



The hour is upon you. The stars have aligned just as the book said. The starlight fills the etched markings on the henges and flows down to pool around you. You draw forth your bottle and dip it below the glowing surface. With this you may be able to finally cure your lycanthropy.

A small explosion followed by the smell of burning sulfur. You cough. Before you stands the demon you summoned shrouded in yellow smoke. You scatter your papers as you stand. They look down at you angrily and see the perfectly drawn runes of capture around them and they howl.

Blood splatters on the ground as your blade cuts through the sample of dragonhide on your table. You smile and nod as you write in your ledger. Silver was getting nowhere but this blade of ruby cuts through the hide like warm steel through butter... you wonder why that is.

RESEARCH ARCANUM is a PbtA game about learning the secrets of a fantasy world for 2-5 players including a GM. It can be used as a supplement to augment an existing tabletop roleplaying game or played on its own to generate the academic history of an Arcanist or to plumb the mysteries of a setting's magic.

When an Arcanist has a period of study they can Consult A Source or Combine Materials and also Ask a Question.

SOURCES

Sources are places, people, entities, or objects that contain or can produce Materials.

They have names and short descriptions about who/what they are as well as a list of Spheres of Expertise that represent what can be learned from them.

To gain a new Source you collaborate with the GM to create them and what they want from you in exchange for access to their Knowledge. You or the GM may pick any of the following.

You must be able to answer a question (or series of questions) of the GM's choice.

You must have sufficient rating in one or more Knowledges.

You must have a reference from a specific individual or from a member of a group.

QUESTIONS

At the end of a period of study you've learned something new. Ask the GM a question that you want to know the answer to and if you have a sufficient rank in an applicable Knowledge they will answer it. If not collaborate with them to refine it so that it is within your Knowledge or rank or to come up with a different one entirely.

MATERIALS

Materials are books, journals, scrolls, notes, etc. that provide info about specific topics. They have titles and abstracts that describe them, and a list of Knowledge that they contain.

To gain a new Material you can:

CONSULT A SOURCE to see what they have to offer
or COMBINE MATERIALS you already possess to create a new work.

CONSULT A SOURCE

When you search the ancient libraries, interview knowledgeable Arcanists, or interrogate a mysteries Artifact say what Knowledge you hope to learn and roll 2d6 + your highest rank Knowledge of the Source.

On a 10+ the Material you find focuses on the Knowledge you sought

On a 7-9 the Material you find has that Knowledge but doesn't focus on it

On a 6- you don't find anything on that Knowledge but you find something in the same Sphere that you find interesting.

Collaborate with the GM to figure out what.

COMBINE MATERIALS

Choose two Materials of equal rank in a particular knowledge or choose two materials of equal rank but of different Knowledges and name the new Knowledge they will produce and then roll 2d6 + their rank.

On a 10+ you produce a new Material one rank above

On a 7-9 you produce a new Material of equal rank

On a 6- you produce a new Material of one rank below

WORKING WITH YOUR FELLOW ARCANISTS

When you want to work with your fellow Arcanists you can OFFER A TRADE or you can COLLABORATE together on the same project and both reap the benefits.

OFFER A TRADE

When you seek Knowledge from another Arcanist say how important it is to you and ask them what they want in return.

They may pick any of the following.

You must provide Knowledge in return.

You must share access to a Source.

You must promise to do them a specific favor.

You will owe them a favor in the future.

COLLABORATE

When you work with another Arcanist use either of your Knowledges as requirements or as modifiers. If a roll is required in your work roll with three six-sided die and take the highest two before adding to it.

THE RANK OF QUESTIONS

An Arcanist's rank in a particular knowledge is equal to the highest rank Material they have. If you have a rank 3 book and a rank 1 lecture your rank is 3 not 4. When you have a particular rank in a knowledge you can answer questions of that rank and below.

A rank 0 question deals with common knowledge. What are the myths? What do organizations say about this? They don't actually speak to the truth of anything necessarily and should be taken with a grain of salt. They should be answered and then a followup question should be asked.

