The Book of MIRRORS ™

The Mage: The Ascension® Storytellers Guide

# The Book of MIRRORS™

GAIA.

ACE of QUESTING.

TEMPERANCE.

THE FOOL.

PAGE of PATTERN.

THE MAGE.

It's not the tale, it's he who tells it.
— Stephen King, *Different Seasons*

The Mage Storytellers Guide

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The Book of MIRRORS™

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Prelude

By Kathleen Ryan

Amanda slides one weary hip onto the edge of the bar stool and leans over the brass rail with her hair in her bloodshot eyes. "I'm looking for a room," she says, her voice grating like a rusty hinge.

The bartender shakes his head and keeps mixing drinks. "No vacancies. Sorry."

"The Yama Kings sent me."

The man behind the counter looks up. He is fairly young, but his tanned face is deeply lined, and his sandy-blond hair grizzled. His heavy brows furrow, and he bites his mustached lip impatiently. "I don't care who sent you, lady. You see that sign?" He gestures across the crowd with an empty shot glass. "It says 'No Vacancies.' 'No vacancies' means we haven't got any rooms. Okay?"

Amanda frowns. Angry, disappointed, aching, hunted, she needs a safe house desperately, and the bartender at the Steel Horse on Shangri-La is her only contact, her only hope. He meets her eyes, and his craggy forehead softens.

"Look, now. Sorry about that." He throws a coaster down in front of her and reaches for a beer tap. "Have one on me. I hate to send a customer away unhappy."

She drinks, and the pale brew stings her cracked, dry lips and burns in her empty stomach. Amanda sets the heavy glass mug down, staring blankly into its depths. As the alcohol hits her, she feels her back and shoulders relax, and a little of the pain goes away. After a long time, her eyes focus again, and she sees the warped and blurry colors of the coaster through the half-empty glass. The image wavers with the sloshing beer, clears at last, and in one corner of the sodden, pulpy cardboard she reads:

OUT

LEFT

LEFT

DOOR BY RAINBARREL

The young Euthanatos drains the glass, grimaces bitterly, and leaves without acknowledging the bartender's friendly good-bye.

Ω Ω Ω

"Come on in here. Hurry."

Amanda squints into the shadows of the warehouse, reluctant to obey the whisperer. She sees nothing. Hesitating barely half a second, she puts her faith in Mitzi — Senex's lieutenant, who plucked her out of deep space to send her here — and darts through the open door.

"Stand away, I'm closing it." Louder now, the voice is high-pitched and girlish. The speaker continues companionably. "Just push through the blackout curtains — I hope you're not allergic to felt — they're a little on the ancient side, but they do the job."

Amanda untangles herself, lets her eyes adjust. To the right, toward the main street entrance, an old jeep on bricks huddles next to partially dissected street cycles and Etherbykes. To the left, a cinderblock wall covered by tires, belts and hoses shelters a cracked wooden door marked

"Office." Three or four halogen lights strung at odd angles glare off of a two-story, chromed-steel junkpile ahead of her. She stares, wondering which way it will eventually fall.

"Nice, isn't she?"

Eyebrow raised doubtfully, Amanda turns to face her host. Teenaged, overalled, smiling, the girl whips the bandanna off her short, curly, light-brown hair and wipes her face and hands with it. The black grease marks disappear; now the grime coats her pale, freckled face evenly.

"We still don't know what we're going to call her. I kinda like the 'Lookfar' or the 'D.D. Harriman,' but the rest of the gang all want…"

Amanda says nothing.

The girl sighs. "Right. Follow me."

Ω Ω Ω

The room has no windows. Door, bed, nightstand, wardrobe, sink, desk, chair all suffer in the light of one naked overhead bulb. Paint peels from the wood. The enamel in the sink is chipped and stained. The plaster ripples and cracks from old drips in the ceiling.

Washed, healed, dry-clad, her hair still wet from dyeing, Amanda stretches out on the old iron four-poster bed, inspecting her meager supplies. Spare clothes, a little food, her disguise kit, towel, another jar of Mitzi's healing salve, extra knives, a loaded gun and three marked clips… and a letter from her teacher she hasn't had the heart to open yet.

She packs it all into leather saddlebags and crams the old clothes, jacket, bag and boots into the sink. The young Euthanatos slips a knife out of its sheath, concentrates, eyes closed, on the heap. Once, twice, many times the old bowie's blade pricks at the fabric, the leather, the rubber heels of the boots. After what seems like hours, she opens her eyes and opens the taps. A thin stream of rusty water washes the pile of dust down the drain.

Amanda lies back, the letter in one hand, her knife in the other, and falls asleep.

Ω Ω Ω

"I'm still not sure about this. I could lose my job, you know."

The words carry only faintly through the door, but the slumbering assassin is on her feet and wary before she realizes what woke her. Amanda swaps Senex's letter for the gun. Barefoot, soundless, taking cover behind the wardrobe…

Three quiet knocks.

"Ma'am?" Amanda recognizes the voice of the girl from the warehouse. "Ma'am? I don't mean to bug you, but there's kind of a problem. Um, a friend of mine is here to see you. I know you probably don't want visitors, but he says it's really important."

Amanda sighs, reaches around for the knob of the dresser door and pulls. It creaks open. Simultaneously, the

door to the room slowly swings wide. She checks the hallway in the mirror over the sink. Towering behind the anxious-looking grease monkey, she sees a face she knows.

"Jeremy?"

"Yeah."

"Come in," Amanda orders, stepping forward, keeping the gun hidden behind the wardrobe. Jeremy hesitates for an instant, studying her changed face and hair in doubt. Satisfied that the tone, at least, is authentic, he ignores the disguise.

"Better go," he says to his companion, shutting her out. She scowls at him as long as she can see him, and then the floor thumps with her running.

Amanda regards him stonily.

"Aren't you…" he starts uncertainly. "Aren't you supposed to be on Cerberus by now? You told me you were walking a thread back—"

"I know what I told you," she cuts in. "Someone cut the thread. Someone tried to kill me."

"Yeah, well, they won't be the only ones if you stay here," he exclaims, on the edge of panic.

"Why?"

"What do you mean?" he demands. "You want a reason other than the obvious one — that you have Richard Somnitz' blood on your hands, and that as soon as they know it, half the House of Helekar will be hunting you?" The ungainly alchemist raises his red eyebrows high incredulously.

"No. Why is this house not safe?"

"Oh." Jeremy deflates into the chair beside him, scratching the back of his neck thoughtfully. "Well, they're probably going to come after Dr. Scherer and me, too… and I hang out here all the time. It's the first place anybody who knew anything about us would look, if they couldn't find us at the shop."

Amanda abandons her corner by the wardrobe. Businesslike, stoic, she tucks the gun into her belt and heaves the saddlebags onto the bed, sits beside them, digs out socks.

"I've got to…" Jeremy stammers, standing. He pushes back a blazing shock of hair, embarrassed without knowing why. Unexpectedly, he finds himself concerned for her, worried, pitying the assassin. "I've got to go now." He leaves her, tapping his fists nervously against his thighs.

ΩΩΩ

Two loud knocks.

"Hello?" A man's voice, too deep to be Jeremy's. "Are you still here?"

David Cho enters the room with his hands spread wide, cautiously, like a lion tamer working with a rabid animal. Amanda lowers the automatic, tucks it away and shrugs into her coat.

"What do you want?" she asks.

"It's nice to see you, too." He leans against the doorjamb, arms crossed now. "I was hoping you would answer a question."

"What question?"

"Do you have somewhere to go?" Her eyes narrow suspiciously. He shakes his head, goes on: "I'm not asking where you're going. I just know that this isn't your usual territory, and Shangri-La is no place for an outsider. Do you have a plan?"

Amanda's brown eyes bore into his. For almost a minute, she says nothing. From below, the faint murmur of the bar and the whine of machinery spill over the silence. David waits quietly, confidently, unwilling to let her simply stare him down. He thinks of Jeremy, confused and troubled by this woman, and enjoys an element of revenge in his patience. Yet, near the end, he feels the same reluctant compassion for the Euthanatos before him, so completely cut away from kindness. He feels, too, the staggering effort it takes her to trust him.

"No."

"All right, then. Come with us."

"Why?" she asks, and he understands the question.

"You saved Jeremy and Dr. Scherer's lives. We figure we owe you for that. And, I hope, we would take you with us even if you hadn't. We're all… idealists. Out to save the world one soul at a time. Stray cat people, if you know what I mean. Sloppy thinkers, maybe. But I hope I never live to see the day this cabal would leave the Devil himself to the House of Helekar."

David shifts his weight forward, head cocked to one side, one eye in the room, one eye out. Down the hall, rustles and clanks herald the rest of the Second Seven, and he nods faintly. His outside hand points, waves someone off and points again, then waggles "come here" at its target.

"I didn't say I'd go."

"You didn't say you wouldn't." He smiles at her. "Have you noticed, every time we meet, we end up running for our lives? Why is that?"

"Hey, David," says the grease monkey, poking her head through the doorway. "Is she coming?" She looked at Amanda curiously. "Are you coming?"

"She's coming."

"I hate to think what Xia and Mike are gonna say about that."

"I'll handle Xia and Michael when the time comes," he replies with a grimace. "They've been outvoted. Now get in here." David glides catlike to the chair, and the girl hops over the bed to perch on the edge of the sink. "What's our status?"

"Dr. Scherer, Jeremy and Zack have booby-trapped the apothecary. They asked Mr. Joseph to set one of his men watching it. Dr. Scherer's up at the mansion, and the Masque gave him sanctuary. Father Tim isn't back yet; he's sending a message through the Chorus to Lacey and those two you're gonna *handle*." She wrinkles her nose at him. "Jeremy and Zack you just shooed away. I'm guessing they'll go down to the machine shop and resent you for a while."

David bites his lip, starting at the ceiling. "How's your science project coming?"

"Oh, she's doing great. I still need to hook up the grav modules we lifted off of that wrecked cruiser, and I want to tune up the primary thrusters, they're noisy as heck, and the life support system isn't good for more than a week yet, and—"

"But she runs?" interrupts David.

"Oh, yeah." The girl nods enthusiastically. "I made the side bulkheads airtight on Tuesday, and Mr. Joseph donated a—"

"Good. Load her up. We leave as soon as Choirboy gets back."

"What?" She cries, alarmed. Amanda, no less disturbed by the memory of the hulk in the warehouse, watches closely. "The old girl isn't ready for this kind of trip yet, David."

David cut in sharply. "We don't have a choice. Go to work, kid. Get Zack and Jeremy to help. If they can't do anything, set them storing food or something." He lowers his voice, speaks earnestly. "She's a good ship, Tommy. Have a little faith in yourself."

Tommy shakes her head. "We can't fly her, David. She isn't named!"

He laughs.

"Come on." The Cultist rises, and the other two follow. Amanda picks up her saddlebags uncertainly. David stands by the door to let them leave, turns off the lone light in the ceiling, shuts the peeling door behind them. With one hand on Tommy's shoulder, the other on the strap of Amanda's bag, he sets a strolling pace down the hall.

"We'll pick up a name and a bottle of champagne on the way down, Tommy. Show a little initiative, kid."

(To be continued....)

THE CHARIOT.
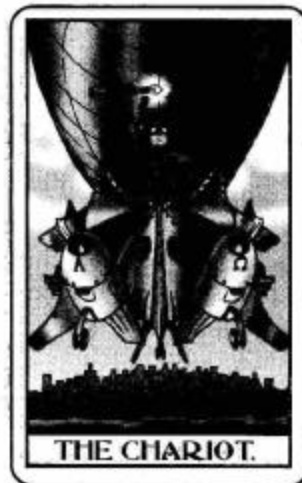
Introduction: Smoke and Mirrors

Every day you play with the light of the universe.
Subtle visitor, you arrive in the flower and the water.
— Pablo Neruda, "Every Day You Play"

Let's talk about stories.

That's what we're all here for, isn't it? To tell stories, to make memories out of a couple of sheets of paper, dice and a gathering of friends. To step away from the grind of our "real world" and walk among phantasies for a while. To make magic.

Roleplaying games aren't really about winning. Sure, there's the bracing thrill of a job well done, of obstacles surmounted and enemies blown to bits. Sure, we all like to "win," but is that the *real* reason we play RPGs?

I don't think so. I think we like bragging rights. We enjoy telling our own stories.

And *you*, poor sucker, get to make those stories come alive.

Welcome to Hell.

Oh, it's not that bad, really. We Storytellers enjoy it here in our own little purgatory. We make the rules, plot the myths, lay the groundwork for an experience that, when all goes well, is almost like sex (and sometimes better). Every few days or weeks, ravening hordes of players descend upon our homes, demanding good times and great memories. And we love it. We love the opportunity to take those pictures we've been drawing on the insides of our skulls and flesh 'em out with a few good friends. We *must* love it: Why else would we drop our hard-earned cash on collections of books, miniatures, soundtracks and battle maps, read ourselves bleary-eyed over complex tomes and arcane charts, argue bitterly with the Rules Lawyer and the Mad Slasher, then do it all over again? We do it because it's a rush to be the Storyteller. Plain and simple, we do it because we can.

We are, in many ways, the games we play. As imaginative creations, our characters and chronicles reflect ourselves. Sure, they're wish fulfillments — who *wouldn't* want to rework the world upon command? — but we can, if we look past the funhouse-mirror effect, touch the glass and see ourselves. The things we love, hate, desire and dream about come to life, if only for a few hours a month. So long as we

don't lose sight of where the mirror ends and our fingers begin, dancing with our reflection can be lots of fun.

Enough pretensions. Let's talk basics.

This is a practical guide. A personal guide. A collection of suggestions, not a tome of rules or Wisdom from on High. Sure, there's lots of "official" stuff to be found in this particular book — character stats, background information, answers to puzzling questions, and more — but this book's main purpose is to make you think. To inspire you. To help you through sticky situations and offer a few options you probably hadn't thought of before. This **Book of Mirrors** is an endless hallway. Every turn and corner should bring you new ideas. And when the name of the game is reality, you can use all the ideas you can get.

Running a Mage Game

As we all know, **Mage** looks like an intimidating game to run. The sheer complexity of the setting, the esoteric nature of the subjects and the potential for rules abuse make the bravest Storyteller cringe at the thought of running an extended **Mage** chronicle.

It doesn't have to be that way. Really.

Mage is, at its heart, a simple game. The rules are easy to remember once you're familiar with them, and the epic conflicts merely offer a setting for some very human stories. Stories of sudden power, progress and survival. **Mage** simply asks: *What if you had the power to change the world? What would you do with it? And what would it do with you?* Everything else springs from that basic idea. The four great factions merely demonstrate what some people have chosen to do with the power they possess. The setting merely reflects the world they've made with it. A world that you, for better and worse, have inherited.

That's it. Simple. Things really don't look that simple when you heft a **Mage** book, though. Wow. What a pile of stuff. So many options. So many realities. Where do I go from here?

Valid questions when you're beginning a game. After all, when you get right down to its foundations, that's what **Mage** should be. A *game*. Fun. Playable. A pastime, not a chore. Hence, I'd rather handle this book with a matter-of-fact approach than with the usual reality-skewering that comes so naturally to **Mage**. Let's put aside the subjectivity and artifice for a moment and talk about the game itself. Let's put aside the bells and whistles and speak plainly. Let's discuss practical things and leave the theory for another tome. Let's talk **Mage**, you and I. We have plenty to discuss.

How to Use This Book

As always, we've tried to keep this book simple and easy to use.

• **Chapter One: Anatomy of a Chronicle** presents a semifictional chronicle, from its inception to its eventual end. Using the game as a forum, Deena McKinney and Wayne Peacock pass along step-by-step advice for the feeding and caring of an extended **Mage** game.

• **Chapter Two: The Storyteller's Corner** brings us to the game developer's table to discuss some common questions about rules, details, errata and the journey of transformation that marks a mage of any kind.

• **Chapter Three: Behind the Scenes of the Ascension War** explores the factions — who they are, how they work, who they control and what they think of everyone else.

• **Chapter Four: Supporting Cast** details animals, spirits and common folks, and addresses their potential roles in your chronicle.

• **Chapter Five: Alternate Chronicle Settings** suggests a variety of different backdrops, a few system guidelines and a range of source material.

• **Chapter Six: Observations from the Field** offers advice on a variety of subjects, from symbolism and magickal style to sex and gender roles. Enjoy!

• **Appendix: Indices** offers reference indexes for rotes, Effects, Talismans and rules, as well as a suggested reading list.

Once More, With Feeling

I shouldn't have to keep saying this, but some people never get the message. Here we go again:

Mage will not teach you magick. It will not make you Awaken. It will not teach you what to do if you *did* Awaken, so don't freak out, join a cult, cut up kitties or call yourself a Verbena. If **Mage** inspires you to keep an open mind, great. If it offends you, ask yourself why. if it makes you want to apprentice yourself to the Grand Master of Flowers or something equally stupid, quit playing and get professional help. Magick, if it does exist, does not come through the pages of a game. Keep an eye on where your fingers touch the glass, and avoid bumping your nose on mirrors, okay?

Most of all, have fun. We do. :-)

Let's go....

RM

Chapter One: Anatomy of a Chronicle

Be careful what you wish for. You may get it.
— Ancient Chinese Saying

Wayne kicked off his shoes, opened a beer and began reading through his new $28 investment. "Hmm," he mused. "Modern mages engaged in a battle for the control of reality. Way cool!" He spent the next few hours in blissful contemplation over the thick purple tome. By the time he'd finished, dozens of ideas buzzed around Wayne's new concept: A fledgling cabal and its entry into the Ascension War.

The next day over lunch, Wayne sprang the idea of a **Mage** campaign on fellow gamers Keith and Deena: "Why don't you come over tonight and make up some characters? I have an idea for running a **Mage** game set in Atlanta."

Deena raised an eyebrow. "This game sounds really weird, Wayne. How can you make such freeform magick work? I mean, there're no spells or anything!"

"How should I know? I've never done this before, either! Look, just come over and give it a try."

That night, Keith created a private detective named Peter Freundlich, Akashic Brother. Peter was a quiet, straightforward guy, not given to showing his emotions, who dreamed of starting his own agency. The specter of his mentor, an Akashic Brother turned Nephandus, shadowed Peter's plans. To prosper, he'd have to confront the turncoat someday, but lacked the power to do so now. Deena made up Clarissa Ryan, Cultist of Ecstasy and owner of a

trendy local club. Clarissa was Peter's opposite in almost every way — emotional, high strung and reckless. Wayne grinned. He could see some "friendly" discussions between Clarissa and Peter in the near future. Wayne also created his own character, Celestial Chorister Father Ethan Shelley, a pious former Oxford don now supervising an Atlanta orphanage.

He had characters. He had a plot. Now Wayne had to get the ball rolling.

"Okay," he said. "You're working at the bar, Clarissa. There are only a couple of people here, since it's just a few minutes after opening. Peter, you came to the club to meet a potential client, but you're a bit early. The band is doing sound checks. Suddenly, you both get this eerie feeling as the band, Custer's Last Stand, runs through their set. They really suck, by the way; they're dressed like cowboys and Native Americans and do really lame Guadalcanal Diary covers. But the weird feeling starts when the drummer begins playing this painted bongo. Peter, you see there's another guy a few tables over who looks as startled as you. He's got silver hair and wears an expensive suit. There's something odd about his eyes. He walks over slowly, and you see that his eyes aren't flesh. They're more like cold glass, with a reddish glow. He smiles and pulls out a gun. Let's see, initiative is Wits + Alertness, right? Roll it."

"Oh, crap," said Keith and Deena in unison.

Call to Adventure: Beginning the Game

What is the wellspring of epic games? Does one jump fully formed from the Storyteller's head? Or is there some other secret? If you want to run a great game from your first session onward, you've come to the right place. This chapter can help you start a **Mage: The Ascension** game from scratch, and offers hints to keep it going once you begin.

What if you're already an experienced Storyteller? Is there anything here that can help you? Of course! Even the most basic advice has wisdom that a seasoned hand can use. Follow the adventures of Wayne and co. and bring a new dimension to your chronicle. You'll be glad you did.

Getting 'Em Together

I'll just go sit by those obvious player-character types.
— Stewart MacWilliam

Chronicles and stories center around characters. As a Storyteller, you can either create the chronicle to fit the characters or let the characters fit the chronicle. Either way works, but each approach begins differently.

The story really starts with the players. Are they eager to get going? Have they already worked out the whos, whys and wheres surrounding their characters? Have they drafted elaborate back histories for each mystick? If so, perhaps an open chronicle — in which the characters provide the impetus for the stories — is the best idea. Experienced gamers favor this sort of game; here, they can wind up their creations and watch them go.

On the other hand, the closed chronicle — where the characters tie into a greater story — might be a better idea if your players seem uncertain. This type of chronicle, ideal for new roleplayers, allows you to control character creation and your plots. Although it might seem restricted at first glance, the closed game works well as a kick-off for a new system, or as a diversion between larger or more intricate tales.

Open Chronicles

Open chronicles begin with character creation; here, Storytellers generally construct their plots around the characters' hopes, ambitions, actions and personalities. You might have a mixed cabal, with Dreamspeakers, Celestial Choristers, Cultists of Ecstasy and Akashic Brothers all thrown together, or end up with a more unified cabal formed by members of similar Traditions.

The biggest problem with open chronicles is getting the group together and keeping it intact without becoming contrived. If you choose this option, get ready to wing it! An open chronicle demands flexibility. Your players have to cooperate with you here — a group made up of an Ecstatic drifter, a bigoted Dreamspeaker and a renegade Progenitor is going to have a tough time staying together without a handful of good reasons! Have your players work out some connections between their mages, and let them roleplay them to the hilt. Maybe the Cultist's sister dated the Progenitor when he was in college, the Dreamspeaker's grudge comes from a "secret project" that the Progenitor happens to have worked on, and the Technomancer feels guilty about his crime. The shaman and the Ecstatic, meanwhile, clash constantly over philosophies, but maintain an unspoken romance disguised by rivalry. What happens if the scientist falls for the Cultist, too? Opposites do attract, after all. Now you have ties that bind — and perhaps gag as well! Drama rises naturally out of interpersonal conflicts. Give the group a compelling reason to stay together — the aforementioned secret project, for instance — and let the players take things from there.

Nobody's perfect, of course. Sometimes it takes a heavy-handed introduction to set everyone in the same direction. As long as the opening scene sets the tone for the game, though, who really cares? Wayne used the dreaded "bar fight" device, but it worked. Peter's potential client probably won't show up, but the characters will be way too busy worrying about Iteration X to care!

There are, of course, a million ways to jump-start the action without a bar brawl. Maybe Peter tracks someone to the alley behind Clarissa's club; maybe Clarissa's old lover wants something he left in her apartment, and has hired Peter to retrieve it...you get the idea. There are many ways to start a chronicle. So long as the tale begins with a bang, you're on the right track.

Closed Chronicles

Closed chronicles are plot-driven. Storytellers create that plot, then ask the players to make appropriate characters within given guidelines. Say you want to run a historical chronicle using the Order of Hermes; one mage could be nobility, another a peasant and the third an ambassador from the Church. Simply tell your players what you want, give them a handout of pertinent information (or make up their characters in advance yourself), and let them take over from there. The focus of the tale comes from you. Although this approach might seem restricting to some

players, such games are easier to begin than open-ended ones are. The characters begin with common goals, mutual ties and a reason to be together.

Closed chronicles have three potential problems: First, you may have difficulties with a player who can't conform to the game's structure. If you're running a Euthanatos chronicle set around cleaning out and rebuilding the House of Helekar, and someone insists on playing a Verbena who hates Euthanatos, that's a big issue. Do you want to keep your plans intact? If so, you need to gently guide the player toward another option or give her character a compelling reason to stick around.

The second problem involves the chronicle's evolution. If all goes well, the players will eventually want to grow beyond the game's original structure. Once the House of Helekar is refurbished, for example, what then? Will you close down your successful chronicle or develop some new ideas? The one-shot game is okay, but eager players will demand more stories if they've had a good time.

Finally, a closed chronicle requires much more work on your part. You need to have a solid idea of the plot, antagonists and direction of the story *before* the game even begins. The players should know, through handouts or discussion, how to act within the setting, and should have reasons to stay on course. Running a good closed chronicle requires more control than an open one, so think things through carefully before you send out invitations to potential players.

The Reflexivity Compact: Listening and Brainstorming

He wants to do us a favor for doing her a favor after she does him a favor? The mind boggles.

— Darrell Autrey

Where do great Storytellers come up with their ideas? Are they naturally brilliant and creative, or do they steal shamelessly from other sources? Where do they get the complex schemes and juicy details that make certain games so memorable? For most Storytellers, the process involves a melange of creativity, resources, player input and luck. You begin with the germ of an idea, add complications, and then set the players free to tie their own nooses.

Return again to the example of Wayne's introductory game. He began with three distinct goals: Get the characters to meet each other; introduce the Technocracy (the chronicle's recurring enemy); and throw in what Humphrey Bogart so aptly called a "dingus" — an enigmatic plot element, in this case the bongo drum. To a lesser extent, Wayne wanted to test the game's rules, and decided that the best way to do so was to run a fight and let the characters use their magick. Wayne was also thinking beyond the initial scenario; he saw some interesting conflicts developing

between Peter and Clarissa over lifestyles and magickal paradigms, and he wanted the players to have a healthy respect for Iteration X. Each character already has some future plotlines built in, like Peter's conflict with his Fallen mentor. By the time the fight in the club ends, Wayne will have accomplished most of his goals. The characters will become comrades in arms, will have survived a scrap with a HIT Mark, and will have a mission: Find out what's so special about that drum!

After the fight, the characters meet. Peter and Clarissa surmise that the drum is some sort of Native American Talisman, and they resolve to find out more about it. Keith and Deena tell Wayne their plans; he, in turn, plots ahead: His character, Father Shelley, will be visiting the nearest reservation in the next scenario. Wayne makes notes to check out some books on Native American culture and artifacts, and to create a Dreamspeaker shaman as a supporting character. He ends the session with a new crop of ideas ready to harvest.

The point of this example is that the Storyteller isn't the only creative force in a successful game. Wayne began the chronicle, but from that starting point, the players became his partners. They planned and brainstormed, handing the attentive Storyteller a platter of ideas for future games. Mingling their ideas and goals with his own, Wayne gets his chronicle off to a great start.

Using Supplements for Best Effect

*Wayne cackled wickedly at the look on Deena's face as he described the Maze of Ebon Gates, stronghold of the Jade Demon. Clarissa had blundered into every web he'd spun, coming on to one of the Nephandus' henchmen and following him to the dark Labyrinth beneath Chicago's Chinatown. Within the Maze, the Fallen archmage awaited his new "acquisitions" — Clarissa, Father Shelly and the Demon's former pupil, Peter. In reality, Wayne had a little help building these Ebon Gates: a chapter in **The Book of Chantries**. In time, a final battle in the Chinese Labyrinth would spell either salvation or corruption for Clarissa, Peter and Father Shelley. Wayne could hardly wait....*

Even the most creative Storyteller with loads of time on her hands runs dry of ideas occasionally. Thankfully, there's a 20-year-old wellspring of creativity waiting inside the nearest game or bookshop: game supplements.

To use or not to use? And *what* to use if you do? That's a matter of personal preference. Some Storytellers take a published book as gospel and work outward from the "established canon." Others pick and choose, rewriting characters, mixing systems and adding or discarding elements as they will. Either option works. Supplements are smorgasbords of ideas. Pick and choose from them, tailoring their settings and characters to fit your individual needs. You may just want to use a few characters in a setting of your own, or might simply choose the ideas as a springboard for some-

thing new. The choice of materials — and the use you put them to — is yours.

If you choose to employ material from supplements, it's important to keep the focus on the players. Ultrapowerful NPCs (Storyteller-run characters) or intricate settings can overshadow your players if you favor what is written over what is played. It's fatally easy to let Porthos take center stage when he's got Sphere powers from hell and influence to match. Keep him in the background, though — the story belongs to your troupe, not to the "Mages of Note," regardless of how interesting or powerful those notables may be. Keep your chronicle focused on the trials of your players' characters. The great measure of a game book is the ideas it inspires, not the statistics it contains.

Preparation

It's not murder; it's housecleaning.

— Wayne Peacock

Preparation exists on a continuum. On one end, some Storytellers like to run their games with nothing more than a few scrawled notes. At the other end, some folks need all the characters neatly finished on sheets, with extensive details and a flowchart of the plot. Most people, of course, fall somewhere in between.

Generally, the more experienced you are the more flexible and informal your preparations can be. Many Storytellers like to begin plotting their scenarios with a simple outline, listing events of the game in the *ideal* order, describing other characters the players will meet along the way. A few notes about important clues, sights or sensations compliment a couple of Storyteller character sheets. That's all most experienced Storytellers need, although there's something to be said for erring on the side of caution rather than being caught unprepared. If you're new to this, spend a little extra time fleshing out the plot and the characters. This brainstorming process — which might or might not involve lots of paper, depending on how you prefer to work — will give you a chance to figure out your approach.

And then there's presentation, the method you use to get ideas across to your troupe. Will you speak through the Storyteller characters and sensory impressions (good) or drone out endless "10' x 10' room" descriptions (*not* good)? Wayne, for example, prefers to speak through his Storyteller characters. He offers clues, details and warnings through dialogue, and saves objective narration for key scenes.

Scripts vs. Notes

Flexibility is an essential but often slippery storytelling art. Players seldom, if *ever*, do what you expect! If you've set up a rigidly linear plot and the players start deviating from it, you're going to get frustrated. Yet if you don't allow them to deviate, *they're* going to be frustrated. Sometimes, however, you have to force the plot along. If you want to avoid total chaos (or boredom), certain things have to happen. Certain plot elements must fall into place no matter what the characters do, or don't do. Without those "falling dominos," you're stuck with a series of random events, not a story. How can you strike a balance between the two?

Scripts are the most detailed preparations you can make. Like pre-designed "adventure modules," they include sample dialogue samples, full write-ups of all the Storyteller characters, maps and minutiae about every possible encounter. While they're useful when players insist on groaning sideboards of description, scripts can be superfluous; they require lots of prep time and detract from the game's natural spontaneity. A Storyteller who feels compelled to stick to her script loses flexibility, and often ends up trapped between what the script anticipates and what the players actually do.

Notes contain fewer details and restrictions than scripts. Although they demand a lot of improvisational skill, a few guidelines offer you more room to move than a pre-prepared script does. Most experienced Storytellers prefer notes over scripts for that reason; they start with an outline, then jot down new ideas when inspiration strikes. As things continue, these Storytellers add details — unresolved plotlines, new characters, changed relationships — into the notes. The hard part is keeping up with your players; there'll be lots of them and only one of you.

The happy medium involves a "cheat sheet," a short outline of important characters, events and plans behind the scenes. With it, you can plot out *who's* doing *what* to *whom* before the players enter the picture. Use this outline as a guidebook, not as a walkway. It's easier to stay flexible when your plot has some "give" to it. A rigid sequence of "*This* follows *this* follows *this*" is a recipe for frustration — yours and theirs.

Be warned: Nothing annoys players more than a poorly prepared Storyteller. Whichever method you prefer, make sure that the game keeps moving. Sessions that begin with "Well, you're all sitting around the Chantry. What do you do?" go downhill fast. A few games should teach you the level of preparation that best suits your needs. Make sure you're prepared enough before you invite the folks over to play. If your schedule is too tight to allow you to prepare a cheat sheet in advance, consider whether you want to run a game at all. Nobody enjoys sitting through a story that you aren't ready to run — least of all you.

• The Cheat Sheet

Put simply, a story's plot is really a matter of cause and effect. What are the events of your story? How do the characters change those events? Do you envision certain outcomes, and if so, how do you manipulate the plot to meet them? The plot of a good game is just like that of a good book, moving between events, settings, conflicts and characters to a climax and a resolution.

A "summary notes" outline for each story can be invaluable. This outline, a few pages noting who's doing what to whom (including short descriptions of the "whos" and "whoms" in question), can save you a lot of scrambling later. Before each game, sketch out the "offstage" players and their agendas as they exist before the troupe gets involved. The players' characters exist to foul these agendas, of course, so leave them out of the equation until they wind up as parts of plans. Once the story begins, use the outline as a "blueprint" for the actions your Storyteller characters pursue. Between each session, update the notes as needed.

Let's say your original plot features a powerful vampire, a cabal of Orphans in an "abandoned" theater, a drug-dealing Progenitor, his gang and a corrupt mayor. You'd describe each person in shorthand ("Rosario, vampire prince of the city; tall, long black hair, commanding presence, speaks politely but firmly. Has control of police, mayor & local gangs but has opposition among Kindred. Has influence over Nightmare Theater Orphans through *Sinclair*, a Blood Doll in the group."), plot out their relationships (the "Doissetep Cabal Politics" chart in **The Book of Chantries** offers a good template for such plotting), and decide what each party wants to accomplish. We'll say that *Rosario* plans to subvert the Nightmare Theater through Sinclair, the *Orphans* plan to host a huge Halloween bash at their place, the *Progenitor's* girlfriend wants them both to attend, *his*

gang plans to crash the party, and *the mayor* plots to break Rosario's command over his office by calling in a professional vampire hunter — one of the players' characters. See how it all ties together?

A chronicle calendar is also a good tool to have. Use a normal block calendar, one with plenty of room to make notes about each day's events. Record what transpires during game time and jot down ideas for the future. You'll probably want to keep two versions: one for you, one for your players.

Improvisation

Improvising, like flexibility, comes with experience. It's a combination of acting out the dialogue and personalities of the Storyteller characters, running with spur-of-the-moment ideas and matching wits with the players. Have fun with it! Get inside the head of a Barrister Martins or a Jodi Blake. What would they say? How would their personalities affect their speech? What if a player's character insulted them? Get into Storyteller characters' heads and behave accordingly. Running solo "conversations" helps immeasurably. Have a Storyteller character meet one of the players' characters for lunch and simply *talk*. The end result is character development; you and the players become more at ease with improvising dialogue.

Three things to remember when running of the top of your head:

• Don't panic. Act as though you've planned for everything in advance.

• Let the drama of the situation take over. If it seems appropriate to have the police bust Clarissa's club just as the HIT Marks back her into a corner, make it so. Which leads to...

• Trust your instincts. If things seem slow, they probably are. If they seem overly complex, you're probably right. Put yourself into the situation at hand and let your inspiration ride.

Post-Game Analysis

When the session's over, take some time with the players to recap. Think through the events that occurred and the Storyteller characters met. Did anything unexpected crop up? Are there characters you want to spend more time developing? Will minor scenes become important in the future? Ask your players what they liked and what they didn't. Ask them what they'd like to do in future stories. Most of all, just *listen*. The players may surprise you by wanting to see that character you just "threw in at the last minute" take on a full-time role. On a practical note, these post-game breakdowns are great for planning the logistics of your next meeting, too. So ask for feedback, pay attention to player "requests" (within reason!) and take their critiques to heart. (See "Everyone's a Critic," below.)

The Group

This is more Akashic trashtalk, isn't it?

— Darrell Autrey

After the chronicle was well underway, Stewart and Pradha, old college friends of Wayne, came into town for a few days. They lived close enough to drop by occasionally, but not close enough to make the trip every weekend. Both were longtime gamers, and both were eager to play **Mage**.

"We've got characters made up," said Stewart over beer, chips and salsa. "I've got a Verbena named Stanislaus Kowalcyk, who really should've been a Dreamspeaker, except that he blundered into the Ascension War without a clue and got rescued by a Verbena coven."

"And I want to play an Orphan, Gwen Fisher," said Pradha. "Her mentor disappeared under mysterious circumstances, and Gwen's been on the run from the Technocracy while she looks for him. We wondered if we could join your chronicle with these characters."

Wayne thought it over. "I don't see why not. Do you think you could commit to playing once a month, say, over a long weekend?" Stewart and Pradha nodded. "Okay, then just give me some time to draw you into the story." He turned to Keith and Deena. "As long as it's okay by you two."

"Fine by me," Keith shrugged.

"Another woman," murmured Deena, with a sigh of relief. Another woman, thought the guys.

A great chronicle depends on three things: the players, the Storyteller and the chemistry between them all. Your troupe, as a unit, creates a unique communicative *space* with its own reality and personality. The tone, flavor and tension within that space comes from the relationships within the group — relationships which can make or break the circle.

New Players

Good chronicles inevitably attract new players — old friends from other games, new acquaintances, significant others and so on. New blood keeps a game going in most cases, but it can be problematic unless you consider the impact the new folks are going to have. So someone new wants to join your game. There's probably less to worry about if you've gamed with her before; chances are, everyone feels at ease with each other. The situation with an unknown player is different; who knows how she'll get along with the rest?

You could always let the newbie play a Storyteller character; this gives you a chance to see how the player's personality and gaming style meshes with the established group. Alternately, you might run a prelude for the new player's character and see how things work out for both. An in-between option grants her "player power" over an existing Storyteller character; she might join the chronicle for one game only, and stay with the program if all goes well.

If the new player creates her own character from scratch, offer her a few extra freebie points to "catch up" to the other characters. Lagging half a dozen points or so behind isn't a real issue, but the mass of points earned over a year's chronicle might make a real difference!

Before you allow another person to join, though, consider how many players you want in your game. It's flattering when hordes of people ask to join the chronicle, but do you really want to run a game with nine players? Most Storytellers prefer to run with three to six people. Remember, the more players you have, the less attention each character will get.

New players can be a blessing or a curse. Someone whose gaming style, philosophy and personality conflicts with the established group can totally destroy a chronicle, while a responsible and interested new player can breathe life into a game that's slowed down.

• Power-Gamers

Sometimes even the most innocuous players get greedy at the expense of the plot and the group. Every Storyteller has probably heard a variant of "What do you mean Leopold Ortega, son of Heylel, archmage ruler of Doissetep and secret spy in the Symposium, can't simultaneously rip Saturn from its orbit and father his love-child on Marianna of Balador?" Before giving these players the boot, try to explain how such actions can screw the game up for everyone else. Hopefully, he'll catch on and be cool about things from there on.

Remind power-gamers that half the fun of playing a game is striving for goals; if a character is unstoppable, what's the use in playing? While you're at it, you may find it helpful to set certain "house rules" on power limits in the game, or to keep tabs on how power-gamers spend their experience. If the problem persists, you may have no choice but to ask the player to resign.

- **Rules Lawyers**

Rules lawyers annoyingly quote rules to Storytellers and players alike, believing that systems should take precedence over stories. They are not people who disagree with or misunderstand the rules; these are folks who've read their gaming books cover to cover dozens of times, use extensive highlighting and insist on an archival-quality page reference system. Most rules lawyers shy away from the Storyteller system on basic principle; the Golden Rule (**Mage**, page 83) tends to irritate people who like systems set in stone. Even so, some folks still insist on rules over roleplay. Now what?

Like the power-gamer, the rules lawyer deserves some explanation when you disagree with his behavior. Explain that while rules are important for certain situations (like combat or magick), they don't have to be consulted every time someone wants to use First Aid to trim a hangnail. Tell him that Storytelling is a matter of pacing and flexibility — looking up every rule in every situation is *boring*. If he continues arguing, take him aside and ask him to stop. Most fully upright human beings get the picture by this point. Nonetheless, you shouldn't be afraid to ask the player to leave the game if solving the rules lawyer problem proves impossible.

"The Talk"

Wayne got up and stretched. "Okay, let's take a break. I need some coffee." He turned to Pradha as she was walking to the bathroom. "Hey, can I talk to you for a minute?"

She paused. "What's up?"

Wayne didn't mince words. "I think the way you're using that rote to turn spandex into kevlar is wrong."

"My last Storyteller let me use it that way," Pradha bristled.

"Yeah, but I'm not sure it works that way by the rules. Here, take a look. If you don't agree, we can talk about it." He handed her the book and went in search of caffeine. By the time he got back to the gaming table, she'd finished reading.

"Okay," Pradha sighed, "looks like you're right. Guess I'll have to think of something else to protect Gwen's lily-white flesh."

"Let me think on it, too," said Wayne. "Maybe we can come up with another solution."

Creative people (i.e., gamers) often lug around enormous egos. They're sharp, witty people and they usually know it. Consequently, they're also a volatile crowd to work with. How can you firmly but respectfully generate a rules decision and make it stick?

If a player disagrees with a ruling, listen to her explanation and consider her side of the issue. You might change your mind once you think about it. Regardless of your final decision, clarify why you've made it. If she persists, adopt a temporary stopgap and give yourself time to think the situation over. If Pradha had continued to argue the fact with Wayne, he might have allowed her to use the rote through the end of the current session. This would've kept things moving and still let him resolve the issue once and for all before the next game.

- **Player Conflict**

Conflict is fun! To paraphrase Aaron Allston, characters can be at each others' throats while players are grinning and having a great time. Clashes can create excitement — *unless* the fights move beyond the realm of roleplaying and turn personal between your players. If that happens, you'll need good judgment to know when to butt in and when to stay clear. If the *players* seem to be having fun and remaining true to their characters' personalities, things are probably okay.

There has to be some kind of friendly bond between all of the players. If things are shaky at the outset, don't worry about it — cohesion often develops as a chronicle progresses. If the players don't link after suitable time passes, though, ask questions. Why aren't the players coming together as a group? Are there unspoken hostilities present? Are some players unhappy with their characters? Does everyone feel included? Do certain players (or characters) seem to dominate the game? If problems seem to exist, look at the gameplay to find out why.

Let's return to Wayne's chronicle for a minute. When Peter discovered that Clarissa had consorted with minions of the Jade Demon, his iron control snapped. He and Father Shelley told her in no-nonsense terms that she was walking down a dangerous path. Clarissa hurled back some insults at both of them, couched not so daintily in terms of their sexual prowess, and the fight was on. Meanwhile, the players were having a great time. The conflict added depth to their characters and to the chronicle as a whole, without causing trouble between Keith, Deena and Wayne. If, for contrast, Deena had snapped at Keith, things would have moved to another level: a level of conflict nobody really wants.

- **The Last Resort**

Hopefully, we're all adults here. It's not your job as Storyteller to play parent, too. Even so, you should be the ultimate arbiter in times of crisis. If things seem to be getting, shall we say, sticky in real life, call a timeout and discuss the problem. If everybody's too pissed to discuss things, you might have to end the session, but that should be a last resort. At worst, that could give the angry parties another grievance against each other. ("It's *your* fault the game got canceled!") If possible, keep things from going that far.

One of the hardest tasks a Storyteller can have is taking a character (or player) out of the group because he doesn't fit. He might be a great guy, but his character seems to be odds with the other mages; he might be the "Dreamspeaker's" boyfriend, but he thinks every other guy in the group is hitting on her out of character. Either way, there's a problem — a problem you'll have to address.

First, take the player aside and tell him, as kindly as possible, about the difficulty. With any luck he'll take the hint and either change his character or his attitude. If things don't improve you may need to threaten to remove him from the group (in character or otherwise). Eventually, you might have to ask him — or *tell* him — to leave completely. Hopefully, this step won't be necessary. If it comes to this, get the others to back you up, and be sure — *really* sure — that there are no better options first.

There's no easy way to ask a player to change or leave. If there's a chance for redemption, you may want to offer him a part in a different chronicle, or run a solo or pair-game for him (see below). Being nice takes some of the sting out of the whole mess. If you have a totally hostile player, though, nothing but complete expulsion will work. (See Chapter Six's essay about sex and gender roles for further suggestions.)

Separating Games from Reality

I need to go to the bathroom. Hand me that big stack of books, will ya?

— Keith Martin

The bottom line is that gaming is a hobby. It's fun, builds friendships, allows exercise of creativity and teaches people about group accomplishments. But it can also become an outlet for misplaced hostility. Each and every person who comes to the gaming table brings baggage from the "real world." If a player has had a rotten day, he may well take his anger out on you or against other players through his character. Some issues that crop up in the game world, such as rape or abuse, may cause tensions for players who've had to deal with these situations for real. What can you do to keep your chronicle realistic and exciting without intruding on real-world sensitivities? What should you do about the player who's had a crappy day at the office and just wants to kill, kill, kill?

First of all, remember that *it's only a game.* If you hit a sensitive spot, work through it immediately. Second, understand where your players are coming from. If someone's got a lousy day job, he may be temperamental at the gaming table. Finally, don't hesitate to talk to a player if his real-

world problems ruin the game. You have more at stake than one player's bad day; there's the enjoyment of the other players and the welfare of the chronicle to consider as well.

Gaming, like any hobby, can become an obsession. If it turns into a force that utterly controls peoples' lives, some self-reflection is probably in order. Even pie and ice cream get boring after a while.

• Everyone's a Critic

Well, that was about as much fun as getting gut-shot with a .45.
— Keith Martin

As we know, life isn't perfect; games are less so. One of the hardest things you'll have to accept as a Storyteller is a bit of well-meant but probably ill-phrased criticism. There's a big difference, of course, between someone saying "That game sucked!" and "Hey, I think tonight's game had some problems. Can we discuss it?" Nobody should have to put up with the former, but let's be honest: Most gamers aren't noted for their tact. Still, if your troupe has some constructive comments for improving the game, you have an obligation to listen. You may not agree 100% with what they say, but listen anyway. They could be right on the mark. A willingness to listen, either to requests or to critiques, shows the others that you're paying attention; better, it shows that you care, and concern excuses a multitude of sins.

The Prime Directive: Have Fun!

"Okay," said Stewart, playing Stanley, "we need to kinda prioritize what's going on and what needs attending to. I'm interested in the whole Umbra thing with the trains carrying spirits of the dead. I mean, what's the Technocracy really doing?"

Wayne had a hard time hiding his grin. The Umbral quest had been in the back of his mind since the game's inception. He'd dropped hints here and there through the stories he'd run, but the characters hadn't picked up any major clues. This session, though, he was ready. He'd worked hard on the Storyteller characters, the Void Engineers' base and enough nasties from Iteration X to keep the cabal very busy.

"On the other hand," said Deena, speaking as Clarissa, "there's that really cute guy in Chicago. And his master, that old Chinese man and the weird Labyrinth I saw...."

"For once, I agree with Clarissa," said Keith as Peter. "If what I suspect is going on with her new lover is true, it's a pressing matter, one that cannot wait."

"I'm with you two," said Pradha. "Stanley?"

Stewart nodded. "Yeah, I guess so. We can always come back to the trains; the tracks shouldn't go anywhere while we're gone."

Wayne remained silent. It wasn't that he didn't have lots of plans for the Maze of Ebon Gates and the Jade Demon; he had all kinds of ideas. But he'd been excited about the chance to take the characters into the Umbra. On the other hand, he thought, this is probably the first time Peter and Clarissa have been willing to work together since the original game. All the players and their characters seem really directed and committed; this is something they really want to do. The Umbra plot will focus a lot on Pradha and Stanley, so it might be a good chance to let Peter and Clarissa be in the limelight before moving on — assuming they survive.

Finally, he smiled. This was gonna be fun.

When a carefully crafted and well-played game goes right, it's a real thrill. What an ego boost when players sit around after a game talking about the great time they've all had! So how can the group continually achieve this kind of success? What are the rights, duties and obligations of everyone in the chronicle?

The true job of a Storyteller is to make sure the players (but not necessarily the *characters*) have a good time. This comes with quality preparation, by knowing players and characters alike, and by catering to their interests. Like a selfless host at a party, you may sometimes have to sacrifice things you'd like to pursue in favor of the players' desires.

Look at the example: If the players are really pumped to follow one plotline as opposed to another, a wise Storyteller would go along with them. If players are interested, they're going to have better interaction and focus. Wayne would've spoiled things if he'd forced the players to investigate the spirit trains when the mages wanted to check out the Labyrinth. He went with the players' desires, and he'll no doubt have a great time watching them squirm in the Jade Demon's clutches.

At the same time, as the Storyteller you have a vested interest in your own enjoyment. You have the right to ask players for common courtesy, like paying attention to the game instead of watching television or making bad jokes. If you've worked hard on an exciting game and the players greet you with disinterest, it's insulting and rude. If you put big effort into scheduling a game around everyone's lives, and players continually show up late, hungover or asleep, no one can blame you for being pissed. Running a good game may give you (and the players) a rush, but having bum players is nothing but a drain.

One final point: The prime directive of games always remains the same. Have fun! *Whenever* in doubt, refer to the prime directive.

Spice of Life: Ongoing Chronicles

Wayne had taken the cabal through about half a dozen scenarios. The group had four characters — Stanley, Gwen, Peter and Clarissa — in addition to his Storyteller character Father Shelley, who served as a mentor to the cabal. He also had two main plots, the ongoing battle with the Technocracy and the burgeoning complications with the Jade Demon.

Now he wanted to incorporate a more coherent flavor and atmosphere into his games. In addition to The Book of Chantries, he now owned The Fragile Path, The Book of Madness and The Book of Worlds. These supplements gave him a wealth of material to draw from. Wayne devised twists for more Storyteller characters, including a kid Marauder who knew how to derail the Umbral trains, and a group of nasty hedge magicians who might be willing to help Clarissa and Peter fight the Jade Demon...for a price. He also thought about a foe from Stanley's past and ways to insert clues about Gwen's vanished mentor.

The game, Wayne thought, stands on a critical threshold. Now if I can just keep things going as well as they have for the past several months, I think I'll have an epic on my hands....

Our Story Continues....

Now you're ready to explore a little deeper into the world of Mage: The Ascension. You feel more or less at ease with the system and the players. Maybe it's too early for a dozen complex, overlapping subplots and crossovers with other Storyteller games, but everyone's ready to examine some new options: solo and pair-games, blue-booking, new rotes and house rules. This section will help you move beyond a chronicle's basic frame to add flavor and classic bits from the genre.

Learning to Listen

When players spout some variation of "Wouldn't it be wild if we met one of those Doissetep mages?" take heed! Player input is vital; Storytellers who ignore requests do so at their own peril. This doesn't mean you have to drop all your plans to organize a trip to Doissetep, but players say what they want to play. If you disappoint them too often, they'll move on.

Aaron Allston notes that every character has her own "story" to tell. Usually, this story focuses on the character's unfulfilled goals and dreams. In Wayne's game, Pradha's Orphan Gwen has an obvious story: the quest for her lost mentor, Bethany. When Pradha first joined the group, Wayne didn't give the distant mentor much thought. Each session, though, Pradha mentions how much she'd like to trace Bethany's whereabouts. Accordingly, Wayne plans out a story in which Bethany, a signet ring and a mysterious faerie play important roles. A series of clues, left where Gwen can find them, steers the group toward the new plot, much to Pradha's delight.

Naturally there's a difference between "Wouldn't it be cool if we found the missing city?" and "Wouldn't it be cool if I single-handedly destroyed MECHA?" Most times, the contrast will be pretty obvious. If your troupe's desires become a power-gamer's wish-list, gently but firmly remind them that roleplaying's not about winning. It's about fun.

The Underlying Theme

There's fun to be found in the dark, of course, but too much despair becomes oppressive. So how dark do you want *your* game world to be? What are the chronicle's primary moods and themes? What's your mystickal society like? How do magickal worlds overlap? In which ways does the "enemy" manifest its power? The "official" World of Darkness provides a foundation for the typical **Mage** chronicle, but the shape of the house depends on the desires of the architect. As the game progresses, ask yourself what *you* would like to play. Then plan accordingly.

Generally, the Storyteller sets the flavor of the chronicle. You decide if the world is one of sheer despair, tentative hope or light-hearted fun. Reflect this mood in the stories you tell and in the atmosphere you weave, in the actions and intentions of your own characters (see **Mage**, pages 148-152, for suggestions and techniques). Set the tone and your players will follow.

From the outset, Wayne wanted his chronicle to take place in a world similar to ours; the Gothic-Punk element exists, but on the fringes of the game. He also decided to use two very different sorts of enemies: the Technocracy, factions of which struggle with each other close to the characters' homes, and a Nephandus who plots against the cabal from afar. Wayne's vision of the Technocracy involves lots of high-tech and corporate espionage — direct methods with clear-cut objectives. The Technocracy offers him the opportunity for high-speed chases, gun battles, kidnapping and blackmail. On the other hand, he sees the Jade Demon as an instrument of subtle menace and horror. The Nephandus and his minions could appear helpful and cooperative while pulling the characters into a seething pit of corruption. This gives Wayne the chance to explore "things we were not meant to know." Scenarios set around the Maze of Ebon Gates involve temptation, power and the price of knowledge while the Technocracy brings in a gritty, competitive conflict. Both options work.

Wayne's world becomes a swirling cloud of gray rather than an inky black swamp. The odds may be against the cabal, true, but doom doesn't wait around every corner. As the game progresses, the cabal's survival hinges on the characters' devotion to each other and their willingness to make sacrifices. These ideas, in turn, become the primary themes of the game. Each mage is quite different. Will personality clashes tear the cabal apart? Or can characters' mutual hopes and fears hold them together?

Atmosphere and Sensory Detail

We live in a sensual world; our mysticks, with their magickal senses, understand that world on a whole other level. So how do you get that across to your players? Description, and lots of it. Not dry droning ("You walk 10 feet down the corridor, check the door for traps and continue down another 25 feet until you come to another door…"), but sensory description ("The air hurts to breathe, it's so gritty and thick. A creeping stain in the corner reeks of rot…"). Place yourself in the game world with all senses going, and you'll be able to carry your troupe along for the ride.

First, think about your normal senses: hearing, sight, touch, taste and smell. When describing a person, consider his obvious physical and personality traits. Move beyond the color of hair, eyes and skin to find the traits which make him really distinctive. Is his voice that of an old man or a young boy? What language does he speak? Does he have a certain smell? Justin Leiber once described a child's scent as a "cross between baby powder and a playground," a brief but powerful observation. In other words, talk about your characters in terms that make them individuals — *memorable* individuals.

The same suggestions apply to places and things. What sets one dusty old tome apart from another? What could you say about an ordinary hospital room that would give a player cause to worry? Push your creative envelope by considering senses other than sight and hearing, then channel your imagination through them.

Next, imagine senses outside normal human range. Mages have (or should have) a certain magickal Awareness. They can tell if something's amiss, magickally speaking — weird feelings, prickles at the back of the neck, nausea or giddiness are common sensations to them. Magick has a "feel" to it that mysticks recognize, a rippling ebb and flow that says "Something's going on here." (See **Mage**, page 172.) Describe that flow to your players as magick goes to work; it may not (and should not) tell them exactly what's happening, but it'll clue them in while underscoring the reality of the game world.

Play on a character's paradigm in your descriptions, too; a pacifist Dreamspeaker may feel sickened if he walks past the site of a Good Death. He may not know precisely what happened, but chances are your description of "a lingering miasma of fear, the scent of sweat and a riveting silence" will attract the character's attention. What about a Celestial Chorus street missionary passing a group of Ecstatic singers? The mystick may feel her heart lighten as the music stirs her soul. No rote or magickal Effect is necessary — any mage will feel something out of the ordinary around such, shall we say, "talented" singers. The Awareness and Intuition Traits provide excellent plot hooks and clue magnets.

Finally, consider the more understated influences of the mind. Beliefs, memories, identities — all of these factors shape our perceptions, providing filters and lenses through which characters perceive the world. An elitist Progenitor surgeon, for example, would regard a hot dog quite differently than a destitute Hollow One would. To the Technomancer, the hot dog is at best something to feed to lab rats; to the Orphan it might be the only meal he'll get that day. Consider these filters when you describe the people whom characters meet; a haughty Hermetic Master would react differently to the Progenitor than he would to the Hollow One (and probably won't think much of either of them). Perception and prejudice shapes the way we see things, and that, too, can play a part.

You *can*, of course, go overboard. Too many rich, thick descriptions bog the game down. The key to giving good sensory detail is knowing *when* to describe *what* in such a manner as to make an impression on the players. Be selective; choose one or two notable things — the things that form *your* first impression — and concentrate on those elements. Remember, you're a *Storyteller*, not a *storywriter*. Watch your players; if their eyes start to glaze over, cut to the chase.

Sense Memory

No, it's not a rote. This invaluable tool for writers, actors and Storytellers involves making a "sense file" in your memory, adding to it whenever possible, and opening it as needed.

First, concentrate on forming a mental filing cabinet for various senses and situations. Next, take a moment — wherever you are, whatever you're doing — to catalogue your sensory impressions of that place. Move from one impression to the next, isolating the experience as much as possible, and add each one to your mental file. End the exercise by closing the "folder" and labeling it. There: You have a sense memory folder of that time, place or event. Whenever you need to describe such a thing, it'll be there.

Sense memory isn't just a tool, it also helps you to appreciate the world around you in ways we normally miss. The next time you go somewhere or experience something, open the mental file. Close your eyes and go through the steps: How does this *feel*? How does it *smell*? Is there a *taste*? How do things *sound*? Finally, open your eyes and catalogue how it *looks*, then add the mental "stamp" on the range of impressions. And there it is — a memorized sense of that place or time. More often than not, we simply skim across our perceptions. Opening files for our many experiences not only helps us remember them, it helps us savor them. If we tell stories, sense memory helps us relate to them on a deeper level than simple words ever could.

Holiday Specials, or Humor Can Be Fun

All right! That's it! It's gotten silly!
— John Cleese, *Monty Python's Flying Circus*

Mage is a pretty serious game; the characters are fighting for humanity's future as we know it. That's heavy material, folks. Occasionally a note of wicked humor is appropriate, especially around the holiday season. The average Sleeper's suspension of disbelief is, after all, generally more flexible between October and the end of the year, and all kinds of things can happen.

When the Atlanta group's troubles with the Technocrats and Jade Demon become too intense, Wayne decides to lighten things up. As Christmas trees appear in parking lots and the neighborhood kids suddenly get a lot nicer, Wayne decides to give the players a special treat: a **Mage** holiday story. After fattening the players up on sweets, he tosses them into a game set at the North Pole, complete with elves and a big man in a red suit calling himself Santa. The only problem is that every now and then, one of the characters hears cries for help in the distance, voices that sound like Father Shelley and the children from the orphanage. Thus begins the adventure that will soon be dubbed "Santa Nephandus and His *Barabbi* Elves." The group has so much fun that Wayne follows the tale with a later epic, "The Applesauce Gang Rides Again," pitting amnesiac mages against a gang of perky cowboy Marauders.

The point to all this is that it's good to take off the black veil occasionally. Gaming is supposed to be fun. If each session is oh so solemn and grave, the players will get bored. It's *okay* to have some laughs once in a while. Really.

Extra Touches

Lots of small, seemingly unimportant touches can make games really fun, and your job much easier. Here are a few suggestions for Storyteller props that give the game an extra boost.

• **Maps and Floor Plans:** When planning an outdoor setting or an urban chronicle, maps are indispensable. A good world atlas can be had for less than $20; many state tourism offices and city chambers of commerce send out maps free of charge. Books of commercial house plans are cheap and come in handy during combat situations. If the characters build a Chantry, draw up floor plans with your players; you never know when unexpected visitors might come calling.

Miniatures and battlemats make combats easy to track, and give the group a focus, too. It's easy to see who's where when you have a tableau right in front of you. See "The Lively Art of Combat," below, for more details.

• **Puzzles and Tricks:** Whether you have a lost page of lore or a seemingly blank scroll, puzzles and trick props keep players amused. Write out a ritual on a piece of parchment, then cut the paper into fragments, losing a few in the garbage can. Putting the pieces together will cause complications! Or use the old trick of writing a message with lemon juice, which remains invisible until held over a candle flame. These kind of "mood" pieces lend a mysterious air to the game.

• **Letters:** Whether delivered by winged familiar, spirit or just snail mail, letters from Storyteller characters to players' characters personalize the game. The players enjoy reading and re-reading witty "in-character" letters more than just listening to a quick speech from you.

• **Pictures:** The cliché is true; a picture is worth a thousand words. Consider getting actual pictures of the places you use in the chronicle, if you can. The World Wide Web is an excellent place to obtain photos. Keep magazine clippings of interesting people as a source for Storyteller characters; catalogs and fashion magazines are a cheap place to start. If you're one of the lucky folks who can draw well, illustrate your main characters and other strange objects or places that are important.

