

Chapter 3: The Role of Traditional Magic in Pop Culture

Systems of Magic

The magic in pop culture magic doesn't just come from pop culture. It originates from the magical practices that are already there. If we look at the structure of a given pop culture magic working, what we'll find is the practitioner's magical background. For instance, if you were to look at my pop culture magic workings you'd see some chaos magic, some ritual magic, meditation, energy work, and neo-shamanism. All of those practices are in the DNA of my pop culture magic work and inform how I practice my magic.

The reason this is important is because your pop culture magic system isn't solely developed because of the pop culture you're interested in. While the pop culture is obviously an important element of such a system, your experiences as a magician are equally important. It might seem like an obvious statement to make, but those experiences play a significant part in helping you develop a system.

When you learn magic, you're not just learning a spell or how to do a ritual. You're also learning a system, with specific correspondences and concepts that help you access the magic. Your experiences ideally provide some insight into how magic works and what you can do with it. You're learning how to think about a magical working, as well as how to do it. You're also learning about the actual magical systems. Whether that magical system is the circle of the year or the Quabala or something else altogether, you are learning about actual systems, which is important if you want to develop your own.

However the role of traditional magic doesn't just stop at having experiences and bringing those to bear in your pop culture magic work. It can be very useful to take the systems you're already familiar with and transpose the pop culture onto those systems. Remember that a system of magic is ultimately a description and as such a lot of the elements of that system can be swapped out for other systems.

In the Dehara system, Storm Constantine devised the core foundational practices around the wheel of the year and the classic five elements. These classic systems were changed only in that pop culture elements were brought in to replace traditional elements and a mythology was developed around the system that is reflective of the pop culture. Storm came up with equivalent holidays and deities for the wheel of the year that people could work with. We matched the classic five elements to specific Dehara that represented the elements of Earth, Water, Fire, Air, and Spirit. The use of these two systems of magic provided specific structures we could work with and they originated from traditional magic.

The Quabala is another example of a system that can be adapted to pop culture magic. It has specific structures and associations and you can map those structures and associations to the pop culture you're working with. You can do the same with planetary magic as a system. Whatever your magical background is, you've been exposed to systems in that background and those systems can be taken and modified to fit pop culture. Now some people will find this blasphemous, but if you're reading this book, you're likely not one of them and you shouldn't be overly concerned by their criticism. Using the systems

of magic you already have access to makes it much easier to develop your system. You're not developing it from scratch, but instead you're using what's already available to you.

I think that before you can develop a system of magic from scratch, it's a good idea to use what you already know and develop a system around it. Doing that very exercise will teach you a lot about how to create a system from scratch. It'll get you to think about what goes into a system, what's actually essential to a system and what's optional about a system. So let's actually map this out and see what it would look like to create a pop culture magic system using an existing system of magic as a foundation.

First you need to pick your pop culture. In this case, let's use *The Dresden Files* by Jim Butcher for the pop culture. The pre-existing system we'll use is the wheel of the year. Now what we need to do is apply the pop culture mythology of *The Dresden Files* to the Wheel of the Year.

Fortunately *The Dresden Files* mythology lends itself quite well to the wheel of the year. We already have Titania for the Summer Solstice and Mab for the Winter Solstice. We can possibly put the Summer Lady and the elder Summer and Winter Lady and elder Winter at other points of the year, but we can also draw on other characters in the Dresdenverse as well. For Samhain, we can place the Red Court Vampires, Black Court Vampires, or the Necromancers. Alternately we could also place Harry on Halloween because of his birthday. The White Court Vampires can be placed on Beltaine.

Now at this point I'm just brainstorming, but note how I'm thinking about what I know of the Dresdenverse, and creating some associations. Of course we need to get more specific than that. We need to match specific characters with the specific holidays. So let's do that next.

Samhain = Harry Dresden because he is the beginning and the ending, he has died and risen again, and he is the herald of winter

Yule = Mab and the Winter Fae who bring on the Winter

Imbolc = Molly Carpenter representing the potential of magic but also her Winter nature

Ostara = Billy and Georgia the Werewolves

Beltane = Lara and Thomas of the White Court

Midsummer = Titania and the summer Fae who bring on Summer

Lughnasadh = Michael Carpenter and the knights of the Cross

Mabon = Mouse

Now these associations are arbitrary and because there are many other characters in the Dresdenverse, we could pick some of those characters. Also because the series evolves and changes, we might find more suitable characters for the times of the year. Using your own familiarity with the series (if you're familiar with it) what associations would you make with the wheel of the year? Why?

