

**GURPS**

Fourth Edition

# THAUMATOLOGY™

## Age of Gold™



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*An e23 Sourcebook for GURPS®*

**STEVE JACKSON GAMES**

Stock #37-1651

Version 1.0 – November 2008



# CONTENTS

<b>INTRODUCTION</b> . . . . .	<b>3</b>	<b>3. CHARACTERS</b> . . . . .	<b>26</b>
<i>About GURPS</i> . . . . .	3	STARTING POINTS . . . . .	26
Useful <i>GURPS</i> Supplements . . . . .	4	Basic Conditions . . . . .	26
About the Author . . . . .	4	“Leader and Assistants” Teams . . . . .	27
<b>1. THE SETTING</b> . . . . .	<b>5</b>	CHARACTER TRAITS . . . . .	27
BACKGROUND . . . . .	5	Advantages . . . . .	27
Magic . . . . .	5	Perks . . . . .	29
MAGICAL WORLD HISTORY . . . . .	7	Disadvantages . . . . .	29
Ancient Egypt . . . . .	7	Skills . . . . .	30
China . . . . .	7	<i>Martial Arts</i> . . . . .	31
India . . . . .	8	Wildcard Skills . . . . .	32
The Victorian Age . . . . .	8	EXAMPLE ADVERSARIES . . . . .	32
The Great Depression . . . . .	8	The Secret Pharaoh . . . . .	32
THE STATE OF THE WORLD . . . . .	9	Madame Jasmine . . . . .	35
Europe . . . . .	9	The Jungle Madness . . . . .	37
The Americas . . . . .	10	<b>4. CAMPAIGNS</b> . . . . .	<b>39</b>
<i>Occult Nazis</i> . . . . .	10	POWER LEVEL AND ENEMIES . . . . .	39
Africa . . . . .	11	Pulp Adventurers . . . . .	39
Australia . . . . .	12	Mystery Men . . . . .	40
Asia . . . . .	12	GAME THEMES . . . . .	41
<i>Shambhala</i> . . . . .	12	Crime Fighting . . . . .	41
<i>Shanghai</i> . . . . .	13	Espionage . . . . .	42
<i>The Black Dragon Society</i> . . . . .	14	Exotic Places . . . . .	42
<b>2. THE MAGIC</b> . . . . .	<b>15</b>	Arcane Archaeology . . . . .	42
PATH/BOOK MAGIC . . . . .	15	INFINITE WORLDS . . . . .	43
Widespread Traditions . . . . .	16	Exotic Mana and Impure Alchemy . . . . .	43
<i>Conversion Between Traditions</i> . . . . .	16	“ <i>The Futuremen</i> ” . . . . .	43
<i>Known Diabolism Books</i> . . . . .	18	History . . . . .	44
ALCHEMY . . . . .	19	Fiction . . . . .	44
Laboratory Alchemy . . . . .	19	Games . . . . .	44
Magical “Herbalism” . . . . .	19	FURTHER READING . . . . .	44
<i>Weird Science</i> . . . . .	20	INDEX . . . . .	45
Personal Transformation . . . . .	21		
MAGICAL “SUPERS” . . . . .	21		
The Alchemically Transformed . . . . .	22		
Ancient Artifacts . . . . .	22		
Game Mechanics . . . . .	23		
SPIRIT-ASSISTED SPELL MAGIC . . . . .	23		
“Cooperative” Spirits . . . . .	23		
Spells Granted and Cast . . . . .	23		
DEMONS . . . . .	24		
<i>True Faith</i> . . . . .	25		

*It is the spirit and not the form  
of law that keeps justice alive.*  
– Earl Warren

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# INTRODUCTION

*It was when he saw two winged demons come howling down Fifth Avenue that Professor Blake realized that the Secret Kingdom was deadly serious about its threats.*

*He had received a series of demands, first subtle, then increasingly sinister, from that clandestine organization, but he had laughed at all of them. He was a man who still doubted all those claims that he had heard about magic – even though some of them came from respectable scholars these days – and the so-called Secret Pharaoh seemed to him a joke in very poor taste. But on the night before his great discoveries were due to be unveiled to the public, he left the Metropolitan Museum of Art just in time to hear the screaming start, and what he saw swooping toward him banished his doubts completely.*

*Blake had served in the Great War, and he had spent most of the 15 years since it ended on expeditions to remote areas of Egypt; he was used to danger. He instantly turned on his heel and fled, without the hesitation that would have killed other men. But he could hear great wings behind him. At any moment, he expected to feel barbed claws in his flesh. Someone stepped out into his path, and he veered around the person, shouting at him to flee. But the other man stood his ground, hefting something in both hands . . .*