• **Quotation Collections:** Dialogue flies back and forth between player and Storyteller characters like spit wads in a classroom. Take advantage of that! Assign a "quotekeeper" to jot choice morsels down and read them back at the beginning of the next game. It's entertaining and keeps a flow of continuity between games.

• **Personalized Binders:** If you can afford to blow a few bucks, make ring-binders for each character to keep things organized. Players can personalize their binders with pictures of their characters, notes, appropriate Sphere sheets (see **Hidden Lore**) or homemade rotes. Dedicated players may even want to write up individual adventure logs from their characters' point of view. It's probably a matter of personal choice whether or not you keep track of everyone's folders or leave the responsibility to the players, but they're helpful things to have.

• **Episode Guides:** Keeping a running episode guide of your chronicle is a lot of fun. Enlist the players' aid, have someone write a few paragraphs about each session, and add a witty title. Storytellers can use episode guides to remember encounters and unresolved plots, while players can use them to keep track of important characters and activities.

The Real Setting

The game's real-world setting can supply just as much depth and mood as the World of Darkness itself. Make the "gaming room" a more hospitable place with a few of these suggestions.

• **Music:** Many gamers enjoy "mood music." Several **Mage** sourcebooks offer suggestions for appropriately atmospheric music, and threads on the subject crop up often on White Wolf newsgroups. Dead Can Dance, The Changelings, Ministry, Loreena McKennitt, Gustov Holst,

Oysterband, Sky Cries Mary, Miranda Sex Garden and R. Carlos Nakai are perennial **Mage** writer favorites, but any artist who sets a mood without overwhelming the game can work. For a more individual touch, record a "soundtrack" of your own selections for each game.

• **Lights:** Lighting is a dilemma. Everyone needs to see their character sheets and dice, but harsh overheads really spoil the mood. Lamps with frosted or colored bulbs can prevent eyestrain while still invoking a touch of mystery. Use candles for additional effect.

• **Props:** As mentioned above, maps, floorplans, letters and clues are good props. If a character has a certain focus for his magick, like a silver pendant, the player may want to bring a real-world equivalent along.

If your group has a problem with players constantly cutting each other off, get some sort of "speaking stick" — anything from a carved Native American staff to a beat-up wooden ruler. A player holds onto the stick while he speaks, then passes it along to the next speaker in turn. Only the player with the stick may speak, though everyone should agree on a maximum time limit.

• **Elbow Room:** Make sure you have enough space for everyone. Some gamers like sitting around a table; others prefer sprawling on the floor with pillows and household pets. Whatever your preference, make sure everyone has room for their characters and notes, a place to roll dice and sufficient comfortable seating.

• **Food:** For some reason, gamers love to eat; rare is the gaming book without a greasy snack smear. So give a little thought to having nibbles ready at hand. Everyone might bring something to chip in each session, or take turns providing all snacks for a given day. Alternatively, everyone could put money into a kitty and make a quick grocery run before the game begins.

Food isn't usually an issue unless one person continually provides everything without reimbursement. No one should *ever* assume it's the host's responsibility to provide munchies. Most hosts appreciate a "free food day," since they're providing space for everyone to meet.

The "R" Word: Rules

I'm only down to Mauled, and my body shielded my ray gun!
— John Craddock

As described in the immortal Golden Rule, systems often take a back seat to drama. To paraphrase Stewart MacWilliam, it's far more important to play the *character* than the game. Even so, rules still serve a vital function: They allow the players to know how the universe works, and offer a frame of reference. Roleplaying is abstract; rules make it more concrete.

Rules should help the game, not hinder it. They ought to make material easier for the player to digest, not more difficult. If a rule undercuts the players' enjoyment of the

game (and drives the Storyteller nuts), discuss revising or discarding it. Be careful, though, that rules revisions don't encourage the players to become power-gamers.

Then there are "house rules," systems agreed upon by the troupe to suit its style of play. Every group has them, whether players admit it or not. Wayne's house rules, for instance, require foci for all Effects and limit the number of botches each player can get in a single game.

If you're new to **Mage**, spend some time reading the rules. Decide what you like and don't like, discuss your ideas with the players and incorporate their input into a house system. Try out your variations, maybe in a practice session, before you bring rules changes into the regular game; that way they won't foul up the normal run of play.

Arbitrating Magickal Effects

Do you believe humans can fly? If so, how fast?
— Keith Martin

Magick is a personal Art, not a series of combat maneuvers. The forms it takes depend on the mage who wills them. So how *does* a given mage define magick? How do his beliefs shape his willworking? For a Storyteller, the answers to these questions depend on each character's (and Storyteller character's) background and beliefs. Read Chapter Eight of the main rulebook and Ross Issac's piece in this book's Chapter Six…and then reread them as often as necessary.

Familiarize yourself with the various Sphere Effects given in the **Mage** rulebook, Chapter Eight. Imagine what magick *looks* like for each Tradition (or Convention), and think about how each group explains magick's existence. Then ask yourself a few questions: How could you describe magick to the players? How does belief influence a character's style? How does it alter the appearance of her magick? Encourage the players to think about their characters' magickal styles — especially what works, what doesn't and why. The "Lady into Tiger" example on page 181 of the main rulebook offers a few clues to such questions.

It's a sad fact that each time you make a ruling on how magick does or doesn't work, you create a precedent. If you allow a character to use magick a certain way in one instance, you'd better justify why she can't repeat the Effect in another. Check out Wayne's early dispute with Pradha; Wayne disagreed with the old interpretation, and Pradha wanted an explanation as to why her rote was fine for one game and not another. In this case, Wayne talked to her, discussed their options, and left the final resolution up for a compromise. Sometimes it's okay to simply say "It doesn't work for the game that way"; hopefully, your player will understand. When in doubt, look at the rotes and use them as examples, or look at the examples and "Magickal Feats" chart in **Mage**, pages 168 and 170.

Finally, don't be afraid to make a decision and stick with it. As long as you're fair and consistent, there shouldn't be a problem. After all, **Mage** is about interpretations of reality — and reality, as we know, is a fluid thing.
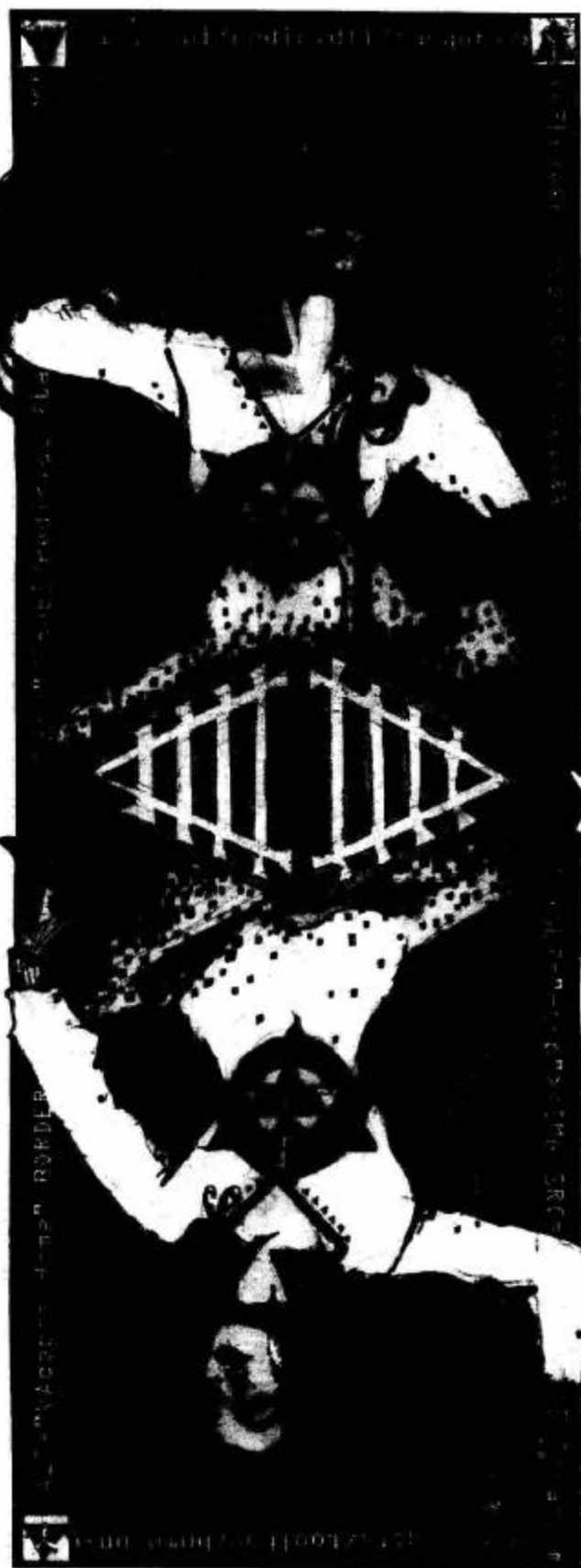
The Lively Art of Combat

Were those your HIT Marks downstairs?
— Keith Martin

After a long semantic discussion, a good scrap can really wake the players up. Still, not all players are "combat monsters"; long die-rolling fests bore the hell out of some people but excite others to rapture. It's generally best to keep a middle ground, then, balancing your chronicle with a mix of "cerebral" roleplaying and fast-paced combat.

Imagine combat as if it were an action scene in an adventure movie. Think about *Die Hard, Raiders of the Lost Ark* or the *Star Wars* trilogy. The heroes never got a break once the weapons came out. You want to generate this same kind of excitement, so avoid the "Next turn— roll your dice again" syndrome. Vivid descriptions — "Bad-dad-ow! The guns roar and bullets scream off the wall just over your shoulder!" — adds immeasurably to the experience. Don't be afraid to look silly; get involved! Combat, in its measure, is drama.

Good pacing is essential for combat scenes. A battle has to move quickly; long dice-rolling-chart-checking contests trash a good story's momentum. Players, like their characters, ought to be thinking on their feet. No one — in real life or fiction — gets to contemplate his next shot for 10 minutes. It's been said that the best combat system is to whack your players upside the head with the rulebook; while we wouldn't advocate such, um, *drastic* measures, the point — that battle doesn't stop while everyone checks all the modifiers — is valid. Don't give 'em room to breathe; don't let up on the pace, *ever*, until the last foe — or character — falls.

Some house rules or shortcuts can help keep combat moving. You might allow only one initiative role per scene. For example, Stanley, Peter and Broti, a new mage in the cabal, are fighting a Man in Black; they roll initiative and get 3, 6, 2 and 4, respectively. Everyone keeps these initiative numbers until the fight is over, rather than rerolling them every turn. Another option "drops" enemies who reach the Wounded Health penalty; combat can last forever if the antagonists keep popping back up. As always, talk to your players about your chronicle's house rules. Ask what *they* want to see in a good scrap. Finally, the supplemental books **Hidden Lore** and **World of Darkness: Combat** offer alternative combat systems — one an abbreviated narrative flow, the other an extensive move-and-modifier option — for close-quarters situations.

Two tools are indispensable to running good combats: battlemats and miniatures. Both accessories help you keep track of who's doing what to whom and where. You've probably seen lead or plastic miniatures, which come individually in blister packs or in boxed collections. Ideally,

you'll want to get miniatures that look like the characters in your game and paint them accordingly. Battlemats are large plastic-coated pieces of cloth, usually available in clear or tan, marked with hexes or squares. They aren't cheap investments; good battlemats can cost more than the basic rulebook! They're well worth the money, though, when bodies start to fly. To save time, if you have a fight planned, draw out the scene in detail on the battlemat and hide it from the players. Be sure to use water-soluble markers (not dry erase markers) and clean up the battlemat as soon as possible. No one wants *permanent* reminders of that fight in the Succubus Club!

• Stunts and Magick

Mage is fantasy; part of its appeal is that you can pull stunts that no real person could manage. Creative combat tactics — acrobatic leaps, banter, timely "coincidences" and dramatic placed shots — break up the tedium of rolling dice. So let your players get creative. Reward their crazy stunts with bonuses, and assign some sort of roll — usually a Willpower, Dexterity + Athletics, or Manipulation + (whatever's appropriate) contest — to decide the success or failure of the stunt. An extra die, a lowered difficulty or total success make good rewards for creative and daring acts in combat. Don't let a strict reading of "the rules" dampen a cool bit.

People think of warring magi as lightning bolt machines; in **Mage**, that's rarely true. The combination of Paradox, Sleepers and sheer difficulty make coincidence a better weapon than vulgar magick. *Literal* weapons, on the other hand, make ideal foci for magickal Effects. Thanks to the movies, many people believe you can blow up a car with a well-placed bullet or survive an explosion intact "If you're lucky." Mages are lucky, all right. Their guns hardly ever jam, their swords remain sharp and ready, and they never seem to run out of ammo. Luck smiles on them in other ways, too; by shifting wind currents (Forces), probability (Entropy), physical prowess (Life) or perceptions (Correspondence, Forces or Mind), a mage can succeed where others would fail...and do so without risking a Paradox backlash.

The oft-cited Cinematic Example guideline given in both **Mage** and **The Book of Madness** offers you a general framework for outrageous fortune. A well-placed punch that sends a foe smashing through a window (Life or Forces) is coincidental; one that makes his head explode isn't. Use your best judgment; if a stunt seems too silly to be acceptable, consider it vulgar. Note that Sleepers aren't stupid; martial arts movies may be popular in Hong Kong, but a mage who leaps 60 feet through the air is pushing his luck, even if he *is* an Akashic Brother. The tone of your chronicle ought to set the "realism" of the stunts you allow; a gritty game won't be nearly as forgiving as a Jackie Chan-inspired romp.

Separation and Capture

"Okay," said Wayne. "You and Myrt, the girl you just picked up on Bourbon Street...."

"Every man should have an affair to remember in the Big Easy," grinned Stewart.

"Well, that's one way to look at it. Anyway, what do you guys want to do? The romantic Mississippi beckons. The moon is full, the night is clear. What next?" asked Wayne. "Midnight stroll?"

"Is the river too scummy?" Stewart asked. Wayne shrugged. "So what if it is? I shuck my clothes and wade in, but no deeper than my knees."

"Myrt follows. She kisses you. She nibbles your neck. And...make an initiative roll."

"What!?" cried Stewart. "What's going on?"

Wayne threw his dice. "Apparently Myrt, because she's trying to stick you with this long, sharp spike. You got three successes to her four?" Stewart nodded. "And she got three successes on her hit roll. Ouch. She jams the thing right into your shoulder. It hurts, and all of a sudden you don't feel so good. Make a Willpower roll."

"Uh, oh. One lousy success," Stewart replied.

Wayne shook his head gravely: "Everything fades to black...."

Separating or capturing characters can be a hassle for novice and expert Storytellers alike. Players don't like to lose by Storyteller fiat, but sometimes the only other option is killing a character outright. Separation or capture situations also force you to run several solo adventures simultaneously. Players get bored waiting on you to get to their turn. So how can you run a capture scenario without pissing your players off?

The secret is trust. If you've always been willing to listen to the others and run a chronicle that's more cooperative tale-telling than order imposed from above, the players will probably give you benefit of the doubt. Stewart, an experienced gamer and Wayne's friend, felt he would be treated fairly, so he didn't panic when his character fell. He figured Wayne wouldn't just kill Stanley for the hell of it, and he was right.

Sometimes it's fun to let a player dig his character's grave; even so, too much of that gets old. The player feels like he can't make a move without risking his character's safety. Occasionally, then, it's good to capture a mage who's done everything right, but who just gets screwed. The world is a dangerous place, after all. Maybe he fell asleep the previous night and woke up in some Marauder kid's dungeon. On the other hand, you shouldn't take advantage of the players' understanding. Capture every now and then is fun, but you *can* overdo it.

A blue-booking session (see below) is a good option to help keep all your players involved during separation and

capture. Take turns pulling people aside to cover their characters' actions while steering everyone back together as soon as possible. *Do not*, if you value your troupe's trust or happiness, set a player off to the side for the majority of the game. You *will* hear about it, and the words won't be kind. (See Chapter Two for more suggestions about running solo games and other odd circumstances.)

Mortal Combat

They're just a bunch of skinheads, but they're really kicking our asses!

— Stewart MacWilliam

The definition of "antagonist" is "One who actively opposes and competes with another." Such opposition doesn't have to result in open warfare, but combat comes with the territory in most RPGs. A **Mage** chronicle needn't be built on endless fighting, but a good sense of drama comes from opposition — or from the threat of it, at the very least.

A cabal of mysticks will face any number of antagonists in the course of your chronicle. While Chapters Three and Four present this subject in more detail, a few points are worth making here.

• Humans Aren't Cannon Fodder!

Most Storytellers overlook the importance of the man or woman down the street, or of the faithful consor who guards the Chantry. Even so, Sleepers need to be more than mindless dupes of the Technocracy and snacks for Nephandi. They're real human beings with their own lives and agendas. Who's that nosy woman who runs the local bookstore? Won't she eventually wonder why these odd characters keep asking her to locate occult tomes? What happens if she follows the unsuspecting characters back to their Chantry one day? The presence of Sleepers raises interesting ethical issues. If those issues are being ignored, it's reality therapy time.

Too many players assume that "normal" humans are weak and ineffectual; quite often, the opposite is true. Just because a trained soldier can't pull a Forces rote out of her hat doesn't mean the M16 slung over her shoulder won't chew a mage to bits. You can have a lot of fun showing the all-powerful willworkers just how effective Sleepers can be.

• The Unearthly

Spirits, vampires, shapechangers...sometimes it seems like the world is full of enemies. Often, it *is*, and an old and powerful vampire makes a serious enemy indeed. And while willworkers can shape reality, few can match the speed and strength of an enraged Garou. Make the characters' lives more interesting (in the Chinese sense) — use characters from other Storyteller games as adversaries.

The trick, of course, is to avoid turning your chronicle into a "monster of the week" circus. There's no denying that mysticks have their share of unearthly foes, from summoned demons to Paradox spirits, but it's essential to limit their appearances. After all, if somebody's conjuring a dragon

every other week, that majestic and legendary creatures become just another bit of scenery. What a waste of good potential!

When some unearthly being shows its shadowy face, don't rattle off its statistics, point of origin and motive; instead, describe it as a mysterious, alluring yet forbidding presence of dubious origins and intentions. What's more effective: the "10th-generation Brujah with five ghouls on motorcycles" or the "burly, scarred man in weathered leather with a predatory grin and a pack of psychopathic bikers rumbling in behind him"? Shift your descriptions of surroundings and antagonists to chill your players, then let them draw their own conclusions from what their characters see.

As we'll see later in this chapter, **Mage** is ideal crossover territory. Just remember that when the eerie stranger comes calling, he's more effective in the shadows than on a character sheet.

• What Evil Lurks?

Tradition mages aren't saints; some are complete assholes. Nor are all Technomancers demons; they're humans with the same emotions and frailties as any Tradition willworker. An enemy is more effective when he seems familiar; we might not agree with his motivations, but we understand what they could be. (Marauders are a notable exception; the more alien their motives, the more unnerving they become — *for that reason*.)

Whether they be mage or mortal, antagonists should be interesting and complex. Give them their own motivations and stories, personalities and goals. After all, this is *your* chance to have some roleplaying fun of your own.

Blue-booking

Another Aaron Allston creation, blue-booking takes place when players and Storytellers write notes and dialogue to each other rather than roleplaying aloud. Aaron took the name from the blue examination booklets he used; spiral notebooks or legal pads work just as well. The point is that you want something portable and easily storable that provides a permanent record of the chronicle.

So what are the advantages to blue-booking over "normal" roleplaying? First of all, bluebooks (or other written archives) store a tangible history of the chronicle. Months later, you can go back and confirm that Caeron Mustai did indeed offer the characters an invitation to visit Doissetep. Bluebooks keep facts readily at hand.

Bluebooks also allow room for the exchange of secrets or embarrassing "offstage" roleplaying. In Wayne's chronicle, Keith might want to indulge in a detailed forensic investigation for Peter, a task that would take game time away from the other players. By writing down his investigation procedures in a bluebook, Keith saves time and keeps the game's momentum going. By the same token, if Gwen and Clarissa

want to engage in a lurid interlude, Pradha and Deena can blue-book the session as a less self-conscious means of flirtation. Blue-booking also provides a good opportunity for characters to keep in touch with their Storyteller-character friends without taking away from game time.

So how do you start blue-booking? Try an "offstage" session for one game. Sit and wait for the players to write materials in their books and pass them on for your replies. Encourage players to write to each other, also; this takes some pressure off you. Or leave downtime at the end of sessions for players to write in their bluebooks. Take the books home, read the players' notes and offer in-depth responses. The next game begins with everyone reading their bluebooks. This allows you a lot more leisure time to write a good reply.

A variant on blue-booking is the e-mail game. It works in much the same way: Players send you a list of actions and requests; you, in turn, respond accordingly. Like blue-booking, e-mail is great for roleplaying meetings, romances and information gathering; it's not so great for combat. You can print the e-mail and thus keep it as part of the "written" chronicle in your notes.

Offstage gaming can be good for the occasional experience point. If the character accomplishes something significant on her own time, give the player a point to spend. Don't let this get out of hand — the "I trashed the Technocrats" power-gamer could glorify his mage's achievements in downtime if you let him. As always, let common sense and balance be your guide. (**Hidden Lore** provides a more in-depth look at blue-booking, and HERO Games' *Strike Force* provides the original source.)

Solo and Pair-Games

You can resolve character subplots with solo or pair-games between major events. Like blue-booking, single-player games allow for time outside the regular game for characters' personal interests. They make great preludes to Awakenings and provide segues into new plotlines. Wayne, for example, brought the Jade Demon into his chronicle by running a solo adventure for Clarissa. The interests of one character soon affected all the characters. One note of caution: Solo and pair-games move along *much* quicker than games with a group of three or four characters. The extra time permits a lot more roleplaying and attention to detail, so prepare accordingly!

Another alternative is a session between two players without your supervision. This is ideal if the players want their characters to embark on affairs of the heart or discuss the finer points of Hermetic ritual. Such sessions allow for in-depth roleplaying and character development. Techniques like solo, pair or unsupervised sessions keep a game from grinding to a halt as one or two players act out their characters' shopping sprees or domestic squabbles.

Ax of God: Complications

Wayne held up his glass to the players: "This is just to say thanks, guys. We've been playing **Mage** for almost two years now and it's been great. Thanks for making my job so easy."

After the toast, he got down to business. "I want to talk about where to go from here. I've got plenty of ideas, so I don't want you to think the game's winding down. But getting the whole Jade Demon thing resolved has left a vacuum of sorts. Not to mention the fact that your characters are getting really powerful. I've still got plans for the trains and the Umbra, which I know interests Stanley a lot, but what about the rest of you? I'm not so much asking for specific things you want to do, but rather which direction you'd like to see the game take. What kind of flavor you want it to have. See the difference?"

"Well, for my part," said Darrell, the fifth and newest player, "I still like exploring 'inner' themes, if you want to call them that. Since my Son of Ether Broti just joined up, he's missed a lot of the philosophizing and talk about paradigms and magick. I'm interested in Seekings and pondering Ascension and all that."

"I like those things, too," added Deena. "In a way, the Jade Demon plot involved Clarissa so much, she didn't really get to think about how a mage lives. Some kind of 'day in the life' type adventures could be fun. Like you said, we're getting pretty tough; reminding us of the power of everyday folks could be a neat twist."

"I see Peter getting back to his detective business," said Keith. "He never really got it off the ground. But magickally speaking, he's a Master of Mind now. I think he's got some new responsibilities — he ought to start teaching. Wayne, you said Father Shelley had located some Orphans in need of a tutor. I think that's a good way for Peter to explore his new level of understanding."

Pradha had been leafing through her new copy of **Werewolf: The Apocalypse**. "Well, I wouldn't mind seeing some crossover stories. We've gotten hints there are werewolves and other things in Atlanta. Why not go exploring? Maybe some of us could play our mages and the rest could play vampires or faeries or whatever. Or maybe I could run another game and you could, gasp, play for a change? Can't you see Father Shelley going on a vampire hunt?"

Wayne laughed. "Vampire massacre *would* be more like it." He turned to Stewart. "You've been quiet, Stewart. What do you think about all this?"

"Actually, I've got a proposition for you. I'd like to send Stanley on a spirit quest of sorts. This is something you could run or blue-book when you have time. Meanwhile, I've got a great idea for a new character. He's sort of an Ecstatic, an adrenaline junkie who likes to climb things, and he's got this turtle familiar who's always making smart-assed remarks. Think we can work something out?"

"You mean you're gonna quit playing Stanley?" asked Deena. "Who's Clarissa going to turn to with all her problems?"

"No, I'll play Stanley again," replied Stewart. "But I feel at this point in his development, he needs to go off on his own. Besides, it will give me a chance to explore a new angle and play a very different character."

"I'll think some more on it, but it sounds fine for now," said Wayne. "Well, as usual, you've all given me something to brood about. Now let's haul out our calendars and try to find a time when we can all play."

The World Turns

The pesky details of getting characters together are long gone; no more crude bar fights for you! Linear plots seem like child's play, and you can even manage a capture-plot without players pelting you with potato chips. Stunning dialogue comes as naturally as breathing, and the players freely contribute their ideas and criticisms. Finally, you're ready for complications — crossover material from other Storyteller games, multiple plots and a little karmic dysentery for the characters. Let's go....

Character Development

Stories and movies are dull as oatmeal if the characters never fail; likewise, a chronicle's pendulum needs to swing between character triumphs and woes. A game in which bittersweet loss shrouds victory is always more memorable and inspiring than a dozen easy conquests. By pitting characters against difficult odds and situations with no obvious way out, Storytellers force players to think creatively, to realize that no success comes without a price tag. Mage's complications make this relatively easy to illustrate. The art of character development insures that there's *some* way out of every situation; it's simply *your* job to make sure it's not the easy one.

Making Players Care

What can Storytellers do to make players care about what happens to their characters? There's a definite *something* that makes a player say, "I've got to act! I can't let this character die!" rather than, "Oh well, I'll just make up

another Hermetic Master." Whose responsibility is it to make sure players give a damn about their characters?

In one sense, it's yours. If you don't like a character, if she doesn't inspire you to run games, say so. Maybe there's nothing technically wrong with her — she's just *boring*. If that's so, tell the player; it's not fair to ignore her just because she has a dull mage. Encourage her to create a more stimulating alter ego.

On the other hand, the player has a responsibility, too. She should try to breathe life into the character, to make her interesting. If you drop a neat plot thread in her lap, she should respond. Furthermore, the player shouldn't continue with a character that really bores her, too. How can she care whether the character lives or dies if she doesn't even *like* the persona?

When does "Oh, it's just a sheet of paper with some numbers and words" become "If I can't escape, my Chantry will fall and that can't happen"? Caring about the mage involves three things: time, challenge and proven success. Romances and friendships don't instantly appear; why should affection for a character be any different? Most players grow fond of their characters only after a few good adventures — especially if they're dangerous adventures. Putting a character in jeopardy is a sure way to make the player care.

What I Did This Summer

One way to keep players thinking about their characters is to challenge them to "assignments" between games. You may want to offer an incentive, such as an extra experience point or a solo game for players who make the extra effort. Within these assignments, players write in character, illustrating their characters' magickal paradigms, Natures and Demeanors. Some "homework" ideas include:

• **Me and My Avatar:** What does the character's Avatar look and act like? How many memories of the past does it retain? How does it interact with the character? These are questions that make the player think about an essential facet of Mage: the Awakened self. (See Chapter Two in the main rulebook for advice.)

• **Personal Rotes:** By writing down several of her character's favorite rotes, the player can get a better grasp on how her mage envisions the magickal Arts. You can discuss and approve the rotes for shared use in the chronicle, or allow them as "surprises" when the mystick needs an ace up her sleeve.

• **A Letter to My Mentor:** Mentors can add a lot to storylines. They may call for help or send annoying watchdogs to keep tabs on their pupils. The player might want to send a note to her mentor and let him know what's going on in her life; this might inspire a visit to the cabal. Then there's a student/mentor dialogue, a blue-book session illustrating how the mentor's personality and magick differs from the character's own.

Finally, good player/character bond usually develops after some successes, particularly if they've been hard won. Did the character unexpectedly defeat the rampaging Marauder? Did she talk her way out of a bad lunch date with Olonga the Whisperer? If the player believes her character can actually *accomplish* something, she'll reward you through better roleplaying.

Awarding and Spending Experience

Storytellers need to set their own standards for giving experience; as with most other aspects of running a chronicle, however, you ought to include the players in the process. Chapter Nine of the **Mage** rulebook gives some basic guidelines for awarding experience points. Expand this list to suit your specific chronicle.

Awarding experience is a matter of trial and error. You'll learn quickly that giving one point for the conclusion of a major story arc isn't enough. On the other hand, if you have newly Awakened Masters on your hands, things went wrong in a completely different way. Err on the side of caution; it's much easier to run another game with a chance for more experience than to take back points you've already given.

What about players who can't attend every session? How does awarding experience affect them? One solution is giving these players experience on a percentage basis, say one point for every three the players in attendance received. You can also offer them other opportunities to make up the lost experience like solo games or "homework" (see sidebar).

What do you do when players start getting too powerful? Do you cut back on experience, or limit how it can be spent? To avoid this problem, set some useful guidelines in the early stages of the chronicle and stick by them later. One to three points is a good per-game total; unusual heroism should be worth a point or two more, but never give more than four points per session.

What about Abilities and other Traits? Simple; make your players justify how their mages learn new things. This prevents a player from buying Mummy Lore when her character's never even *met* a mummy.

Another option allows you to award specific Traits or increases instead of experience points. If Wayne's players spent an entire gaming session exploring Doissetep, for example, he might choose to give them a dot or two in Mage Lore or Chantry Politics rather than the usual two to four experience points. The same holds true for raising Attributes; if a player notes that her character is working out regularly, it's sensible for her to raise the mage's Strength or Stamina. This method works best with Backgrounds and Merits and Flaws, which often take shape as the chronicle progresses. Such things are better granted through events than purchased at the beginning of the game.

Early on in a chronicle, the learning curve is sharp. The Awakened discover the nuances of the world, their own abilities, enemies and allies. The players will probably focus more on getting experience at this stage, simply because there's so much for them to know. Raising character Traits is the system's way of reflecting this knowledge. As the chronicle progresses, players will probably care more about "What happens next?" than "What can I do next?"

Magickal education is a whole different matter, one in which experience points should matter far less than roleplaying or character enlightenment. Seekings (see Chapter Two of this book), instructions, temptations and other obstacles provide a boot camp for your players' hardy characters. The road of True Magick never did run smooth! (**Mage**, pages 226-232, offers extensive guidelines for character progress.)

Magickal Styles and Foci

Foci and magickal styles should reflect a character's culture, knowledge and magickal belief. The **Mage** rulebook (pages 181-184) offers plenty of ideas and rules for foci in the game, but how can you, the Storyteller, convince the Son of Ether that dancing naked in a pit of deer blood may not be the best focus for building an Umbral barometer?

Start by helping the player examine his character's magickal paradigm and style. What's his Tradition's philosophy? Does he follow rules or is he a rebel of sorts? What magickal style does the *player* feel is appropriate? Do the foci *make sense* for the character? And is the combination of both fun to play?

In Wayne's game, most of the characters chose foci typical for their Traditions: Darrell had ether goggles for Broti, Stanley had a cast-iron pot. Pradha wanted to be different. Gwen's an Orphan, though the Cult of Ecstasy influenced her early development. She believes that sensations stimulate her magick, and uses self-inflicted pain to do so. The other characters shudder as Gwen cuts deep scratches into her arms every time she uses Life magick. Still, the gruesome procedure fits her concept of magick as an Art purchased with personal sacrifice and pain.

Next, create some enjoyable scenarios by letting characters create or discover unique foci. Imagine the Celestial Chorister searching for a priceless piece of sheet music that he believes will guide him to a new Sphere. Naturally the sheet music itself isn't magickal, but it may be essential to the mage's self-confidence. A similar sort of adventure could revolve around a Virtual Adept's unique virus program. Adventures like this can lead to journeys around the world...or into the Otherworlds.

Don't ignore the role of foci or magickal styles in your game. While the tools of the Art may seem inconvenient (see the F.A.Q. in the next chapter), the flavor they add to a chronicle is worth the "effort."

Crossover Games

There's a big, hairy, Irish problem over there....
— Wayne Peacock

Crossover games bring other denizens of the World of Darkness into the characters' lives. Imagine the look on a player's face when you tell him his mage's girlfriend just turned into a hulking, clawed monstrosity. Vampires, werewolves, wraiths and changelings mean trouble for the Awakened. **Vampire: The Masquerade, Vampire: The Dark Ages, Werewolf: The Apocalypse, Wraith: The Oblivion** and **Changeling: The Dreaming** offer reams of source material for the enterprising Storyteller. Pull a few of these supernatural creatures into your chronicle and watch your players eye the shadows.

Crossover games also provide an element of discovery that may be lacking in more advanced chronicles. After a certain point, the mages probably aren't going to be too surprised by Technocracy, Nephandi or Marauder tricks. But consider the local Kindred coteries or Garou septs: What happens when the interests of the dead conflict with those of the living? What if the mages blunder into a clash between noble and commoner fae? Suddenly the characters have entirely new societies and creatures to discover. And what fun for you if the *players* have never been involved with other Storyteller games. They'll be just as clueless as their mages!

If the players and Storyteller *are* familiar with other World of Darkness games, they may enjoy playing wraiths, changelings, vampires or werewolves alongside the cabal (with a semiplausible rationale, of course). Quite often, mages and other beings share goals that call for temporary alliances; this also gives players a chance to experiment with something new.

Two problems plague crossover games. First of all, while you don't have to learn an entirely new rule system, you do need a new perspective on the world. Other supernaturals have unfamiliar powers and different cultures to consider. This takes a *lot* of time to do well! A Wendigo will not understand what "Paradox" is, and a Son of Ether won't talk about the Wyrm. As a Storyteller, you might find it easier to learn by playing in another Storyteller game, perhaps as a guest character. This will give you familiarity with the powers that other creatures have as well as a feel for the different games.

The second problem is the "buddy factor." Some players assume that everyone will do anything for an ally. This is far from true; each species — hell, each tribe, clan, Tradition, whatever — has prejudices and preconceptions, most of which are rooted in experience. A werewolf will not let a mage draw "just a little Tass" from his Sacred Grounds, and no vampire will risk offering a bit of blood to the mad sorcerer who calls it "Quintessence"! Likewise, characters

do not prowl the world with copies of each rulebook under their arms. Unless a mage (or Garou, or whatever) has purchased the appropriate Lore Knowledge, he will *not* understand the ins and outs of other supernatural societies. This point, though it's stated outright in many books, needs constant reinforcement in crossover games. Remind your players that they're playing mysterious supernatural beings, not "character classes" in an artificial world.

Other creatures make fun flavorings, but keep the mysticks at center stage. If you want to run a mixed **Mage** and **Changeling** chronicle, in which willworkers and faeries are equal in the grand scheme, go for it. On the other hand, if what you want is a **Mage** game with other beings as supporting characters, don't lose sight of the fact that the main protagonists *are* mages. It's terribly easy to let the bizarre new antagonists hog the limelight. Keep the distinction between a central character and a supporting one, and chances are you'll have a keen new element for your chronicle. (See the next chapter's F.A.Q. for other crossover issues.)

Resonance, Hubris and Karma

I think my Avatar's trying to kill me!

— Keith Martin

What *are* Resonance, hubris and karma, anyway? A quick answer is: three sticky terms central to nearly any **Mage** chronicle, particularly as it progresses from basic dice rolling to a complex, cooperative story. Let's talk about each of them in the plainest of terms.

Resonance is simply a boomerang effect; when a mystick affects the world through willworking, it somehow "bounces back" to touch her in turn. Imagine Resonance to be a fine perfume; after it's stroked on skin, the perfume takes on a slightly new aspect. It's still recognizable, but it changes, too. The scent lingers after the wearer has left, and no two people with the same perfume will smell the same. Magickal Resonance works like that.

Paradox is, in its way, a form of Resonance, but don't picture Resonance as a backlash of reality; visualize it instead as a presence, as the aura of magick. The more mystickal an action or location, the stronger its Resonance is, and the easier it is to feel.

Hubris is probably a more familiar concept; if you've read *Julius Caesar* or *MacBeth*, chances are you've heard of it. Hubris is excessive pride, often pride before a fall. And if you think about it, what hard-working mage *wouldn't* suffer from a bit of hubris? After all, they literally change the world. They have the power to turn wrongs into rights at their very fingertips! With just a thought, they can *alter the very fabric of reality!* BZZZT! Wrong, game over. Thinking like that leads to hubris, overconfidence, fear of failure and ultimately, self-destruction. In **Mage**, might doesn't make

right. As a Storyteller, keep all this in mind, especially as the characters grow more and more powerful.

Finally, there's *karma*. The term comes from Buddhist and Hindu religious beliefs. Put plainly, it means that what goes around comes around. In other words, if you do a good deed, you'll be rewarded; if you do harm, you'll be punished. The rewards and punishments may not come within your lifetime, but eventually, they *will* come.

So how can you use this in a game? For starters, keep a tally of the characters' "good" and "bad" karma. Did they help out some clueless kids or did they ignore a plea for help? Past lives count, too; a mage who committed some atrocity in a previous life might reap bad karma in this one. Many Flaw Traits are great for this; imagine the look on a character's face when a powerful witch (a five-point Enemy) challenges him to certámen, and he has no clue that in a past life he left her pregnant and penniless....

Remember, grasshopper: Resonance, hubris and karma are unique seasonings and textures that set **Mage** apart from any other game. Use them, and the Storyteller god in the sky will rain blessings down on you and your chronicle. (See the next chapter for some practical advice from **Mage**'s developer.)

Ascension

He's as slippery as a greased priest!

— Wayne Peacock

What the heck is Ascension anyway? You'll hear this question from both players and characters, and chances are no one in the chronicle will agree. Thus, you have perfect fodder for character development.

Ascension is, at heart, a personal process and a personal goal. Each mage approaches it differently. To bring that point home, let your players write essays or lead discussions in character. Some questions to get the discussion rolling might include: Is Ascension personal or universal, internal or external? What's the Avatar's role in Ascension? Does Ascension take on a different role according to your Tradition, Convention or faction? How does Ascension affect Sleepers?

Eventually you'll also have to ask yourself, "Should I let the characters Ascend?" And the answer is: that depends. What reasons do you have? Are you closing the chronicle? If not, do you realize you'll be setting a precedent? Are you prepared to explain to the Ascending characters how Ascension manifests for them? How will your decisions impact future chronicles, and affect your setting in general? Be prepared to answer these and many other questions. Think your decision over thoroughly, then proceed with what you think best; it is, after all, *your* chronicle. Just remember that once you've made the bed, you and your troupe will have to sleep in it.

Death and the Mage

Wayne closed the front door softly. It had been a long, sad but exhilarating night. The death and damnation of Clarissa's lover Mao had presented one of the most difficult — and yet one of the best — episodes of the chronicle. He half-expected an e-mail from Deena and wasn't disappointed when he saw a letter from her character, Clarissa.

It was a sad message, a heartfelt farewell to Mao, to the group and to the carefree spirit that had epitomized the wild Cultist. Although Clarissa swore she'd soon return, it was obvious that some vital thing had changed. Deena really got into character with this one, Wayne thought as he scanned the page. The itching at the corners of his eyes suggested more than just fatigue. As he printed a hard copy, Wayne pondered the night's events. By running this adventure for Deena, he'd pushed the chronicle to new levels. He'd almost killed off one of the founding characters and had dealt a blow far worse than death to an important Storyteller character. Yet, the whole experience left him elated. The element of chance had entwined perfectly with his creativity, and with Deena's. Together, they'd written a different kind of tale.

All reality-bending aside, **Mage** can be a deadly game. Mysticks are mortals; unlike werewolves or vampires, they can't shrug off bullets or shrapnel. Unless you set a decidedly nonlethal tone for your game, some characters will either die or come perilously close to it. As a Storyteller, it's worth thinking about character death and its impact on your game.

First, think about how you interpret dice rolls. Do you always go with what the dice say? Or are you willing to "fudge" occasionally if it suits the story? For example, you may have designed a brief encounter in which it's important to the story that the characters win. Are you willing to change the results if the dice say they lose?

You also may want to consider whether you prefer "open" or "hidden" dice rolls. Open dice rolls occur on the table, in plain view of everyone. Fudging is hard since everyone can see what you rolled. Hidden dice rolls take place behind a screen or your hand. You can take the rolls as they are or choose to ignore them; the latter option is probably a must for nonlethal games.

A mixture of the two is usually best. As always, don't forget to ask your players what they'd prefer. Most players, *especially* those who care about their characters, will want open rolls. Why? By this point in the chronicle the characters have probably taken on lives of their own, with complex personalities, emotions and drives. To possess life is to face death every day. Knowing there's a chance they won't make it out of the next scenario alive reinforces the bond between player and character. In the above scenario, for example, Wayne and Deena agreed that they wanted open rolls. Whatever fate had in store for Clarissa, Deena would accept. This made the game much more intense.

Nobody knows what lies beyond death, not even mages (though Euthanatos have some idea...). The death of a player's character (or even a long-standing Storyteller character) should be a momentous point in the chronicle. How will the other characters react? Are there any real-world issues you need to deal with, such as helping the player come up with a different character? And how are the other players accepting this new development?

Finally, don't forget that some characters would rather accept any fate *but* death. Wayne's Storyteller character made a choice to join the Nephandi rather than allow Clarissa to die, whereas Clarissa would *rather* have died than see anyone suffer such a fate. Fear of death is a powerful motivation; use it as the basis for scenarios, the drive for a single character or for the epic theme of an entire chronicle.

Breaking Up Is Hard to Do: The Long Haul and Calling It Quits

Oops.

— The Storyteller (Wayne Peacock)

No one bats 1.000. No one always runs a perfect game. How do you manage damage control when you really screw up? How do you keep things moving along as a chronicle ages? How do you end a chronicle that's worn out or no longer interesting? The following suggestions can help revitalize a stale chronicle — and may help end it when its time has come.

Keeping It Fresh

What do you do when your creative juices run dry? Is there life at the end of a long-running plot? How do you get motivated at the end of a successful story arc? If you've plumbed every character for ideas and new territories to explore and *still* come up empty-handed, what do you do?

First of all, look at your inspiration. What revitalizes you? Do you like to spend time alone plotting, or do you get your best notions from the players? Take some time out and indulge in whatever inspires you. This may be reading a trashy novel, watching a movie or taking a hike in the woods. If that fails, try something you haven't done before.

Be prepared to admit to your mistakes. If you've run a bad game because you're tired or disinterested, take time to explain this to your players. Chances are, they may have some solutions. Maybe one of the players would like to try her hand at Storytelling, either with **Mage** or another game. This takes some pressure off your creativity and gives you a chance to view the world from a player's perspective.

Finally, there's nothing wrong with taking a break. You may want to just put the chronicle on temporary hiatus for a few months, or to leave the restart date open. In the

meantime, put **Mage** on the back burner for a while. If you want to stay in the Storyteller's seat, consider another World of Darkness game. Or try something completely different, such as *Champions* or *Castle Falkenstein*. Sooner or later, you'll remember why you enjoyed the **Mage** chronicle so much, and you'll want to get back to it.

Subplots

Linear storylines that plod from event to event get boring. Just to recap, Storytellers need to weave smaller and less significant plots into the overall story to keep the chronicle interesting. If you don't have enough ongoing complications, you'll have nowhere to turn when players resolve the big plots.

Look back at Wayne's chronicle: He began with two major plotlines. The first concerned the growing Technocratic influence in Atlanta. The second involved the Jade Demon. The Technocracy plot led to meetings with the Garou in the Umbra which connected to events in **The Chaos Factor** sourcebook. Suddenly the characters had new enemies and allies, and Stanley was inspired to go on a personal spirit quest. The Union's overarching goals remained the same, but the Technocrats suddenly became much more complex and interesting.

The same thing occurred with the Jade Demon. Clarissa gained a love interest and suffered terrible losses while learning more about herself. Peter challenged his former mentor and gained enlightenment from both his internal and external battles. Wayne's other subplots related to the characters' personal stories, such as Gwen's search for Bethany, Broti's weird science and Father Shelley's orphanage. Even when the Jade Demon plot was resolved, the characters still had plenty of interests to pursue, thanks to the abundance of subplots.

• Evolving Storylines and Resolutions

As character interests change and evolve, so too should the chronicle. Storylines that drag out forever are as dull as linear plots. Before stories reach this point, resolve them. Look to the characters' backgrounds and Flaws for unfinished business or lingering problems. By the time Wayne's chronicle had entered its second year, for example, he wanted to resolve Gwen's quest for her mentor. Wayne planned a scenario in which Gwen discovered that Bethany was indeed dead and went out to bring the murderer down. The same point applied at the end of the Jade Demon storyline; Clarissa had never been able to comprehend the Sphere of Entropy before (thanks to the Sphere Inept Flaw). After seeing random fate play such an enormous role

in her life, she gained new insights and Deena spent some points to remove the Flaw.

You can be a little cruel to the players by resurrecting a story they've all forgotten. Imagine the looks on their faces when you remind them of the Marauder child's sworn vengeance after they "borrowed" her magickal toy and never returned it! No one will realize why they've suddenly turned into animated stuffed animals — at least, not at first....

Endings

"Well," said Wayne, "I've got some good news and some bad news. The good news is that I just found out the technological studies grant I applied for was accepted. The bad news...."

"Is that you're going to haggis country," replied Keith. "Hey, I think that's great!" Everybody echoed his congratulations. Then their gazes fell on the collection of worn purple books scattered around the living room. Wayne cleared his throat.

"Without a doubt," he began, "**Mage** has been the best game I've ever run. Now, we have a dilemma. It's going to be a little hard for me to run a monthly game from Scotland. What options do you all want to discuss?"

"Will you have e-mail?" asked Deena. Wayne nodded. "Maybe we could still do some solo stuff via the Internet."

"Well, I don't have e-mail," said Darrell, "and I really have a better time sitting down and gaming than doing it over the phone or whatever."

Pradha toyed with her dice. "Actually, though I've had a terrific time, I've let some other things slide that I'd like to turn back to now. I need to finish my dissertation, and I want to get some of my fiction published. To tell you the truth, this isn't coming at such a bad time for me."

"I for one would still like to play," Stewart said. "My time's a little more flexible now, so how would you feel about me continuing the game in your stead?"

"That's a good option," Wayne responded. "Though I admit I've taken the chronicle about as far as I can see it go. Maybe you'd want to use the same basic setting but with some different characters?"

"Or even run a full-fledged crossover game," said Deena. "I'd really love to play a werewolf or a changeling."

"In any case, we don't have to decide anything definite tonight. I've still got some stuff planned for you all to do before I leave in a couple of months, including some particularly interesting character development for this very evening...."

It had been a long and glorious epic. But nothing lasts forever.

All good games eventually come to an end. Sometimes, as with Wayne, real life steps in and takes over. Other times, you and the players just get burned out and need to move on to something different. You'll probably know when the time comes; suddenly, nobody seems motivated anymore.

It's time to call it quits, and as the Storyteller, this responsibility falls to you.

As always, talk to the players. Maybe they're not as apathetic as you first thought. Perhaps you all need a change of pace or an extended break. Maybe someone else wants to take the Storyteller reins for a while, bringing in a whole new set of ideas. But if you all agree that the time has come to shelve the chronicle, give in gracefully. Talk about how you'd like to end the story. Maybe they've never had the chance to engage in a "do-it or-die" showdown with the chronicle's big enemy. This gives you the chance to end the game with a bang. Or perhaps they'd like to leave things the way they are, in case a reunion or sequel game (see below) is possible.

Probably the two *worst* things you can do are to simply stop running the chronicle with no explanation, or to force it along when it's clear everyone wants to stop. No matter *what* your reasons for ending the game, be conscientious of the players' feelings. They've invested as much time and energy as you have, so cutting them off without an explanation is rude at best. Likewise, respect their time and sanity. If it's painfully obvious that no one wants to continue playing, don't keep the story going! You run the risk of having them quit one by one, leaving an otherwise brilliant chronicle to end on a sour note.

• **Sequels, Epilogues and Reunions**

Rather than revive a retired game, Storytellers can often invent exciting new scenarios from the embers of old ones. Stewart, for example, offered to run a new chronicle with new characters. The old mages still exist, but they're out of the loop. Perhaps the other game turns out to be a **Werewolf** or **Wraith** chronicle, with occasional guest appearances from the mystick characters. Anything is possible.

An epilogue to the chronicle might involve a handful of characters. If something didn't get resolved to the players' satisfaction, take this as an opportunity to leave the chronicle on a "settled" note. Epilogues can take place any time after the original chronicle closes, giving you a chance to catch your breath. They're also good opportunities for solo or pair-games.

You may also choose to run "reunion" stories for old characters; these are ideal if you and the players move apart but come back together for visits. Perhaps some years have passed, and the characters have also gone their separate ways. Maybe an old menace from the past returns and begins hunting down the mages one by one; the cabal needs to reunite in order to save themselves.

Whatever you choose, leave the original chronicle on good terms with both players and characters. Tie up any loose ends: Who *was* the Lone Mole, and how *did* she get those boxer shorts from Porthos? Give everyone a chance to accomplish any last minute objectives. If a character always wanted to meet the vampire prince of Chicago, why not let him? What have you got to lose? End your **Mage** chronicle on a positive note. Satisfy your players' desires. They'll remember you fondly and ask you to play when they run their own games. And more than likely, they'll beg you to weave a tale anew....

Chapter Two: The Storyteller's Corner

Use a new Reality with each and every sex act.

Read instructions carefully before using Reality.

The booklet explains how to use Reality.

Don't tear Reality.

Reality only works when you use it.

Make sure Reality is not twisted after insertion.

Reality should not be noisy during sex.

Reality may shift during sex.

Keep Reality out of the reach of children.

— Instructions for Reality™ brand female condoms

"This isn't smart," Deathlace whispered.

"Get over it," Klenton replied. "A Node is a Node, and we need some juice."

"It's not our turf," the Hollow One insisted. "An' I doubt it's free territory."

"Like you never snagged someone else's stash." Klenton's voice was soft but mocking. Deathlace shrugged. Talking sense was hopeless.

A match ignited at the side of the house. "Shit!" Deathlace hissed and gripped her locket. As match touched cigarette, flames framed a face; strong, rugged, with an impassive expression and warrior's eyes. Caught! The Quintes-

sence boiled right below her, so thick she could taste it. Deathlace reached out to the Primal flow as Klenton drew his gun.

"Put it away, little boy," the smoker commanded. "No one sheds blood here but us."

A shadow — massive, shaggy, reeking like a sheep dog after a downpour — reared up behind Klenton. A gigantic paw swiped his gun to the ground, breaking three fingers and ripping the Orphan's hand crimson. The boy opened his mouth, but Deathlace stifled his scream. "We're sorry," she said, "we're going now, we didn't mean to trespass. We're gone—"

"Little sister," said the werewolf with the cigarette, "you have no idea how right you are."

The Man Behind the Desk

Wow. **Mage.** Cool. Wild. Epic, even. A huge, cross-dimensional tapestry of conflicting realities and the wizards who make them. Fascinating. Stimulating. All kinds of fun.

Now how in the hell do I *play* it?

Good question. There are plenty of answers. **Mage** is so open-ended that every Storyteller runs a different game. I couldn't tell you how to run them all even if I wanted to, so for now we'll dispense with the omniscient "the Storyteller must do this" stuff and talk openly and candidly in across-the-table tones.

Hi, I'm the developer. I've been running games in various systems since 1978, and have been wedded to **Mage: The Ascension** since its first supplement in 1993. Lots of people look to me when they have questions; I'm not that comfortable about speaking from on high, but I *can* offer a few answers, if only from experience. My answers are opinions, not rules, and they may not jibe with your concept of the game. The Golden Rule applies; take this chapter as you will.

The Storyteller's Corner covers a variety of design questions in a deliberately informal manner. Please don't take the snide remarks in the wrong way. They're more fun to read (and write) than droning instruction is. The frequently asked questions presented here cover some of the tricky aspects of **Mage: The Ascension**, and address many of its most puzzling elements. Most of the examples come from my own games. If this seems self-indulgent, remember that Storytelling is a personal experience. There aren't many "yes/no" answers, and the end result comes only through doing.

Mage F.A.Q.

I know that it won't be long before the hunger sets in

And I must feed, my friend, feed on your innocence and faith

You have faith in me — You know I'd do you no wrong so let's go for a walk

— Order of the Dying Knights, "Shape of Faith"

Lots of people have lots of questions about **Mage.** Many of these questions have no firm answers; this is a game about dueling realities. Even so, some issues come up across the board — and on the internet and in my mailbox. It's time I tried to give some straight answers.

The following inquiries come from friends, fans and puzzled players. For the sake of sanity and simplicity, I'm not going to go over first-edition questions that were answered in second edition. Many of the old issues are resolved in the rulebook's Chapters Two, Eight and Nine, and all of the references I make come from the current rules, not the original ones.

Naturally, I can't — and won't — answer every conceivable question; **Mage** is a game of mystery and enigmas. Shining a light into every corner would be an impossible task, and would take a lot of fun out of the game. Even so, this F.A.Q. should help ease those around-the-table debates. If your pet question isn't answered here, chances are it's something you can answer for yourself. Or maybe something you *should* answer for yourself....

Design Questions

• **Mage** is a big game. Where does a new Storyteller begin?

With people. That's where good stories always begin. Find an idea that excites you, one that suits your players and your style. Each game is a mirror of the people who play it. Decide on the elements that appeal to you and work from there.

The main rulebook has everything you need to run a basic game. The supplements offer additional options and in-depth lore that the rulebook can't contain. Core supplements (those with neat, important stuff) include **Hidden Lore, The Book of Shadows, The Book of Madness, The Book of Mirrors** and **Beyond the Barriers: The Book of Worlds.** The Tradition and Technocracy books cover their respective groups in depth.

• **What advice can you offer a *Mage* Storyteller, especially one who's never run an RPG before?**

First of all, don't panic. **Mage** offers lots of possibilities, but that doesn't mean you have to use them all. Build the story around something you can sink your teeth into. Set some guidelines for your players and their character types — no Virtual Adepts, all characters come from the same neighborhood, that sort of thing — and stick to your vision. Familiarize yourself with the magick systems in the main rulebook; if things seem too complicated, avoid the "Permutations" section and use only the basics. Set a single focus for the chronicle — say a nightclub where everybody goes on Fridays — and expand when you feel comfortable doing so.

Personally, I recommend starting out with players' characters before their Awakenings or just afterward, and setting an upper limit of 2 or 3 on Arete and Spheres. That gives you room to move — the characters can't do anything *too* heinous yet — and it reinforces the idea that **Mage** is about growth, not raw power.

Most importantly, have fun. Get into the atmosphere of mystery. Improvise. Describe. Set your tale in motion with a simple story and let the players move it. Trying to force a **Mage** game in a predetermined direction is asking for trouble, but you can still keep things within certain bounds by limiting the power level and leaving some of the more outrageous elements (Quiet, Realms, the Umbra) out until you're ready for them. Keep the world mysterious — wizards don't hang out on every corner. Few people even believe magick exists, and even fewer know anything about it. When magick appears, describe how it feels. Ask your players what they do to use their Arts — not just the game mechanics, but the actions their characters take. Encourage your troupe to be imaginative. A cool story is better than a pile of corpses…or an endless argument.

- **Why do so many *Mage* books contradict each other?**

With a few exceptions (like rules changes between first and second editions), they don't. They just *seem* to contradict each other because they're often told from subjective viewpoints rather than objective ones. If you're used to an objective view — "This *is*, period" — the difference can be confusing. The subjective viewpoint — "This is so because I *see* it that way" — offers one part of the story. As we all know, though, all stories have different perspectives.

Take history, for example. Read an account of the American Revolution in a United States textbook. Now imagine it from a British perspective — a bunch of spoiled colonists rejecting fair rule by their sovereign state. We can safely assume that their textbooks tell a different story. Take an American war movie like *The Longest Day* and contrast it with a German one like *Das Boot*. Who are you rooting for now?

Get the picture? Reality is never as cut and dried as we would like it to be. And that's one of the main ideas of **Mage**. Reality is flexible, and everyone has their version.

One of my all-time favorite movies, Akira Kurosawa's *Rashamon*, tells the story of the same crime from four different perspectives. Each person has a different version of the events. A tribunal trying to get to the bottom of the case is baffled, and the men discussing it outside the court are even more confused. "Who knows what truth is?" one man finally says, and that's what I'm getting at in **Mage**. The absolute truth is that there *is* no absolute truth. The supplements are designed accordingly.

The only things to take for granted in a **Mage** book are presented in game text, usually with the words "In game

terms, this means...." Everything else is up for grabs. I do this for two reasons: One, I *like* a subjective world. It's more intriguing and mysterious, and reflects the themes of the game better than a world set in stone does. Two, it leaves writers and Storytellers room to move. I hate it when a player says "But it says on page 32 that all Technocrats live in Paris," while I'm running a tale set in London. **Mage** is more flexible when the doors of possibility are left open. Everyone has a story, and those stories are richer for their apparent contradictions.

• **Why doesn't *Mage* go into more details of real-world magical practices?**

Three reasons: First, the details of "real magic" are pretty arcane (not to mention dull). Most people don't want to read a grimoire, they want to create a story, and few folks would have the patience to wade through esoterica to play a game. On top of that, many real practitioners get (understandably) touchy when their beliefs appear in fiction. Most consider it slanderous, inaccurate or both. Why offend folks unless you want to?

Second, the whole idea of **Mage** is that magick is universal. Reality is in the eye of the beholder. Any type of magick, from Christian miracles to Chaos Theory to Candomble, works so long as the mage understands reality enough to use it. Real-world magic, like religion, tends to be pretty dogmatic — "*This* is the right way; all others are wrong." Many of the practitioners in my acquaintance remain closed to the possibility that anything else might be as valid as the disciplines they prefer, and they argue passionately that only *they* know "the real secrets." I say, tell a Catholic priest, a Wiccan priestess, a mambo and a physicist that what they do isn't "real" because it isn't the practice you follow. After you pick yourself off the floor, you might realize that each of those folks has a valid perspective on the truth.

Third and most important, I do, to a degree, believe in magic. I can't say for certain what it is, and I certainly don't expect to be levitating cars anytime soon. However, it's a proven fact that the laws of our so-called reality are not nearly as solid as we might like to believe. People all over the world practice magic in a thousand different forms, and sometimes they make things happen. Whether the forces they set in motion come from some outside source or from undiscovered scientific principles, the forces exist. I also know enough about magic to know that it shouldn't be screwed with. The Law of Return — the concept that the things you do return to you in ways you can't control — is truth in advertising. Plenty of people have wrecked their lives (and others') trying to find out if magic works.

The pillars of magickal philosophy — that reality can be shaped by will and understanding, that expanded awareness leads to transcendence, that magick changes the mage even as he changes the world, and that nothing occurs without work, sacrifice and peril — lie at the heart of **Mage**:

The Ascension. Many of the magickal societies in the World of Darkness are also based on real-world practices (although the societies themselves are fictional). Still, the line between the game world and the real world is drawn pretty firmly. Personally, I wouldn't even consider turning a game about the quest for perfection into occult propaganda. There are enough screwed up people out there already. So Mage is a fantasy game. Period.

• Who created Mage?

The initial idea for the game came from Stewart Wieck, who set the wizards aside for himself when the groundwork was laid for the World of Darkness series. A fan of Robert Pirsig, Stewart modeled Mage's concepts after Pirsig's idea that creation is ever-changing, propelled by a dynamic momentum. To fuel progress, certain individuals had to step away from the norm, advance controversial ideals and force the world kicking and screaming into the future. That sounded like magick to Stewart, and he set about bringing his own ideals into being.

