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LETTER FROM THE TEAM



Abracadabra!

Once again, the Worldbuilding Magazine team has conjured up an issue filled with inspiration, advice, and entertainment. If you take a look through *Magic*, you'll find pieces from authors new and old, ranging from in-depth analyses of magic systems to mysterious, thought-provoking stories. In addition, we have exclusive interviews with author Ellis Knox about his Altearth and with Tim Hickson, better known by his Youtube alias Hello Future Me. (You should, of course, check out his videos immediately after reading this issue.)

If, after reading, you feel you want to help out with the next issue, *Death & Taxes*, we're always welcoming volunteers. Have a story or article you think would be a good fit for the magazine, or think our readers would be interested in an interview with you? Reach out to the Writing Department, led by Adam Bassett. Want to join the ranks of Editors (the first and last line of defense against typos and misunderstandings) or perhaps lend your artistic talents to the magazine? Our Editing and Art Departments are led by Ianara Natividad and Wynter, respectively. You can inquire by messenger raven, email us at contact@worldbuildingmagazine.com, or join us on [Discord](#). Our Editor and Vice-Editor in Chief Miles Gilberti (StronglyOPlatypus) and Debug200 are happy to answer any questions you may have.

As always, thanks to our wonderful staff for making this issue possible, and we hope you all enjoy this issue even more than the last ones! If you missed the previous issues, they're all available on our website. If you want to participate in book clubs, have conversations with fellow worldbuilders, and discuss the craft, our [Discord](#) is open to all. Happy worldbuilding!

Sincerely,

The Worldbuilding Magazine Team

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WORLD SHOWCASE: ELLIS KNOX'S ALTEARTH

Interview

Interview conducted by Aaryan Balu

Ellis Knox has been creating Altearth, an alternate historical fantasy world in which he's written several novels and short stories. This is how he describes his world.

Ellis: *Where magic is real, monsters roam the land, and the Roman Empire never fell.*

That's the tagline. In Altearth, I take all the history of Europe from the end of the Roman Empire down to today as given. I introduce a couple of fundamental changes, the biggest of which is encompassed in the tag line. Instead of Goths and Huns and Vandals invading the Roman Empire, it was goblins and orcs and trolls. Dwarves, elves, gnomes, sprites: all of them show up along the way—pretty much the entire panoply of European legends and mythical creatures. Where it suits my purposes, I will change history around, but I try to keep as much of it in place as I can.

What was the inspiration/starting point of this world, both in terms of why you chose to write it and where the history diverges from our own?

The inspiration was just one of those ideas that seemed to creep in by the back door. It was back when I was playing RPGs with friends and had the idea that I could have a world in which all the medieval mythology was real. I knew pretty much right away I did not want to play it as a game—it was more of a context or concept than an actual game structure. I gave it some thought and decided on the persistence of the Empire, that the barbarian invasions of the 5th century were monsters instead of barbarians, that magic was real. I decided both Christianity and Islam remained minor mid-East sects and that polytheism would be the world's religion. When I came up with the name, Altearth, I was set.

All that happened pretty quickly, over the span of a few months. The concept burbled (meaning I wrote ideas and notes but not stories) until I decided to get serious about writing roughly ten years ago. The rest, to coin a phrase, is alternate history.

Sounds like a lot of detailed legwork. What attracted you to the idea?

I was educated as a historian, so it was natural for me to turn to alternate history rather than making up a world on my own. I was, and am, fascinated by re-working the history I know into something new. In fact, mostly I leave the human history in place. The inventing comes in finding places and cultures for elves, dwarves, trolls, and so on, and figuring out how they live with each other and with humans.

What are some ways you've found to work these races into the fabric of history?

Dodging is a favorite. When the elves came to Altearth, they came from a cataclysm (they lived in Atlantis), so they scattered. There's no elf kingdom; instead, they live in villages or isolated communities. There's also a group of elves called wagoneers (routiers, in Frankish) who are itinerant. They're vagabonds, but they also serve as merchants and newsmongers to elf communities all over Europa.

Dwarves live in the mountains, of course—the Alps, Carpathians, and Pyrenees mainly. They don't have kingdoms either, but live in cantons with a sort of communal governmental system. Like the Graubünden of Switzerland.

Where do all of these races come from, originally? Have they always been a part of world history, or is there a specific divergence point?

This is one of the places where I have fun. Altearth covers two thousand years, and for most of that time people had only hazy or outright mistaken ideas about magic and monsters and all that. So, from an in-world perspective, the first appearance was the invasion of the goblins in 1131 AUC (378 AD). My book, *Goblins at the Gates* tells that story. That's also the first appearance of magic. But, of course, Rome had laws against sorcery for centuries, so were those incidents real or imaginary? Scholars differ.

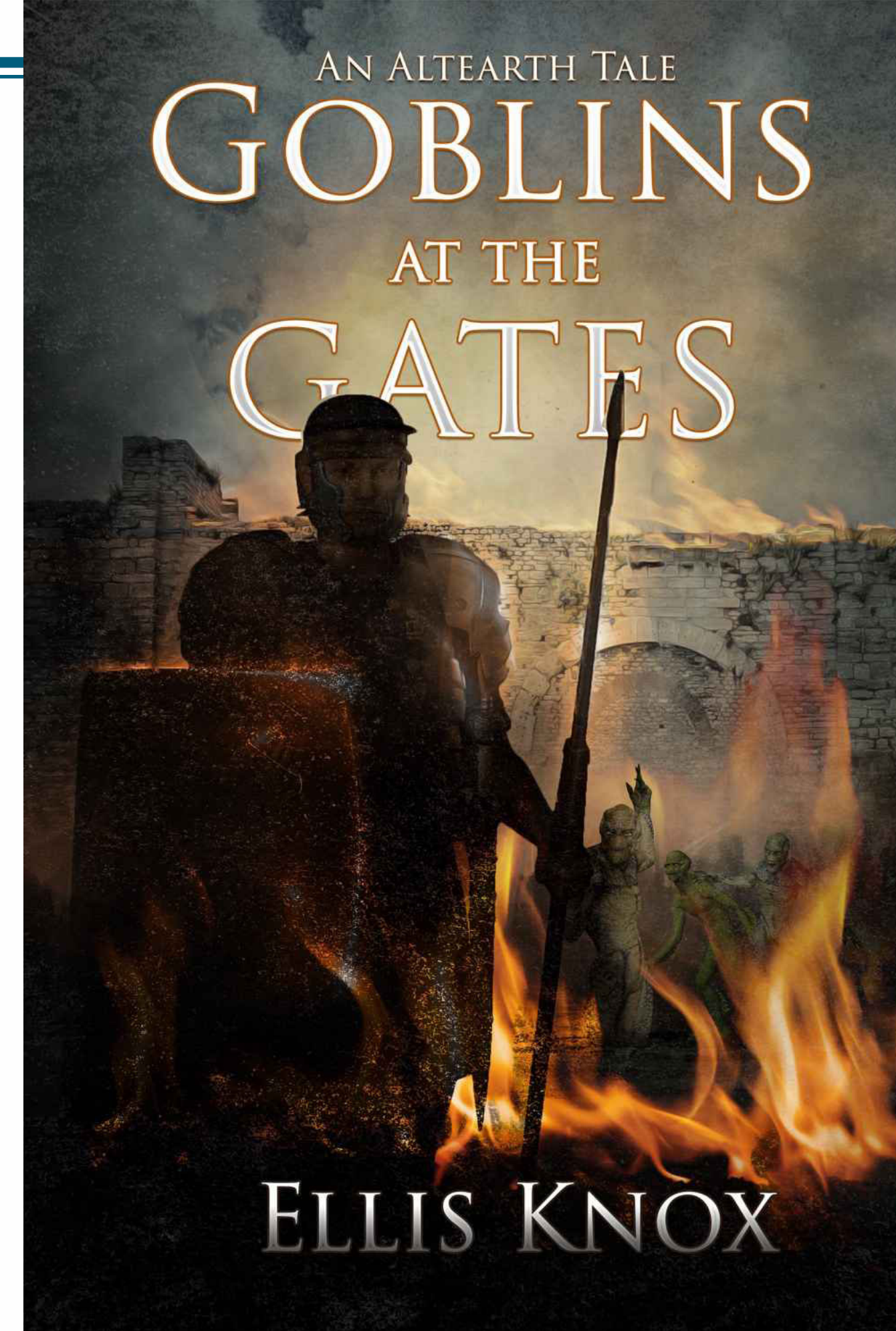


Image by Milo at Deranged Doctor Design

The "real" story is more complicated. I'm writing a book right now, *Into the Second World*, that will tell the origins; or at least what the characters in the book experience. Essentially, those 19th-century theories about Hollow Earth were correct.

When I started, by the way, I did not have that as a premise. I let the dwarves and magic and all that just appear. I had them in a timeline but simply ducked the question of origins. I try to do that consciously. I don't try to plan out everything; instead, I concentrate on individual stories. In each of those, I'm forced to invent more details. I had the idea of re-telling Jules Verne's famous book, and provisionally thought everyone could have come from the center of the earth. As I worked through the telling, it seemed to fit.

So it sounds like a constantly evolving idea of the world as you continue to flesh it out.

Absolutely.

My next book is going to be about Emperor Frederick II. The story of how he became emperor is pretty exciting, so I'm just adding monsters

and magic to it. For example, there will be giants (band name!). Which means I'm going to have to decide where and how they live, how they relate to humans, etc. That's sort of what I mean about how each story sheds new light.

What's one of your favorite societies/races that you've needed to improvise a place for, and what ramifications did that have on the world as a whole?

I really like the wagoneers and the gardiens. In *A Child of Great Promise*, I set the early chapters in southern France, in a region called the Camargue. Gorgeous place, with French cowboys! The *gardiens* are historically real. They raise beautiful white horses. Also, there's an annual assembly of Rom (gypsies) down at the mouth of the Rhone River. I stumbled across some pictures as I was doing research. I did not want to replicate gypsies, but the image gave me the idea that I could find a home for elves by not giving them a home. So I sort of built out from there. I now have hunter elves and fisher elves. I also have a strong tradition of walk-about for elves.

As I said, they all came from Atlantis. That land broke apart (I haven't settled on a date), and the elves spent some years floating on fragments or on flotillas of ships. Eventually, they started landing along the Atlantic coast. A core principle for them is to never assemble all in one place. The actual experience has faded into fragmentary legends, but the trauma remains.

I have ideas for dwarves, but I've not yet written a dwarf-based story. I've got an idea and a title—*Tuck the Unchosen*—but it's like fourth in line right now.

This sort of brings me into a larger question, one that also ties into the greater theme of this month's issue—what are the properties of these elves and dwarves, and how do they interact with magic of the world?

That's very much a work in progress. Magic in Altearth is variously understood. With orcs, for example, magic belongs to the priests and is a function of prayer. God (they're monotheists) grants miracles.

With dwarves and gnomes (I'm very fond of the gnomes), magic is crafting. They have the inborn

ability to work magical items and to infuse magic into items. It's all physical. No spellcasting or that sort of thing.

Elves are different, and I haven't worked out specific parameters except in a couple of general ways. They have three eyes. The third is in the forehead and is called an eye, but it's less about perception than about causing magic to happen. It's both. But I have not done elf magic in a book, so it's rather hazy. I do know that other people fear that third eye, and elves keep it closed for the most part. Legends of the "evil eye" and all that. Elves don't live like other people or look like other people, so they're often suspected and feared. In more modern times, though, elves get involved with technology and become outstanding engineers.

There is a system of sorts underlying all this. In keeping with my goal of making everything legendary real, I decided early on that phlogiston was the "scientific" basis for magic. Phlogiston exists everywhere, including in living creatures. It can be concentrated, even extracted in pure form, but of course it's not until modern times that anyone figures this out. And it's even longer before they come up with the Aethereal Theory, which explains how phlogiston operates through time and space. It may appear to affect and work in the physical world, but phlogiston actually operates through the aether.

What's the Aethereal Theory, and how does phlogiston work in pure form?

It will be the formal theory of how phlogiston operates through the aether. I'll lift what I can from Descartes and sprinkle a little Einstein for flavor.

I think of phlogiston as being like an element, but I'm also toying with the idea of having it have something like quantum states, allowing it to behave differently in different conditions. In one novelette, the crazy scientist who extracts it dies because the substance explodes almost at once. Because he worked alone, no one knew what he'd done, and another few decades elapse before the official discovery.

Right now, phlogiston is more like a premise. It's my handwavium. Vibranium.

In my last book, for example, the lead character, Talyse, is a girl who can fly. I don't go into detail on how she does this. The explanation isn't

important to the story. But a modern Altheart researcher would say phlogiston was involved. Since there's phlogiston inside every cell of our being, I suppose some people just naturally can concentrate or otherwise use it. Or maybe they use what they find in external objects (she uses wind currents). In *Goblins at the Gates*, Inglena has a white sword that can cut through endless enemies, never bloodies, and never dulls. And that's all the detail I give.

Gotcha. So how does humanity react to the arrival of the many new races—and did magic exist beforehand?

Did magic exist beforehand? Well, there are plenty of documents that talk about it. Visions in the sky. Omens from birds. Accusations of sorcery. Did all that "superstition" and magic only arrive with the goblins? Or was some of that also real? I'm not sure I need to resolve that. In Altheart, it's much debated among scholars. As for how humanity reacted, the first arrivals were goblins, then orcs and a bevy of others.

Dwarves appear somewhere in the 5th century (AD) and elves in the 6th or 7th. The Empire was badly disrupted by the invasions and many records were lost. Even contemporary records survive in their earliest written form only from 800 or so and after, so they may have undergone changes. The record, in short, is difficult and sparse.

But, humans welcomed the dwarves, for they fought alongside humans during the invasions. The relationship with elves is more complicated. Dwarves and elves get along okay in the sense that they're not ancient enemies. At the same time, each is so alien to the other, they find it difficult to work together. They have, from time to time, formed alliances with humans and so have worked together that way.

I should add a word about the gnomes. They appeared with the dwarves, as far as we can tell, and always as their partners. Gnomes are instinctively servants. They don't form independent communities. They're clever craftsmen, especially good with small things like furniture or jewelry, and they're outstanding farmers and herdsman. Dwarves live in their stone houses and work stone while gnomes do the farming. With humans, gnomes become something like serfs. It's easy to take advantage of gnomes, but if you treat them badly enough, they simply leave. They don't rebel,

they just do the "secession"—they relocate.

The relationship between the various races sounds like a rich vein of conflict. What are the effects of the new races on Altheart's version of real-world wars and battles?

That's very much in development. I do know that in the 20th century (I'll forbear inflicting Roman dates on you), there's the Great War, which lasts from 1914 to 1945. It's a war between the Surface and the Second World and has profound consequences (a phlogistical version of climate change).

Why didn't the war end until 1945?

It doesn't end because I don't want it to. It's commonplace among historians to say that WWII was a continuation of WWI in many ways, so I just rolled with that.

More common, though, is for me to do a spin. For example, dragons come into Altheart in the late 700s. I basically take Vikings and substitute dragons. They enter the world by magical means—they're created by a cabal of wizards, get out of control, and terrorize Europa for two hundred years.

There are so many cool things in the last sentence. Why'd the wizards create the dragons, how do they affect the world, and what stops them in the end?

I think I'm going to have lindwurms around—they provide a nice explanation for a number of things—and I could have the wizards use them. Mutate? Clone? I leave these things vague until I actually write a story. The closest I've come is the Battle of Stamford Bridge, which is where the last of the dragons are killed. That's a pseudo-historical essay.

In general, I am cautious about nailing down too much. Ultimately I'm a writer, not a worldbuilder. If I make a decision in, say, 951, every story that takes place later has to live with that decision. Eventually I'd get to a point where I couldn't write any fiction—it'd be all essays. So I keep things as unclear as I can, which gives me flexibility to write good stories.

I'll mention one other big historical event. The Hundred Years War becomes the Century War and

is the final victory over the orc empire. One of the aspects of Altheart, I think, that sets it apart is that the world isn't static. It doesn't always have the same cast of characters.

What do you mean?

I mean there can be stories where there are no orcs in the world. The misperceptions about magic means I can have a story in which alchemy is real, or astrology, or crystal balls. I can have a story that takes place before the trolls appear. Or where there are drow but no one knows that yet.

I'm thinking of having the drow be at the root of the Black Death. There are historical accounts where people say the disease seemed to be spread through breath and sight. Make that literal and it's pretty cool.

From a bird's-eye view, is there an overall timeline for the events of Altheart?

I do have a general outline. Here again, details are hazy.

The First Dark Age (500-700, the dates are fluid) is the age of Heroic Magic. Magic was highly unreliable. There were no books, no systems, only individuals doing extraordinary things. Magic was thought to be a manifestation of an individual. A gift from the gods, a genius, something innate. That belief continued for a long time.

By 1000 or so, though, we get schools where magic gets taught. Not in the form of spells and such but as a discipline, like a martial art.

That evolved quickly into actual spellcasting. By 1200, we get colleges and academies and Europa-wide associations of magicians. Think scholastics versus nominalists. We also get people trying to recover the heroic aspects of earlier centuries. A "rebirth" of true magic.

This fragments further by 1500 or so. There are many different disciplines—this is the heyday of alchemy and astrology and numerology, but also of an incipient chemistry and biology. After the destruction of the orc empire, almost no one believes magic comes from a divine source.

I'm doing something with the Reformation, but it's a reform of magical methods. I'll do something with the Enlightenment, but it will be

wrong-headed in some way. Alongside that in the 18th century is a growing scientific movement. Science in Althearth includes a scientific approach to magic. Lots of theories, most wrong. Around 1790 we learn to infuse phlogiston into water to create steam, and industrialization changes everything. I get to have a steampunk phase.

The tagline of the world describes how "The Roman Empire never fell." What caused this to happen, and how does that affect the world going forward?

Yeah, that one's tricky, but I think I can make it work. The big difference is keeping Rome as the capital. My not-yet-written history will say that while Constantine built his new capital at Byzantium (having never converted to Christianity), the advent of the goblins caused Theodosius to return to Italy. Justinian sealed that deal by defending the West successfully. That, of course, will imply that the orc empire is somewhere to the east, but I don't have that geography worked out yet.

Anyway, I have to do a little dance to get through the next few centuries until I get to Charlemagne. I can do it—the long-haired kings will finally get their title—but I don't have it written down anywhere. There's a bit of a hiccup in the late 800s–early 900s, and I might even let things fall apart there for a while. Dragons can cause a real mess. Then recovery with Henry the Fowler. I'll probably keep Rome as the capital, especially since I don't have popes.

The other big change is to have all the other kings—Frankish, Arelat, Briton, Navarre, etc.—be actually under the Emperor. The theoretical medieval hierarchy becomes actual. The theory would have authority running from the emperor in unbroken lines right down to the lowliest noble. You know, that pyramid drawn by just about every Western Civ teacher. It's historically wrong, of course, but that's part of what makes working in Althearth fun. I get to use the stereotypes!

So what are some of your favorite stories and aspects of the world you've created?

My favorite stories are the ones I've written. My second favorite are the ones I have yet to write.

My favorite aspect is no footnotes. That is, I get to use whatever I find, regardless of its historical authenticity. Some of my favorite sources are

19th-century works. They're filled with anecdotes and incidents long since debunked. But if I find it interesting, I use it.

I also have fun writing Althearth historical articles. Those actually do have footnotes. I make up journal names, author names. It's silly and probably of no interest to anyone, but I like it.

Are there any tools or resources that you used to build the world up and might be of interest to WBM readers?

Lots of history books, of course, but that's specific to me. Let's see.

Google Earth. I decide on where the story is to happen. I know, for example, that Frederick of Hohenstaufen sets out from Sicily (age 18) and meets with a pirate called Henry the Fisherman near some island nearby. So, haul out Google Earth and have a look around. I'm not merely after a map, I'm after specific visual details. Which island? What does the coastline look like? I'll also take the place names and do an image search. I study the kinds of trees and rock formations, looking for details—sometimes what I see sparks an idea for a scene. Sometimes the ideas can be fundamental, such as how I got the idea for the wagoneers or how I used the salt hills early in *A Child of Great Promise*.

Another good source, but difficult to navigate unless you already have prior knowledge, is the Internet Archive. That's where I go to find historically outdated books. It's extremely rich if you're writing a 19th-century setting or later, but there are also treasures such as medical treatises or works on magic that date from a time before we got all *scientific* and *rational* on ourselves. Also traditional music. Also just about everything. I even go there for background music as I write. It's the single greatest gem on the Internet.

Thirdly, I would mention communities. Mythic Scribes, Science Fiction and Fantasy Chronicle, and Fantasy Faction are my main hangouts, though there are more. Obviously! Being able to hang around with other fantasy writers is invaluable, not only for specifics but for general morale. 🐾

You can find Ellis' work on his website, [althearth.net](#), or on [Amazon](#).

EXCLUSIVE: TIM HICKSON OF HELLO FUTURE ME

Interview

Interview conducted by Adam Bassett

Art by Tim Hickson

Tim, also known as Hello Future Me, is the creator of numerous lore and analysis videos on YouTube. We were thrilled to be able to speak with him for this final issue of 2018, so without any further ado: here's what Tim had to say about his [On Writing](#) series, his personal work, writing, and more.

