

THAUMATURGICAL PROLIFERATION AND SPELLS OF MASS DESTRUCTION

Using spell availability in your campaign

by Chris Hepler and Jennifer Brandes

PLAYER: So, will the Great Callicantzaros teach me how to cast Fireball or not?

GM: He slams the door.

PLAYER: Huh? Wait a minute, everybody learns Fireball! I beat on the door.

GM: He sticks his head out and says, "Look, kid, you want me to teach you how to throw a ball of flame. That's the same thing as wanting to learn how to kill people. Horribly. And don't tell me you need it to defend yourself, 'cause there's plenty of spells that do that without destroying everything within a forty-foot area. And not only that, you also want to set it on fire, so it will catch, and you can burn down an entire forest, so people and animals you've never even heard of get roasted alive. Sorry, no. Don't know the spell." He slams the door.

PLAYER: What the hell? I yell that there are plenty of other people who know it, and they can have my money just as easily!

GM: There's no response.

When **AD&D** was first developed from its roots as a wargame, each member of the party was seen as a unit in a larger army. As the descriptions of character classes in the first edition *Players' Handbook* imply, the idea was that fighters were the standard troops, clerics the logistics and medics, thieves were reconnaissance, and magic-users the somewhat delicate artillery pieces. As a wargame, this was very cool, but it wasn't a complete world. Yet it set the precedent for how most role-playing games still handle spell acquisition. It's something you do between adventures, or part of the goodies to be handed out after the big climax.

Unfortunately, this view doesn't always hold up. Not every character lives in a war zone. And characters who aren't part of an army need somewhere and someone to learn spells *from*. Why, how, and when a spell is available can be a story hook, plot device, and/or game balance adjuster all in one.

If your game system hasn't stated what percentage and segments of the population use magic, and who can learn it, do yourself a favor as a GM and decide. Preferably before the campaign begins or the mages gain enough experience to learn new tricks. This gives a good base for figuring out how easy it is to learn spells in your world. In **Earthdawn**, for example, where magic is as common as electricity is in America, finding a new spell is much easier than in **Vampire**, where all Thaumaturgy rituals are directly guarded by the Tremere, the most power-hungry of all the clans.

Of course, with the hundreds of spells in most game systems, figuring out which ones you want the party to get is a time-consuming process. Will a spell make one PC overshadow the other characters? Or will it combine with them to be really fun for

everyone? Worse yet, will it combine so well that the "stacked" characters become unstoppable, or so close to it that their only danger is from ungodly powerful opponents?

This isn't just about "spells of mass destruction." Quite often, letting a mage have a face-stomping combat spell works out fine. At least you know what the character will do with it. But in both the first **AD&D** and **Shadowrun** campaigns we were in, a mage in the party got an invisibility spell early on. And in both, the spell let the mage turn the entire party invisible. Not that this was easy, of course -- it was just easy *enough*.

In **AD&D**, the spell's duration is twenty-four hours, unless you attack someone, and the rememorization time a few minutes per level. In hostile territories, the mage threw the spell over the party in the morning, letting them avoid most encounters. In **Shadowrun**, the mage was relatively helpless while sustaining the spell on four people at once, but in that game, the other party members could attack and not break the spell. By the time anyone figured out where the team was, they were halfway out the door.

Both sets of players coordinated their actions, trained as a team, and devised ways to travel with a minimum of fuss. In either case, this is a logical use of the spell for the characters' purposes -- on its own, an invisibility spell can be fun and add drama to the game. But the problem was (and is, for many games) that though the spell was defensive, it still let the characters cut too many corners, making the game less fun. At that point, however, it was too late for the GM to change his mind about giving the mage the spell. Taking it away once the character learned it would rightly have most gamers up in arms about GM abuse of power. ("Boy, did that head shot hurt. You can't remember how to cast that any more. Sorry.") And just giving the bad guys bigger magic gets ridiculous, especially in a world where spells are supposedly rare.

