripple them. Their opponents, on the other hand, tend to be powerful but eccentric at the minimum, and often downright crazy; almost any level of disadvantages can be acceptable for a master villain or evil mystery man.

Alcoholism

see p. B122-123

While actual Alcoholism isn’t really common among real heroes of the age, and Prohibition has made it (somewhat) harder to sustain in recent times, the 1930s are a period when tough guys are more or less expected to have a steady relationship with the liquor bottle, and some may tip over into a real drinking problem. Most PCs travel widely enough that it’s only a -15 point disadvantage for them, but someone solidly based in a “dry” city could take it at -20 points.

Bloodlust

see p. B125

It’s not a truly heroic attitude, but some heroes are former soldiers who switch too easily into pragmatic battlefield ruthlessness, and some crime fighters really want the scum of the underworld taken out of action *permanently*.

Code of Honor

see p. B127

Most heroes of the *Age of Gold* are honorable after their fashion, and quite a few villains at least pretend to be, perhaps obeying the Pirate's Code. Professional codes are quite common among some "heroic" occupations such as private eye, mercenary, or freelance pilot, and not a few heroes consider the Gentleman's Code is still entirely valid – although "duels" triggered by this may have to consist of semi-formal boxing bouts, to avoid legal complications. The Soldier's Code only really works for serving troops, but some ex-military characters will apply such of it as they can to their less formal circumstances, giving them an effective -5 point Code.

GURPS Supers adds *Code of Honor (Comics Code)*; this isn't really recognized in the 1930s, but a mystery man who lives and operates as a paragon of fairness and justice (perhaps even subtly drawing mystical power from the symbolism) might actually adopt these principles – and become known as a veritable Boy Scout.

Compulsive Behavior

see p. B128-129

The importance of symbolism to "men of gold" can also mean that they are driven toward various compulsions, perhaps without quite realizing it themselves. For heroes, this may mean Generosity or Vowing. For villains, Gambling fits the daredevil rogue whose innate magic warps probability, Generosity may reflect a need to be seen as a Robin Hood figure, and Compulsive Rhetoric – detailed in *GURPS Supers* – makes for a theatrical sort of all-round megalomaniac.

Delusions

see p. B130

In an age of great changes – with largely unexplained magic for extra complications – some people snatch at some very strange explanations of how the world seems to work. Even tough-minded adventurers can suffer from some strange Delusions.

Flashbacks

see p. B136

Many mystery men have traumatic origin stories, while more conventional adventurers may have been through the hell of the World War I trenches – and yet Flashbacks are relatively rare. It's just not a convention of the era.

Honesty

see p. B138-139

This isn't unknown among heroic types in *Age of Gold*, but most tend to a "justice before law" philosophy.

Intolerance

see p. B140

This being the 1930s, some kinds of Intolerance are, well, tolerated more than they might be today. *Some* adventurers and mystery men, however, are exceptionally willing to take people as they find them, whatever their nationality or ethnicity –

they certainly tend to be well traveled, and travel does broaden some minds. Indeed, some adventuring groups are notably multi-national.

Pacifism

see p. B148

While some ordinary adventurers and many mystery men are quite ethical, few are really any sort of pacifist. Most believe that force should be met with force, and that violence *does* solve many problems – and some dispense .45 caliber "justice" with quite terrifying enthusiasm. (Ultra-careful, no-killing ethics are found more in post-WWII "Comics Code" heroes.) More restrained heroes who worry about innocent bystanders may have *Cannot Harm Innocents*, but *Self-Defense Only* is limited to a few "Boy Scout" types. *Cannot Kill* would generally be regarded as freakish and unsustainable (although a token *reluctance* to resort to lethal force is respected, even admired by some). *Total Nonviolence* is strictly for saints and holy men. *Reluctant Killer* is really a mental state for realistic non-combatants – and few *Age of Gold* adventurers fit in *that* category!

Secret Identity

see p. B153

Some mystery men live up to the term, finding it convenient to maintain a Secret Identity, but many others are quite open about their activities, even if they wear peculiar costumes. Of course, this means that the openly operating ones with non-adventuring friends or family may have problems (best represented by Dependents, in *GURPS* terms).

SKILLS

High levels and breadth of skill are the mark of most ordinary adventurers, and they are not unknown among mystery men, who are often alchemically transformed into "more perfect" beings – and one possible symbol of human perfection is definitely omnicompetence.

Remember that some technologies (e.g. hovercraft, helicopters, scuba gear, radar) haven't been invented yet, and so the skills to operate them don't exist. Counterparts of some of these things *may* exist in TL(6+1) laboratories; whether their inventors have learned to use them at above default level is another matter.

Alchemy

see pp. B174-175 and

GURPS Thaumatology, pp. 100-107

In this setting, Alchemy skill is handled slightly differently to its treatment in the *Basic Set*.

Firstly, there are several different alchemical traditions, each of which is treated as a *mandatory specialty* of Alchemy skill. However, all of them are quite closely related; the differences are matters of jargon and known recipes, not fundamental disagreements. The specialties and defaults are as follows: Alchemy (Ancient Western), Alchemy (European), and Alchemy (Arabian) default to each other at -2; Alchemy (Chinese) and Alchemy (Indian) default to each other at -2; all other cross-defaults between these schools are at -3.

Secondly, Alchemy is *not* usually classed as a technological skill in this setting, in the sense that it isn't qualified by TL. Alchemists are very traditionalistic, using equipment and basic techniques dating back to the early days of alchemical research. If it becomes necessary to assign a TL for some purpose, including Chemistry skill default levels, assume that all Alchemy is conducted at TL3. The nearest thing to "high-tech alchemy" in *Age of Gold* is Weird Science – but that usually uses different skills.

All of those specialties represent general training in alchemical theory and practice, including the ability to follow standard procedures, perform common tests, and recognize terminology and equipment. Any alchemist can also *attempt* to create some form of the Philosopher's Stone, but to become good at that particular technique requires special insights and experiences, represented by Unusual Background (Insightful Alchemist). Elixir creation *may* also be possible, with restrictions. See pp. 19-21 for details of all of this.

Current Affairs

see p. B186-187

This has an extra specialty available in *Age of Gold: Occult*, covering the latest news about research into thaumatology, the activities of occult archaeologists and known paranormal mystery men, and so on.

Exorcism

see p. B193

This skill is available in *Age of Gold*, but training is generally only given to specialist priests, who may be found in most of the world's major religions. It works fine (probably for much the same reasons as True Faith – see p. 25), but only on demons and other spirits who are possessing a human against the human's will. Non-demonic spirits can generally go where they choose, and they certainly can't be driven away from places where they specifically belong.

Hazardous Materials

see p. B199

In theory, a *Magical* specialty might exist for this skill in *Age of Gold*. In practice, approaches to this subject tend to be very *ad hoc* and improvisational.

Herb Lore

see p. B199

This *may* appear in *Age of Gold* campaigns; see p. 19.

History

see p. B200

History (Magical, for a specific era) is a valid specialty in this setting, although few universities teach such things yet.

Occultism and Thaumatology

see p. B212 and p. B225

Most students of magical theory in this setting are still known as "occultists"; the word "thaumatology" isn't in widespread use. However, for game purposes, this supplement uses

Martial Arts

Many characters in the pulps and early Golden Age comics were excellent hand-to-hand fighters, and some received advanced training in various fighting styles. However, this period predates modern pop culture's love of high-kicking Asian kung fu action. Hence, *GURPS Martial Arts* can be a useful adjunct to *Age of Gold* campaigns, which can certainly see their share of fist fights, but it shouldn't be regarded as essential. PCs shouldn't be designed around mastery of exotic, cinematic martial arts techniques. GMs have the right to veto any style from that book as out of keeping with the feel of the specific campaign, and the advantages Trained by a Master and Weapon Master should be rare at best and very possibly prohibited altogether.

Nevertheless, quite a number of styles *are* appropriate, and some heroes may be sophisticated "scientific" fighters. Even ruggedly mundane pulp-style adventurers may be expert boxers (see pp. 152-153 of *Martial Arts*). Old-fashioned or time-lost European heroes may carry slender blades (perhaps in the form of sword sticks) and study their use intensively; any Fencing style (pp. 156-159 of *Martial Arts*) can work here, but the Italian or Transitional French Schools may fit best for cinematic swashbucklers, or French Smallsword for someone who uses a smaller blade with deadly precision. Really advanced students of modern Sport Fencing might also be effective.

By the 1930s, descriptions and demonstrations of a few Asian combat arts – primarily Jujutsu – had reached Europe and the United States. Furthermore, the idea had spread that not only were some of these experts impressive technical fighters, they maybe knew a few rather uncanny tricks. Indeed, some non-Asian fictional heroes learned useful arts in time spent "out East." If nothing else, Asian fighters were seen as clever and subtle, capable of high levels of Stealth skill; this could go as far as Invisibility Art. For details of one of the first real-world European combat experts to encounter and master Asian fighting styles, and the practical style that he in turn developed and taught, see *GURPS Martial Arts: Fairbairn Close Combat Systems*. It would be entirely possible to run a full-on "stylistic crossover" campaign, probably set in China and featuring local heroes and villains using the many "kung fu" styles detailed in Chapter 5 of *Martial Arts* in full cinematic mode, alongside magic-wielders and more down-to-earth visiting Westerner heroes. Also, it would be quite in character for elite agents of the Black Dragon Society (p. 14) to display expertise in traditional Japanese styles, especially Kenjutsu, perhaps strictly at the realistic level, perhaps with cinematic abilities in a few cases.

words as they are defined in the *GURPS* skill system: "Occultism" is the study of the history and folklore of the supernatural, while "Thaumatology" is the scientific study of how magic actually works.

