

Never-Real Worlds

Adam Simpson:

Hello Mage fans, and welcome to Mage the Podcast, the podcast that works hard towards Ascension so you don't have to. I'm your host Adam, and I'm joined today by co-host Pooka. Have you ever believed the world is out to get you? That the universe is watching you carefully, just waiting for you to slip up so it can squash you like a bug? Well, you're right. It is - if you're a mage. If you're not a mage, maybe you just need to take some time off, relax a little. Most of my listeners already know I'm talking about Paradox, the invisible force that punishes mages for using magic. Paradox is a key part of every edition of Mage. Many Storytellers struggle with how to handle it in their games.

Before I get into today's book, Pooka, how are you doing? Did your travels go well? And are there any announcements for us?

Pooka:

I'm hanging in there. the travels were suitable. The thing about having wanderlust is when you get the timing wrong, it just really messes everything up in your life. So luckily it worked out that I headed home just at the moment I needed to in mostly one piece. So yeah.

Summer is wrapping up. Announcements. We do have a date scheduled for now for the rescheduled TryItCon 2, TerryCon edition. It is now slated for November 7th, 8th, and 9th. More details forthcoming.

Adam Simpson:

In 2018, the Storyteller's Vault offered us *Never-Real Worlds* by Allegra Van Rossum. This 82 page book offers us resources for portraying Paradox Realms to our players.

For those new to *Mage: The Ascension*, Paradox Realms are one of the more severe penalties Paradox can inflict upon a mage. The mage vanishes away and appears in a realm removed from Earth where the forces of Paradox have complete power. If the mage cannot escape, the Paradox realm

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will become a tomb. Before I dive into the book, I thought this would be a nice opportunity to say a few things about Paradox. I don't discuss it often on the show.

Some mage fans believe Paradox is trying to shut down mages and stop magic, a kind of reality police. After reading the four editions of *Mage* and the unpublished *Zero Edition*, I disagree.

I believe Paradox is trying to guide mages so the consensus will be improved. That means Paradox isn't a reality police, it's a mage police.

It punishes mages who do their job badly to make mages collectively more effective. The Consensus is more than a side effect of regular people unwittingly using their wills to shape their world according to their assumptions.

The Consensus provides necessary stasis. The myriad possibilities of the universe need to be locked down to a specific pattern so that regular people have an understandable place to live together.

Entropy and dynamism ensure the universe is a changing place. If the Consensus remained unchanging, it would get further and further out of sync with that universe until a collapse occurred. So the Consensus needs to adapt at a sustainable pace. That's where mages come in. Their job is to bring positive changes to society, that Sleepers agree to incorporate.

Paradox flaws fade with time. Paradox spirits only pester mages for a while before leaving. Paradox realms rarely become permanent prisons. Paradox could eliminate mages, but instead it wants to teach them the limits they must operate within.

Paradox weeds out the mages who refuse to learn. And that leads me to my next point. Paradox has a memory. It keeps tabs on individual mages. It isn't as impersonal as gravity.

Did Paradox form Paradox spirits to keep its records? Or do Paradox spirits form and dissolve as needed to intervene? Perhaps Paradox has its own intelligence that rolls through the darker corners of the Umbra.

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Mages debate these topics, but don't know how to prove anything. Paradox is the supreme mystery which makes Marauders so hard to figure out. Before I move on, Pooka, do you have any thoughts on Paradox?

Pooka:

Oh, so many thoughts. I believe strongly in the theme of hubris in Mage. It opens up one of the defining features of the game to me, that no matter how self-important willworkers might be, their magic doesn't come without consequences.

And in Mage, there are these sort of weird existential consequences that you'd expect for breaking something as abstract as the laws of reality. And that can admittedly be hard to define or visualize or narrate in the context of a tabletop role-playing session.

But reality snaps back when you bend it. And you can say, oh, it just does this much damage, does burn or whatever, or pick from a list of flaws with different point values.

But for me, Part of the charm is to tailor it very specifically to the character. Mages are self-focused creatures who know, at some level, even subconsciously, the price for their more vulgar offenses against the Tellurian, and then they go ahead and commit them anyway.

So to me, like you were saying, that means Paradox should be individualized, and it should have teeth, and it should not be something easy to shrug off. I think that the Mage20 core book gets a little bit snippy, shall we say, about the revised Paradox system. But I quite like it because it makes the player stop and think for a second before they act, even if the character doesn't. It's not that you can't throw fireballs like you're in Dungeons and Dragons, but you better be really sure about whether it's worth it to do so.

And I know that we're talking about realms today as the primary manifestation, but I like the other variations too. I like the bespoke little weirdnesses that kind of precipitate out of a mage's pattern or how the spirit who might show up as this manifestation of the specific aspect of reality you've warped. Or maybe most personal of all, the quiet that you slip into. All great. And all fitting with the World of Darkness's mood where, sometimes it will be painful to act no matter how you try to game the system.

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I think that there's a tendency among some gamers that the things, or the belief, I suppose, that whatever players do themselves of their own volition, that should not have a negative impact on their characters, or at least not a major one.

And I get that sentiment, but I think that the idea of actual risk and sacrifice, the possibility that you'll do yourself more harm than good, that sort of long-term pain that comes from short-term gain,

Mage is better as a game for having that. If you'll permit me, I wanted to just quickly read this bit from the back of the book that we're going to be reviewing today, where it says, the paradox realms were always shifting, never within the umbra, never near Earth. Like Seekings, they test the mage. Unlike avatars, they want them to lose. So it's that personal testing, but it already has this negative arc that you have to grapple with.

