

ALCHEMY

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GUMSHO
ZOOM



Pelgrane Press

GUMSHOE ZOOM: INTRODUCTION

Not everything can support a game of its own, or even a big sourcebook. For those things, we present the GUMSHOE Zoom, a sort of supplement focused on a key game mechanic and its possible applications. In general, Zooms are interesting potential hacks, or intriguing adaptations of the main rules. Some apply to one specific topic or sub-sub-genre. Others cross all manner of GUMSHOE turf; you can slot them in and adapt them to tales of Cthulhuoid investigation, mean superpowered streets, or alien colonies alike.

Zooms are experimental. That does mean that they haven't been playtested, necessarily. (If something in here is really really broken – and it's not, as this ain't our first rodeo – we'll fix it in post.) But that also means we encourage you to experiment with them. Changing the cost, or prerequisites, or point effect, or other mechanical parameters of a given Zoom changes how often it shows up and how much drama it drives. The dials are in your hands.

Zooms will change the focus of your play if you use them. Putting a mechanic on the table puts it into your game. Adding a Zoom means more actions, possibly even more scenes, using those rules. Since the Zoom mechanics are intended to encourage specific actions or flavors, to force a card in your storytelling hand, they aren't "balanced" against "normal" actions or rules. In general, if you don't want to see more of it, don't Zoom in on it.

Zooms are optional rules. You can and should ignore them if you don't want them, or change them at will. After all, if a given Zoom turns out to be crucial to an upcoming GUMSHOE game, we'll change it to fit that specific genre or form of storytelling.

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Alchemy

INTRODUCTION

"THEY FORMED THEMSELVES INTO AN ORDER, HOLDING THEIR GOODS AND MAKING THEIR RESEARCHES IN COMMON, AND, AS THEY BECAME PERFECT IN THE ALCHEMICAL DOCTRINE, APPARITIONS CAME AND WENT AMONG THEM, AND TAUGHT THEM MORE AND MORE MARVELLOUS MYSTERIES."

-- WILLIAM BUTLER YEATS,
"ROSA ALCHEMICA"

Alchemy takes its name from the Arabic *al-khimiya*, ultimately meaning the art or science or matter of Khem, i.e., Egypt. What it means is still very much a live controversy: after a century or so in which it just meant "wrong or primitive chemistry" Carl Jung and Mircea Eliade (among others) reinterpreted alchemy as a psychoanalytic or mystical tradition in which all the metals and alembics just camouflaged the spiritual seeking of the Great Work.

The truth is likely closer to the first than the second, if only because it seems very clear that for at least a thousand years (ca. 800-1800) alchemists in Europe and the Near East really did care about all those bubbling retorts and weird metals, and really did want to turn lead into gold. Of course, every educated person knew that these two courses – material and mystical, exoteric and esoteric – were complementary, not contradictory. Everything operated by divine law, and the microcosm of man and matter reflected the macrocosm of heaven.

Alchemy begins as a historical tradition with the Egyptian Greek

Zosimos of Panopolis (c. 300 A.D.), who set down the basic precepts of the Great Art: by a series of processes, base matter can be refined into perfected matter. When the Roman Empire fell, the Arabs took up the alchemical thread, correlating the various weird Gnostic texts and counterfeiter's formularies into something like an intellectual discipline. Jabir ibn Hayyan (a.k.a. Geber, 721-815) insisted on laboratory experimentation and introduced the doctrine of sulfur and mercury as the elemental metals; his works made their way into Western Europe in the 12th century via Muslim Spain. Geber's combination of Arabic experiment and Greek theory launched an increasingly complex assault on (or seduction of) the medieval mind, which met it with theological rigor and the doctrines of magic stones.

Another tranche of Muslim and Greek alchemical thought entered Europe with the fall of Constantinople in 1453. The Renaissance humanists pursued alchemy with zealous élan, culminating in the works of Cornelius Agrippa (1486-1535) who blended it with magic and kabbalah, and of Theophrastus Hohenheim (a.k.a. Paracelsus, 1493-1541) who added herbalism to the mix and re-emphasized medicine. For approximately the next 150 years, every court in Europe courted alchemists, and every alchemist in Europe courted kings; competition drove further researches and weird arcana alike in a blend of scientific race and artistic throwdown. By about 1720, although scholars like

Robert Boyle, Isaac Newton, and Jan-Baptist von Helmont explored both fields, developments in actual chemistry began to pay bigger intellectual (and commercial) dividends than mystically tinged alchemy. By 1800, alchemy had become a pastime of eccentrics (who drew it ever more toward pure mysticism) and a punching bag for secularists, which is pretty much what it remains today.

