

# Games From Folktales

## Series One Scripts

An experiment in podcasting for the Ars Magica game



**Thank you  
for listening**



# Credits

Written by Timothy Ferguson

Copyright 2016.

Ars Magica, and all related trademarks, are used with the kind permission of Atlas Games.

Thanks to the Ars Magica fan community.

Thanks to the Librivox community, particularly Dr Heather Mbye, whose voice was used in an episode.

## Image credits

Cover fractal:

<https://morguefile.com/search/morguefile/2/spiral/pop>

Appendix image

Photo credit: VMOS via Foter.com / CC BY

Cloacina image

Photo credit: Internet Archive Book Images via Small Kitchen /

Dragon image

Photo credit: flyone via Small Kitchen / CC BY-SA

Gauntlet

Timothy Ferguson

Glowing hand

<https://morguefile.com/search/morguefile/1/hands%2Cgreen/pop>

Hysteria image

[https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Maenad\\_Peering\\_Through\\_the\\_Trees.jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Maenad_Peering_Through_the_Trees.jpg)

Sea image

Photo credit: jaredeberhardt via Foter.com / CC BY-SA

Weighing of the heart

[https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File%3AWeighing\\_of\\_the\\_heart3.jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File%3AWeighing_of_the_heart3.jpg)

White swallow-wort (thief weed) image

Wikimedia commons:

[https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Vincetoxicum\\_hirundinaria\\_Sturm10013.jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Vincetoxicum_hirundinaria_Sturm10013.jpg)

# Games From Folktales

Series One

# CONTENTS

## **MAGIC THEORY**

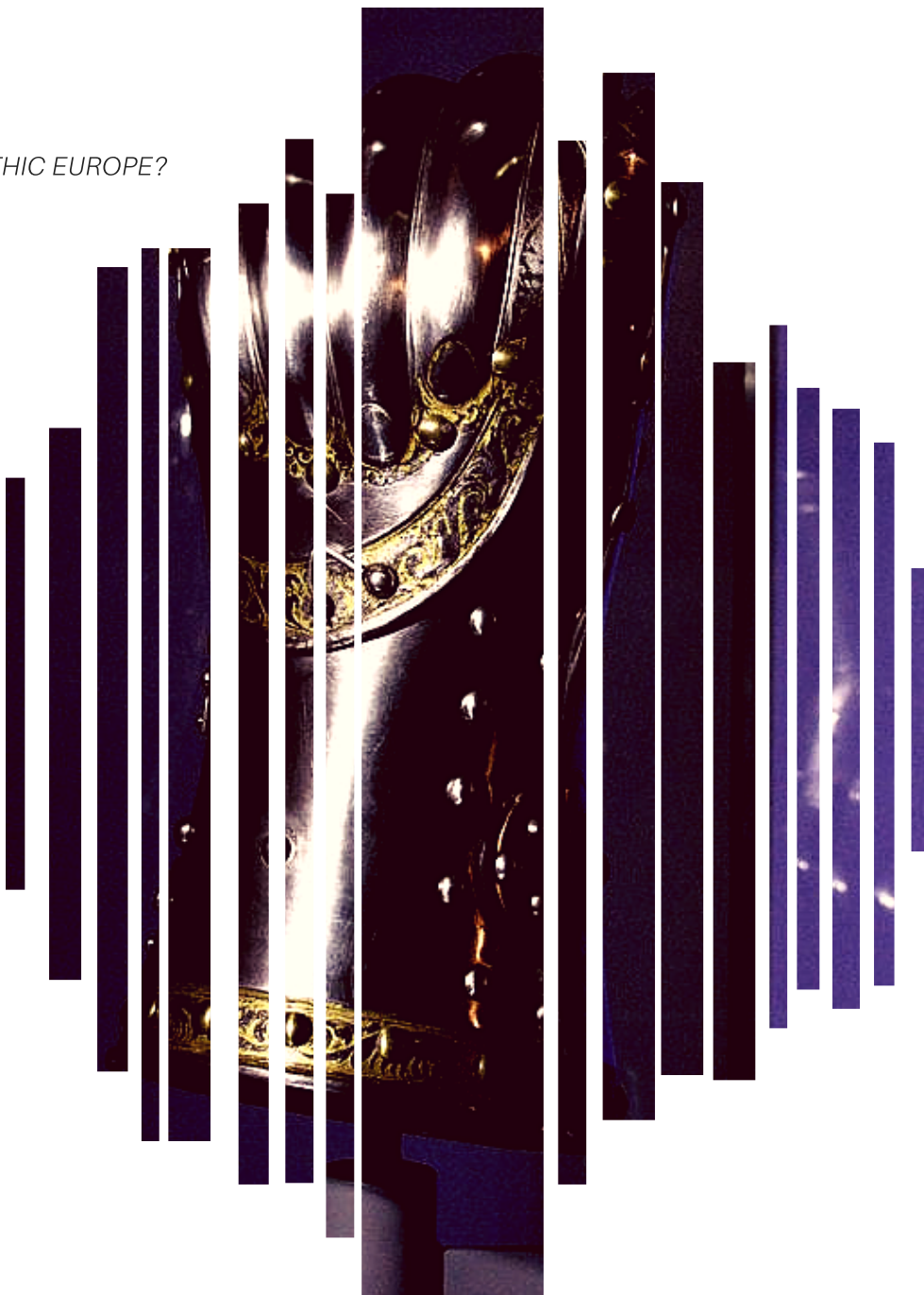
- 4 *STARTING AT THE APPENDIX*
- 2 *WHAT DO YOUR HANDS SAY IN MYTHIC EUROPE?*
- 5 *INTER-SEXUALITY*
- 9 *THE COLOUR BLINDNESS OF CLASSICAL PEOPLE*

## **ORDER OF HERMES LORE**

- 15 *DRESSING LIKE A MURDER HOBO*
- 10 *MASS HYSTERIA*

## **MYSTERY LORE**

- 11 *SACRIFICING HORACE TO CLOACINA*
- 12 *GODS CAN'T SEE YOU*
- 13 *LETTER TO SURA*
- 6 *CHARLES DARWIN WRECKED OUR DRAGONS*





# What do your hands say in Mythic Europe?

In roleplaying games, spellcasters generally make arcane gestures with their hands. In *Ars Magica*, spells are easier to cast if the character can make sweeping gestures. Spellcasting with subtle gestures is a hindrance, and casting without gestures deeply limits a magician's power. Your character's hands are doing something, and that something affects fundamental universal forces: what's the mechanism for that?

