THE SORCERER BALK

By Ron Edwards

You get to play this guy! ... Wait, why are you running away?

To balk:

In horsemanship, when the animal puts most of its weight on its hind legs to resist being led or coaxed somewhere, to the extent of a semi-crouch, looking almost as if it's about to sit down. When a horse does this, you know it absolutely refuses your direction. Less extreme versions include turning its head strongly to one side, away from wherever you're trying to direct it to go.
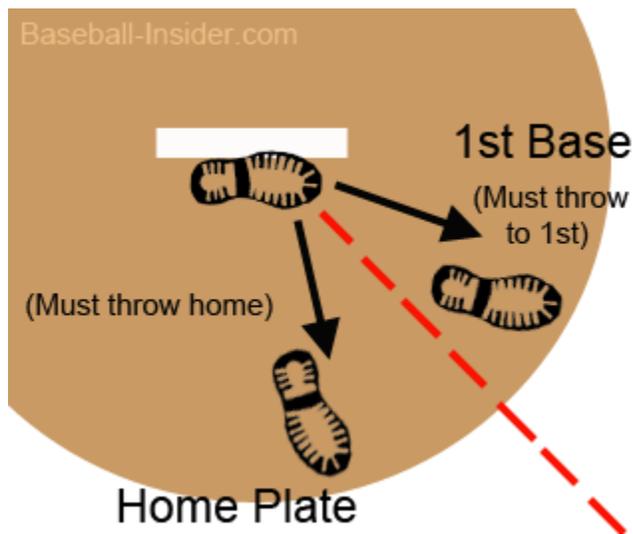
In baseball, a wide variety of actions by a pitcher which indicate that he or she is pitching to the batter or throwing to first base (and which), but then does not, whether intentional or not. One of the hard limits of baseball rules is that a batter is pitted against a pitch without complications. Therefore balking is severely penalized when identified by the umpire, typically instantly rendering the ball "dead" and awarding all players on base a one-base advance.

I've seen it, and I think some of you have too, in trying to get a game of Sorcerer up and running. It can be strange, not like other games which fail to generate interest at the very suggestion, or which turn out to be not especially fun during initial play. Sometimes it's right up front, like the horse: "No." Sometimes, one or more players seem interested and attentive, and then quite suddenly, act weird and contradictory, undermining play, like the pitcher.

What's going on? This little essay is my first formal attempt to figure it out and find some solutions.

PART 1: THE WATER'S THIS WAY!

I might as well say that at least once, I've observed the balk so immediately and so definitely that I'm pretty sure there's no solution. A person or group flat-out won't play. So before we begin, let's make it clear: I can't make your girlfriend reasonable, and I can't fix your fucked-up friends, or their fucked-up POV on gaming. The best this essay can offer is making this or a similar response *less* likely, either initially or along the way.

The basics

> *She heard "demons" and that was it.*

Long ago, when I was first developing and promoting the game, the first response I always got was fear regarding "demons." Everyone was convinced that no one besides themselves would tolerate such an uncompromising, literal use of the term, without the softening trappings of a canonical fictional world or deliberately non-realistic medium.

In practice, this turned out to be less of an initial turn-off than anyone thought. Nevertheless, it does happen that a person finds the concept simply and completely inappropriate, either personally or generally, on the basis of their religious views. If you've already run into this limit with someone, then I think you're out of luck – by the time it's articulated, it's already locked down.

It may be, however, not impenetrable if you start differently. We gamers are not noted for our tact. Consider that "Hey honey! Did you have a nice time teaching Sunday school? Oh look, I got my copy of Sorcerer, want to play?" may not be a winning move. Instead, consider discussing – for example – the role of sin or redemption in role-playing at a heartfelt level. Such things are addressed fully in literature and film, so why not in this medium?

The person who's thought the most about this for Sorcerer is Mark Joseph Young, an active member of the Christian Gamers Guild and all-round contributor of deep thoughts about role-playing. He puts it this way: a game in which doing bad or questionable things is *doomed* to failure, or a game in which doing by-the-book virtuous things is *guaranteed* both success in this world and divine approval, is a fake. Faith and virtue are intertwined in an uncertain world, and as he sees it, the value of Christianity arises from grappling with this rather than racking up "good" checks on a cosmic scorecard. He has gone so far as to recommend Sorcerer as one of the most honest and relevant games available for people of faith.

