SORCERER

by Ron Edwards

SORCERER

AN INTENSE ROLE-PLAYING GAME

by Ron Edwards

Greg Pryor

ADEPT
PRESS

CHICAGO

The Annotated Sorcerer

by Ron Edwards

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Note On This Edition

The Annotated Sorcerer is presented with the original text of *Sorcerer* on the left-hand page, and the related annotations on the right. This text is provided in two formats: 2-on-a-page, creating a horizontal layout suitable for viewing the whole spread at once on digital devices, and single-page, suitable for printing and binding into a paper document via DIY technique or print-on-demand service.

Due to this presentation, the page numbers of the original Sorcerer are considered to apply to the entire two-page spread. In cases where the annotations fill more than the facing page, the overflow pages are marked with roman numerals (for example: page 16-i, page 16-ii, and so on).

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Happy Anniversary!

Or rather … a bit late. Sorcerer was first made available as a TXT file in 1996, in shareware fashion; then was upgraded to a PDF for sale in 1998. The book version with finalized rules was released in 2001. Therefore 2011 was both the fifteen-year and the ten-year anniversary, for the 1996 and 2001 releases.

One of the reasons for the annotations is that Sorcerer is not written for Iron-Man Bad-Ass role-playing. It's easy, very easy. My goal here is to show how.

I've pulled some of the text from my posts at the Adept Press forum, and the people who prompted those posts should be acknowledged. Petter Sandelin, Ralph Mazza, Jesse Burneko, Ben Bailey, Per Fischer, James Nostack, Trevis Martin, Christoph Boeckle, Josh Porter, Christopher Kubasik, René ("Rampage"), E. James Heil, Mackie, Klaus Welten, Joel Shempert, John S, René, "AXUM," Mandy Frank, John Adams, Frank Tarcikowski, Ben Baugh, Michael ("Plotin"), "Abhoth," Mark ("Tasseomancer"), "Arxhon," John ("Paiku"), David Berg, Eric, Moreno Roncucci, Tar Markvar, Bill Cook, Lisa Padol, Jae, Piers ("The Magus"), Nat Barmore, Konstantinos, Simon C, Tim C. Koppang, Mandy, Tim Alexander, Chris Weill, Sven Seeland, Ezio.

PREFACE

Gary Simpson

A word on role-playing systems

Many role-playing games amount to not much more than a series of gorgeous coffee-table books. Others spark the imagination with a set of simple, high-potential ideas. SORCERER is written in the tradition of the early editions of *Traveller, Cyberpunk, RuneQuest, Champions,* and (lo these many years gone) *The Fantasy Trip*. Every one of these games was originally published as a low-budget labor of love and each transformed the experience of role-playing. This spirit of role-playing design never died, and SORCERER owes many debts to *Over the Edge, Prince Valiant*, and *Zero*. Thanks and even a little love to all of the creators of all these ground-breaking games.

Art or game?

I think of role-playing as playing in a band: on SORCERER night, you get together and make cool-sounding noises. You'll have to try people out and have standards for their abilities. Everyone has to listen, everyone has to play honestly and hard, and no other group will be quite like it. It doesn't concern winning, although showing off for your friends might be part of it. It has nothing to do with losing either, although screwing up or regretting things can play its role. In a band, if someone's not having fun, they stop coming. If someone is not up to the level of the other members, or can't handle their

Art or game?

Every word here holds true. This is what I'd later call the Social Contract for Sorcerer play - note its combined hope, ambition, and ruthlessness. I'll revisit all three many times throughout the annotations.

The point is that this game text will not indulge you. It will not provide you with media entertainment as if *it* were a movie, a comic, or a book. It is instead a means to create an entertainment which has affinities with all of those, but in a medium of its own.

end of things, they stop getting invited. Eventually the band might be pretty good. When all is said, the rules you hold are just some instruments. The music is up to you.

Disclaimer

SORCERER concerns stories about dangerous magical acts that have explosive personal consequences. It's "R" rated, not because there are pictures with nipples on them or taboo vocabulary, but because it can lead to stories that are not nice. But they are just stories – **fiction**. If you chew the covers off and go into convulsions, commit any sort of harm to yourself or others, or devote too much time to role-playing, hey: it's **your** problem.

This goes double for anyone who's offended by the game. SORCERER presents a metaphor for the utterly realistic, utterly relevant moral question, *"What will you do to get what you want?"* Its purpose is to create fiction addressing this question. If you take the material in this book literally, you're missing the point and wasting your time.

Visit the Sorcerer website

This game began as an Internet phenomenon, and it continues as such, at http://www.sorcerer-rpg.com. The game and its supplements are available there through direct-order, but you can also find player-generated settings, such notable things as a live-action start-up package, tremendous debate about role-playing game theory, an art gallery, and links to other independent role-playing games.

Specific services and opportunities at the SORCERER website include the following.
- ▼ Participate in active forum discussion and debate.
- ▼ Input data about your character and demons, which are then automatically converted to a PDF file based on the character sheet design of your choice.
- ▼ Register to be an official demonstrator for the game and receive a demonstration packet with an original scenario, art, and detailed materials.
- ▼ Sell your own SORCERER setting materials for your own profit.

The supplements

Two supplements exist to the book you now hold; all together, they compose the final and only version of this role-playing game. In general, I am not a big fan of amendments to role-playing rules, and even less a fan of detailed background sourcebooks. The SORCERER supplements are written instead to be worth your money and time, according to the following rules.

Website

The terminology on this page makes me laugh and cry. Ah, the mid 90s, a time of mailing lists, webrings, usenet, "official" this or that.

Here's a quick rundown of how all this came to be.

- I'd been wanting a sorcerer-only, demon-summoning game for a long time, arguably as far back as 1978 and the game Wizard, from Metagaming. All through the early 1990s I battered ideas together for it, usually set in my halting attempts to recover sword-and-sorcery adventure fiction from the horrible bland pudding of "fantasy." I even put together an Interlock version (the system for the original Cyberpunk), which at least helped me figure out how to organize my ideas.

- Over the Edge opened my eyes. "Oh, so that's how you do it," I said, and starting hacking Over the Edge together with Wizard, producing my first handful of rules pages in late 1994, enough to start playtesting.

- The first real "version," although barely worth the term, was a photocopied sheaf of pages in Word with ripped-off art and scissors-cut layout, in 1996. I only made a few of these to use for playtesting in local conventions and game stores.

- I turned its text into an image-less ASCII file for distribution via shareware at my first website – actually a bit of my grad school webpage – in November 1996. This was effectively the alpha. You ordered it through an automatic thing and I emailed it to you; if you wanted, you sent me $5.00 in snail mail. I got a nice review in Serendipity's Circle, joined a bunch of RPG and pop-occult webrings, and I got a lot of pictures of Abe Lincoln in the mail.

- The Beta, I guess it'd be called, came in 1998, as a PDF for sale for $10.00, off a bona fide actual website. I had to pay a ton to get the ability to process credit cards – no Paypal back then! It was soon accompanied by the Apprentice, itself built off some demo material I'd developed with semi-pregenerated characters and the situational scenario that would eventually be in Chapter 4 of the book. Things got rolling then: I added the first PDF version of Sorcerer & Sword, which was partly written from the original pre-1994 design.

- Sorcerer & Soul emerged in late 1998 from two things: original notes about deeper thematic and metaphysical issues, and nascent game-in-design called The Human Machine, and from the original essay System Does Matter.

- After meeting Dav Harnish and the other creators of Obsidian, I decided a *brief, limited* print run of a real book would be a nice promoter for the PDF and fulfill my dream of seeing the game in a store or two. I developed and re-wrote the text for the book in 2000-2001, rendering the 1998 rules and Apprentice obsolete. I barely made the print run in time for GenCon 2001. Further development of the supplements was simultaneous, such that the three were effectively released as a unit (books of Sword and Soul released in November 2001 and February 2002, respectively)

1. **Innovative role-playing game design.** If the topic can be run using the rules in this book alone, or ideas and principles from other role-playing games, then it's not worthy of a supplement.
2. **Worthy source material.** I take the literary/media sources for SORCERER pretty seriously. A topic for a supplement will reach beyond the bibliography in this book and raise new issues for play; also, it will be examined in some detail with decent scholarship.
3. **Service to your own game.** The supplement's purpose will always be to provide a good engine or materials for your own role-playing. It will never be thinly disguised fiction.

Sorcerer & Sword: How to create, use, and develop dark fantasy adventures in the tradition of the pulp age, by such authors as Robert E. Howard, Clark Ashton Smith, C. L. Moore, and Fritz Leiber. Rules applications include necromancy, the nuances of physical combat, and centering a role-playing story on the player-characters as protagonists.

The Sorcerer's Soul: How to achieve advanced themes in role-playing through the use and abuse of the game-mechanic called Humanity. The literary background for this supplement is the detective tradition, by such authors as Raymond Chandler, Robert van Gulik, and Ross MacDonald. Rules applications include multiple options and consequences for defining Humanity, humans as demons, demons as humans, angelics to go with the demonics, and an original method for preparing scenarios based on the limits of morality.

A word of encouragement
How did SORCERER begin? Here are the incarnations of the game, which might prove handy for those who are thinking about RPG publishing.

- ▼ The very first version was an ASCII file: plain, unformatted text. A person arrived at the site and, upon clicking a button, could send me an automatic e-mail. I e-mailed them an attached file of SORCERER, no questions asked. However, if they liked it, they could snail-mail me five dollars.
- ▼ You know what? I got a whole bunch of green pictures of Abe Lincoln in the mail. It helped that I canvassed the Internet for other independent, grass-roots games, and traded links with all of them. It helped that I always followed up with an e-mail to make sure someone got the game. It helped that I thanked people for their comments and tried to consider all criticisms seriously. Some friendships I formed at this stage proved to be enduring and, eventually, essential to the game's success.

I'm happy with this text, but I remember the difficulty of trying to phrase it. We didn't have any language for talking about a larger role-playing community, your own group deciding to use this game text, me as author to you as reader, and you as a practitioner forming your own game.

▼ The second version of SORCERER was an ashcan: a spiral-bound desk-printed photocopy, complete with art by some of my friends. This is what I brought to conventions and played, played, and played some more. This is what I asked $10 for in person, although that was a secondary issue. This was the serious playtesting stage, when rule after rule, idea after idea, was stripped from the system, leaving only its most functional parts behind.

▼ Then came the serious task: a full re-write, with examples and instructions and all kinds of work put into it, including turning the beast into a PDF file. I acquired the domain name; the site got a full face-lift to include the credit-card order page, a customer had to pay $10 with honest plastic up-front for the game, and now, suddenly, I was a game publisher. The mailing list boomed into one of the scariest game-design debate forums on the Internet. People started asking about supplements, and I took all my ongoing play sessions, notes and inspirations, as well as a host of suggestions, to make a couple.

▼ And now here's this book.

My point in all this is simple. Every step of the way, I turned a (small) profit. It is in fact possible to establish a role-playing game as a commercial reality without risking it all on one big lump of investment. And most importantly, **you can do it too**.

Jeremy McHugh

Chapter One:

INTRODUCTION TO THE GAME

THE HEART OF SORCERY

Know this: all the traditions, cultures, rituals, and bodies of knowledge surrounding what we call magic or the occult are wrong. It is hogwash, flimflam, swindlery, and lies. But even so, here and now in the modern world, there are perhaps several dozen sorcerers in existence. They do summon demons and bind them to their will. They do have an inkling, although no surety, about the unnatural laws.

You are one of them.

SORCERER is a role-playing game based on the classical archetype of forbidden magic. Each player is responsible for the actions of a character who is a powerful sorcerer in the modern-day world, and so each character comes equipped with at least one demon he or she has bound. Also, at any time, a sorcerer character may try to summon and bind more demons. The superhuman abilities are inherent only to the demons; the sorcerers

"Sorcerer is many things, but one thing it's not is pretending to be something it's not."

-- Tar

Here's a diagram of how this book's chapters are organized, which also maps out the exact process of play. The whole thing is a system manual, or perhaps curriculum, in precise order of what needs to be known fully before moving on.

| 1. Introductory Discussion | | 4. Preparation & Initial Play |
| 2. Make Characters / 3. Make Demons | Diagrams | 5. Sorcery / 6. Conflicts of All Sorts |

Emergent Story & Setting
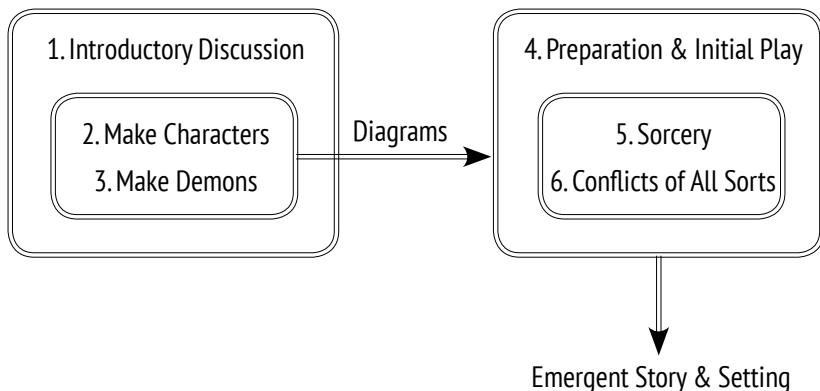
That means it's intended to be read linearly, but also structurally. Chapters 2 and 3 only "exist" in light of what has been explained in Chapter 1. In order to understand Chapter 4, you must grasp the entire box of chapters 2 and 3 fitting into the context of chapter 1, and be armed with the player-character diagrams, or at least understand what they are. You simply cannot begin preparing and playing in the same old way you're used to because you "understand role-playing," and rely on looking things up as you might in many other RPG texts. This goes double for people who've been GM for many different games and who consider themselves experienced.

The order also illustrates a core feature of playing Sorcerer, which is that pre-play setting is reduced to the barest possible minimum, strictly at the service of making characters enmeshed in crisis. More about the setting is established through specific preparation and play.

A lot of games shoot for the initial, necessary inspiration by providing a detailed setting. However, Sorcerer begins with building characters. And since the character creation process necessarily wraps them into in a crisis situation, you only need a little bit of setting to make this go. In other words, setting exists at the outset only to supercharge the characters' immediate hassles, not for the characters to explore. Play itself will make lots more setting (the "complete" setting if you like), which is fine.

Even more importantly, no one prepares any sort of adventure or even situation of any kind until after characters have been made, because features of character creation are the primary tools for that preparation.

---(cont.)

Chapter One:

INTRODUCTION TO THE GAME

Jeremy McHugh

THE HEART OF SORCERY

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Diagram, cont.

For each chapter, I've indicated the part of the diagram being discussed in bold text and outline, as well as adding the crucial practical concept in it.

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┌─────────────────────────────┐          ┌─────────────────────────────┐
│ 1. Introductory Discussion  │          │ 4. Preparation & Initial Play│
│    The Two Statements       │          │                             │
│  ┌───────────────────────┐  │ Diagrams │  ┌───────────────────────┐  │
│  │  2. Make Characters    │  │ ───────► │  │    5. Sorcery          │  │
│  │  3. Make Demons        │  │          │  │ 6. Conflicts of All Sorts│ │
│  └───────────────────────┘  │          │  └───────────────────────┘  │
└─────────────────────────────┘          └─────────────────────────────┘
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                                          Emergent Story & Setting
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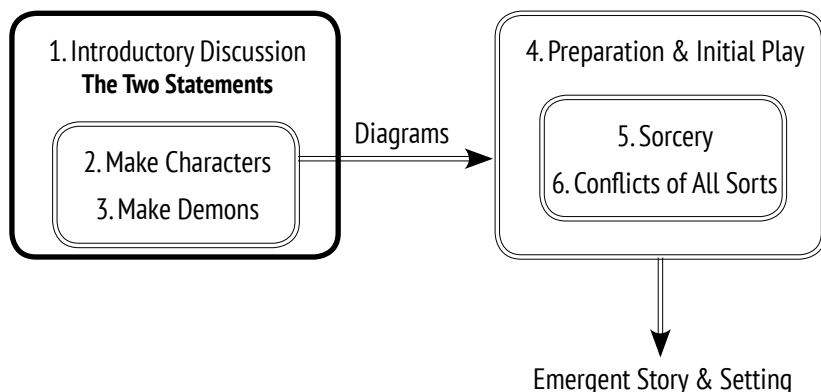
In this case, Chapter One is all about a conversation among people which includes, at some point, the agreement to play this game. And in that conversation, certain things need to be known and acknowledged, so the agreement is really about something. This chapter is nothing more nor less than those certain things.

The Heart of Sorcery

As I see it, role-playing is fundamentally composed of two things: Color, meaning the imagined fictional content at its most basic appealing level; and Reward, meaning what the hell fun it might be actually to do, if any.

Apparently I understood that a long time ago, opening here with the look and feel, which is much more important and much less detailed than the ordinary concepts of setting. However, I somehow forgot to include the lesson from Everway of presenting key visual material. I must not have learned the power of that technique for Sorcerer.

Nor did I manage to get the setting concept fully articulated, except via example in Chapter 7. It's not the same as "modern setting" in the somewhat sanitized, comfort-zone sense I see in many role-playing texts. "Here and now," might be the best term, implicit in early Champions and consistent with the way many novels, movies, and comics are written.

In fact, saying "Here and now" really is the best way to go. It's too easy to get distracted by the game's toolkit flexibility and to be misled into thinking that the game uses settings like skins.

themselves have no special powers beyond their knowledge of how to summon, command, and bind them. The Game Master (GM) plays the demons as characters.

The sorcerer is different from magic-using characters in most role-playing games. Sorcerers are not wizards who channel the harmonious elements of the natural world. They do not "cast spells." Instead, they break the rules of reality to summon beings that are Not Supposed to Be Here. Whatever else they accomplish or believe, they are outlaws: the ultimate in arrogance. By any moral system, karma, or means of adjudging right and wrong, a sorcerer is taking a grave risk by using his or her knowledge.

This sort of magic is powerful, very obviously Not Natural, and has no true masters. Demons shriek with malicious delight or lick their brutish lips in anticipation as they materialize from Outside and match their power against the sorcerer's wits. Sorcerous deeds mix the heady possibility of awesome power and the certainty of blood-freezing danger. If you risk all on a crucial bargain with a demon, get nervous when it readily agrees... what have you missed?

If you want to go the completely classical route, demons would come from Hell, where they ordinarily spend their time torturing the souls of the damned, and the sorcerer is committing an act of blasphemy to bring them to the world. This view is only one of many ways to define the basic idea

> **We get a sniff of sorcery and oh! What plans we make! We'll shake creation and leave nothing but smiles and wit and a reputation all men envy!**
> **—G. Ennis, Hellblazer**

of sorcery, though, and the actual meaning of demons and how they relate to theological issues, if at all, is up to the individual play group. Any sort of afterlife for human beings might be totally irrelevant to demons, much to the surprise of some novice sorcerers.

A quick question

If sorcerers have been around on the planet for a while and they're so powerful, then why aren't they running things? Is there some kind of demonic Illuminati whose conflicts and machinations have provided the real basis for the events in the history books? The default answer is No.

The main reason why not is that demons do not permit general knowledge of their existence. Oh, little exceptions are all right; an isolated report of a slavering night-fiend can be written off. But daily bat-winged strafing of Chicago cannot. Or, a small coven of like-minded people summoning a demon in a basement is one thing, but someone going on prime-time TV to do it is another. Demons will flatly refuse to do things that

are so blatant (see page 58, *Role-playing Demons* in Chapter Three and page 93, *Binding Subtleties* in Chapter Five).

The other reason is that sorcerers are rare. There just aren't that many people who are able and willing to do it. The types of stories implied in these rules assume no more than a hundred active sorcerers in the world at any one time, and usually fewer. Their impact on history has been confined to single events rather than an ongoing saga or conspiracy. Chapter Seven offers options for running things differently.

THE HEART OF THE GAME

The SORCERER rulebook provides the tools for **your** play group, for the story that **you** want to create. This role-playing game starts with intense, powerful characters in a rather sketchy world. It requires the gaming group to consider the following concepts and questions.

The player

The sorcerer is a scary, intense character. Consider a sorcerer you might play, and answer some questions about him or her.

▼ Given that you (the character) have far more power to get what you want than most people, what *do* you want?

> My grief is gain, when you cannot mock it.
>
> —Euripides, Medea

▼ How far would you go? How far have you gone already?

Second, the demonic means to these ends are not nice magic but rather the classic two-edged sword.

▼ What price have you already paid?

▼ Faced with madness, armed with madness, how do you hold on to your humanity?

Third, what kind of crisis has driven you into immediate action? A meaningful sorcerer, one worth playing, is already in motion. You are the protagonist of a story, the main character rather than a bystander.

▼ Are you out for worldly gain, using sorcery merely as a tool?

▼ Or are you an esoteric seeker probing at the fringes of human understanding?

▼ Or are you desperate and driven, perhaps for vengeance or battling against something intolerably unjust?

Resolving this crisis allows the player-character to be rewritten. In a way, each character represents a series of novels, episodes, or movies specifically about that character, and each resolution potentially sets up the story of the next installment.

The heart of the game

Boy do I mean it, exactly as written. These are not fluff, but rather strict instructions: stop, compare them to other games, and think deeply about how they apply to you.

To the player: nothing will take care of you. This game is not intended to preserve your character's life, to make him or her look good all the time, or to make him or her the hero in some guaranteed way. The only thing the character can rely upon is you.

The GM: there is no "plot" you have to prepare, manage, or engineer. All the mechanisms I've described are aimed at what you bring into play, and let the events of play itself become whatever they will. Overall, play will produce a plot. But it can't do that if you try to inflict a plot of your own.

And next comes the first major textual hitch. I started with color and ideology (or "vision"), which is fine, but then moved straight into discussing resolution without touching on the necessary intervening level, that of a group of real people and the context of play in which that resolution would occur. Some of the Chapter 4 text on the basics of setting up a group might have done better here.

Ultimately, the real practical advice is to make the two following statements.

First, a statement of environment, deliberately kept brief and with any amount of implicit tension. Examples from actual play:

- Urban decay, rust belt
- Successful suburbia
- New York City! (with exclamation mark)
- "Here" (meaning the location of play at the time, which was Chicago), in its most familiar places
- Berlin, alienation, the tough price of life (this one was played in Germany)

If it's here and now, then it *is* tweaked, but it is *not* a fictional setting in the sense of an independent construct or alternate. It is close to home, such that what is presented and what happens in this sense acts as a commentary on the actual real world. If it's not here and now, try to be sure that it's emotionally connected to at least someone at the table, rather than being an escapist distancing mechanism.

Second, a statement of the look and feel for demons and sorcery: similarly brief and evocative, visual or conceptual or both. Examples from actual play, corresponding exactly to the opening statements above:

- Spiders and eyes
- Frazetta, fleshy, animalistic
- Cronenberg body-horror, maddened insights
- Hard-core necromancy, the dehumanized dead
- At least one human feature, intimate secret friendship

Those two statements are exactly what to get to, and exactly where to move straight into player-character creation. And that goes for everyone, GM and players alike.

In this role-playing game, becoming more effective through earning experience isn't really the point. Although there is an improvement system, SORCERER already gives you an enormous amount of freedom in terms of game actions. You don't have an individual spell list – you can do any sorcery you want! Think your character is combat-ineffective? Summon a Parasite demon who protects you from bullets and allows you to spit napalm. Feel left out? Contact the demon your buddy Banished during the last run and offer it a future Summoning if it gives you the dirt on its last master. Anything in Chapter Five, you can try; anything in Chapter Three, you can try it with. Good role-playing will always provide bonuses (see *The System,* below). If you're moping around saying, "There's nothing we can do," you're almost certainly missing something.

The keystone of the sorcerous mind, above all else, is arrogance. The rules allow your characters to keep going even if their guts are hanging around their ankles. Nothing – literally nothing – is more important than what you want out of a situation, and whoever has to be Punished, Bound, or otherwise made to obey is by the Pit going to get it.

The Game Master
The hope is that playing SORCERER should generate a good story, specifically one that you and the players are proud of. If you, the GM, don't have a dramatic narrative goal, why play? Consider sorcery, the concept of summoning up Awful Things.
▼ What, actually, is a demon? What does that word mean to you?
▼ What sort of price should be paid just to deal with such a thing?
▼ What kind of outcomes are possible from this activity?
Consider stories about sorcerers, people who are willing and able to do this. What could they be? What would they care about? What kinds of conflicts would make a sorcerer sit up and take notice?
▼ A moral challenge?
▼ A rock 'em, sock 'em combat?
▼ Blood-freezing scary stuff?
You are not all on your own; a fair amount of this book concerns putting the answers to these questions together to make a good game. However, now is the time to answer them to some extent. My own answers are almost certainly not yours and could never be a foundation for the best SORCERER game you could run.

THE SYSTEM

Rolls

SORCERER is a dice-based role-playing game ("Fortune," to use the technical terms proposed by Jonathan Tweet in *Everway*). It doesn't matter what sort of dice are used, as

> The hellish thing about the ritual is that it worked.
> —L. Brackett, Reavers of Skaith

long as all the dice used in that role-playing group have the same number of sides. Player-characters' numerical abilities and momentary modifiers are all measured in dice, so that one might be said to have four dice of Will, or a two-dice bonus in an attempt to bind a demon, or whatever. Rolls are always made against someone else's roll or a set number of dice rolled by the Game Master to reflect how difficult the task is.

Unlike the method in many dice-based systems, the actual total value rolled is not relevant, nor any actual number at all. You are not aiming for a target value. Instead, match the highest single value rolled by each party and see whose is highest. Even one die against ten has a chance to win, which is formally referred to as Success.

> EXAMPLE: Fred and Fritz are engaged in some sort of conflict. Fred rolls 4 dice and Fritz rolls 6 dice. All the dice are ten-sided. Fred's highest value on a single die is a 10; Fritz's highest is an 8. Fred won (was successful). The exact same result occurs if Fred's highest was a 2 and Fritz's highest was a 1.

If the two highest dice are tied, go to the next highest pair and compare them, until one opponent wins. If absolutely every pair is tied, either resolve the conflict in some even way or roll again.

Once the winner is determined, it's time to figure out how well he or she won – the **degree** of success. The winner's degree of success is determined by the Victories: the number of dice that show higher values than the highest of the loser's dice. This concept applies to situations where success may be only partial, such as binding a demon or striking someone in combat.

> EXAMPLE: Fred, above, actually rolled 10, 4, 4, 1, whereas Fritz rolled 8, 8, 6, 5, 2, 2. Fred was still successful, but only gained one victory (the 10 over the 8). His advantage over Fritz is minimal, whereas four (total) victories would indicate total domination. If they were racing, he would have won only by a hair. If he had been trying to hit Fritz, he would have inflicted only minor damage.

If the number of victories is equal to the winner's number of dice, that's called Total Victory.

The System

Little did I realize how controversial my whole notion of role-playing by using the dice had become by the middle 1990s, as it was completely counter to the conventional wisdom of "roll vs. role."

I also fell right into the trap of the whoring-for-dice problem, which brings up the isssue of authenticity which I'll revisit throughout the annotations as well. I can teach all of this at the table, but am beginning to despair that it can ever be taught *de novo* via text.

Rolls

The default use of the dice mechanics is to *resolve* a stated intention and action - i.e., it's closure. Rolling means you find out how it goes.

For the dice to be involved at all, a character is after something, or "directs himself or herself toward it" if you want to phrase it that way. I found myself wishing, when writing the game, for more forceful words in English besides "volition" and "motion." Unfortunately "motivation," although etymologically perfect, has taken on a passive and internal meaning that is totally not suited. Think of the body launching into action, but not actually having quite yet moved, and you'll have the right idea.

Again, rolling the dice occurs only when dialogue during play establishes that degree of action. The dice then establish whether that particular way of getting that particular thing either does or does not happen.

As for what's being resolved: conflict, conflict, conflict ... of interest! Dice are only involved when the intention + action mentioned above are interpretable as adverse to someone, whether the acting character or anyone else. Therefore "I jump over the fence" in abstract isolation is not a roll in Sorcerer. You don't even have a "100% chance." It merely occurs. That is, unless the action is relevant to something adverse, like a chase.

To put it another way, it's just like "opposed task" in all those RPG texts, because every example I read of them turns out to be a conflict of interest anyway. It's accurate to read Sorcerer as using dice only to resolve "opposed tasks" if you're more comfortable with that terminology.

Picking up the dice is always, always based on players' responses to "what do you do?" And in this sense, the GM is very definitely one of the players. And whose dice are used as opposition is always, always based on the issue of interest: the character's agenda-in-launch, and whose interest is opposed to it happening.

More examples:

▼ Fred rolls 10, 8, 8, 4, 3; Fritz rolls 2, 2, 2, 1, 1, 1. Fred won with five victories, and in this case it was Total Victory, which ought to merit some kind of special advantage.

▼ Or Fred rolls 8, 5, 5, 2; and Fritz rolls 8, 7, 6, 1. In this case, Fritz wins with two victories: the first two 8's cancel out, then the 7 and 6 are higher than Fred's other dice.

▼ Or, finally, Fred rolls 9, 7, 2, 2; and Fritz rolls 10, 10, 1, to win with two victories.

The above rules apply to any possible outcome of rolls, with one exception: if one opponent is rolling only a single die, and if he or she rolls equal to the other opponent's highest value, the result is treated as one victory in favor of the opponent with more than one die.

I did lie about one thing: the size of the dice do matter in just one way. The smaller the dice used (that is, the fewer number of sides), the more chance a character using less dice has to match one who is using more dice. If you want higher scores generally and decisively to beat lower scores, then use dice with more sides (ten-sided, or even twenty-sided).

Example: the size of dice and ties
Fred and Fritz are locked in conflict of one sort or another, and it so happens that Fred will be using ten dice and poor Fritz only has one.

If they are using twenty-sided dice, Fred's chance to roll a value of 20 on any of his dice is quite good. If he does so, poor Fritz has only a 5% chance to match it, which at best will take the edge off of Fred's success.

However, if they are using four-sided dice, Fritz now has a fine 25% chance of getting a similar result.

Again, the smaller the dice, in terms of their number of sides, the more chance Fred has to equal Fritz's highest die, or beat it if its value is not maximal.

Therefore, a GM must decide upon what type of die to use in his or her SORCERER game. If dice with less sides are used (d4 or d6), winning rolls will tend to have less extreme degrees of success. If dice with more sides are used (d10 or d20), winning rolls will often have more extreme degrees of success.

The actions taken by player-characters in SORCERER fall into three types: sorcery, combat, and everything else. The mechanics of all three are exactly the same. For sorcery, it's a matter of rolling against some score of the demon, based on the chart in Chapter Five. For combat, it's usually rolling

Reading the dice

It's amazing how many people have made reading the dice harder than it is, over the years. It's not like Risk, for example. Part of the problem may lie with whoever linked the Apprentice at the Wiki article, which used more of a one-to-one dice match than the final version.

Here are a few useful comparisons to test your understanding. The hint for the first three is that matching values across the two rolls are of no interest unless they apply to the highest value. In these cases, they do not, so it's simply and only about the highest value.

> **A: 10 6 6 4 vs. B: 6 5 4 3. A wins with one victory.**

> **C: 9 9 1 1 vs. D: 8 8 2 2. C wins with two victories.**

> **E: 4 3 2 1 vs. F: 7 6 5 5. F wins with four (total) victories.**

Now with ties:

> **G: 10 10 8 7 7 5 vs. H: 10 5 5 5. G wins with four victories.**

> **I: 9 9 6 6 4 vs. J: 9 9 6 6 5. J wins with one victory.**

And again, to keep from being confused by ties that are not ties:

> **K: 9 8 5 5 2 vs. L: 8 5 5 2 1. K wins with one victory.**

For those interested in probabilities, equal numbers of opposing dice yield a 50% chance. An advantage in number of dice shifts the probability upwards, but only by a little bit, and less and less so with more dice. However, that side does benefit from a "longer tail" in terms of how much it might win by, and the more dice you have to your advantage, the "stronger" that possibility becomes, i.e., more likely to happen.

But all of that is secondary to a point which I did not include here, which should have been front-and-center, rather than reserved for Chapter 6.

Oppositional vs. orthogonal

I totally failed to explain one of the most important features of the Sorcerer mechanics right here, where it was needed most. The existing text shows how the dice easily resolve oppositional circumstances, meaning that one side is trying to do X and the other is trying to avoid or stop X, or that both sides are trying to get X and only one will. If Bob is trying to grab a widget and Sam is trying to stop him, or if Bob and Sam are both trying to grab a widget to the exclusion of the other doing so, then roll as described here.

The mechanics also resolve orthogonal circumstances, meaning actions that are happening at the same time, directed toward different things, yet which might affect one another. For instance if Bob is trying to grab the widget, and if Sam is trying to shoot Bob, then all sorts of things might and might not happen. Bob might or might not get the widget, and Sam might or might not shoot Bob.

physical scores, modified heavily by circumstances, and damage is figured from the victories of the winner (use the chart in Chapter Six). For everything else, every character may perform physical, mental, or emotional tasks using one of several possible scores (use the chart in Chapter Six).

Bonuses and penalties

The key to successful rolls in SORCERER is to pile on the dice. This is where role-playing comes in.

- ▼ A dramatic or appropriate quip while announcing the task: +1 die
- ▼ Announcing a task generically ("I swing at him!"): –1 die
- ▼ Repeating a simple task after failing: –1 die (cumulative)
- ▼ Especially clever version of the action: +2 dice
- ▼ Especially stupid move: –2 dice
- ▼ The announced action moves the plot along significantly: +2 dice
- ▼ Obstructive, petty announced action: –2 dice

These are cumulative! If you have a Will score of 4, that means you get four dice to roll for Will-based things, but that just won't be enough. In a dice-rolling situation, the players should not shift *out* of role-playing mode but rather get as *into* it as possible, being dramatic, pithy, and cunning to get up to eight or nine dice. If the demonic assassin is gaping its slavering jaws wide or cocking its flaming shotgun, and if the players just let the dice roll according to the numbers on their sheets, the characters will be eaten, shot, stomped, possessed, and all sorts of other horrid stuff. Role-playing is the best defense against danger and the best means to accomplish the characters' goals.

A crucial role-playing mechanic

There is one final, extremely significant aspect of SORCERER dice that everyone in the role-playing group should understand fully. If the character is carrying out a series of related actions, whatever they may be, victories from one roll may be carried over as bonus dice for the next roll. For instance, if a character gets three victories on his successful roll A, he receives three bonus **dice** for roll B, as long as the GM agrees that task A directly affects task B.

> **EXAMPLES:**
> **In physical combat, Fred might succeed with a solid blow with a crowbar to a gunman's wrist. Let's say Fred begins with four dice, and that his roll succeeded with two victories. His or her next action, in the following round, might then be putting the other end of the crowbar to the guy's jaw. The GM**

Oppositional vs. orthogonal, cont.

So there's four outcomes possible. But they're compounded by the possibility that being shot might itself prevent Bob from grabbing the widget, which racks the possible outcomes up to six.

Resolution techniques prior to 2000 have traditionally handled these circumstances poorly, relying on prior ordering with no uncertainty (most initiative mechanics) or on one person's on-site mandate for what goes when. One of the few exceptions was Zero, published in 1997, from which I was inspired for the final version of Sorcerer's timing/order mechanics. Which, unfortunately, I did not explain until Chapter 6.

Briefly: in an orthogonal situation, following a brief description of every character's committed launch into action, everyone rolls at once. The results set the order of the actions, and characters who are targeted by incoming actions have the option either to abort their intended action in order to defend, or to defend with a single die in order to preserve their intended action in its ordered place, pending a successful defense. A character who has already carried out an action or aborted an action has full defense dice throughout the remainder of that set of actions as well.

Narration

In the past decade, rules for who speaks when, relative to other game mechanics, have undergone a sea-change. The breakout games for it were *InSpectres* and *The Pool*. It might not be obvious that Sorcerer played its own, early role too.

Regarding describing the action during the dice mechanics, I deliberately wrote Sorcerer to be neutral, in direct contrast to the way every single role-playing manual had been written before that. In those manuals, all narration was either provided by the GM or was subject to editing and veto by the GM. Even when such concepts were not explicitly stated, they were implied and illustrated through the examples.

Therefore the neutral phrasing in the Sorcerer rules brought equality to the table. I had observed in practice that many groups were capable of unconstructed narration, permitting anyone to speak first regardless of whether they are the player of that character, another player, or the GM. The GM did not have final authority – their statements were just as subject to this approval as anyone else's.

Sorcerer is written to accommodate this sort of play, in which whoever is inspired to talk and describe as soon as the conflict mechanics appear, simply does it. If what they say doesn't appeal to someone at the table, or if someone would prefer to speak instead, then that gets resolved. A group whose members cannot understand the normal, human, conversational processes involved is not encouraged to play Sorcerer.

There is nothing wrong with the players providing most of the narrations relevant to their own characters and the GM providing most of the narrations relevant to the NPCs. Nothing stops you from treating this distinction as the default. However, it is not set in concrete.

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Bonuses and penalties

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Narration, cont.

Let's say I am playing a character who is shooting at somebody, and the dice are rolled; my shot arrives before the target character's action, and that player or GM chooses to abort the character's action and roll full dice against my shot. They succeed; I fail.

I might say "The carpet rolls under your feet," or "The gun misfires," or "You simply miss," or ... anything. Or you might say it. Or the GM might say it, if that's a different person. Or someone else.

The key is to make use of existing knowledge. "The gun misfires" might be *exactly* the right narration because we know that particular gun has been dropped and kicked around before my character picked it up. Or it might be a boring narration because it was merely sitting in my character's pocket until this moment. Whether a narration is good or bad in Sorcerer is always, entirely specific to that moment and the conditions of the objects and people in the fiction. If you are engaged in play, then your ability to find that perfect narration is quite high.

Therefore be ready to narrate for your character as the default. But be ready to listen to others' excited input as well - sometimes they know your character or are inspired by the immediate circumstances better than you.

The scope of actions and effects

How much does a given roll encompass? Can one topple an empire with a single roll? Assassinate a president? Conversely, might many rolls be necessary to make an omelette, supposing that this action were somehow interpreted as a conflict with the eggs?

The answer is set fairly early in the resolution process, as a function of all sorts of things already established in the scene. It is really the most variable element of the resolution system, and probably the single most glaring absence in the text although in practice it hasn't caused any trouble that I know of.

I do think that's a fascinating absence in the text, although, oddly, it has never resulted in any sort of problem for play itself as I've done it and read about it. Perhaps such things are so easily arrived at during play that no one notices doing it. I think that must be some feature of how the explicit parts of the game operate, producing no hassles in this particular real, but non-explicit part of the decision-making of play.

Bonus dice

Oh my, does this need clarifying.

All right: you, as Sorcerer GM, are not the judge of quality role-playing. You should instead consider yourself the voice of the group engagement. When someone does something that makes anyone or everyone react in an engaged, heightened way, it's worth a bonus die or two.

---(cont.)

permits the two previous victories to carry over to the new roll, adding to the score of 4 for a total of six dice for this action.

In a social situation, Fritz might be trying to learn some important, clandestine information. Let's say Fritz begins with five dice, and that his first action is simply to be charming, establishing himself as a good fellow with no hidden agenda. His roll succeeds with a stunning five victories. Not only does his next roll, based on his actual attempt to pry out the sensitive information, gain five more dice for a total of ten, but the GM also decides that the person he's talking with will be very helpful in any way Fritz desires.

Jeremy McHugh

How about sorcery? Chapter Five describes various rituals like Contacting and Summoning. Fred might have a rather poor chance at Summoning, say, one lousy die. So he puts a great deal of effort and role-playing into the Contacting, gaining lots of bonus dice, in the hopes of succeeding with a substantial number of victories. These can of course be rolled over into bonus dice for the Summoning roll.

This principle is a hugely effective and important part of SORCERER, applicable to any situation in which the first roll conceivably affects the circumstances of the second. It is further discussed in Chapter Four, and examples may be found throughout Chapters Five and Six.

Bonus dice, cont.

That's all. So you're not saying, "Gee, I'm stroking my chin and deciding whether you're 'acting' well enough." Instead, you're saying, "Wow! Cool!" or seeing someone else say that (or nod, or smile, or grunt, whatever) and then remembering that it's worth a bonus die. The rule is based on *acknowledging* that something said or done by someone else was fun for you.

Therefore, bonus dice are not incentive. The net effect may be to see more of it, but that is not the point. The point is to celebrate the medium you're utilizing together.

That's why bonus dice in Sorcerer are not about long, drawn-out, extravagant descriptions of actions. They usually get applied because of the quality of a given stated action, which includes its timing. Here's an analogy from film: in the first Indiana Jones movie, a guy comes running at Indy to kill him with a sword, doing all sorts of crazy whirly sword-moves. Indy grimaces in a kind of "oh come on" way, pulls his gun, and shoots him. My point is that in role-playing, an equivalent reaction and stated action typically make at least one other person at the table cry out or smile-and-nod or otherwise react in a positive way, because their fun just increased. *That's* what you, as GM, are keeping an eye out for, with yourself as a possible reactor as well.

The "advance the story" item needs special mention. It absolutely cannot refer to advancing the GM's story, because such a thing is literally impossible in playing Sorcerer. The GM has no story, just a back-story and the ability to alter NPCs' behavior as things progress (just as a player does with his or her character). So the only story possible is an emergent one, driven in part by the developing and intensifying adversity, but primarily and most importantly by the player-characters' decisions. *That's* the story I'm talking about. It's all about when someone announces an action or completes an action which matters, which everyone knows makes everything different.

Remember in the first *Spider-Man* movie, in the Thanksgiving dinner scene, when Aunt May smacked Norman Osborne's hand when he tried to swipe some pumpkin pie? Wham. We as audience knew that from that moment, everything was different. The two sides of Peter's life (family, aunt, friends) (hero, vs. villain, deadly danger) had collided, literally physically. And mild as it was, in terms of the spectacular violence of the action (i.e., none), it made the whole audience shudder both times I saw the film in the theater.

When a player-character does something like that, it advances the story ... to put it most clearly, it *creates* the emergent story at that very second.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Books and stories

The Hellbound Heart by Clive Barker. The basis for the *Hellraiser* movie series, but much better, especially because the demons are never explained or seen very clearly.

A Personal Demon by David Bischoff, Rich Brown, and Linda Richardson. The adventures of a staid prof and his hot demon babe. My top pick for a modern-sorcery movie premise.

The Devil's Day by James Blish. One of the classic modern sorcery tales and required reading for running apocalyptic versions of SORCERER.

"Lizzie Borden Took an Axe…" by Robert Bloch. All Bloch's stories are scary and gruesome, but this one's a real demonic-possessor winner.

Medea by Euripides. The classic of classics. If there were one, single reference for this role-playing game, this play would be it.

Seductions, Darklings, and *Crucifax* by Ray Garton. The ultimate in uncompromising, gory, straight-ahead horror fiction. Low on sorcerers, but relentless for demons, sex, and splatter of any number of substances.

The Tower of the Elephant, The People of the Black Circle, Hour of the Dragon, and *The Scarlet Citadel* by Robert E. Howard. A look at demonics from the real man of the pulp age. (If you haven't read the original, 1930s Conan fiction before, try it; it's never been imitated successfully.)

The Night Man, Dark Seeker, and *Mantis* by K.W. Jeter. Grim horror-noir, not for the squeamish or gentle of heart.

Adept's Gambit by Fritz Leiber. The classiest sword-and-sorcery story ever.

The Case of Charles Dexter Ward by Howard Phillips Lovecraft. Its famous quote says it all.

Doctor Faustus by Christopher Marlowe. Your basic 16th-century take on why not to be a sorcerer. If you think Faust should have handled things differently, then SORCERER is the role-playing game for you.

Elric of Melniboné by Michael Moorcock. The definitive sorcerous fantasy about demon-summoning and being careful what you wish for.

Practical Demonkeeping by Christopher Moore. An extremely funny take on modern sorcery, full of great characters.

> I say to you againe, doe not calle up Any that you cannot put downe, by the which I meane, Any that can in turn call up somewhat against you, whereby your powerfullest Devices may not be of use. Ask of the Lesser, lest the Greater shall not wish to answer, and shall command more than you.
>
> — H.P. Lovecraft, The Case of Charles Dexter Ward

Bibliography

And boy do I mean that, too. Here's a little diagram to
show how the various references, and stuff like them,
are integrated in my mind relative to the game:

Grimjack
K.W. Jeter
Hellblazer
Garton
Salmonson
Vachss

SORCERER

1980s Comics
**Underground & retro
fantasy-horror &
pulp**

U.S. Film & TV
T2
The Hidden
Exorcist III
Twin Peaks
X-Files

Non-U.S. Film
Argento
Onibaba
Akira
A Better Tomorrow
The Bride with White Hair

1920s-40s
CA Smith
Lovecraft
Howard
Sleeping Beauty

Leiber

1960s & 70s
LSD Retro-Pulp
Moorcock
Wagner

Root Literature & Myth
Medea
Doctor Faustus

A fellow Sorcerer player has described his early concept
of RPGs as mathematical Cliffs Notes for genre, and
I tell you now, that very notion fills me with horrified
nausea. Sorcerer was not written in any such fashion. It
was written for people who were already familiar with
this stuff, tainted by it if you will, from any angle or to
any degree; or for those who'd be inspired by the text
to become such people.

The Devil Wives of Li Fong by E. Hoffman Price. Good old mystic-demonic romance in medieval China. (Why are there all these stories about shy guys with bad-ass demon girlfriends, I wonder?)

Thousandshrine Warrior by Jessica Amanda Salmonson. Demon-haunted fantasy adventure that proves a story can be exciting and depressing at the same time.

Cellars and *In Darkness Waiting* by John Shirley. Quintessentially 80's horror fiction, complete with brooding, shadowy corporations along with the demon-things. Very bloody.

Night Winds, Bloodstone, Dark Crusade, Death Angel's Shadow, and *Darkness Weaves* by Karl Edward Wagner. More rousing gothic sword and sorcery.

Comics

Hellblazer: Dangerous Habits by Garth Ennis. The defining text on messing with demons while trying to stay clean. (DC Comics)

Shadowslayer by Pat Mills. Featuring a maddened adept who manages to stay on the heroic straight and narrow … barely. Fantastic visuals by Tony Skinner and Eric Larnoy. (featured in *Heavy Metal* magazine)

Demon Baby: Hell on Heels by Jim Martin and Dave Hillsman. There's some great sorcery in here among the cheesecake.

The Lords of Misrule by John Tomlinson and Peter Snejbjerg. A spooky and intelligent blending of sorcery, folklore, and urban legend. (Dark Horse Comics)

Movies

The Exorcist and *The Exorcist III: Legion*. Still scary after all these years, and required viewing for running malevolent possessor demons.

Fallen. Re-running the possessor story for the 90s, but not adding much. Not a bad second-tier example of the genre.

Harvey. Sweet, funny, sentimental, and as demonic a movie as was ever made.

Mortal Kombat. See that bad guy Shang Tsung? See how Cary-Hiroyuki Tagawa plays him? Now that's a sorcerer. Make up someone just like him and see to it that he doesn't lose this time.

The Ninth Gate. This movie is full of demons and martial arts too, and it presents a fine example of a possible sorcerous subculture of scholars.

Sleeping Beauty. Maleficent is magnificent.

Tales from the Crypt: Demon Knight. Campy, but full of sorcerous pulp adventure. The main character would be a fine player-character for an apocalyptic version of SORCERER (see Chapter Seven).

Vampire Princess Miyu. Despite the title, vampirism isn't the main theme so much as Miyu's relationship with her captive demon Larva.

Television

Twin Peaks. If you can see that Bob was a demon who possessed Leland Palmer and Laura was the young sorcerer struggling to control him, then you're thinking like a SORCERER Game Master.

The X-Files. The king of all "subtle lurking horror" TV shows. Well worth learning from in terms of planning mysterious, open-ended plotlines and generating unease in players.

Closing Words

The back cover says, "You've never seen role-playing like this before." A lot of features of the game justify this claim, and all of them are built from the following three interconnected principles.

Plot cannot be prepped. Just forget that whole idea. This is about making stories in a genuinely emergent and creative way, not about one person delivering them, nor even about one person improvising them on the spot. And most importantly, play does not guarantee them. You only get a story from Sorcerer if it's something you and everyone else absolutely fanatically *want* to do.

You can't game the universe. There are no break points to exploit, no funky modifiers to stack, no optimal builds. There are plenty of tactics, yes, but strategy, no. Your character will only and ever merely have a *shot* at getting what he or she wants. Take your shot. You can't lock down its success before that.

Nothing is sacred. There is no safety net anywhere, a principle which is manifested in several ways.

