# Malmo Paper

This is a talk based on a book proposal for a book about Playful Occulture, or Playful Occultism. I haven’t decided which, yet.

I’m Dr. Jeff Howard. I’m Associate Professor of Games and Occulture at Falmouth University. I specialize in the Typhonian Tradition as it intersects with Sabbatic Craft of Andrew Chumbley, which means (as we’ll see) that I think a lot about being and non-being.

The primary sense in which I’m using the word “occult” is “hidden,” which is derived from the etymological roots of the word. The *Oxford English Dictionary* outlines the etymological roots of the word “occult” as coming from the “< “CLASSICAL LATIN OCCULTUS SECRET, HIDDEN FROM THE UNDERSTANDING, HIDDEN, CONCEALED, PAST PARTICIPLE OF OCCULERE TO COVER UP, HIDE, CONCEAL>.””

The same dictionary entry defines the word as meaning ” “OF OR RELATING TO MAGIC, ALCHEMY, ASTROLOGY, THEOSOPHY, OR OTHER PRACTICAL ARTS HELD TO INVOLVE AGENCIES OF A SECRET OR MYSTERIOUS NATURE; OF THE NATURE OF SUCH AN ART; DEALING WITH OR VERSED IN SUCH MATTERS; MAGICAL.”

The word “Occulture” is a portmanteau word in the manner of Lewis Carroll, coined by Genesis P-Orridge (experimental musician and founder of the Temple ov Psychic Youth) and popularized by Carl Abrahamsson. It was brought into academic discourse by scholars such as Christopher Partridge and Egil Asprem.

The topic of this talk can be visualized as an infinity sign: an eight turned on its side to represent a Moebius strip of interrelated topics. The left loop (the first one that I will talk about) is about the influence of the occult on games. The right loop (the second one I will talk about) is about occult practice as playful. I mean occult practice somewhat synonymously with magical practice, though slightly more inclusive of practices (such as astrology or tarot) that do not directly follow the Crowleyan dictum of change through will. But the infinity sign suggests that these two parts loop back on each other, so that (as we will see) occult-influenced games might themselves be understood as forms of magical practice, just as some magical practices take the form of games. As Lionell Snell argues throughout *My Years of Magical Thinking*, flexible pattern-making is a key aspect of what sets magical thinking apart from scientific or religious modes of inquiry.

Many games are influenced by the occult, often at the level of narrative and mechanics. Games also include mechanics and rules for simulating magic, sometimes referred to as magic systems. My second book, *Game Magic*, explored many such magical systems (including some created by me in my game *Arcana*) that are strongly influenced by real-world occult traditions, as well as ways in which real-world occult practices could be adapted into game mechanics. Since the publication of this book in 2014, the status of games as a form of occulture has become much better-recognized. The University of Denmark, in conjunction with a group called the Dark Arts Collective, is sponsoring an upcoming conference entirely dedicated to games and occulture, with a CFP that cites Christopher Partridge’s essay “Occulture is Ordinary” as the raison d’etre of the conference. Partridge argues (not entirely convincingly, to my mind) that occulture is ordinary in the sense of being mainstream.

At the same time, there are at least two generations of tabletop designers who have, in contrarian fashion, treated the occult accusations against tabletop roleplaying games during the Satanic panic as an aspirational challenge (almost a dare), using tabletop games as vehicles for representing and simulating occultism as well as (in the case of the *Book on Antitheses*) using games as a medium for occult practice.

From left to right we have, *Kabbale* (a French independent roleplaying game fusing *fin de siècle* occultism with , *Invisible Sun* (a vast, multimodal magic system consisting consisting of lovingly-crafted objects in an unmarked black cube that unfolds like the Lament Configuration), *Seekers Beyond the Shroud* (a single-player journaling RPG based on elaborate ritual correspondences)*, Kult* (an RPG adaptation of existentialist Gnosticism inflected through Left Hand path practices), *Abyss of Hallucinations* (an RPG scenario based on Crowley’s Book of Lies), and *The Book of Antitheses* (an RPG supplement that treats the Satanic Panic’s accusations of RPG’s as gateways into occult practice as if they were literally true).

