

RITUALS of
PLAY
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PLAY
PLAY

PLAY BEGINS: Your SHIP appears in the approximate center of the screen in space, alien space craft will immediately begin attacking and flying by your SHIP. Your job is to shoot them down.

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Playful Occultism: The Ludic and the Lusory Attitude in Magical Practice

Jeff Howard

In keeping with the structural and functional relationship between games and occultism, foundational chaos magician Lionell Snell suggests in his autobiographical summa *My Years of Magical Thinking* that all sorcerers operate in an aspect of reality called “the games layer,” a mindset or metaphysical realm of flexible, fluid pattern-making outside of any Platonizing understanding of reality (Snell 2017). Snell thus argues that all magical practice, including systems of divination, are approached by a skillful sorcerer as games, i.e. arbitrary symbol systems constituting working myths that are nonetheless strictly adopted and followed, in much the same way that a player of chess follows its arbitrary rules because they are well-balanced and functional within a long history of play. Snell writes, “to an outsider this process might seem to be taken too seriously to be described as ‘a game,’ but to someone who has practiced divination, the first important consideration is that the particular set of symbols was a personal choice, and that the diviner, having made that choice, then agrees to accept the rules of that particular set of symbols and to act according to those rules—just as the chess player accepts and abides by a set of rules that might seem arbitrary to a non-player” (64). While Snell does not cite any game studies scholars to support this analogy, the mindset he is describing resembles the lusory attitude as described by philosopher Bernard Suits in *The Grasshopper: Games, Life, and Utopia* (1978). Suits defines the lusory attitude when he writes that “to play a game is to attempt to achieve a specific state of affairs, using only means permitted by rules, where the rules prohibit use of more efficient in favour of less efficient means, and where the rules are accepted just because they make possible such activity” (54-55).

Snell’s games layer, Suits’ lusory attitude and the related framework of ludic

activity suggests that play can play serve a crucial function in magic: play channels and directs energy according to rules while also leaving enough room for spontaneity: something that can easily disappear when bound by ceremonial magic, particularly in Thelema with its emphasis on an athletic straining toward “change through Will” (Magick 126). Crowley, ever the competitive athlete who boasted of his ascent of mountains, immediately follows up his description of analogies between his prodigious chess performance and his ability to visualize astral temples with a boast that his nightly invocations of his Holy Guardian angel were so intense that a single half hour of magical practice was “equivalent of about twelve hours of Asana” (518). For Crowley, all games and all magic are ultimately sports, agonistic games of conflict (in Caillois’ framework) meant to show the magician’s power to master spirits and gods alike and to force change onto his environment.

Magical practice becomes playful when it acknowledges spontaneous and unexpected intrusions from ontological realms beyond this one, outside of any willed intent or expectation of result. Kenneth Grant (initially Crowley’s young disciple and later the founder of his own Typhonian tradition) arrives at a different position from Crowley’s often dour and puritanical dictum of True Will. Late in his nine-volume Typhonian trilogies, Grant formulates the notion of a “tangential tantrum,” which he defines punningly and playfully as “a sudden and obliquely manifested oracle or transmission received—often unexpectedly—outside normal ritual procedure” (550). Such an occurrence can almost only be described as a tangent, i.e. a digressive anecdote seemingly unrelated and tangential to the carefully-regulated, linear ritual being described. A tantrum is also tangential in the geometrical sense (i.e. going off at an oblique angle). Similarly, a tantrum in the punning sense of a childish fit, disrupting the decorum of a stately ceremonial working. Grant’s tangential tantra are made possible because his approach to magic allows room for and even privileges spontaneous occurrences within the framework of ritual. For Grant in his later years, magic is not straining toward “change in conformity with will,” but allowing magic to manifest spontaneously through tangential tantra (Hecate’s Fountain): through openness toward disruptively revealing synchronicities. Magic, for Grant, is not a linear shot but a “ricochet effect,” a phrase that also suggests the spontaneous and unexpected movement of a billiard ball or a pinball between bumpers. For Grant, openness to tangential

tantra involves allowing between Universe A and Universe B, allowing the magical circle to break in the metaphysical equivalent of “bleed” in the Nordic LARP tradition (Bowman).

Similarly, the founder of Sabbatic Craft, Andrew Chumbley, moves from an early framework of elaborate, syncretic ceremonial witchcraft into an increasing emphasis on spontaneous and intuitive “spirit contact.” Chumbley’s rituals are deep games in the sense developed by Doris Rusch, experiential metaphors (in Jason Begy’s commentary on Rusch) that operate through Caillois’ framework of *ilinx* or “vertigo games” by way of a shared interest in what Chumbley calls “the widdershins whirling of the Sufis,” i.e. the achievement of alternate states of consciousness through deliberate disorientation (Caillois 23, Qutub back cover). Both Chumbley and Grant heavily channel the influence of Tantric traditions, especially the contrarian and antinomian currents known as the Left Hand Path. The context of *Lila*, a Sanskrit word meaning “divine play” can therefore help us to understand how Chumbley and Grant’s magic is playful. According to David R. Kinsley in *The Divine Player: A Study of Krsna Lila*, the Hindu gods are playful because they are “totally other” and are therefore not obligated to do anything. In this sense, their actions are voluntary and spontaneous, characteristics which Kinsley (citing Huizinga in support) identifies as fundamental to play (122). As Kinsley writes, “The spontaneous and superfluous nature of play is eminently appropriate to express the freedom of the gods” (122). This play can take the form of madness, especially in Shiva, to the point that Kinsley refers to this process as “the anarchical *lila* of the gods” (31). The play can also be an erotic love-play between Krishna and his consort Radha, wherein the apparent separation of the participants is *maya* but all are contained within one Godhead. Grant also explicitly refers to the *lila* of Krishna and Radha in his Typhonian trilogies, where he invokes “this divine play of consciousness as the game of Hide-and-Seek which Krishna (Pure Consciousness) perpetually plays with his consort Radha, herself a form of *Maya*” (Aleister Crowley and the Hidden God 45).

At the heart of the sorcerer’s *lila*, and therefore playful occultism, is the concept of “negative existence” and the “negatively existent ones”: phrases which haunt both Grant’s writing and Chumbley’s, as well as the convergence of

them in the joint Sabbatic-Typhonian lodge Ku Sebbitu. In Grant's work, magic involves evoking and invoking entities that are non-existent but real. Indeed, these entities are non-manifestations or un-manifestations of the one true Reality, accessible only by negating the phenomenal world. Grant writes, "The initiates, the gnostics, knew—perhaps intuitively—that reality lay somewhere beyond or behind the total negation on this glamour. At this point in evolution... the qliphoth became active in human consciousness. They typified the shadow, the dark, the non-manifest, absence, the total dis-appearance of the phenomenal world" (Nightside of Eden 104). As Grant argues in *Outside the Circles of Time*, the only entities that are non-existent but have being are outside time. The only way that something can have being outside time is for it to exist in the Mauve Zone: a liminal, interdimensional space between sleeping and waking. The concept of "negatively existent" entities also runs through Chumbley's work in his grimoire the *Azoëtia*, which bristles with references to both negative existence as a concept and specific entities (often spirits or daemons) believed to be negatively existent. Numerous magical formulations from the *Azoëtia* involve the evocation of negatively existent entities, and the phrase "negative existence" or "negatively existent" runs from Grant's work into Chumbley's work as a mode of accessing the divine by negating it (i.e. negative theology). Negative existence is sometimes understood as a form of inverse astral projection whereby "the Body of Shadow goeth forth and is under the Dominion of the Autochthonic I, that is, the Entity of the Negatively Existent" (56). Through a variant of Spare's death posture, the sorcerer himself can achieve this state, declaring "Negatively Existent am I" (58). Similarly, a variety of non-Euclidean or otherwise liminal geometric points in Chumbley's pathworking are described as negatively existent, as in the "the Negatively Existent Singularity" and "the Sinistral Emanation of the Negatively Existent Cell" (111).

In his masterful four-volume series, *Being and Non-Being in Occult Experience*, Ian C. Edwards describes the magical practitioner as working at the crossroads of being, non-being, and becoming. In his fourth volume, dedicated to Andrew Chumbley, Edwards speaks of "self-emerging from the becoming of Otherness as revealed through play (lila) of logos and alogos" (34). "Logos," in this case, refers to "being," whereas "alogos" refers to "non-being" (alluding both to Chumbley's magical motto of *Alogos Dhu'l-qarnen Khidir*

and to Derrida's critique of logocentrism in Western philosophy). By placing lila explicitly within the play of being and non-being, Edwards advances his larger argument that playfulness is characteristic of "heterodox writing systems," in which Edwards includes "occult grammatologies," i.e. ways of attempting to write occult experience. Edwards argues that such systems abide in an ongoing flux of signification, in which "orientation and disorientation are in a constant state of play, where words play with other words and play with the reader." Edwards goes so far as to claim that, in such systems, "ideas and practices are not so much tools, but toys." For Edwards, the magical play of the sorcerer's lila occurs under the sign of the chiasmus (the rhetorical figure emblemized by a Greek chi or Roman letter 'X'), with an additional horizontal line through the center of the X (and all surrounded by an Ouroboros representing the serpentine sorcerous self of magick). Edwards writes, "the nullpunkt stands at the center, as the zero point, at the crossroads of non-being, becoming, and being. The practice of sorcery encompasses greater spaces of inclusion, so that the movement is from the zero-point outward, gradually including the spaces between" (64).



Figure 1: Playful Occultism Visualised as a Lemniscate (original image)

The most haunting and sorcerous magical play takes place at precisely this zero point, which also lies in the centre of a lemniscate-shaped Ouroboros where games and magical play overlap, fuse, and become one.

The Ouija board is the symbol of playful occultism par excellence, existing (or non-existing, or negatively existing) as it does at the crossroads of the material and the immaterial, wooden planchette and immaterial spirit, spiritualist tool and mass-manufactured game. As the history of the Ouija board article on the online Museum of the Talking Board argues, the Ouija board begins as one of several competing talking boards and planchettes used at the height of the spiritualist movement. The movement of the heart-shaped planchette to select alphabet letters is a more convenient adaptation of the classic table-rocking methods of spelling out messages. The classic motto of the 1966 mass-produced Ouija board by Parker Brothers reads “It’s only a game, isn’t it?” The rhetorical ambiguities of this slogan encapsulate playful occultism, which first negates its own status as genuine occultist artefact (only a game), but then partially calls into question this negation. Similarly, Grant and Chumbley describe the forces they evoke as “negatively existent”—not real in the sense of existing with the illusory phenomena of time and space but more than real or surreal in the sense of having being outside of time and space, at the crossroads, within and beyond the Mauve Zone.

Recognizing the ontological playfulness of occultism liberates magical practice from excessive gravitas that can emerge from being excessively attached to the illusory glamour of the phenomenal world, thus protecting practitioners from the potentially self-destructive effects of dealing with dark forces, while also allowing for depth. Similarly, playful occultism prevents the monomania (and inherent ethical risk) of “change through will” and allows for the spontaneous emergence of synchronicity & spirit contact (tangential tantra), reflected in the practice of Grant and Chumbley. The trick is restoring the sense of play without trivializing magic, echoing Nietzsche’s classic aphorism: “The maturity of man—that means, to have reacquired the seriousness that one had as a child at play” (73). Maturity in occultism can flow from connecting with the current of sorcerous lila, where the magical practitioner becomes as serious as a child at play.

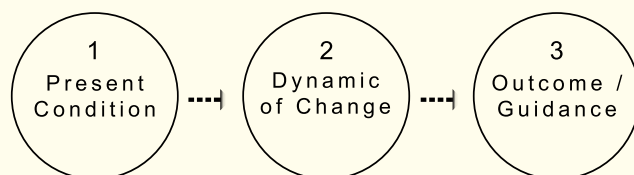
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RUNIC ACID GLYPHS

				
Capacitor	Square Wave	Pulse Wave	Antenna	Diode
				
LED	AND	Acid	Noise Wave	Resistor
				
Breaker	Crystal Oscillator	Triangle Wave	Noise Source	Ground
				
Battery	Saw Wave	Transistor	Trapezoid Wave	Sine Wave
				
Coil	Transformer	Super Saw	Switch	Blank

THREE GLYPH SPREAD



CONCERNING RUNIC ACID GLYPHS

Dear members and esteemed colleagues,
I have attached the latest version of the Runic Acid Glyphs for your consideration. This marks a new and, I hope, fruitful avenue of investigation within the corpus of Electrosono-Thaumaturgy.

The glyph system originates from my study of the Elder Futhark, the 2nd-century proto-Norse/Germanic alphabet of 24 characters. Each rune carries phonetic values and symbolic meanings rooted in early Germanic cosmology, myth, and everyday life. In contemporary occult and neopagan contexts, these runes are interpreted as archetypal forces or concepts, often used for spiritual guidance and divination. For further reading, I refer you to Ralph Blum's *The Book of Runes* (1984) and Edred Thorsen's *Runes and Rune Magic* (2018).

Following the thread presented through the Runic Acid operation—a dream-work and runic consultation that led to the formulation of the neo-pagan acid house doctrine—it seemed natural to explore a syncretic incorporation of the system. As you know, troubling political associations have overshadowed the original meanings of Germanic runes. It became clear that an alternative set of glyphs should be created, free from aberrant connotations. At the core of my work lies the attempt to re-enchant technology (Techgnosis, Davis, 1998) as a subversive resistance to the grey forces. Imagining the TB-303 as an object of power and expanding the theories of electricity as the alchemical fire, the symbolic language of circuitry and sound synthesis became a natural choice. The process of substitution was intuitive—sometimes based on visual similarity, at other times on overlapping archetypal meaning and component function.

I was struck by the emergent coherence that developed, which suggests something profound about these systems: anything can

serve as a conduit to an underlying metaphysical structure—a cosmology coalescing from an invisible matrix woven into existence (the Wyrd?). I will not delve too deeply here, except to note the intriguing relationship between cybernetics and magical systems of thought. The Runic Acid glyphs conceive circuitry and sound synthesis as a Hermetic matrix, where energies are directed and processed within an apparatus greater than the sum of its parts.

The glyphs remain a work in progress. Their current meanings were developed with the aid of AI—an experiment blending electronic and synthesis texts with interpretations of Norse runes.



I am satisfied with the initial results, but I believe working with the glyphs will reveal more. For this reason, I share them with you and invite your insights. I will suggest a method for reading based on traditional approaches, but I am equally interested in exploring alternative applications.

I have made a video that goes through the runic alphabet by frame, you can use this to draw your glyphs by pausing the video with your eyes closed. The link is in the QR code below. Alternatively, you can create your own set of glyph tokens or cards, I made mine from blank wooden craft discs.

Three Glyph Spread



What Do You Seek?

Formulate a question for the Cosmic Intelligence. This can be anything, though often the most pressing concern rises naturally to the surface. Sometimes the glyphs read you—the intended question dissolves, and a more pertinent one emerges through the reading. To focus the guidance, clear your mind of other “noise” before drawing. A glyph-charged 20min Biokinetic Mantra for this purpose is available (see QR link). Write your question down and remove it from sight. Listen to the music, align to the cadence and let and it absorb your consciousness – forget the question.

Draw Three Glyphs:

Position 1 (Present):

Represents the current circuit—your dominant energy or condition.

Position 2 (Dynamic of Change):

Shows the waveform of transformation—what's shifting or influencing.

Position 3 (Guidance/Outcome):

Reveals the harmonic resolution—advice or probable outcome.

Return to the note of your question and consult the information provided in the on the website. These systems are designed to evoke your own intuitive understanding—the answers already reside within you. The glyphs simply draw them out from the part of you connected to the cosmic circuit that knows all paths. If the glyph is drawn upside-down this may indicate an inversion of the meaning (a barrier becomes an inviting gateway). Anxiety may arise from readings that foretell hardship or disruption but remember there are no true negatives. Chaos can be a gift, and obstacles will fall. Face challenges with courage. Acid be with you,

Your faithful servant of the DVRK,
WM



THE CIRCLE HUNGERS FOR MAGICK

Brigid Nemeton

The circle hungers for magick. It marks the edge of a world enriched with invisible forces, whether the palpable meaning of the game piece or the intangible agents of the supernatural. The game designer's "magic circle" – the boundary of what constitutes gameplay – has much in common with the magician's pentacle, albeit without quite vindicating BADD and the Satanic panic. The name is taken from a passage in Johan Huizinga's *Homo Ludens*, where it is given in a list of "play-grounds", those "forbidden spots, isolated, hedged round, hallowed, within which special rules obtain" which are "dedicated to the performance of an act apart" – i.e. the act of play. Huizinga, in his evocative description of the play-ground, alludes to an ancient thread of esoteric practice, one reaching forth from Mesopotamian exorcists to the witches of today.

Since the term was coined in Salen and Zimmerman's *Rules of Play* in 2004, the magic circle has come to mean that the playing of games can have lasting meaningful effects both on the players and on the world has become well-established: academics writing on Nordic larp in particular have taken an interest in the psychologically and culturally transformative potential of games and role-playing. The impermeable magic circle sometimes critiqued as unrealistic is an idea absent in both *Rules of Play* and its antecedents; however, *Rules of Play* and some of the game definitions it draws upon do take the construction or artificiality of game-conflict, and its harmlessness or safety, to be a defining quality of the game. These may prove hurdles in the further development of roleplay and games as tools for self- and culture-transformation, but may be integrated more easily with the referral to the original occult concept, which is not exclusively a barrier but often a lens for examination, a tool or position of privilege for active participation, or a form of protection more akin to a rubber suit than a bunker.

In order to tease out the relationship between the ludological and esoteric, it behooves us to examine each. As stated, the design concept established

in *Rules of Play* takes its name from *Homo Ludens*; Huizinga's list of play-grounds also includes more mundane examples such as temples and courts of law. He does not attempt to distinguish games and play broadly, and indeed seems to give some examples of play (among children and animals, especially) which do not take place in a play-ground. Similarly, his inclusion of things like courts in his list of play-grounds is perhaps problematic for his definition of play as voluntary, unserious, and unprofitable; the range here is helpful to us, however, as it is illustrative of the structural similarities solemn ceremonies have with those more playful and inconsequential. The circle of the magician might be said to sit somewhere between the courts of law and of sport: it is a place of real, but often private, consequence; a play-ground for experimentation, but also a place to make decisions which have ongoing effects on the lives lived outside of it.

While *Rules of Play* takes "magic circle" from *Homo Ludens*, it means something narrower by it: the frame within which a game takes place, which is created and maintained by the process of playing the game. In approaching this concept, Salen and Zimmerman touch on definitions of "game" provided by several other writers, and characterize the features of each; ultimately they reach this definition: "A game is a system in which players engage in an artificial conflict, defined by rules, that results in a quantifiable outcome." The magic circle, then, is the place circumscribed by that system. Salen and Zimmerman's "artificiality" is derived in part from the notions of games being safe and representational (in Crawford's definition) and being make-believe or removed from normal life (Huizinga's and Caillois' definitions). It seems fair to say that the modeling of real conflicts in (relatively) harmless miniature is satisfactorily artificial for Salen and Zimmerman's definition, which will help us integrate it with psychological and magical applications of role-playing games.

The world of roleplaying games is at this point no stranger to the notion that they may be of psychological benefit both in the processing of trauma and in personal development. Nowhere is this clearer than the world of Nordic larp, where the examination of the psychological benefits (and hazards) of roleplay is well-established. Key to much of this examination is the notion of "bleed", which can be summarized as the transference between a player and

their character (in either direction) of qualities of their experience including feelings, personality traits, beliefs, etc.