This summary (and this Zoom) completely neglects the rich, vibrant, and weird alchemical traditions of India and China, by the way. Considerations of space and resources dictate that our focus remains on Europe, specifically on European alchemy from Agrippa to Newton, or about 1500 to 1700. That, as you will find out if you look into it, is more than enough base material to try to refine gaming gold from.

ALCHEMY

"ISOLATED AS I WAS, MODERN SCIENCE HAD PRODUCED NO IMPRESSION UPON ME, AND I LABOURED AS IN THE MIDDLE AGES, AS WRAPT AS HAD BEEN OLD MICHEL AND YOUNG CHARLES THEMSELVES IN THE ACQUISITION OF DAEMONOLOGICAL AND ALCHEMICAL LEARNING."

-- H.P. LOVECRAFT, "THE ALCHEMIST"

There is no "default" or even "authentic" version of alchemy, even of early modern European alchemy. Between trade secrets, mystical baffleleg, the normal variation and drift of occult fashion, new chemical discoveries, and quite probable mercury poisoning, it's almost

ALCHEMICAL EQUIPMENT

The well-stocked alchemist keeps plenty of gear around, to impress the occasional visiting viscount as much as to investigate the realms of matter.

Adopter: A widened tube placed over the neck of the retort to cool or condense the effluent.

Alembic: A vessel below a long spout for distillation of liquid or gas, placed over the opening of a second vessel, the *cucurbit*.

Aludel: A pear-shaped vessel open at both ends, for condensation of vapor.

Assay Balances: Precision scales for measuring matter.

Athanor: The great furnace for calcination and other regulated heating of matter; becomes a symbol of the Great Work. Also *philosophical Egg*.

Bell Jar: Or *bell flask*; a flask open at the bottom or vaulted and bent at the top, used for collecting gases.

Bellows: Used to intensify fire, and to blow air over calcinating matter.

Blowpipe: A tube to direct the alchemist's breath or bellows to a specific place in a working.

Boiling-Glass: Also called a Moors-head, this large glass vessel has a number of tubes or pipettes that can be sealed or attached to alembics for distillation.

Brazier: A metal vessel that can hold a flame and fuel.

Calcinator: Small, very hot oven or furnace for rapidly reducing matter to ash.

Crucible: A small earthenware vessel for melting or fusing metal.

Cupel: Small porcelain or bone-ash (nonreactive) cup, primarily for assaying metals or mixing small doses of elixir.

Descensory: Or descending furnace; a furnace designed to be fired on top so that the product flows down to a receiver.

Flask: A usually metal or glass container that can be sealed.

Matrass: A flask with a round bottom and long upright neck.

Mortar and Pestle: Useful for powdering things.

Pelican: Two-chambered vessel with two arms joined at the top; when heated, provides a constant recirculation of sublimation and distillation.

Retort: A one-piece alembic-cucurbit combination; or just a flask with a long downspout.

Sand Bath: Also *balneum siccum*; a large container of sand, which when heated provides even warmth to all sides of a vessel placed inside it. A water-bath is a *balneum mariae*.

Spirit Lamp: A thick vessel that holds alcohol and a wick, useful for burning things or boiling liquids set on a tripod above the lamp.

Worm: A coiled tube set inside a larger vessel; the longer tube increases surface area and speed of distillation.

impossible to find two alchemical treatises that agree in specific detail, although the broad outline of the Great Work remains recognizable throughout.

The specific language, terminologies, rules, and ordering of the various operations and elements in this Zoom thus default instead to maximum flavor and game utility. My correspondences with astrological signs and classical elements will look very wrong to people who take the Golden Dawn versions as gospel. Most of this is still at least justifiably derived from 16th- and 17th-century alchemical sources, but used idiosyncratically for my own purposes. In short, this Zoom is just like virtually everything else ever written on the topic.

ALCHEMICAL ABILITIES

Alchemists distinguish between the technical art of Alchemy (an Investigative ability) and the mystical or magical works, knowledges, or operations of alchemy: a set of twelve General abilities called *Materia*.

ALCHEMY (TECHNICAL)

This is an Investigative ability, covering not just the technical knowledge of alembics, athanors, etc. but the theoretical study of the nature and elements of matter. It also covers the creation and identification of mundane compounds, tinctures, potions, metallic poisons, elixirs, etc.; in a pre-Enlightenment campaign setting it replaces and incorporates the GUMSHOE abilities Chemistry and Pharmacy.

