

Make Magic More Magical

An Alternative Approach to D&D Magic
For credit and contact, Discord TYP#8047

The Meta Differences

This experiment is inspired by “Breaking Out of Scientific Magic Systems” by John Kim, and is an attempt to build some mechanics for some of his ideas. The overall intent is to root magic in the world and provide mechanical support for narrative or role play elements that add depth to the story and the setting. The primary mechanism I'm using here is to replace the unbounded access to magical energy with a system where the access to needed energies is dependent on various factors. In some ways this will limit, in others it will unleash, and hopefully it will end up balanced and fun.

In this magic system, the ability to cast spells is dependent upon the availability of energies aligned with the kind of spell being cast. Sometimes, the energies will be abundant, or particularly suited to be used for certain magical effects; other times, the energies might be lacking, or even interfere with the casting. For instance, in a holy place, a cleric would easily be able to call upon their god to heal supplicants, while they would have difficulty doing the same if they were standing in desecrated ground. Or, a wizard, having spent years and much treasure creating their arcane study atop a place of power, would easily be able to summon up arcane energies which are not in such abundance out in the mundane world.

Narratively, this aligns with many archetypes in stories: hermits that seek out a connection with greater powers far from the distractions of the human world, healing springs or other places where miracles occur, wizards who build their towers in remote or strange places, necromancers who are drawn to places with dark or cursed histories. By creating a mechanic in which magic is dependent on these energies, and is made easier or more difficult depending on the environment, we now have a way to represent this in game and give the players a richer way to interact with the game setting. It also presents new challenges to be overcome, and can be used to create unique rewards for thoughtful role play and problem solving.

Though this could be used with other magic systems, I'm using A5E because, helpfully, they added a number of other descriptors to their spells that make the mechanics of this idea much easier to implement consistently.

The Basic Mechanics

For casting spells, there are three ways to cast spells. The difference is key, more so than using traditional magic systems because the energy available to cast a spell can differ from when it is prepared and when it is used.

Prepared spells are prepared and selected beforehand. All wizards use this for their spells. Clerics and druids now have the option of preparing specific spells beforehand. Prepared spells remain prepared until used, or a character dies. Prepared spells can be given up during a short or long rest to free up the spell slot.

Spontaneous spells are cast from a set list of spells. All sorcerers and bards use this for their spells. Clerics and druids may use spontaneous casting if they have not prepared a spell in the applicable spell slot.

Ritual spells are cast through a longer process than the brief casting of prepared and spontaneous spells. Because ritual spells take longer, the spell caster can take the time to harness use the most complicated sigils, chants, prayers, etc, which allows the spells to be cast in almost any environment.

To cast spells, the magician must be able to call up the needed energy. The amount of energy required for a spell is equal to the spell slot being used plus one, and the amount of energy a magician can call up depends on the kinds energy in the area, the strength of that energy, and the magicians familiarity with the area and its energies.

Energies present * strength of connection

The energies present can come from different sources. One is the environment itself, be that the people, terrain, buildings, or even history of an area. Another is the magic focuses a magician might carry, which can vary in strength and longevity. A final source is a vow, or geas, that grants the magician access to power as long as they maintain the requirements or obligation. A magician can call up energy from as many sources as they have available, adding the collected energy if needed to reach the needed amount.

The strength of of a single energy, or its connection, will range from 0 to 3.

Environmental energies

The energies present depend on what people, places, activities, or history are in the area. The strength of connection depends on how well the magician knows the energies being called up. For instance, a neighborhood that once burned down might have some faint remnants of energies of fear, fire, and chaos. A magician who knows about the fire could call up some of the energy, but one who knows details of the fire could call up that energy more effectively. This can give players a reason to familiarize themselves with an area in which they are campaigning, and provide tangible benefits when they are defending their homes, or have come well prepared for an adventure far from home.

Magical focus

Whether a wand or staff, a holy symbol, a blessed sprig, or a favorite instrument, magicians can bond with and tap into the intrinsic power of certain objects. The strength of their focus, and their bond to it, is something that can be increased, but only through great effort and sacrifice. A cleric might strengthen the blessings on their holy symbol by undertaking a great work for their god, or their bond to it through hardship and salvation in dire times. This can provide adventure opportunities, or additional rewards for role playing or accomplishments; it also makes these focuses targets for rivals or enemies of the party.

