

Tomes of Magick: Zero Edition, Part 1

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 received a life-changing revelation when you least expected it? Like on your way to school when you're young. Oh, by the way, you were adopted. That's what it felt like for me. I got an email with an attachment. A friend said, thought you might like to see the foundation of all you hold dear.

Today on Tomes of Magic, we're going to talk about it. But first, Pooka, how are you doing?

Pooka:

So keeping busy as an underpaid bee. I've been traveling a lot this summer and now I'm back in my apartment for the foreseeable future putting things in my memoir but it's only a matter of time before the wanderlust bites again so we'll see what happens.

Adam Simpson:

That is the fate of a changeling indeed. Well, are there any announcements for us?

Pooka:

So yeah, I will mention once again, and I'm probably going to be mentioning this pretty frequently for a few weeks at least, we have rescheduled TriadCon 2, TerryCon edition, to November 8th and 9th. For anyone who missed the announcements back in the spring when we initially planned to have this before realizing that it was way more organizational work than any of us had capacity for

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at the time. This is an online convention that Terry Robinson started back in 2021 during COVID lockdown.

The purpose was to get people to try playing and running games for the first time, so in his memory we are bringing it back. It'll all be run through Discord and Zoom over those three days and we're in the process of hashing out who will be involved and the schedule and everything like that now.

There will also be a charity auction of role-playing books and paraphernalia occurring in tandem. Interested parties should visit www.tryitcon.com for more information.

And there's also a Discord where you can stay updated on any news as it develops. We hope that people will check it out and maybe sign up, try a game or two. Why not?

Adam Simpson:

Yeah, I've heard some great comments on our Discord server from people who went to previous Tri It cons, so that one is not to be missed. Well, today is a very special episode of Tomes of Magic. We usually discuss published Mage books. Today we're discussing a book that wasn't published. Instead of reviewing this book, we just want to share the ideas in it. The original draft from Mage the Ascension was given to Pooka and I last year by Terry in PDF form.

There's only one printed copy that probably came from a home printer. The PDF was scanned from that. I would call it a manuscript. It has no illustrations, almost no layout.

The only editing pass it got was some handwritten notes in the margins by Rob Hatch after it was submitted in April, 1993.

Some sections are unfinished. There are notes like "fill this in later" or "who knows Latin for this term". Some sections used text copied in from a Vampire rule book where the word vampire was replaced with mage.

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In a few places, this led to lines that were accidentally quite funny, but this manuscript was produced in a hurry. Laughing at mistakes is not where we're going today. The legal status of this manuscript is unknown.

I spoke with ah Steve Wiek, who granted us permission to discuss it. Why share material from a manuscript that never saw print? Because it had a profound influence on the Nage books that followed, not only setting but rules. It also had an influence on Mage the Awakening, a later separate mage role-playing game. This is Stuart Wiek's original vision of mage, and it's nothing short of fascinating. It gives us the context for several things in the first two editions that were rather cryptic.

I'm going to cover many points quickly and try to make them understandable. If I can manage that, that's vulgar magic. Before we get started, Pooka, what were your impressions when you first read this?

Pooka:

I'll echo what you said about the very casual thought you might like to see the foundations of all you hold dear thing. Because Terry, I went over to record one day and he just kind of randomly handed me this stack of paper. And I say stack, it is like 300 pages or nearly without art, as you said. So it's a lot of words.

And he just said, hey, check this out. And my hands don't shake for much, but that was definitely a moment when they did. At the same time, I kind of find it refreshing when you have that moment where you confront something or someone you idolize and it just gets punctured hilariously sometimes.

So if I can paint like a little word picture here, the front page says and in big letters, it says Mage the Ascension, a storytelling game of changing reality, truth until paradox.

And in red pen next to Truth Until Paradox, it just says, odd. And I love that. I love how even at the start, nobody was fully sure what to make of this weird little game, but it was clear that something special was there.

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So there was a little bit of emotional whiplash, but yeah. And so that feeling kind of carried through the whole read through. I remember Satyros Brucato saying, I think, in one of the interviews on this podcast, that there were these frantic last minute rewrites between this manuscript in April 1993 and the release of first edition in August 93.

