‘A Definition of Enchantment’: A New Approach to Ludic Magic Systems Analysis

Mikael D. Sebag
University of California, Irvine
Donald Bren Hall
Irvine, CA 92617
msebag@uci.edu

Keywords
magic, magic systems, fantasy, Western esotericism, enchantment, religion, hermeneutics

EXTENDED ABSTRACT

Though fantasy games abound with crackling bolts of lightning and dazzling fireballs, game scholars have critiqued the magic systems that produce these spectacles as disenchanted and uninspired. In *Game Magic: A Designer’s Guide to Magic Systems in Theory and Practice*, Jeff Howard states, “The magic systems in many video games are repetitive, dull, lacking in variety, and superficial” (2014, 8). Sociologist of religion Kevin Schut meanwhile observes, “Magic or the gods or spirits, all those mysterious forces, have been reduced to a fancy type of gun or an extra-strong bandage” (2014, 262). William Bainbridge (2013, 176), Nicolas Meylan (2017, 143–144), and Steven Poole (2000, 40) share similar sentiments about the quantifiable and wonderless character of magic in digital games. Though these critiques are leveled at relatively novel cultural artifacts, the underlying discontents of these scholars’ indictments echo—and perhaps descend from—a larger set of troubles that have long beset Western culture.

Sociologist Max Weber first proposed the theory of ‘the disenchantment of the world’ (*die Entzauberung der Welt*) in a lecture in 1917. The disenchantment of the world theorizes that the declining belief in religion and magic and the rise of formal, means-end scientific rationality at the turn of the century lay at the very heart of Western modernity, its crisis of meaning, and its mounting alienation. The narrative of disenchantment—and the question of its persistence into the present day—receives thorough scholarly attention (along with frequent counternarratives of *re*-enchantment) in the domains of philosophy, cultural history, and the history of ideas (Bennett 2001; Josephson-Storm 2017; Partridge 2004; Saler 2012). However, it is the lesser-known discipline of Western esotericism that presents a unique and valuable perspective on the matter of modern (dis)enchantment that game scholars can use for the analysis of ludic magic systems.

Western esotericism is the academic study of philosophical, intellectual, and spiritual ideas and movements that have generally existed at the margins and intersections of rational science and Judeo-Christian religion: traditions such as magic, divination, Hermeticism, alchemy, occultism, Kabbalah, and so forth. Antoine Faivre, who made major strides in establishing Western esotericism as a legitimate domain of scholarly inquiry, scoped and defined the field by identifying a set of common properties among these various traditions. He then classified these select characteristics as essential criteria to qualify any such tradition as truly esoteric. Intriguingly, Faivre’s colleague Wouter J. Hanegraaff observes that these criteria “read like a definition of ‘enchantment,’ set against the ‘disenchanted’ worldviews associated with post-cartesian, post-newtonian and positivist science” (2013, 5). The enchanted premodern paradigm to which Hanegraaff refers took the reality of magic and spirits as axiomatic. This aligns neatly with the neomedievalism of most fantasy games, as the novel imaginary pasts of these games similarly present players with irrefutably real spirits (complete with health bars and loot drops) and admit “*a priori* the material efficacy of magical rituals” (Meylan

Proceedings of DiGRA 2023

2017, 128). Given this alignment, the Faivrean model holds remarkable promise for detecting and articulating the mechanisms of enchantment in the magic systems of fantasy games.

In this paper, I argue that applying the language of Faivre's criteriology to magic systems provides game scholars with a new hermeneutics for ludic magic. I first develop this argument through the explanation of each of Faivre's four essential components for Western esotericism as a form of thought. These are the criteria of:

> 1) *Correspondences*, the notion that there exist symbolic-*cum*-instrumental connections between different parts of the physical and spiritual world,
>
> 2) *Living Nature,* the belief in a cosmos alive in all its parts, suffused with an inner light,
>
> 3) *Imagination and Mediations,* the idea that rituals, symbols, and intermediary spirits reveal connections between the physical world and the spiritual, and
>
> 4) *Experience of Transmutation*, the belief that humanity and Nature have the capacity to achieve a more divine state.

Following this, I demonstrate how we may apply Faivre's theory to games: using close reading of ludic magic systems—and the narrative designs that undergird those systems—to identify the presence of Faivre's esoteric criteria (i.e., his definitions of enchantment). I use a purposively sampled cross-section of twelve titles representing a diverse range of game genres, platforms, and eras in demonstrating this method.