An *Age of Gold* “occultist” will usually have at least a few points in the former. He may be a purely descriptive scholar, with no knowledge of Thaumatology; someone who is attempting to integrate observations with theory, with similar levels in both skills; or a very academic theoretician, with a higher level in Thaumatology. But, this being early days for Thaumatology, nobody can have more than a few points in the skill – usually no more than 2, maybe 4 for a really obsessive researcher who’s been working on this subject for *years*. Such scholars may also study Alchemy and even Weird Science.

Ritual Magic

see p. B218

See *Path/Book Magic*, pp. 15-18.

Savoir-Faire

see p. B218

A very few schools of Asian ritual magic in *Age of Gold* operate at a similar level of formality to martial arts academies. In these places, *Savoir-Faire* (Dojo) is a useful skill.

Symbol Drawing

see p. B224

This is of some use to *Path/Book* magicians; see p. 16.

Weird Science

see p. B228

This borders on magic and alchemy in this setting; see p. 20.

WILDCARD SKILLS

Wildcard skills definitely fit the pulp/cinematic style of *Age of Gold* games, although GMs may restrict them to superhuman mystery men – ordinary adventurers are more mortal in their limitations. As a compromise, any such adventurer might be allowed use of *one* wildcard skill, representing his area of deep and wide-ranging competence, the product of extraordinary aptitude or obsessive focus.

GURPS Supers has a selection of new wildcard skills on pp. 36-37, most of which can be used in *Age of Gold* campaigns. However, *Magic!* is *not* permitted, as magic in this setting doesn’t work like that, and magical abilities should be defined in more detail on character sheets.

Clothes help – but magic makes the man (or monster)!

EXAMPLE ADVERSARIES

The following are examples of the sorts of major antagonists adventurers in *Age of Gold* may have to deal with.

THE SECRET PHARAOH

As the single most notorious master villain in the Western world, the Secret Pharaoh is widely regarded as a threat to civilization. That actually fits how he likes to see himself; he feels fully entitled to rule the world, or at least a good portion of it, and he would happily destroy anything that makes this harder. He has tangled with countless adventurers and mystery men, who certainly see him as a menace. However, some of them have noticed that the reality of the Secret Pharaoh somehow doesn’t seem to match the public image.

The fact is, he isn’t personally the most powerful or competent being on Earth, though he’d never admit it. Some might even call him rather second-string – were it not for the fact that he’s virtually impossible to kill. Furthermore, he has a large and *more* capable supporting organization. He can’t take the credit for this, but no one is telling him so.

History

The Pharaoh Aybtep-Het ruled Egypt some time late in the Old Kingdom period, and he ruled with a bronze fist. (Iron hadn’t been invented yet.) He’d inherited a strong nation and a competent court, but unfortunately, he wasn’t terribly interested in governing well. He was a classic petty tyrant, scowling and shouting at underlings to get anything done and not

concerning himself with details – except in one regard. He very much wanted to become immortal, and he knew that some wizards were supposed to have found a way to accomplish this.

Not many wizards liked working for him, but some wanted to get close to power or failed to run away from his soldiers quickly enough. Many of them suffered the penalty for failure, but eventually, one managed to produce an almost pure sample of the Philosopher’s Stone. However, when word spread through the court that the ruler might actually *never die*, his heirs and ministers were thrown into a panic. A palace revolt was hastily arranged, with one of the Pharaoh’s sons taking over the throne; Aybtep-Het himself was run through with a bronze sword and buried in an unmarked tomb, and his name was wiped from all inscriptions and dynastic records.

But the plotters had almost been too late. Aybtep-Het had prepared a potion of immortality, using the Stone and his own fragments of alchemical knowledge, and drank it as the rebels stormed his throne room. The alchemical concoction was imperfect, though it did preserve him in a state between life and death. It might eventually have healed him, but being sealed inside an airless sarcophagus was too hostile to life.

He remained for thousands of years in this state, until an archaeological expedition from Europe discovered the tomb in 1925, opened the sarcophagus, and took the “mummy” inside back to Cairo for examination. Now at last the elixir could complete its task, restoring the Pharaoh to life (of a sort) with a few superhuman powers as a bonus. Bursting out of the museum where he had been held one night, the Pharaoh caused a little carnage on the back streets of the city, blasting

some minor thugs who tried to attack him and one or two people who failed to show him enough respect – until finally, somebody seemed to recognize his nature.

It took him a while to learn some modern languages and a little about the state of the world from his new acolytes. Eventually, the Pharaoh realized that a lot needed to be done if he was to reclaim his rightful position. So he set to work, building a loyal court with some competent ministers and accumulating the resources he would need. Unfortunately, disrespectful wizards and barbarian warriors soon started to oppose him, and the Secret Pharaoh (as the press named him, despite his poor capacity for actual secrecy) suffered the first of a series of setbacks. Fortunately, he discovered, these weren't too severe, as the power of the Philosopher's Stone continued to flow through him, making him virtually impossible to destroy.

The Secret Pharaoh has thus fallen into the career of mastermind-villain, wandering the world in pursuit of power and resources, but often returning to Egypt. His knowledge of lost secrets gives him a certain amount of power and the ability to recruit some amoral, power-hungry ritual magicians. It's also lead him to raid a number of museums and private collections in pursuit of possible artifacts or magical texts. Lesser minions work for him for the money, because a supernatural mastermind *ought* to make quite a powerful gang boss, or because they're gullible enough to believe his rants.

Powers

As many people guess from his appearance, the Secret Pharaoh isn't really human these days. His gaunt and shriveled visage and tendency to return from destruction leads some observers to guess that he's undead, but that isn't *quite* true either. Rather, he teeters on the edge of life, sustained by the raw power of the Philosopher's Stone, as well as paut, which flows through his veins in place of blood. (If certain powerful wizards ever worked that out, he'd be in serious danger of being hunted down to be drained of that eternally replenished liquid wealth.) He doesn't care, though; the power of the Stone gives him physical strength and great resilience and actually exists independent of his physical form, reassembling him even if he is blasted to pieces.

Thus, he has Unkillable 3 with the Magical limitation. If he's reduced to -10xHP, he's rendered into dusty fragments. A kind of "essential vapor" containing the essence of the Philosopher's Stone escapes; his body then regenerates from that. However, this wouldn't work in a no-mana zone and could be slowed arbitrarily in low mana (at the GM's whim) It might be possible for his followers to locate, collect, and move enough fragments of his remains to restart the process somewhere with more mana, but that would take some organizing. In principle, a combination of physical and magical enclosures could trap the vapor and so stop the process; determined heroes might consider this worth trying.

Additionally, by channeling raw magical energy through his body, he can levitate (albeit slowly) and hurl bolts of "black lightning." By amplifying the power of the Stone to draw energy from his surroundings, he can generate fields of darkness or sap life energies from an opponent with a touch. (These are collectively classed as a personal Arcane Force power, the

Talent for which likewise adds to his Innate Attack skill.) He also now possesses a "sixth sense" for the supernatural. He isn't any sort of trained magician, though; he relies on minions for more subtle effects. Fortunately for him, his unique knowledge of ancient Egypt gives him something with which to repay sorcerous servants who may not be very interested in money or mundane power.

Personality and Tactics

To state the obvious, the Secret Pharaoh is a raging egomaniac who honestly believes that he ought to rule the world, and that the immortality (which he obtained largely through others' efforts) proves that he's a superior being. He has some difficulty coping with modern ideas such as high technology or democracy, although he now can deal with anything up to about medieval developments without too much trouble. Mostly, though, his attitude is that he has people to deal with such things for him. The idea that those people might have their own agendas never crosses his mind. His only real respect is for fellow monarchs, although he's learned a certain amount of grudging caution around powerful wizards and mystery men.



Despite his limitations, he isn't a *complete* idiot. He recognizes the basic practicalities of his situation, and he has learned enough to get by in modern society. Raw determination, obstinacy, a willingness to hit hard, and a slightly weird but focused approach to problems can accomplish quite a lot. Fortunately, too, his followers have mastered the art of talking him out of grossly impractical schemes.

Faced with the threat of personal combat, he orders his followers to deal with the problem, then rails at his opponents for their insolence. If necessary, he uses his powers to facilitate his escape – although he's not above employing his offensive abilities to teach a few lessons as he goes. In the last resort, he prefers destruction to capture, however, because he can always come back later from destruction; imprisonment would be both undignified and inconvenient. He doesn't have much interest in weapons, but he often has a mace and shield as part of his regalia, and he does know how to use them.

The Secret Pharaoh

657 points

Aybtep-Het is wizened and dry to the point of mummification, with a permanent glare in his eyes. Some would say that he looks every one of his 4,000+ years.