- ❧ First, your character's life. It's not easy or quick in this game, most of the time, but your character can die. And less fatally but perhaps more traumatically, nothing in this game is built to ensure that your character succeeds in their goals and dreams.

- ❧ Second, your character's value. The game does not afford you the privilege of playing a protagonist. In fact, it even encourages you to flirt with the possibility of what some call the "moral event horizon," in the form of the Humanity mechanic. If you want to play a real protagonist, someone anyone cares a bit about, then you must earn it.

- ❧ Third, the quality of the emergent story. The game encourages your inspiration and creates a means for it to appear as imagery and events. It leaves open the question of whether you have any inspiration worth doing that with.

I've explained this at demonstrations and conventions before. Some people light up with enthusiasm and start asking eager questions.

No lie: others turn pale and run.

Chapter Two:

CREATING

SORCERERS

Des Jackson

SORCERERS

Steps to make a player-character

Making a good SORCERER character should include all of the steps below.
They don't necessarily have to be done in this order; some people start with
a name, others start with numbers, or whatever.

1. Choose scores to total 10
2. Set Humanity at the level of Stamina or Will, whichever is higher
3. Choose Descriptions for all three scores
4. Choose Cover and Price
5. Choose a Telltale
6. List important Non-Player Characters (NPCs) and places
7. Create the starting demon

"Don't play Sorcerer! It scares the bejeesus out of me."

-- Piers

This chapter is about people talking in earnest to begin their upcoming Sorcerer play. It necessarily begins with one's person's pitch for the game as a whole, effectively a discussion version of Chapter One, everyone together, with *someone* taking on a strong monitoring role. This person typically becomes the GM in practice, although at this point, he or she is acting mainly as an organizer. Assuming everyone is indeed enthusiastic, then we move into application.

This application begins with the two statements I described earlier, and I do mean only those statements with no further elaboration.
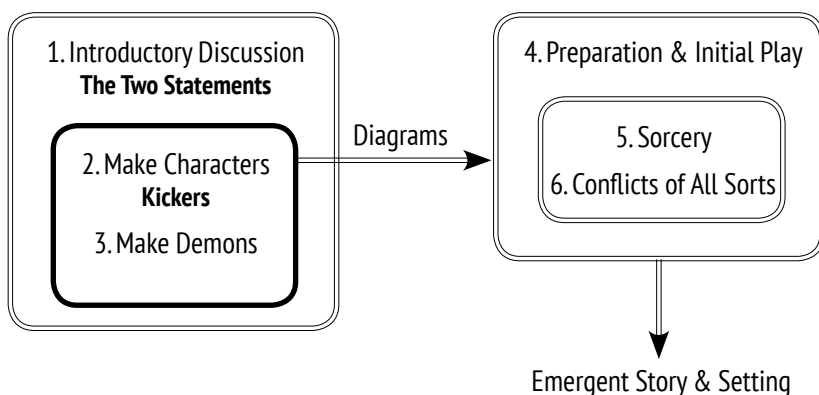
The very next step is individual player work on the player-characters, beginning with the listed requirements and pointing out that they may be established in any order. The people sit around together, arriving at their individual decisions on paper and, as the character concepts emerge, bouncing the ideas off one another. That's what this chapter is about.

For Sorcerer, the starting setting is a *minimal* context for the central role of character – character creation is the door into play for everyone. So one would think rock-solid, highly detailed, and above all reliably committed character content is the key, but that's actually not correct. Instead, Sorcerer characters are "made to be broken." You make up all this stuff, yes, but the point isn't to depict it all in thespian fashion. The character as initially conceived comes under intolerable pressure. The point is therefore to discover which parts hold true, which parts turn out to have been provisional, and even which turn out to have been expendable. The Kicker is the most obvious aspect toward this end, but it applies more generally too. That's why many of the design features of character creation are high in Color, but not especially niche-y or defining – because in Sorcerer, you only begin with what is about to be changed.

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Sorcerers

Christopher Kubasik rightly pointed out that Sorcerer character creation requires three distinct concepts: a person, a person who's a sorcerer, and a sorcerer who faces a Kicker. I recommend always thinking of the last two points separately. Start by thinking about a sorcerer who does indeed successfully, routinely get what he or she wants, with this demon … do this first, and only then, zap it with the Kicker.

How does one do this without writing eighteen pages of perhaps dramatic, but ultimately play-killing back-story? The key seems to be straightforwardness: first, simplicity about the actual content, and second, honesty about working from what you can genuinely relate to.

Whether you're making up a character or talking to someone who's doing so, here are some things to watch for:

- ❧ Off-the-rack concepts with reliable, recognizable personality traits. Yet again the standard ex-Special Forces character concept you've seen, or played yourself, in five previous games? Call it out for the comfort zone it is, on yourself if necessary, and try to make up something more personal.

- ❧ Flowery, purple prose, full of excessive emotions and possibly shock content. This is another kind of defense, retreating behind a wall of verbiage. Go for "He's a truck driver" over "He crouched over the half-eaten remains of his latest victim, barely recognizable as human, were there an observer to judge. 'Mother! Mother!' he cried aloud ."

- ❧ Episodic back-story, full of climaxes and conclusions. You're supposed to be making up the start of a story, rather than filling in or extending an existing one. All you need is, who the person is , how they use sorcery to get what they want, and what has just upset the applecart of their life – enough material for one sentence each, bam and done.

- ❧ Assumptions about fitting in and making a team with the other characters. There is no group play-goal in Sorcerer, no assumed team-up, no "bring us all together," no reason to like or want to associate with the other player-characters unless you, the player, find it a valid thing for your character to do. At the outset of play, make no assumptions about any of that.

Talking during character creation

The best way to do this is to get together, letting people work individually but encouraging an environment of listening and appreciation for one another's ideas.

To whoever's reading this, you have a special role in that environment. But it's not to nanny and direct others' work – it's to listen and to tempt. Specifically, to find where their work creates incipient tension.

Back when I wrote the text, I was thinking too much in terms of pushing and pressuring people into generating tension-filled concepts. But I've learned that the better way is merely to say "yes" to ideas that someone has which are so personally

---(cont.)

8. Once-over: check for likeability and combat readiness
9. Write the Kicker

See the sections below for explanations of what all this means.

Scores

There are three basic scores in SORCERER: **Stamina, Will**, and **Lore**. A beginning sorcerer character has values for each that total to ten: 2-6-2, 5-4-1, 1-2-7, or something. Each represents a number of dice. A player-character must have at least 1 in each score.

Stamina is the general physique, strength, constitution, athleticism thing; Will is force of personality, presence of mind, charisma, clarity of thought; Lore specifically describes sorcerous training. The score's value is its final value for the starting character's competence, the sum of both nature and nurture. Any further bonuses or penalties will have to be situational.

How good is good? Stamina and Will of 2 or 3 will allow a person to function normally in society, if minimally. An athlete would have Stamina of 4 and above, with 6 and above going to exceptional professionals. Will of 4 and above indicates a personality that others easily perceive and may defer to, with 6 and above in visionaries and leaders of all sorts. For player-characters, Will less than 3 is probably risky to the point of life-threatening.

Lore is a little different. Any value above 0 is reserved for sorcerers; even a 1 permits a person to practice all the rituals of sorcery outlined in Chapter Five. Lore 2 or 3 means a sorcerer who understands his or her own training and theory fairly well, and 4 or 5 means knowledge of the general range of theories and practices outside one's own. Lore 6 or higher would mean a truly outstanding adept, someone who could begin their own school of thought. Lore represents how good the sorcerer is, not just book learning, so someone who's studied for decades might still be only Lore 2 or 3.

Humanity is also a score. Starting Humanity equals the higher of either Stamina or Will, but after this stage of character creation it will change independently.

Score descriptions

Choose one description each from the lists below for Stamina, Will, and Lore. If the score is 5 or higher, you may take two descriptions for it. The Score Description not only adds some depth to the character,

> I may be mad. If I am, the world's in trouble. If I'm not, the world's in trouble.
> —P. Mills, Shadowslayer

it often allows the GM to decree whether a character's attempt at a task should get penalty or bonus dice.

Talking during character creation, cont.

gripping, that he or she reflexively rejects them. This is a weird trend in role-playing: when you come up with something that really grabs your own self, then you throw it away as quickly as possible because it might make trouble of some kind. It's as if we have been trained to apply only the comfortable imagination to play, which usually means a genre cliché, rejecting the visceral.

I also ask questions when someone clearly falls into the cliché trap, typically that the character has amnesia or starts looking too much like a given actor's persona or a given fan-favorite character motif. I don't really challenge it or say "are you suuuure" in a leading way, so much as ask questions about what makes the character more dynamic, and that usually results in the cliché being abandoned or being transformed into something better.

Scores

It's hard to describe what I really wanted the scores to be. They aren't supposed to be simulative capability limits of the characters, but rather the degree of force the character can exert outside himself or herself, respectively affecting physical material, behavior, and reality. Each one draws upon the character's entire range of physical, psychological, and intellectual makeup.

They don't correspond as directly to "this much weight," "how far can I throw it" ratings. The scores are intended to operate almost entirely within the human range of effectiveness, almost more of a ranking system than a literal quantitative one. A value of 1 means that one would succeed mainly through luck, i.e., the character cannot exert force of that kind in any reliable way. From 2 and up, we're simply talking about people who can exert that kind of force, and increased values mean more consistent competence at doing so.

I did think in terms of scores 6 and above exceeding ordinary levels of human impact, although the scale is not intended to model the excess in a dogmatic way. A character with Stamina 7 isn't conceived automatically to be able to lift more than one with Stamina 6, for instance. I realize now that I was thinking in terms of multiples: 6 through 10 is jaw-dropping, but within physical understanding; 11 through 15 is stupendous, nightmarish, unrealistic, to the extent of viewers probably denying the evidence of their senses and rationalizing the events away.

Regarding point-builds, the range for the values to differ among characters is surprisingly perfect for the system design: just enough to create functional distinctions among the characters, but not enough to create niches. I was originally inspired in this by *Over the Edge*, and the math is actually modified from the very old game *The Fantasy Trip: Wizard*, so given that pedigree, I guess it's not surprising after all that it works.

CHARACTER NAME

PLAYER NAME

SORCERER

10

9

Appearance:

Humanity

8

Telltale:

7

Descriptors

Stamina _____

6

Will _____

Lore _____

Cover _____

5

Price _____

4

Kicker:

3

Bound Demons

2

	Name	Type	Telltale	Need
1.				
2.				
3.				
4.				
5.				

1

How to use this sheet

For each category, list all the people, demons, places, possessions, and anything else that goes with it. Make sure to write related items near one another.

SORCERER

LORE

PRICE

COVER

KICKER

Score Descriptions do not add dice to a Score. Instead, they describe *why* a Score is the level it is. Any description can go with a value of 2 and above; one could have military training but a Stamina of only 2, which means that you were indeed trained but just aren't very good at it, for whatever reason. However, Stamina or Will scores of 1 should have some negative or wimpy description (perhaps the opposite of one listed below), and Lore 1 means a naive sorcerer.

STAMINA

- ▼ **Athletic regime**. Regular workouts keep you fit and alert.
- ▼ **Chemically heightened.** Uppers are your means to physical excellence.
- ▼ **Clean living.** You live an active, healthy, but not combat-oriented life.
- ▼ **Military training.** You can shoot, brawl, and think straight in a fight.
- ▼ **Natural vigor.** You are one of those irritating people who are in shape without trying.
- ▼ **Scrapper.** Your upbringing included frequent physical violence.
- ▼ **Specialized combat training.** Sport or martial-arts fighting experience.

> **QUESTION: Why "Stamina"?**
> I'll be the first to admit that the term "stamina" as usually applied in role-playing games does not exactly capture the meaning for this attribute. You are free to substitute "body," or "physique" if you want. However, I decided to use Stamina instead of these in an attempt to draw attention to the key purpose of the attribute: it is the truly available energy the character expresses through physical acts. More descriptive terms ("strength," "body") are passive in comparison. Again, though, "stamina" usually has a more limited meaning in role-playing games and clearly the way it's used here is more general than what most people are used to seeing.

WILL

- ▼ **Belief system.** You have a theory of the cosmos that explains you, everyone else, and the demons to your satisfaction. This could indicate extreme rationalism as well as traditional religious beliefs.
- ▼ **High self-esteem.** You know you have intrinsic value. People either admire your confidence or call you arrogant.
- ▼ **Rageful and vengeful.** Determination to avenge a wrong, or to snub the universe simply by surviving, keep you going.
- ▼ **Social competence.** You're just cool. People want to be liked by you and to be associated with you.
- ▼ **User/manipulative.** You home in on others' weak spots to get what you want.

Descriptors

My hope for the descriptors was that they actually *replace* the terms "Stamina" et cetera for each of the values. So Harry, for instance, doesn't really have "Stamina, Will, Lore," and so on, but rather is *described* by "Athletic, Combat-trained, High Self-Esteem, Coven member, Burned-out, FBI agent," with numerical values for those. It might even help to think of them as *traits* instead of "attributes" or "characteristics" in the usual RPG sense of the term. I couldn't find a way to articulate this at the time; it seemed like a lot of verbiage to spend on what is a fairly arcane point. Anyway, now you know.

Descriptors should always be chosen from a fixed list for a given game, which is to say, the chosen combination of statements for that group and that particular game. Such a list creates a perceived range of what sorcerers are like which is very valuable in terms of people understanding both the setting and one another's characters.

The lists in the book were quite refined through playtesting, and I'm confident that they're the strongest possible list for "here and now" Sorcerer. You can certainly make your own, but it absolutely needs to be a group-specific fixed list. Sorcerer character creation does not go well if you use unconstructed, individually-created descriptors.

Using descriptors in play

The descriptors are not thespian instructions for playing the characters, but rather they describe how the character usually deals with problems. That's why they're not hooked up to the bonus dice mechanics. Let's take a character whose Stamina is 4, described as "chemically heightened."

1. When he is on the drugs, he uses four dice. There's no bonus die coming merely for according with the descriptor.

2. When he is not on drugs, he also uses four dice. There is no penalty for using scores outside of their descriptors.

3. When a given action description makes everyone go "cool," then he gets a bonus die, whether the description uses drugs or not. This is important, because the bonus die is not due to in-game imaginary logistics, but rather due to the dramatic reaction of the folks around you.

4. Finally, if you want the character to suffer and do less well when he's off drugs, then take a Price that indicates this problem.

▼ **Zest for life and sensation.** Life is too much fun to allow doubt in the way, or to let others screw with your style.

QUESTION: where's my "Intelligence"?
All sorcerous abilities are known to all player-characters, so there is no need for an attribute to suggest "mental capacity." You may take it as given that your character is one of the smartest and most intuitive individuals alive. You are also free to downgrade that assumption to taste, perhaps taking a Price to reflect this.

LORE

▼ **Apprentice.** Suggested starting Lore = 2. You provide services in exchange for lessons. The mentor is a sorcerer of some note who sends you on mysterious missions.

▼ **Coven member.** Suggested starting Lore = 2 or 3. A coven is a secret group who meets to invoke supernatural forces; most covens are completely ignorant of true sorcery. You belong to one of the exceptions.

▼ **Mad.** Suggested starting Lore = 4 or higher. Your insights about the cosmos are valid, but they have resulted in your being unable to function appropriately in society. This description requires a really serious and general Price, at –2 dice instead of the usual –1. Have fun!

▼ **Naif.** Lore = 1. All you know is that there are demons and you've got one. Good examples are the little kid's imaginary friend, or the succubus whom the good househusband wakes up next to one night.

▼ **Solitary adept.** Suggested starting Lore = 4 or higher. You know enough about sorcery to proceed on your own; either you've never met another sorcerer or you parted ways from them long ago.

QUESTION: what do I know?
Lore reflects how good you are at the sorcerous rituals described in Chapter Five. It is also used to analyze unfamiliar sorcerous happenings or symbols. These uses of Lore are universal for SORCERER games.

If the GM permits, given levels of Lore may correspond to specific knowledge, such as the titles of forbidden books or the names of certain demons.

However, ultimately, the breadth and depth of knowledge depends a great deal on individual character concept as well as setting-specific standards. One character with a Lore of 5 may be conceived to have very limited boundaries of his or her knowledge, whereas another with Lore 2 may be conceived to be a shallow jack-of-all-trades.

Lore

At the time of writing, I tried to distinguish between "suggested" values, meaning subject to change if you wanted, and the absence of "suggested" for the naïve descriptor, which was supposed to be set in stone at 1. That is, if you wanted an adept character with a Lore lower than 5, go ahead, but if you wanted a naïve character, Lore = 1, and that's that.

In retrospect, I find my logic of fifteen years ago unconvincing. It seems to me that the source material is full of naive yet effective sorcerers. I find it most elegant and fully functional simply to jettison all of this numerical maundering, to choose the descriptors that you like the most, and then to assign the scores' values freely, aside from adding up to 10.

Humanity

This score receives a lot more attention in the Development section (see below), but you should know right now that it may be the most important element of the entire game. Humanity is what makes a character worth playing. It may be defined as the role-playing group sees fit, but is often thought of as empathy, social consciousness, honor, or even the character's literal soul. It begins at a value equal to the character's Stamina or Will, whichever is higher.

> The supplement THE SORCERER'S SOUL is entirely devoted to the advanced use of Humanity in all aspects of role-playing, from demon design to character development to scenario preparation. Full guidelines are provided for deciding on an appropriate definition for GM and players, applying the score in complex interaction with demons, and using its fluctuations as a central device for generating stories.

Cover

Being a sorcerer is not an acceptable job description; there must be something your character does as well in the workaday world. Pick a profession or lifestyle that suits the character and that is his or her Cover, which gets dice to either Stamina or Will (player's choice). The character should own and have access to anything reasonable that people who make their living doing whatever his or her Cover is.

Cover is an extremely inclusive term. It is used for all nuances of a given background, lifestyle, or profession, including any physical, social, perceptual, or intellectual elements.

> QUESTION: how does Cover work? Is it a skill list, or what?
> Cover certainly includes the trained skills of a given profession or lifestyle. However, it's far more than that, in several ways.
> Cover is also used for any actions pertaining to that lifestyle, including perception, contacts, resources, personal style and "place," and skills that are associated without really being part of the job. The cover "lawyer," for instance, includes all the technical skills of the job, but it also includes playing squash, trying to remember obscure things, delivering subtle insults, making use of lines of communication among all of law enforcement or corporate structure, and any number of other things.
> Cover may be played retroactively. A player has full rights to propose an action for his or her character that has not previously been acknowledged as part of the character's profile – and the action is fully legitimate if it seems

Humanity

Above 0, the current value of Humanity does not define or constrain character action under any circumstances. This is important.

Cover

The Cover descriptor and the Cover value aren't the same things. The score is not for being the described thing, but rather for how well one does it in conflict situations.

Therefore, yes, a character could be President of the U.S.A. with a Cover value of 1. The descriptor's name means the character holds the office of President; the score's value shows us that he is bad at it. Which isn't all that uncommon, sadly.

Player-character Cover scores are designed to be high because the player-characters are intended to be reasonably competent in the worldly sphere, even if that sphere is "marginal homeless guy." If you created a Sorcerer player-character with that Cover, then by golly, he's going to be *good* at being a marginal homeless guy, when those skills or lifestyle-concerns are relevant to a conflict he faces.

to "go with" the character's Cover. Therefore the character's skill list, in the traditional sense, is continually being created through play.

Cover overlaps with Stamina and Will on occasion, e.g., a character with "combat training: martial arts" for a Stamina description and "martial arts instructor" for a Cover description. When a proposed action seems to have two descriptions that apply, then permit a roll for each score, rolling the victories for the first (if successful) into bonus dice for the second.

The Price

Sorcery doesn't come cheaply. A player-character must have a problem that has arisen or been made worse through their practice of forbidden arts. It must be worth a penalty die in at least some situations that will happen during play. The Rule of Prices states: a Price which conveys no penalty dice doesn't count! A helpful concept is that people are often worst at things they care most about: a lecher could well have a penalty on all interactive rolls concerning the targets of his or her affections. Things like being obnoxious or having an enemy cannot be taken as Prices because they don't really cause the character to be bad at doing things.

Invalid Prices:
- ▼ **Greedy**
- ▼ **Won't kill**
- ▼ **Has a blood enemy**

Valid Prices:
- ▼ **Lame** (–1 to any action that includes running or balance)
- ▼ **Paranoid** (–1 to all actions unless the character is under physical attack)
- ▼ **Arrogant** (–1 to all perception rolls)
- ▼ **Still in denial** (–1 to first roll when dealing with a demon)
- ▼ **Bookish/secluded** (–1 to any first roll in a scene)
- ▼ **Cynical** (–1 to all Humanity checks)
- ▼ **Scarred** (–1 to casual interactions)

And you must remember, padre, that in Rio, where I was born, I was named Luize the Bobo, that is, Luize the Simple. There was something wrong with my head, so that my hands were always clumsy and my feet stumbled over each other. I could not remember very much. But I could see things. Yes, padre, I could see things such as other men do not know.

I can see things now. Do you know who stands beside you, padre, listening as we talk?

—**C.L. Moore, Daemon**

Price

Unlike the descriptors and like Cover, Price is indeed made up from whole cloth; you don't pick it from this list. The list is only here to illustrate valid vs. invalid Price concepts.

Telltale

Something gives the character away as a sorcerer, to those in the know. Telltales are details of physical appearance, habit of dress or hairstyle, or a mannerism or speech pattern. They don't have to be incredibly obvious or informative, but they must be specific and precise.

Starting demons

A SORCERER character begins with one demon Bound to him or her. It's up to the player to decide how this demon happens to have been available for Binding: maybe the character Contacted and Summoned it, maybe he or she found it in a bottle, maybe it's been in the family for generations... whatever fits with your Lore Description and concept of the character. Make up the demon with the GM's help, using the rules in Chapter Three. For the starting demon only, roleplaying or rolling for any Summoning and Contacting is not necessary; the only rolls needed are the strength of the Binding and the Humanity check (see Sorcery and Development, below).

> ... [Ware] was tonsured, like a monk, blue veins crawling across his bare white scalp as across the papery backs of his hands... Father Domenico ... found it upsetting, because he knew the reason for it – not that Ware intended any mockery of his monkish counterparts, but because demons, given a moment of inattention, were prone to seizing one by the hair.
>
> —J. Blish, The Devil's Day

This is the only demon sheet the player will ever get to see, and even then it can be altered once it gets into the GM's hands. After that, the GM generates and controls ALL demon sheets. Only one starting demon is allowed per character, although a character is free to attempt Contacts, Summonings, and Bindings at any time during subsequent play.

Once-over

Here's where both player and GM should take a look at this person on the character sheet.

▼ **Details.** Name the character. Decide where he or she lives. Are the starting demons reasonably covert? If, for example, he is a coven member, who are the other members? Give them names. If an apprentice, then who's the master? If he's crazy as a bedbug, well, why? If his Cover is "martial arts instructor," does he own a studio? What style is it? Or if he's a university professor, where? In what field? During the once-over you should generate a list of NPCs known to the character and a good idea of his or her daily life.

▼ **Suitable protagonist.** The character should be someone movie-viewers or comic-book readers would be willing to root for. That doesn't mean

Starting Demons

Here's a useful thought: the starting demon is how
the pre-Kicker character successfully gets whatever
he or she wants. It's not supposed to be a source of
absolutely guaranteed dysfunction and adversity at this
stage - plenty of time for that later.

they have to be virtuous, nice, or anything else – but if you wouldn't spend $7.50 to see a story about this person, why play or GM them?

▼ **Combat.** Role-playing games often concentrate on resolving violent conflict, and Sorcerer is no exception: the player-characters should be ready to fight, or at least to control demons who will.

As a rule of thumb, consider that Cover and Lore at the very least should each be accompanied by a stable of people, places, and things. Any of the other scores, including Humanity and Price, may also add more to the character's personal world.

The diagram on the back of the character sheet may used to list all the people, places, demons, and things associated with the character. Such items associated with Cover, for instance, are listed in the Cover section. The real use of the diagram, however, lies in placing the written items near to one another insofar as they are related in story terms. For instance, a sorcerous mentor would certainly be listed in Lore, but it might also be placed up against the boundary with the Kicker section, in which, right across from it, is written "first mission with deliberate murder."

Other character sheet designs are available on the SORCERER website.

Gary Simpson

The Kicker

The Kicker is an event or realization that your character has experienced just before play begins. It catalyzes him or her into action of some sort. If your character has lived for years wondering what did happen to his father that stormy night, today is the day he finds a crucial clue. If he has quietly studied sorcery under his master until this moment, today is the day of his first mission. It can be anything as long as it gets the character going. Just imagine the first scene of a movie before the title comes up: "There's this guy. And then **this** happens to him!" The

The Kicker

There's two issues to discuss about starting Kickers.

1. Go back to that point about the distinct differences among the three levels of a Sorcerer player-character: a person, a person who's a sorcerer, and a sorcerer who faces a Kicker. Don't mix them up or fold one into another. Most especially, "I just bound a demon!" cannot be the sole content of a Kicker.

2. Simplicity and honesty matter here too. An excellent Kicker from one of the earliest Sorcerer games was, "Just released from prison." At first glance, it may seem ordinary – and yes, that's the strength of it. I'm not saying that the player had real-life prison experience. I'm saying that he could relate to the situation in ordinary human terms. I certainly can; I am close friends with at least two people who've served hard time.

The Kicker is defined as a fictional crux point, meaning, this *will* be a crucial moment for the character. Therefore in this case, prison *did* make a difference to him in some undisclosed way, and now is the time to see whether that difference is going to work out for him or not.

Sometimes that crux-point concept can be sticky too. For example, a player made up a great initial character concept, a former child star with a drug habit, married to a politician, strategically using his sorcery to eliminate his wife's political opposition. For the Kicker, he proposed a couple of situations in which his wife's political enemies were investigating him or her, one of which included something really bad the demon had done, but my point to him was that the character had clearly been successful so far, and therefore must have handled any such situations well in the past. In other words, the proposed Kickers were simply "more of the same" material that we'd expect to be part of his back-story anyway. I asked him to think laterally: what sort of situation would throw a rock into his character's life which could not be solved simply by sending his demon as usual, but would rather upset the assumptions that he'd been so carefully protecting? He instantly said, "My wife puts me in detox." That's how to get a Kicker.

Kicker is the **this**, and without it your character is just some guy. You can do better than that, can't you?

Kickers are central to SORCERER. They provide the opening conflict that establishes a player-character as a protagonist. They make a player-character worth playing. When a Kicker is resolved, it's a momentous event and allows the character to be rewritten (see Development below).

Kickers come in several categories, and at the very least the GM should tell the players what sorts are most appropriate for the story he or she has in mind.

- ▼ **Shockers:** "Today began like any other until you pulled aside the shower curtain to see the skinned body of your next-door neighbor hanging from the showerhead."
- ▼ **Opportunities:** "You open your suitcase after picking it up at the luggage carousel to find your clothes and stuff gone, replaced by a quarter of a million dollars."
- ▼ **Mysteries:** "A friend on the police force tells you that the scenes of each of the brutal crimes recently perpetrated in your neighborhood have been signed with your mother's maiden name."

Kickers should **not** (1) present a total mystery with no personal significance; (2) dictate a character's actions (e.g. in the suitcase example above, the character could respond in many ways, ranging from keeping the money, spending it right away, or going to the police); or (3) present something he or she may react to casually.

Clearly the player and GM should discuss the Kicker carefully. Some GMs will be happy to have each player come up with something independently, whereas others will want to link each character's Kicker carefully to events in the game's back-story.

> CHARACTER CREATION EXAMPLE: **Harry Scarborough.**
> **Making a character in SORCERER should result in a protagonist who's interesting enough to make a story about. That requires thinking a bit beforehand. In this case, I'm thinking about a competent, hardened fellow who isn't going to worry much about the law. An experienced FBI agent, perhaps. That leads to the notion that he's mostly concerned with human villainy rather than demonic stuff, and perhaps isn't an expert sorcerer. It also brings up some possibilities regarding federally-sanctioned sorcery.**
> **"Oh, like THE X-FILES," says my GM. "No!" I retort. "I'm thinking about a hard-case here, someone who has spent at least a decade carrying out grimy ops, who's traded away valuable pieces of himself for powers he**

doesn't understand, and only now is beginning to question the ultimate goals. He's not an investigator. He's a warrior."

How can this set of abilities and personality get expressed in character creation?

1. CHOOSE SCORES. Harry is to be a very physically competent character, but not as sure or charismatic as many sorcerers. The ten points may be allocated as Stamina 5, Will 3, and Lore 2.

2. SET HUMANITY. This is easy. Humanity starts equal to Harry's Stamina or Will, whichever is higher. That would be Stamina at 5, so Harry's starting Humanity is 5. This may well change a few steps down, however.

3. CHOOSE DESCRIPTIONS for all 3 scores. With a Stamina of 5, Harry gets two descriptors for this score. Combat-trained certainly seems appropriate (Harry can fight and shoot expertly), as well as Athletic Regime (no drugs, no drinking, regular exercise, there you go). Harry's Will of 3 is a bit low, but I don't want him to be a wimp, so describing what he does have as High Self-Esteem works fine – especially since it's supposed to be a little frayed around the edges. His Lore of 2 is certainly best described as a Coven member, especially since he's basically just followed intructions from above in learning and carrying out sorcery, and this activity arises from participating in an organization.

4. CHOOSE COVER AND PRICE. These are easy. The character concept has already given me "FBI agent" as the Cover, which is set at 5 based on Stamina (the GM considers forcing me to use Will as the base for Cover, but gives me a break, as Harry is supposed to be something of a veteran). The whole psychological image of the character dictates the Price of his involvement in sorcery: moral burnout, which then gives me some thoughts about possible conflicts with his employer. A starting Price has a value of –1.

5. CHOOSE A TELLTALE. This must be something that would convey Harry's sorcerous status to a knowledgeable observer, and my creative instinct suggests it should be something grossly out of keeping with the whole FBI squeaky-clean image. A gaudy, arcane tattoo, where it can rarely be seen, is just right. (A Telltale does not have to be visible at all times, but if it isn't, it ought to be unequivocal.)

6. FILL OUT the parts of the character sheet that derive from the story so far, nearly all of which implies various people and other elements of Harry's life. Some of the material will include:

   ▼ Based on his Lore descriptor of Coven, Harry's sorcerous mentor, his interaction with other sorcerous agents, and the general flow of information he receives about cases or tasks should all be worked out to some extent.

- ▼ Based on his Cover descriptor of FBI agent, his rank, his boss, a few cases he's worked on, and his partner should all receive some attention.
- ▼ Finally, his city of residence, his financial and social resources, such as his car, bank account, and living situation should be outlined as well.

7. **CREATE THE STARTING DEMON. For this character, it seems best to keep Harry the mover and shaker, without bringing in too much proactivity from his demon. Full demon creation rules can be found in Chapter Three, and after perusing them, I decide upon an Object Demon, in fact, a demon gun named Woo (cheap joke, I'm afraid). Its numbers are found in Harry's full write-up at the end of this section.**

   The Binding roll is also outlined in the full write-up; suffice to say Harry ends up the loser with one victory down – of course, this information is not available to me as a player. Even worse, Harry also loses a point of Humanity for the Binding, dropping his starting Humanity to 4.

8. **ONCE-OVER: does Harry seem like he's fun to play? I decide he makes most sense as a hero if he is working out a new morality, a new sense of right and wrong, now that the standards he's followed for years no longer seem like they work for him.**

9. **WRITE THE KICKER. This is a very important step in character creation and relies on some interaction between GM and player. A sketchy Kicker can be found in the full write-up for Harry, below.**

If you're stuck

Since SORCERER doesn't draw from a single well-known genre, sometimes it's hard to know what your character should be doing or even care about. The handy list below provides some completely plagiarized character concepts. Not all of these examples are necessarily sorcerous, but it's easy to imagine equivalent roles for appropriate characters.

The Fugitive. You know something terrible, something that has ruined your life and forced you into hiding, forced you into the role of a rebel desperate for allies, one of whom is probably your demon. Being hunted has turned you ruthless and competent at staying alive. Now, all you want are the resources and opportunity for a showdown on your terms. Examples: Sarah Connor from *Terminator 2: Judgment Day*, Walker from *Tales from the Crypt: Demon Knight*, Travis from *Practical Demonkeeping*.

The Seeker. You're in over your head and your life seems a total mystery, the rules shifting every time you think you have it straight. The whole point is to mature and develop as you go, often being forced to triumph before you think you're ready. As you progress, though, you learn things about yourself

Archetypes

The archetypes are pretty good, I think, especially in crossing genre lines.

that are often not welcome. Examples: Jacob Singer from *Jacob's Ladder*, Harry Angel from *Angel Heart*, and even Laura Palmer from *Twin Peaks: Fire Walk with Me*. (This is a dangerous option: these protagonists don't really end up too well, do they?)

The Snoop. You are an investigative sort of person, tough enough, but your main role is not to bring down a villain or prevent wrongs so much as to understand why all this weird stuff is happening. Examples: Fox and Scully from *The X-Files*, Agent Cooper from *Twin Peaks*, Kolchak from the old show *Kolchak: The Night Stalker*, Dean Corso from *The Ninth Gate*.

The True Adept. You walk with demons and know them well, are even comfortable with them. You're certainly one step ahead of whatever dynamic brings most sorcerers to their dooms, and you push the limits and play games with the next level of understanding. You may be a little nuts, but you're definitely cool. Examples: John Constantine from *Hellblazer*, Dr. Norn from *Shadowslayer*, Kane from *Night Winds*, Anra Devadoris from *Adept's Gambit*, Shang Tsung from *Mortal Kombat*.

The Warrior. You are tough and knowledgeable about demons and, although you too are a sorcerer, you make it your business to oppose other sorcerers and banish their demons when necessary. You almost certainly base most of your actions on a moral code of some kind. Examples: Tomoe Gozen from *Thousandshrine Warrior*, the swordsmen in *Highlander*, Giles Redferne from *Warlock*, Father Karras from *The Exorcist*.

> **EXAMPLE CHARACTER:**
> **Harry Scarborough**
> **SCORES**
> Stamina 5 (combat training), Will 3 (self-esteem), Lore 2 (coven) Cover 3 (FBI agent)
> **Humanity 4**
> **Price –1 (burned-out) – applies when trying to persuade others or when resisting persuasion**
>
> **SORCERY**
> **Harry's Telltale is an ornate tattoo on his upper chest.**
>
> **Harry's demon is named Woo. It's an Object demon in the form of a 9mm automatic pistol; its Telltale is an occasionally-mobile red eye on the grip. Stamina 3, Will 4, Lore 3, Power 4**

Example characters

I certainly should have started the character creation process by presenting the two statements for this putative game. They would have been:

- Here and now, the modern outlaw, the city as frontier; Bob Dylan: "To live outside the law, you must be honest."

- Old concepts given modern shape, demons are archaic on the inside, fully up-to-date on the outside.

- References include Fritz Leiber's stories "The Hound" and "The Automatic Pistol," the comics *Demon Baby* and *Lori Lovecraft*, the film *A Better Tomorrow*, John Shirley's horror novel *Cellars*, and Andrew Vachss' first novel *Flood*.

Abilities: Special Damage (lethal), Cloak (self), Ranged Woo's Desire is Corruption; its Need is to have blood dripped down its barrel.

Binding roll: The Binding is defined as Harry practicing with Woo as he would with a normal gun, so his relevant score is Stamina. Harry rolled 9, 8, 7, 4, 2; Woo rolled 10, 7, 5, 2. So Woo wins with one victory and has a +1 in dealing with his master from here on out.

Humanity check (this is a new roll, not the Binding roll above): Harry's high roll was 8 and Woo's was 10, so Woo wins and Harry loses a point of Humanity.

STORY
Harry's been part of a hush-hush federal program to develop sorcery; to his knowledge he's the only success. Not even the regular FBI knows it exists. However,

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he's pushing forty, and he's getting tired of what he's been pretending to believe. His demon seems a lot more trustworthy than his employers, these days.

Kicker: On his last op, he met a person who recognized him as a sorcerer and gave him much needed-help in controlling his demon. His new mission is to find and neutralize this person – the first of which he is determined to do, the second of which he is considering disobeying.

Example characters, cont.

It's a bit grim, but I think the characters illustrate a certain zest to be found within it.

Harry stands up pretty well as an example character, except that the "special federal program" is too classically RPG-conspiracist. It should have been a coven across espionage and security agencies, both internationally and in violation of perceived ideological differences. I can see how my text writhes uncomfortably with being confined within and officially part of the FBI. Also, the phrase "pushing forty" is kind of hilarious to me now. *Forty*? Oh my *God*!

The text for Armand unfortunately misses the point of a naive sorcerer: that Binding is always voluntary and cannot be accidental. He did indeed Bind Jewel and acknowledge his responsibility to meet her Need; he didn't merely wake up next to her. I wrote it too much in Armand's voice at the time, and as I've conceived him, the character always hides his commitments although when he makes them he's ruthlessly sincere.

Stephanie is partly based on the original movie version of Buffy, but not the TV show, which I hadn't seen at all during the time I wrote this example.

All of them could well stand a one-sentence account of how they bound their demons, showing that Harry didn't merely receive it gift-wrapped from his training, for example.

I also tried to show that Kickers need not be networked among player-characters, but you can do it if you want. That's why Stephanie's and Harry's Kickers are linked, but not Armand's.

EXAMPLE CHARACTER:
Armand DeVito

SCORES
Stamina 2 (natural vigor), Will 7 (social competence, user), Lore 1 (naive)
Cover 7 (Hollywood gigolo)
Humanity 7
Price –1 (physical coward) – applies to all attack rolls in in-your-face melee

SORCERY
Armand's Telltale is that he stares hard at people's pupils.

Armand's demon is named Jewel, Passing as a dangerously beautiful woman. Its/her Telltale is a cat-pupil in one eye. Stamina 2, Will 5, Lore 4, Power 5
Abilities: Travel (self), Daze, Fast, Special Damage (non-lethal)
Jewel's Desire is Mischief; its Need is sincere affection

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Binding roll: The Binding occurred in terms of seduction, so it was a straight Will vs. Will roll. Armand rolled 9, 9, 6, 5, 5, 3, 2; Jewel rolled 9, 9, 5, 3, 3. The result is +1 in Armand's favor.

Humanity check: Armand's high value was 6 and Jewel's was 9, so Armand's Humanity drops from 7 to 6.

STORY
Armand has always been a likeable, manipulative skunk; he hasn't done anything evil out of pure luck and inattention and has done good only because it wasn't hard at the time. However, now he's found someone who's using him, and even worse, she's a demon! He didn't even know they

The diagram

I cannot over-stress how important this feature is. It is the true transition into committed play.
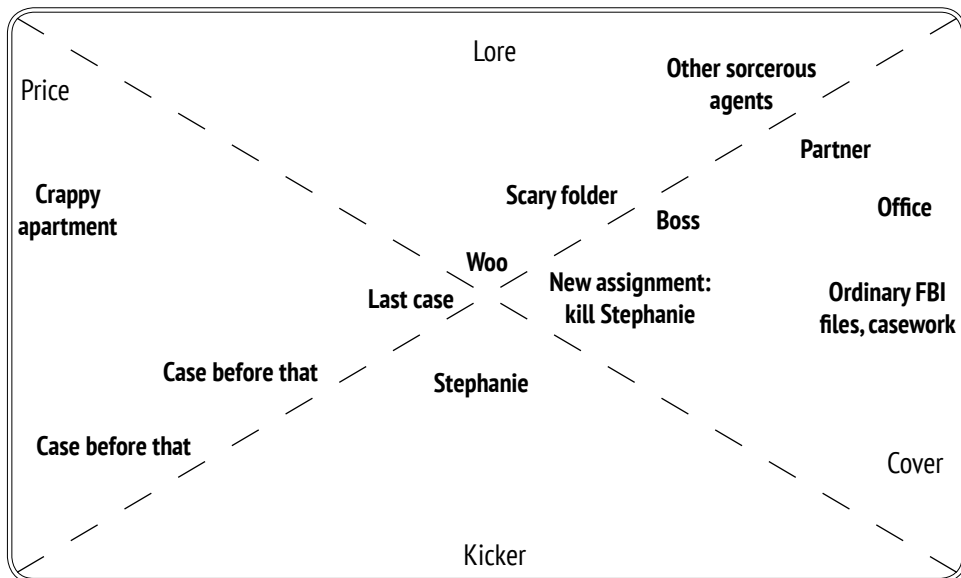
1. Start by making four headings on scratch paper: Lore, Cover, Price, and Kicker. Then list any people, places, or things which go under them. It's important that the items are *only* nouns of this time, not adjectives or attitudes or anything else. I've found that about ten items total is just right. Covers typically include homes and workplaces, as well as any relevant items in them, but if such items are associated with sorcery, then they go under Lore. Lots more things go into Lore than some players realize: the demon, obviously and necessarily, but also any resources or locations for the character's sorcerous activities, stuff he or she may have gained by doing that, and given Coven or Apprentice descriptors in particular, other people.

2. Add stuff to these lists through dialogue. I usually sort of riff off of what I see, asking questions like "If he's a traveling salesman, does he have a spiffy company car or an old beater?" and things like that. Or once for a tycoon character whose Price is arrogance, I mentioned that if it were a genuine Price, then we could expect to see at least one pissed-off former friend in that quadrant. I always try to get some information about where the character lives and their daily habits into the diagram. I always leave the final call up to the player for such suggestions, but they tend to be quite productive.

2. Hypothetically, every item gets placed into its quadrant at the outer edge and dead center of that quadrant, i.e., as far apart from the items in the other quadrants as possible. Then pull together the ones which are physically or socially associated with one another. Pull them toward one another, not toward the center as a default. Therefore if two things are in adjacent quadrants, and if they are related

existed, and then one picked him up at a soiree yesterday, and now they're bound together – a real commitment, just as he's always feared! To deal with this, Armand's going to have to become either a much worse or much better person, and fast.

Kicker: Armand's life-style has finally caught up with him. His previous lover was a mobster's mistress, the one before that was a gorgeous movie star who just overdosed on something bad, and somehow he's ended up with a suitcase full of unmarked bills. He has no idea where it came from. He would have been shot last night if it weren't for Jewel pulling him out of the situation.

EXAMPLE CHARACTER:
Stephanie Page

SCORES
Stamina 2 (athletic regimen), Will 4 (vengeful), Lore 4 (lone adept)
Cover 4 (high school kid)
Humanity 4
Price –1 (bad rep with demons) – applies to all commands to demons Bound by others

SORCERY
Stephanie's Telltale is a bite scar on her forearm, which on inspection matches no known dentition.

Stephanie's demon is named Kerch, an inconspicuous floating mote of light that occasionally manifests a horrid face.
Stamina 4, Will 5, Lore 4, Power 5
Abilities: Armor (confers to another), Vitality, Travel, Special Damage (non-lethal)
Kerch's Desire is Competition; its Need is a periodic pact re-confirmation.

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The diagram, cont.

to one another but to nothing else, then they travel toward the diagonal boundary line, not toward the center.

3. Two associated things will go toward the center *only* if they are (i) in Lore and Kicker, or (ii) in Cover and Price. Often, when this happens, one of the items will drag other stuff with it, either in its own quadrant or from an adjacent one. If things from three quadrants are associated, then they will necessarily pull one another toward the center.

If centering or at least associations aren't evident, it's going to take some dedicated effort in play to get there – by definition, such a character isn't in much of a crisis. Some dialogue during character creation can be helpful here, as long as it's with a light touch and doesn't turn into tedious exposition of extensive back-story.

I definitely should have provided it for Harry, as he was the build-it example earlier in the text. So here it is!

> **Lore:** Woo itself, other sorcerous agents in the coven, the scary way that assignments somehow appear in his file folders, marked with weird runes and smeared with substances

> **Cover:** His immediate boss, the latest mission assignment, office, partner (who I decide is not a sorcerer, hence he's not in the Lore section), the official FBI position Harry holds

> **Price:** His crappy apartment, the sequence of previous cases (this last was a bit of fun inspiration to give a little depth to the "Burned out" concept, and to provide opportunities for the GM to introduce more NPCs from those past situations)

> **Kicker:** Meeting Stephanie during the latest assignment, when she helped him control Woo; and the new assignment to kill or neutralize her – note how little the written material has provided about these events.

Michael S. Miller once called the center of the diagram "the story bullseye," and that's a fine name for it. I think it's pretty evident how the four elements pulled together in the middle of Harry's diagram provide quite a bit of opportunity for both GM and player, which I'll talk about more in Chapter 4.

The diagram's greatest virtue is that things end up in the center not because you put them there on purpose, but because the logic of association pulls them there. And most especially, sometimes things that were invented as mere auxiliaries to more explicit elements get pulled there – and hence are now elevated to maximum importance.

In this case, the Kicker element "Stephanie" drags stuff from all three of the other quadrants towards it. The stuff that's not obviously dragged there remains toward the outer edges, either right out toward the edge such as his apartment, or associated with something in one of the other quadrants such as his partner.

---(cont.)

existed, and then one picked him up at a soiree yesterday, and now they're bound together – a real commitment, just as he's always feared! To deal with this, Armand's going to have to become either a much worse or much better person, and fast.

Kicker: Armand's life-style has finally caught up with him. His previous lover was a mobster's mistress, the one before that was a gorgeous movie star who just overdosed on something bad, and somehow he's ended up with a suitcase full of unmarked bills. He has no idea where it came from. He would have been shot last night if it weren't for Jewel pulling him out of the situation.

EXAMPLE CHARACTER:
Stephanie Page

SCORES
Stamina 2 (athletic regimen), Will 4 (vengeful), Lore 4 (lone adept)
Cover 4 (high school kid)
Humanity 4
Price –1 (bad rep with demons) – applies to all commands to demons Bound by others

SORCERY
Stephanie's Telltale is a bite scar on her forearm, which on inspection matches no known dentition.

Stephanie's demon is named Kerch, an inconspicuous floating mote of light that occasionally manifests a horrid face.
Stamina 4, Will 5, Lore 4, Power 5
Abilities: Armor (confers to another), Vitality, Travel, Special Damage (non-lethal)
Kerch's Desire is Competition; its Need is a periodic pact re-confirmation.

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The diagram, cont.

The arrangement of the four categories is deliberate: if two things are associated across Kicker and Lore, it directly stresses the character's sorcerous identity; if they are associated across Price and Cover, it directly stresses the character's personal and social identity. In either case, the things snap toward one another toward the center rather than merely across an axis.

One more point: note the flexibility regarding possible GM contributions and refinements to the list of NPCs and things. If a player provides a lot of detailed information about them, the GM uses that; but if some of them are left unde-scribed, then those become requests for the GM to provide depth and range to them during play. In this case, the written material for Harry does not actually describe the last assignment or its outcome. (Also, in this case, the situation is compounded by the inclusion of another player-character, meaning that what that player provided needs to be considered as well.)

Showing how the terms change and move through a series of sessions would have been very helpful too, but I have no idea how I might have done that in text form. Merely presenting a series of diagrams with changed terms wouldn't be enough, I think. Suffice to say that at the end of every session of play, re-drawing the diagram is a productive thing to do.

Once-over, viable protagonist

The only thing I can think of is to speak to someone as if I were about to play a character in a Sorcerer game they were organizing, and for which they were the GM.

1. Don't fucking drop the ball on me. You have my Kicker. If it's a mystery, you're supposed to know what's going on. If it's an action-event, you're supposed to round out its human and motivational side. If it's just freaky, you're supposed to embrace the weirdness. Don't cop out. Above all, our shared agreement is that this Kicker is going to matter, and that means not only to at least one other character besides my own, but also to us, the people, here, during play. I know it matters to *me*, in its unbaked, unspiked form. You make sure your deeper/prepped version of it matters to *you*.

2. My character can do a lot. And I'm not sure exactly what he's going to do first, but you can bet that in the first few moments of play, he's going to do something, and it has nothing to do with familiar role-playing tropes or standards for character action. This guy is not a "role-playing character." He is bigger than any prep, bigger than any game-book, bigger than any genre. I am not playing in the "playful" sense of that word. Maybe sometimes he'll be cool or cautious, but never purely reactive. I will not wait for cues.

3. Neither of us can be sure whether my character is the hero, and will eventually be nicely positioned in a climactic confrontation with whoever really and for-sure truly is the bad guy. In a lot of other games, we'd know that for a fact, but not

Binding roll: The Binding is defined in terms of a formal legal compact, so the relevant score is Lore. Stephanie rolled 10, 9, 9, 1; Kerch rolled 10, 8, 7, 4, 4. The result is +2 in Stephanie's favor.

