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Chaos and Ritual

A Literary Magic System for *GURPS Fourth Edition*

by Elizabeth McCoy

There are many different kinds of magical systems in fiction. Of them, a goodly number break down into ritualized magic -- requiring diagrams etched into the floor, pentagram jewelry, herbs, potions, and other such paraphernalia -- and innate magic, which merely requires willpower, focus, and inborn magical talent.

Here, therefore, is one treatment that combines these options, as well as the regular *GURPS* system. (While *GURPS* is used here, any system with a similar "memorized list of spells" could probably be used, modifying as needed.) It also adds the useful cinematic concept of "going beyond your limitations -- then collapsing in a heap afterward."

Kinds of Magic

In the "Chaos and Ritual" system, there are three kinds of magic:

- *Rote Magic*, which allows the performance of rituals, without necessarily learning or memorizing any specific spell. (*Ritual* magic has a different meaning in *GURPS*, involving the summoning of spirits. It can be incorporated into rote magic if it fits the GM's image of how magic should work.)
- *Learned Magic*, which functions like regular *GURPS* magic.
- *Chaos Magic*, also known as *innate magic*, which draws on great power resources with little fine control, and a lot of intuition.

All three types have a minimum requirement of Magery 0, and the default assumption is that Magery is inborn -- you either have it, or you don't. While some magical experiments, accidents, or other extraordinary events might be able to grant Magery, it cannot be simply *learned*. (This is the easiest assumption to change.)

All the limitations from p. B67 are applicable, as is Magic Susceptibility (p. B143). Further, beginning characters may purchase "options" on further levels of Magery! Whatever level they stop at is considered to be that character's maximum Magery (barring, again, extraordinary events as above). If the spells in the

Truth in Spellcasting

Some worlds have "honorable" villains who will follow the letter of their promises -- if not the spirit -- and can therefore be dealt with. These may be djinn, demons, or merely tricky mages. One way to explain this is to give *Magery* a Taboo Trait against lying!

The mage (or creature) may not have Truthfulness -- he's able to remain silent, or weasel logic like celtic knotwork -- but the principles of his magic state that when he's casting a spell, he's telling the universe, "This is what *is*." If he tells casual

world are frequently potent and terrifying, there is no hard limit on what this "ceiling" may be, and an "option" should be 1 point per level of potential Magery. This will *probably* self-select with a maximum of about 20, for 100-point starting character; make options 2 points in a 125-150 starting point campaign. If the cap is between 3-10, 3-5 points per potential level is better.

At the GM's option, potential Magery may add to Sense rolls to detect magical items or prerequisites to learn a spell, but it never adds to magical skills or affects the time required to learn magical skills. To turn potential Magery into an actual level of Magery, the wizard must finish paying for each level.

All mages may also purchase a "mana pool" to power their spells -- Extra Fatigue Points (p. B16), with the Limitation for magic only (-20%, based on the Focused limitation, p. B100). The higher the level of magery, the higher this should be! Characters with potential Magery should have the ability to buy Extra Fatigue Points as part of the package, at least to the level of their potential Magery. For truly earth-shattering magics, their future extra fatigue may be limited by a *multiple* of their potential Magery, or have no limits at all!

Example: *Marie-Susan is starting out as a dimension-hopping character in a home-brew game. She purchases Magery 0 (as her home dimension has only secret magic) and a whopping 20 points of potential Magery, for a total of 25 points. (She also adds 5 Extra Fatigue Points, for another 15 points.) When she falls through the magical wormhole, she quickly uses nine of her earned points to upgrade to Magery 1 -- with 19 levels of potential Magery to go.*

Rote Magic

To use rote magic, a wizard need only have the right books and two skills: Thaumatology and Rites.

Rites is a Very Hard skill, defaulting to -7, which may be used with DX or IQ as appropriate. It is, essentially, the art of following magical instructions. Used with DX, it involves drawing perfect pentagrams, copying arcane scripts, and making correct gestures. High Manual Dexterity may add to this, and the default might be applied to Artist in some situations. Used with IQ, it allows temporary memorization of spell words, correct pronunciation, and other short-term mental requirements. High Manual Dexterity does *not* help with the IQ aspects, though Language Talent and Eidetic Memory might, and Performance skill could be used for the default. Some rituals might require musical instruments, and be bardic songs -- or even require conducting a full orchestra!