If you know someone with this outlook and if you want to play Sorcerer with them, you could do worse than bringing up these points – perhaps through recommending the relevant websites – before mentioning the game itself, much less extolling its content as "you get to summon demons."

Some admissions to be acknowledged

> *Players have trouble with magic being via relationship with demons instead of more traditional delved into forbidden lore.*

"Demon" isn't a fictional term. Its use in ordinary English may not necessarily invoke extra-cosmic entities with intentions of their own, but does mean behavior or even an identity which cannot properly be regarded as a human being. In a Forge conversation about the early draft of Sex & Sorcery, I wrote: *... have you ever had interacted in good faith with someone with a heavy drug habit? It's really horrifying – it seems as if you're dealing with another human being, and then – like the android going "click" in an SF*

movie – they (without thinking about it) reveal that the entire interaction was, is, and can only be about this One Thing: scoring some change for another dose.

I'm talking about something more important than the issues specific to observant religious gamers; this matters whether you're an atheist or whatever, because it's about how we do in fact have hard limits regarding other people. The quote above nails it squarely: "magic," in Sorcerer, isn't a personal-power fantasy so much as a dangerous relationship with an entity who – if it were human – would not meet the social and emotional smell-test to qualify for being *treated* as human. It's not actually the entity or person who's most disturbing; it's the ordinary human's capacity for conducting that smell-test and ultimately drawing that hard line.

That's strong medicine for someone who thought "bind a demon" was pretty much about choosing what powers you get to have. Consider one of the primary influences on the game, the very first story in the comic *Hellblazer* way back when. It's all well and good to be told "You get to play John Constantine" – but a whole different game when you rightly add "Except that you might decide to do what he did to poor Gary Lester," or even, "Except that you might turn out to be Gary Lester."

Some other stuff sets less visible traps for many role-players as well. One of the biggest is the unusually minimal role of setting, or better, the fact that the setting (no matter how original or detailed) is always a mere handmaiden to the situation, i.e., that particular character in a particular crisis situation. The principle even goes deeper to genuinely unfamiliar territory for many role-players, for whom "setting" is a euphemism for GM-driven, large-scale plot. As a mere handmaiden, setting in Sorcerer will not be a larger canvas in which "the story" is written and in which the players may feel secure as protagonists.

Playing Sorcerer can be also deliberately intimate and revealing to one another, as people, and I think this principle becomes apparent pretty soon. For example, whereas in other games the "demon stuff" is canonical and author-originated and what the players make up and do is about the same as in any horror or fantasy game, here it's immediately clear that the parts that are most uncompromising are introduced into the story by you, plural, in front of one another.

Finally, and I am convinced this point plays such a big role that it might be the instant deal-breaker when it eventually sinks in, that that although this is a "story making game," there's no safety net that guarantees a story's production or that the resulting story will be any good. It is emphatically not a "story game" in the sense that a fixed story structure frames the whole experience. Story Now doesn't mean "no matter what I do, we get a story!" It means, "if I don't reach down deep and dredge up real story content in a spirit of genuine authorship in the moments of play itself, this will not be any good."

Social contract

It's also not specific to Sorcerer, per se. Rather if I suggest a game outside of traditional roleplaying the players sound enthusiastic but then do not show up on the night. Most are older and have families and so I understand how difficult it can be to get away some times. But it seems they are more likely to show up if I say I'll run a game of D&D or Shadowrun than if I offer to run something they've not heard of.

Current circle of gamers not inclined to try new things, also tend towards "crunchier" games.

I can organize a quick session of role-playing, but only irregularly and without consistency in who plays. Sometimes I can only wrangle me and another player. None of these factors constitute the baseline for a satisfying experience of Sorcerer. What do I do?

Gaming is frequently a matter of playing with whomever you can, which typically means restricting games and topics to the most accommodating comfort zone, or safest-common-denominator. However, given the points in the above section, Sorcerer is especially sensitive to the principle that role-playing works best when the people involved …

- would really like to play this particular game, i.e., as opposed to some other game;
- with one another specifically, i.e., not with anyone or whoever; and
- at this particular time, i.e., when they could be doing something else entirely.

