# AD&D's Magic System: How and Why It Works

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Working up rules about make-believe can be difficult. Magic, AD&D magic, is most certainly make-believe. If there are "Black Arts" and "Occult Sciences" which deal with real, working magic spells, I have yet to see them.

Mildly put, I do not have any faith in the powers of magic, nor have I ever seen anyone who could perform anything approaching a mere *first-level* AD&D spell without props. Yet heroic fantasy has long been one of my favorite subjects, and while I do not believe in invincible superheroes, wicked magicians, fire-breathing dragons, and the stuff of fairie, I love it all nonetheless! Being able to not only read about heroic adventures of this sort, but also to play them as a game form, increased the prospects of this enjoyment of imaginary worlds. So magic and dragons and superheroes and all such things were added to *Chainmail.*

Simply desiring to play fantasy-based games does not bring them into being as a usable product. Most of the subject matter dealt with has only a limited range of treatment. Thus, giants are always written of as large and not overly bright, save in Classical mythology, of course. Some are LARGE, and some are turned to stone by sunlight, and so on, but the basics were there to draw from, and no real problems were posed in selecting characteristics for such creatures in a game. The same is basically true for all sorts of monsters and even adventurers—heroes, Magic-Users, *et al.*

Not so with magic. There are nearly as many treatments of magic as there are books which deal with it.

What approach to take? In *Chainmail,* this was not a particularly difficult decision. The wizard using the magic was simply a part of an overall scheme, so the spells just worked; a catapult hurled boulders and a wizard fire balls or lightning bolts; elves could move invisibly, split-move and fire bows, and engage monsters if armed with magical weapons, while wizards could become invisible or cast spells.

When it came time to translate the rather cut-and-dried stuff of *Chainmail's* "Fantasy Supplement" to D&D, far more selection and flexibility had to be delivered, for the latter game was free-form. This required me to back up several steps to a point where the figure began a career which would eventually bring him or her to the state where they would equal (and eventually exceed) a *Chainmail* wizard. Similarly, some basis for the use of magic had to be created so that a system of spell acquisition could be devised. Where should the magic power

come from? Literature gave many possible answers, but most were unsuitable for a game, for they demanded that the spell-caster spend an inordinate amount of time preparing the spell. No viable adventurer character could be devised where a week or two of preliminary steps were demanded for the conjuration of some not particularly mighty spell. On the other hand, spell-casters could not be given license to broadcast magic whenever and wherever they chose.

This left me with two major areas to select from. The *internal power,* or *manna,* system where each spell-caster uses energy from within to effect magic, requires assigning a total point value to each such character's manna, and a cost in points to each spell. It is tedious to keep track of, difficult to police, and allows Magic-Users far too much freedom where a broad range of spells are given. If spell points were to be used, it would require that either selection be limited or all other characters and monsters be strengthened. Otherwise, spell-users would quickly come to dominate the game, and participants would desire to play only that class of character. (As a point of reference, readers are referred to the handling of psionic abilities as originally treated in *Eldritch Wizardry.* Therein, psionic manna was assumed, the internal power usable to tap external sources, and the range of possible powers thus usable was sharply limited.)

Having read widely in the fantasy genre since 1950, I opted instead for the oft-used system which assumes that magic comes from power locked within certain words and phrases which are uttered to release the force. This *mnemonic power* system was exceedingly well articulated by Jack Vance in his superb *The Eyes of The Overworld* and *Dying Earth* novels, as well as in various short stories. In memorizing the magical words, the brain of the would-be spell-caster is taxed by the charged force of these syllables. To increase capacity, the spell-caster must undergo training, study, and mental discipline.

This is not to say that he or she ever understands the words, but the capacity to hold them in the memory and to speak them correctly increases thus. The magic words, in turn, trigger energy which causes the spell to work.

