

Tribe of Dawn

Preparatory Research

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I wrote this document as a way to prepare myself before I started working more precisely on *Tribe of Dawn*. I believe that our choice to associate an RTS gameplay with mystical intentions is both very interesting and quite risky, and for both these reasons I had to explore the question a little. Not everything in this document is closely related to the project itself, so don't hesitate to skip the parts you're not interested in!

Games, Knowledge and Mysticism

What is a mystical experience?

A mystical experience is a *direct connection* to the spiritual world. It gives access to metaphysical knowledge *through senses rather than intelligence*. Mysticism is the belief in the possibility of such experiences.

The notion of mystical experience rests on two parallel paradoxes:

- It is a subjective experience which grants objective knowledge
- It is an individual perception revealing the absolute unity of all things

The first paradox has been presented in various ways, but it usually implies that *intelligence and rationality are limited*, and that *altered states of consciousness* may be needed to actually perceive deeper aspects of our world. The second opposition (individuality vs unity) led Walter Terence Stace to establish a distinction between extrovertive and introvertive mystical experiences¹. Both result in perceptions of unity, but the first is achieved through a *vision of the world as a whole*, and the second through a *vision of the world as a void*. The vague aspect of mysticism sometimes allows for these opposed visions to coexist.

The combination of very intimate experiences and absolute communion is a shared aspect of many religious practices, but the opposition to rationality in mysticism makes it possible to fully embrace these contradictions. Consequently, superimposing both paradoxes reveals their irrational coherence: our individual minds are incapable of developing a universal vision, but since *all things are one*, if one manages to sense this connection, they can escape the narrowness of their particular point of view and achieve objectivity.

Mastering the rules

Mysticism postulates that most truths are hidden, and that intelligence is powerless in discovering them. Yet, as living creatures, we have first-hand experience of the rules which govern our world, for we have to obey them at all times. And because this strict obedience is often quite restrictive, we may try to deepen our understanding of these rules, ultimately finding ways to use them to our advantage. Rightfully or not, this ability to discover our world's gears and exploit them became a key aspect of how humans fathom themselves as a species. We take great pride in it, and have thus found many ways of exercising and celebrating it.

¹ Walter Terence Stace, *Mysticism and Philosophy*, MacMillan & Co., 1960.

Most of these mind-sharpening rituals are called games. Games are sets of rules specifically designed to be challenging. They are *spaces dedicated to the mastery of such rules*, and as opposed to the unforgiving playground of real-life, they usually allow us to experiment freely and safely. In regard to mysticism, games function as a completely opposed cult centered on intelligence. They sanctify the *objective reality* of what is observed or deduced by rational thinking, and they may only connect two or more minds together rather than one mind with the spiritual world.

Strategy games and the fantasy of knowledge

Strategy games explore this philosophy in one of its most extreme forms, and they are deeply rooted in the fantasy of gaining knowledge and mastering an environment. Many of them even mimic the evolution of humankind from a fictitious “dark age” to absolute enlightenment, rebranding it as a coming-of-age *tale of mastery* and offering us to embody the ever-increasing wit of our kind.

For this reason, strategy games must make everything simple enough to fit into this narrative, and complex enough to fulfill our longing for brain stimulation. This is achieved by reducing the rational aspects of our world to a *well-designed puzzle* (that is to say a very simple and very complex one), and erasing everything else. In this way, these simplified worlds and their simplified rules manage to take the existential dread out of the intellectual challenge.

Beyond the grasp of intelligence

Yet, outside games, these irrational aspects continue to strike us. There are limits to our analytical power, and these limits could be the reason we feel compelled to expand what little might we have. One of these limits has been particularly distressing for humankind: no matter how close we get to understanding our world’s rules or how skillfully we make use of them, we’re still subjected to them. Not only are we unable to re-design these rules, but we’re also incapable of determining *how they were designed* in the first place, or how, or why. When they strike us as unfair, our powerlessness leaves us with nothing but the need to find some way to cope, and religion has been our most successful invention so far in this regard.

Reason cannot heal emotional pain. It is powerless against fear and has no influence over desires. These emotions dominate us more than reason does and religion is an attempt to reverse this hierarchy by harnessing them. Its language is irrational because it is targeted at them, but its purpose is usually very rational, and religion is often intolerant towards mysticism. However, they both foster faith, which has the capacity to negate the arbitrary aspect of our world’s rules. These rules become just and coherent as soon as they assemble

into a great design. The absurdity of this never-ending game is then nullified, and we are no longer hurt by our inability to find purpose.