That doesn't necessarily means everyone has to be an intimate group who's played with one another for years. I've experienced some stunning Sorcerer play with people who'd mostly met for the first time that day … but they did in fact meet the criteria. So I consider these criteria to override *everything*, even familiarity with one another or experience with this or any other game.

All of which is my clumsy attempt to suggest that "your group" may already be failing to meet the criteria, no matter how long they've been playing together or how reliably they meet, or what nice people they so clearly are. It may be that you're walking Sorcerer right into a mine-field, for a group whose comfort with a specific edition of D&D or Shadowrun represents a safe coping mechanism for inherent structural and creative lapses. (*Disclaimer: playing either of these two games does not <u>indicate</u> such a situation.*)

Is there a solution? Sure. Find two people, just two, in or out of your current group, who seem to you actually to be capable of meeting the criteria, and set up a game with them. This is surprisingly fun and effective.

Here's a useful supporting detail: remove as much gamer identity politics from organizing the game as you can. Sorcerer's *difference* from many familiar games is often interpreted as *opposition* to them, which however true this might be is even wrongly claimed to be inherent in its text. So even mentioning the Forge or indie-ness or whatever can set off defensive behaviors, manifested as refusal. Or, related, don't make extravagant claims about the game either – it's not going to administer oral sex 'round the table, and even if it did, let it get the job done without talking it up first.

And (said wearily) leave me out of it. To your advantage this issue is oddly skewed: if you don't bring me up, then even people inclined to make a big stink about it are OK with playing Sorcerer; but if you do, then their response is so extreme that their silence (if you don't) is a mystery. Or rather, it's a mystery until you realize that the issue has nothing to do with the game or wanting to play it, but rather about saving face. So your best bet is simply to focus on the game and let them skate over the fact that they're conceding some hotly-held position that scored them points on the internet.

A better pitch

I don't know how to explain the game in a few words. Again, maybe this will not be a problem next time and it was a problem the last time only because... I didn't understand how to play it, too. And the annotations will be enough. But I am interested in "ways to explain a game in a few words" in general.

The most effective, honest pitch for a role-playing game relies on two things, which I'm lifting from Vincent Baker and instilling with my jargon. First, its primary Color, phrased perhaps as, why play a (meaning any) *demons* game? Second, its Reward: why *this* demons game, which is to say, what is procedurally notable compared to any other game that might be used?

In the abstract, the Color goes like this: in this game, the player-characters are the most arrogant possible people. It could be out of idealism, out of desperation, out of rebellion, or whatever, but they have taken the whole fucking universe, science and theology alike, and broken it over their knees, because they wanted something. They wanted it so bad that they've enlisted the aid of something that could very well be the worst imaginable threat to them, and so far, are succeeding.

(This is where the whole "Demons don't exist" principle applies. It works beautifully for some listeners but not for others. You'll have to choose whether to introduce it to the others in your group or not.)

The main and most important Reward in Sorcerer is the character arc represented by the Kicker and its resolution through play. The mechanics supporting these are (1) the player writes his or her character's own Kicker, and (2) at the Kicker's resolution, the player re-writes any or all the score descriptors. Now that I think of it, too, the main mechanic which encompasses these is the player's full authority over whether to retire the character after this point.

Wait, what about Humanity? Well, Humanity is the interface between the character and the real world – the character/audience relationship made concrete. If the Kicker and its arc are the *stuff* of the character in action, then Humanity is *about* him or her. It's very consequential, especially at the 1/0 point, but it's still a subroutine of that bigger reward.

All the other reward mechanics are subroutines of these, like the possible improvement of one score's value prior to writing a new Kicker, and should be explained during later use rather than during the pitch.

I hope you can see that Sorcerer's Color and Reward are integrated to an unusual degree. The character's status as a cosmic outlaw is established and conceived as successful so far, and then the Kicker throws that into question. The immediate and ongoing concern is Humanity, yes, but effect is transformation. Sorcerer is ultimately about how a character changes.

So, are the above few paragraphs your pitch? For fuck's sake, no!! The players don't need any of that abstraction. What they need is mainline Color and procedural Reward. Present the setting and the look-and-feel of sorcery in raw imaginative terms, like a nude hermaphrodite scattering golden light with every movement, or the dried-up squashed carcass of a dead cat, or a Roger Dean album cover. Present the requirements for a Kicker and maybe the basic mechanics for Humanity.