Tim: I'm a New Zealander, which is rare enough in these sorts of circles as it is. I run the channel, "Hello Future Me," which creates nerdy content around a number of stories I'm incredibly passionate about, but my magnum opus, you might say, is my writing and worldbuilding series where I breakdown elements of those things and talk about what works and helps, and things we might consider as writers. Undoubtedly, those videos are my greatest passion, as I've always loved storytelling, but more importantly, trying to understand why some stories work and some stories don't.

My actual channel didn't start off with this sort of content. No, like so many others, I started off doing those goofy vlogs where I talk about nothing and nobody watches. A long while after, I managed to pick up this fandom talking about *How To Train Your Dragon*. Yes, the kids' TV series. It was a niche that nobody was making videos for, and so I did. I've since added *Avatar*, Tolkien, *The Elder Scrolls*, and lastly, the writing/worldbuilding series that I've had so many people fortunately watch and support.

Oh, and I have an adorable cat called Mishka, but everyone calls him Supreme Leader Mishka because we sort of have this Mishkerian Empire theme to the channel going. Saying it on here sounds strange, but if you've been around the channel, you get used to it.

Could you describe, in your view, the differences between worldbuilding in some of the series you're known to discuss (such as *Avatar: The Last Airbender* and *Lord of the Rings*), and which you personally prefer?



That is a question I could do a whole four-thousand word video on. There are methodological differences—Tolkien began with languages and wanted to create a world to place them in, while *Avatar* began with its characters and developed a world *around* them. Oftentimes, writers who focus on one *before* the other can end up with a weaker other half. I don't want to reduce my answer to "Which do I prefer between *Avatar* and Tolkien?" as that is something I simply couldn't answer.

The Elder Scrolls has a unique approach to canon that I especially like. Tolkien and *Avatar* have very much "word of God"-based worldbuilding and lore, in the sense that there is often one canonical record of events or understandings of the magic system that make up their worldbuilding. But *The Elder Scrolls* is a muddled mess of lore (in a good way) that makes it feel real in a way I just love. I sometimes feel that fantasy stories with a single set of facts that *everyone* knows and agrees on about history/magic and so on makes the world feel less real, but TES approach to lore is contradictory, interpretive, and complex—it's not even designed so that there is necessarily a correct interpretation in some cases. A lot of times, it's just that some things are, and us readers have to wonder what that might mean. It moves very

much away from the “word of God” approach, and a major figure in that lore community, Michael Kirkbride, who often just acknowledges that he doesn't know or he has his suspicions, but nothing concrete about it.

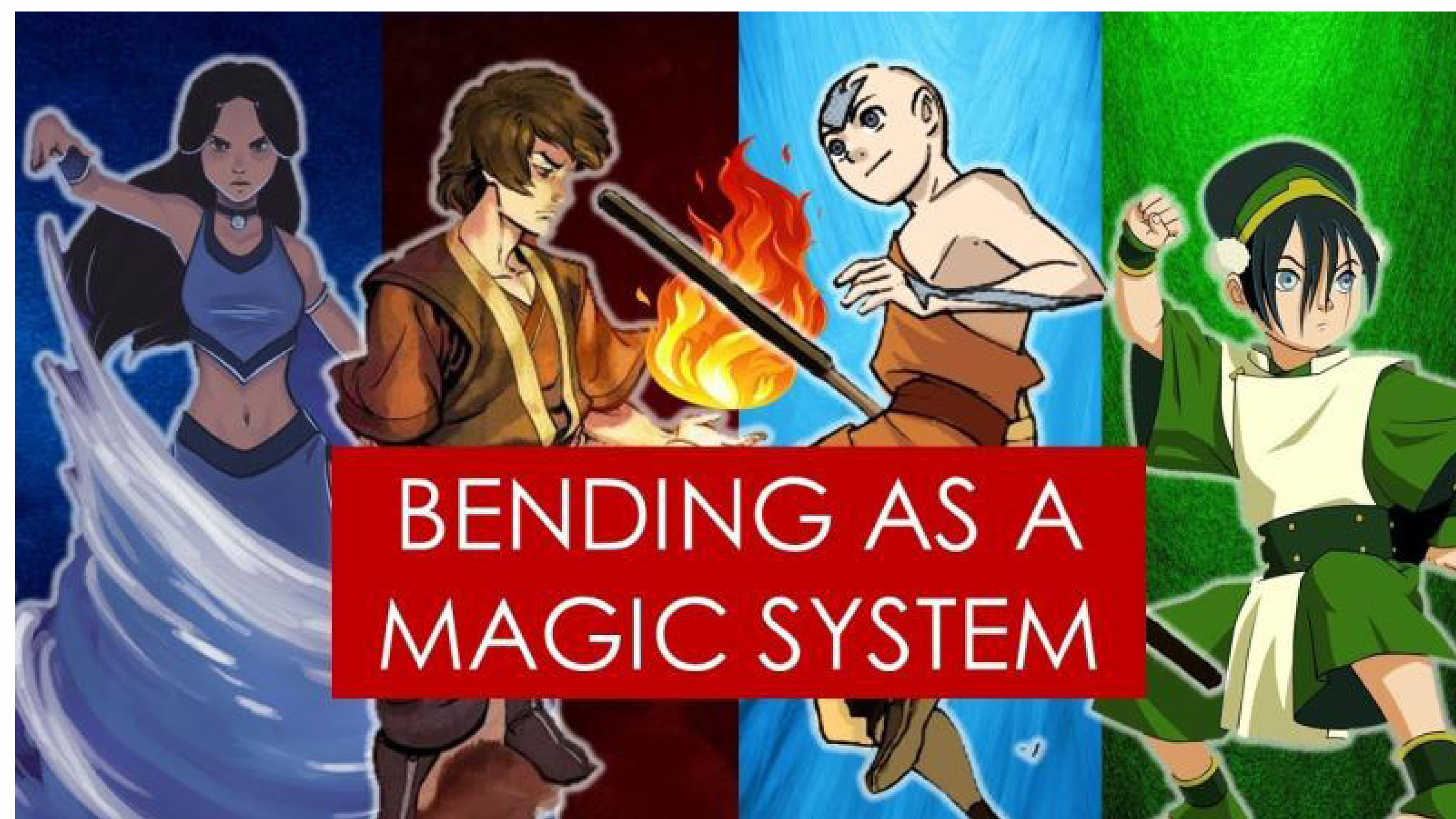
That, to me, is the most enticing approach to worldbuilding, but I love the other styles equally.

The On Writing series, which dives deep into a topic on writing or worldbuilding, has been a mainstay for your YouTube channel since it began in February 2018. What's been the most enjoyable or interesting On Writing video for you and why?

That is a ridiculously difficult question for me, but I think I could say the final part of the original trilogy on magic systems, where I discussed how

Otherwise, it would be my one on how to write a first chapter, which in terms of educational content that is useful to a wide group of people, I really felt I could be proud of. That was also the video where the focus changed for me personally—I felt more like I was writing something that could be used in a classroom, and teachers have come forward to let me know they have used my videos to help teach their kids, which is about the highest praise you can give someone who makes content like this.

The series opened with your trilogy on magic systems mentioned above. I'd like to know a bit more about your thoughts on magic systems. For example, is there anything that you would like to add or change about those episodes now? Something you may have left out or some new media that you feel is worth mentioning?



magic systems can be integrated into narrative and storytelling, using what I feel is one of the best examples of writing ever, *Avatar: The Last Airbender*. So, not only are the magic systems in particular fascinating to me (I've always been a fantasy kid above all else), but I was able to place them in the context of *Avatar's* story which I adore. It's one of the reasons why the story works so well. There was also a big build-up to it for me personally, as I had two whole other videos explaining soft and hard magic systems before I got to this one.

Fantasy has definitely taken a shift towards harder magic systems. Most people who write fantasy these days, in my experience, like to have this comprehensive magic system that they understand and can be utilised by characters in much a similar vein to Sanderson's allomancy or surgebinding in *The Stormlight Archive*—which is great! Don't get me wrong. I love hard magic systems, but I think this might be because I *think*, and these are just my personal thoughts, that soft magic systems are harder to do well in a story. It's easy to fall into deus-ex-machina moments or to have the magic system scale out of control with bigger, badder

forces that don't follow any previously established cohesive rules (as by nature, there aren't as many/ as strict rules as with hard magic systems). GRR Martin has a lot of soft magic in his world, and he does it particularly well, which is part of why his series is so enchanting.

I think it would have been interesting to talk a little more about animated magic systems, like Terry Pratchett's, where the magic very much has a will of its own in some sense. I think that's an idea where there is a lot to play with, but not many people have used it.

That's a good point. The predictability of hard magic systems can certainly be a double-edged sword.

Yes, and I've always had a soft spot for softer magic systems, personally. While this may just come from my allegiance to Tolkien, I tend to find softer magic systems have this older, more ancient and deep alluring feel that is more difficult, but not impossible, to capture than with harder magic systems.

I think it would have been good to talk about power creep within the discussion of magic systems too, if I went back. Those videos were long for me then, but I often do 20+ minute videos, and that would allow me to talk about how some stories essentially defeat the point of their magic system by having these huge power ups that reduce the

conflict to who can cause the most damage more than how can the character use the rules of magic system to resolve the conflict. *Avatar: The Last Airbender* isn't a truly hard magic system, but it deals with power creep logically and well.

I have to ask, what's coming up after the current (at the time of this interview) series on how empires work?

This series on empires was just meant to be one video, but then I realised it needed two, and by the time I was onto the second, I realised it needed three. Woe is me. The final part will be on how empires fall. But as for the future, while I can't say *definitely*, as I often pick and choose videos dependent on what people might want at the time, I have a vague trajectory. I've recently started a subset within the writing series called *On Worldbuilding*, and I'm so happy as to how it has been received. Hopefully, heading into the future, I'll be doing more of those videos on the elements of worldbuilding and how those elements can fit into the narrative—like how having a nationalistic empire sets up a different point of tension in the narrative to security-based empires was one thing we discussed in my most recent video.

I'm looking at doing a video on why prequels have a bit of a...shaky record on quality? The *Star Wars* series being the infamous one, but we wouldn't be looking at that specifically. I'd also like to have a look at prologues in an *On Writing* video.



On Writing seems very well researched. About how long does the average On Writing episode take to put together?

I normally produce two videos per week for Thursdays and Saturdays, but I realised early on after that initial trilogy of writing videos came out that I wouldn't be able to bring them out that quickly with the depth and quality that I wanted. Being reliant on views online for a job made it difficult, because I wasn't necessarily going to get more views taking a whole week to make these videos that I *loved*. As in, I knew from the moment I made my first one that this was what I wanted to do on YouTube, more than anything else.

So, I decided that on the weeks I did *On Writing* videos, I would take a whole week. They're also usually a lot longer than my normal videos, at about 2200-4200 words (as they have been with this recent series on worldbuilding empires), but the length isn't so much the thing that takes the time as the research and phrasing it right does. I try my best to never phrase things as "should" in talking about writing, because it's very easy to say writing *should* be done one way, but it's almost never true.

All in all, a writing video will take between four or five 10-hour days, most of which is scripting with the last day and a little bit being recording/editing. My patrons and Discord community know what this does to my sleep patterns! The other videos are usually alright timewise, but when it's OW week, well, I get a lot of people telling me to go to sleep!

That's understandable. The attention to detail and effort really show, so thank you for putting so much work into them.

I'd like to ask about the way you consume media these days. Since starting On Writing you've shown a clear ability to dissect scenes and

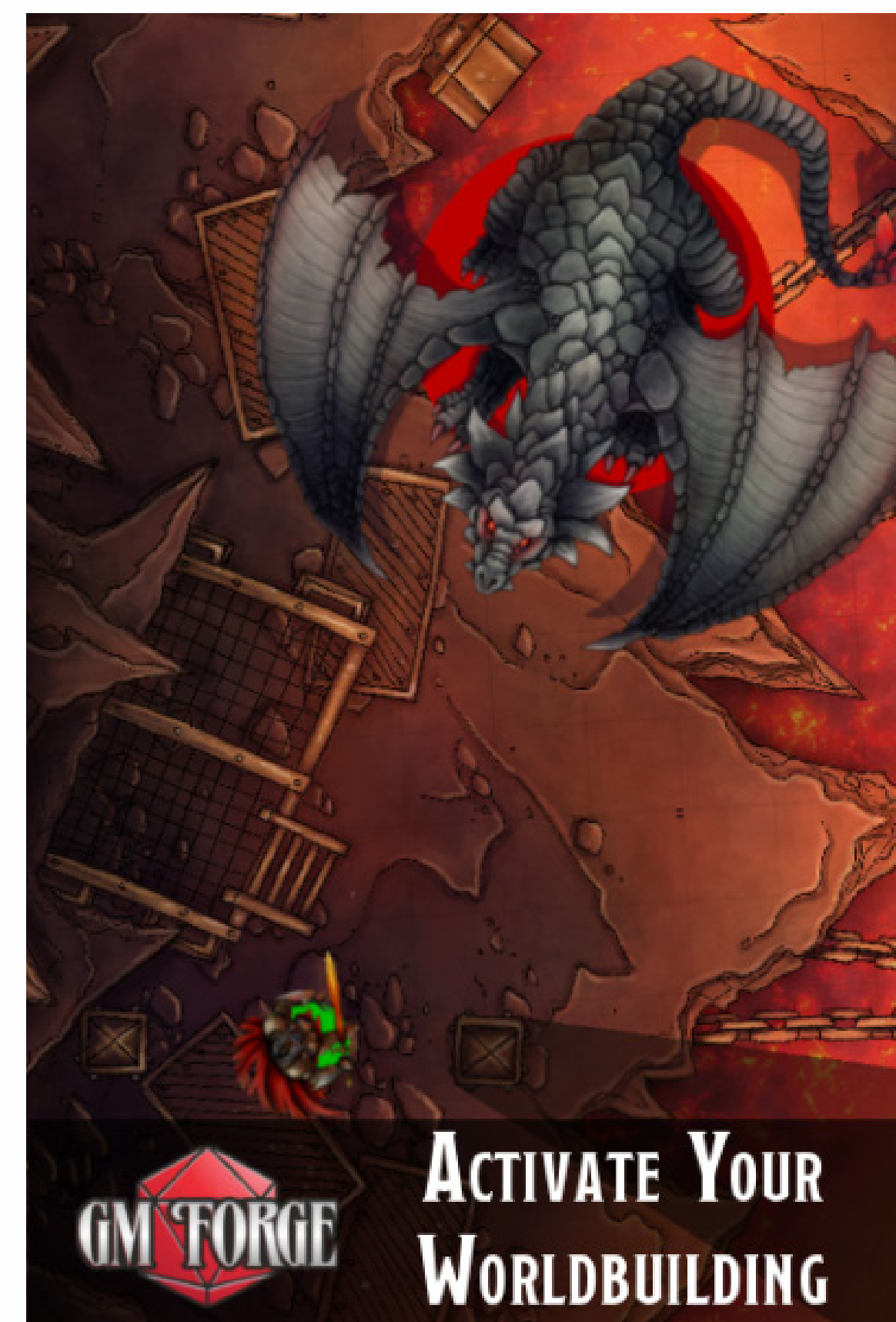
stories into parts to explain why they work (or don't). When watching a new film, series, or what have you, how has this affected your enjoyment of that media, if at all? Are you able to still enjoy a story for what it is or do you find yourself dissecting it even when an On Writing episode does not demand it?

No, no, thank you for watching them! It's a community and my content is a big part of it, but ultimately, it's a community of more than just me. As for the way I consume media, well, funnily enough, I

was naturally experiencing films and books with that dissecting mindset before I started the series. Prior to it, a couple of years ago, I deliberately sat down and took notes on the first chapter of *Harry Potter and the Philosopher's Stone* to try and figure out *why* it was so good. I thoroughly enjoyed doing that just as a personal exercise. I know, that's about the nerdiest thing in the world I could possibly do, but I think I'm amongst good company here!

It hasn't so much *changed* how I consume media as it has *heightened* what was already my approach. I definitely take a more analytical mind to it than I used to. I distinctly recall sitting in the theatre watching the recent adaptation of Stephen King's *IT*, thinking, "wow, this has really good narrative structure." I had similar feelings about *Stranger Things*, which takes a lot from King's work. I enjoy looking at media through this lens. It's very, well, *me*.

In some senses, it has made it less enjoyable in another way. Being a YouTuber means you don't really get to clock off, and whenever I'm consuming content, it's hard not to think about how I could use this for my channel, which can be distracting.



It's easy to get bogged down in figuring out why things don't work, which a lot of writing channels are based on, and that can change the lens through which you view things in a negative way, but I try, in my OW series, to look more at examples that do work, and it's nice to have that positivity, so I'm less focused on the negatives.

As somebody who works so extensively in literature and film, I would like to ask if you've got anything of your own in the works?

I keep my cards pretty close to my chest when it comes to my writing because, as a figure who presents educational content on *how to write* and the like, I have to be careful with how I present my work, unfortunately. Even so, I'd love to share a little bit!

It took me a long time to figure out which book of mine (as I have three which are in final editing stages before I send them to beta readers and hire a professional editor) I wished to pursue in publishing, but I settled on...a book that does not yet have a title. The title has been torturing me! Eluding me at every turn. I just can't figure it out.

Either way, this book was chosen for a number of reasons—representation of my skills, themes, and a few other things—but its premise is this: A man named James invents a machine that can transport him to a parallel world. He does so, and he arrives in a world he calculates to be identical in almost every detail. The problem is this girl he meets—a girl who knows all his secrets, who is his best friend, who he supposedly cares about intimately and has known for a long time. It's partly him figuring out why on earth she's there when she should be mathematically impossible in this alternate world he so perfectly calculated the machine would send him to, but it's primarily about how they grow and connect with one another.

Interesting premise. Is there anything that sets it apart from a story of that nature without the alternate world setting?

I'm hesitant to say much when things could change in the future, but the choice to use the machine and travel to an alternate world by James is set-up as a scientific venture, a voyage of discovery at the start, but as the narrative progresses, the reasons why he left are slowly revealed. These reasons, but also the consequences of him leaving that first world, are critical to the development of the tension at the end of the story and the themes that I wanted to explore—which, sadly, I can't specify without spoiling a major plot point for the book. The book is partly an experimental story that gives every young person what they want most: the ability to go to a world where [x] didn't happen or they didn't do [y]. To play through these events again. It's not about how James approaches that, but rather how does that chance challenge James as a person. This is the real question.

I like that a lot.

Thanks! It's a book I've connected with a lot on a personal level.

Changing focus a bit: when you're writing this or a script, how do you handle writer's block?

Having my job and livelihood at stake is always just a *fantastic* motivator! I rigorously stick to my deadlines, so I constantly have these time pressures pressing down on me to motivate me to work when it comes to script-writing. It's more of an effort to record either by mic or camera (by far the most tedious part, as I have to be upbeat and happy and constantly speaking clearly and so on).

Writing is a different question. I'm not someone who writes often, sadly. Since YouTube has really taken over my life, my opportunities to work on my own pieces have been limited. I'm fortunate that I don't tend to get writer's block when I *do* get to write, as much as I've heard others do. I find going for walks helps me, but it's more about knowing where I'm going. As long as I know where I'm heading with a story (which really comes down by planning process), I don't tend to get blocked, as I always feel there is point [x] I need to reach in a story.

Another strategy, which I don't highly recommend, is that when I feel writer's block, I just stop and try again another day. If I try to write in that state, almost nothing of what I produce is any good, and it tends to indicate to me that I haven't done enough thinking about what I want to feel while I'm writing it or what I want the reader to feel while I'm writing it. So I stop, think some more, and try again another day.

All good advice. Now, as our first YouTube interviewee, I feel obligated to ask about that medium. How did you decide to start, and what advice would you give somebody else interested in making videos?

As mentioned before, I started because I wanted to make goofy videos. So I did. Nobody watched. Well, like 60 people watched. Clearly, I was a star. The *real* moment I chose, per se, to be a YouTuber was a while after that. I made 60 videos and then thought, "well, I gave it a shot" and then gave up. However, the very last video I did was on *How to Train Your Dragon*. Nine months later, it suddenly

shoots up to 200,000 views. I realised then, with the help of my wonderful girlfriend Laura, that I needed to seize this opportunity. I started making nerdy videos/theories/explanations of that universe. After a few months, I added *Avatar: The Last Airbender*, then *Lord of the Rings*, *The Elder Scrolls*, and finally, the *On Writing* series. I knew I needed to diversify my audience if I was going to survive.

As my channel started to get more serious and it was looking like a career option for me (which, by the way, is still shocking to me), I realised that if I was going to make YouTube work, then I was going to have to put in the hours—and that meant willingly taking a hit to my grades at university. That took me a little bit to think through, as I'm someone who loves university, but I did it, and put more time into YouTube over uni (stay in school—work at uni—don't follow my example!).

I find it hard to give advice because this is all still very new to me, everyone's experience is different, and I don't see myself as a YouTube authority on how to do things. It's a very volatile and unique world that is hard to predict and you have little certainty as when things will go well and when things will go badly. Even so, I think, for me, a big part is sticking to personal deadlines. Without them, it's easy to push content aside. Beyond that, it can be really demoralising to work super hard on something and have it be barely viewed or viewed less than videos you didn't work hard on. I've found this quite hard to deal with personally, but I've tried to derive my validation from the work on the video itself (I get a lot out of just finishing it and showing it to a few people), rather than purely the views. It's also an age-old piece of advice that

everyone has heard, but it is true: Make sure you're making videos on something you love, because that is what will keep you motivated. Or at least, that is what I've found for me personally.

