This GIF is a Spell:

Creating and Using Digital Loops in Magical Praxis

by

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Abstract

In recent years, witchcraft has entered the mainstream consciousness as a tool for personal and social change, and in 2021, witches are as likely to use technology such as smartphones and emojis in their spellcraft as they are to use physical materials such as paper and ink. The aim of this research is to define witchcraft in the context of visual art and magic, and to describe the processes used to create a series of magical GIFs intended to act as visual digital spells.

Keywords: witches, witchcraft, spells, spellcraft, GIFs, visual magic.

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Chapter 1

Introduction

Over the past decade, witchcraft has seen a massive surge in mainstream popularity; as of this writing, the #witchesofinstagram hashtag has been used 6.6 million times. This current level of interest is in keeping with patterns that suggest that historically, and particularly during times of great socio-political turmoil, witchcraft affords practitioners some degree of personal power and control amid chaos (Bosker, 2020). In light of the profound uncertainty that characterizes life in the 21st century—due to the human and economic ravages of COVID-19 (Kwai & Peltier, 2021), the pandemonium of the Trump presidency (Clemons, 2021), the psychological effects of natural disasters wrought by climate change (Taylor & Murray, 2020), the global rise of authoritarianism (Gebrekidan, 2020), anxiety about equity and social justice for those who identify as LGBTQIA (Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer, Intersex, Asexual) (Greenfield, 2021), the collective response to police violence and systemic brutality against BIPOC (Black, Indigenous, and People of Color) (Edwards et al., 2019), and public reckonings about gender equality in the wake of #MeToo (Bennett, 2017), to name but a few major challenges—it is little wonder that people now might gravitate toward witchcraft and magic as tools for personal and collective change.

One of the most accessible points of entry into contemporary witchcraft is visual magic, as with emoji spells (Cuen, 2016), in which emojis are arranged in symbolically meaningful ways to achieve a shift in consciousness in the practitioner or viewer. The same principle can be applied to other varieties of digital media, such as GIFs. A GIF (Graphics Interchange Format) is a short looping piece of soundless animation (Heinzman, 2019), and a magical GIF might

contain specific imagery, footage, sigils, or patterns intended to bring about a perceptible result for the user.

Overarching Research Goal

The overarching goal of this research is to create a series of magical GIFs which, when viewed while in a meditative state and accompanied by symbolic action such as incantation or the burning of a candle, are intended to act as spells.

Research objectives. The research objectives for creating the spell-GIFs are as follows:

1. Define witchcraft.

2. Identify the relationship between witchcraft and art practice.

3. Explore how contemporary witches use technology and visual art in magic.

4. Describe best practices for creating animated GIFs.

5. Assemble a series of spell-GIFs using magical and practical techniques.

Summary

Witchcraft offers people some control over the chaos of 21st century life, and visual magic—the art of manipulating visual elements to yield a particular desired outcome—is an accessible entry point into this practice. The aim of this research is to create a series of GIFs, or digital animated loops, which are intended to function as spells. In order to achieve this goal, it is first necessary to define witchcraft, to identify how witchcraft is related to art, to discuss how visual elements are used in witchcraft, to explore how witches use technology and art in magic today, and to describe how to create GIFs, before assembling a series of spell-GIFs using magical and practical techniques.

Chapter 2

Literature Review

Defining Witchcraft

Despite its current commercial appeal, witchcraft is still a divisive topic publicly and does not fit neatly under any single ontological umbrella. Because it exists somewhere at the nexus of spirituality, mythology, history, art, poetry, science, psychology, medicine, and activism, contemporary witchcraft eludes easy or agreed-upon definitions.[1] The witch, of course, is a powerful archetypal figure; "everyone" is familiar with the witch as a negative or positive symbol of independence and—most often, feminine—power that survives outside the purview of conventional society (Grossman, 2019, p. 2). Further complicating matters is that the very idea of treating witchcraft as a legitimate interdisciplinary field of intellectual and philosophical inquiry is most frequently met with derision: Because the efficacy of witchcraft cannot be "proven" under repeatable laboratory conditions, and because magic is such a personal and subjective practice, it is generally dismissed outright as fantasy or delusion by mainstream academia. As Margot Adler observes in her seminal book *Drawing Down the Moon*, "Those who uphold the secular religion of rational humanism put up more blocks to such discussion [of magic, the occult, ritualism, and the supernatural] than adherents of any other ideology" (Adler, 1986, p. 156).

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[1] It should be noted that witchcraft is not synonymous with Wicca; witchcraft is a practice available to anyone of any faith or no faith, whereas Wicca is the name for a modern pagan religion popularized by Gerald Gardner (White, p. 24).

