



# *Inept Sorcerers*

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## 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 Post-It notes, 3"x5" index cards, etc. for spell cards (see page 9).
- At least one full set of polyhedral dice (d4, d6, d8, d10, d12).
- Half a dozen coins, chips, or tokens for Arcana.
- Paper and pencils for taking notes.
- A bottle of something alcoholic (or otherwise suitably inspiring).

## What this game is about

The Power is what sorcerers call the energy that makes magic happen. Every sorcerer can call on Power and shape it using their knowledge.

Unfortunately, you're inept. 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 an ordinary high school student, balancing your homework, your home life, and the study of an old grimoire you found with your friends. You're not exactly a master of magic.

But you're still a sorcerer. You've seen the wondrous, unpredictable results of spellcasting. You've seen the power it could give you - or the beauty it can create. Whatever you end up with will rarely be what you set out to do, but usually what you need.

You might want to play games about characters that are neither "inept," nor "sorcerers." This isn't that game, but can be used to build the game you want; see "Changing the game" on page 7. Since this game is Creative Commons licensed, you can use everything in this game, and publish it under your own name, as long as you give attribution to this game's creators.

## How to create a character

Think of what makes magic **interesting** to you, the player. Then create someone who will wield that sort of magic on your behalf in a fictional world - your player character.

When you have an idea, tell the GM and your fellow players something true about *your character*, something true about *the game world* in which you adventure, and something true about *the nature of magic itself*. When you have heard what everyone has to say, continue developing your ideas about your characters until everyone is happy. If someone is uncomfortable with something you've said, talk it out or rethink what you want to say. If you are uncomfortable with someone else's ideas, speak up and say so.

Next, 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 might never be accomplished, but it's the journey that makes the sorcerer's life worthwhile.

If the GM allows it, you can create a **Spell Card** that's unique to you. Read "how to create spell cards" on page 3 for guidelines, and use existing Spell Cards as examples. This card can represent your specific magical discipline, like alchemy or illusion magic, or just be some personal quirk of your magic or personality.

If you find yourself using the same spells over and over, you can write down how the spell is constructed, along with its total Power cost.

If you have anything else that you feel is important about your character, note it down too, and let the GM know what you want to see happen in-game with it.

## 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. There are no turns, so speak up any time you have something to say.

The GM and the players are encouraged to narrate things that are **Mythically Resonant**; that is, things that reinforce the fantastic mythology of the fictional world you are creating, and evoke the power and imagination of the great stories which have inspired the group. Only your group can tell you what this means to you, so discuss it amongst yourselves if need be.

## How to be the GM

Whenever the players look at you expectantly, look at the principles of magic below, and narrate something interesting and appropriate based on those principles.

- Do things that are Mythically Resonant for light adventure fantasy.
- Remind the players why sorcery is worth it.
- Celebrate the players, their sorcerers, and the goals they both have.
- Creating new cards is magical for both sorcerers and players.
- Power is always at the sorcerers' call, but not always at their command.
- Calling on Power always changes something about the PCs' struggle, for better or worse.
- Use Bothers to inflict hardship or annoyance on the PCs, but not the players.

You can rewrite these principles until you are satisfied with the result. If you are uncertain, take a drink from your alcoholic (or inspirational) beverage until something funny or entertaining comes to you.

You play this game to have fun with the people around you. If something isn't fun, change it.

## Spell cards

When you cast spells, you'll use Spell Cards - nouns, verbs, and modifiers that you combine together to describe a spell. These cards are for you, the player. Your sorcerer can cast spells however you wish. The cards that come with the game are intended to cover the most common uses of magic. However, your game may discover new uses for magic that don't seem to match well with an existing card.

### *How to create new spell cards*

A card must have a **name**, a **Power cost**, and a short **description** of what it means. Power costs for new verbs should be comparable to existing verbs, depending on how seemingly 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 5 points, depending on how flexible or useful they are.

If a 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 common occurrence. Types of sorcerers, or individual sorcerers, can have their own cards. For example, an illusionist might have an "Illusionary" spell card that lets him create phantasms and images.



## 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.
- Cast a spell to deal with the bother.

Whenever you successfully cast a spell to deal with a Bother, roll a d4 and remove that many HP. If the GM rules that the Spell Cards you included in your spell would be particularly effective, increase the size of the die you roll (to d6, d8, d10, and finally d12) for every relevant Card. 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*

You 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 player starts the game with access to every card in the game, unless the GM says otherwise. If it's interesting to have only some sorcerers have access to only certain types of magic, then make it so. For example, perhaps only the nature-witch can cast spells using the Nature card, and the necromancer is the only one who can cast Death spells.

