The Paranormal in Jane Jensen's "Gray Matter"

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Abstract: The main research issue of this article is to determine the extent to which Western esotericism influences the formation of computer game plots. The methodological framework is the occultural bricolage theory (C. Partridge). This article looks at how the paranormal is represented in the game "Gray Matter", created by J. Jensen. Jensen has always used occult bricolage as the main method for creating her games, but in "Gray Matter" this method is perfected. Although the game plot is built around paranormal events, they are not given any unambiguous interpretation; their status is the main question of the game. There are three answers to this question. The first answer is the beliefs of Sam Everett, a girl magician who does not believe in the supernatural. The second answer is the research of Dr. Styles, a neurobiologist convinced that the mind is an energy that can be objectified after death. The third answer is the theory of Dr. Ramusskin, a psi-phenomena specialist, who believes that super-abilities are real, and that spirits and the afterlife exist. It is the last answer that Jensen promotes in creating the game. The basis of "Gray matter" is a bricolage of Stephen King, the works of the Society for Psychical Research, works on parapsychology and the debates around psi-phenomena in neuropsychology.

Keywords: Western esotericism; religious studies; game studies; paranormal; society for psychical research; sacred; secular; occulture

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1. Introduction

The theme of the sacred in computer games is complicated and diverse. In addition to the obvious play with well-known Christian ideas and myths, and appeal to images of Eastern religions (Hinduism, Islam, Buddhism), images and myths, syncretic by nature, that are unrelated to specific religious traditions are often used in games. How, for example, to evaluate such popular games as those about vampires or werewolves; do they use classical mythological religious plots, or refer to their modified forms? How can the usage of myths about Atlantis and other lost civilizations, so popular in many games, be categorized? These questions require us turn to the field of research into Western esotericism, which has been actively developing over the past three decades. Indeed, all these plots refer to a special type of world perception that is not directly related to world religions. Western esotericism (Hanegraaff 2013), as a generator of syncretic religiosity, has become an invaluable depository for screenwriters and game designers since the birth of computer games. This is not surprising: its images are vivid and memorable, they always sound familiar due to wide popularity in the media, and they provide the consumer with an inexhaustible sense of secrecy, because the very term esotericism in the mass consciousness is associated with something inexplicable. This is why it is more popular than well-known, and in some ways boring, religious mythology. In addition, the esoteric mythologemes are so diverse that their combination gives authors an inexhaustible source of ideas for new plots. Therefore, it is rational to consider the specifics of the role of Western esotericism in computer games with reference to a concrete example.

The best and most developed framework for analyzing these manifestations in popular culture is the theory of Christopher Partridge. Partridge proposed the concept of *occulture* in his dilogy,

The Re-Enchantment of the West (Partridge 2005, 2006). According to Partridge, *occulture* originated from *occultism*; this term has been often used and had a very broad meaning. According to Partridge, occultism:

> . . . can be described as a subculture of various secret societies and 'enlightened' teachers involved in disciplines concerned with the acquisition of arcane, salvific knowledge (gnosis and theosophia), the experience of 'illumination', the understanding of esoteric symbolism (often related to occult interpretations of the Kabbalah), the practice of secret rituals and initiatory rites, and particularly the quest for aprisca theologia, philosophia occulta or philosophia perennis—a tradition of divine gnosis communicated, it is believed, through a line of significant individuals, including Moses, Zoroaster (Zarathustra), Hermes Trismegistus (the mythical author of the Hermeticd), Plato, Orpheus, and the Sibyls. (Partridge 2005, p. 69)

In the twentieth century this subculture has gradually emerged from the underground and became one of the sources of modern mass culture. In this way, occulture appeared.