*Professor Blake heard a dull thud behind him – and the leading demon's cry was cut short. Blake risked a glance backward, and then he spun around in astonishment. He was just in time to see the second demon struck square in the ribs with a great two-handed mace. The creature lurched to the ground, but it was still fighting, and it leaped for its opponent's throat. Its claws found no purchase, and a second mace-blow finished the fight. The demon vanished like a bad dream, leaving only a foul stench.*

*The newcomer turned to Professor Blake, who recognized a description from stories in the press. "Doc Mudra!" he exclaimed.*

*The masked mystery man nodded. "Professor Blake?" he inquired, and Blake nodded in turn. "I'm pleased that I found you in time. The Secret Pharaoh evidently believes that you discovered a new form of the Philosopher's Stone in Karnak last year, and this won't be his last attempt to get hold of it."*

*Age of Gold* is a **GURPS** game setting that showcases many of the options and rules in **GURPS Thaumatology**. Specifically, it is a world based on the 1930s of our own history – but it's a version of that past era in which magic of several kinds *works* and is being exploited with increasing enthusiasm by those few gifted folk who can get it to function or who've been imbued with supernatural power by destiny or blind chance.

The 1930s correspond to the latter part of the "pulp era" and the very early days of the "Golden Age" of superhero comics, and that's very relevant here. *Age of Gold* is an age of pulp magic and arcane superheroics. Adventurers in this setting may be two-fisted pulp-style heroes – battling evil masterminds with grit, skill, and scholarship – or masked "mystery men" – alchemically transformed into something more than human. Most of the background will be familiar to anyone who knows the history of our own world in the era, but foreground characters and plots should be wildly dramatic and melodramatic. Magic, it seems, does this to those who encounter it. Some of this magic is ritualistic or alchemical and stylish, while some of it is focused and powerful; the rules from *Thaumatology* allow it to be represented in all its diversity.

## About GURPS

Steve Jackson Games is committed to full support of **GURPS** players. Our address is SJ Games, P.O. Box 18957, Austin, TX 78760. Please include a self-addressed, stamped envelope (SASE) any time you write us! We can also be reached by e-mail: [info@sjgames.com](mailto:info@sjgames.com). Resources include:

*Pyramid* ([www.sjgames.com/pyramid](http://www.sjgames.com/pyramid)). Our online magazine includes new **GURPS** rules and articles. It also covers the *d20* system, *Ars Magica*, *BESM*, *Call of Cthulhu*, and many more top games – and other Steve Jackson Games releases like *Illuminati*, *Car Wars*, *Tran-shuman Space*, and more. *Pyramid* subscribers also get opportunities to playtest new **GURPS** books!

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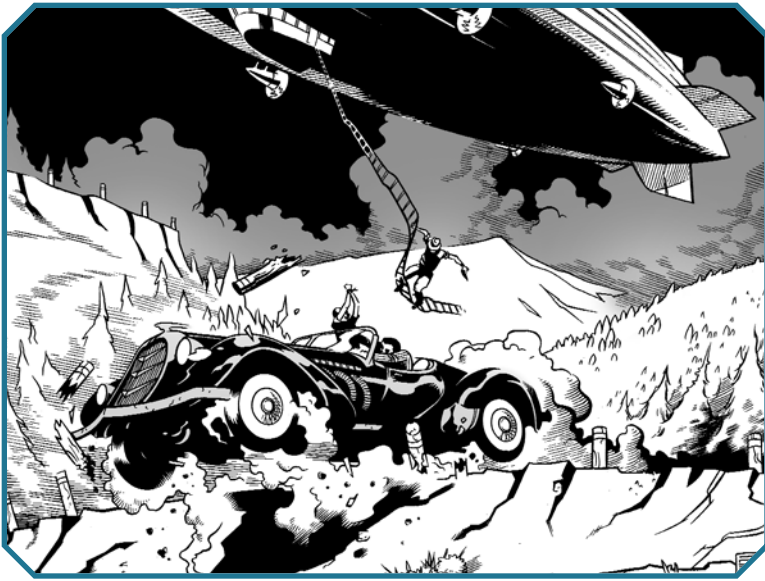
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*Bibliographies.* Many of our books have extensive bibliographies, and we're putting them online – with links to let you buy the books that interest you! Go to the book's web page and look for the "Bibliography" link.

