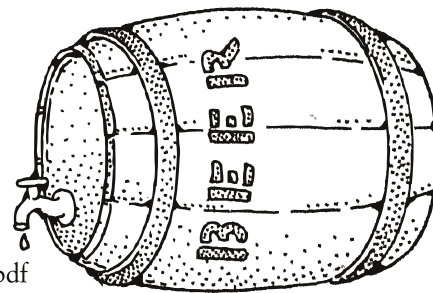


Inept Sorcerers

by Bill Garrett <garrett@astralfrontier.org>
<http://astralfrontier.org/assets/rpg/IneptSorcerers.pdf>



What you need

- At least two players, one of whom will be the GM (grand magician, though the heretical "game master" is accepted in some quarters). Everyone who is not the GM will play a PC (paltry conjurer, though "player character" is whispered by the common folk).
- A set of printed Spell Cards (see back).
- A set of polyhedral dice (d4, d6, d8, d10, d12).
- Paper and pencils, or other note-taking equipment.
- A bottle of something alcoholic (or otherwise suitably inspiring) for the GM.

What this game is about

"It's a very rare person who is taken for what he truly is."

You're a sorcerer - just not a very good one. You might be a barely adequate apprentice, struggling to win your master's respect. You might be a senile old coot who's forgotten most of his spells. You could even be a Japanese high school student, taking classes while you decipher an old grimoire with your friends. It might be Medieval Europe, a modern urban setting, or another world entirely.

You'd like nothing better than to hop down to the pub for a pint. Or chat up that nice girl you've seen in the village. Or get your absent-minded teacher to pay attention long enough to graduate you from sorcerer school. You have goals! You... just haven't made them happen yet. It's not your fault! Things just keep *happening*. Inconvenient things.

Still... you have magic. There is wonder and beauty in the world, waiting to be discovered.

How to prepare for the game

- Watch any 1980's Rankin-Bass animated movie
- Watch anything where Martin Freeman's everyman character is being imposed upon ("The Hobbit", "The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy")
- Watch "Shaun of the Dead" and listen to pub music, e.g. <http://8tracks.com/explore/pub>

How to create an inept sorcerer

Choose a **name** suitable for an inept sorcerer. This name should not impress anyone save the occasional town drunk or gullible novice adventurer.

Choose an **unattainable goal**. It can be something like "earn Master's respect", "win the love of the prince" or "protect the world's last dragon". The goal may never be accomplished, but it's the journey that makes the sorcerer's life worthwhile.

Record a **Chaos Capacity** of 1. The GM can adjust this starting number, depending on how angry and/or boozy the rest of the players are likely to get over the course of the night.

If you find yourself casting the same spell often, you can write it down on note paper, along with its Power cost. An inept sorcerer can cast anything - or try, anyway - so there's no limit on the number of spells you can record as "favorites".

If you have anything else that you feel is important about your character, note it down too! If you want to see some part of your character's story played out, point the GM at your notes.

How to be a player

When something is happening in the game, the GM will set the stage and describe the situation as seen by the PCs. As a player, you get to narrate your actions, and the GM in turn will describe what happens based on those actions. Any player can announce an action at any time, and the GM adjudicates it.

The only action that has its own rules is casting a spell. The GM declares the outcome of anything else you do. However, if you think something you did is Mythically Resonant for light adventure fantasy - if it violates the laws of every fable and fairy-tale for the thing to not come to pass a certain way - then that's probably how it happens.

How to be the GM

Whenever the other players look at you expectantly, start at the top of the list, and work your way down until you find something appropriate to do.

- Do something Mythically Resonant for light adventure fantasy.
- Do something that makes the PCs grow as characters, or lets them advance toward a goal.
- Do something that reminds the players why sorcery is a worthy pursuit.
- Remove a Bother if the PCs have done enough to make it go away.
- Use an existing Bother to inflict hardship or annoyance on the PCs' lives.
- Introduce a new Bother for the PCs to cope with.
- Rearrange or rewrite this list until you are satisfied that the result gives you a game you like.
- Take a drink from your alcoholic (or inspirational) beverage until something funny or entertaining occurs to you.

The game is over when everyone is satisfied that they had fun.