So visits to these little private hellscapes are meant to be lessons, I think, because characters and stories learn from their failures and hardships as much as they learn from their successes and their meditations.

Approaching Paradox from this perspective, rather than just treating it as a stumbling block on the way to throwing fireballs, that's the key thing to me. And for what it's worth, I think Mage20 does ultimately take that position as well. There's a sidebar on, I've noted page 582. I can't believe, or I'm sorry, page 552. I can't believe I wrote that down.

And that lays out several things I agree with, along with several more that are just kind of baffling, but that sort of conceptualization. Now, all that being said, I think I've deployed a Paradox Realm on a player a grand total of once, maybe twice a game, because players end up being risk-averse, or the game doesn't go long enough for them to build up such a massive backlash or whatever.

But it leads me to ask you, Adam, what ways, if any, have you hitherto used Paradox Realms in a game?

Adam Simpson:

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I have not used Paradox Realms very often. I think they're fascinating. I'm glad they're in the game. But yeah, I've got to be honest, I've used them once or twice. One of them I can remember pretty well.

I was running a game where a character was, he thought the Forces Sphere was just so cool, and he was using it again and again. And I thought, okay, I think this time I can actually justify it. So there was a mention in one of the published mage books, a very, very sketchy idea for a possible paradox realm, like a sentence or two.

And it said, maybe they used Forces and they get pulled into a realm where every time they attempt to use magic, they will get an electrical shock so they can't succeed. And that was it for the realm idea in the published book.

Pooka:

Mm-hmm.

Adam Simpson:

So I thought, fine, I'll run with that. My player was using Forces a lot. So he got pulled into a realm that was basically a large room and everything appeared to be made out of glass or something like that. And every time he tried to do anything with any of his Spheres, there would be some electrical shock that would make him unable to complete the effect. And he was pretty annoyed, but he tried to solve this puzzle. I didn't really use dice because I wanted it to be fast, because I wanted to get back to the game with the rest of the players who were there in the game session.

And so there was an opening that the shocks were coming out of. He had to push some glass, basically cubes around to block that up so that shocks would not come out anymore.

I described to him how it required a lot of effort, but I didn't actually make dice rolls for for chance of success. I just told him, if you keep working at it, you'll get those blocks moved. So he got it blocked up. The realm faded away and he was back in the game. I was very nervous about failure,

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and so I didn't want to use dice rolls for that reason. But also, I just wanted it to keep moving quickly so that the other players didn't get too bored.

I think it went all right. But thinking back, if I was going to use Paradox Realms in my game again, I would like a more nuanced approach. So I'm glad that we have a book like this to discuss.

Pooka:

Yeah. For myself, I was going to say the strategy I would use if I had more occasion, well, if I were gaming at all, but if I had more occasion to throw out Paradox Realms, the key to me is to always have a clear reason why the mage ends up in the kind of realm they do, and at least one surefire way to escape that's not impossible to figure out with trial and error.

So the way that I sometimes frame it, I did this Hellcase and Charles Siegel and I did a Sphere book Correspondence project recently, and I did Paradox Realms for that, where I kind of framed it as the division between hubris and catharsis.

The mage realizes the offense they've committed and the way they must atone, sincerely or otherwise. I do think that thinking of it in that way kind of runs a little bit counter to the principles of this book. But what are the principles of this book? Let's talk about them.

Adam Simpson:

Yeah, now that we've had our fun, let's get back to Never Real Worlds. The purpose of this book is to offer roll tables so a Storyteller can generate a large number of Paradox realms based on die rolls. Most tables use a 10-sided die. One table uses two 10-sided, and three tables go from one to five with instructions on how to modify the roll of a 10-sided die.

Goodman Games sells five-sided dice, but rolling a six-sided and re-rolling on six is simple. Books full of roll tables is standard fare for those of us in the OSR neighborhood of RPG land.

The OSR has a reputation for supplying what World of Darkness books rarely do, Storyteller resources. At the time of recording, there's a Kickstarter running for Shadow City Blood and Neon. A member of the OSR community got frustrated running Vampire the Masquerade with so

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few Storyteller resources. So he's putting out his own vampire game with tools for quickly generating cities, neighborhoods, building layouts, urban encounters, etc.

A book of roll tables for every flavor of Paradox would be awesome, but we'll see what becomes available in the days ahead. The book is divided into five sections, the basics, realm creation, atmosphere, obstacles, and miscellaneous. The formula for Paradox realm creation is determine atmosphere, then obstacles, then final obstacle.

That means what is the realm's look and feel? What are some problems to overcome before the end? At the end, what is the final problem? And once that is solved, the realm fades away. The mage goes back home or wherever the mage was before.

So let's start with the basics. This is our first section. It serves as the introduction. Page six tells us the realm "strips the character of their magic and any non-mundane equipment", end quote.

This lines up with page 553 of the Mage 20 rulebook, which says, "and that escape should be measured not by mystic might, but by solving problems without the use of magic", end quote.

However, this is the only place in Mage 20 where it states Paradox Realms prevent magic. Also, previous editions of Mage have made conflicting statements about whether or not mages can use magic in Paradox Realms.

