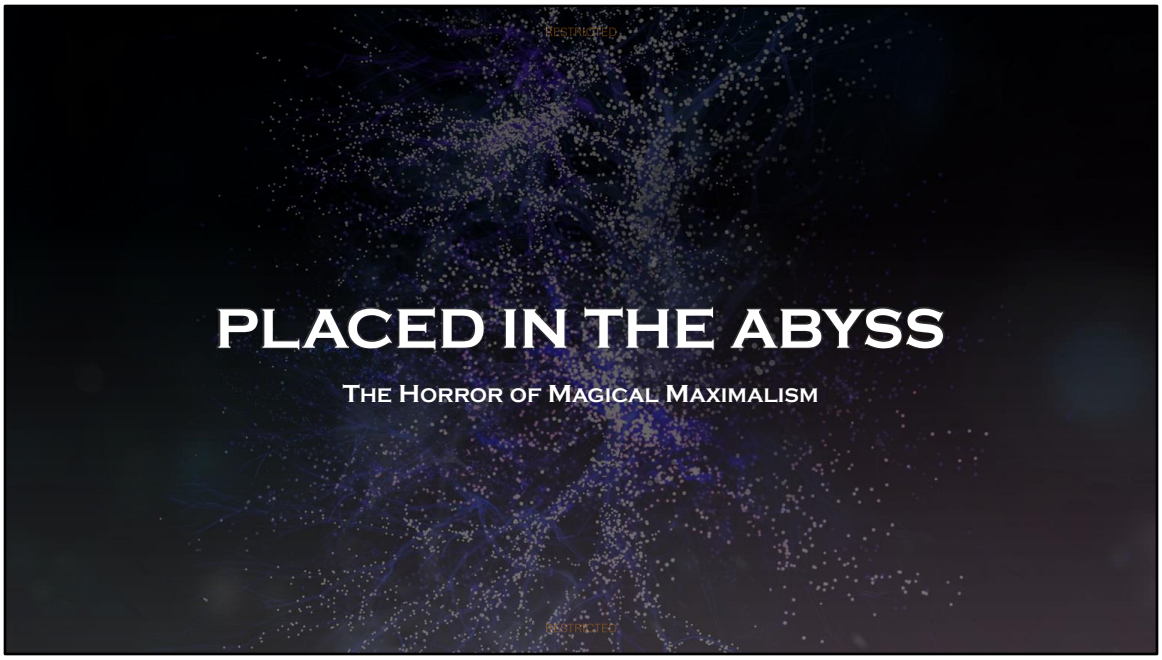

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PLACED IN THE ABYSS
The Horror of Magical Maximalism
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DR. JEFF HOWARD