A rank 1 question deals with facts of the Knowledge. If it is a well established truth you know it. What? Who? When?

A rank 2 question is a question that sparks debate in your Knowledge. How? Why?

A rank 3 question often shakes the foundation of the understanding in the Knowledge. What is the underlying truth?

PERIOD OF STUDY

A period of study is intentionally left vague. It could be a night or a week. And it could be one and then the other depending on the pacing. If there is a 3 year time skip you don't get every week in that period you'll just get the one. Its a narrative time measuring tool not an in fiction one.

A NOTE ON ABSTRACTION

This is a game that lends itself to abstraction. You don't really know the contents of the books you've read in the library or the lectures you attend. But by gaining the knowledge within them you will later be able to call upon it to overcome obstacles and do your own independent research. Don't get bogged down in the specifics except when a Question is asked otherwise this will be nigh-impossible for the GM.

GM Principles

Make the world both consistent and contradictory

Gesture to new avenues of study

Collaborate with the players and their characters

MAKE THE WORLD BOTH CONSISTENT AND CONTRADICTORY

Magic, history, and science share the general perception that a truth can be known. That a fact can be found. But truth is fractal. Under scrutiny generalized claims don't hold up. Meaning it's okay to make broad statements when a character asks a Question and later say something that doesn't hold with those truths in a more specific situation.

Many truths in great Wizard Fiction have relied on magic seeming to be one way and in fact the nature of it being more complex or nuanced than previously thought.

The contradictions are where things are interesting for a magical researcher so feel free to put them in. But let them be explained later with more nuanced knowledge if pursued.

GESTURE TO NEW AVENUES OF STUDY

Players and characters are usually seeking knowledge in a particular field with a particular Knowledge, but the Materials and Sources they find never have just one. Use these to broaden the palettes that the players have to work with and draw their curiosity.

When someone wants to look up a book on Dragons at the library. Ask them what about Dragons they want to learn; society, biology, philosophy? The suggestions you come up with here will either give the player more direction or a new idea.

Then when they find their book think about similar Knowledges. A book on Dragon Biology might be a book about Dragons and includes info about their biology or it could be about biology of magical monsters that includes a section on Dragons, or go with the wildest idea you have as long as it has the appropriate Knowledge the sky's the limit.

COLLABORATE WITH THE PLAYERS AND THEIR CHARACTERS

This is a role playing game after all and not just a protracted game of 20 questions.

You have ideas about how things work and so do the players. Work together when coming up with Knowledges or when someone's trying to formulate a question. If it seems like something is too broad say so and ask questions about what they're interested in.

If its too narrow or specific say so and try to work with them on how they can get more information out of that question (or give them that information and then have them ask a followup.)

When a character or player is interested in making a not evil necromancy ask them questions about what is inherently evil about necromancy as is.

Is it just perception? Is it because it destroys the soul of the body?

What are some ideas they have (player or character) for getting around that problem? They are all magical researchers and should be assumed to have a general understanding of basic rules of magic. Maybe those beliefs are wrong.

Maybe they are more right than modern magic believes.

CREATE A SOURCE

A Lore Source needs a name. The name should tell you what the source is quickly. Titles are good at this when it is a person or entity. Library names are almost always descriptive either about where it is or who owns it. Artifacts may have names but simply a description may suffice to not only identify it but add to its mystery.

Along with the name a one word description followed by an association will help flesh out world building.

The next thing you need to know is what spheres of lore it possesses. Spheres are supposed to be General and contain many potential knowledges within them. (Think about majors someone could have in college.) Somewhere between 3 and 5 spheres is usually good.

And finally you will need a brief description that gives a few evocative ideas or small facts about how it is different from others of its type.

EXAMPLE SOURCES

The Loremasters' Library

Library - Tower of the Circle of Magi

Spheres: Demonology, Magic Infused Objects, Spellcrafting,
Ancient History

The Loremasters' Library isn't the most organized cataloging system, on purpose. It pushes those who wish to use it to think outside the box to even find the texts they need.

