

Ritual Magic

An addition to Magic Systems

First draft

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Ritual Magic abandons the concept of spells with fixed effects, takes magic one step further to a freeform system that allows the mage hitherto unexperienced freedom in spellcasting by creating a framework that governs the game mechanics and, hopefully, game balance.

It was created with the AD&D system in mind, but should be useable with any gamesystem.

Rituals:

A ritual is basically a new form of spell. The differences to traditional spells are greater flexibility, as the mage designs the ritual with the end in mind, and thus every spell effect may be achieved. The preparation time a ritual requires is much longer than that for a spell, sometimes it may take years to complete a ritual. The formula has to be designed by the mage himself, the proper ingredients have to be gathered, the ritual has to be prepared and measures to ensure the safety of the caster should be devised. Then follows the casting of the ritual and the sealing of the effects.

What rituals are and what not:

Rituals should be understood as an addition and expansion to the magic rules provided by your game system, not a replacement. The traditional spells still should take up the bunch of spellcasting in your campaign, to make rituals an outstanding event. Every player playing a mage should have to devise his own rituals, and you might well state that a ritual designed by another spellcaster may not be cast by any other mage, or even that rituals may be cast only once and have to be reworked to accustom the new circumstances before another casting. This is probably the least you should do, else there's the danger that rituals become just another kind of spell.

Game Mechanics:

How you handle this is left to you and depends on the game system you use. I introduced the *Cast Ritual* skill in my campaign and use a skill system that allows raising of skill scores, unlike the proficiency system in AD&D, where you get a fixed score in a skill when you learn it, and it basically stays the same all the time, whether you are a 1st Lvl character or a 15th Lvl character. I use skill ratings. The *Cast Ritual* skill is used to determine the success or failure of the actual casting and also expresses the experience and knowledge the mage has in casting rituals. Other skill or attribute checks might still be required for research etc.

Time and resources required to devise and cast a ritual:

This depends heavily on the power of the ritual, so you have to use your common sense. I have added a framework to give you some guidelines for each of the steps below.

Possible modifiers for the skill check (D20 scale, multiply by 5 to get percentile scores):

+10 to -15	depending on the power of the ritual
+5 to -5	depending on how well the player did designing the ritual
+2 to -2	depending on the quality of materials used
+1 to -1	for experience of assistants, if any

Quite a large range of possible modifiers, but I give usually 25% chance minimum to 85% maximum.

A really powerful mage with a Cast Ritual score of 17 (The maximal score I allow for skills) therefore has a maximum chance of success of 50% (17 -15 +5 +2 +1 = 10 or less on a D20 =50%) for casting the most powerful ritual imaginable (attaining godhood, wiping out a galaxy, and similar stuff). Considering the effects of backfires,

the mage won't try to cast a ritual of such power without a VERY good reason, after all, the player will have a 50% chance of losing his loved character.

Of course you may assign any other special modifiers as needed, but it worked well that way in my campaign .

Casting Rituals:

Casting a ritual requires several steps:

1. Sketching out what the mage wants to achieve.
2. Information gathering.
3. Researching the design.
4. Gathering ingredients.
5. Preparing the settings.
6. Casting the ritual.
7. Sealing the effects.

Step one: Sketching the aims:

This step usually evolves from play. Once a mage declares his intention to cast a ritual, he probably knows what he wants to achieve in general terms. Now he should think about and write down the exact effects that he wants to achieve and hand a copy to the GM. Once this stage is completed, only minor changes should be allowed by the GM, so the mage should think very carefully before completing this step.

Example:

The mage decides he wants to transform into a dragon. Thus he specifies this further: He wants to attain the dragon's form (eg. physical characteristics), but would like to remain his own psyche. Furthermore, he'd like to obtain a dragon's innate abilities, like firebreathing, shapechanging, etc. he writes this down and hands a copy to the DM. There's usually no skill check required at this stage, but the DM might demand an Intelligence check or something similar if the player missed something obvious that the character should possibly know, but the player doesn't. The time required for this stage is usually negotiable.

Step two: Information gathering:

Now it is time to know what possibilities exist to achieve an effect as desired by the mage. This usually involves library research, contacting other spellcasters, and so on, until the mage has enough information to start step three. It may also require more in-depth research about the subject of the spell. If the mage wants to banish an arch-enemy to the abyss, for example, he should have to find out as much as possible about the subject: aims, dislikes, history and so on. If the mage wants to do a ritual that transforms him into a true dragon, he would have to spend quite some time in company of dragons, while learning as much as possible about the psyche, life and powers of dragons, he would have to earn their trust, maybe adventure with them and share their lives. The mage will also have to know what ingredients will most probably be useful before proceeding to step three. The mage might need access to lab, which will vary in cost depending on the power of the ritual. The more powerful the ritual, the better equipped the lab has to be. Time needed may range from a week to a year.

