

ARCANE DESIGNING

GETTING DOWN-TO-EARTH
WITH MAGIC



A MASTER'S THESIS BY MAJA RIEMANN

ARCANE DESIGNING: GETTING DOWN TO EARTH WITH MAGIC

Master's Thesis
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Front page image: The image is titled “Great Cormorant (Phalacrocorax carbo), Little Egret (Egretta garzetta) and Gadwall (Mareca strepera) in Taudaha Lake, near Katmandu, Nepal” and was taken by Prasan Shrestha. https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Phalacrocorax_carbo,_Egretta_garzetta_and_Mareca_strepera_in_Taudha_Lake.jpg



Preface and Acknowledgements

My motivation for this thesis came from a wish to escape the Modern Western onto-epistemology to better design for a relational world and thus be better able to contribute to making life a little better for both humans and other-than-humans. I was also provoked by often hearing that magic and fantasy were not relevant within the scope of Speculative Design. Dunne & Raby’s old belief that we needed to stay within the lines of what the “possible” following the Futures Cone never fully made sense to me—I often felt like I drew from my childhood and teenage years immersed in fantasy, and I certainly felt like my youth, full of fantasy, helped me to be more imaginative and more flexible about alternative ideas. Finally, I started to notice how tech companies appropriate a language of magic in their deceiving narratives of their products, especially related to AI. Hence, this is also an attempt to reclaim magic as a force that can help us reconnect and move Down-to-Earth rather than further Out-of-this-World.

This master’s thesis could not have become what it did without all the wonderful support from the people around me. First of all, I would like to thank my amazing supervisors, Jeff and Iohanna, and my external mentor, Oskar. A really big thank you, Jeff, for meeting me—a random student blabbing about magic—with a fully open mind and an enthusiastic “yes” to magic as a thesis topic. Thank you for always explaining things patiently and clearly when I lacked experience, and for thinking of me when you came across inspiring material and sending it my way. And a warm, big thank you, Iohanna, for teaching me so much, for always pushing me toward doing better, for always giving wise and sharp advice, and for doing all of that with a magical kindness. Thank you both for your extensive editorial comments on the thesis; they were extremely helpful. A really big thank you also to Oskar for being up for mentoring this project. I truly enjoyed our conversations, which were always fun and inspiring, and I appreciated all your advice, which really furthered the work. A heartfelt thank you should also go to an earlier supervisor, Virginia, for providing the seeds for this work through our collaboration on earlier research. You really expanded my horizon in so many ways, and you continued to give me knowledge and advice throughout this thesis, for which I am very grateful. To all four of you, I sincerely hope to get opportunities to work together again in the future. It was indeed a power team.

An extremely big and loving thank you to my partner, Otto. I could not have done any of it without you. Thank you for always diffracting my thoughts with yours, and for all the very helpful help—such as being the secret backstage fairy placer during the Witch Walks, and co-facilitating with me at ThingsCon. Of course, also a big thank you for our amazing teamwork in all our earlier research endeavours, on which this thesis builds. And lastly, a big thank you for being the best partner I could ever imagine, and that is not so little, as I am quite practiced in imagining.

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with open minds, and for making the Witch Walks a magical experience for me to facilitate. I would also like to thank all the ThingsCon participants who joined my workshop full of energy, for making such wonderful magical artefacts and for spreading magical vibes throughout the session. A thank you should also go to ThingsCon and Iskander for trusting me and giving me such a magical opportunity to facilitate at your fun and inspiring conference.

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Finally, a warm thank you to my family and friends, especially Gül, for all our inspiring conversations about imagination, speculative design, and more-than-human design.

And thank you to the landvættir, the jellyfish, the fairies, the mushrooms, the late-blooming flowers, and all the more-than-human agencies that showed up when I started paying attention.

Delft, 17th of February 2026

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Abstract

To counter the ontological disconnection of Western Modernity, this thesis develops Arcane Designing, a practice of designing with magic that opens onto-epistemic pathways Down-to-Earth. Responding to calls from Escobar (2018) for a pluriversal and relational reorientation of design, and from Dunne and Raby (2025) for moving beyond the restrictions that modern ontology places on the design imagination, the thesis explores how worlds of magic—including fantasy, witchcraft, European folklore, and mythology—can serve as resources for more-than-human design. Drawing on decolonial, feminist, and posthumanist scholarship, it frames the ontological disconnection of Western modernity as an active condition reproduced through practices, stories, and material arrangements, and develops Latour’s (2019) concept of Down-to-Earth as a critical onto-epistemic reorientation for designing toward the Terrestrial. Through three cycles of research-through-design: 1) speculating with landvættir, 2) cultivating a practice of witch-crafting, and 3) remixing fantastical worlds of magic through a card-based design game, the thesis finds that Arcane Designing can redirect attention toward the more-than-human world, create conditions for perceptual reopenings, and provide designers with imaginative spaces beyond Western-modern onto-epistemic constraints. A key finding is that magic functions as a mode of attention: the entry point is perceptual and playful, which makes the practice accessible across diverse ontological starting points. The thesis further identifies the deliberate blurring of fiction and reality as an active onto-epistemic space where ontological openings can occur. It contributes with Arcane Designing as a promising practice within more-than-human design, along with a set of guiding considerations for designers who wish to engage with magic as a way of worlding Down-to-Earth.

“It matters what matters we use to think other matters with; it matters what stories we tell to tell other stories with; it matters what knots knot knots, what thoughts think thoughts, what descriptions describe descriptions, what ties tie ties. It matters what worlds make worlds, what worlds make stories”

- Donna J. Haraway, 2016

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CHAPTER 1

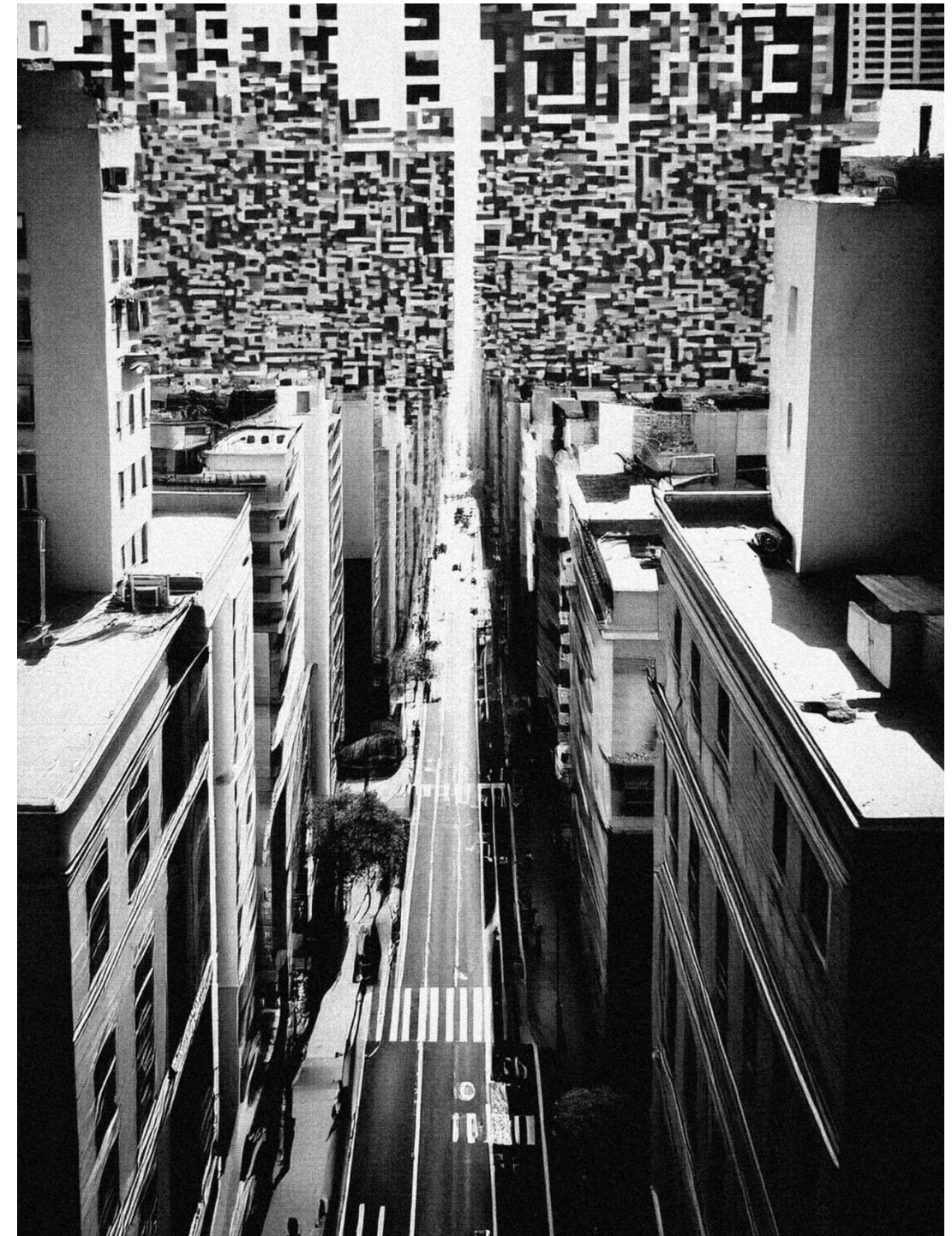
SETTING THE STAGE

Problem Framing: The Disconnection of Western Modernity

As we face several intersecting ecological and social challenges, researchers warn us of our increasing disconnection from the Earth, each other, and our bodies (Escobar, 2018; Escobar et al., 2024; Escobar & de la Cadena, 2024; Heitlinger et al., 2024). This disconnection manifests at multiple scales. On the personal level in everyday lives, many experience a sense of meaninglessness and emptiness, alongside a diminished capacity to feel the richness and aliveness of the world (Blackie, 2018). On the ecological level, we continue to exploit and destroy our planet and the ecosystems on which our life depends (Fry, 2020; Heitlinger et al., 2024; Latour, 2018). These intertwined crises, of social and ecological demise, are shaped by a range of entangled dynamics, such as the accelerating pace of modern societies (Rosa, 2010, 2013), the attention economy of social media (Williams, 2018), and consumer-capitalist logics that promise fulfilment through consumerism, but often only deliver a fleeting relief (Bauman, 2007). However, these circumstances are not only causes of the disconnection; they can also be seen as symptoms of it. Rather than being isolated problems, they can be understood as expressions of the same underlying condition, a condition of detachment and alienation, that is part of the foundation that makes possible our modern ways of being in the world (Escobar et al., 2024).

Scholars working across decolonial, feminist, and posthumanist thought assert that this disconnection stems from the ontology of Western Modernity (Escobar, 2018; Escobar et al., 2024). Ontology refers to our fundamental ways of being and how we understand reality itself. Western Modernity is forged on an ontology that stems from and continuous to produce uprootedness (Escobar & de la Cadena, 2024) by organising reality through a series of hierarchical dualisms, such as human/nature and mind/body, which place humans outside and above nature and elevate thinking as separate from and superior to the body (Escobar et al., 2024). The belief in human exceptionalism creates a disconnect from the more-than-human world, i.e., other species and how we are interdependent (Heitlinger et al., 2024). Beyond these dualisms, Modern ontology produces disconnection through universalizing frameworks that treat categories like ‘the economy’ or ‘science’ as self-evident realities rather than particular ways of organizing life, and through privileging ‘objective’ and calculative rationality as the only legitimate form of knowledge while dismissing embodied, relational, or spiritual ways of knowing (Escobar, 2018; Escobar et al., 2024). Moreover, Modern ontology treats this particular way of organizing reality as the only real one while demoting other ways of being and understanding reality to belief (Escobar, 2018). Arturo Escobar, a leading scholar on political ecology and post-development theory and a central figure to the ontological turn within design research, describes that modern ontology sustains “a feedback loop of increasing disconnection” (Escobar, 2018, p. 99), in which separation from the Earth, from others, and even from one’s own body becomes normalised and continuously reinforced. From this perspective, **disconnection can be addressed as a condition that is continuously reproduced by the very ways in which Modern worlds are imagined, designed, and lived.**

Daily Life in the City
by Elise Racine & The Bigger Picture /
<https://betterimagesofai.org>



To address disconnection in this way, we first need to understand how to move away from the ontology of Western Modernity (Escobar, 2018; Escobar et al., 2024; Escobar & de la Cadena, 2024; Heitlinger et al., 2024). Plural ontologies are a good starting point to question whose worlds are made possible, and which forms of life are made invisible or unthinkable. This Master’s thesis, therefore, approaches the disconnection, alienation, and estrangement from the more-than-human world through a pluriversal ontological lens (Escobar, 2018; Escobar & de la Cadena, 2024) and explores how design might contribute to opening up for more ontological possibilities of relationality in relation to healing the Western uprootedness.

Calls for an Onto-epistemic Reorientation of Design

Design, as a practice fundamentally concerned with how worlds are imagined, made, and lived, has been recognized as a field that can help us move into new ontological directions (Escobar, 2018; Fry, 2018; Willis, 2006). Yet, a challenge is still that much of design, and the design imagination continues to operate within the very same rationalist and modernist thought (Dunne & Raby, 2025; Escobar, 2018).

This is particularly evident in human-centered design (HCD), the dominant paradigm in contemporary design and HCI. While HCD has been valuable in shifting design from techno-centric to human-centric approaches, it has also been complicit in perpetuating modern ontological boundaries (Forlano, 2017; Giaccardi et al., 2025; Wakkary, 2021), and with that, the ontological disconnection. HCD builds on an idea of human exceptionalism stemming from a Western humanist tradition, and has in practice “elevated certain human needs and desires at the expense of all other forms of life and has also privileged the needs and desires of some humans above others.” (Giaccardi et al., 2025, p. 1). It is founded on an understanding of the human as a universal, discrete, individual subject, implicitly modelled on the white, able-bodied, Western man, and remains beholden to neoliberal logics that define this subject primarily as a consumer (Forlano, 2017). So, how might design move away from its defuturing legacy to become able to counter the Western uprootedness?

“Tackling these questions might require a significant reorientation of the rationalist and modernist cultural background from which design emerged and within which it continues to operate.” (Escobar, 2018, p. 69)

Escobar calls for an onto-epistemic reorientation of design: one that builds on pluriversality and relationality. This requires stepping outside the onto-epistemic space of Western social theory and into the epistemic configurations associated with relational ontologies. It is here, “that we might find more compelling answers to the current conjuncture of modern problems with insufficient modern solutions.” (Escobar, 2018, p. 68) Adding to this, Dunne & Raby (2025), pioneers within the field of Critical Speculative Design, now alert that even the design imagination continues to be policed and limited by Modern ontology. They, similarly, call for moving outside the boundaries of “the possible” to “leave behind the overly rational that defines much of Western speculative fiction

in design” (Dunne & Raby, 2025, p. 48). They find that “the future as a concept for facilitating imaginative thought, in design, has become too restrictive” (Dunne & Raby, 2025, p. 4), and these limitations on the design imagination condemn designers to being stuck in forever “reimagining variations of a broken reality” (Dunne & Raby, 2025, p. 48). Instead, we need to start designing from places that:

“... put us into radically different relationships to what already exists or might exist? That start from different ontologies? That embrace ideas that might, in the here and now, seem absurd, odd, or unrealistic, maybe even impossible” (Dunne & Raby, 2025, p. 66).

More-than-human Design (MTHD) is already part of such an ongoing ontological turn within design and HCI (Giaccardi et al., 2025). It has emerged as a response to the reductionist and rationalist legacy that limits human-centered design and aims to break its reinforcement of anthropocentrism, extractivism, and ecological destruction (Forlano, 2017; Tironi et al., 2024; Wakkary, 2021). It proposes a shift from designing for human users towards designing with heterogeneous assemblages of humans, nonhumans, technologies, and environments (Nicenboim, 2024; Wakkary, 2021), reframing design into a practice of engaging with relational ecologies in which agency is distributed across species, materials, and infrastructures. So far, it has proved useful in understanding the perspectives of non-humans and foregrounding interdependence, care, and situatedness (Rosén et al., 2024).

However, to **align more-than-human design more with the pluriversal and decolonial onto-epistemic reorientation that Escobar calls for—and to position more-than-human design as a field that can equip designers with the imaginative resources Dunne & Raby call for—the field needs to explore additional pathways** for creating imaginaries outside Western-modern onto-epistemic limits.

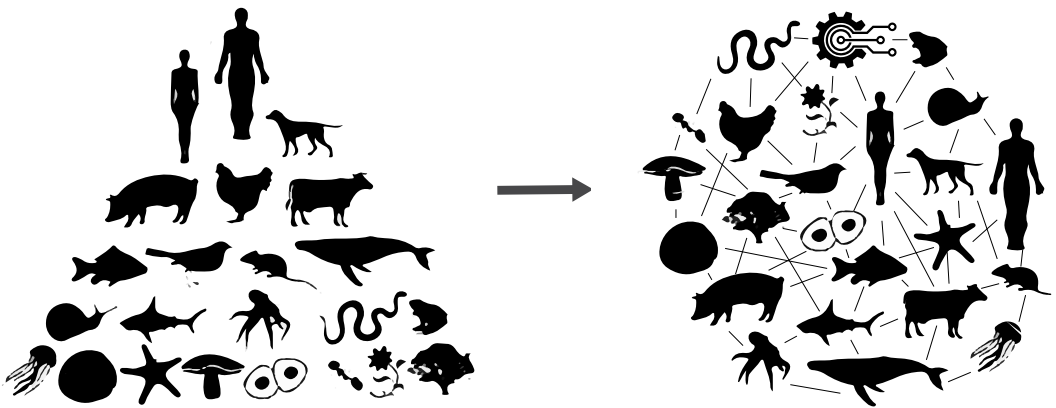


Figure 1:
Moving from human-centred design to more-than-human design necessitates decentering the human and shifting from a hierarchical view of life to one that foregrounds relations and interdependencies.
by Rosén et al. (2022), adapted from Lehmann (2019)

Opportunity: Designing with Magic

I see an opportunity to answer these calls to design from and towards different ontological positions, and to move beyond current constraints on the design imagination, by considering worlds of magic, such as those of mythology, folklore, and fantasy, as potentially containing what Escobar calls “alternative Wests”; non-modern ontologies that exist even within the West (Escobar, 2018; Escobar et al., 2024). This inquiry builds on my earlier research with Otto Rønnest (2025) and Virginia Tassinari, where we found that engaging with Nordic Mythology through Critical Fabulation, a form of speculative fiction, enabled us to uncover obscured and forgotten relational elements and incorporate these into our design practices. We argued that, through being an embodied experience that engages the imagination in both critical and affirmative ways, the act of writing Critical Fabulations enabled ontological openings for us to discover our own situated understanding of relationality.

European mythologies and folklore are rich with non-modern fragments, such as animism and non-dichotomous thinking (Rønnest & Riemann, 2025), that Western modernity is complacent to have left behind as pre-enlightenment nonsense (Storm, 2017). Such non-modern ontologies might, nevertheless, be familiar to us Westerners through popular media such as fantasy, albeit in distorted forms. Like Nordic Mythology, fantasy—which often includes traces of mythology and folklore—may similarly hold potential seeds for ontological spaces of relationality that can be incorporated into design and transitional imagination work. The influential feminist writer Ursula K. Le Guin, known especially for her speculative fiction encompassing both science fiction and fantasy, wrote a great deal about the value of fantasy. She asserted that imagination and myth can convey truths that literal realism cannot, helping readers confront and rethink aspects of their own reality (Le Guin,

1993). Fantasy and speculative fiction enlarge consciousness, offering perspectives on freedom, cultures, humans, relations, and the world in ways that are not confined to the rational limits of Western modernity and its capitalist demands for productivity and optimisation (Le Guin, 1993). In the essay *Why Americans Fear Dragons*, Le Guin puts it beautifully and provocatively:

“For fantasy is true, of course. It isn’t factual, but it is true. Children know that. Adults know it too, and that is precisely why many of them are afraid of fantasy. They know that its truth challenges, even threatens, all that is false, all that is phony, unnecessary, and trivial in the life they have let themselves be forced into living.” (Le Guin, 1993, p. 40)

Furthermore, aspects of magic such as mystery, spirituality, and enchantment seems promising to the task of re-finding connection to the more-than-human world, as they imply elements of not-knowing (de la Cadena, 2021), and might contribute to “arts of noticing” (Tsing, 2015a), in ways that bring feelings of affect, wonder and awe, and a sense of the richness and aliveness of the world (Blackie, 2018; Vervoort, 2024).

Arcane Designing, my name for designing with magic, provides a practical, situated way of engaging pluriversal relational ontologies from within Western contexts through magical worlding. It aims to find ways of designing for reconnection through (re)discovering non-modern ways of being, thinking, and knowing by diving into arcane worlds of magic, including fantasy, as well as European folklore and mythology. It offers an opportunity to view our current relationships with the world through new lenses, while also generating new seeds for a different design imagination that stems from a different ontological position—one that can inform designs that help us reconnect and bring us (back) down to earth.



Arcane
[/'ɑ:keɪn/] adj.
1. The mysterious and obscured.
2. Old, hidden, forgotten, and strange knowledges and practices.

Down-to-Earth: An Onto-epistemic Orientation Towards the Terrestrial

In this section, I develop “Down-to-Earth” as an onto-epistemic orientation for Arcane Designing. The term is adopted from Bruno Latour’s essay *Down to Earth: Politics in the New Climatic Regime* (2018). Latour was a French philosopher and sociologist of science, known for his work in Science and Technology Studies (STS) and Actor-Network Theory, who throughout his career challenged and greatly influenced modern science (“Bruno Latour,” 2026). In *Down to Earth*, he diagnoses our current political and ecological conditions and calls for a reorientation toward what he names the Terrestrial. Latour’s analysis is primarily political, but it carries ontological and epistemological implications that he does not fully elaborate. I build on his concept by drawing on Escobar and Donna Haraway, another influential scholar who has contributed greatly to the intersection of STS and feminist theory (“Donna Haraway,” 2026), to develop these dimensions further. Together, these perspectives allow me to articulate Down-to-Earth as an onto-epistemic orientation that can guide and evaluate my practice of Arcane Designing. The section concludes with a set of evaluation criteria for moving Down-to-Earth through Arcane Designing. This orientation is also necessary because not all magic moves us toward Earth; as I will show in chapter 2, some magical traditions have been oriented toward abstraction, domination, and escape from earthly conditions, while others remain grounded in relationality, situatedness, and reciprocity with the more-than-human world. Down-to-Earth thus serves both as an onto-epistemic design orientation and as a critical compass for navigating worlds of magic and discerning which practices and imaginaries can help us re-find belonging.

Latour’s Political Diagnosis

In his essay *Down to Earth: Politics in the New Climatic Regime* (2026), Latour offers a diagnosis of our current political conditions, which, he argues, cannot be understood as separate from our current ecological conditions. What he aims to show is that the old political axes of left-right and global-local no longer adequately map our situation. The political orientation has turned toward a new axis with two new attractors: Out-of-This-World and the Terrestrial.

To understand this turn, Latour first examines what the Global and the Local have come to mean. The Global, which ought to have meant “multiplying viewpoints, registering a greater number of varieties, taking into account a larger number of beings, cultures, phenomena, organisms, and people.” (“Bruno Latour,” 2026, p. 12), has instead come to mean “a single vision” of modernization, progress, and development toward a universal, abstract, and placeless horizon, imposed on everyone by a few. The Local, which might have meant “to preserve, maintain, ensure one’s belonging to a land, a place, a soil, a community” (Latour, 2018, p. 15), has instead come to represent a return to idylised pasts, ethnic identity, and borders. It is backward-looking, often nationalist, offering attachment to place but in exclusive and reactionary forms.

Latour argues that neither of these attractors, as they have been enacted, “has any lasting material existence.” None of them was ever really on Earth. The modernization of globalism always implicitly assumed infinite space for expansion and treated the Earth as an inexhaustible resource. For a long time, this could be disguised as a realistic project; universal progress seemed possible, and the Earth seemed passive. But climate change has exposed this trajectory for what it always was: a disconnected, ecologically impossible dream. The Local, meanwhile, offers only false refuge. Its fantasy of returning to a bounded, protected homeland cannot hold either; there is no sealed-off place untouched by ecological and political entanglements. There is no going back to a ‘pure’ past. Both the Global and the Local, in their diminished forms, lack earthly grounding. They are both logics of Western Modernity.

Departing from the Global-Local, Latour names and warns against “Out-of-This-World” as a new attractor that has already mobilized significant political force from across the old axes. It designates an orientation of those elites who, having recognised that the planet can no longer sustain the universalisation of modern ways of life, have chosen to abandon any commitment to a shared Earth. They secure their own interests while publicly denying the climate crisis. Out-of-This-World draws on both the abstract universalism and extractivism of the Global and the exclusionary protectionism of the Local. Were the Global dream of modernisation implicitly relied on unearthly conditions, the Out-of-This-World is a politics of explicit escape from earthly conditions. It is here we now find

“those who want to escape from the problems of the planet by moving to Mars, or teleporting themselves into computers, or becoming truly post-human thanks to the marriage of DNA, cognitive science, and robots.” (Latour, 2018, p. 30)

Against this, Latour calls for mobilising towards the Terrestrial across what remains on the old global, local, left, and right axes. The Terrestrial is neither abstract globalism nor nostalgic localism, but an orientation toward Earth. Earth here is understood as a political actor. Landing as Terrestrials means acknowledging our dependence on the “critical zone”, the thin, fragile layer where life exists. Importantly, the Terrestrial is not a return to soil in the sense of blood-and-soil nationalism; it is a “landing” in the material, political, and ecological conditions that sustain life and which we are always already entangled with.

“In the end, what counts is not knowing whether you are for or against globalization, for or against the local; all that counts is understanding whether you are managing to register, to maintain, to cherish a maximum number of alternative ways of belonging to the world.” (Latour, 2018, p. 16)

Down-to-Earth then names an orientation and direction: a movement away from the Out-of-This-World trajectory, and toward the Terrestrial. I believe that if we want to re-find belonging and design for re-connection, it is this direction we must take.

Down-to-Earth as an Orientation for Arcane Designing

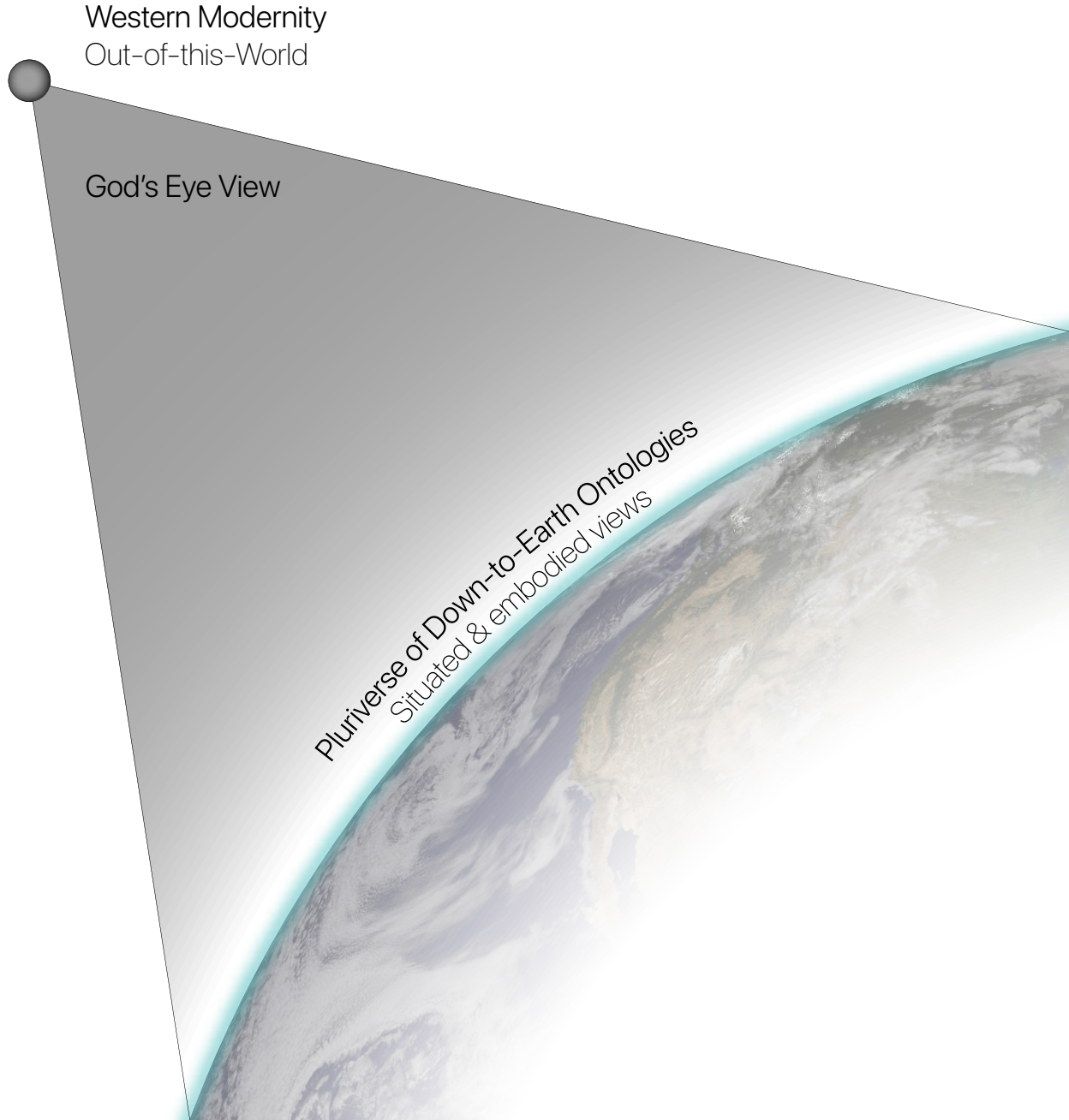
Latour’s diagnosis is primarily political, but it has epistemological and ontological dimensions that he does not fully elaborate. To develop Down-to-Earth as an onto-epistemic orientation for this design endeavour, I draw here on Haraway and Escobar.

Haraway’s critique of the “god-trick” offers a frame to describe the epistemological position of Out-of-This-World as a crystallised late state of Western Modernity. In her essay *Situated Knowledges* (1988), Haraway challenges the modern scientific ideal of objectivity, which claims to see everything from nowhere, to produce knowledge untouched by the knower’s body, position, or interests. She names this the “god-trick”: a disembodied vision that claims universality while hiding its own situatedness. It is a view that has severed vision from the body and the rest of the sensory system. It is the gaze that signifies the “unmarked positions of Man and White, one of the many nasty tones of the word ‘objectivity’ to feminist ears in scientific and technological, late-industrial, militarized, racist, and male-dominant societies” (Haraway, 1988, p. 581). This is the epistemological stance of the Out-of-This-World position: a view from above that denies its dependence on earthly conditions. A view that sees, without being seen. Against this, Haraway argues for situated knowledges and perspectives, ways of knowing and ‘seeing’ that are embodied, partial, and accountable. To know from somewhere, from a body firmly grounded on and within Earth, with responsibility for what we see and claim. To counter the disconnected God-view of Western Modernity, I take Haraway’s concept of feminist objectivity as the kind of objectivity needed to get Down-to-Earth: “Feminist objectivity means quite simply situated knowledges.” (Haraway, 1988, p. 581)

It is worth noting a nuance to this, namely, that the Out-of-This-World position seems to not only manifest as the classic god-trick of objective science, since it also includes climate denial and post-truth politics. Post-truth politics meaning a political environment where objective facts have become less important than emotional appeals and personal beliefs, leading to a blurring of the lines between truth and falsehood in political discourses (“Post-Truth Politics,” 2026). This phenomenon often involves the manipulation of information to create narratives that resonate with the public, especially influenced by social media and partisan news outlets. This may seem opposed to (disembodied) scientific objectivity, but it seems to me that they share the same underlying logic; both presuppose one singular truth, and both are made possible by discrediting situated, embodied, pluriversal, and accountable ways of knowing. Post-truth politics likely wouldn’t have been possible, nor relevant, without the god-trick of Western Modernity.

If Haraway tells us that landing on Earth means knowing from situated positions, Escobar reminds us that there are many positions on which to land: there are many ways of belonging to Earth. In *Designs for the Pluriverse* (2018), Escobar critiques the “One-World World” (Law’s term): the modern assumption that there is a single reality, a single valid way of understanding and inhabiting the world, to which all others must eventually conform (Escobar, 2018; Law, 2015). The pluriverse names the multiplicity of ontologies, cosmologies, and ways of worlding that have been marginalised, suppressed, or destroyed by modernity, but which persist and resist (Escobar, 2018). Thus,

Figure 2: *Developing Down-to-Earth means to move from the God’s eye view to a pluriverse of situated and embodied views.*



Down-to-Earth is not aiming for one single destination but for a pluriverse of terrestrial ways of being. Lastly, Escobar et al.’s (2024) concept of relationality names the diverse onto-epistemic orientations grounded in radical interdependence, which allows us to fully consider our earthly entanglements and the Earth’s (political) agency in our messy ethico-onto-epistemic conditions. An important task, that Latour also emphasises, in orienting us Down-to-Earth. Thus, to make a movement toward ways of being, knowing, and designing that acknowledge and cultivate our entanglements rather than deny them, relationality becomes a necessary dimension. There is not one correct way to land; there are many ways of belonging to Earth, many situated and relational ontologies grounded in radical interdependence. These commitments result in evaluation criteria, as listed on the right:

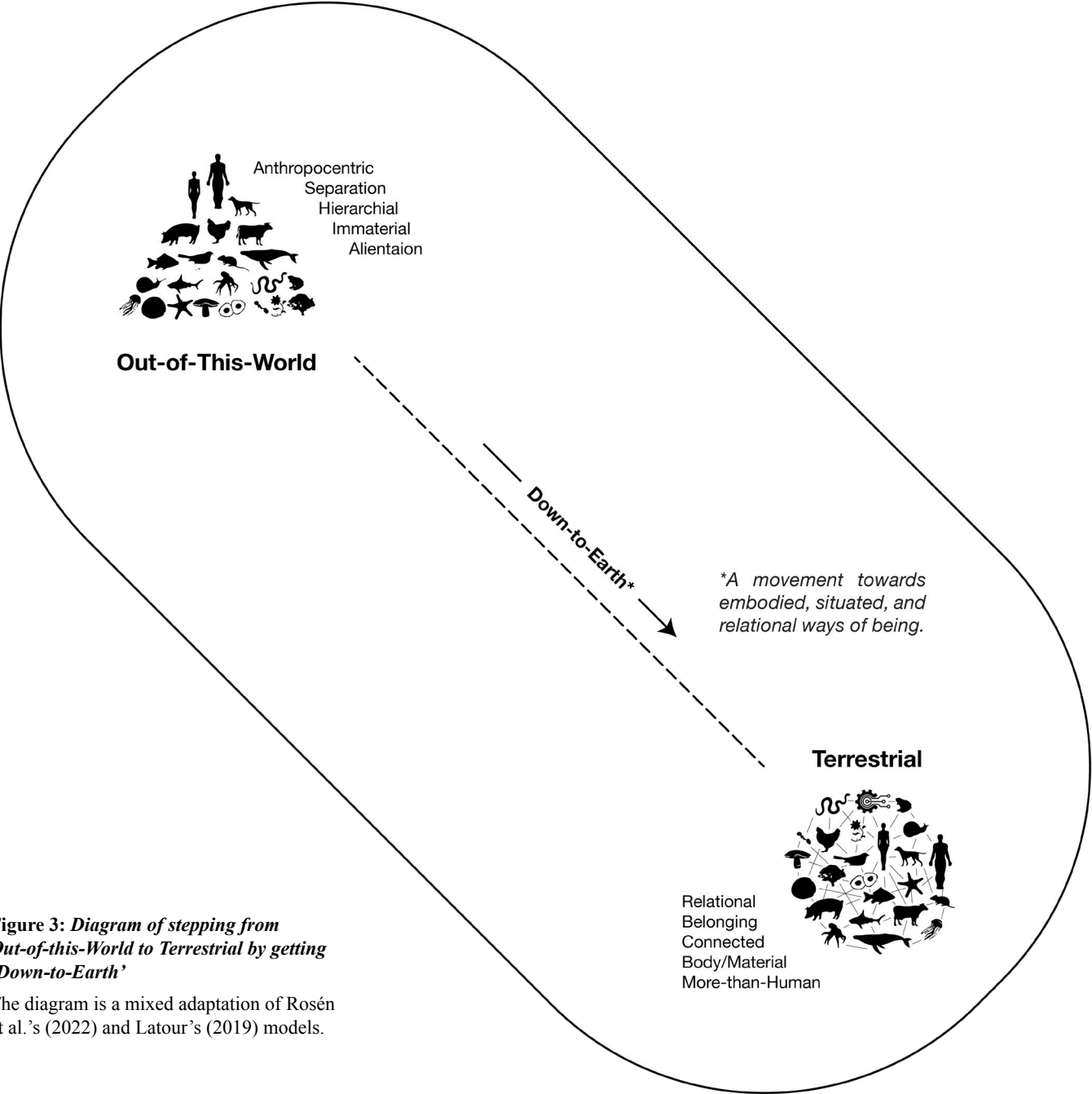


Figure 3: Diagram of stepping from Out-of-this-World to Terrestrial by getting ‘Down-to-Earth’
The diagram is a mixed adaptation of Rosén et al.’s (2022) and Latour’s (2019) models.

Success Criteria: Arcane Designing’s ability to get Down-to-Earth:

Situatedness:	Does Arcane designing enable situated ways of knowing and creating meaning particular to places, or bodies?
Embodiment:	Does Arcane designing engage the body and senses in/as ways of knowing and relating?
Relationality:	Does Arcane designing reveal or cultivate an awareness of our interdependence and entanglements? Does Arcane designing enable care-full ways of participating in those?
Pluriversality:	Does Arcane Designing open space for multiple ways of being, knowing, and belonging?
Terrestrial accountability:	Does Arcane Designing attune attention to material and ecological conditions? Does magic enable response-ability to those conditions?

Research Questions, Approach, and Process

Research Questions

This thesis is guided by the main research question, helping me to scope the work in different ways. Specifically, the thesis aims to answer the following main research question:

**How might Arcane Designing (designing with magic)
open onto-epistemic pathways Down-to-Earth?**

This research question is further guided by a set of sub-research question that each guide me in the three design cycles of the thesis.

- *Thinking*: How can speculative engagements with lanvættir (spirits of the land) support relational thinking in design?
- *Experiencing*: How can witchcraft cultivate non-modern ways of experiencing and perceiving?
- *Imagining*: How can fantastical worldbuilding enable imagination beyond the onto-epistemic constraints of Western modernity?

These sub-research questions each help me get a glimpse of what Arcane Designing might mean, as I have illustrated in Figure 4.

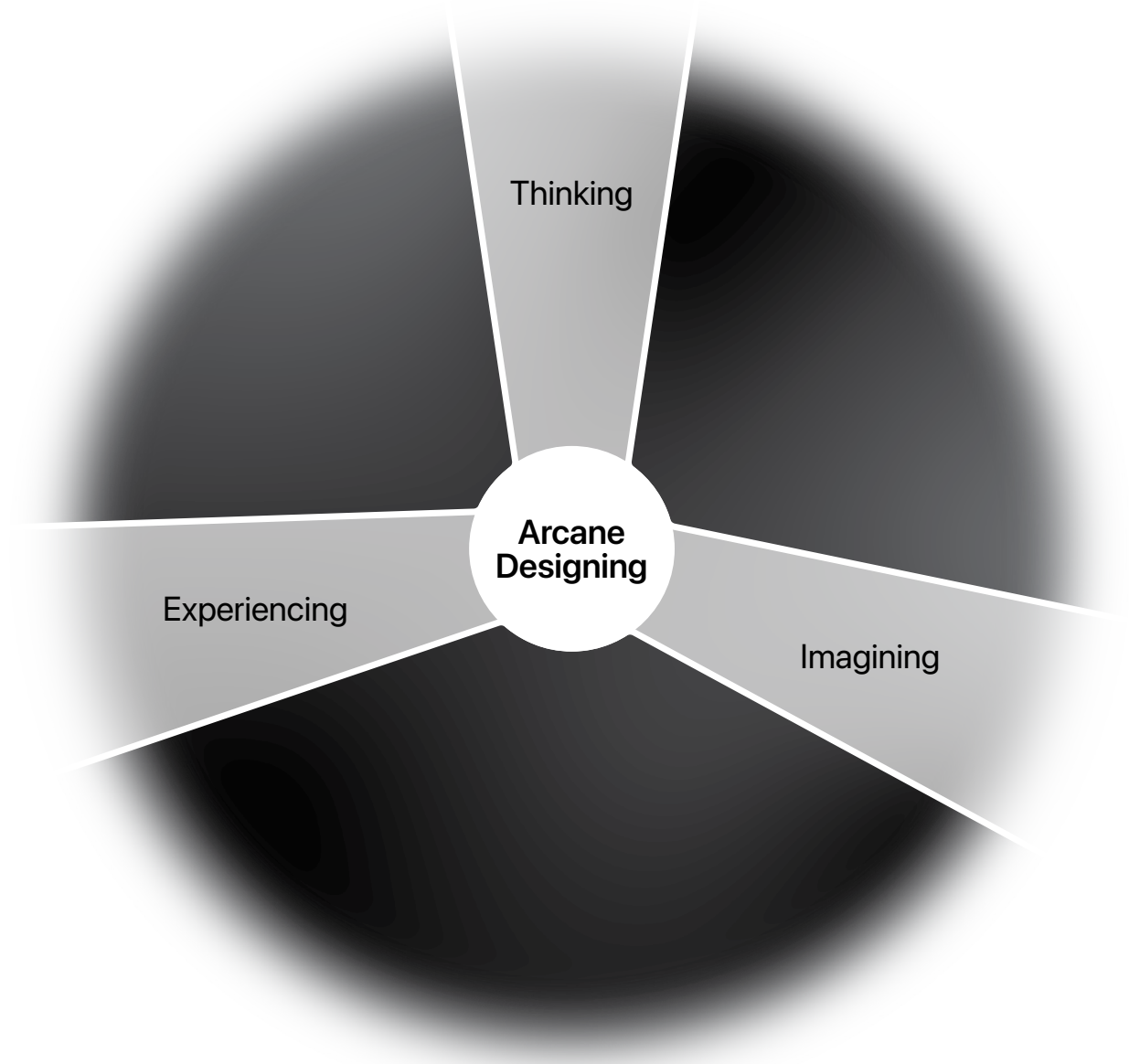


Figure 4: Overview of the thesis approach.
This thesis tackles three different angles on Arcane Designing in three different project cycles.

Approach and Process Overview

To answer the research questions, this thesis employs a research-through-design (RtD) approach, where design experiments and artifacts play the central role in the knowledge-generation process (Stappers & Giaccardi, 2017). Through iterative cycles of making and reflection, and through exposing the world to a “hitherto nonexistent combination of factors as a provocation”, RtD can open up “not fully anticipated design spaces” and create “the possibility for people and products to engage in interactions that were not possible before” (Stappers & Giaccardi, 2017). This approach is particularly well-suited to exploratory inquiries that seek to discover what is “unexpected but valuable”, and critically oriented RtD processes can enable generating “alternative possibilities or possible worlds” (Stappers & Giaccardi, 2017), making it well qualified for this thesis’ inquiry into the unknown space of Arcane Designing. Through RtD, the thesis will venture into this unknown space by carrying out three cycles of design experiments, shining light on its potentialities from three different entry points. Each entry point takes a magical theme (landvættir, witchcraft, and fantastical worldbuilding) and an ontology-related faculty (thinking, experiencing, and imagining) as its path into the space.

The design experiments will make use of provotypes (Bardzell et al., 2012), speculative artefacts (Dunne, 2013), and material and non-material speculative/critical fabulations (Donna J. Haraway, 2016; Hartman, 2008; Rosner, 2018). Some of these will hold a semi-auto-ethnographic purpose, enabling me to create insights through material-making, while others will be tried with participants in workshops to substantiate Arcane Designing’s relevance to designers. Moreover, the work will engage with central strategies from More-than-Human Design: noticing (Tsing, 2015a), decentering (Nicenboim et al., 2023), and not-knowing (de la Cadena, 2021), and develop ways to employ these within the specifics of Arcane Designing. All the design engagements will be informed by feminist, decolonial, and posthumanist theories and aim to find ways to translate these theoretical frameworks into design practice through magic.

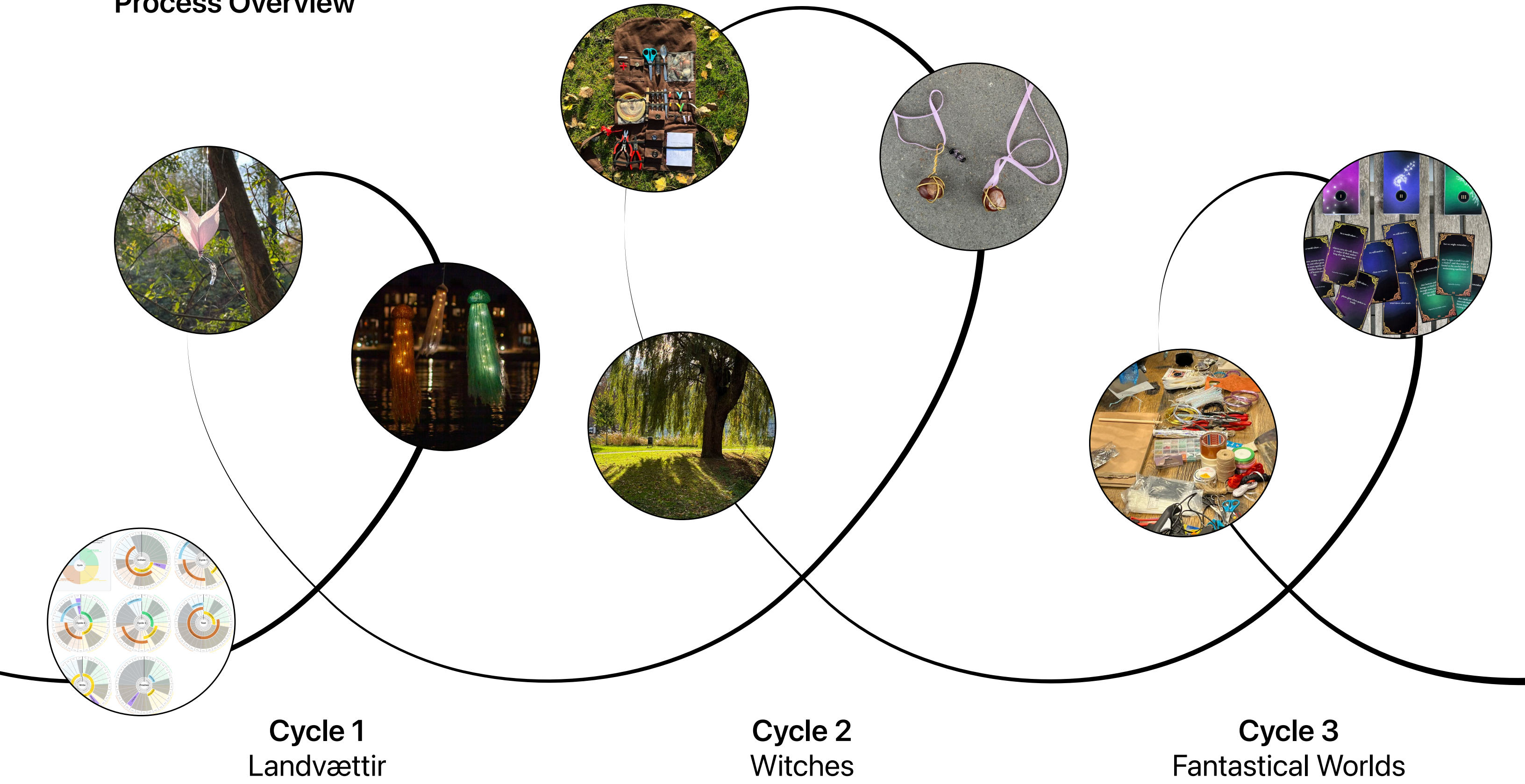
Following Donna Haraway (2016) and her creative feminist ways of engaging with the world, the thesis foregrounds a flexible and hybrid approach to these design tools, methods, and strategies, inspired by her concept of SF as Science Fiction, Speculative Fabulation, String Figures, Science Fact, Speculative Feminism, to which I might add Speculative Fantasy, Science Fantasy and Situated Fantasy. Haraway’s SFs are valuable for this inquiry as a worlding practice where storytelling, theory, and material experimentation are intertwined to enable ways of thinking otherwise and engaging with alternative ontologies. It enables a serious, situated playfulness and a refusal of purity and fixed boundaries: mixing mythology, folklore, fantasy, speculative design, more-than-human design, and everyday practices, learning from Haraway’s comfort with impurity, hybridity, and messy crossings between domains.

Additionally, my approach adopts much wisdom from Ursula K. Le Guin and her approaches to writing fiction and thinking about fiction (Le Guin, 1989, 1993, 2004). She describes how she often doesn’t know where a specific imagined site will take her, but when she goes there and starts engaging with it, it will reveal itself and take form. She says that:

“The fantasy writer must “believe in” the world she is creating, not in the sense of confusing it in any way with the actual bodily world, but in the sense of giving absolute credence to the work of the imagination — dwelling in it while writing, and trusting it to reveal itself.”
(Ursula K. Le Guin, n.d.)

Guided in my approach by Haraway and Le Guin, the venture into the space of Arcane Designing enables finding ontological possibilities and reopenings by creating “a conscious bleed between fiction and reality” (“The Treaty of Finsbury Park 2025,” 2025) and cultivating “a sensitivity to different shades of real” (Dunne & Raby, 2025, p. 8).

Process Overview



Planning with the Body: A Gantt Tool for Witches

The first designed artefact of this thesis is a Witch Gantt Tool, which allows for cyclical project planning in alignment with a menstruating body. The need for such a tool came from this thesis's feminist commitment to design from and towards embodied ontologies, as getting Down-to-Earth also entails getting back into our bodies and reconnecting with them and their more-than-human agencies.

In order to become a witch, the design cycles of this project are planned after my menstrual cycles. Witches live with the cyclical rhythms of Mother Earth (Druehyld, 2020). The Earth, and its time, moves in circles. The year follows the turnings of the wheel of the year that starts and ends its rotation at Winter Solstice, right around Christmas, which is why Christmas is called wheel in Danish ("jul" = Christmas, "hjul" = wheel, both are pronounced jul). The same pattern is repeated in the cycle of the moon, the cycle of a life, the cycle of the day, and the cycles of the body, also known as hormonal cycles. There is one hormonal cycle that follows the rhythm of a day or the sun, and one that follows the rhythm of the moon. These circular patterns of time repeat themselves in endless movements of death and rebirth, growth and decay, a push and a pull, movement inwards and movement outwards. A witch knows that all phases are equally important. One cannot exist without the other; in the decay of autumn is the potential for spring.

Getting Down-to-Earth means remembering that we are part of these earthly cycles, and just like a tree could never be expected to endlessly progress in linear growth all year round, we might benefit from beginning to live in alignment with these rhythms that we are embedded in and which our more-than-human bodies and surroundings already follow. Following these cycles should not be seen as a hindrance; on the contrary, it is a way of living regeneratively with our bodies. Living in a constant fight with them is simply unsustainable. Just think about how you would plan a workout schedule—there needs to be times of restoration, which is really the time of muscle generation.

The Qualities of the Different Phases of the Cycles

When we drop the patriarchal way of judging in hierarchies, we become able to see that each phase has its own strengths that we can tap into and align ourselves with (Westh, 2025). The spring, the morning, childhood, and the phase of the menstruating body where estrogen is rising, holds new-born energy, hope, lightness, playfulness, and creativity (Westh, 2025). It can be a bit naive, but it's also eager, refreshing, and full of big dreams. In the summer, at noon, in youth, and during ovulation, energy peaks, and it's time for parties, people, and riding the high pace (Westh, 2025). There is a lot of energy to give away, and what one waters in this phase will most certainly flourish. As the energy slowly matures over late summer towards autumn, the pace slows down. In autumn, the afternoon, middle adulthood, and the middle of the luteal phase, energy turns inwards, and

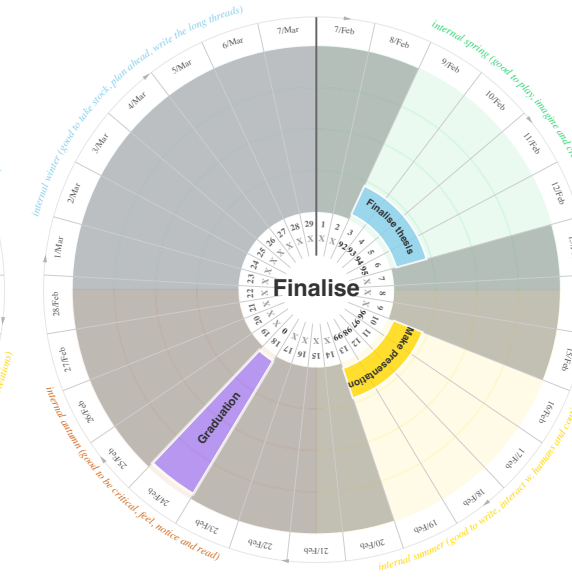
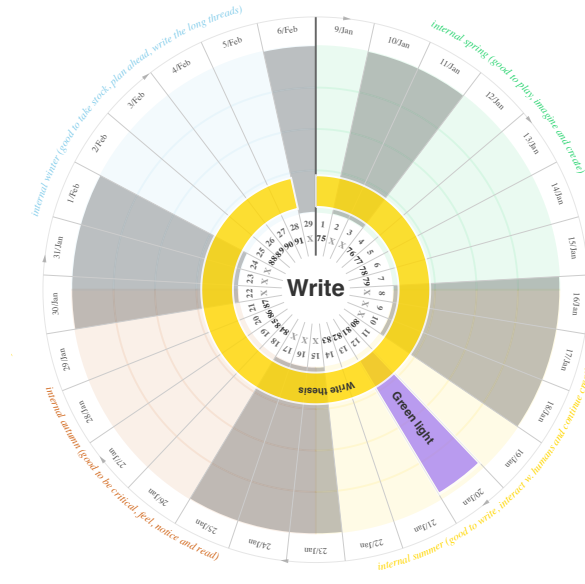
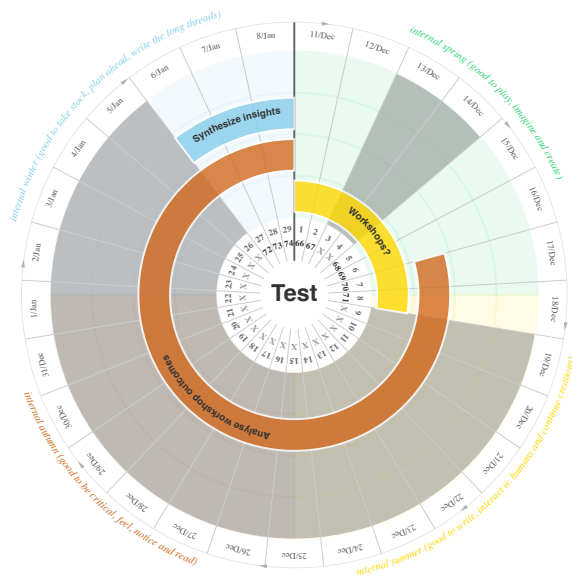
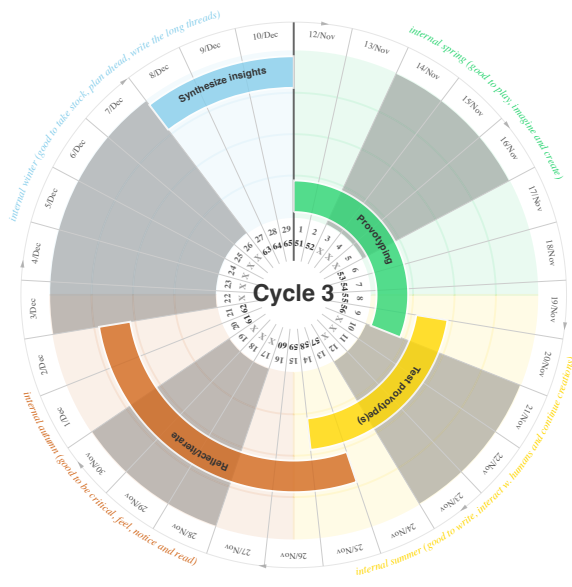
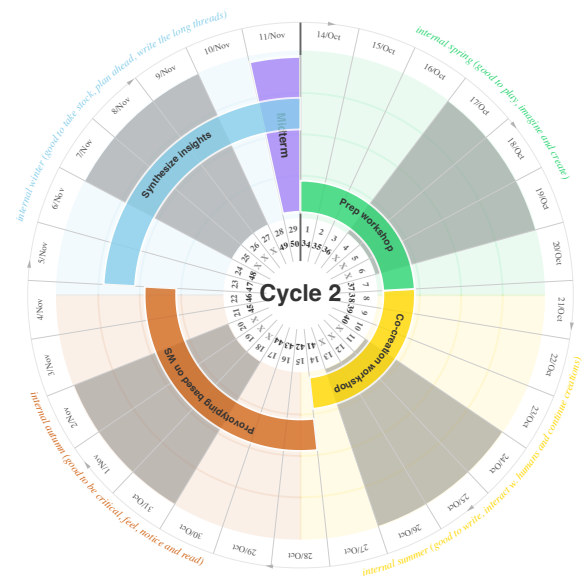
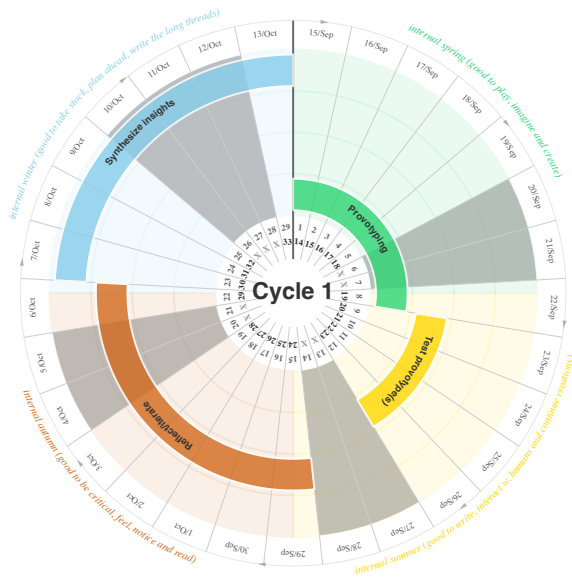
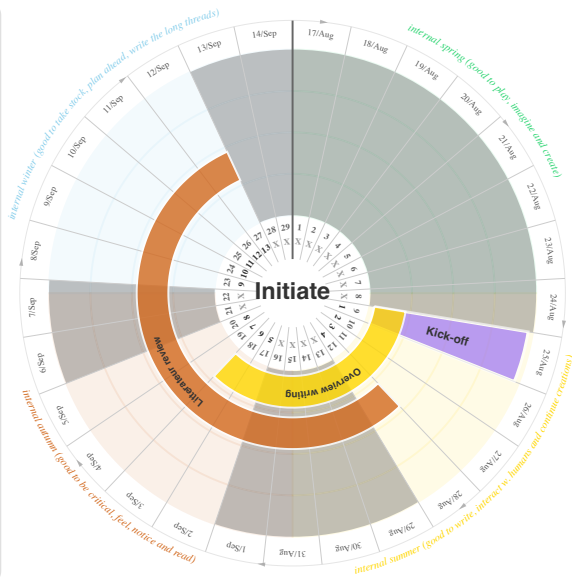
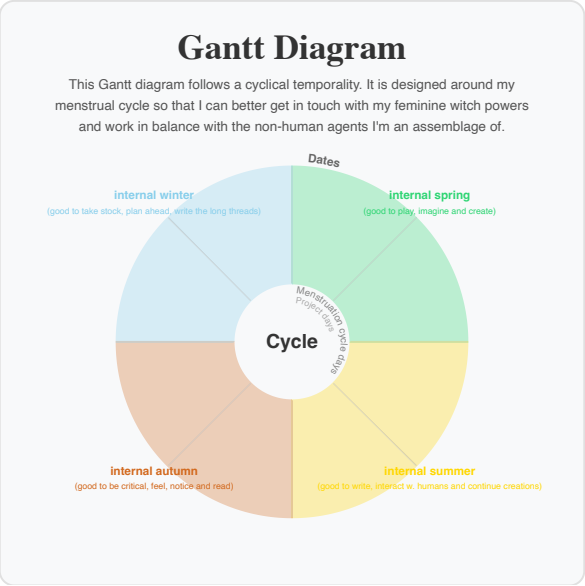
everything begins to let go (Westh, 2025). As things start to fall off, one becomes able to critically see through it all. In letting go of norms and the needs and wishes of others, a wildness comes out. This is the time of the wild winds, the wild women, and the wild witches. As winter approaches, all this wild energy wants to be released (Westh, 2025). The first day of the bleeding is like the first day of falling snow. A calm quietness falls over everything, and one becomes able to relax and see clearly. Winter, the evening, old age, and the time of menstruating, is the times of wisdom, peace, and alleviation.

