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Risus Magic

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This article is an unofficial supplement for use with [Risus](#), the fast-and-loose freeware roleplaying game system by [S. John Ross](#). If you use this material in your own Risus game, please let me know how it goes.

Introduction

A mage, by definition, is a character that has at least one die in a Cliche that allows her to produce supernatural effects of some kind. I'm using the term "mage" here for simplicity's sake; in any given campaign a character of this type may be called a wizard, a sorcerer, a superhero, a witch or a psi, among other things. Similarly, the cool flashy stuff that she can do may be called magic spells, psychic phenomena, or manifestations of the true power of the Great God Chuck. (In my [Stygiad](#) campaign, the "mages" are called "goths" and "spells" are "cool goth effects.") The name is window dressing; what we're concerned with here is that a character who invests dice in such a Cliche can do things that ordinary mortals can't.

I love the fact that Risus' relaxed framework makes it easy to create such characters without requiring detailed spell lists like most games. On the other hand, the first thing I noticed when GMing for such characters is that since there's no real-world analog, I desperately needed some way to define a) the boundaries of what they can and can't attempt to do, and b) how hard it is for them to do it, or (being the nice-guy GM that I am) they'd run roughshod over the obstacles I had oh-so-carefully laid in their paths. Here's what I came up with.

Characters and Cliches

What kind of magic the character can attempt is of course defined by her Cliches. The Risus rules themselves suggest that in a game not centered around sorcerers, the simple Cliche "Sorcerer" is workable. Personally I'd find this *way* too broadly defined for a PC Cliche in most of my games: in a magic-heavy game there's little besides number of dice to distinguish one Sorcerer's abilities from another, making magic too homogeneous for my taste, and in a game with few mages the Sorcerer PC will end up as a combination walking hospital, arsenal, transport system and god knows what else, leaving the "mere mortal" types feeling a little left out.

Mage Cliches should instead incorporate some sort of specialty, as Risus suggests for a wizard-centric campaign. The specialty defines the realm over which the mage can exert mystical power, but there are multiple approaches you can take in deciding what sort of specialties you want for your characters.

Players are encouraged to personalize mage Cliches by giving them cooler names like Deranged Pyromancer instead of Fire-Mage. Mage Cliches can and do overlap areas of expertise, just like any other Cliches -- Necromancers and Shamans can both summon various sorts of spirits, for example, and Wise Women and Mind-Mages will each have their own versions of love spells, just as both Vikings and Knights are good at hitting things with swords.

Any mage Cliche can be bought as a Double-Pump Cliche during character creation.

Creating Mage Cliches: The Mechanics-Over-Drama Approach

One possibility is to divide magic into areas like "fire magic," "divination," and "necromancy" that specify one physical or esoteric element of reality that the mage's spells cover (some RPGs call these "colleges" of magic). This is probably the way to go for a more serious or traditional swords-and-sorcery game, although there's no reason it wouldn't work for a silly campaign as well. (GURPS players will note that nearly any college from *GURPS Magic* or *Grimoire* can be neatly turned into this kind of mage Cliche, and that most of the Cliches on this list are roughly the equivalent of the One College Magery advantage.) This approach gives you Cliches like the following:

- **Beast-Wizard** (speaking with animals, summoning animals, turning into animals)
- **Cybermage** (controlling computers, surfing the Net without a deck)
- **Diviner/Clairvoyant** (reading Tarot cards, seeking missing persons, scrying out enemies' plans, sensing the great destinies of newborn princes)
- **Fire-Mage** (igniting torches, throwing fireballs, summoning fire elementals)
- **Gate-Mage** (teleporting people and things, opening portals through time and space)
- **Healer** (healing wounds, neutralizing poisons, maybe resurrecting the dead...)
- **Illusionist** (causing hallucinations, making things invisible, disguising people)
- **Meta-Mage** (spells that affect other spells: see "Universal Mage Abilities" below)
- **Necromancer** (summoning ghosts, raising zombies, draining life force)
- **Summoner/Demonologist** (calling up Things From Hell, controlling same)
- **Telekinetic** (picking locks, throwing things and strangling people by remote control, rigging slot machines)
- **Telepath/Mind-Mage** (enslaving the weak-willed, erasing memories, communicating by thought alone)

Characters can have more than one such mage Cliche if the GM permits.