Each rating point of Alchemy unlocks two more *Materia* abilities (see table).

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Players can also spend Alchemy on Materia tests to produce magical alchemical effects: a spend of 1 Alchemy pool point adds +2 to the roll.

Learning Alchemy is just like gaining points in any other GUMSHOE ability, except that each 1 rating point of Alchemy costs 2 build or experience points.

The Alchemy ability is capped at 6.

MATERIA (GENERAL ABILITIES)

Alchemists produce alchemical effects by using (and often combining) Materia, the true knowledge and virtue of specific metals and compounds. An alchemist must learn the Materia abilities in a specific sequence, from Salt to Gold, and only after the alchemist reaches the prerequisite Alchemy rating level:

Alchemy rating	Materia
1	Salt Litharge
2	Vitriol Colcothar
3	Sulfur Orpiment
4	Aes Cyprium Sericon
5	Lunar Caustic Quicksilver
6	Vermilion Gold

Materia Abilities

To add a new Materia ability at any time, the alchemist must have:

1. Enough rating points in Alchemy to reach the desired Materia

CSA: CRIME SCENE ALCHEMY

It's not too great a leap from alchemy as practiced to any number of other investigative abilities. With the GM's permission, in a heavily alchemical game Alchemy can be used or spent in even more ways:

- Alchemical tests for contagion can determine whether a bullet came from a given gun, or whether a sword made a specific wound. (Criminology, Forensics, Ballistics)
- Alchemy makes great patter for a long con. (Unjustified Credit Rating or Status favors from rich guys, Flattery, Reassurance)
- Alchemy can detect forgeries, counterfeits, etc. (Forgery, Archaeology, Art History)
- By using the doctrine of signatures, Alchemy can read a man's true nature on his face (Bullshit Detector)
- Alchemy can cover the nitty-gritty of investigating any magical item or artifact without activating it. (Occult Studies, Archaeology)
- Alchemy can identify meteors or other alien metals from kryptonite to cavorite. It might even be able to replicate them with Sericon or another Materia test. (Astronomy)

2. At least one rating point in each earlier Materia ability

To add a new Materia ability during the game, the alchemist must have:

3. Used all the earlier Materia abilities in a game session, though not necessarily the same game session
4. Access to an alchemical laboratory, metals, compounds, and equipment

For details of the specific Materia abilities, see p. 7.

ALCHEMICAL ABILITIES AT CHARACTER GENERATION

Buy Alchemy as normal with Investigative build points; each Alchemy rating point costs 2 build points.

Zuleika spends 4 Investigative build points and gets an Alchemy rating of 2.

Materia are special General abilities and their build points come from the pool of General build points. The first rating point in any Materia ability costs 5 build points; after that, build points for that ability and for all other Materia abilities become rating points as normal.

Zuleika wants to have Materia abilities in the game, so she begins by buying the Materia ability Salt. She spends 7 General build points, and gets Salt with a rating of 3. The first rating point costs 5 build points; the next two each cost 1 build point. If she then spends 2 build points on Litharge, she gets Litharge with a rating of 2.

However, Materia abilities bought at character creation must follow rules 1) and 2) above: the character must have a high enough Alchemy rating to unlock the given Materia, and she must have a rating in each earlier Materia ability.

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For Zuleika to start the game with Sulfur (the fifth Materia in sequence), she needs to spend at least 2 more Investigative build points to raise her Alchemy rating from 2 to 3, and at least 3 more General build points to get Vitriol 1, Colcothar 1, and finally Sulfur 1.

ALCHEMICAL MECHANICS

“RATHER THAN I’LL BE BRAYED, SIR, I’LL BELIEVE

THAT ALCHEMY IS A PRETTY KIND OF GAME,

SOMEWHAT LIKE TRICKS O’ THE CARDS, TO CHEAT A MAN

WITH CHARMING.”

-- BEN JONSON, THE ALCHEMIST, ACT II, SCENE III

To produce a magical effect with alchemy (a *working*), make a Materia test at the required Difficulty. The alchemist must always spend at least 1 point from one Materia ability required. The class of effect depends on the effect’s nature; the terms refer to the quality of the quintessence used, not to the style or effect itself.

SUPPORTING ABILITIES

Although the alchemist must always spend 1 point from the Materia governing the effect he wishes to create, he may spend points from other abilities, at the following ratios of spent pool points to effective points added to the Materia test die roll as follows:

Other Materia: 1 pool point spent equals 1 effective point.

Alchemy: 1 pool point spent equals 2 effective points.

