

Mage: London

The Passover Feast

Part One: The Beginning



carnel

issue 33

Editorial

Mage campaigns and scenarios are perhaps the hardest things I can think of to write in the whole of the roleplaying universe. Despite being my favourite game and a constant source of pleasure and inspiration I have always struggled to write anything for it. Even when running the game my campaigns were more like soap operas than anything resembling the more conventional pattern of material that makes up a roleplaying campaign write-up or article. The best I could have done would have been an *Aslan*-style campaign write-up that anchored the game firmly in the lives of the protagonists of the game rather than the abstract, “open” style of the conventional game scenario.

That kind of creative deadlock was broken somewhat when I took a lot of my notes from my old *Mage* London game and created a kind of background booklet to a new campaign in the same milieu. That booklet then became **carnel** issue 27 and was actually kind of popular in the small terms of reference of the zine.

This issue is an attempt to write up the campaign that issue 27 was the background for. I am not going to pretend that the campaign itself, “The Passover Feast” was a great success unlike the previous two I had run in the same setting. It is hard to talk about the failure of something you have invested a lot of emotion and effort into. Or at least it is hard to talk about it in a fair and balanced way. I think I have done that with this one though. The core ideas are good, they are so derivative they can hardly be otherwise. Overall though the campaign has the right elements that I think make up a good *Mage* campaign. There is the sense of doom or foreboding, the corrupted science theme, the investigation element of peeling back a conspiracy and putting together threads of a story and finally there is the head-fucking multiple realities which hopefully end up with all the player characters wondering whether they are alive or not, human or not and ultimately real or not.

I think the key element of failure in the campaign as played was in having too loose a structure. So for this presentation of it I have tried to present a much more coherent linear storyline that ties everything together. Some parts of it are necessarily vague and where this happens I will try to provide some advice for resolving things in a way that fits the individual case and the theme of the campaign overall.

There is still no resolution to my central dilemma in writing for *Mage* though. How can you say anything about a game where the characters are capable of anything, whose will re-writes the “reality” of anything that might be written here? I do not have any answers, I struggle with it when I am running the thing let alone writing about it.

Interestingly this is a good time to return to *Mage* because there is yet another version of the game out. This version is so stripped down and focussed that I think it may have been a far better choice for this campaign than the rules and background I was using. However at the same time the new edition removes much of what I loved about the first edition rules that I started playing with. Therefore it seems that I cannot write about *Mage* or even write up this campaign without also reviewing and discussing the new rules and the old ideas about the game. The kind of situation I think the game thrives on. Intertwined thoughts and threads creating a pattern.

Robert

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Edition Shock

So you are interested in *Mage*? well you are not short of potential rulebooks. There are First, Second, Revised and New World of Darkness (**nWod**) for the Modern game and you have Dark Ages and Sorcerers Crusade for the Medieval and Renaissance stuff. The Passover Feast is all Modern so we can ignore the last two.

My personal preferences are complicated. I think the setting and philosophy of the First Edition are superior to all the other Editions. However I would be the first to admit that the ideas are extremely complex and very poorly explained in First. However when it came out it was the only game in town and therefore most of the early players and GMs resolved the confusion and uncertainty in ways that reflected their own worldview and philosophy. The point, as we understood it, was that if reality was not fixed, nor consensual but mutable and individual, then any explanation was not just *potentially* valid but in being articulated, actually *became* valid.

I guess at this point you might be remembering why you hated or loved this game. What this means is that in the First Edition any belief system the player can construct and justify is correct (the theory has to be self-consistent and coherent due to the perils of Paradox, if it does not possess these properties it is a **Marauder** viewpoint and we ain't playing those). Since the player is playing a mage their character will "warp" the world in an attempt to make the world conform to their views. The consequence of this is that there is no objective reality that you can ground your game on. Everything is relative and everything is true. That is the joy of the First Edition.

