PYRAMID®

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URBAN FANTASY

THE NEW KINGDOM
by J. Edward Tremlett

GANGS AND MAGICAL TRADITIONS
by Filamena Young

SUPPORTING CAST: LITTLE BITS OF MAGIC
by Paul Stefko

OF SOUND AND SIGNS
by Steven Marsh

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Article Colors

Each article is color-coded to help you find your favorite sections.

Pale Blue: In This Issue
Brown: In Every Issue (letters, humor, editorial, etc.)
Dark Blue: ***GURPS*** Features
Purple: Other Features
Green: Recommended Reading

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IN THIS ISSUE

When most people think "fantasy," they think of dungeons and wilderness. Yet the fusion of "fantasy" with an urban environment creates a different flavor of excitement, as this issue of *Pyramid* demonstrates. Although primarily of a modern bent, most of these articles can be adjusted to fit in nearly any era.

What you know as true is little more than sand in a windstorm, in J. Edward Tremlett's *The New Kingdom* – a generic setting where the ancient Egyptian gods secretly walk among humanity.

Of Sounds and Signs has Steven Marsh flexing the versatility of the ***GURPS*** *Fourth Edition* with two new variations of magic especially suited for urban environments.

Urban settings encourage assembly – especially gangs. In *Gangs and Magical Traditions,* Filamena Young first examines the classification structure of these groups in the real-world and then applies the types to the urban-fantastic tradition, conjuring four systemless gangs who use magic to help their members.

Paul Stefko expands the *Supporting Cast* line-up with four minor magical characters in *Little Bits of Magic*. Use them when you want to add a touch of magic to an otherwise mundane ***GURPS*** campaign.

How magical is your urban fantasy campaign? *Pyramid* editor Steven Marsh helps you explore the issues in this month's *Random Thought Table.*

Streets With No Names offers several open-ended city-style maps for sketching and creating your own towns. Print out batches to use them plain, or render them with special hex grids to help with mapping or miniature use.

While exploring the breathtaking esoterica of your local game shops, consider these urban-magical-themed suggestions from resident reviewers Andy Vetromile and Matthew Pook in this month's *Recommend Reading.*

Matt Riggsby – author of ***GURPS Hot Spots: Renaissance Florence*** and ***GURPS Locations: The Tower of Octavius*** – helps wrap up this issue with the *Last Word* on urban fantasy.

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FROM THE EDITOR

URBAN TO THE FANTASY

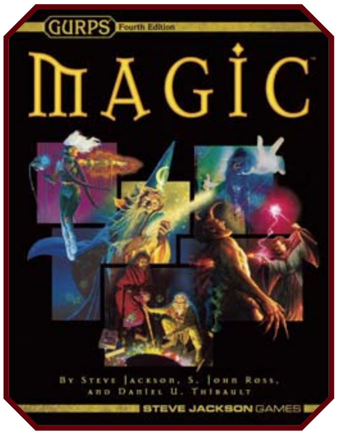
Depending on whom you talk to, urban fantasy is one of those genres that can encompass everything from *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* to ***In Nomine*** to ***Ptolus*** to *Thieves' World* to . . . well, you get the idea. In this issue of *Pyramid,* we took a catholic view of the urban-fantasy theme. The action needs to take place primarily in city-like environs, and the movers and shakers needed to be in some way "fantastic."

Most of our creators took a more traditional Wikipedia view, where the collision of the modern and magical create something not-quite-now. But most of the articles are also adaptable to more traditional views of fantasy – streets have been around for as long as humans have clustered in cities, and the noise and bustle of a noonday marketplace is universal. Hopefully something here will get your game's creative spark flying, regardless of its era.

MAKE YOUR OWN MAPS!

This issue's "handout," *Streets With No Names,* is in the same vein as last issue's well-received *Your Very Own Space Colony* (while being, we think, a very different take on the idea). Many gamers find themselves most able to work their mojo when they're coming up with ideas in the heat of the game; the intention of this map system is to provide an easy way to harness that creativity and record it so you don't forget important decisions or locales!

Did *Streets With No Names* prove useful? Do you want a sequel? Do you have a brilliant idea for a future handout? Let us know!



WRITE HERE, WRITE NOW

We love to get your feedback! Please feel free to send letters and comments to **pyramid@sjgames.com,** or post online on our forums at **forums.sjgames.com.** If this is the first issue you've received as part of your paying subscription to *Pyramid,* then thanks for coming aboard! Regardless, we always welcome comments about what we're doing right and wrong. And if you're inspired to try to contribute to *Pyramid,* please check out our Writer's Guidelines at **sjgames.com/pyramid/writing.html** for more information!

> *The new format for **Pyramid** has many advantages and, so far, has resulted in a quality product. I'm very pleased with the first five issues.*
>
> *– Mgellis, on the Steve Jackson Games forums*

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THE NEW KINGDOM

BY J. EDWARD TREMLETT

It was May 1987. Badly gut-shot, a mercenary named Smithy bled out on a fancy penthouse carpet, cursing his luck.

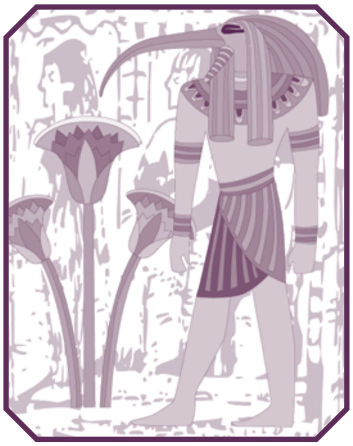
This was supposed to have been a standard smash-and-grab, with Hamadryas Inc.'s mysterious CEO as the target. Smithy's team had spent a month preparing: learning procedures and patterns, personnel and predilections. The plan was airtight, just as their employer had dictated. Nothing left to chance.

It had all gone wrong.

The five-man team had infiltrated through the roof as the target was going from office to elevator with his three stiff-walking, uniformed guards. Quick, silenced shots dealt with security – ***or so they'd thought*** *– and they'd surrounded the fat, wheezing target. Once back on the roof, a helicopter would swoop in, and take them away. Easy, right?*

"Here's the deal, Mr. Byrd," Smithy said, voice disguised, shaking with adrenaline: "Keep quiet and come with us. Our employer just wants a word. Maybe if you're lucky, you'll get to remember it –"

The fat guy stopped wheezing and started laughing – like dry bones clacking together. Smithy's stomach exploded with pain before he heard the gunshot. His men turned to respond but were shot and killed quickly by Byrd's three guards, now rising stiffly to their feet.



The guards had been dead – killshots on all of them. Yet they moved.

Smithy's hold on the mortal coil was slipping away. His life swam before his eyes. So, too, did the target: no longer fat and wheezing, but tall, wrapped in gold cloth, and bearing the face of a long-billed bird. Small, beady eyes regarded the mercenary as long-taloned fingers waved over his head.

"Experience," the dry voice announced. "Ruthlessness. Intelligence, also . . . but not too much. Yes, you shall serve. You I shall take."

That was 1987. From that day forward, Mr. Byrd had ***four*** *guards with him.*

New York City has many different "aristocracies" operating within it – some more legal than others, some more open.

Since the 1950s, a different kind of aristocracy has called the city home. Its members are quiet and secretive, preferring to talk through mouthpieces and executive assistants. They hide in plain sight behind companies, governments, churches, and charities. Their true faces are unknown, their servants are tight-lipped, and their best friends and allies are dead.

They are the gods of ancient Egypt, who slumbered, forgotten, for nearly 2,000 years until certain events brought them back. Fired with new power, they have struggled to redefine themselves in a world that has passed them by and yet allows them to exist within it. Over the decades, they have prospered – harvesting power and money, creating servants, claiming souls, and sometimes receiving the worship they are due.

But their self-proclaimed New Kingdom has enemies: god-killing assassins, ancient monsters, rival organizations . . . and, sadly, one another. Theirs is a house long-divided by godly pride, terrible betrayal, and an underlying suspicion of everything and everyone. Regulated competition has kept their rivalries from spilling over into outright warfare, but how long can this system last when the players of the game are constantly trying to find ways around the rules?

Can the awakened gods find a way to make that great house stand once more, or will their New Kingdom go the way of the human empire that once worshipped them?

The New Kingdom presents a framework for having the ancient Egyptian pantheon exist in the modern day. It gives their ancient and recent history, details the current status of some of their more well-known members, and speaks of their enemies, new and old. As written, it could be used as an urban fantasy campaign, with players portraying "lesser" gods of the pantheon. It could also be used as an add-on to an existing urban fantasy game – providing new enemies, allies, or supernatural background noise.

The article is generic, making it suitable for use in any system. ***GURPS*** is a good choice, especially alongside the excellent ***GURPS Egypt*** (from which much of this article has been inspired). However, other game systems like ***d20 Modern, Deliria, Rifts, WitchCraft,*** or various Storyteller games (especially ***Scion, Demon,*** or ***Mummy***) could be used as well.

GURPS Locations: Metro of Madness *explores the fusion of a supernatural underworld with urban mass transit.*

The Fall of Heliopolis

Almost 2,000 years ago, the people of the Nile were annexed by the Romans, and so, too, were their gods. A traitor among their pantheon – still unknown to this day – provided the invaders the True Names (*ren*) of every Egyptian deity. That gave the Olympian gods absolute power over the gods of the Nile.

Having lost control of their identities, the gods of Egypt were wholly forfeit to the Roman pantheon. Minor deities were remade in the Roman mold, absorbed into less powerful Roman gods, or done away with outright. While the major Egyptian gods still "existed," the prayers and sacrifice that should have gone to them were cruelly siphoned off by their conquerors. Starved of energy (*sekhem*), they became little more than divine masks for the Olympians to wear, and they existed in a dreamy twilight, barely able to comprehend their fate.

Time passed, and when the gods of Rome fell, the gods of the Nile fell along with them. Their worship was abandoned, their names forgotten, their likenesses buried in sand, or destroyed and defaced by adherents of the reigning Abrahamic religions. The near-mindless astral husks of the gods floated in the Underworld, suffering the same fate as mummified mortals whose spiritual bodies (*sah*) had been badly damaged. But rather than being reincarnated into new bodies, as should happen to mortals, they settled into orbit and continued their fevered slumber.

Dreaming in the Underworld, they missed much of the world's turning. They were unaffected by the purge of ancient gods by the Church's orders militant. They were not glorified by the Renaissance but then shredded by the so-called Age of Enlightenment. Deep in the sleep of forgotten gods, there was little more that could be done to them – save awakening.

And awaken they did.

Coming Forth by Day

The first stirrings came in the early 19th century, as the French "found" Egypt and set to work uncovering its ancient legacy. Discovery after discovery brought long-forgotten likenesses and names back to the world. The gods trembled toward wakefulness as the field of Egyptology unfolded around them – ancient eyes creaking open with each new excavation.

It was Howard Carter's excavation of Tutankhamen's tomb in 1922 that truly started to bring them back. The world's imagination was set alight by the fires of antiquity, and with their faces known and their names spoken the whole world over, the gods of ancient Egypt were slowly infused with new power. Their dominions called to them, across the gulfs of time, and though it took another three decades for the damage done to them to be healed, so that they might leave the Underworld, the day finally came.

They woke as one – exploding from the Underworld, clothed in new flesh, and opening their eyes in Egypt, in the former Heliopolis, in 1951. Once they began to explore the new world, they found it not to their liking: cities renamed or gone, temples destroyed or buried, and sacred sites swarming with foreign tomb robbers.

Worst of all, a new, monotheistic religion – Islam – had taken hold of their worshippers' descendants. This new faith did not suffer pagan magic or polytheists, and merely standing in the shadow of the smallest of mosques gave the returned gods pause. It was as though a power even higher than they whispered their *ren* in contempt.

Once they had held to a principle of balance – *ma'at*. But there was no balance to be found here, where they had once reigned. There was only fear.

Realizing there was little they could do in this land, they decided to leave for other places. It was agreed that they would spend some years walking this world in order to see what had changed, and where they might be able to fit in. They also agreed that all past enmities and rivalries – including the question of who betrayed them – should be placed aside.

They were now in a fight for survival, and they had to stand alongside their own.

The Rise of the New Kingdom

After some time of exploring different lands, most of the Egyptian gods eventually settled in America. It seemed the best place for them: quite cosmopolitan in places, boisterously alive, filled with new opportunities, and open to new ideas – including that of *ma'at*. It was also far from both the ancestral lands of their usurpers, and the awful feeling of being watched from on high that now permeated the Middle East.

Once secured in that safer, more accommodating country, the Egyptian gods met once again and came to a number of decisions about how best to proceed. It was clear that the civilized world had little room for the notion of ancient gods or their magic, preferring a single, omnipotent being. To try and publicly assert themselves as divine presences in this new world would be foolish at best, and it might also bring unwanted attention from their old enemies – if they still existed – or the forces that had seemingly run off the other pantheons.

It was therefore decided – some would say "decreed" – that they should play the game according to the new rules. They would fashion new identities for themselves, rewriting their dominions as best as they could, to suit their changed surroundings and old temperaments. Thusly reinvented, they would immerse themselves in the mortal world, relying on wits, followers, and subtle magic to regain power. They would refrain from physical congress with mortals, so as to avoid creating half-gods that could give away their presence to their enemies. They would work together, as friends, toward the day when they might once more be accepted as gods.

Not all the gods agreed. Some thought they had nothing to fear from mere mortals, and they left to reform their cults. Others were convinced the new god of their homelands could be challenged if they all stood against him, and they left to marshal forces against that day. These dissident gods went their own, separate ways from the others.

***GURPS Voodoo: The Shadow War** explores the mythical and magical side of a religion found in some cities, including a secret history that PCs could get caught in.*

Those that remained at the table declared themselves the Council. They unanimously decreed New York City to be the new home of the gods. They proclaimed this time, not without some irony, to be the New Kingdom.

GOING BACK INTO THE WEST

At first, there was a period of peace. Gods moved back and forth between factions, and while there were small squabbles between gods, nothing too serious occurred. Their ancient enemy Apep – would-be devourer of the sun – sent hordes of undead monsters into the world, but these were dealt with quickly and quietly, so that mortals knew nothing was awry. All in all, things were going well.

They would not remain that way for long.

The sign of danger came in the early 1960s, when the gods realized they could no longer feel as many of themselves out there, anymore – as though well-known stars in the sky had suddenly winked out. Attempts to contact them by their likenesses failed, and magic also gave inconclusive results.

Investigations turned up a horrible discovery: a small number of the dissident gods were dead – shot down along with their mortal servants. The bullets that had killed them were painful even to look at, and when the gods touched them, the bullets drained the gods' *sekhem*. Magic used to reveal what had happened proved fruitless; it was as if the assassins weren't there and left no trail in their coming or going.

Worse, the slain gods were not in the Underworld. This meant that either their *sah* had been utterly destroyed, or they had been swiftly reincarnated into mortal flesh. The only reason for such fast reincarnation would be if the trauma had been so severe that no real trace of their previous personality remained – only an echo of divinity so faint that not even Osiris, greatest of gods, could find it.

Perhaps one day the true selves of these slain gods would reawaken, but there was no telling how long that might take. Even without the identity of the killers, the gods realized they were facing a truly deadly, well-prepared enemy. They had gotten lax in their prosperity, thinking themselves untouchable; new measures would have to be taken, and – more important – new servants gathered against this unseen foe.

Despite some disagreement in the Council, it was decided that more gods would be called from the Underworld. This was done to replace the lost, dissident gods, so that their dominions could be looked after. Left unsaid was the fact that these gods would be bound to Council members and unable to rebel, putting their dominions securely back where they "belonged."

Also left unsaid was a sad but tactically sound truth: More gods would provide a buffer between the primary gods and whomever was striking them down.

THE POLITICS OF RESURRECTION

Thoth, one of a few who knew the *ren* of every god great and small, was tasked to develop a list of potential lesser gods to call back from the Underworld. A certain number was portioned out to each Council member, matching them up with past helpers and those with similar or complementary dominions, where possible.

Not every allotment was as smooth a fit as would have been desired, of course. As expected, not every god that was called back appeared. But soon another 40 or so gods were walking the streets of New York City, their *ren* bent to the will of the gods who had summoned them, and their dominions either linked to their new masters, or shared between them.

This brought not only a few replacements for the previously errant gods, but it gave new sources of *sekhem* for the primary gods. Fattened by an inrush of shared power, some gods began to get ideas above their station and wondered aloud why the Council's direction was always shaped by certain members. Should not the number and power of dominions held, rather than past leadership roles, decide who would now lead?

Meanwhile, word of what the Council was doing reached those gods who had turned their back on that body out of mistrust, or to pursue their own agendas. Some of them began trying to call up lesser gods as well – stealing the knowledge of other gods' *ren* from the Council, or buying names from gods on the Council who desired no divine servants. Their callings were often less successful than the Council's, but some positive results were had. Soon these dissident gods too felt the heady rush of new *sekhem* and plotted anew against the Council.

Not only did the dissidents summon up other gods, they began calling back spirits of the dead who had served them in life – re-animating their preserved corpses, or putting them into new bodies. They ensorceled mortals to act as aides, soldiers, spies, and human bombs, and animated objects to perform minor mischief against their perceived oppressors, helping make those on the Council even more paranoid than before.

This secret recruitment went on throughout the late 1960s and early 1970s. As many Americans celebrated peace and love, and demanded an end to war, the cults and private armies of the gods swelled. As the specter of nuclear annihilation loomed to the forefront of the common mind, a magical arms' race was going on behind the scenes, waiting for an excuse to launch.

That excuse came in late 1979, when a small group of lesser gods attacked one of Shu's interests and burned it to the ground. Attempts to find out to whom the miscreants paid fealty failed: Those captured set themselves alight before they could be questioned or scryed, and there was nothing to be discovered in their ashes. Shu accused Nut, who in turn suggested it was Geb, who in turn accused Shu of doing it to stir up trouble.

As they argued, another front company burned, and another god was assassinated by forces unknown. The call for revenge went up from several mouths. Disaster was looming.

Something would have to be done.

*Archeological discoveries awaken magic in the pulp-fiction setting of **GURPS Thaumatology: Age of Gold.***

THE GAME OF GREAT HOUSES

Seeing chaos at work, Osiris called forth Thoth, Anubis, and Isis. He demanded that they meet to work out a compromise between the main factions (the Council, the cults, and the army builders), so as to avoid the war that was coming.

In their deliberations, the three gods agreed on much. It was clear the gods needed a higher body, both to make certain the gods behaved in a balanced fashion and to look out for shared threats, such as Apep's minions and the assassins. However, it seemed best if the roles within it were not fixed, so that any god could lead, in turn.

It was therefore decided to dissolve the Council and have a ruler instead: a tripartite pharaoh made from the greatest of each of the three main factions. A yearly tally of the overall works of all gods would be taken by Ma'at herself – aloof from rivalries and conflicts – and she would decide which three gods would make the pharaoh. Greatness would be determined by how much the gods' "masks" contributed to the well-being of the city they inhabited, through business and commerce. In theory, this would turn potentially harmful rivalries between factions, and individual gods, into healthy competition that benefited everyone.

The decision proved to be fairly popular, especially when coupled with the easing of the ban on congress with mortals – a favor taken by the cults. The initial combination of Ptah-Anhur-Hathor was effective enough to allow all gods to see the wisdom of the decision, and yet lacking enough to goad them into wanting to excel at this new game.

So goaded, the gods put their abilities to work on behalf of what many call the true god of the new world – the American dollar – and making certain it flowed every way that it could.

THE END OF ILLUSIONS, THE START OF THE TALE

Was this a perfect solution to the divided house? No, it was not.

In time the gods, ever-prideful, were at each others' throats again. This time disputes were no longer settled with servants, spells, and swords, but with leveraged buyouts and corporate consolidations. Back-alley deals, corporate espionage, and monetary backstabbing were the new weapons in their hands, and they learned to use them very well, either to take control or to ensure that their rivals did not.

After all, they were told to play nice, not fair.

The tripartite pharaoh, while equitable to all, proved hamstrung. It changed most or all of its names every year, and spent most of that year cleaning up the messes that led to the current selection, almost ensuring that nothing new would stay. Some decisions remained, such as the order to seek out the god-killers, but everything else was likely to be undone on the next selection's first day.

Worst of all, money and power became the ends, rather than the means to the end. Very poor economic decisions were made by far too many of the gods, and certain sectors advanced at terrible long-term costs. Now, with a failing economy, comes the reaping of what the gods have sown.

Tired of the Game of Great Houses, the gods are beginning to circle each other once more. Proud and unafraid, they raise their armies yet again. New gods are summoned from the Underworld to do their bidding, and undead servants raised from mass graves and archaeological sites toil, labor, and wait. The demigods are being told of their true parentage and brought into the fold, so as to create a level of leadership that may prove less loyal than a bound god, but more aware of the subtleties of the mortal world than those gods can understand.