-

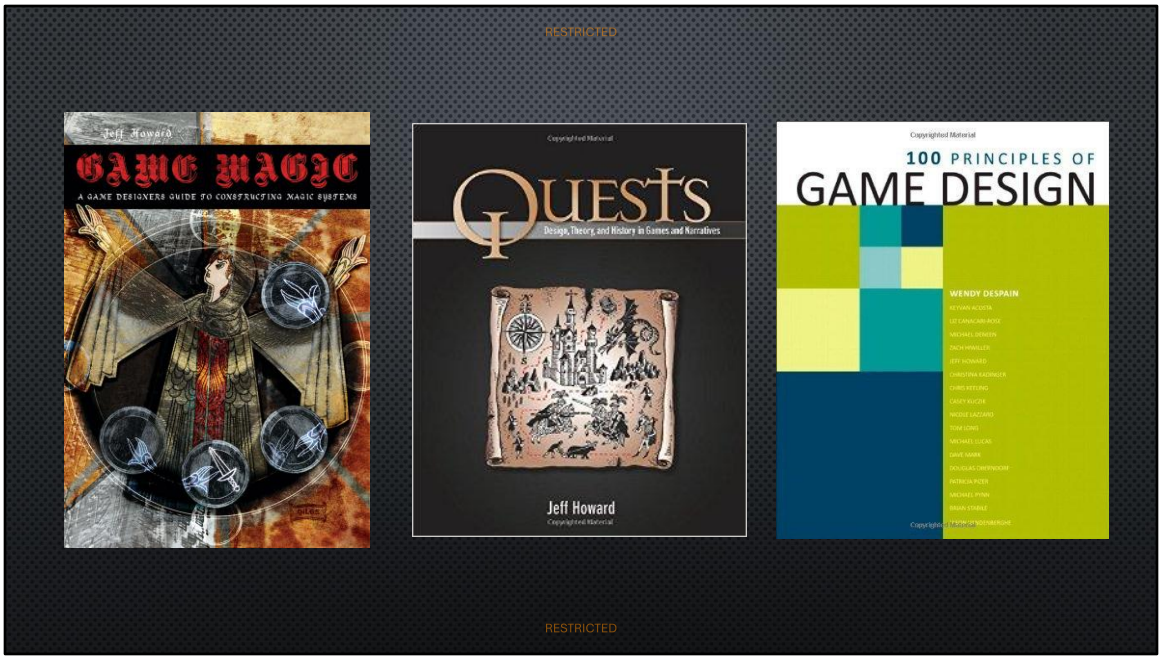
ASSOCIATE PROFESSOR OF GAMES AND OCCULTURE

Howard has presented on games and the occult at a variety of international conferences, including Berlin Occulture, Trans-States, and ESSWE9. Howard studies Sabbatic Craft at the intersection of the Left Hand Path and the Typhonian current. Through his scholarship and creative practice, Howard is an ambassador for the power of play as a transformative and transcendent practice.



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I've written these books on game design and have my own law "Howard's Law of Occult Design." The 2nd edition of my book on Quest design was published this April.

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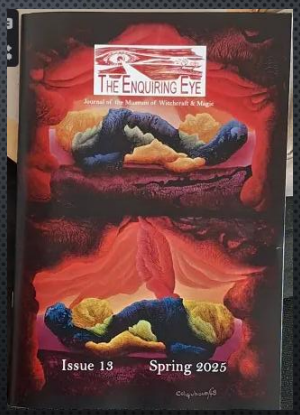
CORE TEAM MEMBER: APOCALYPSE STUDIOS

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RECENT **OCCULT** PUBLICATIONS ON **ANDREW CHUMBLEY** AND **KENNETH GRANT**





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Consider adding MMU rituals of play

IN THIS TALK, I WILL EXPLORE **THREE MAXIMALIST, MAGICALLY-THEMED** TTRPG'S

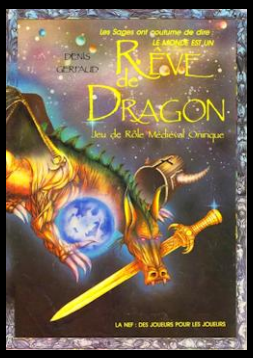
- *Rêve de Dragon* (French, 1st edition 1985, English translations in 2002 & 2006)
- *Invisible Sun* (2018)
- *7 Part Pact* (Patreon version 2026, about to be Kickstarted)

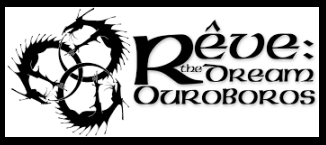


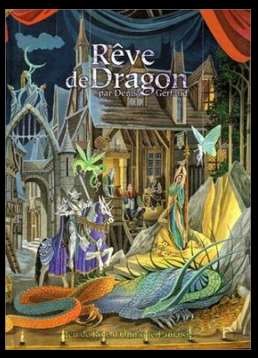


7 PART PACT

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RÊVE DE DRAGON (ENGLISH TRANSLATION: *RÊVE: THE DREAM OUROBOROS*).

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Jeu de Role Medieval Onirique (i.e. oneiric, concerned with dreams)
First French edition published 1985

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INVISIBLE SUN

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Maximalist magic system(s) par excellence. Everything in the kitchen sink, a black cube with hidden compartments, packed with tchoctkes representing 4 magic systems and a meta-magic system

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7 PART PACT



7 PART PACT (PATREON ONLY, SOON TO BE A KICKSTARTER)

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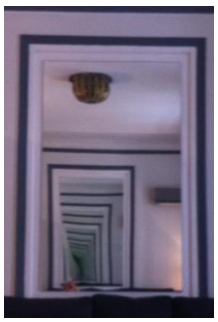
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BUT FIRST, A WORD ABOUT THE TITLE OF THIS TALK

