Sagas

A saga is a series of connected stories, centered around a single covenant. In some cases the only connection between two stories is that both happen to people who live at the covenant, and not even the same people. Other stories are linked into a longer narrative, with a major climax. This chapter provides guidance on how to run a good saga.

Background Questions

While products from Atlas Games provide a wealth of detail about the background of Ars Magica, there are always areas which are open to interpretation by individual troupes. In many cases these are matters that can simply be ignored when writing books, but in others it is more a question of how you use a book in your sagas. This section looks at a few of the more significant choices you need to consider when deciding how Ars Magica works for your troupe.

Rules Questions

Another set of questions you need to decide is how you will use the rules.

First, the rules in the Laboratory and Long-Term Events chapters are only used when the saga stretches over a significant period of game time. You don't need to worry about them for your first couple of stories.

Beyond that, the game as written can be played and enjoyed, at least according to the playtesters. However, you might want to add House Rules, to make things better fit your playing style.

For example, the core rules pay very little attention to economics. As written, this is a game about mighty wizards in a world of legends, and they don't have to worry about how much their socks cost. However, you might want to play magical merchants criss-crossing Mythic Europe and building trade routes that support marvelous cities. An excellent concept, but you will have to add House Rules for trade, and the effects of trade on cities. (Or, possibly, buy *City & Guild*.)

There are some changes you might want to make even if you play something very close to the core game. For example, your group might prefer not to have major events happen purely on the roll of the dice. In that case, you can simply ignore stress dice, and always use a simple die. If you do that, a character's skill will always be the main influence on a situation. Of course, you need to make that clear up front, because a number of Virtues and Flaws rely on the stress die.

More fundamental changes are also possible. In 'canon' (the game as defined by the published rules and supplements) mundane humans have virtually no resistance to magic. You might decide to give all Christians, Jews, and Muslims a Magic Resistance equal to five times the level of the local Dominion aura. This will make it almost impossible for magi to affect someone in a town, and drives a stronger separation of the mundane and the supernatural.

Most gamers find that some features of the game don't suit them perfectly. Making up House Rules to fix this is entirely normal, and even to be encouraged; there are some people who like tinkering with rules almost as much as they like playing. In fact, if your group finds that you have the most fun if you spend several hours a week hashing out new rules to make, for example, the book rules exactly match the latest research on medieval study styles and libraries, and never actually *play* any characters, then go ahead.

At the other extreme, you might find that worrying about game statistics interferes with the flow of your stories, and things work much better when players just say what their magus does. If that works for you, then you can use the spell guidelines as nothing more than inspiration for the sorts of things your magi might do.

The rules and background for Ars Magica as written do favor a particular style of play, but if that doesn't match your style, you should change the rules and background so that it does.

History

Perhaps the most obvious question concerns how much history you want to use, and how close to historical events you want to stay. Some troupes like to keep mundane history the same as real history, and have the Order of Hermes acting entirely behind the scenes. Others prefer to have the magi change things, so that political events look very different from our history. Still others prefer to change things around entirely.

This is a slightly different issue from the best way to include history in a game (see Making it Historical, page @@). All the hints there apply no matter what you choose, although, obviously, the more you want to change things, the less you have to worry about anachronisms.

You might want to run a saga which has very little interaction with the mundane world. Mythic Europe, with historical kings and bishops, is there in the background, but most adventures take place in magical auras, faerie forests, or infernal temples. This sort of saga can be very high fantasy without much problem.

At the other extreme, you might want to put the covenant in a major city, such as Paris, Rome, Constantinople, or Jerusalem, and have the player characters deal with the politics and culture of Mythic Europe on a daily basis.

It is even possible to combine the two ideas, although this requires the most work from the storyguide. Many medieval legends are high fantasy, and they can be real in your version of Mythic Europe. You might place the covenant in a version of Constantinople where the city walls really are made of gold and studded with gems, and magical statues and other wizards are a common sight on the streets. This combination is difficult because you need to find medieval legends, and then make medieval society work around them. On the other hand, it is extremely rewarding, and it is possible to do it for one location rather than an entire saga.