This book assumes the way to escape Paradox realms is to solve the problems they present. Throughout the editions, many statements have been made that Paradox realms are time-outs for mages. Serve your time, and then you can go.

Some are warnings, and after enough time has passed, the mage is free. However, some Paradox realms will only free the occupant when a puzzle is solved, or the mage expresses the proper apology.

This book was written for Mage 20, so the defined paradigms for that edition appear here. Every Paradox realm has its own paradigm. It states, this is how the Paradox realm interprets how reality should be.

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It is unlikely to match up with Consensus reality. This struck me as odd. Why would a realm have a different take on reality? The realm should have its own strange look and feel, but that doesn't imply the realm disagrees with the Consensus.

Paradox is all about the Consensus. The paradigms serve as themes for the look and feel of the Paradox realm. This book doesn't apply them any farther than that. The last item for this section is to note mages cannot die or be physically harmed in a Paradox realm.

They may take Willpower reductions, but an hour of rest in the realm can recover temporary Willpower points. The mage's temporary Willpower cannot exceed the rating when the Paradox realm formed.

Pook, *what did you notice in The Basics?*

Pooka:

So I just want to preface by saying that I am going into this a little bit skeptical because I don't think I would randomize Paradox realms. But I'm here for it. I applaud the effort and I'm ready to see how it might work.

And ultimately, I think my uncertainty around the premise is kind of highlighted in this section where the book undercuts itself a little bit, frankly, because it says Mage20 encourages Storytellers to prepare custom-made realms, and those can happen randomly, and oh, isn't that difficult?

But then it also points out it takes a lot of time to reach that level. To me, That makes it easier to facilitate. You can prepare the realm along the way in the course of the game.

But I guess if you think a player is going to hit 16 points of Paradox before you're able to do that and you want something in your back pocket if you decide to throw a realm at them in the meantime, sure, you don't have to give them a realm, but if you want to and you, for whatever reason, can't get it together on your own, here are these randomized tables.

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So the process in here of, you know, first you pick the Sphere, either randomly or if it's the one that created the most Paradox, and then I agree with you that having a randomized paradigm rather than the character's own, that kind of threw me.

I think that ties into what I was saying before about wanting the realm to feel really personalized. But it's fine. I can roll with it. Overall, the intro, I think it just kind of leaves me asking, will the actual results that fall out the other end of these tables make me feel like these realms present the narrative, the capital P point that I think a Paradox realm should present?

Maybe they'll be great. Maybe I'm making too much of it. Maybe the Storyteller will have to pick up the slack of making the realm feel personal and meaningful regardless of what you roll.

And the intro has some suggestions along these lines.

One that I thought was nice was where it said, think of the realm as a sentient NPC that is actively trying to hinder the player. And then you can kind of make choices on the fly a little bit more effectively.

So, yeah, I'm in it enough to continue flipping forward and seeing what happens. Very briefly, I just also want to be nitpicky and point out that the inconsistency of capitalization is really throwing me.

So, Sphere gets a capital S. Anyway, all right.

Adam Simpson:

Well, next up is realm creation. Five pages give us the high level tables that guide us to tables in later chapters. The Storyteller is instructed to use the Sphere that got the mage in trouble with Paradox. If there isn't one, roll on that table.

The realm's Sphere determines obstacles encountered before the final obstacle. The next table is the realm's paradigm, but this is really about look and feel. A table determines the number of obstacles.

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The final table directs you to a table for the realm's final obstacle, which is usually not tied to a Sphere. Two results on the paradigm table are Mage's Paradigm and Anti-Magic.

These two have a higher probability than other results. If the realm shares the mage's paradigm, the mage will probably never discover that, the way this book is written. It gives no advantages. Anti-magic is a paradox realm that doesn't believe in magic. This doesn't make a lot of sense to me. The forces of Paradox can't do their job if they don't know what's going on in the universe.

Also, the listings on the anti-magic chapter in a later section don't have a consistent theme to tie them together. A paradigm that negates magic doesn't match with Mage 20's presentation of paradigms, nor does it serve a purpose here. Besides, every Paradox realm in this book prevents magic. I think if a realm is going to be tied to a specific Sphere, that Sphere should factor into the final obstacle. Tables based on the mage's essence would be really great. Someone needs to come up with those.

So, Pooka, your thoughts on realm creation?

Pooka:

It just kind of reinforced my feeling that this would all feel a little bit more meaningful if the paradigm at play wasn't random. I suppose you can get interesting clashes between the character's paradigm and another.

I think later in the book, there's some kind of note about how the sort of reason for the Paradox realm to exist is because a different interpretation of reality is what's pushing back against the mages.

And I can kind of see that, but I don't think that necessarily really teaches them anything. Mages are self-centered. Like, are they really going to take that criticism in the form of a pocket reality to heart?

Yeah. But I did think it would be interesting to try actually rolling a couple of these if we have a moment to see what happens.

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Adam Simpson:

Well, I've got a moment. What do we come up with?

Pooka:

All right, so I've got some... I'll try and do these dice on the microphone so you can hear them. My mage dice in the mage try.

Adam Simpson:

Yeah, it doesn't count if we can't hear it.

Pooka:

All right, so table B1, the Sphere at play here. Correspondence.

Adam Simpson:

Now we're getting somewhere.

