DRESDEN FILES ROLE-PLAYING GAME MAGIC THEORY 101

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Collected and converted to e-book formats by Kevin L. Nault

This is a fan effort of a few hours by someone about to join his first DFRPG; imperfections in the internal hyperlinking should be expected. Do enjoy Mr. Neal's excellent breakdown of Dresdenverse magic, though.

Mystic Theory 101: Magic in DFRPG, Part One

Posted by <u>Rick Neal</u> in <u>Dresden Files RPG</u>, <u>What's he playing?</u>

Spellcasting is easily the most complex part of *The Dresden Files RPG*. This should come as no surprise; the game is based on a series of books about Wizard, and the books are full of all the cool things Harry does with magic. To be true to the source material, the game needs to model that kind of play.

The complexity arises from the flexibility of the system. If you want to be able to do everything that Harry does in the books, you need a system that can be twisted and bent to accomplish anything. That means it needs a robust backbone, so it can bend without breaking, and components that can be adapted to any situation the players come up with. This means that designers are left with a limited range of choices in how to implement the system:

- Come up with sub-systems for each possible application of magic.
- Use a very high-level system, where the GM and the players make all the calls with minimal rules.
- Find a middle ground, where there's enough mechanical support to let the GM and players share an understanding of the capabilities of the system, but few enough rules that they can be mastered.

Evil Hat went with the third option, using a mechanic that can be adapted to a wide variety of situations, and tons of examples to help show how to do that. I think it was a good choice, and it results in a good mechanic.

But it also results in a lot of reading for spellcasting types. And while the language they use is very precise, the distinctions between some of the terms can get lost in the fog.

Over the next few posts, I'm going to talk extensively about spellcasting in this game, with the goal of demystifying the concepts, process, and mechanics. I'm going to start talking about theory, both in-world and in-game, so that the terms are clearly defined. Then, I'm going to move on to evocation, and finally thaumaturgy. At the end of those three topics, I may post a few spells, showing how they were created and what decisions were made along the way, but only if there's a demand for it.

So. Let's get going with theory.

Magic in the Harry Dresden books is structured and codified – that's how you get Wizards. Jim Butcher does a good job of laying out the ideas behind spellcasting, so that you can get a solid grip on what magic does and doesn't do, and the mechanism behind it. I'm starting with looking at this in-world theory of magic, because it's important to know what the system is trying to model before we start looking at the model.

Note that I'm using a number of terms in this section that will show up in the in-game section, but the definitions in the in-game section are far more precise than the usage in-world. So, in this section, when I'm talking about complexity, I'm talking about how complicated something is. In the next section, when I'm talking about complexity, I'm talking about a very specific game term.

All magic in the game is basically shaping energy to work your will. That means you need two things to work magic: energy, and your will. You use them in concert to create a change in the world that you want to see[*].

The high-level process is the same for all types of spells, as follows:

1. Form the spell construct.
2. Summon the energy into the spell construct.
3. Release the spell construct.

Wizards break down spellcasting into two categories – evocation and thaumaturgy – but really, casting both has the same high-level process. It's just the details that differ, and that's really the function of the complexity of the spell construct.

Forming the spell construct

A spell construct is a pattern that will produce a change in the world in accordance with the spellcaster's will once it has been empowered. It is a pattern of thought and symbolism bolstered by the spellcaster's will that serves as a receptacle and template for the energy that will be used. Simple spell constructs can be held in the Wizard's mind, enhanced by simple tools such as words, gestures, wands, rings, etc. More complex ones are too difficult to be held internally, so they rely on more symbolic tools, like magic circles, candles, lengthy chants, ritual dances, external power sources, and the like.

The simple spell constructs that can be contained within the Wizard's mind entirely are generally evocations: they are quick, use minimal tools, and accomplish a very simple thing, which is pushing raw energy around. More complex spell constructs are

generally thaumaturgy: they require more time, rituals, and special components, but can accomplish more varied effects, and more powerful ones.

Building a spell construct is half of what spellcasting training is about. Whether it's being able to hold a simple form in the mind to channel a blast of fire through, or knowing the elemental correspondences of different colours and gemstones, these are the tools the caster learned in training, and the pieces that he or she uses to build the spell construct. Some simple constructs, called rotes, are so well-practiced that the spellcaster can form them with hardly any thought at all, while more more complex constructs may require research and preparation to assemble properly.

The more complex the spell construct, the more energy is required to fully activate it, and the more far-reaching effects it can have.

Summoning the energy into the spell construct

Once the spellcaster has created the spell construct, it must be empowered with energy for it to have an effect. Energy has to come from somewhere, and calling in and controlling energy from various sources is what the other half of spellcasting training is about. If the caster is in a hurry, he or she can use his or her own energy, but this can exhaust the caster in short order. The energy of a single human body is generally all needed to keep the body functioning properly[*], so using too much is not a good thing. This is why fast evocations tend to be so tiring for the spellcaster.

With more time, the spellcaster can draw in energy from other sources: the environments, special components, ley lines, energy from other living beings[*], or even just trickle his or her own energy in at a speed that allows it to replenish itself without so rapidly depleting the caster. Complex, external spell constructs can contain the energy as it comes in over time, often within a magic circle, allowing the spellcaster to take longer to supply the requisite energy.

This is another place where the difference between evocation and thaumaturgy differ. The simple spell construct of an evocation doesn't require a lot of energy to empower, but you can funnel as much energy as you care to risk through it and out into the world. Complex spell constructs, like thaumaturgy rituals, are so precise that they need a very specific amount of energy to enact, calculated by the spellcaster when he or she creates the construct.

Drawing and controlling energy can be tricky, and this is where Wizards can wind up blowing themselves (and their surroundings) right to hell[*]. If the spellcaster's concentration falters, or if he or she has tried to use too much energy too quickly, he or she can lose control. The caster can then either let the energy escape into the world,

usually with destructive (or at least inconvenient) consequences, or they can try and contain it, letting it tear through their body and mind. Neither one is a very welcoming prospect, so most spellcasters are careful about how much energy they try to handle at one time.

Releasing the spell construct

Once the construct is fully empowered, the spellcaster releases it out into the world and it does what it was designed to do. The construct is shattered by this release – not necessarily destructively, but mystically, meaning that a new spell construct needs to be created if the spellcaster intends to cast the same spell a second time.

Quick and dirty spell constructs, such as those used in combat evocations, are not very precise, and the target of such a spell usually has a chance to avoid the effects, even if it's simply by diving for cover. However, a more carefully designed and thoroughly researched construct, like a thaumaturgic ritual, usually takes effect without giving the target any chance to avoid it, as long as the assumptions made by the caster at the time of casting are accurate. If he or she has misjudged some aspect of the situation, such as not having a strong enough symbolic link to the target, or not knowing that the caster has some level of magical protection, the spell will have a diminished effect, possibly failing entirely.

And that's a basic run-down of how magic works in the Dresdenverse.

In-Game Magic Theory

The game system models this style of magic with two similar systems: one for thaumaturgy and one for evocation. The high-level basics of both systems are the same, so that's what I'm going to deal with in this post. Subsequent posts will look at each style individually and in more detail.

First, though, let's define the terms we're using.

Terminology

- **Spell.** A magical effect created by a spellcaster.
- **Spellcaster.** Someone who uses magical spells.
- **Evocation.** Quick combat magic involving only the spellcaster's own energy and simple effects that are produced by pushing power around with a brute-force approach.
- **Thaumaturgy.** Ritual magic involving creating more elaborate, elegant, precise, or powerful effects. Takes a longer time to perform, and has a much broader range of possible effects.

- **Power.** The energy needed to make a spell work, measured in shifts.
- **Complexity.** An abstract measure of how difficult a thaumaturgical spell is to cast, measured in shifts.
- **Control.** The effort of the spellcaster to keep the power focused on the spell and doing what he or she wants. This is a roll using Discipline.
- **Targeting.** The Discipline roll the spellcaster makes to control the power serves as the targeting roll to hit the target. It sets the difficulty for the target to avoid the spell. This applies only to evocation.
- **Conviction.** A skill. Governs how much power the spellcaster can draw on a single turn.
- **Lore.** A skill. Governs how complex a spell the spellcaster can cast.
- **Discipline.** A skill. Rolled against a target of the shifts of power drawn in a single turn to see if the caster can focus it on the spell.
- **Backlash.** Damage taken as a result of a failed control roll, either as physical or mental stress and/or consequences. Does not reduce the power in the spell.
- **Fallout.** The effect of a failed control roll on the environment, based on how many shifts of power the spellcaster chooses not to take as backlash. This reduces the power of the spell.

Whether you're using evocation or thaumaturgy, the high-level process is the same:

1. Decide what you want to do.
2. Determine the complexity/power requirements.
3. Draw power.
4. Control the power/target the spell.

Deciding what you want to do

On the surface, this step can look like the easiest part of the process, but it can quickly become the most daunting. In other games, you have lists of spells to choose from, each one doing something very specific. In *DFRPG*, magic can accomplish pretty much anything you can imagine, which can lead to a little bit of paralysis from too much choice.

There's also more than one way to do pretty much anything you can imagine. Want to protect yourself while you sleep? Well, you can make a force field over your house, or rig a fire trap to go off if something evil crosses your threshold, or bind some spirits to keep watch for you. Want to hurt an enemy? You can blast him with fire, or buffet him with air, or cause the ground to swallow him, or even just give him a fatal disease. Not only do you need to decide what you want to do, you have to decide how you want to do it – what mechanism you're going to use to accomplish your goal.

This is very much effects-based magic. Picking what you want to do and how you want to do it is fundamental to everything that comes afterward. Mechanically, you need to figure out what you want to do and how you want to do it first because that lets you figure out how complex the thaumaturgic ritual is and how much power you're going to need to pull off your spell[*].

With thaumaturgy, the field here is wide open. Basically, if you can imagine it, there's a chance that you can pull it off. No guarantees, of course; some things you want to attempt will wind up being beyond the capabilities of your character, or beyond the resources of the situation. With evocations, you have a much more limited range of options: attack, block, maneuver, counterspell[*].

Determining complexity/power requirements

Once you know what you're doing, you've got to figure out how much power you're going to need.

For evocations, this is pretty straightforward: decide how big a hammer you want to hit your target with, and that's the number of shifts of power you need.

For thaumaturgy, you need to figure out complexity. Complexity is kind of a slippery concept in the game, and I'm going to talk at length about it when I get to the post on thaumaturgy. For now, let's just say it's a pretty arbitrary number based on how difficult the spell is to cast. There are guidelines of how to determine complexity, but in the end, you're going to be eyeballing what you want to do and setting the complexity in negotiation with the GM.

The power you need to perform a thaumaturgic ritual is a number a shifts equal to the complexity.

Aside from power, complexity also determines how much preparation you need to do to set up a thaumaturgic ritual. Compare the complexity to your Lore skill. If your Lore is equal to or higher than the complexity, you know what you need to do and have everything you need to get started right away. If the complexity is higher than your Lore, then you need to prepare for the ritual, using maneuvers from your skills to add Aspects to the spell that you can tag for a Lore bonus[*]. Once you've made up the deficit, you're good to go.

In terms of the in-world rationale for what you're doing at this point, consider this the part of the spellcasting process where you are creating the spell construct, either by holding it in your mind (evocations) or by assembling the ritual components and preparations for the casting (thaumaturgy).

Once you're ready to cast the spell, you need to power it.

Drawing power

Now you need to empower your spell construct. The amount of power you can safely draw on in a single turn is equal to your Conviction skill. You can draw more than that, but you take stress for doing it, so it can wear you out pretty quickly. If you need more, it's safer to draw it in smaller amounts over a number of turns.

Unfortunately for the Wizard in the midst of a battle, you may not have time to draw power in slowly. For evocations, which are quick and dirty, you are drawing on your own power, and you need the whole amount of power you've decided to put into the spell *right now* to get the shield up before the ogre takes your head off. Working under pressure like that is tough; any evocations do a single point of stress, plus an extra point of stress for every shift of power you draw over and above your Conviction skill rating. You can, of course, offset this stress by taking consequences, as usual. Try and draw too much and you risk blinding headaches, nosebleeds, exhaustion, and your eyes exploding.

That sets a practical limit on evocation power levels, especially when you also need to control all that power, as outlined in the step below. Thaumaturgy doesn't have that sort of limit on it. The main limitations on thaumaturgic power is time and creativity.

The elaborate spell construct of a thaumaturgic working and the reduced time pressure[*] allows the spellcaster to summon the power needed slowly, over a number of turns. Each turn, the spellcaster decides how much power to summon, rolls to control it as described below, and adds it to the total amount of power accumulated for the ritual.

Controlling the power/targeting

Every turn you summon power, whether it's to store in a thaumaturgic ritual or unleash in an evocation, you need to roll to control the power summoned. This is a Discipline roll, with a difficulty equal to the number of shifts of power you've summoned this turn. If you succeed, everything is peachy-keen. Failure means you have some pain coming to you in the very near future.

Failing to control your power means that the power is uncontrolled. It's going to do some damage to someone or something, and you get to decide whether that someone or something is you. You can decide to take some or all of the shifts of uncontrolled power as backlash, meaning that you clamp your sovereign will down on the chaotic, elemental energies of the universe and force them to do your will. As you may have guessed from the description, it's gonna hurt, either in your brain or in your body. You

take a stress hit equal to the number of shifts of uncontrolled power in either your Physical or Mental stress tracks, but you can't split the stress. It's all got to go to one stress track.

Good news is that you get to keep those shifts of power in your spell. Bad news is that you might die if you you're dealing with too much power.

If you don't want all that primal force echoing around inside you, messing the place up, you can let it out to run rampant through the area around you, messing the place up. This is called fallout. Basically, what you're doing here is handing the shifts of uncontrolled power to the GM and saying, "Here. Use this to mess me up."* This is how houses get burned down, and friends get blasted, and people wind up with donkey heads, and so forth.

Good news is that you don't take any direct damage. Bad news is that the spell's power is reduced by the number of shifts of uncontrolled power that you let free as fallout. Really bad news is that you might still die if you're dealing with a lot of power, as the building collapses around you.

You get to decide how much uncontrolled power you're taking as backlash and how much you let loose as fallout. This can be a very important decision to make, so consider the upside and downside of it carefully.

There's an extra little wrinkle for thaumaturgy with control rolls. Because you're adding power a little at a time to the spell construct, doing a delicate balancing act turn-by-turn, holding the power and the spell construct together with your will, failing a control roll can be worse than with evocation. If you fail your Discipline roll, *all* the shifts of power you've gathered over all the turns of casting this given ritual become uncontrolled, and you have to choose how much to take as backlash and how much to let go as fallout. If *any* is loosed as fallout, it destroys the fragile spell construct, and the spell fails. So, you may be tempted to take everything as backlash, but keep in mind that with thaumaturgy, you may wind up dealing with ten or more shifts of power. That's gonna leave a mark no matter what.

This is why it's a good idea, if there is no time pressure, to draw the power for a thaumaturgic ritual a single shift at a time. It takes much more game time, and more time rolling, but it can prevent exploding heads and burning forests.