Humanity check: Stephanie's high roll was 9 and Kerch's was 8, so Stephanie's Humanity remains unchanged.

STORY

Stephanie is based loosely on the DEMON BABY comics and the movie BUFFY THE VAMPIRE SLAYER. Her father was a great adept who was betrayed and killed by his apprentice; she managed to save his most important books and taught herself sorcery to avenge his death. She's tough and deadly under her normal-chick appearance, but demons think she's just a tender morsel. Kerch was her father's most trusted servitor, and Binding him was her first act of sorcery.

Kicker: Stephanie's been noticed. She and an FBI agent recognized each other as sorcerers, and she knows an investigation's coming soon. To make matters worse, her enemy has recently realized she's on his tail, and just this morning, she barely survived a terrible demon attack mostly by luck. She's decided it's time to look for allies.

DEVELOPMENT

Improvement

After initial character creation, Stamina, Will, Lore, Cover, Price, and Humanity are all completely independent scores, in terms of going up or down due to various changes in the character. Characters change their scores and other features in two ways: one as an ongoing, experience-based effect; the other as a dramatic redefinition.

Experience. Stamina, Will, Lore, and Cover are increased by successful Humanity rolls against the Score's current value. Improvement rolls are allowed after the conclusion of a storyline, not necessarily after every gaming session. The player may check the scores for improvement in any order, but if a point is gained, then no more checks are allowed. (Note that Humanity itself has probably fluctuated up and down due to events during play; it is not checked at this time. See the following section.)

GMs should monitor how fast characters progress by experience. If they improve every adventure, you're going too easy on them. Force Humanity down (see below) by making them desperate and thereby Summoning up

Once-over, viable protagonist, cont.

in Sorcerer. Without that, I'm looking at a character whose actions and attitude I will myself be enacting, without much premeditation, and who I cannot say at this time is necessarily the good guy. I believe he might be, or could be, or could turn out to be. But I won't know which way he'll jump in any number of situations until we get there in play, and that will depend a lot on the immediate history of how we got there, too.

4. I know what I'm doing in one way, though. I'm not going to go spastic on you or turtle up. You won't be looking at my guy and at me, going "What the fuck am I sup-posed to do with that?" I'm listening to you and to everyone else, soaking up every-thing that's said and described. My character's actions and words are right in there with what's happening and what has happened. He is not an idiot, nor a pyschotic. Whatever I have him do, just run with it, respond, bring out the consequences.

5. I love what you've told us regarding our upcoming game. I get it. I want to do that. I can't wait to see it happen via the lens/input of my character, especially in terms of Humanity rolls.

6. The system works, as long as we stay clear about exactly what our characters are doing and what they are driving for, at least at that moment. If you want to know what he's doing, then one of these three things will work: (i) you already know because I just told you, (ii) you ask and I'll tell you, or (iii) you have a pretty good idea and frame right to it, waiting for my nod to confirm that what you say works for me. No tedious murk. We don't need it. With that knowledge in hand at all times, the dice are ready when they're needed.

7. In fact, that brings up another point. You have Bangs, conflicts, possible rolls in mind? Good. So do I. Be ready for me to do stuff which demands rolling, without your permission or prep or any consideration of your readiness.

Development

This whole section needs a core clarification: what is a "story" in this context? The answer is, when all the player-characters Kickers are resolved. They don't have to be resolved simultaneously, but you play until they're all done.

Well then! What is "Kicker resolution?" It all depends on how the character has responded from the outset of play. The circumstances of the initial Kicker have transformed into any combination of threats, opportunities, revised priorities, new relationships, sorcerous acts … all of which have probably generated new conflicts and, as I'll discuss in Chapter 4, climactic moments. A Kicker is resolved when you look back over the history of play and decide that we have all genuinely observed how the initial events prompted transformative, climactic outcomes for that character, and that the implications of the resulting events have been thor-oughly played through.

things and Binding them in order to deal with their problems. Have no mercy; no SORCERER protagonist is worth squat until he's felt the breath of chaos on his ass.

Story conclusion. If the character's Kicker is resolved, and if sufficient drama has occurred to illustrate the character's true colors to all concerned, the player should rewrite the character. This would almost certainly involve losing the old Price and choosing a new one, and might even include rewriting some or all of the score descriptions. The only thing that must remain unchanged is Humanity. At this point the player is free to retire the character or, with the GM, to work out a new Kicker.

Humanity

Changes in Humanity generally reflect changes in the character's moral state. The specific definition of Humanity lies with each individual play group (see Chapter Four), but it can easily be expanded to include physical qualities such as twisted mutations and mental qualities such as sanity.

Mechanically, Humanity is what keeps your character yours, so guard it carefully. Every time your character successfully Contacts, Summons, or Binds a demon (see Chapter Five), roll Humanity against the demon's Power. Failure means you lose a point of Humanity! If you Contact, Summon, and Bind a demon, you have three Humanity checks to make. GMs can also decree Humanity loss rolls if the characters perform heinous acts, such as sacrificing the newspaper boy to Summon something or going on a killing spree for some reason. In such a case, roll current Humanity against itself.

Humanity loss of any sort is perceivable by other sorcerers on a roll of Lore vs. the target's current Humanity. This may manifest merely as a certain haunted look but in some games it may include actual physical changes.

> "You think [him] inhuman?"
> "I think us all inhuman."
> —J. A. Salmonson,
> **Thousandshrine Warrior**

Humanity of zero means the character comes under the control of the GM. A character who gets to Humanity 0 might, if the GM is very nice, get it restored by some extraordinary means and come back under the control of the player. If this does occur, then the character should be rewritten as suggested in the Improvement section above, but not necessarily for the better. Under no circumstances, though, should a player continue to play a character who is at Humanity 0 or less.

Exactly what constitutes low and lost Humanity is going to vary with every different group of SORCERER players (see Chapter Four). The GM

Development, cont.

Therefore the term "story" is only short-hand for seeing all of that happen. It has literally nothing to do with planned events and arcs from the GM's side of the table; there shouldn't *be* any such things in Sorcerer play anyway.

To repeat some important points:

- Kicker resolution is more than merely coping with an immediate crisis. "Ninjas attack!" "I jump out the window!" If the character escapes, that doesn't resolve that Kicker. We haven't seen any reason why or how the event was worth identifying at the level of a Kicker. We haven't seen the character's life change, or any reason for the character to change.

- A Kicker is personal, not a group problem. They don't have to be interlinked (although they may be, either at the outset or later); they don't have to resolve all together.

- A Kicker's resolution may or may not be the signal to retire that character from play, as the player desires; the resolutions of all the Kickers in play ends the story as a whole and may or may not be the signal to end this entire game of Sorcerer, as desired by the group as a whole.

Finally, what do you get when that happens? The character might improve one score by one point, fine. However, the most important and potentially much broader opportunity for change lies in re-writing any or all of the character's descriptors, which is quite a big deal. Consider this example:

- Stamina: sickly (score =1), Will: user/manipulative + social competence, Lore: coven, Cover: philanthropist, Price: paralyzed; *to*

- Stamina: athletic regimen (new score = 2), Will: zest for life and sensation + social competence, Lore: adept, Cover: philanthropist, Price: unwilling to kill

In this case, the character has become practically a whole new person, with transformed physical capabilities, transformed motivations, adding up to a different context for a feature (philanthropist) that did not change. "Role-playing is how a character sheet makes another character sheet." That entire sheet you started with has effectively come to an end, and now we are looking at what the person has become.

That transformation is itself the payoff for play in general, and the decision to make it either the foundation for a new Kicker or a stopping-point is secondary.

should choose from the following list or make up an equivalent and tell the players about it before the story begins.

Humanity is	at 0 or less, you are
Your soul	dead and damned
Your sanity	a gibbering, psychotic wreck
Your sorcery	host to a malevolent possessor demon
Your ethics	commencing heinous criminal activities

Getting Humanity back is a little harder. If a sorcerer Banishes a demon whose current Power exceeds the sorcerer's Humanity, that rates a Humanity gain roll (Humanity against that demon's Power). So will doing something that, in the GM's opinion, confirms the character as a decent human being, in which case the roll is current Humanity against itself. Successful rolls mean restoring one point of Humanity.

> The supplement THE SORCERER'S SOUL is entirely devoted to the advanced use of Humanity in all aspects of role-playing, from demon design to character development to scenario preparation. Full guidelines are provided for customizing Humanity precisely, determining what its fluctuations really mean, and treating a Humanity score of zero in a variety of ways.

EVERYONE ELSE

Other sorcerers

NPC sorcerers should be at least as tough as the player-characters or considerably tougher, although pure power isn't necessarily the most important concern. Probably the most dangerous sorcerers are also the most subtle, in that they are very, very good at directing the attention of nosy people elsewhere in such a way that they are not even aware they've been misled.

When role-playing NPC sorcerers, the GM should remember that an experienced sorcerer has had to deal with a lot of Humanity loss. If an NPC sorcerer is supposed to be a nice guy, he or she better have done a lot of good stuff to stay high-Humanity. Clearly this kind of sorcerer is probably the exception; most sorcerers who have survived their activities for any length of time are not going to be very philanthropic.

> A wizard's Power is based on deceit and unconcern with ... niceties. When he swears on his Power, the promise is always literally true, but its fulfillment is sure to be a disaster. If you would know the true meaning of a wizard's promise, imagine the most evil meaning the words can sustain.
>
> —A.J. Offut and R.K. Lyon, The Demon in the Mirror

NPC sorcerers

When I wrote this, I didn't realize how intrusive and disruptive NPC sorcerers can be, and not in a good way. My early Sorcerer games were full of them, rich in motivation, rich in back-story, with demons littered all over the place, in control or not. After a while, I realized the games went much better without them … most of the time.

Why they're bad:

- Exterior cults and organizations and especially atrocities are a gamer comfort zone, particularly in terms of investigations and planned climactic battles.
- NPC sorcerer priorities upstage the player-characters Kickers, turning the Kickers into mere Hooks.
- They invoke habits of "orc or Gandalf" categories, i.e., something to fight or something to use for cues for what to do next.

Some descriptors require such characters, especially a mentor for an Apprentice, and sometimes members of a Coven. Harry's fellow agents would qualify, for instance. Or perhaps they're intrinsic to a given character's back-story concept, and as such, evident on the character's diagram. If this is the case, then go ahead and make up whatever's needed, but think of them as being there to add pressure and context to the Kicker, and try to avoid the problems I've listed.

And yet, I have to admit that once in a while, bringing in my own GM-created powerful sorcerer or demon into the back-story and situation has been entirely successful. What makes it work sometimes? I wish I knew.

Furthermore, NPC sorcerers will be expert at manipulating demon psychology, including those Bound to player-characters, and will make free use of Banish, Punish, and simply ordering demons to do as they say in order to decrease the heroes' effectiveness. Of course, each will also have a stable of NPC demons, each of which is certainly a character worth considering in its own right.

> **EXAMPLES: NPC SORCERERS**
> **THE CORRUPT CULTIST**
> **Stamina 5 (natural vigor + ex-military), Will 6 (self-esteem + belief system), Lore 4 (coven leader), Cover 6 (cult leader)**
> **Price −1 for initiative (lazy)**
> **Humanity 3**
> **Telltale: uses cult jargon with some demonic references**
> **Demons: personal familiar, inconspicuous (lives in his shadow, which appears very dark), confers vitality, armor, and boost ST; possessors in senior acolytes, each casting a very dark shadow**
>
> **THE FEMME FATALE**
> **Stamina 3 (athletic regime), Will 7 (vengeful), Lore 5 (mad + adept), Cover 6 (society dame)**
> **Price −2 (sociopath: treats men as things)**
> **Humanity 3**
> **Telltale: fashion accessories with demonic runes on them**
> **Demons: passing chauffeur; poisonous parasite**

Persons of power

These people have no Lore but are otherwise equal or superior to player-characters, with Will + Stamina equalling 10 or more. They should be formidable allies and foes, often occupying positions of importance in society or the underworld. It's very useful, every so often, for a GM to stomp the player-characters' noses into the dirt with non-sorcerous adversaries, just to keep them humble. It's also very useful for the characters to have a few such tough, strong-willed guys or gals around as friends.

Just folks

In game terms, all these people have going for them are personality and the pity or inattention of the other types of characters. They have no Lore and their Stamina and Will vary from 1 to (rarely) 4. Think of all the people you know or happen to bump into day by day: your boss, bartenders, professors, the landlord, the kids next door, the girl in the T-bird.

The Just Folks section

I totally failed to explain where most Just Folks come from: obviously, the diagrams. That's the real starting NPC list right there. People on the diagrams necessarily have relationships to the character, whether direct or indirect, and that means that they ever have, or are about to have, some kind of agenda about him or her. And the core point to make about that is that NPCs act upon their agendas.

In Harry's case, we have his boss, his partner, both of which potentially highlight the ambiguity of Harry's official FBI position and his more secret role in the coven.

Such NPCs can and should be created through implication, when they seem too much fun to ignore. They can be made up as part of initial prep or conceived and brought in later, either way.

In Harry's case, all those previous cases are certainly littered with people who benefited or suffered from the outcomes. Also, given his burned-out-ness, one might expect to see some friends or others close to him who have been shut out, but still care.

I tried to emphasize in the text that all such characters should be taken seriously; note that they are mechanically at least as effective as the player-characters outside of sorcery. The text is unfortunately too oriented toward manipulation of the players though; today, I'd phrase my advice toward playing those characters as interesting people with legitimate concerns, and to discover which ones "catch" both for the GM as their player and for the other people at the table.

In story terms, though, Just Folks are very important. For one thing, they might actually know or see things that are relevant to the player-characters, even though they don't know it. But more importantly, there should be a cast of plain ol' normal folks in your game who should be played so as to make the players care about their fates. Sorcery and demonics are just fantasy; real pain and triumph reside in the real human heart. Stories are about people, and there should be lots of people in the game-world with names, problems, and interlocking lives, many of which present problems for the players. A SORCERER story is extremely effective when the players care about the consequences of their actions upon normal people. A GM should present meaningful non-sorcerer characters and encourage the player-characters to act toward their benefit. On the other hand, in a truly dark world, this shouldn't be easy. When it actually works out well, that's great, but the universe is rarely that giving.

Closing Words

I'll show you how I go for the jugular during the GM-player dialogue I tried to model in this chapter, and how far that can take a person and a game even if you don't know it.

I was playing a single but nearly all-night session of Sorcerer in a foreign country, with three native people as players, two of whom I had not met previously, organized by the person I knew.

I began with my own notions for look-and-feel, first by requesting we use a contemporary setting, and we settled on a well-known city in that country, which provided the "close-to-home" context I described in Chapter 1. Second, and working directly out of the range of material in my head which makes me uncomfortable about myself, I suggested that demons would always have some human physical features, and that psychologically, sorcery was based on the idea that to the sorcerers, the demons were the only ones who "truly understood" them.

One of the players, the only woman in the group, protested that she was creeped out by that very notion and would have trouble sleeping. But she didn't flat-out refuse and I got the idea that she kind of liked it, so we went on. And when she was making up her tattoo-artist character's demon, she came up with the notion of a twin-image of her character. As the character's Telltale was a little cut that never stops bleeding, she said, "Yeah, like me [i.e. the character], but without the cut."

I said: "Or … covered in them?" In this case, I was taking what she'd said and finding a way to make it more viscerally stunning for myself, without altering the basic content she'd offered, that the Telltale concerned the cut. She went for that enthusiastically, resulting in the creepiest demon in the game.

Furthermore, she turned out to be the kind of role-player for whom this game was written. Everything she did, every nuance of the positive-negative elements of a sorcerer's relationship with her demon, every aspect of the character's overwhelming creative idealism – it was perfect. My own GM choices about how to frame the next scene or who appears in a given scene were made effortless, in that context. There was no language barrier whatsoever: multiple times, she would produce a comment as a player or a sentence in-character which made everyone laugh or cry out, and then what happened next with her character would inspire me to do the same.

About halfway during the evening and night of play, I happened to notice her arms were marked with old, criss-crossing hairline scars.

Manny Vega

Chapter Three:

DEMONS

DEMON CHARACTERS

Creating a demon character follows these steps in exact order. Ordinarily, the GM builds the demon characters. Sometimes a player has a say in how a demon is built (e.g. if a player-character is Contacting or Summoning it), but the GM has the final word.

1. Choose the demon's Type and an appropriate Telltale.
2. Choose all of its abilities, the number of which will determine its Lore score.
3. Choose its Stamina score based on how physically tough you think it should be.
4. Set its Will score to be at least one die higher than its Stamina or Lore, whichever is higher.
5. Set its Power at equal the dice of its highest score, which is its Will.
6. Choose its Need and its Desire.
7. Once-over: give it a name, clarify its appearance and general behavior, and decide whether any of its scores should be adjusted to fit the concept.

"[The GM] did a great job at playing those demons, in a way that made you actually like **the demon but that was really pretty eerie and also, mean."**

-- Frank

This chapter concerns how players and GM talk while creating demons, whether during initial character creation or later in play. The diagram is the same as for Chapter 2, because demon creation is a sort of role-reversal compared to player-character creation, considering that the player is providing the initial material for the GM to arrive at a playable character.

Although the process starts with a player, the amount of starting information can vary, as described in the text. It's up to the GM to take the demon creation process the rest of the way, remaining true to what the player provided, but also completing the character as his or her (the GM's) character. Therefore the dialogue of demon concept creation is a little bit like an interview, to make sure that the player has provided all the information they want to provide, as well as to make sure (in a perfect mirror to player-character creation) that the GM is excited about playing this … *thing* he or she is about to finish making.

Most of the chapter is about mechanics, written in a way that turned out to be unfamiliar to a lot of people who hadn't played old-school Champions, by which I mean up through its 3rd edition, and a few similar games. Back then, in that particular family of game design, "powers" had no fictional descriptions in the rules, as every character would have a local description of a power toward that end.

So if your superhero had "Energy blast, 10d6," and some other character had exactly the same thing paid for with exactly as many character points, they were *not* considered fictionally equivalent except each does 10d6 damage and generic details such as range modifiers. Each one was not considered completed until, on the character sheet, you had written, for example, "icicle bolts," and the other

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Chapter Three:
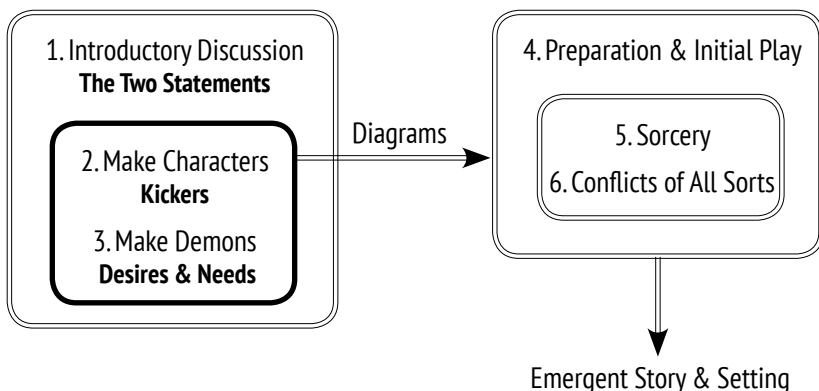
DEMONS

Manny Vega

VEGA

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6. Choose its Need and its Desire.
7. Once-over: give it a name, clarify its appearance and general behavior, and decide whether any of its scores should be adjusted to fit the concept.

Introduction, cont.

person had written "laser turret on head." Specific consequences of these *special effects* (as they were called) were now validated for use in play. If using an icicle bolt in a particular situation were deemed to be consequential in some way, then those effects would in fact be applied in the fiction – *without* any prior explanation or specification of the power's mechanics.

Crucially, special effects do not necessarily have to accord with or even be explained in terms of physics, although they can be described as such, e.g. "icicle bolts." But they can also be described in strictly visual or other sensory terms, as long as the explanation leads to some idea of distinct applications and effects.

That's how the demon abilities work. The rules versions are not in-fiction, colorful descriptions of what the demon can do; they are naked rules-applications which will only take on their full range of in-fiction effects once they are understood both in prep, for that particular game's "look-and-feel," and during play, for that particular demon's expression of it. Therefore those two opening statements are absolutely required and central yet again.

Unfortunately, this chapter is in fact weak on that very Color and how it's supposed to relate to these rules in particular. I was wary of providing too many examples, which I feared would limit conceptions and application in play. I still do.

The steps of demon creation

Follow the order in this list precisely!

All these terms are explained below.

Demon type

There are five basic types of demon, all of which are hard to identify on casual inspection. All demons have a Telltale which a suspicious person might wonder at, and all may be identified as demons by a sorcerer who rolls Lore vs. the demon's Cover (or one die, if the demon does not have the Cover ability). Most demons, if not all, try to avoid outright recognition.

Inconspicuous demons are just that: hard to perceive. One of their abilities is almost always Cloak. They may merely be small, hiding in their master's pockets, or they may be composed of something like shadows or mist or sunlight, or they may actually have powers of invisibility. However, no inconspicuous demon may carry out obvious actions and hope to go unnoticed! Even invisible demons are obvious if they're tearing someone's head off. Inconspicuous demons have a natural Fists attack. Their abilities are conferred either to themselves or to another as defined per ability; they may have the Boost ability.

Object demons are invested into physical items and usually must be carried around. They can act and move, but in that behind-your-back way that all inanimate objects seem to have once in a while. They may have the Boost ability, and their powers may confer upon themselves or another. Their Stamina refers to their physical toughness and capacity to use their abilities only, as they cannot usually carry out independent physical acts.

Parasite demons must live inside a host, usually the summoner and/or binder but not necessarily. They may be actual critters nestled into some body cavity, or they may exist only as an agent in the bloodstream or nervous system. Their powers confer onto the host alone, except for Boost; Boost and Vitality are common. See below for what happens to an unhosted Parasite.

Passing demons look almost perfectly human or animal, and they mix directly into society, which is why they almost always have the ability Cover. Passing demons have a natural Fists attack. Their powers confer upon themselves alone, and they may not have the ability Boost.

Possessor demons completely supplant another being from its body, using a Power vs. Stamina roll. If the takeover is successful, the host remains as a flickering bit of consciousness barely hanging on, unless the demon gained a number of victories greater than his or her Humanity, in which case the host

The default demon presence

A demon has a default mechanics presence in play which is always subject to normal rules use. This presence is, unless modified by abilities, essentially the same as a person. That presence moves like a human, can be perceived like a human (not "as," *like*), can hit like a human, can be hit like a human, perceives things with human senses, can be communicated with, and so on. All of that applies no matter what else is described. Therefore whatever narrated effects are necessary to make it consistent with the thing being (say) a lucky rock, well, that just means they *are* necessary.

One of the least human-like demons I've seen in play was a blood parasite, with almost no identifiable personality characteristics beyond its horrid needs and with no described physical form. Well along in play, the sorcerer hosting it tried to kill it, literally stabbing himself. This was a legitimate attack on the demon, who then exited his body to seek another host. I asked the player what he thought it might look like, and he described a rapidly-spreading, almost pseudopod-like pool of blood. This was all great – and for standards regarding its speed, its ability to go up the stairs in the immediate situation, and anything else, I merely used the scope and scale that would apply a person in that situation.

That concept needs a little reinforcing regarding communication. All demons can and do communicate, and in practice, every sorcerer knows how. The reasoning is as follows: "It can in fact talk, so figure out how, and if you want it to be non-verbal, don't worry, that's just Color and won't impede genuine communication."

Demon Types

I arrived at the Types not only through examples from the source material, but also by juxtaposing two crucial variables concerning relationships: intimacy and proactivity. They play out as follows:

- Passer: low intimacy, high proactivity
- Object: low intimacy, low proactivity
- Possessor: high intimacy, high proactivity
- Parasite: high intimacy, low proactivity

The Inconspicuous category is intended to be a grab-bag for intermediate, alternate, and differently-combined concepts for these variables.

Here's a summary of the mechanical details for each demon Type:

- Possessor: abilities must confer to itself; needs a host; presence endangers host; controls bodily volition unless host makes a conflict out of it
- Parasite: abilities must confer to host (except Boost); needs a host; presence does not endanger host; host controls bodily volition unless the demon makes a conflict out of it
- Inconspicuous: abilities may confer either to host or to itself in any individual case; does not need a host; controls only its own volition

---(cont.)

personality dies. Possessors have a natural attack corresponding to the body they inhabit, e.g., in a human body they have a natural Fists attack. Their abilities may not be conferred, and they may not have the ability Boost. Possessors may or may not have the ability Cover, but if they do, they can use it to mimic that of their host. Many Possessors are limited to certain types of hosts, as defined for the particular demon. See below for what happens to an unhosted Possessor. Also, note the significant difference between Possessor demons with and without the ability Hop.

Some important terms
Master, Host, and User differ significantly.
▼ A master is whomever the demon is bound to
▼ A host is whomever a Possessor or Parasite occupies
▼ A user is whoever controls a given demon ability
Many combinations of these roles are possible, some rather involved. If the user is someone besides the demon, he or she may always tell whether the ability is being conferred (and is therefore available for use) or not.

> **EXAMPLE 1: A sorcerer Binds a Parasite demon, hosting it in his own body. The demon has the ability Big (see below), but the sorcerer is the user. The demon does choose whether the sorcerer may have the ability or not, but the sorcerer chooses when and when not to get Big.**

> **EXAMPLE 2: A sorcerer Binds a Passing demon. The demon has the ability Special Damage and, since it is a Passer, it must be the user. The demon has complete control over the ability and when to use it; its master may only request or demand that it do so.**

> **EXAMPLE 3: A sorcerer Binds a Possessor demon with the ability Travel, hosting it in a handy German shepherd dog. The sorcerer is the master, the dog is the host, and the demon is the user of the Travel, in complete control of its use (again, it may be commanded by the sorcerer to do so).**

For any ability taken by a demon, the user must be defined at the outset; user-ness cannot shift back and forth. When the demon is not the user of an ability, think of the user as the fellow clicking a light switch up and down while the demon is crouching at the circuit breaker in the basement, deciding whether the light switch will work at all.

The term "target" is used as well in the list of demon abilities, meaning only the victim of an offensive power and having no special relation to these other terms.

Demon Types, cont.

❧ Object: abilities may confer either to host or to itself, per ability; does not need a host; is typically moved about by user, but can do so on its own (a bit; more with relevant abilities)

❧ Passer: abilities must confer to itself; does not need a host; controls only its own volition

Possessors

When it's in a host body, the Possessor is more-or-less trapped there. If it wants to get out, or if the host expels it somehow when it doesn't want to go, that's grounds for a conflict roll. Similarly, if it wants to get into a host and the host is willing, it just does, with no need for a roll, but if a host resists, then the dice must be used.

A sorcerer can in fact deal with a demon who is possessing his or her body, even as a mere "bit of consciousness." A sorcerer's bit of consciousness is no small thing, after all. Rituals are still possible, as are basic Will vs. Will commands.

When it's outside of a host, a Possessor demon loses a point of Power and requires a hit of its Need as quickly as possible. Also, at this point, the default demon "presence" applies in full. Therefore the Possessor outside of a host can be targeted normally, it can hit people normally, and can move normally.

How a Possessor demon gets in and out of a host depends on whether it has the ability Hop. If it does, then use the Hop rules. If it doesn't, then the demon cannot move directly from host to host, but must manifest outside the first host's body. To get into the new host, once having dealt with any problems along the way, either the host says "come on in" (i.e. there's no conflict) or again, an attack roll must be made just as it is made for the demon with Hop.

Demon abilities

A demon has abilities from the Demon Abilities list equal to its Lore, and each ability has dice equal to the demon's Power. The "user" must be defined for each ability taken (see above). The actual visual or otherwise-sensory aspect of every ability is set by the player and GM: it should be obvious and dramatic!

See Combat in Chapter Six to see how the demon's Stamina defines how often it may use its abilities. In these cases and in the specific uses of Stamina below, the demon's Stamina is the energy source, even if the user is someone else.

Greg Pryor

Demon abilities

If and when a person needs help in constructing a demon, it's always best to conduct a "what does it do" dialogue. As in, "Someone tries to sink a machete blade into it. What happens?" and, "Someone tries to sink a machete blade into your head. What does the demon do?" and most especially, "Your character is getting exactly what they want from life by using the demon. What is it doing?"

Answers to these and similar questions produce a list of abilities, usually a lot more than the player anticipated.

Type requirements

The use of "almost" in the text about Passers and Possessors is legacy from earlier drafts in which the demon ability rules were less refined, and should have been deleted in the final version.

The requirements for Cloak and Cover are inelegantly designed. Passer demons must have the Cover ability. It counts as one of the abilities accounted for by a demon's Lore score. Therefore a Passing demon has a number of abilities equalling its Lore, right and proper. But for some reason, although Inconspicuous demons must have the Cloak ability, it does not count as one of the abilities accounted for by a demon's Lore score. Therefore an Inconspicuous demon has a number of abilities equalling its Lore + 1.

I should have made Cloak obligatory for Inconspicuous demons and count against the total number of abilities permitted by Lore, identical to the current rule for Cover and Passer. To extend that idea, I might even do the same for Vitality/Parasite, Armor(self)/Object, and Taint/Possessor.

Demon Name

Demon Type

Telltale

General Appearance

Bound to:

Binding strength:

Sorcerer

Stamina _____

Will _____

Lore _____

Power _____

Desire:

Need:

Abilities

_____
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10

9

8

7

6

5

4

3

2

1

0

Demon scores

The easiest way to make up a demon is to choose the abilities, count them, use that value for Lore and Stamina, add one, and use that value for Will and Power. One might imagine a rash of demons with Stamina X, Will X + 1, Lore X, and Power X + 1, and in fact it's a reasonable default.

The funny thing is, although there is no quantitative benefit to be gained, players often do want their demons to be downsized in either Stamina or Lore, and specifically one but not the other. People like making demons which are more limited than they have to be in their range of abilities or resources.

So effectively we see two additional demon builds with distinct quantitative identities: Stamina X - Y, Will X + 1, Lore X, Power X + 1; and Stamina X, Will X + 1, Lore X - Y, Power X + 1.

One of the most extreme examples I've seen was a particularly toxic Passing-girlfriend demon named Snow, whose Need was "to be protected" and therefore endangered itself constantly – with a Stamina of 1. Somehow Snow survived through quite a few sessions.

It's useful to think of the demon's Stamina and Lore providing a "floor" for the Will value, which must be at least one higher than the higher of the two, and the Will providing a similar floor for Power, which must be at least equal to Will.

DEMON ABILITIES

ARMOR. The user converts damage victories equal to the demon's Power taken from edged or projectile weapons to the Fists damage table (see Combat below). This ability has no effect on actual fists damage or damage from heat, poison, gas, or anything besides edged or projectile weapons. It may be defined as actual solid armor, but it also works well to describe partially-insubstantial beings, or even a quick-regeneration factor.

BIG. The user becomes very large, anywhere from bear to mastodon-sized, and his or her Stamina is increased by the demon's Power for purposes of resisting damage and endurance only (not for attack or defense rolls). Without this ability, Passing or Inconspicuous demons may be dwarf-sized to largish-human-sized. A Parasite or Possessor, of course, is defined by the size of its host.

BOOST. The demon's Power is added to a given score of the target for one act (such as a single combat round, see Chapter Six). The score affected is chosen with taking the ability, so if one wanted a demon parasite to Boost, for example, Stamina and Lore, the demon would have to take two separate abilities. Boosting reduces the demon's Power to 1 while it is maintained, decreasing all of its other abilities accordingly. Also, receiving two Boosts of any kind in rapid succession results in the recipient being Confused as per the ability below. Boost cannot be combined with Ranged. Boost cannot be conferred; the demon is always the user.

CLOAK. The demon's Power is subtracted from the Perception dice of anyone who might perceive the user. Inconspicuous demons already have a passive Cloak operating on themselves for free; other demons must take it as an ability and state it as an action.

COMMAND. The user may control one general sort of nonhuman animal with a Will vs. Will roll. Most animals' Will score is 3 or 4. The number of individuals controllable at once equals the demon's Power (doubled for animals weighing under one kilogram); only one roll is required for all the individuals.

CONFUSE. The user matches the demon's Power against the target's Will to force target to lose his or her next action(s), either later in that round or in the next round, whichever applies (see Combat in Chapter Six). This ability is automatically Ranged.

Specific abilities rules

I'll deal with the single most problematic aspect of the demon ability rules right this moment. Take all mention of distances and weights and cross'em off. Make them gone.

Instead, consider that all the abilities operate at personal range, meaning, within the body-range of a normal adult human. Therefore if it's an attack, the user must to be able to reach a target as a human would, without a dedicated movement involved. Warp permits a modification of the material which a person could bring about given sufficient time and resources, removing the need for either. If the ability is communicative or perceptual, it operates within the range of human sensory capacity.

Some of the abilities may seem invalid for this concept, such as Armor, Shapeshift, or any other "alter self" feature, but it does in fact apply, for demons who confer such abilities to another user. The default range of conferral is the demon's communicative capacity.

The following abilities all modify that default "setting."

- Ranged, by definition, expands an ability's range from personal to perceptual. In other words, if the user can perceive the target in any way, than it can be affected by the ability. Ranged also applies to demon conferral of abilities. Another legitimate meaning of Ranged is to expand the scope of how many targets an ability can affect, again as defined by perception.

- Confuse and Daze do not have to take Ranged as an extra feature; they are the only abilities which are already Ranged.

- Travel expands the human scope of movement up to some specified level, whether "fast as a horse" to "fast as a jet" to "global teleport" to "interstellar" or even "interdimensional." Go ahead and set it as you see fit.

- Transport expands the human scope of practical burdens up to some specified level, again, as set for the ability. For this ability, Power may be added to the user's roll for any conflict which threatens the user's cargo.

- Perception as written has no specified range of any kind; it must be defined by the person constructing the demon. Like Travel, Perception covers a vast range of possible concepts, both in degree and in type. It can be defined downwards in scale from human capacity as well as up.

- Link remains as written, being a constant means of perception and limited communication regardless of distance.

Three things must be understood for this conceptual rules modification to work. First, notice that demon Power is no longer sets the scope of a given ability; its scope is set by the distinction between personal and perceptual, and that's it. Second, Perception becomes an incredibly important support ability for various applications of Ranged to other abilities. And third, sufficiently different specifications for a given ability require taking the ability more than once – particularly Perception.

---(cont.)

DEMON ABILITIES

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CONFUSE. The user matches the demon's Power against the target's Will to force target to lose his or her next action(s), either later in that round or in the next round, whichever applies (see Combat in Chapter Six). This ability is automatically Ranged.

Specific abilities rules, cont.

Some of the abilities imply duration: Warp, Taint, Shapeshift, Shadow, Daze, Command, and Hold. In each case, the duration of the effect must be defined by the special effects, during the process of creating the demon. None may be defined as permanent.

Ability Descriptions

Armor: This ability can keep a character from being killed, but it does not protect him, her, or it from being defeated. A lot of victories will knock the snot out of the character in the short term, Armor or no Armor, even if it's just for one action, which can mean a lot. Note the conceptual limitation for the kinds of attacks it protects against. Note also that any special effect is permitted for Armor, well beyond the perhaps-default notion of a hardened outer surface. I've see it defined as becoming briefly insubstantial, simply "eating" the force or damage being delivered, or atmospheric effects close to the character's body. Note that adding Ranged allows Armor to protect more than one character.

Big: No dice are rolled concerning this ability. It applies directly to the two tables used for the effects of physical damage, permitting the user to continue acting despite taking total penalties well beyond his, her, or its formal Stamina limits, as well as providing a substantial buffer for the permanent effects of damage. Big also expands the scope of demon's physical activity beyond human-personal default, to any specific level set by the person constructing the demon. It does require special effects to dramatize all of the listed mechanics effects, and these effects do require increasing the user's size.

Boost: exactly what its name says, and no more. Don't misread this to be a simple bonus; pay attention to the effect on the demon's Power, and the consequences such as its vulnerability to being Banished.

Command: one of the great under-used abilities. You may wonder how many critters can be commanded at once; in the interest of simple practicality and fun, I'll decree that one may command "a roomful" of them.

Confuse: This ability is extraordinarily powerful when coordinated with direct action toward one's goals. It mimics the mechanical effects of being struck hard enough to stop a person in his or her tracks, but its special effects can be defined much differently if desired. If it's used in tandem with a successful use of Cloak, the target may not even realize that the action was lost.

COVER. The user is proficient at any skills associated with a given profession or social status, using dice equal to the demon's Power. Possessor demons automatically have this ability.

DAZE. The user hits the target with a combat roll to subtract Power from all target's perception rolls; the effect lasts for the demon's Power in minutes. Note that the target is not blinded and needs no perception roll to deal with direct attacks or other obvious things. This ability is automatically Ranged.

FAST. The user uses the demon's Power instead of his or her own Stamina for determining actions in a combat round. (If the demon is the user, that's a +1 at least.) The user may include more activities in a combat action than is usually possible (see Combat in Chapter Six).

HINT. The demon rolls Power vs. the Will of the target, and if that is successful, the target rolls Humanity vs. the victories. Failure of the first roll means hallucinations (penalties = victories); failure of the second means terrible convulsions (lethal Special Damage = victories). Success on both rolls means the target's player may ask one Yes-No question of the GM and be answered truthfully. Hint has limiting returns: each successive attempt with the same demon will incur a cumulative −1 penalty, including unsuccessful instances. These penalties are permanent.

HOLD. Requires a regular attack roll; target can't change position unless he makes a Stamina vs. Power roll. A target may be hit by more than one separate Hold. A single Hold does not prevent actions besides shifting places, but a second Hold will prevent motions like shooting, hitting, or thrashing. The third immobilizes the target completely. Multiple Holds must be broken separately.

HOP. A Possessor demon with Hop may change hosts freely, leaving behind either a shaken but essentially okay host or a corpse (depending on the original Possessing roll). The demon does have to be in touching range, unless Range is taken; the Hop effect is visible and obvious unless Cloak is taken. Without this ability, a Possessor cannot leave a host until the host is physically killed. In either case, once separated, it suffers as if it were in Need until a new host is taken.

LINK. The demon and its master can know each other's whereabouts and gain some idea of what is happening around the other. They do not gain telepathic or empathic communication, with one exception: the sorcerer

Ability Descriptions, cont.

Daze: This ability differs from Cloak in being general, for all the target's perception rolls, rather than any directed toward the user's presence. It's subtly different in other ways too, as perception rolls only apply to situations in which perception itself can be construed as a conflict of interests. In other words, a Daze thrown upon a person who is encountering no such conflicts has no effect at all. Note that Cloak and Daze are cumulative in effect, if and when the different conditions for them apply simultaneously.

Fast: This ability has three effects, all of which may apply simultaneously.

- Speed of a given action is increased by the difference between the demon's Power and the character's relevant score. The best way to handle this is to include dice of a distinct color equal to that difference in the roll. Use those dice only for ordering purposes, not when comparing the roll to its opposition.

- The scope of an action can be increased, in terms of its range and targets, with "speed" being the special effect underlying the increase. Thus a gunman might shoot people on either side of him, treating both shots as a single attack with a single roll. In other words, Fast does not confer two distinct action rolls in a round, but it does allow a single action to affect multiple targets through the special effect.

- Certain auxiliary actions which do not encounter specific opposition, but would ordinarily have to be rolled as an action in order to establish timing, may be folded into their ultimate intended action. The most obvious example is readying and aiming a weapon, but the potential applications are legion.

    Hint: This ability works much better with two alterations and three clarifications. The first alteration is that it always works. Therefore the auxiliary rolls are merely side effects. To clarify those:

- If the user succeeds with the Will roll vs. the demon's Power, then he or she is fine.

- If the user fails that roll, then he or she hallucinates and incurs penalties to action much like Pychic Force, but without lasting damage; *and*

- … the user must roll Humanity vs. the victories of the first roll (i.e. newly-rolled dice equal to the number of victories, not the already-rolled dice); failure means taking lethal Special Damage according to the victories from that roll.

The second alteration is removing all that nonsense about permanent penalties. I have no idea what I was thinking; either Hint is a fun ability or it's not, and if it's not, making it ablative won't help it.

The first clarification is that Hint is a communicative ability, and hence subject to the demon's perceptual limits. With no special perception-enhancing abilities, the demon cannot answer questions outside the scope of ordinary human perception.

may command the demon to return immediately. Link only needs to be taken once.

MARK. The target rolls Humanity vs. the demon's Power; failure means anyone (or thing) with Lore of 1 or greater will thereafter perceive the individual as Marked, permanently. A sorcerer may remove a Mark by successfully rolling Lore vs. demon's Power. A Mark is not perceptible to individuals of Lore 0, including the target. (The act of Marking, of course, is obvious unless combined with Cloak.) Marks may be generic or individually recognizable, depending on the play group's definition of sorcery.

PERCEPTION. User adds the demon's Power to whatever score is being employed for perception. Exactly what is perceived must be defined at the outset. The effect can be aura reading, infrared vision, smell, or whatever, but not telepathy or "mind-sense" of any kind. Some categories include:
▼ enhanced normal senses: smell, sight into various spectra, ultra-keen hearing, etc. One version of this is body language reading: picking up intent to act a moment before it occurs
▼ altered scale of a sense: reading the pattern on a credit card strip, or the grain on a dollar bill (useful for demons with Warp)
▼ weird senses: knowing where to "go" when teleporting, or knowing where a requested item might be, or knowing of a person or demon who meets stated specifications

PROTECTION. The demon's Power in dice is added to user's defensive roll against damage from Psychic Force or one non-impact form of attack (for example, most of the versions of Special Damage below). The type of attack it protects against must be defined at the outset.

PSYCHIC FORCE. The user may use his or her Will as a ranged attack, doing damage on the Fists column. People without this ability defend with their own Will score; users defend with their Will or the demon's Power score, whichever is higher.

RANGED. One attack (some form of Special Damage, Hold, or Hop) can be made at a distance. The demon's Power sets how far the attack may go, in meters.

SHADOW. The user controls degree of illumination in the immediate area (about the size of a big room or small auditorium), which must be at least partly enclosed. Despite the name, Shadow allows light changes ranging

Ability Descriptions: Hint, cont.

The second clarification is that Hint does not consult the demon but rather elicits a GM-knowledge answer, as if the demon had opened a reality-bending door. Therefore the answer has nothing to do with the demon's knowledge, opinions, or personality.

The third clarification is that Hint, like Boost, cannot be conferred to another user, and also like Boost, must have a target external to the user (the demon). In other words, the demon cannot Hint to itself.

> **Protection:** Note how limited a single application of this ability is. There is no cheap "force field" in Sorcerer.

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- ▼ altered scale of a sense: reading the pattern on a credit card strip, or the grain on a dollar bill (useful for demons with Warp)
- ▼ weird senses: knowing where to "go" when teleporting, or knowing where a requested item might be, or knowing of a person or demon who meets stated specifications

Protection. The demon's Power in dice is added to user's defensive roll against damage from Psychic Force or one non-impact form of attack (for example, most of the versions of Special Damage below). The type of attack it protects against must be defined at the outset.

Psychic force. The user may use his or her Will as a ranged attack, doing damage on the Fists column. People without this ability defend with their own Will score; users defend with their Will or the demon's Power score, whichever is higher.

Ranged. One attack (some form of Special Damage, Hold, or Hop) can be made at a distance. The demon's Power sets how far the attack may go, in meters.

Shadow. The user controls degree of illumination in the immediate area (about the size of a big room or small auditorium), which must be at least partly enclosed. Despite the name, Shadow allows light changes ranging

Understanding Cover and Cloak

The baseline rule for a sorcerer perceiving a demon is his or her Lore against a single die, but that baseline is overruled by certain abilities. And since those abilities are obligatory for two demon Types, as well as frequently added to any given demon's repertoire, I need to clarify how they work.

The simplest case is posed by a Passer without Cloak, like Jewel in the character example in Chapter 2. The demon is noticeable in the same sense that any character is noticeable when present, and by definition, its appearance is normal. No one has to roll merely to see whether they notice the babe standing there. However, since it *is*, you know, a demon, its presence is inherently duplicitous for any sorcerer nearby, and hence a standing conflict, to be resolved through the sorcerer's Lore vs. the demon's Cover ability with dice equal to its Power.

Now consider a Passing demon with Cloak in addition to Cover. In this case, the thing is a walking double conflict of "hey everyone, don't notice me," and also, "hey sorcerer, don't realize what I am." Therefore two rolls are involved: the first for anyone the demon is trying not to be noticed by, and the second for a sorcerer who happens to have succeeded at the first. The first roll is against an oppositional die plus the demon's Power (Cloak), and the second is against the demon's Power (Cover).

To flip all of that around, now we look at an Inconspicuous demon, which necessarily has Cloak, but without Cover. That means that once revealed, it cannot possibly be mistaken for a human or anything else normal. In defining the demon in this way, the player is effectively saying that identifying this thing as a demon will never be a conflict. The only concern is whether anyone notices that it's present before it does something proactive (which by definition would drop the Cloak). Noticing it is therefore a conflict, perhaps even an inherent conflict when the demon is in a scene, given that other individuals are being disadvantaged by not knowing it's there. But identifying it as a demon, or at least as something quite awful and not normal, is not a conflict and requires no roll.

The roll to notice its presence is straightforward: the observer's Will against a generic oppositional die, plus the demon's Power.

Finally, consider an Inconspicuous demon with Cover in addition to Cloak. This is resolved similarly to the Passing demon with similar abilities described above.

from strong indirect sunlight to absolute blackness. The effect can be sustained for minutes equal to the demon's Power.

SHAPESHIFT. The user has another shape, which can be maintained for minutes equal to the demon's Power. The new shape may have its own special abilities, which may be bought separately. Shapeshift should not be confused with an inconspicuous demon becoming conspicuous to attack or do something directly, which can sometimes look similar.

SPAWN. The demon may produce new individuals. The Spawning demon must not be in Need when it produces one or more Spawn, it takes lethal Special Damage (victories = Spawn's Power) when it does so, and it will go into instant Need thereafter. The sum total of the Power of these Spawn is limited by the demon's Power; once there are existing Spawn whose Powers add up to the parent's, the parent may produce no more. An individual Spawn is technically an Inconspicuous demon. Its Stamina, Will, and Lore are set by its individual Power: Will = Power; Lore and Stamina both equal (Power − 1). A Spawn has abilities equal to its Lore, but it may only choose from the abilities that its parent has. It may be Contained, Punished, or Banished (which kills it), but not Summoned, Contacted, or Bound. It has Desire and Need identical to its parent demon.

SPECIAL DAMAGE. The user gains an attack which uses the Special Damage table (see Chapter Six). It must be defined as either relatively lethal or relatively non-lethal (see the Special Damage table). The user must still use the regular combat rules to hit a target. The attack must be defined, and unless Cloak is taken, the attack proceeds from some obvious action of the user. Some possible definitions follow:
▼ energy discharge (fire, lightning, sonics, etc)
▼ disease/rot
▼ body malfunction (convulsions, asphyxiation)
▼ claws and fangs (an old favorite)
▼ apparently normal weapons (knife, shotgun)
▼ poison (gas, fluid)
A possessor, inconspicuous, or passing demon has a natural Fists attack even without this ability, but parasites and objects do not.

TAINT. The target makes a Humanity check vs. the demon's Power; failure means loss of a Humanity point. The special effect includes physical as well as psychic malformation, with the details being left to the individual play group. Unlike real Humanity Loss, though, the Humanity will return in a few

No mind control

You will note that no human character can be simply "told what to do" via a demon ability. This feature of the game is flatly fixed in place. Taint can produce certain effects which do alter a character's behavior past a given player's control, but it does not establish genuine control in the puppet master or dominating sense.

Review the rules for influencing other characters through dice rolls in Chapter Two, and the application of those rules for commanding demons directly in Chapter Five. Various abilities are quite useful for affecting these rules, but no ability replaces them.

Ability Descriptions, cont.

Special Damage: So, where are the area rules for Special Damage? Apply the annotations for pages 52-53, and subject to that, the attack affects as many targets as its in-game manifestation allows. Most of the time, that will be one person unless Ranged is applied, but even an ordinary attack might hit several targets with one roll under some circumstances, for instance, if an electric-eel sort of ability is activated against more than one person grabbing the user.

This might seem nice and generous, but keep in mind that given Special Damage isn't customizable: once an expanding gas attack, always an expanding gas attack, for example. If you want flexibility, you'll have to take the ability more than once.

Taint: This needs a major alteration: drop the target's Humanity by the victories of the roll, not merely by 1. You may note that this is the single ability in the game which drastically alters a the target's behavior, because if a player-character's Humanity is temporarily reduced to 0, then he or she becomes the GM's character precisely according to the ordinary and otherwise permanent rules for Humanity loss. Also, for this ability, designated special effects are crucial. The ability may affect non-human targets such as animals, according to its special effects.