This is where the one-sheet can be especially helpful. I've already devoted a whole other pledge reward to explaining how to do that, but the relevant points are to provide enough leadership so the others don't feel like the blind led by the blind, and to inspire the others' creativity rather than straitjacket it.

PART 2: AND THE WATER'S NICE, LET'S HAVE A DRINK!

> *I've seen this more from the player side of things. While me and a friend were willing to play, it took us a while and we were only really able to get things rolling with a great deal of coaching by someone who had played before. Even then, it took a fair bit to get into character, and more coaching to get to a place where both of us were comfortable.*

Let's say you've come this far: the group agrees to play, but then one or more weirds out during preparation. Sometimes a player seems unable to process the two statements or any other orienting dialogue, coming up with concepts which are flatly off-base; this is especially dangerous because it's contagious and it invalidates the focus of those players who've stayed with it. Or sometimes a player gets really invested in what the others have come up with, trying to match or adjust to them in order to make the right character "for the group." Similarly but not actually the same, someone might demand full-consensus approval for every little step and decision. Finally, and consistent with some of my points above, conceiving of the demons is more emotionally taxing than anyone expects, leading to the inability to process the meanings of Desire and Need, among other things.

Why does this happen, and how can it be solved? For years, I thought all this was due to the vagaries of a hundred different kinds of game histories, strictly a matter of individual detail per person. Now, I think any and all of these can be solved, or better, eliminated from the start, by one person taking on a special role at the group's first meeting, that of first-among-equals and designated facilitator. Most of the time, this will be the person who's introducing Sorcerer as a game, and also the person who will be the GM. But since this is a distinct role which is neither of those, and since in fact sometimes these things are represented by different people, I want to focus on just what that facilitator should do.

Getting them in the groove

> *In the first group (with gamers coming mostly from a D&D, Vampire, and Call of Cthulhu background) ... with other participants (excluding me and the GM, who was the only other guy who read the books) having moments of interest during characters creations and moments like "Ok, let's just finish this boring stuff and begin play!".*

At long last, and as I tried to illustrate in the annotations until the dead equine was reduced to a greasy film upon the pavement, I finally figured out the precise order of what exactly to do when setting up a game of Sorcerer.

- Present or arrive at the two statements: one for setting, one for sorcery/demons.

- Then go straight into character creation, as follows:
    - Point out the ten steps at the beginning of Chapter 2.
    - Begin with wholly individual work without consultation, letting people work through about half of the ten steps on scratch paper.
    - Restrict your input to pure mechanics (do explicitly cancel the values associated with Lore types in the rules; any Lore descriptor can have any value).

- Then evaluate how it's going and bring one (1) player fully up to speed as the others listen.
    - Is each character a successful sorcerer?
    - Do the Kickers work for you? (they're yours, after all)

o The demon: the best way is simply to ask "How does it help you get what you want?" getting the player to describe the thing in action; this allows you to list the abilities, which sets Lore, and you're up and running from there.

- Then the other players typically get their characters nearly fully done without much help, or at least after listening, they know what parts will require it and ask accordingly.

- Finally, get the diagrams started. They are best begun as four short lists, often prompted by you in terms of where the character lives, what they do day to day, and riffing off the listed descriptors.

This sequence and the specifications in it effectively negate a number of useless distractions or discussions.

One participant in particular complained about the fact that he didn't understand why all the demons "must" hide their existence to the world.

Yeah, I can tell you the problem with that right away: you articulated the principle in the first place. That principle is what the GM needs to go by when playing demons – and that's all it's for. It's not up for debate, and it's not something the players need to know you're doing, at least not during the learning phase. They're not playing the demons, so don't bring that kind of rule into the pre-game discussion. Later, sure, if they read the book or want to GM or just want to know more about how you're playing the demons, it's a fine topic. But not as a must-know, before-play topic, because if it's raised, they'll spot it as an opportunity for debate. Which, in geek-world, means being an argumentative git.

The biggest trap for you is to avoid detailed rules explanations. You do not have to *justify* or *fully explain* anything. The goal here is to stay strictly on-task.

