Aeternum: The Journal of Contemporary Gothic Studies

Volume 6, Issue 2

EDITORIAL

GWYNETH PEATY
Curtin University

Gothic Games

Video games have called upon the Gothic since the earliest years of digital gaming. This is most obvious in games that remediate classic literature. From the text-based adventure *Dracula* (CRL 1986) and the dubious side-scrolling action of *Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* (Bandai 1988), to more recent examples such as *Brink of Consciousness: Dorian Gray Syndrome* (MagicIndie 2012) and *The Wanderer: Frankenstein's Creature* (La Belle Games 2019), video game creators have consistently adopted and adapted Gothic characters, tropes, and narratives. In some cases the works of a specific author have been used as the foundation of a game space, as in *The Dark Eye* (Inscape 1995), a point-and-click game based on the writings of Edgar Allan Poe. In a less obvious fashion, Gothic motifs are embedded within digital worlds through the construction of dynamic environments that allow players to engage directly with themes such as paralysis, control, repetition, identity, mirroring, temporal fluidity, haunting, death, and alternate realities.

As the articles in this volume help illustrate, video games are not simply another vehicle for Gothic narratives but a form of media uniquely suited to Gothic experiences. "It is usual for characters in Gothic fiction to find themselves in a strange place; somewhere other, different, mysterious," argues John Bowen (2014). What better description of a video game? Playing involves entering a zone with its own special logic, a space where normal rules do not apply and you must quickly adapt to survive. In structure, video games operate similarly to haunted houses; full

of hidden paths and doorways, labyrinthine tunnels, monsters, riddles, and secrets. But there are also elements of games that would seem to contradict or subvert the Gothic mode. Tanya Krzywinska points out that:

> Games and puzzles are built on the notion that there is a solution, a winning condition, and many games that we might easily call Gothic […] are therefore caught up within a polarisation between the normative vocabulary of games, where players are catalysts for redemption, and the intractable sense of loss and entropy that characterises Gothic. (2015, 67)

This point of friction represents an opportunity to deepen our understanding of the texts at hand. Krzywinska goes on to suggest a "specifically Gothic winning condition" can be experienced in games that eschew triumphant endings in favour of more reflective, troubling, or melancholy conclusions. In the first article of this volume, 'Bending Memory: Gothicising nostalgia in *Bendy and the Ink Machine*,' Katharine Hawkins explores one such game; tracing a gameplay experience that ends where it begins, trapping the player in an uncanny, nostalgic loop that elides any hope of confident resolution. In our second article, 'Homecomings: The haunted house in two interactive horror narratives,' Erika Kvistad examines how the open-endedness of game narratives can provide a new way of experiencing this most iconic of Gothic locations. Kvistad argues that games, unlike more linear texts, "have the potential to continue the haunting indefinitely."

The third and fourth articles in this special issue both address the ongoing influence of H. P. Lovecraft in video games, each helping to unpack how literary sources are being translated into dynamic interactive environments. Hilary Wheaton examines *Call of Cthulhu: The Official Video Game* (Cyanide 2018), a text that proclaims its allegiances upfront and depends upon the player's knowledge of an extensive transmedia story-world. Marcelo Velloso Garcia and Vítor Castelões Gama examine *Bloodborne* (2015), a game that is less forthcoming with its origin story and yet, they argue, is modelled upon Lovecraft's 1919 short story *Beyond the Wall of Sleep*.

We conclude the volume with two book reviews. Maria Alberto looks at *Twenty-First-Century Gothic: An Edinburgh Companion*, outlining its diverse and accessible approach to contemporary Gothic, while I review Tracy Fahey's powerful collection of Gothic short stories, *New Music for Old Rituals*. As the blurb of the latter states, these tales "illustrate the pervasive power of the past in the present." This has also emerged as a core theme of this special issue, which showcases how a medium such as video games both reproduces and reimagines the historical Gothic in fresh contexts.

References

Bowen, John. 2014. Gothic motifs. *Discovering Literature: Romantics & Victorians*.
British Library. Accessed December 25, 2019. https://www.bl.uk/romantics-and-victorians/articles/gothic-motifs

Krzywinska, Tanya. 2015. The Gamification of Gothic Coordinates in Videogames.
Revenant 1(1). Accessed December 25, 2019.
http://www.revenantjournal.com/wp-content/uploads/2015/11/Tanya-Krzywinska-The-Gamification-of-Gothic-Coordinates-in-Videogames.pdf

Editor's Details

Dr Gwyneth Peaty is a Lecturer and Research Fellow in the School of Media, Creative Arts and Social Inquiry at Curtin University. She completed a PhD by research in English & Cultural Studies at the University of Western Australia, and her research interests include horror, monstrosity, disability, popular culture, and the Gothic. Gwyneth is Deputy Officer for Australia for the Gothic Association of New Zealand and Australia. She has published in a variety of scholarly collections and is currently working on her first book for University of Wales Press.

E-mail: G.Peaty@curtin.edu.au
Twitter: @peaty_g

KATHARINE HAWKINS
Western Sydney University

Bending Memory:

Gothicising nostalgia in *Bendy and the Ink Machine*

ABSTRACT

This paper examines the ways in which Gothic conventions of uncanniness, displacement and backwards-facing melancholia intersect with the experience of nostalgia; specifically, the appropriated, consumable nostalgia demonstrated in the independent video game Bendy and the Ink Machine (2018), *which utilises anachronistic aesthetics that replicate the 'rubber-hose' animation style of the 1930's. However, the temporal and spatial settings of this games exemplify a nostalgia that is displaced, being ambiguous and divorced from the cultural contexts that its design references. It is argued that the contemporary phenomena of appropriating the de-contextualised and misplaced aesthetics of the past exemplifies Jean Baudrillard's discussions of simulacra and the hypertelic. Furthermore, this work asserts that the aforementioned Gothic tropes that are present within* Bendy and the Ink Machine *makes evident the hyperreal uncanniness provoked by this 'displaced nostalgia'. Through a comparative examination of the ways in which nostalgia, the hypertelic and the Gothic are combined through the narrative and visual design of* Bendy and the Ink Machine, *the Gothic emerges not only as a genre that speaks to patterns of regression and traumatic memories, but also a means of demonstrating and 'making strange' the empty signifiers of video game nostalgia.*

Keywords: Nostalgia, Displacement, Uncanniness, Gothic displacement, hypertelic, Bendy and the Ink Machine, Simulacra.

With its emphasis on repression and the haunting, unavoidable memories of trauma, the Gothic provides an ideal setting for a textual engagement with the past. This presents a unique opportunity for a critique of the desire for nostalgic media – including within video games. There is no shortage of Gothic themes within games like *Bloodborne* (2015), *Bioshock* (2007), and *American McGee's Alice* (2000), where the revenant traumas, repressed memories and uncertain or 'looping' narratives allow for an examination of the ways in which the past is represented. This article will demonstrate how the presence of the Gothic within video games distorts the bittersweet pleasures of nostalgia and renders them uncanny. In this instance, nostalgia is understood as more than a process of fond recollection of the past, but rather what Robin Sloan (2015, 529) describes as "a melancholic longing for a space in time." In this instance, nostalgia – like the Gothic – represents a backwards-facing dislocation from the present.

This discussion also explores the phenomenon of appropriated nostalgia and hyperreal aesthetics within contemporary video games, and how it is affected by the Gothic. Using the 2018 independent video game *Bendy and the Ink Machine* (Kindly Beast) as an exemplar of such an engagement with Gothicised nostalgia, the following asserts that the Gothic tradition represents an irruption of the uncanny, the displaced and the repressed into the realm of rose-tinted memory and commodified nostalgia. By positioning *Bendy and the Ink Machine* as a Gothic text, the significance of nostalgic imagery emerges as more than a quirky or quaint appropriation of bygone aesthetics, but rather makes evident the 'empty signifiers' inherent within these appropriations.

Bendy and the Ink Machine: A Gothic Synopsis

While this paper is primarily concerned with the phenomena of uncanny nostalgia as it relates to video games, it is first pertinent to provide context through a synopsis of *Bendy of the Ink Machine* as a Gothic text. There is already a wealth of literature concerning the ways in which video games – particularly survival horror games – reflect and reproduce elements of the Gothic: Ewan Kirkland's (2013) examination of the *Silent Hill* series being particularly useful in this context.

