

# PLAYFUL TAROT:

Adaptations of Tarot In, Through, and Across Games

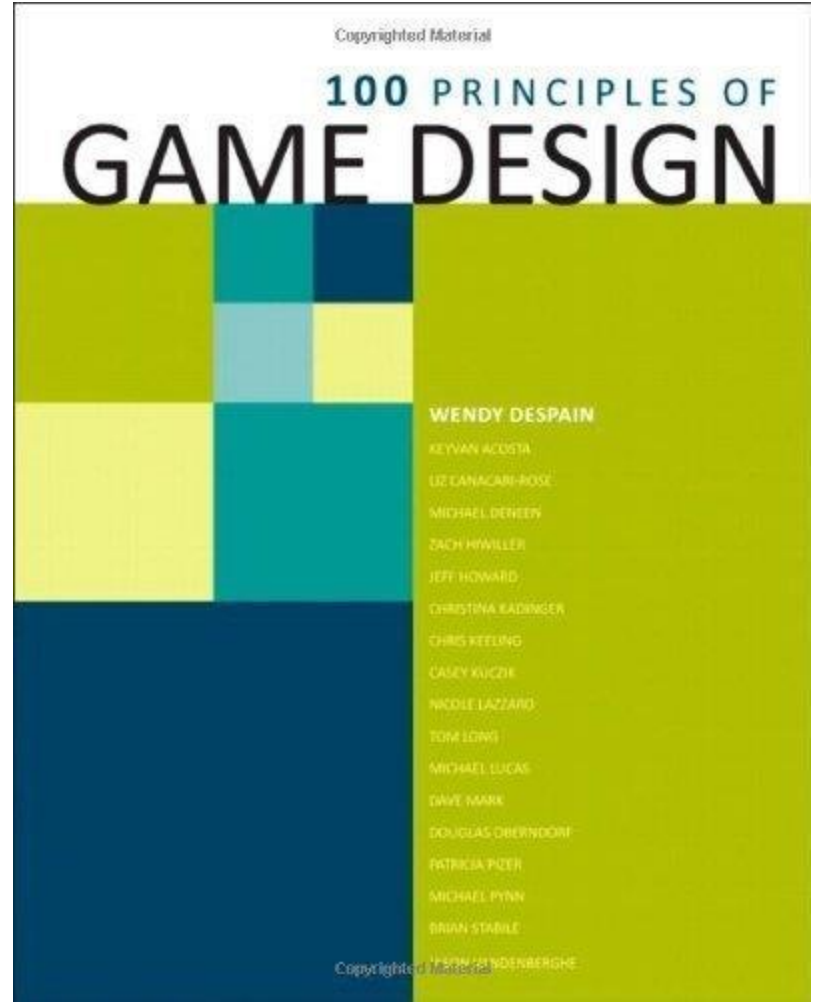
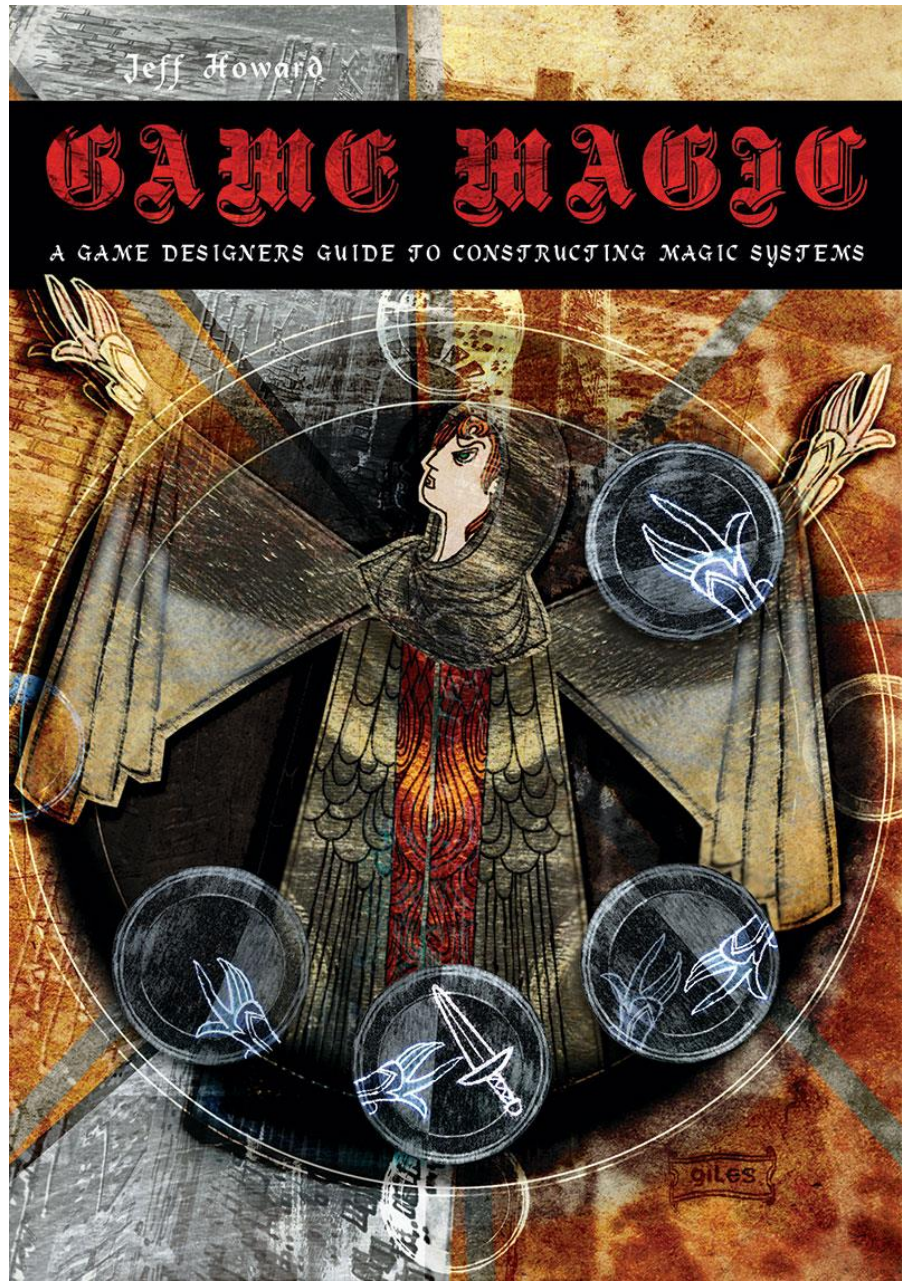
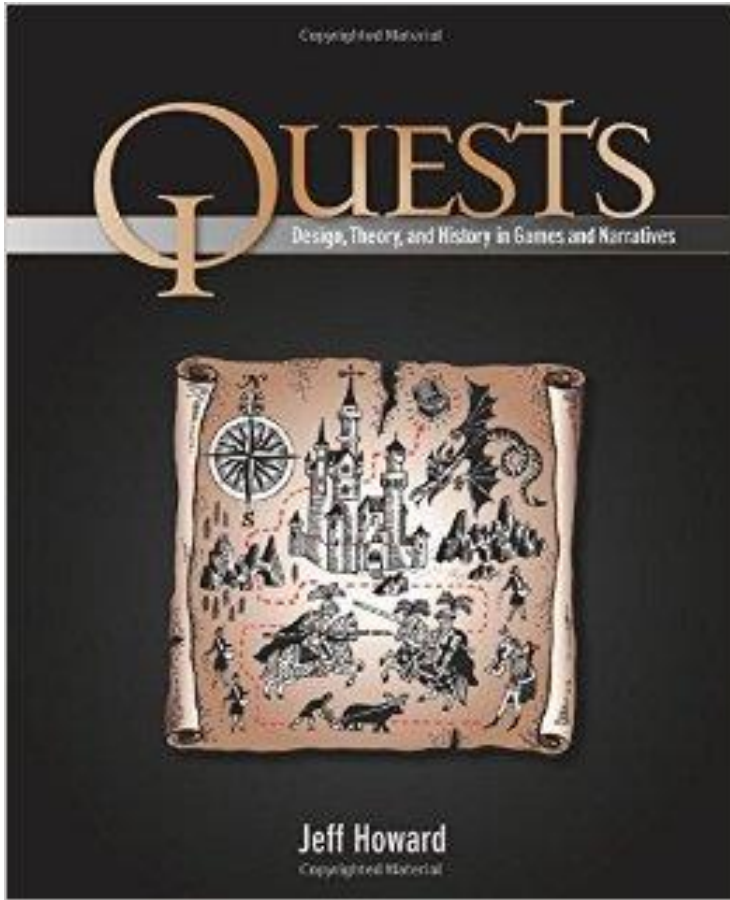
Dr. Jeff Howard, Dr. Rory Summerley,  
Dr. Michael Scott, Tim Philips, Alex Mitchell

DR. JEFF HOWARD

-  
Ludomancer, Technomage,  
Occult Game Designer. Dr.  
Jeff Howard is **Senior  
Lecturer in Games at  
Falmouth University** in  
Cornwall, where he  
specializes in **occult, metal,  
and Gothic themes and  
mechanics.**



[jeff.howard@falmouth.ac.uk](mailto:jeff.howard@falmouth.ac.uk)

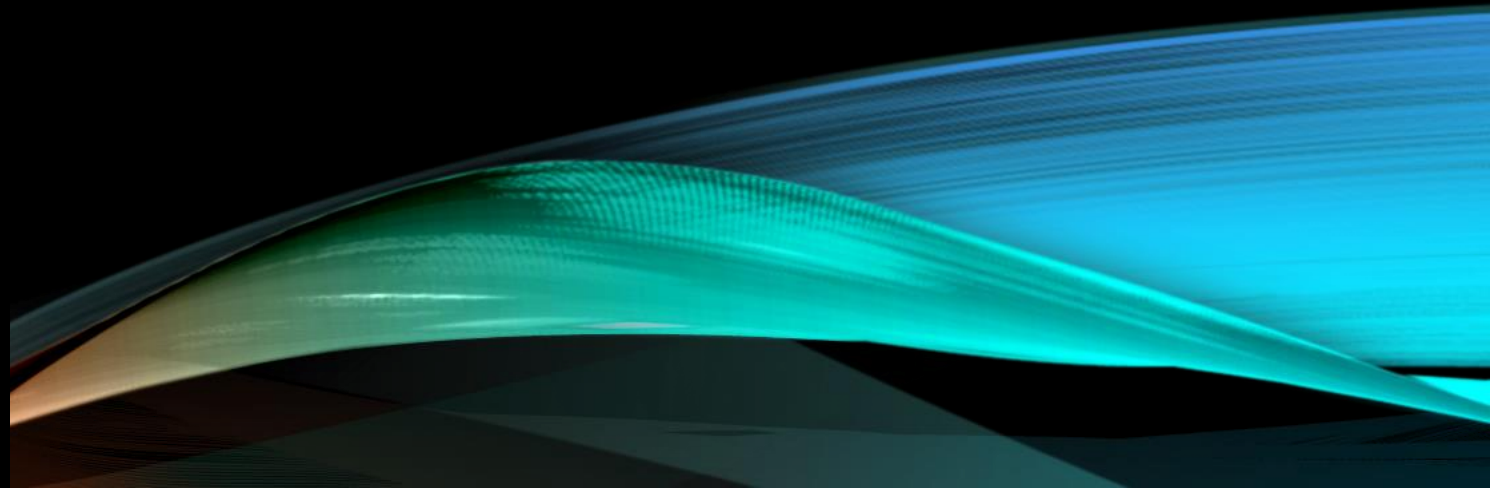




DEADHAUS  
SONATA

CORE TEAM  
MEMBER –  
APOCALYPSE  
STUDIOS

TAROT SKILL SYSTEM  
OVERVIEW



# CO-AUTHORS: GAMES ACADEMY AT FALMOUTH UNIVERSITY



- I. Introduction
- II. Historical Context
  - A) Early modern trick-taking games with tarot
  - B) The 18<sup>th</sup>-century divinatory shift, but still using game-like language
- III. Theoretical context
  - A) Caillois: Agon versus Ilinix
  - B) Lionel Snell: the games layer
  - The work of the sword, the work of the cup
- IV. Contemporary context
  - Three case studies, three strategies for ludic tarot
- V. Conclusions