Des Jackson
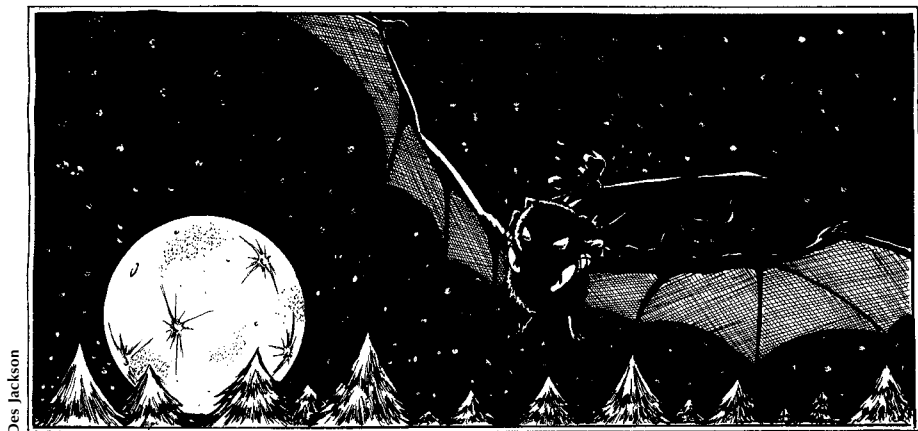
days. This ability is limited only to games where the players don't mind losing Humanity for reasons that aren't their fault, and are willing to role-play the effects, up to and including the temporary loss of their characters.

TRANSPORT. The user may carry others comfortably during movement, including Travel; the passengers' combined Stamina must not exceed the demon's Power.

TRAVEL. The user has the demon's Power as a multiple of normal human movement and can keep going without a break for its Stamina in hours. Travel may be defined as flight, teleportation, or any other mode of travel permitted by the GM. A demon without Travel has the speed and endurance capabilities of a human with its Stamina rating, although how it moves is left up to the player. If its movement abilities give it special plot capabilities, though, it needs to have Travel. Note that Object demons may have Travel too. Travel falls into several categories:

▼ simply a faster or slightly improved version of normal human-type movement
▼ "unnatural" movement: running on water or air, for example, or flying
▼ totally weird stuff, like teleporting or dimension-walking (if you have dimensions in your game).

Given a weird form of Travel, Perception is almost certainly required, defined as the demon seeing where it is going.

VITALITY. Dice of lasting damage (see Combat below) up to the demon's Power are removed when the user takes a rest following combat, as opposed to half the damage. Vitality also confers resistance to aging, but not total immunity.

Ability Descriptions, cont.

Vitality: This ability offers no protection against initial damage, but rather permits a character to live through otherwise-lethal harm, if the demon's Power is high enough. Note that this is not an additive ability like Big or Boost; it is more like Fast, in that it's effective insofar as Power exceeds the thing being modified.

> **WARP.** The user may alter the shape of unliving material, up to its Power in kilograms squared. It will not animate material but simply give it a new shape. The effect lasts for one hour per point of Power. If any damage is to be done by this act, then the demon must also have Special Damage; if any feature of the warped object is enhanced or strengthened, it must have Boost; it must be able to perceive the level at which it is Warping, which may require Perception. Perfect for instant doors, leaving messages engraved in walls, or making simple weapons in a pinch.

Desire

Every demon has a special interest and it will urge its master into situations that give it a chance to indulge. A demon frustrated in its Desire may well become cranky and start to rebel.

Example Desires:
- ▼ **Mayhem**. Explosions, running gunfights, brawls in redneck bars, nuclear war.
- ▼ **Mischief**. The more confused everyone is, the better.
- ▼ **Corruption**. Any activity can be subverted into a dysfunctional version.
- ▼ **Power**. Controlling others is what it's all about.
- ▼ **Sensual gratification**. Mmm good, either in a specific way or a little of everything.
- ▼ **Creation/artistry**. Whatever it is, it'll look good and make sense.
- ▼ **Knowledge**. There's nothing in the world that can't be figured out.
- ▼ **Competition**. Let's find out who's better, and these are the rules.

Needs

Every demon has a Need to do or get something. Binding (see below) gives the sorcerer responsibility to help or allow the demon to meet its Need; failing to offer this incentive in a Binding contract will confer a five-die penalty to the sorcerer's roll. A Bound demon gains a bonus die to its rebellion rolls for every week or so that its Need goes unmet. If a Need is being unmet, the demon will suffer badly, as described in the Rule of Need below.

A Need may be fulfilled by the demon actually doing something, or maybe it just has to be present while something is done. Needs often reflect the demons' Desires,

> **Master likes Larry! Master feeds Larry!**
> —Ralph Bakshi, Wizards

but they don't have to; for example, familiar demons may merely have to drink their masters' blood with their Desires varying widely. Sometimes the

Ability Descriptions, cont.

Warp: The extent of Warp should be conceived in terms of human possibility. A person can in fact excavate a person-sized tunnel through marble and concrete, given tools and time – so Warp can do it as an action. A person cannot drill to the center of the earth given tools and time, so Warp cannot do it. Also, for some reason players often miss the non-living stipulation in the rule, thinking that this is the big "mold flesh" ability, so clarify it if necessary.

Ability activation and fatigue

I'm inserting this material here to lay the foundation for the applied points in later chapters.

All demon abilities are ready for action, meaning that armor and similarly responsive abilities don't have to be "turned on" in any way.

The best way to conceive of a demon "using" an ability is "involved in a roll." In other words, a demon might have its Cloak up and therefore not be immediately visible to anyone, but unless that's part of a conflict requiring dice, it's not counted as "use" in terms of Stamina limits. Therefore quite a bit of demon activity may not require any resource-based thinking at all – but when the dice come out, especially for a lot of abilities and a lot of rolling, don't miss it, either.

Uses during conflicts stress the demon's existence. The demon's Stamina is not drained, but Stamina sets the limit for when blanket penalties, similar to injury, affect the demon's actions. In order to avoid tedious book-keeping and to stay consistent with the narrative rather than simulative logic of the game, think in terms of scenes and conflicts rather than absolute in-game time.

For a given instance of the demon actively using its abilities, it's effectively brought to one of three states:

- The demon has used abilities, in any combination, less times than its Stamina score. This may be thought of as "running smooth," without stress.
- When the uses add up to its Stamina score, the demon desperately wants its Need.
- If the demon uses its abilities beyond this point, it accumulates universal penalties for its rolls at a 1:1 ratio to the number of uses.

It's all right to be a bit approximate with the numbers.

If two or more abilities operate together to produce a particular special effect, then they may be used in tandem. They are rolled simultaneously in separate pools and ordered according to the lower of the two results, and opposed separately for each pool. Depending on the special effects, the abilities may be defined as either permanently tied together for use or separable when desired.

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but they don't have to; for example, familiar demons may merely have to drink their masters' blood with their Desires varying widely. Sometimes the

Ability activation and fatigue, cont.

The possible combinations are insanely numerous and varied, including fabulous applications of Perception, Travel, and Transport; terrifying attacks combining Psychic Force or Confuse with other abilities; and so on and on. I especially recommend Shadow as an under-appreciated support ability.

Tandem abilities do move the demon toward its Stamina limits more swiftly, as it burns more "uses" per action.

Desire and Need

A demon's Desire is chosen from the fixed list in the rules, or any fixed list established by the group for a given setting. It is always a single word, and it is not associated with any specific thing, place, or action. The demon does not **crave** its Desire in a drug-sense. It **likes** its Desire and thinks the whole world ought to tend that way, and might need a little help to get there. If the demon is a conversational type, then it will always bring a dialogue around to its Desire somehow. Whether it does the Desire itself, influences others to do it, or simply wants to be around that particular Desire in action, is up to the demon at the moment, is a matter of capability and opportunity.

Its Need, by contrast, is indeed a craving for a specific thing or an action, which is made up for a given demon during the mechanical creation process (i.e. there is never a canonical list of Needs). There is no ambiguity, ever, about whether the demon received its Need and when the last time was. The demon may like its Need, hate it, or regard it as a physiological necessity. What matters is that it's literally addicted to it and cannot satisfy it without help.

Desire is ideology, personality, taste, and preference. Need is addiction, payment, and power.

A demon whose master contributes toward it being able to enjoy (perform, witness, influence, etc) its Desire will be a happier demon. Such happiness may influence its actions in any number of ways. However, neither (i) Binding strength nor (ii) formally proceeding down the path of rebellion is **directly** affected by the demon's master's actions toward its Desire, whereas both of these things **are** directly affected by the master failing to provide the demon with its Need, or by going to great pains to provide it with its Need.

connection is a little oblique; a mayhem-Desiring demon may have a Need to gamble. The GM should make sure that demons' Needs are not just silly.

Needs may vary extremely widely and are left to the play group's imagination, but the GM may use the following guidelines to tell players what sort of Needs are appropriate. This can go a long way to assure that your SORCERER game has its own distinctive identity.

- ▼ **Gross and savage**. Eat small animals, drink human blood
- ▼ **Annoying**. Sing loudly, overtly come on to possible sexual partners, start fights, disassemble household appliances
- ▼ **Plot movers**. Make bets, follow the news, hack into the internet, follow people, eat other demons (the dreaded Feeder variant)
- ▼ **Trivial**. Get ears scratched, stay clean, meditate regularly

ROLE-PLAYING DEMONS

What are they?

Demon is one of the "open concepts" of SORCERER, meaning that its fundamental definition is left entirely up to the individual role-playing group (the other one is **Humanity**). Whether the GM has decided and decreed for the players, or whether each player comes up with something

> "My name is Azhrarn, Prince of Demons," said the stranger, and at the words, the two thousand candles flickered and went out.
> —Tanith Lee, Night's Master

individually, no matter what, these rules do not provide a specific answer. Chapter Four is all about how to produce that answer yourself.

Playtesting has shown that any and all of the following can be successfully used to define demons across various instances of play:

- ▼ Actual denizens of afterlife punishment, determined to bring as many mortal souls to them as possible
- ▼ Fighter-jet space-ships with hyper-sophisticated, artificial-intelligence mechanical minds
- ▼ Projections of the sorcerer's unconscious desires and hidden traumas
- ▼ Residues of powerful emotions, clinging to objects and places long after the person who produced them is gone
- ▼ Products or leftovers of instances of powerful transgression
- ▼ Golems manufactured from giant plexiglass vats
- ▼ Hybrids of unthinking, formless chaos with instances of material reality (e.g. a person, place, or thing)
- ▼ The spirits of the dead
- ▼ Nodes or coalescences of technological energy, like electricity and nuclear fission, taking on independent life

I have no doubt that your own role-playing group can generate an idea at least as interesting as any of these, or take one of them and add to it a unique spin. The following section presents some general concepts that apply equally well across all of these different definitions.

The Three Rules

All demons share three concerns: the Rule of Binding, the Rule of Need, and the Rule of Secrecy. All demons get a 5-dice bonus to refuse commands that contradict these concerns.

The Rule of Binding: if they are present in (Summoned to) reality but are not Bound, they will start to shrivel up and eventually will be automatically Banished (see Chapter Five for details about sorcerous rituals like Summoning and Binding).

The Rule of Need: if they are in Need (see below), they will react the same way, basically starving to death, or rather, to Banishment. And if the demon is a Possessor or a Parasite (see Demon Type, page 48), it will suffer in just the same way if it does not have a host.

An unbound demon, a demon without its Need, and a Parasite or Possessor without a host will lose 1 Power per day until it is down to zero, in which case it must start making Will rolls to use any dice (much like a character reduced to 0 Stamina; see Damage, in Chapter Six). At that point it will lose 1 Stamina per day unless it rolls its Power successfully vs. its original Stamina. Once its Stamina hits 0, the demon is automatically Banished. These effects are cumulative: an unbound, unhosted Parasite in Need will lose 3 Power per day and then 3 Stamina per day.

The Rule of Secrecy: no demon will tolerate a command to appear or use its abilities in a way that seriously risks widespread knowledge of its existence.

As explained above, demons, not their masters, ultimately control demon abilities. Either they are the "user" of the ability, meaning that they control them completely, or someone else is the user, in which case the demon still has control over whether the user can have the ability in the first place. At times they will refuse to use or to confer their powers. They should be played as characters, including most notably (1) the ability to lie and (2) perfect freedom of movement and communication within their definitions.

So individual demons' attitudes are very important if SORCERER is going to work. Demons have relationships with one another, especially if they're bound to the same master, and they care about things, especially their Desires (see above). Their dialogue and assertions will more than anything

Preparing for demon behavior and actions

Let's check out Harry's gun demon Woo as a full example. It looks like a boring utility object, and it's not particularly big or interestingly-built in mechanics terms. But even with the minimal information provided, there's a lot there to work with and a lot of GM role-playing to look forward to.

1. Consider its Desire in relation to Harry's Price: it must currently be loving the corruption building up on him through the job, even as he is finding it more and more burdensome.

2. It did give Harry trouble on his last assignment – they had some kind of disagreement. And Stephanie helped him control it. What was that last assignment? What did Woo refuse to do, or want to do instead of what Harry wanted?

3. So what is its immediate opinion of Stephanie? Did it know her already? Was she as much of a surprise to Woo as she was to Harry?

Because the Kicker as written did not provide many details, the GM has tons of latitude to arrive at answers for these questions. However, since another player-character is involved, answering them does require looking at Stephanie's diagram and whatever degree of detail that player provided as well.

Preparing through these questions feeds directly into playing Woo as a character rather than a prop, specifically, its opinion of whatever Harry does in response to the assignment to sanction (i.e. kill) Stephanie. Woo is not a complicated demon, but it does find itself in a conflicted situation: it is bound to Harry and relies on him for blood, but if Harry gets disgruntled rather than corrupted, Woo will face problems down the road. In some ways, its Desire is coming into conflict with its Need. Will it become more loyal to Harry in terms of his own personal goals and interests, or less? That will depend a lot on what Harry does next, but you can bet it will go one way or the other.

All of this is still diagram-work. What we're doing here is deepening the diagram into genuine preparation to play the demon. It's obviously closely related to the GM's responsibility to arrive exactly at the details of the new assignment, and anything needed to know or establish about Stephanie.

But what can Woo do? It's just a gun, right? Actually, it has all the scope for movement, action, and communication that a human would have; all the GM has to do is color such activity via its fictional presence as a gun. When it moves, it does so without anyone noticing, because that what objects *seem* to do – and therefore it's what Woo actually *can* do. More directly, it can suddenly be too heavy to pick up, i.e., at the weight of an entire person, using its Stamina score if necessary. It can indeed hurt people autonomously using a Fists attack which is *colored* as "accidental" gunfire. And although talking at it would seem as weird as talking to any inanimate object, it does in fact perceive human communication normally, and it can communicate back in any way the player has conceived it to do, back when it was created.

else set the tone of the story. If these details are attended to along with the guidelines for customizing your own game (see Chapter Four) and the subtleties of Binding (see Chapter Five), the opportunities for role-playing and storytelling will multiply.

EXAMPLE DEMONS

Ruatt

TYPE: Inconspicuous, DESIRE: Sensation, NEED: To kill and eat

Stamina 6, Will 7, Lore 6, Power 7

ABILITIES: Shadow (confers to self), Special Damage (rending teeth, self), Hold (self), Perceive (genuine impending danger to master, confers to self), Protection (confers to master), Armor (confers to master)

TELLTALE: Incongruent illumination around or near its master, once in a while

The story: Most of the time, Ruatt is only ocasionally glimpsed as a man standing in the shadows or stepping away around a corner, near its master. A good hard look at it will discern arching or strut-like shapes in the shadows behind it. But if the master is physically threatened, Ruatt goes into action: the humanoid shape vanishes, the air fills with these criss-crossing horrible limbs or struts, with a central mass that splits into a fanged maw. It is very, very hungry, all the time. But the fun part is that it wants very much to be of service, and it won't eat anyone or anything that is not threatening its master … so that means its master has to get into fights and threatening situations just so Ruatt can eat.

Failure to keep it fed will drop the Binding strength by 1 die per missed week (if the master had the advantage) or increase by 1 die per missed week (if it had the advantage). The moral is, there ain't no such thing as a utility demon.

Monicus

TYPE: Object (circular pendant), DESIRE: Power, NEED: Instances of raw dominance and power-tripping

Stamina 6, Will 10, Lore 9, Power 10

FREQUENTLY-USED ABILITIES: Protection (confers to wearer), Boost Lore

OTHER ABILITIES: Cloak, Perceive (emotions), 6 others of GM's choice

TELLTALE: Really cool rune etched into the flat outer face

The story: What we have here is a really, really powerful demon pretending to be a tiny, wimpy, obedient little demon. It acts as if it has Power 3 and just two little, basic abilities, and it will be quite nice about using them (at Power

Example demons

All of these examples are strange to read at this late date. Although I quite like the cleverness and perversity of the concepts, and they do illustrate some neat special effects for certain abilities, I cannot tell you why I saw fit to mess around so much with character knowledge, which is definitely not a required feature of demon construction. I don't think I've ever used such unpleasantly tricky concepts in actual play.

For people playing the game for the first time, be ready to see some extremely common initial concepts, including the mobile tattoo, the black longsword, and the girlfriend-babe. I've seen all of them many times and am convinced they are a necessary catharsis for many players; therefore, I embrace them rather than reject them as clichés.

3) for its master's benefit at all times. However, a quick look at its real numbers shows it's one of the bigger demonic heavies out there.

The Cloak ability permits Monicus to use its abilities in non-obvious ways. Its real activities, that is, its use of its other abilities, and for whose benefit, and when, depends on the Binding roll and on how well its master takes advantage of opportunities to gain power over others. If the master turns out to be a wimp, Monicus will quickly find a way to get him or her subjugated to someone else, and then transfer allegiance to that person. If the master turns out to be a ruthless and successful user, then it may reveal its greater abilities and to some extent its goals.

Doppelganger
(The demon has the same name as a player-character, hereafter called the "model")

TYPE: Passer, DESIRE: Knowledge (self), NEED: acts of random aggression
Stamina (equal to the model's), Will (Stamina +1), Lore (equal to Stamina), Power (equal to Will)
TELLTALE: Fingernails and toenails grow into claws, requiring frequent trimming.
ABILITIES (pick from this list, in order, a number equal to Lore): Cover (same as model's Cover), Daze (useful for creating uncertainty as to which is which, demon or model), Hint, Perception (of where model is, or "smelling" where he or she has been), Vitality, Fast (thus having a combat advantage over the model), Special Damage (anything nasty)

The story: This demon is a doppelganger, a duplicate of a player-character, presumably summoned up by an enemy sorcerer, or with any other origin that fits the GM's notions about sorcery. Therefore its numbers and abilities depend on the model's, and are left up to the GM based on the guidelines above. For its name, use a modified version of the model's, e.g. Charlie if the model goes by Chuck, Bart if he goes by Bartholomew, or maybe using the model's middle name, and so on. The especially fun thing, though, is that the demon is curious about its "self" and is willing to disobey its master in many ways. For instance, it will interact with the model to learn about its "life." Or it might be initially convinced that it is indeed the "real" character.

Li'l [insert master's name here]
TYPE: Inconspicuous, DESIRE: Corruption, NEED: Praise
Stamina 4, Will 5, Lore 4, Power 5

Closing Words

One of my phrases that has helped many people play the game, and has probably confounded as least as many more is, "Demons do not exist." By this, I mean that in the fictional setting, there is no demonic realm or established metaphysical role for the demons. They are not themselves part of that setting – instead, their presence in the story violates the fictional setting just as much as a real person actually summoning a demon, in our own real world, would violate it.

---(cont.)

ABILITIES: Hint, Boost Lore, Protection (confer to master); also, unknown to master, Perception (master's nightmares, confers to self), Perception (master's nightmares, confers to master)
TELLTALE: Master is impeccably groomed.

The story: This nasty little demon-guy is a perfect duplicate of its master, only about 9 inches tall. It passes itself off as "just a little demon," with its advice-oriented abilities and minor protective powers; it only uses these at Power 3 except for emergencies. But its hidden abilities are truly wicked: it can see its master's nightmares and then reinforce them. Its goal? To push its master, through induced fear and stress, into more extreme acts of sorcery.

Closing Words, cont.

Therefore the setting for any Sorcerer game should not include any fixed explanation for the demons which can be referenced outside the fiction. It shouldn't have any such thing. They should be metaphysically abominable, incomprehensible, in such a way that any in-fiction belief system that accounts for them is merely itself part of the fiction. The creative perspective must not comfortably include a niche for demons, some kind of alternate dimension or anything like that. Even the in-fiction appearance of such a thing, or if the demons talk as if there is such a thing, does not mean it's the case.

I'll round it off with the related point that everything above doesn't mean the demons are psionically made up out of nothing by the sorcerers, either. That's a cop-out over-rationalization too. Instead, they are always Other. Not. Utterly impossible. Understanding this does matter.

Another useful phrase is, "I play all demons as Toons." What I mean by that is, demons are not people, but rather *caricatures* of personality traits, value systems, various visual and behavioral signals, and needs. Friendly or unfriendly, obsequious or arrogant, grotesque or operatically cool, or whatever two extremes you want to draw a spectrum between, a demon cannot function like a person. Cute or savage, silent or voluble, straightforward or mysterious, a demon is fundamentally two-dimensional, operating wholly mechanically among the following variables.

- ❦ Desire: its religion, political ideology, and favorite hobby all rolled into one. The demon likes and enjoys its Desire, and it will try to perform the Desire, to observe it in action, or to influence others to do it too.
- ❦ Need: its addiction, which can be met but cannot be satisfied. It relies wholly on a sorcerer to make sure its Need is coming.
- ❦ The Binding strength, derived from the initial Binding roll, and which side it favors. All demon-Binder relationships are founded on one or the other exploiting an advantage, not on mutualism, nor on any genuine friendship, loyalty, or love. The demon knows this. The sorcerer forgets it to his or her peril.

The net effect is less than human, like a doll pretending that it is human, or a person so reduced by mental illness or drug dependency that his or her thoughts cannot stray from these tracks. Playing such a thing is actually a barrel of fun, as its capacity for loyalty and commitment approaches sainthood until you realize it's predicated on receiving exactly what it wants, and its capacity for injecting chaos or bizarreness truly has no low point, like the sidekick character Dr. Gonzo in the novel *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas.*

It is this very sense of oh-my-God, what-next fun which provides the platform for the practical applications described in Chapter 5.

M. Wayne Miller

Chapter Four:

PLAYING SORCERER

CUSTOMIZING

The SORCERER rules require some fleshing out by both the GM and players. Without this effort, the demons, for example, would be totally individualized, without any relationships between them or general goals. Sorcery itself would be pretty much unique to each sorcerer, one of them programming summoning rituals into computers and another one sacrificing cats in a big cauldron. The villains would just be whatever happens to threaten the characters at any moment.

This chapter is about making something more of it, but strictly on your terms. This rulebook is deliberately written to be a tool for you, not a great big sourcebook full of history, cool characters, and plots. In my opinion, many such products are an excuse to publish fiction disguised as a game and end up cheating the customers out of the chance to build something of their own. (However, if you want to get an idea of how one GM used the SORCERER rules, check out Chapter Seven.)

"I've put myself on the slab. I think that's part of the nature of a good game of Sorcerer."

-- Christopher

This chapter was a serious struggle. I can see that same struggle in the texts of the three main influences (*Prince Valiant*, *Over the Edge*, *Zero*) too, and also that I only made it a little further. There exists, I think, a historical swamp in role-playing as a hobby, to some extent in play and to a very great extent in its texts, which might be called the "whose story is it anyway" swamp. The question can be answered in play in many ways, but the swamp part is not knowing how actually to ask it or to answer it at all.

The chapter concerns the transition from the end of character creation, as manifested in the diagrams, to the activities of the first session of play, with the all-important step of transitional preparation between them. You may note that unlike many games, Sorcerer is not prepped prior to character creation, nor wholly after it. Instead, it's prepped lightly prior to making characters, and more thoroughly afterwards.

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┌─────────────────────────────┐        ┌───────────────────────────────┐
│ 1. Introductory Discussion  │        │ 4. Preparation & Initial Play  │
│    The Two Statements       │        │    Bangs                       │
│  ┌───────────────────────┐  │ Diagrams│  ┌─────────────────────────┐  │
│  │ 2. Make Characters    │  │ ──────▶ │  │ 5. Sorcery              │  │
│  │    Kickers            │  │        │  │ 6. Conflicts of All Sorts│ │
│  │ 3. Make Demons        │  │        │  └─────────────────────────┘  │
│  │    Desires & Needs    │  │        └───────────────────────────────┘
│  └───────────────────────┘  │                      │
└─────────────────────────────┘                      ▼
                                        Emergent Story & Setting
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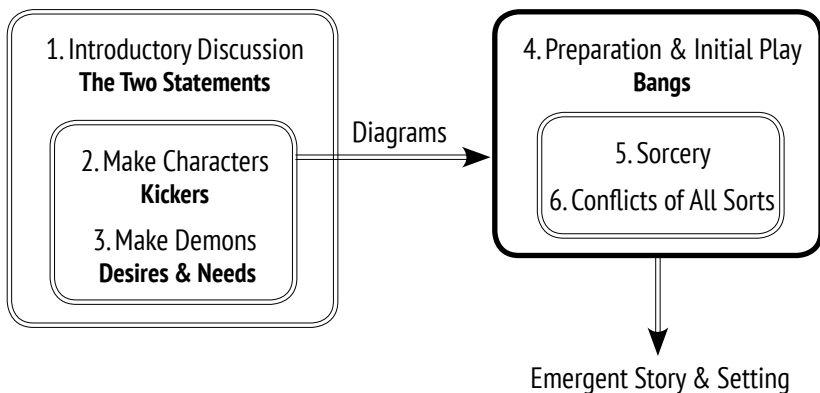
During this transition, the diagrams' content is now transferred wholly to the authority of its primary creators, the players, to the GM as the source of pacing and adversity during play. And yet another sort of authority must now be acknowledged in full during play, specifically that of the players to state actions and dialogue for their characters fully freely, with consequences that override – in fact, replace – any "story" authority that would in other games be firmly held by the GM.

Customizing

It starts well. The opening text of the chapter sure isn't kidding. The order of Humanity, Color, and Tone is actually exactly what I mean, and I mean it as rules, not filler. The good news is that the original two statements have done most of the work already.

Humanity

The strictly game-oriented purpose of Humanity in the SORCERER rules is a form of role-playing balance – it's a reward and punishment system to enforce certain standards of play. However, like all reward systems, it gives rise to a value system during play. That is, it really matters for a GM to think about just what behaviors lead to Humanity checks (which may drop a point) or Humanity gain rolls (which may add a point).

The GM should give some thought to this issue and arrive at some personal standards. It may be that Humanity for his or her game can be given a more specific definition. Some immediate examples might be sanity, salvation, or social responsibility, but again, this decision belongs to an individual play group and cannot be picked off the rack from a list in the game-book. It is literally the most influential design consideration in customizing SORCERER.

The supplement THE SORCERER'S SOUL is entirely devoted to the advanced use of Humanity in all aspects of role-playing, from demon design to character development to scenario preparation. Full guidelines are provided for customizing Humanity precisely, subtle interactions with Parasite and Possessor demons, transforming from human to demon or vice versa, mating with demons, demon children, the "soul" in the religious sense, angels, and the role of morality in designing role-playing scenarios.

Sorcerers

What does sorcery actually look like? It's all up to you: puffs of brimstone vapor, wild hallucinatory visual effects, claws ripping through the "fabric of reality" (whatever that is), and so on. You might want to play it gory or go with subtle changes in color and visual focus. Don't forget sound! Sam Raimi's films develop their impact almost exclusively through sound effects. Both players and GM can contribute to defining this very important aspect of a SORCERER game.

Think about what Lore actually represents. It is not recommended to permit "natural" sorcery, so that characters start accidentally summoning demons and have all sorts of angst about how they didn't mean it. Sorcery is all about meaning it – and meaning it for real. So is Lore knowledge of biblical history, including languages like Coptic and Aramaic? Or is it rather a healthy backing in modern chaos theory? Can sorcerous rituals be done in any language, or should they be in Arabic, or in some hideous pre-human dialect that makes listeners' ears bleed? If two characters with high Lore meet, are there certain books or personages they should both know about? Even one detail along these lines goes a long way. It especially helps high-

Customizing, cont.

Humanity – yes, a definition is important, but don't get bogged down. First, a written definition is good, but don't treat it as a legal document, merely as a door opening up judgment calls of your own. You might not even need such a definition, relying instead only on intuitive applications of the original two statements. I've found that some folks work better with a verbal articulation right at the start, and others work better with a "feel it out and see" approach. Unfortunately I do well with either, so I can't really recommend one way as the right one.

Second, "That's how they see it in the setting" is not a sufficient explanation for Humanity. The touchstone for Humanity checks and gain rolls is never anything more nor less than the GM's personal sense of right and wrong, and to the extent that the group interacts about it, that sense as it exists among all the people playing. That sense may be nuanced or focused by the fictional setting, but the fictional setting cannot replace the real-world, real-person's role.

I do know that if you cannot give an example of what constitutes a meaty and necessary Humanity Check during play, then you're not ready. Doing so doesn't even mean that you fully know why it would be a good example. Nor does this one example have to nail down all conceptual corners of any Checks to come. All that matters is that you can do it this once.

Sincerity and the "shudder"

Let's say, for sake of discussion, that you and I agree that "demons" in the common superstition/religion sense of the word do not exist in real life. That they are pure metaphor for something that is itself very real, very troubling, and instantly mentally-accessible to nearly any human being. So when I say "my game is about summoning and commanding demons," and I provide some suggestion for the fictional context we'll use, two reactions can ensue. The trivial one is to pop the whole issue into Hollywood and turn it into some adolescent, bogus thing. The meaty one is to shudder. Just to shudder.

The person who shudders is the one who can play Sorcerer. My question, embodied in the game as a whole, asked in all seriousness and with great personal empathy, is, What are you shuddering about? That question asks about real people in the real world. And its answer is supposed to be the core of defining "demon," defining the game term Humanity, setting parameters for sorcerous rituals, and defining the descriptors for character-creation during play.

The scary point is that whatever it is you're reacting to, there are people who see no way out except to embrace it. This person must want something, and consider it justified. And the scary point under that is that there exists, infinitesimally, the chance for heroism arising from that state, with a very, very high price to pay for the more-common result of failure. We are talking about existential trauma and deep-psychology horror in the context of an emotionally-engaging, utterly unavoidable conflict.

---(cont.)

Gary Simpson

Lore beginning characters, who usually have a disadvantage in terms of Humanity.

Another issue is, who are the NPC sorcerers out there, anyway? Imagine a Convocation, a meeting of nearly every sorcerer in the world. What would it be like? Where would it be? Would it be a bunch of middle-aged white guys, or a cross-section of every culture? How would they act toward one another, and what sort of issues could have prompted such a meeting? Are they all of the same school of thought or are they divided into completely different philosophical and ethical traditions?

Demons and what they want

The SORCERER GM roleplays the player-characters' Bound demons. He or she must stay on top of this issue every single run: how hungry is Zack getting for his Need? How did Amy treat her demon last time she told it to fight? Did Snaggle get some credit for helping to figure out the problem? In order to run the demons effectively, the GM should develop his or her personal concept of what they're like.

What do demons look like? You could let them all be completely individualized, or you might want to standardize, at least for some specific kinds. Some starting ideas are listed, and add to it all you want. Of course, Passers and Possessors look reasonably normal most of the time, but the

Sincerity and the "shudder," cont.

One last thing: the shudder is not defined by disgust, but most importantly, by attraction. Here is the initial handout for one of the harshest Sorcerer games I've ever run:

SORCERER

Modern day, right here and right now

Humanity = justice

Conceptual constraint on protagonists: "live by the gun." Don't care what capacity, don't care what motivation. Characters are people who have relied upon their ability and willingness to shoot others for a long time.

Look & feel: not cinematic. This is not cool. There is no posing. Do not act all gangsta. Do not bore the rest of us.

This is not Blood Opera. This is not Dust Devils. This is not Unknown Armies. This is not a game. I am not playing.

Use the Descriptor lists in the core book.

Sorcery = Attunement to "how things are," through ritualized and repeated confirmations of how your killing started.

Demons = Environmental manifestations of any sort. All demon types are permitted. Minor surrealism accompanies their presence and activity.

The ability Special Damage is not used, and also waive the default damage capacity. In other words, demons themselves cannot physically hurt anyone.

Demons do not exist. Your character has Bound a demon.

Important concept: your character may have acquired the demon long ago or very recently; choose this detail carefully.

Kicker = emphasize the "today is the first day of the rest of your life" aspect of Kickers – after this, your protagonist really will be a new person.

Here are some quotes I included (used without permission):

Happiness is a warm gun (bang, bang, shoot, shoot)
Happiness is a warm gun, mama (bang, bang, shoot, shoot)
*When I **hold you** in my arms*
*And I feel **my** finger on **your** trigger*

---(cont.)

---

standards you set would apply even to them at least for the moment they're summoned, and also might be an important part of their Telltales.

▼ wild hallucinatory effects in human-shaped outlines
▼ beautiful humans but eerie and corrupt
▼ beastlike, bad-mannered
▼ composite human and several animals
▼ goblin-imp grotesque humanoids
▼ elemental: weather/fire effects, e.g.
▼ slimy tentacular blobby icky things with big fangs
▼ scraping and screaming noises in the background

Demonic Telltales don't have to be automatic giveaways. If not, then a certain enjoyable paranoia is induced as players realize they can never know for sure if someone is a demon. It's a lot of fun for the GM as they begin to suspect even the house plants of being Passing demons.

Even if you do go with completely individualized demonic forms, though, demons in your game should have a distinctive, recognizable naming convention that matches with the atmosphere of the story being told. Slangy, short names like Scatch, Bump, Ranth, Spike, or Fitz give the game a hip, modern feel. You might want to go more gothic or medieval, in which case Latin would be best, or biblical, which would call for Greek names. In a techno-sorcery game, demons' names might be their serial numbers. Give some thought to this; it's one of the most important ways you create a shared environment for your group.

The GM may want to specify or limit the kinds of abilities demons have in the game, depending on the kind of storyline intended. Some demon abilities require the individual GM touch, like Vitality. How exactly does it prolong life, and how long relative to the demon's Power? Do demons with this ability have a specific Need? Also, making up new demon abilities is a good idea because it will scare players who confidently memorize the rules.

Conceivably there could be breeds of demons who share types, abilities, Needs, and other details. The GM could decree, for example, that all player-characters must begin with a familiar: an animal-Possessor demon with Link, perhaps Boost Lore, and the Need to drink the sorcerer's blood. Or a set of beautiful demons who love mayhem could be a special chaos breed. Over time, a whole taxonomy of demonics could develop unique to your group. GMs who want to get certain demonic elements (Desires, Needs, abilities) into the game should hook them to things that the players want.

And how are the demon Types going to be characterized, and how should they differ? For example, you may want to play Possessors as manic,

(quotes cont.)

*I know **no one** can do me **no** harm*
*Because **happiness is a warm gun**, mama*

-- Lennon/McCartney, "Happiness is a Warm Gun"

Every last soul must pay the last toll
In the dice game of life, who gets the last roll?
Is it the one with the suit? The one with the sack?
The one who hides behind his fuckin' gun and his badge?
Negative outlook? Well that's how I'm livin'
And like he said, it's a wicked world we live in
It's a wicked world we live in

I'm wiggin out, flippin' out, hearts is what I'm rippin' out
I'm slippin' out, I'm dippin' out, killin's what I'm livin' out
Pick 'em, let me pick 'em out, spin and let me whip it out
Gat to your face with the fuckin' bullets stickin' out

-- Transplants, "Diamonds and Guns"

Sociobiologists predict that animals that are poorly equipped for aggression are unlikely
to have developed surrender signals. Man, they say, is one of these creatures. But we
developed technology, including a technology of destruction, and this technology "evolved"
much too quickly for our biological evolution to provide us with compensating restraints
on aggression.

-- C. George Boeree

Bill Munny: Hell of a thing, killin' a man. Take away all he's got and all he's ever gonna
have.

The Schofield Kid: Yeah, well, I guess he had it comin'.

Bill Munny: We all got it comin', kid.

-- Unforgiven, 1994

I also included a number of images: Andy Warhol's "Gun," a photograph
of a kids' toy pistol in its "Western Hero" packaging, pie-charts for deaths
by handguns in Texas, and a photoshopped piece that simulated a pistol
being fired directly at the viewer.

So, how're ya doing with this?

---(cont.)

grotesque things, as in *The Exorcist*, or you may prefer suave pod-people slowly replacing humanity.

Most importantly, how about what demons are up to? They could all represent a massive plot or goal of some kind, or maybe there are just a few who have formed a cabal, or maybe demons don't care about one another's goals. Some demonic priorities to consider might include the following.

- ▼ **None**. No shared priorities; every demon is on its own.
- ▼ **Status**. Demons care about where they stand in the pecking order, with a certain hierarchy, deferences, obligations, and privileges attendant upon it.
- ▼ **Intrigue**. Conspiracy vs. conspiracy, each with certain worldly goals to be met.
- ▼ **Damnation**. They plot to drive sorcerers' Humanity to zero.
- ▼ **Transformation**. They desperately want to become human, especially Passers.

Tone

Within the context of the horror-drama as presented in the rules, there is still a lot of leeway for the tone of your game. Three GMs, influenced respectively by *Sin City*, *Death Becomes Her*, and *Babylon 5*, are going to run three very different games. This is perfectly all right! The more different styles of SORCERER stories generated out there by actual play, the happier this game designer is going to be.

There are two especially radical ways to change the "feel" of SORCERER, neither of which is very easy. The first is to get funny. Give the demons all the best sarcastic lines, have them shout "Whoops!" when an innocent bystander gets creamed, create farcical situations where all the important NPCs show up on the scene for wildly varying and mistaken reasons, and so on (see *Army of Darkness*). Comedy is harder than it looks, because it carries the danger of creating a story that no one cares about. But it can be wonderful if the role-playing group is up to it.

The other way is to increase the degree to which violence solves problems. If the very best way to take out the bad guy is to kill him, then the story becomes a tactical exercise in how to get to him and do so. When this is well done (as in *Star Wars* or *Die Hard*), it can't be beaten for sheer intensity. But the danger is falling into the dungeon mode of role-playing, an endless succession of doors and adversaries, and we all know how fast that gets stale.

Sincerity and the "shudder," cont.

For me, the material is close enough to reality to matter. I have never killed anyone. But I have hurt a person to defend myself, I have been injured and threatened with injury, I have "cooled" several potentially violent situations, and I have in fact faced down a real-life gun. I am not a dedicated gun owner or user, but as a boy I was instructed and practiced in the use of rifles, pistols, and shotguns.

Here are the immediate questions that jump out for me. How does one live positively in full knowledge that violence is one of your own effective tools? When do you hurt someone, even kill them? What do you really mean by issuing a threat, when you know that it's not a magic way to make someone stop what they're doing, but rather a promise?

Also, I tell you outright that for me, the shudder is composed of anticipation and attraction as well as fear or disgust. *Merely* frightening or disgusting context for sorcery is not enough.

Des Jackson
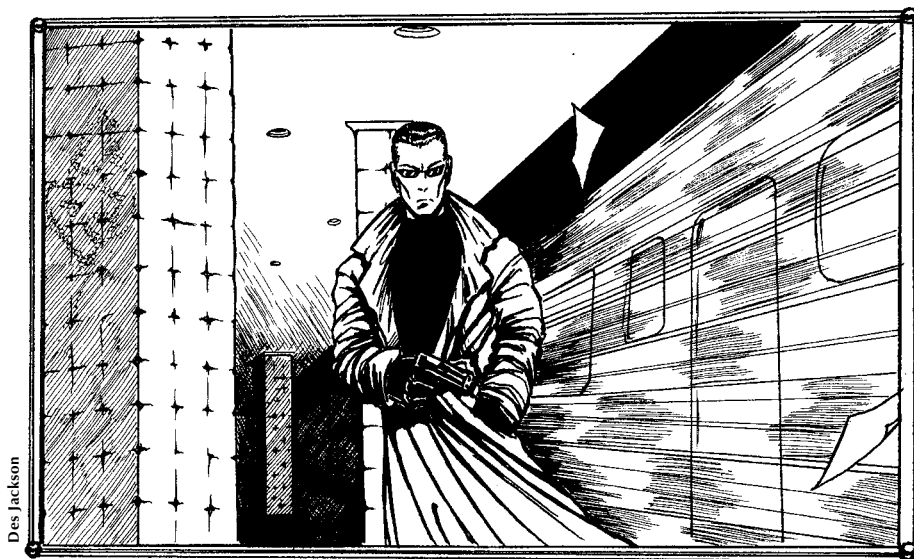
ORGANIZING A GAME

Setting it all up

The whole play group should get involved. Set aside the time and enjoy the chance to talk about the game you'll play. Get people thinking about their characters, and it's perfectly OK if players know something about each others' characters before starting. Some of the Kickers can be rewritten to reflect overlapping character histories. And if someone starts shouting, arguing, or otherwise being a pill at this point, you might as well find out now.

Because the actual stories told by SORCERER are so individualized, the game benefits if everyone knows what kind of story is being developed. The GM should take time to stew over the characters and compare them to his or her notions of what the game's about. Look at the characters' demons and their Binding rolls to decide how to role-play them. Also, the GM should not feel afraid to reject a player-character or to demand modifications.

How many players? Each character comes equipped with a ready-made NPC, the demon, who will be an active participant in every scene. Coordinating all the sorcerers, all the demons, and all the other NPCs in a fight scene can be very challenging. Of course, it's up to individual GMs, but four players or less is a good start. I prefer three at most.

The story

So what will happen, anyway? With a system as flexible as SORCERER, it's crucial to decide just what all the gaming will be about. The usual method for

Organizing a game

Oh, man, this is no good. At least not in terms of knowing my audience. I can see why I put in all three things, but the end result is still in that swamp. First, the leader concept still applies, as the GM does have to ask questions and keep (or get) people thinking Sorcerer-like. But the three things ...

You can't set the number of sessions; that's totally subordinate to Kickers and what happens with them.

Sorcerous tech is best taken from PC material and deepened back-story. And it's intimately tied to the whole look-and-feel thing which at this point should be not only verbalized, but now realized and elaborated upon via the characters, their Lore descriptors, and their starting demons.

The back-story itself should be almost completely emergent from Kicker material, with as much or as little crossing across characters as seems fun. And yet, and yet, it's true, dammit, that solid NPCs have solid content, so it's kind of hard to phrase ... you simply add more content if it excites you, is all I can say.

And the endings ... oogh, this is the worst. I had no idea that the 1990s RPG audience was so deeply trained into canned endings. I was trying to counter *earlier* notions of standard play, which was never to have any endings. Therefore my points here do make sense as long as you think about them as a dynamic phenomenon, based on the GM *recognizing* that ending-level content is already in play. But not about pre-conceiving an ending and then steering towards it.

The story bullseye

Here's what I really should have written about instead: what the GM is to do with the diagrams that were produced from character creation. In play, he or she will be starting scenes and playing characters. But during the transition, the raw material for such things must be refined into usable shape.

I'm going to pretend that Harry Scarborough was written by some other person, and that I'm going to be GM for a game featuring this character. In front of me is the diagram presented back in Chapter 2. What do I do with it?

❧   I consider the material that I, personally, simply enjoy looking at. In this case, I really like: his burnout and a layered back-story for it, the opportunity to play the agencies differently from the stereotypes, and the fact that it's hard to bring a weapon-demon to one's aid in a social/psychological crisis – until you decide whom you need to kill.

❧   I consider as well the material that the diagram has shown me is pulled together by circumstances: in this case, clearly, whatever it is that Stephanie's doing, whatever it is that Woo rebelled about during the last case, and the last case's content. Some of this might need a little consultation with Stephanie's player, but let's assume for the moment that Harry's player has left the details of the case histories and the rebellion up to me.

role-playing games is to provide an elaborate back-story right there in the rules, sometimes the bulk of the rules, but not this time. The GM is required to start from scratch.

The GM should consider how many sessions are going to be involved. The best way to decide is to choose a medium to imitate: will the story be comparable to a TV mini-series, an action movie and its sequel, a novel, or an ongoing comic book? The players should be informed of the decision as well; appropriate protagonists for these different modes of storytelling differ considerably.

The next task is to think about the story itself. Here the GM might consider and include three issues that work together very well: a specific element of sorcerous magic, a long-standing crisis ("back-story"), and the ending.

THE SORCEROUS TECHNICALITY

One of the best places to start is to read the rules for sorcery in Chapter Five very carefully, looking for any twists that could lead to a crisis. Built into the rules for, say, Contain or Humanity loss are all sorts of interesting consequences. Then think up something pretty abominable or tense that could ensue – like these!

The rogue sorcerer
▼ The classic example: an ambitious person in way over his head, with his ends twisted to the desires of an out-of-control demon
▼ A horrific and criminal person completely overmasters a powerful but relatively benign demon, and goes on a terrible crime or nastiness spree or conspiracy. Imagine Hannibal Lector as a sorcerer, master of a reluctant but helplessly bound demon!
▼ An ex-sorcerer, with Lore at least 5, gave it all up and now roams the land as an obnoxious, righteous exorcist and sorcerer-hunter. He's the kind of guy who would have high Humanity (from all the Banishing) but is so ruthless and abusive that it's ended up being pretty low. The perfect pain-in-the-butt NPC.

Demonic weirdness
▼ Imagine a powerful Parasite and a Possessor in the same host, all of whom dislike each other.
▼ Alter the definitions slightly so that over time, a Parasite becomes a Possessor, and then, again over time, a Possessor becomes a Passer.
▼ A Possessor who entirely forgets it's a demon when it inhabits a host. However, its occupancy eventually kills its host after a year or so, and it

The story bullseye, cont.

- Finally, as you can see from both of these items, I need to adopt Woo, the demon, right into my heart as a primary character to play, with *brio*. Corruption, eh? Blood, too.

Those are the questions and issues I need to get creative about. By the time we play, I should have names and scores and events written down, and a sense of which NPCs are about to take action toward or with Harry. I should be quite firmly committed to beginning a course of action for Woo, subject as it will be to the events of play once we get going.

One more thing: that diagram is going to change through play, most likely every single session. People can get killed, or become "finished" in story terms. New characters might be written onto the diagram. Any item may shift position, whether being pulled toward the center or hopping into a different quadrant for some reason.

In the years since Sorcerer was first published, many newer games have presented formal documents to fill out and alter as play proceeds, to reflect changing situations and relationships. Many of them are well-designed and I've thought a bit about inventing something similar for Sorcerer beyond the character diagrams. Every time I've tried it, though, I've found that the diagrams alone serve as the best ongoing paper record of the issues to be brought into play. Their transformations are, themselves, the character and Kicker arcs.

only has a few days as the body deteriorates until it finds a new one, whereupon it forgets again. Now provide the poor thing with an urgent command from its master (now dead) and watch the bodies pile up.

The demon on the loose
- ▼ The death of a sorcerer sends a host of demons into the surrounding area (elementary school, suburbs, etc) looking for masters. Ten years later, what's it like?
- ▼ A Possessor who thinks he's a normal person but wonders why things around him get so weird all the time.
- ▼ Imagine an Object demon as a book: it boosts the reader's Lore and initiates a Contact, unless you can resist its Will. Hard on young sorcerers.
- ▼ For pure mayhem: a powerful, ancient Contain is busted and hungry demons swarm out.
- ▼ An immense demon, whose need is to eat other demons, kidnaps sorcerers and forces them to summon little demons to provide it with food – perhaps its own master is kept captive.

THE BACK-STORY

Now that you have some idea of what kind of sorcerous crisis is looming in the player-characters' future, set up a decades-old fault or failing on someone's part that allowed this sort of situation to get established, only now exploding into its final, unstable, disastrous consequences.

The cabal
- ▼ Every few decades there is a terrible war between sorcerers, reducing their numbers drastically. However, no one knows it's due to powerful demons who compete with each other for status, using their so-called masters as pawns.
- ▼ And that old stand-by for comics fans: the sorcerous conspiracy to rule the world is nearing fruition.

The duel
- ▼ An apprentice learns, rightly or wrongly, that the only way to advance into higher sorcery is to kill his or her master.
- ▼ Two incredibly powerful and recondite sorcerers have been dueling for centuries, for reasons both have forgotten.

Then it's just a matter of providing names and faces. Who is the sorcerer who bungled so badly? How have some non-sorcerers been affected since the problem began? Who has been trying to solve the problem ever since, only to

make things worse? A list of NPCs can then be generated and integrated into the characters' Kickers. Basically, a given character should either be (1) already involved in the situation up to his or her neck, knowingly or not; or (2) just stumbling into it.

