Imagining the Impossible: International Journal for the Fantastic in Contemporary Media
CFP for Volume 5, Issue 1 (2026)
Theme: Ciphers and Codes

To be published Fall 2026

Fantastic worlds and stories seem to have a deep affinity with ciphers and codes. Sci-fi films such as *Contact* or *Arrival* revolve around deciphering alien messages. Fantasy worlds contain constructed languages or 'conlangs', such as Quenya or Klingon, that can take on a life of their own outside the narrative. Cyberpunk worlds, as in Neal Stephenson's *Snow Crash* or the *Deus Ex* series of videogames, often revolve around hackers who must crack codes in order to learn more about the plot or storyworld. Pervasive games, such as "The Beast" used to promote Steven Spielberg's *AI* or "Why So Serious?" used to promote Christopher Nolan's *The Dark Knight*, rely on posing riddles for networked audiences to solve. Strange messages, conlangs, and codes are clearly valued by creators as techniques for drawing audiences deeper into the storyworld.

Yet we may also read the frequent recurrence of ciphers and codes in the fantastic as a meta-fictional commentary on the genre itself. Part of the intrigue of sci-fi and fantasy storyworlds for audiences is working out their particular rules, what we can expect from technology or magic, and what is explicitly disallowed. Fans often approach a fantastic world in the manner described by Borges in his famous short-story "Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius" (1940), as "a labyrinth forged by men, a labyrinth destined to be deciphered by men." Fans create wikis, pool information, and debate theories of how storyworlds function, the forces that govern them, and how apparent contradictions can be resolved. Is the apparent unity of fantastic worlds less a matter of coherent authorial production and more a result of how audiences read these texts, as individual elements of code that must be deciphered and integrated into a larger whole?

Imagining the Impossible invites articles for its Fall 2026 issue that address issues of ciphers and codes in the fantastic. This international, peer-reviewed journal is dedicated to the interdisciplinary study of the fantastic in today's entertainment media, including film, literature, television, games, comic books, animated films, theme parks, and online forums. The journal is double blind peer reviewed and has 1-2 issues per year. Topics can include but are not limited to:

- Actual ciphers, riddles and codes
- Ciphers and riddles as fictional techniques
- Strange and/or alien messages
- Code as a means of access to a mythical past
- Viruses as narrative elements
- Ciphers and code as meta discussions of interpretation

- Conlangs
- Code-cracking and coding as core game actions in the fantastic
- 'Deciphering' as a metaphor for audience interpretive practices
- Codes, riddles, and rules in young adult fantastic fiction such as in e.g. *The Maze Runner* book and film series
- Translations of ancient or unknown languages, both actual and invented

Length
5000-8000 words, Chicago style (in text), please keep notes to a minimum. Illustrations are welcome, 300 dpi at print size, .jpg. Authors are responsible for all illustration copyrights.

Deadline for Volume 5
Please submit a 500-800 word abstract by December 8, 2025. A first draft article is due by May 1, 2026 with publication in Fall 2026. Articles will be double blind peer-reviewed, edited and published online as they are submitted to the journal.

Please send proposals and questions to the editorial team.

Editorial team
Rikke Schubart, University of Southern Denmark, rcschubart@gmail.com
Stephen Joyce, Aarhus University, sjoyce@cc.au.dk
Christian Mehrstam, University of Gothenburg, christian.mehrstam@lir.gu.se
Per Israelson, Stockholm University, per.israelson@littvet.su.se