Bendy and the Ink Machine is a first-person survival horror game developed and published by Kindly Beast studios, initially released in 2017 as free-to-play individual levels (referred to as 'chapters') before being re-released on a variety of platforms as a single game the year later[1]. The game follows protagonist Henry Stein as he attempts to navigate and escape the nightmarish animation workshop of Joey Drew – Henry's former employer, and CEO of Joey Drew Studios. The game begins

---

[1] Note: This discussion is not premised upon the original version of the game that was released as individual chapters. Instead it will refer only to the, self-contained version of *Bendy and the Ink Machine* released in 2018 and played by the author on a PlayStation 4 console.

with Henry returning to the studio after 30 years, having received a mysterious invitation from Drew.

As soon as Henry enters the workshop, it becomes evident that something sinister is afoot. Even before the terrible events that befell the space are revealed, the studio itself replicates many aspects of the classic Gothic setting. Throughout, there is an unsettling suggestion of an unknown, but malevolent presence. The dilapidated studio is filled with discarded equipment, drawings and projectors, as well as posters and cardboard cut-outs of the studio's principle character, Bendy the Dancing Demon. These occasionally move or turn on – seemingly of their own volition. Doors slam, lights switch off, figures are glimpsed disappearing around corners and the Bendy cut-outs appear in the middle of previously empty hallways. Adding to this uncharacterised sense of unease, the studio is labyrinthine and difficult to navigate; producing feelings of disorientation and paranoia that are the hallmarks of a Gothic location (Punter and Byron 2004, 261 -262).

In order to discover what has become of his former colleagues, Henry must make his way through what was once a familiar space; now abandoned and filled with artefacts that offer clues that draw Henry away from the present, regressing back into the terrible events of the past (Kirkland 2013, 112). Through the discovery of a series of recorded statements, Henry discovers that Drew has constructed a strange device called the Ink Machine, which continually leaks ink all over the studio. As the game progresses, it is revealed that the Ink Machine was a conduit for a series of occult rituals to bring the inked cartoon characters to life and generate more income for the studio. The end of the first chapter reveals Bendy as a literal, malevolent demon that has taken over the now ink-flooded workshop.

Each chapter of the game features a different part of the studio that Henry must navigate. From the end of the first chapter, it becomes evident that the studio has been supernaturally altered by the Ink Machine, the space now haunted by its terrible machinations. Its unfortunate employees have also been transformed into wretched hybrids of ink and flesh, their appearances and interactions shift uncomfortably between cartoonish and viscerally life-like. These monstrous transformations, and the subsequent re-appearance and re-appearance of characters and their twisted doppelgangers reflects a relationship between setting and identity, wherein the terrible events that occur within a Gothic setting undermine a character's sense of both time and self (Berthin 2010, 68).

This subjective instability is also exemplified through the game's ambiguous endings. Once the final boss fight with the Demon Bendy is complete, Henry is inexplicably transported to a comfortable-looking lounge room, complete with Bendy posters and memorabilia. Walking into the kitchen, he encounters an elderly Joey Drew, who laments that his obsession with building an animation empire had caused his and Henry's lives to diverge. "Who are we, Henry?" He asks. It is unclear when in the game's timeline this conversation is taking place, or whether this

'version' of Drew is the one that was featured throughout the game, as his recollections seem to contradict the narrative that was just played through. Drew invites Henry to revisit the workshop, and points towards a door. As it opens, Henry re-enters the old workshop, and the game's intro scene replays. The game has reverted back to its origin point: a Gothic 'loop' that prevents both the player and Henry from moving forward from the nightmares that they have encountered (Berthin 2010, 67). As if this were not confusing enough, a mid-credit cut-scene reveals that the entire plot of the game had apparently been a story told by Drew to his young niece. The game ends without a reliable narrator, and the player is left uncertain as to way things 'really' happened.

This narrative unreliability, looping repetitions and the monstrous doubling of characters are all quintessentially Gothic traits that intersect with the uncanny to destabilise conventional experiences of time and identity (Spooner 2006, 51). What is now pertinent to this discussion is the way in which the Gothic elements of *Bendy and the Ink Machine* serve to destabilise conventional experiences of memory and nostalgia.

Nostalgia (for nostalgia's sake) and the Hyperreal

There is already a wealth of literature within game studies concerning the deliberate use of nostalgia in order to signify the values, attributes, or politics of a modern video game. As Robin Sloan (2015) explains, the upswing in gaming nostalgia has facilitated a highly marketable strategy of producing games designed to rekindle memories of games played at a much earlier age. This is particularly present within the amorphous and ill-defined 'indie' label, within which *Bendy and the Ink Machine* exists; Fisher and Harvey (2012, 27) note that indie games such as *Crypt of the Necrodancer*, *Undertale* and *Stardew Valley* adopt an "amateur kitschy style that evokes a homemade aesthetic" as well as "regressive" 8-bit styles that are re-appropriated as a nostalgic celebration of early games culture'. Similarly, Keogh (2015, 153-154) adds that the desire to recall a "golden age" of gaming through the use of nostalgic imagery is a way for smaller studios to make a name for themselves while also keeping their production costs low. Further, Wulf et al. (2018, 61) link the archaic aesthetics of retro-gaming to a desire to return to a 'better' time may be emotional as well as political/economic. Their discussion of video game nostalgia is framed largely in terms of player well-being: the ability to return to a given virtual space – or one that is designed to recreate it – allows players to revisit and revitalise the identities and relationships formed through gaming (62).

However, beyond economic, political or sentimental uses of nostalgia, there are some games that deliberately appropriate anachronistic aesthetics simply on account of the novelty that they confer. The 2017 independent game *Cuphead* (StudioMDHR) takes video game nostalgia to another level (no pun intended). While it does integrate the run-and-shoot playstyle of early platformers like *MegaMan* or *Super Mario Bros*, *Cuphead*'s aesthetics are grounded in the much older 'rubber hose'

style of 1930's Disney and Fleischer cartoons, a time period long before the 'golden age' of video game nostalgia. This concept is described in some detail by Janelle Wilson (2014, 32) who uses Tom Vanderbilt's term 'displaced nostalgia' to describe a longing for a supposed time (and its associated cultural meanings) before a person's birth. Both *Cuphead* and *Bendy and the Ink Machine's* use of 'old timey' aesthetics represent such a displacement; displaying little more than the affectation of a bygone era, rather than meaningful reflections of that time. Indeed, *Cuphead*'s lead inking artist Maja Moldenhauer said of the game's aesthetics, "It's just visuals and that's about it. Anything else happening in that era we're not versed in it" (Cole 2017). Consequently, what arises from both *Cuphead* and *Bendy and the Ink Machine* is a form of nostalgia that is removed from the political/economic/emotional concerns raised by the aforementioned scholars. As Moldenhauer's comments reveal, the only thing recalled is a 'nostalgia of a nostalgia' (Sloan 2015, 527), wherein accurate recollections of period-specific signifiers are replaced by ambiguous representations of the past for consumption within a contemporary environment. The visual designs and world-building of both games carry with them the supposed associations of a by-gone era, but these associations are superficial, and without narrative significance beyond their own self-referential nature.

It is this self-referentiality within video games that Sloan (2015, 535) links to Baudrillard's *Simulacra and Simulation.* Baudrillard (2011, 169) asserts that the newer, consumable simulations that emerge from contemporary replications of the past function to obfuscate their significance within the era that created them. This is a part of a process that he called the hyperreal, wherein the production of nostalgic signifiers within modern media becomes the new point of semiotic reference to the past. Hyperreality is closely related to Baudrillard's notion of the hypertelic, defined in *Fatal Strategies* as the accelerated growth of referential signifiers beyond the objective, to the extent that "telos turns to delirium" (2011, 192). Put more simply, the hypertelic denotes forms of signification (i.e.: nostalgia) that have been produced, reproduced and proliferated at such a rate that they now only imitate, rather than possess meaning.