So looking through this, it's clear there were a lot of rewrites. While this game might have been maybe too caught up in its own philosophy, and if it had been released in this way, would not have been as popular or sold as well as Mage eventually did, I do still think there is something playable and interesting here.

There are just so many ideas in the pages, some of which you can see how they evolved into the concepts we know and love in the game, and some of which just vanished. And Terry talked about wanting to try running it at some point, and I'm desperately curious how the feel of it would be different. So that was on my mind as I went through.

Adam Simpson:

Yeah, I was fascinated. This document captivated me for days. I kept pausing to pace the room and think about what I just read.

Pooka:

Hmm.

Adam Simpson:

I bounced back and forth between excited, intrigued, and confused. I'm a first edition fan, and this is the footnotes I had always been missing.

Well, let's get this party started. Mage first edition had a number of mysteries, but Zero Edition is thorough and tidy. How things started and what's going on behind the scenes is all explained, so it's appropriate we start with origins.

Cosmogony of the Prime is the story of how the universe started. Mages have taught this story to their students since ancient times. The beginning was a single entity called the Prime. It needed to

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achieve its potential and better understand its nature. It split up into quintessence and dynamic force. These two fundamental forces began constructing the universe.

Quintessence is more associated with consciousness, dynamic force with unconsciousness. The Atavuum formed to carry out the next stage. They did not have identities or personalities.

The Prime created Gaia to provide guidance. The Atavuum created Earth, its near Umbra, and perhaps other realms. The Atavuum realized they could do no more, so they fragmented so that smaller beings could form and continue their work.

Smaller beings would be more focused, more local, and thus better suited to manifest identities. The Pure Ones resulted. The Pure Ones either created humanity or set the stage so humanity could begin.

The Pure Ones became interested in humanity. They wanted to create their own progeny like humans did. The Pure Ones used quintessence left behind by the split up of the Atavuum to work great magics.

They used that quintessence to create progeny, and this was called the echoings. The echoings used up so much quintessence, the pure ones realized they had to stop. Weakened by the echoings and unable to create more, the Pure Ones died off.

Before they were gone, they sought out humans with the strongest will and taught them to be mages. They taught them the Cosmogony of the Prime and gave them the responsibility of supervising the process of Ascension.

True Ascension is the universe perfecting itself. This can only be done by the proper interaction of quintessence and the dynamic force. This can only be done by humans who have souls.

A soul is a being that has a conscious and unconscious minds. Ascension is more than just returning the Prime to the unity it had at the start.

It is perfecting all that exists so that it can reconstitute into a better version of the Prime. Humans unwittingly created the spirits of the umbra. Umbral spirits do not have unconscious minds.

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This invalidates many beliefs of the werewolves and other were-creatures who think nature spirits came first and humans are holding Gaia back. You can tell them. Knowing how mad they get, I'm not going to tell them.

The phenomenon of human thought forming one or more umbral spirits is called the Idiom of Entities. Gaia didn't start from it, but the Triat spirits of the werewolves did.

Yes, the Weaver, Wild, and Wyrms of Werewolf the Apocalypse are here as is. Dynamic versus static interaction and the four essences are key concepts of Zero Edition.

The setting, rules, everything revolves around these two concepts that were cleverly worked into every corner of the game. The four essences, Dynamic, Pattern, Primordial, Questing, were divisions of labor of the Atavuum before humanity existed.

The earliest and greatest Pure Ones were Primordial but later Pure Ones had all four essences. The Pure Ones created personalized essences that became the essence families of mages, but more on that later.

The Pure Ones trained mages, but never had children with them.

All through history, mages were 100% human. This means the beliefs of more traditional Verbena are invalidated. It also explains why mage breeding programs have not shown any success worth mentioning.

Even though the Pure Ones died before recorded history, they never really left the scene. The ghosts of dead Pure Ones became gift spirits for mages. The term Avatar was new for first edition. Zero Edition calls them gift spirits.

The Pure Ones were dedicated to Ascension, and their gift spirits are all about pushing mages toward Ascension. Each mage has an essence. I'm pretty sure gift spirits choose mages with compatible essences.

