Stories

General Considerations

There are a number of general points that you should bear in mind when writing stories or adventures for any roleplaying game, including Ars Magica. Other considerations in this chapter are more specific to Ars Magica, but they may still have wider applicability.

Each of these guidelines can be violated in an occasional adventure without spoiling the players' enjoyment. However, it is better if most stories follow them.

Player Character Centrality

Remember that the player characters are the central characters in the story. They may not be the most powerful characters, but they are central to the action. For example, in a horror story the characters must be weaker than the threat, because otherwise it will not inspire horror. However, the story is still about the way the characters deal with the threat, not about the activities of the monster.

You should always plan for the conflicts in the story to be resolved by the player characters, and for the outcome to be determined by their actions. In a horror story, the survival of the player characters should depend on what they do, not on the actions of NPCs. In a political story, the decisions of the player characters should make a definite difference to the outcome. As noted on page @@, troupe style play can help here, because even if player characters need rescuing, other player characters can often perform the rescue.

Plots

Roleplaying game stories should not have a plot in advance. A plot is a sequence of events, with the causal relationships between them drawn out, and if you have that in advance there is only one thing for the player characters to do. This is a remarkably hard lesson to learn, because all the relevant forms of literature with which we are familiar do have plots, as do a lot of published adventures.

Instead, a story needs a set of situations, decisions on what will happen if the player characters do nothing, and decisions on what will happen in response to some of the more obvious possible player actions. Even then, you need to be ready for the player characters to do something unexpected. The better you know the situation, the easier this will be, although some storyguides are naturally very good at winging it.

If possible, you should set up several ways for the player characters to succeed in the adventure, so that the players do have real choices, which don't come down to 'do it the right way or die'. This is related to the next point, the importance of variable outcomes.

Variable Outcomes

You should have at least three possible outcomes for any story: one corresponding to success, another to a neutral performance, and one to failure. Ideally, there should be several degrees of success and failure. This allows you to set up one path as the route to the best success, without dooming the characters if they try something different.

In general, you should also avoid disastrous results for failures, at least unless the players are really, really stupid. If a failure would seriously damage the saga, you should make sure that it is very easy to avoid failing completely. Similar considerations may apply to the survival of magi and companions, although that depends on the attitude that your players have to their characters. (Grogs, on the other hand, are pretty much expected to die.) A disastrous outcome should be foreshadowed with increasing clarity as it gets closer, and ways to mitigate it should become ever more obvious. It is, of course, perfectly acceptable to make a positive outcome impossible if the characters follow a certain route, but disaster should be easy to avoid.

This means thinking of bad results that do not involve the death of beloved characters or the destruction of the covenant. Good options are to take possessions away from the characters, or to injure them so that they lose a lot of study time. You can also inflict longer-term penalties, but such penalties can spoil a player's enjoyment of a character, so they should be used with caution; the point of a game is to have fun, not to undergo some sort of moral discipline.

Hooks

Possibly the hardest part of an adventure is the beginning. It can be extremely hard for the players to see what they are supposed to do. This means that you need to have at least two possible courses of action in mind when you set up a story. It is a good idea to also think of ways in which you can supply hints if the players are completely floundering. If you have variable degrees of success available, you can give hints to a lesser degree of success, so that the players do benefit from working things out for themselves.

If possible, parts of the adventure should naturally flow into one another. The characters should not simply work out that they need to go to some place; they should work out that they need to go to that place and do something, and then when they do something it becomes clear what their following options are. If you don't do that, the adventure effectively begins again every time the characters complete the actions that have been made clear so far, and stand around wondering what to do next.

A related consideration concerns clues and information. If some information is important to the story, you should have one specific way that the characters can learn it in mind when writing the story. They may learn it another way, but if there is one way that you know will work, then the characters have a reasonable chance of learning the information. In addition, this method should be something that makes sense in the context of the story and saga. Asking the inhabitants of a village about a monster makes sense; going and looking behind the altar in the church does not, unless the monster has been seen coming from there.

It is surprisingly difficult to judge this, as the elements of stories always look obvious to the storyguide. One rule of thumb is that things need to be more obvious than you think. Beyond that, you can learn from experience what sorts of things occur to your players, and what situations leave them stymied.

Climaxes

It is good for a story to reach a climax and finish there, rather than petering out. This is, however, very difficult to reconcile with the importance of not having a plot. The best way round it is to work out two or three possible ways to resolve the situation set up in the story, and to make sure that each is a climactic event in which the player characters play a central role.