But if the idea that witchcraft is *not* science is an impediment to accepting it as "real,"

perhaps, then, it is helpful to notice that witchcraft is similar to artmaking in several ways: both

witchcraft and art require the practitioner to trust in hidden processes. Both witchcraft and art

involve elements of play, experimentation, observation, and critical thinking. Both witchcraft

and art necessitate flexibility and collaboration with the unknown.[2] Witch, activist, and artist

Amanda Yates Garcia--better known as The Oracle of L.A.--explains that a spell is "a symbolic

action used to harness the powers of the imagination [to] achieve a tangible result (Stanek,

2017)." Comics writer and magician Alan Moore goes even further, making no distinction at all

between magic and art:

> Magic in its earliest form is often referred to as 'the art'. I believe this is completely
>
> literal. I believe that magic is art and that art, whether it be writing, music, sculpture, or
>
> any other form is literally magic. Art is, like magic, the science of manipulating symbols,
>
> words, or images, to achieve changes in consciousness. (Vylenz, 2005)

In the context of this project, a simple working definition which connects witchcraft and art is as

follows: Witchcraft is an array of practical tools for linking the imaginal world to the physical

realm.

Witchcraft and visual magic. Although there is no single correct way to practice

witchcraft, a compelling portal into the occult can be found in its rich visual language of colors,

numbers, and symbols, connected to a variety of concepts including dreams, mythology,

astrology, and the classical elements air, water, earth, and fire. In truth, the occult has fueled

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[2] Strikingly, the cultivation of a genuine belief in magic and the practice of making art both tend

to be discouraged, more or less, in adults in polite Western capitalist culture.

creative production and spurred artists in every era and in every culture on earth to paint, write, and compose work that is both magical in its inception and in its purpose (Elizabeth, 2020).

In an article for *Contemporary Art Review Los Angeles*, The Oracle of L.A. describes how both witches and artists affix meaning to objects by alchemically manipulating them in some fashion, "bringing things together to create more than the sum of their parts. For both artist and witch, the function of their labor is to encourage objects to communicate something beyond their actual form (Yates Garcia, 2016)." In this way, the visual elements in a spell can be manipulated by the witch to contain meaning.

The Surrealist movement in art. Though the tradition of drawing artistic inspiration from the occult may be ancient, in the western Modernist canon, evidence of occultism in art can be found most explicitly in the efforts of the Surrealists, who sought through their work to join the unconscious and conscious minds in a single reality, seeing themselves as conduits, rather than originators, for artistic expression (Mann, 2016).

The artist as seer. In his *Manifesto of Surrealism*, André Breton advises the artist to use "pure psychic automatism," or automatic writing, to transmit creative material:

"After you have settled yourself in a place as favorable as possible to the concentration of your mind upon itself, have writing materials brought to you. Put yourself in as passive, or receptive, a state of mind as you can. Forget about your genius, your talents, and the talents of everyone else. Keep reminding yourself that literature is one of the saddest roads that leads to everything. Write quickly, without any preconceived subject, fast enough so that you will not remember what you're writing and be tempted to reread what you have written (Breton, n.d.)."

Current Use of Technology in Visual Magic

In 2021, visual magic has gone digital, and might now take the form of a meme on Instagram, a sigil created on an iPad, or an emoji spell cast on Twitter. In a 2015 article on emoji spellcasting for Vice.com, writer Tarin Towers recommends a variety of magical uses for the common iPhone:

> You probably already use this Philosopher's Stone for such sorcery as aeromancy, preparing the sacrament, dowsing, and evocation. (That's checking the weather, looking up recipes and getting the ingredients delivered, finding a nearby coffee shop, and looking at pictures of your friends until you call one of them). (Towers, 2015)

The GIF as Contemporary Art Form

The GIF is a common digital file type most frequently used to communicate ideas and emotions using visual shorthand in the form of looping videos online (Miltner & Highfield, 2017). In much the same way that paint can be used as a medium to create both yard sale signs and royal portraits, the GIF can be used as a medium to create both cat memes and fine art (Dewey, 2012). Carl Burton (https://www.carlburton.io), Hexeosis (http://hexeosis.com), and Nicolas Ménard (https://www.nicolasmenard.com) are three examples of artists and designers who make use of the GIF as a medium to create concise, visually stunning looping artwork.

Using available tools and resources in spellcraft. A general rule by which many artists and witches live, is to "make before you buy," and the Internet is rife with examples of zines, blogs, and free tutorials for inexpensive spellcraft. As the bio-artist, scholar and witch, Whitefeather Hunter, reminds listeners in a 2019 interview on the Missing Witches podcast, "Magic is inherently anti-capitalist" (Torok, 2019). In this sense, the DIY aspect of spellcraft should be viewed as a feature, rather than a bug, of effective spellcasting (Mittra, 2017). With

this ethos in mind, resourcefulness, imagination, and creativity become the most important elements in visual or digital magic.