In some games, the gestures are arbitrary, and are used to signal an aesthetic choice about your character. I remember, from very long ago, that in TSR's *Principalities of Ghantri*, the vampire lord cast spells with great gestures and evocations of dark powers, even though this had no mechanical effect. Games in which they are arbitrary often suggest magicians use them as a sort of concentration aid. The gesture helps the magus focus and channel power, but any rote movement will do.

In *Ars Magica* gestures cannot, strictly speaking, be arbitrary, because a character making a Magic Theory roll can observe a spell being cast, determine its effect, and throw up a counterspell. This implies that the observer is gathering information from the gestures. The gestures, therefore, refer to a shared lexicon. They have a meaning beyond the personal eccentricity of each spellcaster.

I've been thinking about this, in fits and starts, for about four years. My wife speaks a simplified version of Auslan (Australian sign language) because some of her family members use it, and because she used to be a carer for multicap adults. I know a handful of signs, mostly involving being able to signal my wife in noisy restaurants.

As an aside, this isn't too far from how medieval sign languages evolved. Monastic sign language evolved because monks used to read out loud when copying books. This made rooms with multiple copyists so loud that a sign language developed to allow communication by a method less disturbing than shouting over the other copyists. It's also why libraries today have carels.



So, magi can understand each other's signs. Why? We know that they need not be able to understand each other's languages. There are quite a few magi who cast spells using Greek instead of Latin. I'd argue that the signs are not for communication with magi at all.

In *Realms of Power : Magic*, we learn that each spell is actually completed by an airy spirit from the Magic realm. The ability to cast spells is the ability to create, to cajole omnipresent, spirits. Spirits naturally understand all human languages, which gets them over the Greek/Latin/Gaelic divides in spellcasting. I'd argue that the hand gestures are intended as communication with the airy spirits. Magi watching them can understand the signs because this spiritual language is not an arbitrary concentration aid: it's part of the underlying structure of Mythic Europe's reality. This also explains how magi can botch spells.

In the current rules, magi can fail at casting a spell so spectacularly that they are harmed by the attempt. The most profound form of harm is Twilight, where they slip, for a time, into the Magical Realm. This draws them closer to that realm, so that in time they are pulled into it forever. It has never been clear how "botching" works. If the magus gets to just make up the gestures and words, then it cannot be mispronunciation, or failure of performance, that triggers the botch. Magical items cannot botch, so the process of channelling mystical energy is predictable to the point where it can be mechanised. It must be an internal failure to process the magical energy.

I'd posit that Twilight occurs because the magus has used the wrong hand gestures. Twilight experiences are Nature's way of debugging the magus, so that he stops spewing broken code at airy spirits. Many magi come back from Twilight with enhanced powers, precisely related to the target of their failed spell. To me that sounds like the magus has been altered so that he stops damaging reality.

Can non-magi understand the signs? I'd argue they can, particularly if they were raised in a magical environment. Further, I'd argue that just as some children raised by faeries have skill in negotiating their courts, I'd suggest children raised by airy spirits make better spellcasters because their native language is spellcasting sign. There are some communities where sign was the common language, Martha's Vineyard, for example. It seems possible that in a covenant with people from all over Mythic Europe, an argot of natural signs may devolve out of the signs magi use.

In discussing natural signs, we need to note that American Sign Language, which is the sign most familiar to most *Ars Magica* players, is a bit unusual. Early in their development, and I hope you'll pardon a vast simplification, modern sign languages received a lot of criticism that they were not true language, but just a type of mime. Speakers of some languages, including Auslan just kept on with "natural" signs. American Sign Language was, instead, redesigned so that the formal word for a thing bore no relationship to that thing. Over time, ASL has tended to come back to more natural signs, by accruing slang. I'm noting this because it matters for language acquisition by Mythic Europeans without the Gift.

If signs are "natural" then mortals will pick them up. It doesn't take a genius to see the sign for "food" and realise the person would like something to eat. Similarly, the sign for "Ball of Abyssal Flame" may be something so obviously threatening that the mortal has an idea that it might be time to dive into a nearby river. If the signs are in some sense rarefied, then that won't happen, particularly because the Spirits may prevent linguistic drift. You might not get slang in magical sign language.

The sign for "father" in ASL is the dominant hand, fingers spread apart, with the thumb then tapped twice at the eyebrow on the dominant hand side. I'm not sure how it gets to mean "father", and that's the point. You don't look at it and go "Oh, obviously." I presume it's because "mother" is the same gesture at mouth level. That judgement, that it looks similar to another sign I know, so I can guess what

it means, might be what a magus is doing with a Magic Theory roll. If that's the case then, no, mortals aren't going to pick it up. "Father" in Auslan is "FF", which makes some sort of sense if you are literate, although it's not as natural as "mother" (which is "woman" twice, and woman is "person who checks her hair", because sign languages are old fashioned like that).

There may be some sign languages which can be understood by all, but not spoken by those uninitiated in certain mystery cults. Here I'm thinking of Walpiri, which is a signed Indigenous Australian language, understood widely but only used by widows. I'll return to that in a later post.

There are a few added areas this theory needs to cover. How is gestureless magic possible? How is performance magic possible? Is there a relationship between the written form of sign language (Americans have several, Australians just use English which is why I used the fingerspell image above) and the process of enchantment, which explains why devices do not botch? Certainly worth considering for later posts.

Final fun note: it turns out that there are two dialect words for "magic" in Australia. My local dialect uses a sign for "magic" which also means "ghost". The nation-wide sign, in comparison, does not mean "ghost", but also means "fashion, fashionable" for which I want to say they mean "glamorous". I'd argue one is better for faerie magic and the other for necromancy. The ASL sign is slightly funny (it's a two hand waggle and finger flick, like a stage magician)



# Starting at the appendix

Imagine you are an Ars Magica necromancer. The year is 1220 and you are dissecting a corpse to become more magically powerful. This one has a "sport" which is what you call unexpected extra features like additional teeth or calcified internal twins. This one has an extra...thing...at the end of its digestive system. It doesn't seem to do anything so you can't describe it functionally. It looks like an earthworm (and because you speak Latin like most Hermetic magi) you think for it as a vermiform (worm-like) appendix (thing tacked on the end).

