

Building a Working Magic System

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14 June 2011

This set of questions was developed when Holly had to create a magic system from scratch for *White Cat (Curse Workers)*. When creating her magic system, Holly first worked out her plot, then created the world/system to complement it.

Day logic vs. night logic in magic

- Day logic = very like science, this magic is consistent and follows universal rules and laws (e.g. in Harry Potter “lumos” is always going to cause the wand to light)
- Night logic = more organic and entrenched in emotion, closer to a numinous experience (this type of magic is more common in dark fantasy or horror; it tends to represent situations in which magic is “wrong” or “terrible but beautiful”)

The following questions focus on magic systems that use “day logic”
Answer these questions to define the parameters of and create limits for the magic in your world (there must be limits, otherwise all plot problems and conflicts will magically dissolve and your story dies)

1. Who has the magic?
2. What does it do?
3. How does the user make it happen?
4. How is the user affected?
5. How is the world affected?
6. How are magic users grouped and perceived?

Be sure to distinguish between whether this world is an open fantasy (everyone knows there’s magic in the world) versus a closed fantasy (people stumble across magic; it is a carefully guarded secret)

Additional questions to consider:

1. What is the cost of magic? All magic has a cost. The cost can range anywhere from something physical (like losing fingers or limbs) to something more abstract like the emotional toll on the user. (Examples of magic coming with a cost *The Dark Is Rising* by Susan Cooper—character must leave Christmas with family to serve-- or *Skin Hunger* by Kathleen Duey)

2. What are the limits of the magic? Magic needs to be calibrated. Too much power in the hands of the characters destroys the story/capsizes it. Some ways to limit magic: only small numbers of people have it; to use it requires a sacrifice; limit the type or scope of magic; magic can only be accessed through a lengthy or complex ceremony; making a mistake in the magic use destroys the user; magic causes pain or madness in the user; magic causes blight or disrupts industry; magic users are distrusted by society, etc... (Examples *Sabriel* by Garth Nix, *Demon's Lexicon* by Sarah Rees Brennan, *City of Bones* by Cassandra Clare)

3. What is the potential model for your magic system? Is there some sort of organization your magic users are subject to? Potential models include church/clergy; medieval apprentice and master; organized crime; board of directors; academics; solitary hermits working in isolation; Wicca; fairytale model; ceremonial; artists with patrons; alchemy, etc...

4. What do these rules of magic say about the world? Look at your system for its "metaphorical resonances" because whether you intend to or not, the way your magic system is structured will say something about the way you view the world. Magic is narrative. (Examples *Still* by David Feintuch, *A Wizard of Earthsea* by Ursula LeGuin)

A few closing points

- Once you have constructed your system, find a video gamer or role player to review it with you. If there are unintended loopholes or flaws in your logic, they will find it!
- According to some detective, people kill for the following reasons: sex, love, religion, money or status. These are the same reasons people use magic.
- Specificity will serve you best when answering all of the above questions. Be as specific as possible.
- The larger the magic system is, the harder it is to control. Be warned.