*They say the Pharaohs built the pyramids.
Do you think one Pharaoh dropped one bead of sweat?
We built the pyramids for the Pharaohs and we're building for them yet.*

– Anna Louise Strong

ST 15 [50]; **DX** 12 [40]; **IQ** 12 [40]; **HT** 15 [50].
Damage 1d+1/2d+1; BL 45 lbs.; HP 15 [0]; Will 16 [20]; Per 11
[-5]; FP 15 [0].
Basic Speed 7.00 [5]; Basic Move 7 [0]; Dodge 10; Block 9
(Shield); Parry 9 (Axe/Mace).
6'1"; 150 lbs.

Social Background

TL: 3 [-15].

CF: Ancient Egypt (Native) [0]; Western [1].

Languages: Ancient Egyptian (Native) [0]; Arabic
(Broken/None) [1]; English (Native/Literate) [5]; French
(Broken) [2].

Advantages

Affliction 3 (HT-2; Armor Divisor (2), +50%; Attribute
Penalty, ST -4, +20%; Magical, -10%; Melee Attack, Reach C,
-30%) [39]; Arcane Force Talent 2 [10]; Burning Attack 2d
(Affects Insubstantial, +20%; Magical, -10%; Surge, +20%)
[13]; Charisma 1 [5]; Damage Resistance 8 [40]; Detect (Super-
natural Phenomena) [20]; Doesn't Eat or Drink [10]; Flight
(Magical, -10%) [36]; High Pain Threshold [10]; Immunity to
Metabolic Hazards [30]; Injury Tolerance (No Blood, No
Vitals) [10]; Less Sleep 3 [6]; Night Vision 8 [8]; Obscure 7
(Vision) (Area Effect x1, +50%; Extended (Infravision), +20%;
Magical, -10%; Ranged, +50%) [30]; Pressure Support 1 [5];
Regeneration (Regular) [25]; Reputation +2 (As a good payer;
To professional villain minions; 10 or less) [1]; Status 4* [10];
Temperature Tolerance 8 [8]; Unaging [15]; Unkillable 3 (Mag-
ical, -10%) [135]; Wealth (Multimillionaire 1) [75].

Disadvantages

Appearance (Hideous) [-16]; Bad Temper (15) [-5]; Callous
[-5]; Compulsive Behavior (Rhetoric) (9) [-7]; Dependency
(Mana; Very Common; Constant) [-25]; Megalomania [-10];
Overconfidence (15) [-2]; Reduced Air Move -8 [-16];
Reputation -3 (A terrifying criminal mastermind; Ordinary
people in the advanced world) [-7]; Supernatural Feature
(Pallor) [-10]; Unnatural Features 3 (Desiccated Flesh) [-3].

Quirks: Obsession (Preserving his Immortality); Proud;
Sexless; Stubborn about never giving up an objective; Will
always keep his word to monarchs and national rulers. [-5]

Skills

Alchemy (Ancient Western) (VH) IQ-3 [1]-9; Animal
Handling (Equines) (A) IQ-1 [1]-11; Axe/Mace (A) DX [2]-12;
Bow (A) DX-1 [1]-11; Hidden Lore (Secrets of Old Kingdom
Egypt) (A) IQ+2 [8]-14; Innate Attack (Beam) (E) DX+2
[1]-14†; Intimidation (A) Will+1 [1]-17‡; Mental Strength (E)
Will+2 [4]-18; Politics (A) IQ-1 [1]-11; Religious Ritual (Ancient
Egyptian) (H) IQ [4]-12; Savoir-Faire (High Society) (E) IQ
[1]-12; Shield (Shield) (E) DX [1]-12; Shortsword (A) DX-1

[1]-11; Stealth (A) DX-1 [1]-11; Strategy (Land) (H) IQ-2 [1]-10;
Teamster (Equines) (A) IQ [2]-12; Theology (Ancient Egyptian)
(H) IQ-2 [1]-10; Thrown Weapon (Spear) (E) DX [1]-12.

* Includes +2 from Wealth.

† Includes +2 from Talent.

‡ Includes +2 from Appearance.

Note: The Pharaoh's Status reflects a combination of his
imperious style and the implications of his wealth – which is
considerable, albeit in slightly strange forms sometimes.

The Handmaidens

Whenever the Secret Pharaoh is encountered in one of his
home bases, he's likely to be seated on a throne, with a couple
of handmaidens lounging at his feet, pouring him libations
and generally looking decorative in a scantily clad, stylistically
appropriate sort of way. Many of his opponents ignore these
two altogether. That's their mistake.

The pair are always the same two women, known only as
"Mary" and "Adele." Obviously, they weren't always villain-lair
furniture. In fact, they used to be not-very-successful nightclub
singers.

The women first met in New York some years ago, where
they formed an immediate mutual enmity – despite which,
they somehow always ended up in the same crummy clubs,
working for the same sleazy bosses for the same lousy money.
Over time, while they never actually came to like each other,
they were each forced to accept that they had more in common
between them than they had with anyone else. They started
rooming together and working as a double act. They were
never a huge success, but they always hoped against hope for
better. Footloose and cynical, they moved from city to city,
leaving a trail of men who'd confirmed their cynicism and
employers who'd gone bust owing them money.

The trip to Cairo was a bit of a long shot for them, involv-
ing a job offer through an agent who assured them that the
clubs there were always looking for smart new talent from the
States. They worked their way over on the ocean liners, only to
discover that the situation was much the same as always.
Then, one night, their luck turned right around.

They were out drinking off their anger at yet another conniv-
ing tight-fisted club boss when they saw a crazy guy in rags
being threatened by a pair of local heavies. A well-developed
understanding of male vanity told the women that this guy
thought of himself as more than a beggar, and that he was get-
ting angry with the thugs, less because they'd pulled a knife on
him than because they weren't bowing and scraping. Still, the
women were just backing off – no sense in getting caught up in
a back-alley stabbing – when the crazy guy zapped one of the
thugs with black lightning and smacked the other right across
the alley.

Well, this was interesting as well as scary. The women were frozen to the spot for a second, in which time, the crazy spotted them and came toward them. So they did the obvious and hit the deck and groveled.

At first, all they wanted to do was not get killed. But funnily enough, despite the fact that he didn't speak any language they knew, it soon became clear that the crazy was as easy to manipulate as most old guys who just wanted people to crawl a bit – and frankly, he was less of a pest to them than most. (It seems that not everything about him still works after all this time.) In fact, once they'd got to know him, they began to see some potential in the situation. After all, the old guy needed some help getting the hang of the world, and he had some big ideas for the future; he was going to need sidekicks. Why not get in on the ground floor?

And so it was that the "Secret Kingdom" was founded. The Pharaoh's attitude is that these two had the honor to be his first courtiers in this new era, and the sense to treat him with due respect, so he can treat them with regal courtesy. Being the first, they've been around as his court has developed, but that's incidental. Actually, they've done most of the organizing – learning how as they went along, but they've been quick studies – and so they know best how this thing works.

"Mary" is a blond, born in Texas. She has something of a gift for accents when she remembers (treat her as having Mimicry-13, specializing in matching English-language accents but not emulating anyone in particular), but when she doesn't, her tones wander seemingly at random between her home state and New York. She is marginally the less jaded and cynical of the pair. She may still be somewhat susceptible to romantic overtures from good-looking men, but it can be dangerous for anyone to try and exploit this, as the flip side is that she becomes quite violently upset if and when she ever feels betrayed (again). Thanks to her rural upbringing, she has Guns (Pistol)-13 and Riding (Horse)-11.

"Adele" has dark hair and affects a chilly demeanor and a slight French accent. While she does speak (and write) fluent French, she actually originates from Wales. She isn't quite the flint-hearted sociopath she tries to suggest; really, she just wants to make enough money to live in comfort for the rest of her life. Even though she'll cut a lot of corners on the way, her tactics tend to be as subtle and nonviolent as possible.

Although the Secret Pharaoh and his "Kingdom" have committed any amount of mayhem over the years, the Handmaidens have both avoided directly suggesting any overly brutal tactics. They both preserve some very dubious tatters of conscience, and would probably be able to erect fairly plausible defenses if they were ever brought before a court.

The Handmaidens are personally similar, so the following can serve for both of them:

ST 8; DX 12; IQ 13; HT 11.

Damage 1d-3/1d-2; BL 13 lbs.; HP 8; Will 13; Per 13; FP 11. Basic Speed 5.75; Basic Move 5; Dodge 8; Parry 9 (Brawling). 5'6"; 105 lbs.

Advantages/Disadvantages: Appearance (Attractive); Cowardice (15); Greed (15); Luck; Run in High Heels (perk).

Skills: Acting-13, Administration-12, Brawling-12, Carousing-13, Current Affairs (Popular Culture)-14, Dancing-12, Detect Lies-12, Fast-Talk-13, Filch-11, Makeup-13, Sex Appeal-13, Singing-11, Stealth-12, Streetwise-13.

The Secret Kingdom

The Secret Pharaoh's organization consists of a mixture of petty crooks, raving fanatics, and low-level ritual magicians, held together by the low improvisational cunning of the Handmaidens. It is in fact run, appropriately enough, as a kind of pyramid scam. The Handmaidens and a few trusted arrangers, "speaking for the Pharaoh," offer job opportunities, information, and resources to plausible followers, who in turn are left to run their own branches of the organization as they see fit, provided that they return a profit or whatever else it was that they were recruited to achieve. They're kept in line by some vague rhetoric about building an empire for their arcane master where that seems to work, by plain bribes and threats otherwise. When neither is effective, other branches of the "Kingdom" may be assigned to apply some discipline, or the Handmaidens may convince the Pharaoh to deal with the problem personally. Obviously, this is a rather unreliable strategy. Several sub-groups have quietly split off and gone their own way, or remained nominally part of the organization while pursuing their own agendas. Regardless, the Pharaoh rarely notices, and the Handmaidens don't really care so long as their own savings continue to rise.

