

MAGE™

STORYTELLERS HANDBOOK



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P. David Gill, in addition to being a cool roleplayer and all-around nice guy, wrote an entire chapter of the **Guide to the Traditions** — for which he wasn't properly credited. Whoops! Consider this our make-up call.



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CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION: WEAVING THE TAPESTRY	4
CHAPTER ONE: THE CRAFT	8
CHAPTER TWO: THE AWAKENED STRUGGLE	42
CHAPTER THREE: AWAKENING THE STORYTELLER	66
CHAPTER FOUR: AVATARS AND SEEKINGS	98
CHAPTER FIVE: ALTERNATIVE SETTINGS	128
CHAPTER SIX: A WORLD OF MAGIC	190



INTRODUCTION WEAVING THE TAPESTRY



This is *your* book.

This is the book that results from a decade of *Mage* players and fans, from all of their feedback and ideas, from lots of late brainstorming nights, change-overs and revisions.

Usually, a *Mage* game book advances the storyline, introduces some additional character ideas, and maybe gives you some settings or tools for developing your own stuff. It fits neatly into the core framework of the game, expands current rules or tweaks a few things to fix them.

Now this book, in conjunction with you, will break them all again.

Mage posits a framework — a modeling set, if you will — of rules and setting to play a particular form of game. Sure, you might bend it a little to play a more violence-and-betrayal chronicle, or you could tweak it

and play up a romantic game, but you still have Spheres, Arete, the quest for Ascension, and all that, right? So what do you do if you want to play a game where everyone in the world is a mage? Or if you don't like the way the Spheres are defined but you like their implementation mechanic? Or you want to play high-concept but can't wrap your brain around philosophy? It's the Storyteller's prerogative to spin a game around and change it into something more enjoyable for the troupe. That's what this book is about: twisting and turning to make *Mage* your own thing.

To that end, this book has clarifications and updates on rules, sure. It *also* presents alternatives to the usual *Mage* game — different ways of looking at chronicle design and magical systems. More than just presenting options, it presents these as inspirations. These are examples of things you can do, in ways that show you what you'll need in order to implement them.

THE GOLDEN RULE



The pages you hold in your hands are full of rules, clarifications, suggestions and advice. Indeed, there are hundreds of pages of them. Ultimately, however, they are here for one reason — to remind you of that supreme guide known as the Golden Rule. Even the authors and developers at White Wolf bend the rules, make our own house rules, and wholeheartedly ignore rules altogether in our efforts to tell stories for our own tabletop groups. We are constantly adjusting, often on the fly, to make the game fit the needs of the story instead of letting the rules of the game dictate the story. As you read these pages, remember that nothing herein is gospel; nothing in here is the “right way” to do it. This book is just a grand collection of ideas, each presented in all its raw glory, ripe for you to pluck out and test in your own games as you strive to tell the best stories you can possibly give to your troupe. Dive in, harvest the pearls you know will enrich your Storyteller’s chest of tricks and shuck the shells that strike you as empty into the discard pile. You will hear a lot of people say that roleplaying games are not about winning or losing, but those groups of players and Storytellers that have the most fun really are “winning the game,” and don’t let anybody tell you otherwise. We hope that our ideas will help you and your troupe win in your efforts to tell stories that are fun and entertaining for all of you.

Ultimately, the Storyteller should use the rules as tools to enhance the fun of the game for herself and the players. This does not necessarily mean wantonly abandoning any rule just because a single player disagrees with it; after all, the rules are intended to settle arguments rather than encourage them. Storytellers who completely disregard all of the rules will find themselves struggling to keep any sense of order, as players will grow confused and frustrated with no idea of what to expect from the game. On the other hand, Storytellers who never bend on any rule are likely to find the game has become a cage, with the Storyteller and players alike trapped by the dictates of someone else’s idea of what makes a game fun. The decision to ignore or change or bend a rule is an ever-present one, but a good Storyteller will gradually learn when she should stand by the rules as a method of necessary order and when she should overturn them in favor of story progress. We hope this book will help teach Storytellers to make these decisions on their own as often as it offers specific decisions.

FOLD, SPINDLE AND MUTILATE!