Creating Mage Cliches: The Drama-Over-Mechanics Approach

For this sort of wizardly Cliche, don't think in terms of "colleges of magic" like Healing and Necromancy. Think about the mage in terms of what he's supposed to do in the story. This can mean either his dramatic function: does he just provide comic relief, is he a wise mentor or a moustache-twirling villain -- or his personal role: is he a defender of nature, a slayer of undead or a village hedge-wizard? Figure that out, then assume he can attempt any sort of spell that furthers this function.

For example, take the Cliche "Sinister Assassin-Mage," for an evil wizard who's infiltrated the palace to slay the young prince before he comes of age. I'd say this kind of wizard can cast any kind of spell reasonably related to being sneaky, bumping off no-name NPC guards, baffling security and so on, but I wouldn't let him throw fireballs or summon demons.

A few more drama-over-mechanics-type mage Cliches:

- *Alchemist* (transmuting metals, inventing strange drugs, blowing up laboratory equipment)
- *Battle-Mage* (hurling blazing bolts of power, deflecting arrows)
- *Druid* (predicting weather, healing plants and animals)
- *Itinerant Bardic Conjuror* (juggling fire, creating flashy illusions, dramatic special effects and minor entertaining conjurations)
- *Jedi Knight* (clouding stormtroopers' minds, sensing friends' danger, telekinetically grabbing lightsabers out of the snow)
- *Priest-Wizard* (turning undead, healing wounds, removing curses) [Hey, kids! Combine this with a Knight Cliche to make your very own D&D-style; Paladin!]
- *Scheming Village Witch* (brewing malicious potions, causing livestock to be born with two heads)
- *Shaman* (speaking with spirits, traveling in the dreamlands, astrally projecting)
- *Urbane Villainous Court Wizard Who Whispers in the King's Ear* (hypnotizing people, casting entertaining illusions, keeping the weak-willed king pliable) [Thanks to S. John for this one]
- *Wise Woman* (blessing crops, curing livestock, brewing love potions)

Many, many mage Cliches will fall somewhere in between these two approaches, and several on each list could fit comfortably on either one. Some "college-based" Cliches like Healer and Necromancer have become such staples of fantasy fiction and gaming that they've become dramatic roles themselves. There's also no reason the drama-over-mechanics approach can't be combined with a college-type specialty, like Necromantic Shaman or Telepathic Spy, and characters created with either approach should be able to co-exist comfortably in most campaigns.

Universal Mage Abilities

In some game worlds, mages might be able to do one or more of the following no matter what their magical specialties:

- Sensing magic items upon seeing or touching them
- Sensing other wizards on sight
- Sensing other wizards nearby, whether or not they're visible ("I feel a disturbance in the Force...")
- Sensing spells cast nearby
- Detecting the nature (necromancy, fire magic, good/evil/hostile/friendly magic) of magic items or spells in the area
- Dispelling other mages' spells
- etc.

As with any Cliche roll, the difficulty will be higher or lower depending on how closely the action matches the Cliche in question. A Druid might have no trouble sensing the magic of an enchanted oak tree, but have a tough time analyzing a magic cyberdeck.

The GM should have some idea of which universal abilities, if any, he wants to allow his mages. Too many such abilities could make mages overpowered; consider requiring players to buy mage Cliches as double-pumps in that case.

Another option is to allow a Meta-Mage Cliche that covers any direct manipulation of magic itself, and spells that affect other spells. A Meta-Mage can attempt to oppose just about any spell by blocking it, subverting it, taking control of it, or dispelling it; things like protective pentagrams and magical wards would also fall in this Cliche's area of expertise. If the Meta-Mage Cliche exists in a game world, most wizards will probably have at least one die in it.

Tools of the Trade

Don't forget these! The obvious ones include Mystic Staves, Amulets, Books of Forbidden Lore and Loyal Familiars, but some Cliches suggest more specialized tools like Crystal Balls for Diviners, Packets of Brimstone for Fire-Wizards and Meditation Crystals for Telepaths or Mind-Mages.

Wizardly Hooks

If you're using the optional Hooks and Tales rules, being a mage gives a character plenty of entertaining possibilities for Hooks. One obvious way to go is to give your mage a side effect of some kind when she uses magic. Examples: A Telepath who gives nosebleeds to those whose minds she reads; a Fire-Wizard who sets off random candle-flame-sized fires when she casts spells; an Illusionist who glows in the dark for ten minutes after creating illusions.

Another Hook is to limit the usefulness of the wizard's magic in some way, either by limiting when he can use it or by what he can use it on.