The most important part of the back-story is inventing a villain! A really Bad Guy should be included somehow. He or she definitely has some sort of agenda, a series of events that would occur if the player-characters weren't around, which usually gets disrupted by the characters' presence and actions. A good bad guy is more than just some maniac on the loose. Define his or her goals, actions, and personal situation, and tap it into at least one of the characters' Kickers. (Which brings us to figuring out about how the characters are going to get involved, which is handled in the So What Do We Do section, below.)

THE ENDING

Here the question is not how to end a given game session (for that, see Making it Work, below), but rather what a whole series of game sessions should be leading up to. This sort of ending, by definition, means an event or series of events that resolve one or more of the characters' Kickers for good. With a general Kicker-resolving problem in mind, and especially the willingness to modify that notion as play develops, the GM can arrive at a powerful story-ending without railroading the players.

What kind of actions are going to be most effective in the ending scene? If your SORCERER story is basically an action extravaganza, well then, you need a fight. If it's a big ethical novel type of thing, you need a moral dilemma. If it's a puzzle or intrigue story, then you need a revelation. This is an important decision to make at the outset, because throughout the entire game the GM should reinforce the kind of actions that will be most effective in achieving this kind of ending.

Of course, the results of that ending scenario can vary considerably. The characters' actions might pretty much solve the problem, they could solve the problem but must pay a significant price, or for all their efforts, terrible things happen anyway. Consider how the characters' actions can lead to one or more of these conclusions; if you want, weight NPCs' actions and various coincidental events to make one path most likely.

For maximum effect, consider the intellectual content of the ending as well as its simple combat or puzzle-solving qualities. The most serious SORCERER story culminates in the characters coming to ask questions about themselves and about the nature of sorcery. The answers might not be pretty. There are three steps to a real horror story: first, encountering and escaping

from danger; second, investigating a problem or mystery; and third, recoiling in shock from the revelation.

So what do we do

So how are you going to get all these highly individualized, often arrogant and ambitious sorcerers into a situation where they'll cooperate over the long term? Having sorcerers threatened as a group helps, as do well-constructed Kickers, but how about beyond that? There are four ways to do this in a role-playing situation.

The "dungeon" way. The characters coincidentally team up in response to a threat or a promised reward, and then stay together as a team as new opportunities present themselves. It works for certain genres (say, superhero teams) but not so well in a modern setting. For one thing, the rewards involved are not as simplistic as gold or experience points. Unless there's a real reason for the characters to bond in the first run or two, the players may rebel against the assumption that they have done so, often expressing this dissatisfaction with inter-character conflicts.

The squad. The characters are initially defined in the context of a task force of some kind, as in, "you're all members of the FBI or experts they call in regularly." This method may result in fairly uninteresting characters. Unless the story hooks the players in, they may become overly dependent on GM prompting, or they may feel constrained by the limits imposed on them before play and become restive.

The dumb way. By giving no structure at all, the GM provides perfect freedom and realism for the players. In other words, there is no reason for a story to occur. The characters are roped into a shared situation, they deal with it, they get roped by coincidence into another one, and on and on. The players will often respond by caring less and less about the stories themselves, and the game falls apart.

The hard way. The characters are relatively subtly connected by their own histories, some ways known to the players, some ways not. For example, maybe their mentors were once a cabal. Now they are tossed together not by coincidence, but by events that do connect them to one another, so as the characters meet the players have things to learn. The picture that emerges – how the characters' backgrounds are related – should carry with it an alarming or even terrifying threat, so that it is natural for the characters to bond with one another.

So What Do We Do

The four ways are best understood as "games I have tried," in the context of trying to find a new way to play, or at least of trying to articulate it.

The "dungeon way" is put into quotes because I didn't want to pillory any and all play set in dungeons. I did want to say that Sorcerer is not about participating in a designated platoon, nor in designing and populating dangerous terrain in a physically tactical sense.

The squad way is the one I wanted to stomp into the ground, and in retrospect if any of them deserve the label "dumb" relative to Sorcerer play, that one's it. This point arose out of my long experience with comics-based role-playing, in which reading the source material makes it clear that imposed team identity isn't what makes a superhero group.

The dumb way ... well, I feel kind of bad calling it that now. Among other reasons, a lot of play which looks like this really isn't, relying on more subtle structure, and in fact Sorcerer works pretty well like that - just hum away off the dynamics of the diagrams' content and you'll probably be fine. In my defense, a lot of play during the late 1980s and early 1990s tended to mill around a lot until a crucial external cue was provided, and that's what I was criticizing with the term "roping."

The hard way is not actually what I was advocating in the text, although it looks that way because I was trying to find some way in which it could be functional. It's not a very successful bit of prose. Today, I'd say, "Extensive and dangerous back-story is great, but anticipated actions such as 'team up to face the common threat' are poison."

Clearly, the hard way takes a lot of work and GM preparation before play even begins. It can be made easier by providing the characters with a simple task in the first run, but also with a brief contact with something that is far more important and terribly dangerous or upsetting. The "something" can be explicit (the bad guy summons demons to possess children, whom he then sells to rich perverts) or mysterious (all the characters' demons cower and rebel whenever a certain name is mentioned). Either way, it will jar and disturb the players, resulting in them being willing to team up their characters for a little while.

ACTUAL PLAY

Responsibilities

The Game Master. (A quick note: if you're interested in GMing SORCERER, you're probably already experienced enough to have your own standards for how to run a role-playing game. The following aren't meant to imply I have anything to teach you. However, some of it may be food for thought, and some is especially useful for this game in particular. Use what makes sense to you and ignore the rest.)

There are two phrases that GMs might want to avoid in the course of a role-playing game. The first one is, "You can't do that," in response to a player's proposed action. SORCERER is a game about consequences; nearly any act is available to the player-characters (that is, the rules are not built to prevent players from certain things). If you, as a GM, are opposed to a proposed action, just remind the player why, to make sure that he or she is really determined to try this thing.

> **EXAMPLE: the player announces that his character will shoot his Uzi at the villain, who is running across the character's line of sight. The GM simply mentions, "He is right in front of the line of hostage kindergardeners, you know." This is a reminder just in case the player had forgotten to consider everything he or she should.**
>
> **If the player reconsiders the action, well and good. But say he or she is such a jerk as to go ahead and fire at the villain, heedless of the children's cries of fear. The GM should go ahead and permit the action. Of course, regardless of the effect of the die rolls, that character is due for some serious Humanity cost rolling right away.**

Another meaning of "you can't do that" is not referring to the ethics of a situation but rather its physics. If the GM believes that the proposed action is plain impossible, well, the best thing to do is to narrate to the player just what

Actual play

This text shows the same unfamiliarity with the audience, big-time. If you were a GM and player like me, then it's fine, but I did not know that people existed who both wanted this sort of play *and* did not quite believe it was possible. Who, as it turned out, became the game's unintended target market.

Regarding moral standards, I really do not mean statements of this kind to be heading players off or toward certain actions, but merely to keep the GM's Humanity judgments transparent as play goes along. The same goes for physicality – all that about warnings is simply not right, not in theory but in actual practice; the only solution is simply to do it, narrate outcomes and don't bother with statements, because they turn into tedious negotiations.

This section also needs to be cut into two parts: the prep going straight into play, and then what play itself looks like.

Regarding the two phrases, I thought this text was about two obviously bad things that I'm reminding you not to do, but I had no idea at the time that these very things were widely considered standards for "good" play. My way was and is more in line with opening prepared material up to anything which happens during play, without planning toward specific outcomes, which was very definitely not in evidence among RPG customers around 2000.

So: the GM is never to prep for what will happen, but is always prepped for what to use.

About the players, this is solid: it's the second major sign that a given person cannot hack the game at a basic level. The key is actually derived from the examples in the Amber core book: "What do you do?" "What do you do?" The player's job is to stay involved with play and do whatever they want while there.

does happen instead. If the consequences are fatal or otherwise extremely undesirable, the tactic described above can be employed as well.

> **EXAMPLE: "I jump over the elephant!"** The GM says, "You get about four feet up, bump your nose, and end up where you were in a sitting position." If the GM wanted, he or she could have said, "That elephant is very tall." If the player still went for it, oh well, down in the dung they go.

During a fight scene, all of these tactics should be employed in the announcement phase of combat, rather than the resolution phase (see Combat in Chapter Six).

The other phrase guaranteed to disrupt the role-playing session is anything starting with, "You feel..." As in, "Your character feels fear wash through him," or a close paraphrase, like, "Your character is filled with love and admiration." Characters' feelings are one of the very few things the players have jurisdiction over; they are not the GM's business. It's best to provide players with phenomena to react to, rather than to dictate their reactions. As everyone becomes used to one another, the GM will improve his or her abilities to present events in such a way as to provoke emotions.

Both of these tips are part of the overall philosophy of SORCERER's design, in which the GM continually challenges the players to do things. It's a hard line to walk: sometimes they will accuse their GM of leading them by the nose or forcing them to conform to a storyline; sometimes they will feel at sea.

The players

The big issue for the SORCERER player is strictly a courtesy standard. It is that your character must be personally, emotionally involved in what's going on. Players of role-playing games often complain that their characters have no reason to stick around and help one another. To the best of your ability, avoid this problem by assuming that your character does care, and work backwards from there to give him or her a reason. Look at the Kicker, there on the sheet. You and the GM have agreed that it is a priority for your character to exert effort to cope with it, and that means it should be a priority for you, as a player, to direct the character appropriately. Or if the Kicker is not immediately applicable, come up with a liking or disliking for one of the other characters, and resolve to stick around until you can act on it. This is not to say, of course, that your character must always care – but the default should be that he or she does.

Understanding the currency

As discussed in Chapter One, if the character performs a series of actions in which the success of earlier actions affects the success of later ones, then victories from one roll may be carried over into the next roll as bonus dice. More broadly, this principle may be understood in terms of the **currency** of SORCERER:

1 score point = 1 die = 1 victory = 1 bonus = 1 penalty

This is a very important concept! The damage rules, for example, are only one example of its application. It means that the GM can arbitrate any combination of any game effects and be consistent in terms of "fairness." Any roll can be evaluated for victories. Victories can always be translated into penalties or used on the Damage Table, or translated into a bonus for someone during the next round. Several victories, or bonuses, or penalties, can be compared as a total with a score's value to evaluate total effect.

> **EXAMPLES: applying the currency**
> ▼ **Armand attempts to charm his way into a film financier's good graces, preparatory to killing the poor fellow with a knife. He rolls his Will of 7 (descriptor: social manipulator) against the guy's Will, and let's say he succeeds with three victories. His next roll, the attack, is performed with his not-as-impressive Stamina of 2, but he gets the three victories as three bonus dice for a total of five. If the player adds in some good description and perhaps a worthy line, that could be one more, for a total of six dice.**
> ▼ **Stephanie attempts to quell a hostile demon's bad attitude, using the principle that to get a mule to obey, you first need its attention. She smacks it with a right cross to the chin, using her Stamina score of 4 (perhaps with a bonus die for the ritual iron demon-smacking fireplace-poker she's carrying). Say she wins with three victories, due to a great roll. That's three whole dice added to her Will of 4, for a total of seven dice to tell this recalcitrant abomination where to go and what to do.**

That's why the damage rules in Chapter Six and the "rules" given in the following section for Boosting Stamina are not special cases. They are simply the currency of the game in operation. The good SORCERER GM knows that he or she doesn't need lists and lists for every kind of effect; any effect can get turned into damage, penalties, or bonuses. In that sense, SORCERER's system is ready for any eventuality during the game, without all kinds of reality-simulating rules to memorize.

Understanding the currency

This makes me feel warm and fuzzy even now. The only bit I should have made more explicit is when someone is brought to 0 dice. The rule is, you always roll one die. If you are at 0, then the other guy gets another die. Explain negatives too, with examples.

Consider as well a different level of Currency thinking, the idea of a given score as a unit of its own, which is apparent throughout the mechanics but I didn't say it here.

More currency in action: so-called social conflict

 Influencing another character's behavior is a special case, but not because it's handled differently, but because it's actually not. As long as you remember that rolls concern actions, not what someone wants or how they feel, you'll be fine.

Let's take the simplest example of one character telling another one what to do, and the target character saying "No." My first point is that merely saying it isn't enough. What matters is what action the character performs in defiance of the order, especially an action requiring a roll. If that happens, it's time for Will vs. Will …

And let's say the first character wins that roll. Here's the point: the losing character's next action is still decided by the player. In other words, the character is not forced to do what the winning character said. But if he or she doesn't, then the victories of the winner's roll become a penalty to whatever he or she is trying to do instead. The player of a loser of an order/influence conflict really has an interesting choice.

Examples to consider:

Several Possessor demons are vying for control of a single host. How would you manage it?

A demon Bound to one sorcerer is cajoled by another sorcerer to refuse a command from its master. The second sorcerer's ultimate goal is to provoke the demon to rebel against its master and then Bind it. How would you manage it?

Here is a complex example of how the currency of Sorcerer works: Boosting Stamina.

Your character's physical body is limited as to how much Boosting it can support, even beyond the disorientation mentioned in the ability's description in Chapter Three. You can handle being doubled just fine. Base Stamina 3 can be Boosted to 6, no problem. But beyond that, you get the effect, sure, but you also take damage. For each point of Stamina Boosted beyond the doubled level, count one victory against yourself on the non-lethal Special Damage table, effective immediately. Watch *Ghost in the Shell* to see what happens to someone using more strength than his or her frame can handle.

The GM may well state that characters cannot "just know" their own doubled Stamina score, but must take it up to one unit past the safety stage. After all, that's how you know your limits, when it hurts.

Manny Vega

This principle applies to all forms of Boost, although the excess is defined differently. Exceeding Will limits means neural overload; you get penalties equal to the excess applied to every and any action for a while, due to minor convulsions or blackouts. Exceeding Lore limits confers penalties to sorcerous activities (rituals), but perhaps to other acts as well.

More details come into play as well. The demon ability Vitality will provide "defense" against the damage victories incurred by over-Boosting, annulling one victory per point of the Vitality's Power.

However, this isn't very effective if the same demon providing the Vitality is also providing the Boost, because a single demon is very limited in terms of Boost of any kind. While you're Boosted, its Power

drops to 1 for all other purpose, including resisting Banishing or conferring other abilities like Vitality. Therefore a single demon giving you Boost Stamina and using Vitality simultaneously can get you up to twice your Stamina +1 without harm.

But if you have two demons, one for each ability, you're cooking with gas ... the one can Boost you way, way up and the other can protect you well past your bodily limits (as long as you're getting along well with both of them, of course). Such an individual is a monstrous powerhouse: 10–11 Stamina means the person can smash through brick walls and run like a horse, 14–15 Stamina means they can readily lift and toss a motorcycle, 20 Stamina is in the range of four-color superheroes. Do note that **all** damage taken while Boosted remains when the Boost wears off ...

Making the story work

SORCERER sets up characters and stories that benefit from group participation. Get people who are committed to coming, reward them with good sessions, and soon the SORCERER night will become as sacred as a favorite TV show or even more so. How to achieve that all-important satisfaction?

GET TO THE BANGS!

Bangs are those moments when the characters realize they have a problem right now and have to get moving to deal with it. It can be as simple as a hellacious demon crashing through the skylight and attacking the characters, or as subtle as the voice of the long-dead murder victim answering when they call the phone number they found in the new murder victim's pockets.

In order to get to the Bangs if the players are being dense, or if the GM is letting them flounder around, the GM should begin to ask leading questions or remind them of things they might check out. Every group is a little different in terms of how much prompting they need; it's best to err on the over-generous side at first. The amount of "What do we do next?" should be very low, compared to "Oh, crap, I try to convince him we're on his side!" or "I tell Frick to grow big and rip the car door off!"

The really fun part is the final Bang. It's especially easy if your SORCERER game is on the violent side. Envision a climactic set piece, stealing shamelessly from any movie or comic or book you like. Did the demon skin someone and use his identity to escape discovery? Is there a desperate fight on the gargoyle-festooned roof ledge in the rain?

> **Did I say television writers were prostitutes? Hell, we're crib girls, banging and climaxing every fifteen minutes.**
>
> **—D. Gerrold, The Trouble with Tribbles (not the Star Trek episode, but the book about its production)**

The first session

I've found that the first session is clearly different from all the later ones, because it features maximum prep relative to consequential events. In other words, the GM does more to set it up than any other session, but in play, not that much tends to happen. It is often deceptively mild-looking, and various things that the GM felt obliged to accomplish may not even get started. Don't let that fool you. As long as the player-characters did stuff, the demons did stuff, and NPCs did stuff, then you're good. The only requirement is that each of the Kickers' content be in action to any extent at all.

As sessions proceed, that ratio flips dramatically, such that the amount of prep drops almost to nothing and the in-play actions and consequences spike. Also, the *type* of prep changes profoundly, as it becomes a matter of consulting the changed diagrams and thinking almost as player, in terms of which NPCs are about to take direct action.

Get to the Bangs!

The pacing section would become the foundation for discussions later to be called scene framing, which is neither more nor less than everyone at the table becoming aware that the action and events of play have shifted location and forwards in time. It includes the crucial information of which characters are present as well.

It can be more of a group activity than it looks. The GM could say, "I'd like to skip to halfway through the sea voyage," and if no one pipes up about wanting to do something before that point, the group just goes with it. But if someone does, then that desire gets honored. The point is that the initial statement is not some awful decree from the high seat of Mordor, and the call to do something else is not a rebellious challenge to such an authority. Given a forthright exchange among the real people at the table, scene framing is extremely painless. Once a group hits upon a functional language and set of trust about scene framing, the gaming experience changes drastically: no more acrimony about where the characters are and whether they could have got there or would have done something before being there, ever again.

The GM should therefore use both of these two things. First, specific informa-tion from the players regarding what their characters are doing, or about to do. So the GM frequently asks "What do you do?" Based on what the players say, that becomes the basis for the next scene getting framed. Second, his or her own conclusions regarding what the GM characters will do next. Sometimes what they do is so urgent that it will either disrupt one of the players' stated actions, or it will begin a scene of its own. So both of these things are really the same: what charac-ters are stated to do.

Or has it been too long since you had a motorcycle chase? If I'm stuck at this part, I just watch *Rapid Fire* or *The Hidden* again. Then, if you can combine all this violence with some kind of interesting interaction between sorcerers and demons, you've got something.

The nice thing about well-planned set pieces is that they are the only times during the run when all the characters have to be in the same place at the same time. All the investigations and other events that lead up to the Big Brawl or Chase or Explosion can be handled more individually, which means the characters don't have to scuttle around together like a many-legged invertebrate in that old "party checks the next door" way. It's perfectly OK to be unrealistic about distances and time as they all rush to get to the set piece at a certain point; movies do it all the time so that characters can arrive all at once or show up just when they're needed most.

The final Bang of a run doesn't always have to be a violent set piece, especially if your game is more oriented toward moral dilemmas or problem-solving. These are much harder to establish as true climaxes, though, and so are recommended for experienced GMs only.

PACING

Bangs are well and good, but how to get to them efficiently? The GM's most crucial role during play is to dictate scene transitions: in other words, to say, "All right, everyone, you all get out of there and go home. The next morning..." The way to pace right is to know exactly what each scene is supposed to achieve. If the point is merely to get some information across, don't make the characters wait and suffer for it, and do end the scene once they've got it. If the point is to get across town, there's no need to throw in a bar fight along the way.

Although an ongoing game can be seen as a novel, with runs being chapters, individual runs might be seen as 90-minute movies, TV episodes, or issues of a comic book. The best way to learn pacing them is to watch suspense and romance movies and learn to recognize why some scenes seem so useless and dragged-out, whereas others somehow work. Try to copy the way a good director simply cuts away from a scene once its purpose is accomplished, without bothering to show the characters finishing their conversation and saying goodbye.

Sneaky player tricks

Ah, those clever players. Every GM needs to be aware that some players will attempt, through no malevolence or fault of their own, to abuse the rules a bit to get the most effective character possible, or to minimize the obligations and connections of the character to the NPCs. Most of the time, the

Get to the Bangs! cont.

Here's the big advice: framing scenes should never be based on something the GM intends or hopes will happen because of the as-yet-unplayed scene. Don't think in terms of a scene's purpose. Set them in motion only based on what characters are currently stated to be doing.

If you're ever unsure about which of two events would occur first, such as whether character A or character B arrives at a given location, then use simply oppositional rolls, based on the relevant scores. I've been amazed at how easy, useful, and liberating this simple concept is. It's an emergent property of the Sorcerer mechanics that I only discovered years after publishing the game.

Bangs

The essence of a Bang is that it may not be ignored; at its least subtle, a steaming slavering demon appears in the midst of the room and demands (ummm ...) a bride. Now! Somewhat more subtly: in a Sorcerer game a while ago, one character was a homeless crank who got mad at the city government when his disability check stopped coming; my first act as GM, when the character confronted the new mayor, was to have the mayor give this totally skanky semi-mad guy a job – specifically, the job of making sure all such functions operated smoothly. They cleaned him up, sat him behind a desk, and installed a friendly secretary. The player was both flabbergasted and excited, because all of a sudden his character concept had been turned upside down – not violated, mind you, but rather facing all the same conflicts but from a different perspective. Plus, there was the mystery of who this mayor guy was and what he was about.

"Driving with Bangs" is a great phrase, but I have to clarify: I mean in the sense of driving a nail into wood, not driving a car toward a destination. Maybe it would have been better to say "Driven by Bangs" instead – in the sense that when the Bang hits, you have no idea where things will now go.

Bangs are not cues for highly specific actions, either now or later. You may be familiar with GMs and groups who primarily function only with such things. If the magic frog tells them something arcane in the first twenty minutes of the session, they instantly go into "figure out what it meant" mode, or at least stay tuned to how anything it said might be suddenly relevant in some crucial scene later. The assumption within such a group is that these are like bread-crumbs for the group to find its way through the GM's story and enact it as he sees it should be enacted, i.e, the "fun" way. When conducted in this fashion, such input on the GM's part is emphatically not a Bang.

So it's key that a Bang is open-ended. The GM literally has no idea how the characters might respond. Do they seize one of their own number and offer her to the demon against her wishes? Do they dress up the buff warrior in a gown and offer him to it as a ruse, concealing his demon-slaying sword?

Or has it been too long since you had a motorcycle chase? If I'm stuck at this part, I just watch *Rapid Fire* or *The Hidden* again. Then, if you can combine all this violence with some kind of interesting interaction between sorcerers and demons, you've got something.

The nice thing about well-planned set pieces is that they are the only times during the run when all the characters have to be in the same place at the same time. All the investigations and other events that lead up to the Big Brawl or Chase or Explosion can be handled more individually, which means the characters don't have to scuttle around together like a many-legged invertebrate in that old "party checks the next door" way. It's perfectly OK to be unrealistic about distances and time as they all rush to get to the set piece at a certain point; movies do it all the time so that characters can arrive all at once or show up just when they're needed most.

The final Bang of a run doesn't always have to be a violent set piece, especially if your game is more oriented toward moral dilemmas or problem-solving. These are much harder to establish as true climaxes, though, and so are recommended for experienced GMs only.

PACING

Bangs are well and good, but how to get to them efficiently? The GM's most crucial role during play is to dictate scene transitions: in other words, to say, "All right, everyone, you all get out of there and go home. The next morning..." The way to pace right is to know exactly what each scene is supposed to achieve. If the point is merely to get some information across, don't make the characters wait and suffer for it, and do end the scene once they've got it. If the point is to get across town, there's no need to throw in a bar fight along the way.

Although an ongoing game can be seen as a novel, with runs being chapters, individual runs might be seen as 90-minute movies, TV episodes, or issues of a comic book. The best way to learn pacing them is to watch suspense and romance movies and learn to recognize why some scenes seem so useless and dragged-out, whereas others somehow work. Try to copy the way a good director simply cuts away from a scene once its purpose is accomplished, without bothering to show the characters finishing their conversation and saying goodbye.

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Bangs, cont.

Does one of them seduce the demon and turn it against its master? Do they decide to attack it all together on a count of three? Playing in this fashion means the GM must fully abandon "control" over the events of play in the sense of anticipating the outcomes of scenes and the nature of the conflicts within them. There is nothing the players are "supposed" to do.

Bangs are everyone's business. Anyone can deliver one. For the GM to consider or prepare a "bandolier" of them before play is fine, but don't *schedule* them past the first, recognize when they've arrived from someone besides yourself, and be ready to abandon yours unused.

Here is the absolutely central GM technique toward that end: NPCs do stuff. They aren't living in terror of the PCs, trying to brush them off. They respond deeply to the PCs; they are grabby. They aren't helpless. They aren't dumbly locked into their single-blurb descriptions. And you don't protect them from themselves.

You see, the phrase, "Just play the NPCs!" turns out to be a subcultural problem. I have learned that no one knows what I mean by it. It seems to me as if I'm giving the most straightforward advice possible. But after fifteen years, I now know that the communication rate is under 10%. Instead, it can go "doink" right off someone's defenses, because they don't get it, and what they don't get, they blink away. Or it can be heard, but mis-interpreted, as in, "Play the NPCs to elicit the desired player behavior," or "Play the NPCs according to a set track or flowchart." Or worse, thespian: "Act out the NPCs in full, with gestures and accents."

Whereas what I actually mean by it is that when playing NPC 1's actions and dialogue, put aside any priorities except for those of NPC 1. Never mind what NPC 2 wants, or even what the head or the ideology of the organization NPC 1 belongs to wants. Never mind what NPC 1's actions will do to anyone else's plans. Never mind what NPC 1's actions might do to the immediate outcome of this scene. Basically, NPC 1 can always and only do one of three things: hold steady which whatever goals and actions and tactics he was already doing; go solidly hard-core toward getting those goals using new and extreme tactics; or abandon those goals and adopting new ones, to whatever extreme seems (to him) warranted. And in each case, do it as effectively as possible. So when playing NPC 1, you play him. Then, switching to another NPC, do the same with him, and never the fuck mind what that would mean to NPC 1 - save that for when you come 'round to NPC 1 again.

Don't use NPCs to frustrate and block player-character options, and don't use them to herd player-characters in any direction.

So it's not about an overview. It's not about a story. It's not about a plot. It's not about a tapestry. You're not playing "the world." You're playing characters one at a time at a very local, moment to moment level, and as far as the NPC behaviors are concerned, that is literally all.

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Bangs, cont.

Let's be blunt: not everyone can do this. If you're committed to the view that the GM "does" or "makes" or "controls" the story, and that everyone else get to be thespians in that story, then these rules must seem like horrible scary madness. I'm flatly disagreeing with the conventional wisdom that stories must be imposed upon play or they won't happen. I'm saying instead that switching to thespian-author mode, excited by the story *being* created, is more intuitive, less procedurally problematic, more engaging, and more reliably productive. The simple truth is that you play this game if you're willing to agree about that, and if everyone else at the table is too.

Humanity in action

To lay it out in detail ...

1. "This is a Humanity check. Roll your Humanity dice." And I pick up the same amount of dice and roll it too. If the player's dice have a higher value, the character does not lose a point of Humanity; if they're lower, he or she does lose a point.

2. "This is a Humanity gain roll. Roll your Humanity dice." And we do the same in terms of picking up dice. But in this case, if the player's dice succeed, the character gains a point of Humanity. If they're lower, the character does not.

A Humanity check includes no chance for Humanity to go up, and a Humanity gain roll includes no chance for it to go down.

3. The definition of Humanity should be simple and easy, because that means its application during play will be profound. Both Humanity checks and Humanity gain rolls are a top priority for the GM. It may happen that you forget to call for the roll during play itself, which is not a big deal. You can begin the next session by calling for the roll retroactively.

SORCERER rules will act to rebound on such tricks, but it takes an experienced GM to make it happen most satisfyingly. Here are what I found in just two playtesting sessions.

▼ **Invisible mentor.** The character is an apprentice, but his or her story specifies that the mentor is a total mystery and hardly ever calls on the character to do anything. The GM should make sure to have the mentor's occasional commands be overwhelmingly imperative and unavoidable. The mentor should figure into the character's history such that he or she could never have survived without the mentor's help.

▼ **Lone adept with low Lore**. (Similar to above.) The GM should point the player toward the sorcery rules in Chapter Four to show that it's extremely difficult to become an expert sorcerer without the help of others. During play, important information should be only accessible through Lore rolls.

▼ **Vigor + esteem + adept.** Taking these three Score descriptions creates a pretty bland character. The GM's best bets are (1) to hit the character with a terrifying and tremendously life-changing Kicker and (2) to role-play the Bound demon to the hilt. If the character's going to be bland, why then, he or she might as well be in motion.

▼ **Demon buddy.** The player defines his or her starting demon as extremely loyal and well-disposed toward the character, such that if the GM ever has it act fractiously, the player can say, "But my old pal Drax would never do that! He loves me!" A good way to handle this is to change the character's status as a sorcerer right there in the Kicker, so that the demon now has a completely different relationship with him or her.

▼ **Boost Lore and Will.** Ah-ha, says the veteran minimaxer. With a demon who can Boost my Lore and Will, I can summon up all kinds of powerful demons! Here is where the game designer's laughter can be heard in the background. Go ahead. Let 'em do it. Have a great time when the demons start to rebel later in the game, challenging the sorcerer's now-weenie-level Will. And don't forget, those booster demons have Desires and Needs too.

▼ **Banish abuse.** As Humanity increases, Banishing is easier; successful Banishing raises Humanity. This combination can be used as a buffer for the consequences of rotten acts. How to stop it? Well, demons hate to see demons Banished (it could happen to them one day). Perhaps the character's demons will start getting rebellion bonuses, and they'll be subtle about their disobediences, too (see Chapter Five). Also, remember the Binding strength penalty to all Banish rolls.

▼ **One-power servant demon.** This is not so bad an idea: summon up a horde of very weak demons who really can't do much more than fetch

Sneaky player tricks

Wow, this section is way too hostile, too oriented toward making someone into a desired sort of player. My stated fixes for every entry are *terrible*. I now realize that I was trying to deal with a spectrum of compatibility for the game. At one end is the awesome player whose use of even these textually-bland components is dynamite in play, to the utterly unsuited player for whom Kickers and Bangs are already alien and unwanted, therefore for whom vigilance toward these issues would be ineffective. There's also the independent issue of genuine commitment and creative drive, from fully present to fully absent.

Now, instead of all this contemptuous and frankly annoying text, I'd put it this way: play with people who *like* the creative opportunity afforded by Sorcerer, and be open to the fact that you and everyone else will be developing *skill* with it over time. When a person displays dislike of the former or unwillingness to do the latter, then it's no shame for anyone simply to amend membership of the group.

The moment of transition

Now we're past prep, and talking about what to do right there in play. This distinction is unfortunately missing in the text as written, and doesn't provide the insight that Chapters 5 and 6 are toolkit-subsets for everything from this point forward in Chapter 4. Here are a couple of practical concepts which fall right into that transition.

First, if you can, don't move straight from character creation into play, but rather stop and re-convene for play in the next session. One reason is that Sorcerer character creation has some layered steps to it, and I've found that people sometimes simply miss things, such as rolling the Humanity Check for Binding their demon, or not writing down their Cover, or really anything. Glancing over all the work so far for such things is easy and productive.

Second, taking the time really matters in terms of content and back-story. You probably will do well to junk or diminish some of what you had in mind, and focus instead upon NPCs who didn't exist until they emerged from a player-character's creation. You may have to make up some more material such as demons, and you should review the player-characters' demons in the depth because they are yours now, especially regarding Desires and Needs. In my experience, although it doesn't seem like much work, this phase produces a "settling" effect in my mind, as I take all the existing new material and make it my own.

---(cont.)

and carry. It beats union wages! But remember that these little weenies are vulnerable to Banishing or to a hungry Feeder demon. Furthermore, the GM should make sure that their Desires and Needs are substantial.

▼ **Utility demon.** "My demon's Desire is to help me stay safe," or, "My demon's Need is to use his Armor power that he confers on me." The GM should be very clear on the rules for Desires and Needs above, which generally don't allow such wimpy giveaways to the sorcerers. As far as Desires are concerned, the list in the rules is the best place to start, and only the GM can add to it, not the players. The GM should also remember that even a demon which confers the use of an ability to another individual still controls whether the power will be conferred.

▼ **Don't-give-me-lip demon.** Parasite, Object, Inconspicuous, and Possessing demons, depending on the specifics, may not necessarily be capable of speech. The GM should ensure that silence doesn't always obedience.

THE TRAINING RUN

This section provides a practically ready-to-run SORCERER night that takes about half an hour to set up and go, and only a single evening to run. It's nowhere near coherent enough to be the basis for a real game, of course, but the idea is to have some fun and see how the rules work.

First, get two to four willing friends together. Use the *Apprentice* rules or a shallow walk through Chapter Two to make up characters, and keep reassuring them that this is just an introductory, practice run, and any result will be perfectly playable.

The scenario provided is easy and not especially profound: it simply puts the characters into danger. It's kind of *The Amityville Horror* situation, a big scary house with danger lurking around every corner. There are a variety of possible demon-sorcerer and demon-demon and sorcerer-sorcerer interactions, as well as a variety of possible outcomes regarding an NPC sorcerer.

The back-story

Alonzo Clarence Shaw was a sorcerous adept of surpassing power and reputation. He was not a politician, but they needed his help to get elected. He didn't own any companies, but he ran consortiums and mergers that dictated what companies did. He didn't belong to the mob, but they did what he said. If you want to use the material in Chapter Seven as a base, he'd be a major player in the Black Wheel.

The moment of transition, cont.

Third, you need the leisure to consider whether to spike any of the Kickers. You see, all Kickers need to be given more depth and content by the GM, because they have to provide a basis for various NPCs' actions during play, and almost all Kickers require making up a few NPCs from scratch. But spiking a Kicker is something else: it turns a logistic crisis into an ethical one.

For example, remember the Kicker I described earlier, "just released from prison?" I spiked it by telling Ron, the player, that when his character went to work in his new job, doing the accounting for a bar and grill, he discovers the books are cooked – i.e., someone's been skimming money. The question is how honestly the character will behave at this moment, given the myriad options (conceal it, expose it, try to get in on it, try to fix it without telling, and more).

It's especially important when a Kicker strikes you as a bit bland, lacking in urgency or depth. Asking the player to re-write it often devolves into bizarre negotiations; it's much better simply to spike it in prep. I've also found that when doing so, as well as in general, one does well to clarify to everyone else that once a Kicker moves from player to GM, it may well undergo considerable interpretation within the letter of its phrasing.

The training run

This is truly a historical artifact. It began as a demo, for which it served pretty well back in the early promo days, then it developed into a quick semi-pregenerated character method which became the core of the Apprentice. Finally, I extracted the NPC material for this part of this chapter. The strong part is the text about players' decisions, that they can make of the whole thing what they will, up to and including not considering Yzor the enemy. That came out really well in the demo experiences.

However, the problematic text is the arrant railroading at several levels in order to get there, at several levels. Part of the problem is the demo origin, and part of it is the limitations of prose at that time, but the fact is that this section of core book text is firmly stuck in the "whose story is it anyway" swamp, more so than the actual demo was in practice.

Trouble for him is, he's dead. One day one of his prize demons got irked with his high-handed ways, and it ate him. Yzor is the demon, and it is not only as big as a house, it **is** a house, more precisely, a tasteful minor mansion on the rocky shores of the Pacific Northwest.

> **Here's Yzor. It's an Object, of course, with a Desire for power and the Need to eat demons, although people will do in a pinch. Its scores are Stamina 10, Will 11, Lore 9, Power 11, and it is still Bound at +4 (so simply commanding it do something, for example, would be against 11 + 4 = 15 dice). Its abilities are Big, Hold, (sticking targets to its walls), Special Damage (to anyone touching walls, floor, or ceiling), Travel (conferred onto unsuspecting users!), Perception (anything said or done inside its walls), Vitality, Armor, Protection, Cloak, and Spawn.**

How do its abilities translate into play? It can sense anything said or done within its walls, and it can withstand tremendous physical damage (high Stamina + Big). It can alter its interior to move people around inside, that is, conferring Travel on them and screwing with their perceptions of the situation with Cloak. This is also useful to keep people from getting outside. The Hold and Special Damage mean that the walls can actually suck people and especially demons partly into them. Finally, it has two Spawn roaming around the house, which might be defined as weird rippling shapes in the walls (like in *Frighteners*), or as actual people-like demons mingling with the guests.

> **The Spawn guys have Stamina 4, Will 5, Lore 4, and Power 5, with the abilities Vitality, Armor, Protection, and Special Damage (bite). They like to eat demons too, but know better than to deprive their parent, so they are reconciled to eating people instead.**

Yzor is hungry and wants demons to eat, and fortunately for it a sorceress named Yvonne came to see Shaw one day and got trapped. Yvonne fed her demons to the house, but it realized it couldn't afford to let her go. She has made a deal with it: she'll throw a big society party, pretending that Shaw is still alive, and using her coven connections to get a lot of sorcerers there. In return, she gets a chance to escape.

> **Here's Yvonne. She's pretty close to insane with desperation but is cynical enough not to be wracked with remorse for her actions. First and foremost, she's a survivor. I envision her as looking like a dark-haired Michelle Pfeiffer but skinnier, more intellectual and intense-looking, very tan, dressed to the**

nines in a knockout of a dark blue evening gown. She's sexy in a transgressive, scary way.

Stamina 2, athletic regime
Will 5, user + enraged
Lore 5, coven
Cover 4, deviant film producer
Price –1, desperate, applies to all actions when she's not in direct physical danger
Humanity 1

The scenario

Why look, all the player-characters are going to a party. Their Kickers need to accomplish two things.

▼ Get the characters into the party itself. High-society types just get an invitation and show it to the doorman. For others it might be harder, which gives them a chance to see how some demon abilities work (e.g. Travel + Transport, or Daze).

▼ Provide the players with something they think they're there for. This could range from planning to assassinate Shaw, planning to ask him for help, meeting a fellow coven member, or even for some very mundane purpose. One neat idea is for a sorcerer who's been dueling with Shaw for twenty years to send an apprentice to find out what's happened to his or her best enemy.

Given the Kickers and the character's Covers, let the characters have any gear the players want, only disallowing things that are blatantly stupid. There's a lot of latitude, though. It is perfectly all right, for example, to let someone pack a rocket launcher in the trunk of their car. Of course, getting to it later in the scenario might be difficult.

The session might consist of three stages. The first consists of the player-characters getting into the mansion and mingling with (or perhaps skulking around) the party. The GM has to decide what sort of party this is. It could be a perfectly normal assortment of movers and shakers on the Pacific Coast, or, given Yvonne's proclivities, a bunch of pervo-deviants with too much money, or anything in between. It sort of depends on what sort of fate the GM has in mind for the guests; bluntly, the worse people they are, the less it matters if Yzor eats them.

Give the players a chance to spot one another's Lore Telltales, or perhaps a demon's Telltale. Make sure one or more of them gets a look at Yvonne and roll to see if they notice her Humanity loss. Describe her eyes and

mannerisms to be consistent with your concept of what such drastic reduction in Humanity means: a blasted empty look, a hungry depraved look, a distracted otherworldly look, or whatever. All of the players' demons are scared of Yvonne; they know a sorcerer on the edge when they see one. They only attack or interact with her if directly ordered to do so, and will probably demand a quick Need fix before or after. Remember also that the demons will not be inclined to use their abilities dramatically before the eyes of the party guests, at least not initially.

The Spawn demons may well be noticed too, as well as the weird art pieces all over the place, especially since each one subtly incorporates human bones: real ones. These are Yzor's Telltale, and characters with high Lore scores will know that they do not correspond to Yvonne's type of sorcery.

Some of the players will probably look around for Shaw, or direct their demons to do so. Establish that he is simply not to be found, and have any demons that get separated from their master fail to return. This might be unpleasant for a character who is Linked to a demon, as the Link will be broken. Later on, have these demons return, in a panic, carrying a damage penalty or two. You might even have them emerge, shrieking, from a wall in the presence of another player-character.

Once the players are good and weirded out (they might even have realized that they can't get out very easily), stage two begins when Yvonne moves in on one of them (of course, she's spotted their Telltales a mile away). How this happens depends a little on the players' style. If one is kind of a raunchy sort, have her attempt to seduce him in a guest bedroom. If, on the other hand, the players are more mission-oriented tactical sorts, have her claim that Shaw has them trapped there. Her only interest is to get the character somewhere private, relatively distracted, and then have the Spawn demons feed the character and his or her demon to Yzor. Again, depending on the group, this scene could be rated anywhere from family-values-appropriate to triple-X.

If the players have set up some interactions among their characters by this point and maybe exchanged some information, Yvonne's move might precipitate a concerted action on their part. The GM might help things along by having character A's curious demon follow character B as he or she is led away with Yvonne.

In stage 3, Yzor loses patience and hits hard. The walls will actively suck at targets; the Spawn demons will begin to attack the guests and feed them to (for instance) the hot tub. This should be a reaction to a specific action on a player's part, perhaps helping a demon escape from the walls or a dustup with one of the Spawn. The GM should feel free to get as bloodily or

Closing Words

Consider a full set of prepared work for an upcoming first session of Sorcerer, produced through the dialogue I've tried to describe in this chapter. If you're going to be GMing, you have the characters' diagrams, the sheets for their demons, a list of relevant and active NPCs; and from those, you've created a certain amount of back-story, some usable Bangs, maybe some new NPCs, and some idea about locations and activities, and perhaps found some excitement in the prospect of playing any of these. What makes GMing Sorcerer special is that all of this is already unstable. Every sorcerer's life is in flux – something has to happen.

But there's one more choice awaiting you, which lies in the freedom to decide just how hard you're going to push that point, via larger-scale events in the setting.

It may be that when you look at the material that jumps right off the diagrams and demon sheets, it's enough – "Holy shit," you say, "This is going to be some ride," and you feel both thrilled and uneasy at being responsible for such stuff. That's great. That's what I do in most of the Sorcerer games I GM for, for instance, the game with the tattoo-artist character I wrote about in the notes for Chapter 2, to keep the whole context very personal. The city in which the characters moved and struggled did not itself notice or change or provide much beyond its own existing history and cultural diversity. It began and remained stable in a kind of enclosed, existential way.

But it's also possible to go quite far with stuff that happens not only to or near the characters, but to the whole context of their lives and everyone else's, as long as such events seem to you to provide the best arena for the issues and personalities that have already been established. For example, the "gun" game which I described earlier was set in the city in which we, the real people, were sitting. During the first session, I shattered that city's society and infrastructure with the most simple and effective terrorist bombing that my own mind could dream up.

surrealistically graphic as he or she wants; in movie terms, this is the special effect boys' extravaganza scene. Also, at this point, the characters' demons will no longer care whether they get noticed by partygoers; they will only want to escape.

How all this ends depends entirely on the players' choices, and it may even happen that some of them end up on opposite sides. The GM should follow the players' lead in full. Some of the options include the following.

▼ Pure combat: defeat Yvonne, defeat the Spawn, defeat Yzor, and walk out. All this might prove difficult.

▼ Ally with Yvonne against Yzor, perhaps to Banish it (its resistance would be Will + Power + Binding strength, at 26 dice!). This entails convincing her that they are too much trouble to kill, and also that they are to be trusted. She is certainly smart enough to tell when they are just making promises to save their skins.

▼ Ally with Yzor, which involves re-Binding it. This option is rather tricky, as Yzor considers itself to be in the advantage and probably will demand a demon or two to eat as a simple gesture of good faith, even before the Binding begins.

One helpful notion is to allow the players to find Shaw's skin, which happens to be stretched across the ceiling of the master bedroom (his face all distorted near one corner, yuck) and serves as Yzor's personal symbol of the Binding contract. Destroying it might give them some bonuses to counteract those extra dice, but clearly Yzor will defend it to the death and be willing to attack sorcerers directly if they threaten it.

Some notes on play

My experience with neophyte SORCERER players in this scenario is that they begin rather cowardly. They have a hard time realizing that their characters are the toughest, baddest, proudest men and women alive, and they don't grasp that they can order any demon around and even Punish it if they feel like it. When combat starts up, they are scared of taking damage and whine when their characters get, for instance, bitten by one of the Spawn.

However, things shape up quickly. Someone tells a demon what to do and it does it, or they learn that even lethal damage can be held in abeyance with one's Will, or they see what a Boost Stamina can do. Best of all, they learn to pile on bonus dice through role-playing. The GM should encourage insights of this sort and use their appearance as signals to move on to new stages of the story. In a quick psychological flurry, the players get moving fast once they catch on, and the GM has the pleasurable and challenging task of trying to keep up with them.

Closing Words, cont.

It was definitely off the radar of any of the characters, whose sheets concerned things like their jobs and their friends. But it did throw the outlaw-like willingness to violence of the characters into the harshest moral climate that I could think of.

And here's another, perhaps even more unsettling point. Because the GM is not a "storyteller," and because the plot emerges only via the events of play, you must face the blunt reality that, therefore, a given story created by playing Sorcerer does not always wind up coherent. The villain who's responsible for it all, the Swiss-watch precision with which tiny details are recognized as indicators of important processes or activities, the clarity of why this person did that thing at that precise moment, the stunning revelations delivered with perfect timing … none of these are guaranteed to work out effectively. To play Sorcerer, especially as GM, is to accept that play is an *attempt* to arrive at a story and therefore can, in that attempt, fail in one or more aspects.

I love using the tattoo-artist game for examples of all sorts of things, and here's another: ultimately, the story as a whole made little sense. I never did manage to explain why one corpse's skin had been hung in the shower of one of the characters, nor were a particular dead character's motives for some of his actions ever developed convincingly. But it was a great game for seeing sorcerers come to terms with their demons, and quite moving in terms of imagery, characters in motion, and consequences. Their personal arcs were great. But as a whole, a movie reviewer might have called it a "gorgeous mess," and to that I'd have to say, "Yes, that's about it." As raw plot-based story, the results would have qualified as a brave try, at most.

And that is perfectly OK. I urge you, to hell with being the great entertainer, the auteur, the storyteller. To hell with anticipating the praise and appreciation of yet another group awed by your mad skilz of "making it all make sense" as a brilliant masterwork. It may or may not make sense at all. Sometimes it will, better than you could have imagined. You cannot tell, beforehand. Your only role when going into it is to go ahead and find your savage fun in the shudders, pitch all your prep work in together with everyone else's, and *find out* what you can jointly create.

Chapter Five:

RULES FOR SORCERY

Jeremy McHugh
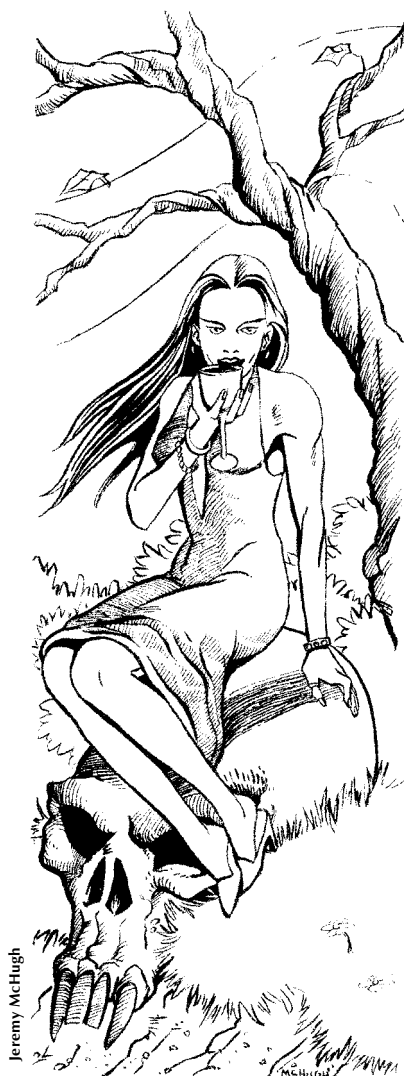
SORCERY

All player-characters in SORCERER can do all the rituals listed on the Sorcery Chart below, at any time during play. The rituals are: **CONTACTING, SUMMONING, BINDING, PUNISHING, BANISHING**, and **CONTAINING**. Even a naive sorcerer (Lore = 1) can perform them, albeit clumsily. All players should be familiar with the Chart; it is simple but has many permutations and important narrative consequences.

Demons cannot perform sorcery. The rituals on the Chart are not available to them as stated tasks under any circumstances.

All of the listed rituals take anywhere from half an hour to three hours to perform correctly. A sorcerer may attempt to speed things up, like Banishing a demon right there in combat, for example, but in doing so his or her relevant score is reduced to one die. Conversely, a sorcerer may choose to

"The system gave mechanics for certain important stuff that play would necessarily address, without micromanaging the path we would take."