Pooka:

So now the paradigm is two d10s. I could use a d20, but it feels more right to do two d10s. So I'm going to be working with Divine Order and Earthly Chaos, it seems.

Number of obstacles, which max out at six. So luckily you won't be doing Paradox realms for the rest of your game session. Okay, so I got one from the realm Sphere plus one from a random Sphere. So I'll roll again. I've got my Correspondence obstacle and a Mind obstacle.

And then the final obstacle, because there's a separate table for that. And that will be an abnormal maze, which is going to be very tough to narrate through the podcast. So you'll just have to trust me that that's going to be the final obstacle.

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So that's an example of, okay, I've been catapulted into a Paradox realm. The Storyteller has nothing prepared. They want to just throw something at me. That's the realm that's going to come out.

A Divine Order and Earthly Chaos inspired one with a Correspondence obstacle and a Mind obstacle.

Adam Simpson:

Okay. And that gets filled in later, but we have later chapters. So I guess this will be a work in progress as we move through.

Pooka:

Precisely.

Adam Simpson:

All right. The next section is atmosphere. Once you know your atmosphere table, which is based on paradigm, roll two or three times for elements of the realm. This could be a black sky with no stars, an endless landscape of identical suburban homes. The mage notices his body becomes metal and mechanical in stages as he moves through the realm. A thick fog obscures whatever else the realm contains.

There are a number of listings that can be placed together to make unique and interesting realms. I really like the large number of elements here. Hats off to the author. My complaint is each table is meant to contain listings that share a theme. The tables sometimes fall short of this goal. A number of them seem to be placed in the same table almost at random. I would like to take some time to reorder the listings in this section.

Put them together by theme instead of paradigm. Themes might include, for example, mechanical world, the end of the world, nature gone wild. You get the idea.

So Pooka, what did you see in the atmosphere chapter?

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Pooka:

I thought some of them were really inspired. The book also sensibly points out that you could apply these to other situations like Seekings or umbral realms to give those a bit of flavor, though in those cases maybe you don't want to be randomizing them.

For a personal seeking, I'd say definitely go for the character's own paradigm. Like, definitely don't randomize that. But a few that I particularly liked, there was one under Mechanistic Cosmos where it's the sky is pitch black but then slowly appears, reveals itself to be golden cogs dripping blood.

There's a Creation is Divine and Alive one where it's the giant corpse of a god that's decaying. And maybe the most fun, under Everything's an Illusion, Prisoner, Mistake, the one where all of the denizens are different artists, writers, developers, and designers who worked on Mage, the 20th Anniversary Edition.

which raises the question, do you have to do the voices? But a couple I wasn't as fond of. So there's an anti-magic one where you start to devolve into a chimpanzee, and part of that includes growing a tail, which chimpanzees do not have.

There's an entry on one of the tables where the entirety is just, it's raining. Feels kind of phoned into me and then some of these just aren't created equal like some telegraph the obstacles you'll face with advance warning and then for some reason I noticed rolling a nine on divine order and earthly chaos lets you change your paradigm like where did that come from, you know? I'm not really sure how The atmosphere options reflect concepts like that.

And several of them felt interchangeable. The corollary of that, though, is just skimming through these is giving me great ideas for ones that I would pick and choose. And regardless of what you end up with, I would say you don't necessarily just want to state the results from the rolls.

You still have to, as the Storyteller, put them together with kind of dreamlike logic and give descriptions that articulate what's in the roll table without just kind of repeating it verbatim so you kind of have to just make it clear that this is the reality you're in now and allow the character or allow the player to explore on their own like ask the questions about the environment and what's

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going on in it and the role tables provide you with the skeleton that you then have to kind of flesh out a little bit

But some of them are more detailed than others, like, "it's raining" doesn't really give either me or the player a lot to go on. I noticed in here, I wrote down, I'm really not wild about this Divine Order and Earthly Chaos table. And of course, that's the one that for my on-the-spot experiment, I will be rolling for.

So let's see if I roll a 9 and have to change my Paradigm. Here we go. Okay. So I will read this just for the sake of people can get a sense of what's on the table.

I rolled a one, which is, the realm is covered in a thick field of wild rose bushes. It hurts to move through them, but the thorns leave no mark. The roses start as buds and begin to bloom as the character completes obstacles.

By the final obstacle, vibrant roses in all shades are in full bloom. So that's very evocative and very nice. Does it really express a divine order and earthly chaos atmosphere?

Adam Simpson:

You could argue that at the start, it's a bunch of rose bushes with thorns that make it hard to move around. That's the earthly chaos. But as you move through it, the beauty emerges and you see the divine order that was hiding in the background at the start. I guess I could interpret that, but then you could probably interpret it another way as well.

Pooka:

Creation is divine and alive. Seems reasonable. Roses for the rose god.

Adam Simpson:

We turn now to the chapter on obstacles. This is the largest chapter in the book and gives us the puzzles and conflicts that make up the obstacles, including the realm's final obstacle. The first nine tables are for Spheres. Seven other tables follow. If you follow this book's assumption that a puzzle

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must be solved, you need to handle failure. The player can't solve the puzzle, the mage is trapped forever in the Paradox realm and taken out of your game.

This book handles that problem by saying death is impossible in Paradox realms. Some puzzles will kill the mage who can't solve them and reset like a video game. They repeat, allowing the Storyteller to drop more hints until the player fails.