All right, we’ve tossed the Golden Rule out there and told you to mess around with rules that make the game fun. “So why,” you ask, “am I paying for a book that just tells me to make up my own rules?”

Because rule books are like prefab kits. They contain parts that are tested, that generally fit together, and that usually offer a coherent and internally consistent framework. Instead of having to make up a whole bunch of stuff yourself and test it by trial and error, you gain the benefit of premade parts. Mind you, you still have to put them together and you have to make sure you pick the parts that you want to use. Instead of forcing a fit, you want to put pieces together into a seamless chronicle — and the published materials help to do that.

When you want to diverge markedly from the direction of publications, though, you may find yourself in empty terrain. Sure, you might have some stuff in mind from a recent movie, or perhaps you want to hybridize some rules. That’s where this book comes in: You can take a look at ways to try out things you’ve wanted to do but haven’t put down on paper.

PREPARE FOR IT...

The Storytellers Handbook is about preparedness. You can run great games on the fly, but when you want to distance yourself from the basic model, you need to put your ideas down in concrete form. This book offers the inspiration that helps you set down your own chronicle directions.

In **Mage** more so than in other games, preparation is key. It’s a big universe with many complex rules — you’ll need a bit more than Cliff Notes to make this fly! As you read through this book, *interact* with it. Ask yourself how it might apply to your game. Put sticky notes on the pages with your own ideas and comments. When you don’t just read about an idea, but you turn it over in your mind and see what you can do with it, you’ll not only give it your own personal spin but you’ll garner a more comprehensive understanding of it.

So take notes. Class is in session and this is your textbook...but it’s a ride through wondrous realms and the graduates are all Storytellers with the right stuff.

WHAT’S IN IT FOR ME?

So how can this book help you make up your own stuff? Sounds like a contradiction in terms. Yes and no — while this book can’t be a comprehensive guide to

everything, it can help point you in the direction of many different and interesting ideas, and it can give examples of ways to implement those ideas. Among these pages you'll find...

Chapter One: The Craft. Errata, addenda and answers to those burning questions and errant loopholes you've always wondered about. Sure, some rules have had minor corrections over time. (Nobody's perfect.) You'll find answers to your questions here as well as some ideas on *why* things were done the way they were.

Additionally, this section includes a boatload of optional rules and rules to change around the game. If it's a rule that would totally alter Paradox, or change Abilities or alter the Spheres, it's in here.

Chapter Two: The Awakened Struggle. Unlike many roleplaying games, *Mage* can often seem overly subtle and abstract. The villain is obscured and may not be a villain at all when viewed from his own perspective. The various sources of dramatic conflict and the possible antagonists central to *Mage*'s metaplot are introduced here, along with ideas for using them to drive stories and plots.

Chapter Three: Awakening the Storyteller. Advanced advice for Storytellers who want to spruce up the game or who keep having problems running it. Setting up in advance, advice for quick game solutions, ways to simplify your systems and paperwork. Motives, themes, and methods. Plus a dissertation on the basics of philosophy and how you can apply that cerebral angle to *Mage*.

Obviously, if you're running *Mage* you're probably a pretty advanced Storyteller already. Chapter Three's advice covers unusual situations, offers a little back-up when players get out of hand and shows you how you can bring your game up to speed by combining advance

planning with some quick time-saving templates or pared-down records.

Chapter Four: Avatars and Seekings. Vital to a mage's magical development is the Seeking, a sort of magical mystery tour initiated by a willworker's own Avatar to goad him toward enlightenment. But *how* in the world do you devise and execute one of these strange trips in a story? This chapter tells you how and produces myriad ideas for Avatars of all Essences.

Chapter Five: Alternative Settings. From fanciful worlds of magic to spins on the outcome of the Ascension War, this chapter covers several samples of chronicles that veer far afield from the usual *Mage* fare. Plus a checklist for making your own chronicles, ideas on things you can tweak or change, and a bunch of material to enhance your specific themes for otherwise usual chronicles.

If you've been itching to run a *Mage* game that's a space opera, or you want to play around with mages in a fantastic setting out of comic books or movies, this is the place to look. Before the World of Darkness becomes passe or repetitive, browse through these ideas. Some of them might spark a new direction for your chronicle or spawn a completely new one.