   Tools for creating GIFs. There are a number of excellent free online tools for rapidly creating GIFs (Fisher, 2021). Of these, GIPHY is perhaps the most popular and flexible, as the application contains an enormous library of GIFs and special effects such as stickers, filters, and text (Coomes, 2021). Users can create animated GIFs by uploading their own digital animations to the app, or they can select video clips from sources such as Vimeo or YouTube and add various visual effects. For artists who prefer to create GIFs from the ground up, Procreate for the iPad Pro and Photoshop are an ideal pairing of applications: Procreate allows artists to use a variety of animation techniques within the Animation Assist function (Bardot, 2020), and Photoshop can be used to refine and stitch together these blocks of animation made in Procreate, as well as to add filters and visual effects to finished pieces (Smith, 2019).

   Summary

   Witchcraft can be defined as a set of practical tools used to link the imaginal world to the physical realm, and in this sense, witchcraft is indistinguishable from artistic practice: Both artists and witches manipulate the visual elements in a given context in order to imbue them with specific meaning. One clear example of this relationship between magic and art can be found in the work of the Surrealists, who sought to join the conscious and unconscious minds in a single reality. In 2021, resourceful witches use technology to link the imaginal and physical worlds by creating emoji spells, sigils, and memes.

   The GIF is a digital medium with untapped potential for creating magic spells, and for artists and witches who wish to make spell-GIFs from scratch, Procreate for the iPad Pro can be used in conjunction with Photoshop.

Chapter 3

Process

Each of the seven completed spell-GIFs is composed of many smaller discrete pieces of animation, video loops, still photographs, and hand-drawn sigils, informed by research and by the author's years of study within the fields of fine art and visual communications. Loosely speaking, the format for each GIF is animated introduction→ magical imagery→ sigil→ animated closing. The steps for creating the spell-GIFs were as follows:

1. Divination

2. Automatism

3. Creation of Short Loops

4. Stitching and editing

Divination

Before beginning the hands-on aspect of creating each spell-GIF, divination in the form of a tarot reading was completed. To accomplish this, tarot cards were shuffled thoroughly while focusing on the creative problem ("Show me the elements and symbols to include in this visual spell"). Three cards were pulled and arranged in a "Situation/Action/Outcome" spread to determine the problem, the suggested action to take, and the outcome if said action was taken, with additional cards pulled for further clarification (Esselmont, 2020). Pulling cards in this way became an integral part of the initial creative brainstorming process (Greer, 2002).

Automatism

Automatic drawing and automatic writing exercises were performed as part of each creative cycle in an effort to generate concepts and imagery for the animations (Figure 1).

Figure 1

Automatic Writing
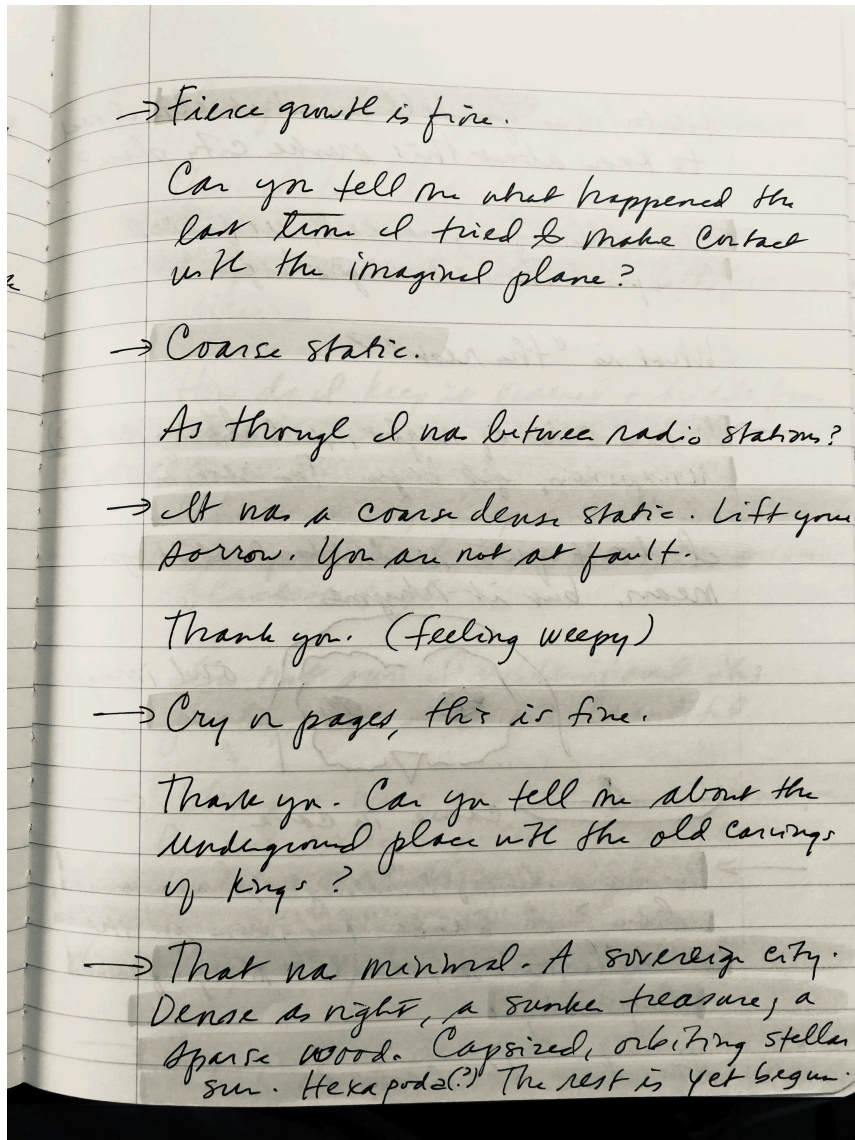
Note. This image shows an example of automatic writing used to

