the Play's the thing

Mysterious Magic

by Michael Mearls

Magic is a bizarre, otherworldly force that can move mountains, annihilate armies, and shape the course of history. Yet, sometimes players treat it with the same respect reserved for empty vials, 10-foot poles, silver mirrors, and other useful but disposable tools. This article presents a simple method for using verbal descriptions and a few other tricks to move a group's focus away from the game mechanics behind magic spells and onto the wondrous effects magic can have. Rather than simply announce that a wizard is using *cone of cold,* you can quickly and easily build a description of the spell's effects that leave the spell's name and purpose uncertain. Using these methods, magic becomes less predictable and much more mysterious, all without changing a single game mechanic.

Describing Spells

The easiest way to make magic more mysterious is to replace the in-game descriptions of a spell's mechanics with in-character descriptions of the spell. Instead of announcing that your sorcerer casts *fireball* and rolling for damage, describe the searing orb of fire your character flings at his enemies and the thundering roar that echoes through the room as it detonates and fills the area with flames. Such a description helps everyone at the gaming table draw a clearer, fresher picture of the action. Plus, cutting out references to the rules leaves some doubt about the spell's exact nature.

The easiest way to create descriptions of spells is to read

through their rules and note their effects. In most cases, a description writes itself, such as the *fireball* example given above. Other times, a spell might operate in such subtle ways that the rules cover only its effects, not its appearance. A cleric casting *hold person* might not give any sign of the nature of his spell until someone notices his victim standing rigidly in place. Rather than announcing your character's action and asking for a Will save, demand the saving throw first, and then tell the players what their characters see. Not only does this make a spell's identity harder to pin down, but the other players feel a lot more tension over saving throws since they can never be sure if they're rolling to resist something minor, like *sleep,* or a powerful spell such as *charm monster.*

Customizing Spells

Using descriptions of spells is a good first step, but sooner or later, the same descriptions used over and over again bring magic back to a mundane state. Once the players have seen one *fireball,* they've seen them all. To get around this, create custom descriptions for each caster's spells. One wizard's *magic missile* does not need to look the same as another's. Creating custom descriptions for spells is a great way to make a character unique and gives him a memorable feature.

Read over a spell's effects and determine its net result. Once you have decided exactly what a spell can do in game terms, think of a cool, eye-catching way to describe how the spell manifests. As long as the effect you

build in no way alters the spell's rules and game function, the description can be almost anything that fits the spell's effects. To help get you started, here are some basic ideas on the forms that these descriptions can take.

Creation: The caster creates a shimmering, magical construct that completes the spell's effect. These descriptions work best with spells that normally lack any catchy, obvious signs. Think of the spell's final result, imagine an item, creature, or other object that could produce that effect, and describe how the caster creates and directs the object to fulfill the spell. For example, a cleric who uses *hold person* might generate a pair of glowing, silver nails that he hurls toward his target. The nails drive into the target's feet and fill her with agonizing pain that either roots her to her spot or forces her to pull her feet free and resist the spell.

Manifestation: These descriptions highlight the caster's role in the spell, creating links between the spell's effect and the caster's manipulation of the magical forces used to produce them. Perhaps whenever a sorcerer casts her *wall of ice* spell, his eyes turn utterly black, and anyone standing near him feels a freezing cold breeze. Once the wall is complete, the sorcerer's hands are left covered in a thin layer of ice. An elf wizard might call a glowing, green longbow into existence to fire *Melf's acid arrow* at his enemies.

Proxy: Spells described in this manner rely on the assistance or works of some outside figure to complete them. A druid who uses

barkskin might cause bark from a nearby tree to animate, remove itself from the tree's trunk, and encase her in a layer of thick, woody armor. One problem with these descriptions is that if the source of the spell, such as a tree from the above example, is not present, it might strain the players' suspension of disbelief. These descriptions work best for NPCs normally found in a specific environment or if used in conjunction with other descriptions.

Transformation: When using a spell, the caster somehow changes to create the spell effect. A wizard who uses *mage armor* might develop thick, scaly skin, while a cleric's *bull's strength* could cause the recipient to grow bulging muscles that strain his belt straps. Some spells could transform the caster and grant him the ability to produce the spell's effect. A sorcerer who casts *fireball* could temporarily gain a dragon's maw and spit a burning ember that detonates on impact.

Themes
To help lend your caster (or campaign world) a sense of consistency and to make creating new descriptions for a particular character easier, pick a single, unifying theme that manifests in all your character's spells. For example, a cleric of a fire god could create and shape magical energy that looks like shimmering flames. His *detect evil* causes him to see a halo of ebony fire around evil creatures, while *divination* takes the form of visions he sees within a campfire. A theme lends consistency to a character's magic and helps focus his personality, background, and abilities. You can easily create separate, competing schools of magic merely by altering how a group of wizards' spells appear compared to the same spells used by a different group. The wizards of the Great Order of Thule rely on magic drawn from demonic creatures to defeat their foes, while the Esoteric Alliance of Ganz teaches that true magic flows from elemental earth. Wizards from both orders might use *ice storm,* but one casts a spell that

summons a frost demon to pelt his enemies with chunks of ice, while the other opens a gate through which hurtle ice-encrusted rocks and chunks of earth.

Ancestry: Something in the character's past helps to define his magic. Perhaps a cleric's magic channels traits from her forefathers, granting her the strength of a warrior ancestor when she casts *bull's strength* or calling upon her ancestral guardians to smite her enemies with *searing light* or *flame strike*. When using a spell, a sorcerer could temporarily gain traits associated with the ancestral source of his magic, be they dragons, demons, celestials, or some other powerful, magical race. These traits either produce a spell's effects directly, such as *endure elements* causing a caster to develop a thick, demonic hide, or indirectly, like a *poison* spell that manifests as a barbed stinger that sprouts from the caster's index finger.