Stewart, his brother Steve, and the Chrises Hind and Early brainstormed for the better part of a year, creating the skeleton of the game. The first draft was, shall we say, radical — too radical for most people to accept. An in-house rewriting session retooled Mage from the ground up, shifting the metaphysical original into a more streamlined, accessible format. Many of White Wolf's best minds — including Bill Bridges, Brian Campbell, Sam Chupp, Ken Cliffe, Andrew Greenberg, Mark Rein•Hagen, Rob Hatch, Kathy Ryan and Travis Williams — created the Marauders, the Umbral Realms and ties to other WoD games. The final result was revolutionary enough to attract a cult following, and confusing enough to elude a larger audience.

Enter the developer. A Werewolf freelancer at the time, I applied for the job after being tapped to write the original Technocracy sourcebook (later changed to five smaller works). Following a hasty read-through of the game's editing draft, and the design of a 16-page outline of my plans for the line, I was hired — three days before the game's release at GenCon '93. After scrapping the original Mage supplement schedule and starting fresh, I co-wrote the first expansion book, The Book of Chantries, with Steve "Sabbat" Brown. That work put many of the line's most powerful concepts into motion.

A number of influential writers guided Mage's baby steps: Chris Hind, Brian Campbell and geneticist Judy McLaughlin helped transform the Technocracy from soulless villains to misguided (though no less dangerous) crusaders. Kathy Ryan took the Marauders as her own. Sam Chupp, Nicky Rea and Kevin Andrew Murphy helped blur the lines between metaphysics and mystery, and the uneasy teamwork of Dan Greenberg, Darren McKeeman, Harry Heckel and myself birthed the wild Digital Web. A collaborative interplay between Werewolf boss Bill Bridges and I bound our games together, and a host of authors from Beth "Order of Hermes" Fischi to Jim "Samuel Haight" Moore helped shape the Mage cosmos. My personal beliefs in mysticism, transformation and responsibility melded well with Stewart's concept of magick as a metaphysical force of change. The resulting world combined the best (and most puzzling) dreams of both creators. Mage's gestation may have been rough, but it was never boring.

It was another two years before the release of the second edition solidified the original's premise into a viable game, with all themes intact. Until then, however, a steady stream of supplements like The Book of Shadows, The Book of Madness and the pseudo-historical Fragile Path expanded Mage's audience from a cult to a movement. As of 1997, Mage ranks second only to Vampire: The Masquerade among the Storyteller games in terms of sales and acclaim.

Rough start. Great present. Lots of hope for the future.

System Queries

• Can a vampire/ werecreature/ changeling/ wraith become a mage, or vice versa? How about ghouls or Kinfolk? Why don't these creatures suffer Paradox when what they do clearly violates "reality"?

No, no, no, no and no. Mages *can* be ghouls (or vice versa), but drinking Kindred blood stimulates a taste for more of the same. That's a dangerous habit, even for a mage, and may well lead to a Blood Bond — or a Blood Hunt. As for shapeshifter kin, there's no reason why one couldn't Awaken, but there's no real "system" benefit for doing so. Mage-ghoul and mage-Kinfolk combinations are immune to the Delirium (see below) and either could be a friend, enemy or both to the Changing Breeds.

The theories about Paradox and other supernatural creatures are many and varied. No, they don't suffer Paradox as a rule. Why not? For simplicity's sake, let's just say that what they do conforms to "static" boundaries. Their powers work the same way with the same limitations each time. A Curse of Aeolus Gift creates a creepy wall of fog. That's it. Nothing else. A mage can do the same thing with Matter and Mind magick, but she can do a great deal more, as well. The werewolf is limited to the powers that Gaia gave him, while the mage is limited only by her understanding and skill. The price for that potential is Paradox, the force that kicks in when you push reality too far, too quickly. Mages do that. The others don't.

(See "The Hidden World" in Mage, Chapter Nine, for more detailed crossover stuff.)

• Can a mage regenerate damage? Can she soak aggravated wounds? Is healing injuries vulgar or coincidental magick?

No and no. Some house rules might allow a mage a soak roll against vampire or Garou claws or teeth, if only for survival. Strictly speaking, though, a mystick needs Life 3

magick to soak or heal aggravated damage. Mages are *mortal*, and mortals bleed. A lot.

The third answer depends on the injury; healing a broken arm could be coincidental ("It's just sprained"), so long as the bone isn't sticking out of the skin. Healing a severe burn would be vulgar, but healing internal injuries wouldn't be. In general, assume that if a person watching the operation would say "That can't be," the healing is vulgar.

Oh, yeah; healing aggravated wounds is *always* vulgar. Sorry.

• Are mages immune to the Delirium that most shapeshifters invoke?

Yes. This doesn't mean that a 10-foot-tall werewolf doesn't scare a mage (It'd scare the hell out of me!), just that he won't go running off in blind panic.

• Why aren't the Chantry, Familiar, Resources or Sanctum Backgrounds given in the main rulebook?

Long story. They're available in **The Book of Shadows**, the **Mage Players Guide**, and were originally included in the second-edition rulebook. The first version of that book ran far too long to be printed, however, and many things had to go. Since the Backgrounds existed elsewhere, they were cut (the other material went into **Hidden Lore**). Since the cuts were made while the book was in the layout stage, we missed the reference to them on the "Character Creation Process" chart. Even then, the reference is only half a mistake; the Backgrounds are still available, just not in the main rulebook.

• When are you coming out with "The Nephandi Players Guide"?

I'm not. Period. I'm as open-minded as the next person (and more open-minded than most), but the idea of a Players Guide for mages dedicated to corruption strikes me as careless and offensive. To make black magic seem cool is asking for trouble of all different kinds.

• I'm confused by Quintessence, Tass and Nodes. Can you explain what to do with them?

Okay, let's take each in turn.

• Quintessence is the base element of reality. Channeled through magick, it allows a mage to shift the odds in her favor by reducing the difficulty of the player's roll. **Mage's** first edition claimed that Quintessence was finite, like oil, and that mages waged war over it. That concept has been scrapped in favor of the idea that powerful emotions or occurrences create "new" Prime Force, coloring it with the Resonance of the event that stirred the pot. A mystick can regain his normal Quintessence rating up to the limit of his Avatar rating by meditating at a Node (see **Mage**, page 131). To absorb more Quintessence, he must use a Prime 1 **Rush** Effect. He cannot spend more Quintessence in one turn than his Avatar rating allows, and cannot reduce a magick roll difficulty by more than -3 in any case. A large store of personal Quintessence typically lasts longer
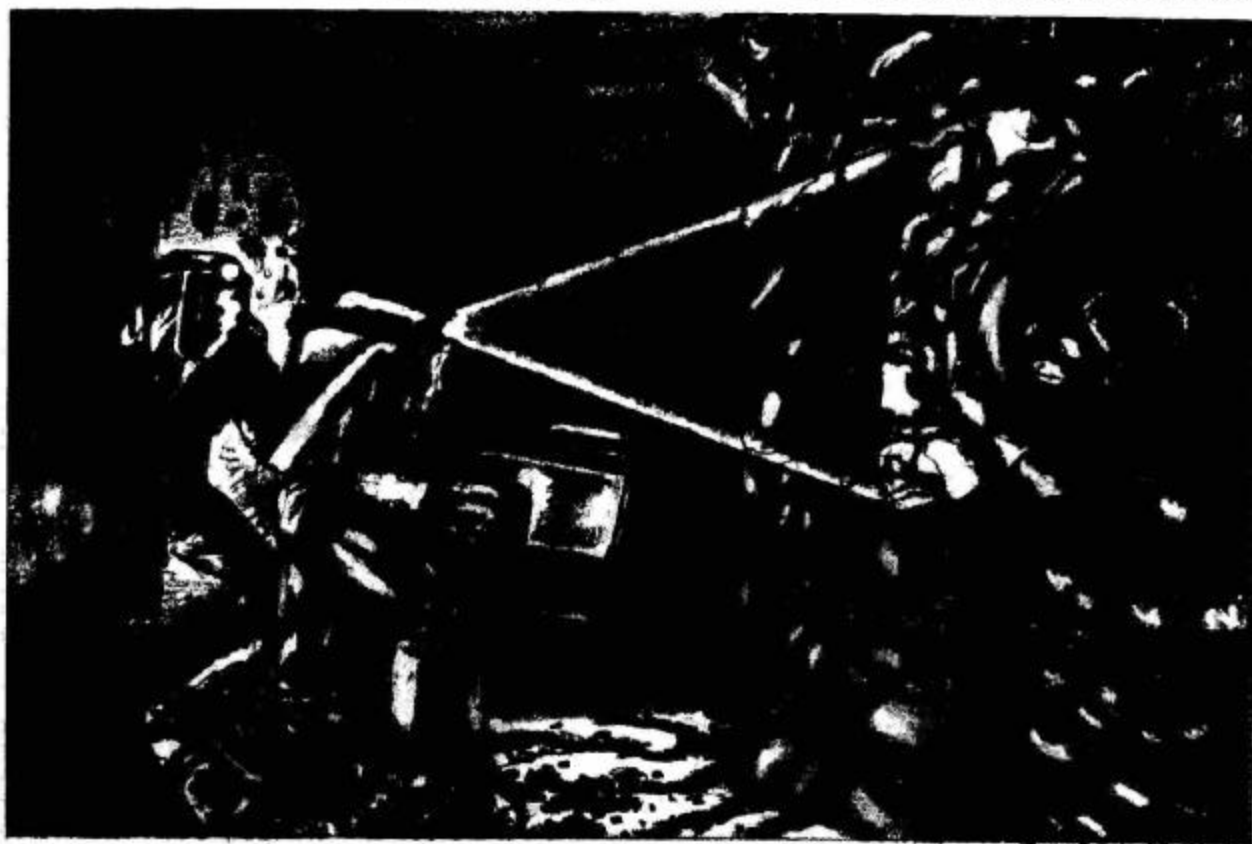
than a small one — a useful thing during rituals and long adventures. In story terms, those who can see Prime Force notice powerful halos around characters with lots of stored Quintessence.

As I mentioned, Quintessence and Tass contain Resonance left over from the things or places from which they came. Prime Force drawn from a lover's wishing well would have a different "taste" than that taken from a battlefield. This aura makes certain kinds of Quintessence better for some types of magick than for others (see the "Magick Difficulties" chart in the rulebook). As a Storyteller, feel free to describe these different sensations, too. Doing so adds an extra kick to the old "I gain three points of Quintessence" thing.

• *Tass* is just Quintessence in solid form, like magic mushrooms or faerie dust. When eaten, it has a powerful taste. When channeled with Prime 3 Arts, it becomes raw energy, its material form crumbling into dust. Tass often collects at Nodes, but can come from different sources, too.

Vampires, Garou and other creatures contain a bit of Tass in their blood. Mages do not. You can figure that a mage gets one point of Quintessence for every two points of Gnosis, Blood Pool or Glamour in the creature, or for every single point of Power or Corpus channeled from a spirit. Distilling this Tass from physical beings requires Prime 3, and doing so from spirits requires Prime 4. I have to emphasize that *no* werewolf, vampire, ghost or faerie will *ever* willingly give a wizard some of his blood to play with, even if they're best friends. Doing so would be like giving your bank card and PIN number to a drug addict. Furthermore, faeries and Garou know that a small part can hold the essence of the whole, vampires understand the peril of the Blood Bond and spirits risk total destruction by giving their essence away. Given these facts, would *you* offer a wizard some of your blood? No one really trusts a mage to begin with, and who's to say what he'll *really* do once he's got some of your blood? Storytellers, this is a big *no*. Similarly, no other creature will allow a mystick to skim Prime Force from a caern or Freehold. Although such places are good for 10 points of Quintessence per level of the area, this is trespassing of the worst kind (see **Mage**, page 233).

• *Nodes* are mystick places, rich with Primal energy. Although the "Quintessence war" idea is history, Nodes are still valuable. They're areas where the energies of creation have surged to the surface; places like that are valuable no matter how available Quintessence is.

These mystick locations create a certain amount of Tass, and carry strong Resonance from the events that created them or from the purposes for which they're used. Powerful Nodes exude "flavors" so rich that even mortals can sense them. A magickal working that taps a Node transfers that power into the shape that the spell assumes, whether the mage wants it to or not. The Node Background lets several mages combine their points into a single shared Node from which they can all take Quintessence. Unless something threatens to destroy the place, just assume that everyone can get what they need in "free" Quintessence. Tass is another story, and the amount that can be drawn depends on the size of the characters' Background pool (see that listing for more details).

• **What good are foci, anyway? I know reality is malleable, and my character knows it, too. Why can't he just accept that and throw his focus away?**

(Sound of a long sigh.) First of all, let's make the distinction between *player* knowledge and *character* knowledge. Now remember that magick styles — and by extension, foci — are extensions of belief. Belief is central to magick. No mage can work her Arts without the belief that she can do so. The magickal style she adopts says volumes about those beliefs, her self-image and her culture. For that reason alone, style and foci are important roleplaying notes.

Now no matter what your rulebook might say, the mages in the game world do *not* realize that they can throw away their ritual tools when they become enlightened enough to work without them. That process comes through experience, through realizing that magick comes from *you*, not from your rituals or tools. Until a mage reaches that state, she believes that her actions set spells in motion. Till then, the chants, lighted candles, prayers and sacrifices carry the mystick intent from the mage into her world. Even after she realizes that rituals aren't essential, her magickal style forms a bridge; the foci she chooses are the materials of that bridge. They might form a rope catwalk, a stone arch or a steel suspension bridge. Either way, the style, and by extension the foci, link the mage to her magick. Until she understands otherwise, she needs those elements to work her Arts.

Too many players treat foci as inconveniences. It's so much easier for characters to whip off Effects without spending time doing some dance or mixing up some potion that players discard the whole idea. If you want to run a high-fantasy chronicle, it's up to you. Personally, I think a game in which my mage carves elaborate runes or enters a trance is much richer than one in which she just flings off a magickal spell without any drama or effort. In the first edition rules, most foci were encumbrances, tied to certain Spheres and burdened with certain modifiers. The newer systems allow you to improvise more, to personalize style and foci to the mage. They're less of a hassle and more of a creative tool.

When I'm running a game, I always ask my players "What's your mage doing to make this happen?" The inevitable response "I'm using Forces 3, Prime 2" is met with "No, tell me what your *character* is doing to make this happen." Once the player gets into the spirit of describing the pentacle that her character inscribes, the dance she

performs and the sudden gust of wind and the flicker of the candles, the game takes on new form. It becomes a story.

Could there be a better reason to have foci in the game?

(See Chapter Six for more details about magickal styles, foci and the significance of both. Oh, by the way, mages *never* ask each other "Hey, what foci do you use?" "Focus" is a game term, not a phrase that mages employ. Hearing characters talk like that makes me wince.)

Paradox

• **My players think Paradox is stupid, complicated or unnecessary. How should I handle it?**

An often misunderstood aspect of the game, Paradox serves a threefold purpose.

• Paradox reflects the magickal and metaphysical truth that actions have consequences. The more radical the action, the greater the risk and the more severe the consequences. Some magickal practices espouse Threefold Return — "That which you do returns to you threefold." While Paradox isn't always threefold in its effects, it certainly makes the point that magick involves risk.

• Paradox maintains game balance, and does so in a more real-world way than "fatigue points" or "memorized spells" do. Paradox also maintains the edgy atmosphere of the World of Darkness — a world not unlike our own.

• Paradox adds an element of uncertainty to magickal workings — an element that's perfectly in keeping with the metaphysics of "real" magic. The mystick Arts set forces in motion, and no one, not even the wisest mage, can predict how these forces are going to turn. If the whole idea of magick is shifting reality, it makes sense that reality's going to shift back occasionally.

Anyone who understands real magic knows that one doesn't muck with the forces of the cosmos without stirring up some heavy juju. The forms that juju takes depend on the actions that set it in motion, but it doesn't just go away. Paradox is the cost of playing the game — literally.

(By the way, Paradox is not a hungry beastie in thrall to the Technocracy. While different mages have different impressions of it, I'll say in game terms that Paradox is a force, not a creature. No one holds the leash to that force. Some just ride the wave better than others.)

• **Why can't a mage just throw fireballs around? That's more fun than worrying about Paradox.**

If you want to dump Paradox and run a limitless **Mage** game, go ahead. Just remember that a world where people bowl with hellfire is going to be radically different than the World of Darkness. The

established setting is dark and mysterious. Things happen in the shadows, not in full view. Magick is dangerous, risky and often subtle. A world where there's nothing to stop mages from following their whims won't be much like the one we know, and the power balance is going to be way off. If a mystick can toss a fireball down the street without consequences, what stopped his kind from taking over the Earth long ago? Isn't a world like that supposed to be the wish-dream of the Ascension warriors?

Think about a world where mages have unlimited power. Think about what life would mean to the average Joe. Would you want to live there? More to the point, would you want to run a game in which power-gamers could do whatever they wanted to?

• **Where's the line between "coincidental" and "vulgar"? How can the beliefs of Sleepers affect that line?**

The line between "Sure, that could happen" and "That's not possible" is a fuzzy one. Most of the time, it's pretty obvious — frogs don't burst into flame and fly when someone spits on them. The Cinematic Example sidebar at the beginning of **Mage**'s Chapter Eight covers most circumstances. Things get harry, though, when a mystick employs a style that suits the beliefs of the people around her. Whether she chooses to mask her magick in an appropriate way or simply follows the beliefs of the local culture, the mage gains an upper hand over rivals who use more overt, more vulgar, Arts.

Take a Hermetic wizard as an example. Unless he hangs out at a Renaissance fair, his elaborate rituals look pretty crazy. If something overt actually happens as a result of this silliness, most onlookers respond "That can't be!" The spell is therefore "vulgar with witnesses." Even if the wizard does associate with like-minded mortals, there will be some questions (to put it mildly) if he conjures up a demon through a Pentacle of Mars. There's only so much a Sleeper can accept, even if he shares a common belief with the mage. Some things are always vulgar.

(There's an old misconception that you can invoke the forces of Paradox by having someone run around and shout "I disbelieve that! I disbelieve that!" — as if disbelief was something you could turn on and off at will. Magick is not some cheap illusion, it's reality. For the record, a person believes that a thing is possible (it fits her paradigm), she does not (it violates her worldview), or she changes one to fit the other (she converts). Shifting belief is not something that happens easily or at will. It's a dramatic, often traumatizing event that leaves the person grasping for something to hold onto. Kind of like Awakening…which, in a way, it is.)

Still, in certain cultures magickal styles — especially technomagick and shamanism — are perfectly in line with peoples' beliefs. The "Magickal Geography and Influence" section of **Mage** covers these bases pretty well, but what happens if our Hermetic friend *does* conduct a ritual during the Atlanta Renaissance Fair? What's a Storyteller to do?

Lets assume that a small Effect — say a ripple of breeze or a minor conjuration — is coincidental. Even a large Effect — like making a building disappear — *might* be coincidental if everyone watching is convinced that it's a great illusion which happens quickly and then returns to normal. (It would still require a lot of successes to pull off, and might be pretty vulgar if there were people *inside* the building who watched the *world* disappear. But I digress….) The Blatancy Skill, from **The Book of Shadows**, helps immeasurably with this. Yet if things get too crazy, no amount of "Copperfielding" is going to work. If the building stays gone or dances around, the mage in question is in trouble.

Paradox doesn't have to strike immediately. If a coincidental Effect turns vulgar after casting (like leaving a building invisible), a Paradox storm gathers, waiting for the next botched spell. In game terms you might assign double the normal Paradox if a mage takes advantage of cases in which things look coincidental but are ultimately vulgar.

Props, showmanship and the proper setting are essential to staving off Paradox, too. To utilize mortal beliefs, the mystick has to work within their limits. It's easy enough to be a stage magician so long as you entertain your audience in the proper place. If David Copperfield were to walk down the street making flowers grow, people would notice. He's out of bounds — and out of luck — when he's out of the proper element.

Utilizing belief has another price, too, one covered in more detail in Chapter Four under "Normal Folks." Believers expect miracle workers to work miracles for *them*. A mage who pretends to be a faith healer had better be braced for the followers who will inevitably demand his talents and piety. People don't just see a miracle, even a scientific one, and go on their way without comment. They want more. They expect certain behaviors from the mage. If they don't get these things, they get nasty. Worse, they might lose their faith. When that happens, everybody loses.

• **How do *you* run a Paradox backlash?**

Unpredictably. I take the circumstances into account and improvise. Most times, I prefer to simply note "Uh oh, Atropos blew it," and let the effects kick in when I want them to.

Let's use that infamous klutz as an example. In one game, Atropos tried to exterminate the Men in Black who had crashed her van. As they loomed out of the rain, she shook her dice (foci) and called for a lightning bolt to come out of the storm — and blew it. The player, Shadow, botched her roll. I noted it and moved on. A few turns later Atropos tried to use her Arts to run away at great speed. Another botch. More Paradox. I noted it again and continued. Other mages were stirring the pot further with their

Effects. Some succeeded, others didn't, but no one was leaving reality well enough alone. Finally, Shadow botched another roll. Atropos had piled up a pretty impressive tab by that point, so I brought out something nasty.

Wrinkle.

I knew that by strict definition of the rules, Wrinkle shows up over Time infractions. I didn't care. Suddenly a creaky old man in a white suit emerged from the ruins of the van, shaking his finger at Atropos. The look on Shadow's face was priceless. Rather than rolling initiative or checking out Wrinkle's Charms, I just had him interpose himself between Atropos and the Men in Black. Poor Atropos (not Shadow) started crying. The old man took pity on her. When the Men in Black flashed their badges at him, he looked them in the eyes. One of the other characters noted that the MiBs began to tremble. "Hey, you know what *he* just did?" the character whispered to Wrinkle, pointing to a Man in Black, "He just took an arrow out of his chest without flinching" (the MiB had, indeed).

"Oh, really," said Wrinkle with an evil leer. "I suppose we'll have to teach him a lesson." And with that the MiBs vanished. Forever.

Atropos was no match for Wrinkle. I knew that when I brought him in. Even so, I had no intention of wiping Shadow's character out of existence. The warning was enough. Wrinkle looked over the two rain-soaked mysticks, said "Now *behave!*" and disappeared. I had Shadow mark five points of Paradox off of Atropos' sheet and proceeded with the story.

I improvised, playing the situation for maximum dramatic potential, and then continued after the point had been made. If Shadow hadn't taken the hint, the next backlash might have blown Atropos all over the road. As it was, I'd made my point and added a memorable moment to an otherwise routine action scene.

That's how to run a backlash — or any other odd occurrence, for that matter. Run it when it suits you, know when to stop and don't let the letter of the law interfere with a good scene.

• What about Quiets, Paradox Realms, hobgoblins and the like?

The example above works for Quiets, trips into cyberspace and passages into the Umbra. Your best option is to improvise, sit back and let the story develop. It happens more easily than you might think with a cooperative troupe.

These concepts are too abstract to run successfully by charts or tables. You could cross-index various circumstances over 100 pages and still end up missing the combination that happens to occur in your game. Odd phenomena come with the territory in **Mage**, and they invest the game with its most challenging aspect: improvisation. If you have the foundations worked out, it's easy to improvise. Just throw yourself at the ground and miss.

Seriously, the secret to running one of these puzzlers is to save the occurrence until you're ready to handle it. If you don't feel confident about running a sudden Paradox Storm, then don't. Save it for later. Quiets, Realms, mindscapes and the like are story elements, so treat them like upcoming plots. Brainstorm about the upcoming story in between sessions and make a few notes if you have to. Come to the table with a plan, set it up, then yank reality-as-they-know-it out from under the characters. You'll know what's coming. They won't.

Now comes the fun part: description. Let your imagination run riot and describe what you see. It helps if you have an encyclopedic knowledge of **Mage** supplements, but that isn't really essential — nor is it the point. Crib from movies, books or other sources if you want, but personalize your upheaval so that your players feel off-balance. Now set things in motion and let the players figure it out. Get up. Move around. Run through the whole menu of Techniques described in **Mage**, Chapter Seven, and catch the players up in your enthusiasm. When they do something, counter it with some new occurrence. Watch the clock — and your players — to avoid going overboard, but otherwise let things ride. If everybody's caught up in the action, consulting charts or checking supplements only slows the game down.

Most Quiets, Seekings and Paradox Realms are solitary experiences, at least at first. If you can set up a solo gaming session with one of your players, do so and spring the trap then (this also works for romances, family matters and other one- or two-character plot elements). Dim the lights or use appropriate music to establish the atmosphere in the gaming area. Narrate the setting, but let your player do as she will. Then play off each other. Again, if you cooperate this is easier than it seems.

Once events in a solo session have reached a point where others can join, wrap the session up and set a date for the next game. If you haven't had time for a whole game session, a blue-booking exchange (see Chapter One or **Hidden Lore**, pages 8-9) might be in order. Either way, open the next collective game with the other characters realizing that something's wrong with the mage in question. From there, guide them along through the territory you've already explored with the solo player. Again, improvise using whatever notes or scenes you used before. When things seem to have reached a fitting climax, allow your players to find the solution to the Realm or Quiet. If things seem too easy, have something boot the characters out and start again.

You can usually stay one step ahead of your players by answering four simple questions:

- Why is this happening?
- What's making it happen?
- What might stop it from happening?
- What else *might* happen in the meantime?

Once you have the answers to those queries, the map of the Realm or mindscape lies in front of you. Don't worry about having the answers to everything before you begin. Most questions, once asked, answer themselves.

Seekings and the Avatar

• What about Seekings? How can I run one?

Seekings are special cases. A mystick advances through one to the next level of her enlightenment. A Seeking pits the mage against aspects of her personality that she must transcend. These stumbling blocks often manifest as symbols, and the keys to the puzzle offer themselves in metaphorical terms. Classic symbols — caves, deep water, flame, riches, animals — feature prominently in most voyages, but these symbols can vary depending on the mage's culture or beliefs. Most Western mages' Seekings involve trials by the four elements, but many Eastern mysticks encounter puzzles left by the gods. Each journey is uniquely suited to the mage in question and features the issues facing her in the story. As a Storyteller, I recommend setting aside time to prepare a Seeking session with the player (or blue-booking it), and preparing the obstacle course in advance.

All Seekings follow a certain pattern: The mage enters a dreamworld where things have symbolic form. She overcomes some sort of frightening obstacle — let's say she passes through a wall of fire — to enter the first "chamber" and goes from there to another, and another. Each "chamber" represents a state of enlightenment — in game terms, a point of Arete. She'll encounter 10 chambers throughout her life, each representing a trial, each trial more difficult than the last. Every time she goes Seeking, the mage must pass through the chambers she's encountered before; the details of each trial alter slightly every time she goes through, though, so it's never exactly the same trip twice. It's always possible to fail a test that's been passed before. On top of all this, the mystick's Avatar often shows up for the ride, offering slight hints but leaving the puzzle for the mage to unravel. Some Avatars actively frustrate their mages, especially if conflicts have occurred between the sorcerer and her inner self. (More about running Avatars, below.)

If/when the mystick passes her trial, the Seeking ends and the mage has a rapturous moment — an Epiphany — which affects her for days. If/when she fails (which she often will), the pains of the trial consume her. Most mages emerge from a failed voyage trembling, depressed and often terrified by the things they encountered. Sometimes the punishment or obstacle is so severe that a mage falls into a Quiet for days on end. Other times, a sorcerer suffers a loss of Willpower — a couple of temporary points are *gone* until she rebuilds her determination. In certain cases, such as the

character relies too heavily on her magick in or outside the voyage, she might return to the real world missing some vital sense, like sight or hearing, and she must learn to work without it. Only when she passes the Seeking obstacles will she advance in Arete. This takes lifetimes for most mages; not years, but centuries. Many never make the trip all the way to the end.

In general, Seekings follow six steps: Initiation, Impediment, Trial, Choice and either Acceptance and Closure or Denial and Failure.

• *Initiation* begins the quest. The mage passes through some symbolic gateway which leads to the rest of the vision.

• *Impediment* presents the first challenge. The mage's fears and insecurities manifest and tell her "Thou shalt not pass." This step often requires a Willpower roll to get through.

• *Trials* present obstacles that terrify the Seeker by confronting her with the issues that she must face. Examples include a cliff (which she must jump from), a fire (which she must walk through), laughing spirits (which she must dismiss) or other symbolic barriers.

• *Choice* forces the mage to make a decision during a Trial. That decision closes the chamber and either allows the mage passage or sends her back "home."

• *Acceptance* is the correct choice, and it's not an easy one to make. The questing mage must face her deepest issues, often abandoning things she loves or embracing things she fears. This also might entail a Willpower roll, although the brunt of the decision should rest on the player (who hopefully takes the whole thing seriously). From there, *Closure* brings an Epiphany and ends the quest. The rapture lasts for days; the Arete is fairly permanent. (See "Losing Arete or Willpower," **Mage**, page 230.)

• *Denial* means the mage isn't ready yet. She fails the test for whatever reason and plummets back to the mortal world, and suffers some kind of trauma to remind her of her loss. *Failure's* mark lingers for hours or days, and ranges from tears and depression to blindness to Quiet or Paradox-like Flaws. The greater the Seeking level, the greater the cost of failure and the longer it lasts. The higher you climb, as it were....

Some other things to keep in mind for Seeking sessions:

• Seekings are deliberate. They don't just happen. Tell your player to inform you when she wants to purchase another point of Arete, then prepare a separate story in which the character goes questing. If you want, discuss the elements she'd like to see in the vision and consider appropriate Trials that the character might encounter.

• Choose appropriate symbols. A Virtual Adept might see an obstacle as a matrix wall of code, a Dreamspeaker might see a sheer peak, and a Man in Black might uncover a conspiracy to dismantle his Convention. A good symbology book (see Appendix) goes a long way toward picking suitable icons.

• Seekings should be roleplaying sessions, not dice contests. Toss the systems out the window, narrate and improvise. The only rolls the players should make are Willpower rolls to determine if characters pass especially nasty obstacles.

• Inner journeys often bring family matters, unresolved guilt or group tensions into the realm of the subconscious. Many archmages remain stuck for centuries on end because they've become so enraptured with power or politics that they cannot let go and advance.

• Seekings are about facing fears, abandoning pleasures and accepting personal change. They are not easy to begin with and should grow more difficult as time passes.

• No one but the Avatar comes along for a Seeking. Such quests are personal affairs.

You can, of course, opt to leave Seekings out of your game entirely and simply base character advancement on experience points. To do so, however, would rob the chronicle of the potential for some really meaningful stories — and some kick-ass solo games.

(An archetypal Seeking can be found in **The Book of Shadows**, pages 173-176. Potential obstacles are mentioned in **Mage**, page 228.)

• **What do I do with a character's Avatar?**

Play it, I hope. There are untold hours of fun to be had from teasing a player with his character's Mystick Self.

From a strictly game-system perspective, the Avatar allows a mage to refuel his personal Quintessence pool (up to the maximum of his Avatar rating unless he uses Prime 1 to "suck-it-'n'-store-it"). From a story perspective, things are more interesting. The Avatar is an independent character like any other; the higher the mage's Background rating, the more pronounced his Mystick Self is and the more often it appears. Like I said, you can have a great time adding commentary from the shadows through the Avatar's voice. Best of all, most Avatars are invisible to other mages so you can prod a player without making a commotion.

Lots of people have questions about the origins of Avatars. I'd like to leave the issue open to interpretation. The Mystick Self is supposed to be enigmatic; wrapping it up in systems and pronouncements takes away from the Avatar's mystique, and trivializes what can be the most important motivating force in a mage's life.

Avatars can have many different forms: pets, shadows, towering figures wrapped in flame, divine voices, future selves, even characters that seem real but elude everyone else's sight. (Has anyone out there *ever* figured out who Cassie's Avatar was in **Cult of Ecstasy**?) While you might discuss the nature of an Avatar with a player before you begin a chronicle, it might be more fun to let the character

discover his Mystick Self the hard way. It all depends on what you want to do in the game.

(**Mage** discusses the Avatar on pages 31-32, 131 and 230. Most Tradition and Technocracy books mention various Avatars in both obvious and obscure terms. *White Wolf/Inphobia* magazine (issues 48-51) explored the mage/Avatar bond in a four-part comic called "Embracing the Mask." **The Book of Shadows** presents a nice little tale by Beth Fischi on pages 164-166.)

Time, Science and Technomancy

• **If science is magick, how can Sleepers use it? Does technology *become* magick if it's brought back in time to a point before its own invention? If the Technocrats are so advanced, why didn't the ancient ones use Time magick to foresee modern technology, invent it, and kick the Traditions' collective ass?**

(**Warning:** Major esoterica alert. Do not expect an easy answer.)

In our world, certain things are law. Water flows downhill. People don't float off the ground. Fire begins with a spark. Living things breathe. Both science and magic (and their cousin religion) accept these laws, then go about defining why the laws exist and how a person might get around them. The borders of science are narrower than those of most forms of magic or faith, but as quantum physics and chaos mathematics show, those parameters aren't nearly as defined as we think. True Magick, the Art of the mage, reaches beyond the limits that most mortals understand; magick makes the most basic laws open to interpretation. Even magick, however, accepts that some things come with the territory.

Magick is not arbitrary. It still works within the definitions of Creation. The more you understand Creation, though, the more you can tinker with it. In game terms, a character advances through the Spheres as her Arete increases. Normal humans can move the boundaries of Creation slightly with heroic effort, but they cannot do it on a whim. *Mastering* the boundaries of Creation requires more than just an open mind — it demands a mental, physical, spiritual and metaphysical Awakening, as well as control and expertise (Arete and the Spheres). Without all that, a person can operate within the limits of natural laws, but finds it hard to overcome them.

• **What sets these natural laws?**

The basic structure of things came with the package. The foundations of existence were in place long before people arrived on the scene. Dinosaurs did not float through the air like soap bubbles, even though there were no Technomancers to tell them they couldn't. The oldest legends claim many miraculous things happened, but even then there were limits.
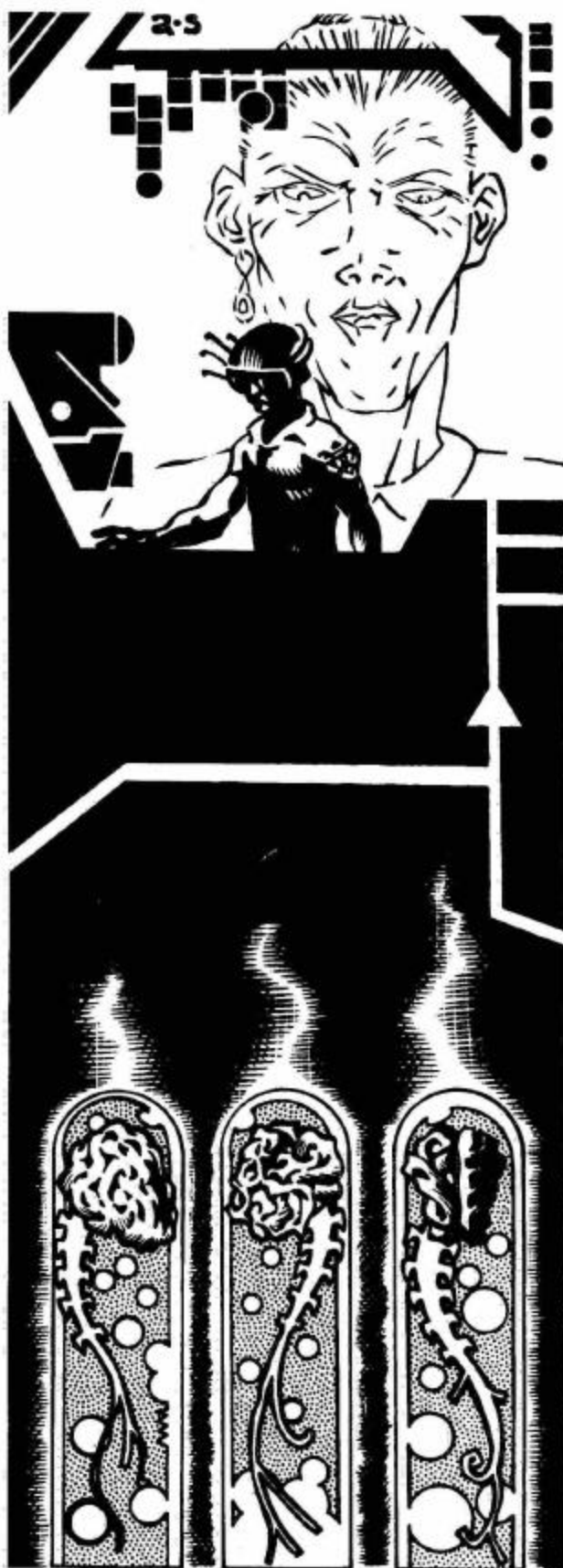
Somewhere along the line people discovered that those limits could shift if folks believed they could. The more people who believed in something, the more likely it became. The reverse was also true; if people would *not* accept something or if they felt it was unnatural, the possibilities for it narrowed. In time the basic structure gave way to a host of different possibilities. A person might make fire by rubbing sticks together in one possibility, or might call upon the fire spirits to do it for him in another. One method might work better than the other in some places, while both would work equally well in others — depending on what people believed would work. This "belief factor" became crucial over time. It didn't matter much to the early folk, but as cultures arose it became vital to those who stepped outside the boundaries — the mages.

As the possibilities shifted, the magic, technology and religions available to the common folks (the ones who couldn't do *anything* new) followed. The limits followed the will and beliefs of the people, and there were *always* limits. No culture, no matter how mystical, believes in *everything*. True Magick's own laws — the borders of Paradox — settled around those limitations. Anything outside those boundaries remained possible, but risky. If people said "That won't work," there was a good chance that it wouldn't — or that it would blow up in the mage's face.

For millennia most forms of ritual magick were possible; people could talk to spirits, conjure storms and heal the sick so long as their Arts worked according to local beliefs (see "Magick Styles" in **Mage**," pages 72-73 and 179-186). At that time technomagick was difficult to perform (read: vulgar in most cases), and modern technology was out of bounds, even for the "technomancers" of the era. Running around with a gun would have been inconceivable in ancient Rome, although the thought of a rapid-fire missile weapon had probably occurred to a few Technomancers by that time. Daedalus is a perfect example of the Classical Technomancer: a man capable of miracles given time, materials and the belief of his people. Even so, his devices rarely worked without complications — in other words, Paradox.

In game terms we use the parameters of coincidental magick to define what is and isn't considered possible (for the modern era's limits, see "The Cinematic Example" in **Mage**). The more people who believe a thing is possible, the more coincidental it becomes. Early attempts at technology or technomagick were risky; the "classic" laboratory explosion could have resulted from Paradox backlash.

• **So was the first person to create fire a mage? Was** *everyone* **Awakened back then?**

The question's open to debate, and mysticks have been doing just that for millennia. It's possible that everyone was Awakened in ancient times, but personally I don't think so.

More likely, the first firemaker had a quantum leap of thought (a heroic effort) or a stroke of dumb luck, learned how to do that one trick well, and passed it on.

Many legends disagree; in most cultures' lore, the first people were near-divine beings with the power to command the elements at will. Seeing as how the ancient vampires and shapeshifters supposedly preyed on people at whim, that myth doesn't seem likely. Some primordial folk, often called the Wyck, were True Mages in the Awakened sense, and were by all accounts a race apart from other people — linked to the mundane people by blood, but working on a higher plane.

To return to the original question, technology grows to suit the prevailing beliefs. One man builds a machine, makes it work (or convinces people that it will), and others make use of it eventually. Over time it becomes part of belief — part of reality. It's not magick, exactly, unless the machine or process in question pushes the boundaries of reality so far that only sheer will can make the device function. Sleepers are capable of such "strokes of genius" on occasion, but lack mages' ability to will them on command. Normal people's technology relies on someone else paving the way.

The technological device that is taken through a time portal *may* work in the past. Or it may not. It's your choice, based on what you want to happen in your game. Do you want a character to become like Ash in *Army of Darkness?* Then let the shotgun and chain saw rule. If not, they're just lumps of metal filled with dangerous fluids and powders. Who knows what'll happen if something from a different time appears in a period whose residents cannot comprehend its existence? Are the laws of mathematics, physics and chemistry part of those basic laws we discussed earlier, or did they come about because enough people willed them to be? The answer depends on what you want to occur in your chronicle. It's not one we can give you.

Someone once asked if a Sleeper passing through a time portal could synthesize gunpowder in the Dark Ages using the available tools and his memorized science notes. I'd say that someone trying to synthesize gunpowder with medieval technology and some hazily recalled science papers doesn't *need* Paradox to blow himself up, though he might succeed on a small scale — *if* the Storyteller wants him to. A traveler who tries to set up a gunpowder factory in an unfamiliar time period is asking for trouble, whether he's Awakened or not. Although Paradox doesn't usually affect un-Awakened mortals, there's no telling *who* it might affect if a mage acts radically in another period. The laws of reality are *terra incognita* in the distant past or future. Anyone, mage or mortal, who tries to fool with the established order might create a paradox, evoking the effect of the same name.

- **If early Technocrats discovered things and therefore created reality, what existed before they existed?**

The early Technocratic explorers didn't *discover* reality or *define* reality (much as they might like to believe) — they *limited* it. They took something that was by nature more fluid than the lands from which they came and forced it to conform to their views by eliminating its possibilities.

How is that possible? The Order of Reason's Inner Circle understood that a simple adage — "Anything that isn't nailed down is mine. Anything I can pry up is not nailed down"—contains a metaphysical truth: If your mojo is stronger than another person's, his reality belongs to you. The scattered shamans of the Americas and Africa worked in small groups or alone. The Technocrats worked together and had the collective weight of the Old World behind them when they went forth into the unknown. To lay claim to a "weaker" reality, the early Technocrats sent their agents out to convert the land through ritual, indoctrination and force. Over time they spread their limited view of reality across the world (although a few remote locations are still free of their dominion — for now).

How did they do it? Their efforts began by establishing a "party line," a doctrine of what was and was not possible. (Or what was and wasn't *legitimate* — many early Technocrats were still God-fearing and regarded pagan magick as "unnatural Devil's work" or "superstition" rather than as "impossibility.") Once this paradigm had been established, the explorers went forth into uncharted lands. They claimed those lands for God, king and country, named them on maps and in journals, and sent accounts of their efforts back home. From then on, when people heard names like "Virginia," they thought of the land they had been told existed. A name had been given, and names have power. (See Chapter Six.)

Back in the "new" lands, the explorers tore down the natives' sacred places and performed new rituals, consecrating the energies to the Technocrats' purposes and eliminating their opposition. Local shamans and elders were killed or converted and children were taken away to missions or schools where they were taught that the old ways were wicked and impossible. Over time the possibilities of the New World were narrowed down to what the Inner Circle chose to allow. (Just look at the terminology — the Americas were named for mapmaker Amerigo Vespucci, the native people were called "Indians" and "Negroes" and terms like "New World" and "Dark Continent" became common references.)

No conversion is perfect, though. Reality still has a lot of give to it, and no culture has ever completely rejected the notion of magick. Still, the free-flowing reality that the indigenous mysticks understood was turned against them. The Technocratic paradigm has won — for now.

- **How can I put that into game terms?**

By adjusting coincidence. If the local culture favors Lakota shamanism, the Son of Ether and the Man in Black are going to have problems. If a shaman arrives in Central Park, he has a nasty surprise in store. The Arts he used so freely back home turn vulgar and dangerous. If you're running a game in the past or future, use common sense. A Christian missionary who asks for divine intercession in the pirate-age Caribbean has a better chance of fitting in than the one who prays in the Amazon jungles during the same period. If your chronicle takes place long before the Ascension War, you might even adjust magick difficulties to "Highest Sphere + 2/ Highest Sphere + 3/ Highest Sphere + 4" to reflect a more flexible reality. It's your game. (Chapter Five features some suggested guidelines for alternate time periods in the World of Darkness.)

The Ascension War

- **Do we *have* to play members of the nine Traditions? Must I use the Ascension War as my chronicle setting?**

Not at all. You can run a Technocracy game, a Crafts game or a mixed-group chronicle, so long as the characters have some reason to be together. Your troupe can avoid the factions altogether and forge its own destiny (see "Solitaries" in **Mage**, pages 55-56); my mage does. Although I hesitate to suggest a Nephandi chronicle (the issue of black magick strikes a little too close to home; see above), and feel that a Marauder one would be problematic, they are always options if you're willing to do the work (see **The Book of Madness**, Chapters One and Three). The Council merely provides one of several options in the Ascension War.

As a symbol of change, order, balance and decay, the Ascension War is a backdrop for adventure and is a powerful allegory. It's also a logical progression from the question "What if you really *could* mold reality through magick?" I think it's reasonable to assume that, given magick's powers, secret societies *would* spring up and vie for world domination. Mortal nations have done it throughout human existence, so why should magickal societies be any different? The forces these societies represent tie into the metaphysical heart of the game; the struggle between them represents the dance of Creation itself. Finally, the Ascension War provides a forum for debate and satire. The writers and artists who create the game books make many subtle (and not so subtle) commentaries, and individual Storytellers can pack their chronicles with as many political and social observations as they desire. In short, the Ascension War provides a lot of raw material and a framework for building with it.

If the conflict doesn't work for you, scrap it and do what you will. The only constants in a **Mage** game should be:

- The idea that magick is a real and viable force;
- That magick stretches the boundaries between what is real and what is not;
- That magick carries the weight of responsibility, whether you like it or not; and,
- That the mage transforms both herself and the world around her through her Arts.

The Ascension War provides a conflict dynamic and a metaphor for the forces involved, but it's hardly the only way to play the game. One of **Mage**'s greatest strengths (and most intimidating aspects) is that there isn't a "right" way to play it. It's as open-ended as you want it to be.

- **Does a character have to stay in his original Tradition? Does everyone in a Tradition practice the same magickal style?**

No to both questions. Traditions are social groups, not magickal castes. Some of them are more formal than others, but all of them offer members some flexibility. Obviously they mandate some kind of instruction (the magickal styles described in the group descriptions) and order, but they rarely restrain a member who wants to leave.

In the beginning the Council formed around three things: magickal practices, cultural backgrounds and mystic philosophies. Over the last 500 years it has come to favor the last two qualifications over the first, and considers philosophy more important than anything else. The early Traditions insisted on orthodoxy, but soon pitched the idea when it became impractical. Nowadays a mage uses whatever tools she prefers.

There are elements common to the Traditions, of course; Hermetic masters don't teach their apprentices pagan blood magick, and Virtual Adepts don't build Frankenstein monsters. People tend to be drawn to others like themselves, so most mages within a given Tradition practice similar magicks. Even so, a Tradition provides a community, not a commandment. Some Verbena use computers. Some Ecstatics use them, too. Some Virtual Adepts prefer to work their magick through musical instruments, while their Dreamspeaker friends talk to the spirits of power tools. Diversity is the cornerstone of the Council of Nine; so long as a mage agrees with the idea behind the magick, the form she uses to channel it is unimportant.

A mage who leaves one Tradition for another might be considered flaky, even dangerous. Magick requires discipline, and while the Traditions value imagination, they frown on people who can't make up their minds. The rival factions within the Traditions (and their enemies) value trust. A mystick who shuttles between different groups seems untrustworthy; one who leaves the Council entirely seems treasonous. Even so, some mages forswear allegiance to the Tradition that trained them. Most even live to tell about it. Quitting is not in itself a capital offense.

The Conventions are a lot more rigid. Technocrats consider themselves parts of an important machine, and they don't take well to people who refuse to fit in. Malcontents rarely end up in the Technocracy's ranks to begin with, though. If the Union's ideals don't scare them off, its screening process often weeds them out.

The Crafts are a lot like Traditions. Although they don't deal with Ascension politics or wrestle with Council intrigues, they have affairs of their own to attend to. Like the Traditions and Conventions, each Craft is a society with rules, agendas, a shared history and a culture. **The Book of Crafts** covers some of the larger magickal societies, but many others can exist if you want to create them. The world is certainly large enough to permit a variety of magickal cultures.

So-called Orphans have the clearest Path of all. They simply do whatever they want and go wherever their lives lead them. Naturally those lives involve the same struggles that other mysticks face. **Mage**'s Chapter Two describes the universal Mystick Path; membership in a magickal society is an option, not a requirement. Those who avoid or defect from the large factions or Crafts still walk in their shadows, often watching their backs for mages who don't take their treason well. Those who Awaken on their own or work within some smaller group or culture (like a Wiccan who attains her full potential without actually encountering the Verbena) carve their own Paths as they go. The road is familiar, but the hazards are much less obvious.

Despite the old first-edition preconception of Orphans as frightened, hunted children, the solitaries and independents of the world can be as strong and accomplished as the greatest Tradition mages. Fictional sorcerers like John Constantine, Merlin or Mercedes Lackey's creations Diana Tregarde and Jennifer Talldeer would exist outside of Ascension War factions, yet would follow Arts as established and powerful as their more obvious counterparts. Tregarde is obviously a witch, but would not be a Verbena; Talldeer follows a modern Native American practice based on ancestral lore, but would not be a Dreamspeaker in the strictest sense. These examples, and many others, show what you can do with **Mage**. So no, your characters aren't restrict to Traditions for life. They're not restricted to any at all.

And speaking of first-edition preconceptions: *Not all Orphans are Hollow Ones*. In fact, the Hollow Ones are technically a Craft, an organized magickal society, though most of their members Awaken on their own. Still, each Orphan is an individual; they don't all dress in black lace and listen to The Cure. Honest. (Not that there's anything *wrong* with that, mind you.)

• The upper levels of the Spheres are really powerful. Why don't the archmages simply wish the Technocracy out of existence? Why doesn't the Inner Circle mount an all-out attack against Horizon? Why do all these ultrapowerful mages plot and plan instead of wipe each other out?

They don't wipe each other out for the same reasons that the U.S., the Soviet Union and China didn't just settle their differences the old-fashioned way during the Cold War: mutually assured destruction. If your rival has the same weapons you have, and any one of you could wipe the floor with Creation, it's suicide to whip out the nukes and let fly. There's a tremendous amount of reality at an archmage's fingertips. No one wants to be on the receiving end of it if he gets mad. Multiply that power by a dozen or more and you'll understand why Doissetep is a hotbed of intrigue instead of a battleground. If every archmage in the Chantry dealt with his problems like an angry mortal would, the place would have become a crater centuries ago. If *all* the rival mysticks did the same…. Well, draw your own conclusions.

There's also something to be said for age and enlightenment. Violence is rarely the best solution to a problem, and killing your enemy isn't always the best option (if it's an option at all). An archmage realizes the folly of wasting a life: A dead person can never be your friend or ally. He can't trade with you, do your dirty work or join you. Worst of all, he might come back as a wraith or in some other incarnation that remembers you enough to hate you (a problem the Akashics discovered when they waged the Himalayan Wars against the early Euthanatos cults). A dead person cannot change the world, and while killing seems like an easy solution to the Ascension War, most enlightened mysticks realize how important *all* kinds of change are.

Believe it or not, many mages still consider murder a blasphemy against Creation (or at the very least a waste of good potential), and they hold life as sacred. Killing isn't something taken lightly, and it carries consequences beyond simple jail time. All cultures revile murder; even ones that glorify war take a dim view of killing one's own kind. By the time they reach the highest levels of their Arts, mages realize that they all belong to the same clan, the same culture, the same family. To wish each other out of existence would be tantamount to fratricide. They'll do it, but not lightly. And it always has a price tag.

Murder by magick is the riskiest kind of warfare — who knows how the killing will affect you further down the line? Resonance is a fact that most archmages accept. The things you do come back to you, even if the forms they take aren't always obvious. Even the Euthanatos avoid using magick as a murder weapon, especially against other mages. You can never tell what the long-term karmic backlash might be.

And then there's the big picture to consider. Mages (especially old ones) tend to take the long view of things, and murder is a limited option. There are some serious forces at work in our ever-changing Creation, and not all of them are as obvious as they seem. Remember that each of the four great factions represents a cosmic principle — dynamism, stasis, entropy and balance. What happens if you wipe one out? No one who considers the Ascension War's stakes wants to find out. Better to neutralize your enemy, to use, convert or bind him, than to destroy him. He may hold the key to eternity in his hands.

• **What about Ascension? What does it mean to you? How would you run it in a game? What does a character need to accomplish to Ascend?**

First of all, let me tell you what Ascension isn't. It's not gaining an Arete of 10. It's not attaining 6 in all Spheres. It's not achieving great power in a Horizon Realm. As mages throughout time can attest, those things actually distract one from Ascension. Ascension itself is transcendence of power, not the acquisition of it, and it's far more elusive and ephemeral than raw will or understanding.

(The mythical Oracles may have Ascended, but no one's really sure. Lots of mages doubt these grand figures even exist. For the record, I want to say that there will be no Oracle rules or Spheres. Oracles aren't power-oriented — in fact, they may have set aside mortal magick altogether through their limitless understanding. No one I've ever known is capable of playing a being that has transcended human limitations; when you think about it, rules for doing so would be a contradiction in terms.)

There's another form of Ascension, of course: external Ascension, wherein everyone reaches Nirvana at once. This is where the goals of the various factions come in. Everyone has a different impression of transcendence, and each group is convinced that its ideal is the perfect one, that if everyone just believes as the faction does, everything will be perfect. No one is quite sure what will happen after this occurs, but hey, it'll be great. It doesn't take a Rhodes scholar to recognize my commentary on *that* conviction, which runs through the whole **Mage** line: fanatics are notoriously blind to the flaws in their own ideals. People have fought the goriest crusades in history over lesser concepts, so the Ascension War makes perfect sense, given the goal.

Running Ascension is difficult; it's like trying to write a story about the ultimate heaven, one beyond the usual harps and halos bullshit, where everything really *is* perfect. How do you run a game there? I'd say you don't. If you choose to have a character Ascend, that's cool, just don't expect to have her run around the chronicle afterward. I make a few suggestions about Ascension and the game in Chapter Nine of the main rulebook (pages 231-232), but my best advice is this: Ascension is suspense. It's a carrot on a stick. Once the horse has the carrot, the trip is over.

Ultimately **Mage** isn't about winning by Ascending. It's about the quest for Ascension, about the journey of transformation that comes with a new reality. That quest may be eternal (I think it is) but it's an essential part of a

mage — of humanity, for that matter. Ascension isn't about winning, it's about progress. Those who look for a single goal as "the final Ascension" are, I believe, missing the point. The corrupt visions of the Technocracy, Nephandi, Tradition archmasters and Marauders show what happens when that search is lost in agendas.

At the end of Clarissa Ryan's saga in the **Mage** rulebook, Clarissa Ascends. She's not especially powerful or even enlightened, but by surrendering her life, she gains something far greater, something her treacherous mentor won't find if he lives a thousand years. How do you describe that which defies description? You go *beyond*. Ascension is when you move on past everything we understand, past goals, limits and states of mind. It is a state beyond human limits, whether spiritual, physical or metaphysical. Hey, if 500-year-old mages can't answer the question better than that, who am I to do it?

• **Who's *really* winning the Ascension War?**

That would be telling :-). Seriously, I think you should decide the winning side for yourself. Let's put it this way: It's never who you think it is.

Last Word: If It's Not Fun, Why Bother?

Under all the layers, **Mage** is a game. It's supposed to be fun — fun for everyone, including you. Everybody has their own definitions of fun, of course, but if you're miserable every time your turn at Storytelling comes around, something is wrong.

Several years ago a young Storyteller whom I dubbed "the Loophole Fairy" called me constantly. His players, it seemed, had taken the freeform nature of **Mage**'s magick system as license to do whatever the hell they wanted to, on the grounds that the rules didn't specifically say they *couldn't*. After a few calls (during which I learned the extent to which rules-rapist players could destroy both a game and their Storyteller's sanity) I told him it didn't sound like he was having any fun. He allowed that he wasn't. "Then why the hell do you bother?" I asked. He never called again.

In the early days, roleplaying games pitted the gamemaster against his players. That adversarial relationship still continues in some groups. Things don't have to be this way; in the long run, constant conflict breeds animosity, not friendship. Personally, I feel that the best games are fun for *all* the players, including the one who runs the game.

So if you're not enjoying yourself, talk to your players before the next session begins. Let them know what's bothering you. Chances are they simply aren't aware that they're driving you nuts and will probably change their habits once they understand the problem. If they ignore you or, worse still, antagonize you further, quit. That's always an option. You're not under any obligation to run a game for a bunch of dicks. If Storytelling isn't fun, there's not much point in doing it.

Chapter Three:
Behind the Scenes of the Ascension War

*Every perspective contains its own truth — from the angle
of one perceiver or one group.*
— Robert Anton Wilson, *Reality Is What You Can Get
Away With*
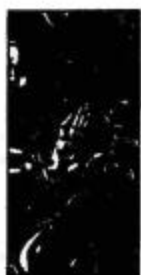
No man is good enough to be another man's master.
— George Bernard Shaw, *Major Barbara*

"What have you done to my hand?" The little man held up the ruined mess of flesh and bone at the end of his arm and waved it in Santiago's face. "What have you done to me?"

"I? I have done nothing." Santiago was dismissive, imperial. Still, the little man persisted with his complaints. Santiago sighed. "Listen, I shall explain. Did you agree to join with us?"

"Yes — Yes, I did."

"Knowing that there would be a price?"

"Yes, but I never expected this!"

"Hush. You are hysterical and I find it annoying. So you knew that there was a price. And did you not seal our covenant with us and our Master by placing your hand within the Pool that is the gate to our Master's realm?"

The little man was confused. "Yes, but when I pulled my hand out, it looked like—"

"Quiet. You placed your hand in the gates of our Master's domain, and you want to know what I've done to it? Idiot. But I have some good news for you."

"Oh, really?" The little man's face brightened, even as he cradled his mutilated stump.

"Yes. I'll let you take it up with the Master personally." And as the little man was carried away shrieking to be placed in the Pool, Santiago noted that his screams were not so annoying after all.

We all know about the Traditions; the main rulebook, various Tradition books, **Horizon: Stronghold of Hope**, **The Book of Shadows**, **Hidden Lore** (Chapter Three) and **The Book of Chantries** (Chapters One and Four) all contain stockpiles of information about the Council cousins. Hard info about the Technocracy, Nephandi and Marauders is more difficult to come by. While the various Technocracy books, **The Book of Madness** and **Hidden**

Lore's third chapter hold plenty of information, those sources are scattered and often subjective. Sometimes you need a little more to go on. Well, here it is — to a point.

This chapter covers the Ascension conflict from a Storyteller's perspective, exploring who these mystical combatants are and what they mean to you. Even so, we've left you lots of room to move. The adversary that's too familiar loses power. A Nephandus becomes just another mage if you stand her in broad daylight and point out all her flaws. Besides, your players will probably read this book, too. What fun would it be if all of the Fallens' schemes were nailed down here in black and white, exposed for the Chart-Checking-Loophole-Finder's next attack? Hence, we've left you the tools; the shapes you carve from the shadows come from your imagination alone.

Marauders

"Good God," said Arthur, "it looks just like the sea front at Southend."

"Hell, I'm relieved to hear you say that," said Ford.

"Why?"

"Because I thought I must be going mad."

"Perhaps you are. Perhaps you only thought I said it."

—Douglas Adams, The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy

"And now, if you would please follow me," the tour guide recited, "we will enter the most famous room of Versailles. This, the Hall of Mirrors, has been the site of the signing of innumerable treaties, including the Treaty of Versailles which ended World War One. The hall was constructed in…"

The Echo ignored the drone of the guide's facile, memorized speech. Every wall and door was faced with mirrors, silvered glass covered the ceiling, and the polished marble floor reflected his face back at him. Only the windows were imperfect, but as night fell and the lights came up, he knew those too would slowly reveal the truth: first the shine of his gray, shantung silk suit, the glint of his mirrored sunglasses, the dazzling spray of light from the faceted chime around his neck — then, much later, his own weakly handsome face and early-white hair.

Entranced, he stepped out smartly in his silver patent-leather wingtips and laid a perfectly manicured finger on the closest glass tile.