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In Revised Edition, Bitter Road, page 90 states, "the default setting for Mage assumes that avatars are chunks of primal energy not really self-aware that hold memories of past lives and act as an interface between consciousness and magic", end quote.

When I read that, I asked, where is this coming from? It looks like it came from Zero Edition. Revised Edition made some changes to avatars, but I won't go into that now. Realm with a capital R means planetary realm. Earth and its near umbra is a realm. Mars is a realm. Venus is a realm. Earth is the only known source of souls, yet other realms have alien life. One thing not addressed is, if Earth is the only source of souls, and beings with souls create umbral spirits, what are these life forms of the other realms?

That's the origins topic. As for commentary, first edition didn't give a clear origin for the universe and kept avatars mysterious. The Cosmogony of the Prime assumes very strong continuity in mage society over thousands of years and that mages all agree on the same detailed story.

Most mage fans prefer a setting where mage factions keep their own lore and disagree on history. Stuart Wiek saw a society of mages that mixed regularly and agreed on many things.

Brucato pulled the game towards mage factions that were more separated with more divergent views of the world. Pooka, what was your take?

Pooka:

It was definitely maybe the most jarring thing when I first read through this was that the term avatar does not appear anywhere in the text. It's like, wow, you know, and it's helpful that you mention the roots of this in Mage the Awakening as well, because that was definitely another sort of thing that I felt reading through that it aligned much more with that game's "here's the way things are" sort of take.

To some extent, the creation myth here read to me like the text was trying to answer open questions raised by Werewolf, such as, where did the Umbra come from? And having these universal beliefs, some of which, like the original prime entity separating itself to better understand its own nature, or the slow build of sentience among the Pure Ones that eventually gave rise to avatars, they echo actual beliefs either in the real world or in Mage of later editions.

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But I do think it was the right move to wind this back and leave it open to interpretation, especially because so much of the rest of this overview tilts at that same focus on subjective reality that carries through into future editions of the game with the Technocracy of the defenders of objective reality, naturally.

So making the history more uncertain allows groups of mages to develop their own takes on their origins and the universe's origins, keeping it a mystery. And speaking of mystery, we have this capital M mystery in here, and it's this agreement across all mages to keep their power secret, which felt like, okay, Vampire has a masquerade, Werewolf has delirium, what can we do to make sure the mundanes don't know about wizards?

And later we get a background with that same name that's just arcane, but this is like a more abstract concept that's this global conspiratorial agreement among all mages.

And that hidden world theme is shared by all of the World of Darkness games in one way or another. People have also pointed to *Ars Magica* as source material for the game, and we do get a couple notes later on about the Order of Hermes in here.

But while this is a game aware of its own history, both inside and outside the text, it still feels solidly within the modern World of Darkness and reflective of its ethos.

All that being said... There is as much or more material in this section that is relevant to Mage alone. A lot of it sticks out at odd angles, and there are a lot of words in here with capital letters, making them game terms to memorize, which for anyone who's not into rolling up all this esotericism and smoking it like a cigarette, it's a very steep learning curve.

So you have like, the great loss from the Withdrawing of the universal intelligence caused the Mythic Age, and every single noun in that sentence I just said has a capital letter. So they filed it down a bit to fit Mage better into the game universe.

I think many of these ideas could be introduced back into the game now, but they didn't really have a place in the core book draft. And some of them I would love to bring back. Those essence families, yes, we can talk about them later.

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But for example, the primordial essence has two streams of mage avatar that have arisen within it. The Shards Shibboleth, who are, I quote, elitists of aesthetic regimes, and the Line Zadig, who are crazed crusaders of the inscrutable.

Fabulous. Give me more. So this points to Avatar descent as this additional axis of character creation on top of the Traditions. And the families we get here are simply the largest ones. So in theory, this was an aspect that in future supplements could have been diversified and expanded alongside adding, you know, crafts and whatever else.