The time to work out what spells the party can have is before they learn them. But how do you restrict them other than just saying "no?" How do you make spell acquisition *fun*, or part of the campaign-story? Look at what the spell actually does. How do the other denizens of your world feel about a group of adventuring ruffians knowing a spell like *fireball*? How are destructive magics controlled by law? What are the chances that the PCs can find an intelligent, friendly, cooperative teacher who knows just the spell they're looking for?

Below are both rules-oriented and story-oriented ways to determine spell availability in your campaign world, no matter what it is. Mix and match as you see fit.

THE RULES WAY

Regardless of game, there are some universal factors that determine how common a spell is, and whether or not someone would teach it to a stranger. To determine whether a character can find a teacher with the spell he wants, make two open-ended D10 rolls (if a 10 is rolled, roll again and add the result, allowing for the chance of extremely high numbers), looking for a base target number of 6. The first roll determines whether anyone nearby knows the spell, the second whether they are willing to teach the PCs.

However, no mage exists in a vacuum, and the specifics of the desired spell have a great deal to do with how common it is. The following modifiers can affect spell availability, giving sample increases to this base target number (penalties) and sample

decreases (bonuses) for unusual factors. All modifications are cumulative.

Spell Situation	Modifier
Spell causes dramatic transformation that "scares the peasants" (grows bat wings or 10' taller)	+1
Spell has broad range of possibilities difficult to counter (illusion, shape changing, teleportation, invisibility)	+2
Spell causes property damage	+1
Spell immobilizes people	+1
Spell is lethal to human beings	+2
Spell controls people's minds (<i>Charm, Control Thoughts</i>)	+2
Spell has area effect	+1
Spell has enormous area of effect (<i>Earthquake</i>)	+2
Spell has stigma attached (undead raising)	+1
Spell has effects that spread (fire, diseases)	+1
Spell is banned by authorities	+2
Spell is rare, new, or awfully powerful	+1-2
Spell works on willing subjects only	-1
Spell heals/cures people	-1
No local government/restrictions or anarchy predominates	-1
Magic in general is part of local economy (Thera in Earthdawn)	-1
Spell is part of local economy	-4
Magic is part of local religion	-1
Spell is part of local life (crop growth spell in farmland)	-2
Big city	-1
Very magical population (drow elves in AD&D)	-2
Spell is used by governments	-1
Spell is used by militaries	-2
Spell has "been around forever" or is "popular" or "trendy"	-1
PC magician has serious cash	-1
PC magician does serious advertising	-1
PC magician has something mages want more than cash	-2

Keep in mind that numbers higher than 10 are not impossible - just unlikely. Similarly, a roll of 1 always creates some critical circumstance (such as stirring up anti-magic hate groups by asking about it). The availability roll can be conducted about once a week in game time, or more frequently if magicians travel through the area often. If the player finds a strategy to counteract a penalty, drop the penalty and let her try again.

If the first roll succeeds, determine the potential teacher's willingness to deal with the character by making the second D10 roll with the following modifiers.

Condition	Modifier
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Teacher has racial bias to student	+1-3
Student has lousy Charisma	+1
Student has superior Charisma	-1
Student has superhuman Charisma	-2
Student is hunted by enemies (penalty waived at cost of alerting enemies)	+1-3
Student has bad reputation	+1
Spell banned by authorities	+2
Spell is teacher's means of wealth (they fear competition)	+2
Teaching spells is teacher's means of wealth	-2
Spell can be easily used on teacher	+1
Spell is lethal to human beings	+2
Spell is open-ended in its use (as per Availability table)	+1
Spell cures/heals	-1
Teacher gets prestige for teaching spell to student (ideology, famous student, teacher invented spell)	-1-3
Mild cultural difference (New York to Atlanta)	+1
Moderate cultural difference (New York to Paris)	+2
Severe cultural difference (New York to Tokyo)	+3
Extreme cultural difference (New York to hive intelligence)	+4
Language barrier	+1-3
Student has ready cash	-1
Student has more than double fee	-2
Student has relative mountains of cash	-3
Student has unusual magic to trade	-1 to -4
Teacher thinks mages should "stick together"	-1
Teacher is lonely for other mages	-1
Teacher considers it a duty to teach the spell	-2

Play with the spells in your game system and see what Availability comes up. Write the number down next to the description of the spell for easy reference (modify it if there are extenuating circumstances not covered here). For class-and-level-based systems, these can be further modified in comparison to whatever level of spell the GM deems standard - for instance, Fourth Circle spells in **Earthdawn** could be the "no modification" standard, and First through Third Circle spells would be more common (-3 to -1), and Fifth and above would increase the penalties.

