

Albion

Celtic fantasy roleplaying in a once and future Britain

Reforged Edition

Silver Branch Games

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setting.

Dedicated to Steve Kinley, one of the godfathers to
Albion over many years, who never got to see this
book. And to John and Tim for relentless
encouragement.

Disclaimer: although partly inspired by modern-day
fact, especially in the geography section, this is a
work of fiction. If the setting refers to your home
town as a den of foul sorcerers, please don't take
this as a slur. Just bolt the door.

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GETTING STARTED with this book

This is a **roleplaying game**: a sort of interactive storytelling where you and your friends play through the adventures of a set of imaginary characters, making up the story as you go along.

If you're new to Albion, read the *Book of Birch* first. That gives an overview of the main elements of the setting, plus the basics of the rules, in just a few pages. If you're going to use a character someone's made for you, there's enough there to start playing and fill in the gaps as you go.

If you're a player, the *Book of Holly* tells you how to make a character to play. The *Book of Alder* tells you more about how rules for specific things work, and the *Book of Rowan* tells you about magic-related stuff – you can look up the bits that are relevant to your character. The rest of the book is mainly for the GM.

If you're running the game (the “GM”), you should read the more detailed rules on how to do stuff in the *Book of Alder* and the *Book of Rowan* (but not necessarily all the spells). The *Book of Spindle* is specifically aimed at helping you to plan and run a game. It might be good not to let the players read too much about the setting, so you can reveal it as you go.



INTRODUCTION

Albion began in the 1990s with two basic ideas: “What about a Celtic style fantasy roleplaying game?”, and, “What about setting it in a future period after the world’s been remade by serious climate change, sea level rise and social disruption?” Putting those together promised a distinctive style and flavour with fresh choices for “monsters”, without having to worry about historical accuracy – it could be its own thing. There followed much work drawing out these ideas, burning through several rules systems till I found one that actually did what I wanted (it started off in *Legends Walk!*, a superhero game I wrote). A PDF book came out in 2005, but it wasn’t a complete picture of the game I had in my head, and it wasn’t terribly well presented. Well, I’ve learned a thing or two since then and this, finally, is an edition I’m happy with. I hope you will be too.

History seems to have caught up with me. Climate scenarios that seemed extreme when I started are now looking quite likely, along with other challenges like the financial crisis and peak oil. The game uses this as background colour rather than foreground focus – it isn’t intended to be eco-preachy, though the hooks are there to play up that angle if you want. (I’ll just say it here once: the real world could really do with you taking action, soon.) No group in the setting is entirely “right” (though they might think so), and it’s open for you to push things in your chosen direction. Similarly, it does contain a lot of Celtic elements but veers away from taking heads as trophies and suchlike and toward modern interpretations of trappings and symbolism without getting too “new agey”. Hopefully this makes for a palatable game with plenty of mythic resonance.

What’s A Roleplaying Game?

A roleplaying game (RPG) is basically a fun way for a group of people to sit round a table and play “let’s pretend” using a particular set of rules and a fictional world background. The **players** (real people) each have a **character** (an imaginary person), with information about that character and what they can do. One person takes the role of **Game Master** (GM) instead, describing the setting and the situations and events the characters encounter.

Players say what their characters do, and the GM says what happens as a result. This often involves rolling one or more **dice** (the singular is “die”), based on information about the character, to see whether actions succeed. As the characters interact with each other and the setting a story takes shape. You can have any adventures you can imagine! The aim of a book like this is to guide you toward that.

Player characters are often referred to as **PCs**, and non-player characters (the people they meet, controlled by the GM) as **NPCs**. A **session** is a real-world measure of time when the players get together to play, perhaps over an evening. A **scene** is a game-world measure of time when the characters pursue a set of actions at a particular location. A **story** or **adventure** is a set of scenes; a set of stories is sometimes called a **campaign**.

What’s Albion About?


Things that are concealed and things that are revealed.

The physical setting has ordinary splendours. There are mountains, valleys, rivers, seas, dark forests, lonely moors and bustling towns. Its fantasy is not one of spectacles like fortresses in huge spires of rock or cities built in trees. Neither is it a large place with features of extraordinary size.

The people get on with their lives – for the most part in pretty ordinary ways. Everyone knows stories of strange creatures, magic and heroes who perform remarkable feats, and they enjoy hearing them and passing them on. But when you enquire about the origins of these tales, they usually come from a distant relative or a friend of a friend. Only a few people have witnessed such things firsthand.

Yet magic does slumber beneath the land and is occasionally woken. Fundamentally the game is about what people *do*, and through this wonders can be manifested and the land itself can be changed. The gifted few can shatter a rock with a spear or summon the wind with a song. The destined few will encounter creatures of the otherworld and become champions of humanity. The despised few will blight the land and twist the spirit of the people.

The role of your characters is to be the flash that illuminates what people are capable of, what’s really going on in the world, and the road their society will travel into the future.



THE BOOK OF BIRCH

BEGINNINGS

The Prophecy of Ash

The Shrug breaks the surface

*A new world has always come from
the ninth wave*

RECORD OF AN ADDRESS BY BROTHER JUSTIN ROSEMARY

As your village is seldom visited by members of my Order, your elders have asked me to address you while I am here. It is always a privilege to help the young to understand the wider world. You may have heard much of what I say before, but please be patient for the benefit of those who have not. You will have your chance for questions soon enough.

Our lore tells us that our world has passed through many ages. The time before our time was the Age of Madness. The world was wider than today. People made many kinds of machines – like complicated tools with a life of their own – and depended on them for all manner of things. To make these in great numbers people surrendered the ideals of craft and worked without pride in places that sent poisons into the air, water and land. There had been very great wars, and nations tearing themselves apart as neighbour fought neighbour. Some people did not have the food, water and shelter they needed, while others had more than they could ever use and hungered for more. Forests were cut down, and whole kinds of plants and animals died. It was our own forefathers that did this.

There were voices of warning, and many who tried to show a better way. Their voices were heard, and others joined them – but many clung to wealth and power, or simply hid from change. In the end it was too slow for the patience of Gaia.

In any system, when pressure builds to a certain level it must be released and a new balance found, like a river bursting its banks. Gaia acted ruthlessly to relieve the discomfort, unimpressed by human cleverness. The Shrug came. The waters rose, more even than the warnings had guessed, and the seasons and weather changed. Like a building with a bad foundation, their society slipped. Machines lost the power that drove them, and blight, sickness and hunger walked the land. Madness and violence truly gripped the people, and they clawed over each other to hold on to what had been – which brought it, finally, tumbling down.