Are there any videos you feel should have been better received? Something you put a lot of work into but didn't perform quite as expected?

There are videos in the *On Writing* series that I am just as proud of but aren't as widely watched. I made a two-parter series on delivering exposition. A lot of writers aren't as interested in the mundane parts like those sorts of things, so fewer people have watched it. But it's not like I thought it "deserved" more views. I knew it would be less popular. I've made a couple of *Elder Scrolls* videos which explore fictional battles in the *BazBattles* or *Historia Civilis* fashion. They took absolutely *ages*, a couple of sleepless nights, and I loved them personally, but they didn't amount to much.

Now, aside from the aforementioned series which you reference frequently, I'd be interested to know what your inspirations were for all of this.

I wouldn't be able to point to any single person. When it comes to my writing, it was Tolkien who started me reading and writing, so in a sense, it all started with him. I've also come to love John Green's books. His books deal a lot with mental health issues, an issue close to my heart, as well as a few other themes that I have come to connect with and explored in my own stories. Mike [DiMartino], Bryan [Konietzko], and Elizabeth and Aaron Ehasz are the four minds behind *Avatar: The Last Airbender*, which has an incredibly special place in my heart, clearly inspired the channel, and has influenced how I have written, experienced, and read fantasy my whole life.

I definitely took some inspiration from *Overly Sarcastic Productions*, a duo who makes content on history, mythology, and the occasional piece on writing, when it comes to YouTube. As a broader "inspiration," I've had this long standing need to make my videos, I'll use the word, "comprehensive." I've often felt that educational content (or even content surrounding the lore of worlds I love) is often relatively brief, or they touch on things that most writers already know, meaning the advice isn't that helpful. I try my absolute best to not be like that, but to instead provide clear, very specific, and comprehensive help that goes past the basic

stuff that most already know. So, an inspiration for how I approach my content is kind of creating the content I wanted to see but could not often find. Hence why instead of a 10-minute on how to worldbuild empires, I end up making three parts, each 20+ minutes in length. Because if I didn't, I wouldn't do it justice.

Where do you see Hello Future Me the YouTube Channel and Tim the actual person in 5 years? How do you hope to see things progress?

Oh, the dreaded future. My instincts tell me to flee and hide. Foremost, I want to have my book published. As much as I am a YouTuber, writing is my greatest passion, and I would like to bring that to fruition. Hopefully, I'll be married to my beautiful girlfriend too! If I'm lucky, I'll have two books out.

As for Hello Future Me—YouTube channels are constantly in a transitional state, changing to adapt to the new online environments they find themselves in. My channel has been gradually changing to represent more educational content in the form of the *On Writing* series, and that does seem to be the way of the future for me. I shouldn't think I'll wholly stop making theories or lore videos, but ultimately, I really enjoy the educational tilt my channel has fallen into over the past few months, and I shall continue to let it do so. 🐉

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**We would like to thank Tim for taking the time to be a part of this issue of Worldbuilding Magazine! You can find him on [YouTube](#), [Twitter](#), or [Facebook](#).**

**If you would like to share your world in an upcoming issue of Worldbuilding Magazine please [email](#) or contact us on [Discord](#).**



# COMMUNITY MAGIC SYSTEMS

Magic Prompt Response

Curated by Adam Bassett and BH Pierce  
Foreword and art by Adam Bassett

During development of this issue we teamed up with Inkblood Writer's Guild and invited our communities on Discord and social media, to submit to us some details on their magic systems. We've chosen a few and are delighted to present them! From living masks to divine codes, there's some truly inspiring ideas here.

## Alzamastry

By Lisa Galbraith

Alzamastry is an integral science in this alternate version of our 18th-century Earth. The energy that powers alzamastry is produced by ghosts. As ghosts walk toward a gate to the afterlife, they convene in great highways of the dead. All these spirits moving across the world give off an energy known as vesanmer. Crystals placed along these highways absorb the vesanmer that passes over them. Alzamatrists in this era have not yet developed a microscope powerful enough to understand the connection between which crystals can be used, but only crystals within the hexagonal crystal system can be used. This includes emeralds, aquamarine, some types of quartz, and many others.



Once a crystal has been charged, it is known as a pathstone. A pathstone can then release the stored energy in a variety of ways. An alzamatrists controls

I'd like to extend our thanks to everyone who took the time to submit their magic systems to us. It was a lot of fun reading through them. We may be doing something akin to this in the future should time and space allow, so keep an eye out for more community projects!

how a pathstone releases energy by carving formulas into the crystal. Simple commands can be written in any language, such as "light" or "heat," but for complex control, one must use a language called Babelian, or lingua dei. Using this language, an alzamatrists can give more nuanced commands that can do things like regulate interior heating in a home, create force fields, fire cannons, or even manipulate the weather.

Thought to be either the language of God, or the language spoken by all humans before the Tower of Babel, this language has been reverse-engineered from only a few sources. A significant branch of alzamastry is linguistics, as experts attempt to decipher more of the language from the roots they already know. Complex grammar forms are not yet known, meaning all commands must be rendered in simple sentences or phrases that still leave no room for ambiguity. The art of creating a formula to carve into a pathstone could be seen as a cross between linguistics and computer programming.

Alzamastry has significantly impacted the history of this alternate Earth world. One of the biggest changes occurred in the Maya civilization in the 8th-century where a doctor discovered how to use pathstones to target and destroy the "evil spirits" living in a sick person. Flash forward to the arrival of Europeans, and the indigenous knowledge of curing viral and bacterial diseases made smallpox a minor issue. In the present 18th-century, indigenous civilizations remain in power across most of the Americas.

Pathstones have also led to much earlier inventions of technologies. What we would recognize as a railroad analogue first appeared in the mid-18th century, and Paris was illuminated by streetlights as early as 1678. An earlier industrialization also kickstarted the women's rights movement in the 17th century.

## Bonded

By Tristen Fekete

Bonded is a title given to persons who can manipulate Gate Energy using their connection to one or multiple Demons. The first Bond dictates the general type of manipulation and further Bonds build on that power depending on the abilities the subsequent Demons have. This energy originates from the Gates—bridges between the world of humans and that of the Demons. Becoming Bonded is an immensely difficult task requiring young humans passing through a Gate, offering pieces of their bodies as liability, then locating and Bonding with a Demon. Should a person fulfill this task, their Demon will reside within their body until said person dies or exceeds energy usage past what their bodies can store. When a Bonded dies, his or her Demon(s) will return to their realm. However, if a Bonded uses all the Gate Energy at their disposal, their Bond can be severed, killing the Demon(s), or both die in the process. Bonded can freely manipulate Gate Energy as their Demon did and enter and exit Gates as they please.



Image by Tristen Fekete and Adam Bassett

When activating their Bond, a person takes on characteristics of the Demon(s) they Bonded with. For example, a person Bonded with a reptilian Demon will shrink or enlarge as per the original size of the creature, rapidly grow scales, develop

lengthened fingers and toes, as well as numerous other minute changes when activating it. This change comes as a result of the body being a bridge between human and Demon, allowing the use of the Bond's ability. Abilities vary between even Demons of the same species and revolve around environment and body manipulation. A sand-dwelling Demon could wield (aside from the obvious sand manipulation) wind or stone manipulation, camouflage, moisture absorption, or heat radiation abilities. Each Demon can only possess a single ability, and humans with multiple Bonds possess one per Demon.

Many Bond Candidates fail. It is common to see people missing extremities, limbs, organs, and facial features. While undergoing the test is optional, many cultures view it as a right of passage. Some will only accept Bonded leaders while others may view them as members of high society, chosen ones, or gods. Others see Bonded as ordinary people with extraordinary capabilities, and still others fear them.

## Evoirs

By Aaryan Balu

Evoirs are, simply put, a precise language of shapes which can channel magic into various functions. In the city of Coriau, the language of evoirs has been monopolized by the aristocratic class to maintain absolute dominance. While certain classes of people might be given specific evoirs to practice until perfection—a dock clerk, for example, may train with an evoir to lift a heavy cargo platform—the fundamental grammar of the language is a closely-guarded secret, scarcely understood by most. What an Evoir can do varies wildly with relative skill levels—from explosive traps to amplification of seed size, the power is limited only by the skill, knowledge, and creativity of the user.

Structurally, an evoir is a circle inlaid with lines and curves that each represent a single concept or object. The fundamental fields (Grow, Attract, Perceive, Amplify, Connect, Transform, as well as their opposites) act as the "verbs" of the magical commands, which form the evoir's backbone. These can be shaped by the subject and object, which are the "nouns" (the range of which includes elements, metals, organic matter, emotions and sensations, physical materials, etc.). Modifications can involve size, shape, and trigger (like opening a door), as





well as more complex layering and connections. A sorcerer is limited by how much mental energy they can devote to activate or maintain various evoirs; a more practiced, efficient, or resilient user can use more powerful/numerous evoirs before burnout. Evoirs are exceptionally difficult to master and are almost impossible to create on the fly. This limitation encourages preparation and dedication, along with research into technologies and systems that can keep them sustained for longer.

Examples: An evoir to Repel, placed in the shoe, can be used for an enhanced jump. An svoir to Reverse-Amplify, strung via Connections around the room, can effectively soundproof it. Growth evoirs targeted with extreme precision can aid healing, while Decay can take life or destroy other evoirs.

The result of this system is a strong bureaucracy within Coriau made up of stratified levels of clerks with different "classified" levels of evoir knowledge. The more you need to do, the more you know. Meanwhile, the nobility maintains a vise grip on industry thanks to the wealth and esteem provided by their magic. The result for the lower classes is stagnation and a growing separation in levels of power and agency. These power structures face turmoil at the turn of the Industrial Revolution, which introduces new materials whose corresponding markings haven't been discovered.



## Kalma Magic

By Tina Hunter

Magic in the world of Kalma comes in three forms.

**Crystals.** Magic within *Vollonite crystals* remains inert unless acted upon by humans. By engraving one of the 24 magic sigils on the crystal that corresponds to the reality or elemental magic desired, any kind of magic can be obtained. Once a sigil is engraved, the magic must be activated with life force through the use of bloodletting (also known as feeding the crystal with blood). Animals are most commonly used to charge or feed the magic within the crystals; however, human blood does just as well. Note that usage depletes the crystal's magic, and it will need to be recharged.

**People born with magical abilities.** Commonly referred to as Inborn, each Inborn manifests a single random magical ability of the 24 types of magic (the same used in sigils). While an Inborn is highly likely to give birth to another Inborn, their



offspring are not guaranteed to inherit the same type of magic. Historically, Inborns have been royalty or upper-class citizens. However, in recent years, more non-hereditary Inborn have been born into lower-class families, resulting in changes to how the ruling class handles them.

Most Inborn find they have better control over their abilities when they use their hands to direct the effect, though such gestures are not required. In fact, many great Inborn have been able to control their abilities without even maintaining eye contact. Only force of mind/thought is required. A person casting the magic can maintain it as long as the individual has the strength and energy to do so, since this type of magic still requires life force.

## Magical locations throughout the world.

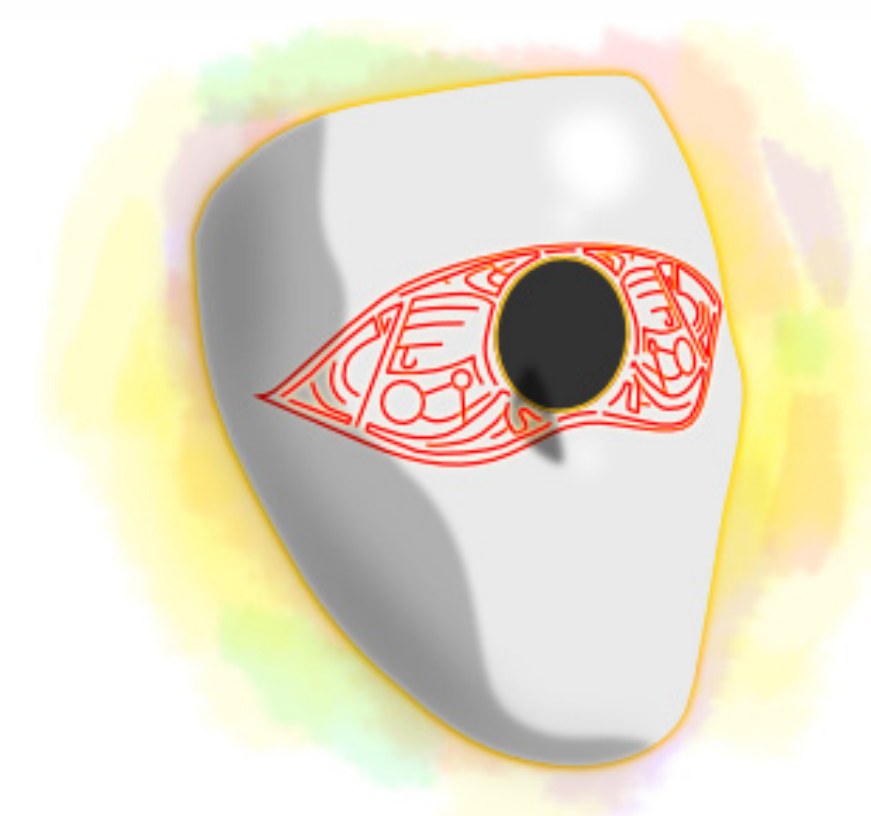
There are four locations, all mountain ranges, where the crystals and stones have magical effects on the immediate environment. Any sigils engraved on these crystals and stones do not produce any kind of effect. These mountain ranges have either sound or gravity magic, and due to the environment that the magic produces, inhabitants have developed regional mutations. An example would be the Drake Burg mountain range. The lighter gravity of this region causes an increase in size to all inhabitants, including the Drakar (nicknamed Giants) and their massive dragons.



## Mask Craft

By Winter Child

A gift from malicious spirits, this magical process gives the user the ability to control the senses of others -- at the cost of their essence. While



carving a mask from a special fey wood, the maker imprints their intent onto the item, and imposes upon it an idea of which sense this mask will manipulate. This manipulation can be as broad as sight or taste, or as specific as thermoception, the sense of temperature. The design of the mask must also reflect its domain, else its use will be distorted and unpredictable. Masks of sight should feature eyes, for example. The combination of these, the maker's willpower and the design of the mask, will sap some of the essence from the user and use it to fill the mask with its power. This always manifests physically in some way. One who has made a mask of tongues may find themselves with less of a tongue themselves when their craft is complete.



But there is danger in the masks -- they carry living essence, and thus are living. They aren't individuals or sentient beings. Rather, they are a living shard of willpower, devoid of thought, seeking only to dominate and use their power. The wearing of a mask allows it to force itself upon one's mind, attempting to take over the body of the wearer. Should it succeed, it will twist and deform the body in order to better fit the half-realized image it has of itself. Wearers who succumb to their masks become monsters with hallucinatory power and nothing but the desire to use it.



## Niôr/Invocation

By Biscuit

Invocation, or Niôr as it is called in-universe, is the natural process by which Mankind manipulates and controls the world. Reality is maintained and controlled by the Divine Simulation, which could be considered as something like the Matrix, a sort of grand computer that is part of everything. When an event or object is no longer required by the Divine Simulation, such as a wildfire being put out, the code related to that event or object is deactivated and disposed of. Because of damage done to the Divine Simulation eons ago, there is a backlog of deactivated and corrupted code that must be contained in a very specific section of the Divine Simulation. Mankind possesses an inherent connection to this realm, and it is through their souls that they are capable of pulling out pieces of deactivated code and reactivating them.



This is done by the usage of Divine Runes, with each Divine Rune having their own collection of code. For example the rune of Fire allows an Invoker to create and control fire. Runes can also be conditionals, for example. Prescribing a rune of fire onto a piece of a building before connecting it with a rune of conditioned wetness will lead to the activation of the rune of fire, setting the building ablaze, so long as both runes and the connection between them remains perfect.

Because Invocation is unnatural, in the sense that no mere mundane creature should be able to control reality, the processing of Invoking eats away at the source of Mankind's power; their divine flesh and blood. Constant usage of Invocation causes the skin to crack and vanish in flashes of crimson lightning; however such painful limits can be surpassed by acts of cannibalism. In the process of cannibalizing their fellow Humans, Invokers consume the sparks of divinity within their soul, increasing their own power and connection to the Divine Simulation.

Humanity possesses this divine connection because their ancestors, Primordial Man, consumed the eldritch flesh of a treacherous divine being. This connection with reality means Humanity has near unlimited potential, allowing them to skip over technological boundaries and conquer their non-divine rivals.



# THE LIMITS OF MAGIC

Magic

Theory

Systems

Cosmology

Mythology

Terry Herc

In a world where magic is real, what prevents witches and wizards from becoming almighty beings? What keeps these magical mortals from attaining unbridled, godlike power? How is it that the world is not torn asunder by these tyrannical spell-throwers? Perhaps your world *is* tormented by such malicious forces, but even then they need some sort of tether to keep them grounded. Good worldbuilding has constraints, if not to keep your creation from flying apart, then to keep the story interesting and filled with challenges.

Understanding what limits magic in your world is essential to establishing consistency. A magic system with rules and limitations can provide a solid foundation on which to build your world, as well as the stories you place within it. Whatever your character's goal, be it selfish or just, no journey goes unimpeded. Stories thrive on conflict, and the possession of magical ability does not change this. While mundane problems may not trouble a typical mage, magic itself can prove a tricky and inconvenient endeavor. The way your characters can (or can't) access magic makes for a fantastic obstacle between them and their goals, especially where magic is necessary to realize their desires.

Barriers to power can be grouped into six common categories: location, knowledge, patron, materials, capacity, and time. Some limits may make for more effective stories. When considering each type of barrier, ask yourself how these might work for you, and how you can use these limits to create a more consistent world.

**Locations:** In some worlds, magic operates by flowing through the fabric of reality. In your world, this might be represented by monuments and locations that can channel energy, such as pyramids, towers, or geoglyphs. Magic might even come from areas of natural beauty like mountains, lakes, or forests, and they could fill your world with relative abundance.

Here, the origin of power is in the physical location. Proximity might affect the strength of spells, and casting them may not work from further away. In some sense, a mage is only powerful if they have access to a place that channels arcane energies. If the location is lost or inaccessible, this creates a roadblock for the character and could become a plot-related hurdle. Controlling or restricting access to these places may be important to your characters. Having magic rooted in a physical place allows for conflict to revolve around it and creates an anchor point for your story.

An example of location-based magic appears in the collectible card game *Magic: The Gathering*. Players cast spells using a resource called mana, which they receive from a special type of card called "lands." Some cards provide lots of mana, and more powerful spells require more mana to cast. The works of Alfred Watkins describe another kind of location-based magic called ley lines. In this concept, invisible conduits of energy flow through locations and can be drawn on to produce magical effects.

**Knowledge:** Some say that knowledge is power, and in a world where magical power must be learned that isn't far from the truth. Knowledge is embodied by specific spells, rituals, words, and motions, attained through study, reflection, and practice. Spells can be created or woven together, and only those with the required knowledge can wield magic.

Knowledge-based magic is akin to science, and in some sense it follows the scientific method. Combinations of motions, objects, and words are tested and the results of these magical experiments are documented. A collection of dusty old tomes might represent the body of magical knowledge in your world. However, if lost or eradicated, then all that magic must be rediscovered.

The system of magic that appears in the *Dying Earth* novels by Jack Vance is characterized by this



limitation. Magic users in Vance's world must read and prepare spells in advance, committing them to memory for a one-time use. Constant study is necessary to replenish the use of magic in this kind of world.

**Patron:** A patron is a magical being who can bestow their power upon another, allowing characters to gain access to magic through this relationship. A patron may not always have a character's best interests at heart, for they could be a devious demon-god just as easily as an angel from the seventh heaven.

Patronage is limiting in two main ways. The first reason is that if the patron disappears or revokes their good will, the character loses their magic. It is, ultimately, a gift. The second reason is that the power given must always be less than that possessed by the patron. If it could be greater somehow, then that implies that the power of the patron has come from some other source, and that other source would be the true limit.

The warlock's pacts found in the *Dungeons & Dragons* tabletop roleplaying game are an example of magic bestowed by an external force. In this world, powerful entities provide characters with access to magic. In exchange, the patron might ask the character to perform certain tasks with implications beyond simple understanding.

**Materials:** Traditionally, this would be the "eye of newt and toe of frog" of Shakespeare, or a powerful magical tool like the wands of *Harry Potter*. In this sort of system, magic comes from ingredients or objects. In the absence of these resources it is impossible to perform magic. Thus access to materials, like special powders, gems, rings, liquids, and elements, is the true measurement of how powerful a sage can become.

This might be akin to chemistry or alchemy, and could go hand-in-hand with knowledge based magics. At its heart, it is the combination of physical things that creates the power; there is perhaps a word or ritual to bind them, but in the center are the ingredients themselves. Someone may be prevented from performing a huge magical feat because they do not have the right shaped crystal, a particular kind of dried herb, or a suitable sacrifice.

J. R. R. Tolkien's popular works make use of several magical artifacts, notably the One Ring, which

is most fully described in *The Lord of the Rings*. Created by the Dark Lord Sauron, the ring allows the wearer to control the wills of other susceptible individuals. In Tolkien's works, the possession of the ring and its eventual destruction are the driving forces of the plot and characters.