Other Magical abilities: In *School of Night* or other campaigns using a

Class of Effect	Difficulty
Base: “Dungeon adventuring” style physical effect	4
<i>Base effect on pint-sized (+0) human-sized (+2) or room-sized (+4) amount of matter</i>	
<i>In combat or strenuous activity (+2 or take 2 rounds for +1), in laboratory conditions (-1)</i>	
Volatile: Magical effect changing inanimate, physical world	5
<i>Volatile effect on pint-sized (+0) human-sized (+2) or room-sized (+4) amount of matter</i>	
<i>Volatile effect on living matter, e.g., turning blood to fire, or air in lungs to water (+3)</i>	
<i>Make Volatile effect temporary (+2, automatically temporary on living matter)</i>	
<i>In combat (+2), other strenuous activity (+1), in laboratory conditions (+0)</i>	
Fixed: Magical effect changing ensouled or sapient matter: humans, spirits, demons, etc.	8
<i>Fixed effect on alchemist herself (-2)</i>	
<i>Fixed effect on crowd of mooks (+2) on multiple named PCs or NPCs (+2 per NPC); named PCs and NPCs make Difficulty 8 Stability or Health test to resist</i>	
<i>Fixed effect duration: permanent (+7), one month or adventure (+4), one day (+2), one scene (+0)</i>	
<i>In combat (+2), other strenuous activity (+1), in laboratory conditions (+0)</i>	
Awakened: Magical effect changing the macrocosmic world; dynasties, kingdoms, etc.; also a major alchemical opus such as the philosopher’s stone, alkahest, resurrection, etc. Always requires three Workings, in three adventures.	
First Awakened Working	9
Second Awakened Working	11
Third Awakened Working	13
<i>May also require specific actions (maneuvering a marriage into being), special materials, further tests, etc. at the GM’s discretion; must be performed under laboratory conditions; requires Alchemy 6, cannot spend Alchemy on test</i>	

Magic ability or the like, 3 pool points spent equals 2 effective points.

Astrology, Occult Studies: Or similar abilities, depending on the campaign’s theoretical underpinnings. 2 pool points spent equals 1 effective point.

Health, Stability: 4 pool points spent equals 1 effective point. Describe the specific debility, madness, or injury you court or cause yourself to prepare or complete the working. These points do not refresh until the end of the adventure.

Multiple Alchemists

Multiple alchemists may participate in a working by spending 1 Alchemy pool point each, which *does not* add to the die. Each participating alchemist must also spend 1 point from the Materia governing the effect, which *does* add to the die.

Formulae

Players may wish to create workings combining up to three Materia: a Base napalm equivalent using Sulfur + Orpiment; a Volatile lava-summoning using Sulfur + Salt; a Fixed mirror that reveals the true soul with Salt + Colcothar + Lunar Caustic. If the player can justify it, both (or all three) Materia become “governing” for rules purposes.

Once a PC has created an alchemical effect with a Materia test, she (the player) can write down its combination of Materia and specific effect. Her character can then repeat that same working using the proven formula at -2 to Difficulty.

Artifacts

An alchemist can permanently imbue an effect into a metal artifact (e.g., an always-lit Quicksilver Lamp) at +7 to Difficulty, or +4 to Difficulty with a 2-point spend of a Craft skill to make the artifact.

EFFECTS OF ALCHEMICAL MAGIC

In many cases, especially with Base workings, the spell either works or it doesn't: its effect is “enough to solve the immediate problem the alchemist set out to solve, or better than that if you rolled a 6.” GMs should default to this result unless mechanical quantification is absolutely necessary.

REMAKE THE MAN: ASHEN ALCHEMIES

The viroware enhancements in *Ashen Stars* make excellently alchemical elixirs. For NPC evil alchemists, just use them as written, with maybe one or two potions surviving the fire in the laboratory for our heroes to experiment with.

For an enhanced alchemist, each elixir (enhancement) costs 2 build points to derive or discover the recipe. (The player can instead come up with a suitable Fixed working of her own to replicate the effect, if the GM allows it.) Using it in an adventure requires an Alchemy spend equal to the enhancement's initial therapy cost. After imbibing the elixir, take Health damage with the Upkeep as the damage modifier. This Health damage cannot be refreshed or healed until the end of the adventure, except with Lunar Caustic or similar magic.

Game-mechanical effects of workings should generally match the alchemist's result (the total of the die plus effective spends): at minimum, 1 Health, Stability, Athletics, etc. or Difficulty shift per 1 point of result.

