

Disenchanted re-enchantment: comparative analysis of *World of Darkness* and *Monsterhearts* tabletop RPGs

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BODY TEXT

My presentation is dedicated to a comparative analysis of two urban fantasy tabletop role-playing games: *World of Darkness* and *Monsterhearts*, using the concepts of *disenchantment* (Weber 1993) and *re-enchantment*. *Disenchantment*, as understood by Charles Taylor (2007), is part of wider process of secularization, the transformation of a unified cosmos into a mechanized universe consisting of discrete elements, as well as a shift of human identity from porous, open and vulnerable to a world of spirits and forces, to modern and closed-off “buffered self”. In turn, *re-enchantment* (Saler 2012) implies that Western people try to re-enchant their world through different cultural practices, like the creation and interaction with enchanted *secondary worlds*, for example, in tabletop role-playing games (TRPGs).

The perception of TRPG as a re-enchanting practice became widespread among game scholars in recent years (e. g. Schrier et al 2018). However, I would like to address the contradictory relationship between this media and enchantment. TRPGs constantly use pre-modern images and narratives for their fictional universes, but they often build these universes around modern logic, creating disenchanted worlds, despite the presence of particular imagery associated with enchantment, like magic or gods. This unintentionally naturalizes the modern and secular worldview as universal and timeless, reducing differences between ages and cultures to the amount of information about the world.

It is important to highlight that in my presentation I do not address the possibility of TRPG to cause the feeling of enchantment in the players themselves, and focus on the ability to create a *simulation* (Frasca 2003) of an enchanted world, providing the possibility to imagine logics and worldviews different from that of modernity.

I understand a TRPG as a type of *protostory* (Koenitz 2018), a hypothetical set of all stories made possible by a particular set of rules. Specific stories, like particular game sessions, are created from the *protostory* through the process of *instantiation*, which consists of perceiving and realizing *affordances* (Linderoth 2011) presented by the game, possibilities available for players to take actions pertaining to in-game situations.

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I divide affordances into two big groups: *interpretative* and *active*. *Interpretative affordances* denote a potential for the player to perceive in-game situations in a specific way – for example, viewing a particular NPC as “evil”, interpreting their own character as a “hero” or recognizing intertextual references to popular franchises. This type of affordances is closely associated with the idea of *resonance*: the sensation of interpreting a representation of the game as relating to something other than only the game’s rules, as referring to something not entirely contained within the game itself and of the everyday world in which we live (Chapman 2016).

Active affordances denote “objective” affordances to take in-game actions, like attacking an antagonist or using a supernatural power. Both types of affordances constantly influence and shape one another, often creating a *configurative resonance* (Apperley 2010), a situation when resonance is caused by the results of players’ efforts.

Using those instruments, I compare the approach to enchantment in *World of Darkness* and *Monsterhearts*.

The genre of urban fantasy itself calls to mind the idea of re-enchantment, especially in case of WoD which consistently connects supernatural creatures with fundamental modern topics like ecological crisis (*Werewolf: the Apocalypse*), inequality (*Vampire the Masquerade* and *Wraith: the Oblivion*) or *disenchantment* itself (*Mage: the Ascension* and *Changeling: the Dreaming*). This provides a willing troupe of players with affordances to create a story addressing those themes. But at the same time, the logic of the rules and worldbuilding itself strongly favors the interpretation of the game world, including its supernatural component, as a disenchanted realm.

Halloy and Servais (2014) highlighted the following features of the *experience of enchantment*:

Ontological uncertainty as to the entities involved and the experience itself; Uncanny feelings;

An attentional focus on inner bodily and mental states; Dissociative and hypnoid states;

A shift in perceived agency.

While there are many affordances in the WoD *protostory* to create a situation resonating with those features, there are much fewer affordances to interpret them as a natural part of the world and not problems or exceptions.

WtA, VtM and WtO constantly address the problem of agency, but with a clearly modern preference for retaining individual agency in the hands of an individual and protecting borders of the psyche. Clear classification of different supernatural creatures transform possible ontological uncertainty of perceived entities into simple lack of knowledge. This lack of knowledge, in turn, can and should be rectified with the help of player’s and character’s knowledge and supernatural powers that can provide a definite answer about the nature of a particular entity. Therefore, the game provides very little incentive for participants to role-play the reaction to encountering supernatural creatures as “uncanny feelings”.

In contrast, secondary worlds of *Monsterhearts* provide much more affordances for interpreting them as enchanted. They lack any clear ontology that players can use, instead hinting at multitude of myths and tropes that can be invoked by players and their characters as part of the game with neither tools to prove one interpretation as true nor guarantee that truth is out there at all. Some character variants, like *Queen*, *Chosen*

or *Cerberus*, collapse the fundamental difference between human and supernatural altogether. Game often addresses the problem of agency through mechanics of *Strings*, but does so in a way that questions and even criticizes the understanding of the subject as “buffered self” that should protect its borders at any cost.

All of this provides players with a lot of affordances to introduce *uncanny feelings* in the game world, both as something experienced by their characters or as something caused by them, and connects the *Monsterhearts* with a wider tradition of re-enchanted secondary worlds.

The case of *Monsterhearts* is particularly important, because it illustrates that problems with simulating an enchanted world in TRPGs stems from the traditional, but not inescapable, approach of this type of game to rules and world-building. Therefore, it can be overcome or, at least expanded upon, in order to make TRPGs a better tool to increase cultural literacy.

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