**Natural Capacity:** In your world it may be that only some entities have greater access to magic. Perhaps dragons and elves have innate magical abilities due to their ancestry or spirit. Maybe only certain groups can develop magical skills due to their heritage or birthplace, and other groups lack this inborn quality. Whatever the cause, some beings can use magic while others cannot.

Capacity-based magics are exclusive by their nature; either it is in you or it is not. However, in your world it may be possible for a character to augment their pre-existing magical capacity by shedding their body, opening their mind to the edges of reality, or some other process of transcendence. These changes may come with risks like caster burnout, madness, or self-immolation. Similarly, a character could experience changes that reduce their ability, making them mere mortals.

The *Wheel of Time* series by Robert Jordan includes a source of energy called the One Power. Individuals who can access it are called Talents, and only they are born with the capacity to weave this power into magic, which may come with dangerous consequences.

**Time:** With all the variety already mentioned, it may simply be that time is what keeps wizards from attaining godly powers. There might just not be enough time to visit the sacred places, acquire the necessary knowledge, gather the exotic ingredients, bond with the wisened patron, or perform the esoteric ritual. It could be that the mortal body just cannot live long enough. Or it could even be that magic is only accessible at certain points of time, such as a full moon or planetary alignment.

The passage of time could also have a significant effect on magic in your world. Magic could be unstable and susceptible to decay like a living thing. It could be that magic is strongest only at certain intervals, and can only be used when the time is right. Your characters may need to wait before they can use magic, or maybe they are in a race against time so they don't miss their opportunity. It could even be that time itself is the source of magical energies, and by controlling time a wizard can weave the most powerful spells.

The television series *Avatar: The Last Airbender* makes use of magic with variable strength over time. In this world magic users can control one or more of the four elements; air, earth, fire, and water. Through the course of the show it is revealed that fire magic grows weakest during a solar eclipse, and this becomes a major plot point in the story.

**Consistency in Magical Systems:** Beyond the magic possessed by an individual character, consider what holds together the system of magic as a whole. What is the source of magic in your world? Is it an innate part of the fabric of the universe? Is it bestowed by the gods? Is it connected to one's lifeforce? Consider how the source of magic imposes limitations on what it can do as we move toward one final point, which is consistency.

Having a consistent magical system in your world involves deciding what it can and can't do. Understand how magic is created, and how it can be shaped and manipulated. When you know why your magic works, you can then apply that to your characters and their motivations. Keep in mind that your characters may not know what is possible or impossible, and this disconnect is something you can reveal to your audience. A misunderstanding can make for an effective story, if your audience understands why something does or does not work.

Consistency is an important pillar of world-building, as without it stories won't hold weight and will easily fall apart. Creating a magical system with an internal consistency makes for a stronger story. Your audience can suspend their disbelief about the source of magical energy, but the inconsistent application of your rules for magic will create a disjointed world.

Strive for consistency, it should be one of the primary goals when you create. Your world and your characters will be stronger for it. 🐉

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# SANDERSON'S LAWS: BUILDING A MAGIC SYSTEM FOR STORYTELLING

Magic

Theory and Analysis

Fantasy

Aaryan Balu

If you've spent much time in the fantasy/worldbuilding community, it's likely you've come across the name Brandon Sanderson or his seemingly endless collection of books, worlds, and magic systems. While Sanderson has done a whole lot of giving back to the community (between [lecturing at BYU](#), updating his [blog](#), and co-hosting a [Hugo Award-winning podcast](#)), I want to dig into what he calls "*Sanderson's Three Laws of Magic*"—that is, tools for worldbuilding magic that can be used to create more engaging and exciting worlds and stories.

Of course, as Sanderson himself says: none of these laws are absolute. Whatever gets you excited, gets your butt in the chair and worldbuilding, is the law you need to follow. These guidelines, however, are widely applicable and can open whole new dimensions to your stories and worlds.

## Sanderson's First Law

***An Author's Ability to Solve Conflict Satisfactorily with Magic Is Directly Proportional to How Well the Reader Understands Said Magic.***

As frequenters of Worldbuilding Magazine, it's likely that you've got tons of ideas for your magic system: where it comes from, what it can do, and who can use it. You may know the personalities of every god that walks the earth, and exactly how many midichlorians are required to get you into Hogwarts, but when it comes to telling stories in these worlds (whether in novels, RPG campaigns, or just talking your buddy's ear off) this first rule is a useful one to keep in mind.

Here, Sanderson denotes the difference between a **hard** magic system and a **soft** magic system, with the distinction coming from how...well, *magical* your magic is. Sanderson's own systems tend to lean toward hard magic: distinct rules and a clear

understanding of the mechanics allow characters to use magic to solve their problems in a believable, satisfactory manner. His *Mistborn* books contain arguable his hardest system ever, with the wicked powers of *Allomancy* often being described as almost video game-esque. With the rules clearly defined, Sanderson proceeds to write intense, complex action scenes that make full use of the rules he's set up. And for many, this blend of magic and action can be exhilarating to follow.

Why do we often have such a visceral response to a hard magic system? There's an innate sense of satisfaction that comes with watching somebody work within a ruleset we understand. Jackie Chan movies are delightful because, as inventive as he might get, we know he's working with just his body and his environment. A street magician is only engaging because we know she's not *actually* manipulating reality; she's just skilled at sleight of hand. A hard magic system takes this principle and applies it to a fantasy realm. Getting a rogue out of trouble by having him slink in the shadows will delight a reader as they experience the character's competencies; getting a sorcerer out of trouble by using her long-practiced flight spell will do just the same.

With all that said, plenty of stories rely on a soft magic system—your average spellcaster or Force-wielder uses nebulous and mysterious arcane magic to do some awe-inspiring things. Those stories are delightful in their own right, primarily inspiring a sense of wonder in the reader. That's an emotion that's fueled the fantasy genre since its inception: the ability to step into a new world full of mystery and inexplicable forces is a huge aspect of the escapism that we're all looking for in our epic worlds. At its best, soft magic is vast, awe-inspiring, and humbling, inspiring the sense of universal mechanisms beyond our control and understanding.

But there's a tough balance when it comes to using this style of "anything-is-possible" magic: one of the main criticisms that's been lobbed at fantasy in general has been the very idea that *anything is possible*. Need a getaway? Teleportation spell. Need to break a lock? Lockpicking spell. Or, even better, teleport-spell your way around the door!

If this sounds like a bad use of magic, it absolutely is. *That's because it doesn't follow Sanderson's First Law.*

While we know the source of magic in Tolkien's *Lord of the Rings*, we never fully know how it works on a mechanical, spellcasting level; only that it's an awesome, mysterious, and works on a massive scale. But this ambiguity isn't ever used cheaply: Gandalf doesn't use it to simply turn the Balrog into a kitten or call the Eagles for an express ride into Mordor. Tolkien is careful never to let the magic solve his narrative conflicts; at least, not without a great cost. In doing so, he avoids one of the biggest storytelling sins of all—*deus ex machina*\*. Problems are solved on a very human (or Hobbit, as it were) level.

The more you let your characters (and readers) know about the workings of magic, the more they can do with it. It's Chekhov's Gun; if your character uses a tool—magic, technology, or a gun on the mantel—to get out of conflict, then the character's awareness of that tool needs to be established beforehand. On the flip side, the less the reader understands the less magic can be used to solve plot problems in a way that feels satisfying. The same goes for sci-fi technobabble; if we understand the mechanics of a system, then those tools can be used. Even in a James Bond movie, we need to see the gadget in his pocket before he can use it to escape from whatever crotch-laser or shark pit he's managed to get himself trapped in.

## Sanderson's Second Law

### Limitations > Powers

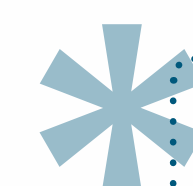
Another law that holds true for storytelling in general. In fantasy it's tempting to build a magic

system of epic proportions, complete with godlike powers and a massive scope. But how many times have we seen the knight in shining armor who can do no wrong and lose no fight? Or the D&D power-gamer who rolls up a flawlessly optimized, Lawful Good Paladin to stomp through the game? Story—and interesting worldbuilding—is about conflict, which stems from flaws. There's a finite number of powers in the world, but an infinite number of unique limitations.

When talking about magical flaws, the most diverse source of powers has to come from superheroes. For example, consider some of our favorites: Spider-Man, the Hulk, and Batman. While the power to fly is cool, there's something viscerally fascinating about the physics of Spidey's web-slinging. While the Hulk has immense strength, his limitation stems entirely from the fact that the rage is unchecked and potentially catastrophic; it's that Jekyll-and-Hyde dynamic that makes the character worth following. And Batman is...well, he's Batman. He's a human who dresses up like a flying mammal and takes on a huge variety of superpowered and non-superpowered villains.

For worldbuilders, though, the limitations of a magic system can often have profoundly interesting effects on its societies and characters (more on that in the Third Law). For an offbeat example, the manga/anime *Fullmetal Alchemist* revolves around the idea of equivalent exchange: "*To obtain, something of equal value must be lost.*" This limitation which drives the quest of its protagonists, Ed and Al, as they struggle with the value of human life being greater than the sum of its parts. Brent Weeks' *Lightbringer* magic system can only be used a limited amount before the user goes insane, so the society develops the *Freeing*: a yearly religious ceremony where magic users, too close to madness, engage in a celebratory feast before voluntarily submitting to death.

When it comes to powers, comic books and fantasy have pretty much tried everything under the sun. What makes the power unique and fascinating is what you can't do—or *what you must do to achieve it*. Anybody can build a story with an invincible character who wields an invincible



**Deus ex machina:** "God from the Machine", a plot device where a problem is abruptly resolved by an unlikely occurrence or character. Originally named after the use of a crane to introduce actors playing deities in Classical Greek theatre.



magic system. We call that a Gary and/or Mary Sue, and we hate them.

So what are some practical ways you can incorporate limitations? There are a few here that can help get the ball rolling—the key is to make them feel natural and organic within the world.

- **It makes you tired.** “Old reliable”—the mana meter. A good way to handwave various power levels is to have magic work like a muscle; some are more gifted than others, and you can work to increase your capacity. I recommend combining this with other limitations, though.
- **It makes you unstable.** Power corrupts. Psychological consequences of magic lead to a true balancing act; is it worth madness madness? What choices do people make under these conditions, and what does that say about what they’re willing to risk?
- **It physically hurts.** Make the characters work for it. The consequence is immediate and tangible. Not so great for the sense of wonder, but it could be interesting.
- **It has a high barrier to entry.** One sloppy line and the rune blows up in your face. Want to cast a spell? Get ready for years of study and a society that organizes itself around the highly educated.
- **It requires finite/perishable resources.** Suddenly resource management becomes a source of tension. It works both on a macro level (we need to restock on handwavium, guys!) and a micro one (I need to conserve my handwavium during this fight!).
- **It requires a sacrifice of life.** Blood, flesh, soul, whatever. Make it cost something huge.
- **It’s tied to a specific trigger.** Maybe the magic only works when your character is angry. Maybe they can only super-jump when they’re drunk, or when they’ve recently been around a dog.
- **It can be negated.** Sanderson defines this more as a “weakness” than a limitation, but it’s nevertheless useful. Kryptonite is a good example.

Bottom line: Flaws drive plot, and make a magic system unique. Once you’ve got a seed for a cool power (flight, talking to animals, or good old-fashioned spellcasting), take some time to sit down and figure out: what are your magic’s *limitations* (what it can’t do), *costs* (what you lose by using it), and *weaknesses* (where it gets completely defeated)? As

a bonus, tying these limitations into your plot and worldbuilding can make the world feel even more real, as we’ll discuss with the Third Law.

### Sanderson’s Third Law

#### Expand What You Already Have Before You Add Something New

It can be tempting, as a writer and worldbuilder, to think that bigger is better; that every society might need its own distinct style of magic—or religion or geographic features or historical events or technological advancement—in the name of worldbuilding. In truth, less is often more. Magic and worldbuilding are a web of ideas and events that span through a massive period of time and space; it follows, then, that some of the most fascinating aspects of the world can come from pulling a single thread somewhere down the line and considering as many ramifications as possible. Sanderson himself puts it best:

Often, the best storytelling happens when a thoughtful writer changes one or two things about what we know, then extrapolates purposefully through all of the ramifications of that change.

Extrapolation based on small changes demonstrates a thoughtful understanding of the mechanics of worldbuilding and the web-like structure of the craft. The same rule holds true for geography, culture, and history as well. Do you need a dozen landforms scattered across the map, or eleven distinct cultures with different origins and histories? This is the real meat of worldbuilding, because it’s where the magic and the world intersect. Sanderson focuses on three key words: *Extrapolate*. *Interconnect*. *Streamline*.

#### Extrapolate

These are the “*what if?*” questions that we ask ourselves. How does your magic affect the uber-rich and the ultra-poor? How does the presence of a physical god affect the world’s religions and cultures? This is probably one of the most difficult—and most rewarding—aspects of worldbuilding, because the interplay between magic and society is one of the most powerful aspects for creating something unique. The same way that a mountain mining town and a tropical city will develop differently due to their respective resources, the way

a world and civilization responds to *your* magic system is an excellent opportunity to create something wholly new.

A fantastic example of this comes in the form of the show *Avatar: The Last Airbender*, which manages to almost-flawlessly integrate its magic and culture to create a truly lived-in world. From architecture (the icy structures of the Water Tribe or massive walls of the Earth Kingdom) to technology (the Fire Nation’s hot air balloons), the cultures of *Avatar* are blended seamlessly because the show’s creators allowed the magic to shape the people.

The bottom line: *What happens as a consequence?*

#### Interconnect

Let’s say you want to broaden the scope of the powers. Is there thematic interconnectedness? A single power source? Sanderson himself excels at this—*Surgebinding* in *The Stormlight Archive* has ten magical “Surges” that are fueled by stormlight, and each of the ten orders of magic users has access to two unique Surges. *Mistborn*’s sixteen powers were conceived to fill the roles of a heist crew, and are fueled consuming different types of metals. In fact, Sanderson’s love for interconnectedness goes so far, he’s got a unifying theory of magic that underlies every story in his universe, the *Cosmere*, the discussion of which could fill an entire dissertation.

Bottom line: the result of this is a world that feels more realistic: Our existing world is incredibly complex, but it’s also governed by fundamental rules that unify the variation we see. Biology can be explained by chemistry, which in turn can be explained by physics (and as with everything, there’s a [relevant xkcd](#)). In the same way, the interconnectedness of powers and limitations leads to a world that feels more cohesive and believable, and makes magic less of a “kitchen sink.”

#### Streamline

Don’t use a new thing when an old thing will do. It can be illustrative to look at how different groups of people face the same challenges and resources. A mark of good worldbuilding and storytelling is efficiency: how many purposes can you make a single power source serve? A single religion? A single character?

Sanderson’s debut novel, *Elantris*, and the related novella *The Emperor’s Soul* demonstrate this principle. In these stories, the primary magic known to the kingdom of Arelon is called as “*Aon-Dor*”—drawing specific shapes in the air to channel magic to create intended effects. However, several other nations exist in the same world, each with their own magic system derived from the concept of shapes; *Dakhor* monks have arm bones twisted into specific shapes that grant powers such as durability and teleportation, *ChayShan* is a complex martial art that magically enhances strength and grace, and the Rose Empire’s *Forgery* uses deliberately-shaped “stamps” to magically alter an item’s identity or history. Thus, although the source and origin remain the same, the method of accessing magic each say something different about the culture that uses it.

All in all, of course, these are just guidelines; a framework that may or may not be useful to wrap your brain around building a magic system. But they’re useful tools to keep in mind, from someone who certainly seems to know what he’s doing. And if these laws still sound too stuffy or prescriptive for you after this article, Sanderson has you covered with his Zeroth Law: *When in doubt, err on the side of awesome.* 🐉

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# MAKING MAGIC: ANALYZING SPELL-BASED MAGIC SYSTEMS

Magic

Theory and Analysis

Fantasy

Ianara Natividad & Noah L.

## Introduction

Magic has remained a staple of fiction throughout cultural history. Beings who possess fantastical magical power fill the annals of mythology and legends. Ancient gods altered their own physicalities and created new beings. Geoffrey of Monmouth's iteration of the wizard Merlin delivered prophecies and moved massive stone monoliths using his powers (feats also harkened to by later depictions of Merlin). During the Renaissance period, German scholar Heinrich Cornelius Agrippa penned the *Three Books of Occult Philosophy*; the work included his findings on different types of magic as well as magic's relation to religion and divinity, among others. From the mystic orders of the Middle East to the panics of purported witchcraft in the western world, magic (especially perceptions of it) has touched cultures all around the globe and sparked imaginations over generations. Prominent authors, such as J.R.R. Tolkien, C. S. Lewis, and J.K. Rowling, perpetuated magic's presence as a plot device or underlying backbone of worldbuilding in modern fantasy literature. Though a powerful storytelling tool, magic may operate differently within each work, but a common trend appears in the presence of rules or a system that governs it.

When working magic into a world, a worldbuilder faces the dilemma of developing a corresponding system. But, what is a magic system? For the purposes of this article, a magic system refers to a system of powers (whether supernatural or otherwise) that serves as a moving force within the world. From an in-setting perspective, magic's impact may mean altering, if not breaking, the standards for reality; for an author's purpose, it can serve as a prominent plot device to build or move the narrative. Ultimately, the magic system "has to have rules."<sup>1</sup> No matter the form, the worldbuilder establishes as many or as few guidelines as needed to make it work, perhaps to varying degrees of transparency to the audience.

Spell-based magic is arguably one of the most popular, if not most recognizable, magic systems. J.K. Rowling popularized a form of spell-based magic in the *Harry Potter* series. However, decades prior to Rowling's fame, spells and spellcasting had already gained immense traction in entertainment culture through its appearance in the game of *Dungeons & Dragons* (D&D). With video games' rise, developers of games such as *The Elder Scrolls* capitalized on the established trope of spell-based casting by utilizing spellcasting mechanics in their works.

Dissecting a spell-based system entails understanding what defines it, its limitations, and the diversity of its sub-systems. Based on this analysis, a worldbuilder can then determine the pros and cons of using a spell-based magic system for their setting.

## Putting the "Spell" in Spell-Based

According to its name, a spell-based magic system is defined by its users invoking and manipulating magic via spells. So then, what are spells? The spell is the "how" of a spell-based system. Spells refer to sequences of actions that can cause magical effects, and spellcasting refers to the act of carrying out those sequences. Most commonly, spells mean uttering strings of characters, words, or phrases, but may also include moving one's body (such as with hand or wand gestures).

In *Harry Potter*, wizards and witches utter verbal spells while wielding a wand, sometimes accompanied with specific movements—for example: "The swish and flick!" of the Levitation Charm. The various spellcasters in D&D and similar games use any combination of verbal incantations, hand gestures, and material components (naming only a few possible requirements) to invoke magic. In D&D 5th edition (D&D 5e) specifically, a mage

can cast a spell called Fireball by uttering verbal phrases and gesturing with their hands (or appendages) all while holding a "tiny ball of bat guano and sulfur." Each spellcasting system will have its specific definition or structure for spells, though the overall premise remains constant through different works.

## Common Limitations of Spell-Based Magic

Rules for a magic system can include limiting how magic manifests and gets used. How magic manifests addresses the scope of magical capability in any given setting. The rules of spellcasting may lean toward how magic is restricted.<sup>2</sup> Magic in any given setting will impact the perceptions regarding the efficacy of mundane means. Limitations diversify magic systems from one another (as will be further discussed later), and they explain why magic has (or has not) replaced certain "normal" methods of accomplishing goals in life. Most often spellcasting limitations take one or more of the following forms: special tool and material requirements, verbal chants, and energy.

### Special Tool and Material Requirements

Special tools refer to items consistently needed to cast spells which tend to be iconic of the system. The worldbuilder decides how necessary special tools are to manipulating magic, whether vital to casting or simply an aesthetic alternative. For instance, the wand is iconic to spellcasting in *Harry Potter* as well as necessary for most wizards. However, the idea of special tools isn't limited to just wands. In *The Elder Scrolls V: Skyrim*, the player can use staves to cast spells outside their usual skill. In D&D, dedicated spellcasters may require magical focuses to use their powers, which come in the form of staves, crystals, and even symbols representative of the gods.

Compared to special tools, material requirements are expendable or niche in their use. D&D 5e's spell system allows the usage of specific ingredients for spells. This approach contrasts with the use of focuses as a blanket material component. For example, a druid could use a caterpillar cocoon to focus their magic and cast the *Polymorph* spell. Often, these ingredients aren't expended, so a caster can use them repeatedly. In other scenarios, the game requires material components with notable gold (currency) costs. A cleric can only cast the *Raise Dead* spell when they expend 500 gold pieces worth of diamonds during casting. Unless the

cleric is extremely wealthy, they cannot just resurrect creatures on a whim. It could take months to save the money for components, building a buffer period into the spell without explicitly stating so.

Component limitations provide a physical cost to spellcasting. Tools may prove a one-time investment while material requirements need constant replenishment. Furthermore, spell-based systems can contain both to differing degrees. Tools and materials in spellcasting have a lot of potential variety that can define the aesthetics and economy of a spell-based system.

### Verbal Chants

Verbal chants provide a direct, often conspicuous spellcasting method. The basis for incantations can depend on the world's lore. Verbal chants pose another way one might limit how mages cast their spells since they require that a caster have an understanding of the language, the ability to speak, and the time to do so.