While the tone of *The Book of Antitheses* is somewhat tongue-in-cheek, the foreword by x author argues that roleplaying games can approach religious experience if played with sufficient intensity of concentration, opening the way past the realm of the imaginary and into what Henri Corbin dubbed the imaginal. As a case study, consider *Seekers Beyond the Shroud*, a player must attend to the magical correspondences of real-world day and time, along with associated harmonious use of the proper incense, colour, metal, and gemstone. Indeed, the table of correspondences included in *Seekers Beyond the Shroud* is a simplified version of the kind found in Crowley’s *Liber 777* and Stephen Skinner’s *Complete Magician’s Tables*. As the player engages in solitary, rule-based visualization of narrative scenarios associated with these rituals (including the acquisition and outfitting of a magical sanctum, astral projection from the sanctum, and encounters with otherworldly entities), the player chronicles these emergent narratives in a journal. The line between doing these practices and engaging in the actual practices of ceremonial magic in a system like the Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn (including the development of a magical temple, the projection into astral temples, and the evocation or invocation of astral entities). At a certain point, a variation of Arthur C. Clarke’s oft-quoted maxim emerges. Just as “Any sufficiently advanced technology is indistinguishable from magic, “Any sufficiently advanced simulation of ritual can function as ritual.” This is unsurprising, given associations between game-playing and magic that originate in the work of the first scholar of game studies, Johan Huizinga, and his concept of the magic circle as expressed in *Homo Ludens*. Huizinga’s concept of the magic circle (a boundary around the game that changes the value and significance of what is inside it) is analogous to the magician’s magic circle in ceremonial magic, which operates as a barrier protecting the magician from demons. Huizinga writes, "Just as there is no formal difference between play and ritual, so the "consecrated spot" cannot be formally distinguished from the play-ground. The arena, the card-table, the magic circle, the temple, the stage, the screen, the tennis court, the court of justice, etc., are all in form and function play-grounds, i.e. forbidden spots, isolated, hedged round, hallowed, within which special rules obtain. All are temporary worlds within the ordinary world,. dedicated to the performance of an act apart" (10).

While the general parallels between occultism and gameplay are readily available, it’s a very specific type of game that I’d like to focus on for this talk: games that are about shifting state (between life and death, material and spiritual, this plane of existence and others), as well as games that help players to shift state. This idea is in the spirit of the Trans-States conference, but also rooted in ways of thinking about games and complex software systems in general. State change appears in influential roleplaying and tabletop games as planar travel, which is a form of metaphysical voyaging derived from the concept of astral projection as present in Theosophy of H.P. Blavatsky and the ceremonial magick of the Golden Dawn and, later, Aleister Crowley’s practice of Rising on the Planes in Liber O. One way of shifting metaphysical state is astral projection, often simulated and represented in games as planar travel. Astral projection appears in first edition on Advanced Dungeons and Dragons, along with the related concept of the Silver Cord. An immediate popular culture source for these concept is Dr. Strange comic books, though Gary Gygax mentions books on theosophy and occultism more generally in his appendix of suggested reading for Dungeon Masters in *Master of the Game*. Further sources of these concepts is laid out in an blog post on OSRGrimoire: As multiple blog entries attest including those on OSRGrimoire, D&D gains much of its concepts and imagery of shifting states into other worlds from the illustrations of Steve Ditko in Dr. Strange comics. Ditko’s worlds are deeply surreal and psychedelic Ditko was an aficionado of both psychedelics and Tibetan mysticism, where an ambiguity exists as to whether these other worlds are internal states of consciousness, extradimensional realms, or both. It is in this ambiguous space between representation, simulation, and practice that ludomancy exists.

<https://osrgrimoire.blogspot.com/2020/08/>

Both the ceremonial and the sorcerous methods of achieving gnosis are present in games. Occult tabletop & digital roleplaying simulates state-shifting ritual with increasing depth and soul. The ceremonial approach to gnosis is most overtly represented by the intensely tactile, multimodal, and intricate magic of Invisible SN.

In a 2014 Game Developers Conference talk in Austin, TX, I proposed a principle that I referred to as Howard’s Law of Occult Design. It was later published in a book *100 Game Design Principles*. Howard’s Law of Occult Game Design is “THE POWER OF SECRET SIGNIFICANCE IS DIRECTLY PROPORTIONAL TO SEEMING INNOCENCE AND SIMPLICITY” I was referring to games like *Castlevania: Symphony of the Night,* in which a seemingly straightforward ending turns out to be false, and a seemingly arbitrary yet deeply rule-based sequence of actions reveals an inverted castle. I was also thinking about indie game developer Jason Rohrer’s *Passage*, which (like many indie games of the period) presents itself on its surface as a simple 8-bit walking simulator but is (in fact) a deep and poignant autobiographical narrative about the trade-offs of romantic relationships against the backdrop of the artistic tradition of the memento mori. Occult games in the sense that I am using them are games with hidden thematic depth. In this sense, Rohrer’s *Passage* is more occult than his *Cordial Minuet* (the title of which is an anagram of *Demonic Ritual*), even though *Cordial Minuet* is more inspired at the level of aesthetics by occult lore.

I have later realized that Howard’s Law and its accompanying sense of occult game design was close to what Doris Rusch calls a deep game in her book of the that title. According to Rusch, deep games are games with “meaning and purpose” that express a personal experience through experiential metaphor. Experiential metaphor is metaphor conceived of as an “abstract structure” also known as an “experiential gestalt” (a term further developed by Rusch’s mentee at the Singapore MIT Gambit Lab, Jason Begy.

The presence of games that are occult both in influence and in underlying structure opens up the possibility of occult practice itself operating as a form of play. Such an approach is made possible by the existence of early game scholars, such as anthropologist Johan Huizinga and sociologist Roger Caillois, who understood play as being fundamental to human behaviour and culture. Both of these scholars, who wrote in the early to mid twentieth century and before the advent of videogames, saw play as exemplified in games but not limited to them.