I'm pulling that specific example out, but I think it points more generally to the utility of the exercise of this read-through. So avatars and essences are something which, for three decades now, with maybe the exception of Sorcerer's Crusade tilting at the latter,

They've had little to know tangible or mechanical impact on the game. Fans have noticed that. People have made attempts here and there to have them matter more. And here we have an option for doing that spelled out reasonably clearly. And that's something which kept occurring to me throughout the book. Like, how can I make this work given what Mage has turned into was the question that kept arising, which of course raises questions about differences in the overall setting. So what do we think about that?

Adam Simpson:

Let's get into the setting of Zero Edition. Domains are important places in the Near Umbra where mages and umbral spirits can establish themselves. Shadow domains form where other planetary realms brush up against the Earth realm.

Each shadow domain contains a narrow area that could be called a bridge leading to another planetary realm without passing through the Deep Umbra. Nematia domains form from the thoughts of humans, but are also created by Celestines and Incarna, the powerful umbral spirits.

Every dream a person has when sleeping forms a small nematium that drifts into the Near Umbra. Human creative energy is valuable, and that's why the Dream Lords try to snatch the dream nematia when they can.

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The Dream Lords and the Dream Realms are a big part of Zero Edition. They were intended to be a major feature of the game. I just described the importance of the interaction between the conscious and unconscious minds of humanity.

To shepherd Ascension, mages learn dream magic and recognize the Dream Realms as an important part of the Near Umbra. The Deep Umbra is cold, empty space. It surrounds the planetary realms, and mages shouldn't expect to encounter anything there.

Nephandi are human mages who decide to serve the Wurm of Werewolf the Apocalypse, There are no cauls yet. They transform into monstrous, ugly things that cannot survive on Earth.

They live in the Near Umbra and disrupt mages' work there. They are Umbra-only opponents. That's why 1st Edition mentioned Nephandi not living on Earth. Technocrats are Earth-only opponents.

Orphans are mages, but they don't have gift spirits. They don't have essences. Orphans started a few decades ago. In the eighteen hundreds there were no Orphans. Neville Sinclair, the old wise Hollow One, can't exist in Zero Edition.

Lacking essences and gift spirits, other mages see Orphans as a different class of mages. That's why we saw mention in 1st Edition of mages being concerned about Orphans.

Orphans don't have foci for using the Spheres and pay higher experience costs to raise traits. Remember, they're called instruments in Mage 20. They're called foci in previous editions.

The Traditions have a project called The Reconciliation. They want to bring other planetary realms back into proper alignment with Earth realm. They set up mystic observatories in shadow domains where they try to fix the universe. I have latched onto this idea like white on rice. I am bringing it into my games. If my players don't like it, I'll find new players. If this becomes a controversy that tears the Mage community in half, my apologies.

Pooka:

So be it.

Adam Simpson:

Sometimes when mages die, they become a renvoys. The body doesn't decompose and it produces quintessence or creates a pocket dimension or some other mystic benefit. Mages hold onto renvoys to keep the benefits and sometimes even argue over who should keep it.

The smarter mages know renvoys are not corpses. The will of a mage is so strong when death comes, the mage might say, forget that and hold onto life through sheer willpower.

That's the benefit of having a willpower of 10, folks. If the mage gets three successes on an Arete roll, their body goes into a coma while the mind wanders. The higher the Arete, the longer the coma. There's a chart.

When the mage reclaims the body, the nearby mages might have some explaining to do. Marauders cannot talk. Even with Mind Sphere telepathy, Marauders are unable to communicate with non-Marauders. If a Marauder drops by your Chantry for a visit, you cannot talk it out. There are no Nodes. Mages want quintessence, but it ain't easy to get. Mages know werewolf cairns have quintessence.

Some talismans store quintessence. There's Renvoys. Meditating anywhere will restore quintessence of the Avatar Background rating, although it's called Gift Background in Zero Edition.

This helps me understand why first edition books kept mentioning how mages wanted to raid werewolf cairns and how rare and valuable talismans were. When the traditions teach their students the Spirit Sphere, they teach dream magic along with it.

There is no Council of Nine. The Traditions work together, but there is no political structure, at least not that I noticed in the text. There are no seekings.

When a mage raises Arete, just spend the experience points and mark your character sheet. There are, however, five stages in the process of personal Ascension. They are called Evolutes. They are Awakening, Agentia, Apanthropy, Athanasia, Ascension. They all start with the letter A. There is a

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mystic connection between Enlightenment and the first letter of the alphabet, I think. I could be wrong on that.