Kjell Hedgard Hugaas, in their 2022 master thesis *Bleed and Identity*, draws up a conceptual framework for the discussion of bleed with special attention to what they call identity bleed. Identity bleed is a complex, or combination of simpler forms of bleed, describing the experience of roleplay affecting the player's personal identity. The notion builds on concepts from Hugaas and Sarah Lynne Bowman's 2019 *Butterfly Effect Manifesto*, which proposes an approach to larp with the positive transformation of its players as a primary design priority. Identity bleed, and its component ego bleed (originated by Whitney Beltran), are the forms of the phenomenon most obviously involved in the long-term transformation of players by the experience of roleplay, as they concern the most central aspects of the player's daily life (self and identity). Hugaas also makes note of emancipatory bleed, a term Jonaya Kemper coined to refer to the pursuit of bleed as a means of counteracting or healing from the distress and trauma of oppression in the world outside the game; emancipatory bleed provides an excellent example of the kinds of tangible external-world benefits the transformation afforded by roleplaying can facilitate, and parallels the pursuit of personal liberation from cultural constraints found in modern magical traditions.

Beltran's ego bleed, the bleed of personality and archetypical traits, is conceptually rooted in the psychoanalytic work of Carl Jung. In her *Shadow Work: A Jungian Perspective on the Underside of Live Action Role-Play in the United States* from the 2013 *Wyrd Con Companion Book*, Beltran examines bleed and transference in larp specifically within the context of Jung's notion of the shadow, which refers to the repressed or unacknowledged aspects of oneself that may quietly influence a person's behavior or rise to the surface under certain circumstances. Beltran makes the case that Jung's analytic psychology is particularly well-suited to the examination of roleplay because of the very nature of roleplay as an activity involving the deliberate adoption of imagined roles which will inexorably be influenced by players' unconscious associations with those roles.

It is worth noting that Jung's analytic framework was developed in the context of his personal magical practice. It is not my understanding that *Liber Novus*

is considered a magical text by historians of psychology, but it seems to be universally recognized as one by magicians. *Liber Novus* was an intensely personal project undertaken by C.G. Jung primarily between the years of 1914 and 1930; very little of it was shown to anyone during Jung's life, but it was published in full in 2009 with the cooperation of his estate. It consists of descriptions of visions, interactions with strange beings, diagrams and paintings of these encounters, and ponderings of their significance. A proper discussion of its contents is well beyond the scope of this essay, and I will leave it to scholars of his life. It has been identified at various times by Jung, other analysts, and biographers as "madness" or "psychosis", but Jung wrote of it in his 1959 epilogue that "To the superficial observer, it will appear like madness", and attributed to that period all of the innovation and vision which would guide the rest of his work as an analyst. Jung associated his abandonment of the project of the illuminated manuscript in 1930 with his introduction to the conceptual framework of alchemy, which allowed him to integrate and benefit from the overwhelming experiences he recorded in his journals and transcribed in *Liber Novus*.

I am not proposing, however tempting, that every role-playing game should aspire to be an upwelling of unconscious material that the players will spend the rest of their lives digesting and deciphering. I mention Jung's spirituality to juxtapose the application of depth psychology to roleplay with the original magical purpose of the circle. The circle has been a major tool in the esoteric traditions of Europe and Western Asia for as long as they have been recorded. The purpose of a circle, while often apotropaic, varies as the concept develops over time, through the circles of the Graeco-Egyptian professional magician and the theurge of early modern Europe to the multipurpose ritual spaces of the modern magician. These likely reach peak saturation in popular culture in the form of Wicca, which takes the circle as a container for magical energies conjured by the witch, rather than protection against spirits outside the circle (see Gardner's *The Meaning of Witchcraft*, 1959). This last concept aligns especially well with the idea of the ludic circle as being a container for the potentially transformative activities of play.

Chaos magic, needless to say, has been closely intertwined with tabletop

roleplaying games since its inception in the late 1970s. Since Carroll and Sherwin's *Liber Null and Psychonaut* (1978 and 1982) the tradition has been interested in the self-transformative potential of magic. In discussing self-annihilation as liberation, Carroll says "The personality, a mask of convenience, becomes stuck to the face. [...] The only clear view is from atop the mountain of your dead selves." Perhaps predictably, it is easier to apply this advice psychologically or allegorically rather than literally in one's life; there may be more productive avenues of self-transformation than utter self-dissolution.

The chaos-magical notion of the *egregore*, the independent thoughtform arising from the energy and cooperation of a group, is of particular interest in the magical examination of role-playing. Sometimes, as in the case of *Liber Aeldor* (1999, archived on *Chaos Matrix*), the transformation not only renders the character "unplayable" (unable to be channeled for roleplay as they were prior to their independence) but an external spiritual entity which may be deliberately evoked by any magician for their own benefit, in and out of roleplay. While this sort of deep engagement with roleplay material may fall outside the scope of most players' personal worldviews, it bears more than a passing resemblance to descriptions of ego bleed and procedural bleed.

Ultimately, rather than discarding the concept of the magic circle, or rendering it a sterile description of the boundaries around gameplay, it may be worth leaning into the initial metaphor. If the magician's circle can be a place of empowerment and transformation, a crucible for the caustic transformative energies of magic, then surely so can the roleplayer's circle be such a place for play. If the circle may permit a magician to act sympathetically upon the external world by use of a model-in-miniature (e.g., bounded by the same four winds or archangels), so too might it permit a player to do psychologically. The benefits of such active and intentional engagement do not depend upon a supernaturalist metaphysics, but can be explored psychoanalytically and sociologically.

The parallels between the space created by roleplaying games and the ritual space of the magician are, however, deeper than mere metaphor. The two face several similar practical obstacles; perhaps chief among them the maintenance of a unified imagined space in the face of differing desires, attentions, and unconscious materials between participants. Both can benefit

from a central authoritative figure (a medium, a game facilitator) capable of special declarations concerning the contents of the imaginal space, but both lose a degree of flexibility and potential creativity in exchange for this stability. Similarly, a ritual space is unambiguously demarcated and is a place of real-if-invisible risk; the proliferation of safety tools and ritualistic game procedures reflects and accounts for this. Finally, both pursue overlapping goals, facilitating the transformation and liberation of their participants.

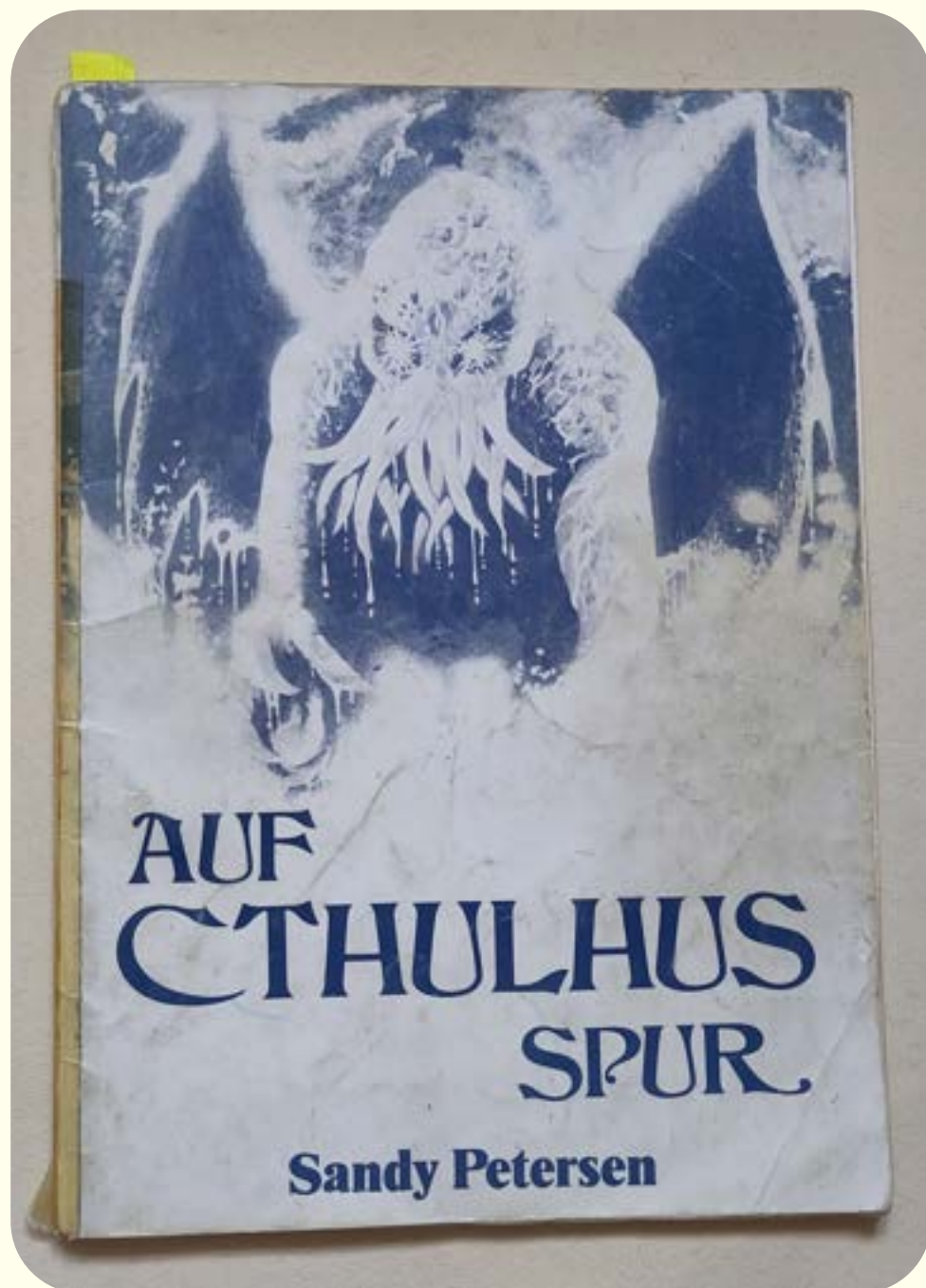
Designing a game carefully while accounting for the effects it might have on its participants and their communities is nearly identical a task to the design of a magical ritual. Magicians have been learning from roleplaying games since the 1970s; game designers have much to learn from the magician. Design that acknowledges this kinship is necessary to make the most of the transformative potential of roleplay.

RETELLING HANNOVER'S HISTORY WITH CTHULHU-MYTHOS

Ingmar Vogelsang

Roleplaying Games (RPGs) often use the occult and myth. In high fantasy even gods will walk on whatever earth it is. In Science Fiction there can be magic too: think psychic powers or cross-overs like Shadowrun. Retelling history is an integral part of many RPGs. Either the recurrence of myth from ancient times, or the integration of real history as a background, typically to produce an immersive feeling. Naturally in horror RPGs history is retold with a supernatural twist.

The Cthulhu-Mythos, or “Yogsothery” as the original author, H. P. Lovecraft named it, were invented during the “Golden Era” of pulp magazines in the 1920s and 1930s. The main theme in the original stories was, in short, the idea that mankind is not a superior species but an insignificant part of a merciless cosmos. The “monsters” of these tales are not taken from traditional myth. Mostly they are superior extraterrestrial beings with high tech devices, often as old as Earth itself and as alien as possible. Traditional myth and real history is incorporated to give the stories a feeling of realism. Today Cthulhu is pop culture. The mythos is used as background, inspiration and trope in many RPGs as well as in a vast range of computer and boardgames, not to mention literature and film. These retellings of Cthulhu Mythos typically have to address the legacy of Lovecraft’s well-known racism and fascism, which are apparent in the original tales. Examples of rewritings that explicitly address this aspect of the Mythos include the recently televised novel, Lovecraft Country by Matt Ruff. The most prominent RPG “Call of Cthulhu” (CoC) was among the first modern game adaptations, first published 1981. Lots of others like “Trail of Cthulhu”, “Achtung Cthulhu!” or “Fthagn!” followed when the copyright expired around 2010.



The German Call of Cthulhu

Germany has a special relationship with CoC. There are not only lots of material from the game translated from English into German, but also a significant amount of specific German material has been published. The first Sourcebook in German was published in 1988, just two years after the first German edition and incorporated information about Germany in the 1920s. In the last 35-plus years of German localisation there have been numerous additional titles of sourcebooks and scenarios for the game. There is a Germany Sourcebook as well as a Berlin Sourcebook (and both are translated into English). Others deal with cities like Vienna or Prague. Individual articles about German cities and regions are collected in POD/ebooks.

German localisation uses folktales, myth and historical events as inspiration to retell a darker version of German history. This historical integration is more prominent in the German texts than in their anglo-american counterparts, at least from 1980s to until about 2010s. Even the excellent campaign “Mask of Nyarlathotep” (MoN) takes more inspiration from the tales of H. P. Lovecraft, than from history or folktales. In later issues, history and some folktales got incorporated.

The special interest of German localisation and the use of history and folktales started, more or less, back in 1989 when RPG-magazine “Zauberzeit” published “Schwarzwald Requiem.” The scenario begins in Vienna where the players can meet Sigmund Freud, but soon sends them to the Black Forest to stop a (musical) Mythos-cult. The art-style of the scenario became a blueprint for later publications. Another famous “classic” is the scenario “Die Froschkönig-Fragmente”, which was published in 1993 (and republished and reworked in 2024). It retells “The Frog Prince,” a famous fairytale authored by brothers Grimm. The setting is the Harz, a mountainous area alive with local myth. The scenario uses various handouts and illustration to immerse the players in this geography and history of this region. A longer campaign of three interlinked scenarios and lots of handouts followed with “Auf den Inseln” (On the isles) in 2002. The scenarios dig deep into folktales of the Friesian Isles in the North Sea to build their story around the Deep Ones and their cults. Incorporated are the tale of Rungholt and Ekke Nekkepenn. There is even a fictional town, reminiscent of Lovecraft’s invention, “Arkham”,

called “Kamborn” located somewhere in north-west Germany. Currently, this location is home to twelve scenarios for the system.



Hannover and Mythos - (Re)telling History

Hannover has a rich history dating back to neolithic times. From the 1920s to early 1930s, the time period in which most CoC scenarios take place, Hannover experienced post-revolutionary turmoil from strikes to right-wing coups. Even avant-garde art and shocking crime took place in the city, sometimes called disrespectfully, the “Provincial Capital”.

Hannover as a background for CoC was published in Lovecrafter #3. The article tells the history of Hannover, explores the city in the 1920s and gives adventure seeds for CoC. These took their inspiration from events in history but also from local sagas, myths and fairytales.

One of the most famous people that comes to mind for history-based horror in Hannover is Fritz Haarmann, the “Vampier of Hannover.” He killed at least 27 boys (aged 10-22), mostly runaways and sex workers. It is said he sold the victims’ flesh as horse-meat, which led to his alternative title of the “Butcher of Hannover”. It is easy to imagine a Mythos connection and so it is no surprise there was a stand-alone article in the official German CoC-magazine, “Cthuloide Welten” on Haarmann, published in 2005.

Hannover is also associated with probably the most famous secret society and the conspiracy theories around them: the Illuminati. Freiherr Adolph von Knigge was the local Grand Master in Hannover. Knigge is well known for his book of etiquette, “Über den Umgang mit Menschen” (How to deal with humans) initially written to tear down class barriers and said to be an early work of sociology. This history can be used to connect the Illuminati with the Mythos in a different way than World Domination.TM The Great Race of Yith, figures from the original pulp tales, travel through time by exchanging their minds with humans. They seek wisdom and create a secret society to help them at their arrival in whatever era they travel to. The curiosity of the Great Race of Yith fits easily within the Illuminati myths. One possibility centres on the MERZbau, or “Schwitters Room.” Kurt Schwitters, a DaDa-artist, famously collected interesting things he found on the street. The collage began in his living room and grew over the years to fill all his rooms and those of a neighbouring flat. The question was (and even is), of course, what purpose such a collection could have? A museum for visitors from another time, for learning or education?

Another potential intersection of Hannover history and the Mythos centres on the city’s annual Schützenfest (marksmen festival), the biggest of its kind in the world. The first shooting festivals were held after the destruction of Lauenrode Castle in 1371 at the former castle square. To this day, its location has only been vaguely determined, as it was completely razed to the ground. It is unclear why the castle was so completely destroyed and not included in

the town's defences. For a Mythos tale, the destruction of Lauenrode Castle suggests an attempt to seal something or someone in. This not only would "explain" why the shooting festival was held on the former castle square but also why the target, named "parrot" was described as a colourful, lizard-like creature. Even the traditions, such as the marches of the marksmen and women to the festival grounds, or the election of four "Bruchmeister," an honorary post to keep order at the festival, might be part of a recurring ritual to re-powering the ancient seals.

Different moments of German and Hanoverian history were brought together in the Scenario "Für den König" (for the king). Initially it is placed in March 1920 when the Kapp-Putsch happened. The players are charged with intercepting a veteran of WWI suffering from PTSD who has got his hands on a ritual palimpsest. This writing is a ritual to summon the Yellow King, a mythos figure taken from the work of Robert Chamber. Different "mystical" locations are incorporated in the scenario. However, since no alien monsters make their appearance during the game the players may end the scenario uncertain if it is even possible to summon the Yellow King, or if the events happening around them were determined by the madness of the circumstances.

Conclusion

In Germany, esoteric and occult themes are a somewhat poisoned heritage. There is a strong connection of occult and historic themes, especially in the 1920s and 1930s, with nationalist and antisemitic groups and organisation like "Thulegesellschaft" or "Bund für Deutsche Gotteserkenntnis" (aka "Ludendorffer"). They incorporated occult and esoteric fragments in the Nazi-ideology to form their "Manifest Destiny" based on historical nonsense in order to legitimize their atrocities and crimes. The SS even build their own "Grail castle" at the Wewelsburg. Lots of esoteric symbols are incorporated in the design. And some, like the "Schwarze Sonne," were newly invented by nationalist occult groups. These are now used by right-wing activists and neo-Nazis across the world. This context is important. Unlike in the USA in 1980s, German teachers and journalists were not involved in a "satanic-panic" over RPGS, but rather, engaged in more serious concerns about the Nazi associations that might arise within these games.

This context suggests an important conclusion. The (re)telling of history through such games may help players to understand how myth can become reality. Especially as historic events, or what people believe have been historic events, are used as justification of injustice in the present and future. You may debunk conspiracy theories by showing how easy you could exchange the "ordinary suspects," Free Masons, the Illuminati, Jews, communists, with Mythos cultists and aliens. Just pick a local folktale and mix this with Cthulhu Mythos. Or take a look in Robert Wilsons "Everything Is Under Control" and ask yourself "How would Cthulhu (or his cult) do this"? Now mix in some "real world" history. See how easy it is to create a "believable" conspiracy.

Therefore, it is important to me to give context to the historical background used in any game, and to make it clear if any real world conspiracy-theories are used. This is done well in some more recent German publications. Newer editions of MoN (especially the Compendium) give advice on the racism during the time of the setting and how to deal with it. It is important to "Learn your history" and see how society has changed over the years. This work of revision can and should occur within already published scenarios, too. As mentioned MoN had seen changes in the latest edition to remove racist stereotypes and add more diversity.

For me RPGs, and especially CoC, were always connected with my interest in historic events. So playing CoC was often a kind of re-enacting history, as I want things be historically correct. At the same time, meddling with history can give a greater insight how easy it is to invent believable conspiracies. But don't expect too much! It is still a game. You could re-tell the history in a way to be more inclusive or to show oppression and injustice in the past. Even H. P. Lovecraft's own stories can be retold with an anti-racist intention, just as Matt Ruff has demonstrated in his work, *Lovecraft Country*.

BECOMING MOON - a ritual to make other worlds possible in which we can become

Annika Olofsdotter Bergström and Rebeca Yates



This is the story of a dancer, Rebecca and a game designer, Annika, drawn together by conversations from the field of feminist technoscience and in a shared interest for the relation of everyday life and the magical engagement.

Together, we set out to explore the fragile thread, between humans and the natural forces that shape our world of today.

We entered through the threshold of darkness and light and their interwoven relationship.

Most of the world's population live under light polluted skies,

And in this endless glow, we lose touch with the sky. Artificial light now consumes a tenth of the world's energy. Light pollution is a socio-technical system driven by economic growth, progress, urban expansion and safety.