Initially, this is exciting because you haven't seen one of these before. When you see new things while doing dissection, your character learns more about the body faster so you become a more powerful magician. You decide to check the books and see if anyone else has seen these. The first person you check, of course, is Galen. Galen is the great anatomist: he's been the anatomist that everyone refers to for the last thousand years. Galen is your guy, and he has never seen this appendix. No-one has ever seen this appendix.

Now, this is because, in Ars Magica, what people believed to be true in medieval Europe is, generally speaking, true. In the real world Galen didn't dissect humans corpses to write his books of anatomy. He dissected monkeys and the ones he dissected don't have appendixes so, in Mythic Europe, no-one has one, but this guy does.

Now this wouldn't cause you concern except the next person you vivisect also has an appendix.

And the next.

So time to do some tests. If you create a corpse - and remember created items are more perfect than items that appear from the real world: they are closer to the holotype to use modern scientific parlance - what happens if it has an appendix. What happens if you use Intelligo magic to look inside your own body and and you have an appendix?

**What is this organ, where has it come from, what does it mean?**

Now, if it's only a local event - if you write to necromancers elsewhere in Europe and you say "Gang can you all look for this thing and they say "No. Don't be ridiculous we haven't seen it" it could be local warping. Local warping occurs when magicians cast magic either in a single powerful event or smaller spells over and over again over a prolonged period near a local population, sufficient for that population to be slightly distorted by the magical energy.

There are some quite extreme versions of warping already in Ars Magica. There is one community of people where the average body temperature is about 20 degrees lower than that for the rest, so they live perfectly comfortably on Alps, but die of heat exhaustion if they descend to lower altitudes. House Tremere is served by a caste

of amber-eyed individuals, who have an inherent sensitivity to magic, are more likely to be homosexual than average, and all of whom can trace their ancestry back to a small group of soldiers whose eyeballs were gouged out by the Bulgars and then replaced in a single ritual hundreds of years ago.

So if you look at your local community and this appendix effect is only found in the very young, you could say this was because of some sort of local cataclysm that occurred recently. You could work back through the population using age to date when occurred, and then you could find the local magician, or rival, or if you yourself were responsible for the appearance of this thing.

But what if its regional? Then it could be a miracle, but lets not work on that basis: God doesn't need to create an organ: his miracles can be direct. Water, wine, done. It could be that it is a faerie symbiotie

There are other symbiotes described in Ars Magica. The main one that's been described is from Transylvania, and is a sort of thief weed. You cut open the fleshy part of your left hand near the thumb, insert a spring of weed into it and while the weed remains embedded there it makes any lock that you touch fall open. The weed is, of course, vampiric and, like all faeries in Ars, it exists to gain energy by altering your life story.



If you have seen the thief weed you have seen something similar to what a faerie appendix would look like. You might have some ideas of what the faerie who created it is attempting to do. Perhaps the appendix is there as a forerunner of some great disaster; a famine, a plague or an invasion. You'd need to examine it to work out what it does. This could give you hints on the cataclysm. Is your region is going to be on the receiving end, like a plague, or are you going to harm your neighbors. For example if your people can now eat stones, and so no longer have logistical problems with food, it makes invading the surrounding area easier.

**But what happens if everyone has an appendix? What happens if you have an appendix?**

It certainly wasn't there before, like most corporeal necromancers, you know all of your internal organs. You certainly didn't have this weird squiggly thing where it is now.. What could have caused that?

Well it could have been a cosmological change. If you believe Empedocles, who was an ancient Greek philosopher of great importance to Helleno-Buddhism and House Crismon, time is a circle. It starts at a point of perfect enlightenment and Empedocles himself wrecks everything and plunges the world into time. Everything gradually decays from there with life becoming less and less coherent and ordered, until eventually all that's left are protean shapeshifters who can exist in chaotic, randomly-violent environments. Even these are finally driven to extinction, and all that remains is a swirling void,

After a time the chaotic void begins to cohere again, and life emerges. From that simple life organs emerge, and these organs move independently in the world until, as the amount of order increases, they combine,



becoming more and more ordered until eventually, at the far end of time, they transcend physicality and become spirit.

**So does the appendix signal that, somewhere, something happened that made time briefly go backwards?**

Now this very important to your magician because the downward spiral of time is what makes destruction magic easier than creation magic. Your character can disintegrate a wall and not spend great magical energy making sure the wall doesn't reassemble itself, however if you make a wall, you need to spend vis to stop it fading away at sunset - because stones don't fall up. Except in the counter-cyclical alam: the time of increasing order, things work the other way.

If, however briefly, something caused time to go backwards, and if you could, however briefly, cause that to happen again, during that brief time your power of creation would be limited only by the character's physical endurance, and the physical endurance is regular ted and can be reinforced by creation magic. So: although you wouldn't have the powers of a god - you'd still be limited to your own senses and your own mystical capabilities - you'd nonetheless be able to permanently alter the structure of the world, if you planned what you were doing quite carefully.

So next time you are playing Ars Magica, and there's a skirmish, and one of your grogs guts some poor unfortunate bandit, make sure to look quite carefully at his digestive system.



One of the earliest controversies I can remember from Ars fandom is this: given that magic can't affect your essential nature, can it change your gender? The generally given answer is no, and this is because the way gender is affected by magic in other roleplaying games is so terribly, terribly juvenile. Basically being transformed into a woman is seen as a shaming, disempowering, embarrassing thing and so its treated as a practical joke played on male characters. Being a woman is a curse they need ot fight and eventually be cured of. Very early te history of Ars Magica the wirters indicated that the Gift was found equally in male and female children and therefore the Order of Hermes embraced equality. Strangely the Founders were and not split 50/50, but you could claim that this was because they were descended from a Roman priesthood, with a patriarchal cultural bias.

So magic can't change your gender because g is essential to your character. This is rather strange though, because magic can do so much else that isn't prevented by the Limit of Essential Nature. It can make you older. It can change you, temporarily, into a wolf. It can cut off your arm. These changes are, apparently, less essential than your gender. It can't make you younger, because mortality is inherent in the human condition, but it can slow the rate at which you age.