Character Customization

The GM can introduce new Spell Cards. They might be specific to a given sorcerer or a class of sorcerers, or available to everyone. Such cards can have special rules. For example, an Alchemist might have an "...In A Bottle" card which lets him create potions for later use, and an Illusionist might get a "Phantasmal" card, making the result of her spell a figment of light or thought.

If an unattainable goal is too harsh, the sorcerers can have one or more personal Bother, with their own HP, and can overcome those problems through roleplaying or spellcasting.

Character Advancement

The GM can let a PC learn a "signature spell" - a specific chain of spell cards for some purpose, like "fireball". When casting this specific spell, the character's Chaos Capacity is 3 higher than normal. Summoners, shapechangers, or battle-mages might all have such preferred magics.

the GM can increase a sorcerer's overall Chaos Capacity by 1. This lets him draw more Power safely, putting more powerful spells in his reach and making simpler spells routine. This should be pretty rare.



Bothers

Bothers are anything that make the PCs' lives difficult. Botherers exist to frustrate sorcerers from achieving their goals, and to be correspondingly satisfying to overcome. Something the PCs can't do anything about isn't a Bother, it's just something the GM narrates. Botherers must be interesting - they should be entertaining, menacing, engaging, or otherwise provocative. Botherers that don't evoke a player response should be discarded.

Bothers can be monsters, ordinary living people, inanimate obstacles, places, or even situations. A summoned demon, a flooding river, and the post office closing early can all be Botherers.

Bothers have Hit Points, or HP, that tell you roughly how much effort is required to make them go away. The GM can assign HP by fiat, or roll a d4 through a d20 to establish HP. When a Bother's HP reaches zero, discard it.

If a Bother itself takes an action that would seriously hinder or inconvenience a character, the GM can create a new smaller Bother with the appropriate amount of HP to represent it. If the GM creates a new Bother that would logically invalidate another Bother, add that old Bother's HP to the new one and remove the old Bother.



There are three ways to remove a Bother's HP and end it as a problem:

- Remove 1 HP for every other player (including the GM) who acknowledges you for a rather good bit of roleplaying related to dealing with that Bother.
- Remove 1 HP for every player who expresses disinterest in the Bother as an element of the story.
- Remove one or more HP when casting a spell.

When casting a spell to remove a Bother, roll a d4 and remove that many HP. If the GM rules that your spell is especially relevant, increase the size of the die you roll (to d6, d8, d10, and finally d12) for every specifically appropriate spell card you threw in.

Spells that would do nothing against a Bother automatically do 0 HP, but the GM must tell the players why if they ask.

For example, Katerin the Conjurer has a fire-elemental problem. She wants to defeat a rogue summon, and casts "Banish Fire Faerie With Water". The use of "Fire" isn't strictly necessary, but it helps define the spell, and the use of the opposing Water element contributes as well. Due to the two specific cards, her spell does d8 damage.

On the other hand, if Katerin is fighting a fireproof enemy wizard and uses "Conjure Fire", her spell does 0 HP.

A spell doesn't have to be an attack to overcome a Bother. "Ward Friends In An Area" can protect a party from a gang of hostile kobolds, removing them as a Bother. The kobolds are still there, they just don't matter any more. An enemy dragon can be fought off with lightning, or bought off with gold.

How to cast spells

When your sorcerer casts a spell, you do two things: draw Power to make the magic happen, and assemble spell cards to define what it does. You can draw Power and assemble cards in any order, and do either one repeatedly, until the spell is ready to cast.

Drawing Power

Spells require Power to successfully cast. But, drawing too much Power can make a spell get out of control. An inept sorcerer who loses control of the magic can conjure something unexpected - or simply blow up.

Each spell starts at zero Power. Each time the player draws Power, roll a polyhedral die, starting at d4 and moving up to d6, d8, d10, and d12. Each time the player rolls, add the number on the die to the Power total. Players cannot draw Power again after rolling a d12.

For example, Zambar the Adequate is powering a spell. He Draws Power and rolls a d4, getting a 3. His Power total goes from 0 to 3. This isn't enough, and he draws Power again. This time, he must roll a d6. He rolls and gets a 5, taking his Power total to 8.



Assembling the spell

Players assemble spells from Spell Cards, consisting of an action and a subject, such as "Create" and "Fire". Players may add additional cards, subject to each card's rules. Players may also remove cards, if they find there's not enough Power to make their spell happen the way they want. The collection of all Spell Cards in a given spell is called a chain.

