

First Draft

# Unexplored Arcana

Unexplored Arcana is an open-ended one-page RPG designed around the creation and discovery of magic. One GM and one or more players are required. By design, Unexplored Arcana creates space for creativity on the part of the GM and the player(s).

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!

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## 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.

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## 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 player(s) or GM, and the *sigil* cannot contain any writing in such a language. Gibberish, languages unknown, symbols, and glyphs are all acceptable.

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.

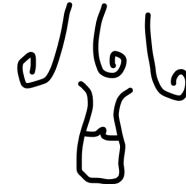
For example, a player may wish to cast a spell that creates a gust of wind. They consider the *command* “airum”, but realize that using the word “air” is against the rules. Instead, they use the *command* “fwoosh”.

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.

Later in the game, 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.

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## 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.

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### AN EXAMPLE SCENARIO

The following is an example interaction between one player and a GM.

The player character, Sha'reia, walks into a tavern, hoping to discover a rumor with which to start her adventure. She decides the best way to learn of the area

around her is to purchase rounds of drink for all the tavern's patrons. She walks up to the bar. Hoping to conjure a pile of gold, the player announces they would like to cast a spell. The GM acknowledges, and the player produces the *command* "klintes aurivium", and the following *sigil*.



The GM regards the *sigil* for a moment, then narrates as a pile of gold coins and silver bars appears before Sha'reia. Sha'reia then asks to buy a round for the house, and the barkeep agrees.

After some celebration, a man nervously approaches Sha'reia, eyes shifting restlessly. He explains that he suspects his neighbor to be an evil sorcerer, and is wondering if she is in town with the intention of helping people. Sha'reia is suspicious, and internally decides to try casting a spell that will tell her if the man is being truthful.

The player announces they would like to cast another spell. They consider the *command* "revellium", but realizes it's too close to the word "reveal", and instead goes with "harasuiin". They don't feel like they have a lot of good reasoning for this choice of *command*, but they know it isn't a big deal

if they make a good enough *sigil*. They present the GM with the following.



The GM interprets this as a mystical intimidation, and describes the man standing paralyzed, quivering in fear. Frightfully, he admits that he doesn't really think his neighbor is dangerous, and is instead spiteful as his neighbor always manages to grow far more impressive cabbages than he can. Sha'reia agrees to help with the man's harvest.

The player has already decided they want to cast a fertility spell on the soil of the man's garden. As the characters walk to the man's home, he asks Sha'reia what sort of magic could help him. The player knows what they'll be attempting, but realizes that saying their plan outright will give the GM too much information about their intentions. Instead, Sha'reia tells the man that magic is unpredictable, but she is sure that he'll be happy with the result.

They arrive at the farm, and the player announces another spell. With a well-chosen *command* and *sigil*, the GM describes the crops in the man's garden suddenly growing to astonishing size. The man thanks Sha'reia, and she moves on.

# Second Draft

# Unexplored Arcana

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*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.

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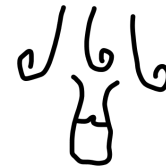
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The GM makes the same connection, and the spell's effect is exactly as the player intended. By referencing the established elements of this adventure's language of magic, the player and the GM are able to create semiotic meaning, and establish a system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

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## 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.

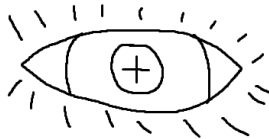
In *Unexplored Arcana*, magic produces unexpected but fantastical effects, and the results of spells should maintain a sense of wonder. Additionally, throughout an adventure the results should stay relatively unexpected—often in the realm of the player's expectation, but with exact details outside of 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.

# Playtest Notes

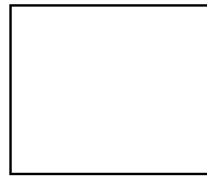
- Playtester asked about color
- Vivian: tall gothic dark elf
- Heading into an unexplored ancient ziggurat
- Expedition leader splits everyone up, sending Vivian on her own
- Vivian would like to cast a spell
- Casts fwoosh; very sizeable flame (height comp. to length of forearm)
- Steps on a pressure plate, a massive boulder drops
- Casts gardor, penalized for using "guard", a hole forms in the wall beside her which she walks through
- Enters a massive chamber with coffins around the area and a huge altar with another coffin, twice the scale, surrounded by ornamentation
- Vivian approaches, then decides to cast a spell
- Casts shunci, which leads to a vision of the past
- Player asks if the characters know the spells are unpredictable; affirmative answer
- Vivian walks closer to the altar to better investigate, and things are further described
- Vivian casts a spell
- Raises concerns for the better drawer being better
- Casts Quorgor, which makes one arm very strong
- Plans quorgir, but wants to cast another spell first
- Casts fwoosh-hal, which gives the fwoosh weight
- Casts quorgir; flawless execution