-- David

Now we are really in the thick of play! This chapter doesn't have anything to do with GM or player roles beyond what's in Chapter 4. Like Chapter 6, it's a subroutine of Chapter 4, specifically a toolkit for anyone playing a sorcerer and/or a demon, with the more general rules applying in full no matter what.
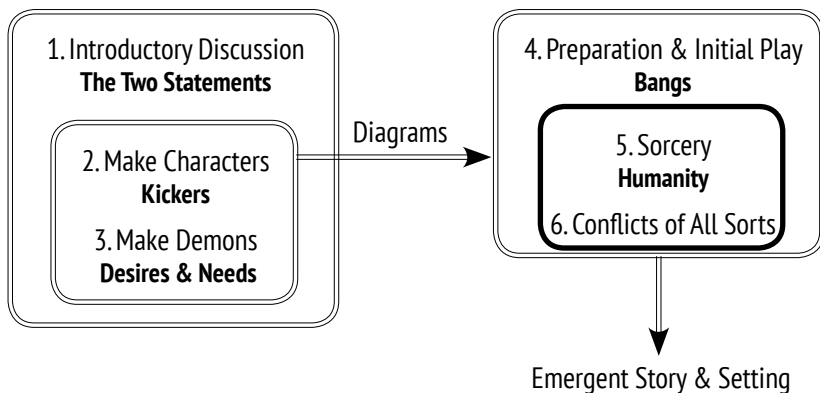
The rules here are driven by one, solitary idea: don't wimp out! Here's where the system struts its stuff, in terms of (i) when it can be used (stated actions), (ii) how it's used (mechanics and Color), and (iii) most importantly, what happens (narrating effects and working with them later).

For the GM, your job is to stay true to whatever the dice and narrations so far, up until this very moment in play, mandate to happen. At first glance this seems straightforward, until you realize it means, no editing and fudging, and above all, apply those results *hard*.

That ties directly into, or rather is a specific application of, my points about abandoning the whole "GM's story" paradigm in Chapter Four. You aren't telling "the story." Without that burden of playing for the future, you are freed to play hard *right now* regarding the sorcery system's results, which then become a springboard for coming up with what your characters will do about it.

For the players, that means you possess remarkable raw effectiveness via your character. Couple that with the fact that in Sorcerer, the GM has no story that you are supposed to cooperate with or guess at. Huge in-game impact + actual freedom to direct your character's actions? That's something new.

Every player-character knows all the sorcerous rituals. You don't have to level up or buy the skills or meet any thresholds at all. Instead, you use them and see what happens. You even have unlimited scope of permitted demon concepts and builds.

---(cont.)

take from eight to twenty-four hours to perform a ritual, being very careful in all its details, in which case he or she gains a 1-die bonus to the roll.

THE SORCERY CHART

Ritual	Sorcerer's	vs. Demon's	Modifiers
CONTACT	Lore	Power	Sequence of tries
			Drugs
SUMMON	Will – Humanity	Power	Sequence of tries
			Drugs
BIND	Appropriate Score	Will	Desire and Need
PUNISH	Will	Stamina	N/A
BANISH	Will + Humanity	Power + Will	N/A
CONTAIN	Lore	Power	Preparation

CONTACTING a demon requires expanding one's mind well out of commonly-acknowledged boundaries. The sorcerer's Lore is matched against the demon's Power.

Bonus dice for Contacting are awarded for massive doses of hallucinogens refined by the sorcerer for this use. For every hit dropped, award the sorcerer one die as a bonus. However, there is a cost to this sort of activity: at the end of the Contact attempt, successful or not, the sorcerer must roll his or her Will vs. dice equal to the number of hits dropped. Failure means that his or her Will is impaired by one for several weeks; total failure (no victories) means the loss is permanent!

One can continue to attempt a Contact even after a failed roll, with a penalty of one die to Lore and Stamina both per extra attempt. If the cumulative penalties bring Lore to zero, the sorcerer is catatonic for several hours; if they bring Stamina to zero, he or she faints, again for several hours. The clever player might raise the character's Lore with hallucinogens and Stamina with stimulants... the clever GM will certainly allow this but will also make the most of various physical and social problems that might arise thereby.

A player may describe a demon for his or her character to Contact, even specifying numerically if he or she wants, but the GM can always alter the

Introduction, cont.

The rituals are even built to operate in strange, emergent combinations which are impossible to predict or map out in the abstract – it all depends on what you decide to do with them in the exact and immediate context of this particular character, in this particular game.

I won't lie to you: the system is unforgiving and a sorcerer character will often not get what they want, or in the way they want it. Your character must strive to succeed, through stubbornness as much as by dice and role-playing strategy. Never mind any visions or plans for what you want the character to be like or to become. Save your imagination for the now … and *use* it.

Rituals in action

Dice are important, yes, but as I see it, the real gold of the rituals is the potential for them to tap into the already-established Color and content of play. My advice is, when a player-character conducts a ritual, get into it and say what it looks like, sounds like, and feels like, in detail. This is, if you will, where the special effects budget (or the artist's ability, or the novelist's prose) comes forward. Why? Because all this content will in turn become raw material and scaffolding for later statements and descriptions, themselves of great and hitherto-unanticipated consequence.

You might wonder why to bother with the snapshot option, considering its weakness in dice. However, if you're playing a sorcerer, role-playing and rollover bonuses do play their parts in the right circumstances, and the payoff for the right ritual in the middle of a serious rapid-fire confrontation is enormous. Or if you're the GM, consider that any demon or NPC sorcerer will react to such an attempt most personally, whether successful or not.

A quick note about Humanity loss due to Humanity checks: you only ever lose one point at a time. This is just in case you thought that Humanity would be reduced by one point per victory scored by the opposing roll, which shows up occasionally in new groups.

Contact

When you've Contacted a demon, certain kinds of interactions are possible. First and foremost is communication of any kind. I thought it was clear, but now I know to say it here for sure: just because you Contacted a demon doesn't mean you have to go ahead and Summon it, and just because you Summoned it doesn't mean you have to Bind it. Contacting solely for the purpose of conversation and perhaps bargaining about other rituals is perfectly fine, and it makes a lot of sense once a number of demons have been observed in play and, in some cases, Banished.

Certain rituals are also possible through a Contact: Summon (obviously) and Punish, but not Bind (the demon has to be real for that), Contain (ditto), or Banish (obviously).

demon who actually shows up (see Contacts and Summons During Play, below).

Once Contacted, a demon can be perceived and spoken to; any kind of information can be exchanged. But there is no way for either sorcerer or demon to affect one another, either physically or in terms of Binding, unless the demon is Summoned. The communication stays open, so to speak, for about an hour, unless the sorcerer terminates the Contact or makes another Contact roll to prolong it.

SUMMONING a demon may only be attempted if it has been Contacted, whether by the summoner or by someone else. All demons want to be Summoned and will not resist; the only thing that the sorcerer must overcome with his or her Will (as modified by Humanity) is the demon's intrinsic Power. The same penalties to Stamina incurred by repeated attempts to Contact also apply to Summon. A summoned demon is not automatically bound, which is why the wise sorcerer may perform a Contain ritual before trying.

One method for improving the chances to Summon is a sacrifice: killing a living thing during the ritual. The victim's Stamina or Will, whichever is higher, is used as a one-time bonus to the roll. The social disadvantages of making this practice a habit should be clear both to players and GM; furthermore, performing a sacrifice entails making another Humanity check. If it is a human sacrifice, this check has a penalty equal to the victim's Humanity instead of the usual single-die penalty.

> "But I didn't think the ritual worked."
> "What ritual?"
> "We tried to call you up at the meeting last week, but I didn't think it worked because I didn't draw the circle of power with a virgin blade that had been quenched in blood."
> "What did you use?"
> "A nail file."
> There was a pause...
> "Are you offended, Great Spirit?"
> "I am about to bestow the greatest power in the world upon a woman who draws circles in the dirt with a nail file. I don't know. Give me a minute."
> —C. Moore, Practical Demonkeeping

BANISHING a demon is much like Summoning, although the demon will almost certainly resist with its Will, and the sorcerer uses his or her Humanity as a bonus. If the demon is bound, the strength of the binding (regardless of whose favor it supports) is used as a penalty. A banished demon must be re-Contacted and re-Summoned in order to trouble anyone, ever again. The successful sorcerer may make a Humanity Gain roll (current Humanity vs. demon's Power) if (1) the demon's Power was greater than his or her Humanity and (2) the sorcerer did not Summon that demon in the first place.

Contact, cont.

I admit that it takes a certain non-intuitive effort to make a failed Contact roll into a valid, interesting, productive moment of play. "Nothing never happens," allegedly, but the chance exists for a player to put everything he or she has into a Contact attempt, and then be faced with what seems to the player to be a flat-out empty whiff. There are two solutions I've seen and done.

One is to treat the Color and in-game effort of the attempt itself as a social issue regarding other characters close to that character. Given that some crisis situation exists, the sorcerer has just spent a day, probably, to this whacked-out activity which has apparently been worthless. How do they respond? Supportively or with outrage? The other way is as unsubtle as it gets: as a kind of damage, probably on the Fists column of the damage table.

Finally, why are Contacting and Summoning so hard, anyway? Several people have complained that the game isn't very satisfying if you want a character seizing demons from the air left and right. My call was and is that the difficulty is thematically important: sorcery is inherently an adverse activity, and even an adept has to suffer and risk much for its most significant rituals, and they might not work. In other words, you don't get to have whatever you want exactly the way you want it, and sorcerers worth the name must deal with failure all the time and suck it up.

Banishing and Humanity

Power is best understood as the demon's successful imposition upon reality, in both the degree to which the universe is violated, and in the degree which the universe is forced to accept once the demon is here.

Comparing it with Summoning may be useful. It's hard to Summon a high-Power demon because the universe resists such a nasty violation of reality. But it's also hard to get rid of that same demon because once it's here, the universe has been bitch-slapped into including the demon into reality, at least unless Need erodes the demon's Power.

Note that a sorcerer cannot gain Humanity by Banishing a demon of lower Power. The logic is that in terms of score totals, the demon is "less here" than the sorcerer's Humanity. The sorcerer is operating within his or her already-established range of impact on the universe via Humanity. It seemed to me then, and does now, that Humanity gain in this context requires getting out of what might be considered a Humanity safety zone, especially because unlike all other modes of Humanity gain, this one is not explicitly associated with doing something decent.

Gary Simpson

BINDING a demon is the most important act of sorcery. One may have contacted and summoned a demon to Bind it, or one may merely encounter it in reality. The means of Binding can vary from person to person, which is why "appropriate score" is used instead of some specific skill. You can challenge it, promise it something, or even seduce it, whatever is appropriate to the demon's Need and your personality. The score you roll against the demon's Will depends on the Binding rite, as follows.

▼ Stamina: wrestling the demon, undergoing some sort of agonizing initiation ritual, dancing or chanting, sexual exhaustion.

▼ Will: asserting open authority, mutual exchange of services, emotional seduction, negotiated "sale," animal-style dominance.

▼ Lore: tattooing, painting or drawing an image or rune, creating/shaping an object, intoning a formal, memorized formula.

Binding an un-Bound demon always works! Either the demon or the sorcerer will have the success for the roll, and the total number of that individual's victories will be used as a bonus for all their interactions thereafter. Demons love to be poorly bound.

> **EXAMPLE:** Joanna (Will 6) is Binding a small demon (Will 4) with a riddling contest, so they match Wills. She rolls 6, 6, 5, 4, 2, 2, 1 (a rotten roll!). It rolls 10, 8, 4, 3, for success with two victories. The GM records that the demon now has a +2 dice bonus whenever it and Joanna are matching rolls for any reason.

Binding

I'll revisit some of the points made in Chapter Three because here we are talking about direct application in real play. The core concept is that Binding is thematically unique, because it establishes ground rules for a specific *relationship*.

Binding by definition makes the Binder responsible for providing the demon with its Need. Both participants understand this in full, for any and every instance of Binding, even if the sorcerer is Naive. Failure to receive its Need makes the demon lose Power, just as a Parasite or Possessor loses Power when outside a host. Under-supplying or frequently-supplying the Need does affect Binding strength and the demon's tendency to rebel or not to rebel.

The demon's Binder is not responsible for indulging its Desire and Binding strength is not affected by how much the demon is getting its Desire stroked. Doing things in accord with the Desire might give a bonus die to various interactions, including commands, but again, that's not a matter of Binding strength. Similarly, failing to indulge a Desire does not incur penalties to interaction or ritual rolls, nor will it directly lead a demon down the path of rebellion. A demon will not lose Power by missing out on its Desire as it will with its Need.

Binding always works – what does that mean? It means that the roll to Bind doesn't connote success or failure, but rather the conditions of the act. Doing the act succeeds, case closed. A few points:

❧ Binding is a sorcerous ritual, meaning it has to be initiated by a sorcerer; demons can't do that.

❧ Because it's a ritual, the lengthy time requirements do apply if you want to use more dice than a snapshot single die.

❧ It always works on a demon who is not itself currently Bound. You can't Bind a Bound demon; it has to break its existing Binding first.

❧ All Binding rituals establish the sorcerer's commitment to provide the demon with its Need.

Even with those stipulations, Binding is a huge plot-affecting act. It puts a wrench right into the classic GM notion of throwing a ravening un-Bound demon at the characters as a "monster." One single-die snapshot Binding solves *that* problem.

That goes double regarding information. You buried a deep dark secret in your back-story? All it takes is a player-character summoning a demon with a Desire for Knowledge and asking it the right question. Or the Hint ability. In this game, if they want to know, then they will.

It is strongly recommended that players attempt to increase their Binding rolls with appropriate role-playing, using the bonuses and methods described in Chapter One, and avoiding possible penalties. The main penalties to Binding include (1) offering the wrong sort of contract, which is unlikely to happen because a demon is in an extreme state of Need when it is summoned and will not conceal what it wants; and (2) annoying it in some way, like Punishing it first or some such thing.

A Bound demon cannot be re-Bound unless it is freed from the first contract, which requires the demon to rebel against its initial Binding roll (see below). There is no upper limit to how many demons a sorcerer may Bind, but a demon can only be Bound to one sorcerer at a time.

Binding a demon brings it fully into existence and confers on the binder the responsibility for meeting the demon's Need, as well as any other agreement the two come to regarding what they want to do in the world. What the demon wants is explicit in its Desire, and what the sorcerer wants – well, that's what a SORCERER story is all about.

PUNISHING a demon removes its Power in dice equal to the sorcerer's victories. The penalty applies to all the demon's abilities; the dice are regained with Stamina rolls vs. the strength of the Punish. This hurts the demon a lot, and they really hate to be

> ... it is only about things which concern us most that we lie clearly and with utter conviction.
> —M. Moorcock, Elric of Melniboné

punished. You can punish your own Bound demon automatically, removing Power equal to or less than your Will, down to Power 1. Punishing someone else's Bound demon uses the strength of the Binding as a penalty.

CONTAINING a demon means limiting its movement, whether to a certain vicinity or relative to another person or object. A Contained demon absolutely cannot move itself outside or across the Contain's boundaries. The demon is also immune to Banishment as a consequence of Need or lack of a host or master (although it can be formally Banished by a sorcerer). The sorcerer must prepare the focus for the Containment, such as a pentagram, adding a bonus die for every successful Lore roll against his or her own Stamina, which represents the concentration necessary. The Containment isn't tested until a demon challenges it, which then determines whether it was well made or not by a Basic Success roll. A given Containment must be defined at the outset as general (applying to any demon) or specific (applying to a certain individual or type).

SORCERER does not require that player-characters have every nuance of their knowledge listed and quantified on a sheet in order to dictate what they

The closed Binding roll

I go back and forth all the time about the closed/secret roll for Binding. On the one hand, it's one of the few actually fun instances of withheld knowledge in my experience of role-playing games. On the other hand, it is definitely exceptional and potentially counter to some of the player-knowledge heavy aspects of Sorcerer. I more-or-less punt in actual play, meaning that I roll the dice openly, record the result, but don't say it aloud and don't make a big deal out of the number in any other way. So if the player simply can't live without knowing, he or she can pay attention at that point, and if not, not.

Punish

Punish may seem like a secondary ritual, but it can be used strategically, specifically to modify the odds for Summon and Banish.

Don't forget the part about waiving the roll for a demon you've Bound. Consider: here you are, faced with a ravenous and vicious un-Bound demon. Fine – Bind it, with a snapshot action, which is guaranteed to work. Then you can Punish it down to the ground for free, and then you or someone else gets a way better chance to Banish it. The only risk is whether the Binding strength is high, which would mitigate the advantage, but it's not a bad combination given a bit of luck.

On a more thespian note, Punish is fun because the rules mandate that demons hate it, but note that it's not fuel for rebellion against Binding. In other words, hate it as they do, demons still accept Punish as part of the ordinary circumstance of being Bound. Which is pretty disturbing and ties into the baseline notion that although Binding is a relationship, even at its most mutual it can never be a really *good* relationship.

Contain

Like Binding, Contain always works, although in a different way. The question is not whether it can be set up, but whether it will hold, when and if challenged. Therefore its automatic properties are worth considering.

One such property is to protect a demon from its own Need. This is a big deal; it's the single and only way that a demon is not jonesing for it. Whether this factors into what the demon wants and might agree to, depends a lot on the immediate circumstances, but it might matter a lot. Especially since if, for whatever reason, the demon is content with being Contained, it need not challenge the barrier and can therefore enjoy the benefits as long as it likes, or until something else breaks it.

Another property is its flexibility in scope, placement, and function. The boundary is basically a simple line that any and all demons may not cross, but it can be drawn in whatever shape or placement, its configuration can be stable or adaptive, and it can describe a field in two, three, or (ouch!) four dimensions. And it sort of matters, a lot, whether it's placed such that a given demon is kept in or out.

may or may not do. To the contrary: the player has a free hand, within the limits of his or her concept of the character's Lore, in proposing that the character has known a particular sorcerous detail or concept all along. In other words, although the player has only this minute decided to Summon up a Gibbering Googly-Moogly, the narrative effect of doing so is to establish that the character has indeed known how to do this very thing since (say) before play began.

Group sorcery

Sorcerous cooperation is very effective. Binding and Punishing are always one-on-one, but Banishing, Summoning, Contacting, and Containing can get some bonuses through helpers. One sorcerer is designated the primary, and he or she will incur any Humanity checks as a result of the action. The helpers roll just as the primary does; any successes they get confer the victories as a bonus to the primary, and any failures confer no penalty. Along with the usual role-playing bonuses, this is the smartest way to increase one's sorcerous chances, far better than messy sacrifices and dangerous drugs. It's the main reason why covens exist and why adepts take on apprentices.

Sorcerous rituals in action

The Contact. Kavita, the sorceress, has Stamina 2, Will 5, and Lore 3, and at this point she has a Humanity of 5. She has defined a demon with Power 4, so the basic roll is 3 vs. 4. She takes three hits of hallucinogenic drugs to boost her Lore to 6, so it's a basic 6 vs. 4 roll. Immediately after the attempt, successful or not, she will have to roll her Will (5) vs. 3, or suffer a one-die penalty to her Will thereafter. She also must immediately roll her Humanity against the demon's Power, a 5 on 4 roll, to check for Humanity loss. This step takes about two hours in all.

> O King, as a child weaveth a daisy chain, thus easily did you call up these shapes of terror. Not in such wise fareth he that calleth out of the deep the deadly terror indeed; but with toil and sweat and straining of thought, will, heart, and sinew fareth he.
>
> —E. R. Eddison, The Worm Ouroboros

What happens? Her first roll succeeds, with a high of two 10s vs. one 10, the demon appears in the air, and they can talk to one another. Her Will roll also succeeds, so she doesn't get dizzy and careless from the drug. But her Humanity roll has a high of 8, and the demon's Power got two 10's, so her Humanity instantly drops to 4.

The Summons. The basic roll is her Will minus her Humanity (5–4=1) vs. the demon's Power, which is 4. She may also carry over the single victory from

Contain, cont.

The list of possible variations goes on:

- It can be physically disrupted or strictly subject only to demonic challenge, as conceived
- A sorcerer might be able to open holes for demons to get in and out, or not
- It can be associated with an object/area or not
- I can be fixed in place or mobile
- It can be a trap that nabs a demon who touches it, or a zone which must be entered

Contain might seem squishy written out like that in the abstract, with all these ifs and buts, but it's actually quite solid in actual play which is grounded in that particular game's two basic statements and its established look-and-feel for sorcery.

Group sorcery

The text says that helping is very effective, but that's only true if you're the primary and it's written from that perspective.

I didn't write the helping rules in order to foster teamwork-tactics during play. I wrote them to permit one sorcerer to bully or convince another to serve his or her agenda, instead of whatever that guy might be doing on his own.

See the difference? These rules are not about tactically increasing the probability of success. They are about whether someone is doing what he or she wants, or what another person wants.

And to clarify, only the primary roller incurs a Humanity check, if the ritual in question calls for one.

If tactical teamwork is in fact relevant, then don't use the helping rules. In a desperate, fast situation in which everyone has a common goal, as in a desperate snapshot ritual to Banish a demon, then don't team up, just have everyone take his or her single-die shot separately.

Kavita example

I really should have rolled the dice and reported every single number. I thought at the time it would have distracted from the other points I was trying to make, but in fact, the omission hampered them, so people missed the rolled-over victories and the bonuses.

the Contact roll as a bonus die for this one. However, 2 against 4 is still a lousy roll, so she enlists her sorcerous mentor to help as well as killing an animal with Stamina 4 (this would be a goat or sheep level of Stamina). Afterwards, she must check for Humanity loss again, this time rolling 4 dice vs. 4 (Humanity against itself), and yet again as well for the sacrifice. This step takes about two hours.

What happens? The mentor rolls his own Will minus Humanity (which happens to be 6 minus 2) against the demon's Power (4) in a basic contest, succeeding with one victory, so Kavita now has a 1-die bonus for his help, a 4-die bonus for the sacrifice, and another for the carried-over bonus from the Contact. The total is 7 dice vs. 4; she wins, so the demon now physically appears in reality, pretty much just like she'd envisioned. The Humanity checks, this time, are successful. So far so good!

The Binding. Kavita is dealing with a demon who likes contracts and bargains, so the Binding roll is her Will against its Will: 5 on 4. Conceivably, any victories from the Summons could be used as bonus dice, if the role-playing and details are appropriate; for purposes of this example, let's say they are not, so no bonuses are granted. Kavita decides to hold out and haggle for hours upon hours, so the GM awards her a bonus of 1 die, for a final roll of 6 on 4. Because she took the extra time for the bonus, the GM has her make a Stamina check against 3 dice to avoid fainting. And again, Kavita must check for Humanity loss.

What happens? The Binding, of course, works perfectly, and the GM secretly records the result. It so happens the demon wins with one little victory, so "+1: demon" is entered in the GM's notes. She fails the Stamina check, so collapses in exhaustion. She will awaken with a newly Bound demon at her service.

Of course, this example is missing all kinds of back-story. The GM knows how much the demon conforms to Kavita's player's description, there is probably some role-playing to dramatize and possibly add some dice to the Binding roll (especially if the player actually wrote up the contract), and the mentor and Kavita certainly need some interaction as well. There were four Humanity checks along the way; if any were missed, how is that reflected as an effect on Kavita as a person? And finally, what was going on with all the other characters in the game during that final, day-long Binding roll?

In-game Contacts and Summons

The demon that begins play with the character doesn't have to be Summoned; the character's own beginning story should describe how he or she came to encounter and Bind it and may or may not include a Summons.

The only required Humanity check for the starting character is for the Binding.

But sooner or later characters will want to Summon something up (if not, the GM isn't making things dangerous enough!). In this case, the player of the relevant character must provide at minimum the following: the list of demon abilities desired and how they confer, the demon's Type, and the demon's Desire. The GM writes up the demon, assigning the Power level based on the abilities (e.g. having three abilities implies a Power of at least 4) and filling in any details, most notably the Need.

Alternatively, the player may provide a fully written-up demon, with the exception of its Need. In this case, if the thing is successfully Contacted, the GM may alter details of the demon's write-up, for example substituting abilities or changing the Desire, or even changing the Type. One detail is altered for each die of the demon's roll that is greater than any die of the character's. This method, by itself, should not add new abilities or increase scores, so the demon's scores will be left unchanged.

In either case, the GM may also employ the option to add a point of Power for each victory the player gained. If this option is used, by itself it should change nothing else about the demon. For example, if a character Contacts a demon with Power 4 and rolls three victories total, then its Power gets boosted to 7, but its other scores and its number of abilities remain unchanged.

> EXAMPLE: modifying a Contacted demon
> Joanna the sorceress has decided to Contact and Summon a demon. The player, Elizabeth, presents the GM with the following information: a Passing demon with the abilities Travel, Transport, and Protection, none of which may be conferred (it's a Passser), with Desire for sensation. She goes on to specify its scores at Stamina 3, Will 4, Lore 3, and Power 4.
>
> The GM keeps an eye out for an opportunity to alter things a bit when the Contact roll is made. Joanna rolls 6 dice (given her Lore score and various modifiers), getting 10, 10, 8, 7, 7, and 5. The demon's Power is 4, so the GM rolls four dice, getting 10, 5, 5, and 5. Joanna has won with four victories.
>
> This roll also means the GM is out of luck: no die of the demon's was higher than a die of Joanna's. The demon appears very much as she conceives it. The GM may increase its Power by four, to a score of 8, because she succeeded with four victories.
>
> However, what if its roll had been 7, 3, 3, and 2? In this case, it still would have appeared (she won with three victories), but its 7, higher than one die of Joanna's, means the GM may alter a detail. He decides to alter

Modifying demons

These rules are messy, based on some resolution concepts from pre-1998 Sorcerer which were eventually thrown out. The +1 Power for every victory is no good, because it equalizes the demon against those very same victories rolled over into the upcoming Summoning roll, if that's what's going on in the scene. Therefore I recommend ignoring this rule and consider increasing Power by +1, only, to be one of the optional details for changing based on the next rule. And if you do it, give the player an equal-izing die for the Summons, again, if that's the next action.

Also, the next rule is much better re-written to permit changing one single detail, unless the Contact roll gives the sorcerer Total Victory.

Regarding those changes, I recommend making them strictly in the interests of your own fun and anticipation as the person who will be playing this thing.

Joanna example

There's an error here: her Passer needs the Cover ability, and therefore should have had Power 6, rolling one more die. Presuming the same results, then the demon's Power would increase to 7.

Also, if you use the above alteration to the demon-modifi-cation rule, then the GM gets to change one detail.

the Protection ability to Warp, as he has a notion or two about how this ability might be fun in the near future. Also, since she won with three victories, he may increase the demon's Power to 7 if he wants.

If the character happens to have interacted with the demon in the past and is specifically attempting to summon this particular individual, the GM may ignore these alteration rules and simply allow the demon to appear or not based on simple success. Or, if he or she desires, demons may be considered to be so protean that even the same individual may be different each time it is Contacted, in which case the rules for increasing its Power will apply, although not for changing its Desire or Need.

Player and GM alike must distinguish between the player and the character: all the creative work described above does not necessarily mean the sorcerer, the character, can summon "whatever he or she wants." That rests with the definition of sorcery specific to the play group (see Chapter Four).

Finally, Contacting and Summoning are momentous game actions. They may require more thought and preparation, especially for first-time SORCERER players and GMs, than quick and effective play time permits. You might want to conduct these actions between runs, so that other players don't have to sit around and wait, and the GM has time to consider all the implications carefully.

BINDING SUBTLETIES

To repeat from Chapter Three: an unbound demon will lose 1 Power per day until it is down to zero, in which case it must start making Will rolls to use any dice (much like a character reduced to 0 Stamina; see Damage, in the next chapter). At that point it will lose 1 Stamina per day unless it rolls its Power successfully vs. its original Stamina. Even worse, in many cases it cannot get its Need without a master's help, which will further reduce all its rolls by one die. Once its Stamina hits 0, the unbound demon is automatically Banished.

If a Bound demon's master dies, the demon is still Bound. That usually means its Need will eventually go unmet long enough to give it enough bonuses to rebel and become unbound, freeing it to seek a new master. A clever sorcerer may arrange for his pets to remain fed after he dies, thus carrying out his will as long as the arrangements last.

Role-playing demons is based on how well and truly they are Bound. A demon may rebel at any time, matching its Will against its master's (modified for one side by the strength of the Binding), in order to disobey a command. A badly Bound demon might disobey all the time, or it might bide its time

Independent variables

I'm highlighting this section to remind whoever's reading this, make it clear to everyone else at the table that these three variables are completely independent:

- Bound or not bound
- Summoned or not summoned
- Binder alive or binder not alive

In other words, a demon may be Banished, but remain Bound. Or killing its Binder neither un-Binds the demon nor Banishes it. It's sort of a bummer to be right in the middle of play, when someone carries out a number of actions that assumes any such thing, then finds out the hard way.

until the perfect moment. If its Need is met frequently, it might cut its binder some slack; conversely, a demon who is kept continually in Need will rebel and generally behave fractiously even if it is well Bound. It depends largely on how the binder treats the demon. If it is continually used as just a convenient tool or arbitrarily Punished, it will start resenting its binder. A little consideration, on the other hand, might go a long way with some demons or concepts for sorcery.

The GM should keep track of where a disgruntled demon is on the following scale of dissatisfaction with its master.

> Presumably the demon would not have harmed its master. Likely the scent of blood, the proximity of the girl, Eberhos' sudden lunge confused the enraged leviathan that waited in the darkness outside. The creature instantly released the alchemist.
>
> As much of him as had passed through the narrow window.
>
> —K.E. Wagner, The Dark Muse

- ▼ **Stage one: brat.** This is characterized by a brief, single instance of refusal. One common example is if the sorcerer orders the demon to do something in an obvious or public way. It may also occur if the demon has gone long enough without its Need being met, or it was warned off of something it might like to do, or it was insulted or brought to heel in front of others. There's no malice here: the demon is "testing" its master and will behave later if it's disciplined properly or given its Need, as appropriate.

- ▼ **Stage two: rebellious.** The demon is generally fractious and will be whiny, insulting, or prone to negotiations, depending on its personality, and its master must beat it in a Will vs. Will roll to make it obey. A demon only gets this disobedient from serious inattention to its Needs, unnecessary Punishment, and ongoing lack of respect in general. The master needs to change his or her ways quickly, or there will be trouble.

- ▼ **Stage three: vengeful.** This is bad. The demon will now apply itself seriously to its master's injury, humiliation, or demise. Less subtle demons simply attack the master as soon as his back is turned, or give crucial information to the master's enemies. Subtle demons will play extra nice for a while and time their refusals, inactions, or open attacks to the very worst possible moment. Most sorcerers with demons in this state end up dead. Remember, nothing induces a demon to tell the truth about its intentions or what it's up to on its own time; even direct orders may be met with stubborn silence.

Stage three + The other stage three

The path of rebellion may be thought of as forking at its extreme end: either the demon stays Bound and uses that status (and its added dice) to do terrible things to its master, or it basically goes for a clean break. If it takes the first option, and if it kills its master or otherwise renders him or her incapable of fulfilling its Need, then it will probably find its way toward the second option eventually, but the point of taking that first option is that the demon is willing to stay in an entirely unsatisfying relationship merely for the purpose of petty revenge.

▼ **The other stage three: true rebellion.** The demon simply cannot stand being bound in this way any more and attempts to break the Binding itself. This is very hard; the demon must repeat the Binding roll, with the strength of the Binding as a penalty (regardless of who had the advantage). Bonuses include the weeks it has been in Need and any other situational bonuses the GM assigns.

Every SORCERER game must establish its own standards for just what kind of power balance should exist between sorcerer and demon. How the GM handles these interactions should be consistent with the atmosphere of the game itself. Some GMs are good at creating a feeling of drama and brooding menace, whereas others are able to coax incredibly funny moments out of role-playing situations. Run with whatever works for you and your players.

Jeremy McHugh

EXAMPLE OF DEMONIC REBELLION.
Our hero, James, has a tough demon named Zogg, who usually stays nestled in a scary-faced ring he wears, emerging to attack in a flurry of shadowy tooth and claw. Its Desire is mayhem, its Need is to follow the news (it's an infotainment junkie), and its original Binding roll gives James a 1-die advantage. Lately, though, James has been unsympathetic to Zogg's tendency to discuss, say, election reform or college football drafts at inopportune moments.

Now James is jumped by four suburban Satanist ninja guys who hate his guts (sue me, this is just an example). Based on previous experience, he expects Zogg to leap into view and defend him, but the GM has decided that Zogg is now in the bratty stage.

GM: What do you do?
Player (worried): Isn't Zogg appearing?

GM: Just his taloned hand, materializing above the ring and flipping you off, then disappearing. The four guys get closer, fanning out to trap you against the building's wall.

Player: Aagh! Zogg, you get your demonic butt out here and fight!

Hmm, says the GM, this is a contest of Wills. On the player's side is the character's Will of 5. On Zogg's side, that's the demon's Will of 5, minus 1 for the Binding, plus 1 for the annoyance about being dissed earlier, and plus 1 more just because James is not being very polite at the present either. So it's a basic roll of 6 vs. 5, Zogg's favor.

If the player wins, Zogg dutifully appears and fights. But the demon will remember how James was so rude and demanding, and the GM notes this down for future reference – perhaps moving its attitude to the next stage of rebellion. If James fails, though, the player might think again about the right tack to follow, and the GM should provide a hint.

GM: Nothing happens. One of the guys pulls out a pair of garden shears.
Player: Gah!

GM (cutting the player some slack): Why not try to ask Zogg again, nicely this time? Think about what the poor guy likes to do.

Player: CNN, Zogg! All next week!

GM: Zogg's face appears over the ring, one eye wide and the other slitted suspiciously. He says, "Can I hold the box?"

Player: Yes!!

So they roll again. This time, James has 5 again and the demon has 5, as before minus 1 for the Binding plus 1 for being in the brat stage, and –1 (the GM decides) for the Need being so generously promised (and after all, Zogg's Desire is mayhem). So it's 5 on 4. If this second roll is failed, James is in big trouble. However, if Zogg and James have a generally decent relationship, and this is meant only to be a reminder to the player rather than a life-threatening plot climax, then the GM probably plans having Zogg help out its master eventually – after letting him get kicked around a little.

Communicating with demons varies widely. There is no telepathy in SORCERER. Passers, Possessors, and Inconspicuous sorts generally talk fine, unless otherwise defined; Parasites might, given their individual definitions. But they and Objects mostly communicate by conferring/using their abilities or by failing (refusing) to do so. These demon types are ostensibly low-stress, as they don't talk back, but that makes things difficult if they get fractious. Conceivably complex objects like a laptop computer might communicate, or a car's dashboard LEDs, but a cruel GM might make their messages relatively obscure.

Don't underestimate Lore

I kick myself, twice, here before you in admitting that I totally stiffed Lore in both this chapter and the next. It's the most powerful ability in the game in terms of effectiveness and contribution to the shared imagined fiction. You can do so much with it! Can be used to understand any and all nuances of a demon's current situation, or the nuances of any given ritual in action, such as a Contain, the circumstances of a given demon's Binding, and so on and on. Such rolls are solid gold for feeding directly into other, applied actions.

Be specific! "What kind of sorcerer would Bind a demon like this?" "What might this demon's Need be?" "What sort of details would be especially effective in trying to Bind (or Banish, or Contain, or whatever) this demon?" I'm not talking about poking into a void with a ten-foot pole or goosing the GM to throw you a bone of his or her choosing. I'm talking about thinking like a sorcerer and, as a consequence, *both* gaining some advantages *and* enriching the ongoing dialogue which establishes the crucial Color of play.

Dumb sorcery

There are two reasons why most sorcerers die young. The first one is that they get seduced by all the available power. They sacrifice lots of animals or people to Summon cool demons, thus forcing their Humanity way down. Then, as they are probably responsible for some serious criminal activity, they have to start dealing with some determined enemies. And if they start behaving in such a way as to expose the demons' existence, they're in for some serious rebellion.

Even worse, they Summon demons into Contains, without Binding them, and try to Punish or starve them, thinking this will soften them up for the Binding. However, this only gives the demon massive bonuses to the Binding roll – setting the sorcerers up for extremely well-timed rebellion. Sure, any demon will act extremely obedient in such a situation, but their Wills are not reduced by intense Need and they will have every motive to lie through their fangs as they pronounce an oath of loyalty.

SORCERER is not about accumulating more and more powerful stuff; it is written to enforce the limits of ambition and power. Eager power-gamers will be in *big* trouble. GMs should bring the full weight of the system down on anyone who forgets this, quietly and carefully role-playing the demon's determination to make its master's life a living hell.

Playing "around"

Playing demons can go into very dark, direct territory when game events provide them with a little freedom. But doing this well means remembering that Sorcerer GMing should never be about arbitrary actions. I take care always to base what a demon does when "off the leash" upon existing characterization, earlier actions, and clear consequences of earlier failed/successful rolls.

For example, my friend Ed was playing a character named Dennis, who had left his sexy but rather dangerous demon Chuni behind in his house, to pursue an individual who'd been clearly spying on him and the house. Waylaid by his nosy and good-hearted friend Rowan, who was very concerned about him, Dennis had failed badly to peddle an elaborate lie to her to lead her to go home.

Failed rolls of this kind are a deep cue for me in terms of Bangs based on NPC behavior. I confirmed with Ed that Dennis would continue to pursue his target, then decided privately that Rowan was obviously aware that Dennis had tried to lie to her, and therefore went straight to Dennis' house and tried to get in. I knew that Dennis had been puttering on the lawn and had not gone back to the house to lock it up before running off, so she found a way in. Therefore Chuni, already riled by her observations of people snooping around the house, nabbed her to indulge a little Need, inflicting much although non-fatal harm. After all, via his failed lie, Dennis had indeed "sent" Rowan there, from a demon's point of view.

Ed knew nothing about any of this until he had Dennis return home, to find Rowan sprawled in his living room, obviously a victim of Chuni's characteristic way of enjoying her Need. Granted, Dennis was astonished, but what matters is that no one at the table should be, even though Chuni didn't explain herself/itself to Dennis, and I didn't explain it to Ed until after we were done playing.

What's going on with my choice as a GM? It wasn't to goose Dennis toward some next action I wanted him to do, nor was I screwing Ed over in an arbitrary fashion, far from it. It ties right back to my big point about the GM not wimping out, and working *only* from previously established actions and rolls, but also driving *hard*. It probably doesn't surprise you that Ed, although rattled, launched himself into the next moments of play with ten times the dramatic tension and driven activity.

Tell'em what to do

Command, command, command! Once you realize that telling a demon what to do isn't a ritual, but rather a single action with all your dice available, then your sorcerer becomes ten times more effective and interesting.

When I'm GMing, which is to say, role-playing the demons, I typically waive the demon's option to disobey a successful command from a sorcerer, i.e., accepting penalties to do what it wanted anyway. I don't ignore the option entirely, but since demons are such cartoonish entities, lacking all nuance to their understanding and urges, the flat success/fail almost always makes more sense to me for them in the

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Tell'em what to do, cont.

moment of play. This leads to some of my most enjoyable play moments, when a player-character snaps, "Sit! Stay!" to a slavering, homicidal attacking demon, and succeeds, to its master's consternation.

The text unfortunately cites Desire as a mechanically significant item regarding the demon's path to rebellion. That text should isolate Need as the primary mechanic in that process, with Desire being more of a coloring, dialogue-based accompaniment. Since I didn't set this point up too well in Chapter 3, it's doubly misleading here.

Closing Words

As the player of a sorcerer character, it's amazing what you can do! Every bit of the sorcery is available to you at all times, with complete freedom to address any demon character in the game in any way you want. I really didn't want to outline all the ways I discovered or speculated that various rituals might be combined in various sequences, and even now it hurts me a bit to include that one about Binding + Punish + Banish. My hope is that once the people in a group find their feet with the rituals, they'll come up with ideas I never dreamed of which are all perfectly valid by the rules.

The bulleted detail for this chapter, in the diagram, is Humanity. You may have notice the chapter doesn't say much about it, except to remind you that four of the rituals have potential Humanity consequences. This is yet more of my infamous reluctance to spell out possible interpretations and consequences of the system, for better or for worse. Here are some of the principles that were lurking under the chapter as I wrote it.

More than any other acts in the game, doing sorcery directly illustrates what kind of person the player-character is: with what materials and actions, toward what end, at whose expense, and what kind of expense. In fact, since in this game, Lore and the rituals are the *only* thing distinguishing sorcerers from anyone else, what your character does with sorcery creates a unique "thematic sphere" of activity for him or her. That's another reason to go creatively hog-wild during play when rituals and any other details of sorcery are involved – think of it as active, consequential, and above all dynamic portraiture.

Mechanically, because it's hard to raise Humanity via sorcery, actions like Contacting, Summoning, and Binding mainly operate as the big negative in the big equation that will eventually contribute to one of the Four Outcomes described in Chapter 7, especially when high-Power demons are involved. Therefore these moments contribute greatly to that portraiture I'm talking about, again, whether the actions are successful or not.

Chapter Six:

RULES FOR EVERYTHING ELSE

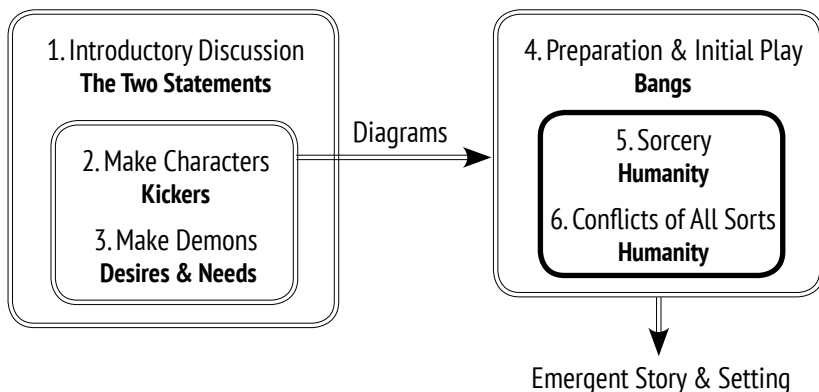Manny Vega

EVERYTHING BUT COMBAT

SORCERER does not use dice for unopposed actions. If a stated action is consistent with the character's Cover and general expertise, the character simply succeeds. Dice are used if there is some reason for the GM to think the character might have a problem, in which case the GM calls for a roll and decides what score should be used. To repeat: dice are used in this game only when the character faces opposition or notable difficulty. The system is not built to simulate routine activity.

The player has it easy; he or she rolls dice for the appropriate score, give or take a few for bonuses and penalties. The GM decides how many dice to roll in opposition. These dice represent how annoying, distracting, or simply difficult the circumstances are, using the following guidelines.

"This is the only game I've played where the conflict mechanics make no sense without the fiction. You know? Without the context of the story, of the specifics, there's no way the dice rolls make sense. Most games, there's this big book, and there's this little bit of story stuff, and all this stuff for combat. And when it's time to fight, you just pull out the big chunk of the book and use it and everything else stops. Most games you can set up the characters and 'try out' the combat system independent of any actual story. Here, you could never do that."

--Eric

As with Chapter 5, we're still in hard-core personal toolkit time, for everyone playing their characters at the table, making use of what's there, to do whatever seems to be the thing for them to do, at that moment.

1. Introductory Discussion
The Two Statements

2. Make Characters
Kickers

3. Make Demons
Desires & Needs

Diagrams →

4. Preparation & Initial Play
Bangs

5. Sorcery
Humanity

6. Conflicts of All Sorts
Humanity

↓

Emergent Story & Setting

Just like the previous chapter, the real point of this one is not the actual mechanics, but rather their impact on Humanity. Losing Humanity by doing too much dangerous sorcery means arriving there more-or-less via a technicality. But with everything this chapter's about, we're talking about raw themes and ethics based strictly on how your character has chosen to treat other people.

To say it as simply as I possibly can, in this game, the conflict and dice system in this game are so consequential, and dangerous, that I urge that you only engage in them regarding things which really matter to you.

Yes, you need to know "how to hit," how damage is tracked, how your character dies, just as with any role-playing system. But the core issue is, *about what*? Not only can combat and other dangerous situations kill your character, but they provide the most arresting and relevant circumstances for such Humanity rolls to arise: conflicts which may inflict harm.

---(cont.)

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Introduction, cont.

After all, taking it all the way down, Humanity = 0 means your character has passed through the "moral event horizon," much like an anti-hero or sympathetic villain who has committed one too many gratuitously cruel acts, and is now effectively written off as a lost cause by most audience members. It's likely that getting into fights – at least certain kinds, for certain reasons – is more about that potential event than it is about character injury or death.

Everything but combat

Right off the bat, the language runs into trouble. I think I did a credible job of battling the murk here, but it's hard to be at the vanguard, I suppose. The first sentence is right on target: "Sorcerer does not use dice for unopposed actions." But what does that mean?
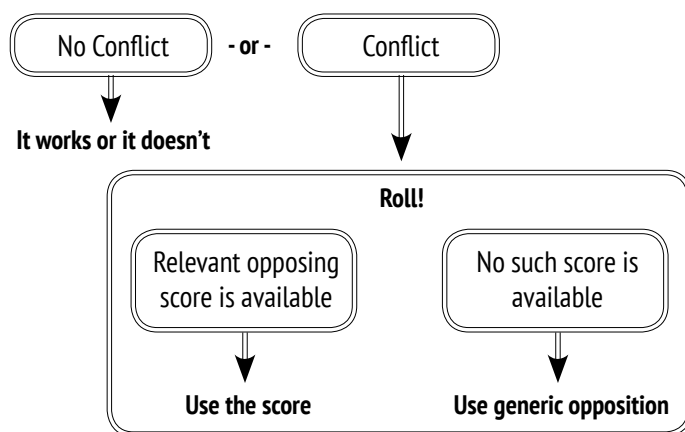
Here's how it plays out in today's terms. Begin with stated actions. "At that moment," above, is crucial.

First, either there's no conflict and hence no roll, or there's a conflict, and hence a roll. There is no wiggle room.

Let's look at "no conflict" first. It means literally no conflict of interest among characters, i.e., the results of the stated action aren't consequential for anyone. Focus on what is happening prior to the roll, not merely its consequences. This is what I'm always blathering about concerning conflict of interest. Does what is happening as established so far, often inadvertently or unexpectedly, put one or more characters' existing interests in jeopardy? If the stated action does this – to or for any character – then it's time to roll the dice.

Even if the immediate visual concern is, "Oh no, does the mainmast snap!" (or mizzen or whatever it's called), the genuine concern is what that means to the character's safety and ability to proceed toward some end. It's not about the mainmast.

An example I use a lot is this: if the character is nailing his back door shut, apropos

Number of opposition dice	Representative circumstances
0	Typical, easy task for this character; automatic success; no roll needed
1	Mildly annoying distraction: someone is talking, character is driving, etc
Greater than 1; less than character's score	Trickier than usual; separate demand for attention; loud music playing, etc
Equal to character's score	Notably hard task for this character; serious distraction, e.g. someone is trying to hit the character
Greater than character's score	Task is possible only through luck; it's a really hard thing to do, and someone is beating the character with a dead cat, or the character is hanging from a catwalk by the legs, or something equally aggravating
0 again	Flatly impossible for this character; automatic failure; no roll necessary

Of course, all the role-playing-oriented bonuses and penalties described in Chapter One apply in full as well. Also, penalties for characters' Prices and injuries (see Combat below) apply to interaction and physical task rolls as well as those for combat. Players are responsible for assigning the penalties in the appropriate situations, and they should apply them without being monitored by the GM.

Characters and their skills

In many role-playing games, there is this big long Skill List, and every player knows, by looking at the character sheet, how good a character is at fighting with a battle-axe, piloting a helicopter, and toasting toast. SORCERER is different. A player looks at the sheet and sees a Cover, a Price, and Descriptions for each of the Scores. And that's all that's needed.

> EXAMPLE 1: Fenster is a CIA agent and has 3 dice at it. At one point he is confronted with a gun left behind by an assassin (who can't really be faulted, as he was eaten by Fenster's demon). He examines it and the GM tells the player the bullets look funny, then asks for a Cover roll, which is three dice. The GM rolls just one die for difficulty, considering him to have a good chance. If Fenster is successful, the GM tells him that the bullets have

of nothing, then there is no roll. The action is narrated and confirmed according to existing knowledge about the character, which in most cases yields, "Bang bang, you're done." More generally, when there's no imaginable adverse context for doing something you can reasonably do, the character can simply do it, with no dice involved.