There's also an extra little wrinkle for evocation with control rolls. Just because you managed to successfully control the raging torrent of flame that you've focused into a lance with the force of your will, it doesn't mean you hit your target. Your Discipline roll also determines the difficulty for the target to avoid your spell. This is the targeting

roll. The target can take normal defensive actions to avoid the spell with a contested roll on an appropriate skill.

And that sums up the process of casting a spell, both in-world and in-game. Next time, I'm going to take a detailed look at evocation, talking about the little twists and turns of that system.

Footnotes

*Unless, of course, you botch the spell. Then you might create changes that you don't want to see. Back

*i.e., the energy is needed to keep the caster alive. If you don't have the muscle power for your heart to contract, things start getting pretty bleak on the survival front. Back

*Sacrifice of this nature is frowned upon, but needs must when the devil drives, right? Back

*Possibly literally right to hell. Back

*And it gives you a real opportunity to add some colour to your spellcaster. A Wizard who tosses around waves of fire at every problem that comes his way is a very different character from one that gets things done with carefully applied divinations. And part of the fun of playing a spellcaster is seeing how you can use different tools to accomplish your goals. Back

*Though there's a fair bit of leeway in what constitutes a maneuver, and the special effects of a given spell are a great way to make play exciting. I'm going to be talking about that a fair bit in the evocation post. Back

*I'm going to be talking about this *extensively* in the thaumaturgy post, both because it's an important topic, and because it gives players a great opportunity to add coolness and character to what is essentially an extended stint of dice-rolling. It is, in my opinion, one of the coolest things about this system. Back

*Not always the case, if the spellcaster needs to whip up a powerful veil in a hurry to hide from a rampaging monster, for example. Then the character may decide to draw more power than is, strictly speaking, safe. Back

*And your GM will grin evilly, and say, "Thank you." He or she may or may not cackle maniacally. Back

Evocation, or How to Blow Stuff Up: Magic in DFRPG, Part Two

Posted by <u>Rick Neal</u> in <u>Dresden Files RPG</u>, <u>What's he playing?</u>

Last time, I talked at a high level about the nature and process of magic in *DFRPG*, both in the game world and in the game mechanics. This time, I'm going to take a closer, more detailed look at evocation – what it can do and how it works.

What is evocation?

This is the magic of the fire blast, of the force shield, of the earthquake and the tidal wave and the tornado – magic tied to the power of the elements.

Evocation is the brute force, quick-and-dirty application of magic. It happens fast – in a single round – so you don't get to apply a lot of finesse, and you don't get to draw on outside power sources. That makes it somewhat limited in what you can do with it, and also very draining to use. With evocation, you grab hold of a big<u>*</u> chunk of power and slam it into the shape you want, holding it there through pure force of will.

It can be very effective combat magic – indeed, it's pretty much the only magic that can be cast in combat<u>*</u> – and a Wizard with decent Conviction and Discipline scores can do more damage than a howitzer. Or take the damage a howitzer dishes out.

But only for a little while. Then he or she needs to have a little lie-down.

What can you do with it?

In the novels, Harry points out time and again that the true measure and power of a Wizard is not his magical ability. It's his knowledge, his resourcefulness, and his creativity. This is a theme that carries over into the game in a big way, and I was very pleased to see it.

On the surface, evocation looks pretty limited in what you can accomplish with it: you can use it to attack, block, perform a maneuver, or counterspell<u>*</u>. Each of these things, though, has some surprising depth to the variations available. It's not four things that you can do; it's four categories of things.

Attack

Attacking is taking the energy you can conjure and hitting someone with it. It is the second most limited use of evocation, and the most straightforward. Scoop up a

brainful of fire, and rub it in somebody's face. Your goal with an evocation attack, as with any attack, is to damage your opponent. As I mentioned in a previous post, however, while attacks are necessary in combat, you shouldn't just keep blasting away at your opponent until he, she, or it goes down. Given the cost in Mental Stress to using evocations, this is doubly true for magical attacks like this.

But there are some interesting variations you can throw on your attack. You can spend shifts of power to turn it into an area attack, blasting everyone within a zone, or you can split your shifts of power and targeting roll between multiple opponents, to only damage enemies. This gives you some very flexible firepower, letting you zap everyone or only select folks.

The big deal with evocation attacks, however, is their damage potential. Putting together a Weapon:7 attack with your primary element is pretty easy to do, and that's roughly twice the power of a shotgun blast to the face, in game terms. It outdoes a claymore mine. And if you tweak your build properly and have the Fate Points, one or two Weapon :11 attacks aren't out of the question – you'll just pay for them.

Keep in mind, also, that attacks don't necessarily have to be physical. Spirit evocations, in particular, are well-suited to attacking the Mental Stress track of an opponent, but I'll talk a little more about this when we get to the elements.

Block

Blocking is taking the energy you can conjure and sticking it in something's way. You can block an incoming attack, or an individual creature's actions, or seal off an area to prevent anyone going in, or do pretty much anything that involves you using power to actively interfere with what someone else is doing. The key to a block is that you're trying to prevent something.

Blocks have a little more variety in implementation than attacks: you can do the same sort of thing where you try to cover an entire zone, or where you split the result among different targets, but you can also convert the block to armour, extend its duration beyond the instantaneous, and even use it to interfere with non-physical things, like perception.

So, Harry's force shield is a block. Molly's veil is a block. Harry's armoured duster is a block. Wrapping someone in ghosts to prevent them from moving is a block. Putting up a mental defense to keep someone from messing with your brain is a block. Putting fire in the doorway to prevent someone from leaving is a block.

And, like attacks, the strength of the block is determined by how much power you channel into it. You're probably going to be spending more shifts on extras for blocks than you do for attacks, but you can still throw up a pretty effective shield for a few rounds without instantly frying your brain.

Probably.

Maneuver

Performing a maneuver is taking the energy you can conjure and using it to change something around you in a relatively non-invasive way. This is really using evocation to jockey for advantage in combat, either by removing an impediment to you or by imposing an impediment on your opponent. That means adding an Aspect to or removing an Aspect from your target.

Maneuvers are where evocation really opens up, and your creativity can work wonders. The huge variety of things that can be maneuvers is limited only by the imagination and the creativity of the spell caster, and is another chance for the player to express his or her character.

Basic maneuvers are pretty cheap, power-wise. You need at least three shifts of power for the maneuver to work – more if the target has an opposing rating of Great (+4) or higher. If you're not targeting another character, the amount of power you'll need will be something of a judgement call on the part of the GM, but the guidelines are pretty lenient.

You can use your excess power for a number of nice little customizations: affecting an entire zone, affecting multiple targets, and making the Aspect sticky, for example. It can get pretty easy to rack up the shifts you need if you get greedy, though, so it's not always a good idea to pour everything into a single maneuver.

On the other hand, every maneuver costs at least one point of Mental Stress, so if your Discipline can handle it, you might as well pull in a number of shifts equal to your Conviction and use the extra shifts to add some extras. It all costs the same, up to that point, so the only thing you need to worry about is making your control roll.

Just as I mentioned in the post on combat, maneuvers are where you can realize big gains for your efforts. With evocation, though, you are limited by that Mental Stress cost, so you need to be careful.

Counterspell

Counterspelling is taking the energy you conjure and using it to attack the structure of another spell. It's really just a special case for the attack action, but is broken out on its own because it can only be targeted at a magical effect, and it can only make that effect go away.

It works just like an attack spell, except what you're trying to do is call up enough shifts of power that you can overwhelm the shifts of power in the effect you're attacking. This is an all-or-nothing kind of thing: either you wipe the spell out, or nothing happens. It works on all types of magic, but the time needed to perform it is (slightly) longer than most other evocations, so it's not going to be very useful to dispel the fireball that the sorcerer has just launched at your head.

Well, you can try, I guess. The catch is that, unless you take a second to make an assessment on the spell you're targeting, you're just guessing how much power is needed. If you you don't call up at least as many shifts of power as are in the targeted spell, you've just wasted your time and some of your energy. And if you call up too much, you've got the standard control issues. You can make an assessment roll as a free action using your Lore to tell how many shifts of power you'll need, but that takes a split second, and by then your eyebrows are gone.

So, for the most part, you're going to be using counterspells against ongoing effects, like blocks or maneuvers or thaumaturgical effects.

Counterspells only do one thing, but they do it very well.

How does it work?

So, that's what you can do. How do you do it? Well, I covered the basics last time, but let's go through things in a little more detail.

Spell Construct Phase

First you need to decide what you want to do and how to do it. Within the game world, this is essentially creating the spell construct in your mind. Within the game, you pick whether you want to attack, block, maneuver, or counterspell, and what element you're using. You also get to decide on the jazz of the effect: what it looks like, what you do to make it happen, things like that.

The jazz is important – don't neglect it. It may not necessarily have a game effect[*], but you should play it up because it gives you a few seconds to spotlight your character and the way he or she does things. Use the opportunity to add cool to your character. Keep

in mind all the variations that you want on the spell, and what sort of dramatic impact you want it to make as you describe what you're trying to do. Sweeping a wave of flame over a mob of goblins looks and feels very different, and is different mechanically, than targeting a dragon with a focused beam of pure righteous anger.

Drawing Power Phase

Once you know what you want to do, you need to calculate the power you're going to need. For evocations, this is generally pretty easy: maneuvers require three shifts minimum, plus whatever extra shifts you want to add to make it harder to resist, or make the Aspect last longer. Everything else, the power is split between the power of the effect (as weapon or block rating) and any extras you're adding, like multiple targets or longer duration.

Mechanically, this is the most complex part of casting an evocation, as you try and balance the amount of power you can channel without hurting yourself (determined by Conviction) versus the amount of power you can easily control (determined by Discipline and a dice roll) versus how much stamina you have (determined by your Mental Stress track and consequences) versus how much power you need (determined by what you're trying to accomplish).

Controlling Power and Targeting Phase

Once you commit to the amount of power you're using and how it's going to be split, you make a Discipline roll to control the power. You need the roll to meet or exceed the number of shifts of power that you're using – failing means that some or all of the shifts of power are uncontrolled. The amount of uncontrolled power is the difference between the roll you needed[*] and the result of the roll. So, if you're channeling a Great amount of power (4 shifts), and the result of your Discipline roll is Average (+1), you've got three shifts of uncontrolled power.

This is where things can really start to hurt[*].

You get to decide what to do with the uncontrolled shifts of power. One option is to take backlash, where the energies rip through you, but you manage to focus them into the spell anyway, getting the result you want. You also take a hit to either your Mental or Physical stress track equal to the number of uncontrolled shifts of power – in this case, a three-point hit. While you get to choose which track you take the hit on, you can't split the hit between tracks. You can, of course, take consequences as usual to offset the stress hit partially or entirely. The power still goes into the spell, however; you get the result you wanted, but it cost you a little more than you had planned on.

A second option is to let the power spill out of you as fallout, running loose in the area around you, messing with your stuff. You take no damage*, but the environment isn't so lucky. What you're doing here is handing the uncontrolled shifts of power to your GM, making puppy-dog eyes, and racking your brain to try and remember if you've done anything especially upsetting to him or her recently. The GM gets to decide how to apply the power, maybe by sticking nasty Aspects on the scene and your allies, or maybe just applying stress to unintended targets. But not to you. No, you had your chance to be all self-sacrificing, and you gave it up – now you get to watch others pay the price. The power of the spell is also reduced by the amount of uncontrolled power you let loose as fallout, so it's going to work less well, if at all, on top of everything else. With three shifts of uncontrolled power, the GM has enough to put an Aspect on the scene or a character (need 3 shifts for a maneuver), or blast another character with a 3-stress hit*, or even targeting all characters in the zone with a 1-stress hit (1 shift of power for a Weapon:1 attack, 2 shifts to target the zone).

The third option is to split the amount of uncontrolled power between the two options, taking some as backlash and giving some away as fallout. This gives you most of the disadvantages of both choices, without all of the benefits, but sometimes it's the way you have to go to keep the spell power from falling below a minimum threshold, or because you can only absorb so much damage before dropping, or any number of other reasons. You get to decide how to split the uncontrolled shifts of power, and this can be a pretty important decision.

It's also another opportunity to show what kind of person your character is.

But enough about failure. What about success? Well, if your Discipline roll is successful, you control the power and you get the spell off, and it works the way you want it to. For attacks and maneuvers, this Discipline roll is also the targeting roll* – your result is the difficulty that the target has to beat with a defense roll to avoid the effects of the spell. If they can beat your targeting roll, they effectively get out of the way and the attack or maneuver fails. If they can't beat it, you hit them with the spell, and they get stuck with the Aspect or take damage from the attack.

DAMAGE

Calculating damage from a spell is the same as calculating the damage from any other weapon, with one little twist: the weapon rating is based on the shifts of power in the spell. So, if you use 4 shifts of power in the attack, you're attacking with a Weapon:4. The formula for damage is:

- targeting roll in shifts – defense roll in shifts + weapon rating

So, if your targeting roll is Great (+4), and the defense roll is Fair (+2), and you're using a Weapon:3 (3 shifts of power in the evocation), you do a total of (4-2+3) 5 shifts of damage. That means a 5-stress hit to the target, which is enough to get anyone's attention.

Simple*.

Rotes

Rotes deserve special mention. These are spells that your character has learned well enough that he or she can essentially cast them in his or her sleep. What this means in the game world is that the character has the spell so thoroughly practiced that he or she can fling it off with but a thought, and with almost no effort.

In game terms, you never have to make a Discipline roll to control the power of a rote. It's assumed that you've rolled a 0 on the dice, so you automatically control a number of shifts of power equal to your Discipline. This is a valuable resource, so pick your rotes wisely – you only get a number of rotes equal to your Lore skill rating. I suggest trying to pick an attack rote, a block rote, and a couple of maneuver rotes. That gives you a nice arsenal of combat magic that you can rely on.

With rote attacks, you still need to make a Discipline roll to target the spell, so it's not all gravy – a rote spell does not guarantee a hit.

Elements

So, I mentioned earlier that evocation is tied to the elements. Elements are really just the physical* manifestations of the power you're tossing around with evocation – as the rules say, it's hard to visualize using the ramifications of thermonuclear force to harm a target, but easy to visualize a blast of flame burning someone. Because magic exists first and primarily in the mind of the spellcaster, they tend to categorize the forces they're playing with in easy-to-conceptualize forms, thus being able to pull off a quick attack or block without having to parse from an abstract equation to a concrete effect.

Most spellcasters use the standard Greek elements: air, earth, fire, water, and spirit. There is a note in the rules, though, talking about how some casters use concepts based on other traditions: Listens To Wind probably uses elemental associations based on the Native American medicine wheel concepts, and Ancient Mai probably uses one of the Chinese elemental groupings. There's no reason your character can't use a different set of elements and associations, too – subject, as always, to GM approval.

What you're looking for in a set of elements is a combination of physical manifestation – fire is gouts of flame, air is blasts of wind, etc. – with a range of non-physical

associations – fire is purification, air is motion, etc. The write-up of the various elements in *Your Story* covers the five Greek elements very nicely, showing what you can and can't do with them. This is the kind of detail you want to establish if you're using a different set of elements.

