

Ars Magica

Fifth Edition

DESIGN NOTES: A MAGUS' LABORATORY

The Laboratory rules are one of the central features of *Ars Magica*. Certainly, they are one of the features that most attracted me to the game, way back when. I didn't want to change anything too fundamental here; this is part of the Fourth Edition rules that works well.

However, it was also part of the rules that had lots of different rules jostling for position. The rules for inventing a spell were different from those for learning a spell, which were different from those for making a potion ... you get the idea. This makes it hard to remember what the rules for a particular activity are.

So, the first set of changes was concerned with unifying the mechanics. All laboratory activities now work from the Lab Total. There are no exceptions or strange variations. Similarly, any activity that uses a Lab Total now needs a Lab. Similarly, all Lab Texts now work the same way, whether they are texts for spells or enchanted devices. Learning spells is now more a matter of reinventing them based on someone else's notes, although the rules for doing so are still much the same as before. Since enchanted item Lab Texts work the same way, they are much more useful than they were in earlier editions, and characters might actually want to take the trouble to use them now.

The change to item Lab Texts fitted into the second set of changes. The laboratory activities described in the core rules should all be appealing, and accessible, to young magi, since most player characters are young magi. This required major changes in two areas.

First, talismans. While nice in principle, these never really seemed worth the bother in earlier editions.

They are now potentially much more powerful, and the talismans of dead magi are likely to be sought-after treasures. Still, it takes time and *vis* to make a really powerful talisman; the main advantage it has over other items is that you can get far more powers in one place.

Second, familiars. Simply switching to the standard laboratory rules made a big difference here; bond qualities are gone, although the three cords are still



there. In addition, you can improve the bond, in all respects, over time, so there is no reason not to bind your familiar when you are a fairly young magus. Unless, I suppose, you want to bind a dragon; that would be quite hard.

The final set of changes was simply concerned with cleaning up presentation and fixing minor glitches in the rules. After five rounds of playtest, I think it's much clearer what the laboratory rules are, now. Still, the rules for inventing spells and creating enchanted

devices are basically identical to the rules in ArM4; those were rules that worked well, and there was no need to change them.

In the next set of design notes, I'll talk about two elements of character generation that I knew had to be addressed in the revision: Virtues and Flaws, and the mismatch between character generation and characters developed in play. So be sure to check back!

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