Given all that, why might people balk in the middle? I think I know. Lately I've been dissecting game designs according to which elements are fixed, which are taken from lists, which are required to be made up, and similar categories. Considering only the pre-play character creation steps, Sorcerer presents an unusual array:

	The way it is	Choose from fixed list	Required but customized verbally	Required and bought with points	Required and randomly determined	Entirely made up
Sorcerer	Being a sorcerer (rituals) Having a demon	Score descriptors Demon abilities Demon Desire	Price Cover Kicker Demon Need	Score values for character Score values for demon	None	People, places, and things on the diagram

A bunch of stuff you get out of the box, you have to make up, and a bunch of stuff you're used to making up, you have to take as given or choose from a list. And since the ten steps of character creation can be done in any order, it's a recipe for instant paralysis unless the player has managed to put aside what they expect or think they know.

Keep it moving right along, but without rushing. You have to be pretty tough at this point, to hold their feet to the fire and simply say "do it like it says." However, it's tough *love*, because all you're doing is finding out what the players would really like to do. Never direct a developing character toward anything you want; always frame your input in terms of fulfilling rules requirements. This is crucial, because if

they start feeling pushed and trying to guess what you want, they'll start applying all sorts of habitual behaviors which in their interiors, they know are flawed.

I'm saying it again and again: only do what I'm describing here, not what you're used to explaining or feel you have to explain. Some rules and ideas will drag you straight into classic what-if why-not vortices from which your purported "let's play Sorcerer" will never emerge. The repeat offenders include:

- *Humanity*. Don't define it! Everyone got all pumped up about specifying Humanity upon reading *Sorcerer & Soul*, but that is an advanced technique for people who already know how to play. It is textually supplemental for a reason.
  - o Nine times out of ten, Humanity devolves to "empathy and decency" in practice anyway, so just keep it there.
  - o The only things you have to tell them is that the Humanity value does not restrict or define the character's behavior in any way, and that Humanity 0 is the moral event horizon after which the character is unplayable.

- *Bonus dice*. No matter what you explain, they'll think it means whoring for dice by pleasing you with purple prose, and most horribly, by *pre*-narrating the outcomes of an intended action. So don't bother. Leave that discussion aside entirely and then apply the rules (correctly) in play.

Know the game

> *No real problems organizing a game, just trying to get the rules sorted in my head.*

I sympathize about this issue, especially having organized and been the rules-guy for so many new and different games myself. It's difficult to be learning it as you go, while they learn too, for any game. For some reason, Sorcerer proves especially fractious this way. I've tried to explain the organization of the book better in the annotations.

Here's my bare-bones list of game mechanics to know fully, to explain briefly (as *procedure*, not theory), and to apply accurately and without hesitation.

Authorities
These are, simply, who gets to say for sure, and about what.

- Back-story: This is the GM's job, period. This job especially applies to Kickers and to the physical details, agendas, and characterization of NPCs.

- Situational, or "what's going on" in terms of the immediate fiction: This is more complex. Anyone can prompt a scene or immediate situation given that their character does something or goes somewhere to initiate it, including the GM. In the event of several such prompts, the GM decides which current proposed/stated actions yield the very next in-fiction scene (see below for how to do this fairly). As far as actually stating the fictional circumstances of the "opening" moments of a situation, that's the GM's job, with a lot of room for table-talk style, unconstructed input from others.

- Outcome, or how to determine consequences within scenes: More than nearly any other game, this is extremely mechanical in Sorcerer, with absolutely no opportunity for fiat or interpretation. You roll when you're supposed to, GM and player alike, not "when the GM says." Furthermore, the dice outcomes are numerically what they are, as hard limits.

o Humanity checks and gain rolls present an interesting case because they are prompted by the GM's emotions and judgment – but consider carefully that they are not *optional*. The GM cannot give a pass for a Humanity check, for example. Given the internal prompt, it's against the rules for the GM to ignore it.

- Narration, or how to describe things, especially the consequential outcomes in the above category: Anyone. This is utterly unconstructed in Sorcerer and represents one of the primary opportunities for coloring play. (See below more details on how this works.)

All the following are sub-systems of the Authorities distribution described above.

Scenes and events
NPC actions are brought into play in several ways:
- inter-scene, whereby player-characters are faced with the effects of NPC actions which they had no chance to confront or witness;
- scene-initiation, whereby NPCs actions burst upon the characters unexpectedly; and
- within-scene, whereby characters in the same scenes have the same mechanical opportunities to act regardless of who plays them.