I. INTRODUCTION  
TO PLAYFUL  
TAROT





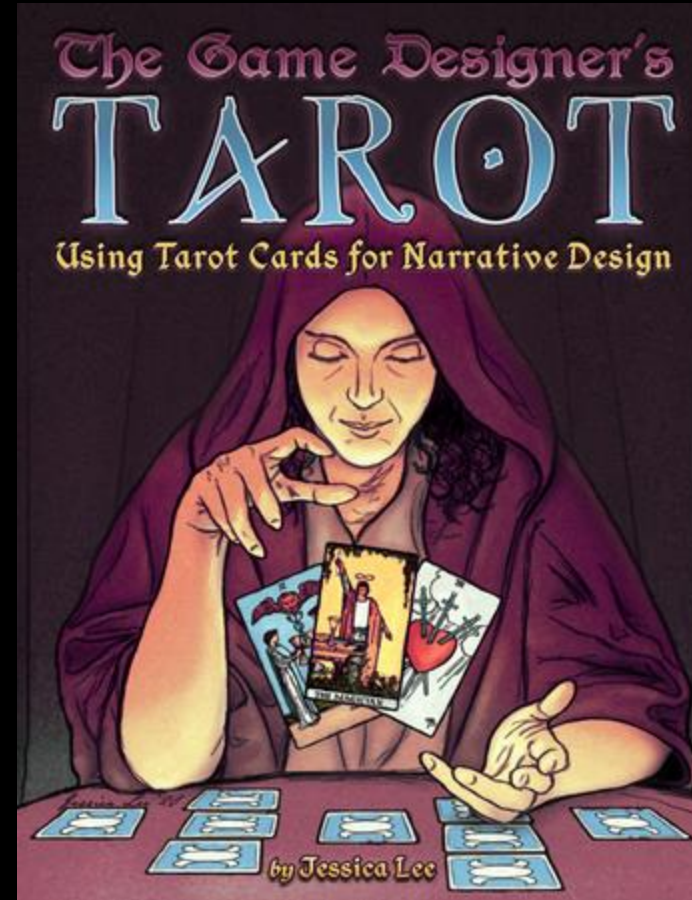
## Why all the best game developers play Tarot

Card mode



Feature by Edwin Evans-Thirlwell, Contributor

Published on Jan. 14, 2022





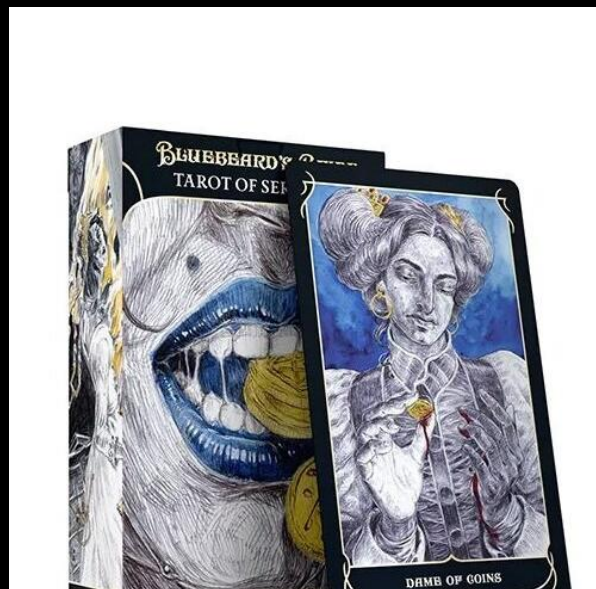
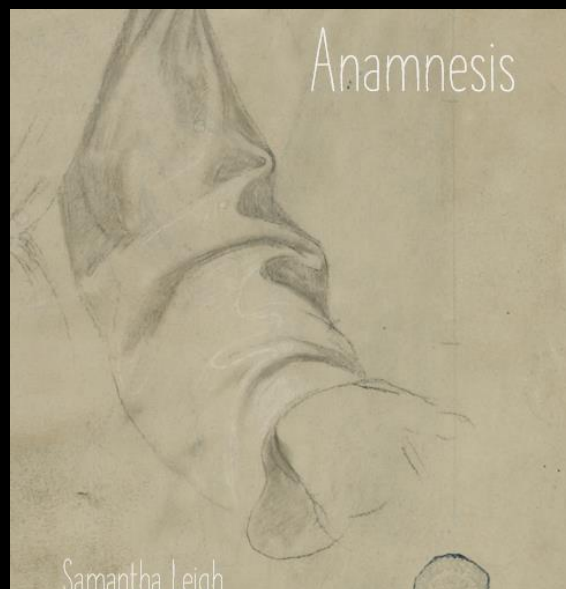
# TABOO


THE SIXTH SENSE™




TABOO ©+TM 1988 RARE LTD





**P**   
**PRINCESS**

WITH A

**C**   
**CURSED**  
**S**  
**SWORD**

A role-playing game  
for one player  
with a tarot deck  
and a journal.

by Anna Anthropy

# ADAPTATIONS OF TAROT IN GAMES CAN FUNCTION AS OCCULT PRACTICES

Adaptations of tarot in games can function as occult practice because tarot was always fundamentally ludic, i.e. in its origins and at its heart a game.



II. HISTORICAL  
CONTEXT:  
DECONSTRUCTING  
THE  
LUDIC/DIVINATORY  
DIVIDE

# THE COMMON HISTORICAL THROUGHLINE

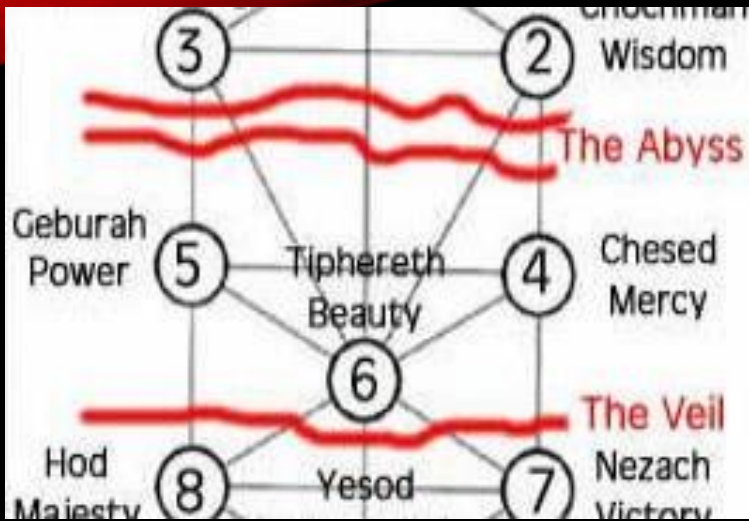
- Tarot cards begin as playing cards for various trick-taking games, and later become divinatory tools based on historical misinterpretation

## THE GAME OF TAROT

Michael Dummett



# LUDIC-DIVINATORY FAULTLINE



- “The gap between the occultist and the serious historian is unbridgeable, because occultist theories rest upon a whole spurious pseudo-history of the Tarot pack. To give its true history is, necessarily, to puncture those theories, any attempt to avoid puncturing them obliges one, at best, to fudge the facts.”  
Michael Dummett

# THE DIVINATORY/LUDIC DIVIDE

- The historical moment (more like an era, or a series of moments)
- At which tarot becomes understood as a divinatory tool
- This is 18<sup>th</sup> century
- So, we can speak of a deck as being before the Divinatory divide or after it
- Marseilles is created around the time of this shift, and used by those who are adapting it for divinatory purposes
- Visconti-Sforza (15<sup>th</sup> century) is created prior to the divinatory shift (but can, of course, still be used in divination)





## THIS DIVIDE/FAULTLINE IS REAL BUT ALSO ARBITRARY AND SUSCEPTIBLE TO DECONSTRUCTION

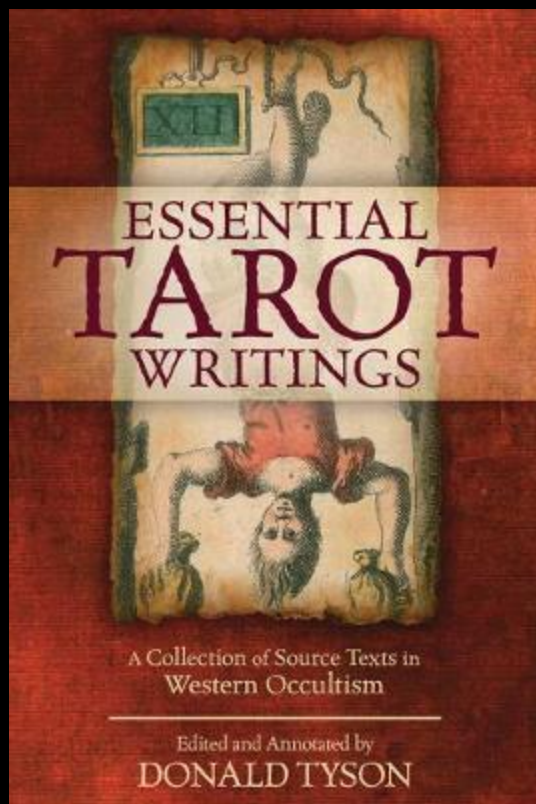
- the original 18<sup>th</sup> century French work on tarot as divination acknowledges the dual status of tarot as game and divinatory tool
- deeply interconnected to the point of being, at times, nearly inextricable



