

# In Defense of Prime



## Adam Simpson

Hello, Mage fans & welcome to Mage the Podcast. The podcast that works hard towards Ascension, so you don't have to. Prime time, the Prime Directive, Optimus Prime. When you hear "prime" you know it's important. Mage the Ascension has 9 Spheres but only one of them is called Prime. Today we're going to discuss el numero uno.

I'm your host Adam. Today's topic was suggested by Mage fan **Heilong**. He started dropping ideas on how different mage groups would interact with the Sphere. The fact that some Mage fans feel the game's rules would work better if Prime is removed from the 9 Spheres came up. After a number of suggestions for an episode, I asked **Heilong** if he was

trying to work himself into an episode. He said, “I wouldn’t record with you if you paid me!” I said, “That’s it. We’re doing an episode together.” So here we are.

Heilong, how are you today? Ready for the prime cut?

**Heilong**

I think so. I’ve got some ideas and we’ll see if they’re interesting.

**Adam Simpson**

Heilong, you mentioned an interest in armchair mage discussions. Can you tell us what you mean by that?

**Heilong**

Yeah, armchair. The idea is that a lot of Mage occurs outside of the table session. This happens with a lot of role-playing games, but with Mage, I found it’s particularly fun to read and talk about and research outside the table. And the majority of my time with the game actually doesn’t occur at the table.

It’s trying to figure out all the questions that the game raises. And this can be even as simple as, what is hermetic magic? So Bonasagus and Trianoma go out and find all the Hermetic mages. And then I’m sitting in my in my office thinking, what does that look like? How do they know a Hermetic mage? Do they knock on doors and say, excuse me, are you a Hermetic mage? And they say, no, I have many friends.

I'm not a Hermit. Like, what does that mean? And what is the core of the Hermetic thinking or philosophy that sets them apart from other mages?

And you can spend months or years thinking about what that means to your table and how much you want to bring into your game and how much you just want to think about it.

And that's the armchair general, the armchair mage concept that I'm thinking about.

### **Adam Simpson**

How do hermetics recognize their own? And a lot of other questions come up in the minds of mage fans when they're reading over the materials, and it's nice to have a place to talk about those. Fun fact for our listeners. When I was in China for 4 months in my college days, the locals told me they couldn't pronounce or remember my name. I had to choose a Chinese name. I met a man whose name translates to "gold dragon". I thought, if he can be gold dragon, I want to be black dragon. So for 4 months, everyone Chinese & Western knew me as Heilong. On our Discord server I noticed another guy named Heilong so I had to ask him about it. Another American who spent time in China & had the same thought I did as a teenager. Heilong's knowledge of Chinese culture leaves no doubt which of us should use the name.

Today we'll introduce the Sphere of Prime, discuss objections against it, cover what it can do, different approaches to it & finish off with some story ideas.

Prime is the Sphere that deals directly with magic & magic energy, called quintessence in Mage. When the World of Darkness started, White Wolf was publishing Ars Magica's 3rd edition. Many people admired its magic rules that were tailor-made for Middle Ages

thinking. When the Wieck brothers started writing Mage, they adapted the system to modern, Western thinking. Ars Magica's Weem involved magic energy, spell modification & magic creatures. That became the Sphere of Prime.

In Mage's setting, quintessence is not only magic energy but a kind of fundamental substance behind all energies, matter, living things, spirits & ideas. Beyond a few abstract & unprovable physics theories, Sleepers have no knowledge of quintessence. Mages believe quintessence exists in 2 forms. Free quintessence can be pulled into a mage's body from a Node or Wonder to be used in Sphere effects. Raw quintessence is locked into physical objects, spirits, electricity, etc. There are also invisible pools of raw quintessence not locked into patterns but mages have a hard time getting their hands on it.

Early editions of the game state the Prime Sphere levels 1 to 3 are commonly learned by mages because of their practical use. Mages want to use quintessence to strengthen their magic. Levels 4 & 5 of the Sphere are hard to learn & not needed in the daily lives of most mages. Chantries made an effort to recruit mages who know the higher levels of Prime. More recent editions of the game put less emphasis on Horizon Realms & Chantries so Prime masters aren't so important.

That's a basic intro to the Sphere of Prime. Anything to add, Heilong?

## **Heilong**

Yeah, I have somewhat different view of quintessence than I think even what the rules say. I know that there's a couple of places where it says it's the stuff that powers magic or it's the energy source for magic. And I try to think of it the other way around where...

Quintessence is that fifth element and it's everything. Literally everything is made of Prime. So there's only one quintessence and that's everything.

And magic is not so much powered by quintessence, but is the art of moving that everything around in ways that can change what reality, I guess, actuates as in the real world.

**Adam Simpson**

Okay, so sort of redefining magic as not supernatural power, but actually just getting your hands on that fundamental stuff that really is behind everything.

**Heilong**

Right. Yeah. It's not as magic as in a superpower because even the Sleepers generate quintessence and they at a lower level change the world. So magic is just kind of everything.

**Adam Simpson**

I can see that approach. Prime is one of the 9 Spheres in every edition of the game. I never gave much thought to removing it but some Mage fans believe the game would improve without Prime. Heilong factored the objections down to 4. We'll discuss them one by one. What's the first?

**Heilong**

Prime supports, the first objection is Prime supports metaphysics of the setting. We don't want philosophy, we want a good set of rules.

## **Adam Simpson**

I think the best reply to this objection is the Prime write-up on page 208 of Mage 1st Edition. "... the complexity of the Sphere's theories dissuades most mages from pursuing it further. They lose sight of the Sphere's benefits and its all-encompassing importance to Ascension." Did the author have future objections in mind when he wrote that? Probably not, but I still think it's a good response. The metaphysics came later. The usefulness of Prime for manipulating not only quintessence but also Sphere effects is clear to me. In one sense, I guess I do want philosophy. The quintessential underpinnings is a bit of mage philosophy that has practical use. Using Prime to manipulate the quintessence foundation of an opponent or obstacle is something that works equally well on Earth or in the Umbra. The game's setting assures us it's one of the few things mages can rely on regardless of what odd place they find themselves. As a 1st Edition fan, my players may wind up in some very odd places. How would you answer that objection, Heilong?