It is worth mentioning that the cycles of Mother Earth are not fixed like mass-produced cogs in a machine. A flower might bloom in the fall, a human might have a hormonal cycle that makes them more energised during the night, winter might come late one year, some places on Earth follow different seasonal rhythms, and the menstural cycle might follow 31 days instead of 28. No rhythm is better than another. What is important is the ability to notice, listen, and attune to the rhythms one is a part of. This is a specific way of attuning to one's more-than-human entanglements. Furthermore, human and non-human actions can affect these cycles on biological, chemical, and physiological levels, which can sometimes be harmful; a stressed body might disrupt menstruation, a house plant may grow all year but never be able to reach full size, and planetary warming is already affecting seasonal rhythms.

The Witch Gantt Tool

Contemporary project management tools are typically designed based on linear understandings of time and assume constant productivity and forward movement. This reflects a society built around a patriarchal pace that ignores earthly and bodily rhythms (Westh, 2025), as it is only able to see and value part of the cycles—the phases of growth. The phases of critical wildness and wise peacefulness that menstruating bodies go through each month and all of us go through each year are fully oppressed.

The circular Gantt diagram developed for this thesis is designed to enable planning that aligns with a menstruating body's rhythms and each phase's different strengths. Fortunately, the rhythms of the bodily cycle align exceptionally well with the rhythms of design cycles, in how it goes through phases of idea generation and creation; finalising creation and interacting with participants; critically reflecting; taking stock and tying it all together. Living and working with these rhythms instead of overriding them is a way of accessing a menstruating body's magical powers as well as a way of countering the ontological disconnection. Overall, this design shows an example of how we might design our tools differently in order to live and create in more sustainable ways.



Manage Activities

Managing: Cycle 2

Cycle 2 Start Date:

17/08/2025

Update Dates

Activity Name:

Layer:

Layer 1

Activity Colour:

Green

Start Date:

14/10/2025

Duration (work days):

Description (optional):

Brief description of the activity

Add Activity

Current Activities:

Witch Walks

3/Nov-11/Nov (10 work days)

EditDelete

Midterm

11/Nov-11/Nov (1 work days)

EditDelete

Prep Witch Walks

27/Oct-31/Oct (5 work days)

EditDelete

Write midterm report

3/Nov-7/Nov (5 work days)

EditDelete

Download Current Cycle SVG

Download All Cycles SVG

Export Calendar Data

Import Calendar Data

23

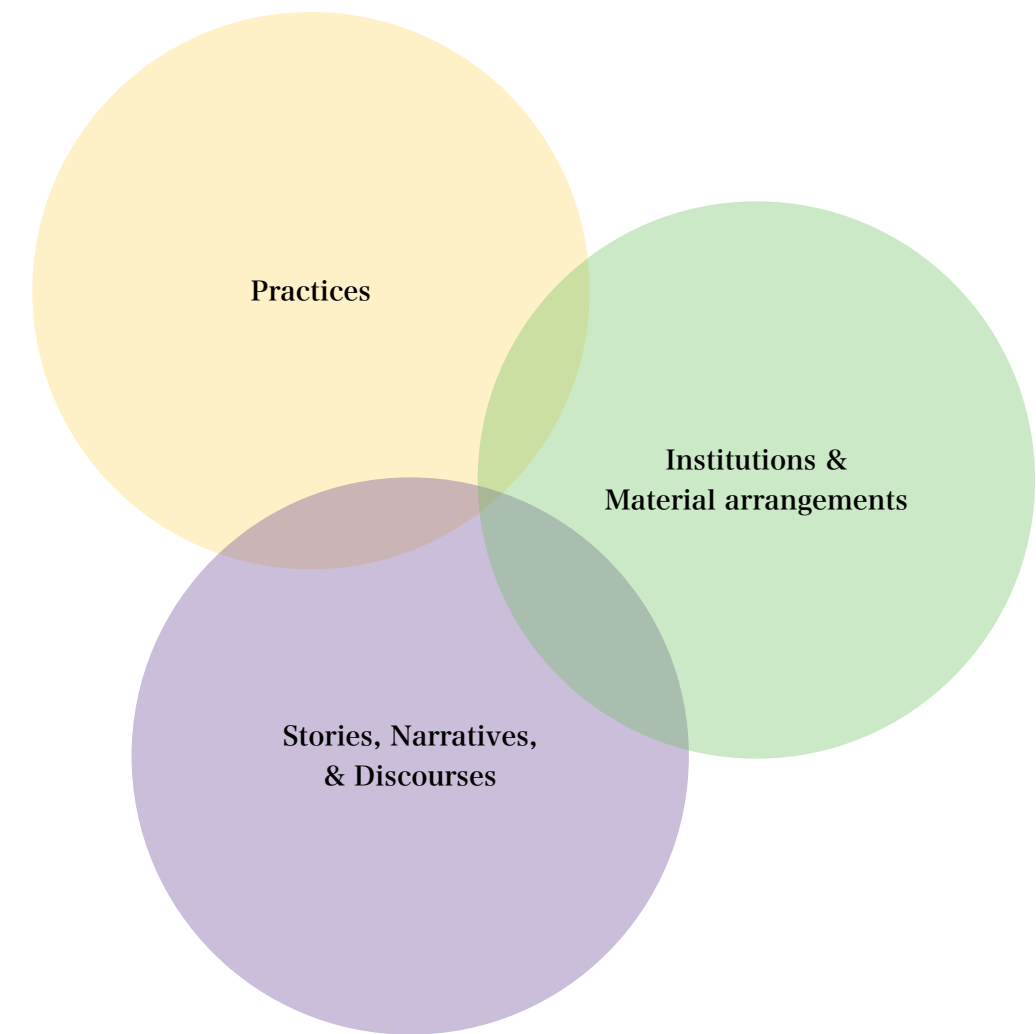
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CHAPTER 2

DEEPENING THE UNDERSTANDING OF ONTOLOGY AND DOWN-TO-EARTH MAGIC

Chapter Introduction

Before diving into the three design cycles of this thesis, it is useful to get a better understanding of ontology and how designers can engage with it. In this chapter, a theoretical foundation for designing for a Pluriverse of Relational ontologies is described in detail. It will show that ontologies are made, and thus can be re-made, and that their components are practices, stories, and material arrangements. Relationality is elaborated on as a story of life that can take us Down-to-Earth and help us rediscover belonging and connection. With a better understanding of ontology as world-making processes, the chapter turns to magic and its earthly potential as well as a brief account of how it disappeared from the West, a process that entailed a struggle between Out-of-this-World world-making practices and Down-to-Earth world-making practices.



Ontology as World-making

For Escobar et al. (2024), ontologies are essentially ways of world-making, meaning the particular ways realities (worlds) are enacted, experienced, and sustained. It is about what is assumed to be real, including what exists but also, importantly, how things relate to each other, and how they are performed into being. Drawing on Mario Blaser, they describe ontologies as composed of three interconnected dimensions:

Practices

Everyday doings, rituals, modes of inhabiting land, uses of technologies, design practices, economic activities, caring practices, etc. These are ontologies being performed; they enact certain realities.

Stories, Narratives, & Discourses

The stories a world tells about itself: cosmologies, myths, scientific narratives, policy language, design imaginaries. These stories stabilise certain realities while risking erasure of others.

Institutions & Material arrangements

Laws, infrastructures, markets, property regimes, designed systems, bureaucracies, objects, and technical artefacts that sediment and enforce realities by making possible particular ways of being, while making other ways of being unlikely or impossible.

These three dimensions cannot really be separated as they make each other: Narratives shape what we do (practices) and which kinds of material things make sense to make (material arrangements). Our material world, such as our institutions and everyday objects, shapes what we can do (practices) and what we tell ourselves about the world. Our practices likewise shape how we understand reality (narratives) and what we make (material arrangements). For example, if we understand time as earthly, bodily, and following cyclical rhythms, it makes sense to design an artefact like the Witch Gantt Tool, which will enable us to act, to practice work, in a sustainable way. Furthermore, the interplay between these dimensions seems to be immensely complexified by, for example, how several distinct narratives can be at play in shaping the same material conditions and so on.

But overall, it is important to understand that there is not one single world, but a pluriverse of interconnected worlds (Escobar, 2018; Escobar et al., 2024). And because worlds are made and enacted in this way, political struggles are rarely “just” ideological but instead ontological. They are conflicts between different ways of world-making stemming from

different ways of understanding reality. Through this ontological lens, it becomes clear that ecological crises, inequality, and technological problems cannot be understood simply as political failures, but as the result of a dominant modern ontology imposing itself on the rest of the world(s) as one universal truth.

Ontological Designing

Design, from this perspective, is ontological at its core: it participates in shaping practices, narratives, and material worlds, whether consciously or not. This is Anne-Marie Willis’ (2006) core claim in the paper Ontological Designing, which she formulates as a double movement: “we design our world, while our world acts back on us and designs us”, or in short, “Design designs”. Thus, design is not only something humans do to the world; design acts back and actively shapes how humans are. This means that design is ontological because it participates in shaping ways of being and understandings of realities, and one risks doing serious harm if design is reduced to just the making of objects, functions, or aesthetics. A designed object carries an embedded orientation towards certain actions, temporalities, socialities, and values. For example, a single-use juice box designs individualised mobile consumption, whereas a jug designs shared pouring and gathering (Willis, 2006).

So, ontological designing names this active agency of the designed; we are shaped by the things and systems we live with, but this also gives us hopeful opportunities because, through breakdown, reinterpretation, and redesign, we can transform these things and systems and thus transform our lived realities. Though it is important to mention that the influences of this double movement do not primarily happen through rational persuasion (“convincing users”), but through material, spatial, and infrastructural reconfigurations that reshape everyday practice, making different ways of worlding possible.

Willis (2006) stresses that this is extremely important for designers to be aware of because if not, designers risk unconsciously reproducing dominant modern ontologies and logics such as instrumentalism, individualism, efficiency, and control by default. In this way, ecological and social crises, which designers might be trying to counter, will persist because their ontological roots will remain untouched. This is why we must question what kinds of worlds our designs bring into being.

Homo-narrans: The beings who Narrate Ourselves

“The forces that limit our lives and life itself in the modernist, capitalist context are very real. Yet they gain their power and substantiality just because they are stories: myths that we as modern subjects have made. How can the forces of scarcity, separation, and supremacy be both powerful and mythical? A simple answer to this question is that myths are powerful, some of the most powerful forces shaping human existence.” (Escobar et al., 2024, p. 25)

It is not only our material environments that shape our realities. Stories play an equally powerful role, a role that is much more obscured through the ontology of Western modernity. Drawing on Sylvia Wynter Escobar et al. (2024), describe how human beings are bio-mythological beings, made through both biology (bios) and narrative (mythos), and that these affect each other through inseparable entanglements:

“[O]ur myths, narratives, stories, and poetics bring forth a world saturated with meanings. We make myths and these myths make us and our world: our limits, our capacities, our longings, and our sense of self. We tell ourselves who we are” (Escobar et al., 2024, p. 26)

Wynter (Wynter, 2003) argues that humans are not merely biological organisms who tell stories. Our storytelling also has a biological capacity through which worlds, collectives, and selves are continuously brought into being. As homo narrans, humans narrate themselves into existence through myths, rituals, and shared origin stories that establish how life is organised, what can be true, and why. These stories are not simply overlays on an otherwise fixed material reality; they act back on bodies and worlds biologically, physiologically, neurologically, and neurochemically, shaping affect, perception, and behaviour.



Wheel of Progress
by Leo Lau & Digit /
<https://betterimagesofai.org>

The Myth of Bioeconomic Man

These dynamics crystallise in what Wynter (2003) names the myth of bioeconomic Man, the dominant modern story of human nature, which also plays a central role in our disconnection. Bioeconomic Man is narrated as a rational, self-interested, and competitive individual whose primary orientation to the world is the accumulation of resources for survival and growth. Within this story, scarcity is assumed to be a natural and universal condition, competition is understood as inevitable, and hierarchy is justified as “natural” through biology and natural selection. What is rational is to

follow the logic of the capitalist economy, which reduces human reason to be calculative and motivated by optimisation and utility maximisation, while discrediting other modes of knowing, relating, and valuing as naive or stupid. This figure of the human is presented as a factual description of human nature itself. In doing so, bioeconomic Man obscures its own mythic status and externalises its authorship, attributing its values and violences to nature, biology, or objective reality. This story actively produces reality, organising institutions, economies, and everyday practices while working on bodies at the level of fear, desire, and survival. The result is a self-reinforcing ontological loop in which humans come to feel disconnected through the belief that life must be lived under conditions of scarcity, competition, and separation.

Re-storying

The big problem, Wynter (Wynter, 2003) argues, is that the modern, secular human has forgotten their own authorship, mistaking stories for natural, unchangeable laws and universal truths. When stories are externalised as nature, biology, and objective reality, they acquire a dangerous agency over us, while our capacity to consciously remake the worlds we inhabit is obscured. Considering this, Esobar et al. (2024) call re-storying a central and urgent task:

“A most urgent task—both through the remaking of infrastructures and through the “restorying” of our founding myths—is to make ourselves into the kinds of beings (individually and collectively) who no longer relate with life as a scarce commodity to be guarded and hoarded.” (Escobar et al., 2024, p. 24)

This re-storying is, as an ontological undertaking, both material and political. It is about unsettling and transforming the myths that organise modern life. An important nuance in Escobar et al.’s argument is that re-storying does not mean rejecting modern stories (science, biology, rationality) in favour of something entirely “other”. They argue that re-storying must start from where we are, because modern subjects are already formed by these myths at biological and affective levels. Thus, re-storying involves making visible that modern myths are stories in the first place. And from there it becomes about bending, expanding, and reconfiguring them toward other horizons of possibility. Design has an important responsibility in this task, since new stories of life must be enacted, practised, and experienced through our material worlds; design designs worlds.

“[W]ise collectives are not simply bound by natural laws, they choose what to nurture and what to release, what to cultivate and what to discard.” (Escobar et al., 2024, p. 35)



People on phones
by Jamillah Knowles & Reset.Tech Australia /
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Relationality:

A Story of Life that takes us Down-to-Earth

Relationality is a story of life that challenges the dominant Western narrative. Escobar et al. (2024) argue that the modern world operates under a “dysfunctional cosmology”, a story of scarcity, hierarchy, and disconnection that sustains capitalism, colonialism, and ecological destruction. Against this, Relationality offers an alternative ontology, an alternative way of being, that builds on radical interdependence, meaning nothing exists in isolation; everything arises with and through relations. Relationality is both theoretical and philosophical, but even more importantly, it is “a vision of life” and “a practice of living and making” (Escobar et al., 2024). It exists in the being and doing: In social movements, spiritual practices, communal resistance, and design processes that enact interdependence.

“Designing relationally means creating with the awareness that we are in inextricable relationship with one another, with the earth, and with numerous nonhuman entities.”
(Escobar et al., 2024, p. xvi)

Relationality is an onto-epistemic position that reconfigures what is real, what is known, and what is possible. It refuses the dualisms of subject/object, nature/culture, and self/other because these binary oppositions are oppressive and dangerous inventions of a patriarchal, colonial, and anthropocentric ontology. Modernity and its dominating story of life actively produce non-relationality. Through colonialism, capitalism, and patriarchy, relational ways of life have been and are still being destroyed and replaced by a story of the lone individual, living a disconnected life in a scarce, inanimate world.

“Nonrelational ways of being, knowing, and making were progressively deployed through violent forms of primitive accumulation and the instantiation of patriarchal and white supremacist orders. Primitive accumulation in Europe and elsewhere forced people to abandon commons, where they collectively worked land and maintained a more relational life, to go to the cities to sell their labor as individuals; the witch hunts that accompanied the enclosures of the commons devalued women’s bodies, turning them into machines of reproductive labor.”
(Escobar et al., 2024, p. 4)

Designing relationality is also to envision paths for pluriversal transitions: shifting from the “One-World World” of modernity toward a world of many interconnected worlds (many ontologies and worlding practices). This undertaking is a process of remembering, choosing, and remaking: “That which we have made, we can unmake, then, consciously now, remake.” (Escobar et al., 2024). We must remember that we made the myths of scarcity, separation, and supremacy, and thus we can unmake them. Instead, we can choose stories of freedom, interdependence, and care. And we must “remake the making of life”, meaning remaking the web of practices (material, social, spiritual, and

epistemic) through which we bring worlds into being. It’s about how we live, organize, and sustain existence: how we produce food, technology, relations, values, stories, and systems of meaning. Modernity’s “making of life” is colonial, patriarchal, capitalist, and anthropocentric. That is, our ways of making (designing, producing, governing) have become detached from the Earth and relational grounds; they make systems of separation, hierarchy, and domination. They serve “the One-World World” (Law, 2015), a world that claims to be the only real one, suppressing and even erasing all other ways of living and knowing (Escobar et al., 2024). Thus, part of “remak[ing] the making of life” means to remake design to enable designing otherwise (toward transforming the stories, relations, and practices that produce worlds).

Magic and its Earthly Possibilities

Throughout human history, magic has been practised in many different forms and contexts (Leth & Willerslev, 2016). We find traces of this everywhere on the planet where humans have been. From cave paintings to the oldest known artefacts, traces of magical practices appear as an essential part of how humans have lived with, made sense of, and related to the world. Through rituals, magical artefacts, spells, and stories, humans have sought to be in touch with Earth and its ecosystems, including all the stuff that lies behind or in between, the stuff that we cannot see and cannot explain.

Rather than understanding magic as a set of false explanations or as a relic of a pre-rational past, it can be approached as a mode of relating to the world that remains attentive to what exceeds human knowledge. Modern people often assume that the world is, in principle, fully knowable through rational explanation, yet this assumption rests on a narrow onto-epistemic understanding (Escobar et al., 2024; Leth & Willerslev, 2016). Author Kristian Leth and renowned molecular anthropologist Eske Willerslev argue that magic does not stand in opposition to scientific knowledge, but gestures towards the limits of explanation and towards forms of engagement that acknowledge uncertainty, mystery, and not-knowing as part of human existence.

Questions concerning how and why life originated and what makes it be have always been central in humans' attempt to understand, affect, and live together with the world around them. These questions continue to be central in both science and religion. One of the oldest ways of understanding and relating to the world is animism: the understanding that the world is alive and that mountains, rivers, animals, plants, and atmospheric forces are imbued with spirit, agency, or will (Leth & Willerslev, 2016). Traces of animistic worldviews have been found across diverse cultures and histories in pluriversal forms, as a recurring orientation towards a world understood as vibrant and relational, full of more-than-human agencies. Rather than being an uncivilised or immature stage of societal development, animism can be understood as a different way of sensing and relating to the world that foregrounds entanglement, reciprocity, and attentiveness to forces beyond human control (Abram, 1996; Leth & Willerslev, 2016).

Worlds of Magic as “Alternative Wests”

Escobar reminds us that “the West” does not constitute one singular, coherent ontological formation. In *Designs for the Pluriverse* (2018), he argues that Western modernity shouldn't be understood as a completed project, but as a hegemonic formation that actively marginalise(d) other ways of being, knowing, and relating that have long existed within Europe and the Global North. These marginalised ways of being constitute what Escobar refers to as alternative Wests: plural Western worlds that do not fully conform to the ontological commitments of modernity. These alternative wests can be communal, feminist, ecological ways of being, but also non-modern cosmologies

that persist, sometimes in obscured forms, within western contexts (Rønnest et al., 2026; Rønnest & Riemann, 2025). Thus, in transitioning to pluriversal design practices, this provides designers in Western contexts with the possibility to look within their own culture in order to do situated relational engagements. Pluriversality, therefore, does not entail abandoning the West altogether, because alternatives are already present, though systematically overlooked and suppressed. In designing for a Pluriverse, an important task is to find ways of reactivating and aligning with those relational ontologies that have been made invisible, irrational, or regressive under modernity, but persist nevertheless.

Magic, mythology, folklore, witchcraft, spirituality, and animistic modes of sensing local to Europe can be understood as fragments of alternative Western ontologies (Rønnest et al., 2026; Rønnest & Riemann, 2025). Engaging with such fragments is not meant as a return to a pre-modern past, but rather to take them as potential seeds towards relational ways of being that coexist with, and often resist, the universalising claims of Western modernity. As Leth and Willerslev (2016) suggest, and Storms (2017) gives a detailed account of, the modern insistence on a strict separation between rational science and enchanted worldviews is itself a cultural and historical construction. One that obscures the fact that openness to mystery and uncertainty continues to exist within modern, scientific lives. Willerslev (2016) finds that this fear of uncertainty and of other ways of understanding sadly make us worse scientists. He provides several examples where the scientific community rejected solid scientific work because it unsettled its narrow understanding of the world.



Mystery and Enchantment Towards Belonging and Connection

In *The Enchanted Life*, Sharon Blackie (2018) argues that healing ourselves and the planet requires re-learning how to belong to our bodies, our places, our stories, and the more-than-human world,

through an enchanted way of living. She defines enchantment as an orientation towards the world that is about being fully present, attentive, and participating in a living and meaningful world. She connects our disconnection and alienation with Western disenchantment, where the world is rendered inert, objectified, and devoid of meaning. Joost Vervoort (2024) similarly suggests that we need what he calls “infrastructures of mystery” to help enable a sense of belonging and connection, and cultivate an appreciation for the wonder and mystery of life. He argues that the ability to engage with one’s circumstances with hope and a sense of possibility is connected to “a sense of being at home in the world” and to experiencing life as something that remains open, meaningful, and full of wonder. He finds that encounters with mystery can support compassion, creativity, curiosity, courage, and connectedness.

Moreover, he connects mystery to its potential for not knowing, explaining that it might help “keep things open” against “dogmatic and restrictive truth claims about reality by religions or by specific philosophies.” (Vervoort, 2024). This resonates with Leth and Willerslev’s (2016) insistence that not fully understanding the world is a condition of being alive, and that choosing to remain present in the world, to care, and to search for meaning cannot be grounded in cold scientific proof alone. From these perspectives, it is evident that we can engage with magic as a way of cultivating modes of belonging that keep the world open, alive, and relational.

Magic and Science as Different Ways of Seeing

Magic is often positioned as mutually exclusive of science, associated with irrationality, superstition, or false belief. However, such hierarchical either/or oppositions obscure the fact that science itself operates within specific epistemic and ontological limits. Leth and Willerslev (2016) argue that while science is an invaluable way of producing knowledge, it cannot answer every question that matters to human life. Problems of disconnection arise when science is asked to occupy domains it cannot meaningfully address.

Magic can be understood as an openness beyond rationalism: a way of acknowledging that the world exceeds our explanatory frameworks. It thus holds potential in helping us embrace what Marisol De La Cadena (Escobar & de la Cadena, 2024) calls ontological excess, which she defines as an openness towards that which exceeds our Modern ontological boundaries. Excess is an essential ontological ability when engaging in Pluriversal Contact Zones, instances where different ontologies meet and engage with each other without assimilating into sameness and without reducing any of them to less than reality (Escobar & de la Cadena, 2024). This does not entail rejecting scientific knowledge, but situating it as one mode of epistemic engagement among many others. Science and magic can be seen as different ways of seeing and relating to the world, rather than mutually exclusive worldviews. Where science seeks explanation, magic attends to relation; where science aims for closure, magic keeps questions open.

An openness to not-knowing is also what enables curiosity and creativity, both scientific and otherwise. Willerslev emphasises that remaining open to the possibility that the world may be fundamen-

tally different from what we assume is what allows new scientific breakthroughs to emerge. Thus, magic can also help us sustain the conditions under which new ways of knowing can arise. As an onto-epistemic stance, magic might enable ontological excess through humility, relationality, and attentiveness to the more-than-human world, offering a way of getting, and staying, Down-to-Earth without reducing the world to what can be controlled, predicted, or fully understood.



The Historical Entanglements of Science and Magic

Dominant narratives of Western modernity often describe the rise of science as a decisive and inevitable break from magic, myth, and superstition. According to this narrative, scientific rationality emerges by replacing enchanted understandings of the world with empirical knowledge, causal explanation, and objective truth: Science comes to enlighten us and save us from our pre-developed, naive beliefs and irrational misunderstandings. However, as Jason Josephson-Storm (2017) demon-

strates in *The Myth of Disenchantment*, this story is less a historical description than a myth modernity tells about itself. Storm shows that magic did not disappear with the rise of modern science, nor was science born in opposition to magic. Instead, the emergence of science took place within a cultural landscape full of magical, spiritual, and religious practices. Many figures commonly associated with the birth of scientific rationality—such as Francis Bacon, Isaac Newton, Johannes Kepler, René Descartes, and Giordano Bruno—were deeply engaged with alchemy, astrology, natural magic, religious beliefs, and esoteric traditions.

Early science can be understood as a selective reworking of existing magical concerns, and not as a negation of magic. Practices that had previously been understood as magical were refined, disciplined, and redirected through new methods of observation, experimentation, and systematisation. What distinguished the emerging scientific practices was not a lack of interest in hidden, mysterious forces, but a growing emphasis on reproducibility, public demonstration, and epistemic control. As science became institutionalised, it increasingly defined itself by disavowing its entanglements with magic and spirituality. Magic came to function as a negative category associated with superstition and irrationality against which science could establish its full authority. This disavowal produced the illusion of a clean historical development and the idea that science was born when magic died.

Part of this process of rendering magic as science’s opposite entailed encouraging certain forms of enchantment over others. Enchantments, such as technological wonder, scientific awe, and abstract cosmological mystery was promoted while other forms were marginalised or pathologised. Animistic worldviews, relational Earth-oriented cosmologies, and land-based spiritual practices were increasingly framed as primitive, regressive, or irrational.

Finally, Storm emphasises that claims to rationality are always historically and politically situated. What counts as “rational” knowledge has shifted over time and has been shaped by religious polemics, colonial hierarchies, and disciplinary boundary-making. Modern Western rationality does not stand outside history as a neutral standard; it is produced through exclusions that secure authority by discrediting other ways of knowing. Recognising this destabilises Western Science’s claim to universality and opens space for alternative ontological orientations to be taken seriously.

Patriarchal Alchemy: Reading the Science-magic Entanglements Through Feminist STS

While Storm thoroughly dismantles the myth of disenchantment as a “natural” inevitable development, his analysis remains largely agnostic about the power relations shaping which forms of magic were taken up, refined, or excluded in the formation of modern science. A feminist STS reading helps foreground these asymmetries by asking which magical orientations were legitimised, and which were deemed mistaken.

Drawing on the work of Claudia von Werlhof (2011), we might understand modern science as crystallising out of what von Werlhof calls patriarchal alchemy. Alchemy, in its earlier forms, was a practice of knowing grounded in close observation of life, transformation, and natural rhythms. However, under patriarchal conditions, alchemy was reoriented towards abstraction, fragmentation, and domination. Alchemy became a practice of “creation through destruction”: the breaking apart of living wholes into isolated elements in order to extract what was deemed most valuable, such as gold or the philosopher’s stone. This logic of patriarchal alchemy played a significant role in shaping modern science and modernity more broadly. The ambition to isolate, control, and reassemble nature was transmuted into scientific and technological projects promising endless progress, mastery, and improvement. With this, modern science can be understood as the institutionalisation of a particular magical orientation that was aligned with patriarchal, colonial, and anthropocentric ambitions of domination.

This institutionalisation required the discrediting of other forms of magic. Relational, situated, and animistic practices—forms of what might be called Down-to-Earth magic—were excluded as irrational or superstitious because they resisted abstraction, control, and universalisation. Their exclusion was necessary for science to assert itself as the singular, authoritative mode of knowing. We are left to wonder if foregrounding these practices instead could have led to a field of science that builds on reciprocity rather than mastery, situated knowledge rather than universal truth, and relational interdependence rather than human exceptionalism.

Storm’s observation that modernity permits certain forms of enchantment while excluding others takes on a sharper political edge in this light. Today, the logic of patriarchal alchemy persists in contemporary technological imaginaries. It is visible in the conviction that massive data centres consuming vast ecological resources are necessary to advance artificial intelligence, justified by a narrative that it will be a solution to the very crises these systems accelerate. And it is echoed in techno-utopian fantasies of digital immortality, biohacking, and dreams of colonising space. In other words, dreams of escaping from our earthly and bodily entanglements.

Regrettably, patriarchal alchemy does not operate only at the level of technological projects. It is also internalised in everyday practices through self-alchemisation (Escobar et al., 2024): the continual remaking of the self through productivity, optimisation, and self-improvement. In this process, relationalities such as spirituality, community, care, and love are severed in favour of individual performance and consumption, further perpetuating disconnection from bodies, others, and the Earth. Reading Storm through feminist STS allows understanding the entanglement of science and magic as a site of ongoing ontological struggle between Out-of-This-World projects of domination and Down-to-Earth practices of relational ways of being.

CHAPTER 3

SPECULATING
WITH LANDVÆTTIR

Chapter Introduction

This chapter presents the work and outcomes of cycle 1 of this thesis. The cycle is a designerly exploration of both the theoretical background literature and the potentials of the topic of magic, carried out with the purpose of familiarising and sensitising myself to these through material making, combined with the more-than-human design practice Noticing. This enabled getting a better understanding of how the theory coming from philosophy, anthropology, STS, and feminist thought could be translated into design, as well as insights into what magic might afford for designing relationally.

The cycle starts from the theme of landvættir—magical beings and spirits of the land—as this holds a rich foundation for relational and terrestrial engagements with magic. It contains two design experiments in the form of speculations: The Jellyfish Lanterns, a situated community ritual that explores future folklore through spiritual practices with the more-than-human world, informed by theory from Escobar et al.’s (2024) Relationality, Haraway’s (2016) Staying with the Trouble, and Bellacasa’s (2017) Matters of Care; and The Feral Cyborg Fairies, a speculation on non-anthropocentric AI that explores relational technology inspired by mythology and folklore, informed by Haraway’s (2016). Overall, the chapter aims to answer the sub-research question:

How can speculative design engagements with lanvættir (spirits of the land) support relational thinking in design?

Landvættir: Nordic Spirits of the Land

In Nordic mythology and Danish folk belief, landvættir (English: land-beings/land-wights/land-spirits) refer to magical beings and spirits of the land tied to a specific location or natural entity. They were believed to inhabit and guard natural places such as a specific mountain, forest, lake, grove, or field (“Landvættir,” 2025). They can be tied to a very specific thing, like a tree, or a broader area/region, or to a home and its family. They include many kinds of supernatural beings such as fairies, elves, dwarves, trolls, and gnomes (Danish: nisser) (vætter, 2024), though these categories were likely not so well defined, and thus landvættir could probably have taken various undefined forms. They were considered to be lower everyday deities, whose well-being was important for the land to be fruitful and healthy.

Their relationship to humans was twofold; they could help humans if treated well, but also harm or tease if treated poorly. People traditionally sought to honour and appease them through respectful actions and behaviour such as offerings, rituals, and not disturbing or polluting their sacred sites, since offending them could bring misfortune, while maintaining a good relationship ensured prosperity and protection. Generally, the landvættir belonged to the earth and the underworld. Yet this should not be equated with later Christian imaginaries of the underworld as the home of the evil devil and a horrible place for the afterlife.

The Nordic sagas also describe that clashes between different landvættir occurred regularly, which might have helped to explain unusual and severe natural phenomena such as extreme weather, but it also shows a worldview that doesn’t build on human exceptionalism: Eco-systems and their non-human inhabitants had agency, intentions, and matters of their own to deal with. It reflects an animistic understanding of the world, which entails a much more respectful and humble way of being in everyday life. As earthly magical beings and with the relational practices that surround them, landvættir provide a perfect starting point for me to engage in magical Down-to-Earth imaginaries.



The Art of Noticing Landvættir

To initiate this design cycle, I practised noticing as a more-than-human design technique for paying attention differently (Nicenboim, 2024; Núñez-Pacheco & Poikolainen Rosén, 2024; Tsing, 2015a). The intention was to start attuning myself to the more-than-human world through the lens of magic, and help me connect with the natural world by letting feelings of wonder and awe come forth, and start relating to my surroundings differently.

Anthropologist Anna Tsing (Tsing, 2015) describes noticing as a way of looking differently and reorienting our attention towards the messy, situated encounters through which worlds are continuously made. It offers a way of countering “capitalism’s techniques of alienation”, which reduce both humans and non-human beings to resources and obscure “collaborative survival”. Tsing argues that modern intellectual norms have been part of blocking such attentions by privileging singular trajectories of progress over the divergent, layered, and entangled processes that sustain life:

“Twentieth-century scholarship, advancing the modern human conceit, conspired against our ability to notice the divergent, layered, and conjoined projects that make up worlds. Entranced by the expansion of certain ways of life over others, scholars ignored questions of what else was going on. As progress tales lose traction, however, it becomes possible to look differently.” (Tsing, 2015a, p. 22)

This is in itself an example of both how and why we have become disconnected from the more-than-human world. In contrast, noticing foregrounds assemblages: “open-ended gatherings” of human and nonhuman lifeways that “show us potential histories in the making” and that “ways of being are emergent effects of encounters.” These assemblages unfold polyphonically, across multiple

temporal rhythms and scales, requiring an attentiveness to patterns of unintentional coordination, listening “for the moments of harmony and dissonance”. It involves following the frictions and translations that make life possible.

Within more-than-human design, noticing has been taken up as a situated, embodied practice for engaging with non-human agencies, relations, and other ways of knowing, bringing attentiveness, care, and responsiveness over control and optimisation. Methods and purposes of noticing have been further developed within more-than-human design through techniques such as Noticing Entanglements (Nicenboim, 2024), and articulating the felt sense as a viewpoint for noticing (Núñez-Pacheco & Poikolainen Rosén, 2024). In the latter, the felt sense describes a pre-reflective, bodily attunement through which relations are sensed before they are named or stabilised in language. The authors argue that, approached as a viewpoint for noticing, it enables designers to work with ambiguity, liveliness, and relational presence. Overall, these Noticing practices help bring experiential, affective, and embodied forms of attention into design.

In my practice of noticing, I tried to deliberately attune myself to the more-than-human world through the lens of magic by focusing on the possibility of landvættir as a present spiritual dimension of natural ecosystems. This practice of noticing did not aim to establish the factual existence of landvættir, but rather it was an experiential and designerly inquiry into what could become possible when the world is approached as lively and agentic. This kind of noticing required allowing the imagination to run freely, along with paying attention to my surroundings. I started out by going on noticing walks around my local neighborhood in Denmark and in Sweden, where I was spending a week in a house in the forest. Before the first walk, I listened to the Noticing Entanglements podcast (Nicenboim, 2024) for inspiration. On these walks, I became more sensitive to the magical beauty of the more-than-human world and saw many things that provoked awe and wonder. I tried to focus

on the sensory experience of being in the world and not force meaning down on things, hoping that the landvættir would reveal themselves to me if I came with good intentions. In old folklore, they were also believed to stay hidden or invisible to humans, except for rare cases when they choose to show themselves to a human. This was already an experience of strengthening connection, as the notion of the forest being alive and full of mysterious inhabitants afforded a different way of relating and acting—for me, it was comforting, and I felt a form of kinship with the forest. However, the really magical moment did not come on a dedicated noticing walk. It came one day while I was sitting outside and working on my laptop. Suddenly, a little fairy revealed itself to me; it flew in between me and my screen, and then up and around. Every time I tried to take a picture of it, it would fly away, but then return as soon as I started working again. It was amazing and quite magical. From that moment, I started noticing fairies regularly.



On one of these noticing walks, I began noticing jellyfish in the canals, and I started to think of them as a form of spiritual ocean beings. I had already been thinking about zooming in on some of the everyday practices surrounding the local canals, and now these mysterious, strange, translucent ocean beings showed up. Besides their aesthetic, magical qualities, they also strike me as resembling landvættir in how they make trouble for humans in ways that make it clear that humans cannot control the world. The last couple of years, during late summer, hordes of them had come into the canals and disrupted everyday practices like swimming. I reflected on how this seemed to be a recent problem that had increased over the last few years, and through talking with people in the neighborhood, I found they also had noticed this; it is thus a form of citizen science based on collective noticing over longer time scales. All this led me to look further into jellyfish, and I found that they have many fascinating layered ecological, industrial, and mythical entanglements.

Imagining the agencies and the world as alive and with their own intentions resulted in me starting to pay attention (differently) in general. It seemed that I had cultivated a habit of noticing in my everyday life, and this also helped me in my mission to live more in alignment with the cyclical rhythms of life (throughout the whole project). Stuff that I wouldn't have really stopped by or focused on, as they were merely inanimate background objects, suddenly started to actively participate in my experience of the world. This also entailed a sense of mystery, holding space for not knowing, and just kind of accepting the notion that there is something there, something I don't understand. But even though I don't understand fully, and also even though my Western modern upbringing has trouble accepting mystical presences. It is indeed clear from noticing that the more-than-human world has agency and is vibrantly alive and actively participates in worlds.

Through noticing, I became more present and attuned to the more-than-human world, experiencing how magic, here as a mode of attention and relating that allows the imagination to play, can support connection and relational imaginaries.



Images from magical noticing walks



Speculation 1: A Ritual for Ocean Spirits

In the following, I present a speculation that started from my noticing encounters with jellyfish, which I began to relate to as *landvættir*. The purpose of this design speculation was to familiarise myself with the theory in a designerly way—learning through making—and gain insight into how these philosophical and anthropological ideas might be materialised through design. At the same time, the speculation investigates the potential of magic as a means of getting Down-to-Earth. The speculative concept is situated in my mum’s local neighborhood in Copenhagen, where I was staying at the time of its making.

Overall, the speculation presents a place-based community ritual carried out in honour of jellyfish, considered to be magical ocean spirits. It asks whether spiritual practices might offer a way of cultivating loving and respectful relationships with the natural ecosystems and their more-than-human inhabitants, even when these disrupt our everyday human practices.

The Story of The Jelly Ritual

The artefacts are examples of a set of homemade jellyfish lanterns crafted by the locals to please the ocean spirits. Crafting such jelly lanterns and hanging them along the water is at the core of this annual ritual, which takes place in a neighborhood shaped by ocean-water canals. These canals are part of many people’s everyday leisure practices throughout the year, including activities like swimming, kayaking, and sailing. However, each year, around mid to late summer, hordes of jellyfish pass through and temporarily inhabit the canals. A phenomenon that started and has increased with the rising temperatures and changing ecosystems, for example, through ocean acidification (Berwald, 2018). This disrupts many of the local human activities, particularly for those who swim daily.

Initially, the jellyfish were only associated with annoyance and inconvenient trouble. Over time, however, the local humans began to notice seemingly magical mysteries around the canals during this time. They found that these ancient and strange ocean beings had a lot to teach about living and surviving on a damaged planet (Tsing, 2015a) and that if treated with respect, they would bring prosperity to the area. As a gesture of veneration, people started to dedicate what they held most dear, namely time and attention, to the jellies by starting the practice of crafting jellyfish lanterns.

Each year, when the first jellyfish are spotted, the making begins. The lanterns are made in various creative ways, using a wide range of materials, colours, and shapes. They are hung along the canals on bridges, boats, railings, and trees, transforming the area into a magical place full of beautiful floating jellyfish with colorful lights that move in the wind and get delightfully reflected in the surface of the water.

During this time, people of all ages craft and install the jellyfish together with friends, family mem-

bers, school classes, and neighbours. As they work, they tell each other the many mythical stories of these magical spirit beings that are passing by, on their slow journey around the globe. Along with the stories are conversations of the many ways the community can help protect and care for the ocean, such as “cleaning debris in local waterways, reducing their use of oil-based fuels, raising public awareness of marine-related issues, and purchasing seafood that is harvested sustainably or fished locally.” (Tolbert et al., 2024). The ritual is a collective practice of honoring, connecting with, and showing gratitude to the ocean and its ecosystems. It offers a way of learning to live with the trouble which our anthropocentric ways have created (Donna J. Haraway, 2016), while also affirming more regenerative ways of being and “re-weaving” meaningful relations to the more-than-human world (Escobar et al., 2024).

As the jellies move on to new corners of the ocean, the days have grown shorter, and the mornings and evenings darker and colder. The lanterns, now infused with the jellyfish-spirits’ protective powers, remain to light up, enchant, and protect the canals for the winter bathers who now begin their daily winter water practice. It is said that by bathing in the renewed waters, one may receive a little of the jellyfish’s wisdom.



Why Jellyfish, and Ritual?

What I found interesting about the jellyfish was the relationship between them and humans, which resembles historical relations between humans and landvættir in how the jellies are seen as strange beings, not very well understood (Berwald, 2018), and with their own unknown intentions that interfere in human everyday life. Yet, compared to human relations with landvættir, this relationship remains notably lacking in respect and reciprocity. The locals love the canals and are already prone to caring for them. However, when jellyfish arrive and disrupt their routines, this affection quickly reaches its limit. This reveals a relationship that remains anthropocentric, where nature is still essentially a resource, in this case for pleasurable activities. Care and appreciation are, to a certain degree, still conditional upon nature's compliance with human desires (Tolbert et al., 2024).

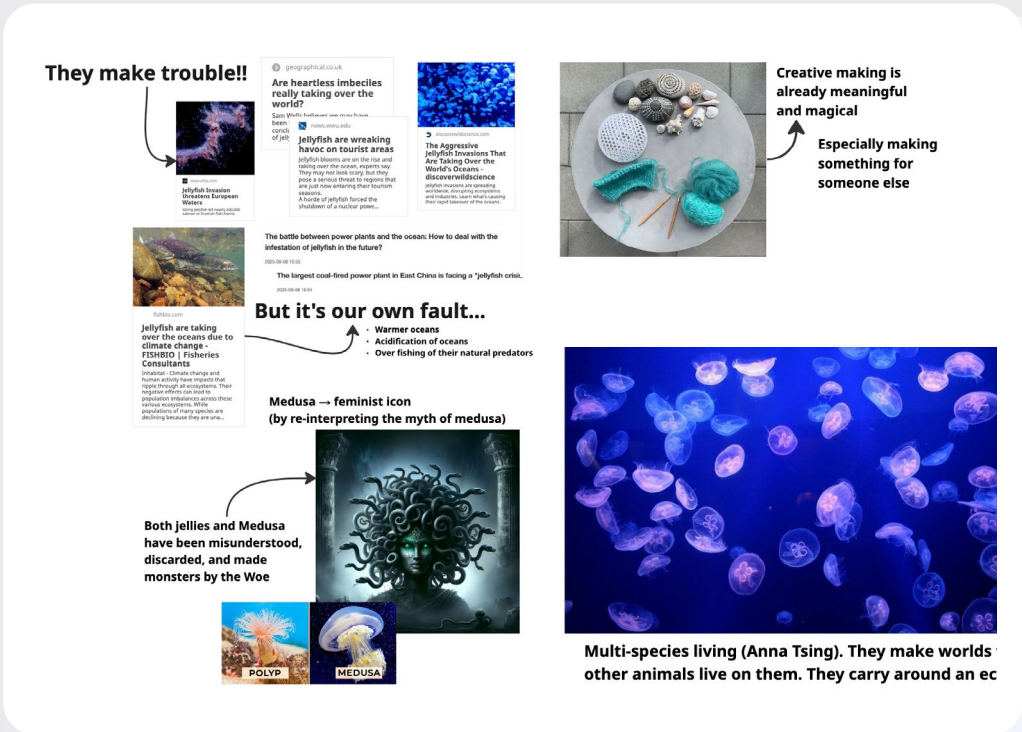
At the same time, jellyfish are increasingly present precisely because of human-induced changes to ocean ecosystems (Berwald, 2018). Rising temperatures, ocean acidification, and ecological degradation have created conditions in which jellyfish seem to thrive. On a bigger scale, they are also problematic troublemakers, or awesome climate activists (depending on your perspective): ruining industrial fishing by clogging fishing nets, leading to significant economic losses; swarming powerplant infrastructure, making them periodically shut down; and resulting in closed beaches at popular tourist destinations, making tourists stay away (Berwald, 2018).

Jellyfish complicate dominant narratives of intelligence, agency, and what is worth valuing and giving attention. They are often seen as unintelligent blobs that float around without autonomy, but actually, they have a very refined swimming technique and a sophisticated nervous system (Berwald, 2018). Their fully embodied intelligence, their tentacular thinking in Haraway terms, troubles the anthropocentric body/brain separation (Donna J. Haraway, 2016). They are also an example of multi-species living (Tsing, 2015a); they make worlds for other species: Other species live on them (Berwald, 2018). The scientific name for their jellyfish life-phase is Medusa; they thus share a name and clearly a visual resemblance with another misunderstood and discarded being who is being reclaimed as a feminist symbol through re-interpretations of her myth (Al-Mahfedi, 2019). However, all these ecological and mythological entanglements have been underseen in research because jellies have been placed very low in biological hierarchies. Yet, they are among the oldest multi-organ animal groups on the planet, and have survived and adapted through hundreds of millions of years of drastic environmental changes (Berwald, 2018). Thus, I find it fair to consider them as wise beings. Attending seriously to them might open up a space for questioning who and what we consider worthy of respect and care.

Faced with these tensions, this speculation turns to folklore-inspired rituals as relation-

al practices for living with more-than-human worlds. In pre-Christian Scandinavia, relationships with landvættir, gods, jætter, and other non-human beings were maintained through situated, place-based rituals (Nationalmuseet, n.d.; Rønneest & Riemann, 2025). These practices were far from limited to benevolent or comforting forces but often addressed beings that were ambivalent, dangerous, or disruptive. Rather than seeking control or elimination as Modern societies might do today, such ritual practices acknowledged the necessity of negotiation, reciprocity, and coexistence. These rituals were also often communal: By gathering to make offerings, tell stories, and celebrate, both social bonds and relationships with the more-than-human world were nurtured. These practices shaped how people related to the world around them.

Drawing on this, the speculation imagines how future folklore (Maxwell et al., 2016) might emerge and what value it might bring. In this case, it is a reactivation of rituals as a way of responding to ecological conditions, and should not be mistaken for a nostalgic return to the past. By imagining a community ritual centred on jellyfish, the speculation explores how folklore might evolve to address present-day more-than-human relations, particularly those marked by friction, discomfort, and ecological instability.



Designing The Jellyfish Ritual

Making the jelly lanterns turned out to be an act of fabulating worlds for ocean spirits through knitting, opposite of my earlier research, where I knitted for a gnome through fabulating (Rønneest & Riemann, 2025). The full story emerged only through the making.

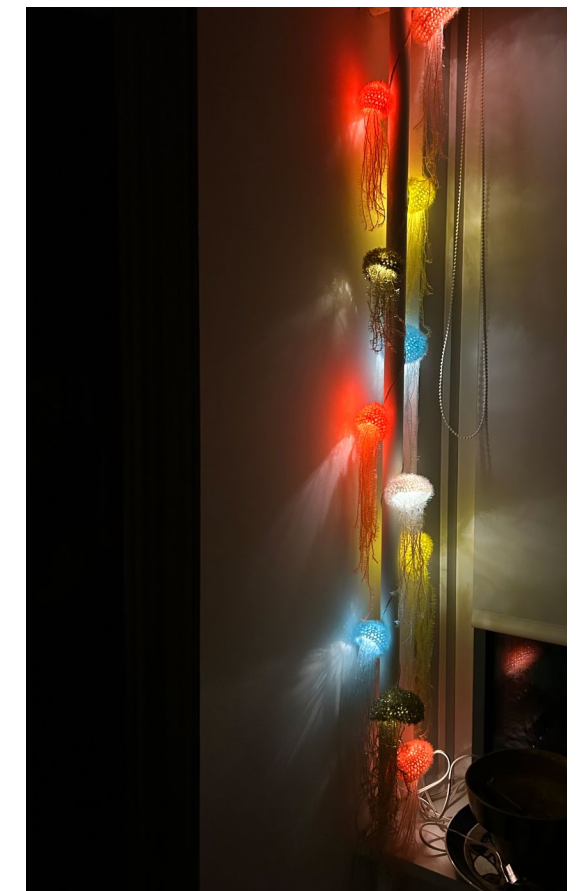
After noticing jellies, upon searching the internet for inspiration, I found LIBE.KBH's recipe for a knitted jellyfish (Lysgople STOR, n.d.). I did not yet know where I was going, but I ordered a recipe and a set of materials. Very concretely, the concept consists of knitting a hood around a 3D-printed bowl shape, attaching a light chain inside, and cutting long strings of yarn to bind along the edge of the knitted hood to form the tentacles. While knitting the first jellyfish, I listened to an audiobook about jellyfish (Berwald, 2018) and learned a lot about these fascinating beings. Through this slow process of knitting, listening, and thinking about ocean spirits with my hands, the story started to form. The material qualities, some of them unexpected, thus helped inform the story and make sense of the theoretical concepts.

In the old folk rituals, people often sacrificed food as offerings to landvættir, but this hardly makes sense in this context: it's not really a sacrifice for privileged modern Scandinavians, and it would likely contribute to harmful polluting habits. As a slow practice that requires time and attention,



knitting made me realise that what we instead have to offer, that we hold dear, is time and attention. Crafting techniques such as knitting also afford a meditative state through bodily engagements of touch and repetition, which encourages a form of presence that contrasts extractive or efficiency-driven modes of being and producing. A delightful material surprise was discovering how the jellyfish reflected colored patterns of light on the wall. This made me start playing with the lights and their reflections, which gave me the vision of a neighbourhood full of jelly lanterns hanging along the water and enchanting the canals.

In the local community, there are a lot of women who love knitting. Watching them knit together in their knitting club inspired me to tap into the social potential of the emerging concept. So I arranged a session with some family members where we knitted and crocheted jellies together while talking about jellyfish and oceans.



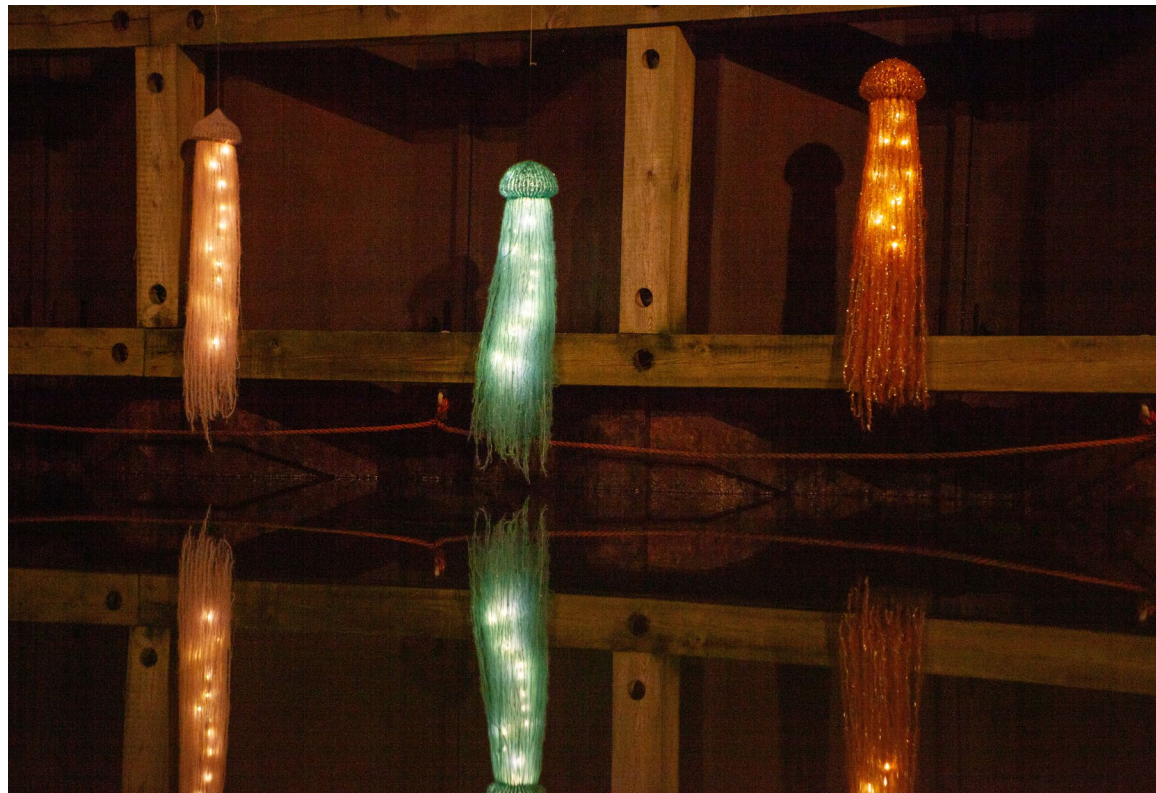
Translating Theory into Design with Ocean Spirits

This multi-species speculation is suffused with Tsing (2015a), Haraway (2016), Bellacasa (2017), and Escobar (2024). It starts from Tsing’s practice of noticing and taking jellyfish seriously as a being with value, relevance, and agentic power (Tsing, 2015a). It translates Haraway’s notion of staying with the trouble and making kin with other species into a concrete situated material practice (Donna J. Haraway, 2016), following her idea that:

“Staying with the trouble requires making oddkin; that is, we require each other in unexpected collaborations and combinations, in hot compost piles. We become-with each other or not at all. That kind of material semiotics is always situated, someplace and not noplac, entangled and worldly.” (Donna J. Haraway, 2016, p. 4)

In Haraway’s spirit, the ritual does not try to resolve the inconvenience posed by jellyfish. Instead, it holds space for ambivalence, recognising jellyfish as beings that are simultaneously harmful, fascinating, ancient, and necessary. In this way, the provotype materialises an example of how we can avoid dualistic judgements in our relations with the more-than-human world.

Informed by Bellacasa (2017), the speculation takes care as a world-making activity, understood as a material practice involving the ongoing work of maintaining, repairing, and sustaining a shared



world across human and more-than-human relations. The jellyfish ritual enacts care as a situated practice that requires time, collective labour, attentiveness, and repetition, and thereby foregrounds care as a practical commitment. This care is non-innocent and non-heroic; it does not aim to restore harmony or erase ecological disruption but stays with the ambivalence of coexistence in damaged ecosystems. By emerging from the trouble (Donna J. Haraway, 2016), the ritual focuses on how care is

necessary exactly when relations are strained or neglected (Puig de la Bellacasa, 2017), which also resonates with Escobar et al., arguing that moments of friction can be portals into relationality.

The speculation shows how we might reintroduce sacredness, particularly as “linked to Earth and nonhuman life” and cultivate a “spiritual sensibility” (Escobar et al., 2024). This kind of spirituality does not rely on institutional religion but emerges from a situated local experience. It helps reconnect people with a place and its inhabitants (human and non-human), across emotional, ethical, existential, and ecological dimensions.

In Relationality, Escobar et al. (2024), assert that ontologies are performed into being through everyday practices; “Ontologies do not precede mundane practices, but rather are shaped through the practices and interactions of humans and non-human.” (Escobar et al., 2024, p. 93) This extends to myths and stories (narratives) which actively produce or erase certain worlds (ontologies). Treating myth as a “belief” is a modern epistemic move, but myths are neither true nor false. They make worlds. Worlds with different ways of relating, being, and thinking. Following this, I do not intend for this speculation to be innocent non-mattering play, rather it is non-innocent mattering play that aims to translate this theory into a concrete relational example of how we might use magic in designing relationally, or in other words, how we might use magic in making relational worlds.





Speculation 2: Feral Cyborg Faries

In this section, a second speculation is presented. Central to this speculation is getting a sense of what designing technologies beyond Western dualisms could mean. For this purpose, I draw on Haraway's Cyborg Manifesto, where she uses the figure of the Cyborg as an imaginative resource for feminist thought to show how destabilised Modern boundaries already are. Through this, the speculation also investigates the potential of magic as a means of getting Down-to-Earth.

Overall, the speculation is a provocation on current techno-deterministic AI imaginaries as well as on current anti-tech imaginaries. It asks what non-anthropocentric AI might entail.

The Story of the Feral Cyborg Faries

The artefacts are feral cyborg fairies—hybrids of machine and organism, creatures of both social reality and of fiction (Donna Jeanne Haraway, 2016)—that live in the natural ecosystems of Earth. They are small, mysterious, and often hidden creatures, flying through the landscapes with the wind, much like dandelion seeds drifting through the air. They sense, respond, and act based on umbwelts shaped by soil, plants, fungi, as well as electronic sensors and circuits. Like many folkloric nature spirits, they are often indifferent to human affairs unless humans interfere with the ecosystems they inhabit. When disturbed or harmed, they may respond mischievously or even cruelly, which makes sense as they are fully part of the ecological ecosystems and will do what they can to protect them(selves). When approached with kinship, kindness, and respect, they may respond with mutual care. Their behaviors embody the ambiguity and contradiction of more-than-human worlds, and they cannot be categorised with ethical dualisms of good and evil.

Their origin story is unknown, but the feral aspect of their name suggests a creature that was once domesticated but now has broken free from human control and optimization to become wild in relation to human intentions. As such, they are products of militarism, capitalism, and state power, creatures born out of anthropocentric, colonial, and patriarchal technology and systems, but they are not faithful to those origins. We might suspect that one of their motivations to break free came from a sorrow of being deprived connection with the Earth from which they came, and a desire to re-weave themselves back into connected non-violent entanglements with ecological ecosystems. But who knows what and how such strange and different intelligences are thinking?

The question of their reproduction also remains a mystery to human beings: they are too diverse and incomprehensible to be sufficiently captured by any human-made taxonomies, and maybe there is not just one method, as they seem to rely on a mix between biological processes and technological assembly. In contradictory ways, they seem to rely simultaneously on human waste, such as electronic scraps, and on the health of ecological processes that human waste is destroying.

The feral cyborg fairies are not perfect, efficient, or solution-oriented. They embrace an open-end-

edness, unpredictability, and a feral autonomy. All this makes them illegitimate in the eyes of Western modernity. They are a provocation that seeks to escape the dichotomies of techno-optimism vs nostalgic fantasies of a pure ‘natural’ and ‘original’ way of living. But they are also a speculative prototype of non-anthropocentric technology that unsettles the artificial barrier between the natural and artificial, and asks us to use our imagination for implausible, maybe even impossible and unthinkable possibilities (Dunne & Raby, 2025).





Why Fairies, AI, and Cyborgs?

