

The Art of Magic

# Ars Magica

Fifth Edition



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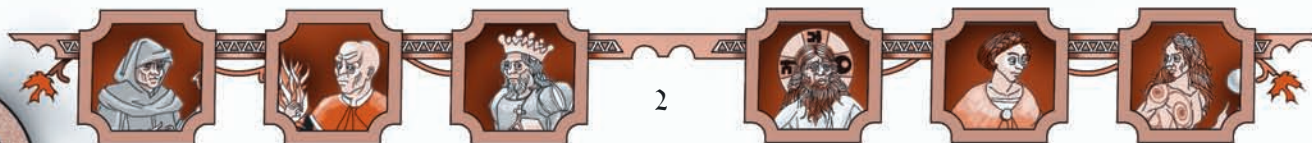
[www.atlas-games.com](http://www.atlas-games.com)

Ars Magica players participate in a thriving fan community by subscribing to email discussion lists (like the Berkeley list), compiling archives of game material (such as Project Redcap), maintaining fan-created web sites, and running demos through Atlas Games' Special Ops program. To learn more, visit [www.atlas-games.com/ArM5](http://www.atlas-games.com/ArM5).

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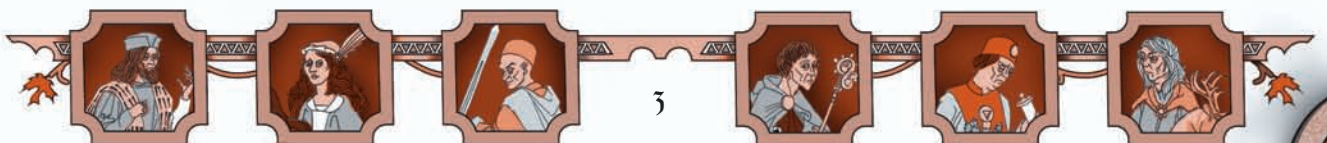
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## Chapter One

# Introduction

*On the day the faeries came to burn the village, Walter was repairing the thatch on his roof. As he worked, he kept half an eye on the strangers who had arrived the previous evening. Walter didn't like the look of them, particularly the woman. She looked like the sort who sold watered ale, and seduced men so she could rob and kill them while they slept.*

*The group seemed to be waiting for something, and when the faeries rode out of the woods Walter thought he knew what. The grass blackened and smoked in the hoofprints left by the shining crimson horses, and the hands of the faerie nobles were swathed in flames, as always. Walter shouted the alarm, and the villagers ran for the church. He shifted to get off the roof, and his leg went straight through the damaged thatch, trapping him. His warning shouts changed to cries for help, but the other villagers knew the rules.*

*Run straight for the church. Stay in the church until the faeries have gone. Do not come out to help anyone, no matter who it looks and sounds like.*

*Helpless, Walter watched his death approach as the priest began to ring the church bell. The strangers split up, the woman moving forward by herself and calling to the faeries in a language Walter didn't understand. For a moment, he thought she was a spy for the faeries, but then the leader threw a bolt of flame, and Walter thought she was merely dead.*

*She wasn't. The fire that could destroy a house in a moment had left the woman completely unharmed. She spoke again, more loudly this time, gesturing at the faerie leader's horse as she did so. A moment later the horse shrieked, a dreadful, high sound that went on and on, and bucked its rider off. The faerie got to his feet as the horse rolled, still screaming in agony, igniting small fires as it writhed.*

*The woman spoke again, and this time the faerie listened. Walter couldn't understand what they were saying. The discussion went on for some time, as the horse got to its feet, seemingly unharmed, and the woman's companions came forward to join her. In the end, some sort of agreement was reached, and the faeries turned and rode back into the forest.*

*Walter watched the woman, clearly a witch of some sort, approach his house, looking up with an unpleasant smirk on her face. She spoke and gestured again, and Walter felt some force grab him. He was lifted off the roof, but then placed gently, standing, on the ground in front of the witch. She spoke to one of her escort, who then spoke to Walter.*

*"My mistress would like to talk to the priest and bailiff. Please bring them here."*

*Walter did not feel like arguing, and ran to the church, shouting that the faeries were gone.*

## Welcome to Ars Magica

Dragons lair in the mountains, angels watch over the Church, faeries dance in the forests, and demons tempt men and women to their ultimate downfall. The magi of the Order of Hermes live in a world of mythic power, the world of Mythic Europe. Welcome to that world.