## **Heilong**

Kind of the same opinion. Quintessence for Mage is the difference between having a spell casting system and having what Mage has developed as a magic system of really changing reality.

So if Quintessence is the underlying reality, then Prime is the metamagic or the thing that holds it all together and I always like the fact that not only is it there for you to explore, but it's also stated even the Masters of Mage don't really understand it because they're human and to really understand quintessence, to really understand Prime, you need to be celestial or some great being.

So it lets you but it lets you do things at the game that a spell list would limit you to.

### **Adam Simpson**

Well, let's hear the second objection to Prime.

### **Heilong**

The second objection is, in terms of systems, Prime makes several effects more difficult.

Prime two to create something from nothing. Mage is hard enough, let's remove annoying complications.

### **Adam Simpson**

Prime is known as the Sphere tax. You have to know level 2 before you can do a number of things players want to do. Sphere magic at conception was supposed to be the most powerful kind of magic in the World of Darkness. To demonstrate that, mages can fire off some potent spells. Until Mage 20, Sphere magic was the only kind of magic that could make permanent things. Matter magic can make bricks for a house that will be there many years later. A mage can use it to create a dinner jacket to get into a nice restaurant, forget about it through a long, traditional French dinner & then sell it afterwards for Uber money to get home. That's nice for one effect. The game designers wanted Sphere magic to pack a punch but if it's too easy it can be unbalancing compared to other World of Darkness characters. To compromise, the Prime tax was added. I think it works well. It's the right compromise. I want the powerful magic and I can understand building up my character a bit to reach it. How would you reply, Heilong?

## **Heilong**

Yeah, same opinion. The mages in the game are insanely powerful because they can literally do anything. So you need some sorts of parameters to not just tamp them down for balance or anything like that, but also just to make it interesting.

You need those corridors and limitations and paradigm and paradox are a couple of them, but having Prime be the difference between moving things around and actually creating them out of nothing, I think is a nice game mechanic.

## **Adam Simpson**

Well, I think it's time for the third objection.

## **Heilong**

It was important in the early days of the game because mages were fighting hard for ownership of Nodes. As that faded, the Sphere for that fight should go with it. Game writers gave it less attention, making it less useful.

## **Adam Simpson**

Prime is useful for a lot more than fighting for Nodes. We'll look at that in a few minutes when we cover uses for Prime. Neglect from the game's writers is unfortunate but the attention the Sphere gets in the core rule books is enough to ensure its relevancy. What's more, I like the fact that talking about what the Sphere can do beyond the first level quickly leads to discussing metaphysics of the setting. Just as mages are taught about the nature of quintessence, mage players should have some basic knowledge of the game's concepts. If players learn that bit by bit as they spend experience points on Spheres, I'm

confident that will get them more excited about the game. Heilong, how would you answer?

### **Heilong**

Yeah, I mean the argument is essentially that it's just a tax. It doesn't do anything by itself. And that it's really just a holdover from first or even Zero Edition. And there was, I think Terry at one point had said that 1st Edition had wrote itself into a corner where you could run the Technocracy game and the Node hunting game once or twice, but then you kind of ran out of stuff.

But I think the developers got away from the Node hunting or the Node raiding, and that was good. but they kind of didn't replace it with anything in terms of Prime specifically. Why if I've got a mage character, why is that character hungry for quintessence other than some just narrative reason?

And there was a little bit of, it was kind of left behind in some ways, which is a shame, but I think there's still enough that if you really want to dig into it and you really want to explore it, that the foundations are there for a lot of good imagination.

### **Adam Simpson**

Well, finally we have the fourth objection to Prime.

### **Heilong**

The descriptions of the 5 levels of Prime don't progress well. The five levels of

correspondence in other spheres are elegant. Prime's janky write-up demonstrates it's poorly conceived.

### **Adam Simpson**

This doesn't bother me at all. I've worked in software development for years. I hear people talk about elegant code. I want code that works well in the situation, that is reasonably efficient. Elegant code is meaningless theory to me. I've heard so many scientists talk about how messy the universe is. Whether or not it's really messy or we just perceive it that way is the real question. The universe is under no compulsion to make sense to us. The fact that mages have an elegant progression for some Spheres & not others makes the game's setting look real to me. Mages are supposed to debate the nature of reality. Having some Spheres poorly understood or poorly expressed gives fuel to those debates. If I Awaken tomorrow & start training at a Chantry, then hear mages explain the Spheres with "It's all so simple, really" then I want my money back! I'll go learn cantrips from the Changelings.

British author Douglas Adams started off his science fiction book *Restaurant at the End of the Universe* with this. "There is a theory which states that if ever anyone discovers exactly what the Universe is for and why it is here, it will instantly disappear and be replaced by something even more bizarre and inexplicable. There is another which states that this has already happened."

If you want to take the Prime Sphere out of Mage, you can. Use Awareness skill to sense quintessence. Use the Avatar Background to absorb quintessence or move it around. Use Spirit to draw essence from the Penumbra to enhance effects or Matter Sphere to enhance

Forces effects. You can run Mage without Prime but I don't want to. I would be giving up a lot of the fundamental magical effects that I want to use. How would you answer this one, **Heilong**?

### **Heilong**

Well, like I said before, quintessence is everything. So it's in Mage what holds everything together and what makes the magic possible. But it's also the difference between real and imagined. And when you mentioned Changeling, I was laughing because if if you have a story, I'm the cat that interrupts the podcast. Then you become that because you decided you were, and that's perfectly good in Changeling. But it doesn't really work that well in Mage. Cause if I said that at a table, the Storyteller would say, okay. Well, what does that mean? What Spheres you using? How's that working? And why is that here in the mud ball as opposed to just an umbral image?