Examples: A Mind-Mage whose magic doesn't work on Elves; a Healer who can only cure during daylight hours; a dwarvish Diviner who must be underground or in a cave to cast accurate auguries.

Or pick some other way to inconvenience your mage that's related to his form of magic or to being a mage in general. Examples: A Shaman followed by mischievous spirits; a Priest-Mage who has undertaken a sacred vow to hunt down the undead; an Earth-Mage who must watch his back at all times for agents of the hated Aeromancer cult.

Casting Spells

Spell difficulty is based on two linked principles: *Dramatic Necessity* and *Laws of Nature*. Tiny violations of the Laws of Nature are easy; spells that help the plot along are easy. Spells that thumb their noses at the universe AND the scenario tend to turn the offending wizard into Ground Chuck. So it goes. The GM decides on a case-by-case basis how strongly to apply each principle.

Difficulty	Laws of Nature	Dramatic Necessity
(Automatic success under most conditions): Trivial.	Any attempt to magically warm a beverage, open an unlocked door, tie shoelaces, or fill an ice-chest are Trivial. Trivial Magic is stuff that the mage could do himself if he weren't so darned lazy.	The spell has no practical effect to speak of.
5: Simple.	Any spell that helps the party achieve something as a whole, or acts as a tool to achieve an end, is Simple. Any spell that actually achieves something directly is probably Ordinary.	The spell will make things more fun for everybody.
10: Ordinary.	A spell is "ordinary" if it is meant to overcome a single obstacle that faces the mage, or the mage's share of an obstacle that faces the group. Unlocking a door, receiving divinatory insights and random clues, cleaning up a small building, summoning a brief summer rainfall (in the summer!), or a standard Fireball go here.	The spell would be nifty. Nothing special.
15: Complex.	Any attempts to shut off building power, extinguish a house-fire, feed a small army, teleport the mage long distances or the party short ones, or manipulate the emotions of a small gathering goes here.	The spell would hog the scene a bit.
20: Difficult.	The mage could visit Pluto by himself with this, or take the whole party to Los Angeles. Any one significant hidden fact can be revealed, and freakish, unseasonal weather is possible. In general, any attempt by the mage to act as a one-man party of adventurers is Difficult. Any attempt to create large animals or humanoid slaves with animal intelligence go here.	The spell would upstage the other characters.
30: Dangerous.	Teleporting the whole group to Pluto is Dangerous Magic. Looking for the complete solution to the week's mystery in a crystal ball is likewise Tempting the Wrath of the Gods. Any attempt to create an intelligent being, or a bigass beastie, is Dangerous.	The spell would upstage the whole scenario.
n/a: Impossible.	Any attempt to utterly wreck the campaign world or campaign plotline.	The spell would upstage the GM.

(This scale is for when the task being attempted suits the Cliche being used -- other Cliches might be able to attempt similar things at higher difficulty numbers.)

In a magical combat situation, of course, none of these numbers are likely to apply -- standard Risus combat rules remain in force.

Target numbers may be adjusted up or down at the GM's option by factors including: bonuses for especially entertaining or inventive spells; penalties for repetitive or uninspired ones; and bonuses for extensive preparation, greatly increased casting time, assistants and so forth.

Success and Failure

If the spell roll either fails or succeeds by a reasonable margin, the GM simply tells the player "you've failed" or "you've succeeded," and describes the effects. If the roll succeeds by a significant amount, the GM may rule that the spell has some beneficial effect above and beyond its intent.

If the roll fails by a significant amount, the mage may suffer a backlash of some kind. Backlash effects can include: one or more dice of damage against the Cliche used to cast the spell, having the spell's intended effect backfire against the mage or his companions, loss of wizardly Tools of the Trade ("your staff cracks and splinters in your hand as you try to channel the arcane force"), or something else appropriately nasty. The more difficult the attempted spell and the worse the roll, the more severe and/or permanent the consequences are likely to be (see also the [Unlimited Mana Calamity Table](#) for many evil possibilities).

What constitutes a "significant amount" of success or failure in a given situation is always defined solely by the GM.

Creating Magic Items

Caution! Really Optional Unplaytested Material Ahead! [Feedback Wanted!](#)

Magic items are a type of bonus-dice gear (see [Risus](#), "Proper Tools" section) found in many fantasy campaign worlds. Enchantment of such items is generally time-consuming, exhausting and risky, and GMs may disallow it altogether if they want to keep magic item creation out of the hands of PCs. Other types of magic items besides bonus-dice gear may exist, of course, created by other means.