Rules and statistics in this book are specifically for the **GURPS Basic Set, Fourth Edition**. Page references that begin with B refer to that book, not this one.



Why “*Age of Gold*”? What better name for a setting that not only draws on the Golden Age of comics, but features alchemists seeking to transform lead into precious metal?

## USEFUL GURPS SUPPLEMENTS

This supplement is linked to *GURPS Thaumatology*; games will need that in addition to the *Basic Set*. Some GMs and players may find *GURPS Magic* worth referencing, although “spell-based” wizardry and the sort of alchemy that produces handy potions are only small parts of the setting. They can easily enough be downplayed, ignored altogether, or restricted to those spells described in the *GURPS Basic Set*. Likewise, *GURPS Powers* and *GURPS Supers* may be useful when designing and playing high-powered “mystery men,” but they aren’t mandatory.

In addition, other *GURPS* books may help, although they’re strictly optional. *GURPS High-Tech* includes information on the sort of TL6 equipment that adventurers may well want, including especially a range of firearms. *GURPS Martial Arts* may be useful for *Age of Gold* campaigns featuring lots of melee combat (see p. 31). *GURPS Infinite Worlds* could provide a wider context for all this (see p. 43).

Some e23 *GURPS* products contain highly relevant information. *GURPS Martial Arts: Fairbairn Close Combat Systems* describes fighting styles that developed in the 1930s and that were used in Shanghai in particular (see p. 13); it also discusses their creator (himself something of a real-life pulp hero figure). The two volumes of *GURPS High-Tech: Pulp Guns* provide many more options for adventurer firepower (or for their opponents’ weaponry). Meanwhile, *GURPS Lands Out of Time* could be useful for a “lost world” setting and its monsters. Visit the e23 site often to discover more handy material.

There are also a number of older *Third Edition* books that may be relevant. Some of these are still available in paper form, and some can be obtained as PDFs from e23. They *definitely* include *GURPS Cliffhangers*, which contains extensive information on the world in the 1930s, and more on the pulp mode of adventure. *GURPS WWII* and its accompanying line of books mostly cover the next decade, of course, but they provide quite a bit on the 1930s by way of context – and World War II is where the world is headed in *Age of Gold*, unless things diverge radically from our history. *GURPS WWII: Weird War II* is especially useful for its coverage of the lead-up to the war from a weird history/conspiracy theory point of view. Furthermore, some of the equipment and military information in these books may be significant. Lastly, *GURPS China* and *GURPS Egypt* can offer cultural context for some *Age of Gold* games, *GURPS Places of Mystery* can exist as a source of stylish scenario locations, and the *GURPS Magic Items* series might suggest a few interesting artifacts for mystery men to employ.

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Phil Masters, the author of this book and *GURPS Thaumatology*, is also the author or co-author of such *GURPS* products as *Places of Mystery*, *Atlantis*, *Dragons*, and *Banestorm*, along with the *Discworld Roleplaying Game* and the *Hellboy Sourcebook and Roleplaying Game*. He likewise edited some recent pulp-era-related products for the line. In his hilltop lair far across the ocean, he plots further arcane contortions in the universe of roleplaying games, *even as you read these words*.

*We are living in what the Greeks called the right time for a “metamorphosis of the gods,” i.e., of the fundamental principles and symbols. This peculiarity of our time, which is certainly not of our conscious choosing, is the expression of the unconscious man within us who is changing.*

– Carl Jung

# CHAPTER ONE

# THE SETTING

*Vultures were circling high in the cloudless African sky. But when a shadow fell on them from even higher, they scattered nervously. The pride of lions far below would take its time about its kill, after all.*

*Aboard the amazing helix-plane, its inventor and pilot adjusted the controls and turned to his passenger. "So, monsieur le commandant – this is the land where you served in the past unpleasantness, n'est-pas?"*

*Major George Gregory, late of the British Army, nodded briefly. "I had a colonial posting out here in '14," he confirmed, "and they kept me here while we chased that old fox Lettow-Vorbeck for next four years."*

*"So this is a place with many ghosts for you . . . ah, I am sorry, my friend – that was a jest of a poor sort."*

*"No offense taken, old chap. Yes, this is a land with a lot of ghosts, going a very long way back. But they aren't as unhappy as the ones you'd find in Flanders."*

*"I can comprehend that, I think. How does India compare, though? Or China?"*

*Gregory frowned and gazed out of the helix-plane's windscreen. "Every nation's ghosts are a little different, in my experience . . ."*