I think that, that quintessence really lets you in Mage build really fun logical structures of how different people create different realities and then not just talk about it, but also make it stick because quintessence then becomes that cement block of boom. It's not just imaginary. This is part of reality. Now you're going to have to deal with it. And then you roll Arete to see who's right and who's wrong.

### **Adam Simpson**

Yeah, that's a good example. I remember going into so many college dormitory rooms and cement blocks made up the furniture. And it's that attitude of, no, this is my furniture. And

yes, you do have to deal with it while you're visiting me. So that works surprisingly well for me.

## **Heilong**

Exactly.

## **Adam Simpson**

Our next topic is what the Prime Sphere adds to our games. Heilong has a number of points to share that go beyond the obvious. Before that, I'm going to lay out some points so that listeners new to Mage can keep up with the conversation. Mage fans know the Prime Sphere funnels quintessence into pattern magic for Forces, Matter, Life & Spirit effects. These are not the only patterns. Ideas & related mental patterns are also a part of Mage's setting. Mages strive to not only learn magic & get an edge over their rivals. They also want to influence society to either improve it or make Sleepers better accept the mage's worldview. Observing quintessence flows & guiding quintessence into new thought patterns goes a long way towards accomplishing those goals. The changes made may persist on their own but if fueled by quintessence here & there, the probability of lasting change increases.

Prime allows mages a direct connection to quintessence flows large & small. Players who want to explore game concepts like the Consensus, Paradox, paradigm conflicts, etc. can use Prime to key into quintessence, resonances, ley lines & other tangible signs of what would otherwise be very abstract ideas.

Finally, Sphere effects that involve affecting other Sphere effects will come up in your games. Making all magic easier or harder. Establishing or weakening magical barriers. Making an opponent's effect do something different or hit a different target. Prime allows STs direct access to a topic that will show up in games again & again.

Heilong, tell us more about what the Sphere of Prime adds to games.

### **Heilong**

You hit it right on the nose. Prime is the study that mages do to make the difference between something imagined and something real or something, a flash in the pan effect versus actually building foundational building blocks for and your paradigm and your agenda to be a functional part of reality. So If you're two of the things that you can do with with Prime are, I can't remember the word now, consecrate something, which is, and that lets you imagine, what does consecrate mean? So if everything is a framework, that quintessence flows through it and the quintessence flowing through it is what makes it real and you put more quintessence into that thing then becomes somehow more real.

And I just think that's the the coolest concept in the game of... I've got a mage and I said, okay, I'm going to create this effect and then when it's done, it's done, no harm, no foul. But if I have Prime, I can say, okay, I'm going to create this effect, and I'm going to continuously feed it quintessence until it's real enough so that it will actually impact more reality.

And so you get things like, I'm going to cast - I'm going to tear your arms off, let's say that. And, and I use Prime to say, no, my arms are an essential part of my framework. And

I'm going to just make myself so real that your effect is much, much more difficult to do. And I just think that's the coolest concept because it's almost like a meta magic of it doesn't matter how good you are at forces. There's a fundamental reality that the prime mage... I'm able to tap and really just almost change the rules. And changing the rules is such a fun part of Mage, as opposed to just comparing one spell list to another.

### **Adam Simpson**

Yeah, I think in most RPGs, let's see Dungeons and Dragons is rather famous nowadays for being the role-playing game whose magic system has no counter magic. The wizard who does the spell first is going to win in a wizard duel, basically, because there's no way to undo another wizard spell unless you do some anti-magic cloud or something. But that, again, is not really something that you compare stats between wizards. It's just the spell happened, it has its effect, and when it's done, you can do magic again.

### **Heilong**

Right.

### **Adam Simpson**

So in a lot of RPGs, I think it would be which mage has more skill. I guess you do a roll like that. But Mage allows you to actually influence the situation you're both standing in with the Prime Sphere, which, yeah, I agree. It's pretty cool.

### **Heilong**

And it really lets you build your paradigm in practice. So let's take the Taftani with their concept of Asha, which is the fire of truth. Is that fire true because it's fire? Or if you

pump quintessence in it, does it make you create this, like, super truth? And when you think about cultural practices of burning things to sacrifice them to the gods, if you use Spirit, you can create a kind of a conduit from your thing to the gods, and that's great. But if you use Prime, and then use the Mage20 rules where I can make a dumpster fire and get a lot of quintessence from it, why does that work? And I think Prime is the is kind of the answer to that, because what you're doing is you're transforming something from whatever it is into raw quintessence that you can use.

And if you have... I'm trying to think. So, on the one hand, if you have a Taftani and you've got this truth, that truth can be a sort of counter magic to say it. Look, every spell you're doing, every effect you're doing is druge, untruth. It's the lie and I'm the truth. And so I'm just going to put a piece of fire in my hand and block whatever it is you're doing. And then you can get into something a little bit more abstract where If oil is fossils of dinosaurs and the Technocracy is burning oil to fund the world, does that mean we're deleting dinosaurs from reality or some past that they don't like?

And is the whole petro-oil economy just a Technocracy plot to burn out all the deviant things of the past through an economic filter to create the very dull and bland and static world that they're looking for?

**Adam Simpson**

There's an idea I hadn't thought of.

**Heilong**

Yeah, it's one of those. And that's, I guess, what I'm trying to get at is it's the same thing, but on two different scales with two different purposes and two different reasons. And that really lets you not just change the kind of magic you're doing in the game, but also, what is your character's agenda? Where do they want to see the world? And why are they using Prime in this way or that way? And that's just one of those things that it lets you do. As opposed to like again, if if you're a Celestial Chorus member and you think the One, and being in harmony with the One is what magic is all about, then Prime lets you resonate with this divine power to bring the divinity closer to our reality.

And then all of a sudden, reality is not defined by Sleepers so much as it's defined by the One. And now you've got a whole category of magic that you can do on that basis that really makes your character interesting and their Prime effects interesting.