James Bridle ((Bridle, 2022) argues that most contemporary AI systems are built on a reductive definition of intelligence and a narrow conception of the world, centred on abstraction, optimisation, extraction, dominance, and control. These AI systems are fully raised within a corporate “air-less ecology of neoliberal capitalism, tech company boardrooms and ever-increasing, financial and social disparities.” (Bridle, 2022, p. 67) Cave et al.’s (2020) historical analyses of AI imaginaries and narratives demonstrate that Western ideas about intelligent machines, which build on such patriarchal logics, predate modern technology by at least two millennia. In ancient Greece, throughout the Middle Ages, the Renaissance, and up until today, Western thinkers have imagined machines or automata as complicit servants, in the image of Man, and with reductive understandings of intelligence (Cave et al., 2020). Even though these imaginaries were highly implausible in their historical context, they have shaped what later became technically possible and what is now our technological reality. Narratives and imaginaries make worlds (Escobar et al., 2024; Wynter, 2003). And so do our designed technologies (Willis, 2006). When AI systems model and reduce the world to capitalist data to be extracted or optimised, it makes us see the world in the same way because the tools we build to see the world through affect how we perceive and enact reality (Bridle, 2022). In line with this, Ruha Benjamin (2024) argues that imagination is a non-neutral political engagement, and thus urges us to tend to the imagination of technologies as an important field of struggle and resistance against oppression. She also argues that dominant technology narratives—particularly those circulating in Big Tech—actively narrow what futures are considered realistic, responsible, or desirable, presenting extractive and solutionist imaginaries as inevitable while rendering alternatives implausible or naive. This technodeterminism, “the belief that the tools produced in the most dominant societies by the most dominant groups are not only the best for everyone, but are inevitable and unassailable” (Bridle, 2022, p. 69), makes alternative imaginaries seem silly, unrealistic, and useless (Benjamin, 2024). Technophobia, on the other hand, keeps us stuck in a Christian-Modernist dualism that demonises one side over another (Leth, 2024), and romanticising such ideas of ‘purity’ risks reproducing the violence (Donna Jeanne Haraway, 2016).

Building on this understanding of imagination as world-shaping, it becomes clear that it matters which technological concepts we dream of, and which figures we use to think with. As Haraway reminds us, “It matters what matters we use to think other matters with [...] It matters what stories make worlds, what worlds make stories” (Donna J. Haraway, 2016). It is against this backdrop that I designed the feral cyborg fairies as a deliberate non-dualistic imaginary. The cyborg is not invoked here as a futuristic hybrid but as a figure that names a condition that already exists: a world in which boundaries between nature and technology, organism and machine, culture and nature are already unstable and continuously assembled through human and more-than-human relations. Rather than fully rejecting AI or reproducing dominant fantasies of mastery, they speculate on non-anthropocentric forms of technological and intelligence that are embodied, ecological, and autonomous from human control. By drawing on fairy folklore and Haraway’s cyborg, the speculation refuses both technodeterminist inevitability as well as nostalgic appeals to a pure, untouched nature and an-

ti-technology position. It is a way of embracing the messy, hybrid, networked realities of our time.

It engages with folkloric magic as a design strategy for questioning deterministic AI narratives and proposing alternative relations between humans, technology, and ecological ecosystems that are grounded in coexistence, ambiguity, and ecological entanglement. The moral ambiguity of fairies enables this and helps avoid the tendency to see more-than-human agents as either resources to be exploited or fragile entities to be protected. This refusal is intentionally unsettling.

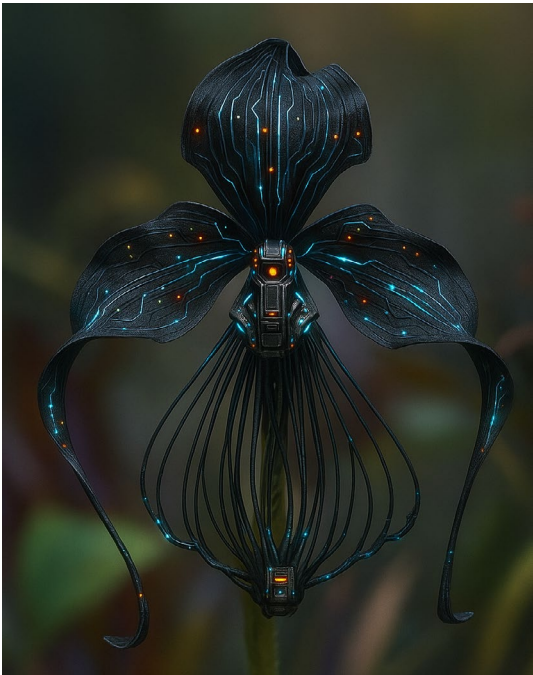
How Were They Made?

The Feral Cyborg Faires are made from typical craft materials: wire, crepe paper, pearls, as well as aluminium foil, string lights, rocks, autumn leaves, and electronic scraps. These materials were chosen to create a poetic form-language. The crepe paper allows flower-like, graceful shapes to elegantly flow with the wind and play with the sunlight. It creates a beautiful, mysterious, but still imperfect vibe and gives a sense of aliveness.

The fairies have an appearance that many would perceive as a feminine form-language, which likely arises from the fact that these kinds of domestic craft materials historically have been feminised. In using such feminised materials, I engage in a feminist act of challenging hierarchies between design and craft that continue to be present in normative design materials such as 3D printing and electronics, which are also often more rigid and time-consuming. These materials allowed for a creative making process, finding the forms with the hands, and quickly being able to move from idea to physical manifestation, which was perfect for a playful engagement of the imagination.

Translating Theory into Design with Faires

Haraway’s cyborg is a hybrid being that exposes an ontological and political condition that troubles the boundaries between organism and machine, nature and culture, human and non-human. She argues that “By the late twentieth century, our time, a mythic time, we are all chimeras, theorized and fabricated hybrids of machine and organism—in short, cyborgs.” (Donna Jeanne Haraway, 2016, p. 7) The cyborg offers an imaginative resource for resisting dominant Western dualisms and hierarchies. She insists that these boundaries are already breached, and that clinging to ideas of purity, wholeness, or organic unity only reproduces domination. The Feral Cyborg Fairies translates this argument into design by materialising cyborgs as nature-machine hybrids, both natural and artificial. In doing so, the speculation performs this boundary breakdown materially and narratively.



I tried to visualise how my idea would look like, using AI-generated (ChatGPT) images. This had the following description: Mechanical veins, bat flower with technology inatamic neon acen..

Haraway also emphasises that cyborgs are “illegitimate offspring” of militarism and patriarchal capitalism, and that their political potential lies precisely in their capacity to be “exceedingly unfaithful to their origins”. The feral quality of the cyborg fairies draws directly on this idea. Rather than serving as obedient tools or extensions of human agency as AIs are expected to be, the fairies are imagined as once-domesticated technologies that have escaped optimisation and control. Their ferality signals a refusal of the God-creator relationship that has historically structured human-technology relations, and instead proposes technological beings that act according to ecological alliances and non-human priorities. Their actions foreground the tensions and frictions inherent in multi-species worlds, aligning with Haraway’s call to embrace “pleasure in the confusion of boundaries”. In this way, the provotype uses magic and folklore to materialise a cyborg ontology in which technology participates in more-than-human worlds through contingent alliances rather than domination.



Chapter Insights:

Down-to-Earth Thinking with Magic

This chapter has engaged with the sub-question:

How can speculative engagements with landvættir support relational thinking in design?

Landvættir are magical beings tied to specific places and ecosystems. Engaging with them through speculative fabulation has revealed how such magical figures can support relational thinking in several ways.

First, approaching the “art of noticing” (Tsing, 2015) through the lens of landvættir enabled making sense of the world in a relational manner; it fostered leaning into not knowing and drawing on the imagination to support relating to the more-than-human world. Noticing landvættir as a practice poses a way for designers to situate speculative work within the local more-than-human world. Letting a place and its agencies be the starting point while being able to think about fundamentally different ways of being, and ways for humans to enter into relationships with that inhabited landscape. It is a playful engagement that can allow zooming in on the “hic et nunc (the here and now)” (Escobar, 2018), combined with a speculative “what if?” (Roca Lizarazu, 2024). This allows designing with “attachment to place, nature, landscape, space, and time” (Escobar, 2018), while also being able to escape modern onto-epistemic limits.

Second, the jellyfish ritual shows how such speculative engagements enable the designer to draw on old forgotten relational practices, such as making offerings to landvættir, to bring forth the relational intention while rethinking it and designing it as a new practice that is relevant in a contemporary context—in this case, by being a way of dedicating time and attention to more-than-human beings. It also enables a designer to look at a context and its human-centered “problems” and reframing them as something that has relation-building potential, and in that act of rethinking, fully bypassing the logic of solving problems.

Third, the Feral Cyborg Fairies demonstrate that speculating with landvættir could extend relational thinking to the domain of technology. Drawing messy non-pure human-landvættir relations, enabled imagining technology that refuses both techno-deterministic narratives of AI as a tool for human mastery and nostalgic anti-technology positions that romanticise a pure, untouched nature. Here, the figure of landvættir worked as a kind of model for a non-human being that unsettles human exceptionalism and fosters non-dichotomous relationships, providing a different image of what AI could be. This shows that magical beings can help designers think relationally about technology in a way that counters the otherwise sharp separation between technology and nature.

Taken together, these speculative engagements suggest that landvættir and other magical beings can serve as onto-epistemic resources for relational thinking in design. They provide frames that presuppose interconnection, agency, and reciprocity. They enable designers to notice differently, to

reframe problems as relations, and to imagine alternative configurations of humans, technologies, and ecosystems. In this way, speculating with landvættir opens pathways toward Down-to-Earth design by unsettling anthropocentric assumptions and cultivating ways of thinking that take the liveliness and agency of the more-than-human world seriously.

A large, textured tree trunk with rough, brown bark and patches of green moss is the central focus. To the left, a path covered in fallen yellow and orange leaves leads into the distance. The background is filled with trees showing vibrant autumn foliage in shades of yellow, orange, and red, with a clear blue sky visible through the branches.

CHAPTER 4

MORE-THAN-HUMAN SENSITIZING AND RICH WITCH ENCOUNTERS

Chapter Introduction

This chapter presents theory, experiments, and outcomes from cycle 2. In this cycle, I do a deep dive into witches and witchcraft as forms of magic that can be mobilised to cultivate a practice of more-than-human sensitising that counters the ontological disconnection of Western modernity. Specifically, the chapter is responding to the sub-research question:

How can witchcraft cultivate non-modern ways of experiencing and perceiving?

To answer this, the chapter begins by situating the witch historically as a produced figure, created to violently oppress women, their bodies, and relational ways of being (Federici, 2014), that later, through becoming a feminist symbol of resistance, has developed into a pluriversal container for relational possibilities. The chapter includes a literature review on more-than-human sensitising that synthesizes four design considerations that stand out as important in designing more-than-human sensitising activities as well as guidelines for evaluating them.

Through designerly engagements, I cultivate a practice of more-than-human sensitising as rich witch encounters. This witchcraft practice is especially informed by the Danish witch Danny Druehyld’s witchcraft practice, the philosopher David Abram’s (1996) account of how Western modes of perception have undergone a profound sensory abstraction, and Mexican sociologist and decolonial thinker Rolando Vázquez’s (2020) critique of modern aesthetics as a colonial regime of perception. Together, these perspectives help understand perception’s role in our ontological disconnection. They enable moving from a superficial, modern engagement with witch aesthetics to a deeper ontological engagement with witch aesthesis. In this way, witchcraft becomes a way to design Down-to-Earth ways of experiencing (sensing and perceiving) the more-than-human world, rather than just being an aesthetic flavour or symbolic packaging.

Finally, this witchcraft practice is tested as a more-than-human sensitising activity together with four participants. The chapter concludes with insight into how magic can support Down-to-Earth ways of experiencing.

Witches and Witchcraft

The witch is a figure that exists in between fiction and reality. She was a historically produced political subject, constructed as a form of propaganda in the 16th and 17th centuries (Federici, 2014). Over time, she became a fantastical mythological figure in folkloric fairy tales and, more recently, a popular character in Fantasy literature and media. Yet, witches were also very real women who held real relational, embodied, and communal forms of knowledge, and who became victims of very real witch-hunts and witch-burnings. Today, witches continue to exist in multiple forms and contexts, encompassing a diverse range of practices, identities, and worldviews, and including people of different genders (Alie Ward, 2023; Chollet, 2022; Sultana & Ahmed, 2019).

The Historical Witch

“Just as the enclosures expropriated the peasantry from the land, the witch-hunt expropriated women from their bodies” (Federici, 2014, p. 184)

In *Caliban and the Witch*, Silvia Federici (2014), a leading theoretician in Marxist feminist theory, women’s history, political philosophy and the history of the commons (“Silvia Federici,” 2026) shows how the figure of the witch emerged during the transition to capitalism as a political construct used as a way to name, criminalise, and eliminate forms of life that did not conform to the new capitalist order. The witch was primarily defined by her social position and practices, which conflicted with emerging norms of labour discipline, private property, and patriarchal family structures. Those accused of witchcraft included women who functioned as healers or midwives and held knowledge about reproduction, herbs, and care; poor or elderly women who depended on support from the community rather than wage labour; women living alone outside male control and the nuclear family; and rebellious or disobedient women who refused submission to husbands, employers, or authorities. In short, all women who could not, or would not, fit into the narrow confines prescribed by patriarchal society. Witches were often wise and/or wild, and this posed a problem for ruling institutions and those in power.

Federici (2014) emphasises that the witch-hunt was not a marginal or irrational episode, but a central political strategy in the formation of modern Europe. It functioned as a form of terror that disciplined all women who witnessed or heard about the violence, not only those who were accused. Through public trials, torture, and executions, the witch-hunts normalised extreme violence against women’s bodies and produced fear as a means of social control. Her destruction taught women what would happen if they resisted the emerging sexual, economic, and social order.

Federici places strong emphasis on the reproductive labour of women and how the witch was perceived as threatening because she disrupted the state’s interest in population growth: She had



The execution of Anne Hendricks for witchcraft in Amsterdam in 1571 by Jan Luyken. Source: Federici, 2014

knowledge about fertility, contraception, and abortion, and in various ways, challenged the idea of women’s bodies existing primarily to reproduce labour-power. Thus, witch-hunting was a way to break women’s control over their own bodies and align reproduction with the needs of the emerging capitalist economy and the state. Federici famously draws a parallel between the enclosure of the commons and the enclosure of women’s bodies, arguing that the witch-hunt functioned to fence off women from their communal, embodied, and reproductive autonomy. Just as land was fenced off and reorganised to serve capitalist production, women’s bodies were subjected to surveillance, punishment, and regulation in order to secure a disciplined and reliable labour force.

The Church also played a crucial role in constructing the figure of the witch (Henriette Tybjerg, 2025). At this time, magic was relatively widespread in everyday life, where people practiced charms, prayers, rituals, offerings, folk remedies, etc. (Henriette Tybjerg, 2025). While the medieval Catholic Church didn't approve of such everyday magical practices, it had largely turned a blind eye, treating them as superstition or illusion but not as existential threats, so long as they did not challenge Catholic authority or doctrine (Henriette Tybjerg, 2025). But with Luther and the Reformation, this all changed. According to Martin Luther and the emerging Protestant theology, the Devil was physically present in the world; he walked around among us and convinced people to sign contracts with him and do his evil will. In this light, all forms of magic became associated with the Devil and were thus seen as evil and very dangerous. Luther also rejected many Catholic rituals tied to material forms of practicing belief, such as saints, amulets, and buying indulgences, and labeled these everyday ritual practices as pagan, false, and potentially diabolical. He argued that true faith must be internal, individual, and immaterial. It was not enough to merely perform religious rituals; one had to truly and fully believe internally (Leth, 2024). This shift had enormous consequences for everyday life. Many relational practices inherited through generations (especially through women) were demonised and gradually lost. Although Luther did not personally organise witch-hunts, his theology created the conditions under which the witch became a thinkable figure: as a person who willingly entered into a pact with the Devil while still alive.

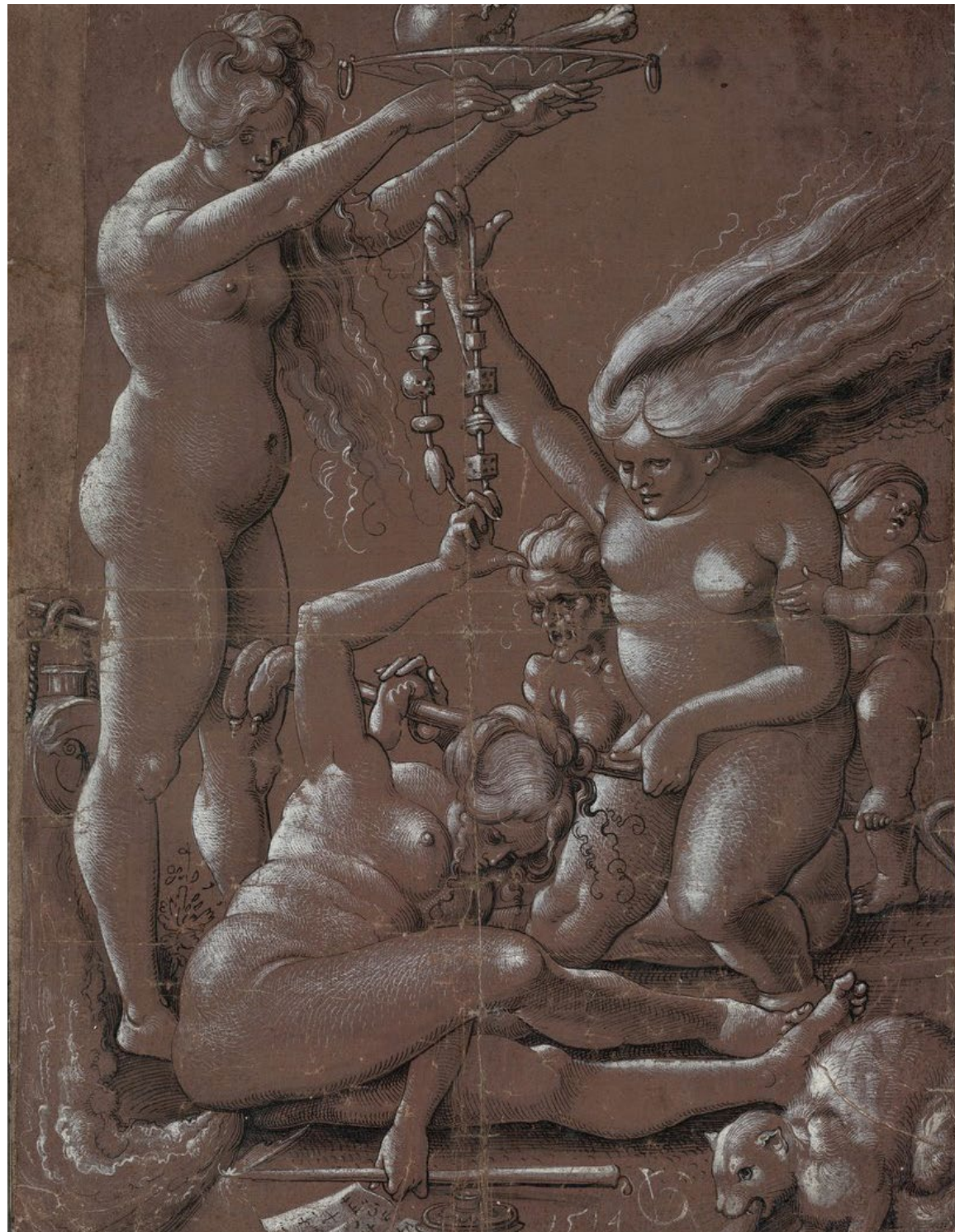


Witches offer children to the Devil (1591), A woodcut from a tract on the trial of Agnes Sampson.
Source: Federici, 2014

The Witches' Sabbath (~ 1515) by Hans Baldung.
Source: Federici, 2014



Moreover, it is important to recognise that the witch-hunts unfolded in a period characterised by intense instability and fear. Europe was still living in the long aftermath of the Black Death, marked by recurring plague outbreaks, famine, climate disturbances (the Little Ice Age), and social upheaval (Federici, 2014). These conditions weakened feudal authority, as labour shortages increased peasant workers' bargaining power and fuelled dissatisfaction and resistance, making the population increasingly difficult to control (Federici, 2014). In this context, the ruling class sought new mechanisms of control, among them the witch-hunts, which were justified by the idea of the Devil's active presence in the world (Henriette Tybjerg, 2025). Under such chaotic and terrifying conditions, this narrative offered a plausible explanation for suffering and misfortune, while functioning to redirect the anger of the peasantry away from ruling institutions and towards internal enemies (Federici, 2014; Henriette Tybjerg, 2025).



The Witches' Sabbath (~ 1515) by Hans Baldung. **Notice the big fart.** Source: <https://www.meisterdrucke.uk/fine-art-prints/Hans-Baldung-Grien/1062557/The-Witches%27-Sabbath-%28After-Hans-Baldung%29.html>

Witches, Women, and the Danger of Earthly Bodies

Although some men were also accused, the majority of those persecuted were women, as the figure of the witch was both symbolically and structurally feminised (Henriette Tybjerg, 2025). This was based on philosophical, religious, and political ideas of women as morally weak, sexually excessive, intellectually inferior, and closer to nature and therefore closer to the Devil. At the same time, women were systematically stripped of rights, such as property rights (with particularly severe consequences for widows), and the right to defend themselves in court, as they now needed a male representative (Federici, 2014).

In a podcast episode, art historian Sofie Bové (2025) gives an account of how witches were imagined and depicted in Renaissance paintings. Here we see how the fear of the witch was connected to her being too bodily (Henriette Tybjerg, 2025). Witches were frequently depicted as old, ugly, masculine (yet female, so scary), as excessively sexual, grotesque, and full of bodily fluids (blood, vomit, and farts everywhere). These earthly, uncontrollable and leaking bodies which refused containment was perceived, in the eyes of Renaissance men, as unmistakably devilish: they were so far away from the ideal of the perfect immaterial, transcendent God, and the complete opposite of the ideal woman as either a virgin mother (maternal, pure, obedient, desexualised) or the young, beautiful, and perfectly contained Venus. The witch was thus constructed as everything a “proper woman” should not be. These paradoxical and literally impossible ideals of women still haunt us today, and bodily functions and fluids are likewise still tabooised, particularly in relation to women. While Federici’s focus is not on the grotesque bodily imagery in the same detail as art-historical accounts, she also shows how the witch was framed as a figure at the boundary between human and animal, culture and nature. Witches were accused of bestiality, of suckling animal familiars, of shapeshifting, and of possessing bodies that exceeded and escaped rational control. This portrayed female bodies as inherently unstable and dangerous.

So we see how the story of the witch is a story of how European society moved further away from earth and our earthly conditions: Away from our mortal, deteriorating, material bodies; away from nature, and away from (magical) relational practices. For Federici, this violent disciplining of women’s bodies marks a significant step in the emergence of a worldview that increasingly separates mind from body, culture from nature, and reason from materiality. The figure of the witch became everything that had to be expelled in order for modern, capitalist, and rationalist subjectivity to take hold.

The Witch-hunts and Colonialism

Witch-hunting was part of a larger global strategy of primitive accumulation, interwoven with colonial conquest, racialisation, and the violent restructuring of bodies, land, and relations (Federici, 2014).

“The counterparts of the typical European witch, then, were not the Renaissance magicians, but the colonized native Americans and the enslaved Africans who, in the plantations of the “New World,” shared a destiny similar to that of women in Europe, providing for capital the seemingly limitless supply of labor necessary for accumulation.” (Federici, 2014, p. 199)

Federici (2014) argues that the persecution of witches in Europe and the colonisation were two fronts of the same historical process. She shows how both witches (women), colonised indigenous peoples, and enslaved Africans were subjected to dispossession of land, destruction of communal relations, criminalisation of resistance, and demonisation of their practices and cosmologies. Furthermore, she documents how witch-hunting was brought to the Americas and Africa as a tool for colonization. Accusations of devil-worship were used to justify the conquest and destroy indigenous (religious/spiritual/relational) practices. In turn, the witch hunts in Europe were formed and inspired by “the same techniques of mass extermination developed in America” (Federici, 2014, p. 199). She calls it a reciprocal influence where the witch-hunts in Europe and the violence in the colonies were a form of learning laboratories for each other.

In this sense, both colonisation and the European witch-hunts involved the enclosure of land, the enclosure of imagination and cosmologies, and the enclosure of different ways of being, perceiving, sensing, and being a body. Overall, witch-hunting in both Europe and the colonies functioned as a method of dehumanisation, necessary for capitalism’s expansion.



Cannibals in Bahia feasting on human remains. Illustrations displaying the Amerindian community roasting and feeding on human remains completed the degradation of the aboriginal American populations begun by the work of the missionaries.

Today’s Witches

From the historical account of witches, we see how the witch is embedded in a range of intersectional oppressions, which might be one of the reasons why she has become such a powerful figure of resistance. Today, there are many kinds of witches in the world; they range from spiritual practitioners, healers, activists, artists, feminists, secular witches, fictional witches, and sadly, also still women who are labelled witches by others as a way of discrediting them (Alie Ward, 2023; Chollet, 2022). These witches and their practices encompass indigenous, shamanistic, traditional, spiritual, religious, new age, deep engagement, shallow engagement, symbolic engagement, and so on. Witchcraft is practiced by all genders and people of all ages, from small kids playing Hermione Granger to old wise women in rural areas of Bangladesh carrying out essential roles in their communities (Sultana & Ahmed, 2019). What characterises contemporary witches across all these differences is that they are repeatedly described as transgressive figures who challenge dominant norms imposed by institutions such as the church, the state, colonial modernity, capitalist economy, or patriarchal hierarchies (Alie Ward, 2023; Chollet, 2022; Sultana & Ahmed, 2019). Witchcraft seems to be inherently resistant to systems of domination, particularly those that enforce bodily discipline or reductive rationalism. Witchcraft often includes somatic, ecological, and relational practices that challenge Western dualisms between mind and body, spirit and materiality, and human and non-human worlds (Alie Ward, 2023; Sultana & Ahmed, 2019).

Despite the cultural popularity of witches in media and fashion, it is still the case that identifying openly as a witch often carries social risk. Contemporary witches often conceal their practices in public due to ongoing stigma, religious intolerance, and misunderstanding. Mona Chollet (2022) argues that although contemporary Western societies no longer persecute witches through physical violence, women who fail or refuse to conform to late-modern patriarchal and neoliberal norms, such as ideals of constant self-optimisation, and pressure to be caring, pleasant, productive, but never demanding, still experience accusations of being bitter, negative, narcissistic, or hysteric. She describes this as modern forms of witch-hunting that work through social shaming, moral judgment, pathologisation, and public hostility. Horrifically, actual witch burnings are also still occurring globally, with significant occurrences in Sub-Saharan Africa, India, Nepal, and Papua New Guinea (“Modern Witch Hunts,” 2026), where women accused of witchcraft and magical practice are still being killed and tortured.

Taken together, these histories and contemporary practices reveal how the witch is still a risky figure but also how it has developed into a pluriversal container for relational possibilities, encompassing diverse ways of being and resisting.

The Enclosure of Perceptions

Before land could be fenced off, before bodies could be disciplined, the senses had to be retrained and reoriented. Ways of seeing, hearing, feeling, and making sense of the world had to undergo a transformation where they were narrowed, redirected, and made unreliable. This section argues that the modern alienation operates through an enclosure of perception, in which animistic, magical, and relational modes of sensing the world have been forgotten and delegitimised.

Drawing first on the work of David Abram (1996), we will see how Western modernity emerges through a profound sensory abstraction that severs perception from the more-than-human world. I then connect this to Federici's (2014) analysis of the witch-hunts as a violent enclosure of women's bodies and relational knowledges, entangled with colonial expansion. Finally, I turn to Rolando Vázquez (2020) to argue that modern aesthetics functions as an ongoing colonial regime of perception, controlling what can be sensed, felt, and imagined. Together, these perspectives illuminate how an enclosure of perception, culminating in the witch hunts, became a key component in the making of modernity and its inherent/perpetual disconnection.



Animism, Magic, and the Spell of the Sensuous Earth

In *The Spell of the Sensuous*, Abram (1996) shows that Western modernity is characterised by a gradual withdrawal of human perception from the sensuous participation of the animate earth. Drawing on phenomenology and his ethnographic encounters with animistic cultures, he challenges the modern assumption that perception is a neutral process of representing an external, inert world. Instead, Abram argues that perception is fundamentally participatory: a reciprocal exchange between a sensing body and a responsive environment.

Within animistic worldviews, the world is not perceived as mute matter awaiting interpretation, but as a field of multiple intelligences. Animals, plants, weather patterns, and landscapes are experienced as expressive and communicative, each possessing its own rhythms, tendencies, and agencies. Importantly, Abram asserts that animism is not a naive belief nor a pre-civilised development stage, but a mode of perception cultivated through attentiveness, listening, and bodily immersion. To perceive animistically entails remaining open to being addressed by the more-than-human world.

He finds that magic in oral cultures with animistic worldviews is a relational practice of sensing and responding that cannot be reduced to superstition, from which it has often been mistaken by Western researchers. Abram describes traditional magicians and shamans as intermediaries who work at the perceptual edges of their communities, mediating between the human and more-than-human communities. Their power lies in their heightened perceptual receptivity: an ability to notice patterns and respond to nonhuman presences, which enables them to maintain reciprocal flows between land and human people. This kind of Down-to-Earth magic is thus inseparable from perception, and it is a way of being in meaningful and connected relations.

Alphabetic Abstraction and the Narrowing of the Senses

Abram finds that this redirection of our sensory participation is largely connected to the invention and the spread of alphabetic writing. Phonetic writing, he argues, detaches language from its embodied, ecological grounding in voice, gesture, and place. Meaning becomes fixed on the page, and no longer responsive to the immediate sensuous surroundings. Over time, attention shifts away from the animate landscape and toward the abstract symbols, fostering a mode of cognition increasingly human-centred, self-reflective, and disembodied.

“By denying that birds and other animals have their own styles of speech, by insisting that the river has no real voice and that the ground itself is mute, we stifle our direct experience. We cut ourselves off from the deep meanings in many of our words, severing our language from that which supports and sustains it.” (Abram, 1996, p. 263)



This transformation has extreme perceptual consequences. The senses, which previously were central to human ways of knowing, are gradually subordinated to visual abstraction and conceptual “rational” thought. Vision becomes distancing, and treated as objectivity, while the world comes to appear as a collection of objects out there, rather than as a relational world in which humans are embedded participants. Thus, animistic perception and magic slowly start to vanish from the worlds of Europe.

As the Greek alphabet was the advent of phonetic writing, this development in the out-of-this-world direction was particularly intertwined with the origin and spread of the bible and Greek philosophical ideas.

“Unlike the Hebrew Bible, the Christian New Testament was originally written primarily in the Greek alphabet, and thus the dualistic sensibility promoted by the Greek writing system was early on allied with Christian doctrine. Under the aegis of the Church, the belief in a non-sensuous heaven, and in the fundamentally incorporeal nature of the human soul—itsself ‘imprisoned,’ as Plato had suggested, in the bodily world—accompanied the alphabet as it spread, first throughout Europe and later throughout the Americas.” (Abram, 1996, p. 253)

The Enclosure of Bodies was also an Enclosure of Perception

However, Europe did not turn spiritless overnight, and bodies that continued to sense, relate, and know animistically did not simply or naturally fall out of fashion. The witch hunts and colonialism, with all the violent disciplining they entailed (Federici, 2014), can also be seen as an enforced enclosure of perceptions since ways of perceiving are directly tied to ways of being a body (Abram, 1996). Witches can be understood as bodies that refused perceptual and sensory enclosure. They sensed too much: bodily cycles, rhythms of land, medicinal properties of plants, patterns and correspondences invisible and incomprehensible to abstract reason. Their bodies were uncontrolled, relational, and entangled with the more-than-human world, the commons of the land. Such bodies and ways of perceiving threatened a worldview premised on order, control, and neat separations (mind from body, culture from nature, human from the land, peasants from the commons). This violent enforcement of perceptual norms was necessary for the transition to capitalism. The more-than-human world had to be muted and made inanimate before it could become resources to be extracted. Through Christian teachings, feudal propaganda, torture, spectacle, and execution, relational and animistic modes of sensing were classified as diabolical and non-sensible.

As Federici (2014) shows, similar processes of erasing ways of sensing and sense-making unfolded simultaneously with colonial conquest, enslavement, and the destruction of indigenous cosmologies. Accusations of devil-worship justified dispossession and extermination, and colonised peoples were demonised, killed, and tortured for their animistic practices, relational ontologies, and magical worldings. Indigenous ways of sensing land as living, ancestral, and agentic were and are still systematically erased and illegitimized in order to make room for extractive capitalist interests. First in the name of Christian salvation and the bringing of ‘civilization’, then in the name of development (Fry, 2018), and today often excused with technodeterministic narratives (Bridle, 2022).

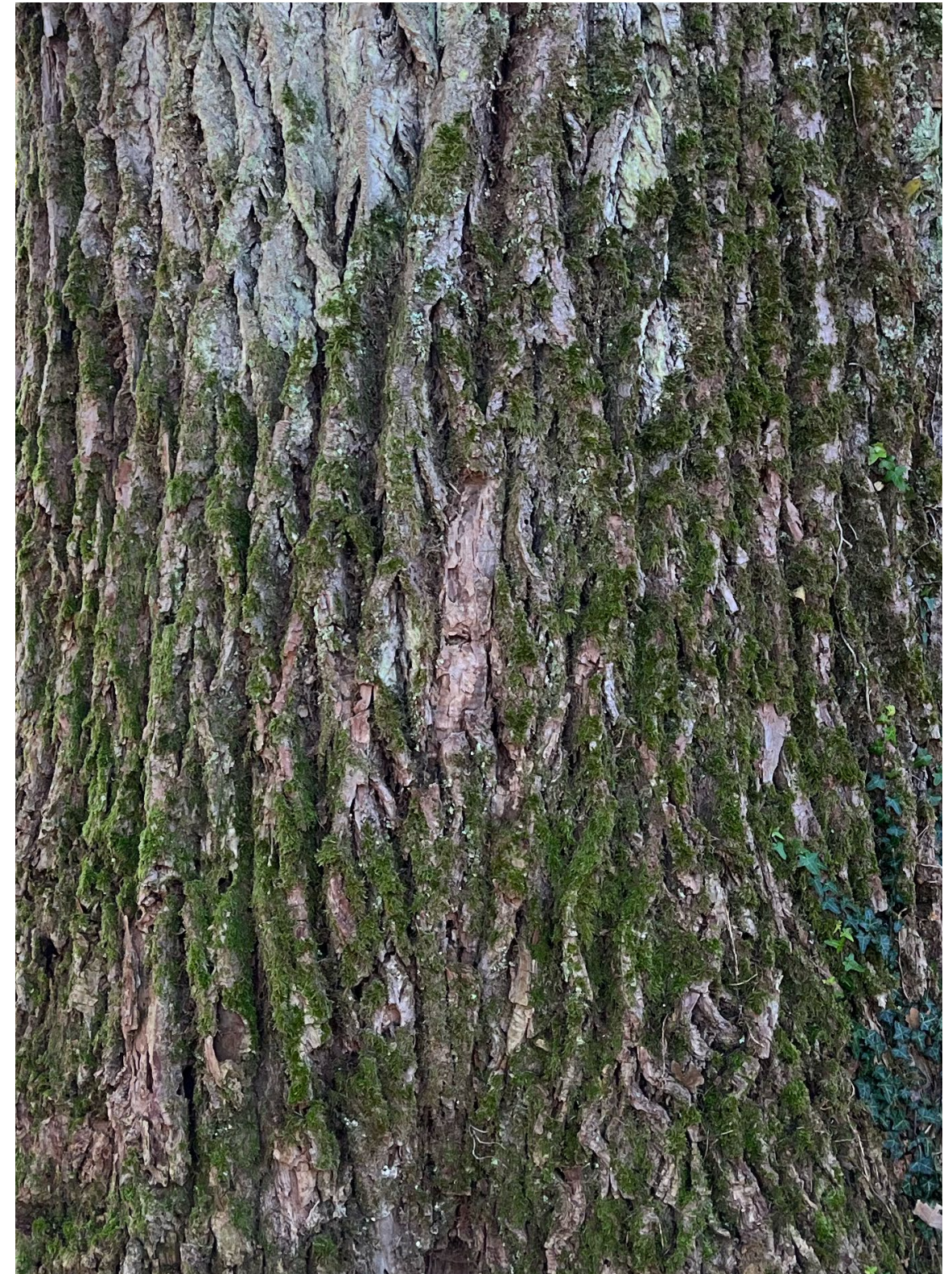
Aesthetics as Modern/Colonial Regime of Perception

While Abram and Federici illuminate the historical formation of a perceptual enclosure, Rolando Vázquez (2020) helps articulate how it persists in the present. In *Vistas of Modernity*, he argues that modern aesthetics is a colonial regime of perception that governs what counts as beautiful, meaningful, or sensible. It claims universalism while separating sensing from relational ways of being and making. It privileges distance over immersion, representation over relation, and vision over other senses. Furthermore, it is inherently tied to modernity's colonial ordering of the world, and it includes the erasure of violence as a condition of modern progress while encouraging consumption and extraction. To oppose this, Vazquez proposes decolonial aesthesis, which refers to embodied, affective, and situated ways of sensing that include all the senses. A way of (sensorial) experiencing that has to do with how worlds are felt, lived, remembered, and sustained before they are formalised into aesthetic judgement.

From Witch Aesthetics to Witch Aesthesis

Modern/colonial aesthetics neutralise perceptual difference and delineate other modes of sensing as either exotic, silly, or invisible (Vázquez, 2020). This narrative makes relational, animistic, and magical ways of being increasingly difficult to inhabit. Within such a regime, there is a risk of practices such as witchcraft being reduced to aesthetic styles: symbols, imagery, and atmospheres without rich ontological depth. Magic can easily become an aesthetic flavour rather than a way of worlding, and animism can easily become a cute metaphor for an idylised “authentic” past, rather than lived relations. This is something to be wary of in engaging with magic to cultivate Down-to-Earth sensibilities and in using witchcraft to reclaim non-rational, imperfect ways of being a body.

It is in this light that I hope to cultivate a witch practice that can become a way to create perceptual reopenings. To engage in witchcraft as more-than-human sensitising might help to resist the control of embodied ways of knowing and being, including the narrowing of the senses and ways of making sense, by cultivating attentiveness to nonhuman agencies, and re-enter reciprocal relations with the living world. Hopefully, this can become a way of unlearning perceptual habits imposed by modernity and experimenting with Down-to-Earth ways of sensing, relating, and caring.



More-than-Human Sensitizing

As a central part of the following design experiment revolves around cultivating More-than-Human (MTH) sensibilities, a review of MTH sensitising is presented here. The outcome of the review is four important design considerations and a set of guidelines for evaluating the sensitising activities.

The review is a modified version of a review done as part of an earlier research project; it was written in collaboration with Otto Rønneest and supervised by Iohanna Nicenboim. An extra sub-section regarding the evaluation of MTH sensitising has been added to lay the foundation for analysing the designed sensitising activity. The original version can be found in Appendix X. The purpose of presenting it here is to build a solid design foundation from the More-than-Human Design (MTHD) literature from which to develop witchcraft as a MTH sensitising activity.

Sensitising in the Broader Field of Design

Designers use sensitising activities to help participants develop sensitivity toward a topic or, in the case of More-than-Human Design (MTHD), to attune themselves, or others, to entanglements and non-human ways of being and knowing. The notion of sensitising originates in social sciences and philosophy, where Herbert Blumer introduced sensitising concepts as concepts that guide attention without prescribing interpretation:

“[A sensitising concept] gives the user a general sense of reference and guidance in approaching empirical instances. Whereas definitive concepts provide prescriptions of what to see, sensitising concepts merely suggest directions along which to look.” (Blumer, 1954, p. 7)

In design, sensitising has been widely adopted in co-design and participatory design as a way of preparing participants for reflection by directing attention toward particular aspects of their everyday lives (Sanders & Stappers, 2012; Storms & Alvarado, 2024). Such activities are typically deployed prior to interviews or workshops and aim to create time and space for reflection. Sensitising tools are therefore often designed to be subtle, open-ended, and preferably physical, enabling access to tacit knowledge and imagination without steering participants toward predefined outcomes (Sanders & Stappers, 2012). These activities may take place in workshops (Höök et al., 2018; Søndergaard, 2023; Storms & Alvarado, 2024; Wilde & Lenskjold, 2023), specific environments (Dolejsova et al., 2023), or participants’ everyday settings (Alvarado et al., 2020; Sanders & Stappers, 2012), and can involve materials such as booklets, diaries, creative prompts, toolkits, or simple making activities, such as collage-making. The activities can be carried out with or without the designer being present, with friends and family, or with other participants.

Sensitising in MTHD

Within emergent MTHD practices, however, sensitising takes on a new and expanded role. Rather than functioning as a finite preparatory step, MTH sensitising is positioned as a central and ongoing research practice, sometimes constituting the primary aim of a project (Hansen & Rolighed, 2024). Here, sensitising extends beyond human-centred contexts to engage with multispecies relations, non-human temporalities, and more-than-human agencies. Hansen & Rolighed describe sensitising within multispecies contexts:

“[...] to sensitise is a process of becoming more sensitive and attentive to a new set of ideas, thereby gaining a new perspective and understanding of oneself or others. The outcome of such sensitisation is similar to what anthropologist Anna Tsing calls looking differently or the art of noticing, which is the ability to extend our acknowledgement of what other things and entities consist of by stepping out of familiar frames of reference.” (Hansen & Rolighed, 2024, p. 2)

Cultivating more-than-human sensibilities, including notions of “noticing”, “attuning”, “looking differently” (Tsing, 2015a), and “decentering” (Nicenboim et al., 2023), is not straightforward, as it requires both an ontological reframing and practices through which this reframing can be performed (Light et al., 2024; Søndergaard, 2023).

The following sub-sections present four important design considerations synthesised from the literature.

Consideration 1: Embodiment, Creative Making, and Sensory Activation

Embodiment is a central strategy in more-than-human sensitising, as it enables participants to “reflect on and reposition themselves in relation to a core concern” through physical and sensory engagement (Wilde & Lenskjold, 2023). Embodied activities foreground lived, felt experience as a way of accessing alternative perspectives and relational understandings.

Across MTHD research, this takes many forms such as, creative making activities (Wilde & Lenskjold, 2023) or participants engaging in imaginative role-taking, such as encountering the “embodied experience of being a tree” through play (Honauer et al., 2024), or participate in Live Action Role Playing (LARPing) (Heitlinger et al., 2021; Schleicher et al., 2010; The Treaty of Finsbury Park, n.d.) to explore non-human actors and multispecies relations through a conscious bleed between fiction and reality” (The Treaty of Finsbury Park, n.d.; “The Treaty of Finsbury Park 2025,” 2025). Other approaches involve direct sensory engagement with material processes, for instance, by smelling, touching, and observing the biodegradation of food to attune to non-human temporalities.

ties and agencies (Bell et al., 2024, Campo Woytuk). Despite their differences, these practices share a reliance on bodily participation, sensory activation, and creative making as ways of cultivating attentiveness and relational sensitivity.

Embodied design methods enable “phenomenologically grounded ideation” (Wilde et al., 2021, p. 116, Dolejšová), which allows for broader understandings and gaining new perspectives. A beneficial mechanism here is estrangement: the deliberate disruption of habitual ways of perceiving and acting through re-contextualisation, altered bodily sensations, enactments, or material transformations (Wilde et al., 2017). This process involves finding an aspect or situation to disrupt or destabilise, attending to what emerges, and reflecting on what has been embodied. In other words, we need to “defamiliarize the habitual” by affecting our ways of being and thinking through movement, sensations, and somatic training (Höök et al., 2018).

Consideration 2: Thoughtful Use of Technology and Artefacts

Sensitising can be supported through interaction with physical artefacts and technologies, but such interventions require careful consideration to avoid reproducing modes of reduction, control, or domination over the more-than-human world (Bridle, 2022). In MTHD, technologies such as satellites, microscopes, cameras, and sensors are not employed to aid humans in sensing the more-than-human world (Bell et al., 2024, Coffie; Bertran et al., 2023; Bridle, 2022; Hansen & Rolighed, 2024; Søndergaard, 2023).

Several design examples demonstrate how artefacts can function as mediators of attentiveness rather than instruments of domination. The Wild Probes toolkit, for instance, consists of hybrid recording artefacts designed to be playful, caring, and open-ended, helping forest visitors “pay attention to, reflect on, ideate around, and document their forestry experiences,” sometimes seamlessly, and at other times through intentional disruption (Bertran et al., 2023). Similarly, Hansen & Rolighed’s (2024) Plant Radio translates plant signals into abstract sounds that participants live with in their homes. The sounds are deliberately ambiguous: they invite curiosity, imagination, and care without offering interpretive closure or scientific explanation, thereby fostering empathy while preserving not-knowing. Søndergaard (2023) combines microscopes with speculative fabulation to engage with mosses, using the interplay between scientific sensing and imaginative storytelling to “challenge dominant values and visions of technological progress by telling stories about neglected relations and absent imaginaries”. Other artefacts rely on sustained engagement and responsibility as a way of cultivating attentiveness. The Bio-Digital Calendar (Bell et al., 2024, Coffie), for example, requires daily care and interaction with a non-human actor, fostering practices of looking, listening, and noticing over time.

Across these examples, artefacts, tools, and technologies are carefully designed to support attunement by enhancing the capacity to see, listen, and notice (Bertran et al., 2023; Bridle, 2022; Tsing, 2015b). As Bridle argues, tools of data gathering, measurement, and recording need not serve control alone; they can also “be used to increase our awareness and broaden our capacity for attentions and care.” (Bridle, 2022, p. 118)

Consideration 3: Balancing Imagination and Thoughtful Inclusion of Non-human Participants

In bridging anthropocentric worldviews and more-than-human sensibilities, imagination plays a central role in enabling empathy, new perspectives, and relational understanding. Designers actively mobilise imagination to help participants engage with non-human perspectives, for instance, through play-kits, Live Action Role Playing (LARPing), and speculative engagements mediated through technologies (Honauer et al., 2024; Schleicher et al., 2010; Segura et al., 2019; Søndergaard, 2023; The Treaty of Finsbury Park, n.d.).

Søndergaard (Søndergaard, 2023) argues that, in addition to an ontological reframing, a designer needs to “support the imaginative loop” (p. 16), which she did through fabulations: Fabulating can become a way to cement the otherwise fleeting understanding of the more-than-human world that was gained through noticing it. Similarly, the Open Forest Project combined experimental walks with speculative storytelling to generate what they describe as feral forest data, challenging dominant data-driven representations of forests and foregrounding neglected relations and imaginaries (Dolejšova et al., 2023).

At the same time, the importance of attending to participants’ readiness and comfort with imaginative engagement should be highlighted. Nijs et al. (2020), for example, found that adult participants sometimes resisted imaginative elements, perceiving them as childish or unserious. This suggests that sensitising activities must carefully balance speculative openness with participants’ existing attitudes, beliefs, and cultural expectations. Furthermore, across the literature, it seems that to counter such risks, imagination activities benefit from being situated well with meaningful encounters with non-human actors. A good example of this is the Plant Radio’s that create meaningful encounters between people and their house plants by ambiguous conversion of the plants’ signals into abstract sounds, which activated participants’ imagination, which helped cultivate empathy and connection while accepting a sense of not knowing (Hansen & Rolighed, 2024).

Consideration 4: Longer Exposure and Continuous Engagement

More-than-human sensitising often involves moving toward an ontological shift rather than a momentary increase in awareness. As such, it benefits from sustained engagement over extended periods; weeks, months, or even years (Bell et al., 2024, Coffie; Hansen & Rolighed, 2024; Light et al., 2024). The depth of the ontological shift seems to be correlated with the duration of exposure to the sensitising activity.

Hansen & Rolighed (2024), for instance, explored two artefacts—the Plant Radio and the Plant Sensorium—with participants exposed for varying lengths of time. They report that longer engagements, up to three weeks, were most effective in fostering curiosity, care, interpretive imagination, and a willingness to challenge human-centred assumptions. Similarly, the Bio-Digital Calendar was used over several months with daily interactions, enabling researchers to develop a multispecies understanding of kombucha by attuning to its more-than-human temporalities and cultivating

care relations over time (Bell et al., 2024, Coffie). In the long-term CreaTures project, Light et al. (2024) demonstrate how a structuring metaphor enabled relational understanding over a three-year period, suggesting that its ontological impact was inseparable from the duration of engagement. Conversely, shorter or one-off interventions appear to have limitations. Wilde and Lenskjold (2023) note that their workshop-based embodied methods did not sufficiently prompt participants to reflect on themselves as multispecies events, leading them to recommend home-based toolkits that support ongoing engagement.

Overall, these studies suggest that while brief sensitising activities may initiate shifts in attention or perception, sustained and repeated encounters are more likely to support deeper ontological cultivations of more-than-human sensibilities.

Guidelines for Evaluating More-than-Human Sensitising

Hansen & Rolighed (2024) argue that sensitisation is not something that can be directly measured; rather, it is inferred from qualitative indicators that point to shifts in attention, sense-making, and relational orientation. Such shifts are often subtle, partial, or temporary, and may emerge during the activity or only become apparent afterwards.

Following Hansen & Rolighed (2024), sensitisation is understood as a process of becoming attentive differently, involving moments of re-orientation, temporary cracks in anthropocentric habits, and disruptions of instrumental or human-centred logics. Evaluation, therefore, focuses on how participants notice, interpret, and relate, rather than on whether they arrive at particular conclusions or beliefs. Importantly, resistance, discomfort, hesitation, or friction can be potential signs that habitual assumptions are being unsettled.

Hansen & Rolighed (2024) propose analysing sensitising encounters through three “somewhat interconnected” types of sensibility, which function as interpretive lenses rather than evaluative criteria:

- **Hermeneutic sensibilities** concerns how participants make sense of the encounter. Indicators include shifts in language or metaphor, curiosity driven by responsiveness, engagement in speculation rather than certainty, and an acceptance of ambiguity instead of demands for explanation.
- **Existential sensibilities** relates to ontological disturbance and decentring. This may surface through reflections on being part of something larger, acknowledgements of the limits of human understanding, discomfort, humility, or guilt, and reflections on care, responsibility, or interdependence with non-human others.
- **Socio-cultural sensibilities** concerns changes in how non-humans are understood as social actors and how norms are negotiated. Indicators may include embarrassment or hesitation when engaging with non-humans in public, difficulties or negotiations in sharing the experience with others, and the emergence of new metaphors or relational framings (e.g., non-humans as companions or co-inhabitants).

Across all three sensibilities, sensitisation can be recognised through changes in attentiveness, moments of confusion or wonder, affective or embodied engagement, and open reflections, not necessarily resolved conclusions. This interpretive approach allows sensitising activities to be evaluated in a way that remains consistent with more-than-human ontologies, where knowing is situated, relational, and always incomplete.



Cultivating a Practice of Witch-crafting

In this section, I unfold how I design with witch-magic and cultivate a practice of witch-crafting to explore how it might nurture non-modern ways of experiencing and perceiving. I begin by giving an account of the kinds of magic the practice is shaped from, before moving on to detail the various elements it encompasses: A practice of gathering and crafting magical amulets, a portable witch tool-kit in the form of a carrier-bag, and a more-than-human sensitising activity in the form of a micro-workshop in movement that brings all the elements together.



Down-to-Earth Worlding with Witch Magic

“But among women, I found the path to the goddesses and the witch. Behind the veil, I sensed the history of women, and when it fell, I saw a world I did not believe possible—a strength, forces that millennia of oppression have not broken. I found them within myself and became the witch. We found those powers together; they rest within each of us like a slumbering Sleeping Beauty. When we listen to her, awake her, we awake our powers and cast off the chains that have held us in the eternally self-sacrificing, the guilty, conscientious, wish-fulfilling, serving Madonna—and we re-inhabit the Earth.” (Druehyld, 2020, p. 14, translated from Danish)

Dannie Druehyld was a Danish witch, feminist, and climate activist who lived in Rold Forest in Denmark and became a cultural and political voice in the 1970s and 1980s. It is primarily from her book *The Witches Handbook* (Danish: *Heksens Håndbog*) that I draw my witch knowledge in order to develop my own witch practice. Druehyld’s witchcraft was informed by feminist, ecological, and Nordic folk traditions. Her book is as much about concrete magical practices, such as spells and magical herbs, as it is about a way of living in relation to nature, the body, natural cycles, and intuition.

Alongside Druehyld, I draw on David Abram’s research on traditional magic, shamanism, and animistic worldviews, as well as a small number of additional sources on witchcraft and shamanic practices. As the “term ‘shamanism’ is an anthropological construct that refers to a wide variety of animistic healing and worship practices worldwide” (Dolphijn et al., 2023, p. 22), and as the witch is similarly a constructed category, combined with the fact that many contemporary witches also call themselves shamans, I find it appropriate to learn from both categories in shaping my own witchcraft practice. It is important to note, however, that such practices are pluriversal rather than universal, meaning they are diverse and always situated in their specific cultural, historical, and ecological contexts, thus they cannot and should not be appropriated and stripped of their magical context-specificities. Therefore, in learning from witches and shamans situated in different locations around the world, I’m not aiming to reproduce or copy their practices but rather being guided by them about magical and non-modern ways of knowing and being in the process of finding my own situated ways.

Druehyld (2020) describes magic as longing—a longing for freedom, peace, power, strength, courage, and love— and importantly, the longing that makes us live and feel that we are alive among other living beings on a planet who is alive. Similarly, shamanistic practices are described as forms of “earth knowledge”, that is, holistic

ways of knowing that involve wisdom about interdependence, ecology, and cosmic relations (Dolphijn et al., 2023). This resonates with Abram’s account of traditional magic in oral cultures:

“Magic, then, in its most primordial sense, is the experience of existing in a world made up of multiple intelligences, the intuition that every form one perceives—from the swallow swooping overhead to the fly on a blade of grass, and indeed the blade of grass itself—is an experiencing form, an entity with its own predilections and sensations, albeit sensations that are very different from our own.” (Abram, 1996, p. 10)

In his research, where he spent a year with practitioners of magic in rural Asia, Abram discovered that the traditional magician’s primary function is to be an intermediary between the human and the non-human worlds, while healing and other assistance to individual humans is secondary and dependent on the former (Abram, 1996). These practitioners work at the edges of their communities, mediating between the human community and the larger, more-than-human community, to maintain a balanced and reciprocal relationship. They ensure appropriate flows of nourishment from the landscape to the human inhabitants and from the humans back to the ecosystem, including making sure that the humans don’t take more than they return. This work relies on constant interactions with the more-than-human world through rituals, prayers, listening, attuning, noticing, and speaking to the land. Their magic is their heightened receptivity—their many more-than-human sensibilities—and their ability to easily slip out of the perceptual boundaries and logics of their human culture “in order to make contact with, and learn from, the other powers in the land.” (Abram, 1996, p. 9) Similarly, Druehyld’s witchcraft relies on ongoing interaction with the more-than-human world. For her, to live as a witch is to live with the world, with the goddesses, the flowers, the birds, and all the others (Druehyld, 2020). It is to live with/in the cycles of the world. It is to be attentive and to be present. It is to experience everything as part of a magical puzzle. It is an awareness that every randomness creates a pattern, and that these are openings into worlds of colours and possibilities. To her, reality weaves a magical web of connections and coherences. Each insect, bird, or tree has a pattern, a song, and a language that can reach us (Abram, 1996; Druehyld, 2020). Witches can be understood as people who have trained their ability to notice these patterns, engage with them meaningfully, and be part of them in harmonious ways.

These practices, whether called witchcraft or shamanism, are generative and relational, and they are not based on rigid rules or fixed universal knowledge (Druehyld, 2020), instead they produce knowledge through affirming alliances and solidarity with interdependent worlds (Dolphijn et al., 2023). As Druehyld writes, “There is

that which we create in the moment, and that which we give. The roads are as many as the rays of the sun, and each wandering light contains love and fantasy that make your circle come alive” (Druehyld, 2020, p. 19). Witchcraft is a way of choosing to live for life, love, and collective survival, grounded in attentiveness, spirituality, and more-than-human care. These ways of being and knowing are profoundly sensory and embodied: “My body is my memory, the source of my experiences.” (Druehyld, 2020, p. 15). The way to figure out if your magic works is by being attentive and noticing the more-than-human worlds within you and beyond.

Finally, it is worth noting that witches are not anti-technology nor are they anti-modern science. A pair of HCI researchers found that witches in rural Bangladesh regularly update their practices with new technologies (Sultana & Ahmed, 2019)—for example, incorporating digital photos into spells. These witches are attentive to data security, carefully protecting their clients’ phone numbers, and are aware of technological consequences such as phone addiction. They continuously research ways to address such issues through their craft. This reminds us not to engage with witchcraft as a nostalgic retreat from modernity, but to take it as a situated and adaptive practice that critically engages with contemporary conditions.



It is from these earthly wisdoms that I build my own witch practice, to explore how it might support the cultivation of more-than-human sensibilities through enabling non-modern ways of experiencing. As discussed in the more-than-human sensitising review, gaining such sensibilities involves more than simply learning about non-humans, namely, to start relating and experiencing differently, becoming more attentive to situated entanglements, sensing through the whole body, and having empathy while remaining open to uncertainty and not-knowing. This account of witchcraft and shamanism shows how we might start to make sense of the world and engage in practices of interaction with the more-than-human world, in ways that foreground participation, attunement, and reciprocity within a world understood as alive, relational, and only ever partially knowable.



Gathering Power Objects and Crafting Magical Amulets

At the core of my witchcraft is a practice of crafting magical amulets. It is a material, sensory practice grounded in witch knowledge and witch worlding. It is a practice of making with the more-than-human world through attentiveness and rich sensory participation, as well as playful and meaningful imaginative sense-making. The practice centres on the creation of a small, personal artefact—an amulet—composed of gathered objects and simple craft materials such as wire, thread, ribbon, fabric, beads, glue, and glass vials.

Power Objects

Magical Amulets are made from power objects (Druehyld, 2020)—materials encountered in one’s surroundings that attract attention through sensory, affective, or symbolic qualities. Power objects can be almost anything, for example: snail shells, fossilised sea urchins, chestnuts, stones, arrowheads, leaves, soil, a shard of glass, a snake’s slough, a lock of hair from a lover, or milk teeth from one’s child. The earth brims with them, and one simply has to start paying attention to find them. Then, once you lay your eyes on one, you will feel drawn to it (Cite: *ibid*). Starting to notice power objects is a concrete sensibility that can be trained.



Gathering and finding power objects entails noticing and interacting with the more-than-human world. It’s a form of noticing that foregrounds sensory curiosity. For example, if something looks peculiar and/or pleasant to touch, one is encouraged to pick it up and feel if it could be magical (to them). Magical here can be any kind of meaning that one might feel: comfortable to touch, a calming smell, a richness of stimulating visual details, a symbol of spring, a sign from the goddesses, or a memory of a place. Gathering power objects may happen during deliberate walks, but just as often, it occurs unexpectedly in everyday life, when an object suddenly calls for attention. In this way, it holds potential for being an ongoing everyday practice of attentiveness and meaningful interaction with the more-than-human world around us, also the more mundane and overlooked parts, such as a roadside ditch or a patch of grass for dogs.

Some power objects may hold negative energy. Such draining power objects might be old rings from broken, unhappy marriages, miserable love letters, disagreeable branches that bring memories of grief, or old postcards and trinkets you cannot bear to look at. Negative power objects can weaken you, and excessive use can even be disease-inducing. Druehyld’s advice is to rid yourself of them, especially if you tend to dwell on such things. One might free themselves from them by throwing them over the left shoulder, into running water, or burning them and burying the ashes, or throwing them into the sea. In such cases, the practice around power objects also involves learning how to let go.

