

Communication of Magic Systems in Visual Media

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Magic systems are a staple of the fantasy genre, and one of the first things one thinks of when the words fantasy world is uttered. Flinging spells, charms, enchantments and rites of summoning often suffer, when the properties of the used magic system are not communicated or neglected. If magic inside the media is used carelessly, the effect can be severely detrimental to the immersion, value and strength of the narrative within the visual work.

The approach of the paper is purely on the qualitative side of research. Three works of visual media of fantasy genre, which include some form of magic system, each with own place within popular culture have been selected, analysed and compared against each other, to evaluate how well they communicate the properties of the magic system to the audience, and how well is the communication supported by the narrative.

Therefore, this paper hopes to shed light on the issue, highlight possible mistakes, analyse and explain choices undertaken by visual media creators and craft a base for general framework of thought when translating magic systems into visual media, which would reinforce the produced artefacts, resulting in stronger narrative design and better visual storytelling. Although, a properly developed magic system is something that is inherently a concern of the writer, nonetheless, It is up to the director in charge of translating the written material to properly communicate the system to the characters and audience.

Although a small addition to the body of knowledge, the paper provides a basis upon which additional branch of research can be developed, opening up possibility for further expanded research on the topic, which could combine the quantity of the researched media with the qualitative research, while implementing a practice-based research methods to develop a more comprehensive framework for visual communication of magic systems in future works.

Visual Media, Communication, Magic System, Harry Potter, Lord of the Rings, Fullmetal Alchemist: Brotherhood

1. INTRODUCTION

“Swish and flick!”, a swift movement of the wrist, necessary for performing simple levitation charm, as Professor Flitwick explains in the Harry Potter and the Philosopher’s Stone (2001). For multitudes of children, this was perhaps the very first step into the cinematic world of magic systems, clear and unclear. Together with Harry, the audience learned more about the magic in the world of Harry Potter, but as is per usual within the education system, the basics of the magic were taught to the students of the Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry, and to audience, which was, same as Harry, a newcomer in the wizarding world.

2. METHODOLOGY

Within the scope of this paper, the selected approach of study is within the realm of qualitative research. Albeit severely lacking in the academic study, the topic opens to discussion over the internet, where experienced and published authors write essays. Within the existing discourse, extra care must be taken, as the extensive existing scrutiny of the topic is heavily subjective, usually towards the author’s preferences. The methodology hopes to combine extensive research, analysis, and comparative methods.

Therefore, the methodology chosen begins with extensive research into the available online discourse and existing literature, from which several points of agreement across the community,

have been inferred, while also attempting to not consider, but not translate personal biases. From the research, a strong base for critical analysis of the selected works was established and utilized.

For analysis, three works of visual media have been selected based on following criteria.

- Tangible knowledge of the work's existence within the popular culture
- The researcher's familiarity with the work, enabling for critical, secondary viewing.
- Based on the previous criteria, diversity of the placement on the magic system scale based on the assumption, supported by the researcher's familiarity with the work.
- The work being an adaptation of pre-existing literary work, for further possible comparison.
- Diversity of the visual medium

Continuing with the analysis, the works have been critically viewed and reviewed.

After the analysis of the complete works, the research notes were gathered and evaluated, drawing conclusions per each work of media.

Enabling the employment of further comparative methods between the viewed works, while also providing basis for additional comparison against the literary origin.

Critically evaluating and comparing the results, similarities have been drawn and explanations added, when evaluating against the researched literature.

Originally, the proposed methodology aimed at preparation for additional, practice-based research, although currently outside the scope of the paper, it is expected to be able to provide additional insight into the difficulties that are inherent to creation of magic systems, their visual adaptation and communication.

Considering the nature of development of visual narrative works, the practice-based part of the research is expected to inadvertently cause the methodology, while arguably linear, become subject to iteration and recursion, as new questions arise and researched.