In the first two, choosing the order of relevant actions (when several present themselves) may strike you as a fine way to control story events and outcomes without being noticed. Don't do that. Only use the inter-scene technique if the fiction already dictates that the player-characters have no way to witness or confront the NPC actions. Conversely, don't insert cues or bread-crumbs to make them go and do so either. For the scene-initiation technique, if and when a player-character action would also initiate a scene, then a simple roll-off between relevant values for the two or more characters should be used to determine the order of the scenes being played. This is shockingly easy and stress-reducing once you get used to it.

On a larger scale, your guiding concept for any and all scene-framing should be Kicker-centric, or better, diagram-centric. Before play, make sure the diagrams are updated – are all persons, places, and things in play, or implied by the four quadrants' names, present and in their current state? Have all the new ones been added? Are individual items pulled together appropriately? If so, then look at the center of each player-character's diagram and you will find which NPCs to use, and about what, and where. As my first sentence in this paragraph implied, don't forget to keep the Kicker's quadrant's contents fully engaged.

When to roll and what to say
What is a conflict and what isn't: I tried to explain this fully in the annotations, but here I stress that rolling dice is never optional. When the fictional circumstances call for a roll, you do it; and when they don't, you don't. Get away as hard as you can from the idea that the *GM decides* when the dice are employed. In this, the GM and everyone else are in exactly the same boat. If you are the GM, then you will do well to model this for everyone else, so they can see that you are prompted to roll by any given character's action which calls for it, and that they are too.

Quite a lot of games since 2002 have strict rules about narrating mechanics-based outcomes, ever since InSpectres and The Pool, including more than one of my titles. This has led to a certain mystique surrounding "who gets to narrate." As stated above, Sorcerer is designed upon a completely different concept, to de-construct play from single-person narration rather than trade single-person narration around.

In practice, this means allowing or even asking anyone who seems invested in the current outcome what he or she thinks it looks like, fictionally. Once everyone is reasonably empowered to contribute in the first place, then the group as a whole may arrive at its own, local standards for who gets the final "rubber-stamp" authority over this input, which is usually distributed around the group for specific things. It might look utterly traditional, i.e., player-to-character, GM-to-everything-else, or it might not.

Reading the dice
The first instructional video I plan to post is all about this. To this very day, people play several sessions of Sorcerer, asking me all sorts of questions on-line as they go, then turn out to have borked the dice so badly I can't believe my eyes. Here's rule #1: *most of the individual die faces are irrelevant.* This is not a system which requires assessing entire pools' contents against one another.

For example, let's say the roll turns out to be 9 7 7 4 1 against 8 8 8 6. When this *really* means is 9 vs. 8 – and that's all. You should read it as 9 • • • • against 8 • • •. The first set wins with a single victory.

High ties only mean removing the single highest die from each roll and reading them again. So if the two rolls were 9 7 7 4 1 against 9 8 8 6, then they become 7 7 4 1 against 8 8 6, which really means 7 • • • against 8 8 •. Here, the second set wins with two victories.

Only once you have really grasped the simplicity of roll vs. roll comparisons should you attend to the orthogonal expansion ("combat" so-called in the rules). But the thing to understand is not necessarily the dice sequence so much as the reason for this expansion in the first place, which is when one acting character could succeed or fail and the other acting character could succeed or fail, with all possible outcomes making sense. Nearly every time someone stumbles over the mechanics, it's not because they don't get (for instance) aborting actions, but because they didn't get this more important point to begin with.

For example, in a Sorcerer & Sword game, a bad-ass player-character has confronted the mounted guards of a slave-chain in some horrible-beautiful wasteland. He kills one of them, but the other wheels his mount around and dashes toward the huddled group of slaves, to do who knows what. The player says, "I throw my [insert cool whirling-blade thing name] at him!" As GM, I'm going to take it as given that the player-character wants to prevent the guard from reaching the slaves.

Do I switch to the orthogonal method? No! This is zero-sum, not orthogonal at all, because the guard has no way to "fail" at getting to the slaves as an independent phenomenon. The player rolls offensively, and I rolls defensively for the guard. Yes, the attack can do damage if it hits, but the point is that it hits before the guard gets to the slaves. The hope is that it does enough at least to make him lose his next action.