The troupe must simply decide whether the magi can change history. The assumption in official books is that the history of Mythic Europe looks, on the surface, like that of medieval Europe until 1220, the canonical starting date. However, many of the reasons behind historical events involve wizards, faeries, and other mystical creatures. The default assumption is that Mythic history will diverge from real history after 1220, as player characters interfere, but that need not be true in your saga.

The Order of Hermes

The Order of Hermes might seem to be very well defined in the books, but in fact a very important question is left vague, for individual troupes to determine. How organized is the Order in practice? In theory, Tribunals, Quaesitors, Redcaps, and the Peripheral Code tie everything together and enforce a myriad rules. In your saga, that might be the case in practice as well, so that player characters who break the Code face punishment, unless they take careful steps to hide their infractions. Individual covenants might have to register with the Tribunal or be forcibly removed, and all new magi might be recorded in a central register.

At the other extreme, Tribunals might be primarily social events, where the Code is only actually enforced if someone has made enemies of virtually every other magus in the area. Magi a century old might frequently appear and announce that they have been members of the Order for decades, and Redcaps might be supported by individual covenants who need messengers, rather than by the Order.

Both versions of the Order are fun to play, but they produce very different sagas. The more intrusive and organized the Order is, the larger the role that politics plays in the saga. An Order that does not bother to enforce its rules allows the player characters to essentially ignore it and concentrate on adventures. It also allows the player characters to become overtly involved in mundane politics.

The Church

The Church is an important institution throughout Europe, and it is all but impossible to avoid at least some interaction with it. This means that you must make a decision on how to portray the Church in your saga. Because Christianity is a living religion, and the contemporary Roman Catholic church is institutionally continuous with the Western medieval church on which the Mythic version is based, this is a question you should discuss with your troupe, to avoid offending anyone.

The fundamental choice is between a Church which is basically good with a few bad members, and a Church which is basically evil, with a few good members. A Church perfectly balanced between good and evil is theoretically possible, but only likely to work in practice if the players encounter the clergy only rarely.

You should also decide on the Church's attitude to magic. Historically, the church in this period condemned magic as nothing but deception and lies, but that is not really a tenable position in Mythic Europe. The Church might believe that magic is the work of the devil, and thus sinful, or that it involves the use of God-given gifts, and thus can be virtuous, if used for good ends. Alternatively, the Church might be in the throes of a debate on this very topic.

The canonical setting does assume that relations between the Church and the Order of Hermes are cool, at best, although there are individuals on both sides with better or worse relationships across the divide. Sagas where the Order tries to overthrow the Church can be exciting, as can sagas where the Order tries to join the Church, or, of course, where the Church simply is not very important to the player characters.

The Infernal

How many demons do you want in your saga? Demons and diabolists make excellent unambiguous enemies, but the extent to which you use them has a strong effect on the tone of the saga. If there are demons everywhere and a diabolist in every village, then you have a very dark setting where the characters are surrounded by enemies. On the other hand, one diabolist as the main enemy for a saga can be much more hopeful, as things get better once the enemy is defeated.

You should also consider how you want to play demons. Traditionally, they are interested in souls, but also have a penchant for violence and destruction. Emphasizing the violence makes demons into monsters the player characters have to kill, while emphasizing their efforts to corrupt people makes for much more subtle enemies. Subtle enemies are not necessarily a good thing; your players may not want their characters to wrestle with ambiguous moral choices or struggle with temptation.

The Fate of Magic

A common trope in stories involving a magical past is the decline of magic, so that eventually the magic goes away and leaves us with our contemporary world. The canonical background to Ars Magica assumes that, if this is happening, it is so slow that no-one has yet noticed it. Magical auras give way to the Dominion in some places, but in others magic grows stronger.

In your saga, magic could be declining, rising, or steady. Steady magic is the least intrusive on play, as either of the others will have a profound influence on a saga full of magi. It is also the default assumption of sourcebooks; magic was neither stronger nor weaker when the Order was founded, and has not changed noticeably since.

On the other hand, the decline of magic can easily be linked to the advance of the Dominion. As western Europe leaves the Dark Ages and civilization starts to spread once more, remote areas that used to be magical wilderness become incorporated into farmland. By 1220 this might no longer be an occasional nuisance, but rather a serious threat to the Order, as auras vanish and vis sources become scarce.