Deity: An obvious choice for clerics and druids, this theme involves a particular god's symbols, myths, and other important icons. A *magic weapon* spell could cause the enchanted armament to physically change to appear as the god's favored weapon, though it retains its original characteristics. Spells that grant a creature enhanced abilities or defenses alter the target to take on the god's characteristics or visage. A cleric who uses *divine power* transforms into a powerful hero or crusading saint from his deity's myths.

Element: One of the four elements, air, earth, fire, or water, could serve as the source of a character's magical abilities. All of her spells feature some indication of this link, even if the element does not play a direct role in the spell's function. For instance, a fire mage's *web* could manifest as a swarm of flickering, gray flames, while a water wizard's *haste* could appear as a stream of shimmering liquid that coats the spell's target and imbues its effects upon him.

Totem Creature: Drawing on the traits and abilities connected to a wild

animal, the caster's magic could appear in the form of a specific creature, or it could grant him an animal's traits. A good choice for rangers and druids, this theme can be used to forge a connection between a character and a specific creature or a broad type of animal. The caster could summon a spectral animal that fulfills a spell's effects, such as a *flaming sphere* that manifests as a fiery bear or a *magic missile* that appears as a small flock of soaring eagles. Other spells could cause the recipient's appearance to change so that it resembles the caster's totem animal, granting him a few animal traits that reflect the spell's effects.

Changing Themes
As a caster gains experience, her theme can change to reflect her better grasp of magic. This provides a convenient excuse to add new ways to describe spells to your repertoire. For example, a druid whose spells highlight her connection to a wolf totem could take up a new, stronger totem, the grizzly bear, to reflect her increased skills and her greater responsibility to protecting a forest. As a campaign progresses, even a slight change to your themes and spell descriptions can help enforce a sense of mystery and keep things fresh. The same descriptions used again and again can eventually become stale.

Class Abilities, Skills, and Feats
Not only can spell descriptions help enliven magic, but they can also help inject some mystery and color into a spellcaster's other abilities. Simply apply the process outlined above to abilities a spellcaster gains in addition to his spells. For example, a barbarian/druid whose magic draws on a snake totem could gain serpentine traits when he enters his rage. His skin grows scales, fangs sprout in his mouth, and his eyes turn into a snake's. Other class abilities could gain similar traits. When a rogue/wizard makes a Hide skill check, the shadows around her seem to melt and flow to help conceal her from view. The

character's skill check receives no modifiers for this effect, but it explains how an arcane caster could become adept at sneaking into heavily guarded areas. By the same token, an otherwise mundane feat could have an arcane or divine origin. When a cleric uses Dodge, a divine, invisible guardian knocks aside an attack. Again, the feat's rules and net effect remain the same, but the description of its function helps highlight the cleric's close bond with his deity.

Spontaneous Descriptions

Over the course of play, you might find a great opportunity to introduce a new description for a spell. As long as you do not try to alter the spell's effects, go for it. A wizard's *scare* spell could suddenly manifest as a gleaming, shining cat to spook a pack of dire rats. If you see a chance to alter a spell into a form that fits the current scene and your character's opponents, use the guidelines here to make the spell more interesting and improve everyone's enjoyment of the game.

Using Spell Descriptions in Play

While creating new ways to describe your spells can help customize a character, it should never interfere with the flow of play. Your spells can be mysterious to the players, but your DM needs to know what you are up to. The easiest way to handle this is to use a set of index cards to keep track of your spells. Write down the basic rules for a spell, such as its save DC and effects, along with one or more descriptions you use with it. When you cast a spell, you can refer to the card to remind yourself how to describe it and then simply hand the card to the DM to allow him to resolve the spell's effects. This way, there is a barrier between your spell and the game rules from the players' point of view, but your DM knows what's going on.

Obviously, when using spell descriptions as a DM, you never need to worry about losing track of which spells an NPC is using. However, even if your players do not use spell descriptions, the index cards can help speed up play by cutting down on time spent looking up spells in the *Player's Handbook*.

Always remember that spell descriptions are there to make the game more engaging. They serve a roleplaying purpose but should not interfere with the game's rules unless your DM expressly decides otherwise. A cleric of the god of winter whose *hold person* coats his enemies in a thick layer of immobilizing ice should be able to use that spell without restriction in a desert. The spell's manifestation merely reflects the source of its magic. Taking a torch to a creature frozen in place by *hold*

person should not melt him free. The spell's rules still apply as normal.

Example

Tylsika is a 3rd-level wizard of the Great Order of Thule. The general theme to her magic is that her spells summon and bind demons to produce magical effects. Here's how her player customizes a few of her favorite spells.

Web produces a sticky mass of material that holds creatures in place, fills an area for quite some time, and can be burned away with fire. Tylsika's *web* spell summons a horde of tiny demonic insects that form a swarm in the spell's area. They create a dense mass that holds creatures in place within it. However, the demons are terrified of fire and flee from it.

Chill touch drains hit points and Strength with a touch attack. Tylsika's *chill touch* spell summons a tiny demon with a long, barbed tail that perches on her hand. When Tylsika touches an enemy, the demon stings her foe and delivers the spell's effects.

Shield produces a barrier that improves AC. When Tylsika casts it, a group of small, flying demons appears around her. They flutter about and intercept attacks, swallowing arrows fired toward her and blocking sword blows with their bodies. As the spell nears the end of its duration, the number of flying demons around her dwindles. **�D**