If gender is essential, how much resistance to magic does this grant? Your soul's freedom is essential. You can't sin under influence of magic. You can't sell your soul under the influence of magic. Thinks you are forced to do, you cannot be made morally culpable for by magical means. If your gender is protected in the same way, does it protect the experssions of your gender?

I'm not talking about the most overt expressions either. I'm male, so I have androgenic forearm hair. As that is a secondary sexual characteristic, does it have resistance to magical destruction?

The Church had to deal with this issue because intersex people exist. In the modern United States, about 1.7% of babies are born in some sense intersex. The Church, facing similar numbers, ruled that if a person could function more ably in one gender than in the other, that was their gender. The point was to force

people to pick one role and keep to it, rather than switching.

There are all kinds of weird writings at the time indicating that, physiologically, sex was more permeable than it than it is in our world.

Women were counselled against strident exercise, warming foods and hot baths, because these would affect their fertility and, in extreme cases, cause them to change into men.

Despite these writings, there is no sign that children were prescribed warming as a treatment to change a female heir into a male one: Kings without sons, like Henry the VIIIth for example, never feed their daughters pepper, submerge them in warm baths and force the to go hurdling, in the hope they will become boys.

So, in Ars Magica, sex is often said to be immutable, because other systems handle this so badly, and because permanent changes to the mind of the character are seen as disempowering to the player.

I'd argue that in Arrs Magica we have a mechanism which allows us to sidestep these issues: mystery cult initiation. Cult initiation means a character can change deeply ingrained features, but only with effort, so that trivial switching is reduced. If, however, you want your character to undergo a metamorphosis, and spiritually transcend their limiting physical realities, this is possible. This means a transgender character could undergo ritual initiations which allowed a change of sex.

Certain ancient Greeks had this done to them by faeries: Tiresias, a blind seer, was changed into a woman by a goddess, and lived as one for many years. This was seen as the source of his wisdom. Mystery cult initiation allows a character to change gender or race, and know the things only people in those communities know. This allows us to pass tangentially through real world religions that see twin-spirited people as shamanistic: living on the margin of society, protecting it from hostile spiritual forces.

So to conclude, I understand why early Ars Magica fandom thought male characters could not become female through Hermetic magic, but I'd like to suggest that the later, Mystery Cult, mechanic gives the player enough control over the process that it becomes a roleplaying challenge rather than a childish joke or punishment. This provides a loophole, which some troupes may wish to explore in their sagas.

.  
I

Intersexuality  
and essential  
nature



Monster manuals are taxonomic. That is, they divide monsters by type so that you can get the statistics of the creature based on similar creatures. Medieval bestiaries didn't work this way at all. Medieval bestiaries worked on the idea of significatos, that is, when you are reading about the creature the most important thing is to work out what God wanted you to learn by looking at it. Now, the difference comes about because of our understanding of natural history.

People in the Thirteenth Century believed that the creatures of the world had been created, wither a single act, or through a series of rolling miracles. Some other monsters were later created by sin. Satan himself makes dragons. Inappropriate family relations also seem to have a habit of creating dragons. It is only following Darwin that we get modern books which allow you to decide a creature is a dragon, then classify it into a subtype.

It's this way of looking at creatures which has led to our current problem: which is that you start with the image of the dragon and then create some tiny twist to make a new type, a new species.

This isn't what medieval people thought about dragons. They decided what the dragon meant, and then built up its physical characteristics from there. Sometimes the dragon is a physical embodiment of a place: the dragon represents a mountain and opposes miners because they are stealing its treasure, or it loves miners because it likes living in the holes they dig. The dragon can be the physical representation of a moral fault which the hero needs to overcome, or the dragon can, like many faeries, act as a guardian of the boundaries of social propriety.

I blame Charles Darwin for this difference because, with the addition of the works of Cuvier, who popularised the idea of extinction, we now have this idea that creatures follow types, and that deviations are unusual, rare or forced by humans in the same way that they are with dogs (although Darwin was not certain all dogs were the same species). Darwin suggested that moving away from the core species you had endless variations, and it's the construction of these variations which leads us to having such uninteresting dragons in our roleplaying games.



# Charles Darwin wrecked our dragons



Dragons should represent the obstacles the characters need to overcome.

Let's take another example: in Mythic Europe dragon trees exist on two separate islands: the Hesperides to the far west of Africa, and in Soqotra, to the east of Africa. In the real world this is because dragon trees used to exist across Africa, and have been driven to extinction, with the exception of these two, tiny island fortresses.

Now to a Mythic European that makes no sense at all, because extinction is not a thing. Competition between species isn't a thing. Dragon trees appear on those two islands, because dragons are on those islands, and one follows the other.

Similarly dragons themselves appear because God uses them as teaching tools, and this is why we so rarely see dragons doing any of the things you'd expect biological dragons to do. Dragons don't have the plumes of a peacock, or the spines of an echidna, because they don't mate and they are not preyed upon. In the entire Ars Magica line we have seen one dragon egg, and that was in a magazine article.

You never see mating flights of dragons. You never see people train dragons. They are biological creatures, but biological creatures in Mythic Europe do not follow the laws of selection which are obvious to us.

Mythic Europe, then does not follow our modern idea of ecology, which is that it is random life responding to the pressures of its environment. Mythic Europe is a designed stage in which the great play of redemption is acted out by humans under the supervision of an interventionist author. Dragons, as major props in this play, have meaning and significance that is deliberately written into their physical structures. They are incarnate moral lessons.

This leads us back to some very early ideas from Second Edition Ars Magica, that when you were designing a combat, the important element of that design wasn't fairness or verisimilitude, it was the construction of a play experience that you modified while it was being acted out.

So, if an encounter was too simple, you would add new features to the creatures powers to make it more challenging.



If, through random dice rolls, the creature was going to destroy the party, you could reduce the damage or effectiveness of its attacks, to keep the play experience intact.

In modern gaming, this is sometimes considered cheating, however this is what God was thought to be doing in medieval Europe. I'd argue that character is Ars Magica, particularly those with high Lore skills, should be aware that this is how the Universe is structured. This moves us past some of the difficulties that we have with the Magic Realm.