Humanity: do it right
Make sure you know the difference between a *Humanity check* and a *Humanity gain roll*. The first determines whether Humanity decreases by 1; the second determines whether Humanity increases by 1. A Humanity roll is always one or the other, so don't collapse them (win-increase, lose-decrease) under any circumstances.

Also remember the difference between rituals and the ethics/judgment prompts. The Contact, Bind, and Summon rituals call for a Humanity check, and the Banish ritual permits a Humanity gain roll in limited circumstances. Whereas the ethics/judgment prompts call for either a check or a gain roll depending on what's being done.

Some people benefit from the "theme music" concept, which is to say, you call for the relevant roll whenever you think the fiction should be accompanied by a distinctive creepy "this matters, if he does it,

it's bad" musical motif, or conversely, whenever you think those harmonic trumpets should kick in for a "this matters, he's showing us what he's made of and it's good" moment.

To clarify something implied above: Humanity is only ever lost or gained in increments of 1. That means you can't be screwed by a bad roll into Humanity 0; you have to *choose* to risk it while your Humanity is currently 1. (The exception is my annotated suggestion for the demon ability Taint, but its effects are temporary.)

It's perfectly OK to start a session with retroactive Humanity rolls to catch up with what you forgot to do last time. Once players get used to the rules (i.e. once modeled properly to them), then they'll make sure this doesn't happen often.

> *Application of humanity as a stat e.g. Humanity is sanity and is rolled to perceive the truth behind things. In that case asking for humanity rolls feels like a perception check and not at all "sorceresque", if you get my meaning.*

Here's the problem: when in used in-fiction, Humanity cannot be a "truth" perception check, because that falls into the category of gaming the system – doing an end-run around the limitations of an in-fiction character and giving them a place at the table with the real people. Humanity can indeed be used as an active score, like Stamina for instance, when the character is appealing to another or trying to perceive at the level of emotions and sincerity – in fact, in this, it's a lot like the Sincerity die in My Life with Master – but that's all.

Damage

The first issue with damage of any kind in Sorcerer is what a penalty is supposed to mean, anyway. Mathematically, it's a burden imposed onto the sheet, expressed as a reduction in whatever handful of dice you're picking up. In other words, don't think of *scores* being reduced, but rather the roll (this is also significant because there are some rules which do increase or decrease scores – and those rules act differently.) The total penalty is the sum of the current lasting and temporary ones, which is what the numbers on the right of the sheet are supposed to be tracking. Any and all damage or its equivalent simply pile into these same two types of penalties, making it unnecessary to parse current penalties or problems by the nature of the separate attacks or whatever.

The second issue is that temporary penalties always vanish once they've been applied to a roll. So the lasting ones are a base, which may increase with further injury, upon which current temporary penalties are briefly stacked, used, and discarded.

Once you have that, make sure you can work with those two tables found in Chapter 5 and at the end of the book.

- The first one, "Total penalties," concerns the immediate and momentary state of a character who's engaged in current conflict-based actions – i.e., about to roll dice. Its content constrains what actions can be announced, basically by forcing its inclusion into those actions. However: since it is based on current total penalties, that table only ever applies to a single moment, and needs to be re-consulted for following moments.

- The second one, "Total lasting penalties," concerns the physical state of the character after a conflict is wholly over; in other words, never use this table during the conflict. It's based on the *halved* total lasting penalties – that's right, in traditional terms, the character instantly heals half

of his or her "real" damage when the fight's over. A better way to look at it is that the damage seemed worse than it really was.

You'll notice that neither table describes the actual degree of physical injury the character is sustaining during the conflict itself. This is left entirely to narration and the immediate mandates of the current fiction itself, in the moment. There are no real "damage tables" in Sorcerer matching point totals to specific fictional content.

With any luck, the above points will clarify my annotations about death in the rules text as well.

PART 3: A LITTLE SELF-EXAMINATION

> *... we had a smoother characters generation but again we only managed to play two/three times as their interest in the game quickly faded as they were perceiving the game to much "traditional".*

Are you ready for this? Here I'm writing to the person who is most likely organizing the game for the others, and in practice, is also the GM. I'm posing this exact question because once no one in the group is balking, you might be dealing with a game *you* weren't ready for *either*.

Your brain

Consider your inspirations, which come in three types, in ascending order of importance.