THE STORY WAY

If you're like us, the problem in running campaigns isn't rolling dice and saying yes or no - that takes a minute of thinking at most. The real trouble is how to turn learning spells into an adventure hook that's fun, memorable, and/or believable. For more specifics on where and how spells are restricted, take it from the point of view of law enforcement. As an example, look at the tried-and-true fireball spell common to **AD&D**,

Earthdawn, Shadowrun, Palladium, and many other systems. Regardless of the exact mechanics, it usually boils down to the following:

* It's destructive. This is a spell that kills *lots* of people and does it well. A mage can throw one into a tavern, McHugh's, bazaar or rock concert and kill twenty people in under a second. It also destroys buildings, records, and property. Think about how much would burn if your house caught fire. Expand that to a medieval-type city in a fantasy world -- all the houses packed together and made out of wood -- the very circumstances that led to the Great Fire of London. Even if people survive the initial blast, where do they go after? What does the government do with the newly homeless? How do friends, families, and therapists deal with all the shell-shocked survivors?

* Countermeasures which actually stop the spell while it is being cast are minimal. You can try to put out the flames afterward, but unless someone watches the caster who can figure out what they're doing, and is willing and able to stop them, a "mad sniper" scenario could kill hundreds.

* Numbers are not much of an advantage against a mage with the spell. Even if a watch patrol or squad car of cops pulls up, one good blast and they're dead, too. And so are the ambulances or healers who come to the scene. Without countermagic or overwhelming mundane force, the cops and governments are relatively helpless even against a single powerful magician.

* It's portable and concealable. Even if the government checks everyone coming into their city at a gate or an airport, how can they tell who knows the spell? Anyone can wear more standard clothes than robes, and in **Shadowrun, Earthdawn, and Vampire**, where it isn't necessary to tote around a spell book, there's no way to tell short of mind reading. Some game systems require spell components, but how do you keep people from getting sulfur and bat guano? Again, it comes down to either countermagic or a very "proactive" police state...um, police *force*.

* Even if you do catch the mage, how do you prevent this from happening again? How do you keep a magical prisoner who could (for all you know) throw another spell and entrance your guards? If you kill the mage, you're still faced with all their possible teachers, students and fellow cultists who know the same spell.

Fireball, therefore, is about as dangerous as a rocket launcher loaded with incendiary shells, and should be treated as such. Never mind such frightening heavies like a *Death Spell* or *Earth and Air*.

Using Spells in Play

Having the capability to kill masses of people with a thought puts a damper on the "we're alone against the world" feeling which creates suspense in most novels and games. An evil villain surrounded by platoons of guards isn't that intimidating if you can blow down his entire house or de-cloak in his bedroom at night with ten of your buddies. This leads the GM to either restrict himself exclusively to magical bad guys, or simply takes the fun out of the game by making everything too easy for the players. Not to mention that non-spell-caster characters should also have a chance to shine.

The GM can find it difficult to "herd" players in the right direction by providing

an onrushing crowd of maddened people, armed guards, or superior opponents if the players are ready, willing, and able to commit mass murder at every turn. How many times in a detective novel is the hero slapped around and told to stay off the case? And how possible is it for people to slap around your magical PCs? Not likely, unless the enemy are more magical yet.

Again, of course, the time to restrict spells is before the PCs get them. When deciding what to let the party have, a GM should figure out what scenarios the characters are likely to run into, and what spells would let the characters get around them, even in ways other than killing people. Such spells can be called "force multipliers."