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.

For example, Zambar the Adequate wants to Fireball 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 start with an empty pool of Arcana. Each time the player rolls a die that comes up 4 or less, gain one Arcana.

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 Arcana for the 3, but none for the 5.

### *Casting the spell*

The spell is cast when the player is ready to let it go (or can't roll any more dice to draw 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, and the arrangement of cards in the chain makes sense to everyone at the table (for example, "Commune With Conjure" is nonsensical).

A sorcerer who has drawn too little or 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 cards in the chain, and the GM determines what happens with that Power.

Once a sorcerer has drawn Power, he has to cast *something*. It need not be the original spell, or anything close to it. If the player has drawn Power but does not cast a legal spell, that which has been drawn becomes Excess Power and the GM determines what happens next. See "Excess Power" on page 6 for how this works.

## Excess Power

The GM is ultimately in charge of how Excess Power is spent. However, the player has some control over this process.

### *Arcana*

You may spend any or all of your Arcana, each effect costing one token: Reduce Excess Power by 1, do an extra HP of damage to one Bother, or do one special thing with the spell (as determined by the GM, or any optional game rules in play).

After you've spent all your Arcana, or don't wish to spend any more, discard any remaining Arcana. Once the player is done spending Arcana, the GM determines what happens to any Excess Power: twist the spell, create a Bother, or something else unique.

### *Twists and New Bothers*

The GM can spend Excess Power to twist the spell in novel or unexpected ways. Use Excess Power as a guideline for how much to twist, rather than as a hard limit. Adding or removing a card soaks Excess Power equal to the Power cost of the card. Changing cards soaks the difference in Power costs (or 1 Power, at minimum). Re-interpreting the effect of a card (such as negating, inverting or amplifying its effect) soaks the Power cost of the card.

The GM can also twist the spell by introducing a totally new card, soaking as much Excess Power as the Power cost of the new card. If this happens, the new card becomes available to the sorcerer's player for use in future spells.

The GM can create a new Bother, or strengthen or alter an existing Bother, reading Excess Power as the Bother's HP.

There are other possible ways to manifest Excess Power. One example, called "Taboos", is described here. Your group can come up with your own.

## Taboos

A Taboo is a magical requirement placed on future spells, or a prohibition on other activities. For example, a sorcerer might lose access to Fire magic, or cause everything he targets with a spell to spin in place.

A Taboo has HP, like a Bother. You don't deplete a Taboo's HP by casting spells. Instead, you remove 1 HP from a Taboo by using it as a Spell Card. A Taboo can still be removed from play through good RP or player disinterest, as normal. Once a Taboo's HP has been depleted, the sorcerer can choose to use it as a new Spell Card, like a new card that came out of a twist. A Taboo shouldn't have more than 3 HP or so, to avoid annoying the player too much.

For example, a wizard tries to blind a group of orcs. However, the spell goes wildly out of control - the orcs' eyeballs separate from their heads, grow wings, and fly away. The GM creates a new Taboo, called "Eyeballs", with 3 HP.

The unlucky wizard must include "Eyeballs" in his spell chains three times, once for each point of HP. After three uses, the "Eyeballs" spell card becomes available to the wizard for use - if he wants, that is. But until then, he will end up casting spells like "Commune With Friends With Eyeballs" (where the winged orbs keep track of his allies, rather than his conventional divination magics) or "Banish Monsters With Eyeballs" (where occult staring contests intimidate a pack of ogres into leaving the party alone).



## Changing the game

This is a game about inept sorcerers - usually traditional spellcasters in some sort of middle-to-high-magic fantasy world who for whatever reason have difficulty getting their magic to work as they want. Movies like *Krull*, *Dragonslayer*, *The Last Unicorn*, anime like "Mahou Sensei Negima" or "Magic User's Club", and books like the *Harry Potter* and *Magic Kingdom of Landover* series, all feature characters of this type.

It doesn't have to be that way. But if you want to run this game in a different way, you should answer a few questions for yourself, and make some decisions based on your answers. Players will respond to the expectations that you set, so set expectations by changing names, rewriting text, and having a conversation with your players about what these things mean.

### ***Decide what 'inept' means***

Are the characters supposed to be bad at magic, or is magic simply too much for any person to control? A game where forbidden sorcerous knowledge puts any occultist at risk from Lovecraftian extradimensional entities can be played using these rules, but should be presented very differently. A serious modern-day game might have apprentice adepts learning the arcane arts, ever at risk.

If "inept" no longer describes the tone you want for your game, choose a new name for your game. "Inept Padawans" is perfectly valid for a light-hearted Star Wars game, but "Pupils of the Force" sets a more serious tone.