Now you get this fun contest where the Celestial Chorus member pulls Excalibur and pumps it full of Prime so that he can fight evil, and the Syndicate member pulls out a can of oil, lights it on fire, and says, no, no, we're going to do it my way.

### **Adam Simpson**

Prime. What is it good for? Ab-so-lute-ly noth-ing. Hold on. It is good for a few things. I'm going to walk through the 5 levels of the Sphere to give a practical basis for the discussion that follows. What Prime can do at level 6 or higher is going to require some work by STs that decide to use arch Spheres. Many people don't. I'm focusing on 2nd Edition & Mage 20. Those 2 editions refined the Spheres after the game started or took a new direction.

At level 1, mages can sense free quintessence. The Awareness skill allows sensing the supernatural but only mages trained in Prime can make passive Awareness checks to sense quintessence. Mages can store more quintessence in their bodies than the Avatar Background allows if they visit a Node or take it from a Wonder. They can also gain quintessence at a Node without the Avatar Background. One's own health levels can be converted to quintessence in an emergency. Mage 20 tells us this level allows the consecration of clothing or objects which allows them to bond with the mage for conversion to spirit form or not getting warped by magic. Want to take your pants to the Umbra with you? Would you like your watch to still be there after teleporting to Africa? No problem.

Level 2 allows mages to sense raw quintessence & fuel pattern magic. The regular flow of quintessence into the bodies of people & animals can be disrupted causing them disorientation. Create invisible platonic ideals. This basically means you can use quintessence to create the pattern of something that isn't tied to a physical pattern. The platonic ideal knife in your hand has no physical form so Sleepers can't see it. But spirits, supernatural creatures & other mages know it's real & can feel the edge if you're in a bad mood. You can use free quintessence to charge up fists, objects or platonic ideals to do aggravated damage to supernaturals. Punching a wraith right between the eyes is possible with Prime 2. Mage 20 states this level can bond living things with a mage. A child on your back is also protected against fire by your Forces effect if the child is temporarily bonded to you. Mage 20 also says a body of light can be created at Prime 2. This is a

platonian ideal copy of the mage's body. By itself, not very useful but other Sphere effects open up if a body of light is ready for use.

Level 3 of Prime allows moving free quintessence from place to place. Nodes, other mages, Wonders, Horizon Realms. Move quintessence from any one of those to any other. Mages can make Wonders now. Mage 20 states level 2 quintessence charging of objects is available at level 3.

Level 4 is getting into the more specialized & esoteric stuff. A mage can drain raw quintessence from inanimate objects. This causes the object to disintegrate because its fundamental nature is being erased. Being surrounded by flames that give off no heat is a Celestial Chorus Rote. Other mage factions have different versions of that Rote.

Conjunctional effects with Matter or Forces allow the altering of basic properties of inanimate objects. Reducing mass but not otherwise changing the object. Or only altering magnetic properties of an object. Items can be made intangible. Force patterns like fire, electricity, wind & others can also be altered. This is quite interesting but not well supported with specific Rotes. STs have to adjudicate when players want to try this. Mage 20 allows making Wonders at Prime 4, not 3.

We finish our walkthrough with level 5. Mages can stop or increase the flow of quintessence into the bodies of living things. They can charge themselves or other mages with quintessence from nowhere but only up to the Avatar rating of the mage. Stopping the flow of raw quintessence into a living thing will kill it. A health level of damage per turn. Mages get real insight into the relationship between quintessence & Paradox. A point of quintessence can be used to make a trap that attracts Paradox spirits. Whether it destroys

them or sends them away for a while is debated by mages. Masters of Prime talk about how Paradox is a kind of anti-quintessence but mages with less knowledge of Prime can't understand such talk. Mage 20 states new Nodes can be created but only at certain, special places. Prime 5 is very interesting but, unfortunately, poorly supported by Rotes in Mage books.

Now that the walkthrough is done, I'm turning it over to **Heilong** for his ideas on uses for Prime.

### **Heilong**

All right. The one thing that absolutely captured my imagination was the platonic ideal. And it's the body of light, and it's just almost an illusion, which didn't seem terribly useful to me. And I kind of skimmed over it the first couple of times I read it. But then the word platonic appears in Revised and other versions. And I'm like, what is the platonic version of something?

And then I'm thinking of Neoplatonism where there's an astral perfect version of everything and where the lesser reflections of that, like the perfect triangle that you can't draw on the chalkboard because the medium is too base in that view.

So what would it mean to create the platonic version of myself? So if I'm a mage and I create a body of light and there's a platonic version of myself and it's standing there with a full head of hair and doesn't wear glasses because he can see, or is it my version of that perfection?

And I'm trying to think of what that could mean for magic, because if I was a mage and I was spying on somebody and I created a platonic version of that opponent, I could figure out, well, what's the difference between the platonic version of them and the regular version of them? And how can I make them farther apart? Day by day. So in other words, it almost gives me like a spying effect on a person or a chantry. If I was looking to attack a chantry and I created the platonic version of that chantry, what perfections could I see? How could I either, if I was a good mage, how could I bring that Chantry closer to that perfection? Or if I was a bad mage, how could I prevent? Okay, this is what the ideal is. This is what they look like now. How can I make those farther apart so that these guys never get off the ground? And I just add that perfect map of something is, I think, something that would be a lot of fun to play with and in different versions. And then if you compare that to, say, a Dreamspeaker whose view of the world is, no, no, the spirit world is the truth. So if I look at the spirit of a person in the umbra or spirit of rabbit, let's say, the embodiment of all rabbits, then I understand the truth about rabbits and I can compare that to the real world and make decisions based on that.

And how does that spirit zeitgeist of something compare to the astral realm, the platonic perfection of something? And then creating different paradigms around that to create different effects to say, what kind of mage do you have and what are you all about?

And I guess the other kind of... Maybe not so good mages to say, well, I've been able to see the platonic version of the world, so I'm going to create the platonic version of the world. And oddly enough, you weren't there. So we're go to have to do something about that.

## **Adam Simpson**

Uh-oh!