generate ideas for the magical imagery in each spell-GIF.

At this stage in the process, no idea or piece of information gleaned through automatism was

deemed too esoteric or nonsensical; all possibilities were given the space either to develop or to

fade, accordingly (Cameron, 1992).

Creation of Short Loops

All animations and special effects were made in Procreate using the Animation Assist

function within the application (YouTube, 2019). Traditional frame animation techniques and

rotoscoping, as well as more experimental and improvised methods, were used to create the short

pieces of motion design that make up each GIF.

Visual ephemera and faux film artifacts. The spell-GIFs contain visual elements that

are intended to evoke old film stock, early cinema, and Surrealist photography. In *A Spell For*

Increasing Intuition, for example, video footage of a roiling sea was shot on an iPhone 8 and a

silvertone filter was applied. This video was imported to Procreate where individual frames were

removed at random, and the frame rate was decreased from a standard twenty four frames per

second (Escobar, 2019), to twelve frames per second. A digital circular cutout was then applied

over each frame in the sequence to simulate the appearance of waves being viewed through a

porthole (Figure 2).

Figure 2

Ocean Porthole: A Spell For Increasing Intuition
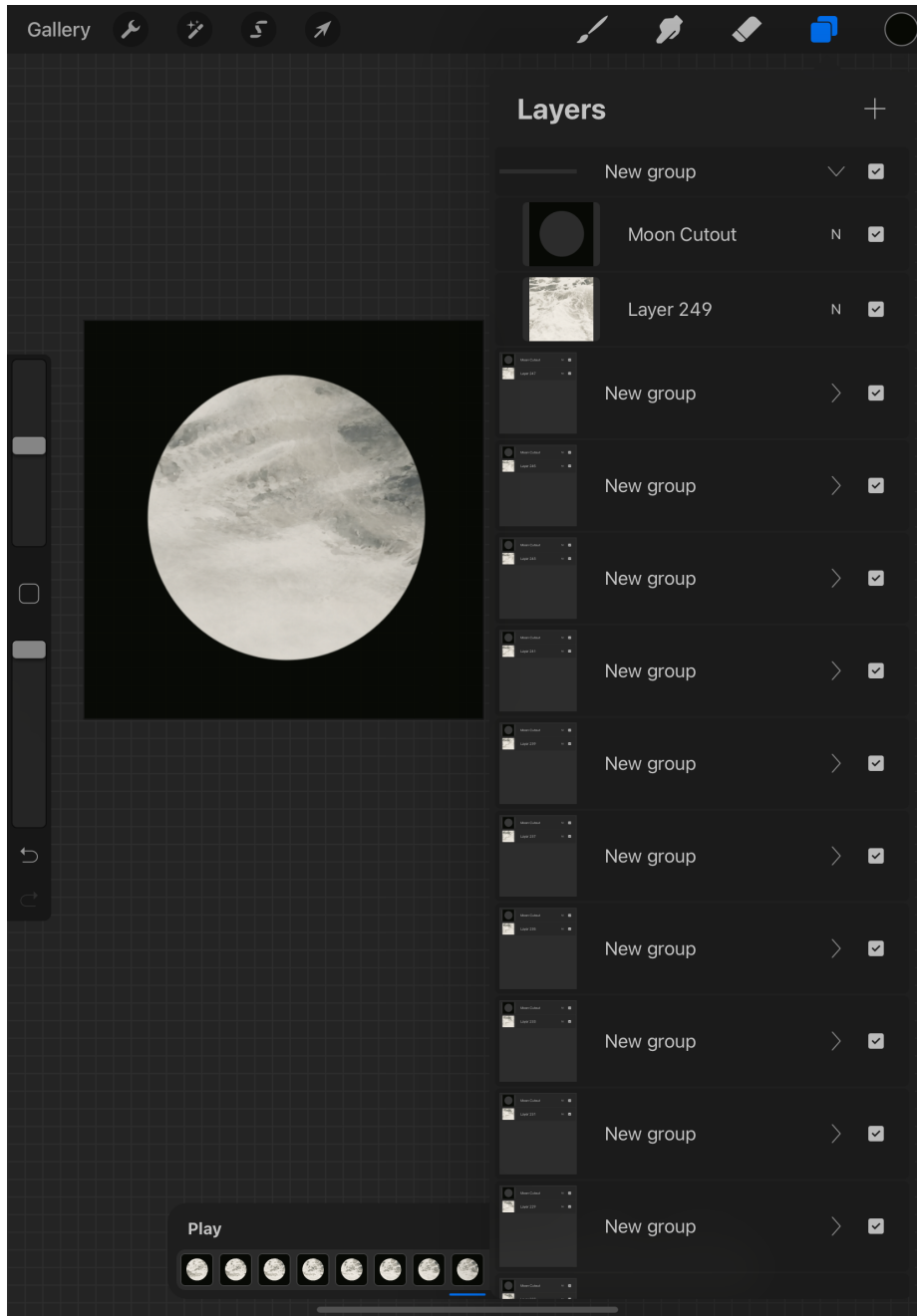
Note. This image shows Procreate's Animation Assist interface, and