In *The Elder Scrolls V: Skyrim*, player characters use magical Shouts that are exclusively cast through verbal components based on the ancient in-game language of dragons. However, if a character is gagged (as seen in the opening sequence with an imprisoned user of the Shout) or otherwise loses their ability to speak, they cannot utilize this magic.

Similarly, Christopher Paolini's *Inheritance Cycle* features the "Ancient Language," which was once spoken by all beings. Ancient figures had tied this language to magic, and in subsequent generations, mages harnessed its power to cast spells. Each word in the language represents specific magical feats and requires extreme mental focus to enact a word on a specific creature or object. Mispronouncing a word or otherwise failing to grasp the language's lexicon led to dire consequences, such as spells failing or backfiring on the caster.

### Energy

The final way to limit spellcasting is the application of "energy," which measures raw magical power. The amount of power that a spellcaster can tap into or utilize dictates the extent of their abilities. A worldbuilder designs the nature of this energy to fit the world's narrative, possibly inventing their own terms to address the phenomenon. Some narrative works give looser definitions while



others apply a definite mechanic. The worldbuilder can account for how this power turns into magical effects as well as develop a process or hierarchy for spellcasters to progress.

Works often quantify energy into a finite mechanic (such as the usage of “mana” in *World of Warcraft*) for worldbuilding, narrative, gameplay, or all of the above. In *The Elder Scrolls*, spells rely on magicka, the world’s version of magical energy. Magicka limits how often one can cast spells and locks away more powerful abilities through steeper costs. This requirement forces a mage character to continuously acquire magicka. Having only a small amount of this energy will limit the character only to basic spells, such as *Flames* and *Ice Spike*, while a larger pool would unlock more intensive spells, such as *Fire Storm* and *Blizzard*.

In Jack Vance’s *Dying Earth* series, mages must prepare spells, each of which produces only one specific effect, in advance. Multiple uses of a single spell would require preparing it multiple times. Spells effectively serve as magical “ammunition” that disappear once cast until they could be prepared again. Therefore, spellcasters must have the foresight to know which spells they will need and how many. The more magical power a mage possesses, then the more spells they could prepare in a given day. This spellcasting system became more popularly known as “Vancian Magic.” D&D has utilized Vance’s concept of prepared spells through its editions, albeit to differing extents.

The base rules of D&D 5e use an altered version of the energy concept with its spell slot system. Each spell and spell slot receives a rating from 1st-level to 9th-level, and cantrips (rated at 0-level) are at-will spells that do not cost slots. Casters can use a slot to cast a spell of equal level or lower, and, within any given time, they have a

limited allotment of slots. This allotment increases as a mage grows more experienced in the game. Higher level spell slots can invoke exponentially more potent magical abilities, just like gaining magicka in *The Elder Scrolls*. Once the caster expends a spell slot, they must rest (usually for eight hours or so in-game) to recover their power.

D&D 5e’s spell progression essentializes the power of spellcasters into a form suitable for gameplay, but the narrative implications of their magic appears in the spells they gain access to. For example, wizards have the largest spell list of all the classes but can only use the arcane. Arcane magic focuses on “hacking the multiverse” as Jeremy Crawford, the edition’s lead designer describes it. As the game’s premier magical scholars, wizards learn spells through time and study. Since they independently gain their magic, wizards aren’t directly beholden to any greater entity. Their abilities alter, if not break, the multiverse’s laws for reality. On the other hand, clerics and druids tap into the divine powers of gods and nature, respectively. Someone or something bestows magic upon a divine spellcaster, and the nature of their spells tends to be more nurturing. Clerics and Druids can sustain and manipulate life energies, including healing and resurrection, but they usually act according to the will of their benefactors.

### Diversity in Spell-Based Magic

Defining the rules of the spellcasting process provide a major avenue to diversify spell-based magic systems. Spellcasters are powerful and sometimes dangerous cooks who use spells as recipes for magic. Spells add structure and consistency to the extraordinary, often reality bending powers that magic invokes. More often than not, mages follow set methods for how they cast and what their spells accomplish. Thus, diversity exists in three major areas: the source, act, and effects of spellcasting.

#### *The Source of Spellcasting*

The source of spellcasting refers to the origins of magical power in two aspects: how it exists in any given world and how individuals harness magic. Figuring where spells come from and who can cast them are the first steps to defining and diversifying a spell-based system. Worldbuilders can answer the following questions, among others, to define how individuals harness magic:

- What is the world’s source of magic? Do the world’s inhabitants know where it comes from?
- Does everyone in the world have access to magic? If not, then who does?
- Is magical capability innate, acquired, a combination of both, or something else entirely?
- Does an individual need training to use magic? If so, how does one acquire such training? Are there any other requirements to spellcast?

Different worlds may have their own sources for magic. A supreme being (like a god) could have granted part or all of its power to civilizations, allowing them to use spells. Perhaps magical energy simply exists much like the laws of physics do in the real world. Magic could even be an aspect of the universe that goes beyond comprehension or cannot be attributed to a single phenomenon. The source is a macro-level aspect of the magic system that a worldbuilder can leave as vague or detailed as necessary.

For instance, D&D’s *Sword Coast Adventurer’s Guide* explains that magic exists through “an essential element of the universe” known as the Weave. While not inherently magic itself, the Weave serves as the raw power behind magic. Phenomena which adversely affect the Weave also influence magic’s stability throughout the realms.

*The Witcher* series also features mages who tap into a primordial source known as Chaos. The Chaos is never fully explained, though it is generally seen as a dangerous, often destructive force. Similarly, multiple theories exist regarding the origins of magicka in *The Elder Scrolls*. Magicka could be the remnants of a dead god, residual energy from the ancient beings that created the world, or the life force of deceased organisms. The mages in each setting do not fully comprehend the nature of their magical sources, yet they still harness magic despite the potential dangers.

Moreover, a world where only people of certain bloodlines or biological aptitudes can cast spells will develop a different dynamic for magical usage compared to a magic system accessible to everyone. Magic may be more valued or feared due to its rarity in the former case. Otherwise, when everyone has magical powers, society may apply magic during everyday life. After all, who needs matches when a snap of one’s fingers creates a small flame?

In D&D, sorcerers derive their powers from different types of ancestry, and their spellcasting capabilities reflect these origins by being more spontaneous. In contrast, wizards typically study and use spells over years of practice. Within this system, different casters can rely on natural-born ability or training to use magic. However, spellcasting in another world may not have such clear cut or varied distinctions over who can use magic.

#### *The Act of Spellcasting*

Diversity in the act of spellcasting can come from the different combinations of actions a magic user carries out and the time it takes to do so. The following questions provide a basis for diversifying a system based on the act of spellcasting:

- How do spellcasting styles vary between individuals or groups of individuals, if at all?
- What preparations or components, if any, are needed to cast a spell?
- How long do spells take to cast? Do casting times change based on the spell, the spellcaster’s skill, or other factors?
- Are there any means to circumvent traditional spellcasting? What are they?

Some answers may overlap between systems, but the overall combination will seldom be duplicated. Regardless of how the answers interact with other facets of a spell-based system, they should follow some standard or consistency.

The D&D 5e ruleset has full spellcasters (which refer to magic users who have access to the most powerful levels of magic) separated into different classes: the bard, the cleric, the druid, the warlock, and the wizard. As mentioned earlier, while both druids and clerics have access to healing spells, they draw their magic from separate entities. Wizards differentiate amongst themselves by committing to a particular arcane tradition that reflect their magical specializations. Every caster has a specific narrative as to how they manipulate magic, yet the class-specific spell lists have overlapping options. The spell list similarities imply that different types of casters have their own standards or methodologies on how to produce the same magical effects.

Classifying mages based on spellcasting style can also lead them to have certain social dynamics. Mages who cast in one way may have a rivalry with a group of a different spellcasting style, or society





at large can hold particular views for each type of spellcaster. In the *Dragon Age* series, the maleficarum refer to mages who pursue dangerous and forbidden styles, such as blood magic. The maleficarum are actively hunted by the game's Templar Order, and their stigmatized reputation casts a negative light on even other non-hostile mage groups.

Furthermore, a worldbuilder can determine how vital certain components are to spellcasting. For instance, if casters lack the proper materials, then they may have limited or no magical capability. The wizards of *Harry Potter* provide a notable example, as most who do not have their wands cannot cast spells or use magic at all. Similarly, mixing the ingredients incorrectly (uttering the wrong words, as in *The Inheritance Cycle*, or saying them out of order) may invoke unexpected effects, if not cause magic to fail entirely.

Time's impact on spellcasting also affects the dynamics of a spell-based system. Perhaps a spell that allows a truncated verbal sequence does not take as long to have an effect. Maybe another system reduces the time needed to cast when a mage possesses certain items. Instantaneous casting versus long drawn out rituals; whether spells must be cast during certain hours, or certain days, or times of the year—these examples show how time matters in spellcasting. When mages can invoke powerful magic with a single, short drawn utterance, they not only seem more powerful, but the world at-large may find them more threatening. However, the spellcaster who must remain meticulous and in isolation to even tap into their powers will likely fear others rather than be feared as they attempt to use magic.

Variation in spellcasting does not have to eschew pre-established rules for spells. However, in any given spell-based system, exceptions may exist that alter the time or components needed for casting. In *Harry Potter*, the verbal sequences seem uniform throughout the wizarding world, but multiple characters exhibit the ability to cast without speaking by instead mentally focusing on the desired spell. The sequences still exist, though the stipulations to cast them have changed. The verbal component was removed and, by extension, the time to cast the spell decreased. Exceptions, loopholes, edge cases—they all can define and diversify a spell-based system as much as its actual rules and structure. However, even breaking the system requires some semblance of consistency. Preferably this rule breaking parallels pre-established

methods so as not to seem arbitrary.

### *The Effects of Spellcasting*

The possible actions and sequences used for spellcasting can potentially be infinite. Endless variations also exist for the produced magical effects, though distinct spell-based systems may have overlapping qualities. On the macro-level, the answers to the following questions help to define and diversify spellcasting effects:

- What are the upper and lower bounds for spell potency?
- What qualities are used to categorize spell effects?
- What limits a spell's effectiveness? For example, can spells affect only certain types of matter or invoke a set number of effects?
- Can spellcasters modify the effects of spells? What variations exist in their effects?

D&D spells can manipulate most facets of reality (e.g. producing telekinetic effects, harnessing elemental energies such as fire or water, healing, creating matter, etc.). The game clearly defines the upper and lower bounds of magic in play with its spell slot system, as previously explained. The ratings represents a scale that goes from replicating mundane capabilities to exceedingly reality-shattering feats. To give an idea of the power curve, one cantrip (or 0-level spell) called *Prestidigitation* can clean or soil objects within a cubic foot of volume while *Demiplane*, an 8th-level spell, allows the caster to create their own spacious pocket dimension. A more narrative-driven approach may rely less on clear cut lines of separation between spells, though a sense for potency could end being a measure of relativity between magical feats. Thus, a worldbuilder should have an idea of what their system's spells can accomplish compared to the overall power scale of the setting.

Spells can also have categorizations based on their effects' qualities. Some of the more common classifications may include range of effect, targeting, and duration, among others. Multitudes of categories potentially exist, depending on how specific a worldbuilder wishes to separate spell effects. The above examples cover general classifications, but categories can be especially particular (such as if a spellcaster must conduct a spell at a certain time of day, use specific materials, etc.).

D&D notably categorizes its spells into schools of magic based on the effects they invoke. Spells that provide protective or defensive benefits fall under the school of abjuration; spells that create energy, which includes most offensive spells and healing, fall under the school of evocation. Video game series like *Dragon Age*, *The Elder Scrolls*, and *The Witcher* also utilize the concept of magical schools or branches. These categories help to focus players' understanding of how magic works in each setting. Generally, the method by which a worldbuilder sorts spell effects can help characterize the system.

Each spell in D&D also specifies who or what it can target. Sometimes spells can only affect the caster, though they will more often be able to target other creatures. Creature types are a categorization that represent specific groups in the world (examples including humanoids, beasts, monstrosities, undead, plants, and more). Certain spells can only target specific creatures, such as *Hold Person* only affecting humanoids. Sometimes spells even have special effects when used against a particular creature type; for example, *Blight* deals the maximum possible damage against plants. However, not every spell will target specific creature types, so this form of targeting presents a niche way of categorizing spells.

A prospective byproduct of spellcasting variation surfaces in the style of the produced effects. A system could have a mechanic where a mage adds effects or alters the potency of a spell by supplementing regular casting with other components (such as items, additional verbal chants, or other requisites). These enhancements may still need to adhere to the specific rules for that spell's overall structure, though. For instance, some of D&D's magical implements include wands or staves that expand a caster's magic repertoire. These items usually grant mages access to spells they normally cannot use (akin to *The Elder Scrolls*), though the spells can only be cast at a fixed level of power.

Spell variations can also appear overtly with the effects' aesthetics. The *Patronus* charm (a spell that "produce[s] a silvery-white guardian or protector, which takes the form of an animal") from *Harry Potter* is a famous example. Although the spell has consistent functions, the *Patronus* manifests as different, albeit not always unique, animal forms for each caster. In contrast, a system that allows spells to have only one set manifestation, such as

in Vance's *Dying Earth*, will likely only have one appearance for each spell. These two examples appear on the extremes of the spectrum. Creating a unique spell-based magic systems may mean employing combinations of restriction and malleability in spellcasting styles and effects.

### **The Pros & Cons**

Up to this point, this article looked into the nitty gritty of spell-based systems: what constitutes a spell-based system, its limitations, and diversity between sub-systems. However, as the old saying goes, knowing is half the battle. Now it is time to look into whether a worldbuilder may or may not want to use a spell-based magic system in their work.

#### *Why Use a Spell-Based System?*

- **A legacy through the ages.** From ancient myths to modern popular fiction, spellcasting holds a longstanding place in literary history. A worldbuilder should never lack material for inspiration. Narratively, spell-based systems will likely invoke familiarity with audiences, possibly reducing the degree to which one has to explain or describe its magic.
- **Structured as needed.** A spell-based system's most defining characteristic is that it uses spells to manipulate magic. While spells often come in the form of verbal chants, they can include other components. A worldbuilder possesses flexibility in how to structure spellcasting, whether as simple or as complex as desired.
- **Unlimited power (maybe).** The exact nature of magic will vary based on the world and narrative. Spell-based magic systems do not inherently limit the type or magnitude of the magical effects they create. The worldbuilder has the freedom to adjust their system's power level as necessary. The added flexibility can also make pulling off magic-based story hooks more viable, if not easier.
- **The value of words.** Spells are vital to this system, and they can also serve a major role in developing, or even defining, other facets of the world. Spellcasting's methodology (from verbal chants to gestures and materials, if applicable) can hold deeper meaning and reflect the world's lore. Perhaps magic comes by using the language of a dead empire, or maybe spells are the product of the cultures that use magic.



- **The looming past.** Spellcasting's prevalence and popularity can backfire. A worldbuilder may find it more difficult to create a spell-based system utterly distinct from its predecessors. One also risks subconsciously deriving facets of other settings' magic systems, which may make the work come off as a copy of another. Creating a truly unique spell-based system may take more effort to accomplish.
- **Too much freedom.** When the presence of spells defines the system, it leaves a lot for the worldbuilder to fill in. Designing unique spellcasting will demand attention to methodologies or stipulations for magic. If the system comes off as overly simple or too easily understandable, then the audience may find it boring. On the other hand, exorbitant amounts of detail can end bog down spellcasting with complexity or inconsistencies, not to mention the worldbuilder's potential time investment for that effort. By leaving too many gaps, one risks creating a spell-based system that seems incomplete.
- **The benchmark of reality.** Magic forces a worldbuilder to consider their world's standards of reality. Depending on the power of spells, a worldbuilder should always be prepared for the question, "Why not just use magic to do [x]?" Spellcasting, in all its possible versatility, typically subverts and breaks pre-established laws of existence. As a story device, spellcasting can also be an avenue for plot holes or narrative inconsistencies because of the scope of what magic can do.

## Conclusion

The vast capabilities of magic can make designing a spell-based system daunting. Fortunately for the worldbuilder, spellcasting is among the most prolific types of magic systems due to the prevalent mythos of mages, exacerbated by popular fantasy media. The first step to designing a spell-based system lies in understanding its various elements, such as limitations and the aspects that help create diversity. Still, challenges will exist in creating something unique yet comprehensive. If you need a magic system with a rich repertoire for inspiration that provides variety in its application and effects, then look no further than spellcasting. 🐉

## Glossary

Dungeons & Dragons (D&D) - A fantasy tabletop role-playing game typically played in a group of two or more people.

Mage - A common, umbrella term in fantasy settings for individuals who can use magic.

Tabletop Role-Playing Game (TRPG) - A form of role-playing game where groups of players create characters and describe those characters' actions via speech or writing, often within a particular setting.

## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> Sanderson, Brandon. "Sanderson's First Law." *Brandon Sanderson*, <https://brandonsanderson.com/sandersons-first-law/>. Sanderson delves into three laws of magic overall; aside from establishing the need for rules, the first law also discusses the different ratings of magic systems, from soft to hard magic.

<sup>2</sup> Herc, Terry. "The Limits of Magic." *Worldbuilding Magazine* 2.6 (2018). Web. Another article in this issue of Worldbuilding Magazine specifically addresses magical limitations; recommended for further reading.

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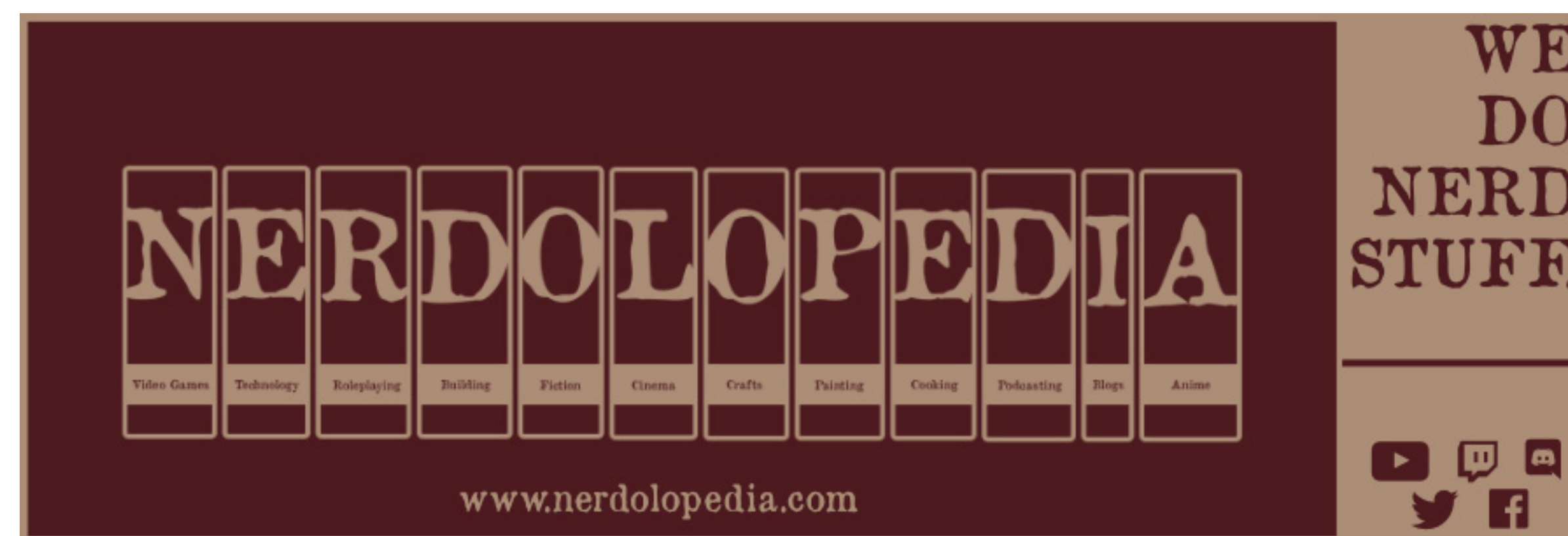
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# THE NEWSROOM

Magic Fiction Fantasy (Low) Explicit Romance

Daniel Baker & C. Lynn Baker  
Art by Anna Hannon

The bright morning sun slowly crept above the green mountains lining the horizon. As it rose higher, its rays cast down on Jasper Valley. Johannes Cain, responding to the warmth, stretched his hands over his head. This daily ritual was accompanied by a crackling sound from his poorly-rested joints. He took in a deep breath before standing on the cold floorboards of his home. He proceeded to the bathroom, taking each step with care. There, Johannes mulled over the findings of the previous night, splashing water on his face. He shuddered at the cold touch. Rather than making him alert, it served only to add to his feeling of dread.

Back in his bedroom, Johannes carefully selected a well-made, but unassuming, charcoal suit coat that lacked the elaborate filigree of his proper wear. He wore it open over a plain button-robe, completing the look with an old, but well-maintained, four-tailed necktie. Slinging his drawstring satchel over his shoulder, he walked over to the full-length mirror in the corner. After adjusting his necktie and taking one last apprehensive look at his reflection, Johannes stepped through the mirror.

The bustling noise of the copy floor engulfed him on the other side. One of his coworkers—a squat man in an ill-fitting neophyte’s robe, carrying a crate of learning-stones and some sheafs of parchment—noticed his appearance and greeted him.

