"Any sufficiently advanced technology is

Sufficiently Advanced Magic

Dealing with Magic in the ALTERNITY® Game

by

Stephen Kenson

Magic in a science-fiction setting? The idea is not as outlandish as it might sound at first. As Clarke's Law reminds us, many elements of science fiction can seem magical to an outside observer, especially one who is not acquainted with advanced technology. In addition, many science-fiction settings feature unusual mental powers or aliens with unique abilities that could be considered "magical" in the right light. Finally, some worlds actually blend SF and fantasy elements together, creating a fusion of science and sorcery. Here is a look at all these different options for injecting a little magic into your ALTERNITY® game adventures, particularly in the STAR*DRIVE™ campaign setting.

Sleight of Hand

Even in the most rational "hard science" science-fiction setting, the hand is still quicker than the eye. The age-old arts of prestidigitation and misdirection allow stage-magicians to perform amazing tricks with the right amount of preparation. Many people want to believe in magic in some way, so the arts of the stage illusionist can find an audience even in the technologically advanced worlds of the future.

This is hardly fantasy magic with fireballs and lightning bolts, but a skilled stage magician can still pull off some interesting stunts with a little forethought and preparation. A Free Agent hero might pick up the Manipulation skill with a specialization in *prestidigitation*, making small objects seem to vanish or appear out of thin air; or *lockpicking*, allowing the hero to escape from otherwise "impossible" traps. Such skills are often useful for impressing and charming the natives on different worlds, whether the hero uses them to produce a flower out of nowhere as a gift to a nobleman's lovely daughter or to escape from confinement when things have not quite gone as planned. Combined with Personality skills like Deception and Entertainment, the hero can do a good job of convincing some people that he really does have magical powers of some kind.

With the advanced technology available in an SF setting like the STAR*DRIVE campaign, "magic" is easier to perform than ever, although people are often harder to fool. With scanners, holographic projection, and gravity control, would-be magicians can pull off amazing feats. Combined with the skills of a true stage magician, such feats can appear "magical" even to fairly sophisticated people, at least until they find out how the trick is done. Then the "audience" is not likely to appreciate being fooled.

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Adventure Hooks

▼ The heroes are traveling aboard a large starship or visiting a resort planet. They attend the performance of a legendary stage magician, renowned for his incredible feats of illusion. At the climax of the performance, the magician vanishes from the stage in a puff of smoke, only to reappear inside his magician's cabinet, dead, stabbed in the chest with a prop dagger. Unknown to anyone else, the magician has been assisting an underground railroad of sesheyans in escaping from VoidCorp. A VoidCorp assassin, lurking beneath the stage, stabbed the magician when he dropped through a hidden trapdoor, then pushed his body into the cabinet through the hidden door below. Can the heroes find the assassin before he or she manages to escape?

▼ Stories are circulating about a mysterious "ghost ship" that wanders the spaceways near a particular system. The story has been going on for years, but recently there have been actual sightings of the ghost ship—an ancient dilapidated hulk floating through space, with strange lights flickering inside. Also, several ships in the area have disappeared recently. The authorities blame the local asteroid field as a navigation hazard, but many of the spacers have heard that at least one of the missing ships managed to send out a distress call saying they had spotted the ghost ship heading right for them. Something is definitely going on, and it has everyone spooked.

The truth is that a group of space pirates are using advanced holographic projection to create the "ghost ship," using it as a distraction for their own raids. Ships vanish, and everyone blames the "ghost." The heroes may be asked to investigate by the local authorities or one of the vanished ships might belong to a friend of theirs. They can track the pirates back to their lair, hidden in the depths of a large asteroid, and recover the lost ships and their crews while exposing the deception.

▼ A human prophet has appeared on the weren homeworld, preaching heresies about the Orlamu faith and demonstrating miraculous powers that have impressed the weren. Officials of the Theocracy are obviously concerned with the possible contamination of the weren culture and with the possibility of a popular uprising of weren against them, but they have been unable to apprehend the prophet as yet. The heroes can attempt to infiltrate the prophet's cult and discover that he is using advanced technology, controlled by a subdermal NIJack implant, to produce his "miracles."

Sufficiently Advanced Technology

Even the advanced technology of the STAR*DRIVE setting can be overshadowed by more advanced alien technology. Several "precursor" races are mentioned as existing on worlds explored by humans, races that died out thousands or even millions of years ago. While most of their technology has turned to dust, some examples of it still exist. Such technology may be so advanced as to be beyond human comprehension, effectively magical. Generally these technologies are at Progress Level 9 or greater, although even a functional PL 8 artifact would be priceless to any of the stellar nations in the STAR*DRIVE galaxy.

Some possible "wonder technologies" are described here, but they are not the only ones. Some precursor technology may be so advanced that it simply cannot be described in terms of human science. Most of the tech here should be considered PL 9 or better. Exactly what such powerful artifacts are capable of is entirely up to the Gamemaster.