Every sorcerer has access to every card in the game, unless the GM says otherwise. If it's interesting to have only some sorcerers (like a nature-witch and a Hermetic arcanist) have access to only certain cards, then make it so.

When a card text starts with "...", at least one other card must come before it in the chain. When a card text ends with "...", at least one other card must follow it in the chain. No card can appear more than once in the chain. Other than these rules, cards can be chained together in any way that makes sense to everyone involved in the game.

For example, Zambar the Adequate wants to create a fireball and hurl it at an orc. He constructs a chain of "Conjure..." and "...Fire". Later, many orcs appear, he might add "...In An Area" to attack several at once. But discovering that his ally Schmo is in the line of fire, Zambar hurriedly adds "...Except" and "Friends".

Casting the spell

Once a sorcerer has drawn Power, he has to cast *something*. It need not be the original spell, or anything close to it.

The spell is cast when the player is ready to let it go (or can't roll any more dice for Power), and two things are true: the total Power cost of all cards in the chain is less than or equal to the total Power drawn to cast the spell, and the arrangement of cards in the chain makes sense to everyone at the table ("Commune With Conjure" is nonsensical).

A sorcerer who has drawn too much Power risks a spell going out of control, or doing something unexpected. Excess Power is the total Power drawn, minus the Power needed by all the cards in the chain, minus the character's Chaos Capacity. If this number is positive, the GM should create one or more new Botherers whose total HP equals this Excess Power. Alternately, the GM can inconvenience the PCs in some fashion, usually by taking away some advantage they've accrued.

For example, Zambar wants to create a fireball. His "Conjure Fire" chain has a Power of 7. He Draws Power. He rolls d4, d6, and d8, and gets 3, 2, and 2. This is exactly enough, so the spell succeeds.

Later, Zambar casts "Conjure Fire In An Area Except Friends", for a total power of 11. He Draws Power. He rolls d4, d6, and d8, and gets 4, 2, and 6. This is 12, which is 1 over what he needs. His Excess Power is 1, minus his Chaos Capacity of 1, or 0. He's still okay.

Finally, Zambar's friend Katerin wants to summon a horde of monsters, so she casts "Conjure Monsters In An Area", requiring Power 13. Katerin's player rolls d4, d6, and d8, getting 2, 2, and 3. This isn't enough (she's 6 short). To fully power the spell, she rolls a d10 and gets a 10, leaving her with a total Power of 17! This is 4 over what she needed. Her Chaos Capacity of 1 soaks a point of that, and 3 points of Excess Power are left over. The GM creates a HP 3 Bother, describing it as a rebellious imp that will chuck fireballs at the party instead of the enemy.

A sorcerer can adjust the spell on the fly to avoid creating a new Bother. If Katerin was casting "Conjure Monsters In An Area" and had 3 points of Excess Power, she could change the spell to "Conjure Monsters With Water In An Area". The monsters would be made of water, would need a source of water to come from (like a nearby stream or lake), and could be destroyed by fire, freezing, and so forth. The spell isn't exactly what Katerin intended, but it'll do.



Example Spells

Detect Water (Commune With Water, Power 2) - the sorcerer can detect nearby sources of drinkable water.

Fireball (Conjure Fire, Power 7) - the sorcerer calls up fire from nothing and uses it as an attack. If there's an existing source of flame to draw on, this could also be cast more cheaply as Craft Fire.

Wall of Earth (Ward Here With Earth, Power 5) - the sorcerer draws up an earthen bulwark to shield himself or others nearby.

Healing Touch (Craft Friends, Power 5) - the sorcerer shapes flesh to heal injuries, close wounds, and ease pain.

Weather-Working (Craft Air and Water In An Area, Power 9) - the hedge-wizard or witch's ability to manipulate rain, wind, clouds, and other forms of weather.

Animal Form (Exchange Me With Nature, Power 8) - another staple of country spellcasters. Take on the shape of any natural animal.

Cleric's Circle of Consecration (Ward and Banish Death In An Area, Power 17) - a powerful protective spell, keeping stronger undead creatures at bay and reducing weaker ones to ash if they cross its border.