A mostly toothless, three-in-one god sits and watches the new order fall apart in slow motion. As it watches, it hopes a solution will yet present itself, and prays that the plan it hatched early in its yearly reign will soon see fruition. But to whom does a god direct its prayers?

How does it hope for a miracle it cannot itself create?

DIRECTIONS ALONG THE RIVER

Aside from using the setting as a means to introduce supernatural elements or for allowing adventurers to be demigods, players could portray newly summoned "lesser" gods. They might have all been summoned by the same god, be bound to him, and obligated to work together to serve his interests. Or they might each have been summoned by a different god, which would see them sometimes expected to work at cross purposes, or as rivals, while trying to achieve their overall goals.

Common tasks given to such heroes are: maintaining a dominion; doing legwork or leg-breaking for their patron's interests; running or destroying front businesses; helping create and supervise undead servants; battling the minions of Apep and other creatures that have forgotten *ma'at*; finding, minding, and training their patrons' half-mortal children; being administrators and directing those beneath them; or other dangerous tasks best given to a "disposable" person who shouldn't disobey orders.

Common goals for such PCs are: adjusting to the new world; reclaiming or re-inventing their dominions; improving a dominion; making their own plans, plots, and advancements, either for their patrons to share in or unbeknownst to them; creating their own servants and demigods; and summoning other gods, either to be servants or to let them out of the Underworld.

Gods who perform their tasks adequately may be rewarded with more freedom or power, or at least allowed to remain at their posts. Hope of release is futile, for a small measure of the *sekhem* they generate is shared by their patrons. No patron wishes to lose out on power.

Whether the PCs do what they're told is up to them, but disobedience runs the risk of being sent back to the Underworld – something no one wants. In time, a god might become powerful enough to buy freedom from the patron, or challenge him directly to win it. But failure in that regard would be costly indeed.

***GURPS Loadouts: Monster Hunters** has a variety of predesigned equipment kits for monster hunters and investigators.*

PROFILES OF THE RETURNED

Here are a few of the more accessible names in the New Kingdom, and what they've been up to of late. They could be used as patrons for PCs or as rivals of their patrons.

Anubis (Dr. Jack B. West)

Anubis always took his role as the conductor of dead souls to the Underworld very seriously. So when he learned that some new god had supplanted his duties in his absence – claiming dominion over those souls, and seeing to their salvation or damnation – he became angry. He turned his back on the Council and instead went to work raising an army in the hopes of unseating this upstart, single god. As Dr. West (tall, Caucasian, unmemorable), he supplies all aspects of the funerary industry through a variety of front companies, everything from embalming fluid to coffins. When the moon is full in the sky, he calls up the souls of those embalmed with his fluid, promising them protection from the usurper god and elevated status in the Underworld if they will serve him. He also has a number of "lesser" gods in his service, sharing his dominions of death, travel, and the moon, and aiding him in his business and army-building endeavors. When he has enough dead souls in his army, and can count on the full backing of other gods' armies, he will march them to Egypt and retake it from the usurper. Until then, he remains quiet and patient, though as persistent as a dog on a hunt.

Horus (Mr. Horace Elder)

Horus takes the appearance of a moderately handsome, well-built, middle-aged man of indeterminate racial background. He wears an eyepatch over the ruins of his left eye, lost while battling his uncle Set. He is impulsive and easy to anger during the day, but well-considered and patient at night. His company, Horizon Enterprises, owns the world's largest aircraft manufacturing plant, and has several contracts with civilian airlines around the world. His major dominions are air, leadership, vengeance, and protection from evil. He has raised several gods to tend to his minor dominions, and he created armies of flying, stone falcon-soldiers in preparation for the next war. He would rather not raise the dead from their slumber, though, and has refused to sire with mortals as he finds it inappropriate. A founding member of the Council, he still believes in the game, though he knows it will soon end.

Isis (Ashante)

The goddess of love, magic, and protection from evil appears as a voluptuous, motherly woman of mixed Middle-Eastern and sub-Saharan African descent. She always wears a large, golden ankh around her neck. She is tender yet aloof, entrancing and mysterious. She is a well-known singer – fusing European electronica with Middle Eastern lyrics and themes – who uses her wealth and influence to create charities for women throughout Africa and the Middle East. She also acts as the high priestess of Isis, encouraging women in those areas to abandon monotheism and return to the goddess, which has made her politically unpopular. She has summoned many lesser gods and born many demigods, all adopted by mortal members of her cult. She was one of the original dissidents, much to her husband's dismay, and still prefers to be called a goddess by mortals.

Set (Mr. Ty Storms)

CEO of the most-despised company of the Western world, Mr. Storms oversees Thunder Industries, the top military contractor for almost every NATO nation and secret backer of several private armies, including the highly controversial Darkriver. His friends call him "Ty," but he doesn't have many – just business partners he assists then secretly betrays in an endless circle of help and hurt. He doesn't threaten or bluster; he tells people how it is, sparing no detail.

He takes the form of a skinny whip of a man with a fascinatingly weird face. He wraps himself in an expensive dark suit. He is the god of storms, chaos and hostility, and shares his dominions with no one. He has many undead and created soldier-things at his call, but no lesser gods, as he wouldn't trust them, and no demigods, as his epic battle with Horus left him incapable of siring. That said, he is one of Horus' few true friends on what's left of the Council, as he believes that there's better opportunities for chaos within the structure than outside.

Thoth (Mr. Lostalus Byrd)

The roly-poly CEO of Hamadryus Inc. – number two provider of computer motherboards, number one provider of machine language translators – seems an unassuming man. He is a large fellow with Arabian features and very little hair, slow-moving with a cane and constantly *harrumphing* into a handkerchief. He is also always accompanied by stiff-moving, oddly silent (undead) security guards. A small battery of computer programs prepare the way for him by blanking his image from security cameras and other electronic means of recording and sensing.

His dominions are writing, knowledge, and communication – all more dangerous than one might suspect. He has a number of lesser gods attending his needs, and a son and a daughter he's raising himself. He still thinks the Council was a good idea with Osiris there to help lead it, but he is willing to participate in the new game . . . so long as no one guesses he's playing everyone against each other to keep them from discovering certain things he's done, both now and in the past.

In urban-fantasy campaigns, popular types of PC groups include journalists, paranormal investigators, and special units of law-enforcement agencies.

ENEMIES NEW AND OLD

Enemies of the Egyptian gods have appeared, each with his own reason to hate.

Apep the Chaos-Serpent

Lurking within the maddened whirlwind of lost souls and monsters that is the Twelve Hours is the creature that would eat the sun. Long has he been there – attacking Ra's Sun-Boat each night, hoping that neither Bast nor Set will come to save Ra from his fangs. Each night they appeared, and each day the sun rose, thwarting Apep. But Apep was patient, for one day he must win, so he continued.

Then, for the longest time something was wrong. The Sun-Boat did not come through the Twelve Hours, yet the sun rose and set. Apep could not leave the Underworld triumphant, nor send his spawn out into the world. Something out there was keeping him at bay – something new and more powerful.

Apep was patient, as always. He merely curled up to sleep and waited for something to change once more. Almost two millennia later, the Sun-Boat once again traversed the Twelve Hours.

Overjoyed, Apep attacked, and while Ra and his allies were still powerful enough to keep Apep from wrecking it, there was an uncertainty in their stance. It would seem that things had changed much over the ages, and Apep's spies in the living world confirmed this. The gods were weaker than ever and struggling to re-assert themselves.

So Apep has stymied them in this, sending as many of his creatures out of the Underworld as he can. He raises armies of zombies, plagues of ghosts, storms of skulls, and numerous other, horrible things. He sends them into the world to do battle with the gods and their servants. The goal is not to defeat the gods – Apep knows this is likely impossible – but to stir fear and chaos into the hearts of those the gods would have serve them, making them afraid of what they cannot explain, instead of welcoming of it.

Apep is patient. Apep will one day win. Everything that happens now is just a step in that direction.

Aten the Denied

The returned gods are not the first of their pantheon to be spiritually annihilated. In the 18th dynasty, the "rogue pharaoh" Akhenaten declared the empire a monotheistic state, proclaiming the sun-disk Aten to be *the only* god. Powered by worship and praise, the force of nature was given a *ren* and stirred to sentience, gaining dominion over all.

The other gods were swept aside by the new regime. They offered their fealty in exchange for Aten's aid, but he dismissed them to their fate, cold and uncaring. But when the reign of Akhenaten ended in ignominy and shame, and all traces of Aten's worship were obliterated, the other gods repaid him for his coldness.

Starved of *sekhem,* Aten was powerless to stop them from remolding his *ren* back to what it should have been. Nonetheless, the damage was done: ever after a tiny sliver of consciousness screamed within the sun-disk, trapped in a mostly mindless force of nature and unable to be heard.

When the other gods fell, themselves forgotten, they unwittingly joined Aten. When Tutankhamen's tomb was uncovered, the power surge that brought them back brought him back as well – a little later than the others, perhaps not as fully. Reawakened, he "remembered" his betrayal and swore revenge upon those who had wronged him.

However, he had no desire to reveal himself, fearing that the gods might overpower him, destroy his mind, and send him back to the Underworld. Instead, he mirrored their actions, taking secret control of a complementary industry – gas for neon lighting – and began summoning gods the New Kingdom did not desire, those who had been too broken by the Olympians to be of any service. These he remade as best as possible and told them of how one of the gods had conspired with the Romans. He also told them that all other gods had profited by it until the fall of Olympus, which was hardly true, but believable to those he'd rescued.

He offered his divine servants a chance for revenge, so long as they were willing to die once more for it. They were.

Since then, the gods of the New Kingdom have been harried by an unknown group of "lesser" gods and their ghostly servants. They spy on the interests of more powerful beings, strike harshly, and then run away. Those who are caught immolate themselves before they can be forced to talk.

Of all the primal gods, only Anubis knows that Aten has returned, given their shared dominion of death. Anubis is sitting on this information for now, planning to use it as a bargaining chip with the others. If Aten should attack *him*, though, all bets may be off.

> *The gods of ancient Egypt slumbered for nearly 2,000 years until certain events brought them back.*

The Knights Templar

The as-yet unidentified god-assassins are, in fact, the remnants of a Christian militant order supposedly destroyed in the 14th century. They are alive and in command of a number of deadly secrets. And they have the gods of the New Kingdom in their sights.

Ages ago, the Templars found the secrets of Solomon inside his temple, including ways that supernatural beings could be confounded, contained, and destroyed. They used this knowledge to slay monsters and gods in Europe on behalf of the Church, and to destroy djinn encountered on the battlefield during the Crusades. When ordered to surrender their secrets to the then-corrupt Vatican, the order faked its destruction at the hands of Phillip II of France and went underground.

Nonhuman PCs might work alongside members of one of the popular group types (see p. 8), or they might be hiding from one or more of those groups.

The Nature of the Divine

Whatever game system the GM uses to present the New Kingdom will help flesh out the abilities, powers, and drawbacks of the gods, of course. Here are some general ideas and metaphysical realities about them, which the chosen rules set should reflect. GMs are free to adopt, adapt, or ignore these strictures in order to better fit the gods into their game.

The returned Egyptian gods are powerful, but not all-powerful, nor all-seeing or all-knowing. They are ageless and immortal, yet they can be wounded and even killed. Death is not eternal: so long as they are conscious, and their *sah* is mostly intact, they can reform their *khat* in the physical world, and travel from the Underworld to inhabit it. They can also manifest in their *khaibit,* special likenesses of themselves (magically altered statues, paintings, and the like), mortals with whom they have created a spiritual bond, and their demigod children.

The gods are bound to their dominions; they are responsible for each one's well-being and maintenance, have access to magic based on them, and gain power from their existence. For example, Set is the god of storms, so has a hand in their coming and going, and he can throw them at his foes. Whenever a storm is nearby, he can gain *sekhem* from it. Gods who share dominions know what the other gods are doing within it, though not why or how.

Dominions are demanding: The power is tied to the *sah* of the god that controls it, and if it suffers, so does he. Likewise, if it prospers, so does he, and if a complementary aspect of it prospers, so does he. This is why Horus, god of the air, went into aircraft: The more his planes travel through the sky, the more *sekhem* he gets. Thoth gains power every time the moon rises, because he "makes" it rise. When he was in the Underworld the moon still rose, but he had no oversight; if something had gone wrong, nothing but physics could have saved the world.

Gods can heal from most physical and magical damage, either using magic or *sekhem* to heal. However, they can't recover from spiritual damage done to them in their physical forms, such as from the deadly, *sekhem*-draining bullets the Templars use, which shred the *sah* as they pierce magic and flesh. Enough spiritual damage destroys a god, but even then there is a chance that, if the *ren* is undamaged, he will incarnate into mortal flesh, and one day regain his memories.

The *ren*, however, is all-important: It holds they key to their personality, magical identity, and power. To know the *ren* of a thing or person is to be able to command it, call it from the Underworld, imbue it with personality or powers, and remake or utterly destroy it. To use another god's *ren* in a hostile manner, unsupported by a ruler's decision, is the worst crime any god might commit. It is cause to have their own *ren* shattered and to be left adrift in the Underworld, mindless and unable to scream. Ideally, a god's own *ren* should only be known to him, but some of the gods – Thoth, Isis, and the still-missing Renenet – know them all.

They say Osiris knows them all, too, but none dare ask.

The lesser gods have been called back from the Underworld by gods who know their *ren*. The summoner has the option of mingling the dominions of both or either god, or leaving them distinct. Most summoning gods choose to share in the dominions of the god they're calling up, in order to gain *sekhem* while not being directly responsible for its maintenance. Some share one of their own dominions, out of fairness or because they're too busy to handle everything.

If gods decide to join with one another in a composite entity, such as the tripartite pharaoh, they must share their *ren* with one another. They may have imperfect memories of what they do as a composite entity, but they will still remember each other's *ren*. In theory, this makes conflict between factions less likely, but this has yet to be tested.

The gods would theoretically be on the same "level" as other pagan gods or more recent metaphysical creations, such as voodoo, MIBs, or the like. Why they are directly and adversely affected by Islam, but not by aspects of the other two Abrahamic religions, is unknown.

Since then the Templars have lurked at Christendom's fringes, waiting for another Crusade or the Apocalypse, whichever comes first. They have graduated from shields and swords to Kevlar and theo-toxic bullets. They also know how to hide themselves from gods and other supernatural entities, and avoid having their minds controlled by them.

While infiltrating a neo-pagan group in New York City, their agents discovered a bona fide pagan god and dealt with it accordingly. Then they followed clues to another cult and dealt with its deity, learning from its dying whispers what had been happening over the last century. Since then, they have been quietly and carefully stalking the New Kingdom. They have no idea that they killed Osiris, but that assassination drastically changed their targets' patterns, and it's taken them until now to readjust.

The Templars are a relatively small, cell-based organization that exists on monies funneled from a large, Christian charity. They look for zealous, chaste men who struggle with having perfect faith in an imperfect world. Initiation reveals the mind-blasting truth about their spiritual enemies, and how to keep them at bay. Survivors become Pages to a Knight, to be taught the sword, the shotgun, and the magical secrets of the order. Pages who survive that may one day be knighted and take a Page of their own.

About the Author

The tomb of J. Edward Tremlett lay unopened for untold aeons, and now this shambling revenant poses as a clerk in the coolest bookstore in Lansing, Michigan, luring innocents toward eldritch tomes. Before then he traveled to South Korea and Dubai, UAE. He edited *The Wraith Project,* saw print in *The End Is Nigh* and *Worlds of Cthulhu,* writes for Op-Ed News and dreams of sand-strewn times long past. His wife wonders when he'll stop wrapping himself in linen and watching *The Mummy.* His three cats love all the sand.

OF SOUND AND SIGNS

BY STEVEN MARSH

In an urban-fantasy setting, magic is often defined on a macro level (see *Random Thought Table* on pp. 34-35 for a discussion of this). But just as often – perhaps more so – magic is defined on a personal level; everyone's mojo works a bit differently. Fortunately, with ***GURPS*** *Fourth Edition,* it's easier than ever to take an ability or a package, apply some modifiers, and tweak the flavor to something new and interesting.

Here, then, are two possibilities for mystical tweaks. In particular, they are well-suited for an urban-magical setting.

AURAL MAGERY

With this limited form of magic, the ability of the magician to manipulate the arcane forces of the universe is modified by the level of ambient noise; the louder, the better! The modifier to the mage's spells is based on the lesser of actual noise *or* how much noise – or little – he can perceive, as per the following table (based on the *Hearing Distance Table* from p. B358).

Aural Magery Modifier Chart

Sound	***Modifier***
Absolute silence/deaf	cannot cast
Leaves rustling	-3
Quiet conversation	-2
Normal conversation	-2
Light traffic	-1
Loud conversation	-1
Noisy office	+0
Normal traffic	+0
"Quiet" rock band	+1
Heavy traffic	+1
Jet takeoff	+2
Very loud rock band	+2
Metallica	+3

These modifiers all assume that the magician is at "ground zero" for the sounds involved; if he is a distance away from them, or if the sounds are muffled or blocked, then the modifier is based on the actual amount he can hear. For example, being at a loud rock concert might normally be worth a +2 bonus to his spells, but if the mage is in a closed restroom where the sound is muffled to the level of ordinary traffic, then he would be at +0 . . . but if someone were to open the bathroom door, the mage might find himself with an unexpected bonus. In general, each -1 to Hearing shifts the modifier one step toward absolute silence, to a minimum of -3 for any perceptible noise.

Since this form of magic is based on the amount of actual noise the magician can perceive, a master of aural magic who keeps his ears plugged will not be able to access his powers at a rock concert, but will instead find himself at a greatly reduced potency, or even powerless!

The Mage Who Could Hear a Pin Drop

Why is aural magic limited to the lesser of the actual or perceptible sound? If a keen-eared magician can hear a quiet conversation as easily as a normal person can hear a noisy office, why can't he cast magic without penalty?

The metaphysical answer is that magic relies on both energy (in this case, tapping the vibration of sound waves) and perception of that energy (being able to hear).

The game balance reason is that, if there weren't such a limitation, then Acute Hearing would also end up providing a bonus to all magic rolls . . . a far too healthy benefit!

Being proficient in aural magic does not protect against any other deleterious effects of damaging decibels; if the loud sound would be disorienting or otherwise adversely affect the mage, then he will still suffer the consequences.

If a poor aural mage has Hard of Hearing – as so many do, eventually – its -4 to Hearing works like any other Hearing penalty, reducing the bonus on the chart by four steps. For example, a partially deaf student of aural magic who is in heavy traffic (normally a +1 bonus) would instead perceive it as loud conversation (-1 penalty).

If aural magery will play an important part of a campaign, the GM might allow for finer gradients on Hard of Hearing.

The map on p. 12 is adapted from ***GURPS Banestorm: Abydos,*** *which explores a medieval city of necromancers.*

For example, a lesser version of this disadvantage, worth -5 points, would bestow a -2 penalty to Hearing rolls and skill rolls where you need to understand someone, and worsen the modifiers for magic by two steps on the *Aural Magery Modifier Chart*. An aural mage who is deaf is unable to use magic for as long as he cannot hear.

The bonuses and penalties of aural magic almost cancel out, but clever mages will find ways to experience bonuses more often than penalties. Thus, in settings where aural magic is one of many types of magical styles, wizards who use it buy their spells and Magery normally, but must add a 1-point perk: Aural Magic.

BOUNDARY MAGERY

One common theme of urban supernatural empowerment is the idea of "territory" – mages who mark their areas of influence or domain within a city. (See *Gangs and Magical Traditions* on pp. 13-18 for a few example groups that take their turf very seriously.) Most often this is done as a flavor element – wizards claim certain parts of a city as "theirs" so that they can be found by their friends and those who need them . . . or even enemies!

What if, however, that inclination to mark territory doesn't derive from mundane impulses, but from a supernatural need to acquire or bolster power?

One way to model this is by taking some or all levels of Magery with a form of External Sources Only (see ***GURPS Thaumatology,*** p. 24).

New Limitation: Within Defined Territory Only

Variable

Your magic can only be used within geographical areas in which you have defined your territory using a physical object or symbol, such as a standing stone, graffiti, totem pole, etc.

In ideal circumstances, it takes three objects to define a triangular-shaped territory. Complicating matters is the fact that the each object needs to be within "line of sight" of two others defining the perimeter, without any permanent constructs obstructing the straight line between the two. Within an urban fantasy environment, this most often means that it takes *four* objects to define an area, which is made of at least one rectangle-shaped city block.