While this paper makes no particular ethical stance on the presence of hyperreal nostalgia within contemporary media, the introduction of the Gothic may serve to alter its textual implications. A Gothic reading of *Bendy and the Ink Machine* facilitates a recognition of the cognitive dissonance inherent in the 'splitting' between meaning and signifier that is evidenced in *Cuphead*. However, although both games are certainly cut from the same hypertelic cloth, *Bendy and the Ink Machine* sets itself apart through its rapid, Gothic descent into uncanniness and horror. By making evident the artifice of signification through Bendy's de-lineated duality as both a corporate logo and a literal demonic entity; this game allows us to explore a setting that makes no attempt to obfuscate the emptiness of its profligate signifiers, 'making strange' (Bennet and Royle 1999, 37) the phenomena of nostalgia for nostalgia's sake. This is not so much a deliberately critical process as it is a darkly

parodic and uncanny romp through hyperreality that revels in that which is "more false than the false: illusion and appearance" (Baudrillard 2001, 188).

Gothic Nostalgia

According to Sloan (2015, 529), the original definition of nostalgia is grounded in a belief that it belies 'extreme homesickness': a psychosomatic malady characterised by melancholia and feelings of spatial displacement. Although this is an antiquated definition, its etymology remains relevant within a discussion of the Gothic and its intersection with uncanniness and a fixation on the past. Indeed, in *Contemporary Gothic*, Catherine Spooner (2006, 10) describes the Gothic as "profoundly concerned with its own past." She asserts that in comparison to other genres, "Gothic has a greater degree of self-consciousness about its nature, cannibalistically consuming the dead body of its own tradition" (ibid). From this visceral description, the consumption of nostalgic signifiers within contemporary media takes on a particularly ghoulish aspect that is at odds with Wulf et al. (2013) and David Heineman's (2014, 9) observation that the act of seeking out signifiers of our past through nostalgic media is a way to emotionally connect to a supposedly 'better' past.

Part of the appeal of games like *Cuphead* is that the twee, appropriated 'old-timey' aesthetics could simply be interpreted as representing a more innocent time; an assumption that *Bendy and the Ink Machine* exploits through associating these styles and settings with unsettling or outright terrifying circumstances. The most obvious example of this is the cartoon image of Bendy himself. In cartoon form, he resembles early iterations of Mickey Mouse: bearing a c-shaped grin, over-sized white gloves and a rounded, non-threatening body. Bendy's image is omnipresent throughout the game, often in the form of cardboard cut-outs and posters displayed throughout the studio. As the terrible events of the game progress, what ought to be a benign cartoon character consequently becomes an oppressive presence; one feels themselves being 'watched' by the cutesy, ever-smiling cartoon (Kindly Beast 2018). The aesthetics of a bygone, 'better' age that *Bendy and the Ink Machine* appropriates become linked to terror and vulnerability rather than longing.

Indeed, the past to which Gothic narratives typically refer is almost always one of trauma, begetting an inability to move forward (Berthin 2010, 67), as demonstrated through the game's non-linear, 'looping' endings. What this suggests is that there is a distinction between the melancholia of nostalgia that Heineman and Sloan identify, and that of Gothic nostalgia. Even the term 'Gothic nostalgia' may be understood by some scholars as oxymoronic: Wilson (2014, 27) maintains that since nostalgia always entails a degree of longing for the past, the concept of 'negative nostalgia' (that is, the longing for a sad or traumatic past) cannot possibly exist. Perhaps it is more accurate to say that Gothicised nostalgia differs from Wilson's definition in that it is not so much a longing for, as much as it is a romanticised or obsessive dwelling upon the past that provokes such an affective melancholia.

The Gothic and the Uncanny

The presence of the uncanny is a well-established trope within both traditional and modern iterations of the Gothic, comprising elements of displacement, repression, looping and even death (Punter and Byron 2004, 283), all of which are present within *Bendy and The Ink Machine.* In *The Uncanny*, Sigmund Freud (223) defines the phenomena in terms of liminality - an incursion of strangeness into the realm of the familiar. In order to properly delineate the aesthetic experience of uncanniness from that of outright terror (Freud 281), he gives a detailed explanation of the German etymology that describes the phenomena in terms of feeling ill at ease within the realm of the familiar. Freud explains that the term *der heimlich* broadly refers to the comforting sensation of being at home, as opposed to *der unheimlich* which is what ought to remain hidden and unfamiliar – the feeling of being 'not at home' (Freud 1919, 239). However, Freud is also careful to make the point that uncanniness is not merely the binary opposite of *der heimlich,* as this term also functions as its own antonym, wherein *der heimlich* becomes *der unheimlich*; signifying both canny familiarity and uncanny displacement simultaneously (Freud 1919, 223). Joey Drew Studios ought to be a place that provokes fond (if bittersweet) memories for Henry. However, as the Gothic elements of the game unfold, the 'homeliness' of the familiar space becomes tainted, even as he reminisces while exploring.

Sloan (2016, 213) notes that players of horror video games experience feelings of uncanniness when confronted with their unconscious fears: the confrontation with a double, compulsive repetition and the revenant, infantile animism that Freud (1919, 236) describes in terms of *der unheimlich.* Freud's emphasis upon 'infantile animism' is particularly interesting within the context of a discussion of a video game about an uncanny cartoon character. Freud (1919, 231) described animism in terms of a 'childish' belief in an inherent life-force within non-living things – supposedly a remnant of 'primitive' human spirituality. As adults, we 'know' that a cartoon character is merely a drawing on a piece of paper. And yet, Bendy exists as both a literal demon given life by the Ink Machine *and* through the aforementioned scrutiny suggested by the ubiquitous repetition of his image. There is a peculiar visual/narrative pun here: the animism that provokes uncanniness within a hitherto familiar setting is in and of itself a literal animation.

Sloan (2016, 214) explains that identifying uncanny elements within video game architecture is also reliant upon the cultural knowledge of a given place. For both Henry and the player, the discovery of the events that lead to Demon Bendy being brought to life are a crucial part of the uncanny terror of the studio. Such spatial uncanniness serves to heighten the growing sense of fear and panic when a player navigates a space initially designed to provoke nostalgia (Sloan 2016, 215), as evidenced through the disorientation, paranoia and hopelessness engendered by the Gothic setting of Joey Drew's workshop. This is demonstrated both through the

confusing navigation of the space, but also in small interactive elements embedded within the environment. For example, one particularly unsettling moment at the beginning of the game shows an animator's desk with a drawing of cartoon Bendy. If the player turns away and looks back three times, Bendy's pose and expression changes. There are multiple 'jump scares' throughout the game, where one of the cardboard cut-outs of Bendy will unexpectedly appear in the scene; falling through doorways, 'glancing' around corners or simply being 'placed' by unknown forces where it had not been previously.

These location-specific events are not simply jump-scares designed to startle the player; they replicate the impression that the player is entirely at the mercy of unseen, trauma-induced forces that have marked the studio as a Gothic territory. The subsequent confusion and ambiguity of the space decentres the player from a privileged or empowered position within the narrative, recalling Punter and Byron's (2006, 262) assertion that a Gothic location, "figures loss of direction, the impossibility of imposing one's own sense of place on an alien world." Spooner (2006, 51) links the decentring effects of the Gothic space with the uncanny, explaining that within such a setting, "one is only permitted to comprehend one's surroundings, to feel the comfort of recognition, once one has reached a position guaranteed to provoke a sense of otherness and personal risk." To engage with such a space, she continues, is to be at a subjective *and* spiritual disadvantage.

While Sloan (2016, 212) is careful to stipulate that there is a distinct dichotomy between the experiences of nostalgia and the uncanny, a sneaky caveat emerges when one considers that the hyperreal nostalgia present in *Bendy and the Ink Machine* and *Cuphead* is not the same as the longing for an actual past. If we understand uncanniness as the re-emergence of outdated signifiers that have been surmounted and resigned to the past, then the hyperreal evocation of those signifiers by a contemporary medium suggests a level of uncanniness. Through this logic, both *Cuphead* and *Bendy and the Ink Machine* may be described as uncanny. However, the uncanniness of one is not the same as that of the other. *Bendy and the Ink Machine* replicates a nostalgia that is ambiguous and self-referential, but it would also be overly simplistic to confine it wholly within Sloan's (530) description of commodified/consumed nostalgia. This is not a game that seeks to capitalise on the fond memories of players, nor on the novelty of the de-contextualised aesthetics of a bygone era, as is the case of the smooth, consistent visual style of *Cuphead*. It is arguable that a part of the success of *Cuphead* is how completely the 1930's aesthetic is integrated into the design of the game: as an artistic product the signifier is empty, but the mask remains intact.