“Good luck on tonight’s show!” said the young man.

“Sure. Thanks,” Johannes continued without paying him much mind.

Johannes searched the floor with hopes of finding his best friend and confidant, Sachia. A look of discontent rested on his brow, as she wasn’t at her normal station. He took a brief glance back at the neophyte and briefly delved into the young devotee’s memory. An image flashed into

his mind—Sachia had been through here mere moments ago, heading up the stairs. Johannes, destination in mind, proceeded to the mail floor.

As he walked up the stairs, Johannes caught a glimpse of her gold and emerald robe flowing above him. He quickened his pace, catching up to his compatriot.

“Sachia!” Johannes said, tapping her back. “Can I ask a favor of you?”

“What are you offering in return?” Sachia inquired, whipping around. “I think you’re talented enough to break that necromancer from the east end of Apvant before it becomes the City Guard’s jurisdiction. You find out what he knows, and we’ve got the most valuable story of the year.”

“I’m not an investigative journalist. Aren’t interrogations and criminals your thing?” Johannes asked. Sachia leaned in, her stern look indicating his excuses wouldn’t satisfy her. “Deal,” Johannes conceded. “I just need you to cover my morning report. They’ve given me an interview with...” Trailing off, he took a moment to recall the morning guest. “Some conjuration mage. Wants to promote his new tome. The notes are on the set. I appreciate it. Thanks.” They shook hands, and Johannes turned and disappeared to his office.

The office was fully illuminated as he stepped inside. The viridescent crystals around the room instantly dimmed at the impatient wave of his hand, and the grain of the office’s planked wood walls softened. Johannes never understood who was responsible for the increased illumination in his office while he was out. It was such a waste of valuable mana.

He slowly removed his charcoal suit coat,



hanging it on the wooden stand that supported his crimson pointed hat. Lifting the hat, Johannes admired the ornate star and moon designs reminiscent of the yonder years. Though he was born centuries later, he secretly felt a connection to that golden age. He wished the pointed hat were more fashionable today. If so, he wouldn’t just keep it on the stand in his office.

After donning the hat, he took a quick admiring peek back into the mirror on the wall. For just one brief moment, he had forgotten the burden of last evening’s events. The four-tailed neck piece was removed and draped on the stand as he remembered it all once more.

Johannes settled on his bench and adjusted his cushions. The bentwood ash piece was perfectly contoured to allow the most comfortable recline. It was Johannes’ favorite way to ponder and plan. As he began to replay last night’s troubling interview over in his mind, he stared at the detailed carvings of bromeliads in the crown molding of the room.

The disaster in which Johannes had found himself entwined innocently began the previous night. Lyrus Daygazer, the archdirector of INVOKE Thaumic, had arrived on the set for the evening’s interview. This highly-publicized and anticipated event was strategically scheduled for the evening of the Trade Guild’s Day of Disclosure. On this pivotal date, every company operating in Akanar presented their financials to the public at the Trade Guild Hall. The most important day in ten years for the entire financial world allowed Johannes to present a quaint human interest story: **What Makes the Man?** That night he was supposed to tell the story of the most important man in the world—the headpiece of the world’s largest mana generation and distribution company. On that night, everything went wrong.

The interview had started out well—routine, even. Johannes and his guest were introduced by his broadcast partner as thousands of people gazed into their crystal balls and scrying pools to watch. Johannes began with friendly greetings and then dove into the questions.

*Daygazer: It might be prudent to stick around until the doors close, but I have a feeling things are going to turn out well for me and INVOKE Thaumic. I’d much rather spend my time here answering questions.*

*Cain: I see. You’re very confident. Consult any oracles lately?*

*Daygazer: Ha! If prophecy were a real branch of magic, then I would only be in control of the second largest industry in the world rather than the first. Oracles can’t tell you any more than you can find out with careful planning.*

*Cain: And what is your stance towards planning? How do you get all the details right before acting?*

*Daygazer: All the details don’t have to be right. The most important part about planning is setting your initial course of action, but having contingencies. Your initial plans will never be completely successful, so you have to be able to respond when things go wrong and guide yourself back into the correct path. Be adaptive.*



**Cain:** So, I'm sure all our viewers are dying to know the answer to this one. What would you say makes you so successful, and what steps can we emulate if we're looking to make it into business?

Daygazer: I consider myself to be a self-made man. I started out with very little. I worked in a marketplace stall just outside the Capitol City. We sold refurbished goods of all sorts, from leather clothing to steel weaponry and even a wand or enchanted gauntlet sometimes. I made a small sum off of

bucklers. An even better opportunity came to me—a mining company who wanted to purchase mineral rights to the land. I had no interest in keeping it, as some diviners I had hired said there was nothing valuable to be found. I sold off the rights to them for 50,000 dinars. Too little, as they discovered an immense trove of heaven's shard! The business flourished, but abandoned the site during a harsh winter. I bought the company from their previous director. I named it "INVOKE Thaumic," and to this day I still harvest the heaven's shard and refine it into mana



adventurers looking to find their fortune in the Uncharted Lands. When I knew I wasn't going to get any further, I sold the stand and my workshop to a young up-and-coming Capitol politician.

Here's the important bit: if you're looking to make it in business, you can't be afraid to take risks. I made a purchase in the Uncharted Lands—250,000 acres. I thought I would simply lease it to a development crew to build outposts for trailblazers and swash-

potion, to be distributed to the good people of Aka-nar.

Cain: Very impressive, very intriguing story. I wasn't going to ask, but land prices in the Uncharted Lands aren't as low as they used to be, and eventually you will have used up all of the heaven's shard in your mine. Does INVOKE Thaumic have a long-term plan for maintaining that success? For example, sustainable mana sources? I know of one company that

promises they can draw unlimited mana from the movement of celestial bodies, I think it's called Celestial Sigils?

At the mention of his competitor, Daygazer had flown into a rage. "I really don't have time for this!" he shouted. "What do you think you're saying? If we can't stick to the contracted topic, then I have to leave." Daygazer disappeared from the set and left Johannes and his broadcast partner to conclude.

Johannes was torn from his contemplation by an abrupt knock. After stirring from his resting position, he walked over to the door. Sachia was on the other side.

"How did it go?" said Johannes.

"Well enough," replied Sachia. "The old codger with the new spellbook was such an interesting man to interview." Her voice was smoldering in heavy-laden sarcasm.

"I need to talk to you about something," Johannes said, before being cut off—a small shard of pearl on his desk was now spinning and rattling in its indentation, indicating he was being paged. "By Enlil! I have to go." Johannes dashed out of the room and into the hallway, quickly vanishing up the staircase at the end.

Johannes stepped into the office of the Editor-in-Chief, slowly intruding through the doorway. "Noah, sir. You requested me?" Johannes ventured.

"Indeed," replied the Chief. "You have an empty schedule for the Zenith broadcast slot. One of the members of the opinion panel has fallen ill. I need you to take his place."

Johannes stammered before accepting the task. "I'll do it." Johannes was, in fact, grateful to have such an easy assignment. All he would have to do is smile, nod, and occasionally make noises to the affirmative. Nodding and grunting would be easy.

With a gesture at his own head, the Chief asked one more favor: "Take that ugly thing off beforehand, won't you?"

A few minutes later, Johannes took his place on

the table, thankful to have the furthest seat from the host. To his right were a man and a woman he was certain he'd never seen before. Johannes wondered if they even worked at the news center. At the end of the table sat a presenter that Johannes knew, but not by name.

"The sun is now shining directly down on our beautiful town of Jasper Valley," the host began, "but today's story comes not from home, not from Apvant, not even from the Capitol. This event happened yesterday in the Uncharted Lands, almost twenty miles northeast of the Van Klaer Outpost. A small child, age eight, fell into a ravine near his family's cabin. No surveying efforts have made it out that far, so none of the family was aware of the dangerous chasm. Not to fear—a retired City Guard member from the Van Klaer Outpost heard the news, gathered her climbing equipment, and pulled the child out of the ravine by the end of the day! She brought along with her a priest from the outpost, who treated his injuries and expects the child to be happily running again, although hopefully with a more discerning eye.

"Now we turn to our guest speakers to hear their reactions."

The man was the first to speak, without even being introduced. "I think it's shameful," he commented, "that this happened in the first place. The Capitol needs to supplement the National Survey program and let our brave homesteaders be aware of these natural hazards."

"Thank you," said the host, "And what are your thoughts, Beth?"

The woman was the next to speak. "This is a perfect opportunity to improve communications between homesteaders and the nearby outpost. The child would have been rescued much faster had crystal chains been laid down to their home, and communications magicians say it wouldn't cost more than fifty dinars per household."

"Thank you." The smiling host then turned to address the final member of the panel. "And, Mr. Cain, what do you think?"

Johannes had not expected the presenter to know his name, having been a replacement. He cast off a small stupor and meagerly gave his thoughts. "It's... certainly a nice story." He adjusted his chair, pulling it closer to the desk. "A story of



selfless sacrifice. Risking one's life to save another. The Guard member should be applauded.”

Johannes was not asked anything else for the remainder of the panel; the two original members were left to argue which infrastructure upgrades should be made to best aid expansion into the Uncharted Lands.



After the broadcast slot had ended, Johannes found Sachia at her desk in the copy room. “Sachia, I still need to talk to you. Do you have a minute?”

“Absolutely,” she said with her trademark sarcasm. “I need to tear myself away from this intriguing investigation.” Now sincere, she confessed, “I really wish I could crack open the East Apvant case. Remember, you owe me.”

“You remember last night’s debacle with Lyrus Daygazer?” he asked as he moved files and drafts from a chair onto the cluttered floor, sitting in the only unoccupied flat surface near the workspace.

“Of course. You made a right fool of yourself.”

“That wasn’t the end of it. After that disaster, I

needed to get some air. I went outside and decided to stroll through the South Gardens. As I sat on a bench, a strange man approached me.” Johannes glanced around the copy room, painfully aware of all the eyes and ears it held. “I can’t tell you any more here,” he said. “Let’s go sit where we can converse alone.”

Sachia and Johannes settled into the records room in the basement, surrounded by crates of learning-stones. Each one contained a broadcast from years gone by, but Johannes suspected none held a story as interesting as the one he was about to tell.

“The man wore a common robe, opal-black. It made him very difficult to see against the night. The hood was worn in a fashion that I didn’t recognize, obscuring his face. As he approached, I was struck with panic. I attempted to sense his thoughts, but his mind was strong and prepared for such an intrusion. Still, he allowed me to learn his motive—non-hostile. The horizon was clear, and I relaxed slightly. He sat next to me on the bench, beginning to speak in a grating tone of voice. It...” Johannes tapped his fingers on his head as he took some time to consider the cause of the strange man’s tone. “It almost sounded like his throat or lungs had been burnt.”

Johannes continued to tell his story. “He pushed

his finger into my chest, saying ‘You have no idea what you’ve gotten yourself into. Lyrus Daygazer is a dangerous man at any moment, but you choose the Day of Disclosure to make him upset?’

“I stammered for a bit, trying to get out an excuse, but the man continued to talk. ‘You can call me Prospero,’ he said. ‘I know about your talent, your ability to tell people exactly what they want to hear. If you’re going to hear what I have to say, you’ll do best to make use of it.’

“At that moment, I was intrigued, but frightened more than anything. Although I wanted to leave, I knew I needed what information he had to share. Should this man be telling the truth, my life could be in danger. He said that when he was young, he had worked in a marble quarry far from here,” Johannes said gesturing into the distance, far from the records room. “One year, the foreman said they were moving out—there were far greater treasures to be found elsewhere. They set up in the Outlands, quickly beginning to mine heaven’s shard and sell it to the Capitol. The foremen and the site captain were so happy, they didn’t care that a small portion of the stock would go missing each day. One winter, the guardwall to the north was breached. The smell of brimstone on the wind made the cause obvious, but they didn’t have time to investigate the damage, nor who had laid the explosives. Creatures of the Outlands poured into the camp and the Captain was killed during the evacuation. His crew never mined there again, and INVOKE was established within the year.

“I guessed his point—‘Lyrus doesn’t like competition, and he’s about to eliminate Celestial Sigils as well,’ I said.

“He nodded, confirming my suspicions. ‘Smart man. Lyrus won’t be wanting much attention drawn to him.’” Johannes leaned forward on his crate, and with a pointed tone said, “That has to be why he was so upset last night.” Sitting back, he continued the story. “Prospero pulled something from his robe—I flinched and shifted back. However, my temperament was assuaged as he revealed the object to be an envelope.

“It was a missive addressed to Lyrus, taken off one of his couriers and replaced with a significant bribe to conceal its disappearance. It’s a confirmation of an assassination order. Prospero told me that the assassin is using a pseudonym, but the victim is the Director of Celestial Sigils. ‘The Guard

will be of no help,’ he told me, ‘but your news center can verify the seal on the envelope.’ Before I could speak again he bid me good luck, then vanished.

“I’ve had a horrible night, Sachia... I don’t know what to do.” Johannes reached into his robe and produced a small envelope bearing a red seal. “It’s authentic,” he said, “but I don’t read Rogue’s Cant.”

Sachia couldn’t help but reveal a grin of satisfaction. “The things you pick up while working with criminals. I’m glad I put in the time to learn it.” Sachia took the envelope, removing a small piece of parchment from inside. She began to read the letter, eyes racing down the paper. When she neared the end of the page, her look of concentration became one of astonishment. “This name, here,” she said, signaling to an incomprehensible collection of markings, “is the name taken on by the prime suspect in the East Apvant case.”

“The necromancer, then? We already have him. We can stop the assassination!”

“No,” she said, shaking her head. “This letter was sent long after the necromancer was caught. One of our working theories is that the pseudonym is used by all the members of their cabal. If that’s the case, the assassination is still going to happen.”

“What if we were to warn the director?”

“Trust me, that never works. If we tell the director, he’ll begin to act suspicious. Daygazer’s spies will know, and he will die anyway.”

“We stake out the Director’s home, then. Get ready to help if we see a break-in.”

“That won’t work either. This letter doesn’t list the date—all it says is, ‘the agreed-upon time and location.’”

Johannes dropped his head into his hands. “There’s no way to help him then.”

“For what it’s worth, Johannes, you’d have made an excellent investigative journalist. If you want to stop this,”—Johannes’ face began to pale as she spoke—“you have to break the news. You have sufficient evidence and credibility. You can do it tonight on your evening slot. The only issue—”





Johannes cut her off. "Is that I'd be the one to die instead." He walked out of the room before she could reply.

There wasn't time to cry, but he had to all the same. Negotiating agony and preparation, Johannes pulled himself to his desk to make a few notes for the evening report. Unsettled, but resolute, he knew what to do. He washed his face and put on his four-tailed necktie and charcoal grey suit coat, picking them up from where they lay on the floor. Tucking the notes into his inside coat pocket, he took one last glance into the viewing mirror and paused. Reverently, he bent over to pick up his crimson hat. He secured it on his head, turned the iron doorknob, and confidently stepped out the door.

Johannes looked directly into the recording-pearl. His creed was simple: always make eye-contact with either your guest or with your audience. Behind him, the amicable orange glow of the setting sun lit one of the news center's many control rooms. This sunset would provide a memorable backdrop for his program, and Johannes took it to be a sign of good luck. "Good evening, Jasper Valley!" 🐼

Johannes found himself frustrated with the penetrating light of the crystals in his office. He paced the length from the door to the small viewing mirror, back and forth. The reflection of his haggard figure brought a sick feeling in his chest each time he approached it, and he would quickly face the door again. His paces became heavier and heavier until the dust being shaken off of the floorboards collected on his shoes. The increasing force behind each subsequent heel-face turn finally caused him to lose his balance and plummet towards the floor.

Sitting up against the rough wall, Johannes placed one hand on his brow. It came off damp, and he ran it down his robe in disgust. With a labored rising to his feet, Johannes began to blaspheme the name of Enlil, as was his habit when distressed. He bellowed out curses, staggered across his office, and finally came to rest on his wooden lounge.

Now laying down, Johannes was able to feel the unapologetic hardness of the polished wood. This feeling exacerbated the incredible tension in his shoulders, and Johannes began to laugh aridly from his throat. "It's hopeless!" he cried. "It's unfair! It's absurd!" As he laughed, he twisted his torso forward, lifting his head off of the lounge. The nervous laugh quickly became an agonized scream, and Johannes swung his arm at the gnarled hat stand, bringing it and its contents to the ground. Kneeling beside the fallen stand, the tears began to fall.

## ART FEATURE: ANNA HANNON

## Interview

*Curated by Wynter*

I have always been a big reader. Stories such as *Lord of the Rings* and *The Dark Elf Trilogy* fascinated me, and I enjoyed getting lost in them. Then, one fateful day, I was invited to a 3.5e Dungeons and Dragons game! I was hooked immediately and have been playing regularly for the last thirteen years. I became enthralled with creating characters and weaving their stories with others. It was only a matter of time before I was creating the world they lived in from the ground up.

My art is deeply connected to worldbuilding. I'd even say worldbuilding is where all my inspiration comes from. I cannot draw or paint a character

or scene without knowing where it came from in a story or world. The characters in my portraits live and breathe within their own worlds—most from my own making. I enjoy crafting homebrew settings especially for RPGs and then creating art for scenes that I think are important for the story. I am currently in the midst of a personal project writing an RPG adventure module for the 5e D&D system that caters somewhat to my own tastes and centers around the city of Bridgewater. The world was once rife with magic, divine and arcane, but humans lost touch with those powers over the last several centuries. Still, creatures of myth remain, though only a few know of their existence. The







"Dana"

setting is low magic with a grim atmosphere, which I personally find most appealing and why I try to make artwork with a dark ambiance.

Since I moved from Windows OS to Linux, I began using Krita as my digital painting software of choice. The process goes roughly the same with each piece. First I like to sketch out a few thumbnails. You might think you have a solid composition in your mind, but breaking it down into five or more iterations really strengthens the final piece. Then I will gather reference material such as a character pose, textures for clothing, jewelry, etc. After that, I get the full-sized canvas ready and do a very loose sketch before going over it with a couple value studies. This phase lets me decide what sort of lighting scheme will work. For character illustrations I like to work from Clint Cearly's "Sweet 16" character lighting lesson. For the painting of Dana, for example, I chose a basic front light. In the story, she is meant to be a helpful character for players but it is difficult to determine her motives. This lighting is 'neutral', making it difficult to discern whether she is a villain or a hero. As minor as they may appear, choices such as these can help a piece immensely.

Next I begin to paint in values (usually in black and white) and build up my colors. As I mentioned before, each painting has a story: whether it be a character or a landscape. Again for Dana, I paid extra attention to the texture of her clothing to better give the feeling of ruggedness. There are wrinkles, dirt, and scars in the armor and a practical clothing design overall. Then I add in the little details: the wolf clasp to hint at her werewolf hunting background; the sword at her hip, nearly in darkness, to hint that she is a lady not to be messed with! 🐾

*Special thanks to Anna Hannon for letting us show her work. You can find more at her [website](#) and on [Twitter](#).*

*If you would like to be featured in an upcoming issue of Worldbuilding Magazine please [email](#) or contact us on [Discord](#).*







# EMBRACING NATURE: USING RPG MECHANICS TO INSPIRE WORLDBUILDING

Culture

Economics & Industry

Fantasy

Tabletop Gaming

Cathy, the Overprepared GM

In *Dungeons & Dragons* 4th Edition (D&D 4e), the game designers experimented with different sources of magic being an integral part of their mechanics, including their version of nature magic known as “primal magic.”

I absolutely loved this idea when I thought about it. In fact, I love nature-based magic and always have. Polymorphing into predatory beasts, communing with groves of trees, finding magic in the mundane and wonder in the wilderness—these are a few of my favorite things.<sup>1</sup>

I wanted to take one of my nations and really run with the idea of primal magic. I didn’t just want to pepper it with a few druids. I envisioned something analogous to steampunk instead, except with nature magic and mystic shamans at its base rather than clockwork mechanisms and mad scientists. Unfortunately D&D 4e didn’t really have a setting like that, so I had to build it from the mechanics they did have.

## Taking Stock

First, I needed to assess the existing mechanics that focused on primal magic. D&D 4e has an assortment of powers and rituals focused on natural animals, plants, poisons, weather, and, to a lesser extent, the physical elements. The bulk of material dedicated to primal magic was defining the classes (Druids, Barbarians, Shamans, and Wardens) and info to support them.<sup>2</sup> That was pretty much it.

<sup>1</sup> Feel free to sing along. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0IagRZBvLtw>

<sup>2</sup> Actually, they had the Seeker class, too. It’s famously weak among people who like 4e, so I converted it to an alchemist class, changed the magic source, and altered some of the powers. Long story. Anyway, for our purposes, pretend there are only four primal classes.

Unfortunately, the basic premise was a big hole in the system. The official 4e description for the source of the power stated only that it came from the primal spirits of nature. That’s the entire explanation. This idea sounded interesting to me at first, but it got fuzzy when I thought about it. The designers never really explained what the primal spirits of nature were, exactly how they granted power, or how the power they granted differed from non-primal powers. For example, the explanation doesn’t distinguish between a primal spirit of nature granting power to a shaman and a god of nature granting divine magic to a priest. I mean, I guess I could have just declared primal spirits to be intrinsically different from gods and arcane powers, taking the approach that D&D did. It’s sort of the cover-my-ears-and-chant-la-la-la approach to worldbuilding, but I thought it would be more useful to try to fill in that gap and see what I could deduce from the explanation.

Inspiration struck when I reread Lois McMaster Bujold’s *The Hallowed Hunt*<sup>3</sup>. In her world, there is a tradition called the “forest magics” which uses blood sacrifice to harvest magic from the blood and souls of living creatures. So for example, a mage might sacrifice a wolf to bind the spirit of that wolf to the spirit of a warrior. The recipient of the wolf spirit gains superhuman strength and stamina and a sensitivity to the world of spirits. Bujold elaborated on this idea, but the basis got my mental engine revving. It made me think of the ancient druids officiating over ritual sacrifices in the midst of Stonehenge.<sup>4</sup> Loving the image, I decided that the nation would be Celtic-flavored.

<sup>3</sup> Lois McMaster Bujold is a goddess of the written word, and if you are not intimately familiar with her work, I strongly urge you to stop reading this article and devote yourself to catching up on her oeuvre immediately. No pressure.

I brainstormed associations with Celts and thought about how I could incorporate them into the nation. Irish and Welsh names were easy to add. I could picture the natural environment, looking up images of the British Isles to find rolling green hills, shadowed forests, white cliffs, quiet lochs, rugged highlands, and cold bogs. Clashes with the Roman Empire figured heavily in Celtic history, so I decided to steal Roman history, politics, and military tactics for the invading nation to the west. I chose to organize the nation by clans since they featured prominently in ancient Irish society. Then I reskinned the gods to Brigid, Herne, Dainu, Dagda, and Taliesin rather than the Daughter, Son, Mother, Father, and Bastard found in Bujold’s books.

So, I had some worldbuilding seeds but had strayed a bit from the primal magic issue. Then one of my soon-to-be players asked me a very important question. “I’m thinking of playing a druid,” he asked, “How do druids fit into this world?” I wanted the four classes to feel distinct from each other yet connected to primal magic, so I took a few days to think through my feelings on the matter.

“Copying from one source can feel derivative, but copying a dozen sources and modifying them to fit together can build you something entirely new.”

## The Classes

### Shamans

I started with Shamans. In terms of game mechanics, Shamans are healers associated with spirits, which served them in and out of combat. They act as supportive magic users rather than physical warriors. I decided that in terms of the world, the shamans maintain the relationship

<sup>4</sup> Not that they did that there. Evidence overwhelmingly shows ancient Celts did practice religious human sacrifice, so it makes sense that druids would have presided over it. And I have no evidence they did so at Stonehenge, but that seems a great place to imagine it happening. “Did the Celts or Druids Perform Human Sacrifice?” Celtic Studies Resources, [www.digitalmedievalist.com/opinionated-celtic-faqs/human-sacrifice/](http://www.digitalmedievalist.com/opinionated-celtic-faqs/human-sacrifice/).

between clans and spirits. I had read a number of books where people who came back from clinical death gained the ability to see the souls of the dead, so I decided that’s how my shamans would get their power. To become a shaman, they had to die alongside a natural creature—sometimes an animal, but maybe an older shaman, or great tree, or something. The prospective shaman would need to gamble greatly by sacrificing itself to clinical death. Its spirit would float free from its body, letting it interact with other spirits. If it were able to forge a bond with a primal spirit and then return to life—perhaps resuscitated by someone else who oversaw the ritual—then it would revive as a full shaman with a spirit companion. It would retain the ability to affect the spirit world through its companion, and it would sustain the companion from its own life energies.

### Barbarians

So, that explanation could work for shamans. Barbarians would be easy, then. In the game, a barbarian is a brutal melee warrior able to both absorb and mete out huge amounts of damage. They’re defined by their “rages,” the game’s term

for heightened states that make them even more effective. Translating that concept into the world, I imagined that barbarians would be the champions and shock troops of the clans, exemplars of their fighting prowess and ferocity. I decided that they would get their powers the way Bujold described: by sacrificing the spirit of an animal into a warrior. The shamans, of course, would perform the ritual since they were the intermediaries with the spirit world. The rage states would signify times when the barbarian lets the spirit of the animal take over. The animals would match the clan totems (snake clan barbarians would bond with snake spirits, the horse clan barbarians would bond with horse spirits, etc.).



## Druids

In the game, a druid is a skirmisher that can shift between animal form and human form, summon animals, and cast spells that affect the battlefield. I saw a key to understanding the druid in another of Bujold's ideas, a hallowed beast. A hallowed beast is created by sacrificing the soul of one beast at the end of its life into another, transferring the wisdom and training of the old to the new over many generations. Eventually these beasts become something more than a beast, a shadow of a god or a beast-god. A druid is created by sacrificing one of the hallowed beasts and taking them into their soul through a ritual similar to the barbarian's—however the soul of a hallowed beast is much deeper in magic and harder to bond with. Potential druids do not primarily act as warriors but are chosen for their wisdom and fortitude. Rather than rages and battle strength, they gain magical powers.

Since druids can take on animal forms, it would make sense for them to act as the intermediary between the clans and the natural world in the same way that the shamans mediate with the spirit world. They would monitor the health of the ecosystems and befriend natural and magical beasts. If a basilisk or a family of griffons or a tyrannosaurus herd moved close to a village, it would be the druid's duty to decide the best course of action (Investigate? Chase off? Kill? Tame?) and pursue it. The druids would initiate young hunters, trappers, fishers, herders, loggers, farmers, vintners, and ranchers into their craft. They'd also decide what could be hunted or fished and when, and they could determine whether or not a part of the forest can be logged or turned into farms.

Perhaps most importantly, druids would be responsible for overseeing the great beasts. They'd breed or capture the beasts themselves, carefully tracking pedigrees and scouting new bloodstock. They'd choose and train their human caretakers and check in to see that the beasts were being properly reared. Conveniently, hallowed beasts also make a great in-game description for the beast companions from the 4e rule set. I didn't see any game reason for them to be tied only to ranger characters the way they were in the rules, so I altered the rules a bit to make them available to all primal classes.

## Wardens

So with the place of the druids fleshed out, only the wardens remained. In 4e, wardens are a defender class, melee warriors responsible for protecting other party members from harm. They don't get rages exactly, but they take on "forms" which give them special powers as they fight. The problem with that description is that it sounds like something between a druid and a barbarian with a slightly different tactical focus. I wanted to find a way to clearly differentiate them in-world.

After some brainstorming, I decided to start by differentiating the warden's magic from the druid's. Originally, both had a wide range of nature spells, but I reflavored some of each so that the druid's power focused on living aspects of nature: trees, thorns, claws, tentacles, and so on. In contrast, I specialized the warden's spells into the timeless, non-living parts of nature: weather, rocks, seasons, time, etc. These changes led me to another idea.

I could imagine gaining tiger powers by sacrificing the tiger and bonding with its soul, but what about control over the weather and mountains? You can't very well kill a rainstorm or a rock.<sup>5</sup> The sacrificing had to go the other way. I decided wardens were created when a person sacrificed themselves to the immortal spirits of nature. Sometimes the immortal spirit snags the soul as it leaves and reanimates the body, experiencing a mortal life for a brief few decades. With wardens, the primal spirit stays in control, but it has memories and feelings from the faded soul of its human companion.

Within the setting then, wardens would be fairly rare and treated with great respect. They'd personify specific places or concepts of nature, like Warden of the Winter Solstice or Warden of the Great Fens<sup>6</sup>. They might not feel beholden to any particular clan, but they would personify the relationships of the clans to the immortal spirits of nature and

<sup>5</sup> Well, technically I suppose there exists a monster manual somewhere that gives monster stats to rainstorms and rocks so that a party could fight and kill them. Nonetheless, for this setting I decided that rainstormicide wouldn't give you anything useful besides pure satisfaction and dry skies.

<sup>6</sup> Cathy the Overprepared GM. "Finding the Fens." *Worldbuilding Magazine*, Aug. 2018, pp. 18–22.

would protect their people against anything which went against the natural order. Their forms would then be really different from the barbarian rages because the primal spirit takes over. With wardens, the primal spirit is always in charge, and instead, the spirit uses its power to modify the host body while shifting into its forms.

## Rituals of Sacrifice

I liked how the ideas from Bujold helped flesh out the classes, but thinking about wardens led me to ruminate on non-living primal spirits and concepts. Did I want to go full on animist with my world and make it so that everything had souls? I toyed with that idea for a while but decided to go a slightly different route. All places would have some magical energy created by living beings, but this nation had been feeding its land for centuries. The holidays and rituals required sacrifices of blood, magic, soul energy, and lives on a regular basis. This made the land itself unique. Other nations may have some primal spirits, but this nation had a living land rich in primal power. In other regions, forests are just a bunch of trees, but in this land, the forest is alive and aware. Stepping into it is a completely different experience than anywhere else in the world.

To create a change on that wide a scale would require rituals on an equally immense scale. Not just the shaman class performing magic (because they could never be more than a tiny percentage of the nation's population), but something where a significant portion of the population was regularly contributing blood and energy. So I came up with the idea of the Great Hallowed Rituals. Ordinary rituals are things that an individual would use to get personal results: curing a person from disease or getting information from an oracle, among others. The Great Hallowed Rituals would involve the entire country participating together in an act of faith, community, mysticism, and sacrifice.

I wanted them to be tied to the seasonal cycle, so I decided on four great ritual celebrations, one for each season. Tales of Herne the Hunter and the Wild Hunt inspired me since it seemed to encapsulate the blend of nature and savagery I wanted.<sup>7</sup> I imagined autumn would feature the ritual of the Wild Hunt, when shamans would sanctify young men as hunters from sundown to midnight. Possessed, the hunters would be swept away by the Wild Hunt as they bled their energy into the land. One of the hunters would grow antlers and become

the Huntmaster, choosing the Wild Hunt's quarry. At midnight, the Huntmaster would die and the other hunters would return to their homes dazed, drained, and fuzzy on what happened.

Greek mythology provided the inspiration for spring, where young women consecrate the Wild Revel. From dawn to noon, they'd dance in a psychotic frenzy to awaken the fertility of the land. One young dancer would become the Maenad and grow a crown of thorns and flowers.<sup>8</sup> She'd direct the Wild Revel but in the end be torn apart by the dancers she led. Like the hunters, the dancers would return dazed, drained, and with little memory of the Revel.

Elizabeth Vaughan's *Chronicles of the Warlands* inspired the winter ritual, where I decided fathers and old men would participate in the Long March. From midnight to dawn, they'd walk a bright road only they could see. A few hours in, the walkers would be surrounded by the glowing, translucent forms of the dead who, for this one night a year, could keep company with their living kin. The last walker still marching at dawn would become the Gatekeeper. His body would turn to stone in order to guard the gate to the realm of death for a year.

I lacked a clear inspiration for summer, but eventually, I decided that if I wanted to have a mirror ritual to winter. To contrast the winter ritual's focus on endurance and the past, I needed a restful ritual with a focus on the future. So in the summer ritual of the Long Dream, mothers and old women throughout the nation would lay down in the sun to sleep. Most of the women would wake, burned and drained, having bled their strength into the land. However, vines and plants would smother and pierce one dreamer until only the barest suggestion of her face was left. For the rest of the year, she'd be the oracle for the nation, sustained by the plants that enveloped her until the death of the greenways in autumn.

<sup>7</sup> Britannica, *The Editors of Encyclopaedia*. "Herne The Hunter." Encyclopædia Britannica, Encyclopædia Britannica, Inc., 14 May 2007, [www.britannica.com/topic/Herne-the-Hunter](http://www.britannica.com/topic/Herne-the-Hunter). Geller. "The Wild Hunt - European Folk Myth." Mythology.net, Mythology.net, 14 Jan. 2017, [mythology.net/norse/norse-concepts/the-wild-hunt/](http://mythology.net/norse/norse-concepts/the-wild-hunt/).

<sup>8</sup> In the original mythology, the Maenads were frenzied followers of Dionysus, possessed by their god. Britannica, *The Editors of Encyclopaedia*. "Maenad." Encyclopædia Britannica, Encyclopædia Britannica, Inc., 26 Aug. 2010, [www.britannica.com/topic/maenad](http://www.britannica.com/topic/maenad).



## Consider the Implications

So far I had better integrated the classes into the setting and had a better idea of what the flavor of my nation would be, but I still hadn't achieved anything like the nature magic equivalent of steam-punk. So now it was time to look at the details I had amassed and think through their logical conclusions.

First, I looked at what sort of magic was common enough to be dependable. Shamans and druids have access to a free cantrip called animal messenger.<sup>9</sup> They can whisper a short message to an animal who delivers it to someone within a day's journey, and they'd be able to do this spell every day. So if even 1% of the population were a shaman or a druid (or maybe other magic users who learned the cantrip), even small villages would likely have a resident with the ability to communicate magically. It would create a sort of distributed communication network, like the internet but with birds and cats instead of computers. The day's journey put an interesting wrinkle on things though because it had two implications for long-distance communication. First, migratory birds would make the fastest and farthest-reaching messengers, but they'd be seasonal. Spring and fall would bring a flood of distant news, I imagine. Second, if you want the message to reach a distant goal, you'd have to set up a system to relay the message beyond the limits of the cantrip. It could take a while and it would have to travel from animal to animal, being renewed and repeated by spell casters along the way. Shamans and druids would know all the news. The best of them would probably be terrible gossips, knowing everybody's business and always on the lookout for the latest info to spread or use. They may constantly maintain their network so that they know who to contact to get information to the right place. They'd be better than the pony express for top speed, but each message would need to be very short.

Construction, farming, and other industries would rely on very different methods if they had access to helpful plants and animals as well as spells that could alter or enhance them. Animals, plants, and fungi fill in for a lot of technology/magic. For example, rampant blackberry and rose

bushes would form fort palisades rather than have wood cut and lashed together. Village buildings might be topped by living sod rather than thatched roofs. Plant signals might replace road signs. Sewer systems wouldn't dump stuff into the water system; they'd use natural filtration and active bacteria colonies to handle it, so druids would be sanitation specialists, too. Swarm druids would also be uniquely suited to pest control, not only limiting the loss of crops but also minimizing the spread of diseases that use vermin as carriers.

Actually, if they depended on the natural world and had spokespeople for it like esteemed wardens and druids, then they'd be both knowledgeable and protective of their ecosystems. They'd have a relatively low population density for their technological level but relatively high crop yield and health, which would imply either greater family planning or something else to cut down numbers. Humans might practice a lot of human sacrifice, widely use contraception, or kill each other a lot in battle. If the monarch has a cabinet, then the person in charge of wilderness areas would have more influence than in other lands and will likely have important coordination with defense, urban planning, and culture.

With druids changing to animal form, hallowed beasts running around, and everyone using animals to communicate, build, and travel, settlements and services must adapt to non-humanoids. Streets, transportation, lodging, and so on would likely have to be able to fit bears and other oversized animals. Eating establishments would need to be able to cater to a wide variety of palates. Animals would have to be treated as equals or at least have recognition under the law, though they may not necessarily be treated with kindness. People would be just as wary of the strange oxen in town as they would of a strange human, but they won't just immediately put a collar on it or roast it for dinner.

The natural seasonal cycles would become even more crucially important than in pre-modern societies. Modern tech insulates us from the cycles to a large extent, but a nation and culture built around primal magic can have technological advancements while breathing to the rhythms of nature.

On the other hand, the wilderness would have a very different connotation. It wouldn't be a fearful place of monsters as seen in medieval folklore. People who embraced nature magic would have a

different relationship with nature than, for example, historical Europeans. If we posit a technology based on primal spirits, then we'd have to rethink some of our traditional associations with nature. Primal wouldn't mean primitive, and natural wouldn't mean anti-human or anti-technology. Another shift in thinking is that, in D&D, druids have traditionally been cast as "true neutrals" in terms of good-evil and law-chaos dichotomies. This is an outgrowth of the idea that nature is a separate sphere from humanity, and that the good and law are human ideals. In a world where nature, culture, and technology are yoked together, this separation makes little sense, and proponents of nature could be as civilized, good, and lawful (or barbarous and chaotic) as any other segment of humanity.

## Takeaways

Now, my guess is that you won't have an immediate need to create a nature-punk nation based on D&D 4th Edition mechanics. Few people do. But you may want to look at the quirks in the mechanics in your own game and see what worldbuilding they may inspire. Regardless of the system you use, here's a quick take on my technique:

- Bujold is a brilliant goddess of writing and reading her books can change your world.
- More broadly, mix and match ideas from history, literature, movies, urban legends, and wherever else you feel inspired. Copying from one source can feel derivative, but copying a dozen sources and modifying them to fit together can build you something entirely new.
- Try to figure out where you don't have good explanations for something. Those areas can give you a lot of bang for your brainstorming buck.
- Sometimes you'll use mechanics to inspire worldbuilding, but sometimes that worldbuilding can also inspire you to tweak the mechanics. It's usually pretty easy to re flavor a power, spell, or item to fit your world without changing the balance of the rule set.

## Details in a nature-punk nation:

- Shamans return from death to mediate between the clans and the spirit world.
- Barbarians are warriors bound to a sacrificed animal spirit who serve as champions of their clans.
- Druids are wise folk bound to hallowed

beasts who mediate between the clans and the mortal natural world.

- Wardens are primal spirits who possess sacrificed warriors and serve as avatars of the immortal natural world.
- Animal messenger gossip networks would dominate communications.
- Nature magic construction methods would mean buildings are grown as much as built.
- Druid-run public health systems could be exceptionally effective.
- Politically, the equivalent of the Director of National Parks would be significantly more powerful and would likely have important coordination with defense, urban planning, and culture.<sup>10</sup>
- Settlements, services, and laws have to adapt to non-humanoids.
- The natural seasonal cycles dominate culture and affect technology more than we're used to.
- Primal doesn't mean primitive. Nature doesn't mean neutral. Natural doesn't mean anti-human or anti-technology. Clichés are fun, but you don't have to stick to them unless you want to. 🐾

<sup>10</sup> Australia has a particularly well-described page on their Director of National Parks. <http://www.environment.gov.au/topics/national-parks/parks-australia/director-national-parks>



<sup>9</sup> A cantrip is a small spell, learned early and cast without using up resources.



# STRANGE MAGIC

Fiction

Fantasy (Low)

Explicit

Romance

Adam Bassett

I tried to forget her after we separated—or rather, after she left me. It was an honest effort, filled with long and sleepless nights and longer days in which I could only think of sleeping. Once the initial sorrow passed, a heavy doubt remained. What could I have done different? Somehow this always seemed a profound question in the films. It really wasn't. Regardless, for the lack of anyone to speak with, I asked my cat this many times. He just blinked and meowed for food.

One afternoon, in the shade of an oak beside the river, I stopped to catch a view—the river gurgled and foamed over the stones that obstructed it—and ran a hand through the mud. It was cool to the touch. I dug my hands in deep and—arms now covered in a dark film of soil and clay—molded it until it resembled her, as best the river mud could. The act of creating the sculpture was enjoyable, though once it was finished, I felt all the guilt and doubts flooding back into my consciousness. I had no defense but to walk back the way I'd come.

Later that week, she passed the little house on a bike, hair streaming like ribbons in the wind. I knew where she would go. To Fort Williams Park, not far from the lighthouse. We could see the red roofs of the visitor center and museum around it. I'd gone there a few times as a kid with my parents and sister, took old college friends there who were visiting from out of town. It was where she'd taken me on our first date. Her favorite place, and through her eyes I saw the park in a whole new way.

We leapt and dove into the sea. As we fell she cast a spell on me, pressing her thumb against my forehead so hard that it hurt, then did the same to herself just before we struck the salty water. As the Atlantic swallowed us she held me below the surface until I realized I could breathe underwater, for a time. I always wondered if the other spell she cast on me was intended. If she had ever truly wanted my love as wildly as I longed for hers.

I was both certain and uncertain that the world must exist around her. She was too incredible for

that not to be the case—despite my understanding that such a thing would be completely insane. Perhaps it was time to check in to the asylum.

All I would have to do was tell them I fell in love with a girl who could breathe underwater.

Love is strange magic. The idea came to me often after I started seeing her, and after she stopped seeing me. Love was stranger than the myriad impossibilities she could perform. It made me do stupid things like jump off cliffs and create little people in the sand that she would give life. It filled me with the thought that nothing could have overcome us.

Still worse, love was something everyone else seemed to have.

I returned to the riverside some nights. Sometimes I was careful to avoid the site where I sculpted her in mud. Other times I would walk straight to it, fix the parts that sagged or broke, and head home. I did this for nearly a week, wondering toward the end of it what would happen when the forecasted rains came that weekend. The mud which dried on the shore of that river would sink in on itself and run back into the river. My mind had some difficulty wrapping around that concept. It was just mud, just a dumb figure, yet after fixing it up for a few days and the act of creating it, I felt some sadness seeing the projected rainclouds come is way on the television. The meteorologist said, "Best to save any trips with the family for next weekend," with a smile.

I went back to the river for a second time that night, finding my way by the light of a dim dollar store flashlight. I could hear the river gurgling and the song of crickets among the fresh grasses. It was cold that night, and I'd dressed in a light coat which didn't do enough against the wind and snow. Along the way I doubted my resolve. Surely there wouldn't be rain in the coming days. Surely it was a dumb thing to wander the woods so late at night. There were plenty of local tales about bears and wolves in these woods. I'd seen none of them,

but that didn't mean the monsters didn't exist out there, lurking in the dark.

