



The Alternate Magic System

by Griffith M. Morgan III

An excerpt from the upcoming adventure book, *The Terror of Spiral Keep*. © 2026, The Fellowship of the Thing, Ltd.

A magic system for classic RPG games which replaces the standard Vancian magic system. The rules in this document are solely intended as guidelines for your own fantastical medieval adventures, additionally, these mechanics are still in a working draft state, thus you are encouraged to adjust or alter what is here to suit your needs.

The rules are in five sections:

1. Intelligence and Magical Aptitude

(How a character's intelligence correlates to how good at magic they are)

2. Known Spells and Enchantment Points

(How many spells and of what level the character can have in memory)

3. Spell Difficulty Level

(What level of spells the character can cast)

4. Magical Power or Spell Points

(How many spells the character can cast)

5. Killing Blows and Desperate Sorcery

(Taking damage and collapsing from casting too many spells)

This being the 4th draft of these rules and having been

written after Chris and I recorded a video on the subject; some terminology will differ from the content in the video which outlines them. Yet, the mechanics remain unchanged.

1 Intelligence and Magical Aptitude

How a character's intelligence correlates to how good at magic they are)

One's facility for remembering spells is called Magical Aptitude. The higher this value is, the more spells a Magic-user may memorize. Magical Aptitude is based on the Intelligence Ability score.

Intelligence Modifier Chart (Magical Aptitude)

Character Intelligence	Magical Aptitude Value
10 or less	No magical aptitude. Unable to use magic.
11	+0 Magical aptitude, but no bonus.
12 – 14	+1
15 – 16	+2
17 – 18	+3
19+	+4

Values greater than 19 may need to be adjusted accordingly.

Record this number as "Magical Aptitude" on the character sheet.

Because this table is built to match the old rules, an 18 ability score grants only a Magical Aptitude of 3, preserving numerical parity with the Fighter Strength Chart from Supplement I.

Written commentary by Arneson and Gygax provides a lot of leeway on how one wishes to interpret and apply rules within their own play sessions with the old game.

In the Dragon magazine, Gary Gygax implied he felt the game should be human-centric, thus high primary attribute characters with the old game are of a single class and more likely human. Those of below average on primary attributes would be best as the other races, elves, dwarves, and halflings. Thus, a low Intelligence Magic-user of average Strength may be more appropriate as an Elf.

If you also consider the inclusion of zero-level non-class characters in the Holmes Edition, I felt it important to have Magical Aptitude only have a value of 0 for 11 Intelligence characters. This isn't so much about the equation as a personal quirk.

Optional additions one could use with this system would be magical training being required to become a Level 1 Magic-user, for 0 Level, or non-class Magic-

user characters, and/or a one-time magical training allowing for an increase of +1 to a player's intelligence.

Though neither of these ideas would align entirely with the original rules. The Loch Gloomen Battle Report, on page 82 of *Blackmoor Foundations*, reveals how several characters appear to be dual classed humans.

2 Known Spells & Enchantment Points

(How many spells and of what level the character can have in memory)

The quantity and level of spells a Magic-user can memorize are dependent on the amount of Enchantment Points they have. Enchantment Points are based on Magical Aptitude and Experience Level.

The equation for calculating Enchantment Points is:

Character Level + (Character Level x Magical Aptitude)

Example:

A 3rd level Magic-user who has a 16 Intelligence (Magical Aptitude of 2) may have $3 + (3 \times 2) = 9$ Enchantment Points. (A handy chart is included below)

Record this number as "Enchantment Points" on the character sheet.

Enchantment Point Chart

Magical Aptitude →	0	1	2	3	4
Character Level ↓					
Level: 1	1	2	3	4	5
Level: 2	2	4	6	8	10
Level: 3	3	6	9	12	15
Level: 4	4	8	12	16	20
Level: 5	5	10	15	20	25
Level: 6	6	12	18	24	30
Level: 7	7	14	21	28	35
Level: 8	8	16	24	32	40
Level: 9	9	18	27	36	45
Level: 10	10	20	30	40	50

Spell Enchantment Point Cost:

Each spell a Magic-user knows takes up as many Enchantment Points as the level of the spell: Thus 1st level spells use 1 point each, 2nd level spells use 2 point each, 3rd level spells use 3 point each, and so forth.

Select spells and add up the levels of each spell – this may not exceed the character's Enchantment Points. (see also section 3 below, Spell Difficulty Level)

Example: the above 3rd level Magic-user has 9 Enchantment Points and could have the following spells ready for casting in memory:

Four 1st level spells (4 Enchantment Points), one 2nd level spell (2 Enchantment Points), and one 3rd level spell (3 Enchantment Points), for a total of 9 Enchantment Points used.

Memorized spell combinations may be changed between adventures. Note the names of all memorized spells on your character sheet before play commences.