Are games irreligious?

Pragmatically, there's no equivalent to the mystery of life's creation inside a game. We know that each game's set of rules was either designed by someone or constructed through several anonymous iterations (depending on the game's nature, we can even modify these rules ourselves). Any spiritual question is thus contained within the boundaries of the game's fictional world, which makes such questions fictional too. We may explore spiritual matters within a game, but the gaming experience is rather profane.

Making up rules for a game is an almost blasphemous act of mimetic play: a child "plays God" when they decree that the floor is now lava, or that this time, paper beats scissors. Some strategy games even contain several layers of mimicry: their designers have created rules which allow their players to set more specific rules. Then, the game's fictional characters will have to follow every single one of these rules. This is the premise of the god game genre. Being a god is not a mystical experience. Inherent omniscience is extremely different from escaping ignorance through a spiritual connection, and being self-sufficient is the opposite of experiencing unity. It is also a very rational experience, which doesn't have much to offer from a sensorial point of view. For this impersonation to become mystical, we would have to leave our transcending god behind and imagine a more intermediate entity, immanently pervading each element of a world and transcendently escaping logical perception. All in all, a full change of perspective would be necessary.

The traditional player role is anti-mystical in at least two ways:

- In most games, from *Battleship* to *Civilization*, all information is immediate, objective and absolute. This vision contradicts the very existence of a spiritual plane, of its mysteries, and of the mystical ways they can be uncovered.
- In most games, from chess to *Pikmin*, the fictional world is a territory to conquer and its characters are instruments in this conquest. This vision prevents any experience of genuine unity or communion from happening.

Mystical experiences in games

Games are unclear rituals. Following very formal rules, they repeat invariably, performance after performance, but in most cases their symbolic value is ignored and illegible. Since the sub-category of video games emerged, giving authors a more precise control over how games were played, many attempts have been made to enhance the mystical potential of these experiences:

- Taking inspiration from the synesthetic research of 20th century artists, objects like *Rez* or *Electroplankton* put sensorial perceptions at the center of meditative and spiritual performances.
- Trying to bring mystery into the playful act, games like *Kowloon's Gate*, *LSD: Dream Emulator* or *Yume Nikki* adapted their interaction rules to their spiritual environment, and focused on the player's subjective experience.
- Others, like *Pathologic* or Nathalie Lawhead's entire output, embraced irrationality as a crucial part of their internal logic.
- *Moon: RPG Remix Adventure*, which later inspired *Undertale*, was an attempt at reversing the individualistic mechanics of the RPG genre in order to put the mystical communion of all souls at the center of its experience.
- Finally, narrative games such as *Mutazione* have managed to provoke feelings of spiritual communion and unity through decentralized subjectivity and ritualistic mechanics.

A form of irrational communion could also be recognized in *Twitch plays Pokémon*. This kind of collective experiment has been very hard to label, including for its participants. While it seemed to reveal unknown truths about ourselves as a group or as individuals, it also seemed completely alien to human reason, and the crowd witnessed its own actions as if they were commanded by a summoned spirit. The value and meaning of a game is always modified by the way it is played, and mysticism can be achieved through unconventional methods of play, whether they're imagined by the players or by the designers. Finally, these variations can also affect the way a game environment is perceived. An object like *Petscop*, which is presented as completely unknown and unexplained, no longer seems like a set of logical rules invented by a designer. The staging of this object's appearance surrounded it with the same doubts we have about our world's creation: it is unclear who designed its rules, how, and why.

Subjectivity in rational game systems

Although it is definitely possible to build mystical video game experiences, does this possibility extend to each and every gameplay genre? Some of them seem more deeply rooted in the rules of logic, the pleasures of individualism and the fantasy of objectivity than others.