### ***Decide what 'sorcerer' means***

Are the characters traditional magic-users, alchemists, shapechanging psychic warriors, or something else entirely? Is it magic that they wield, or some other force? Ultimately, this game is about people who wield an unwieldy power to achieve their aims. If most of what your characters do is something else, a different game may be right for you.

## Changing the characters

You can set a new tone by changing how characters are created. For example, an unimpressive name and unattainable goal may not be suitable for more serious fare. Perhaps characters have a Public Name (their True Name being a profound magical secret) and a Motivation. You can tie these to other rules, if it's interesting - for example, giving characters an extra Arcana or two to spend when they cast spells in line with their Motivation.

## Changing the rules

You can dial the difficulty up or down by changing spell card costs. The costlier a typical spell, the more likely the player will roll more dice, and the more likely that Excess Power will result.

You can make it easier or harder to gain Arcana by changing the roll requirement (dice that roll 4 or less), or eliminating Arcana. Players with less Arcana are more vulnerable to small amounts of Excess Power.

You can - and should - add new cards, remove old ones, or rewrite cards that don't make sense. The cards that come with this game are geared around a typical fantasy spellcaster's repertoire. There's no time travel, no mind control, no modern technology.

## Classes and specialization

Your sorcerers can specialize. For example, you might have alchemists, battle-mages, druids, Hermetic wizards, nature-witches, and more. Each of these classes might have its own set of nouns, verbs, or modifiers. For example, perhaps only a witch has "Nature", while only a necromancer has "Death".

Individual classes, or individual cards, can have special rules that cost Arcana to activate. For example, an alchemist might spend Arcana to bottle a spell they are casting into a potion, and carry it around for later use.

## Examples

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 Arcana Tokens for the 3 and the 4.

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 Arcana Tokens to soak it.

Katerin the Conjuror 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 Arcana 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 twisted the spell by spending an Arcana 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.

Takeo, ordinary high school student, wants to create a magic barrier to keep marauding kobolds out, phrasing it as "Ward Monsters". He draws 5 points of Excess Power, but the GM is sympathetic and goes easy on him.

"Instead of a magic circle like you'd planned," the GM says, "metal washtubs plummet from the sky and knock the kobolds senseless." The spell is twisted to include "With" and a new card, "Washtub", which Takeo can use in his spells from now on.

## 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.

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## Spell Cards

Write these down on Post-It notes, 3"x5" index cards, or something similar. You can use some, all, or none of these cards, or create your own.

### Verbs

**Commune With... [1]** - You can sense, detect, talk to, or otherwise make contact with something.

**Ward... [3]** - You can protect something from harm, theft, or detection, depending on how you phrase the spell.

**Craft... [6]** - You can shape, strengthen, or enhance something. This can be physical movement, shape changing, or improvement of various kinds.

**Exchange... [10]** - You can transform something into something else, or swap the positions of two things. Use "...With..." to mix in two different nouns.

**Conjure... [10]** - You can summon or create something or someone from nothing.

**Banish... [15]** - You can dismiss or dispel something - an element, a power, or even a creature.

### Nouns

**Me/Here [1]** - Your spell affects yourself, or the spot where you're standing.

**Object(s) [2]** - Your spell affects an inanimate object (or collection of small objects).

**Friend(s) [3]** - Your spell affects a friend or ally (or all friends or allies, depending on the spell).

**Foe(s) [4]** - Your spell affects an enemy or hostile person (or all such parties, depending on the spell).

**Air [2]** - Your spell affects the elemental power of air. This includes smoke, gases, and wind.

**Earth [2]** - Your spell affects the elemental power of earth. This includes rock, dirt, metals, and so on.

**Fire [2]** - Your spell affects the elemental power of fire. This includes heat and anything that's superheated, such as magma and lava.

**Water [2]** - Your spell affects the elemental power of water. This includes many weather phenomena and other non-water liquids.

**Nature [4]** - Your spell affects unintelligent or primitive living things such as plants or animals.

**Monster(s) [5]** - Your spell affects powerful supernatural monsters - hill giants, werewolves, or vorpal bunnies.

**Death [5]** - Your spell affects unliving things like vampires, ghosts, and spirits.

**Faerie [6]** - Your spell affects the mysterious spirits of nature, life, and magic itself - elves, nixies, dryads, and the high and noble Fair Folk.

### Modifiers

**...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.

**...In An Area [5]** - Your spell affects an area, rather than a single target.

**...Powerful(ly) [5]** - Your spell works against warded, armored, or otherwise very resistant targets that would normally ignore mortal magics.

**...With... [1]** - This uses one noun as a catalyst for acting on another one.