Schools of Alchemy

In both fiction and reality, the term "alchemy" is used for several different practices that, while they may owe something to each other, have distinct methodologies and goals. This suggests that the Alchemy skill might require specialization. Cross-defaults depend on the degree of communication and shared assumptions between groups of alchemists.

In a game based on real-world history, Alchemy (European) and Alchemy (Islamic) might default to each other at -2; they share ideas and texts, but come from notably different cultures. Both derive from Alchemy (Ancient Hellenic), which mystics would say has its share of lost secrets, so both default to and from that specialty at -2. *Tech-Level Modifiers* (p. B168) may also apply; European and Islamic alchemists generally operated at TL3-4, while the Hellenic world was TL2. If Alchemy is primarily a mystical process rather than a science, though, then it might not be a technological skill. Historically, the tools and techniques *did* evolve – but perhaps not as radically as some technologies.

Alchemy (Chinese) and the above specialties differ so much that there may be *no* default between them. If a default exists, then it's likely to be at -6 or worse. Alchemists from these cultures *might* be able to learn something from each other, but they'd have to break down huge barriers of language, imagery, and assumptions.

There's some evidence of an Indian version of alchemy. Certainly, ancient India had useful practical chemistry. Alchemy (Indian) might default to and from Alchemy (Hellenic) at -6 and Alchemy (Chinese) at -4.

Alchemy as a Spiritual Discipline

Some modern writers claim that alchemy – in its most sophisticated form, anyway – was *really* a spiritual discipline. They theorize that the creation of gold from base metals and the attainment of immortality were metaphors for the quest for spiritual perfection. Certainly, some quite early alchemists claimed that the mental disciplines involved were more important than the practical chemistry, and Western alchemy came to include a fair amount of Christian symbolism, while the Chinese version had longstanding links to Taoism. Alchemical processes were often described in obscure terms (to protect the craft's secrets from "unworthy" readers), and incorporated many rituals (ensuring repeatability and controlling timing). Still, most alchemists seem to have had distinctly material goals.

An alchemist who *is* pursuing spiritual goals should study the Meditation skill (p. B207). If spiritual perfection is necessary, then he must enter a meditative trance before attempting any major alchemical process. He may also need a degree of "spiritual improvement" to achieve high levels of Alchemy skill. For instance, Alchemy at 14+ might require Will 10+, no worse than -15 points in "bad" mental disadvantages (as defined by the GM, or simply *anything* not tied to spiritual purity), and no disadvantage self-control number below 12; Alchemy at 18+ could call for Will 14+, no unsuitable disadvantages at all, and no self-control number below 15 in any event. The philosopher's stone might only be found by an alchemist who's a model of self-control, balance, and virtue – and may cure mental problems as well as creating gold or granting immortality.

Alchemy as an Aspect of Other Subjects

If magic is a complex academic discipline, of which alchemy is one branch, then the Alchemy skill may be part of any competent wizard's repertoire. It might even be a prerequisite for other magical activities, and the wizard who doesn't understand the basic interaction of magical forces with matter – alchemy – doesn't have a hope of getting a spell to work. This could be a general restriction, or apply only to elemental colleges, spells requiring contact with the spirit realm, etc.

Alchemy could also be a vital part of wizards' academic training, providing a symbol system or basic theory. The Alchemy skill may be a prerequisite for Thaumatology or Ritual Magic. In some settings, those skills might be unable to exceed Alchemy by more than a couple of levels – the more advanced the grand theory, the more underlying knowledge is required. Conversely, if alchemical ideas arise naturally out of abstract magical studies, then Alchemy might default to Thaumatology at -4 or so.

Laboratory Procedures

Historically, alchemy involved lengthy, repeated processes: heating, sublimation, distillation, etc. Alchemists invented much of the standard equipment known to modern chemists, and used it heavily. Fantasy alchemy may be less tedious, but Alchemy is *definitely* a laboratory-based skill, and the effective alchemist will need a well-stocked lab. Setup costs and other statistics are as follows:

Home Lab: No skill modifier. Fills a sturdy table. $1,000.

Professional-Grade Lab: +1 to skill. Fills 100 square feet. $5,000.

Excellent Lab: +TL/2 to skill (round down). Fills 200 square feet. $20,000.

Analysis by Taste and Scent

Real-world alchemists assessed substances, not only by chemical tests and by sight, but by smell and sometimes even by *taste.* The risks involved – given all the natural poisons, heavy metals, mercury fumes, etc. – should be obvious. Competent alchemists doubtless knew that some materials were too dangerous for this, but their view of procedural safety would rarely pass in a modern laboratory.

The logical consequences here only have a place in the most grittily realistic of games – especially if anyone wants to play an alchemist. A sickly, hallucinating, short-lived, brain-damaged PC isn't much fun. Emphasizing that alchemy involves a certain amount of eccentric risk-taking might be amusing, though, and could justify an assortment of disadvantages. Alchemists could also benefit from *advantages* acquired through careful training and gradually acquired resistance, including Acute Taste and Smell, Discriminatory Taste (for individuals who've achieved cinematic degrees of refinement), High Manual Dexterity, and Resistant to Poison – and maybe Combat Reflexes and Danger Sense for those whose laboratories explode especially often.