Arcanist Ragina

Enchanter of the Circle of Magi

Spheres: Demonology, Fey, The Planes, Nature of the Soul

Arcanist Ragina is a 5th Circle Enchanter who focuses on theory and practical use of soul projection and the nature of extraplanar beings. She is an agreeable middle-aged woman who enjoys a conversation over a sweetened cup of coffee.

Jellkik the Wise

A Demon of Envy

Spheres: Demonology, Art, History, Enchantment

An Envy Demon willing to trade knowledge for favors. Polite, very knowledgeable, but tends to put people on edge. Some say its their laugh others their penchant for staring at people's faces appraisingly.

The Orb of Storms

Elemental Artifact

Spheres: Elemental Lore, The Plane of Air

A gray-blue orb of swirling clouds punctuated occasionally by a lightning strike. It reveals secrets to those bearers that know how to listen. It whispers when the wind is strong or wet with rain. It longs to go home.

CREATE A MATERIAL

Materials need titles. Be willing to name your materials plainly in a way that describes what they contain. That will often be more useful than some flowery evocative but opaque title. But if inspiration strikes put it on the page. Just don't spend time looking for it.

A material also needs an author, whoever or whatever wrote it. This is a good place to potentially tap an existing Lore Source to give more information about them or to lay seeds for future Sources.

But the core information of a material are its Knowledges. The knowledge distribution of a material comes in a couple varieties.

Either it is not really about a single subject at which point it will have 3 to 5 knowledges at rank 1. But if a book is about a particular subject it will have 1 Knowledge that is higher than the rest usually rank 2 but on a rare occasion rank 3. Its hard for an expert to impart expert information.

But a material should have rarely if ever have only one or 2 knowledges.

Knowledges shouldn't be overly specific but more so than Spheres.

(Think a class one could take in college or a subject of a paper.)

Play with the size of them so people don't feel like that'll take forever to get a broad understanding within a Sphere.

And finally there should be a little abstract about the material. It doesn't need to be complex or clever just describe how the various knowledge has come together to form a cohesive narrative (if the material happens to have one.)

EXAMPLE MATERIALS

The Journal of Esme

Journal - Esme, Daughter of Drakul

Knowledge: Dragon Blood 3, Herbology 2, Anatomy 2, Drakul 1,
Artificial Selection 1

An old worn journal with many oddly colored stains. It is written mainly in the local tongue but several sections are deeply coded. It seems to be an eclectic mix of research notes and personal journal entries.

Bloodsails and Leyboats

Research - Yusef Demirci

Knowledge: Leyboats 2, Bloodsails 2, Leylines 1

A series of papers on the nature of leyline travel written by a hermit who worked for a time with the Bloodangels in Shumbol to develop their blood-magic powered war-balloons.

FLUMEN MORTATIUM

Poetry and Magic - Able the Wise

Knowledge: Liquid Necromancy 2, Poetry Forms 2

A book written in an ancient language and also cyphered. It contains verses about death as well as experimental spell structures for animating a river the author had fallen in love with.

An Anthology of Odd Religious Practices

Anthology - Arcanist Kennzik

Knowledge: Religious Sects 2, Cyclopes History 1, Keys of Power 1

A book with many secondhand accounts of religions with odd magical powers, methodologies, or social structures. Some of which are holdovers from when the Cyclopes ruled the world, or have true artifacts of power.

PLAYING AS A SUPPLEMENT TO ANOTHER GAME

When used as an add on to another ttrpg this game allows the interested players to dive deeper into the worlds lore and find useful information at their desire. However, this game is not designed with the interface of mechanics in mind with other games. It is more a supplement that allows for establishing fiction that is often left at the wayside in other games. For good reason too. Longterm research isn't something that will interest every player or be helpful to every game. It may distract or possibly even make pacing more difficult to manage in a short or action focused game.