Welcome to **Ars Magica**.

**Ars Magica** is a roleplaying game, where in you and your friends tell the stories of a group of powerful wizards, magi of the Order of Hermes, and their allies in the world of Mythic Europe. Mythic Europe is much like the Europe of 1220, the middle ages, but dragons, demons, angels, and faeries are all unquestionably real, and no aspect of society is untouched by myth.

**Ars Magica** is a game about magic, and its rules for magic are widely regarded as the best in any roleplaying game. They combine flexibility and rigor, allowing you to create powerful wizards who can do almost anything, while provid-

ing clear guidelines on just how powerful a wizard needs to be to do anything you can think of. The rules also cover the creation of enchanted devices, binding familiars, and training apprentices to carry on your magical legacy. The time an **Ars Magica** magus spends in his laboratory is at least as important to him as the time he spends on adventures.

This book is the core rulebook for the Fifth Edition of **Ars Magica**. Some of you will have played previous editions of the game, and will find much here that is familiar, although improved. For others, this is your first encounter with **Ars Magica**, so everything will be new and wonderful.

## Basic Ideas

In many ways, **Ars Magica** is very similar to most other pen-and-paper roleplaying games. Players have characters, who are defined by a set of numbers, and control their characters' actions by telling the other players what they do. One player, called the "sto-

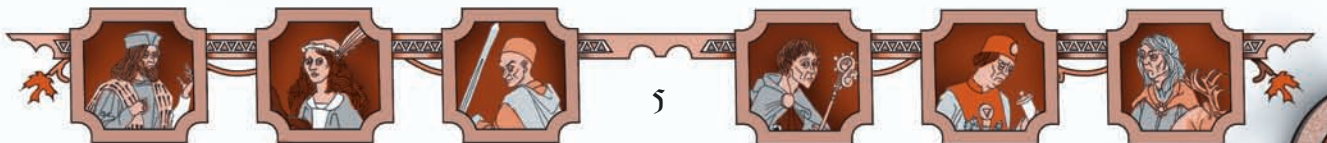
ryguide" in **Ars Magica**, handles most of the world, deciding what antagonists and extras do. Conflicts, or tasks that might be beyond a character's capabilities, are resolved according to the rules described in this book, and a die roll.

There are also a number of differences. None of these features are unique to **Ars Magica**, but they are rare enough that you can have played roleplaying games for years without encountering them.

First, the available character types are not equal in power. Hermetic magi are far more powerful than other possible player characters. Power does not necessarily correspond to how interesting a character is to play, and The Gift that allows magi to work magic also causes them problems in most social situations.

Second, most players have more than one character. This is called "troupe-style roleplaying," and is discussed in detail in the Sagas chapter. The role of storyguide may also pass around the group, or troupe, and player characters are divided between central characters (magi and companions) and supporting cast (groggs). A player would normally only play one central character at a time, but might play several grogs at once.





## Stress Die

Initial Roll	Result
0	Check for a botch. <i>No zeros on botch dice:</i> No botch, die roll is 0. <i>One or more zeros on botch dice:</i> Botch. Total is 0, and something bad happens.
1	Re-roll, doubling the result. Zeros count as ten. If more ones are rolled, continue re-rolling and doubling.
2-9	Die roll result is the number showing on the die.

Third, the game is normally centered around the place where the characters live, called a "covenant," rather than around a wandering group of adventurers. This opens up a whole set of new story possibilities, and the covenant is as much a character in the game as any of the human beings.