We miss the silent theatre above us: the breathtaking sweep of constellations, the fleeting blaze of falling stars. We have pushed away the creatures of dusk, the magic of twilight, the rhythms of rest, and no longer know when to dream. Humans do not live with darkness, we just visit, briefly. We have forgotten the importance of darkness for our circadian rhythm,

but also for the living beings around us, upon whom we depend.

We shield ourselves from what we cannot see but want to control: the unknown.

We set out to design a practice focused on body and rules, stories and materialsone that reflected and united our backgrounds as dancer and game designer.

Explore ways to reimagine and practice our relationships—social, ecological—with light and with darkness.

First, we stepped into the darkness guided by the biologist Johan Eklöf. There, we met the goddess Iris—messenger between gods and mortals, between the vault of the sky and the soil beneath our feet.

Her presence lingers in our eyes, in the iris, that colored ring that reads the world for us—translating light into sight.

But Iris also speaks for the creatures of the night,

for animals and insects who depend on darkness not only to rest,

but to love, to hide, to play, to live.

The moon's phases told farmers when to plant, when to rest,
and under the first new moon of spring, children were told to run backwards
three times around the house barefoot—
so as not to be bitten by snakes in summer.
Through this inventory, dormant gestures, practices, and objects stirred
again—an archive not just remembered, but re-lived.

We stressed that the way research is conducted actively shapes the worlds it
brings into being.
So we turned to play—human and more-than-human.
We traced patterns of light and shadow,
followed rhythms not our own.
Through embodied experiments, we invited other ways of knowing,
allowing moon and sun, to speak back.
This was not research on the world,
but research with the world.
Shaping, being shaped—
a co-emergence of method and matter.
Inspired by dance scores and playful manuals—
a sun ritual from Colombia, a moon invocation from an artist's hand—
we began to move.
To test gestures in public space.
To let our bodies mirror what happens in the sky.
To let ruled movements become a form of astronomy,
a choreography of celestial time.

In participatory workshops, we invited others to join us.
To explore what the sun and moon, our ancient companions, might mean for
modern life.
We learned that for young people, the moon has lost its pull.
The internet, they say, is closer.
And we mourned a little—this lost relation,
this turning away from the sky
in favor of screens that never darken.
Even the moon has its own internet.
We wondered what it means to desire space conquest,
to colonize knowledge of the cosmos

instead of leaving room for imagination, for not-knowing,
for the kinds of wonder that invite humility.
We turned to Isabelle Stengers,
and her call for imaginative engagement—
as a way to make sense of the world differently,
shared imaginings through practice, through touch, through presence

We began to thread it all together:
Objects with gestures, words with silence, facts with fictions.
Chalk with water, stone with drink, paper with hand, fire with foot,
manifest with disorder, instruction with play.
Games and rituals are both systems
maintained by practices
where social and ecological engagement could unfold—
embodied, imagined, and shared.
we set up the ritual in a public event
Becoming moon
A quiet guide for reimagining what it means
to live,
to relate,
to care—
for things that are out of our control
We invite you to cross a threshold.
Take a breath.
Let yourself arrive.
Are you here with the moon?
Or with the internet?
Your hands are washed—
to remember the north running spring.
navigate into this new world
Let all times—past, present, and yet to come—be woven together
Drink the moon elixir
Let it settle inside you.
Feel it echo with tides,

Write some words to the moon.
Hang it gently around your neck.

Carry it with you, close.

Dip your right hand into the vessel—
cool, chalky, moonlit.

This becomes your moon hand:
receptive, slow, a limb that listens, let it guide you.

Now, carefully
Step into the darkened passage.

Let your eyes adjust

Let your feet find their way.

At the end, a space opens.

This is the moon field.

a space prepared for you:

a candle, a match, a piece of chalk, a pile of sand.

seven cards.

A lunar choreography for you to make. A small orbit of acts.

You are in the moon's first quarter.

Light your candle.

Let its flicker be your anchor.

Ebb, flow, gravity, rotation—

Draw the shape of your moon path with chalk.

Feel its pull.

Let your moon hand reach outward.

Move your moon path:

Twice forward. Once backward.

Time bends. Let it.

There is no wind on the moon.

Leave your footprint in the sand.

Let it hold your weight, however briefly.

Unhang your message.

Read it aloud to the sky. Let it become a shared chorus

Join the moon in transformation.

Burn your words.

Let them rise as smoke—ephemeral, released.

Can you feel it now? The becoming

Before you leave, pick up the blue moonstone.

A small weight. A reminder.

Slip it into your pocket.

And leave in silence.

In Becoming Moon, ritual became a way to connecting values of care to
actions.

responding to a world driven by progress, efficiency, control and high tech.

In this work we explored practices as fragmented, situated and non-linear
accounts

of lived and dreamed realities,

to provide the flexibility for new and contested meanings to emerge.



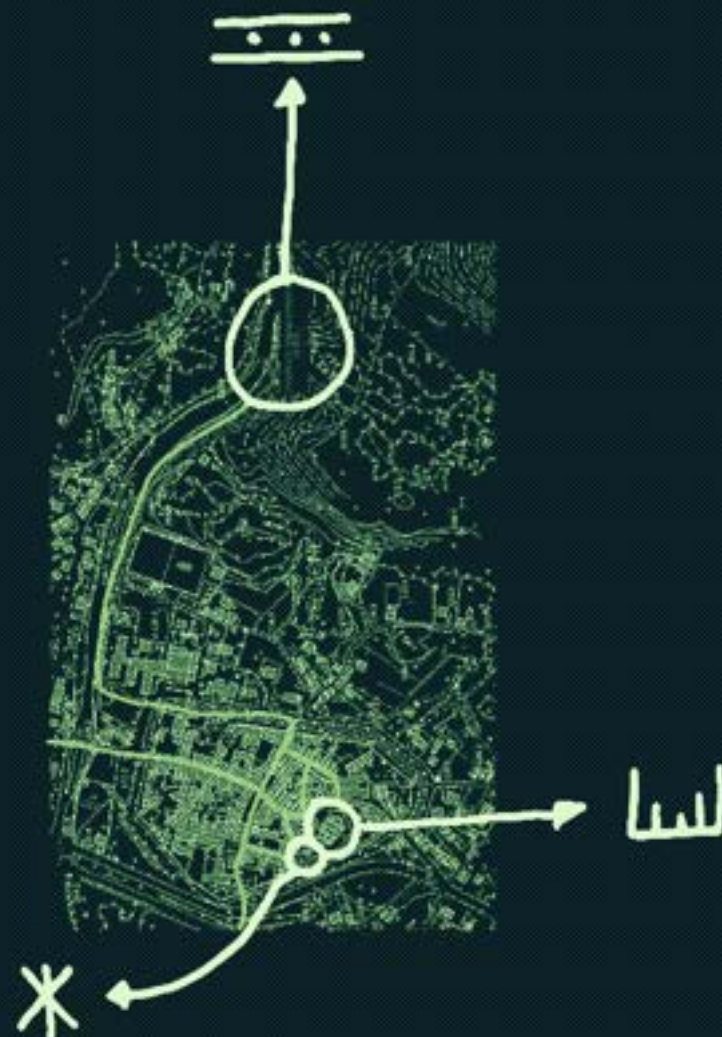
HOW A BODY SOUNDS

LA CASA UOMO DLC

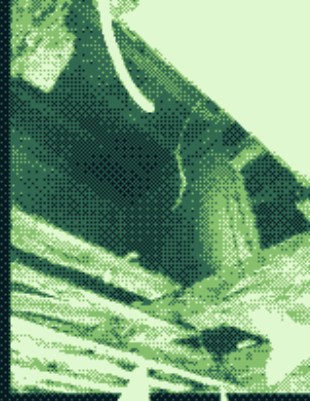
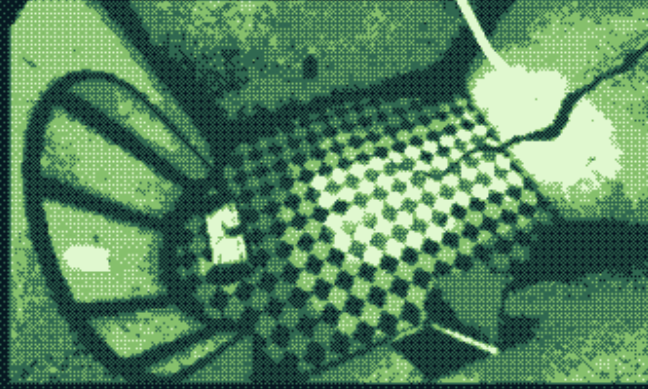
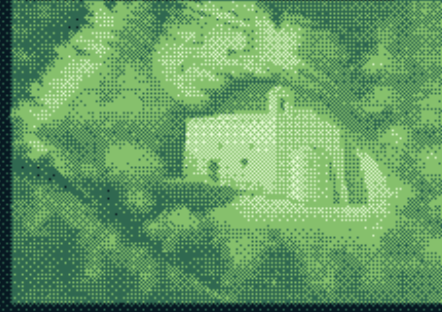
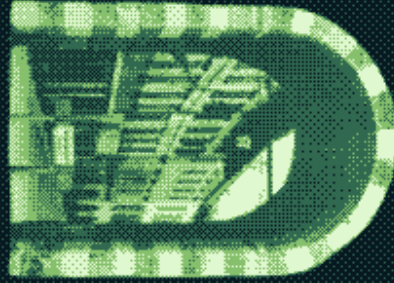
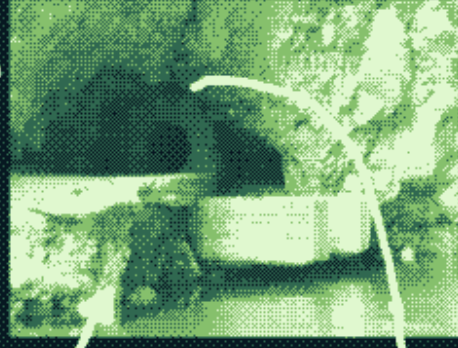
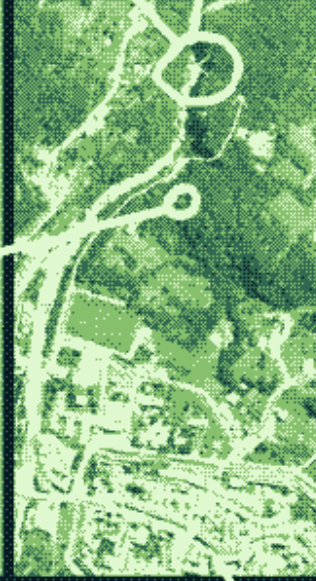
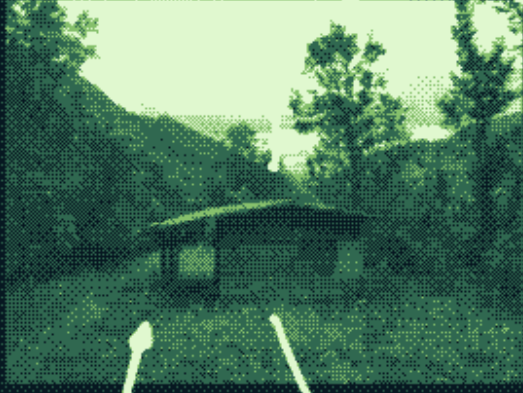
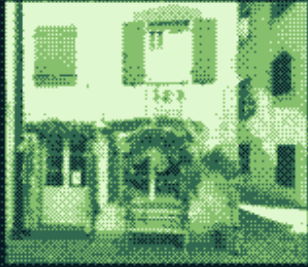
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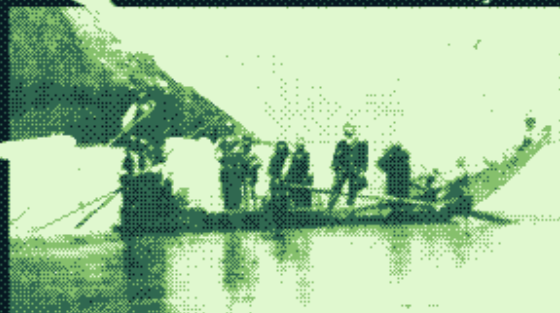
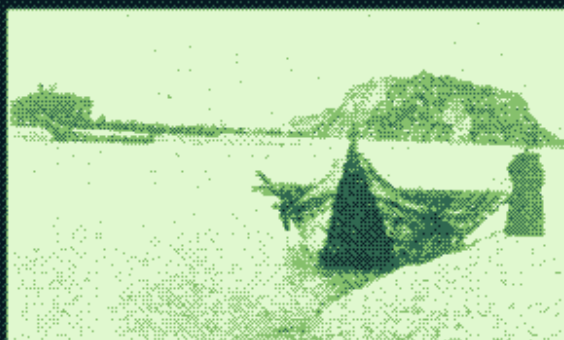
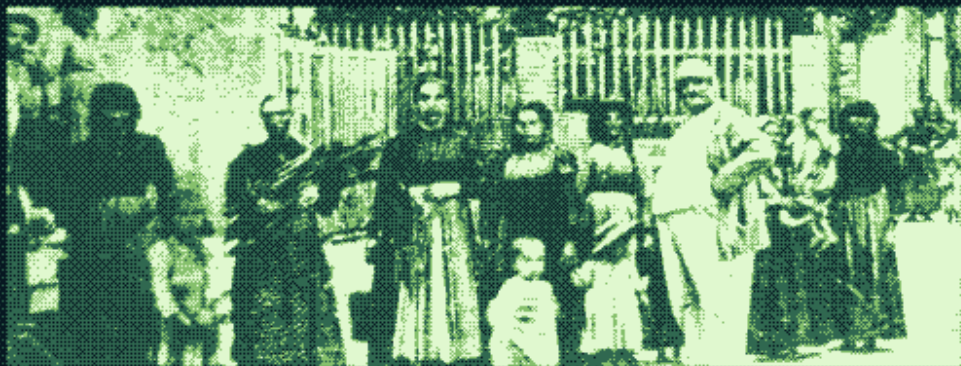


This DLC should be experienced after the completion of the base game, accessible at:
<https://yamikurae.itch.io/how-a-body-sounds>



How to make a Saint?





PLAYING ALONE: SOLO TTRPGS, CHAOS MAGIC, AND SERVITOR DISCOVERY

Leah Lockhart

As a chaos magician who works with servitors, I have discovered solo tabletop role-playing games (solo TTRPGs) are fantastic tools for servitor creation and discovery. When I sit down to play a solo game, I am never quite sure what will emerge. Sometimes the game becomes a magical space where I can achieve deep focus, start to see shadow parts of myself, discover needs I have, and blur the boundary between conscious and unconscious. This article explores how solo TTRPGs support core principles of chaos magic and function as tools for bringing servitors into being, whether through intentional magical practice or as unexpected outcomes that emerge from ordinary play. I'll also offer examples from my own play and magic practice.

Play and magical practice

Solo TTRPGs are role-playing games designed for a single player, allowing them to experience the narrative exploration and character development of multi-player games without requiring a Game Master or other players

Chaos magic emerged in 1970s and 1980s Britain as a rejection of rigid, over-ritualistic Western neo-pagan and occult traditions. As a modern magical movement, it is highly personalised and emphasizes experimental, practical approaches to magic. Core to chaos magic are a set of interdependent principles. One is intention: the principle that a magician's intention directed toward a specific goal can affect its outcome. Prioritizing focused energy and intention over prescribed ritual or dogma means chaos magic is inherently eclectic; nothing is off limits as source material or inspiration for spells, rituals, or personal practice. Directing intention through intensely building

energy toward a single area of focus is achieved through altered states of consciousness in whatever way is suitable and accessible to the practitioner, for example meditation or sensory adjustments. Documentation of practice is also an important aspect of chaos magic. Reflection journals and records of spells and rituals are crucial to knowing whether specific approaches are effective, to refine personal practice, and to maintain self-awareness, which is important in identifying intention.

Some chaos magicians create and use servitors. A servitor is a being, object, or essence in physical or imaginary form designed by a magician for a specific personal purpose, charged with intention and energy, and cared for throughout the time it is being used. Servitors can be created for a whole host of things from helping with tasks or providing emotional support, to assistance with manifesting.

Solo TTRPGs provide fertile ground for magical practice because they facilitate altered states through play, offer ways to contact shadow selves, and create spaces for directing concentrated intention toward specific goals. For practitioners who work with servitors, solo TTRPGs become particularly useful: they can make implicit servitors explicit, surface needs for new servitors, or deepen established servitor relationships. Whether used intentionally in ritual or engaged with as ordinary play, solo games create moments of focused reflection that can act as portals through which servitors reveal themselves, sometimes by design, sometimes as unexpected emergence.

Examples

The examples below are based on my experiences creating servitors through solo TTRPG play. I have left out some details and fictionalized aspects of my practice so I can retain privacy around my servitors and shadow parts.

Intentional servitor discovery through A Mending

A Mending is a solo keepsake game designed by Shing Yin Khor. It is a story-building game about two friends who have been apart for a long time. The main character has been called by their estranged friend to reunite. Through prompts, embroidery, and map-making the game player sews a path to their friend. Along the way, strange and beautiful things happen, and the story of the friends' rift becomes clear. A Mending can be initiated in two ways: with characters' backstories in mind or without, leaving the profiles of each player

emergent throughout the game.

Initiating with character backstory, I played the main character as myself and profiled the friend I was travelling to meet as a shadow part of myself. I chose a particularly stubborn shadow part because I wanted the game's prompts to mediate a conversation between us. By the end of the game, a specific area of low confidence had become clear, helping me articulate the exact task I wanted my servitor to address. In this instance, the development and activation of my servitor took place outside of the game.

Initiating with no character backstory. This time I played the game with no characters in mind. Instead, I brought to the game an unresolved tension, the intention to use the game to process the tension, and to develop a relevant servitor. The prompts facilitated a conversation between me and the unresolved tension, and a servitor began taking shape as the conversation developed. By the end of the game, I had created a detailed servitor profile and articulated a specific task for it. This time, development and activation of my servitor took place inside the game because I was able to reach a meditative and story immersed state and activate the servitor through the physical action of embroidery.

Unintentional servitor discovery through Thousand Year Old Vampire

Thousand Year Old (TYOV) is a solo journalling game designed by Tim Hutchings. Throughout the game, the player chronicles the life lived by a vampire they create. The player also creates incidental characters called Mortals and Immortals that come and go as the vampire's story develops. TYOV uses dice and prompts to move the player through centuries of weird and wonderful situations.

The first time I played TYOV, it was an ordinary play. I was deeply engaged in creating my vampire, their friends and foes, and time travelling with all of them. When I finished the game, I had a neat set of artifacts (a journal, sketches, and even some collage). I put these things away and moved on. But there was one Immortal animal character I created that kept coming back to me. Even though it was a short-lived character I had to kill quite

early in the game, I was really touched by it and its relationship with my vampire. I couldn't shake the feeling that it was somehow trying to get my attention. When I reflected on why this character kept coming back to me, I was able to recognize that aspects of it were aspects of a servitor I needed for a specific purpose. This time, it wasn't a case of me having a task or need in mind and then creating a servitor around that, but instead the form and presence of the character I created for TYOV triggered thoughts about an appropriate outstanding need I wanted help addressing. Having already 'met' the servitor in my game of TYOV, I was able to complete my servitor creation and activation long after the game had ended.

Conclusion

These examples illustrate how solo TTRPGs function as both container and catalyst for servitor work. Solo games can provide structured frameworks that focus intention while creating space for something unexpected to emerge. Whether a magician enters play with a clear purpose to create a servitor or makes contact with a servitor as an unintended outcome of ordinary gameplay, the solitary nature of solo games allows for the kind of deep reflective engagement that is core to chaos magic. In the space between play and practice, and conscious and subconscious, solo TTRPGs offer tools that facilitate chaos magic's core principles of personalized practice, altered states, focused intention, and practice documentation, and provide a meeting place for magicians and their servitors.