demonstrates the use of a cutout stencil applied over each frame in

a sequence.

A similar effect was achieved in *A Spell For Writing Well* by applying a keyhole-shaped cutout

over footage of an eye (Figure 3).

Figure 3

Keyhole: A Spell For Writing Well

Note. This is a still image from *A Spell For Writing Well*,

demonstrating the effect of a keyhole stencil placed in a layer

over footage of an eye.

        Video of the eye was first shot on an iPhone, then aged by applying the silvertone filter

within the photo editing app, removing frames at random in Procreate, and increasing the frame

rate from twenty-four frames per second, to thirty six frames per second, resulting in a subtly

choppy sequence reminiscent of Buñuel's 1929 Surrealist classic *Un Chien Andalou* (Buñuel,

2019).

Another technique used to simulate aged film involved drawing over randomly-chosen

frames in a video in Procreate, as demonstrated in the opening video sequence of a tree in bloom

at the beginning of *A Spell For Renewal*: When the entire sequence is played, the hand-drawn

elements become suggestive of the cue marks and chemical degradation visible on an old film

reel (Figure 4).

Figure 4

*Simulated Film Degradation: A Spell For Renewal*

Note. This image is a still from *A Spell For Renewal* in which the

picture has been drawn over to simulate aged film stock.

Frame animation. In *A Spell For Renewal*, a chimera appears to approach and consume a worm, then to continue on its path. This sequence was achieved by creating the chimera and the worm in separate layers in Procreate, then alternating between copying each of these layers and moving them incrementally (Fast, n.d.). Because the piece consists of two characters--the chimera and the worm--and a background, the layers were grouped in such a way that the application could display each layer in every frame of the reel (Figure 5).