But if the character is nailing his back door shut as a vicious demon is loping down the street toward the house, intent on first impaling and then eating the character, then the action is indeed going to require a roll. The in-fiction fact that the physical actions are identical in each case is a distraction, and it must be abandoned. If possible, taken out back and shot.

Given such a conflict, then typically you use the relevant score of the other character, in this case, the demon. Notice that the door isn't the issue, so the door doesn't roll. This isn't about how hard it is to nail a door shut.

Did I say, "Now it's time to roll the dice?" I did, and you must! No glossing over it. No one can say, "Oh, gee, I guess I give in, so we don't need to roll now." *This* is the mechanical element which underlies every concept in the game, in tandem with the concept of using established content to move forward.

So what's all this about "difficulty," then? Oh boy. It's time to eat a little crow, I suppose.

The generic opposition concept refers to the fact that in fiction, sometimes objects do in fact operate as if they were people, often malevolent, often taking sides in some other conflict in the sense of imposing barriers or complications. This isn't the same as "no conflict." Gaming culture unfortunately has minimal language to distinguish between the two. I certainly didn't at the time of writing.

In such a case, pretend for a moment that the object or geographical feature or whatever is like a person and assign it an appropriate score. That's what my table was supposed to be about. However, it's very misleading if seen as a difficulty scale in the absence of conflict, compounded by the fact that I had no language for it except "difficulty." Vincent had the right idea in *Dogs in the Vineyard* with a fixed four-dice value for "bad luck" – meaning the subjective experience that the immediate world is filled with oppositional objects.

Characters and their skills

Here's a needed citation: I ripped off the KGB cyanide-bullet thing from the DC comic *Suicide Squad*. I have no idea whether it's historically accurate.

In Example 1, Fenster shouldn't be rolling against difficulty, but rather against the assassin's Cover ability. Note that it doesn't matter a bit that the assassin is dead and gone. Similarly, in Example 2, he's rolling against the sheriff's Cover, possibly with a penalty or two for the lousy circumstances.

You know, I just decided that Fenster is a boring character in a boring game. It would have been much better to use Harry from Chapter 2 in much more adverse circumstances.

had a little X carved into their noses, and the X filled with cyanide: an old KGB trick.

EXAMPLE 2: Later, Fenster is locked in a jail cell in some nasty little town in Outback, USA (the sheriff apparently don't appreciate feds stickin' their noses into things around hereabouts). That night, he tries to pick the lock and escape. USA training does help you learn this stuff, tricks with credit cards and so on, but his stuff is all in the sheriff's desk drawer and all he's got is his fingernails. Poor Fenster has to roll against five dice.

EXAMPLE 3: Still later, Fenster is looking over a car and wondering whether he should buy it. This task has nothing to do with being a CIA agent, nor with sorcery. But looking at Fenster's Will descriptor, which is "social competence," the GM knows that this guy has an eye for which cars are cool and which aren't. Fenster rolls Will vs. the salesman's spiel (which is also Will) in order to evaluate if this car is really that cool. Of course, success at this roll tells Fenster nothing about whether this particular car is in good running condition.

The general rule in SORCERER is to let the player try, rather than to forbid attempts based on some list of terms in the book. They might have a 1-die roll, or the GM might just tell them their efforts have come to naught, but who knows? Covers and Score descriptions can sometimes combine to give characters a chance to do something they never thought of trying before.

It can sometimes be difficult to decide just what to roll against. In many cases, Humanity can be surprisingly useful. For example, this score can actually be used as an active attribute, much like Stamina or Will, when trying to use or appeal to another's sense of empathy or morality. Also, a character trying to control his or her visible emotional reactions might try a Will vs. Humanity roll.

Perception

Every score is potentially a perception score in SORCERER. If the character might possibly notice something, there are two ways to handle it. First, if the situation is something the character has been trained for (it corresponds to his or her Cover or the description for any other score), then use the dice of the score against whatever difficulty the GM proposes. Remember that scores do not merely describe a character, rather, each one rates his or her proficiency at a wide range of activities, including perception.

Characters and their skills, cont.

A related problem for this section and also for the entire chapter is its focus on Stamina as an active score. There's nothing here about using Will or Lore pro-actively.

Perception

This whole section is quite tough from the get-go, for all the usual sucky reasons for this issue in role-playing, which are too extensive to rant about in detail here. In Sorcerer, you can solve 55% of the problem by folding the concept right into the conflict rolling anyway, i.e., going forward with a hostile party's stated action and retroactively narrating such that a failed defense means you didn't perceive in time. And 44% of the rest will be already handled by reasonable scene framing, leaving only 1% to be handled as described here. Which this example doesn't justify in the slightest.

It should work like this: first, whether Fenster spots that he's dealing with a demon. That's his Lore vs. a single die, case closed. If you have the original printing that talks about (10-Power), then ignore it. Second, if he can tell that the guy really isn't a car salesman, which is his Cover against the demon's Cover ability, which it would be using since it's a Possessor.

Fenster's still boring. Buying a car? What sort of conflict of interest is that? Plus the text inaccurately implies that the descriptors are required features of addressing a problem.

Any roll which depends on or enfolds perception is fair game for being affected by the demon abilities Cloak and Daze.

EXAMPLE: Perception
Fenster has the cover "CIA agent" and Lore 4, and he doesn't yet know that the guy he's talking to, with whom he's supposing to be negotiating some scummy narcotics deal, has been possessed by a hideous demon with Power 6 and Will 6. They're talking for a bit, and the GM decides there are two chances for Fenster to get suspicious. The first is if the demon displays some inappropriate behavior, tipping off Fenster's experience as an agent. It's Fenster's Cover against the demon's Cover. If Fenster wins, he'll know this guy is not on the up-and-up regarding the drug deal, but that's it. The second is if the demon's Telltale catches Fenster's attention as a sorcerer, so the roll is Fenster's Lore against the demon's (Cover = 4). This time, if Fenster wins, he'll know he's dealing with a demon because its tongue is forked (or whatever the Telltale is).

The other way is for those situations in which the character is in a situation for which his or her training is completely inadequate – there is no possible way the Cover can apply. The GM may simply rule that the character is a helpless chump, ripe for whatever might be sneaking up or oblivious to the scene's nuances. More nicely, the character may roll Will at just one die, in order to get some inkling of what is happening. But even a successful roll would not mean the character has a very clear idea of the problem and, if a combat situation has developed, the GM may rule that his or her actions must be strictly defensive for the first round.

Also, the rules provide no such ability as "sense demon." A sorcerer may spot a Telltale, but has no guarantee that he or she is right about what it signifies, and there's no telling what **kind** of demon has been spotted.

Furthermore, SORCERER has no rules for telepathy, forcing someone to tell the objective truth, or any kind of

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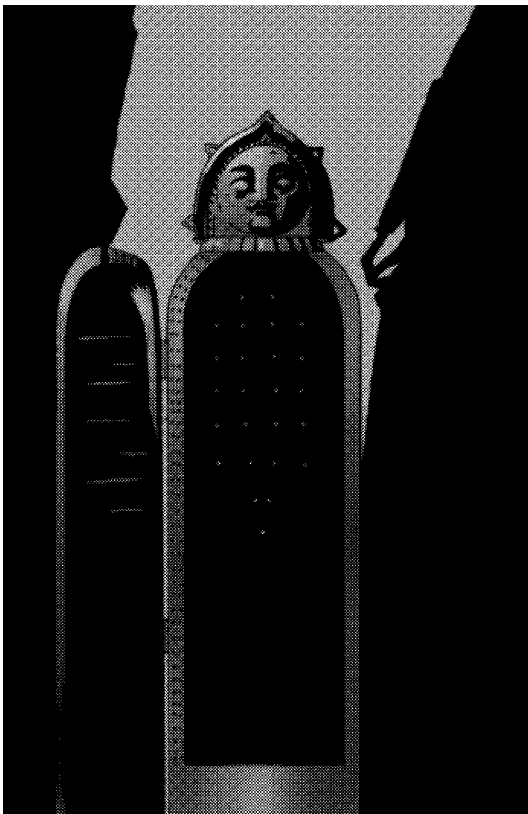
retro- or precognition. The implication here is that there is no surety about who's a demon, who's possessed, or any such thing. A given GM may decide to change this rule, either by defining certain Telltales as dead giveaways (e.g. demons always have one red eye, or smell of sulfur) or by allowing a demon ability Perception that can spot another demon easily. But it's more fun to disallow such things. Uncertainty, fear, and paranoia are the GM's friends.

COMBAT

As in so many role-playing games, combat is organized into rounds, meaning segments of time in which everyone, more or less, gets to do one thing, more or less. The length of a round is completely situational. It is organized in the following way.

1. Everyone states intended actions in no particular order. Statements may be amended freely until everyone is satisfied.
2. The GM determines the relevant scores to use, and bonuses and penalties are assigned so that the number of dice to use is clear.
3. Everyone who's doing something proactive (not just defending) rolls at once. The order of the highest values rolled, from highest to lowest, determines the order of the actions.
4. All actions are now resolved in order, meaning rolling defense or difficulty dice (it's best to use other dice than those used in step #3, which should still be sitting on the table). Some characters will abort their upcoming actions in order to defend. Excepting that one specific thing, actions cannot be changed at this point in the round.
5. Record all damage, figure out where everyone's been moved to, and otherwise resolve this combat round. Any unused actions are lost at this point. To repeat: unused actions cannot be "saved."

Actions

Everyone gets a single action per round. A single action can be an attack, an evasive or blocking motion, a shift in position, a spoken phrase with crucial content, or anything else that takes about two seconds. It may not be a combination of motions unless the character has more than one action to use ("I block then hit!" is two actions, not one). Instructing a demon is a full action as well. Just as in non-combat situations, actions are automatically successful unless they are especially difficult, like dashing across a slick surface, or opposed by another character.

It is perfectly all right to state a rather general action, as long as its intended **results** are explicit. For example, "I give him a one-two jab and

Combat

Well, shoot, it's not necessarily about "combat" at all, is it? It's not even about complexity. It's about orthogonality. So, for oppositional conflict, roll once, no matter how complex. The only complicating factor would be linear "feeder" rolls representing setup for bonus dice and accessory actions. But for orthogonal conflict, no matter how simple and using whatever scores apply, do the rounds, including the ordering, for all the actions going on.

Consider that moment when everyone at the table realizes that we're gearing up for a bunch of rolls. The tip-off is that spoken input becomes more proactive and the described actions or spoken words will affect other characters, and at least two people are talking rapidly.

I love this phase, what I call "Free and clear," also seen in more specialized form in the Trollbabe and Spione rules. The idea is that we're gearing up for effective, simultaneous launch of dedicated action on every involved character's part. To do that, no spoken input actually launches it, much less finish it, but rather positions it to start, freely allowing for revisions, until everyone's ready.

To help with this moment, I want to clarify that there are no true multi-actions in Sorcerer. Statements which sound like such things must choose which single thing really is getting rolled for. Do, however, note the role of area, because you can indeed target more than one character with the right attack. Also, note as well how the Fast ability provides some wiggle room , allowing for "area" attacks with rapid single-shot weaponry, for instance. It's still just one roll, though.

What about actions that seem automatic or unopposed? One discussion centered around knocking over a lantern in a night-time fight, for instance. The solution is that all such actions do in fact have to be rolled to establish ordering, and how such circumstances may be considered automatically adverse, or rather, perverse, so they are opposed by dice even if no one is doing anything actively to stop them.

One issue that's cropped up more than once is whether and when a given demon's ability turns on. My take is that a demon is never caught with its Armor down, or anything similar. Such abilities are available at all times, in response to whatever happens, without the need to announce it. Therefore, let's say you harbor a demon which grants you the use of its Armor ability – the only reason it won't work is if the demon decides it doesn't feel like letting you use it. It's not an issue of timing.

---(cont.)

uppercut!" is specific, whereas "I take him off-balance with sudden strikes!" is general. Again, either way is fine.

A character may additionally perform some little action like shouting something, shifting position or which way he or she is facing, or cocking a weapon, as well as their main action. This is announced during the Intentions phase as well; it cannot be added later.

A couple of significant ways exist to get some extra activity into a single action. The first is simply to be employing the demon ability Fast, which basically means the GM permits the ability's user to do a little bit more per action than everyone else in the situation. The second is when Cover and Stamina are both applicable in the given situation. Resolving such actions uses the currency of the SORCERER system, as discussed in Chapter Four and applied in this case as follows.

> **EXAMPLE 1: a combat-athlete character**
> The player has announced that the character is leaping over a barrier to come crashing down upon an opponent. The GM calls for a Stamina roll first, then rolls the victories (if any) over into bonus dice for the Cover-based attack roll. If the first roll fails, however, the GM may well state that the character failed to clear the fence well – the best solution is to apply the victories against the character as penalty dice for the second roll; if they exceed the dice of the second roll altogether, the second action is canceled. (Such a harsh ruling is called for when the initial task of a combined action fails.)

> **EXAMPLE 2: a swashbuckling pirate character**
> In this case, we see a fight in which the rolling, pitching deck of the pirate ship, the booms of the cannons, and shouted commands in nautical jargon are making for a very confusing situation. A predictable pirate-type attack might be to swing down from the rigging, or whatever it's called, and slash at a foe on the way by. The player may roll Cover first to invoke the character's piratical background, then roll victories (if any) into the Stamina-based attack roll. Failure on the first roll, in this case, is probably not grounds for a penalty to the second, depending on the GM's personal aesthetic guidelines.

> In both examples, the rolls are made essentially as a single action and do not take any extra time in game terms. Also, the player should remember that good role-playing descriptions on either or both rolls are worth bonus dice as well.

Combat, cont.

During system explanations at conventions, I sometimes set up a Tarantino example: several characters standing in a circle, each one pointing a gun at the head of the person to his or her right, and each one saying, "Don't you shoot, I'll blow you away!" Basically, unless every single one stands down, just go straight into resolution and let the ordering carry the day. No matter what's rolled, the situation plays out functionally, and everyone can see how ordering works and how to abort to defense.

Talking and fighting

If what a character says does not directly influencing another person's action, because it's not a command or appeal or anything like that, then it enters the fiction when the player speaks, and the fictional individuals can act on it upon hearing it. The only limitations is that, if they're in the middle of a complex conflict sequence, their potential responses are rather limited: do as already announced or abort it, that's it.

However, if the spoken information is a command or appeal designed explicitly to change a target character's action, then this is a bona fide conflict-oriented rolled item. The classic example is ordering a demon to do something other than what it's doing.

In this case, the spoken action is handled exactly like combat actions, and is very straightforward. Either it gets into the fiction before the undesirable action occurs, and is subject to a defensive response just like any other attack, or it doesn't.

That's why ordering demons about in combat is dicey. Not only might they get their undesirable action in prior to the order, but if they do get the order, that means they have to abort this round, and implement the order next round. It's far better to have a good relationship with the demon such that (a) it has a pretty good idea of what you want out of the crisis already, and (b) even when it does go off on its own, it typically won't do something you really, really want it not to do.

Sometimes raw information can be treated the same way, when it is implicitly relevant to the character's current course of action. For example, a character, let's call her Beth, might be engaged in attacking her father, unbeknownst to her, and someone shouts this information to her, and let's also assume that Beth would probably not want to attack that particular relative. If the speaking character's roll is higher than hers, then it's established that she heard the shout, and perhaps, or perhaps not, the player chooses to have Beth suddenly abort her attack.

If Beth's roll is higher, though, then it's a tragic moment: the words get through too late.

Once the proactive rolls are made, setting the order of the actions, some of them will require some defensive or difficulty rolls to see how well they succeeded or how badly they failed.

Regarding characters who were doing something active, if a character is acted already but is then hit in combat, he or she simply rolls full Stamina to defend, including any modifiers. However, if he or she has not yet acted, the character has two options.

▼ He or she may choose to suck up the attack, thus rolling only one die in defense. If the character is not incapacitated by the attack, he or she may carry on with the stated action, when its turn comes up.

▼ He or she may defend actively, using full Stamina with any modifiers. Actively defending, however, forces the character to abort his or her upcoming action.

This part of the round also brings in the characters who were only defending, or doing something relatively inactive like hiding in a corner. At this point they roll dice in response to others' proactive rolls.

EXAMPLE: **Organizing a combat round**
Our hero Brandon and his cool demon buddy Fragg are attacked by unsavory thugs wielding bicycle chains and tire irons. Everyone wants to pound on someone else, so battle is joined.

Actions are announced: Brandon is attacking Thug B, Frag is attacking Thug C, Thug A is attacking Brandon, and Thugs B and C are attacking Fragg. The GM calls for straight Stamina rolls with a 1-die bonus for each creep due to their weapons.

Everyone rolls dice equal to the respective character's Stamina, and here are the high values, in order: Thug A gets three 10s, Brandon gets two 9s, Thug B gets one 9, Fragg gets an 8, and poor Thug C rolls a high 5.

Now for some fine-tuning. The first roll to deal with is Thug A's attack, and Brandon sensibly aborts his attack in order to defend fully, and the player's performance is so wonderful the GM grants a big 2-dice bonus.

How's that work out? A closer look at Thug A's roll is 10, 10, 10, 4, 3, 3, 2. Brandon's defensive roll is on 6 dice with the bonus, for 10, 10, 6, 4, 4, 1. Thug A wins with one victory.

That puts Thug B's attack on Fragg next, and the demon simply opts to tough it out with a 1-die defensive roll. Thug B's roll was 9, 2, 2, 1, 1 (no lie!), and Fragg's little die gives him a 7, so Thug B gets one victory over the demon. (We'll deal with damage in the next section, but in this case, one piddly victory is practically meaningless against the awfulness that is Fragg.)

Extended Examples

Ah, Brandon, the example that will not die. Everyone hates it. However, its only actual error is that Thug C should receive an extra two dice for defense against Fragg's attack.
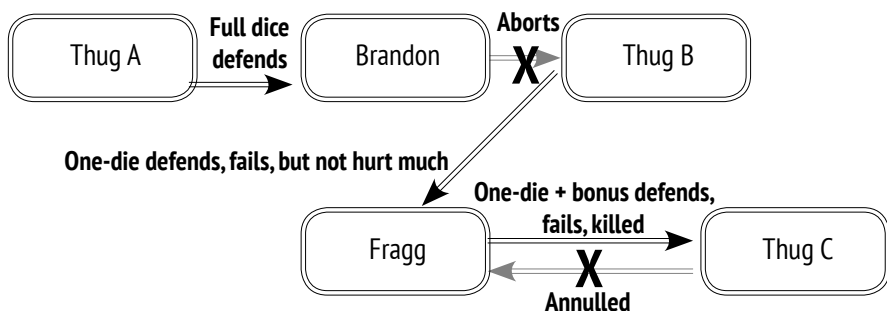
My current-day advice: (i) learn to do quick diagrams like I'm about to show you, (ii) put out sticky notes or index cards and pile up dice on them, and (iii) take your time and enjoy yourself. In this case, we have five characters, five actions established in pre-roll talking, and since this is a simple example, every arrow means "strikes at."

```
┌────────┐      ┌──────────┐      ┌────────┐
│ Thug A │ ───▶ │ Brandon  │ ───▶ │ Thug B │
└────────┘      └──────────┘      └────────┘
                                       │
                                       ▼
                ┌──────────┐      ┌────────┐
                │  Fragg   │ ◀─── │ Thug C │
                └──────────┘      └────────┘
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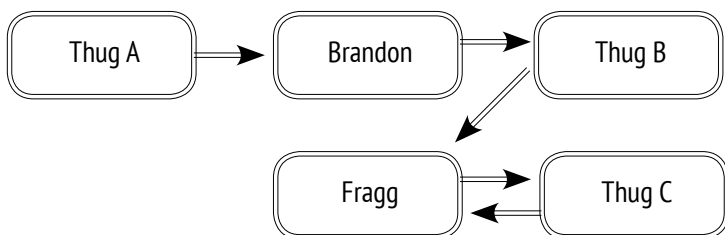
OK, so next, upon rolling the dice, we find out the order, which given the values in the book, turns out to be:

```
┌────────┐   1   ┌──────────┐   2   ┌────────┐
│ Thug A │ ───▶  │ Brandon  │ ───▶  │ Thug B │
└────────┘       └──────────┘       └────────┘
                                    3  │
                                       ▼
                 ┌──────────┐   4   ┌────────┐
                 │  Fragg   │ ───▶  │ Thug C │
                 └──────────┘ ◀───  └────────┘
                                 5
```
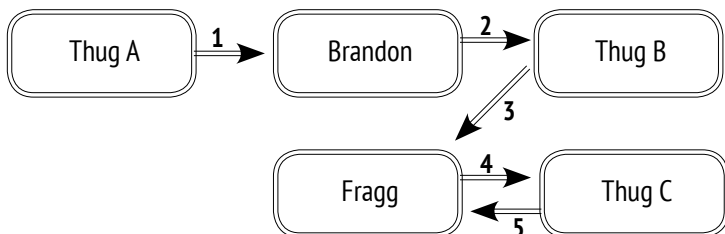
Then we conduct these actions in that order, finding out as we go which recipients choose to abort their actions for full defense and which do not.