Finally, characters in *Ars Magica* improve over years of game time, and most sagas cover at least a few years of game time. Adventures are occasional interruption in their lives, not everyday activities, and consequences that come years down the road can still have an impact on an ongoing series of connected stories, called a "saga." In many sagas, families grow, children grow up, and characters die of old age. *Ars Magica's* rules provide plenty of support for the ways that characters can study, learn, and improve over time.

*Ars Magica* is particularly well-suited to long running sagas, but it can also be played as a one-off, one-session game, or a mini-series of connected stories. Similarly, although the official setting is very similar to historical medieval Europe, apart from all the mythic power around the place, the rule system works well for a magic-centered campaign in any fantasy setting. The Mythic Europe, Stories, and Sagas chapters discuss ways to run the game, and provide hints to help you do whatever you want with it.

In the last analysis, *Ars Magica* is a game. If you have fun with it, you are doing it right.

## Structure of the Book

This is a big book, as it needs to be to explain all the rules and background for *Ars Magica*. The first chapter, this Introduction, provides a quick overview of the game, and explains the basic die-rolling mechanic.

Chapter 2, Order of Hermes, describes the order of wizards that is central to the game.

Chapters 3, 4 and 5, Characters, Virtues and Flaws, and Abilities contain all the information necessary to create a character. Chapter 6, Covenants, deals with creating the place where the characters live. Chapters 7, 8, and 9, Hermetic Magic, Laboratory, and Spells, describe Hermetic Magic. Chapter 10, Long-Term Events, covers things that happen to the characters over months or years, including character improvement, aging and death, and Warping by mystical power. Chapter 11, Obstacles, details the things that might harm the characters, most notably combat.

Chapter 12, Realms, explains the four different sorts of mystical power in Mythic Europe, the Divine, Faerie, Infernal, and Magical Realms. Chapter 13, Bestiary, provides a sample of creatures from each of these Realms. Chapter 14, Mythic Europe, provides hints on making your world feel like it happens in the mythic world.

Chapters 15 and 16, Stories and Sagas, provides advice on using the preceding material to actually make a game that the troupe enjoys.

## Die Rolls

The success or failure of most actions in an *Ars Magica* story is determined by rolling dice. For non-magical actions, the roll is normally Characteristic + Ability + Die Roll against an Ease Factor. If the total equals or exceeds the Ease Factor, the action succeeds. The amount by which the result exceeds the Ease Factor gives some indication of how successful the action was. Magic uses the same basic rules, but there are special rules for determining what to add to the die roll, and the number that the total must beat.

## Simple Die

Roll a ten-sided die. Each number counts for its value, except that a zero counts as ten.

## Stress Die

Stress dice are rolled when a character is under stress, and thus might succeed spectacularly, or fail with equal flair. Such a significant failure is called a "botch," and always has serious effects.

For a stress roll, roll a ten-sided die. One and zero have special meanings, but the other numbers count for their value, as normal. On a roll of one, roll again and double the number rolled. If the re-roll is also a one, roll again and quadruple. On second and subsequent rolls, a zero counts as ten. If a player rolled ten consecutive ones, the number rolled on the eleventh throw would be multiplied by 1024. Stress die totals in the hundreds are likely to happen a handful of times in a long-running saga.

On the first roll, zero counts as zero, and you must normally roll for a botch. Roll a number of ten-sided dice determined by the situation, called the "botch dice," and if any of them show a zero, you have botched. If you roll no zeroes on the botch dice, the die roll is simply a zero.

Some stress rolls cannot botch. In that case, a zero on the initial roll is simply a roll of zero. Similarly, if a character has qualities that reduce the number of applicable botch dice to zero, the stress roll cannot botch.

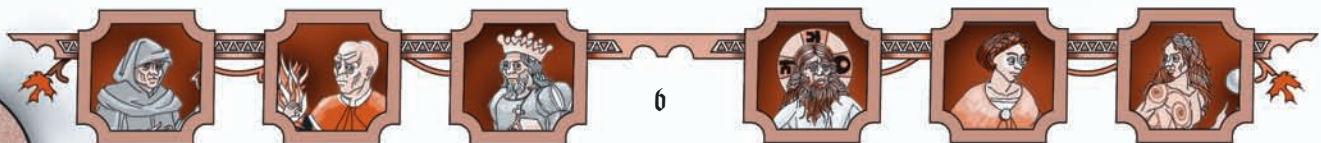
On a botch, your total for the roll is always zero, in addition to any other consequences. If you roll a zero but do not botch, the total is calculated as normal, adding zero from the die roll.