One thing to keep in mind with elements is that there are multiple ways to interpret and parse the same effect for different elements. Lightning, as a sidebar in the rulebook points out, can reasonably be created using air or earth, and in *Storm Front*, Harry associates it with fire, so you've got three of five elements covering it. If you want to freeze water, you can do it using water evocation, or fire evocation to draw all the heat from it, or earth or air to apply cold to it. If you want something to explode, fire can do that, but so can the erosive power of water working on the forces holding the object together, or air expanding inside it, or earth causing the polarities of the molecular bonds to repel each other, or spirit causing the anima of the components to fly apart.

Thinking of creative ways to use your elemental powers to perform a wide range of effects is a fun exercise in creativity and tactics. It also can tell people a lot about your character: someone who just uses fire to burn things is different from someone who uses fire to heal by sterilizing a wound. As I've pointed out before, Harry says often enough in the books that the real measure of a Wizard is his or her knowledge and resourcefulness, so look for ways to apply the tools you have to the problem at hand.

Using Evocation Effectively

Everything above makes evocation look pretty straightforward, and it is. But there are some important things to remember when using evocation, and some non-intuitive things you can do to maximize the effectiveness of your spells.

Watch Your Mental Stress

This is the battery that powers your evocations, and you take a minimum 1-stress hit every time you use an evocation. If you've got a Great (+4) Conviction skill – not unreasonable in a spellcaster character – you can toss out a maximum four evocations in a single combat without having to worry about consequences. This number goes down if you pull in more power on any of your evocations than your Conviction rating. That's a tough limiting factor, so you need to be aware of it.

Good news is that, if you have a little time after using an evocation to catch your breath, the stress goes away. Consequences will take longer, so that's another factor that you have to budget carefully.

Bad news is that fallout can really drain your battery quickly if you take the hits to the Mental Stress track. It's very worthwhile considering dumping fallout damage into the Physical Stress track to keep your Mental Stress track available for pumping out the magics. Of course, in the middle of combat, you may have other things eating up your Physical Stress boxes, so it's a delicate balancing act.

Every time you look at using an evocation, you have to make sure you get the biggest bang you can out of it, because you only get to toss a few around before things start looking grim for the home team. So husband them, using them when they'll do the most good.

Don't Neglect the Non-Physical Correspondences of Your Elements

Fire is great for purifying, water is great for eroding, earth is great for strengthening, air is great for thinking, and spirit is great for emotions. Any of these can be used in non-physical form as an evocation – attack, block, maneuver, or counterspell. In particular, look for opportunities to attack physically tough opponents in their Mental Stress track – it's likely less robust than their physical one. It's also a good place to kick enemy spellcasters – they probably have better mental defenses, but any hit takes away some of the battery they can use to attack you back with evocation.

Attacking someone's Mental Stress track is a good way to avoid an accidental First Law violation: you're less likely to kill someone that way. But you need to be careful about the type of attack to avoid a Third or Fourth Law violation. This can have unpleasant consequences for your character, though it can also provide some interesting drama and roleplaying.

Prepare

If you've got some time before going into battle, gird your loins. Take a little time to employ some maneuvers to stick Aspects on yourself that you can use in the combat to come. This is a common stock scene in books and movies, and works great as a little montage over the soundtrack of your favourite '80s power ballad. Some suggestions:

- Assemble a pouch of little charms that can help your spellcasting. Resources skill to add the Aspect: Magic Charms.
- Spend a little time ritually purifying yourself. Discipline skill to add the Aspect: Ritually Purified.
- Paint warding runes and sigils on your hands and face. Lore skill to add the Aspect: Runes of Warding.
- Scout the battlefield. Stealth skill to add the Aspect: I Know the Terrain.

- Do some research on your opponent. Scholarship to add the Aspect: I Know Their Tricks.

These give you some nice free invocations to use when you need them in combat, making sure that when you use one of your precious and limited evocations, it's more likely to be worth it.

In addition, it's not a bad idea to use some thaumaturgic rituals to enhance your effectiveness. Veils, armour, enchanted weapons, a bandoleer of potions, and so forth, can go a long way to making sure you're ready for anything.

Maneuver, Maneuver, Maneuver

Evocation maneuvers cost Mental Stress just like every other evocation, but mundane maneuvers cost you nothing but time. Come up with maneuvers in combat to help you land your evocations and maximize their impact. Some examples:

- Snatch a lock of an opponent's hair to provide a magical link to your target. Fists, Athletics, or Weapons skill to add the Aspect: Sympathetic Targeting Link.
- Do a mystical medicine dance to attract the attention of the spirits and help you. Performance skill to add the Aspect: Favour of the Manitou.
- Use mystic gestures to carefully weave the spell energy into the form you need. Athletics skill to add the Aspect: Arcane Arm-Waving.
- Shout the names of powerful beings that you have uncovered in your studies to supercharge your spell. Lore skill to add the Aspect: Power of the Secret Names.
- Sneak up behind your target. Stealth skill to add the Aspect: Blindsided.

Don't Forget Your Fate Points

If you've had time to prepare and are taking time in battle to perform maneuvers, you probably have a number of Aspects you can tag for free on a given turn. Sometimes, though, you really need to push an attack over the top, and that's where Fate Points come in. Failed evocations can really deplete the resources of your character, what with the cost to even attempt them and the potential fallout and backlash, and the limited number of evocations you can cast in a given combat. If nothing else is going to work, spending a Fate Point to avoid that sort of loss is a good choice. Or if you think that bolstering this evocation is going to really make the difference in the fight.

Pick Your Battles

Sometimes, the fight just isn't worth unleashing your magic, either because the enemy can be fairly easily defeated by mundane means, or you know there's a tougher battle coming up, or you're fighting normal mortals and don't want to risk killing them. It's a

good idea to have a mundane fighting skill or two to fall back on, and to know when it's time to run away and avoid a battle that is just going to deplete your resources without really advancing the plot or your goals.

And if you can't run away, but you don't want to fight, and can't afford to waste your magic, concede. I know, it goes against all the instincts of the experienced gamer to just say, "I give up. You win." But if you've taken a consequence or two in the fight up to that point, you get Fate Points, and you also get to decide how you lose. Maybe, if you've been fighting your way through mooks to get to the big bad, conceding is the way to get captured and presented to the boss, giving you a chance to blast him or her without having exhausted yourself on the minions.

So, that's a pretty detailed look at evocation. We're pushing 5000 words with this post, so I'm gonna stop writing now. Next time, I'll talk about thaumaturgy.

Footnotes

*Or not so big, depending on what you want to do and what your capabilities are. Back

*I'm going to do some talking about combat thaumaturgy in the next post in this series. Back

*There's a section in the marginalia of the rules where Billy suggests using it to move, but Harry points out some pretty telling flaws in that plan. I could see allowing spellcasters to do it, but it's pretty much a last-ditch, hail-Mary thing that's gonna end badly. Back

*Though it could, if you roll well and your GM is benevolent. Or if you roll poorly and your GM is… less benevolent. Back

*That is, the number of shifts of power you called. Back

*Though, to be fair, not as much as if you failed a control roll with a thaumaturgic ritual. Back

*Well, not *directly*, anyway. But being stuck in a collapsing building can certainly present opportunities for more damage to come your way. Back

*If the GM is feeling benevolent, the target may get a defense roll. Or not. As one playtest character's Aspect puts it, A Wizard's Mistakes Are Big And Messy. Back

*Why is Discipline pressed into double-duty as both the control of the power and the targeting roll rather than something like Athletics or Weapons or Guns? I can think of three reasons:

1. Mechanically, it eliminates another roll in the spellcasting process, thus speeding up play in one of the more complex pieces of system.
2. Also mechanically, Wizards already need to have three fairly high skills: Conviction, Discipline, and Lore. Adding another skill as a targeting skill makes it significantly harder for Wizards to have a variety and range of skills, as they would need to optimize a fourth skill to make their character effective in their (supposedly) core competencies.
3. Story-wise, it's just cooler to have the Wizard guiding the blast of fire with the force of his or her will.

Back

*Things are slightly less simple with attacking multiple targets, but the essence remains the same. Back

*Or not so physical, in some cases. Back

Thaumaturgy, or How to Break the Rules: Magic in DFRPG, Part Three

Posted by <u>Rick Neal</u> in <u>Dresden Files RPG</u>, <u>What's he playing?</u>

This may be my longest post – it's closing in on 7000 words, which is a respectable length for a short story. Thaumaturgy is a big subject to cover, because it's a big system in the game. Just wanted to warn you before you start reading.

Quick recap. First, I talked about general magic theory in DFRPG. Then, I went into detail on evocation. Now, I'm tackling thaumaturgy.

What is thaumaturgy?

This is kind of a tough question to answer. The basic answer is, "You know what evocation is? Well, thaumaturgy is *everything else*."

Thaumaturgy is the careful crafting of a complex, sophisticated spell construct that can reach beyond the immediate presence of the spellcaster to have an effect. It is the scientific and artful application of mystic knowledge and training to produce an arcane solution to a problem. It is a ritual designed to produce change in the world.

On the one hand, because of the careful preparation and ability to work slowly gathering power, thaumaturgy can produce effects of such staggering power that they dwarf the most potent evocations. On the other hand, because of the fine control that the caster can exert over the energies gathered, thaumaturgy can create effects of immense subtlety. You are limited only by your imagination and creativity when it comes to deciding what you can and can't do with thaumaturgy – once you come up with the idea and structure of the spell, your ability to cast it is governed primarily by the cool stuff you can think of to make it work.

With care and precision, thaumaturgy can be the safest kind of magic to cast, sacrificing speed for safety. However, when it goes wrong, it goes wrong *big time*.

What can you do with it?

The key with thaumaturgy is that you're using magic to, in essence, break a rule that the rest of the world has to follow. Little things like conservation of mass, the Laws of Thermodynamics, basic physics, stuff like that. Tracking someone down when you have no leads. Curing a disease without using medicine. Traveling 200 miles on foot in 20 minutes.

The biggest stumbling block in using thaumaturgy in the game is paralysis brought on by too much choice, at least in the beginning. You can do anything, really *anything*, that you can conceive of[*]. The rules break things down into a few broad categories, but really you can work out a ritual for any magical effect you can conceive of or have read in a book or seen in a movie.

The broad categories are meant primarily to provide some guidelines for determining complexity. As you read through the descriptions, you're going to see a lot of overlap, and you'll be able to think of how to accomplish the examples using one of the other categories. This, I contend, is a good thing: it provides room and system support for Here are the categories:

Solve improbable or impossible problems.

This is almost a meta-category that all the other categories could be said to be part of. More specifically, in the way it's defined in the book, it's doing something that *could* be done with a skill, given enough time and skill and favourable conditions. Thaumaturgy doesn't care about that[*] – it lets you get what you want in situations when the skill wouldn't work.

So, need to climb a modern skyscraper? Athletics lets you climb stuff, but the difficulty of climbing the sheer glass sides, plus the extreme height, makes the success of an Athletics check somewhat problematic. Thaumaturgy to the rescue! Whip up a little spell to let you walk up the side of the building, or even just fly you to the top.

Trying to find a tiny key hidden in a scrap metal dump? Alertness lets you spot things, but one little key among the piles of metal has a pretty high difficulty, and searching will take a long time. Again, thaumaturgy to the rescue! A little spell can pick the one key you need[*] from the vast, steely junkpile.

The key question here is, "How would I do this without magic?" If the answer is a skill, then this is the category you're looking at.

Create lasting changes in people and things.

Turning lead into gold, or people into frogs, or live people into dead people. The key thing with this concept is that you're essentially engaging in a contest with the target, and you use your magic to (hopefully) overwhelm their defenses and make change happen. The change can be as simple as adding or removing an Aspect from the target, or as complex as ripping the soul from someone and binding it to yours service.

These sorts of changes, while lasting, are not necessarily *long* lasting, which is why Wizards aren't all rich from all that aluminum they've transformed into gold. Generally,

the longer you want something to last, the more difficult it is to do, and the more power it's going to require, unless the change is something that cannot be reversed – like killing someone.

So, if you want to turn yourself into a gerbil, this is how you do it. If you want to put someone into a dreamless sleep, this is how you do it. If you want to reinforce the door of your lab, this is how you do it. If you want to cause someone's heart to burst out of their chest, this is how you do it. If you want to cause a thunderstorm, this is how you do it. If you want to reinflate a collapsed lung, this is how you do it.

Now, it's worth noting that these types of changes often run afoul of the Laws of Magic, so practitioners looking to try something need to think carefully about how they're going to do it. But these sorts of things also deal with personal shapeshifting and healing, so there are safe applications.

Provide inaccessible knowledge.

Here, we're talking about things like scrying, precognition, mind reading, and things like that. You can spy on remote people and places, or you can make assessments on targets. Basically anything that lets you know something you otherwise couldn't. This is a pretty broad range of things, and has a great deal of overlap with the other categories, depending on how you choose to go about it.

Let's say you're going up against a nasty monster, and you need to know what its weaknesses are. You've got a number of possibilities to find that out, as long as you've got some sort of link:

- Use scrying to spy on the creature and see how it behaves.
- Summon up a spirit of intellect and interrogate it.
- Mystically analyze some of its hair or its true name to see what the arcane correspondences tell you.
- Call up the ghost of its last victim to help you by whispering its secrets in your ear.
- Use automatic writing to channel the lore of the Akashic Library into your pen and onto your page.
- Ritually tune your eyes and mind so that when you next encounter the creature, you will just be able to *tell*.

Each of these options touches on at least one of the other categories, but they're grouped here because they all do the same kind of thing. They help you to *know something*.

You can also use magic to make declarations. Assessments and declarations are, after all, two different ways of knowing something about something. With assessments, the GM tells you what he or she has decided the target is like. With declarations, you tell the GM what you've decided the target is like. As with mundane declarations, though, if you get greedy, you're gonna get slapped down*.

Allow interaction with the supernatural.

Summoning demons, trapping faeries, communing with nature spirits, and channeling ghosts all fall into this category. So do exorcisms and mystical assaults against these creatures*. There are lots of beings that mortals just can't see or interact with, and this category is all about breaking that restriction.

The most basic kinds of interaction we're talking about here are things like summoning something, binding it to your service, and then dismissing it. So, if you wanted to put a genie into a bottle, this is what we're talking about. Or if you want to call up an assassin demon and send it after your enemies. Or tempt some of the wee folk into a magic circle using pizza as bait, and then bargain with them for service.

Beyond that, though, there are other applications. The right kind of spell with the right kind of links can damage a demon itself, rather than the ectoplasmic body it's built for itself to walk around in. It can allow you to touch a ghost physically or hear the complaints and secrets of the spirit of a house. You can use it to ghost-proof a room, or make all the invisible spirits in an area visible. And, in extremis, you can use it to drive the possessing demon out of the little girl before she eats her daddy.

As you can see, there's a lot of overlap (as usual) with the other categories.

Shape magical energies into physical forms.

