Magic in Roleplaying and Reality

Abstract

Few roleplaying systems are devoid of magic, whether presented as a sub-system within the game or designed for narrative considerations. Even in science fiction and contemporary genres magical or pseudo-magical material is included, often for the purposes of creating a "sense of wonder" in comparison to the mundane world. However, as this sense of wonder exists already among many peoples and cultures who use magic, it is worth considering whether the various roleplaying magic systems can act as research aide for cultural anthropology, and whether it is possible to use material from this research to develop a universal magic system for roleplaying systems.

The Pragmatics of Magic

Assigning an appropriate method to confirm the existence of magic has some interesting historical precedents. The Malleus Maleficarum, the nortorious "witch's hammer" of the counter-Reformation, spent its initial chapter on discussion the question "do witches exist?". Concluding in the positive, it then decreed that even to doubt this proposition was itself heretical. The four hundred "sorcerors" burnt at the stake in Languedoc, 1577, were recipients of such proofs. They probably would have appreciated the opportunity of appeal to a more rational text.

The roleplaying industry tends to be a little more open minded about such affairs, but not conclusively so. In an early issue of Dragon magazine, Gary Gygax, whilst criticising "cumbersome" spell point systems (like AD&D psionics perchance?) derided suggestion that spell points were more "realistic" than the AD&D "imprinting" method. Kevin Siembelda, author of the Palladium game system, recommends that if we come to the opinion that we can perform magic we should seek counsel from a priest (for what purpose? I wonder, excorsism?). On the other end of the scale, it is clear that the people at Chaosium are more than just advocates of shamatic and pagan values, and Steve Jackson, in typical liberal fashion, describes Earth as a "low-mana" world.

The meta problem is one of proof, which is nominally the domain of science. Conventional wisdom would suggest that science doesn't have much regard for magic. This isn't quite true. The scientific method, from Bacon and Descartes, through Hume and Kant, to Popper and Feyerabend, has defined quite specifically what is acceptable scientific evidence and by being so specific has actually defined the pragmatic domains for both science and magic. Likewsie cultural anthropology has made several important insights concerning the behaviour of magic-using cultures. Combining both the philosophy of science with the practise of magic provides workable pragmatic domains which, for all intents and purposes, are as about as "realistic" as any system of magic can be.

Firstly, both magic and science co-exist in this universe. The boundaries of space and time remain inviolate, although the individual experience may be altered by scientific or magic means. Both space and time remain positive quantities (i.e., you cannot go backwards ion time or move in negative space and remain in this universe). Research by Evans-Prichard into the magic using Azande tribe of Africa confirmed that a belief in magic does not change the level of logical operations, but rather it alters the actor origins of a particular event. Under no circumstances would an Azande suggest that a hit fell down and then a strong wind occurred, but that the strong wind that blew down the hut was a

conjuration or spirit. The co-existence of magic and science reaches its philosophical definition in Wittgentsein who notes that the causal definition of the universe may indeed be open to scientific investigation, but its actual existence must surely belong to the domain of magic. Mathematically, Godel's theorem also p[rovides another confirmation; the axioms of any propositions cannot prove the proposition. Why is there something when there could be nothing? That's the magic of the universe (i.e., if the universe is constantly expanding what is it expanding into?)

Secondly, science is falsifiable in virtue of its repeatability and universality. Magic is entirely context-specific, non-repeatable and therefore not falsifiable. To give an example, if a character suddenly gained the ability to fly, and spent several minutes involves in aerial gymnatics the evnt, whilst empirical, certainly wouldn't be scientific unless it was repeatable and most importantly, open to independent witnesses. Yet as soon as those conditions are fulfilled, this magical event becomes a scientific fact, the value of the two domains being incommensurable in their value.

Thirdly, because meaning itself is not accessible to scientific analysis, communication and narrative become part of the domain of magic. It is notable that this mode of consciousness is universal among all non-industrial cultures and is retained by children of modern society (c.f., Piaget). Every event in the world is provided with multiple levels of meaning and significance. Whilst this can lead to pragmatic confusion between the boundaries of culture and nature (as noted from Durkheim to Levi-Strauss) constructing a narrative, or myth, is the most efficient means of retaining large amounts of context-bound information with extreme precision. We can also note the level to whioch magic already incorporated into linguistics: to perform magic is to cast a "spell" using insubstantial "wyrds", which tranform the mind or "spirit" of the listener.