Sometimes this is simply impossible, as only one climax can resolve everything, and most alternatives leave some tidying up. In such a case, the tidying up should be made as trivial as possible, so that it doesn't need to be played out in detail. For example, if a diabolist has kidnapped the daughter of a local lord, a true climax would be defeating the diabolist in his lair and freeing the girl. If the girl is freed first, then the diabolist should come after the characters, so that the adventure doesn't end with them simply sneaking out of the lair and making their way home. On the other hand, if the diabolist is killed first, you should make it easy to get into the lair and rescue the girl, so that it can be glossed over in a few sentences.

This is probably the most flexible rule. If the players want to play through the aftermath in detail, because they enjoy that sort of roleplaying, you should certainly allow them to do so.

Story Types

The power level of a saga makes a large difference to the sorts of stories you can easily run. Hermetic magi are extremely flexible, especially once they have a bit of experience. In most cases (see Saga Speed, on page @@) the power level of a saga will increase over time, and it is best if the style of play changes with it.

For simplicity, this discussion divides stories into three types: reactive, where something happens and the player characters respond; proactive, where the player characters want to do something and go out to make it happen; and soap opera, where the stories arise naturally from the continuing lives of the characters. Obviously, most stories will have elements of all of these types, but the basic distinction is helpful.

Reactive Stories

Reactive stories are a good way to start a saga, because it gives the players something immediate to do. They also serve to remind the players that their characters are not aware of everything going on in the world before it happens. They work well with young magi, but become harder to create as the magi get older.

This is because, with a reactive story, the magi are only interested in resolving the problem, and thus will use the most efficient means available. In general, they do not care *how* the problem gets resolved. Thus, elder magi might solve a political campaign against the covenant through the liberal use of Mentem spells. This is unlikely to provide the hours of entertaining political play that the storyguide was after. Investigative stories are quickly short-circuited by Intellego magic, and enemies that a powerful magus cannot simply dispatch are too powerful to be common.

Once the magi are very powerful, it is possible to run reactive stories for just the companions and grogs. Give them a reason not to disturb the magi, and then let them sort the problem out by themselves. It is possible to make the stories very challenging for the mundane characters, because if everything goes horribly wrong the players' other characters can charge in to save the day, which is much more satisfying for the players than having non-player characters do it.

There are several books full of reactive stories in the Ars Magica line. *Tales of Mythic Europe* contains stories suitable for relatively young magi, while *Tales of Power* contains stories for older characters. *Hooks* contains a number of short stories designed to introduce new elements, such as noble politics or ancient magic, to the saga, and prime the characters to start on proactive stories. *Thrice-Told Tales* contains stories designed in three parts, which happen several years apart as part of the saga. Finally, *Dies Irae* contains several stories concerning ways in which the world might end, if the characters cannot prevent it.

Proactive Stories

Proactive stories are good at any power level. For one thing, you know that at least one player is interested in pursuing the story. For another, if the player wants stories to resolve something, that means that his character cannot trivially achieve it. As a magus increases in power, the character's ideas get steadily more grandiose, but always remain challenging. These challenges might arise because the character does not want to resolve the story in the easiest way possible.

As an example, a powerful maga might want to win the friendship of a local monastery, and have it be genuine friendship rather than magically enforced. All at once, the maga's magical power becomes much less important. She can use it to perform spectacularly helpful acts, but she cannot simply use Creo Mentem to make all the monks love her. Alternatively, a magus might want to make the covenant's magical aura into a mobile regio, so that they can travel secretly around Europe. Hermetic magic cannot just do this, no matter how high the magus's Arts are, so he must spend time looking for hidden mysteries and unearthing forgotten secrets. Things that go wrong in his experiments might well require a great deal of power to put right.

In one sense, hooking into these stories is very easy; the players want to do it. In another, it's very difficult, as getting suggestions out of your players can be like getting blood out of a stone. The best thing to do is just keep asking what the players want their characters to do, until they provide answers on which you can hang a story.

Several supplements for Ars Magica provide ideas for proactive stories. *Ancient Magic*, *Legends of Hermes*, and *Mythic Locations* describe things that characters might search for, while *Hermetic Projects* and *Transforming Mythic Europe* describe things that the characters might try to create.

Soap Opera

Almost any long-running saga develops elements of soap opera, as the characters develop histories with each other. These sorts of story work well at all levels of power, because powerful magi have good reasons not to intervene with brute power when their friends are involved, and even if they do, then the consequences of their actions simply give rise to more soap operatic complications.

'Soap opera' does not mean that the stories are all about the adulteries of covenfolk, although some may be. It can include the ongoing relationship with a whimsical faerie queen, delicate negotiations with a dragon, and repeated battles with a demon who has injured the covenant in the past. Essentially, a soap opera story is one where the characters are constrained by the results of the past and their plans for the future.

