Inept Sorcerers

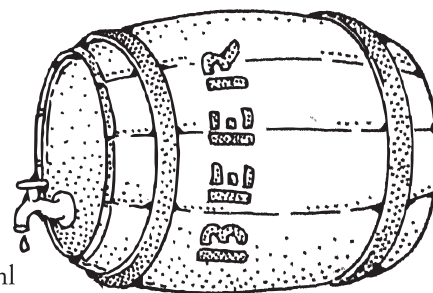by Bill Garrett < garrett@astralfrontier.org >

http://astralfrontier.org/games/inept-sorcerers.html

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 **Mastery** of 2. This is the maximum number of Mastery Tokens you can carry at one time, indicating how much control you have over your magic.

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.

How to grow stronger

As sorcerers gain experience and control over their magic, their Mastery goes up. The GM can declare that everyone's Mastery is raised by 1 at the end of a story arc. This lets the sorcerers draw more Power safely, putting more powerful spells within reach and making simpler spells routine.

How to customize the game

The GM can introduce new Spell Cards. A card must have a name, a Power cost, and a short description of what it covers. If a GM's particular world includes important metaphysical concepts, cards can be created to cover those cases. Examples would be "Good" or "Evil" cards for a world where moral alignments have magical force, or a "Dominate..." card for worlds where mind control is a reality.

Cards can be created for specific classes of sorcerers that exist in a GM's world: alchemists, illusionists, battle-wizards, druids, and so forth. Such cards can have specific rules attached to them.

Power costs for new verbs should follow a progression (1, 3, 6, 10, 15, 21) depending on how powerful or useful they are. Power costs for nouns should be between 1 and 10, depending on how rare, hard to manipulate, or useful the noun can be. Modifiers should be between 1 and 4 points.

Bothers

Bothers are anything that make the PCs' lives difficult. Bothers 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. Bothers must be *interesting* - they should be entertaining, menacing, engaging, or otherwise provocative. Bothers 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 Bothers.

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 stellar bit of roleplaying related to the Bother.
- Remove 1 HP for every player who expresses disinterest in the Bother as a story element.
- 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.

A spell doesn't have to be an attack to overcome a Bother. A magical barrier that repels monsters and their attacks can protect a party from a gang of hostile kobolds, removing them as a Bother because they're no longer a serious obstacle.

A spell that doesn't completely overcome a Bother can still change or mutate it. For example, dousing a raging fire with water might send up a large cloud of scalding steam.

For example, Katerin the Conjurer is fighting a fire-proof wizard. Her fireball spell does 0 HP, and the GM tells her the wizard has a shield against such magic. So she calls forth an ice elemental. She rolls damage, but not enough to remove all of the enemy wizard's HP. The GM suggests that the wizard himself is defeated, but the elemental now goes rogue.

To defeat the summon, Katerin casts "Banish Water Faerie With Fire". The use of "Water" isn't strictly necessary, but it helps define the spell, and the use of the opposing "Fire" element contributes as well. Due to the two specific cards, her spell does d8 damage and the elemental vanishes.

How to cast spells

When your sorcerer casts a spell, you do two things: assemble spell cards to define what the magic does, and draw Power to make it happen.

Assembling the spell

Players assemble spells from Spell Cards, consisting at minimum of a verb and a noun, such as "Create" and "Fire". 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".

Drawing Power

Spells require Power to successfully cast. 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. Players also immediately gain 1 Mastery Token each time a die comes up 4 or less. Players may not have more total tokens than their Mastery score.

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. He gets a single Mastery token for the 3, but none for the 5.

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. If this number is positive, the GM should create one or more new Bothers whose total HP equals this Excess Power, or add those points to an existing Bother.

Using Mastery Tokens

A sorcerer may spend Mastery Tokens to do two things: soak one point of Excess Power per token spent, rewrite the spell chain by adding, removing, or updating a single card per token spent. You can spend as many Mastery Tokens as you have available. Because Excess Power isn't worked out until after the spell is cast, you can't soak Excess Power, then Draw Power again on the same spell. However, you can alter a spell chain and then Draw Power again, if you like and are otherwise able.

If the sorcerer alters his spell, the player should describe the outcome of the change.

For example, Zambar wants to create a fireball. His "Conjure Fire" chain has a Power of 12. He Draws Power. He rolls d4, d6, and d8, and gets 3, 4, and 5. This is exactly enough, so the spell succeeds. He gets 2 Mastery Tokens for the 3 and the 4, and his Mastery of 2 allows him to keep both.

Later, Zambar casts "Conjure Fire In An Area Except Friends", for a total power of 20. He Draws Power. He rolls d4, d6, d8, and d10, and gets 4, 4, 6, and 8 for a total of 22. His Excess Power is 2, so he spends 2 Mastery Tokens to soak it.

Katerin the Conjurer wants to summon a horde of monsters, so she casts "Conjure Monsters In An Area", requiring Power 18. Katerin's player rolls d4, d6, d8, and d10, getting 3, 4, 5, and 10, leaving her with a total Power of 22! This is 4 over what she needed. She earns 2 Mastery Tokens for the rolls she made (3 and 4), and she uses those to soak 2 points of Excess Power. The GM creates a HP 2 Bother, describing it as a rebellious imp that will chuck fireballs at her instead of the enemy.