The so-called "Vancian" magic system allows a vast array of spells. Each is assigned a level (mnemonic difficulty) rating, and experience grades are used to expand the capacity of the spell-caster. The use of this particular system allows more restrictions upon spell-casting character types, of course, while allowing freedom to assign certain spells to lower difficulty factor to keep the character type viable in its early stages. It also has the distinct advantages of requiring that spell-users select their magic prior to knowing what they must face, and limiting bookkeeping to a simple list of spells which are crossed off as expended.

The mnemonic spell system can be explained briefly thus: Magic works because certain key words and phrases (sounds) unlock energy from elsewhere. The sounds are inscribed in arcane texts or religious works available to spell-users. Only training and practice will allow increased memory capacity, thus allowing more spells to be used. Once uttered, the sounds discharge their power, and this discharge not only unlocks energy from elsewhere, but it also wipes all memory of the particular words or phrases from the speaker's brain. Finally, the energy manifested by the speaking of the sounds will take a set form, depending on the pronunciation and order of the sounds. So a *Sleep* spell or a *Charm Monster* spell is uttered and the magic effected. The mind is wiped clean of the memory of what the sounds were, but by careful concentration and study later, the caster can again memorize these keys.

When *Advanced Dungeons & Dragons* was in the conceptualization stages some three years ago, I realized that while the "Vancian" system was the best approach to spell-casting in fantasy adventure games, D&D did not go far enough in defining, delineating, and restricting its use. Merely having words was insufficient, so elements of other systems would have to be added to make a better system. While it could be similar in concept to the spell-casting of D&D, it had to be quite different in all aspects, including practice, in order to bring it up to a higher level of believability and playability with respect to other classes.

The AD&D magic system was therefore predicated on the concept that there were three power-trigger keys-the cryptic utterances, hypnotic gestures, and special substances—the *verbal, somatic,* and

*material* components, possible in various combinations, which are needed to effect magic. This aspect is less "Vancian," if you will, but at the same time the system overall is more so, for reasons you will see later.

Verbal spell components, the energy-charged special words and phrases, are necessary in most spells. These special sounds are not general knowledge, and each would-be spell-caster must study in order to even begin to comprehend their reading, meaning, and pronunciation, i.e., undergo an apprenticeship. The basic assumption of this training is the ability to actually handle such matter; this ability is expressed in intelligence or wisdom minimums for each appropriate spell-using profession.

Somatic spell components, the ritual gestures which also draw the power, must also be learned and practiced. This manual skill is less important in clericism, where touching or the use of a holy/unholy symbol is generally all that is involved, while in the Illusionist class it is of great importance, as much of the spell power is connected with redirection of mental energy.

Material components are also generally needed. This expansion into sympathetic magic follows the magic portrayed by L. Sprague de Camp and Fletcher Pratt in their superb "Harold Shea" stories, for example. Of course, it is a basic part of primitive magic systems practiced by mankind. In general, some certain material or materials are also needed to complete the flow of power from the spell-caster, which in turn will draw energy from some other place and cause the spell to happen.

now do considerable studying, but he or she must also have the source material to study. AD&D also assumes that such material is hard to come by, and even if a spell-caster is capable of knowing/memorizing many and high-level spells, he or she must find them (in the case of Magic-Users and Illusionists) or have the aid of deities or minions thereof (in the situation faced by Clerics and Druids). These strictures apply to other professions which are empowered with spell use, as appropriate to the type of spells in question. In order to expand mnemonic capacity, spell-users must do further study and be trained. Thus, the system is in some ways more "Vancian," as such information and studies are indicated, if not necessarily detailed, in the works of that author. It might also be said that the system takes on "Lovecraftian" overtones, harkening to tomes of arcane and dread lore.

In addition to the strictures on locating the information for new spells, and the acquisition of the ability to cast (new, more powerful) spells, the requirements of verbal, somatic, and material components in most spell-casting highlight the following facts regarding the interruption and spoiling of spells: Silencing the caster will generally ruin the spell or prevent its instigation. Any interruption of the somatic gestures—such as is accomplished by a successful blow, grappling, overbearing, or even severe jostling—likewise spoils the magic. Lack of material components, or the alteration or spoiling thereof, will similarly cause the spell to come to naught.