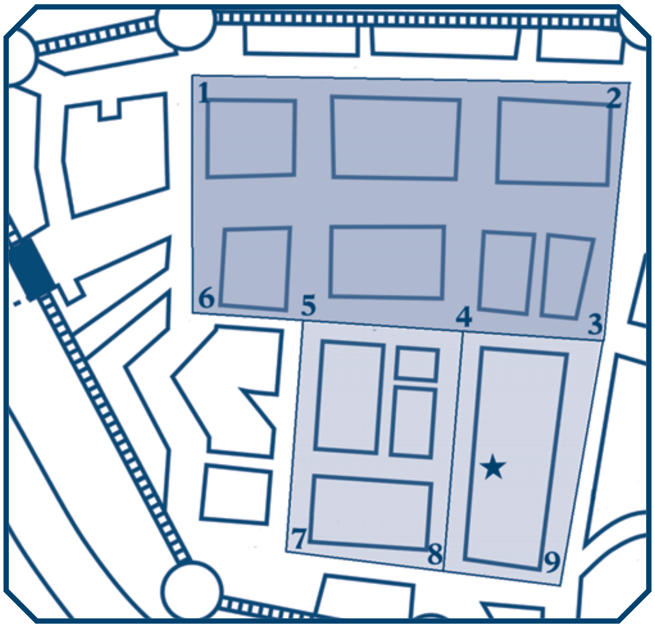
Making a focal token requires a Symbol Drawing roll. The margin of success on this roll is the penalty for others to detect it as something meaningful with an Occultism or Hidden Lore roll. Alternatively, after a successful Symbol Drawing roll, the marking magician can attempt to hide his token better with Camouflage or an appropriate Artist skill, using that success roll's margin of success instead.

The GM should set the size of the token in the campaign (loosely, "big enough to be noticeable but small enough to hide in plain sight"). Something the rough area of a traffic sign makes a good minimum size, and there should be no maximum size. A larger token – for example, a huge statue, or a graffiti mural that spans two corners of a building – can greatly increase the ability of that marking to make line of sight with other tokens!

The number of markers a magician can dedicate is equal to his Will; each additional token is a 1-point perk. It doesn't require any effort to undedicate an existing token, but either physical contact is required or the token must be destroyed.

Focal tokens make connections with every other token from the same person that is within its "line of sight." If a token is destroyed, defaced, damaged, moved, or taken, it becomes unpowered and no longer forms a connection with other tokens, although the other tokens in the network for that mage remain in effect and may form differently configured areas. If a token is so depowered, the attuned mage may make a Will roll to see if he notices before casting a spell (assuming the he wasn't the one doing the depowering). Of course, if he goes to use his magic and discovers he can't, he might have a clue . . .

Example: Alicia, a boundary mage, has hidden her runes amid the graffiti of the city (numbered 1 through 9 on the map). Unfortunately, her nemesis Sedine discovered two of her tokens – 5 and 8 – and destroyed them. The former territory defined by 1-2-3-4-5-6 is still intact; there is line of sight between 3-4 and 4-6. (Even if 4 were destroyed, the 3-6 connection would enable Alicia to practice her magic in that area.) However, the destruction of those tokens means that Alicia's territory south of the 3-4-5-6 line is no longer "hers." If she can replace the 8 token, then the 3-4-8-9 rectangle will be available to her again. In the meantime, Alicia has a backup plan: Her home (marked with the star) has three additional tokens that define a triangular "haven," so if Sedine tracks Alicia down to her domicile, believing her defenseless, she's in for a rude awakening . . .



The value of this limitation depends on how much time will be spent within the area of the defined territory. In an exclusively urban campaign centered on the city, it might be worth -30% (the same as a 10" gadget that can only be taken away by stealth or trickery). In campaigns that spend a lot of time away from the defined area, it could be worth -60% or more.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Steven Marsh is a freelance writer and editor. He has contributed to roleplaying game releases from Green Ronin, West End Games, White Wolf, Hogshead Publishing, and others. He has been writing for *Pyramid* for over nine years. He lives in Indiana with his wife, Nikola Vrtis, and their son Sam.

GANGS AND MAGICAL TRADITIONS

BY FILAMENA YOUNG

Somewhere in the slums of Haiti, the last of Papa Doc's gang of boogiemen cast black magic to aid in their midnight runs for profit and terror. Right now, in jungles of Thailand, a street thief is teaching his son the mystic Hindu magic to aid in their clandestine operations. In Dublin, a coterie of hooligans looks to their grandmother's protections, offered magically by the Others in exchange for strange favors.

A gang is a union of people who share resources and a mutual identity. Once, gangs referred to collections of workers – early labor unions. They were poor men who shared their profession as an identity and a means to make life easier for the group as a whole. Over time, gangs evolved from being workers united to being the poor collected. Especially in the United States, cultural identity took the place of profession in gangs; because many minorities were trapped in a cycle of crime in an effort to overcome poverty and the lack of opportunity, "gangs" and "crime" began to be synonymous in many situations.

The FBI and other crime-fighting forces classify gangs into four categories in terms of size, ability, and purpose. In a world where magic is real and active, these classifications can also influence the amount of magical education a gang member can achieve through the gang itself without looking for outside assistance.

Schoolyard gangs or "wanna-be" gangs are loose collections of youths who tend to gather and commit crimes largely in defiance of the system they are a part of. If magic exists among these small groups of delinquents, it is more fluke or coincidence than unity in occult understanding. Thus the East Side Boys who harass the inhabitants of a cul-de-sac in a gated community to annoy their parents might have a magician in their midst, but his knowledge of magic is purely coincidental and not because of his gang affiliation.

A slightly older and somewhat more dangerous growth of the schoolyard gang is the *scavenger gang*. Scavenger gangs are often little more than a group of petty criminals who have found identity and strength in numbers. Their activities rarely rise above minor crimes and their leadership fluctuates wildly. Like schoolyard gangs, if magic exists in a scavenger gang, it is coincidental and just a function of chance.

When most people think of gangs, the third type – the *territorial gang* – comes to mind. This is a network of people engaging in criminal activity as a means to control and protect territory. Often, these gangs share cultural and ethnic identity in addition to any criminal behavior. Territorial gangs can be very sophisticated, with traditions and rituals that go back to their inception. Obviously, if magic exists, it can be intrinsic in many of those traditions.

Corporate gangs are for-profit groups that can reach global scopes. Mafia crime syndicates, drug cartels, and terrorist operations can fall into this category. Aside from scope and scale, corporate-style gangs often have complicated taboos and codes of etiquette. The punishment for violations of these taboos often far exceed the slight or insult. However, in the end, most of these codes are set aside or forgotten about in favor of the gang's real goal: profit. Magic among corporate gangs may have started as a mundane ritual – time-honored and revered as part of familial or religious obligation – but by the time most gangs are big enough to be looked at as this classification, magic has become just another tool in their arsenal.

GANG PLUS MAGIC EQUALS . . .

If you have weapons, drugs, numbers, violence, and a willingness to commit crimes to get what you want, what's the use of magic, anyway?

A gang can use magic for as many reasons as they have ways of practicing it. A single member of a schoolyard gang might use magic as revenge against people who have embarrassed the rest of his buddies; he might not think of using it any other time, Members of a corporate gang who know esoteric secrets might make magic a part of their daily activities as a way of paying homage to the traditions that set them apart from other organizations.

Is magic something that's always been around, or has something happened recently to bring it into the world?

Here, then, are four unique gangs, corresponding to the four types of gangs mentioned previously. Each includes its history, traditions (both magical and mundane), and adventure seeds to incorporate it into an urban-magic campaign. Variations for how to include these examples in more "traditional" fantasy-magic campaigns are also provided.

LA FAMILIA BLANCA

La Familia Blanca fancies itself to be the hardest, toughest gang in the small suburban community it lives in; it is a classic example of a schoolyard or wanna-be gang. This is true primarily because there are no other gangs in the community it occupies; thus, it has no real turf to protect. All eight official members of La Familia are of mixed Hispanic decent, grandchildren and great-grandchildren of migrant workers who made good in the outlining farming communities and did something with their lives. The members of La Familia Blanca are products of the American dream, but they fail to realize it. Instead, they tag walls, harass people walking through their neighborhood, and otherwise cause trouble without dramatically breaking the law. All eight have done some form or another of community service, and two of them have been kicked out the local high school. They're troublesome guttersnipes but little more, and they wouldn't be of much note if not for Marisol Pilar. Marisol is not the leader of La Familia; she's the younger sister of the oldest and meanest of the bunch, Renaldo Pilar. Renaldo and the other kids call her "Saint Marisol" and beg her to perform her miracles on them to protect them from evil witchcraft.

Marisol is not a saint. She is a witch in a line of witches that stretches for generations. However, Marisol's connection to the magic of her people has waned, and she is not as well-trained as her grandmother had been. She is also only 14 and as a result is too shy and too obedient to her older brother to question him. No one else in La Familia has even the potential for magic, but rumors of Marisol's miracles give the gang an edge in bluffing its way through intimidation of the local community. Marisol is a good girl in a bad crowd, while Renaldo is just rotten through and through.

Traditions

Despite the fact that Marisol knows her magic is a form of witchcraft, Renaldo has no idea. He is violently superstitious, and much of the theft and violence La Familia commits is in response to supernatural threats that Renaldo has imagined. He is particularly concerned with the idea that other people might be putting hexes or curses on him and his gang. Marisol saw potential in the gang signs and tags of more legitimate gangs such as the M3 or the Latin Kings. Much of the symbolism of these gangs is steeped in religious or occult symbolism, and Marisol took the time to adapt a series of protective sigils and hide them within graffiti. Marisol's wards against witchcraft and evil can be found all over the subdivision La Familia live in, though even the most astute observer might miss them since they so closely mimic the symbols of other gangs.

Setting Variations

Since most of Marisol's magic is cleverly tied into traditional gang symbolism, in a very low-magic setting, the gang operates exactly as already described with little variation; it's subtle enough to go unnoticed by any but the most observant occultist. In a high-magic setting, and especially in a setting where magic is commonly know about, Marisol will likely become even more secretive; her rituals will border on paranoia like her brother's as she struggles to keep him from seeing the similarity between what she does and what is done by the "witches" he hates.

If a Game Master would like to, La Familia can easily be moved to a historical or fantasy setting, a place or culture full of superstition and prejudice is ideal, as it allows the GM to explore the tragedy inherent in Marisol's situation. Perhaps Renaldo is the leader of a small, disorganized peasant inquisition hoping to seek out and destroy witches, with his magical sister trailing behind him in peril thanks to his obsession.

Description

The entirety of this schoolyard gang consists of eight full members and a few hangers-on that have neither been "jumped in" yet nor "made their bones" . . . not that any of the full members have any idea of what those activities really are.

Aside from the tagging Marisol uses to spread her magical wards, their activities include a string of thefts that the police have not yet connected to La Familia. There is actually nothing random about the break-ins, which tend to happen to victims' cars rather than their homes. Renaldo is convinced that members of the quiet community are witches and has his buddies steal personal items from them "just in case." When Renaldo is sure these people are a threat, he has Marisol use the items in charms to thwart their abilities to cast spells. So far, Renaldo hasn't picked anyone actually capable of magic, so Marisol isn't sure if the charms really work, but she doesn't want to say that to her brother and risk making him angry.

La Familia Blanca is a gang by definition, but borders on a cult of personality that revolves around Renaldo's growing mania and Marisol's magical ability. Renaldo is violent but not yet dangerous, while Marisol is warm and welcoming. Should things continue along their current path, one of two things is likely to happen for the youth gang. First, Marisol may break away from her brother and the gang will break up, leaving Renaldo to his paranoia and violence alone. Alternatively, Renaldo's passions might overwhelm Marisol. If the second event occurs, Marisol's charisma may just lure more and more young people to the gang until they are actually a problem in the area. Renaldo will get much worse before he gets better, and with his sister's gentle charms and magic, the gang might evolve into a real cult.

Maybe the articles in tabloids about supernatural events have more truth in them than people realize. Grab some issues to mine for adventure outlines.

Adventure Seeds

- Renaldo Pilar has seen one of the heroes around his neighborhood and has decided that he is a "witch" and a threat to La Familia. (He decides this even if the PC isn't aware of La Familia's existence!) At first, it might be little more of a nuisance for the adventurer, as some scrawny wanna-bes follow him around and make life a bit more difficult; the gang members will run if approached, as their job is only to watch. Eventually, they'll have orders to get something personal from the hero, which will result in one or more break-ins at his home, car, or place of work. This plot hook might be particularly interesting if the target of Renaldo's obsession really is a spellcaster; if Marisol's charm to bind his magic actually works, the hero could be without the ability to cast his spells until he finds the charm and destroys it!
- While traveling through La Familia "territory," one of the PC spellcasters notices Marisol's peculiar gang signs. It would take a bit of research, but the heroes could eventually realize that the signs are wards that disrupt magic from being practiced in the area. If they investigate further, they are far more likely to run into Renaldo and his violent teen-thugs than they are Marisol, which leaves the heroes with the choice of possibly injuring a bunch of stupid kids to find out what is really going on, or backing off and never learning about Marisol or her special ward magic.

THE IRON RIDERS

After World War II, a number of biker gangs like the Hells Angels got their start as motorcycle clubs composed mostly of vets hoping to keep connected with others who had been through the war. It isn't uncommon for yesterday's soldier to become disenfranchised when he returns to civilian life and wind up as tomorrow's criminal; in the same way, some of these once-innocent motorcycle clubs grew into the criminal biker gangs.

So it was with the Iron Riders. In 1941, an elite squad – Cycle Infiltration – drove into Germany to fight the Nazis on their home turf. In doing so, they came across a facility just outside of Munich used by members of the Thule Society in their metaphysical studies, encountering something that changed them forever. The scientists had unleashed something horrible; were it not for the unit arriving when it did, much of the Munich countryside might have been destroyed by the monstrosity summoned there.

The boys learned horrible secrets that night, including a smattering of magic from the Knights Templar.

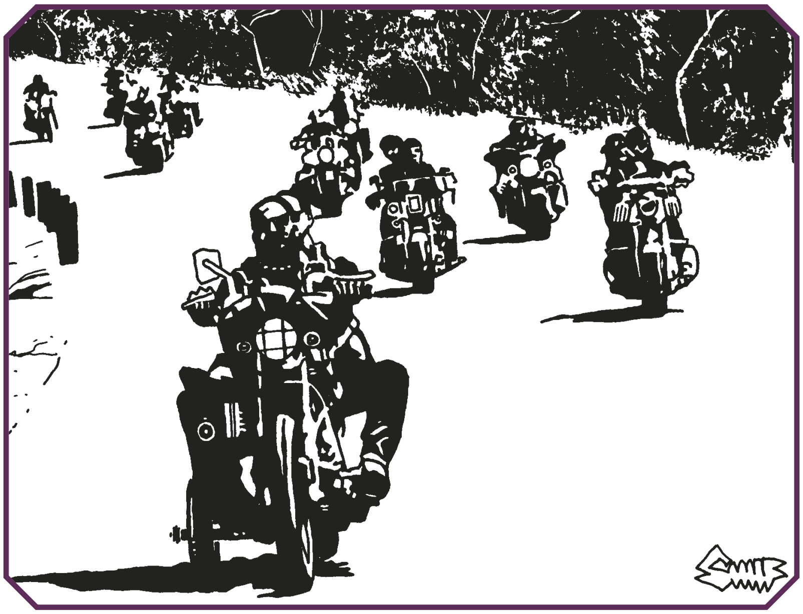
When they left Germany after the war and went into retirement, they found that no one outside their squad could really understand what they'd been through. In time, that alienation led the boys to leave their families and take to the roads of the U.S. as a group. Over time, criminal activity became easier than living hand to mouth, and a magical gang was born.

Traditions

There are a few of the original unit left, those who did not die by violence or drug overdose over the years since the war. Those remaining are old but far spryer then men half their age; newer, younger members of the biker gang assume this has something to do with the experience in Munich. Members don't discuss it much, but everyone knows the old men possess lost Nazi magic.

A few of the men have taught their spells to younger riders, especially to sons of dead members. The magic itself tends toward spells that enable a warrior to fight harder and longer, his weapons to become more dangerous, and his enemies to die quicker – all magic one would expect from a knightly order.

Over the years, the Iron Riders have modified many of those spells to suit their lifestyle better. Spells that enhance bow and arrow have been applied to a biker's shotgun and shells. Abilities that enable a knight to imbue a set of armor with divine radiance now toughens a biker's leather clothes without much divinity to speak of.



Description

The Iron Riders are a classic scavenger gang. They stay in no one place for very long; they split, grow, shrink, and merge in no consistent way. When the gang has split into a few smaller bands of bikers, there is often no clear leader, and guidance fluctuates based on who has the best plan (or at least the loudest one). Communication between groups traveling independently is rare and tends to happen only when one of the more established members dies, or on the chance that two groups run across one another in the same town. These occasions are when the sons of dead gang members – or those otherwise deemed deserving – are taught more of the lost Teutonic magic. In this way, most magical education centers on funerals.

GURPS Action 1 and ***Action 2*** *offer campaign suggestions and game mechanics useful when running cinematic urban-fantasy games.*

Since much of the guidance and leadership comes from burned-out veterans of World War II, Iron Rider criminal activity tends to happen inadvertently rather than with premeditated malevolence. For example, a group of Riders in a bar near a truck stop noted that some frat boys from a nearby college were looking at them, and asked the students what they wanted. Miscommunication flew back and forth between the gang and the boys until one of the Riders – still suffering from untreated posttraumatic stress disorder– snapped. Violence ensued as the bikers descended on the unprepared students. The Riders weren't looking for violence, but – because they are a biker gang with a reputation – violence often finds them. Add drug and alcohol abuse to the mix, and even second-generation gang members grow to be much like their mentors: angry, hurting, and violent, with the magical potential to do real harm.

Setting Variations

While many of the rituals and magic at the Riders' disposal are either ancient or profane, they rarely see them as anything more then other tools in their arsenals. Because of their transient nature, Riders treat their magic in a low-magic setting as most people might treat an illegal gun: There's a time and place to flash a little magic and a time and place to use it in order to win. In higher-magic settings, however, the Riders are more likely to exhibit their magical abilities as a means to intimidate, keeping an air of danger and mystery about themselves. Better still if magic is illegal.

Transporting the Iron Riders to fantasy is really a matter of taking them off their bikes and putting them on horses. It can be a simple matter of calling them a mercenary group of horsemen, knights without a lord who were once in some noble army; their exposure to dark arts when battling the armies of an evil wizard changed them. Now, with no king to pay these Riders, they must make their own way.

Adventure Seeds

- A PC with an estranged father or uncle is contacted and told that the relative has recently died; he is asked to go to a town in the dusty Midwest to attend the funeral and a reading of the man's will. When the heroes arrive in town, they notice a large contingency of the Iron Riders, who are there for the funeral. It turns out the PC is the last adult relative of the dead man and therefore (as the Iron Riders see it), the hero should carry on the tradition and magic of the Riders. They invite him and his friends to ride with them for a few months while he is taught what he needs to know about the Templars' magic.
- A mad diabolist has summoned something terrible into world, and it's up to the heroes to stop it before it grows big enough to be unstoppable. They learn the creature had been released once before over 60 years ago, but was banished by some American GIs. They discover that some of those soldiers are still alive and active in a notoriously violent and dangerous biker gang. The investigators will have to not only track down the Iron Riders, but also find a way to gain their trust so that the old soldiers will help stop the monster once again.

THE FAST HARD DISCIPLES

The Fast Hard Disciples – or FHD – used to be nothing but a crew of losers running the streets and trying to claw their way to the top. Not one of them had the talent or intelligence to play the game as it needed to be played; they were just a scavenger gang in those days, hustling without flow.

Then Papa Macoute moved into the city looking to make a place for himself. The stories and rumors about what Macoute did in New Orleans and why he left that city were universally bad. Whatever the truth might have been, the boys of FHD didn't pay much attention to them when Papa Macoute came to them with his ideas . . . especially when they generated results. Soon after that, Papa Macoute used the FHD to establish a territory in one of the poorest and most desperate ghettos in the city. Before long, the scattered gang was a tight-knit militia with an iron grasp on its turf.

What the hustlers of the FHD didn't know was that many of the gang were descended from Haitian immigrants – in particular, a bloodline strong with magical potential. Papa Macoute knew, of course, and taught the boys with the most potential his private kind of "voodoo."

Now, much of the gang knows at least a few spells granted to them by dark powers that give them a special edge in conflicts with the law or other encroaching gangs.

Traditions

In the beginning, Papa Macoute was the only magical support, and his black magic was the only thing to set the FHD apart. Times have changed, and with them the magical traditions that define the FHD. Most of the gang members have a spell or two, but the elite – those closest to Macoute or on their way to the inner circle – have an arsenal of black magic as dangerous as their collections of assault rifles.