## **Heilong**

ght, right. Stuff like that. Maybe not the polite but not nice mage. Gives me some ideas for that. That was one. And the other is in terms of scrubbing Nodes.

That's one of those really big deals that doesn't get a lot of ink. But the idea that the Void Engineers specialize in scrubbing those to change the resonance to be something more useful to the technocratic model than Tradition model, I just think is almost like an NPC job. It's like an accountant. It's very important, I'm sorry for all the accountants out there, but who wants to play the desk job? So in a game, you don't want to play the house cleaner or the people that do all the necessary things to keep things going. You want to be James Bond.

But the idea that there are NPCs changing resonance on a place and what that could mean. So, I've joined the Technocracy. I was an Orphan mage, and I have this chantry with a one point Node, and I'm really proud of it, and I've done all these things, and joined the Technocracy. And I go to work, and I come back, and they've scrubbed the Node, and my house just isn't the same place because they've scrubbed my quintessence source to be their quintessence source, and what would that mean? And how would that work? And then you could get into more resonance stuff where, I don't play with resonance. I can't quite wrap my head around how to use it in a game. But I love the concept that this kind of Prime versus that kind of Prime is the resonance of it. And even an idea that from, was it Fae Dark Ages, where they said the Fae taught mages how to do the binding and the

shaping. And for me, that created this question about, so wait a minute, is the difference between changeling magic and mage magic resonance? That we actually churn those dreams and that divine intelligence that is in the platonic circle that is in the mage book, is that just us changing dreams into resonance, which actually makes quintessence? And the difference between the dream and quintessence is really just resonance?

That we make it solid enough to be something that is alien to the fey that taught us? And then what can you do with that? If you have a mage, again, a Chorister that's all about harmonizing with the One and you've got the argument with a hermetic who's saying no, no, we don't want to follow that harmony. We want to control, want to own it. We want to use that and use willpower to create magic so the resonance you would get from a hermetic mage might be something like arrogant or forceful. Whereas the Chorister might be passive aggressive. Again, I've seen the true reality and you weren't there and we're going to do that. And then what kind of effects come from that I think is really interesting to think about.

### **Adam Simpson**

Yeah, I guess one thing to interject here is I do remember reading a lot in the Mage books about how in the early editions, the Technocracy was trying to take Nodes away from Tradition mages. And one of the things they talked about was after Void Engineers seized a node and chased off the Tradition mages, one of the things they wanted to do was scrub the Node.

And it makes you think, oh, you make a dirty Node into a clean Node. And that's not actually what they were talking about. They want to use higher level Prime effects to

change a Node so that its feeling, its operation, its resonance, et cetera, is more appropriate to technocrats. So if you have hermetic wizards using a Node, then they use it in the way that hermetic wizards would use a Node. And after the technocracy take it, they would say, we're not doing incantations and spell books and levitating dragons and all that weird Middle Ages stuff. We're doing modern things. And so we want to not really clean a dirty Node, but we want to make this Node synchronize with our way of thinking, our way of using quintessence to do the sorts of things that we do. And so they would scrub the Node to make it their kind of Node. And the idea was if somehow they all died and left and the hermetics came back the next day, they would say, oh man, this is terrible. We've got to scrub this Node before we can use it for the sorts of things that we do. And besides a few high-level Prime rites, there wasn't a lot of practical rules information in the game of how hard is it to use a Node that is not scrubbed for your style of magic. It was kind of assumed that even though the 9 Traditions had different sorts of magic, they were a little bit different, not very different. And there's this assumption that Technocracy magic was very different. So a Chorister could go over to a hermetic chantry and say, well, things are a little different here, but I can use the quintessence. Whereas a technocrat would show up and say, this quintessence is so different. I just don't like it. I would love to scrub this. I guess a failure to support that with hard rules was a bit of a drawback from the early editions and people are saying, well, there's four editions, why didn't they fix that? Well, the truth is because Nodes became less important and there was less talk of scrubbing Nodes by the time you got to Revised Edition.

## **Heilong**

Yeah, I love the idea of having a Node in a town that starts as a community center and

then shapes the town according to that. And then later it becomes a church. and the resonance of it changes and then it helps shape the town just by virtue of being a different resonance Node and then later it becomes a bank. And so this town is going to see the effects of it based on who has scrubbed the Node last and who's occupying the Node now.

And one of my favorite, I've never worked it into a game, but I always wanted to have powerful mage be the small, the little old lady at church who sits in the back, shows up every week, pays her tithes, doesn't say anything. And everybody thinks the preacher or the priest is the mage, but it's actually her. And she doesn't do anything other than control the resonance of the Node. But for whatever reason, in that terrible urban city, there's no vampires for five blocks.

### **Adam Simpson**

So she's worth it after all.

### **Heilong**

Exactly. It looks like she's not doing anything, but somehow, there's no wraiths and there's no vampires for five blocks and nobody knows why.

The only other thing I can think of is combining Prime with other Spheres and what does that do to it. So in maybe non-traditional combination is Correspondence.

So if I consecrate two things to each other, like I consecrate two people in a marriage, right? In a lot of traditions is consecrating the two people together so that they're married in life, they're married in death, they're connected because they're part of the same reality.

They're part of the same thing but then another mage is an evil mage. Comes in and uses Correspondence to separate them. I think that's just really fascinating. How does Prime go up against Correspondence in that way so if two things are consecrated but they're separated and what does that mean and how does that work and what are different ways you could play with that. One of the things I was thinking was that movie Ladyhawk with Rutger Hauer and Michelle Pfeiffer and...

### **Adam Simpson**

Was it Matthew Broderick?