Of course, this assumes the spell has the appropriate verbal, somatic, or material components. Some few spells have only a verbal component, fewer still verbal and material, a handful somatic and material, and only one has a somatic component alone. (Which fact will most certainly change if I ever have the opportunity to add to the list of Illusionists' spells, for on reflection, I am convinced that this class should have more spells of somatic component only—but that's another story.)

All of these triggers mean that it is both more difficult to cast a spell, especially when the new casting time restrictions are taken into account, and easier to interrupt a spell before it is successfully cast.

Consider the casting of a typical spell with V,S, and M components. When the caster has opportunity and the desire to cast a spell, he or she must utter the special energy-charged sound patterns attendant to the magic, gesture appropriately, and hold or discard the material component(s) as necessary to finally effect the spell. Ignoring the appropriate part or parts, all spells are cast thus, the time of conjuration to effect the dweomer varying from but a single segment to many minutes or tens of minutes. These combinations allow a more believable magic system, albeit the requirements placed upon spell-casters are more stringent, and even that helps greatly to balance play from profession to profession.

A part and parcel of the AD&D magic system is the general classifi-

cation of each spell by its effect. That is, whether the spell causes an *alteration,* is a *conjuration/summoning, enchantment/charm,* etc. This grouping enables ease of adjudication of changes of spell effects or negation of power. It also makes it easier to classify new spells by using the grouping.

It seems inevitable that the classification and component functions wil eventually lead to further extrapolation. The energy triggers of sound and motion will be categorized and defined in relation to the class of dweomer to be effected. This will indicate what power source is being tapped, and it will also serve to indicate from whence the magic actually comes, i.e., from what place or plane the end result of a successfully cast spell actually comes. Perhaps this will lead to a spell-casting character having to actually speak a rime, indicate what special movements are made, and how material components are used. While this is not seriously proposed for usual play, the wherewithal to do so will probably be available to DMs whose participants are so inclined.

It all has a more important and useful purpose, however. Defining the energy triggers will make it possible to matrix combinations by class of spell-caster and dweomer group. Mispronounced spells, or research into new spells, will become far more interesting in many ways if and when such information is available and put into use!

As it now stands, the AD&D magic system is a combination of reputed magic drawn from works of fiction and from myth. Although they are not defined, verbal and somatic components are necessary energy-triggers. The memorization of these special sounds and motions is difficult, and when they are properly used, they release their small stores of energy to trigger power from elsewhere. This release totally wipes all memory of sound and/or motion from the memory of the spell caster, but it does not otherwise seriously affect his or her brain—although the mnemonic exercise of learning them in the first place is unquestionably taxing. Duplicates of the same spell can be remembered also, but the cast spell is gone until its source is again carefully perused.

The new form which spell casting has taken in ADVANCED DUNGEONS & DRAGONS has a more realistic flavor to it—unimportant, but some players revel in this sort of thing, and that is well enough. Of real importance, however, is the fact that it requires far more effort from spell-casters in gaining, preparing, and casting spells. It makes them more vulnerable to attacks which spoil the casting of the spell. All in all, it tends to make each and every profession possible for characters in AD&D to be more equal, but still very different, from all of the others. Lastly, it opens up new areas where new development can be done at some future time, and if such new material adds significantly to the enjoyment of the game, it will certainly be published—in experimental form herein, then possibly in final form in a revised edition of the work itself.

If the foregoing doesn't completely explain everything you or your players wish to know about the AD&D magic system; if after all of those words there are still unanswered questions, doubts, or disputes, remember the last and overriding principle of the whole: ITS MAGIC!



RIGHT HANDS

"... DRAINO, OF COURSE ..."