DE GÉBELIN 1781

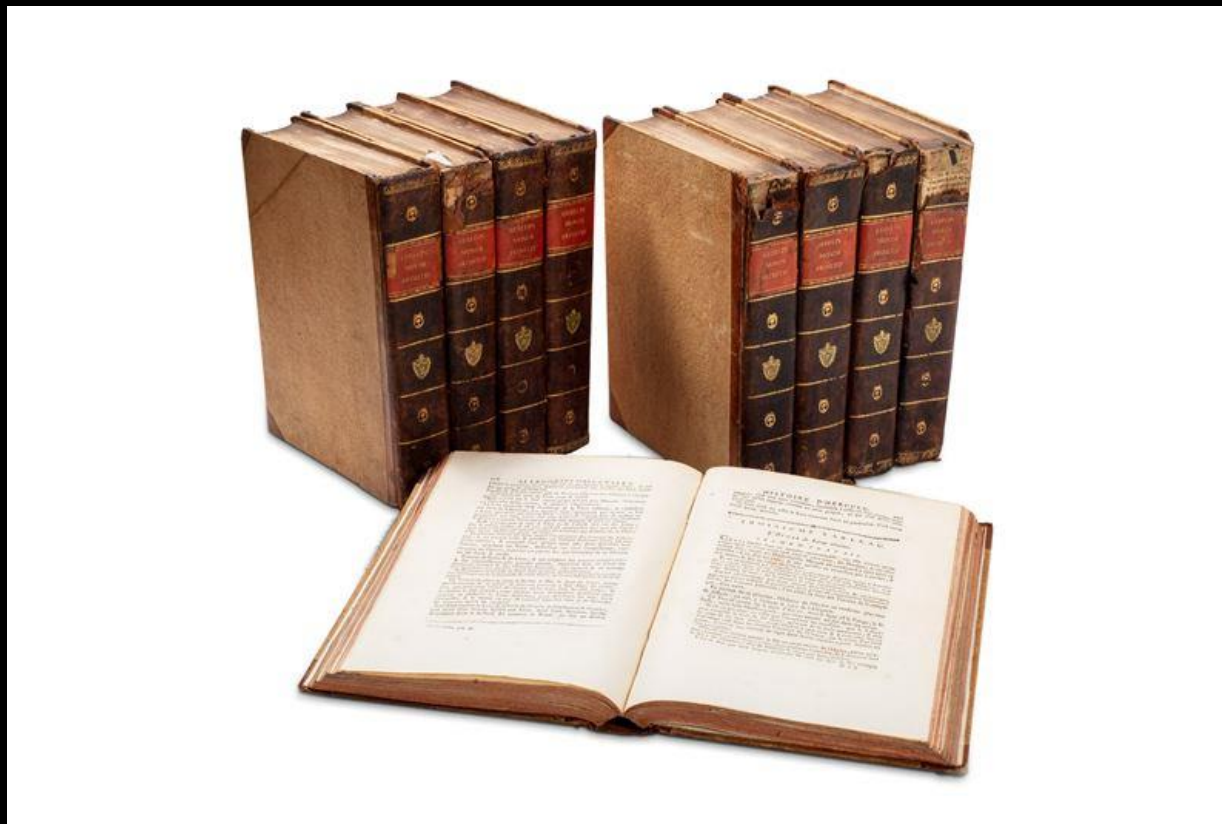
“THE GAME OF TAROTS”

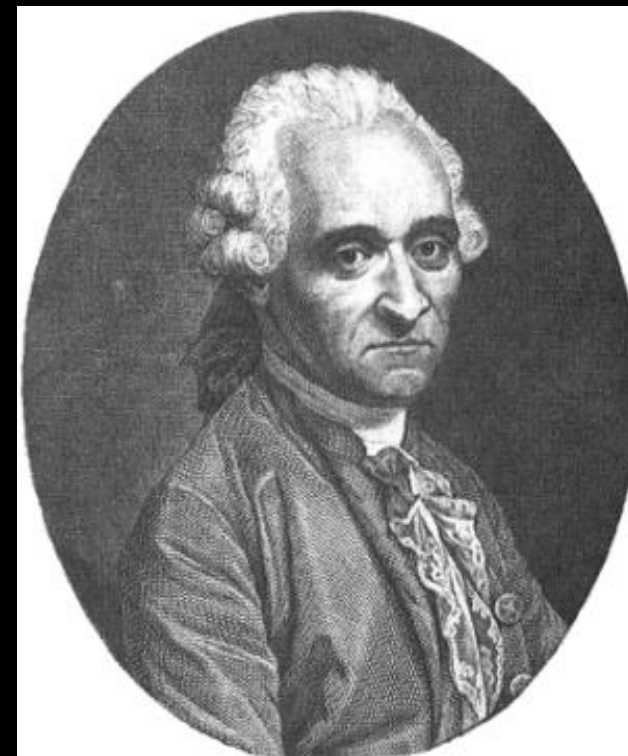
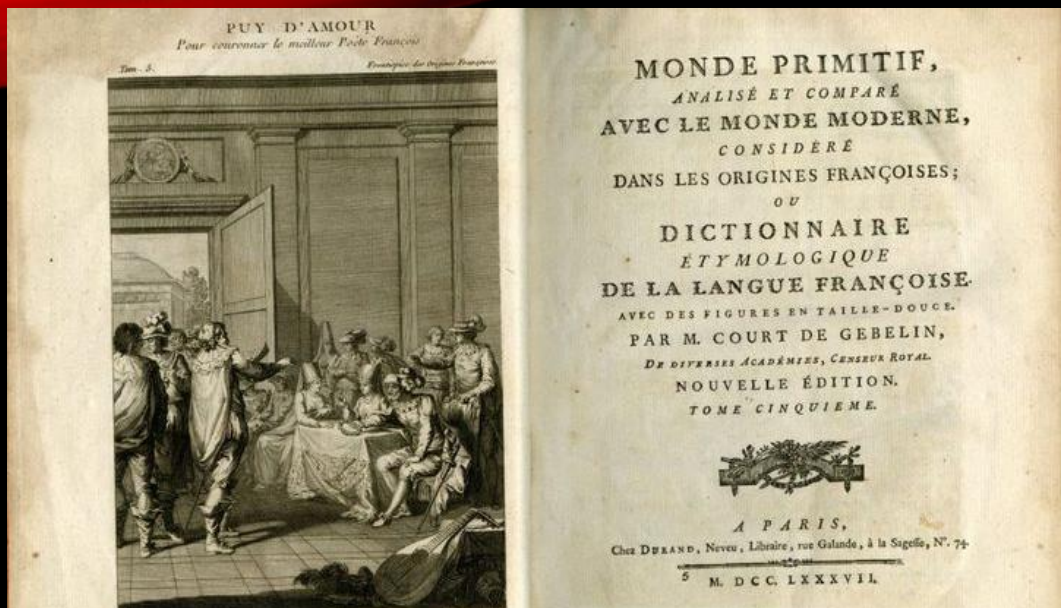
# A PROJECT OF LUDIC ARCHEOLOGY & ALLEGORICAL RECOVERY



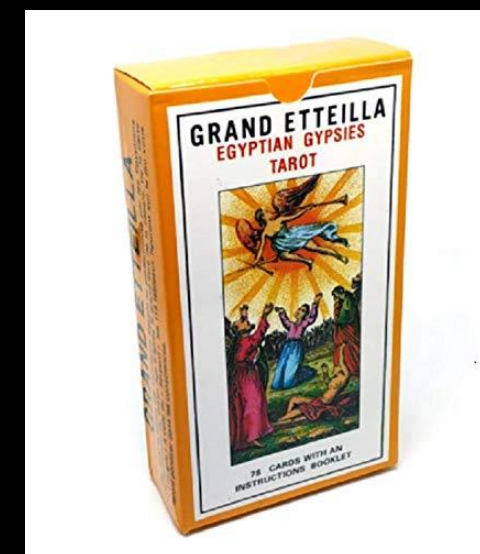
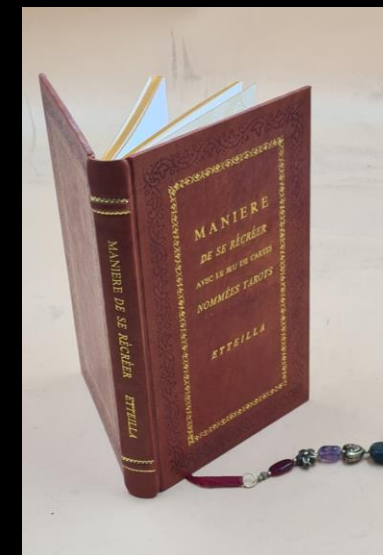
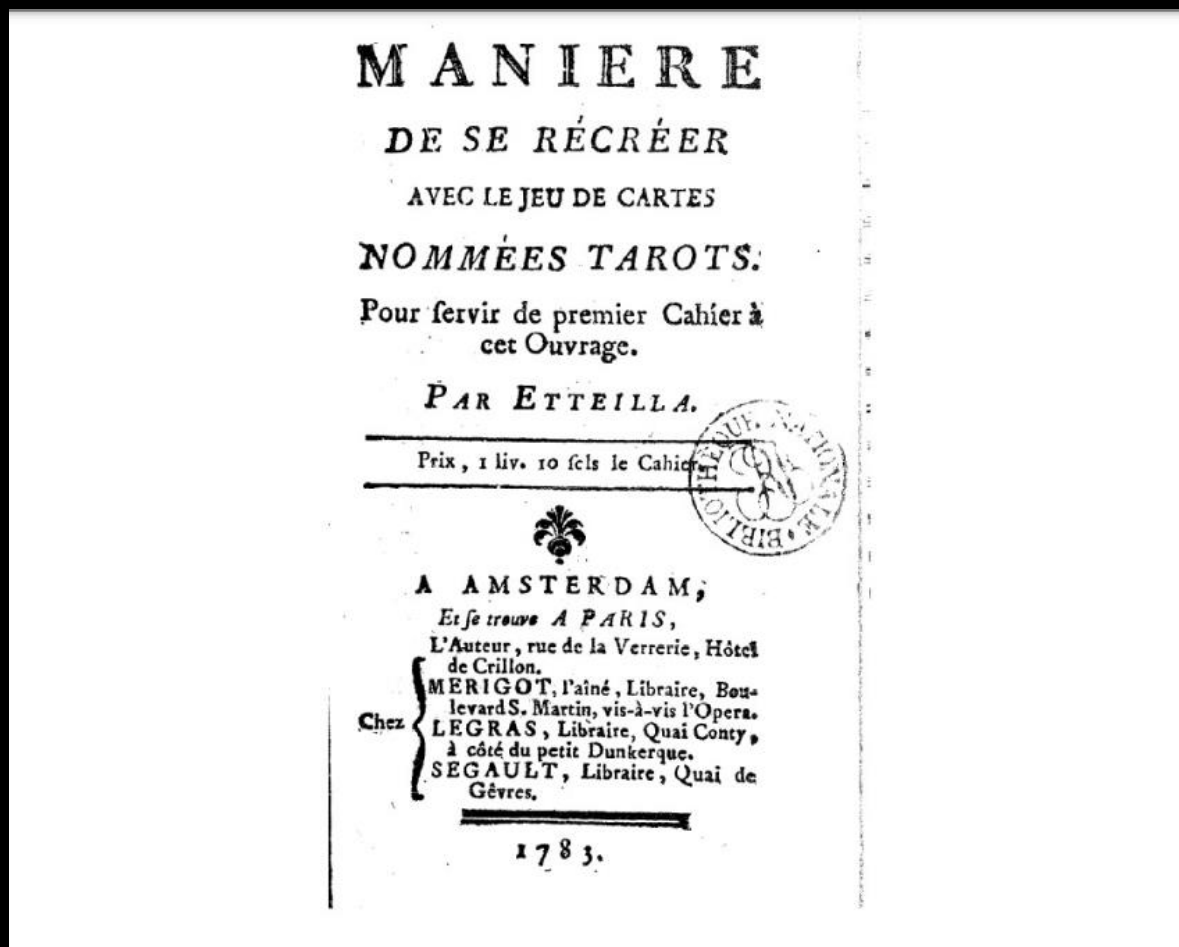
# LE COMTE DE MELLET (1781)

“AN INVESTIGATION INTO THE TAROTS AND INTO DIVINATION BY MEANS OF  
TAROT CARDS.”