*But before he could explain further, his eyes widened. "Look out!" he barked. Pierre de Rocheford understood his comrade's superhuman awareness too well to question the warning. He cut power to one rotor, and the helix-plane slipped sharply down and sideways – just in time to avoid the claws of a great winged monster that had appeared seemingly from nowhere.*

*"Sacrebleu!" exclaimed the Frenchman.*

*"Just so," murmured Gregory, as he swiftly extracted his hunting rifle from its traveling case. "Now, hold this thing steady a moment, old chap. It looks like we'll have a little shooting today!"*

**Age of Gold** is a world-wide game setting – and with 20th-century transport technology and the adventurous pulp ethos both very much to the fore, PCs should know that they have a whole world to play with. Nonetheless, mystery, drama, and deadly threats fill this world. Not everything is known as yet, and some of the unknown regions of the planet are stuffed full of strangeness and deathtraps. Supernatural power exists and can very definitely be used for evil as much as for good. Meanwhile, even in the most "civilized" corners of the known world, utterly mundane evils are emerging that threaten to drag the planet down into darkness.

## BACKGROUND

The 1930s are a time of instability and widespread public uncertainty. Since the Wall Street Crash of 1929, the world plunged into the Great Depression – a period of economic decline and mass unemployment. With the democratic capitalist system seemingly in crisis, rival political systems – totalitarian mass movements such as Fascism, Nazism, and Soviet Communism – appear to offer powerful alternatives. Meanwhile, new scientific and medical ideas such as Einsteinian relativity and Freudian psychology shake the very foundations of human belief, while astronomers discover just how huge the universe really is.

This much echoes our own history. In the world of **Age of Gold**, though, another, older challenge to conventional thinking is also on the rise: the power of the supernatural.

## MAGIC

Magic, it seems, has existed throughout history, and many of the usual suspects (Merlin, Michael Scot, John Dee, Faust, Cagliostro, etc.) were probably genuine wizards – but magic was often unreliable, and wizards tended to be autodidactic loners, so its effects on history were limited at best. Events transpired much as in our past, and indeed, many sensible pundits could and did deny the very existence of magic.

However, the Victorian age, with its global European-dominated empires and increasing ease of travel, saw a lot of communication between different magical traditions, each with small fragments of useful knowledge and power. This led to scholarly cross-fertilization, while the growth of scientific archaeology brought important ancient material to the attention of intellectuals. This process peaked with the discovery of a sample of the Philosopher's Stone in an Egyptian New Kingdom tomb by noted archaeologist Flinders Petrie in 1919.

With the key to alchemy, the most scientific of the magical arts, now available, broad-minded scientists began to probe the truth behind the old wives' tales and superstitions. Marie Curie investigated the relationship between the elements in the light of alchemical theory, and Albert Einstein theorized about the nature of alchemical forces. Unfortunately, despite the best efforts of such geniuses, magic still keeps many of its secrets, driving investigators crazy with its elusiveness – but a few researchers have achieved useful results, mostly by not trying too hard to work out *why* magic works, but just *using* it; the fusion of alchemy and modern science sometimes produces especially dramatic effects. In game terms, the results of applied alchemy, as it were, tend to take the form of seriously weird, pulpy "superscience," which sometimes only works for the crazy genius who invented it.

But alchemy – which in this setting is defined broadly as the science of magical transformations – is just one branch of magic and not even the most common. Perhaps the most widespread form, which can work for a lot of people without special gifts or insights, involves ritual procedures – usually lengthy processes with a lot of chanting, gesturing, and special ingredients, leading to subtle but useful effects. Because ritual magic takes so long, and sometimes (though not always) involves multiple participants, such magicians often form subtle conspiratorial groups or build cults of personality. They then either hire people with or learn mundane skills to back up their supernatural power.

The world also contains a surprisingly large number of magical artifacts and devices, apparently created by past magicians who may have used now-lost arts. Many of these items are powerful and versatile enough to make their current wielders quite formidable. Furthermore, there exist potent spiritual beings of at best uncertain temperament, some of whom are willing to lend power to compliant mortals.

In fact, because all these forms of magic take complex variant forms, it sometimes seems that *anything* is possible with magic. That's not quite true, but the limits are certainly vague.

## Mana Levels

As spell-based magic isn't the norm in this setting, "mana levels" don't have as much significance as in some campaigns, but broadly, for practical purposes, most or all of the Earth in *Age of Gold* can be classed as normal to high mana; magical procedures can be conducted by anyone, but people with Magery often have an advantage. Most magical artifacts and devices can be used by anyone who knows how they're designed to function, and anybody can perform alchemical lab work. Only mages can reliably perform Path/Book rituals, although non-mages can study this type of magic and attempt to cast it at -5; see p. 126 of *Thaumatology*. Spirit-assisted magic permits non-mages to cast spells, as discussed on p. 91 of *Thaumatology*.