Magic could also be declining along with all the other supernatural powers, in which case the Dominion would suffer as much as the Order of Hermes. Miracles would become less common, fewer demons would appear, and faeries would retreat fully into stories. Such a background sets up a tragedy for magi, unless they have the chance to reverse the decline.

A third option is to have magic on the rise, again either in opposition to the other supernatural auras or in concert with them. This might work well if you want to start with a saga that is closely tied to mundane historical facts, and increase the level of fantasy later. If only magic increases in power, the player characters might become more powerful than any opposition, but if all the realms increase together the newly-powerful magi will face newly-powerful priests, faeries, and demons, so the challenge remains, just at a greater scale.

Saga Speed

Advancement in Ars Magica happens by seasons of game time (see Advancement, page @@), and so the number of seasons of game time that pass for every game session is an extremely important factor in determining the style of a saga. The ideal saga speed is entirely a matter of troupe preference, but it is important to be aware of the implications in advance. Fortunately it is easy to speed up or slow down a saga if you decide that you have made a mistake.

Resources

The resources to which the player characters have access also influence the speed of advancement, although that influence is much lower than the speed of the saga. It doesn't matter how many books or how much vis the characters in a slow saga have; they never have time to study them.

Nevertheless, it is important to give some thought to resources.

Vis comes in two ways: vis finds, which don't renew, and vis sources, which do. Early in the saga it is better to hand out vis finds, rather than sources. You can then keep track of how much the player characters use, and decide how much vis you want them to have, before you hand out sources. Vis finds run out naturally, while sources have to be taken away, which might annoy the players.

Vis amounts are highly saga-dependent, and there is no 'right' way to do it. The following numbers are merely a guideline.

Low vis: Up to 5 pawns/magus/year. Studying from vis is very rare, and vis-boosting the Penetration of spells is almost unheard of. Only necessary rituals are cast, and enchanted items are uncommon.

Moderate vis: Around 10 pawns/magus/year. Studying from vis is common, although books are still preferred. Enchanted items can be made fairly easily; the main concern is getting the right kind of vis, not the amount. Rituals can be cast if they are helpful, and in extreme situations the magi might use vis to boost spell Penetration.

High vis: Around 20 pawns/magus/year. Magi can do pretty much anything they want involving vis. This is probably too much vis for most sagas.

Books also come in two sorts, summae and tractatus, and the analogy goes further than that. Because a tractatus can only be studied once by a given character, you can be fairly sure of the effect that it will have. If you want to keep the rate of power advancement down, restrict the number of summae the covenant has, and don't let the covenant build up a large reserve of tractatus no-one has studied yet. In addition, when a magus's Arts reach the point of being as high as you are comfortable with, cut off the supply of books. The magus can still invent spells or learn other Arts, and that buys you time to become accustomed to the new level of power.

Don't forget that magi in a covenant can write books for each other. You shouldn't interfere with such activities, but should take them into account.

Slow Saga

In a slow saga there are, on average, two or more game sessions per season. Characters do not improve much, and the different lifespans of magi and companions are largely irrelevant.

The main advantage of this style of saga is that the style of play does not have to change much (see Power Levels, page @@). The main disadvantage is that the laboratory rules, which are central to Ars Magica, will get little use. In addition, players may become frustrated if their characters do not improve. This style is closest to the conventional style of most roleplaying games, and is a good way to start a saga, as it allows everyone to get used to their characters and establish their personalities before time, perhaps, starts to pass more quickly.

If you intend to play a slow saga, Virtues and Flaws affecting study, lifespan, and other seasonal activities in game are much less significant, while those that affect the character's starting scores are much more significant. There is no need to change the classification of any Virtues or Flaws, unless you want to, but players should be aware of the relative importance of the different types when they are creating their characters.

Medium Saga

A medium saga has, on average, one to four seasons per game session. Characters do improve, but unless you play very frequently, or over a long period of real time, magi are unlikely to die of old age or pass into Final Twilight.

A medium saga is a good compromise rate, and an excellent way to start, since it is fairly easy to slow down or speed up, as required. Flaws affecting study are of similar significance to those affecting character generation, so players need not pay attention to such subtleties.