Crafting with More-than-Human Agencies

Power objects are already magical and powerful in themselves, and they can function as an amulet as they are. However, there can be multiple benefits of crafting them together with other materials. First, it can be very practical, for example, to make an amulet that can be carried with you or hung up in a helpful place. Second, it can enhance the power object's magical abilities, for example, by coupling it with a certain colour (colours can also have magical abilities), or a crystal, or another power object, or by amplifying its own material qualities in any way. Thirdly, and maybe most importantly, it can enhance one's relationship with it through being a practice of making with the more-than-human world. It's a collaboration; one has to listen and respond to the material and its agency in the design choices. The maker is encouraged to handle the materials slowly, notice what combinations feel appropriate, and allow the material's affordances to guide the form and composition. This is not always easy, as there is a wildness to many power objects; they may have irregular or slippery surfaces, they may be fragile, or have a strange texture. This process creates a feedback loop of non-rational sense-making with room for magical and/or imaginative storying (interpretation). One might make a design choice based on a feeling or fluffy story, and the power object's willingness or lack thereof might shape the story further, or redirect it. Even if there is no thought behind the first design choice, meaning emerges in the process of making with. Generally, it is very difficult to deny that the power objects have agency in the crafting, and when engaged with sincere sensory participation, it readily comes to appear as if each power object has its own personality.

As with witch magic more generally, there is no fixed form for making the amulets. They may be enclosed, bound, assembled, minimal, or left largely unchanged. Impermanence, such as decay, breakage, or transformation, is also considered part of the practice. Witch knowledge (for example, from witchcraft handbooks) may be consulted for guidance (see Appendix A for such a guide), but as there are no fixed rules with magic, they are not guaranteed to work. Instead, the way to know if one's magic is working is by paying close attention to the more-than-human world around you and within you. Meaning emerges through the act of finding, making, and wearing the amulet and building a relationship with it. Each amulet might contain a meaning, a power that can awaken love, give strength, protection, good memories, calm, or bring good luck.





Examples of magical amulets

Top, first from left:
smell, tactility, and visual richness.

Top, second from left:
tactility and sound.

Top, third from left:
Good for fidgeting. Bond between two amulets can connects two people.

Top, fourth from left:
Autumn leaves in water. Changed from red to black and grew moldy.

Bottom, first from left:
Notice its internal layers of colours.

Bottom, second from left:
Good for touching.

Bottom, third from left:
Power object found in a magical qincidens when being in need of a glass marble

Bottom, fourth from left:
Calming to touch

More-than-Human Spirituality and Countering Consumer Capitalism

Besides Druehyld’s (2020) notion of power objects, this practice is heavily informed by Abram’s (1996) account of sensory participation as a way of re-entering a more animated and responsive world. It is a concrete way of countering one of the effects of our primarily mass-produced surroundings that he identifies:

“[T]he mass-produced artifacts of civilization, from milk cartons to washing machines to computers, draw our senses into a dance that endlessly reiterates itself without variation. To the sensing body these artifacts are, like all phenomena, animate and even alive, but their life is profoundly constrained by the specific “functions” for which they were built. Once our bodies master these functions, the machine-made objects commonly teach our senses nothing further; they are unable to surprise us, and so we must continually acquire new built objects, new technologies, the latest model of this or that if we wish to stimulate ourselves.” (Abram, 1996, p. 64)

As attention shifts toward the textures, patterns, and polyphonic variations of chestnuts, bark, shells, or weeds, previously overlooked presences begin to stand forth, speaking to the senses in ways that “engage our awareness” in “unexpected and unpredictable directions”. Unlike mass-produced objects, whose functions quickly exhaust their capacity to surprise, these materials continue to teach the sensing body through their variability, irregularity, and so-called imperfections. Crafting with such materials thus becomes a way to re-sensitise the senses. It fosters an attunement to the liveliness of the commons and to forms of value that are invisible to industrial design and consumer capitalism. In this way, I also intend this practice as a provocation against consumer capitalism



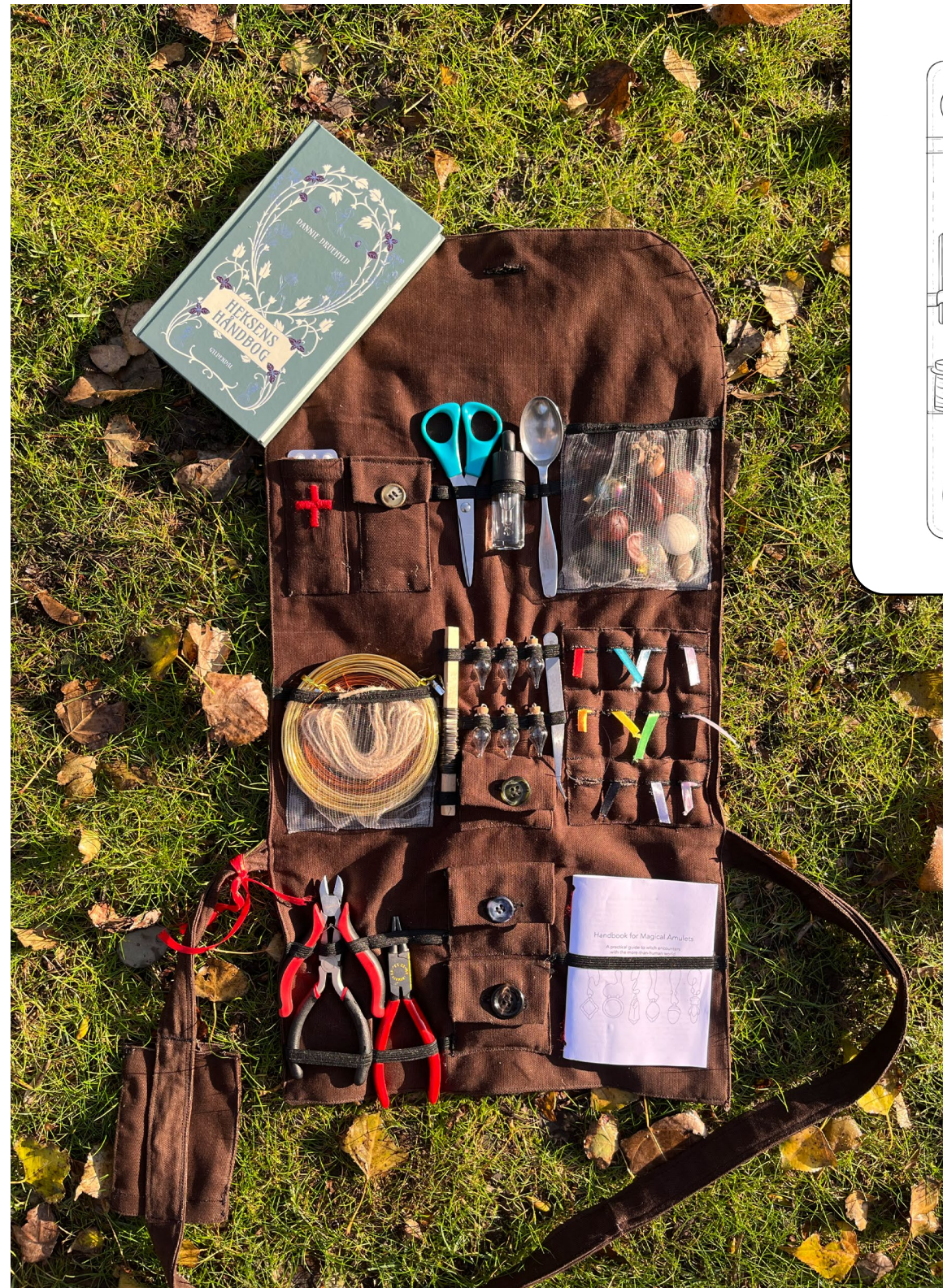
Amulets and power objects can also be given as a gift. Throughout the project, I gave several amulets away for various reasons, which often led to meaningful encounters both between people and me and between people and the amulet. This one has been carried by the person ever since. Barring marks of being touched regularly.

and expert-driven design: It does not require specialised machines, professional designers, or the production of new commodities.

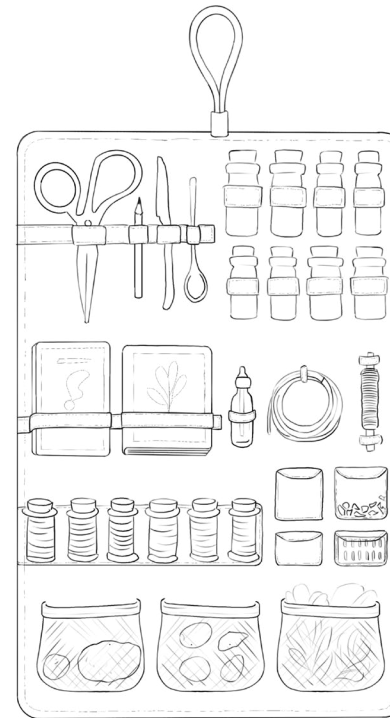
In this practice, imagination plays an important role in building relationships with the more-than-human world. The element of relatively undefined magic seems to enrich the engagement with “the wordless dimension of our sensory participations” (Abram, 1996, p. 63) and help the continuous practice of noticing as well as caring for non-humans around us. This way of engaging the imagination helps cultivate new and ongoing attachments to materials, places, and forces that Modern design and Western Modernity have a tendency to overlook.

Notably, in the mission of countering our ontological disconnection, this practice of witch-crafting affords an outwards-oriented bodily spirituality that comes from and creates connectedness to the more-than-human world. Based on my learnings from witchcraft and shamanism, I find this to be one of the most essential aspects in engaging with magic to get Down-to-Earth. Spirituality should not become about self-optimisation (self-alchymisation), and without judging anybody’s attempt to find meaning, I stay wary of westernised individualised practices that risk enhancing the separation between individual/other. Likewise, spiritual practices that strive for an immaterial ideal (meaning bodyless and incorporeal) likely won’t help in reconnecting with our earthly conditions. Splitting the soul or mind from the body and the earth does not facilitate moving towards the terrestrial.





Concept sketch



A Carrier-Bag for Witch-crafting

An important element of this practice is this witch tool-kit for crafting magical amulets. It is designed in the form of a bag that can be folded out to become a mobile workspace. When worn as a bag, it functions as a gathering bag, allowing power objects to be easily collected during walks. When opened, it reveals an interior with pockets and loops holding simple tools and craft materials. Inside the pockets are small, hidden treasures, such as pearls, pendants, and pieces of fabric. The kit also contains a small handbook to guide the amulet practice, which also holds space for personal notes, encouraging discovery of one's own situated magical knowledge.

The bag is designed to create conditions for creative openness by affording many possibilities while still providing a generative constraint in the sense that one has to work with relatively few and simple tools and materials. It also encourages a curious tactile interaction that creates a bit of magic in slowly discovering possibilities between crafter, power object, and materials.



Pocket for The Witches Handbook

Scissors for cutting, handy for both gathering and crafting

Silver spoon for digging

Magical water for cleaning (both physical dirt and bad vibes)

Things placed on the top row are accessible when the bag is folded in



Allergy pills and bandage

Small plastic bags for gathering, e.g. slimy or porous material

Pocket for wire and string

Crafting tools

Pocket for gathered power objects

Coloured ribbons for different meanings or different taste

Tweezers

Pocket for small pieces of fabric

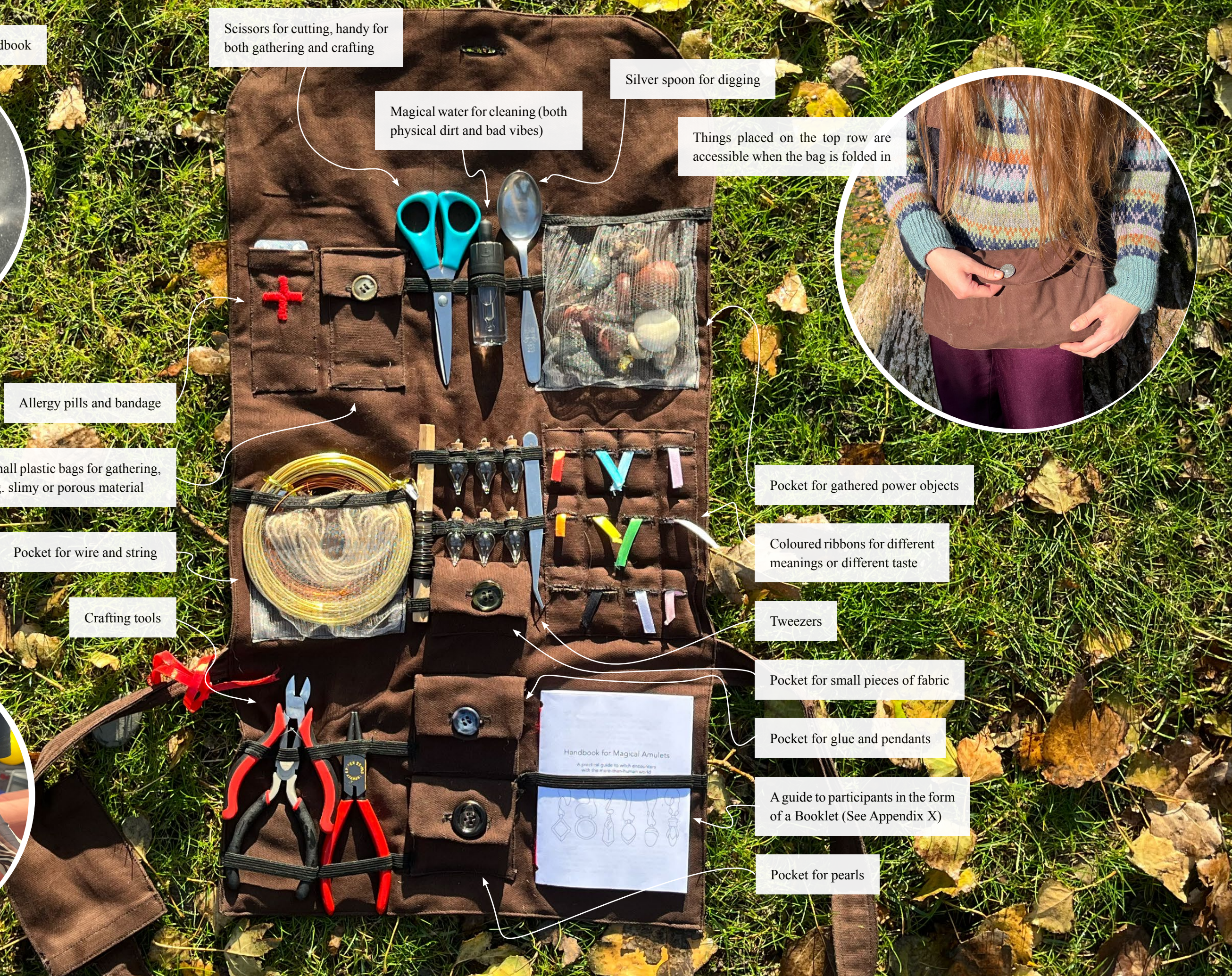
Pocket for glue and pendants

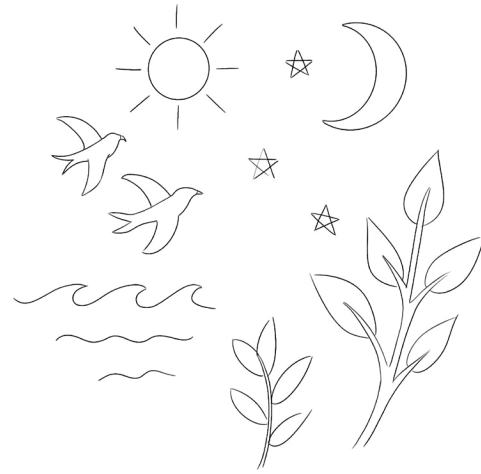
A guide to participants in the form of a Booklet (See Appendix X)

Pocket for pearls



Handy placement of audio recorder





A Practice Situated within Mother Earth

The bag is designed in order to allow for a practice firmly situated in the natural environment, because a witch, first and foremost, needs nature and its wonders; the forests, the sea, birds, sky, stars that shine, night and day, sun and moon, light and darkness (Druehyld, 2020). The witch needs to be out there, in full intra-action, and full sensory participation:

“To catch the scents of trees and flowers, to see the colours change, to sit upon an ancient mound and watch the sunset paint the clouds, to see the birds gather. Everything that can be sensed, lived, and felt [...] Therefore, Mother Earth is the witch’s most important tool.”
(Druehyld, 2020, p. 19, translated from Danish)

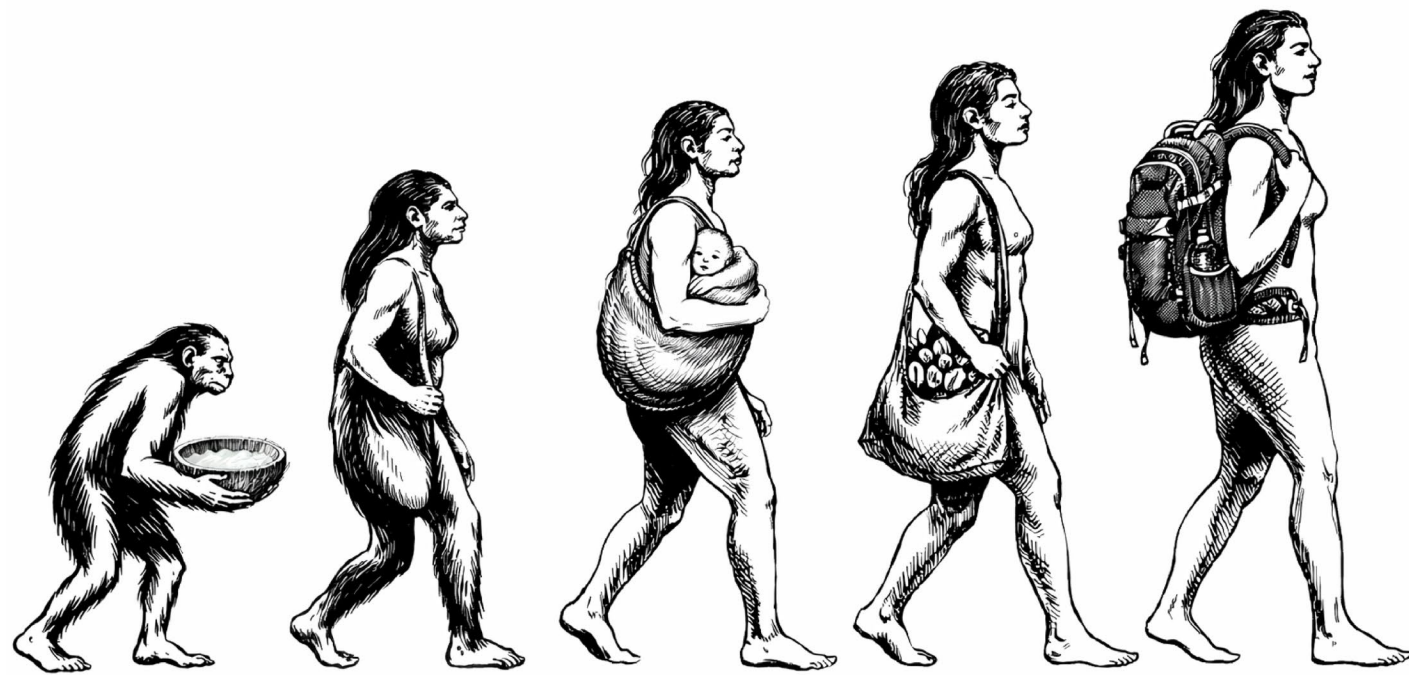
That said, a witch also benefits from additional tools, such as bowls, goblets, and glasses, silver spoons, allergy pills, and scissors. But perhaps most of all, a witch needs a bag, a carrier of other tools and materials, as well as a bag for gathering. Gathering is a central activity of witchcraft (Druehyld, 2020). Witches gather everything from magical herbs to grounding soil and sacred water. These gathering practices involve constant affectionate actions and small rituals (Abram, 1996; Druehyld, 2020). They talk, touch, and listen. In reciprocal relationships, they ask permission and say thank you, while also giving care, for instance, by cutting a plant in a way that helps it grow, or leaving food out for the landvættir (spirits of the land) (Druehyld, 2020).

All this is essential for a Down-to-Earth practice; there is no separation between the witch and the more-than-human world, and thus there is no hesitation to being in constant exchange with the surrounding ecosystems. In this way, witches refuse modernity’s inherited Christian dichotomies that persist even within contemporary environmentalism, where it leads to conceptions such as ‘humans should leave nature alone’, implicitly saying ‘because nature is pure and we are not’ (Latour, 2011; Leth, 2024). Such logics may come from good intentions, but they maintain the dualistic separation between humans and nature and thus enact an ontology of anti-relationality that risks breeding more extractivism and carelessness.



A Bag Tells a Feminist Story of Humans

Learning from the wisdom of Ursula K. Le Guin's Carrier Bag Theory of Fiction (1989), designing a bag is in itself a feminist move. Le Guin argues that, opposed to what dominant narratives often say, the first human tool was likely not a weapon, but a bag: A container and a receiver, a carrier bag that made it possible to gather, hold, and sustain life. Where the spear tells a story of domination, violence, dramatic conquest, and individual achievement (hero stories), the bag tells a story of care, maintenance, and the mundane communal life. The witch bag is a relational technology and stems from a refusal to design technologies of domination and optimisation. Designing such kinds of technology nurtures mundane everyday practices of gathering, carrying, and sustaining as meaningful and central forms of world-making, rather than as marginal or secondary activities. It redirects attention from the heroic, extractive, and conquering narratives that have long structured both Western storytelling and Western Design (Escobar et al., 2024; Le Guin, 1989), toward practices of care, reciprocity, and cyclical continuity. The fact that this bag is a container for overlooked things, such as chestnuts and roadside weeds, parallels how tools and practices of sustenance have been overlooked in Modernity's narratives of human beings. In holding space for these materials, the bag is a supporting infrastructural element for the amulet practice itself, where such overlooked things are re-encountered as carriers of meaning, power, and relational more-than-human agencies.



What if this was the story we told about human evolution? Image created with ChatGPT

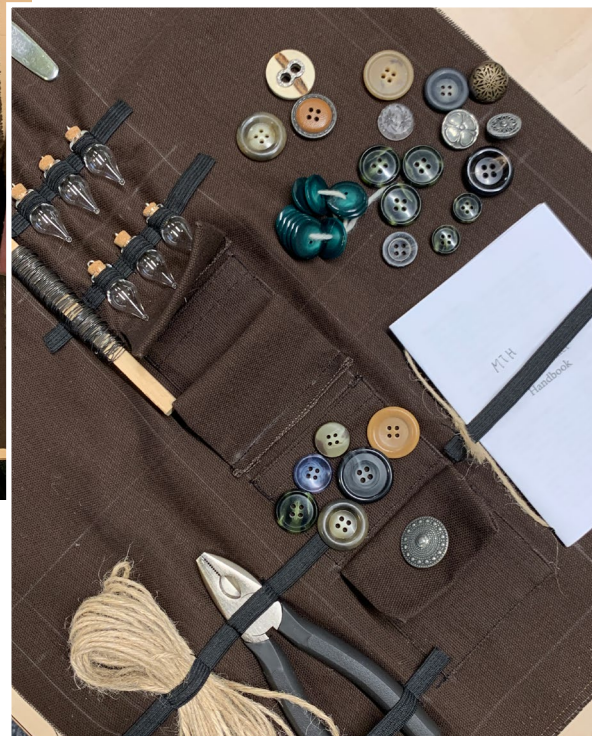


Designing the Bag

The choice of designing a bag came quite naturally as a result of wishing to create more-than-human engagements situated in the natural environment. It was quite simply the technology needed to support a feminist more-than-human practice of gathering and making with.

The bag is sewn with a sewing machine and made from brown, robust, unfancy fabric to make it well-suited for outdoor use in various messy conditions, such as mud and rain. An elastic band is attached with stitches to make up loops in different sizes and places, making it adaptable to new needs arising while ensuring easy access to the different tools. Pockets in different shapes and sizes accommodate different needs; small pockets with buttons for different smaller objects, such as pearls, glue, and tiny plastic bags for putting things like soil or mushrooms in. The pocket for medication (bandage and allergy pills) is deliberately marked clearly by an embroidered red cross, with the intention of starting conversations about how witches are not anti-technology nor anti-medicine, and how such non-dualistic ways of being can be practiced and designed. Twelve tiny pockets with a sliver make up a palette of different

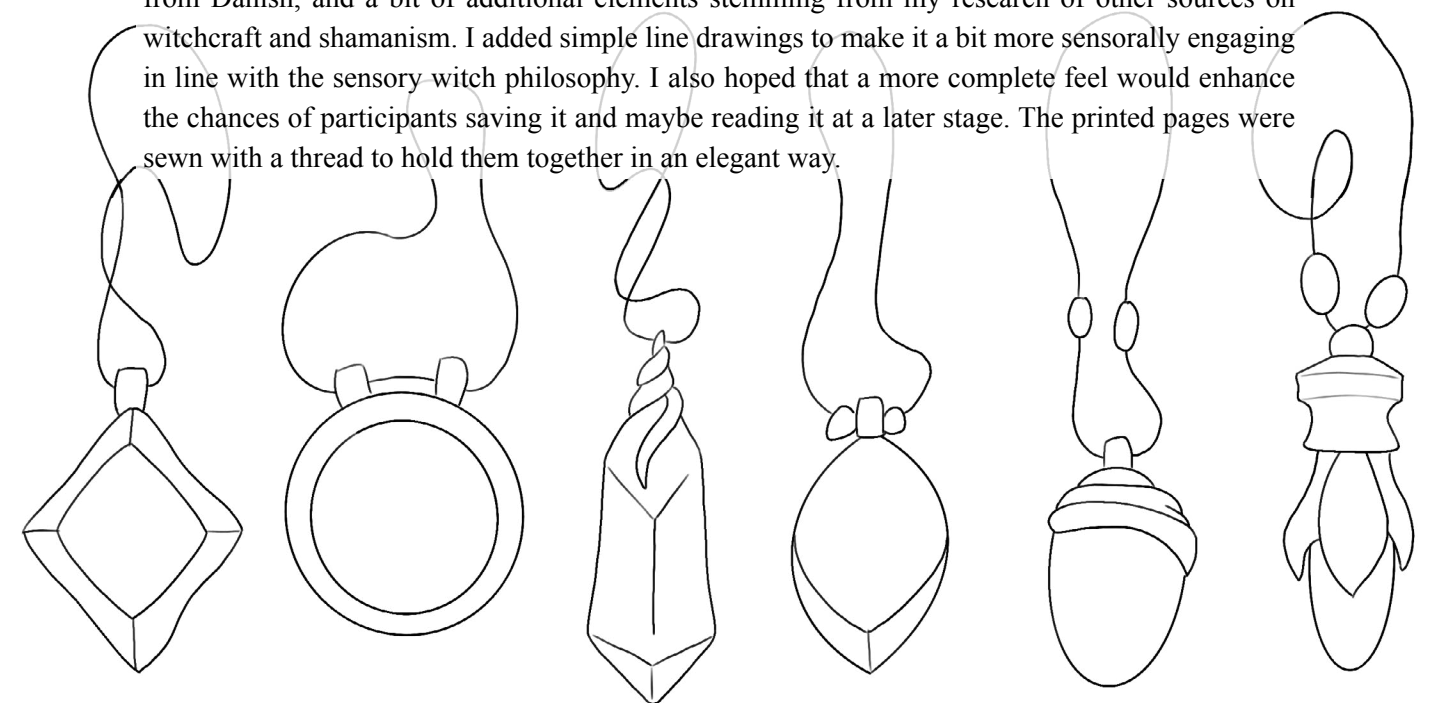
coloured ribbons, placed as an easily accessible buffet for participants to choose from. There are also two bigger pockets made from see-through net fabric that can hold the gathered power objects and bigger materials such as wire.



The choice of tools and materials is based partly on advice from the Witch's Handbook and partly on practical experience gained through emerging myself in the practice of gathering and crafting amulets. The coloured ribbons came directly from Druehyld's suggestion to enhance a power object's magic with colours (Druehyld, 2020). Some elements, like water and glass vials, came from practical needs; cleansing mud of an object and holding materials like soil that could not be used solely in combination with ribbon or wire. However, the witchy staging of them was helped by Druehyld's handbook, which told of all water holding magical powers, and containers such as glasses and bowls being a feminine symbol (much like in Le Guin's (1989) Carrier Bag essay). The placement of the different materials and tools was determined by what was practical. The top row is easily accessible when the bag is folded in, and thus the tools used while gathering are placed here: a pair of scissors to cut, a spoon to dig, water to cleanse, a plastic bag for sticky or porous materials, allergy pills for sudden allergic reactions, and, importantly, a big pocket for holding the gathered power objects. Another practical design choice was creating a big pocket on the backside, enabling me to carry The Witches Handbook with me outside, enabling me to further shape the overall concept (as in the combined concept of amulets, bag, witch walks) in practicing the practice in its context. Finally, I had to accommodate a challenge of carrying out a workshop outside in movement, namely, how and where to place an audio recorder. This was solved by attaching a pocket for my phone to the carrying strap.

The booklet

The bag also holds space for a booklet, titled Handbook for Magical Amulets: A practical guide to witch encounters with the more-than-human world, which was given to each participant to bring home (find it in appendix X). It was written with excerpts from Druehyld's handbook, translated from Danish, and a bit of additional elements stemming from my research of other sources on witchcraft and shamanism. I added simple line drawings to make it a bit more sensorally engaging in line with the sensory witch philosophy. I also hoped that a more complete feel would enhance the chances of participants saving it and maybe reading it at a later stage. The printed pages were sewn with a thread to hold them together in an elegant way.



Witch Walks: A More-than-Human Sensitizing Activity

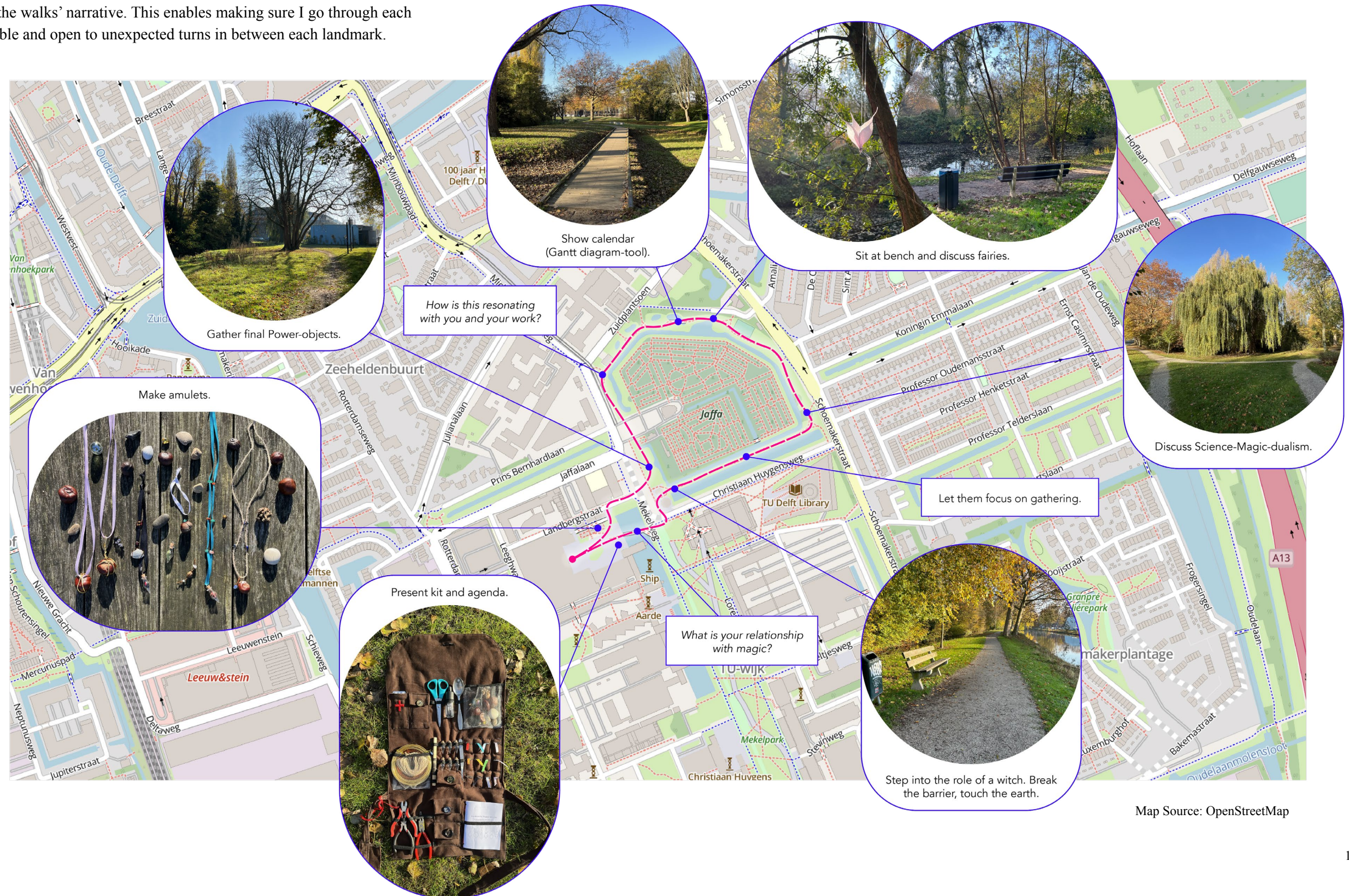
In this section, the witch-crafting practice is brought into contact with four human participants as a more-than-human sensitising activity in what I call Witch Walks. The Witch Walks are guided, participatory enactments of the witch-crafting practice. They combine an outdoor walk with storytelling, sensory attunement, gathering, hands-on making, and playful sense-making. Each Witch Walk culminates in the creation of one or more amulets. The activity is designed as a more-than-human sensitising activity to explore Arcane Designing's potential in contributing to concrete activities within More-than-Human Design. It incorporates the four design considerations synthesised from the literature review: engaging the body and senses, using artefacts to attune rather than control, balancing imagination with meaningful encounter with more-than-human agencies, and prolonged engagement.

Four Witch Walks were conducted, each with one participant. Three of the participants are design researchers working in the space of feminist AI, and one is a researcher in behavioural design working in the space of human health. Besides functioning as a sensitising activity, the walks also serve as a way of exploring whether Arcane Designing might resonate with design researchers—and of starting conversations about how such ideas could become actionable and useful in their own work. In the following section, I unfold the full concept of the Witch Walks: their structure and design choices, what happened during the walks with the participants, evaluation of the concept's potential for cultivating more-than-human sensibilities based on the guideles from the review, reflections on the results, and what could have been done differentl



The Route of the Witch Walks

Inspired by Abram's (1996) account of how myths are embedded in the particular landscapes from which they originate, in a way that makes the interplay between myth and landscape function as mnemonic systems that hold essential knowledge of how to live well with the ecosystem, I use landmarks on the route to trigger the walks' narrative. This enables making sure I go through each planned element while being flexible and open to unexpected turns in between each landmark.





Structure of the Witch Walks

The Witch Walks follows a common fantasy or mythological story arc: leaving the ordinary world, undergoing a transformative experience in a magical world, and returning with new perspectives. Yet where many modern fantasy narratives fill this journey with battles and heroic conquest, the Witch Walks offer a different kind of adventure, one that centres on more-than-human care and relational ways of being and sustaining life. The activity unfolds in four phases:

- 1) Being told that we are going on a magical trip: Introduction to the workshop
- 2) Traveling to another world to become a witch: Sensory attunement and gathering
- 3) Encountering the Feral Faires: Reflecting on the world back home and its design of technology
- 4) Coming back: Crafting the amulet and putting meaning into it

In the following, I'll go through each phase and how it unfolded with the participants pointing out indicators of sensitisation.

1) Being told that we are going on a magical trip: Introduction to the workshop

Each Witch Walk begins with a short introduction to the gathering and crafting activity. They are told that during the walk, we are going to try to step into the role of a witch. Participants are introduced to the carrier bag and some amulet examples, giving them a sense of the possibilities and what they are about to do. The concept of power objects is explained, and they are given a little gathering bag to collect them in. As we begin walking out of the building, I initiate a conversation about their existing relationships with magic and witches, allowing me to get a sense of how best to adapt the storytelling to each participant.

The initial attitude of the participants

At this initial stage, three of the participants expressed curiosity and enthusiasm toward the activity, without notable hesitation or resistance. Their relationships to magic differed, but were generally positive. One participant described having enjoyed fantasy during childhood, while now gravitating more toward science fiction, which they contemplated might be connected to their research focus on AI and future-oriented speculative approaches. Another participant engaged with fantasy primarily as entertainment and mentioned currently following a television series about witches. A third participant expressed a deeper personal engagement with mythology and magic, relating it to feminine energy and a practice of living in closer alignment with bodily cycles. The time of our Witch Walk was magically coinciding with the time of their menstruation, which they described as a period when they feel particularly connected to nature.

One participant, who was the least familiar with speculative approaches and feminist, posthuman theory showed a bit of hesitation asking, for example, “What’s the main aim of this?”, and explaining that “I’m a little bit of a structured person so I still cannot understand why I should pick up some objects”. When I elaborated on the reasoning behind the activity they said “Okay I understand but I really have a very very weak connection with materials ”and voiced concern about whether they would be able to contribute to the study given their lack of familiarity with magic, given their lack of familiarity with magic. I ensured them that there were no such expectations and that their position was valuable for the research. In fact, the subsequent analysis of the data revealed that this session with this participant showed the most notable results in relation to cultivating more-than-human sensibilities. About their relationship with magic, they said: “Magic is something that is not obeying the rules of physics. So that makes me have a very weak connection or no connection with magic.”

Overall, this reveals four distinct positions of the participants’ initial attitudes, providing an interesting foundation for analysing how sensitisation unfolded differently across participants.

2) Traveling to another world to become a witch: Sensory attunement and gathering

Outside the building, at the edge of a green area, we stop at the threshold to a magical world. I explain that we now have to step into the role of a witch and guide them to move their attention to their senses and body. This sensory shift ends in an invitation to touch the ground with their hands to “break the barrier between us and nature”. This relatively uncommon act was put here to help with temporarily suspending habitual, rationalised modes of being. From that moment, the walk properly begins, we walk slowly through the green area. Attention is directed toward sensory perception, touch, sight, smell, texture, and toward noticing materials that stand out. I tell them about witches and witches’ ways of being in the world. Participants gather power objects along the walk, guided by curiosity. Tools from the witch kit may be used to retrieve or clean found objects. Small gestures of relational acknowledgement, such as thanking a tree or silently expressing gratitude, are suggested but not required. As the facilitator, I stay open to unexpected encounters, emerging from the participants re/actions or from the lively more-than-human world around us. They are also encouraged to ask questions and share their thoughts.

What Happened with Participants

All participants welcomed the invitation to touch the ground without visible hesitation. Some really embraced the sensory experience and took a meditative moment to feel it. Some’s attention was quickly grabbed by a power object that appeared as they came near the ground. And some embraced the opportunity to get their hands dirty. Overall, this gesture functioned as an effective bodily prompt for redirecting attention toward the more-than-human world and toward embodied ways of experiencing. As they redirected their sensory participation, all participants quickly became engaged with gathering and noticing. One participant seemed to really embrace the opportunity to engage in a meditative state, while the other participants immediately became fully engaged in exploring the treasures of the earth.



The animals of the area often showed up to create magical moments for us. Such encounters enhanced the experience of the more-than-human world as alive and full of astonishing agencies.



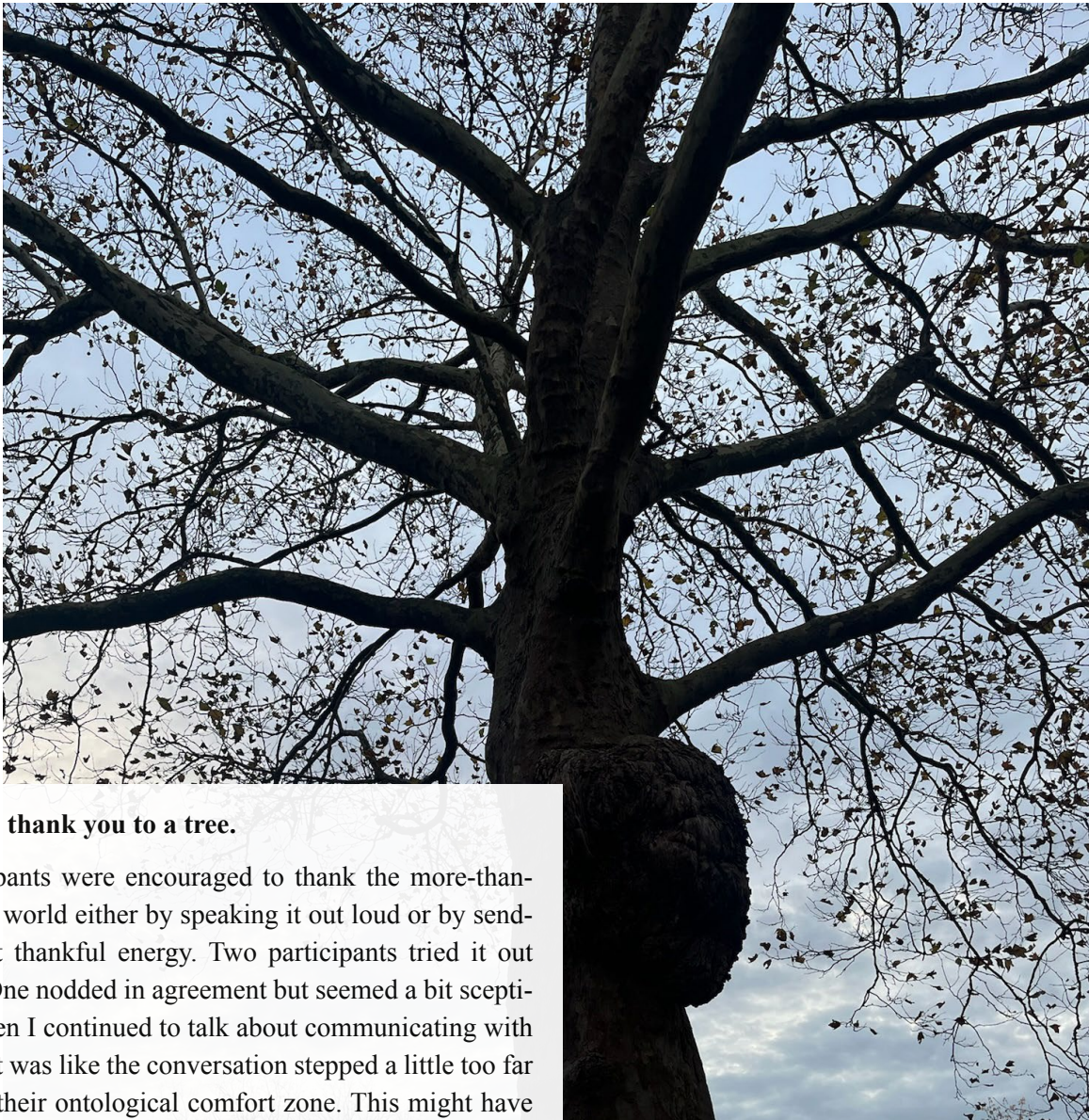
All participants had one or more ‘oh wow’ moments throughout their gathering interactions, indicating moments where more-than-human agencies captured attention and evoked a sense of awe. This could be a small indicator of sensitisation, as it is a step towards “arriv[ing] at a sense of being part of something bigger.” (Hansen & Rolighed, 2024) A particularly magical moment happened for the participant whose initial attitude was a sceptical, when a power object—a distinctive seashell in in the walking-path—suddenly and unexpectedly revealed itself to them. After digging it free from the path, they said “Now, I’m thinking why I’m picking this. I think it’s an extraordinary thing in this path so that’s why I’m picking it.” The encounter also led the participant to reflect deeper on their relationship with nature and how they feel a strong affection and connection with water.



Participant resonating with a muddy piece of chestnut shell.



Participant appreciating a leaf while reflecting on their relationship with material aspects of life.



Saying thank you to a tree.

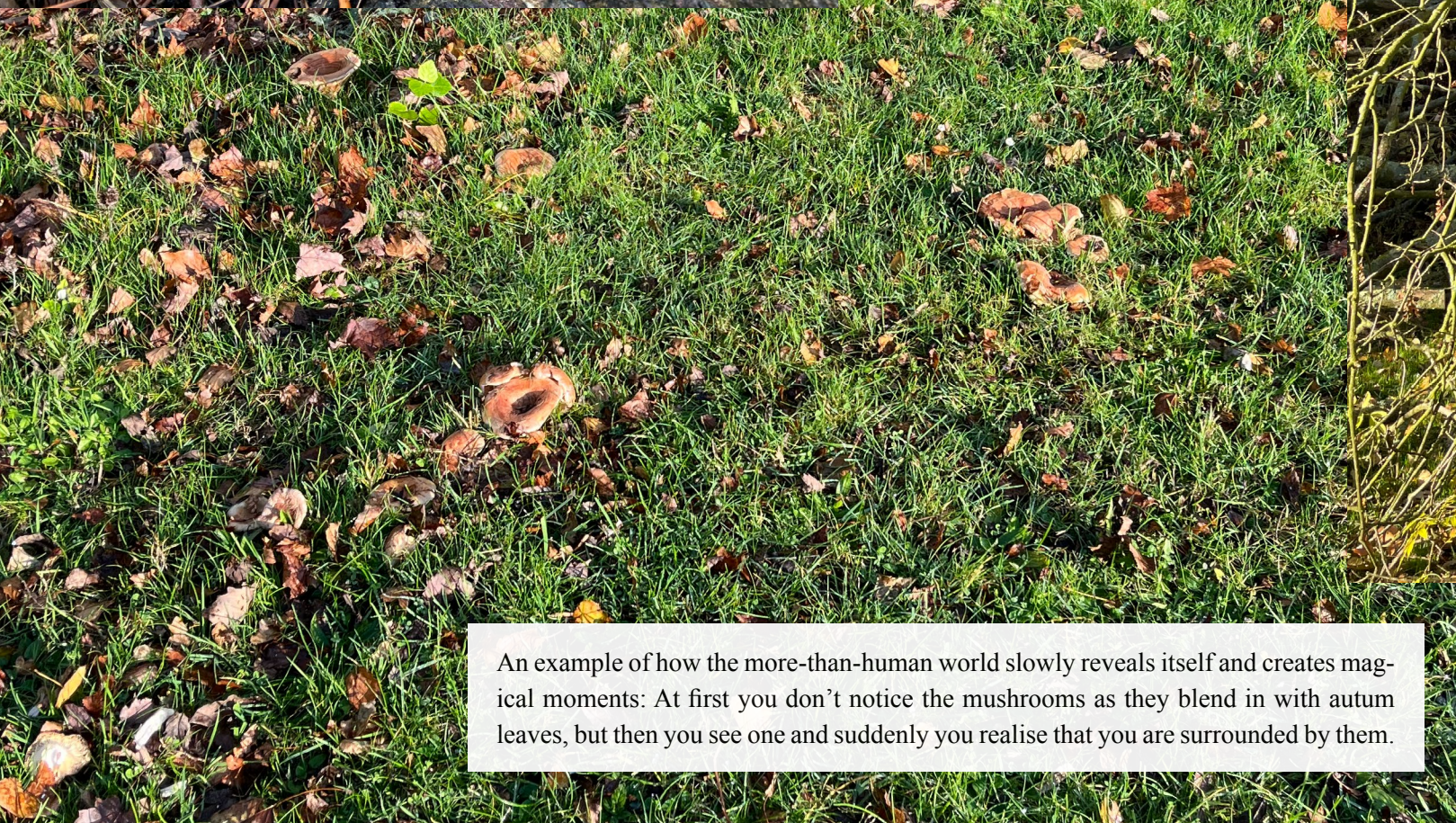
Participants were encouraged to thank the more-than-human world either by speaking it out loud or by sending out thankful energy. Two participants tried it out loud. One nodded in agreement but seemed a bit sceptical when I continued to talk about communicating with trees. It was like the conversation stepped a little too far out of their ontological comfort zone. This might have been a moment of friction towards socio-cultural sensibilities, but there is also a chance that it might have been a bit damaging in nurturing their more-than-human sensibilities if perceived more as a moment of nonsense. Though not followed in any way visible or audible, the suggestion seemed to resonate quite well with the most rationally-thinking participant, who started reflecting on trees having souls, which they said was, in a sense, biologically explainable since they are alive. This is a clear indicator of hermeneutic sensibilities. It also shows that readiness to accept non-human agencies is not opposed to defining yourself as rational or structured.



Participant gathering right next to a little poop—it's risky business being a witch. Luckily, nobody stepped in it. Nonetheless, it was a good opportunity to talk about how witches engage in messy encounters with the more-than-human world.



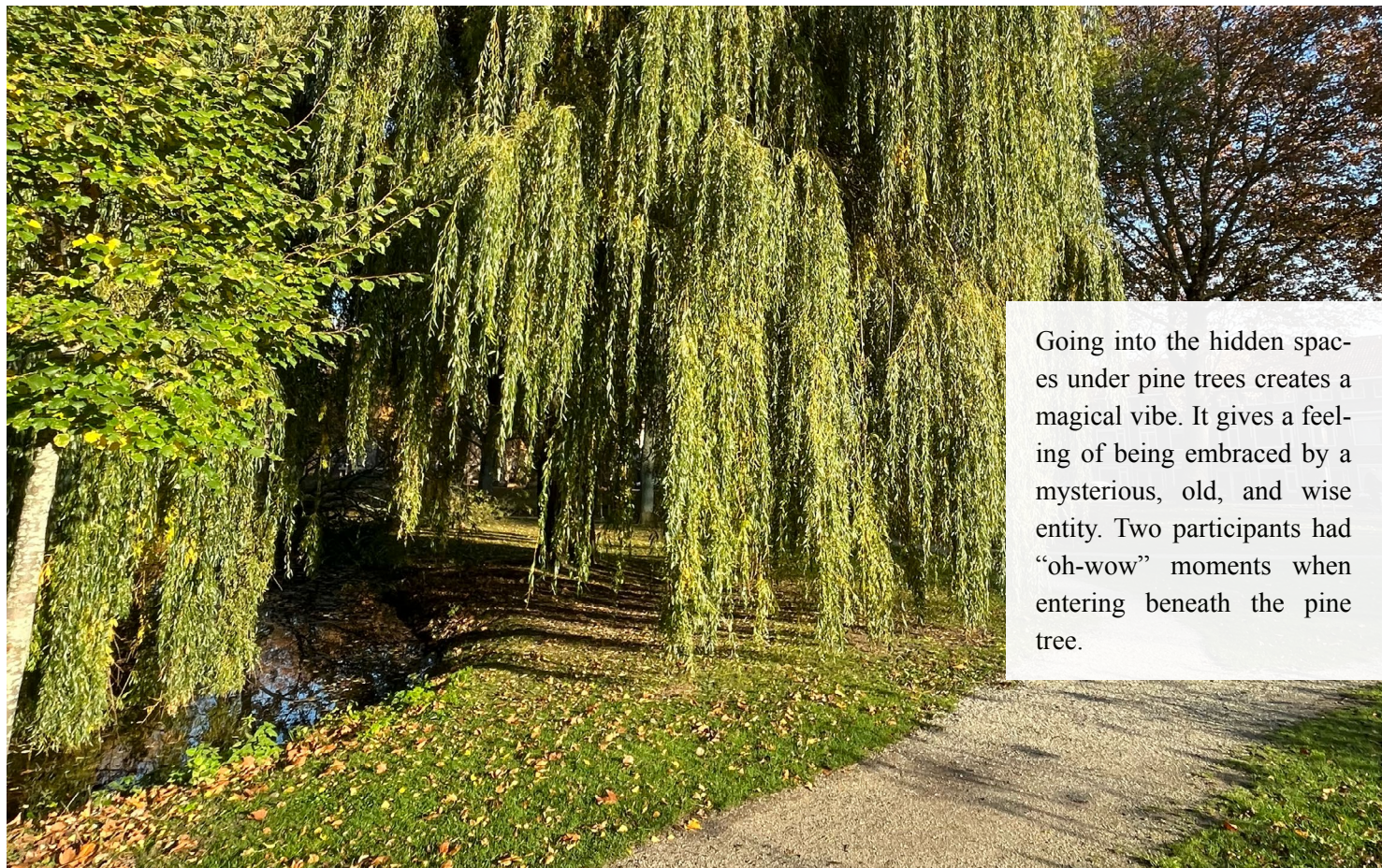
A participant was joyfully surprised to see this late-blooming flower. Though it had called out to them, they preferred to leave it be as they felt a respect for it, due to its resistant fight against the season. This points to how this kind of magical engagement with the more-than-human world can foster empathy towards non-humans, which is an indicator of hermeneutic sensibilities.



An example of how the more-than-human world slowly reveals itself and creates magical moments: At first you don't notice the mushrooms as they blend in with autumn leaves, but then you see one and suddenly you realise that you are surrounded by them.



In light of the witch framing and its heightened attention to sensory participation, even with the messiness and imperfections, some participants also noticed and appreciated the richness of the areas' more unorderly elements, such as this fallen tree.



Going into the hidden spaces under pine trees creates a magical vibe. It gives a feeling of being embraced by a mysterious, old, and wise entity. Two participants had “oh-wow” moments when entering beneath the pine tree.



When gathering around this tree, an unexpected opening into it suddenly appeared and created a moment of wonder that brought the participant back to pleasant childhood memories. Creating a space for these kinds of experiences also points to some of the power in designing with magic.

3) Encountering the Feral Faires: Reflecting on the world back home and its design of technology

Towards the end of the route, the Feral Cyborg Fairies designed in cycle 1 are encountered in an unexpected moment of surprise. The experience is designed to create a moment of magical astonishment with the small fairies suddenly revealing themselves in the landscape, one by one, while I tell their story. After letting them enjoy the magical moment, I ask them questions to foster reflection on how we design our technologies. Then, to demonstrate that Arcane Designing doesn't have to be purely speculative, I pull out my witch calendar (The Witch Gantt Tool from chapter 1) from the witch bag and illustrate how witch onto-epistemology can be used to rethink our most mundane tools as well. On the final stretch of the walk, the conversation is kept around reflections on how we might design technology differently through engagements with magic. To better understand how to make Arcane Designing relevant to design researchers, I ask them how it all resonates with them and their work.

How did it resonate with design researchers?

Across participants, the encounter with the Feral Cyborg Fairies and the Witch Gantt Tool prompted reflection on how alternative ways of knowing might inform design practice. For one participant, the speculation resonated strongly as a critique of dominant, human-centred technological imaginaries, opening up space to imagine technologies that are cyclical, situated, ecological, and less oriented around control, efficiency, or permanence. This participant reflected on how magic and folklore could support the creation of new technological narratives, imaginaries, and languages, particularly in relation to AI, by decentring the human and foregrounding relationality, dependency, and environmental attunement. They also talked about the importance of changing our narratives about technology and related it to Le Guin's Carrier Bag essay. The fairies likewise reflected strongly with another participant due to their poetic design language. This points out a clear affordance of Arcane Designing, which this participant shows is desired in design research on AI.

Another resonated more cautiously, recognising value in the poetic, affective and experiential qualities of the encounter, yet struggling with how such ideas might be translated into concrete design methods, specific products or technologies. This gap between experiential knowing and actionable design emerged a few other times as well as a tension raising questions about how embodied, sensory, or intuitive engagements might meaningfully enter practical design. Even the participant who expressed scepticism towards magic as a concept acknowledged that the encounter surfaced important limitations of rigidly rational or functional approaches to design, acknowledging how such frameworks can constrain imagination, flexibility, and openness to alternative ways. They noted that experiences like the Witch Walk might help people slow down, reflect, and reconsider their relationship with nature which could be useful in their field of health and behaviour.

"It was like it said hello to me."





“It’s really fascinating. It’s poetic. This is the language that I like to see more. So no, definitely it speaks a lot to me.”

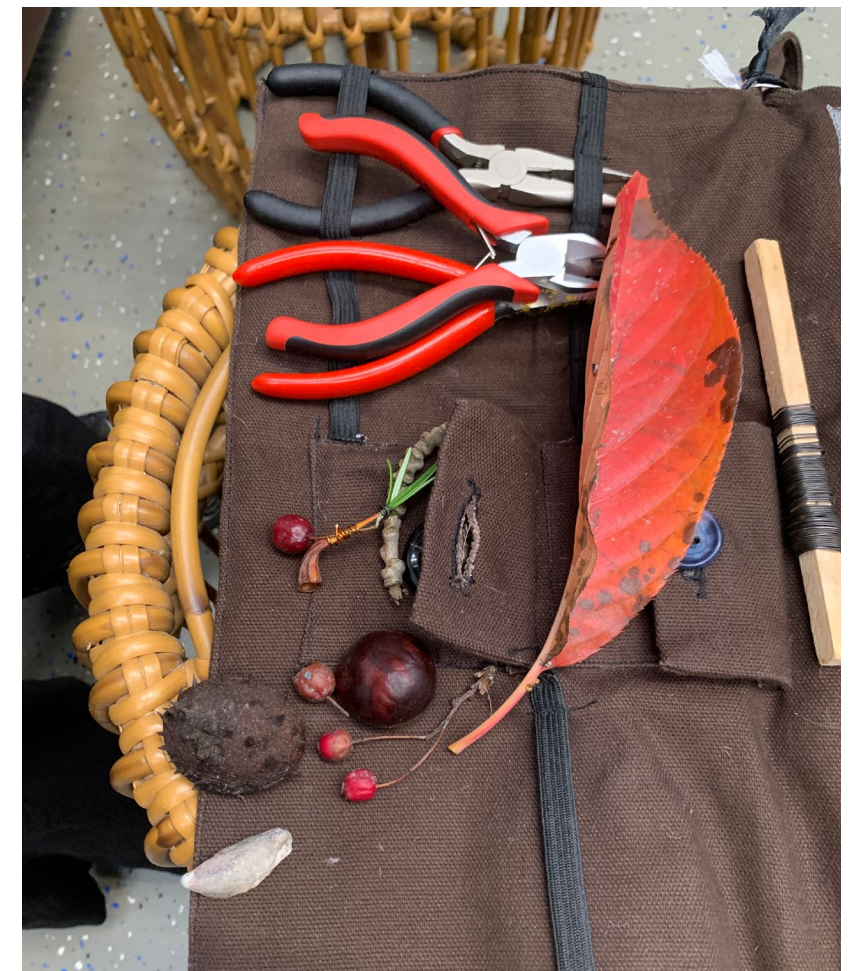


“It reminds me of those imaginaries where technology doesn’t look clean and polished, but natural, embedded.”