Unlike Thaumatology, Rites may be studied by anyone who has a good excuse to practice the necessary skills; would-be occultists, overly-obsessed gamers, or "deluded" new-age witches are all likely to pick up a little of this skill.

Thaumatology (p. B225) allows the rote-mage to tell a true magical tome from a fake, research new rituals or modifications to existing ones, and fill in the gaps in poorly-written spells. It is not strictly necessary for a beginning student -- if there are grimoires that are *meant* to teach the novice.

Casting a spell from a book typically requires two *checks* for the Rites skill, one for the physical components, and one for the vocal ones. Roll *once* for the skill, and then apply it to both IQ and DX. Use the lowest margin of success, if applicable.

Example: *Marie-Susan finds herself in the library of the Master Mage. Since she was going through a phase of "white witchery" anyway, she gleefully makes off with the first book she can lay hands on.*

lies, the universe will stop believing him . . .

For every lie such a being tells, his skill with supernatural powers is penalized by 1. He must either make his lie into truth, somehow, or behave as if he had *real* Truthfulness for a period of time to earn back the universe's faith in his word -- this will be at least months, and possibly years.

With IQ 13, DX 10, and 1 point in Rites, she will be checking any rolls against a 10 and a 7, respectively. Hopefully she won't choose to practice dangerous spells that require perfect pentagrams . . .

Spell prerequisites are not needed to perform most rote-based spells -- the instructions were written by someone who *knew* the prerequisites -- but Magery prerequisites are still in effect. If a spell requires Magery 2, and you have only Magery 0 . . . Oh, well. A kind GM may allow the attempt, but at a penalty to Rites skill equal to the amount of Magery lacked.

A rote-cast spell takes *at least* ten times as long to prepare and cast as a learned (see below) version, or longer, at the GM's option.

Spells may be learned from books, of course. Some rituals are long and complex and may never be attempted outside of the warded pentagrams, but others can start out being performed by rote with elaborate trappings and -- if points are spent on the spell skill itself -- become mental constructs, with all the ritual contained in the mage's mind and only a few words required to activate it.

Learned Magic

When a spell has been learned, either after rote repetition (above) or Wild Talent inspiration (below), it is treated in the default manner of **GURPS** spells, as per **GURPS Magic** or chapter five of the Basic Set. This includes the need for prerequisites!

***Example:** The spunky and precocious Marie-Susan, having stolen the Master Mage's book of Gate spells, has been dimension-hopping with glee -- and some close calls -- for a while now. Putting a point into the Plane Shift spell (p. B248), she can now dispense with much of the paraphernalia that the ritual casting required. (The GM, perhaps unwisely, has ruled that prerequisites are not needed for Plane Shift.) Watch out, multiverse.*

Chaos Magic

A chaos mage has the Wild Talent advantage (pp. B99-100), with the Focused limitation (magic only) and Retention enhancement. Many also have Emergencies Only. Any successful use of this ability may also justify upgrading a level of potential Magery to actual Magery, if the points are available!

If it pleases the GM, a chaos mage may receive a small bonus to the Wild Talent roll if someone is using magic *on* him at the time -- especially if a useful Wild Talent manifestation would be the same kind of magic, or a very specific counter.

Again at the GM's option, two basic "chaos skills" may be available, upon which other, more specialized skills, can be built: Shielding and Chaos Jet. These have no prerequisites save the chaos mage Wild Talent package, but tend to cost a lot. (Chaos mages should have lots of Extra Fatigue Points.)

Chaos Jet

Essentially, pick a missile spell attack, such as Fireball (p. B247) or Lightning (p. B244), and apply the +0% Jet enhancement (p. B106) to it. It costs the maximum amount to cast, and the same to maintain, but does not need to "build up" in the caster's hand.

