

Tomes of Magick: First Edition



Hello, Mage fans, this is Adam Simpson speaking for Mage the Podcast. Today I would like to kick off what I hope will become a new series on the podcast. I'm calling it Tomes of Magic.

This is my chance to go back and pick published books for Mage the Ascension, starting at 1993 and talking about them, sharing with you what they offer, what they got right, what is not quite as good as it could be, possible problems with the books, and just letting you know what is available out there, what has been published over the years, because this is not just historical interest. Those books are still available today in print on demand and PDF from Storyteller's Vault, I believe is the division of DriveThruRPG.com. So everything is still available, you can still pick it up, and the different editions of Mage do not have as great a differences as you may think, so you can take something from any edition and use it in any other edition more easily than you may think. So before I start talking about the book that started it all in 1993, First Edition core book, I want to take a brief detour and just talk about the different editions of Mage the Ascension.

There are four editions available, and there's First Edition, Second Edition, Revised Edition, and Mage 20, or Mage 20th Anniversary. A lot of people just call it M20 for short. A lot of people take the current version of any role-playing game they like and they say, well this is the most current version, this must be what I should be playing, and they only look at that edition. And that's fine, Mage 20 is a great edition. I've got it myself on my shelf, I enjoy it. I haven't run a lot of games in it so far, but I plan to in the future.

But what I want to say is that the four editions of Mage have a lot to offer in their own right, and even though there are four different editions, there are two that really stand out and are especially worthy of your attention. If you like First Edition, Second Edition does it better. If you like Revised Edition, Mage 20 does it better.

I think if you're looking for what to try for your next campaign, I think Second Edition and Mage 20 are the two editions that are really worth your while investigating. Revised and First Edition have a lot of published books that are great resources for your game, but I believe that the rule sets, the explanations, and even the layout of the books are a lot better for Second Edition and Mage 20. Now why am I recommending two editions instead of number one? I mean, why don't I just tell you my favorite edition and say, hey, that's the best, that's the one for you? Well, the reason is in role-playing game design, there are often two approaches. Not in every case, but often. Mage the Ascension is no different. There is the rules light, and there is the more detailed rules.

The same thing is played out with the most popular and oldest role-playing game of them all, which is Dungeons and Dragons, originally published by TSR. Now it's Wizards of the Coast putting it out. With Dungeons and Dragons, the current edition is Fifth Edition.

That is probably the most popular edition. A lot of people playing that. Great game.

But there's also a large number of Dungeons and Dragons fans out there right now who are running campaigns and having a lot of fun with Basic Expert, often called BX D&D. BX D&D came out in, I believe it was 1980, so that is almost 40 years old. Why are so many people playing and getting excited about and introducing new players to such an old edition? It's not because Fifth Edition is bad or they hate it.

It's because they like the rules light approach. Not to get into too much detail for you here, but the rules light approach to role-playing games is the rules are simple. They are less detailed. Less page count is given to explaining them to the players. This is strong in the area that it is quicker to pick up. It is easier to understand, you know, just in a person's mind intuitively.

And because of that, it is a lot easier to make rulings during play. If the rules don't cover something, then the game master will look things over and say, well, the rules aren't all that complex. I guess I would change them this way or introduce a new rule like this. And that's my ruling for this unexpected situation. Now let the game continue. And the weakness of rules light games is there are a lot of people who want to have situations covered by the rules.

And when they hit something unexpected, the game stops. There's disagreement at the gaming table. Someone doesn't want to, or doesn't feel comfortable coming up with a ruling. Or someone might throw out that ruling and say, here's how we'll cover it. And the other players say, no, I don't agree with that. I don't like doing it that way.

These kinds of role-playing fans like the more detailed rules. And I can certainly understand that. I can see where they're coming from.

So with Mage the Ascension, Second Edition is the rules light option. The rules are generally simpler. There's less to look up.

It is easier to get an intuitive grasp of them and to make a ruling on the fly. I'm used to that. So I guess I kind of like that.

I'm not going to say it's better, but it's an approach to role-playing with which I am comfortable. There are a lot of people who I talk to online and offline who like the detailed approach to rules. I get that.