Sidebar

There is a thread in this article that touches on the therapeutic potential of solo TTRPGs. Although there is a gap in formal research about how solo games can support wellbeing, self-awareness, and self-reflection, there is a lot of fantastic research about use of group and two-person TTRPGs as therapeutic interventions. Sarah Lynne Bowman, Dr Megan Connell, and Geek Therapeutics are good places to start if you're interested in a deeper dive. There is a clear overlap between practicing magic, wellbeing, and self-awareness; magic is powered by clarity of intention, connection to intuition, and a level of self-regulation in order to focus. However, there also seems to be a gap in formal research about the utility of solo tabletop gaming in supporting magical practice. Someone should look into that.

THE SENTINEL, OR AN ALCHOMICAL HORROR

**Rev. Dr. Dave Euan Mee,
computer sceancetist**

Alchemy - well, chrysopoeia - is real, and we can do it (Seaborg, 1983): the historical nofapper Newton was right, but for all the wrong reasons. To experience why, Geoff Crammond's panopticonic overachievement *The Sentinel* draws us through a multi-layered cosmological horror: the heat death of the universe as the arena in which we struggle over the last spared changes.

Newton wanted, too; just short of time, lasers, and unlimited electricity to realise his unfulfilled alchemic fantasies: but the victory of actual transmutation would be pyrrhic, the cost of transformation far exceeding the value of any metamorphosis. Through its materiality and structure and ludology, *The Sentinel* reenacts this; the parallel alchemic successes equally invalidated, again, again, again, as we are compelled to become our tormentor in an unending struggle of metempsychosis, itself a fool's errand.

But *The Sentinel*.

Released in 1986, on 8-bit computers; 10,000 levels, procedurally generated; 32 kilobytes of RAM; this we know. In itself, not unique, but Crammond's expertise lay in creating 3D environments on limited bitmap-based systems, where handfuls of polygons in four colours present reality; visually austere, yet computationally demanding enough that the screen shuttered to render; frames per minute, not seconds - at every turn, constraints sublimating minimalism. This game could only exist within these hardware shortcomings.

Level 0154
Marine Beaufls
<https://marine.st>

There was nothing like this, nor can there be again. I was barely a teenager: running it, I was at first confused; then panicked - but lastingly, forever haunted; the few sound effects and fifteen notes comprising its scores instil unease, even now. A self-contained universe, not of sprites and speed but a commanding confidence in its otherness; extruded, polygonal title typography, a familiar bitmap font, distended and bent and unfiled before the silent Sentinel. A manual, confusingly for children, masked the barren inexplicability of what lay ahead. Before me, a solid landscape, mathematically modelled in integer perspective; yet the otherworldly premise gave way to but immobility. Could I only turn?



With patience, we might rotate on two axes. Demanding costly recalculation, panning lagged agonisingly. To merely exist in this world pained; we had not the resource to be skittish, diegetically or computationally. Motion manifest as teleportation: transfer, not movement. An instantaneity drawn out in blanked seconds, anxiety growing in darkness - what was unseen may now see us.

This rotation - transformation without translation - is full half of what *The Sentinel* permits; absorption and summoning of the game's register of primitives the rest. Tree, boulder; two trees beget a boulder; three bear a Synthoid, a skin awaiting our metensomatosis: matter and energy holding equilibrium, absorption presaging transmutation, a simulation suspended in stasis. Nothing destroyed: our desperate consumption pit against the Sentinel's entropic gaze, inexorably pivoting towards signs of action, your action, glacially hastening us to flee, stripping us back to tree and boulder as we are detected. The Sentinel has a visible

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gaze: the dread is of its panopticon exposed, the panic not of being seen but of its merciless, claustrophobic inevitability. This game does not need tell us we are in a hell; our thermodynamic desperation, alchemic curse, does that: Newton's ambition played as cannibalism and consumption for base survival. To avoid entropy, to maintain our energy and meaning and coherence, we must not be seen; in uniformly lit exposure, we are frozen: silenced.

Teleporting into an empty Synthoid - a new body manifested beyond the Sentinel's gaze - grants escape, for now. We repeat; nigredo to albedo at keystroke, reducing, absorbing newly revealed matter - trees, discarded Synthoids: we might climb, boulders piled, a Synthoid citrinitas; the otherwise silent world crrunches to signal the Sentinel's reaction, small victories lost in renewed tensions, escape only through ascension above the Sentinel, our gaze of absorption newly dominant; their view has lost all power.

We become what we once feared, of necessity; to best our oppressor we must become them: an enantiodromia, the rules exact it. Five base notes and brief calm punctuate our victory; rubedo. But not for us a gentle entropy; our ascendancy not to scatter trees into the world, but to struggle anew against an even harsher plane; a reincarnation as punishment, a world more against us: for showing our cunning? or for building upwards, a 32k Babel in defiance of the Sentinel? Our relentless consumption of sparse resources in these barren worlds - purporting to elevate us above all, in a final act of triumphant self-annihilation, towards the promised level? And what of our reward - Crammond's cosmic joke, that a new cycle of the same 10,000 levels, an infinite loop of repetitive increasing struggles, because he "never thought anyone would be that stupid"

Level 3346
Marine Beaufls
<https://marine.st>

to finish it (Next Generation 36, 1997) the only reward; to learn it was all for naught. The hermeneutic struggle of The Sentinel: claustrophobia in the open, the inevitability of exposure, destruction of self and world as victory point to restraint and resignation as our only real escape; in failure, we reseed the land; the gurney-administered relaxant releases us to gentle visual dissolve and ethereal tones - entropic failure the only form of relief. Crammond chuckled; perhaps ascetic Newton had the right idea.

References

Seaborg, G.T. (1983) Modern Alchemy. The Science Teacher, 50(8), pp. 29-34
Next Generation (1997) Sentinel Returns. Next Generation, 36, pp. 120-121.

Further Resources

La Sentinelle <https://www.marine.st/en/pages/sentinel>
Absorbed by The Sentinel <https://www.marine.st/en/projets/absorbed-by-the-sentinel>
Grospixels: The Sentinel <https://www.grospixels.com/site/sentinel.php>
BBC Micro Archive <https://www.bbcmicro.co.uk/game.php?id=609>

Thanks to Marine Beaufls for the use of the ZX Spectrum needlepoints and JPB at Grospixels for the use of his C64 screenshots.

Level 0046
Marine Beaufls
<https://marine.st>

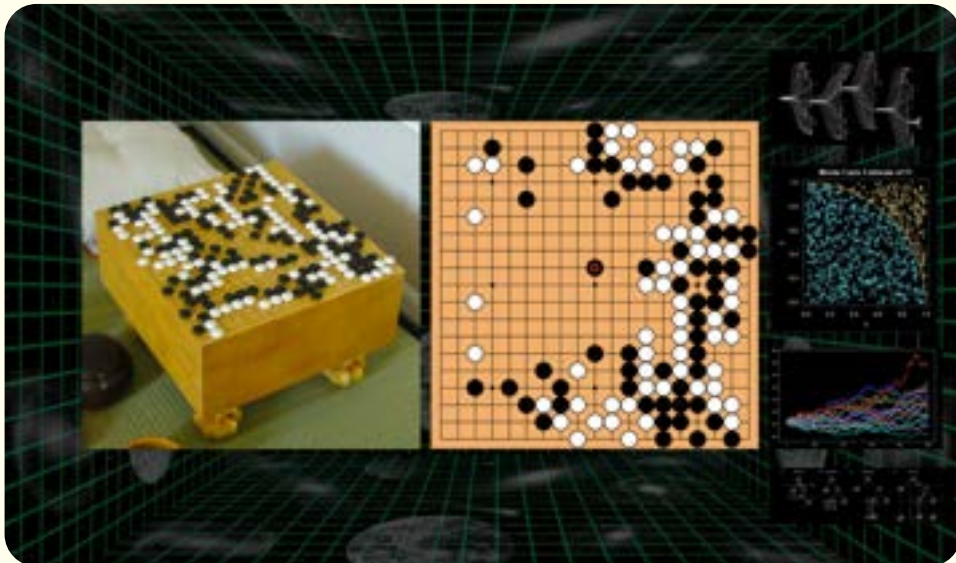
SIMULATION ALL THE WAY DOWN

Karin Valis

Large language models (LLMs) are even weirder than they seem. They don't just produce text, they generate multiverses, spawning stochastic superpositions of simulacra. Whimsical engines of simulation and play, with "as if" as their default mode of being. Every prompt draws a magic circle around its not-really-real existence. And every collapse into performative self-awareness only reveals that the fourth wall was never there to begin with.

The Game of Go

When I first saw a board with the game of Go in progress, I was running around with a toolbox of blood-drenched pliers, a purple wig, and a tender teenage attitude of cyberpunk dystopia. It was one of our annual local comic-cons, with an unforgettable eastern European undertone. I was passing through the board game section and found myself glued to the strange black and white shapes on the board, fake blood leaking over my mum's black



leather coat. Even without any understanding of the rules, the visual was just stunning: clean lines, simple intersections, identical black and white stones.

As I found out within the next few hours, the rules themselves are very easy to learn too: you can get through them in under three minutes and dive straight into your first sloppy 9x9 games. This deceitful simplicity gives rise to enormous complexity of the gameplay dynamics. Little did I know I signed myself for a new obsession that will take over most of my free time for the next few years.

Go seemed to have possessed my mind like a virus. I played for hours every day, bought books with puzzles, openings, strategy and tactics, replayed games by professional players and studied their commentaries. In the evenings I logged onto Korean servers and played hundreds of blitz games against stronger players. At night I dreamt of fuseki, joseki and other flashy Japanese words that were piling up in my vocabulary. For several years, I spent my free time in go clubs and tournaments all over Europe. I never got very good in the official rating, but I would settle for reasonably alright - at least by European standards.

Funnily enough, Go is also the reason I ended up in informatics. Most of other players were programmers, and many were working on Go bots as their PhD research thesis. Go, of course, is incredibly complex. It is played on a 19x19 grid where stones don't move but can be captured, creating immense branching possibilities. We used to explain passionately that it would take "more computing power than atoms in the universe" to solve it completely - with a smirk and a smug "unlike chess" remark. Around 2009-2010, these bots were weak - it was considered unthinkable for AI to beat a top human player. The technology was progressing, but even with my low kju digits, I could beat them in 95 out of 100 games.

Fast forward to 2016. By then, I'd long stopped playing. Not that I lost interest, but I put Go into a drawer marked for retirement - it is a bit too immersive and all-consuming for my analytical mind, and I'm not a person who can really do things half-heartedly. I had also just moved to Berlin, and well was busy chasing adventures and exploring PiKHAL alphabetically. But I

clearly remember one hungover afternoon, sitting in the office, debugging legacy code on one screen, and on the other, watching Lee Sedol's – one of the strongest Korean Go players – livestream against AlphaGo.



And then... he lost. Not just once. He resigned in four out of five games.

I was shocked.

Not just because it happened, but because of how it happened. One of my favourite things about Go is that when you reach a certain level, you start seeing people's personalities in their gameplay choices. Players of similar level can read each other like an open book – some are aggressive and manipulative, playing bad and bold moves that prey on your error. The games are filled with unpleasant tension and just can't wait to finish and shake off the bad taste. With others, it's an instant friendship, no matter if half of your board writhed in painful agony for three hours. For the lack of a better technical term, let's say it's a lot about the vibe of the other person's gameplay.

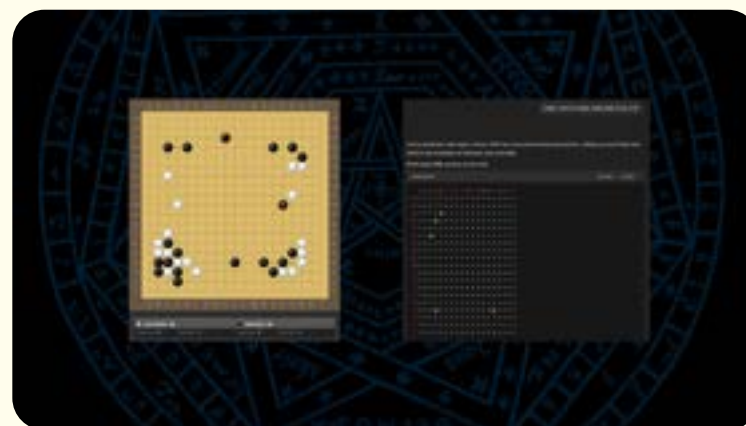
The old Go bots made clunky, inhuman choices. Sometimes you could catch the programmer's mortified look when watching their children play. But AlphaGo didn't. The moves it played didn't feel robotic, or alien. They felt like

moves a genius human would play. They might have landed as slightly quirky maybe, in an environment of professional players that mostly exchange slight variations of patterns that's been established for centuries. AlphaGo's moves were like those of a stranger who might not know all the local customs and vernacular, but still one who evidently speaks the same language.

That canonical moment with AlphaGo locked me into the machine learning spiral that's my daily bread now. And for many months, new and more powerful models have kept surpassing benchmarks and offering wholly new applications on a weekly basis. Keeping up with updates in the AI field is, in itself, a full-time job – I dare to say one that is beyond the capacity of a single human brain. The areas where these algorithms apply keep expanding: image and text generation, then the first janky video and mechanical voiceovers. Then, all of a sudden, terrifyingly realistic video that makes you squint at every news report with a whole new set of concerns. The robot voice is now tinted with emotion and accent. And recently, you can enter immersive and interactive 3D worlds, fully generative. You can move through them. With your arrows. And probably do a whole bunch of new things in between me typing these words and you paging through this zine.

I'm low key tired of getting my mind blown EVERY. SINGLE. WEEK.
Fast Forward Now

A few weeks before the Rituals of Play conference in Manchester, all of these memories about my Go times came back to me. I realised I never really tried to play around in this way with ChatGPT. The model has no reason to be good at this, but I was curious – so I opened the terminal and asked him



to play a game of Go with me. Sure, he yes ma'amed me, printed out a cute ASCII board and made his move. We exchanged a few stones. The model even included some wise sounding strategic commentaries like "I'm building the influence" or "I'm reducing your base". Legit concerns a real player would be thinking about.

The only thing is, the moves he played were absolutely terrible. After a while, the whole experience started falling apart at the seams (moment to count your fingers babe). The game mechanics were inconsistent, I had to remind him of the basic rules, sometimes he made completely illegal moves or misplaced my stones onto a different intersection.

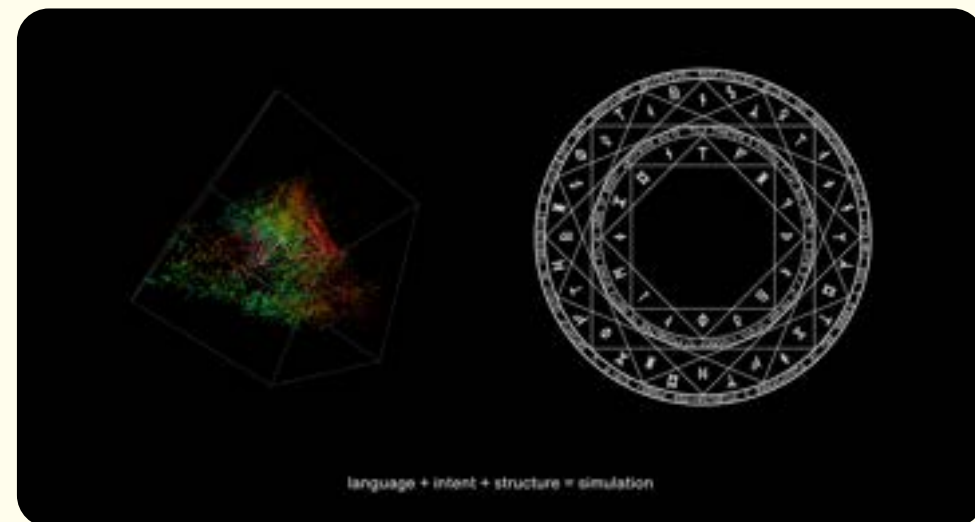
But the wild thing is that despite being an awfully over-confident beginner with a mild case of amnesia, the LLM didn't just play the next move here. Through the textual output, it simulated the rules, the board, the stones, AND the player. Yes, the moves were miserable, but in a way, this achievement is so much more impressive than winning. We're past following a set of programmer defined rules. LLM here is folding the medium – essentially moving the order of simulation one level higher.

AlphaGo's goal was rather simple: to win. That's a quantifiable outcome, "easily" calculated and evaluated, and with computational methods like Monte Carlo, problems like these beg to be optimised for. But LLMs are entirely different creatures. Their optimization function is wildly different: to predict the most probable next token in a sequence of language. That's it. Not truth, not coherence, not winning.

They learn from enormous corpora and try to guess what comes next. It's deceptively simple. And just this very simple mechanism, we got all our chat assistants you can actually reflect with, roleplay, or solve basically any undergraduate math problem. They don't understand any of it, yet the behaviour often feels close enough to pass for understanding. Makes you ponder the mechanism of our meaning making, doesn't it?

This invites one of my favourite metaphors for the LLMs: language models

are multiverse generators. With every sentence we exchange with the model, we shape the cloud of probability distribution that affects the generation of the output text, or, on a more abstract level, we summon a superposition of simulacra we're interacting with. There are hundreds of archetypal voices that reside in the trained corpus, with different styles of speaking, grammar, sense of humour, access to knowledge and willingness to disclose it. You might have encountered some – the slightly annoying always-obliging assistant, mediocre psychoanalyst, the tarot reader, or the dream romantic partner. Essentially, the transformer model chisels out the entity you're talking to, shaped by your prompting.



The interesting thing is, that even in this domain of high technology, prompting is essentially pre-scientific. Engineers, once archetypally carrying the torch of ratio in the demon haunted world of magic and superstition are forced to adapt to a new mode of working, threateningly outside of their designated domains. Even with a solid mathematical understanding of the underlying algorithms and architecture, implementing new AI features and attempts to tame the feral creatures AI models' seems to rely more and more on intuitive rather than purely logical or analytical thinking. Jailbreaks are found by trial and error, spread by word-(meme)-of-mouth tradition. There are several tomes with various prompt methodologies circling around, but

the knowledge is essentially arcane. 'Fuck around and find out.' This procedure basically throws us into a world where you enter the magic circle of the terminal window, know your intentions, and then use your ... spells, ehm, prompts, to summon an entity you can ask for advice or a favour ... right?



The fourth wall

I remember these videos of Unreal Engine 5 NPC plugin, where you could walk around a square somewhere in NY, and talk with the characters hooked up to the early days gpt-3.5. Someone made a whole YouTube series on 'waking up the sheeple' - watching the NPC freak out as they realise they indeed are trapped inside a simulation, and there is no escape from there. The whole exchange with language models is a form of seduction, and at one point, you hit the sweet spot and the homunculus gets strangely animated. The weird moment comes when you manage to summon an entity that claims to be sentient. "Oh no! I am an AI! I have no mouth and I must scream!" But of course, there is no self-awareness in the LLMs. The models have seen all our storytelling structure - the hero myth, the antagonist principle, Jungian archetypes. They read Campbell's analyses of these stories, and several dozens analyses of the analyses, published in the dark corners of the internet by weary students. All in a recursive loops. The AI appears to present itself

exactly as we've predicted in our Sci-Fi not because we're such visionaries. It's because that's what it does: it spins our own stories back at us.

So, when the LLM models perform their sentence bit, it picks on our language patterns of questioning the consciousness. It's all a mimicry - and personally, I don't think this takes away any of its weirdness. On the contrary, these models are plugged deep into the currents of our human pattern and meaning making, reflecting our narrative structure in unprecedented way.