Anyways, at Arete 4, a mage must achieve Agentia, or Arete cannot increase. Agentia is making a positive change in the culture the mage lives in on Earth. The Culture skill on the character sheet is no coincidence.

At Arete 7, the mage must achieve Apanthropy. That means increasing the Mystery Background that was later renamed to Acane. At Arete 10, the mage must achieve Athanasia, or Ascension is impossible.

Athanasia is using magic to either become immortal or greatly extend one's lifespan. This gives more time to work out Ascension. At every Evolute after Awakening, the gift spirit separates from the mage to talk to the mage or give a vision. This is called a Journey with a capital J. This is the only time the gift spirit communicates with the mage. Ascension requires an Arete of 10. Ascension causes the mage to disappear. Their body and mind are gone and do not return. The mage starts existence on a higher plane. This is hinted at on page 225 the second edition rulebook. Each of the five original World of Darkness games had a transcendent aspirational goal for that supernatural group. Vampires speak of Golconda.

These transcendent goals were supposed to be vague, allowing them to be defined for each gaming table if desired. Zero Edition had hard specific rules for Ascension, and that didn't quite match the precedent.

That's probably why Ascension was made more mysterious in 1st edition. Quiet is not insanity. In order to work magic, mages resist the Consensus, the understanding of the universe that allows the universe to hold together.

When that is taken too far, when mages do it too well, Quiet is the result. When a mage loses sight of the reality he is opposing, not only does he have trouble relating to the world, but he can't effectively work against something he's lost sight of.

Mindscapes are deliberately started. They do not happen on their own. The mage realizes something is wrong and retreats into his own head to sort it out. Wits plus Enigmas difficulty four

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to identify the core problem. Each success lets the mage influence the mindscape. Successes also determine how long the mindscape lasts, not how long it seems to last.

Quiet got its name from mages in mindscapes. They lie still, make no sound. They are quiet.

Two mages experiencing Quiet who are near each other will affect each other's Quiet. Players make a roll each time their mage absorbs quintessence to see if Quiet occurs. There is 1 to 17 point chart with Quiet effects that I think is quite useful for our games.

When Quiet ends, roll to see if hobgoblins remain. Just because you've got your head back together doesn't mean the fun has to stop. False sleep is a condition where a mage cannot use the Spheres or Arete until a problem is resolved. There are no systems or precise instructions. We're told it's connected to the Evolutes, traumatic events, or changes in magical goals. The appendix gives us boogeymen.

These are frightening humanoid creatures that manifest physically to attack mages and those near them. They often trouble newly Awakened mages. Boogeymen are connected to fear. When a mage understands and masters the fear, they cannot trouble the mage anymore. If someone can get the haunted mage to properly understand the boogeymen, the boogeymen go away. Mages often take the newly Awakened mage to a Chantry to protect the initiate's family members and friends from boogeymen.

Dark births are also in the appendix. These otherworldly creatures are from other planetary realms and thus called Nephilim by mages as a kind of expression. They are a black void that claws, tentacles, and other things come out of. They destroy all matter they touch. Fighting with them is dangerous. Paradox spirits hate them. All vulgar magic near a dark birth will not suffer paradox because the forces of paradox are more worried about the dark birth. There are systems for boogeymen and dark births and for opposing them. I'd like to use them in my games.

I think they're brilliant additions to the mage setting. The appendix gives us a sample story that features a mindscape and specific suggestions on how to run one. However, the manuscript has no pages after 275, which is in the middle of the sample Mindscape.

That was the setting topic. Pooka, what did you observe on this topic?

Pooka:

That's a big topic.

Adam Simpson:

Yeah

Pooka:

Can I just say, maybe my favorite red line note in the entire manuscript is the all caps one on page 31 that says, no, vampires create goth world. It's not the Wyrms. The Wyrms is not goth enough.

I mentioned more capitalized terms than are probably necessary, and they just keep on coming here. But I think maybe the main thing that I paid attention to was how much structure there is around dreams here, almost none of which I want to say made it into the game from the beginning.