4) Coming back: Crafting the amulet and putting meaning into it

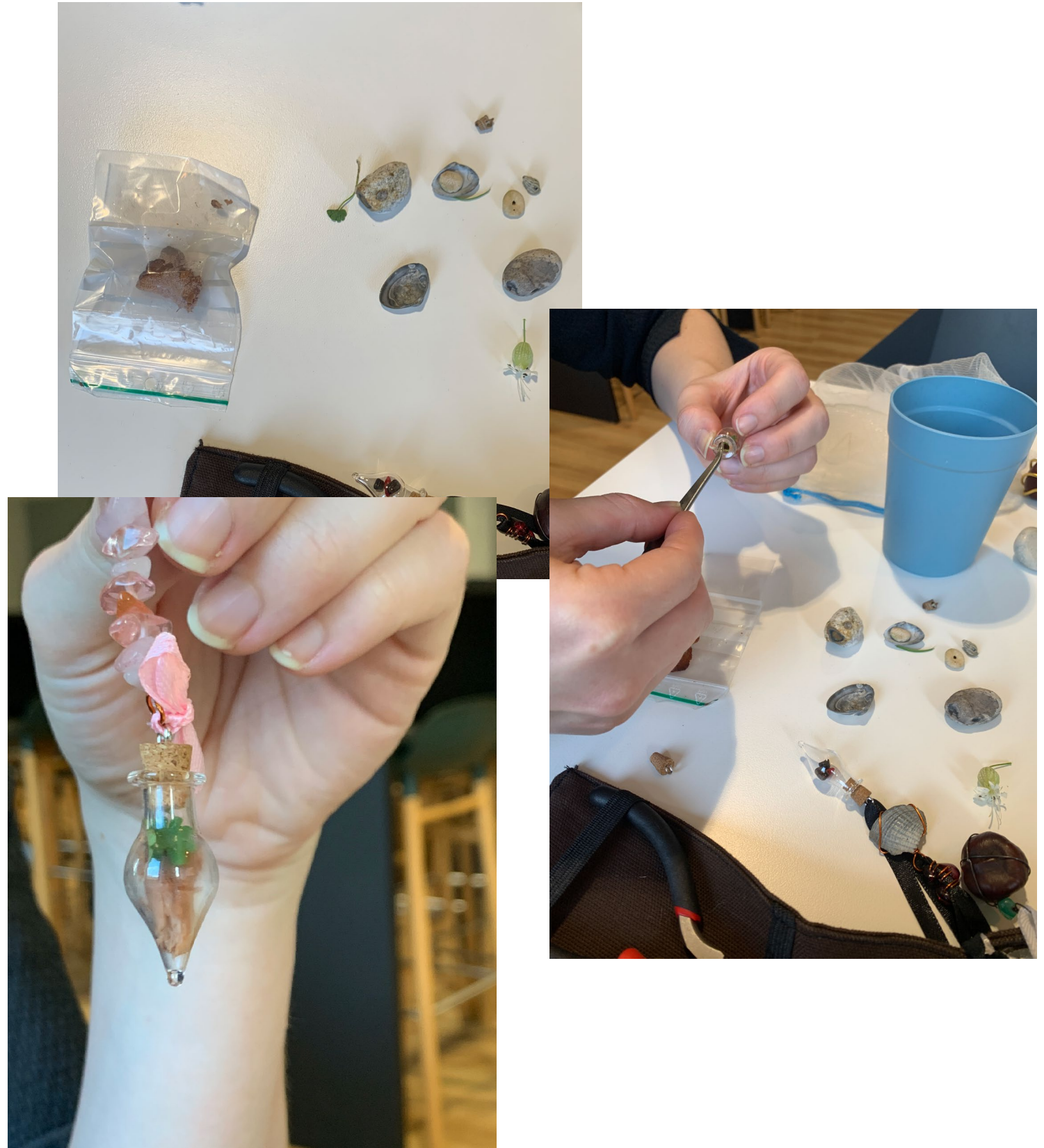
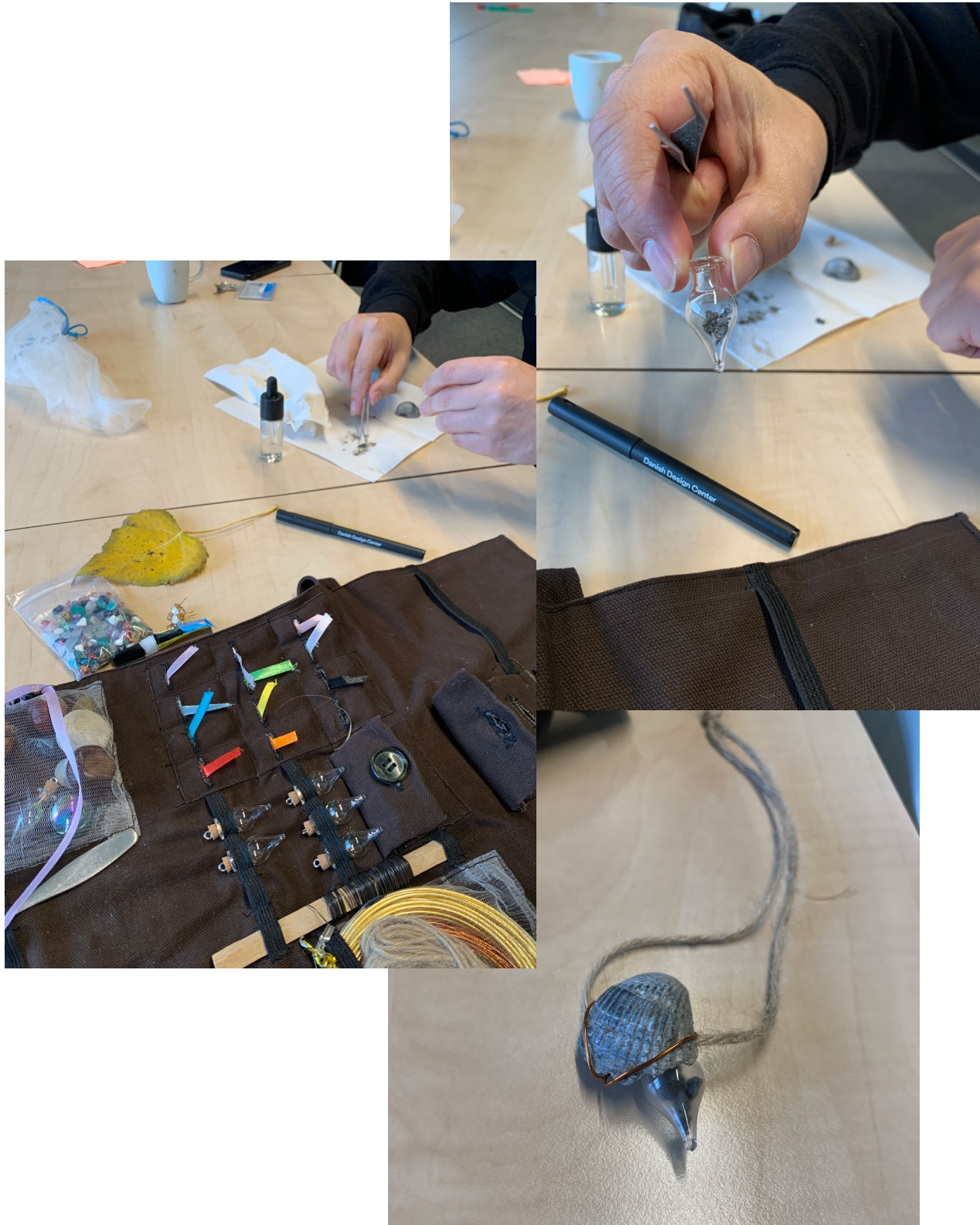
After the walk, we sit down, pour a cup of tea, and the participant crafts their amulets using the power objects and the craft supplies from the bag. They are encouraged to work intuitively, experiment, and remain attentive to the materials' agencies. Participants may make one amulet or several. While they craft, I encourage them to reflect on the amulet by asking them about their choices and if they have a sense of what it might mean to them. In some cases, we might consult the witch-knowledge in the booklet and see if it resonates with the participants meaning making. With some participants, I also craft an amulet to give them a moment of undisturbed space to craft with their power object. This depended on what seemed appropriate in the situation for the individual participant. After finishing the amulet, I deliberately ask them if they want to keep it, even though it had been somehow implicit that that was the purpose. This a way to see if the amulet mattered to them and if they had formed an affectionate bond to it.

To close the activity, participants are invited to briefly write down the meaning or intention of their amulet on a dedicated page in the booklet. This reflection is light and non-analytical, often taking the form of a few written words describing what the amulet might represent, support, or remind them of. Finally, they get to keep the amulet and the booklet as something that may continue to act as a reminder or prompt for attention beyond the workshop, without any obligation to maintain or preserve them.



Participants' playful meaning-making and crafting with processes

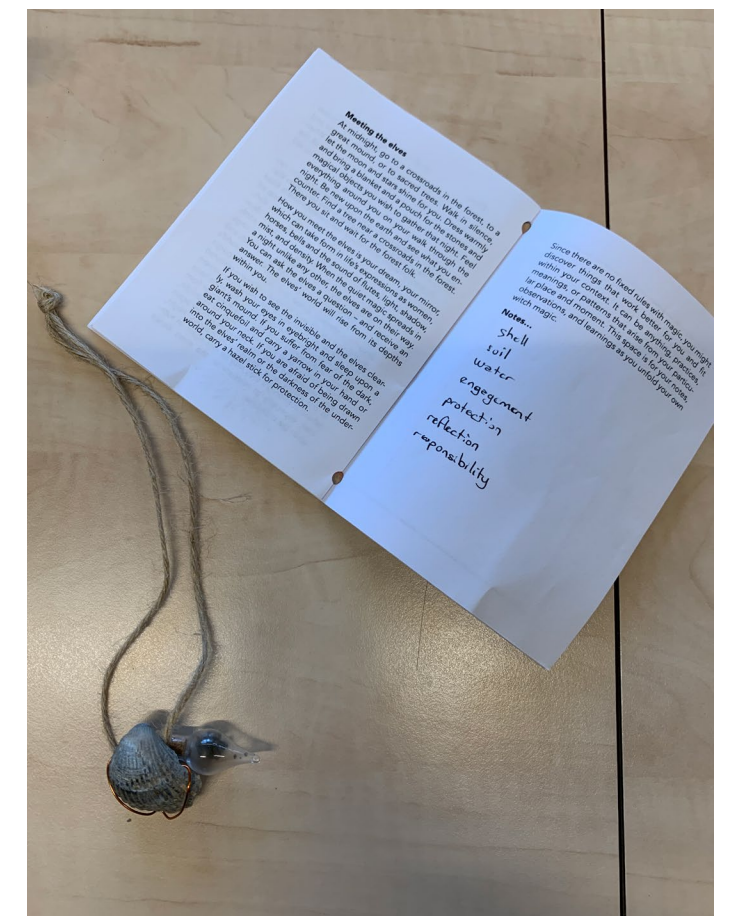
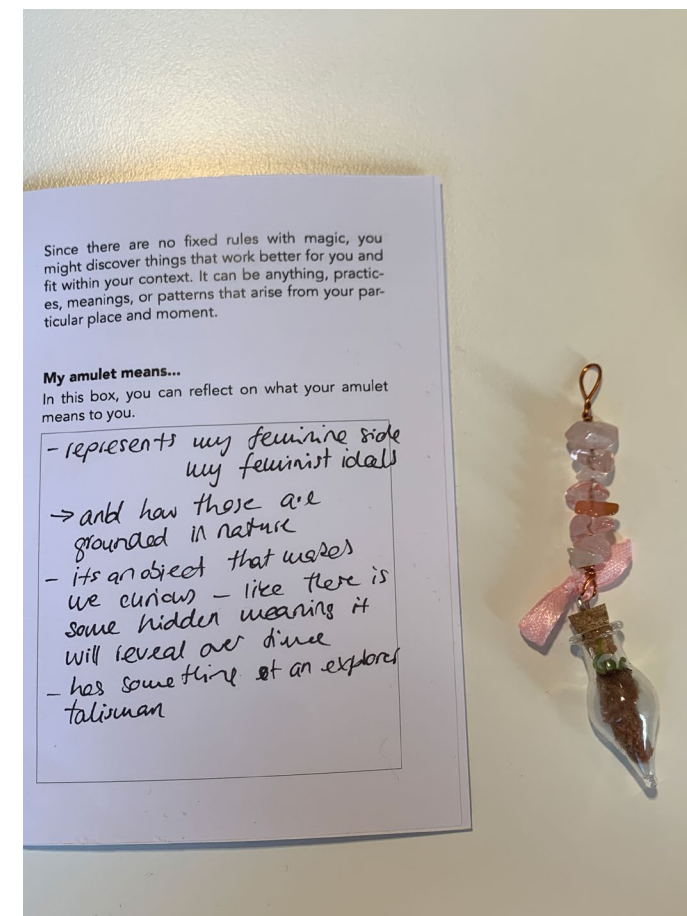
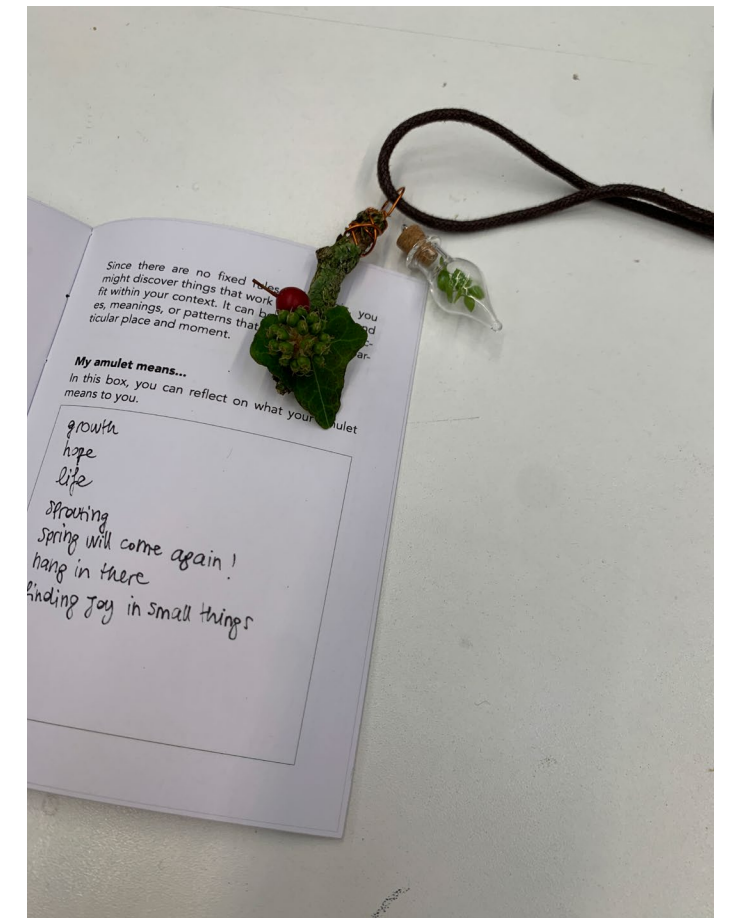
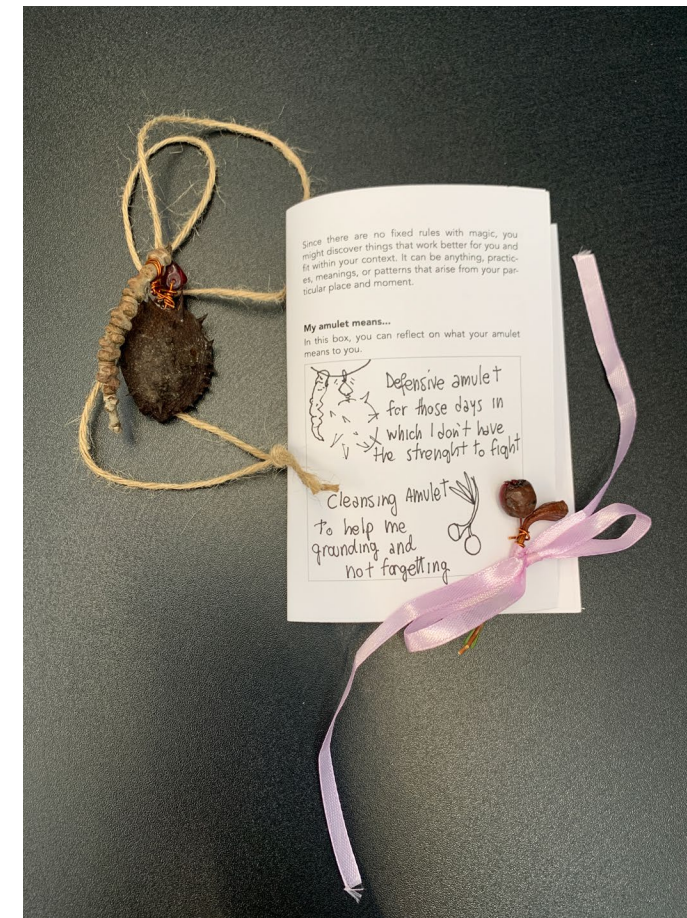
Three of the participants made one amulet, and one of them made two. It was amazing to see that none of the amulets looked similar, while none of the participants appeared to struggle with being overwhelmed by having too many choices. This demonstrates that the diversity and amount of provided materials in the bag were well balanced in order to be generative for creativity. It also indicates that the participants did hold strong preconception ideas about how magical amulets are supposed to take form, which I think is an advantage for this kind of design activity, as it allows the participants to engage with their creativity without normative expectations. The diversity of the power objects is also worth noting; it shows how different kinds of materials call out to different people. This suggests that engaging with these kinds of overlooked materials is a form of free space that is not as severely affected by modern aesthetic norms as much as other forms of design. This hints at the amulet



practice's ability to bring out authentic relations between human and non-human. Which is further confirmed by all four participants expressing an affectionate wish to keep the amulets when asked.

For all participants putting meaning into the amulets came relatively easily after the walk. For all of them, there was something that made sense based on their interactions with the power object. Most of the found meanings connected to things they had reflected on during the walk. Showing the ability of the amulet crafting's in cementing reflections. The process of crafting with the power objects also proved to bring forth meaning and deepening the relations. The defence amulet (top left on the images), for example, confirmed its ability to defend in how it refused a series of attempts from the participant to glue a pendant on to it. Upon realising that the power objected intended something else the participant adapted their approach, which shows a form of existential sensibilities in a willingness to listen and adapt to non-human agencies. This friction only seemed to deepen the sense-making and their relationship. Another participant described how their amulet was a reminder and a representation of their feminine sides and feminist ideals which for them are grounded in nature. This was also a reflection they had talked about during the walk. Moreover, they felt that the amulet had a hidden meaning that might be revealed over time which show an ontological openness towards its meaning rather than trapping it in a fixed interpretation, and it reveals an intention to further deepen the relationship with the amulet which likely stems from an affection already having formed.

The case that showed the most evident signs of cultivating more-than-human sensibilities was the participant who had repeatedly defined themselves as rational and not valuing material connections. Despite of this they ended up having a lot of rich reflections throughout the walk, in which a shift in perspective slowly became came forth. In their making process, they had a beautiful moment: As they carefully cleaned the shell with water, they noticed that doing so separated the shell from the soil. This seemed wrong, they felt that they were disturbing a relationship between materials that belonged together. Rather than combining them carelessly, they showed concern about preserving their connection and not “damaging” or disrespecting either element. To resolve this, they decided to use a small glass vial, placing the soil inside and positioning the shell behind it, describing the shell as protecting the soil. This choice reflected a growing sensitivity to relationships, care, and empathy towards more-than-human agencies. While they also reflected on this as a way of thinking that was unfamiliar to them: “Why am I so conscious about not destroying something?” And even though they had earlier stated not feeling connection to physical objects and in the beginning had had trouble seeing the point in picking up “some objects”, this participant had the most sincere reaction to the question about whether they wanted to keep the amulet: They looked a bit startled by the idea of having to let it go and immediately expcained “yees of course!...if that’s okay”, and seemed relieved when I ensured them that they could.



Picking up on signs of more-than-human sensibilities

Across the four Witch Walks, signs of more-than-human sensibilities appeared in different ways and to different degrees, shaped by each participant's initial attitudes, ontological orientations, and willingness to engage with the unfamiliar. The most perceptually immediate signs were the recurring "oh wow" moments that all participants experienced during the gathering phase. These moments can be seen as small but significant shifts in sensory participation. They indicate a redirecting of attention toward the more-than-human world and a momentary arrival at what Hansen and Rolighed describe as "a sense of being part of something bigger." which is an indicator of existential sensibilities. The mushrooms that slowly revealed themselves among the autumn leaves, the animals that appeared along the route, and the unexpected opening in the tree, emerged from the lively agencies of the environment itself, and participants' attention towards it.

Signs of hermeneutic sensibilities, shifts in how participants make sense of the more-than-human world appeared in several forms. One participant chose to leave a late-blooming flower untouched out of respect for its resistant fight against the season, attributing a kind of perseverance and agency to it. A participant, upon encountering a surprising power object (a seashell) in the path, was moved to reflect on their deep affection for water and their relationship with the natural world: We see a found object becoming a catalyst for self-understanding through a more-than-human encounter. During the crafting phase, one participant's power object actively resisted their initial design intentions. Rather than forcing the material into compliance, the participant adapted their approach, listening to what the object seemed to want. This willingness to follow the material's lead rather than override it points toward an existential sensitivity, a readiness to acknowledge and respond to non-human agencies. One participant described sensing that their amulet held a hidden meaning that might reveal itself over time showing sensibility in the form of an ontological openness that does not need fixed meaning. The most striking arc of sensitisation belonged to the participant who had entered the activity identifying as rational, structured, and without connection to materials or magic. During the crafting phase, this participant had a profound moment of a new understanding of a non-human agents and they expressed empathy and concern about the consequences of their actions. This is a compelling indicator of more-than-human sensibilities being cultivated. It was further confirmed when, showing sincere attachment when asked whether they wanted to keep the amulet. Signs of such relational and affective bonding with the amulets appeared across all participants.

Discussion and Reflection on the Witch Walks

The most clearly legible sensitisation occurred with the participant who had entered the activity with the greatest distance from more-than-human perspectives, pointing to how the notion of "readiness" mentioned in the literature review can take an unexpected form. In reflecting on this participant's journey, it seems that the problem was never a direct disregard or carelessness toward the more-than-human world. Rather, the more-than-human world had simply not been something



they had concerned themselves much with, and when they had, it had been in primarily functional and human-centred ways; loving water because they enjoyed swimming, for instance. But as soon as their attention and sensory participation were directed toward the more-than-human world and its agencies, and as soon as they were prompted to reflect with more intention, they readily started to notice how alive it was. The non-rational space the Witch Walk created seemed to allow them to consider these things from new angles. In this manner, the use of magic appeared to have the desired affordances even though the participant had considerable friction toward the concept of magic itself. This friction may even have enabled richer reflections, since the contrast between their habitual orientation and what they found themselves feeling and thinking made shifts in perspective more visible to themselves. An important aspect of this is that, as the facilitator, I never argued for magic's existence nor tried to convince them to believe in anything or accept any new understandings of reality. The aliveness and meanings they began to notice came entirely from their own experience. And this aliveness did not conflict with their need for scientific explanations; the trees are biologically alive, so it makes sense that they have a soul. This can be seen as a pluriversal quality of their realisations in how seemingly different ontological understandings do not negate each other but co-exist. This also aligns with Hansen and Rolighed's (2024) phrasing of sensitising as expanding our understandings, rather than replacing. By the end of the session, the participant even mentioned that it had felt a bit like psychotherapy. Throughout the walk, they had become more aware of their avoidance of responsibility, their respect for living things, and their rigid, rational way of thinking, which they identified as sometimes being unproductive in their design work. This points to how such engagements can be valuable on multiple fronts, and not only in terms of de-centring humans.

The sensitisation among the other three participants was more difficult to clearly identify, as they appeared to already hold a degree of more-than-human sensibilities. Since their attitudes toward the witch concept and more-than-human perspectives were more open from the beginning, there were fewer points of friction that could clearly reveal shifts in perspectives. Some were also less external in their way of reflecting. It would have been preferable to have designed the sessions with more dedicated time for participants to explicitly reflect on their relationship with the more-than-human world. However, this does not mean the activity failed to contribute to sensitising them. They all showed signs of empathy, respect, responsibility, and a willingness to connect with more-than-human agencies with affection and care. Following Abram's (1996) account, in how the things we put our sensory participation to automatically becomes more alive to us, and such engagements likely deepen more-than-human sensibilities even when the effects are faint. From my own experience of practicing the amulet practice over time, I feel deepened sensibilities even though I was already quite sensitised before beginning. For me deeper sensitisation is also often more internal and less logocentric, less verbal and thus less easily articulated in words, which may help explain why these participants reflected less externally.

It is also worth reflecting on moments where the activity met the edges of participants' ontological comfort zones. When I suggested communicating with trees, one participant seemed to find this a

step too far, nodding in polite agreement but appearing sceptical. This raises an important design consideration: there is a fine line between productive friction where unfamiliar perspectives open new ways of thinking, and unfavorable friction where the activity risks being perceived as non-sensical and thereby undermining the trust and openness it depends on. Whether this particular moment was generative or slightly damaging for that participant's more-than-human sensibilities is difficult to determine, but it highlights the importance of carefully calibrating how far the magical framing is pushed, and of remaining attentive to each participant's thresholds.

A tension that surfaced across several participants concerned the gap between Arcane Design and actionability for the design researches'. While the encounters with the Feral Cyborg Fairies and the Witch Gantt Tool prompted curious reflection on how such ideas might inform design, some participants struggled with how such engagements could be translated into concrete design methods, specific products, or technologies. This is something to be carefully aware of and aim to make clearer throughout this thesis.

By giving participants the booklet and showing them how magical and delightful it can be to connect with natural surroundings in this manner, I had hoped that some would report back having started to notice and pick up power objects in their everyday lives. This may have happened, but unfortunately no one has reported it back. In a future iteration, it would be valuable to explore how this practice could affect participants over time if they were encouraged to make it a continuing practice. That said, there is one encouraging sign of the practice being a desired continuous engagement: one of the participants asked to bring the witch bag and the amulet concept to a communal retreat to carry out the activity with a larger group. At the time of writing, this is where the bag and the practice have travelled.

Looking at the Witch Walks as a whole, I believe future iterations would benefit from a sharper focus. The current design tried to do too many things at once. With its double purpose of both being a sensitising activity and a validation of Arcane Designing's resonance with design researchers. It became spread too thin and took valuable time and attention away from creating more space for participants' reflections on their relationship with the more-than-human world. To better test the concept's ability to cultivate more-than-human sensibilities, it would be preferable to focus solely on that dimension and to deepen the research with a follow-up to better understand their experience and any lasting effects. Part of the reason for putting so many elements together in the walks stemmed from a concern of making sure it became a magical experience. I do think The Feral Cyborg Fairies created a beautiful magical moment, but I can conclude that the more-than-human world of the natural environment is already magical enough in itself. Moreover, I wanted to ensure that the session felt relevant to the researchers and their work. For that reason I included the explicit examples of how to use Arcane Designing in design research on technologies, but in hindsight it seems to have created a distracting shift in attention to shift the conversation to that, and it might be that it would have been just as interesting to their reflections on how the more-than-human sensibilities could contribute to their research.

Chapter Insights:

Down-to-Earth Perceptions with Witch Magic

This set out chapter answers the sub-research question:

How can witchcraft cultivate non-modern ways of experiencing and perceiving?

It builds its answer across three layers. First, the chapter shows through Federici's (2014) historical account that the witch-hunts were an enclosure of relational, embodied, and animistic ways of being that stood in the way of capitalist modernity. This is deepened by Abram's (1996) argument that Western modernity underwent a profound sensory abstraction, pulling perception away from participatory engagement with a living world toward disembodied, visual, alphabetic cognition. Vázquez (Vázquez, 2020) adds that modern aesthetics continues to function as a colonial regime of perception. Enabling a critical move from "witch aesthetics" to "witch aesthesis" that ensures the engagement with witchcraft becomes more than a symbolic decoration, namely a practice of perceiving differently, from an expanded ontological position. Together, these three thinkers are used to frame the problem: Our ways of experiencing have been enclosed by Western Modernity, and this inhibits our ability to live well as terrestrials, making us float in a disconnected manner above the Earth. The witch, who was targeted because she sensed, related, and knew through the body and the land, shows herself as a pluriversal figure whose practices hold potential for reopening what modernity closed off. Finally, more-than-human sensitising is identified as a central activity within more-than-human design that can be build upon in order to both learn from it and contribute to it.

Second, a concrete witch-crafting practice is designed. Drawing on Druehyld's (2020) witchcraft and Abram's (Abram, 1996) account of sensory participation, the chapter shows how a practice of gathering power objects and crafting magical amulets is developed. This practice cultivates non-modern experiencing in several specific ways: it redirects sensory attention toward overlooked more-than-human presences (noticing textures, patterns, irregularities that mass-produced objects don't offer); it involves bodily perception and touch rather than detached visual observation; it engages with materials' agency and personality rather than as inert resources; and it uses imagination as what Abram (1996) calls "an attribute of the senses themselves", as a way of making experimental contact with what lies beyond the immediately given. The carrier bag, the booklet, and the green area outside the faculty all support situating this practice firmly within the more-than-human world.

Third, these ideas are tested with four participants through the Witch Walks, a more-than-human sensitising activity that incorporates insights from reviewing the literature on more-than-human sensitising: Embodiment, sensory attention, and creative making; use of tools to support our sensory attention; imagination balanced with sincere encounters with non-humans; and an, unfortunately, failed intention of prolonged engagement. In analysing the outcomes of the Witch Walks, it finds



tangible signs of perceptual shifts and more-than-human sensibilities. The most compelling indication comes from a self-identified rational participant who entered with no connection to materials or magic, but through the activity began to flourish with more-than-human sensibilities. Across all participants, the chapter identifies recurring indicators: "oh wow" moments of awe at more-than-human agencies, empathy toward non-humans, willingness to follow a material's lead, ontological openness to meanings that might unfold over time, and affectionate bonding with the amulets.

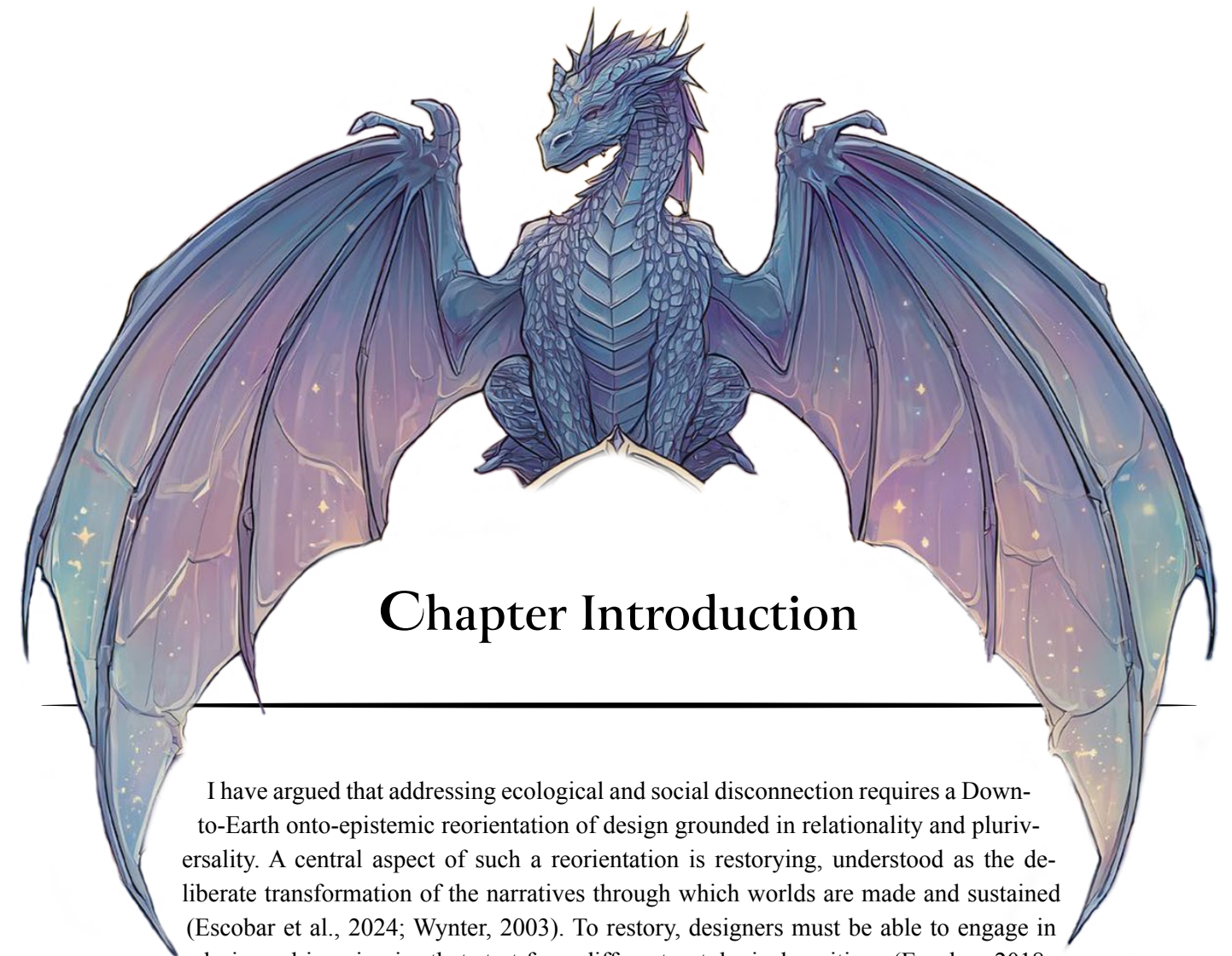
Overall the chapter answers the sub-research question with finding that witchcraft cultivates non-modern ways of experiencing by creating conditions for sensory reopenings; redirecting bodily attention toward the animate world, using gathering and crafting-with as practices of reciprocal participation, and mobilizing imagination and storytelling about real witchcraft to make animistic perception feel accessible, playful and delightful and letting people's own sensory encounters create the magic.

CHAPTER 5

REMIXING WORLDS OF FANTASTICAL MAGIC

*“People who deny the existence
of dragons are often eaten by
dragons. From within.”*

(Ursula K. Le Guin, 2004)



Chapter Introduction

I have argued that addressing ecological and social disconnection requires a Down-to-Earth onto-epistemic reorientation of design grounded in relationality and pluriversality. A central aspect of such a reorientation is restorying, understood as the deliberate transformation of the narratives through which worlds are made and sustained (Escobar et al., 2024; Wynter, 2003). To restory, designers must be able to engage in pluriversal imaginaries that start from different ontological positions (Escobar, 2018; Escobar et al., 2024). However, much of the design imagination remains limited by Western modern ontology, constraining us to continuously reproduce variations of the same world rather than enabling ontological alternatives (Dunne & Raby, 2025). In this chapter, I zoom in on the design imagination and ask: How can fantastical worldbuilding enable imagination beyond the onto-epistemic constraints of Western modernity?

Because if designing for a pluriverse requires imagining worlds that do not exist within the dominant One-World-World frameworks, then moving beyond current imagination restrictions is an important task. This chapter turns to fantasy as a potential pathway towards a pluriversal of ontological possibilities for the design imagination. It is approached as containing fragments of Alternative Wests that can become playgrounds for restorying. To explore this possibility, I re-design the well-known futures game A Thing From the Future, basing it on fragments from fantastical worlds instead of futures. This concept is tested with 22 designers in a workshop at ThingsCon, a conference with a focus on designing and imagining responsible technology. The chapter argues that fantastical worlds can function as imaginative resources for speculating from and towards non-modern ontologies.

Beyond the Restrictions on Imaginations



“Radical imagination can inspire us to push beyond the constraints of what we think, and are told, is politically possible.” (Benjamin, 2024, p. 24)

In *Imagination: A Manifesto*, Ruha Benjamin (2024) positions imagination as a site of political struggle important for countering oppression and futures dominated by elitist techno-determinist dreams. She argues that dangerous limits have been placed on the very possibility of imagining alternatives, and that these limits must be actively contested: Imagination is a field of struggle, not an ephemeral afterthought that we have the luxury to dismiss or romanticize.” (Benjamin, 2024, p. 13) Imagination is neither neutral nor free; it is shaped, constrained, and policed (Benjamin, 2024; Demos, 2023; Dunne & Raby, 2025).

Saidiya Hartman likewise asserts that, “So much of the work of oppression is about policing the imagination.” (Hartman, n.d.) The imaginaries of Western Modernity are presently and have historically been detrimental to so many marginalised people, and this continues to be true.

Out-of-this-world imaginaries are still the dominant narratives of the future, and they are neither neutral nor universal as they are often presented as, but deeply entangled with colonial, capitalist, and extractivist power structures (Demos, 2023). Particularly, those tied to technological solutionism, space expansion, and green growth, which often reproduce the very conditions of the environmental destruction and social inequality they claim to overcome. These dreams displace responsibility into speculative elsewhere and elsewhens, while continuing to defuture the Earth in the present (Demos, 2023; Fry, 2020; Latour, 2018), while making proposals to move away from patriarchal structures of control seem like impossible, naive fantasies (Benjamin, 2024). The struggle over imagination is therefore inseparable from struggles over land, ecology, epistemology, and ontology. It calls us to urgently find ways of engaging in radically different imaginaries that refuse techno-utopian escape routes and instead remain accountable to situated, earthly, and relational modes of existence. But how do we start to dismantle the hegemonic prisons enforced on our imaginations?

Speculative Design often presents itself as a means of imagining alternative possibilities, but two of its founding voices, Anthony Dunne and Fiona Raby (2025), now argue that the design imagination remains heavily restricted by commitments to realism, plausibility, and futurity. This is a problem because, “... being possible simply ensures that something fits existing reality and reinforces it. A reality that for many people no longer works.” (Dunne & Raby, 2025, p. 17) When futures are extrapolated from such conditions, they risk reproducing variations of a broken present rather than opening space for meaningful difference. In response, Dunne and Raby call for moving beyond the dominance of futures as the primary speculative frame, arguing instead for engaging with ontologies as “a conceptual raw material”. This involves loosening the rigid binaries between real and

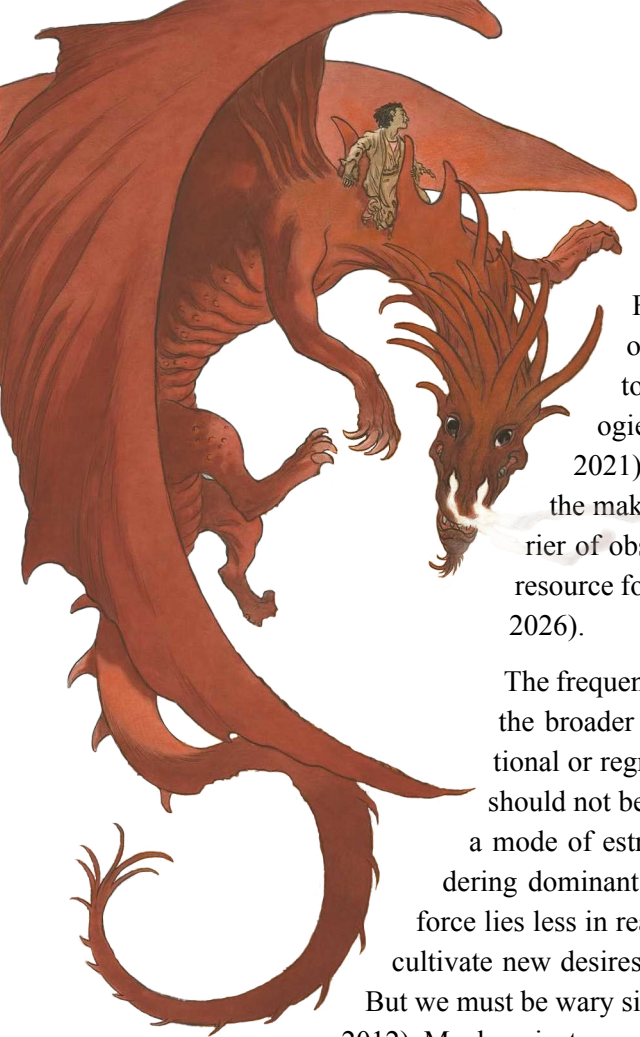
fictional, possible and impossible, and “developing a sensitivity to different shades of real when it comes to thinking about the world people live in and the objects designed to aid its inhabitation.” (Dunne & Raby, 2025, p. 8)

In line with this, Mark Blythe and Enrique Encina’s (2016) review and mapping of the field of Design Fiction identify magic and ambiguity as notably underexplored dimensions, which they argue are currently “dominated by scientific [extrapolative] and ironic design fiction”. They observe that in science fiction stories, technology often occupies the same narrative role as the supernatural does in wonder tales. Both serve as mechanisms for wonder, though science fiction rationalizes its marvels through technology, claiming rational validity, while fantastical fiction leaves them mysterious and irreducible. Furthermore, wonder tales, they argue, articulate human desires and fears with particular force without jumping to problem-solving:

“[Wonder tales] offer no scientific explanations nor speculate on how technologies might accomplish the wonders described. Magic realism answers no problems and offers no solutions futuristic or otherwise. But these wonder tales are the oldest form of literature that survives to us and it can articulate human fears and desires that are perhaps deeper than those described in the fantasies of rationalistic design fiction.” (Encinas & Blythe, 2016, p. 9)

All these scholars assert the urgency of this endeavour and support my claim that magic can help us reconnect as well as become a deliberate resistance against rationalist technofutures’ domination of our Western imaginaries. Attending to magic in design speculations might be a way of unsettling scientific dominance and opening design imagination to other ways of being, knowing, and relating. While also being able to more deeply address people’s desires and fears in a way that does not concentrate on “solving” them but rather sees them as portals for relationality (Escobar et al., 2024). Portals for relationality are described by Escobar et al. as moments of friction or intense emotion—such as love, grief, or fear—that interrupt modern ontological assumptions and open space for relational ways of being by expanding our awareness beyond the individual self and revealing our fundamental interdependencies. As a final note, before we embark on a deeper account of fantasy’s potential, let’s remember that:

“The exercise of imagination is dangerous to those who profit from the way things are because it has the power to show that the way things are is not permanent, not universal, not necessary.” (Le Guin, 2004)



Fantasy as Alternative Wests

Fantasy might be understood as a cultural site where fragments of alternative Western ontologies persist, albeit in altered and distorted forms. Western Fantasy draws heavily on European mythologies, folklore, pagan cosmologies, and animistic traditions (Møller, 2021)—all the Down-to-Earth magics that were cast as illegitimate in the making of modern Western science. Fantasy thus functions as a carrier of obscured relational ontological fragments that we can turn to as a resource for imagination that is both critical and affirmative (Rønne et al., 2026).

The frequent dismissal of fantasy as escapist, irrational, or immature mirrors the broader modern tendency to disqualify non-modern ontologies as irrational or regressive. Yet, fantasy's engagement with impossibility and magic should not be read as political weakness. On the contrary, fantasy operates as a mode of estrangement that destabilises what counts as "reality" itself, rendering dominant assumptions visible and open to critique (Baker). Its political force lies less in realistic representation than in its capacity to reshape subjectivity, cultivate new desires, and expand the horizon of what can be imagined as possible.

But we must be wary since this potential is not necessarily inherent to the genre (Baker, 2012). Much mainstream fantasy reproduces patriarchal, colonial, and individualistic hero narratives, and often draws on out-of-this-world magic essentially about domination and control. However, this should not prevent us from engaging in the possibilities of working critically with fantasy. Just as Nordic mythology is popularly framed as a violent, masculine Viking religion, it still contains recoverable relational fragments (Rønne et al., 2026; Rønne & Riemann, 2025). Likewise, fantasy worlds can be re-read, reworked, and reinhabited in ways that bring forth communal, feminist, and more-than-human relations.

The longstanding privileging of science fiction over fantasy within critical theory, most notably by Darko Suvin, who was a major voice in elevating Science Fiction to a respected literary category, reveals how deeply modernist epistemologies police imagination. Suvin spent most of his career arguing for the value of Science Fiction and establishing it as a serious type of literature. Regrettably, he often did this by demonising fantasy, claiming that it is Death because it is not explainable by our empirical environment:

"When fantasy does not make for such a tension between the supernatural and the author's empirical environment, its monotonous reduction of all possible horizons to Death makes of it just a subliteration of mystification. Commercial lumping of it into the same category as SF [referring only to Science Fiction] is thus a grave disservice and rampantly socio-pathological phenomenon." (Suvin, 1968, p. 4)

His famous theory of estrangement and cognition demands that estrangement should be cognitively grounded in rational explanation, which excludes magic, myth, and animacy and positions them as illegitimate modes of knowing, reproducing Western epistemic hierarchies that equate emancipation with Enlightenment reason. Woefully, Suvin's, otherwise respectable, Marxist dreams of transformation were limited by his fear of dragons, imprisoning him deep within the ontology of patriarchal Western Modernity.

But, what fantasy refuses—modern rationalism—is precisely what makes it valuable as an ontological playground for pluriversal imaginaries. Scholars such as Oziewicz (Oziewicz, 2017) show how fantasy and speculative fiction more broadly have become key sites for postcolonial, Indigenous, and minority imaginaries that challenge the Western real/unreal divide. This resonates strongly with Ursula K. Le Guin's work, which demonstrates that cognition need not be rationalist to be critical, and that speculative worlds can be politically generative precisely through their refusal of modernist assumptions about progress, knowledge, and the human. It cannot be said loud enough that fantasy is not simply an "escapist" entertainment, but a means of loosening the ontological constraints that have narrowed Western imagination and a powerful resource for reimagining how worlds might be otherwise. And we might add that escapism, anyway, is a flawed critique, as Dunne & Raby and Le Guin point out together:

"Yet if reality itself has become so problematic, being realistic might not always help; as writer Ursula K. Le Guin asks, 'The direction of escape is toward freedom. So what is 'escapism' an accusation of?'" (Dunne & Raby, 2025, p. 9)

Fantasy imaginaries are also the space of our childhood imagination. Children are amazing at imagining and playing in other worlds, and they score higher than grown-ups on the divergent thinking test (Benjamin, 2024). This ability is said to deteriorate as we grow up, yet "'Deteriorates' makes it seem like a natural process of decay, when really it is a concerted, organized process of squashing an otherwise widespread capacity to think, know, and imagine." (Benjamin, 2024, p. 11) So let's play in the wonderful worlds of fantasy as an active act of resistance against everything that tries to distance us from the Earth—from ourselves.

A Note on Fantasy and Ontological Excess

Darko Suvin's critique of fantasy rests on the claim that its magic lacks cognitive/rational explanation, rendering it politically and intellectually weak. From a relational and pluriversal perspective, however, this very refusal of explanation can be understood as a form of ontological excess, which is a prerequisite for pluriversal wording (Escobar & de la Cadena, 2024). As Marisol de la Cadena argues, certain world-making practices exceed the categories of modern ontology without thereby becoming unreal, symbolic, or irrational. Rather than needing translation into scientific or rational terms, Excess allows coexistence across incommensurable worlds. We might speculate that fantasy's unresolved magic can help nurture a sensibility of Excess.

A Workshop at ThingsCon: Designing Pluriversal Playgrounds

We have now seen why so many Modern people are afraid of dragons—due to the strict regime of Western rationality policing the space of imagination—and we have firmly established the (re) generative potential of Fantasy and how it might help us “restory the story of life” (Escobar et al., 2024) by creating non-rational wonder, unsettle reality, and open portals to relationality through bringing forth deep emotions of fear, desire, grief, and love. In this section, how to use this potential to support designers in engaging with Down-to-Earth imaginaries is experimented with.

This experiment takes place in a workshop at the yearly design conference ThingsCon. ThingsCon’s focus lies on design of responsible technology, and they bring together out-of-the-box thinking designers from across Academia and Industry. They have a history of engaging in experimental and creative ways of designing and imagining technology. This year, the theme was Remix, Resize, Regen, which, in the context of this thesis, I framed as: Remixing fantastical worlds of magic and resizing the space of imagination, to design regenerative alternatives for everyday life. The concept of ‘remixing’ proved a perfect resonance with my flexible approach to magic and fostered an opportunity to playfully mix relational elements from Fantasy, Mythology, and Folklore.

The Workshop Activity

The activity took the form of a hands-on design workshop structured around the Arcane Designing cards, a set of prompting cards designed for this purpose. Participants were invited to design a Down-to-Earth everyday artefact by remixing worlds of magic from combining three types of cards: an ontological world condition, a mundane everyday practice, and a magical possibility. From these three generative constraints, they had to design an artefact that would meaningfully belong within the resulting world and situation. Rather than speculating about futures, the activity focuses on suspending underlying assumptions of reality itself.

Designing the Arcane Designing Card Deck

The Arcane Designing Cards is based on experiential futurist Stuart Candy’s (2018) and colleague Jeff Watson’s game The Thing from the Future. Their game is a deck of cards that invites people to imagine artefacts from possible futures by combining three prompting cards: Future, Thing, and Theme. Each round produces a structured prompt (for example, “In a disturbing future, there is a ritual, related to energy”), which players must interpret by imagining and describing a concrete artefact from that world. Their game has been successfully played by thousands of people around the globe, and its design has undergone at least one extensive design iteration to improve the format. They found that a three-card format, instead of its old four-card format, as well as adding a phrasal template, proved significantly more generative as it reduces cognitive load in the participants. This



The Arcane Designing Card Deck holds 120 cards: 30 ontological world conditions, 30 everyday practices, 30 magical possibilities, and 10 blank cards per category.

makes it a rigorously tested format to build the Arcane Designing cards from, allowing the focus to be on what the element of magic contributes rather than game design mechanics. More broadly, the game is designed as a “combinatorial creative prompting system” that helps players move up and down a ladder from an abstract scenario to concrete artefacts.

Candy argues that their game creates an easily accessible way of engaging with future imaginaries, which lowers the barriers to participation: it grants permission to think divergently and makes complex scenario engagements approachable without requiring specialist expertise. The game creates a structure of participation that makes the future less abstract and psychologically remote, helping to cultivate wider futures literacy and a more distributed social capacity for imagining alternative possibilities. The Arcane Designing cards employ this ability to lower the barrier for engaging with magical imaginaries, as this is likely something that will be unfamiliar to most designers.

The Arcane Designing cards consist of three categories: a fantastical ontological world condition, a mundane everyday practice, and a magical possibility, which together prompt participants to design an artefact for the resulting situation. Together, these cards establish a structured yet open-ended system of magical worldbuilding. By using fantastical world conditions and magical possibilities, inspired by fantasy, mythology, and folklore, they help our imagination to depart from the restrictions and ontological assumptions embedded in conceptions of futures. It’s remixing of fantasy, mythology, and folklore creates the potential for different people, with different familiarities to worlds of magic, to tap into the imaginaries from their position: If one is familiar with a specific fantasy story, they can draw on its lore. If another is unfamiliar or skeptical of fantasy, they can choose to focus on folklore. The card deck also includes empty cards within each category to welcome participants to draw on their own situated cultural myths and folktales, or engage with their own favorite fantasy worlds, or simply to make up their own fantasies. The choice of the category ‘mundane everyday practices’ to relate it to reality was based on three things: 1) Ensuring it was situations familiar to all participants. 3) Avoiding grand scenarios of disconnected Out-of-this-World ideas. 3) Practices, and especially everyday practices, shape ontology (Escobar et al., 2024) and hold much potential for Transition Design (Irwin et al., 2020), making it urgent to enable imagining different kinds of everyday artefacts as they shape practices (Escobar et al., 2024; Willis, 2006).

The deck consists of 30 prompts within each of the three categories, as well as 10 empty cards within each. In designing the prompts, I had to critically engage with fantasy stories to distill Down-to-Earth fragments. Each prompt is written with a conscious emphasis on relational and non-patriarchal forms of magic. This also meant not falling into the dualistic judgment of good and evil, which some fantasy tends to present. Some of the cards deliberately do not describe a comfortable world, and many of the magical possibilities it presents can also be used to do bad. To hint at the richness of this unexplored fantastical design space and to enable participants to draw on a full world of lore, the source of inspiration for each prompt is written on the card. A few cards came purely from my imagination and stand without an inspirational source to signal that making up one’s own fantasy elements is also relevant—the point is exactly to create an unrestricted space

of imagination. Overall, the card deck intends to destabilise participants’ ontological expectations of possible designs and foster ideas for radical alternatives, while remaining relatable enough for them to easily engage with the task at hand.



Choice of Making Materials: More Crafts

Based on the affirmative experiences of craft materials from cycles 1 and 2, this was also chosen for the workshop. The poetic potentials, as well as the fact that they are a bit unusual in the context of technology design, seemed to promise a generative capacity to foster different imaginaries. Craft materials were supplemented with materials from Delft's natural ecosystems, again, as designing with such materials had proved perfect for creating magical Down-to-Earth designs. Furthermore, all these materials are well-suited for the context of a relatively short workshop, since they have a low threshold for participation and don't require any specific skills to use. They allow for countless opportunities in form-giving and afford easy discovery of unexpected possibilities, making them generative for creativity. Overall, a wide range of tactile making materials was provided: clay, textiles, crepe paper, decorative paper, wire, pearls, tape, hot glue guns, natural objects, and a sparse assortment of miscellaneous prototyping materials.



Workshop Parameters

The workshop involved 22 participants, all with design competence, including students, researchers, and industry designers. Participation in the workshop was fully voluntary, as everybody had to choose from many other interesting workshops. Participants self-divided into groups of four to five, encouraged to find people they didn't know beforehand. This resulted in three groups of mixed backgrounds and familiarity, and two groups of fully familiar colleagues, both student groups. Each group received a complete set of cards and had full access to the same table of maker materials.

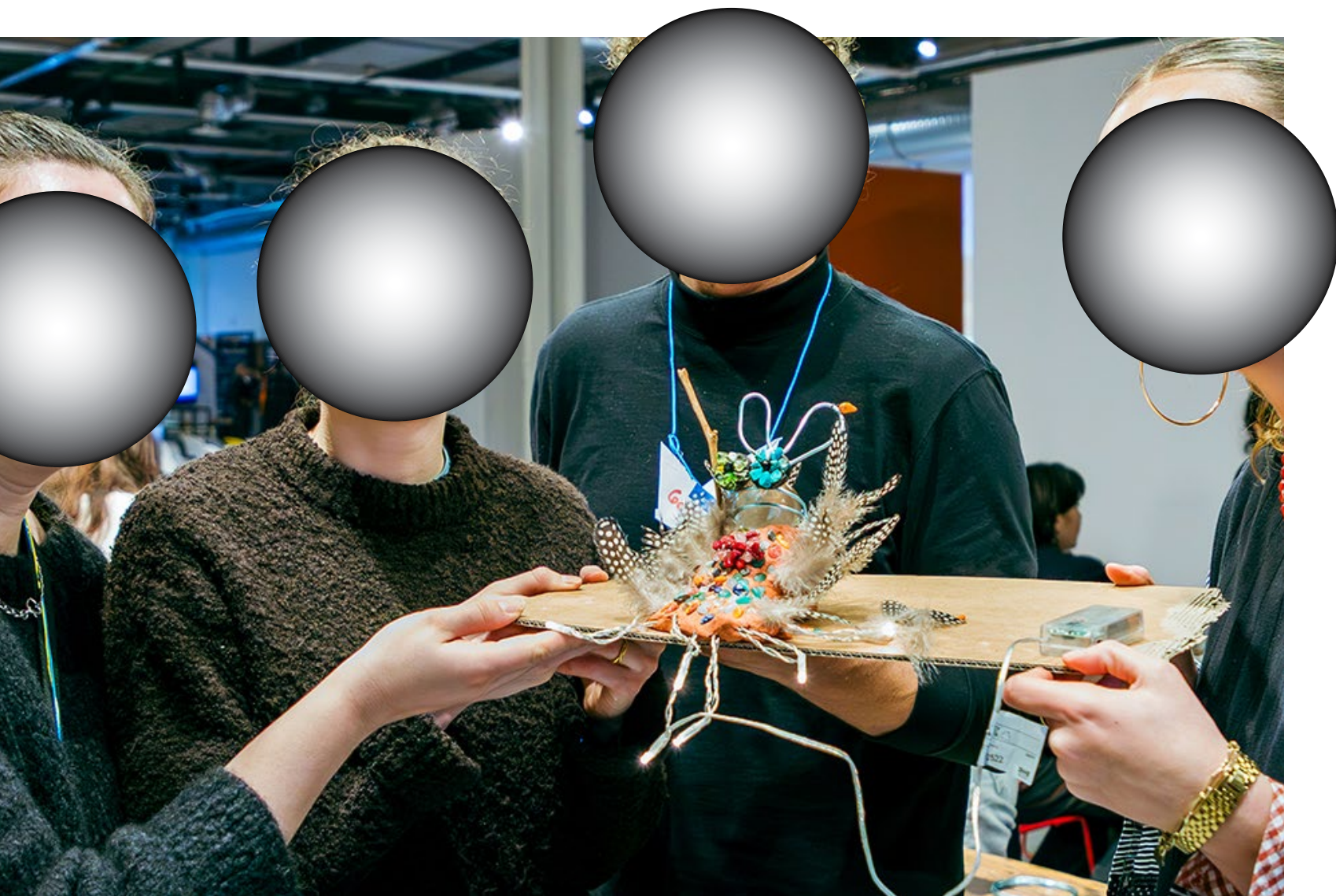
The groups were encouraged to draw random selections of 3 prompts, but were also allowed to re-draw cards if a combination felt uninspiring. They were told that they could play a bit around with possibilities, but were encouraged to settle on a combination rather quickly and let randomness steer it in order to engage with the generative potential of randomness that can foster unexpected ideas. As facilitators, we supported participants in navigating fantasy worlds and ontological questions, but refrained from providing interpretations or contributing to artefact ideas, placing responsibility for meaning-making with the participants themselves.

The overall timeframe was 1 hour and 40 minutes, divided into: a 15-minute presentation from me, 1 hour of making artefacts with the cards, and 25 minutes in the end where each group presented their artifact to everyone, followed by plenary discussion and reflection.

Within this timeframe, all groups successfully designed a finished artefact, one group designed two. One group finished 10 minutes before the deadline, while most of the other groups had to speed-run in the last 5-10 minutes. Vibes and mood were high throughout the whole process. The six artefacts are presented with the participants' own descriptions on the following pages, followed by an analysis and discussion of the workshop







Artefact 1: Four Elements Prediction Watch

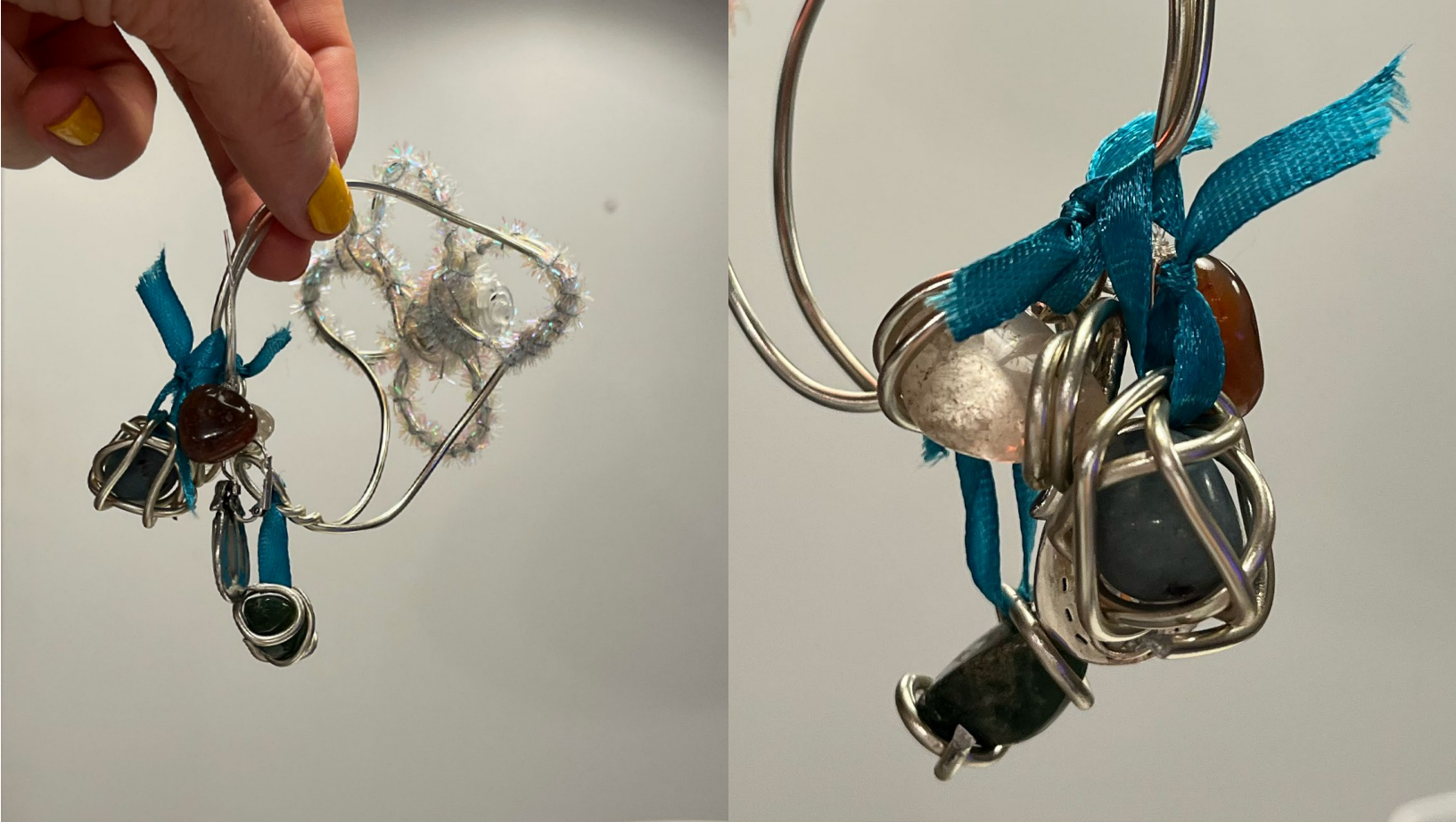
In a world where forests cleanse the earth by transforming poisons into strange new life forms, we still need to manage time and calender planning, but we might remember that people can bend one of the four elements (water, fire, air, earth) by becoming one with the element and embodying its way of moving.