The remainder of the Editions are essentially a reversal of this initial anarchy of belief. Each successive Edition introduced better rules and systems and more and more objective reality, things that are true for everyone. I personally think that the two went hand in hand but I have to admit that my initial Mage groups had a lot of house rules for the First Edition and that the majority of them were either the same as the rules for the Revised Edition or actually not as good as the rules there. From a pure systemic point of view Revised is the easy winner.

However Revised also has a terrible setting. Revised essentially saw the removal of all spiritual and hyperreal elements for the game. It also ended the big metagame setting developments, effectively leaving the game world sterile until the advent of the **nWOD**.

For me Revised is so confined, restricted and objective that is pointless. It is a game that seems to have no more ambition than to be a poor man's *Hellblazer*. On the other hand it is a lot more coherent and makes more sense. You need only an average amount of imagination to understand it. That may seem a derogatory statement but the way I see it is that Revised dropped the bar to entry into the game but did so by hamstringing all the long-term aficionados that already understood the implications of the game. What was a framework to help introduce beginners could also be a stifling scaffold for others. The more a single subjective viewpoint was pushed the more the rules seemed to define the game as having to be played in just one way or just one style. The idea that the rules were to be interpreted broadly and concepts such as **Tradition** interpreted liberally to reflect that they were a construct within the game, not a binding metagame concept, was lost.

The **nWod Mage** is an interesting compromise. I have to say that there has not been enough time for me to play a campaign with the new setting so all my statements have to be qualified about it. That said it is clear that while the new game imposes heavy restrictions on the freedom of belief in the game and also the fluidity of reality it does at least realise the importance of the transcendental and recognises the spiritual element of game and give it a proper place.

What does that mean anyway? Well it means that the spirit worlds are back and mages are once again people who transcend mundane reality and perceive higher truths. However all of it is now done in a strict Gnostic fashion that seems to me to be derived entirely from a Greek and Hermetic strand of occult thought. That kind of The Da Vinci code occult that is so popular at the moment.

Again it seems a wise move to shift units but I cannot help but be disappointed by the lack of ambition or rather the way ambition has been squandered in this game line. It is a game of intrinsic possibility being shoved into a jar of occult convention.

So, recommendations for the *Passover Feast*? If you are new to the game then it is hard to beat the **nWod** game as an introduction. It is easy to grasp and the rules certainly have not got any worse. Indeed a lot of house rules and interpretations have run along similar lines to the official advice in this rules set. However in terms of the campaign you might have to work a little bit to explain the unreformed First Edition Technocracy group I use as they main antagonists.

These technology based magicians channel their magic via the user of technology that would seem impossible or on the very edge of conceivable by most people. When a Gnostic mage might have a square of magic numbers or a wand the technocrat has a laptop or an artificial womb that allows them to clone people. All the normal rules about magic but the focuses and terminology is all different.

If you understand most of my gripes and preferences in the paragraphs above or, alternatively, you are really into the occult, magick, New Age, postmodernism, paganism or any alternative belief system that please pick up First Edition second-hand and wing it. The fractured and subjective nature of reality and belief will already be familiar to you and the material is unlikely to be more confusing that anything else on the subject.

If you want to use the campaign pretty much unchanged (with the cyberpunk elements such as robots and HAL type machines) but you want a relatively conventional game with solid rules go with the Revised Editon. This is a pretty good all-round choice. However you should ignore some of the material pertaining to the Umbra as the campaign is likely to involve trips to the Dark Umbra and the Virtual Web and these can be severely hampered by the **Avatar Storm**.

Inspiration

The Passover Feast is composed of elements that are drawn from several films and books and I am not going to make any claims about my originality or creativity in creating this campaign. However there is a point to the creative thieving I did. As the campaign was aimed at people who were potentially unfamiliar with the game and the setting I wanted to have a basic plot that was quite recognisable and easy to grasp. The brief is “familiar but strange”.