> Occulture includes a range of 'deviant' ideas and practices . . . including magick (as devised by Aleister Crowley), extreme rightwing religio-politics, radical environmentalism and deep ecology, angels, spirit guides and channeled messages, astral projection, crystals, dream therapy, human potential spiritualities, the spiritual significance of ancient and mythical civilizations, astrology, healing, earth mysteries, tarot, numerology, Kabbalah, feng shut, prophecies (e.g., Nostradamus), Arthurian legends, the Holy Grail, Druidry, Wicca, Heathenism, palmistry, shamanism, goddess spirituality, Gaia spirituality and eco-spirituality, alternative science, esoteric Christianity, UFOs, alien abduction, and so on. (Partridge 2005, p. 70)

Modern society was imbued with these themes, they became an integral part both of its private and public spheres. The widespread popularity of occultural mythologemes led Partridge to the idea that occulture is not simply a subculture. It is 'culture' more broadly conceived, concerned with esoteric, paranormal, and occult themes, which is primarily disseminated within popular culture (Partridge 2016). The bricoleur is the constitutive element of the occulture. In Partridge's theory, a bricoleur was a tailor sewing a patchwork of religiosity from pieces of occultism. Partridge supposed in his works that occultural bricolage was one of the most popular ways of creativity in modern culture. If this is true, then it would be interesting to trace the role that it plays in the creation of computer games.[1] We will now turn to the work of the writer and successful game designer Jane Jensen, in order to consider the specificity of occultural bricolage in computer games, using her work as an example. For further analysis I will use game reading combined with intertextual analysis of popular culture.

2. The Way of the Bricoleur

Jensen has worked on adventure games throughout her life. The role of this genre is significant for the development of the whole industry. This genre is almost of the same age as modern personal computers, so its history repeats the history of the development of the PC in many respects (Salter 2014). It should be noted that, according to the very specifics of the games, this genre should have a serious connection with the occulture. One reviewer described this genre as follows: "The very word *adventure* conjures images of exploring strange and dangerous environments, venturing into uncharted realms,

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[1] Partridge only outlines an approach to the analysis of computer games, limiting his study to movies, music and subcultural currents. This is how Partridge describe the possibility of occulture game studies: "For example, much might have been made of the video game genre, which, replete with occultural baggage, puts the elusive powers sought by occultists virtually into the hands of the player. The individual enters the occultural matrix and acquires occultural-like knowledge and skills in order to manipulate supernatural forces" (Partridge 2005, p. 183).