```
┌────────┐  Full dice  ┌──────────┐  Aborts  ┌────────┐
│ Thug A │   defends   │ Brandon  │  ──X──▶  │ Thug B │
└────────┘  ─────────▶ └──────────┘          └────────┘
                                                  │
      One-die defends, fails, but not hurt much   │
                                                  ▼
                        ┌──────────┐  One-die + bonus defends,  ┌────────┐
                        │  Fragg   │        fails, killed        │ Thug C │
                        │          │ ◀──────────────X──────────  │        │
                        └──────────┘        Annulled            └────────┘
```

Granted, when we move to the next round, the text strangely specifies or implies that Brandon has to shoot for all five Will dice as he struggles to master himself, but I suppose he could. Actually, though, it's more effective to roll vs. a *single* desired die, then add the victories from that success (if successful) to it. The net effect can be most enjoyable when role-playing bonuses are also involved. I've seen the ensuing action get up to ten or twelve dice.

Fragg's attack was on Thug C, who opts to tough it out with one defensive die and continue to attack the demon as the last act of the round. For Fragg's attack, we have 8, 6, 6, 6, 5, 4, 4, and the thug manages to roll a whole 2 on the defensive die. Not to go into details about damage in this example, but Thug C is sadly rendered inoperative and therefore never gets to complete his stated action.

Combat rolls and modifiers

What really matters in combat is how many dice the combatants are rolling against one another. Usually it's just Stamina vs. Stamina, but the GM should afford many, many situational bonus and penalty opportunities in combat as well as the standard ones (see The System in Chapter One). These examples should give guidelines.

▼ "I swing at him!" –1 die for generic gamer-boy behavior.
▼ "I pivot, twist, and hook punch him right in the nose!" +0 dice: this is just right
▼ "I sweep his feet and then spin-heel kick him in the head!" +1 for niftiness
▼ "I shove him when he's standing on the icy patch!" +1 die for tactics
▼ "I whack his head while he's looking over that way!" +1 die for tactics
▼ "I pick up this handy crowbar and smack him with it!" +1 die for reach and weapon advantage
▼ "I stick my fingers in his eye!" –1 die for difficulty, although a success might be figured according to the edged weapons section of the damage table

Sometimes players state tactics that rely on the opponent doing certain things, as in the ice patch and sucker punch examples above. The GM should make sure to give bonus dice only for actions that apply to the situation as presented at the time of announced actions, rather than allowing the players to dictate what the opponent is doing.

Most of the advantages above and from Chapter One can be combined, so good tactics and role-playing can rack up bonus dice pretty quickly. The point is, in SORCERER combat, it's not just a matter of the dice ruling the events. The role-playing during the combat rules the dice! If you've been badly hit, your dice are in the negatives, and the guy's coming at you, role-play it well – and you can triumph.

Damage

This is going to hurt. The number of victories in each successful attack roll, modified by the Damage Table below, is taken as a penalty right off the

Combat rolls and modifiers

Empty-headed whoring for dice is so, so obvious. The rule is for something much better: if you work with what's there and introduce a little to move it forward so everyone gets it, then you get a bonus. Explain it as follows: it's not about pre-narrating the eventual effect in visual terms, but charging its *initiation* with fun, both socially and visually. Such a charge is either there or it isn't, and if it isn't, merely assign no bonus dice and move on.

That said, if you're not the GM and it seems to you a bonus die ought to be thrown down, say so. All I'm saying is, don't pretend you should get one when all you did was babble for a while.

Regarding bonus dice from previous successful rolls, it's very useful to know exactly what "next roll" means, especially in an orthogonal situation. The rule is that a rollover bonus of any kind can only be used if the new roll is based on an action directly related to the former roll's outcome. It works best if you ask, "Can this action even be possible without the result of the previous action?" If the answer is yes, then the rollover bonus doesn't apply.

Also, next *roll*, not "next round." It's really the next roll for that character. You can't bank a bunch of bonuses from separate rolls into a single later roll, and you can't save a bonus for a while and do other things before returning to a related action.

If the character's very next roll does not incorporate the previous one's victories, then those victories dissipate and are mechanically no longer meaningful. Therefore rollover bonuses appear like lightning and their results strike like lightning. The bonuses don't create environment for a variety of rolls; they simply make the next bolt strike harder, when and if it's eligible.

You *can* chain a series of successful rolls through sequential rounds, albeit risking the loss of accumulated dice with a single failure along the chain.

character's scores. Yes, all of the scores, not just Stamina. Anything the character tries from that point on will be reduced by the damage (with one exception, explained below). Depending on the type of attack, more penalties might be assessed as well.

> There's nothing in the universe cold steel won't cut.
> —R. E. Howard,
> Beyond the Black River

Damage Type	Penalties (where X = number of victories)
Fists/bludgeon	X for next action
	1 lasting penalty
Edged weapon	X for next action
	X lasting
Small handgun	X for next action
	X lasting
Nasty big handgun	2X for next action
	X lasting
Rifle	2X for next action
	X lasting
Big auto-gun	3X for next action
	2X lasting
Special damage non-lethal	X + demon's Power for next action
	X lasting
Special damage lethal	2X for next action
	X + demon's Power lasting

Total penalties	Effects
less than or equal to Stamina	nose bopped, ears ringing, seeing stars
greater than Stamina	solar plexus hit, nerve center struck, joints twisted; pain incapacitates movement or action
greater than 2× Stamina	shocked, stunned into helplessness; no dignity

EXAMPLE: Damage and penalties
What happened to Brandon in the round described above? He was hit for two victories with a "fists/bludgeon" attack, so he has a two-dice penalty for his next action, plus an additional penalty die that lasts until the end of the fight. That's three penalty dice total for the next action! Ouch!

His Stamina is 3, which is equal to the penalties, so he is discommoded but not limited in what sort of actions he may announce.

Damage and Penalties

The table shows the total penalties of the moment and the content describes how it feels, not about how it is. Note that lost action and enforce it: it's hugely consequential, a big part of how fights are won, or rather lost. Once you understand that, then the demon ability Confuse should light up as one of the real heavy hitters.

Later, our heroes subdue their foes, but the last one managed to pull out his .357 and plug Brandon in the belly for three victories. Double ouch! Fortunately, Brandon has the ability Armor, conferred to him by his Parasite demon, so the damage is figured as if he'd been punched rather than shot (you'll notice this effect was not helpful when he did get clubbed earlier). He takes one lasting penalty and three for the next action.

So here Brandon is, already carrying one penalty from the crowbar to the head earlier, and saddled with four more from the bullet, for a total penalty for his next action of five dice. With a Stamina of 3, that means he's not far away from being totally creamed. Currently, he's immobilized – conceivably, on his knees and gasping like a fish. All right, on his next action, he's got NO dice (3 – 5 is less than zero). What can he do?

Now for the good news. A sorcerer who's taken more penalties than his or her Stamina may make a Will roll (with no penalties) against the number of dice the character is trying to be able to use next round, up to his or her maximum score. This does not count as an action.

As long as the sorcerer is not carrying penalties greater than twice his or her Stamina, this attempt may be made. In situations of this sort, the key lies in getting role-playing bonuses to rack up the Will roll. This stuff is what theme music is all about.

Greg Pryor
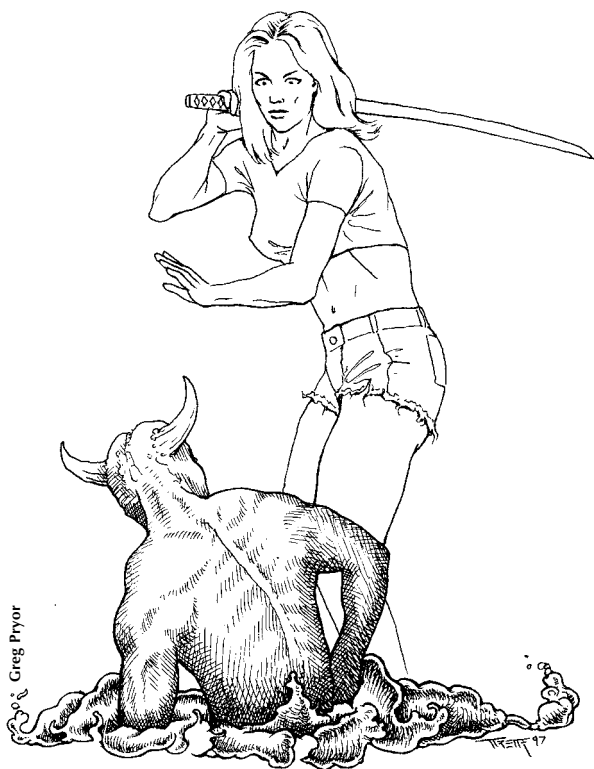
EXAMPLE: Getting through a fight.
Brandon's hurt. If he wants to do something physical, he can make a Will roll against one to three dice of difficulty, and if he makes it, he can use that many dice of Stamina. Or if he wants to issue an instruction to Fragg (who, let's say, is busy satisfying his rather unpleasant Need with Thug C's remains), he has to roll his Will against five to use all five dice of Will for his command. Either way, it's two rolls: one to master himself, and the second to

attempt whatever he has in mind to do next.

If the player can role-play well and think in terms of resolving a given story-oriented conflict, that can hop Brandon's Will from five to eight dice for that all-important first roll.

Keeping track of damage

The penalties carried by a character fluctuates wildly during combat, based on the current total of lasting and momentary penalties. Playtesting has shown that keeping track with scribbled numbers is often confusing, and that either of the following methods, by contrast, is crystal clear.

▼ The paper clip method employs the numbers listed vertically on the side of the character sheet. Use two clips; one marks the level of total penalties, and the other marks the level of lasting penalties.

▼ The counters method requires two designated spaces, such as two boxes drawn on a piece of paper. Mark one "momentary" or "one-action," and the other "lasting," and you're set to place little beans or glass beads or whatever to keep track. The total penalties at any moment, of course, would be the total number of counters.

Recovery from damage

One-round penalties clear up during the fight, but lasting penalties are never as bad as they look either. After the fight, if the character can rest and recover for a little while, their lasting penalties are halved (round up). Whatever is left over will last for a while, in the form of bruises, stitches, and so on, as follows.

Total lasting penalties	Effect
less than or equal to Stamina	skin broken/scraped, bruises
	need bandages, icepacks
greater than Stamina	injured
	need stitches, slings, temporary crutches
greater than 2× Stamina	bones exposed, hemorrhaging, guts hanging out
	need intensive care

EXAMPLE (continued):

In the long term, Brandon is affected only by the lasting effects of his two injuries, which are based on four penalties. This is where he'll be until he either takes more damage or gets a chance to rest up after the fight. Let's say it's the latter, in which case half that damage will simply go away, putting him at two penalties for a while, less than his Stamina of 3. The GM rules that he's got big bruises on his head, abdomen, and lower ribs and

Keeping track of damage

What is up with people not using the paper-clip suggestion? It's awesome and easy.

Recovery from damage

One can come through a fight quite well, even upon getting one's ass kicked. I really love that "space" of being hurt and still going, perhaps more effectively rather than less, as a primary dramatic moment in playing Sorcerer. Characters in that space make all the best and most interesting decisions about their demons, about Binding, and about anything else.

Make sure the players get it too, though. I still painfully recall the moment during early playtesting when a player, upon his character's receiving total penalties that exceeded his Stamina, shouted "I'm dead!" in an accusatory fashion and petulantly crumpled up the sheet.

Learn both of those tables and use them as directed and for their distinct purposes. Obviously, as I learned that day, players should understand that penalties are mainly about actions rather than raw survival, and the in-fight table is especially important regarding what a character can and cannot do.

Now it's time to talk about getting killed. Boy, did I create a textual hassle, although it works well once you know exactly how to read it.

Character death is possible, but difficult. Here are the numbers. Because lasting penalties are halved following a conflict, a character can take lasting injury penalties up to and including four times his or her Stamina score, and still live. That's the cut-off.

Except when you're benefiting from the Vitality ability, which is to say, your demon's Power is greater than the damage inflicted. In that case, these numbers go up by the difference, which is awesome.

I wanted brushes with death to be moved past relatively easily, once their immediate circumstances were over. I ended up taking a rule almost directly from Over the Edge, in which damage was halved once the dangerous circumstances were over; Hero Wars did something very similar too.

That's also why death still isn't automatic, even at the cut-off penalty level. Once a character does sustain that number of lasting penalties, and is thereby mortally injured, *then* the rule says, if there is any imaginable in-game justification for receiving intensive care then or soon, the character lives.

And that bears discussion. Does the character die or not? If in-game circumstances are the determining factor, then isn't that the same thing as GM fiat? I suggest the answer is no, it's not GM fiat. It's about what is known at the table, not what is suddenly imposed after the fact of injury. Therefore the GM does not suddenly invent a team of paramedics who dash in from off-screen. He or she, and everyone else, checks around all the details and circumstances of that particular location.

---(cont.)

will be pretty tender for a couple of days, but is otherwise not in medical danger.

Demons in combat

Demons time their actions and make their rolls just like any other characters. Note that instructing a demon is a full action, so if your demon is faster than you are, it will probably be moving before you have a chance to tell it what to do. Or if it's irritated with you, maybe it won't be moving until you tell it. Either way can be an advantage or a problem, but every player ought to be aware of his or her character's relative position to the character's demons in the course of a combat round.

Demons' abilities cause them fatigue. Each time a demon uses an ability, keep track. If the total number of abilities used in a single scene exceeds its Stamina, assign it penalties equal to the difference. Thus each successive use will incur another 1-die penalty. When the number of penalties exceeds the Stamina score, the demon will not be able to use any abilities at all until it has a chance to recover.

Many sorcerers will have demons who are not obviously present until combat starts. There are many, many ways to have a demon pop up apparently out of nowhere. Inconspicuous types will suddenly "appear" when they do anything aggressive, and all the other types may take Cloak and keep it on most of the time. If you combine either of those tactics with Big, the surprise can be considerable. (An object, say, a ring, that turns into a creature is best handled as Inconspicuous rather than as an Object with Shapeshift.)

Combatants who have never before faced a hideous, snarling demon may well have to roll a contest of Will vs. the demon's Power in order to function properly in combat with it. If the demon wins the roll, the loser will take the number of victories as a penalty to all of his or her rolls. This extremely deadly option could certainly apply to certain player-characters in the first session of play.

If a demon takes more than twice its Stamina of lasting damage, it dies nastily, then oozes, vaporizes, or explodes into nothingness, leaving no direct forensic evidence. Exactly what happens to a killed demon depends on whether it was Bound at the time. If it was unbound, it's Banished and the killer may get a Humanity gain check. It could be re-Summoned just like any other Banished demon. If it was Bound, though, it's dead and will never be seen again. If its master really wanted to, he or she could call up a similar demon, but it's not the same individual.

The demon ability Armor presents a special case of switching columns: it converts bullet or edged weapon damage into Fists damage. It has no effect against real Fists damage. As for Special Damage, some demon attacks are

Recovery from damage, cont.

Given that, is intensive care available, or not? That question can be answered without controversy.

For the risk-prone sorcerer, it's good to know that the demon ability Vitality counts as "intensive care" under all circumstances, regardless of current Power.

meant to be stunning, not lethal; for these, wherever the Special Damage table reads "lasts," use it as "next" and vice versa (see the Table for details).

Various modifiers

▼ **Armor**. Protective clothing has pretty much the same effect as the demon ability Armor, but it varies in detail depending on the type of attack. Kevlar converts Gun damage into Fist damage, but it is less effective against piercing melee weapons. The GM must judge what other sorts of armor are capable of. Real fist damage is useless against armor, unless the character does something clever like tripping or joint locking, in which case the armor is ignored. Note also that all attacks in SORCERER are considered to be aimed, and no armor (aside from the demon ability) covers everywhere.

▼ **Automatic maximum**. The GM has total discretion to award to any character an automatic maximum, meaning Total Victory, regardless of the actual victories rolled. This is for cases where the target is completely helpless or similar situations.

▼ **Fatigue**. Most fights in SORCERER are short, but the GM is free to apply new penalties at any time if he or she thinks one has gone on for too long. Also, if characters try to do anything physical just after a fight, the GM should apply a blanket 1-die penalty to their rolls in addition to any damage penalties.

▼ **Guns**. These weapons are generally very effective (see the local news if you need proof). However, they are not omnipotent. Drawing a weapon is a full action, as are aiming and re-establishing aim. Firing without aiming incurs penalties, usually 1 to 3 dice. If the GM wants to limit the power of trigger-happy player-characters further, he or she should assign a simple roll to check for jams, misfires, and similar troubles. Characters who try to use guns without having a Cover that justifies proficiency with firearms will be at –2 dice at the very least. Finally, guns can be taken away and used against their owners even more easily than demons can...

▼ **Guns II**. The rules are bound to be disappointing to those players fascinated with hollow-point rounds, bursts per second, ammunition capacity, and other details of gun design. If in the GM's opinion a given gun has some special advantage, merely use an appropriate damage category. As a rule of thumb, if the detail in question has never made a plot-important difference in any commercial movie with which the GM is familiar, it should have no effect on play.

▼ **Melee weapons**. If they're blunt, just give the user a bonus die or two on the Fists damage table. If they're edged, then use the Blades/Claws table.

Various modifiers

Automatic maximum is no joke, and I encourage you to use it. People sometimes hide behind the potentially forgiving combat-action rules when the existing fiction should permit no such thing. You should develop your standards and cut-off level for ruling this effect in, as well as combining it with a jacked-up damage column, in accord with the defining statements that underly any serious game of Sorcerer.

Regarding guns, here's my thinking. Shooting is a highly significant action. It's something a character really wants to do, not some snap-action hurt'im "move" they have in their back pockets when their to-hit roll comes up. My rationale is that distinguishing between gun-savvy vs. not goes a long way toward making sorcery more powerful and interesting. In other words, when guns aren't "zap you die" toys, but rather tools which require understanding and skill to use consistently well, then they aren't available as easy backups for any and all character concepts.

Unfortunately, I screw this up all the time in play, when I fall into the habits of Hollywood rather than remembering what game I'm playing. I always regret it, too.

Regarding multiple actions, my thinking has changed. Now, I suggest saying "one action, suck it up, what is it," for all dialogue that leads into rolling dice. This is good, because single rolls can be pretty limited in scope when it comes to physical action, and therefore really effective action takes a couple of rounds to set up. The dice mechanics do wonderfully good fight choreography when you apply them at that level. And consider my points about Humanity: if you parse a complex action through a series of rounds, then you have all the more opportunities to reconsider what you're doing.

That concept ties right back into the point about guns, too, meaning that anyone can yank away at a trigger, but a serious gunshot might require two or three rounds to pull off well, and therefore you have to decide to shoot a person over more than one moment of reflection about it. And conversely, it makes Fast really count!

Full defense is like a little one-character oppositional simplification in the middle of an otherwise orthogonal situation. You roll for it at the outset of the round just like everyone else. If you come in ahead of your attacker's value, then poof, they missed, pre-emptively. And yes, it also means if your roll fails to beat the attack dice coming at it, you get to abort the initial roll for a brand new defensive roll, although without the two-dice bonus. So full defense is, even at worst, still a double chance to negate the attack coming at you.

Here's something I should have included in this section: voluntarily aborting an action during the resolution sequence. Effectively, it's the same as aborting to defense, and should use those rules in full, even though there may not be any kind of attack coming in at the character. This turns out to be a crucial mechanics component of Humanity-relevant decisions right in the thick of combat, so I recommend that everyone at the table understands it.

▼ **Multiple actions**. Players may want to pack as much as they can into a single roll. When the GM thinks this is getting out of hand, he or she should permit the stated actions and apply blanket penalties (1 or 2 dice) across all of them.

▼ **Other attacks**. Attacks like stun gas or poisons should be assigned a Power and treated like Special Damage. Also, most details in combat are best handled simply by giving bonus dice.

▼ **Other things**. Lots of players are going to come up with combat details and want to know how they work, preferably in the most game-effective way possible, things like distance modifiers, how far can I run and still attack without penalty, that sort of thing. The GM should play it fast and loose, combining the above guidelines to assign quick bonuses and penalties.

▼ **Second-rate foes**. Certain combatants should be designated "one-hit" opponents, in that if a character hits successfully, the target is put out of the fight. Whether they are stunned or maimed depends on the type of attack, but they certainly can be ignored for the rest of the combat. This is strongly recommended for large group combats with nameless minions.

▼ **Switching damage categories**. The GM may also change which category of damage applies in certain situations. For example, a pistol at point-blank range may well use the category for a much heavier weapon. (This option eliminates characters shrugging off bullets fired into their temples.)

▼ **Tactics**. Perhaps the player's best bet in combat is to follow up and capitalize on a foe's initial penalties after taking a hit. The chance to finish a fight is greatly increased if they or a friend can get in a second attack before the foe can recover even from a minor blow. Doing the usual role-playing game thing, which is to attempt to chip away at a foe over time, is not very effective in SORCERER.

▼ **Total defense**. If all the character's actions in one round are completely defensive, add a two-dice bonus to his or her rolls.

The supplement SORCERER & SWORD includes plenty of rules for making full use of the system in sweaty, frantic, steel-clanging combat. It is based almost entirely on the conventions established by pulp-fantasy fiction in the 1930s and 1940s by authors such as Robert E. Howard and Fritz Leiber.

Various modifiers, cont.

In fact, if you go back to my simplistic Tarantino example, it's conceivable that once everyone looks at the dice on the table, *then* everyone suddenly decides to stand down: very dramatic.

I built these rules from the innovative mechanics found in Zero (1997). They're a bit different from that game in that if you decide not to abort to defense in Sorcerer, you still have a chance not to be hit.

Hey, you know what's really fun? When there are two or more complex conflicts occurring more-or-less simultaneously during play, in different locations. The rules let you run them simultaneously, letting the dice determine when you switch attention back and forth among them. It's cinematic as hell.

Final Words

I had tried to write many role-playing systems over the years, but perhaps the real breakout notion which allowed me to complete this one was to abandon the idea of infinitely stackable character components.

It won't work. For instance, having a high Stamina and utilizing the demon ability Fast doesn't get you as much from Fast as it would if you had low Stamina.

Racking up scores and abilities and whatever onto a single tactic starts detracting from other avenues of effectiveness too quickly. When I did permit this mechanics effect, it was for very carefully-chosen bits, as for Cloak and Boost, for which I wanted the full Power of the demon in question to be exerted upon the fiction as a unit.

There is no security in Sorcerer character design. Piling on dice works great for actions (tactics) but not for whole situations or sessions (strategy). You can't build a character who can rest comfortably on the high side of a probability hump for his or her niche and avoid everything else.

Instead, you must think flexibly, and be ready to try something new. Seize a demon, soak up a new source of lore, or consider a new application of the rituals you'd never thought you'd do, but is just right for the current circumstances. The game works wonderfully when you use what's there, and it will make you suffer horribly if you try to beat it.

In fact, I urge you to *accept* damage, including defeat, to interpret it merely as changing the arena of conflict. Remember how often the characters in the source material fail and suffer. When that happens to your character, let go of how you planned to win, because now, your story is about the guy who won anyway, or went down in glorious flames in trying.

This is quite a subversive concept in role-playing, both to let go of the present and how you want or expect your character to look at the moment, and to let go of the future and of your dreams for what the character might become.

M. Wayne Miller

Chapter Seven:

THEME AND MEANING

How I Did It

Here is an example of running SORCERER. It happens to be my own version of play, developed over the course of playtesting. By no means should you copy it slavishly! Although I wrote SORCERER, that doesn't necessarily mean I will have the best ideas for running it, or be the best GM for it. That person might be you, and there's no reason why you should assume otherwise.

So the following material is only to demonstrate how one takes the basic skeleton of the SORCERER rules and uses them to construct a personal vision. There are several instances of either interpreting or even bending the rules, such as the True Names, the gradual shifting from one Demon Type to another, and the way I chose to deal with sex, madness, and drugs. Again, these are not intended to be "the rules" for such things, or even guidelines, but rather examples of one way to go. By all means, develop your own.

"That chart clued me in that while Sorcerer is all about Humanity at the player level, to the characters **it looks like everything is all about Lore."**

-- James

Now it's about when the sessions are under way. Bangs arrive more organically, the situations and problems have evolved into novel forms, and characters' value systems have been discovered, expressed, and stressed.

The intended structural result includes rising action, climaxes, and in a word, stories. This chapter is about how that can happen without forcing it to happen, either before play as a whole or session-prep by session-prep. If you follow what I've written here, begin with the components for the initial vision, prepare as I've described, and play as indicated – what do you *get*?

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┌─────────────────────────────┐           ┌─────────────────────────────┐
│ 1. Introductory Discussion  │           │ 4. Preparation & Initial Play│
│    The Two Statements       │           │    Bangs                     │
│  ┌───────────────────────┐  │  Diagrams │  ┌───────────────────────┐   │
│  │ 2. Make Characters    │──┼──────────▶│  │ 5. Sorcery            │   │
│  │    Kickers            │  │           │  │    Humanity           │   │
│  │ 3. Make Demons        │  │           │  │ 6. Conflicts of All Sorts│ │
│  │    Desires & Needs    │  │           │  │    Humanity           │   │
│  └───────────────────────┘  │           │  └───────────────────────┘   │
└─────────────────────────────┘           └─────────────────────────────┘
                                                        │
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                                           ┌─────────────────────────────┐
                                           │ Emergent Story & Setting     │
                                           │ The Big Four Outcomes        │
                                           └─────────────────────────────┘
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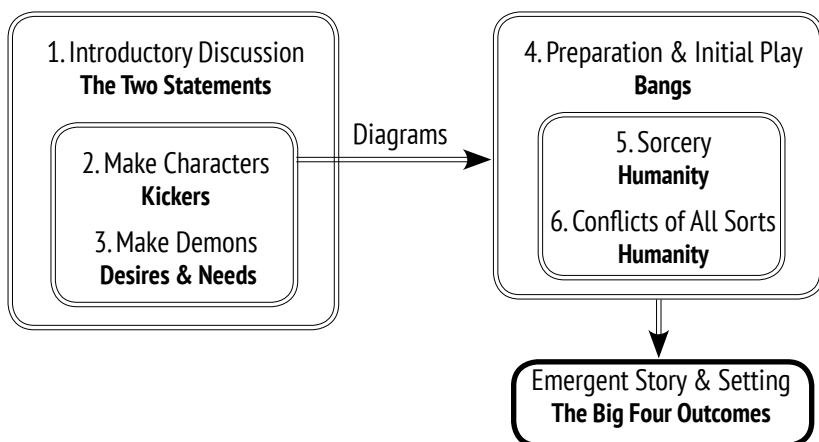
Sorcerer is character-centric, not setting-centric, which is why setting only begins as an atmospheric and inspirational element. The story emerges through play, but also, as a side-effect, setting becomes more concrete and well-understood too.

And that's why this book as a text cannot be read as an entertainment, a proxy for play.

Part One: The world and style

The idea is to kick around the United States and run a few sessions for each locale, generating "slice of life" stories, little horrific, off-kilter takes on things. Although set in the 90s, they should feel like period pieces and might grade into surrealism. For example, stories set in Pacific Grove, California, would be kind of *Twin Peaks*-ish, or perhaps the *The X-Files, The Lords of Misrule*, or *Exorcist III* are good references. Stories concern families and long-time ties in a beautiful town community, full of hidden sorrows and lurking evil. Incredible heroism and villainy exist in the malt shop or behind bedroom doors, and all the while the kids build sand castles and play in the sun.

Stories set in Tampa, Florida, on the other hand, would be grimier and more violent. The student cafes are a little more beatnik than they are in reality, the strip joints are more hardcore, the downtown business is more intense, and the gangs are more dangerous. The stories here would be noir-ish mysteries with urban survivor themes. References include the comics *Sin City* and the first few issues of *Hellblazer,* the novels *Naked Lunch* by William Burroughs and *Flood* and *Strega* by Andrew Vachss, and the movie *Pulp Fiction*.

The overall concept is not a cyberpunk set piece for action stunts, firefights, and thwarting large conspiracies. Instead, the city will still be there after the characters are gone, the world will go on as before. What matters are the small, desperate, occasionally noble stories that exist on nearly every corner.

The theme of this version of SORCERER is **transgression**. Whatever rules one happens to believe in, what happens when they are broken? The stories produced by this style of play will address this question in terms of murder, sex, and even sanity.

Part Two: Sorcery

There are two general branches of sorcery of interest, one very old and classical, the other quite recent and regarded as radical. Each is subdivided into a variety of approaches, only some of which are described below. The total number of sorcerers in the world is estimated at just over a hundred.

Rarely, the great sorcerers of the world call a Convocation. Sorcerers find out about it in the oddest ways, and even the maddest and most alienated ones somehow make their ways there. Demons are strictly second-class citizens at a Convocation and a sorcerer who can't keep his pets well-behaved will definitely lose face. These meetings are called only during dire emergencies which threaten the practice of sorcery as a whole.

Part Two: sorcery

What to say about Lore? It's so full of potential and so easy to overlook during play. I advise everyone at the table to treat it as a sketch, to be transformed as you go into a more detailed, more refined, more intriguing version of itself. More than that, I find myself reluctant to say. It's the kind of thing the game is designed to do well, but I can't guide your brush for you. The material here simply shows where we went.

Convocation

The Convocation idea is simply fucking stupid. It looks great on paper, but every time I tried it in play, it fell flat. I can unequivocally advise you not to do it.

How I did it

My only critique here is that result incorrectly implies that I made all this stuff up in a unified way, prior to play. Play began with much less detail on the table, partly influenced by the role-playing game *Kult*, more so by the references that I listed. The detailed content came about mainly through preparation for the first and second sessions.

Also, it combines content from two separate games, although I did conceive of these and other games at the time within the same distinct thematic zone. I'll describe the two games, played over most of 1994-1996, to try to show how play *produces* the kind of setting depth that I presented in the original text. I'd already played Sorcerer, which is to say, the rules-notions which did become the eventual rules, a couple-three times. These were the first long-term, dedicated games, played with two different groups, which I think overlapped in real time.

For perspective, the house party scenario in Chapter 4 was also built more-or-less throughout this period, but wasn't played in a dedicated fashion until I took the game to local game days at game stores, and local cons in 1996-98. My mini-supplement Demon Cops was written much later, in 2000, during the publication process for the core book.

The first game

There were three players. Dan was an aspiring filmmaker whose character, Nancy, was pretty much a direct grab from the character played by Fairuza Balk in the movie *The Craft* (Dan had kind of a thing about this actress), with Lore 5, defined as Adept and Mad. Plus her demon was over-the-top horror-awful, with Power 11 or 12, really freaking strong and psycho. It was more or less an occult force with time and space and ... well, it was bad news. Jonathan was his friend and also a student at the kung fu school, whose instructor was a friend of mine (and also a talented artist; the ones with the subway, the bat-rider, and the woman reading the scary book are his). His character was, if I recall correctly, less memorable, but kind of a fun guy. I don't remember his demon at all. Camille was a close friend of mine,

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THE CLASSICISTS

Classical sorcerers belong to ages-old traditions and cults; they are knowledgeable about specific texts and fluent in a horrible nonhuman language spoken by un-Bound demons. Their Binding methods include extremely complex contracts.

Classical demons have True Names, which they will only reveal if commanded. Trying to Bind a demon without knowing its True Name incurs a penalty equal to the demon's Power, and a sorcerer must make a Lore vs. the demon's Power roll in order to understand the name and recall it. However, if the sorcerer can do this, he or she may add Lore as a bonus to any rolls concerning that demon.

There are two basic types of classicists, each of which includes several named groups.

▼ The immortalists include only apprentices and adepts, and practitioners usually belong to a specific school or practice. It's a purely scholarly path, passed on from master to apprentice in dreadful secret rites. Immortalists believe demons are innately malevolent and that the practice of sorcery threatens one's soul.

▼ The ecstasists tend to be covens, generally short-lived. To them, sorcery is based on acts, not symbols. Its concerns include (1) pure passion, for the sensation/ecstasy freak; (2) propitiation, even nature magic; and (3) love and manipulation, often in abusive forms.

Example immortalists: The Way of the Black Wheel. These guys are your basic diabolists. They (and their demons) are interested in pure death: killing and control of killing, immortality, and revenge, revenge, revenge. Black Wheel Binding contracts are excessively convoluted even by classicist standards. This is a dangerous path: the User of abilities is usually the sorcerer, so Humanity rolls are common, and complete loss of Humanity to a Black Wheel demon usually means it kills you and eats your soul. Oddly, practitioners are relatively non-suicidal – death is considered strictly a means, so there has to be another, explicit goal. Big-time redeemed assassin storylines are possible here.

Black Wheel demons are usually Parasites (replacement body parts) or Objects (usually symbolic items like amulets or wands, incorporating mummified body parts). Some of these Parasites can completely claim a host's body and become a Possessor or Passer, if the host's Humanity goes to zero. None of the demons are content to be used for simple utility; they often require harm to oneself or another in return for a conferred ability, especially for Special Damage, Vitality, and Armor.

The first game, cont.

whose character Lupa was the heir to a Latino gangster family, with a tattoo demon named Raimondi, which as it happens, she (the real person) later got tattooed on her actual ass.

This game taught me how well the fictional-framework categories, like demon Types among other stuff, intertwined with the dice. The bit in the core book about how to deal with simultaneous Parasite and Possessor in the same host came from this one.

The other thing that came out of this game was the dice currency itself showing its stuff. We found out how well the roll-over mechanic worked.

In terms of story, it was very violent. We were all intense fans of both Hong Kong gangster drama and B-martial arts flicks. But it also brought forward a strong dose of surrealism that kind of slipped it to the players unexpectedly. Dan was impressed by my use of contemporary spaces, for example, having a great deal of a scene occur through the parts of an airport you don't see as a traveler, rendering the familiar utterly unfamiliar without any magical effects at all.

This was the game which produced some of the stuff in Chapter 7, specifically the Cult of the Dark Lady. The big demon pretty much became the villain of the piece. Wow, now I remember, all that sex-transgressive stuff, and the madness stuff ... we actually got sort of philosophically deep among all the spattered body fluids. Some of the story involved revising time, and not merely in the "change the past" way, but revising what time is.

Too much of the plot came from GM-framing and my own plans getting manifested through play. I hadn't quite learned something about that yet, which the next game was to show me. But the plus side was learning how much fun it was to have a character descend well into the depths of Humanity loss, yet not be de-protagonized. Nancy had been essentially set up for disaster by Dan's initial character creation choices, and we all learned that in this game, disaster was only the start of when you got to play your character, not the ending.

The second game

The players were Ron (not me, another guy; I was GM), Margie, and Taer, although Taer didn't play past the first couple of sessions. I knew them mainly through the game, comics, and bookstore Novel Ideas, where Ron worked. This was the time I figured out, literally during the prep for session three or four, what this game was capable of. The whole idea of "story prep" which I'd wrestled with for a solid decade blew away like smoke.

The game-fiction was set in my home town area, the Monterey Peninsula in central coastal California, the same that I later messed with fictionally in Demon Cops and the Forbidden Tome scenario. This version wasn't dressed up anywhere near as those; the only fictional addition was that I changed the names of the towns and exaggerated their traits slightly.

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Other immortalist groups include the Redemptionists, who are deeply and traditionally religous, and the Apostate, always represented by a single sorcerer.

> **EXAMPLE ECSTASISTS: the Cult of the Dark Lady. This group is more directly religious; practitioners speak of a central, mystical personage called the Dark Lady, or the Queen of Witches, or Mother Night, and a hundred other titles. Her true name is unknown. A fine cinema reference for this group may be found in Dario Argento's films *Suspiria* and *Inferno*.**
>
> **To perform the most basic sorcery (the Contact), you must perceive her and then move beyond. She remains a mystery, only rumored actually to have spoken to the most high sorcerers. All religion, all visions, transgressions of all kinds are ultimately hers, in the form of ecstasy and sacrifice.**
>
> **Contacting and Summoning the demons of the Dark Lady usually requires a wild orgy, with the coven's help. The demons are beautiful, passionate, vain, and very wilful, with Power often above 6. They are typically Passers or Possessors; their primary shape is always human-like, although Shapeshift is possible. Common abilities include Link, Psychic Force (defined as a jolt of pleasure), Vitality, and Daze. They may have a unique Boost Lore ability. This is a deliberate exception to the rule that Possessors and Passers may not have Boost. It requires physical congress of some kind, requiring the sorcerer to make a Stamina vs. his or her own Will (to let go of any inhibitions), then a Will vs. his or her own Stamina (to direct the tantric energies to sorcerous goals). Players are encouraged to roleplay to gain bonuses for these rolls.**
>
> **Day to day, coven management is probably the main issue. The sorcerer may be the organizer and leader, or the focus or tool of the non-sorcerous leader. There can be totally anonymous covens, or the belief system of a coven may not be sorcerous at all, such as a self-help organization or garden-variety cult. Also, the demons' roles in the coven range from totally dominant to totally subservient, depending on the skill and personality of the coven leader.**

There are plenty of other ecstasists, including summoners of the much-feared Body Double demons, who possess host after host through sexual contact and forget their own nature after inhabiting a host for a while.

The second game, cont.

Ron made up a guy who'd just been released from prison, a mild accountant sort. His demon was a family heirloom ring with a fussy personality and Boost Stamina. He liked the idea of this kind of nebbishy guy who could throw a truck if he had to. Margie made up a nun who was dedicated to saving demons' souls, and her current demon was a sort of zesty, mischievous wind-spirit. I got the idea that the nun liked the demons a bit more than she let herself know. Taer made up a private investigator named Grey with a demon pal, a sinister childhood friend named "Jim."

My initial prep was fully based on my own back-story and my notions of clues that the characters might discover about that. Here were the components.

1. A demon based almost entirely on a brilliant concept from … I believe it was a supplement for *Blood Shadows*, an RPG from West End Games. The idea was the demon skinned someone, wore its skin, and only figured out that it was a demon when the skin started to slough off, then did it over and over again, attempting entirely sincerely each time to live a normal life as whoever it thought it was at the time. I loved this and ripped it right off. Uhhhh … poor choice of words. Anyway, I worked out a whole history of whom it had killed and the lives it had lived over the last couple of decades. I believe I named it "Scatch." You can find it described a little abstractly on pp. 69-70.

2. A back-story concerning the death of a sorcerer who'd summoned Scatch, and a young woman who had been a little girl at the time, now grown up. She had a demon buddy too, a nice guy who protected her, and she didn't really realize that she was a sorceress.

Putting these together yielded a bunch of different groups, well, not organizations in the RPG sense of the time, but concentrations of people in the community. One was a horrific child-abuse clique, influenced by my reading lots of stuff by Andrew Vachss. There was another bunch who thought they were occultists. I'd just seen the movie version of *Legion* ("Exorcist III") on Ron's advice and so as it turned out, included a very fine asylum. Still proud of that one.

All of these things were the flotsam and wreckage left over from the initial badness of the sorcerer, who had a great name which I might remember if I think about it some more, as well as the horrors inflicted by Scatch over the past decade or two.

As you can see, I had a bit too much going on. I didn't respect the Kickers well enough. Although I'd written the rule, none of us really knew what to do with it. Also, Taer didn't write a Kicker and eventually accepted a suggestion that he'd himself found the discarded skin of a former Scatch victim under his patio. But this was definitely him holding out until the GM provided a standard hook; I didn't realize until much later that this was a red flag.

The first couple of sessions were good in their way, for three of us. Margie and Ron really got into the setting and found their feet with these characters, kind of

Jeremy McHugh

THE RADICALS

Radical sorcery is not backed by any body of education or shared practice through history, and its practitioners and details are highly individual. There are only two groups which are consistent enough to be identified, each including a bevy of cliques and idiosyncratic loners.

The sanzoku

Technically, these practitioners are hardly sorcerers at all, with Lore of 2 at best. They know about Binding, in a limited way, but little else. Their demons are Objects, always weapons, whose Desires include mayhem, competition, and honor, and whose Need is always to fight. Interestingly, when one such weapon is beaten in a fight with another (that is, its wielder dies or concedes), the demon "hops" to the winning weapon, which now is two Object demons sharing one object (sort of a blend between Possessor and Object). The new demon is then Bound by the weapon's wielder.

The wielders of sanzoku weapons know only that their weapons are capable of great combat feats, and a strange martial subculture has grown up in the last few decades, of people engaging in savage one-on-one combat in kind of an ongoing tournament. It is this subculture that defines the sanzoku sorcerer as a coven member. Rumor has it that *Highlander* was a garbled dramatization of this activity.

Sanzoku demons' Power rarely exceeds 3, but their abilities are all combat-enhancing. Some sanzoku demons confer their abilities and others

The second game, cont.

grooving on the bad-yet-gratifying relationships with the demons. Both of their characters were pretty nice people who thought of themselves as empowered to do a little good if they got the chance. As I recall, nearly all the conflicts and action scenes in the first two sessions were canned, meaning, I'd prepped them, shoved the characters into them during play, and ran them with a strong idea of what the scene was for and what they should know. You know ... "good GMing."

Taer politely excused himself from the game. It was a little mysterious at the time because the rest of us had liked his character and the fucked-up friend, "mad bad and dangerous to know." That was my first encounter with a good role-player for whom Sorcerer was simply not the right game.

We continued. The NPC play was working pretty well. The young woman character had clicked well with the remaining players, so they were invested in her situation and concerned that her demon ("Jake") was itself set to go out of control if she didn't figure out a few things. Another NPC named Sally had blossomed from a throwaway character into a lot of fun. The two active player-characters were quite invested in finding out my back-story, and so, in terms of standard "good GMing," everything seemed to be going hunky dory. Story, right? Story role-playing, right? Good story?

Except that when prepping for the fourth session, I suddenly realized something. I had my various NPCs. I had my back-story. I had the locations. And ... there was no point whatsoever in planning a God damned thing. What would they do next? Whatever they announced. What would the demons do next, individually? Whatever I thought/felt was what they'd do, in the moment. What would happen in any given location or scene or combination of characters at the moment? The only possible answer to each question was, whatever would happen when we played it.

My need to prep *events* evaporated. I had the materials. I had a strong sense of current NPC priorities, investment in characters, and simple passion about the topics. The player-characters were solid engines of internal conflict and externally-directed attention to what was happening around them. Wow, I said. I don't need to prep events at all!

I mean, zero. No events. I had the stuff, and all we needed to do was keep playing. Holy fucking shit. I took a deep breath, drew a few circles-and-arrows diagrams to remind myself who was who, and went into the next session without a safety net.

I swear to God you would never believe how much fun the following sessions were, up to and including the climax of our story and of the Kickers. Did the young woman undergo memory-therapy with a hard-nosed hippy counselor ... which resulted in resurrecting the dead sorcerer? Did Scatch actually become a sympathetic character, for a demon anyway? Did Sally give birth to Jim in a horrific re-summoning ritual after Jim was banished, after having killed Grey? Did both sorcerer player-characters utterly transform into bad-asses on the knife-edge

do not. Interesting variants include Travel (not conferred), allowing the weapon to be always near to hand, and Cloak, permitting weapons to be hidden under unlikely circumstances. It is this last that allows sanzoku weapons to include claymores and katana, along with the more predictable array of fighting knives, nunchaku, baseball bats, and brass knuckles.

Sanzoku demons are picky about their masters' behavior. They are not interested in unfair competition and will swiftly betray a master who uses anything but a melee weapon or who wimps out from frequent armed encounters. The most powerful sanzoku sorcerers have as many as five demons in their weapon. Of course, as untrained sorcerers, the wielders usually fail to accord with so many demons' Needs and Desires, and so their weapons become increasingly unreliable. Furthermore, these demons are not articulate and simply base their loyalties (i.e. conferring or performing abilities) on the wielder's actions.

The Psyche junkies

The most radical sorcery involves ripping one's perceptions wide open, usually with the help of designer hallucinogens. A common cocktail would be something like MDMA with a solid backing of high-quality morphine, followed by rites of one's own creation for Contacting and Summoning. Psyche-based Binding follows no set pattern. This brand of sorcery is obviously much more improvisational, and the primary risk is going straight off the deep end, ending up muttering and picking at oneself in an asylum or alleyway. Lore descriptions are most often naive and mad, with adepts being very rare. This sort of sorcerer regards the classicist as an old poop; the classicists think these guys are somewhere between stupid and insane.

The radical sorcerer is indeed close to the edge. The first issue is drugs. The cream of the crop for sorcerous purposes is something called Psyche, which is tremendously rare and mysterious in origin. Nearly all sources can be traced back to sorcerers, it's rumored, although trying to learn more is a quick path to suicide. Non-sorcerers pay high for Psyche too, in that it is purported to invoke a genuine psychotic episode with no long-term effects. Since (unlike most drugs) it is so rare, it hardly ever hits the street and various pushers have become practically legendary in the drug culture. The slang name for Psyche, especially after being stepped on a few times, is "shrack."

The other issue is sanity. The radical sorcerer has the ongoing problem of projecting his reactions and desires into commands: impromptu shapeshift, warp, and Contacts, usually reflecting the sorcerer's reaction to frightening or unwelcome events, or even unconscious desires. Losing all one's Humanity through this path of sorcery means the practitioner can no longer distinguish

The second game, cont.

between moral judgment and mortal arrogance? Did they go into that asylum, to give us all (the real people) nightmares for years to come? Yes, yes, all yes.

I had no idea it was going to get that good. All I had to do was respect the back-story and the events to date, play my characters, and trust my own aesthetic judgments about where/when to open and close scenes. The more I cared about what was going on right then, and the less I cared about how it was going to turn out, the better it got. Ron and Margie felt as if their characters were, for the first time ever, freed from any kind of expectation or pre-established role they must fit into to be "played right," and instead, played those two characters in their own right, who would take whatever was thrown at them and damned well say and do whatever they would. It was exhilarating, scary, and ultimately liberating.

between any sort of reality and unreality, and may even become unstuck in space and time.

Furthermore, the Psyche-based demons themselves are insane. They respond equally unconsciously to the perceived commands described above, for example with uncontrolled Travel, whether teleporting about or walking through walls, usually masked by a Cloak. They might even include time-stops and speed-ups. The most common type is Inconspicuous, stretching its definition pretty far: hallucinations that others only sometimes see, moments in a movie or song, or manifesting as things you pull out of your pockets. Their Power may be as low as 2 or as high as 15. Common abilities include Shapeshifting, Warp, Hint, Confuse, Perception, and Cloak, but all abilities are allowed, often in unexpected combinations.

	Black Wheel	Dark Lady	Psyche	Sanzoku
Demon type	Object, parasite	Passing, possessor	Inconspicuous	Object/weapon
Abilities	Sp. Damage, vitality, boost lore	Boost (any), hop, command, protection	Cloak, confuse, perception, shadow, travel, warp, shapeshift	Any combat abilities
Typical Desire	Mayhem, power	Sensation, corruption	Knowledge, artistry, mischief	Honor, competition
Prices	Arrogance	Perversions	Psychosis, addictions	Paranoia, recklessness
Lore type	Apprentice, adept	Coven	Naive, mad, adept	Coven
Telltales	Amulets, tattoos	Jewelry, fashion accessories	Weird phrases and actions	Scars, weapons
Basic methods	Sacrifice	Seduction, orgies	Trauma, artistry	Victory
Advanced methods	Necromancy, immortality	Rejuvenation, charisma	Time/space travel	n/a

DEEP STUFF

This section isn't absolutely necessary for starting up a SORCERER role-playing group. But if you want to get profound (some might say pretentious), then here's the way to do it.

There's a bit more to this content which I didn't include, originally composed on scratch paper while I ate lunch at a roadside diner. You can read about it in Chapter 1 of Sex & Sorcery, and you'll also understand why I had to hide it from the waitress whenever she came around.

Complex sorcery and other magic

There might be devices that can perform sorcerous acts. Containments and Object demons are of course objects, but what about something like a demon gate that can Summon without a sorcerer making a roll? These items can make a huge difference in how often, how easily, and how well sorcery is performed during the game, so the GM must decide whether and how to use them very carefully. Some people simply must use a "demon gate" in any story they creates, so it's at least an option. The role-playing games *Mutant Chronicles, Feng Shui*, and *Dark Conspiracy* offer a veritable wonderland of nasty, icky weaponry and devices to play with. Or if you want to go medieval-classical, the Mayfair gaming supplements *Demons* and *Demons II* are a good place to look.

Another variant of sorcery to consider is necromancy, the art of communicating with and controlling the dead. One might define Possessor or Parasite demons who can only occupy dead bodies. However, nearly any sort of necromancy presupposes certain things, for example that a person's spirit does survive the death of the body. If you're going to use this stuff, make sure that you have a strong idea of what your presuppositions will be. The artistic angle is worth considering too: walking dead are pretty disgusting and they'll almost certainly distract from the, dare I say it, more psychological horror of the way SORCERER is currently designed.

Conspiracies

I strongly encourage keeping the number of sorcerers on Earth very, very low – perhaps fewer than a hundred at any time. This is partly to maintain the Other-ness quality of demonic magic, as opposed to incorporating it into human culture as just another technology. Another reason is to keep the players involved with their own characters' goals, especially in relation to non-sorcerers, as opposed to getting all wrapped up in what a bunch of superior sorcerers are up to. But hey! As long as we're in the Deep Stuff section, consider changing this notion.

If sorcerers and demons have played a major role in shaping human affairs throughout history, then part of being a sorcerer (or a really significant one, anyway) means being connected up with this power play or conflict or whatever. Some GMs love re-writing the 20th century in terms of "what if there were demons" or "Hitler was a demon" or some such; some GMs hate it and prefer the very personal, very local nature of sorcery. Such a GM might proclaim that every shred of occultism and magic throughout the ages has been so much hogwash, and the first real demon-summoning occurred when MTV was invented.

Another idea is to suppose that there is some kind of realm or dimension that demons come from, and why have such a thing unless you're going to crack the gates and let them through? Demons could be attempting to rip open the boundaries between the real world and their own hellish existence, so that "Hellsgates" could release a swarm of demons onto the world if they get their way. It sort of spoils the philosophical issues of the game, but it also allows for the very best in smash'em-up adventure. The role-playing game *Dark Conspiracy* presents such a situation that a Sorcerer GM might use as a model, if this is the way the story is going.

Gary Simpson

The really big questions

It's cosmic time. What is sorcery all about, anyway? One option is to pose some kind of incredibly vast conflict, as in Moorcock's Eternal Champion novels. The world is a big chessboard and humans' fates after death, demons, and even gods are involved in the Great Game. After all, assumptions about damnation, Hell, sin, and similarly alarming issues are going to pop up in a game about demons anyway, so why not use them? It would be kind of interesting if your demon-binding sorcerous characters discovered, after several game sessions, that angels exist too. Yikes!

This idea is the **apocalyptic** variant of Sorcerer, which has a lot in common with the movie *The Prophecy*, the role-playing games *Armageddon, In Nomine*, and *Rapture*, and the comic book *The Preacher*. It's heavy stuff: God is real, the book of Revelations was truly prophetic, the actual beings of our cultural mythology walk the earth, and your characters are there.

The really big questions

It's nice to see that I was trying to write about real religions all the way back then, but my terminology was naïve. Instead of "Judeo-Christian," I'd now say "Abrahamic."

If you explore this kind of plotline, you'll have to think about what you and your fellow players believe or want to consider for plot purposes. Our modern cultural world-view is primarily Judeo-Christian, proposing a supreme being named God who made everything, established right and wrong, and is generally relevant to anything we humans do. How is this going to affect your game of SORCERER? There are four options, representing viewpoints that have been part of Western thinking ever since the first century A.D.

> The [angels] ask, "Who are you?" The Shadows ask, "What do you want?"
>
> —J. M. Strazcynski, Babylon 5

▼ Avoid it entirely, explicitly disavowing any attempt to involve God or afterlife issues into the demonics of the game. This is how the rules are currently written, but it is difficult because these issues do permeate our thinking and tend to appear all the more subtly even when they are denied. If the group can handle it, the best way is to establish some sort of blanket disavowal of all these issues, at least as they're currently expressed in terms of religion, and provide an alternative. "All that stuff is Hooey," is the message – but **This** ("this" being some ethic or metaphysic the GM is big on) is not, and that's what it's really all about.

▼ "God vs. the Devil." Also called the Manichean heresy, this view posits an equal adversary to the Big Guy, named Satan or the Devil. They're fighting (playing) some kind of war (game) in which human loyalty and behavior counts highly, and demons are working overtime for the biggest bad guy of all. SORCERER plotlines in this category would do best to follow the Faust story and its thousands of variants, with damnation occurring when Humanity goes to zero.

▼ "God and the fallen angel." This is the Miltonian view, that Lucifer is not and can never be a true adversary of God, but is rather a part of His ineffable plan, rebellion and all. It means that although there may be evil, injustice, sin, and all that, there is a higher purpose that simply cannot be beaten or challenged. Plotlines from this perspective must tackle the question of why, if God is really in charge, evil and suffering (Humanity loss) exist at all. More-or-less good demons and more-or-less mean angels fit into these stories well; nearly all of the apocalyptic examples above are in this category.

▼ "God and the world-spirit." In this view, demons are part of reality, and there are lots of wild and interesting things out there besides them. It is also one of the best views for including many kinds of magical or mythical beings besides demons, allowing you to use all those sourcebooks written for other games. Perhaps, in fact, the whole path of virtue or Goodness, which the demons oppose, is very abstract compared with the earthy or

profane path of sorcery. The sorcerer's point of view would be essentially pagan, claiming that there is nothing cosmically wrong with reality in any of its horrific or delightful aspects. The storyline would concern whether they are right.

Thematic points

Regardless of what cosmos-view the GM and players hit upon, SORCERER will always be about one issue: how does one accomplish a desired task with methods that are (or very easily could be) evil? Ordinarily, one imagines, things worth accomplishing are best done with methods themselves considered good. "The ends do not justify the means" is one of our most cherished concepts.

However, much literature, drama, and mythology raise a difficult issue: sometimes the only means to hand are not themselves good. In that situation, how does one balance the ongoing negative effects of one's means with the goodness of one's ends? Is it even possible? Would only a lunatic try? Or, sometimes, perhaps even good means lead to bad ends. Sometimes, the outlaw's way is the only option.

Of course, most individuals treading this path are villains. Either they are simply evil people who seek their selfish ends with evil means, or they are well-meaning sorts who convince themselves that "this time" their methods are justified. Such people are proud and vengeful; for anyone else, they say, these means would lead to great evil, but in my case it's for the best.

If you are interested in the meaning of a story you and your friends generate, SORCERER allows you to examine these issues. A villain is willing to sacrifice his or her own humanity for some goal that is often, upon examination, rather petty. A character worthy to be a protagonist should be more complex than that. The most interesting SORCERER plot allows this person some hope of achieving a truly worthy goal, but places the means firmly along the path of sorcery.

The resolution of the story can include the following:

▼ **Retribution**. The hero fails totally, losing control of the methods and accomplishing nothing but disaster for all concerned.

▼ **Remorse**. The hero achieves the goal, but it is an empty victory for the methods have blighted the results beyond recognition.

▼ **The Outlaw Prevails**. The hero achieves the goal, but the methods were kept under control and not permitted to spoil the vision;

▼ **Redemption**. The hero achieves the goal only by putting aside the methods and trying another way entirely.

Thematic Points

I'm very happy with my phrasing in this section. It is exactly how I wanted to bookend the thematic questions I raised in Chapter 1. The big four outcomes are the point, goal, purpose, and meaning of the game. And I cannot over-stress that they are, and can only be, *outcomes* of playing.

To realize this same kind of bookending through play, and speaking to the GM especially, you must respect a given player-character's full Kicker. That means playing it past whatever climax occurred in play, and well into its repercussions, including dealing with any emergent conflicts as well. Don't drop it at the first sign of a conclusion: "Oh, hey, you found the guy who killed your dad, I guess that's done." If the plot has occurred as organically as I've been trying to describe here, then it is quite unlikely that no one else has any opinion about the events, or that the character can simply go back to his or her previous life untouched.

The best prep question for you after a particularly definitive or dramatic conclusive moment for a character (relative to his or her Kicker) is, "Well, now what?" Meaning, not what new crisis occurs, but rather, given all that's happened, what does the character do now? Even asking for a look at the character's typical day will often generate a powerful response for everyone at the table.

Playtesting has produced the full range of these outcomes to SORCERER stories. I think this represents a significant improvement over many video-game style role-playing games, in which the characters merely live or die, and in practice, they simply keep living so that the game will continue.

GOING OVER THE EDGE

Over the what?
The concept of "over the edge" as it applies to role-playing games is the brainchild of Jonathan Tweet, whose excellent game of that name (including an essay by Robin Laws) is required reading for anyone who likes to experiment with the art form. The idea is simply to push the limits of what kind of story can be told by roleplaying, seeing what the form is capable of expressing. Here are some interesting examples for SORCERER, but the main idea is to come up with something equally weird all by yourselves.

These sorts of shenanigans are not recommended for a starting SORCERER group but rather for some experienced players who want to get experimental.

> **Anything done for the first time releases a demon.**
> —D. Sim, Cerebus: Church and State

Something simple
Why not get away from all these narrative constraints attendant on the modern setting? Time to swing the broadswords, summon the demons, and sacrifice virgins right out there in the open. Sword-and-sorcery is not very common in current fantasy fiction and roleplaying. Oh, fantasy is all over the place – that's the stuff with the elves and those wise, sad-eyed wizards who never seem to get down and get funky. But what about all that great pulp adventure by Clark Ashton Smith and his friends? When sorcerers wore black robes and swore by Set and knew how to have a good time? You might be surprised at how different this is from what modern fantasy has become: check out *The Scarlet Citadel* or *People of the Black Circle* by Robert E. Howard, wipe the blood out of your eyes, and make up some half-breed demon-spawn S.O.B who eats barbarian heart on toast.

I call this option "something simple," but it's harder than it looks for players used to other fantasy role-playing games. Sorcery is not a tool like a "fetch" command on a computer screen or a bazooka to level at a foe. It is pervaded by fright and unearthliness. Dogs bark and babies cry when a sorcerer passes; peasants mutter darkly and grip their pitchforks; noble ladies quickly hurry away – pausing for a final glance. When a spell is cast, disturbing psychedelic effects suffuse the air and the fabric built of perception

Some techniques

More thoughts about Bangs … specifically, when and how to shine a spotlight on all the player-characters. Sorcerer games tend to include multiple characters in separate locations, often rapidly getting in trouble. The way to do this is actually start all the scenes, then jump-cut across them regularly, perhaps fifteen to twenty minutes per unit in my experience. When a character gets right to the point of going to the dice, "freeze" him or her and keep going until everyone else is at such a point too. Then run the conflicts as one great big one – it works great.

Consider the spectrum from completely disconnected protagonists, not even indirectly, to an already-established team of protagonists, already fired-up about their next move. Neither extreme is especially common in playing Sorcerer given the character creation method. Most common is a set of protagonists who do not know one another but whose situations overlap indirectly, and for whom any action tends to have secondary or tertiary effects on the others. When you're the GM in some variant of this situation, the best thing to do is to include the effects of one character's actions as peripheral features in a later scene about another character, whenever the locations of the scenes permit. If and only if you don't force it, you'll find that it's productive simply to run two of the current protagonists' current actions right into one another, going past one another at the same street corner, for instance.

Spotting the right time for such reminders that the characters are indeed sharing the same location may sound hard or arbitrary, but in later play, it becomes much easier: you're dealing with player-generated Bangs, significantly altered character diagrams, and more focused and desperate actions on the part of your own NPCs. So moments when two or more player-characters would experience maximum chaos or adversity by being in one another's presence are more likely to emerge right there in play, with no planning needed.

If I'm not making myself clear, then here it is: never make decisions in play which take into account how you want a scene or situation to result. Make them in order to ground scenes and situations in what's gone before and to enrich the potential for conflict. You'll get nowhere trying to make a Sorcerer player-character do anything specific.

and reality becomes airy and insubstantial. In this type of fantasy, magic is a moral as well as physical act.

Society in pulp fantasy (sword-and-sorcery) is not pretty and friendly, like in the perky modern fantasy novels. There are no nature-loving elves or centaurs ready to help lost travelers, no benevolent mother-worshipping cults. Kindly wizards do not offer helpful, if cryptic advice and last-minute rescues. Instead, culture is direct, gaudy, sensual, and brutal. Kings are mad, queens are decadent, and priests are corrupt. Whether in the silk-hung halls of Baron Alryx xcvii or in the pits of the worst slum of the scummiest border town, life is cheap and human rights are nearly unheard of. Ghouls lurk in every other cemetery, half-evolved (or devolved?) man-apes struggle to speak from caves, and ravens croak dismally.

Des Jackson

> **The supplement Sorcerer & Sword provides extensive guidelines for creating and playing sword-and-sorcery fantasy adventure, including rules for character and setting creation, frightful necromancy, exotic drugs, hypnotism, curses that echo down the ages, vicious beasts, brooding ultra-powerful demons, and blood-spattered combat.**

Recursion

For all anyone knows, demon summoning is a wholly creative act, in that demons as contacted, summoned, and bound are really creations of the sorcerer and reflections of his or her psyche. Thus the game as it continues, and as the characters learn that this may be the case, will concern their attempts to struggle with their own conflicting selves and aspects. This option

is for those role-players who like to write short stories about their characters on the computers at work.

Start with what looks like a regular SORCERER game, but the GM should encourage the players to make up extremely intense, active demons during character creation, and during play he or she press the players hard, hopefully generating some fairly excessive behavior. Then later the characters will learn that the demons are themselves only aspects of their summoners, and therefore the characters are psychologically responsible for demonic activities. The idea is to explore what the characters, and by extension the players, are trying to express by objectifying these particular aspects of themselves.

A narrative experiment

Imagine running a few sessions in the modern-day, in which the story is founded on the effects of some mysterious events from a century before. The characters solve some of the mystery and uncover some interesting long-standing questions. Perhaps they were embroiled in the side-effects of a terrible duel between sorcerers that has lasted decades.

Okay, then, that story is designated "over." Have everyone make up new characters appropriate to the period when the duel began, say 100 years ago. Some of these characters might even be known to the original characters. Now, run the story where the ancient mysteries originated. Of course, some of the characters' actions will be constrained to set up the story that will happen (and that the players just played) a century later.

Now do it again... and again. Eventually you'll get to the point, centuries ago, where the story's future ramifications are so locked-in that you hardly even have to play. And there, the answer to the mystery of what started it all awaits.

A scary idea

This idea is less deep but more dangerous. How about playing SORCERER just like it's written, but have some or all of the players take on the roles of demons? Of course, they would have to know a little bit more about demonic relationships and conspiracies, if any, than the usual beginning SORCERER players do, but that's easy enough. I think this context could yield some absolutely wild storylines, not to mention some serious opportunities for catharsis after a hard day's work.

Recursion

Sadly, the recursion turns out to be a little bit trivial.

A narrative experiment

I still want to do this with Sorcerer, although the technique has now found a home in Vincent Baker's *In a Wicked Age* and in my solo game, *Relic*.

A scary idea

This "play the demons" notions is the first tweak people bring to the game. In practice, it turns out to be ass. Don't do this one either.

Final Words

Looking back over the book, I find there's an element which hasn't received much attention over the years: the role of being funny. Sorcerer doesn't immediately appear to be a funny game, and yet, there's a certain range of humor in its inspirational sources, and as I've found, in play. I'm beginning to think of it as an intermittent yet significant feature.

---(cont.)

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Final Words, cont.

It's not necessarily nice humor. Looking through some of my inspirations, it's like the mordant Merlin's Laugh from Robertson Davies' *World of Wonders*, or even outright grotesque as in S. Clay Wilson's comics and in John Callahan's cartoons. Or satirical, and unafraid of excess, like Voltaire's *Candide*, films directed by Pedro Almodóvar, stories by John Collier, and the standup routines of Bill Hicks. Most positively, it's generous and open, especially when acknowledging the utterly absurd quality of life and the cosmos, as with Fafhrd's laughter in Fritz Leiber's story "Adept's Gambit." But it spares no one, especially not oneself.

So my advice is to indulge whatever bizarreness, absurdity, or sarcasm manifests itself during play. Let it emerge, laugh if you feel like it, and keep on going.

I'll reference the tattoo-artist game one more time: in that game, the mood among the characters and infusing most of the scenes was composed of desperation and personal sadness, with a little bit of hope and artistry here and there. But I don't think it would have worked unless some mad moments of laughing out loud hadn't found their way in as well. In one scene, the character was dealing with two demons. The one Bound to her was disgruntled and rebellious, threatening to cause all manner of trouble; the other was seeking to be Bound to her in a somewhat threatening way. The exasperated sorceress whipped up a one-shot Contain simply to shut the latter up for a moment or two, choosing to use the handy toaster-oven in her flat. So we had this demon, who happened to be a roughneck-type Passer, a big burly guy, suddenly folded and spindled and flattened, then neatly snapped up like a weird little package into the toaster-oven's interior.

There was the sorceress explaining to her disgruntled demon that no, she had not been "seeing" this other demon on the sly, and if it did not listen, it could go right into that oven too, and meanwhile the other demon, who was a considerably violent presence in the game, made sputtering outraged noises from inside the toaster-oven. We all knew the character was in genuine danger. We also squealed and guffawed, reinforcing rather than defusing the intensity of rolling the dice to see whether either demon's worst urges could be quelled.

I get more from playing Sorcerer than from a number of horror-themed role-playing games published over the years. But it's not because Sorcerer is more gory or uses more black ink. It's because the games I'm thinking of were, in the words of a friend of mine, "dying of sincerity," whereas here, gallows humor, existential humor, and above all defiant humor are a big part of the material. The sorcerer character takes on the universe, whether personalized by a God or not. To do that, or to author such a character with integrity, requires either insanity or the ability to laugh at the level I'm talking about.

I don't know if you, the reader, can tap into this. I hope so, and I hope you can tell me about your experiences in playing the game some day.

APPENDIXES

Gary Simpson

SYSTEM DOES MATTER

I have heard a certain notion about role-playing games repeated for almost 20 years. Here it is: "It doesn't really matter what system is used. A game is only as good as the people who play it, and any system can work given the right GM and players." My point? I flatly, entirely disagree.

"Whoa," you might say, "my GM Herbie can run anything. The game can suck, but he can toss out what he doesn't like and then it rocks." OK, fine. Herbie is talented. However, imagine how good he'd be if he didn't have to spend all that time culling the mechanics. (Recall here I'm talking about *system*, not source or story content material.) I'm suggesting a system is better insofar as, among other things, it doesn't waste Herbie's time.

"Oh, okay," one might then say. "But it's still just a matter of opinion what games are good. No one can say for sure which RPG is better than another, that's just a matter of taste." Again, I flatly, entirely disagree.

Some definitions would be good. First, I'm talking about traditional role-playing games, in which the GM is a human, and the players are physically present with one another during play. Second, by "system" I mean a method to resolve what happens during play. It has to "work" in two ways: in terms of real people playing the game and of the characters experiencing fictional events.

System design: part one

(The following is based on the ideas presented at www.darkshire.org/~jhkim/ rpg/styles/faq v1/faq0.art but I'm expanding their application pretty widely.)

Three player aims or outlooks have been suggested, in that a given player approaches a role-playing situation pretty much from one of them, with some, but not much, crossover possible.

- ▼ *Gamist*. This player is satisfied if the system includes a contest which he or she has a chance to win. Usually this means the character vs. NPC opponents, but Gamists also include System Breakers and dominator-type role-players. RPGs well suited to Gamists include *Rifts* and *Shadowrun*.
- ▼ *Narrativist*. This player is satisfied if a role-playing session results in a good story. RPGs for Narrativists include *Over the Edge, Prince Valiant, The Whispering Vault*, and *Everway*.
- ▼ *Simulationist*. This player is satisfied if the system "creates" a little pocket universe without fudging. Simulationists include the well-known subtype of the Realist. Good games for Simulationists include *GURPS* and *Pendragon*.

Here I suggest that RPG system design *cannot* meet all three outlooks at once. For example, how long does it take to resolve a game action in real time? The simulationist accepts delay as long as it enhances accuracy; the narrativist hates delay; the gamist only accepts delay or complex methods if they can be exploited. Or, what constitutes success? The narrativist demands a resolution be dramatic, but the gamist wants to know who came out better off than the next guy. Or, how should player-character effectiveness be "balanced"? The narrativist doesn't care, the simulationist wants it to reflect the game-world's social system, and the gamist simply demands a fair playing field.

One of the biggest problems I observe in RPG systems is that they often try to satisfy all three outlooks at once. The result, sadly, is a guarantee that almost any player will be irritated by some aspect of the system during play. GMs' time is then devoted, as in the Herbie example, to throwing out the aspects that don't accord for a particular group. A "good" GM becomes defined as someone who can do this well – but why not eliminate this laborious step and permit a (for example) Gamist GM to use a Gamist game, getting straight to the point? I suggest that building the system specifically to accord with one of these outlooks is the first priority of RPG design.

(Note, therefore, that I might praise a given system because it matches beautifully with one of these outlooks – *even if I don't share that outlook and might hate playing that game.* This is an important point, because I now have some criteria to judge, instead of just yapping about "what I like.")

System design: part two

Now that a system has an outlook or aim to use as a yardstick, it's time to dissect that resolution method in some detail. Here I follow Jonathan Tweet's suggestion (found in the rulebook of the excellent RPG *Everway*) that there are three modes of resolution in role-playing.

▼ *Fortune*, meaning a range of results is possible for each instance (I rolled a 10 on 3 dice, under my skill of 12; I hit!). Most RPG systems are primarily Fortune-based for historical reasons; methods include dice, cards, and all sorts of other things.

▼ *Karma*, which compares two fixed values (I have a 7 in fencing, you have a 4, I win). *Amber* is one of the few mainly-Karma games.

▼ *Drama*, in which the GM (or rarely, the player) resolves the outcome by saying what happens ("You skewer him!" says the GM, without rolling or consulting numbers of any kind).

A given system may certainly mix and match these methods, and in fact *Everway* actually permits the GM to concoct his or her own smooth blend. *Amber*, for example, modifies its Karma system with Drama; *Extreme Vengeance* its Drama method with Fortune; and *Sorcerer* its Fortune method with Drama. Some systems use different methods for different sets of activities; e.g. *AD&D* uses Karma for magic and Fortune for combat.

Let's consider Fortune methods as the example because that's what most of us are used to. So the question becomes, given that a system is (e.g.) mostly Fortune-based, how well does it actually work during play? I suggest two things to check carefully (these terms stolen from ecology, of all things).

▼ *Search time*, meaning, how long does it take to know what you got? This includes knowing how many dice to roll, calculating modifiers, counting up the result, and so on.

▼ *Handling time*, meaning, so what happens? This includes comparing the outcome to another roll or to a chart, moving on to the next step if any, ticking off hit points, checking for stunning, and so on.

I certainly can't dictate how much is too little or too much – but I do claim that if they are not appropriate for the player outlook of the game (Gamist, Narrativist, Simulationist), players will complain, rightly, that the system "bogs down" (Narrativist), is "unfair" (Gamist), or isn't "realistic" or "accurate" (Simulationist). A good system's resolution should get the job done in appropriate amount of real time. Which job, and how long is appropriate, depend on the outlook. A new RPG system has no excuse simply to rely on the old paradigm of (1) roll initiative, (2) roll to hit, (3) roll defense, (4) roll damage, (5) check for stunning, etc, etc. This is a leftover from wargaming

and is strictly Simulationist + Gamist. The RPG for you might be very, very different. In *Zero*, for instance, the order of actions, the success of each action, the degree of success for each action (including damage), and every other aspect of resolution are determined by **one** roll per player and **one** roll by the GM, in all cases, even in large-group combat. This game's system is truly an eye-opener for those used to the older methods.

(Again: it so happens that I'm a hard-core Narrativist who enjoys Karma-based systems most, with a little Fortune mixed in. But according to the principles above, I can now *judge* a system according to *its* priorities, rather than just going by "what I like.")

Another interesting question about resolution methods is, what is actually being resolved in terms of numerical game mechanics? Consider three things: the actual event ("do I hit?"), the energy it takes to do it ("deduct 4 Endurance"), and the reward ("You did 18 damage, that's 18 EPs, mark'em down"). Food for thought: maybe an RPG needs only one of these, two at most, and can let the third just vanish – and it doesn't matter which. I'm still thinking about this issue, though; at the moment it's just a notion, not a conclusion.

In conclusion

I suggest a good system is one which knows its outlook and doesn't waste any mechanics on the other two outlooks. Its resolution method(s) are appropriate for the outlook: they have search and handling time that works for that outlook, in terms of both what the players have to do and what happens to the characters. (One might even suggest that the method be thematically suitable as well, as in marbles for *Asylum* and playing cards for *Castle Falkenstein*; I like this idea too, but it's not absolutely necessary.)

Therefore the ongoing debate about "system-light" vs. "system-heavy" is a waste of time. A system is not automatically good if it is more or less complex than another. The degree of acceptable complexity comes from the game's outlook, and should be judged in that context only. A Simulationist, Fortune-based game almost has to be complex (or historically they have been), but a Narrativist, Karma-based game is most satisfying with a simpler system.

Please consider comparing a few systems yourself before reacting too strongly to this essay. It's fair to consider how many role-playing games you have actually, truly played. That is, real stories and sessions with characters the players created and cared about, not demos at a tournament or running a quick combat. I suspect that those of us who've played more than a few RPGs in a committed fashion will agree that "system doesn't matter" is a myth.

REFERENCE SHEETS

THE SORCERY CHART (see page 86)

Ritual	Sorcerer's	vs. Demon's	Modifiers
CONTACT	Lore	Power	Sequence of tries
			Drugs
SUMMON	Will – Humanity	Power	Sequence of tries
			Drugs
BIND	Appropriate Score	Will	Desire and Need
PUNISH	Will	Stamina	N/A
BANISH	Will + Humanity	Power + Will	N/A
CONTAIN	Lore	Power	Preparation

THE EVERYTHING ELSE CHART (see page 100)

Number of opposition dice	Representative circumstances
0	Typical, easy task for this character; automatic success; no roll needed
1	Mildly annoying distraction: someone is talking, character is driving, etc
Greater than 1; less than character's score	Trickier than usual; separate demand for attention; loud music playing, etc
Equal to character's score	Notably hard task for this character; serious distraction, e.g. someone is trying to hit the character
Greater than character's score	Task is possible only through luck; it's a really hard thing to do, and someone is beating the character with a dead cat, or the character is hanging from a catwalk by the legs, or something equally aggravating
0 again	Flatly impossible for this character; automatic failure; no roll necessary

DAMAGE TABLE (see page 107)

Damage Type	Penalties (where X = number of victories)
Fists/bludgeon	X for next action
	1 lasting penalty
Edged weapon	X for next action
	X lasting
Small handgun	X for next action
	X lasting
Nasty big handgun	2X for next action
	X lasting
Rifle	2X for next action
	X lasting
Big auto-gun	3X for next action
	2X lasting
Special damage non-lethal	X + demon's Power for next action
	X lasting
Special damage lethal	2X for next action
	X + demon's Power lasting

DAMAGE PENALTIES TABLE (see page 107)

Total penalties	Effects
less than or equal to Stamina	nose bopped, ears ringing, seeing stars
greater than Stamina	solar plexus hit, nerve center struck, joints twisted; pain incapacitates movement or action
greater than 2× Stamina	shocked, stunned into helplessness; no dignity

LASTING PENALTIES TABLE (see page 109)

Total lasting penalties	Effect
less than or equal to Stamina	skin broken/scraped, bruises need bandages, icepacks
greater than Stamina	injured need stitches, slings, temporary crutches
greater than 2× Stamina	bones exposed, hemorrhaging, guts hanging out need intensive care

SORCERER

10

9

Appearance:

8

Humanity

Telltale:

7

Descriptors

Stamina _____

6

Will _____

Lore _____

5

Cover _____

Price _____

4

Kicker:

3

Bound Demons

2

Name	Type	Telltale	Need
1.			
2.			
3.			
4.			
5.			

1

SORCERER

LORE

PRICE

COVER

KICKER

DEMON NAME

DEMON TYPE

TELLTALE

GENERAL APPEARANCE

Bound to:

Binding strength:

SORCERER

10

9

Stamina _____

Will _____

Lore _____

Power _____

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Desire:

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Need:

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Abilities

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