"Sir, please do not touch the walls or furnishings."

Ignored, the guide pursed his lips and snapped his fingers for the guards. "Sir, please remove your hand from the wall," he continued, "or we will have to ask you to leave." After a moment's pause the guide signaled and a guard stepped in. The gaudy young stranger shrugged off the guard's grip.

Forced to consider the distraction, the Echo shifted his attention (but not his eyes) from the wall. His hand passed lazily over the shiny pendant around his neck. The guards, the guide and the tourists vanished. The room's infinite reflections bubbled and warped. Behind the rooms many images of the Marauder, startled eyes stared, open mouths screamed and bleeding fists pounded soundlessly.

The Echo sauntered dreamily to the center of the room.

The Kingdom of the Mad

So you want to throw a Marauder or 20 into your chronicle. Excellent! The crazies offer everything a Storyteller could want in subplots and antagonists: An overreaching, take-over-the-world mentality; specific, character-confusing goals; interesting, difficult-to-combat battle tactics; and more quirks and foibles than any thousand Technocrats have.

All right, maybe that's a little exaggerated. Rumor has it that there are a few interesting Technocrats and, naturally, the more you elaborate on any character, the more interesting he becomes. The point is: Technocrats are "agents" and you can justify doing them cookie-cutter style. They're meant to be that way and that's cool. Marauders, however, don't come in six-packs.

Diverse as they are, the Mad Ones have certain things in common. Keep these elements in mind when the sick little buggers appear in your game. This section is a kick-start guide — training wheels, if you will, for the magickally insane. For more details, check out **The Book of Madness**, Chapter Three, especially the "Storyteller Hints" on page 97. Remember, though, that rules and Marauders don't mix. We offer you a few system guidelines if you need them, but the most effective way to run the crazies is to simply let them do whatever you want them to do, rules be damned. That's one of the main reasons why players are advised against creating Marauder characters.

The term "Marauder" comes from a 12th century account of "ravaging marauds like unto the mad, strewing storms like flour in a baker's hovel." The "marauds" in question laid waste to the Hermetic Covenant of Fuar Drochit, turning the stones to flowers and setting fire to the wells. Word of the massacre made its way into the annals of House Criamon and the name Marauder stuck to the Mad Mages like tar and feathers. It's not a name they use themselves, understand — far be it for them to consider such a dull title. It's not like they know each other or anything. What a silly thought!

From the outside looking in (or is that inside looking out?), it's easy to recognize the things that bind the crazies together. First, all Marauders are clinically insane. When a

Quiet, Paradox and Wild Magick

There are big system differences between Marauders and "ordinary" mages. Those differences are handled in this special, crooked gray thing for easy reference.

The Mad, Mad, Mad, Mad World

Mechanics-wise, when Joe Blow becomes a Marauder he trades in all of his accumulated Paradox to enter a state of permanent Quiet. A Marauder's level of madness (as described in the chart, below) is determined by the loonyness of the worldview he "chooses."

Quiet Chart

Quiet Score	Degree of Madness
1	One constant, simple difference between inner and outer realities. Very few Marauders are this sane.
2-3	The Marauder's universe is different from reality in a few basic ways, but he can still communicate in and understand the world.
4-6	The Marauder's world has little to do with reality, but most of the important events and people he knows are "translated" for him by his Avatar.
7-9	Communication between the Marauder and any nontelepaths is almost impossible. A powerful Marauder at this stage wanders through the world, or more frequently the Umbra, and is an accident waiting to happen. Reality tears where he goes.
10	Static Reality cannot support the Marauder. He drops out of any Realm he visits and drifts through the Umbra aimlessly. No one knows what happens next.

This isn't quite the same scale of madness as the one for normal Quiets; for comparison see Mage, page 178.

When a mage "passes over," every three points of Paradox he had (or that he caused when he first went Wyld) becomes a point of permanent Quiet. That base Quiet should be recorded on the character sheet, if there is one. The character will never be saner than this; his "madness level" cannot drop below this base amount. Leave room to pencil in other numbers, though — Marauders are inclined to grow more mad.

Paradox

Contrary to popular belief, Marauders aren't entirely immune to Paradox. Here's how it affects them:

• Coincidental magick generates no backlash unless the Mad One botches her spell. Vulgar magick generates backlash, but not the automatic point of Paradox. Calculate what the backlash ought to be according to regular Mage rules (page 167).

• Then, for every point of Quiet a Marauder has, subtract three points of backlash. The Marauder is affected only by what's left over. Everyone else in the area had better run, though, as the Consensus seeks a scapegoat.

Inflicting this "bounced" Paradox is lots of fun. For you, anyway. Depending on how nasty you want to be, you can ignore "personal" backlashes like Paradox Flaws and the Burn or let them strike at random mages in the area — including the players' characters. "Group" backlashes like Paradox Realms or Spirits affect the Awakened in the area at your discretion. Want to motivate the characters to ally with the local Technocrats? Garou? Marauders? Stick 'em in a small universe together for a session. Stop for the evening just after the Realm scoops them up for a fantastic, mind-wringing cliffhanger. Toss a few Nephandi into the mix for even more jollies.

But back to business....

• When a Marauder's player botches a vulgar magickal roll, the character's Quiet increases. The rate is one point per "1" that comes up after all successes are negated (i.e., a double botch is worth two new points of Quiet). Depending on the balance of power you maintain in your chronicle you may extend this penalty to botched coincidental rolls, too. The White Wolf house rule is to treat Marauder coincidental magick botches like particularly catastrophic mundane ones.

• The Marauder moves up the Quiet chart when a botch occurs and stays at his current madness level until he interacts socially with people or things that don't share his madness. The effort to bridge the gap between the character's own world and someone else's reduces his insanity by one point per week of contact. His Avatar readjusts his delusions to match the world a little more, and the Paradox "bleeds off."

Wyld Magick and Wild Magick

Marauders are notorious for doing things that they shouldn't be able to. How did a little old lady Awaken with enough power to call up a griffin in her dining room when master mages have trouble doing the same thing? The rules for Paradox don't really apply to these guys. Marauders are too dynamic to tie them down.

See the rules for wild talents in the main rulebook (pages 226-227). Now imagine a character or three whose Spheres expand and contract with the needs of your story. Maybe a character's normal Arete is 4, his Life is 2, his Prime is 2 and his Correspondence is 3. Suddenly he's in three different places at once, siphoning a Node and growing three arms. Can he do that? Yes, if you want him to.

If you need a framework to hang Marauders' wild talents on, assume that one can use her unpredictable power once or twice in a story. If you really want to be cruel, make that once or twice a game session or tie the wild talent to the madwoman's Quiet rating. The crazier she is the more she can use her wild talent. Of course insanity is kind of limiting in itself; a mage who's mad enough to slip up and down the magickal spectrum is probably too demented to be comprehensible. She shifts voices, names and maybe even faces in an effort to keep up with the Wyld forces within. Yes, this is a frightening thing to see — and a damned entertaining Storyteller character to run. Marauders should be anything but predictable.

Sleeper believes in a reality that isn't "true," the headshrinkers call her psychotic. A Marauder believes in a reality that doesn't have any truth whatsoever (to an outside observer), ergo, she's also psychotic. Where the Mad Ones have the advantage over the mad ones is that the mages really live in the realities they believe in. Some of these realities are simply skintight; cosmologically, the crazies create their own spandex universes. This results in states of permanent Quiet (covered in more detail in the "Quiet, Paradox and Wild Magick" sidebar).

The Mad Ones are partially immune to Paradox because they are so wrapped up in their Quiets. (Again, check out that sidebar.) Farandwee can hardly see Marauders, Welduh gropes around and misses them, and the crazies don't suffer the backlash that Tradition, Nephandi and Convention mages do. To add insult to injury, the backlash, Paradox Flaws and vengeful spirits that Marauders generate are likely to affect other mages.

Marauders as a whole have their power because (serious, impressive music, please) they are but pawns in the mighty game known as the Ascension War. In a strict **Mage** chronicle the Nephandi can be generalized as Destruction, the Technocracy as Order and the Marauders as Chaos. In crossover Storyteller chronicles it helps to know a little **Werewolf** cosmology; in the Triat of Wyrm, Weaver and Wyld, the Marauders fight for the Wyld. This matters a great deal in plots involving spirits, Garou and the other Changing Breeds.

The vital point is that a Celestine on the Wyld/Chaos/Dynamism side of the war gives individual, carefully selected mages the ability to use their Quiets as shields against Paradox. Whether this happens willingly or not is presumably up to the ethics of the powers involved.

Marauders also have a common agenda: They are out to destroy the minions of two other factions in the war, the Nephandi and Technocracy. Their mission is not a matter of ethics, doctrine, private motive or even "We're good; they're bad." It's a primal, knee-jerk reflex. Like a vampire after blood, the Marauder has no choice in the matter. He gave up that option (or it was stolen from him) when he joined the battle. The Mad Ones can pick their time, place and method, but the fact is that they will attack. Note, however, that recruiting Technocrats, stealing and spying contributes as much to the war effort as direct assaults do, and still satisfies the Wyld urge.

The Fallen are winning the war, so the Marauders (subconsciously) hate them most. (Tradition, Craft and Orphan mages are considered neutral in the war, so the Marauders' simmering bloodlust doesn't apply to them.) To illustrate this point, imagine that a Mad One with a gun walks into a bar. There's a Technocrat, a Nephandus and a Council mage sitting around a table playing cards (don't ask why). The Marauder probably shoots the Nephandus first, the Techie second and, depending on her peronal inclination, may shoot, ignore or buy a drink for the blood-splattered Tradition mage.

Perhaps to make the Marauders more enigmatic and unpredictable in the Ascension War, the Wyld hides its

role as benefactor. The Marauders don't know how they become what they are, who they actually work for, or really much of anything at all!

The Marauders are universally crazy and are stuck crazy. Becoming a Marauder is a one-way trip unless it's a chronicle-shattering plot point. The mage lays down his sanity for the cause of Chaos, and the sacrifice is permanent.

Finally, Marauder Avatars, whatever Essence or appearance they have, however strong they are or how much they seem to communicate with their mages, are sane (well, sane-ish) and in command. Ordinary Avatars have a tendency to (or at least try to) boss their mortal selves around. Marauders' shards take the Art to new heights. They "translate" the outside world into elements of the Mad Ones' Quiets (the lifespans of the really crazy ones depend wholly on Avatars' ability to do this), and can use this influence to make the mages do whatever they want, more or less. Self-control takes on a whole new meaning for Marauders.

Marauder Girl's Guide to Psychoses

Designing crazies shouldn't be all camp, tongue-in-cheek, lighthearted foolishness. (There are far too many scary clowns out there.) A good character has complex motivations and a history. A good *Marauder* needs an interesting, well-designed madness.

Sometimes the idea for a Quiet (and the Chaos Mage it goes with) may spring forth whole cloth from your imagination. Otherwise you may find it useful to think of the person's desires and background first. Determine where the cracks in his personality were before he slipped into Quiet. Run through the events that led to his change in a prelude (Mage, pages 90-92). Did he choose the Wyld of his own free will? If he was a mage before, do his Awakened contacts realize that he's gone insane or are they still in the dark? Did they turn on him? Did he turn on them? Has he noticed that he's Awakened? These are just a few of the elements to consider. Any one of them might be the key to the character's current identity and Quiet as a Marauder.

To help you out with this area of design we've compiled a list of derangement types — real mental problems and variations unique to Chaos Mages. These don't cover every possibility, they aren't particularly scientific or systematic (this is the *chaos* section of the rules, after all), and they certainly ought to be mixed up, messed with or combined as much as you like.

- **Amnesiacs** build their realities deliberately or unconsciously, excluding some memories and elements that they can't bear to live with: the death of a parent, partner, spouse or child; a war; incarceration; torture; or their own failures. A mage's Quiet is a world where these things never happened.

For example: An architect loses her right arm in a car accident. The pain and mental anguish of the amputation is in Correspondence and Forces (spatial and scientific doodads relevant to her job), and she compensates for the genuinely missing arm with telekinetic-style Effects. *She doesn't realize the arm is missing so will never be able to use Life magick to replace it, though other Marauders might fix her up if she lives long enough to meet them (and if they think that a missing arm is a problem in the first place.)

- **Dead Men** usually Awaken and/or go Marauder during near-death experiences. Their Quiets are hells, heavens, purgatories, family vaults, vampirism (oh, *baby!*), "reincarnations" or coffins. Whatever the limits of their tombs or afterlives they manage to move around fairly well — at this high level of madness, the Avatar can control elements like distance and time. **(The Book of Madness'** Barrister Martins is a good example.)

- **Escapists** tend to fall into a Quiet of dreams gradually. Some other world becomes more important than reality, whether the Mad One invents his own world or borrows one from fiction. He wraps a Quiet composed of that fantasy gently around himself like a wool blanket. People likely to become Marauders of this sort include soap-opera aficionados, roleplayers, movie buffs, sci-fi and fantasy fans, Democrats, conspiracy theorists, fundamentalists and game designers.

- **Infiltrators** act as double agents. Their madness makes them into members of one of the opposition groups in every detail: Technocrats, Tradition or Craft mages, *barabbi*, full Sleepers or consors. False *barabbi* don't live very long, of course, and fake Convention agents barely longer, but a very few, skilled mage-and-Avatar combinations manage to keep up the facade for years. The more the mage knows about the organization he "belongs" to, the better. Technocrats, in particular, may break their conditioning and "sign up" with Chaos, only to return to their orderly work. Of course the character is much more content now that his heart's in his job — sabotaging the Convention. Remember that his mind and all of his loyalties and resources are pledged to the Technocracy, not the Marauders, but he will never knowingly act against the Mad Ones.

- **Lunatics** are a catch-all group. Don't forget to make one or two Mad Ones who are just plain crazy. Not everything has to make sense, and moonstruck Marauders certainly don't. Think Monty Python, Ambush Bug and Three Stooges, then watch the collateral damage pile up. (Check out Raspberry Popart Salad in **The Chaos Factor**.)

- **Manic-depressives** wobble between energy and apathy, mania and catatonia, optimism and pessimism. This translates into either a cyclical Quiet (possibly tied to some outside cycle — the seasons, phases of the moon or stock market) or a constant Quiet about which the Marauder has varying emotions.

- **Megalomaniacs** believe themselves to be Christ or Anti-Christ figures, Hitlers or Gandhis, Einsteins or Michelangelos, demons or gods. All those *ersatz* Napoleons belong to this group. It isn't just that a megalomaniac wants to be someone else (as an escapist or infiltrator might), he wants to achieve apotheosis. In his own Quiet, he has. This derangement isn't limited to identifying with an already famous figure; the Marauder may feel himself, as himself, to be capable of greatness (in whatever field) such as the world has never seen. Occasionally, he's right.

- **Melancholics** generally followed the downward spiral even before they became Marauders. Some were clinically depressed, some did it as a hobby. Goths, Hollow Ones, great tragedians, post-war writers, grunge rock stars — any or all of them are candidates for a Quiet that emphasizes all that's worst about life in the World of Darkness (particularly if they enjoyed being depressed in the first place). This madness may also spring from sense of guilt, desire for punishment, death wish or masochism. The Islington Horror (**The Book of Madness**, page 84) has "traveled" without rest from atrocity to atrocity — as a prisoner in Auschwitz, as a survivor of Samarkand under the Mongols, as a Miniconjou Sioux at Wounded Knee.

- **Multiple Personalities** are common among Marauders. Sleepers and mages who already suffer from this disorder may retain it in their Quiets — either internally, by shapeshifting as each personality takes control (Life 3, not uncommon in the wild surge of first Awakening), or by *actually* dividing into several different Marauders (Mastery in Life, Spirit, Prime and Mind or just Correspondence 4 and Multitasking; only experienced mages jump right into this). Alternatively a Marauder may just *believe* herself to shapeshift or walks around in a "crowd" all the time. As the Marauder gains power and Arete, she actually changes shape from persona to persona.

  Those crazies who were of one mind before the Wyld transformation and who become multiple personalities often have one Marauder identity and one Sleeper, consor, Council, Craft or Technocratic self who's completely unaware of the change. (See Infiltrators, above, and Stephen of Warwick in **The Book of Madness**, page 89. Also, go check out the entire Grant Morrison run on *Doom Patrol*. Hell, do that even if you *don't* care about Multiple Personality Disorder; it's the best Marauder-style comic ever. *Shade the Changing Man* is a close second.)

- **Obsessive/Compulsives** assign vast importance to something — not usually something that everyone else considers vital. One might fixate on an element (Lady Macbeth's bloody hands, the beating of a tell-tale heart, a relationship with Michael Douglas) until it saturates her mind (or her Quiet). The obsession usually compels her to act irrationally (constantly washing her hands, giving herself up to the police). Whatever form the obsession takes, that thing or person or idea really is as important in the Marauder's universe as the mage thinks it is. The compulsion involved acts as a powerful geas and the Marauder must fulfill it.

  For example: The Echo obsesses over mirrors. They frightened him from childhood; he Awoke while trapped in a mirror-tiled elevator. He saw his own reflection (his Avatar) speak to him and concluded that *he*, not the image in the mirror, was the reflection. His Quiet differs little from reality, but he's deathly certain that when he can't see a mirror, he doesn't exist. This compulsion dictates his choice of dress, furnishings (chrome all the way), restaurants, cars, enemies (Technocrats make nice shiny things, Nephandi don't), foci (Mirror, mirror on the wall). His compulsion also turns him from a shy, mild-mannered, ex-accountant into a cold-blooded killer — no one on this side of the glass is real, right? Whenever his mirrors are taken away, he merely loses consciousness, but if he ever gains Prime 5 he could be in real trouble.

- **Paranoids** who go Marauder are lucky: Now everyone really is out to get them. Not much changes from the "mortal" version of this well-known ailment, unless the Quiet involves more derangements — perhaps escapism or atavism (see Throwbacks, below).

- **Phobics** come in two varieties: the ones who eliminate all traces of whatever frightens them from their realities, and the ones who populate their madness with their fears. Since the former are effectively amnesiacs (see above), we'll deal with the latter. Marauders who are melancholics or shellshocked stay frightened of their banes even after going mad, and their universes are living nightmares. Slightly more upbeat crazies (megalomaniacs, sociopaths) conquer their fears and have fun bossing around/destroying/riding like horses whatever they once feared.

- **Shellshocked** Marauders have undergone terrifying, unbearable experiences; some fatal flaw (possibly a manipulative Avatar) dooms them to flashbacks under stress, combat situations or simply with loud noises. Marauders who crack under stress may suffer from mild flashbacks; many Quiets reflect the mood and manner of mages' conversion to Chaos. Combine this derangement with the Flaw: Flashbacks for maximum angst.

- **Throwbacks** live in the past — literally. More comfortable in some other, better (through the rosy glasses of nostalgia, at any rate) time, the mage exists is a reality that is that era. Atavistic delusion is quite common among archmages and ex-Dreamspeakers, Sons of Ether and Void Engineers, and snares Sleeper archeologists, Ghost Dancers, Civil War reenactors, Republicans, New Agers and historians, as well. Favorite eras include pre-Colonial, pre-Communist, the Mythic Age and the mage's own childhood or youth. The last type appears to be a psychological regression from the outside; few Marauders have enough Life magick to change their actual ages. (See the "Historical regression" section of this book's Chapter Five, and Medea and Miss Zhao in **The Book of Madness**.)

Structure?

It had all gone critical. Wizardry was breaking up. Goodbye to the University, the levels, the Orders; deep in his heart, every wizard knew that the natural unit of wizardry was one wizard.

— Terry Pratchett, *Sourcery*

"Organized Marauders" is something of an oxymoron. Marauders are either solitary or stick together in tiny, schizophrenic bands. There are, however, two notable exceptions.

The small groups of Marauders come in three types: those that share Quiets; those that don't, but whose members still realize they're a team; and those that work together oblivious to the fact that they do so.

Fusion

Marauders who share Quiets usually achieve lunacy together. A group of kids playing Cowboys and Indians near a toxic-waste dump might Awaken and go Marauder as a *gestalt* because Baneful spirits tried to possess them — the fantasy world they played in becomes their shared "reality."

Occasionally Chaos Mages who go critical thousands of miles and years apart go psycho in the same way. This happens a lot with Marauders who have escapist Quiets. Suppose that the Tolkien universe represents the fantasy world that many medievalists revere. A fantasy fan might go Wyld and develop a Quiet set in Middle Earth. He's probably not the only person to lapse into Tolkien's little playland. When two such Mad Ones meet, they may continue on as adventuring companions, bound by their mutual fantasy. (Don't laugh too hard — we didn't say these Marauders identify with the good guys.)

Fusions also occur when one Mad Mage sucks some Sleepers into his Quiet; his victims become his consors and, if they Awaken, his partners in crime. This kind of "Wyld vortex" can seduce even experienced mages. Woe to the character who tries to **Dreamscape** with a member of a fusion!

Since everyone in a fusion shares a delusion, these groups tend to work well together. Unfortunately for them their shared reality carries them further and further from what anyone else considers sane. Who's going to anchor you when everyone else is full of hot air, too? Eventually most fusions drift so deeply into madness that no "sane" mind — or reality — can recognize them. The cycle gang in **Loom of Fate** and the crew of the Umbral Dutchman in **The Book of Chantries** represent fusions in action. Although they don't do at all well in Earth's mundane theater, these crazies blossom into virtual armies in the Deep Umbra (see "Jupiter and Saturn" in **Beyond the Barriers: The Book of Worlds**). They don't last long, but they really do some damage.

Cabal

The second breed of "group Marauder" vaguely resembles a Tradition cabal. These mages who have similar goals meet, like each other and decide to work together. The difference between Marauder and Tradition cabals lies in members' relationships: Each member of a Marauder cabal must exist and be a friend within every other member's reality. Note that no one has to appear the same way twice. One person may wear many faces within a mad cabal.

Take Robert Davenport, the leader of the Butcher Street Regulars, as an example. He knows who he is (doesn't he?), but his comrades see him differently. He's El Cid to his lieutenant Señorita Abraxas, the Director of the Play to Lord Ex, Davenport to Mr. Nicholas, and occasionally a grandchild to Mother Goose. Barrister Martins (in an allied cabal) calls him the Judge. Martin's fiancee Miss Zhao refers to him as the Honorable Dragon. Who is he, *really*? Good question. Maybe Davenport himself doesn't know.

(The concept of identity is tricky, magickally speaking. If a name defines who you are — or *what* you are — what do you become when everyone including yourself calls you by a different name? Mysticks who place great value in Naming sometimes call Marauders *The Nameless*, those without set nature or form. While those mages respect someone who refuses to stay Named, they fear him, too. Such a being cannot be trusted. For more information about Naming, see Ross Issacs' essay in Chapter Six.)

If a mad cabal is to survive, it needs at least one member (preferably the leader) with a foot or two in reality. It also needs at least one member who can keep track of the others and prevent them from wandering off between missions, and at least one member who can explain a plan or situation to everybody else in terms that the crazies can understand. It's okay for one mage to fill all these roles, but if she's killed the cabal becomes the proverbial chicken with its head cut off. The Storyteller should keep track of a mad cabal's "leader." If that particular tree falls in the forest, everyone hears it.

Members of cabals are a bit more sane than the average Marauder is. But at the same time they tend to be more unstable (maybe it's that Naming thing); they fly off the handle at odd times or simply take on other delusions and wander off. A group's mix of Quiets and personalities has to be just right to keep it from breaking up, and one outrageously insane mage can put all the others at risk. Mad cabals are small — six members or less — and very rare. The group may fall apart in its early stages. If it survives its first month, however, a mad cabal may last for decades.

Conflux

The most bizarre grouping of Marauders is unique to the Mad Ones (though the Nephandi Lords could use such teamwork if they caught on to it). No one knows anyone else no one works with anyone else, and it's possible that none of the members even realize that they're Marauders. Seemingly solitary mages, controlled almost completely by their Avatars, come together for specific purposes and assignments, act on them and part without noticing each other. These "freeform" groups are rare, but devastatingly effective.

To illustrate: Elizabeth Dribb arrives in Union Station by train at the same time that a subway from the Pentagon carries Sergeant Manuel Mendoza to his destination. Dribb and Mendoza, unaware of each other, head for the Greek lunch counter where Tim Conners works as a dishwasher.

As a Syndicate executive and his entourage enters the station, Conners flips out; to him, the Technos are soldiers sent by the Committee of Public Safety to take him back to the final embrace of *Madame la Guillotine*. He mutters and stirs up lightning to strike the soldiers. Mendoza, for his part, sees them as zombies and prays for his loa to lay them to rest. Dribb sees the Order of Reason come to take Mistridge, decides that history will be different *this* time and summons a dragon to devour the knights. Conners electrocutes three, Mendoza causes two heart attacks, and though the dragon disappears the instant it crosses the Gauntlet, the Paradox backlash destroys the executive. Dribb and Mendoza go their separate ways without speaking to Conners or each other, but their Avatars have used their "hosts'" powers of telepathy to interrogate the Technocratic survivors, and plan their next meeting.

Though "working units" consist of groups of three or four mages, conflux can work on a broad scale. Provided the Avatar grapevine intersects often enough, the "hive mind" can pass messages and arrange meetings months in advance or at the drop of a hat. Because none of the members can betray (even unwittingly) more than two or three others, the group lives longer. Because Marauders drawn into confluxes learn (unconsciously) from each other — they share enemy lists and magick — the individuals prosper, too. Confluxes attract infiltrators, throwbacks, amnesiacs, escapists, paranoids and other Mad Ones with relatively subdued Quiets.

Naturally, all things being mad to begin with, there's no reason why a Marauder can't "belong" to two or three groups at once. Mother Goose might work with Robert Davenport, but that won't keep her from appearing alongside Tim Conners or the demented cycle gang. The "fluid" insanity of the Marauders allows them to be anywhere you, the Storyteller, want them to be, doing whatever it is you want them to do. Does a leaf ask the wind for directions?

Tactics

Aside from conventional weapons (Uzis, pipe bombs, tear gas, big sticks with nails imbedded in them), spy-novel tactics (infiltration, subversion, assassination) and straightforward magick, Marauders have two major, nigh-exclusive aces to play against their enemies.

Haw Spencer 97

• **Paradox**

Sane mages don't think of Paradox as a weapon, but Marauders who know the basics of magick realize that it is a tool. Will-working even the simplest vulgar change in the universe (turning a vampire into a lawnchair, for example) within range of Nephandi or Technocrats on Earth brings down the corrective wrath of the Consensus on the unsuspecting enemy. Elizabeth Dribb's dragon-summoning magicks, for example, didn't accomplish anything in traditional terms. The Effect failed. However, the effort generated considerable Paradox, which recoiled on the only nonMarauder mage in the area: the Syndicate exec. This attack form might be a little dangerous for those with low Quiet scores, but a truly Wyld and crazy guy with, say, a rating of 8 is immune to 24 points of backlash. Techies aren't. This tactic is all the more effective in that it works best when the Marauder's roll botches. Go for those difficulty 10 Effects and enjoy.

A Mad One who uses this attack form is inspiration for characters to ally (temporarily) with Technocrats. If there's one thing mages on both sides of the Precepts of Damian can agree on, it's that Paradox is *bad*. Excessive backlash can also create a Paradox Realm, sucking the characters in even if they didn't cause the Tapestry rip — not a bad thing if the trip saves them from personal enemies.

• **Zöoterrorism**

Zöoterrorism, the Marauders' specialty weapon, is even more fun to use (from your point of view, not the players'). Marauders use critters for every task under the sun: Fighting (griffins), frightening (hydras), mass destruction (firebirds), riding (yales), companionship (yeti), beasts of burden (bonnacon), nightlights (ercinee), doctors (chaladrii), lie detectors (chi-rin), spies (sapient jerboa), Umbral transports (roc), statuaries (cockatrice) or whatever. A critter that is practically designed for a task is out there somewhere, and a Marauder is all too willing to call upon it to do his bidding.

Let your imagination run wild. Pull out your old mythology texts, bestiaries (we recommend *The Book of Beasts* by T.H. White), heraldry texts and *The Arabian Nights*. Check out the section on designing Umbrood in **Mage** (pages 235-239) and Bygones in **Ascension's Right Hand**. The rules for Marauder-summoned critters are the same as for summoning any other spirit beasties. **Horizon: Stronghold of Hope**, **The Book of Madness** and the main rulebook have ready-made stats for critters to be inserted into your game. Naturally, controlling such beasties is more difficult than summoning them, but most zöoterrorists know how to approach angry dragons. Those who don't won't last long enough to learn.

Agencies

Although they've existed on the fringes of sanity since the birth of civilization, Marauders have gathered momentum in the modern world. They have even learned to work together on a large scale in two specific cases.

The seed of Marauder organization, the Knights of St. Stephen, grew from cabal to Chantry to its current form as the backbone of the Umbral Underground in roughly 600 years. The second large Marauder sect, the Bai Dai, has blossomed from conflux to Tellurian-spanning behemoth in three years. (Well, seeds of the Bai Dai were planted as early as 1939; it didn't achieve a hell of a lot until recently.) Both groups recruit new members every day. The turnover rate keeps numbers low, but life expectancy rises each year. A strong leader could start another big cult any day now, or unite the two existing factions into a truly formidable force.

The Umbral Underground

The U.U. traces its roots back to Stephen of Warwick's efforts to take creatures like dragons, unicorns, chaladrii and griffins from Earth (where they were dying) to Umbral Realms not yet explored by the Order of Reason's forerunners. The group's current "mission" is to find Marauders who have Awakened on Earth and evacuate them to Realms beyond the Horizon. There they may learn to control themselves and eventually return to fight on their home turf.

The common Mad Path was Awaken, cause chaos and die a glorious death. Thanks to the U.U., the Mad Ones have the foundations of a stable apprenticeship program. Many crazies who might have died nearly powerless in another age are now capable, dangerous, well-trained foes who make raids on Technocratic and Nephandic deep-space strongholds.

Most of the U.U. want a return to simpler times — a more flexible Consensus, a thinner Gauntlet — and feel that the fewer Nephandi and Technocrats who exist, the better. Each member has some personal stake in bringing balance back to the Ascension War, even if she can't explain her desires in these terms. Generally, members believe themselves to be ethical and moral people (whatever their kill counts might be), and justify their attacks on these grounds rather than on their own goals and wishes. U.U. forces try to attack only Technocrats and Nephandi, avoiding causing harm to "civilians" (Sleepers, their allies, each other) whenever possible.

Notable divisions of the U.U. include:

• The **Butcher Street Regulars** (the lead cabal of the planet-bound contingent), which recruits new cabals, organizes Earthly Marauders for group attacks and finds out as much as possible about the other factions in the war.

• The **Men of Gotham** — a group of half politicos and half vigilantes based in New York City — which focuses in part on the United Nations, the Syndicate and globocorps

but also keeps a bloody finger on the pulse of the Sabbat in the area.

• The **Copper Dragoons** which comprises three allied cabals that are active in India.

• An unnamed, small-but-growing network thrives throughout Spanish-speaking South America, and the BSR's Señorita Abraxas is busy tracking members down and recruiting them for the U.U.

• The White Lotus Women, better known as the **Shangri-La Ladies' Club**, a largely Asian sorority (with a few exceptions), is established firmly on the Horizon Realm of the same name but keeps chapters open in its home countries.

• The **Force of Chaos**, a hideously confusing infantry fusion, keeps the U.U. active on the moons of Jupiter.

• The **Numpa Kachpa** (sniping Native American zöoterrorists who work on both sides of the Gauntlet) takes its name from the Bruhle Sioux word for "Two Strikes," but hasn't explained why.

• **Al Borak**, a Muslim organization devoted to keeping holy places (Nodes of all kinds) free of corruption (Technocrats and Nephandi) watches over northern Africa and the Mediterranean.

• The **Fantastic Twenty-Six**, an espionage organization with code names based on the NATO standard Phonetic Alphabet — Alpha, Bravo, Charlie.

• Finally, the loosely connected group (mainstay of Marauder-rescue efforts) called **Harriet Tubman**, the **Knights of St. Stephen** or simply **The Railroad** transports members and Bygones between Earth and points beyond.

Although the U.U. functions in a sort-of united fashion, it would be a mistake to imagine that its "leaders" sit around a table discussing strategy; the few conversations that have leaked out of Marauder meetings make less sense to a "rational" person than does the quacking of a gaggle of geese. Nevertheless the Mad Ones, like geese, achieve miraculous results. Masters of esoterica claim there are discernible patterns in U.U. discourse, but it's not something the players' characters are likely to decipher unless you'd like them to....

The Bai Dai

The Bai Dai, the second large Marauder faction, doesn't usually bother to rationalize what it does. Its goal is the near-extermination of humanity (particularly other mages) as a direct effort to weaken the power of the Consensus. Fewer people, less belief, less control for the Technocrats. Logical, isn't it? Many "sick" Marauders — those with psychoses like megalomania, sociopathy or obsessions with death — gravitate toward the Bai Dai, as the Echo does.

The top dogs of the Bai Dai aren't interested in training their recruits; the top brass prefers to set grunts down wherever they will do the most damage before clocking out. Bai Dai teams often teleport Marauders with Quiets of 8 or 9 directly into Technocratic establishments as living Paradox bombs. While an Umbral Underground zöoterrorist might draw the line at harming her animal allies, the critter-minded Bai Dai don't hesitate — Bygones, consors, Sleepers, Tradition mages and even other group members are tools to be deployed for greatest tactical advantage. The upper ranks are fairly stable; the lower tiers have a high casualty rate. The entire organization seethes with fresh Mad Ones and enslaved Sleepers in a constant lust for expansion. If the leaders ever took care of their troops, the Bai Dai's membership would explode.

Notable divisions include:

• The **Hemlock Court**, reputedly the base of operations for the leader of the Bai Dai. The court resides in a huge mansion on the east valley wall of Shangri-La.

• The **Fire of the Mahdi** began last century as a North African anticolonial cabal. Today the Fire is highly active in all forms of mass terrorism — forget hostages; this gang strives for death in quantity.

• The **Maenads** follow their historical namesakes in drunken murderous rampages across three continents. The members of this conflux — primarily "subservient" women from patriarchal societies — make their ways back home after each raid, amnesic and accepting of their lot...until the mood for murder strikes them again.

• **P'o Chün**, the "Broken Army Star," roams China seeking out officials of the People's Government. Though it originally took its name from Taoist astrology, the label is doubly appropriate: More than half the members have served in the military and some now wear their uniform hats with the star patch ripped apart.

• The **Seven Bowls**, a Christian extremist group, raids Progenitor bases and first-world military installations in search of plagues and chemicals to use against Sleepers.

• The **Flowers of Camaxtli**, another religious cult, is a remarkably long-lived fusion devoted to the Aztec god of war and fire. Followers don't survive very long, but the sect finds converts easily. Centered in Chichen Itza, the group sucks in tourists and residents alike. (Japanese Aztecs with cameras and bonfires!) These last Marauders look as bizarre as they act.

"We're All Mad Here"

"What I was going to say," said the Dodo in an offended tone, "was, that the best thing to get us dry would be a Caucus-race."

— Lewis Carroll, *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*

Politics among the Mad is a contraction in terms — the naturally chaotic Marauders don't hold conclaves, debates, hierarchies or much of anything else for that matter. Sometimes they understand each other, but most times they

don't even realize that their kind exist. A mage who declares "I'm a Marauder!" is a liar, a moron or a low-Quiet Mad One in an unusually lucid moment. More than likely, he's the first or second of those three.

At present, the only true point of contention among Marauders is a question of ethics. Some Chaos Mages believe in (or couldn't care less about) the wholesale slaughter of mundanes (following the theory that the fewer people who create the Consensus, the easier it will be to change it). Others try to use more diplomatic and humane methods to alter reality. But because all Marauders, regardless of method, are really working toward the same thing, and because their (largely Primordial and Dynamic) Avatars don't necessarily give a tinker's damn whether any Sleeper lives or dies, the factions rarely come to blows over the matter.

Influence

When mortals meet the Mad, individuality rules. A single Mad One may own three corporations, two charities and a police precinct; another may not have pants to call his own. The Mad don't so much influence the mortal world as much as they spin it on its axis. The more ordered something is, the more active the Marauders seem to become. As the world grows more complex, the incidence of mages or mortals "going Marauder" seems to increase.

Most Marauders make do without friends or influence — they don't live long enough to accumulate bar tabs, let alone Sleeper contacts. If any ties or wealth remain after a person goes stark-raving buggo, that Marauder might be able to cling to the pieces of his old life. What he does with these pieces depends on him — and on the needs of your story. While the Dynamic Dynamos do pick up occasional consors, the process isn't always friendly. Though some Sleepers join the Wyld

Ones willingly, most "sidekicks" get swept along in the tide of madness, becoming near-slaves in the process. (See the origin of "Annie" in **Ascension's Right Hand**, pages 30 and 112, if you don't believe it.) Few Marauders understand what they do to Sleepers; to them, consors are company, necessary props in a delusional reality. But, like props, consors often break if abused. Most end their days in Paradox explosions, asylums or in hails of gunfire or dragon breath.

When the Mad Ones make willing friends, those allies come from the fringes of society — they're criminals, vagrants, social workers, starving artists, loners and even normal people with good, old-time virtues like charity or compassion. Since these kinds of people deviate from the Technocracy's vision anyway, they unwittingly help themselves when they aid the Marauders. (All right, maybe that's not quite fair, but this is the anti-Techie section of the book.) More often than not, however, the Mad ally themselves with odd creatures — Bygones, Umbrood, magickally animated furniture or their minds' own creations, brought to "life" by the crazy power of the madmen.

Crossover Potential

Working as they do on the Wyld side of the fence, Marauders make worthy allies of the Changing Breeds. One Black Fury pack runs with the arch-Marauder Medea, while Johnny Gore the Corax hangs with the Umbral Underground. Malkavian vampires seem to be appropriate companions for some crazies, while Black Spiral Dancers seem more appropriate for the murderous Bai Dai. Ghosts and faeries fit well into most Marauder worldviews; the Mad have pretty low Banality ratings, which makes them cool in changeling circles. Even so, it's worth noting that Marauders are unstable allies, even for other mad folk.

Nephandi

The whole world singing the same happy tune
Something so low even hound dogs can croon
To insanity
— Richard Thompson, "Bank Vault in Heaven"

Louis di Alessandro surveyed the coffeehouse with a slight frown. It was well-lit, and he knew that the brightness of a café was proportionally opposite to the quality of the coffee it served. He took a cautious sip from the steaming cup of espresso before him and grimaced. It was as bad as he'd anticipated.

He was saved from taking a second sip by the arrival of his 11:30 appointment (di Alessandro's eyes slid to his watch automatically: 11:42. This one was both late and sloppy). The boy who slid into the booth mumbling apologies and excuses. Di Alessandro waved him to silence and looked him up and down.

The mage didn't look like much: sallow, mid-20s, dressed in the de rigeur black of the Hollow Ones. A silver ankh swung from a leather cord at his neck, and his nose ring was tastefully thin.

Di Alessandro took another sip of coffee to hide his disgust.

"I really shouldn't be here," the child began.

"Shush." Di Alessandro put the coffee cup down with a clank. "You are here, Alaric. Can I get you something to drink? No? Well then, perhaps I can get you something else."

"Really, I just came to tell you that I've thought it over and I'm not interested." Alaric looked defiant, but with his kind, di Alessandro knew, that was just another way of saying "frightened."

"Now Alaric, you're just being contrary. I can do quite a bit to help you, and the price is right, is it not?" Mentally sighing, di Alessandro tried his best to project calm. "Look, I've known you for how long?"

"Two weeks."

"Okay, two weeks. But that doesn't matter. What does matter is that I've seen the way the others treat you. I've seen how they look at you as second class. You shouldn't have to put up with that crap."

"Those are my friends you're talking about!"

"Sure, sure," di Alessandro's voice was soothing, "but you still feel like you don't quite belong, don't you? You want to show them that you're worthy." Almost unwillingly, the boy nodded. Inwardly, di Alessandro smiled. This was going to be easier than he'd thought. "Well, I have just the thing." His face still a mask of concern, he reached into his pocket and pulled out what looked to be the mother of all marbles, a smoky glass sphere three inches in diameter. Dimly glimpsed shapes moved within its depths.

"What is it?" Alaric leaned forward for a closer look.

"It's a Paradox eater. With this on you, you'll be able to kick out the jams and impress your friends. You'll probably even be able to rescue them once or twice, and the best thing is, with this thing's help you can get as vulgar as you want, and absolutely nothing will happen to you."

"Nothing?"

"Nothing."

"But," Alaric stammered, even as he reached for the globe, "why are you doing this for me?"

Di Alessandro appeared to muse the question over and leaned forward with a smile. "Because, Alaric, I like you. Because you remind me of me, a long time ago, and I want to give you the help that I never got. And, because I already have one."

"Oh." A pause. "Thank you." Alaric hastily stuffed the sphere in his pocket, then scuttled out into the night. Di Alessandro shook his head. It had been too easy. The thing he'd given the boy, while it did devour something, it certainly didn't feed on Paradox. When the things the sphere contained broke free, they would forever taint Alaric's reputation with his "friends" and he would have only one place to turn: back to di Alessandro, and the things in his sphere.

Despite the lousy espresso, the barabbi found himself grinning, and he settled back to wait for his next customer. "Nothing like loving your work," he said to no one in particular, and drank deeply.

Ecstasy of the Fall

Consider the lowly virus. Barely even considered to be alive, it somehow manages to worm its way past the defenses of a given cell (and even that cell dwarfs our little virus, let alone the organism of which that cell is an infinitesimal part) and inserts itself in the genetic machinery of the cell's nucleus. That's when interesting things start to happen. The cell, infected by the tiny virus, starts churning out copies of the virus. The cell is corrupted, and in its corruption serves the will of its corrupter. Then, when it has given its all, the cell dies and its bastard cuckoo children, the other viruses, are loosed upon all of the other cells in the body. Eventually the body itself becomes corrupted and dies. Every cell dies, even as the greater whole does. And

our plucky little virus? Well, it dies too, but with a job well-done and no sentience to speak of, it doesn't much care.

Consider the Nephandi. They're the viruses in the body of Creation, and the rest of the Awakened community is the cell they prey on.

To think of the Nephandi as evil "just because" is to shortchange them immensely. While the goals of the Fallen might seem less admirable to us than, say, the eco-friendly agenda espoused by the Dreamspeakers, that doesn't mean the Nephandi's goals can be dismissed out of hand as unimportant or peripheral. After all, the end of the universe will involve everyone.

In the short term, most Nephandi consider themselves in service to a greater, primal power — perhaps one that predates the so-called Pure Ones or Prime. To them, it makes eminent sense to worship these first powers, to do their bidding and serve their whims. After all, in some sense one can see them as the original owners of the universe. On a more profound level, however, the Nephandi seek to aid and abet the end of everything. Creation has had its run, and now, by the will of those Things that preceded Creation, it must die. Some Nephandi view this goal as the mercy killing of a suffering reality; others see their actions as a destruction test. ("If the Universe can survive what we're going to do to it, then it deserves to. If it can't, then it deserves to die.") Regardless, all Nephandi have the same ultimate goal: to serve the will of the Others and, by doing so, to bring about the end of everything.

This is not to say that Nephandi are right or nice, even though they can be pleasant, apologetic or even persuasively charming. (If you find yourself agreeing with the Nephandi viewpoint as this chapter proceeds, the author takes it as high praise of his skills and recommends that you seek professional psychiatric help.) In the end, Nephandi are those souls who believe in and actively seek to spread corruption — and they enjoy their work. They don't want to rule the world, they want to end it, and all of reality with it. The Technocracy may wish to recreate the world in its sterile image, but at least at the end of the process there would be a world left. The Traditions may squabble among themselves, but they squabble about what to do with the world — not how best to destroy it. The Marauders may be mad, but destruction is incidental to their attempts to create a more comfortable reality for themselves. The Nephandi, by doing the will of their Dark Masters, would destroy all — and they're cheerfully callous about it.

To you, the Storyteller, the Fallen provide a chance to tempt, challenge or possibly destroy your players' mages. It's fun to play the bad guys, and they don't get much badder than these servants of corruption. Unlike vampires who whine about their "Beast Within," or pathetic Wyrm-tainted fomori pawns, the Nephandi embrace what they are with gusto and purpose. There's a philosophical point to their evil, and they defend it wholeheartedly. A Nephandus

chooses what he becomes, and the barter of a soul is not something done lightly. The Nephandi are the dark reflections of the magickal Path, symbols of what can happen when a mage jumps headlong into the Abyss. Make them seductive, frightening, mysterious and lethal. The one thing these guys are not is boring.

Drawing Down the Dark

In essence the Nephandi are the shadowy side of the Ascension War. Whether born with a Nephandus soul (*widderslainte*) or corrupted in the service of one of the other factions (*barabbi*), the ranks of the Nephandi consist of those workers of magick who have given themselves, heart and especially soul, to the service of utterly inhuman Things. (For details, see **The Book of Madness**, Chapters One and Four.)

Outsiders divide the Nephandi into three sects, classifying them by their objects of worship. Unsurprisingly, these divisions are artificial and often incorrect, but serve as a rough guide for the uninitiated. Demon-worshipping Infernalists work for the pleasure of Demon Lords. These Nephandi hew closely to the traditional image of the antisocial occultist. Stranger still are the Malfeans, those Nephandi who have given themselves over to the worship of the aspect of the Triat called the Wyrm. These mages share in the corruption enjoyed by the Black Spiral Dancer werewolves, and work toward active destruction. Finally there are those who worship the Things in the Outer Dark. These last are perhaps the truest Nephandi of them all.

The hierarchy of raw power is the only organization the Nephandi know. Those with the most magickal power, cunning and ruthlessness claw their way closer to the exalted Lords in the Dark, while those less fortunate, experienced or powerful are left in lesser ranks. Theoretically, marching orders come from one of the Entities that the Nephandi worship, down through the Gilledians and their associated prelati to the adsinistrati, Shaytans and pawns in the field. It rarely works that way in practice. Even as the various Dark Lords contend against one another in the Infernal Realms and the Outer Dark, so too do their servants jockey for position in and around Earth. Orders can be lost, assignments can be altered and political opponents can be betrayed — the variations are practically infinite. However, it doesn't appear as if the Dark Lords care about this corruption of the letter of their purpose, so long as the end result satisfies the Damned.

What's in a Name?

Scholars have argued over the origins of the name "Nephandi" for quite some time. The "ph" would indicate Greek origin, but the "nd" conjunction of letters implies the Latin gerund form. To confuse matters further, the only mythological reference that might even be vaguely con-

nected with those who serve the Outer Darkness is the story of the "Nephilim," the gigantic sons of mortal women and angels mentioned briefly in the Old Testament. At the moment the best guess has it that early Nephandi in the Middle East may have claimed to have been children of the Other Things; by the time the story made its way to the Greek-speaking cities of Asia Minor, the Fallen Ones had been thoroughly confused with the mythological giants. It only makes sense that the name would be confused as well.

Soldiers of Nightmare

Authority among the Nephandi rests with the ability to back up words — and nothing else; "official" rank is less important than magickal power and cunning. However, some among the Nephandi feel that they must maintain appearances and have devised a loose system of rank into which they slot all of their compatriots. The lower a Nephandus is on the totem pole, the more important he thinks rank is; more experienced Fallen use their titles only to cow their inferiors.

• **Pawns (un-Awakened):** Ranging from cultists to rent-a-thugs, pawns are in it for the money, promise of power or the thrill of inevitable violence. Few pawns know what they actually work for, and few except K'llasshaa cultists even care. Any adsinistratus worth his salt has easy access to a small horde of un-Awakened pawns, who run errands, serve as muscle and occasionally cover hasty escapes. Body Count (**Ascension's Right Hand**) is a typically nasty example of a mortal pawn.

• **Pawns (Awakened):** Mages from other factions (or better yet, mages without any affiliations to protect them) make excellent pawns for the Fallen Ones. The irony is that most sorcerers who fall under this designation don't think it applies to them. Most Awakened pawns dwell in a state of advanced denial, thinking that they can go back to their friends whenever they want. However, this denial can provoke fatally dangerous whiplash; calling a pawn out on her new affiliation might lead her to a murderous response. (Check out the poor fool in this section's prologue to see the first stages of such delusion.)

Mages hate facing Awakened pawns in combat, and with good reason. These poor fools seem sorry for what they've become, and that hint of remorse can cause an opponent to pause *just* long enough…. Awakened pawns are almost always irredeemable, but every so often a Tradition mage thinks that *this* time will be different — and gets a face full of Entropy as fitting reward for his compassion. These tragic souls are the bearers of their own damnation, and make fitting players for emotional dramas laced with strychnine.

• **Shaytans:** The Fallen version of SWAT troopers, Shaytans describe their profession as "killin' thangs." They refer to seducers as "administrati," and cordially loathe rules-mongers wherever they find them. There's more to

the destroyers, however, than cute nicknames and bad attitudes; Shaytans are deadly combat effectives who have both magickal and conventional training. Many of them are little more than living weapons, honed in the Labyrinths and placed in the hands of an adsinistratus to do with as he wills. When you want heavy artillery, a Shaytan is the right tool for the job — nasty, remorseless and gleefully devoted to utter destruction.

• **Adsinistrati:** The salesmen of the Abyss, adsinistrati make damnation seem attractive. The best of them can convince devout Technocrats to walk smiling into Hell. Fortunately, seducers this good are few and far between. As adsinistratus service involves a lot of field work, there's a high turnover rate in the profession. Few adsinistrati survive a year on the job; those who do, however, are among the most dangerous mages alive. (See Jodi Blake in **The Book of Madness, The Book of Shadows** and **Hidden Lore**.)

Few mages ever meet a Nephandus more powerful than an adsinistratus. Generally, that's more than enough. While adsinistrati can reach Gilledian heights of power, the majority of them rely on their wits and winning personalities as much as their magickal skills. Still, underestimating an adsinistratus is a sure way to get yourself killed.

An adsinistratus never initiates conflict unless her back is to the wall. After all, the point is to spread destruction, not to be destroyed. Even with one foot in the grave, an adsinistratus attempts to sell her killers on the gospel of the void. In all cases, adsinistrati are unfailingly polite, attractive and persuasive — until someone crosses them. Then, whatever formidable powers they possess are unleashed without mercy or reservation.

• **Prelati:** The eyes and hands of the Gilledians, the prelati roam the Tapestry doing the will of their Masters and getting in a little recreation on the side. Powerful but not ostentatious, a prelati hangs back and lets others take the risks, unveiling only as much of his potential as a given situation demands. Particularly sensitive matters can demand the attention of a prelati; even then, the so-called "sentinels" assemble teams of Shaytans and adsinistrati and send them in to do the dirty work. There have been perhaps a dozen cases in the past 30 years when prelati actually got involved in fieldwork firsthand, but each time the repercussions of the events echoed for a decade afterward.

Most prelati travel alone, but any of them can summon help almost instantly. Demons wait at their beck and call. Sentinels also maintain ties across the mortal and Awakened worlds, where vampires, shapeshifters, spirits and dark fae await their commands. These pawns rarely know whom or what they serve; the command to kill is issued and many of them follow it without hesitation. Prelati make allies (none dare call them "friends") across the spectrum, often visiting their contacts in other, more pleasing forms. Archmages themselves are often corrupted in body as well

as mind by the time they reach this rank; the deformed archmage Yaqub al-Iblisi (**The Book of Madness**) indicates the horrors that these dark masters become.

• **Gilledians:** According to unofficial sources, there are eight living Gilledians, including four dead ones who have bound their souls to their rotting bodies, and one who is neither alive nor dead, but who seems to have achieved an existence outside of time. Old, powerful and insanely paranoid, these elder *barabbi* almost never leave their places of power. The reason for this is fear: Each Gilledian dwells in constant terror of assassination by one of his rivals and sees potential traps in every inch of reality outside his own walls. On the exceedingly rare occasions when another Nephandus must deal with a Gilledian, the outsider is bound and brought to the master's home. Generally, Gilledians work through their servants; not one Nephandus in a hundred has actually met a Gilledian.

While they're not afraid of using their powers, Gilledians fear Paradox intensely; thus, they've grown exceedingly subtle in their Arts. More than one Nephandus has compared the behavior of the Gilledians to that of certain vampires who, having lived long enough to have tasted immortality, fear losing it that much more. Galarius, master of Drachus Vachor, and the fearsome Jade Demon (both in **The Book of Chantries**) are moderately powerful Gilledians. The worst of their kind, however, wait beyond the Horizon, dragging Void Engineers and Ethernauts into their bleeding edens.

• **Aswadim:** The bodhisattvas of the void. Teachers and sages, the aswadim prefer to interfere with mages' magickal development rather than tamper with their day-to-day affairs. An aswad never announces himself as such. He merely finds a way to get close to a promising Nephandus and takes the student under his wing. When he feels the student has learned enough, the aswad vanishes, rarely (if ever) speaking to his student again. Occasionally the aswad may take it upon himself to extricate his student from a particularly dangerous situation. The student who relies on this sort of rescue, however, isn't long for the world. Most aswadim prefer to let their students fend for themselves; a student who constantly needs assistance, they reason, isn't worth teaching.

Aswadim tend to be quiet, subtle folk. Although the occasional dark miracle might manifest nearby, the Fallen One himself prefers to appear unassuming and keep his power in reserve. Second-guessing such corrupters is damned near impossible because aswadim rarely tip their hands with vulgar magick. They let the world speak for them: winds rise, plants whither and shadows lengthen when an aswad is near. Such sorcerers deny that there's anything Nephandic about them. Their purpose is to open the way to the Dark Reflections Path, not to indulge in petty fighting or displays.

Action Units

The Nephandi send a wide variety of unit types into the field. The composition of any given strike team depends,

obviously, on the nature of the team's mission; sending a gang of pawns to assassinate a Chantry head is a waste of good cannon fodder, while putting a full strike team on the case of a pesky mortal is overkill. Evil does not mean tactically inept.

The basic self-sufficient field unit consists of pawns (un-Awakened, of course) who may or may not know what they're actually doing, herded along by a pair of Shaytans and a single adsinistratus. The pawns hound the team's target into the open, whereupon the Shaytans pick up the chase and, hopefully, finish it. The commanding adsinistratus rarely, if ever, gets involved directly, but may take an active hand in matters if it looks like the Shaytans are in trouble.

The size of strike teams varies. The largest in recent history (working undercover as a street gang in west Philadelphia) consisted of over 40 un-Awakened pawns, nine Shaytans, no fewer than three adsinistrati with overlapping responsibilities and a single prelati. Why such an intense concentration of force was necessary remains unclear, but the series of bizarre incidents (the exposure of a thriving mail-order business in human remains, a fire that devastated over 130 houses, the discovery of a pair of "house of horrors"-style murder sites) in the Philadelphia area following the deployment of this strike team indicates that it was hard at work on *something*.

While pawns are expendable, Shaytans and adsinistrati are not. Every strike team keeps a backdoor open — a group of local pawns who can cover an escape. Such "safety valves" remain ignorant of their purpose until the Fallen come calling.

Basic strike teams go armed to the teeth with both eldritch and conventional weaponry; a bullet to the brain kills as surely as an Entropy-induced embolism, and without the risk of Paradox. In special cases, strike teams request special allies from their Masters, allies which can best be described as *things*. Often literally indescribable (or at least foul), these things are deadly in combat, garnering as much advantage from their hideous appearance as from their claws, tentacles or other weaponry. On the down side, these "living" weapons tend to invoke heavy Paradox backlash. In situations that demand heavy artillery, most strike teams will take that risk.

It's rare for more than two strike teams to work in a given city at a given time. Strike teams often steer clear of one another's operations by unspoken agreement.

Recruiting: The Price of a Soul

Recruiting is a labor of love for the Nephandi. Even a failed recruitment, one in which the "prospect" dies, is a victory: that's one fewer mage in the field, one more corpse to scare the enemy. Most recruiting is done by adsinistrati, though tactics vary from seducer to seducer. Very few recruiters bear active marks of their service; the Nephandi understand the importance of packaging.

Nephandi almost universally reserve the stereotypical, "Join us and you'll receive power beyond your wildest dreams!" sales pitch for Sleepers, most of whom end up as guards, runners or bagmen. Such mortals (many of whom dabbled in home-grown Satanism or some other form of pseudomystical quackery before attracting dark attention) spend their entire service eagerly anticipating the moment when some Dark Overlord or other will grant them cosmic power, thus enabling them to take over the world. Most of these idiots aren't bright enough to spot the logical fallacies in this pipe dream of power (#1: If the Outer Things are omnipotent, why do they need henchmen?; and #2: If the Other Things are coming to reclaim the world, does anyone think they'll *share*?), and so are willing to wait years for their "just rewards." Self-blinded by dreams of power, these henchmen gladly perform the most depraved acts imaginable, all in hopes of a reward that will never come. Few of them ever rise above being cannon fodder — or demon fodder, for that matter. The K'llasshaa favor the "Be badder than bad" approach more than the other factions do. Hey, it works: These demented Fallen claim a nearly endless supply of cultists willing to follow even the most suicidal commands without question.

True mages (or even hedge wizards) rarely fall for this nonsense; they already have power and know its price. The Nephandi reserve a pair of more involved approaches for these advanced souls. The first is brutally direct — essentially a case of "Join us or die." While most Fallen avoid open warfare, they'll gleefully kidnap a promising subject and drag him home for "playtime." Orphans and Tradition mysticks are favored targets for snatch-and-grabs; Marauders tend to be too volatile and Technocrats too well-guarded for this approach to work well.

Mages without close companions wind up in the Pits. Once the target has been secured, the recruiting team goes to work with tools both physical and magickal. According to those rare escapees of this sort of recruiting, the techniques used are nothing short of abominable: Fingers are chewed off and then forcibly regrown through perverse Life magick, only to be removed again; scuttling parasites are inserted into screaming victims who are then forced to watch the creatures' progress. In one memorable case, a mage was immobilized as his own fingernails were made to grow at a visible pace toward his eyes.

Eventually even the most hardened soul arrives at one of two states: he cracks and joins the Nephandi in order to make the torture end, or he dies. Entertaining as it may be, this "enticement" isn't particularly effective. Most pain-converts die in the Cauls before their Rebirths are complete.

Experienced mages are usually difficult to abduct. In these cases a seducer gives his target enough rope to hang herself — and then reels in the corpse. An adsinistratus going after a powerful mage never reveals his true affiliation. Rather, he sets a subtle trap, a promise or appeal to the subject's better nature, insecurity or ideals. He baits a tasty hook (often with his own body), dangles it in front of the "fish" and waits for a bite. Few tempters have to wait long.

If carnality doesn't work, the tempter offers up esoteric knowledge, batters the subject's faith or raises disturbing questions with nasty answers. If all else seems to fail, the tempter offers aid against some greater threat and then either collects on his markers or spreads the word around. Once the walls have begun to fall, the convert has no place else to turn and the Nephandus reels in his prize. This is the most effective form of recruiting. The subject joins of her own free will.

Wars in the Out Side

When not settled with a serrated knife in the back or some suitably esoteric display of Entropy magicks, disputes among the Nephandi are brought to court for the Nephandi equivalent of litigation. The court in question can be found in one of the Labyrinths, usually the one with the most ties to the strongest party involved. Courts are formal occasions, half bloodsport and half pantomime, with the highest ranking prelati or (in rare instances) Gilledian present presiding over the affair. Depending on the whim of the presiding judge there may or may not be evidence or a jury, and torture may or may not be used on any and all parties. Trials by combat, fire or Umbrood are common (if a bit jejune at this point), and divinations as to the truth of the matter may be read in the entrails of innocent bystanders.

Abductions

The sensationalist news media is full of stories of "alien abductions" by "greys" — roughly humanoid aliens who perform unspeakable fertility experiments on their victims and then turn the hapless humans loose. According to secret Void Engineer files, these incidents are for real. The culprits aren't "aliens," however — not in the usual sense, anyway. Rather, such "greys" are joyriding Void Engineer barabbi having a little fun with their recruiting. Officially, the Convention has made it a priority to clamp down on this matter as soon as possible. There hasn't been much of a reduction in the number of abductions, though, and certain other Technocrats wonder how diligently the Engineers are actually pursuing the issue.

