

Ars Magica

Fifth Edition

DESIGN NOTES: THE ART OF COMBAT

The Ars Magica Fourth Edition combat rules were, it must be admitted, broken. They had the consequence that, the more armor you wore, the more damage you took. This was, needless to say, not the intention. Other quirks of the weapon statistics meant that, according to ArM4, the mightiest force on the medieval battlefield was a naked man with a stick. Fixing this was up at the top of the list of priorities for ArM5.

My initial thought was that this would be one of the easier bits to fix. Just change the statistics for the weapons and armor, and the main silliness goes away. Then, I thought, I could concentrate entirely on the magic system, a much more subtle and complicated part of the rules.

I was right about the magic system being more complicated, but wrong about how easy the combat rules would be to fix. The immediate feedback from playtesters was strongly in favor of rather more radical changes to combat.

So, I threw away the old combat rules, and started again. Initiative, Attack, Defense, Damage and Soak seemed to be good basic statistics, and would ensure at least some familiarity between editions. After that, I thought about the place of combat in an Ars Magica game.

First, physical combat is not the central emphasis of the game; the central emphasis is magic. Thus, the combat system should be quick to use, quicker than ArM4. Further, magic should integrate straight into combat, rather than being relegated to a segment stuck onto the end of the combat round.

Second, physical combat should be dangerous. The rules should encourage people to find ways other than fighting to solve their problems.

Third, shield grogs should be useful. They've been a part of the background since the beginning, but under Fourth Edition rules it was virtually impossible for them to protect a magus.

Finally, the combat rules should be able to handle groups where one player is dealing with three grogs at



once, without bogging things down.

I revised the rules along those lines, and sent them back into playtest. The new rules introduced the concept of groups; a small number of fighters working together, and controlled by a single player.

Unfortunately, the first draft meant that a dragon fighting with his five pet mice was functionally equivalent to six dragons, and the playtesters took great delight in pointing such problems out to me. A couple of groups also took the opportunity to complain vigorously about the fact that, in ArM4, a character could die from six paper cuts.

So, I started revising. More restrictions and clarifications on groups made them less problematic, while making it a major advantage to be part of a group trained to fight as a team. (So train your grogs together!) A completely revised wound system means that if you take six paper cuts, you just have six paper cuts. Unless one of the wounds becomes infected, you aren't going to die. This also has desirable effects on damage from spells that do damage continuously over a duration; if they only do a little damage, they won't kill anyone.

After another round of playtesting, one group revealed, by detailed analysis, that differences in weapon quality were too large; having more expen-

sive weapons made victory almost inevitable. So the weapon and armor statistics had to be reworked again. All weapons of the same cost are roughly equivalent in power, but they have different strengths and weaknesses. More expensive weapons are better, but if you are much more skilled than your opponent, you will still probably win.

At the same time, there were complaints about the lack of rules for unarmed combat, or for trying tricky maneuvers. I added a framework for those, and sent the rules back for playtesting. This time, they only needed minor tweaks.

The end result is a combat system that plays, I am told, much more quickly than ArM4, particularly if you have more than half a dozen characters on a side. Shield grogs are extremely useful to magi, and spell-casting is part of the standard combat sequence. Combat is dangerous, particularly if you botch your defense roll, but it's dangerous in the right ways. A fully armored knight with a greatsword is a serious threat; a naked peasant with a stick is not.

In the next set of design notes, I'll talk about another one of the central features of Ars Magica — the laboratory rules. So be sure to check back!

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