

WHISPERS FROM THE PIT

THAT VOOODOO THAT YOU DO: MAKING SPELLS SPECIAL

Greetings from the pit once more, dear readers.

This *Whispers from the Pit* is about spells, and more specifically spell trappings. There aren't any new rules included. If you want them, you'll need examples in the *Fantasy* or *Sci-Fi World Builder Toolkits*.

Trappings

First of, we'll look at exactly what a trapping is. Trappings come in three forms—those that determine how a spell is cast, those that give an effect, and those required for casting a spell in the first place.

Casting Trappings

A casting trapping is something like “whispered words” or “gestures.” Take a look at *beast friend*, for instance, which has a trapping of “mage concentrates and gestures with his hands.” It defines how the spell is cast and no more.

Casting trappings can be used to help define a particular style of magic as well. A combat mage, for instance, could have a rune engraved on his skin which, when activated (an arcane skill roll), gives him the effects of the *armor* spell. The rune by itself isn't magical—it's just a trapping to explain how the spell is invoked. Maybe the same mage has to spill a few drops of his own blood to cast a spell, not enough to cause any injury, of course (that's a way of adding a trapping to the Soul Drain Edge). A cleric of war wanting armor may simply repeat a war hymn or give a certain battle cry.

What about a bard, a staple of a well-known fantasy game? Does *Savage Worlds* even support bards? Sure it does. Just take a the Arcane Background (Magic) Edge and list all your casting trappings as songs or short tales. Easy!

Try to avoid casting effects like “drink potion” or “read scroll” unless you're using a different form of magic from what's in the main rules. Potions and scrolls, to most gamers, are very specific items, they don't fit the form of: “vials of cast whatever spell I want from my repertoire so long as I have enough Power Points.”

A character *could* have a special tonic which allows him to work magic, but then you get into problems about how it recharges Power Points. Claiming the liquid mysteriously replenishes itself is pretty cool, but it also means your tonic bottle becomes a thief magnet, and you've now turned a casting trapping into a material trapping (see below).

Okay, so do you need a casting trapping? Well, no, not really. Any miracle can simply be imagined as a prayer to the respective deity. A mage, at least traditionally, just repeats his

words of powers, and our bard sings his song. The trapping, in this respect, is already covered by the character's Arcane Background.

Let's be clear on one thing, though—there's no reason a spell can't have casting *and* effect trappings. In fact, having both makes your setting more detailed, and certainly a lot cooler. A mage who simply casts a fireball (*blast* with a fire trapping) by repeating certain words of power just isn't as cool as a mage who must commune with the spirits of the fire realm to invoke his spell. Both make the same die roll, both spells have the same effect, but one has more flavor.

Effect Trappings

Effect trappings don't, by themselves, tell you what a spell does—that's covered by the spell game mechanics. These trappings are basically what the spell looks like when it goes off. Most times these are for offensive and defensive (i.e. combat) spells, such as *bolt*, which has trappings of fire, ice, light, darkness, colored bolts, and insects.

Every spell should have an effect trapping, even fairly mundane spells like *healing*. Maybe the recipient is surrounded by a brief glow, or wounds rapidly knit closed. Again, both spells with these trappings work the same, they just look different. The trapping doesn't have to be anything totally astounding, as it's really just there to increase the flavor.

As I said earlier, we looked at new game mechanics for acid, cold, darkness, electricity, heat, ice, light, and necromancy in the *Fantasy World Builder Toolkit*. Even without that book, it isn't rocket science to invent your own unique effects. Of course, not every spell needs, or indeed should have, an effect trapping with a new mechanic. A cleric of the sun casting *healing* may surround the target in a fiery glow as an effect trapping, but the target shouldn't burst into flames and burn to death. The glow is just dressing.

Ideally, effect trappings should have different game mechanics *where they fit*. Precedent has been set with fire trappings, which have a chance of setting a target on fire. I'm not going to repeat anything from the *Toolkits*, and common sense is all you need. If fire burns, why can't light (or darkness) blind, ice be slippery, and such like. Game mechanics should, of course, be balanced. If you make ice trappings too powerful (such as freezing a victim solid until he escapes), every mage is going to be using it. These are side-effects of the spells, remember; they should never outshine the effects of the spell itself.