### **Heilong**

Matthew Broderick. Yeah. It was his first movie. Where they got cursed to one of them would be a wolf at night and the other would be a hawk during the day and there would be this moment of twilight where they could see each other just before the transformations but only that one moment so the curse couldn't break the bond between them but it could keep them apart for all their life. And I was wondering, it would be interesting to have different ways of playing with that where you have it like, let's say you have a Syndicate mage who's consecrating money, right? He's just consecrating things to make money, he's producing money, he's using Primal Utility like crazy, but nothing's working out for him. Can't figure out why, and it's because there's a hermetic that is using Correspondence, or a Virtual Adept, let's say, that's using Correspondence to just continuously separate him from his bank account. So he can generate all this money, but for whatever reason, it just keeps slipping through his fingers and he doesn't understand why and it's driving him nuts

because on paper he knows he's worth billions of dollars or whatever, but he just can't seem to touch any of it ever.

And every time he needs money, he's always cash poor. He's always borrowing \$20. He's worth billions, but he's always borrowing money for a cab or something. And there's this Virtual Adept sitting by his keyboard saying, yeah, take that.

**Adam Simpson**

So that would be accomplished with the Prime Sphere?

**Heilong**

Right, the Prime Sphere to consecrate the two things, you know, the money or the two people.

**Adam Simpson**

Oh, I see. The Prime ability to, let's see, I think it was Prime 3 or 4, to connect two people so that when the mage doesn't affect a fire and he doesn't burn himself, that the consecrated person also does not get burned. So in this case, you would be using Prime to disconnect the Syndicate mage from the money that he's generating with the Sphere of Prime

**Heilong**

Right. So that I don't think it would counter it completely, but it would create some interesting disconnect. Like you said, the money's there, but because somebody's attacking with Correspondence, what does that mean?

And the other combination I think is Prime & Mind, which is if I take an idea and I put Prime into that idea, does that mean it manifests in the real world as a physical thing, or does it just mean that that idea is not going to die?

So if I have this, let's say, world peace. I have this idea of world peace. I can't summon it, but I can keep the idea alive by pumping with Prime so that even when it doesn't seem to manifest the way you want it to, that idea still just permeates. And I'm wondering if maybe that's one of the ways that mythic threads get burned into the pattern, where the Verbena just have these magical grows and they're continuously producing Prime effects that make all the legends that we know true. The legend of the true king or something like that. And then you could have fun with, what was that Merit that you're the legend of something so if I'm the legend of James Bond i get to do a James Bond thing.

### **Adam Simpson**

Oh, yeah. Was that Revised Edition? I can't remember the name of it. But yeah, I think I do recall that one.

### **Heilong**

And I'm wondering if you could create something like that, like a temporary mythical thread using Prime and resonance to be the thing. Let's say James Bond again. So I need to be James Bond. So can I pump that idea of me being James Bond with Prime and make that real enough so that I can get some James Bond bonuses in James Bond situations? And how would different Traditions use that? I don't think of Verbena as going to James Bond so much, but what would it be like if one of them comes up and for one scene everyone's like, is that the true king? You know, I don't know. I mean, Neo's got the stuff.

Is he the one? I'm not sure. And maybe get some bonuses on whatever you think is appropriate. I just think that's another fun use of Prime.

### **Adam Simpson**

Before we move on to our next topic, we should take a look at Primal Utility - the alternate Prime Sphere known only to the Syndicate, a Convention of the Technocracy. Alternate Spheres were introduced at the tail end of Revised Edition. Mage 20 features them in the main rule book. Are alternate Spheres a way of making the Technocracy more unique? Do they demonstrate the Technocracy's strong influence on the Consensus by allowing them to re-write the way the 9 Spheres work? STs need to interpret that on their own if they use alternate Spheres.

I looked at the Primal Utility write up on pg. 526 of the Mage 20 rule book. The write up leaves some things unclear so a bit of interpretation is required. There seems to be 2 kinds of quintessence: regular & money-quintessence. Money-quintessence is money & magic energy at the same time. All mages can sense both. Only Syndicate members can access money-quintessence. Syndicate members can use regular quintessence sometimes, not always. Determining when is fuzzy for me. It appears to me that Primal Utility is superior to the regular Prime Sphere but that can be debated. The question I want answered is, if all mages can sense both kinds of quintessence, why wasn't the cover blown off of Primal Utility years ago? Why aren't more mages researching it?

I don't use alternate Spheres but if I did, I would want a few things settled. First, newer editions of Mage want to reduce the struggle for the control of Nodes by introducing other sources of quintessence. Getting quintessence from the emotions of groups of Sleepers is

emphasized. Does this mean psychic energy can be converted to quintessence if it lines up well with the practices & paradigm of a mage faction? This would mean an alternate Sphere of Prime isn't really needed. Or does an alternate Sphere of Prime allow an alternate quintessence? This justifies the alternate Sphere & makes the Syndicate's magic unique. They stopped caring about Nodes & get the quintessence they need from ventures. This helps make them sinister as they are in essence keeping a secret from the other Conventions.

Heilong, you have some ideas on Primal Utility so could you tell us more about it?

### **Heilong**

Yeah, I'm actually enamored with Primal Utility because I love the concept that the Syndicate has of quintessence being value and not so much money, but just value and that abstract concept of it. So if value is reality, then Primal Utility allows the Syndicate to control reality by controlling the value of something. So you take a Mind Rote and that Mind Rote is, we're gonna see what you think about this. Then if I use Primal Utility with that I can use the same Mind Rote to devalue that idea and this is kind what I was talking about before where if you have a business, no, let's see just your party in the game. If the Syndicate member sees that as a what's called venture, your party is now a venture, then your Syndicate party member, instead of just being the accountant, can actually be a project manager.

Pump value into all your endeavors and provide bonuses or lower difficulties or mechanically do it that way but the idea is that he's investing in the success of the party by pumping quintessence into it and likewise at need the team could take a hit for the

Syndicate member so he could pull quintessence out, either as tass or as raw quintessence. And I just think that's the coolest thing I've ever heard of. It's right there with having a large ritual to create a wellspring for a Chorus member to then manipulate reality through manipulating the quintessence that's there. I just think it's the coolest idea ever. Again, it lets you do some customization because for the Syndicate member, it's value. But for the NWO member, quintessence is the collective unconscious. And you were talking about, can psychic energy generate quintessence? So do we need Prime or could we just say it's all zeitgeist? And I think instead of answering that objectively, having the Sphere of Prime lets you have that in-game argument between the NWO agent and the Syndicate agent, where the Syndicate agent is saying, yeah, I can use Primal Utility, and can make this all better by by just pumping money into it.