This isn't to say that the verdict of a court is binding, merely entertaining. Court is often an excuse for a carnival, with dancers, jugglers and more perverse entertainers to amuse the crowd (and jury). Indeed, some Nephandi set up court appearances for themselves just so they can make a splash in the social whirl of the Labyrinths.

Rumored Tactics

My spirit white as lightning
Would on my travels guide me
The moon would quake and the stars would shake
Whenever they espied me

— Steeleye Span, "Boys of Bedlam"

Dragging the whole of Creation down to rotted corruption isn't something that you accomplish overnight. The ultimate victory of the Nephandi's masters must come instead as a result of millions of tiny operations, each of which brings eternity one step closer to crashing down.

• **Stalking Horse** — The Nephandi don't care about being subtle with humans; it's reality that they have to worry about offending (for the moment). As a result, a favorite tactic involves terrifying or bribing prominent Sleepers (especially politicians and entrepreneurs) into working for the Dark Lords. These high-ranking pawns follow orders from Below, taking actions so inflammatory as to flush the local Tradition mages out. Major land purchases are always good for getting Dreamspeakers in a huff, while lobbying for statutes on obscenity, lifestyle or drugs usually lures Choristers, Cultists and Verbena into the public arena. While the Tradition mages attempt to deal with things subtly, they're easy prey for Shaytan hit teams. The more the Tradition mages try to keep things under wraps, the wilder the Shaytans get, forcing the defenders to devote more and more of their energies to keeping a lid on things. Manipulation of pawns can also reveal the presence of Technocrats, who may come into the field to find out why their bought politicians or businessmen aren't bought any more.

• **Keeping the Pot Boiling** — An alliance of Technocracy and Tradition mages banished the majority of the Nephandi a half century ago, and the Fallen Ones haven't forgotten. They now delight in stirring up trouble between the two factions. A *barabbi* or two will usually infiltrate each side in a given city, handing over information on the "enemy's" weakness that's too good to resist. Mutually destructive battles result, leaving both sides desperate for help. This, of course, the *barabbi* are only too happy to supply. The chain of events escalates from there. If a temporary truce ever threatens, a time-honored technique involves each mole "outing" the Nephandus on the other side, giving her putative allies all the more incentive to renew the fighting.

• **Turf Wars** — There's always good fun to be had in inciting the local supernatural population. Vampires and werewolves never need an excuse to be paranoid, so providing them with one simply increases the entertainment. In cases like this, a Nephandus kills a few innocent bystanders (if he's really feeling vicious, he establishes a "pattern" to his acts) and alters the corpses somehow by using magick. Favorite "tricks" involve mutilations, spontaneous cancers and cracking corpses' bones and draining their marrow from inside. Once the Nephandus' pawns scatter the bodies throughout his city (using Time magicks to diffuse any reading someone might get on time of death), it's only a matter of time before the local supernaturals get wind of this new, unknown threat. Vampires get jumpy, blame one another and go for each others' throats. As any vampire worth his salt has his fingers on a dozen or so mortals, these humans also get caught up in the conflict, leading to riots, murders and other civic disturbances. While all of this shakes down, the local Garou go on the warpath. Chaos, terror and bloodshed inevitably ensue, all to the benefit of the Nephandus' masters.

• **Dream a Little Dream** — Open confrontation is not and never has been the Nephandi's style. They prefer to attack only when the overwhelming advantage of numbers is on their side. When the odds go against them, the Fallen harry their targets from a distance, weakening them slowly until they fall from attrition.

Dreams are wonderful staging grounds for this kind of assault. A steady flow of nightmares piped into the victim's subconscious disrupts her sleep patterns, makes her nervous and irritable, and often leads to fatal mistakes. And then there's the tactical advantage gained when a Nephandus studies his foe from a distance: By provoking a victim in her dreams and watching how she reacts, a smart Nephandus can gauge how she'll act when the nightmares become real.

Faces in the Shadows

There are many ways to serve the Lords of the Outer Darkness. While most Nephandi could quaintly be labeled "self-starters," at least when it comes to the business of corruption, some band together into groups to pool their resources. Others prefer the "easier" duties of taking orders and gravitate toward sects that fulfill a need for command.

The K'llasshaa

The demented K'llasshaa turn their service to the Outer Things into a mixture of art, religion and insanity. By tapping rebellious and/or disturbed Sleepers, these minions of the Howling Void create cults like the **Flaming Brand Church**, the **Wailing Darkness** and **The Order of the Golden Pyramid**. Within these midnight sects, the maddest of the Fallen urge their followers to "devotions" wherein torture, self-mutilation, orgies and blasphemy are just appetizers. Rich in resources, pawns and intimidation, the K'llasshaa promote an apocalyptic gospel in which the Hungry Void awaits its final act — the impending death of the universe. K'llasshaa commit the foulest acts of depravity with the greatest reverence in the unspeakable names of their unspeakable deities. Serial killings, messages written in blood, severed body parts sent through the mail, church and synagogue vandalism, particularly gory rapes and murders — all are acts of worship to members of the K'llasshhaa.

An inductee into the K'llasshhaa must make his conversion as spectacular and as public as possible. The act of initiation must also serve as a renunciation of all that the mage stood for in his previous existence, leaving no doubt as to where the mage stands *now*. Betrayals of friends and

loved ones, desecration of Nodes and holy sites, sadistic violations of innocent bystanders — all of these put the stamp of legitimacy on a mage's conversion to the K'llasshhaa

Malfeans

Regarded with some suspicion by the rest of the Nephandi, the Malfeans (not to be confused with the Spectres of the same name) are Fallen Ones who pledge their devotion and service to the Wyrm. These mages work toward the end of everything, seeing license to rend, destroy and annihilate in the Wyrm. While many Malfeans tend to overintellectualize this alliance with the Wyrm ("We don't actually believe in the existence of a giant annelid nibbling on all of creation, Desmond — the notion of Wyrm is just a linguistic construct created by the oral tradition of those quaint Garou to mask the active entropic principle which will lead, sooner rather than later, to the heat-death of the universe."), they do pledge their souls to *something* on Malfeas (see **Book of the Wyrm**, Chapter Three), often walking the Black Spiral itself to affirm the depth of their commitment.

Even other Nephandi regard Malfeans as somewhat…off. These corrupters who spawn fomori in their Labyrinths and work within Pentex itself prefer the company of Black Spiral werewolves and shambling half-men to that of other mysticks. Nephandi who have endured trips to the Underworld comment that Malfean Chantries resemble the greater Labyrinth in the Dead Worlds, while those who've danced the Malfean Spiral remark (if and when they stop gibbering) on the similarities among all three places. Though all Nephandi can be seen as Primordial souls, the ones who pass through the Spiral Gate seem to be in touch with something more elemental than anyone is willing to imagine. This, as can be imagined, unnerves even the most hellbound Nephandi. A Demon Lord is more accessible — and perhaps more merciful — than raw infinity.

Infernal Cults

Converts to the cause of those selfsame Demon Lords, these Fallen mortgage their souls to evil spirits in return for a better place in Hell. To these Nephandi, Creation is damned from the outset, so one might as well get as good a seat as possible. More corrupters than destroyers, the minions of Infernal powers muster cults and networks like the **New Rite Church**, the **Blissful Waters Brotherhood** and the **Dai Han Loc** — serene-sounding fellowships with hidden levels. Infernalist Nephandi within these organizations preach blistered scriptures or outright Satanism. Outside the cults, lone demon-brokers tempt weak mortals into whirlpools of sin and hatred. Infernalist cults tend to work subtly, preferring slow poison to the bloody ax. These Nephandi own nightclubs, galleries and corporations, and control politicians, entertainers and simple-minded devil worshippers. While the other Nephandi sects twist themselves into monsters, most Infernalists remain clean and innocuous — on the surface, anyway.

The Benevolent Society of Lost Souls

Less an organization than a social club, the Benevolent Society comprises the elite of the Nephandi's snatch-and-grab units. This isn't because its members have any special training or receive any particular orders from Beyond the Nighted Gulfs. They simply enjoy torture and kidnapping and therefore practice both until they get very, very good at them.

The Benevolent Society is bound only by its members' enjoyment of their shared activities; it's not uncommon to find Malfeans, K'llasshaa, Infernalists and even the odd Sabbat vampire out for a "social." Members of the B.S. often affect Victorian or Edwardian fashion styles, use mock-formal language and generally come across as swishy versions of the droogs from *A Clockwork Orange* — at least until they spot a target. The resulting carnage is all the more stunning considering the genteel air these Fallen affect.

Chapters of the B.S. can be found in any major city. Membership rosters are unstable to say the least. While the society does not recruit for itself — its prizes are inevitably turned over to others — a high percentage of *barabbi* taken by the society eventually join its ranks.

Dances with Elder Things: Politics

The best earthly parallel to the politics of Labyrinths is the medieval court. Substitute Demon Lords, Malfean Incarna and Outer Things for medieval lords; rank-and-file Nephandi for courtiers; and pawns for serfs and the rest falls into place. The fortunes of each Labyrinth or *ahriman* (cabal) wax and wane according to the status of the various Demon Lords or fringe-dwelling beings involved in it. Vicious infighting rages between the servants of assorted Outer Lords; there are no rules nor mercy in these wars. Privately, some Gilledians suspect that the Lords of the Nephandi encourage this internecine squabbling as a way of culling the weak from their service — and as entertainment.

Infernalist Nephandi have the best organization, and as such have the fiercest and most firmly established rivalries. While the squabbles of the Outsiders may be perfectly vicious, the ambiguous nature of what the Nephandi fight for tends to limit the duration of such conflicts. The organization of Malfean Nephandi breaks down on along looser lines, however, and resulting factions rarely coalesce long enough to engage in squabbles. On the other hand, should anyone else maneuver against a Malfean's position, the interloper is likely to be swarmed by local Malfeans. Infernalists accuse Malfeans of ignoring details. Malfeans claim that Infernalists who work one soul at a time are petty and small-minded. Outsiders insist that both groups ignore the truth of their struggle. And so the merry chase goes.

Little of the fighting occurs out in the open; far from it. Politicking, promises, alliances and deception are all steps in the endless dance of knives. There's a lively trade in favors and information, but the game's not unlike playing poker with razor-edged cards. Asking for help from someone who serves another Entity is tantamount to admitting that her patron is superior to yours; incurring debts to servants of other Powers may make your own Patron look askance at you. It's always risky to incur a debt with the Damned; some things are worse than losing your soul.

(This brings us to an interesting question: If Avatars reincarnate, where's the horror of damnation? It's simple, really: Consciousness is but a small part of the soul. In the great mixmaster of the Abyss, Avatar may be separated from consciousness; the soul is thrown into a pit of torture or imprisonment, the Avatar goes into a huge cauldron. In the latter case, the Essence mingles with countless other souls before it's reborn in a mortal body to take on another consciousness. This may be why true-born widderslainte (pretainted souls) are so hard to come by: The Nephandic consciousness usually remains behind while the Avatar goes off to begin the process all over again. Thus the human consciousness remains behind, bound to whatever bargains it made before death. Nephandi — the smart ones, anyway — spend much of their lives trying to make sure those bargains aren't too difficult to "live" with after death. Few are successful.)

Although deadly political games are played by Nephandi in the field, the Fallen tend to be subdued in the face of the enemy. It's a truism among the Benevolent Society that you're safe from your adsinistratus until the second you've completed the job — but getting the job done is what comes first. After that, it's wise to find another job — quickly. "Publish or perish," as it were.

The Tainted Touch

The Nephandi have their fingers in a great many pies. Then again, they have a great many fingers — and other appendages. The hallmarks of a group under Fallen sway are a combination of high public profile and murky finances, a centralized organization in which the corruption of one or two key individuals taints the entire group, and some vague aroma of respectability that masks what the group is really up to. Organized crime, tabloid TV, the drug trade, televangelism and international politics are the obvious Nephandic playgrounds. You can find the Fallen swimming anywhere where money, greed, jealousy and vindictiveness heat the waters — the beauty pageant circuit, gambling towns, the fashion industry....

The Nephandi have fingers in a lot of pies, but that's all. It's not worth their while to have total, micromanagerial control of things — they leave that sort of obsession to the Syndicate. Rather, Nephandi merely introduce their favored viruses, stir the cocktail and let nature take its course. This "nudge, don't shove" approach isn't only more effective than micromanagement, but it suits the Nephandic worldview.

A few realms of Nephandi influence include:

• **Religions, Roleplaying and the New Age Movement:** There's more in common between these three disparate interests than you'd think at first glance. Each inspires a certain dogged devotion while offering a haven to people too disturbed or neurotic to think for themselves. Each appeals to the need to believe, a need that all Technocrats in the world can't allay. Each offers an array of paranormal icons that a clever manipulator can control — icons that cross over from one to the other with ease. Each has critics so vocal that stirring them into a frenzy is child's play. By playing these elements against each other, the Fallen gut them all.

It doesn't take much to pit these cultures against each other, either. Herr Flax goes drinking with a developer from Black Dog Game Factory and suggests "God Told Me To," a game about serial killers. The developer thinks it's a neat idea and sets to work. Flax drifts over to the New Age bookstore where he hangs out, and encourages the owner to purchase the *Necronomicon* paperback. It's worthless, but will probably inspire a few fuck-ups to try out the Dark Side for kicks. Having achieved both goals, Flax sends anonymous letters to the local Baptist church, or forwards it copies of *Lycanthrope: The Rapture* or *The Satanic Bible*, books available from the other two contacts. Whee! What fun! Just for good measure, he goes back to the Game Factory with a copy of the church's last sermon (a call to arms over abortion), lets the bookstore know that the mayor's planning a bust on "occult headshops," and watches everyone trash everyone else.

Who needs magick?

By pushing a few buttons in each group, a Nephandus can drive the more unstable members into fits guaranteed to provoke a public scene. The public, disgusted with the lot, writes everybody off as lunatics, thus undercutting the credibility of everyone concerned. Imagination is dismissed. Anger is roused. Faith is undercut and violence may be forthcoming. The Nephandi love this game, and they play it all the time.

• **The Entertainment Industry:** Like religion, mass media has influence out of proportion with the number of people involved in it. Also like religion, mass media stirs up passions — jealousy, greed, guilt, fury — that any tempter can use. Imagine the fashion circuit: A totally superfluous business in which vanity and extravagance reign; a small, exclusive community that influences the way people look at themselves even as it chews up its own; or the pornographic underground, where sex is reduced to a commodity, sold or protested but never revered. Consider music, movies, even local theater. Then consider the effect that the whole mess has as people across the world watch and want to become part of it all.

The Fallen don't control this fertile pool, they spawn in it. Most Nephandi who come from entertainment backgrounds maintain their ties after their Rebirths. They might direct plays from offstage or climb up in the spotlight. Either way they can cause a lot of damage, gain a lot of converts and have a lot of fun. (If you can stand it, watch *Showgirls*

Dreams of a Dead Thing

The true Malfeans are not Nephandi, nor are they werewolves, fomori or other nightmare beasts. They're ghosts, the ageless never-born Spectres who sleep uneasily at the heart of the Underworld's Labyrinth. Created when Entropy was born, these creatures gnawed the endlessly shifting corridors of the First Labyrinth from the raw stuff of Creation. Now they slumber restlessly in the chambers and halls they've carved out for themselves, dreaming dreams of power and destruction.

The Fallen are no strangers to the Underworld. Nephandi feel somewhat at home in the deepest hells and shifting Tempest (if such nightmares can be considered "home" by anyone sane; it may be that some Fallen are madder than Marauders). The corridors of the Underworld's grand Labyrinth mirror those of the Chantries of the Damned in many respects. In the years following World War II, a team of Infernalist researchers set out to discover the truth behind this uncanny resemblance. The conclusions this research team reached both frightened and angered its superiors. Not one of the researchers outlived the presentation of the team's findings by more than five minutes, and every report, note or voice recording made during the course of the study was burned. Even so, certain materials, smuggled out by Void Engineer barabbi to Convention acquaintances, revealed the chilling truth.

In essence, reports claimed that the entities that the Nephandi serve are nothing more than the dreams of sleeping Malfeans in the primal Labyrinth. The Labyrinths, titles and natures of all that dwell Beyond are reflections and sleep-distorted versions of the thoughts flickering through the sleeping minds of the never-born. And when one of the sleeping Malfeans awakens, much that he dreams vanishes.

This suggests a flaw in the Nephandi's armor — a glaring one. According to Shadowland lore, the oldest and most powerful Malfean, Gorool, awoke just as the Technocracy and Traditions commenced their final assault on the Nephandi in 1944. Observers from both groups remarked that the defending Nephandi seemed confused and weakened, and many of them called on powers or allies that never materialized. The implication of all this is that Gorool's awakening destroyed his dreaming creations, denying the dreams' servants the power they needed in their hour of need.

Those few who have glimpsed these reports are uncertain about what to do with their knowledge. If ageless creatures lie dreaming in the Shadowlands, how do their phantasies manifest outside the Horizon? How powerful are these ancient dreamers, and what might happen if they all woke up at once? Would the resulting Great Awakening rob the Nephandi of their power or would it be the doomsday they all pray for?

What if it were both?

and imagine a Nephandus in either Kyle MacLachlan's or Elizabeth Berkley's role. It's not difficult.)

Televangelism, which mixes both religion and entertainment, is so rife with Nephandic influence that the Fallen practically have to wait in line to get involved. In addition to all of its other benefits, televangelism offers the Dark Reflections an opportunity to cheapen faith while mocking it. Best of all, the pawns perform so beautifully without prompting that a Nephandus just has to whisper the occasional taunt or promise to keep a toy in line. Talk about a plush assignment!

• **Dark Conspiracies:** Conventional wisdom has it that a global conspiracy of Satanists exists, a gathering of cultists that infiltrates the media, kidnaps children, mutilates animals and undercuts the Church. This is, of course, farfetched. There is no such global conspiracy.

There are lots of them.

Sure they're disorganized, petty and ridiculously mismanaged, but they're plentiful. People across the world fall into rebellion, rage against the establishment or adopt the clichés of devil worship. Some of them are true Infernalists (see **The Book of Madness**, Chapter Four), but most are just losers. Still, a loser who can make other people suffer is a powerful pawn, and the Nephandi value such pawns. By

inspiring people to hate, giving them an outlet which includes blasphemy, and by tossing in the occasional cookie, a single Nephandus can gather a small herd of allies and send it against the innocent. This doesn't take much — the Fallen One need not even lead a cult to enjoy its benefits — and the effort furnishes a ready-made army should the Nephandus need a sudden backup. A cult that includes VIPs (cops, mayors, doctors, celebrities) has even greater potential (see the Ties Merit in **The Book of Shadows**). A cult doesn't have to be large to be effective.

• **Pentex:** The corrupting network called Pentex, the obvious territory of Malfean mages, contains an interesting mixture of Nephandi and Syndicate Technomancers. Their skirmishes keep the already convoluted Wyrm-corp twisting in its own coils. Not the most effective use of resources, perhaps, but one that ensures that no one really dominates the company.

No one truly "owns" Pentex except the Wyrm itself. The Nephandi in its halls play interesting games, scuttling the efforts of Technocrats who try to keep tabs on the corporation. Yet everyone essentially works for Pentex, not the other way around. Even so, it's a prime piece of real estate: A Fallen One with Pentex connections can call in fomori First Teams (see **Book of the Wyrm** and **Freak Legion**) as backup, sabotage rival companies and even influence local politics. Tradition mages who cross that Nephandus can be attacked in a dozen

ways in a dozen places — from a Wyrm-tainted meal at O'Tolley's to a hostile police chief to a squad of fomori armed to the teeth — without endangering the Nephandus.

Crossover Potential

The possibilities should be obvious. Black Spiral Dancers, Sabbat vampires, Oblivion-bloated Spectres, Infernalist wizards, unseelie fae, demon-spirits, Wyrm-creatures and mortal pawns — any or all of these beings hover around any Nephandus of worth. While these associations have their problems — Black Spirals, in particular, put their allies on the line — they offer a Fallen One a wide sphere of influence — and give each Storyteller a wide range of crossover tales.

The Technocracy

You are a true believer, created by the Masses for the Masses. Be thankful that you have an occupation to fill your time. Be thankful…. Buy and be happy.

— Omm, THX1138

Five men sat around an oak table. All the trappings of the Order that Richard Drake knew were gone, replaced by fluorescent lights and a few "inspirational" posters. He awaited sentence, patiently listening to the opinions of five bitter old men. A balding man in a dark-blue suit continued to lecture.

"I don't need to restrain you, Drake. You came here of your own free will, didn't you?"

"More or less. I chose not to have some goon gun me down while I ran out of my own living room."

"My dear Mr. Drake! You're far more valuable to us alive! This Symposium is not a trial for your execution, and killing you would accomplish nothing."

"Why break an old habit?"

"Mr. Drake, I do not need to kill anyone. Take a look at the world around you. Do you want to know why I'm sitting at the head of this Symposium? People want me here. Common people. The man who wants to go to work every day without being assaulted by unseen horrors. The woman who wants to raise her children safely and set aside a retirement fund in her savings account. The thousands of employees at the Benning plant on the edge of town. That's who I'm hear to represent. The common man. Whereas you, my friend, represent a small cabal of killers that has fallen from its Mystick Path."

"No. I work with a Chantry of mages that protects my city from people like you."

"Mr. Drake, after what I'm about to show you, you'll welcome the opportunity to work with us. Why should you turn us down? As a member of the Order of Hermes, you should welcome the chance to learn. Is your own Tradition any less hierarchical?"

"Your knowledge is based on lies. You deceive to gain power."

"Would you like to hear the truth? You are the one who killed the Syndicate representative to this council. I know all about your particular genetic anomaly. You possess the ability to take the form of a creature from the Mythic Age. You treat this creature as a separate entity, one for whom you feel no responsibility. You have little control over its activities. I can give you that control. Through the training of Iteration X, the genetic work of Damage Control and an education at the Ivory Tower, I can give you what your Order has always failed to provide."

One World, One Truth, One Paradigm

The world is a battleground of ideas. Philosophies, religions, nations — all of these forces divide the human race. Corporations gather wealth. Politicians broker power. Nations prepare for war. And behind the scenes, hidden from mortals, more sinister alliances are made. Supernatural forces prey upon humanity. Vampires victimize. Werewolves rage. The Restless Dead possess. Powerful mages broker power, too. As they debate antiquated philosophies, they argue over how to protect humanity. While the Traditions argue, the world falls into darkness, terrorized by the forces of the occult.

One Union stands against the darkness. Its vision of the future is Utopia, a world of prosperity, security and reason. At least, that's what the Technocrats profess. They plan to unite the world under their banner through science and idealism. They patrol, recruit and protect the Masses from the forces of the unknown. Their greatest weapon is technology and they use it to advance their ideal: One world, one truth, one paradigm of reality.

It's a noble ideal. Too bad their power has corrupted it.

Technocracy 101

They began to weave curtains of darkness;
They erected large pillars round the Void,
With golden hooks fasten'd in the pillars,
With infinite labour the Eternals
A woof wove, and called it Science.

— William Blake, The Book of Urizen

Okay, let's start at square one. What is the Technocracy? Is it an army of cyborgs with chainguns waiting to mow down our heroes? Is it a bunch of glorified goons in black suits who set up fusillades of gunfire? If it is either, the characters should be able fire up their Forces rotes and cast a few fireballs to save the world. That's one way to run a

Technocracy story. It can be entertaining, but consider the alternatives. Technomancers can be more than just targets.

Maybe our approach should be something more subtle. After all, we might want a little more in our stories than straight combat. We could make all the technology in our stories evil — well, all technology except cool things like computers and rocket packs. Then we could focus on the whole "magic versus technology" schtick. We'll make our pack of New Age heroes virtuous crusaders against an uncaring high-tech world. They'll throw their televisions out the Chantry windows, light up a few sticks of incense and the world will be a perfect place! That could work, too. It could also be shallow. Why sell yourself short with an easy moral about the "evils of technology?"

Stories involving the Technocracy center on the dark side of technology, the potential of what it can become if we're not careful. Any time a new technological innovation is introduced to the world, it has the potential to be abused. When that invention "arrives," a paradigm shift takes place. That shift can change our lives, affecting the way we see the world. With each paradigm shift, a larger shift also takes place: a trend toward technocracy.

A technocratic society is one in which technology molds culture. It encourages us to stop thinking of people as human beings and start thinking of them as machines. We don't sleep at the end of the day, we pump caffeine into our systems until we crash. We don't heal, we expect doctors to be like automobile mechanics, patching us together when we break down. We stop making decisions based on humane values; instead, we set aside our feelings and measure our world with statistics. We even stop talking to each other and stare at television screens to find our entertainment.

Does this mean that all technology is evil? No, certainly not. Used carefully, technology can improve our world immensely. We can educate, inoculate, protect and produce. But if the people who use that technology can't control it, it controls them. The results are nightmarish.

Demonstrating the dark side of any technological innovation in a story is easy enough. Just take a bit of tech and give it a technocratic spin, emphasizing the dehumanizing aspects of the invention. Think of the negative aspects of television, for example. Families prefer it to each others' company. Endless commercials influence what we buy. Programs project images of ideals; if they don't reflect us, we don't exist. So-called objective journalists define our world for us; we decide what is important based on what they say. And that's just the beginning.

Stories about the Technocratic Union involve conspiracies, too. What if a small cabal of mages controlled the masses using its technocratic influence? What if the mages could raise millions of dollars or influence elections by showing the right commercials on TV? What would be

possible if genetic engineering and military hardware had no limits? Here's a simple answer: The people who controlled that tech could control the world. **Mage's** Technocracy does just that. To a point.

Any technological inventions — telephones, televisions, credit cards, computers, transportation, education, health care, corporations — can be used to focus the magick of the Technocratic Union. Technology is a ubiquitous force that has an undeniable effect on our culture. Those who control it control the world. Introducing this equation to your game is easy. Build layers of conspiracy, throw in a system of magick based on controlling technology, add a dash of paranoia and you have the basic elements of **Mage's** Technocracy at your command.

Still, Technocrats aren't just hyperscientific bullies; they have a legitimate ideal, one they pursue regardless of cost. To them, the world can become a utopia if they influence enough people, recruit promising mages and unify "magick" into the science that they believe it is. The ideal has become tainted, however. The Technocrats have summoned up something they can't fully control. Sounds like magick, doesn't it? It is. False pride can corrupt anyone, from the lowliest technician to the most powerful Secret Master in the Realms of the Deep Universe.

Regardless of who is "winning" the Ascension War, the World of Darkness is a far cry from Utopia. Rather, it's a dystopia infected by technocracy. The Union's original vision has been perverted in this high-tech world. Machines no longer exist solely to serve humanity — humanity lives in the shadow of The Machine. Developing that theme is a little more complicated than just sending out waves of HIT Marks and Men in Black to kill the characters, and developing that theme makes for more intriguing stories.

Structure!

The easiest way to integrate the Technocracy into a chronicle is to build it into your setting from the start. From the overlords watching from the skies to amalgams fighting in the trenches of the Ascension War, the Union's hierarchy is extensive. Once you have built that structure into the setting, you can integrate it into the game.

The Technocratic Union is at a distinct disadvantage — its forces are divided. If the Technocracy ever decided that its only goal was to kill every supernatural creature on Earth, it would have to divert its resources from other projects. According to its master plan, the Technocracy fights the Ascension War in three ways or on three battlegrounds: "alternate dimensions," Sleeper culture and open warfare. To meet this demand, the Union separates itself into three groups: Horizon Constructs, the Symposia and amalgams.

Horizon Collectives and Constructs

Stationed in geosynchronous orbit over many major cities, Horizon Collectives organize the Technocracy's forces. Like Horizon Realms, these Constructs form pockets of reality that allow Technomancers to practice their Arts without invoking Paradox. The "boundaries of coincidence" have been molded to accept technomagick and to reject more mystick styles (see **Mage**, pages 184-186). A single Convention usually dominates operations within a given Construct. From there, high-ranking Technocrats monitor and coordinate operations over large industrialized areas. For examples, see the Northern California Security Collective (**Technocracy: NWO**), the Acme Pyrotechnic Institute (**Technocracy: Iteration X**) and EcoR (**Technocracy: Progenitors**).

Large Constructs stretch into Realms of their own in the far reaches of the Umbra, encompassing huge operations and offering maximum security. Earthbound Constructs (what the Traditions call "earthly manifestations") tie the mortal world to Umbral stations. **The Book of Chantries** (Chapter Two) describes a couple of the big Realms. The largest by far is Autocthonia, described in **Beyond the Barriers: The Book of Worlds**.

Symposia

Each of the world's major cities contains a Symposium of Technomancers that oversees local operations. Each Convention has a chair on the Symposium, but one member is chosen to lead it. Naturally that member's Convention dominates the group. Each of the other Conventions concerns itself with spheres of influence important to its society: Iteration X infiltrates the police force, the NWO places sympathizers in mass media and academia, and the Syndicate commands local corporations.

The Symposium maintains ties to the local Constructs; each Construct has a representative on the Symposium who also reports to her Convention leaders. Symposium politics can get heated at times, but they avoid the distractions that characterize Tradition councils.

Amalgams

Each Symposium also oversees a number of amalgams in the field who report on their progress monthly. Each Horizon Collective likewise contains a collection of amalgams to keep it running. Like cabals, amalgams often (but not always) contain representatives from different Conventions. Each amalgam has distinct duties, which include monitoring an area, converting the Masses and neutralizing threats. Each amalgam has an assigned leader who is responsible for the conduct of his group. It's both a privilege and a punishment to receive leadership orders; anyone who's seen a war movie understands the double-edged sword of command.

Dispatch Centers (Fronts)

While Tradition mages gather in Chantries, Technocrats hide their operations behind fronts. Any given corporation or business — a firm of psychologists, an automobile assembly plant, a huge software manufacturer — may conceal a dispatch center. Anywhere that technology can be, shall we say, "abused" can be a front. Examples include Duplex Assembly/Recycling in **Technocracy: Iteration X** and Dr. Burns' gang in **Technocracy: Progenitors**.

"I am Not a Number…"

Tradition mages describe the Technocracy as "soulless," a hive-mind haven for fascist stooges. Considering how the two groups meet, the impression isn't surprising. Low-level Technocrats, who often cross swords with the players' characters, are a uniform bunch. The upper levels and more covert positions harbor the individual Unionists. At the base of the Technocratic pyramid, staunch individuals are rare. Powerful mages are at the top. Hence struggles for political and economic power are intense on the upper levels of the order. Un-Awakened and low-level Technocrats are the pawns of their masters, and a pawn sometimes has to be sacrificed to further a strategy.

While outsiders consider the Technocracy a monolith, the Union is, in fact, divided. Theory and practice don't always agree. There's a schism between those who theorize about the Ascension War and those who see it firsthand. On the Horizon, high-ranking Technomancers have idealistic visions. On the front lines, theory only goes so far. Amalgams often need to take their own initiative. When they go too far, they get crushed under the very Union they support. A few staunch individuals get promoted; they struggle against other Technocrats to determine the fate of the Technocracy from there.

• **Low-Level Consors:** The lowest levels of the Technocracy don't require Awakened mages. Conditioned Sleepers perform many of the simplest tasks. Obedience is paramount. Resistance is futile. Technicians, gang members, grunts, media dupes and blackmailed stooges mean nothing against the Greater Good. Technocratic brainwashing is a science perfected nearly a millennium ago, so betrayals are uncommon. Yet promising individuals hide among the ranks. Some rise to promotion through conformity while others display initiative or win power by Awakening. Most, however, remain at ground zero.

• **Greater Consors:** Many front-line operatives in the Ascension War are either on the verge of Awakening or have developed their affinity Spheres (see **Mage**, pg. 227). Ciphers, cyborgs, HIT Marks, space marines and Men in Black walk the line between Awakening and mere awareness. None of them would be considered Sleepers, but few command much technomagick. Some technicians learn the most arcane secrets that un-Awakened minds can comprehend, while specially prepared field troops make impressive cannon fodder or infiltration experts.

Advancing from the lowest level of the pyramid is like uncovering a conspiracy. Talented Technomancers slowly discover the intricacies — and fallacies — of the Union. Rebels and crusaders who oppose the conspiracy are easily crushed because of their lack of power. Idealists and visionaries find their own reasons to rise to power. In fact, Awakening is a moment of revelation for many Technomancers: they realize their roles in the grand scheme of the Union. The vision of the master plan — the Time Table — becomes clear.

• **The Enlightened:** The word "adept" describes beginning Tradition mages; beginning Technomancers are generally referred to as "Enlightened." Each Convention also uses other words to describe its Awakened servants:

• **Armatures:** These Iteration X cyborgs and specialists offer firepower to support their teams.

• **Students:** These are Progenitors who either study in Research Constructs or test discoveries in the field.

• **Research Associates:** These Void Engineers either prefer to work with other Engineers in other Realms or condescend to work with amalgams on the front lines.

• **Operatives** and **Reporters:** The NWO sends these agents to investigate supernatural aberrations on the front lines.

• **Associates:** The Syndicate understands that control is power. After Awakening, Associates command the fields of commerce — legal and otherwise.

Symposia typically give amalgams information on a need-to-know basis. Amalgams with limited duties, responsibilities or loyalties have little choice but to remain focused on their given tasks. Nonetheless, the Enlightened have a practical point of view that their masters often lack because of the time they spend in the field. Many of them start out trying to convince their masters to follow other courses of action. When this fails the staunchest members of the Union secretly pursue their own activities. If they're discovered, they're slapped down hard. If they succeed, they're worthy of promotion.

• **Experts:** At this level of Enlightenment, a Technomancer usually finds herself promoted to a Symposium or Research Construct. She has to be careful; a shift in power can mean trouble for an amalgam on the wrong side of a political struggle, and that can mean trouble for her subordinates, as well. Powerful Technomancers may prefer to be promoted to Research or Horizon Constructs out of a simple survival instinct — it's safer there!

• **Masters:** Many of the most powerful Horizon Constructs center on one or two masters. Masters are typically absorbed in their studies or addicted to the politics of their surroundings. They tend to be very specialized in their concerns; each one follows the vision that brought him to

Enlightenment with fanatical devotion. Though many retreat into research or leadership (like MECHA's Matriarch), some remain close to Earth, participating in elaborate conspiracies (like Dr. Ken Himiitsu and the World Advisory Council).

• **The Inner Circle:** Beyond the Horizon sit the Secret Masters, the Inner Circle of the Technocracy. Whether they actually control the Union is debatable, but their influence is undeniable, if only through the record of their achievements.

Once a Technocratic Secret Master commands a few Spheres, financial and political influence are simple pleasures. A privileged few command Realms that are utopias to the theorists who study them, and dystopias to those who live there. The precious few who reach the sixth Sphere gain powers too great for the world we know. Master scientists hide in Realms located in the Deep Universe. Freed from Paradox, they pursue alternate boundaries of reality. This arcane technomancy may be a century ahead (or more!) of that enjoyed back home, but is far too vulgar for Earth. This visionary technology must remain in the Deep Universe until the Technocracy fulfills the primary plans of its Time Table.

Visionary Technocrats find it far more tempting to explore odd theories than to obsess over the grim realities of the physical world. Who gives a damn about a dying planet when there's higher knowledge to attain? As one would expect, the mages of the Inner Circle find it difficult to sympathize with issues on the front lines.

Tactics

Many of the Technocracy's accomplished goals can be witnessed in cities. What tactics do they use to achieve them? A few classic strategies include:

• Information Wipe

You don't need to put a bullet in someone's head to eliminate him. A person's interaction with the modern world depends on an intricate web of information. Snap a few strands and you eliminate traces of him. You can even snap a lot of strands: confiscate or revoke a mage's driver's license, shut down his credit card, or manipulate his phone bills, student loans or bank accounts. A target can even be evicted from his apartment with a little shove, and can be denied access to his savings. When all records of a person cease to exist, he may think twice about causing grief for the Technocracy.

Wiping information from the minds of a victim's associates is even more extreme. Thanks to the NWO's mastery of mind control, a lover can be conditioned to reject the victim, or her family can be made to disown her. A close friend can even be eliminated and replaced with a clone. Sever enough of a mage's social ties and she might even renounce her former life and join the Union.

• The Dragnet

Mysticks manipulate reality to cast their magicks. In response, the NWO uses conjunctional Correspondence/Prime Effects to track down magickal activity. **Sense Quintessence** and **Filter All-Space** are pretty basic procedures. Technomancers also have access to an invention called *manar*, a method of detecting magickal activity. (See **Technocracy: NWO** for more details.) Wise mages tread lightly and obscure any traces of Quintessence from their Chantries' Nodes.

Once Reality Deviants have been detected, a variety of mundane forces can be employed. Why use a chaingun when you can frame your victim on the local news? Set up a nasty crime. Falsify evidence at the police station. Manufacture a psychological profile that will commit someone to an insane asylum. With enough mundane influence, Technomancers can save their magickal efforts for more important tasks.

• Mindscaping

Stories of people who learn too much and who receive friendly visits from the authorities abound in UFOlogy. Abduction is followed by conditioning. The forces of law and order can then trap their victims in *mindscapes*, illusory virtual realities with built-in situations that test a subject's reactions. (For several examples check out a few episodes of *The Prisoner*, especially "A, B & C.") A captured Reality Deviant (or even a whole cabal) can undergo a little psychological trauma once a mindscape is in effect. In game time, play this tactic like a dream sequence (see "Seekings," Chapter Two). Such adventures present fascinating roleplaying opportunities. By asking "What if?" without putting the characters' lives on the line, your players can explore what makes their mages tick.

• The Manchurian Gambit

Anyone can be conditioned with enough work. If you program a Sleeper to execute part of a plan, the effects can be horrifying. The betrayal of a friend, rejection of a lover or loss of a job can destroy morale. Sleepers don't need to undergo a full education or initiation to serve the Technocracy. All the boys in black need is a little access to victims' minds. (See **Technocracy: NWO** for details of magickal conditioning.)

• Brainwashing the Masses

You can advance any idea if you control mass media. It's one more weapon in the war for reality. The amalgams who control mass media can denounce promising mages, shift political trends, persecute the innocent or draw attention away from current issues and ideas. When one mage is manipulated by the Union, it's frightening; when hordes of Sleepers are controlled, it's downright chilling.

A similar agenda conceals the movements of the supernaturals. Technocrats know that the average Joe isn't

in any shape to deal with vampires or werewolves. Why, then, should he know they exist? After all, it's only a matter of time and trouble before reality is cleansed. The Union therefore covers up evidence of Reality Deviants' existence to avoid panic. The media is just one tool of many in this agenda's suitcase, but it's a powerful one.

• The Gray Man

It's often easy for an agent to impersonate a Tradition mage. Set up a situation where he pretends to be on the run, let him make some friends, foreshadow his betrayal and before long the cabal is reluctant to trust any mage. Does another friend of yours want to join your gaming group a few weeks late? Let him work undercover.

A variant of this tactic involves using a Gray Man as a lure for a trap. The mysticks think they have some inside help. In actuality they're being set up every step of the way. Frame them for a crime. Blame them for a war between two powerful factions and trap them in the middle. Set them up to assault a perfectly innocent Sleeper institution. There's a chess game going on every day and Tradition mages who investigate too much are just asking to be used as pawns.

Agents and Agencies

War! What is it good for?
GM, IBM,
U3, CNN,
Universal European....
— Laibach, "War"

A war effort this large needs many specialists. Each Convention controls several agencies, and any one of them can act as an ally of struggling Technocrats or as an enemy of troublesome Traditionalists. Again, the Technocracy books give copious details. Here are a few quick agencies to note on your battle roster.

• Damage Control

This organization within the Progenitors manufactures monstrosities. These mutants are extremely unstable — their very existence invites Paradox (see "Unbelief," page 177 of **Mage**, or pages 58 and 65 of **The Book of Madness**). Damage Control customizes genetic freaks for dangerous operations. Albino alligators that crawl out of toilets and hyperintelligent housecats with poisonous claws are typical Progenitor "pets," while clones and Victors provide more subtle alternatives.

• Shockwave

This Iteration X agency organizes firepower, pure and simple. Said firepower consists of anything from Kamrad gangs with baseball bats to black helicopters or cybernetic animals. The BioMechanics Methodology commands the forces of Shockwave, and gives Akashic Brothers something flashy to defeat — or flee from.

• Statisticians

Another Iteration X Methodology masters the science of prediction. Statisticians influence weather patterns, traffic accidents and games of chance through probability manipulation — if the odds are right, any dire (or beneficial) situation can occur. Since these Technomancers work carefully behind the scenes, countering their Time and Entropy procedures can be difficult. Hell, it's hard enough just to *notice* them, let alone stop them. Once the Statisticians set things in motion (often through extended-roll Effects or straight-up Storyteller fiat), these procedures are eminently coincidental. Statistics, after all, don't lie.

• The Men in White

Loyalty is the watchword of the Men in White. These high-ranking NWO operatives organize amalgams of Men in Black and watch the political activity within Technocracy operations very closely. Each Man in White controls a pyramid of conspiracy. At the top, the eye remains eternally vigilant. Getting to this vaunted position takes decades of success in the field, years of politics in Symposiums, promotion to a Horizon Construct and survival through countless Loyalty Reviews and conditioning exercises.

The men at the top are supported by an extensive network of intelligence systems. Intelligence analysts supply them with summarizes of current supernatural activity. Gray suits and flashier operatives often get their briefings from analysts or white suits before going off on missions. (Think of the beginning of a James Bond film or an episode of *Mission Impossible* and you get the idea.) The base of the power pyramid is composed of black suits, sympathizers and other low-level ops. Below that are the Masses of Sleepers that they oppress.

• Q Division

Countless years of espionage films have convinced the general public that gadgets are an important part of espionage. The government, after all, has plenty of high-tech items it hides in the interests of national security. Within the NWO, Q Division develops Devices (Technocratic Talismans) to assist agents in the field. (See **Technocracy: NWO** for sample toys and the means to acquire them.)

"Q Division" is also the nickname for Research and Execution of the Void Engineers. R&E doesn't let its "tecknology" sit around in development labs. The Engineers' investigators are Techies in the field and they will travel *anywhere* to test specifications.

• DSEATC

The Dimensional Science Evaluation, Administration and Training Committee commands the Void Engineers' resources. Only a fraction of its financial influence is applied on the front lines. Most money is spent on teams that patrol and explore places outside the mortal world. The Earth Frontier Division handles undersea exploration.

Pan-Dimension Corps explore the Near Universe and Deep Universe. Cybernauts patrol the Web. Chrononauts explore time itself.

Closer to the front lines, the marines of the Border Corps Division and the "ghostbusters" of the Neutralization Specialization Corps work in amalgams to ensure that Earth remains safe from Otherworld incursions. Investigators from this division have attitude, and they hate it when other Technocrats get in their way. Relations with other Conventions are not what one might call harmonious.

Politics

It's easy to reduce the Technocratic Union to a simple stereotype, especially when it behaves like a massive bureaucracy. That perception is fine for a bunch of battle mages who want to kill the bad guys freely. However, a chronicle that involves Technocracy politics offers plenty of levels of conflict and a host of opportunities for intrigue. Despite their grand "unity," the Conventions disagree about how to resolve their problems. These disagreements extend from the amalgams to the Symposiums, and hamper the efficiency of the whole.

• **Iteration X** values efficiency above all else. Operations, members argue, are often best handled by a show or threat of force. The Clockwork Convention dispatches Kamrads — un-Awakened grunts — and experimental military tech to deal with trouble spots. The group's solution to "Reality Deviants" is widespread execution, although this idea is unpopular enough with the other Conventions that it's rarely approved.

Not all of Iteration X's operations are militant; academicians, statisticians and cybertechnicians argue that the world can become efficient without genocide. These personnel decide the proper timing, calculations and probabilities for operations across the Union. Sadly, they still have difficulty figuring in wild cards like free will or luck. This may explain the Convention's hatred for other mages.

Most Iteration X agents within an amalgam follow orders. Dissidents must be clever and careful to avoid discovery. Many Iterators carry either heavy firepower back-up weapons or cybertech "modifications."

• **The NWO** would rather recruit mages than kill them. These operatives reinforce the Convention's version of "truth" among Sleepers and Awakened alike through threat, abduction and conditioning. Information is power; NWO agents pursue it, hide it and alter it to suit their needs. Infiltration, surveillance and intimidation are their tools, and conditioned Sleepers called *sympathizers* carry out their plans.

NWO agents in an amalgam prefer mind games and misdirection to open confrontation. When combat does erupt, sympathizers and Men in Black are trained to react with deadly force. Conditioned to fight in units, amalgams of MiBs develop repertoires of procedures for discretionary violence.

• **The Progenitors** want to learn, and they welcome any opportunity to field-test their creations. Scientific advancement is their top priority; rigid protocols are often ignored in favor of experimentation. A deeply paranoid group, the Progenitors ensure their survival through cloning and biotech. In combat they either nail their quarry from a distance (via drugs or replacement) or rip him to shreds (with custom-built "pet projects").

Promotion within this highly academic community usually depends as much on political acumen as on scientific achievement. Like the NWO's academicians, Progenitors take the political struggles of Symposiums very seriously. Most of them insist on publishing and documenting the details of every operation. How else are they going to get funding? Progenitors in an amalgam provide medical support, deadly traps and chemical enhancements to their compatriots. Expect them to take notes from afar for later research.

• **The Syndicate** watches the bottom line and does whatever it takes to turn a profit. From this Convention's standpoint, command follows cash. He who controls the gold controls the world, and three guesses who has the gold. The real power brokers lay their webs throughout the modern world, hiding behind a colorful facade of career criminals. The Syndicate has an office anywhere there's mass commerce (legal or otherwise). Its operations can be a trifle ruthless. You can't make an omelet without breaking eggs, they say, and the Syndicate makes some really big omelets.

This Convention dispatches hit men and financial tyrants to the front lines. (Every enemy has a weakness, and everyone's gotta eat sometime.) Though enhanced by subtle technomagicks, these "Hollow Men" (the point guards for agent groups) seem weak compared to HIT Marks or biotech abominations. Most outsiders, including other Conventions, underestimate them. It's a mistake. The Syndicate is the proverbial iceberg, and its influence has spread further than any of its rivals imagine. The World Bank, the Pentex megacorp, the shop down the street — everybody owes the Syndicate *something*. Money is the puppet string of the modern world, and this Convention has a firm grip.

• **The Void Engineers** work better with other Engineers than they do with other Technocrats. They tolerate their companions, but only to a point. The "jumpsuits and clipboards" ruse they maintain serves to cover what may be the loosest cannon on the Technocratic deck.

Not that they're not dedicated. Void Engineer marines and field techs guard the hidden places. When and if something big breaks through, the Void amalgams stand on the front line. This threat has created a sense of gallows humor and tight camaraderie among the lower ranks. In the

upper divisions, things are more cerebral. The Grand Old Men lose touch with their hard-working subordinates in favor of more "significant" research in deep space. There's a gap between the grunts and their detached masters, one which widens when the orders come from another Convention. In the vastness of the Deep Universe, many Engineers lose sight of their ideals — and sometimes their humanity.

Agendas

The members of the ruling Symposium in any given city have an agenda to pursue. To reflect this, take a look at your chronicle's setting, establish the local group's goals and decide on its progress. It doesn't matter whether the players' characters are Traditionalists, Technocrats or neither; each Symposium has some motivation for its actions, and the agenda decides what those motivations are. Plot that agenda and you create story hooks that will last for months.

So where do you start? Begin with a few key locations that are under Technocratic control. Figure out the obvious (and not-so-obvious) fronts, bunkers and research facilities, establish the competence of the local Symposium leaders, and add a few interesting figures for the characters to bounce off. Bankers, police chiefs, academics, researchers — anyone who works toward stability or knowledge is a candidate. There is a host of low-level grunts in the Union, but even faceless grunts are, contrary to the stereotype, organized by human beings.

Each person in a Symposium has a particular agenda to advance. Business types refer to such goals as "mission statements," while academics prefer "theses." As you set these goals, document "pet projects" for the different personalities in the Symposium. Consider their bids for power. Writing up a few brief paragraphs or simple sentences goes a long way when brainstorming an agenda, and it kick-starts your creativity. Now decide who's doing what to whom, assign a few important agents, drop a few clues to the players and watch the fun begin. Instant technocracy is at your command.

• Eliminate "Reality Deviants"

The Symposium's goal is a straight-up massacre of everyone who defies the reality it seeks to impose. Every city has at least one executive ready and waiting to unleash the troops. This works once or twice on starting characters, but powerful cabals of Traditionalists manage to evade this agenda rather easily. Once a low-level cabal has held off an amalgam assault it's time for the Symposium to resort to more devious tactics.

• Maintain Surveillance

This goal raises the paranoia quotient. The Union can't watch everywhere so it periodically changes the focus of its surveillance. Once in a while it shifts to the characters. Before long they notice they're being watched — and start looking over their shoulders.

In a Technocracy chronicle you can have the Technomancer characters assigned to gather information on a new location. If that location is a mystick Chantry, the characters become the hunters, waiting for the moment when they can abduct, convert or eliminate the Deviants. Conversely, the surveillance can turn on them; command suspects, rightly or otherwise, that the characters have become less than loyal. Watch the shadows, kids.

• Recruit Promising Traditionalists

An espionage-based story relies on subtle recruiting methods. Once a project involving local Reality Deviants has been authorized, the Technocrats could trick Tradition mages into working for the Technocracy by abducting them and forcing them to work through mindscapes, offering them compromises in return for safety, or could use the characters by planting a NWO operative in the group. Why destroy when you can recruit — or corrupt? Clones, turncoats, sellouts and infiltrators all further such agendas. Waste not, want not.

• Advance Research

The Technocracy's resources may be vast, but they aren't unlimited. The time and effort required to pursue Reality Deviants detracts from other operations, such as maintaining Research Constructs. Thus, Symposium members who argue for research funding oppose those who want to unleash the dogs of war. The Union needs results and many Technocrats go to great lengths to ensure that they're achieved. If Traditionalists are out to shut down a Research Construct, they threaten the research projects. Hence the Deviants should be eliminated. If they leave the facility alone, the Symposium's resources are better spent elsewhere.

• Patrol for Supernatural Activity

Mystick mages form the primary threat to the Technocracy's plans, but they've been known to collaborate with other groups as well. It's always a good idea to gather information on these potential enemies. The Union may choose to gather data on fae freeholds, Kindred coteries, Garou septs or just about any other organization. Setting up this kind of conflict in the background of your chronicle can spread ripples throughout your game, especially in a crossover chronicle. The mage characters may spend a lot of time trying to fix supernatural situations that are complicated by meddling Technomancers. If the Technocrats tamper with vampires, the undead might wonder who's been spying on the prince's haven. The bloodsuckers are a notoriously old-fashioned lot, and the idea of technomagick is lost on most of them. By establishing a watch on Kindred politics, you create a whole new level of intrigue, a level on which Tradition mages may become vampire allies — or scapegoats.

• Secure New Fronts

The Technocracy gains power in a city by securing dispatch centers. It takes time and resources to establish these fronts, which draws resources away from other activi-

ties. The Union's collective hold briefly weakens at these junctures. When the time is right, Tradition characters might fight to stop Technocracy operations. Technomancers, meanwhile, fight to protect them.

Using this plot in a story develops the role of the Technocracy in your chronicle. Did you forget to include a major corporation in your city? Have you noticed a disturbing technological trend in your real-world city that you want to explore? Has someone bought out a share of economic power? Make a move to "acquire" it for your Symposium. Technocratic forces increase or diminish one skirmish at a time.

• Maintain the Gauntlet

Umbral forces, Restless Dead or Paradox spirits can threaten the security of the Union in a Technocracy-based chronicle. Void Engineer characters have a chance to take the lead whenever such threats present themselves. In a Tradition-based chronicle, the characters may either sympathize with these forces or deal with what the Technocracy can't control.

Who Sits Where?

Symposia fall prey to a rather pernicious corporate idea. Despite what the suits might profess, gathering more people around a meeting table does not make meetings more effective. In fact, it's all too easy for such meetings to be so consumed by bureaucracy and "rules of order" that they become recursively political instead of responsive and useful. Welcome to the 436th meeting of the local Symposium....

Debates over the number of members required on a board vary from city to city, but some titles and positions are fairly common. It should also be noted that the meeting place of a Symposium changes regularly. Gatherings are always held in high-security areas. If necessary, meetings are held in secure Horizon Constructs. Most Symposia prefer to meet in Earthly Constructs whenever possible, though; one never knows what sorts of traps a Convention has planted in a Construct one's never visited.

• The Chairman

The chairman (or chairperson) controls the most-valued position on the board. This executive calls meetings to order and keeps the analysis on target. She also reports to the nearest Horizon Construct and Inner Circle reps.

"Now that we have dispensed with the minutes, we will examine old business. First, the resolution of a recurrent problem: An alleged Chantry of Reality Deviants is operating in the northeast sector of the city...."

• The Secretary

Aside from taking minutes, the secretary ensures that the board uses proper meeting procedures.

"Point of order: May we implement directive 337-D and obtain an amalgam field update on the progress of this old business before beginning discussion?"

• The Convention Representatives

Only one Convention can control the chair, but the other Conventions still elect representatives to a Symposium. The board expects each representative to be fully briefed on the activities of his or her sphere of influence.

Each amalgam in the field has a spokesman who reports directly to a Convention Representative. If an amalgam goes too far, the Convention Representative requires the amalgam to make a full report before the Symposium, at a specially convened meeting. Technomancer characters dread the thought of being called before the board.

"I see no reason as of yet to call Agent AT324 before this assembly. Instead, I will detail what he has learned this week from the surveillance of the Chantry in question. As you know, Watcher Operatives have installed a monitoring device that operates through the network of the local cable company...."

• The Construct Representatives

If a city houses several Constructs, each Construct has a representative on the board. These representatives present the concerns of their respective domains. If a Construct lies slightly outside the physical world, its representative acts more like an ambassador than a representative subservient to the chair.

"Surveillance? Are we still limited to surveillance? Do I need to demonstrate the threat this Chantry poses? Perhaps I should present what our security cameras caught during the Chantry's last raid on our research institution!"

"Point of order: That is scheduled under new business, as you will see listed under Agenda Item Number Five, Subsection Three. Please review the agenda beforehand, Representative Seven."

• The Analysts

The agenda of each meeting is developed before the meeting begins. If necessary, an analyst or field specialist is present to offer expert opinion on particular matters.

"Agent AT324 has exhibited tendencies to overextend surveillance time. We have noted that his performance improves when he is authorized to send at least two Gray Men to gather information firsthand. Furthermore, I have documented data on a cabal of lycanthropes nearby that would warrant taking such precautions. Said lycanthropes may interfere with the stability of our monitoring system...."

• The Statistician

Each Symposium employs a statistician, usually from Iteration X, who can estimate the chances of success of different strategies.

"According to relevant data, the odds of successful abduction of at least one member of the Chantry increases by 44.26% if the additional staff is requisitioned."

"Thank you, Representative Thirteen."

• The Financial Officer

The Syndicate watches the budgets of all operations closely. Even after a Symposium approves methods, the financial officer must approve the budget.

"Considering the cost of reinforcing loyalty and increasing the sleeptaught training of these additional agents, I can only authorize $1.7K for the adjustment of this operation."

"So noted. The Symposium authorizes the addition of two Gray Man Operatives to the amalgam studying said Chantry. Our august NWO representative, Number One, has the action item of seeing to the further conditioning and sleepteaching of these field agents before they are assigned. Number Two, may we proceed to new business now?"

Given the layers of justification and documentation required to have the full support of a Symposium, it's no wonder that the best amalgams tend to go rogue from time to time.

Influence Behind the Curtain

Need more to work with? No problem. The agents of the Technocracy are ready to do your bidding. Whether you want characters to track down Reality Deviants or gather power for global conspiracies, the Union has secured its influence throughout the world.

• **Travel Agencies**

It doesn't take much to monitor who's going where. Thanks to the threat of terrorism, airline passengers are screened more closely than ever before, and computer technology makes tracking them easy. Mages may try to run from city to city, but they can't hide. Mainstream travel routes are routinely monitored, right down to hotels. Security cameras, electronic locks and security staff all give the illusion of safety to travelers, but such precautions can be used for more sinister purposes. Travel agencies coordinate blanket surveillance efforts across the world without realizing what it is that they do — or for whom.

Every major city holds several travel agency dispatch centers. Start with an office, add a receptionist and a few employees with computers and you have all the basics. The front makes a regular income serving Sleeper tourists. In the back room, surveillance — focused particularly on airplanes, trains and buses — watches for mages on the move.

Next comes the local welcoming committee. A rep from Iteration X or the NWO coordinates an amalgam of security agents. Under a second front (often a security firm), the rep puts one or two agents in each of the major hotels. The agents can alert the local Symposium to the presence of a new cabal through patches to video cameras, credit card traces and similar methods. Once they're spotted, the Deviants are in for a late-night visit.

• **The Communications Industry**

Who's watching whom? The Technocratic Union dominates the field of communications and faces little opposition. Aside from the occasional egotistical vampire or meddling Virtual Adept, the NWO has a firm hold on these resources.

Every major city has a dispatch center piped into the local mass media. While "control" is too strong a term for what the Technocracy does, there's no denying the influence it has. Total command of the media is an illusion, of course (unless you want to make things darker then they already are), but there are enough stations hooked into the Technocratic web to make the characters — and players — feel vulnerable as hell. ABC, NBC, ITT, GE, AT&T — it doesn't make any difference. The characters will run into the NWO ASAP.

Technocrats prefer management roles over grunt work. It takes only one Technomancer with the Mind Sphere to access a number of sympathizers through headsets, telephones, pagers, walkie-talkies and cell phones. Any local television station or phone company office can be completely subverted by a few skilled agents.

Iteration X employs a legion of electricians and technicians in the phone companies to serve the Time-Motion Management Methodology. One Armature can easily supervise 20 or 30 Ciphers. Surveillance is the primary goal, and these folks are good at it. There's an intriguing urban legend about telephones: Even if a phone is on its hook, someone can still listen at the other end. Operators are standing by.

NWO Gatekeepers oversee local television stations and newspapers, carefully controlling the information that's disseminated. Brainwashing the Masses is their first goal. These agents, under the pretense of business, skew news reports before they hit the public. This censorship isn't as obvious as one might think; burying a fact at the end of a long story on page A25 is more effective than threatening the reporter, and much easier.

Keeping tabs on information is Gatekeepers' second goal. Low-level operatives scan incoming news for "odd" reports. Periodic TV checks turn the idiot box into a monitor station (did you *really* believe v-chips were created for parents' sake?). Finally, Watcher agents set up shop in TV stations and newsrooms. When a story breaks, they are the first to hear it.

• **Silicon Valley (heavily contested)**

Just about anyone can start up a company these days. Take Silicon Valley, for instance. New offices are being built there all the time. Of course many of them require tight security to discourage theft and corporate espionage. That's because the owners don't want people to see what's hidden behind the concrete and mirrored glass. Many different factions, from Glass Walkers to Virtual Adepts to Void Engineer Cybernauts to NWO sympathizers, live side by side in the valley. And with so many talented individuals planning "career paths," someone with a knack for programming can wind up just about anywhere....

Corrupting an office in Silicon Valley is a straightforward operation. All of the computers link to a single network, which presents the opportunity for a Techno-

cratic Apparatus from hell. Anyone who reads e-mail can be conditioned through slow mind manipulation. The system also generates a low-level supply of Quintessence by draining most of the employees of their life essence. Hard-working employees who sit at their computer terminals for hours feel the effects of this procedure the most, but remain unaware of its significance.

The Conventions cooperate to exploit the front from there. With their Time Sphere talents, Syndicate representatives can ensure financial success and can maximize profits. Void Engineers use the front as a staging ground for assaults on the Digital Web. The NWO uses start-up companies as recruitment centers. More than one Virtual Adept or Glass Walker werewolf has fallen into the Order's web while searching through the classifieds for employment. One building holds many conspiracies. In the words of Microsoft, "Where do you want to go today?"