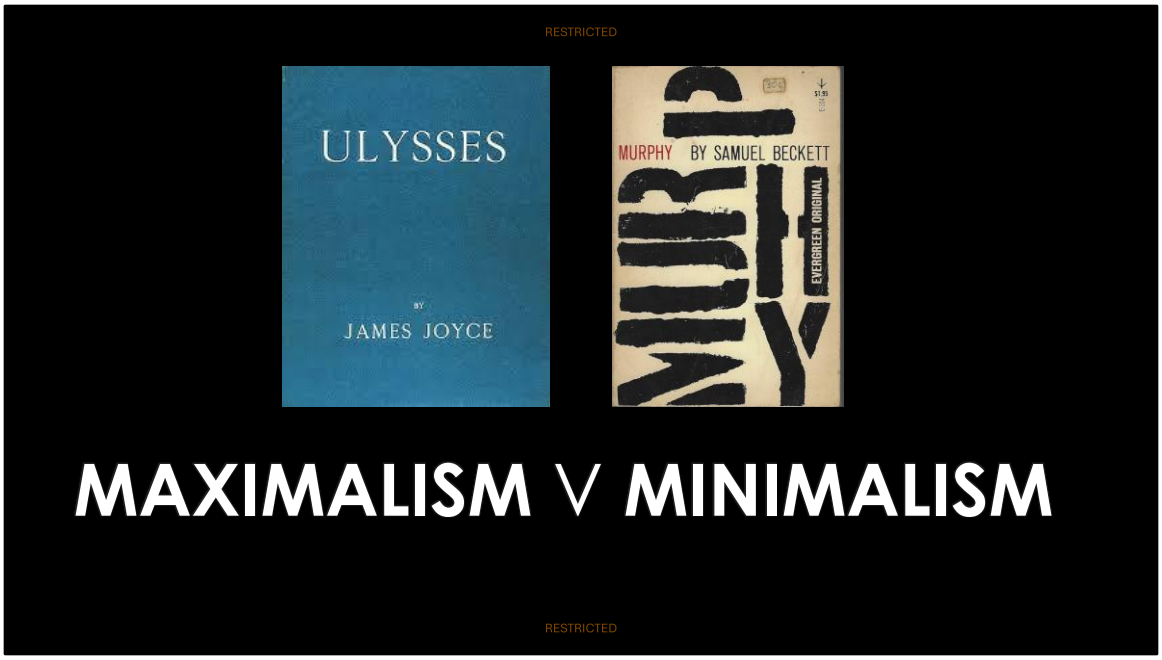
"**PUT IN THE ABYSS**" IS THE LITERAL TRANSLATION OF THE FRENCH "**MISE EN ABYME**"

A FRENCH PHRASE DENOTING **RECURSION** AND CONNOTING THE (HORRIFIC?) **VERTIGO** THAT RECURSION IMPLIES

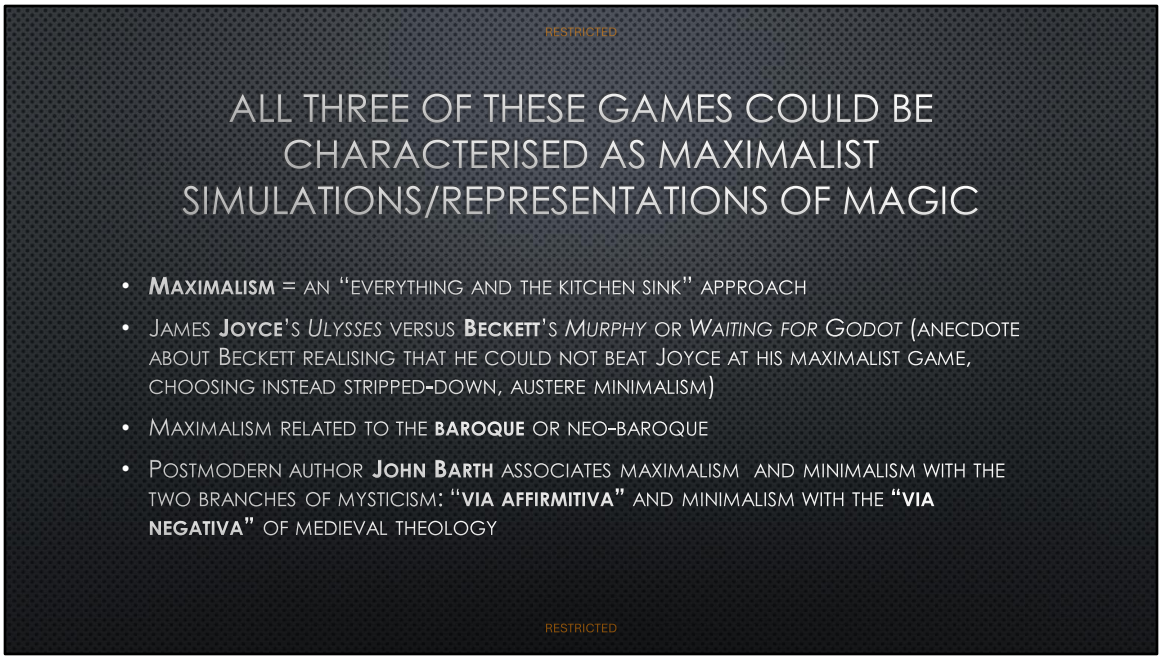




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Maximalism and minimalism are artistic and literary terms. Famously, Joyce tried to reproduce the entirety of Dublin into his mammoth novel, *Ulysses*.,such that the city could be reconstructed via its description in the story. The younger Beckett, a friend and protégé of Joyce, realised that he could not beat Joyce at his own game, so he aspired toward a deliberate minimalism. E.g. Waiting for Godot, with only two characters and a dead tree on stage.