Drive-Tech

At PL 8 a stardrive can propel a ship through drivespace to its destination in only 11 hours, much faster than the PL 7 stardrives available in the STAR*DRIVE setting. Such a vessel could appear at its destination at the same time that

early-warning systems first detect the resonance waves of its approach, allowing for lightning strikes and surprise tactics. Worlds relying on warnings from their drivespace detectors would be caught off guard. At PL 9 or higher, a drive might cross space almost instantaneously, providing a tremendous advantage. Any stellar nation would go to great lengths to possess such technology, so it is best for advanced stardrives—like most precursor technology—to be unique things that appear in an adventure briefly, then are destroyed to keep them out of the hands of those who might abuse them.

Psi-Tech

Some precursor technology may be based on or controlled by psionics. Even if the campaign setting doesn't normally allow psionic abilities, a piece of precursor tech might bring them out, at least temporarily. Psionically controlled technology might require the Telepathy skill of *contact* to use, or it might respond to sufficiently strong thoughts from anyone. Psionic-enhancing tech can increase the user's psionic energy points, psionic skill levels, duration, or all of the above! Of course, there is always the possibility that psi-tech carries some kind of psionic "imprint" from its original owners, a psychic "ghost" that might take control of anyone using the technology, providing the basis for an SF ghost story.

Nanotech

Nanotech consists of microscopic machines known as "nanites," capable of reorganizing matter on a very small scale. A swarm of nanites can transform raw materials into finished products based on pre-programmed blueprints, recycle waste materials with almost 100% efficiency, and transform matter in almost any way desired. A nanite plague, on the other hand, can quickly deplete a world of all life and even break down whole planets, given time. Invisible to the naked eye, the effects of nanotech would certainly appear to be magical to most observers, especially if

some kind of remote-control device existed for controlling the nanites, allowing an individual to apparently wield power over ordinary matter, transmuting and transforming it at will.

Matter-Energy Conversion

Modern science tells us that matter and energy are related. This technology utilizes that theory to transform matter into energy and vice versa. The possibilities for matter-energy conversion tech are almost endless, though again, this technology is available at PL 8 or higher. Among the simpler possibilities is teleportation (transformation of matter into energy, which is beamed to a distant location, then restored to matter). Using drivesats or similar relays, it would even be possible to beam things through drivespace, creating an interstellar transportation network. Matter can be converted into energy for fuel, releasing almost unlimited power; and energy can be converted into matter to materialize virtually any object out of "nothing." Used as a weapon, this technology can simply dematerialize targets, transforming them into pure energy.

Time Travel

Perhaps the pinnacle of any technology is the ability to master time. A precursor time machine might be a small device that is worn or carried, a vessel of some kind, or a free-standing gate that travelers simply step through. It might be controlled manually, verbally or psionically. It's up to the Gamemaster to decide how time travel works and what time travelers can do to alter the past. Information and ideas about time travel appear in the *ALTERNITY Gamemaster Guide*.

Adventure Hooks

▼ A rogue mindwalker discovers a world that holds a legendary precursor artifact known as the Mindcrown. The crown contains highly advanced psionic amplifiers that magnify the psionic abilities of anyone who wears it to near-godlike levels. Unfortunately, the crown also drives its wearer insane from the tremendous psionic input. Using the crown destroyed the civilization that created it and eventually drives its new

wearer to madness. The heroes must come up with a way to overcome the tremendously augmented powers of the mindwalker, who may be using the crown to control and influence others around them.

▼ The heroes visit a world containing the ruins of a precursor civilization. Unknown to them, the precursors possessed incredibly advanced matter-energy conversion technology that responded to their thoughts, providing them with everything they desired. Unfortunately the thoughts of "primitives" like the heroes lack the mental discipline of the precursors. As the heroes explore the planet, they find their every whim starting to come true. Old friends, enemies, and loved ones materialize out of nowhere. Incredible treasures and desired objects appear, and the heroes' fondest dreams and darkest nightmares begin to come to life. To complicate matters, the converter is draining energy from the heroes' ship to help power its creations, making it difficult to leave the planet. The heroes must conquer their fears and find some way of shutting down the system (which self-destructs and never functions again, of course).

▼ The heroes discover a precursor time-gate and pass through, unaware of its true nature. The heroes' actions inadvertently change the past. The galaxy they return to is nothing like the one they recall, dominated by a hostile alien race. One interesting possibility in the STAR*DRIVE setting is to have the galaxy dominated by a normally primitive alien species like the weren or the sesheyans, who have developed advanced technology in this timeline. The heroes must go back through the time-gate to undo their mistake, while agents from the new timeline seek to stop them and preserve their own history.

Powers of the Mind

Mindwalkers and psionic talents exist in the STAR*DRIVE setting, allowing characters to perform feats of mind-reading, extra-sensory perception, psychokinesis, and even healing and shape-shifting. Psionic skills are similar in many ways to the powers of magicians. In fact, psionics might be the truth behind

many such myths. To primitive humans in the millennia before psionics were understood, the abilities of a gifted few seemed like "magic."