Finally solves it on one of the iterations. Otherwise, the puzzle gets replaced by new ones until the player can solve one. This keeps mages from getting trapped in Paradox realms, but unfortunately, it removes tension.

When your players learn every Paradox realm operates like this, they may think of them as drudgery instead of a high-stakes challenge. This book makes losing time the real penalty.

The longer it takes to solve the puzzle, the more time will have passed on Earth before they can escape the realm.

Pooka:

Mm-hmm.

Adam Simpson:

Some puzzles list skill roles with low difficulties. Others have a solution that doesn't involve rolling dice and keep resetting until the player gets it.

I think mixing it up is a better approach for a Storyteller. Let an occasional realm give a swift unexpected death with a reset, while for others, you let the player know their character senses a final demise for failure.

For the crucial moment when a puzzle must be solved, I would avoid dice rolls. You can have dice rolls for clue gathering. Good rolls can supply more clues. Have a solution in mind and let the player find it or listen if the player suggests an alternative that makes sense.

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Also, as I said before, published mage books tell us Paradox realms don't always demand a puzzle be solved. Let the realm be a mystery. And if the player can't solve it, let the mage be frustrated for a while and then released.

Some paradox realms are just a timeout. This book offers a lot of obstacles. So if one can't be solved, you can shift the scene to another one. Also, you can use a Storyteller cop-out. If the player really can't solve the puzzle, have a Paradox spirit appear and point out a mage who can't solve a challenge this simple shouldn't be taking such chances with magick.

Make the mage apologize to the Paradox spirit and the mage is released. This is one of the few times the Storyteller can actually lecture the player on vulgar magic without breaking the fourth wall.

Since I'm offering suggestions, I'd have some Paradox Realms allow magic, making the Spheres work differently or affects being dangerously powerful. Keeps things interesting. We're fortunate there are so many puzzles in this chapter. Some look good while others are lacking.

I would like to take the time to sift them. I would keep some while dropping others. Some of the Sphere obstacles work well while others don't seem to fit. There's a table with 10 monsters to defeat. Some of them are too easy, while others are too gimmicky. There's a table with 10 real-world games two people can play. It states if the mage's player loses, keep playing or switch games until the player wins. There has to be a better solution than that. A table offers 10 riddles, and they're really good. I copied them down for my fantasy RPGs. There's a table with five situations that revolve around buttons or simple dilemmas.

The solution in each case is do nothing and let the problem fade away. This kind of solution can be good for variety, but having a table all about that doesn't seem to work very well.

A table offers five abnormal mazes. Three of them are diagrammed for us. These look great. I'd like to try them in my games. There is a mention of the Dread Gazebo.

Hats off to the author for relaying a bit of RPG history for new gamers.

Pooka:

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Yes.

Adam Simpson:

For those of you who don't know about the gazebo, and we have a lot of listeners who have English as a second language, in the United States, many people build small roofed structures with a wood or concrete floor. They put chairs in it. There's one or more doorways without doors. The walls are latticework or screens. You find them next to outdoor swimming pools or gardens. In the early days of the internet, a person put a post on a billboard about his D&D game.

He mentioned a gazebo off to the side as he was describing a scene to his player. The player didn't know the word and thought it was a monster from the monster manual. The game master at first didn't understand why the player drew his sword and watched the gazebo carefully.

The player asked questions about what the gazebo was doing, and the game master kept saying, come on, it's a gazebo. The player did things like circle around, cast sleep spells and other preparations. The game master replied, but it's a gazebo.

When the player announced he was out of ideas, the game master, frustrated by now, said, the gazebo devours you. Make another character. That early billboard post went viral. You can see homages to it in YouTube videos, podcasts, etc.

So Pooka, what was your take on the big obstacles chapter?

Pooka:

Can I just say, I'm glad that we both had the Dread gazebo in our notes. I had it like underlined in boldface to mention.

Adam Simpson:

That was awesome.

Pooka:

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Yeah. I agree with the points you said. Again, you're going to have anywhere up to six of these, and each one does have one or more solutions provided, but it's kind of like, if someone is going to hit this realm more than once, it's going to get kind of, okay, we've seen all these obstacles before.

And for the most part, they are associable with the Spheres, but going through and sifting does seem like the better strategy so that you can introduce a little bit more variety into the mix.

There's also a sidebar that contrasts the Paradox Realms with Seekings, where the intention, heavy quotes, of the space is to help the character grow as opposed to make the character fail.

But in either case, I like that it highlights allowing characters to overcome obstacles in ways you as the Storyteller haven't expected. So it's nice to reward inventiveness. Just don't let them rules lawyer their way into obnoxiously breaking things, because that's just tiresome.

There are two that I did want to read in full because they were wonderful so under Mind there's one called babel where it says the character must descend a great tower. Along the way the character's sense of language starts to shift. They will forget random words such as window or step and the objects these words represent disappear from the realm. Some words may change their meaning, and thus the represented objects also change.

If bookshelf becomes the word for door, and the character wants to enter the door, they must say, I turn the knob on the bookshelf and enter it. If the concept of walking disappears, then the character must run or climb.

So as a linguist, I would have endless fun with this, and my players would hate me by the end. But that was one of my favorites. By contrast, I mean, I still like this one, but...

Under entropy, one of the results is heart where it says, The character's progress is blocked by a locked door. A manifestation of one of the character's loved ones is there as well.

