

Deadlands 1876

ARCANE BACKGROUNDS

Overview

The use of Arcane Backgrounds in *Deadlands 1876* generally follows the *Savage Worlds* system, with some modifications intended to better fit my campaign, as well as incorporate older, First-Edition *Deadlands* materials such as *Hucksters & Hexes* and *Fire & Brimstone*.

Notes on Terminology

This guide uses “Arcane” as a broad term meant to encompass a character with an Arcane Background. These characters may also be considered “Awoken,” “Supernatural,” or “Magical.” Those who use Magic and have the Spellcasting skill are officially referred to as Hucksters, but may also be referred to as spellcasters, witches, warlocks, sorcerers, conjurers, magicians, magic-users, and so on. Those who rely on Miracles and use Faith to invoke their Powers are officially known as the Blessed, but may be labeled clerics, preachers, rabbis, imams, dervishes, monks, hougans, mambos, miracle workers, faith healers, and so on. Those who practice Shamanism and use Tribal Medicine are officially known as Shamans, but may also be called medicine men, witch doctors, druids, kahunas, Jedi Knights, and so on.

Weird Science

In *Deadlands 1876*, so-called “Weird Science” is more closely aligned with traditional science, with a decidedly Romanticized flavor akin to “Jules Verne meets steampunk.” Following the terminology found in Gibson and Sterling’s *The Difference Engine*, those who follow a path of Romanticized science are generally known as “Savants.” A *Deadlands* Savant gains “power” through the logical manipulation of cause and effect, and requires only a “belief” in the principles of science, including investigation, experimentation, and universality. Of course, the fact that ghost rock is hardly “scientific” lends itself to a genre-based interpretation of this process, but anachronistic *Deadlands* inventions such as submersible ironclads and Analytical Engines are still constructed upon a foundation of generally-accepted scientific principles. Likewise, alchemy, astrology, geomancy, parapsychology, and other pseudo-sciences may also be afforded more “authenticity” under this system. Savants who possess the Weird Science skill have limited use of the Powers table, are not connected to any supernatural milieu, and may not make holy (or unholy) Appeals to expand their capabilities. For that reason, the “Arcane Background (Weird Science)” Edge has been changed to “Savant,” which defines the character rather than the field. A Savant may still create inventions as stated in the *Savage World* rules, within certain limits and pending the Marshal’s discretion.

Typical examples of fictional Savants include Mary Shelley’s Victor von Frankenstein, H.G. Wells’ Moses Nebogipfel, Hawley Griffin, and Dr. Moreau; Jules Verne’s Captain Nemo and Robur-le-Conquérant; H.P. Lovecraft’s Crawford Tillinghast, Thomas Pynchon’s Heino Vanderjuice, *Event Horizon*’s William Weir, *Jurassic Park*’s John Parker Hammond, Fringe Division’s Walter Bishop, and pretty much anyone from Gallifrey. The oft-fictionalized Lady Ada Lovelace Byron and Nikola Tesla may also be included here, as well as—let’s face it!—Emmett Lathrop “Doc” Brown, Professor Hubert J. Farnsworth, and Rick Sanchez!

Arcane Powers

The following rules are for characters possessing an Arcane Background. Although they generally follow the official *Savage Worlds* system, I've made enough alterations to detail them fully.

Source of Arcane Power

Characters with an Arcane Background receive their magical abilities by forming an intense relationship with supernatural. The nature of each relationship varies according to the specific Background, but all require a human to mortgage his soul in return for supernatural power.

Magic & Spellcasting

Hucksters must establish personal pacts with individual supernatural entities to gain power. Although the *Deadlands* rules refers to these entities as “manitous,” that is simply a convenient Algonquian term, and the truth is more ambiguous. A Huckster’s supernatural pact may involve an actual Native American manitou, a Christian demon, a Hebrew angel, an elder god, an unnamed mystical force, or even the spirits of the dead. Obviously, a Huckster’s conception of her supernatural entity colors much about her magic, including the trappings required to enact her Powers. For instance, a witch who sells her soul to the Devil, a Qabalist who bargains with Qliphothic angels, and a mysterious surgeon who draws arcane power from dreams of “The Silent City” are all practicing magic, but each conceives of his or her relationship with the supernatural in radically different terms. They all have different practices, trappings, vocabularies, and even variations in Powers.