By contrast, the artifice inherent within *Bendy and the Ink Machine* is exaggerated and grotesque to the point where it occasionally appears jarringly discordant. From an early point in the game's narrative, the cognitive dissonance provoked by the awkward juxtapositions between animation styles is striking. While the environment of the workshop resembles a cartoonish diorama, with thick, inky

lines drawn over off-white cardboard-like surfaces; the appearances of NPCs (non-player characters) like Sammy Lawrence are rendered in a much more realistic 3D fashion. There is no integration between the modern and archaic animation styles; their awkward incongruence speaking to the artifice that Spooner (2006, 32-33) maintains is a hallmark of a Genre that is continually anachronistically appropriating elements of its own past. This strange aesthetic inconsistency gives the impression that these characters are out of sync – physically and temporally – with the environment and setting of the game**.** These unsettling, liminal elements present within *Bendy and the Ink Machine* represent a confluence of the uncanny and the hyperreal that trouble the "daylight, quotidian certainties" of the normative and everyday (Punter and Byron 2004, 286).

This uncanniness is not limited solely to the aesthetic design of the characters, it is also evident within the phenomena of 'doubling' and doppelgangers. Throughout the game supporting characters Boris the Wolf and Alice Angel consistently appear and re-appear in different incarnations of the same individuals – all with different names, appearances and motivations. Elaborating on her previous description of the Gothic as 'cannibalistic,' Spooner (2006, 11-12) asserts that such inconsistent revivals "imply a reappropriation and reinvention of previous forms, rather than a straightforward repetition." This is most evident in the depiction of Twisted Alice, a distorted version of the cartoon character Alice Angel brought to life by the Ink Machine. In the third chapter it is hinted that this version of Alice may once have been the original voice actress for Alice Angel who became jealous after being replaced. She is eventually dispatched by Allison Angel, another version of the same character.

These doublings merit the obvious comparisons to *Doctor Jekyll and Mr. Hyde,* however the gendered dynamic present in this example also recalls traits of the female Gothic (Kirkland 2013, 112) that are best exemplified in *Jane Eyre.* The rivalry between 'monstrous' and 'angelic' versions of the same woman reproduces what John Fletcher (1995, 46) describes as the "uncanny as doubling relation between the youthful protagonist and the older woman." This 'uncanny as doubling' that Fletcher identifies is a common convention within Gothic traditions, and is exemplified through patterns of repetition, regression, looping and the aforementioned presence of doppelgangers and doubles (Punter et al. 2004, 283 - 284). Subsequently, the Gothic's emphasis on revenant memories and the horrors that they entail affords an opportunity to examine the uncanniness of nostalgia

Looking Backwards: Gothic Repetition and uncanny nostalgia

While Sloan (2016, 530) maintains that nostalgia may occasionally function as a reflective tool that allows for a more critical or informed outlook for the present, an intersection with the Gothic produces a far more melancholic aspect. As mentioned in the opening synopsis, this melancholia is no less present in Gothic video games

than in more traditional media. Kirkland (2013, 113) states that Gothic representations of the past are ideally suited to the gameplay of survival horror games like the *Silent Hill* franchise, where the player must explore an abandoned or dilapidated environment in order to piece together left-behind clues and discover the 'secret' of a mysterious past. This re-discovery represents an interaction with the past that is more likely to provoke dread or sadness than critical reflection. As Victor Sage and Allan Lloyd Smith assert, "The Gothic is the perfect anonymous language for the peculiar unwillingness of the past to go away" (1996, 4). The link between the backwards-facing nature of the Gothic and the melancholia of nostalgia are made even more evident by Svetlana Boym (2001, xv), who describes nostalgia as "a rebellion against the modern idea, the time of history and progress. The nostalgic desires to obliterate history and turn it into private or collective mythology to revisit time like space."

In both the *Silent Hill* games and *Bendy and the Ink Machine*, players are obliged to "revisit time like space" in order to progress through the games' narratives. *Bendy and the Ink Machine*'s engagement with traumatic pasts represent more than mere 'nostalgia for nostalgias sake'. The 'home' that is longed for through melancholic, 'backwards nostalgia' is no longer the realm of the familiar: it is – as Freud would have it – the *heimlich* as its own discomforting antonym. The longing for bygone days has become uncanny through the piecing together of "embedded narrative fragments" (Kirkman 2013, 113).

David Punter and Glennis Byron (2004, 284) describe Gothic repetition as a fairly broad set of phenomena, including deja-vu, doubling, doppelgangers and the return of the revenant repressed – all of which are present in the narrative and visual design of *Bendy and the Ink Machine.* While the instances of Gothic repetition will differ from text to text, they all demonstrate what Christine Berthin (2010, 67) refers to as a "distortion of chronology". Be it a supernatural revelation of a traumatic past, the recollection of repressed memories or the obsessive fixation upon a by-gone trauma: a Gothic protagonist is incapable of moving beyond their 'haunted' past.

While there are no 'ghosts' per se in *Bendy and the Ink Machine,* it is nonetheless a setting that is haunted by the spectre of Bendy, a manifestation borne of the violence visited upon its setting. As Kirkland has already shown, the discovery of objects from the past within a rediscovered site of trauma produces a Gothic uncanniness that blurs the delineation between the past and the present. This is no fond recollection of mementos, but a revenant incursion of a terrible event into the here-and-now: a Gothicised form of nostalgia wherein a subject in the present is not wistful, but haunted. This relationship between haunting and temporal delineation is deepened through a Gothic application of Jacques Derrida's notion of hauntology. In *Specters of Marx*, Derrida describes the apparition of a ghost or spectre as that which is 'without origin'; a dislocation of an event from its mooring within a set position in linear time and space. He explains that the revenant nature of such a haunting becomes paradoxical, given that an entity from the past cannot 'return' to a

present to which it never belonged (Derrida 1994, 10-11)**.** Such spectral displacement is writ large within the Gothic tradition of temporal loops and revenant ghosts; and continues within contemporary media such as video games. As Spooner asserts:

> With new media and their pluralised, networked selves (all at once gestural, haptic, spoken, visual, textual, simultaneously dis-and-re-embodied), ghosts are traces of previous media formations and prior senses of (mediated) selfhood, belatedly visible, shadowy, both after-effects and after-affective." (2015, 6)

The ghostly recollections of former technologies, semiotics and media formations that Spooner describes are apt exemplars for the experience of video game nostalgia and retro-gaming, particularly within a Gothic context.

The temporal displacement that the hauntological represents is a crucial element within the Gothic, especially when said displacement is the product of an unacknowledged or repressed trauma. According to Valdine Clements (1999, 4), the repression of trauma has the capacity to disrupt the everyday through the development of "cumulative energy that demands its release and forces it into the realm of visibility where it must be acknowledged." When Clements' assertion is understood in conjunction with Berthin's (2010, 67-68) aforementioned 'chronological distortion', a Gothic pattern of 'looping' emerges whereby a repressed experience of violence, terror or death creates a temporal displacement wherein a character is incapable of moving past a repressed, yet revenant trauma.

As explained in the synopsis, the 'first' ending of the game shifts Henry back to the very beginning of the first chapter. In the preceding conversation, Drew mournfully declares that the characters he and Henry created stripped him of his sense of self; his meaning doubled in that it could refer to the lifetime spent building an animation empire, or to the supernatural events of the game. He admonishes Henry for not encouraging him away from his eventual downfall before showing him to the door that leads back to the workshop. Consequently, the narrative loop that returns Henry to the game's beginning is not only an uncanny temporal disruption, but it is also a quite literal exemplar of the relationship between trauma, chronological distortion and selfhood that Berthin (2010, 67) defines. Drew's request to visit the studio carries with it an implicit plea for Henry 'fix' the narrative and move beyond the trauma wrought by the Ink Machine. All the same, the Gothic ouroboros remains unbroken, and Henry repeats his opening lines: "All right Joey, I'm here. Let's see if I can find what you wanted me to see" (Kindly Beast 2018). The temporal and subjective muddling that arises from this Gothic loop cannot be resolved within a normative assemblage of linear, forward-facing narratives, nor of optimistic, stable notions of 'self'. Consequently, within the modern video game setting of *Bendy and the Ink Machine* we may observe the unusual yet recognisable presence of conventions that have haunted the plots of Gothic literature for centuries.