There *may* be some small areas with differing mana levels, or even aspected or variant mana (see pp. 58-60 of *Thaumatology*), at the GM's option – small magical "hot spots" or "dead zones," either general or "aspected" in some way. Wizards might fight for control of small high-mana "places of power," while larger ones might be the location of "lost cities of sorcery." Cunning adepts might exploit low or no-mana zones to hide themselves from supernatural detection or assault. Magic in the setting is certainly strange and unpredictable, but such variations should be kept as rare plot devices or points of interest, and not cheapened by overuse.

Some evidence actually indicates that general mana levels have risen in recent years – that the Age of Gold was initiated, not by a few archaeological discoveries, but by a shift in the paranormal dynamics of the whole world that restored things to a state unknown since ancient times. However, as thaumatologists aren't used to thinking in terms of mana levels, they haven't really addressed this idea yet. In any case, it's hard to say what might have triggered such a huge change, and how

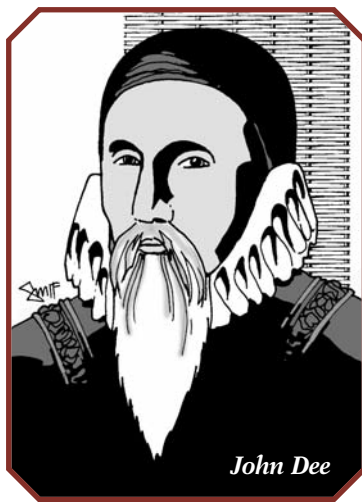
it might relate to the known academic discoveries of the last couple of decades. Perhaps some archaeologist or treasure hunter opened a sealed tomb and exposed a particularly potent and volatile form of the Philosopher's Stone to the atmosphere, or unknowingly released a trapped horde of magical spirits. Perhaps it was something to do with the confused state of the collective unconscious in the modern age. This would imply that Petrie didn't find any more of the Philosopher's Stone than many other searchers of the last couple of thousand years; he just chanced across some after an environment developed in which it could work properly.

## The Philosopher's Stone

The single most significant magical phenomenon in *Age of Gold* is the substance or object known as the Philosopher's Stone, which countless alchemists throughout history have sought to create or "accomplish" through processes of research and purification. In its pure form, this can allegedly catalyze the transformation of other metals into gold. It may also grant human immortality in some way. However, the details are unclear, if only because the truly pure form has rarely been achieved. The pure form may, according to some modern theories, even represent some kind of unattainable perfection. The Philosopher's Stone appears to equate to what Chinese alchemists call "nine-crucible cinnabar" or "drinkable gold," a potion of immortality.

What is notable in *Age of Gold*, however, is that imperfect or impure forms of the Philosopher's Stone have been fairly frequently produced. These actually produce lesser but still impressive results, including temporary elemental transmutations. They also impart dramatically flawed immortality or other superhuman powers to anyone who consumes them. Tiny quantities of these "imperfect perfections" are often important in the production of alchemical elixirs. They may have been employed in the manufacture of many magical artifacts in the past. Certainly, such artifacts often grant superhuman powers to their users. The forms that the impure Philosopher's Stones take are as varied as the effects they produce; they may be liquid or solid, metallic, crystalline, or seemingly organic, sweet-scented or toxic.

So far as broad-minded scientists can determine from the few samples they've managed to obtain in the face of determined competition from alchemists and wizards, the "Philosopher's Stone" is more a state of matter than a substance as such. Matter in the "Philosopher's Stone" state acts as a matrix that can hold and store paranormal forces, perhaps as a sort of "standing wave." This is one property that all "Stones" have in common. Research continues to determine whether the different forms that the "Stone" takes all include microcrystalline particles with the appropriate structure, or all in fact be completely different in their chemical composition and form. What is known is that these substances can have enormously powerful transformational effects on other substances, living beings, and intelligent minds in the vicinity – which of course makes research much more difficult. Some researchers also think that matter can only become the Stone if a nearby living mind is exerting trained willpower to that end, guiding the all-important psychic forces into the part-formed matrix – which would explain the huge difficulty in reproducing important results.