Chapter Six: A World of Magic. A long, hard look at crossovers and where mages fit in a unified World of Darkness — and what you want to watch out for! Ways to integrate other game themes and characters. Expanding the World of Darkness to encompass other ideas beyond the core of *Mage*.

More than just giving you some crossover rules, though, Chapter Six is also a toolkit — it examines where you're likely to run into problems with mixed venues and how to address those issues. In some cases they may not even *be* problems or may spark new ideas.



Sample file

CHAPTER ① THE CRAFT



Running a compelling, engaging **Mage** game is hard work! The Storyteller — you — must put a lot of thought into what the game's about, how to execute it, and which areas of the theme and mood to focus upon. It may not seem like much at first, but it's a lot to juggle. Do your Storyteller characters have the right

mindset to capture the game's mood? Does Resonance really work the way your players all claim that it does? What the heck was the development and writing team *thinking*, anyway?

Let's start small, with the niggling rules, and then move up to the big time: the assumptions behind why **Mage** not only works the way that it does, but has produced the many books it has.

FAQ



Visitors to the White Wolf website will recognize questions from the **Mage** game's Frequently Asked Questions herein. In some cases they've been expanded upon, as necessary. You'll also find answers to several other questions that may have come up in the course of a long-term chronicle.

What happened to the numbers on the book spines?

The numbers on the spines of various **Mage: The Ascension** books, sort of reminiscent of the Halo numbers from various Nine Inch Nails CDs and videos, provide a method of keeping track of which **Mage** books you do and don't have. The numbers existed in the waaaaay back very beginning on the first books, but they're not used any more.

In too many cases a spine number wound up being more trouble than it was worth. They never had much use ("I need **Mage** book #21!") and they caused some confusion when weird events transpired — anything from books coming out of order due to changing release dates, to books with the wrong numbers!

By the time of the Revised edition, it was clear that the spine numbers, while perhaps whimsically flavorful, didn't serve much purpose yet conversely could cause problems. (Yes, people actually complained when a typo led to a duplicated spine number on one printing.)

Perhaps more noteworthy, some **Mage** books — the Tradition books — never had a spine number, so there was no way to fit them into any sort of comprehensive list.

This list includes all of them, including editions that are no longer in print:

- 01 **Mage** (first edition)
- 02 **Mage Storytellers Screen** (first edition)
- 03 **Book of Chantries**
- 04 **Loom of Fate**
- 05 **Progenitors**
- 06 **Digital Web**
- 07 **Book of Shadows**
- 08 **Chaos Factor**
- 09 **Iteration X**
- 10 **Book of Madness**
- 11 **New World Order**

- 12 **Ascension's Right Hand**
- 13 **Mage** (second edition)
- 14 **Mage Storytellers Screen and Companion** (second edition)
- 15 **Void Engineers**
- 16 **Horizon: Stronghold of Hope**
- 17 **Book of Crafts**
- 18 **Book of Worlds**
- 19 **Book of Mirrors**
- 20 **Syndicate**
- 21 **Technomancer's Toybox**
- 22 **Digital Web 2.0** (misnumbered as 21)
- 23 **Orphan's Survival Guide**
- 24 **Tales of Magick: Dark Adventure**
- 25 **Guide to the Technocracy**
- 26 **Initiates of the Art**
- 27 **Spirit Ways**
- 28 **Masters of the Art**

What happened to (my favorite stuff that wasn't in any book)?

Victims of word counts. **Mage** revised, for example clocked in with 90,000 words over what we could print. For reference's sake, that's about equal to an extra 160 pages of material that just couldn't fit in the main book. It's unfortunate but it's also a law of publishing. It's up to the developer to decide what's essential and what can be held until later. So if you thought something was at the heart of **Mage** but you didn't see it in the book, chances are that it was held for a later release.

Of course, with the release of revised books and updated Guides, a lot of material has finally made it to press. Still, every once in a while something doesn't fit because of space (like **Merits and Flaws in Laws of Ascension**) or manages to slip through the cracks into obscurity (like **Lions of Zion**, who never appeared in the revised **Storytellers Companion**).

I'm confused by the new **Paradox** system. Does **Paradox** always backlash? Does it always release the entire amount? The descriptions seem contradictory.