On the Web

Forums:

<http://forum.astralfrontier.org/>

Character Classes:

<http://astralfrontier.org/blog/2015-07-10-inept-sorcerer-classes.html>

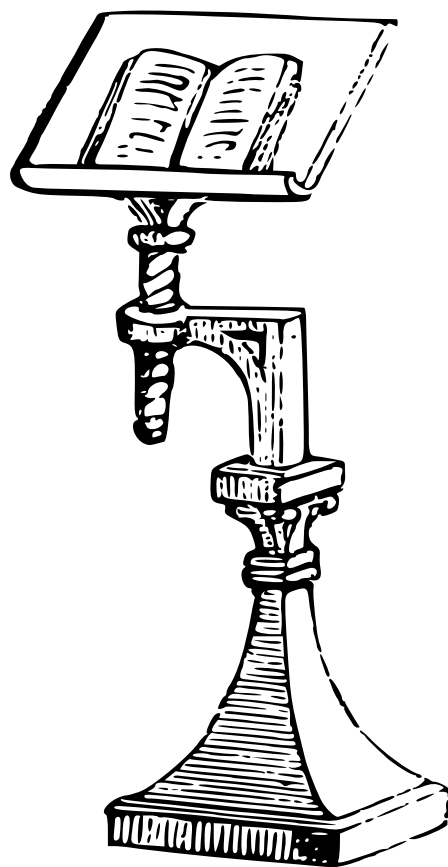
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Interior art from <http://openclipart.org/>.

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"There are no happy endings because nothing ends."

Commune With... [1] You can sense, detect, talk to, or otherwise make contact with something.	Craft... [2] You can shape, strengthen, or enhance something. This can be physical movement, shape changing, or improvement of various kinds.	Ward... [3] You can protect something from harm, theft, or detection, depending on how you phrase the spell. You can protect yourself (or a target) from something instead.
Exchange... [4] You can transform something into something else, or swap the positions of two things. Use "...With..." to mix in two different nouns.	Banish... [5] You can dismiss or dispel something - an element, a power, or even a creature. This isn't needed to make physical or magical attacks against a target, but is needed to destroy hostile magic.	Conjure... [6] You can summon or create something or someone from nothing.
...In An Area [3] Your spell affects an area, rather than a single target.	Quiet(ly) [4] Your spell is subtle and will not be noticed unless something specifically calls attention to it.	Powerful(ly) [5] Your spell is twice as effective at depleting a Bother's HP, or otherwise twice as powerful, as a normal spell.
...And... [2] Your spell can chain together multiple nouns, verbs, or other appropriate terms.	...Except... [2] Your spell doesn't affect a specific thing, even if it would otherwise.	...With... [1] This uses one noun as a catalyst for acting on another one. For example, "Ward Me With Fire" creates a shield of fire around you, which would burn anyone coming close.

<p>Air [1]</p> <p>Your spell affects the elemental power of air. This includes smoke, gases, and wind.</p>	<p>Me/Here/This [0]</p> <p>Your spell affects yourself, the spot where you're standing, or something you're touching.</p>	<p>Nature [3]</p> <p>Your spell affects unintelligent or primitive living things such as plants or animals.</p>
<p>Earth [1]</p> <p>Your spell affects the elemental power of earth. This includes rock, dirt, metals, and so on.</p>	<p>That/Those [1]</p> <p>Your spell affects an inanimate object (or collection of small objects) at range.</p>	<p>Death [4]</p> <p>Your spell affects unliving things like vampires, ghosts, and spirits.</p>
<p>Fire [1]</p> <p>Your spell affects the elemental power of fire. This includes heat and anything that's superheated, such as magma and lava.</p>	<p>Friend(s) [2]</p> <p>Your spell affects a friend or ally (or all friends or allies, depending on the spell). This can be "any friend" or a specific named friend.</p>	<p>Monster(s) [4]</p> <p>Your spell affects powerful supernatural monsters - hill giants, werewolves, or vorpal bunnies. This can be anything that qualifies, or a specific type of monster, or a specific monster.</p>
<p>Water [1]</p> <p>Your spell affects the elemental power of water. This includes many weather phenomena and other non-water liquids.</p>	<p>Foe(s) [3]</p> <p>Your spell affects an enemy or hostile person (or all such parties, depending on the spell). This can be "any enemy" or a specific named enemy.</p>	<p>Faerie [5]</p> <p>Your spell affects the mysterious spirits of nature, life, and magic itself - elves, nixies, dryads, and the high and noble Fair Folk.</p>