*I shall not see a world that
will be dear to me.
Summer without flowers,
Kine will be without milk,
Women without modesty,
Men without valour,
Captures without a king...
Woods without mast,
Sea without produce.*

Morrigan

However, the seeds of a new way had already been sown. There were people across Albion who had a clearer vision of what was coming, and prepared for it. Chief among them was Ramage, a man of great learning and vision. He saw that when the machines fell it would be like it was before they came, so the new world would have to combine the skills of the past with what had been learned about living in harmony with Gaia. He found his inspiration

in an ancient time he loved, when people lived with honour and close to nature. So they worked, our Fathers and Mothers, as the past fell and burned around them. They went about in secret, gathering allies and saving those with the skills they would need. And in time, when the frenzy had subsided and those who had survived looked for guidance, they came forth as the Druid Order and forged the

people anew.
Two hundred years
have passed since then, and
we continue to watch over Albion.

This land has changed since our forefathers knew it by its other ancient name of Britain. The Seven Kingdoms bear their old names: Alba in the north, a wild country of mountains and forests; Northumbria, with cities and wild hills; Mercia, with its woodlands and market towns; flat Anglia with its marshes; ever-thirsty Kent with its fruit trees and seaports; Wessex, from its desolate moors to the palm trees of its coasts; and the green valleys of Cymru in the west.

Not all places are good or safe. The lone traveller risks wild animals and robbers. These are more substantial than legends and fancies of strange creatures and spirits. The ruins of London in the south, bordered by three kingdoms but claimed by none, belong now to a wild and dangerous folk. There are other such places, and also Wastelands, where the sickness in the land itself will lodge in your bones. Out at sea are the walls of mist from which none return. The sensible traveller avoids these places and stays on the greenways, rivers and canals in the company of others.

Hospitality is a great virtue that binds us together. Parents send their children for fosterage with the skilled and wise, building bonds of friendship. Each town and city has a hostel where travellers can rest on their journey and bring news of other places. News also travels with the bards, who carry the stories and songs of our people. Wherever you go, you know that the people look after their own. Our laws protect safety and honour. Those who break them are fined according to their offence. Those who are injured or sick are cared for – each area has its own hospital. Some people choose not to live under the protection of the Order. This is their choice to make, but we hope that they will come to change their minds, for their children's sake. Some, of course, are simply not suited for civilised society.

Many skills were nearly lost during the Age of Madness. We formed guilds to guard the most vital and pass them on to new generations, for example the Smiths for work in metal, and other professions came to work this way

too. Merchants
have similar bodies
called Chambers of

Commerce. Most young people embark on an apprenticeship with the aim of becoming a journeyman, able to practice in their own right, and eventually a master of their trade. You will soon be ready to do this – choose wisely and you will do well.

One of the main causes of the Age of Madness was technology getting out of control. "Technology" actually means the application of skills, but to the people then it meant the making and use of the machines I mentioned earlier. People became so reliant on it that they would do what best suited the machines rather than what was proper. Our "technology" depends on watching the way nature works and applying its principles to make the best use of what Gaia provides. In growing, for instance, we put plants together that will help each other grow and imitate the layers of a natural forest, from lowest to highest. We do not want to go back to the machines and repeat the mistakes of the past. Curiosity and inventiveness are natural, but they can be applied to better ends.

Finally, you would not forgive me if I left this out, I think. Yes, after a number of years under the Order, it became clear that what could only be called magic was creeping back into the world. Actions would occasionally have unusual consequences, and a few people began to discover strange new abilities. The nature of magic and the reason for its appearance were not well understood. Some of my learned colleagues assert that it cannot be completely understood, by its very nature, but while I respect their opinions I must point out that by study we have already learned a great deal about it, and will surely learn more. It is clearly bound up with the great Web that connects all being and acting. It is certainly true, however, that magic can be a danger to oneself and others, and it should only be used by those with the proper qualifications.

To conclude: we have built peace, in harmony with Gaia, for the good of all. There are some who think to break this peace, but their efforts will come to nothing as long as we remain vigilant. Now, does anyone have a question?

Who are these people?

In Albion people follow a range of occupations, from farmers and fishers to professionals like doctors and the officials who keep things running. Here are some of the more important ones.

DRUIDS

*Serve the Earth. Serve the people.
Hold to the path.*

Druids are powerful individuals. They have great knowledge, and often some magic. But probably greatest of all is their social influence: the staff and nettle-green robe command respect in all civilised parts of Albion. A druid can overrule a king and sway any gathering; they are accountable only to their peers and their own conscience. However, as the ancient druid saying has it, "With great power comes great responsibility." The Druid Order exists to serve society, and members can be called on at any time for advice and arbitration of disputes.

The primary study of a druid is the lore of the natural world: the names, properties and behaviours of plants and animals, the relationships of living systems, and the science of arranging natural elements to form a harmonious and productive whole. To be ordained as a full-fledged druid the successful student replaces their family name with the name of an appropriate plant and takes up their staff. They are usually addressed as "brother" or "sister" (the full version would be "Brother Simeon Thyme".)

The Order keeps alive the memory of the Age of Madness, and fears most of all a return to that kind of world. Therefore it is zealous in policing trends that might lead in that direction, like development of new technology. To protect the world it has fashioned it will go to great lengths. A few voices liken it to an overprotective mother, and say that it should look instead to the challenges of the future - but not too loudly.

BARDS

No mere minstrels, the bards are keepers of memory and tellers of the tales that define the people. They know both legend and current events, and are masters of public speaking. Many travel from place to place, spreading their words and songs and learning new ones. The praise or satire of a bard can make or break any enterprise. Many know a little magic as well. Bards have social status almost as great as druids and kings.

CRAFTERS

Excellence in physical work is greatly prized in Albion. There are many crafts, from glassblowing to weaving to thatching. Most craft professions are organised in **guilds**: bodies that preserve skills, maintain standards and represent the interests of their members. The most powerful is the Smiths' Guild for workers in metal, which operates nationally under the guidance of the Order.

The **Artificers** are a society of accomplished crafters and thinkers who seek to return science and technology to prominence. This puts them at odds with the Druid Order, so they keep their membership and activities secret. Members research in hidden laboratories, explore the countryside for caches of technology from the Age of Madness, and engage in intrigues with agents of the Order for their own safety and the hearts and minds of the people.





WARRIORS

Many people in Albion know how to fight to some degree. However much the Druid Order might wish otherwise, there will always be tensions and disputes, brigands on the roads and wild areas with dangerous beasts.