And when I say money, I mean as a focus for the Primal Utility effects, I'm investing in the future. And the NWO is saying, yeah, money's good, but it's really about the mind and through the mind, you're connecting the collective unconscious to reality. So it's not about how much money you have. It's really just about what's real and what's not and how you define reality.

So what I've done is I've created regulations that mean that you have to pay, let's say, 50% of that money to me as a tax. And the Syndicate member now gets mad. He's like, no, you can't just take the value out by imagining it.

The NWO agent says, actually, yes, I can.

## **Adam Simpson**

Okay, so that's how you would work with Primal Utility in your games.

## **Heilong**

Yeah, I don't see it as a separate Sphere so much as really a specialty. I'm not a huge fan of creating more Spheres. I think 9 is plenty. But I am a big fan of exploring how each... kind of faction or Tradition would specialize in each Sphere to promote their paradigm and their agenda.

And I think what the Technocracy is doing, and this is for me pure Technocracy, is they've actually gotten the mystical 9 Spheres to a point where they can almost give it a new name and have it almost be something different because they've specialized it so so highly that it does the same thing, but it does it so differently that it almost seems like it's a different Sphere. I think that's pure technocratic wonderful shenanigans.

## **Adam Simpson**

Okay, so every mage has a different approach to a given Sphere, but the Technocracy takes such a different approach that you facilitate that by providing alternate rules, which gets written up as alternate Sphere, when actually it's just an alternate approach to the same Sphere.

## **Heilong**

Right, so they've gotten so good at their version of it that it almost has different rules and it almost has different constraints.

## **Adam Simpson**

So the Technocracy has alternate Sphere write-ups in the rule books because their approach is so different from the mystical one that it's not just a matter of a plus one or minus one difficulty or using a different instrument. Let's give you a different set of rules because it's just such a different approach.

## **Heilong**

Right. And they've got the clout to make it stick. So they actually get their own write-up. Yeah, I love that idea.

## **Adam Simpson**

Because quintessence is such an essential part of the game's cosmology, mages discuss it quite a bit. This leads to some very different views on the nature of quintessence & the universe it supports. **Heilong**, what are some views on quintessence we might hear from mages?

## **Heilong**

Well, I touched on it a little bit, but you take the same idea and you put it through the lens of each Tradition or Convention and you get something very different. With Syndicate, it's value. And what does that mean? You can explore that. I came up with a fun Rote for one of my players, which is called I Don't Need a Gun.

And the idea is that using Entropy and Prime, he can see the value of everyone in the room. And he can see the value of what they could be and what they need and that sort of thing. And then with Entropy, he can find the path to make those things real. And the end

result is he walks into a gunfight, there's a gang, there's drug dealers, the FBI's there, everybody's shooting each other. He walks in, he doesn't have a gun because he doesn't need a gun because he's a Syndicate member.

So what he's using is Prime to see what is the value of this? And then I can talk to everybody, you need Entropy get them to listen. But the what is the value that I can make a deal that isn't just me talking fast. It's actually showing them there's a better way. So he walks into a gunfight and then walks out with a suitcase full of money because he's made a deal with absolutely everybody there. And the deals are real because it's Prime, not a Mind effect. He's not fooling anybody. This is real value. He's offering real value for this. And that's something almost really specific to the Syndicate, even though it's Prime.

And then if you contrast that with the etherites, right? Ether is the conduit for everything. It's a real physical thing. It's the plasma trails in space that are moving reality from one place to another. And you can put ether in a jar.

And I created an ether communications network, which confounded my players because it was basically just a piece of Play-Doh with a copper wire stuck to it. And they're like, what is this? And what it actually is, is the Play-Doh is actually ether. And through harmonic uses of resonance, the etherites were able to use the resonance from the Prime, from the ether, to communicate across vast distances by sending, not through Correspondence, but by sending radio waves.

So it's like radio, but it's actually the resonance in the Prime that they're manipulating. And that's not something a Syndicate member would do. It just doesn't make sense in

their paradigm. But for the Etherite, yeah, ether lets you do almost anything because it's the missing piece in every one of your theories. So if I can base a theory on some fanciful thing, I use ether to plug that logical hole and what's the phlogiston. The idea that there's a chemical called phlogiston that happens when you burn things and they used to put mice under glass and they would burn stuff and they might also die because that's what happens and they would say the phlogiston is poisoning the mouse. Turns out it's just eating the oxygen, which is what was killing the mouse. But the idea of phlogiston still exists. An etherite would take actual ether and make that phlogiston real.

And that's a very different view than the Syndicate had. And then the last example I'll come up with is Akashic Brotherhood. Now you've got the yin yang principle or yin and yang and chi and in this concept yin yang would be the raw quintessence and the chi would be the free quintessence so the cycle of yin and yang moving and pushing against each other and pulling against each other is all of reality. And then learning Prime is the same as learning to focus that chi that makes you more real and more able to do things beyond what is expected.

And that concept, again, has nothing to do with the value of the Syndicate or even the ether. Because if somebody said, hey, can you put chi in a bottle? The Akashic could look at you like you were totally missing the point. That's not a thing. You can't bottle chi. And the ether is like, because we can. We bottle ether all the time. As a matter of fact, here's a pack of ether gum that you can chew that'll make you think better. And the Akashic would just absolutely lose their marbles at a concept like that. But they're all Prime. All these ideas, they're different views on the same thing. But that's pretty different.

## **Adam Simpson**

Okay, so basically for players new and old, a great way to make their mage character or even the faction they work for unique is to ask what is the most valuable, most important ideas for this mage or this group of mages. Tie that to quintessence and now you have a practical way to make mages stand out in games from other mages.

