

THE OCCULT IN VIDEO GAMES: AN INTERVIEW WITH JEFF HOWARD

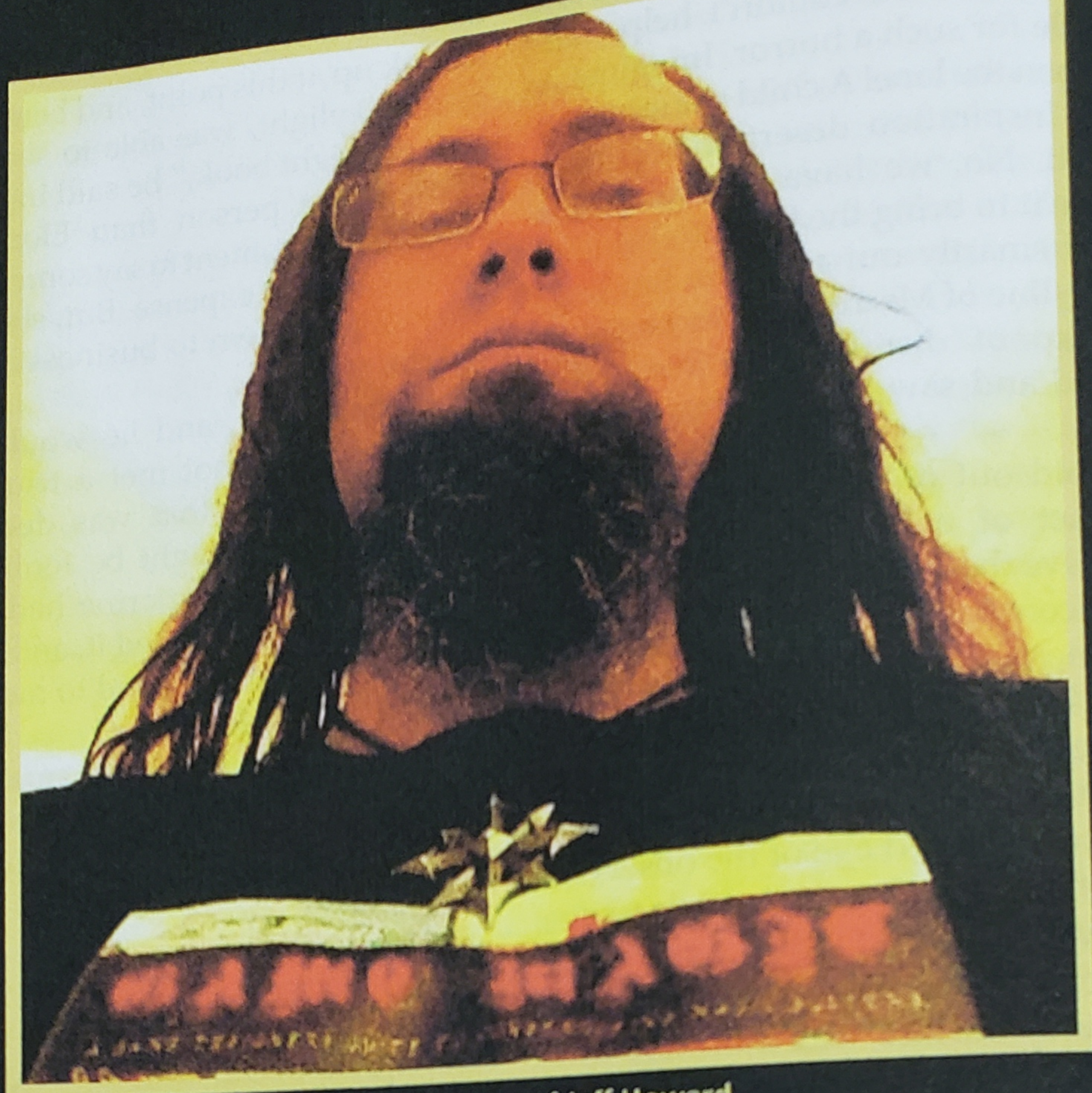


Photo courtesy of Jeff Howard

BY RICHARD DANKSKY

To the casual observer, video games are awash in the occult. Spooky mysteries, unlockable secrets, and ancient tomes abound, to the point where the occult has become, for lack of a better word, prominent. From the hidden world of the *Dark Souls* franchise to the ancient mysteries of *Destiny*, the occult has become a key part of games, both in their worldbuilding and in their practical design.