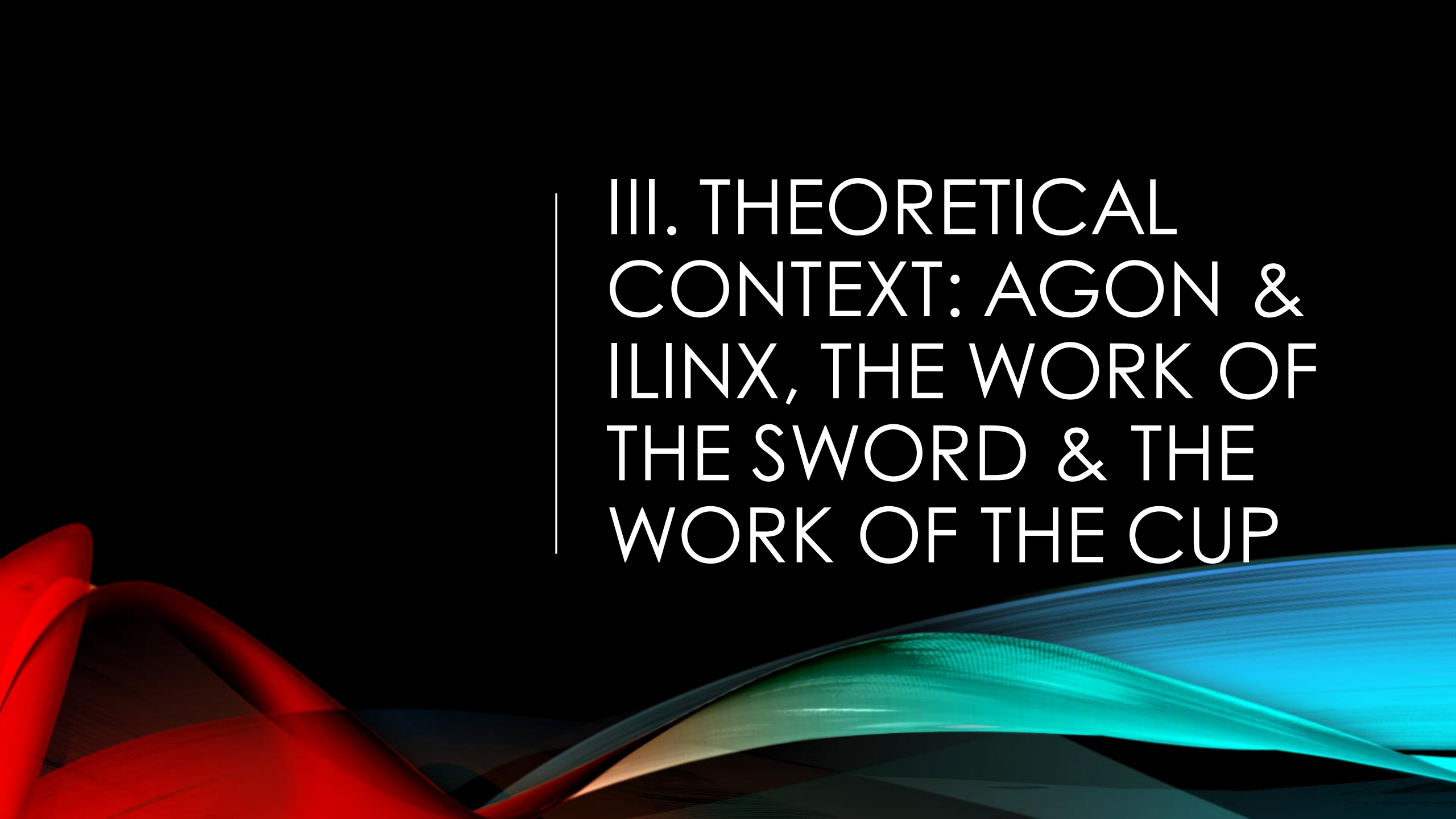


# ETTEILLA (JEAN BAPTISTE ALIETTE) 1783



# ETTEILLA ADDS DIVINATORY HEADINGS AND ALSO CALLS A SPREAD "LE GRAND JEU"

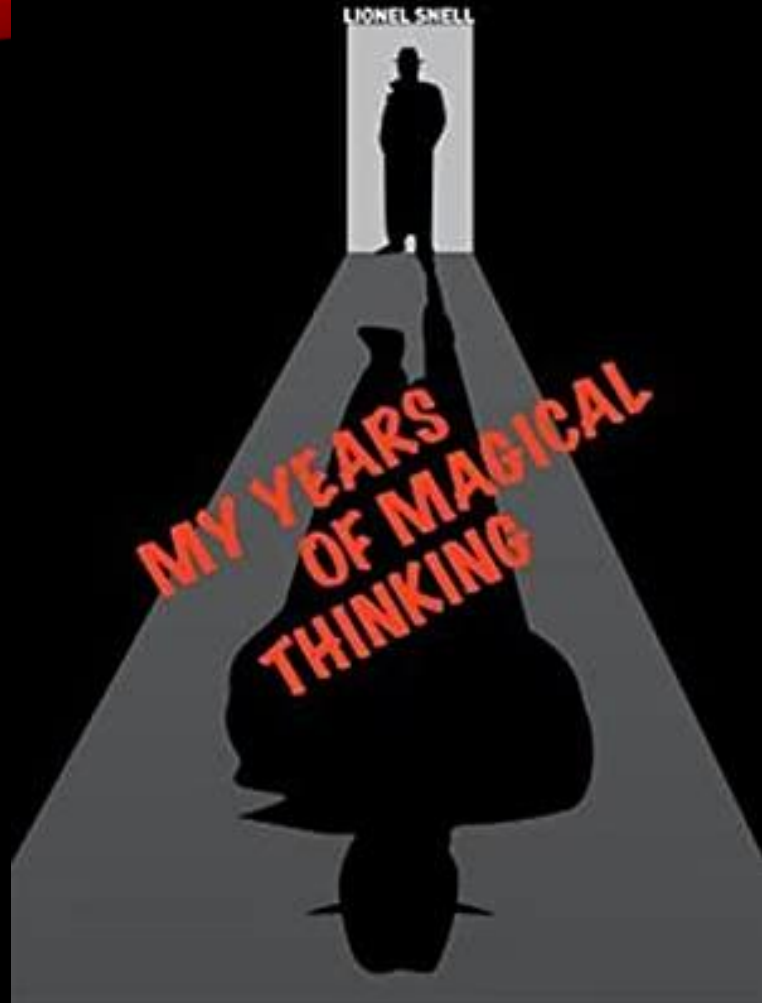
.....	33,32,31,30,29,28,27,26,25,24,23	
present {	.....}	present
.....	66,65,64,63,62,61,60,59,58,57,56	
22.....	55.....	44.....11
21.....	54.....	43.....10
20.....	53.....	42.....9
19.....	52.....S.....	41.....8
18.....	51.....	40.....7
17.....	50.....	39.....6
16.....	49.....	38.....5
15.....	48.....	37.....4
14.....	47.....	36.....3
13.....	46.....	35.....2
12.....	45.....	34.....1
.....	future	
past.....		past

The background features abstract, flowing shapes in red and blue, set against a dark background. The red shapes are on the left, and the blue shapes are on the right, both appearing to flow and curve. The text is centered in the upper right quadrant.

III. THEORETICAL  
CONTEXT: AGON &  
ILINX, THE WORK OF  
THE SWORD & THE  
WORK OF THE CUP



# DIVINATORY PRACTICE IS STILL EXISTS IN THE GAMES LAYER



- It still abides by rules
- It still has goals
- Lionell Snell, in *My Years of Magical Thinking*, argues that tarot is one of many “working myths” or systems of symbols through which a magician can spontaneously understand patterns in the universe and thereby influence them (159)
- Moreover, Snell argues that magical thinking operates in “the games layer,” a layer of reality that exists above any Platonizing model and therefore allows the magician to move between such models in order to survive and thrive

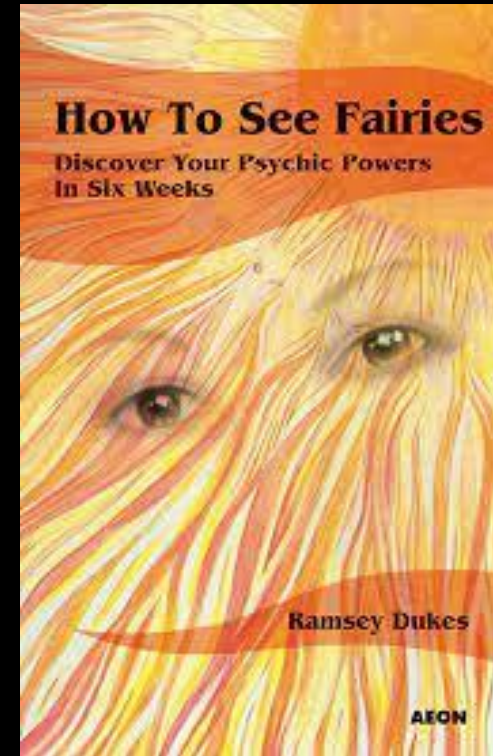
# SNELL ON GAMES

- “Another example would be the use of symbols for divination. A traditional set of symbols such as the tarot pack, I Ching or even tea leaf patterns would first be chosen, then fortified by meditation and study, then dealt at random as one might for a simple gambling game, and then ‘read’ for meaning suggested by their symbols” (64).
- “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).

## THE MAGIC CUP AND THE MAGIC DAGGER

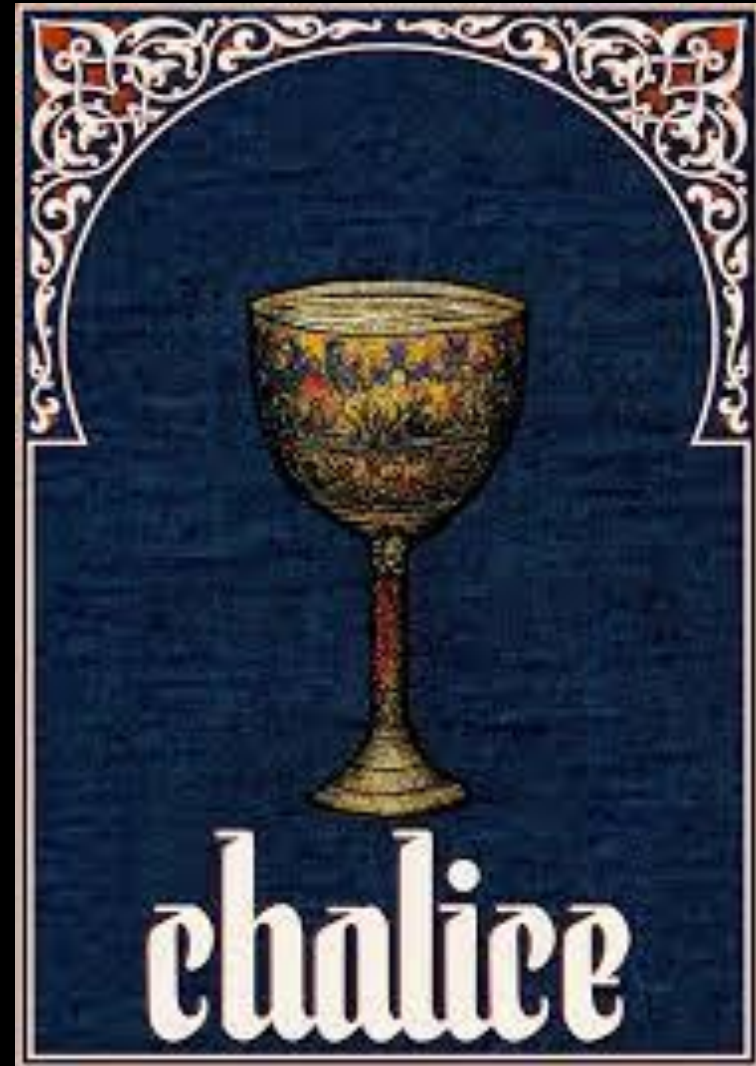
So we need to encourage a different mindset, one that will allow things to develop without slamming on the brakes. To illustrate this mindset I will use an analogy based on a Cup and a Dagger—two so-called “magical weapons”.