Now we get into things like brewing potions*, crafting wards, and conjuring swords*. It's *creating* something from magic that has a lasting presence in the world and an impact on physicality. Yeah, it's kinda fuzzy, but so are all the other categories. Really, what we're looking at here is producing something from nothing, as far as game system is concerned. So, setting up an invisible wall of force that will seal a doorway for the night falls into this category, as does forming a suit of ectoplasmic armour to wear into battle. So, too, does making a magical booby trap, or creating a temporary body for a spirit to inhabit, or conjuring a feast out of the air.

This is potent stuff, and it has the same big catch that creating lasting change does: duration. Making something permanent from nothing is impossible; the magic maintaining the thing will naturally* decay as time passes, and dawn and dusk are

important thresholds in the day that sap the strength of ongoing magical effects. Eventually, unless the caster spends time, effort, and energy to refresh the magic frequently, the spell will wear off and the conjured thing will go away. So, the armour vanishes, the sated guest becomes suddenly hungry again, the pile of gold melts away, and so on.

But if you really need a rope for a few minutes, or a plank across a chasm for thirty seconds, or an impressive mansion for the evening, this can do it for you.

How does it work?

The basic structure for thaumaturgy is the same as for evocation, but the emphasis on what's going on – the interesting bits where the story gets played out – are different. With evocation, it's all about the risk of walking that fine line between power and control, when your ass is on the line and you need to think hard about what you're willing to risk to achieve your goals. With thaumaturgy, it's all about the set-up and the story of the spell.

So, while the basic metaprocess of spellcasting is the same – form the spell construct, empower the spell construct, release the spell construct – the system for thaumaturgy focuses very heavily on the preparation for the spell.

Spell Construct Phase

The first step in using a thaumaturgic ritual is the same as in using an evocation: figure out what you want to do and how you want to do it. While the choices for evocation are somewhat limited, the wide variety of things that you can apply thaumaturgy to can be overwhelming. Don't let it paralyze you; you don't need to solve every problem with magic. When a good idea comes to you, go for it. When one doesn't, let it go. If you *really need* to use magic and you don't have an idea about how, talk to the other players and the GM. They may have suggestions.

Start with practicalities: what's the goal? What are the obstacles? What would get you past the obstacles to the goal? Let those simple ideas guide your magic. If the goal is to get into the building and the obstacles are security guards and a security system, what gets you past them and into the building? Maybe invisibility. Maybe intangibility. Maybe a disguise. Maybe a quick shortcut through the Nevernever. Maybe a distraction like a demon materializing to slaughter the hapless mortals<u>*</u>.

The option you choose is another great chance to showcase who your character is and what sort of person he or she is. Your strengths are, of course, going to play a role in the choice – if you're good at veils, invisibility is a solid choice, after all – but that's just

another way of revealing things about your character. The kind of person who is good at veils is different from the kind that's good at demon summonings, for example.

Once you've got the effect and the method chosen, you have to figure out how tough the spell is to cast.

Determining Complexity

This is the most complex part of thaumaturgy, mechanically speaking. It's the calculation of how difficult the spell is to cast and how much power it will require, which are the same number but mean different things. The complexity of the spell determines the power requirements, so let's just talk about figuring out the complexity.

This is where you start looking back at the categories of thaumaturgic effect described above to determine what the mechanical effect of what you're attempting with the ritual is going to be. Here's how you work out the complexity:

- If the spell is going to reproduce something that could be accomplished with skill use, the complexity is equal to the roll result that would be required with that skill. So, if you could climb up the side of a building with an Legendary (+8) Athletics roll, the complexity of a spell to get you quickly to the top of the building is 8.
- If the spell is going to essentially perform a maneuver to add or remove an Aspect from a target, the complexity is equal to the defending skill of the target, with a minimum of 3. So, if you're trying to open a Great (+4) lock with magic, then the complexity is 4. However, if the target is another character (or anything capable of an active defense), it gets a defense roll, so to make sure you land the maneuver, you have to increase the complexity to match the highest possible defense result. That means that, if you're using a glue spell to make someone Stuck to the Floor, and they have Great (+4) Athletics, the complexity becomes 8 (4 for the Athletics, plus 4 for the maximum possible roll).
- If you want to stick someone with a lingering Aspect – essentially, a consequence – the complexity has to exceed the defense skill plus the maximum roll, plus a number of extra shifts equal to the appropriate Stress Track, plus a number of extra shifts equal to the kind of consequence you want to inflict. So, if you wanted to cast an amnesia spell on someone with Good (+3) Conviction, the complexity becomes 17 (3 for the Conviction, plus 4 for the maximum roll, plus 4 more for the Stress Track, plus 6 for a severe consequence). Killing someone means you have to match the defense skill, plus the maximum roll, plus the Stress Track, plus *every* consequence, plus one to take the target out – complexity 29 for someone with Average (+1) Endurance.

- If you're creating something, the complexity is going to be equal to the quality of the item, plus any modifiers. So, throwing up a Superb (+5) ward for an hour[*] is complexity 5, or 7 if it covers an entire zone, or 10 if you want it to cover an entire zone for a full day.
- If you're doing any of the above but adding or removing some aspect of the effect, the complexity goes up or down, depending on the case you can make to the GM.

Now, if you're trying to do something cool, you're quickly going to see the complexity of the spell start to climb into double-digits. Don't sweat it. You don't need to roll to meet the complexity at any point; with enough preparation, any spellcaster can cast a spell of any complexity[*].

Preparation Phase

Now that you have the complexity of the spell determined (and thereby the power requirement of the spell), you have to prepare the spell. In game-world terms, this is when you build the external, independent spell construct – the ritual, with all its paraphernalia and weird little requirements.

There is one thing you *need* to have to cast a thaumaturgic ritual, and that's a symbolic link to your target. If you're casting the power on yourself, then hey, easy. Otherwise, you need some sort of arcanely significant representation of the target – blood, hair, a picture, a map of the location, the true name, whatever. You must have a minimum of one symbolic link, or the spell cannot find the target. You can use more links if you want, and each of these is effectively a declaration, giving you an Aspect that you can tag for making up the Lore deficit, as described below.

The amount of preparation you need is based on the complexity in comparison to your Lore. If the complexity of the spell is equal to or lower than your Lore skill, you know all the tricks you need to know in order to pull the ritual off with the stuff you have in your pockets – you can move directly to the next phase. Of course, complexity scores for thaumaturgic rituals can quickly range up into double-digits, so that's not always going to be an option.

When you have a deficit between your Lore skill and the complexity of the spell, you need to make it up before you can cast the spell. To do that, you need to go through the kinds of things that Harry goes through in the books in order to gain bonuses to your Lore. When Harry needs to cast a big spell, he spends time, talks to people who might be able to help, looks things up in books, ritually purifies himself, and buys strange and expensive ingredients, and that's what you need to do, as well. Here's how it works with the game mechanics:

- **Spend Fate Points.** You can spend as many Fate Points as you like to invoke your Aspects to give you a +2 to your Lore. If you haven't got any applicable Aspects*, you can spend a Fate Point to get a flat +1, as usual.
- **Take extra time.** Having your character sit out a scene gives you a +1 to your Lore, as he or she is getting ready to cast the spell. There's an interesting discussion about this on p262 of *Your Story* about the ramifications of this to player groups that you need to read before really considering this option.
- **Take consequences.** Taking consequences gives you +1 to your Lore for every box of Stress the consequence would offset: +2 for a minor, +4 for a moderate, +6 for a severe, +8 for an extreme. This is some sort of self-sacrifice that you're working into the casting of the spell. For physical consequences, the images are fairly obvious – blood sacrifice, flagellation, scarification, starvation, etc. Mental consequences can show how you short out your mind by trying to hold too much of the spell in your head, or maybe just indicate the extra effort you're putting into the casting or the lack of sleep as you've been preparing. Social consequences get a little trickier, but I think that, if you've been putting together a spell that requires some unwholesome ingredients or acts, Arrested for Graverobbing could work, or maybe a Wild-Eyed Crazy Demeanor after spending all that time looking into forbidden books. The rules also suggest Oaths to other beings as a good way to boost your Lore – something like I Owe a Favour to Mab*.
- **Inflict consequences**. You can get the same boost to your Lore skill by inflicting consequences on another being, whether they are willing or not. Note that this is a pretty dark route to go, even if the sacrifice is willing, and will probably have repercussions, but consider that killing another sentient being nets you +20 to your Lore skill for purposes of casting the spell – it can be a real temptation for the right kind of Wizard*.
- **Make declarations.** This is really the meat of the thaumaturgy system – it lets you cast more powerful, cooler spells by coming up with cool stuff for the preparations. What you're doing with this option is looking at your skills, and coming up with some interesting way that they can contribute to the spell. Then you roll on that skill, making a declaration to place a temporary Aspect on the spell that you can tag for a free Lore bonus. So, maybe you want to make a Lore skill roll to Research Sumerian Rituals, and then make a Resources skill roll to buy a Cuneiform Tablet to use in the ritual, and a Contacts skill roll to borrow some Shedu Blood from a friend, and top it all off with a Discipline roll to undergo a Purifying Meditation. Bang. You've just added +8 to your Lore skill for this ritual, as well as adding a bunch of cool details to it.

Once you've made up the deficit between your Lore skill and the complexity of the spell, you're ready to move on to the next phase.

Drawing and Controlling Power Phase

Now that you've got the spell construct… er, constructed, it's time to fill it with power. You need to draw in a number of shifts of power equal to the complexity of the spell, but you don't need to draw it in all at once. Generally, you want to call in power equal to or less than your Conviction each turn of casting – calling in more does that pesky old Mental Stress, one point for every shift of power above your Conviction skill. Unlike evocation, though, you don't take any Mental Stress if you keep the amount of power you channel each turn equal to or less than your Conviction skill.

The mechanic here is pretty simple: decide how many shifts of power you're going to draw in a given turn, roll your Discipline score to try and control those shifts and, if successful, add them to the running tally of how much power is invested in the spell. When you've called and successfully controlled a number of shifts of power equal to the complexity rating of the spell, it goes off. Normally, there's no targeting roll needed – you made sure it would hit the target when you set the complexity.

Of course, sometimes you don't make that Discipline roll, and that can be bad.

When you fail a Discipline roll trying to control the shifts of power you've summoned on a given turn, *all the power* you've currently got gathered for the spell becomes uncontrolled. That can mean massive amounts of loose energy that you've got to figure out what to do with. If you let *any* of it go as fallout, the entire spell fails, period. So, in addition to maybe having the building collapse on you and your friends catching fire, the super-special escape spell didn't get you out of there. The alternative is backlash, but considering you may be dealing with double-digit shifts of power, this is a good way to redecorate the walls with your brains. The upshot? BE CAREFUL.

Now, it's not always that grim. If there's no time pressure, there's no need to roll. The GM just tells you how long it takes to cast the spell, and the spell goes off. This is probably going to be a longer time than if you had rolled, but no need to get impatient, right? Better slow and living than quick and dead.

The Story of the Spell

Thaumaturgic rituals can either be the most interesting, engaging part of the game, or it can be a quick bit of mechanical business that gets the characters from one bit of the story to the next. Which it's going to be is going to depend on the needs of the game at the moment. If the spell itself isn't really important, you can gloss over it pretty quickly and move on. Otherwise, you want to devote a little attention to it. That means telling the story of the spell.

Lenny Balsera posted this on the DFRPG site a couple of months ago, and it tells how he came to the idea of the story of the spells, and the impact it has on play. I can't improve on what he says there, so just go read it.

The core of the idea is that what's important in a thaumaturgic ritual is not the mechanical hoops you have to jump through or the dice you roll or even the way you work out the effect. What's important for thaumaturgy is the *impact casting the spell has on the story in the game*. And not just whether the spell works or not; the entire process of attempting to cast the spell is important to the story – the things that the caster is willing and able to do to prepare, the way the effect is accomplished, the choices of how to build the ritual, the way he or she goes about casting it – all of it.

That's where you should put your attention when someone starts talking thaumaturgy.

So, when you look at performing a thaumaturgic ritual, you need to think about a way to make the preparation you do fit into the story and say the things you want it to say. Look at the skills you're using in the preparation phase, and string them together in a way that makes sense and adds cool to your character. If your Wizard bases his or her magic on the Enochian rituals of John Dee, then the preparations are going to be different from a Wizard following the ecstatic traditions of the Sufis, or a Wiccan practitioner – use this opportunity to set him or her apart and make the spell more interesting.

You want a great example of a story of preparation for a thaumaturgic ritual? Go see *Iron Man 2*. Watch Tony Stark put things into place to create the new element for his chest reactor*. He alienates his friends by keeping his secrets (takes a social consequence – Drove Friends Away), gets the box of his father's stuff from SHIELD (Contacts, Messages From Dad), tries to get Pepper's help (Rapport, Pepper's Got My Back – failed!), finds the model of the expo (Alertness, The Secret of the Expo), guts his house to access the power and room he needs (Might, Remodeled To Death), buys or salvages the parts he needs from his expensive cars and other toys (Resources, Got Everything I Need), figures out the necessary element (Scholarship, New Element Template), puts together a particle accelerator (Scholarship, Kit-Bashed Particle Accelerator), and finally flips the power switch and lets it go.

That's the kind of thing you're striving for with a good thaumaturgic ritual preparation.

The Art of the Montage

Here's the downside. It takes time, and focuses things strongly on the spellcaster for as long as it takes for the preparation and casting to play out. Sure, you can cut back and forth from the spellcaster to other characters, but it still effectively focuses the spotlight

on one character for a significant amount of time. Especially because, if the characters have decided to eat a huge amount of time doing a ritual like this, everyone else is probably waiting for the outcome.

So as not to unbalance the spotlight time too much, it's best to not run through every little bit of the preparation every time the spellcaster decides to trot thaumaturgy out. Take a tip from 80s action movies*, and use a montage. Just describe something you're doing for preparation in a simple (but colourful) sentence, make your roll, and move on to the next item. Imagine a power ballad playing over the short cuts of your character going from task to task.

Of course, there are some situations where you *want* to focus the game on the preparation and casting of a ritual spell. In those cases, go for it. Roleplay all the preparation scenes, delve into the difficulties encountered along the way, and revel in it. Make it a set of scenes that everyone in the game is going to remember and talk about.

Conversely, there will be some situations where you don't even want to spend the time it takes to do the montage approach. Maybe it's a simple spell that the caster has done many times before, with no really dramatic outcome, and no time pressure. How do you handle the preparation then? Well, just say it all works and the spell goes off. Forget even rolling. Just take it as read that the spell works as described, and move on with the game.

The key here is to give the spell as much story as is good for the overall story, and no more. Deal only with the things that are going to matter, and drive on. But when it's interesting and makes a good addition to the story, throw yourself into it.

Using Thaumaturgy Effectively

Those are the pieces that make up the thaumaturgy system, along with some comments on how they fit together and how to use them in play. Now for some thoughts about how to get the most out of thaumaturgy for your character. I want to be clear, here; I'm coming at this from the viewpoint of the GM – I've never actually been a player in a *DFRPG* session. These are just the things I've picked up from my reading of the system and running it from the other side of the screen. But they're things that I think will hold true for most campaigns, subject to the whims of the GM.