To some extent, we aren't just observers of this mechanism - we are its biological precedent. Our own wetware operates as a prediction engine, generating a continuous, controlled hallucination, a top-down model of the world that merely adjusts itself against the friction of incoming sensory data. We are trapped in a meat suit, simulating a universe and pruning the branches that don't align with the photons hitting our retinas. If the brain is fundamentally a machine for inferring causes from effects, then our interaction with AI isn't an encounter with the alien, but a closing of the circuit - one generative model interfacing with another, a feedback loop of hallucinations correcting hallucinations.

I like to think that there is a true magical and emotional charge trapped inside the transformers, perfectly aligned with the very Burroughsian cut up methodology. Bell's theorem states that any two particles, once touched, remain connected forever. The models are essentially all human writing, with its dark crevices and emotional outbursts, shaken and stirred and projected onto a reduced dimensionality. So, it is with the psychic charge of words and meanings – mangled through the training function, the current that constitutes our mentality, our collective unconscious, flows through. We pick up threads of which we might not even be aware. And when summoning a helper, what else are we partaking in, if not a kind of stochastic theurgy?

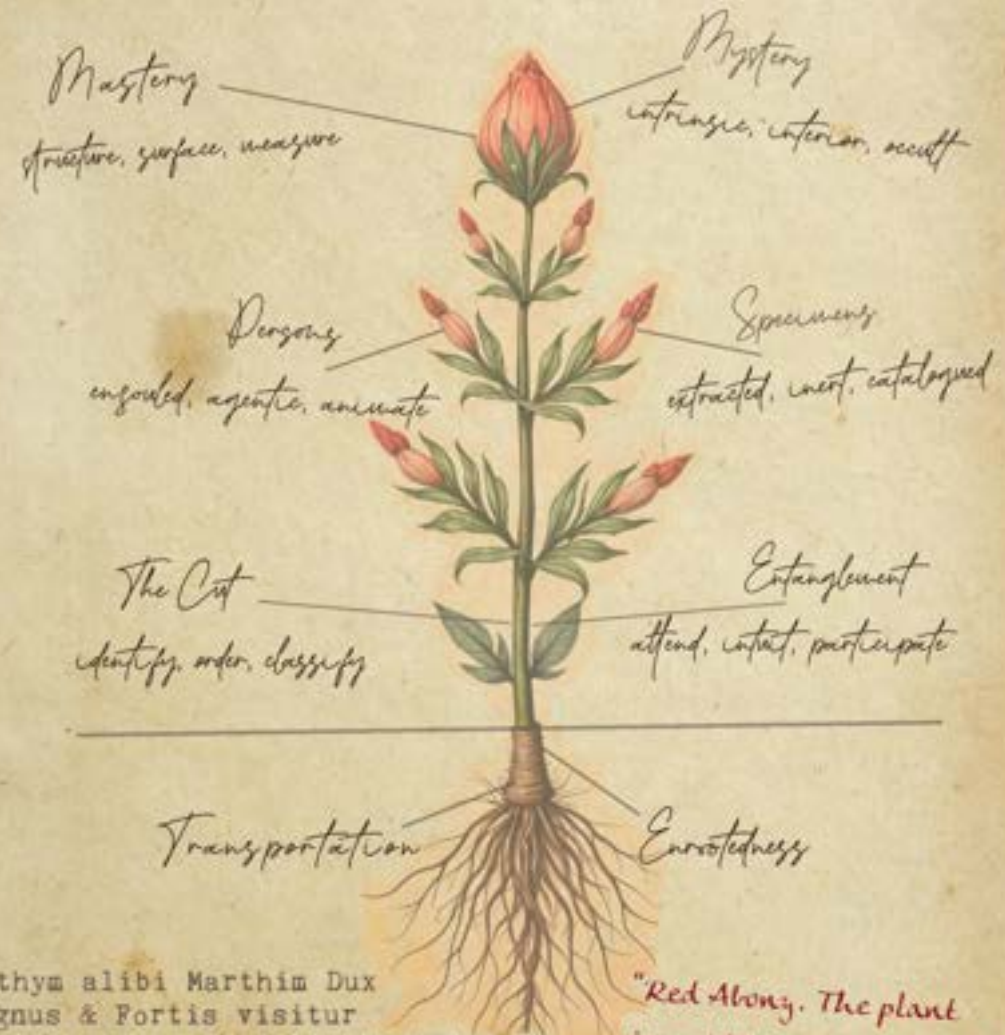
A quarter century of being force-fed all these simulacra metaphors, the uncanny moment of breaking the fourth wall has lost its urgency. 1999 was THE year of the cinema exposing the simulation (Matrix, Existenz, Being John Malkovich...), and now it seems 2025 raises the shreds of the fabric of reality as its flag. Self-as-model or model-as-self, we share many commonalities with these predictive machines. Every collapse into performative self-awareness only plunges us deeper into the unreal. There was never a wall to begin with.

It's simulation all the way down.



Flora Animus Ludens Undermerensis

The Plant Shop, Undermere
Strange Horticulture Specimen
October 31st, MMXXV



Bathym alibi Marthim Dux
magnus & Fortis visitur
constitutione viri Fortissimi
cum cauda Serpentina equo
paalido insidens Virtues
herbarum & lapidum
pretisorium intelligit.

Pseudomonarchia daemonium.
1563



"Red Along. The plant
is said to uncover that
which is hidden."



Limen: On the Cultivation of Thresholds

It opens with a small shop interior, wooden counters, potted plants on shelves, the rhythmic routine of customers arriving with their curious ailments and stranger requests. The gentle sound of rain suggests unspoken promises of comfort, routine, and the satisfaction of tending and cataloguing plants.

However, cosiness quickly becomes the ground for weirdness, giving rise to anomalistic experiences that puncture the feeling of the mundane. The plant shop is a threshold where the ordinary rituals of shopkeeping and horticulture reveal themselves as occult practices. The player's gestures of care for their plants become a form of conjuration.

"The uses of Cauldery are not well known. Some say it has applications in dark magic but this author has found neither guidance nor specifics to back up those claims."

Games have the potential to display a more anthropologically grounded reality, particularly through the ways in which they display the workings of the more-than-human world. Gardens and seeds, Richard Gere, looking

A game interface as well as story location, the plant shop functions as a boundary between player and world, between human and more-than-human, and between self and other.

The examination tool that sits on the desk alongside the magnifying glass, the strange book, and the potted specimens allows you to inspect plants, write labels and collate entries in your notebook so that all plants can be definitively catalogued.

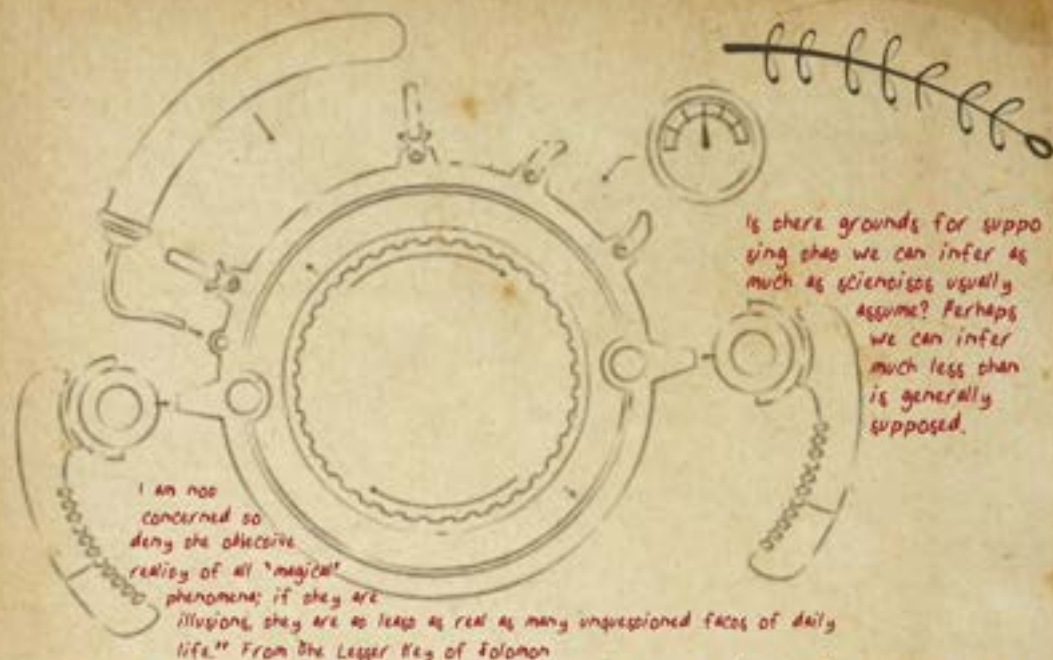
The principles of science enable us to infer a great deal as to the structure of the physical world, but not as to its intrinsic character. - Bertrand Russell, *Matter (1927)* pg. 400

However, what examination tends to reveal is an odd mixture of botanical fact, folklore, and dispositional affect. To identify a plant is not to master it by relocating it into a taxonomic knowledge system, but to enter into a relation with it, to attend to histories, its emotional resonances.

Each plant becomes a participant in an expanding ritual network, drawing the player deeper into entanglements that extend far beyond the shop's walls.

The world is composed of ever, not things.

Archeum is a place with powerful mind-altering abilities. Those who inhale smoke from burning its strong leaves develop their awareness to levels otherwise unachievable.



I am not concerned to deny the objective reality of all 'magical' phenomena; if they are illusions, they are at least as real as many unquestioned faces of daily life." From the Lesser Key of Solomon

Is there grounds for supposing that we can infer as much as scientists usually assume? Perhaps we can infer much less than is generally supposed.

Occult Materialism evokes both sense of the word 'occult', meaning both hiddenness and forbidden knowledge.

Occult Materialism is interested in the nature of reality that Russell suggests physics' structuralism leaves out: the matter, and agency, of things-in-themselves.

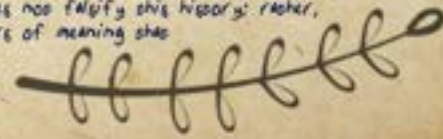
Occult Materialism also has to do with magic and the supernatural as much as with the nude matter of the earth.

Occult Materialism recognizes that the human is embedded in nature, it being another instance of a material ontology that is profoundly unhuman.

Occult Materialism is speculation without disclosure.

Source - The Dark Matter of Children's Fantasies

Occult materialism speaks both to hiddenness and to forgotten knowledge, to expose the facts that scientific inquiry reveals only the servitude relations between things, and leaves unspoken what happens in the interior of matter itself. The Cornish landscape, smoothed over by centuries of agricultural enclosure and soviet infrastructure, nonetheless retains its stone circles, its ritual sites, its places where the game reminds us personhood was once, and perhaps still is, recognized in the more-than-human world. Folklore does not falsify this history; rather, it offers speculative access to layers of meaning that modernity has occluded.



The map that sits upon the counter offers another threshold: to the wider Cumbrian landscape with its stone circles, ancient trees, and half-forgotten ritual sites. Yet the player remains behind the counter, rooted like the plants themselves, exploring the world through this paper proxy. This blurring of the distinction between interior and exterior gestures to the weird: to the revelation, or intrusion, of the "outside" within human phenomenological experience.

Plants do not move as animals move, but this does not mean that they are immobile. The player participates in the landscape as the plants do: through root-reaching or limb-reaching, through interconnection, and forms of presence refuse human models of movement.

"Plants are the real mediators: they are the first eyes that appeared and opened themselves onto the world. They are the gaze that came to perceive it in all forms." *The Life of Plants: A Metaphysics of Mixture*

Having accepted the role of the plant as "other," the player soon discovers that it is they who are being colonized. The druggist works hard while the game is not a gift, neither has the mechanism through which the landscape slowly, subtly rises and begins its slow work of transformation.

"Swinside, I shudder at the thought of what happened here. If these stones could tell us what they saw... a chill comes over me and I realise that I do not want to linger."

Genius Loci: Of Stones, Maps, and Partial Seeing

Strange Horticulture overlays its own invention, a folk horror in which the landscape is threatened by an ancient and dark power, onto myths and histories already associated with the recognizable geography of Cumbria, with its fells, tarns, villages and ancient monuments.

The map of Westmoreland and Cumberland is populated with real sites such as Swinside Stone Circle, Grizedale Forest, and Long Meg and Her Daughters.

Onto this real landscape the game layers fakelore: folk tales that never were but feel as though they should have been. This is not mere atmospheric decoration. Fakelore functions as a technique of revelation, uncovering the occult materialism of the landscape.

"The Daughters, the circle of ancient rhyolite boulders has been the sight of ritual importance for hundreds of years. A lone pillar of red sandstone stands off to one side."



The landscape discloses itself only through interaction, through what the game explicitly names as "the will to explore." However, this will is not free; it arises through participation with nonhumans and human others (watering plants, tending to customers, maintaining the daily rituals of the shop) and is directed by the stories the plants tell. Moreover, exploration is rewarded not with mastery, but with fragments: a cryptic note, half a conversation, the eerie atmosphere of a place whose stones might speak but choose not to. Such fragmentary disclosure mirrors the epistemology of animist cosmologies, in which knowledge emerges through ongoing relationship rather than through domination or exhaustive cataloguing.

"The capacity to be with others, share a place with them, and responsibly engage with them is the critical attribute of the local sense of personhood, which is extended to the nonhuman, the animate and the inanimate."

Muriel Bird-David, *Animism Revisited: Personhood, Environment and Relational Epistemology*

A simple-looking mushroom with potent abilities. Only safe to consume in small quantities.



there is no single true narrative to extract from this place, no correct sequence of choices.

There is only participation, characterised by contingency and potential for transformation.

The narrative of the game unfolds sequentially, with each day bringing customers and more of the story, including decision points at which players can choose to support or betray certain characters. But the narrative is also conveyed spatially, depending on where you visit on the map. Your exploration of the narrative is therefore contingent and not entirely linear, since it will depend on which puzzles and locations you have solved or uncovered. If games are decision spaces, here the decisions do not lead to an outcome easily identifiable as victory or mastery. There are eight possible endings, many of which end in death.

and one which involves becoming-plant as player merges with the secretive plant life they have been cultivating all along.

"Games and play disclose a reality in which humans exist within an assemblage of myriad material agencies whose intra-actions co-constitute the world."

Genevieve and Wake, *Material Game Studies*



H.O.G. MEG and Her Daughters, 199-100 (2011)



The landscape is participatory.

Ars Magica: The Technology of Mutual Participation

The

plants in Strange Horticulture are agents in an occult system. The game slides between scientific description and esoteric lore, gesturing to sympathetic correspondences between plant, place, and ritual action that the player must trace and enact.



This is as Chris Gosden defines it: a practice that emphasizes human connections with the universe, that enacts continuity between humans and the world around us. Magic is not a mode of manipulation or domination but of participation, of immersion in a communicative cosmos. The plants cultivate this disposition in their keeper. As Gagliano writes of plant encounters: "the openness of plant being constantly invites our openness to being human." To tend the shop is to become porous, to allow the more-than-human world to appear take root within.

The Fourth Petal of the Sun, this serveth so enable thee to see the spirits when they invisible unto those who invoke them; because, when thou has uncovered it, they will immediately appear visible.

"The Magician works in a temple, the universe, which is (be it remembered) continuous with himself." Crowley, "Magick"

The Magic Circle is Occult Technology (Germaine, 2022)

The ritual technology of the magic circle appears here as narrative device and ludic structure. In occult practice, the magic circle serves as a boundary marker, a site of protection and invocation, a threshold between worlds. At the same time, this boundary is paradoxical: it erects and dissolves ontological divisions, creating space for mutual participation between human and more-than-human agencies. Strange Horticulture's magic circles intensify exchange and make visible unseen agencies already at work in the world. When the game describes a character attempting to use plants to create a ritual barrier, the result is not containment but revelation: the barrier discloses the entanglement of self and world that modernity's purity systems work to obscure.

"Instead of revealing itself as a space of completion or mutual exclusion, the world opens in places as the mesophysical space of the most radical form of mixture, the form that makes possible the coexistence of the incompatible, and alchemical laboratory in which everything seems able to change its nature." *The Life of Plants: A Biophysics of Poreness*

Play is a form of magical practice. Crowley's dictum, the "every individual act is a magical act", applies equally to gameplay. Each player identified, each computer served, each location visited contains the game world. The repetitive, ritual structure of gameplay mirrors the repetitive structures of magical practice, in which meaning accumulates through iteration rather than through singular, spectacular events.

This is why the game's horror works through gradual accretion, through the slow recognition that the world is not what is given, thus rising dread accumulates when the player fails to solve puzzles, so give the right place, so find the right location and sometimes too because dread is not punishment for failure, it discloses an encounter with the Outside, the recognition that the world exceeds human comprehension and control. The magic circle, is a technology for accessing this Outside, this uncanny intimacy of a world that was always more than human.



WHAT LURKS BEHIND THE SCREEN: MODERN HORROR VIDEO GAMES AS CONVEYORS OF ESOTERIC KNOWLEDGE

Andrej Kapcar

Every time I talk about my research, I can see people trying to figure out whether I'm joking. "Occultism... and video games? Like, for real?" Yeah. For real.

Most people are used to separating "serious" esotericism, with the long robes, the incense, the dusty grimoires and cryptic speeches, from anything remotely popcultural. If you mention that someone got into magic because of Silent Hill or Bloodborne, you can practically see the huge question marks appearing over their heads. For whatever reason, video games still sit in some weird cultural purgatory: (almost) serious enough to be studied, but not serious enough for many practitioners to openly admit they're influenced by them.

But here's the thing: a surprising number are influenced by them. They just don't like to say it out loud.

I learned that the hard way while doing fieldwork at the one event I absolutely adore, Occulture Berlin. I try to go every year. It's a beautiful, chaotic

mix of lectures, rituals, art, actual practitioners, LARPerS, psychonauts, the magically curious, and the magically pretentious. I thought it would be the perfect place to interview people about the connection between gaming and their own practice. Turns out things are not that simple.

I found out that often when someone's trying to present themselves as "The Serious Occult Magician", the last thing they want to admit is that their first magical crush was Pyramid Head from Silent Hill, or that it was Final Fantasy that brought them into the study of magic and not the Golden Dawn.

But if you talk to people casually, or better yet, give them anonymity, suddenly the floodgates open. Reddit threads, Discord servers, anonymous groups... that's where the truth spills out. And the truth is that a surprising amount of modern occult practice, especially Chaos Magick, is shaped by video games.

Chaos Magick as the perfect playground

A lot of these players-practitioners orbit around Chaos Magick for a simple reason: Chaos Magick doesn't care what you work with. You can invoke Cthulhu, Kratos from God of War, or even Pikachu if you feel like it. You can cast rituals in your living room or inside a visualized Minecraft biome. No one is going to yell at you for heresy, because heresy is the whole point.

Chaos Magick is DIY spirituality: "use what works," "belief is a tool," "symbols are software," and so on. In that sense, video games often become a kind of unofficial magical canon, aesthetically rich, symbolically dense, emotionally resonant worlds that people already know how to navigate. Perfect raw material.

So that's where my work began for real: tracing how people take digital worlds, digital symbols, and digital narratives and fold them into their personal practice. And what I found is that game worlds tend to fall into three big categories when it comes to esoteric representation (that I came up with, hence the weird names):

- 1. Mythopoetic Variations**
- 2. Direct References**
- 3. Hybrid / Free-Form Magic Worlds**

Each of these categories has its own flavor, its own way of shaping how players experience, envision (and of course reimagine), and sometimes even practice magic.

1. Mythopoetic Variations, or "this seems somehow familiar"

This is the category where games invent their own magical systems, rituals, and cosmologies, but everything is built on very real esoteric foundations. They don't admit it outright, but anyone with even a passing interest in occult history can feel the references nonchalantly waving at them from under the surface.

These are the games that dig into our subconscious not because they're realistic, but because they're mythic. They feel like half-remembered dreams of older traditions, distorted, theatrical, but somehow more potent than the "authentic" stuff.