World Intelligence Agencies

Every industrialized nation has an intelligence community, a second sovereign nation within its borders. The command structures of the largest intelligence agencies are built like mirrored funhouses: phantom deflections misdirect the people inside. Each cell questions the loyalty of the others. Each department suspects the loyalty of other departments. This is intentional. Technocrats develop their own cells within the intelligence agencies of the world, and they all answer to one world-encompassing conspiracy.

• The World Advisory Council

Agents of the Technocratic Union have infiltrated agencies throughout the world. Most of them report to one conspiratorial organization: the World Advisory Council. This secret society gathers information on all of the mortal intelligence communities, as well as on the United Nations and the World Bank. As one would expect, the ability to reshape reality gives these agents an edge over Sleeper security systems designed to keep them out. In the council's halls, a collection of specially selected advisors influences the various world powers. The more significant the nation, the more capable the council's staff. (See **Technocracy: NWO**, page 59, for as many details as we're willing to impart about this shadowy group.)

• Intelligence in the United States

Every branch of the United States government has been infiltrated to one degree or another. Even if the various conspiracies of supernatural creatures didn't exist, the government would still be corrupt. Some things never change.

The intelligence agencies have all been infiltrated, but with varying degrees of success. The FBI was the easiest to infiltrate. The largest obstacle wasn't subverting agents, but actually struggling for control with a secret, international organization of vampires. Go figure. The controlled FBI

handles domestic affairs. Falsifying evidence against a mage in the United States to stir up federal agents is child's play.

The CIA was somewhat more difficult to break. This Kafkaesque organization consists of wheels within wheels. The Technocracy faces a lot of inside opposition, especially from a mortal organization known as Operation Twilight. (For more information, see the book of the same name.) So arcane are the reaches of this "government within" that loyal agents, independent operatives and infiltrating Technomancers can all exist and function within the same building without being aware of each other.

The NSA presents the biggest challenge to outside influence — it still maintains its integrity! This organization handles communications security and maintains state-of-the-art codebreaking, especially with the cooperation of a few freelancing Virtual Adepts. The NWO and the Adepts wrangle round and round within this small but baffling agency; the jury is still out as to whether the NSA represents the greatest hope for or the greatest threat to the United States' survival. Only time will tell.

Crossover Potential

As the above examples suggest, the Technocrats can cross spells with any number of Reality Deviants, from werewolves ("research projects" or "filthy beasts") to vampires ("useful, if deadly, aberrations") to ghosts ("there are no such things — I'll prove it") to faeries ("it's all in your mind, kid"). Pentex and the Syndicate have the wildest romance imaginable: They trade in each others' weaknesses while feeding each others' needs because they're both "good for business." Rival Technocrats do not, it should be stressed, know much about Pentex or anything about the Syndicate's interests in it.

The Union's rather stilted view of the world hampers its vaunted knowledge. Despite its impressive research abilities and data files, the Union remains convinced that all other supernatural life forms are simply the last remnants of dying superstitions. Technocrats refuse to realize that their Union is only a small part of a seething universe — and that the universe is beyond *anyone's* control.

Where Does It All End?

Contrary to what paranoia insists, the Technocracy does not and cannot control everything. It can't control everyone. However, through subterfuge and propaganda, it can still pretend that it can. Paranoia is the Union's greatest weapon. If the Technocracy infiltrates enough fronts within a city, the Traditionalists will eventually suspect any technological device and will continually keep an eye out for Technocratic activity.

The Ascension War, as far as Traditionalist characters are concerned, isn't really about tearing down the World

Bank or wiping out Silicon Valley. It's a battle that's fought one skirmish at a time. Each Sleeper reclaimed, each front that's destroyed and each abducted mage who's rescued is a victory. It's a war for survival for Technocracy characters. They want to be on the winning side while maintaining their identity. Within the shifting maze of the Union they serve, they fight to keep their sense of direction and to uphold their ideals…just like any other mage.

Truth be told, you are the final arbiter on how extensive the Technocracy's influence is in any given city. Whether your Technocrats work as antagonists, temporary allies, turncoats or even heroes, the Union works best when most of it remains in the shadows. By establishing fronts, developing characters behind the scenes and plotting Technocratic agendas, you create an endless supply of plot hooks. The world is yours.

Chapter Four: Supporting Cast

The mind of the people is like mud, from which arises
strange and beautiful things.
— W.J. Turner

He came out of the alley damned fast. *Jennifer had a second to react before the bastard swung his pipe. She chose reflexes over magick, and Psycho-boy missed by light years. Her backpack swung out, knocking the pipe from his hand. Her follow-up strike, a powerful kick, collided with a soft gut. He should've fallen but laughed instead. High, creepy giggles, like a coffin-hinge impersonating human sounds.*

Red eyes glowed from a suddenly bestial face. Like some hologram morph, the nutcase transformed from geek to bat, shedding his Salvation Army clothes in a heap. Jennifer felt no ripple, no Paradox energies as the little freak tittered again and flew straight at her throat. Whatever she faced, it wasn't a mage....

Cast Party

Every Storyteller could use a little help when certain situations arise. Sure it's easy to fake the personality of the weary detective or the whiny technician, but sometimes we need more to go on. What happens if the detective stumbles onto an important clue — a clue that puts the players' characters at risk? What's the chance that the technician might shoot a mage before that reality-warping spell goes off? We don't *need* rule systems and advice to help us through such circumstances, but sometimes they help.

This chapter offers a selection of systems and Storyteller suggestions for human and animal characters and spirit beings. Use them as you see fit, but remember a simple truth: *Everyone wants something.* Though it's painfully easy to see Storyteller characters as "monsters" or "encounters," the world doesn't revolve around combat. The best stories flow from the answers to three simple questions:

- Who is this character?
- What does it want and why?
- What will it do to get what it wants?

Ask yourself *why* when a Storyteller character appears and you'll have a road map for that character's actions. It doesn't matter if the being is a beast, a Sleeper, a spirit, another mage or something else altogether. Stories evolve from conflicting needs, when two or more parties want different things or when they use different means to reach their desires. This chapter gives you the "whos" for a variety of tales. The answers to the other questions will come from you. (See "What's My Motivation?" later in this chapter for more ideas.)

Animals

Nothing to be done really about animals. Anything you do looks foolish. The answer isn't in us. It's almost as if we're put here on Earth to show how silly they aren't.

— Russel Hoban

The world doesn't revolve around human beings or monsters. Beasts of field, stream or sky can be introduced into your chronicle in any number of ways. Some characters have animal companions while others summon, create or shapeshift into beasts. Witches and shamans are renowned for their affinity with beasts, but even hard-core Technocrats have their "uses" for our animal cousins. Imagine a cybernetically enhanced guard dog, a mutant squid or a hyperintelligent rat. See the possibilities? Obviously a few pointers and systems for the animal kingdom would be useful.

Animals in Your Game

When you think about it, animals are natural plot hooks and characters. Our furry friends all too often become lists of stats rather than characters in their own right. That's a disservice, both to your story and to animals themselves. Naturally you don't have to play out the motivations of each blue jay that wings past the characters' heads; even so, a creative Storyteller can take her chronicle in some interesting directions just by introducing an animal or two and playing them for all they're worth.

The first step in creating a significant animal character is to compare it to the ones in your own life. Think about the role your pets (if you have any) play in your own life story. Now think about the animals that cross your path occasionally, and about the impact they have on you. Finally, consider your own feelings about certain beasts. Now translate these feelings into the world of the game. It isn't hard to get below the surface when you use your own experiences as a springboard for storytelling.

Then there are the animals themselves. How do *they* feel? What do *they* want? Anyone who declares that animals are simply bundles of tissue and instinct has never spent much time around them. They're living beings, not objects, and have personalities and motivations all their own. Unlike "monsters," they won't fight to the death — they'll run away, instead. Few animals take abuse in stride, though, and they're more fun when they don't; a horse with an attitude problem is much more interesting than a collection of statistics that takes a mage from Point A to Point B. You can play up those personality traits to add an extra dimension to your games — a dimension that's entirely appropriate for a game about magick.

Really fantastic stories can lead you to the next logical step: animals with the habits, desires and even speech of humans. Look at Merlin's owl Archimedes in White's *The Sword in the Stone* or at the Companions in Mercedes Lackey's Valdemar series; such animals are staples of mage lore. While really exceptional familiar spirits command magickal abilities like those described in **Ascension's Right Hand**, many low-key familiars are simply animals with unusual talents or intelligence. These creatures are attracted to mysticks on general principle.

Animals are also primal links to our inner natures, unclouded by metaphysics or pretenses. Animals simply *are* what they appear to be; even a clever beast acts according to its nature. By working an animal into a story, changing a player's character into a beast or introducing some natural familiar that joins a mage, you make a commentary on the character. If a Dreamspeaker can become a falcon, has a hawk as a familiar and calls herself Angela Skytalon, you get a pretty good idea of the kind of lady she is. In short, the animals we love, fear or become reflect the people we are.

So how can you work animals into your storyline? Simple.

As a Familiar

Everyone knows about the witch's cat, the wizard's owl or the shaman's totem beast — the animal who shares the mystick's life as an equal. A familiar accompanies her so-called master or mistress, skitters about the kitchen or watches the house while master is away. While **The Book of Shadows** presents a separate Background Trait for powerful familiar spirits, many sorcerers simply have unusually intelligent animal companions rather than mystickal helpers.

Animal familiars play lots of roles. Imagine a raven who guards a Verbena's garden. What's he like? What does he know? Consider the ancient cougar who has walked beside three generations of Dreamspeaker shamans. Why does he do it? What legends might follow in his wake? And what about the fussy owl perched on the archmage's shoulder or the parrot who says a great deal more than "Polly wants a cracker?" Once you think about the possibilities, you realize how many stories could originate from a single, well-played familiar.

In game terms a "natural" familiar has normal animal Traits, with Mental and possibly Social scores between 2 and 5. She has her own set of priorities, tastes and agendas, and her own reasons for hanging around the mage. She may or may not speak, depending on how fantastic you want things to be, but her intelligence and communication abilities are obvious. This familiar has a smattering of Abilities outside the normal animal range, but doesn't have

any unusual powers or Advantages. She might understand a thing or two about magick (perhaps a dot or three in Occult or Lore), but can't use it or teach it. No special summoning ritual or Effect calls this familiar — she comes and goes of her own accord. The bond described under the Familiar Background does not apply to a "lesser familiar," and she cannot absorb Paradox. A really strong or talented animal familiar (like a wise panther or a talking bear) might cost the mystick a few Background points in Allies, and often comes with enough power to back up her personality.

As a Shapeshifter's Alternate Shape

Shapeshifting is a common Art, especially among witches and shamans. While a mystick transformed into an animal keeps her own personality and sentience, her physical abilities typically become those of the beast. In time her mind may even follow (see **Mage**, page 203, for the differences between **Lesser Shapechanging** and **Perfect Metamorphosis**).

Plenty of stories can be told about a transformed mage. Maybe she's "stuck" as a deer during hunting season or is so exhilarated with her new form that she doesn't *want* to change back. Perhaps she's been transformed by someone else (like the proverbial frog prince) and lacks the skill to change back. What if she's done something in beast guise that haunts her later, like killing a small child while

running with a wolf pack? Perhaps she has taken a lover of a different species. Complications abound, and complications are stories.

In game terms a character needs either Life 4 or 5 to transform into an animal. Someone else with Life 5 can do it for him, but undoing the spell might demand a similar Effect if the original caster makes the change permanent. Shapeshifting is vulgar magick in the modern world — even the most mystical cultures consider it unnatural, if possible. Some tribal peoples (or Changing Breed Kinfolk) have an affinity for shapechangers; among them, shifting to animal form *might* be considered coincidental if they had reason to believe the mage was one of their own. Once attained, a beast form lasts like any other Effect (see "Range, Damage and Duration" in **Mage**, pages 165-166). A mage who assumes a particular form regularly may have a specialization in that form for two experience points. This allows the character to move, communicate or even think as if he actually had been born a beast. Otherwise he has to learn how to move and behave like that animal when he changes (which can be lots of fun in itself).

People who change into animals often have something in common with the beasts they become — form follows nature, as the saying goes. A slow, strong shaman might become a bear, while a coward might become a mouse. This holds true whether the transformation is the mage's idea or not — if Heasha Morninglade changes you into a toad,

chances are there's some toad in you already. Storytellers with a head for modifiers might want to increase or decrease a transformation's difficulty by +/-1 if it seems appropriate (like changing a sneak into a weasel) or inappropriate (like changing him into an lion).

Animal transformations can be fun, especially when you get a player involved. Ask him what his character's totem is (assuming he has one), or have him describe the sort of animal that his character would be. Play up the differences of the character's new form — the scents he missed when he was human, the unbalanced feeling of walking on four legs or careening through the air on uncertain wings. Describe the world from his new perspective — a hawk has a radically different point of view than a cockroach or human does. Have fun with it; chances are, a mage who learns to shapeshift will become so intoxicated with his new form that he'll assume it whenever possible, regardless of the risks.

Oh, yeah, the risks. Beyond the obvious Paradox problems (and the higher difficulty that comes with vulgar magick), the form itself offers a host of unusual problems. A mage transformed into a weak beast can be trapped or killed easily — his Physical Attributes become those of the animal, for better or worse (see "Game Traits," below). Hunters or police might mistake the mage for a real animal and track him down. Things that would kill the beast (lack of water for a fish, a flame for a moth) endanger the mage. The greatest risk of a new form, though, is more insidious: The mystick might like it too much.

Beast forms "run away with" a mystick's human mind; a **Lesser Shapeshift** spell demands that the player spend a point of Willpower a day for the character to remember that he's not an animal. If that Willpower runs out, someone has to get into the animal's mind to draw forth the mage within. Until then he's an animal in every way (no, he can't use magick). Reaching a "trapped" shapeshifter can be considered a mindscape journey (**Mage**, page 179) wherein the terrain is the animal's habitat. A wizard trying to extract her friend from a panther's mind might find herself wandering through a dense Indian jungle. To rescue her comrade she has to track him down, immobilize him without harming him and commune with him through telepathy until he regains his senses. In game terms this quest could involve a long tracking contest, a fight and a resisted Willpower roll (difficulty 6 to 9 depending on the length of time that the subject has been a panther).

Animals are what they are. Even the smartest ones aren't restricted by social niceties. A wolf is a predator; a mage who shies away from blood shouldn't become a wolf unless she's prepared to deal with lupine nature. A fastidious mystick may be horrified by the, shall we say, *earthy* existence of a beast. Animals don't use napkins or toilet paper, and they're not bashful about their needs. Since

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shapeshifters tend to follow their inner natures, a mystick might find some lost part of herself through a transformation; once she gets past the shock, she discovers how much she's like a wolf. This can be liberating and enlightening — some Verbena feel that everyone should become an animal for a day just to strip off the civilized bullshit — but it's dangerous, too. Many shapeshifters are scary folks because they're in touch with their primal sides. They tend to be impatient, willful and direct, which unnerves their "refined" companions. This primal shift can put a mage at odds with her civilized ethics. Say the wolf-woman gets hungry, goes hunting and kills a man by ripping his throat out. Sure it sounds easy enough, but how well would you deal with waking up in a clearing, naked and covered in sticky blood, knowing you had killed an innocent hiker? Shapeshifting, especially into "cool" predator forms, isn't as carefree as it sounds. As the Storyteller you can draw from all points of the shapeshifting experience for atmosphere, complications and ideas.

As a Companion

Like the familiar the animal companion has a close relationship with her master or mistress. Unlike the familiar she doesn't come with any special powers or intelligence. Such companions range from cats to guard dogs, from hunting falcons to tame wolves. They won't attack their masters without good reason, but anyone else is fair game.

Animal companions are pretty cool, but they come at a price — upkeep. A pet jaguar has to be fed. A trained hawk must have somewhere to fly. A watchdog should be walked a few times a day unless you want a real mess on your hands. Upkeep's not a problem if the character is wealthy or lives in the wild, but a tame panther in a loft apartment is a problem!

And then there are the laws. It's not difficult for a mage to sidestep minor legalities, but if she has a dolphin in her swimming pool, people will ask questions. You can dispense with the real-life hassles of pet ownership (upkeep, registration, vet bills, chewed rugs) if you choose, but keep in mind how much fun they can provide. If every conflict in your chronicle is a life-or-death matter, a story in which the Dreamspeaker's white tiger trashes the Chantry furniture is a refreshing diversion. ("*Bad* kitty! *Bad* kitty!")

Animal companions tend to reflect a character's inner nature or totem spirit. A gruff HIT Mark would have an ill-tempered Rottweiler in contrast to an Ecstatic's mellow sheep dog. Playing a companion against type — like gifting a harried Ether Scientist with a chirping songbird — might provide a good twist, but even the most unlikely combinations should hint at some deeper affinity. Birds of a feather flock…well, you know. Suit the companion to the character and let both grow.

As an Adversary

One of the most popular Sherlock Holmes stories is *The Hound of the Baskervilles*. Even though the hound itself remains "offscreen" for much of the tale, it casts its baleful gaze across the entire narrative. Imagine a beast worthy of its name — a Jaws, a Black Cat, a Shere Khan or a King Kong. An animal doesn't have to be a combat monster to cast its shadow across a story; like the ape in "Murders in the Rue Morgue," an animal adversary can be terrifying in its absence.

When you strip away our weapons, skills and clothing, human beings are pretty weak beasts. Animal antagonists remind us of how fragile we are. Even though the Awakened have formidable forces at their command, an animal — or a pack of them — can make most mysticks nervous, and with good reason.

"Antagonist" doesn't necessarily mean "enemy." The cabal might be fond of its hound, but that doesn't mean a thing if the beast bites a visiting archmage on the leg! An antagonist complicates a story by opposing the main characters' plans. The resulting conflict can be as brutal, humorous or touching as you want it to be.

Antagonists are most effective when they're in their natural elements and the mages are not. When you send an animal (or a group of them) against the characters, describe the scene's atmosphere for all it's worth. Five cats standing in broad daylight aren't scary; a dark alley filled with bright eyes and the sounds of shrieks, on the other hand…. If you can, rob the characters of their advantages before confronting them with creatures. Animals use their environment to their advantage. You can follow their example if — or when — the beasts come out to play.

As a Symbol

Mages see the world in symbols, omens, portents and foreshadowing. Every culture has developed animal symbols, from Egyptian gods to Hallmark cards, and you can use those symbols to suggest meanings in your stories. Look at the "Techniques, Themes and Mood," and "Atmosphere" sections of **Mage**'s Storytelling Chapter (pages 148-152). It doesn't take Carl Jung to see how an animal — especially one with "loaded" significance, like a cat or a pig — could be used to make a point. A raven with a butterfly in its beak is a bad omen; a groundhog showing its head at midday is a sign of good times. If you want to get really esoteric, an animal might be a metaphor for an entire story. Maybe the animal itself isn't present, but its legacy — in the form of a name, riddle or Talisman — comes through all the same.

An animal can symbolize more than the sum of its Traits. A good book on art or symbolism is a valuable aid. Just be careful not to overdo symbolic imagery — you don't want to beat your players over the head with allegories.

As a Plot Hook

As you can tell from many of the examples above, animals make great plot hooks. You can set a whole story spinning around the antics of a single animal. Maybe it's hiding and needs to be found; maybe it's rabid — or maybe it isn't, but folks *think* it is. Perhaps it belongs to a mage's mother. Perhaps it simply follows a mystick home and decides to stay.

Remember that most people react instinctively to animals. Some folks tremble and others gush, but few people ignore an animal once it appears. Remember, too, that many mages (especially nature-oriented ones) are more sympathetic to an animal's plight than to a person's. It's easy enough to imagine a Verbena defending a tiger, or a Dreamspeaker leading a white buffalo to safety. These same characters might turn away from humans in distress, but animals draw them into new and vital stories.

Stories about animals can illuminate new aspects of characters' identities. Imagine the Man in Black who dispenses Technocratic justice with a cold, gloved hand. Now imagine him at home, tossing a stick to his beloved German Shepherd, scratching its ears, sleeping with it stretched across his legs. Whole new image, isn't it? The possibilities are endless. Any character — from the ancient Hermetic with a fear of dogs to the brave Adept who cracks in the rat cage — can be thrown into sharp relief through his love or fear of animals.

Packs and Swarms

Although the Traits listed below detail a range of creatures, some animals are so small or immense that statistics and rolls don't do them justice. If a swarm of hornets or a horde of rats accosts the characters, use the rules that follow.

Instead of trying to determine what each and every member of a pack or swarm does, simply roll to see if the swarm itself harms a character. Narrate the results from there.

Each beast type is given a listing on the chart, below. Roll the Damage listed against difficulty 6 once per turn and allow your players to try to dodge or soak the result. This damage is normal, not aggravated. Packs attack once per turn per target, and act on the initiative given on the chart.

If a character dodges he can move normally for the remainder of the turn. Otherwise his attackers slow him down to half his usual movement. If they score more than three Health Levels' worth of damage in one turn (after the target soaks), or if the player botches an appropriate roll, the character is knocked down and overrun. He can only move a yard or two per turn and the swarm's damage difficulty falls to 5. Efforts to get back up and continue moving have higher than normal difficulties (7 or worse).

The Health Levels listed reflect the amount of damage it takes to disperse a pack or swarm. An additional two Health Levels will destroy the attackers completely. Pistols, rifles and small melee weapons (knives, brass knuckles, bottles, claws, bare hands) inflict a single Health Level per strike, no mater how many attack or damage successes are rolled (that is, the strike only hits one creature). Shotguns, submachine guns and large melee weapons (swords, staves, boards, chain saws) do normal damage (each damage success rolled eliminates one Health Level of the swarm as a whole), as do large-area attacks (Molotov cocktails, frost storms, gusts of wind, explosions). Swarms and packs don't soak.

Note that normal animals do *not* count as witnesses to vulgar magick.

Depending on the size of the pack, two or more characters might be affected by it and can attack it in return. Anyone who helps a character who is overrun can be attacked as well. A human can outrun some packs or swarms (those consisting of rats or bugs), but can't hope to outrun others (those consisting of hyenas or birds).

Animal	Damage	Health Levels	Initiative
Small bugs	3	5	2
Large bugs	4	7	3
Flying bugs	4	5	4
Birds, bats	5	9	5
Rats	3	7	3
Large rats (one or more feet long)	4	9	3
Feral cats	4	6	6
Wild dogs	6	15	4

Game Traits

Imagine that the leader of your characters is turned into a frog. How strong is he? How far can he leap? How much damage can he take before he goes squish? While the Storyteller system assumes that you can work around most situations through roleplaying and narrative, questions like these are bound to come up. That's what rules are for.

The following Traits depict a variety of animals in a systems format. Use them as guidelines when necessary. For simplicity, assume that all wild animals have Mental Traits of 1, Perceptions of 2, and Primal-Urge and Survival scores of 4. Specially enhanced beasts, like cybernetic hounds or magickal cats, may have higher Mental or Physical Traits than the ones listed below, and trained animals can have a variety of Abilities, from Empathy to Hunting. Truly mystickal animals (including creatures modified with extensive technomagickal cybernetics) can have the Special Advantages listed in **Ascension's Right Hand**, pages 80-89. Their abilities are far superior to those of normal animals.

Alligator/Crocodile

Attributes: Strength 3, Dexterity 2, Stamina 4
Willpower: 5
Health Levels: OK, OK, OK, -1, -1, -3, -5, Incapacitated
Attack: Bite for six dice; tail for four dice; swims faster than most nonaquatics
Abilities: Alertness 3, Brawl 3, Intimidation 4, Stealth 3
Move: Walk/Run/Other: 5/26/10

Antelope/Deer/Impala/Stag

Attributes: Strength 2/3/2/3, Dexterity 3, Stamina 3/2/2/3
Willpower: 3
Health Levels: OK, OK, -1, -1, -4, -4, Incapacitated
Attack: Gore for three to five dice (none for deer); antelope and impala run faster than deer
Abilities: Alertness 2, Brawl 2, Dodge 2, Empathy 2, Stealth 2
Move: Walk/Run/Other: 7/30 (40)

Ape/Gorilla

Attributes: Strength 6, Dexterity 3, Stamina 4
Willpower: 3
Health Levels: OK, OK, -1, -1, -1, -3, -5, Incapacitated
Attack: Bite or rend for seven dice
Abilities: Alertness 2, Athletics 2, Brawl 3, Intimidation 3, Stealth 2
Move: Walk/Run/Other: 7/20/10

Bear

Attributes: Strength 5, Dexterity 2, Stamina 5
Willpower: 4
Health Levels: OK, OK, OK, -1, -1, -1, -3, -5, Incapacitated
Attack: Claw for seven dice; bite for five dice
Abilities: Alertness 3, Brawl 3, Intimidation 2, Stealth 1
Move: Walk/Run/Other: 5/20

Bison/Cape Buffalo

Attributes: Strength 6, Dexterity 1, Stamina 6
Willpower: 2
Health Levels: OK, OK, OK, -1, -1, -1, -3, -5, Incapacitated
Attack: Gore for seven dice; trample for eight dice (no attack roll needed to trample — roll Dexterity + Dodge, difficulty 6, to avoid. Stampedes raise dodge difficulties by +2 or more)
Abilities: Alertness 2, Brawl 2, Intimidation 4
Move: Walk/Run/Other: 10/22

Boar (wild)

Attributes: Strength 4, Dexterity 2, Stamina 4
Willpower: 3
Health Levels: OK, OK, -1, -1, -2, -4, Incapacitated
Attack: Bite for four dice; gore for five dice

Abilities: Alertness 2, Athletics 2, Brawl 2, Intimidation 2
Move: Walk/Run/Other: 7/20

Cat (domestic)

Attributes: Strength 1, Dexterity 3, Stamina 3
Willpower: 3
Health Levels: OK, -1, -2, -5, Incapacitated
Attack: Claw or bite for one die (can rake for two dice when cornered)
Abilities: Alertness 3, Athletics 2, Brawl 2, Climbing 3, Dodge 3, Intimidation 2, Stealth 4
Move: Walk/Run/Other: 5/20

Cheetah

Attributes: Strength 3, Dexterity 5, Stamina 3
Willpower: 3
Health Levels: OK, OK, -1, -1, -3, -5, Incapacitated
Attack: Claw for four dice; bite for five dice; runs faster than anything on Earth (except a Swara werecheetah)
Abilities: Alertness 3, Brawl 3, Climbing 3, Dodge 2, Intimidation 2, Stealth 2
Move: Walk/Run/Other: 10/50

Cobra

Attributes: Strength 2, Dexterity 2, Stamina 2
Willpower: 6
Health Levels: OK, OK, -1, -1, -5, Incapacitated
Attack: Bite for three dice; venom for six dice (no soak against venom if the bite inflicts damage). Can spit venom 20 feet with Dexterity + Brawl roll, difficulty 8)
Abilities: Alertness 2, Brawl 2, Climbing 2, Intimidation 4, Stealth 3
Move: Walk/Run/Other: 2/10

Cougar/Leopard/Panther

Attributes: Strength 4, Dexterity 4, Stamina 4
Willpower: 3
Health Levels: OK, OK, OK, -1, -1, -3, -5, Incapacitated
Attack: Claw for six dice; bite for five dice
Abilities: Alertness 3, Athletics 2, Brawl 3, Climbing 4, Intimidation 3, Stealth 3
Move: Walk/Run/Other: 10/30

Cow/Bull

Attributes: Strength 3/5, Dexterity 2, Stamina 3/5
Willpower: 2
Health Levels: OK, OK, -1, -1, -3, -3, Incapacitated
Attack: Bite for three dice (bulls gore for four or six dice)
Abilities: Alertness 2 (bull: Brawl 2, Intimidation 3)
Move: Walk/Run/Other: 10/25

Crow/Hawk/Owl/Raven

Attributes: Strength 2, Dexterity 3, Stamina 2

Willpower: 3

Health Levels: OK, -1, -1, -2, -5, Dead

Attack: Claw for two dice; peck for one die (desperation)

Abilities: Alertness 3, Athletics 2, Brawl 1, Dodge 2, Intimidation 2 (trained birds: Brawl 3, Empathy 4, Intimidation 4)

Move: Walk/Run/Other: 1/2/20

Dog (large or guard)

Attributes: Strength 3, Dexterity 3, Stamina 3

Willpower: 5

Health Levels: OK, -1, -1, -2, -2, -5, Incapacitated

Attack: Bite for five dice; claw for four dice

Abilities: Alertness 3, Athletics 2, Brawl 3, Empathy 2, Intimidation 2, Stealth 2

Move: Walk/Run/Other: 7/25

Dolphin

Attributes: Strength 4, Dexterity 3, Stamina 4

Willpower: 4

Health Levels: OK, OK, -1, -1, -3, -5, Incapacitated

Attack: Bite for three dice; ram for five dice

Abilities: Alertness 2, Athletics 3, Brawl 2, Dodge 2, Empathy 3

Move: Walk/Run/Other: 0/0/30

Elephant

Attributes: Strength 12, Dexterity 2, Stamina 10

Willpower: 5

Health Levels: OK, OK, OK, OK, OK, -1, -1, -1, -1, -1, -3, -3, -5, Incapacitated

Attack: Trunk for eight dice; bite for three dice; gore for 13 dice (difficulty 8); trample for 18 dice (no attack roll needed — roll Dexterity + Dodge, difficulty 6, to avoid)

Abilities: Alertness 3, Brawl 3, Empathy 3, Intimidation 5, Stealth 1

Move: Walk/Run/Other: 15/30

Frog

Attributes: Strength 1, Dexterity 2, Stamina 1

Willpower: 2

Health Levels: OK, -1, Squished

Attack: None (some have poison that can paralyze a person who fails a Stamina roll, difficulty 7. The victim must either eat the frog or suffer a wound treated with the frog's poison to be affected)

Abilities: Alertness 2, Athletics 1, Dodge 3, Stealth 3

Move: Walk/Run/Other: 1/1/2

Hyena/Jackal

Attributes: Strength 4, Dexterity 2, Stamina 3

Willpower: 3

Health Levels: OK, -1, -1, -3, -3, -5, Incapacitated

Attack: Bite for six dice

Abilities: Alertness 3, Athletics 2, Brawl 3, Intimidation 3, Stealth 3

Move: Walk/Run/Other: 7/28

Hippopotamus

Attributes: Strength 7, Dexterity 1, Stamina 8

Willpower: 5

Health Levels: OK, OK, OK, OK, -1, -1, -1, -1, -3, -3, -5, -5, Incapacitated

Attack: Bite for 10 dice; trample for nine dice (no attack roll needed — Dexterity + Dodge roll, difficulty 5, to avoid)

Abilities: Alertness 2, Brawl 3, Intimidation 3, Stealth 1

Move: Walk/Run/Other: 5/20

Horse/Zebra

Attributes: Strength 5/4, Dexterity 2, Stamina 4

Willpower: 3

Health Levels: OK, OK, OK, OK, -1, -3, -3, -4, -5, Incapacitated

Attack: Trample or kick for five to six dice; bite for three dice

Abilities: Alertness 2, Athletics 3, Brawl 1

Move: Walk/Run/Other: 10/35

Lion

Attributes: Strength 4, Dexterity 3, Stamina 3

Willpower: 5

Health Levels: OK, OK, -1, -1, -1, -2, -2, -5, Incapacitated

Attack: Claw for five dice; bite for six dice

Abilities: Alertness 3, Athletics 2, Brawl 3, Dodge 2, Intimidation 5, Stealth 3

Move: Walk/Run/Other: 10/30

Bobcat/Lynx/Wildcat

Attributes: Strength 3, Dexterity 3, Stamina 3

Willpower: 3

Health Levels: OK, -1, -1, -5, Incapacitated

Attack: Claw for three dice; bite for four dice

Abilities: Alertness 3, Athletics 2, Brawl 3, Climbing 4, Dodge 3, Stealth 2

Move: Walk/Run/Other: 5/26

Monkey

Attributes: Strength 4, Dexterity 4, Stamina 3

Willpower: 3

Health Levels: OK, -1, -1, -2, -2, -5, Incapacitated

Attack: Claw for four dice; bite for five dice

Abilities: Alertness 2, Athletics 2, Brawl 2, Climbing 5, Dodge 3, Stealth 1

Move: Walk/Run/Other: 5/10/10

Octopus/Squid
(normal: five to 10 feet long)

Attributes: Strength 4, Dexterity 3, Stamina 6
Willpower: 5
Health Levels: OK, OK, -1, -1, -3, -5, Incapacitated
Attack: Squeeze for four dice; bite for five dice (difficulty 8); mass grab (difficulty 7; each success after the first adds one die to squeeze damage Dice Pools as the creature wraps one more tentacle around its prey)
Abilities: Alertness 4, Brawl 3, Camouflage 3, Dodge 4, Intimidation 3, Stealth 3
Move: Walk/Run/Other: 0/0/20

Octopus/Squid
(huge: 30 to 80 feet long)

Attributes: Strength 8-10, Dexterity 3, Stamina 10
Willpower: 10
Health Levels: OK, OK, OK, OK, OK, -1, -1, -1, -3, -3, -5, -5, Incapacitated
Attack: Squeeze for eight to 10 dice; bite for nine to 11 dice (difficulty 7); mass grab (difficulty 6; each success after the first adds one die to squeeze damage Dice Pools as the creature wraps one more tentacle around its prey)
Abilities: Alertness 3, Brawl 3, Camouflage 2, Dodge 2, Intimidation 10, Stealth 2
Move: Walk/Run/Other: 0/0/25

Python

Attributes: Strength 2, Dexterity 3, Stamina 3
Willpower: 4
Health Levels: OK, -1, -1, -2, -2, -5, Incapacitated
Attack: Constrict for four dice per turn; bite for two dice
Abilities: Alertness 3, Brawl 3, Climbing 2, Dodge 3, Intimidation 2, Stealth 3
Move: Walk/Run/Other: 5/10

Rat

Attributes: Strength 1, Dexterity 2, Stamina 2-3
Willpower: 4
Health Levels: OK, -1, -5, Crunched
Attack: Bite for one die
Abilities: Alertness 2, Brawl 1, Dodge 3, Stealth 3
Move: Walk/Run/Other: 5/10

Rhino

Attributes: Strength 10, Dexterity 2, Stamina 8
Willpower: 3
Health Levels: OK, OK, OK, -1, -1, -1, -3, -5, Incapacitated
Attack: Gore for 10 dice; trample for 11 dice (no attack roll required — Dexterity + Dodge roll, difficulty 7, to avoid)

Abilities: Alertness 3, Brawl 3, Intimidation 2
Move: Walk/Run/Other: 10/20

Shark (tiger, blue)

Attributes: Strength 4, Dexterity 3, Stamina 5
Willpower: 3
Health Levels: OK, OK, OK -1, -1, -1, -2, -3, -5, Incapacitated
Attack: Bite for seven dice
Abilities: Alertness 3, Brawl 3, Dodge 3, Intimidation 3, Stealth 2
Move: Walk/Run/Other: 0/0/26

Shark (great white, hammerhead)

Attributes: Strength 7, Dexterity 3, Stamina 7
Willpower: 5
Health Levels: OK, OK, OK, -1, -1, -1, -1, -3, -3, -5, Incapacitated
Attack: Bite for nine dice
Abilities: Alertness 3, Brawl 2, Dodge 2, Intimidation 6, Stealth 2
Move: Walk/Run/Other: 0/0/28

Spider (large)

Attributes: Strength 1, Dexterity 3, Stamina 1
Willpower: 2
Health Levels: OK, -1, Splat
Attack: Bite for two dice plus venom for three to six additional dice (at one die per turn over three to six turns) if the target does not soak the bite. Damage from venom can also be soaked.
Abilities: Alertness 1, Athletics 1, Brawl 1, Dodge 3, Stealth 3
Move: Walk/Run/Other: 2/5

Tiger

Attributes: Strength 5, Dexterity 4, Stamina 4
Willpower: 3
Health Levels: OK, OK, -1, -1, -2, -2, -5, -5, Incapacitated
Attack: Claw for six dice; bite for seven dice
Abilities: Alertness 3, Athletics 2, Brawl 3, Dodge 3, Intimidation 5, Stealth 3
Move: Walk/Run/Other: 10/35

Wolf

Attributes: Strength 2, Dexterity 2, Stamina 3
Willpower: 3
Health Levels: OK, -1, -1, -3, -5, Incapacitated
Attack: Bite for four dice; claw for two dice
Abilities: Alertness 2, Athletics 1, Brawl 3, Dodge 1, Stealth 2
Move: Walk/Run/Other: 7/28

Normal Folks

I can't help feeling wary when I hear anything about the masses. First you take their faces from 'em, calling them the masses, and then you accuse 'em of not having any faces.

— J.B. Priestley

Priestley is right, of course; mages of all types regularly lump all un-Awakened folks into a group called "the Sleepers." Mages then upbraid each other (and the Sleepers, too) for forgetting that each person is a miracle in and of himself, each with a theoretically infinite potential for change. The jury has yet to return with a verdict on mass Awakening; is everyone a potential True Mage or is that an exclusive club? No one can say for sure, but there's been a war raging for the last 500 years over the possibility.

The un-Awakened present their mystick kin with a variety of challenges. If everyone can Awaken, what makes mages so special? Is it their job — their destiny — to help all people to Awaken (and Ascend), or is enlightenment each person's own responsibility? Should magickal powers be left to fate or should they be a reward for those who strive to master them? Is mass Awakening really a good idea? (Imagine the chaos of a world where everyone is a mage.) Or is it something that's best left to "those who can handle it"? Who decides who's worthy? There are some pretty unbalanced mysticks out there, and everybody seems to have different ideas about what it takes to be a "good mage." Does an "enlightenment gap" make it all right to treat Sleepers like cattle, as some mages do, or is that just selfish pride? These questions might go an eternity without answers, but any mage worth the name ponders them from time to time.

Pondering aside, it must be remembered that the majority — the very powerful majority — of humanity is made up of "just plain folks" — not mages, not vampires, not other weird shadow thingies. It stands to reason, then, that the majority of characters with whom the players' characters interact will belong to the un-Awakened masses. It's easy to mistake these normal people for pushovers when you have 5 dots in Forces, but just remember who keeps the electricity running in the Chantry.

The Storyteller should keep Sleepers in mind when directing a chronicle. They're more than just Paradox-keepers or window dressing; they're *people*. And every person is a walking storybook waiting to happen. Every

person passed on the street has endless stories to tell. Not all of them seem worth telling, but each person's story is like a private movie to him, a drama in which that human being is the star. In real life our tales intersect with other peoples' when we cross paths. In gaming, however, characters often cross swords instead of paths; most "encounters" in roleplaying games turn into battles of words or weapons. It doesn't have to be this way. While conflict is part of any exciting story, characters meet all kinds of people in the course of their lives. Those meetings, in turn, shape each character's future. One of the toughest habits for gamers to break is the tendency to regard all other people as potential enemies, allies or rewards. By investing the people whom characters meet with stories and motivations, we avoid stereotypes and deepen our tales and games.

What's My Motivation?

When an actor plays a part she does not live the character's life. What she lives is the agenda, the motivation, of her character. These agendas come from what the character wants, why she wants it and how she plans to get it. A woman who was abused by her father and fears more beatings reacts differently to a man's anger than does a woman whose parents were loving and who fears nothing. These reactions suggest the things that the abused woman wants from a man and the ways in which she tries to get them. These methods, in turn, shape the direction that her story takes. And this direction shapes the role the woman has in your chronicle.

Each person in the real world acts based on his or her needs, history and culture. If you understand these elements of a character's life and work with them when roleplaying, you create a more satisfying performance — one filled with life rather than recitation. Just as a good actor understands the forces that shape her character's actions, a player or Storyteller who understands her character's background makes her chronicle live just a little more. That's the heart of roleplaying — not the Attributes or Abilities, but the lives behind those Traits. And those lives are shaped by the motivations of those who live them.

So "What's my motivation?" isn't a joke, it's a great way to get a handle on characters. When the cops come sniffing around the Chantry, when the Virtual Adept's mom calls, when the Ecstatic's boyfriend questions her nonmonogamy, ask yourself what those people want, how they plan to get it and why they want it in the first place. Those characters' actions will have a lot more impact when you, the Storyteller, have their motivations, backgrounds and personalities in mind.

You don't have to write all the details down, though a few notes go a long way toward making a character more than just a name (e.g., "Jessica Bradly: 19-year-old Mass Com major, works at WVCW college radio, wants to be a DJ to impress folks. Low self-esteem. High energy. Slightly

irritating personality. Tries to figure out people she finds intriguing while making them notice her. Short brown hair, dark complexion, green eyes, stocky.") These simple notes refresh your memory between game sessions, too. Just remember that each person is a storybook. Think of the so-called Sleepers in those terms and you'll never have to fish for a story idea again.

Traits, Roles and Ordinary Folks

It's been said — pretty accurately — that a Storyteller shouldn't assign game statistics to something unless he intends to let characters kill it. Mages can certainly slaughter Sleepers, but there are myriad reasons (beyond morality) not to, so it's rather pointless to offer a range of Traits for all kinds of people when it won't come into play. When bullets do fly, however, the **Mage** rulebook's Appendix provides details on a variety of militant mortals; **Destiny's Price** lists Trait templates for a collection of hardcases in Chapter Five; and **Ascensions' Right Hand** contains rules and systems for creating custos, from Chantry butlers to mercenaries, and features a whole chapter about Storytelling such characters. In general, though, it's best to simply play the un-Awakened as people and leave the game mechanics for serious combatants.

Plots that feature the un-Awakened ought to be based on conventional events, at least as normal people perceive them. You might contrast the magickal antics of your mages with the everyday lives of the people around them (see *John Constantine: Hellblazer* for marvelous examples of this). Emphasize the ordinary in ordinary folks; these people, with rare exceptions, shouldn't babble about vampire clans or Technocratic plots. The less these people know about the Hidden World, the more dramatic the contrast is between their mortal lives and the melodramas of the Ascension War. And dramatic contrast fuels dramatic Storytelling.

One of the most intense games I ever ran (says the developer) involved two Storyteller characters who were friends of the heroes, a pair of police detectives who often helped the cabal. Over time these cops became vital parts of the chronicle, friends as well as background characters. When one of them was suddenly killed during a battle, the heroes (and their players) were shocked. When the other detective was implicated in an illicit affair with her dead partner, the shock deepened into anger. When the accusation seemed fishy, both the characters and the players put everything they had into finding the culprit: a would-be lover who manipulated evidence to force the surviving detective into a breakdown, and into his arms. The search and climax involved mundane research and roleplaying, no magick or superpowers; the final "battle" involved one gunshot, three punches and a broken arm. Nevertheless this story went down in chronicle history as one of the most

moving episodes in a three-year chronicle — a story propelled by ordinary people doing (fairly) ordinary things.

As we all know (I hope), people are more than punching bags and targets. The roles they play are as diverse as those described in the Animals section. un-Awakened folks can be *companions* (lovers, best friends, sidekicks, servants), *adversaries* (detectives, reporters, cult leaders, bureaucrats), *symbols* (runaways, homeless people, misers, fanatics) or *plot hooks* (ailing aunts, framed reporters, lost children, ruthless tycoons) with a little motivation and imagination.

The following is a list of roles that normal people can play in a chronicle. The roles described previously for animals can also be extrapolated for people.

Loved Ones

The people we love aren't always close at hand, yet they exert a powerful influence on our lives (good and bad). If something's going on with our parents, perhaps we feel the echoes, if only across the phone lines. Why should mages be any different?

It's easy to play mages in a vacuum; real stories come when that vacuum implodes. What happens if the Verbena's mother is robbed? If the Virtual Adept's father comes down with cancer? If the Man in Black hears his brother has run away from home? Let's expand past the family: The Hermetic adept meets an old school friend who's deep in debt. The Chorister finds her old priest has fallen from grace. The Progenitor runs across his old boyfriend during a drug-selling mission downtown. Who *wouldn't* act under such circumstances, especially if reality was at their command?

Love — of many different kinds — is one of the greatest human passions. Kings have surrendered crowns, mothers have entered burning buildings and prophets have given themselves over to fire and the cross for love. A mage who remains cold in the face of love has issues (or a really lousy player) to confront. And that confrontation results in stories of a different kind from those of combat. (See the **Wraith** supplement **Love Beyond Death** for a more in-depth look at love and roleplaying.)

Subjects of Salvation

It's easy to dismiss mortals as Sleepers or the masses. What happens when the masses have faces, when the Ascension War becomes more than just an excuse to fight? A mage — any mage — is still a human being. A dramatic meeting with another human being brings the humanity of those involved to light. The reasons for the war become clear, as do its stakes.

Let's take a particularly remote Hermetic, for example. He talks a lot about "the Ascension dream," but to him it's abstract. He lives in a Horizon Realm, surrounded by books, in a land without much Paradox. What does he know about reality when the only world he knows is his own? Now let's throw him a curve ball — a stowaway who hitches a ride on

a magick bus and finds herself trapped in the Hermetic's magick Realm. What's *her* take on things? Is she impressed? Disbelieving? Cynical? Overwhelmed? What's her background? Is she a sullen runaway ("Shove your magick, asshole!"), a starry-eyed believer ("This is what I always dreamed of!"), an opportunist ("What a great idea for a nightclub!"), a refugee ("Don't send me back there, *please!*")? Now how is this mortal pissant going to affect our Hermetic friend? What stories will the chemistry between them ignite? Two things are certain: Those stories won't be boring, and they won't leave either character feeling the way they did before.

Subjects of salvation come in many different forms, from the person who's just discovered magick to the mortal trapped between the cracks — folks in the crossfire, folks with agendas, folks just trying to survive in the world they know. The tales that arise from such conflicts force a mystick to assess his perspective, to come down from the throne and look the peasant in the eye. "What are you *doing*, Merlin, and who do you think you're doing it *for?*" It's hard to dodge that question when the questioner stands in your face and demands an explanation. (**Destiny's Price** covers salvation and the streets with uncensored detail.)

True Believers...or Not

And then there are the people who *do* believe, who understand the reality of magick even if they can't use it themselves. These folks are just a smoke screen for many players ("Hey, it's not vulgar if I convince them I'm a faith healer!"). This approach, while valid when deciding an Effect's difficulty roll, shortchanges both the story and the characters involved. What's it *like* to be a mage among believers — or among potentially hostile skeptics? Ask questions and answers follow.

True believers are just ordinary people. They want the same things and interact with the players' characters in the same ways. At heart, though, they hold some faith that accepts miracles. Those miracles might be scientific ("Isn't technology amazing?"), religious ("Yes, I trust in God's power."), primal ("That is simply the ways things *are*. Who can explain them?") or even media-generated ("I *know* it's true! I saw it on *20/20!*"). In any case, that faith allows a mage to employ a magickal style that fits the belief.

Where do these beliefs come from? Quite simply, they come from desire. People believe what they do because they *want* to, because it seems right, because it fills a need. True believers, then, are people with something to gain from a

mage. They don't simply let the character walk through their lives and strew miracles without asking for something.

Just as normals flock to someone who verifies their beliefs, they won't tolerate someone who violates their beliefs. Normal people who take this confrontation to extremes, particularly in regard to mages and other supernatural powers, are witch-hunters. They come in all kinds, from fanatics who protect their religions to atheists who refuse to accept anything outside the norm, even if it means destroying something wondrous. Mages have always had to step carefully around the un-Awakened for fear of the mob — there are worse things than Paradox.

The bloody hunts of the Renaissance and the quashing of "heretics" and "infidels" never really stopped, the tactics simply changed. A mage in modern society needs to watch his back for police, reporters and debunkers, as well as for hunters of a more informed variety, like members of the Inquisition or Arcanum. A mystick who lives in a dogmatic culture still feels the witch-fires at his back. Go ahead, use pagan Arts in Saudi Arabia. If the Paradox spirits don't nail you, the true believers will. Even if the people don't actively hunt a mystick, many avoid him: he's "odd," "not right," "insane" or perhaps "dangerous." The mage's meetings with the un-Awakened might take on a distinctly nasty flavor, and mortals have all sorts of ways of showing disapproval. ("Hey, Penny, didn't we pay the gas bill?")

Belief is the battlefield of the Ascension War, and in this case the battlefield lives and breathes. A mage looks upon its many faces every day. Each person he encounters — be it his best friend, his postman, his local sheriff or an IRS agent — plays a part in the shifting struggle for reality. By emphasizing that those people have needs and relationships that go beyond being a backdrop, you tap a vein of ideas that leaves hack-'n'-slash in the dust. .

Spirits

In whatsoever place ye may be, ye Spirits, who are invited to this feast, come ye and be ready to receive our offerings, presents and sacrifices, and ye shall have hereafter yet more agreeable oblations.

— The Greater Key of Solomon

Mages also deal with beings far more esoteric than mere humans or animals. While the "Hidden World" section of **Mage** (Chapter Nine) covers many of the systems you need when the Breathing Night descends on the characters, some questions remain unanswered. How does one run the Color Red? Or a zeitgeist time spirit? Or a summoned demon? It's easy to play an Umbrood being like a human being, but is it the best approach? Let's explore some different ways to portray spirits.

Roleplaying a spirit is unlike playing a character of any other sort. Humans and mages, even vampires and werewolves, if properly detailed, have personality quirks. Supernaturals aren't precisely "people" in the way we understand them, but they *are* people nonetheless. They're shaped by their environment, experiences and by their hopes and dreams. Each one is an individual, and each has the potential to evolve into something different, something shaped by time and circumstance.

Not so spirits.

Spirits are created with a definite role to play, and their very being reflects their purpose. Spirits dutifully (and usually gladly) accept their roles and act out their assigned offices without bothering to question why.

But can the leopard change its spots? Of course. The roll call of spirits that have forsaken their assigned duties to become the corrupt entities that skinchangers call *Banes* is long and depressing. By contrast, certain debased spirits have sloughed off their former wretchedness and have become reborn forces of harmony, like fallen angels in reverse. But change redefines a spirit, forming it into something more appropriate to its new nature. Apparently there just aren't any merciful Epiphlings of Pain or cowardly Bear-spirits. When an Umbrood's nature changes, its very *self* changes with it. Form follows function closely in the spirit world.

There are, of course, differences among spirits. Not all fire elementals manifest in quite the same way, and not all Tree-spirits speak with the same voice. However, these variations are usually fairly cosmetic. Even if two River-spirits interpret their tasks in different ways, they are still the very essence of River. That essence is something that manifests in every aspect of their personalities, from smooth, flowing speech — "Ah, yess, the answser you sseek can be found deep below" — to graceful gestures.

Playing the Unseen

Spirits that are roleplayed properly should seem quite alien to outsiders. Even Dreamspeakers, who are qualified authorities on the Unseen, are frequently surprised by the demands or questions of newly met spirits.

At the same time a spirit can be rather predictable when you know what its purpose is. Keep that spirit's role in mind when you play it, and don't let its personality or goals stray too far. Although a water elemental that is in love with a Fire-spirit might make an interesting encounter, a spirit like that is clearly the exception. That isn't to say that Umbrood are faceless drones; the more powerful a spirit is,

the more personality it manifests. Gafflings of a certain type blend together into a mass, while a single Jaggling might possess a subtle, unique personality quirk.

Be careful of anthropomorphizing spirits too much, though. Giving one of the Unseen a human face and personality kills the feel of the Umbra and its denizens. If spirits act like mages with a different rules framework, what's the point of having them at all? Spirits should be sublime, inscrutable and instinctive. They run on pure intuition. Only the greatest Umbrood have personal Natures or Demeanors, but deep personality traits still come from the spirits' essence. An Incarna of storms has a tempestuous, wild Nature, even if one of her aspects wears a Caregiver Demeanor. The lesser spirits simply act like what they are; a Lightning Gaffling says little, says it loudly, then leaves.

Spirits' single-mindedness can frustrate a mage who thinks she's the center of the universe. To a spirit everything is happening *right now*, and it has certain things that it should be doing. Unless a character has something to offer that would serve the Umbrood's purpose, or that might pose some sort of threat to it, the mage is unimportant. To a Fox-spirit, Fox is all. Rabbit is important because Rabbit is food. Bear is something that should be avoided. Your average group of mages probably doesn't have anything to do with Fox so Fox-spirits have nothing to do with the characters.

Where does this leave the Storyteller? Let's go back to motivation — in a spirit's case, its name. What is the Umbrood's purpose? The answer reveals a lot about how it acts. Now what is the face it wears, and why? That indicates how it reacts to certain people. Now let's stop there and go on instinct. Playing spirits can seem pretty tricky if we ask too many questions. Let the name of the spirit — its motivation, basically — guide the way you play it. Even if the Umbrood wears a mask, that mask depends on what the spirit is. A demon is a demon, even if she acts like a cheerleader on the surface.

Why?

It's an age-old question, really. The standard response when dealing with the spirit world, however, boils down to "Because."

Children's literature goes a lot further toward describing certain facets of the spirit world than the most complicated metaphysics do. One of the main reasons this is so is that spirit-stuff trades largely on faith. Rationales and scientific diagrams mean nothing in the Umbra — the spirit world simply *is*. Fox is tricky, so all Fox-spirits are tricky as well. In fact, they're all *Fox* — just expressed a little differently. True, the spirit world has a great many complications — and mages don't help matters by Naming everything they meet so that it all suits their worldview— but it's ultimately pretty simple.

What exactly do we mean by *Naming*? It's a simple yet ancient magical truth, one shamans, Hermetics and the Changing Breeds understand well. Put plainly, the principle of Naming means that a thing is what it is because someone Named it to be that way. Said "someone" is usually a divine being; God says "Let there be light," and there it is — light. The greatest power of magick, according some philosophies, is that it changes a name and thus changes the being. That's one of the reasons why magicians are feared and hated in many cultures — they usurp the power of God or the gods. (More on Naming in Chapter Six.)

Let's use Fox as an example. According to primal lore, the Creator Named the world, and all its creatures took form and purpose when they were Named. Fox became clever and quick when the Creator Named him Fox, because that was what the name Fox conveyed. To this day, some primal undercurrent in all foxes and Fox-spirits everywhere responds to the name Fox. Thus, Fox is Fox, he isn't Rabbit. He acts like we think a fox *should* act.

The high Umbrood, the gods of the astral Courts, wear dozens of masks over a single name. The "Trickster" spirit may be seen as Loki, Coyote, Mephisto or Dionysus, but he's still one spirit, even if he has many Umbrood Lords walking around in his place. The Hermetics, who delight in memorizing the endless ranks of the Umbrood Courts, recognize that each spirit is an aspect of a greater force. That force has a name granted to it by the Creator, and has many lesser names given to it by humans.

A great spirit's personality traits — its Nature and Demeanor — are simply extensions of its purpose. The Trickster concept isn't defined by Loki's quirks, as any werecoyote is glad to point out. Loki comes *from* Trickster. He's a face of Trickster that somehow gained enough personality and ability to be counted as a major spirit in his own right. It's a good idea, if a mage plans to deal with the spirit face-to-face, to know the various names and personalities that Trickster has. It's also a good idea, if you're the character's Storyteller, to know which face to present.

The Godling with a Thousand Faces

While simple spirits conform to their given names and look the same way to every mage who sees them, mighty spirits, such as the Umbrood Lords, often appear as exactly what the viewer expects to see. Say you're in the court of Raggadoom, Eighth Duke of Thunder. Whatever Raggadoom's true form is, visiting mages aren't likely to see it. If a mixed cabal gains audience with the duke, each member may well perceive him differently. The Akashic Brother from Hokkaido may see Raggadoom in the long-nailed form of Raiden, while the Norse-pagan Verbena may see old red-bearded Thor himself. The Comanche Dreamspeaker may note that Raggadoom has chosen the form of Thunderbird, while the Nuwisha tagging along for fun might see any or all of these images, depending on how

she tends to think of Thunder-spirits. The principle remains the same, but the exact shape tends to be defined by the viewer's expectations. Of course, the viewer might not understand precisely *why* she sees the spirit in such a fashion ("Uh, why does the Ocean-spirit look like a seaweedy J. Edgar Hoover?"), but there's usually some reason. Everything has a purpose in the spirit world, no matter what Hollow Ones may say.

Of course there's an exception to every rule. Some Umbrood display a certain amount of individuality that defies immediate explanation. Shudderskin Nell, for instance, appears in the same clammy, soft-boned form no matter who she speaks to. Most mages are at a loss to explain this sort of thing. Some Dreamspeakers, however, know that a living being can only stay so long in the Umbra before becoming disconnected from the physical world. These unusual spirits, they say, may well have once been mortals or mages whose strength of will held them together after they became beings made entirely of spirit. Where does this individual come from and what made it unlike Ancestor-spirits or similar Umbrood? Who knows? Perhaps that's the sort of thing that a person truly is without the concerns and limitations of flesh. (Aelida, Lady of Feathers, is a prime example of this type of spirit.) Of course, flesh defines humanity so much that nobody will probably ever know the truth.

And then there are the *zeitgeists*, the time spirits who embody the memories of ages. These arcane beings take their forms directly from human impressions. Say something happens on Earth. If it's dramatic enough it makes a tremendous residual energy impression (free Quintessence!). In most cases that Odyllic Force simply fades away. Occasionally, however, it takes shape as a time spirit. Such shapes, which vary tremendously from manifestation to manifestation, emulate the impressions that people have of an age. Few folks, even mages, understand the zeitgeists. Only Cultists of Ecstasy can commune with these odd beings (see **Cult of Ecstasy**, page 65).

Playing these many-faceted spirits can be challenging. You have a few different roleplaying options at your disposal, though. When in doubt, choose the one you feel most comfortable with.

• **The old-fashioned way:** "You all go off to meet Thor." By presenting the Umbrood with a single face, you reduce confusion and roleplaying time. Simply address everyone with one face and let it go at that. While this can be appropriate in certain situations — it would be odd to encounter Raiden at a hall dedicated to the Norse storm god — making spirits too familiar takes away from their unearthly nature.

• **Different voices:** "You, Imiko, see Lord Raiden, who rumbles as he speaks; Wulfgar, Thor appears before

you, his hammer set solidly on one shoulder...." Take everyone in turn and describe who and what they see. While this approach takes a bit more time and effort (and requires a bit of familiarity with mythic figures), it captures the shifting essence of the gods and underlines **Mage**'s undercurrent of "What is truth?"

• **The faceless god:** "The clouds swirl and suddenly divide. A huge lightning bolt slashes through the air and explodes at your feet. When the smoke clears you see a message from the spirits." This is the most atmospheric approach, and often the most effective one, especially in Earthbound stories. Something unearthly happens and it's up to the characters to figure out what it means.

• **All of the above:** When the cabal seeks answers at a hall, it receives a message written in lightning. When the characters pass into the Norse Court of Valhalla, they meet Thor. When they approach the storm god in Midrealm, they see his many different faces. This technique, while confusing, may be the best way to underline the epic Tapestry of reality — nothing is as absolute as it seems.

Bargaining with the Unseen

All spirits insist on certain protocols, regardless of their natures. Mages who would deal with them on friendly terms must follow the spirits' rules. While there are plenty of wizards who acquire enough power to *force* Umbrood to obey, those people learn to watch their backs. Shamans prefer to earn spirits' goodwill. Power is always a good thing to have — not every spirit listens to reason, you know — but a willing partner is more helpful than a collared slave.

The essentials of good bargaining are respect, knowledge and reputation. A mage without any of the above might as well write "loser" in big bright letters on his forehead. All spirits demand respect; some require downright abasement while others merely insist on manners and deference. Few spirits will do something for nothing. The practice of *chiminage* (long known by the Garou) covers bargains with spirits. In order to receive advice, assistance or answers, the mage must make a sacrifice, offer an appropriate gift or undertake some quest on the spirit's behalf. If the summoner seeks to bind the spirit into a sacred object, she must tender even greater chiminage. (Examples of the dues asked by totem spirits can be found in **Axis Mundi: The Book of Spirits**.)