That's another great way to do it. They like Mage 20 because it covers the situations that might come up in their games. And once they study those rules and learn them and put a few bookmarks into their gaming books, they're ready to handle anything that comes up.

And they don't have to make rulings very often, which they often don't really want to do. So those are two editions of Mage that are available to you. They're both great.

There's a lot of material in there. I recommend them both to people. And you can ask yourself, am I a rules-light kind of person, or do I like detailed rules? Either way, there is an edition of Mage that is ready for me to explore.

So now that I've explained the different editions, I want to get back to today's topic, and that is I want to talk about the First Edition of Mage the Ascension. This came out in, I believe it was late 1993. The book that started it all, it was the book that offered us new rules.

The Freeform Magic System is what it's most commonly called today. It offered us the Nine Mystic Traditions, the Technocracy, the Marauders, the Nephandi. All this great stuff started in that book, and it was an eye-opener for a lot of people, myself included. It was a whole lot of fun.

Now, on paper, the official, I guess you could say, First Edition had a number of books that ran right up until the Second Edition core book was published, and I believe there was a number on the spine of each book through first and Second Edition. So Second Edition core book was number 14 IT WAS #13!!!, even though you don't see a number 14 on the spine.

It was a core book, so it was above that sort of thing. So that was about 13 books for the official First Edition. Now, I have another way of looking at it.

For me, there's an unofficial true First Edition, and there's a true Second Edition. This is just my take on things, but the reason I see this is Phil Brucato was his publishing name at the time. Now he is referred to as Satyros Brucato.

He came in as the line developer for White Wolf Game Studio, and he came in shortly after the First Edition core book was published, and he took over as line developer. It was his job to be editor and director for where the game line was going to coordinate the efforts of all the writers and a lot of other important responsibilities involved in that. He had a vision for Mage, and that for me was really Second Edition,

and his vision was great. He had a lot to bring to the table, and we're very glad that he did, but there were some things from First Edition that were forgotten. They were toned down. They were pushed aside to make room for the Second Edition vision, and I like both First Edition and Second Edition a lot, but I get a little nostalgic for First Edition because it only had two books published, so it didn't have a lot of time to communicate its vision, which I think was really a great one.

And again, I like the Second Edition vision as well. Don't get the thought that I'm bitter about anything. I really enjoy all four editions of Mage, but I get so excited about the original First Edition vision, and that was one of the reasons that I took to online sources like in those days, Anders Mage Page, because it took the vision of the true First Edition, and it ran with it. It understood what was trying to be communicated there, and there were a lot of unofficial fan pieces that were typed up and put online that continued that vision of First Edition, and that's why I'm working on reprinting that material that went offline years ago and making the new web site Anders Mage Page 2.0, but I'm not going to get into that now. I talked about that before, so back to First Edition. I get so excited about it that I just got to try and curb my enthusiasm for this episode of Mage the Podcast so that I can speak coherently, which I'm told is usually a good thing.

So as I keep my excitement to a minimum, why don't I tell you what was so interesting about First Edition? The First Edition, of course, introduced to us the Freeform Magic System, which won awards at gaming industry ceremonies, as it turns out. I found out years later that an award was given to the Freeform Magic System of Mage the Ascension. First Edition core book was nominated for the Casus Belli award for best role-playing game of 1993. Second Edition won an Origins Award for best role-playing game in 1996. Also, the nine mystic traditions that we enjoy so much and have talked about for so many years were introduced in First Edition.

The basic concepts were there from the start, and Second Edition added new groups like the Ahl-i-Batin, Ahl-i-Batin were added in Book of Shadows I think is how it's pronounced, and a number of other great things that we'll get into later. Most of what we talk about today in Mage the Ascension was right there from the beginning, including the five conventions of the Technocracy. Love them or hate them, they were there from the start and were much discussed.

Now, the rules for First Edition were reworked heading into later First Edition and Second Edition. They were not so much scrapped and rewritten as they were streamlined, they were refined, there were some helpful innovations in there. Satyros Brucato really did a lot of us a big favor in his refining of the rule set, and so that's why I tell you if you like First Edition, Second Edition did it better.