The Magic Realm in Ars Magica is thematically incoherent. You can see the way it was written in Realms of Power: Magic - twelve authors each bringing a good idea. I did magical cats. There's nothing underneath it all, except the idea that magic is the underlying power of the material Universe and that it does not care about humans, which distinguishes it from Faerie. I'd argue that the difference is that faeries respond to human will, whereas Magical creatures are part of the clockwork which was authored by the Creator, and therefore it is alright for Magical spirits to have meaning. They can be, in some sense, living plot elements, because medieval people really did believe the purpose of dragons was to be conquered by saints. The purpose of monsters was to embody, and force you to face your own sins, as part of your path to redemption. This allows us to move closer to the magic realm having a coherent, useful idea behind it.

The creatures the Magic Realm generates are not interested in humans, but the person who created the Magic Realm is.



William Gladstone was a British prime Minister, who did the various sorts of things leaders of Empires do, but for the purposes of gaming his most interesting feature is that he popularised the idea that the classical peoples were colourblind. Now, we know this wasn't true, but he thought their colour-blindness was the only explanation for what he found in their literature. If only one person had said the sea was the colour of wine, you might put it down to a poetic whim, but strange misattributions keep happening in classical texts. Hector has blue hair, honey is green, the rainbow has three colours. Gladstone thought this meant there was something wrong with the eyes of the people writing.

I'm also drawn to think about the colours in the Egyptian tombs in The Lands of the Nile. I wonder, did their deco-inspiring use of bright primaries occur, in our fantasy world, because they literally could not see tones?

Now the question for game designers is not why he was wrong, but how we can take advantage of him being right. Where did the new colours come from, why, and what stories can we tell about it?

In Ars Magica, the world has been through various epochs. They aren't listed as discretely as in Middle-Earth, where the ages are numbered, but there are clear points where the cosmology changes. The first is the Titanomachy, which is where the great creative forces of magic are cast down by the pagan gods. The name comes from the overthrow of the titans by the Olympians, but various other myths can be tied in to this. The gods of Ireland overthrow the fir bolgs. Isis steals much of the power of Ra and gives it to her husband or son. The elemental races are pushed aside by the races people can worship.

The next is the Silencing of the Oracles, which is where the pagan gods go into hiding for some reason. Later Christian writers claimed it was because Jesus was coming, but pick your own motivation here.

In the Ars Magica setting, the ancestors of the player characters, the Founders of the current magical tradition, also did things which might define an epoch. One lost his powers in a secret ritual to make his new tradition the dominant one. Another moved the axis around which the tides of magic in the world wash. A side effect of this was that ghosts changed colour: the Romans described their ghosts as being black, in medieval Europe they are white. One of these changes may have bled new colours into the world.

Perhaps moving the Axis Magica had another effect though. Maybe it made the world more magical. The game mechanics in Ars Magica have a casting bonus of zero in natural environments, with bonuses ranging up to ten points for being near the lair of a magical beast, in a place where magic has been practised, and so on. When a character goes into a place with a higher score, colours are brighter, sounds are clearer and flavours are more pleasant. This effect becomes more intense as the magical nature of the place increases, such that the only magi who regularly go into the Magical Realm, which has a score of ten, train themselves to not be interested in the ephemeral, worldly sensations, to avoid being overwhelmed.

We think that the score of zero, no bonus, as the natural background of the world, but what if, in ancient times, the background score was a negative number? That would make the world less vivid. There would be fewer colours, and they would blend together more, so a rainbow of three shades might be possible. Similarly, the tiny, accidental magics which allow potential apprentices to be detected would occur less often, and so they would be detected less. This explains why the current age of magic goes from a handful of powerful wizards to the many dozens required to wage a continent-wide war within the space of a couple of generations. New magi are easier to find, and easier to train.

In the basic Ars setting we tend to think of the changes of the epochs in terms of the dominant realm. Magic was dominant, then Faerie, now Divine, and in the future either infernal or divine depending on how you see the apocalypse as playing out. In older editions, Reason was to be the next dominant realm, and some of us have played with all kinds of odd, new dominants. In one of my settings, the next age is a sort of steam-powered Renaissance.

What if there are smaller subdivisions which don't change the dominant realm, but just change the background number for magic from zero? This makes the Norse guys trying to wake the primordial giants a bit less of a world-destroying problem.

It also gives player characters something to do which doesn't break the world: they could change the underlying ease of magic. So, if the characters fulfil their saga arc, maybe the background number for magic might move up to, say +1. The magic realm is still aura 10, but because it is closer, Twilight incidents, where magi have accidents and slip into a sort of magical coma, are easier to recover from. New colours become obvious: perhaps some that didn't have English names until after the period (orange or pink, for example). Minor magic becomes simpler. Potential apprentices become a little more obvious, magic is slightly simpler to study. The biggest change, of course, is that people become aware that this sort of change is plausible. Future generations of magi work to follow in the characters' footsteps, bootstrapping the world ever closer to the Magic Realm.

It might also explain why so many dragons seem to train cults of magicians. In Ars Magica we know of at least three, in the Hesperides, Soqotra, and the Order itself. A more magical environment allows dragons to stray further from their lairs, and use their powers with less fatigue. This line of thinking reminds me of Pope Sylvester II, who was said, in 1000 AD, to have put back to sleep the great dragon which lies beneath the Alps, thereby preventing the end of the World. That's a great story, but I sometimes wonder if what he did, really, was to stop the epoch changing. After all, the Pope has a strong interest in keeping the Divine as the cardinal realm.

# Mass Hysteria

Mass hysteria, for the purposes of this article, refers to the manias in which a group of people all begin to exhibit shared physical or psychological symptoms, for which there is no direct cause. The earliest recorded are the dancing manias which swept Mythic Europe. Mass hysteria is poorly understood, but documented cases have several factors which align, with a striking congruence, with the life of companions in Ars Magica settings.

Mass hysteria is far more common in group who live **separated from the rest of society**.

Most covenants are physically separate, because of the dimming effect of magic of large numbers of believers in the Divine. There is also a social distancing in being covenfolk: many have fled feudal society, and live outside the understood confines of the Three Estates.