The two most dramatic examples we've see are, once again, from **Shadowrun** and **AD&D**. Chris's **AD&D** character sold out a thieves' guild when he was second level, earning the enmity of Ether, a complete bad-ass assassin. Both GM and players knew that if this guy took off his hood, you'd see "Evil Recurring Villain You'll Love to Hate" stamped on his forehead. After the first encounter, the group took to back roads, using the invisibility trick mentioned above, and then started hunting *him*, figuring that if we waited for him to strike we'd have no chance. We couldn't take him in a stand-up fight; we averaged fourth level and high twenties of hit points apiece, with our only magic being a little +1 and +2 stuff here and there. But we had what was theoretically a dinky second-level spell, *Web*.

Goodbye.

The problem with *Web* is even with a successful saving roll, it cannot be avoided; everyone in it is helpless for several rounds. In other words, if someone hits you with this spell, unless you've got specific countermagic or light yourself on fire to escape, there's nothing you can do.

We beat the *crap* out of Ether. We pounded and pounded and zapped his berserker buddies and stabbed him while he was valiantly fighting his way out of that *web*. And when the smoke cleared, four of our six party members were on the ground. But we got him.

The GM told us afterward that Ether had about 126 hit points, and still, he had to fudge to keep him alive past the first round. If you haven't played **AD&D**, think of 126 hp as having the damage-absorbing capability of big dragons, AV-4 aerodynes, or Rhode Island.

In a game system that kills people even faster, you can see a spell's "force multiplier" work in under three seconds. At the end of a certain published **Shadowrun** adventure, we were facing some monster-bad ork mercenaries who were armed and armored to hell, spilling out of a helicopter to surprise our team. While others readied their guns for the big firefight, Chris asked the GM to describe what they had on them. Lots of grenades, he asked hopefully? Bandoleers of them, the GM said. So he threw a *Magic Fingers* spell: basic telekinesis at very long range. So much for the pins. Of course, since *each* of them were carrying grenades and the pins were jumping like popcorn, the GM ruled that they, and the helicopter they were in, turned into a fireball bigger than one Chris' character could ever cast.

Magic Fingers is, again, a simple spell with little effort involved. The weak link

in the scenario that this spell exploited? The bottle-neck of destructive power and the open-ended description of the spell.

Recognize how small details like this can stop your climactic battle before it ever gets past foreplay. Look for key omissions in spell descriptions, like the lack of upper limits on how high you can *Levitate* someone in **Earthdawn**. In that game, if you fall farther than thirty feet, it's probably a slow march with black armbands for you. Look for something that can shut a bad guy's combat effectiveness down entirely; again, **Earthdawn's Bone Dance** is a first-Circle spell that, if cast successfully, sends the target into convulsions (and out of action) for anywhere for four combat rounds, minimum. And, like *Web*, watch out for something where even a successful resistance means the target is still down and out. Spells like this that last for more than two or three rounds might as well just kill the victim outright.

As far as defensive spells are concerned, watch out for things that negate attacks entirely (*Stoneskin*, *Fire Shield*), or don't have any obvious way to get around their effects (*Wall of Iron*). Polymorphing or shape-changing is practically invisibility itself: who will notice a fly in their corporate skyscraper, or a pigeon on the window? And the old "I flutter above their head and then turn into a rhino" number can be tough to deal with too, if only for calculating damage to both parties.

In a lot of these cases a little thought beforehand can save you a headache after. If the spell omits a critical bit of info in its description, add it in before anyone ever uses it. If it's the spell itself that's the problem, you may want to tone down the effects, disallow it entirely, or just put in a few restrictions (see **Roleplaying the Learning**, below).

Finding the Teacher

This is an often-overlooked point in spell-acquisition where the GM can throw in plot complications and even some characterization without actually introducing the teacher mage. The mage not being home is a standard delaying tactic - but where is he? The mage could be homeless, moving from street to street eating out of garbage cans, because she's cheap, poor, or even looking for spell components. In seriously high fantasy, maybe the teacher's house only appears in this world every now and then, and the characters have to find where it'll be next. Maybe the mage is on the run from an oppressive regime, a jilted lover, or big guys with tattoos. Maybe she's using that invisibility spell to her best advantage, and she checks out the characters when they start asking about her.

