

# Communication of Magic Systems in Visual Media

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

"Swish and flick!", an essential wrist movement for the simple levitation charm, as professor Flitwick explains in the *Harry Potter and the Philosopher's Stone*. (2001) For multitudes of children, this was the first cinematic venture into the world of magic systems, explained and unexplained. 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. As such, it has been a topic of widespread discussion along the panelists at conventions and online forums, with established writers such as Brandon Sanderson publishing several essays on the topic of laws of magic in fantasy, humbly named Sanderson's Laws of Magic. Stated as:

1. "Always err on the side of what's awesome" (*Zeroeth Law* – Unofficial) (Sanderson, 2016)
1. "An author's ability to solve conflict with magic is DIRECTLY PROPORTIONAL to how well the reader understands said magic." (Sanderson, 2007)
2. "Limitations > Powers" (Sanderson, 2012)
3. "Expand on what you have already, before you add something new." (Sanderson, 2013)

Sanderson wrote these in relation to writing, thus providing us with his take on basic literary framework for creating magic systems. Albeit, one might argue that those are only concerned while constructing "Hard" magic systems, as Sanderson's usually are, the guidelines provided construct a firm base for "Soft" magic systems as well. Several critiques and expansions were presented, with Sanderson elaborating on the rules in his essays, to all of which, along with proper explanations of Hard and Soft are mentioned in latter sections of the research paper itself.

Concerning this paper, the discourse is limited to literary medium, and as such, its translation into visual medium is limited, usually violating the storytelling technique of Show, don't tell. Consequentially, several acclaimed works of visual media suffer from this issue. Therefore, this paper hopes to elaborate and build upon literary framework, providing a base for visual representation of magic systems in visual media.

## 2. METHODOLOGY

Due to the nature of the researched subject, the inferred approach will be purely qualitative. Combining research, analysis, comparative methods and practice.

To form a strong objective basis for analysis, the proposed approach begins with a research of available literature and resources. Arguably, the available discourse on the topic is strongly subjective and further divided by the categorisation of the system by the Hard to Soft scale. Therefore, we can infer that the base will be drawn as a mixed generalisation of guidelines, second-hand experience and supported opinions, applied based on context for optimal results, while attempting to establish agreed upon definitions, outlining possible difficulties one may encounter and avoiding translation of any pre-existing bias into the analytic part of the research practice.

Drawing from the established basis, the analysis, as proposed, should be combined with comparative methods. While the analysis will consist of an objective look at the establishment and communication of the magic systems in chosen visual media, further viewpoints for analysing need be considered, besides "Does it work and is it showing, not telling?", such as the form of explanation within the narrative of the story.

Several artefacts of moving visual media will be considered and viewed for analytic purposes, chosen based on their popularity and standing on the aforementioned scale of categorization.

As we are strongly drawing from the literary background, the proposal of comparative method is in place, for analysing the work of visual media, but analysing the literary base for said work and afterward comparison of the two. As such, it is expected to provide us with additional insight into the visual expression of the literary work, the interplay between the two, and answer possible proposed questions that elaborate and expand upon the topic.

So far, the proposed methodology is designed to prepare us for the practice-based research, where we will attempt to develop a magic system of our own and devise its expression and communication in the visual narrative setting. 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, as new questions arise and are subsequently proposed and researched.

### 3. PROJECT-SPECIFIC RESEARCH

For our intents and purposes, the first and foremost area of research should be the proper establishment of the core concepts of Hard and Soft magic systems, as their understanding is essential in the comprehension of the problem of our concern, and further research builds upon concepts and problems derived from them.

Afterwards, the research of the discourse needs to be steered towards the problems that arise from the before established concepts, providing us with the first part of the scrutiny, under which the following research fall under. A book by Orson Scott Card, *How to Write Science Fiction and Fantasy* yields itself useful by outlining several predicaments and considerations one faces when approaching the topic of world-building, magic systems included. While as a guide steered towards both science fiction and fantasy literature, by mentioning key elements, areas of overlap and predicaments in the context of comparison. (Card, 1990)

Following Card, Brandon Sanderson has published three essays on the topic magic systems, in which he presents his ideas of "Sanderson's Laws of Magic", providing guidelines to help create functioning systems which help write narratively powerful stories. These essays are further supplemented by lectures, where he recycles the

elaborations, while adding another set of examples and expansions. The essays each state a law, then elaborate and expand on the law, both in context of the existing works and previous laws. The context and discussion of Sanderson's Laws of Magic is strongly based in the magical system design and narrative construction, and as such, requires the reader to have a previous knowledge of story structure, elements and plotting devices, but will be unable to facilitate the reader with the needed knowledge as it is out of scope of the paper. Taken into consideration, further research and reading needs to be done in the realm of storytelling, facilitated by Robert McKee's *Story: Substance, Structure, Style, and the Principles of Screenwriting*, Joseph Campbell's *A hero's Journey* and John Truby's *Anatomy of Story*.

One of the things accomplished by the Sanderson's Laws of Magic is sparking the discussion on the front of magic systems, which resulted in several essays, consisting of critiques, expansions and proposition of several new laws, out of which the most interesting ones fall under the writing blogger known online as Atsiko, who collected his blog posts underneath *Magicology: The study of Magic Systems*, providing us with comprehensive response to Sanderson's venture into magic systems, and a good starting point for following the discourse on the topic. (Atsiko, no date)

For the analytical of comparative part of the research in the realm of visual media and its literary origin, several franchises have been chosen to represent different parts of magic system scale. The criteria for selection was diversity of the magic systems, status as an adaptation of a pre-existing literary work, popularity and the author's familiarity. Selection which is diverse in the categorisation of the magic systems should provide us with an example and context for each analysis, while the popularity attempts to not alienate readers, forcing them to go familiarize themselves with lengthy works. Thus, the following franchises are chosen: The Harry Potter franchise, Lord of the Rings franchise and Fullmetal Alchemist. Both visual media and literary works which they are based upon will be taken into account and provide a basis for both analytical and comparative parts of the research. (Selected works are a subject to change).

Furthermore, several nods to other existing works of art and franchises which will not be subject to deep analysis and comparisons will be made, such as *Game of Thrones*, *Hunter X Hunter*, *Star Wars*, The Marvel and DC universes and several fantasy books.

## 5. DEFINITION OF PROPOSED OUTCOMES

The expected and proposed outcome of this research is major contribution to the sparse academic landscape and speculative discourse of the topic of magic systems, stretching established ideas towards the visual media by extrapolating from literary sources and examples. The paper hopes to bring much needed clarity and guidelines for expressing all sorts of magical systems in an effective, unconvoluted and visual manner in the realm of narrative works.

The devised methodology was designed to both objectively view multiple sides of the argument, but to include practice-based research which puts us into the place of the writers and directors, facilitating better understanding of the difficulties which arise from designing and adapting magic systems in narrative contexts on paper and screen.

Therefore, the paper not only aims to collect, establish, analyse, compare and critique existing discourse, but also build upon it, creating a basic framework for adaptation of magic systems, with the aim to not only help, but encourage the adaptation and the creativity and innovation that follow.

Furthermore, the magic system and its expression designed as a part of practice-based research will be applied in a visual media work, thus subjecting it to further considerations due to requirements of a story, with a goal of strengthening it, both visually and narratively.

## 6. REFERENCES

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