Macoute is what practitioners of voodoo in New Orleans call a *bokor* – a black magician who uses magic to further his own ends and destroy anyone or anything in his way. As a result, all the magic practiced in the FHD is malicious. Necromancy – including manipulation of the spirits of the dead – is a favorite focus for members of the FHD; ruling by fear is always easier than ruling by power. Rumors abound of the FHD resurrecting dead soldiers to gain vengeance on those who killed them. Members of the FHD also apparently have soul-catchers that can seal the souls of fallen enemies into bottles, enabling gang members to torment them even after death.

Description

Rarely overt with their spells, Macoute has done an excellent job of driving home to these hooligans that fear of the unknown is their primary weapon against anyone who might stand up to them. As a result, other gangs won't enter their territory, and even the cops won't violate FHD turf without a SWAT team.

Learn more about the game mechanics of spirit magic in ***GURPS Thaumatology.***

They are often just as secretive with their membership as they are with the rest of the world; unlike more traditional territorial gangs, they rarely wear gang colors and don't have specific gang tattoos. While some might get tattoos to go along with the symbolism of the malicious voodoo they practice, none have any specific heraldry connected to the gang or Papa Macoute. In this way, anyone in FHD territory could potentially be a member, with eyes and ears open to spy for Macoute.

Today, drug trafficking is the most common illicit activity for FHD, and there isn't much crack cocaine that moves through the city that doesn't pass through FHD hands at one point or another. Rumors persist that Macoute wants it that way not for the profit, but because he puts something in the drugs that flood the city. Whatever the truth is, the police either can't or won't interfere; though they have arrested Macoute many times, even the federal authorities haven't been able to stick anything to him. Judges die of heart attacks, prosecutors go mad, and children of investigators go missing and are never seen again. The FHD play for keeps.

Setting Variations

Macoute is an expert magician, and not just in his own tradition. He knows magical practices from alchemy to traditional African weather control. As a result, he not only knows his own business, but the business of anyone else who might be doing magic within the city he resides in. In a low-magic setting, he uses this knowledge to stand just on the edge of possibility, making outsiders to the FHD unsure which rumors to believe about the gang. In a setting where magic is widely known, Macoute and his men work very hard to create the illusion that what they are doing is unique, and more dark and dangerous than anything else anyone has ever heard of. That gives them the element of surprise and doubt even in a game world where the cops carry wands with their guns.

While there are a number of ways to move the FHD into a fantasy setting, one thought is to put the gang in charge of the docks. Since they are a highly organized territorial gang, they won't be the merchants who own the ships, but instead are the dockhands and coolies who run the physical end of the shipping in and out of a major city. Questions as to whether or not Macoute is messing with shipments of ale or grain can easily replace fear of laced crack cocaine.

Adventure Seeds

- The rumors are true – at least some of them. Papa Macoute is indeed putting something special in the crack cocaine that poisons the city's poor and addicted. In this scenario, the additive is an ingredient made mostly out of puffer fish that will allow him to change the addicts into the city slowly into a form of zombie. The heroes stumble across one of Macoute's early experiments – a small swarm of the mindless, hungry bodies. If they manage to fight the zombies off, it will be up to the investigators to somehow halt the spread of the tainted drugs, and perhaps do what the cops can't (or won't) and stop Papa Macoute permanently.
- A friend or relative of the adventurers is an investigative journalist fresh out of school, hoping to make a name for herself. This journalist did a rather damning exposé on the FHD, exposing some of their tricks as nothing more than chicanery. In the eyes of the gang, the article marked her for death. She'll initially tell the heroes she has received strange threats: chicken legs nailed to her door and the like. Shortly thereafter she goes missing. (Her father offers monetary incentive if friendship or blood are not enough to compel them.) The heroes are likely to need to mount an invasion of FHD turf and hope that their "take no prisoners" attitude is just another myth; otherwise, there's no hope for the poor journalist.

THE TANAKA-SANWAON SYNDICATE

Thirty years ago the Tanaka brothers – Taro, Hamato, and Ichiro – served their father's business faithfully in a ghetto outside of Kyoto. Their father was a gravedigger; because of his job, he and his family were considered unclean and thus lower-class citizens. Members of this lowest class of Japanese society were often subjugated and forced to live in slums outside of the city, separate from normal people.

All three brothers were good sons with high hopes and brilliant minds, but their dreams of a better life seemed doomed to lead nowhere but heartbreak. However, as they matured, they noticed the well-dressed men in flamboyant colors and dark glasses who strutted through the city streets without an apparent care in the world. Those men were the Yakuza, semi-legitimate crime syndicates who had run the vice in Japan since the Edo period.

These "businessmen" had the world on a string, and the Tanaka brothers wanted their share. In time, the brothers got the attention of a soldier in a local Yakuza family, and they quickly began making a name for themselves as a team. However, greed got the better of the boys, and they soon found themselves competing for the same accolades and prestige. Common thinking was that there is only room for one man at the top, and each brother wanted to be that man. Individually, the Tanaka brothers secretly went out in search of an edge to get over on the other, and each brother discovered lost magical arts quite by accident.

Thirty years have passed, and the Tanaka brothers have used their magic to grow in power and become three heads of one crime syndicate, each still jockeying for power over the others.

For an urban-fantasy experience available in both comic and game form, get ***Hellboy*** *(available as a comic from Dark Horse, a roleplaying game from Steve Jackson Games, and a series of movies).*

Traditions

Each brother of the syndicate has a clan under his command, with each clan studying the magical arts that the brother himself discovered. Their magic is called *Onmyoudou*, or "way of the spirit," and its practitioners use special rituals to summon spirits to do their bidding and lend them magical aid. While the magic is the same among the three clans within the Tanaka-Sanwaon syndicate, each clan devotes itself to its own spirit types, which subtly change the flavor and effects of their spells. Taro's clan focuses on kitsune fox spirits, known for their cunning and speed. Hamato, the middle brother, has his clan restricts itself to the dokuja, or poisonous snake; their acts are often filled with venom, and they strike quickly when seeking vengeance. The eldest brother, Ichiro, has his clan be the most subtle, and they deal with the most ethereal – and possibly the most frightening – spirits: gaki, hungry ghosts who can make nightmares of the lives of good men and women.

Setting Variations

Whether in a setting rich with magic and a public awareness of wizardry, or in a world just slightly askew of reality, the Tanaka-Sanwoan Syndicate operates about the same. All three clans do their best work swiftly and subtly, when their enemies don't see them coming. For them, magic is a thing only to be spoken of between student and teacher, and even then only in the most secretive of terms and codes. Even if wizards roam the city streets and fling fireballs casually, the Tanaka syndicate maintains absolute silence about the hidden daggers up their sleeves, both literally and figuratively.

Perhaps obviously, very little needs to be done to use the syndicate in fantasy setting other then make room for a Japanese-like culture; at most, perhaps the sheer number of gang members should be decreased to fit the population of the world.

Description

Today, the Tanaka-Sanwaon crime syndicate numbers in the tens of thousands between their Japanese and American operations. Split into the three clans or bases of power – one for each of the Tanaka brothers – the syndicate has hundreds of subclans with a complicated hierarchy and tight organization; it rivals more traditional and legitimate corporations in its structure.

The Tanaka-Sanwaon syndicate is one of the most successful for-profit enterprise in the world of the Yakuza; they are textbook examples of a corporate gang. Their system of honorific greetings and social customs are complicated even by Japanese standards, and the smallest slight to the wrong superior can quickly end in bodily harm.

Established members of the Tanaka-Sanwaon all have traditional Yakuza tattoos – complicated works of body art that cover much of their backs, upper arms, and even their chests. However, these tattoos also serve as ritual focuses in their work with spirits, featuring the spirit types their clan is known for. People say that some of these tattoos are magical, able to come to life when the owners see fit.

If there is a vice to be had, the Tanaka-Sanwaon is making money off it, with Taro's clan focusing on gambling and loan-sharking, Hamato's clan making most of its money on the drug trade, and Ichiro's clan primarily profiting in prostitution and slave trade. Theft goes against the code most Yakuza practice, and members of the syndicate caught stealing are killed outright before their souls are turned over to Ichiro himself for further punishment.

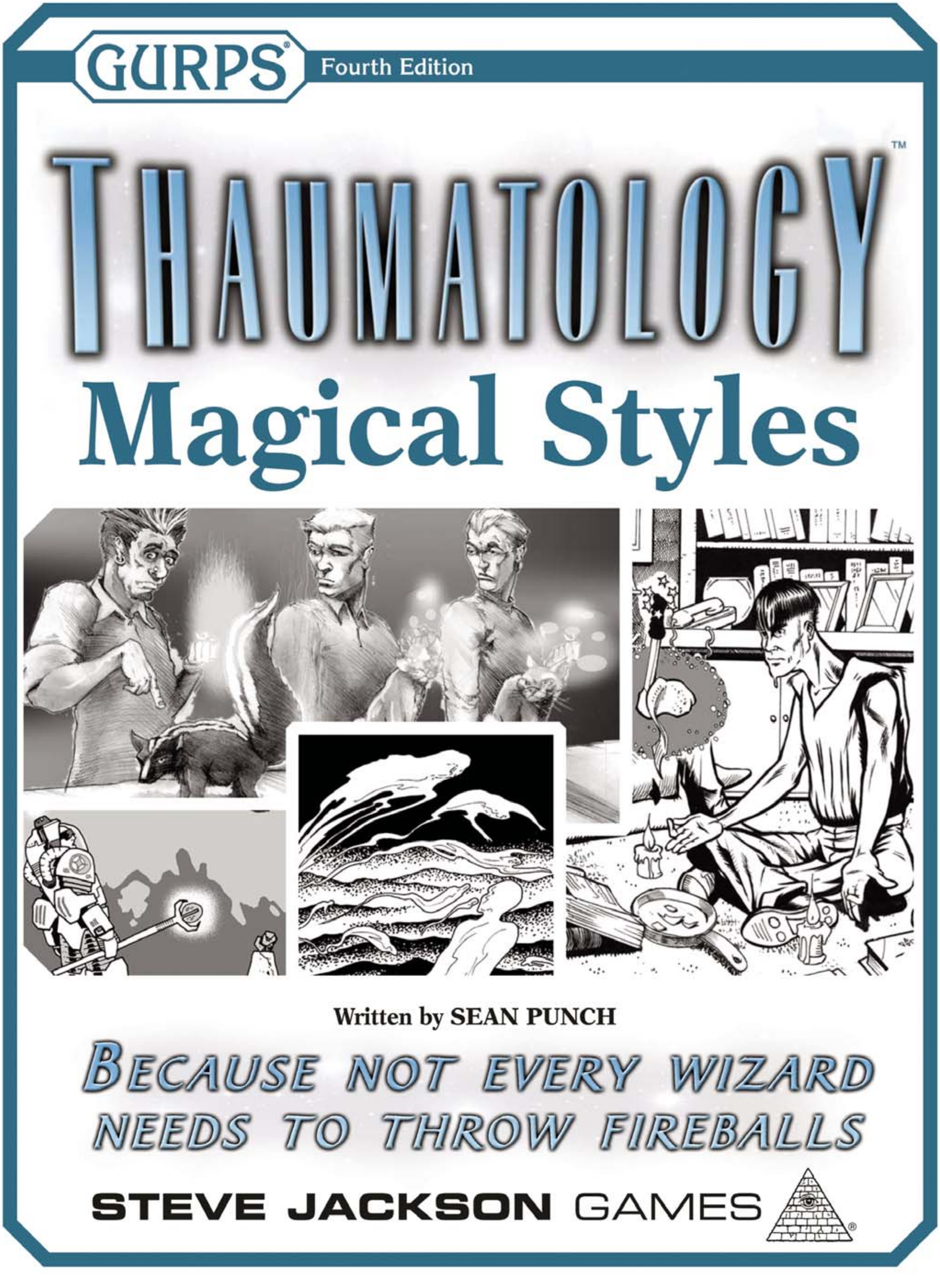
Adventure Seeds

- There is some truth to the stories that members of the various clans have magical tattoos. It is even true that those tattoos can come to life, after a fashion. Really, the tattoos are just spirits that the Syndicate has summoned to help in their criminal endeavors. These summoned spirits are able to transform themselves into tattoos and sleep on the skin of humans. One of the heroes wakes up one morning to find a beautiful tattoo on his back – one he didn't have the night before. It's a spirit from a dead member of the syndicate who got lost and has no way to return to its home in the spirit world. It speaks only in archaic Japanese; to make matters worse, it won't leave the adventurer alone until it can be sent back home. He will have to get in contact with the Syndicate, find out what he can about the summoned spirit, and figure out how to send it away . . . which might require contacting the ghost of the dead man.
- From the outside, the Tanaka-Sanwaon Syndicate looks like a complicated but well-run criminal empire. On the inside, though, there is a decades-old stalemate between the three brothers and their power base, with no one brother able to get enough power to overpower the other two. Somehow, possibly because of his connection to the hungry ghosts, Ichiro becomes convinced that the heroes are just what he needs to get an edge over his brothers. He propositions them with money and power if only they will help him dominate the Syndicate. However, Taro and Hamato quickly learn of the proposition; each in kind reaches out to the adventurers in hopes of gaining their assistance in winning the struggle. No brother will be delicate in his offers for long, and they will threaten, cajole, and ultimately harm the heroes until they make a decision to help one of the three (or until they decide to try to deal decisively with *all three* factions).

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Filamena Young is a writer, freelancer, student, mother, and gamer, all full time. She's worked on several books with White Wolf Publishing, written a small number of short fictions for a handful of small pro markets and is training her two-year-old to take over the world. More about her at www.filamena.com.

Some gangs share resources, a mutual identity, and magic.



GURPS® Fourth Edition

THAUMATOLOGY™

Magical Styles

Written by SEAN PUNCH

BECAUSE NOT EVERY WIZARD NEEDS TO THROW FIREBALLS

STEVE JACKSON GAMES®

STREETS WITH NO NAMES

Have you ever needed to generate an interesting city system on the fly, or peg down what an unplanned urban area "really" looks like? Print out a stack of these map parts ahead of time, and never get caught shorthanded again!

Each map section is designed with a street in the center and buildings along either side. The four possible basic shapes (plus the cul-de-sac) can each be oriented and lined up as needed. If lining up multiple pages for a larger map, either trim off the graph-paper note sections at the top and bottom on each page or (ideally) fold them behind the map piece.

On paper, each street is 2.5 inches wide, giving ample room for miniatures. Each page includes a compass rose, so that GMs can indicate proper orientation. The open circle in the center of the rose is the perfect spot to designate a page number, so the GM can keep the streets in order. For example, a four-by-four city section can have its pages stacked so that pages 1-4 are numbered on the first row, followed by pages 5-8, and so on. There is also a sheet of note boxes to jot down information about who and what PCs can find on each street and in each building; you can either make these their own separate pages or print them on the back of each map section.

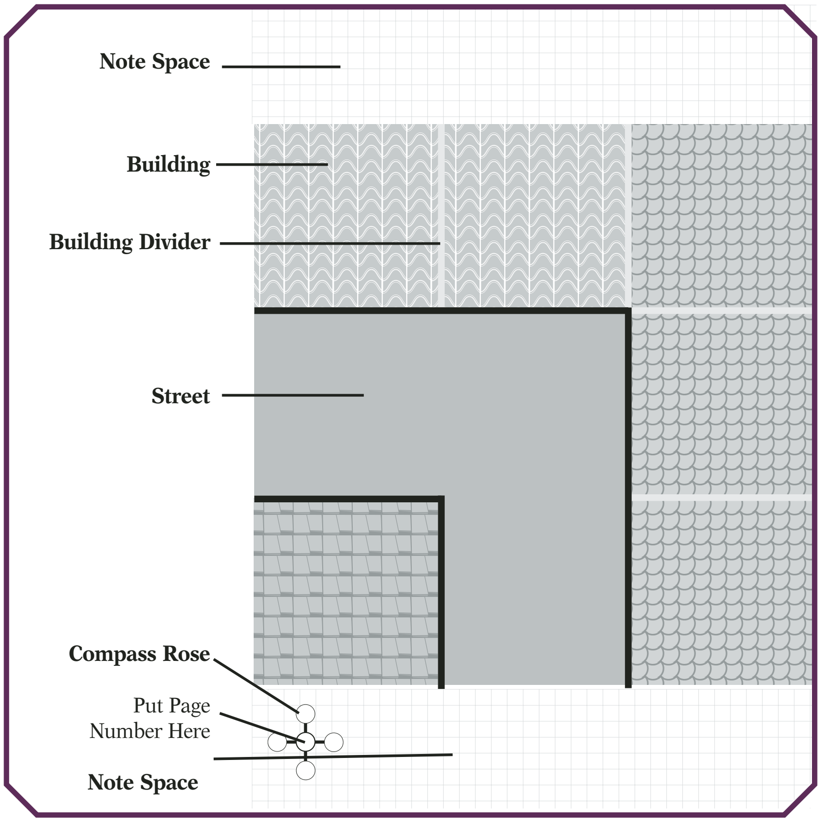
Black lines on the maps indicate street edges, while light gray lines delineate potential building dividers. To create buildings, simply darken the gray lines to indicate dividing walls. Draw doors and windows into buildings, as needed.

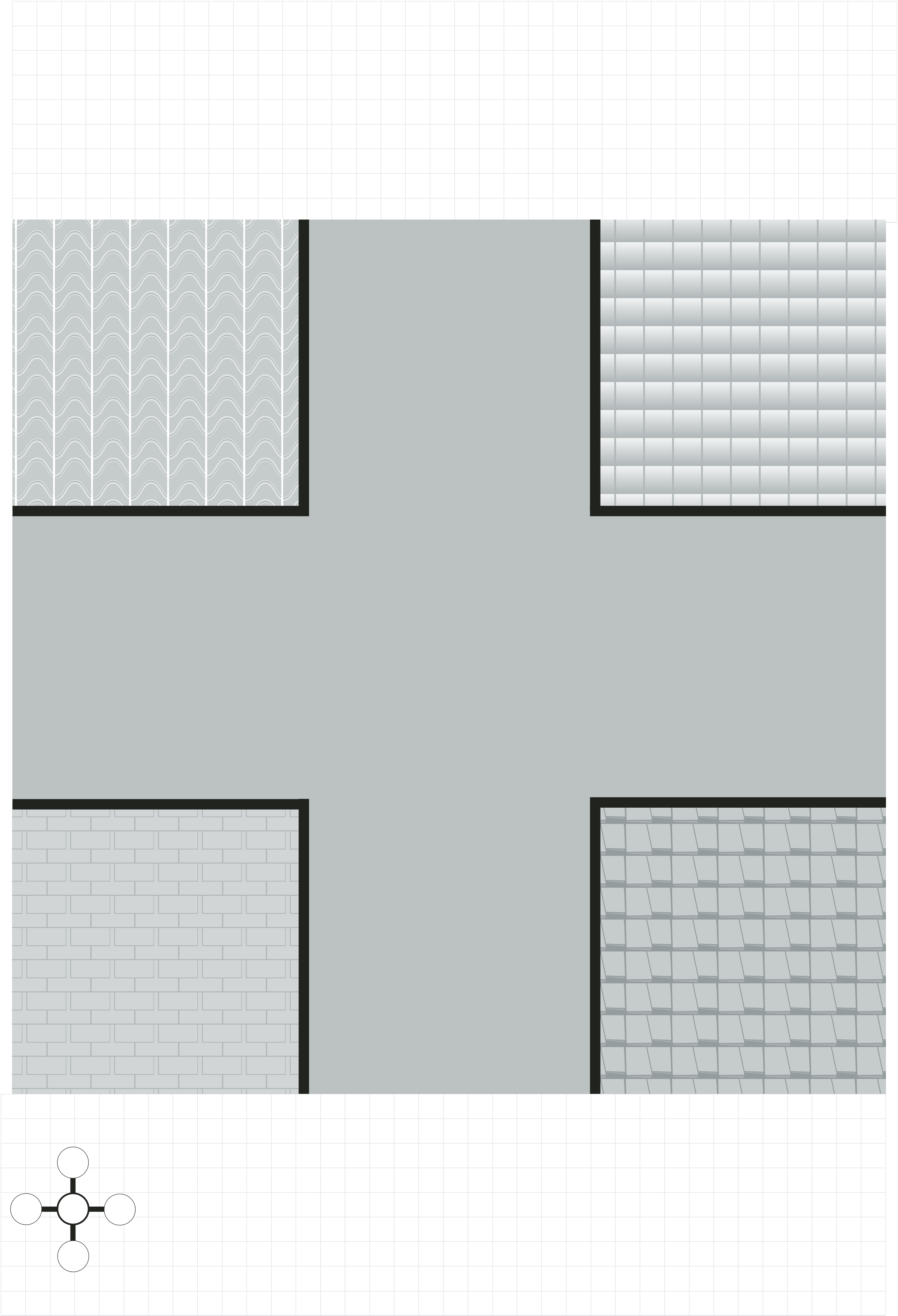
For groups who require a hex grid, two are included on pp. 27-28. To use them, first print out the desired street map. Then decide which orientation you want it. Run the paper through again so that the hexes print on top of the already-printed map; this will be the *opposite* of traditional duplex printing. (You're printing on the same side twice.) Use p. 27 for map pages used in portrait orientation, and p. 28 for maps used in landscape orientation (that is, turned 90° or 270° to the way the maps are now).