Finally, magic cannot be subject to conscious and intentional manipulation, whereas science, being based on knowledge, cannot avoid it. Magic is beyond the realm of knowledge (i.e., supernatural) and therefore cannot be understood, unless the character has somehow reached god-like status, win which case they are probably more involved with terraforming and can no longer live in human society. Magical skill is not the instrumental manipulation of the universe (science and technology already perform those tasks), rather it is the ability to adapt to the flow of the universe in a manner that best suits the desires of the character. How extreme these effects are depends on the magical aptitude of the character.

Most roleplaying games don't attempt to apply these conditions to their magic system. This is hardly surprising, as a setting in a fantasy world with only passing respect for real world legends and lore can take practical libertioes which storytellers of old would have grimaced at. The physical problems of casting a spell, such as fireball, is suspended in favour of dramatic intent - with no due consideration or explanation of where the energy comes from to creat a ball of fire 33 000 cubic feet in volume! The most notable exception to this common shortcoming must be Mage: The Ascension by White Wolf games (also available for GURPS) which notably, is a magic based game in a contemporary setting. No other game really satisfies the pragmatic requirements of magic use in a manner that does not contradict scientific methodology.

In Mage, the object/subject dichotomy is transcended through a consensus concerning the nature of reality. Magic effects are applied according to the aptitude of the character in a particular sphere of influence. Almost any effect is allowed, as long as a logical, coincidental justification for the magical effect can be sustained, both to the mage and to any witnesses. Otherwise the possibility exists for 'paradox', a fragmentation in the consensus of the natural order of the universe; the magic, being the character attempting to alter this consensus, is notably the character who suffers the ill effects. These ill effects usually take the form of hallucinations and to observers, insanity.

The Forms of Magic

If magic is to satisfy certain pragmatic requirements it must also have formal prerequisites. It is from these 'forms', which is about as close to Plato's definition as one can find, the power is generated and create the inferior copies of magical effects in the mundane world. Like the pragmatics of magic, the forms of magic make their appeearence in the world simultanaeously as both mystical and scientific fact: space, time, the elements, and colour, for example, are

conceptually linked to primal forms from which magical power is embodied. How this magical power is embodied is inevitably tied to the mode of consciousness employed by the magic user.

ICE's Rolemaster delineates these modes of consciousness with exceptional clarity. The basic rules describe three realms of power, Mentalism, Essence, and Channelling, each of which explain the formal source of each realm of power. Mentalism describes a world that is subject-centered, the magic coming from the inner strength of the user. Essence magic assumes an essential energy holding the physical structure of the universe together. Essence magicians alter this flow of energy to sculpt their magic. Finally, Channelling relies on the transfer of magical power from local or planetary deities to their believers.

In Advanced Dungeons & Dragons these basic forms of magic also have procedural and content differences. Cleric spells, the AD&D equivalent of Chanelling are, at early levels, learnt through prayer and meditation, almost like Mentalism, whereas at higher levels they are supplied by servants of the Cleric's deity and eventually by the deity itself. Magic User spells, in contrast, take the form of mystical symbols which implant themselves on in the casters mind. These remain beyond the conscious control of the characte who only knows the words which release the spell. Rather like Rincewind from Terry Pratchett's The Colour of Magic (et al), the AD&D magic user is much a slave to mystic symbols and the AD&D Cleric is to their god(s).

An interesting variation to this format was that from a very underrated and regrettably now out of print game, Swordbearer. In Swordbearer, there were two types of magic, Elemental and Spiritual, with spells being contained in nodes, which were near perfect representations of the magical form in the game world. For example, to find a node to cast an elemental light magic spell, the caster would have to wake early in the morning and search for a single ray of the dawn sun. Spirit magic, by comparison, was grouped around the ancient concept of the humours (phlegmatic, sanguine, choleric and melancholic) which were embodied as the formal spirit of the individual. The result was a feeling that the magical forms were an intrinsic part of the game universe, and not merely yet another skill or piece of equipment that the character picked up on their travels.

Both Steve Jackson's GURPS and the Heros System are attempts to construct spell systems without formal magical requirements and in doing so, they run into pragmatic difficulties. Both are organised into generic colleges, oftenm with internal college prerequistites, placing the magic user in a university which most students would probably balk from. The mystical element of magic, the main reason why players would choose magic using characters to begin with, is lost in an attempt to "min-max" the game system.

Ars Magica, with a strong European medieval slant, successfully uses the historical associations of that period to establish a procedural system of magical forms. Through a combination of techniques and forms, phrased as Latin word combinations, spells are generated. The source of magic however remains abstract, and magical skill is merely an attempt to release powers already in the universe. With some disjunction in the genre, little attention is provided on the effects of changes in word order, which was of importance in medieavl Latin. By the same token, Ars Magica at least makes associative stories with variours creatures in their Bestiary, which seem to have some historical-mythical precedent. A personal favourite of mine is the magic quill from a hedgehog which can write by itself.

