

Inept Sorcerers

by Bill Garrett <garrett@astralfrontier.org>
<http://forum.astralfrontier.org/>

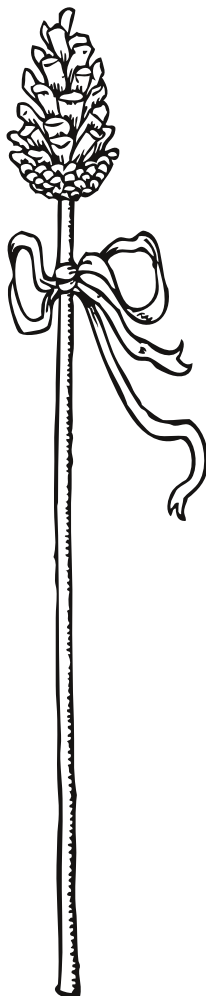
What you need

- 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. These can be shared by everyone.
- A set of polyhedral dice (d4, d6, d8, d10, d12). These can be shared by everyone.
- 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

You're a sorcerer - perhaps an apprentice of no particular distinction, perhaps a senile old coot or *alter kocker* Kabbalist, perhaps a practicing wizard who still hasn't got the knack. It might be Medieval Europe, a modern urban setting, or another world entirely. No matter who or where you are, though, a few things are true.

You'd like nothing better than to hop down to the pub for a pint. Or chat up that nice girl you've had your eye on in the village. Or figure out why your master is still unwilling to graduate you from sorcerer school. You have goals! You... just haven't made them happen yet. But things just keep *happening*. Inconvenient things...



How to prepare for the game

- Watch a 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

Player characters have three things: a name, an unattainable goal, and a Chaos Capacity.

Choose a **name** suitable for an inept sorcerer. This name should not impress anyone save the occasional town drunk and the rare lonely barmaid.

Choose an **unattainable goal**. For many inept sorcerers, this is something like "win my master's respect" or "become a competent spellcaster". It can be something else, such as "win the love of the princess" or "protect the world's last unicorn". The goal may never be accomplished, but it's the journey that makes the sorcerer's life worthwhile.

Starting characters have a **Chaos Capacity** of 1. As your sorcerer becomes more capable and less inept, his Chaos Capacity will increase. 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.

How to be a player

The GM sets the stage, describing a situation for the inept sorcerers. The other players then describe their actions, and the GM describes in turn what happens based on those actions. Any player can announce an action at any time, and the GM adjudicates it.

However, no matter what the sorcerers try to do, there are only a few actions that have meaningful results:

- Do something Mythically Resonant for light adventure fantasy
- Convince a competent character to get something done
- Cast a spell

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, either toward their goal or toward a new one.
- 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, or when someone's inept sorcerer has become reasonably powerful and competent.

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 you narrate as GM.

Bothers aren't necessarily monsters or living things, but they can be. A wide canyon, flooding river, or post office that's closed for business can all be Botherers.

Bothers have Hit Points, or HP, that tell you how many meaningful actions, roughly, are needed to make them go away. You can assign HP by fiat. If you want a random HP score instead, roll d4, d6, d8, d10, or even d12 based on difficulty of the Bother. Final Bosses or similar end-game threats can have d20 HP.

Actions that should be particularly effective against a problem will knock off 2, 3, or even more HP. Actions that are useless will remove 0 HP. Most other actions will knock off 1 HP.

If a Bother takes some action that would seriously inconvenience a character, create a new smaller Bother with fewer HP (roll d4, or pick something appropriate) to represent it.



How to cast spells

When a sorcerer casts a spell, he does two things: draw Power to make the magic happen, and assemble spell cards to define what it does. The sorcerer 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 his magic can conjure something unexpected - or simply blow up.

Each spell starts at zero Power. Each time the player draws Power, he rolls 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. Players may not add the same card to the chain more than once. 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 eventually precede it in the chain. When a card text ends with "...", at least one other card must eventually follow it 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

The spell is cast when the player is ready to let it go (or has run out of options), 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.

Once a sorcerer has drawn Power, he has to cast *something*. The chain should do something similar to the declared intent of the spell, but if that's not possible, it can be just about anything as the spell power goes out of control.

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 Schmo wants to summon a horde of monsters, so he casts "Conjure Monsters In An Area", requiring Power 13. He rolls d4, d6, and d8, getting 2, 2, and 3. This isn't enough (he's 6 short). His d10 is a 10, leaving him with a total Power of 17! This is 4 over what he needed. His 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 Schmo instead of his foes.

For example, if Schmo was casting "Conjure Monsters In An Area" and had 3 points of Excess Power, he 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 Schmo 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.

Character Advancement

To reward a sorcerer for good play, or just to add some new flavor, the GM can introduce new Spell Cards. They might be specific to a given sorcerer, or available to everyone.

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.

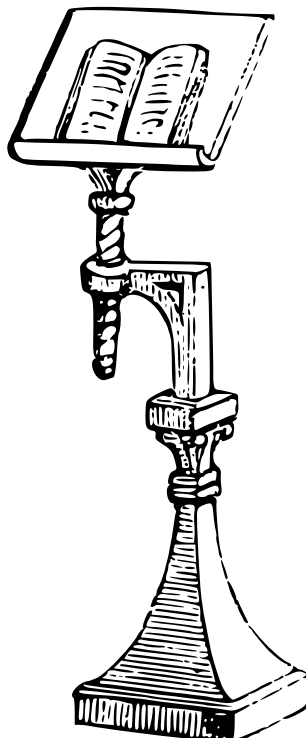
the GM can increase a sorcerer's Chaos Capacity by 1. This lets him draw more Power safely, putting more powerful spells in his reach and making simpler spells routine. This should be pretty rare.

Acknowledgements

Beth, Drew, Jenn, Madb, and Phil, for encouraging me.

The gang on Ello, and Josh's group, for being willing to playtest this thing before I got a chance.

Interior art from openclipart.org



Commune With... [1] You can sense, detect, talk to, or otherwise make contact with something. This can be an elemental power, a person, a spirit, or whatever. Use this to overcome Bothers by learning something or saying 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.	...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.
...And... [2] Your spell can chain together multiple nouns, verbs, or other appropriate terms.		

<p>Air [1] Your spell affects the elemental power of air. This includes smoke, gases, and wind.</p>	<p>Earth [1] Your spell affects the elemental power of earth. This includes rock, dirt, metals, and so on.</p>	<p>Fire [1] Your spell affects the elemental power of fire. This includes heat and anything that's superheated, such as magma and lava.</p>
<p>Water [1] Your spell affects the elemental power of water. This includes many weather phenomena and other non-water liquids.</p>	<p>Me/Here/This [0] Your spell affects yourself, the spot where you're standing, or something you're touching.</p>	<p>That/Those [1] Your spell affects an inanimate object (or collection of small objects) at range.</p>
<p>Friend(s) [2] 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>Foe(s) [3] 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>Monster(s) [4] 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>Nature [3] Your spell affects unintelligent or primitive living things such as plants or animals.</p>	<p>Death [4] Your spell affects unliving things like vampires, ghosts, and spirits.</p>	