

Creating Realistic Magic Systems GenCon - 2004

As I recall, this was the first time Gencon offered this topic as a panel. The same authors who participate in the other panel discussions (Shared Worlds, The Business of Writing, etc) are the ones who participated in this panel. I actually have a few of the names from the session in my notes this go-round. Jean Rabe, Chris Pierson, and Linda Baker are three of the six people who fielded questions from the group.

There are A LOT of notes in my book for this one. Gaming hinges on creating complex mythology and world systems. A huge amount of those worlds and world systems are rooted in magic or a blend of magic and technology. If you want to write in the SF/F genre these days, and you can't make a coherent Magic system, you are doomed.

As a result, this discussion was packed to the gills and had people standing in the room for an hour for lack of chairs.

First and foremost, every author emphasized the need for magic in a world to make sense. Before you begin writing a story you need to create the world (which is a character as much as your people) and the laws of that world (including magic). Decide how much magic there is in your world. Is it everywhere? Is it only available in certain places or objects? Is it integrated or no? Can people use and direct magic or is it something which is just a part of the natural world? Are there major and minor types of magic?

Next, ask yourself WHO may use magic. Can anyone use magic? Only priests? Only special people. Is it intrinsic, a trained skill, or both? What makes magic possible?

Once you begin to answer these questions and create parameters for magic use in your world, you can then get down to brass tacks. You can determine how magic influences society and culture. You can determine how it effects trade and politics. Here are some of the questions the panel members threw out as starting points to help you flesh out your magic system:

- 1) Why don't the magicians run everything (assuming they don't)?
- 2) Why doesn't everyone have magic?
- 3) Why is it exclusive? (or not exclusive)
- 4) If you have levels of magic (some easy some hard), then how is it kept in check? How is a balance maintained?
- 5) Does your magic system overpower the story? Is it too complex?
- 6) What are the limits of magic? (Control of the weather only? Instant transport? Mind control?)
- 7) What is the price of magic? (Does it drain power? Does it eat life? Does it require precious items?)
- 8) If magic is convenient or every-day then it must have a side effect. This side effect can be unknown at first, unseen, or unforeseen.
- 9) What can magic DO? (Level mountains, kill people, raise the dead?)

- 10) Do you have to study to gain magic?
- 11) Are magicians celibate or must they give up other parts of life to maintain their power?
- 12) Is the magic sensory? (Created by music or art? Does it require tactile interaction with something?)
- 13) Is magic sentient? Do you have to ask it for permission or petition the magic for a favor (as a god)? If so, is magic a joint use between the magic and the magician or is the magician only a conduit being used and possessed?
- 14) What is the source of magic? All power comes from something! (Gods, manna, crystals, blood, Gaia, etc)
- 15) Is magic finite or exhaustible? Is it like oil or coal and once you use it all, it's gone?
- 16) Are there health consequences for magic? To the magician? To the general population?
- 17) Do races in a world have different KINDS of magic?
- 18) How does a magician or wizard tap power? Growth? Study? Both? Other?
- 19) How do spells work (if you have them)? Talisman? Staff? Instrument? Stones? Limited numbers of objects? Why?
- 20) If there is a limit to the number of magic users or magical objects, why is that?
- 21) Can your magic users combine power together? If not, why? What happens when they do?
- 22) How is magic divided? Race? Class? Sex?
- 23) Can magic ability be lost? Can you overuse magic? Does age effect your ability?
- 24) How does religion and society view the use of magic? Good, bad, or indifferent?
- 25) If magic is learned, how long does it take to learn?
- 26) Is magic an art or a profession?
- 27) What is the status of a magic user? Are they equal to doctors, politicians, or trash collectors?
- 28) Are magic users organized? Do they have a guild or organization? A political structure?
- 29) Can you make a living as a magic user? How do magic users gain income?
- 30) What varieties of magic are used? Necromancy, alchemy, demonology, potions, divination, astrology, etc?
- 31) Are mages good, bad, or both? Are they perceived by the population as bad or good when they are the opposite?
- 32) Do mages live with everyone else, or do they live alone? With others of their kind?
- 33) Are mages banned from any jobs?
- 34) Do certain jobs require that you be a mage?
- 35) Where do you go to learn magic (if it is learned)?
- 36) Does it cost to go to magic school? How do you find the school? Do you have to be invited?
- 37) Do politicians or the people try to protect mages or to destroy them?
- 38) Do magic users have to take a vow of poverty?
- 39) Do individuals barter with or for magic?
- 40)