All incidents of mas hysteria occur in communities under **stress**. That stress can be economic, but also includes social change and disasters. Covenant life is meant to be a respite from adventuring for magi: but it isn't a respite from danger. There's a reason most magi live in castles. Mythic Europe is a dangerous place and sometimes the thing that wants to kill you really is on the other side of a stone wall a yard thick.

Incidents often occur in people who have little **social standing**. There's some debate here, as to if the conditions usually appear in people of rank, and then flow into the lower strata of society. That being noted, companions live in a feudal society. The magi are at the top: they are at the bottom

Outbreaks of mass hysteria occur in **populations which skew female**. I know how sexist that sounds, but the data is in on that one, I'm afraid. In small covenants that keep to traditional gender roles, when the magi leave with their shield grogs, the remaining population skews female.

Mass hysteria, in slightly later than the game period, was often seen as a form of spiritual possession, caused by faeries or demons. There are also other alternatives. An attack by another covenant could take the form of contagious madness. A very early Ars Magica supplement had a covenant plagued by the dreams of a dragon, about to hatch from its egg, deep below the covenant. The hysteria may be a result of a Twilight experience suffered by a resident magus, who appears unaffected, but acts as a carrier. It may be caused by poisoning, due to the residue of magical experiments getting into the covenant's water supply. It may signify that the covenant's Aura is uneven, and people working in one particular area have been Warped to an unexpected degree. This may be the precursor for eruption of a previously hidden regio.



# Sacrificing Horace to Cloacina

I knew a gentleman, who was so good a manager of his time, that he would not even lose that small portion of it, which the calls of nature obliged him to pass in the necessary-house; but gradually went through all the Latin poets, in those moments. He bought, for example, a common edition of Horace, of which he tore off gradually a couple of pages, carried them with him to that necessary place, read them first, and then sent them down as a sacrifice to Cloacina: this was so much time fairly gained; and I recommend you to follow his example. It is better than only doing what you cannot help doing at those moments; and it will made any book, which you shall read in that manner, very present in your mind. Books of science, and of a grave sort, must be read with continuity; but there are very many, and even very useful ones, which may be read with advantage by snatches, and unconnectedly; such are all the good Latin poets, except Virgil in his "Aeneid"

– Lord Chesterfield "Letters To His Son"

So, this seems like a toilet joke, but what if it isn't? In *Ars Magica*, and in many other roleplaying games, gods exist, and they gain some sort of sustenance from sacrifices. In *Ars*, gods are faeries and faeries love poetry. What happens if you continually send poetry to a goddess? What happens if you do it day by day, every day? That's worship.

The goddess mentioned was the spirit of the Roman sewer system: perhaps a nymph that was transformed when her stream was enclosed to create it, or perhaps a Spirit of Artifice that sprang into existence as its cornerstone was laid. Her tiny shrine had two statues, and it is not clear what they represented: purity and filth, perhaps. I'd argue being on her good side is one of the ways of getting the, little used, Good Environment modifier, which means your character ages more slowly because of the healthy surroundings.

As a goddess of modest appeal: she's going to pay a character sending her daily poems a lot more attention than, say, Lugh, who has a lot more going on in his life. A character with close ties to her could be a big fish in a small, however foul, pond. Has she a putrid Pope? An impeccable Nurse? What powers might such dedicated servants have? What sacred places might she maintain, in her dual aspect, as keeper of the clean from the unclean? There is clearly the scope for a Mystery Cult here.

We know little of the historical Cloacina, but she seems to have the following features. She is the enemy to plagues, and is a spirit of fecundity, tied somehow to Venus. She has a power over lost treasures. The Queen of the Sable Rivers commands, and is perhaps embodied by, the dark tunnels beneath the major cities, and is kind to those forced to shelter there. She is, in some sense, the most approachable of the Cthonic deities, and the most forbearing. Chesterfield, above, claims that characters gain a study bonus by reading in the chamber of necessity, but not on sciences, and therefore magic Arts, but only on more frivolous things, like Lores.

Cloacina is likely an enemy of Baal-peor, the demon prince who is an open gullet and a ceaseless defecation. Baal-peor flees women, as noted in a short story by Niccollo Machiavelli, so at least some of the Goddess of Filth and Purity's enforcers will be of that gender. As an aside, she's a formidable supporting character in Terry Pratchett's *Dodger*, which I recommend.

I've just finished recording some Ancient Egyptian folktales for Librivox, and I'm particularly interested by the story of Naneferkaptah, in which he steals the spellbook of Thoth, who is the god of wizardry. He does this using various spells that allow him to create the sorts of living statues which haunt so many dungeons. He also defeats a vast, regenerating serpent by rubbing sand in its wounds, to create a physical barrier that prevents the pieces reuniting. All lovely stuff, proving that some gaming tropes are older than the Pyramids.

The thing which interests me is that it takes Thoth a couple of days to become aware that his magic book has been stolen. He then goes to Ra, who says "Sure, you can kill him, and his family" which Thoth does by a sort of magical compulsion. The compulsion is carried by a spiritual agent, rather than Thoth himself. This is, as the translator notes, unexpected for people who are used to Judo-Christian conceptions of the Divine. Egyptian gods don't know what you are doing, the vast majority of the time. To know things, they need to either perceive them, using the limited perceptive capacities of their bodies, or be told by minions. These are limited in number: there is not an angel by every blade of grass in this conception of the Divine.

## Gods can't see you in Mythic Europe



The scene above is famous: it's the Weighing of the Heart from the Book of the Dead. The heart is in the little urn on the left, the Feather of Truth is on the right, and if you fail the test, the crocodile-faced thing in the center right consumes you. The test is necessary because the Gods don't actually know if you are guilty or not. They don't have omniscience. Your sins have changed you, in a spiritual way, and that change is detectable, but not by casual observation.

The text we are looking at above is a spell, and its function is to wreck this test, so that the human always passes on to Paradise, regardless of the state of the heart. The Gods are fooled by this, even Thoth, god of magic, who is standing there on the right with his pen, ready to write down the result. Thoth's strangely limited, for a God of Cleverness. Our way around this in *Ars Magica* is to have the gods as powerful faeries: they care about the emotions generated by the ritual, not the actual ritual itself, so they don't mind if, superficially, you are conning them. Well, the Eater of the Dead may care: but no-one asks her.