Miracles & Faith

The Blessed draw their power from their personal belief in divinity, and their investment in a specific supernatural system structured around this divinity, usually expressed as a religion. In order to be considered “Divine,” a supernatural power must have the ability to create reality itself, judge human interactions, and determine the fate of all human souls—believers or not. A Blessed character believes that his Powers flow from the Divine, and are therefore a reflection of his soul being in correct alignment. There is no need for a personal pact, and intelligence is nowhere near as important as belief. In many ways, Faith is actually more powerful than Magic, and may have a viral effect—the more souls that are invested in a belief system, the stronger it becomes. Of course, there is interplay between the Magic and Faith; if a manitou gathers enough followers, a whole religion may soon develop around him, granting Faith-based Powers to believers who now worship that supernatural entity as a god. This also creates a few gray areas between Magic and Miracles, such as rising cults, voodoo, Enochian magic, and so forth. One of the main differences between the Faith and Spellcasting skills is the manner in which Powers are deployed—Magic must follow a distinct set of rules and needs a variety of fetishes to cast a spell, while a Faith believes that Power is a divine reward. Another difference may be seen in the comparative ease in which a sorcerer may trade one manitou for another, whereas a priest who loses or abandons his faith must start from scratch.

Shamanism & Tribal Medicine

A Shaman derives his power from his connection to the living earth, which is always conceived of as a living entity. A Shaman believes in a rich spirit world, but understands such beings as manifestations of a living principle, and are not viewed as divine, alien, or necessarily even moral. Shamans believe that everything in the universe has a spirit, and they pursue balance and harmony above all. To a Shaman, a sorcerer’s manitou is a misguided spirit who is either tricking a human or has itself fallen prey to delusion; while the deity worshipped by the Blessed is merely a narcissistic appropriation of the Great Spirit. While most Shamans in *Deadlands* are Indians,

many other cultures may also produce Shamans, from Celtic druids to Japanese animists. Although specific language and terminology may vary—a druid is unlikely to have “Tribal Medicine” as the name of his spellcasting skill—at the heart of Shamanism is a pagan belief in natural spirits and a devotion to harmony.

Power Point System

As per the *Deadlands Reloaded* guide, an Arcane character must take an “Arcane Background” Edge at creation. This gives the character 3 Power slots and 10 Power Points. New Power slots may be purchased at the cost of one Edge. A Power slot allows the character to learn one specific Power. This includes Blessed characters and shamans as well—in other words, the *Savage Worlds* rules trump the *Deadlands Reloaded* rules for the Blessed, who must treat Powers with the same mechanics as Hucksters and Shamans. (Alternately, a Huckster may trade in one Power slot for three Trick slots. More simplistic forms of magic, these “Tricks” are detailed in the out-of-print sourcebook, *Hucksters and Hexes*.)

Powers purchased by the character may be used at any time, providing the character has the appropriate amount of Power Points to spend. These Powers have been *learned*—taught to the apprentice by a wiser master, wrested from a sorcerer’s manitou, gleaned from an arcane tome, apprehended during a peyote-induced trip to the desert, revealed after a week of fasting and prayer, tattooed onto his skin by the Outsider, etc. At character creation, the player must specify exactly how his character learned his initial set of Powers. Whenever an Arcane character equips a new Power slot, he must likewise learn the Power he desires. This can be worked out through role-playing and general advancement narrative, and usually involves finding a hex among an enemy’s belongings, ingesting a new drug, undergoing a grueling Sun Dance, discovering a dusty old grimoire in the Rare Books Room at Miskatonic University, etc.

Appealing for Power

Using learned Powers is not the only magical pathway open to an Arcane character. At any time, no matter the number of Power Points she has, the character may use a Power by “Appealing” to her supernatural benefactor. How this is done varies:

Magic & Spellcasting

As described in *Deadlands Reloaded*, a Huckster appeals to a manitou by making a “deal with the devil.” This is usually her own manitou, but sometimes contact is made with other wandering entities. Casting a spell in this fashion does not cost Power Points. Rather, the Huckster draws five cards, plus one additional card per point of Grit, as well as possible additional cards depending on Edges and modifiers. The Huckster then creates a poker hand, as per the *Deadlands Reloaded* rules, and uses that to determine her success. A failure, or drawing a joker, results in Backlash. If a Huckster has access to a Power she has not yet learned, whether reading it from an old scroll or torn from an enemy’s spellbook, she may also Appeal. If this Power is above her rank, she may still make the Appeal, but there is always a penalty involved—generally fewer cards are dealt to the Huckster, or a higher hand is needed for success.