As a final bit of customization, it's possible to trim streets and line up hexes (if needed) to make double-wide streets. Trimming the outside edge from four of the angle shapes, for example, allows the creation of a double-sized intersection.

If using the hexes, what scale they are will obviously depend on how wide the streets are. The standard ***GURPS*** notation of 1 hex = 1 yard results in streets that are about seven feet wide; this might be suitable for the incredibly narrow allies of a medieval city, but it's inappropriate for modern cities. Zoning laws vary wildly, but 20-foot-wide streets are about the minimum for a two-way street (which would make each hex about three yards). Streets that are 36 feet wide commonly allow for on-street parking on one or both sides; such a street would be approximately 1 hex = 5 yards. Some cities boast 100-foot-wide arterial and primary collector streets (15 yards per hex on these maps), 80-foot-wide secondary collector streets (12 yards per hex), and 60-foot-wide residential streets (nine-yard hexes).

If you need some ideas for the kinds of buildings to include in your city or village, check out the suggestions offered by *Your Very Own Space Colony* in *Pyramid #3/6*.





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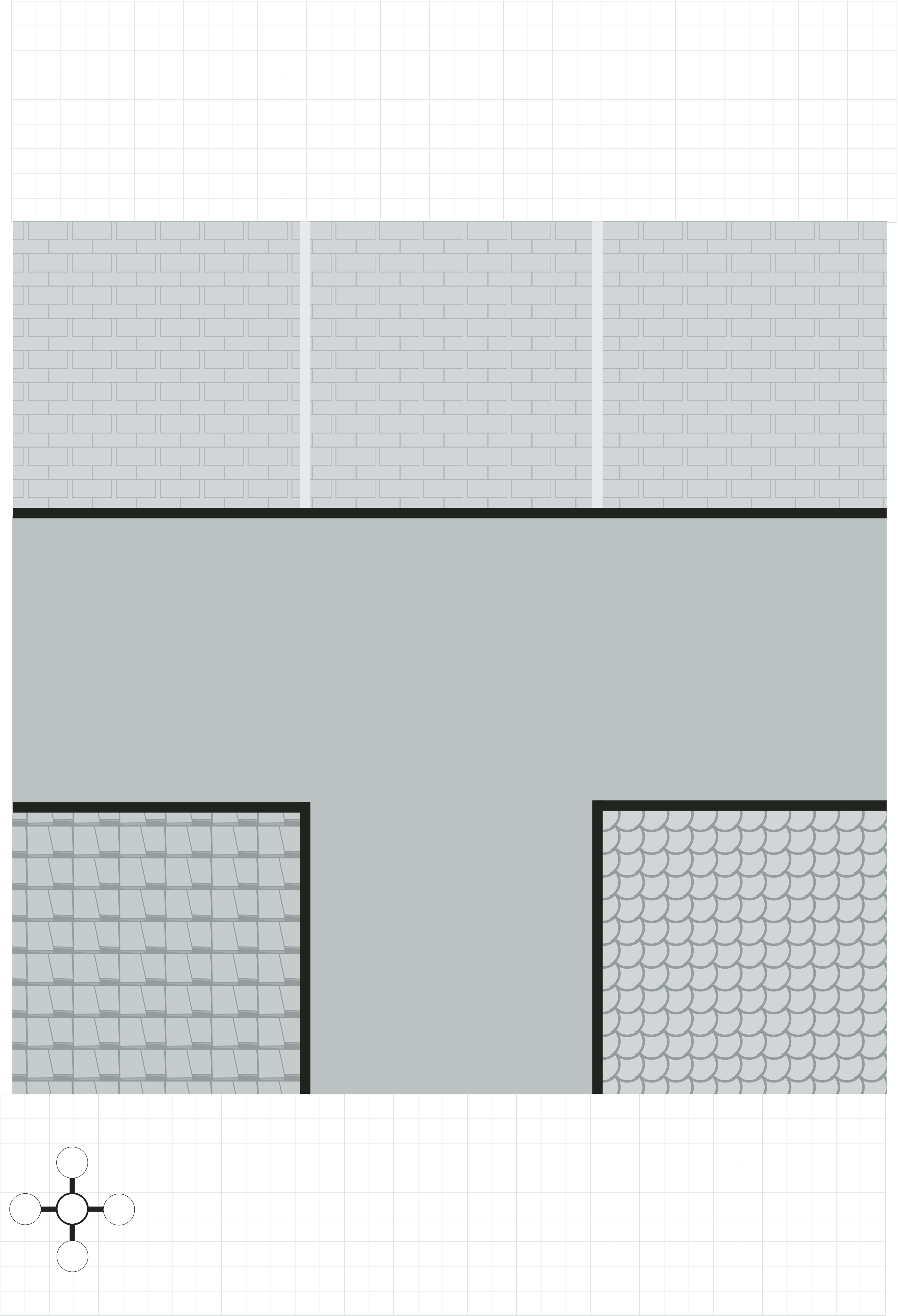

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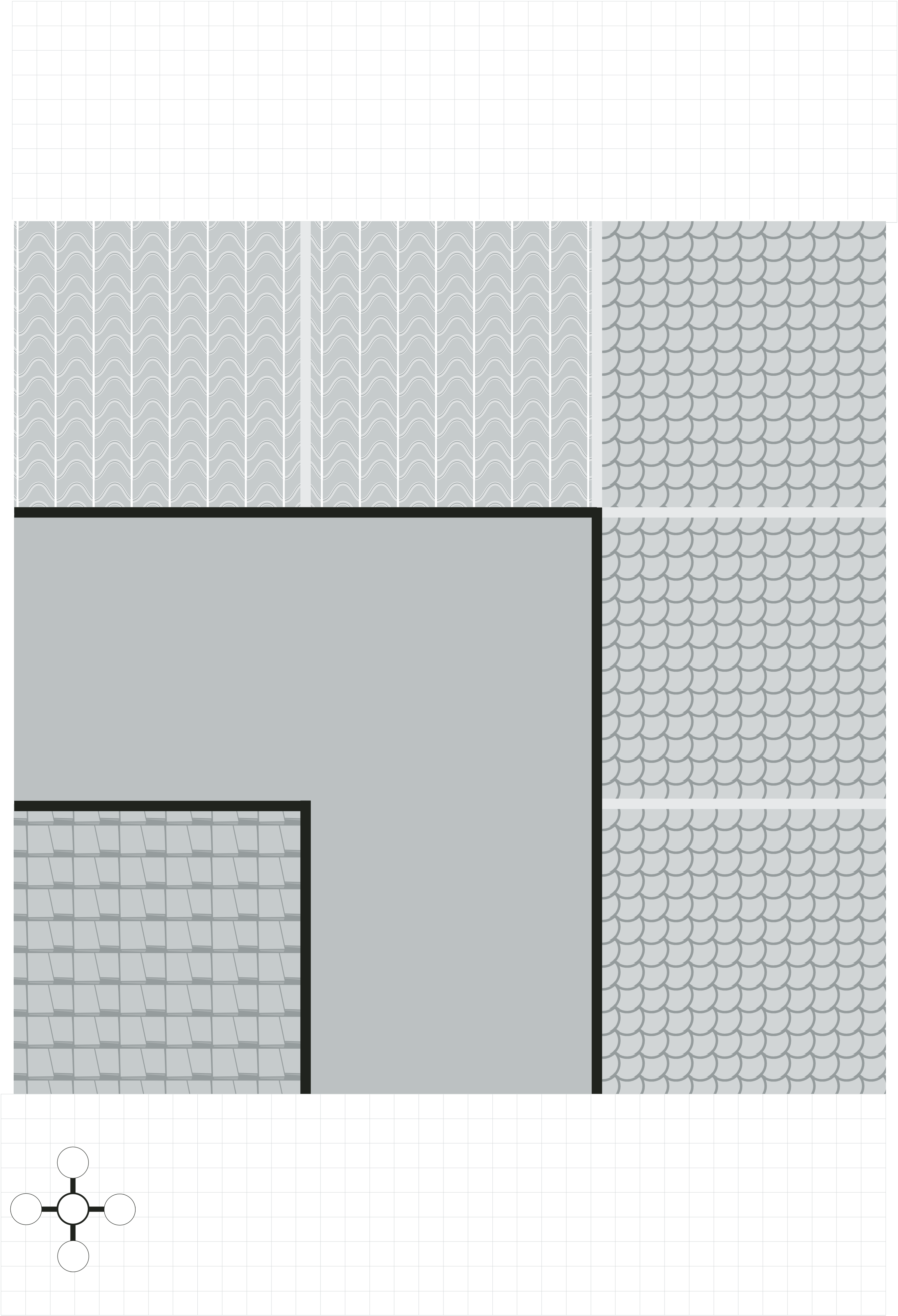

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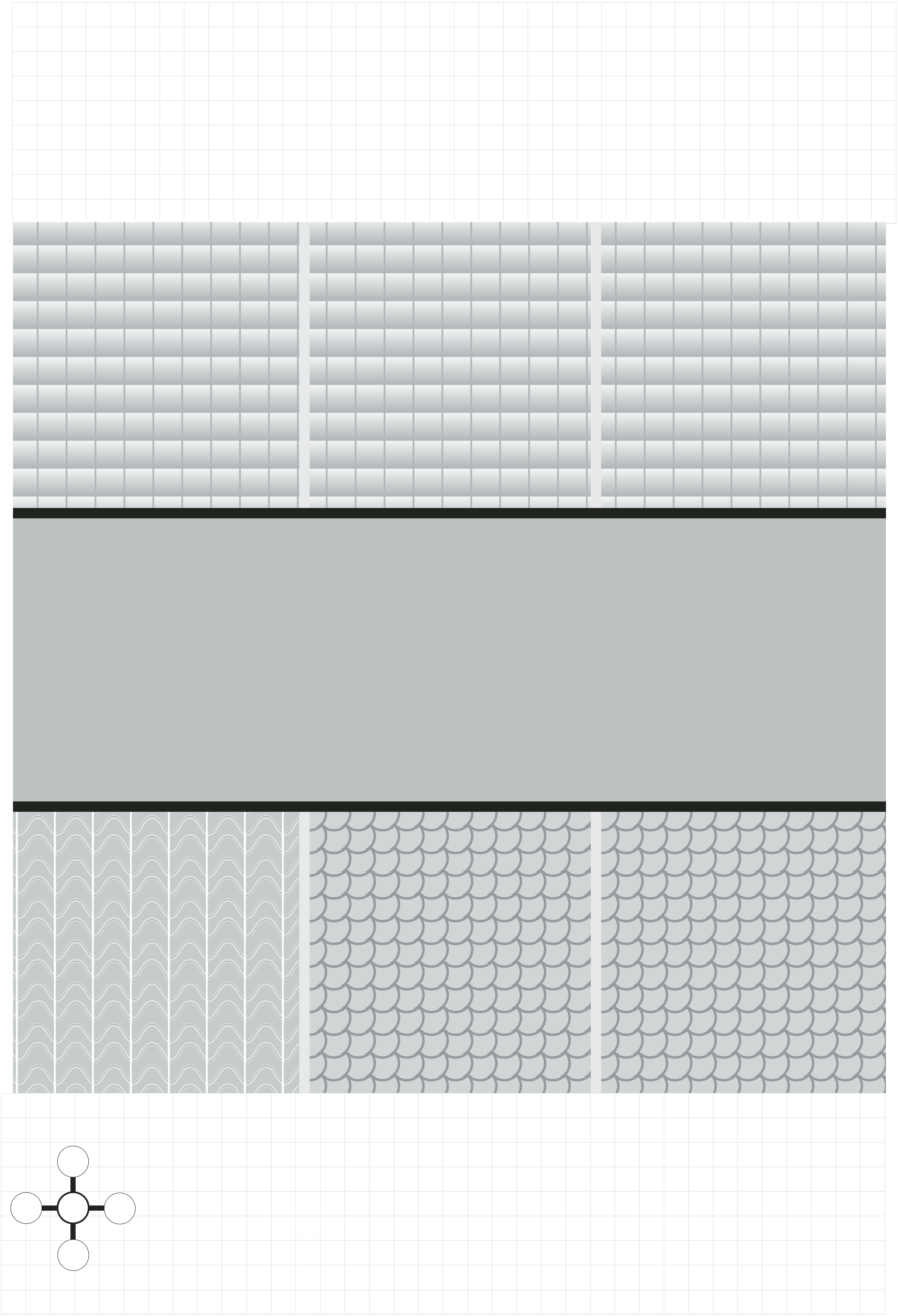

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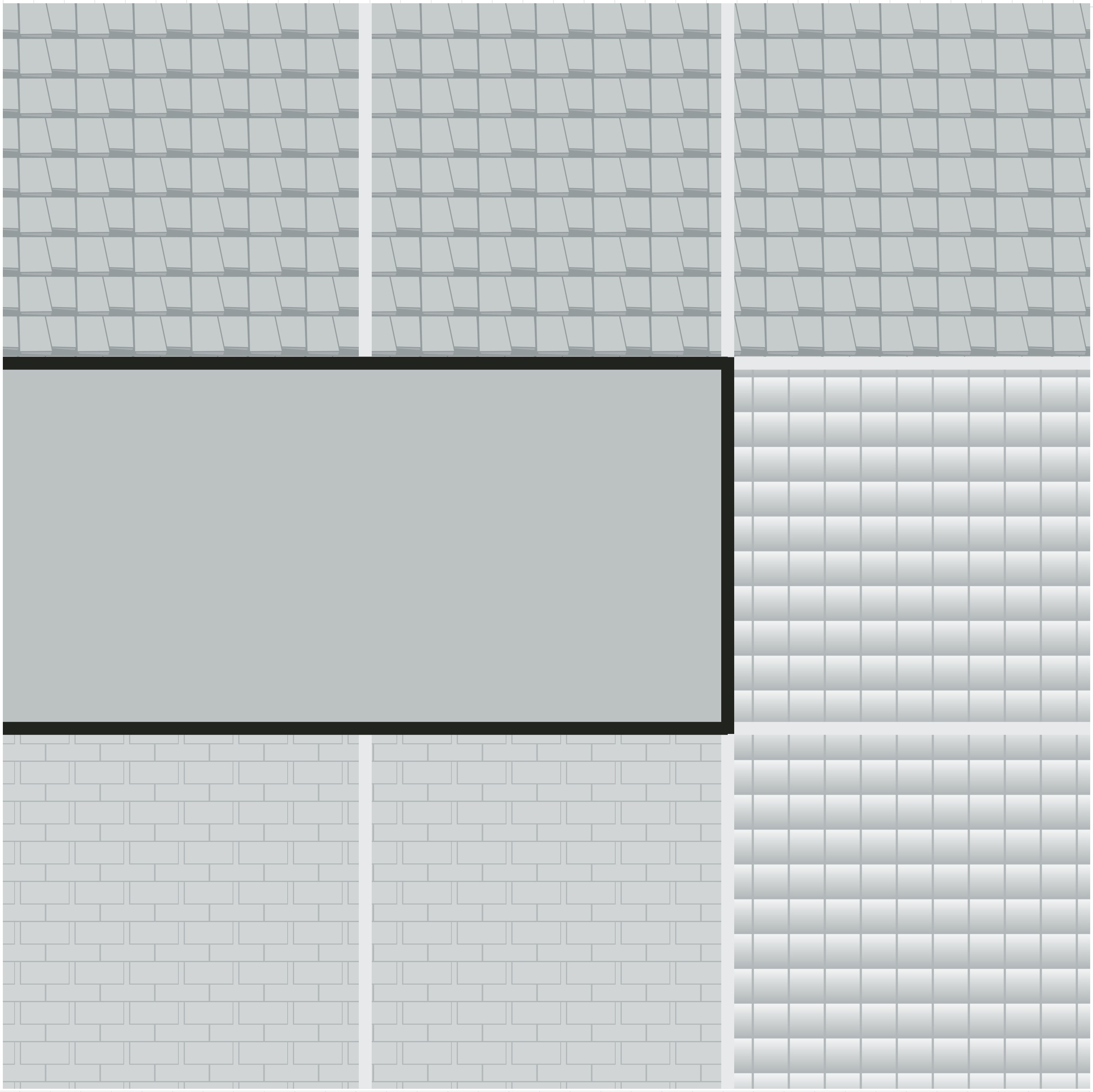