But only one group specialises in combat, and they are few in number because the kingdoms have always been at peace. Warriors are athletes skilled with several weapons, with a culture of excellence and personal honour. Most include at least one prodigious physical feat among their skills and seek to learn more. Many find positions among the King's Guard of a major settlement; others become solitary wanderers.

Wielders of Magic

Witches know common magics and the skills of healing, and are often found serving small communities as the source of wisdom and medicine. Within these communities they are respected and even feared, for their insight and will as much as their uncanny powers.

Magicians are rare individuals who study magic for its own sake, devoting themselves to its different branches and levels. Their powers can be truly formidable. The Druid Order distrusts them because they are not governed by any ethical framework.

Shamans are strange-seeming folk who deal with the spirit world and its inhabitants, and their interactions with the mortal plane. As well as spells they learn the skills to travel the spirit world in search of answers and power.

Outsiders

Most folk in Albion consider themselves part of "civilised" society, following the plan of the Druid Order flavoured by their own local customs. They know that there are others, regarded as strange, barbaric or both, living in smaller communities alongside them.

Woses are the descendants of people who clung to life in the urban sprawls when the Shrug came. Rather than follow the Druids they remained where life was said to be impossible without the machines and other trappings of the Age of Madness. Many died, but some managed to create a tribal lifestyle in territories around the parks, lakes and rivers. They hunt the remaining animals, and scavenge among the decaying buildings for useful relics of the world before. They venerate the spirits of animals and their own ancestors. Each tribe is named after a particular totem beast that's important in its area.

Wastelanders are people who live in Blighted parts of the land. Before the Shrug people stored up Blight in certain fortress-like places, usually on the coast. Some tales say it was a way to get rid of the accumulated wrongness of their lives, to avoid the consequences. When the Shrug came the fortresses were unable to contain the Blight and it seeped into the air, water and soil, causing plants and animals to sicken and die or, sometimes, to warp in unnatural ways. Some people continued to eke out a hard existence in the face of sickly crops and monstrous wildlife. Those that survive are altered in gross or subtle ways, so that a visit to their villages presents a weird and horrifying spectacle, although their custom of dress is to cover as much of the body as possible. They have strict codes of manners and behaviour, and are courteous but distant with strangers.



What is the world like?

The land

The mainland of Albion is a single large island, with a number of smaller ones around the coast and further out. Travelling out to sea, sooner or later you encounter the **Mistwall**, a great height of dense, eerie mist. Folk do not venture into this by choice: some who do get turned around and emerge somewhere nearby, confused, but they are the lucky ones. Most do not return. Where the mist presses close to the land navigators take great care.

It's a temperate land. In the south the climate is warm, with dry summers and mild winters. Going north it gets colder and wetter, with the mountains of Alba seeing deep snow most years. Most of the country is lowland and hills, presenting little difficulty to the traveller.

The weather, however, is varied and changeable. It's a traditional topic of conversation. You can easily get a cold, rainy day in summer or a sunny one in winter. Most years there are at least a couple of floods somewhere in the country, as a huge amount of rain falls in a short time. The people defend against this as best they may, and have moved away from some risky areas.

The people

The people of Albion are the descendants of the inhabitants before the Shrug. The tales tell of a strange-sounding mixture of bloodlines, appearance and culture: with skin colours ranging from light to dark, and many different languages and creeds.

In modern Albion you can still see the evidence of this. Some groups have kept old beliefs and practices alive, and some bloodlines have stayed strong so that you can still meet folk with skin of black, brown or olive. Many modern inhabitants, especially in the towns, are the products of bloodlines that have interwoven through many generations, with pale tan skin and, most commonly, dark hair and eyes. But, as ever, people come in all shapes and sizes.

Growing up

Children live with their parents till about age 11. Then they go into **fosterage** till about age 16: their parents arrange for them to live with someone else, usually of higher status in the community, often along with several other youngsters. The idea is that they learn from the fosterer and build strong bonds with their foster-brothers and -sisters which will serve them well in the future. It's like a boarding school spread across the community. They are not cut off from their parents, and will see them often.

At about age 16 youngsters embark on **apprenticeship** in an occupation, going to live with a master along with any other apprentices they might have. This might be quite a formal arrangement, especially in occupations that are regulated by strong **guilds** which have their own rules, or it might be less formal ("Do as I say or else!"). A master can be like a parent, friend, meal ticket or slavedriver. The occupation followed is determined by the young person's aptitudes and attitudes (a known troublemaker finds it harder to get a master to accept them), and the contacts and prestige of their family and fosterer.

Authority

In tales of ancient times noble families held power over those less fortunate. Albion is not like this. Some people hold greater respect because of their profession or position, and their words count for more, but this is balanced by obligation.

In day-to-day matters the highest authority is the **King** (or, less commonly, the Queen). There are many kings: most oversee boroughs, usually a larger settlement and its surrounding area. They are responsible to the local **Assembly**, acting as the public face of the community and the highest of the class of **officials** who see to organisation and administration. Kings should be wise, just and generous.

Other posts include the **Reeve** who heads the administrative service and the **Constable** who leads the **Watch officers** in maintaining law and order.





Clothing

Clothes are predominantly of wool or linen, with occasional use of hide. For men it's a shirt or tunic and trousers, with quality, pattern and dyeing sending messages about status. (In Alba some men wear kilts, especially in the Highlands.) Women may wear the same, but most prefer a skirt or dress. A treated cloak or long coat provides outer protection against the elements. Jewellery and fine ornaments are used by both sexes as visible marks of wealth (and can also be used as gifts or trade).

Most people have a very small knife for eating. Actual weapons are reasonably common, and are restricted mainly by context. If it looks reasonable for the person to have it, that's alright – for instance someone who does a lot of travelling would be expected to have a staff, cudgel or sword for protection. If they're unnecessarily heavily armed in town or seem likely to initiate violence the Watch will have a word. The same goes for armour, only more so: it's uncommon and very obvious, so it suggests imminent trouble.

Technology

The role of unrestrained technology in bringing about the Shrug is well known, and there are differing views on what level should be allowed. Now society is based more on craft than science, and people value objects for the skill that goes into making them. The “cutting edge” is in ingenious mechanical devices, though these rarely catch on – simpler, more robust alternatives often exist. For instance, a good crafter can make a basic bicycle or trishaw, and these are sometimes seen in towns, but for most people a horse is more practical.