The strategy genre, in particular, has very anti-mystical pillars:

- A focus on skillful rational thinking
- An immediate control of allied units, which often comes with a godlike view
- Immediate and objective information
- Clear, consistent and predictable rules
- Domination as the long-term goal

But it is possible to subvert these pillars without escaping the strategy genre:

- Although mysticism postulates that there are limits to what intelligence can detect. Experiencing what rational mastery feels like can actually reinforce the effect of this revelation. If the player can solve some problems with intelligence, but faces the obvious fact that something else will be needed for others, they can have a more complete experience and measure the merits of both worlds. Mysticism allows individuals to regain power and relinquish control at the same time, and both of these dynamics are useful tools of game design.
- It's impossible to feel a genuine, symmetrical connection to beings we feel superior to. On the other hand, immediate communication can be an aspect of absolute unity, and a general, objective point of view can be a consequence of collective vision. These two essential features of strategy games have traditionally been presented as attributes and means of power because we played as individual rulers. Switching the point of focus from a single individual to the community as a whole can allow to retain these features while also radically redefining the player's relationship to the game's environment.
- A core element of mysticism is the revelation of mysteries. Secrets are meant to be discovered, so the only difference between mystery and information is time, and there is a strategy-friendly solution to delay information: make it a resource. Introducing the unveiling of mysteries as a new element within the task line can be a way to cast a veil of darkness on the world without impoverishing gameplay.
- There's no mystery where there's predictability, but it is possible to introduce unexpected variations or surprising events while also maintaining consistent rules. A strategy game's environment must feel fair and allow its player to plan. But if the planning options are simple and broad enough, it isn't necessary to know exactly what we're planning for. If randomness doesn't change the basic rules, it doesn't harm. Having a blizzard or a demon attack in *Northgard* isn't unfair. Introducing mystical research as a gameplay element to gain information about incoming events can also be a solution.
- Introducing survival elements into the genre allows to replace the domination goal with a more reasonable flourishing goal. That's what happens in *Banished*: every human living within the game area is part of the same community, and there's no opposition. Another difference with traditional strategy games should be the representation of death. Death is a very simple yet hard to master rule of our world. Arguably, it is the most defining rule of the experience we call life. As such, it is at the core of religious practices, sentiments and narratives. We should try to represent this aspect of death in a meaningful way, rather than making it either a casualty or a victory.

Mysticism in Tribe of Dawn

“But thought’s the slave of life, and life’s time’s fool”

Shakespeare, *Henri IV*, 1st part, verse 4

Who is the player?

The player should help strengthen the bond which links the creature to the humanoids. They shouldn’t feel like one individual entity controlling the tribe, but rather like the tribe itself as a whole, which would include the creature. *Tribe of Dawn* isn’t a God Game. Although the humanoids depend on a larger, mystical creature, it doesn’t control them, and they don’t control it either.

Reason and Faith

The mystical aspects of the tribe’s actions (prayers and rituals) shouldn’t feel like tools used within a rational management. These aspects shouldn’t feel less powerful than reason. They should serve entirely different purposes, and feel absolutely needed when reason shows its limits.

Survival and Romanticism

The weakness of the humanoids in comparison to the greatness of nature should be experienced (as in *Shadow of the Colossus*), but it should also be overcome when it becomes clear that the tribe is part of its environment, not opposed to it. Their struggle is a quest for balance rather than a fight.

Connection to the spiritual world

In *Tribe of Dawn*’s environment, sacred creatures can be seen and felt. Throughout the game, as more prayers are learnt, it becomes easier to communicate directly with them. The tribe’s culture is focused on spirituality, and this aspect of its life is not separate from quotidian, practical actions. Its three orders, whether they’re in charge of exploration, prayers of tending to the village, are all religious.

Sensorial communion

Prayers, which align on the sounds and vibration of the creature’s rhythm, should participate in a sort of collective transe. Rhythm, unity and knowledge should blend into one intense and continuous signal.

The world as a whole

Throughout the game, a series of broken bonds between creatures and humanoids, the tribes and the land, the creatures as a group and the two sides of the day are mended. Connection after connection, this entire environment should feel like a unique entity.

Subjectivity (a few ideas)

- Knowledge can be a rare resource: specific actions (like exploration, research or inventory) could be needed to make valuable information available.
- Information gathered by the player through individual units should feel subjective without making the game unfair. For example, different explorers could detect different elements depending on their personality, and having a tile explored by the 3 of them would ensure that everything has been detected.
- We can imagine a specific prayer or action which allows the humanoids to share their perceptions and achieve objectivity, providing the player with exact and more precise information.