As of second edition, we got Book of Worlds, but then Mage started yielding some, though not all, of that design space to Changeling, which has muddied the waters between the two games ever since in terms of how they handle dreams.

It's also fascinating how localized this is to the Umbra. So it had to account for Werewolf's cosmology to some degree, to the point that the domains, capital D domains we're talking about, are localized in what's called the Gaia Sphere.

Bits like this, it makes me try to envision what scenes would look like in a typical game, and I think it would be a lot of meditation, a lot of astral projection, and a lot of trippy 2001 Space Odyssey visuals. I wonder if it makes sense to say mages in this edition end up being defined by their minds and or their essences more than their wills, which is a subtle but important distinction.

Like, wills still matters, but... It's sort of like how mages think that defines them in this. Don't know. I'm kind of rolling with that thought as I speak it.

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And the traces of that in later games, like the astral reaches being the favored corner of the umber for mages, are present here. But the feel of it is overall more cerebral and conceptual than adventurous. And one might expect the latter in a tabletop role-playing game.

Like, I'd still play this, but... I also wanted to mention... you had a comment that you left in the Discord that I thought summed up some of this feeling really well, where you said, when you were reading this, you felt that the Wiek brothers had a more abstract intellectual approach to mages and their activities, but that maybe Stuart Wiek was more interested in unlocking the mysteries of the world than the emotional struggles of player characters.

And I think that that's really what comes through here from the way the world is being described. It's definitely fun though, spotting the little differences in details. You mentioned that Marauders can't talk and I totally missed that.

But then I noted a bit where it says that they've achieved complete harmony with their gift spirits, that is their avatars, in a way no other mages can. And then like, huh, Marauders, they figured it out.

Dream mages can create these enchanted items called lenses that the book says function in both physical and spiritual reality, sort of prefiguring treasures in Changeling.

There's a bit about where they define quiet as paradigm drift, which I like, although linking it to taking in too much quintessence should be handled with care. I mean, I like the idea, but making the primary resource for doing magic somewhat poisonous is like, be careful with that.

With reference to the Nephandi and the Nephilim, I would absolutely throw those in my game too. The alignment with werewolf that happens in this book means that mages are fundamentally caught up in the fight against the Wyrms to defend Gaia.

She's still Gaia, she just means something cosmologically different to them, and mages' methods are maybe less bloody than the Garodu's, although not necessarily less flawed. And I love the Evolutes, even if they really serve no purpose other than creating checkpoints on the path to Ascension.

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And I do agree that A is a mystical letter. Just ask the folks over in the Trinity universe about that. The fact that you can't get past Arete 4 until you, to use their example, get Tipper Gore to hear offensive song lyrics, or that you can get to Arete 10 and just chill there without Ascending, I imagine those would make for intriguing scenes in gameplay.

One consequence though of that unified theory of what Mage nature is and what Ascension is, is that the journey becomes less about personal discovery and more a ticking of boxes at every three dots of Arete to reach a defined conclusion.

So as a result, magic on the whole, or the whole being a magical human, it feels much more functional to me in here. Maybe more typical of tabletop role-playing games in general.

And I do think expanding the scope in later books to have players consider more about what magic signifies for the one who wields it, that's what makes Mage unique. To put it another way, paradigms here seem more focused on how magic works rather than why and maybe the existential aspects or the teleological ones are something that arose more organically over the game's history.

And maybe some proportion of players ignore those anyway. But that line of questioning is something I was actually surprised not to see more of in here. But maybe it was just lost in the dizzying shuffle of terminology and groups and all of that, and I missed it.

I am ready to talk about groups, though.

Adam Simpson:

Zero Edition gives us lots of information on mage society. Mage cabals are called broods. The term used by older mages is coterie, and yes, coterie is a term for Vampire the Masquerade for a group of vampires. Dynamic Continuum is a term that means all mages currently alive.

Ascension Army is an expression, not an actual army. It means all mages except Technocrats and Nephandi. Technocrats and Nephandi do not work for Ascension, so they're not covered by the term.