# ALCHEMY

In this setting, alchemy is very much the “science of magic” – or, to be more precise, the science of magical *transformations*, in every sense. This includes but is not restricted to the transformation of mundane substances, correctly mixed and treated, to produce magical effects, which themselves often involve further transformations. It centers on the search for the true Philosopher’s Stone (in the form of “drinkable gold” for alchemists with a Chinese background); even the recipes for very minor, seemingly unrelated elixirs often require a small quantity of some impure form of the Stone.

In general, it is recommended that alchemy should be kept as a background feature of *Age of Gold* campaigns – mostly the concern of NPCs. To start with, it is very much a laboratory science, mostly involving long hours of nitpicking experimentation in pursuit of rather abstract results – none of which is terribly appropriate to high-action pulp-adventure gaming. Furthermore, alchemy can’t do *very* much as of *Age of Gold* 1930s; even if countless great secrets were understood and results achieved in the past (which is much debated by occultists), that lore has been largely lost. Even where recipes for useful repeatable results are known for certain, they tend to demand very expensive ingredients, often including the elusive Philosopher’s Stone – which is frankly too valuable to use as an adventurers’ weapon, when it’s available at all. Some PCs may have Alchemy skill, but that will mostly serve to help recognize alchemical phenomena, perform the odd analysis, or just act as character color.

Nonetheless, alchemy *is* important as part of the setting background, and can produce some interesting plot effects.

## LABORATORY ALCHEMY

As alchemy is mostly a crazy sort of off-stage magical science, the creation of potions and research into subjects such as the Philosopher’s Stone is mostly the concern of wild-eyed eccentrics, aging scholars, and the occasional secret society with long-term plans. These people may commission expeditions in search of ancient texts or rare ingredients, and they may issue trusted employees with a potion or two if there seems to be a very specific need, but they aren’t really in the business of “field alchemy.”

These alchemical scientists are more likely to work from well-secured and carefully equipped home bases. For the important parts of these, use the rules for laboratories from p. 102 of *GURPS Thaumatology* or p. 211 of *GURPS Magic*, but treat the local TL as being 3 for this purpose (see p. 31 for the reason); hence, an “excellent” lab would give no more benefit than one that’s merely “professional grade,” so that category can be ignored. Nonetheless, many alchemists have much bigger laboratories than the “excellent” standard, either so that they can accommodate assistants, or because they have to store large quantities of ingredients.

Most such laboratories have a distinctly archaic, stone-and-oak-panels aesthetic, although there may be some modern glassware and Bunsen burners lying around. Alchemists may be quite dementedly old-fashioned, but they can usually appreciate convenience.

## The Philosopher’s Stone

In *Age of Gold*, the Philosopher’s Stone is a slightly more varied and unpredictable thing than the version discussed in *GURPS Magic*; gamers who require details should use the following rules instead.

Creating a Stone is a task necessitating 52 weeks, an alchemical laboratory, and a roll against Alchemy-10. This can be treated as a Hard technique, but characters can only buy it up from default if they have Unusual Background (Insightful Alchemist) (see p. 28). It also requires ingredients worth at least \$10,000. Treat this as making an elixir according to the rules in *GURPS Magic*, including the option to create multiple doses by using extra ingredients and taking -1 to skill per extra dose.

Make the skill roll at the end of the year; a critical failure gets a roll on the same table as for elixirs, and a normal failure wastes all the ingredients. On a normal success, if the character didn’t have Unusual Background (Insightful Alchemist) before, he gains it; otherwise, he gets one bonus character point that must be applied to the technique. He also creates *some kind* of Philosopher’s Stone – but this is only somewhat similar to the “perfect” Stone on a critical success. Even then, it might not grant perfect immortality or transform any other metal to gold. In fact, the nature of the stone created is entirely up to the GM; its effects can include one or more of the following – usually two or three options, but sometimes more, especially after a critical success.

1. Provide perfect protection against either aging, disease, or poison while worn next to the skin.

2. If consumed, make a person 10 years younger and eliminate all diseases from their body. Alternatively or additionally, at the GM’s option, it removes any and all physical disadvantages, reverses the effects of past diseases, and so on.

3. Transform 10 lbs. of any metal to the same weight of gold on contact, permanently. The Stone then crumbles to dust and vanishes.

4. Transform 1 lb. of any metal to the same weight of gold on contact, but only for 2d×4 hours, once per day.

## Magical “Herbalism”

Generally, in *Age of Gold*, “alchemy” means use of the *GURPS* Alchemy skill as such. Some beneficial magical results *might* be achieved using herbal ingredients and ancient herbal lore, but these are rare at best and generally come within the ambit of Alchemy skill. Hence, GMs are free to simply prohibit the Herb Lore skill.