The next thing you need to do is develop workings that actually help you verify the pop culture associations. Just because it seems like a good idea to link Harry Dresden to Samhain, doesn't automatically mean it is. Do a pathworking to verify whether or not it's a good fit. The pathworking will start out with an invocation of the character. Then you invoke the energy of the holiday. You can then discover if the character meshes with the energy of the holiday.

If the character does fit the holiday, you can develop further workings for the character, based around the holiday. If the character doesn't fit, then you may need to do some further discovery work. A system isn't developed over night. It's carefully worked on and developed, tested and verified.

This is just one possible system of magic. We could map *The Dresden Files* to the Quabala as well, or to the planetary magic system. However what's important is that you actually know those systems. If you're going to apply pop culture to a traditional system of magic, you need to know the existing correspondences so you can determine if there is a potential connection between your pop culture and the system you want to use. Look at the system and its correspondences and ask yourself how the pop culture might align with that system. Write down possible connections and then test them as I described above (or through your own methods) to see if there's an actual viable connection.

If there is a connection, you don't want to just stop at the pathworking. You want to develop the connection and create something meaningful. For example, let's say Harry Dresden really does match up with Samhain. Once you've done that pathworking, you may want to do further ones to get more information and ideas on how you can develop workings around Samhain that also integrate Dresden into the working. Then you want to do the workings and record the results.

Some years ago I developed a Harry Potter ritual where I associated the four quarters with the four houses. To develop that working I did some reading of the HP series, paying attention in particular to the symbols and associated behaviors of each house. Then I matched the houses to the quarters, based in part on classic elemental associations, and in part on the archangelic correspondences that are associated with the four directions.

I linked Gryffindor to the South, the Element of Fire and the Archangel Michael, because courage and bravery are the favored traits of the Gryffindor house. I linked Hufflepuff to the North, the Element of Earth, and the archangel Auriel because Hufflepuff values honesty and are very grounded. I linked Ravenclaw to the East, the Element of Air, and the archangel Raphael, because of the focus on intellect in Ravenclaw. I linked Slytherin to the West, the Element of Water and the archangel Gabriel, because of the focus on cunning and moral flexibility. Finally I linked Hogwarts to the Element of Spirit, because the houses are contained in Hogwarts, but also make it what it is, similar to how the four elements are contained by Spirit, but also make it what it is.

I tested these particular associations and was able to verify the connections. Then I developed the ritual for a group of college students and explained the pop culture system and its correspondences to them. People sorted themselves according to the house/quarter they felt called to be in. We then invoked the quarters using the chants for the HP houses. Each person got something from the ritual, in no small part because the connections to the four quarters made sense to them and helped them understand the Harry Potter mythos differently. They were able to connect to the characters more meaningfully.

This wouldn't have happened if I hadn't taken the time to develop the correspondence and test it. I didn't take it any further, but I'm sure I could have developed the system further, possibly mapping the HP universe to the Tree of Life or developing a unique system, but still drawing on some elements of a classic system. What you'll find is that a lot of pop culture has the necessary connections built into it

and the reason for that is because to some degrees pop culture stories aren't all that original. They draw on certain formulas that have been around for a while and use symbols and meanings to help people connect to characters. Those symbols and meanings are prevalent in other stories and mythology and so it makes it easier for us to relate to the pop culture. Yet what is distinct about pop culture is that you also see modern themes and concepts woven into the story and those modern themes and concepts invite their own opportunities for developing a system of magic around them.

Homework: What traditional systems of magic do you have experience with and how do those systems influence your pop culture magic? Share your answers on the pop culture magick Facebook group and use #pcmsystems when answering.

Modern themes and how you can develop systems around them

One person I know developed a system of magic working with 7 demons, using the roles in chess as the correspondence system. While some version of chess has been around for a long time, I've never come across anyone using chess as a correspondence system for magic until this person did it. What this demonstrates to us is that we don't need to solely draw on magical systems to develop a pop culture system of magic. We can draw on other types of system as well.

This is a significant realization because it demonstrates how magic can be adapted to any system, provided you have a solid understanding of the system and a good relationship with what you are mapping the system to. In the case of the aforementioned person, his court system, based on chess, is continually being developed, both by his continuing understanding of chess and the relationship he continues to build with the demons.

So let's consider some other possible inspirations for developing a system of pop culture magic that doesn't draw on classic systems of magic, but nonetheless are effective.

Games, such as chess, are one possible inspiration. The reason games are useful is because you already have correspondences and rules built into them that can be useful for helping you develop the magical system. In some cases people have drawn on role playing games such as *Dungeons and Dragons*, *Mage the Ascension*, and *Vampire the Masquerade* for their inspiration. However you can also draw on board games and video games for your inspiration.