Baudrillard and the production of Gothic Signifiers

Understood in this sense, the literal return of the repressed through the influence of the demonic Bendy is more than an instance of a Gothic trope, it also represents a liminal incursion into the logics of Baudrillard's phenomenon of the hypertelic and hyperreal signifiers. This is precisely on account of the liminal nature of Bendy's character: simultaneously a cutesy, consumable cartoon simulacrum of a demon *and* the actual malign manifestation of repressed trauma. From an early point in the game, the delineation between these two versions of Bendy is complicated. Initially, Bendy existed only as a cartoon demon with no inherent meaning of his own, save for the (literally inscribed) surface-level implications assigned to him by his animators and the faux nostalgia that is imbued within the game's visual design. However, through supernatural forces, Bendy is conjured into a state of existence that is beyond mere signification. What was once simply an aesthetic 'sign' has now gained its own material reality that transcends both the physical and ontological boundaries of its two-dimensional origins - effectively reversing Baudrillard's notion of the hypertelic. Rather than an empty, cartoonish signifier that merely simulates meaning, Bendy becomes an entity that has gained meaning through a manifestation of revenant, repressed trauma. Thus, the irony inherent in *Bendy and the Ink Machine* lies within the semiotic de-lineation between Baudrillard's notions of objective meaning and the hypertelic. What was initially designed as an abstraction of the concept of a demon – cute, domesticated and contained within the 2D realm of a cartoon – is literally transformed into the form of a malevolent demon that gains sentience outside of the auspices of human conception and control.

Here is where Gothicised nostalgia intersects with Baudrillard's critical analyses of the production and proliferation of consumable signifiers. The game's narrative is contingent upon Bendy's transformation from twee, commodified signifier to an uncategorised and dangerous entity that signifies the looming death of the player-protagonist. Bendy is both a Gothic manifestation of repressed human fear and trauma, as well as a disorienting perversion of Baudrillard's aforementioned theories; wherein the empty signifier (cartoon Bendy) becomes "more real than real" (Baudrillard 2011, 188) through the catastrophic auspices of a literal machine. Understood through Baudrillard's description of machines as the means of production and consequently the producers of empty signifiers that elude both meaning and identity (2011, 126-127), Joey Drew's use of the Ink Machine to generate profit demonstrates "the social relation of death upon which capital thrives" (140). Put more simply, as a signifier produced by the Ink Machine through the exploitation of the studio's employees, the Demon Bendy represents the intensified ambiguity of signs that perpetuates both a capitalist economy, as well as the death of object, meaning and self.

This culminates in the ultimate Gothic loop: not on account of Henry's implied return to the beginning of the game, but also because for Baudrillard the

only viable strategy to oppose hyperreality entails (2011, 126), "a science fiction about the system returning to destroy itself, at the extreme limit of simulation." As the game ends, it is revealed that although Bendy has supposedly been destroyed by the literal (and symbolic) playing of his own 'end reel', the illusion of objective reality and meaning continues: the production of empty signifiers continues until Bendy's 'death' (that most Gothic of processes) delivers it to the very place where it began, and will begin again.

Conclusion: The Gothic Video Game as Demon-strative

As previously stated, the theme of revenant repression is a common theme within Gothic traditions and is consequently reflected in video games that employ Gothic elements. However, in the instance of games like *Bendy and the Ink Machine,* the confluence of Gothic repetition and the presence of nostalgic signifiers (even ambiguous or empty ones) reveals the paradox of Wilson's 'backwards nostalgia'. According to Sean Fenty (2008, 27), video games have the capacity to represent the past in any way that a player desires to remember it through their 'presence' within an imagined past, and therefore their potential to play (or replay) that past – no matter how harrowing. Indeed, it is this possibility of playing through the signifiers of trauma that may offer an opportunity to properly acknowledge and understand them, even if that process is one that provokes sadness or fear, rather than resilience. This paper suggests that the popularity of games that replicate Gothicised nostalgia – and the revenant horrors therein – actually exemplify what Wilson claims is impossible: the desire to revisit and engage with pasts that are haunted by trauma.

What is most evident, however, is that this process of engagement with the melancholia of Gothicised nostalgia actually offers an opportunity to re-evaluate our relationship with the past. By combining the hypertelic and Gothicised nostalgia within an uncanny and hyperreal space, *Bendy and the Ink Machine* makes monstrously evident the ways in which we make sense of our troubled histories. By reading the game as a Gothic text, Henry's return and re-return to the nightmarish setting of the workshop presents us with an uncanny engagement with the events and semiotics of the past. The blending of hypertelic aesthetics with temporal displacement and revenant trauma makes a gloomy sport of saccharine, consumable nostalgia, and begs the question of what we *want* to remember, and what we wish we could leave behind.

References

Baudrillard, Jean. 2011. *Jean Baudrillard: Selected Writings (2nd Edition),* edited by Mark Poster, 188-209. Stanford: Stanford University Press.

Bennet, Andrew and Royle, Nicholas. 1999. *Introduction to Literature, Criticism and Theory (2nd Edition).* London: Prentice-Hall.

Berthin, Christine. 2010. *Gothic Hauntings. Melancholy Crypts and Textual Ghosts.* United Kingdom: Palgrave Macmillan.

Boym, Svetlana. 2001. *The Future of Nostalgia.* New York: Basic Books.

Clements, Valdine. 1999. *The Return of the Repressed: Gothic Horror From the Castle of Otranto to Alien.* New York: State University of New York Press.

Cole, Yussef. 2017. "Cuphead and the Racist Spectre of Fleischer Animation." Accessed July 29, 2019. https://unwinnable.com/2017/11/10/cuphead-and-the-racist-spectre-of-fleischer-animation/

Derrida, Jacques. 1994. *Specters of Marx.* New York: Routledge.

Fenty, Shaun. 2008. "Why old school is "cool": A brief analysis of classic video game nostalgia." In *Playing the Past: History and Nostalgia in Video Games,* edited by Laurie Taylor and Zack Whalen, 19 -31.

Fisher, Stephanie, and Harvey, Alison. 2013. "Intervention for Inclusivity: Gender Politics and Indie Game Development." *Loading…The Journal of the Canadian Game Studies Association*, 7(11): 25-40.

Fletcher, John. 1995. "Primal Scenes and the Female Gothic: Rebecca and Gaslight." *Screen,* 36 (4): 341-370.

Freud, Sigmund. 1919. '*The Uncanny': The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud, Volume XVII (1917-1919): An Infantile Neurosis and Other Works,* 217-256. London: Hogarth Press and the Institute of Psycho-Analysis, 1958.

Heineman, David. 2014. "Public Memory and Gamer Identity: Retrogaming as Nostalgia."*Journal of Games Criticism, 1.* Accessed August 20, 2019. http://gamescriticism.org/articles/heineman-1-1/.

Keogh, Brendan. 2015. "Between Triple-A, Indie, Casual, and DIY: Sites of tension in the videogame cultural industries." In *The Routledge Companion to the Cultural Industries*, edited by Kate Oakley and Justin O'Connor, 152-162. New York: Routledge.

Kindly Beast. 2018. *Bendy and the Ink Machine*. Kindly Beast/Rooster Teeth Games. Video game.

Kirkland, Ewan. 2013. "Gothic videogames, survival horror and the Silent Hill series." *Gothic Studies,* Vol. 14(2): 108-122.

Punter, David, and Byron, Glennis. 2004. *The Gothic*. Massachusetts: Blackwell Publishing.

Sage, Victor, and Allan Lloyd-Smith. 1996. *Modern Gothic: A Reader.* Manchester: Manchester University Press.

Sloan, Robin. 2015. "Videogames as Remediated Memories: Commodified Nostalgia and Hyperreality in Far Cry 3: Blood Dragon and Gone Home." *Games and Culture,* Vol. 10(6): 525-550.