The open, receptive attitude that seems to foster clairvoyance is analogous to the Cup, and it is very different from the Dagger of analysis. In the following exercises you will be encouraged to gather sensory data, to explore with all your senses, and I will encourage you to imagine yourself as a Cup, filling up



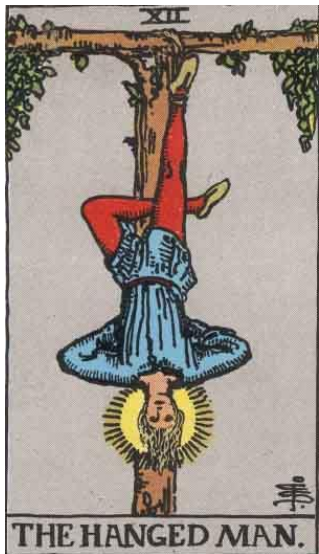
# LIONELL SNELL ON THE WORK OF THE CUP AND THE WORK OF THE DAGGER

What you want to discourage at this stage is the tendency in a scientific culture to behave like a Dagger that cuts things open to examine them and analyse into separate parts. For if our Dagger side is over-active, then all impressions get shredded before they can collect.



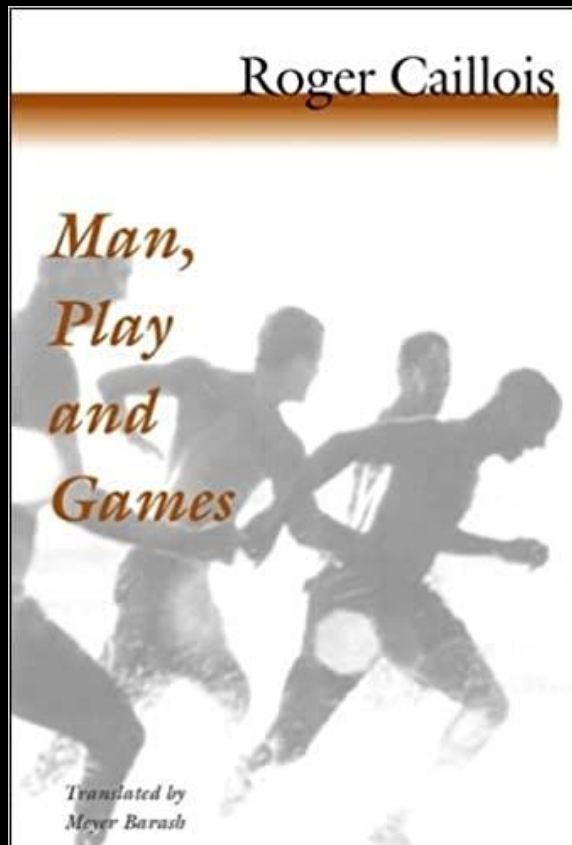
# SNELL = THE WORK OF THE CUP AND THE DAGGER ARE COMPLEMENTARY

We are not abandoning the Dagger, simply telling it to wait its turn. First we need to gather impressions in the Cup, and only when we have got some results should we then use the Dagger to see if they were worth collecting.



TAROT IS AGON &  
TAROT IS ILINX

# THEORETICAL CONTEXT: PLAYFUL TAROT & CAILLOIS' TYPES OF PLAY



Roger Caillois

*Man,  
Play  
and  
Games*

The background of the slide features a circular inset containing a grayscale photograph of several soccer players in motion on a field. The players are shown in various dynamic poses, such as running and kicking, which complements the title 'Man, Play and Games'.

*Translated by  
Meyer Barash*

Caillois' four types of games:

- 1) Agon (Conflict)
- 2) Alea (Chance)
- 3) Mimesis (Imitation or Make-Believe)
- 4) **Ilinx (Vertigo)**



# A HISTORY OF GAMES PLAYED WITH THE TAROT PACK

THE GAME OF TRIUMPHS

VOLUME TWO

BY MICHAEL DUMMETT AND JOHN McLEOD



- Tarrochi (multiple variants)
- Minchiate

# TRICK-TAKING GAMES BASED ON TRUMPS (TRIONFI)



# WHEN TAROT IS USED AS A GAMBLING GAME, THE GAME IS "AGON"



# TAROCCHI IS ORIGINALLY USED IN TRICK-TAKING GAMES

- Based on trumping the opponent
- i.e. having the highest hand
- It is therefore a game of conflict, triumph, domination: what Roger Caillois in *Man, Play, and Games* would call “agon” (i.e. a type of play based on conflict)

# TAROT TRUMP = TRIONFI = MILITARY PARADE CELEBRATING TRIUMPH



# WHEN TAROT IS USED IN DIVINATION, IT IS \*STILL\* A GAME, BUT NOW IT IS “ILINX”



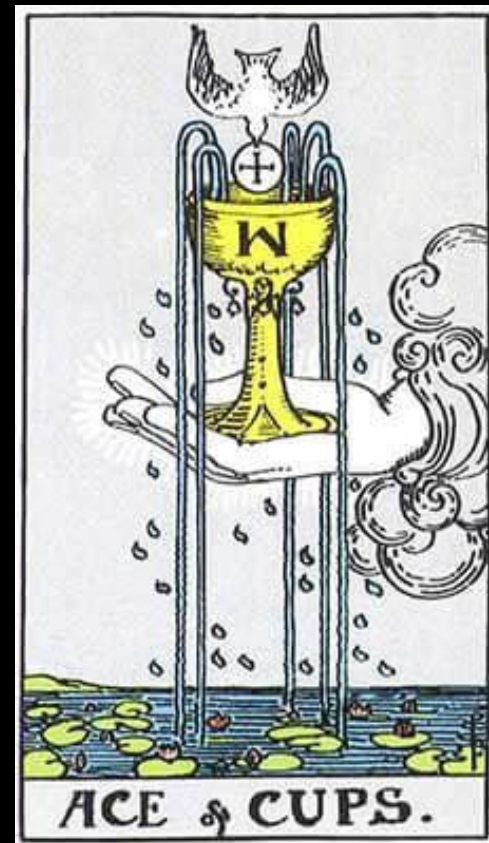
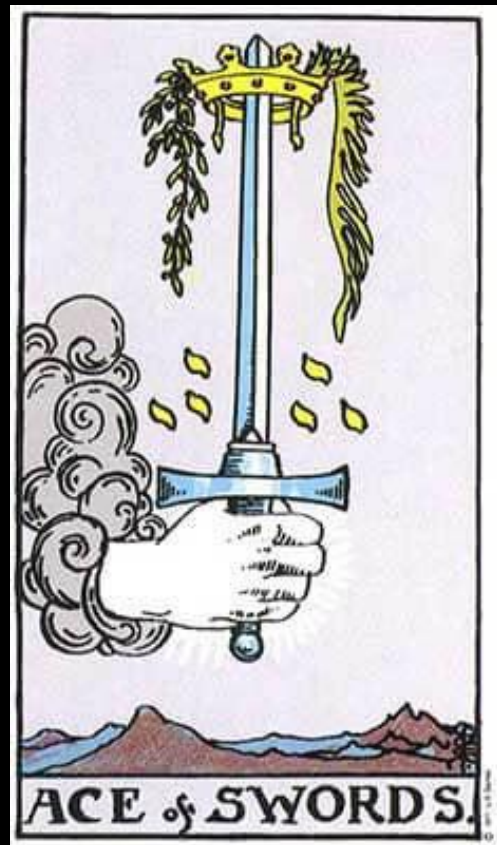
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ILINX = VERTIGO GAME (LITERALLY  
WHIRLPOOL)