foiling the diabolical plans of archetypal enemies, solving mysteries and having unusual experiences. The entire graphic adventure genre is ill led with detailed plots and fascinating settings and characters. Sometimes, the adventure milieu is handled in a very serious fashion" (Computer Gaming World 1994, p. 53). The first computer puzzle games appeared in the mid-70s and represented text narrations in which a player, using a set of commands entered from the keyboard, could solve puzzles and move further along the plot. The first such game was the *Colossal Cave Adventure* of 1976. Four years later, Ken and Roberta Williams founded the *Sierra On-Line* company that became one of the genre industry leaders. It was this company that produced the first quest, *Mystery House*, which used graphic drawings and in many respects made the genre of adventure one of the most successful for computer games in the late 1980s and the first half of the 1990s. Jane Jensen began her career at this company. Her debut game was *Gabriel Knight: Sins of the Fathers,* which immediately gained public attention and popularity. According to critics, this game brought the genre of adventure games to a new level, proving for the first time that the computer game can be frightening (Wilson 1993, p. 14), in that the plot can compete with the thrillers of Stephen King (Ardai 1994, p. 32), and by design can be an interactive movie (Ardai 1994, p. 32). Critics also noted that Jensen's game occupied the almost empty niche of computer horror. This reception led to the recognition of *Gabriel Knight: Sins of the Fathers* as the best adventure game of 1994, according to two large computer game magazines (Computer Gaming World 1994, p. 53). It should be noted that critics saw an occult basis in the game, and one of the reviewers noted that "*Gabriel Knight* throws the player convincingly into the world of Satanism and live sacrifice, of seedy and lecherous New Orleans" (Ardai 1994, p. 36). Such characteristics were not accidental; it was an indication of the direction of all further Jensen's creativity, her games were an illustrative example of occultural bricolage.[2] Jensen's first success made her continue the story of Gabriel in her next two games, each of which was based on an occultural plot. The first part of the series used the history of ritual murders related to Voodoo magic. The plot of the second part built around the investigation of crimes committed by werewolves, and the third part was based on the search for the grail combined with the theme of secret societies and vampires. Jensen carried out research for the creation of each game. For example the last game of the Gabriel trilogy, *Gabriel Knight 3: Blood of the Sacred, Blood of the Damned*, came out in 1999. To a large extent its plot was based on the famous book by Michael Baigent, Richard Leigh and Henry Lincoln, *The Holy Blood and the Holy Grail* (Baigent et al. 1983). The game used all the main "findings" of these authors: a story with the genealogy of Christ, a story with His descendants, an extensive interpretation of the grail, etc. Thus, four years before Dan Brown's *The Da Vinci Code*, the ideas of Baigent and Lincoln were embodied in this computer game. Jensen unmistakably found the attraction of the idea of *Sacred Blood and the Holy Grail* for the consumer, this was later confirmed by the stunning success of *The Da Vinci Code*. However, the format of the adventure computer game, created in poor quality 3D, did not allow her to realize her findings on the same high level as Brown. From the perspective of the theory of occulture, the most curious of Jensen's games is *Gray Matter*, released in 2010 by her own *Pinkerton Road Studio*. Firstly, this is the most ordinary of all of Jensen's games compared to the Gabriel series, or her last game *Moebius: Empire Rising*, it contains almost no supernatural phenomena. Secondly, the whole plot of the game is built around the status of paranormal phenomena. The main intrigue is the answer to the question: is there really anything outside the bounds of modern scientific knowledge about the world? Thirdly, *Gray Matter* is the best example for the demonstration of the work of occultural mythologemes in computer games. Let us now turn to these themes one-by-one.

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[2] The fact that Jensen is a typical occultural bricoleur is undoubted. All of her big games and books are based on a complex cocktail of occultural mythologemes and ideas. Thus, her most famous novel, *Dante's Equation* (Jensen 2003), which was even nominated for the Ph. Dick Award, is based on the idea of the fifth dimension popular in New Age Science and Kabbalistic gematria; the stylized Kabbalistic tree of Sefirot is even placed on its cover.

3. The World of *Gray Matter*

To begin, it is better to say a few words about the plot. The game is built around the story of Sam Everett, a girl who has accidentally gained entry to the house of the famous neuroscientist, David Styles, and is posing as his new assistant. In this role, Sam recruits a group of students for a series of experiments to visualize physical exercises and their possible influence on the physical condition and health. These experiments immediately become mysteriously connected with inexplicable events occurring on the campus of Oxford University and coincide chronologically with Styles' experiments. The game has two protagonists, Sam Everett and Dr. Styles, each of whom has their own goals. There are four tasks for the player: to enter the professional magicians club, *Daedalus*, and find the answer to the inexplicable phenomena on the campus in the role of Sam; to define if communication with the spirit of the doctor's deceased wife is possible, and to find the causes of events on the campus in the role of Dr. Styles. The main antagonist in the game is not known from the beginning, the whole intrigue is built around its definition. In the end, it turns out that Angela Mulholland, one of the participants in Styles' experiments, is endowed with paranormal abilities.