Individual members of the organization *mostly* tend to be low-level thugs with average attributes – maybe ST 11 and IQ 9 – and relevant combat skills at around 10. However, some are better than this, and those who come to the attention of the Handmaidens may be marked down for better positions and more resources for their jobs. However, those who look really smart tend to be kept well away from the Pharaoh; they might annoy him or, worse, realize what's going on and get ideas above their station.

An exception to the rule of keeping smart operators out of the way of the leader lies in the handling of ritual magicians. Everyone understands that the Kingdom's use of magic is one of its important edges, and magicians tend to sign up because they can learn something that only the Pharaoh can teach. This is unfortunate, but some magicians, for all their book-smarts, are quite unworldly; the others just have to be brought into the scam to some extent. Still, the Handmaidens are nervous about this part of the operation, and they spend a lot of effort monitoring the smarter-looking magicians. On occasion, they've resorted to mixtures of unsubtle sex appeal, veiled threats, and promises of long-term advantage to keep a magician on side. The one or two who seriously *worship* both the Pharaoh and the ancient Egyptian gods are noted as total flakes, and kept somewhere quiet. Unfortunately, the Handmaidens may not understand the very real danger of a determined magician actually contacting a "god" – that is, a spirit with enough power to make the label look valid.

MADAME JASMINE

Madame Jasmine is a secretive force in the criminal, political, and occult underworlds of *Age of Gold* China. Always pursuing her own goals, accumulating as few debts as possible while spinning webs of chaos and control that span the nation, she can serve as friend or foe to adventurers – or to anyone else. The truth about herself is something she surrounds with misdirection and disguise.

History

The woman now known as Madame Jasmine was born the daughter of a minor local official in Ch'ing dynasty China. She seemed destined for marriage to some male of her own class – a prospect that she grew to dread during her later childhood, given her free-spirited intelligence and solitary nature.

However, everything changed on the day when her family was attacked by bandits while traveling. She somehow escaped, scrambling away in the confusion, and fled into the hills in blind panic. Collapsing lost and hungry, a Taoist hermit rescued her. He recognized her intelligence and magical potential while nursing her back to health, and he trained her a little in the arcane arts on a whim.

From then on, the girl cast her old life aside. Even if any of her family had survived the bandits, she didn't care; she had something else to concern her. She persuaded her first teacher to tell her where she might learn more. She set out on a wandering pilgrimage that occupied the next 10 years of her life. She had some dangerous moments at first, but by luck and effort, she mastered those skills that could keep her alive when magic wouldn't serve. She grew quick, quiet, and a competent con artist. She even spent a little time in a martial arts school, but magic was her first concern.



She never committed herself to any spiritual path or ideology. She might claim that she is a true Taoist, still seeking her own way, but the fact is that she only really cares what works for *her*.

When she thought that she knew enough, she set to work using her magic to accumulate resources, eventually settling down in a remote rural manor house to pursue her studies. Her neighbors were bemused at first, but after she had demonstrated her opinion of banditry, those peasants who mostly wanted a quiet life decided that they rather liked her.

But the world wouldn't leave her alone. China was collapsing into civil war, and any part of the land that lay outside any

faction's control sooner or later became the subject of someone's greed. Madame Jasmine – as the girl now called herself – laid claim to a couple of neighboring villages, offering protection in exchange for guaranteed food supplies and the services of some domestic staff, but she was shrewd enough to see that her pocket realm wouldn't remain untouched for long. So she studied the problem, and then she slipped away from her home for a few days at a time.

Chaos soon erupted in the three nearest warlords' headquarters. Men died; rumors of war and of coup plots spread; military supply trains and pay chests vanished in the night. Each of the three accused the other and became bogged down in fighting. None of them could find the time to lay claim to a certain rural manor or its villages.

Madame Jasmine smiled. That would serve – for a while. But sooner or later, one of the three would win that struggle, and even if he then died – well, eventually, one of the greater powers of the land would sweep over everything. It was very troublesome. Furthermore, she now had need of certain arcane texts that her library lacked, and of supplies of certain rare minerals and herbs. So she donned innocuous garb, took some adventurous village lads as grooms, escorts, and token guards; brought along two of their sisters as servants; and set out for the cities of the coast. She would have to play a complicated game, perhaps, but she had yet to meet a warlord or a politician who she couldn't outsmart or manipulate.

Powers

Madame Jasmine is a competent ritual magician, trained in every aspect of the Invocationist school (pp. 17-18). She isn't quite as good as she thinks, but she's generally good enough. She's noted in occult circles for her ability to deal with spirits. She also possesses a range of mundane skills, which she is happy to employ; it seems to her like a waste to use magic on most of her opponents.

Personality and Tactics

The strange thing is that Madame Jasmine really just wants to be left alone. She longs to settle down with a good library and some competent domestic staff, and ignore the world. She's a clever solipsist, who really doesn't see why she should pay attention to all those people who are less intelligent than herself. But life has taught her that the world won't leave her alone if she ignores it, so she adopts a policy of preemptive strikes.

Having started down that path, she's built an impressive network of spies, informers, and temporary allies in half a dozen major cities. For a loner, she runs quite an organization – several organizations, in fact, some of them under false names and identities. She even has a reputation as a crime boss or spy-mistress in some quarters, which she doesn't bother to discourage; it distracts and misleads her opponents. However, she never employs or commissions bandits, a class of criminal that she despises. Still, adventurers who first hear of her this way will probably expect an imposing and power-hungry dragon lady; if and when they ever encounter Madame Jasmine in person, they may well be disconcerted by this cool, quiet, scholarly, unassuming woman. Mind you, she's every bit as deadly and ruthless as the false image suggests. She can even fight hand to hand, unarmed or with short butterfly swords, although she knows that a quick knife-thrust – or a little poison in someone's food – is less risky for her.

Not that she'll necessarily turn out to be the PCs' enemy. Madame Jasmine despises greedy warlords and hates bandits with what passes as a passion for her. She would even quite approve of the idea of reuniting China and ending the current civil war – in principle. The trouble is, anyone who might be able to accomplish this would also probably threaten her independence, so she'll sabotage their efforts, just to be safe.

All this means that Madame Jasmine is trapped in a life that is almost the polar opposite of what she'd like, having to deal with people and sow chaos when she really prefers calm solitude. This tells her that the world is hateful and it's other people's fault; in her own eyes, she's pursuing the least troublesome response to this fact.

One problem that is currently getting worse for her is the Black Dragon Society. They've recognized her as a local power, and they've approached her with the offer of an alliance. She immediately guessed that they'd only want to exploit her, and that the entanglement would make the inconveniences in her life worse – but they aren't taking no for an answer. So far, they're remaining diplomatic and she's remaining polite in reply, but either side might become tired of this game at any point – or Madame Jasmine might decide that it was safest to say yes. Adventurers could become involved in this matter, as pawns of either side or as third parties trying to prevent a dangerous alliance from forming.

Madame Jasmine

353 points

In any of her identities, Madame Jasmine appears as a well-dressed but essentially unremarkable Chinese woman. She is aged about 37.

ST 8 [-20]; **DX** 12 [40]; **IQ** 14 [80]; **HT** 11 [10].
Damage 1d-3/1d-2; BL 13 lbs.; HP 8 [0]; Will 14 [0]; Per 14 [0];
FP 11 [0].
Basic Speed 6.00 [5]; Basic Move 6 [0]; Dodge 9; Parry 9
(Shortsword).
5'3"; 115 lbs.

Social Background

TL: 6 [0].

CF: East Asian (Native) [0]; Western [1].

Languages: Mandarin (Native) [0]; Cantonese (Native) [6]; English (Accented) [4]; Russian (Broken) [2].

Advantages

Alternate Identity (Illegal; Chiai Tiao, Shanghai Gang Leader) [15]; Alternate Identity (Illegal; Pao Pang, Hong Kong Fortune Teller) [15]; Ambidexterity [5]; Contact (Underworld Herbalist; Poisons/TL6-15; 12 or less; Usually Reliable) [8]; Contact Group (Streets/Political Underworld; Skill-12; 12 or less; Somewhat Reliable) [10]; Independent Income 5 (Rents) [5]; Indomitable [15]; Magery 3 [35]; Reputation +2 (As a capable underworld operator in her Chiai Tiao identity; In the Shanghai and environs underworld) [5]; Spirit Empathy [10]; Status 1* [0]; Wealth (Very Wealthy) [30].

Perks: Style Familiarity (Wing Chun). [1]

Disadvantages

Callous [-5]; Enemy (The Black Dragon Society; Watcher; 9 or less) [-7]; Loner (15) [-2]; Overconfidence (15) [-2];

Reputation -2 (As a shady character; To law-abiding folk throughout China; 7 or less) [-1].