They state that the key to it is within their beating heart and that the character will have to cut it out of them to progress. If the character refuses, the manifestation insists that they will die anyway in a week because the metal in it is slowly poisoning them.

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The character's choice is to either wait for the fake version of their loved one to die and lose a week in the real world or to kill them and keep moving. I have no idea why this is under entropy, but damn, that is some heavy role playing that you might get into kind of out of nowhere on the basis of a random die result.

So maybe before you actually throw these at your players, consider which ones you actually want to go through the process of narrating, because that scene in and of itself, that's going to take up a lot of time and energy for you and your player. And as you pointed out, your other players are going to be sitting around twiddling their thumbs.

So important to bear in mind. So yes, there's also a Correspondence one where kind of in the other direction, you just have to realize that the obstacle is an unlocked door and walk through it.

And then there's a Life one where you have to start doing complex genetics to build the correct animal necessary to pass the obstacle. There's the classic one guard is telling the truth, one is always lying, pair of doors thing.

And then Prime has one that's just climb a ladder. So... You know, like it's kind of all over the place and it's not always clear why a given obstacle is under a given Sphere.

And I think it's a little bit of an issue when something that's randomized might require extensive thought and/or planning in and of itself. Some of them also have this vibe of if you don't do anything, you still progress through the obstacle, which seems counterproductive to me.

So, yeah, I mean, just circling back to the same point again, go through, mark the ones you think you'll want to use and the ones you think you'll want to just kind of re-roll if they come up. Make it easier for yourself and for your players.

Adam Simpson:

Yeah, I think my main point of confusion reading this book was I had this assumption that Paradox realms were supposed to be short. They were small, they took up a short amount of time, and then your game continued. And this author approaches it as Paradox realms are frequently very large places with a lot in them. And you can have whole, you know, what is it?

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Adventure or series of game sessions in this Paradox realm, because there's so much going on and so many problems to solve.

Pooka:

Yeah.

Adam Simpson:

And so, yeah, that adjustment in approach was what made me scratch my head a few times. I'm not saying it's wrong, but it was certainly challenging my assumptions.

Pooka:

I sort of would approach Paradox realms as more extended scenes, myself, but I would also never drop it in the middle of a session.

Adam Simpson:

But the final, oh, I'm sorry, go on.

Pooka:

It would be absolutely a thing to hold off until the end or ask the player, can we do like a solo session before the next meeting so that you can kind of resolve this?

Because I do think it requires the time and attention necessary as a piece of the mage's character growth and not just this side scene you have to get through with a bunch of die rolls. I understand that not everybody games that way though. So there are people for whom this might be very useful, but it is kind of this underlying issue that I have with the entire process.

That said, I could roll a couple obstacles for my test case here and see what comes up.

Adam Simpson:

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What was it? Two before the final? Is that what you got?

Pooka:

Yeah, so I had Correspondence and Mind. So I'm going to roll Correspondence first. Let's see, a seven. Ooh, alright, this is, bear with me. Tears in the fabric of reality begin ripping across the realm. One of them swallows the character. The tear closes behind the character and a keyhole appears where it once was. The character must find the key that opens back to their Paradox realm. Outside of the Paradox realm, reality is a void where hundreds of Paradox realms are opening up to. The character can see through these tears to the other Paradox realms, but cannot enter them.

In this void, they will come across another mage. This seems to be a real mage, and they are also facing the same obstacle. Whether or not the character chooses to work with them is irrelevant. Eventually, they will come across a key.

The key works for either the character's realm or the other mage's realm. Although there is a second key somewhere in the void, the character will not know this. Let this play out. Remember that neither the character nor the other mage have access to magic, and neither of them can die.

All right, interesting. Meeting a counterpart that you perhaps have to contend with in order to escape. And then for Mind... Ah, it's the two guards, two doors thing. All right. One's telling the truth, one's lying. I've seen Labyrinth. I know how this goes.

Adam Simpson:

Yeah, I was thinking back to that as well, but apparently it's older than that.

Pooka:

Yeah. And then, like I said, the final obstacle is an abnormal maze, which obviously we can't really describe through the magic of audio. But the one that I would get would be, I guess that is indescribable. So... Once they enter the maze they are seemingly stuck walking around in a circle

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they can turn back and return to the previous obstacle it's always just round the last bend but ahead of them is just constant turning I guess that is kind of describable.

Adam Simpson:

Yeah, and you know I hate to say it, but that also reminds me of the movie Labyrinth, where there was a scene all about that towards the beginning of the movie. So I guess I would use that as an example of how to portray it.

Pooka:

It reminds me of Thor Ragnarok where he's trapped in not just a circle, but a freaky circle.

Adam Simpson:

Well, the fine chapter is called Miscellaneous, and it is three pages of Paradox spirits and a page of mazes. A spirit is assigned to each Sphere. No stats are given because in a Paradox realm, a Paradox spirit should reign supreme.

The author doesn't name Satyros Brucato, but refers to a comment from an interview where Brucato said, any opponent with game stats can be killed by players. Some are taken from Mage books, some appear to be new, although Wrinkle is rightly associated with the Time Sphere. I don't agree that each spirit should be connected to a Sphere.

For Prime, we have Otiosus, who isn't described well enough for me to use. Judgment is connected to Spirit, but in the Mage 20 book, Judgment appears on page 639 and is not associated with a Sphere.