MATERIA

These abilities cover the magical uses of alchemy. They do not necessarily refer to the mundane substances of salt, lead, etc. but of the active quintessence of those substances either tinted into physical powders, elixirs, etc. (“material components”) or imbued within the alchemist herself, depending on the campaign's underpinning assumptions. Some campaigns might require both physical and inner quintessences, or a ritual act recapitulating the Operation.

Each Materia writeup includes the following:

Name

Followed by a brief mundane chemical explication, traditional alchemical iconography, classical elements, and in parentheses the sign of the zodiac representing it.

GMs who apply ad hoc modifiers based on existing lore or other magical correspondences can use this header for hooks for such things.

Operation: The stage of the Great Work represented by this Materia, and more generally the kind of magical effect it produces.

Base: Standard “dungeon adventuring” effects possible with this Materia. Begins at Difficulty 4. Any alchemist with a rating in the corresponding Materia ability can use a Preparedness test (“I just happen to have the correct salve on me”) instead of a Materia test to create a Base effect, at +1 Difficulty.

Volatile: Other sample magical effects possible with this Materia, changing the physical, inanimate world. Begins at Difficulty 5.

Fixed: Sample magical effects possible with this Materia, changing the ensouled or sapient world: humans, spirits, demons, etc. Begins at Difficulty 8 (Difficulty 6 if used on the alchemist herself). +R = take the result as a bonus, divided up how the alchemist wishes

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Awakened: Sample magical effects possible with this Materia, changing the macrocosmic world: e.g., the affairs of kingdoms. A major alchemical Opus such as achieving the Philosopher's Stone, the Alkahest, etc. is an Awakened work. Requires at least three tests (beginning at Difficulty 9, 11, and 13), and in *School of Night* campaigns, a successful Art-Making test that creates a Masterpiece (*SoN*, p. 4). Other campaigns should add similar prerequisites for Awakened effects. Performing an Awakened working requires Alchemy 6; Alchemy points cannot be spent on the Materia test for an Awakened working.

Players may want to copy (or cut-paste-print) each Materia writeup onto an index card for ease of reference during the game.

Salt

Not just sodium chloride, or even any electrically neutral ionic compound, but according to Paracelsus the actual matter of all earths and metals. White fish or salmon, frog, disc or pentacle, bees. Earth of Water (Aries)

Operation: Solution, the dissolving of solid (or gas) into liquid.

Base: purify food or water; preservative

Volatile: transform solid to liquid

Fixed: change made-up minds; +R to Sense Trouble pools

Awakened: ossify then erode a bureaucracy or social structure (Church, state, etc.); Sal Sapientiae, the salt of wisdom, conveys knowledge of all languages including those of beasts and birds (+1 to all Academic abilities)

Litharge

Technically a crystalline form of lead oxide. Lead connects to Saturn,

melancholia, the raven, and the scythe symbol; *caput corvo* (crow's head). Earth of Earth (Taurus)

Operation: Coagulation, the solidifying of a fluid. *Solve et coagula* (dissolve then congeal) is the rhythm of all alchemy.

Base: darkness bomb; slowfoot resin (Difficulty 8 Athletics test and at least 2 rounds to extract feet from); xerion (stop a bleeding wound, restore 1 Health)

Volatile: transform a liquid to a solid

Fixed: summon Gnomes (Earth elementals), divide test result up into Scuffling (damage +1 per Earth spent), Health and Athletics pools -- spending 1 Litharge refills one pool for all Gnomes summoned; suspended animation

Awakened: pull together a loose empire into a centralized state; freeze time in a chamber; Cronus' Knife (kills anyone with flowing blood whom it stabs)

Vitriol

The former name for a sulfate; sulfuric acid is "spirit of vitriol." Glass, cobra or viper, eagle, the black sprite. Fire of Water (Gemini)

Operation: Sublimation, the evaporation of a liquid.

Base: strong acid (burn through locks, chains, mortar, etc.); soundless steps

Volatile: transform a liquid to a gas; dry out a solid

Fixed: levitation; breathe water; take gaseous form (+Litharge)

Awakened: exalt a figure to king or bishop; Flying Ointment (not just flight through the air, but intuitive

flight and communion with airy spirits be they demonic or angelic)

Colcothar

Ferric oxide, hematite. Iron connects to Mars, cholera, the sword. The hag of the wood, the bleeding stone, the tortoise, the peacock. Earth of Fire (Cancer)

Operation: Fixation, the conversion of spirit to matter.