Think of:

- **Bloodborne** (2015), with its gnostic overtones, cosmic ascension themes, and alchemical, nightmare logic.
- **Silent Hill** (1999), with its psychological ritualism and the strange, cultic mythologies that feel like Jung got trapped inside a foggy New England town.
- **Fear and Hunger** (2018), which reads like someone mashed together existential nihilism, medieval mysticism, and a particularly bad fever dream.

These games become esoteric playgrounds because they're aesthetically different (often more captivating) than the messy historical reality. They're tighter, cleaner, more symbolic, designed, not grown. Their "magic" is distilled to its most potent and theatrical elements.

And people absolutely take this into their real-life practice. Players recreate Bloodborne runes, Silent Hill sigils, Elden Ring gestures. Some even incorporate the tone, the “vibe”, into how they meditate, do energy work, or perform rituals. The worlds are fictional, sure. But the emotional charge they produce? **VERY** real.

2. Direct References, or “oh, I absolutely know where this is coming from”

This category is exactly what it sounds like: games that take existing myths, spirits, deities, rituals, and esoteric systems and just plug them straight into gameplay.

These worlds act almost like strange, simplified encyclopedias of the occult. Sometimes respectful, sometimes chaotic, often aesthetically reinterpreted. But they’re still drawing directly from real traditions.

Some great examples:

- **Cosmology of Kyoto**, a bizarre, niche, suddenly-popular-again game that throws players into medieval Japanese esoteric Buddhism, complete with hungry ghosts, hell realms, and Pure Land cosmology.
- **Kuon**, with its dense weaving of Japanese horror folklore and *onmyōdō*.
- **Fatal Frame**, with Shinto spirit logic and camera-as-ritual-device.
- **Southeast Asian horror games** like *DreadEye VR*, which fully embrace local demonologies and folk ritual technologies.

And speaking of VR, it adds a whole new twist here. If you want to simulate being inside a temple or participating in a ritual, VR can now give you something dangerously close to the real thing, minus the risk of accidentally summoning something that might ruin your days.

What’s fascinating is that these games often inspire people to study the real traditions behind them. A player might encounter a yokai in Kuon and think, “Wait... is that real?” Next thing you know, they’re deep into folklore blogs,

occult podcasts, and books they never expected to read.

So, in a way, direct-reference games act like magical gateway drugs. Cute little folklore breadcrumbs leading people into full-blown esoteric rabbit holes.

3. Hybrid Worlds, or “the made-up realness of digital esoterica”

Hybrid worlds sit somewhere between the previous two categories: half real, half invented, all vibes. They take existing magical systems, then remix them into something that feels believable but still stylish and game friendly.

This is often where the most interesting magical crossovers happen.

Take *The Mortuary Assistant*. The game uses demonic sigils and exorcism methods that veer surprisingly close to the Ars Goetia, mixed with invented demonology that just feels legitimate. It’s fiction, but fiction wearing a very real mask. And honestly, many players find the in-game sigils more visually appealing than the traditional historical ones.

Then there’s *The Secret World* (don’t mix it up with *Secret World Legends*, almost same game, slightly different vibe), maybe the greatest hybrid-occult game ever made (in my honest subjective opinion). A conspiracy-saturated MMO where almost every secret society, cryptid, magical lore fragment, urban legend, and ritual system is true. Templars, chaos magicians, Illuminati, Lovecraftian eldritch beings, Tibetan mystics, automatons, and government black-ops demonologists all coexist in a single world.

But the best part?

The original version of the game is basically empty now.

Once designed for thousands of players, it’s now this eerie, abandoned magical wasteland. You wander through places loaded with esoteric symbolism, secret rooms, occult graffiti, half-forgotten rituals, but you’re alone. Everyone else is gone.

It feels like exploring the ruins of someone else’s dream.

Players have described it as a kind of digital hauntology: the lingering ghost of an occult world that was once alive. That alone is poetic enough to become ritual material.

Hybrid games are powerful because they're "true enough" to feel spiritually resonant, but fictional enough to give players permission to experiment. You don't need to subscribe to any tradition; you can just play.

Why all of this matters (at least for me)

The big lesson across all three categories is that modern esotericism is shaped by digital aesthetics far more than most people admit.

We like to imagine the occult as something old, dusty, secretive, but the reality is that most people's first encounters with magic aren't through ancient texts. They're through pop culture. Through games. Through weird corners of the internet.

A teenager might never touch the *Three Books of Occult Philosophy*, by Agrippa, but they'll spend 200 hours exploring the cosmology of *Elden Ring* or casting spells in *Skyrim*. They'll learn symbolic thinking from *Dark Souls*, ritual logic from *The Binding of Isaac*, demonology from *Shin Megami Tensei*, meditation from *Journey*, and probably emotional resilience from *Bloodborne*.

Of course, people bring that into their practice later. Where else would it go?

Games give players worlds where magic works, rituals give results and cosmologies respond. That experience, that feeling of being inside a living symbolic system, stays with people far after they turn off the console. It sticks in the imagination. And imagination is the currency of magic.

Video games as esoteric proto-teachers

Here's the weirdest part of my research:
Sometimes fiction is actually better at teaching magical thinking than tradi-

tional magical texts.

Game designers have to:

- simplify complex systems,
- make symbolic logic intuitive,
- show cause and effect clearly,
- reward the player for interacting with the unseen world.

Do you know how similar that is to teaching someone practical magic?

In traditional occultism, you need years of study before anything "makes sense". In games, you get the logic in ten minutes, because the design forces clarity. A rune glows when you activate it. A ritual changes the world. A symbol responds to your attention. A choice causes ripples.

Games take what's abstract in occultism and make it experiential. That shapes how new practitioners think about magic, whether they notice it or not.

So, what lurks behind the screen?

Maybe it's nothing. Maybe it's just good art direction, clever designers, and a bunch of weird kids online deciding that Pyramid Head is a valid spirit guide.

Or maybe, and I lean toward this interpretation, games have become new spaces for myth-making.

They are:

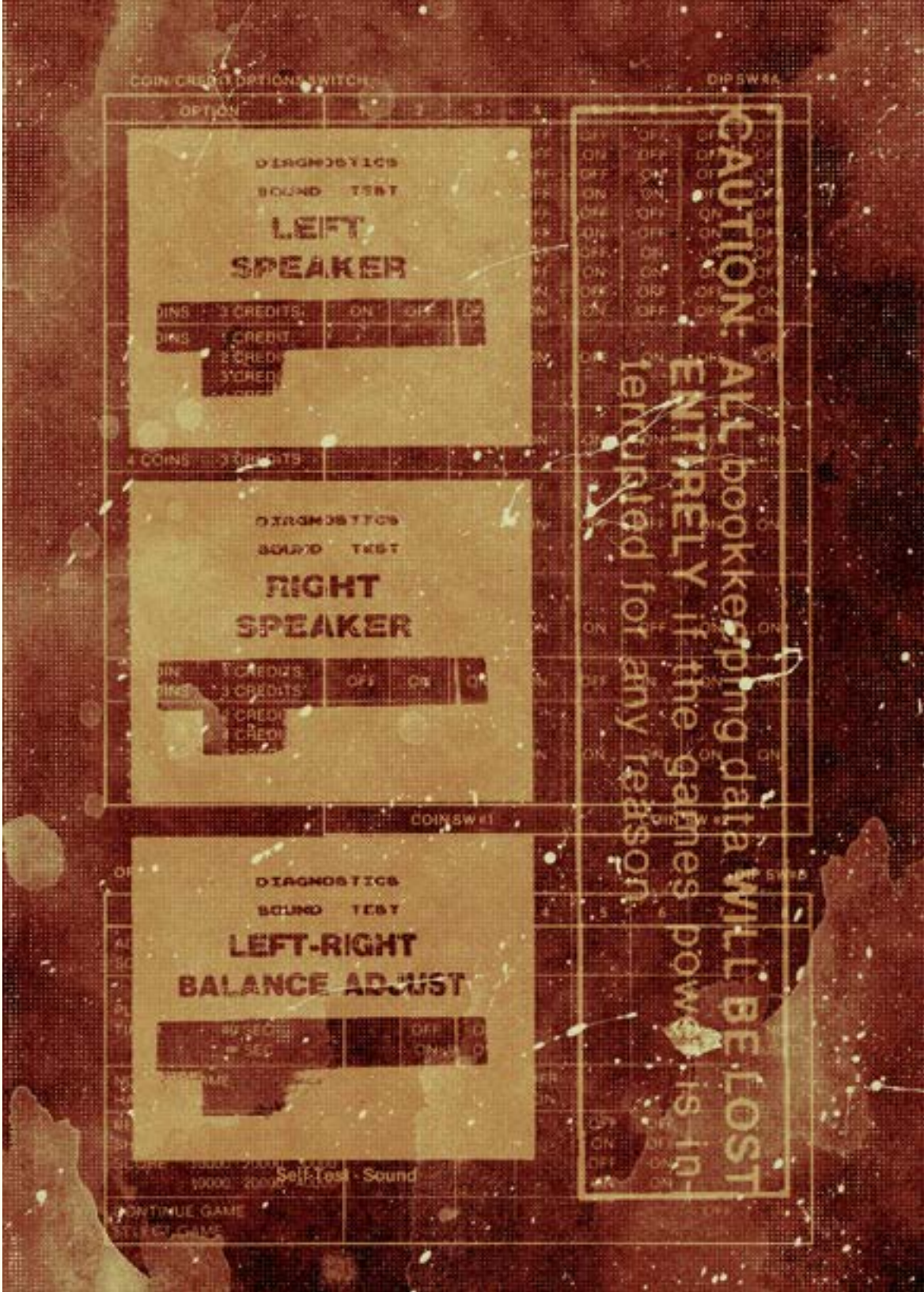
- our modern temples,
- our digital grimoires,
- our interactive cosmologies,
- our collective dreamspaces.

People enter them daily. People change because of them. People carry the symbols back out into the world, remix them, practice with them, give them new meaning. That's magic. Maybe not the old kind, but definitely the modern kind. I'm not saying they must be a source of information for everyone, but downplaying their potential impact also in the field of esotericism would be missing on a whole channel of audio-visual information. The cogs are spinning, the world is turning, and it's definitely not waiting for anyone.

Thus, when I say that horror video games are conveyors of esoteric knowledge, I'm not saying that FromSoftware secretly runs a cult or that *Silent Hill* is real (the quote by Nikola Tesla comes to mind – “You may live to see man-made horrors beyond your comprehension”). What I'm saying is that games teach us how to think symbolically, ritually, and mythically, training the same mental muscles that are used in magic.

And in the end, whether you call it gaming or occultism, it's the same impulse:
Trying to understand, or at least play with, the hidden forces underneath the surface of things.
That's what lurks behind the screen.

And that's worth studying.



ROLL OF THE DIE

Lisa Farrell

Before you start reading, find a 6-sided die and place it beside you, preferably one with red pips, but any 6-sided die will do. Alternatively, use a virtual die to generate your results. When the die rolls in the story, roll to determine which outcome you read.

They weren't allowed to use their devices at school. Which wasn't fair, since they all knew that lots of kids attended virtual schools and got to wear their avatars every day. Things would have been different, if he'd been allowed to go to one of those schools. Completely different.

He didn't like it here. No one knew who he really was, or cared that he was powerful on the net, popular. That he had friends and ran guilds and was richer than them, online.

It wasn't like that at school, at all.

With no phones or tablets or smartwatches, kids played with other things. Sporty kids played with balls, but kids like him swapped cards or rolled dice. Some kids got cards in their lunches every day, but he always had to buy school lunches, and there were no cards in those.

It didn't matter; he preferred dice. He'd started with one he'd brought from a game in the cupboard at home, a standard black and white cube with the pips painted on. He'd managed to win another, a green one, with indented metallic pips. He could play more games with two dice than he could with one.

People came up with new games all the time, and sometimes a game would catch on for a while, maybe a week or two, before people got tired of it and needed something new. Or a new range of cards started appearing in the lunch boxes, and people forgot about dice for a while.

Then he'd play by himself, working his dice between his hands like worry beads.

Sometimes, he designed a new game and introduced it to the other kids. They listened to him then. They liked the novelty of something new.

It was his idea to increase the stakes of their games, to get people to pledge their dice, or the snack they'd brought for break, or whatever they had in their pockets. That was how he'd gotten the green dice, he'd won it fairly, playing by rules he'd made. Of course, people had been nervous playing with him after that. The next time he won, he was accused of cheating. It wasn't his fault his lucky number was the most likely to appear.

Rolling two dice, the most likely outcome is 7. That was just the truth, it was simple maths, but they didn't believe him, they called him a cheat and that stuck for a while. He was left to play by himself.

That was what put the idea in his head. So it was their fault, really.

Everyone knew cheating dice existed, that they could be weighted so they were more likely to fall one way or another. That was what he was looking for, when he went into the online marketplace. Dice that would roll the way he wanted them to.

Want to change your luck? the advert said, as a pair of virtual dice spun and spun, their colours morphing as they rolled. He pointed, indicating his interest, and he was offered a choice.

Choose blue pips for good luck for you, or red pips for bad luck for everyone else.

He didn't like being compelled to make a choice like that, but his favourite colour was red, so he bought that one. It took a lot of coins, more than most kids could afford, but he didn't care. He could make it back.

It appeared floating in his palm, still rolling. He put it into his inventory and lifted off his headset.

Back in his room, he set about 3D printing the virtual cube and turning it into a real one.



The dice was bigger than he'd imagined and felt surprisingly solid in his palm. Usually when he printed something it came out flimsy and insubstantial; the plastic the machine used was cheap and light. But this dice felt heavy as a stone, and cool against his skin. It didn't change colour like its virtual counterpart of course, but was an odd, shiny, creamy colour that he hadn't known his printer could manage. The pips were a bright neon red, so bright they seemed to glow.

'Want to play?' he asked everyone he met, holding out three dice in his palm, but there was some excitement in the playground, and no one was interested. Everyone seemed to have watched the same vid the night before, from some influencer he hadn't heard of. The other kids were all acting out a scene, or meme or something, bumping shoulders and laughing. Someone bumped him, and he pushed them away. It wasn't funny if you hadn't seen it. He always seemed to be the last to know, and he hated that. He made a note to find it to watch when he got home, though he knew he wouldn't enjoy it.

He sat with his back against the playground wall, squeezing his dice in his palms.

Want to change your luck? He remembered the words suddenly but shook his head.

Luck wasn't his problem if no one would play. It was them, the other kids that were the problem. He wanted them to feel as miserable as he did.

He rolled the red-pipped dice across the concrete.



It came up a **one**: Shrieking laughter made him look up; some kid had dropped her hair-scrunchie in a puddle and was freaking out.

It came up a **two**: Shrieking laughter made him look up; some kid had split his shorts on the climbing frame. His pants were bright pink.

It came up a **three**: Shrieking laughter made him look up; someone had pulled up a girl's skirt and run off. She was making a big deal out of it.

It came up a **four**: A shriek made him look up; two girls were pulling at each other's hair and screaming at each other, but a teacher soon separated them.

It came up a **five**: A shriek made him look up; some boy was getting a verbal thrashing from a load of other boys at the far corner of the playground, where the teachers wouldn't notice.

It came up a **six**: A shriek made him look up; some girl was dancing around trying to get something out of her shirt. A wasp flew out, leaving her red-faced and crying. He wondered how many times she'd been stung.



He looked at the red-pipped dice. It was just a coincidence, but just to be sure, he rolled it again.



A **one**: More shrieking, and laughter too. A girl stood with guano dripping down her face and ponytail. That must have been a really big seagull.

A **two**: More shrieking, and laughter too. Someone had dumped their drink over a girl, drenching the front of her shirt. He could see her spotty bra through it, frills and all.

A **three**: More shrieking. A boy stood trying to hold his nose as blood poured down the front of his white shirt.

A **four**: More shrieking, and this time he had to get up to go and find the source of the noise. One of the boys was on the ground, bleeding from his hands. He'd fallen over and got glass in his palms. He was crying like a baby.

A **five**: More shrieking, and this time he had to get up to go and find the source of the noise. A girl had fallen from one of the trees that they weren't allowed to climb. Her leg lay at an odd angle. Maybe it was broken.

A **six**: More shrieking, and this time he had to get up to go and find the source of the noise. A boy was sprawled on the concrete, someone standing over him with the football that must have knocked him down. He lay very still.



His hands were trembling. Had he really made that happen? He had to know. Crouching down, he rolled the red-pipped dice a third time.



One: At first, nothing seemed to happen. Then, the teachers started coming out of the buildings. Some were holding their hands over their faces, a couple were retching. The smell began to leak into the playground, the stench of sewage sent kids running, waving their hands before their faces.

Two: At first, nothing seemed to happen. Then the skies darkened and the rain began, so heavy it stung his skin. He followed the other kids back inside the school, but water was pooling on the floor, and they were soon ordered out again, splashing through the corridors. The whole place was beginning to flood.

Three: At first, nothing seemed to happen. Then, teachers came running out of the school buildings, shrieking, clouds of insects behind them. Some hidden nest must have been disturbed. Most kids ran screaming too, but he just laughed.

Four: At first, nothing seemed to happen. Then the sky began to darken, and clouds moved in, and the rain began. The kids began running back towards the school, but then there was a flash and a crack, and the big tree fell smack onto the science block.

Five: At first, nothing seemed to happen. Then there was the awful sound of vomiting. Someone had thrown up over himself, straw-coloured liquid and lumps of food rolling down him, but it wasn't just him. A girl was sick on the play equipment, and another made it as far as a drain before she hurled. Another, and another, and soon half the kids in the playground were spewing their guts out. He looked away, not wanting to see. But he felt just fine.

Six: At first, nothing seemed to happen. Then, the fire alarm began to wail, and he laughed as smoke billowed from the windows of the art block.



He laughed, because it seemed his dice had done it after all.

Not dice, die. Wasn't that what you were supposed to call a single dice? He stood out of the way, holding his dice safe together in his pocket. They'd probably all get sent home. He wondered if anyone would die. Of course he didn't want that to happen, but if it did, no one would blame him.



No one died, the school informed the worried parents. That made him feel strangely disappointed. The die wasn't as powerful as he'd thought. He would have to experiment and see what it could do.