One further note, never duplicate the effects of another spell with a trapping. *Obscure* creates a zone of darkness which lasts for a few rounds. If you're adding it to *blast*, the effect should either last until the end of the current round, until the caster's next action, or give the victim a chance to throw off the effects (like a Spirit or Vigor roll).

Material Trappings

These don't appear in any standard power, but you can find one on page 81 of *Savage Worlds Revised*, the form of the *bedknobs and broomsticks* spell. In this example, a witch *needs* her broomstick to *fly*. Her spell isn't any better than a guy just mumbling some words, but it's a specific requirement.

You could go down the typical fantasy route and demand every mage needs a material trapping to use a spell, but to be honest, 90% of players probably don't give a moment's thought to them, and having one character continually hold up the game while he goes off to collect duck's nostrils and spider spit just isn't fun for the others. There's no reason why a mage can't use them, but it's better to charge him a flat 50 gold pieces per Rank he has every time he levels up (as an example) than demand he keep an exact list of how much he has of every spell component for every single spell he knows.

Maybe a generic wizard has to have a wand or staff. It isn't actually a magic item, just a focus for his power. If he loses it, he has to make a new one (takes an hour, day, week, or whatever else you feel is appropriate). Gandalf always had his staff to hand when he worked magic, so there's a precedent in fantasy. It also removes the need for those pesky spell components you might be thinking of introducing into your game.

Ideally, keep these spells to a minimum, or tie them into a specific Arcane Background. If you create a Witch AB, then sure, she may need a cauldron to work her spells, which have the potion trapping.

Edge Trappings

No, I haven't gone insane, but I am stepping into non-spell territory for a moment. There's no reason why a character, arcane or otherwise, can't have a trapping for his Edges. It doesn't work for every character archetype, but let's go back to our bard again as a prime example. If you want to duplicate a traditional RPG-style bard's special powers—look at taking Leadership Edges. All the bard does is use the standard Edges with a “trapping” of song. No new rules needed at all.

Spell Names

The name *bolt* tells you what the spell does, but it gives you about as much flavor as sucking a piece of paper. *Savage Worlds* uses the spell names it does for ease of use (we don't know

what names might be appropriate to your setting, after all), but you should really be looking at renaming your spells to suit the trappings—all of them.

Take a look at *bolt* and its trapping list. You could call it *fire dart*, *shards of ice*, *light sphere*, *blinding orb*, *prismatic shaft*, or *insect swarm*. Again, all these versions produce exactly the same effect, but they're flavorsome. If I've built a mage who specializes in fire, I want spells that sound cool, not the same as the hippy druid character in the group.

One Trapping, One Spell?

So, should every spell with an effect trapping be a unique spell, or can a mage chop and change? At the end of the day that's up to you, but if you're going to use any examples from the Toolkits, which provide additional game mechanics, they should really be separate spells. A mage, for instance, would learn *bolt* with a fire trapping and with an ice trapping as different spells. Otherwise, he is gaining twice the benefit.

Making Your Own Spells

Sometimes we get asked whether there's a formula for creating balanced spells. The answer is “no,” though several fans have created their own DIY spell cost tables. At the end of the day, a spell is balanced when the GM says it's balanced, and not before. Not exactly what you were after, I'm sure, but here are some general tips.

New spells should be available to both characters and NPCs, primarily as a counter to super-spells. If you create a spell which can kill a Wild Card instantly with no chance of avoiding the fate, then you can bet your players will either demand access to it or start thinking about another game.

Spells with minor game effects, such as an Open Lock spell, should generally be low Rank. In many cases, you can get around these spells by renaming *boost/lower trait* into a specific spell, such as *open* (which *boosts* Lockpicking only), or by creating a cheaper version which grants a fixed skill bonus, rather than a die step increase. The big drawback to this is that it now means there are another 29 or 30 spells available, and a character can only have so many.