Sloan, Robin. 2016. "Homesick for the Unheimlich: Back to the uncanny future in Alien: Isolation." *Journal of Gaming and Virtual Worlds,* Vol.8(3): 211-230.

Spooner, Catherine. 2006. *Contemporary Gothic.* London: Reaktion Books Ltd.

Spooner, Catherine. 2015. "Introduction. Gothic in Contemporary Popular Culture." In *Monstrous Media/Spectral Subjects: Imaging Gothic Fictions from the nineteenth century to the present.* Manchester: Manchester University Press.

Stengel, Ellen Power. "Edith Wharton Rings "The Lady's Maid's Bell"". *Edith Wharton Review*, vol. 7(1): 3-9.

Wilson, Janelle. 2014. *Nostalgia: Sanctuary of Meaning.* Minnesota: University of Minnesota Publishing.

Contributor Details

Katharine Hawkins received her Doctoral thesis from Macquarie University in 2019 and is now continuing her research into the intersecting fields of the Gothic, feminism and Monster theory. Her recent writing focusses around the relationship between the Monstrous Feminine and rage, the resurgence of the archetype of the Witch within contemporary feminism, as well as gothic tropes within indie-video games and film. Katharine spent five years teaching sociology, gender studies and criminology before beginning work at the Western Sydney University Library. She currently lives in Sydney with two black cats and the spectre of her student debt.

Email: k.hawkins@westernsydney.edu.au
Twitter: @TheLadyLycan

ERIKA KVISTAD
University of South-Eastern Norway

Homecomings: The haunted house in two interactive horror narratives

ABSTRACT

This article explores the use of anachronism and repetition in two haunted-house game narratives: Michael S. Gentry's Anchorhead *(1998), a Lovecraftian interactive fiction game, and Kitty Horrorshow's environmental narrative game* Anatomy *(2016). While neither of the houses that the narratives centre on contain literal ghosts, in an only slightly wider sense they are both haunted: they are spaces that hold a hidden trauma, and spaces in which time becomes strange, subject to repetitions.*

Gothic haunted-house stories tend to hold out the hope that once the trauma is recalled, once the secret is discovered, once the ghost is confronted and its story told, both the narrative itself and the haunting repetitions can find closure and come to an end. But even as these two game narratives make use of their perhaps intentionally frustrating gameplay to put the player in the same peculiarly Gothic position as the games' protagonists - disoriented, isolated and questioning their own perceptions - their open-endedness gives them the potential to use this narrative feature in an even more unsettling way: it gives them the potential not to end. While Anchorhead *does have an ending from the player's perspective, although one haunted by continued repetition for the game's protagonist,* Anatomy *refuses any closure at all, leaving the player themselves trapped in the game's haunted space and damaged time.*

Keywords: haunted houses, game narratives, remediation, repetition, anachronism

You may not remember where you have seen this scene before, but you probably recognise it, or at least something like it: we see a car coming up to a house that looms at the end of the drive, a shadowy presence in the midst of late-afternoon sunlight. A small child leaps out of the back seat, followed by the family dog. The parents are at the tail end of some minor argument; their teenager is on her phone, annoyed at having to move to the middle of nowhere. One of the parents, mildly stressed but smiling, says to the other: "This will be a fresh start for our family." They move into the gloom of the house. For an instant something flickers in the upstairs window - was that a distorted face? - barely glimpsed by the teenager, who frowns before returning to her phone. The dog hesitates on the doorstep, whines softly, then follows the family inside. Watching, we know that the fresh start is in fact a decaying repetition.

In Jerrold Hogle's introduction to the Gothic, he lists an array of spaces where a Gothic narrative might play out:

> a castle, a foreign palace, an abbey, a vast prison, a subterranean crypt, a graveyard, a primeval frontier or island, a large old house or theatre, an aging city or urban underworld, a decaying storehouse, factory, laboratory, public building, or some new recreation of an older venue, such as an office with old filing cabinets, an overworked spaceship, or a computer memory. (Hogle 2006, 2)

In Gothic narratives, what these spaces have in common is that they are "antiquated or seemingly antiquated", and that they conceal "some secrets from the past […] that haunt the characters, psychologically, physically, or otherwise at the main time of the story" (2). Hogle's old-new list, and the suggestive phrase "seemingly antiquated," emphasise that Gothic space is inherently anachronistic. Time becomes strange within such spaces, subject to repetitions; the past may only seemingly be past. The haunted house could be described as only "seemingly antiquated" - a space where the past becomes all too relevant in the present - but in many narratives it could also be described as only seemingly *new.* This might be literal, as in the very common trope of the new-built house that turns out to sit atop a (in the US, often American Indian) burial ground. Or it could be figurative, as in the house that turns out not to be a family's fresh start after all, a trope that comes up frequently in fiction (a few recent examples are *American Horror Story* (2011), *The Haunting of Hill House* (2018), *The Conjuring* (2013), *The Amityville Horror* (2005) and *Pet Sematary* (2019)), but that can even impose itself on reality. "One family hoped their new home might bring a fresh start" is the first line of the article "The Ghosts of Pickering Trail," in which a family notice, after a loss, that their house "feels different" and decide to move - to a new home that they then experience as haunted (Hunt and Wolfe 2015).

The idea that repetition is a sign of trauma, and specifically a sign of a hidden or forgotten trauma, finds an early articulation in Sigmund Freud's concept of the repetition compulsion. In "Remembering, Repeating and Working-Through," he

argues that we repeat the things we cannot bring ourselves to remember, the things that have become secrets from ourselves: "we may say that the patient does not remember anything of what he has forgotten and repressed, but acts it out. He reproduces it not as a memory but as an action; he repeats it, without, of course, knowing that he is repeating it" (Freud 1914, 149). For Freud, while the act of remembering is not necessarily itself enough to make this cycle stop, the beginning of treatment is recognising the repetition *as* a repetition and "tracing it back to the past" (151).

However far this applies to human psychology, it is exactly the logic of haunted house narratives. Discussing the ways in which the psychoanalytic and the occult run into each other, psychoanalyst Adam Phillips agrees with his interviewer, Harvey Blume, that "repetition compulsion" might be "a psychoanalytic way of talking about what simply used to be called a curse" (Blume 1997). An even closer synonym might be 'a haunting'. Haunted house narratives tend to present an expectation that once the trauma is recalled, once the secret is discovered, once the ghost is confronted and its story told, both the narrative itself and the haunting repetition can find closure. These narratives are about spaces where time works strangely or badly, where it runs off track or gets stuck, and the hope they hold is that this glitch will be fixed and allow time to move smoothly again. Often this happens, although sometimes the hope is denied: in Susan Hill's *The Woman in Black,* for instance, uncovering the haunted house's buried trauma provides only a short reprieve before the ghost returns with life-wrecking force. But however unsatisfying and painful it is, we as readers do get *an ending* to the story, as the narrator cuts us off sharply: "They have asked for my story. I have told it. Enough" (Hill 1983, 235).

This article will explore two Gothic narratives, both of which are digital games: Michael S. Gentry's *Anchorhead* (1998), a Lovecraftian interactive fiction game, and Kitty Horrorshow's environmental narrative game *Anatomy* (2016). (*Anchorhead* was rereleased in an illustrated version in 2018 with minor changes to the script and gameplay; this article uses the 1998 version.) Of course, many games open up Gothic domestic spaces for the player; I have chosen to look more closely at these two in particular because they are examples of two different and telling ways of using a strange relationship with time for Gothic purposes. Each of these narratives centres on a house, and while neither contains any literal ghosts, in an only slightly wider sense they are both haunted: they are spaces that hold trauma, and spaces in which time quirks and glitches and repeats. Here, I want to trace these narratives' Gothic use of anachronism and repetition, but also to suggest that the open-endedness of game narratives gives them the potential to use this narrative feature in an even more unsettling way: it gives them the potential *not to end*.