The key elements of the plot are borrowed from the Japanese *Ringu* films, the Japanese novel *Spiral* (or more accurately an English synopsis of the novel available on the web, I think it has been translated into English since then¹) and the Japanese film *Tetsubo*.

I would recommend watching all the films as they are excellent but the key one is the first *Ring* film. It really scared me when I saw it, there is a real sense of unease and disquiet in the imagery of the mysterious video. The key inspirational moment though actually comes from the sequel when we see the spirits of those already killed by the Sadoku and the protagonist suddenly realises that she too must be dead.

Musically there was of course *Joy Division* with their lyrics of urban decay and revealed truth. In a similar vein, *FSOL* albums *Lifeforms* and *Dead Cities*.

Finally there are the novels of Philip K. Dick which I think are perennial reading for any Mage fan. Dick’s themes of revelation, the notion of the self and the indeterminate nature of reality are like an exegesis of any good Mage game.

I will note the origin of the ideas in the synopsis of the main plot.

Bibliography/Filmography

Films

Ring, Ring 2, The Ring: the Japanese Ring films are the starting point for this campaign obviously. The first film is really the key one while the American remake is slightly more science-based which is helpful for stealing Technocratic ideas and conceptualisations of the Ring idea. The second Japanese Ring film is generally pretty weak as a horror film and sometimes seems comically bad. However it does have a brilliant ghost sequence that provided some inspiration for the interior of Futura.

Pi, Eraserhead: To me Pi is a great depiction of an Orphan, Son of Ether Mage. While Eraserhead makes you ask “Is the girl behind the radiator his Avatar?”. However stylistically both films are good places to look for strange imagery to use for the DVD in the campaign.

The Matrix is a great cinematic introduction to Mage, to paraphrase Morpheus : “Do you think that how strong I am has anything to do with the size of my muscles? Do you think that’s air you’re breathing?”. To be a Mage means to understand that all Matter and further still, all Reality, is the subject of Will.

¹ It has been and the ISBN is 0007179073.

Synopsis

To try and simplify the description of the campaign I am going to try and note down the main outline of the situation the group are meant to interact with.

A project called “Futura” is approved by the Technocratic Convention in London. The project is proposed and sponsored by Iteration X and supported by the New World Order and the Progenitors. The proposal is to explore the possibility of creating an AI supercomputer that is capable of simulating the population of the entire world with a more modest milestone goal of modelling the inhabitants of London and providing some predictive capabilities as to public moods given certain modelled events (e.g. elections, terror attacks, infectious disease breakout and so on). It is opposed for political reasons by the Syndicate who feel that the project should be under the aegis of one of their existing future prediction projects. The objection is over-ruled as the Syndicate’s efforts are confined essentially to market and economic behaviour and that it would be helpful to approach the topic from a new direction.

Futura is staffed mostly by researchers and a small security staff. The project is housed in an underground facility with access to the Rotherhithe Tunnel¹. The multi-layered bunker provides secure housing for the newly constructed computing facilities and the huge power and communication infrastructure the project will require.

Several months are spent designing and refining the new machinery and various mathematical models the project requires to be successful. Without the aid of the Syndicate however the project decides to use help from Enlightened mages outside the Technocracy, mostly from the neutral-aligned Sons of Ether and the Virtual Adepts. The work is divided up in a way that would make it almost impossible for any one individual to determine what the final use their work might be put to. In addition a certain amount of irrelevant problems are sent out to provide some chaff as to who is commissioning the work and what the work relates to.

At the same time the Void Engineers have identified a dormant Dynamic Node in the city and change a planning application for a nearby development so that the foundations of the new building will end up uncovering the Node which is currently buried deep beneath some existing housing. The ruins of the Bronze Age structure surrounding the Node are duly discovered and the normal Sleeper archaeological process is put in place. The Void Engineers arrange to “retune” the Node but when they arrive at the site they are unexpectedly attacked by Marauders and driven away from the scene. Contrary to their initial survey the Node seems active and moderately powerful and is now attracting Marauder and probably Tradition attention. The Void Engineers decide to try and analyse why the Node has changed Nature before tackling the situation again.