- Stories (movies, whatever) including demons and the various nuances of the Faust story. Yes, this is the least important.
- Stories (movies, whatever) about dysfunctional relationships of any kind: people with people, people and societal norms, people and sources of power. I've often said *Carne Trémula (Live Flesh)* was my first pick for "the Sorcerer movie," for this reason.
- Reality: whatever makes you actually shudder in either fear or anticipation or both. What have you never observed, or find disturbing to contemplate observing, in a role-playing game? What pisses you off so badly that you avoid stories about it, knowing that others' viewpoints about it are intolerable to you?

Do you actually have all of these firing "on kill, Mr. Sulu"? It's your job to inject them into every aspect of back-story, for each character as well as for whatever context you want them to act in, and most especially for the Kickers.

Consider your own artistic drive. Do you really mean it, or are you still wearing your Great Gamer hat? Such hats come in various forms ("The GM," "experienced player," "best role-player at the table," et cetera), but they are always about status and privileges among the gathered people in the group. Are you willing to put your inspirations first, and your gamer-specific social concerns aside?

Are you going to play another game, inadvertently? Repeat offenders from early years are Call of Cthulhu, Vampire, and Unknown Armies; today it would be Dogs in the Vineyard and Primetime Adventures, or more accurately, lousy but apparently common attempts at them. Sorcerer is regarded with some trepidation for a reason – many of the games partly inspired by it actually back off from its combination of thematic challenges, despite their innovations in other aspects of play.

Your guts

The true Sorcerer GM is ruthless. He or she should see that the NPCs really drive toward what they want, and really react to what happens; that the demons are obsessed with their Desires and starving for their Needs, and that the framed-scene circumstances act like one-two punches in boxing.

Of this whole section, your guts above all are what makes play non-traditional, by which I mean, not like the GM-centric story-production play historically associated with Dragonlance, much Shadowrun, many White Wolf games, and derivatives thereof. It's also what distinguishes Sorcerer from nearly any prior GM/player games, despite the superficial similarity of having a GM at all.

You're framing scenes and playing many of the characters in them. Aside from that, you aren't any different from anyone else at the table. You frame and play, frame and play, frame and play, and that's all.

The single marking variable to know whether you're doing this or not is this: whether you are trying to explain and justify yourself at the table as you go along. Because you shouldn't be doing that. You don't have to tell a player why his or her character's demon just bit a chunk out of the character's leg. You don't have to explain why you called for a Humanity check. You don't have to explain why an NPC decided to kill himself.

Every one of those things should in fact have a reason, whether based on your aesthetic decisions about and expectations of the characters you're playing, on your responsibility to juxtapose existing components of the fiction in the most Kicker-aggravating way possible, or on the outcome of one or more dice rolls. But your job is not to explain and justify those reasons. If people are really interested in what you're doing, you all can talk about it later. But in play, Sorcerer is *in play*, and not subject to debriefing or encounter sessions.

It takes a lot of uncompromising motivation to play like this. Don't expect the game text or any supportive text to provide it for you.

Your heart

The true Sorcerer GM is the least arrogant person at the table. Why? Because it ain't your story, and you're not in control of what happens. By "happens," I'm talking about the way conflicts evolve from the interactions of characters within scenes, and about what happens both in those conflicts and as the outcome of that overall scene. And therefore in the larger picture, the way the story "goes."

It's a weird combination. The GM responsibilities truly parse and separate two things:
- The combination of back-story content and NPC reactivity, and
- Story-power, what I've called Force in the past, which is the control over both scene framing and multiple aspects of resolution which effectively give the GM full authorship over the story's direction.

You get the first, always, but not the second, ever. Once you accept that, something interesting happens and one more symbolic piece of anatomy gets engaged.

By which I mean, ultimately, you as Sorcerer GM are really there only for the sheer fun of it. This ties all the way to that Social Contract: you *believe* in these players and cannot wait to see what they do with the intelligent, gutsy material you've presented and continue to present. Far from being the author of the story, you are its primary audience!

And that, nothing more, is why the GM is the sole person at the table calling for Humanity checks and gain rolls. Ultimately, it's the audience who gets to judge the characters. The concept of the moral event horizon, for instance, is a matter of response, not prescription.

I think that's pretty cool.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS