

Unexplored Arcana

Unexplored Arcana is an open-ended one-page RPG designed around the creation and discovery of magic.

The core of Unexplored Arcana is in the formation and use of magic. Problems may be solved through mundane means, but a magical solution is almost always superior. Unexplored Arcana also requires a close collaboration between player and GM. Much of how the adventure plays out will involve interpretation of player action, and a game of Unexplored Arcana requires a willingness to allow interpretation and misinterpretation, often involving unexpected outcomes. This is not a failure of communication—this is the fun of the game!

MATERIALS REQUIRED

Playing Unexplored Arcana requires one GM, one or more players, paper (or a digital canvas) on which to draw, and something to draw with. Optionally, a die or dice of any size can be used by the GM as part of resolution, but this is not required.

THE LANGUAGE OF MAGIC

Unexplored Arcana is driven by the discovery and use of the language of magic. Casting magic requires two components: the *command* and the *sigil*. The *command* is a

spoken component, whereas the *sigil* is drawn. The *command* cannot contain any words or parts of words in a language spoken by the players or GM, and the *sigil* cannot contain any writing in any such language. Gibberish, languages unknown, symbols, and glyphs are all acceptable.

Sigils should be drawn with one color, and this color should remain consistent throughout the game. Players are encouraged to explore more abstract representations of their ideas, rather than focus entirely on pictorial depictions.

When casting a spell in Unexplored Arcana, the player does not communicate the intended effect, or any other information about the spell. Instead, the player states they wish to cast a spell, and produces a *command* and *sigil* for the spell they wish to cast. The GM considers both of these, working to interpret what this spell should do. Together, the GM and the player(s) construct their own language of magic.

For example, a player may wish to cast a spell that creates a gust of wind. They consider the *command* “airum”, but realize that using the word “air” is against the rules. Instead, they use the *command* “fwoosh”.

They produce the following *sigil* as part of the spell.



The GM then interprets this *command* and *sigil*. The *command* “fwoosh” reminds them of the sound of rushing water, and the *sigil* makes the GM think of waves. As such, the GM describes the result as a rush of water, which achieves a similar effect as originally intended by the player.

Later in the adventure, the player wishes to cast a spell to refill their waterskin. Remembering the results of “fwoosh”, they cast a new spell, devising the *command* “fwish” and producing the following *sigil*.



The GM makes the same connection, and the spell's effect is exactly as the player intended. By referencing the established elements of this adventure's language of magic, the player and the GM are able to create semiotic meaning, and establish a system of communication.

This relationship of guesswork exists not just between the player and the GM, but also in the world of Unexplored Arcana itself. Magic is a force that is poorly understood, yielding often-unexpected results. A mage in Unexplored Arcana rarely knows exactly how their magic will manifest, and approaches every problem with a basic intention, and perhaps a hope of how the spell will turn out.

ADVENTURE DETAILS

Magic is the main method by which players interact with the game world. The GM narrates a given scenario, and the players decide their character's response. The results of an action are determined by the GM, either with reasoning and logic, a roll of a die, or whatever other method they prefer.

Still, there are many scenarios in which the most reasonable approach is one that is entirely mundane. Though players are encouraged to search for a magical solution for any scenario they find themselves in, other systems may be required to compliment the adventure. Such systems, for example inventory, travel, or resources, are kept to the discretion of the GM.

It is important to remember that the player characters are, by definition, practitioners of magic. Though players are free to construct their characters as they please, the final result should not be someone with a great amount of brute strength, or a silver tongue that allows them to haggle for wares. Instead, such scenarios would be better solved with offensive magic, or persuasive charms. An action should be strategized in terms of what *commands* and *sigils* could create a solution, not what mundane actions could be used to subvert *Unexplored Arcana*'s systems.

GMING AND INTERPRETATION

In *Unexplored Arcana*, the GM plays a crucial role, interpreting the effects of the players' spells and moderating the players' engagement with the game's systems. Though the GM's interpretation is final, the following are some general guidelines after which they can direct their decisions.

First and foremost, a GM must ensure that *sigils* and *commands* obey the rules of the game. Regardless of context, a *command* consisting of the word "fireball" would be considered invalid, and certainly shouldn't result in the player character casting a fireball.

It is the space between recognizable language and total gibberish where the GM must make more nuanced judgements. For example, one GM may decide that a *command* "protego" is influenced too obviously by the word "protect", whereas another might consider it valid. Similarly, one GM may ban the *command* "aqua" for consisting of well-understood language, and another might say that Latin is perfectly acceptable. The same applies to *sigils*, and their rules.

If a player produces a *command* or *sigil* the GM determines is invalid, they can choose how to react. The GM may simply make the player produce a new *command* and/or *sigil*, or they may make the spell take a different effect than the player intended.

These penalties shouldn't be too harsh, such as a spell failing entirely—*Unexplored Arcana* intentionally rides a fine line between the unknown and the interpretable, and players should be encouraged to explore that.

When a valid *command* and *sigil* have been produced, it is up to the GM to describe the effects of the spell. The process for this is largely left to the GM's discretion, but they are encouraged to be creative, comprehensive, and consistent.

In *Unexplored Arcana*, magic produces unexpected but fantastical effects, and the results of spells should maintain a sense of wonder. Additionally, throughout an adventure the results should stay relatively unexpected—often in the realm of the player's expectation, but with exact details outside of what the players might have imagined. GMs should also strive to include as much of the *command* and *sigil* as possible, incorporating various details from the spell into the final result. Finally, a GM should be consistent. *Unexplored Arcana* is about building up a language of magic throughout an adventure, so similar *commands* and *sigils* should produce similar effects, giving the player a chance to learn about and connect with the magic system. Later spells are likely to reference earlier ones, and when they do so successfully the player should be rewarded with an effect closer to what they intended.