In contrast RuneQuest effectively combines magic pragmatics with formal prerequisites by accepting the narrative pragmatic of magic. RuneQuest, as the name implies, embodies the mystical forces of the universe into specific symbols or runes, which vary in context according to the particular spirit, god, or sorcery being invoked. The runes represent direct copies of the various forms of magic, which are primal to the game universe. Interestingly these forms themselves have a certain historical linearity, with extremely powerful characters being able to make their own rune combinations and in some cases, introduce new runes into the game world.

RuneQuest is also notable because it organises its magical types according to historical staghes. Spirit magic is a strongly individual magic with simple foci employed by shamen and their ilk in primitive societies. Divine magic, by contrast, requires shrines, temples and so forth and is most appropriate for traditional societies. Finally, sorcery is an advanced and complex process by which the forces of the invisible god (i.e., the magic essence of the game world) are

used to challenge the spirits and gods. Not surprisingly this requires at least requires competence in literature, a requirement to which many spell systems remain quite ambigious.

As a whole, most roleplaying games, with the possible exceptions of Swordbearer and Ars Magica, do not take into account the historical associations of forms in the magic system, relying instead on an associative structure (Rolemaster, AD&D), or linearity (RuneQuest). Whilst sometimes these associative forms have a high aesthetic value in their own right (e.g., the use of the cross as the symbol for the Humakti Death cult in RuneQuest), the use of single value symbols is highly suspect as language itself is contextually specific. Whilst cross-cultural association of magical symbols may not then be possible, it is possible to construct the formal processes of power based on the three world theory (objective, social and subjective) universe. The table below may help elucidate these conditions:

World	Source	Content	Primitive	Traditional	Modern
Objective	Essence	Elements	Shaman	Wizard	Scientist
Social	Chanelling	Actions	Shaman	Priest	Sociologist
Subjective	Mentalism	Thoughts	Shaman	Mystic	Artist

Notes on the social types described above: A primitive society is defined as one without any systematic, state-enforced set ouf institutions, laws, or professional classes. The "shaman" profession is a generic term with access to all sources of magic. Thus, the term "primitive" is double-edged. It is undoubtably true that such cultures are underdeveloped in terms of technological and institutional scale. It is also true that they are "primal" insofar as their linguistic (and therefore magical) system havs not undergone a process of rationalisation or fragmentation. Contrary to the RuneQuest perspective, Shamanic magic should be the most powerful, but also the most time consuming and risky. Powerful because it is appliciable across all three "worlds", time-consuming because it relies entirely on narrative with instrumental and technical being on a minimal scale, and risky because of potentional confusion between world domains.

A traditional society develops from a primitive with the introduction of the state, laws and professions. The ofrm that a traditional society takes is dependent on the structural orientation of the society which combines two worlds into a siongle bloc and rationalises these from the other world. Thus, any traditional society will have two of the three professions listed, but loses the third. Magic in traditional societies is literature based. The magic of traditional societies is less risky, less powerful, but much quicker and makes greater use of foci.

The characteristic feature of modernity is the rationlisation into a three world model, and the loss of magic as a formal activity related to the professional domains. Following the similar domains, modern magic, when and where it exists, is very weak, risk free and almost entirely foci depoendent. Furthermore, and most importantly, is the loss of magic-related professions that are institutionally anchored; the United Nations does not employ Wizards. In reviewing Weber's studies on the rise of Western modernity, Jurgen Habermas in The Theory of Communicative Action Volume I notes that modernity itself is only possible with "... the break of the ascetic search for salvation with the profane orders of this world and the separation of contemplative devotion from those same orders." (p211)

This process represents a logical inversion of Clarke's Law, which states that a sufficiently advanced techology is indistinguishable from magic. Televisions replace the need for crystal balls, the computer becomes an alter by which communication with the spirit plane of the Internet is possible. The telephone is easily transformed into a "telling-bone", and Catweasel always made reference to "electrickery". Likewise we may elaborate Clarke's Law to social systems and aesthetics. A sufficiently evolved social system is indistinguishable from a god (the nation, the corporation), whereas a sufficiently advanced artistic work becomes indistinguishable from individual subjectivity (consider those ideas about Virtual Reality, espousing it as a new 'second universe'). The law becomes inverted because the foci of technology, systems and art, replace the narrative basis of magic. Ultimately an increase in technology, systems and art products lessens the qunatity and power of magic in the world. To en extent, West End Game's Torg used this perspective in their "splintered earth" model, where different regions of the planet were asssigned difference axioms of influence.