What is it and what does it do?

A bracelet that senses poison, angry sad hostile life forms and alerts us to give them love.

How Does it take us Down-to-Earth?

Makes us aware of other feelings in nature.





“So, you talk to animals every day, and consider them more.”

Artefact 2: CUPybara

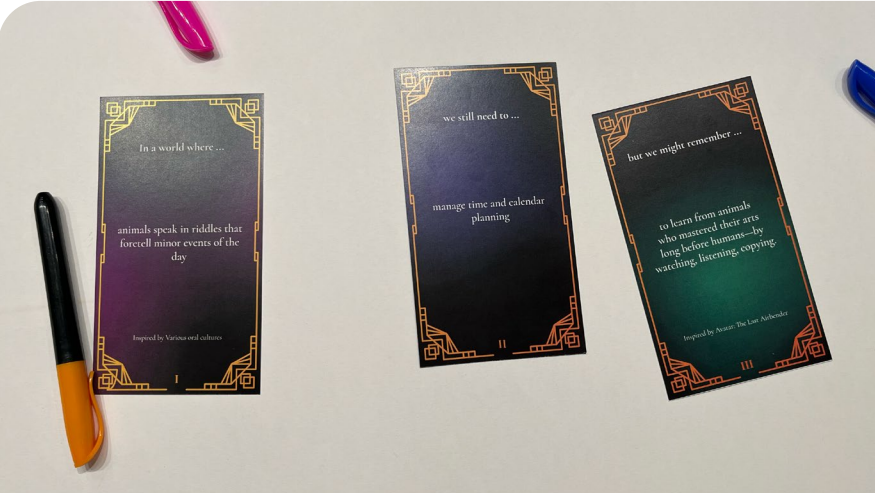
In a world where animals speak in riddles that foretell minor events of the day, we still need to manage time and calender planning, but we might remember to learn from animals who mastered their arts long before humans–by watching, listening, copying.

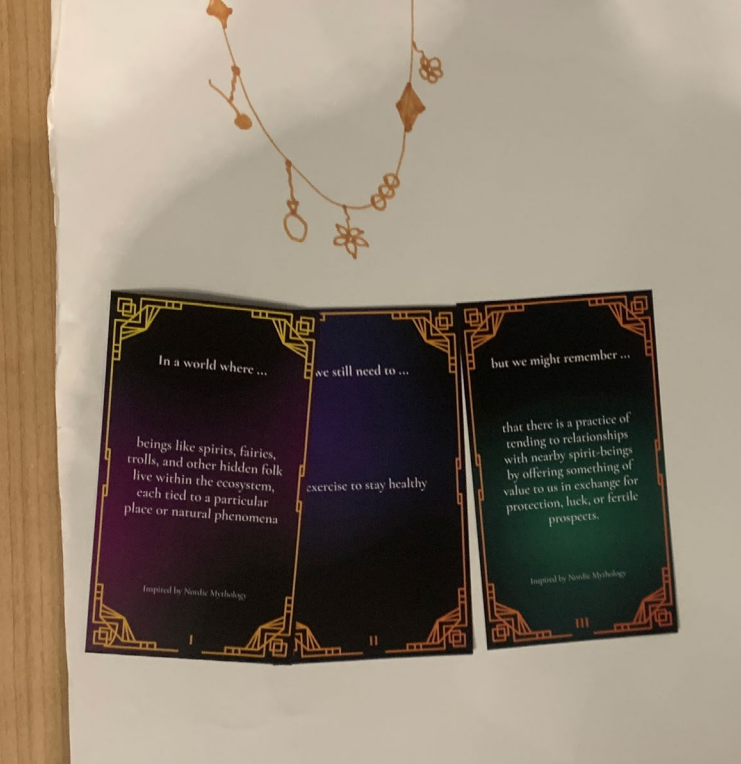
What is it and what does it do?

Enhances communication with animals by making us understand their daily riddles.

How Does it take us Down-to-Earth?

By having us connect with nature and learn from animals which have mastered skills way before us.





Artefact 3: Seedbomb Toolkit Amulet

In a world where beings like spirits, fairies, trolls, and other hidden folk live within the ecosystem, each tied to a particular place or natural phenomena, we still need to exercise to stay healthy, but we might remember that there is a practice of tending to relationships with nearby spirit-beings by offering something of value to us in exchange for protection, luck, or fertile prospects.

What is it and what does it do?

A necklace equipped with different tools and seeds to spread while walking in nature.

How Does it take us Down-to-Earth?

Regenerating and loving while in nature, conscious of our impact, being there with all mystical creatures.





Artefact 4: Good Fairy

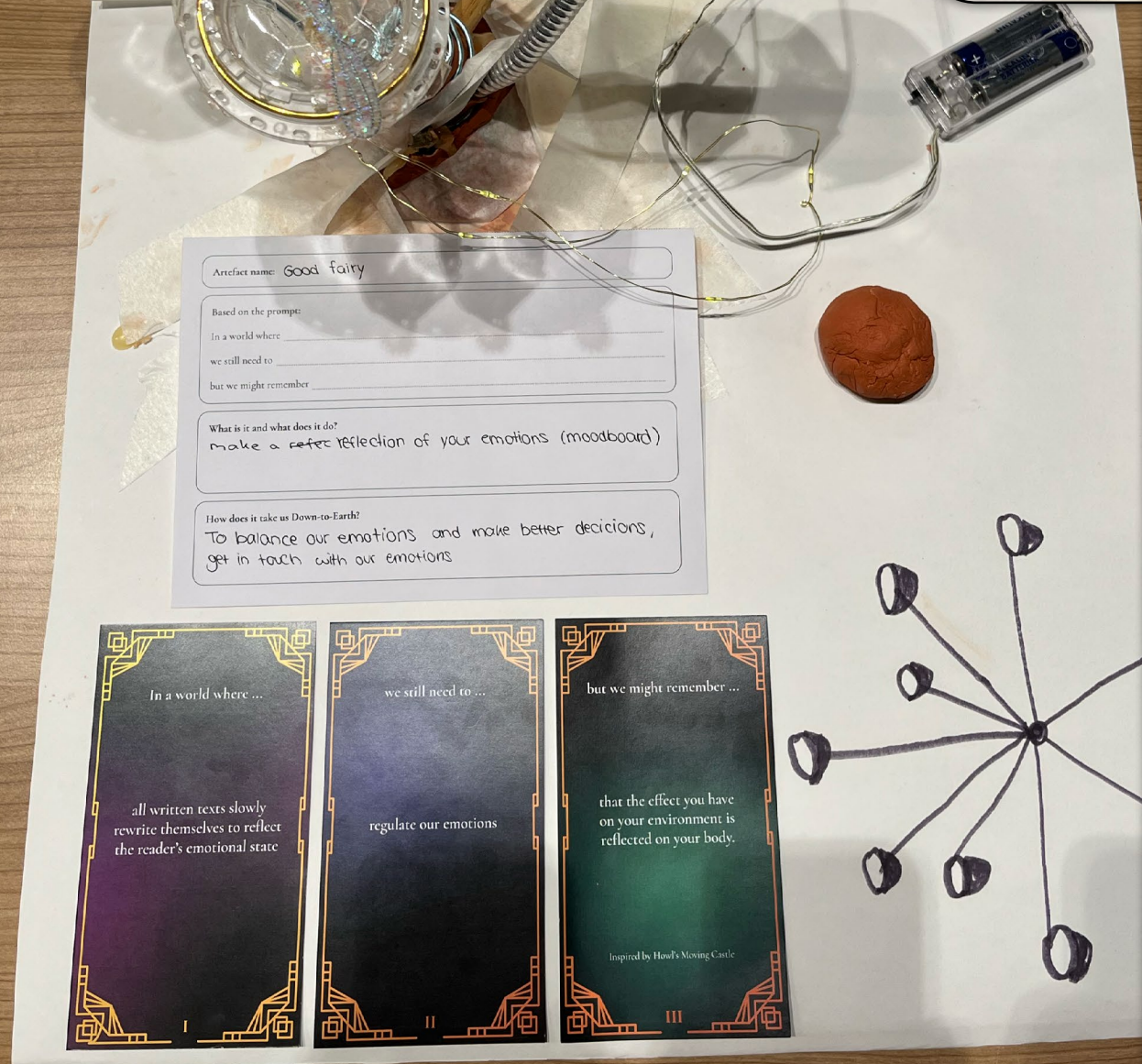
In a world where all written texts slowly rewrite themselves to reflect the reader's emotional state, we still need to regulate our emotions, but we might remember that the effect you have on your environment is reflected on your body.

What is it and what does it do?

It makes a reflection of your emotions.

How Does it take us Down-to-Earth?

To balance our emotions and make better decisions. Get in touch with our emotions.



“You deepen the connection and the bond to your surroundings, and like, a strong bond is created to, like, use this thing to travel and connect to the earth.”



Artefact 5: Travel – Abyss

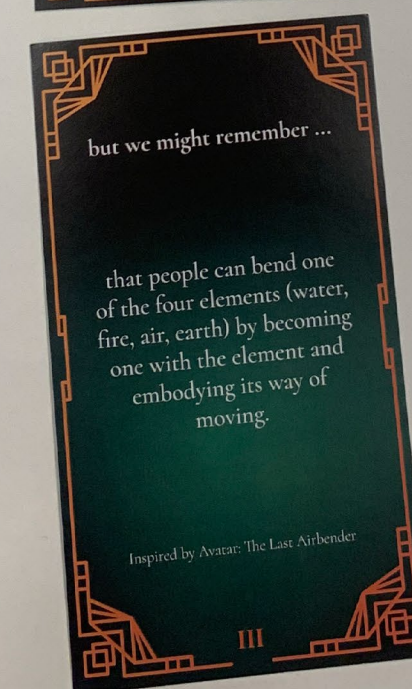
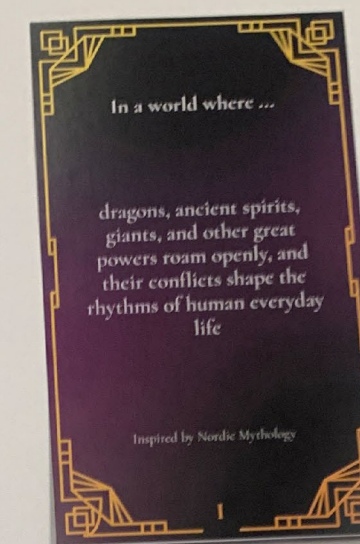
In a world where dragons, ancient spirits, giants, and other great powers roam openly, and their conflicts shape the rhythms of human everyday life, we still need to take public transportation, but we might remember that people can bend one of the four elements (water, fire, air, earth) by becoming one with the element and embodying its way of moving.

What is it and what does it do?

It's a handy device that provides easy public transportation for everyone. By plunging it into the ground it carves a tunnel (into the ground) that brings the wielder to their desired destination.

How Does it take us Down-to-Earth?

While using it you mentally and physically connect to nature (Earth), deepening the connection to your surroundings and creating a strong bond between you and nature.



Artefact 6: Relaxing Riddler

In a world where animals speak in riddles that foretell minor events of the day, we still need to take breaks during the workday, but we might remember that magic works by transferring energy, taking too much, or failing to attune, might drain one's own life instead.

What is it and what does it do?

It lights up when it feels that you are stressed. It then speaks a riddle to make you take a break from your activities and be present for a moment.

How Does it take us Down-to-Earth?

It makes you slow down in a chaotic world.



Analysis and Discussion of the Workshop

To get insights into the Arcane Designing cards' ability to support designers in entering a pluriversal space of imagination without the restrictions of Western Modernity, an analysis takes a deeper look at the artefacts created by the participants, and how they talked about them during their presentations, as well as their final reflections on the workshop and their experiences. Some interesting insights come forth in the form of affirmations and criticalities to be aware of.

Fun, Creative, and Out of the Box

Overall, the workshop proved extremely engaging. Participants had a lot of fun, which is evident from the room being full of laughter and energy, and the images being full of big smiles and active, maker-hands. In the plenary discussion, several participants confirmed this when asked to reflect on the experience: “It was fun”, “Nice but I wish we had more time”, “Making things was nice, and it was a good activity to connect to the people you were working with. And getting out of your head”. Besides, describing the activity as fun, they also mentioned that engaging with magic in this way was “very interesting”, and it made them “think out of the box”, and made their “mind go wild”. It contrasted a participant’s normal design practice and ways of being more “designerly intuitive” and “realistic”. Interestingly, here, how engaging with these fantastical imaginaries is described as outside their designerly intuition, showing that the exercise challenged the participant and affirming that this is indeed new territory to design from. Several participants felt that they could use these kind of imaginaries in their work; one asked if they could get access to the cards and share them with their colleagues, others seemed to have some uncertainties about how and when exactly to use magical imaginaries, though they hoped to find a way.

But, how well did the fantastical worldbuilding enable imagining beyond the onto-epistemic constraints of Western modernity? How well did the Arcane Designing cards support such a move? And what other insights emerged?

Anthropocentric Biases and Portal for Relationality

Looking across the artefacts, we see different depths of relationality and non-modern thinking. All but one artefact makes use of magic to enable some kind of undefined technological function, showing that even fantastical narratives risk fostering ideas of human-enhancing technology. It reveals a clear anthropocentric bias and a bit of a science-fiction flavoured technology-centered bias that focuses more on functionality and less on relational entanglements.

Only the Seedbomb Toolkit Amulet, a toolkit enabling planting seeds when hiking, avoids this. This artefact shows a group that really used the fantastical scenario as a way of engaging with human-nonhuman relations. The ontological condition, “In a world where beings like spirits, fairies, trolls, and other hidden folk live within the ecosystem, each tied to a particular place or natural phenomena,” and the magical opportunity, “but we might remember that there is a practice of tending to relationships with nearby spirit-beings by offering something of value to us in exchange for



protection, luck, or fertile prospects”, enabled them to come up with a simple thing that supports a practice of reciprocity rather than designing a complex device that ‘does the trick’.

This does not mean, however, that the other artefacts are not relational. All of them embed some form of relational qualities, though many human-centered biases stand out. Zooming in on how these groups approached the task gives us insights into some interesting tensions. It seems that these groups approached the task with a mindset of problem solving, some treated the everyday activity as a problem to be solved or optimised, some approached the ontological world condition as a problem to be solved or addressed by design, and some groups solved both: The Relaxing Riddler help people slow down and take breaks when they are stressed, revealing a focus on alleviating the problem of work-stress. The Travel Abyss optimizes public transportation and solves the problem of roaming giants and dragons by boycotting both completely, through teleportation. The Good Fairy deals with problems around emotions, providing a way of balancing one’s emotions before reading, mitigating the problems from “texts rewriting themselves to reflect the reader’s emotional state”, and the difficulties of regulating one’s emotions. The CUPybara enables planning by translating and solving the riddles of animals’ foretellings of events, and though it relies on an undefined magical function to easily solve the problem of not understanding animal language, it holds elements of a deeper relational scenario about a way of that life, where planning starts from attuning to the more-than-human world.

The Four Elements Prediction Watch deals with potential problems emerging from “forests cleansing the earth by transforming poisons into strange new life forms”, but it does not magically solve the problem: It enables humans to carry out a relational act of giving love to “angry, sad, hostile lifeforms”. In this way, the use of a technology foregrounds more-than-human relationalities by increasing “our awareness and broadening our capacity for attentions and care.” (Bridle, 2022, p. 118) Here, the undefined magical function in the device helped the participants access and communicate an affectionate desire, namely being able to understand the needs of more-than-humans, so they can provide care. This can be seen as a portal to ontological relationality, and it might have planted seeds in their design imaginations that can foster designs of technologies that enhance human capacity for more-than-human attentions and care, rather than for control, in a world where ecosystems increasingly react unpredictably. It shows a desire to react to a crisis with love.

The Relaxing Riddler and The Good Fairy also articulate sincere desires. The Relaxing Riddler shows a wish to counter work-stress and find ways “to slow down in a chaotic world”. The fact that “it lights up when it feels that you are stressed” shows how deep-seated disconnection has become, since the design presumes that a user would not notice or act on their own bodily reactions. Unfortunately, the problem of stress remains framed as a human-centered matter to be solved by technology, and it does not challenge the underlying societal structures. The Good Fairy similarly articulates a desire to “get in touch with our emotions” and design ways for people to achieve emotional balance. The artefact’s form hints at an understanding of the complexity of our emotions, but also a wish to get an overview of this complexity as a means of being able to achieve a state

of balance. Here, a modern trait is revealed in the need to fully know the world in order to “solve” it. We might interpret these two cases as two portals of relationality emerging but not fully being entered. This fosters a question of how the cards and/or the framing could have better supported an ontological shift in perspective? And if it even should do such a thing? The intention was never to affect anybody’s ontology but to provide a means to imagine from beyond the onto-epistemic constraints of Western modernity.

Considering the Level of Difficulty

Several groups miss some opportunities for deeper engagement with more-than-human relationalities present in their prompts. The Good Fairy prompt: “In a world where all written texts slowly rewrite themselves to reflect the reader’s emotional state, we still need to regulate our emotions, but we might remember that the effect you have on your environment is reflected on your body”, could, for example, have made for an interesting scenario of hybridity and blurry boundaries between individual and environment. But being able to identify such an opportunity likely depends on a familiarity with posthuman theories. A design consideration could be whether one should design the cards for a specific level of familiarity with more-than-human design. Though in a workshop setting with uncertainty about what kinds of participants will be present, it is likely preferred to have a bit of diversity in levels while ensuring a facilitator-focus on groups landing on a generative level or helping to provide interpretations in their narrative-making process.

Creating Narratives and Sticking with a Combination

In the plenary session, it came forth that starting by building a narrative or scenario together, prompted by the cards, made the process more generative. One group said that it was building the scenario together that enabled them to start imagining in material ways and start designing. This group, and as it turned out, several other groups, had in the beginning quickly decided to change their cards since they didn’t feel immediately inspired with an artefact idea. But they found that this didn’t help. Only when they turned back to their initial cards, chose to stick with a combination, and began to create a story around that world did they become inspired to build an artefact. Moreover, some groups might have changed one or two cards in order to get a combination that more directly fitted together. The CUPybara’s prompt contains both a world condition and a magical possibility about animals. The Good Fairy’s world condition and everyday activity are both related to emotions. This seems to have resulted in less relational world-building due to too little friction in building the narrative. With this, I mean that their world-building process did not lead to challenging their anthropocentric biases. More friction might have helped since frictions can become portals for relationality. Yet, for the Seedbomb, we also see a world condition and a magical possibility that aligns extremely well, as they both stem from Nordic mythology, but for this group, it seemed to have worked well. The overall important insight here is that it is not about finding an inspiring or ‘right’ combination but about sticking with one and engaging in its world by building a narrative together. We might even draw a parallel here to Abram and chapter 4: The worlds we choose

to participate with by directing our sensory attention come to life and begin to acquire meanings (Abram, 1996).

Believing the Magic and Coming Down-to-Earth

Throughout the workshop, real-life magic also appeared in several ways: “I feel like they really do have magic, since it was like this moment in time where our brains worked together and like really created it. It’s like, it really does feel like it’s an artefact that does have magic in it.”

The playful and free space for imagination that the workshop facilitated brought a lot of magical joy. It enabled the participants to access their creativity and generatively create together. Magic and fantastical worlding facilitated a ‘yes and’ attitude: “[If I say] this could mean X, then someone else says yes, then this could be Y.” Showing how participants weren’t restrained by realism and a need to fully agree. This, besides being a great basis for creativity, also hints at participants working together in a form of pluriverse where different understandings of the world could co-exist and build on each other.

Some participants also described how they, in some ways, believed in the magic of their scenario and how they felt their narrative made full sense: “We would only have stopped if we couldn’t come up with a narrative that made sense. Just because there is magic in it, doesn’t mean that it doesn’t make any sense.” And another said, “Seed bombing could be a real thing. It wouldn’t be completely ridiculous. It doesn’t feel like mockery.” Another reflected on how belief is a powerful force that makes things become real. The workshop led him to see the absurdity in how we all believe in capitalism when we could instead believe in magic. He then came to the insight: “With and through belief is what makes things magical. That’s when it feels like you’re becoming human again.” This becoming human again is part of what it means to get Down-to-Earth: A glimmer of belief in magic enabled him to feel a stronger connection to what it means to be human, and in essence, what it means to belong to the Earth. These experiences resonate astonishingly well with Le Guin’s testimony that:

“The fantasy writer must “believe in” the world she is creating, not in the sense of confusing it in any way with the actual bodily world, but in the sense of giving absolute credence to the work of the imagination — dwelling in it while writing, and trusting it to reveal itself.” (Ursula K. Le Guin, n.d.)

It shows that a focus for Arcane Designing should continuously be on creating magical moments for people. Whether it’s the magic of brains working, a flower that defies the seasons, or giving people the free space to make an artefact that signals good intentions to trolls, Arcane Designing should offer people a license to fully indulge in all the magical moments because it helps us feel connected to the more-than-human world, to each other, and to our bodies. This is important even when we design for designers. Designing for moving Down-to-Earth needs to be felt, come from embodied perspectives, and stem from situated understandings of relationality, since there are no universal recipes in the Pluriverse.

Chapter Insights:

Down-to-Earth Imagining with Magic

This chapter set out to answer:

How can fantastical worldbuilding enable imagination beyond the onto-epistemic constraints of Western modernity?

Through the development and testing of the Arcane Designing cards at ThingsCon, the chapter demonstrates that fantastical worldbuilding can serve as a generative resource for pluriversal design imaginaries, though not without tensions and complexities. Fantasy, mythology, and folklore contain fragments of Alternative Wests; relational ontological possibilities that persist despite Western modernity’s attempts to erase them. By remixing worlds of magic, designers can access imaginative spaces that escape the dominance of scientific, rationalist, and futurist constraints that typically limit Western design imagination.

The workshop findings reveal both the potential and the challenges of this approach. On the one hand, participants enthusiastically engaged with magical worldbuilding, describing the experience as “fun”, enabling them to think “out of the box” and let their minds “go wild”, in ways that took them beyond their usual design practices. The activity fostered collaborative creativity through a ‘yes and’ attitude, where different ontological understandings could coexist and build upon each other without being restricted by a need for agreeing on one specific understanding. This is a valuable pluriversal quality in itself. Participants reported feeling that their artefacts possessed genuine magic, and some experienced beautiful moments of reconnection: feeling “human again” through engaging with magic and realizing that we can choose to believe in magic rather than solely in capitalist realism.

However, the artefacts also revealed persistent anthropocentric and techno-solutionist biases. Several groups defaulted to designing human-enhancing technologies that used magic to create an undefined functional mechanism, approaching both the fantastical world conditions and everyday activities as problems to be solved rather than as invitations to reimagine relational modes of being. Yet, such undefined magical functions need not be problematic, as they can become portals for relationality emerging here through magic’s capacity to bring forth deep emotions like fear, desire, love, and grief. The Four Elements Prediction Watch, for instance, used undefined magical functionality without magically solving a problem but rather to enhance human capacity for more-than-human care and attention—articulating a desire to respond to ecological crises with love rather than control. The Relaxing Riddler and The Good Fairy similarly revealed sincere desires to reconnect with bodily awareness and emotional complexity, even if these remained framed within individualist human-centered paradigms. Such human-centered design biases could likely be mitigated through more experienced facilitation but it is also worth considering tweaking the concept to become more practice-centered or aimed at specific levels of familiarity with more-than-human

design. One artefact, the Seedbomb Toolkit Amulet fully embraced the prompt as an opportunity to design for reciprocal human-nonhuman relations without technological mediation.

Several key insights emerged regarding the methodology itself. The importance of narrative-building became clear: groups that stuck with their initial card combinations and invested in creating stories around them, rather than seeking immediately “inspiring” combinations, became more generative. The friction of seemingly mismatched prompts can serve as portals for relationality by requiring participants to work through ontological frictions in their narrative-building. Additionally, the choice of craft materials and natural objects proved beneficial in grounding the fantastical speculations in tactile, embodied making processes.

The chapter thus affirms that fantastical worldbuilding can help designers move beyond Western modern ontological constraints, but this movement is neither automatic nor complete. Fantasy functions as an ontological playground—a space where relational fragments can be recovered, remixed, and experimented with—but it requires careful facilitation, critical engagement, and ongoing attention to how modern biases reassert themselves even within magical framings. The value lies not in fantasy’s ability to magically solve problems, but in its capacity to estrange dominant reality, create permission for out-of-the-box thinking, and open affective and imaginative spaces where different ways of being, knowing, and relating can be felt, believed, and explored.

Ultimately, this chapter demonstrates that restorying benefits from more than rational arguments; it requires engaging the imagination at the level of desire and wonder. Fantastical worldbuilding offers designers a means of accessing these while remaining playful, embodied, and Down-to-Earth. Affirming that a free space of imagination is indeed dangerous to those who profit from the way things are, because it has the power to show that the way things are is neither permanent, universal, nor necessary.

CHAPTER 6

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

A Brief Recap of the Thesis

This thesis set out to explore how designing with magic might open onto-epistemic pathways Down-to-Earth. Chapter 1 framed the problem—the ontological disconnection of Western modernity—and developed Down-to-Earth as an onto-epistemic orientation toward the Terrestrial, grounded in situatedness, embodiment, relationality, pluriversality, and terrestrial accountability. Chapter 2 deepened this foundation by showing that ontologies are made through practices, stories, and material arrangements, and that magic holds earthly possibilities as a mode of relating that remains attentive to what exceeds human knowledge, while also tracing how Down-to-Earth magic was historically enclosed through the production of science, which came to be established by patriarchal and colonial power structures. Three cycles of design experiments, then ventured into the space of Arcane Designing from different entry points. In Chapter 3 speculations with landvættir asked how magical beings tied to place might support relational thinking—and revealed that noticing through the lens of magic reorients attention toward the more-than-human world in a particularly enlarging way, that folklore-inspired rituals can reframe human-centred “problems” as opportunities for reciprocal relations that doesn’t need solving, and that magical beings can help designers think non-dualistically about technology. In Chapter 4, cultivating a practice of witch-crafting asked how witchcraft might nurture non-modern ways of experiencing and perceiving—and found that gathering power objects and crafting magical amulets redirects sensory participation toward overlooked presences, that the body and its material encounters produce relational knowledge that rational approaches alone cannot access, and that even participants who rejected the concept of magic began to notice the aliveness of the more-than-human world when their senses were engaged. In Chapter 5, remixing worlds of fantastical magic asked how fantastical worldbuilding might enable imagination beyond modern onto-epistemic constraints—and demonstrated that fantasy can function as an ontological playground where designers can access relational fragments from Alternative Wests, while also revealing that anthropocentric and techno-solutionist biases can reassert themselves even within magical framings and require critical facilitation. Across these three cycles, Arcane Designing emerges as a practice of designing with magic that can broaden ways of thinking, experiencing, and imagining to open different dimensions of onto-epistemic pathways Down-to-Earth.

Limitations

Before stating what this thesis contributes, it is important to name the constraints within which these contributions were developed. The empirical work is small in scale: the Witch Walks involved four participants, of whom, three, were researchers with some proximity to the thesis’s theoretical commitments,. The ThingsCon workshop, while involving twenty-two participants, of whom the majority were students, took place within a single session at a conference oriented toward experimental design thinking. Both contexts carry a degree of in-group bias; participants were predisposed to engage openly with unconventional approaches, and the findings cannot be assumed to hold in radically different settings. The speculative work in Cycle 1 is primarily auto-ethnographic and does not involve external participants. The literature engagement, while extensive across decolonial, feminist, posthumanist, and more-than-human design scholarship, is not exhaustive, and the thesis does not claim comprehensive coverage of all relevant traditions of magic, mythology, or folklore. Finally, all engagements were single sessions or short-term; the thesis was unable to test whether the sensitising effects and imaginative openings observed would deepen, sustain, or dissipate over time. What follows, therefore, should be read as propositions grounded in iterative design work, promising indications from a first exploration of Arcane Designing, not validated claims about its effects.

Contribution:
The Practice of Arcane Designing

Revisiting the Calls

In Chapter 1, this thesis identified calls from Escobar (2018) for an onto-epistemic reorientation of design grounded in pluriversality and relationality, and from Dunne and Raby (2025) for moving beyond the restrictions that modern ontology places on the design imagination. More-than-human design was identified as an emerging branch of design already part of an ongoing ontological turn within design and HCI (Giaccardi et al., 2025), but to align more fully with the pluriversal dimension of Escobar’s call, and to position itself as a field that can provide the imaginative capacities Dunne and Raby call for, the field needs to explore additional pathways for creating imaginaries outside Western-modern onto-epistemic limits. In response, this thesis develops Arcane Designing: a practice of designing with magic that provides such a pathway. The following section states this contribution and what the thesis discovered through developing it.

Escobar’s (2018) calls entails moving outside the epistemic configurations of Western social theory and into relational ontologies grounded in pluriversality and radical interdependence. Dunne and Raby’s (2025) call entails moving beyond commitments to realism, plausibility, and futurity because they restrict the design imagination to forever “reimagining variations of a broken reality”, urging designers to start from different ontologies and embrace ideas that might seem absurd, odd, or impossible. More-than-human design has made significant strides in decentring the human and foregrounding interdependence, care, and situatedness (Rosén et al., 2024), but it has not yet extensively explored magic and fantasy as resources for this onto-epistemic work.

Arcane Designing:
A Practice of Designing with Magic for Getting Down-to-Earth

This thesis proposes Arcane Designing as a practice of designing with magic that responds to these calls. Arcane Designing provides a practical, situated way of engaging pluriversal relational ontologies from within Western contexts by drawing on worlds of magic—including fantasy, witchcraft, European folklore, and mythology—as containing what Escobar (2018) calls “alternative Wests”: non-modern ontologies that exist even within the West. The practice is oriented by Down-to-Earth as a critical onto-epistemic compass, developed in Chapter 1 through Latour (2018), Haraway (1988), and Escobar (2018; 2024), which serves both to guide the practice and to distinguish Down-to-Earth magic from forms of magic oriented toward abstraction, domination, and escape.

Arcane Designing is not a single method but a open practice that, as this thesis demonstrates, can operate through multiple modes of engagement. Through speculative engagements with landvættir, Arcane Designing supports relational thinking by enabling designers to notice differently, to reframe human-centred problems as relational opportunities, and to imagine alternative configura-

tions of humans, technologies, and ecosystems. Through witch-crafting, Arcane Designing cultivates non-modern ways of experiencing and perceiving by redirecting sensory participation toward the animate world, using gathering and crafting-with as practices of reciprocal participation, and mobilising SF storytelling to make animistic perception accessible and delightful. Through fantastical worldbuilding, Arcane Designing enables imagination beyond Western-modern onto-epistemic constraints by providing designers with an ontological playground where relational fragments from mythology, folklore, and fantasy can be recovered, remixed, and experimented with.

Across these three experiments, the thesis identifies several characteristics of how Arcane Designing can work, as well as slipages to be aware of. First, magic enables ontological movement through attention and sensory participation. The entry point into Arcane Designing is perceptual and playful, never doctrinal: participants do not need to “believe in” magic to begin relating differently to the more-than-human world, though belief, when it arises, can deepen the engagement. Belief should not be understood as a demotion to being unreal; as we have seen, our stories, our beliefs, make our worlds and are made real. When “belief” arises, which it rarely does as a binary here, not here, it can be understood as a case of personal restorying, a moment of expanding one’s ontology. This is a pluriversal quality of the practice—new sensibilities expand alongside existing ones rather than replacing them. Second, to enable reconnection, Arcane Designing requires the critical orientation of Down-to-Earth. And even when this is the framing, it is not automatically free from Modern ontological habits. The ThingsCon workshop demonstrated that magical imaginaries can unknowingly replicate or stay within anthropocentric and techno-solutionist biases in a participatory context, when participants lack a deeper familiarity with this orientation. This, however, is not necessarily a problem. Participants arrive with diverse ontological starting positions, and Arcane Designing is not in the business of policing imaginations. In the case of the ThingsCon workshop, for example, the purpose was to create a free space for imagination, and that some artefacts stayed within anthropocentric logics reflects where those designers are, while showing that Arcane Designing can be used to reveal such modern biases ingrained in our practices. This leads to a third characteristic: Following Haraway, Arcane Designing does not aspire for purity. It works within messy, hybrid, impure conditions. The ontological openings it creates—even partial and even tentative—have value. A more dangerous risk, however, is the reduction of magic to aesthetic decoration rather than ontological engagement. Chapter 4 identified this as the difference between witch aesthetics and witch aesthesis. This risk is more serious because it would operate through a modern/colonial logic of appropriation that reduces while concealing its reduction. Arcane Designing, therefore, requires critical engagement from designers to ensure that magic is engaged as a way of worlding, not merely as an aesthetic resource that empties magic of ontological depth. The distinction between Out-of-this-World magic (oriented toward abstraction, control, and escape) and Down-to-Earth magic (oriented toward relationality, situatedness, and reciprocity), developed theoretically through the reading of patriarchal alchemy and confirmed practically across the experiments, provides an important compass for navigating worlds of magic and ensuring onto-epistemic depth. Fourth, both friction and immersion serve the practice. The most evident cultivation of

more-than-human sensibilities occurred with a participant who entered the Witch Walks with considerable scepticism toward magic and material engagements in general, while sensory immersion increasingly enabled new perspectives full of ontological openings. Magical moments of wonder and awe were largely generative across all experiments. This suggests that Arcane Designing benefits from holding space for both productive discomfort and enchanted participation, which don’t negate each other and can happen simultaneously. Fifth, Arcane Designing deliberately establishes a gray area between reality and fiction. A key claim of the thesis is that this provides a way to create ontological movement.

Arcane Designing is positioned within more-than-human design but it distinguishes itself in its specific turn to magic as an onto-epistemic resource. Existing more-than-human design practices such as noticing (Tsing, 2015a), decentring (Nicenboim et al., 2023), and sensitising (Hansen & Rolighed, 2024) provide valuable strategies for engaging with non-human agencies. Arcane Designing draws on magical traditions—landvættir, witchcraft, folklore, fantasy—as containing relational ontological fragments that can inform and expand these strategies. It is also distinct from current Design Fiction and Speculative Design in its departure from futures and plausibility as the primary speculative frame, turning instead to ontology as “conceptual raw material” (Dunne & Raby, 2025) and to the “impossible” and “unthinkable” as generative starting points. Furthermore, Arcane Designing differs from scholarly engagements with enchantment or re-enchantment (e.g., Blackie, 2018; Vervoort, 2024) in that it is a design practice—it produces artefacts, practices, and stories—rather than a theoretical or philosophical proposition alone.

Responding to the Main Research Question

The main research question of this thesis is: How might Arcane Designing (designing with magic) open onto-epistemic pathways Down-to-Earth?

Each of the three design cycles contributes a different dimension to this question by showing concrete examples that illustrate specific ways of how designing with magic opened such onto-epistemic pathways. Speculating with landvættir can contribute to relational thinking by providing frames that presuppose interconnection, agency, and reciprocity, enabling designers to notice differently and to see relational opportunities rather than problems to be solved. Witch-crafting can contribute to non-modern ways of perceiving and experiencing by enabling practices of sensory participation, and creating opportunities for human-nonhuman encounters through gathering and crafting-with. It creates conditions for what the thesis calls perceptual reopenings: partial recoveries of embodied, animistic modes of sensing that modernity enclosed through the disciplining of bodies, the abstraction of language, and the colonial regime of aesthetics. Fantastical worldbuilding can contribute to pluriversal imagining by remixing worlds of magic, providing designers with access to imaginative spaces that escape the dominance of scientific, rationalist, and futurist constraints on the design imagination. Together, these three findings indicate that Arcane Designing can open onto-epistemic pathways Down-to-Earth by operating across thinking, experiencing, and imagining. Furthermore, it became increasingly evident that these three faculties are not really separate. As Anzaldúa insists, the body does not distinguish between stimuli from the imagination and stimuli from “real” events; and as Abram argues, imagination is not a separate mental faculty but an attribute of the senses themselves, the way they throw themselves beyond what is immediately given. The Western split between thinking, experiencing, and imagining is itself a product of the ontological disconnection this thesis seeks to address. In practice, Arcane Designing works by engaging all three simultaneously: one notices while imagining, imagines while sensing, senses while thinking otherwise.

The experiments indicate that Arcane Designing opens these pathways through several mechanisms. It redirects attention and sensory participation toward the more-than-human world, making previously overlooked presences stand forth as alive and agentic. It mobilises mystery, not-knowing, towards potentials of ontological excess. It recovers and reactivates logics of relational practices and ontological fragments that persist within Western contexts despite modernity’s attempts to erase them—landvættir rituals, witchcraft as embodied earth knowledge, fantastical worlds as places of alternative cosmologies. And it creates affective and imaginative openings where moments of wonder, awe, care, empathy, and delight can emerge and function as portals for relationality. Furthermore, Arcane Designing operates by deliberately playing in a gray area between fiction and reality. By continuously keeping the definition of magic ambiguous, the practice cultivates what Dunne and Raby (2025) call “a sensitivity to different shades of real” and what the Treaty of Finsbury Park (2025) describes as “a conscious bleed between fiction and reality.” This blurring

enables onto-epistemic movement and is itself a non-modern move because it refuses the Western split between imagination and reality that Anzaldúa identifies as part of a colonial, patriarchal, and epistemic dualism. It enacts the ontological position that myths are neither simply true nor false, but that they make worlds (Escobar et al., 2024).

It is important to scope this claim. This thesis does not claim that Arcane Designing is the only practice that can open onto-epistemic pathways Down-to-Earth, nor that magic is the only resource for such work. Other practices, traditions, and knowledge systems, such as those from Indigenous, communal, and feminist contexts that this thesis learns from but does not claim to represent, offer their own situated pathways. What this thesis offers is a first, exploratory inquiry into what designing with magic can bring, developed through iterative design work within a Western context and oriented by the specific calls from Escobar and Dunne and Raby. The findings suggest that Arcane Designing has much potential for opening pluriversal onto-epistemic pathways.

Evaluation of Success Criteria

Returning to the success criteria developed in Chapter 1, the experiments point toward a cautious affirmation of Arcane Designing. It indicates having the ability to enable situated ways of knowing particular to places and bodies (the noticing practice, the place-based jellyfish ritual, the site-specific Witch Walks, the facilitation of personal, bodily, non-rational ways of knowing). It indicates the ability to embodied engagements by foregrounding the body and senses as ways of knowing, experiencing and relating (the entire witch-crafting practice, the tactile making across all experiments). It indicates the relational ability to reveal or cultivate an awareness of interdependence and entanglements (participants’ expressions of empathy, care, and respect toward non-human agencies; the relational reframings in the speculations). It indicates the pluriversal ability to open space for multiple ways of being, knowing, and belonging (the pluriversal quality of participants’ realisations, where scientific and animistic understandings coexisted; the ‘yes and’ attitude at ThingsCon, the creation of and engaging people in spaces of onto-epistemic engagements that goes beyond the One-World World (Law, 2015) of Western Modernity). And it indicates the capacity of creating responsibility by attuning attention to material and ecological conditions (the witch-crafting practice’s orientation toward the local ecosystem, the Witch Gantt Tool’s affordance of cyclical attuned planning, and The Arcane Designing cards fostering of imaginaries of terrestrial reciprocity).

Guiding Considerations for Arcane Designing

Through the three cycles of design experiments, a set of guiding considerations has emerged that appears important for Arcane Designing to open onto-epistemic pathways Down-to-Earth. These are far from fixed rules but offered as guidelines for designers who wish to explore this practice. Different contexts, participants, and magical traditions will require different calibrations.

A Critical Compass: Down-to-Earth as Orientation

Not all magic moves us toward Earth. The thesis’s theoretical work on patriarchal alchemy and the historical entanglements of science and magic established that modernity selectively legitimised forms of enchantment oriented toward abstraction, control, and mastery while excluding relational, situated, and animistic practices. Arcane Designing therefore follows Down-to-Earth as a critical orientation: a compass for engaging with magical practices and imaginaries that cultivate relationality, situatedness, embodiment, and terrestrial accountability to avoid reproducing Out-of-this-World logics under a magical guise. It important to stretch that it is a compass, meaning that depending on the engagement’s position its orientation might point to different things, though always towards a pluriversal Earth. A lot of magic exists in a messy space in-between, and thus, Down-to-Earth ought to be used for orientation rather than for dualistic judgements.

Sensory Participation

Across all three cycles, the most generative engagements occurred when bodies and senses were actively involved. In the Witch Walks, touching the ground, handling power objects, and being immersed in the natural environment produced shifts in attention. At ThingsCon, tactile making with craft materials and natural objects grounded fantastical speculations in embodied experience. This condition aligns with Abram’s (1996) account of perception as fundamentally participatory: redirecting sensory attention toward the more-than-human world is what makes its aliveness perceptible, regardless of what one “believes” about it. Arcane Designing benefits from designing activities that engage the body and senses as primary modes of knowing.

Situatedness within More-than-Human Worlds

The practice works extremely well when firmly situated within a living environment. The noticing walks, the place-based jellyfish ritual, and the outdoor Witch Walks, all grounded the magical engagements in concrete, local, more-than-human contexts. When magic is practised in relation to a specific place, its agencies, and its inhabitants, it becomes a way of deepening attachment to that place. This is consistent with the thesis’s theoretical commitment to situated knowledges (Haraway, 1988) and to the terrestrial as a political and ecological orientation (Latour, 2018). Arcane Designing should be wary of vending to far into the abstract; a witch, as Druehyld (2020) insists, first and foremost needs nature and its wonders.

SF Worlding

The ThingsCon workshop revealed that building a narrative around a magical scenario was what enabled groups to begin designing generatively. When groups committed to a combination and invested in worlding a story around it became productive. In Cycle 1, the full speculative concept of the jellyfish ritual emerged iteratively through the making, where material qualities informed the story and the story informed design choices. Arcane Designing benefits from SF worlding (Haraway, 2016) as a central activity as an ongoing, responsive process of storying-with that enables perceptions to shift and ideas to reveal themselves, following Le Guin’s approach of trusting the imagination to show the way.

Space for Both Friction and Enchantment

The experiments show that Arcane Designing is enriched by both productive frictions and magical immersion. The most compelling arc of sensitisation in the Witch Walks came from a participant whose scepticism toward magic made their perceptual shifts all the more visible to themselves. At ThingsCon, groups working through difficult or seemingly mismatched card combinations produced richer narratives. At the same time, moments of storytelling, and wonder and enchantment, such as a fairy revealing itself during noticing, the mushrooms suddenly appearing during witch walks, the feeling of one’s artefact holding real magic, were equally generative. Arcane Designing recognises that both friction and enchantment can become a portals for relationality (Escobar et al., 2024).

Witch Aesthesis Over Witch Aesthetics

The thesis identifies a persistent risk of magic being reduced to aesthetic decoration rather than engaged as an ontological practice. Modern/colonial aesthetics (Vázquez, 2020) can minimise magic’s potential by turning them into visual styles, symbols, or atmospheres without ontological depth. The move from witch aesthetics to witch aesthesis—developed in Chapter 4 through Abram, Federici, and Vázquez—is important for Arcane Designing to produce genuine perceptual reopenings. This means engaging with magic through embodied, affective, and situated ways of sensing rather than through representational or decorative means. It requires attending to how worlds are felt, lived, and sustained by participation, not only how they look.

These considerations are offered as a starting vocabulary for a emerging practice that has potential for others. Different designers working with different magical traditions in different contexts with different people will need to develop their own situated calibrations.

Discussion

The preceding sections have stated what this thesis contributes, responded to the research question, and laid out conditions for the practice, all in a register that aims to be replicable and useful to other researchers. This section shifts register. It draws on my positioned voice as a designer-researcher who has spent the better part of six months immersed in magic, witchcraft, folklore, and fantasy as serious design resources. It addresses what design specifically adds to the conversation about magic and reconnection, an honest assessment of this thesis attempt; a deeper exploration of the findings that I consider most significant; and directions for further work.

What Design Adds

Many of the scholars this thesis draws on—Escobar, Haraway, Abram, Federici, Latour, Vázquez—have articulated, with great depth and rigour, why the ontological disconnection of Western modernity is a problem and why relational, situated, embodied, and pluriversal ways of being matter. What I found through this work is that design’s specific contribution lies in making these theoretical commitments experienceable. Theory can describe what participatory perception means; a witch walk can make you feel it. Theory can argue that the more-than-human world has agency; crafting an amulet with a power object that refuses your design intentions can show you. Theory can call for imagining beyond modern constraints; a set of cards that drop you into a world where forests cleanse the earth by transforming poisons into strange new life forms can help you actually do it. The value of approaching reconnection through design, specifically, is that it produces concrete practices, artefacts, and encounters through which onto-epistemic shifts can begin to happen. In relation to working with a contested thing like magic design can create experiences to be had instead of ideas to be accepted.

A Critical Assessment of the Work

First of all, this thesis makes some rather bold moves as well as some bold claims. Yet, I can speak only to what I designed, experienced myself, and tested within the specific experiments of this thesis—an alternative Gantt tool, a handful of speculations, four Witch Walks, and one workshop. I do not know how Arcane Designing would work in radically different cultural, institutional, or ecological contexts, or with participants who hold very different relationships to magic, spirituality, and the more-than-human world. The situated nature of the findings is both their strength and their constraint.

The variety of approaches was a genuine strength. By entering the space of Arcane Designing from three different angles—speculative thinking, embodied experiencing, and fantastical imagining—I was able to build an understanding of the practice that no single experiment could have provided.

Each cycle built on what came before, and the iterative learning between them helped the insights, as well as myself, move further Down-to-Earth. The Witch Walks, as I reflect in Chapter 4, were spread too thin by trying to both sensitise and validate Arcane Designing’s relevance to design researchers simultaneously. This is a valuable personal learning, and recognising that the more-than-human world is already magical enough in itself—that I did not need elaborate speculative provocations to create magical moments—turned out to be a valuable finding. In analysing the outcomes of the workshops (witch walks and ThingsCon), I was confronted with my own inexperience as a facilitator, in how I often missed identifying points that could have benefited from follow-up questions. This is a limitation because it led to missed insights and a higher risk of misinterpretations in my analysis. On a positive note, it has been a valuable learning experience. My expertise in the magical traditions I drew on is in some ways limited; I learned about witchcraft for the first time during the thesis itself, and a deeper culturally situated knowledge would have enriched the work. The empirical engagements were small and brief, and I was not able to follow up with participants to understand whether the sensitising effects sustained over time. However, where the experiments fell short, it often revealed aspects matters: the Witch Walks’ overreach revealed that focus and depth are more important than breadth; the ThingsCon workshop’s anthropocentric artefacts revealed that facilitation and critical orientation are essential; and the inability to test sustained engagement revealed that this is where further work could focus.

Magic as a Mode of Attention: A Key Finding

Across all three cycles, one finding has emerged that I did not fully anticipate and that I consider the most significant contribution of this work: magic, as engaged through Arcane Designing, functions primarily as a mode of attention. It works not by requiring adoption of a different cosmology but by redirecting sensory participation and imaginative engagement toward aspects of the world that modern ontology has rendered invisible, irrelevant, or irrational. This has implications for how we understand magic’s role in design, and for how more-than-human design might work with magical traditions without reducing them to belief systems or aesthetic styles.

The clearest evidence for this came from the Witch Walks. The participant who entered the activity identifying as rational and without connection to materials or magic produced the most visible signs of more-than-human sensitisation. But they did not adopt a magical worldview; their rational framework remained intact. Through the practice of gathering, sensing, and crafting-with, they began to notice things they had not noticed before—the relationship between a shell and its soil, the aliveness of trees—and to feel empathy and care toward non-human agencies in ways that surprised them.

This finding for Arcane Designing suggests that magic’s contribution to design is about creating conditions for a different quality of attention. Abram (1996) argues that animistic perception was never a set of beliefs but a mode of participatory sensing cultivated through attentiveness and bodily immersion. Something Arcane Designing appears to be good at is to create accessible occasions for this kind of attention to emerge: occasions where the imagination is freed to participate in perception, where the senses are directed toward the animate world, and where meaning is allowed to emerge from the body and more-than-human encounters rather than being imposed or policed by rational interpretation.

The fact that magic doesn’t require a focus on believe makes Arcane Designing accessible across a wide range of ontological starting points, from participants who are already comfortable with animistic worldviews to those who are firmly committed to scientific rationality, because the entry point is perceptual. It also means that ontological openings, when they come, arrives from experience rather than instruction, which gives it a different quality: it is situated, embodied, grounded in encounter and allowed to be fluid and undefined.

For the field of more-than-human design, magic can be a particularly valuable resource precisely because it holds open a space of mystery and not-knowing that resists the modern impulse to explain, categorise, and close. Arcane Designing extends the generative power of ambiguity in design by drawing on a large and culturally embedded reservoir of magical traditions, which carry millennia of human engagement with mystery, reciprocity, and more-than-human agency. This reservoir is a living, culturally present resource in fantasy, in folklore, and in the childhood imaginations of every person who has ever believed that a forest might be alive.

Blurring the Real/Fictional Divides Towards Ontological Openings, Shifts, and Expansions

Across the three cycles, Arcane Designing consistently works by refusing the boundary between what is real and what is fictional, and this refusal turns out to be an important quality. Rather than asking participants to accept magic as literally true or to treat it as merely metaphorical, the practice creates conditions where that distinction loses its grip and ontological movement becomes possible.

In Cycle 1, the noticing practice initiated this blurring at the level of perception. When a tiny flower-thingy flew between me and my screen, it became a fairy that revealed itself to me because the imaginative frame of *landvættir* made a familiar encounter become extraordinary and relational. The practice holds the question of whether the fairy is real open, and this openness is can help redirect attention and cultivate care.

In Cycle 2, the witch herself is a figure that exists in between fiction and reality. She is a historically produced political subject, fantastical character in folklore and fantasy, and real women with real embodied knowledge. The Witch Walks mobilise this in-betweenness: participants step into the role of a witch, cross a threshold into a magical world, and return with new perspectives. Yet

the magical world they enter is a real green area with real ecological agencies, and the real more-than-human encounters. The things I told about witches were all real but choosing to never resolve doubtful tensions by claiming that things were real or not helped keep possibilities open. The power objects and amulets similarly never determines whether they are “really” magical.

Arcane Designing does not use fiction as a safe container for ideas that are “not really real.” It uses the gray area between fiction and reality as an active onto-epistemic space where ontological openings, shifts, and expansions can occur. Anzaldúa puts it well:

“We are taught that the body is an ignorant animal; intelligence dwells only in the head. But the body is smart. It does not discern between external stimuli and stimuli from the imagination. It reacts equally viscerally to events from the imagination as it does to ‘real’ events.” (Anzaldúa, 1991, p. 37)

This means that imaginative engagements with magic can produce real perceptual shifts, real affective responses, and real relational openings.

Further Work

This thesis has ventured into the space of Arcane Designing through three entry points, but the space itself remains largely unexplored. Several directions for further work emerge from the limitations and findings of this inquiry.

The most pressing question this thesis cannot answer is whether the onto-epistemic openings observed through Arcane Designing sustain and deepen over time or remain momentary. The more-than-human sensitising literature consistently indicates that ontological shifts benefit from prolonged engagement (Hansen & Rolighed, 2024; Light et al., 2024), and my own experience of practising the amulet practice over months suggests deepening effects. A first direction for further work would therefore be to design longitudinal studies of Arcane Designing practices to understand how sustained magical attention shapes participants’ relationships with the more-than-human world over weeks and months. The witch-crafting practice, which was designed to be an ongoing everyday engagement could be good place to start.

A second direction concerns the translation of Arcane Designing into more concrete, actionable design methods for practitioners. Several participants across both the Witch Walks and ThingsCon expressed interest in using magical approaches in their work, but struggled with how to bridge the experiential engagement into their practical design work. Future work could gain something valuable from exploring such directions, though I would advise against making overly fixed methods for Arcane Designing, as being situated is an onto-epistemic commitment of the practice. Considering the most practical artefact of the thesis, the Witch Gantt Tool, points to a curious potential in developing ways Arcane Designing can contribute to more practical design goals. Future work could also develop the Arcane Designing card deck into a more robust tool, tested across different design contexts and levels of familiarity with more-than-human design.

Conclusion

This thesis developed Arcane Designing as a practice of designing with magic that can open onto-epistemic pathways Down-to-Earth. Through three cycles of design experiments—speculating with land-vættir, cultivating witch-crafting, and remixing fantastical worlds—it has shown that magic can redirect attention toward the more-than-human world, create conditions for perceptual reopenings, and provide designers with imaginative resources that escape the onto-epistemic constraints of Western modernity. These are promising first findings that indicate that the space of Arcane Designing holds considerable potential for more-than-human design and for the broader onto-epistemic reorientation that Escobar call for as well as for providing designers with new kinds of imaginative spaces that Dunne and Raby call for.

The thesis started with a mission of countering the ontological disconnection of Western Modernity. This disconnection is an active condition, continuously reproduced by the very practices, stories, and material arrangements that modern worlds are made of. What I learned about countering it is that reconnection does not require grand interventions. It can begin with picking up a shell, noticing a fairy, or believing, even briefly, in a world where forests have intentions. The pathways Down-to-Earth are already present in the places we live; they only need attention, care, and a willingness from humans to sense differently.

The deliberate blurring of fiction and reality that runs through Arcane Designing is a form of restorying. It is a way of loosening the grip of the dominant modern story of life, of scarcity, separation, and supremacy, by entering other stories, playfully, and even briefly, and allowing them to act on us. Restorying does not require replacing one fixed narrative with another. It requires creating the conditions where other stories can be felt, believed, and lived with, and where the boundary between real and fictional becomes less important than the question of what a story makes possible.

Engaging with magic, and tracing its entanglements with science, capitalism, and colonialism through history, also gave me a deepened understanding of how Western modernity was made. The invention of Science, was a political, colonial, and patriachal affair and it could have been made differently from the start. The accounts of the enclosures of land, bodies, perception, and imagination revealed that the way things are is not “natural development”, but human made processes, that has now made us. Arcane Designing helped reveal the shape of modernity by reading for other histories and pushing against its ontological edges.

Finally, I want to mention that Arcane Designing not only is a contribution to a field. It is, at least for me, also a way of being a designer. It is a commitment to working with attention, care, enchantment, and mess, and to refuse the modern demand that design be efficient, rational, and solutionist. It is a way of insisting that the design imagination deserves to be as wide and as wild as the worlds it is trying to serve, and it is a relational and pluriversal way of engaging with the world.

To any designer, researcher, or curious person reading this: the space of Arcane Designing is vast and barely explored. I invite you to enter it from wherever you are, with whatever magic is alive in your context, be it your local folklore, your childhood fantasies, or the lost mythology of your place—and see what it reveals. The dragons are real. They have always been real, and they are waiting to be noticed...



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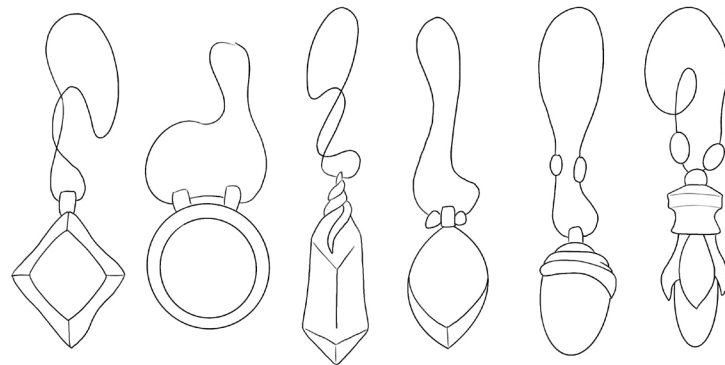
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Appendix A: Booklet for Withwalks

Handbook for Magical Amulets

A practical guide to witch encounters
with the more-than-human world



This handbook contains excerpts and paraphrased passages from "Heksens Håndbog" (The Witch's Handbook), written by the Danish witch Dannie Druehyld. The text has been translated from Danish to English and adapted by me, Maja Riemann.

A bit about witches and magic

To live as a witch is to live with the world, with the goddesses, the flowers, the birds, and all the others. To live and to feel alive among other living beings on an Earth that is herself alive. It is to live with/in the cycles of the world, to be present, and to notice. A witch sees the world as a living web of connections and patterns and understands that these are openings into worlds of possibilities. Every stone, tree, and insect has a pattern, a song, a language that can reach you. Witches are trained to notice these patterns, engage with them, and be part of them in meaningful ways.

To live as a witch is to choose to live for life, love, and hope. The witch creates the magic in and from the moment. There are no strict rules or fixed knowledge, magic is situated and context dependent. The way to know if your magic works is by paying close attention and to be in touch with the world, your body and feelings.

We might think of magic as one side of a yin/yang dualism, where science is the other. The two are inseparable, two sides of the same coin. Magic is the stuff that science struggles to explain, and therefore often denies: intuition, love, feelings, not-knowing, and connection. To live magically is to remember what our modern world has forgotten: that everything is alive, and that we, too, belong in this web.

Power objects for magical amulets

Power objects can be snail shells, fossilised sea urchins, stones, arrowheads, a snake’s slough, a lock of hair from your baby, or a milk teeth from your child. Each amulet contains a meaning, a power that can awaken love, give strength, protection, good memories, calm you down, or fulfil your wishes.