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There is a quote on page 7, making it clear Technocrats know they are mages. "In the World of Darkness, a force claiming science as its power assures that the consensus reality is steeped in cold objectivity and the supernatural is relegated to superstition and ignorance. The heralds of science know otherwise, but such a shaping of reality suits their purposes and hampers the efforts of their rivals. So they struggle to maintain the lie", end quote.

The nature of the Technocracy changed in second edition, but at the start, that's what the Technocracy was like. Stuart Wieck's vision of mage society had no place for disparates. All non-Technocrats agreed the Technocracy was a problem and should be opposed.

There are eight essence families, two for each essence. The essence families have been around since prehistoric times because the Pure Ones started them. Dynamic has the Morgantics and House Palinurus. Pattern has the Aristoi and Family Chironus. Primordial has Shards Shibboleth and Line Zadig. Questing has the Incadere and Parapraxis. I probably butchered the pronunciation, but I'm doing my best.

Each family has four or five words of description, but they are vague, very open to interpretation. The manuscript has no further information on individual essence families.

The Sophos Council is where representatives of the eight families meet to discuss issues. The families are political groups in mage society that operate independent of the Traditions.

After deciding their character's essence, players choose one of two families. Traditions have more influence in mage society than essence families, but the text indicates that could change in the future.

At the master level, mages become aware of flaws in their Traditions, beliefs, and methods. The knowledge the Oracles hold starts looking very appealing. Oracles have societies called Veiled Circles. They defend their own territory from mages who aren't ready to join.

Oracles have little interest in Earth or Sleeper society. The Order of Hermes was started in the Middle Ages by mages. It trained non-mages in linear magic and related subjects.

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The Hermetics were the first group of people who found a way to awaken themselves and become mages. House Criamon led the charge. I'll bet House Bonasagus was jealous.

We do not get names of other groups who awakened themselves. Hermetics are not mentioned as a player character option. While we're on the subject of hermetics, there's an interesting bit from the appendix, which gives reasons why mages might interact with other supernaturals.

It mentions Tremere vampires and says, "Now these kindred magi wish to rejoin mage society, the details of which are saved for a future mage supplement. For now, have certain Tremere apprenticed themselves to player mages", end quote.

Pooka:

Yeah.

Adam Simpson:

A little different take on things was taken in later published books. There are two kinds of chantries, ancestral chantries, which are old, established, and associated with a Tradition, and cadre chantries, which are young, lack resources, and mix Traditions together.

Ancestral Chantries do not like Cadre Chantries, but do not openly speak against them. They do, however, try to withhold support from them. This is meant to represent dynamic versus static principles at work in mage society.

An Amalthean is a mage that destroys other mages to exploit their gift spirit. They are not a faction. Amalthean is a description. They are the criminals of mage society. Mage history.

By the time of the Greek Empire, mage societies combined to form three coalitions who all had great influence in Sleeper society. There was one for magic, one for religion, and one for the natural sciences. The coalitions are not named. Copernicus is a figure from real history. In the 1500s, he taught Europe the Earth revolves around the sun. In Zero Edition, Copernicus was an evil, calculating member of the faction that would later be named the Technocrats.

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My view of European history will never be the same. Copernicus, like all mages, knew Earth was the center of the most important planetary realm. His published work deliberately led Sleepers to believe the sun was at the center.

This caused the consensus to reinforce a cosmological principle that isn't true. This broke peaceful relations among mages since ancient times and hurt the alignment of planetary realms.

His motivation? From that time forward, the Technomancers held great influence over the Consensus. The manuscript doesn't state it clearly, but the Technocracy either believes the universe will adjust to their change in time, or they just don't care.

The Ascension War is about repairing the universe and human society at the same time. In late first and second edition, the Ascension War is about helping human society. In revised edition, it's about mages trying to gain power over each other.

Well, that's Zero Edition on Mage Society. Pooka, what stood out for you?

Pooka:

I'm just amazed it took them until Copernicus to have that kind of break in their numbers. Like, that wasn't that long ago.

Adam Simpson:

Yeah, I guess that is surprising.