If there was too much Excess Power, Katerin could have reconfigured the spell by spending a Mastery Token. For example, dropping "In An Area" would have let her conjure a monster, but not blanket the battlefield with them like she'd planned.

Cooperative Spellcasting

Sorcerers can cooperate on a spell if their magical traditions are compatible. The players should provide an explanation on how this works if the GM has doubts. The spell is cast by one sorcerer, with the "...Together" card, but all sorcerers involved may spend their hoarded Mastery Tokens on the spell. However, when creating Bothers from any Excess Power left over, multiply by the number of sorcerers involved in the casting.

Example Spells

Detect Water (Commune With Water, Power 3) - the sorcerer can detect nearby sources of drinkable water.

Fireball (Conjure Fire, Power 12) - 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 7) - the sorcerer draws up an earthen bulwark to shield himself or others nearby.

Healing Touch (Craft Friends, Power 9) - the sorcerer shapes flesh to heal injuries, close wounds, and ease pain.

Weather-Working (Craft Air and Water In An Area, Power 15) - the hedge-wizard or witch's ability to manipulate rain, wind, clouds, and other forms of weather.

Animal Form (Exchange Me With Nature, Power 16) - 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 23) - a powerful protective spell, keeping stronger undead creatures at bay and reducing weaker ones to ash if they cross its border.
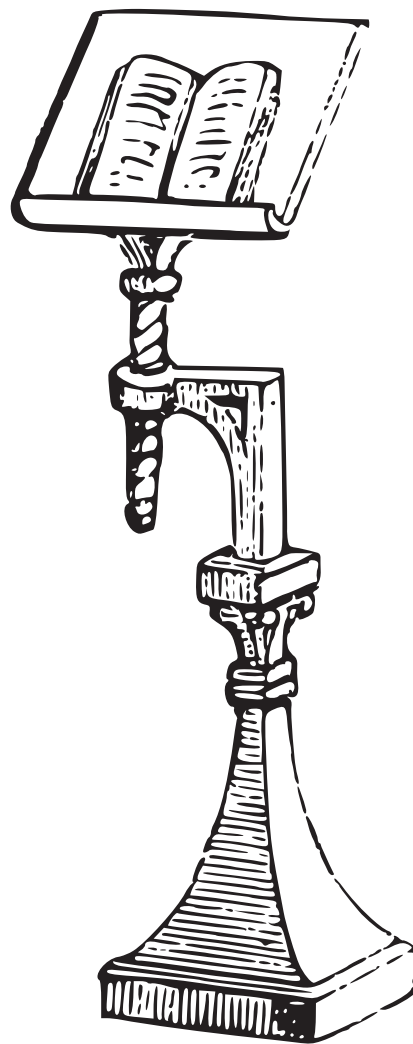
Acknowledgements

"There are no happy endings,
because nothing ends."

Commune With... [1]	**Ward... [3]**	**Craft... [6]**
You can sense, detect, talk to, or otherwise make contact with something.	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.	You can shape, strengthen, or enhance something. This can be physical movement, shape changing, or improvement of various kinds.
Exchange... [10]	**Conjure... [10]**	**Banish... [15]**
You can transform something into something else, or swap the positions of two things. Use "...With..." to mix in two different nouns.	You can summon or create something or someone from nothing.	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.
...In An Area [5]	**...Together [3]**	**Powerful(ly) [5]**
Your spell affects an area, rather than a single target.	You can cast your spell in a team with your fellow sorcerers. When you do, all sorcerers in the group may spend (but not earn) Mastery Tokens. However, multiply Excess Power by the number of sorcerers when creating a Bother if the spell goes out of control.	Your spell is twice as effective at depleting a Bother's HP, or otherwise twice as powerful, as a normal spell.
...And... [2]	**...Except... [2]**	**...With... [1]**
Your spell can chain together multiple nouns, verbs, or other appropriate terms.	Your spell doesn't affect a specific thing, even if it would otherwise.	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.

Air [2]	**Me/Here [1]**	**Nature [4]**
Your spell affects the elemental power of air. This includes smoke, gases, and wind.	Your spell affects yourself, or the spot where you're standing.	Your spell affects unintelligent or primitive living things such as plants or animals.
Earth [2]	**Object(s) [2]**	**Monster(s) [5]**
Your spell affects the elemental power of earth. This includes rock, dirt, metals, and so on.	Your spell affects an inanimate object (or collection of small objects).	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.
Fire [2]	**Friend(s) [3]**	**Death [5]**
Your spell affects the elemental power of fire. This includes heat and anything that's superheated, such as magma and lava.	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.	Your spell affects unliving things like vampires, ghosts, and spirits.
Water [2]	**Foe(s) [4]**	**Faerie [6]**
Your spell affects the elemental power of water. This includes many weather phenomena and other non-water liquids.	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.	Your spell affects the mysterious spirits of nature, life, and magic itself - elves, nixies, dryads, and the high and noble Fair Folk.