Paradox is a fickle force. Sometimes it backlashes; sometimes it waits. Sometimes it's a hammer and sometimes it's like sandpaper against your skin.

Paradox usually ignites as it's garnered but not always. Figure about a one-in-ten chance that **Paradox** will hang on a mage instead of backlashing immediately. Of course, the player can always spend

Willpower to prevent the Paradox from going off all at once. Ultimately it's up to the Storyteller to decide whether the Paradox explodes as gathered or whether it hangs in the balance.

When Paradox backlashes, it's usually easiest to simply fire off all of the Paradox accumulated at once and look up the results in the appropriate damage and flaw tables. If you want to run with more uncertainty in your Paradox, you can roll a die pool equal to the Paradox rating of the mage; each success (6 or more) causes one point of Paradox to discharge from the pool in a backlash. (Permanent Paradox can still discharge in this case, but it doesn't go away.) Take the results for the amount of total Paradox that backlashes; the mage stores up the rest.

In the event that a mage has some hanging Paradox left in his pool, it still disperses at a rate of one point per week, as stated in the rules.

What are the differences between vulgar and coincidental magic? What happens when a mage casts coincidental magic, and how much does the player have to describe? The rules seem kinda sketchy.

Vulgar and coincidental magic are described in *Mage* on pp. 137–138, but the descriptions leave a lot of leeway. Ultimately, the full limits on what counts as “vulgar” versus “coincidental” are up to the game that the Storyteller wants to run.

In brief, coincidental magic is anything that *could* reasonably have happened without the intervention of magic. If a mage does some mojo and a couple of cars crash, well, they *could've* crashed anyway; it's a coincidence. Likewise, if the mage prays for intervention while an enemy is chasing him and suddenly the enemy's elevator gets stuck, it's a coincidence — not because all miracles are coincidental but because an elevator could conceivably just happen to become stuck.

Vulgar magic is anything outside the bounds of coincidence. The mage hurls lightning from his fingers — that couldn't plausibly happen in the real world, so it's obviously magic! Similarly, if a mage steps into a bathroom in one city and steps out of one in another city, it's clearly something that couldn't have “just happened,” and it's vulgar magic.

The boundaries of coincidence and vulgarity aren't set, though. The Consensus has some effect: What people *believe* is possible shapes what *is* possible. Thus, if a mage manages to convince people that he has some incredible gizmo that really works and lets him appear to hurl lightning, the effect may

well be coincidence — the mage does his magic and waves his hands, but the device is doing the work, right? As far as people can tell, anyway. Similarly, a mage may have special knowledge about some little-known “fact” of science that he leans on, but if it's not widely spread and believed, it won't appear to be a natural part of what could have happened, so it'll be vulgar magic or science.

When a mage does vulgar magic, he cuts loose with an effect and fires off something that clearly violates the natural order. Simple. A coincidental effect is usually much more subtle, though. The mage sets magic in motion but then weaves that magic into the Tapestry. The magic nudges events into a certain direction; those without magic can't even tell that anything unusual happened. The mage might not even know what is going to happen! The *player* should describe a plausible coincidence, but the *mage* merely sets up events and probably doesn't even know if the end result came from chance or from magic. For instance, a Hermetic mage could invoke the power of Forces to strike an enemy down coincidentally. The mage weaves the magic into the Tapestry and hopes that it works. Lo and behold, a severed power line hits the foe and shocks him. Unusual, but it could happen, so it's a coincidence, and nobody can really tell if it was magic or not. The *player* knew by rolling dice, and the *player* described the plausible coincidence (subject to the Storyteller's approval), but the mage only knows that he relied on magic, he believed, and lo, his enemy was struck down.

Individual Storytellers should play with the boundaries of coincidence as it suits the nature of the game. Coincidence and vulgarity will shift from time to time, place to place and person to person, too.

What's permanent Paradox, how do you get it, what does it do and is it the same as a permanent Paradox Flaw?

Permanent Paradox results when a character has some sort of massively unusual alteration that consistently and constantly violates the “rules” of reality.