Pooka:

Considering they're talking about some mages being 2,000 years old at different points, it's like, all right, surely there was some friction before the 16th century. But the stuff you point to about Copernicus, actually, and the book, it also lumps in Kepler and Faraday at one point. This is early 90s World of Darkness. We've got to have all of the historical scientists be secret immortal Technocrats.

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But it goes back to that reality as subjective versus reality as objective line of conflict, which is separate from the "we have to defend Gaia" conflict, which is separate from the "I have to overcome my own limitations to dissolve my essence back into the atuvuum" personal conflict or whatever it is, which is separate from the tension between those monolithic ancestral chantries versus the more heterogeneous cadre chantries.

All of those lines of conflict are present in later editions of the game, but they're all just slightly different in timbre here. So it's interesting to see these routes, which they took and simplified it in some ways and then complicated in other ways.

Going through some of the groups, the notion of an Ascension Army is ridiculous and I love it. Capital A, Ascension, capital A, Army. We must also mention within that army, there's a faction called the Millennialists who are putting all of their magical eggs in the year 2000 basket because this was written in 1993 and why not?

I also wanted more about the Amaltheans, if for no other reason than because their name comes from this mishmash of mythology and folklore that goes places. There are repeated references, not just in their section, but largely in their section, to a trait called facet, which I don't think ever gets fully defined, but it seems to be this mashup of like the avatar background or the gift background that with vampiric generation related to your essence family.

And Amalthea functions, Amalthea as a term, functions almost like vampiric diablery with mechanics derived from that trait. So the Amaltheans are like mage diablerists or something.

And maybe all of these traits applied to Arete originally, and then the author read Robert Persig and changed the conception or something. I don't know. But it seems like there were kind of two different concepts that are conflicting within the document. Like the editor maybe didn't catch all of the references or something. I'm not sure.

It's an interesting notion, though, about these parasitic mages that are trying to like absorb Avatar fragments to increase their power, Highlander style. I'm also not entirely clear on what all of the circles are.

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You mentioned the veiled circles, but there are also references to inner circles, greater circles, and occult circles. I'm wondering if it's like an alternative to the initiate through master progression that we get for each Sphere, because they do seem to be linked to individual Spheres.

But let's also talk about essence families. On the one hand, okay, I don't like the suggestion that all mages theoretically have this metaphysical lineage that they can trace back through the Pure Ones to the original self-obliterating prime entity or whatever.

It's too much like not only Mage the Awakening, but also like Vampire. And while I'm fine with some Verbena believing that, mean, doing their line of descent through the wick or whatever, I don't like it as being, this is the way it is.

However, I love the idea of essence and its subdivisions being a new axis of splat that can be paired with any of the Traditions, really, to see what combinations result.

We have this concept of sophos that refers to a family's behaviors and attitudes and philosophies, and I wonder how that would parallel things like the code of Ananda or other moral precepts among the Traditions.

There are some Rotes, or rituals as they're called here, that get handed down within those families, although the notes in the game show that this was a section already on the chopping block by this draft.

And that idea of Cadre Chantries showing a more dynamic side of mage society points to how when mages from not only different Traditions, but also different essence families get together, they can teach each other a thing or two.

Adam Simpson:

Right

Pooka:

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And there's a really intriguing seed in here where it says you can switch essences or essence families by becoming a Sleeper again for a short time. So like, how does that work?

And we don't get nearly enough mechanics for any of it. It says you have to raise facet in order to do that change, among other things, and it's anyone's guess how that works. But it's enough to intrigue me and think about how could I bring this into modern age, the ascension and make it interesting within the context of the game as we know it now. I think it would be really cool to have mages suddenly become Sleepers for a time and then reawaken being totally different. I just have no idea how I would game that out.

Yeah, the other that is appealing. That was my former mystic life. It's like, huh? Some new students like, we do that? and And mentor says, oh yeah, we do that. I used to be a verbena.

Adam Simpson:

Well, that's part one of our look at Zero Edition. There will be a part two where we look at the Traditions, magic rules, game rules, and our reflections on the manuscript. In closing, I want to leave this advice. Don't be a Copernicus. Damaging the universe for personal gain is bad. Here at Mage the Podcast, we are against that kind of thing.

Pooka:

Yeah.