Mysticism in non-religious Art

Although mysticism is a spiritual experience, it has been explored extensively by atheistic or agnostic artists, not only as a subject, but also as a creative phenomenon or philosophy. In 19th century Europe, the rise of “Art for Art’s sake” was accompanied by several forms of religious sentiment directed towards Art. Examples include Joséphin Péladan’s occultism, the mystical romanticism of Gérard de Nerval or the *Religion of Beauty* described by Robert de la Sizeranne in John Ruskin’s writings. The most renowned example of a profane mystical experience in Arts came at the beginning of the 20th century, in the form of a small cake. The taste of Proust’s madeleine is known to have caused a character’s long-lost memories to reappear suddenly. For the hero of *In Search of Lost Time*, this sensitive experience known as involuntary memory actually unlocked a secret door of perception, revealing the unknown reality of past moments, abolishing the limits of time, space or identity, and containing the secret of artistic creation.

This kind of altered state of perception has been pursued in various manners. In the early 20th century, Hans Prinzhorn started collecting and exhibiting the works of his psychiatric patients, establishing links between illness and creative self-expression. This inspired Jean Dubuffet to coin the Art Brut label to describe works created in extreme mental states, or by persons whose creative minds weren’t parasitized by artistic culture. But cultivated artists wanted their part in this exploration too. The spiritualists used precipitated painting, the surrealists used automatic writing, and Aldous Huxley used drugs. His methods strongly influenced the lifestyle and philosophy of the beat generation, as well as the psychedelia subculture of the 60’s. It fully embraced the paradoxes of mysticism, managing to focus both on the individual and on the world as a whole:

The mystical experience is doubly valuable; it is valuable because it gives the experiencer a better understanding of [themselves] and the world and because it may help [them] to lead a less self-centered and more creative life.²

While the occultism of the romantic era was mainly inspired by mystical forms of christianity or by fantasized versions of medieval paganism, Huxley was mainly influenced by Hinduism, Buddhism, and Asian philosophers. He shares this trait with virtually every Western artist of his time who expressed interest in mysticism.

Before the Beatles travelled to Rishikesh to learn transcendental meditation, Ananda Coomaraswamy’s views on religious Indian Art directly influenced Jacob Epstein, Stella

² Aldous Huxley, *Moksha: Aldous Huxley’s Classic Writings on Psychedelics and the Visionary Experience*, ed. Cynthia Palmer & Michael Horowitz, Park Street Press, 1999.

Bloch, Alfred Stieglitz or John Cage. The latter's introduction of noise, randomness and chaos into Western music can be seen as a mystical act, and he notably used the divinatory art of *I Ching* in his performances. In the 1930s, Antonin Artaud praised Eastern performing arts, and Balinese theatre in particular, for their intense connection to mystical experiences, which he deemed largely superior to Europe's over-intellectualized theatre. Subsequently, several Western troupes such as Ariane Mnouchkine's Théâtre du Soleil started learning or taking inspiration from Kathakali, Noh, Xiqu or Topeng, all of which have their roots in religious tales or performances. The appropriation of Eastern religious practices by irreligious Western artists has since been extensively criticized. It is mostly perpetrated by intellectuals perceiving their own civilization as overly rational, and thus seeking some truth in cultures they think are less decadent. More often than not, this reasoning is grounded in the colonialist beliefs that these cultures are also less developed, or that they are inherently different.

In areas populated by communities whose forebears were uprooted by colonization, the use of religious elements in non-religious Art is especially prevalent, notably as a way to assert a cultural heritage. In Brazil, Candomblé and Umbanda, syncretic religions created by the African diaspora, have become a crucial part of the country's artistic culture. Their orixás, divinities originating from the West African Yoruba religion, are recurring subjects of the abundant Brazilian music scene. This absorption engendered mystical masterpieces such as the *Afro-Sambas* of Baden Powell and Vinicius de Moraes, who were both irreligious when the album was recorded.

Secular Art – Art which isn't related to religion, rituals or spirituality in any way – is mostly a modern thing which became relevant since the Italian Renaissance³. That is to say that through History, Art has mainly been used as a way to connect – through senses – with sacred mysteries. It could be argued that the belief in such a power in Art is in itself mystical, and it is quite telling that the development of secular Art was concomitant with the appearance of almost religious forms of Art appreciation. Its mystical potential wasn't altered by its secularisation. It seemed stronger than ever when Kandinsky described it in *Concerning the Spiritual in Art*, and this power of horror and fascination has remained unchanged ever since. From the search for irrational knowledge in *Twin Peaks* to the communion with a spiritual world in *Majora's Mask*, new occult languages and rituals are still consistently imagined to fuel the mystical influence of the Arts.

³ Elena Martinique, "Defining Secular Art. or a Different Kind of Religious Experience", Widewalls, 2016, <https://www.widewalls.ch/magazine/secular-art>.