My discussion draws on Tanya Krzywinska's work on agency and helplessness in horror video games, and on her argument that players of horror games experience periods of control and periods of loss of control, "creating a dynamic rhythm between self-determination and pre-determination" (Krzywinska

2002, 207). Where Andrew Darley describes the player's experience of a loss of agency as a generic limitation of video games (Darley 2000, 157), Krzywinska argues that this oscillation between the experience of agency and control and the experience of "helplessness in the face of an inexorable predetermined force" is artistically productive, a crucial element in how these games create their sense of horror (2002, 211). But where Krzywinska focuses on cut-scenes, fairly clearly delineated periods in which control is "wrested" from the player, the games I will discuss interweave experiences of agency and helplessness throughout. Specifically, in both games, elements of 'bad' gameplay - hard-to-navigate environments, repetitive movement through the same space, frustratingly limited options, and, in *Anchorhead*, the possibility of silent failure - put the player in a Gothic position of limited knowledge and reduced scope of action.

In both, too, the ending underscores rather than fully resolves this sense of mingled agency and helplessness. Elsewhere, Krzywinska argues that the fact that games can be won inherently draws them away from the Gothic genre:

> Games and puzzles are built on the notion that there is a solution, a winning condition, and many games that we might easily call Gothic […] are therefore caught up within a polarization between the generic vocabulary of games, where players are catalysts for redemption, and the inescapable sense of loss and entropy that characterizes Gothic. (2015, 67)

We do find this polarisation in *Anchorhead,* which provides a victory condition and the opportunity for closure on the level of game mechanics, although one haunted by failure, loss and continued repetition on the narrative level. But *Anatomy* entirely refuses this kind of closure and does not end at all, leaving the player themselves stuck in its haunted space and damaged time.

Anchorhead is a text adventure where you play by typing commands. You are an unnamed young woman who finds herself in the gloomy New England coastal town of Anchorhead. Your husband Michael has inherited an ancestral home there after the previous owner, Edward Verlac, killed his wife, his daughter and himself. Your new home turns out to be a classic Gothic mansion, and its unsettling presence spreads through the whole town:

> The fabled Verlac family mansion looms before you in the gloom, its dark creaking presence dominating the clearing and, somehow, even though it is not visible through the trees, the entire valley. The foreboding shadow of the Verlacs seems to enshroud all of Anchorhead from here. (Gentry 1998)

As you explore the house and its surroundings, you discover a number of strange things, but perhaps the strangest is the fact that for hundreds of years, male Verlacs have been born on the day of their grandfather's death. The phrase "He always returns to his blood" keeps appearing, scrawled on walls and pieces of paper, and

over the course of play you learn what it means: that for generations, the spirit of the Verlac family's founder, Croseus Verlac, has "traveled down the family line, passing from body to body in a hideous, incestuous ritual whereby he impregnates his own daughter, then projects his black soul into the innocent body of his infant grandson." Croseus's final aim is to create a machine to summon a Lovecraftian Great Old One, Ialdabaoloth, to Earth. Edward Verlac killed his family and himself to avoid this fate and try to break the cycle, but this did not work; instead, your husband, a distant relative, was called to continue the family line. Your job, as the Gothic protagonist, is to uncover the secret and make the cycle of repetition stop.

Anatomy opens with the sound of a VHS cassette being fed into a tape player, and a blue title screen with a date: 8_18_1994. You find yourself in a fairly crude 3D modelling of an ordinary-looking suburban house at night. Although you are seeing your surroundings from a first-person perspective, everything you see has a line of static over it, as on a corrupted VHS tape. In the kitchen you find an audio tape player, and from then on the gameplay consists of moving from room to room and playing audio cassettes; each tape ends with an instruction on where to find the next one. On the tapes, a soft, staticky voice talks to you about houses. It begins: "In the psychology of the modern civilised human being, it is difficult to overstate the significance of the house […] Perhaps it is due in some small part to seeing them as a reflection of ourselves." The tapes go on to anatomise the concept of the house: "if we were to dissect a house as we might a human cadaver, we would find ourselves able to isolate and describe its various appendages and functions in a decidedly anatomical fashion." The voice compares its rooms to the organs of the human body: the living room as the heart, kitchen as stomach, hallways as veins, staircase as spine, windows as eyes. In order to keep listening, you have to keep exploring the house, even as, increasingly, you want to do neither. Then, once you reach the bedroom, the game crashes.

Restarting a game usually gives you a fresh start, letting you fix what went wrong. But here, you quickly realise that this time the game is a little different, a little worse - a damaged repetition, like a tape wearing thin. On the second playthrough, you hear an electrical buzzing noise in the background. The images you see are a little more corrupted: objects glitch in and out, the furniture shifts positions, lines that look like spiders' legs slice through the walls. The sound quality of the tapes rapidly breaks down, and so does the captioning: "THERE IS A TAPE IN THE DINING ROOM" becomes "THERRRRRRRRRR   RE IS A TAPE IN THE DINING ROOM." By the third playthrough the house is cast in a reddish light, inexplicable objects glitch in and out of view continually, and the print on the screen is almost unreadable. At one point the tape is just the sound of a scream; the caption reads "HHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHURTS." If you make it to the fourth play-through, you eventually find yourself stuck in a single room, unable to move, listening to a recording that, you realise, is the voice of the house itself: "What happens to a house when it is left alone?…If it goes for too long unlived-in, what does it think of? What does it dream?…It may haunt itself, inventing ghosts to walk

its floors." Finally, it falls silent and just leaves you there, inside. This time the game does not crash. In one narrated playthrough on YouTube, the player, John Wolfe, waits in confusion for a while before saying: "Assuming this is the end […] That was great!" (Wolfe 2016). The question that is never quite answered is: is the game, the space, finished with you? Are you done yet? Are you out yet?

The Gothic has been engaged in counterfeiting the past from the start, argues Jerrold Hogle - not just in representing or making use of the past, but specifically of a "quasi-antiquarian" false or "emptied" past (Hogle 2006, 15-16). As he points out, Horace Walpole's *Castle of Otranto* (1764), often read as the genre's origin point, casts itself as a repetition of something older by pretending to be a translation of a manuscript by a Renaissance priest. This idea of the Gothic as "a term used to project modern concerns into a deliberately vague, even fictionalized past" (16) finds an echo in games researchers' explorations of horror games' use of older, anachronistic, or even 'dead' technologies. Jay David Bolter and Richard Grusin describe this as remediation, the process by which new media, rather than simply replacing earlier media, "refashion", quote, and transform them, either through *immediacy*, "a style of visual representation whose goal is to make the viewer forget the presence of the medium (canvas, photographic film, cinema, and so on)", or through *hypermediacy*, "a style of visual representation whose goal is to remind the viewer of the medium" (Bolter and Grusin 1999, 272-273). (Bolter and Grusin focus on visual representation, but present-day horror games are just as interested in using other senses in remediation, like hearing and touch - the distinctive 'clunk' sound of a tape entering a VHS player in *Anatomy* and the way the game controller acts as a stand-in for the feel of a camera shutter release in *Fatal Frame* (Nitsche 2009) are two examples of what Christian McCrea (2009) calls "sensorial mimicries and connections as a type of expanded realism.") Christian McCrea, Michael Nitsche and Ewan Kirkland all explore the ways in which older technologies and media forms haunt digital horror games. In Kirkland's words:

> Horror video games' emulation of white noise, photographic blurring, and celluloid imperfections, produces the uncanny impression of an older, ghostly or undead analog media seeping into, contaminating and enveloping the digital. (2009, 123-124)

Horror games, he argues, tend to "explicitly evoke associations between media and the occult, using old media technological artifacts […] as signifiers of a ghostly, evil, or threatening presence" (117-122). This contamination of the apparently-new by the apparently-old feels almost inevitable in the context of the Gothic's inherent anachronism, in which the past being dead does not mean that it is actually past.

Anchorhead and *Anatomy* both engage in remediation: they are products of the fairly recent game technology of their time, while drawing on and playing with both earlier stories and earlier ways of telling stories. *Anchorhead* describes itself as an "interactive Gothic", and it is as laden with Gothic tropes as any story could be

without collapsing into parody: the crumbling mansion, certainly, but also the surly and uncommunicative locals, the husband who you may not know as well as you thought, the lost child, the hidden passage, the strange portraits, the incestuous secret, the constantly terrible weather. There are shades of Daphne du Maurier in the depiction of the marriage, and of Shirley Jackson in the townsfolk. Most obviously, though, the story is directly Lovecraftian: Miskaton University has its campus in Anchorhead, and an eldritch space-horror is heading for Earth in the form of a tentacled comet. Tracing the Lovecraft references in the text, reviewer Bruno Dias notes that "at times it feels like a tour of the highlights" (Dias 2018).