3. CRITICAL AND CONTEXTUAL REVIEW

Magic systems have been a topic of widespread discussion among the panellists at conventions, podcasts, blog posts and online forums, with

established writers such as Brandon Sanderson joining in on the discourse, sparking the discussion. It was Sanderson, who after experiencing a major backlash from his panelling peers delved into thought and came up with the initial classification of the magic systems. Therefore, according to Sanderson, magic system can be classified as either Soft or Hard, depending on its properties and how much they are communicated to the audience. To properly understand and critically evaluate magical systems, one must first encounter what Sanderson named Sanderson's First Law of Magics, which reads as follows:

"An author's ability to solve conflict with magic is DIRECTLY PROPORTIONAL to how well the reader understands said magic." (Sanderson, 2007)

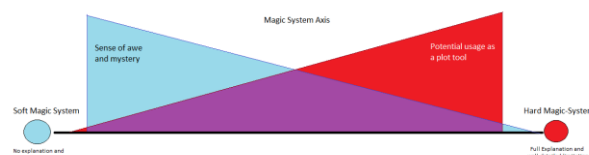


Figure 1: Sanderson's First Law, Illustrated

3.1. Soft Magic System

A soft magic system is one that either does not follow an established set of rules or the audience is generally unaware of them or made unaware, since a soft magic system can still follow a set of rules, but ones that only author knows. As such, it brings forth several positives and negatives. For one, this form of magic system can be easily used to create a sense of the fantastical or tension, where characters and audiences alike wonder what they might encounter behind the corner. One might say that soft magic system is the magical one, but with the positives come negatives. Mostly undefined, it is very easy for this form of magic system to compromise the narrative, and as such, it cannot be used to solve problems which, for the story to remain compelling should be resolved solely by the virtue of the characters. If the writer does so anyways, all the tension from the story disappears, the audience feels cheated and the solution to the problem, encountered by the characters can be easily compared to undesirable Deus Ex Machina. Therefore, the result is the magic undermining the narrative, rather than enhancing it, with additional risk of accidental creation of plot holes.

Even though Sanderson recommends using soft magic mostly for the visuals and ambience, he does recommend, that if the problem at hand be resolved using the soft magic, it should not make

the journey easier for the character. Instead, even though the magical effect did make the problem go away, it should be replaced by a bigger problem, putting the character in a worse spot than he was in before.

As a critique and expansion of the Sanderson's First rule, C. R. Rowenson argues, that a conflict inside a story can be solved using soft magics, without damaging the integrity of the narrative, even going as far as contributing to the overall worldbuilding. Rowenson separates the conflict inside a story into two, a minor and a major conflict. Partially agreeing with Sanderson, Rowenson places stresses that the Major Conflict, defined as a struggle with great weight and/or importance in the narrative should not be solved using unpredictable and unexpected magic events, but argues, that minor conflicts, as ones with little to no narrative weight can be solved with soft magic events. (Rowenson, 2016) Therefore, Rowenson's rephrasing of the original law reads:

"An author's ability to solve MAJOR CONFLICTS with magic is DIRECTLY PROPORTIONAL to how well the reader understands said magic." (Rowenson, 2016)

3.2. Hard Magic system

Magic systems on this side of the scale have explicitly described set of rules. In this case, it is well within the ability of the author to solve conflicts using magic, if the audience understands how the magic works. Albeit, it is not the magic magically fixing problems, it is the character's sharp wit and experience that helps overcome the conflict. The Hard Magic system might seem restricting, but within its limits, it enabled the author to create twists, enhance the worldbuilding and in many ways, still surprise the audience.

Sanderson presents the Isaac Asimov's three distinct laws of robotics as a perfect example of what a hard magic system is. Asimov never adds, changes or violates them, yet the interplay within them provided us with multitudes of compelling stories.

One major drawback of a hard magic system is its inherent similarity with science, albeit one of the story world, but as such, it can cause the audience to lose the sense of wonder, which also feeds into common misconception, that the Hard Magic Systems have to obey the laws of science or their need to have an explanation as to either why does

the magic in the world exist, where does it come from or similar questions.

3.3. Soft vs. Hard and Nebulous vs Rational

Mythcreants in their blog posts on the topic of magic systems have hinted at, but not established yet a possibility of analysing a magic system by other qualities, other than Softness and Hardness. While considering magic systems, and what they need to fulfil to be, what they call, rational magic system, the strongest argument is the ability for the reader to extrapolate. Rowenson notes on the topic, that if the reader has the ability, by the virtue of examination and extrapolation, reveal at that point hidden parts, or predict possible additions to the system, before they are revealed by an author, then what the reader is dealing with is a rational system. While, on the other side, if the future developments of the system must be explicitly revealed by the author himself, then it is a Nebulous system. Mythcreants use Harry Potter and Avatar: The Last Airbender as an example of nebulous and rational system, in order, Rowenson, on the topic of Harry Potter notes that:

"The readers and Harry have to learn about magic the same way, through demonstration and memorization. At no point can we extrapolate beyond what we're given."