For instance, John Constantine, a young “Novice” Huckster, has found Hawley Griffin’s lab notes, and has figured out a way to glean the Invisibility Power from it. Because Invisibility is a “Seasoned” Power, John cannot cast Invisibility until he advances another rank. Therefore, to use Invisibility, John must Appeal to his manitou—a nasty demon called Nergal. Because the Power is one rank above John’s own, the Marshal rules that John may only draw five cards, forgoing his extra Grit card. The Marshal also declares that because Griffin’s notebook describes

the Invisibility Power in the language of a Savant's alchemy, John must show a Full House or greater for the Power to be successful.

Miracles & Faith

A Blessed character may Appeal under the same conditions as a Huckster—to use a Power at no cost, to use an unlearned Power, or to call for a Miracle above his rank. Unlike a Huckster, the Blessed may appeal to use *any* unlearned Power—a spellbook or scroll is not required. However, failure brings more severe consequences. When making an Appeal, the Blessed makes a “leap of faith” by tossing a Faith roll vs. TN-4, with a -1 penalty for every Power Point the Miracle would normally cost, plus a -1 penalty for each rank of the Power. A successful roll grants that Power, with a Critical Success additionally restoring all the character's lost Power Points. A failed roll results in a lost Action and a sudden Fatigue level; but a Critical Failure results in a “Crisis of Faith.” The Blessed temporarily loses a Faith die and a Spirit die until he commits a spontaneous act of redemption, as described in the *Deadlands Reloaded* rules.

Shamanism & Tribal Medicine

Shamans Appeal by using the same system as described above for the Blessed, substituting Tribal Medicine for Faith. Rather than a Crisis of Faith, a Critical Failure brings “Disharmony,” and requires the Shaman to perform a spontaneous act of re-balance.

Belief & Paradox

In the world of *Deadlands 1876*, magic is not yet common or widely acknowledged, particularly among the “civilized” folk who dwell in large cities. The more subtle or natural the employment of a Power, the greater its chance of success. Also, an arcane act performed in front of believers has a greater chance of succeeding than a flashy display of magic suddenly unleashed in public. If an Arcane wishes to use a Power in a way that would shock, terrify, or enrage nonbelievers, the Marshal should impose penalties on the appropriate rolls. Indeed, even success can be dangerous! If a spectacular spell succeeds in the presence of nonbelievers, it may unleash “paradox,” or instabilities that directly affect the nature of local reality. Such effects are part of Backlash, and are entirely up to the Marshal.

For example, let's say a Huckster wants to cast the Puppet Power. Using a voodoo doll on a Haitian slave or “mesmerizing” a willing target with a golden pocket watch are excellent pathways to success; whereas casting sparkling dust into the air and screeching “OBEY ME, PUPPET!” to a senator giving a public address may result in a -2 penalty on the Spellcasting roll, let alone create a general outcry. Of course, using a Power in a region laboring under a high Fear Level is always much easier, as its inhabitants are already primed for the supernatural. And needless to say, using Powers against other Arcane characters rarely triggers a penalty.

New Edges

Knack

Inspired by various fictional milieu such as Orson Scott Card's “Alvin Maker” series and (God help me) Piers Anthony's “Xanth” books, “Knacks” are inherent magical powers that serve very limited functions. Knacks are taken as Edges, and may only be used once per day. They are always at the Marshal's discretion. A character possessing a Knack is not considered an Arcane, and has no greater supernatural powers. For instance, Bob the town dowser who can find water with his forked stick; Esmeralda the fortune-teller who reads Tarot cards; Nigel West Dickens the

snake-oil salesman who brews vigor tonics; Samantha the “witch” who makes love charms; all of these characters may be seen as possessing appropriate Knacks.

Sources & Credit

Many of these alterations are based from my years playing other role-playing games, particularly White Wolf’s “World of Darkness” series and Chaosium’s *Call of Cthulhu*. My ideas about magic, belief, and paradox were significantly influenced by White Wolf’s *Mage: The Ascension* milieu, while *Call of Cthulhu* taught me that a spellcaster be willing to sacrifice for his powers! I may also be slightly indebted to GDW’s old *Space 1889* game and Steve Jackson’s *In Nomine*. As mentioned in the text, the idea of Savants was stolen directly from William Gibson and Bruce Sterling’s *The Difference Engine*, and Knacks are taken from Orson Scott Card’s “Alvin Maker” series.

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