The magic and games are deeply intertwined. This is especially true in non-digital games, such as board games and card games, which are contemporaneous with the historical origins of magic and were sometimes invested with magical symbolism and significance by ancient cultures. As multiple scholarly and popular sources, such as Joanna Thompson in “Sticks, Stones, and Knucklebones: The History of Dice,” the first dice were sheep knucklebones used for divination, known in Greek as astragals and in Latin as talus. https://dicemaniacsclub.wordpress.com/2020/02/22/the-history-of-dice-part-1-ancient-dice/ https://entertainment.howstuffworks.com/leisure/traditional-games/history-dice.htm

Our modern-day twenty-sided dice or d20, itself one of the Platonic solids that is part of the mystical cosmology of Pythagoras, first appears as a mysterious Greek die inscribed with written Coptic characters and probably used in divination in conjunction with the Papyri Graeci Magicae.

As Stuart R. Kaplan explain in *The Encyclopedia of Tarot*, he tarot decks used in divination began as a card game known as Tarocchi and only later acquired the layers of mystical significance associated with divination when figures like Le Comte de Gebelin argued that the cards represented the mysteries or “arcana” of the Book of Thoth (1).

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 thus argues that all magical practice, including systems of divination, are approached by a skillful sorcerer as games, i.e. arbitrary systems of symbols constituting working myths that are nonetheless strictly adopted and followed by a sorcerer, 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, emphasis mine). While Snell does not cite any game studies scholars in order 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.* In a famous attempt to define games, Suits writes “"TO PLAY A GAME IS TO ATTEMPT TO ACHIEVE A SPECIFIC STATE OF AFFAIRS [PRELUSORY GOAL], USING ONLY MEANS PERMITTED BY RULES [LUSORY MEANS], WHERE THE RULES PROHIBIT USE OF MORE EFFICIENT IN FAVOUR OF LESS EFFICIENT MEANS [CONSTITUTIVE RULES], AND WHERE THE RULES ARE ACCEPTED JUST BECAUSE THEY MAKE POSSIBLE SUCH ACTIVITY [LUSORY ATTITUDE].“ (54-55)

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Enochian Chess, a four—handed variant of chess played by the 19th-century Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn, operates as a nexus between games intended for entertainment and deep games with a spiritual intent. Indeed, MacGregor Mathers, his wife Moina Mathers, and W.B. Yeats are known to have played Enochian chess with a fourth, invisible spirit partner. Enochian Chess developed by the Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn as a form of initiatory training and (later) a method of divination, especially if the one or more of the players is disembodied. In each of these cases, play is a sacred activity of the gods, a mode of achieving spirit contact, or both. Because the Golden Dawn system is at least partially organized around Enochian correspondences (the angelic language discovered or invented by John Dee and Edward Kelley).

Moreover, Aleister Crowley saw his early experiences as a virtuosic chess player, able to play multiple separate games of chess simultaneously while blindfolded, as preparatory for his ability to visualize astral temples as a part of his training in ceremonial magick. Crowley writes, “ON THE SURFACE, THERE SEEMS LITTLE RELATION BETWEEN MAGICK AND CHESS, BUT MY ABILITY TO PLAY THREE GAMES SIMULTANEOUSLY BLINDFOLD WAS NOW VERY USEFUL. I HAD NO DIFFICULTY IN VISUALIZING THE ASTRAL TEMPLE BY AN EFFORT OF WILL, AND OF COURSE I WAS PERFECTLY ABLE TO WATCH THE RESULTS OF THE INVOCATIONS WITH MY ASTRAL EYES." *THE CONFESSIONS OF ALEISTER CROWLEY*

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: they channel and direct 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.” 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 an boast that his nightly invocations of his Holy Guardian angel were so intense that a single half hour of magical practice was “equal to 30 hours of Asana.” 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.

But Kenneth Grant (initially Crowley’s young disciple and later the founder of his own Typhonian tradition) arrives at a different position. 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.
* ALSO, A TANGENT IN THE GEOMETRICAL SENSE (I.E. GOING OFF AT AN OBLIQUE ANGLE)
* ALSO, 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 TANRA (GRANT, HECATE’S FOUNTAIN): through openness toward SYNCHRONICITIES THAT DISRUPT THE STATELY DECORUM OF CEREMONIAL RITUAL. 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.

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, experiential metaphors that operate through Caillois’ framework of ilinx by way of a shared interest in what Chumbley calls “the widdershins whirling of the Sufis.”

* RECOGNIZING THIS **LIBERATES MAGICAL PRACTICE** FROM EXCESSIVE GRAVITAS
* **PROTECTS US FROM THE POTENTIALLY SELF-DESTRUCTIVE** EFFECTS OF DEALING WITH DARK FORCES
* WHILE ALSO ALLOWING FOR DEPTH
* IT **PREVENTS THE MONOMANIA** (AND INHERENT ETHICAL RISK) OF “CHANGE THROUGH WILL”
* AND ALLOWS FOR THE **SPONTANEOUS EMERGENCE** OF **SYNCHRONICIT**Y & **SPIRIT CONTACT** (TANGENTIAL TANTRA)