We have already established that despite the fact that the main theme of the game is paranormal phenomena, this game is very typical of Jensen's work. It is easy to compare the plot of *Gray Matter* with the plots of other Jensen games. The first shortcut of *Gabriel Knight: Sins of the Fathers*, showing the hero's dream, immediately hints at magical rituals related to human sacrifices. In the next interactive scene after the shortcut, in the dialogue between the protagonist and his assistant Grace, it becomes clear that Gabriel is writing a horror book about voodoo magic (a typical occultural element), and there are ritual murders (another occultural stamp) in the city. By the middle of the game (in the third chapter) Gabriel knows that he is a descendant of a German family of so-called *Schattenjäger*, who at all times have fought with evil forces and defended the world. In this way, by the middle of the game, the whole plotline passes completely into the realities of occulture, with the occultural realities in the game considered as normal. The second part, *Gabriel Knight 2: The Beast Within* begins with a shortcut in which residents of the town come to Gabriel's German castle with a request to protect them from werewolves. The third part, *Gabriel Knight: Blood of the Sacred, Blood of the Damned* begins with the story of a child of a noble family who needs to be protected from the persecution of vampires. Thus, the occultural component is not simply given to the player at once, it is introduced as an evident element, a part of everyday life. The world of the Gabriel trilogy is a place where voodoo magic rituals are real, where werewolves and fighters with evil spirits live, powerful secret societies operate, and where the religious history is only a facade for the hidden realities of esoteric practices. A similar situation is found in Jensen's previous game *Moebius: Empire Rising*, where all political events are subject to the Moebius law and are only an echo of past events.

The world of *Gray Matter* is completely different. There are regular references to occultural mythologemes and stereotypes in the aesthetics of the game from the very beginning. The first shortcut shows an old English mansion in the pouring rain, lit by lightning flashes.[3] This mansion makes a frightening impression on the girl sent to be an assistant to Dr. Styles and, in addition, a strange shadow banishes her. The place frightens her so much that she leaves without trying to cross the threshold of the house. Sam Everett, the main character, a post-goth girl, is not shy, she is a magician and lover of English literature, she has *Frankenstein* by Shelley in her bag, which is why the house does not make any unpleasant impression on her.

The image of the house owner—Dr. Styles—has been created to embody all the figures of the mad scientists known to literature (it is not insignificant that Sam has Shelley's novel in her bag). He is a loner, does not leave the house, wears a mask on his face, is very rich, and carries out strange experiments in the basement. This effect is further enhanced by Sam's comparison of Styles to Dracula

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[3]　An obvious and direct reference to clichéd images from literature (E.A. Poe, H.P. Lovecraft), films and games on the occultural theme (*Darkseed*, *Black Mirror*).

when none of the Oxford students are willing to participate in his experiments. The first meeting between Sam and the doctor deliberately develops the player's anxiety through increasing suspense. However, the most interesting thing in *Gray Matter* is that all these classic methods are used only to make the player feel surprise. Styles turns out to be a high-quality neurobiologist, depressed after the tragic death of his wife, his mask covers the burn marks that he received trying to save her, and the experiments in the basement are aimed at studying the possibility of brain functioning; they help to understand the degree to which visualization can affect the entire body. Thus, almost all the indications of occultural mythologemes turn out to be fake by the beginning of the second part of the game. Even when, in the third part, Styles' private laboratory with an isolation tank and random number generator for contact with deceased people, are shown, the player sees only a scientist who has experienced a grievous loss and who is trying to find an opportunity to overcome the death of a loved one by means of his science. It is already clear at this moment that the main issue of the game is the status of paranormal phenomena.

4. Three Shades of Gray

In the game, there are three ways of understanding the paranormal. Samantha Everett, the main character, represents the first. She is a young girl with an unstable psyche and a difficult past, and does not have an education. Sam is a magician and she sees her future in this occupation. If anything unusual is possible for her, then it is only what is created by the illusion of a skillful manipulator. Therefore, for the whole game she tries to find and expose the villain who is arranging the strange events in Oxford. Her reluctance to believe in the supernatural is so stubborn that even when evidence of the inexplicability of the events becomes apparent, she still continues to suspect a clever fraudster, a "master illusionist, one of the best in the world" (*Gray Matter*, chp. 6). Her way of thinking is described very accurately in the words of her magician mentor, Mephistopheles, which are spoken before Sam finds out about the existence of real super-abilities: "magicians in general don't believe—anyone else might be capable of the real thing" (*Gray Matter*, chp. 8). Sam finally recognizes the possibility of the paranormal explanation of events only in the last scenes of the game. A similar position is also taken by Styles' friend, Dr. Hellborn, who suspects Styles of insanity caused by depression and sleep deprivation.