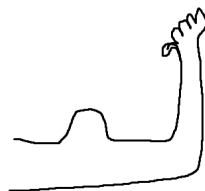
Fwoosh



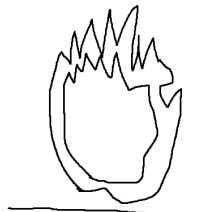
Shunci



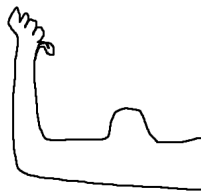
Gardor



Quorgor



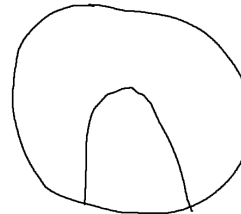
Fwoosh-Hal



Quorgir



Gardnor



Gardror

- Moves the top of the coffin and reveals the figure within
- Goes to let the rest of the expedition know, finds the boulder blocking the way; cultists come out of their coffins
- Casts a spell
- Gardnor summons a wall to seal them away and turns to the boulder
- Pushes against the boulder with the arms and lodges deeper
- Casts gardror and creates a passage

## Feedback:

- Favorite thing: casting a spell of a certain type lets you build off of that spell (like gardor -> gardnor -> gardror, quorgor -> qurorgir, fwoosh -> fwoosh-hal)
- Excellent system for lateral thinking and problems you can solve with creativity and building off things you've done in the past
- In a longer term session (i.e. if you were playing for 5 hours or 5-10 sessions), by session 2-3 don't think the players are gonna be coming up with new stuff; just iterating on other spells they've cast; what's known; not a system that's good for limits but stuff like putting holes in walls is super potent and someone using it shouldn't be allowed to turn it into a bunch of solutions
- Good game for like 1 or two hours; longer leads to major balancing issues; balancing is just inherent in the system created (which is fine for one-page rpgs which are more supposed to be one-off-y stuff)
- If trying to create a larger system for a lengthier period of time the option of creativity kind of limits what you can do; fewer limitations means fewer explorations of objects
- Lot of striving for a lot of creativity, but with infinite creativity eventually the players find the best option and only do that (meaning limitations)
- Was really fun; good GMing

# Playtest Report

The playtester was fond of the general structure of the game, but playing through the game revealed some areas that were less clear. The player asked whether they were allowed to use color in their sigils, which wasn't previously included in the rules. I ended up ruling that all sigils must be monochrome, and all sigils have to be the same color (i.e. you're allowed to use a color, but you can't change colors for each sigil), so that emulates using a single pencil or pen.

The playtester also raised the question of whether his character was aware of the fact that spells were unpredictable, or if the things that happened were actually what their character intended to cast (unknown to the player). This was also clarified in the affirmative, that magic is inherently unpredictable in this world, and that when a character casts a spell it is in many ways a guess.

Another issue that came up was how to deal with commands that were rules too close to English words. The playtester, in trying to cast a protective spell, produced the command "Gardor". I ruled this was too close to the word "guard", and decided that for such interactions the penalty would be that the effect of the spell could not be something related to "guarding". The playtester was initially frustrated by this, however it was clarified that this does not mean the spell fails, simply that its function is incredibly unexpected. In the case of "Gardor", which had a sigil of an empty rectangle, it ended up creating a hole in an adjacent wall.

All three of these things were addressed in the second draft through further clarification. That said, there were some general design issues that became apparent, and were by their nature somewhat more difficult to address. The playtester noted how the emphasis on total creativity is likely to lead to players trying to optimize the fun out of the adventure. For short sessions this is unlikely to be a problem, but for longer sessions the playtester suggested players would find one or two spells that work well (and

which are more predictable than trying to come up with something new) and only use those and variations of them.

I thought of a few ideas to address this, involving things such as a "staleness" mechanic for similar spells, or a certain type of magic shifting or evolving with enough use, but I was unable to include a satisfying realization of these ideas in the limited space of the single double-sided rules sheet.

Here's a diagram of a prototypical core interaction within Unexplored Arcana.



The intended experience of the game is that the player and GM build up a language of magic together, with the player getting better throughout the game at communicating the intended effect of their actions. The game should also be fun, with the player being creative and exploring various ideas for spells and creative solutions. I think that, with respect to these goals, the playtest was very successful, though the concerns about the ways players may avoid trying novel solutions is one area that may need further refinement.