Any mage may attempt to create a magic item appropriate to his Cliches. A Cybermage can enchant a LeFay 3000 laptop that gives bonus dice to hacking and programming rolls, but wouldn't have any luck creating magical Combat Boots of Kicking Ass.

The difficulty of enchanting a given magic item is determined like any other spell. Enchantment is often Complex to Difficult magic or worse (at a minimum it certainly "hogs the scene" since it's an attempt to create permanent, portable bonus dice), though mages may pump their dice as normal if the pumping rules are in play. An enchantment spell may require rare, hazardous or special ingredients.

Creating magic items is personally costly to the mage. Creating an item costs one die of the Cliche used, permanently, per bonus die of the created item. In other words, a Cryptic Elvish Diviner(4) who wishes to create a one-die Deck of Farseeing Tarot Cards rolls against the difficulty determined by the GM. If successful, he expends one die and becomes a Cryptic Elvish Diviner(3). This loss in dice is permanent, though lost dice can be regained through character advancement as normal.

If an enchantment attempt fails, the character loses the appropriate number of dice temporarily (just until "healed" normally), any special ingredients are consumed in the attempt, and the mage cannot try to create a similar item again for a period of time specified by the GM.

Depending on the campaign world, mages may be able to team up to create magic items, dividing the expenditure among themselves.

Danger! Really Completely Experimental Unplaytested Material Ahead!

Modifications to the "personal-die-for-an-item-die" rule are possible if the GM and players want to get funky. Some suggestions:

- Some magic items can actually give the user a Cliche he wouldn't otherwise be able to use. Example: a magic flute that makes anyone who plays it a Flutist(3), whether or not he knows how to play a note. To a character who already has a similar Cliche, it's just a "normal" bonus-dice item: if a Musician(3) plays the aforementioned magic flute, he becomes a Musician(6). Charge the enchanter one extra die to create such an item.
- A "flavored" magic item is one that grants bonus dice only under specific conditions. These items give *two* bonus dice for each *one* die spent by the mage, but are only usable under some limitation that makes the item useful only about half the time, such as only against a certain type of foe, only during certain phases of the moon, only when casting a certain type of spell, etc. Example: Miranda the Malicious, Battle-Mage(3), has just had a bad romantic breakup and decides to throw herself into her work to make herself feel better. She wishes to create a magic sword named Ballbreaker that gives two bonus dice when wielded by a female against a male opponent. The GM agrees that this is an acceptable limitation, so if Miranda's dice roll succeeds, Miranda becomes a Battle-Mage(2) until she earns back another Battle-Mage die through character advancement, and the deadly blade Ballbreaker is created as a two bonus-dice item, usable under the above conditions.

Non-Dice-Based Magic Items

Some classic and/or cool magic items just don't do things that can be defined in terms of dice. Often this is an item that *automatically* succeeds at a given task: a pen that writes messages only descendants of the true Dwarven King's bloodline can read, or a portal that teleports those who pass through it into the Sinister Court Wizard's tower (or someplace unpleasant, if the wizard doesn't want company).

Determining the power and dice cost of this kind of item is much more subjective, of course. The GM and player take hold of the magical principles of Dramatic Necessity and Laws of Nature and sit down to haggle. Use the spell difficulty chart as a rough guideline: An item that has little to no practical effect, won't throw the campaign world into chaos, or in general would make things more fun, will be in the low range. A magic shoe-polisher is probably a one-die item. Stormbringer or Sauron's Ring is more than likely off the scale for PCs to create, unless it's a *very* unusual campaign. Any magic item that will completely derail the campaign is of course impossible to enchant, though interesting things might happen if somebody tried.

Credits

The difficulty chart and much of the text under "Casting Spells" was adopted practically word-for-word from S. John Ross's excellent [Elemental Magic](#) article for GURPS; many thanks are due for his input.

Aside from Risus itself, [GURPS Magic](#), [GURPS Grimoire](#) and [GURPS Wizards](#) are excellent sources for spells and wizardly Cliches. All three books were instrumental in writing this article. [GURPS Magic Items I](#) is the complete reference for the enchanter of magic items.

Links

If you liked this, check out the following:

- [LordZamiel.is.Dreaming](#), "Fantastic Fantasy Adventures in RisusLand," a full fantasy supplement much in the spirit of Risus Magic. Also, several other Risus settings, character sheets, and many other cool things.

Back to [I, Game Geek](#)

Risus