Not because the Second Edition view of the Mage world was just better, but because the rule system is better. So if you're going to run a game, you need to read those rules and make a few references to them at the game table. So hey, Second Edition is going to help you out more than First Edition.

Even though the rules were a bit clunky, they were soon refined before Second Edition core book was even published. As I said, Brucato did a lot of great work for us and kept that game strong. Now, some people, some Mage fans that I talk to have told me that they remember First Edition fondly.

They like it because it had so many dark corners, as one Mage fan put it. There were so many areas of the world of Mage that were not yet detailed, they were just hinted at. They were given a name but no further material, and so there were a lot of unknowns, a lot of virgin territory, you could say, where a Storyteller could write in whatever they liked.

And yeah, I think that's great too, but I didn't like First Edition for what it didn't have. I liked First Edition for what it did have, what it did offer to us in that core book

and the first true supplement, which was Loom of Fate. First Edition had a view of the world of Mage that had a lot of different emphases and even some different specific material than we were seeing in Second Edition.

And I think if you create a synergy between the setting of First Edition and Second Edition, you can create something for your players that is really thought-provoking and a lot of fun to play through. So let's talk about this. What did First Edition bring that was toned down and forgotten later on? What I really liked was First Edition focused on the overall concept, not so much the details.

I got the sense that the people writing for First Edition really felt like they were under the gun to communicate a large and complicated concept to the readers. And so they let a lot of things slide when it came to, for example, the Akashic Brotherhood or the Euthanatos Traditions. They put down some very basic information and it was in effect a placeholder. They said, we've got this group. They're going to be interesting. We don't have a lot of time to talk about them now.

We'll get into this later. For now, we're just letting you know that they're here. Just give us some time to flesh this out.

We really want you to understand the overarching concept here in our first edition. So what was this big concept that was so difficult to communicate? Well, really, today, still after four editions and a lot of books, there are a lot of people who are having a hard time understanding the metaphysics of magic, the whole understanding that they should have to approach magic in games of Mage. And so we shouldn't be too critical of the attention that the First Edition writers put into communicating the big concept, because I think it was a big concept.

There were a lot of things that are tough for people to pick up, especially people coming in from a game of Werewolf or Dungeons and Dragons or other games where - Mage really offered something new. There were two things about magic in First

Edition that are important to communicate. Now, a lot of people know that the explanation for why we don't see fireballs down Main Street in the world of Mage is because of Paradox.

If Mages are flashy or forthright with their powerful magic, then Paradox is going to shut them down very hard, and so mages are very conscious of this, and so they keep things on a low profile. That is half the story, though. That is not the full story.

First Edition did a very good job of communicating that there was another reason that reinforced the secrecy of magic, and that is mages were focused on their own goals. Mages were part of a mystic society or the world of magic and the supernatural, and because of that they were interested in things that Sleepers did not know about or did not really want. Sleepers want political power in society. They want money. They want knowledge about things that are very real to them. Mages are in a different category. Mages want quintessence, which is magical power. They also want Nodes. These are things that Sleepers don't even know about, so mages spend a lot of their time trying to get a hold of more quintessence Nodes because they are sources of quintessence, and so mages are trying to get control over pieces of land that oftentimes have no value to Sleepers.

Mages want to track down talismans, which are the term for magic item in Mage. They want these objects of power that Sleepers don't even believe exist. Maybe a few of them are items in museums, but for the most part, talismans are objects and pieces of equipment and items that Sleepers have never heard of, and even if Sleepers had them in their hands, they would have no reason to think they were anything special.

Mages also want knowledge of things that are in the umbra. First Edition makes it clear that there are a large number of Mages who spend their time in the Umbra either looking for realms or looking for things that disappeared in those realms or trying

to gain more knowledge of what's going on in the Umbra. Sleepers don't even know that the Umbra is there.

Mages want political power in Mage society, not really in Sleeper society. Mages want to be in charge of their Tradition or their Convention. They want to have a prominent position in a Chantry, and First Edition told us that a lot of the Chantries exist in Horizon realms that are removed from the earth of everyday Sleeper life, and so Mages are pursuing political power and influence in groups and places that Sleepers don't even know about at all.