Consider Expecto Patronum, a Charm for repelling dementors, even though we see it early in the movie, it had to be later named and explained, before Harry could utilize it to solve any upcoming major conflicts, as the Sanderson's First Law dictates.

Therefore, with Soft and Hard, as two categories, the scale, on which the magic systems in analysed works could be placed on looks like this:



Figure 2: Hard-Soft scale, Illustrated

But, if we include Nebulousness and Rationality into the mix, the final scale takes following form:

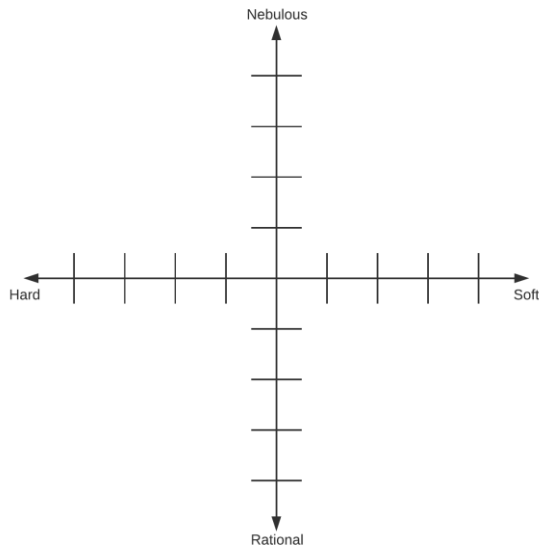


Figure 3: Hard-Soft, Nebulous-Rational Scale, Illustrated

4. PROJECT-SPECIFIC RESEARCH

4.1. The Magic in Lord of the Rings Trilogy

Drawing upon the previously established scale, the magic in middle-earth is one that is very soft and nebulous. Considering only the films, Peter Jackson explains very little regarding the magical forces in the Tolkien universe, mostly resorting to dropping hints in form of foreshadowing.

4.1.1 The One Ring

The trilogy opens with a short, narrated history of The One Ring (TOR, for short) by Lady Galadriel where she outlines a foiled plot for world domination, TOR's strong corrupting power, the ring possessing a will of its own and we are shown its ability to turn its wielder invisible.

Later on, Frodo learns of TOR's invisibility power when the TOR slips onto his finger when he falls inside a tavern in Bree, but he also learns that whenever he uses the power, Sauron's all-seeing eye can see exactly where he is, essentially broadcasting his whereabouts to the enemy, preventing him from ever again using the ability,

albeit the ring inadvertently tempts him time and time again.

4.1.2. Gandalf and Saruman

Gandalf and Saruman are the prominent spellcasters of the Lord of the Rings trilogy and where most of the magic system is shown. Early on in *The Fellowship of the Ring*, the audience bears witness to a duel between these powerful wizards. Both Gandalf and Saruman employ the power of telekinesis to fight and during it, their telekinetic powers are being amplified and channelled through their staves, as once Gandalf is disarmed, he is seen at Saruman's mercy, who wields the two staves, pointed at him. Staves being a strong channel for the wizard's power is further reinforced in *Return of The King*, when Gandalf, after being unscathed by Saruman's fireball (which is a spell that occurs only this once) breaks Saruman's staff, leaving him defenceless.

In *Lord of the Rings*, during the Mines of Moria sequence, the audience sees Gandalf using magic on the Bridge of Khazad-dum, where he channels a spell through his staff to split the bridge in half, sending Durin's Bane, the Balrog of Moria plummeting deep into the abyss below the Durin's Bridge.

After the Battle of the Peak on the summit of Silverthine and Gandalf's death, Gandalf reappears later in the Two Towers, where empowered, he easily breaks Gimli's axe that was thrown at him, Legolas' fired arrow and scorched Aragorn's sword out of his hand.

4.1.3. The Elven Gifts of Lothlorien

At the end of the fellowship's visit to elvish realm of Lothlorien in first movie, Lady Galadriel and Lord Celeborn present the adventurers with great gifts. Out of them all, only three make appearance later in the trilogy. To Samwise Gamgee, Galadriel bestowed an elven rope, which they later use to descend from Eryn Mui to the swampland of Dead Marshes, where the rope comes undone with a single tug, and afterwards, they use the same rope to tie a leash to Gollum. Frodo receives The Light of Eärendil inside Galadriel's crystal phial, with the following words:

May it be a light to you in dark places when all other lights go out.