Tagged on to this is another piece of advice—don't create spells just for the sake of creating them. You don't need 50 offensive spells which do slightly different damage or have a slightly different set of Cost, Range, and so on. By altering just the trappings, and giving them subtly different game mechanics, you can create a battery of combat spells using just *bolt*, *blast*, and *burst*.

When deciding on the Power Point Cost, think about the effect and how many times the average character can cast the spell. A starting character is limited to just 15 Power Points, with

a maximum of 35 (assuming you stop shortly after Legendary). Even if you carry on playing at high Ranks, characters still have to climb the Experience ladder first. The more powerful the spell, the fewer times it should be castable, and thus it has a higher Cost.

Occasionally we get asked whether a certain spell should have a higher or lower Rank, Cost, or whatever. The answer we usually give is, "if you want." *Savage Worlds* isn't a set of rules carved in stone. The rules are generic, and should be altered to fit your campaign as you see fit. If you want invisibility to be a Novice spell, then make it happen.

No Power Points

So what if you don't want Power Points in your game? D&D doesn't, and never has in the core rules. I know I said there weren't going to be any rules here, but D&D is a popular game and we know some of you like the way spells are handled instead of working out Power Points. Here's a very quick way of handling a similar system in *Savage Worlds*.

This is a very quick system, and isn't a new rule we intend to use. To be honest, it's not even well balanced, but it took only a few minutes to design. I'm sure you'll come up with a more balanced and elegant (and different) system of your own.

The "att" below refers to the character relevant arcane attribute, that being Smarts for most and Spirit for cleric-types. Note, that if a character changes his appropriate stat, he gains one extra spell per day per die increase. I chose not to use arcane skill at the basis because that's a measure of how well a character can cast his spells, not a measure of his basic ability to hold spells in his head.

Because of the way the table works, a spellcaster needs a minimum d6 stat at Novice to work magic, d8 at Seasoned, d10 at Veteran, and d12 at Heroic and Legendary.

For example, a mage reaching Legendary with a d12 Smarts could cast 8 Novice (6+2), 6 Seasoned (6-0), 4 Veteran (6-2), 2 Heroic (6-2), and one Legendary spell (6-5) per day.

Should he be able to cast any spell he knows, or does he have to nominate spells at the start of the day? That would be a setting rule you'd have to decide on should you opt to use a system like this.

Whether or not a character instantly learns new spells when he increases Rank or whether he has to take the New Power Edge for each spell as normal is a choice you have to make. If you go with the former method, spellcasters get very powerful very quickly. If you go the opposite route, the character has no more spells than a regular *Savage Worlds* character of his Rank, but he can cast them more often.

Of course, such a system opens up more questions. How do variable spells like *bolt* work now, for instance? If I had to use a system like this, I'd keep it at one spell but with different effects at different Ranks. Maybe at Novice I'd allow a single 2d6 *bolt*, at Seasoned the character gets one 3d6 *bolt* or two 2d6 *bolts*, and so on.

Other Genres

These notes apply equal well to other genres. Most sci-fi games are likely to stick with psionics, of course, but there's no reason why you can't have cryomancy, electrocancy, or pyromancy trappings for these mind benders. Even without these, maybe the recipient of telepathy gets a bad headache or his eyes bleed. It really depends on what sort of game you're running at the end of the day and whether you want psionics to be people who simply stare at victims and deliver an unseen mind bolt, or who produce a showy effect.

Horror can run the full gamut like fantasy, but ideally NPCs should stick to nasty trappings, like bloodletting (not always their own), swarms of spiders, screaming skulls, or having a victim's flesh just rot and drop off.

Wiggy

PC/Spell Rank	Novice	Seasoned	Veteran	Heroic	Legendary
Novice	Half att -2	—	—	—	—
Seasoned	Half att -1	Half att -3	—	—	—
Veteran	Half att	Half att -2	Half att -4	—	—
Heroic	Half att +1	Half att -1	Half att -3	Half att -5	—
Legendary	Half att + 2	Half att	Half att -2	Half att -4	Half att -5

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