Lack of resources also helps to keep the general technology level low. Necessity, coupled with the bias of the Order, has meant a huge shift to biomass: material and energy from plants. Fortunately, major forestation projects were set in motion shortly before the Shrug, so many areas have a good supply of wood which is managed very carefully. Licensed charcoal burners work in the forests, and the many useful qualities of wood and other plant products have been rediscovered. Harnessed power comes from the elements, or from animals or people. Steam power is sometimes found – this is at the upper end of what the Order will allow, and will be scrutinised carefully. Miners

search the Dumps left by the Age of Madness to find useful materials, but it can be dangerous work.

Many smiths are content to make ploughs, tools and weapons, but some tinker with more advanced creations. The Artificers specialise in invention and are often found with unusual mechanical devices or potions. For instance, many use “longarms” that fire a metal ball at great speed using the power of compressed air – articles that are ingenious, beautiful and deadly.

Trade

Few transactions in Albion involve what the pre-Shrug world would have recognised as “money”. There are several different ways of exchanging goods and services.

Gift is the most basic form of human exchange, requiring no compensation. Obviously this depends on the relationship between the parties involved. Generosity is regarded as a virtue; an essential one for Kings, who are expected to bestow boons and gifts on the people.

Barter is a straightforward exchange of goods or services between two parties. The terms and arrangements are decided purely between the two, generally with no record kept. This is fairly common, especially in remote or rural areas.

The Let is a more formalised version of barter, used for most trading in settlements. Citizens have accounts, and agree to a transfer of value between them recorded by the Tallymaster's office. The unit of exchange is the pound.

Currency bars are pieces of metal used mainly for trade between settlements. They only exist in high denominations, and anyone using them who isn't a known merchant is likely to be asked questions.

People arriving in a new place will probably not be on the local Let, so will need to find locals to barter with – most often trading their work and skills for what they need. Town authorities can usually find something that needs doing. Travellers can at least count on basic accommodation and food in places big enough to have a **hostel** run by the authorities. This is free, according to the laws of hospitality, but it's polite to only stay a few days and to make a contribution by passing on news or helping with odd jobs.

ENTERTAINMENT

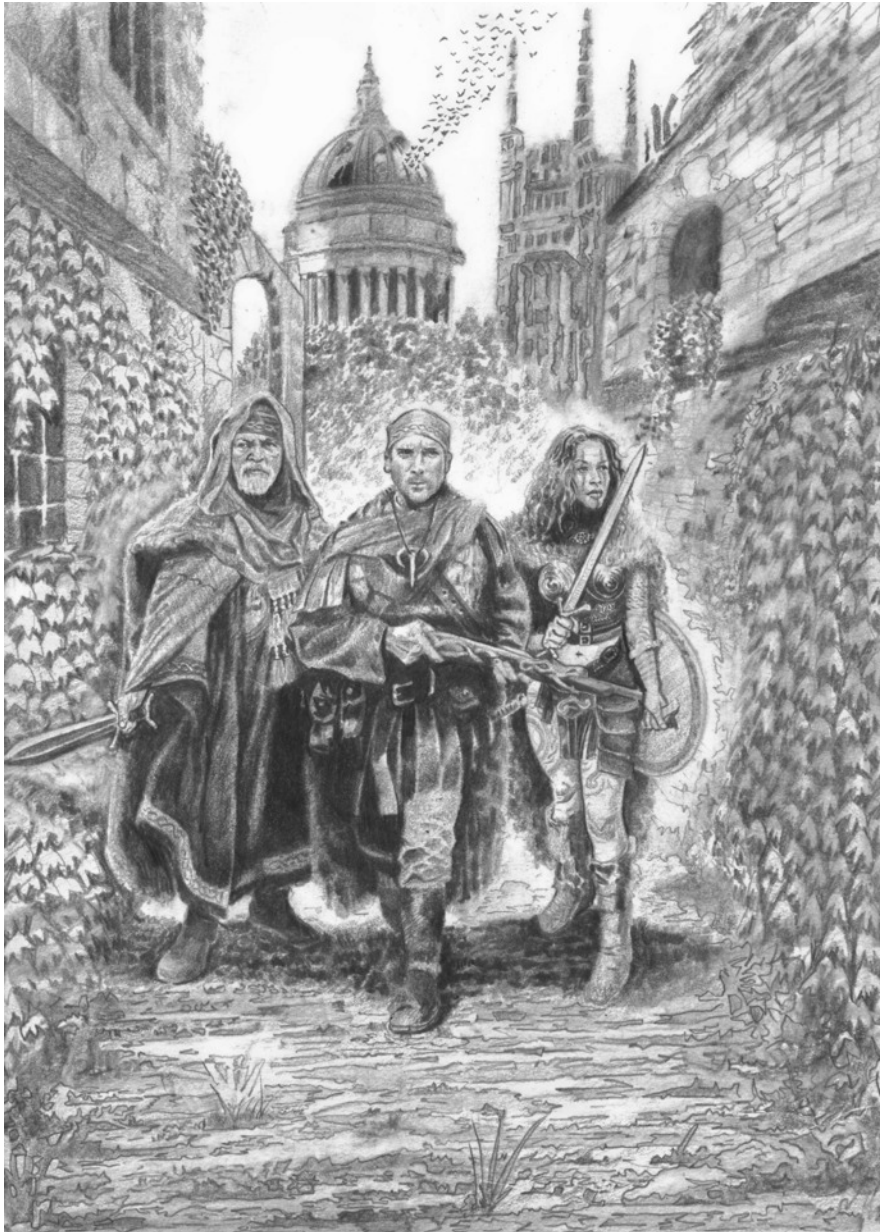
It's said that before the Shrug people had all manner of strange machines to entertain them. Now, however, pastimes are simple and direct.

Music is perhaps the favourite way to uplift the spirits. Many people can manage at least a few tunes on one instrument, and folk think nothing of breaking into song together, whether in an inn or out in the fields. Instruments can be anything from the history of the land, but are usually of portable size and requiring simple (but skilled) craft processes to make. Examples include whistle, flute,

small harp, fiddle, guitar, bodhrán and other small drums. Professional musicians are more likely to have larger and rarer instruments.

Storytelling is also common, and all sorts of people enjoy spinning a yarn for their friends. Professional tale-tellers can keep large audiences silent and spellbound with dramatic renderings of ghosts or heroes.

Games are enjoyed, both athletic sports like football and hockey and board games of strategy like chess and draughts. Gambling, less common among reputable folk, mostly uses dice.





¶

The four major **festivals** of the year are the lunar fire-festivals: Samhain, Imbolc, Beltain and Lughnasad. These are a time for peace and celebration, marked by feasts, fairs and games. There are lesser celebrations at the four solstices and equinoxes, and many localities have their own traditional festival days.