GMs with **GURPS Magic** can select an appropriate Jet spell, instead. A chaos jet is *not* limited to 3d of damage or three yards, but each additional yard of range *or* each additional die of damage costs an extra fatigue point. (So a 4-yard, 4d chaos jet would cost 3+1+1 points of fatigue, or 5 fatigue.)

Also up to the GM is whether or not the chaos jet is actual *chaos* (with, presumably, different properties than fire or lightning), or if the Wild Talent has merely latched onto some random Jet/Missile spell, with potentially unusual special effects or nuances.

Shielding

If using only the *GURPS Basic Set*, Shielding is actually a variation of Armor (p. 253). It has no maximum DR, and manifests as an "aura" of protection around the mage, but it is full cost to maintain and only protects against magical attacks -- fireballs, lightning bolts, Chaos Jets, etc. When the enemy wizard tosses a fireball, and the chaos mage puts up his arms to instinctively defend himself and the innocent bystander behind him, the fireball will splatter with great pyrotechnics a few inches away from the chaos mage's face. (Unless some of the damage gets through the DR, in which case the chaos mage is going to look sunburned.)

If using *GURPS Magic*, the GM may prefer to adapt Force Wall (p. M170).

When defending against spells that do not have a properly cinematic physical manifestation, the GM *may* let the chaos mage adapt Shielding (half its DR applied to the mage's roll to resist), or allow a roll against the chaos mage's Wild Talent in order to add Magery and potential Magery to the resistance roll.

Example: Proving that the GM gave her too many points to start with, Marie-Susan also purchased two levels of the chaos mage Wild Talent, with Emergencies Only, for 30 points. The first time she's attacked by a would-be robber, she manages to activate a (relatively low-power) chaos jet. The robber, sensibly upset, runs away, and Marie-Susan does a little dance of glee.

Epic Fatigue: Going Into Debt

Normally, a mage who wants to cast or maintain a spell beyond his normal limits must burn hit points to power it. This may not be suitably cinematic, especially in circumstances where the characters are being required to exceed their limits again and again. Extra Fatigue Points help, but even they can be used up in titanic battles of power and magic.

Going Into Debt is an optional rule to pair with the Chaos and Ritual system. It allows a caster to spend fatigue now, and pay for it later.

Going into fatigue debt is much like dying, at least in the mechanics; see p. 327. First, the mage runs through all his fatigue points. Then, instead of spending hit points or falling unconscious, the mage must make a HT roll. If this roll fails, the caster must make a Will roll to maintain concentration, *and* take one hit of damage. (This damage does not affect casting new spells.) Either way, the caster has now gone into fatigue debt -- he has access to a full multiple of his prior fatigue points, but the *instant* he stops maintaining his last spell, he will take 1d hit points of damage and fall unconscious until this fatigue debt is recovered!

Just as with additional multiples of HP can be gone through before death, further multiples of FP can be gone through. Each multiple requires a HT roll and may inflict a hit of damage, and each "threshold" passed adds 1d of damage to the eventual toll the mage will pay.

*Example: Marie-Susan is heroically protecting a great hall while her friends escape and summon her arch-rival and romantic interest, the Master Mage. The GM has **GURPS Magic** and has allowed MS's Wild Talent to latch onto Utter Wall (p. M170). Covering an area of 5 yards across, she's dumping 20 fatigue points into the effect per minute. With only HT 10 and 10 Extra Fatigue Points, she's gone into fatigue debt by the first minute. She fails her HT roll, takes one hit of damage, makes her Will roll, and continues for another minute. After a total of five minutes (and three failed HT*

rolls) later, her friends arrive with the Master Mage, who uses Create Gate to rescue them all. Marie-Susan, already at -3 HP, takes a whopping 4d of damage, goes to -5 HP, and faints dramatically as the gate closes behind them. Fortunately, between Healing and Lend Energy (she needs to recover 100 fatigue before she can wake up!), she awakens with little harm done.

Now she just has to deal with the debt she owes the Master Mage . . .

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