The second way of understanding the paranormal is represented by the figure of another protagonist—Dr. Styles. Styles leads the *Center for Cognitive Abnormality Research*. His specialty is the study of abnormalities in the development of the brain. Styles' scientific career before his wife's accident (reconstructed in the game according to archival data from newspapers and magazines) was built around studying the possibilities of human potential. He became especially famous as a result of an article on the reality of the existence of super-powers of the brain, for which he was severely criticized by his colleagues and was noticed by parapsychologists, who appreciated his ideas. Styles' theories are a borderline between occulture and recognized science. In Styles' ideas many clichés common to so-called new age science (Hanegraaff 1997, pp. 113–81)[4] are represented: the idea of the potential hidden in the unused part of the brain; the image of the brain as a television like a transmitter of information; the concept of consciousness as energy, which only the brain can hold for a while; and the idea that the brain can project consciousness into the past and the future. Styles believes in the possibility of the existence of his wife's consciousness after death. Everything that he does in the first parts of the game is aimed at the objectification of her consciousness in tangible form. Styles also appears to be a typical new age scientist due to certain practices, using the isolation tank and activating his abilities to visualize the past by stimulating all the sense organs. In one of the dialogues, Styles

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[4]　It should be noted that some of these clichés (for example, that we only use 10 percent of our brains) are the property of pop culture and do not relate to real science. Here one can see the intertextuality of popular culture, as "10 percent of the brain" is a common trope that is sometimes found in films, tv-series or games, and is embedded in "the encyclopedia of knowledge" of modern man.

emphasizes that our reality is our perception (another New Age cliché), he "chose the reality to keep his wife alive" (*Gray Matter*, chp. 5), but he has been shocked by the inexplicable events in the house that indicate that his deceased wife Laura could indeed return. Such an attitude to events indicates that Styles is also a skeptic, who shares a number of considerations from the New Age sphere, but does not believe in the reality they suppose at all.

The third way of understanding the paranormal is represented by Dr. Ramuskin, who appears in the game in only one scene, but the understanding of the world that he expresses is at the same time the disclosure of all the mysteries of the game and an indication of the origins of Jensen's bricolage. Characters like Ramuskin are Jensen's visiting card. They perform a *deus ex machina* role, appearing somewhere in the middle of the narrative, and their explanations shed light on all the ambiguities of the game and provide the hero with an end to Ariadne's thread, with which it is possible to find a way out of the maze of the plot. The brightest example of such a hero is Professor Hartridge from the first part of *Gabriel Knight*,[5] whose lecture about voodoo clarifies everything in the plot. Ramuskin plays the same role in *Gray Matter*. His first time appearance is as the author of a book on parapsychology, from which Styles takes instructions for his experiments contact the consciousness of his deceased wife. Later Styles visits the scientist in his house. The appearance of Ramuskin's house is interesting. Obviously, he is much poorer than Styles: there are oscilloscopes for measuring paranormal activity on the table in his house, there are images of Buddha and Parvati on the wall, there is a dancing Shiva and Indian elephants on the fireplace. Ramuskin is represented intentionally as a marginal scientist, a typical example of the occulture.[6] His ideas are typical. He explains all the strange phenomena in Styles' house through the spirit of the deceased wife. For some reason (possibly a trauma at the time of death or an unresolved problem) her spirit cannot accept death—cannot enter the afterlife. Here, classical considerations regarding the spirits of the dead are shown, dating back to the history of spiritualism in the second half of the 19th century (Guttierez 2015, pp. 48–274). All forms of Styles' work (contact through the RNG, messages during visualization) are considered by Ramuskin as classic messages from the world of spirits. He interprets the incidents in Styles' house and during experiments related to the case at the university as the classic manifestations of telekinesis, i.e., the super-abilities of living people. In addition, he talks about cases of similar superpowers in humans, in particular, the story of a shaman who had the gift of producing electricity with such intensity and strength that it led to fires and whose pyrokinetic abilities did not work when he was wet. In conversation with Styles, Ramuskin mentions the Society of Psychical Research, an organization created in the 19th century, whose goal was to study unusual and unexplained phenomena from a scientific point of view. The cases investigated by the SPR, according to Ramuskin, are similar to the Styles case. Ramuskin indicates directly that the story of the shaman was investigated by the Society of Psychical Research in 1900.[7] Thus, Ramuskin appears as a typical exponent of occulture, popularizing its classic ideas.