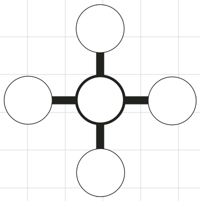

Building 1

Building 2

Building 3

Building 4

Building 5

Building 6

Building 7

Street

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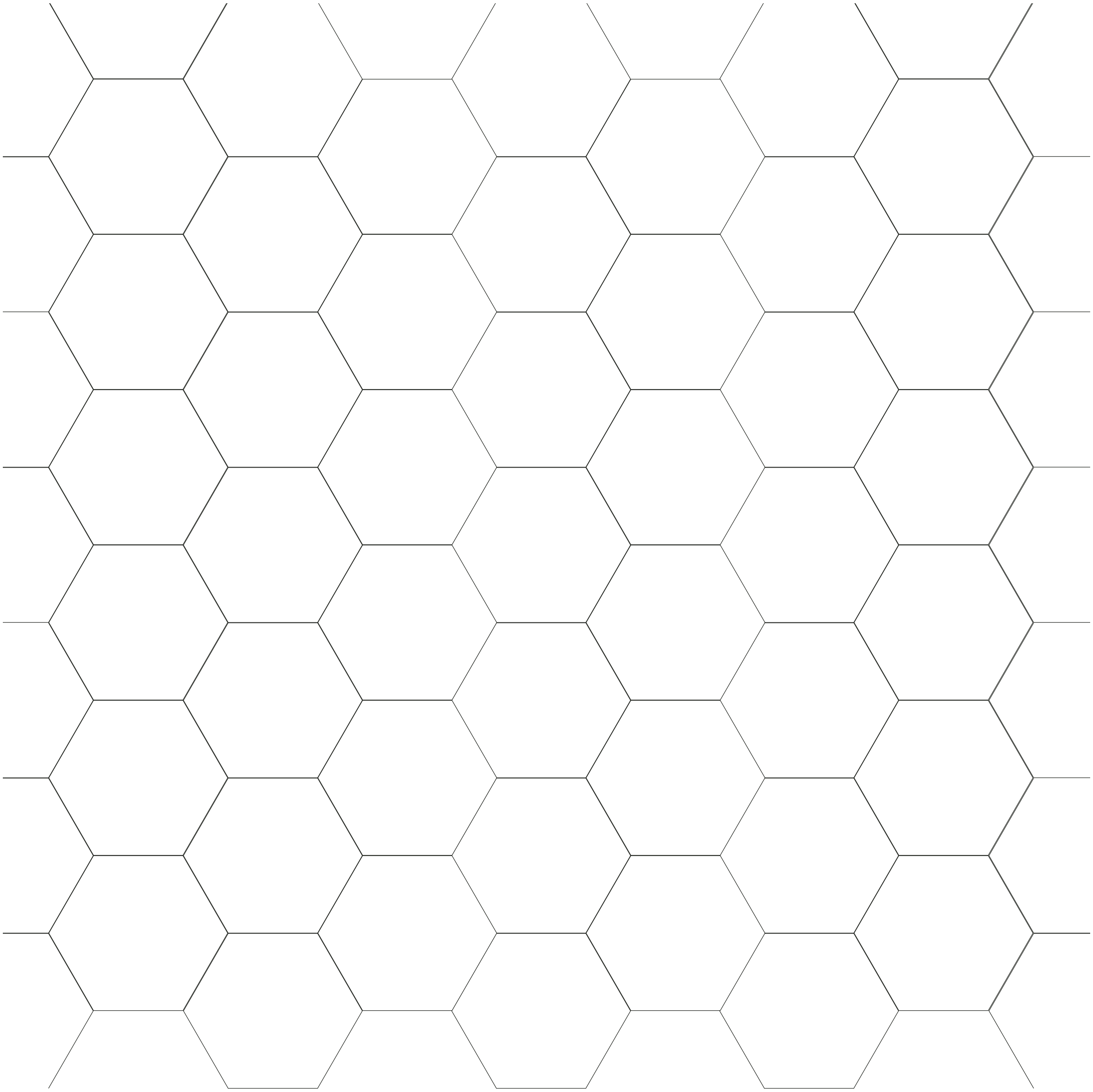
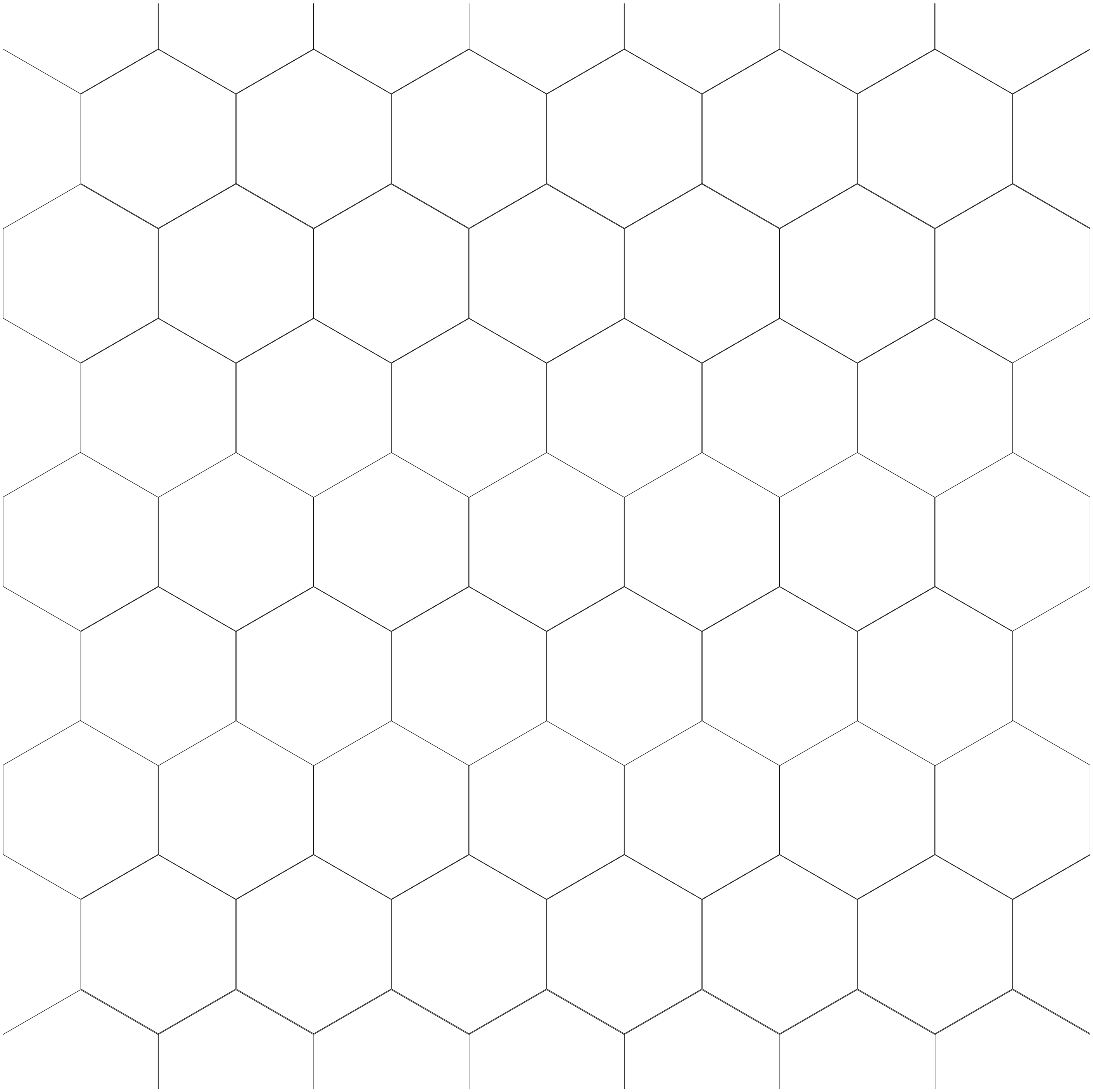




SUPPORTING CAST

LITTLE BITS OF MAGIC

BY PAUL STEFKO

Even in a campaign steeped in magic, where the heroes wield strange supernatural abilities against the vilest of fiends while the world around them remains unaware, not every magical character needs to possess world-shaking power. Sometimes, a GM may just want to throw in a character with a smidgeon of magic, one who exemplifies the adage that a little can go a long way.

Here are three such characters for use as NPCs in modern-fantasy ***GURPS*** campaigns. A grade-school necromancer, a sidewalk music man, an aging nurse with a kind word for every patient, and a young hood on the way to making it big – these characters can inject just a little bit of magic into what might have been an everyday scene.

The character stats herein assume an otherwise mundane modern setting in which magic is not common knowledge. All of the characters have at least some level of the Secret disadvantage. Also, only spells from the ***Basic Set*** have been included. GMs with access to ***GURPS Magic*** should expand or modify spell lists as appropriate.

THE LITTLEST NECROMANCER

Tina Newman has seen more death than any nine-year-old should. She's had both grandfathers die, one of a heart attack, the other a stroke; watched both grandmothers and an aunt slowly die of cancer (breast, lung, and brain, respectively); and seen over 30 beloved pets dead in various ways.

The pets are still with her. She's working on the rest.

Last year, Tina discovered that she had the power, through a special ritual she pieced together from old nursery rhymes and fairy tales, to animate the dead. So far, she's only managed to bring her dead pets back, but she's planning to try raising her aunt as soon as she can sneak away to the cemetery.

Otherwise quite a cute little girl, with straight blond hair and hazel eyes, Tina has grown pale of late, with bags beneath her eyes betraying her late-night excursions into the back yard to dig up her subjects. She favors plain dresses in black, dark blue, or purple, and she wears her hair tied back with a long gray ribbon, a gift from her late aunt.

The most disturbing thing about Tina is her extensive knowledge (for a fourth grader) of death and funerary customs; she will go on about this lore at length if anyone lets her. Her parents are beginning to worry and are considering sending their daughter to therapy.

Tina's "Pets"

Tina has animated two dozen of her dead pets, mostly hamsters and guinea pigs. She keeps the half-rotted zombies and skeletons in a hollowed-out tree stump in the woods behind her house, not really knowing what to do with them now that she's reanimated the corpses. If threatened, she may release them on her enemies. The undead pets attack as a swarm; they have Move 4 and DR 2, do 1d cutting damage per turn, and are dispersed after losing 10 HP.

As a result of her frequent re-animations, the yard behind Tina's house is very slightly Death-aspected, giving +1 to Necromantic spells and -1 to Healing spells.

Using Tina in the Campaign

Tina fills a very particular role: the "evil death mage" that can't just be punched, kicked, or shot. As a cute, precocious nine-year-old, she has a natural aura of innocence that totally belies her nighttime activities. Depending on the party's view of necromancy, there could be a distinct moral dilemma here.

On the other hand, there will certainly be groups in any campaign that would have need of a budding death mage like Tina. The Cabal probably thinks she's adorable! (See ***GURPS Cabal*** for details on this group.) The heroes may feel compelled to protect her, all the while trying to direct her away from the dark path she seems destined for.

Some popular urban-fantasy locations: bars, bookstores, clubs, museums, parks, sewers, subways, and universities (especially libraries). Add these to maps that you generated from pp. 20-28 of this issue.

Tina Newman

60 points

ST 8 [-20]; **DX** 11 [20]; **IQ** 12 [40]; **HT** 10 [0].
Dam 1d-3/1d-2; BL 13 lbs.; HP 8 [0]; Will 14 [10]; Per 11 [-5]; FP 12 [6].
Basic Speed 5.00 [-5]; Basic Move 5 [0]; Dodge 8; Parry 8 (unarmed).
4' 2"; 60 lbs.; SM -1.

Social Background

TL: 8 [0].
CF: Western (Native) [0].
Languages: English (Native) [0].

Advantages

Appearance (Attractive) [4]; Empathy [15]; Magery 0 (Night-Aspected, -40%) [3]; Magery 2 (Night-Aspected, -40%; One College, Necromancy, -40%) [4]; Night Vision 2 [2]; Patron (Parents; 15 or less) [30]; Pitiable [5].

Disadvantages

Lifebane [-10]; Odious Personal Habit (Talks about death constantly) [-5]; Secret (Child Necromancer) [-20]; Social Stigma (Minor) [-5]; Wealth (Dead Broke) [-25].

Skills

Climbing (A) DX [2]-11; Expert Skill (Thanatology) (H) IQ-2 [1]-10; Fast-Talk (A) IQ-1 [1]-11; Fortune-Telling (Augury) (A) IQ+2 [1]-14*; Hidden Lore (Undead) (A) IQ-1 [1]-11; Stealth (A) DX [2]-11.

Spells

Death Vision (H) IQ+1 [2]-13†; Lend Energy (H) IQ-2 [1]-10; Lend Vitality (H) IQ-2 [1]-10; Sense Spirit (H) IQ [1]-12†; Summon Spirit (H) IQ [1]-12†; Zombie (H) IQ+1 [2]-13†.

* Includes +3 for Empathy.
† Includes +2 for Magery.

THE MUSIC MAN

Buskers. Every city has them. These itinerant musicians take up homes on street corners and at bus stops, playing their instruments in hopes people leave whatever they can spare in the open case, coffee cup, or hat. Some are atrocious while others are actually decent. But once in a very long while, you may come across a street musician who is simply magic.

Max Magill is one such musician.

Max is a thin, weary-looking black man in his late 40s, almost always dressed in dirty blue jeans, a white t-shirt with a faded concert logo stained across the front, and a long black coat. He keeps his head shaved but wears a thin goatee and mustache, both almost completely gray.

When Max is setting up or packing away, few notice him, save for the occasional kind-hearted passer-by who drops a quarter into his old felt hat as Max sets his guitar case down. But when Max Magill plays his guitar, people stop.

Max is not just a street musician. He's an authentic musical magician, able to weave his music into his listeners' hearts or even the fabric of the universe itself. Admittedly, his knowledge of spells is limited, but this is because of lifestyle, not potential. Had the avenues been open to him, and had he chosen to pursue them, Max Magill could have been a powerful wizard indeed.

But that was not to be. Max lives on the streets, playing his guitar for change and living on handouts and the spoils of Dumpsters, because he likes it. The streets are where his heart lies. Max will mention (over a cup of coffee and a hot sandwich) that he can feel a rhythm in the streets, and he can only sleep at night when he has his ear pressed against the warm floor of the city.

Max's Guitar

The "lucky" guitar that is Max's signature is an old, heavy-looking acoustic guitar, the exact make and model now unrecognizable from age and wear. The body is covered in scrawled autographs from seemingly every major guitar player of the last century, all penned over and around countless stickers advertising everything from concerts and venues to long-forgotten fast food franchises.

The guitar's craftsmanship is evident from the first notes Max plays. This is perhaps one of the finest guitars ever produced, rivaling any guitar legend's custom favorites. The guitar is a piece of fine-quality equipment, granting Max a +2 bonus to his Musical Instrument (Guitar) skill.

Using Max in the Campaign

Max Magill may be most easily explained in a full urban fantasy game, but that may not be where he can best be used. In urban fantasy, there is the question of why Max didn't

What if magic is tied to how high a warlock is above or below a city (while still being within a manmade structure in the city)? Tap the tallest skyscrapers or the deepest sewers for power!

become a full-fledged wizard. Even if he chose not to look for the magical and mysterious, someone with his level of potential power would have been actively sought out by at least one magical group.

Instead, Max might serve better as an anomaly, a tiny piece of strange magic in an otherwise mundane (or at least, non-magical) campaign.

An interesting option would be to make Max's guitar the source of his abilities. Perhaps the guitar can't be positively identified because it wasn't made by human hands. Maybe Max won the proverbial "duel with the devil," gaining the guitar as his prize.

Using Max in a traditional fantasy setting would seem easy on the surface, but it raises the same kinds of questions that come up in an urban fantasy campaign. First, his Secret becomes very hard to justify. There isn't really a reason to hide his Magery, except to avoid whatever stigma could be applied to a penniless wizard. Why hasn't Max been identified by the Mages' Guild or College of Bards? If he has and has refused membership, why is he still allowed to practice?

> *Once in a very long while, you may come across a street musician who is simply magic.*

Max Magill

100 points

ST 10 [0]; **DX** 10 [0]; **IQ** 11 [20]; **HT** 12 [20].

Dam 1d-2/1d; BL 20 lbs.; HP 10 [0]; Will 11 [0]; Per 11 [0]; FP 12 [0].

Basic Speed 5.50 [0]; Basic Move 5 [0]; Dodge 8; Parry 8 (Brawling).

5'9"; 165 lbs.

Social Background

TL: 8 [0].

CF: Western (Native) [0].

Languages: English (Native) [0].

Advantages

Magery 0 [5]; Magery 3 (Musical, -50%) [15]; Musical Ability 2 [10]; Pitiable [5]; Signature Gear 1 (His lucky guitar) [1].

Disadvantages

Appearance (Unattractive) [-4]; Secret (Mage) [-5]; Wealth (Dead Broke) [-25]

Skills

Acting (A) IQ+1 [4]-12; Area Knowledge (City) (E) IQ+1 [2]-12; Brawling (E) DX+1 [2]-11; Detect Lies (H) Per-1 [2]-10; Fast-Talk (A) IQ+1 [4]-12; Gambling (A) IQ-1 [1]-10; Holdout (A) IQ-1 [1]-10; Musical Composition (H) IQ+1 [2]-12*; Musical Influence (VH) IQ+2 [8]-13*; Musical Instrument (Guitar) (H) IQ+4 [4]-15*†; Observation (A) Per [2]-11; Panhandling (E) IQ+3 [8]-14; Scrounging (E) Per+2 [4]-13; Singing (E) HT+3 [2]-15*; Urban Survival (A) Per+1 [4]-12.

Spells‡

Ignite Fire (H) IQ+1 [1]-12; Light (H) IQ+1 [1]-12; No-Smell (H) IQ+1 [1]-12; Purify Air (H) IQ+1 [1]-12; Purify Water (H) IQ+1 [1]-12; Seek Water (H) IQ+1 [1]-12; Sense Emotion (H) IQ+1 [1]-12; Sense Foes (H) IQ+1 [1]-12.

* Includes +2 for Musical Ability.
† Includes +2 bonus for very fine-quality guitar.
‡ All spells include +3 for Magery.

THE NIGHT NURSE

Maria Hartman became a nurse 45 years ago to help people. Many years, two marriages, and thousands of patients later, Maria is still helping people – far more than any of her colleagues realize.

Maria has always been good with the sick and injured. As a child, she would walk into an ailing loved one's room and sing a cheery song, causing a smile to appear on the relative's face. Instantly he would feel better, seemingly just from seeing Maria.

Even today, Maria doesn't quite realize that what she does is actual magic. She knows that she can heal people with just a touch, but she also does well with otherwise mundane techniques. She also can prepare quite a few herbal and folk remedies, which she'll quietly administer to her patients.

After her last husband left her, Maria began working the night shift at the hospital. She found the quiet of the nearly empty building to be soothing, allowing her to work with her charges while they slept. Some never even knew that she had been there, but word of their often miraculous recoveries always made it back to Maria.

Maria Hartman is a round-faced, gray-haired woman in her late 60s. At work, she dresses in plain blue scrubs, usually with one of a large collection of buttons affixed to the breast. She wears a pair of bifocals low on her nose. Accustomed to working alone, Maria is often found humming softly to herself as she checks on her patients.

Using Maria in the Campaign

Maria is a kind soul with a tremendous gift. Because of this, she can make a valuable ally for any adventuring group. She should respond well to heroes but will be distrusting of the more ethically flexible. In the end, though, Maria can't help but aid those who really need her.

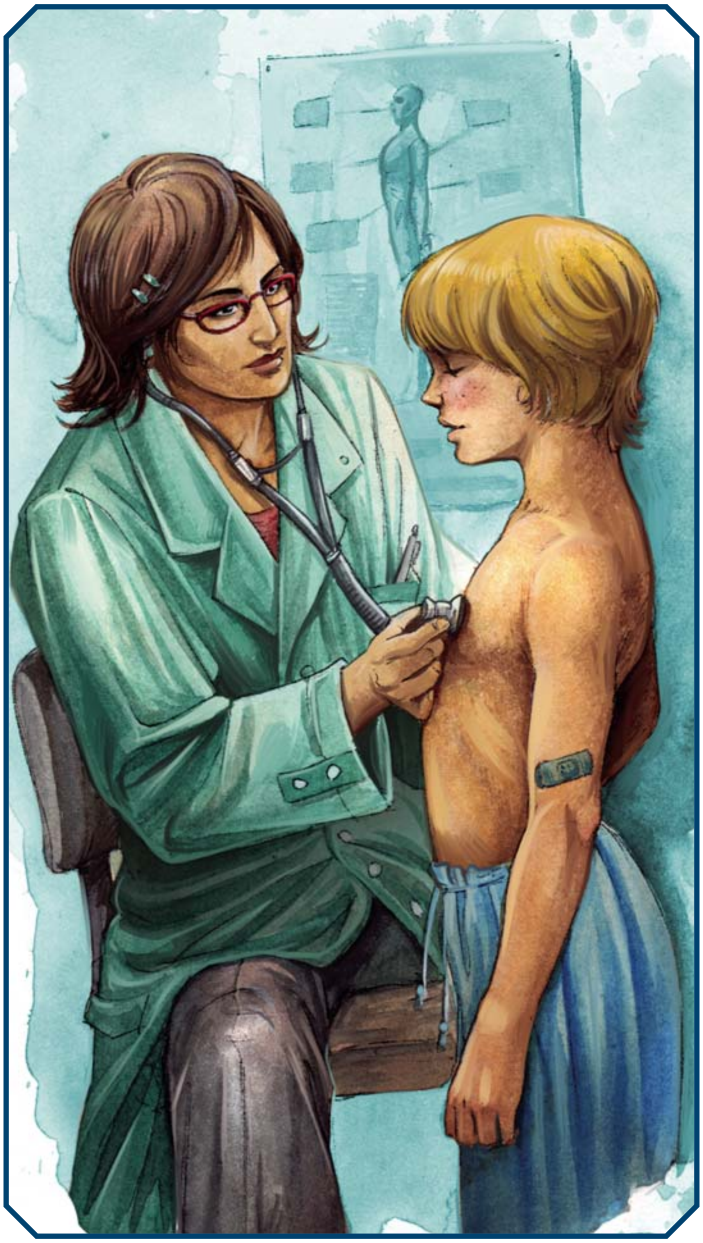
Magic relying on plants (including herbs) will be more difficult to cast in urban settings because there is far less vegetation than in the country. A plant-using wizard might call attention to his abilities with his large window or patio garden.

An interesting use for Maria is as a relative to one of the adventurers. Should the PC find himself in the hospital, Maria will be sure to seek him out and ensure that he receives the best attention from the other nurses.

Maria Hartman

85 points

ST 8 [-20]; **DX** 9 [-20]; **IQ** 13 [60]; **HT** 11 [10].
Dam 1d-3/1d-2; HP 8 [0]; Will 13 [0]; Per 13 [0]; FP 13 [6].
Basic Speed 5.00 [0]; Basic Move 5 [0]; Dodge 8; Parry 7 (unarmed).
5'3"; 140 lbs.



Social Background

TL: 8 [0].
CF: Western (Native) [0].
Languages: English (Native) [0].

Advantages

Healer 2 [20]; Magery 0 [5]; Magery 1 (Healing College Only, -40%) [6].

Disadvantages

Bad Sight (Mitigator, glasses, -60%) [-10]; Secret (Mage) [-5].

Skills

Diagnosis/TL8 (Human) (H) IQ+1 [2]-14*; Diplomacy (H) IQ-2 [1]-11; Electronics Operation/TL8 (Medical) (A) IQ-1 [1]-12; Esoteric Medicine (H) Per+1 [2]-14*; First Aid/TL8 (Human) (E) IQ+2 [1]-15*; Gardening (E) IQ [1]-13; Housekeeping (E) IQ [1]-13; Naturalist (Earth) (H) IQ-2 [1]-11; Observation (A) Per-1 [1]-12; Occultism (A) IQ-1 [1]-12; Pharmacy/TL8 (Herbal) (H) IQ [1]-13*; Physician/TL8 (Human) (H) IQ+1 [2]-14*; Veterinary/TL8 (H) IQ+1 [2]-14*.