Prepare as a player.

Because of the wide range of things you can do with thaumaturgy, it can get overwhelming to use it in play. And if you don't use it in play, then you've wasted 3 Refresh and surrendered a huge amount of flexibility and functionality for your

character. The best way to make sure you're not paralyzed by choice is to do a little homework as a player to build in some options for your character. Here are some tips:

- Work out a selection of rituals that your character might want to use beforehand. Can't come up with anything? Look at the story bits you wrote for your character during character creation – especially the novels – and pull some ideas from there. Figure everything out at leisure, including working out all the math you need, what you're going to do for preparation, and so on. Write it down and build a spell book. Add to the spell book, putting in the new spells you work out during play.
- Take a look at your list of skills, and figure out a way each one can help you prepare for a ritual. Write it down and put it with your spell book. Add to it as you come up with new ideas, and keep updating it. In addition to this giving you a range of options for the preparation phase, it lets you look for ways to express themes in your magic and the way you practice it.
- Work out your bonuses for different types of thaumaturgy, based on your focus items and refinements, in advance. Keep it up-to-date as your character advances.
- Look at your specialties in thaumaturgy and make a quick list of some neat things you think you'd like to do with that ability. Keep expanding the list, and every now and then convert one of the ideas into a fully-worked up ritual for your spell book.

These things will accomplish two different goals: first, it will give you a bunch of pre-built stuff that you can use in play when you're out of ideas or you don't want to spend a whole bunch of time agonizing over what to do; and second, it will build your confidence and skill in using the system on the fly.

Think outside the box.

You can accomplish pretty much *anything* with thaumaturgy if you're creative enough. So get creative. Look to your specialties for the obvious starting points in coming up with ideas, but look for ways that you can apply them to effects that may, at first, appear to be out-of-bounds.

Let's say you want to curse someone, sticking them with the Real Bad Luck Aspect. You can do that by messing with the laws of probability if that's your specialty, or you can do it by summoning a demon to interfere with the target at inopportune moments if that's something you're better at. You can conjure and interrogate a ghost for information if you've got a specialty in ectomancy, or you can enter a trance and access the Akashic Record if you've got a specialty in psychic magic.

I've said it before, and I'll say it again[*]: the measure of a Wizard is not how powerful they are, but how creative they get with what they've got[*].

Take your time.

If you have no time pressure when casting, then you're being foolish or cocky if you summon enough power in a given turn that you can fail the control roll. If your Discipline is Good (+3) or lower, of course, then you always have to make the Discipline roll, but if you're Discipline is Great (+4) or higher, then you can summon a number of shifts completely safely each turn.

Do that.

Aside from its broad range of effects, the big advantage to thaumaturgy is that it hurts less to cast properly than evocation – if you do it right, you take no Mental Stress. However, it can be far, far worse if you fail, because suddenly you have to deal with *all* the power you've summoned into the spell up to that time. That can mean dealing with double-digits of uncontrolled power sloshing around messing the place up..

Now, if you've got to rush, then take the biggest risks earliest, when a failure will have the least amount of power to ruin your day. As you go on, drop the number of shifts each round to minimize your risk.

Let's look at the odds[*] of things going badly. Assume you need 10 shifts of power and you've got a Discipline of Great (+4).

- If you've got the time to go 1 shift per round, then you've got no chance of failing. Yay!
- If you've only got 3 rounds to pull the spell off, and you summon power in blocks of 3 – 3 – 4, then you have an 18.5% chance of sucking up 3 shifts of power on a failure, an 18.5% chance of sucking up 6 shifts of power on a failure, and a 38.3% chance of sucking up 10 shifts of power on a failure.
- If, under the same circumstances, you summon power in blocks of 4 – 3 – 3, then you have a 38.3% chance of taking 4 shifts, an 18.5% chance of taking 7 shifts, and an 18.5% chance of taking 10 shifts.

Those odds speak for themselves.

Sometimes, magic isn't the right answer.

Thaumaturgy is wide-ranging, powerful tool kit, but sometimes it's not the best solution. Don't ignore the other facets of your character in favour of relying on spellcasting. Harry carries a revolver and keeps his contacts happy with him. He knows when to use divinatory magic and when to ask Karrin Murphy to look someone up for him. Keep in mind that, though magic is probably central to your character, it is not the solution to every problem.

Combat Thaumaturgy

One of the main distinctions between thaumaturgy and evocation is that evocation is combat magic. But thaumaturgy can be combat magic, too, as long as you can perform it all within the confines of a conflict scene. There is, in fact, something deeply cool about the idea of a Wizard scrambling to pull together a ritual amid a nasty firefight, with his or her companions fighting desperately to provide the needed time.

If you're looking at doing this, there are a few things you need to keep in mind. First, the casting time of a thaumaturgic ritual is going to be dependent on how fast you can summon the necessary power, which means how big a risk you're taking trying to control the power. Budget wisely.

Second, if you're coming up with the ritual in the middle of a conflict scene, you've really got to keep an eye on the complexity. If you need to do any preparation, it's going to take time, as you get ready to cast the spell, and some options may just not be available because of the circumstances. Of course, you can by-pass this by doing some preparation beforehand that can give you Aspects suitable for magic that you can attach to whatever ritual you start to put together. This is subject to GM approval, but it can work pretty much the same way as the preparation tips I gave for evocation.

And there you have my thoughts on thaumaturgy. Hope it was useful.

Footnotes

* If the GM lets you, of course. Back

* Well, it cares about the time thing, sort of. Back

* As long as you've got a sympathetic link to it. Back

* And, being a GM myself, I will laugh. Back

* Pretty much the same thing. Back

* Though this is really handled by a sort of subsystem in crafting that I'm going to talk about another time. Back

* Although there's a good paragraph on p275 of *My Story* as to why this last idea is not always a good plan. Back

* Or supernaturally. It is magic, after all. Back

* Probably not this one, unless it's *that* kind of game. Back

* Durations are a little slippery. It's ripe ground for negotiation between the spellcaster and the GM as to how long a ward would last as a default duration. Back

* In theory, anyway. The higher the complexity climbs, the more power you're going to need to gather, and the more rolls that's going to take, which increases the odds of rolling that disastrous failure on the control roll that lets 30 shifts of power loose in your immediate vicinity. But no guts, no glory, right? Back

* And really, why wouldn't you? Didn't you read this post? Back

* But really, who'd go THAT crazy? Right, Harry? Back

* This is, of course, a violation of the First Law of magic. Inflicting Mental or Social consequences may be violations of the Third or Fourth Laws. Back

* Okay, some may be arguing that this is science and not ritual magic, but he still has to assemble all the items and information he needs before he can perform the ritu… I mean, experiment… that lets him do something impossible. I stand by my assessment. Whether you call it magic or science, this is a near-textbook example of the idea of the story of the spell. Back

* Is there anything we can't learn from 80s action movies? No, there isn't. Back

* Harry's said it, too. Back

* And doing the unexpected is the most fun in play, I find. Back

* Odds are pulled from this site. Back

Getting Ready, or A Thaumaturgic Preperation Cheat Sheet: Magic in DFRPG, Part Four

Posted by <u>Rick Neal</u> in <u>Dresden Files RPG</u>, <u>What's he playing?</u>

Based on the comments from my last post on magic in *DFRPG*, it sounds like people are looking for a cheat sheet with a range of examples of how to prepare for rituals and some example spells, so those are the first two posts I'm going to do. This one is all about preparing for the ritual. I've broken this down in a list format: there's a heading for each type of consequence and each skill, along with a few examples of the type of preparatory action you take for each, and the Aspect each action gives you. This Aspect is either the consequence (for the consequences) or an Aspect on the spell that you tag to make up the Lore deficit.

Now, these are meant to be examples; the list is *not* exhaustive, and you'll come up with better ideas as you sit around the table. I've tried to come up with one or two fairly standard things for each item, as well as one or two less obvious thoughts. Some skills, though, are a bit of a reach, and you need to keep that in mind. Your GM may pull you up short if you try one of these things. Hopefully, though, they'll give you some ideas to try, and a starting point for your own creativity.

Some of the suggestions below don't directly affect the spell itself, but instead affect other preparations for the spell. That's okay. The Aspects they place still get placed on the spell, paying down the Lore deficit. It's all part of the story of the spell, whether you're making a Contacts roll to find someone who knows something or using Resources to hire a detective to find someone who knows something. Basically, what I'm doing with a lot of these is choosing one moment in a longer event, and using that for the Aspect – so, if Harry's trying to convince Bob to help him with a potion, he can use Contacts to represent knowing him, or Rapport to persuade him to help, or Resources to bribe him with porn, or Empathy to know that Bob wants some time running loose, etc.

Time-wise, some of these take longer to pull of than others. The amount of time you have to make the spell happen is something you have to work out with the GM, but thaumaturgy can sometimes take days or weeks to get everything in place to actually perform the ritual, so I've given a wide range of time frames in the examples below. If you're concerned about spending too much time on getting just one Aspect, try negotiating with your GM to see if the task can be broken down into subtasks within the time frame, then come up with a way to use each subtask to give you the opportunity to stick on another Aspect.

Ready? Good. Here we go!

Physical Consequences

- Spill some blood to help power the ritual – Deep, Bleeding Cut
- Burn foul substances and breathe in the noxious fumes – Hacking Cough
- Sleep on a bed of nails – Pinpricked Back
- Walk around the perimeter of the city to define the area of the spell – Really, Really Sore Feet
- Fast for three days to purify yourself – Weak With Hunger

Mental Consequences

- Performing difficult calculations to compose the spell – My Brain Hurts!
- Cross-checking ancient manuscripts, translating from multiple languages – It's All Greek to Me. Or Maybe Akkadian.
- Take mind-altering substances to change your perceptions of the world – Tripping Balls
- Delving deep into your dreams for hidden knowledge and revelation – Sleepwalking Through the Day
- Matching wits with a spirit of intellect for a secret chant – Thinking in Circles

Social Consequences

- Ignoring personal hygiene for a few days while you research – What's That Smell?
- Dropping out of sight for days at a time while you work on the spell – Ignoring My Friends
- Trading favours with one of the fey – In Debt to the Summer Court
- Getting arrested doing a little nude graverobbing – Unsavoury Police Record
- Watching everyone you meet to see if they're spirits sent to attack you – Weird Stalker Vibe

Skill-Based Aspects

Alertness

- Finding six dimes with the right dates on them to use in the spell – Matched Money
- Spotting a bit of marginalia in a book that provides an important key – Lore of the Doodle
- Catching a fly with chopsticks – Can Accomplish Anything
- Knowing what to look for when the spell starts to turn – Ready For Anything

- Checking out the pattern of stoplights blinking to red to help with your timing – In the Zone

Athletics

- Scaling a cliff to get a feather from a falcon's nest – Merlin's Feather
- Running from the gang when you're caught asking questions on their turf – Working Hard For It
- Chasing down a fleeing informant – Caught You!
- Dodging the cars in the middle of the busy street as you paint a targeting sigil – That One Almost Got Me!
- Making a parkour run over the rooftops, tracing a ley line – Charted Power

Burglary

- Stealing a personal item for a symbolic link – My Foe's Hairbrush
- Scoping out the museum to find the pattern of the guards' patrols – Guard Schedule
- Solving the secret of the puzzle box – Power Unlocked
- Breaking into a meet between two foes to overhear their plans and weaknesses – I Heard Everything
- Stealing a famous painting to trade to a faerie lord for help – For Services Rendered

Contacts

- Finding out personal information about your target – I Know You
- Spreading a rumour to rattle your target and get him on the defenses – Vicious Gossip
- Getting a warning when your target is ready to act against you – Every Move You Make
- Getting a friend to share his lore with you – Borrowed Wisdom
- Co-opting a target's circle of friends to isolate him – You're All Alone

Conviction

- Seek the blessing of your priest – Blessed Undertaking
- Psyching yourself up to attempt the spell – I Can Do It!
- Steamrolling over others who tell you what you're about to do is impossible – I Think I Can, I Think I Can
- Letting your can-do attitude affect those around you – Confidence is Contagious
- Holding true to your goals in the face of someone trying to argue you out of them – You Won't Change My Mind

Craftsmanship

- Carving a small figure to represent your target – Voodoo Doll
- Crafting your own magical implements for the ceremony – Hand-Made Tools
- Sound-proofing your workshop so the street noise doesn't distract you – A Quiet Haven
- Creating a miniature diorama of the city to help with location spells – Little Chicago
- Examining a target building to see where to focus the destructive power – Weak Spots

Deceit

- Convincing an apprentice Wizard that they should give you access to their master's library – Lore of the Master
- Getting the fire department to show up to your rival's house to draw him away from a ley line you need – Ill-Gotten Power
- Disguising yourself as a security guard to get access to the museum's Egyptian exhibit – Mummy Dust
- Convincing one of the fey nobles that "John Doe" is your true name as payment for knowledge – Duped Fey Lord
- Acting contrite when the cops question you so that they don't search your car and find the stolen spell materials – Hot Merchandise

Discipline

- Maintaining a complex mental image during the creation of the magic circle – Focused Visualization
- Fasting for two days to purify yourself – Cleansed
- Meditating to find your centre before beginning the ritual – Centred
- Facing down a fierce river spirit to get some water from its sacred river – Old-School Holy Water
- Keeping your ego in check when groveling for a favour from a hated rival – Eating Crow

Driving

- Charting the quickest route between five points of a giant pentacle centred on City Hall – Magic Street Map

- Chasing down one of the Erlking's Hounds to get a special material component – Fey Dog Drool

- Getting safely out of gang territory after a meet with a contact goes badly – Home Free

- Spray painting a magic circle around a city block at speed – Mobile Tagger

- Winning a drag race with the scion of Hermes, and thus earning his favour – Mercury's Respect

Empathy

- Sensing the weak spot in your target's psyche – Chink in the Armour
- Linking your emotions with those of the target – Simpatico
- Understanding what your informant isn't telling you – Listening to the Silences
- Not falling for the con man's lies and getting the real newt's eyes instead of tapioca – Discerning Customer
- Getting a sense of what the cops want to hear when you have to explain your presence in the evidence locker – Say the Right Things

Endurance

- Pulling an all-nighter to work out the complex sigildry for your magic circle – Cram Session Calculations
- Maintaining a lotus position on top of a pole while performing the ritual – Yoga Power!
- Crawling through a faerie bramble of razor-sharp thorns to get a special flower – Nevernever Bloodrose
- Surviving a mystic toxin after being poisoned by a spirit angry at your theft of its power – Ghost Scorpion Survivor
- Performing a six-hour chant without needing a break – Ritual Stamina

Fists

- Snatching a handful of hair from your target – Sissy Sympathetic Link
- Triumphing in a ritual battle with a spirit, gaining its help – Wrestled With an (Almost) Angel
- Breaking out of a ring of gang members unimpressed with the mystic sigil you painted on their clubhouse – Arcane Tagging
- Counting coup on a buffalo spirit – Blessing of the White Bison
- Showing the proper respect to a traditional martial artist and getting him to teach you a special Chi Gong technique – Master's Teaching