For example, consider a character with a Characteristic + Ability total of 9 making a stress roll.

If the roll comes up 6, he has a total of 15, 9 from the Characteristic + Ability total, plus 6 from the die roll.

If the first roll comes up a 1, he re-rolls and doubles the result. If the second result is also a 1, he does so again. So, if he rolls two 1s and then a 5, he has a final total of 29: 9 from Characteristic + Ability, and 20, from multiplying the final 5 by 4.

If the first roll comes up a 0, he needs to check for a botch. If none of the botch dice come up 0, his total is 9, the Characteristic + Ability total, plus 0 from the die roll. If any of the botch dice come up 0, his total is 0. The Characteristic + Ability total is also negated by the botch.



## Botch Chance

Number of Botch Dice	Chance of Botch	Example Situation
1	1%	Good conditions; the default number of botch dice.
2	1.9%	Running through undergrowth.
3	2.7%	Climbing a crumbling cliff in a high wind.
4	3.4%	Fighting in driving rain while in running water up to your ankles.
5	4.1%	Translating negotiations between the Pope, a Faerie Lord who speaks only ancient Egyptian, and a powerful elemental spirit who speaks no human languages.
6	4.7%	Fighting exact faerie copies of yourself and your companions on a crumbling ice floe in a blizzard.
7	5.2%	Climbing a sheer wall of ice in a blizzard. (The Ease Factor for this would be very high as well, probably about 21.)
8	5.7%	Fighting exact faerie copies of yourself and your companions in a faerie forest where the plants are actively interfering with you.
9	6.1%	Juggling five full cups of wine while four dancing bears cavort around you.
10	6.5%	Casting a spell in the church of the Holy Sepulchre in Jerusalem.

## Ease Factors

The following table gives sample Ease Factors for tasks of varying difficulty.

Ease Factor	Difficulty
0	<i>Trivial.</i> A character needs to be severely hindered to have any chance of failure. Almost never worth rolling for.
3	<i>Simple.</i> An average character with no training succeeds about 70% of the time. Only roll if failure is very significant, otherwise assume success.
6	<i>Easy.</i> An average character with some skill succeeds about 70% of the time, and talented or skilled characters almost never fail.
9	<i>Average.</i> Talented or skilled characters succeed about 70% of the time, unskilled characters have little chance of success, and moderately skilled characters have about a 50% chance of success.
12	<i>Hard.</i> Unskilled characters always fail, and moderately skilled characters normally do, unless they are very talented. Skilled characters fail about half the time.
15	<i>Very Hard.</i> Even moderate skill gives almost no chance of success. Skilled and talented characters fail about half the time, but very skilled, highly talented characters succeed about 70% of the time.
18	<i>Impressive.</i> People at the top of a skill succeed about half the time. Those with lesser abilities have next to no chance.
21	<i>Remarkable.</i> Very skilled, highly talented characters only succeed occasionally.
24+	<i>Almost impossible.</i> The greatest masters of a skill succeed when they get lucky.

*Notes:* An average character has a score of 0 in the relevant Characteristic, a highly talented character has a score of +3. Moderate skill is a score of 3 in an Ability, "Skilled" means a score of 6, and "Very Skilled" means 9.

## Botch Dice

Botch dice represent the chance that something will go seriously wrong in an activity. The number of botch dice should reflect how likely a problem is, and the number of botch dice that come up zero determine how badly something has gone wrong.

There are some situations where, although a character could do very well, he could not do very badly. This applies, for example, if the character is making something, but has time to do it again if the first attempt goes badly wrong. A disaster might happen, but would not be the final result, so a botch is

not really possible. In such cases, no botch dice should be rolled.