3. Spell Difficulty Level

(What level of spells the character can cast)

The maximum spell level a Magic-user can cast is dependent on their Intelligence and their Experience Level. This Spell Difficulty Level is determined using the equation: Character Intelligence + Character Level and referring to the below chart:

Spell Difficulty Level Chart

Intelligence + Level	Maximum Spell Level MU Can Use
12	1st
14	2nd
16	3rd
17	4th
21	5th
23	6th
25	7th
27	8th
29	9th

Example:

A 5th level Magic-user with an Intelligence of 12 gets a 17 ($5 + 12 = 17$). They can cast spells up to 4th level.

Record this as Maximum Spell Level on the character sheet

4 Magical Power (Spell Points)

(How many spells the character can cast)

Magic-users consume Magical Power when casting spells. As they advance in Experience Levels they gain more Magical Power and can cast more spells.

A character's Magical Power is their Hit Points.

Where Fighters generally subtract Hit Points from damage by enemy attacks, Magic-users subtract from their Hit Points

when they cast spells. Consider this to be a form of weakening to their stamina caused by the exhausting concentration required to control and focus magical power. Thus, Magical Power is the same thing as the character's Hit Points. Hit Points used to cast spells are recorded just as damage from combat is recorded.

Generating Magical Power (and Hit Points)

It should also be noted that the following Magical Power (Hit Point) rule supplants the standard hit die level progression for Magic-users published in the original rules from 1974.

Magic-users roll 1 four-sided die per experience level which may also be modified by a character's Constitution bonus.

Example:

A 5th level Magic-user totals up the rolls of 5 four-sided dice:

3, 4, 1, 2, 2 = 12

If the Magic-user also has a Constitution of 15 or higher they add 1 to each die rolled, resulting in $12 + 5 = 17$ hit points.

How Much Magical Power Does a Spell Cost?

The amount of Magical Power points used per spell cast is the same as Enchantment Point Cost (i.e. the level of the spell).

Thus, casting a 1st level spell would cost the Magic-user 1 Magical Power Point, and casting a 5th level spell costs 5 Magical Power Points. Again, these costs are subtracted from the Magic-user's total Hit Points.

Example: A Magic-user has 17 Hit Points

While adventuring they cast a 3rd level spell. This reduces their total Magical Power/ Hit Points to 14: $(17 - 3) = 14$

Later during the game, a goblin throws a spear hitting the Magic-user for 5 points of damage.

Magical Power/ Hit Points are once again reduced: $14 - 5 = 9$

Hit Point costs due to spell casting are not physical damage yet do require a week of rest for them to be recovered back to full strength in the same manner as wounds.

The old game treats hit point loss from being wounded during battles as an abstraction, meaning characters are not actually being wounded, but rather using Hit Points as a saving throw. For more on this subject watch our video, Hit Points: The Original RPG Death Saving Throw. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MQQxFq-TI5U>

5 Killing Blows and Desperate Sorcery

(Taking damage and collapsing from casting too many spells)

Combining losses to Hit Points from wounds via the Alternate Combat System, as well as the loss to Hit Points from spell casting via this Alternate Magic System, requires one final rule:

Since the cost of spell casting is reducing a Magic-user's Hit Points, they become weaker the more spells they cast as well as effecting how many wounds they can sustain before dying.

I feel this creates drama and tension for players, as even a powerful Magic-user, who casts many spells, becomes vulnerable to a lesser attack such as a thrown dagger (1d4). Additionally, a Magic-user may be reduced to zero, or less, Hit Points from spell casting.

It is important to know how Magic-users lose their last Hit Points - is it a killing blow, or desperate sorcery?

Killing Blows

If a Magic-user is low on Hit Points/Magical Power and receives a wound from physical harm which reduces their HP to 0 they become unconscious. Any value less than 0 means the Magic-user is dying. It may be possible to bind wounds or use magical healing immediately following a battle to resuscitate the character by bringing their Hit Points to 0 or above.

Desperate Sorcery

If a Magic-user so chooses, they may cast a final spell which brings their Hit Point/Magical Power total to 0 or less. A desperate action is different from taking damage. Magic-users reduced to 0 or less hit points from spell casting are not dying, they instead fall into a coma.

Since these rules are a fragment taken from my own home game, I will leave it up to your own judgement regarding Magic-users who expend too much Magical Power.

Depending on your own preference, the Magic-user may be drawn out of the coma through Clerical healing, and or via a Magic-user spell.

My personal ruling is to only allow waking a Magic-user from their coma via magical resuscitation. If you have read *A Wizard of Earthsea* by Ursula Leguin, you may see the logic in this choice.

Alternate Notation (good for NPC's)

It is easy to record all this information on a character sheet. Just write the numbers where character level is recorded on a character sheet or in referee notes:

Level + Magical Aptitude / Enchantment Points / Maximum Spell Level

Example:

Character Level: 5 + 2 / 15 / 4th

However, NPC's and spell-casting monsters encountered via random die rolls may still use Vancian magic as it simplifies the referee's duties.