Base: seal or hold fast (superglue, hold portal, etc.); fiery sword (+1 to damage)

Volatile: transform a gas to a solid; freezing

Fixed: hold person; +R to Stability pools; spider climb

Awakened: resolve a battle or a war; Sword Unvanquishable

Sulfur

Not just the yellow powdery element, sulfur is the hot, dry, active nature of metals and the soul of matter. *Leo rubeus* (Red lion). Fire of Earth (Leo)

Operation: Calcination, the conversion into a calx (powder or metal) by the action of intense heat, the expulsion of volatile substance from matter.

Base: firestarter; fireball (use Shooting or Scuffling to cast; +1 per point in result and per round spent; spend 3 roll 3 = +6 fireball if alchemist takes 6 rounds to cast)

Volatile: transform a solid into gas usually with explosive effect (damage as fireball, doubled within 3 yards); make matter fireproof

Fixed: +R to Scuffling or Weapons pools; contact the Devil or demons; summon Salamanders (Fire elementals, as Gnomes, p. 8 above; damage +1 per Fire spent)

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Awakened: awaken a sleeping king (+Litharge); Gehennical Fire

Orpiment

From auri-pigmentum, “golden pigment” of arsenic trisulfide. Sweat or tears, phlegm, wheat, yellow swan. Water of Air (Virgo)

Operation: Distillation, the thickening of liquid from air or thinner liquid; also the Citrinitas, or yellowing, or xenosis.

Base: tear gas; poison gas (+2 Difficulty); reassemble a burnt document; make brandy or whisky from wine or grain mash

Volatile: transform a gas into a liquid; shrink or compress matter

Fixed: get someone really drunk; fall as gently as the dew; summon Sylphs (Air elementals, as Gnomes, p. 8 above; damage +1 per Air spent)

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Awakened: create a fanatical movement; Palingenesis (restoring life to burnt plants)

Aes Cyprium

“Cyprian brass,” also just copper. Copper connects to Venus, blood, the cup. Griffon. Water of Earth (Libra)

Operation: Conjunction, the joining of two substances.

Base: tame animals of any kind

Volatile: blend two materials; attract lightning

Fixed: become beautiful; engender lust; summon Undines (Water elementals, as Gnomes, p. 8 above; damage +1 per Water spent)

Awakened: unify two houses or nations, often used to set up the Chemical Marriage; Chimera (joining of two beasts)

Sericon

Antimony, which when reduced with iron crystallizes into a star-pattern. Thus star, pentagram, spider; *lupus pullus* (gray wolf) or *leo viridis* (green lion). Black King. Air of Earth (Scorpio)

Operation: Putrefaction, the decomposition of a substance or oxidation of a metal; also the Nigredo, or blackening, or melanosis.

Base: +R damage bonus to weapons, lasts until end of scene

Volatile: rust metal; decompose organic matter; cause a metal to reflect gravity (+Sulfur)

Fixed: speak with the dead; kill; imprison a soul (+Aes Cyprium+Litharge; +2 to Difficulty)

Awakened: subvert and destroy a great house; call a comet to change

the stars; Vampirism (+Aes Cyprium)

Lunar Caustic

Silver nitrate, also called lapis infernalis. Silver connects to the Moon, dog, milk, dove, mirror. White Queen; white rose, lily. Water of Water (Sagittarius)

Operation: Ablution, the washing of a substance clean and pure; also the Albedo, or whitening, or leukosis.

Base: counterfeit silver; healing potion (+R to Health pools), weapon-salve (a healing potion applied to the weapon that did the damage to cure the wound, cures it completely, R uses); fulminating silver (explosive metal, +R damage, goes off when struck or stepped on; +2 Difficulty)

Volatile: purify matter; amplify light; Argent-vive (living silver) adds +3 per point spent in workings governed by earlier Materia (+3 Difficulty; convert excess points of result into pool points in Argent-Vive)

Fixed: sleep; reanimate the dead (either one NPC or zombies as Gnomes, p. 8 above; damage +0); +R to Shooting pools; invisibility (+2 to Difficulty to spot including Hit Location for every 1 Health lost by user, max +6)

Awakened: purify (or reveal) affairs of state; paint a living painting (with Art-Making or Art); Alkahest (+Salt); White Stone (creates and fulfills desires and illusions, transmutes metals to silver)

Quicksilver

Not mere metallic mercury, but philosopher’s mercury or *mercurius nostrum*, “our mercury,” the spirit of all matter; cold, wet, reactive. Clouds, fog. Rebis the Hermaphrodite, Cupid,

Melusine, pelican, mermaid, *cervus fugitivus* (questing deer). Air of Water (Capricorn)

Operation: Cibation, the nutrition of matter to increase it; also Fermentation, the implantation of life in matter.