Our leisure furnishes me with the opportunity of learning from you, and you with that of instructing me. Accordingly, I particularly wish to know whether you think there exist such things as phantoms, possessing an appearance peculiar to themselves, and a certain supernatural power, or that mere empty delusions receive a shape from our fears. For my part, I am led to believe in their existence, especially by what I hear happened to Curtius Rufus. While still in humble circumstances and obscure, he was a hanger-on in the suite of the Governor of Africa. While pacing the colonnade one afternoon, there appeared to him a female form of superhuman size and beauty. She informed the terrified man that she was "Africa," and had come to foretell future events; for that he would go to Rome, would fill offices of state there, and would even return to that same province with the highest powers, and die in it. All which things were fulfilled. Moreover, as he touched at Carthage, and was disembarking from his ship, the same form is said to have presented itself to him on the shore. It is certain that, being seized with illness, and auguring the future from the past and misfortune from his previous prosperity, he himself abandoned all hope of life, though none of those about him despaired.

Is not the following story again still more appalling and not less marvelous? I will relate it as it was received by me:

There was at Athens a mansion, spacious and commodious, but of evil repute and dangerous to health. In the dead of night there was a noise as of iron, and, if you listened more closely, a clanking of chains was heard, first of all from a distance, and afterwards hard by. Presently a specter used to appear, an ancient man sinking with emaciation and squalor, with a long beard and bristly hair, wearing shackles on his legs and fetters on his hands, and shaking them. Hence the inmates, by reason of their fears, passed miserable and horrible nights in sleeplessness. This want of sleep was followed by disease, and, their terrors increasing, by death. For in the daytime as well, though the apparition had departed, yet a reminiscence of it flitted before their eyes, and their dread outlived its cause. The mansion was accordingly deserted, and, condemned to solitude, was entirely abandoned to the dreadful ghost. However, it was advertised, on the chance of some one, ignorant of the fearful curse attached to it, being willing to buy or to rent it. Athenodorus, the philosopher, came to Athens and read the advertisement. When he had been informed of the terms, which were so low as to appear suspicious, he made inquiries, and learned the whole of the particulars. Yet none the less on that account, nay, all the more readily, did he rent the house. As evening began to draw on, he ordered a sofa to be set for himself in the front part of the house, and called for his notebooks, writing implements, and a light. The whole of his servants he dismissed to the interior apartments, and for himself applied his soul, eyes, and hand to composition, that his mind might not, from want of occupation, picture to itself the phantoms of which he had heard, or any empty terrors. At the commencement there was the universal silence of night. Soon the shaking of irons and the clanking of chains was heard, yet he never raised his eyes nor slackened his pen, but hardened his soul and deadened his ears by its help. The noise grew and approached: now it seemed to be heard at the door, and next inside the door. He looked round, beheld and recognized the figure he had been told of. It was standing and signaling to him with its finger, as though inviting him. He, in reply, made a sign with his hand that it should wait a moment, and applied himself afresh to his tablets and pen. Upon this the figure kept rattling its chains over his head as he wrote. On looking round again, he saw it making the same signal as before, and without delay took up a light and followed it. It moved with a slow step, as though oppressed by its chains, and, after turning into the courtyard of the house, vanished suddenly and left his company. On being thus left to himself, he marked the spot with some grass and leaves which he plucked. Next day he applied to the magistrates, and urged them to have the spot in question dug up. There were found there some bones attached to and intermingled with fetters; the body to which they had belonged, rotted away by time and the soil, had abandoned them thus naked and corroded to the chains. They were collected and interred at the public expense, and the house was ever afterwards free from the spirit, which had obtained due sepulture.

The above story I believe on the strength of those who affirm it. What follows I am myself in a position to affirm to others. I have a freedman, who is not without some knowledge of letters. A younger brother of his was sleeping with him in the same bed. The latter dreamed he saw some one sitting on the couch, who approached a pair of scissors to his head, and even cut the hair from the crown of it. When day dawned he was found to be cropped round the crown, and his locks were discovered lying about. A very short time afterwards a fresh occurrence of the same kind confirmed the truth of the former one. A lad of mine was sleeping, in company with several others, in the pages' apartment. There came through the windows (so he tells the story) two figures in white tunics, who cut his hair as he lay, and departed the way they came. In his case, too, daylight exhibited him shorn, and his locks scattered around. Nothing remarkable followed, except, perhaps, this, that I was not brought under accusation, as I should have been, if Domitian (in whose reign these events happened) had lived longer. For in his desk was found an information against me which had been presented by Carus; from which circumstance it may be conjectured—inasmuch as it is the custom of accused persons to let their hair grow—that the cutting off of my slaves' hair was a sign of the danger which threatened me being averted.

I beg, then, that you will apply your great learning to this subject. The matter is one which deserves long and deep consideration on your part; nor am I, for my part, undeserving of having the fruits of your wisdom imparted to me. You may even argue on both sides (as your way is), provided you argue more forcibly on one side than the other, so as not to dismiss me in suspense and anxiety, when the very cause of my consulting you has been to have my doubts put an end to.

Pliny the Younger



There are three stories in the letter: the phantom of Africa; the early ghost story; the hair cutting people in white tunics. Let's work through them one at a time.

Africa appeared to me, when I first heard the story, to be a genius locus: a spirit of place. She appears as this in *Between Sand and Sea*. It's entirely unclear what she wants: why she gives these prophecies to a mortal. This makes her seem suspiciously like a faerie seeking emotional reaction, and for her story to be retold. Assuming she's not a faerie, she seems to be limited to the northern expanse of Africa: the fertile bit above the Sahara. The spirits from that part of Africa are engaged in a civil war between sterility and fertility, represented by the Sahara and the Nile, or the colours red and black. Africa would seem to serve the Black, because her area is fertile. She could be wanting the young Roman to go and prepare himself before administering his territories, because the Black, unlike most spirits, has a use for humans. As they spread irrigation, they are agents in the war against the desert.

The second section is a traditional ghost story, complete with clanking chains. The ghost has all of the *Ars Magica* elements, being geographically limited and having a final purpose which, once fulfilled, allows the creature to rest. The scholar knows this, and so he is able to say to the ghost "No, wait a minute, I'm just going to finish writing this. We both know that you need to communicate with me, so you just wait there." That's interesting, and it's not something a faerie would allow: it would transform into a monstrous shape to force a stronger emotional reaction.