For instance, a mage can, using Life magic, give himself better muscles. Usually this use is short term to give a temporary boost; the mage garners a small amount of Paradox and suffers Pattern bleeding because of the stress of altering his personal Pattern. On the other hand, a Master of Life might use magic to preserve himself beyond normal human lifespan, retaining youth and vigor for a century. This usage

clearly violates the “laws” of conventional human existence. Why doesn’t the Master suffer Pattern bleeding? Because instead of temporarily stretching his Pattern, he permanently rewrites it. The problem is that he rewrites it in a way that reality doesn’t accept, so he constantly has the looming threat of Paradox hovering over him. In game terms, he has permanent Paradox.

If your mage garners permanent Paradox, mark it by filling in (not just X’ing) the Paradox box(es). That Paradox always counts for the character’s Paradox backlashes — it means worse backlashes and more damage — but it never goes away. It can’t be removed with Prime magic. It only goes away if the mage undoes the thing that caused it (such as removing a cybernetic enhancement) or if the Consensus changes to permit it (such as if the Consensus comes to accept that cybernetic enhancement as “normal”). Once that happens it converts to normal Paradox and can be discharged.

Permanent Paradox is not the same as a permanent Paradox Flaw. The latter results from a nasty backlash giving the mage some hindrance that permanently hampers him: a withered hand, dead-white hair, a Derangement or some similar problem.

Okay, smarty pants, so if the Consensus says “reality is what people believe,” then how come the Consensus works? Most people don’t believe that reality is whatever they want to believe, so it shouldn’t be, right?

The Consensus is an aftereffect of the creation of the Tellurian. Like the existence of Prime energy, it’s not really subject to interpretation. Prime energy (Quintessence) exists in spite of the fact that most normal people don’t believe in it. In some cases there are things that just “seem to be,” whether due to historical inertia or cosmological constants.

In Mage, belief, channeled through will, creates reality. Mages can do this consciously because they are Awakened. Sleepers do so only on the deepest most unconscious levels, such that individual belief amounts for little, but the collective mix of such unconscious convictions is strong enough to bind reality to a particular mode of being — to make it follow certain rules of what is acceptable and what is not. Since it is an unconscious process, people can’t simply wish things weren’t different (unless they’re Awakened). In addition, many neurotic contents of this collective unconscious of sorts might well make their way into consensual reality, even though nobody in his right mind would consciously let such

things exist. Hence, vampires and other night beasties lurk in the real world.

The “real world” is the material world. Anything can exist in the Umbra, regardless of consensual belief (although even here there are certain laws, and hence Paradox). It seems that the reality filters only really kick in for the material world, much as an individual’s own ego will not allow certain thoughts to become conscious, relegating them to the unconscious to reappear later as dreams or Freudian slips.

Of course, you can play around with the idea of who exactly makes up the Consensus. It’s not necessarily only humans. Maybe spirits, animals or even unknown others participate in this masterful tapestry called the Consensus. While belief affects the Consensus, it doesn’t necessary create it. Some “laws” of nature may exist independent of belief, and others might change with varying degrees of ease and speed.

When stepping sideways, does the Avatar Storm cause damage from failed Spirit dice, or from a separate roll of Arete + Paradox? And does the Storm affect anything other than mages?

It’s Arete + permanent Paradox. The Storm affects only enlightened individuals and creations — that is, mages and Talismans.

So how come the Avatar Storm doesn’t affect shapeshifters, spirits, what-have-you?

The Avatar Storm is attracted to strong, powerful Avatars. It’s like lightning striking a magnet. Shapeshifters aren’t exactly human and certainly don’t have Avatars in the Mage sense (they have spirits, but they are part spirit). Spirit entities, by the same token, are not necessarily Avatars.

Why did the Avatar Storm happen the way that it did? It seems like a cop-out to take Masters and the Umbra out of the game.

Some people think the Avatar Storm is just a plot device that came out of nowhere. Well, multiple nuclear devices went off in the Underworld. The Sixth Maelstrom arrived. Doissetep collapsed in the largest display of Forces in memory. The Digital Web crashed and reset. The Tradition stronghold of Concordia/Horizon was invaded and fell! And people think that the logical result of these events upon the spirit world should be *nothing happening*?