GMs should flesh out the teachers before the characters ask about them. How many mages are there in this town, and do they work together or on their own? What do the magicians do with their magic in everyday life? Even magicians who are somewhat solitary need to eat; do they use their magic for their job, or are they more like modern Wiccans, holding down mundane jobs and practicing only in their free time? What sort of friends does the mage have? (Smart mages will have chums in the community or government who will put in a good word for her during witch-burning times.)

On a larger scale, what *is* the local opinion of magic? In most games, even though player characters can be chock full of magic, spell-casters are a minority of the general

population, meaning as a group they will be treated specially. Depending on the local religion and ethics, the public response can be to hate and fear mages, revere them as sacred (either allowing them great freedom or keeping them "protected" at all times) or want to use them to their own ends (individuals blackmailing or coercing them or the government shunting them into a higher tax bracket since other people can't compete).

In most cases, due to the reasons given above, people will fear mages both for what they know they can do, and what they don't understand. If the characters are new to town and ask about the local talent, they could bear the brunt of public response to some messy fireballing incident a few weeks ago. Witch hunts and racial war are quite vicious in our world, and we don't *have* real magic. What superstitions would arise from the real powers that mages have in your game?

In **Shadowrun**'s official histories, a scandal involving the Eight Immortals' rock band mind-controlling their audience has forever made people leery of magical coercion. A gamemaster could take this one step farther and say that urban legends have sprung up about mages using *Control Emotions* spells to snare the lover of their dreams. The game consequence? The potential romance with an NPC love interest now has a hurdle to get over, as her (or his) family thinks it's just the mage PC and his "evil charms." Or people clam up when the characters mention the word "mage," and word quickly spreads not to talk to them or they'll "give you the evil eye." How can they find a teacher when just talking about magic has the city guard posted in front of their house, waiting for them to make a wrong move?

If magic is genetic, mages might be selected at birth to be killed, moved to concentration camps, or entered into government training programs. Will the characters encounter one of these mages, or look for the few whose families saved them, training them in the ruins outside of town to strike back against the regime? In a place like this, magic can be synonymous with "enemy of the state." It might even be custom to kill cats and small animals, just in case they're witches' or vampires' familiars.

Even where magic is a part of the local environment and mages are common, individual teachers still vary greatly in their personality and behavior. Is he out carousing? ("Yeah, the Great Callicantzaros isn't in *again*, and when you find his mangy half-drunk behind, you can tell him that unless he gets his butt back here, *Mrs.* Great Callicantzaros is going to sweep that pentagram off the floor in the basement!") Down in the fields figuring out why the crops aren't growing? Out with the king, lightning-bolting peasants for his entertainment? Behind so much paper in the Great Library no one is sure if he's alive -- they just leave food by the door and it disappears by morning? On a holy crusade into the netherworlds? Constructing her unstoppable engine of destruction? ("Um...never mind that thing in the basement. It's...complicated. [BOOOM!] What did you want again?")

Any first impression the character has of the teacher can come back into the plot later, either while he's still trying to convince the teacher he's worthy of teaching, or afterwards when he's in debt to her. Maybe *Mrs.* Callicantzaros does clean up that pentagram and lets something loose to ravage the countryside. Or the crops aren't growing because someone's sabotaging them. Or the peasants revolt because of how the

king treats them and the PC gets targeted as a friend of that awful magician. Or the teacher overthrows the government with her unstoppable engine of destruction, the final part funded by the PC's purchase of the spell. What does the group do about these things? What protagonists do best - get sucked into another adventure.

Maybe this teacher isn't a mage at all, but can still get the PC the spell. It just takes some, uh... "judicious omission of details" and some money. ("Here, have the scroll. No guarantees. Goodbye.") Never mind the irate, very powerful mages trying to find the thief (or whoever bought the stolen goods) and bring them to justice. Or a PC mage/thief character can combine her specialties.