THE WORK OF THE SWORD = AGON,  
THE WORK OF THE CUP = ILINX

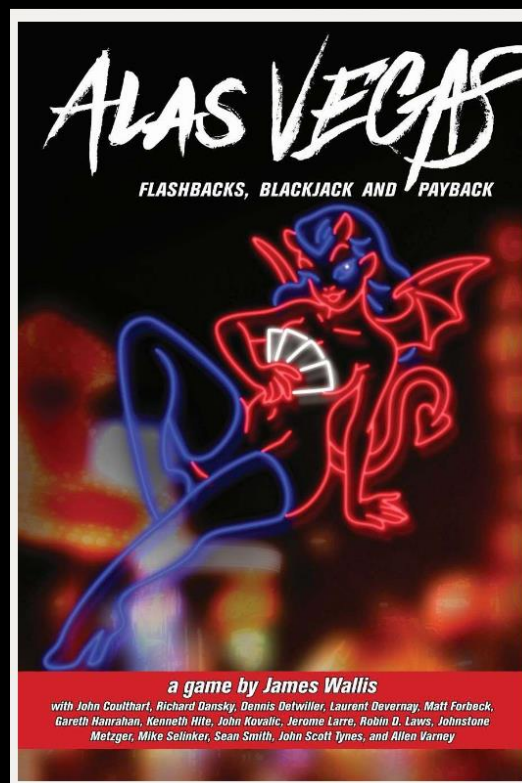




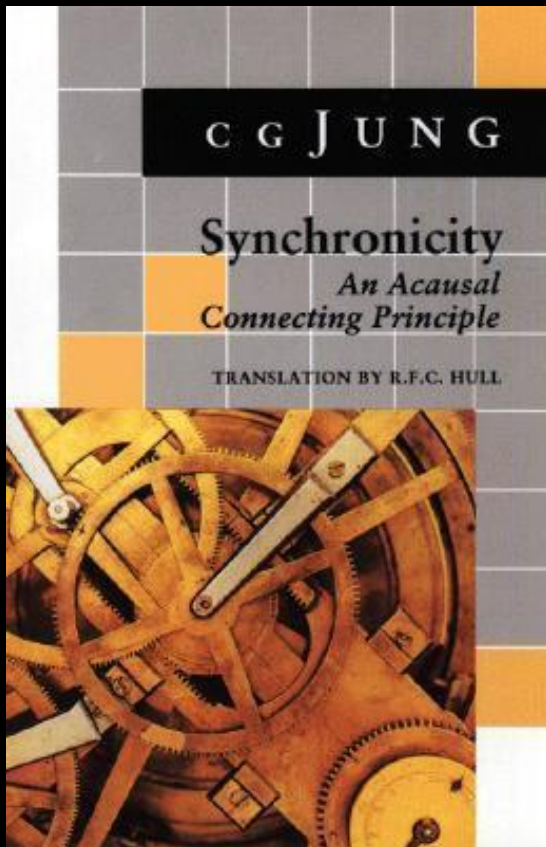


IV. THREE CASE  
STUDIES

# PLAYFUL TAROT: THREE CASE STUDIES



# SYNCHRONICITY



## The Synchronicity Principle

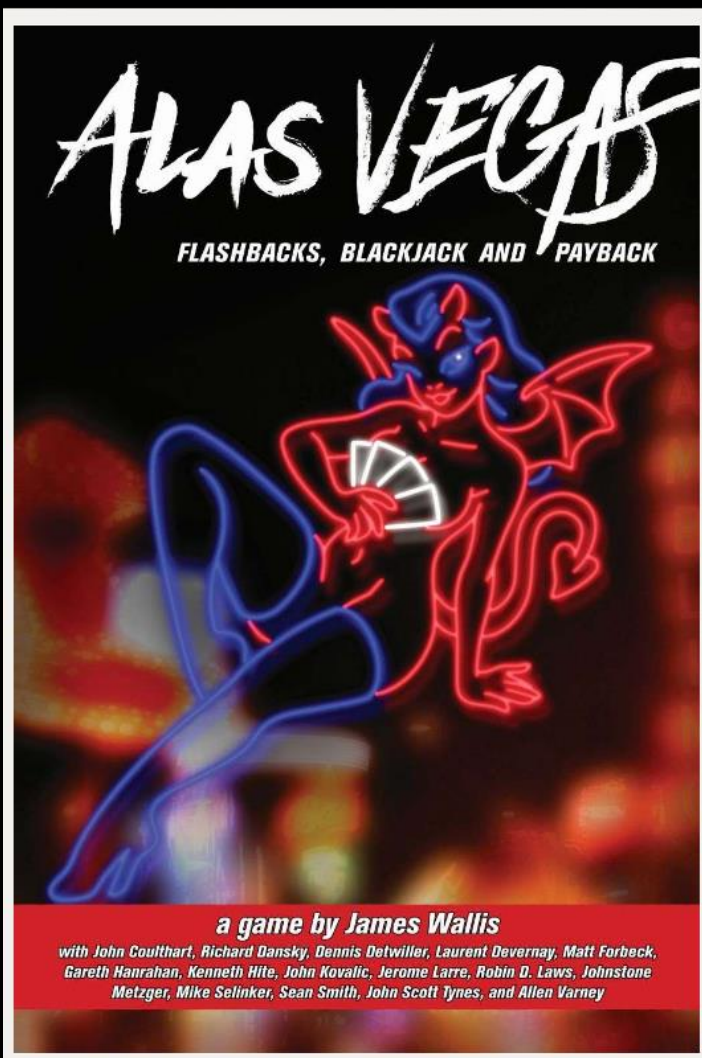


Synchronicity is an **acausal** principle and can be defined by a **meaningful coincidence** which appears between a mental state and an event occurring in the external world.

(Carl G. Jung, 1951)

# CASE STUDY 1: ALAS, VEGAS





# ALAS VEGAS

FLASHBACKS, BLACKJACK AND PAYBACK



**a game by James Wallis**  
with John Coulthart, Richard Dansky, Dennis Detwiller, Laurent Devernay, Matt Forbeck,  
Gareth Hanrahan, Kenneth Hite, John Kovalic, Jerome Larre, Robin D. Laws, Johnstone  
Metzger, Mike Selinker, Sean Smith, John Scott Tynes, and Allen Varney

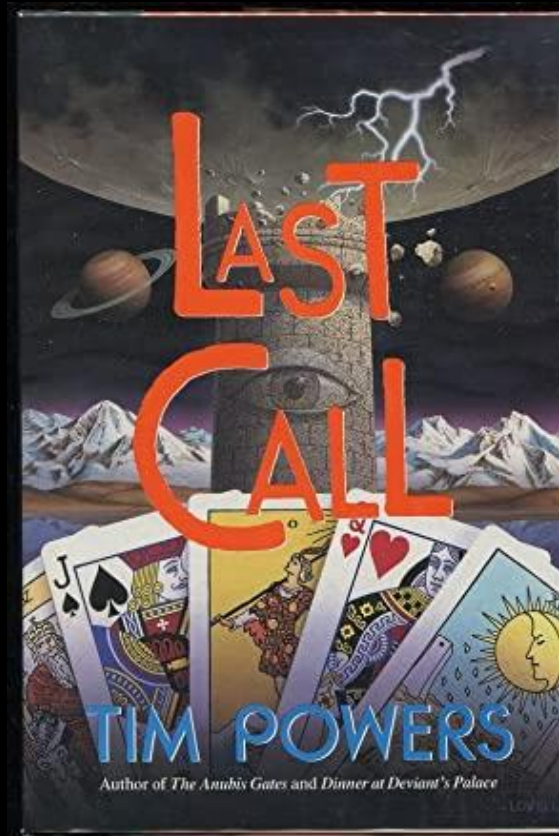


# COMBAT AS BLACKJACK WITH TAROT

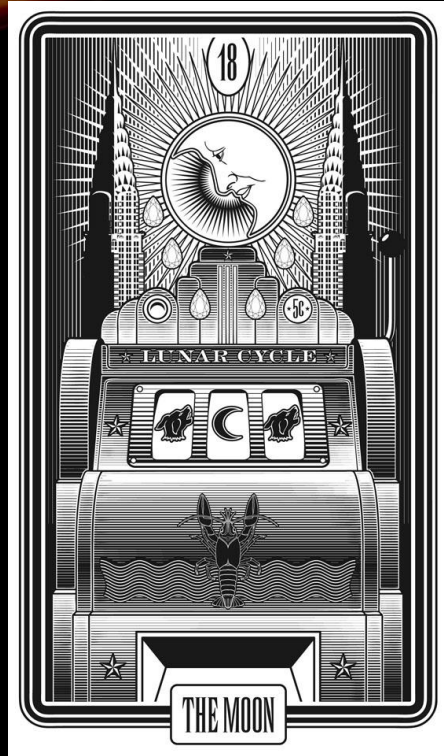
# DUNGEON MASTER AS DEALER (MAGICAL FORCE AND CARDSHARP)