But in many cases, the definition of "occult" remains fuzzy or misunderstood. Seeking to clear up that misunderstanding, and to give game designers a better tool set for grappling with the occult in their creations, is designer and professor Jeff Howard. The author of *Game Magic: A Game Designer's Guide to Constructing Magic Systems*, Jeff deals with both the practical and theoretical ends of the equation. He was kind enough to sit down with us to discuss how game controllers are occult devices, what to do about "old and spooky," and the benefits of making your game more occult.

Dark Discoveries: In popular culture, "occult" tends to get used simply to mean "old and spooky." How would you define the term, particularly within the context of games?

JEFF HOWARD: I define the occult as a set of esoteric imaginative and spiritual traditions comprised of systems and mythologies representing the supernatural and metaphysical forces of the cosmos that can be communed with and controlled through magic. The word "occult" literally means "hidden."

DD: But that still leaves us with that popular definition, which feels much broader but less interesting than yours.

In certain ways, it's almost become a marketing term.

JH: Rather than contesting the definition of occult "magical" and "spooky," I am extending this definition by exploring the underlying structure of magic and origins of spooky atmosphere. Magic and spooky come only partly from a set of surface or aesthetic tropes (pentagrams, goats' heads, skulls), and these symbols were originally meant to point toward deep underlying metaphysical forces and ideas, such as the sublime and the divine (sometimes expressed through its contrast with the infernal). Putting the magic back into magic systems means recovering the experience of the sublime: that which challenges our ability to represent or put into words. The symbols of religion and mythology were meant to operate as springboards that allow us to take a leap toward the sublime. Finding a glowing pentagram is cool, but summoning a secret spirit by placing a dragonglass crystal at the pentagram's top right point while chanting "hekas este bebeloi" is sublime. Both are occult, but the first is purely a matter of surface and the other is intimately embedded in systems of gameplay and narrative.

DD: How would you fit your notion of the occult into more formal game context?

JH: In terms of game systems, I would define the occult as any system that is deliberately opaque, obscure, or hidden beneath the surface: requiring complex, seemingly arbitrary actions that actually obey a deep, rigorous symbolic logic. If magic is the alteration of reality through the will, then game magic is the alteration

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simulated and virtual world through symbolic operations. At the heart of the occult is a deep reverence for the combinatorial power of symbols, for the permutations and depth of symbolic expression and interpretation as found, for example, in Kabbalah, Tarot, and the angelic Enochian language of John Dee.

DD: What's the benefit of adding literally "hidden" systems and information to games?

JH: In games, the occult can provide

a) Mysterious, resonant symbols (spirits, gods, planes, artifacts) and combinatorial principles for generating rich, deep, and systemic lore out of these elements. This lore consists of esoteric explanatory frameworks for the hidden forces that govern a given universe or plane of the multiverse.

b) These hidden forces and esoteric logics then provide inspiration for systems of gameplay that correspond to the lore of a particular world. The fictive metaphysical rules of a particular simulated world can help to generate coherent yet mysterious rules for playing within this world.

c) A sense of mystery and foreboding associated with metaphysical depth.

d) Freedom and transgression associated with the inversion but also deepening of many of the religious structures that shape Western society and storytelling. Alternative and openly heretical ways of envisioning or re-visioning ideas about God, the gods, the sacred, and the profane.

DD: That's a significant contribution. As you've described it, it seems to lean more heavily towards worldbuilding and less towards the actual mechanics of play. How would you describe "occult gameplay?"

JH: Some game magic systems, starting with the 1980's CRPG *Dungeon Master* and extending forward into the tabletop game *Ars Magica* and the GameCube horror title *Eternal Darkness*, feature language-based magic systems in which players combine runes and words through grammatical rules to form spells. These grammar-based magical game mechanics resemble actual occult systems and also the equally arcane craft of programming used to make computer games and other software. Programmers write incantations in obscure symbolic languages governed by hidden logic that, when precisely and correctly arranged, can orchestrate rich multimedia experiences.