In a medium saga it is quite likely that companions and grogs will die of old age, although probably not until the saga is rather advanced. As the characters are likely to have seen extensive play before their deaths, this can create excellent opportunities for roleplaying, and the chance to play the heir of a favored character.

Fast Saga

In a fast saga, more than one year passes per game session, on average. In a fast saga, magi rapidly become powerful, and a magus who starts the saga fresh from his gauntlet can expect to die of natural causes before the end. Companions may be played only a handful of times before they die of old age.

In fast sagas, the emphasis is very much on the magi, particularly once they have become powerful (see Power Levels, page @@). Virtues and Flaws that affect only a character's starting scores are much less important, and should probably be made reclassified or made more effective if they are to be balanced.

Fast sagas are good for players who want to play epic magi who create magical effects which influence the whole of Europe, but they are not a good way to start a saga. In a fast saga, characters change radically almost before you know it, so a slightly slower start is a good way to get to know them. If some members of the troupe are new to Ars Magica, it would be rather difficult for them to manage five or more seasons of study between every game session.

Pulsed Saga

A pulsed saga combines the fast and slow sagas. A dozen game sessions might cover a single season, but then twelve game years might pass before the next session.

Pulsed sagas have many advantages. The intense bursts of activity give companions and grogs ample opportunities for play, while the long periods of downtime allow characters to study, and magi can advance to high levels of power.

Most sagas are pulsed to some extent, as it is very unusual to hit exactly the average rate every session. It only really becomes a separate style when the contrast between rates becomes extreme. This also creates the main problem with this speed of saga: it can be difficult to provide an in-game reason for everything becoming quiet for years of game time, after the characters have spent a season involved in one adventure every week. If you do want to play a pulsed saga, it is important for the storyguide to work out how each story arc will finish, and why any loose ends will wait years before needing to be resolved.

Troupe-Style Roleplaying

In a typical roleplaying game one person serves as the gamemaster, while the other participants have one character each, whom they play from session to session. Troupe-style roleplaying breaks away from those assumptions, and this can make it difficult for experienced roleplayers to get into. There are a number of types of troupe-style play, and while they are listed in ascending order of difference from standard roleplaying this is not meant to suggest that the later forms are better than the earlier. If you want to try the full range, it is probably best to work up through the stages, so that people get used to the differing roles of troupe-style games, but you can also pick a single stage that sits well with your group and simply use that.

If Ars Magica is your first roleplaying game, you should simply select the style that seems most appealing, and then modify it as necessary so that everyone is having fun.

Although none of the styles of troupe-style play are better for everyone, it is almost always better to use some version of troupe-style play rather than conventional play. This is because, although the game is centered on magi, it is very hard to run a whole saga in which the players play their magi in every session. For one thing, it becomes very difficult to challenge a whole group of fairly experienced magi, as at least one member of the group is likely to be skilled at any form of magic. It can be done, but having to do it every session is likely to strain the storyguide. Another problem is that magi like to spend time in their laboratories, and they might well not want to go out at the same time. After a while, it can come to seem rather artificial if everyone drops everything to go on an adventure.

However, if you play in the conventional fashion and some players have non-magi, different problems arise. First, magi are far more powerful than other characters, and get far more attention in the rules. Someone stuck playing a knight might well find his character aging and dying, possibly of boredom, while the magi study magic and create enchanted devices, and even when he does get to see some action he is likely to be overshadowed by the magi in most adventures.

Even the simplest troupe-style play avoids these problems, as every player has a magus and another character. Thus, you should at least try it out.

Alternative Characters

In this version of troupe-style play each player has two or more characters, but only plays one of them in a given session. At least one character should be a magus, and at least one should be a companion (see page @@). There is nothing to stop a player having two magi and four companions, if he can cope with only playing each character once every six sessions or so, and with the book-keeping of keeping each character up to date.

If you play this way, it is essential that a player's characters have good reasons not to go on adventures together. They may dislike each other, but this is not essential. Instead, one player's companion could be closely linked to another player's magus, or the two characters could have very different interests.