Quirks: Curious about magic; Hates and despises bandits. [-2]

Skills

Acting (A) IQ+1 [4]-15; Administration (A) IQ-1 [1]-13; Alchemy (Chinese) (VH) IQ-2 [2]-12; Area Knowledge (Beijing) (E) IQ [1]-14; Area Knowledge (China) (E) IQ [1]-14; Area Knowledge (Hong Kong) (E) IQ [1]-14; Area Knowledge (Shanghai) (E) IQ [1]-14; Area Knowledge (Vicinity of Home Manor) (E) IQ [1]-14; Astronomy/TL4 (Observational) (A) IQ-1 [1]-13; Breath Control (H) HT-1 [2]-10; Current Affairs/TL6 (Occult) (E) IQ [1]-14; Current Affairs/TL6 (South China) (E) IQ [1]-14; Fast-Talk (A) IQ [2]-14; Filch (A) DX [2]-12; First Aid/TL5 (Human) (E) IQ [1]-14; Fortune-Telling (I Ching) (A) IQ [2]-14; Hiking (A) HT-1 [1]-10; Housekeeping (E) IQ [1]-14; Interrogation (A) IQ-1 [1]-13; Karate (H) DX-2 [1]-10; Knife (E) DX [1]-12; Meditation (H) Will-2 [1]-12; Observation (A) Per-1 [1]-13; Occultism (A) IQ+1 [4]-15; Panhandling (E) IQ [1]-14; Philosophy (Taoist) (H) IQ-1 [2]-13; Politics (A) IQ-1 [1]-13; Psychology (Human) (H) IQ-2 [1]-12; Riding (Horse) (A) DX-1 [1]-11; Ritual Magic (Invocationist) (VH) IQ [8]-14; Savoir-Faire (Dojo) (E) IQ [1]-14; Savoir-Faire (High Society) (E) IQ [1]-14; Shortsword (A) DX [2]-12; Sleight of Hand (H) DX-2 [1]-10; Smuggling (A) IQ-1 [1]-13; Staff (A) DX [2]-12; Stealth (A) DX [2]-12; Streetwise (A) IQ-1 [1]-13; Survival (Woodlands) (A) Per-1 [1]-13; Symbol Drawing (Invocationist) (H) IQ-2 [1]-12; Thaumatology (VH) IQ [1]-14; Wrestling (A) DX-1 [1]-11.

Magical Paths

The Elements-13 [4]; Knowledge-14 [8]; Luck-12 [2]; Protection-14 [8]; Spirit-13 [4].

* Includes +1 from Wealth.

† Includes +3 from Magery.

THE JUNGLE MADNESS

Sometimes, an opponent is simply a wild creature – but in *Age of Gold*, that doesn't mean that it can't also wield complex magic or have a strange history. Explorers and planters who advance into the jungles of Central America encounter unexpected threats. Terrified whispers speak of the Jungle Madness.

History

Atototl the Bargainer was born into a merchant clan in an ancient city-states of pre-Columbian Central America. Led astray by a dangerous lust for power, she formed an alliance with the Lord of the Vines, a powerful but utterly inhuman forest spirit. This gave her access to spirit-assisted magic, which she used all too freely, so that she eventually became a human minion of the spirit. Even her humanity eventually faded, and she became purely the agent of the Lord of Vines on Earth.

For years, she – it – was a terror to the civilization that gave her birth. But she probably didn't cause its collapse, or even contribute much to it; that was just the usual blind forces of history, war, climate, and social instability. When urban culture vanished from that land, the being that had once been Atototl became little more than a myth, and an occasional menace to the tribal peoples who wandered the forest. In fact, the being spent much of the time in a dreamless torpor.

But today, civilization – or at least, urban humanity – is once more intruding into the jungle that this being sees as her own. The Lord of the Vines has all but retreated from this plane of existence, fading with the centuries as even spirits do, but the creature who is now known only as the Jungle Madness continues as its one point of contact with material reality, through which its remaining power flows.

Both the spirit and its minion remember its great concern: to protect the deep woods from anything that might disturb their wild, timeless existence. Both thus have once more awakened.

The jungle is seen by the human newcomers as something to be *conquered*. They want to clear it back, to fell trees for timber, plant crops, even build towns. They have powers and resources of their own, of course, but the Jungle Madness has not only power, but cunning, and the remorseless determination of the wilderness itself.

Powers

The Jungle Madness is a terribly stealthy, feral creature of the jungle, with spirit-granted animalistic and plant-like features. However, it used to be a human and an intelligent one at that; it's capable of frightening cunning and some adaptability. Moreover, it receives a range of spirit-assisted spells from the Earth, Knowledge, Meta-Spell, Plant, and Water colleges, and it has been given the ability to use them well enough.

Personality and Tactics

Atototl the Bargainer no longer exists; the Jungle Madness has long since reached the “vessel for the spirit” stage. Indeed mental disintegration has been followed by physical *enhancements*. Its purpose is to keep the natural world, and specifically the jungle, wild and untainted by civilization. The Lord of the Vines tolerates humanity, but only in small, Stone Age groups. Fortunately, it is not only relatively weak these days, it is effectively limited to a small area. Destruction of the forest would reduce that area, which makes it fight even harder. The Jungle Madness might like to *extend* the jungle, but it lacks any capacity for the necessary planning, and the Lord of the Vines is almost literally out of touch with reality. Neither is really capable of negotiation.

However, the Jungle Madness is by no means a mindless berserker. It is really quite expert in the tactics of ambush and harassment, and it can apply magic to the purpose quite ingeniously. GMs should note the combination of advantages, skills, and spells on this character sheet and be ready to use them to the full! It has little understanding of modern technology, but it has learned to recognize firearms, and it knows that it should avoid being shot. It prefers to engage hand to hand only to finish off single, weakened, ideally unarmed victims, if at all.

The Jungle Madness

297 points

The Jungle Madness is a barely human figure of indeterminate age, naked and hairless, with greenish, leathery, vegetable-like skin.

ST 11 [10]; **DX** 13 [60]; **IQ** 9 [-20]; **HT** 15 [50].
Damage 1d-1/1d+1; BL 24 lbs.; HP 16 [10]; Will 15 [30]; Per 13 [20]; FP 15 [0].

Basic Speed 7.00 [0]; Basic Move 9 [10]; Dodge 11; Parry 10 (Wrestling).
5'6"; 105 lbs.

Social Background

TL: 0 [-30].

CF: Ancient Mesoamerican (Native) [0].

Languages: Proto-Mayan (Accented/Semi-Literate) [-3].

Advantages

Claws (Blunt Claws) [3]; Clinging (Specific, Wood, -40%) [12]; Combat Reflexes [15]; Damage Resistance 3 (Tough Skin, -40%) [9]; Detect (Spirits) [10]; Fit [5]; Magery 3 (Pact, Fanaticism, -15%) [31]; Metabolism Control 4 [20]; Night Vision 5 [5]; Outdoorsman 3 [30]; Perfect Balance [15]; Plant Empathy [5]; Reduced Consumption 2 [4]; Slippery 2 [4]; Temperature Tolerance 2 [2]; Ultrahearing [5]; Unaging [15].

Disadvantages

Addiction (Spiritual Energies; Cheap; Highly addictive; Legal) [-5]; Berserk (12) [-10]; Bestial [-10]; Callous [-5]; Extreme Fanaticism (Protection of the Jungle) [-15]; Innumerate [-5]; Loner (6) [-10]; Paranoia [-10]; Reputation -3 (Terror in the night; Jungle dwellers; 10 or less) [-3]; Sense of Duty (Plants, and the Lord of the Vines) [-10]; Ugly Appearance [-8]; Unnatural Features 2 (Green Skin) [-2]; Wealth (Dead Broke) [-25].

Quirks: Careful; May be momentarily distracted by polished gold. [-2]

Skills

Area Knowledge (The Jungle) (E) IQ+5 [16]-14; Brawling (E) DX+1 [2]-14; Camouflage (E) IQ+7 [8]-16*; Garrote (E) DX [1]-13; Gesture (E) IQ+3 [8]-12; Innate Attack (Beam) (E) DX [1]-13; Naturalist (Earth) (H) IQ+2 [2]-11†; Navigation/TL0 (Land) (A) IQ+2 [1]-11†; Occultism (A) IQ+1 [4]-10; Stealth (A) DX [2]-13; Survival (Jungle) (A) Per+3 [2]-16†; Tactics (H) IQ [4]-9; Throwing (A) DX-1 [1]-12; Tracking (A) Per+3 [2]-16†; Wrestling (A) DX-1 [1]-12.

Spells‡

Animate Plant-12 [1]; Bless Plants-12 [1]; Blossom-12 [1]; Body of Slime-12 [1]; Counterspell-12 [1]; Create Earth-12 [1]; Create Spring-12 [1]; Create Water-12 [1]; Destroy Water-12 [1]; Detect Magic-12 [1]; Dispel Magic-12 [1]; Dry Spring-12 [1]; Earth to Stone-12 [1]; Earth Vision-12 [1]; False Tracks-12 [1]; Fog-12 [1]; Heal Plant-12 [1]; Hide Path-12 [1]; Identify Plant-12 [1]; Plant Form-12 [1]; Plant Growth-12 [1]; Plant Vision-12 [1]; Pollen Cloud-12 [1]; Purify Water-12 [1]; Rain of Nuts-12 [1]; Rejuvenate Plant-12 [1]; Sand Jet-12 [1]; Seek Earth-12 [1]; Seek Plant-12 [1]; Seek Water-12 [1]; Shape Earth-12 [1]; Shape Plant-12 [1]; Shape Water-12 [1]; Tangle Growth-12 [1]; Walk Through Plants-12 [1].