Spirits like to go forth into the material world, if only for short periods of time, and love to be appeased and flattered. Many of them have allies in need of assistance or tasks in need of completion. By offering to help with such chores a person can ask for a favor or two in return. Providing a vessel for Gauntlet-crossing is the best (and riskiest) way to get on a spirit's good side; some shamans and voodooists offer themselves while Infernalists and some Hermetic magi offer simulated flesh-creations or innocent victims for possession. A mage with Spirit 3 or 4 can awaken

a spirit in an object (see **Awaken the Inanimate**), offer a mortal host (see **Create Fetish** and **Free the Mad Howlers**) or simply bring the Umbrood across (see **Breach the Gauntlet**). An especially brave or trusting shaman can offer herself up for a Skinride (see **Wraith: The Oblivion**, the **Living Bridge** Spirit Effect or the Possession Charm), although she should be careful how she extends the invitation, and to whom. Some spirits really *shouldn't* be allowed into the material world, and a mage will often be held accountable if she lets things get out of hand.

Knowing what you're doing when dealing with spirits is vital; a few dots in the Spirit Lore Trait presented in **The Book of Madness'** Appendix should be standard for shamans and conjurers. Knowledge includes the proper rites for spirit-summoning, forms of address (Hint: Be nice), tokens of respect and things to beware of. Acquiring such lore is one of a mage's greatest tests — you can learn only so much without hands-on experience.

Once a mage has been around a while, the spirits learn her name and deeds. A reputation can be a real help or a real problem, depending on who you are, what you've done and who you're addressing. If Raven knows you've been kind to birds and have dealt fairly with other spirits, he'll be more likely to help you than if you had a name like Loreena Owlkiller and a reputation of shutting spirits up in fetishes. Power helps, no doubt about it; a mage with Spirit 4 gains a certain amount of respect from the Invisible Ones no matter how she acts. But even so, a smart medium values her connections and treats the spirits fairly and well. A careless mage's sins can literally come back to haunt her in more ways than the obvious.

Hermetic Arts and black magic work on spirits in a more adversarial way than shamanism does. A wizard coerces Umbrood beings to do his will through combinations of sacrifices, incantations, bargains and threats. Although any smart magus maintains a tone of respect in his dealings, most conjurations include a protection pentacle, binding incantation, bribe and a threat. While these protocols can be very effective when a character wants something done (see "Umbrood Protocols" in **Order of Hermes**), they tend to leave a bad taste in whatever passes for a spirit's mouth. Wizards are good at ordering spirits around, but they're not very good at making friends with them.

Dreamspeakers and other wise shamans maintain good relationships with the Umbrood — relations which have bred affinities with some Paradox spirits. Unlike other willworkers, the spirit-cousins can convince a reality sentinel to go away, to "write off" an infraction or to bust someone else. This talent depends on three things: A successful Charisma + Spirit Lore roll (difficulty 5 + the spirit's Rage); good, clever roleplaying ("No wait, it wasn't me, it was *him*...."); and an absolutely impeccable reputation for solving problems without vulgar magick. The Paradox spirit, like any cop, might let you off the hook once,

but won't ignore repeat offenses or excuses. A Dreamspeaker who rips open the Gauntlet, brings a dragon through and then suffers a backlash isn't going to be very successful if Wrinkle comes calling. Gods help the shaman who convinces a Paradox spirit to punish an innocent person; word *will* get around. The results won't be pleasant.

(Remember that placating Paradox spirits doesn't work with other forms of Paradox backlash. A careless shaman is just as likely to get blasted out of existence by a sudden explosion as is the Hermetic wizard with the itchy spellbook finger.)

Sample Spirits

The Umbrood fall into many of the roles we've already discussed, from adversaries to familiars to companions to loved ones to symbols. The forms in which they appear may seem alien, but in the end they are inspiration for the same types of stories as animals and humans are. Spirits can hate, love, question and confound mages just as mortals can. Their manifestations — a quaking of the ground, a stirring of the breeze, a sudden feeling of *clarity*, as if the whole world just snapped into focus — make a different impression than mortals do, but deep down spirits are just other types of characters. See "Creating Mood and Atmosphere" in **Mage** (page 148), and the Storyteller Hints for demons (page 104) and the Three Worlds (page 121) in **The Book of Madness** for more detailed suggestions for practical spirit storytelling.

The following Umbrood join an impressive list of published spirits (see **Werewolf: The Apocalypse, Axis Mundi: The Book of Spirits, The Book of Madness,** the **Mage** rulebook and **Beyond the Barriers: The Book of Worlds** for starters). Descriptions of time-spirits (zeitgeists) can be found in **Cult of Ecstasy**. The best spirits, however, are the ones your players can't read about. They're the ones you create.

Glitterfly (Joy Epiphling)

Willpower 3, Rage 3, Gnosis 8, Power 20

Charms: Airt Sense, Cleanse the Blight, Influence

Image: These tiny Epiphlings of Joy are all but invisible and untouchable, even in the Umbra. A Joy-spirit seems to be a minute shimmer of intense color, and a faint glimmer of something beautiful from the viewer's past. When a Gaffling of Joy speaks, it almost croons or hums hypnotically, coupling speech with Influence. If someone actively tries to communicate with a spirit, it becomes excited and energetic, broadcasting an uplifting sort of exuberance that can wash the fatigue from a weary mage's limbs.

Joy-spirits are rare. They seldom appear in great numbers save in truly extraordinary circumstances. Some magi like to bind these Epiphlings into fetishes in their Chantries, retreating to the spirits' warmth whenever the world hangs

heavy on their shoulders. Unfortunately joy does poorly in captivity; fireflylike Epiphlings often burn themselves out struggling against their prison walls. Many Dreamspeakers consider it a crime to compel service from these fragile Umbrood, and refuse to associate with anyone who is selfish enough to try to "own" a Joy-spirit.

Achlodoch (Madness-Spirit)

Willpower 4, **Rage** 7, **Gnosis** 7, **Power** 25

Charms: Airt Sense, Blighted Touch (madness), Influence, Materialize, Mind Speech, Shapeshift

Image: *What* image? There isn't any solid look or feel to spirits of insanity. Some of them resemble wailing clouds of fog with occasional bursts of color deep inside, like heat lighting on an overcast night. Others take the forms of humanlike apparitions, and always speak articulately and reasonably with strangers.

Achlodochs make for bizarre encounters, and they're naturally drawn to mages in Quiet. These spirits are known to take material form, playing the roles of hobgoblins in a madman's dementia. Curiously enough, they rarely appear in the company of Marauders; perhaps the Mad Ones are too much like them to be of any real interest. A few off-kilter mages enjoy unleashing Madness-spirits on Sleepers as a form of rude enlightenment; these perverts usually meet appropriate fates of their own. Over the course of extended associations, the innate nature of the mad Epiphlings affects mischievous mages. The results are sometimes amusing, but usually terrifying.

Shrike (Pain-Spirit)

Willpower 3, **Rage** 8, **Gnosis** 5, **Power** 30

Charms: Airt Sense, Armor, Possession, Tracking

Image: Cutting, slashing, ripping, biting, stabbing, shredding, abrading — these bundles of sharp projections whirl through the Umbra like masses of arc welded shuriken. They only stop occasionally to unfold like metal hedgehogs and linger over a hapless plaything. The average Pain-spirit isn't as malicious as most might see it; it doesn't hate its victims or lash out in anger. However, pain is its business, and like all spirits it's quite devoted to its task. Shrike Gafflings don't have enough personality to enjoy or be indifferent to their work; they simply go about it, which frightens many mages more than wanton cruelty might. (Another form of Pain-spirit, one that's not quite an Epiphling, can be found in Grandfather Thunder's Brood in **Axis Mundi: The Book of Spirits**.)

Some sadomasochistic Cultists of Ecstasy call these things in to oversee high rituals, or bind them into pieces of equipment. However, only the truly dedicated do this more than once — the intensity of a Shrike's attentions can break down mental boundaries quite nicely, but a mage's endurance is, after all, only human.

The Reaper (Death Epiphling)

Willpower 10, **Rage** 10, **Gnosis** 10, **Power** 300 or so

Charms: Practically anything appropriate. The Reaper tends to exhibit Airt Sense, Appear, Armor, Blast Flame, Influence ("*Go away*"), Lightning Bolts, Mind Speech, Reform and Tracking. It also has access to a number of specialty Charms that have surprised more than one unwary mage.

Image: You probably don't need to be told what this spirit looks like. Westerners have seen Death with the same fleshless face for centuries. This mighty Epiphling, practically an Incarna, embodies its image by taking the form of the classic Grim Reaper of superstition. The rustle of a black shroud, the stale smell of grave earth and old bones, the flash of light from a scythe-edge so sharp its wounds never so much as sting — that's the Reaper.

This mighty Death-spirit is difficult to compel or bind. It's strong enough to resist the calls of all but the most talented archmages, and such willworkers don't find it worth the effort. Contrary to popular folk tales, the Reaper can't release the ghosts of loved ones from death — that's just not part of its province. Life is life, and death is death; the Reaper is just the spiritual embodiment of the part in between. No mage has yet to encounter Death while it performs its duty, and so it's difficult to tell if the spirit actually does appear to collect certain souls at the time of death. (Most mages dismiss this as just a little too superstitious for their tastes, anyway.) The spirit's business is its own, and it doesn't discuss such with mortals. A mage is most likely to encounter the Reaper if the mortal wanders the astral Realms of Death (in which case Death could appear to gauge the importance of the mage's business and perhaps evict her). The Reaper can also be encountered in the presence of death so widespread and pervasive that spirits flock to the scene of their own will.

The Euthanatos acknowledge the Reaper as one of the most powerful Death Epiphlings in existence, and offer it a respectful nod or salute whenever they cross its path. The spirit doesn't usually return the favor, though. Like all Epiphlings, the Reaper has little personality beyond that with which the concept of Death instills. It is neither malicious nor benevolent — it simply *is*. Its attention is a difficult thing to attract, and no amount of Gaiman comics, Pratchett novels, *ouija* boards nor black candles is likely to convince it that a person is worth talking to. Nor does the spirit have any particular love for chess, although it has apparently learned to play (and very, very, very well, if you must know).

Although a couple of mages have tried to bind the Reaper into a fetish, such attempts have always failed — dismally. Cooler heads advocate giving up — if you need a Death fetish, best you go pick a Gaffling to inhabit it. Besides, even if somebody could bind the Reaper into a physical object, chances are the bearer would die shortly afterward. A Death-spirit that powerful can't help but flood a fetish with so much death Resonance that some would leak out and stick to the object's owner. Not a pleasant thought.

Chapter Five: Alternate Chronicle Settings

"What do you see?"

Marcus gazed across the cloudy moors, sizing up the figure that stumbled through the mist. Damned big, it was, and horned. The clutch in his chest was colder than the bone-whipping wind. "I think it is the Devil," he replied to his companion. "I told you the seance was a mistake."

"Nonsense." The older man blew hotly upon his cupped hands, warming the leathery flesh. Mist exploded around his fingers like sudden smoke. "The seance was a diversion, nothing more. Let the spoiled brats think we called up their Satan. I know for a fact that our pursuer is of far frailer stock than any Infernal kin."

The young acolyte grimaced. "And how, pray my friend, would you know the Dark King's guise?"

"Marcus," chided the wizard, "I've taken tea in the chambers of the damned. This is no devil. Believe me," he said, his eyes gone suddenly bright and glowing, "I know devils when I see them, well enough."

Mage: The Ascension sets a magickal battle for reality in the gritty Gothic-Punk milieu. Yet mages don't just confine themselves to urban life, black clothes and body piercing. They've been around since time immemorial, and they don't all live in the big city. This section provides you with new setting ideas and resource materials for "alternative" chronicles. Change is good; defy the paradigm.

Locales

A good alternative setting should spark your imagination, and your players' as well. Finding one is easy once you think about it — any number of stories can leap from a single setting. To find an option, send your imagination spinning across the possibilities, then ask yourself a few simple questions: How do I get the characters there? What will they do? Who will they meet? And what's at stake when they do? Anywhere you can think of, from an ancient mountain village to a futuristic Realm, can be a background to adventure. The city is only the beginning....

Rural

Moving from the city to the country opens up new possibilities. What a shame about that lovely old farm

sitting in the path of the new freeway! Lucky that the owners have some special "friends," isn't it? Friends that won't let the bulldozers through without a fight....

Some characters, like Verbena, Dreamspeakers, Sons of Ether and most Nephandi, prefer hidden, simple lives to the clutter and cluster of cities. Rural tales come naturally to them. Other mages, like Technocrats or Hollow Ones, seem out of place in the country. Naturally, the shock of contrast conjures up its own share of stories for them. In short, then, a rural setting is an ideal change of pace, with its own sets of values, textures and moods.

A rural setting introduces a whole new culture to your chronicle. Here, the emphasis is on the value of land and a simple lifestyle rather than on a hot nightlife and nonstop action. Boring? Not at all! Look at the importance of land in sagas of the Old West: People *died* in conflicts over property. Alliances and wars resulted from rural disputes over land rights. And then there are good old-fashioned values, values that rise from a need for stability. Conservatism, hospitality, privacy, responsibility, a helping hand to those in need and a kick in the pants to freeloaders — such values rise in places where nature promises nothing, where aid comes only from your friends. "Country folk" have a fierce pride and loyalty to the land no "city dweller" could comprehend. They find inner strength and power from the simple beauties of golden fields and sunsets over dark ponds. They fall asleep listening to faraway train whistles, to closer songs of frogs and katydids. To them, the land is a living thing, sometimes benevolent, occasionally hostile.

Think about *why* your characters are in a rural setting. Maybe one of them owns property out in the country; let's say the Verbena inherited his family farm or the Etherite discovered his mentor's secluded lab. Perhaps the characters fled to a bolt hole in the country; after all, Technocrats kinda stand out in the back country. Maybe the place is full of resources, magickal or otherwise; the city isn't a great place for farm animals, and old stone circles retain their power when the land around them is left alone. Think about these issues *before* you toss the characters into agrarian bliss. As always, make sure the players are enthused about the idea, too. For further inspiration, see **The Book of Chantries**; Chapter Four details a Verbena farming coven where life is anything but dull!

Three common tales arise from the rural chronicle. First, there's the "city to country" plot: The characters have to leave the city and move out to the country. Maybe they're looking for inner peace or outer sanctuary or just some breathing room. Stories might involve urban characters trying to adjust to rural life, dealing with their nosy but well-meaning neighbors or escaping town gossip. A second plot explores the "wonders of nature": The characters spend a lot of time communing with the land in search of their own identities. You can use this plot to run primal scenarios involving animal encounters, personal trials on the land and so on. Finally, there's "the horror of nature" plot: Here, the rural culture is anything but friendly, and the mages suffer from nasty neighbors and Mother Nature's scorn. The

possibilities range from *Deliverance*-style chases to creepy horror or natural disasters. What's the power of a mage worth against a twister? What if the new Chantry rests atop a Native American burial ground? What if angry spirits will do *anything* to wreak vengeance? So much for "little coven on the prairie."

You can draw from dozens and dozens of television shows and movies for inspiration. Most of them are pretty corny, though *Baby Boom* is relatively tolerable. Tom Brown's books, such as *The Tracker and the Search*, are enjoyable essays about woodland survival, and Jack London's tales balance reverence for the outdoors with respect for nature's fury. Vera and Bradford Angier's *At Home in the Woods* is an engaging tale of an urban couple determined to make a fresh start in the wilderness. S.E. Hinton's *The Outsiders* (the book and the movie) shows the power of rural life's transformation on city folk, and Spider Robinson's *Time Pressure* is a science-fiction book in a similar vein.

Other sources portray nature as more terrifying than enlightening. H.P. Lovecraft's collection of stories in *The Dunwich Horror* is a must read for any "horror-of-nature" scenarios; *Deliverance* is essential viewing material. Sherlock Holmes once commented that the countryside is much more insidious than the city because crimes and violence can easily lie hidden. Stephen King underlines the point in many of his books and stories of rural life, such as "Children of the Corn," *Cujo*, *Misery* and "The Body." If terror's what you're after, design tales that make the ordinary aspects of rural life grab the characters, then slowly strangle them in their own entrails.

The best sources for "wonders-of-nature" scenarios, however, are your own experiences. Spend some time in the wilderness and get a feel for the land. Do some hiking or camping and immerse yourself in the isolation. Visit a small town, eat some lunch in the local diner and talk to the people — *politely*. Find out when their families settled there and how they make a living. Many folks will be pleased to answer the right questions, especially if you explain you're doing some research (don't mention gaming — it's not well thought of). If this is a bit too much fieldwork for you, watch some episodes of *Northern Exposure*, a show also worth watching for its "urban to rural" plots. Many cable channels feature nature and travel programs every night; if these don't give you story ideas, you're in the wrong line of work. For a multicultural view, *Learning from Ladakh* is a fine educational film about a rural community in central Asia coping with modernization. Finally, you can find some great anthropological accounts of nature, animals and the human experience published by Thor Heyerdahl, Jane Goodall and Dian Fossey. These folks have spent good portions of their lives in the wild, and their observations can inspire the more couch-bound Storyteller to explore the world with more than just his imagination.

Exotic

What's "exotic," exactly? Paris? Las Vegas? Tibet? Try any or all of the above. Any place that's outside your troupe's usual experiences can be an exotic setting for adventure and intrigue. If you live in rural Idaho, New York City might be considered

exotic; if you're used to stories set in the continental U.S., distant places like Rio, Hawaii or the Sahara Desert can break up the monotony, adding an air of unpredictable mystique. Deep down, most people love to explore the unknown.

Exotic chronicles can work in one of two ways: The players may be natives of the area; the setting is ordinary to the characters, but exotic to the troupe. Alternately, the characters could be globe-trotters, exploring different cultures; here, the players and characters both find the setting exotic. Most players find it easier to get into the second option — it's not an easy thing to adopt an Arabian mindset if you're a Jewish kid from Brooklyn; the challenge offers some great roleplaying experiences to those who can handle it, though. If your characters are as unfamiliar with the lay of the land as their players are, you can take advantage of that novelty. Watch the fun as the cabal puzzles out strange customs, takes in the sights and gets lost at all the wrong times....

Mage is an international game. As the rulebook says, *anyone* can be a mage. The Awakened don't tend to stay home forever, either; unlike the entrenched Kindred, mysticks wander across this vast reality, finding steps along the Path wherever they go. It's easy enough to send an American cabal from the Nevada deserts to the Himalayan peaks, from Rome's catacombs to the African Congo. Perhaps the player characters are members of a war cabal, seekers on a quest or agents of some greater power. They can travel by mortal means — aircraft, ships, trains, feet — or mystick ones — portals, Correspondence jumps, spirit travel, etc. Each passage has its own complications, of course: Customs officials, cash (or lack thereof), and interference from Technocrats, vampires or other Awakened beings creates headaches for the jetsetting mage, while magickal routes prove unreliable, unpredictable or Paradox-prone. Planes crash, trains get delayed, cars break down, wars break out. Maybe the magickal curtain between Russia and the rest of the world (see **Rage Across Russia**) still stands; perhaps that jump portal was a one-way trip. What do you do if you're stuck in Beirut when fighting breaks out *again*? What if the Gauntlet's too thick to cross in London and you're trapped on the side with all the spirits and ghosts? You have a million and one ways to complicate travel if you want to use them, and what's a good story without a little complication?

Culture clashes are all kinds of fun, too. Films like *The Gods Must be Crazy*, *Midnight Express* or *City Slickers* show what can happen when folks from one place run headlong into people from another. Differences in languages, manners, religion, perception or hygiene can turn a simple situation into a desperate one. A Christian Chorister's going to have problems if she gets dogmatic in Saudi Arabia; a doped-out Ecstatic better have a **Teleport** spell ready if he plans to pass through Turkey. Most cultures — including our own — aren't forgiving about mistakes. Ask the Japanese kid who was blown away for knocking on an American's door — if you can. The complications can range from the tragic to the hilarious, depending on how you choose to run things. Some characters might, like James Bond, fit in anywhere without

trouble; on the whole, though, it's often more fun to ruffle their feathers than see them breeze across the world.

Complications are great; too many of them, though, can grind the game to a halt. Players like to be challenged, but hate to be frustrated. Make sure they have something to hold onto when the characters enter a strange land, whether that be a friendly contact, a wise familiar or a talking crystal. If you want the folks in your cabal to come from a strange location, make up a few culture note handouts so the players won't feel completely lost. If the characters are new to the area, keep the players in the dark and reveal details as they come. A middle option — introducing a native character or a Storyteller guide — allows you to emphasize the setting's strangeness without paralyzing your players. It always helps to have someone who knows the language.

Obviously, it helps if you're familiar with the setting yourself. Maybe you've done a lot of traveling or have lived somewhere most of your players have never seen. Working from what you know is often easier than doing a lot of research. If foreign cultures fascinate you, then by all means have a ball. Maybe you've never actually been to Japan, but your hunger for things Japanese has supplied you with a trove of information. You'll need all the help you can get — the whole point of setting a story in a distant land is novelty. It's not a change if the folks in Tokyo act just like the folks in Atlanta, and it's kind of a disservice to the setting, too. Work the setting for all the atmosphere you can muster; describe, describe, describe (see **Mage**, pages 148 and 154).

Films, travelogues, guidebooks and experienced friends are great sources for location descriptions. Emphasize culture and flavor over mapwork; it's more important to capture the feel of a place than to pinpoint locations. If you have the time, get some traveler phrasebooks like Berlitz guides and Lonely Planet Survival Kits — they're cheap, easy to read and packed with lots of helpful information. Several cable channels and PBS stations feature weekly and even daily travel shows; watch a few of these and you'll never want to run a local chronicle again! Atlases tend to be dry; you can find a place, but you won't get much of a feel for it. Most roleplaying lines have area supplements of varying degrees of quality; the best ones give a good overview of the area and offer insights on the culture; Victory Games' old *James Bond 007* series had especially good location sourcebooks. For World of Darkness details, see **A World of Darkness Second Edition**, **The Book of Crafts**, **The Chaos Factor** and the various by Night, Rage Across, Necropolis, Immortal Eyes and Dark Kingdom series.

The conditions of reality are not always the same. The "Magickal Geography and Influence" section in the **Mage** rulebook (pages 184-186) describes the boundaries of "coincidence" and the styles a mage can use to her advantage worldwide. This same section can come in handy if you choose to run a historical chronicle, too; just apply similar conditions — wild Chinese magick would be appropriate in an Age of Heroes chronicle, while computers would be vulgar — and use it as needed.

The Otherworlds

If you play **Mage**, you'll end up in the Umbra. Seekings, spirit quests, Web jaunts — all of these things pull willworkers into other Realms. These Otherworlds are far too numerous to detail here; the concept that reality is infinite finds Exhibit A in the lands beyond the Gauntlet.

Reality, in **Mage**, is flexible. Adventures in the Otherworlds are as flexible as you want to make them. If you've wanted to run crossover stories with other fantasy worlds — Middle Earth, Oz, the *Star Wars* galaxy, and so on — here's your chance. If you want to make a point about the Earth, you can create a Realm to spell it out for your troupe. If you want to throw reality as we know it out the window and indulge in madness from Kafka to Kricfalusi, the Realms are your license to do so. Just be sure that when the tale is done, your characters return to the real world. The war for reality has many battle-grounds, but the prize is the Earth — at least for now.

Mage, **Wraith** and **Werewolf** offer a wealth of source material for the Worlds Beyond; the key reference, **Beyond the Barriers: The Book of Worlds**, covers travel, rules, atmosphere and crossover possibilities. Other books, like **Umbra: The Velvet Shadow**, **The Book of Chantries** and **Digital Web** (both collected as **Mage Chronicles I**), **Horizon: Stronghold of Hope** and **The Book of Madness**, explore different Realms and their inhabitants. Don't be shy if — and when — the Otherworlds enter your tale. The only limits there are your imagination and your troupe's intentions.

Historical

Wouldn't it be nifty to watch the final victory of Tokugawa Ieyasu? Or the defeat of the Spanish Armada? How about the horrors of the Garou Impergium? Or the sack of ancient Troy? While they require more research and world-building than simple locales do, historical chronicles offer a creative change of pace, and take advantage of player interest and expertise, as well. Chances are you have at least one history buff in your group! Many Storytellers hesitate to create historical chronicles because of the characters might change history. Don't worry about this; instead, immerse the characters in the period's flavor. It can be a heady brew indeed.

First, before you do anything else, read thoroughly through the timelines and histories given in **Mage: The Ascension** (Chapter Three), **Horizon: The Stronghold of Hope** (Chapter Two), or **The Fragile Path** (Chapter One). Familiarize yourself with the status and form magick takes in your chosen time period. How will it affect the characters' willworking? In ancient times, people believed in miracles; certain kinds of magick were easy for mysticks but hard for Technomancers. Then there are enemies to consider; many mages died in the fires of the Inquisition. Think about the forces behind the major conflicts: Vampires, werewolves, other mages and even faeries make nasty enemies. Make sure your opponents suit the setting — there weren't any HIT Marks in feudal Japan, for example, but the hedge magicians weren't pushovers. Think about the societies —
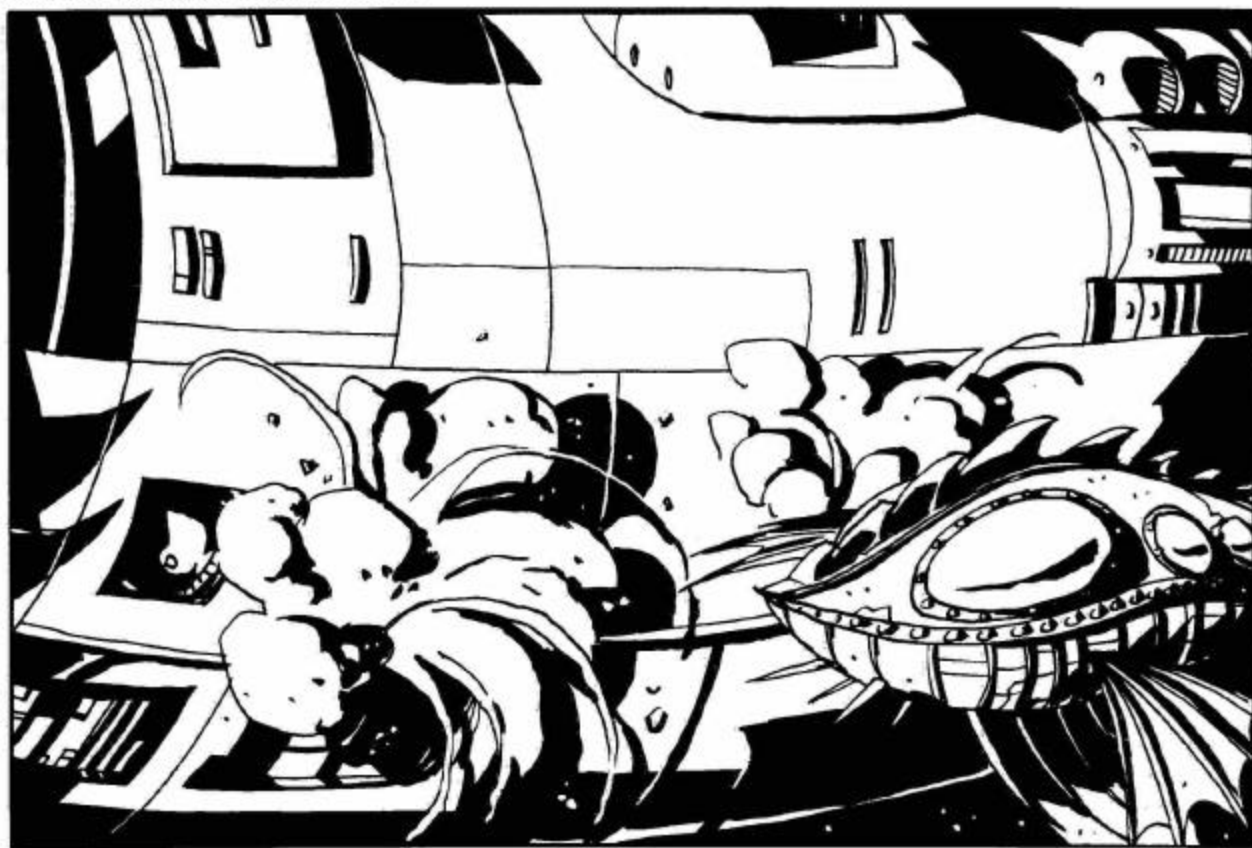
magickal and mundane — and about the effects they have on your setting. History is more than the passage of years.

Then consider how the characters arrive: Is your chronicle a period piece, or has some event created a time rift? The attitudes your players favor will spring from their characters' backgrounds. A modern mage would be horrified at the casual cruelty of Renaissance Italy, but a wizard of the times would simply shrug at the way things are. Gender roles, faith, manners, social standing, language, even literacy vary tremendously from time to time. It's a good idea to pass out a short "period notes" sheet if you're running a period game, to let your players know what is and isn't "proper." If the cabal arrives from modern times, be prepared to confound the characters with social mores and culture shocks. Our modern world is the product of a million years of change.

If you're concerned about players altering the world, ask yourself whether the player characters could *really* accomplish anything to stem the tide of history. If not, proceed apace, avoiding crisis points like the burning of Joan of Arc. If you *must* include certain historical events, contrive things so that the cabal cannot intervene. If Joan of Arc must die, work the chronicle's events to impede her rescue: a storm on the English Channel, a surprise battle with bandits or Joan's own self-sacrifice could undo the best magicians' plans. Don't be afraid to award ingenuity, though; if players come up with a sound plan to save Joan, don't stop them merely for the sake of history. You can make their lives difficult in other ways, and can revamp your chronicle timeline quicker than you can regain your players' lost trust. Finally, be clear to your players about your feelings on changing history. If you're flexible enough to consider an "alternate" world history, let them know. If, on the other hand, you don't want major events changed, advise your players from the onset (then expect them to ignore the warning).

Before beginning, do a little research; timelines and maps are essential to most historical chronicles. Start with a trip to the local library. Historical surveys or textbooks are good ways to get an overview of the chronicle's time period. Most general histories have good bibliographies for in-depth studies, and include maps and timelines to compare events worldwide. Take advantage of historical novels and films, too; many cable channels have historical specials and travel shows that can give you a "feel" for your setting. A few books you shouldn't be without include: *The People's Chronology* by James Trager, Rand McNally's *Atlas of World History*, *Cosmos* by Carl Sagan and *A History of World Societies* by Robert McKay. *Connections*, James Burke's television show and book, is a fantastic piece that links together world history, science and art. Finally, don't forget that other games often have great historical resource materials (see below). *GURPS Timeline* from Steve Jackson Games is particularly useful, and many of that company's sourcebooks provide an inspirational boost to the harried Storyteller.

Ultimately, remember that the story is more dramatic than the time and place. An historical setting should inspire good stories, and vice versa. No matter how intricate your setting, it's not worth spit if you don't have a good tale to share.

Prehistoric Times

Most historians place "prehistory" between 10,000 B.C. to 5000 B.C., the time before civilizations arose in Egypt, Mesopotamia, East Africa and the Indus Valley. Prehistoric societies organized themselves around hunting and gathering; they didn't fight magickal wars, they fought for daily survival. Most tribes wandered until advances in agriculture allowed them to build permanent settlements. These, in turn, provided for the emergence of written languages and more sophisticated cultures.

Magic and spirituality were very important to prehistoric peoples. Archaeological evidence of burial sites shows that even Neanderthal tribes had some concept of an afterlife; their graves contained food, flowers and simple tools for use in the hereafter. The caves of Lascaux and elsewhere show an appreciation for both the aesthetic and the fantastic. On the other hand, the period lacked "landmarks"; there weren't any "Spheres," no Traditions, no Technocracy. To the people of this world, the Umbra and the material world are as one. Consider prehistory a clean slate on which to write mystickal history.

As a Storyteller, center your chronicle on basic themes: living and dying, building artifacts, surviving winter's onslaught, fighting huge animals, and so on. In this more primal time, ask yourself how magick functions and how it appears. Is magick more widespread? How do willworkers use it? How does the power of belief affect magick's form and limits? What kinds of foci exist? Is magick a part of daily life, or is it reserved for dire occasions? How do the un-Awakened treat willworkers? Does everyone live together or do mysticks keep themselves apart? How do people of this time use language or share customs? What superstitions do they have? Remember, nobody sits around pondering metaphysics and Hermetic philosophy! Spirits are the *real* reality.

Prehistoric stories revolve around finding food, shelter and the necessities of life. Players will find the game more interesting if their characters have other people to care for — children, the elderly, even the entire village. Antagonists come in many forms: prehistoric animals, rival tribes, natural (and spiritual) forces, even monsters. Imagine a struggle with angry local spirits in a world where the Umbrood have the upper hand. Or a scenario fighting the "advanced" civilization from the neighboring valley — a tribe with better weapons or powerful magicks. How can the player characters defeat their enemies and grab these new discoveries? How might they compromise in a world where that concept is hard to grasp? If you include **Werewolf: The Apocalypse** in your setting, there are the War of Rage and the Impergium to consider. Can you imagine battling genocidal Garou for survival? For Storytellers and players interested in the spirit world, consider an ongoing conflict with one of the setting's mythic forces, like the Great Serpent or Buffalo Spirit. In this ancient age, everyone's a Dreamspeaker to some degree; the Technocrats, however, trace their beginnings to the first toolmasters. How might those two groups relate? Or prevail?

Magick is wild and unpredictable in this unshaped world. Difficulties might go as low as Highest Sphere + 1/+ 2/+3, and some spells (like Level One Spirit Effects) might succeed under the Automatic Success rule (**Mage**, page 81). All primal magicks would be considered coincidental, though science (even magickal science) would be totally vulgar, or even unworkable. Paradox is simple — things go boom or the spirits rage — but rare. The "simple" Spheres — Forces, Life, Matter, Prime and Spirit — would be easy to use, while more esoteric ones — Correspondence, Entropy, Mind and Time — might demand higher difficulties or be out of reach altogether. It's hard to use things you don't understand, and prehistoric mages are simple folk. Most mysticks use foci simply because it hasn't occurred to them that they don't have to; the mighty Wyck, however, understand that magick flows from the will, and may work their Arts without anything more than that. Perhaps that's why they were so revered — they transcended what was "possible" and taught others to do the same.

Mysticks are always different from the people around them, and they share common experiences across all periods of time. Chapter Two of **Mage: The Ascension** describes some elements common to all eras of magick: Awakening, visionquests, enlightenment and temptation. Use these "landmarks" to guide your players. **Verbena**, **Cult of Ecstasy** and **Dreamspeakers** elaborate on the tools and practices of primal magick; **Werewolf: The Apocalypse**, **Axis Mundi: The Book of Spirits** and **Garou Saga** provide many suggestions for primitive mood and flavor. Finally, **Ways of the Wolf** and **Beyond the Barriers: The Book of Worlds** present sample stats for prehistoric beasts.

"Real-world" references — good ones, anyway — are harder to find. Jean Auel, author of *Clan of the Cave Bear* (also a film) and *Valley of the Horses*, has written the most accessible tales of prehistoric culture. Melvin Konner's *The Tangled Wing* offers a more academic yet fascinating look at the development of intelligence, spirituality and biological destiny from the dawn of time. *The Naked Ape* by Desmond Morris is also useful for Storytellers who want to explore the connections between biology, prehistory and the soul. Although "caveman" movies abound, *Quest for Fire* is one of the few films about the period worth viewing.

The Ancient World

The ancient, or Classical, period of world history ran from the rise of the first civilizations around 5000 B.C. until the fall of Rome around A.D. 450-500. The former hunter-gatherers settled in river valleys or by the seas to participate in new learning, building, travel and expansion. Culture and technology flourished across the world — Egypt, Assyria, Kush, China, Japan, Greece, Rome and the Celtic lands are only the most obvious examples.

Most of these civilizations valued mysticism and magical beliefs. Some people, however, looked to early science and philosophy instead. Mages who worked with scientific tools began to influence the mystick Arts; after early failures, their ideas began to catch hold. As the Low Mythic Ages gave way to the High Mythic Ages, beliefs began to form "territories" where certain paradigms dominated the regions. Although everyone accepted the reality of what we now call the "supernatural" as fact, the ways in which they perceived the world shaped the

forms that "acceptable" magicks could take. A Hindu mystick could work great miracles in the Kush; if he traveled to Britain, all the rules changed. His Arts became vulgar and harder to perform. Scientists and Technomancers shaped reality as if it were bronze, shutting out things that defied their worldview. When Rome fell, those paradigms shattered across Europe like statues beneath a barbarian's hammer; the courts of the Orient preserved ritual practices (and scientific and magickal paradigms) for hundreds of years to come. The boundaries between coincidental and vulgar magicks varied wildly throughout the period; look to the myths of a given culture to determine what is and is not "acceptable" when you enter this era.

This is, in many ways, the prime age of magick; even so, the Arts become harder to accomplish as time goes by. Magickal difficulties rise from Highest Sphere +1/+2/+3 to Highest Sphere +2/+3/+4 during this period; consider the lower modifiers "in force" between 5000 B.C. and 1000 B.C., while the higher ones cover the more "civilized" times of 1000 B.C. and 1000 A.D. Current modifiers (Highest Sphere +3/+4/+5) apply to games set after 1000 A.D. While common beliefs blame the increasing "stasis" of the world on Technocratic influence, it may have more to do with the number of people *in* the world itself than with a single mindset between them. If this theory is true, the next millennia might see magick become more difficult still; there are, by the Modern Era, many times the number of people as there once were.

Although the World of Darkness was never quite as "wild" as its ancient myths suggest, the Classical Era still offers a selection of monstrous hazards to contrast the usual human opponents. The creatures we call Bygones live and flourish in remote corners of the ancient world, and artificers like Daedalus construct technomagickal wonders. Your chronicle need not resemble a Biblical epic; Greek comedies and Arabian tales suggest a lighter tone than history books or Charlton Heston flicks do. The ancient world is every bit as rich and varied as our own.

You have plenty of options if you choose to run a game in the Classical Era: Imagine your troupe struggling with Moses against the Pharaoh, marching with Alexander's army or fleeing before the Romans. Look to the tales of Cuchulain and Beowulf, Boedicea and Medea, Gligamesh and the archmage Solomon. Consider the wilds of Britain, the frozen barbarian Northlands, the mountains and jungles of old India or the rarefied courts of the Orient. The characters may be Roman warriors, Hindu seers, prophets of Yahweh or priestesses of Astarte, slaves from Carthage or bull dancers from Crete. Many of the world's modern religions come together during the period, and the old pagan faiths are in full flower. Stories can run the gamut from intrigue-laden missions to surreal adventures, from philosophical debates to all-out war. Any and all of the cultures of the day offer tons of possibilities.

Books and movies about this period are plentiful. Biblical epics include *Spartacus*, *The Robe*, *Ben Hur* and *Masada*. Greek plays like *Antigone*, *The Trojan Women* and the *Orestia* cycle show that there's more to this period than guys in sandals. While the *Arabian Nights* stories come from the later Muslim era, they

often recall the bygone Age of Heroes that every culture has. Time/Life's excellent *Great Ages of Man* series has several books about the Classical cultures, and every library and bookstore carries a wealth of books detailing myths and customs of the ancient world. On the game front, **The Book of Crafts** details several magickal societies from ancient times, while **Vampire: The Masquerade** and **The Book of Nod** refer to the First and Second Cities of the vampiric Kindred. Finally, Steve Jackson Games offers a selection of *GURPS* sourcebooks for Greek, Roman, Chinese, Arabian and Celtic settings.

The Middle Ages

Feudalism, religious wars and the sluggish march of culture marked the Middle Ages in Europe, from about A.D. 500 to 1350. (In Japan, the feudal period extended to the 1800s.) The fall of Rome created a vacuum of power and knowledge unfilled for hundreds of years — a time of superstition and darkness. The Middle Ages were a turning point for many willworkers, who found themselves torn between the old ways and the coming of philosophy and reason. Indeed, the year 1325 brought the beginnings of the Ascension War with the first gathering of the Order of Reason.

Nasty as the Middle Ages might have been, they can be a rich historical setting for your chronicle. Reality is about to make a major shift; why not make the characters a part of it? Consider the politics and state-building of the time: the battles of Charlemagne, the rise of Byzantium, the Norman Conquest, the Crusades and the conspiracies of imperial Japan, to name a few. Combining the prehistory of the Ascension War with the struggles of the times will keep your players very busy.

The obvious source of Western fantasy, this Medieval period brims with chronicle concepts. Ever had the urge to rescue the princess or slay the evil baron? Now's the time to do it. Delighted by the sound of sharpened broadswords or Gregorian chants? Let your players hear them, too. Do the ravages of plague or the screams of burning witches fill your nightmares? Bring them to the table for a chilling Mage tale. Turn your characters into kingmakers like the Earls of Warwick, warriors like Roland or Richard Cour de Leon, ladies like Eleanor of Aquitaine or lowlifes like Falstaff. And then there are the monsters — the dragon, the griffin, the troll — and the mortal structures — king, Church, nobility and trade — that give the era its charm. The Middle Ages are horrific, heroic, romantic and ridiculous. The possibilities are endless.

There's no lack of places to go for ideas. The **Vampire: The Dark Ages** series (including the rulebook, **Constantinople by Night** and the **Book of Storyteller Secrets**) provides invaluable information for running a chronicle in the medieval World of Darkness; look at the main book's Chapter Eight for an overview of mage society. *Ars Magica* has loads of material; *Pendragon* from Chaosium deals with Arthurian chivalry and feudal society; the game's Ireland supplement *Pagan Shores* is especially good for Celtic settings. *GURPS' Japan* and Gold Rush Game's *Bushido* are helpful for chronicles in the Far East. Moviewise, you have some quality and some crap to consider. The single best film is likely *The Lion in Winter*, followed by *Becket* and

Braveheart, the Fox version of *Robin Hood* (starring Patrick Bergen), *The Name of the Rose* and (for a dark fantasy setting) the demented *Excalibur*. *Chinese Ghost Story* and *San Goku Shi* are good places to begin for old Chinese chronicles; any of Akira Kurosawa's movies, particularly *Ran, The Seven Samurai, Yojimbo, Throne of Blood* and, of course, *Rashamon*, are highly recommended for Japanese chronicles.

The Renaissance and Reformation

"Renaissance" literally means "rebirth." This period of roughly 300 years (1350-1650) marked an improvement over the Middle Ages. The oppressions of feudalism eased, a new middle class emerged and trade and technology bloomed. New science, printing technologies and the gradual decline of divine-right monarchy promised hope to the common folk. The Catholic Church lost ground to Protestant reformers like Martin Luther and John Calvin, and the arts gained the genius of Michelangelo, da Vinci and Giatto, among many others. The magickal Arts had their geniuses, too, like Francis Bacon, and, of course, their fools like Dr. Faustus.

Yet these centuries had their horrors, too. The Black Death hit Europe in 1348; over a quarter of the population died in a matter of months. Religious and political upheaval caused nearly constant warfare. The first waves of explorers and pirates terrorized the New World. For mystick mages, the days grew dark. Despite the new Council of Nine Mystick Traditions (founded in 1466), the Order of Reason steadily gained ascendance; it stopped the plagues, incited witchburnings and plumbed the depths of creation to bring back science. The Mythic Era faded away, to be replaced by the Age of Reason.

Renaissance chronicles can be rich indeed; to the mysticks, the age is a disaster. Hope fades and magick whithers. The old Arts give way to Church miracles, devilcraft and Grand Science; witch hunters kick down doors and drag mysticks of all kinds to the torture chamber. The fledgling Traditions come together only to fall apart. The Order of Reason is winning a battle barely begun, and the truth is, it benefits mankind in its own hygienic way. In the so-called New World, the native peoples fall to disease, gunpowder and sharpened steel. The culture war that climaxes in the Old West begins; even the Council, with its high ideals and kinship, relegates the mages of Africa and the Americas to second-class status. What's a mystick to do? Run? Hide? Fight? Anything's an option.

The Order of Reason is having a field day; this age marks the Technomancers' peak of power and respectability. A far cry from the "evil modern Technocrat," the Reason Scholar is a man of good breeding and high intentions. The darkness of superstition falls before his candles and the dragon of ignorance gets skewered on his sword. The bright days of the Renaissance blind the Order to the things it sets in motion. The lands it conquers seem fresh and savage compared to the infested world it leaves behind. Sadly, the evils of that world — piracy, disease,

fanaticism and greed — follow these brave fellows wherever they go. Their grand gadgets, maps and classifications rob the world of uncertainty and pave the way for exploitation.

Not that a Renaissance chronicle has to be a dark affair; high adventure is the order of the day. Art, courtship and intrigue attain new heights. The world becomes an open door for anyone with enough daring, friends and opportunities. For mages, such things are always close at hand.

The movies are full of inspirational source material: *Cutthroat Island, The Sea Hawk, The Three Musketeers* (1970s version), *Henry V, Stealing Heaven, The Seventh Seal, A Man for All Seasons, Flesh + Blood, Anne of a Thousand Days, Lady Jane, Queen Margot* and *Orlando* are the best of a varied lot. Several game books, including *GURPS' Swashbucklers,* TSR's *A Mighty Fortress* and the **Mage** historical game, provide setting details. Renaissance music is easy to find at Renaissance festivals and in specialty catalogs and music stores, and it adds a lot to the "gaming room" atmosphere.

The Era of Enlightenment

Who said the characters have to be Tradition mages? The Enlightenment, from around 1650 to 1790, was a perfect time to be a member of the Order of Reason. Scientific discovery and rational philosophy became the norm while spirituality and magic fell by the wayside. Within the Order of Reason, the Enlightenment entered a period of hubris and turmoil, culminat-

ing in the Victorian Order's reconstruction as the Technocracy. Players who choose to play Technocrats in this era have a couple of entertaining options: hunt rival mysticks, play diplomat on the political scene, try to save the world — or conquer it.

The irony, of course, is that while the scholars and scientists practice rationality, a new kind of violence devastates Europe. England suffers a religious and political revolution in the mid-to-late 1600s, while the old divine-right monarchy in France crumples in 1789. The New World gains its independence even as Britain strives to conquer the rest of the globe. In the East, the Turks besiege the borders of Christian Europe, Russia tries some new ideas, and China and Japan both grapple with foreign incursions. The Industrial Revolution lays its foundations even as artists and thinkers look back to the Classical Age for inspiration. All in all, the Era of Enlightenment is full of contradictions.

Among the Traditions, life is chaos. Their Arts become vulgar. The Dreamspeakers revolt. The Akashics withdraw. The Ecstatics party in dark corners with Hellfire Clubs while the Verbena lick the wounds of periodic witch hunts. The Chorus and Ahl-i-Batin struggle for the moral leadership of the Council, and the Solificati are long gone. Only the Euthanatos and the Hermetics seem to prosper, secreting themselves in the cracks of "enlightened" society and waiting for those cracks to widen. Off on the fringes, the wild cards that will soon form the Electrodine Engineers — the early Sons of Ether — toil with the toys of this new age. Their star rises in the Victorian Era, but its light is beginning to show.

This is a time of action, manners, reconstruction and conquest, of prosperity in Europe, uncertainty in the East and devastation in the native lands. Great thinkers like Jefferson and Franklin epitomize the ideals of the age. The arts — especially music — reach unforgettable pinnacles, and crusading physicians try to purge the healing profession. The Age of Enlightenment is an age of revolutions; its shockwaves will be felt for centuries to come.

Magick must be subtle and appropriate to the region; Europeans have some very set ideas of what is and isn't "possible." Most forms of technomagick are still vulgar, and the mystick Arts seem downright impossible unless they work within a low-key Christian paradigm. Even witchcraft is considered small potatoes by those who admit its existence at all. On the "dark continents," reality is freer, but still conforms to local beliefs. A Hermetic magician on the Ivory Coast is a Paradox magnet, and while a Chinese sorcerer works miracles in her homeland, she'd best be careful if she somehow ends up in America....

Reading some of the dry period literature is a must to understanding Enlightenment philosophers' worldviews. Locke and Rousseau are relatively accessible; Isaac Newton is a must for scientifically oriented chronicles. Fortunately you also have an excellent selection of films to choose from: *The Adventures of Baron Munchausen*, *The Horseman on the Roof*, *The Mission*, *The Madness of King George*, *Rob Roy*, *The Crucible*, *Amadeus*, *Restoration* and *Dangerous Liaisons* are just a few. Much of the music from this period is beautiful; try works by Handel, Mozart and Bach.

Romanticism and the Victorian Era

Academics often pinpoint Romanticism's beginnings with an infamous house party hosted by Lord Byron. Among his guests were Mary Wollstonecraft Shelley and Percy Bysshe Shelley. The bored guests dreamt up a plan to entertain each other with horrifying stories; Mary Wollstonecraft Shelley later went on to publish hers as *Frankenstein*. Romanticism, which ran roughly from 1790 to 1830, was in many ways a backlash against the Enlightenment and the Industrial Revolution. Instead of rationality, the movement promoted emotion and wonder. It paved the way for the weird contrasts of the Victorian Era, which ended in the bloody trenches of World War I.

Victoria ruled England (and, by extension, much of Europe) from 1837 until 1901. During her reign the Industrial Revolution conquered Europe; Europe, in turn, went out to colonize and control the rest of the world. New and powerful machines changed everything from textile production to communication to travel. People had more leisure time and could indulge in richer lifestyles. Victoria imposed both a love of beauty and a strict code of conduct on her subjects. Everything was right and proper in her empire. Or was it?

Beneath the veneer of Victorian aestheticism and propriety lurked darkness; just read Charles Dickens or accounts of Jack the Ripper. People suffered from horrible conditions in factories, and native peoples fell under colonial oppressions. The year 1848 saw bloody revolts in nearly every nation of

Europe, including Britain. Occultists, pagans and primitivists staged a revival. For Tradition mages, this became a call to arms. When the Technocratic Sons of Ether defected from the Technocracy to assume the ninth seat on the Council, the Traditions rejoiced; their happiness ended with the departure of the Ahl-i-Batin in the 1920s.

Victorian chronicles provide a lot of options for players. Characters can be Sons of Ether who escape the Technocracy only to find resentment and suspicion among their new Tradition allies. The Dreamspeakers and Ecstatics suffer horribly during the final years of the colonial struggle and westward expansion, and their rage ignites a fire under their colleagues. Many Akashics battle English intruders or leave their homeland to see the world once more; along the way, they add new members and ideas to their ancient Brotherhood. The Hermetic Houses shrug their collective shoulders inside the occultism movement, and they get pleasing (and not-so-pleasing) results. Imagine a player's amusement — or disgust — when his character is confronted by The Great Beast Crowley, Rasputin or Sir Arthur Conan Doyle.

Ah, yes. Detectives. From Poe's Dauphin to Doyle's Sherlock Holmes, the setting overflows with men and women seeking the hidden truth. This is the perfect time for an Arcanum chronicle, or one featuring the adventures of un-Awakened consors on the fringes of the war. A group of willworkers might investigate "strange cases" to earn a living; a Hermetic cabal might found a mystic society of Sleepers — or cross a Nephandus who's doing the same thing....

Don't ignore happenings in the United States, either. Westward expansion provides an opportunity to mix sixguns with sorcery. The werewolves and Bastet are hip-deep in the bloody conflicts between Native Americans and white settlers — conflicts that extend way beyond the mortal world (see **Werewolf: The Wild West** and its supplements). Guess which side the Technocrats are on? The Dreamspeakers and an Ecstatic sect called Los Sabios Locos (see **Cult of Ecstasy**) go on the warpath in the West; the results aren't pretty, but they sure are interesting....

Whatever type of chronicle you choose, take advantage our own Victorian style revival that's touching everything from playing cards to underwear. The quintessential resource on Victorian chronicles is *Castle Falkenstein*. This wonder from R. Talsorian is an innovative and exciting game in its own right. Among its sourcebooks, *Comme Il Faut* and *Steam Age* are particularly useful. *Cthulhu by Gaslight*, the alternate setting of Chaosium's *Call of Cthulhu*, is also excellent source material. The weird westerns *Deadlands* and **Werewolf: The Wild West**, and the plainer *Western Hero* and *GURPS West* offer tons of material to the Storyteller with a cowboy bent.

And then there are the movies: *Lady Hamilton*, *Pride and Prejudice*, *Ken Russell's Gothic*, and *Immortal Beloved* are good films for the Romantic period. Merchant Ivory films, such as *A Room with a View*, *The Age of Innocence* or *Angels and Insects*, and the Jeremy Britt *Sherlock Holmes* series, are good for the latter part of the century. Hammer Studio's horror films and American International Pictures' Poe flicks depict a dark side of the era, as do *Bram Stoker's Dracula*, *The Seven-Percent Solution* and any number of Jack the Ripper films. Westerns comprise one of the most popular film (and literary) genres of all time; *Dances With Wolves*, *Little Big Man*, *The Unforgiven*, *Stagecoach*, *Red River*, *The Wild Bunch*, *A Fistful of Dollars* and *The Good, The Bad and The Ugly* are fine starting points. Romantic Era composers include Beethoven, Wagner and Schubert; Tchaikovsky, Rimsky-Korsakov and Strauss are among the best-known musicians of the late 1800s. For reading, try the writings of Ambrose Bierce, H. Rider Howard, Stephen Crane, H.G. Wells, Edgar Allan Poe, Jules Verne, Charlotte Bronte, G.B. Shaw or Robert Louis Stevenson. Oh, yeah, and those poets, too — y'know, like those Byron and Shelly guys....

The Roaring '20s and the Depression

In many ways the 1920s was an age of fools. The motto of the times was "Eat, drink and be merry"; World War I conjured up horrors beyond imagining, and folks wanted to forget. Despite prohibition and religious fervor, the 1920s brought violence and change. Women's suffrage, gangster wars, communism and unrest in colonized lands wrecked the remnants of Victorian stability. Occultism became chic for some and diabolical for others. When the boom went bust in '29, the world went to hell. Bad crop years added to the insult. Despite hard work and innovate government programs, the lean times dragged on until the beginning of the next war.

The post-war years are pretty unstable for the Awakened. By the time we reach the '20s, the Council has gained a lot of its old strength, fed by the vitality of the Etherities and the resurgence of the Hermetic and Verbena Arts. The Ecstatics get their collective house in order, but it's in sad shape until the '50s; Choristers use religious backlash as a forum for their own revival. Sadly, the Dreamspeakers and Ahl-i-Batin are in ruins, their homelands decimated by outside incursions. The Subtle Ones leave the Council entirely after the war, and the shamans and Euthanatos regroup in what's left of their homelands. Among the Technocrats, trust wavers; the Electrodine Engineers are gone and their compatriots, the Difference Engineers, display an arrogant attitude. World War I has seen the first full-scale deployment of technological arms, and the results leave even the most loyal Technocrats dismayed. Like the Council of Nine in the Renaissance, the new Technocracy hesitates, stunned. In the pause, their rivals strike....

Over the last few centuries, the Nephandi have grown strong and plentiful; conquest, industrialization, revolution and all the angers and ills that went with each have spread corruption so thickly that the Fallen can practically lick it from their fingers. If you choose to run a chronicle in this setting, remember that Nephandi are everywhere. Why not build a chronicle in which the Fallen or other dark powers are the great enemy? How about scenarios in which Tradition mages and Technomancers must

cooperate or perish. Don't forget that the 1920s are the age of Lovecraftian horror, too; that country estate in rural New England could be crawling with unspeakable "guests"....

Stories from this period need classic bits: gangsters, flappers, prohibition and glitzy lifestyles. A Syndicate-Giovanni cross-over game might be fun. Characters could be members of these two groups, allied against all comers — including the local vampire prince. An Ecstatic-based chronicle might center in the Gadsby-esque social circles, dipping below the obvious vices to reveal the Infernal taint underneath. Pulp stories featuring wild adventures and two-fisted heroes are natural playgrounds for Sons of Ether and their brave consors (see **Sons of Ether**'s Prelude story). And then there's the tale of the lone apprentice, sent by her mentor to retrieve a couple of books from a crumbling mansion on the Boston outskirts. You and your troupe can have all kinds of fun before — and after — the Great Depression.

The works of H.P. Lovecraft, Robert E. Howard, Dashell Hammett and F. Scott Fitzgerald are great inspiration for 1920s chronicles; Chaosium's *Call of Cthulhu* line offers a wealth of source material about the period, and Archon Games' *Noir* presents a splash of gangster flavor. If you can find it, HERO Games' classic *Justice Inc.* offers a treasure trove of settings and ideas for Pulp Era games. For mood music, try Irving Berlin, the Gershwins, Scott Joplin or Robert Johnson (or better yet, try *all* of them). On the film front, check out *The Maltese Falcon*, *Miller's Crossing*, *Chinatown*, *The Razor's Edge*, *Scarface* (the original, not the 1980s remake), *The Untouchables*, *His Girl Friday* and *Elmer Gantry*.

The Big One

The War. *The* War. Oh, yeah. World War II and the years surrounding it are perhaps the most fertile setting a Storyteller could want. Source material is everywhere, and the events are recent enough to carry a punch today. Depending on which way you want to go, you could present a rip-roaring pulp adventure, a dark war chronicle, a beat-the-devil Nazi-bash or a heroic story about hope, renewal and the difficulties of both.

Let's talk about the period for a moment, shall we? After the first great war, the industrialized world was reeling. Sudden prosperity in the United States collapsed as the stock market crashed; crime and poverty rushed in to fill the vacuum. Other countries were left burying their dead and rebuilding their morale after the first war. Some nations, like France, England and the U.S., wanted to be left alone; others, like Russia, Germany, Italy and Japan recovered their pride in sweeping nationalism, building powerful states at other peoples' expense. A series of small "skirmishes" turned to all-out war by the end of the '30s. The United States tried to avoid the mess, but by 1942 everyone was involved.

The Awakened in this period are no exception. The Nephandi make their move worldwide. The Traditions and Technocracy split along national and ideological lines, some siding with the powerful Axis, others with the Allied nations or with those caught in between. The horrors of war provide a great smoke screen for a rash of supernatural clashes and Infernal summonings. The Fallen call many dark allies across the barriers, feeding them mortal souls and Awakened pawns. The Tapestry starts to unravel until a brief coalition between Technocrats and Council mages disrupts a huge summoning in Berkenschoss, a German castle near the Black Forest. Many of the most powerful mages on all three sides die in a huge battle which obliterates the fortress and several surrounding towns in 1943. The greatest Paradox storm in history is said to have carried the combatants away; to date, no one has found the Realm they might have created. Some people claim the Marauders are involved, but no records remain.

In a series of brutal fights and purges, the Fallen are driven down and out. Survivors flee beyond the Gauntlet or go deep into hiding. A monumental ritual seals the Gauntlet, strengthening it against later attacks. The Void Engineers and Sons of Ether cement the protection with a line of attack satellites orbiting the Earth. The alliance falls apart immediately thereafter, leaving the Traditions stronger and the Technocracy weakened. The Virtual Adepts defect soon afterward. Things have been getting stranger ever since. Welcome to the modern world.

There are more movies about this era than we could possibly name; some of the better ones include *Raiders of the Lost Ark*, *Casablanca*, *The Eagle Has Landed*, *The Big Red One*, *Saboteur*, *Grapes of Wrath*, *Indiana Jones and the Last Crusade*, *Bridge on the River Kwai*, *The Rocketeer*, *The Tin Drum*, *Open City* and *Schindler's List*. Books abound, from the tales of John Steinbeck to military histories, from Golden Age comic books to *The Diary of Anne Frank*. Sources about the years between the War and our own time should be obvious, as should the parameters of coincidental and vulgar magick. Game books include the silly but helpful *Golden Age of Champions* (second edition), West End's *The World of Indiana Jones* and its sourcebooks, and the **Wraith** supplement **Charnel Houses of Europe: The Shoah.**

Cyberpunk and the Near Future

While Harlan Ellison, Philip K. Dick and Anthony Burgess laid the groundwork in the '60s and '70s, the cyberpunk revolution took hold somewhere in the '80s. Writers like William Gibson, Bruce Sterling and Lew Shiner led the way; Pat Cadigan, Melissa Scott, Spider Robinson, Michael Swanwick and a host of other greats carried it into the 1990s. For a time, cyberpunk was *the* genre for writing and gaming; yet, as Orson Scott Card wrote in 1991, the movement was "virtually over" before it had begun. So many new writers merely wanted to imitate these cyberpunk pioneers that things got stale and soon ground to a halt. The point of this lit review is that you the Storyteller should take a chance. Do something new and different with the genre. Consider the **Mage**-cyberpunk cross-over and create a *new* reality.