So really, Mages are interested in different things than Sleepers. So Mages are putting all their effort into things that Sleepers have never even seen or heard of, and that keeps Mages removed from making a flash on Main Street or in a capital city or even in the history books. Mages have their own history, their own goals, their own groups that they're interacting with that Sleepers don't even know about.

It's like a shadow history. So if you were to go in First Edition to a Chantry and talk to the Mages there and see what books they were reading, what things they were talking about, what things they were concerned about, it would be a whole set of historical events and famous people and famous objects and rites and places of power that Sleepers have just never heard of. And even if you told Sleepers about them, they just wouldn't understand why anyone would care about those things.

Now, moving down my list, the other thing that was communicated by First Edition was that Mages were abstract thinkers. They were, in a manner of speaking, big idea people. Mages were focused not on things that were happening today or even next week or next year.

Mages were thinking about large overarching concepts. They were worried about where society is going, the predominant paradigm of Sleepers. Mages wanted to

make long-term large changes in the world that would make their style of magic more accessible in the future.

10 years from now, 100 years from now, mages really had a focus on the big picture. And that sort of high-level abstract thinking and sets of goals are harder for Sleepers to connect with. Most Sleepers are, for better or for worse, worried about the next election, or what their religious group is doing, or something about Sleeper history that is important to them that, again, mages just aren't really all that interested in.

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So if you were to go to mages and say, hey, this religion is pushing this other religion out of this country, or hey, this set of information about history is being reported incorrectly, or hey, this politician just came into power, and now everything's going to change in this country, according to First Edition, most mages would say, well, I'm sorry, I just really don't care about that. That's what the Sleepers are doing. The Sleepers are doing their thing, and I'm a mage, and us mages, we're doing our mage things, and there's not a lot of overlap here.

Let the Sleepers handle their own problems, we mages are going to handle our problems. The most concern we have for Sleepers is to go to some of their ancient sites, and some of their museums, and some of their capital buildings, and hunt down some information that matters to us. Even their religions and their philosophies are just not so applicable to us.

We have higher-level meta-religions, and higher-level historical facts, and historically important people that we're worried about. So that kept mages separate from Sleepers, and the result of that was mages were a lot more mysterious. They were very enigmatic, magical sorts of figures who would kind of walk into regular life and Sleeper society every once in a while, look around a little, maybe stir up a little bit of trouble, and then they would quickly fade out of the picture again, and go to their magical places, and their magical societies, and talk about things that just didn't make any sense to Sleepers.

So players in this game had a really fun time trying to learn more about the hidden mystic societies, and the shadow history, and the hidden places, and getting into all these things that they just knew nothing about before. First Edition really made that exciting for me, and I like to bring that set of ideas into my current games. First Edition focused on the relationship between mages and all of history, or all of society, the relationship between mages and the dominant Sleeper paradigm.

Mages wanted to make large, vague, long-lasting change, and for me that was very interesting. That really fired up my thinking, and got me excited about a lot of different possibilities. Second Edition saw a real problem that was happening among Mage fans, and that was that there were a number of Mage fans who were having trouble connecting with this.

They felt like they couldn't relate to mages, they couldn't relate to a lot of the things that were going on in the game world, and so when Satyros Brucato came into Second Edition, he said, hey, I want to make this game more personable, more relatable. I want to focus on a Mage's inner journey, their relationship with themselves, how they cope with their new life, their mystic path, their learning of magical lore, and their progression towards personal ascension, and finding their place in a large, mysterious world. That was a great thing.

That was very helpful. It made Mage much more accessible to a large number of fans, and I'm glad that Satyros Brucato offered that to us. But at the same time, I look back at First Edition and that large, vague abstract approach to things, and there's a lot there that appeals to me.

I just get excited thinking about that. So I like to go back and pick up my First Edition core book and read through it again at times, not for the rules, but for the setting information, which is not like anything you're going to find in later editions of Mage, and so if you have a chance to pick up a print-on-demand or a PDF of that First

Edition core book, I think there's going to be a lot in there that's going to stimulate your thinking and help you to see the world of Mage in a way that you may not have thought about before. So that's my challenge to Mage fans who have been in the game for a while and have only seen later editions.

There's more to it than you may think. Another thing about First Edition which I found interesting was it did a good job of communicating this idea of what sort of person became a mage. My own feeling was that later editions of the game made it look like becoming a mage was more a random event.