In a game-world sense, the Avatar Storm is a gross consequence: It’s a reminder of the impending Sixth Age/Armageddon and a slap in the face to arrogant mages (and others) who thought that

they could meddle around with cosmically destructive forces.

In a theme/ mood sense, the Avatar Storm helps to make the Umbra more isolated and mysterious. It also cuts the Masters off from Earth, thereby changing the power dynamic of the game.

See also the metaplot wrap-up on pp. 33-35.

It seems really hard to build a fast Effect. With penalties for fast-casting, required successes and the like, most mages will have trouble getting more than one or two successes in a turn.

This rule is deliberate; mages should take time to prepare, cast their Effects wisely and use brains, not brute force. Magic turns the universe on its head — it is not something done quickly or lightly! Magic is not an instant cure-all for everything. A mage can't rely solely on magic to fix every problem.

A mage under stress is probably better suited using some subtle magic to nudge events into her favor or splitting dice pools to get a simple personal Effect backing up a normal action. Real titanic workings will take time and effort. If a mage just *has* to do something phenomenal in one turn, that's what Willpower and Quintessence expenditures are for. Remember, too, that if all that your mage wants to do is kill someone with vulgar magic that successes on the attack roll do add to damage as with any other sort of attack, so even a one-success fire blast can inflict some hefty damage with a good shot.

If a Storyteller wants to let mages build faster Effects, it's easiest to get rid of the fast-casting difficulty penalty and to loosen up the success chart so that one or two successes can still score useful results.

Now you know what was intended — that magic be a demanding but rewarding craft. If you want to change it, you can.

Um, what are the Technocracy's Conventions, anyway?

Blast, that sidebar just didn't make it into **Mage Revised**. In brief, the Technocracy has five Conventions: Iteration X, concerned with computer and material sciences; New World Order, which works with social engineering and information distribution; Progenitors, who practice medicine; the Syndicate, which works with money and economics; and the Void Engineers, who explore and chart unknown places and dimensions. Together they uphold the Precepts of Damian, a set of guidelines that exhort them to protect humanity and explore the cosmos.

What level of Life magic is required to heal other people?

As implied in Life 3, "To more complex creatures, she can exert change, causing the entity to grow or change as she desires," a mage can heal or injure other people (and complex animals) with Life 3. Transforming the Pattern into something else requires Life 4.

What's the deal with the metaplot?

See pp. 32-35 for a discussion of all things metaplotty.

How are Geasa (Mage Rev pp. 298–299) supposed to work?

A *geas* Flaw reduces the value of a corresponding Merit or Flaw. The point table, unfortunately, is backward (oops). So if you have a very simple *geas*, it's worth 1 point — it reduces the cost of a Merit or Flaw only slightly, because you're unlikely to break it and thus unlikely to lose the Merit or suffer the Flaw. If you have a very nasty *geas*, it can be worth up to 5 points — it will mitigate a Merit because you're almost certain to lose it. Of course, a *geas*' value can never be more than *one less* than the value of its corresponding Merit or Flaw.

A straightforward example: Say that your mage has Sphere Natural: Spirit (a 5-point Merit). Then say the character has a *geas* to always leave a small sacrifice of food for the spirits when eating — a minor *geas*, worth about 2 points. The cost of the Sphere Natural Merit is now only 3 points, but if the mage ever fails to fulfill the *geas*, he loses the Merit.

As a Flaw, consider a mage with the Crucial Component: sunlight Flaw. This Flaw is 2 points. The mage also takes a *geas*: always eat your vegetables, a 1-point *geas*. The mage gains one freebie point for the Flaw, but if he ever fails to eat his veggies, he suffers from the Flaw in the future. (In this case, you're getting points for a Flaw you *don't even suffer* unless you break the *geas*. Pretty sweet.)

Can a mage change Traditions?

Conditionally, yes. A mage who switches through different Traditions during early training gains the *Dual Traditions* Merit (see p. 298 of **Mage**). Similarly, a mage might gain this Merit during the course of play at a cost of 14 experience points and lots of role-playing. The mage gains the indoctrination and skills of *both* Traditions at once, which is why it's such an expensive Merit.

A mage *might* change to a wholly different Tradition and abandon a former one at some point. The mage probably gains the *Probationary Sect Member* Flaw or a similar social penalty. Making such a