

THE MAGIC SYSTEM ARCHITECT



Designing Magic with Power, Purpose, and Consequences

A guided dark fantasy writing workbook

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Welcome to the Workshop

Magic is most memorable when it shapes what characters want, what they fear, and what they must sacrifice. This workbook guides you from a first spark of an idea to a system capable of carrying a full story.

HOW TO USE THIS WORKBOOK

Each chapter follows LEARN, SEE, DEVELOP, and CHALLENGE. Read the principle, study the continuing example from Veyr, answer the guided questions, and test your design in a scene. Revisit earlier answers when a better idea emerges.

YOUR STARTING IDEA

In one or two sentences, describe the magical idea you want to explore.

Chapter 1: The Foundations of Magic

LEARN

A system becomes compelling when its powers create choices, not just spectacle.

SEE: THE CITY OF VEYR

In the drowned city of Veyr, magic is the art of lending one memory to the tide. A caster may summon a current, but must decide which memory to surrender.

THE DESIGN PRINCIPLE

Ask not only what this element adds to the lore, but what new pressure it puts on the characters. If the same plot could unfold without this magical rule, consider giving it a stronger consequence.

NOTES AND FIRST IDEAS

Chapter 2: Sources of Magical Power

LEARN

The origin of power influences who controls it, who fears it, and how it is obtained.

SEE: THE CITY OF VEYR

Veyr draws power from the sea of remembered lives. Inland practitioners can only cast using bottled saltwater taken from the drowned shore.

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NOTES AND FIRST IDEAS

Chapter 3: Rules, Limits, and Restrictions

LEARN

Clear limits make solutions earned. Distinguish what is impossible from what is merely difficult.

SEE: THE CITY OF VEYR

A Veyr caster cannot recover a memory once surrendered. Stronger tides demand older or more emotionally important memories.

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NOTES AND FIRST IDEAS

Chapter 4: The Cost of Magic

LEARN

A cost should alter decisions, relationships, or identity rather than function as decorative pain.

SEE: THE CITY OF VEYR

A ferryman saves a village from a flood, but loses the memory of his daughter's face. She survives; their relationship does not survive unchanged.

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NOTES AND FIRST IDEAS

Chapter 5: Schools and Types of Magic

LEARN

Categories help readers understand specialization without turning every mage into the same tool.

SEE: THE CITY OF VEYR

Veyr teaches tidecalling, saltbinding, and echo-hearing. All draw from memory, but each alters the world in a different way.

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NOTES AND FIRST IDEAS

Chapter 6: Progression and Mastery

LEARN

Growth feels meaningful when mastery changes judgment as much as raw power.

SEE: THE CITY OF VEYR

Novices move cups of water; masters redirect harbours. The best masters learn to negotiate a smaller cost, never to erase it.

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NOTES AND FIRST IDEAS

Chapter 7: Forbidden Magic and Corruption

LEARN

Forbidden techniques are strongest when the prohibition has a coherent history and moral tension.

SEE: THE CITY OF VEYR

The Black Current allows a caster to sacrifice someone else's memories. It is outlawed because its victims may never realize what was taken.

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NOTES AND FIRST IDEAS

Chapter 8: Magic in Society and Religion

LEARN

Magic reshapes work, law, class, faith, warfare, medicine, and ordinary routines.

SEE: THE CITY OF VEYR

Veyr requires licensed tidecallers to register every spell. The poor sell memories for storm protection while temples call the exchange sacred.

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NOTES AND FIRST IDEAS

Chapter 9: Artifacts and Ancient Powers

LEARN

Artifacts should have histories, constraints, and consequences that support the world's rules.

SEE: THE CITY OF VEYR

The Pearl of First Rain stores a thousand memories. It can calm one storm, but releases the stored memories into every mind nearby.

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NOTES AND FIRST IDEAS

Chapter 10: Your Complete Magic System

LEARN

Test the system for consistency, dramatic pressure, and meaningful interaction with the story.

SEE: THE CITY OF VEYR

A Veyr rebel plans to save the city by flooding the archive of stolen memories. Doing so may restore some lives while destroying the knowledge needed to protect the harbour.

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NOTES AND FIRST IDEAS

Magic System Reference Sheet

CORE PROMISE AND SOURCE OF POWER

THREE RULES THAT ALWAYS APPLY

TWO HARD LIMITS

IMMEDIATE AND LONG-TERM COSTS

MAJOR DISCIPLINES AND SOCIAL INSTITUTIONS

FORBIDDEN PRACTICE AND CENTRAL MORAL QUESTION

Prepublication & Consistency Checklist

- ☐ The rules are understandable before the climax.
- ☐ Costs cannot be conveniently ignored.
- ☐ New powers do not appear solely to resolve a crisis.
- ☐ Society responds logically to common magic.
- ☐ The protagonist makes meaningful choices within the limits.
- ☐ Names and terminology remain consistent.
- ☐ The system creates conflict as well as solutions.

FINAL REFLECTION

What is the most interesting decision your magic forces a character to make?