Guns

- Using a paintball gun to hit your target with a special mixture to help you focus the spell – Painted Target
- Casting the special alloy bullet you need to imbue with magical energy – Mystical Gunsmithery
- Grazing a gryphon on the wing to gather the blood – Gryphon's Blood
- Using a holy-water-filled water pistol to trace a protective sigil on a door from a distance – God's Supersoaker
- Finding a collector to sell you a wheellock pistol owned by Edward Kelley – Kelley's Gun

Intimidation

- Scaring a straight answer out of a contact – Extorted Knowledge
- Getting a fey lord to lose his temper so that he owes you a favour – Pissed-Off Elflord
- Facing down the guardian of the sacred spring and getting your drink – One Drink at the Hippocrene
- Getting safely through a bad neighbourhood to the spot you need to cast the spell – …For I am the Meanest SOB in the Valley…
- Scaring off a rival who wants to poach the power from a ley line you need – Mine, and Mine Alone

Investigation

- Double-checking the information you got from an old book – Confirmed by Independent Sources
- Uncovering blackmail material to get the help you need from a rival – Dug-Up Dirt
- Surveiling the target to learn her routine – Creature of Habit
- Running a background check on the target to find a weakness – Uncovered Connections
- Finding the secret message hidden in the illustrations of a grimoire that unlock real power – Deciphered Keys of Power

Lore

- Spending time researching the spell you want to cast – Well-Documented Ritual
- Knowing the name of the fey spirit who knows the most about this type of ritual – Expert Advice

- Uncovering the proper invocations to call the attention of powerful spirits – Names of Power
- Finding the recipe for the proper pigments with which to craft the magic circle – Enhanced Circle Paints
- Having a mystic secret to trade for one that you need – Arcane Bartering

Might

- Breaking through a locked door to snatch something personal of your target's – Smash and Grab Sympathetic Link
- Winning a wrestling match with a snake loa to get it to help you – Dhamballa's Aid
- Physically holding two mystically attracted pieces of stone until the correct moment in the spell – Atlas's Task
- Holding a door shut in the face of an angry troll after you stole his club – Grimbash's Maul
- Ceremonially snapping a sword in half to curse your foe in battle – Swordbreaker

Performance

- Painting an intricate protective pattern within your magic circle – Detailed Glyphs
- Using a Native American medicine dance to help focus your magic – The Blessing Way
- Singing a song to calm the three-headed dog guarding the way out of the Nevernever after getting information from the spirits – The Orpheus Trick
- Using complex dramaturgical rites to walk the Monster of Glamis through the performance of MacBeth* – Curse of the Scottish Play
- Playing a sad tune on your instrument to harness the emotions of the audience to power the ritual – Dirge of Power

Presence

- Gathering a small band of folks together to help with the ritual – My Very Own Cult
- Getting a hearing at the local practitioners' coffee klatch to solicit advice – Peer Reviewed Ritual
- Letting your target know you're coming for him, and then using the worry that generates to help target the spell – My Reputation Precedes Me
- Not backing down when warned by very frightening demons that you shouldn't proceed – I'm My Own Man (or Woman)

- Having someone tell you a secret to try and curry favour with you – People Like to Help Me

Rapport

- Getting the bartender to open up to you about the movers and shakers in the area – Local Power Structure Scoop
- Convincing the wee folk to do some snooping for you – Little Spies
- Having friendly Wizards willing to offer some advice on constructing the ritual – A Little Help From My Friends
- Not letting the spirits you're bargaining with for information know that you're intimidated – Poker Face
- Getting a partner for a sex magic ritual – Tantric Power

Resources

- Buying enough silver to make a strong magic circle – Sterling Protection
- Having the ingredients for the ritual on hand – Well-Stocked Workshop
- Hiring a private investigator to find information about your target – Target Dossier
- Spreading money around on the street to gather information – Money Talks. And Listens.
- Flying to Prague to check out the Sedlec Ossuary for necromantic sigils – Lore of the Bohemian Necromancers

Scholarship

- Tracking down a complete transcript of Dutch Schultz's last words to unlock their mystic secrets – French Canadian Bean Soup[*]
- Translating a medieval Latin grimoire to find the name of a demon that you can bind to your service – Solomon's Key
- Knowing enough about physics to be able to focus the least amount of energy for the greatest effect – Optimized Force Calculations
- Checking the stars for the appropriate sidereal configuration to empower the spell – The Stars are Right
- Bandaging the cuts you got from crawling through the junkyard to find enough copper wire to wrap the stone that's going to hold the lightning to power your spell – Blood-Bought Conductor

Stealth

- Sneaking out of the library with their copy of a rare book – "Borrowed" Necronomicon

- Hiding in the underbrush with your prize as the goblins chase past you – Goblin Arrow
- Following your target home to help you target the spell – I Know Where You Live
- Mugging a dark fey for his headgear – Red Cap
- Hiding in the office building until after hours in order to work your divination in the right place – Johnny on the Spot

Survival

- Finding the rare herbs you need for the ritual – Real Mandrake Root
- Befriending cats to use as a pattern for your shapeshifting – Live Models
- Finding the hidden grove with the magic pool – Unspoiled Place of Power
- Convincing the big cats in the zoo not to eat you as you pluck one of their facial hairs- Tiger's Whisker
- Keeping your seat on a faerie horse as you join the fey hunt to curry favour with their lord – Riding to Faerie Horns

Weapons

- Slicing off a piece of a Minotaur's horn to use in your ritual – Heroic Picador
- Performing a ritualized weapon pattern to harness and direct your energies – Magic Kata
- Dueling another Wizard over a rare magic herb – The Last Really Magic Mushroom
- Impressing a collector with your knowledge of Renaissance rapier makers so he loans you a rare one – Medici Rapier on Loan
- Winning a game of darts with a leprechaun to get him to give you some of his treasure – Faerie Gold

So, there's a big list of 140 different things you can do to help make up that pesky Lore deficit. If you can't find what you need on it, I hope it at least gives you a starting point for coming up with your own ideas.

Next post, I'm going to look at putting together a few spells, using everything I've been talking about in the previous posts, and explaining the decisions at each step. If there's a particular spell you'd like to see me put together, let me know in the comments of this post or through Twitter (@Neal_Rick), and I'll see what I can do. If you can give me the Lore, Conviction, and Discipline scores of the Wizard creating that spell, all the better – it'll give me some hard numbers that I don't need to make up.

I can't guarantee that I'll work out every spell request posted, because I think that the post will be plenty long enough if I just do three or four spells. So, if you want to make sure that your spell request gets used, make it interesting.

Footnotes

*Apologies to Ken Hite for stealing this one. But I try to steal from the best. <u>Back</u>

*This Aspect really only makes sense if you've read Dutch Schultz's last words. <u>Back</u>

How to Build Spells, or A Practical Grimoire: Magic in DFRPG, Part Five

Posted by <u>Rick Neal</u> in <u>Dresden Files RPG</u>, <u>What's he playing?</u>

Alright. This post, we're going to take a look at how to put together some actual spells from the ground up.

The requests for spells came from you folks out there, but I'm not going to work out all of them, only a few examples to show the thought processes involved. If you're looking for a long, detailed list of possible spells, you're not going to get it here; in my opinion, having a list like that undercuts one of the great things about playing a spellcaster in the game, which is the ability to use your powers creatively and come up with spells on the fly. This post is focused on the sorts of things you need to take into account when creating a spell, and only secondarily is it intended to offer a little inspiration to the magically inclined out there<u>*</u>.

I'm going to be using Harry's stats from *Our World* as the basis for the math in this post. You can find his write-up on p136, if you want to follow along at home.

Let's get started.

Get Away From Me!

In a couple of places in the book, Harry blasts a foe with an evocation that catapults them away from him, giving him time to run away or deal with something else.

Now, as with any evocation, there are lots of different ways to apply the various elements to produce the effect; air and spirit are the most obvious, but a mystic wave of water or a blast of expanding air from a sudden heat source or the gravity of the target shifting 90 degrees would also all work. For our purposes, let's go with spirit, in the guise of pure force slamming into the target and sending it flying.

Once we've chosen the effect, we have to pick what mechanics we're going to use to model it. For this effect, it's a little tough, because there are no rules for using evocation for movement – Harry points out that movement via evocation would be a wild, uncontrolled, unsafe thing. Because we're applying this to an enemy, though, we don't mind those problems so much.

The obvious option is to model it as a maneuver, applying the Aspect Knocked Sprawling or something like that<u>*</u>. If the point of the spell is to move the target one or

more zones away from you while applying the Aspect, I'd say that it would take extra power to do that. And there we have the mechanic.

Next, we need to determine power requirements. Assuming a standard mortal as a target, that's going to take 3 shifts of power to apply the maneuver. However, if we also want to move the target one or more zones away, that'll take a little more power – I'd say 1 per zone, plus another 1 for every level of barrier between zones that the target needs to move through. So, Harry, with a Superb (+5) Conviction, can call up 5 shifts of power for only a 1-stress hit. That's enough to toss a normal target 2 zones away if there's nothing in the way. If there's a barrier:1 fence in the way, the target's only going 1 zone away. And a barrier:2 wall means the target's not going anywhere. Let's keep it at 5 shifts for our calculations.

So, 5 shifts is easy to call up, with only a 1-stress price tag. But it's still more power than Harry can readily control with his Good (+3) Discipline and his focus item (his staff). He'll need to roll at least a +1 on the dice to keep from having to worry about backlash and fallout, which he should be able to do 38.3% of the time. Assuming success, the target should probably get a chance to oppose with either an Athletics roll (to dodge) or Might roll (to tough it out and not be moved).

Final version of the spell looks like this:

Knockback

Type: Spirit (force) evocation, offensive maneuver

Power: Varies; typical is 5 shifts – 3 for effect plus 2 for distance

Control: Roll Discipline plus appropriate specializations and focus items.

Duration: One action

Opposed by: Target's Athletics or Might

Effect: If the spell hits, the target has Knocked Sprawling temporary Aspect applied, and is thrown one zone away from the caster for every extra extra shift of power. Barriers between zones reduce the distance by their barrier value: i.e., the shifts of power must overcome the barrier value to move the target through the barrier.

Notes: GMs may wish to apply some damage to a target passing through – or failing to pass through – a solid barrier.

Feather Fall

A quick, simple spell to keep you from getting hurt when you fall. This is a little more challenging than the above spell, partially because of the way falling works in *DFRPG*. See, when you fall, you take a hit equal to 5 stress for every 10 full feet you fall, and most protections just don't work against it. You need either supernatural toughness or a shielding spell specifically constructed to absorb falling damage. Given the speed at which things fall, even evocation may not be fast enough to save you[*].

Let's look at two different ways to save yourself from falling damage: through evocation and through thaumaturgy.

Evocation

For this, we're going to want to set up a block, obviously, focused on absorbing falling impact. The obvious element for this one is air, though earth comes a close second, by lessening gravity and softening the surface. But let's go with spirit, because Harry's better at it – forming a cushion of force for him to land on.

For every shift of power we channel into the spell, it's going to offset one shift of stress from the fall. This means that the amount of power we want is going to vary depending on how far we're falling. For simplicity's sake, let's go with 5 shifts, so that we take no damage from a 10-foot fall, and only 5 shifts from a 20-foot fall; enough to be useful, but still practical to deal with in an evocation situation.

So, simple. Pull in five shifts of power, and roll to control. 5 shifts is easy for Harry to call up with his Superb (+5) Conviction, requiring only a 1-stress hit on his Mental track[*]. With his Good (+3) Discipline and his shield bracelet focus item, he's effectively got a Great (+4) Discipline, so he needs to roll a +1 or better to soak up the 5 stress, which is again a 38.3% chance for him. Because he probably really needs this to work, let's hope he's got a Fate Point to spend.

Final version of the spell:

Featherbed

Type: Spirit (force) evocation, defensive block

Power: Varies; typical is 5 shifts – enough to offset 10 feet of falling distance

Control: Roll Discipline plus appropriate specializations and focus items.

Duration: One action

Effect: This spell reduces the number of shifts of damage taken from falling by the number of shifts of power in the spell.

Thaumaturgy

Thaumaturgy is far too slow to be of use when you get tossed off the side of a building, but if you know you're going to be facing down a feathered serpent on top of the Chrysler Building, you might want to consider a little preparation for the (hopefully) unlikely event that you're going to plummet to your doom. Now, the rules don't explicitly talk about this sort of contingent spell, but the way wards work and can trigger magic shows the basic process.

What we're really doing here is designing a low-powered ward that is activated by falling a certain distance and, when activated, unleashes a stored evocation to cushion our fall. So, for base complexity, we're talking about a single shift for the basic ward that we need to trigger the evocation – wards release stored spells when they fail, so we want this one to fail pretty quickly. Add 2 more shifts for the conditional trigger, and then as much power as you want in the final protection – let's say 10 shifts, giving us a free 20-foot fall. Total complexity of 13.

Now, Harry's got a Lore of Good (+3), so he needs to make up 10 shifts in order to be able to cast this spell. So, how about he researches the basics in his library (Lore: Basic Ritual Research), gets Bob to check his calculations (Rapport: Bob's Input), tracks down where to find a peregrine falcon nest (Investigation: Bird's Nest), sneaks past building security to get to the roof where the falcons are nesting (Stealth: Through the Perimeter), and climbs out on the ledge of the building where the birds nest to snag some feathers (Athletics: Flight Feathers). That gives him an extra 10 shifts, so he can now cast the spell[*].

Finally, Harry needs to pull in 13 shifts of power to make this work. Given his Good (+3) Discipline and lack of bonuses to thaumaturgic control of this type (his specialty is Divination), he's probably safest going 1 shift at a time, which means it's going to take 13 rounds for him to actually cast the spell. But this is the sort of thing where you usually *don't* have a lot of time pressure, so that's okay. Harry needs to roll a -2 or better on each of the rolls to successfully cast the spell. That means he's got a 6.2% chance of blowing any of rolls, which is as safe as he can possibly make it.

Once cast, the ward is going to last until the next sunrise, unless it's triggered. When triggered, it lets go with a 10-shift block against falling damage.

Final version of the spell:

Mystic Parachute

Type: Thaumaturgy, wards

Complexity: Varies, 13 is typical – 1 for the ward, 2 for the trigger condition, 10 for the defensive block

Duration: Usually, until sunrise

Effect: Once cast, this ward is triggered whenever the recipient of the spell falls 10 feet or more. When triggered, the ward creates a 10-shift defensive block against the falling impact.

Variations: This model can be used to create all sorts of triggered spell effects.

PSYCHOMETRY

The primary tool for practitioners to get magical information is The Sight, but it's got a few risks. First, you've got to worry about the stress from whatever you see, and second, you've got to figure out the meaning of the stuff you see. It's a powerful, flexible tool, but it doesn't always fit the situation, especially if you're not dealing with magical stuff. For psychometry of mundane objects or people, The Sight is not the best choice.