Example:

The mage visits the local library, looking for texts about dragons, legends, songs, historical entries, related spells etc. After this first information, let's say he thinks he found a place where dragons are thought to live. He sets out to study these dragons, live with them, maybe kill one to delve into dragon anatomy. As you can see, this is dangerous enough...After some time the player studied dragons, the DM decides that this should suffice. The DM might demand skill checks on Legends&Lore, History, Library Use or whatever he deems appropriate for the library research part of this step. The other part will probably require some Charisma or Fellowship check as well as decent roleplaying. Time required: about one month for library research etc, maybe about half a year to a year for studying the dragons, depending on whether the mage breaks off the research to go adventuring in-between.

Step three: Researching the design:

Once the mage has all the knowledge he needs, he should withdraw into his study and research the ritual. This can take from a week for a minor magical effect up to a year for a world-shattering spell. The *Design* of a ritual is a written instruction, similar to spell written down in a spellbook. A Design describes all parts of casting the

ritual. The player should work this out and write it down. Preparation, precautions, and casting should all be detailed on the design, as a step-by-step set of instructions. Depending on how imaginative and colourful the description is, the player should be awarded experience. Flavour and atmosphere are the keywords, not game mechanics.

The DM should add additional information on possible backfires (keep this secret for greatest effect). The mage needs a place where he is undisturbed, and usually two to forty weeks of work, depending on the power of the ritual.

A successful Intelligence test should be required to create a flawless design (Make a hidden roll so the player does not know whether the copy is flawed or works right.). If this test is not passed, roll a hidden Wisdom or Insight test, to determine if the mage recognizes the flaw in his design. If the flaw is discovered, the mage may again spend half the time he needed to devise the design to correct it, if not, it will automatically backfire.

Example:

After he has got all the information he needs, the mage withdraws to his chambers and laboratory to devise the design. He decides he needs a dragon that is killed during the course of the ritual, so he may transfer his mind into the dragon's body and the DM approves this method. Another possibility would have been to use a shapechanging method, but the mage prefers the first one...he never was a nice guy, after all. With the basics of the ritual in mind, the player then writes down the design. You can find the sample design in Appendix A.

Step four: Gathering the ingredients:

Depending on the power of the ritual, this can be quite messy for the mage. Most ingredients and materials should be readily obtainable, such as candles, braziers, etc, but one or two can be more of a problem, depending on the kind of ritual. This will probably mean that the mage has to set out adventuring to find the ingredients.

The mage will have to pay 500 to 100 000 GP or more for the materials, time is at least two weeks with a usual maximum of ten weeks for the ingredients money can buy.

Example:

The special ingredient that is not normally obtainable is the dragon, so the mage and his fellows set out to capture one. Assuming they succeed, the mage spends some time buying the more mundane materials, such as dcandles, braziers etc. But considering the mage's gains should the ritual succeed, the DM states that the mage also needs a sword of dragonslaying with which he has to kill the dragon during the ritual. Time required is about one or two weeks for the mundane components, while the special components should be aquired through adventuring.

Step five: Preparing the setting:

In order to conduct the ritual properly, the scene should be set very carefully. Placing magical symbols, wards, etc, drawing summoning circles and pentagrams, instructing the assistants, if any, all belong into this stage that usually happens immediately before the casting, although not necessarily. Some rituals may require a proper place with a distinct atmosphere that enhances or enables the effect to take place. Depending on the nature of the ritual, this can be as few as one hour up to weeks spent in meditation and preparation. Monetary expenses are usually low.

Example:

The mage decides the ritual might work better if cast in the dragons cave, where his presence is still strong. The wicked DM decides that this actually imposes a penalty, as the mage has to overcome the dragons presence as well in order to successfully cast the spell. So he travels to the dragons cave and sets up the scene: He draws the symbols on the floor, places candles, instructs his apprentices, secures the dragon to his designated place and so on. He might as well have all his stuff brought along when he captured the dragon, provided he did think of this. The time required is about half a day.

Step six: Casting the ritual:

The mage now primarily follows the instructions laid out in the Design. This is the most simple and the most crucial stage, as any undiscovered flaw in the Design or some other component will now take effect, costing only the mage's life if he's lucky. Money is not required at this stage, and time can be from an hour to several weeks.

Example:

The mage then begins casting the ritual, following the instructions of the design. The ritual reaches its climax when the mage rises his sword high over his head, chanting the final words before sinking the sword deep into the dragons heart. Provided he made no mistakes and passes his final dice roll, the mages soul will now be transferred into the dragons body. He would be lucky if he'd taken some measures to heal the dragon after the ritual. Time required is about four hours. Let's say he has Cast Ritual skill with a score of 15, which is modified by -7 for power, +5 because the player has spent some time to think about it and roleplayed very well when he studied the dragons and gathered information, and -2 because his fellow adventurers have never before assisted in casting a ritual, which would leave him with a modified score of 11. This equals a 60% chance to succeed.

Step seven (optional): Sealing the ritual:

This step is only required when the rituals effects should be permanent. Deciding whether this step is required is a bit tricky. For example, a ritual that gives the mage information will not need it, as the effect ends as soon as the mage knows everything he wanted to find out by this ritual, but a ritual that holds someone in a forcecage for example would need it, as it is the ritual that powers the effect. I've made this optional, as it is rather difficult to come up with a proper way of sealing a ritual. You might demand it for the powerful rituals. Time required is usually short, as it is more a part of the actual casting than a separate step.