There are four two-dimensional mazes, which is nice, but the book refers to the mazes so often that more than four would have been a nice addition.

So Pooka, what did Miscellaneous do for you?

Pooka:

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I didn't think it was really necessary to have it be a separate chapter. Like these spirits could have very easily been in one of the previous ones. We got other mazes in the previous chapter, so I don't know why these were separate.

I agree about the amount of detail, like Otiosus gets three sentences, Wrinkle gets five paragraphs. So yeah, it's fine. I was kind of confused about it being its own separate chapter.

Adam Simpson:

Yeah, it seemed to be, here's the material that didn't properly fit into others, so we shook it out in a miscellaneous at the end. Yet, as you said, the abnormal mazes, they did fit into obstacles, and the regular mazes, they didn't. And so, yeah, Hard to understand all the organization, but it's really not a big complaint.

So looking at the book as a whole, I found page references to be two pages off. A book about Paradox Realms should discuss how the mage's friends can find and enter the realm to help their cabal mate.

Two obstacles mention a way to accidentally wander into a null space slightly outside the Paradox Realm. This null space doesn't lead anywhere and doesn't allow escape. All the mage can do here is get mental or magical messages sent to others before stepping back into the Paradox Realm. A concept this intriguing needed better treatment. Most players won't even think of sending mental messages when they reach a dark, empty space. Although I've dropped a number of criticisms on this book, I want to make it clear I really like the book.

In the past, I've had a few vague notions of what I might do with Paradox Realms, but that wasn't enough to get me through a real Chronicle with players. This book gives me not only a lot of great ideas, but a framework to refine and extend.

I'm indebted to the author for that. I think a lot of Mage Storytellers don't use Paradox realms because they don't have a handle on how to present them or keep them interesting after two or three uses. This book is the answer a lot of us need.

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The notion that every Paradox realm presents multiple puzzles implies the forces of Paradox are okay with mages messing with the consensus as long as they can prove they're smart. I don't think the author intended this, but the thought brought a smile to my face.

This book emphasizes intelligence, persistence, and bravery as the qualities needed to be a mage. I'm fine with that, but I don't want to draw the line there. Past mage books have mentioned how Paradox at times wants to teach lessons including self-control, subtlety, and thinking of others.

Some puzzles or just confrontations in Paradox realms, emphasizing those would be a welcome addition. Whether it's a symbolic situation or a conversation with the spirit, lessons like Less Magic or Slow Down are appropriate for mages.

Pooka, what were your thoughts on the book as a whole?

Pooka:

I like your notion of proving how smart you are, because that makes me think, even if Paradox is this force that's kind of depersonalized and universal, the expression of it through a realm is deeply personal.

And I can imagine a mage plunging into one of these and being like, hmm, I seem to be in this pocket universe. I need to figure out how I can get out. Bet I have to prove how awesome I am.

And that's just, that fits, you know?

Adam Simpson:

All right, all right.

Pooka:

So I can see how this book is a useful tool for a lot of Storytellers who are not me. And, or rather I can see how other Storytellers might use it as intended. Whereas I would rather just poach

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material from it when building Paradox realms or other personalized spaces, like for a Seeking that I would take the time to more methodically construct and deploy on my own.

There is a wide range of stuff to draw from, and there's a something for everyone feel. But think that randomizing them can end up with, you get a lot of variety with minimal effort, but you also have a decent chance of generating a setting and a narrative for a chapter of your Chronicle that just feels really out of place.

Your mileage may vary for how okay with that you are. I think if the book had more explicitly framed the randomization as optional and provided more structure to not using it, I would have been into that.

Maybe the author could have suggested builds that can combine specific options across the tables, like whatever the one you said about nature is wild or something. I'm like, yeah, that would have been cool.

Maybe they could have done the templating differently. I don't know. Like rolled for the nature of an obstacle and then pair it with the bodily or atmospheric effects that associating it with a particular Sphere would have.

It's an interesting concept, if nothing else. And certainly a lot of inventiveness went into developing these descriptions. So I think that's pretty cool.

Adam Simpson:

Well, I tried to think of puzzles emphasizing that, and I had an idea. The player's mage appears in a cave. A complicated machine is blocking the exit, but the player soon discovers filling an empty tank with water will cause the machine to raise the stone blocking the exit.

The player sees a bucket. A stream is nearby. When the player empties the bucket into the tank, the water surges out, knocks the mage over, and washes him down several levels into the mud.

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Require skill rolls to make the laborious climb back up to the machine. Trial and error will teach the only way to make progress is to pour water a little at a time into the tank and wait until the water settles inside the complicated machine.

There's frustration, but no risk of death. No spirits appear. The trap doesn't hinge on a skill roll. The player should get the hint. A little at a time works. A big dose doesn't.

And the Storyteller will have to hope that the player takes that lesson back into the outer world. Pooka, do you have any thoughts before we move on?

Pooka:

Sounds like Home Plumbing the Ascension. But, yeah. See, things like that are great because... I can visualize how to construct what you just described for different kinds of character and how each of them would kind of struggle differently with that kind of scenario.

And there are ones like that in the mix here, just not the majority, I would say.

Adam Simpson:

Yeah. Well, like many things, Mage tells Storytellers to think of something for Paradox realms. I think as a result, many Storytellers don't use Paradox realms. Storyteller resources like this book make it easy to roll up, say, five Paradox Realms and set them aside for later.