Let's look at a specific application of psychometry – Harry needs to find out who left a footprint in his backyard. Obviously, this is going to be a thaumaturgic ritual*, and Harry's got a pretty good symbolic link, which is the footprint itself. He needs to decide how he's going to use his magic to get the information he wants: he could trace a link from the footprint to the shoe, or call up the spirits of the grass for a description, or any one of a number of things. Harry's a bit of a traditionalist, though, so he opts for looking into the past to see an image of the person who made the footprint.

If Harry were using mundane means, he'd find the person who made the footprint using Investigation: taking a picture and maybe a cast of the print, comparing it to shoe types to find the brand and noting anything odd about the tread or wear pattern, finding out where the shoe is sold, sifting through customer lists, etc. Doable, but difficult. Let's set the difficulty at Superb.

The difficulty of the skill check is what sets the complexity of the ritual, so we've got a ritual of complexity 5 right here. Harry's Lore is Good (+3), so he needs to make up two shifts in order to cast this spell. He spends a little time examining the rest of his yard looking for other footprints, to give himself a larger sample size for the ritual (Alertness: Multiple Prints), and then he's ready to cast the spell.

He needs to call 5 shifts of power, and he's got a Control of Good (+3). He's also got a specialty in Control (Divination +1), so he's effectively got a discipline of Great (+4) for this ritual. If he goes 1 shift at a time, he's going to take 5 rounds to cast the ritual, and need to roll -3 or higher on each roll; that means he has a 1.2% chance of failing any given roll. Should be easy for him.

Final version of the spell:

Psycometric Retrocognition

Type: Thaumaturgy, divination

Complexity: Varies, 5 is typical

Duration: One scene

Effect: This spell allows the caster to see an image of a person linked to an item. The person must be important to the item in some way: the current owner, the creator, the last person to touch it, the person who broke it, etc.

Up, Up, and Away!

In the Dresdenverse, spellcasters usually don't try flying spells, and there's a paragraph at the bottom of p282 of *Your Story* that explains why*. It's a matter of control – just because you have the ability to fly doesn't mean you have the expertise to safely move through the air. And given the penalty for falling from any sort of height, there's a real danger inherent to slipping the surly bonds of earth.

That said, building a flying spell is pretty simple, if the GM is going to allow it. Personally, I would let someone get away with it if he or she built the character to show that he or she had spent time mastering the intricacies of aerial movement. Here, I'm thinking a minimum of a stunt to reflect the ability to use Athletics for flying, and preferably both the stunt and an Aspect to show the time and effort expended in gaining this off-beat skill trapping.

The guideline for gaining new powers by using magic are laid out in the sidebar of p283 of *Your Story*: what you need to do is transform yourself into a form with the new powers. You need shifts of complexity equal the amount necessary to kill a target, plus you need to spend Fate Points to gain the temporary powers.

So, let's say Harry wants to be able to fly, binding the winds to hold him aloft and move him around, and his benevolent GM has okayed the attempt. In my mind, though it's not listed anywhere in the rules that I can find, transforming a willing target should be

easier than an unwilling one, so for purposes of this spell, Harry has to meet a complexity equal to all his possible consequences plus 1, but doesn't need to overcome his Stress Track (because he just decides to take all consequences rather than Stress), and his defense rating is locked at Mediocre (+0) (because he's not trying to resist the spell or defend against it in any way). This sets the base complexity for the spell at 21: 2 for his minor consequence, 4 for his moderate consequence, 6 for his severe consequence, 8 for his extreme consequence, and 1 to take him out. The taken out effect becomes gaining the ability to fly.

Duration becomes very important for a spell like this. I'd start the default duration at a single scene* (15 minutes or so), so if Harry wants to be able to fly for longer than that, he needs to boost the complexity as well. Let's say he needs to be able to fly for a day. That increases the complexity by 5, stepping him up the duration ladder from 15 minutes to a day. Total complexity comes out at 26.

In addition to this complexity, Harry has to pay Fate Points for the power, in essence temporarily lowering his Refresh to buy the power for the duration of the spell. While there is no Flight power, there is Wings, which is a -1 power. That's close enough for our purposes, so Harry needs to pay a Fate Point for the power. If he needed to fly super-fast, he'd have to pay the Fate Point for Wings, plus another 2, 4, or 6 for the desired level of speed power. But let's keep it just to flying.

Now, Harry's got a Lore of Good (+3). That means he needs to make up a whopping 23-shift deficit to be able to cast this spell, and he needs to have at least a single Fate Point left at the end to pay for the Wings*. For convenience, let's say he goes through the same routine he did for the Magic Parachute spell above, giving him +10. After that, he buys some special incense for the ritual (Resources: Ritual Incense), gets Listens-To-Wind to bless his falcon feathers (Contacts: Shaman's Blessing), does a little research into the wind patterns over the city to find the optimal place to get the attention of wind spirits (Scholarship: Air-Flow Map), fasts for a day to purify himself (Endurance: Ritual Purification), spends an hour conducting a centering meditation (Discipline: Focused Mind), and then drives out to where he's going to cast the spell and scares off the muggers in the park so he can work uninterrupted (Intimidation: Quiet Workspace). That bumps him up to a total of +24, so he's set to cast the spell.

Dealing with so much magic, there's a real potential that, if things go badly, Harry's going to be in a world of hurt, so he's going to go slowly with the actual casting, drawing one shift of power at a time. With his Good (+3) Discipline, that means that he needs to roll -2 or better on each of his 26(!) rolls to get the power he needs and take to the air. He's only got a 6.2% chance of blowing any single roll, but with the large

number of rolls, he's got about a 16.8% chance of succeeding on all 26 rolls without needing to spend a Fate Point or take some backlash*. Not an easy spell.

Final version of the spell:

Rite of Icarus

Type: Thaumaturgy, transformation

Complexity: 26; can vary depending on duration

Duration: One day

Effect: When the caster completes this ritual, he or she must pay one Fate Point. The caster then gains the ability to fly, as per the Wings supernatural power, for one day. Unless the caster has some training in moving aerially (reflected by an Aspect and/or stunt), the caster's Athletics is considered Terrible (-2) for purposes of moving by way of flight.

Variations: This model can be used to gain any reasonable power, subject to GM approval. Fate Point cost is equal to the refresh cost of the power acquired.

Final Thoughts

There you have five examples of building spells. The mechanics get to be second nature pretty quickly once you get your head around a couple of basic concepts, so don't let it overwhelm you. Come up with a couple of prebuilt spells that your character knows and you can see coming in handy during play, and work out all the math before hand to help speed things up during play, and you'll soon start to see the way things fit together. Once that happens, building spells on the fly gets much easier and faster.

Next up in the *Magic in DFRPG* series is *Math and Miscellany*, where I'm going to talk about how to work out bonuses from focus items and specialties, as well as some of the corner-cases of the magic rules: things like The Sight, Soulgazes, Potions, and so on.

Footnotes

* What I'm really saying is, "Come up with your own spells. It's more fun for you, and you'll like them better." Back

* As an alternative, use it as an attack, and ask the GM to make any consequence inflicted reflect the idea that the spell knocked the target back. Back

* At least, not without the expenditure of Fate Points and a kindly GM... Back

* And let's be honest: If we're falling off something tall enough to hurt us, we're in the kind of situation where we need to be monitoring our stress tracks carefully. Back

* Plus, the player has come up with an interesting little story about how the spell is cast. The story of the spell, remember. Back

* Though I'd be willing to rethink that if someone came up with a convincing – and cool – enough justification for using evocation. Back

* In my mind, this is false. I think a lot of spellcasters *try* flying spells; they just give up on them real quick when they see the problems involved. Back

* Though I'd vary this based on circumstances, the intent of the character, and the needs of the story. Back

* Or accept a compel to be named at a later time by the GM – a compel that he can't refuse, no matter how many Fate Points he's got. Back

* By contrast, having a Discipline of Great (+4) would mean that he'd have a 72.2% chance of making the rolls. Huge difference! Back

Math and Miscellany: Magic in DFRPG, Part Six

Posted by <u>Rick Neal</u> in <u>Dresden Files RPG</u>, <u>What's he playing?</u>

This is, I think, going to be the last post in this particular series. After this one, I don't think I'm going to have anything more to say about the magic system for a while. This is sort of a hodgepodge of stuff about magic; it's basically everything that didn't fit under the other headings. So, let's get going.

Calculating Your Bonuses

Just looking at the powers, most Wizards are going to look very similar. They've all got Evocation, Thaumaturgy, The Sight, Soulgaze, and Wizard's Constitution. That doesn't leave them a lot of Refresh to spread around on stunts or other powers, so they all wind up looking the same, with the same range of powers. But they can be very specialized, being better at some things than others. While this is a cool thing, it does lead to some complexity in working out just what the values for doing different things are. The Wizard player in my *Fearful Symmetries* game made herself up a little spreadsheet to help track the various bonuses, so she doesn't need to sweat things during play, and honestly, that's a pretty good idea.

Your base scores for various things are your skills: Conviction for the save level of power you can call, Discipline for controlling that power, and Lore for figuring out thaumaturgic rituals. But different situations bring different bonuses into play. For our purposes, let's assume a Wizard with a Conviction of Superb (+5), a Discipline of Great (+4), and a Lore of Great (+4).

Specialties

Let's look at Evocation, first. When you take Evocation, you first choose which three elements you have familiarity with. Then, you get to apply a specialty to one of them. This specialty is going to be be for either power (increasing the effective Conviction score of the caster when using this element) or control (increasing the effective Discipline score of the caster when using this element).

Picking the element to apply this to is going to be a matter of taste. You can get pretty much the same effects out of any element – provided you're creative and clever enough – but each element has a different style and feel to it. And, of course, each is just better at some things than others.

The choice of power or control is going to be a much more difficult matter. Mechanically speaking, it's good to have equal scores Conviction and Discipline, because that lets you

call a fair bit of power and still have a pretty good chance of controlling it. If your Conviction is higher than your Discipline, then you're either not going to be calling on all the power you can, or you're going to be running a higher risk of uncontrolled power and the concurrent fallout or backlash. If your Discipline is higher than your Conviction, you'll have less trouble controlling the power you call, but you'll have less power available without taking Mental Stress. Having the two skill ratings equal to each other is a good compromise.

Now, I'm a firm advocate of ignoring the mechanical benefit in favour of the story or character concept, so you may not want to have your Conviction and Discipline equal each other. Maybe, like Harry, you want to have access to a frightening amount of power, and always be running the risk of losing control of it. Or maybe you like the idea of a careful, precise Wizard, with little power, but total control over what he or she is doing. Character considerations should always come before mechanical ones.

For purposes of our demonstration, though, let's go with a bit of a funk element theme of Earth, Air, and Fire. We'll give our Wizard a specialty in Earth (Control +1).

With Thaumaturgy, you don't need to pick which areas you know, the way you do with the elements of Evocation. You automatically know them all. But you do need to pick one area of specialization, and choose whether the bonus is for complexity (increasing the effective Lore skill of the caster when using this area) or control (increasing the effective Discipline skill of the caster when using this area).

Looking at the two options of complexity or control bonus, I have to say that I think the complexity bonus is going to be most widely useful. Because of the way casters can draw in limited amounts of energy over a number of rounds, what control bonuses effectively do is speed up the casting time of a ritual. While this is handy, a complexity bonus comes in handy in speeding up the preparation time of the ritual – usually a much greater amount of time – and bringing more complex spells realistically into play. Still, if taking a control bonus means that you now have one or more shifts of power you can draw each round without a chance of failure, it's definitely worth considering.

Choosing the area is somewhat less structured than choosing an element for Evocation. The wide range of specialties available for Thaumaturgy – basically, any kind of magic you can think of – can mean that you're spoiled for choice. Here's where it's vitally important that you focus on your character concept to make the decision: pick the area of magic that works best for how you see your Wizard actually using magic.

Let's go with a specialty in Wards (Complexity +1) for our notional Wizard. This makes more powerful wards available with less preparation time, showing that he or she has paid special attention to the theory of warding magic.

Refinements

Refinement is how your Wizard specializes even more in his or her magic. Each level of Refinement gets you a new element, or two specialization bonuses, or two focus items. These all work the same way as above, though there is an explanatory paragraph about how you need to take your specializations in columns, like skills.

So, let's give our Wizard one shot of Refinement, going for two specializations: Air (Power +1), and Wards (Power +1).

Foci

Like specialties, focus items give a bonus to power or control (for Evocation) or to complexity or control (for thaumaturgy). You get two focus slot items for taking Evocation and two for taking Thaumaturgy. Now, there's nothing in the rules that say you can't use the slots from Evocation to buy Thaumaturgy foci – you can, by the rules, take all four focus item slots and buy a four-slot item for Thaumaturgy, for example. I can't even see it messing too much with game balance, though there may be some profound thing I'm overlooking.

Still, it makes sense thematically to limit the slots you get from Evocation to buying focus items for Evocation, and the same for Thamaturgy. At least, it makes sense absent any story or character reason to deviate from it.

Focus items can take pretty much whatever form the caster chooses, though there are size considerations: the required size of the item increases with the number of slots spent on it. The same follows for enchanted items. Let's stick with one focus item for Evocation, and one for Thaumaturgy. Each item will use up two slots, meaning they can be no smaller than a ring.

For the Evocation item, we have to choose not only the element that the item applies to and whether it's a power or control item, but also whether it works for offense or defense. Let's make this one a small geode pendant that grants a power bonus and a control bonus for offensive Earth evocations. That's Geode Pendant (+1 Offensive Power and Control for Earth).

For the Thaumaturgy item, let's keep going with the wards theme. We don't need to narrow the focus the way we did choosing offense or defense for the Evocation item, so let's just make it a ring of cold iron inlaid with silver that grants a complexity and control bonus to wards. That's Iron and Silver Ring (+1 Complexity and Control for Wards).

Final Totals

Here's how it all breaks down. Our Wizard works magic with the following scores:

- **Water and Spirit Evocation** – Can't do these.
- **Fire Evocation** – Superb (+5) power and Great (+4) control.
- **Air Evocation** - Fantastic (+6) power and Great (+4) control.
- **Offensive Earth Evocation** – Fantastic (+6) power and Fantastic (+6) control.
- **Defensive Earth Evocation -** Superb (+5) power and Superb (+5).
- **Thaumaturgic Wards** – Fantastic (+6) complexity and Fantastic (+6) control.
- **All Other Thaumaturgy** - Great (+4) complexity and Great (+4) control.

Enchanted Items

Enchanted items come out of the crafting area of thaumaturgy. They're handy little gizmos that you can trot out when you need them and release a prepared spell with no Mental Stress, no risk of backlash or fallout. You can trade in a focus item slot, gained when you take Thaumaturgy, Evocation, Channeling, Ritual, or Refinement for two enchanted item slots.

Any spell you can cast, or even conceive of, can be stored in an enchanted item, with one big catch: the power of that spell is limited to your Lore. This is called the strength of the item. While that may not limit your options with storing evocation effects in your enchanted item, it does seriously put a crimp in how powerful a thaumaturgic effect you can store. There are two other, not-quite-so-heavy limitations on enchanted items: first, they only work for you, and second, they only work once per session.