Example:

The mage wants to remain in his new state of existence, so he seals the ritual by binding his soul to the new body. He achieves this by burning his old body as soon as takes possession of the dragon's body.

Appendix A: Sample Design:

Dragon Form:

This ritual will enable those bold and strong at heart to transform to true might, gaining not only the form but also the essence of pure dragonhood, thus to become no mere imitation of those oldest and mightiest of livings, but to join their ranks.

First, you will have to find a dragon serving as vessel for your humble soul. Choose the dragon carefully, for you will get all the power the dragon had possessed in life, so choose only the mightiest and oldest dragon for your gain.

Then you will also need a blade of dragonslaying. You may create this yourself or may use one created by another mage, this will usually not influence the ritual.

A brazier is also recommended to burn the incense that help you concentrate and let the power flow freely through you body.

If you have acquired all the things you need, begin by securing the dragon tightly to the floor of his cave with ropes of purest silk while chanting the first of Caldrens Incantations of Holding. Proceed by drawing a circle with chalk soaked in the dragons blood. This must be done in utter silence and will prevent the dragons soul from escaping. Draw then your focus onto the floor opposite to the dragon while chanting your Personal Incantation of Might. Once you have done this, light twelve white candles covered with ash in a circle around the dragon.

Cast then the complete Rite of Le'shrac with care. Your assistants will have to set up and light the brazier in the meantime in such fashion that your focus, the dragon, and the braziers build a perfect triangle. This completed, sit down in the center of your focus and enter your meditative trance while inhaling the braziers scent. Gather all the power you are capable to wield.

Let then the blade, that has to be bathed in purest water while you meditate, be handed to you by your assistants. Start chanting the second of Caldrens Incantations of Holding while walking over to the dragon. At the culmination of your chant, strike the blade into the dragon's heart with all the power you can while battling with his escaping soul for control of his physical presence. If you don't succeed killing the beast with but one strike, the ritual will fail. But if you succeed, the dragon's body will be yours, and with it all his might. Your assistants have to burn your old body immediately to prevent your spirit to return to it.

If you then survive within the mortally wounded body (it will take some time for you to heal, be sure you receive proper attendance and care by your aides), the world will celebrate the birth of a new being of power, of a new Dragonmage.

Backfire (DM Information):

The dragon dies, but his spirit wins the battle for body control and manages to escape to some part of the casters mind. This means for the mage that he is possessed by the dragon, though he may not immediately be aware of this. Depending on your mood, the possession might come and go with stress situations, always happening when the mage really can't need it. Finding a way to get rid of this problem could turn out to be tricky.

Fumble:

1: The dragon's body dies and with him the mage.

2: The dragon possesses the mage completely, which might become a problem for his fellows and assistants, as he will surely seek revenge.

A word on Backfires:

I suggest that when designing the backfire, especially for powerful rituals, choose one that will allow the player to continue play his character. Give him some troubles, but also means to overcome them, just don't take the character out of play because the player's dice didn't want him to succeed...You might rule otherwise with fumbles, which leave a much smaller chance for the character to be blown to pieces or whatever. And as you've seen in the example, the chances for the player to succeed are not that great, but don't discourage him by threatening to kill him outright should he fails his roll.

The dangers of introducing rituals:

The foremost problem could be players using rituals to enhance character stats. Dealing with this is difficult for me as my players are just great - they recognize that building a too powerful character would spoil the fun for the other players, so I never actually had the problem. Most experienced players should recognize this also, if you tell them (although this might not be a satisfying solution in terms of roleplaying).

Up to now I haven't encountered any other problems, as it is quite well balanced I guess. Just be sure to spend some thoughts on this topic and how your mages will probably handle this before introducing rituals in your campaign.

Some final thoughts:

As you will have recognized, these guidelines leave MUCH room for the DM to give the player a tough shot. Depending on how nice you are, you might demand just one skill check for the complete casting, or you might demand skill checks for every part of the castings as seems appropriate to you, I've made good experiences with the method I use. But don't be unfair, the player has probably risked much if he ever reaches the point of casting a ritual of such power as described above, and if he has done well and spent lots of thoughts and work into the ritual, drop the chances in his favour. As you hopefully have seen in the design above, colourful description is the key to success, and the more detailed the ritual is, the easier it is to judge for you. Don't punish a player who is honest enough to build some possibilities of failure into his design!

If you think this is too powerful, you might be right. But the materials needed in this ritual are not easily obtained, and of course I've chosen a very powerful (though not necessarily imaginative:) ritual as an example to show what is possible for the player (which would have to be rather high-level if he wants to stand a chance to ever successfully cast the ritual), and what the DM can do to prevent 'powermonging'. And then there's the possibility that it doesn't work quite as the mage intended, and really nasty backfires...

Hope you enjoy this, drop me a note whether you liked it or not, and suggestions are always welcome. I intend to explore the use of symbols and materials in rituals, so I would appreciate your suggestions.

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