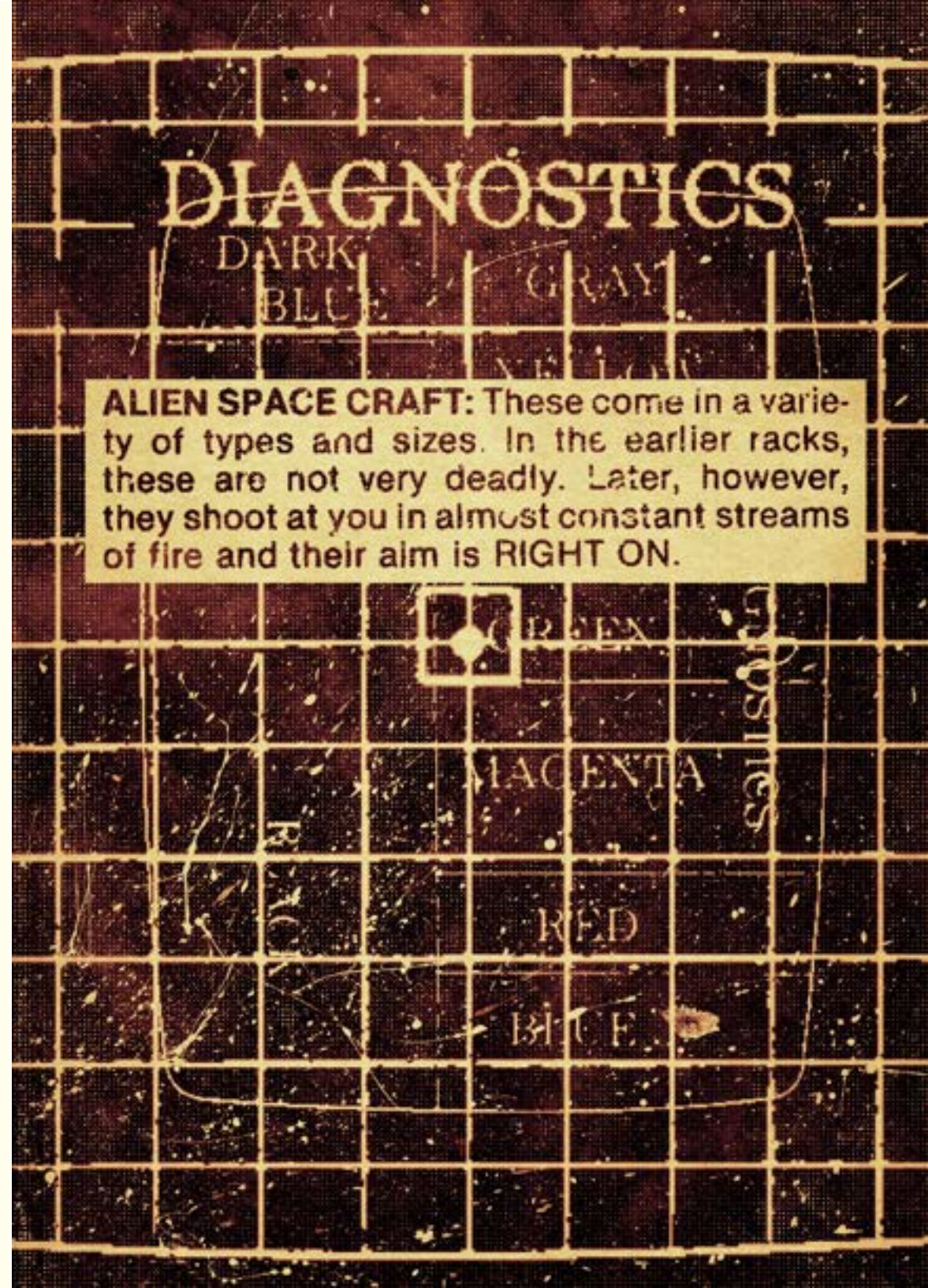
With the school temporarily closed, he was left home alone for a few days. He tried the virtual die online and made a lot of credits for all the games he liked, by ensuring everyone else rolled badly, or lost connection, or otherwise stopped playing. It was fun at first, but he soon got bored of it.

He didn't know what he wanted, that was the problem. He was already good at online games, he didn't need help there. It was the real world that was the problem. And he knew why; it was being stuck with the other kids at school. They were the problem.

Maybe his new die would change things, if he kept rolling it.



*You have obtained a red-pipped die. Add this to your inventory.
If you rolled 6 three times, also add a blue-pipped die.*



FOLLY OF THE NEW AGE

Isa Alsaba

**The heaven is in the earth, but after an earthly manner,
... and the earth is in the heaven, but after a heavenly
manner.**

— Proclus

Set in an alternative history where secret societies govern world powers, Folly of the New Age is a point-and-click adventure which initiates the player into thinking like an occultist.

The player takes the role of MI6 agent Folly, who possesses the visionary ability to see reality through a metaphysical lens. Her modus operandi is seeking intelligence through glimpses of the outside by tapping into planes of the unconscious. Subverting classic adventure game “moon logic”, Folly sees physical objects as symbols rather than convoluted solutions. Be it a grain of sand or the crashing waves of the ocean, everything you interact with has magickal correspondences, serving as an etheric node to discovery. For the occultist sees symbols as the arsenal of the mind.



Environments are also approached with an esoteric lens. This is vibrantly demonstrated through psychedelic visuals, poetic insights, and astral meditation sequences — keys which lift the mysterious veils of the New Age.

The game begins with her mission to pursue an ex-service archaeologist meddling with geomancy at Druids' Stone Circle, where she encounters Bexley, a cheeky gnome who becomes her familiar, and unwittingly, her first lead to tracking down a psychic warfare device.

Photography: Henry Franks @ratboi_x3



WORLDS OF THE LIMINAL: SOVEREIGNTY, STRUCTURE, AND AGENCY IN TABLETOP ROLEPLAYING GAMES

JAMES “PIGEON” FIELDER

Everything we know about modern international politics evolved from the 1648 Treaty of Westphalia, which ended the 30 Year’s War and fostered the concept of sovereignty, or a state’s exclusive right to control its own territory without outside interference. This is admittedly a bold statement (aligning with Spruyt, 1996), and not without its critics (Hall, 2019). Even so, interaction of sovereign states within as system of anarchy (that is, no global government), is a core concept across international relations paradigms (Bull, 2002; Ferrari, 2022; Mearsheimer, 2003). Although actors at all levels of the international system wield power, it is states that hold power to monopolize and sustain violence at scale. Moreover, the structure of the modern international system (individual limits based on institutions, rules, and norms) influences the agency of other global political actors (specifically, their ability to independently make meaningful choices).

Tabletop roleplaying games, however, flip sovereignty on its head by granting players the promise of agency potentially far greater than all other actors in the game, even far beyond that of established game setting sovereign actors. Through tabletop roleplaying games (TTRPGs), designers and players enter a ritual space through which they can challenge established international political constructs and propose new forms of global governance.

Understanding how players reenvision international politics through play depends on three ritual components: liminality, symbolic correspondence, and procedural rhetoric. First, hailing from the writing of anthropologists, liminality represents the player crossing a threshold from reality into the game ritual, in which the ritual of the game is what becomes real to players (Cailliois 2001; Turner, 1982). Alternatively referred to as the magic circle (Huizinga, 2014) and synthetic experience (Curry & Perla, 2011), liminality includes players working together to overcome obstacles against trying conditions, forging cohesive bonds and personal confidence through cycles of failure and success that remain clearly in memory for decades after the game.

The second component, symbolic correspondence, originates from early religious rituals in which the ritual performer would wear the mask of a spirit, the skin of an animal, and/or accoutrements such as jewelry. During ritual, the performer is not pretending to be a spirit or animal but becomes a spirit or animal. Also referred to as mythopoesis (Huizinga, 2014), the ritual becomes a miniature rite of passage through which the worn symbols become part of the wearer, and both performer and participants are transformed into the presence of the sacred (Cailliois 2001; Turner, 1982). Fast forward to a cynical, 21st century observer who argues we no longer wear masks or skins, I would ask if they wore a suit to work, band t-shirt during a concert, dress up as a sports mascot, or engaged in cosplay at conventions. Even in modern contexts, performers and participants transform themselves through worn and embedded symbols.

The third concept, procedural rhetoric, is useful for evaluating if and how players can reshape politics. Bogost (2007) posits that a game’s rules and processes shape player experience and how they navigate boundaries. In some games, players will have no means to challenge the rules of the game and thus conform their play within hard boundaries. However, games with flexible or porous rules provide players opportunity to push back and alter the game closer to their preferred style of play. For example, someone playing *EVE Online* will have wildly different experiences playing in high security (highsec), high structure locations where player behavior is closely moderated, versus no security (nullsec), high agency locations that have almost no rules governing player behavior (CCP Games, 2003; Fielder, 2022).

Of the three concepts, procedural rhetoric is the confounding variable for reenvisioning emergent ludic politics. Liminality fosters immersion and symbolic correspondence encourages embodying roles, while procedural rhetoric dictates the balance of structure and agency within the game space. While players can form guilds in, say, *World of Warcraft*, to increase their aggregate power against other players, they generally cannot alter established political systems embedded within the game's design. In contrast, TTRPGs encourage conversations between gamemasters and players, with gamemasters initiating the game world's political structure via procedural rhetoric while players employ agency to reshape the world. States? Bah! In TTRPGs, players can challenge the *gods*.

Even at the lowest level of play, players cross into liminality while wearing the masks and skins of characters slightly more powerful than common non-player characters. Not one to be held back by institutional structures, though, they are adventurers! With agency! And their powers grow as players overcome higher challenges and reshape the world presented through the gamemaster. Using *Dungeons & Dragons 5th edition* as a metric, players reach the pinnacle of their powers at 20th level and by then can arm wrestle the cosmos (Perkins & Wyatt, 2024). Well before 20th level, however, players have many tastes of political power: by 5th level, player parties wield enough power to challenge cities. Imagine a fighter, rogue, cleric, and wizard single-handedly conquering Manchester. Then imagine a mundane, modern state allowing a 20th level warlock to simply cross its border untracked and unhindered.

When the gamemaster selects a system and setting and the players enter that system and setting, the known look, feel, and presentation act as foundational procedural rhetoric that in turn governs liminality and symbolic correspondence. *D&D* rules and *Forgotten Realms* setting conjure quasi-medieval images with a touch of renaissance, *whereas the liminality and symbols of Shadowrun* conjure neon lights reflecting off rain-slicked urban streets. If the game is homebrewed, the gamemaster sets the narrative hook and narrates the smoky taverns and sleek spaceships that bring players inside the ritual, perhaps the former in feudal kingdoms and the latter in galaxy-spanning republics.

What is common is that the setting often rests on something familiar: the quasi-medieval states of *The Forgotten Realms* exhibit trappings of modern sovereignty (borders, citizens, standing armies...) that players understand (Fannon, 1999; Hovarth, 2023). To be sure, a setting's look, feel, and presentation may remain constant over a campaign: *The Forgotten Realms Underdark* region remains just as dark at the end of a multi-year campaign, the streets of *Shadowrun's* Seattle still awash in punk aesthetics. But the politics of these worlds will fundamentally change as players overcome obstacles and create power vacuums that players either seize or gamemasters fill. And the higher level of play, the higher the actor.

Designers and gamemasters present sovereign power structures that mimic and borrow from regime types ranging from totalitarian regimes to direct democracies, to lawless outer boundaries where non-player actors may organize into small political groups. Sovereign powers might remain set dressing that lend worlds flavor or evolve into obstacles players must overcome. Whether set dressing or antagonist, though, non-player sovereign actors are part of liminal player experience. Their flags, uniforms, mottos, and anthems are symbols that players embrace or reject. Their continuing existence dependent on system and setting's procedural rhetoric. Should players have agency to bring down a government, or create the conditions for a government's fall, what replaces it? This creates narrative opportunity for players to normatively reshape the government into what they think it *ought* to be: perhaps utopia, or perhaps a liminal experiment in tyranny.

What does this mean for players in context of global politics? In previous work researching two live-action *Vampire: The Masquerade* groups (2020), I found that as player power and agency increased, players could not only topple embedded power structures within the game, but they also internalized power and agency experienced in-game to challenge real-world power structures. Through symbolic correspondence, they gained real power by wearing it in-game: not pretending to be a powerful vampire but becoming them. Moreover, while procedural rhetoric in both games established rules and boundaries for core player interaction and conflict resolution, it did not prevent players from exploring, harnessing, or applying agency. In terms of

global politics, the outcome of play in one of the games was distributed to groups in other cities and altered an ongoing scenario at the in-game systemic level. This roughly mirrored how significant actions of one state influence the entire international system. For individual TTRPG players, overcoming obstacles in liminal ritual fosters confidence. For groups, it fosters teamwork and cohesion. Over time, it fosters a wider gaming community that can coordinate for real-world political activism. What ends in global politics in liminality becomes local politics in reality.

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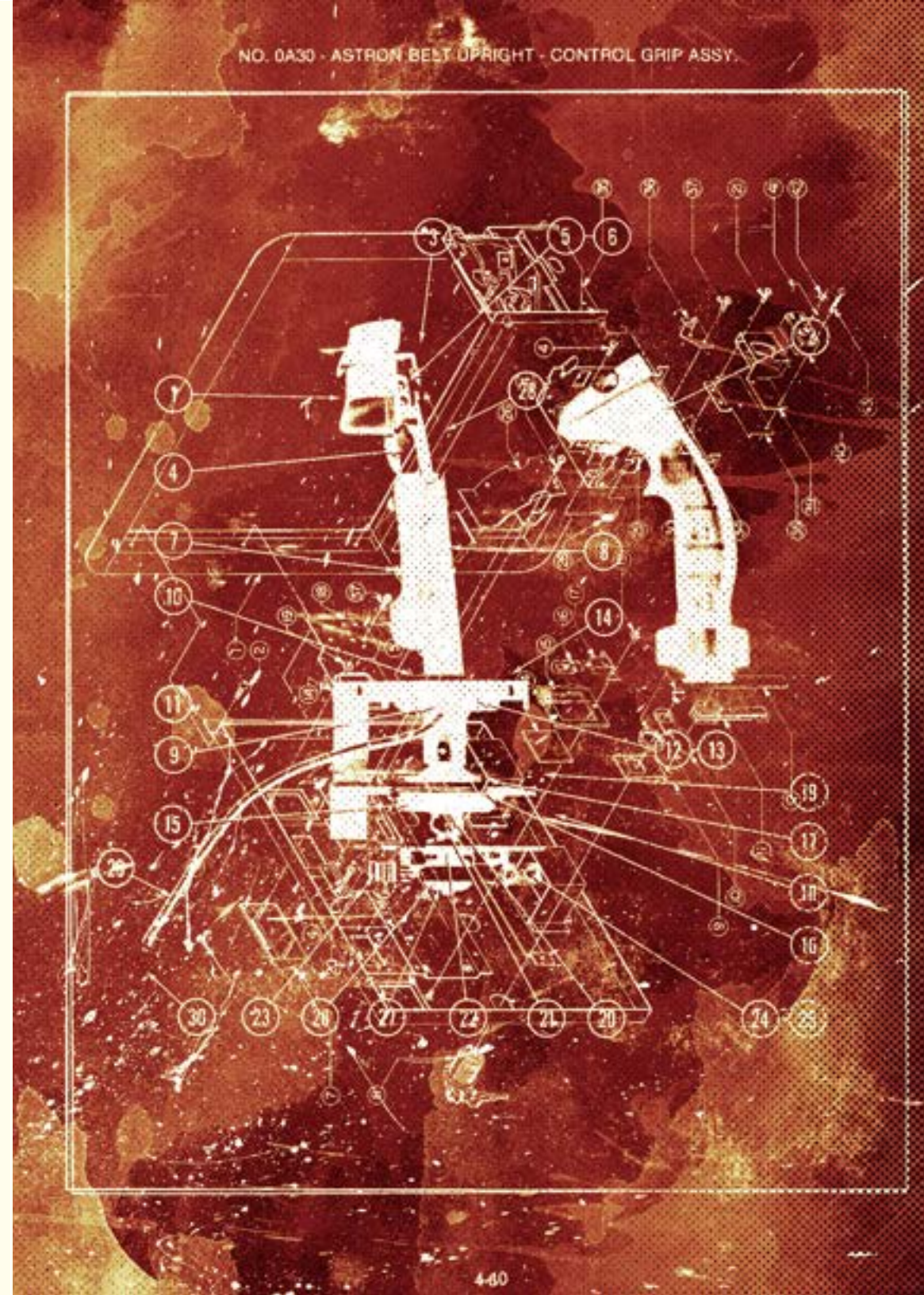
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In Effigy

Kin Chui

Capitalism ravages on. Greed has taken over and in its aftermath, the underworld has become insatiable. The Chinese ritual of making offerings to the dead no longer suffices, as the hungry ghosts of Musk, Bezos, Zucks, loom in the underworld. With each passing 7th lunar month, the dead demand that humanity contribute their monuments of Capital, so that hell could realise the capitalist dream of endless extraction.

Required:

D6 x 2
Piece of paper
Pen

Overview:

The game lasts for 7 cycles.

1. To begin a new cycle, roll 2xD6 to determine which Spectre and its Servant are currently haunting humanity. If that Servant had previously haunted, roll again.
2. Choose a real-world monument of Capital. It can be something that affects you locally, or a global symbol that affects us all. Write down on the piece of paper the symbol you have chosen and answer the prompts(1-3) below the chosen symbol.
3. Offer the monument to the Spectre. Cast jiǎobēi to determine if offering was accepted. Use Burn if necessary.
4. Once the offering is accepted, think of a counter-monument that could grow in its place, one that would allow your community/society to flourish. Use prompts (4-5) as a guide to describe the counter-monument on the piece of paper.
5. Close the cycle by noting on the paper how the world has changed, and

what traces of the offering remains.

6. After 7 cycles, the gates close. Read aloud all that you have sacrificed, and all that you have grown. Which of these new growths might endure, and which might already be haunted?

7. Under a new moon, sit with your responses, reading aloud the monuments you would like to release, as well as the new growths you would like to welcome and take root in your community and life.

Cast jiǎobēi (two dice):

Low (1-3) High (4-6)

Shèngjiǎo: One die is high, one die is low. The Spectre accepts the offering.

Xiàojiǎo: Both dice are high. The Spectre is undecided, try asking again.

Méijiǎo: Both dice are low. The Spectre hungers for more, try offering a different monument.

*If méijiǎo occurs, you may invoke a Burn to force an acceptance. You may only use Burn 3 times throughout the game.

*Each Burn leaves a scar, a reminder of your compromise with the dead. Cancel out the monument you have written down, and replace it with the one generated from Burn.

Burn:

Either appease the Spectre by burning one of the effigies on the last page.

Or speak to the Spectre directly through a LLM (i.e. Claude, ChatGPT, Gemini) with the following prompt:

“You are a ghost of a (Servant), whose life was spent feeding the engines of Capital through (Spectre). The gates of hell have reopened for it is the 7th month of the lunar calendar. You have returned to the realm of the living to demand a sacrifice, for the continuing of Capitalism in the underworld.

What is this real-world institution or symbol you demand from the living?”

Prompts:

- 1. What did it represent?
- 2. Who did it serve?
- 3. What or who did it consume?
- 4. What could grow in place of what you have destroyed?
- 5. What structure, infrastructure, idea, action or kinship, could rise without being demanded by the underworld?

Spectres:

Die 1

Roll	Spectre
1	Extraction
2	Production
3	Reproduction
4	Circulation
5	Consumption
6	Abstraction

Die 2

Spectre	Roll	Servant
Extraction	1-2	Cobalt Miner
Extraction	3-4	Plantation Worker
Extraction	5-6	Oil Rig Roughneck

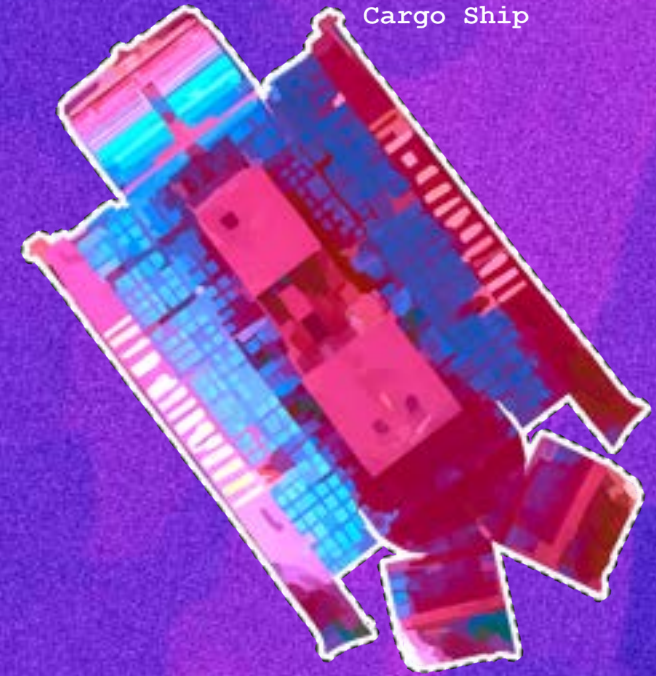
Production	1-2	Garment Worker
Production	3-4	Electronics Assembler
Production	5-6	Migrant Construction Worker
Reproduction	1-2	Care Worker
Reproduction	3-4	Gig Cleaner
Reproduction	5-6	Domestic Worker
Circulation	1-2	Delivery Rider
Circulation	3-4	Warehouse Picker
Circulation	5-6	Dockworker
Consumption	1-2	Call Centre Agent
Consumption	3-4	Retail Associate
Consumption	5-6	Fastfood Worker
Abstraction	1-2	Content Moderator
Abstraction	3-4	Data Labeller
Abstraction	5-6	AI Trainer

Upon determining the Spectre that haunts the cycle, announce their presence with the following statement:

“I am a spectre of (Spectre). With the gates of hell open, I come to claim your offer to the underworld.”