* Defaults from Survival; Includes +3 from Outdoorsman.

† Includes +3 from Outdoorsman.

‡ All spells are learned for spirit-assisted casting only and hence are treated as Easy skills; all levels include +3 for Magery.

CHAPTER FOUR

CAMPAIGNS

Doc Mudra was setting out to storm the enemy's headquarters – alone!

This hadn't been his plan. But as it approached the Caribbean island, the amazing helix-plane was forced down by an unnatural storm. Now, the Uncanny Four were battling a small army of fanatical minions and sorcerers. The Doc yearned to fight alongside them, but they all knew that Miranda Chatford was a prisoner of the Secret Kingdom, and rescuing her was the first priority.

She'd stumbled across the Secret Pharaoh's scheme to steal an entire nation while seeking to disprove strange rumors that had emerged from the Central American rain forests. The Uncanny Four foiled the Pharaoh's first move – an attempt to forge a pact with the Jungle Madness itself – but by then, Miranda was captured. Tsai Wu Tsi magically located her, but the Secret Kingdom had been waiting for them!

The Doc used his powers of levitation to avoid the traps and ambushes set around the one path to the great mansion atop the island's storm-lashed cliffs, and his mighty strength to smash through the locked doors. But when he was met by a hail of bullets and bolts of black lightning, and he heard the crazed taunts of a man 4,000 years dead, he knew that he was facing the fight of his life!

A variety of campaign styles and formats are possible in the **Age of Gold** setting, from light to dark, two-fisted to mystical, fantastical to historical. Most scenarios and adventures should involve magic and the supernatural. (It's perfectly possible to run games that don't, but in that case, the campaign might just as well be a standard **Cliffhangers** or historical 1930s game.) The variety of magical systems provided by **GURPS Thaumatology** means that this provides a wide range of possibilities.

POWER LEVEL AND ENEMIES

A large factor in defining the style of an **Age of Gold** game is the power level of the PCs – pulp adventurers or mystery men (see pp. 26-27). This in turn tends to determine the type of antagonists that they face.

PULP ADVENTURERS

Pulp adventurers can deal with a range of problems, including mundane crime and espionage, but the high-stakes, supernatural-oriented style implied by the setting means that they should often end up fighting colorful opponents in interesting places. “Leader and Assistants” groups (p. 27) will mostly operate at this level, but with the occasional monstrously powerful opponent, mind-warping puzzle, or “impregnable” villain fortress to challenge the leader. Adventures often have a notch more magical strangeness to reflect the leader's magical nature.

Opponents

Beyond the ordinary gangsters, spies, hoodlums, and the random mob of cultists with, quite likely, lower skills but more determination than ordinary crooks, lie the “boss villains” of many a classic pulp plot: the *evil masterminds* – master spies, gang bosses, cult leaders, and the like. An evil mastermind may well wield supernatural powers, but this isn't mandatory; a combination of intelligence and good organization can make quite enough trouble for any heroic band. Still, in **Age of Gold**,

all but the most cautious or arrogant villain will at the very least hire in some arcane support. The Secret Pharaoh (pp. 32-35) and Madame Jasmine (pp. 35-37) can both act as masterminds.

While an established criminal leader will certainly have a good number of goons on his payroll, a competent small-timer, or a potential schemer on the make, can still provide an interesting challenge. (Imagine the story of *The Maltese Falcon*, except with the falcon as a magical artifact, and the Fat Man numbering a medium and a ritual magician among his minions.)

Equally, the balance of forces in the mastermind's organization can vary. Traditionally, it consists of a lot of mediocre goons, perhaps a competent (if not necessarily perfectly trustworthy) lieutenant or two, and maybe a tough bodyguard or enforcer to provide heavy-duty muscle – and, in **Age of Gold**, probably one or two of those hired magicians. However, a secret magical conspiracy, say, might have a fair number of fairly competent magicians one level down from the mastermind, plus a few trainees and bodyguards, and only as many low-grade hirelings or dupes as the various magical circles need to handle routine matters. Alternatively, a loose society of quasi-religious conspirators might have a lot of “cells” whose members have negligible combat ability, but some wealth and social influence – and the ability to summon or conjure tough magical “enforcers” (zombies, petty demons, etc.); in that case, the mastermind would be mostly an ideologue, coordinator, and “keeper of the lore.”

A substantial mastermind-led organization should provide sufficient challenge for many sessions of play, but players will hope to bring it down eventually. This isn't guaranteed to work perfectly, though. While the organization itself *may* be destroyed, sometimes with the help of official law enforcement, many scheming villains are notoriously prone to escaping and rebuilding from scratch – the Secret Pharaoh, for one, is very hard to defeat in person, and even harder for Pulp Adventurer-level opponents to subdue permanently – and some organizations are just too big and diverse. No PC group is likely to destroy, say, the entire Mafia, although an ambitious local *capo* might take the role of mastermind in a campaign and be defeated in the end. Organizations with some national government's tacit backing, such as the Black Dragon Society (p. 14), are also difficult to eliminate permanently; any survivors always have a safe haven from which to rebuild.

An alternative class of plot and opponent comes closer to horror than crime-busting. An *Age of Gold* campaign can feature any number of supernatural monsters, including such traditional types as vampires, zombies, and ghosts, along with one-off menaces such as the Jungle Madness (pp. 37-38). In that case, the standard plot involves the PCs learning about the problem, either from contacts or employers or by a direct encounter; studying and analyzing it, and then applying violent countermeasures. While “kill the monster of the week” games can become repetitive, the monsters can vary quite a bit, and there's always scope for interesting interactions within the PC group and in their relationships with bystanders, victims, local law enforcers, and the occasional rival magic-savvy group with their own agenda.

Adventures often exhibit magical strangeness.

At Home

Many pulp hero groups will have a “home base” area, where they may well have a local Reputation and where many plots will arise for their attention. This will generally be a city, but the principle can easily extend to a whole state or even a nation. A group might act as private investigators or troubleshooters, taking paid work from people who understand that they know one set of streets especially well, or they might be freelance crime fighters, sworn to defend their home town. Equally, they might be state or government agents – perhaps a “special problems” force within the Secret Service – with appropriate jurisdiction and assignments. Or they may simply be free agents who pursue whatever problems come to their attention, but who naturally hear most about matters close to home.

A focus on “home area” plots has many advantages, not least that characters can easily buy plausible Allies and Contacts along with Area Knowledge or Current Affairs skills in the expectation that they'll be useful. The GM can have a detailed map of the area, probably drawn from historical sources (an old guidebook or map, a social or regional history book, or whatever), and can create a cast of recurring NPCs. There's a lot of satisfaction in a feeling of “this is our place, these are our people, and we keep them safe.” Nonetheless, the tight focus may

feel repetitive after a while, and the idea that one city suffers all this variety of problems can seem increasingly implausible. In that case, the GM can shift the focus, at least temporarily, or give the PCs a reason to wander further afield.

Globetrotting

The opposite of a “home base” campaign is one where the adventurers wander the whole game world, dealing with some class of problems wherever they happen to arise. If they have a home base at all, it's just somewhere to relax and store their spare stuff.

It's just as possible for a game to involve lots of travel without the heroes being rootless nomads. Magical defenders can deal with monsters when they show up on the defenders' home turf, then track some of them home to finish the fight, while hired guns can take jobs both down the road from HQ and on other side of the world, if that's how the calls come. But the pulp era does mark the first time that adventurers could plausibly reach any part of the planet within days rather than weeks or months, if the need arose and funds were available, and writers took advantage of this to depict truly world-spanning heroes. Thus, a full-on globetrotting campaign is an entirely reasonable idea. The advantages are obvious: cultural diversity, interesting scenery, and magical or political opponents of a huge range of types. The drawbacks may include a lack of focus and the fact that the PCs will need a wide range of languages and Cultural Familiarities to work properly – but really, that's what globetrotting adventures are about.

MYSTERY MEN

A “mystery men” *Age of Gold* campaign is definitely a superhero game – but it should also have at least a slight edge of high weirdness. Remember that all of these superhuman characters are empowered by magic, which isn't fully understood, and the transformations they experience are supposed to make them *different* – hopefully better, but definitely *other*. Even the most straightforward super-strong tough guy who thinks that he's fighting for mom and apple pie has the power of alchemy flowing through his veins, and may actually be changing into an *archetype*. The “men of gold” can resist or ignore these changes, but anyone who really understands what's happened to them knows that they're on a path to an unknown destination. Many of their opponents will be even stranger than they are, and as the campaign continues, the weirdness factor should mount up.

Nor should the heroes find it easy to remain grounded. They may insist that they're just regular guys who've picked up a trick or two, but ordinary humans will always look on them as something very special and a little scary. Remember, the setting has no history of costumed crime fighters; it doesn't even have a tradition of superhero comic books. The men of gold are inventing things as they go along. Likewise, governments and other organizations are trying to develop appropriate and effective responses to the phenomenon. This may be a more naïve age in some senses, so that few people assume that governments are served by sinister Men in Black, or that the military is developing secret super-weapons – but it's nonetheless a world in which J. Edgar Hoover, Josef Stalin, and the Black Dragon Society all wield great power. The Men in Black and the super-weapon projects may be out there, all the more sinister for being less widely believed in.