Base: make surfaces super-slick; create light; perfect mirrors to see around corners; make beer

Volatile: expand or increase matter; animate statues

Fixed: engender love; shapeshift; clairvoyance

Awakened: change or adapt an institution; Homunculus (+Sericon); Moonchild (+Lunar Caustic +Sulfur)

Vermilion

Mercuric sulphide, or cinnabar. The Red King, also phoenix, ouroboros, red dragon, red rose. Unifies all elements: Fire + Water + Earth + Air (Aquarius)

Operation: Multiplication, the increase in number and power; also the Rubedo, or reddening, or iosis.

Base: +R as Armor rating to flesh or clothing

Volatile: multiply matter or increase its power

Fixed: +R to Preparedness or Athletics pools; +(R/3, round down) Magic pool points; cure poisons; contact angels; giant strength (lift up to R x 100 lbs.)

Awakened: Chemical Marriage (+Quicksilver +Lunar Caustic) creates the environment for the new golden age; Philosopher’s Stone (+Quicksilver +Sulfur; changes base metals to gold, resurrects the dead, heals all wounds)

ALCHEMY

Gold

Gold, the perfect metal of the Sun, hence of the phoenix and the Golden Fleece. *Leo aureus* (golden lion), *aquila aureus* (golden eagle). Fire of Fire (Pisces)

Operation: Projection, the extension of the power of gold into other metals and materials.

Base: make false gold; change 1 die result by 1

Volatile: Aurum-vive (living gold) adds +3 per point spent in workings governed by earlier Materia (+2 Difficulty; convert excess points of result into pool points in Aurum-Vive)

Fixed: change heart; Phoenix Pool (put R points in pool, spend to change any die roll on a 1 for 1 basis, lasts until pool exhausted or end of adventure, can only be cast once per adventure); immunity to magic (may involve contests of Result vs. Magic result)

Awakened: create the new Golden Age somewhere on Earth; Aurum Potabile or Red Elixir (perfects human self; drinker becomes immortal, annoyingly perfect, and hopefully benevolent NPC)

CUSTOMIZING ALCHEMY

The Zoom mechanics above are designed to fit conceptually into the “standard game space” of GUMSHOE: capable characters, with action modeled on common storytelling conventions. But an individual GM may want to blow up or (comparatively) de-emphasize the role of alchemy in her game. This section helps her customize the rules to fit exactly the kind of story she wants to tell.

DIALS

These options change the Zoom mechanics. The GM may want to tinker with these dials until the flavor fits the table as a whole, as well as her notions of genre and drama. Use as many or as few of these dials as you wish for your preferred, specific flavor.

Dialing it Up

The following changes make alchemy **more powerful**, prevalent, or prominent in the game. A full-fledged game of pre-Enlightenment paraphysics might wind up using all of them! In some games, the GM might restrict these dials to alchemists with ratings of 3+ in Alchemy. Each additional point in the ability activates one more dial. Alternately, she may want to unlock one dial per new Materia learned.

- Each point of Alchemy spent during a Materia test adds +3 to the roll, not +2.
- Count up the elements used in the working: e.g., a Litharge + Sericon working to attach a dead arm to a live body has 3 Earth and 1 Air. Add the largest number of elements as a bonus (+3) and adjust the effect accordingly (Earth-ascpected: the arm is heavy, the subject suffers melancholic fits)
- Any working performed while its governing Materia’s astrological sign is ascendant is at -2 to Difficulty.
- Alchemists can make Preparedness tests (at +2 Difficulty) instead of Materia tests for Volatile effects as well as Base effects. For games with really powerful, versatile alchemists, they can make Preparedness tests (at +3

Difficulty) instead of Materia tests for Fixed effects.

- Alchemists may spend Stability on Materia tests at 1 point for 1 effective point, as in *Trail of Cthulhu*. This is a double-edged advantage, at best (*hello mercury poisoning!*), but it does potentially vastly increase the players’ available pools.
- In multiple-alchemist tests, the assistant alchemists are not required to spend from the governing Materia, although they must still have a rating in it.
- Making a permanent alchemical artifact can be split over three sessions, dividing the Materia test into three tests at Difficulties equal to one-third (rounded up) of the original Difficulty.
- Enchanted, ancient, or masterfully wrought alchemical equipment (alembics, etc.) can add +1 to +3 (the maximum possible total equipment bonus) to every operation it’s used in.