## **Heilong**

Right.

## **Adam Simpson**

Okay. Yeah, that's great. I should spend more time thinking about that. Mutable history is the name I give to the concept of actual past events changing into legend because of the power of the Consensus acting on history. Legends, stories of the past that aren't true, could also become true after changes caused by the Consensus. Published Mage books hint at this but give no definitive statements.

Heilong had some thoughts to share on how this relates to quintessence & the Sphere of Prime.

## **Heilong**

So the idea of mutable history or subjective reality is core to Mage. That's really what the game's all about. And it's the thing that makes Mage really stand out from every other game that I've ever played, even Vampire. So Vampire, you've got the Curse of Cain,

you've got all this stuff. But with Mage, you can change what's real And you can even change what was real.

And this contest is really the core of the Ascension Wars, the core of what the game's about much more than the, not much more, but alongside the actual adventures you do is that the changes that you're characters are promoting and quintessence really makes that something with teeth as opposed to just a concept. You can have two groups that disagree with each other and they want to see something different for the future and that's got conflict and that's got story but if you've got quintessence behind it, whoever wins that contest, whoever wins that story, doesn't just impact social norms. The idea is that it impacts the actual reality that everybody else now has to work with. I just think that's a great concept.

### **Adam Simpson**

Heilong has three story ideas to share. Let's hear them.

### **Heilong**

So first idea is there's a hole in the world that does not have quintessence. And this is kind of a session zero idea. So I've got players with different characters and they're all, well, I've got two dots in Prime, or 3 dots in Prime, or I've got one dot in Prime, What's the difference? We've all got the same down in Prime. So I kind of concocted this to say there's a hole in the world that doesn't have quintessence and just have each player define what this looks like when they look at it with Prime.

And it really is just a session zero exercise to have each player say, okay, well, my characters are Verbena and I'm interested in the Nodes and ley lines from the older game ideas. If there's a hole in the world, then obviously this is damage to the World Tree and something, something, something, and come up with different ways to look at what a hole in the world would be. Whereas the Celestial Chorus member then comes up and says, yeah, you're close, but this is actually a path to Tartarus or hell that we need to get Buffy to go plug up because there's a hole in the world and all the demons are going come out from this thing. And that's pretty clear. And I can see that because I can see the tapestry of reality and that tapestry has a hole in it and that can't be anything good.

And then you get the Virtual Adept that just says this is a dead sector. This is not a problem. We can actually just fill this with data. Oh and different ways of looking at reality itself through the Sphere of Prime to help players get a hold of what their character's magic is all about.

And then all the effects that once you get the core of what your character's magic is about, then you can develop practices and paradigms and effects that reflect that that through line, that core idea.

So that was the first one. And then the second one I thought of, it would be fun to have a technocratic psionics campaign. This is something I've always wanted to kind of dork around with, but it's such a niche game that I never dove into it. But a technocratic psionics campaign, the characters are charged to bring promising, extraordinary citizens with budding psionic abilities. The adventures are designed to place the extraordinary citizens in stressful situations while the characters use Prime to assist locking their

manifestations in place. And what you're doing now is using Prime to augment the psionic paradigm that the NWO has. So it's really a New World Order campaign. So the idea is you have to get the extraordinary citizens to the adventure back unharmed. And, secondary plot is to explore their psionic abilities by using Prime to connect them with the collective unconscious. So you're making psionics. It's a psionic training adventure where the mage is Gandalf, and he's trying get Frodo to the volcano to destroy the ring.

And then the third one was talking about Hollow Earth. The monks in Hollow Earth, the Shambhala, meditate to send power through secret tunnels to selected Sleepers to empower their enlightenment. This could be seen as a new or highly specialized use of Prime. What are they doing? How are they doing it? And do all the players need to block this or block some outside faction from endangering it?

Finding Shambhala is a spiritual journey, so fighting interlopers in a race to the monks may be as philosophical or as physical as desired. The character's perception of the nature of reality through Prime is as essential to the progression as their feat and survival skills. And again, this is from a Hollow Earth tradition where there's monks meditating and sending all the energy from Hollow Earth up through secret tunnels to Tibet and other places.

And I just thought that was a great concept. I think it's a Prime effect of some section of Akashics meditating in Shambhala to change the world through their chosen representatives like the Dalai Lama.

## **Adam Simpson**

I thought I'd add one. Old habits die hard.

The players hear a few times about a group of young mages who claim a breakthrough after studying the eccentric writings of Miguel da Milano, a Renaissance era mage. They have raised the yield of a Tradition Node & there are rumors they created a new one for themselves. Soon after, Tradition elders put out a call for help as the innovative mages are under attack. Marauders are stalking the young mages while organized crime groups are fighting with Technocrat agents nearby, risking the safety & secrecy of Tradition mages. As the players become involved, they learn the crime groups are planning to raid the young mages' Chantry. The breakthrough involves generating quintessence from the activities of industrious Sleepers in a city. The Syndicate plans to steal knowledge & then assassinate the mages to keep the secret but they don't want the New World Order to catch on to the discovery. The players are thrown a curve when they learn the attacking Marauders are actually members of the young mage group who have become unstable from working with volatile quintessence flows. The players will need to weigh their priorities. Are the new discoveries too dangerous to keep? Too valuable to lose? How much of the Syndicate's secrets are safe to possess?

This brings us to the end of our little chat on the Sphere of Prime. Heilong, do you think the Traditions have a prime directive? Don't openly contact a sorcerer group that hasn't yet discovered the Sphere of Prime? Or am I mixing Star Trek into Mage again?

## **Heilong**

I think you're on the money. I think the rogue council is arguing with them about that.

## **Adam Simpson**

That must be it. At any rate, we're confident a better understanding & appreciation of the Sphere of Prime will help you boldly go to new worlds in your Mage games. I hope you enjoyed this episode. Heilong & I certainly enjoyed bringing it to you. The discussions continue on our Discord server. Look for the link in our show notes.