These words foreshadow the light's later use in the Return of the King, as both Frodo and Sam use it to defend against the great spider Shelob. The very last gift, which each member of the fellowship received, besides Gandalf, were the elven cloaks, woven by Galadriel and her maidens herself. The Cloaks were to shield the wearer from the gaze of the enemy, which helped the hobbits escape multiple times during the films. Once, when Merry and Pippin were trying to escape from the orcs into Fangorn, and the second time, more prominently, when Frodo and Sam used one as a form of camouflage, hiding them from the sight of the Easterlings at the Black Gate in form of a rock. Although the members of the fellowship are seen donning the elvish cloaks upon leaving the Lothlorien, the films do not mention their acquisition by the fellowship, nor they hint at their magical effects.

4.2. Evaluation

Critically evaluating the use of magic in the story of the Lord of the rings, Peter Jackson and Tolkien keep it consistently soft, with only mistake being made was not informing the audience of the effects of the elvish cloaks, albeit it was used to solve only a minor conflict. One could argue that Gandalf saving the fellowship from the Balrog on the bridge of Khazad-dum was cheap, Sanderson himself uses this moment as an example of solving problems using soft magic, but only to make the matters worse for the characters. (Sanderson, 2007). Lastly, there are some elements in the films where the magical properties of certain items are spelled out to us by the characters, one case being the magical sword Sting, which Bilbo gifts to Frodo in Rivendell, whose magical ability is to emit a blue glow when the orcs were nearby and second item being Palantír of Orthanc, a black spheroid, said to possess the ability to communicate with other existing Palantíri.

4.3. The Magic of Fullmetal Alchemist: Brotherhood

As one could deduce from the name, Fullmetal Alchemist: Brotherhood (Further shortened as

FMA:B), concerns itself with the metaphysical science of understanding, deconstructing and reconstructing matter called alchemy. As understood, the alchemy is governed by a single law, and that is the Law of the Equivalent Exchange. The Law is as follows:

"In order to obtain or create something, something of equal value must be lost or destroyed."

Violating the aforementioned rule causes Rebound, by giving too little and taking too much, the out of balance alchemical forces violently shift in an attempt to stabilize and balance themselves, failing the process of transmutation, taking more than was meant to be giving, usually causing serious injury or even death.

The world in FMA: B operates by this law, and it is explicitly explained to the audience by two ways. One, by the failed attempt of the Elric brothers to resurrect their late mother, which causes Edward to lose his leg and his brother Alphonse, and by the narrator explicitly explaining the basis of the equivalent exchange to the audience at the beginning of every episode in the first season of the show.

As a magical system, it is around 80% on the hard side of the scale, and 30% towards the rational side. Every part of the alchemy, that concerns the plot is directly explained to the audience through the dialogue. Within the series, it is also explained how the alchemy operates, and where does the energy required to perform the transmutation originate from, yet the system is not fully hard, and that is caused by three reasons.

4.3.1. Human Transmutation

Human transmutation is a major plot point of the franchise, as the story follows the Elric brothers in pursuit of their goal, that being return of Alphonse into his body. Alphonse inhabits a hollow suit of iron armour, to which his soul is directly bound by Edward using a rune drawn in blood. To do so, Edward had to sacrifice his arm, in exchange for Alphonse's soul. Later on in the show, we find out

that this was an imperfect exchange, as only part of alphonso's soul was bound to the armour, which from the beginning started rejecting the unholy combination. During the beginning of the series, the Elric brothers are searching for an artefact called The Philosopher's Stone as they believe have the divine power of bypassing the law of equivalent exchange, enabling them to return Alphonse's body to his soul. Unfortunately, as we follow the Elric brothers on their journey, we uncover the sinister truth behind the philosopher's stone and the grand scheme surrounding it.

4.3.2. Research and Alkahestry

Alchemy itself is treated as a form of scientific pursuit in the world of FMA: B, to the extent of state alchemists being awarded grants. Therefore, it is safe to assume that characters inside the world operate on the basis of not all knowledge of alchemy being found out.

Furthermore, to the east of Amestris lies the country of Xing, which practices a different form alchemy named Alkahestry. Alkahestry uses different source of energy and focuses more at the medical applications. In the series, there is only single character who utilizes this form of alchemy, May Chang, therefore there is not much known about it.

4.4. Evaluation

While the author himself knows way more about the magical system in FMA: B than the audience, it is through Elric brothers' pursuit that the audience learns about the world of alchemy, often through the brothers or other characters relaying information to each other.