Geas

Some people are simply attuned to certain energies, and become natural conduits. A geas can be something like a paladin's vow, or a cleric's vow of poverty, or a pact a wizard makes with a planar entity. The strength of the geas depends on the strictures placed on the magician; the stricter the bonds, the stronger the connection. A geas is a common source of energy for magicians who pick up spells through their heritage or upbringing, as they have found a way to bend the world not through formal training, but through tradition and folkways.

Environmental Energies

Using the additional spell schools, the GM can determine what energies might be available for a particular spell based on the presence of certain elements. All places will have some form of energy present, as there are no mundane places in a world suffused with living energy. However, not all places have the energies a magician is seeking, or at least not so obviously, so it is prudent to learn about a place, its histories, its character, and its people, to best be able to tap into the latent and living energy that surrounds us.

Acid – The presence of acidic or corrosive substances; certain natural springs or wastelands; decay and subversion

Affliction – A place of pain or suffering; the presence of the crippled or damaged; despair

Air – Open spaces where the wind can blow;

Arcane – A place of arcane magic; locations of power; mystery and secrets beyond mortal ken

Attack – The presence of battle; aggression and opposition

Beasts – Wild and untamed places; feral animals

Chaos – An unpredictable place

Cold – Freezing and frigid temperatures

Communication – The presence of understanding and connection; a place where information flows

Compulsion – A place where choices are not given; slavery and service; surrender

Divine – The presence of the gods manifest; holy places; the temple of your god

Earth – Uncovered earth, free from cobble and foundation; bare stone faces; caves

Enhancement – The finer workshops; trainers and teachers

Evil – Malice and massacre; a history of pain and suffering

Fear – Uncertainty; a place of huddling and fright; worry

Fire – Burning or has been burned; forges; fuel

Force – Physical power; velocity and impact; kinetics

Good – Compassion and cooperation; a place of salvation

Healing – A place of rest and recovery; caretakers; restoration

Knowledge – Libraries and archives; a place of study and scholars; astronomy; alchemy

Law – Rules and strictures; a place of judgment

Lightning – Places where lightning has struck; electrical storms

Movement – Open plains; roads; unrestricted speed

Nature – The wilds, untouched by civilization; verdant landscapes

Necrotic – Death, decay, rot; places of decomposition; the memory of plague

Negation – Opposition; a place where powers were thwarted; erasing what once was

Obscurement – Mist; darkness; that which is hidden; secrecy

Planar – The thin places between worlds; what has gone out and come back from this world

Plants – Crops and gardens; wooded areas

Poison – Toxins; fields of hemlock; venomous creatures

Prismatic – Rainbows; bright light; gems of many colors

Protection – Shields and armor; places of sanctuary; where the strong have stood in defense of the weak

Psychic – Places of meditation; wit and wisdom; profound emotions

Radiant – The sun; bright lights; holy presence

Scrying – Where you can see far; reflections; a place where secrets are told, mysteries revealed

Senses – A place where a sense is heightened or dampened; intense sensation

Shadow – Dim light; the space between dark and light; a place where the sun cannot reach

Shapechanging – A place where beast and civilization blurs together; a change or transformation;

Sound – A din or clamor; a noisy place; an echoing cavern

Storm – High winds and thunder; dark clouds;

Summoning – A place where the barriers are thin; where a call is answered; memories of that which wishes to cross over

Technological – A place of industry or innovation; clever devices

Telepathy – Knowing what someone else is thinking; a place where no one can keep a secret

Teleportation – Exceptional speed; appearing seemingly out of nothing

Terrain – A place where the ground changes how you move; where you are constrained by your surroundings

Thunder – Storms; great claps or peals of sound; deep rumbling

Time – Where time stands still, or escapes you; the most exact of timepieces

Transformation – A alchemy lab; a foundry; a place of initiations

Unarmed – The open hand; fist fights; boxing

Undead – Skeletons, zombies, wraiths; where the dead have walked; desecrated ground

Utility – A well prepared party; stockpiles and warehouses; useful objects

Water – Rivers; lakes; oceans; wells

Weaponry – Swords and spears; an armory; soldiers under arms

Weather – A place you are exposed to the elements

Places of Power	
1	A wooded glade, a simple shop, a homesteader's vegetable patch, a creek, a bar fight
2	Deep forest, a market square, a thriving farm, a fast running river, a column of soldiers marching to war
3	Old growth forests, a bustling bazaar, a storied plantation, a great lake or ocean, the sight of a great and momentous battle

Magic Focus

Most magicians will have a spell focus appropriate for their class; wands and staffs for wizards and sorcerer, holy symbols for clerics or heralds, nature totems for druids, musical instruments for bards. These allow the casting of cantrips at most times, but they do need to be safeguarded, especially as the focus becomes more powerful. Magicians who seek a more powerful focus might seek out master artisans to create one out of rare materials, or with esoteric methods, or perhaps even to inherit one from a powerful mentor. As a magician becomes more experienced, they might also form a special bond with a particular item, allowing them to reliably cast more spells even far from familiar or friendly lands.