Beliefs

The beliefs of most people follow the teachings of the Druid Order.

Gaia is the Earth-system: its physical parts, like hills, trees, rivers, clouds and animals, and the relationships between them. The druids teach that it is a living organism in itself, with an indwelling spirit. For popular understanding they style it as a generous but stern mother, but are clear that it's really transpersonal – that is, one should not describe it as being like a human personality, nor as an inanimate thing divorced from human qualities, but as something of a higher order.

People do pray to Gaia in the sense of giving thanks for nature's bounty and asking for a good harvest, but not usually in the sense of appealing to

a morally superior being, seeking salvation or asking for help to improve one's situation. The druid teachings are about finding one's proper place in the scheme of things, in terms of relationships to the physical environment and other people. Ethics and virtues follow directly from that, answering the question of how to live a harmonious and rewarding life.

Pre-Shrug **religions** have survived in small groups that keep the beliefs and customs alive. The Order lets them get on with it as long as they don't cause disruption. They usually have similar ideas about virtues and conduct, and conduct their worship in private. Outsiders find them a bit strange, but in most cases welcoming to visitors who behave considerately. However, they're keenly aware that their precious faith is close to dying out – some become fatalistic, and some grow zealous.

Many people have a vague belief in “the **otherworld**” – a place different to Albion, home to faeries and strange beasts. Scholars also talk about other worlds and their relationships. Occasionally someone claims to have been there or to have met one of its inhabitants. Such talk is played down, as the Order doesn't officially recognise that such places or beings exist.

THE WEB

The concept of **the Web** is fundamental to the druid view of the world. It is the network of connections between events, objects and people, and the universal rules that govern their interaction; the paths down which energy flows. The lattices and symbolic beasts of knotwork designs are often used to try to record aspects of the Web. It influences things that happen, but they can influence it as well: a sufficiently powerful event, like performing a skill extraordinarily well, can produce an effect outside the range of normal possibilities or permanently change the universe's idea of how things should be. In some places and times the Web is more fluid and flexible, making these effects easier. In other situations it is more rigid, which makes them harder.

Those who study such things talk about a number of key "Threads" in the Web, embodying important concepts and virtues like Valour, Generosity and Craft. For "the fitness of things" these must be strong and healthy, but they can be frayed or even broken – this happened a lot in the Age of Madness. It's said that a person can come to embody a Thread, through long association or birth-destiny. The Web itself can be damaged by sudden strains like incompetent use of World Magic. Messing up the fabric of reality is generally counted a very bad thing, and is the primary argument for sparing and regulated use of magic.

MAGIC

Magic is real and demonstrable, though usually marked by its effects rather than any pyrotechnic accompaniment. Many people have seen it used by a village witch to cure sickness or heal an injury, for instance – but that just looks like a chant or song followed by the person getting better. Accomplished magicians can shapeshift and command the elements – most people will be surprised and frightened to see such things.

There are two types of magic, though most practitioners don't distinguish as academically as this. Spirit Magic draws on the caster's internal resources to produce direct effects on the body or mind and deal with the spirit world. World Magic uses the caster's power as a lever to move the strands of the Web, and affects the elements, living things and the patterns of fate.

BEASTS

Since the Shrug Albion's wildlife has gradually thrown off the poisons of the Age of Madness and reclaimed territory. The familiar beasts are here: rabbit, fox, badger, eagle, crow, robin, otter, squirrel, toad, adder, deer...

Also here, though in smaller numbers, are beaver, boar, wolf and bear. The druids know they were lost from Albion in ancient times, but avoid drawing attention to this and the fact that they do not know how they returned.

The druids do know the origin of other strange, rare creatures: the grey wallabies, great cats, forest apes, rainbow birds, water dragons and others. They are aliens, brought from other lands when the world was wider to be put on display or kept as pets. When the Shrug came their care was abandoned, but some survived to breed in the wild. Few prey on humans, but many can be dangerous if approached.

The Wastelands breed unwholesome beasts of their own. The Blight changes animals in chaotic ways. Occasionally one finds a breeding colony with shared characteristics – for instance, there do seem to be reliable reports of groups of dog-sized rats from more than one location, and blight gulls are well known on certain coasts. Many of these creatures exude toxins, making bites and scratches doubly dangerous.

Then there are the stories of beasts from the otherworld and travellers who barely escaped with their lives...

STRANGE PLACES

Tales of the otherworld give it castles and caves with chambers offering peril and reward. In Albion, for the most part, the closest things to these are the ruins of the Age of Madness, which are often grimmer and grubbier affairs but sometimes transformed by enterprising inhabitants. They bear ominous names like railway yard, sewage plant, power station, shopping centre... No doubt an actual resident of that Age would be able to describe many such places, with their shadowy vaults and unfathomable machinery. For the most part people are happy to leave them to their decay.





RULES BASICS

CHARACTER ABILITIES

When you make a character you'll end up with quite a lot of information about their background, the kinds of things they're good at doing, their motivations, and special abilities or magical powers. That'll all be explained later, but for now we'll look at the core elements: attributes and skills.

Attributes

These are the innate natural talents of a character for different kinds of activity. Pretty much every roll involves one, and some other things are calculated from them. There are seven of them, and for ordinary humans they are rated 1 to 4, where 2 is average and 4 is exceptional.

- **Vigour** is raw physical energy, used for feats of strength and endurance.
- **Agility** is whole-body physical coordination and flexibility.
- **Deftness** is how good you are with your hands, including hand-eye coordination and affinity with physical materials.
- **Wisdom** is the ability to absorb and recall information, analyse it and put it to good use.
- **Ingenuity** is creativity, imagination, making mental leaps, thinking quickly or laterally, cunning and instinct.
- **Presence** is self-confidence, manifesting as courage, charisma and willpower.
- **Awareness** is perception and intuition; how in touch you are with the world around you.

Skills

These are areas of learned and practised ability, like Persuasion, Medicine, Craft Metal or Sword Fighting. There's a fairly long list. They are rated from untrained (0) through professional (2) to master (4).

MAKING A ROLL

When a character tries to do something in the game there are two ways of deciding what happens. The GM may state that they succeed or fail automatically, if the task is well within their abilities or completely beyond them. This is fast and should be used where appropriate, especially when dramatic tension isn't important.

The other way to decide what happens is to roll a "pool" of six-sided dice ("d6") to see whether you succeed, and how well. As a rule of thumb, any roll marks the situation as dramatically important, and the result you get is what happens rather than an excuse for multiple repeated attempts (though you'll soon see ways to shift that in your favour).