On the other hand, there may be the occasional traditional rural herb-wife or witch-doctor with a few interesting tricks to hand. GMs who want to include such characters can allow them to learn Herb Lore, usually at TL4 or below (whatever their own general TL), and use it for one or two potions or elixirs. It should be subject to all the restrictions discussed on pp. 104-105 of *GURPS Thaumatology*, however.

# INDEX

- Aborigines of Australia, 12.  
Advantages, 27-28.  
Adventure themes, 41.  
Adversaries, example, 32-38.  
Africa, 11.  
Agartha, 12.  
Alchemy, 5-7, 11, 13, 19-21; *skill*, 30-31; *transformation by*, 22.  
Alcoholism disadvantage, 29.  
Americas, 10.  
Appearances of mystery men, 21.  
Arcane archaeology theme, 42-43.  
Arch-demon, 25.  
Archetypes, 9, 11, 13.  
Arch-Mage Unusual Background, 28.  
Artifacts, 5-6; *powers and*, 22.  
Asia, 12-14.  
Atototl the Bargainer, 37-38.  
Australia, 12.  
Aybtep-Het, *see Secret Pharaoh*.  
Background of setting, 5-14.  
Basic character conditions, 26.  
Black Dragon Society, 12-14, 31, 36, 37, 40, 41, 42.  
Bloodlust disadvantage, 29.  
Books for diabolism, 18.  
British Empire, 8, 9, 12-14.  
Cairo, 12.  
Campaigns, 9-43.  
Central America, 11.  
Channeling advantage, 27.  
Character traits, 27.  
Chiai Tiao, 37.  
Chi modifier, 23.  
China, 7-8, 12-13.  
Cloaked perk, 29.  
Code of Honor disadvantage, 30.  
Comics Code Code of Honor, 30.  
Communist Party, *China*, 13; *Russian*, 9-10.  
Compulsive Behavior disadvantage, 30.  
Conversion between magic traditions, 16.  
Costumes of mystery men, 21.  
Courtesy Rank advantage, 26.  
Crime fighting theme, 41-42.  
Cultural Familiarities, 26.  
Current Affairs skills, 31.  
Delusions disadvantage, 30.  
Demons, 24-25.  
Diabolism, 18.  
Disadvantages, 29-30.  
Dunorne Foundation, 43.  
Egypt, 7, 11-12.  
Elements, 16.  
Elixir Knowledge Unusual Background, 20, 28.  
Elixirs, 20.  
Espionage theme, 42.  
Europe, 8-10.  
Exorcism skill, 31.  
Exotic places theme, 42.  
Extra Attack advantage, 27.  
Flashbacks disadvantage, 30.  
Futuremen, 43.  
Gadgeteer advantage, 20, 28.  
Gentleman's Code Code of Honor, 30.  
Germany, 10.  
Gizmos advantage, 20, 28.  
Gold standard, 9.  
Great Depression, 8-9.  
Green Gang, 12.  
**GURPS**, 4, 14, 19, 23, 26, 30;  
*Basic Set*, 4, 28, 30, 43;  
*China*, 4; *Cliffhangers*, 4, 9, 39; *Cops*, 42; *Covert Ops*, 42;  
*Egypt*, 4, 12; *Espionage*, 42;  
*High-Tech*, 4; *High-Tech: Pulp Guns*, 4; *Infinite Worlds*, 4, 43; *Lands Out of Time*, 4; *Magic Items*, 4; *Magic*, 4, 19, 20; *Martial Arts*, 4, 29, 31; *Martial Arts: Fairbairn Close Combat Systems*, 4, 13, 31; *Mysteries*, 41; *Places of Mystery*, 4, 12; *Powers*, 4, 23, 27, 28, 33, 36, 38; *Power-Ups 2: Perks*, 29; *Russia*, 10; *Supers*, 4, 23, 27, 29, 30, 32, 41; *Thaumatology*, 3, 4, 6, 10, 12, 15-20, 22-25, 28-32, 39, 44; *WWII*, 4, 9; *WWII: Iron Cross*, 10; *WWII: Weird War II*, 4, 10.  
Handmaidens of the Secret Pharaoh, 34-35.  
Hazardous Materials skill, 31.  
Herb Lore skill, 31.  
*Hierarch* (book), 18.  
High TL advantage, 28.  
History of the world, 7-14.  
History skill, 31.  
Home base, 40.  
Honesty disadvantage, 40.  
I-Cops, 43.  
India, 8, 13.  
Infinite Worlds campaigns, 43.  
Infinity Unlimited, 43.  
Insightful Alchemist Unusual Background, 19, 20, 28.  
Intolerance disadvantage, 30.  