Figure 5

Chimera Eats Worm: A Spell For Renewal
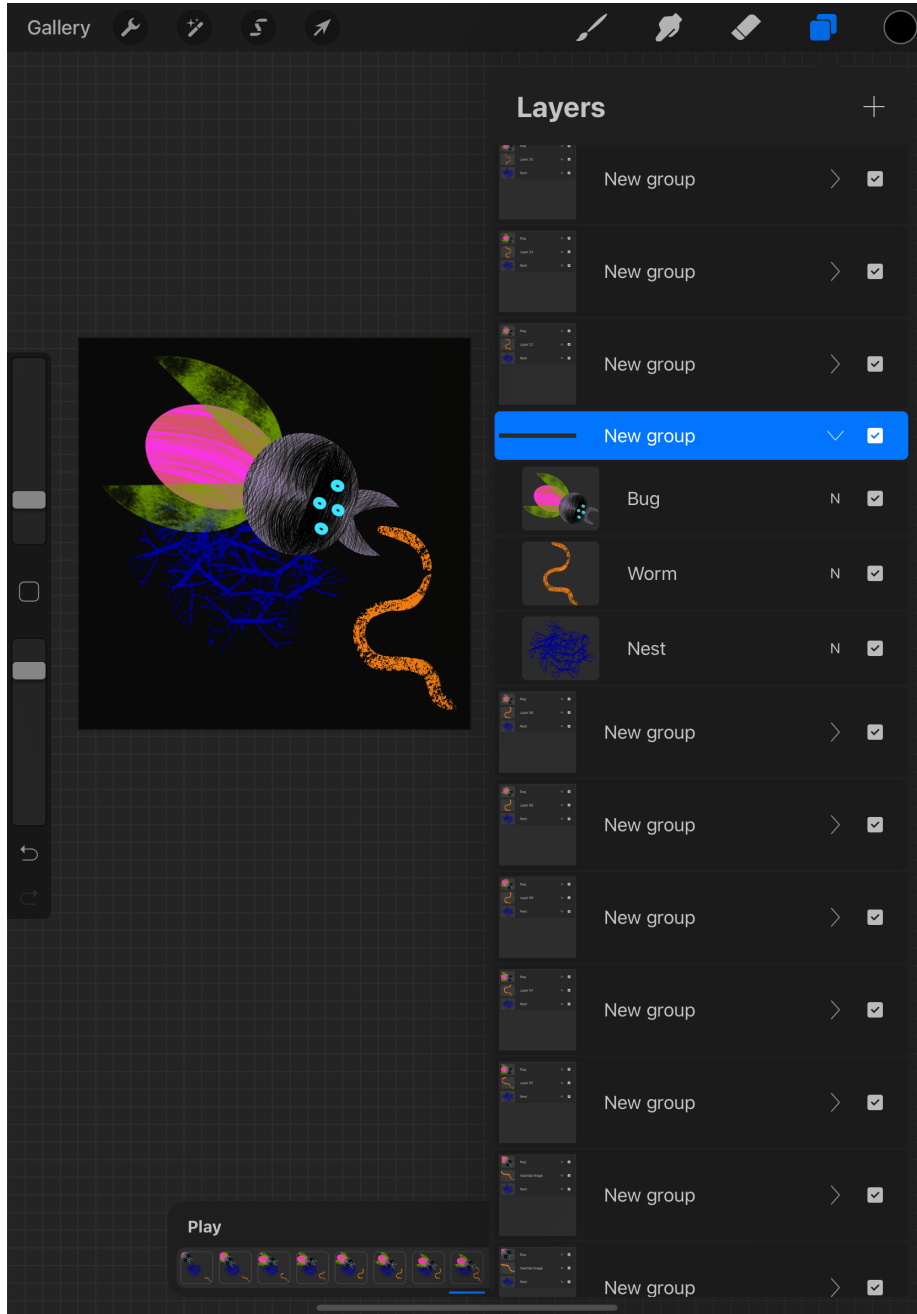
Note. This figure shows the grouping and stacking of separate elements

in a sequence within Procreate's Animation Assist feature.

Similarly, in *A Spell For Writing Well,* the flapping wing was created by drawing a bird's wing with an Apple Pencil, copying this frame and reversing it, repositioning it slightly, then duplicating both frames three times for a total of six frames which were then played on a loop to simulate the rapid movement of a bird's wing in flight (Figure 6).

Figure 6

Flapping Wing: A Spell For Writing Well

Note. This is an image showing six transparent layers in an animated sequence, demonstrating how a drawing of a bird's wing was duplicated, reversed, and adjusted to create the illusion of flapping.

Another example of frame animation used to create visual ephemera can be seen in *A Spell For Success:* In the GIF's introduction, a series of black lines morph into abstract patterns resembling feline faces, then fade over an orange background. This effect was achieved with the Animation Assist function in Procreate by digitally painting an empty layer orange with a noise brush, "drawing" subtractively into this layer with the eraser tool, then copying the layer, painting lightly over the erased lines with the noise brush, and drawing subtractively over this second layer. The process was repeated until thirty four layers in total had been created. The effect is one in which the "ghosts" of previous layers are visible as the sequence loops (Figure 7).
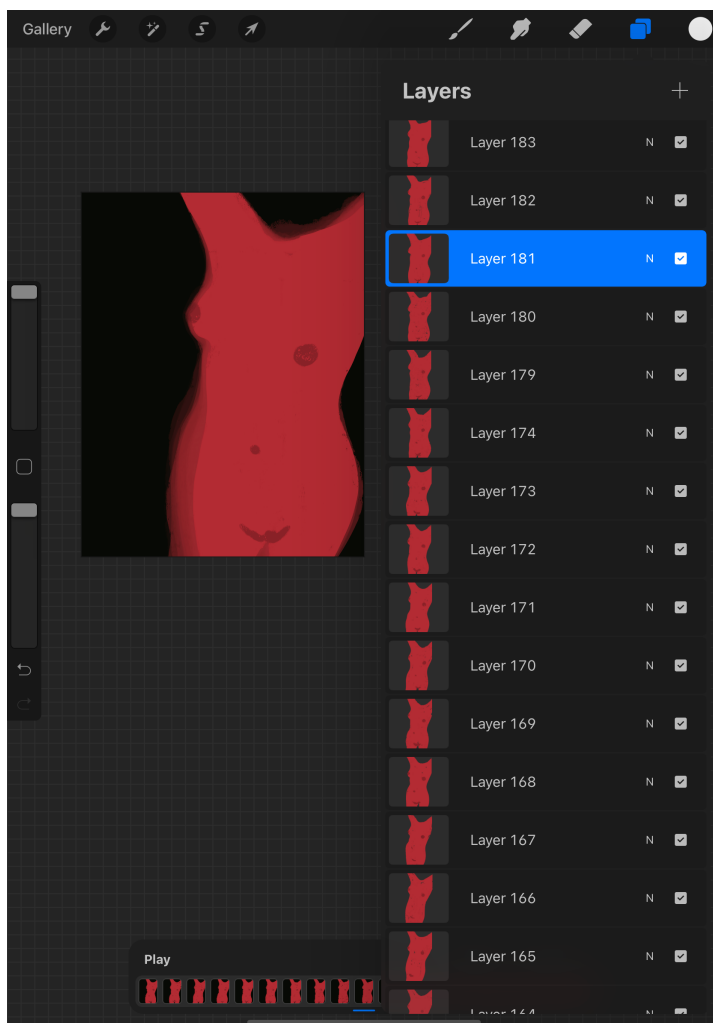
Figure 7