The last variable to consider is the source of information. If the teacher has enemies, they may use the PCs as a way into the magician's house, or demand "one small favor" from them in return for the address. And once the mage finds out who sent them, the characters will have to talk for a while to get out of their predicament. They may be so busy they completely forget about getting their spell.

Motivations

You know what the player character wants - the spell. So what does the teacher need, want, or just feel like that day? This mage, whatever trials of life she has suffered through, is in a position of power relative to the PC. And more likely than not, she won't be easily threatened or bribed with any spells in the PC's collection. Meaning she can ask for whatever payment she wants...

The number one motivation for everyone is survival. This breaks down to security, food and drink, and usually money to accomplish the former. If the mage is threatened by the locals, she may ask the PC to help -- scaring, persuading, or coercing people into leaving the mage alone...or just providing an alternate target. Perhaps the mage is threatened by some less-easily-impressed entity such as organized crime, dragons or otherworldly creatures, and needs some difficult-to-find item to appease them. What if the mage is dying of disease, curses, or old age, and needs the character to find a cure? What if this motivation is reversed: they wish to die for their true love, god, or family?

Number two on the list is prestige and long-range goals. How the magician earns prestige instantly fleshes out another part of the world. If the magician wants to impress someone, it creates another character who could affect the lives of the PCs. The teacher may have reached the point where the other mages know all *her* strengths and weaknesses -- but having four skilled students win a magical tournament in her name (and she only has three students so far) would raise her status permanently. Or perhaps this magician's research funding is going to be cut, and he (with a little help from our heroes) needs to stage something that will convince his superiors of its dire necessity. If magic is genetic, perhaps the mage is hearing that biological clock ticking away, and wants to have children to pass on her gifts. The potential lover could be anyone from the student, to a lost girlfriend in another land who must be rescued, to one of the other PCs the mage thinks is cute.

This is an easy place to bring in the rest of the group. Although the party's mage may be the only one directly dealing with the teacher, the teacher may pick up on the

usefulness of the whole group. The PCs in most roleplaying games form a more-or-less cohesive team in combat. That's *useful*, especially for private citizens such as the teacher forbidden to do such a thing. If the mage is a public figure who wants something illegal done, he may not publicly sanction their actions, but can reward them through a middleman. And, of course, if the party is composed of people the mage has no emotional connection to; they can be set up, framed, or sent on a suicide mission, leading to still more complications as they figure out why, and look for revenge.

Roleplaying the Learning

What fun would it be if the spell worked exactly right the first time and every time after? It'll *probably* work out the way the player expects during the rest of the campaign, so here's your chance to show how weird magic is when it's *not* under control.

All the possible quirks come out when one mage tries to teach another how to tap into power. Even if the cosmology of the world is fairly ironed out in the rulebooks, the NPC magician sure doesn't know *all* that stuff, but rather has her own superstitions and traditions hammered into her by her teacher. Even if she is completely enlightened, she can still have trouble explaining it in a way the PC understands ("Spells are like snowflakes. They never fall in an inappropriate place.") This works especially well for spells where the duration or effects are random, determined by dice rolls. ("I find that *Metal Wings* keeps you aloft longest when you face north to breathe the purer air that sweeps down from the mountains, which you must hold in your lungs for as long as possible. It also helps if you haven't had sex since the last full moon...hey, wipe that look off your face!") Any idiosyncrasies the teacher has can be passed on to the student, because he actually believes *this is the way it works*. This gives a GM a great opportunity to give a powerful spell to a PC while adding some extra baggage and restrictions to keep it under control.

If magic is strongly associated with an ethnic group, fashion trends can easily spring up. If the best magicians in a human kingdom are elves recruited from outside, the mages bring in their habits and folk wisdom along with real magical power. This can affect just the PC ("*Plant Talk* only works if you promise never to harm a tree."), or the whole kingdom (the king's court starts eating spinach and cauliflower, the elves' staple...leading the merchant classes to imitate it...leading to the merchants sending out explorers, namely your group, to find more land where they can grow these crops, etc.).