My thoughts and Ideas about the Alternate Magic System

Dave Arneson talked about using point systems as one of many rules which were tried before the original game was published. This is supported with the discovery by Dan Boggs of a manuscript known as the Snider Variant. It is hard to date when it was created precisely, yet it had to have been typed up before the publication of the original game. Dan's assessment for a creation date is circa 1972 to early 1973. This puts the rules firmly before Arneson sends Gary Gygax twenty or so pages of game mechanics he used for Blackmoor when the two began their collaboration.

Some may consider this change to core principles within Vancian magic as too much of a deviation which may result in a lack of balance between the classes. I have never felt one should worry about balance because real life is never balanced. Again, if we consider how Dave Arneson allowed Pete Gaylord's wizard character to be armed with a battle axe, it seems clear there is historical precedent for imbalances. Often it is up to the players to balance encounters themselves through their choices. They can talk, they can fight, or they can run away!

As I mentioned above, some sort of point system was being used in Blackmoor. Using something similar seems ideal for someone who has their own ongoing Blackmoor campaign. More recent editions have tried to fix some of the Magic-user's lack of spells when playing at starting levels. This is often achieved by adding in weaker spells called cantrips. These are often under-powered, making them nearly useless in a game.

What this Alternate Magic System does is provide more flexibility to Magic-users of all kinds and levels. The obvious overuse would be to cast more Fireball spells, yet often it is the weaker spells one runs out of first, and those weaker spells can be handy. Many of you have been in the position of saying to yourself, "I have a 3rd level Lightning Bolt Spell, but right now I would give anything for a 1st level Detect Magic Spell!"

I also feel other classes can take a level or two in magical casting ability if they choose to. All they would need to do is find a Magic-user who is willing to train them for the appropriate fee of 100 to 600 Gold Pieces to learn basic casting ability for spells. This would require a month of training to use fundamental spell casting as a level 1 Magic-user.

I feel the dynamics between how many spells a player has memorized, how powerful their spells can be, and how many they may cast, can be very interesting during a play session.

While the rules cover spell casting, I have not provided the obvious additions one would want when using these rules. How can magical scrolls, potions, items, and artifacts enhance a Magic-user's capability?

The addition of magical enhancements is something worth pondering, as again, Pete Gaylord's Wizard of the Wood was very fond of using Super Berries when casting his spells.

Due to how minimal the design is it fits into the old game well. It is entirely possible to have one player using the Alternate Magic System, while another is using Vancian magic – everyone gets to play how they like, and everyone wins. Because it follows the power levels of Vancian magic closely it is also possible to continue to use Vancian magic for NPCs and monsters without change.

I have played a variety of point-based spell systems, both published, and home brewed for use with the old game. I feel this system provides greater depth to player experience when using spell points for enchantments. I had not found a set of mechanics which captured what I was looking for and thus I had to create my own.

Please reach out and let me know what your experiences, ideas, and changes are if you try using the Alternate Magic System in your own games.

Thanks, Griff

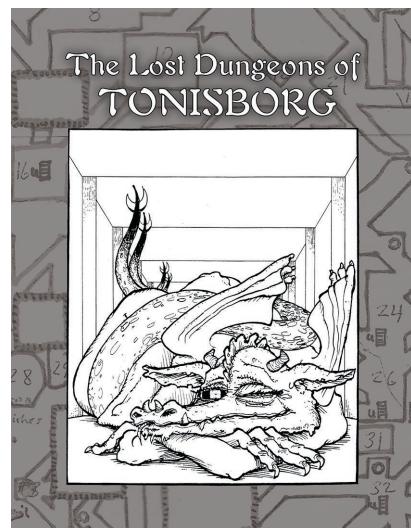
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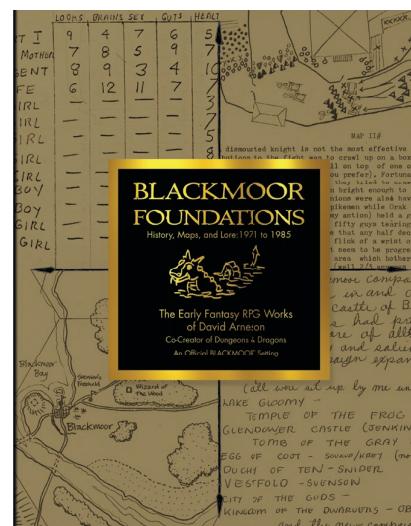
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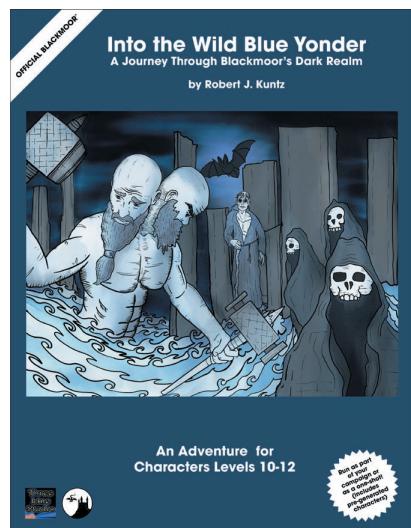
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