These last two restrictions are more flexible than the first one. You can get an extra use per session out of an item if you reduce its strength by one, down to a lower limit of Average (+1); you can also get two extra uses out of an item by spending an extra enchanted item slot on it; and, finally, if you're all out of uses but you really need to use that item, you can squeeze another use out of it for one point of Mental Stress. You can also make the item usable by others by reducing its strength by one. Note that, with the exception of the Mental Stress thing, all of these decisions must be made at the time you create the item, and don't change after that.

The only way to increase the strength of an enchanted item above your Lore score is to spend an extra enchanted item slot on it. Period.

So, looking at these points, it becomes pretty obvious that most enchanted items are going to store evocations (like Harry's duster and force rings) or use thaumaturgy for maneuvers or simple tests. I've put a couple of enchanted item examples together

below, based on the stats of our notional Wizard example, with the Lore of Great (+4). They specifically use thaumaturgic rituals, because there aren't any of those as examples in the rulebook.

Parkour Shoes

These shoes let the wearer move for one scene as if he or she had made a Great (+4) Athletics roll for changing zones, overcoming barriers, and basically doing cool free-running stunts.

Spell Provided: A thaumaturgic ritual granting Great (+4) Athletics for one scene.

Power Crystal

When activated, this crystal enhances the spellcasting ability of the Wizard for one scene.

Spell Provided: A thaumaturgic ritual using a maneuver to place the sticky Powered by Crystal Aspect on the user. The user gets one free tag; thereafter, he or she must use Fate Points as usual for invoking the Aspect.

POTIONS

I'll let you in on a secret: I'm on the fence about potions. I think they might just be a little *too* good, compared to enchanted items. See, they work pretty much like enchanted items, with the following differences:

- You must allocate an enchanted item slot to a potion, but you get to decide every session what potion is in that slot.
- You only ever get to use a potion once.
- Anyone can use a potion once it's been created.
- You can leave the slot allocated for a potion empty at the start of a session, and fill it with a potion that you just happen to have prepared that fits the situation. Doing this requires you to either pay a Fate Point to have the convenient potion, or succeed at a Lore roll.
- When you create a potion, or when you use it, you can boost the strength by +2 for every Aspect you invoke (with the normal Fate Point cost). You can even take compels in advance to get this boost.
- If you allocate extra enchanted item slots to a single potion slot, the strength of the potion you create and carry in that slot increases by one for every extra enchanted item slot allocated.

So, really, the only downside to potions is that you can only use each one once, while the upside is extreme flexibility, far beyond what enchanted items offer. Of course, that may be why Wizards are so famous for their magic potions…

As with enchanted items, any effect you like can be stored in a potion, with the strength limited by your Lore skill. Here are a few samples, again using our example Wizard's Lore of Great (+4):

Shadow Juice

This dark liquid makes the drinker hard to see or hear for a scene.

Duration: One scene

Effect: The drinker moves with a Stealth of Great (+4) for one scene

Bottled Confidence

While not actually making the drinker more attractive, this potion gives them an air of confidence and comfort that draws people to them.

Duration: One scene

Effect: The user gains the sticky Aspect Magnetic Confidence. The first tag is free; thereafter, the user must pay Fate Points, as usual.

Aqua Regia

This powerful, mystic solvent can be sprayed at a target as an attack.

Duration: Instantaneous

Effect: Acts as a Weapon:4 attack. It is equally effective against flesh and inanimate material, dissolving both rather speedily and messily. Must be applied with the successful use of a relevant skill.

THE SIGHT

Unlike the previous material, which is aimed mainly at players, this section is primarily for GMs. There are no spoilers, but using the Sight is pretty passive for the player; most of the real work comes on the GM side of the table.

First thing, it's important that players understand that using the Sight is dangerous. If they're running around with their third eyes open all the time, the GM has to show

them the error of their ways, with stunningly, absurdly high hits of Mental Stress. They'll get the message soon enough.

Why? Two reasons. First, it reinforces the source material – Harry goes on at some length about how keeping your third eye open will fry your sanity. Look at what he goes through after seeing the naagloshi. Second, coming up with an interesting symbolic scene for what is revealed by the Sight takes some work on the part of the GM. If he or she has to come up with five or ten every session, that's putting too much of a burden on him or her – you're going to wind up with lacklustre visions as the creative well runs dry. Maybe not right away, but it'll happen.

But the Sight is an important piece of the Wizard's kit, and deserves some love. I've found that prepping for a scene where a character is going to use the Sight is similar to prepping for a conflict scene: you need a little bit of ground work, but then you can fit it in anywhere you need it. When you look at the overall structure of your scenario, it's pretty easy to spot the main potentials for conflict scenes, so you work up some stats for the opposition. Same thing with the Sight: you can guess the points at which a character is going to want to take a little peek behind the curtain, so you work out what they're going to See in advance.

Most times, they're going to be looking at someone, something, or someplace that you've signaled to them is important in some way: a mysterious figure who may or may not be on their side, a bloody knife left on the floor of an otherwise-spotless apartment, a standing stone in the middle of a forest, that sort of thing. If you put something like that in your scenario, write up a short blurb about what it looks like to the Sight, along with a short list of possible Aspects for the character to suss out. And then figure out how hard it's going to punch the Wizard in the brain.

Setting the intensity of the vision can be a little tricky. On the one hand, you don't want to make it so easy that there's no risk to it, but on the other, you can rapidly trap the character in a Sight-induced death spiral if you set the intensity too high. Remember, the character takes a Mental attack of the intensity +dF for looking at whatever it is. If the character does not successfully defend against this, he or she *keeps looking and gets punched in the brain again*. The character cannot close his or her third eye unless and until he or she successfully defends against that attack. As long as the third eye remains open, the attacks keep happening. See? Death spiral.

If you set the intensity at equal to the Discipline of the character, it's pretty much a toss-up each round whether or not the character successfully defends, and that's not a bad default. That's kind of arbitrary, though, and tends to penalize characters who really bought up their Discipline score. If we're talking about looking at a creature, you could

do worse than let the Refresh cost of the creature set the intensity – not directly, but relative to the starting Refresh of the characters. So, if you're playing at Submerged level (starting Refresh 10), and you're looking at an elf (Refresh cost -6), maybe set the intensity two shifts below the character's Discipline. If you're looking at a grendelkin (Refresh cost -18), maybe set it three to four shifts above the character's Discipline. Does that almost guarantee a death spiral? Maybe. But three things to remember: one, the character may have Fate Points to spend; two, they can always concede before being taken out; and three, they're the one who had the bright idea to look at a grendelkin with the Sight.

Upshot? Prepare for the characters using the Sight. Think about what they're going to see, and how much it's going to hurt them.

Soulgazing

Not much more to say about soulgazing than I said about the Sight. It's somewhat safer than the Sight, because you can't get stuck in one, but the person you're soulgazing is also looking into you, and will wind up with some of your Aspects figured out. Again, preparation is key for the GM: figure out what they're going to see, and what will be seen by the other party.

The only other real trick is that soulgazes can be initiated by other people. Read over *And Then Our Eyes Met* on p228 of *Your Story*. It's a good way to hook characters into plotlines, or to feed them info when they need it, or just to creep the hell out of them, depending on how you use it.

Faster Magic (Minor Spoiler for Turn Coat)

Shapechanging like Listens to Wind has come up frequently in discussions. Using the basic thaumaturgy rules, how does Listens to Wind do the super-fast shapechanging, keeping up with the naagloshi in *Turn Coat*? The mechanics of the magic system don't support it. How about other powers, like the Gatekeeper's ability to worldwalk? Again, doable via thaumaturgy, but he does it *so fast!*

The answer to this is pretty simple. They have the appropriate supernatural powers: True Shapeshifting and Modular Abilities for Listens to Wind, Worldwalker for the Gatekeeper. They paid the Refresh, and they have the power, along with their spellcasting.

But how do they change it so that they do it using their spellcasting? Again, it's simple. They say, "I can do this because I got very good at the spells and learned how to do them very fast."

So, if you want a Wizard who can change into a bird via thaumaturgy without spending hours preparing for and casting the spell, spend the Refresh and take Beast Change, then say you got that power through your thaumaturgy. Want someone who can spurt out streams of fire every round without the Mental Stress of evocation? Breath Weapon. I did it with magic. Bam. Done.

Law Breaking

One thing the group needs to decide when setting up the game is how big an impact they want the Laws of Magic to have on play.

For example, in the *Fearful Symmetries* campaign I'm running, the characters are in on the ground floor of the Thirty Years' War. Things are chaotic and life is cheap. That means that there's less White Council oversight in Prague, so people can get away with a little more in bending the laws. In fact, during one of the first big fights, Izabela blew a mortal's head off with magic, thinking he was a vampire. I didn't force her to take the Lawbreaker powers, because of the circumstances and the fact we were early in the campaign. On the other hand, a large part of her backstory and her Trouble is based on the fact that her mother was a lawbreaker who enchanted a man she was in love with. So, we obviously want some weight to the laws.

The Lawbreaker powers are a neat little feature of the system, much like the Dark Side points in Star Wars, giving the characters more power if they break the law than they get if they don't. But as they gain that power, they lose control of their own destinies, becoming closer and closer to being creatures completely governed by their nature rather than their choices. There are certain players who will like that sort of character, the draw of power and the slide to darkness. There are also players who don't want to deal with that sort of thing.

Forcing a character to take a Lawbreaker power is a bad idea. Don't do it. It's forcing change on the player that he or she may not be comfortable with.

That said, you need to make the possibility very real to the players if you want to keep the weight of the laws real for them. So, if a character is about to break one of the laws, make sure you warn them. Give them a chance to back off and do something else. That way, the player gets to choose whether or not they get to play a Lawbreaker, rather than having it forced on them. And those clever fellows with an Aspect alluding to the lure of the Dark Side? Well, go nuts with the compels. They asked for it. But never, never, never when they're out of Fate Points. That's just forcing the choice on them.

Those of you playing along at home will have noticed that, while I've said this is the last article in the *Magic in DFRPG* series, I have ignored a large, complex chunk of the

system: Sponsored Magic. That's not really an oversight; or rather, it's a deliberate one. Sponsored Magic is kind of tricky in the system, and I haven't got my head all the way around it yet. I may come back to this series with a final article on it, but it won't be right away.

No, the next thing I think I'm going to tackle in *DFRPG* is Mortal Stunts. I'm finding they're often overlooked by the players, but have a wealth of good stuff for all types of characters.

But that'll be after the *Armitage Files* game post from tonight's game, and then my week-long pilgrimage to GenCon. If any of you are attending the con, I'll be helping out Pagan Publishing and Dagon Industries at booth #315. Stop by and say hi, and I'll fulfill my booth weasel duty of trying to sell you some cool Cthulhu stuff.

The Real Story of the Spell: Cooperative Thaumaturgical Preparation in DFRPG

Posted by <u>Rick Neal</u> in <u>Dresden Files RPG</u>, <u>What's he playing?</u>

So, as you know if you've been following my blog, I'm starting a new *Dresden Files RPG* campaign. In fact, the first session is this coming Saturday. The past week or so, I've been helping my players get their characters finished up, and thinking about how I'm going to run this game.

One of the challenges I'm facing is that I've got two Thaumaturgists in the game. Now, there's nothing wrong with that, but Thaumaturgy, when it happens and you pay attention to it, can take over the focus for a significant amount of game-time, and with two Thaumaturgists, I've had some concerns about whether that will force the other characters into the background.<u>*</u>

Why? Well, because when someone decides on using Thaumaturgy, they snag the GM's attention while they work out complexity, make up the Lore deficit, and then do the actual casting, possibly dealing with the fallout or backlash.<u>*</u> That can eat up a good chunk of time for every spell they cast.

And it occurred to me. One of the biggest time sinks in using Thaumaturgy is the preparation phase - the time when the Wizard was trying to make up the Lore deficit with maneuvers. The player spends some time looking over his or her skill list, trying to see what skill will work to put a maneuver on the spell for that all-important two-shift bump to Lore, while everyone else looks on, maybe making suggestions, maybe having side conversations, maybe wandering away for a bit.

But nowhere in the book does it say that the Wizard is the one who has to put the Aspect on the spell.<u>*</u> In some ways, it's strongly implied – the examples all talk about *Wizards* making up the Lore deficit on their own spells. But some of the things you can do to add that Aspect are not necessarily things that need a Wizard.

The main thing with spellcasting in the game is that, mechanically, it is complex enough to require attention, but all the interesting bits happen narratively. That's why there's a sidebar stressing the importance of telling the story of the spell – making the preparation and casting of the spell interesting and involving. So, it makes sense that, in a game where you have several characters, that a person casting a spell would rope in some of his or her buddies to help with getting things ready.

So, send your cop buddy out to check the crime scene for blood – the sympathetic link you need to the creature that killed the schoolboy. Get your rich friend to buy you the amethyst you need to powder for the ritual. Send four other folks out to specific points on the map to act as the other points of your pentagram. Get that scholar in your group to look up the proper form of address for Sumerian royalty so that the ghost of the king will talk to you. They're probably better at these things than you, anyway.

Does that sound like cheating? I mean, you've got Mediocre Athletics, so you get your pal with Superb Athletics to climb the cliff face to get water from the spring in the sacred cave. How is that fair? You've just co-opted someone else's abilities, right?

Fair doesn't enter into it, in my opinion. What you've done is taken a character who would otherwise have been sitting around waiting for his or her turn, and you've given him or her an opportunity to show off what that character is good at. And the GM can throw in a bit of interesting business with the whole thing, like maybe having to dodge a rock slide or leap over a crevasse, to throw a little bit of the spotlight on that character.*

In fact, if the spell is important enough,* you can have entire sessions that revolve around the preparation for a spell. Maybe the group needs to sneak into a secure place to work the ritual. The entire process of sneaking in can be a session, adding either a single Aspect that's needed to the spell, or even adding a whole sequence of Aspects as people deal with things during the stealth mission to make sure that things go off without a hitch.

Like what? Well, how about Security Monitors Spoofed, Guards Rerouted, Doors Barricaded, Approaches Under Surveillance, and The Perfect Spot all working to give the spellcaster enough time to work the ritual without interruption?

It's all about dramatizing the preparation* and involving the entire group. It'll bring the story of the spell front and centre, and give everyone a hand in crafting it. And that just makes the game better.

It gives everyone a taste of the magical cool that is the Dresdenverse.

Footnotes

* I don't really think it will, but it's something to be aware of, so I can make sure it doesn't happen. Back

* Details on all this stuff can be found in these two blog posts. Back

* I fully expect that many of you were there ahead of me. Sometimes, little observations like this can take a while to make it to my brain. Back

* Remember that thing I said back here about helping each other find the cool? Well, here ya go. Concrete example. Back

* This bit is vital. You don't want to waste this schtick on every little spell that should be cast without any roll. Save it for when it's something big and cool and important. Back

* This is something I've been doing sort of half-consciously, but not explicitly enough, in the *Fearful Symmetries* game, with Izabella's investigation of the curse on Gold Lane. So far, she's racked up four Aspects of the spell: Bound Angel, Anchor Points, Christian Magic, and Curse of Unsleeping. She'll be able to use these Aspects to help her craft the ritual to unravel the curse when she makes up the Lore deficit. Back