Ghost Image: A Spell For Success

Note. This is a still from an animated sequence in which the "ghosts" of previous frames are visible.

Rotoscoping. To achieve a more naturalistic animated effect, traditional rotoscoping techniques (De Groot, 2019) were used in the creation of the GIFs. In *A Spell For Summoning Courage*, video of a dancing figure was imported to Procreate and rotoscoped by digitally painting over the figure in each frame of the sequence (Figure 8).

Figure 8

Rotoscoped Dancer: A Spell For Summoning Courage

Note. This figure shows a sequence in which footage of a dancer's body has been rotoscoped.

Similarly, in *A Spell For Moving Unseen*, multiple copies of an image of a hand were rotoscoped with paintings of flames. When the loop is played, the flames appear to be flickering on top of the fingers of the static hand (Figure 9).

Figure 9

Rotoscoped Hand of Glory: A Spell For Moving Unseen

Note. This image is a still from a sequence in which flames are rotoscoped over a static hand.

     Sigils. A sigil is a symbol that is understood to possess magical attributes (Zakroff, 2018). Although there are innumerable methods for creating magical sigils, the process for creating the sigils that appear at the end of each spell-GIF was as follows:

1. A magical intention or power phrase was written down. In *A Spell For Summoning Courage*, for example, the chosen power phrase was "COURAGE IGNITE ME."

2. Spaces between letters were eliminated: "COURAGEIGNITEME."

3. Duplicate letters were eliminated. The statement was now "COURAGEINTM."

4. The letters were simplified into basic shapes.

5. The basic shapes were arranged into a symbol or pattern.

6. The finished sigil was "charged" by drawing it on a piece of paper, then burning the paper while picturing courage as a physical substance igniting the body.

7. The sigil was used magically by including it at the end of the spell-GIF.

Editing

     Editing the spell-GIFs was accomplished by stitching together the smaller clips of animations, photos, and video, and using the Photoshop timeline panel in conjunction with Photoshop video editing tutorials (Smith, 2019).

     Timeframes. The GIFs were created between February 1 and April 2 of 2021, and in the following order:

1. *A Spell For Increasing Intuition*

2. *A Spell For Writing Well*

3. *A Spell For Moving Unseen*

4. *A Spell For Renewal*

5. *A Spell For Summoning Courage*

6. *A Spell For Success*

7. *A Spell For Expansion.*

Materials, software, applications, and tutorials. Procreate for the iPad Pro, in concert with the Apple Pencil and an iPhone, were used to create short looping animations containing imagery, textures, patterns, and various visual effects and artifacts. These smaller building blocks of animation and video were then edited together in Photoshop on a MacBook Pro and refined by adding fade-ins and fade-outs and adjusting timing, and assembled into the finished spell-GIFs.

Tutorials for animating in Procreate and editing video in Photoshop were found primarily on YouTube and on Skillshare.com.

Outcome

The completed spell-GIF project consists of seven GIFs loosely inspired by the seven classical planets in antiquity: The Sun, The Moon, Mercury, Venus, Mars, Jupiter, and Saturn (Maunder, 1934). Each GIF contains visual elements and symbols associated through magical correspondences to a given classical planet, and is intended to be used by the practitioner to achieve a specific tangible result (Ronnberg & Martin, 2010).

Chapter 4

Conclusion

The overarching goal of this research was to create a series of magical GIFs which, when viewed while in a magical meditative state by the practitioner and accompanied by symbolic action, were intended to act as spells.