Even in the enlightened age of the 26th century, mindwalkers have something of a magical mystique to them. The Orlamu use psionic skills combined with religious and military training. Hatire seers, mystics, healers, and mind knights use their abilities in the service of humanity and the Cosimir, their deity. Ancient techniques and rituals, once thought to be the province of sorcerers and shamans, are used to train novice mindwalkers. The line between psi, magic, and mysticism is often blurred.

In primitive cultures (human or alien), psionic skills are more likely to be considered something akin to magic. Psionics may be revered and respected, feared and hunted, or trapped and enslaved by the populace, depending on their view of "magic." Sesheyan shamans sometimes demonstrate psionic skills based on their faith and primitive rituals. It may take some convincing to show them the similarities between their "magic" and the psionic skills practiced by other races.

Adventure Hooks

▼ The heroes discover a world settled by colonists more than 300 years ago. A navigational error sent the colonists off course and carried them into the reaches of unknown space. They were fortunate enough to find a habitable world and began to practice their anti-technological beliefs in the extreme. In only a few generations, all advanced technology was eradicated from the colony, and their descendants recall only vague stories about their ancestors "coming from the distant stars." The technology of the colony is roughly PL 3.

However, some of the colonists have developed psionic abilities. The superstitious people are mistrustful of psionics, and anyone openly displaying such abilities is lynched by an angry mob. An underground of psionics exists, secretly trying to help their people and hoping to find a homeland of their own where they will be safe from persecution. They may take the arrival of the heroes as a sign. A mindwalker hero might even

have visions or "hear" telepathic cries for help, leading them to investigate.

▼ Strange phenomena seem to be "haunting" a noble family on a planet visited by the heroes. The palace is plagued by poltergeist phenomena (objects flying around, spontaneous fires, and so forth) along with strange visions, ghostly images, unusual bouts of depression, and people behaving strangely. Many believe it is the ghost of the Duke's late wife, who died in a tragic accident.

Unknown to the Duke, his teenaged daughter is a powerful mindwalker just coming into her abilities. The local prejudice against psionics, the girl's "proper" upbringing, and the loss of her mother when she was young have caused her to repress her talents, which are manifesting through her unconscious thoughts and feelings. A mindwalker hero might be able to determine the true cause of the "ghost."

A complication comes in the form of one of the Duke's courtiers, who was behind the "accident" that claimed the Duchess' life. (He intended to kill the Duke.) He fears that the Duchess' ghost really has come back to haunt him. He might be driven to try to kill the Duke's daughter if he discovers the girl is psionic, since he'll assume that she can read his mind and discover his guilt.

True Magic

All of the above options assume that "magic" in the ALTERNITY game is simply some kind of technology (even psionic "technology") masquerading as magic. It's also possible to add true fantasy magic and creatures into an ALTERNITY setting, creating a combination of science and sorcery. The special effects ("FX") rules from the *Gamemaster Guide* provide guidelines for using magic to create a science-fantasy campaign.

In such a setting, magic might always have existed, or it might be a fairly recent occurrence. Many science-fantasy settings have a world-altering event where magic becomes a reality and civilization must deal with the repercussions of it.

Magic can be an expansive power (existing everywhere in the universe, or at least the galaxy) or a very localized one (existing only in certain areas of

space, certain planets, or even specific places on a planet). Localized magic can even be added to a regular SF campaign setting like STAR*DRIVE as a one-time occurrence. For example, a particular stellar phenomenon might alter the nature of certain physical laws, allowing magic (or something very like it) to exist. When the phenomenon fades, the magic goes with it. It will be back, but not for another 20,000 years or so, when the proper celestial alignments happen again. Strange drivespace accidents can temporarily strand heroes in a region where magic seems to replace science and the right ritual is required to restart the stardrive before the strange creatures outside the ship manage to get in. Perhaps the Orlamu are correct and drivespace is the Divine Unconscious, the primal force of creation. Who knows what might be possible there?

Adventure Ideas

▼ The heroes are on a planet near a black hole. The black hole draws off stellar gases from the nearby sun, creating a colorful "whirlpool" effect around its event horizon. Every few centuries, the planet and the black hole come perilously close to each other—not enough to damage the planet significantly (although bad weather and earthquakes are common at that time) but enough to make space travel difficult. The close proximity of the singularity does have a strange effect, however. For a few days or even weeks, magic is possible on the planet. People who perform the correct rituals can cast spells, creating amazing effects. The singularity might enhance innate psionic ability, or it might create an area of space-time highly sensitive to thought, causing reality to conform itself to the desires of individuals in the right state of mind. The elaborate spellcasting rituals are used to evoke the right state of mind but can be disastrous if done wrong.

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A fan of both science-fiction and fantasy, Steve Kenson likes to combine them in RPGs, which is probably why he writes stuff for so many of them. He still fondly recalls exploring the wrecked starship from Expedition to the Barrier Peaks.