In addition to the three forms of reflection on paranormal phenomena, the source of these phenomena is also present in the game—in the secondary character, Angela Mulholland.[8] It is clear from the player's first acquaintance with her that Angela is inclined to genuinely believe in real magic and fairies. Later the player discovers that Angela's father was a magician and pub owner who died in his pub during a fire. According to Style's experiments, Angela's brain was active as if in the phase of sleep in the unexplored part of the brain. Angela herself believes that all of her abilities come from

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5   There are similar situations in other games. For example in the last game, *Moebius,* this role is performed by the teacher of the main character, Professor Reed. After a brief conversation with the Professor, a file revealing the meaning of the whole theory of *Moebius* appears on the main character's computer.
6   For more information about the marginal position of researchers of the paranormal see Hansen (2001). It is interesting that, according to Hansen, the paranormal is an antistructure, it is always associated with destruction, a transition, a violation of the established order, a paradox, or an ambiguity; it blurs the boundaries. That is why the paranormal manifests in moments of serious social shock and changes, or during periods of personal crisis (for example, as in this case, the loss of a lover).
7   One of the rare cases where the game makes a direct reference to the source from which its images have been taken. This is almost the same as making an academic footnote in a fiction book.
8   Her surname is especially interesting in that it refers to the famous David Lynch film.

fairies who turn out to be bad, because they hurt her father. Thus, the case of Angela in the game also does not have a definite solution, it is only clear that she has some special abilities.

5. Components of Occultural Bricolage

As we have already noted, *Gray Matter*, is unlike most computer games on the occultural theme, as it does not deal directly with the reality of another world and its related forces, but places all unexplained phenomena on the verge between mental illusions and the reality of another world. Here, Jensen's game follows a special tradition in the literature of horror that developed at the beginning of the 20th century. Unlike classics of this weird and new weird genre (Cowan 2015, pp. 469–77), for example H.P. Lovecraft or E. Lee, writers such as A. Blackwood, G. Meyrink, and S. Grabiński left the reader with an uncertain sensation of the possible reality of another world, placing the fact of its existence on the verge between a psychological illusion and reality. Following this tradition, *Gray Matter* deliberately does not directly answer key questions, even at the very end of the game. This uncertainty is best expressed in the final words of Dr. Styles: " . . . I don't have proof of anything . . . lots of research is needed" (*Gray Matter*, Final shortcut). It can be said that the game is deliberately built around a secret that does not have a direct solution, so that the player, who has reached the end, feels a sense of dissatisfaction and will wait for the second part, in which, according to the teaser, the answers will be provided.