This style of play is quite close to conventional roleplaying, in that everyone has their own characters, and no-one is handling more than one character at once. As an extra bonus, it makes it easy for players to introduce new characters if they become tired of an old character or don't like the way he is developing in the saga. This style avoids many of the serious problems that the conventional style raises in Ars Magica, but it can still lead to rather more magi going on an adventure than is ideal.

Pooled Characters

Playing with pooled characters means that, in addition to a player's magi and companions, there is also a 'pool' of grogs and bit-parts, who can be played by anyone. Thus, on a typical adventure, one player might play his magus, a second her companion, while the other two take grogs from the common pool.

This has a number of advantages. First, the number of magi in a group tends to be small, which makes them easier to challenge. Second, the covenant staff get to appear on stage, without condemning anyone to playing bit parts all the time. Third, when playing a grog you can cut loose and enjoy yourself. If you overact and ham up your main character, you are likely to end up annoying the other players. On the other hand, a grog who is hammed up can be restricted to small doses, making him entertaining rather than annoying.

More generally, because a grog is not your main character, it is easier to take major risks, or to do things that you know make the character look stupid. The actions of grogs can be some of the most memorable aspects of adventures. It is also possible to run more than one grog at a time, since they can fade into the background while another character takes most of your playing attention.

From the storyguide's perspective, you can kill grogs to emphasize the seriousness of a situation without killing characters into which the players have invested vast amounts of emotional energy. In games with pooled grogs, grogs are supposed to die. They are played enough for the players to care, but they are not so central that a grog death means a major change in the saga. This applies to other major events; grogs get maimed, go mad, or acquire responsibilities that mean they can no longer go on adventures.

In this style of game it is very important for each pooled grog to be looked after by a single player for development between sessions. It is probably best to start with just one grog per player, and create more as people get more used to using the advancement systems. The player managing the grog's downtime activities gets to say what he does in his time off, and as the number of grogs grows some troupes enjoy spending time on the soap-operatic aspects of the relations between the grogs and the magi.

It is important to remember that Ars Magica's advancement system means that characters do not fall behind in power when they are not played, so that players' primary characters do not lose out when the players are running grogs.

Another major advantage of this style of play is that it can easily handle player absences, particularly if the player warns the troupe in advance. As long as the troupe can get that player's main characters home before the session for which the player is absent, there is no problem at all, just one fewer people to play grogs. The system can even handle players leaving for years to work overseas; their characters fade into the background, spending all their time in the lab, and then can rejoin the saga when the player gets back, still at the same sort of power level as the characters who have been played.

Of course, the game does still rely on the storyguide being available.

Guest Storyguiding

The next level of troupe-style playing involves a player occasionally running a session. The normal storyguide can play some of the pooled grogs, and thus remains involved in the game.

This has a major advantage, in that it gives the regular storyguide an occasional break, which can be very good for both creativity and enthusiasm. It also allows someone to have a go at storyguiding without committing to running a whole saga.

There are, however, potential problems. Since the regular storyguide is going to play, the guest storyguide cannot check all the details of the story in advance, so there is a risk of clashing with the regular storyguide's long-term plans.

The best way to avoid such problems is to have the guest storyguides run stories that take place in isolated locations, such as a distant island, or a cave complex. Regiones (page @@) are excellent for this sort of thing, particularly if they can only be entered under rare conditions, so that the characters cannot go back. The guest storyguide should discuss the sorts of rewards and risks that he can include, so as to avoid upsetting the regular storyguide's plans. It is even possible for the guest storyguide to run a story that takes place in a dream, so that it has no long-term effect on the saga at all, but such devices can easily be overused.

Alpha and Beta Storyguides

The next step is to have more than one member of the troupe acting as storyguide on a regular basis. One storyguide, the alpha storyguide, is responsible for the overall shape of the saga, and has final veto power on story additions, but one or more beta storyguides take responsibility for specific aspects of the saga. A beta storyguide might be responsible for a particular magical regio, or for a local faerie forest, or for the covenant itself, if the characters have joined an old and large institution. As long as the action remains within that location, the beta storyguide has free rein. Some of the participants are still just players, however.