Dialing it Down

These changes, by contrast, make alchemy **less powerful**, or less useful for players. They don’t make it worthless – if you don’t want alchemy in the game, don’t use this Zoom at all! – but they do raise the cost of meddling with matter.

Once you’ve chosen which dials to use, the GM might remove one of them for an alchemist with a rating of 3+ in Alchemy. Each additional point in the ability removes one more dial. Alternately, she may want to remove one dial per new Materia learned.

ALCHEMY

- Each point of Alchemy spent during a Materia test adds +1 to the roll, not +2.
- Non-governing Materia spent during a Materia test provide 2 effective points per 3 total points spent (of all non-governing Materia).
- The plurality of points spent for a Fixed, Volatile, or Awakened effect must come from the governing Materia ability. Harder yet: the Materia ability must provide the majority.
- The ability to spend Alchemy on Materia tests is only unlocked at Sulfur 1. Or Quicksilver 1.
- All workings performed when the governing Materia's sign is not ascendant are at +2 to Difficulty.
- An Awakened Working can only be performed when its governing Materia's astrological sign is ascendant.
- There is no bonus to performing a working with its formula written down.
- Learning Materia abilities requires Potential Points (as in *Rough Magicks* or *Voodoo*); in an even stricter game, learning Alchemy requires Potential Points.

SOURCES

There has been far more chaff than wheat on the subject of alchemy since about the second century A.D. Even picking the wheat from the wheat can be a challenge.

Rather than guides through alchemy itself, I primarily depended on guides through its ever-changing imagery for this

Zoom: *A Dictionary of Alchemical Imagery* by Lyndy Abraham and *Alchemy: An Illustrated A to Z* by Diana Fernando between them almost make one comprehensive book. *Alchemy* by Johannes Fabricius has a lot of meat in its plentiful period illustrations, but is weighed down by a serious attachment to alchemy as a metaphor for Jungian psychoanalytic analysis. Alexander Roob's *Alchemy & Mysticism* from Taschen is even more full of gorgeous alchemical imagery but provides little textual guidance.

Historians of alchemy are still trying to extract the field from the long, beguiling dead end that Carl Jung and Mircea Eliade took it down. Lawrence M. Principe's *The Secrets of Alchemy* makes a decent start at the project; B.J.T. Dobbs' *The Foundations of Newton's Alchemy* and William Newman's *Alchemy Tried in the Fire* have laid down firm foundations for the 17th century in Britain and America, at least.

There are very few good taste-the-cinnabar fictions about alchemy, but reading Gregory Keyes' *Age of Unreason* series and Neal Stephenson's *Baroque Cycle* will at least get you in the neighborhood of the feel and vocabulary.

Finally, all the alchemy you could ever want is at The Alchemy Web Site at levity.com/alchemy. Primary sources, imagery, essays, all of it searchable – another alchemical labyrinth for the querent to wander down.

♄ Saturnic Lead	♄ H A I B A J H ♄ H ♄
♃ Jupiter Time	♃ ♃ A E G W R R ♃ ♃ ♃
♂ Mars Iron	♂ → →
♁ Sol Gold	♁ ♁ Δ ♁ ♁ E A J ♁ ♁ ♁
♀ Venus Copper	♀ ♁ ♁ ♁ ♀ ♁ ♁ ♁ ♀ ♁ ♁ ♁
☿ Mercury Quicksilver	☿ ♁ ♁ ♁ ☿ ♁ ♁ ♁ ☿ ♁ ♁ ♁
♁ Luna Silver	♁ ♁ ♁ ♁ ♁ ♁ ♁ ♁ ♁ ♁ ♁ ♁
Acetum	X + ♁
Acetū distillat	X ♁
Aes	♁
Aer	♁
Alcibicus	X A A ♁
Alumen	♁ ♁ ♁
Anabruma	♁ ♁ ♁ ♁
Aunus	♁ ♁ ♁
Artificianus	♁ ♁ ♁
Aqua	♁ ♁ ♁
Aqua Fortis	♁ ♁ ♁
Aqua Regis	♁ ♁ ♁
Aqua Vita	♁ ♁ ♁
Arena	♁ ♁ ♁
Arsenicum	♁ ♁ ♁ ♁
Arsenicū	♁ ♁ ♁ ♁
Aurochaku	♁ ♁ ♁
Aurogymna	♁ ♁ ♁ ♁
Luna	♁ ♁ ♁ ♁
Labrum	♁ ♁ ♁ ♁
♁ ♁ ♁	♁ ♁ ♁ ♁