# THE MAGICIAN IS BOTH CARDSHARP AND SEER





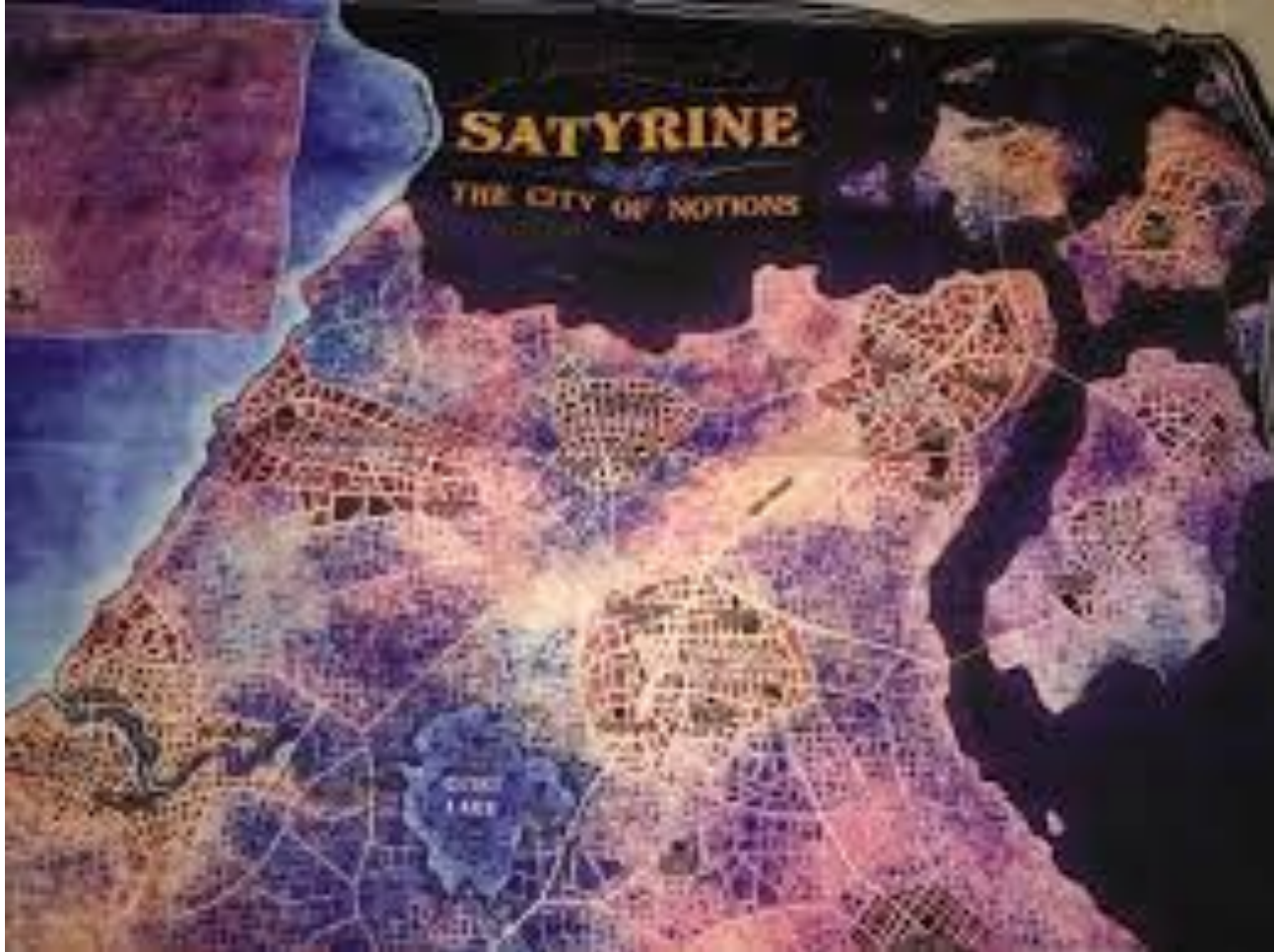


# CASE STUDY 2: INVISIBLE SUN



# SOOTH DECK





# SOOTH DECK CORRESPONDENCES

- Secrets, Visions, Mysteries, and Notions
- Rats, Stones, Mirrors, Clocks

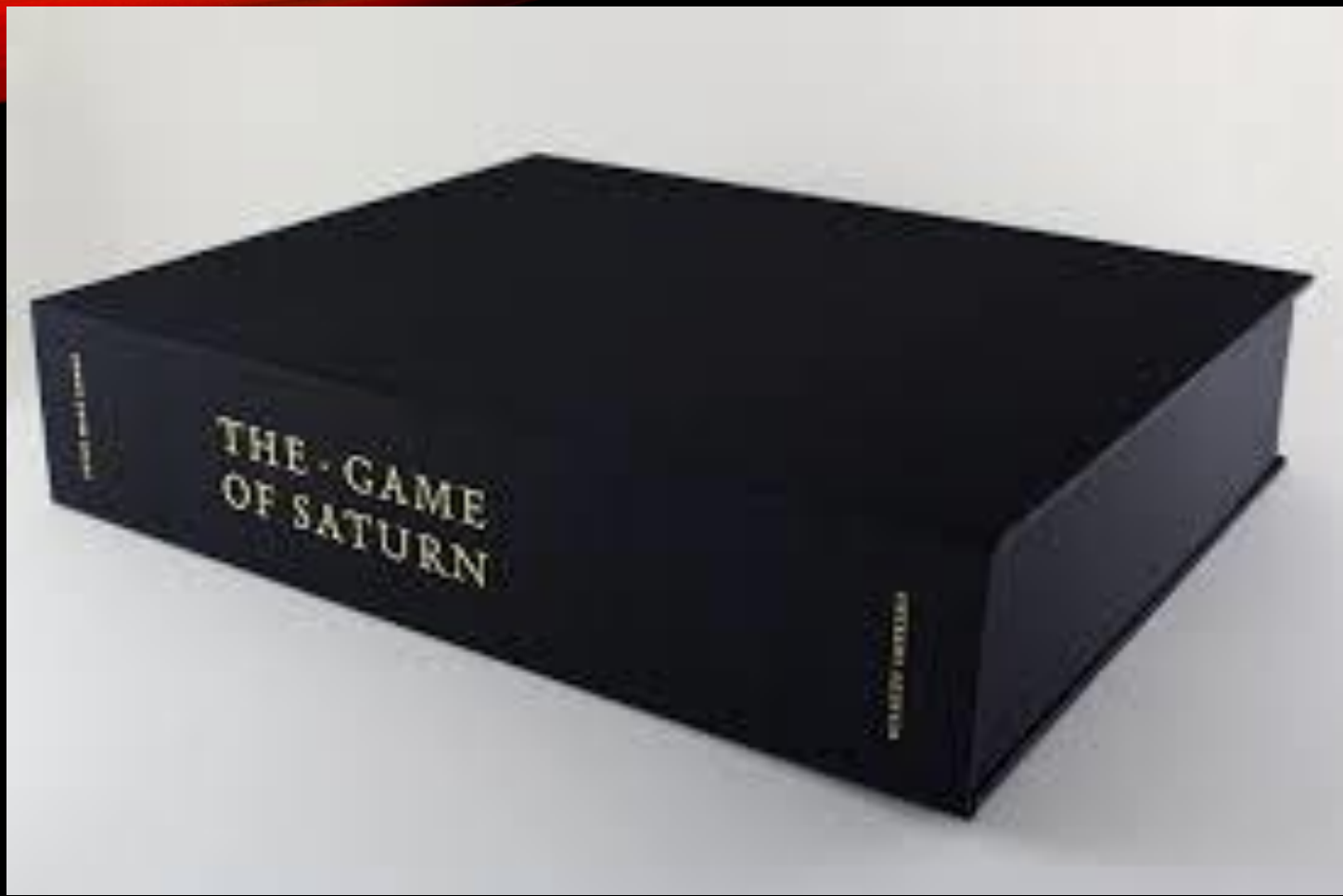


# EMBEDDED IN THIS SYSTEM, EACH CARD RESONATES WITH CORRESPONDENCES

- Layering semiotics
- Multiplying possibilities for synchronicity
- Emulating and re-creating the systems of ceremonial magic that the Golden Dawn and others accreted around tarot
- But also ripping these systems apart and re-building them from the ground up in the image of another world

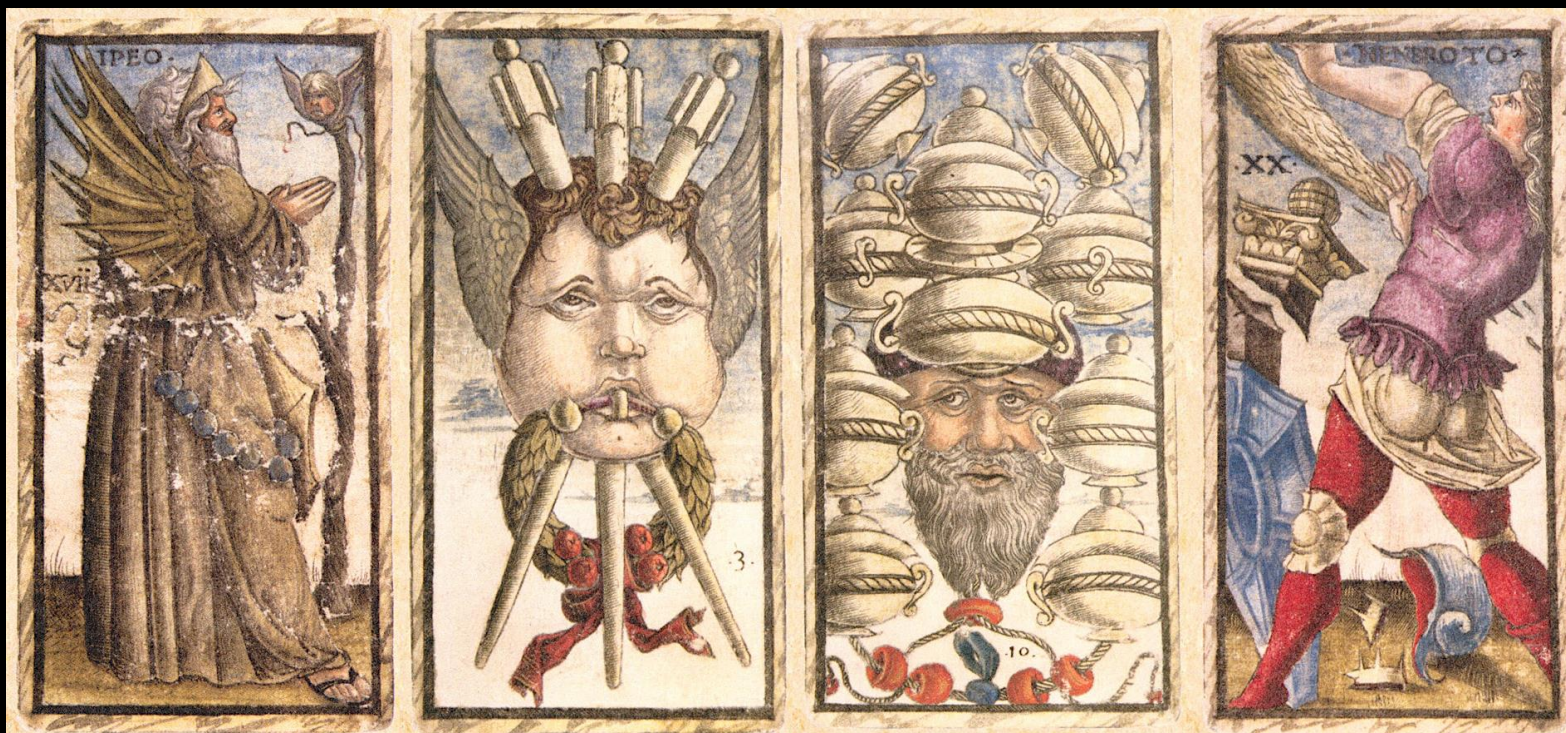




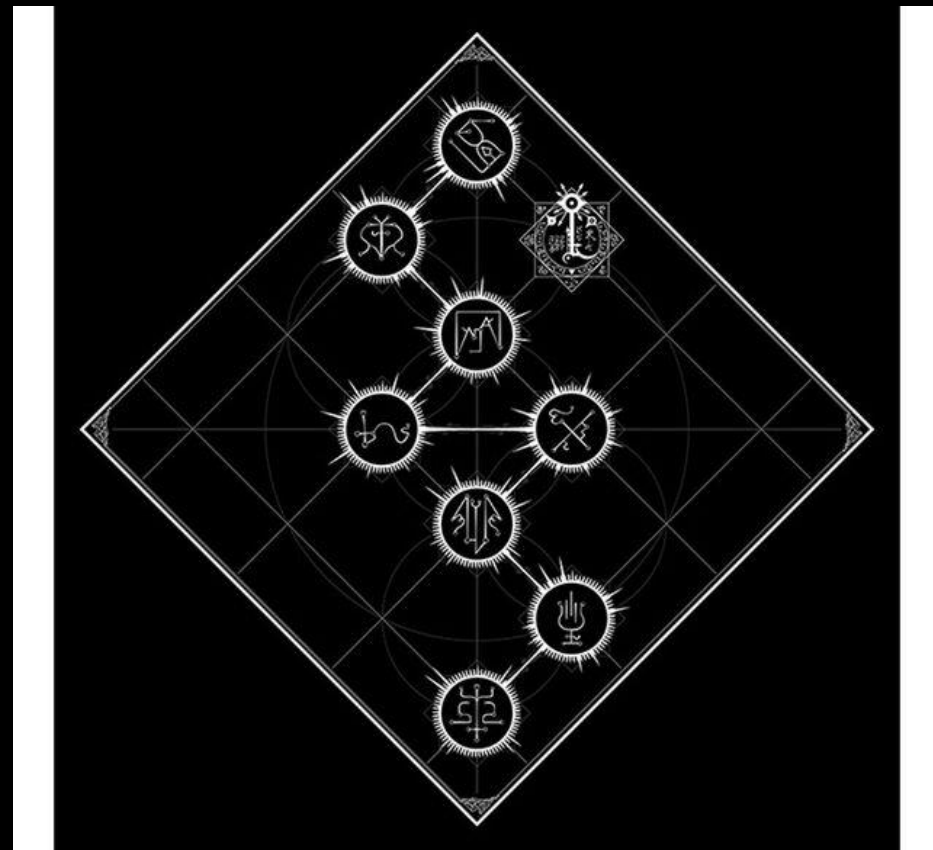




THE SOLA-BUSCA DECK WAS USED IN GAMES  
AND NOT DIVINATION \*AND ALSO\* ENCODES  
RITUAL PRACTICE, FUNCTIONING AS A DARK  
GNOSTIC, SATURNIAN GRIMOIRE THAT PETER  
MARK ADAMS DECODES IN A GAME OF  
SATURN