Also, from the title. John Barth on maximalism versus minimalism. "The medieval Catholic Church recognized two opposite roads to grace: the via negativa of the monk's cell and the hermit's cave, and the via affirmativa of human affairs, of being in the world whether or not one is of it. Critics have aptly borrowed 1 those terms to characterize the difference between Mr. Beckett, for example, and his erstwhile master James Joyce, himself a maximalist except in his early works."

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THE **MINIMALIST** AND **MAXIMALIST** APPROACHES TO PLAYER EXPERIENCE EXIST ALSO IN TABLETOP RPG'S

- MINIMALISM = STRIPPED-DOWN RULESETS, ELEGANTLY TERSE NARRATIVES
- THE ONE-PAGE RPG
- BUT ALSO THE OSR MOVEMENT





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IN CONTRAST, THESE THREE CASE STUDIES FOR THIS TALK

ARE **MAXIMALIST**

AND **MAGICAL**

MAGIC SYSTEMS INCREASINGLY ANALYSED IN GAME STUDIES

MY OWN MONOGRAPH, *GAME MAGIC*, 2014.

FOLLOWED BY ANDREJ KAPCAR'S RECENTLY-DEFENDED PHD BY PUBLICATION (WHO UNDERSTANDS MAGIC SYSTEMS AS ONE MANIFESTATION OF OCCULTURE & ESOTERICISM)

AND MIKAEL SEABAG'S WORK, INCLUDING A RECENT ARTICLE ON MAGIC SYSTEMS IN GAMES & CULTURE, WHO UNDERSTANDS MAGIC IN TERMS OF ENCHANTMENT





7 PART PACT

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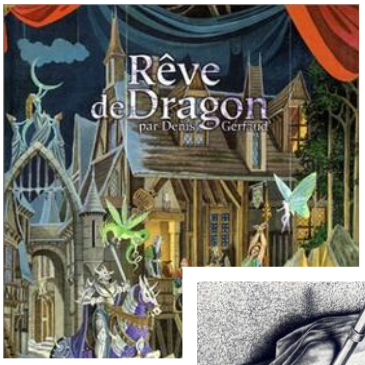
THESE THREE CASE STUDIES HAVE 4 FEATURES

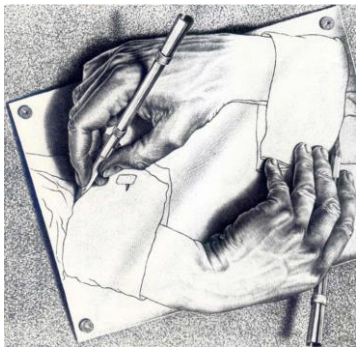
- **MAXIMALIST** = EVERYTHING AND THE KITCHEN SINK APPROACH, MAGIC IS MODELLED AS COMPLEX SYSTEMS OPERATING AT VARIOUS LEVELS OF ABSTRACTION
- **RECURSIVE** = MODEL ASPECTS OF MAGIC AS NESTED SYSTEMS INSIDE OF EACH OTHER AS SELF-CONTAINED BOARD GAMES
- **META** = THE VARIOUS LEVELS OF THE MAGIC SYSTEM FEED BACK ON EACH OTHER
- **DREAMLIKE** = MAGIC IS A DREAM WITHIN A DREAM

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RÊVE DE DRAGON (ENGLISH TRANSLATION: *RÊVE DREAM OUROBOROS*)
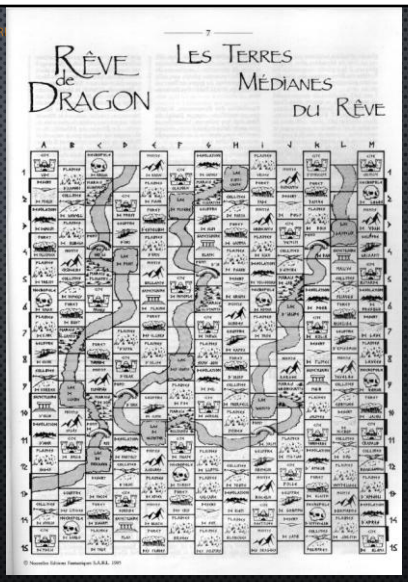
- Players play a (standard, D&D) party of adventurers
- Twist: they are actually **inside of a dragon's dream**
- Second twist: **magic users** (*Hauts-Rêvants*, or High Dreamers) **bend reality by whispering into the dragon's ear**, thereby altering the dream
- The second twist puts us into a Hofstadter-style "**strange loop**" of Escher-like **recursion** (hence the Ouroboros of the English title)
- Third twist: every **casting of every spell** requires to mage player to **play a board game** in which he **moves through the dream** realm to change the dragon's dream