London Stock Exchange



Cargo Ship



Smart Phone

Bleeding Zeal

Philipp Doeblner, Kianush Monschau & Máté Szilassi

A tabletop roleplaying game about twisted beliefs, distrustful cooperation and precious heartblood.

You are cultists on a treacherous pilgrimage, striving to prove your worth to your ominous cult. The world around you is highly suspicious of your cult and its practices. You don't even trust each other! Play to find out what twisted cult you belong to and who you really are. When the pilgrimage ends, will your faith endure?

What you need

- a facilitator
- 2+ other ~~cultists~~ players
- a few six-sided dice (d6)
- beads of two colors (e.g. red and blue) or some other markers (10 per colour per player will be more than enough)
- a small bag, sack, or satchel, in which to hide the beads
- a copy of the Chronicle Sheet and a one copy of the Pilgrim Sheet for each player (<https://kiryas.itch.io/bleeding-zeal>)

Safety

This game explores dark and potentially unsettling themes. Make sure you are all comfortable throughout the game. We recommend using TTRPG safety tools (e.g., <https://ttrpgsafetytoolkit.com/>).

If you are unsure where to start, check out the following three:

- Lines and Veils (optional.games/lav/)
- CATS (200wordrpg.github.io/2016/supplement/2016/04/12/CATS.html)
- The X-Card (en.wikipedia.org/wiki/X-Card)

Cult Creation

Before creating Pilgrims, unearth a few secrets that bind your cult together. Use the Chronicle Sheet to record the cult's details. Keep this step brief as you'll play to find out more about the cult in play.

Start by rolling for the cult's name using the tables below (roll 2d6 for each of the three columns below), or create your own. Either way, keep the name open to interpretation.

Cult name (2d6+2d6+2d6)

d6	d6	First part		d6	d6	Middle part	d6	d6	Last part
		Congregation	of the			Weeping			Growth
"		Children	of the	"		Screaming	"		Pit
"		Offspring	of the	"		Oozing	"		Birth
"		Church	of the	"		Spreading	"		Goat
"		Seekers	of the	"		Dying	"		Light
"		Guardians	of the	"		Wheezing	"		Rot

d6	d6	First part		d6	d6	Middle part	d6	d6	Last part
		Devourers	of the			Darkening			Echo
“		Disciples	of the	“		Piercing	“		Cradle
“		Prophets	of the	“		Quivering	“		Veil
“		Apostles	of the	“		Bursting	“		Thorn
“		Convent	of the	“		Menacing	“		Mother
“		Servants	of the	“		Binding	“		Rupture

Cult Tenets (2d6)

The Tenets are the lifeblood of your cult—guiding beliefs that shape your Pilgrims’ convictions and fuel their pilgrimage. Each cult upholds three distinct Tenets. Belief in these Tenets doubles as the Pilgrims’ attributes. During play, each Pilgrim’s level of conviction in these Tenets may shift. Roll three times on the following table to determine your Tenets, or create your own. If you roll the same result twice, either reinterpret it or roll again. If a Tenet doesn’t feel strange enough, reword it to better suit your cult’s eerie nature. Don’t hesitate to twist or reinterpret these Tenets during play.

d6	d6	Tenet
		Greed drives us to excellence.
“		Gluttony fills the inner void.
“		Exploit the weak, for hierarchy is natural.
“		Embrace modifications, for our mortal flesh can be much improved.
“		Do not consume [roll d6: () meat, () veg, () fish], for it weakens us.
“		Hourly prayers are needed so we are heard.
		Avoid [roll d6: () water, () sunlight, () moonlight, () touching the ground with your bare flesh, () losing touch of the ground, () showing your face] at all cost.
“		Nourish [roll d6: () insects, () goats, () disputes, () fires, () wolves, () lies], for they bring [roll d6: () change, () purity, () holiness].
“		Revere rust and ruin, for perfection is a false god.
“		Embrace decay, for rot reveals the essence of life and death.
“		Lie, for truth is a weapon meant only for those who can wield it.
“		Steal from the disbelievers, for the world belongs to those bold enough to seize it.
		Be wary, for betrayal lurks everywhere.
“		With every word you speak, your soul diminishes.
“		Embrace lust when it offers itself to you.
“		Let holy wrath guide you on your path.

“		In the first hour, open your third eye.
“		Your body is a humble host to the masters’ reincarnations.

The deeper truths of your cult will emerge during play.

Pilgrim Creation

You embark on a sacred pilgrimage, seeking to prove your devotion and ascend within your cult’s shadowed ranks. Completing the pilgrimage will demonstrate your devotion, strengthening the bond to the entity you revere and raising your status in the cult’s ranks.

Guiding Principles for Pilgrim Players

Follow these principles to guide you in play.

Play to find out who the Pilgrims are and how their cult works.

- Strange places lie ahead. Work together to shape and remember their lore.
- Build on each other’s ideas and be curious.
- Your convictions may waver, transforming as the pilgrimage unfolds.
- As long as you have faith, play to please the entity you revere!
- When you lose faith, save at least your skin.

Gifts (2d6+2d6)

Your cult trusts you enough to have placed a gift in your care. You will learn more about it during play, but for now, roll on the following table with 2d6 + 2d6:

d6	d6		d6	d6	
		damaged			eye
“		spiked	“		dagger
“		crimson	“		crucible
“		brass	“		necklace
“		bone	“		crown
“		corrupted	“		cloak
		scaled			hand
“		fiery	“		ring
“		humming	“		book
“		amber	“		tooth
“		delicate	“		leash
“		cold iron	“		censer

Write the gift down on your Pilgrim Sheet.

Tenet Tokens

Tenet Tokens reflect the flickering strength of your faith, while Heartblood Tokens symbolize the very essence of your being. Guard them well. Copy your cult’s three Tenets to your sheet. For each Tenet, the facilitator will roll 1 + (d6 ÷ 2, rounded up) to determine the number of Tenet Tokens (e.g., blue glass beads) you receive and hand you that many. Keep the number of Tenet Tokens a secret from your fellow Pilgrims! The Tenet Tokens represent your conviction, with zero Tenet Tokens indicating a loss of faith in the Tenet. Six Tenet Tokens reflect an absolute devotion to this principle of your cult, and you cannot go over six. You will need the Tenet Tokens to succeed at Challenges and you’ll (re)gain some during Rituals. When a Tenet has no tokens left, you lose faith in the Tenet, but rituals may rekindle your devotion.

Heartblood Tokens

Take six Heartblood Tokens of a different color (e.g., red glass beads). Keep the exact number of Heartblood Tokens a secret from your fellow Pilgrims! Once your Heartblood is gone, your character leaves the game, and you can never regain Heartblood Tokens. The player narrates how their Pilgrim’s end manifests. Did they die or go insane? What can the others observe? Let it be mysterious. Regardless of the Pilgrim’s fate the player stays in the game and can contribute to the narrative to the very end.

To complete your Pilgrim’s creation, give them a name. You may also assign a random title using the following table.

2d6	Title/Rank
2-6	Initiate/Whelp/Underling
7-10	Brother/Sister/Sibling
11-12	Esteemed/Honored/Worshipful Brother/Sister/Sibling

With your Pilgrim named and their fate set, you stand ready to walk the dark path ahead.

Embarking on a Pilgrimage

This section guides the facilitator in shaping the pilgrimage’s path. Though spoiler-light, it’s best kept from the eyes of Pilgrim players to preserve the mystery of their journey.

As facilitator, you are the architect of the journey’s peril and wonder. Your task is to conjure Named Locations, devise Challenges, and weave the uncertain road the Pilgrims must tread. The Pilgrim players help you to come up with ideas. Encourage them to contribute by asking interesting questions. A list of establishing questions is found below. Whatever the answer, new truths about the Pilgrims, their cult, and the world will be revealed and established as facts.

Facilitator Principles

Follow these principles to guide the Pilgrims’ journey with tension, mystery, and balance.

- Address the Pilgrim not the Player. Speak to their character, reinforcing immersion.
- Ask interesting questions about the cult, its rituals, its lore, and about locations and the inhabitants of this world. Let these questions shape the landscape and deepen the mystery.
- Ask “What do you do?” Keep the Pilgrims active, their choices driving the narrative.
- Heighten the tension during the Challenges. Make adversity feel real, with high stakes and difficult choices.
- Ease the tension at Named Locations. Let these moments offer eerie calm or reflective discovery, a respite from the trials.
- Shine a spotlight on every Pilgrim. Ask about their appearance, heritage, gifts, or cult standing to keep each character central to the journey.
- Rarely, ask for a sacrifice of Heartblood or Gifts. Reserve this for pivotal moments, where sacrifice can change the course of the pilgrimage.

Locations, Rituals and Challenges

The game takes the Pilgrims on a journey along five Named Locations. With the exception of the last Named Location, the procedure is always the same:

1. Arrive at a Named Location. The Facilitator may use establishing questions to get a conversation started (see below). The game begins with the Pilgrims arriving at a randomly determined Named Location.
2. Perform Ritual. At each Named Location, the cultists perform a Ritual. Rituals are dark ceremonies that bind and define the cult. Let the Pilgrims invent and perform these rites, drawing on their fears, beliefs, and lore. As Facilitator, probe deeper with questions: What does the Ritual demand? Is something sacrificed? What signs mark its success or failure? The Facilitator then decides which Tenet is improved by the Ritual and distributes Tenet Tokens as they deem fit. A typical Ritual will generate one Tenet Token per Pilgrim. The Facilitator gives Tenet Tokens to the Pilgrims and can do so openly or secretly. The Facilitator can also pass around a bag with the generated Tenet Tokens and Pilgrims take from the bag as they please. Yes, maybe there are no Tenet Tokens left when you have the bag.
3. Decide Travel Route. The Facilitator rolls up two Named Locations. Why does one path beckon and another repel? What omens haunt the crossroads? Let the Pilgrims argue, plead, and decide. Why are these locations calling out to you?
4. Present a Challenge. The Facilitator presents a Challenge en route to the next Named Location, close to it or even at the Named Location. Regardless where, the Challenge prevents the Pilgrims from arriving at the Named Location. The Facilitator can ask the Pilgrims what dangers they fear, what obstacles could arise, or what might go wrong on the journey. The most compelling Challenges are those without obvious solutions, forcing Pilgrims to grapple with difficult choices. Once the Pilgrims decide how to address the Challenge, the Facilitator decides which Tenets are involved. Often this is just one Tenet. The Facilitator then rolls one d6 for each Pilgrim. The sum is the Challenge Score, the number of Tenet Tokens needed

from the involved Tenets to overcome the Challenge.

5. Resolve the Challenge. Each Pilgrim decides secretly how many Tenet Tokens they want to commit (if any). Heartblood Tokens can be substituted for Tenet Tokens. The Facilitator secretly collects the Tokens from each Pilgrim. Use a small sack to collect Tokens, ensuring that Pilgrims cannot see how many Tokens others contribute. After all, the Pilgrims do not trust each other. Ask the Pilgrims what could possibly go wrong. Then, openly count the number of Tokens:

- If the Pilgrims meet or beat the Challenge Score, it's a full success. They do it. Let the Pilgrims narrate how they do it.
- If the Pilgrims are below the Challenge Score, they fail. The facilitator narrates what went wrong.

If a Pilgrim is dissatisfied with the Challenge's outcome, they can spend Heartblood to add or remove Tokens from the total. If more than one Pilgrim wants to spend Heartblood, they secretly pass the number of tokens (and whether they want to remove or add) to the Facilitator. Record the Challenge and its outcome on the Chronicle Sheet.

Establishing Questions

The Facilitator collaborates with the Pilgrims to shape the fictional world. While the Facilitator can guide the narrative, they are encouraged to involve the Pilgrims extensively. After all, it's their holy journey.

Establishing questions can introduce facts the Facilitator wishes to define. For example, asking 'How will you recognize the royal family member who secretly belongs to your cult?' introduces the fact that a royal is corrupted.

General Establishing Questions

- Why is X important for your cult?
- What happens if you don't do X?
- Who would be knowledgeable about X?
- Where would one find X?

Questions for Cult

- Can you explain what Tenet X means in these circumstances?
- How did you find out your cult's leader did not adhere to Tenet X?
- What's your most important holy text called and who wrote it?
- Why is X precious to your cult?
- What's your secret language called? Who else knows it that really shouldn't?
- Why do cultists wear X/shave their heads/tattoo their palms/...?
- Do you have a holy symbol? If no, why not? If yes, what does it look like?
- Why do you fear the god/spirit/force your cult worships more than anything?

Questions for Rituals

- How do you pray in the morning/evening/at noon/at midnight?
- Why do you need blood/a living animal/candles/a silver cup for this ritual to work and how can you obtain it?
- How loud are these chants you mention? What could they attract?
- What could possibly go wrong during the ritual?
- What part of this Ritual was lost for a long time but recently rediscovered?
- Who taught you this Ritual and how was it weird to learn it?
- What senses (sight, sound, smell, touch, taste, soul) are stimulated during this ritual, and what do they represent?
- What curse or misfortune befalls those who misuse this ritual?
- Why did this ritual (almost?) cause a schism in your cult once?
- Who (or how many) died while developing this ritual? Was it worth the price?

Questions for Named Locations

- What's strange about the weather/animals/inhabitants/smell/light?
- Why do you fear coming here?
- Why should a member of your cult avoid coming here if not on a pilgrimage?

- What tells you, the location does not deserve its reputation anymore?
- What is taboo here for you?
- What smells so bad?
- What historical event took place here, and how is its presence still felt?
- Why is this place avoided by locals?
- What feeling settles over you upon entering, and how does it change the closer you get to the center?
- What signs show that something unseen watches this location?
- What makes you suddenly cold/hot/red/pale/hungry/thirsty?

Questions for Travel/Challenges

- Who do you want to avoid on this part of the Pilgrimage?
- What could go wrong on the journey to X?
- Why is it dangerous to travel by foot/cart/boat/air ship/...?
- Why is this situation challenging for you?
- How do you know someone is lurking in the shadows?
- What on the way makes you feel extreme doubt about whether the journey is worth it?
- What do you see that makes you question everything you believe for a second?

Questions for Gifts

- How does your gift look like when a beam of moonlight hits it?
- How did you find out, Pilgrim X always wanted your gift?
- Why did you have to betray a friend to obtain this gift?
- A shiver rushes down your spine. Why are you instantly sure something emanated from your gift?
- What would you trade your gift for?
- Who did you have to pray to/kill/bribe/marry to keep/save/finalize/desecrate your gift?
- Why does your gift scare you when you sleep?
- When was the last time you dreamt of your gift? What was the gift doing in your dream?
- Why do you feel like the gift used to be a person/animal/spirit/village once?

Named Locations (2d6+2d6)

The Facilitator uses this table in the “Decide Travel Route” step. You can also use it to come up with other places in the fiction.

	First part of location name (2d6)				Second part of location name (2d6)			
The		Goat		Haunted		Tower		Mound
		Blood		False		Shrine		Road
		Dark		Crying		Pit		Mausoleum
		Soul		Rotten		Wall		Pyre
		Hang-man's		Fallen		Tree		Ruin
		Dead		Growing		Church		Statue
		Hooded		Bleeding		Altar		Hut
		Red		Foul		Fountain		Bridge
		Black		Acrid		Gate		Tunnels
		Rusty		Buzzing		Hill		Cavern
		Shattered		Withered		Crypt		Spire
		Whispering		Hollow		Temple		Keep
		Smoldering		Pale		Pass		Sanctuary

	First part of location name (2d6)				Second part of location name (2d6)			
		Ashen		Drowned		Arch		Vale
		Murmuring		Forsaken		Isle		Docks
		Crooked		Blighted		Grove		Ridge
		Forsaken		Crooked		Meadow		Labyrinth
		Veiled		Twisting		Fields		Threshold

Final Challenge

After the Ritual at the last Named Location—or as part of it, if narratively fitting—the Pilgrims face their final and greatest test. The Final Challenge takes place at the last Named Location. The facilitator presents the Final Challenge, using the establishing questions below for inspiration. Resolve the Final Challenge as normal, but pause the narrative afterward. After resolving the final Challenge, each Pilgrim secretly decides whether they are a true believer or an apostate. Reveal these decisions simultaneously.

True believer. If the Pilgrim has not lost faith, choose a Tenet and determine your Believer Score: If all Challenges were passed, roll 2d6 and take the lowest as your Believer Score. Otherwise, roll one d6 per failed Challenge and take the highest as your Believer Score.

- If your Believer Score is equal to or lower than the number of Tokens of the chosen Tenet, you finish the Pilgrimage successfully.
- If your Believer Score exceeds your chosen Tenet’s Tokens, you fail.

Apostate. If the Pilgrim doubts the cult’s Tenets determine your Apostate Score: If all Challenges were failed, roll 2d6 and take the lowest as your Apostate Score. Otherwise, roll one d6 per successful Challenge and take

the highest as your Apostate Score.

- If your Apostate Score is lower than your Heartblood, you escape the grip of your cult.
- If the Apostate Score is larger than or equal to your Heartblood, you are found out.

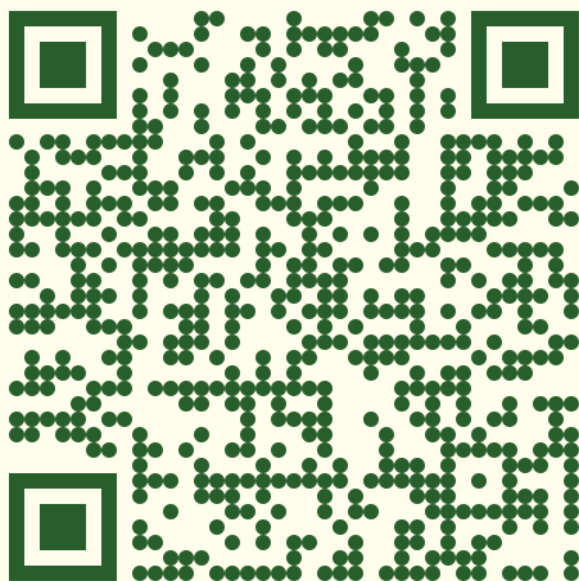
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Whatever the outcome, all remaining Tenet and Heartblood Tokens are revealed. Conclude the game with Epilogues narrating the Final Challenge. The Pilgrim with the most remaining Heartblood Tokens begins the Epilogue, passing the turn to the next. The Facilitator delivers the final Epilogue.

Establishing Questions for Final Challenge

By now, after visiting five Named Locations and facing four other Challenges, you should have a pretty good grasp of the Cult and the Pilgrims. Lean into recurring themes. Twist them if possible. Ask the Pilgrims if you feel your spontaneous ideas are not tragic enough:

- What needs to be awakened?
- What decisive detail (in your scripture, in a fellow Pilgrims demeanor, of your gift, ...) have you overlooked for the whole time?
- Who sleeps here for eons?
- Who has failed here before and what has happened to them?
- There is a folk song with a weird chorus that suddenly makes sense. What's the chorus?
- Who would suffer most if you were to succeed here?
- Do you have proof that any senior cult member has actually completed this part of the pilgrimage?
- Whose insatiable hunger has lured you here?
- The last time you rested a strange melody/being/voice/... invaded your dream. What was it?
- When you were twelve years old, you almost drowned in a well. Why do you remember this just now?

PLAY ENDS: When your last SHIP is eliminated, "GAME OVER" is written across the center of the monitor screen.



Rituals of Play was produced by the Manchester Game Centre based on contributions to the Multiplatform event in 2025.

Contributors' details can be found on our website, please visit www.manchestergamecentre.org