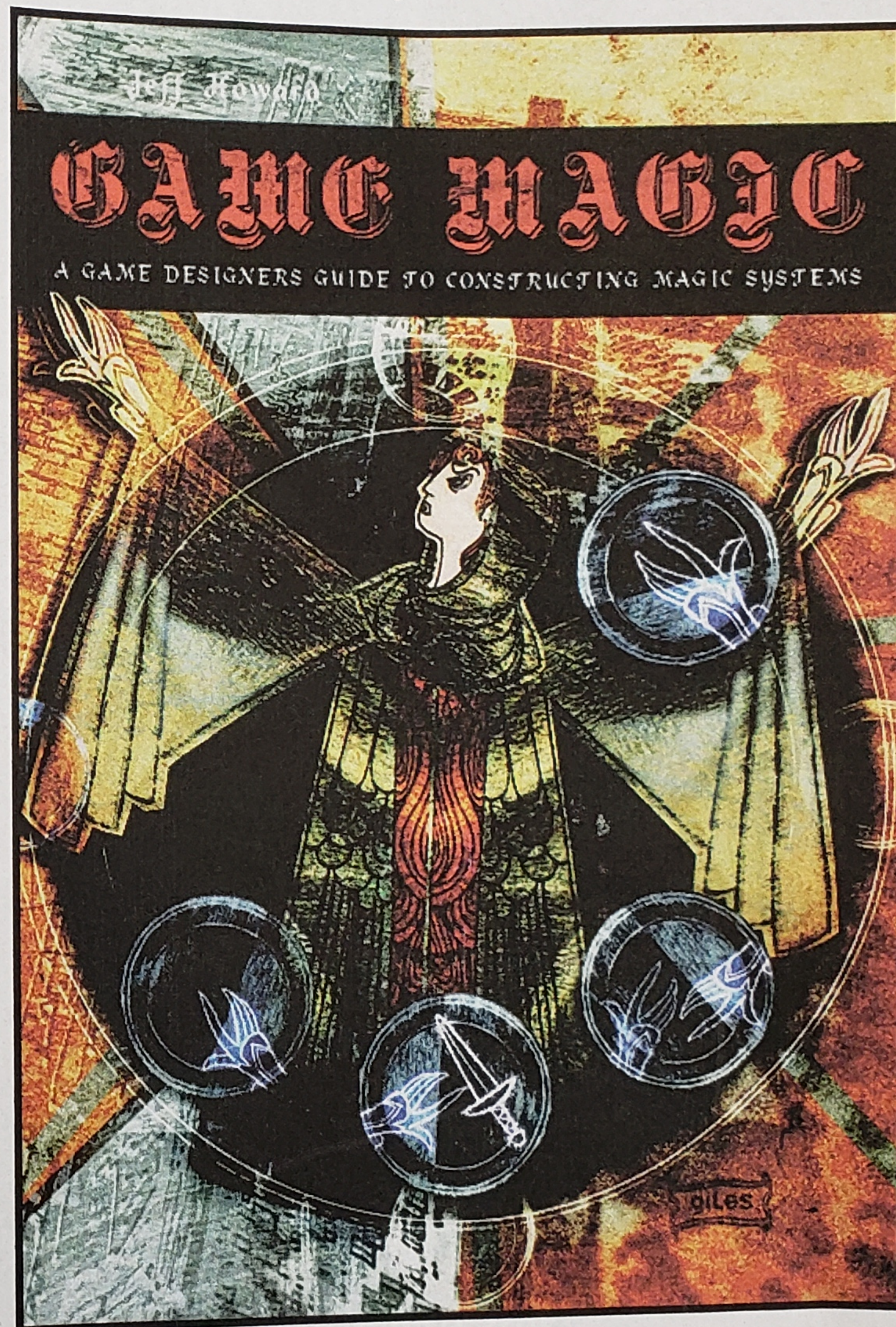
DD: One could conclude that any form of modern video gameplay is, in a sense, occult because you're using the representational language and symbology of the controller and the game UI to produce desired results in a world.

JH: I would definitely agree that any act of gameplay is inherently occult because of the use of symbols in order to interact with and control a simulated world. One could extend this argument further to suggest that all acts of programming and therefore software/game development are also occult, since lines of code are incantations that,

when uttered correctly according to a prescribed ritual, control computational processes. This line of logic leads to the famous Arthur C. Clarke statement that "any sufficiently advanced technology is indistinguishable from magic."