LE DRACONIC

C'est la langue supposée des Dragons. Elle se compose de symboles et d'images, visuels et mentaux. Elle peut être visualisée ou écrite, mais jamais parlée. Il n'y a pas de sons qui y correspondent. C'est par l'usage de cette langue dont ils visualisent mentalement les concepts que les magiciens influencent le cours du rêve des Dragons et produisent ce qui, dans ce monde, est appelé la magie.
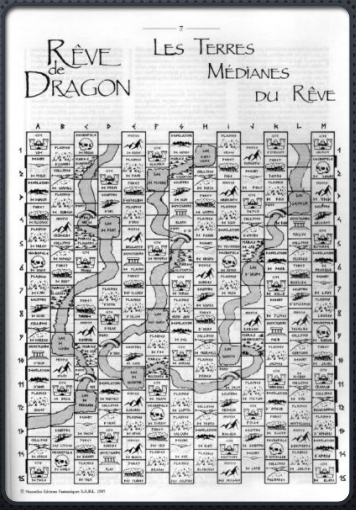


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Talk here about the overall premise of high dreaming. Spellcasting as board game within the game

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RÊVE DE DRAGON : DREAMLANDS

- Between the mundane dream (remember, everything in this game is a dream) and the Dreamtime
- The magician travels astrally to these spaces in trance. They are not physical lands, but mental ones
- Represented as hex spaces, each of which is a Dreamland
- To cast a spell, a particular Dreamland must be reached
- Any given Dreamland can be mastered, suppressed
- Repression suggests a psychoanalytic framework, but astral travel and trance suggest a mystical one

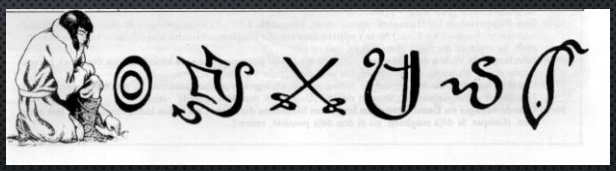


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Les 4 Voies. Le Draconic est une langue **symbolique.** Selon la "clé" utilisée, les symboles qui la composent peuvent avoir une multitude de significations. Une "phrase" en Draconic ne signifie jamais une seule chose, mais une "infinité". Les Sages prétendent que la signification ultime du monde et du rêve est contenue dans chaque mot de la langue des Dragons. Pour l'usage pratique de la **magie**, 4 **clés** sont retenues, qui sont appelées **Voies** : la Voie d'Oniros, la Voie de Narcos, la Voie d'Hypnos et la Voie de Thanatos.
Ainsi, selon qu'il est lu suivant telle ou telle Voie, un "texte" en Draconic signifie telle ou telle chose. Les "formules" des sorts, sortilèges et rituels (incantations mentales destinées à altérer le cours du Grand Rêve) sont écrites en Draconic. Mais suivant le type de magie désiré, ils doivent être lus suivant l'une des 4 Voies.

LES TERRES MEDIANES DU REVE

Les Dragons rêvent le monde, mais ce monde n'est pas le seul. Ils rêvent une infinité d'autres rêves, et tous ces autres rêves sont rêvés simultanément, comme une infinité de **plans parallèles.** En ce qu'ils sont des Grands Rêvants autant que des Grands Rêvés,

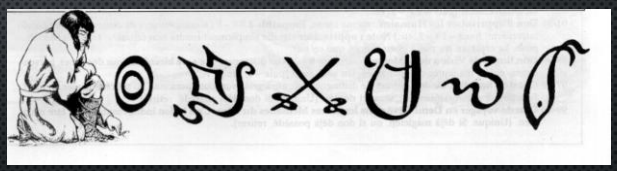


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Draconic as a symbolic language.

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- "What else can be said about this role-playing game, except that it's in French, and even in good French" AR Thigel
- This rulebook reads like *Dungeons & Dragons* as written by Baudelaire or Rimbaud

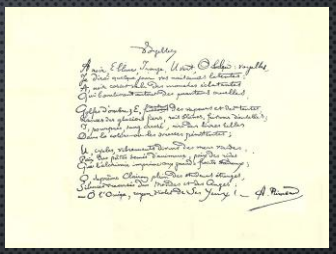


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In other words, Reve de Dragon is very French (in terms of the symbolist and







Gerfaud's insistence that draconic is not a spoken language, but a language of correspondences visual and symbolic, echoes Baudelaire's poem *Correspondences* and Rimbaud's *Vowels*

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INVISIBLE SUN

- Monte Cook Games
- **4 separate magic systems**, each modelled as a board game(or at least complex mini-games)
- These **4 separate magic systems** occurring within a **larger meta magic system**
- Meta magic system = **path of suns** and **Sooth deck**
- Each card from Sooth deck placed on path of suns affects the overall magic system



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- The Vance board and Crafter's matrix and (above all) the Goetic flowchart of invisible sun