However, it seems that mysterious things are only attractive when the secret conceals some reality in itself, therefore, the answers to unresolved questions should be provided in the game directly. It is possible to find them if we apply the explanations to the plot suggested by Dr. Ramuskin, the main occultural character in the game. According to him, there are two forces in the game: Angela, gifted with telepathic abilities from childhood and seeking an alliance with Styles by any means, and the spirit of Laura, Styles' wife, who tries to tell her husband about the threat from Angela and the causes of her death. This theory is confirmed completely by a number of game events: the spirit of Laura tells Styles about the threat from Angela twice (the first time in the isolation tank, when she asks about the state of the car in which Laura died, and the second time on the lake, when she reminds Styles about a student who came to him on the day of the disaster), and the random number generator finally completely reproduces the message from the spirit in the final stages of the game—the word "imposter", unambiguously indicating Angela, who is trying to impersonate Laura. At the end of the game, Angela behaves exactly the same as the shaman from the SPR study who was described by Ramuskin—the characters push her into the water to neutralize her, after which she cannot make fire. Thus, all the secrets of the game are built around the exploitation of classic mythologemes and images of occulture, but Jensen deliberately does not show them directly. This is unprecedented for Jensen, since all of her previous games were completed without defaults and understatement. Moreover, this is a unique case for the whole genre, in which every game has been viewed as the finished product.

Let us now return to the roots of Jensen's bricolage. It is obvious that the novels of Stephen King were one of the main sources for *Gray Matter*. The image of the main antagonist, Angela Mulholland, is a combination of King's *Carrie* and *The Firestarter*. Angela's main psi-ability—pyrokinesis, inherited from her parents (from her father, in Angela's case)—and the story about the experiments of the scientist at the university, who was considered to be insane, are taken from *The Firestarter*. Angela's psychological shape, her strange behavior that is caused by the knowledge of her psi-abilities, as well as her asociality, unsociability and religiosity are all taken from *Carrie*.

All explanations of the activity of Laura's spirit, as well as the forms of this activity, fit into the general patterns of the spiritualism of the second half of the 20th century. The use of an RNG-generator is also a common practice in parapsychological studies. In addition, Jensen used real discussions on the status of parapsychology that were present in neuropsychology at the beginning of the 21st century (Shermer 2003; Moulton and Kosslyn 2008). To tell the truth, the majority of neuropsychologists consider all phenomena of a parapsychological nature to be poorly substantiated and unprovable,

whereas Dr. Styles joins Jensen in this debate from the standpoint of neurobiology, defending the reality of these phenomena.

The whole story with the scientific explanation of the parapsychological phenomena (telekinesis, pyrokinesis, etc.) is directly related to the Society of Psychical Research, some examples that are given by Ramuskin are taken from the works of this society. Maybe the whole game is a deep echo of this society's activity. It would be better to remind ourselves that the activity of SPR was focused on verifying the inexplicable and strange phenomena of spiritualism, telepathy and telekinesis with the help of modern scientific tools.[9] As an elite society that united in its circle a lot of outstanding figures of modern scientific knowledge,[10] the society seriously engaged in the study of a mass of cases recognized as being the result of superstition and charlatanry by mainstream science. It was this society that gave rise to the parapsychological research of the 20th century. Egil Asprem characterizes its ideology as follows: "the possible reality of spiritualism and other occult phenomena would not constitute a break with a naturalistic worldview, but rather indicate that our picture of the natural world had to be radically expanded" (Asprem 2015, p. 267). According to Jeffrey Kripal, members of SPR "embraced science as a method that could throw new light on old religious questions" (Kripal 2015, p. 262). It is interesting that members of the society, in spite of the denunciations made,[11] were religious and sometimes believed that they had experienced the paranormal. Thus, one of the founders of the society, Frederic Myers, was convinced that, with the help of a medium, he communicated with the deceased wife of his cousin, whom he loved. Myers in his life had a passion for Greek paganism, Christianity and agnosticism, and discovered that the theory of Darwin synthesized his personal religious credo. Myers believed that there are only three apparent facts: the reality of life after death, the imprint of every past thought and action in the universe, and that there is progressive infinite moral evolution to an absolute goal (Kripal 2010, pp. 36–90). Some of his colleagues had similar beliefs (McCorristine 2010, pp. 103–38). All these ideas are central themes of the game. It can be said that Styles' ideas are similar to the principles of Myers, and the central idea for the SPR, namely to expand the boundaries of science, is reflected in all of Styles' activities.