The criterion of correspondences appears in such titles as *Dungeons & Dragons* (TSR/Wizards of the Coast 1974–), *Wildermyth* (Worldwalker Games 2021), and the interactive fiction *Savoir-Faire* by Emily Short (2002). We see the idea of living nature at work in *Magic: The Gathering* (Wizards of the Coast 1993–), *World of Warcraft* (Blizzard Entertainment 2004–), and *The Elder Scrolls* series (Bethesda Game Studios 1994–). We can locate examples of imagination and mediations in such games as *Potion Craft: Alchemist Simulator* (tinyBuild 2021), *Eternal Darkness: Sanity's Requiem* (Silicon Knights 2002), and Monte Cook's *Invisible Sun* (Monte Cook Games 2018). And lastly, Faivre's notion of transmutation appears in such games as *Diablo III* (Blizzard Entertainment 2012), the *Neverwinter Nights* series (Atari 2002–2009), and the tabletop roleplaying game *Mage: The Ascension* (White Wolf 1993–2004).

This is an explicitly conceptual paper; its primary goal is to "bridge existing theories in interesting ways, link work across disciplines, provide multi-level insights, and broaden the scope of our thinking" (Gilson and Goldberg 2015). In addition to making sense of recurring scholarly indictments of ludic magic's paradoxical wonderlessness, this work represents a first step in a longer line of scholarship that directs attention to magic in games. Using Faivre's criteria in this specific albeit nontraditional way provides games scholars not only with a useful vocabulary for articulating the mechanisms of enchantment at work in ludic magic systems but allows us to consider and discuss magic in games in a similar analytical mode to how we approach the study of religion in games (*à la* Aupers 2013; De Wildt 2023; Geraci 2014; Wagner 2012). Ideally, this work invites future scholarship to more rigorously attend to the spiritual and affective dimensions of magic in games and to scrutinize the designs of the systems within those games that either produce *or hinder* enchantment.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Aupers, S. 2013. "'A World Awaits': The Meaning of Mediatized Paganism in Online Computer Games." In *Religion beyond its Private Role in Modern Society*, edited by W. Hofstee and A. van der Kooij, 225–243. Leiden and Boston, MA: Brill.

Bainbridge, W. 2013. "Magic." In *eGods: Faith Versus Fantasy in Computer Gaming*, 157–184. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Bennett, J. 2001. *The Enchantment of Modern Life: Attachments, Crossings, and Ethics*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2001.

Faivre, A. 1986 [1994]. *Access to Western Esotericism*. Albany, NY: SUNY Press.

Geraci, R. 2014. *Virtually Sacred: Myth and Meaning in World of Warcraft and Second Life*. New York, NY: Oxford University Press.

Gilson, L. and Goldberg, C. 2015. "Editors' Comment: So, What Is a Conceptual Paper?" *Group & Organization Management*. 40 (2).

Hanegraaff, W. 2013. *Western Esotericism: A Guide for the Perplexed.* London and New York, NY: Bloomsbury Academic.

Howard, J. 2014. *Game Magic: A Designer's Guide to Magic Systems in Theory and Practice.* Boca Raton, FL: CRC Press.

Josephson-Storm, J. 2017. *The Myth of Disenchantment: Magic, Modernity, and the Birth of the Human Sciences*. Chicago, IL: Chicago University Press.

Meylan, N. 2017. *Mana: A History of a Western Category*. Leiden and Boston, MA: Brill.

Partridge, C. *The Re-Enchantment of the West: Alternative Spiritualities, Sacralization, Popular Culture and Occulture*. London and New York, NY: T&T Clark International.

Poole, S. 2000. *Trigger Happy: Videogames and the Entertainment Revolution*. New York, NY: Arcade Publishing.

Saler, M. 2012. *As If: Modern Enchantment and the Literary Prehistory of Virtual Reality*. Oxford and New York, NY: Oxford University Press.

Schut, K. 2014. "They Kill Mystery: The Mechanistic Bias of Video Game Representations of Religion and Spirituality." In *Playing with Religion in Digital Games*, edited by H. Campbell and G. Griever, 255–275. Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press.

Wagner, R. 2012. *Godwired: Religion, Ritual and Virtual Reality*. London and New York, NY: Routledge.

Wildt, L. de. 2023. *The Pop Theology of Videogames: Producing and Playing with Religion*. Amsterdam, The Netherlands: Amsterdam University Press.