It was just percentages. Mages that you find are more representative of a standard sampling of society. You've got all personality types, all points of view, all walks of life, and that's fine, and it makes the game very relatable for people and maybe a very good idea for a lot of Mage fans.

But for myself, I liked that First Edition idea that mages had to have three qualities or they would never become a Mage at all. All mages were very intelligent. They were open-minded, very flexible thinkers who could look at a problem in a variety of different ways. They could take multiple approaches to a situation and entertain that thinking at the same time. And the third was they were very strong-willed people. They had a very firm will.

Once they had a new idea or looked at something in a totally different way, they could use a strong will to force their change using magic on the world. And so because these three qualifications were needed for a person to awaken and become a mage at all, there were very few mages. All the editions do a good job of letting people know that there aren't very many mages in the world.

They're a very valuable commodity, you could say. But First Edition, I think, did the best job of communicating a very small group of people that valued each interaction with another mage. I mean, in some cases, if you're on Earth and not in some Horizon

Realm or out on the Umbra, then every time you met a mage, that was a memorable experience that was really worth noticing, really worthy of the player's attention.

Because this society of magic was quite small, there weren't many people who had the qualifications. Because of that, First Edition also painted a picture of mage society as being quite intellectual. Now, it wasn't all eggheads reading books and writing treatises.

The fiction that started off the First Edition core book did a very good job of communicating high-octane action and adventure, thrills and spills. Some people read it and they think it's a little bit corny. It's like, oh my gosh, there's so much car chases and sword fights and chases through airports and all this sort of thing.

Isn't this a little cheesy? It's like, well, no, I think it was really needed. The rest of the book gives us very cerebral, intelligent, scholastic sorts of mages, but this opening fiction makes it clear that, hey, this setting has something for everyone. There's a lot going on.

It's not all studying tomes of magic and increasing your Sphere knowledge. There's also fights and chases and action, and you can have as much pulpy adventure in here as you like. In fact, we encourage it.

But getting back to this intellectual society, there's been a few times in my own experience, when I was around college age, where I was in special settings, where I was around these elite, intelligent, scholastic sorts of people. And I remember at the time being a little jealous. I wished I was that sort of person, so I fit in better there.

But these advanced studies sorts of people were reading a lot of old, thick books. They were discussing philosophies and schools of knowledge with simple aplomb. They were really very intellectual people, reading a lot, writing a lot, discussing a lot, having very interesting conversations.

And First Edition wanted to communicate this feel for mage society. These were the smart guys. Now, they weren't boring guys.

They weren't always sitting around, but they were very sharp people. They had a lot to say. They had a lot of knowledge they've taken in, and they have created for themselves a really intellectual society.

One example of this is page 59 of the First Edition core book. It tells us about colleges with a capital C. These are colleges of mage society. Second Edition and later doesn't seem to mention them - at least that I can remember. A College in mage society is a sort of club or group where mages from different Traditions of the Council of 9 get together and say hey, we are really passionate about this field of study or developing this idea and so we're going to make a club of mages where we are going to get together and debate it, create research projects or experimental laboratories where we really pursue this area. The example they give is the society of The Burning Wheel which is predominantly Celestial Chorus mages and Order of Hermes mages. They are concerned about developing their knowledge of the Sphere of Prime and how it might relate to other things and how it might lead the way to a 10th Sphere of magick that has not yet been formulated or discovered. And so, they would have all kinds of debates and magical experiments trying to increase their knowledge of Prime and it really was an intellectual enterprise.