Nonetheless, those mysteries and strangenesses aren't entirely dark or relentlessly horrible. Magic is a thing of wonder that can be used just as easily for good as for evil. It doesn't always remain in the shadows; it can generate light shows in broad daylight. The monsters can be comprehended and fought by sane, brave heroes; killing an evil vampire with a magical fireball is an unambiguously good idea. (Are there any less-evil vampires? That's up to the GM. The setting assumes that such creatures mostly live up to the stereotypes, but some things in *Age of Gold* do turn out to be a bit less straightforward than the myths would suggest.) This is *not* a world of Lovecraftian existential terror.

Mystery men usually work alone, but may form groups for a range of reasons – as an *ad hoc* response to a single huge threat, to exchange information about their strange situation, because they share an origin story, or because they've all been recruited by the government. See *GURPS Supers* for discussion of teams and the reasons for their existence, and then apply a 1930s/magical twist.

Antagonists and Venues

In a sense, higher-power games are simpler to run than Pulp Adventurer-level campaigns; there's less to decide about geographic scope or opponent power levels. A mystery man may be *based* in a single city, but he's likely to travel the world, and worthy opponents have to be on his own level. This level of power can't and shouldn't be confined to one place, and the only serious opponents for mystery men are their equals.

Still, different campaigns – or at least different long-term plots – can have different focuses and flavors. Heroes can fight monsters, or deal with more subtly human evils. Super-powers alone may not be enough to handle subtle conspiracies with influence in every corner of a society. It's useful to be able to smack down the odd summoned demon or deal with the ultimate other-than-human mastermind in the final confrontation, but beating up any number of cultists or goons just gets a mystery man on the Wanted posters if the conspiracy already runs the government. Indeed, for interesting games, the opposition may *have* to be a little more complex and subtle; for a team of ordinary humans, defeating a werewolf is an accomplishment,

but for a team of mystery men, even a pack of bestial werewolves is just a disorganized fight scene. A group of villainous magicians who are turning congressmen into blank-eyed slaves, on the other hand, makes for a *plot*.

As mystery men often represent archetypes or symbols, so can their opponents. Figures may manifest pure evil or individual vices (greed, lust, anger, or whatever), or be the champions of foreign nations or political movements (“negotiators” of the Black Dragon Society, a product of successful Nazi arcane research, or horrors of Socialist Biological Science emerging from secret research stations in the depths of Siberia). Villains can also be more complex and troubling symbols – manifestations of raw capitalist amorality or symbols of the PCs' own nations who treat all other nationalities with xenophobic contempt, or superhumans who espouse “Social Darwinism” and regard all less powerful humans with casual contempt. For that matter, “heroes” with a pitiless, absolute concept of morality could tip over into vigilante extremism, especially if their morality is based on some minority religious code or peculiar philosophy.

The venues for these confrontations can range across the globe. Some will take place in the major cities of the heroes' homeland, of course, in the way of superhero battles – a game is likely to involve its share of attempts at bank robbery, political assassination, and so on – but mystery men should rarely be loath to pursue their opponents back to their lairs, or to oppose subversion, piracy, or organized injustice wherever they may be found. Games can also feature a full set of *really* exotic locations, such as “lost cities” in the depths of unexplored jungles or mountain ranges, undersea kingdoms, and extradimensional realms occupied by nonhuman spirits. Space and time travel are likely to be rarer, but in a magic-saturated universe with nigh-four color tendencies, nothing can be quite impossible. Finding ways to transport adventurers to such places should be tricky – some parties will have powers or high-tech vehicles that can resolve that problem, but others may have more difficulty. For GMS who really want to take their groups elsewhere or whenever the odd magical portal, captured weird science vehicle or assist from a friendly NPC answers the need.

GAME THEMES

There are certainly a number of different themes that are appropriate for *Age of Gold* game plots. The pulp/Golden Age comics basis for the setting raises a number of strong possibilities. A single campaign can encompass several of these, and games definitely shouldn't be straightjacketed.

CRIME FIGHTING

The default occupation for an *Age of Gold* hero is fighting “evil” by conventional definitions and in its standard forms – robbery, assault, murder, extortion, and the like. Cops or G-men deal with such things as their day job, private eyes can be hired when a victim somehow feels that official law enforcement isn't doing enough, masked vigilantes prowl the nighttime streets on the lookout for evildoers, and anyone can just happen to be passing or can be asked for help by a friend or

relation. Some scenarios and campaigns are fairly straightforward and combat-oriented – see criminals, fight criminals – but others can involve some amount of detective work and puzzle-solving, possibly up to the level of detail that merits extensive use by the GM of *GURPS Mysteries* as a reference.

To use terminology of *GURPS Mysteries*, “pulp-style” mysteries will *usually* be more “hard-boiled” or “thriller” than “cozy” in style, but mystery scenarios could quite easily be set in, say, the polite upper levels of society or in some quiet rural community. It involves a mixture of “cozy mystery” polite investigation and odd, ghost-story-like incursions of the supernatural.

The pulps and Golden Age comics generally took a pretty straightforward line on crime: It was wrong; the people responsible rarely displayed much in the way of redeeming features; and they deserved whatever they got from the heroes.

However, even those sources occasionally allowed that ordinary people could become desperate or could be weak or misled; the Great Depression was certainly a time of widespread hardship. One of the things that made extralegal vigilantes look so appealing to readers was that the “heroes” could sometimes deal with the sort of wrongdoers who could evade justice by invoking the letter of the law – amoral corporate executives and slum landlords, crime bosses with too many layers of insulation between themselves and the dark deeds that they sanctioned, and so on. Likewise, from a modern point of view, the law of the time had some divergences from true justice, at least as it was actually enforced; members of the “wrong” race or sex should be forgiven some cynicism on the subject. Hence, heroes with only very slightly anachronistic attitudes might often work at a tangent to the cops and judges of the time.

Even those who followed the letter of 1930s morality could end up breaking the letter of the law. Vigilantism often steps over one line or another, especially when the vigilante has to adapt for his lack of official powers. Similarly, pulp-era private detectives were forever finding themselves at odds with the cops, who didn’t much like the freelance competition. Magic complicates things further: The law rarely allows for it, the cops don’t have to like it, and any mention of the subject is likely to make any eventual court case much more complicated. GMs setting up a law enforcement campaign will have to decide and agree with the players whether the PCs are going to be working mostly or partly within the letter of the law, and how well they are likely to get on with ordinary cops and prosecutors – which can of course involve them being friendly with some and hated by others. **GURPS Cops** may be a useful reference for “law enforcement” campaigns, although it mostly focuses on the present day.

ESPIONAGE

Alternatively, play can focus more on international interactions while still remaining subtle and shadowy. This mostly takes the form of espionage or counter-espionage. The latter can mean something akin to a crime-fighting campaign, with higher stakes and more exotic opponents. Indeed, any crime fighter can occasionally run into a foreign spy or subversive, complicating things a little as compared to ordinary crime stories, but not really changing the nature of the game. However, full-time counter-espionage specialists need additional skills and knowledge, and sometimes a more subtle touch; they may also run into rather more capable and determined opposition.

Adventurers who are themselves spies or covert operators, working in hostile or neutral territory, make the situation even more challenging. Full-time spying is a tricky, subtle business, often long on moral ambiguity; it can also be quite hard to play out convincingly in an RPG, as both the players and GM will need a clear grasp of the intricacies of the topic. (The **GURPS Third Edition** supplements **GURPS Espionage** and **GURPS Covert Ops** may help here.) Magic may be immensely useful to spies, allowing them to bypass many conventional countermeasures – but in **Age of Gold**, some opponents may be confidently expected to employ some *unconventional*, formidable, magical countermeasures! Furthermore, as the significance of magic and weird science for this and other purposes becomes increasingly obvious, every covert organization on Earth will move into the field. A deadly global secret war has begun brewing, involving powerful national intelligence services, secret

groups such as the Black Dragon Society (p. 14), and smaller but still dangerous factions such as the Secret Kingdom (p. 35). Magical espionage campaigns can thus be complex and deadly. The size of what’s at stake and the according level of danger and violence mean that some subtler mystery men are being sucked into all this alongside the more conventional operators, and they are finding that mere magical power doesn’t *always* give them a great advantage.

EXOTIC PLACES

In the traditions of the pulps and high-magic adventure, some plots can be travelogues above almost anything else. With important events and complex political power-plays taking place everywhere from the wilds of Outer Mongolia to the nightclubs of Berlin, from the teeming back alleys of Shanghai to the Mayan ruins of Yucatan – and with magic and conventional research locating lost cities in Central Africa, cursed tombs in Egypt, colonies of colonies in Scottish lochs, hidden lamaseries in the Himalayas, and “Atlantean” secrets in the ocean depths – adventurers can be forgiven for spending much of their time admiring the scenery.

Obviously, this aspect of **Age of Gold** style mostly serves as an overlay on conventional action-adventure plots. Nonetheless, it’s something that GMs should consider in its own right. Lush physical descriptions and wide cultural diversity should be the norm. Some of this will remain in the background of the actual plot, but parts will have distinct game-mechanical effects. For example, social interactions with important contacts may be subject to frequent Cultural Familiarity penalties, while simply getting from point A to point B as quickly as possible may require two or three vehicle skills (perhaps at varying tech levels) and assorted Survival skill rolls. More exotic locations yet may be completely incomprehensible without use of skills such as History or Archaeology. While **Age of Gold** games are primarily about pulp-style action and adventure, players should recognize that more cerebral skills have very definite uses.