Dice pool

For most rolls you get the number of dice by picking the attribute and skill that are most relevant to the task and adding their ratings together. (Sometimes you just roll an attribute.)

So for example to swing a sword a character would use Agility + Fighting (Sword). If they had professional level skill (2) and an average attribute (2) they'd roll 4 dice. If you wanted to know something about how swords are made or maintained you could use the same skill with the Wisdom attribute.

Reading the dice

Count each die that shows 4, 5 or 6 as one **success**. A single success means you just barely do it, though not very well; 3 successes is a good, solid result; 5 or more successes is truly impressive.

No successes (all dice show 1, 2 or 3) means **failure** for the task. If all the dice show 1's that's a **fumble**: you messed up especially badly and the GM describes the awkward consequences, like dropping your sword or accidentally insulting the druid.

Exploding dice. In *Albion* dice “explode” for a high-energy action feel: for each die that shows 6 you can roll a further die, and if it shows 4, 5 or 6 that’s an extra success to add to the total. If a 6 comes up again carry on re-rolling. This adds an element of unpredictability – even a small dice pool has a small chance of great success.

Halfmagic. A really large number of successes can cause something almost magically impressive to happen – see *The Web* later. The threshold varies by time and place, so just make sure the GM knows when you get over 5.

Example. Bob’s character is attempting a roll of Agility (3) + Climbing (2) for a dice pool of 5. The roll gives 1, 3, 4, 6, 6. That’s 3 successes to start with, and those 6’s let him roll two more dice – they come up 3, 4 so that brings the successes to 4. He succeeds very well.

Difficulty

The GM can declare a task to be **difficult**, in which case you subtract 2 dice from your pool before rolling. A **very difficult** task subtracts 4 dice. Difficult tasks are the sorts of things that normally require a professional in that field; very difficult ones are a challenge even for them.

You can also get **Advantages** (+1 die each) or **Disadvantages** (-1 die each) to reflect special abilities or situations. In fact the GM can customise the difficulty to the situation.

Fluke Die

A roll of a single die is sometimes referred to as a Fluke Die because the result is determined more by luck than skill and there’s a significant chance of things going horribly wrong (fumble).

- Characters get a Fluke Die when they run out of dice for a roll due to difficulty or injury.
- The GM can use one to judge the effects of sheer chance.

Opposed rolls

These happen when two characters come into conflict – fighting, interrogation, haggling, chess match, etc. Both characters make appropriate rolls.

The one with more successes gets their way, and the difference tells you how decisive it was. Ties usually go forward (dramatically!) to another roll. You might have to be a bit creative to come with attribute + skill pairs – e.g. if one uses Presence + Persuasion to talk the other out of attacking, use Presence + Intimidation to stay aggressive.

Blessing and Curse

These reflect metaphysical forces that alter your luck – think of them as lift or drag on rolls. It might be the result of magic, special properties of an object or character, or a peculiarity of the local environment. The GM will often tell you to apply them without explaining where they come from. Your *character* probably won’t realise anything unusual is happening, unless it’s a big effect or it happens over an extended period.

They are measured in levels, each of which flips one die from a failure to a success or vice versa. Apply them *before* you re-roll any 6’s. Rather than turning dice to show particular numbers, it’s easier to group them on the table and move dice between groups. Dice with 1’s and 6’s on the original roll are immune to Blessings and Curses. Levels of Curse and Blessing cancel each other out, so just apply the difference to rolls. Any levels you’re not able to apply to the dice you’ve got have no effect.

Blessing – for each level, convert one die that’s an ordinary failure (2 or 3) to an ordinary success (4 or 5). If you have levels left, each turns one ordinary success into a 6 so it explodes. *Example:* you roll 2, 3, 4 but have 3 Blessings. The 2 and 3 flip to successes, and the 4 can be re-rolled for a possible extra success.

Curse – for each level you must convert one die that’s an ordinary success (4 or 5) to an ordinary failure (2 or 3). Any remaining levels turn ordinary failures into 1’s – if all the dice become 1’s you fumble the roll! (If you have any 6’s don’t bother with the 1’s because you can’t fumble.)

Weavings are properties of characters and objects that give a Blessing or Curse in a particular kind of situation. A person might have developed a deep understanding of the ogham tree Oak, enabling them to draw on its associations with strength and rulership. A sword might be particularly effective against thieves or when fighting underground.





FIGHTING BASICS

*"You can see the dawn a-comin'
Or is that the flash of a spear?"*

The Power and the Glory, Horslips

When it comes to fast and furious action, the combat system comes into play. It wouldn't be a Celtic-style fantasy game without a good chunk of this, and when warrior heroes apply their skills and feats it should become spectacular. This section gives you the basics of combat. There are more detailed rules and an extended example later. Once you get used to the steps it should be fairly simple, while including some interesting tactical options.

INITIATIVE

When it comes to high-speed action, things happen in **rounds**: chunks of time around 5 seconds long divided into 10 **phases**. Initiative is a combination of reaction speed and tactical awareness. At the start of a round everyone rolls one die and adds the result (1-6) to an initiative bonus that's been calculated from their character's abilities. These rolls are straight: no exploding, spending points, Blessings, etc.

The GM counts down from 10 to 1, and your initiative total tells you when you become **ready** and can take your **action** (e.g. punching, throwing, shooting). After phase 1 the next round starts, until the fight is over. Sometimes there's a bit of "book-keeping" at the end of a round, like checking to see whether an unconscious character has woken up.

You can also use a phase to do one simple thing as a **free action** each round any time after you're ready for your first full action – like drawing a weapon, picking something up or running a short distance. More involved actions like all-out sprinting take a full action. You can spend a full action to do anything you could with a free one.

An initiative total **over 10** means you can act once on 10 and again on the remainder, e.g. 14 gives 10 and 4. Really high results (probably involving supernatural aid) can wrap around again, but you can only have one action per phase so it goes down

the phases: for instance a result of 22 would give actions on 10, 9 and 3. You count as ready anytime after you can take your first action.

An initiative total **less than 1** means you're too confused to take a full action this round. You can take a free action on phase 1 if you're conscious.

You can **hold an action** from its ready phase till later in the round, but don't delay too long or it'll be lost. Characters **on the same phase** can act (or make other tactical choices) in descending order of Initiative *bonus*. You can only take **one action per phase**, regardless of type of action.

ATTACK AND DEFENCE

In combat the main activities are, naturally, trying to punch, club, hack, stab or shoot an opponent – attack – and trying to dodge or parry these things – defence. A commonly-used attack can be written down as attack dice/base damage, e.g. 4/3.