DD: So that understanding of gameplay as intrinsically occult is what inspired *Game Magic*?

JH: I wrote *Game Magic* to help game designers, developers, writers, and programmers put the magic back into magic systems, re-enchanting systems that have often degenerated into repeatedly mashing a button on a row



of icons in order to fire a combat spell. *Game Magic* is a game design grimoire, a cookbook of recipes (including computer code and pseudo-code) for making richer, deeper, and more immersive magic in games. I triangulate magic between three nodes: game magic, fictive magic (from the literature of the fantastic), and occult magic (historical human sorcerous beliefs and practices). The magic of games can be enriched by weaving inspirational ley-lines between all three types of magic.

DD: What's the biggest failing in the way games attempt to integrate the occult?

JH: Most games that purport to simulate or represent magic and the occult have a narrow vocabulary, simplistic grammar, and neglect of the multimodal performative

aspect of language (i.e. the way that colors, gestures, artifacts, and musical sounds can communicate alongside and in conjunction with words). Spells like "throw fireball" imply a world with a shallow ontology (structure and order of being) that is physical and mechanistic rather than metaphysical and mysterious. Far too many games treat spells as magical artillery.

DD: What advice would you give a designer looking to incorporate occult elements into their game?

QUESTS

Design, Theory, and History in Games and Narratives



Jeff Howard

JH: Designers should strive toward an orthogonal relationship between the things in a world and the magical symbols used to affect these things: for every word a thing, for every thing a word, in perfect symmetry. However, in keeping with the definition of occult as hidden, it is equally important that the richness of a given gameworld be obscured, secret, and not always visible. The occult manifests in lore, which refers to narrative through mythos and backstory rather than story understood narrowly as plot. Lore depends on secret connections and ambiguous, multivalent symbols.

DD: One of the big pushes in games today is towards

accessibility—making games as easy as possible to play for players of all experience and skill levels. How do you reconcile that with a sense of the occult, which by definition has to be hidden and not immediately apparent?

JH: I reconcile accessibility with occultism through the idea of depth. The mantra "easy to learn, hard to master" springs to mind. In a game with depth in the form of hidden secrets, it is often perfectly possible to play the game at a surface level and enjoy it. A sense of awe sometimes comes from discovering that depth and complexity were hiding in plain sight, lurking like the sailboat in a magic eye poster or a fearsome face in a "when you see it" meme. I formulated this idea as "Howard's Law of Occult Game Design" in the book *100 Game Design Principles* (Ed. Wendy Despain). To quote, "Secret Significance is Directly Proportional to Seeming Innocence \times Completeness." In other words, the power of secret significance is directly proportional to the apparent innocence and completeness of the surface game.

DD: What are you working on now?

JH: The *Arcana Ritual Toolset* is the most recent ongoing iteration of my long-term transmedia project, called *Arcana*. The *Ritual Toolset* has two parts: 1) a game about performing rituals 2) an editor for building one's own rituals for other players to explore. Players perform symbolic actions, such as lighting candles, burning incense, chanting, and tracing sigils in order to invoke extraplanar entities and/or travel to their planes. Behind the scenes, these symbolic actions nudge the player (and/or the summoned entity) along various vectors in an n-dimensional concept space or metaverse. In its furthest extension, *Arcana* is intended as a set of open-source tools, assets, and resources for occult game design: a shared world of game lore in which a community of players and developers can create any desired form of magic (whether historical, fantastic, or purely invented).

DD: Sort of a Lego of magic for game designers?

JH: I sometimes use the phrase "the *Minecraft* of magic systems" to describe *Arcana*. Instead of making worlds out of cubes, players and users of *Arcana* make rituals out of symbols. One of the exciting aspects of *Minecraft* is that it blurs the lines between playing and developing games, since the true interest of *Minecraft* is building in creative mode. This creative gameplay is possible because *Minecraft* consists of a relatively small number of interesting building-blocks (types of cubes) and a dizzying number of possible combinations of these elements. In *Arcana*, I am attempting to leverage the combinatorial explosion of occult symbols in order to create emergent magical gameplay.



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BRIAN KIRK

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