When an Arcanist asks if they know something outside of the context of this game keep the fiction established by their collected knowledge in mind when deciding whether or not to call for a roll. And if a roll is called for their rank in the specific knowledge could be used instead of their normal modifier if its higher, as a bonus, or as justification to give them a boon or some sort of advantage. Play with how you interface it with the other game you're playing and let your players know that it may change if it makes things trivial or too difficult or is overtaking the mechanics of play.

ADAPTING A CHARACTER FOR PLAY

A starting Arcanist should have one knowledge they've read extensively on (rank 2) and two they have dabbled in (rank1).

What are they?

If you feel that this character is already an established Arcanist with experience have one expertise (rank 3), two subjects that are well read in (rank 2), and 3 that they have dabbled in (rank 1). If they already have Materials per the fiction when the game starts create those as well.

What about magical research interests them?

What do they intend to do with the knowledge and power that they will accrue through their studies?

PLAYING RESEARCH ARCANUM AS A STANDALONE GAME

The game as the sole focus as a oneshot or campaign play will ultimately come down to repeated periods of study as the Arcanists try to find out more about the world.

There may be some friction with other Arcanists (be they player characters or non-protagonist characters) but there is little straight up conflict. There is no looming war unless you make one. There is no evil dragon coming to burn the countryside. Just magical academics doing nerdy stuff.

If that sounds appealing go for it!

While I haven't had an opportunity to do this myself I suspect this may lend itself well to forum or play-by-post play. But it can totally work in live play especially when people are active in their collaboration and not everything is left at the GM's feet to improv.

Starting on the next page is a world building and starting prompt for getting a standalone game going.

LIFE OF AN ARCANIST

Research Arcanum is a game about magical research. One of you will be playing as the GM who will be in charge of playing the faculty of your magical university, answering questions posed about the world and of magic, and arbitrating collaboration in creation of the world, its inhabitants, and the materials in libraries.

Discuss who wants to take that role and come to a consensus about who that should be.

The rest of you will be playing as magical researchers, Arcanists, that attend a magical University. Oh also you'll be roommates.

What is the magical university you all attend named?

What people actually call it?

Where is it? A large campus in a major city, an ancient castle tucked away in a remote location, or floating through a sea of stars on some gargantuan extraplanar animal?

MAKE YOUR ARCANISTS

What are they called? What are their pronouns? What about their appearance tells people they are Arcanist right away?

They will start the game with one knowledge they've read extensively on and two they have dabbled in.

What are they?

What about magical research interests your Arcanist?

What do they intend to do with the power that they will accrue through their studies?

You each have your own room but they are small and the only place on campus that is truly your own.

What do they look like?

You share a communal living space with a living room kitchen and patio. What time does look like? Each player should come up with a piece of furniture their character help to furnish the place with.

You aren't full Arcanists in the eyes of the school yet you only have access to the first circle library (which contains text safe for the untested) and the lectures of a very put upon Arcanist.

THE STARTING GATE

Think together about what sort of lecturer you want to be interacting with in the beginning of your magical studies. What are their fields of knowledge? Are they focused on the syllabus or prone to tangents? What would they rather be doing?

You will also have access to the basic library on campus. What sort of Knowledge is contained to teach promising Arcanists on how to be safe and ethical with magic?

Which brings us to the first period of study. But before we dive into that, take a break and let the GM get some thoughts together about the nature of magic and how the lecturer will be approaching their teaching... and of course... the questions on the exam that passing will allow you to work with other Arcanist Lecturers, Libraries, and the Artifacts of the Archmages.

The first period of play is where the Lecturer introduces themselves and the roommates first get to know each other. Play out small scenes where each roommate arrives to their shared room. Who shows up first?

After everyone is introduced they will all receive a magical message of the location of the first lecture. The Lecturer gives their introductory statements about how they'll be guiding and introducing the roommates and their classmates into the arts of magic.