The base for most situations is a single botch die. For example, a person climbing a cliff in fair weather would get a single botch die. Factors making a disaster more likely increase the number of botch dice. A strong wind might add a single botch die to the climber, while a weak and crumbling surface might also add a botch die.

The table above gives the chance of a botch for a given number of botch dice. Note that, as the character must first roll a zero on the stress die, the chance of a botch can never be higher than 10%.

Multiple zeroes on the botch dice indicate that things have gone very wrong indeed. Three or more zeroes indicate that things have gone about as wrong as they could. The consequences of this depend on what the character is doing.

For example, consider the character climbing a crumbling cliff in a high wind. If he botches, he falls, as that is the obvious disaster. A single botch indicates that he falls fairly early in the climb, and takes only a little damage. A double botch indicates that he falls a bit over half way up, while a triple botch indicates that he gets almost to the top, and then falls. The damage in each case will depend on the height of the cliff and what is to be found at the base.



# Glossary

The following terms are some of the more important in the game, and they come up repeatedly in what follows.

**Bonisagus:** The brilliant eighth-century magus who developed the Parma Magica and, with the help of the other Founders, the whole of Hermetic Magic. The founder of House Bonisagus.

**The Church:** All Christians, whether priests or not. Also used to refer specifically to the organizational structures of the Church in Western Europe.

**companion:** A game term, not used by characters, referring to central characters who are not magi.

**Covenant:** Strictly, a group of magi bound together by an agreement going beyond the Code of Hermes. By extension, the place where those magi live, and all the other people who live there with them. Almost all *Ars Magica* sagas center on a single covenant.

**The Divine:** The greatest power in the universe, generally believed to be the creator and sustainer of all existence. It backs the Church, the Jews, and the Muslims.

**Faerie:** One of the four mystic realms. Faeries always care about humans, sometimes in the way a torturer cares about his victims.

**filius/filia:** A magus trained by a given magus. Only used after apprenticeship. After the Gauntlet, the new magus becomes the filius of the magus who trained him.

**Formulaic magic:** Spells that have been worked out in detail ahead of time. They have one effect each, but magi can only use their full power through Formulaic magic.

**The Founders:** The twelve magi who founded the Order of Hermes in the eighth century. Bonisagus, Bjornaer, Criamon, Diedne, Flambeau, Guernicus, Jerbiton, Mercere, Merinita, Tremere, Tytalus, and Verditius. In many modern accounts, Diedne's name is replaced with Trianoma's.

**Gauntlet:** In full, the Apprentice's Gauntlet. The final test administered to an apprentice to determine whether he is ready to become a magus; it differs significantly between Houses.

**The Gift:** The ability to use almost any form of magic, with proper training. All magi have The Gift. The Gift makes people around a character uneasy.

**grog:** A game term referring to supporting player characters. Characters also use it, but mainly to refer to warriors employed by a covenant.

**Hedge magic:** A contemptuous term used within the Order of Hermes for any magic other than Hermetic magic.

**Hermetic magic:** The extremely powerful and flexible magic practiced by the members of the Order of Hermes.

**The Infernal:** One of the four mystic realms. Infernal creatures seek to corrupt and destroy people.

**Magic:** One of the four mystic realms. Magical creatures do not care one way or the other about humans.

**maga/magus/magi:** A member of the Order of Hermes who can use Hermetic magic. Used by both players and characters. "Maga" is the feminine form, "magus" the masculine, and "magi" the plural.

**Mythic Europe:** The world of *Ars Magica*. Much like medieval Europe in 1220, except that the myths are true.

**Order of Hermes:** An order of wizards stretching across the whole of Mythic Europe, bound by an oath that keeps them from fighting each other or trying to rule the mundanes. One of the most central organizations in the game.

**parens:** The magus who trained another magus. This title is only used after apprenticeship; at Gauntlet, the master becomes the parens of the new magus.

**Parma Magica:** A ritual learned by all Hermetic magi at the conclusion of their apprenticeship, which allows them to resist magic. The first of Bonisagus's great discoveries.