What has occurred is related to fact that the Node was used to imprison a powerful Nephandic spirit many thousands of years ago. During the Sleeper investigation several carved stones forming the “cairn” of the spirit were removed from the site. Freeing the

1 Although the Blackwall Tunnel would do equally well. See the section on No Literal London near the end of the issue. The key properties of the tunnel is that it is a large road tunnel running under the Thames in the East End. The tunnel has several bends or turns and it possible to “turn into” the bend in the tunnel to enter the loading bay of the installation.

the discovery of the buried and broken stones. The slab is still intact and in place and it is slowly uncovered by the archaeologists. Then one day the slab is lifted away from the platform and taken away. Even distanced by Time any character witnessing the event should make an **Awareness** roll to feel a shudder of unease with the lifting of the stone.

It is not possible to locate the top stone now (it is in the custody of the Void Engineers and its location will be revealed in an later instalment). However it does not seem to have been destroyed.

The Visitor

The resurgent node has attracted a Marauder who is always near the Node but spends most of their time outside the Gauntlet (to detect the presence of the Marauder will probably require Correspondence, Spirit and Mind or Prime to search the Near Umbra, alternatively simple Spirit Sight will do if the PC is willing to guess which Umbra the Marauder might be located in.

The Marauder has a vaguely humanoid appearance but appears as a series of “layers” of human anatomy. One layer is made up of blood vessels and the heart, another of the nervous system and the brain, another of muscle and sinew, another of bone. The layers move around leaving a trail as one layer moves, then another. Only when the Marauder stands still do the layers seem to coalesce into a single being. There does not seem to be any layer of skin or fat and when the creature stands still the layers alternate, giving a rippling, shifting effect to the creature as its various component organs rise and fall to the “surface”.

The Marauder has the following Spheres: Forces 5, Spirit 3, Prime 3. It has Arete 6. Paradox effects relating to its use of Forces magic constantly occur around it including strange electro magnetic fields that cause metal to float or move around, arcing bolts of electricity between any metal present (such as the building site scaffolding) and the Marauder. When the Marauder manifests all manner of strange things should happen and the confrontation should be quite eerie and scary.

The PCs can use brute force kill the Marauder (after all, fighting a Marauder away from Sleepers is a chance to cut loose with all manner of magic) but they should beware the forces of Paradox that surround them. Backlashes are more potent in the presence of the violated reality. Perhaps an easier solution would be to try to attune to the Node to make the Mages magic easier in the area and then raise the **Gauntlet** using Prime and Spirit magic. The Gauntlet is currently at 4 but raising it to 7 or 8 might discourage the Marauder from continuing to haunt the area. Remember that Marauders are whimsical, irrational creatures with a lust for magic and that there are many other places they could be than contesting a single node against multiple opponents, hostile spirits and a powerful Gauntlet. On the other hand a Marauder is just as likely to fight viciously to preserve its desirable find. Such is the nature of madness.

A computer capable of predicting the future; a malevolent spirit loose in the city. What is the mysterious Project Futura and who runs it? Why are people just vanishing out of existence?

A Mage Campaign based loosely on the Ring films offers a chance for a group of Tradition Mages to explore a Technocratic project going badly wrong and save London from a contagion that feeds the gnawing hunger of the slumbering Malfeans in the depths of their dark Labyrinth.

This first section of the campaign outlines the synopsis, the Nephandic creature at the heart of a series of mysterious deaths that grow in number and violence. There are suggestions on ways to start the campaign and involve the characters. Descriptions of the strange DVD that holds a dark enchantment. There is an exploration of some of the ideas and influences behind the game.

Start to discover the secrets behind The Passover Feast.

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