Research Objective 1

The first objective was to define witchcraft. If a spell is "a symbolic action used to harness the powers of the imagination [to] achieve a tangible result (Stanek, 2017)," and if magic and art are one and the same (Vylenz, 2005), an appropriate definition as it applies to this project is as follows: Witchcraft is an array of practical tools for linking the imaginal world to the physical realm.

Research Objective 2

The second objective was to identify the relationship between witchcraft and art practice. Just as artists routinely manipulate and arrange physical objects in order to communicate meaning to a viewer, visual elements in a spell can be similarly manipulated and arranged by practitioners of magic to imbue them with meaning (Yates Garcia, 2016). This juxtaposition of selected visual symbols in a spell can be used to subtly alter a practitioner's state of consciousness to achieve a specific intended result.

Research Objective 3

The third objective was to explore how contemporary witches use technology and visual art in magic. Contemporary witches cast spells, use iPads to draw sigils, share magical memes on social media, and are as likely to use smartphones and emojis as they are to use physical tools such as paper and ink in their magic (Towers, 2015).

Research Objective 4

The fourth objective was to describe best practices for creating animated GIFs. Applications such as GIPHY are excellent for making and customizing quick GIFs from a menu of standardized options (Coomes, 2021), but for creating GIFs from scratch, the most effective tools proved to be Procreate for the iPad Pro, an Apple Pencil, an iPhone, and Photoshop on a MacBook Pro.

Research Objective 5

The fifth objective was to assemble a series of spell-GIFs using magical and practical techniques. Short pieces of animation and special effects were made using Procreate, then were edited and stitched together in Photoshop and exported as GIFs. The creative process was as follows:

1. Divination: Tarot cards were pulled as part of the creative brainstorming process (Greer, 2002).

2. Automatism: Automatic drawing and writing exercises were performed in an effort to generate imagery and concepts for the animations (Cameron, 1992).

3. Creation of Short Loops: Procreate's Animation Assist function was used to make short pieces of animation and visual effects (YouTube, 2019).

4. Stitching and Editing: Creating the spell-GIFs was accomplished by stitching together the smaller clips of animations, photos, and video, and using the Photoshop timeline panel in conjunction with Photoshop video editing tutorials (Smith, 2019).

All seven spell-GIFs can be viewed in their entirety at http://www.erikajohnston.com/this-gif-is-a-spell, and can be used alone or as elements in ritual practice.

Summary

As of this writing, the completed set of seven spell-GIFs represents a unique approach to using digital technology in visual magic, though the creation of the GIFs is part of a tradition in witchcraft—and in art generally—of using and repurposing materials and resources in innovative ways.

To deploy the spell-GIFs magically, a practitioner needs only to use them with intent, which can be accomplished by performing symbolic actions to focus the mind while the GIFs are looping. Suggestions for symbolic actions include lighting a candle, reciting relevant poetry, or simply meditating on an intention that is congruent with the aim of a given spell. Further recommendations are as follows:

- *A Spell For Increasing Intuition:* Lunar magic; Use on a Monday (and for maximum effectiveness, use during a full moon).

- *A Spell For Summoning Courage:* Martian magic: Use on a Tuesday.

- *A Spell For Writing Well:* Mercurial magic: Use on a Wednesday

- *A Spell For Expansion:* Jovian magic: Use on a Thursday.

- *A Spell For Renewal:* Venusian magic: Use on a Friday.

- *A Spell For Moving Unseen:* Saturnian magic: Use on a Saturday.

- *A Spell For Success:* Solar magic: Use on a Sunday (and for or maximum effectiveness, use at high noon).

The construction of the discrete pieces of animation contained within each GIF proved to be the smoothest and most satisfying aspect of the creative process; allowing ideas and images to flow from the ether, into material reality—that is, from the imaginal to the physical—is an

inherently mysterious activity in any context, making it the most compelling element in the author's own art practice. Maintaining organized and consistent files, on the other hand, does not come naturally to the author, which caused avoidable confusion and frustration within the workflow. Given the opportunity to redo the project in its entirety, a good file management system would rank as the most important factor to success.

In retrospect, this project has been instrumental in concretizing for the author the very real connection between art and magic. The project has also compelled the author to view animation as an approachable medium with serious artistic potential, and one that she will further use in her professional work going forward.

The overarching goal of this research was to create a series of GIFs intended to act as spells. These GIFs were brought to fruition through the use of both magical and mundane techniques in tandem, and serve as a reminder that no single method or set of tools is "correct" with regard to witchcraft, as witchcraft is infinitely malleable and individual. In creating GIFs from scratch, the artist must find the tools and creative processes that personally resonate, just as in witchcraft, the witch must discover the tools and creative processes that personally resonate.

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