Magical Focuses	
1	A runed wand, a holy symbol, a sprig for a living tree, a favorite mandolin
2	A staff marked with powerful sigils, an amulet blessed by a saint, a totem infused with a spirit of nature, the favored instrument of a virtuoso
3	The staff of an arch mage, a holy relic touched by your god, a totem that binds your soul to land, the harp that charmed a demon

Magic energy can also come from specific spell components. For instance, a small vial of acid, or a piece of a tree struck by lightning, or a scrap of bronze; these might work for acid, lightning, or transformation respectively. Holy relics, like blessed items of fetishes, could be used by clerics or druids. Magical components are consumed in the spell, as the essence within them is pulled from them for the spell. The strength of the energy provided depends on the component itself, as well as the meaning of that component to the magician. An especially pure alloy is more potent than a bit of pig iron, and an item a magician has kept with them through many adventures, or perhaps an heirloom, will yield more energy than something bartered for. These kinds of components can be sought after rewards, as they allow potent magic when it might otherwise be inaccessible to the magician.

Magical Components	
1	A pinch of salt, a piece of iron, a bit of sulfur, a rough diamond
2	A pinch of sea salt from distant shores, a piece of purest steel made from sanctified iron, black powder made by a master alchemist, an expertly cut diamond
3	A pinch of salt from mines that plunge to the heart of the world, steel worked in a celestial forge, demon's naphtha, a diamond expertly cut by the magician themselves

Geas

If a magician seeks a certain kind of energy for a spell, the most reliable way to do this is to make themselves a living conduit of that energy. This is no mean feat, and requires constant commitment, as once the geas is broken, it is nearly impossible to mend. This is the price of power.

A geas will allow the magician to aspect themselves to one of the secondary spell schools listed above. The strictures of the geas should relate to the origin of the geas as well as the spell school. For instance, an orc with the Ancestral Blessing gift, might have been given a geas by their clan elders to never show discomfort or pain to outsiders, which would allow them to access the *protection* school, and thus cast resistance and shield. A stricter geas, to never show pain at all, would give access to greater power, but would also mean the orc could never show pain, even to themselves, a much more difficult pledge to keep.

A geas is most appropriate for magicians who are not formal spellcasters, for both mechanical and narrative reasons. It can help flesh out the upbringing and culture of the magician's people, and give them a constant remind of the source of their magic.

Geas' and Vows	
1	Give money to beggars, pray and carry out a simple ritual each day, obey officials and authorities, always carry a weapon
2	Give a large portion of your earnings to the needy, keep to complicated rituals morning and evening, submit yourself to local rulers for some service, carry a martial weapon at all times
3	Keep nothing but the bare necessities for yourself, spend all free time in service of a temple, you must always have a master, wear your weapons at all times, even when sleeping

Gameplay

These mechanics add extra steps for magicians to carry out, and possibly additional things to keep track of, during the game. When in an area, a magician can make an Insight or Arcana check to determine the presence of any accessible energies from the environment. This will not sources of energy they are aware of, so they would know that the hills count as *terrain* but not that the barrow beneath them also counts as *attack* and *weaponry*. Magicians can spend time gathering information with the appropriate checks to reveal other potential sources of energy. How well a magician can connect to that energy should be discussed and determined with the GM.

Magicians with a magical focus will need to note the potency of their focus, and their connection to it. If they choose to use magical components, these will need to be noted specifically in their inventory, as they are used for specific spells, and have varying levels of potency. Magicians who prepare spells should also consider, when using high level spell slots, preparing those spells before leaving their home or stronghold where their knowledge and connection will make it much easier to conjure up the needed energies.

For magicians using prepared spell slots or ritual magic, no additional steps are needed with the spell is cast. For magicians using spontaneous casting, they will need to declare from where they are drawing their energy. To be well prepared, they should already have sensed or researched the area, and having confirmed with the GM what the magician can tap into, will declare this with confidence. If the magician finds themselves unprepared, or perhaps with poor information, their declaration might result in an unexpected result, as the energies available may not be what they were expecting. Alternatively, a well prepared and equipped magician might be able to gather up sufficient energies to wield exceptional power in their casting.