The big advantage of this style is that the alpha storyguide can have a magus and companion, as long as they are designed to go on the sorts of adventures that the beta storyguide runs. In addition, this version of troupe-style play can handle the alpha storyguide's absence as easily as that of any other player, as long as there is some advance notice.

The alpha and beta storyguides should make sure that they are agreed on the sort of reward level that is appropriate, and on the tone of the saga and its individual parts. There is nothing wrong with making a faerie forest into a comedic part of a saga, as long as everyone is agreed in advance, but introducing laser guns and spaceships is likely to cause problems.

This style has the additional advantage that events can sometimes surprise everyone, including all the storyguides, when the different plots interact in unexpected ways. This is an advantage, in the same way as unexpected player actions are good for a conventional game, but it does mean that the storyguides need to be very flexible.

Pure Troupe Style

In the purest form of troupe style, everyone runs games in roughly equal amounts, and there is no alpha storyguide. This requires quite a bit of coordination, and the troupe must decide on a method for resolving disputes in rule interpretation. One possibility is to have one person as the 'rules storyguide', and have her interpretation be final, but a more democratic method might also work if the group is willing to cooperate.

This style gives everyone an equal chance to run the game and play characters, and can handle any anticipated player absences without any trouble. If one player runs out of storyguiding ideas, she can simply play for a while, until something new occurs to her.

Pure troupe style does, however, require a group of players all of whom are comfortable with rules and with running games. This might prove difficult, especially if the troupe recruits new members from time to time.

Researching a Setting

So, you've decided you want to run an Ars Magica saga. What now? You need to create the covenant, probably with the co-operation of the players (see page @@), and then you need to put it somewhere. There are a number of options for this, and none is better or worse than the others. You can even switch between them during a saga, either doing more research, or deliberately including more non-historical elements.

Research needn't involve books and libraries. You can search on the internet, ask questions on discussion forums, or watch historical documentaries on television. This is, after all, a game, so you should research the things you find interesting, in a way you find enjoyable.

The Pure Fantasy Saga

You can set your saga in a pure fantasy world. You might adapt a published one to include the Order of Hermes, or create your own. The advantage is that you don't have to worry about historical facts at all, and can have exactly the setting you want. The disadvantage is that the setting of Ars Magica has even influenced the mechanics, so you will find that you have to adapt or ignore a lot of the game material.

The No-Research Saga

Pick a Tribunal for the covenant (see the map on page @@). Pick names for the local nobility, towns, and parish church. Decide what sort of geography you want. Use elements from the Mythic Europe chapter (page @@) to make your stories feel medieval. Have fun, and ignore people telling you that the king of England in 1220 wasn't William the Bastard.

The Low-Research Saga

Get hold of a modern map of Europe, and pick an area with the sort of terrain you want. Look up twelfth and thirteenth century events in an encyclopedia or general world history, to give you a few names and trends. Most of the cities, towns, and villages in modern Europe were there in the Middle Ages, only smaller, so shrink places. (There are some exceptions, but at this level of research, you don't want to worry about that.) Add more forest. Roads, with the exceptions of freeways/motorways/autobahn, tend to follow historic routes that sometimes go back to the Romans, so you can use those as described.

From that point, things proceed as for the no-research saga.

Alternatively, buy one of the Tribunal Books from Atlas Games, and set your saga in that Tribunal. This gives you most of the benefits of the Extreme-Research Saga, with a level of effort more like the Low-Research version.

The Medium-Research Saga

Pick your area from a modern map, as above. Then find a history of that area, and read the chapters on the twelfth and thirteenth centuries. This will give you quite a few names, a fair bit of social detail, and some idea of which towns were important back then. Work what you've learned into your saga in a way that will impress your players.

The High-Research Saga

Once you have chosen your area, get hold of a history of that area that focuses on the twelfth of thirteenth centuries. Reading such a book will probably give you more information than you can possibly include in a saga. More recent histories are better for gaming purposes than older ones, because recent historians tend to pay more attention to what life was like, and to events other than battles and the deaths of kings. Give characters names that match the sorts of names you find in the book, so that they 'sound right'. Have the repercussions of events you read about affect the covenant. Foreshadow future history, giving the players a chance to change it. And so on.