Spells†

Awaken (H) IQ [2]-13; Lend Energy (H) IQ [2]-13; Lend Vitality (H) IQ [2]-13; Major Healing (VH) IQ-1 [2]-12; Minor Healing (H) IQ+2 [8]-15.

* Includes +2 for Healer.
† All spells include +1 for Magery.

THE CAT BURGLAR

Lincoln St. James was nobody, really – a small-time thief with dreams of hitting it big – but he had one thing none of the other hoods had: magic. Lincoln discovered his talent at an early age, but with neither obvious opportunity nor the ambition to seek out the less obvious, he never took his spellcasting beyond a few parlor tricks.

No, Lincoln was content to simply get by. On the streets, a few simple tricks could add up to a good amount of "getting by." Unfortunately, Lincoln pulled one too many stunts – or perhaps just one trick against the wrong victim – and ended up on the receiving end of some old-fashioned gangland justice. He was dragged into an alley one night, beaten unconscious, and loaded into a van.

When Lincoln awoke, his captors offered him a deal. He could either work for the "organization," as they called it, or he would find himself in an even more unpleasant situation than he already did. Lincoln wasn't stupid; he took the deal.

Truth be told, it's all working out pretty well. He's gone way past just shoplifting and snatching purses. The job pays well, and his new employers have him learning a much more valuable skill set. He has plenty of free time,

Some ideas for hiding nonhuman faces in modern times include kerchiefs tied over the head; makeup; surgical masks; oversized floppy hats with large sunglasses; and long wigs with hair styled to partially cover the face.

and when he's on the job, he may grab whatever catches his fancy – as long as he gets his bosses' score.

Lincoln St. James is lanky and pale with greasy black hair he wears just long enough to slick back in a wave. He typically dresses in black pants and turtlenecks. When he's on the job, he carries a fine-quality 9mm semiautomatic pistol in a belt holster. In a slim, black bag, he stores a set of fine-quality lockpicks (+2 bonus to Lockpicking) and good-quality electronic lockpicks (+1 bonus).

Using Lincoln in the Campaign

Lincoln St. James is presented here primarily as an antagonist. If the heroes have acquired a valuable object, important document, or unique artifact, Lincoln's employers may send him in to take it from them.

Another possibility, however, is to seed Lincoln into the game as a potential ally or hireling. His employers don't have need of his services all the time; he's free to take other jobs when he chooses. Perhaps the adventurers need something stolen but are lacking in the proper skills themselves. With the right contacts, they might catch word of a hot young thief with certain special skills.

Lincoln St. James

100 points

ST 10 [0]; **DX** 12 [40]; **IQ** 12 [40]; **HT** 10 [0].

Damage 1d-2/1d; BL 20 lbs.; HP 10 [0]; Will 12 [0]; Per 12 [0]; FP 10 [0].

Basic Speed 5.5 [0]; Basic Move 5 [0]; Dodge 8; Parry 9 (Brawling).

5'11"; 140 lbs.

Social Background

TL: 8 [0].

CF: Western (Native) [0].

Languages: English (Native) [0].

Advantages

Magery 0 [5]; Magery 2 (Dark-Aspected, -50%) [10]; Night Vision 2 [2]; Wealth (Comfortable) [10].

Disadvantages

Duty (Criminal organization; 9 or less) [-5]; Greed (9) [-22]; Kleptomania (9) [-22]; Secret (Mage) [-5].

Skills

Brawling (E) DX [1]-12; Climbing (A) DX [2]-12; Computer Operation/TL8 (E) IQ [1]-12; Driving/TL8 (Motorcycle) (A) DX [2]-12; Electronics Operation/TL8 (Security) (A) IQ+1 [4]-13; Electronics Operation/TL8 (Surveillance) (A) IQ-1 [1]-11; Fast-Talk (A) IQ [2]-12; Filch (A) DX-1 [1]-11; Guns/TL8 (Pistol) (E) DX [1]-12; Lockpicking/TL8 (A) IQ+1 [4]-13; Observation (A) Per-1 [1]-11; Savoir-Faire (Mafia) (E) IQ [1]-12; Search (A) Per [2]-12; Shadowing (A) IQ-1 [1]-11; Sleight of Hand (H) DX [4]-12; Stealth (A) DX+1 [4]-13; Traps/TL8 (A) IQ-1 [1]-11.

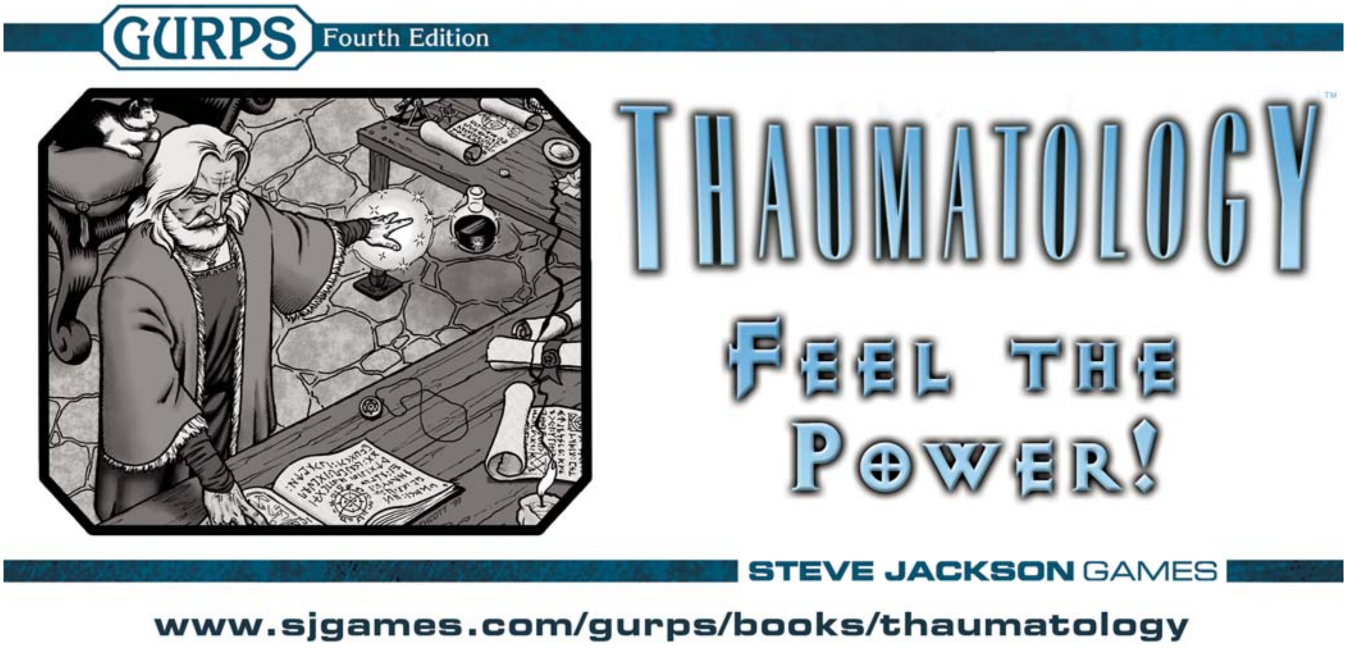
Spells*

Apportation (H) IQ+1 [2]-13; Armor (H) IQ+1 [2]-13; Blur (H) IQ [1]-12; Continual Light (H) IQ [1]-12; Darkness (H) IQ [1]-12; Daze (H) IQ [1]-12; Foolishness (H) IQ [1]-12; Light (H) IQ [1]-12; Shield (H) IQ+1 [2]-13; Sleep (H) IQ+1 [2]-13.

* All spells include +2 for Magery.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Paul Stefko discovered his own magical potential at a very young age. Unfortunately, no one teaches Food college spells these days. When he's not busy working on the alchemical formula for Bam!, he enjoys writing science fiction and fantasy, reading anything he can get his hands on, and playing board games with lots of tiny pieces. His work has appeared in the previous incarnation of *Pyramid* as well as the speculative fiction anthology *Triangulation: Taking Flight*. He lives in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, with his wife, Jamie, and a respectable wizard's library.



Random Thought Table

Adjusting Bedknobs and Calibrating Broomsticks

by Steven Marsh, *Pyramid* Editor

It's evening now; throughout the course of the day I had used a harmonized crystal to contact my wife, channeled the vibrations of the universe to heat dinner, and summoned the voice of a bard who had been dead for over a decade.

Of course, we don't look at cell phones, microwave ovens, and CDs as magical. But that's because – to turn a phrase – perhaps any sufficiently advanced magic is indistinguishable from technology.

Certainly there's a workaday commonness to arcane elements as they appear in many high-magic worlds – especially in urban environments. We have streetlights and hot and cold running water; a Gygaxian megalopolis might use red heat and blue cold crystals placed above a basin, with glowing orbs on the outside of buildings. (Why is magic always more common in urban worlds? If it followed the tradition of our own world, with fae relegated to the wilds and strange old shamans working miracles on the outskirts, wouldn't magic be more plentiful the less urban an environment is? Maybe there's a campaign hook in that . . . but not today.)

Of course, the intersection of "urban" and "magic" is more meaningful, interesting, and varied than "just like technology, but with magic" – although that is one possibility. But to more methodically meditate on the mélange of magic and mingling masses of mankind, let's presume the "urban" remains mostly constant. In other words, it's a medieval or modern city upon which magic is overlaid. In this case, what forms can magic take to affect that urban environment?

Let's look, then, at four dials that can be adjusted to describe magic, and how these variables might affect a typical cityscape.

Availability (Do You Believe In Magic)

One of the most common – and commonly considered – magical variables is availability: how common the stuff is. This is often reflected in "mana levels" or similar game constructs.

It's best to think of availability as being like the magical water table of the setting. In low-availability places, the area is "arid" of magic . . . and vice-versa for the verdant environment of a high-availability area. The notion of a "water table" is especially handy because it's not something that we see every day, even though it affects our everyday lives.

Secrecy

One interesting "switch" that sits beside the accessibility dial is secrecy. A common feature of low-accessibility worlds is that magic is actually a secret. In these settings, magical forces are possessed only by shadowy forces, conspiracies, and other folks who know how to keep hush. The ***World of Darkness*** is, perhaps, the quintessential gaming example of this, but there are many, many urban magical examples in and out of the RPG world.

It's difficult to envision secrecy being a large component of a high-accessibility world, but it is possible. For example, envision a setting where (say) 10% of the population – if exposed to magical powers – become so infused with energy that they turn both dangerously insane and insanely powerful. Now envision that the other 90% can use magic, but they need to keep it from the other 10%. Add a social taboo, a prohibition, or even a law to just identify and kill the 10% outright and – voila! – high-accessibility *with* secrecy!

Wizards might hide charms and wards in graffiti. See p. 12 for a full example.

In worlds where magic exists, two strikingly similar areas would probably be as comparatively distinct as parched Las Vegas and ultra-humid Orlando. Yes, they're both sweltering tourist destinations, but they couldn't feel more dissimilar.

ACCESSIBILITY (YOU CAN HAVE MAGIC)

Slightly more affecting to an urban setting is accessibility: how many people can tap magic. This differs from availability in that something can have the potential to be widely available, but be accessible only to a small group of people. (A good example is literacy in medieval Europe; it's relatively straightforward to teach someone how to read – and thus it's potentially quite available – but few actually knew *how* to read, so literacy wasn't very accessible.)

Accessibility affects how much a part of the everyday fabric of life magic is, regardless of how available it is. Let's continue our literacy-as-magic metaphor. In our literate society, words are an omnipresent part of our society, so that we don't even notice them. Billboards, wallets, laundry labels, inscriptions on jewelry . . . letters are *everywhere*. So, too, would accessibility affect magic. In a high-accessibly world, Everyone would know what to do with magic if they ever got their hands on it (which depends on availability).

In an urban environment where magic isn't very accessible, it would tend to be ignored. If magic is powerful yet inaccessible, it might be resented or viewed as a separate world, in the same way that even middle-class luxuries are astronomically out of reach to the poorest caste of India.

I heard someone asking, "What does a high-accessibility, low-availability world look like?" Good question! Envision a Mad-Max world where there are almost no firearms left, but information about guns has been passed down as lore, stories, and folktales. Some post-apocalyptic scavengers find a cache of pristine guns, fully loaded and ready to go. Even if they hadn't seen guns before now, they still know what they are, and can use them almost at full efficacy from the beginning ("Just point and shoot!"). High-accessibility/low-availability works the same way; folks may not have much magic available, but when they find it, they know what to do with it.

POWER (UH-OH: IT'S MAGIC)

Often tied to availability in many game settings (again, check out "mana levels"), *power* is how effective magic is at achieving significant results. Again, look at literacy: It's everywhere (high-availability), it's commonplace (high-accessibility), but it doesn't do very much on its own (low-power). Its power is significant but subtle.

In high-power settings, effects can alter nations or even worlds. Whether the setting ends up feeling like a magical "fear of nuclear annihilation" landscape or has a steampunk-esque "we can change the world for *good!*" optimism depends mostly on whose hands the powerful effects are in (accessibility).

In many gaming settings, there tends to be a gulf in power, usually separating "everyday items" from "artifacts." Thus your heroes crawling the sewers searching for adventure may encounter a potion or scroll (low-power), all the while living on a city that's actually floating on a sky island (high-power). There is often a lack of "mid-power" that would allow for, say, a permanently flying summer-cottage island.

RELIABILITY (EVERY LITTLE THING SHE DOES IS MAGIC)

If power is how effective magic is at achieving significant results, then *reliability* is how effective magic is at achieving *any* results. The more reliable magic is, the more often it will be used for everyday effects. A low-accessibility/high-reliability setting would probably lead to two distinct groups: those who use magic daily (as much as possible), and the "mundanes." Conversely, high-accessibility/low-reliability might indicate a world where everyone learns a magical knack or two growing up – akin to how most kids in the real world learn a few "magic" tricks growing up, but never really use them again because they're not that useful.

PUTTING IT ALL TOGETHER

So, we've got a bunch of knobs we can tweak here; what do they all mean? By mapping them onto an existing campaign, you can come up with new story possibilities by adjusting one of them. For example, what happens in a previously low-power/low-reliability world when magic's power starts increasing? Suddenly everyone who learned a trick or two might start trying them again. Even a seldom-working spell can become worthwhile if – instead of turning a pinch of salt into gold – it can transform a *pound* of salt into gold.

ABOUT THE EDITOR

Steven Marsh is a freelance writer and editor. He has contributed to roleplaying game releases from Green Ronin, West End Games, White Wolf, Hogshead Publishing, and others. He has been editing *Pyramid* for over nine years, during that time, he has won four Origins awards. He lives in Indiana with his wife, Nikola Vrtis, and their son Sam!, who is a two-year-old force of nature entirely worthy of his exclamation mark.

Alternatives

Another factor closely tied with reliability is whether or not there are any alternatives to whatever effects magic is attempting to create. If there are, then magic will only be used if it's more effective (at least part of the time) than the alternatives. Folks will put up with magical devices failing 20% of the time if the alternative is nonmagical ones that fail half of the time. Of course, the alternatives might be more effective in some respects than in others. People are more likely to die in car accidents than airplane crashes, but a mid-trip complication can be much more problematic on a plane than in a car! It can be the same idea with magic: Why would an urban magic world put up with magilamps plunging its streets into darkness once a week because of mana fluctuations? Well, if the alternative electrocuted people when they failed . . .

ODDS AND ENDS

SETTING EXAMPLES

Using the ideas presented in this issue's *Random Thought Table* (pp. 34-35), GMs can assign values to the four urban-fantasy aspects at campaign creation, and they can come up with new and interesting ideas. Here are random examples of urban environments.

Low availability/mid accessibility/low power/high reliability. In this world, strange fluctuations of the stars result in magic frequently being unavailable to anyone. Under the best of circumstances, magic can be used by half the population (in this case, women). The magical effects women can have are low, but they work unerringly when available. (Every day, each woman awakens with the knowledge of whether her spells will work today.) In this world's Victorian London, men in power attempt to keep women subjugated and subservient to the ones who fear feeling powerless more than anything else. Many groups of women attempt to turn the social tide, overtly in the halls of power or covertly in the streets; they do not rely on their magical gifts but often base their days' goals on whether or not they can use their magic that day. Still other groups agree with the men, striking against their sisters from the shadows.

High availability/high accessibility (at first)/mid power/mid reliability (with alternatives). From birth, everyone becomes steeped in the magical traditions of the world (modern like our own). From astrological signs to the significance of names, the powerful but fickle effects of magic touch every child up until the age of maturity. At that point, many of those coming of age feel the call of *run-spring*: the drive to leave their magical heritage and embrace technology. After all, note the run-springers (those who have left magic), technology is almost as reliable as magic, and it grows more powerful every year while magic has remained stagnant for centuries. Society has split between the run-springers and the magi; they coexist, but their worlds seldom cross. Each year that teens dabble in technology, they risk severing their ties to magic forever; none last for more than five years spanning both worlds. But for up to five years, those who take the chance can experience a way of life that's . . . well, *almost* magical.

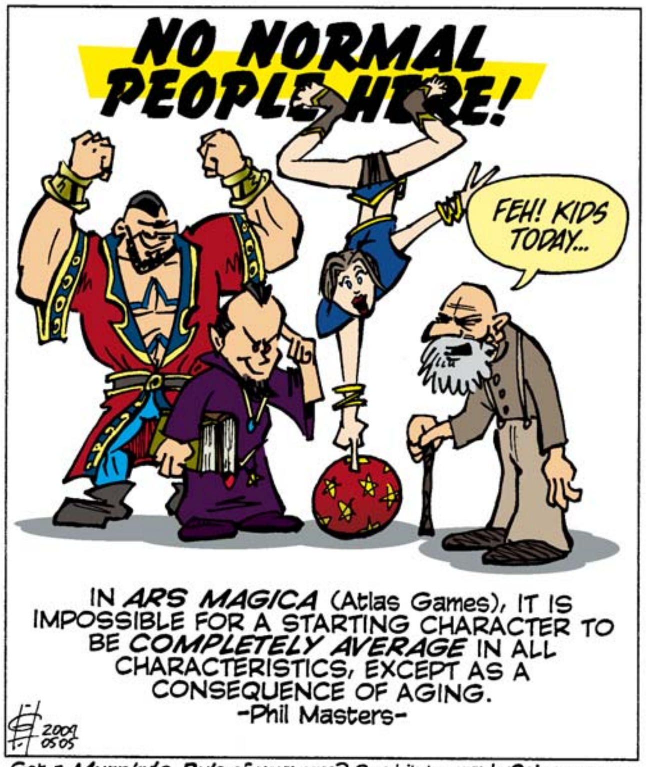
Random List of Movies and TV Shows

Some of these movies and television shows are set in urban-fantasy cities, while others have some inspirational urban-fantasy scenes. This is list is a small sampling of a wider selection

- *10th Kingdom* movie
- *Angel* television series
- *Blade* movie series
- *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* television series
- *Cast a Deadly Spell* movie
- *Dungeons & Dragons* movie
- *Friday the 13th: The Series* television series
- *Harry Potter* movie series
- *Interview with the Vampire* movie
- *Moonlight* television series
- *The Omega Factor* television series
- *PSI Factor: Chronicles of the Paranormal* television series
- *Spirited Away* movie
- *Underworld* movie series

MURPHY'S RULES

BY GREG HYLAND


NO NORMAL PEOPLE HERE!
FEH! KIDS TODAY...
IN ARS MAGICA (Atlas Games), IT IS IMPOSSIBLE FOR A STARTING CHARACTER TO BE COMPLETELY AVERAGE IN ALL CHARACTERISTICS, EXCEPT AS A CONSEQUENCE OF AGING.
-Phil Masters-
2009 05 05

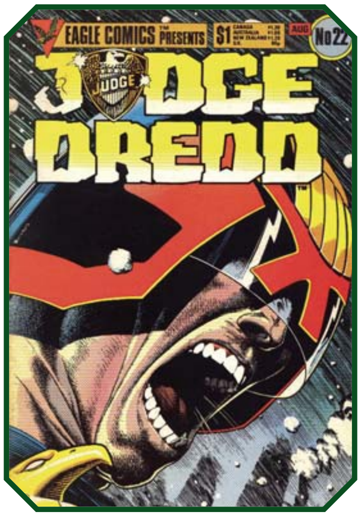
Got a *Murphy's Rule* of your own? Send it to murphy@sjgames.com

RECOMMENDED READING

URBAN FANTASY RUN WILD

BY ANDY VETROMILE

Taking out an offending motorist with a pair of chainguns hooked to the hood of one's car is an appealing form of wish fulfillment, but for some even that visceral thrill might give way to the heady perfume of power to be had by waving one's wand at it. Urban fantasy combines the delirious delight of magic powers and fantastic creatures with the material comforts of the modern age. Save a dingy castle? It has its charms. Save the Sears Tower in Chicago? Now *there's* a fight to light up the night sky. Arguably there are three indispensable components needed for a good fantasy story set in the cold asphalt jungle: the setting, the powers, and the enemies. The right RPG can do this, but so can the right mix of bits and pieces taken from several RPGs.