Where the teacher takes the PC to practice is also a consideration. Just where do you field-test *Creeping Doom*, *Ward Against Lupines*, *Animate Dead*, *Hellblast*, *Wall of Stone*, or a spell that lets you blot the sun from the sky? In a big city, testing ranges could be bought and paid for by a college of magicians, but they're only open to those in favor with the college. And if the PC isn't careful enough and the testing range is destroyed, the college is going to need prime real estate - preferably lots of open space and some very durable borders. How do the locals feel about living next door to this testing range? And what can the player characters do to convince them it's okay?

The threat of misfired magic is never greater than when mages are experimenting, and the learning process is constant experimentation. *Haste* could give the character the

runs, age him five years, or give him attention-deficit disorder. *Increase Body +4* can cause all sorts of medical problems if some organs (heart) are souped-up and others aren't (lungs). Sound-based illusions could cause a constant "echo" behind the caster for days or create bad music to drive an illusionist mad.

Of course, when the character is going for *really* hideous spells, how does he learn or practice them at all? Who will trust someone else with *Wish*? Part of the reason *Wish* is usually a rare magic is because it is on the power level of an atomic bomb, but more versatile. Crafty mages will want a way to undo the spell if the students prove untrustworthy. They can teach them the *Wish* formula (or any other deadly spell) with a few minor errors in the pattern so that when the PC uses it under certain conditions (say, anything that harms other people), it just shuts down. Better yet, a savvy magician can install "backdoors" like computer programmers use. Thus armed, they can disable a mage's spell capability or be personally immune to its effects. If the teacher is truly mercenary, or someone gets them under duress, the "password" could get out, leaving a third party with a way to negate the magic of everyone this mage ever taught, including the PC. If this is the ultimate villain of a campaign, it can be very dramatic when the party readies its worst spells only to see the villain sit calmly through the attack.

The teacher herself may want to use the characters for some other purposes...and won't necessarily tell the characters first. If the teacher says that they have to enter a trance to learn the magic, what character would doubt them? Of course, while they're in that trance, the mage can make some hypnotic suggestions which further her own agenda. Programming a hapless PC mage to take out a pistol and shoot the state senator at her next rally leaves relatively little trace, particularly if the PC isn't supposed to survive. Less malicious mages may try to implant suggestions to reform the mage "for his own good," from quitting smoking to being a good Catholic to sending money home to the magician in grateful thanks every month. ("I loved it...It was better than *Earth Darts*...I'm going to cast it again and again...") Real do-gooder mages may try to psychologically repair the repressed memories of their students or help them through therapy before trusting them with magic.

Practical considerations can also lead the teacher to rip off her students, either intentionally or accidentally. If you need diamond dust to cast *Stoneskin*, a mage isn't likely to give up his supply just so a student can keep trying "one more time" to get it right. So maybe this teacher has never used the spell, but only copied it down by rote from his instructor...who copied it from hers...who copied it from his...who wasn't trusted at all by his, but was assured it would work if the diamond dust were actually *present*... but none of them know. Con men can take advantage of this rarity in an eyeblink. ("Of course I got *Stoneskin*...I just don't have the stuff to throw it with...you want the spell formula or not? Six thousand, up front.") The PC is left with garbage - and a motivation to get back the stolen money, leading them into another adventure thread that can come back when they find the con man on vacation in some exotic spot.

Conclusion

Spell availability need not be a headache. In a well-run game, a simple request to

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learn *fireball* can start four or five stories rolling at once, run the party out of two or three countries and keep them narrowly dodging assassins for so long they forget to even ask about the spell. Magic is something which keeps fantasy games different from the real world and can smooth down a thousand frayed edges. But it can also take away the fun by creating so many shortcuts the players don't bother to think. With a handle on how player characters learn their spells, you can keep a rein on when and how they'll use them, while also giving them a personal and pressing stake in that most magical of devices: the plot.