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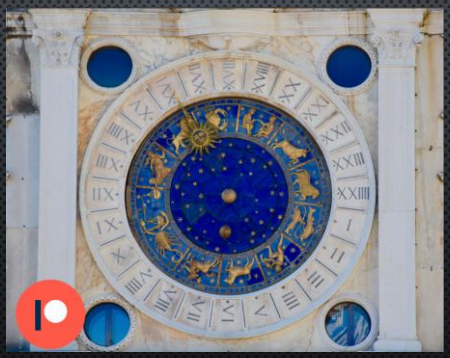


Invisible Sun goetic faction = the **unfathomable infernal hierarchies** implied by the Goetic grimoires as adapted (in spirit but not in detail) by the Goetic faction of *Invisible Sun*

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7 PART PACT (JAY DRAGON)



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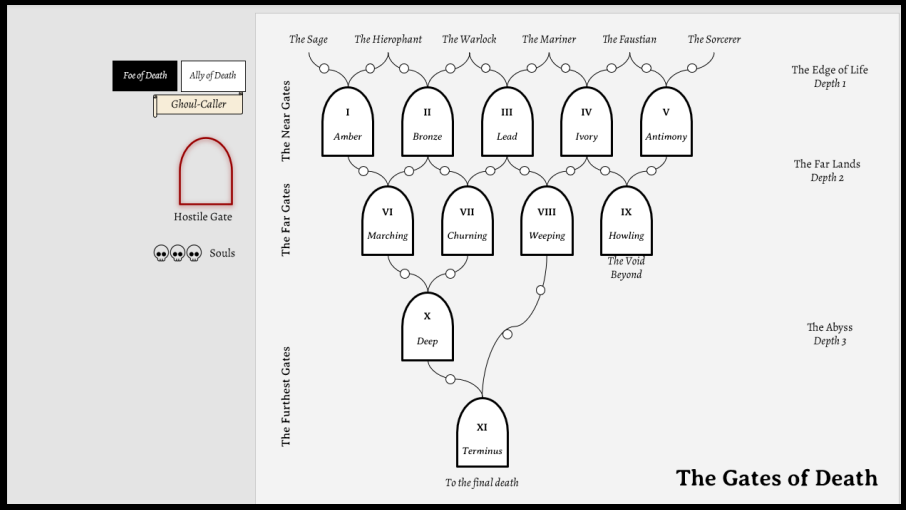
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THE MAGICAL MAXIMALISM OF *7 PART PACT*

- EACH PLAYER PLAYS ONE OF **7 WIZARDS**, EACH **RULING OVER ONE DOMAIN** (DEATH, SEA, DREAMS, ETC)
- MAINTAINING **EACH DOMAIN IS A SEPARATE BOARD GAME** WITHIN THE OVERALL GAME
- THE GAME IS, IN JAY DRAGON'S TERMS, **GM-FULL** RATHER THAN GM-LESS (AS HAS BEEN THE TREND WITH OTHER GAMES)
- AND AN **ORRERY** PLAYMAT TRACKS ASTROLOGICAL TIME BY INDIVIDUAL PLANETS AND STARS
- AND A **VAST GRIMOIRE** OF GENERALIST SPELLS IS AVAILABLE TO ALL PLAYERS
- SOME DOMAINS ARE META (E.G. SAGE AND SORCERER, WHO RULE OVER THE DRIVE TOWARD A COHESIVE PLOT AND THE OPERATION OF MAGIC ITSELF, RESPECTIVELY)

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Face-Down Schemes



Pawn

Conspiracy

Aries *Hierophant* The monks and pilgrims of the Temples	**Leo** *Warlock* The lords and ladies of the Noble Clans	**Sagittarius** *Sorcerer* The scholars and researchers of Spyrholm University
Taurus *Hierophant* The merchants and bankers of the Blue City	**Virgo** *Warlock* The soldiers and servants of the Halcyon Isles	**Capricorn** *Necromancer* The dead and nearly-dead of the Graven Isle
Gemini *Hierophant* The farmers and shepherds of the Chalk Cliffs	**Libra** *Mariner* The fishermen and divers of the Reaches	**Aquarius** *Sage* The druids and hermits of the Moonlit Atoll
Cancer *Hierophant* The beggars and thieves of Scuttleport	**Scorpio** *Mariner* The sailors and travelers of Foreign Lands	**Pisces** *Sage* The dreamers, the wanderers, and all those without a home

Targets of the Devil

The Twist



The Devil's Machinations

To place a face-up card on the board (accomplice, machination, etc.) google the relevant card and copy/paste its image in.

Use the associated spreadsheet to track card positions.