*Antagonists* details a number of characters who would have ambiguous and difficult relations with player characters, and who could play an important part in soap-opera stories.

Story Ideas

The first question faced by a new Ars Magica storyguide is 'What do magi do?'. What sort of adventures can you send them on? On the whole, they do not go into cave complexes full of monsters, kill lots of them, and then carry away piles of treasure. On the other hand, they might do that occasionally. This section provides some guidance on stories.

Exploration

The characters go somewhere they haven't been before, and find out about it. This covers going into caves, killing monsters, and taking their stuff, but it is much broader. It also includes traveling to the local abbey and trying to set up good relations with the abbot, finding a faerie forest and learning how to collect raw vis there, and even visiting other covenants of the Order for the first time.

Exploration stories are a very good way to start a saga, as the characters and players will both want to know more about the area around their covenant. In addition, once they have been introduced to an area you can use that place to generate more stories.

*Mythic Locations* is a whole book full of places for characters to explore.

Places to Explore

The Covenant. If the covenant was there before the player characters joined, they may not know everything about it.

Mundane Villages. The villages nearest the covenant will become aware of its existence, so it is a good idea if the magi know a bit about them. Friendly relations would be ideal, of course.

Mundane Towns. The magi are likely to need supplies which have to be bought in a town, so they should explore the local towns. This might be best done by sending the grogs, with maybe a companion.

Other Covenants. Magi are expected to give hospitality to visiting magi, even if they turn up uninvited. Getting to know your neighbors is a good idea, provided you can avoid upsetting them.

A faerie forest where the intelligent creatures have the shape of animals, and the dumb brutes have the shape of humans.

A faerie palace where a shining queen grants rewards to those who bring the most beautiful stories. The stories become jewels or fine tapestries when told, and it is possible to learn much from the queen's stored treasures.

A faerie village which looks a lot like a mundane village, except that the wheat is literally golden and the fruit trees bear gems. Attempting to eat the food is not recommended.

A set of ancient standing stones which form a magical regio. In higher levels the stones are aware and intelligent, being the forms of ancient elementals.

An abandoned village, depopulated by an infernal plague and now the home of demons and undead.

A lake which covers both a magical regio and a faerie regio. If characters enter the magical regio, they find many talking fish, which live in an elaborate society. In the faerie regio they find beautiful people living underwater, in a castle built of shells.

A covenant that fell under mysterious circumstances, and lain undisturbed since. (See *Calebais: The Broken Covenant.*)

Treasure Hunting

Magi are not immune to the lure of treasure hunting, particularly the lure of raw vis. For a covenant, the greatest treasure is a vis source, which reliably provides a certain number of pawns of vis every year. Mundane treasure also has some appeal, but most covenants are rich anyway, and magi with vis can make mundane riches fairly easily. Books are an exception, as useful ones cannot be magically created. Enchanted devices tempt magi almost as much as vis, and in some cases the search for an Arcane Connection to a powerful enemy can motivate an adventure.

You should be careful about handing out vis sources in the early sessions of the saga, as a generous supply of vis can lead to fast advancement on the part of the magi. If an isolated vis treasure is too large, you can just refrain from giving any more for a while, but taking a vis source away is more likely to annoy the players.

*Ancient Magic* is, in an important way, a whole book of treasures for characters to hunt, although the reward is more likely to be knowledge than a physical item. *Legends of Hermes* describes important magi from the history of the Order, but involves the player characters by having them hunt the treasures that those magi left behind them.

Treasures to Hunt

The raw vis found in the body of the magical wolf that hunts in the hills north of the covenant.

The raw vis found in the tears of happiness cried by a particular faerie prince.

A shield created by the wizard who trained the wizard who trained Bonisagus. The shield is said to defend its wielder from all magic, no matter how powerful, but it also has great historical interest.

The cauldron owned by a powerful faerie, which is said to have the power to raise the dead.

A staff created by a powerful Flambeau magus, said to have the power to create a fire large and hot enough to reduce a city to fine ash.

A flying castle, crafted by a follower of Tytalus decades ago, that simply vanished from Hermetic knowledge. (See *Legends of Hermes,* The Flying Castle of Thomae)

The library of a hermit magus who used to live somewhere near the covenant.

A fallen temple of Mercury, still containing details of some of the powerful rituals of the Cult of Mercury. (See *Mythic Locations,* The Fallen Temple of Mercury)

An Arcane Connection to the dragon that lives in the mountains, so that the magi can use sympathetic magic to overcome its Magic Resistance.