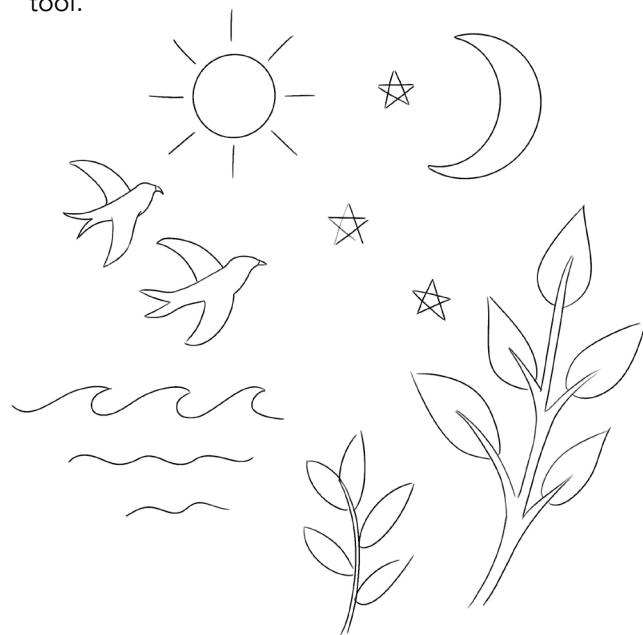
Amulets are made from power objects. The earth brims with them; you simply have to find them, and once you have first laid eyes on them, you will feel drawn to them. It is generally considered good practice to spit on amulets that you find before you take them home with you.

Some power objects have negative energy and must be burned, thrown over your left shoulder, or into running water. These can be old rings from broken, unhappy marriages, miserable love letters, or stuffed canaries that bring you back to memories of grief and childhood. Postcards and trinkets you cannot bear to look at are also power objects that can weaken you and, through excessive use, even be disease-inducing. If you tend to dwell on such things, free yourself from them by burning them and throwing the ashes into the sea, or bury them.



A witch's most important tool

What a witch needs is, first and foremost, nature: beautiful places, the sea, birds, sky, stars that shine, night and day, sun and moon, light and darkness. To catch the scents of trees and flowers, to see the colours change, to sit upon an ancient mound and watch the sunset paint the clouds, to see the birds gather. Everything that can be sensed, lived, and felt lets forces sink deep within you and paints your soul with images that you can always recall. Therefore, Mother Earth is the witch's most important tool.



Bowls, goblets, and glasses

The bowl, glass, or goblet symbolises yourself, what you hold within you, and it is the symbol of joy, sorrow, emotions, love, imagination, and intuition. It is a feminist symbol and you can fill your bowl with what you wish to nurture. The bowl or jar symbolises the womb – the eternally giving lap, the cyclical development. You can fill it with fragrant herbs, small things you keep, or a special magic you are working with.



Soil

Soil holds the strength of the earth beneath our feet. It can help you stay grounded, balanced, and steady in your life. Soil gathered from a place that is meaningful to you—a garden, a forest, or an ancient mound—carries the memory of that place and can connect you through space and time. You can also use soil to bury things you want to free yourself from, such as an amulet that brings you unwanted vibes, old letters, or other power objects with bad memories.

Stones

Stones are ancient, wise, and patient beings. They can lend their calm to those who listen. For restless hands, they make good companions. You might

design your amulet so that the stone can still be touched—that way, it can also serve as a joyful fidgeting toy.

Plants and leaves

Plants and leaves flow with the influences of earth, water, air, and sun. Their magical power is linked to their colour, scent, and the conditions in which they live. Herbs hold specific powers that can affect you in particular ways, but all leaves and plants can safely be used in amulets. They often exhibit the wonderful quality of changing their form once placed inside an amulet. This makes them especially suited to support you in times of transition — or when your life, or something within it, feels too still, they can bring a welcome movement. Autumn leaves symbolise feminine energy that holds both calmness and wildness.



Silver spoons, silver or gold coins

Used for the digging up of magical roots or soil. If you have inherited silver, you can scrape off a little and use it in amulets against poverty, misfortune, and all kinds of calamities.

Smell and scent

Smell attunes the soul and mind; scent is the souls of flowers and it brings memories of sun, moon, deep nights, and forests. The scent gives birth to inner images and inspires creation. Scent is accompanied by goddesses, angels, elves, and fairies, filling the room with ethereal beauty and with lightness. Scents can protect, keep away what is heavy or uneasy, and ease anxiety.

Candles

Candles can be lit when you meditate, work with magic, or form a witch circle. The colour of the candles depends on the season and your wishes but if you are in doubt about which colour to use, choose white. Beeswax candles, especially those bought in churches, bring calm, purity, and harmony. They are used in prayers and blessings. Beeswax candles cleanse a room and create spirituality and a sense of the sacred.



Water

Water symbolises the ocean, the lake, the spring, the soul, the psyche, the inner life, imagination, the images of the soul, dreams, and the feelings of love. Everything that blossoms within you and springs forth through creation, creativity, expression, and art. Water is the medium through which these forces flow.

Spring water is to be preferred, but water from forests lakes, the ocean, rain, clear puddles, streams, and rippling brooks can also be used. If you use water on an altar, use spring water—it will not spoil. If your tap water is drinkable and clean, be glad and use it. All water contains the sum of mist, rain, sea, and springs. Water gives us life as a gift every day. Receive the water with joy, use it with care and reverence.



Colours

You can harmonise ribbon colour and power object, so the effect of the amulet is strengthened.

White

- » Cleansing, protection, brings peace, clarity, calmness (in the mind), strengthens spirituality, immersion, concentration, healing, blessing, praying.
- » Earth, air, new moon, crown chakra.

Black

- » Clarity, grief, hiding, with black you give nothing away, use it with caution.
- » Earth, water, Saturn.

Red

- » Passion, sexuality, love, power, energy, vitality, extroversion, courage, anger, health, money, witches.
- » Fire, Moon, Mars, ruby, root chakra.

Orange

- » Eastern spirituality, morning/dawn, attraction, pride, energy, grounding, happiness, waking up, creation energy.
- » Fire, sun, ruby, sacral chakra.

Yellow

- » Intelligence, clear mind/thoughts, mental strength, creativity, art, kindness.
- » Air, Sun, Mercury, topaz, solar plexus chakra.

Green

- » Compassion, abundance, fertility, harmony, health, spring, elves.
- » Earth, water, full moon, Venus, emerald, heart chakra.

Blue

- » Truth, peace, allegiance, devotion, understanding, wisdom, inspiration, friendships, happiness, joy, spirituality, religion, protection, pain-relieving, Völva magic.
- » Water, Jupiter, Saturn, moon, lapis lazuli, throat chakra.

Purple

- » Spirituality, intuition, understanding, mystic, inner knowledge & wisdom, frees from fear, overview.
- » Amethyst, crown chakra.

Pink

- » The extra feminine, romanticism, human love.
- » Venus, pink diamonds.

Graveyards

Graveyards are ancient sacred sites where Mother Earth and the Tree of Life have been worshipped for thousands of years. From the church mounds the landscape stretches wide.

Everything at the sacred site holds power and holiness. Therefore, proceed with care. The dead are inviolable; do not incur their wrath – let them rest in peace.

Work in the graveyard takes place after sunset. Silent and still, you gather the herbs, stones, and soil you need, treating them with respect. Otherwise, it may go for you as it did for the boy who heard that luck would bind itself to churchyard soil kept in one's pocket. When he left the graveyard, his pocket was full of worms.

Earth and stones are especially powerful from graveyards at midnight on Midsummer's Eve and All Hallows' Eve, after sunset. Thursdays are powerful and strongest at the full moon. If Midsummer's Eve falls on a Thursday under a full moon, the time is perfect.

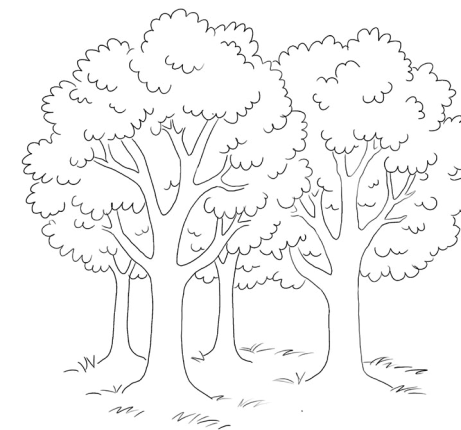
Grounding (in a circle)

We are together, feel your breath, breathe deeply. Feel the grass beneath your feet, the earth lives, you are alive, feel the stars, the clouds, the moon above you. You are a part of the cosmos. With your head in the stars and your feet upon the earth you live, you are, feel your hands, feel that we are together. We are together in love and peace. Send your wishes for love and peace into the circle, and take joy in both receiving and giving. Be upon the earth in the circle.

The sacred trees

Deep within the forest, among fern moss and old man's beard (gnome beard), stands the oak — healing and magical. By the lake, alder and willow dip their roots into the water. The trees have granted wishes and healing to humankind for thousands of years.

You can use the hazel rod for a witch-riding broom, the willow for wishes, the beech for health, and the birch's witch broom to protect your child. The tree Ash, Yggdrasil, draws its power from the earth's deep roots and unites us with the arch of the heavens. The tree is the forest's sacred and holy place, and it is inhabited by beings. Honour it and protect it, for it holds the roots of life.



Precautions with the sacred trees

The trees you use for magic must never be harmed. Be careful when you harvest, break a little bark or a branch. You must not cause the tree to wither or fell it. Should that happen, illness and misfortune will enter you. It is wise to make a small offering to these trees. This is usually done on Walpurgis Night or Midsummer's Eve, but it may be done at any time, especially after you have used the tree.

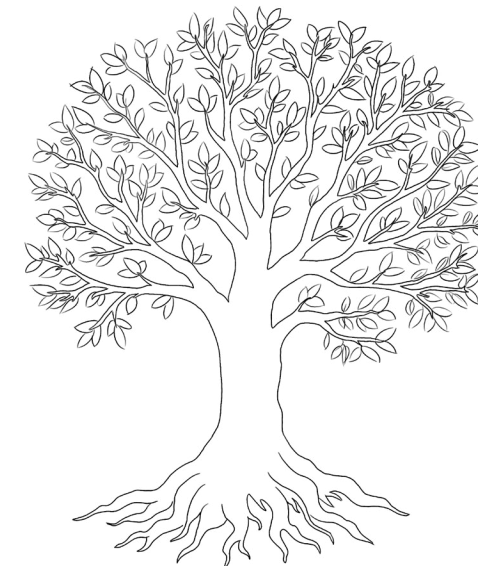
You must not sleep beneath an elder, for it will bring you unrest. The little folk may give you bad dreams, and it is said that in your deep sleep, you may draw sickness from the tree. Never relieve yourself beneath an elder — it is an insult and will make your skin raw. Using elder wood for furniture invites the little folk and causes unrest, especially if it is in the bedroom.

Do not sleep beneath an oak, for lightning strikes there. Do not dig for treasure beneath a hawthorn, for you will dig up ghosts. A rowan must always be self-sown to bear strength. Rowan and juniper do not get along. Do not keep them together in the house, for their quarrels bring fire. Do not mix them in the same amulets. Do not burn rowan or elder, for it brings discord into the home.

Getting to know the tree

The tree's energies rise through its trunk at noon and spread into its crown. Sit with your back against the tree's trunk. Imagine that you grow together with the tree—that you are one with it. Let your strength follow the tree up into its crown. See the world from the tree's top. And return.

This can be used if you lose your way in the forest, become afraid, weary, or despondent. Sit by the tree and feel yourself one with it. Be recharged.



Elves

The elves, the forest folk, the little people, move quietly in the forest's shadow, dancing in mist and on mossy bridges. The elves' time is eternity. When the mist parts and leads you into the world of the elves, time glides by imperceptibly. Here you will forget everything about the life you know.

Few find the world of the elves today. But you can meet or sense these ethereal forest beings on Walpurgis Night, when the forest awakens and is filled with life anew. From every little hollow, a forest elf awakens and creeps from the earth's warm darkness into the light of the sun. From shadowy clearings, from high moors, from the life of the earth, the elves step forth on the year's darkest turnings. The elves guard the forest's life, peacefulness, and magic. When the eternal rhythm of the world's breathing spreads across the forest on Walpurgis Night, you can fill your mind with a many-coloured web of images, from which you may draw powers for your life. During the long winter, the elves have stayed in the earth's deep caverns and wander from their winter to their summer dwelling. At midnight, you can seek the silent folk. The elves wander again to the earth's inner realms on All Hallows' Night, where at midnight they may be met again. In summer, especially at midsummer, the elves dance upon the meadows.

Meeting the elves

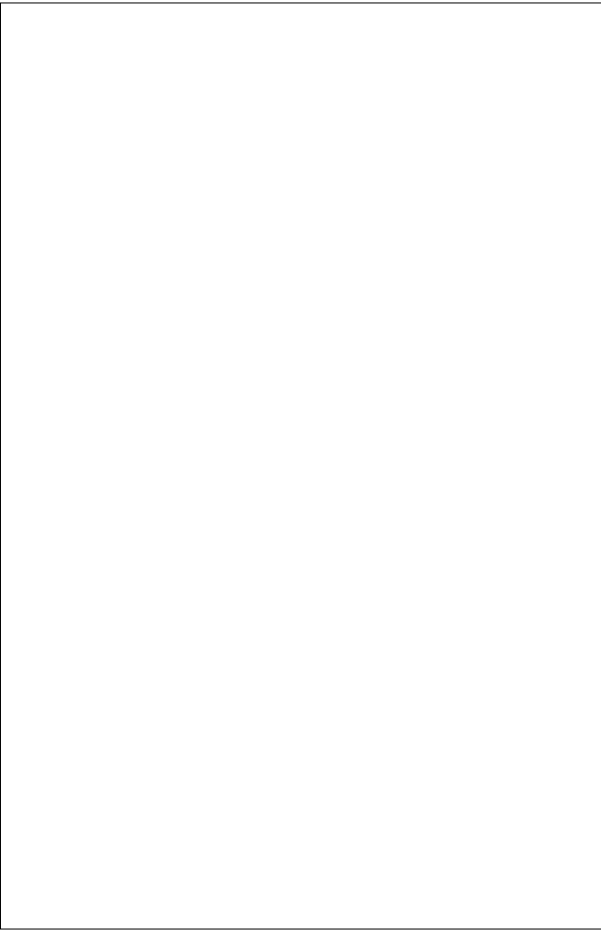
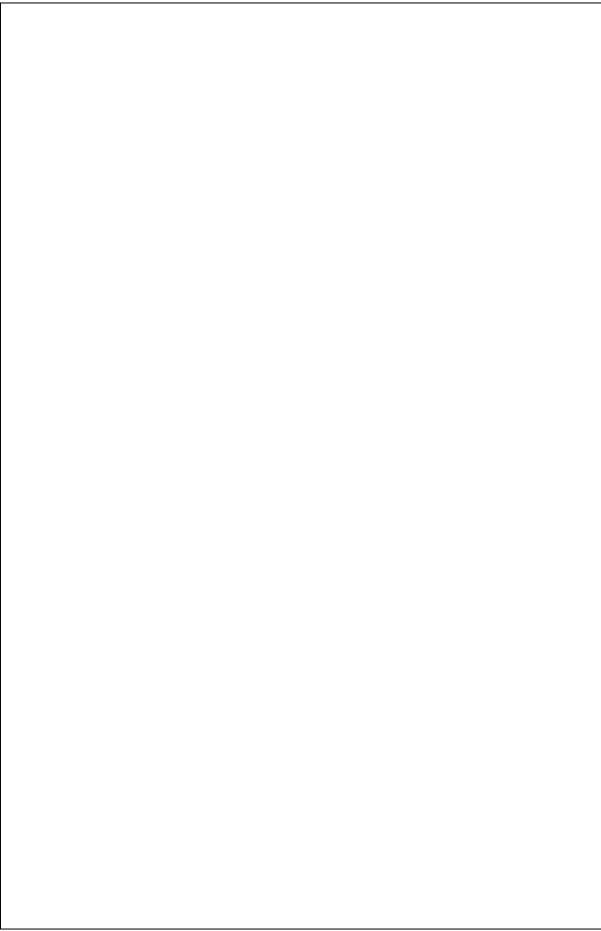
At midnight, go to a crossroads in the forest, to a great mound, or to sacred trees. Walk in silence, let the moon and stars shine for you. Dress warmly and bring a blanket and a pouch for the stones and magical objects you wish to gather that night. Feel everything around you on your walk through the night. Be new upon the earth and see what you encounter. Find a tree near a crossroads in the forest. There you sit and wait for the forest folk.

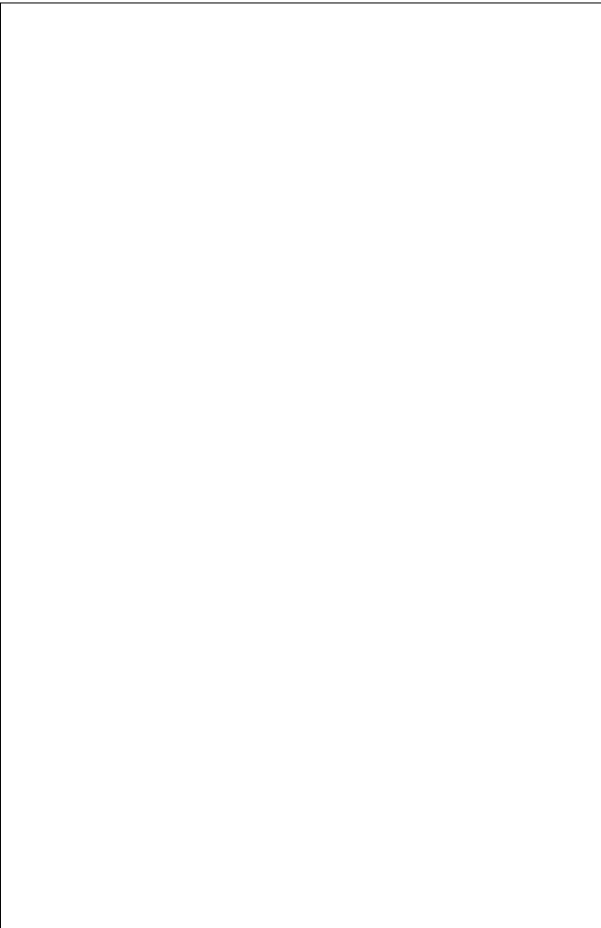
How you meet the elves is your dream, your mirror, which can take form in life's expressions as women, horses, bells and the sound of flutes, light, shadow, mist, and density. When the quiet magic spreads in a night unlike any other, the elves are on their way. You can ask the elves a question – and receive an answer. The elves' world will rise from its depths within you.

If you wish to see the invisible and the elves clearly, wash your eyes in eyebright and sleep upon a giant's mound. If you suffer from fear of the dark, eat cinquefoil and carry a yarrow in your hand or around your neck. If you are afraid of being drawn into the elves' realm or the darkness of the underworld, carry a hazel stick for protection.

Since there are no fixed rules with magic, you might discover things that work better for you and fit within your context. It can be anything, practices, meanings, or patterns that arise from your particular place and moment. This space is for your notes, observations, and learnings as you unfold your own witch magic.

Notes...





Appendix B: Arcane Design Cards

On the following pages, I have added the Arcane Design Cards as printable spreads.

In a world where ...

beings like spirits, fairies, trolls, and other hidden folk live within the ecosystem, each tied to a particular place or natural phenomena

Inspired by Nordic Mythology

In a world where ...

immense magical storms periodically sweep the land, forcing everyone to seek shelter until they pass, and infusing crystals with storm-born energy

Inspired by Stormlight Archive

In a world where ...

the great ash Yggdrasil (the tree of life) connects all the realms of Earth, creating places where different worlds, worldviews, and ways of being can meet and enter into conversations

Inspired by Nordic Mythology

In a world where ...

belief itself shapes reality so strongly that gods appear or vanish depending on how many people remember them

Inspired by Diseworld

In a world where ...

the Earth is alive, wounded, and capable of communicating through seismic murmurs that only some humans can interpret

Inspired by The Broken Earth trilogy

In a world where ...

objects carry the will, desire, or malice of their makers long after the makers are gone

Inspired by Lord of the Rings

In a world where ...

old forests shift paths to guard their secrets from intruders

Inspired by Lord of the Rings

In a world where ...

all people live in flying cities above empty deserts, and all magic comes from water

Inspired by A Dungeons and Dragons Campaign

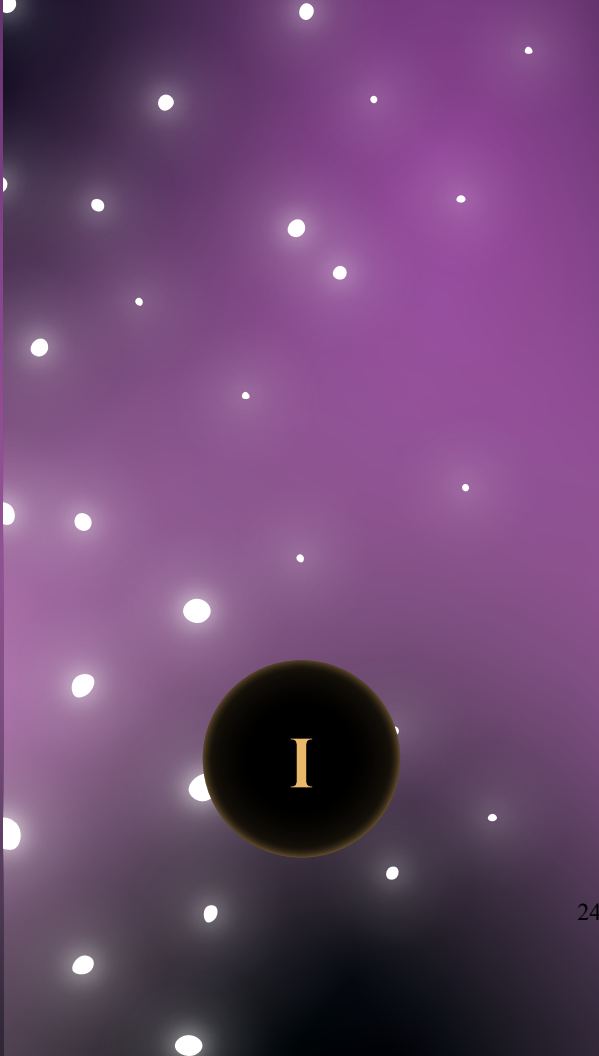
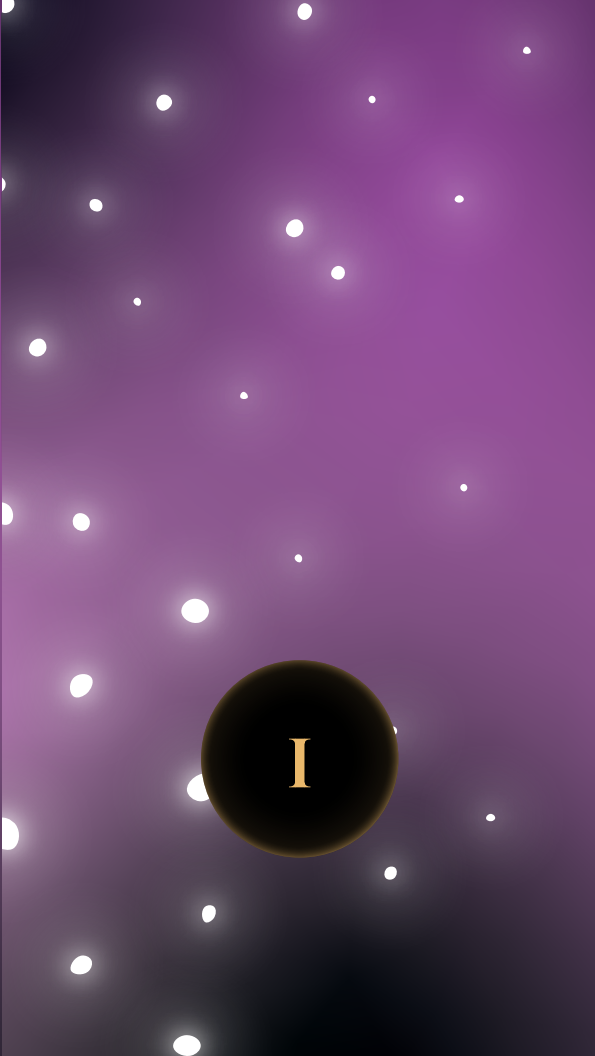
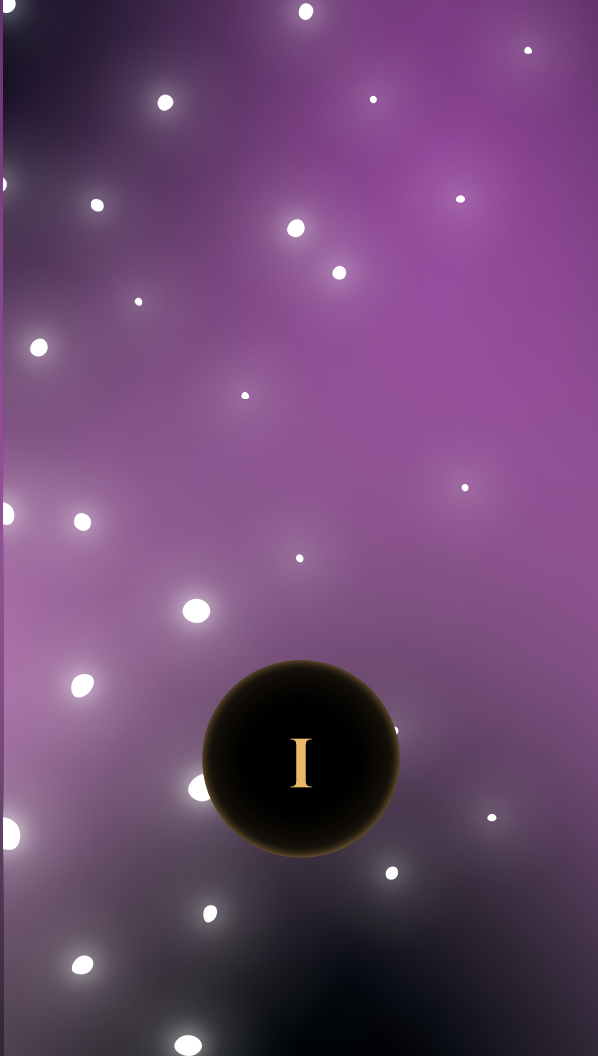
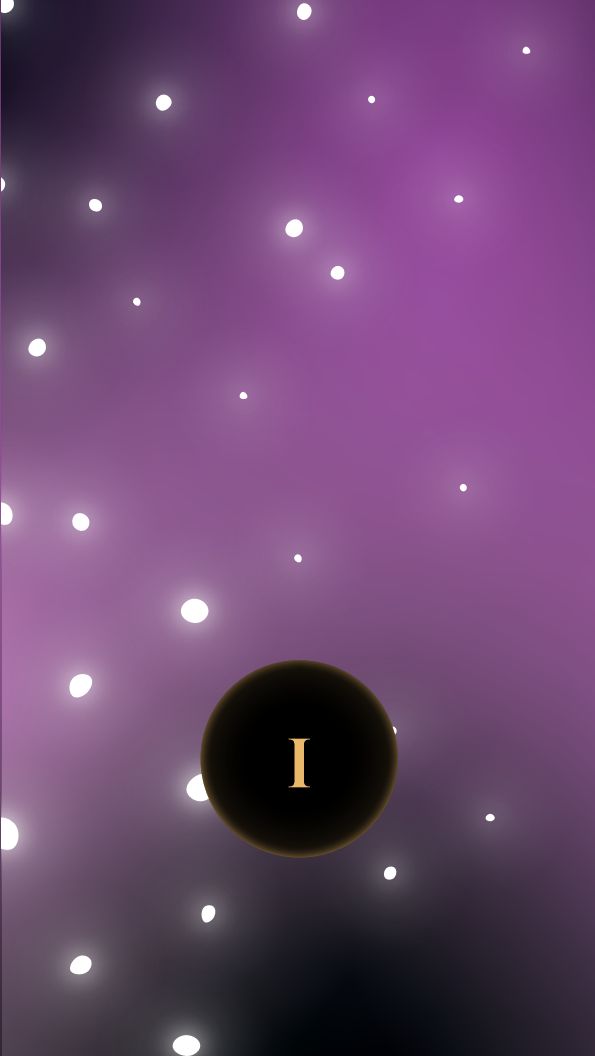
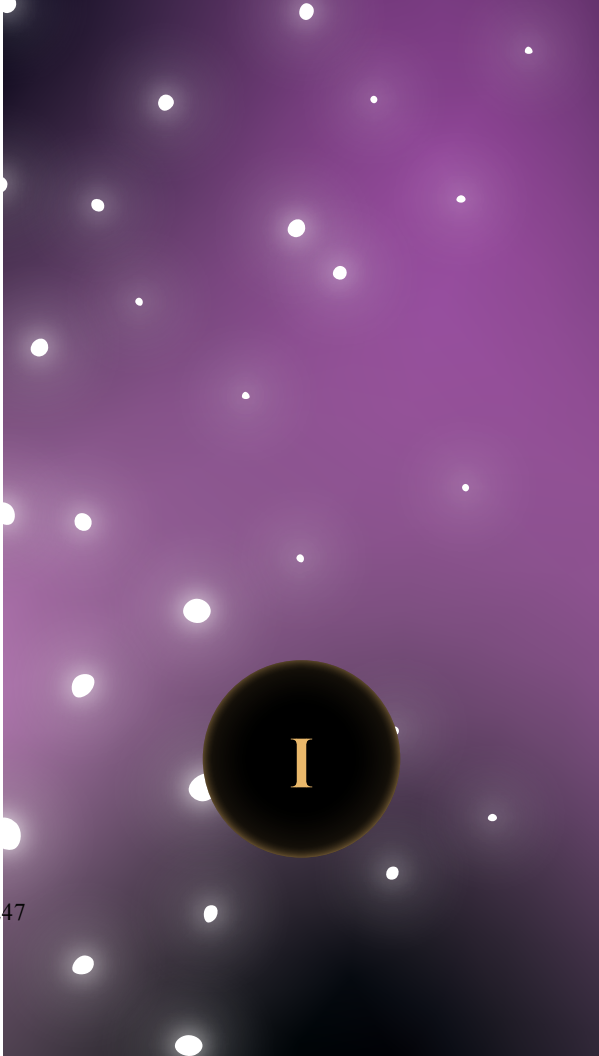
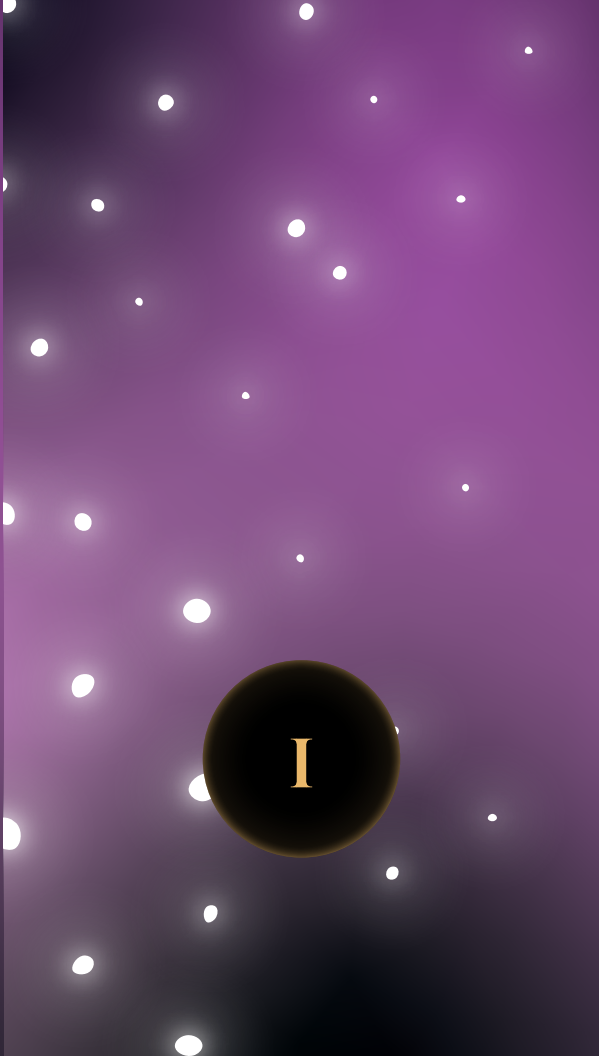
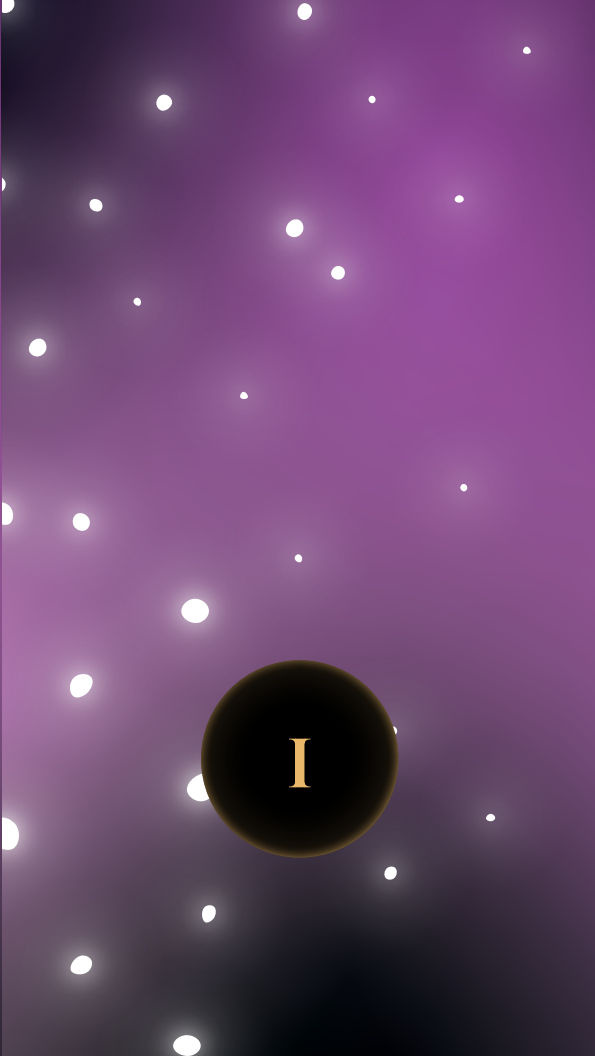
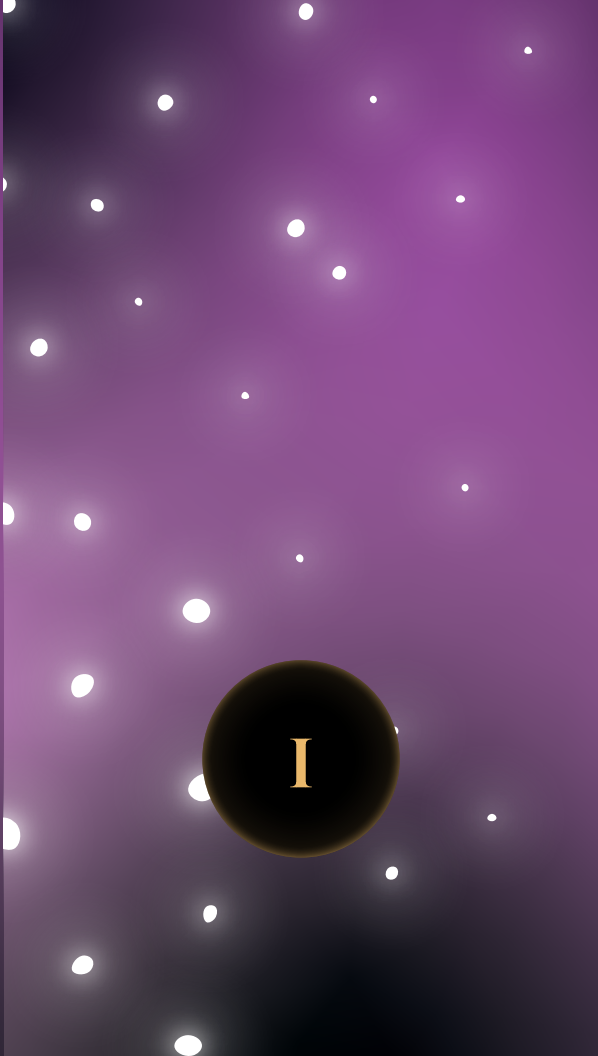
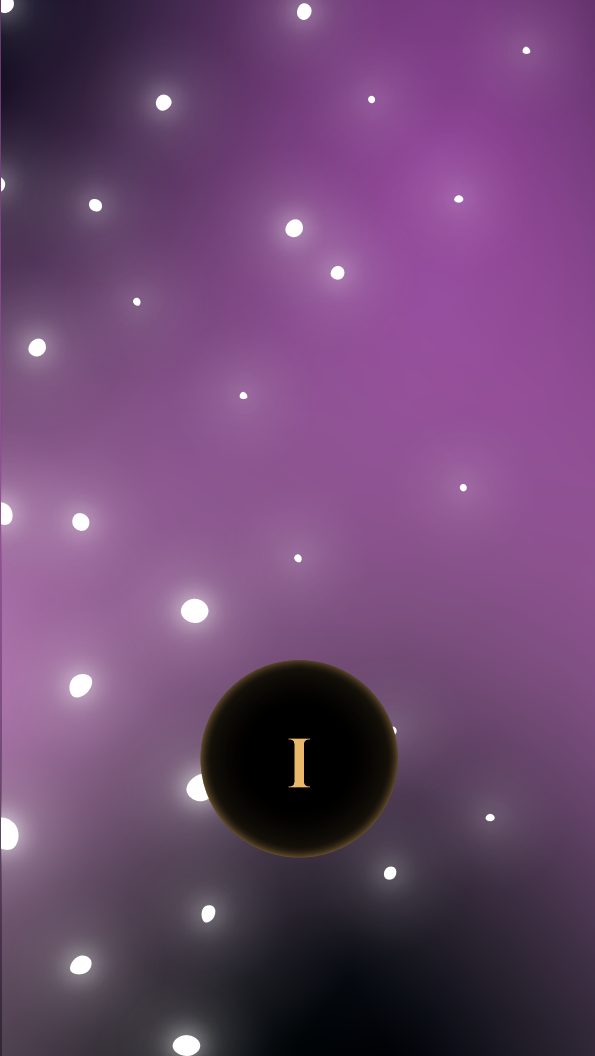
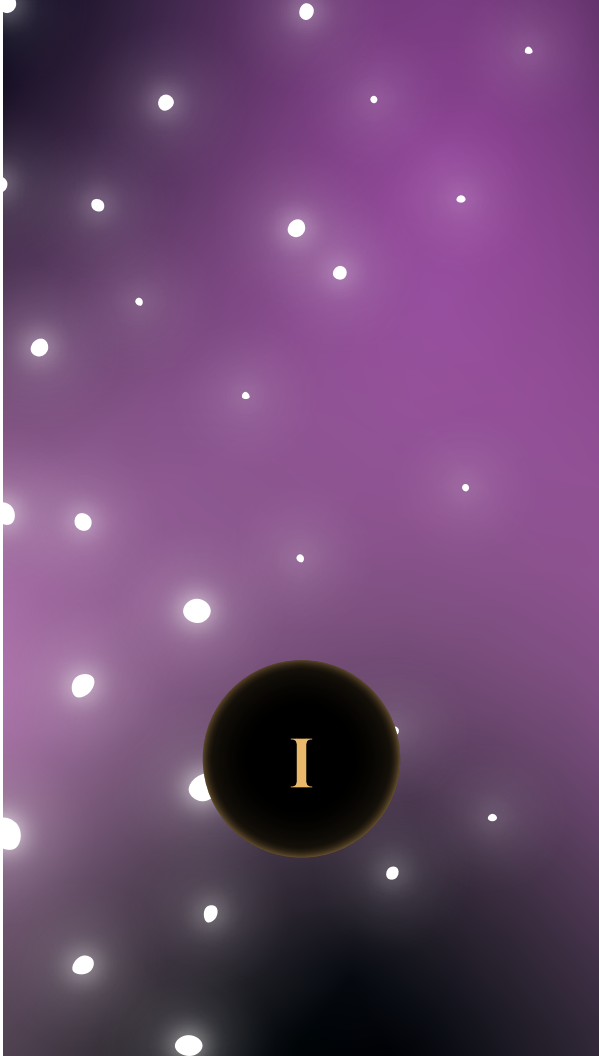
In a world where ...

monsters are born from human fear as much as from ancient curses

Inspired by The Witcher

In a world where ...

spirits inhabit household objects and might move them when no one is watching





In a world where ...

the air itself gives us our awareness, and awareness is seen as a gift from the more-than-human world, which is connected to the awareness of every other breathing, sensing being

Inspired by Various oral cultures

I

In a world where ...

the wind carries messages from distant places, but only those willing to listen carefully can understand them

Inspired by Various oral cultures

I

In a world where ...

animals speak in riddles that foretell minor events of the day

Inspired by Various oral cultures

I

In a world where ...

shadows detach from bodies during full moons and wander freely

Inspired by Various oral cultures

I

In a world where ...

all written texts slowly rewrite themselves to reflect the reader's emotional state

Inspired by Various oral cultures

I

In a world where ...

forgotten gods still roam the edges of civilisation, occasionally interfering with daily affairs

Inspired by American Gods

I

In a world where ...

old songs can awaken dormant powers in the landscape

Inspired by Various oral cultures

I

In a world where ...

plants glow when spoken to kindly

Inspired by Various oral cultures

I

In a world where ...

every person's soul walks beside them in the form of an animal-shaped companion that reveals their deepest nature

Inspired by His Dark Materials

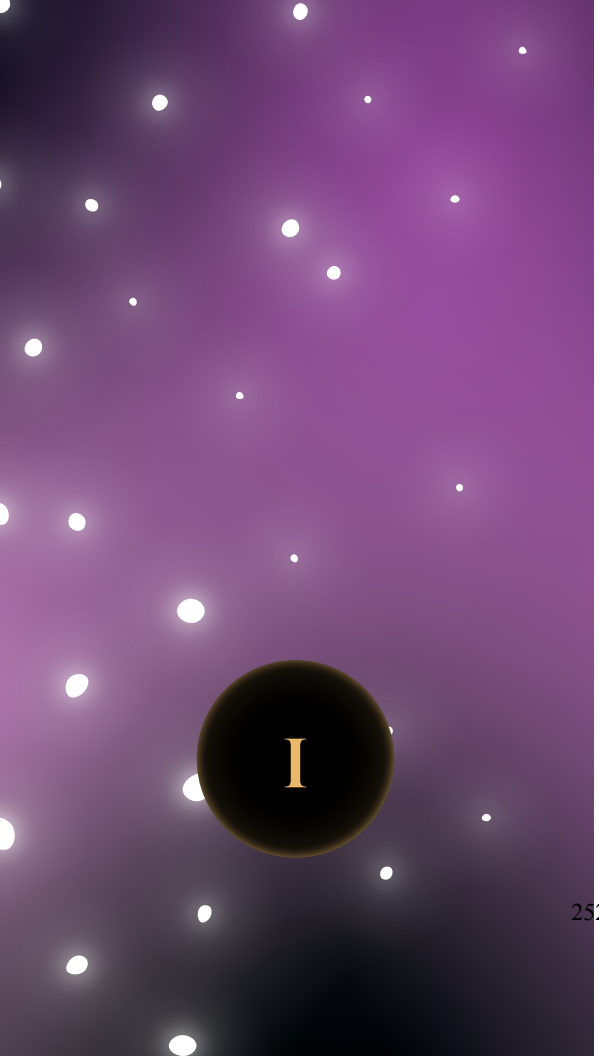
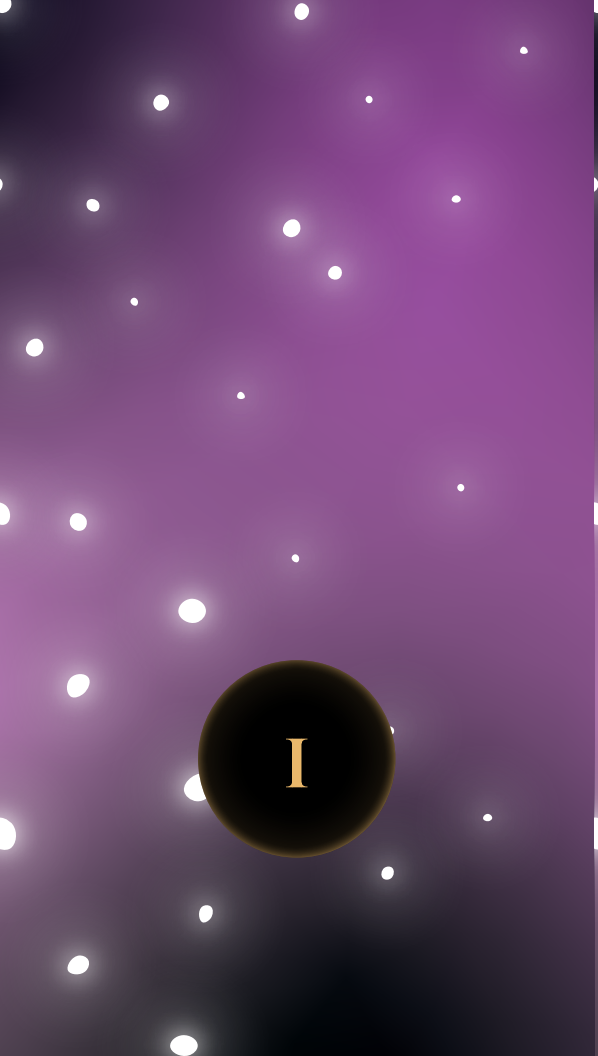
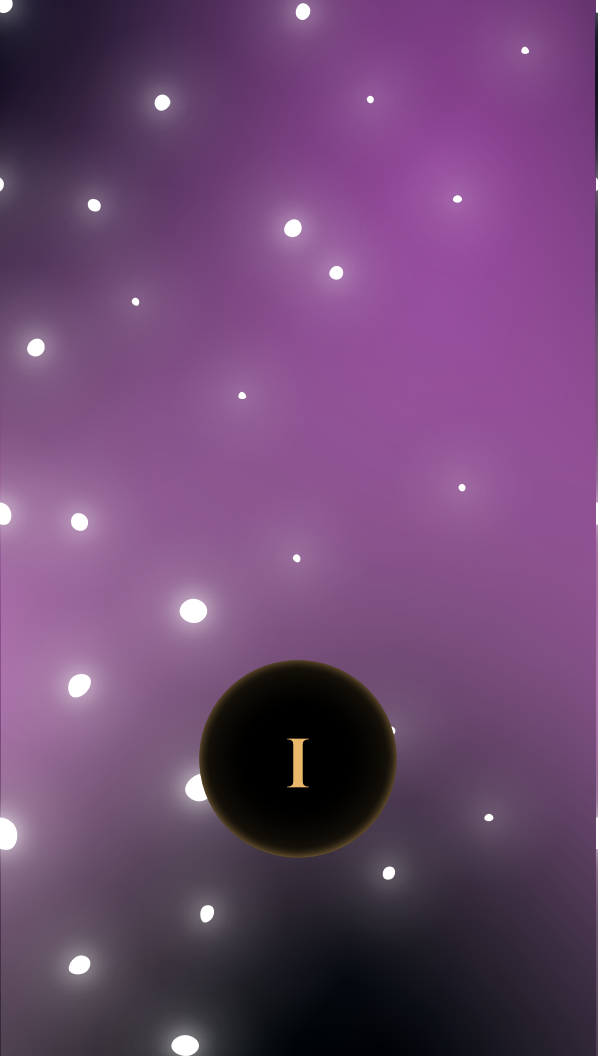
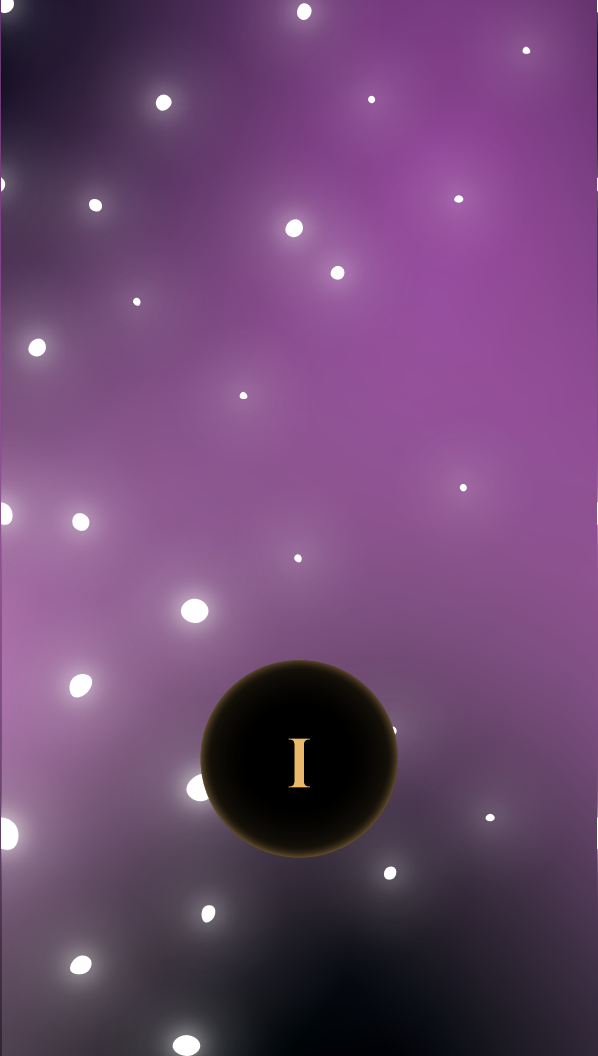
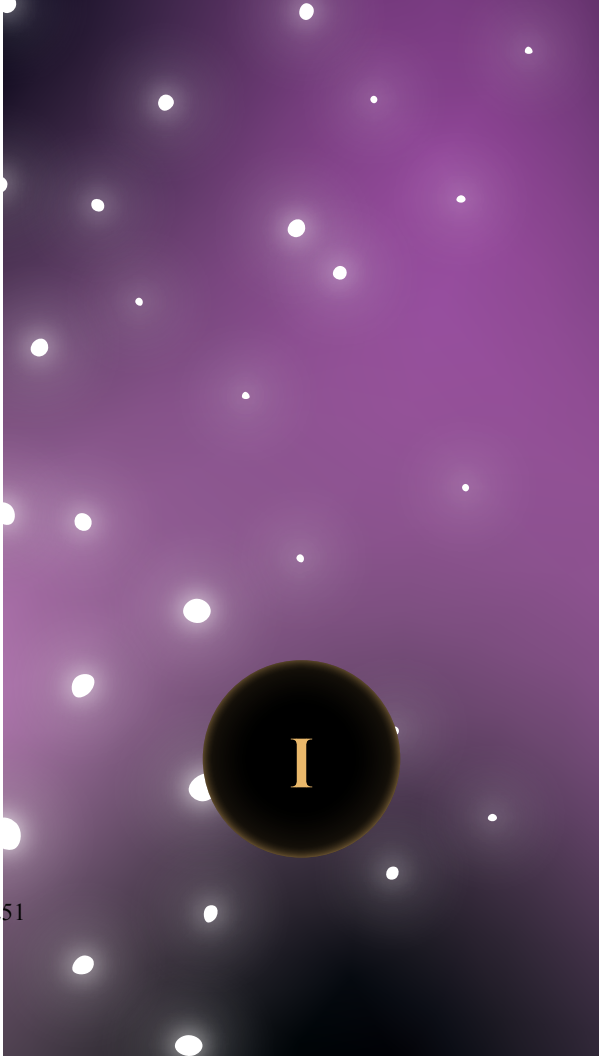
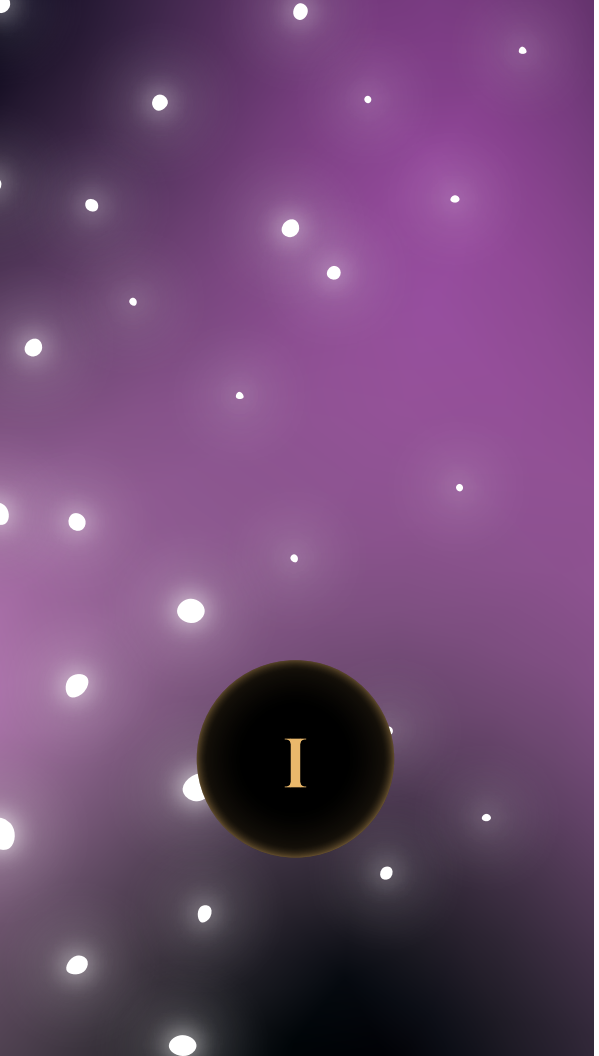
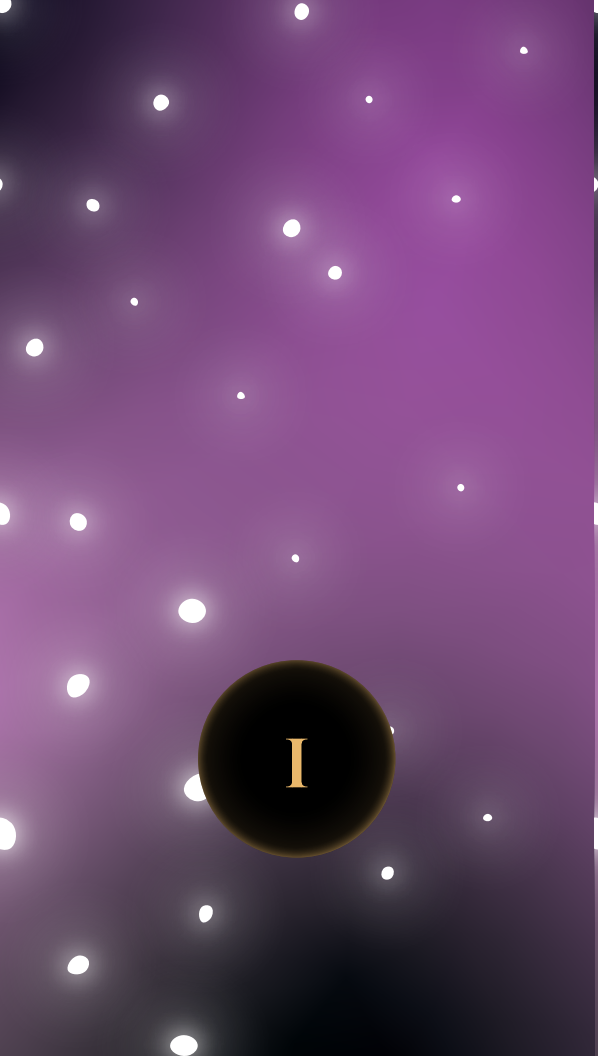
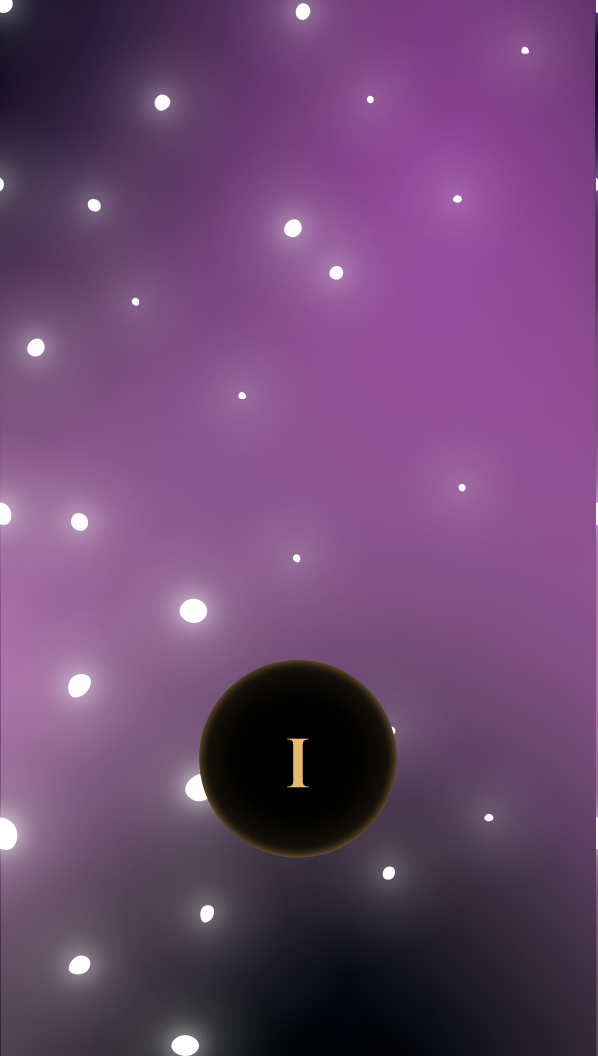
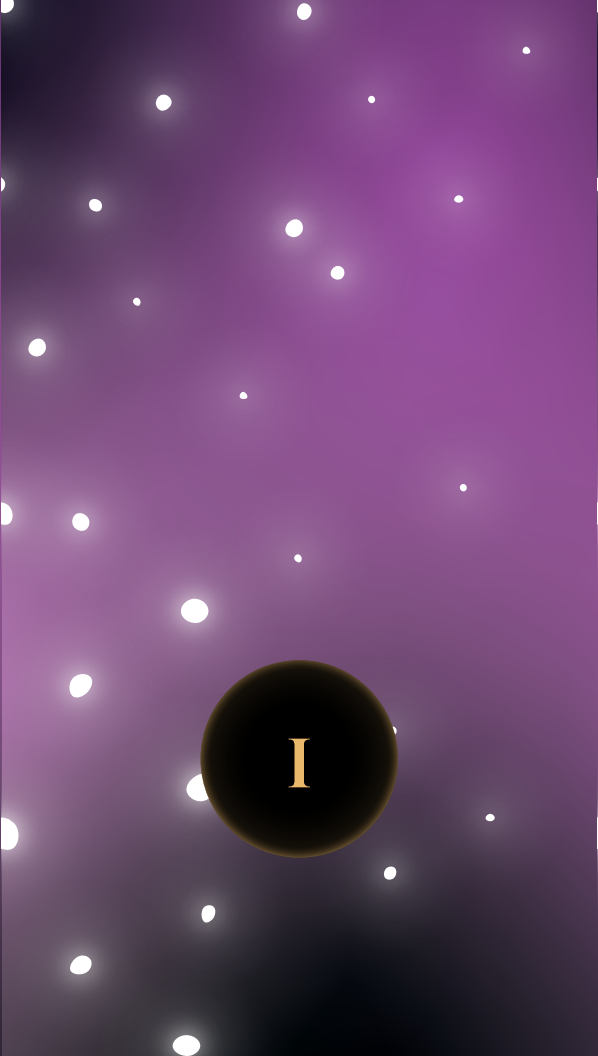
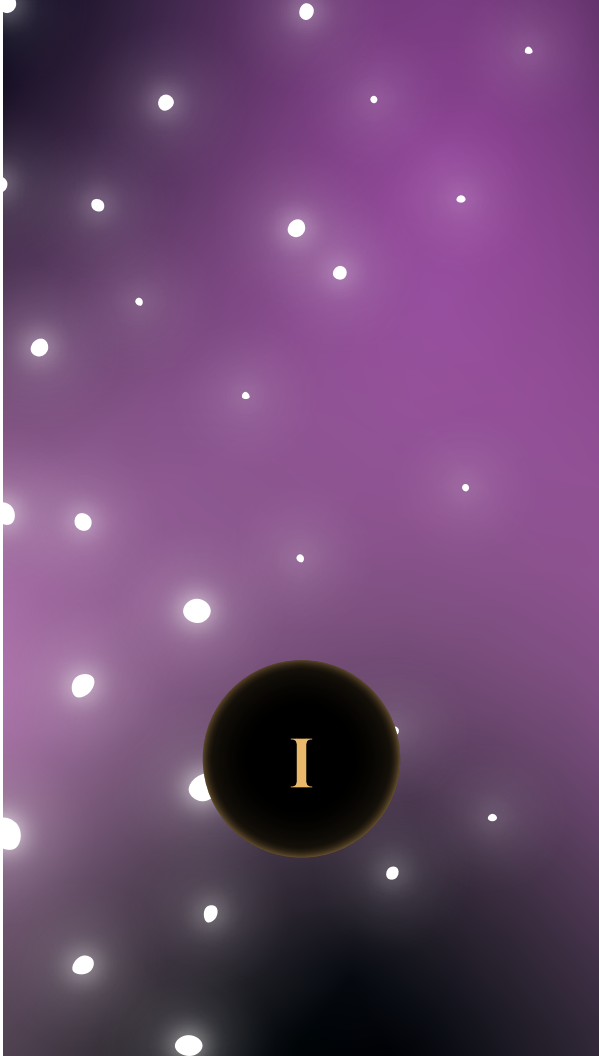
I

In a world where ...

the dead remain as luminous silhouettes visible at dusk

Inspired by Various oral cultures

I



In a world where ...

ordinary objects gain agency
through enchantment and
occasionally act on their
own whims

Inspired by Harry Potter

In a world where ...

mists are sentient and
sometimes nudge individuals
toward paths they did not
choose

Inspired by The Mistborn Trilogy

In a world where ...

time fractures around
certain powerful artefacts,
causing multiple possible
histories to coexist until
resolved

Inspired by The Elder Scrolls

In a world where ...

forests cleanse the earth by
transforming poisons into
strange new life forms

Inspired by Nausicaä of the Valley of the
Wind

In a world where ...

where snowflakes are
considered to be some of the
most sacred beings

In a world where ...

spirits shift form based on
how humans treat their
surroundings

Inspired by Avatar: The Last Airbender

In a world where ...

dragons, ancient spirits,
giants, and other great
powers roam openly, and
their conflicts shape the
rhythms of human everyday
life

Inspired by Nordic Mythology

In a world where ...

creatures like gorgons,
giants, and chimaeras
emerge from the wounded
places of the land

Inspired by Greek Mythology

In a world where ...