If the random tables give you something odd, adjust it. If you do this between games, there's no stress or delay during a game session. Some people don't like the idea of random roll tables in World of Darkness games. It's too mechanical, too random. World of Darkness games should be creative and reflect something of the person running it.

That's fine. But think for a moment, are you getting into a rut? Are you avoiding things because they're too hard to invent in the middle of a game? Roll tables can help you out. After a while, you can set them aside.

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Roll tables are not a permanent tool. I like bringing OSR lessons like this into my World of Darkness games to shake things up. This book makes the assumption Paradox realms are full-size Umbral Realms. I always thought of them as being the size of, say, a living room.

But challenging my preconceptions is probably a good thing to do. Well, before I move on, Pooka, anything to add?

Pooka:

I think we actually didn't mention the unavailability of this book, which we should probably point out.

Adam Simpson:

Oh, yeah. Oh, gosh. I forgot. Thank you for being here, Pooka.

Pooka:

Yeah, we meant to do that at the start and then ended up talking about the book before. So yeah, we should point out that this book is not currently available on the Storyteller's Vault.

My understanding is the author took it down because of the AI art. So The book was generated, a lot of the art was generated using an early iteration of Art Breeder, an AI tool back in 2018.

And lots of the official sort of community content sites like Storyteller's Vault instituted a policy of no AI art in late 2023, early 2024 was really when they started ruling out.

So some people removed all of that artwork from their books. Some people replaced just AI generated images. Some, as in this case, took their work down entirely.

And some people just left it as it was, and plenty of AI stuff has been uploaded since without repercussions. So regardless of one's stance on AI art, I think one can agree it wasn't a terribly successful policy.

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In any case, I don't know what the author's position is at this point on their work being put out into the world, but Allegra Van Rossum, if you're listening, we would love to hear from you, and we would love to point people towards where they can buy this book.

And even if you aren't able to get a copy, I hope that describing the sort of construction that's going on here inspires people to put together maybe their own randomized tables if they're so moved.

Like I said, I wouldn't use it exactly as intended, but I still get inspiration from it. When I've done my own homebrew that involved mixing and matching expressions of paradigm from tables before I read this one,

I tried to have those be open enough that they could go like in whatever order and define a character's story. I would say this book's take on realms is maybe a little too impersonal or one-off for that, but in exchange it offers these kind of rich narrative detail options for you to run the scene that's set there.

So if that suits your storytelling style better, try it out, see how it goes.

Adam Simpson:

While we're discussing examples of paradox realms, I can't ignore the movie *Groundhog Day* from 1993 starring Bill Murray. No, I'm not stuck on this movie. I'm bringing it up because both the first edition rulebook and the *Mage 20* rulebook recommend the movie as an example of a Paradox realm connected to the Sphere of Time.

I like the movie and recommend it if you have a free evening and a bowl of popcorn. I don't think of it as a *Mage* movie, but it's the story of a man who gets trapped in a sort of extra dimensional bubble that won't release him until he learns a lesson about the value of each day he's given.

In that sense, it's like a Paradox realm. He can't die and can't escape a single day that repeats endlessly. So can we use this in our *Mage* games? I think we can use material from the movie to make our own Paradox realms, but I don't recommend using the movie as-is in your games.

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The subtlety of the repeating time loop is best displayed if the mage has to figure out he's not in Kansas anymore, but in a Paradox realm. The time needed to handle this realm well is recommended for a game with only one player or pull the other players into the realm to help the mage who is trapped.

Make this Paradox realm the focus of a session or two instead of a diversion. Also, the life lesson of valuing each day plays well in the movie, but don't expect the same experience at your game table. The player will either catch on too quickly to give it weight or see it as sappy.

A puzzle resolution that requires repeating the day to build up knowledge seems better to me. That teaches the mage to slow down. Some solutions can't be rushed. Otherwise, have the mage see how the Sphere effect that caused the Paradox hurt several Sleepers. The mage must help each one of those Sleepers recover from the harmful effects of the mage's magic then the forces of Paradox will see the mage cares about non-mages and the Paradox realm ends. Pooka, what do you think of Groundhog as a Paradox Realm?

Pooka:

I love this, and the next time I run a game where someone gets too profligate with their Time magic, I am going to be deploying this.

Adam Simpson:

Yeah, I think the the movie gives us ideas for Paradox realms, but I just think that someone would have a negative or a poor experience if they saw the movie and said, yeah, like that.

I'm just going to drop that in my game. It's going to be great. Well, it might not be great, but definitely very good ideas for us.

Pooka:

Yeah, fair.

Adam Simpson:

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Well, you know, I think I have said all that I can think of to say on Paradox Realms. Any parting thoughts before we wrap up?

Pooka:

Wouldn't it be weird if like podcasting was a Paradox realm that we kept getting trapped in and the way to get out was to record an episode. Kind of feels like that sometimes.

Adam Simpson:

Yeah, the loop would stop if I would learn my lesson, but I just can't learn it, apparently.

Pooka:

Yeah. More content.

Adam Simpson:

Well, now that we're at the end of the episode, let me summarize. *Never-Real Worlds* is a book worth buying to help your mage games. Whether you use it as intended or simply pull some ideas from it, I think you will find it worth your while.

I paid full retail for my on Storyteller's Vault before it was taken down. And that's about it for me.

Truth until Paradox, baby.

Pooka:

Bye.