I spun around, casting the light around myself, but even with the light I couldn't see a thing off the path. Everything was darkness and quiet, save for the river and bugs.

I had to step off the path to go toward the river. To the part where I'd sculpted her in mud. I knew it was stupid to go, yet my feet pressed on as though they were possessed. When I arrived, the river was full and loud, a layer of snow over everything, and my sculpture was not in its place.

I stepped to the spot I'd left it, shining the light. Where it once lay was a patch of soil, lightly snowed upon and in the shape of a young woman, heavier snowfall all around it. A chill crept along my spine.

A sound, like the bending of a bough, came from my side.

I shone the light at it. In my haste I nearly dropped it. As I collected myself, I saw that in front of me there was a young woman, one who vaguely resembled the one whom I loved, made of dried mud with snow on her head and shoulders. On her forehead there was a mark—a fingerprint—pushed into it. It noticed the branch beneath its foot and stepped back, avoiding it like a child would something new.

So I ran.

I made an honest effort to convince myself none of that happened. The morning was typical enough: a quiet breakfast of oats and an orange with the cat, who meowed at precisely the same time he always did. The news was on, the meteorologist reported as usual—the rains were still coming—and a quick look through the news on my phone didn't yield anything out of the ordinary.

As noon approached, there was a knocking. It did not come from the door, but rather a wall. Whoever knocked was moving along the side of the house, rapping at walls, windows, doors, whatever it was beside. I found my father's shotgun in the cellar—it was an older model, but, if I spoke boldly enough, it might be enough to scare off the intruder without coming to blows. My hands shook as I loaded it, recalling the night before as the knocking continued. When it came time to face the

man on my porch I took a deep breath and—when it wasn't too close—swung open the door, taking aim and shouting, "What do you want?"

It couldn't respond, for it had no voice. It had left a trail of soil in its wake, walking around the house, and where the snow had fallen on it, the golem's shoulders were scarred.

"Shit," I said, unable to ignore what so clearly stood in front of me.

It took a step closer. I yelled for it to stop and it did. A strange coincidence, surely. I set the shotgun on a nearby chair. The golem did not strike me as malicious. It was a being of soil and sand, clearly wounded from the snows, a marred shape of the woman who I modelled her after. I did not feel threatened, though my heart did skip a few beats as a thought occurred to me. A memory of how my love and I made sand castles on the beach and how she'd pushed her thumb into the sands and animated a battle between little sand men to see which castle was superior.

Hers won—something I always suspected was rigged.

I ran a finger along the thumbprint depression in the golem's forehead and recalled the way which she'd cast those spells. Soil pulled away from the creature and it slumped for a moment.

"I'm sorry," I said, making a note not to touch the spot again, recalling how the underwater breathing, and the sand people, and everything else she'd done was temporary. How cruel, I thought. How cruel for this golem, even for all the sand people who I hadn't previously considered, to be given a life only to lose it in a few days. A few hours, maybe.

"I'm sorry," I said again.

When the rains came, it stayed on my porch, watching the storm, occasionally standing and cowering at the sight of lightning or when a squall brought rain onto the deck. I set up a curtain with a few towels, which I think helped. It stayed there all night.

I don't think, in all the time I knew the golem, that I quite knew what to do with it. It wasn't her, not by any means. Though it had something resembling her face and body, it could only make the





Image by deificat

most basic movements. It did not smile. It did not have a gleam in its eyes—for they, too, were made of soil—and it did not have that laugh I missed so much. The one which shook her whole body and made her fall to the ground. No, the golem was not her, but I liked it. I liked having it around, though, the cat did not. The poor thing would not go near that creature and hissed whenever it saw the beast of soil. I had to start feeding it in the cellar, away from the windows where it might see the golem.

The mailman was the first person to see it, besides the golem’s creator and myself. He saw it stand and sped off down the road as if demons chased him. The golem went after him, and, though it did not emote quite like a person, I could tell it did not intend to make peace with the man.

“Stop!” I shouted, and it obeyed. It returned to the porch, but it was then I knew the rains were the least of my worries.

The following day, I did not receive my mail. I thought it suspicious. Once the cat and his bowls were locked up in my bedroom, I lead the golem into my basement, where the rains and people would not find it. My paranoia was validated when

the police came knocking, claiming there was a report of suspicious activity. Once they searched the place, I spoke to them about how I lived alone with my cat and yes I travelled quite a ways into the Portland for work, and no I haven’t eaten meat since the late nineties. We had a laugh about how vague “suspicious activity” was, and they admitted they didn’t know what they were looking for. The report claimed there was a monster here—which both officers found hilarious—but it was a small town, and they had a duty to check out each report.

“Sorry to waste your time, officers,” I said.

“We’re sorry to trouble you, sir,” one said.

“Mac,” the other nodded at the cellar door. “One more to check.”

I honestly considered striking them then. I had a good angle. There was an old college hockey trophy within reach. I could have taken one out with no trouble. The other would likely fall as well, taken by surprise. I could not kill them, though. It would wound my soul in a way that it could not repair. Even if I did, there would be blood and bodies to explain away should four officers arrive the

following day. So I let them open the door, descend the steps, and prayed that my golem would be still.

“What’s that?” the officer named Mac said. He saw the golem right away. Of course he did. It was standing in the center of the cellar, after all. Not an inconspicuous place.

I was about to try and explain it—a sand sculpture preserved with some artist’s tool perhaps—but the golem moved toward the officers. One drew his pistol. Perhaps it recognized aggression or sensed my panic. Whatever the reason, it charged them, tackling one to the ground and frightening the second so much that he screamed.

I yelled at the officers, “Go!”

The golem chased the officers out of the house, a silent rage about it as it passed me to pursue them as far as the car. It slammed its fists on the hood of the vehicle as the officers backed up, then gave chase down the road until I shouted for it to stop.

It walked to my side and stared at me. It was waiting for orders—I think—and I realized my mistake with the officers in the cellar. Was this what she’d created the golem for? To protect me? To prove some absurd point about how oppressive I’d been in our time together? I’d insisted we should live together, and be monogamous, and what our wedding might look like. All things that made complete sense to me, but then she was always different. That’s why I’d loved her. That’s why she left me, I think.

A drop of rain hit my cheek.

“Come,” I told it, a sinking feeling in my chest.

I walked into the woods, carrying the dollar store flashlight. When we were beside the river at the spot she’d created a golem of my sculpture, I walked to the edge. Rain was coming faster now, the storm about to break. I told the golem, “Step into the river.”

It did as I asked. It was truly loyal, or perhaps *obedient* was a better term. It pained me to see it walk toward the river, and twice I almost commanded it to stop. It was not her, it was not me. The golem was *alive*, I suspected. What right did I have to ask it to step into that river and lose itself? Would it ever be able to reform? Was her spell

strong enough? How could I look at myself in the mirror each morning knowing that I so willingly gave this exotic creature to an early demise?

I hadn’t made up my mind when it took its first step into the water. It made no sound, which disconcerted me as much as I was relieved. Soil turned to mud and flowed downstream as it lumbered toward the center of the river. It deformed and withered with each step as I held back my tears, watching only to confirm what I knew would happen next. When the golem melted away, the rains came in full, soaking me to my core.

I turned on the flashlight and headed home to let the cat out of my bedroom. 🐾

# WORLD ANVIL

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## ASK US ANYTHING

### *Additional Materials*

*BH Pierce*

This Ask Us Anything is presented by a senior member of the Amalgamated Order of Interdimensional Persons, Percival Aluminus Illuminus, Adjunct Professor of Gateways, 3423 WestNorth Street, Dunno-on-the-Spire.



***From Adam Bassett:***

***What might you suggest for explaining a magic system to your readers without sounding too much like a textbook, or making any characters appear stupid?***

Don't disparage the dull. If it weren't for them I wouldn't have anyone to teach. Those who don't know all that's going are quite useful for exposition. Such a character could be a child young enough to have not yet learned how magic works or someone from a faraway land who is unfamiliar with such spellcraft. Or they could be a lout who sleeps in class, snores like a bear and has the *gall* to be offended when you throw a piece of chalk at them. If you don't want to go this route, there is another that demands more skill to pull off.

The slow drip method has magic occur in story, but the only explanation given is what is what is immediately needed to understand the scene. For example, if your characters are in a caravan that comes under assault by wind mages, the only information given will be what their most common form of attack is and how to drive them off. With this nugget of information, the reader can follow what's happening without being bogged down

about your expansive history about wind magic and where it comes from. Later in the story, the magic can be explained when the reader will be glad to have their questions answered, rather than be bored in the middle of a fight scene.

Either way, you must explain your magic system so that it does not get in the way of your story. Having one of the aforementioned wind mages walk into view and explain their powers is boring. Having a grizzled veteran explain to a shaking rookie what to expect as one bears down on them is...less dull.

***From Noah L.:***

*I've been hit with writers block on my world recently. What do you do to help with that?*

Get away from your world. Jump on a ship and sail to lands unknown. Hop in a rocket and blast off into outer space. Open a random portal and jump in (Disclaimer: *Do not do this*). Once you've gotten away from your world, keep it up. Do some research into unfamiliar subjects. Read about civilizations you don't know much about. Watch a movie or series in a genre you wouldn't normally indulge in. While you're at it, shake up your physical routine as well. Go outside and take a walk to get some fresh air in your lungs. Get to those chores you've been neglecting. Find a horse and jump on it (Disclaimer: *Do not do this*). After you've had some time away to stretch your mental legs and your physical legs, take a look at your world again. The experiences you've had and knowledge you've gained may give you a new perspective and your

old problems. At the very least you'll have new aspects to put into your world to distract from the problems you just can't solve. Stepping away and indulging in new things is the best when to snap yourself out of any kind of rut.

*From Strongly\_O\_Platypus:*

***Sometimes the real world is itself funny or ridiculous. How do you insert some of that funniness into a fictional world without undermining the tone?***

That depends entirely on the tone. If your world is built around the Gumdrop Castle in Sugarplum Forest, then some levity will be part and parcel with the setting. If your world is built around Bloodspire Castle in Mutilation Forest, levity will be slightly harder to come by. But even in the darkest of worlds it is good to remember that Humor is one of the most omnipresent and powerful forces in the multiverse. Spend some time around those who deal with tragedy every day, doctors, soldiers, police officers, and you'll find ample amounts of gallows humor flung around with abandon. Even in the bleakest of times, funny coincides can lighten the mood. Groups of friends will have their own private in-jokes. Some artistic soul is going to take the time to create amusing graffiti about the local evil overlords. No matter what horrors dwell in your world the people in it will find *something* to laugh at, they always do. 🐉

*If you would like to have one of your questions answered by me, please send it to one of the following locales: [contact@worldbuildingmagazine.com](mailto:contact@worldbuildingmagazine.com), [Discord](#), and [Twitter](#). Some Junior members of the Amalgamated Order of Interdimensional Persons will sort through them and select the most pertinent ones for my perusal.*

Home of the WBM Book Club and  
Worldbuilding Wednesdays.

 **DISCORD**

**Check it out!** 



# PROMPTS

It's easy to hit a writer's block or overlook small details. We would like to combat these issues by asking our readers questions about their worlds that they may not have thought of and offering writing prompts to spark their imagination. If you would like to write a short story based on one of the writing prompts, or have a prompt you would like to share with us, please submit it to [contact@worldbuildingmagazine.com](mailto:contact@worldbuildingmagazine.com) or on [Discord](#)/[Social Media](#).

## Submission Requirements:

- The file must be no longer than 5,000 words
- The file must include title and author(s)

## Worldbuilding Prompts:

- Is magic tied to a specific resource? If so, how has that affected the way civilizations have developed? Does population distribution follow ley lines rather than waterways, for example?
- How does magic interact with your world's technology?
- How, if at all, is magic regulated by the government?
- How has magic changed funeral practices?

## Writing Prompts:

- Write from the perspective of the first non-magical person in a world of the arcane.
- Show one scene from 2 opposing perspectives.
- *"Those people are savages. They perform rituals and delve into the arcane. It's damning, but I have a plan."*
- *"Magic has been nothing but evil! Anyone who dares to use magic will be executed without trial!"*

# STAFF PICKS



**Title:** *Bayonetta*

**Developer:**

PlatinumGames

**Publisher:** SEGA

**First Edition:** 2009

This game is unique in terms of its premise and physics. There are several abilities Bayonetta is able to use including those

which allow her to manipulate her mobility, enhance her combat strengths, and even slow time. It's both challenging and rewarding to play, in large part thanks to her variety of skills.

Rated M for Mature Content

**Chosen by:** Rose Brady



**Title:** *Bloodrush*

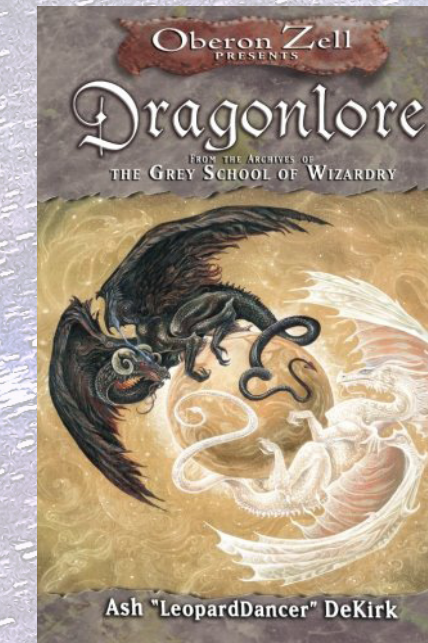
**Author:** Ben Galley

**Publisher:** Ben Galley

**First Edition:** 2015

The first of Galley's *Scarlet Star Trilogy*, *Bloodrush* introduces a magic system based on blood and is set in a gritty Wild West version of Wyoming.

**Chosen by:** Adam Bassett



**Title:** *Dragonlore*

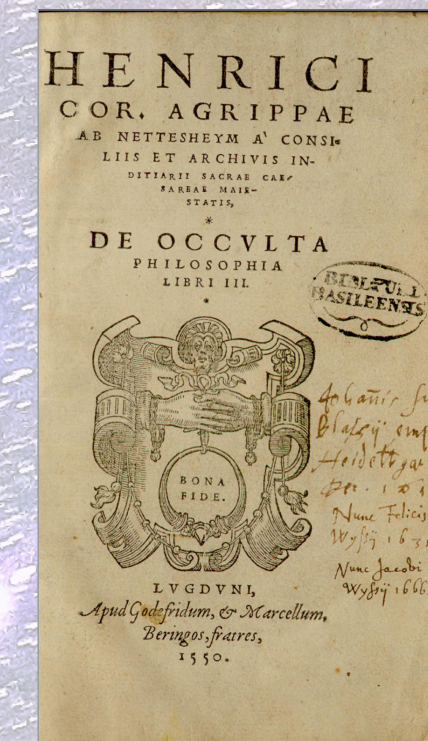
**Author:** Ash "LeopardDancer" DeKirk

**Original Publisher:** The Career Press

**First Edition:** 2006

A very interesting read, *Dragonlore* cuts deep into the history and myths of dragons around the world, along with taking different looks at how they (dragons) impact our modern culture and storytelling.

**Chosen by:** Noah Lane



**Title:** *Three Books of Occult Philosophy*

**Author:** Heinrich Cornelius Agrippa

**Original Publisher:** Llewellyn Press

**First Edition:** 1531

One of the most important works of western occultism. Agrippa traveled throughout the western world, collecting esoteric knowledge and distilling his findings into three books that covered the elementary, celestial, and intellectual realms respectively. The result is a fascinating collection of

spells, theorycraft, symbolism, and philosophy. The full text is available at <http://www.esotericarchives.com/agrippa/>

**Chosen by:** Bokai



# MEET THE STAFF

## Aaryan Balu, Writer

My name is Aaryan, a second-year student at the University of Virginia. I'm more of a writer than a worldbuilder, but like any self-respecting fantasy fan, I've put the time in to develop my skills in both areas over the last couple of years.

Along with Adam, I'm in charge of interviewing worldbuilders for the Showcases at the top of the magazine, and I write the odd article when I think I've got something to say. I'm actually pretty new to this operation and incredibly excited to be a part of such a cool endeavor.

I study biology and philosophy in school, both of which I like to think help my worldbuilding and storytelling. When I'm not working for WBM, you can usually find me reading, DMing, or writing my own fantasy stories. My current project, *The Rogues of Coriau*, centers around a team of thieves who infiltrate a noble household to rob the vault, only to get caught up in the sweeping revolution that threatens to overwhelm the entire city. My goal, ideally, is to paint the city of Coriau as a breathing character, a pre-industrial pot of chaos just on the verge of boiling. Since I'm unlikely to pull that off on my own, I've been relying on WBM to help build it up, little by little.



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Winter Child — Writer



2018 was amazing. We started a blog, looked at the importance of bread, explored the fens, and built strange maps. We read about the mysterious Fishermen, learned a bit about conflict in Dungeons & Dragons, and now we finally got to talk about magic.

None of this would have been possible without the guests and staff who volunteered precious time to help each issue come to fruition. We would like to take this time to thank each of them:

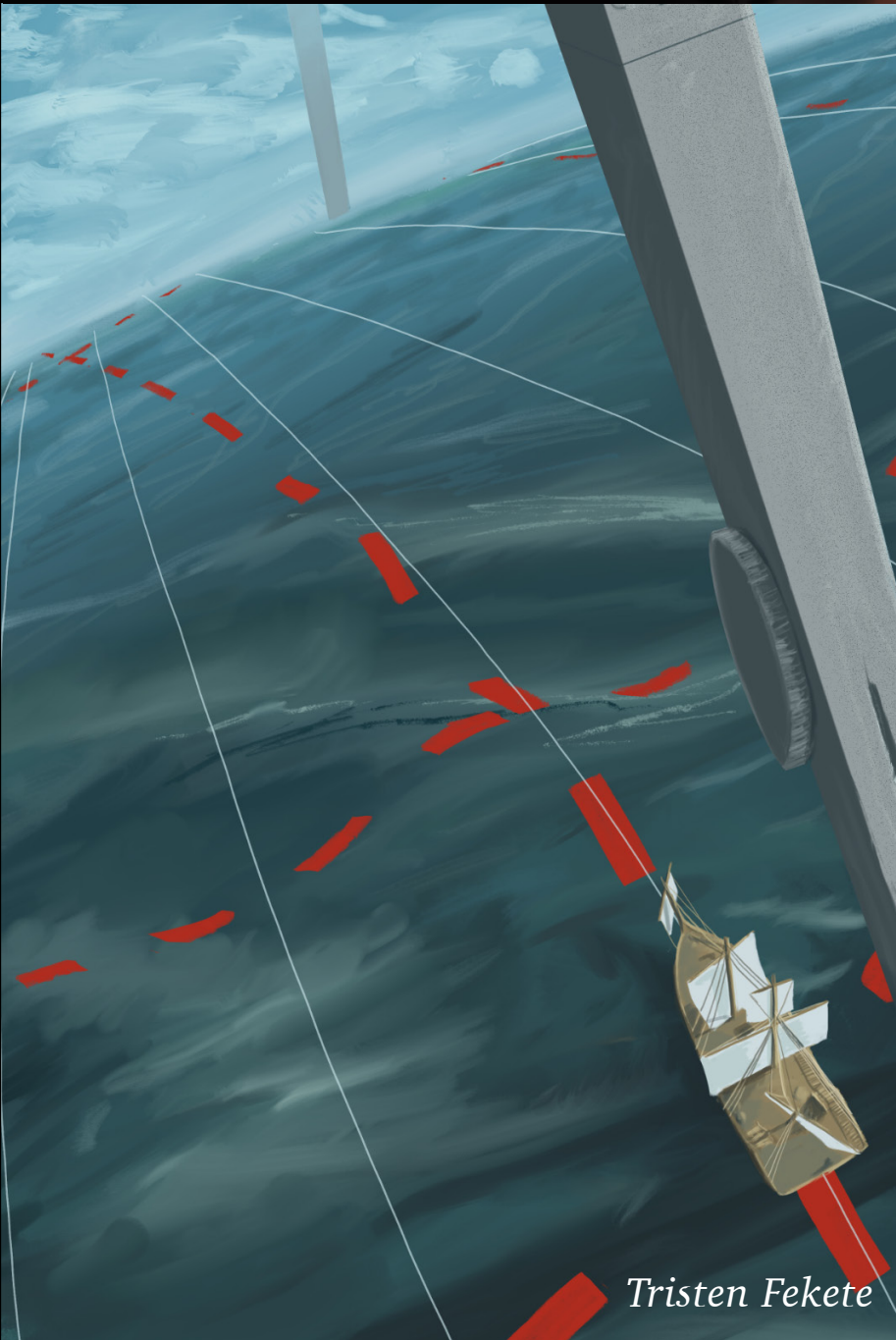
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Anna Hannon



Tristen Fekete



Tristen Fekete



Tristen Fekete

## Join Our Team

Worldbuilding Magazine is always seeking writers, editors, artists, and other passionate worldbuilders. 2019 will be no different!

Our **Writers** help by providing content for the magazine. **Editors** refine it and provide invaluable feedback. The **Artists** breathe life into the magazine and our **Layout Artists** arrange everything into the final products you see. Last but not least, the **Meta** department assist with organization and the community. If you are interested in helping with the construction of Volume 3, email us at [contact@worldbuildingmagazine.com](mailto:contact@worldbuildingmagazine.com) or find us on Discord.

See you in 2019!



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