Now, that doesn't translate easily into high-tension actions scenes in Mage unless you get a little creative with it. I thought it really enriched the setting. I imagine there being all sorts of different Colleges. Some of them more scholarly, some of them less so. That opened up a lot of possibilities for rich game play. Not just the Colleges but there were others things about the intellectual approach in First Edition. There was a lot of emphasis placed on libraries. Every mage was encouraged to spend some points on the Background to develop their own library. Mentors could double as a li-

brary for study purposes. Mages were very powerful in First Edition. They could more easily spend their experience points and get experience cost discounts from studying so they could advance quickly in their Spheres. Having this level of power was not considered so upsetting to the game world because, again, mages were spending a lot of their time in Chancies and Horizon Realms and Umbral Realms, in very secluded places playing out their mage conspiracies and adventures away from Sleeper society. So when mages had a battle or had a major upset or major political victory or upset everything, again, Sleepers very rarely even notice that it was happening. So powerful mages were not considered such a problem. They were outside of Sleeper society so often. And when they were there, well, Paradox kept everything low key. So this more big picture, abstract approach to things, this more scholarly bent to Mage represented very well in First Edition. And so, a lot of things there get me really excited, really get me interested. So, I recommend picking up First Edition. Not for the rules that it lays out, but for the setting material which I think will stimulate a lot of great ideas for your own Chronicles. It's a different way of looking at Mage.

Today, when I talk to other Mage fans and I talk about First Edition they seem to have a little trouble understanding. They're saying look, the rules in Second Edition were better, a lot of concepts were explained in more concrete terms. Why are you so excited about First Edition? Why do you want to focus on that? Why don't you just let it be a clumsy first attempt? Push it aside and focus on the good stuff? And when I try to explain my feelings on the subject, really, I think about a scene in a comic book that communicated it so well. The Sandman comic book series by Neil Gaiman and Vertigo Comics had an original series that was 9 or 10 books. The final book in that series was called The Wake. It has a great scene towards the beginning where the main character, Morpheus, a member of the Endless, the lord of dreams - a very supernaturally powerful, important figure behind the scenes of the world, has had a major cataclysm

and he was killed, he has been eliminated. So all these different members of the realm of dreams and the other members of the Endless who are so important in running the universe are getting together and they're saying this is a real tragedy. We have to mourn the loss of the lord of dreams and we have to set things in order for what comes later. So they choose a man who's going to be an officiant. A person who is going to be important in the funeral ceremony that they have for the lord of dreams.

So he goes to the castle which is kind of the headquarters of the realm of dreaming - which is outside of Earth. He gathers together a number of important people there at the castle and they're going to go to this wake or funeral ceremony and as they're all leaving with the officiant, the attendees turn back and they wave to a young man on a balcony who is very finely dressed, who's not going to the funeral. The officiant asks them, who are you waving to? Who is that? They say, that's the lord of dreams. And the officiant is of course confused and he says wait a minute here. I don't understand. He asks for more information. He basically says if that's the lord of dreams, what died? Who are we mourning today? And the reply comes, a point of view. That expresses it so well. With First Edition, it was a point of view of the world of Mage that was too early pushed aside in favor of the point of view that came to us in the Second Edition.

Again, I like them both. They're both great. They're both certainly worthy of your attention. I'm thankful for what Satyros Brucato offered us. But still, there's a lot to learn from First Edition. And so, sometimes I get a little teary eyed about how short the First Edition run was. But it's still there for us in Loom of Fate and the First Edition core book. We can still look it up today and benefit from the richness that's there. We can even go to the material of Anders Mage Page and see how that was continued by enthusiastic fans. Developed further the early views of everything that was going on

there. It's given a little more material for us. I'll try to offer more of that to you on Anders Mage Page 2.0 in the future.

But that is my look back for Tomes of Magick on First Edition core book. A great book with a lot to offer. Even today, for Mage fans regardless of what edition you are playing. Worth a look. If you don't have time for that then take my word for it, there's some good stuff there. I've had a chance to tell you a little bit more about it. So you can play with those ideas on your own. Maybe a new direction or new side story will be added to your own Chronicle. And of course at Mage the Podcast we always like to hear about that. If you would like to communicate with us there are several ways you can do it. On Twitter or on Email let us know what you're thinking. Hopefully in the days ahead I will have a chance to continue Tomes of Magick and look at some of the other books published for Mage the Ascension. Next time I'd like to look at Loom of Fate which is one of the earliest books for Mage.

So, signing off, this is Adam Simpson for Mage the Podcast. You can find us online: Mage the Podcast.com. You can listen to past episodes there. See what we've talked about in the past. You can also follow us on Twitter. @magethepodcast.

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Signing off, this is Adam Simpson. Wishing you success with all of your Mage Chronicles.