ARCANE ARCHAEOLOGY

Lastly, don’t forget that all this exoticism relates to one of the central themes of the game world: the presence and resurgence of magic. Even adventurers who never leave their home towns may find themselves digging into the mysteries of ancient history and the enigmas of the supernatural. Many plots can revolve around competition for magical secrets or attempts to determine the nature and vulnerabilities of some supernatural monster. This can lead to archaeological adventures in a conventional sense – digging up buried artifacts in some wilderness site or beneath the foundations of a long-inhabited city – or it can entail similar antiquarian work in musty libraries and museums. It can also involve questioning *living* sources: seemingly ageless Tibetan lamas, eccentric scholars, crazy visionary seers, and the more talkative sort of inhuman creature.

The action-adventure part of an archaeology-oriented game can involve lethal competition from rival researchers in service to ruthless, selfish factions, in best *Indiana Jones* style. There’s also the occasional misunderstanding with ordinary armed locals along the way. Battles with supernatural guardians might occur in the more *active* sorts of site.

On occasion, research missions may come to resemble shamanic vision quests. Alchemists and mystery men especially may come to see the search for knowledge as being as much spiritual as intellectual, with guardians assigned to challenge and test rather than merely to kill interlopers (though the harsher sort of spiritual journey isn't always exactly safe, for the quester's life or sanity), and success leading to *wisdom*, with power as "merely" a side effect.

In short, arcane archaeological adventures can involve just as much wonder and strangeness as any globetrotting "tourist"

INFINITE WORLDS

The world of *Age of Gold* can be fitted into the greater Infinite Worlds setting described in the *Basic Set* and *GURPS Infinite Worlds* as follows

The peculiar parallel timeline known to Infinity as Mandrake-1 lies on Quantum 4. It's obviously an exotic and worrying world, although Infinity knows of worse. The presence of functioning magic is always a concern, and although Mandrake-1 doesn't seem to have metaphysical theories that could lead to parachronic gate creation, the sheer diversity and varied scope of magical activities on the timeline doesn't rule much out. One Infinity operation is monitoring local work on quantum mechanics; if anyone comes up with a "Many Worlds" interpretation, and then lets the thaumatologists know, things could turn very messy. Fortunately, eccentric scientists on the timeline tend to get distracted by alchemy or related weird sciences, which is retarding development in quantum and nuclear physics. Some Infinity scientists think that this is a very good thing, and they are lobbying for any Manhattan Project on Mandrake-1 to be *sabotaged* if and when it is instituted. Their guess is that a nuclear explosion here could generate a far worse Hellstorm than on any of the Merlin lines.

Certainly, Mandrake-1 displays signs of severe parachronic fragility. Its history appears to be somewhat *confused* at the detail level, especially with regard to the paranormal. Infinity believes that it may have suffered one or more reality quakes in the past, and that many of the powerful magic items known to exist here may be reality shards. In fact, some of the lost cities and such periodically discovered by local explorers may also be giant shards. (I-Cops assigned to the timeline dread the day that they're told to investigate *that*.) All those exotic "ancient relics" are also likely to prove very interesting to Reich-5's Raven Division, should they ever gain access. Given that they'd get on just fine with elements of the timeline's own Nazi Party, containing such incursions would be a very high priority. It might be the sort of mission that would involve tricky alliances with local adventurers and heroes.

Infinity's Sheldrake Section and the Duncorne Foundation are predictably fascinated by Mandrake-1's combination of parachronic fragility, diverse magical methodologies, and attempts to integrate magic and science. I-Cops are frequently assigned to babysit or monitor legitimate Sheldrake or Duncorne missions to the timeline, and Infinity almost takes it for granted that periodic illicit visits take place on *somebody's* dollar. Time Tours lobbied frenziedly until a few tourist trips were permitted, and they definitely want more. Infinity insists on guides who'll come down *hard* on rule-breaking and who'll know when to pull a party out early.

campaign, just as much two-fisted adventure as any crime-busting game, and just as much mystery and subtlety as any espionage plot. The heroes should find themselves probing the lost secrets of ancient cultures – and quite likely fighting the wildest monsters out of their mythologies. This should certainly ramp up the strangeness level in a Pulp Adventurer-level campaign, while mystery men may find themselves adopting downright mythic roles for themselves, as the new era of magic transforms them into its own legends.

EXOTIC MANA AND IMPURE ALCHEMY

As Sheldrake analysts point out, Mandrake-1 apparently has "exotically aspected" mana; the spell systems familiar from a number of other magical timelines are rare or largely unknown here, whereas other forms of magic work just fine. At some point, someone will want to take a trustworthy spell-user (if that's not an oxymoron) through and see how well he gets on. The main thing delaying this experiment is Infinity's rational nervousness about playing with forces it really *doesn't* understand.

One other peculiarity of the timeline is the widespread presence of useful but impure forms of the Philosopher's Stone. This substance – well, a substance of that name – is known on a few magical timelines, especially several of the Azoth lines, but in most cases, it has to be "perfect" to be useful, and it often has only a few specific (if powerful) arcane properties. Homeline researchers give themselves headaches trying to integrate the prevalent alchemical theories from many different timelines, in all their obscure and contradictory glory, and to determine if they're all really talking about the same thing.

"THE FUTUREMEN"

As further option, assume that the I-Cops haven't been able to avoid notice in their operations on Mandrake-1 . . . But no one locally actually knows what they are. Their extratemporal origins fortuitously make them highly resistant to informational magics, and they've managed to sustain the policy of never leaving a man behind. So they've ended up being seen by the citizens of Mandrake-1 as yet another strange faction, dubbed "the Futuremen" by the local press for their high-tech gear.

They're generally thought of as a mysterious wildcard conspiracy, vaguely on the side of good but prone to strange and amoral actions, such as stealing archaeological discoveries or making certain people *disappear*, permanently. Some people think that they're time travelers, although local SF fans reckon that proper futuristic gear would mean Art Deco blasters and personal force fields, not undersized handguns and skimpy bullet-proof vests. Most natives assume that they work for some unusually benevolent and technology-oriented – but of course crazy – mastermind.

FURTHER READING

Apart from the various **GURPS** supplements discussed on p. 4 and elsewhere in this book, many other sources can be useful when setting up *Age of Gold* games.

HISTORY

Taking the history of our own real world as the baseline for this setting means that any good history of the period may be helpful – and there’s plenty about the 1930s available online. (Some of it may be a bit unreliable, but no matter – the *Age of Gold* may have all sorts of petty divergences, especially where it’s cool.) The *Encyclopedia Britannica* is always useful, for a start.

In addition, the two volumes of *Suppressed Transmission*, by Kenneth Hite (Steve Jackson Games, 2000) are absolutely invaluable as a source of information on weird, conspiratorial, and occult history for game purposes. They were frequently referenced in the creation of this setting.

FICTION

Pulp-era adventure tales have occasionally been reprinted in recent years, and while not many of these deal much with magic, it might be worth dipping a few of them to get a feel for the pulp style. Some of the available series titles include the famous *Doc Savage*, by Kenneth Robeson, and *The Shadow*, by Lester Dent and Walter Gibson, both of which have been republished in recent years by Nostalgia Ventures. Likewise, a number of Golden Age comic stories (especially from DC Comics) have been reprinted in (often rather expensive) book collections; some of the stories involve typically powerful supernatural superheroes. See, for example, DC’s *Golden Age Spectre Archives* and *Golden Age Doctor Fate: Archives*.

Among modern comics, Mike Mignola’s *Hellboy* and some of its spin-off titles (published by Dark Horse) are noted

for combining (mostly horrific) supernatural themes with pulp-style action. Although most stories are set in the modern period and/or involve “Cthulhoid” monstrosities (see below for why this is a problem), some look back to the 1930s or 1940s, and many involve a more traditional view of the supernatural.

GAMES

A number of RPGs have been set in the pulp 1930s, with various types of magical or paranormal activity present, and they might be mined for ideas for use in *Age of Gold* games. The best known is Chaosium’s *Call of Cthulhu*; see also, for example, *Trail of Cthulhu* from Pelgrane Press, *Spirit of the Century* from Evil Hate Productions, or *Hollow Earth Expedition* from Exile Game Studios.

Note, however, that many of these draw on the work of H.P. Lovecraft for their primary inspiration. Lovecraft was a wonderful writer who is rightly popular with gamers, but his “Cthulhu Mythos” is a dark, modernist take on the supernatural, whereas *GURPS Thaumatology: The Age of Gold* draws on older or more flamboyant conceptions of magic – the kind of thing that fits with the four-color comic book aesthetic. There are horrific aspects to this setting, certainly, but contact with the supernatural doesn’t automatically drive normal humans mad (a little crazy, perhaps, but not gibbering mad), magic can safely be used for good, and traditional magical creatures are more common than uncaring tentacled monstrosities.

That said, *Ken Hite’s Adventures Into Darkness*, by Kenneth Hite (published in PDF form by Ronin Arts, 2008), which merges specifically Lovecraftian horror with the Golden Age superheroes of the Nedor Comics stable, is absolutely recommended as a source of ideas and atmosphere.

No one can flatter himself that he is immune to the spirit of his own epoch, or even that he possesses a full understanding of it.

– Carl Jung

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