I do note that the ghost seems to cause sickness, wasting, and mental illness in the people it encounters. This seems entirely contrary to the ghost's mission of getting its body buried. I'd suggest this is involuntary, and occurs simply because of the proximity of the ghost. They are perhaps a form of warping.

The third story contains what I'd like to consider as early cases of alien abduction. Glowing figures come in through the window and, upon a sleeping person, perform a medical experiment. Now, the experiment isn't a particularly great one: they are stealing hail, which can be used as an Arcane connection to control the person from a distance or reduce their magical resistance. It still contains all of the usual characteristics of what we would now call a sleep apnea experience. In the Middle Ages these were also called being hag-ridden.

Some people conjecture they have a relationship to the modern experience of people who claim to have been taken from their beds by alien figures. I've always thought of alien abductions as a faerie experience, but you could argue instead that these are the weakest type of spirits who are interacting with humans through dreams. In dream states, humans are less strongly protected by their personalities.

# Commentary

The spirits in this story predict the future, but do not seem to do anything to bring the future about. They tell Pliny he won't be charged with a crime. They do this in the useless way, understood only in hindsight, so common in folkloristic oracles.

In the frame narrative, the letter is to Pliny's friend Sura. He is more knowledgeable about metaphysics than Pliny, but has a tendency to argue both sides of any question. Pliny finds this confusing, but in *Ars Magica*, it's one of the paths to Enigmatic Wisdom. It's the sort of contemplation of contradiction which lies at the heart of some approaches to zen.

So, in this letter we have examples of spirits using humans as soldiers in their wars. We have ghosts using humans to fulfil their final business on Earth, and we have very early versions of the alien abduction story.



Clothing isn't really a matter of choice in much of historical Europe. What you wear isn't so much fashion as a method of telling people how you deserve to be treated. Many games don't deal with this at all: people wear whatever, mechanically, gives their characters the biggest bonuses. Their clothes don't look like a rich medieval person's, because they send no message. In some computer games, to encourage people to not look like their clothes have been shaken onto them by a thriftshop zombie, there are "set" bonuses. Dress like a warrior-priest of the goddess of darkness and night and you sneak better, but only if your gloves match your shoes. She cares about accessories more than what's in your heart.

In much of historical Europe, sumptuary laws existed, and these made it illegal for the wrong sort of people to wear various things. Fur fringes, weapons, silk garments, certain colours...all of these are not to be worn by those with plebian blood. If your character is a poor farm boy off for adventure, that excludes him. Wear the wrong coloured shirt and you are literally telling a caste of armed men that they should bow down to you when you walk past. This can get you fined, beaten or imprisoned in certain countries.

In Venice, the middle class women loved game-lawyering the sumptuary laws. So, fringes might be banned, but if it was detachable it wasn't a fringe, now was it? A particular colour might be banned, but if you added a little black, then clearly it was an entirely different colour and was fine. Eventually the authorities gave up, and rich people took to wearing the stuff only really rich people could afford. Venice got really colourful and, to more staid communities, terrifyingly deabuched, really quickly.

Sumptuary laws had various rationales. One was that the rich dyes and fabrics came from the east, and so the money for them was being given to the other side of the Crusades. Buying cool stuff from Araby funded mercenaries for the Islamic nobility. How true this was is debatable, but it was a reason given at various times. Another was that the poor lacked the moral fibre to have cool kit. It would lead to pride, and covetousness, and the sorts of things that rich people with dedicated spiritual advisors would steer clear of. The final reason, though, is one of the most popular in cities like Venice: in the medieval world, no sensible person believes that everyone is

equal. The point of clothes is to tell people where you stand in the social hierarchy, so that there's no need for violence to force the people below you to act in a suitably deferential way. Given the tendency of the people in the Italian city states to start intergenerational games of "do you like my knife?" politeness was important.

When we look at many of the things medieval people wore, they seem a bit silly to us. Their conspicuous consumption seems a little odd. Even if we accept that their understanding of economics was poor, and so they thought that rich people saving money caused recessions, their belief that rich people should live not at the edge of their income, but at the edge of their credit, appears bizarre. The point, though is this: your status in medieval Europe is being constantly checked, through series of signals. Your expenditure fuels these signals. Do you regularly throw the parties required of a senior courtier? Well, then you obviously have powerful friends. Have you sold off the family silver? Then you can't afford mercenaries or dowries. Status is performed, but not everyone is permitted to perform.

Fashion is part of this: it forces consumption, so it separates the vastly rich from the merely wealthy. Fashion can also be political. Far later, the cavaliers and roundheads, for example, made their In Ars Magica, there's a little social signalling, but it's mostly kept within the society of wizards. If your magus turns up to a tribunal and there are a bunch of guys wearing red and orange, they are likely to start setting things on fire. If there's another group in grey-black, that's House Tremere, which wears a uniform because they are essentially a political party. The house of messengers wears red caps, to say that they have the rights of magicians, even if they lack powers. The magical police force, the hoplites, wear sashes. Average humans have no idea what any of these signals really mean, with the exception that they know hurting redcaps is bad luck.

In the opposite direction, there were marks to exclude. The obvious one is that Jews were forced to wear various clothes markers. This was theoretically for their protection, and the protection of nearby gentiles. The right to farm the Jews, which is to say, soak them for cash, was owned by various powerful lords, and if you beat up a Jew, you were preventing his farmer



(and that's literally what the practice was called in English) from collecting as much cash, and could expect a lawsuit.

Criminals also had marks to prevent them being mistaken for citizens. Prostitutes in much of Italy needed to wear red capes, shoes, or hats. In Ars Magica, where the messengers of magicians wear red caps, and have their home base in Italy, this has surely led to needing to punch someone in the face.

One house tells humans that wizards wear blue robes with stars on them, conical hats, and carry staves. These wizards need to speak and move their hands to cast magic. This is the House that likes sneaking around civilisation the most. By making sure that people know that wizards look a certain way, and can be depowered with simple preventative, they make their own lives easier, because they do not wear blue robes most of the time, they use spindles or wands instead of staves, and most of them can cast magic with bound hands or silently. The only strong signal mortals have about magicians in Ars is a deliberately false one, to set up a contact protocol which aids the magicians.