Although, most of the information is explicitly explained to the audience through the characters, narratively speaking it works, although discussion can be made about the system's nebulosity or rationality. While some elements can be discovered through rational thought, other are shrouded in the nebulous cloud of the author's mind, and the audience has no option, other than to wait for more information to be disclosed.

4.5. The Magic of Harry Potter

The Wizarding world of Harry Potter is vast, spanning originally eight, now, at the moment of writing, ten movies. Although the scope of this paper will only consider the original eight films, and even then, it is out of the scope to delve comprehensively into every facet of the wizarding world, therefore, a more general approach is taken.

The magic system in Harry Potter sits at an interesting place, in the middle of the scale, in regard to Hard-Soft axis, argued both by Sanderson (Sanderson, 2007) and Rowenson (Rowenson, 2016). On the Nebulous-Rational scale, the system sits firmly within the Nebulous scale at around 90%. The audience severely lacks the ability to extrapolate any possible uses of certain spells or similar applications. Is it possible for Harry to cast Expelliarmus, disarming non-wizard enemies, or is its sole use only against wands? The only uses the audience ever knows is the ones that Rowling explicitly tells or shows us. (Rowenson, 2016)

4.5.1. Wands and Spellcasting

On the necessity of wands, Rowling herself notes:

"You can do unfocused and uncontrolled magic without a wand (for instance when Harry blows up Aunt Marge) but to do really good spells, yes, you need a wand." - Rowling, 2001

This happens within the movies on several occasions, generally by the virtue of strong emotion, such as Lily Potter protecting young Harry from Voldemort. Although, in the Prisoner of Azkaban, we can see an unknown wizard sitting in the Leaky Cauldron inn, manipulating his spoon using only his finger, although this fact is never mentioned or explained.

Generally, spells are cast verbally by using wand as a channel, usually aimed at the target of the spell, although several spells can be cast non-verbally, as showcased by multiple wizards during the series, most prominently when deflecting incoming attacks.

All the spells and the ability to cast them is learned by practice and memorisation, and very rarely by discovery/development. Therefore

"the readers and Harry have to learn about magic the same way, through demonstration and memorization." - Rowenson, 2016

Which firmly sits within the narrative of the books, as both the audience and Harry venture into the wizarding world for the first time, discovering it piece by piece.

4.6. Evaluation

The magic system of Harry Potter is very diverse, and a vast majority of the spells, magical effects and items are remained unexplained. While some parts, and several spells (such as Expecto Patronum) are, along with their inner workings, explained in depth, other spells do not have share the privilege. This safely places within the magic system of Harry Potter in the middle ground between Hard and Soft magic systems. Although earlier parts of the series suffer from occasional Deus Ex Machina, plot holes or lapses in logic, later instalments learn from the shortcomings of their predecessors. Narratively, the way audience learns about the wizarding world is through the eyes of Harry, and as such the magic is communicated to the audience. Due to its prominent nebulosity, the wizarding world remains wondrous, magical, charming and inviting towards the target audience, the children. Lastly, the consistency of the visuals and communication can be attributed to difference between singular writers and directors of the instalments, whereas the previously analysed works have been completely written and directed by unchanged people. This is the body text. This is the body text. This is the body text. This is the body text. This is the body text. This is the body text.

5. RESULTS

After viewing, analysing and evaluating the selected works, few patterns have surfaced, which provide a guideline for creation and communication of magic systems in visual media. Although the selected works have been purely visual, and the goal of the research was to build a base for framework or a set of guidelines to apply to future production of similar visual works, the resulting knowledge is tightly connected to the art of writing without applied practice. All three of the selected works have shared similar signs, and thus they are to be described below:

Firstly, any visual media, which includes magic system partial to the Hard side of the scale, and wishes to have the rules communicated to the audience, has to go through great lengths to creatively show the laws of the magic system, otherwise, the author has to resort to telling the

audience, thus failing the "show, don't tell" guideline for filmmaking.

Secondly, the Sanderson's first law of magic directly applies to the visual media, although derivative versions of the law (namely, Rowenson's) can be applied with similar success.

And lastly, the prominent factor that the three selected works shared was that the magic system has been communicated to the audience in a narratively sound way, usually through the main character(s).

5. EVALUATION AND CONCLUSIONS

Therefore, when creating any form of magical system, the plot and the narrative has to work hand in hand with the magic system, to create the type of story that the author aims towards, while very importantly, keeping the writing part of the development tight and waterproof, without any parts, which may break the immersion, feel cheap or cheat the audience.

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