The *Final Fantasy* series is a good example of video games that can be adapted to pop culture magic systems. A few of the games have incorporated jobs into the game, where a character can take on different jobs to learn different skills. You can apply this same approach to your own magical work. For example, you can take on the job title of summoner and learn everything this to learn about invocation, evocation and creation of spirits. Then you can take on the job of diviner, elemental, planetary magician, and so on and so forth. The breakdown of various magical activities into jobs that embody the skillsets can be used by you to set up a system. The system allows you to take on the specific job roles needed for a given magical act and brings with it access to the information and skills of the job.

Board games provide a similar inspiration. Any given board game has specific rules and the rules are used to set up the experience the player has as well as defining how the player can lose or win the game. You can use the rules of the game to set up a magical system around those rules. For example, I developed a simple system around the game *Triominos*. I used the matching rule in *Triominos*, as well as the creation of a shape by the end of the game to set up sigil workings. Each activity performed in the game helped to set up and cultivate the magical working, until it was fired off by the ending of the game and the completion of the shape. By understanding the rules of the game, and seeing how I could apply those rules to magic I was able to come up with a simple, but effective system that could be used every time I played the game. Your system doesn't need to be overly elaborate and if you understand the rules of a game, you can make the very act of playing the game the mechanism by how you do a magical working. In fact, you can create a meta-system where any game you play becomes a magical working. What occurs in the game is used to set-up and push through the desired result you want to manifest in the world around you.

What makes games potential sources for magical systems is the use of specific roles that embody activities and concepts and the overall rules that go into creating the game. The rules describe how the game works, but also how the world the game embodies works and so games can provide you lots of ideas about your own magical work or even provide a magical system you can work in. The one thing to be aware of are the limitations. For example, if you use chess as a system for working with spirits, what chess brings with it are the limitations of chess, specifically what actions/moves the spirits can take within their respective roles on the board. Of course when you're developing the system, there are ways for you to work with those limitations and make some changes, but you're still drawing on the core structure of chess to provide the foundation for the system and as a result it will have some bearing on what you can do with the system. An example of how you could work with those limitations is that you could explore the actual roles on the chess board. For example, you could explore the role of the King as it relates to the board, but also as it relates to being a king.

We don't need to limit ourselves to games in order to come up with viable systems of pop culture magic. My system of space/time magic drew significant inspiration from the *Deathgate Cycle* and comic books. In the case of the *Deathgate Cycle*, I liked the explanation the authors had for how their version of magic and probability manipulation worked. I took the core rules and applied them to my own magical work and found that it enhanced what I was doing. In the case of comic books, I learned a lot about how comics are written and what rules of space and time go into the writing and art. I took what I learned and applied to my space/time magic because it made sense to me. To this day both of those sources inspire my space/time magical work (along with more traditional sources).

Not all modern resources you draw on have to explicitly reference magic. What all of them need to provide is a structure and rules that make sense to you and can be mapped on to magical work. What made comic book design and writing work for me was that it made sense. I could appreciate how the design and format of a comic book could be used to experiment with space and time. I could take the rules, the concepts and structure of comics and neatly apply it to magic to get consistent results.

Another source of inspiration for a system of magic can be found in the adventures a character goes through in a story. For example, if you wanted to develop a magical system around the book *Fight Club*, you could do it. *Fight Club*'s central premise is all about breaking things down, hitting bottom in order to achieve liberation. So your system of magic, based on that premise, would be about liberation through breaking down everything within you and around you that was holding you back. It would be a fairly intense system of magic that would really be about stripping away all the illusions you've placed on yourself. The premise of what you draw on defines and dictates what will happen in your magic system, which is worth remembering so that whatever system you develop is done carefully with full awareness of the possible outcomes.

If you want to use modern systems for magical work, you need to spend some time learning about them and asking yourself how you can apply what you've learned to your magical practice. At the same time, you can't force a fit either. It will either make sense or it won't. If it doesn't make sense, let it go, but if it does make sense, explore what would happen if you applied magic to the system and then develop it from there.

Homework: What modern systems, games, stories, etc., do you draw on for your pop culture system of magic? How have you adapted your magical work to that system and what limitations come into effect? Share your answers on the pop culture magick Facebook group and use #pcmsystems when answering.

Conclusion

What you've discovered in this chapter is that no system of magic is purely built from scratch. There will always be at least some inspiration (and usually pre-existing systems) you draw on to help you develop your system of magic. What's relevant here is the realization that your system of magic can draw on a variety of perspectives and influences, including the non-occult. When we open our minds to what we can learn from what's available to us, then we free ourselves to discover what magic can really be.