It is interesting that both the psi-ability of Angela and the appearance of Laura's spirit are used as the basis of the plot of the game at the same time. In fact, this blurs the boundaries of scientific explanation in favor of a crypto-religious explanation. It is worth remembering that the whole idea of studying paranormal things began from the phenomenon of the poltergeist, originally considered to be an evil restless creature from the spiritual world, or the ghost of a deceased person that showed itself in extravagant and dangerous forms. The term *paranormal* replaced the term *supernatural*, which was theologically-burdened and colored by skepticism. The focus was gradually shifted from the world of spirits to human abilities in the study of paranormal events. The idea was simple, while it was not possible to discuss the reality of the spirits of dead people, it was entirely possible to scientifically study a person's special and unexplained abilities. According to Jeffrey Kripal, it is thanks to the study of the paranormal that the poltergeist became "not an angry ghost but the ghost of anger" (Kripal 2014, p. 244). Destroying this scientific tradition, the spirits of the dead and psi-abilities coexist in *Gray Matter*.

6. Conclusions

Now let us ask ourselves: what does the story of *Gray Matter* contribute to the general theme of this issue, "The Sacred and the Digital"? First of all, it is obvious that religion in modern computer games has become the space for bricolage. In the Jensen's case, this is a bricolage that plays with

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9   Six committees were officially created in the society from the moment of its organization in 1882: reading of thoughts, mesmerism, the Reichenbach phenomenon, the phenomena of spirits and houses with ghosts, psychic phenomena and a literary committee (McCorristine 2010, p. 114).

10   According to Shane McCorristine "With members such as William E. Gladstone, Arthur Balfour, Lord Tennyson, Arthur Conan Doyle, Robert Louis Stevenson, William James, William McDougall, Henri Bergson, Charles Richet, Sigmund Freud and Carl Gustav Jung, the SPR resembled a Who's Who of the fin-de-siecle" (McCorristine 2010, p. 104).

11   Spiritualists later called SPR a 'Sadducean' organization (McCorristine 2010, p. 112).

themes and images from the sphere of Western esotericism. Jane Jensen is a typical occultural bricoleur, mixing elements from different esoteric teachings, near-scientific theories and fiction to create the plot of her games. The players—the consumers of Jensen's product—are also bricoleurs. The use in the game of commonplaces from occultural mythology (psi-abilities, contact with spirits, the possibility of life after death, etc.) is an indication that all these occultural plots are included in "the encyclopedia of knowledge" (Eco 1986, pp. 46–86) of the modern player; they are easily identified by him and are considered either as a norm or as a generally accepted fantastical assumption. Here again we return to Partridge's idea that occulture has become ordinary, and has determined much of the specifics of modern mass culture. Moreover, the commercial success in the sphere of computer games (especially games built on fantasy or sci-fi) is often associated with the exploitation of occultural images, where they have become the norm and recognizable.

Perhaps the game under consideration indicates one more interesting trend. Reductive models that lead to the explanation of strange phenomena by means of natural causes do not satisfy the target audience of games like *Gray Matter*. After all, Jensen deliberately refuses to explain the strange phenomena as only a special type of human ability, she adds the reality of life after death and the existence of spirits as facts. The modern player still wants to repeat Tennyson's verses "And may there be no sadness of farewell/When I embark;/For though from out our bourne of Time and Place/The flood may bear me far,/I hope to see my Pilot face to face/When I have crossed the bar". The reality of this being beyond the bar, even without meeting with its pilot, still remains an attractive alternative to the modern reductive explanation of the spiritual world. Parareligious plots show the desire of the modern man to create his own religion, in which the reality of the sacred still occupies a central place.

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