The Extreme-Research Saga

Read several single-volume histories of the area in question, to get a more balanced view. Find, and read, histories of specific aspects, such as the history of a single city, or of the law, or of the Church, or even a single monastery. Track down books written in or about your area during the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, and read them in translation. Learn Latin so that you can read the ones that haven't been translated yet. Learn paleography so that you can read the ones still in manuscript. Go back to university and get a Ph.D. in medieval studies while actually just researching your saga.

Somewhere before the 'learn Latin' stage is the amount of research that most authors do before writing a Tribunal book or similar piece of setting material for the line. For a personal saga, that's a lot of research.

Saga Styles

There are a number of different ways of playing Ars Magica, all valid, and many compatible with each other. Indeed, almost any combination is possible over the course of a saga, particularly as there is nothing wrong with the style of a saga changing over time. The descriptions here are merely intended to give you some ideas, and help you work out what sort of saga you want to play.

High Fantasy

The characters spend much of their time dealing with demons, faeries, giants, dragons, and angels. Powerful, flashy mystical effects are extremely common, dealing with mundanes is not. This works particularly well with a low-research saga, as high fantasy elements have to be made up anyway.

Mundane Interactions

The characters spend a lot of time dealing with local nobles, churchmen, bandits, and traders. They might worry about whether the covenant has enough cattle to provide the vellum for its library, or be concerned with the trend towards violent antisemitism sweeping the country. Magic might be used a lot, but it tends to be low-key and subtle, even if it is powerful.

Hermetic Life

The characters spend most of their time interacting with other Hermetic magi. They might be dedicated politicians in the local Tribunal, bibliophiles trying to gather the finest library in the Order, or Hoplites dedicated to hunting down any magus who turns to diabolism.

Action-Adventure

The characters fight and defeat enemies, whether by force of arms or force of magic. They may or may not loot the bodies afterwards.

Investigation

The characters unravel mysteries, discover murderers, and trace the resting place of lost treasures.

Politics

The characters negotiate with others to get what they want, or to help their allies get what they want.

Creation

The characters are trying to build something, whether abstract or concrete. They might be trying to create the strongest, most vibrant covenant in the Order, or a giant flying ship, or bring justice and peace to a war-torn area of Europe.

Saga Priorities

The highest priority for any saga is to ensure that all the players are having fun. This is much easier if you have good communication between the players, and people are not afraid to talk about what they do and don’t enjoy in the game.

If one player finds certain story elements upsetting or offensive, then you shouldn’t include them. If another player finds the *absence* of the same elements upsetting or offensive, then you have a real problem within the group that you will need to talk about. The historical setting of Ars Magica makes this sort of conflict more likely than it might be in other games. For example, a Christian player might find plot lines that portray the Church as corrupt offensive, but a pagan player might find plot lines that portray the Church as virtuous equally offensive. The only way to resolve such problems is to talk about them, and the resolution might be a decision that Ars Magica is the wrong game for your group.

On a less serious level, different people enjoy different styles of story. The covenant and troupe-style play mean that Ars Magica is well-adapted to covering many styles of story in a single saga, and so this sort of problem can generally be solved within the game. Players should be allowed to adapt their characters, or introduce new ones, if they find that their existing characters do not fit well with the sorts of story they enjoy. On the other hand, if the main storyguide does not enjoy running the kinds of story that certain players want, that might be a good opportunity to try out guest storyguiding. Communication and tolerance are also important for resolving this issue, as players may have to put up with some stories that are not really their thing, so that everyone can have fun.

Finally, “game balance” in Ars Magica is nothing more than a tool for making sure that all the players have fun, by making it hard for one player’s character to monopolise the spotlight. Magi are not balanced against companions, but the idea is that everyone will take turns playing their magi and companions, and so the spotlight will move around. This means that you do not need to worry too much about game balance when modifying the rules to suit your play style. As long as the changes help everyone to have fun, they are good.

Roleplaying games are a way to explore other worlds, other perspectives, and other possibilities. But they are, or at least Ars Magica is, first and foremost entertainment.

Enjoy yourselves.

Quid rides? Mutato nomine, de te fabula narrantur. — Horace, Satires