Click to add notes

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"IT'S A LOT. AND THAT'S KIND OF THE POINT." THE MANY SIDED NEWSLETTER



THE FIRST REVIEW OF SEVEN-PART PACT DESCRIBES IT AS "GM-FULL" RATHER THAN "GM-LESS"

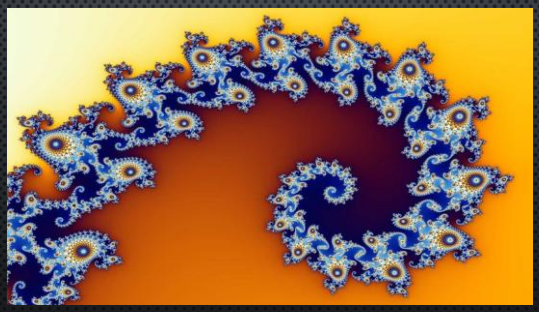
GM-LESS GAMES POPULAR IN THE 2000'S (E.G. BEN LEHMAN'S POLARIS) AND OFTEN ASSOCIATED WITH MINIMALISM, I.E. **COLLABORATIVE STORYTELLING** GAMES WITH **STRIPPED-DOWN WORLD SIMULATIONS** REQUIRING NO GAME MASTER

GM-FULL MEANS THAT **EVERY PLAYER** IS EQUALLY **INVOLVED IN MANAGING ASPECTS OF THE WORLD SIMULATION**

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MAGIC, IN ALL THREE CASES, IS
FRACTAL/RECURSIVE



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Into the Woods posits that storytelling is, by its very nature, fractal, such that any scene reflects the themes and structure of the whole. Jesse Schell ascribes the same quality to games in general. These three TTRPG's take this fractal quality to its extremes, so that systems which are ordinarily quite abstract become nested, self-reflective. 7 Part Pact

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MAGIC, IN ALL CASES, IS **SIMULATED** TO A HIGH DEGREE OF **DETAIL AND GRANULARITY**

- Simulationism (summarised by Marcis, derived from Mary Kuhner, popularised by John H. Kim)
- With che Wilbraham's reminder that one of the functions of the game master is to keep track of a simulated world

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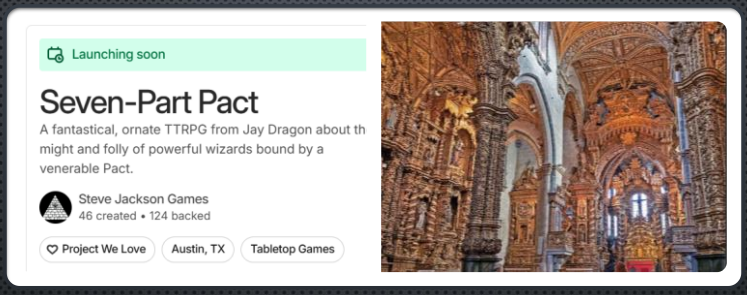
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MAGIC, IN ALL CASES, IS CONTEXTUALISED WITHIN AN UNUSUALLY **POETIC**, **SURREAL**, **BAROQUE** FRAMEWORK

- IN *RÊVE DE DRAGON* , ADVENTURES ARE SOLVED THROUGH **GRASPING POETIC ANALOGIES** AT THE HEART OF THE PUN-FILLED PROSE (VERY MUCH IN THE SPIRIT OF FRENCH SYMBOLISM/SURREALISM AND FRENCH WRITING MORE GENERALLY)

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RECURSION IS "ORNATE" = **BAROQUE** (AND AN EXAMPLE OF WHAT NDALIANIS CALLS "NEO-BAROQUE AESTHETICS)

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Baroque tendencies toward filigree upon filigree, ornamentation, intricacy of form. The official synopsis of 7 Part Pact describes it as "ornate," alluding again to the baroque aesthetics.

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IF RECURSIVE DREAMS EXIST, THEN SO DO **RECURSIVE NIGHTMARES**

- IN WHICH RECURSION IS ALLOWED TO **METASTASIZE** INTO THE **NIGHTMARE LOGIC OF MAGIC OUT OF CONTROL**
- *RÊVE DE DRAGON* : THE HIGH DREAM OF THANATOS (NECROMANTIC AND MALEFIC DREAMS)
- INVISIBLE SUN *THE NIGHTSIDE* (SURREAL GAMES BASED ON THE LEFT HAND PATH)
- SEVEN PART PACT "THE FAUSTIAN" CELESTIAL WATCHER ROLE (DEVIL MACHINATIONS)

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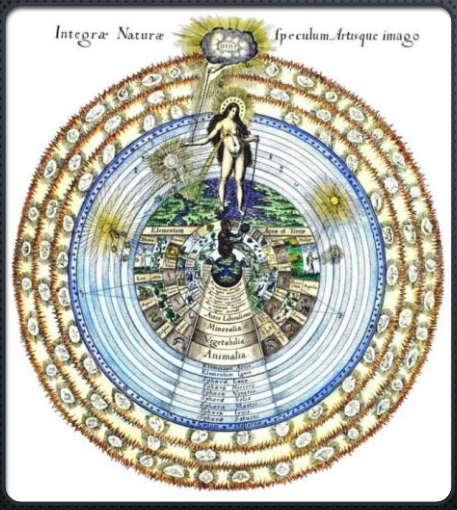
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HORROR IS **NOT THE PRIMARY DESIRED AESTHETIC EFFECT** OF THESE GAMES, BUT IT IS A **RESULT**