- Attacker makes attack roll.
- Defender tells attacker the defence result.
- If the attack beats the defence, attacker works out the damage.
- Defender rolls to resist the damage and applies any effects.

Attack

Use the appropriate Fighting skill (Sword, Knife, Club, Unarmed, Archery, and so on) with different attributes for different types of attack:

- Agility for melee (unarmed, hand weapons)
- Dexterity for thrown weapons
- Awareness for missile attacks (bows, slings, guns).

Defence

Defence uses Agility and a Fighting skill to block or avoid an incoming blow. Most melee skills include footwork to avoid an attack as well as parrying with their weapon, but ranged weapon skills like Archery don't have a defence component. You can use your best applicable skill, so using Unarmed to dodge sword blows is possible.



Guard. We use this as the default form of defence to speed things up and reduce the number of rolls. It's a fixed number as if you had rolled defence and got an average result. When a fight starts, find the attribute + skill for defence, based on how you're fighting. Take half that dice pool, rounding down: that's your Guard. It applies automatically on any phase when you're not doing anything else, against all attacks you're aware of. It may change as the situation does, going as low as zero.

Common Guard modifiers

Unaware	no Guard
Unready	-1
Defending against missile weapons	-1
Cover (vs missile weapons)	+1
Shield	+1
Injured (see below)	-1 per 2 Injuries

Active defence. Sometimes you do actually roll defence. You can do this as a reflex response if you see that an attack will overwhelm your Guard. It uses up your next full action in the round: if you have none left, only Guard is available. Against a tough opponent you might want to play cautious and hold your action in case you need to defend. Against missile attacks it's difficult (-2 dice).

DAMAGE

On a successful hit, add the difference between attack and defence successes to the base damage for the attack; a fixed number. The potential harm then includes both the accuracy of the attack and its intrinsic power, and the target must resist this total to find out what effect they suffer from it.

Base damage

Some kinds of attacks are intrinsically more harmful than others, and that's what base damage reflects. For unarmed combat or hand-held weapons add on any levels of Vigour above average (2), or subtract any levels below average. Other factors like creature size can also affect base damage. It can be negative – for instance an unarmed attack by a person with Vigour 1 has base damage -1. This means an attack needs to be more accurate to have any chance of causing harm.

Base damage

Unarmed	0
Knife, small club, staff, claws	1
Sword, mace, most other one-handed weapons, arrow/bolt	2
Two-handed sword, airarm, fire smallarm	3
Really Big hand weapon, fire longarm	4

Resistance

Characters have a Physical Resistance dice pool based on their Vigour attribute. They roll this to withstand the attack, with successes taken away from the total damage, and read the result on the following table. (A fumble adds 1 to damage!)

Armour has a rating that adds on to your resistance result (more on this later).

Damage result

0	Unharmd
1-2	Hurt
3-4	Injured
5-6	Unconscious (and Injured)
7+	Dead (and Injured)

Damage effects

Note Hurts and Injuries on your character sheet: they build up and give penalties while they last, eventually incapacitating the character.

- **Hurts** are bruises, cuts and shock that slow you down. Each subtracts 1 from Initiative for future rounds. They usually heal at the rate of one per 5 minutes of reasonable rest.





- **Injuries** are serious wounds that hang around for longer. Each takes 1 off Initiative *and* gives a Disadvantage for all rolls except Resistance. (Instead of recalculating Guard each time, knock 1 off per 2 Injuries.) They usually heal at the rate of one per day of reasonable rest.
- **Unconsciousness** means you can't act and are unaware of what's going on. You might only be stunned for a while: at the end of each round after the first, roll Vigour with your Injuries as a difficulty penalty. If it succeeds you can act normally from the start of the next round. If it fumbles you're out for the whole scene.
- **Death** is not inevitable for heroes. You can spend Destiny Points (see later) to either go out heroically or cling on till help arrives.

An example

Let's put this together in a quick round of combat. Mitch Brophy (who we'll meet later) is unfortunate enough to run into a hungry wolf. Here are the summaries of their combat stats.

- Mitch: Init +5, Knife 5/1, Phys Res 2
- Wolf: Init +3, Bite 4/2, Phys Res 3

Mitch's Guard for knife-fighting is half of 5, rounding down to 2. The wolf's Guard is also 2. They roll initiative. Mitch rolls 2, for a total of 7. The wolf rolls 5, for a total of 8. The GM starts the count: 10, 9, 8... the wolf can attack.

The wolf rolls 4 dice for its bite, getting just 1 success. Now Mitch isn't ready yet, so his Guard is down at 1 –but that's still enough to sidestep such a clumsy lunge.

Now it's phase 7 and Mitch can attack. He rolls 5 dice to strike with his knife, getting 3 successes. The wolf is ready so its Guard is 2: it's a hit, though only 1 success gets through. Mitch adds that 1 to his base damage of 1, and tells the GM that the wolf must resist 2 damage. The wolf rolls its physical resistance of 3, and gets 1 success. That comes off the damage, leaving 1 point: a Hurt.

As there are no more actions to take the GM moves to the next round. They roll initiative, with the wolf at -1 from that Hurt. What will happen next?

MAGIC BASICS

Combat and magic are perhaps the two central pillars of the fantasy genre. While combat offers characters the opportunity to vanquish a foe through heroic physical feats, magic opens the door to a world truly different from our own – a land where mysterious individuals pursue unguessable purposes, and where “mere” humans possess the ability to manipulate reality on a grand scale or a subtle one. Like combat, magic requires special rules, which is why it has a section of its own.

To work magic, first you have to become aware of energy flows that most people never notice. Then you learn to manipulate them, using your own will and life-force as levers, into ever more complex patterns. (The characteristic Celtic knotwork designs, with their intertwined threads and symbolic beasts, are used to visualise and record spells.) When the pattern is right you push energy through it to set the effect in motion. An accomplished caster can do all this in a split second and produce a significant effect without breaking a sweat, but beginners have to be less ambitious. Magic has risks too: if you lose control of the power you're manipulating it can have serious consequences.

Magic is not an everyday occurrence in Albion – that's what makes it magic. Although people know that these things occur, obvious magic is a cause for wonder. Those who can use it are both common, in the sense that most villages will have one or two people who know one or two simple charms, and rare, in the sense that there are few accomplished magicians working openly. A master magician will not have lists of dozens of spells, but a compact and versatile selection that suits their inclinations.

Types of magic

There are two different types of magic, distinguished by power source and effects. In game terms, they are separate skills.