One of the best examples of "genre run wild" in an urban setting is the *Judge Dredd* series of comics. Begun in 1977 in Great Britain, Judge Joe Dredd and his group serve as police, judge, jury, and – if need be –executioner for the criminal element in futuristic Mega-City One. The judges faced a wide swath of crazy, clever, and entertaining villains and threats, and a nice undercurrent of satire kept the series relevant. The books excel in presenting a surprisingly believable setting wherein science fiction is lined up side-by-side with psionics, magic, and interdimensional beings, among others. The setting is rich in ideas for an urban fantasy. A GM need not limit himself to the supernatural bits – the heavy menu of mutants, cyborgs, and intelligent robots can easily be repurposed as mystical beings – and the mean streets can give way to other features of the comic like the Cursed Earth wasteland outside the city walls.

The first iteration of *Dredd* as a roleplaying game was from Games Workshop in 1985; it sold both as a boxed set and a book (the *Game Master's Book* was offered sans *Judge's Manual,* dice, cardboard character cutouts, and map). It was rereleased four years later as a hardcover book, also without all the trappings but with both the Game Master's and judge's books combined. The second version is a little easier to find than the first, though both are something of a collector's item. Mongoose Publishing then created a ***d20 System*** version in 2002 (which went for $39.95, but it's downloadable as a PDF for $27.97); they plan to release a new version this summer that utilizes the *Traveller* system. New material for the ***d20 System*** line has dried up, but it continues to receive support through the company's magazine articles.

What recommends the original version over the newer one is the advice on being a Game Master. Indeed, even without respect to the setting or subject matter, it is considered to be one of the finest GM tutorials ever published. Its crash-course on the *Judge Dredd* setting is also concise, offering a great general outline of the world.

White Wolf is best known for its *World of Darkness* series of games using the Storyteller system, placing vampires, werewolves, and other supernatural beings (and their curses) at the forefront of the plots. But it is another of their lines, the trilogy of ***Adventure!, Aberrant,*** and ***Trinity,*** that deserves special mention here. Each volume details a period of human history and how the adventurers of that time changed the world.

Adventure! is a pulp vision of the 1920s, a time of derring-do and world exploration. Heroes called the Inspired begin to display uncanny abilities that lead to exploits like those in old movie serials and dime novels. Nothing too flashy, most of the adventurers run along the lines of circus strongmen or stage hypnotists, and they band together to investigate not only the dark corners of the Earth but also their own bizarre origins.

In most medieval settings, people can get away with hiding their faces with the hoods of cloaks. In modern times, a covered face is suspicious, unless the person is (or is trying to pass herself as) a Muslim woman.

Since by definition urban fantasy is the joining of at least two popular genres of fiction, it stands to reason a truly marvelous campaign can be generated by picking the best bits from several sources. There's no reason even the seasoned GM has to depend on a single resource when manifesting fun; variety is practically demanded of him.

The second stage is the modern world, and ***Aberrant*** poses the question: What would someone do with superpowers? Earth is now populated by paranormal celebrities capable of exerting their will on, literally, everything. Heroes here are called novas, and by tapping into quantum energies, they display abilities that dwarf those of their Inspired forebears. Those same benefits are also slowly killing most of them, though, altering their minds and bodies and turning some of them into the planetary threats they purport to stop.

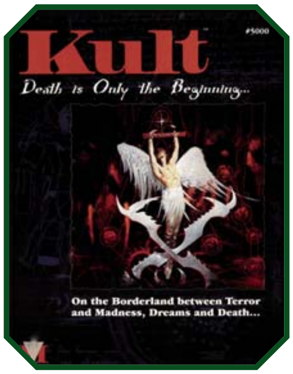
That timeframe then leads to ***Trinity,*** an oppressive Earth scarred by the world-shaking events of the second book. Some governments struggle to put the planet back together again with the psionically gifted members of the Orders, while others concentrate on keeping their citizenry under their thumbs. More in the vein of a dystopian techno-thriller, this is closer to the gritty angst many fans expect from White Wolf.

The benefits to this series are twofold. First, PCs have access to powers of one sort or another in each of the books; second, the feel of the background is changed from volume to volume. A GM can mold the materials to his particular campaign by taking the power level and the atmosphere that makes the best match for his brand of urban fantasy. Want to run reborn gods in a ***Shadowrun***-style industrial sprawl? Use the Titan-like powers from ***Aberrant*** and the bleak worldview from ***Trinity,*** and the minions of Set now walk the filthy streets of Gotham. Using power sets from the other books tones it down, allowing "street-level" magics to dominate the action.

The prices range from $25 to $40 for most of the core books, many of which are still available at online auction sites for near-retail cost, but the tag also depends on the release. The first iteration used the Storyteller system, but come the ***d20 System*** era, a new set was released to make use of that license, and the price had gone up on some (especially those that were hardback books). Further, all are available as PDFs in the $5 to $12 range (in addition to most of the supplements for each entry).

Perhaps it's less "urban fantasy" and more "urban nightmare," but for what may be the darkest of settings, there's ***Kult*** (Metropolis Ltd.; originally $24.95 but now available only through secondary markets). A result of the competition in the early 1990s to produce the most heart-wrenchingly despairing settings possible, ***Kult*** posited a *Matrix* sort of world that saw humanity held prisoner by dark and supernatural forces. (It was available briefly as a reprint in the mid-1990s, and a PDF version has yet to appear.) Reality as we understood it was a lie, and only heroes as shadowy as these enemies could pierce the veil. They were also possessed of (or by) eldritch energies that could fight fire with fire, but a PC also had a severe drawback to compensate. It might be a deep-seated phobia or some horrible family secret he maintains, buried in his parents' basement . . . or the hero might just be howling-at-the-moon mad. Average folks erect barriers of ignorance to prevent themselves from slipping into insanity, but to one degree or another, the protagonists know things for what they are. The deeper they delve, the greater this awareness becomes.

It's no exaggeration to say this is one of the most depressing worlds ever to hit roleplaying, but it's also unconventional. It compares more favorably with H.P. Lovecraft than with J.K. Rowling or Jim Butcher. If the walls between fantasy and reality are to blur in the GM's game, ***Kult*** can deliver the goods. It can be used as is, but to bring it into line with other examples here, it could be that the "priorities" of these worlds are reversed. Magic can still be one of the defining elements, but what if the party is empowered by the failing of dimensional walls? The high-level horrors might be the outsiders, and they're trying to force their way into a genuinely mundane setting. Nothing need change about the personas the players use. They're still mad as hatters to a man, and in fact this could be part of the team's origin story. They turn into street sorcerers with this intrusion because of their fragile but receptive mental state, but their purpose is married to a quandary: If magic is what lets them put the demons back in their bottle, how can they be sure their efforts won't be short-circuited by success? Like using an electric knife to cut its own power cord, closing the book on these beasts may require deeper sacrifices than just relinquishing power. And most mages, once they've tasted the forbidden fruit, aren't going to want to give up that power no matter how many lives it saves . . .


Kult
Death is Only the Beginning...
On the Borderland between Terror and Madness, Dreams and Death...

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Andy Vetromile is a freelance writer and editor with an insatiable taste for games. He's been reviewing them for over 10 years and still can't wait for the next release. He has also edited several ***GURPS*** books.

RECOMMENDED READING

DEFINING URBAN FANTASY

BY MATTHEW POOK

What *is* urban fantasy? Technically, it is a subset of the fantasy genre, one that takes elements, though not the setting, of said fantasy genre and drops them into a contemporary setting, usually in a town or large city. Because the fantastic is considered to be at least weird, if downright dangerous, then anyone with pointy ears, fangs, or capable of casting magic usually has to live hidden away from the bulk of human society. There are a knowledgeable few, which in most urban fantasy stories are the protagonists – and in gaming, the player characters. This is "low" urban fantasy, which is not often found in RPGs; when it is, it tends more toward the horror genre, as in ***Angel Roleplaying Game*** ($40 for the core book, Eden Studios, **edenstudios.net**), or to make the players the monsters, as in the *World of Darkness* setting (White Wolf, **white-wolf.com**).

More typically, urban fantasy RPGs tend toward the high end of the genre. Most people are aware of not just magic, but also of the pointy ears and the fangs (and in some cases getting surgery done to have the pointy ears or the fangs, if not both). It is this wearing on their respective sleeves of the genre's fantasy elements that is our starting point, to which will be added in turn another genre for flavor. Of course, if this is all *too* high, then there are available two good starting points of the genre. ***Urban Fantasy HERO*** ($29.99, HERO Games, **herogames.com**) is as good an introduction and an overview of the genre as you would expect, while ***Dreaming Cities*** (Guardians of Order, 2005) provides a more literary approach. Both come with extensive discussions of magic and numerous example settings.

If we are to start out high, then we need a really big dose of science fiction. Although it might be derided for mixing Tolkien with cyberpunk, it should be noted that ***Shadowrun*** ($34.99, Catalyst Game Labs, **catalystgamelabs.com**) has not only reached its fourth edition, but also – in 2009 – its 20th anniversary. Thus, its "Sixth World" will be familiar to many gamers: a thick and heady "Better Than Life" mix of the cyberpunk genre (high-tech adopted and internalized by low-life protagonists vs. uncaring corporations) with traditional fantasy elements (elves, dwarves, orks, trolls, magic, and really powerful dragons). This setting's 60-year-long history begins in 2012 with the restart of the ancient Mayan calendar that heralds not just the return of magic, but also the reappearance of various races (now known as Metahumanity) last seen in the Fourth Age, that period being described in the more traditional fantasy RPG, ***Earthdawn*** (Redbrick Limited, **redbrick-limited.com**).

These events, combined with financial meltdowns, pandemics, and political upheaval has lead to a much changed world. For example, in the default ***Shadowrun*** setting of 2070, North America is home to the Confederated American States, the United Canadian and American States (UCAS), numerous Native American Nations, and the Elvish principality of Tír Tairngire, among other nations. Most corporations are sovereign nations unto themselves, only answerable to other corporations, while the more powerful dragons hold much financial and political power and are on an equal standing with corporations. Indeed the late dragon Dunkelzahn successfully ran for the UCAS presidency, while Lofwyr, as head of Saeder-Krupp, is the richest individual on Earth.

Players in ***Shadowrun*** are cyberpunk's low-life protagonists, "shadowrunners" working as deniable assets for the corporations, doing anything from theft to smuggling to sabotage. Individual roles include armed-to-the-teeth street samurai, drone riggers (with a swarm of remote control drones), hackers operating their own wireless Personal Area Networks, and technomancers able to innately connect to the matrix without resort to hardware. A magic user casts spells and communes with spirits according to his tradition, such as Hermetic magic and Shamanism, while an Adept channels his magic into his physical abilities to become (for example) the ultimate gunslinger or martial artist. ***Shadowrun*** *Fourth Edition* comes with improved mechanics and more player options, all supported with a setting easily accessed via the new material and the full background available through the 20 years worth of supplements.

Before beginning an urban-fantasy campaign, decide how well-known the supernatural is. This dictates how much the PCs need to hide their actions.

If you still want your urban fantasy to be high, but not so much-in-your face – and ***Shadowrun*** is always that – then ***Victoriana,*** now in its second edition ($35, Cubicle Seven, **cubicle-7.com**), represents a far more genteel and sober alternative. Well, it's sober and genteel for the upper echelons and bourgeoisie of the very class-conscious society this RPG presents. For the lower classes, genteel and sober might be something to aspire to, as might be overthrowing the social order, but just getting by is a struggle in itself. In this 1867-set RPG, the class divide applies to race as it does everything else. While humans are found across all strata, Eldren (the game's elves) are generally upper class; Dwarves and Gnomes middle class; and Beastmen, Halflings, and Ogres lower class. Meanwhile, the poor old Orc holds his own against European expansion on the Dark Continent. Although these races match many of those found in ***Shadowrun***, their influences feel more like those of ***Warhammer Fantasy Roleplay***. To practice magic in ***Victoriana***, a character requires a license from the Guild, with unlicensed use punishable by the minimum of a fine at best and imprisonment at worst. Knowledge and the practice of the Dark Arts – Demonology and Necromancy – are punishable by imprisonment and even execution. Thaumaturgy is the dominant form of magic, but Mediumship is increasingly fashionable also. Petty magic remains the province of the wise old woman and the street shaman, and is derided by the Guild as being both contemptible and primitive. As in ***Shadowrun***, characters in ***Victoriana*** chafe against society and its ills as the game's "Gutter Runners." With a freedom grasped from the accepted social order, they can run its drawing rooms and rookeries to undertake tasks such as exposing necromancers, preventing child exploitation in sweatshops, or even chasing dragon myths (they don't exist though). As with ***Shadowrun***, the new second edition provides better rules and an expanded background that includes limited steampunk elements.

If you want more "fantasy" with your urban fantasy, then you have no heavier choice than ***Ptolus: Monte Cook's City by the Spire*** ($119.99 for the print edition or $60 for the electronic version, Malhavoc Press, **montecook.com**), weighing in as it does at 672 pages! This is a "super-deluxe" campaign designed for the ***d20 System***, by one of the designers of ***Dungeons & Dragons*** *Third Edition*, so the fantasy hardly gets higher than that. Its setting is the port city Ptolus, dominated by an impossible, towering rock spire topped by a hidden fortress, while below lies the "Dungeon." The latter is comprised of many regions, including the Undercity Market; Dwarvenhearth, an ancient dwarven city; and the Banewarrens, a storehouse of ancient evil items, as well as a great dungeon itself. The city's dungeon regions are a constant draw for adventurers – that is, the player characters – who are encouraged to join the Delvers' Guild, which will support their forays below. As with the other titles suggested here, the setting adds a degree of technology – in particular, clockworks and firearms – but also Chaositech, a demon-created combination of magic and technology. ***Ptolus*** is both a complete campaign that will take the delvers from 1st to 20th level, and a complete city sourcebook. Superbly cross-referenced and supported, its DM's advice details running the campaign itself and – in particular for our purposes – for running urban campaigns. The interactive/investigative nature of urban encounters and adventures will provide a welcome change from the dungeon bash's explorative/combative nature.

Lastly, we break from our high calling to go low and traditional, with the magic mostly hidden, although with ***The Dresden Files RPG*** (Evil Hat Productions, **dresdenfilesrpg.com**), we add not one genre, but two. Based on Jim Butcher's novels, the game explores the world of Harry Dresden, Chicago's only openly practicing wizard (and private eye). He tries to protect the rest of society from various supernatural beings (including vampires, werewolves, and the fae) and their politics. Their inclusion marks the game's first genre as horror, the second being noir, the novels being written in first person.

The game uses the Fate 3.0 rules, a ***Fudge*** variant first seen in the publisher's superb pulp action ***Spirit of the Century*** ($15-$50 depending on version, Evil Hat Productions, **evilhat.com**), whose mechanics nicely encourage a player to have his character interact with both his colleagues and the environment. Sorcerers, Lycanthropes, Changelings, Champions of God, Emissaries of Power (such Knights of the Faerie Court), Red Court Infected (essentially pre-vampires), Wizards, White Court Vampires, and Pure Mortals (ordinary folk who know about the supernatural) are all possible character types. Its magic, if not tightly controlled, is monitored by the supernatural powers that be. Occult Chicago, described by Chicagoan and master of the esoteric Ken Hite, is almost a character in itself, but Baltimore is also detailed, as is a guide to making your own city home to the supernatural.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Matthew Pook resides in Birmingham, England, with the requisite pair of black cats and a perky Goth (not obligatory, but fun nonetheless), plus more games than he can eat. A pedant and proofreader by day, a reviewer by night, he has been gaming for nearly 30 years. He has been saying mostly good things about those games for almost 10 of those years now.

> *That's the thing with magic. You've got to know it's still here, all around us, or it just stays invisible for you.*
>
> *– Charles de Lint*

LAST WORD

WITH MATT RIGGSBY

For the *Last Word* in each issue of *Pyramid,* we chat with someone in the game industry known for his work in the topic field. This month we talked with Matt Riggsby, author of ***GURPS Locations: The Tower of Octavius*** and ***GURPS Hot Spots: Renaissance Florence*** (among other works).

PYRAMID: So, what is the Last Word on urban fantasy?

MATT RIGGSBY: *Context.* One of the significant features in urban fantasy is the depth of connections between the protagonists (or, in our own little worlds, PCs) and the world around them. The dominant strain of modern fantasy has people wandering around in the wilderness a lot. J.R.R. Tolkien and Robert E. Howard didn't have a huge amount in common, but one thing they did have was a lot of traveling through wide-open spaces; you see this in a lot of later fiction as well.

Like many fantasy games, they have heroes who don't have a lot of connections with the places they go. They get in, fight, find the McGuffin, whatever, and then they're on their way. It's a bit like a Western. This strain of fantasy leans heavily on isolation, which leads to lawlessness, self-reliance, and so on.

Urban fantasy, however, puts characters in a deep web of associations. Lone wolf characters, who are a dime a dozen in non-urban fantasy, don't work nearly so well in an urban setting. It's hard to be a mysterious loner if someone can ask around and – in a few minutes – find out where you live, who your neighbors are, what your favorite bar is, what your cousin did on his last birthday, and so on. Even if you manage to get that lone wolf whose relatives are all dead, he still has his house or apartment, which is next door to all of those other people, still has to buy things, still has to exist in the context of other people.

What urban gaming provides you, instead of the freedom of the wandering adventurer, is immediate access to a lot of the things one goes adventuring for. Not quite so much of the killing things and taking their stuff, typically, but do you want knowledge? Most scholars sensibly live in cities so they can talk to other scholars. Riches? Kings and merchants keep those in town, not caves in the forest, and the craftsmen who make all of those pretty things live there as well. And social contact? It's all about context; there are vast social webs you can follow to learn everything you need to know about your competitors and enemies. And you can probably see them all by walking around for a day. Wilderness gaming is fine; I enjoy it myself. But I get a different satisfaction from playing games in a place where everybody knows your name.

I wonder if urban fantasy is appealing because it gives the clarity that fantasy brings to an "urban" experience that many of us experience daily; within the context of our day-to-day lives, knowing that we're the Destined Walkers in Darkness or the Seers of the True Path or whatever sure beats wondering if we picked the right major in college . . .

GURPS Fourth Edition
Hot Spots:
Renaissance Florence
STEVE JACKSON GAMES

That's what Joss Whedon nailed. The high school experience, amped up with a few supernatural beasties, just works. And if you can do that with other parts of the urban experience, you've got something with real appeal.

So how little "fantasy" would you be comfortable in having in an urban fantasy campaign?

If you're going to admit to fantasy then, from a practical point of view, why take half-measures? Gimmie a sorcerer-duke, real rather than heraldic griffins, and real creepy-crawlies in the sewers.

*Maybe to maintain a closeness to the "real world"? The **World of Darkness,** for example, allows players to look at the world around them, and go, "Ah-**hah!** That's why things are messed up!"*

It certainly keeps things accessible, but don't forget how loaded with fantasy that is. It looks like the real world, sorta, but the players are all vampires, wizards, werewolves, and the like – packed with fantasy. Or Neil Gaiman's *Neverwhere.* A lot of the book is filled with metaphors and turns of phrase made real, from the Marquis de Carabas to the Black Friars. The names are all the same, but it's definitely not the usual London.

> *Context.*
>
> *– Matt Riggsby*

If you could live or game in a "fantastic" version of any real city, any era, where would it be?

This is perhaps a bit of a cheap answer, considering my recent book, but I'd pick just about any major city of the Italian Renaissance. Artistic creativity is off the charts, the food is just starting to get really good, and it's . . . well, Italy. The Mediterranean has a magic all its own, fantasy version or not. Same for living or gaming, though were I to live there, it'd be a slightly quieter place. Maybe a villa outside Genoa.

*Since you name-dropped your latest project, tell us a bit about the new release **Hot Spots: Renaissance Florence.***

It's an overview of the city of Florence from the early 15th to mid-16th century, which involves the best-known ruling dynasty never to hold formal office (well, almost never), the father of modern diplomacy, some of the best art the world has ever seen, and the Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles. Sorta. There's intrigue, vast wealth, and enough small wars to keep the most bloodthirsty characters happy.

Locations: The Tower of Octavius *and* ***Hot Spots: Renaissance Florence*** *are available at* ***e23.sjgames.com.***

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:

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

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

GURPS rules and statistics in this magazine are specifically for the ***GURPS Basic Set,*** *Fourth Edition*. Page references that begin with B refer to that book.

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