The Context of Magic

The final consideration of magic refers to the specific contextual examples. Most roleplaying games pay very little attention to the importance of such contexts. ICE's butchering of the (mostly!) subtle magic employed in Middle Earth by superimposing the rather flashy spells of Rolemaster into the game is an example of a system not poaying attention to the context. On the other end of the scale, context is so important to Chaosium's Call of Cthulhu that the nihilist perspective of H.P. Lovecraft is reproduced perfectly, complete with investigations into "realistic" magic texts, and an inevitable madness resulting from dealing with issues that the tiny neurons of the human brain were simply not designed to cope with. Notable the RuneQuest packages from Mythic Earth also take into due consideration of the various magical contexts.

Nevertheless, few games attempt to generate a cross cultural system of magical content from which particular contexts of magic may be applied. The investigations of Max Weber into cultural variations of metaphysical values could be applied to elucidate magical contexts. For example, Weber noted that the Ancient Greek metaphysical tradition emphasized affirmation of the universe through passive contemplation. As such the magical content of Ancient Greece aslso emphasizes these features. The lesson of the Odyssey was that despite some pretty devastating opposition, Homer's frontal lobe was even more powerful; and Pythagoras was a prophet of some repute through the same metaphysical tradition. Looking a little further to the east, the Indian emphasis on mastrer of the self through escapism from the natural world leads to exceptional body control skills as performed by various fakirs and sadhu. The following table (Theory of Communicative Action, Vol I, p211) highlights the structural genres that traditional societies emphasized, therefore demonstratingan understanding of their structure of magic.

World Evaluation/Method of Salvation	Active (Ascetic)	Passive (Mystic)
Rejection	Mastery (Judiasm, Christianity)	Flight (Hindu)
Affirmation	Adjustment (Confucianism)	Contemplation (Ancient Greek)

The reification of physical objective into subjective actors is an important magical context which roleplaying systems tend to perform quite admirably. This is not surprising given that similar personality traits seem to be assigned to similar physical objects. A sentient mountain is invariably a psychological metaphor for stability and greatness, whilst a semi-active volcano is invariably noted for its temper. Nevertheless, somethingas grandiose as a mountain isn't needed for reificiation. Properties assigned to metals and herbs have not only provided the foundations for modern chemistry and biochemistry, but also have narrative associations capable of evoking an emotional response, although like all narrative magic, the context is socially specific. A rose, for example, is typically perceived as a symbol of love. Yet it also represents silence allegedly from a meeting between the Persian King Xerxes and a Greek next to a rose bower at a temple of Minerva, hence the phrase "sub-rosa" for meetings held in confidence. The Saxons and the Romans associated the rose with death, whereasd inspired by the modern passion of the enlightenment, the rose is the symbol of the French Socialist Party.

Against Charlatans

Despite the proceeding text, one recommends a rigorous agnosticism concerning magic. Other the past several years my own approach towards the notion of magic has altered from a hard-line atheist opposition to a doubly hard-line agnosticism. Despite all historical evidence both for and against the existence of magic, it has become evidently clear that the very topic is something that cannot be known. At best, there is substantial cross-cultural evidence of the practise of drama and rituals, of the use of tailsmans and amulets, and of consultation with the stars and the spirits of the earth. At the same time, ther is no evidence of a magical effect being associated with a magical ritual in a repeatable and causal manner.

Aleister Crowley remarked in Magick in Theory and Practice that "the question of magick is the question of discovering and employing hitherto unknown forces in Nature". This sounds more like a scientific method than a magic

one. It is not a matter that the forces of nature are unknown, rather they are unknowable. The magical emphasis on attempting to make correlations where there should be none is perhaps a little leftfield of standard scientific practise, but certainly cannot be denied on that basis alone. Neverthlesss there is sufficient reason to doubt. I see no evidence to accept the suggestions of mechanical psychology which attempts to subordinate individual consciousness to biochemical goal points. These "wizards" seem to be interested in little else but mind control. Nor do I accept the view of any religion which attempts to define a moral order upon the universe as such a stance removes any notion of social responsibility in practical behaviour. Finally, I cannot comply with a single standard of aesthetics which denies the complexity of the world and limits future aesthetic development under a single dimension.

Ultimately my personal position remains strongly modernist. In a world beset by the problem of the enlightenment, the recognition that there is no pre-ordained meaning to the world leaves the self in the realm of practical action. Perhaps it is through roleplaying games that the sense of wonder associated with previous times can be recaptured. However, in this world, and in these times, a retreat from modernity is not a viable tactic. The point becomes not to seek magical knowledge, but to understand its history, and to live a life worthy of being described as magical.

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