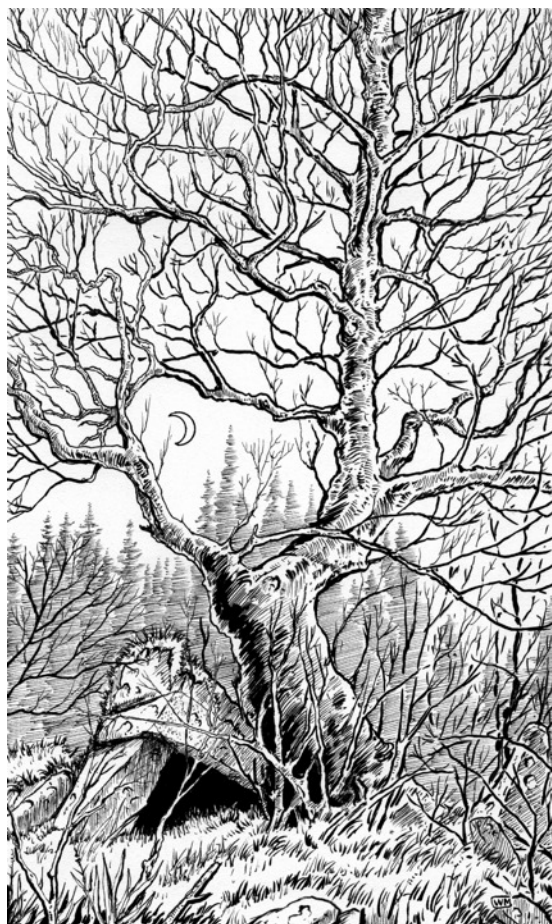
Spirit magic uses the caster's own personal power, usually in a simple and direct way. It includes such effects as controlling the mind and actions of another, augmenting physical and mental abilities, and dealing with the spirit world.

World magic is perhaps more sophisticated, using the caster's personal power as a sort of lever to affect the (sometimes massive) forces of the physical world by pulling on the strands of the Web. Examples include controlling elements and forces (e.g. light, fire, water, weather), dealing with the living realm of plants and animals, and working with chance and fate themselves.

Practitioners usually follow Spirit or World Magic, but Magicians are rare individuals who study both forms of magic.

The spells are further divided into **Realms** to reflect their different emphases. For Spirit these are Body, Mind and Essence; for World they are Elemental, Living and Web. Some occupations give access to spells from specific Realms.

Some spells exist as both Spirit and World versions. These must always use the skill they're learned with; you can't cast the World version with your Spirit Magic skill or vice versa. However, familiarity with the effects of one does help you detect and counter the other.



Types of spell

Charms are simple magic, usually with just one function. Most magic is of this type, and if someone happens to have picked up some magic along the way – perhaps taught by a friend or relative as a youngster, or by a teacher while training in a basically non-magical occupation – it'll be a Charm. They're easy to cast, and don't require any understanding of the general principles and application of magic – though if you have that you'll be more effective. Charms are cast using the Spirit Magic or World Magic skill, as appropriate.

Some Charms are “**complex**”. They are still of limited flexibility but require a greater understanding, making them less common and harder to learn. You can only learn these by specialising in a magical profession.

Arts are more powerful, complex and flexible, taught only to those who specialise in magic. For instance, *Fire* could be used to start a fire or put one out, make shapes within an existing fire, make someone burst into flames, sense fires nearby, heat metal objects and so on. Each Art is a skill in its own right, but its level can never exceed the relevant parent Magic Skill (Spirit or World).

Casting spells

In order to cast a spell you must:

- know the spell (you can cast any spell you've learned);
- have levels in the relevant skill if it's an Art or complex Charm (simple Charms can be attempted without magical training);
- spend time casting it (most can be done as a Full action, but some require longer as noted in their descriptions);
- use a focus, some action that aids you in manifesting the magic;
- make a casting roll;
- pay a Price in personal energy, which might limit the number of spells you can cast in a short period.

If the casting roll succeeds, use the successes as noted in the spell description to work out the detailed effect of the spell. You also need to decide whether to spend a success to negate the Price.



If the casting roll fails, nothing happens at all. The caster was not able to marshal and structure the energy they needed. On the bright side, there's no Price for this.

If the roll fumbles, the Price is unavoidable and the magical energy breaks free of the caster's control, causing bad things to happen. This works differently for Spirit and World Magic and is explained in the *Book of Rowan* section.

The casting roll

Casting a spell uses the Spirit Magic, World Magic or Art skill, as appropriate, with a mental **attribute** depending on the nature of the spell.

- Use Ingenuity for spells that are mainly about complexity; it's also the default to use if it's not clear which attribute is best.
- Use Presence for spells that are mainly about power.
- Use Awareness for spells that focus on perception and gaining information.
- For a spell that's a direct attack aiming to do damage to a target, use Ingenuity for proficiency and accuracy and use Presence as the base damage.

Charms tend to take the same attribute all the time, but Arts have greater flexibility and may use different attributes for different effects.

Modifiers

Factors like area affected, range, duration and size of target can affect the difficulty of the cast. The Charms have it pretty well spelled out, but the possible options with Arts are greater. This is covered later in *The Book of Rowan*, but basically a spell takes Disadvantages as those quantities increase, dictating how good you have to be to do it effectively (or at all).

Price

A spell takes some of the caster's energy as it is completed. A successful cast causes a Hurt *unless* one of the casting successes is spent to negate it. In other words, if you're good enough you can cast the spell without tiring yourself, but if you're not so good or you're going all-out you will get fatigued. If you only get one casting success you must spend it on the spell and pay the Price.

Like other Hurts, you can recover one for each 5 minutes of reasonable rest. Apart from possible consequences of fumbling a cast, this is the only limit on the number of spells you can use and it is at least partly in the control of the player.

Some spells that involve permanent changes have different Prices that cannot be avoided.

An example

Mitch Brophy is a versatile chap. He learned a couple of Charms growing up. He doesn't understand how magic works (no skill), but if he does as he was taught he can get a useful effect.

On this occasion he's being pursued by a pair of guards and decides to use the *Impression* spell to make a brief illusionary sound so they go off down the wrong alleyway. The GM says it'll simply work if Mitch manages a decent cast (an important character might get a roll to avoid being fooled).

Mitch takes an action to mutter the words. The roll is Ingenuity (3) + Spirit Magic (0) for a dice pool of 3. He gets 2 successes. He could drop one of those to avoid taking a Hurt as the Price, but then the illusion would be a bit rubbish, so he accepts the fatigue. The guards go charging away.