**Quaesitor:** The investigators of the Order of Hermes, they find Hermetic criminals and present evidence of their crimes at *Tribunal*.

**Redcap:** One of the messengers of the Order of Hermes. Most do not have The Gift.

**The Schism War:** A war in the early eleventh century in which House Diedne was eliminated, and which nearly tore the Order apart.

**sodalis (pl. sodales):** The normal term used by magi to refer to other magi. It is a term used between equals, and emphasizes that all Hermetic magi are equal within the Order.

**spell:** An individual use of magic, generally Hermetic magic. There is no real limit on the number of spells a magus can cast in a day, although casting too many in quick succession is likely to exhaust him.

**Spontaneous magic:** Magic created by a magus on the spur of the moment, to meet an immediate need. Generally much weaker than Formulaic magic, but much more flexible.

**Trianoma:** The maga who met Bonisagus soon after he invented the Parma Magica, and took on the political mission of bringing Europe's wizards together in a single Order.

**Tribunal:** 1) One of the thirteen areas into which the Order of Hermes divides Mythic Europe.

2) The meetings of the magi in one of those areas, held once every seven years.

**Vis:** Raw magic. The most valuable thing to most magi.





# Ars Magica

## Fifth Edition

“You may be the greatest wizard Europe has ever seen. Not yet, apprentice, but soon. When your studies are complete, neither knight nor king, neither demon or dragon shall command your fate.

“You alone shall decide the history of this land, from Scotland in the West to the Holy Land in the East. The King believes the tales we tell to the simpler folk.

True power lies not in the nobility or the church, but in our laboratories and covenants. It lies with us: the magi. The wizards.”

Dragons lair in the mountains, angels watch over the Church, faeries dance in the forests, and demons tempt men and women to their ultimate downfall. The magi of the Order of Hermes live in a world of mythic power — the world of Mythic Europe. Prepare to explore that world with these essential supplements for the Fifth Edition of the *Ars Magica* roleplaying game.

#### HOUSES OF HERMES

This series of player sourcebooks delves into the Houses that compose the Order of Hermes. It begins with *True Lineages*, covering Houses Guernicus, Mercere, Tremere, and Bonisagus. It's followed with *Mystery Cults*, concerning Houses Bjornaer, Criamon, Merinita, and Verditius. The series is completed with *Societates*, detailing Houses Flambeau, Jerbiton, Tytalus, and Ex Miscellanea.

#### REALMS OF POWER

Four supernatural Realms of power hold sway over Mythic Europe, and are explored in this series. In *The Divine* you'll find details on Judaism, Christianity, and Islam, as well as rules for Divinely empowered wonder workers and angels. *The Infernal* concerns the forces of Hell, whose demons work to corrupt all the people of Mythic Europe. *Magic* delves into the source of power wielded by Hermetic magi, and Magical creatures like elementals, dragons, spirits, and the unquiet dead. Finally, *Faerie* tells of the Realm whose denizens live according to roles and stories, drawing vitality from the mortals who become part of their tales but cannot survive them unchanged.

#### TRIBUNAL SOURCEBOOKS

From the central lands of Germany and France, to Greece and Asia Minor, to the far-away lands of Arabia, tribunal sourcebooks contain the myths and magic of the Hermetic Tribunals of Mythic Europe and beyond. Discover the Middle Ages as it could have been in *Guardians of the Forests*, *The Lion and the Lily*, *The Sundered Eagle*, and *The Cradle and the Crescent*.

#### METACREATOR TEMPLATE

Enhance your gaming experience with Alter Ego Software's *Ars Magica* Metacreator Template. It provides whole-character and covenant management from creation, to study and training, to spell research and enchanting magical devices. Game system rules and adjustments are built in with hundreds of data items ready to use from *Ars Magica* Fifth Edition. All data is fully customizable with character sheets, spell books, and encounter groups, plus HTML and RTF stat block outputs. Visit [www.AlterEgoSoftware.com](http://www.AlterEgoSoftware.com) for more information.

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