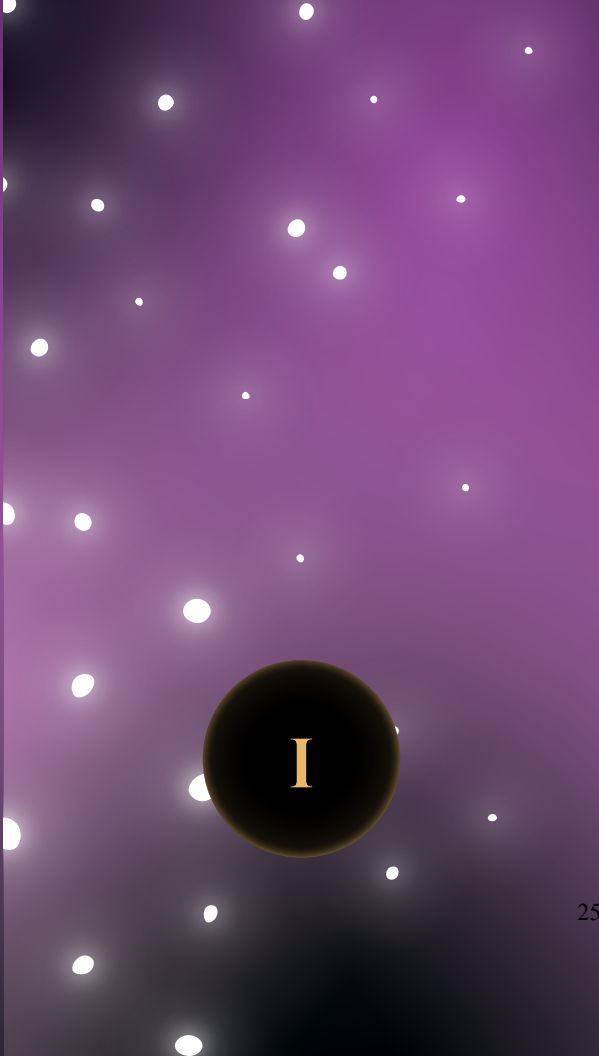
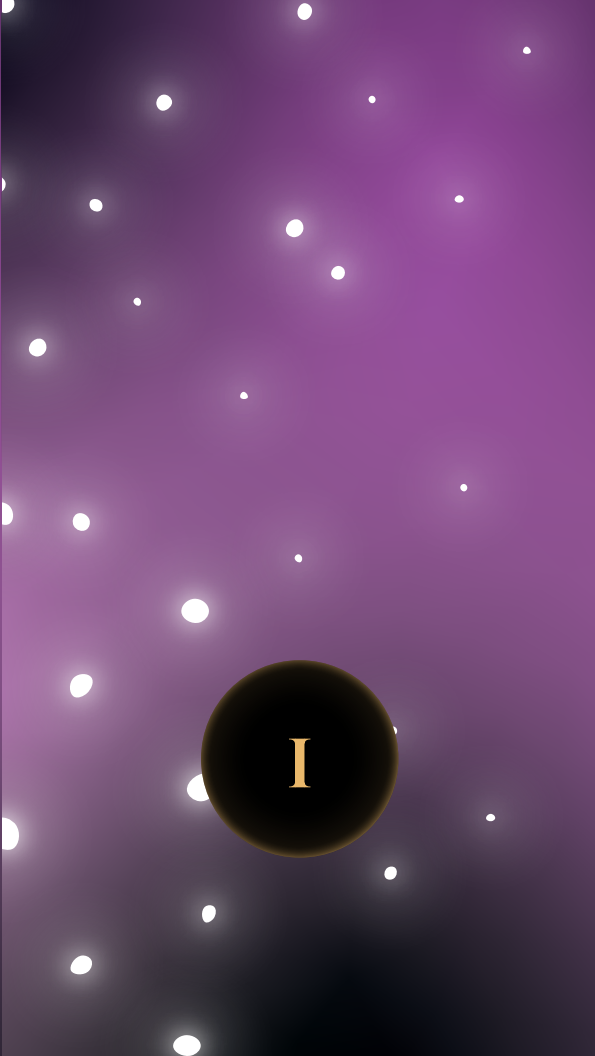
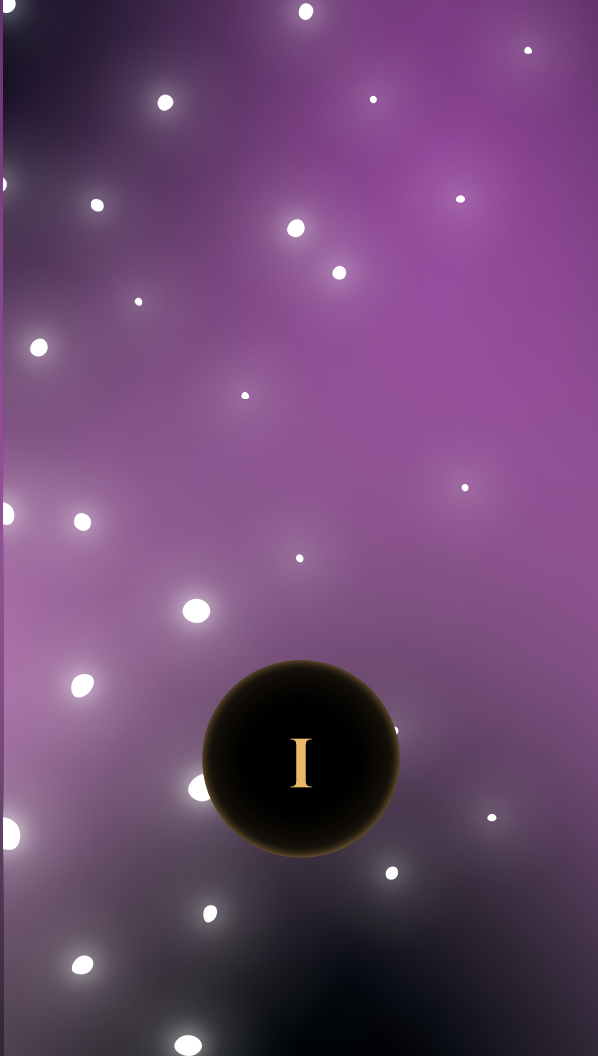
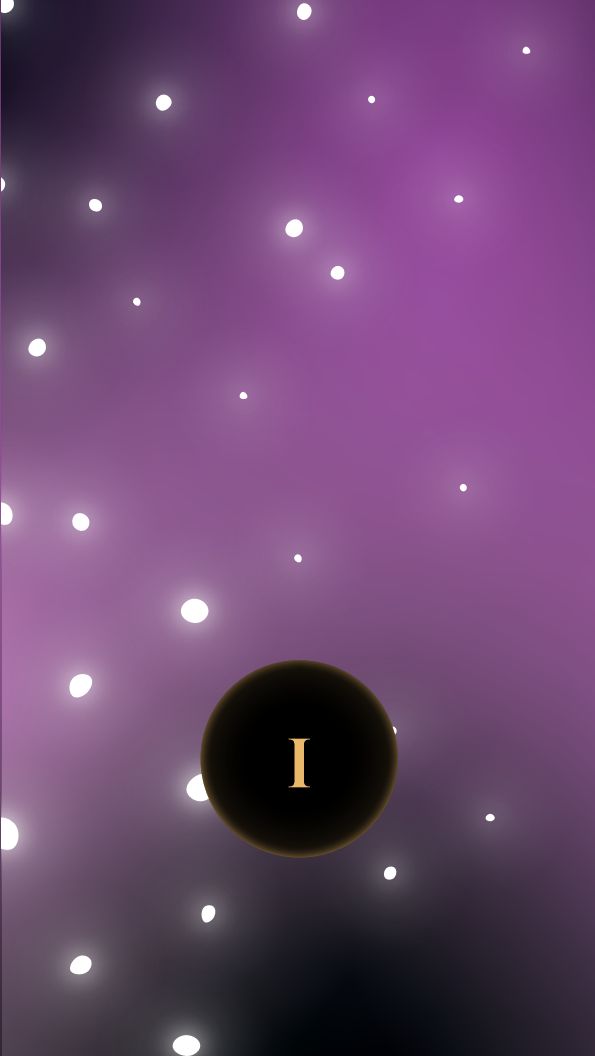
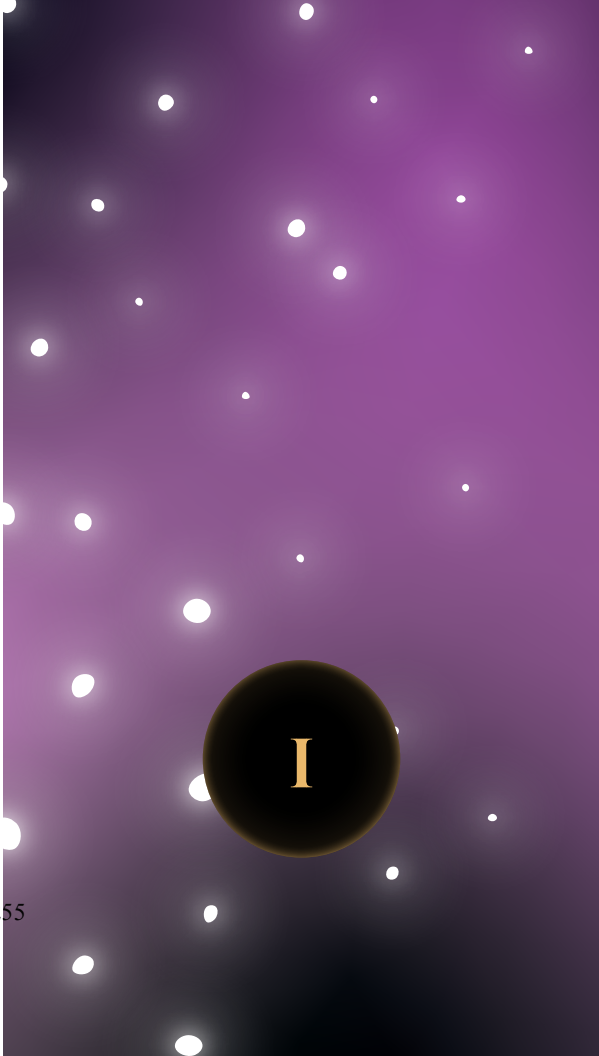
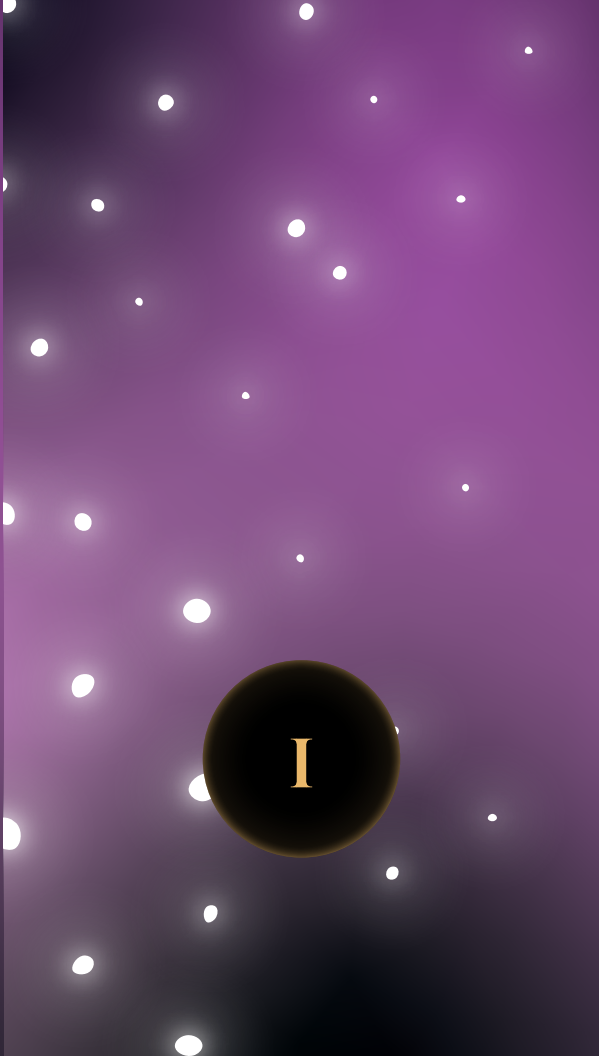
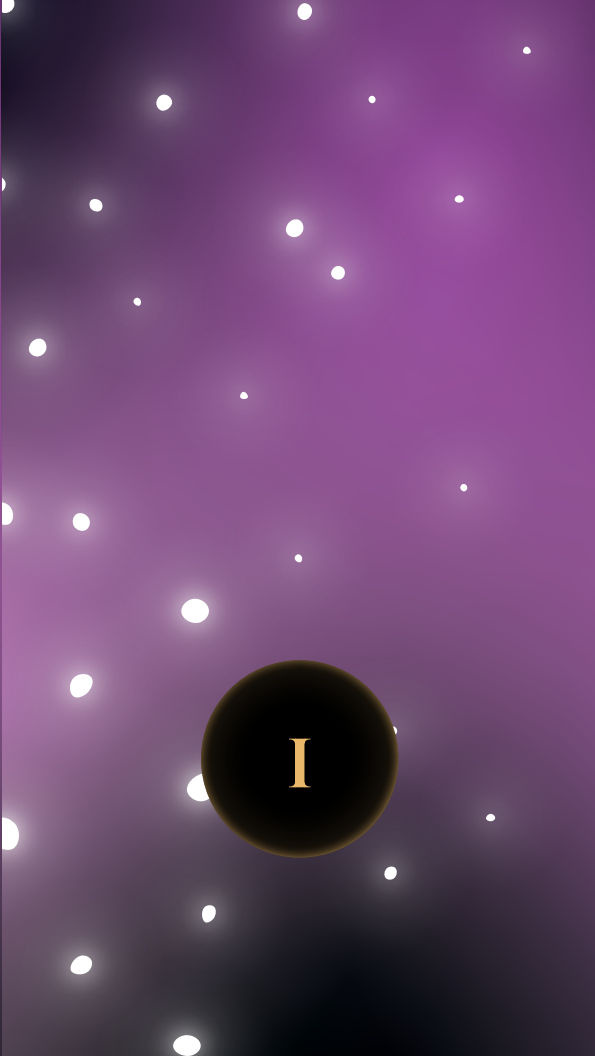
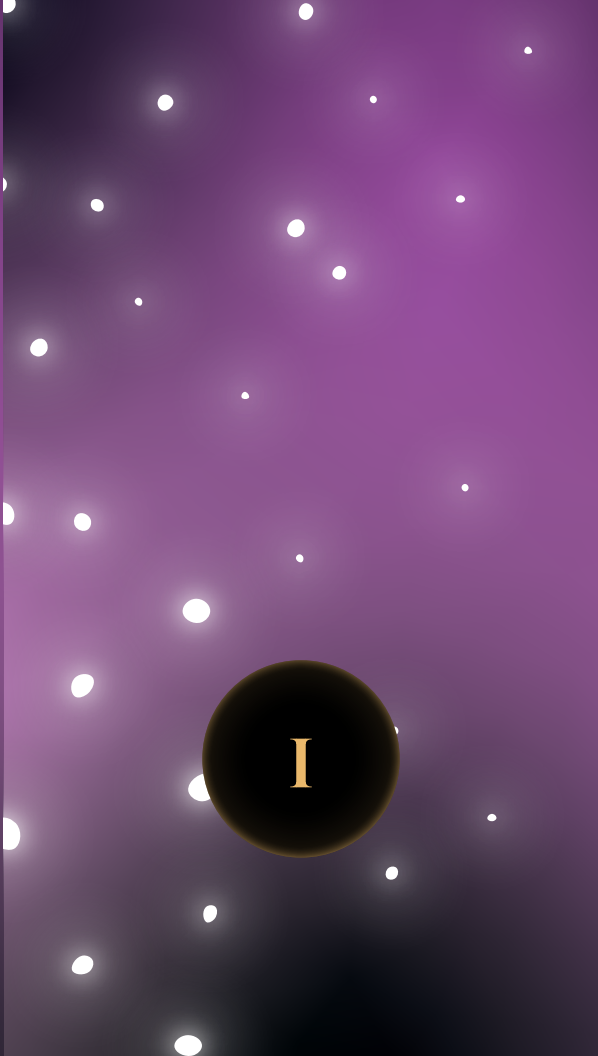
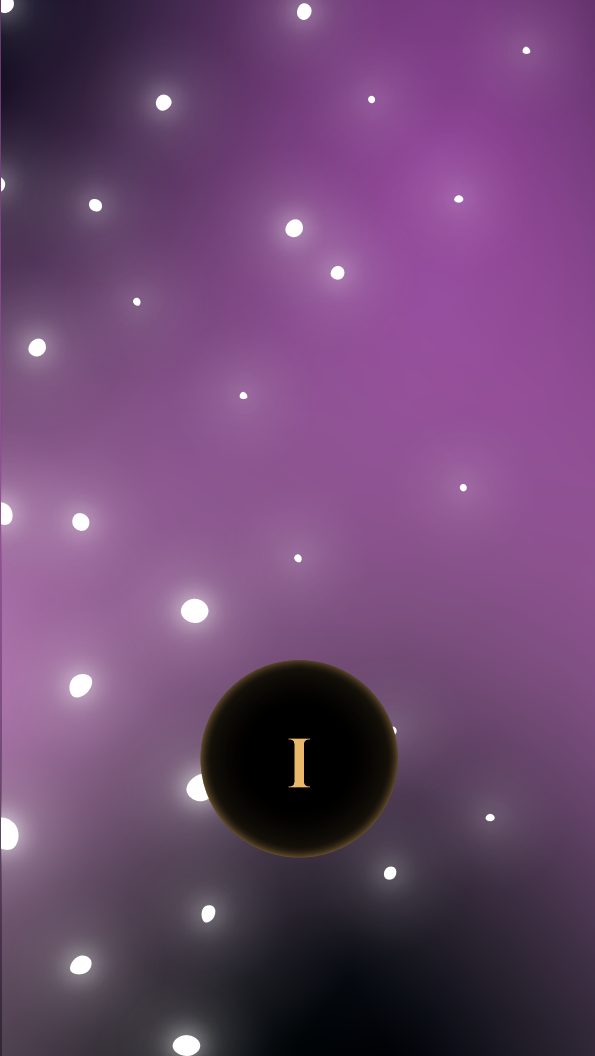
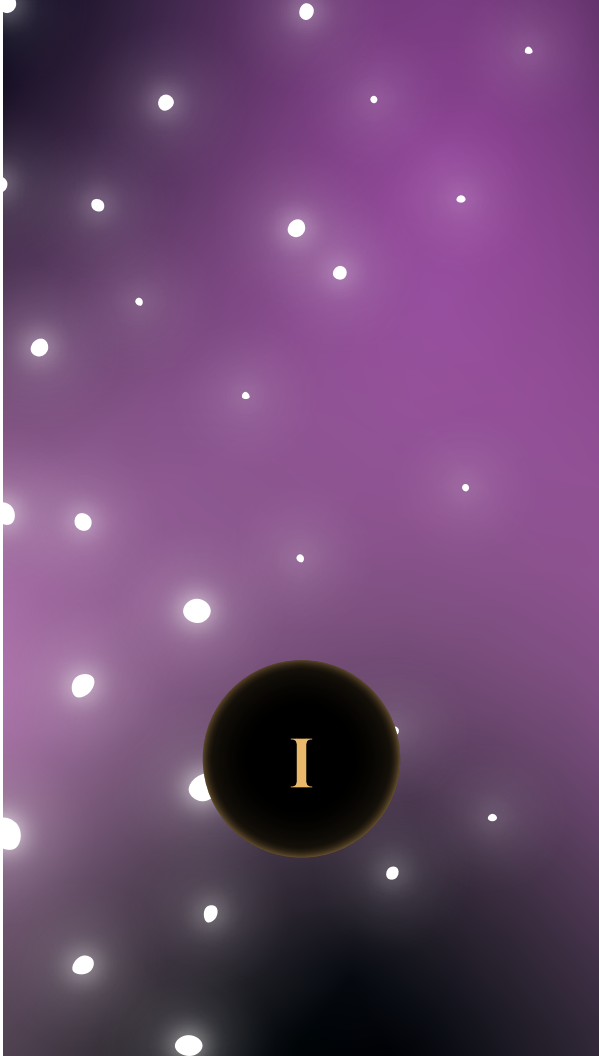
time is cyclical, and the great
wheel of the year depends on
our participation—renewing
itself only when we live in
harmony with its rhythms

Inspired by Celtic folklore

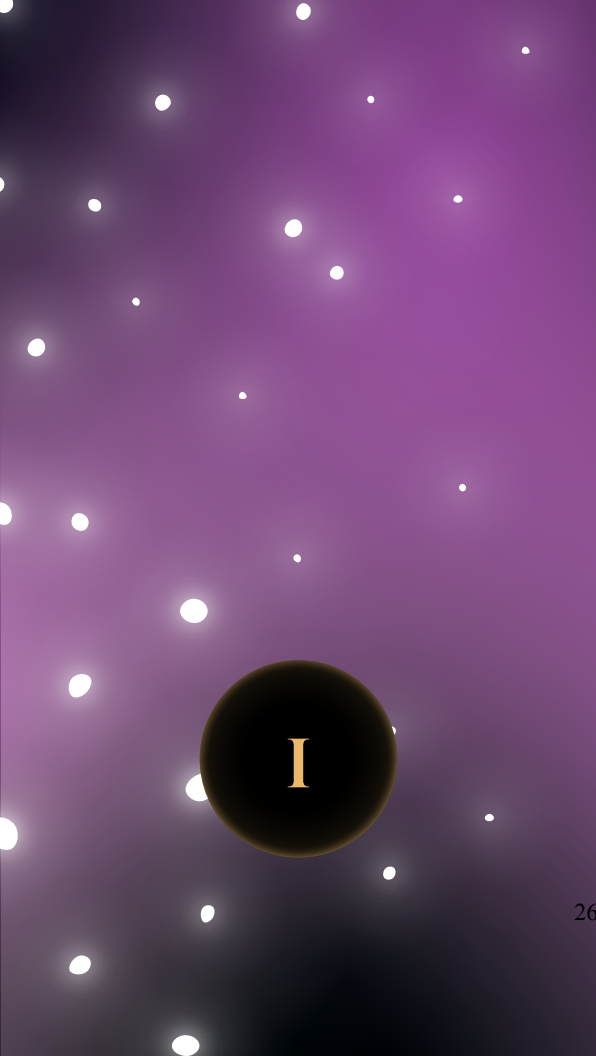
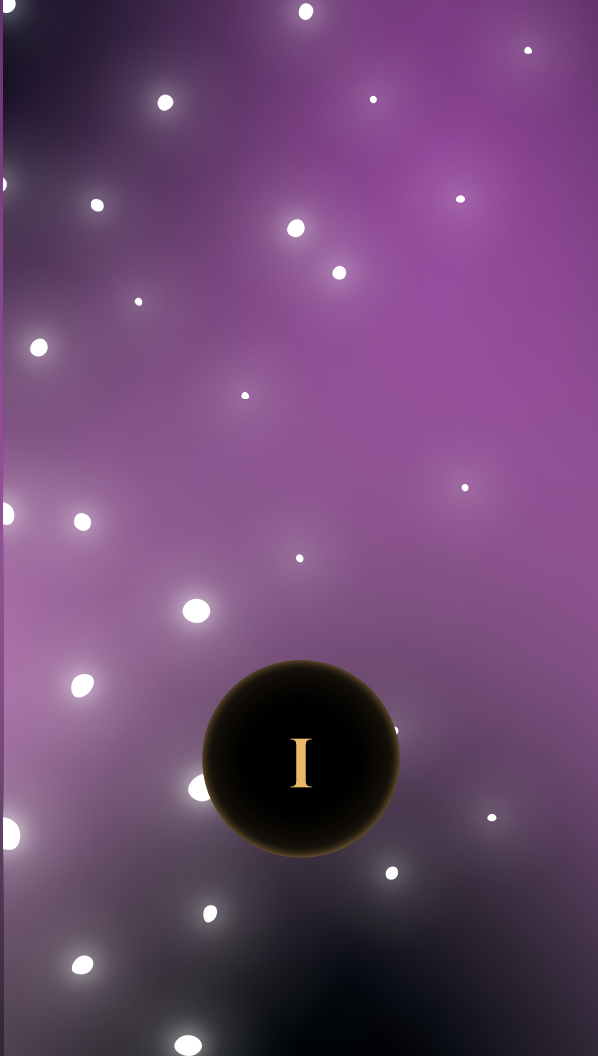
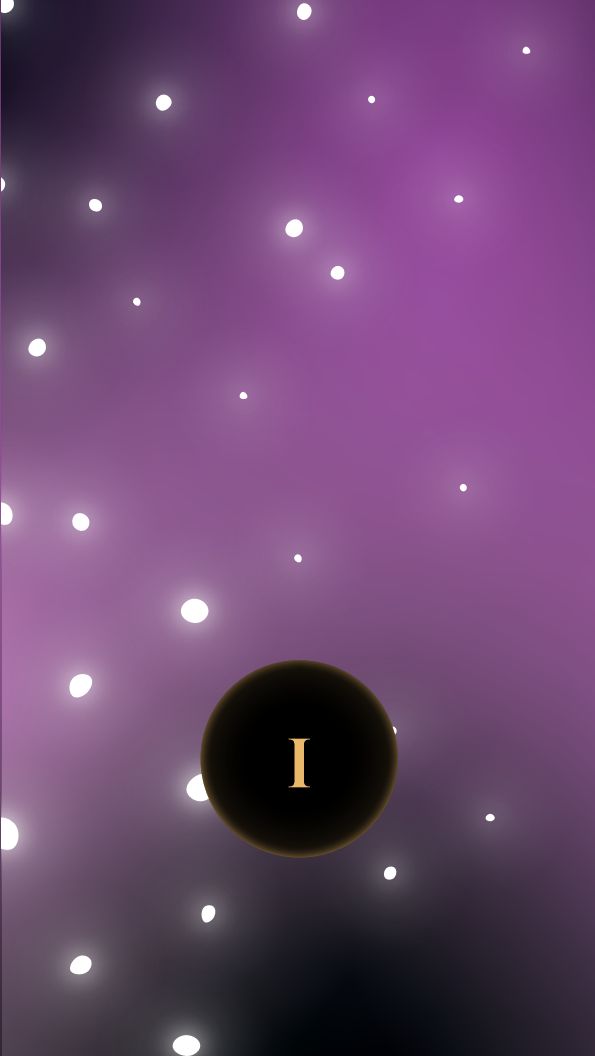
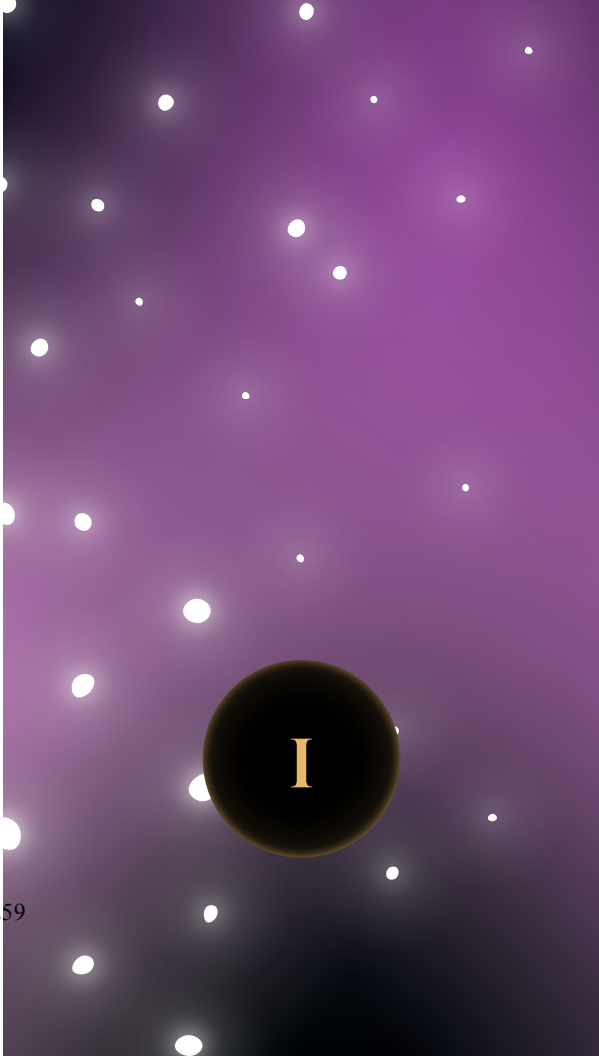
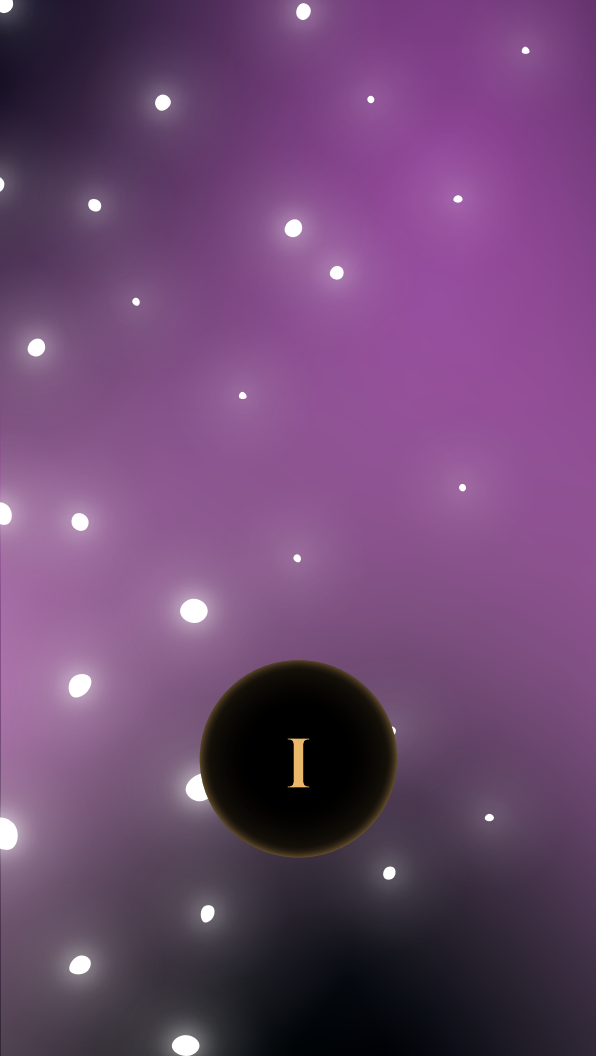
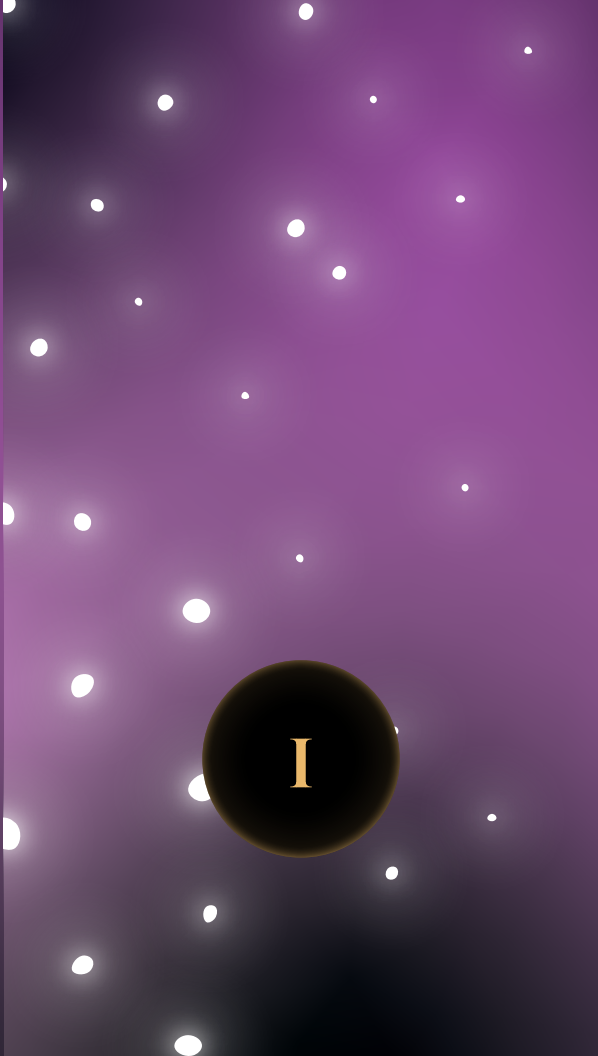
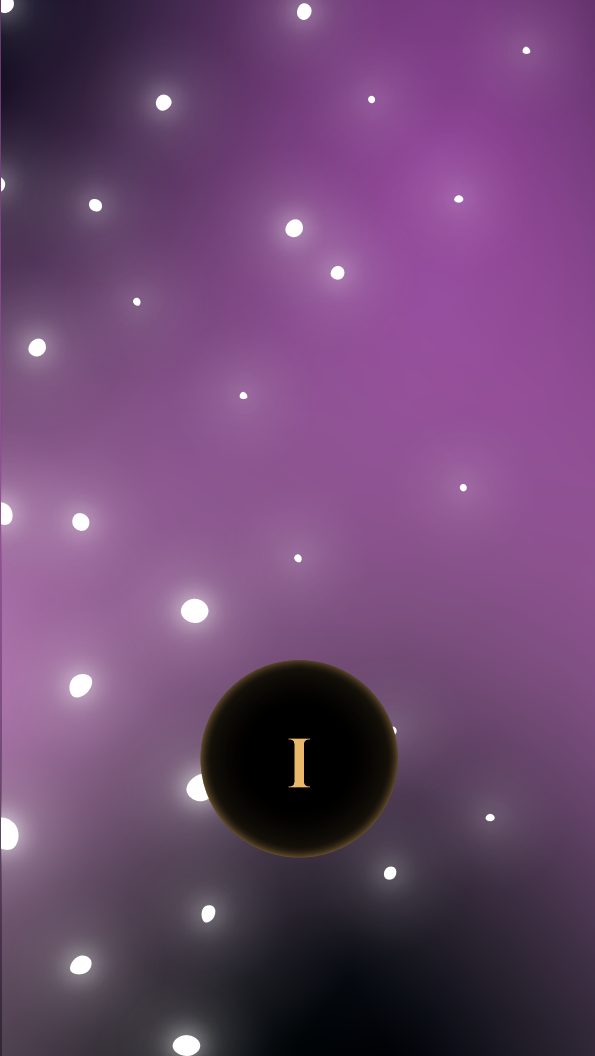
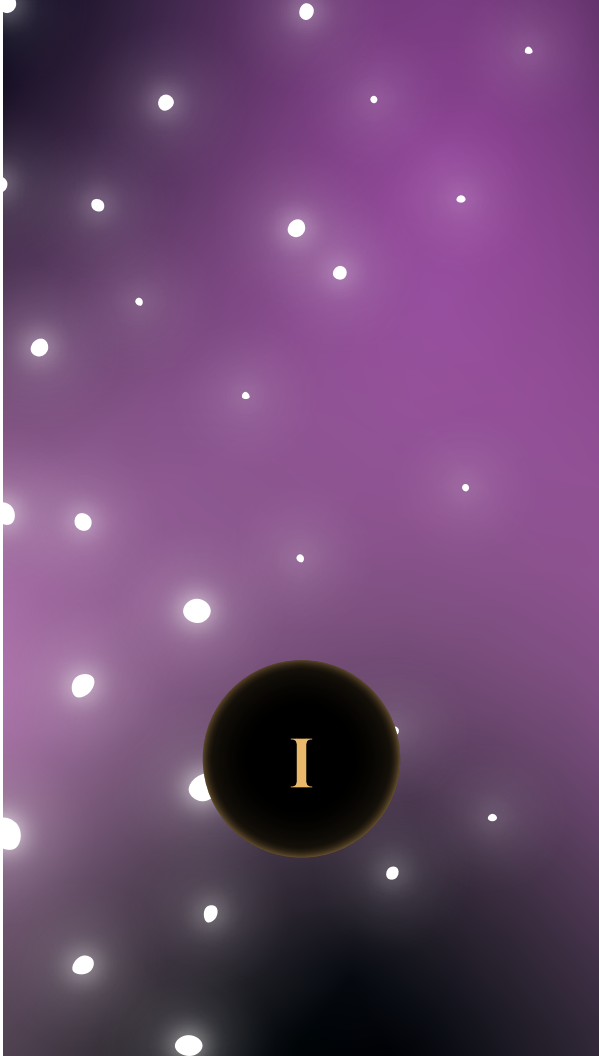
In a world where ...

a heavy fog covers the land,
erasing memories of the
past—sparing people from
sorrow yet denying them the
truths needed to mend what
was broken

Inspired by The Buried Giant























but we might remember ...

that people can bend one of the four elements (water, fire, air, earth) by becoming one with the element and embodying its way of moving.

Inspired by Avatar: The Last Airbender

III

but we might remember ...

that there is a practice of speaking the world into changing by speaking things' true names, which one can learn through a trusting relation with the thing.

Inspired by Earthsea

III

but we might remember ...

that “*to light a candle is to cast a shadow*”, and thus magic is bound to the careful work of maintaining equilibrium.

Inspired by Earthsea

III

but we might remember ...

that there is a practice of tending to relationships with nearby spirit-beings by offering something of value to us in exchange for protection, luck, or fertile prospects.

Inspired by Nordic Mythology

III

but we might remember ...

that humans and spirit-beings can bind themselves through vows, each receiving abilities and obligations from the other.

Inspired by Stormlight Archive

III

but we might remember ...

that we can seek guidance from the ancient weirwood trees that silently witness all things and hold the memories of the land.

Inspired by Game of Thrones

III

but we might remember ...

that the effect you have on your environment is reflected on your body.

Inspired by Howl's Moving Castle

III

but we might remember ...

to listen when animals speak wisdom we have overlooked.

Inspired by Narnia

III

but we might remember ...

to resist the pull of dominant narratives and act against the expected Story.

Inspired by Diseworld

III

but we might remember ...

that strengthening sympathetic connections with non-humans allows us to influence what we care about.

Inspired by The Kingkiller Chronicle

III



but we might remember ...

that dreaming is a way of staying whole: it lets the subconscious speak and keeps us in balance with our surroundings so that we do not become like those who are cut off from their inner depths and wander the world in a waking madness of rationality.

Inspired by The Word for World Is Forest

III

but we might remember ...

that boundaries are alive and we can affect them through how we imagine them.

Inspired by Howl's Moving Castle

III

but we might remember ...

that magic works by transferring energy; taking too much, or failing to attune, might drain one's own life instead.

Inspired by The Witcher

III

but we might remember ...

that our magical side requires silence to remain clear, attuned, and capable.

Inspired by Earthsea

III

but we might remember ...

that myths and rituals must be enacted regularly to sustain the land, for neglecting them lets the world grow brittle and forgetful.

Inspired by Various oral cultures

III

but we might remember ...

that any attempt to redirect the flow of energy requires deep honesty with oneself.

Inspired by Avatar: The Last Airbender

III

but we might remember ...

to learn from animals who mastered their arts long before humans—by watching, listening, copying.

Inspired by Avatar: The Last Airbender

III

but we might remember ...

that clarity appears when we sit still long enough for the spirit world to reveal itself.

Inspired by Avatar: The Last Airbender

III

but we might remember ...

from the earthbending philosophy that grounding ourselves helps the earth speak back, revealing what lies beneath.

Inspired by Avatar: The Last Airbender

III

but we might remember ...

that love freely given, without thought for oneself, can create protections no force of domination can break.

Inspired by Harry Potter

III



but we might remember ...

that respecting the ancient
giants of the underworld
is just as important as
respecting the gods and
goddesses.

Inspired by Nordic Mythology

III

but we might remember ...

that lighting a small flame
reveals hidden presences
willing to collaborate.

but we might remember ...

that small, overlooked
materials might contain
latent magical potential
waiting to be activated.

Inspired by The Mistborn Trilogy

III

but we might remember ...

that words carry creative
force and must be chosen
with care.

Inspired by The Elder Scrolls

III

but we might remember ...

to sense the unseen force
of energetic intra-action
connecting all beings, letting
it guide action through
alignment.

Inspired by Star Wars

III

but we might remember ...

that our bodies know how
to speak with the world,
and when we attune to this
sensory knowledge, noticing
birdsong, shadow, wind,
and the grain of the earth,
the spirits respond with
guidance.

Inspired by various oral cultures

III

but we might remember ...

the waterbending teachings
of patiently carving paths
through stone without
ever needing to strike,
and of adapting but never
surrendering.

Inspired by Avatar: The Last Airbender

III

but we might remember ...

that creativity loosens the
rational grip of society
and channels our magical
abilities.

III

but we might remember ...

that unresolved pasts
continue to ripple through
the present.

Inspired by The Elder Scrolls

III

but we might remember ...

that practising not-knowing
in the face of life's many
mysteries enables magic to
flow through us.

III







Appendix C:
Project Brief

DESIGN
FOR our
future

TU
Delft

IDE Master Graduation Project

Project team, procedural checks and Personal Project Brief

In this document the agreements made between student and supervisory team about the student’s IDE Master Graduation Project are set out. This document may also include involvement of an external client, however does not cover any legal matters student and client (might) agree upon. Next to that, this document facilitates the required procedural checks:

- Student defines the team, what the student is going to do/deliver and how that will come about
- Chair of the supervisory team signs, to formally approve the project’s setup / Project brief
- SSC E&SA (Shared Service Centre, Education & Student Affairs) report on the student’s registration and study progress
- IDE’s Board of Examiners confirms the proposed supervisory team on their eligibility, and whether the student is allowed to start the Graduation Project

STUDENT DATA & MASTER PROGRAMME

Complete all fields and indicate which master(s) you are in

Family name

Initials

Given name

Student number

Riemann

MR

Maja

6075339

IDE master(s)

IPD

Dfl

SPD

2nd non-IDE master

Individual programme
(date of approval)

Medisign

HPM

SUPERVISORY TEAM

Fill in he required information of supervisory team members. If applicable, company mentor is added as 2nd mentor

Chair

mentor

2nd mentor

client:

city:

optional
comments

Jeff S. Love

Iohanna Nicenboim

dept./section

dept./section

country:

SDE/KInD

SDE/MF

! Ensure a heterogeneous team. In case you wish to include team members from the same section, explain why.

! Chair should request the IDE Board of Examiners for approval when a non-IDE mentor is proposed. Include CV and motivation letter.

! 2nd mentor only applies when a client is involved.

APPROVAL OF CHAIR on PROJECT PROPOSAL / PROJECT BRIEF -> to be filled in by the Chair of the supervisory team

Sign for approval (Chair)

Name

Date

Signature

294

CHECK ON STUDY PROGRESS

To be filled in by SSC E&SA (Shared Service Centre, Education & Student Affairs), after approval of the project brief by the chair. The study progress will be checked for a 2nd time just before the green light meeting.

Master electives no. of EC accumulated in total

EC

Of which, taking conditional requirements into account, can be part of the exam programme

EC

	YES	all 1 st year master courses passed
	NO	missing 1 st year courses

Comments:

Sign for approval (SSC E&SA)

Name

Date

Signature

APPROVAL OF BOARD OF EXAMINERS IDE on SUPERVISORY TEAM -> to be checked and filled in by IDE’s Board of Examiners

Does the composition of the Supervisory Team comply with regulations?

YES		Supervisory Team approved
NO		Supervisory Team not approved

Comments:

Based on study progress, students is ...

	ALLOWED to start the graduation project
	NOT allowed to start the graduation project

Comments:

Sign for approval (BoEx)

295

Name

Date

Signature



Personal Project Brief – IDE Master Graduation Project

Name student

Maja Riemann

Student number

6075339

PROJECT TITLE, INTRODUCTION, PROBLEM DEFINITION and ASSIGNMENT

Complete all fields, keep information clear, specific and concise

Arcane Design: Getting Down to Earth through/with/for Magic

Project title

Please state the title of your graduation project (above). Keep the title compact and simple. Do not use abbreviations. The remainder of this document allows you to define and clarify your graduation project.

Introduction

Describe the context of your project here; What is the domain in which your project takes place? Who are the main stakeholders and what interests are at stake? Describe the opportunities (and limitations) in this domain to better serve the stakeholder interests. (max 250 words)

As we face several ecological and social challenges, researchers warn us that we (humans, especially living in Western-centric societies) have become disconnected from the earth, each other, and our bodies (Latour, 2018; Escobar, 2018) and that our current ontology holds us in “a feedback loop of increasing disconnection.” (Escobar, 2018, p. 99)

While design has been recognised as a field that can help us move into new directions, an obstacle is still that much of the design imagination continues to be policed by and operate within rationalist and modernist thought (Dunne & Raby, 2025; Escobar, 2018). In line with Escobar’s call for a significant reorientation of design, Dunne & Raby now argues for moving outside the boundaries of “the possible”, since “the future as a concept for facilitating imaginative thought, in design, has become too restrictive,” and “no longer provides enough critical distance from the present”(Dunne & Raby, 2025, p. 4). Instead, we need to start designing from places that “... put us into radically different relationships to what already exists or might exist? That start from different ontologies? That embrace ideas that might, in the here and now, seem absurd, odd, or unrealistic, maybe even impossible” (Dunne & Raby, 2025, p. 66).

This project addresses these challenges by developing examples of how magic and fantasy can help uncover relational design imaginaries, contributing to the development of a design practice that stems from a different onto-epistemic stance, one that is non-modern and non-anthropocentric. The project’s context is everyday interactions and practices. However, its outcomes contribute to the community of design researchers working on More-than-human Design by expanding this field to consider magic as a promising approach to designing with humans and non-humans.

Personal Project Brief – IDE Master Graduation Project

Problem Definition

What problem do you want to solve in the context described in the introduction, and within the available time frame of 100 working days? (= Master Graduation Project of 30 EC). What opportunities do you see to create added value for the described stakeholders? Substantiate your choice.
(max 200 words)

The problem is that we have become disconnected because of our way of being in the world, which leads to environmental destruction and existential dread. An extension of this problem is that we cannot “solve” this problem from within the current dominating Modern ontology that still shapes much of the design imagination and both perpetuates and reinforces these problematic ways of being, thinking, and knowing.

I see an opportunity to answer Escobar’s call to design from and towards different ontological stances by considering worlds of magic and fantasy as containing non-western-centric ontologies that exists within and is familiar to us westerners: By experimenting with design processes situated in these worlds of magic, fantasy, and arcaneness, combined with a series of designerly experiments of creating speculative artefacts, provotypes, and fabulations I aim to (re)discover relational and regenerative ways of being, thinking, and knowing. It is an opportunity to look at our current relationships with the world through new lenses while also generating new seeds for a different design imagination that can inform designs that help us reconnect and bring us (back) down to earth.

Assignment

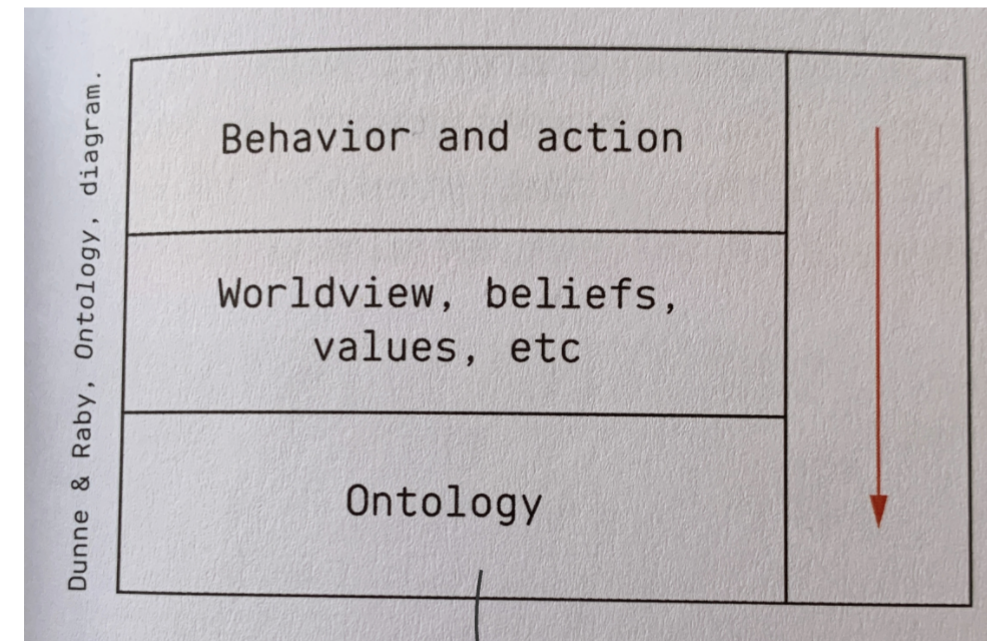
This is the most important part of the project brief because it will give a clear direction of what you are heading for. Formulate an assignment to yourself regarding what you expect to deliver as result at the end of your project. (1 sentence)
As you graduate as an industrial design engineer, your assignment will start with a verb (Design/Investigate/Validate/Create), and you may use the green text format:

Design a series of provotypes, in the form of fabulations and speculative artefacts, to be shared and/or co-created with young adults in Western countries through workshops, to explore if and how magic can facilitate designing from outside Western anthropocentric ontologies and contribute to designing for relational ways of being, in the context of everyday interactions and practices.

Then explain your project approach to carrying out your graduation project and what research and design methods you plan to use to generate your design solution (max 150 words)

I will employ a research-through-design approach, carrying out iterative cycles of making provotypes, speculative/critical fabulations, and speculative artefacts. These will be developed through design processes situated in worlds of magic, fantasy, and arcaneness (mythology, folklore, and fictional fantasy), and informed by theory, tools, methods, and/or practices from more-than-human design, speculative design, anthropology, and philosophy.

An initial literature review will identify criteria for recognising when designing from outside Western anthropocentric ontologies happens. These criteria will further guide the design of the artefacts and serve as a lens for evaluating them.



“Home to fundamental shared assumptions about what can and cannot exist, and ways of being in the world.” (Dunne & Raby, 2025, p. 5)

image / figure 1 Ontology diagram by Dunne & Raby, 2025

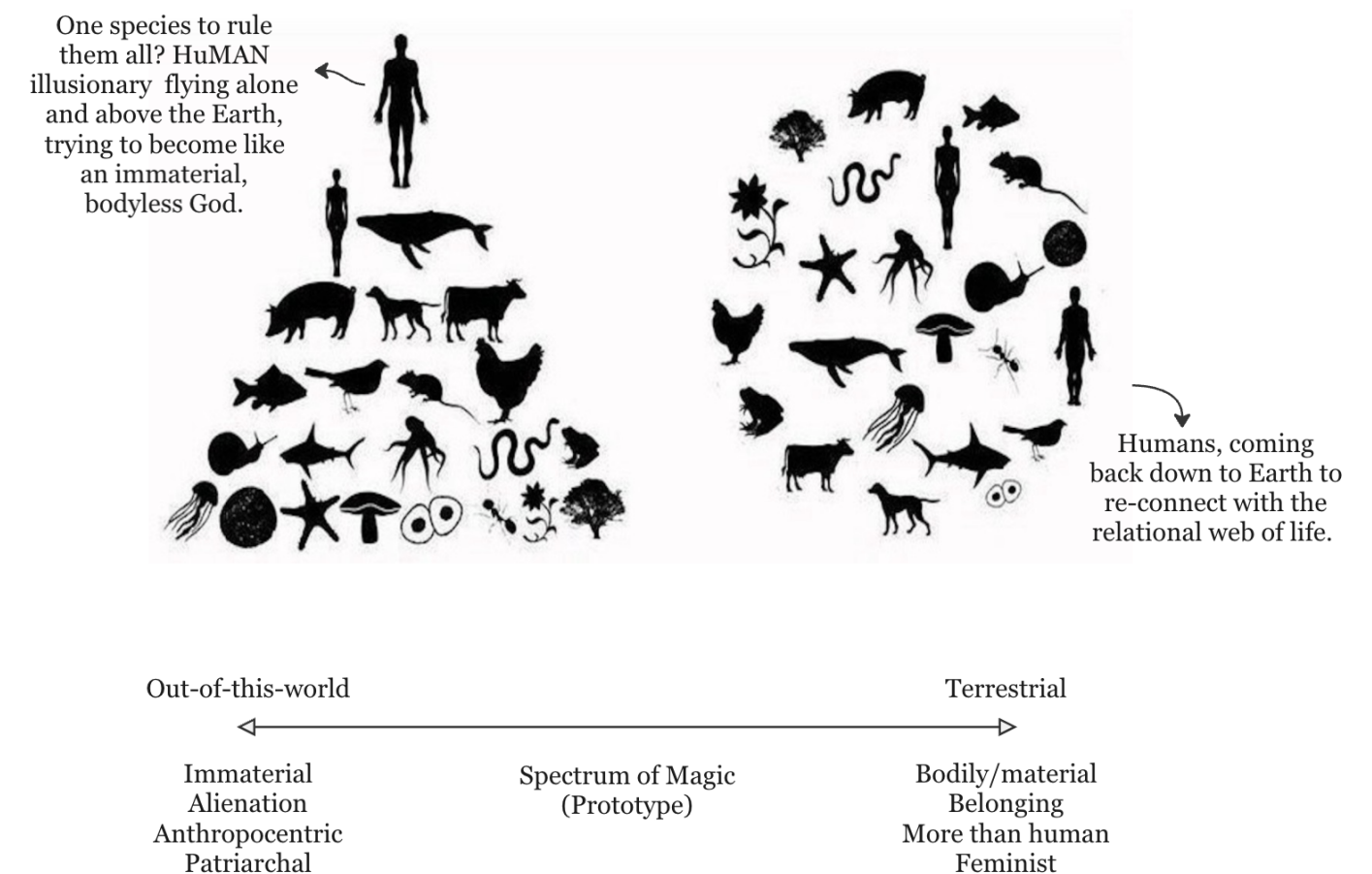


image / figure 2 Prototype of spectrum of magic, a tool to help identify the kinds of magic that help us get down to

Project planning and key moments

To make visible how you plan to spend your time, you must make a planning for the full project. You are advised to use a Gantt chart format to show the different phases of your project, deliverables you have in mind, meetings and in-between deadlines. Keep in mind that all activities should fit within the given run time of 100 working days. Your planning should include a **kick-off meeting, mid-term evaluation meeting, green light meeting** and **graduation ceremony**. Please indicate periods of part-time activities and/or periods of not spending time on your graduation project, if any (for instance because of holidays or parallel course activities).

Make sure to attach the full plan to this project brief.
The four key moment dates must be filled in below

Kick off meeting

25/08/2025

Mid-term evaluation

11/11/2025

Green light meeting

20/01/2026

Graduation ceremony

24/02/2026

In exceptional cases (part of) the Graduation Project may need to be scheduled part-time. Indicate here if such applies to your project

Part of project scheduled part-time	☐
For how many project weeks	
Number of project days per week	

Comments:

Motivation and personal ambitions

Explain why you wish to start this project, what competencies you want to prove or develop (e.g. competencies acquired in your MSc programme, electives, extra-curricular activities or other).

Optionally, describe whether you have some personal learning ambitions which you explicitly want to address in this project, on top of the learning objectives of the Graduation Project itself. You might think of e.g. acquiring in depth knowledge on a specific subject, broadening your competencies or experimenting with a specific tool or methodology. Personal learning ambitions are limited to a maximum number of five.
(200 words max)

My motivation stems from a wish to escape the Western-centric onto-epistemology to better design for a relational world and thus be better able to contribute to making life a little better for both humans and other-than-humans. I was also provoked by often hearing that magic and fantasy were not relevant within the scope of Speculative Design. Dunne & Raby’s old belief that we needed to stay within the lines of what was possible in the Futures Cone never fully made sense to me - I often felt like I drew from my childhood and teenage years emerged in fantasy, and I certainly felt like my youth full of fantasy helped me to be more imaginative and more flexible about strange ideas. Finally, I started to notice how tech companies appropriate a language of magic in their deceiving narratives of their products, especially AI. Hence, this is also an attempt to reclaim magic as a force that can help us re-connect.

Personal learning ambitions:

1. Improve my maker-skills and my ability to materialise my ideas.
2. Further explore fabulations potential for design and improve my fabulation writing.
3. Expand my design imagination and my ontology.
4. Detangle my relationship with time from the capitalist idea that time equals profit, enforcing constant efficiency and productivity.

References:

Dunne, A., & Raby, F. (2025). *Not here, not now: Speculative thought, impossibility, and the design imagination*. The MIT Press.

Escobar, A. (2018). *Designs for the pluriverse: Radical interdependence, autonomy, and the making of worlds*. Duke University Press.

Escobar, A., Osterweil, M., & Sharma, K. (2024). *Relationality: An Emergent Politics of Life Beyond the Human*. Bloomsbury.

Latour, B. (2018). *Down to Earth: Politics in the New Climatic Regime*. Polity.

Complete Project Timeline - All Cycles