- YET HORROR IS A RATIONAL SUB-REACTION TO THE EXPERIENCE OF **EXTREME, UNCANNY RECURSION** AT A SYSTEMIC AND FICTIONAL LEVEL
- THIS IS ESPECIALLY TRUE OF SYSTEMS OF SORCERY, WHICH IS AT ITS ROOT ABOUT GAZING INTO AND ALTERING **THE HIDDEN, OCCULTED MACHINATIONS OF COSMOLOGY**
- THESE SYSTEMS EVOKE AWE, AND AWE IS RELATED TO THE **SUBLIME** (EDMUND BURKE)
- THE SUBLIME HAS WITHIN IN AN ELEMENT OF **TERROR** (ANNE RADCLIFFE)

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JAY DRAGON DESCRIBES MAGIC AS THE TOOL THAT BREAKS THIS MACHINE

- "The world is a complicated machine in its infinite array, countless fractal pieces interlocking into great whirring institutions, droplets of rain building up into storms which grow the crops and govern the lives of man. All that lies beneath the heavens is part of this machine, and it all may be broken in an instant through the use of magic.
- Magic is the tool Wizards use to fundamentally break the game's rules." Jay Dragon

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THIS IS NOT THE ONLY APPROACH TO MAGIC

- I've given a Last Tuesday society talk about folk magic in tabletop RPG's
- This magic (in both ludic and actual practice) is simple, operative, stripped-down

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Mork Borg's Esoteric Hermit class has 6 abilities, which (like all the game's classes) can fit on a single page.

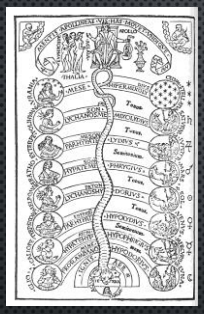
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THE MAXIMALIST APPROACH IS USEFUL IN PROVOKING PERILOUS AWFUL/AWE-FUL MAGIC

- William s. Burroughs "Magic is either dangerous or it is nothing."

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ALL 3 GAMES ARE MANIFESTATIONS OF **NEO-PLATONIC** AND **GNOSTIC COSMOLOGY** (AND ROMANTICIST AND SURREALIST MODERNISATIONS), ALLOWING US TO PLAY WITHIN NESTED DREAMS

The **Multidream** of *Reve*
The **Shadow a**nd the **Actuality** of *Invisible Sun*
The Pact of the Dreamers in *Seven Part Pact*
Dreams are a good metaphor for roleplaying games
Reality as dream-within-dream is also a Neoplatonic, Gnostic, and (later) Romantic and Surrealist concept
“Is all we see or seem but a dream within a dream?” Poe
Calderon *Life is a Dream*
“Merrily, merrily, merrily, merrily, life is just a dream.”
“We live inside a dream.” Special Agent Philip Jeffries

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NEOPLATONIC COSMOLOGY HAS ITS HORRORS (I.E. GNOSTICISM). THERE ARE RISKS TO RECOGNISING THE WORLD AS A RECURSIVE DREAM THAT IS SYMBOLICALLY MANIPULABLE

- "Stoop not down to the darkly-splendid world;
  In which continually lies a faithless depth, and
  Hades
  Cloudy, squalid, delighting in images unintelligible,
  Precipitous, winding, a blind profundity always
  rolling,
  Always espousing an opacous, idle, breathless
  body." Chaldean Oracles 145

- This recursion (magic as a game inside of a game) simulates a particular vertiginous, dizzy feeling of gazing into an unfathomably complex and, ultimately, unknowable system
- This is the horror of magical maximalism

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THESE GAMES REPRESENT MAGIC SYSTEM AS BOARD GAMES OR MINI-GAMES (GAMES INSIDE THE GAMES)

- The hex-based **Dreamlands** of *Rêve de Dragon*
- The various **Celestial Watcher boardgames** by which the domains of *7 Part Pact* are simulated and regulated (especially, for purposes of this talk, by the Faustian and Necromantic wizards)
- The Vance board and Crafter's matrix and (above all) the Goetic flowchart of invisible sun
- This recursion (magic as a game inside of a game) simulates a particular vertiginous, dizzy feeling of gazing into an unfathomably complex and, ultimately, unknowable system
- I.e. the unfathomable infernal hierarchies implied by the Goetic grimoires as adapted (in spirit but not in detail) by the Goetic faction of *Invisible Sun*
- That unknowability is thrilling and terrifying

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