The common elements of cyberpunk are probably familiar enough from **Digital Web** and **Virtual Adepts**: high-tech computers, wetware, corruption of the body through biotech "improvement," and so on. Where did the explosion of cyber-

technology come from? Consider having a new "wave" of slick wetware show up in your story; perhaps your characters will be the ones who discover its Nephandic origins. Perhaps the Traditions have won the Ascension War, but now a faction of Virtual Adepts takes control. They want to "improve" humankind, yet hubris drives them to extremes. You could set the battles between the Virtual Adepts and their fellow Traditions (or the surviving Technocrats) in an Umbral cyberrealm, or on dark streets and in alleyways amidst a technological black market. Maybe the Technocracy gets its wish and transforms the world into a gleaming metropolis — with a rusted underbelly. Things always have a way of working out bent, especially in the World of Darkness, and as we know, any sufficiently complex reality breaks down sooner or later....

The authors cited above are a good place to start your research; add Simon Hawke (*Psychodrome*), Neil Postman (*Technopoly*), Dan Simmons (*Hyperion* and *The Fall of Hyperion*) and Noam Chomsky to the list. R. Talsorian's *Cyberpunk* and FASA's *Shadowrun*, plus all their sourcebooks, are excellent gaming resources. *Shadowrun*, in particular, details the combination of magic and technology. *GURPS* also has a number of supplements; the best is perhaps *GURPS Psionics*. Magazines like *Wired*, *Mondo 2000* and *Permission* have a great cyberpunk look and feel in both articles and ads. Movie inspirations include *Bladerunner*, both *Terminator* films, *Total Recall*, *Strange Days*, *Hackers*, *The Crow*, *Robocop*, *Akira* and *Appleseed*. The Borg of *Star Trek: The Next Generation* and *First Contact* exemplify just how dangerous rampant cybertechnology can be.

Ascension War Apocalypse Now

What would happen if the Ascension War tore reality apart? What if the Umbral Realms no longer provided an escape? Say *no one* emerged on top after the magickal battle to end all battles. What would the world be like then? And what about the Wyrm and Antediluvians that haunt the other creatures' nightmares? If you're an enterprising Storyteller with a passion for doom and gloom, this fallen world is the setting for you.

Like prehistoric chronicles, many post-apocalyptic scenarios would focus on mere survival. What ended up destroying civilization — nukes, disease or some unknown horror? Are vestiges of this force still around? Have the characters seek out other scattered willworkers; set the story around rebuilding society from the ground up. Antagonists could include competitors, powerful crazies or nightmares from the mages' own souls.

And then there's the tragedy of truly Greek proportions: The players' characters cause the apocalypse themselves. Perhaps they were low-level Technomancers who unwittingly let loose a nuclear horror or deadly virus. Maybe they were sorcerers who made a literal Devil's deal with Infernal powers, and were left to rot on a dying world. It could be that some seemingly innocent thing set a chain

of events in motion, events that led to Gehenna or the Apocalypse (see the climax of **The Chaos Factor**). Now what? How do you rebuild the world — or apologize to the survivors if you've done the damage?

Another bittersweet option is for the characters to be freshly Awakened in this nightmare. They know nothing of True Magick; Tradition mages would call them Orphans, but there are no Tradition mages left. Your ragged band might be seeking rumors of reclusive sorcerers who can teach them. Meanwhile, they have no idea how to shape reality and unknowingly wreak harm wherever they go. Post-holocaust tales are really bleak, but they offer an opportunity to start from scratch — if you're lucky.

In the World of Darkness, the threat of ultimate destruction is a sword of Damocles hanging over the Earth. In other games, like *Kult*, *Twilight 2000*, *The End* and *Rapture*, the worst has already happened — or is in progress as we speak. *A Canticle for Leibowitz*, *The Stand*, *Lucifer's Hammer* and *Brave New World* are probably the best known post-apocalypse novels. If you want to accurately describe the horrors of nuclear or biological warfare, check out any armed forces medical or tactics manuals. The genre also has plenty of films like *Wizards*, *Threads*, *A Boy and His Dog*, *Mad Max*, *The Road Warrior*, *12 Monkeys*, *Planet of the Apes* and *The Quiet Earth* to feed your morbid curiosity.

Screw With Time

Are you genuinely ambitious? Do you have plenty of time on your hands (no pun intended)? Are creative juices rampaging through your system like testosterone in a 16-year-old kid? If so, consider rewriting the history of **Mage** and creating a one-of-a-kind chronicle that really rocks.

First, think about your point of departure: At which points in history do you plan to make radical changes? Perhaps the Mythic Age never ended and the Order of Reason never came into being. Maybe the Traditions never came together. Maybe the Nephandi won World War II after all. Take advantage of "what if" scenarios and decide on what day the Earth really changed and why.

Next, extrapolate a bit. Think how your point of departure affected subsequent history. If the Order of Reason and the Traditions weren't around, for example, who was? If the Mythic Age continued, how is society different? What's it like to have magick and mythical beasties floating around? Write out your alternate timeline and fill in as many gaps as possible about culture and technology. Don't skimp on this step! You need a firm grounding in the past to make your alternate world believable.

Finally, detail the present. What are the characters' driving goals? What forces oppose them? Are they minor figures in a world where everyone knows True Magick? Or are they a rare breed, persecuted and fearing for their lives? As you build the chronicle's setting, think about the sorts of scenarios and plots you can work into the timeline.

"Alternate world" books and movies are somewhat scarce. The films *Cast a Deadly Spell* and *Witchhunt* depict 1940s America where magic is common practice. Television's best examples are *Brisco County Junior* and *Wild Wild West*. Randall Garrett's *Lord Darcy* books and stories combine Victorianna with the "science" of magic and private investigation. Other useful books include Gene Wolfe's *New Sun* series, Simon Hawk's *Wizard of 4th Street* and *Time Wars* chronicles, Orson Scott Card's *Prentice Alvin* series and Robert Heinlein's *Time Enough for Love* and *Job, Comedy of Justice*. James Burke's *The Day the Universe Changed* provides good ideas for departure points. The greatest inspiration for such games, however, is your own imagination — and sheer guts.

A Final Word: Too Much Sugar Spoils the Fudge

Spend time developing your alternate settings. Do your homework and get your players to watch the movies that inspire you. If cooking a full-course medieval dinner gets you in the mood to run the Chronicle of the Black Death, go for it! But keep this in mind: No matter whether you write a 500-page dissertation for your setting or simply wing it based on a couple of notes, that setting is only as good as the story and characters within it. It's easy — way too easy — to let a setting overpower the characters; a good setting, though, should enhance the story, not bury it. Work creatively with your material and, as always, talk to your players. Find a balance between setting and saga. Setting is a picture frame. The tale's the thing.

Chapter Six: Observations from the Field

*If you must tell me your opinions, tell me what you believe
in. I have plenty of doubts of my own.*
— Johann Wolfgang von Goethe

*Thunderbird's wings swept across the city sky.
To others, the wings might look like clouds, but
Michael Skyhawk was not fooled. There was a
reckoning in the sky, a promise of harsh storms
and more to follow. The city folk scuttled home,
too busy to watch the sky for wisdom. I used to
be like that, mused the shaman. I'm glad I woke
up.*

*Thunderbird's eyes flashed. Winds from
heavy wing beats stirred the trash in piss-drenched alleys, and
turned umbrellas inside out. If you really took the time to notice,
you'd see storm clouds with angry faces, hear war cries in the
wind. Most people went their ways, shutting themselves behind
triple-locked doors, securing themselves against a dozen kinds of
storms. The rain and wind were the last things they feared.*

*Thunderbird's warning shook the sleeping city. People
marveled at the strength of the storm, but paid it little mind.
Michael watched sadly from a distant mountain. This storm
might pass, true, but there were always others, growing worse
every year until the very Earth rose up against the city's proud
little children. "Clutch your toys while you can," he whispered.
"Recess is almost over, kids, and you're about to fail the
exam...."*

Running a chronicle is not a solitary activity. Neither
is writing a book about same. The observations offered in
this chapter go beyond **Mage**'s world and encompass good
games in general. Take them for what they're worth; like
the observations in Chapter Two, they're opinions, not
Holy Writ (or worse still, *rules!*).

Enjoy.

Gender, Sex and Gaming

Much of reality — the welfare system, war, the social roles ordained for women and men — are created collectively and can only be changed collectively.

— Starhawk, *The Spiral Dance*

By Deena McKinney

[Developer's Note: Deena made her "official" mark on **Mage** with the chronicle of Clarissa Ryan in the second edition rulebook. Since then, she's been a White Wolf regular. Her actual experience with the game goes back much further, and can be found in a quasifictional form in Chapter One. As a longtime gamer, writer and feminist (oooh, that evil word!), Deena has a few things to say about gender roles, sexuality and the gaming table.]

I could easily write an entire book on men and women in gaming. The topic dredges up issues of romance, sexism and communication. How do you deal with romantic entanglements? What kind of gender miscommunications crop up in gaming? Where — and how — can you draw lines before things get messy? Let's talk.

We'll have to keep things short and sweet — sex is an endless topic. Keep in mind that I'm just hitting the tip of an enormous iceberg, and that my comments are broad and general. As with most information in this book, *you*, the Storyteller, along with your players, have to decide what's best for your chronicle. Hopefully this is some bittersweet food for thought.

Partners

Let's face facts: While the gaming industry is rapidly and mercifully changing, men still outnumber women in this hobby. Women often get involved in gaming just to spend time with their significant others. Yet with a little consideration, these "buddies" can end up being among the best players in a chronicle. And lest I sound sexist (*Moi*, bastion of feminist causes? Never!), let me point out that the *reverse* is also true. Sometimes men get involved in games because their *female* significant others are players or Storytellers. And to cover all the bases, don't forget the possibilities of men having male significant others and women having female significant others. We live in a complex society. Diversity is the norm, not the exception, so don't leave gay gamers out of the picture.

This brings up a couple of issues for Storytellers. How do you treat a player's partner? How do you handle the chronicle if player romances go sour? For starters review the options for new players. Has "the buddy" ever gamed before? If not, invest some extra time in teaching her, passing on not just the rules but the whole *concept* of roleplaying. Run a solo game for her so she can learn the

ropes without pressure from the other players. Finally, weave her character into the ongoing plot and give her a chance to work herself into the group.

We're all human, of course, and romances do sour. If a relationship between two players dissolves, it can spell disaster for a chronicle. But don't take this as a given. Is the chronicle important to both partners? If so they'll probably be willing to talk about how their split affects the game. Ask them how they feel about continuing to play together. If someone (or both someones) wants to bow out, respect his wishes. It's easy enough to have characters go on quests or Seekings, then return when the players' lives have settled.

If both people decide they still want to play, don't push things. The two players in question will probably set their own limits on interaction. Structure a few scenarios that focus on other characters and plots rather than on the ex-partners. This gives the couple a chance to settle back into the game and redefine their personal space. Don't force them into situations in which they have to talk exclusively to one another; a pair-game or a scenario in which both get captured is probably a bad idea!

What do you do if one of the players suddenly has a new love interest who wants to play while the old lover is still in the game? My advice is to treat the newbie as if he were any other new player (see Chapter One). If you're wary of introducing new players, assign them Storyteller characters or set up guest appearances before making newcomers bona fide members of the chronicle. Run a pair-game for the new lovebirds; get to know the new player's style. Just don't treat him differently. It's not fair to the other players and may really hurt the old lover's feelings. If the new love interest is *already* a player in the chronicle, don't make a big deal of the blossoming romance. Deal with things easily and casually; concentrate on aspects of the game that don't affect the new couple directly. If they get, shall we say, uncomfortably demonstrative in front of the ex, mention it to them in private. You're going to have some tension, but keeping communication lines open and remaining sensitive to everyone's feelings makes things much easier.

Virtual Candlelight

What about an in-character romance? It can be a lot of fun — especially if the romance crosses gender lines (a male player/female character having an interlude with a male player/male character, for example). If the two players are having a good time, let them. Don't interfere unless one player feels coerced or threatened and asks for help. Some players might use in-character romances to make unwelcome advances on other players, so keep an eye on such flirtations. If the fun seems mutual, fine; if not, be ready to step in. If the whole idea of character romance makes you uneasy, allow players to roleplay on their own or blue-book the relationship and keep you posted.

Character-to-character romance can take time away from the game as a whole. If, for example, Pradha and Keith (from Chapter One) wanted to roleplay a session of witty seduction (or outright sex) as part of the mainstream chronicle, chances are the other players would be bored out of their skulls. Someone who's driven a long way during a busy workweek merely to witness two *other* players' characters' passions is liable to be pissed off. Don't be afraid to take the players aside and say, "Hey, this is neat, but I think it's something you can do during a break, in a blue-book or over e-mail." Gaming's prime directive is to have fun, but it should be fun for everyone.

Unless you like nasty scenes, avoid playing out sexual assaults. The reality is bad enough; bringing it to the game table, especially against a players' will, can do serious damage to your game — and to your friendships. This is especially true if you have female players in your group. The subject carries a weight for women that most men can't understand. It's one thing to have a player point out that her character was raped; it's quite another to have it happen to her during the story, even more so if the player had no idea the attack was coming. And make no mistake — the assault happens to the player as well as to her character, just in a different way. Rape and molestation are dramatic, but they're nitroglycerin, too. The feelings they trigger, even in a fictional context, radiate outward from the game to reality. If Keith had his character rape Pradha's, you can bet the two players would be hostile toward each other — possibly forever. If you sense something like this coming, cut to a commercial and discuss the matter with the players. Better yet, avoid the situation altogether unless it's the assaulted player's choice. Even then, be aware that things will change afterward.

Pink and Blue Baggage

Moving from the concrete to the abstract, let's talk about the theoretical subject of sex and gender. What is the difference? Quite simply, *sex* is a biological attribute while *gender* is a social construct. Although sexual drives don't usually strike us until puberty. Gender stereotypes hit us the second we emerge from the womb. We quickly shove newborns into gender roles — everything's blue for boys and pink for girls. Girls get lace, frills and dolls; boys get building blocks, jeans and trucks. Girls slowly become domestic or maternal while boys develop aggression or a sense of competition. For some reading on this subject, see Deborah David and Robert Brannon's *The Forty-Nine Percent Majority*. And don't feel too bad about being both a victim and an enforcer of gender stereotyping. The powerful influences of family, school and media leave their impression on all of us.

Believe it or not, this socialization has a profound impact on games. Even the most enlightened, egalitarian and liberal players, myself included, sometimes enact

society's creeds on male and female behavior. What do I mean? Just think about the way we speak. Women tend to use qualifiers like "you know" or "I was thinking maybe," whereas men do not (again, keep in mind these are general trends, not absolutes). Women see conversation as consensus, whereas it's competition for men. Men tend to cut women off more frequently than they do each other, and women don't usually respond critically to such interruptions. Women *do* take issues like slavery, murder and sexuality more seriously than their male counterparts; an event that seems like harmless fun to the guys might seem cheap or degrading to the gals. Your players' own personalities determine what they like, but those personalities themselves come, in part, from socialization.

Socialized behavior extends beyond the obvious boundaries: female roleplayers often fall into gendered "caregiver" roles. Male players *automatically* look to female players as maternal figures who provide snacks, rides or general organization. And consider the sole woman in a game full of unattached men (or vice versa)? Such messiness can *really* ruin a game and lead to hard feelings. For further reading (and if you want to check out the research), I suggest Mary Field Belenky's *Women's Ways of Knowing* and Deborah Tannen's *You Just Don't Understand*. These books don't condemn anyone, they simply offer suggestions about improving communication.

Homosexuality

So what *about* alternative lifestyles? Can homosexual romances cause tension in a game? Of course they can! Beyond the obvious social quirks about such things (which may or may not be worth challenging, depending on your troupe), there are the greater issues of romance as a whole. Any time you have two people — fictional or otherwise — who love each other, there's going to be stress on occasion. What difference does it make if romance involves two men or two women? Everyone squabbles over the garbage or the groceries. The kind of stress that results depends on who's in love with whom.

If everybody's cool with an alternative relationship (between players, characters or both), there are no real problems outside of those addressed above. Unfortunately many people still have issues about the subject. Like I said, those issues could be brought into perspective in the game: Maybe a strong, reliable character is secretly gay; perhaps the friendship between two close friends blossoms into something more than either party had expected. Handled well, such elements can enrich a story way past its usual limitations; fumbled, they can reinforce every prejudice you can imagine. Set events in motion if you feel your troupe can handle them, but don't ignore objections and force relationships into the story. Forcing a sexual situation

on a player through his character is a bad idea; doing so if the player in question is homophobic is asking for trouble.

Naturally, a character's orientation should to be worked into the player's roleplaying. Although lots of gays and bisexuals have common experiences — discrimination, self-searching, courtship — relegating everyone into "butch" and "fem" clichés is a disservice to the chronicle, the characters and the Storyteller. Gay characters (player and Storyteller alike) can easily fall into ignorant stereotypes, even if there's a gay player "in control." Obviously it's a good idea to avoid stereotypes unless there's a point to be made. Some subjects also hit a little too close to home to use. A gay player whose character gets bashed might be horrified unless the attack gives him an opportunity to trash the bashers; even then, the incident could be considered insensitive. Infecting a gay player's character (or even another character in the group) with AIDS would be cruel. If all else fails, remember that people — gay, bi or otherwise — are people. Everyone has motivations and emotions and those things rarely depend solely upon orientation.

If the players are gay and want to have an in-character relationship, sound out the rest of the troupe on the situation. It would be really lousy to force a couple to conceal their relationship just because it was unconventional. Yet it would be equally disruptive to have that same couple all over each other in front of their uncomfortable friends. This one's out of your hands; let your troupe handle the issue as it will.

Now What?

So you have a general idea of the sex- and gender-related problems that can arise in a game. But what do you do about them? First, consider the "sex ratio" in your game. If you have an overabundance of one sex or the other, why not try recruiting some new players? Sex and gender troubles tend to be fewer in a game that has equal male and female players. Next, be aware of peoples' feelings and relationships. If everyone seems happy, fine; if someone's getting annoyed and seems reluctant to talk about it for fear of being ostracized, do something immediately. Are the guys expecting the woman to provide snacks or rides? Ask players to take turns driving or bringing food. Are all the women hitting on the sole male player (or vice versa)? Consider talking to the object of desire. Find out how he or she feels about the situation, and make sure the other players know if it's a problem. Is flirtation (or all-out necking) a distraction? Kindly but firmly tell the players to keep it out of the game. Is sexist language an issue? Record your game on audio or video tape. Pay attention to the interactions. Do people complete their sentences? Does everyone get an equal chance to speak? Or are players cutting each other off?

My closing advice is simple: Shatter the stereotypes. Look to new ways of knowing and understanding. Don't be afraid to try something new or put something old on the shelf. Don't worry if an alternate approach doesn't work. The important thing is to keep an open mind. **Mage**, after all, is about the power to change the world. Such power begins with individual thought and action. Welcome to the *real* war.

In the Mind's Eye

If we analyse the principles of thought on which magic is based, they will probably be found to resolve themselves into two: First, that like produces like…and, second, that things which have once been in contact with each other continue to act on each other at a distance….

— Sir James G. Frazer, *The Golden Bough*

By Ross Issacs

[**Developer's Note:** Ross knows magical games. His work spans *Kult*, *Nephilim*, *Pendragon*, *Call of Cthulhu* and now **Mage**. His observations about symbols and their significance in magick are worth checking out, especially if you have one of those players in your group who claims "I don't *need* any foci! What good are foci? My mage has a 5 Arete, why *should* he have foci…?"]

Whether through runes carved on an oak branch, blood rendered in a copper cauldron or the 72 names of the Shem ha-Mephorash, mages use a variety of styles to employ magick. But what *is* a magickal style, exactly? What gives foci their power?

Objects into Concepts, Ideas into Signs

First and foremost, let's understand that human beings are symbol-using animals. We often use something — an object, sound, event — to represent something else. We use sounds to communicate and we call it language. We use letters to approximate those sounds and we call it writing. The human mind swims in an ocean of symbols — linguistic, graphic, mathematical and mythic; when you think, you think in words, numbers and pictures. It's impossible to think without symbols. They're how we perceive and communicate about the universe. This ability to symbolize — to say "this means that" — allows us to attach meaning to something beyond its form or function. A rose, for example, is more than just a flower; for many people it represents romantic love.

This inner language is largely a product of culture; everyone around us uses the same symbols in a similar way. A rose is a rose because everyone says it is, and no amount of calling a rose by another name will change that. We learn not only our culture's language, but its value system, behavior patterns and taboos from a very early age. These concepts define the way we see the world. We learn how to "use" such tools from our parents, teachers and peers, from television,

music and books, and from millions of unknown chance encounters. Reality can be described as consensual because everyone around us consents to use the same tools to comprehend reality. The people of a particular culture don't know any other way to grasp the world.

Every culture has its own way of looking at existence, it's own symbols and belief systems. The Inuit, for example, have over 40 words for snow — snow that falls lightly in big flakes; small flakes that fall like rain; hard, driving snow; and so on. To the farmer in Iowa, it's just snow. We don't consciously agree on a symbol's meaning; our concepts are organic — growing, changing, evolving with or without our consent. Our cultures shape the symbols we understand. Like blind men feeling an elephant for the first time, we comprehend the world through a limited vocabulary defined by our culture's worldview. Modern people believe in science because that's all we know. That same science baffles "primitive" people because it's outside their experience.

Symbols can be prisons. We see only what our minds can comprehend and express. The tools we use to understand the world come from our culture, and are limited by that culture. Until we learn other sets of symbols — other languages — we see the world from a single perspective. That view locks us into a single way of thinking.

Some symbols are loaded, packed with such powerful ideas that they set our hearts racing. Look at the way we respond to profanity, insults or desecrated symbols — they're like physical assaults. "Soft" symbols express simple ideas: The letter R represents the "R" sound and communicates R-ness. "Hard" symbols carry a punch through complex associations: The Christian cross or the American flag are more than the sum of lines or colors. And then there are personal interpretations of symbols. Compare a veteran, who sees the American flag as a symbol of pride, with an Islamic Fundamentalist, who sees it as a symbol of oppression. Let one burn the symbol and watch how the other reacts. Our cultures not only teach us which symbols to use, but which ones are more important than others.

Myths and Magical Symbols

On the other hand, certain symbols — myths — are significant to *every* culture in one form or another. This symbolic language runs deeper than a single tongue, appealing to something fundamental in human consciousness. Carl Jung called these symbols *archetypes*, and he thought they could be cataloged through dream interpretation. Joseph Campbell sought common threads among the world's mythologies in his search for our primal symbols. Witness the similarity between the Jewish Yahweh and the Sioux Wakan-Tanka, or compare the Chinese Goddess of Mercy, Kuan Yin, to Catholicism's devotion to Mary. Both cultures describe similar concepts embodied in similar forms — a sky father or an earth mother. Mythic symbols transcend cul-

tural paradigms — the snake grasping its own tail, the Trickster God, the Mentor, the anima and animus — which suggests that these symbols are genetic or that they linger from the time when we belonged to one tribe. Even so, each culture has also managed to transform the mythic into the local; although Kuan Yin and Mary both personify mercy, Kuan Yin is a product of Chinese culture while Mary is Western. No matter how these symbols came into being, they indicate that we all belong to one culture — the human race.

Culture not only defines the way we perceive reality, it provides a way to go beyond those perceptions. The runes of the Elder Futhark. The 72 True Names of God (the Shem ha-Mephorash). Wiccan rituals. Prayers at an altar. Each paradigm provides a way to experience a sense of Other by defining the proper mystic symbols and a framework in which to use them. Those who believe in these powerful symbols can transcend this reality and experience another, deeper one. This is true even in the modern world. The language of science allows its practitioners to transcend the realm of the senses and experience a reality of quarks, leptons, black holes and DNA. Transcendent symbols, by their nature, are the most potent kind of symbols; they can break down the walls of reality. This is the power of magick.

Every mystical tradition, from ancient Egyptian magic through the alchemy of the Yellow Emperor to modern Wiccan practices, follows two basic principles. The first principle, *similarity*, means that like affects like. To make something happen, you mimic that action in some way. An item, dance, ritual or mantra represents something else because it resembles the object of its magic. If a rose is the symbol of romantic love, you can make someone fall in love by using a rose petal in a magic ritual. A corollary to this is the idea of *taboo*. To prevent something from happening, avoid actions that resemble the unwanted effect; these actions are taboo. If you don't want to break your mother's back, avoid stepping on cracks.

The second principle, *contact*, suggests that items once connected continue to affect each other, even over great distances. The object represents the greater whole to which it once belonged. The infamous voodoo doll depends on this principle. The magician takes a person's hair, fingernail clippings or bits of clothing and works them into a wax figurine which represents the intended victim. A corollary to this idea is the concept of *Naming*: If you give something a name, a symbol by which others will know it, you have power over that object. Many magicians across the world take craft names to safeguard the ones they were given at birth; anyone who discovers a True Name would, by many reckonings, have power over the mage.

These two principles form the basis of both magickal style and foci. Foci are symbols that stand for something else. A red rose represents romantic love and is a common focus for love magick. A magickal style establishes the

foundation on which those foci can be used to change reality. The relationship between a magickal style and its tools is a paradox. Magickal style defines which foci — which symbols — have the power to affect reality. On the other hand, magickal style derives its power from its foci. A magician practicing Egyptian magick employs symbols — ankhs, scarabs, hieroglyphs, invocations to Osiris, Isis or Horus — dictated by the style. The tools are only useful within the framework of the magickal style.

Foci, however, also characterize a magickal style. The ankh is only useful to a magician who believes in Egyptian magick. The mystick Arts depend on hidden concepts and the understanding of same; a magician who cannot understand symbolism is considered unworthy of the name. Magickal practices, therefore, depend heavily on symbolism. If the language of magick is allegory, then foci are the letters and magickal style the grammar.

Symbols and the Mystick

A mage doesn't live in a vacuum. He's part of the culture from which he came, a product of his environment. The willworker's view of the world and the ways in which he transcends that perception depend on where he comes from. Compare a shaman born in the Australian outback with a shaman from the Siberian steppes. Both understand the spirit ways, but each one works with a style — in a set of symbols — that depends on where he was raised. Both mages are shamans; the Australian pours out sacred water on the roots of his ancestor tree, while the Siberian climbs a narrow birch tree through a hole in the roof of his yurt. Both employ the foci and magickal styles of their respective cultures.

Magickal style is vital to a mage, especially a young one (see Chapter Two). We connect with ideas through our symbols, and magick begins with ideas. Mages don't start the game knowing the ins and outs of their Arts. Such knowledge takes time to master. Unfamiliar with the principles behind True Magick, the mystick relies on old, familiar beliefs to tap the power of her Avatar. It's easier to think magick comes from someplace *else* — through crystals, incense, rose petals or prayers — than from *within*. Hence the symbols become stand-ins for the magick, wires to its power source. To use them is to connect with that power. The symbols reinforce the magick. A young Verbena, dressed in ceremonial robes and standing before an altar covered with red candles, rose petals and a lock of hair from her intended target enters a magickal state of mind. She channels her love spell through the symbols.

Symbols also provide a jumping-off point for mystical experiences. They're not just for the Sleepers' benefit, although some mysticks like to use them that way. Runes, Tarot cards, crystals and other trappings lead the occasional mage to a deeper enlightenment, one beyond the symbols themselves. Wizards prowling for recruits use "loaded" symbols and whole magickal styles as testing grounds and learning tools for new apprentices. Some Hermetic masters, for example, instruct their pupils in alchemy or numerology first, then slowly wean them off these "training wheels." As the mage progresses, she learns to see behind the symbols; she might still use them to focus herself, but she understands the larger truth that the foci represent. This isn't as easy as it sounds; Douglas Adams' adage about throwing yourself at the ground and missing still applies. A paradigm is a hard habit to break. The mage can learn that trick, however, and many more through Seekings, study and experience. She overcomes her attachment to foci and relies on will alone. That's the fundamental difference between a mage and a hedge wizard: One eventually learns that the symbols are a crutch, while the other thinks the symbols are the magick.

Today's mages have a wide variety of styles at their disposal — more than in any other period in history. People from across the world have met, traded ideas and learned each others' symbols. This is the great legacy of the Council, Technocracy, Age of Exploration and mass media. Today, we know more about various beliefs — Shinto, Zen, Candomble, tribal practices — than people did at any other time in history. We swap symbols between cultures, assimilating them into our own; you don't have to be a Buddhist to believe in reincarnation nor do you have to be an Egyptian to know what an ankh represents. Nowadays a Euthanatos can study Egyptian magick almost as easily as she can learn about Chaos Theory. She can watch a documentary on TV, buy a book at the mall and find supplies at the local bookshop. Ironically the Technocracy's success works against it; as Sleepers and Awakened learn more and more from around the world, the possible and the impossible blur. Cultural symbols become mystical ones. Mystical ones pave the way for magick.

What Do Others Believe?

So what does the symbolic nature of magick have to do with you, the Storyteller? Quite simply, magickal style and foci can mean the difference between coincidental and vulgar magick. A well-chosen symbol, be it holy water or a chaingun, carries a magickal idea. If the Sleepers watching that symbol believe in its power, the mage behind the symbol can employ it without risk. (Well, without *much* risk, anyway.) Whether they choose to believe in it or not is up to you, but it will depend a lot on the local culture. Everyone, to some degree, believes in *something*; call it magic, religion, science or superstition. Ask yourself: What do the Sleepers here believe? Magickal styles are the Mythic Threads in the tapestry of reality.

Take New York City as an example. In certain neighborhoods some people practice Santeria. Those who know those people know their power. To *get* that power, they believe, you might cut off the head of a live chicken, drink its blood and invoke Ogun, Orisha of war (and suffer the

consequences afterward). A few blocks away in a Hasidic neighborhood, a Quabbalist invokes one of the 72 True Names of God to accomplish the same thing. The symbols are familiar in both neighborhoods. People who would never consider practicing magic (let alone magick) still know that these symbols mean power. Technological worldview or no, there are plenty of people who sweat when they hear voodoo drums. On the other hand, a mystick using Santeria in rural Idaho, where nobody's even heard of it, runs into a brick wall of faith — or lack of it. He creates a Paradox, literally. His Arts are vulgar because no one believes in the symbols.

Even the most powerful symbols, however, can carry only so much belief. As the world shrinks some truths become universal. Come on now, you can't *possibly* believe that a witch can fly across the sky on a broomstick, can you? Those stories just come from hallucinations. And Mohammed didn't *really* move a mountain, that's just a metaphor. Even the most faithful believers can only accept so much before the Mythic Threads snap. Hence we have vulgar magick — the point at which credibility says "No way." Reality has only so much slack to offer; a good symbol takes up a little more, but a mountain won't move without a monumental pull. And Paradox waits for the rope to go tight.

It's important to understand how a symbol relates to magick. We use symbols to communicate, to say that "this means that." It isn't a great leap from there to magick. It's a path taken by every culture since the beginning of time. That's how our brains work. When a player chooses a magickal style and foci for her character, ask her where those symbols came from and what they mean to the mage. Does the Dreamspeaker who grew up in the bayous of Louisiana practice voodoo or Santeria? Are those Hermetic trappings just for show or does she really think pentagrams work? Make your *player* define what her *character* does to make her will reality. Have her write down important symbols and play them for all they're worth. Sure she can just say "I use Time 3/Life 4," but it's so much more fun when she tells you about the altar and the elements and describes the sudden rustle of the wind. That's the difference between storytelling and chartgaming, between *role*-playing and *roll*-playing. Every culture has it's own magickal language, its own Mythic Threads. If **Mage: The Ascension** is a game about battling realities, then it's important to know what everyone believes.

Sharing the Spotlight

Only the sinner has a right to preach.
— Christopher Morley

by John "The Gneech" Robey

[Developer's Note: John and I co-ran various games for nearly five years. During that time we both learned an incredible amount about the interplay between Storytellers, players and those who aspire to be both at once. John's writing credits include **The Book of Shadows**, **The Perfect Warrior** and *Indiana Jones Adventures* from West End Games, as well as his own online magazine *Astounding Adventures* (http://members.aol.com/astadvqtrl/main.htm).]

Most gaming groups are one of two varieties: A group of players that needs a Storyteller or a group of Storytellers that needs players. If your group is fortunate enough to be the latter, the time will come when two or more Storytellers will want to collaborate, either on a single story or on a chronicle. When this works, it's terrific. When it doesn't work, things fall apart fast. Let's discuss how to make collaborating work.

Guest Storytellers vs. Jointly Moderated Chronicles

The simplest form of multi-Storyteller chronicle is the "guest shot," when one of the players takes on the responsibility of running the game for a single story. The player's usual character becomes a Storyteller character for the duration of that tale, while the chronicle's usual Storyteller either creates a persona to play or uses some established Storyteller character. If there's already a Storyteller character who hangs around during most adventures, this is a good person for the regular Storyteller to play.

Some Storytellers, feeling that they're the only people who can be trusted with their plots and characters, won't allow guests to run in a chronicle (just as Bill Watterson refused to let anyone market *Calvin and Hobbes* because he felt that he would lose control of his characters). If the idea of guest Storytellers really bothers you, then you certainly shouldn't use them. If you're undecided, consider the advantages of allowing guests.

• **Depth and Variety:** Everyone comes to a game with an entirely different set of experiences, attitudes and ideas. If your stories revolve around urban decay or Gothic angst, and the guest Storyteller's tastes run more toward body-in-the-library mysteries or whimsical romps, you'll see sides of the characters that you've never seen before and aspects of the setting that you may have overlooked. Such switches also make for a great change of pace.

• **New Subplots, Storyteller Characters and Settings:** When a guest Storyteller introduces a new supporting character to the story, the regular Storyteller should feel free to incorporate him into the overall chronicle — provided he isn't twisted into something different than he originally was. Rick the Cynical Bar Owner who was an important contact in the guest Storyteller's plot can later be a font of rumors, resources and subplots for the regular Storyteller. If he suddenly becomes Rick the Secret Technocracy Agent Spying on the Heroes, the guest Storyteller may feel (justifiably) irritated that his character has been sabotaged.

• **More Gaming with Less Work:** Most players think about playing a lot more than they actually do it. That's usually because the Storyteller simply doesn't have time to come up with something good. The more Storytellers there are, the less pressure there is on any one of them to devise plots all the time.

The Guest's Obligations

As useful as introducing a guest Storyteller is, the regular Storyteller may feel legitimate anxiety about letting someone else mess with the world he's worked so hard to create. The guest Storyteller therefore has certain obligations to keep in mind when she designs and runs a story.

• **Continuity:** Make sure you're familiar enough with the details of the chronicle to get them right at a moment's notice. If the Storyteller has established that the Virtual Adepts don't exist in your chronicle, then the guest has no business trying to run a story that involves them.

• **Chronicle Cohesion:** The guest Storyteller should avoid making any major changes in the regular plot line; any issues that come up during her story should be resolved in that story or remain on the fringes of the regular Storyteller's game. For example, if the grand storyline concerns a cabal of Orphans trying to make its way in the world, the guest Storyteller shouldn't have all of the characters initiated into the Sons of Ether so they can be teleported through a one-way gate to Dimension X and fight slithering horrors until the year 2199. Similarly the guest shouldn't kill off (or otherwise permanently alter) existing Storyteller characters, wipe out Manhattan with a nuclear bomb or work other drastic changes.

• **Storyteller Character Limitation:** When someone who is usually a player stands in as Storyteller, she has to ensure that her usual character doesn't suddenly gain all sorts of knowledge about what's going on. It's basically a principle of fairness to the other players: What fun is it to be presented with a situation or puzzle and then watch somebody else's character solve it all? They could be watching television instead. Furthermore, it should go without saying that you shouldn't use your "Storyteller's fiat" to give your character new abilities that she wouldn't normally have. ("By reading the ancient tome, Karena gets three more points of Arete!") It's important to remember that the *players'* characters are the stars of the show. Let them remain that way if you shift from one role to the other.

• **Regular Storyteller Veto:** If something happens that the regular Storyteller just can't live with (usually something that goes against one of the principles of Continuity, Chronicle Cohesion or Storyteller Character Limitation), he should have the right to overrule it. This right shouldn't come into play often; it can really step on the guest's toes. However, the regular Storyteller shouldn't be afraid to do it if he believes an event will upset the game. It's better to have a short, quickly resolved dispute than to have the regular Storyteller who mutters darkly throughout the remainder of the chronicle.

The Shared Chronicle

The next step up from the guest Storyteller is a chronicle designed from the beginning to be run by two or more Storytellers. Each Storyteller has his own set of characters, plots and settings, but the two of them share a pool of information. Both Storytellers take turns; one runs the game while the other plays a character. The shared chronicle has all of the advantages and disadvantages of the guest Storyteller, but on a much greater scale.

The shared chronicle should be designed to be just that from the beginning. Once a chronicle has begun and the Storyteller has invested effort into creating characters, places and situations, giving another Storyteller equal authority can be unnerving and disruptive.

• **Creation:** Before a single session of play begins, the two Storytellers should work out what the chronicle's basic themes, situations and assumptions are. While there's room for diversity in taste and style, the essential elements of the chronicle must dovetail at least half the time. Otherwise the game will be disjointed and maybe even schizophrenic. ("We were fighting zombies in the sewers last week, now we're on Mars. What gives?")

• **House Rules:** The Storytellers need to establish house rules that they agree on. Disjointed effects can also arise if one Storyteller is a strict bookkeeper and the other rarely rolls (or calls for rolls of) the dice. Decide what guidelines you will use for resolving botches and what (if any) variant rules you will use for combat. Once these rules are agreed on, stick to them! Players, even the most well-meaning and character-driven ones, quickly learn which Storytellers are "softies" and which are strict, and adjust their styles of play to give them what they see (consciously or unconsciously) as an advantage.

• **The Common Setting:** The Storytellers need to create the story's overall setting together. Shared elements generally include the characters' base of operations, mentors or contacts, one or more recurring (usually low-level) antagonists and various other setting details. To borrow a phrase from the *Thieves' World* books, any of these elements may be "used, but not used up." Blowing up the cabal's haven is a no-no, as is wiping out mentors or burning down the city, unless these actions come about through the players' characters. Shared elements aren't just central to a coherent chronicle — they're important creations in and of themselves, and few creators like to see their brainchildren abused by others.

• **Hands Off:** The last thing the Storytellers need to do before the game begins is establish which plots or subplots are off limits to each other. There ought to be an element of give-and-take to these limitations; Storyteller A might want to create an intricate storyline involving a brood of Tremere stalking the city's mages. Storyteller B should therefore lay off vampires in general, and the Tremere in particular. However, in return for that Storyteller B may want exclusive rights to the local Void Engineers for his own storylines. This way both Storytellers get a bit of turf for themselves.

This trade-off promotes more than simple fairness; it allows each Storyteller to have some gray areas where mystery is preserved. If both Storytellers know everything that's going on, both lose the vital elements of surprise and novelty that make *playing* so much fun. We recommend that each Storyteller in a shared chronicle keep his or her own special character; a mage run by two different people appears schizophrenic at the very least. In a *really* open chronicle you can even allow other players to take turns as guest Storytellers, allowing both regular Storytellers to play simultaneously while a trusted player takes the helm.

A good rule to go by as the tale progresses is that a particular element "belongs" to both creators — unless the one who introduced that element in the first place decides to take it out. Say Storyteller A introduces a rampaging werewolf; Storyteller B is free to have that rampaging werewolf come back in one of his own stories, provided that the storyline doesn't force the character through any major changes. (If the characters fill said rampaging werewolf full of silver, that's another matter.) Storyteller A is free to do whatever she wants to the rampaging werewolf, from killing her off to having her join the cabal, because she created the character.

When a Storyteller introduces a new element that she *doesn't* want to share, she should inform her partner that it is "off limits." If Storyteller A introduces the rampaging werewolf and declares her off limits, then Storyteller B can't use her directly, although he could incorporate her existence into his own stories. ("During her latest rampage, the werewolf killed the leader of the local Void Engineers. Now the Void Engineers are scrambling to rearrange their power structure. Your mentor thinks this is the perfect time to strike....")

Pitfalls of the Shared Chronicle

Over time a shared chronicle may showcase one Storyteller over another. She might be more prolific than her partner or have more time on her hands. Maybe the players simply favor one person's plots over the other's. Diversity is

the shared chronicle's main strength, but it can also become the wedge that divides it…and it may or may not be possible to put the chronicle back together again.

If anyone notices a fracture, the Storytellers should discuss the matter. If the less-dominant Storyteller doesn't mind reducing his role in the chronicle (becoming more of a "recurring guest Storyteller"), then there's no problem. If the second Storyteller doesn't want to diminish his role, you need to figure out why the chronicle's focus is shifting, and what can be done to correct it. Figuring out the source of the problem usually suggests a solution. If Storyteller A simply doesn't come up with as many story ideas as Storyteller B, they should pool some new concepts, whether from prepublished sources or other inspirations. If the players just like Storyteller B's stories better than Storyteller A's, Storyteller A should try to find out why and see what can be done to improve her storytelling style. If one Storyteller just tends to take over, both partners need to recognize this and take steps to counteract it. The difficult part is recognizing the schism; acting to correct it is easy.

Sometimes both Storytellers will find themselves tangled up in the house rules they helped create. Even worse, they might feel that they're both getting bored with the whole thing. If both Storytellers want to keep the game running there are a few things they can do. For starters they can pitch the old house rules and start again with a new set (after notifying the players, of course). A more radical solution comes from a dramatic shift in the chronicle itself — some earthshaking event causes things to skew in new and unexpected directions. Everything goes onto new ground from there: Perhaps the central setting is blown off the map. Maybe the characters are caught and shipped to MECHA or lose their identities to some Technocratic vengeance. This is **Mage** — anything you want can happen. The Storytellers need only agree on a course of action. Their solution can be as simple as changing a few game mechanics or as complex as blowing up the world so that the characters have to rebuild from the ashes.

If all else fails, one Storyteller can simply let her partner take over the existing chronicle while the other creates a second, and they run the two simultaneously. The second Storyteller can design a chronicle that's more suited to her tastes. This new chronicle may have some elements of the old one — perhaps it takes place in a different city in the same world or in the distant past. Two different games with a common base presents all kinds of possibilities for crossover storylines: guest star appearances, common antagonists, even the occasional news flash about some important event elsewhere. Once two games are in place, there's no reason why the two Storytellers can't run guest shots in each other's chronicle. After all, who'd know the world better than someone who helped create it?

Double-Storyteller games are challenging, innovative and fun. So long as both partners share a respect for each other's stories and designs, the collective chronicle can be a great way to avoid Storyteller burnout and same-story boredom.

Through a Glass, Darkly

Now we see only reflections in a mirror, mere riddles, but then we shall be seeing face to face. Now, I can know only imperfectly; but then I shall know just as fully as I am myself known.

— I Corinthians 13:12

Hey, I didn't play Dungeons & Dragons all those years without learning something about courage!

— Helpful Geek, *The X-Files*

By James Estes, Looking Eagle

[Developer's Note: Jim Estes (given the name Looking Eagle after a real-life visionquest some time ago) is a dear friend, spiritual seeker and damned good writer whose legacy includes the American productions of *Kult* as well as books like **Halls of the Arcanum, Celestial Chorus, The Inquisition** and both **Mummy** and **Mage** second editions. As a gay writer with a profound sense of the sacred, Jim has balanced the call of religion with the needs of a human being and an artist. This isn't as easy as it sounds.]

It begins around a fire.

One person — whoever has the gift — begins to speak, and with her telling comes a story. Perhaps it is a new story. More than likely, though, it is a story well-known and loved: a story from "a long time ago," the fables, myths and legends that shaped a community's understanding of the world. Heroes overcame their foes and taught resilience, strength and cunning.

Joseph Campbell has written on the nature of the monomyth, the kernel which lies at the heart of every hero-quest: *A hero ventures forth from the world of common day into a region of supernatural wonder: fabulous forces are there encountered and a decisive victory is won: the hero comes back from this mysterious adventure with the power to bestow boons on his fellow man. (The Hero With a Thousand Faces,* prologue) These myths and stories were more than just means of passing a winter's night. They were shells which carried meaning, which taught the community's values and hopes, and allayed its fears. The trials and travails of heroes-gone-before became the pathways for the next generation.

But that was then and this is now. We have routinely stripped meaning from stories, dissected them, deconstructed them, retranslated them — but allowed them to lay on fallow earth.

We live in an age bereft of mythology. Such tales are dismissed as unscientific, ahistorical or irrelevant by today's scientific-minded world, and discarded as the remnants of primitive civilization. But even so, the urge to mythologize, the mythic need, has never died. Every culture has its myth

systems — its values, its heroes and heroines, its enemies — and this mythic need cannot be denied. Look at popular culture and you'll see the resurgence of myth: How is the battle between Superman and Doomsday truly unlike the battle between Mithras and the Bull? And did the Son of Krypton not go through his own "Harrowing of Hell," as Christ did, before returning triumphant to his world?

True, parallels go only so far; stretch any parallel far enough and it will snap. The point remains that you can kill myths, but you cannot kill the mythic need; squelch it in one form and it will reappear elsewhere. Superheroes, science-fiction sagas, fantasy epics — these are the thrust of the mythic need in a mundane world. It is also true that these may simply be stories, and a cigar may just be a cigar — but people with mythic imaginations can see the shimmering traces of mythology hidden in many places.

But there is an even stronger revival of the mythic need. What began as an offshoot of historic wargaming has in fact grown up, and in growing has delved back into its ancient roots. To call roleplaying a rebirth of the ancient art of storytelling would not be vain hyperbole — it is a valid assessment of what a well-crafted game may achieve in its greatest moments.

Roleplaying can be seen as both a form of interactive storytelling and a means of satisfying the mythic need. The concept of roleplaying as interactive storytelling has been addressed many times, in many places. What's significant here is that we exercise the mythic imagination through Storytelling — in creating characters, we create heroes for the new mythology; in creating stories, we learn which values we consider sacred (courage, honor, conviction, truth). Roleplaying games are entertainment and amusement, true. They can, however, become occasions for personal and even spiritual growth as we establish those values which are important to us.

The Hero in the Mirror

The first element of the game is the character. What begins on paper is little more than a collection of Traits — numbers and adjectives which create an individual with a bit of personality and a history. In *playing* the character, however, we give it life. The best roleplaying experiences tap into that realm of creativity where the character grows seemingly of its own accord. ("I don't know why my character just did that. It just seemed natural" is the hallmark comment of such an experience.) Through such characters, through their experiences and adventures, we ultimately create not just "characters," but heroes, archetypes and metaphors for ourselves. The process of character creation can be as simple — or as flat — as spreading points or rolling dice. On a deeper level, it begins by looking within our-

selves to see where we are deficient, to see what we honor and to create a metaphor that speaks to these elements. It is in the character creation process, in looking at that "dark mirror" and seeing those puzzling reflections, that we ultimately learn to see our true selves.

Who are the characters, the "heroes" we create? They may be individuals with desires, dreams or aspirations quite like ours, or — more often — they may be passels of characteristics not entirely our own. "I would never do that," we might say, "but my character would." Are the two so different? Or does the personality of the character seep from the personality of the player, from parts of his psyche that even he is unaware of?

At its best roleplaying brings out facets of our personalities that even we don't notice right away, facets that emerge in our real lives as well. Someone who seems harsh and cold can create a warm, loving character — but in playing that character, in allowing him to develop, the player gains some of the character's warmth. I have looked back at a number of my characters which were shadows of myself; as an adult, I see those shadows more clearly. At its worst, the character becomes a haven from real-life problems. A disturbed player cannot — *will* not — see past his character and may get lost in the world of the story. Obviously this second situation is a problem. We shouldn't let it stop us from taking a peek in the looking glass, though — those kinds of examinations are more helpful than harmful if you're even halfway sane. Ultimately we are responsible for what we do with our observations. The character provides a glimpse of things we might have missed, but he remains a mirror. Just a mirror.

Finding a Tune

Playing characters gives us a chance to grow. Such characters, however, cannot exist in a vacuum. Heroes need a stage where their dramas can unfold. And thus comes the story in storytelling. The Storyteller who devises the plots and settings for his chronicle sets the stage where the mirrors dance. The structure of that stage often sets the steps for that dance, provides the music and the tempo. A good gaming troupe can sit down with existing characters and an existing setting and create a new story on the spot, but it often takes a little practice before everyone finds the rhythm. Good "improvised myths" take experienced troupes, but the result can be breathtaking. It's not the complexity of the stage that makes the dance — it's the willingness of the players and the Storyteller to work together. The story grows from the characters. And the characters grow from the troupe.

The progression of a story — the development of the major plot and subplots into a seamless epic — allows our characters to grow beyond their one-dimensional descriptions into full-fledged metaphors. In a world sorely lacking in heroes (the media would much rather focus on one man's folly than another man's valor), we have the opportunity to create new heroes for our community. In creating these heroes, we learn something of heroism. Heroism (following Campbell's monomyth again) is not simply beating the crap out of villains; it is the ability to rise above one's obstacles, to learn from them, to triumph and return to our community with rewards in hand.

Thus, through the nexus of heroes and their triumphs, the new mythology is created, filled with tales of love and violence, honor and betrayal, courage and cowardice. These new myths become the shared experiences of the troupe, just as myths retold become the shared experiences of any community. We retell our adventures to anyone who listens; most people "had to be there," to understand the tales, but in our community the enthusiasm those adventures bring is obvious enough — sometimes a bit too obvious. Even so, we understand the myth and what it means to us.

So what's the role of the Storyteller in an "interactive storytelling" environment? The Hopi proverb, *He who tells the stories rules the world,* is only part of the equation. The wise Storyteller doesn't enforce some egotistical self-serving plot upon her audience. She's just a guide who shapes a story, who births it and then helps it mature. She's more midwife than mother — it takes a troupe to raise a good story.

The Storytelling process can, at times, be laborious and underappreciated. But it can be a joy as well. It's fun and sometimes educational to watch our mirrors dance, become heroes more than stats. Roleplaying games are entertainment; this fact should never be forgotten. On the other hand, though, they also offer a greater promise: to look within ourselves and give ourselves the opportunity to grow, to create new heroes and new myths and to look into the mirror and learn from what we see. The heroes of mythology are the puzzling reflections of humanity; the heroes we create are puzzling reflections of ourselves. Their stories are our own.

After a particularly grueling or satisfying game, look back and reflect upon your new mythology in action. Learn from the trials of your heroes and from the lessons of their myths. Watch and listen to the others. We all have something to offer. Finally, put analysis aside and just have a good time. May your dark mirror brighten into dawn.

Appendix: Indices

Player: *I've got the "Aura of God" Merit. That lets me reroll all my "1s" and double all my successes.*

Storyteller: *Huh?*

Don't you hate stuff like this? You're in the middle of a game when somebody pulls up some obscure reference that takes you half and hour to locate. *Screech!* There goes the story. It shouldn't happen, but it does. All the time. While many — if not all — of the Storyteller systems are optional, it's always handy to know where all the rules and variants *are*, just in case....

Flipping through a pile of books in the middle of the action is a pain. In the interest of saving you time, effort and hair, we've included a fairly thorough index of rules, magicks and other helpful stuff. The following listings cover all of the books released as of August, 1997, and include a few references (when possible) to books published through December of that year. Supplements that hadn't been laid out at the time this index was compiled have been asterisked (*). For space considerations, some of the more in-depth systems have simply been referred back to the **Mage** second edition rulebook's own index (pages 291-294). Enjoy!

Abbreviation Key & Book Sequence Numbers

• **Mage Main Line Books**

M1 = Mage First Edition (#1)

S = Mage Screen First Edition (#2, and good riddance to it!)

BoCH = The Book of Chantries (#3)

LoF = Loom of Fate (#4)

P = Technocracy: Progenitors (#5)

DW = Digital Web (#6)

BoS = The Book of Shadows (#7)

CF = The Chaos Factor (#8)

IX = Technocracy: Iteration X (#9)

BoM = The Book of Madness (#10)

NWO = Technocracy: NWO (#11)

ARH = Ascension's Right Hand (#12)

M2 = Mage Second Edition (#13)

HL = Hidden Lore (#14)

VE = Technocracy: Void Engineers (#15)

H = Horizon: The Stronghold of Hope (#16)

BoC = The Book of Crafts (#17)

BoW = Beyond the Barriers: The Book of Worlds (#18)

BoMR = The Book of Mirrors (#19)

*S = Technocracy: Syndicate (#20)

*TT = The Technomancer's Toybox (#21)

• **Tradition Books**

VA = Virtual Adepts (Trad Book #1)

V = Verbena (Trad Book #2)

SoE = Sons of Ether (Trad Book #3)

AB = Akashic Brotherhood (Trad Book #4)

CC = Celestial Chorus (Trad Book #5)

CoE = Cult of Ecstasy (Trad Book #6)

D = Dreamspeakers (Trad Book #7)

*E = Euthanatos (Trad Book #8)

*OoH = Order of Hermes (Trad Book #9)

• **Additional Supplements**

ARC = Halls of the Arcanum

DP = Destiny's Price (Black Dog)

FL = Freak Legion (Black Dog)

FP = The Fragile Path

MC = Mage Classics I: The Book of Chantries & Digital Web (**Note:** page numbers follow original books' order)

MT = Mage Tarot Card Set

WD:O = World of Darkness: Outcasts (Hollow Ones)

*WD:S = World of Darkness: Sorcerers (hedge magicians)

Magick Index

Talismans & Devices

Character Systems

This index covers rules surrounding characters and their abilities, Traits and creation systems. Ever wondered where to find that damned Ghoul Merit? Here it is.

Character Creation

"Basic" Traits

Abilities

Backgrounds

Merits

(+ Cost in Points)

Flaws

(+ Worth in Points)

(q.v. Merits)

Rules & Systems

This index covers various systems scattered between different books. The essential game systems can all be found through the main rulebook's "Index" (pages 291-294). First edition references have been omitted for clarity. Imagine looking up a rule in two different places, written two different ways....

General Systems

The Otherworlds

Group Specialties

* (Note: These items cover "tricks" that certain factions keep up their sleeves. They're not so much rules as suggestions, but can give your favorite mage a helpful edge.)

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Creativity is hiding your sources.

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Common Magickal Effects

Mage presents such an awesome variety of options that attempting to compile a "spell list" would be as impossible as it would be undesirable (the name of the game is "imagination," after all). Even so, the following guide offers some especially common Effects and the basic Spheres you'll need to accomplish them. These are by no means the only ways to accomplish a given Effect, simply the most obvious ones.

Some listings feature two Sphere levels; the first allows a mage to work on himself, while the higher level lets him affect others. Healing yourself takes Life 2; to heal someone else, you need Life 3. Other Effects start small (like conjuring a wind), but require higher Sphere levels if you want to do something really big (like conjuring a storm). These variable powered Effects have been marked with a "+".

Here's a really simple way of judging an Effect's level: To sense something: Level One; to nudge it: Level Two; to affect it in a lasting way: Level Three; to do something big with it: Level Four; to do something really big with it: Level Five or even Six.

• Body Magick

Adapt to Hazards	Life 2 (3)
Animate Corpse or Parts	Life 2/ Prime 2
Cause/Cure Disease	Life 2 (3)
Create Body	Life 2 (simple) or 5 (complex)/ Prime 2
Duplicate Body	Life 5/ Prime 2
Grow New Limbs or Other Features	Life 3 (4)
Heal/Harm	Life 2 (3)
Heal/Harm Vampires	Life 3/ Matter 2
Increase Physique/Traits	Life 3 (4)
Increase Speed	Time 3
Revive Dead	Life 4/ Spirit 4/ Prime 2
Rot Body	Entropy 4 (or Life 4)
Shapeshift	Life 4 (5)
Soak Aggravated Damage	Life 3
Transform into Another Element	Life 4/ (whatever Sphere applies)

• Objects & Elements

Conjure New Elements	Forces 3/ Prime 2
Conjure New Objects	Matter 3/ Prime 2
Create "Physical" Illusions	Forces 2+/ Prime 2
Direct Existing Elements	Forces 2+
Disintegrate an Object	Entropy 3/ Time 3 (or Matter 3)
Harden/Perfect an Object	Matter 3+
Invisibility Field	Forces 2+
Invisibility on Living Being	Forces 2/ Life 2
Levitation/Flying	Forces 2+ (or Correspondence 3/ Life or Matter 2)
Shift Probability	Entropy 2
Speed/Slow Velocity	Forces 2+
Transform Objects	Matter 2+/ (whatever Sphere applies)
Transform Forces	Forces 3+/ (whatever Sphere applies)

• Perceptions & Psychic Powers

Astral Projection	Mind 4+
Clairvoyance	Correspondence 2 (or Correspondence 2/ Mind 3)
Create Mental Illusions	Mind 2+
Enter a Dream	Mind 3
Influence Mood	Mind 2
Mind Control	Mind 4
Precog/Postcog	Mind 2/ Time 2 (or Time 2)
Psychic Disruption	Mind 3
Psycho-Physical Damage	Mind 3 (or Mind 3/ Life 3 for agg. damage)
See Auras	Mind 1 (or Spirit 1)
See Avatar	Mind 3/ Prime 2/ Spirit 1
See Through Another's Eyes	Mind 3
See Through Mental Illusions	Mind 4
Sense Energies	(appropriate Sphere) 1
Shield Mind	Mind 2
Subliminal Influence	Mind 3+
Telepathy	Mind 3
Telekinesis	Forces 2+
Translate Languages	Mind 3 (or Mind 3/ Forces 2 for a group)

• Quintessence

Absorb Quintessence	Prime 1
Channel Quintessence Between Things	Prime 3
Create Node	Matter 3/ Prime 3
Destroy Something with Quintessence	Prime 4 (object) or 5 (creature)
Drain Node	Prime 4
Drain Quintessence	Prime 3
Fuel New Pattern	Prime 2
Refine Tass	Prime 3

• Spirit Powers

Bless/Curse	Entropy 3
Command Spirit	Mind 4/ Spirit 4
Conjure Spirit	Spirit 3
Create Fetish	Spirit 4
Create Talisman	Prime 4
Drain Spirit Energy	Prime 4/ Spirit 4
Enter Umbra	Spirit 3
Harm Spirit	Spirit 3
Open/Close Umbral Portal	Spirit 4
Speak to Spirit	Spirit 2
Touch Spirit	Spirit 2

• Time & Distance

Affect Distant Item/Being	Correspondence 2+
Conjure Earthly Being	Correspondence 4/ Life 2
Create Multiple Images	Correspondence 3 (or Forces 2+/ Prime 2)
Create Multiple Objects	Correspondence 5/ Matter 3/ Prime 2
Enter V.R. Astrally	Correspondence 2
Enter V.R. Physically	Correspondence 3/ Life 3
Open Gateway Between Locations	Correspondence 4
Set Time Trigger	Time 4
Speed/Slow Time	Time 3
Teleport	Correspondence 3 (4)
Time Travel	Time 5+
Ward/Ban	Correspondence 2

The Book of MIRRORS

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Mage: The Ascension takes place in an epic world loaded with dangers, intrigues and contradictions, a world where nothing is ever what it seems to be. Within the exotic realm of the Awakened, wizards plot, demons rise and reality itself shudders in pain and rapture.

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MAGE

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WORLD OF DARKNESS

THE FOOL.