Now that these things were thrown out, specifics were discussed. They began with the fact that language normally has a very specific use with regard to magic. Things to wonder about, consider, or address with regard to language and magic are:

Does magic have its own language? If so, is it a spoken language or is a "relational" language such as dance, writing, drawing, architecture, music, or sculpting? Is there one spoken language

for everyday use in your world and another for magic? If so, you need to be specific and actually construct this language and its grammatical rules before you start throwing things into your story. Perhaps there is a strange syntax to the language of magic. Perhaps all magical spells must be in poems -- specific types of rhyming systems or whatnot for specific types of spells. Are the original meanings of words a clue to their magical use? Be sure to check the Latin roots of words for clues in this regard. Often "true" names have power. The world of Earthsea is an example of this. Perhaps there are "lost" words or "true" names of things which bring out power and you must know these in order to move forward. Or, is magic completely silent with no language at all?

Next, symbols were discussed. Symbols are often hallmarks of magic. They can be anywhere and anything. On buildings, on clothing, on objects. They can be colors or shapes or patterns. They can be crafted or found. Symbols should be specific for different kinds of magic, political systems, cultures, or time periods. Use your imagination and historical input to develop symbols for your world and how they relate to magic use.

This brought us back to brainstorming questions. Here are yet more things to ask yourself as you create your magical world:

- * Can a wizard run roughshod in the name of a "greater good?"
- * Are all magic users slaves? Are all non-magic users slaves?
- * Is there an apprenticeship system?
- * Do wizards live longer or shorter lives?
- * Do magic users sacrifice themselves for others -- perhaps they die early but there is a reward to their family if they help society?
- * Perhaps magic is "fashionable" but not thought of as "real?"
- * Are magic users stalked? Are they like celebrities? Is there an equivalent to a paparazzi in this culture following magic users around?
- * Does magic conflict with technology or social progression? Is it old and no longer useful? Does it go out of style? Is there no real reason to learn magic anymore because of automation?
- * Are magic users mentally unstable in your world?
- * Are there magic charlatans and con-men? Are there people who pretend to have magic when they really don't? What are the consequences to these people?
- * Are wizards "above the law?"
- * Does magic develop down dead end paths? Perhaps several kinds of magic developed and one was thought of as superior (think Beta vs VHS for magic systems).
- * If one culture has magic knowledge and another does not, if the magic is "given" to the other culture what will happen? How do the cultures deal with the fallout?
- * Are certain spells illegal? If they are, how is the offender identified and prosecuted?
- * Is transport magical? Is it safe? Does it have limits?
- * Are there magical weapons? How do you use them in battle? Must you be a magic user to wield them?
- * Does magic CHANGE a weapon?
- * To what level, if any, does magic replace technology?
- * May magic be stored, hauled, hoarded, or replayed?

Most important, the authors emphasize that your magic system should not become overwhelming. Magic should help move the story not be the story. If you do this, you will often allow magic to remove tension and conflict and, at the end, can become a telescoping mechanism which makes your tale transparent. If someone can just discover a scroll and fix whatever goes wrong then what is the point? There must be consequences for your world and your characters. Without conflict and tension a story goes nowhere.

This panel was very lively. It was more like a brainstorming session than the usual panel discussion. Various people threw out the names of reference materials or examples of authors who had done a particularly good job of world and magic development. Writers cautioned people to try to find a new hook, something a little different, to make their magic system special and new instead of the same old thing. In short, this was a really fun panel and if they have it again I'd recommend attending.