Requests for Assistance

In many fantasy stories and legends, heroes or oppressed villagers travel to the wizard's tower, looking for assistance. In Ars Magica, the player characters are the ones who get asked for help. You could run an interesting story in which the players take the roles of people seeking help from the covenant, and those characters could join the covenant as grogs after their success, but more normally these stories would involve the magi responding to requests.

One problem with this sort of story is that the magi might not want to help, so it is generally better if the saga creates some reason for them to listen to the request. For example, most magi will listen to a request for help from a noble whom they have been desperately trying to turn into an ally, but are likely to ignore a request from a bunch of smelly peasants they've never heard of. On the other hand, the story might be more concerned with how the covenant responds to the request, rather than with what happens when they have made their decision.

Things to be Asked

A village is being stalked by a monster which carries off and eats virgins.

The same village, nine months later, has a lot of strange babies who don't appear entirely human.

A village is threatened by famine after the river dried up.

The relics have been stolen from an abbey, and the monks fear that magic or devil-worshippers were involved.

Magi at the covenant made a bargain, almost a century ago, with a powerful monster, so that it would not destroy a city. The period of the bargain is almost up, and the city elders want the current magi to extend it. They have no idea what the details were.

A nobleman is involved in a dispute with his neighbor, which is heading towards war. He portrays himself as the innocent victim of an unscrupulous robber, and begs the assistance of the magi.

The other nobleman turns up a week later with a similar story of wronged innocence.

Crises at Home

Some emergency faces the covenant. The advantage of this sort of story is that the characters will try to solve it. The problem is that the consequences of failure can be serious, so you have to give some thought to what will happen if the characters *don't* succeed.

In general, the reward for success in such adventures is simply that things do not get any worse. Thus, you should avoid relying on them too heavily; give the players a chance to get positive rewards for their heroism.

Potential Crises

A monster attacks the covenant.

A magus from another covenant starts a campaign of harassment against the covenant, being careful to avoid blatantly violating the Code. He might attack grogs, or blight crops, but he will not scry on the covenant, nor attack a magus without declaring Wizard's War.

A bishop hears that the covenant is full of heretics, and sets out, with a small army, to investigate.

A local lord demands that the covenant swear fealty to him, or face the consequences. Swearing is against the Code, but so is getting into a war with the nobility.

A powerful faerie decides to use the covenant as part of his latest game.

The covenant's Magical aura starts to fade.

The covenant's Magical aura suddenly strengthens, and the magi find themselves sharing space with a group of annoyed, arrogant, and powerful spirits.

The covenant disappears into a regio, and the magi cannot immediately find the way out. (Or in, for those who were away at the time.)

The grogs rebel against the tyrannical rule of the magi. The players are likely to be playing both sides of this dispute, which could be tricky, but very effective for experienced players.

Politics

The Order of Hermes has extensive politics, and the mundane elites of particular areas also have political concerns. Negotiation, trade, and court cases all fall under this general heading. Political adventures tend to involve little combat, and normally cannot be solved by the simple application of magic, which makes them good for more powerful magi. It also makes them a good place for companions to shine, particularly mundane politics, where The Gift is a serious hindrance to the magi.

Political Issues

A Hermetic Tribunal is coming up, and the other covenants are looking for allies. Of course, choosing to work with one makes enemies of another.

One of the player magi is framed for a serious Hermetic crime.

One of the player magi is caught in a serious Hermetic crime.

The covenant tries to build good relations with a local mundane notable, such as a lord, bishop, or abbot.

A mundane enemy of the covenant tries to take an important piece of land, possibly containing a vis source, off them through legal processes.

War threatens to break out in the region around the covenant. While the magi could stay neutral and, most likely, survive, it would not be good for the covenant. Can they broker a peace?

The local bishop begins preaching vigorously against heresy, and priests are instructed to enquire much more closely into people's activities. Many people resent this, but no-one dares to speak out publicly for fear of being branded a heretic.

The player character magi disagree strongly over the best course of action to take, and spend the entire session arguing about it.

Quests

Quests shape a series of stories, rather than a single story. They differ from treasure hunting in that the object of the quest is more elevated, and the process of getting there is as important, and significant for the characters, as the discovery itself. In troupe-style play, a quest is best designed to be split up by stories involving other characters, so that people do not feel that one character’s obsession is taking over the saga.

Objects of Quests

The Holy Grail.

The cave where Bonisagus devised the Parma Magica.

The lost rituals of the Cult of Mercury.

The resting place of one of the Old Ones, powerful magical creatures who died, or fell asleep, millennia ago.

The fields of Elysium.

The secret of raising the dead through Hermetic magic.

The character's father.

True faith in God.