Invocationism, 17-18.  
Invention Unusual Background, 20.  
Japan, 14.  
Jungle Madness, 37-40.  
Kuomintang (KMT) Party, 12-13.  
Laboratories, 19, 20.  
Laboratory alchemy, 6, 19-20.  
"Leader and assistants" teams, 27.  
Limited Magery advantage, 28.  
*Lineaments of Purity* (book), 18.  
Madame Jasmine, 35-37, 39.  
Magery advantage, 15, 28, 29.  
Magical devices and artifacts, 5-6.  
Magical herbalism, 19.  
Magical modifier, 23.  
Magical School Familiarity perk, 29.  
Magical supers, 21-23.  
Magic in setting, 5-6.  
Magic Resistance advantage, 28.  
Mana Damper advantage, 28.  
Mana Enhancer advantage, 28.  
Mana levels, 6.  
Mandrake-1, 43.  
Martial Arts skill, 31.  
Masked perk, 29.  
Material components, 16.  
Materialist psychic research, 10.  
Medium advantage, 27.  
Military Rank advantage, 26.  
Mudras, 8.  
Multiple simultaneous magical effects, 16.  
Mystery men, *adventures*, 40-42; *power level*, 26, 27, 40-41; *term*, 21.  
Mystic Symbols limitation, 28.  
Nazis, 10.  
Nine Unknown Sages, 12.  
Nonprotective Clothing perk, 29.  
Occult Current Affairs specialty, 31.  
Occultism skill, 31.  
Pacifism disadvantage, 30.  
Pao Pang, 37.  
Path/Book Adept advantage, 15.  
Path/Book magic, 15-18.  
Paut Knowledge Unusual Background, 20, 28.  
Paut, 20, 28.  
Perks, 29.  
Petrie, Flinders, 5, 6.  
Petty demon, 24-25.  
Philosopher's Stone, 5-8, 19-22, 28, 31, 43; *effects of*, 19-20; *transformations by*, 20-22; *see also Secret Pharaoh*.  
Pirate's Code Code of Honor, 30.  
Police Rank advantage, 26.  
Power level, *enemies and*, 39; *starting points and*, 26-27.  
Pulp Adventurer power level, 26, 27, 39-40; *adventures*, 39-40.  
Raven Division, 43.  
*Razor's Edge* (book), 18.  
Reality quake, 11.  
*Record of the Embassy* (book), 18.  
Reich-5, 43.  
Ritual Magic skill, 16, 32.  
Ritual space, 16.  
Ritual-time length, 15.  
Ritual-time significance, 16.  
Ritual witchcraft, 17.  
Russia, 9-10.  
Savoir-Faire skill, 32.  
Secret Identity disadvantage, 30.  
Secret Kingdom, 35.  
Secret Pharaoh, 8, 32-35, 39, 40.  
*Seventh Text of Misdirection* (book), 18.  
Shambhala, 12.  
Shanghai, 13.  
Shanghai Municipal Police (SMP), 13.  
Shangri-La, 12.  
Sheldrake Section, 43.  
Skills, 30-32.  
Skintight perk, 29.  
Soldier's Code Code of Honor, 30.  
South America, 11.  
Spells from spirits, 23-24.  
Spirit-assisted spell magic, 6, 7, 23-24.  
Starting points at creation, 26, 27.  
State of the world, 9-14.  
Status trait, 26.  
Style Familiarity perk, 29.  
Superheroes (term), 21.  
Supernatural powers, 22-23.  
Supersuit perk, 29.  
Symbol Drawing skill, 16, 32.  
Symbolic components, 16.  
Talents and magic workings, 16.  
Tech level of setting, 20, 28, 31.  
Thaumatology skill, 31.  
Theories regarding other spirits, 24.  
Time Tours, 43.  
Transformations, 6; *by Philosopher's Stone*, 20-22; *means of*, 22.  
True Faith advantage, 25, 28.  
Undead characters, 22.  
United Kingdom, 8, 9, 12-14.  
United States of America, 11.  
Unrealized Potential perk, 28, 29.  
Unusual Background advantage, 17, 20, 28.  
Useful **GURPS** supplements, 4.  
Victorian age, 8.  
*Way of Perfect Conquest* (book), 18.  
Wealth, starting, 26.  
Weird science, *in Russia*, 10; *skill*, 20, 32.  
Wildcard skills, 32.  
Wu, 7.



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