# SOOTH DECK DISTILLS & DRIVES MAGIC SYSTEM





# CASE STUDY 3: CHALICE



# chalice

## CHALICE = TAROT AS SINGLE-PLAYER JOURNALING GAME

### how to play

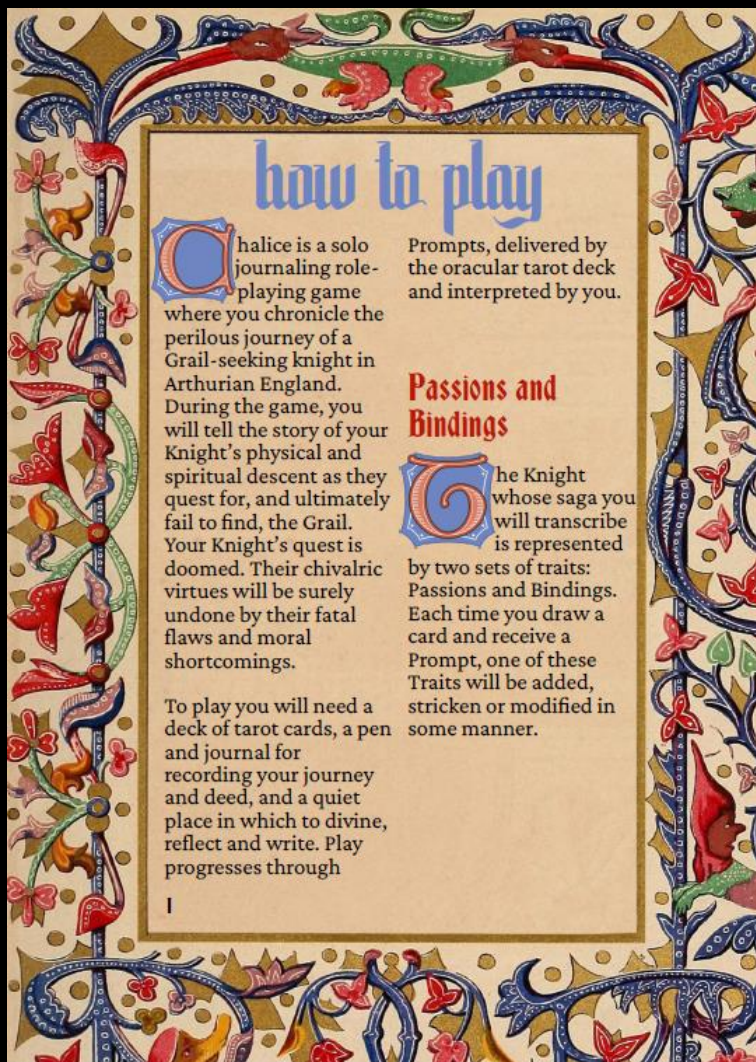
**C**halice is a solo journaling role-playing game where you chronicle the perilous journey of a Grail-seeking knight in Arthurian England. During the game, you will tell the story of your Knight's physical and spiritual descent as they quest for, and ultimately fail to find, the Grail. Your Knight's quest is doomed. Their chivalric virtues will be rarely undone by their fatal flaws and moral shortcomings.

To play you will need a deck of tarot cards, a pen and journal for recording your journey and deed, and a quiet place in which to sit, reflect and write. Play progresses through

prompts, delivered by the arcana tarot deck and interpreted by you.

### Pastors and Biddings

**C**he Knight whose saga you will transcribe is represented by two sets of traits: Pastors and Biddings. Each time you draw a card and receive a Prompt, one of these Traits will be added, modified or modified in some manner.



# TABLE OF BIRTH OMENS

**U**pon your birth, a seer bore witness to a powerful omen. Draw from the Major Arcana.

- **The Fool:** A wild boar is sighted. You will be brash and headstrong.
- **The Magician:** A dragon is seen moving in the earth. Great powers will manifest in your life.
- **The High Priestess:** An owl watches your birth. You will be blessed with rare insights.
- **The Empress:** A red stag is seen nearby. You will lead a life of peril and danger.
- **The Emperor:** A red veil falls upon the moon. Bloodshed is in your future.
- **The Hierophant:** An auroch is seen nearby. You will lead a life of vigor and health.
- **The Lovers:** A satyr is seen nearby. You will live a life of hedonism.
- **The Chariot:** A veil obscures the sun. Your birth is an act of revenge.
- **Strength:** Crops are spoiled nearby. You are destined to be sickly.
- **The Hermit:** A lion is seen nearby. You will be strong and valorous.
- **Wheel of Fortune:** The midnight star is seen in the sky. You are born lucky.

# BOOK OF DOOMS

## book of dooms

### MAJOR ARCANNA

**The Fool:** A youth begs to enter your service as a squire. Who are they? Why are they drawn to you? *Create a Binding.*

**The Magician:** An ally is slain by an otherworldly adversary. *Strike a beloved Binding.* How do you overcome the supernatural? *Create a Passion based on magic.*

**The High Priestess:** In the company of other knights, a seer predicts greatness in your future. One of the knights mocks your naivety and slaps the seer, deriding them as a witch. If you put the knight in their place, *strike a martial*

*Passion and create a rivalry Binding.* If you dismiss the witch, *create a supernatural Binding.*

**The Empress:** While resting in a meadow, you are approached by a pair of richly-dressed servants who direct you to the tent of their noble patron. Struck by the patron's charm and beauty, you become their lover. You are showered with affection and great riches—on the condition that you do not tell anyone of their existence, under pain of great ruin. *Create a resource Binding.* *Should you lose this Binding, strike three additional Bindings.*

**The Emperor:** You cross paths with an old flame from long ago. Who is



CHALICE  
AMPLIFIES  
ARCHETYPAL  
RESONANCES



ITALO CALVINO  
IL CASTELLO  
DEI DESTINI INCROCIATI



EINAUDI





V. CONCLUSIONS

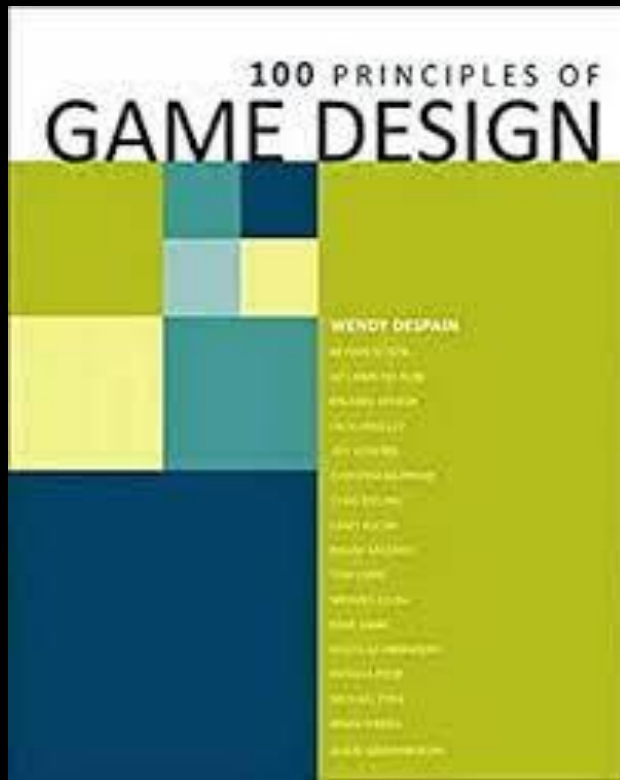
# ONE META-STRATEGY OF PLAYFUL TAROT

- Keep the gameplay as close to divinatory tarot reading as possible, removing barriers of modern genre & convention
- Let any, allowing the work of the dagger to serve the work of the **agonistic gameplay open the way for Ilinix/reflection** cup
- Cultivate the ludic qualities always already inherent in tarot
- **Generate vertiginously synchronistic narratives** within the context of **agonistic systems**.

# THREE CASE STUDIES = THREE STRATEGIES OF PLAYFUL TAROT

- A) *Alas, Vegas*: **reverse engineer tarot as an agonistic gambling system** whose intricacies distract the rational mind and **open the intuition to possibilities of narrative**
- B) *Invisible Sun*: **re-create the tarot deck**, shaping its structure and imagery as the **basis for a magic system** that resonates with the narrative themes of a particular world and allows for moments of awe-inspiring synchronicity
- C) *Chalice*: use tarot as the basis for procedurally generated narrative, creating prompts from the cards that spark human imagination

# HOWARD'S LAW OF OCCULT DESIGN

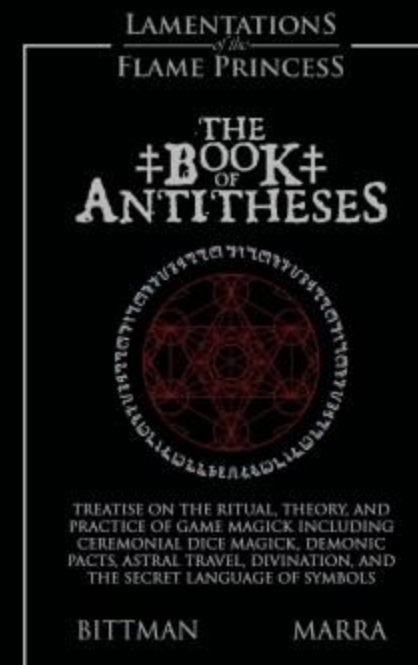
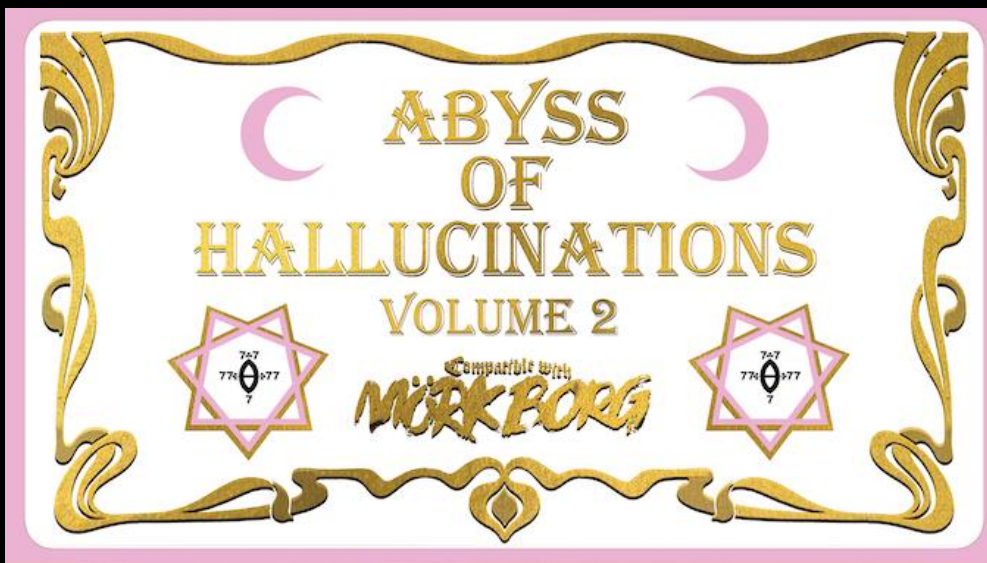
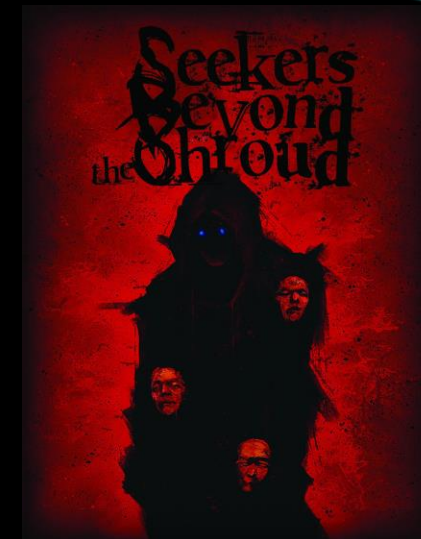


Howard's Law of Occult Game Design (or just The Law of Occult Game Design or Howard's Law) can be expressed as a formula: "Secret Significance  $\propto$  Seeming Innocence  $\times$  Completeness."

# SIMILAR TO JASON ROHRER'S CORDIAL MINUET









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