That *Anchorhead* is populated by earlier Gothic tales is, of course, not remarkable in itself - genres are constituted by tropes that inevitably create a sense of family resemblance between works. But this intertextuality directly affects the player's experience, creating a sense that you, the protagonist, are being manipulated not just by a vindictive spirit or cultists trying to steal your unborn child, but by the storytelling conventions of the Gothic, which seem to combine to create a kind of tug backwards in time. The game is set in 1997, and a very few modern-day touchstones bear this out - the pregnancy test you take at the end of the game, your husband doing Dennis Hopper and Christopher Walken impressions in the shower. But overall, *Anchorhead* feels more like the 1920s than the 1990s: your husband tells you that your car has inexplicably stopped working, and the electricity and phone service at the house have not yet been connected. Your belongings are piled up in the great hall, but the game does not allow you to introduce a sense of the present day into your home by unpacking. Even your own role in the story feels like a drift into gender roles from a few decades earlier: your husband has taken up an academic post, but there is no mention of your occupation or your plans to find work in Anchorhead. Anachronism becomes a Gothic force of its own, keeping you literally in the dark, unable to get away easily and unable to communicate with the outside world.

Anatomy, too, is deliberately anachronistic. Kitty Horrorshow uses the game engine Unity to create basic, glitchy, low-resolution 3D graphics not only because it allows her to build quickly and easily, but also for aesthetic and emotional purposes. There is a nostalgic quality to the way *Anatomy* looks: "Low-poly models and washed out/pixelated low-res textures channel something very atavistic to me, and recall those games I was so fond of (Hexen, Thief, EverQuest), which managed to successfully create massive, immersive, enthralling worlds in a time where 3D graphics were still extremely primitive," she says in an interview (Priestman 2015). But in her games, the enjoyable familiarity of this 90s nostalgia quickly turns uncanny. In another interview, the developer notes that the beautiful computer graphics of many present-day horror games can be inherently comforting even when they show horrific things, while "on a really basic level, it's unnerving to look at something that's grainy and washed out and kind of broken and wrong" (Hudson 2016). The game's "broken" elements - the suddenly rearranged and glitching 3D models, the crashes - create a sense that the game itself is only partially in control of

your experience. Krzywinska describes the experience of loss of control in gaming as a horrifying sense that *something else,* essentially the game itself, is in control: the cut-scene, for instance, "reinforces the sense that a metaphysical 'authorial' force is at work" (2002, 211). In *Anatomy*, however, the experience is closer to being in a fairground haunted house that is falling into disrepair.

This lack of a sense of an outside force at work links to the fact that *Anatomy* could be argued not to have an external enemy. Andrew Bailey sees *Anatomy* as echoing *P.T.* (Konami 2014), a playable teaser for a *Silent Hill* game that was cancelled before release, and which is thus itself no longer available: "Looking at independent projects like […] Kitty Horrorshow's *Anatomy* (2016), it is easy to see that the spectre of *P.T.* did in fact generate a mimetic compulsion with the survival horror community" (Bailey 2018). *P.T.*, too, is about exploring a haunted house through repetition, in this case a looping hallway that changes and grows more unsettling with each loop. Like *Anatomy*, it has no fight or defense options; when a ghost moves towards you in the hallway, there is nothing you can do to stop it. But a major difference between the games is that in *Anatomy*, it is hard to imagine what defending yourself would look like. Each play-through makes the game more unsettling and harder to navigate, but this is presented not as, for instance, a predator getting closer to you with each repetition, but as the medium itself fraying and falling apart more with each replay. In essence, the increasing horror of the later parts of the game is presented as being *your fault* - you are breaking the game by playing it.

The game's use of anachronism is unsettling on another level, too. The player's experience is mediated through the storytelling technology of the past, not once but twice over: you are listening to an audio tape of a voice playing on a tape recorder, and this is itself recorded on a VHS tape that shows, from your point of view, your own movements through the house. Finally, this VHS screen appears within a digital game on your computer screen. But these layers of mediation, which we might expect to distance us from what is happening, instead fail to maintain this distance coherently. If we are listening to pre-recorded audio, why does it feel as if the voice on the tape is responding to our presence - even, at some points, as if it is talking about us? If we are watching a VHS tape, as the scan lines seem to indicate, how can we be controlling the things that happen on the tape in real time? If we are playing a digital game, why does it shift, fray and degrade every time we restart it? Is this happening now, or is it a repeat - a replaying of a memory, a revisiting of past trauma?

Writing about *Jane Eyre* (1847), another of *Anchorhead*'s ancestor texts, Sandra Gilbert describes the archetypal Gothic protagonist as "a trembling heroine…who can't quite figure out the mansion's floor plan" (Gilbert and Gubar 1979, 337). In both games, it is not just the in-game actant who behaves like a Gothic protagonist - which, after all, they are - but the player. (Here I use Jesper Juul's (1999) basic distinction between the person playing the game, the player, and the character they

control, the actant.) The design of both games makes you, the player, disoriented, unsettled, drawn along by a series of increasingly narrow and inexplicable choices, always a little stupider, a little less in control than you want to be.

Anatomy and *Anchorhead* are both frustrating to play. Reviewers tend to criticise *Anchorhead*'s text parser, which sometimes leaves you stuck trying to guess the verb that will move the action onwards, as well as its possibility of silent failure; as Bruno Dias points out, it is possible to render the game unwinnable on day three because you failed to pick up a towel on day two (Dias 2018). Andrew Darley's description of how the generic limits of action in games can lead to a sense of "frustrating stasis" reads like a description of both games:

> one gets trapped, endlessly running between all-too-familiar locations, revisiting the same characters and scouring the same settings, imprisoned and unable to progress further because a certain vital move is now denied one. Not only are the conventional limits of the game itself revealed at such moments, but so is its pre-programmed character: the element of control and choice it seems to offer is revealed as illusory. (2000, 157)

But rather than inevitably detracting from the player's experience, this intractability, these moments of dysfunction, can be powerfully Gothic in themselves. In a blog post titled "I am bad at interactive fiction," game critic Line Hollis reproduces a series of screenshots of her interactions with *Anchorhead*. Hollis repeatedly comes up against the "rigmarole" of the text parser - at one point she is told that "You can't pour the flask; it's not a liquid" - but most of her interactions fail in a more complex way, as she tries to break out of the role the game has assigned her:

> >talk to husband about matches
> You can't think of anything to say about that at the moment.
> >get book

It is obvious Michael is trying to hide something from you, and while you very much want to know what in the world it is, it would be best not to make a scene about it here.

> >make a scene about it
> That's not a verb I recognise.
> >kick michael in the head and balls
> I only understood you as far as wanting to kick Michael.
> >kick michael
> You would never do anything to hurt your husband.
> >the fuck i wouldn't
> That's not a verb I recognise. (Hollis 2012)

These "bad" interactions work strikingly well as Gothic scenes in themselves: Hollis's protagonist is trying to get her husband to talk to her, but he refuses to engage with her, and the game will not let her say what she wants to. When she tries to lash out in frustration, the game just intones that "[y]ou would never do anything to hurt your husband." Here the limitations of the game emerge in a way that feels curiously like intentional gaslighting, as Hollis is told that she would never do something she is actively trying to do right now. A response that might have been intended by the game designer as a reminder of the difference between the actant and the player - you, the player, may want to kick Michael, but the actant never would, so that move is not possible - instead creates the potential for identification between the two. The player's frustration merges with the actant's: neither of them can do what they want to; both are continually reminded of the limits of their power. My own experience of playing *Anchorhead* had different, but similarly Gothic "bad" elements: imagining myself more as the second Mrs de Winter than as the protagonist of *The Yellow Wallpaper* (1892), I maintained a friendly attitude towards Michael, but I got lost continually, forgot objects I would need later, and found myself repeatedly circling back to the same place, rereading the same descriptive text, trying to remember which direction was out. Literally, I could not figure out the mansion's floor plan.

Anatomy faces the player with choices that are even narrower, and that get increasingly so as you play. At the start of the game, your agency is restricted to finding and listening to tapes in a mostly dark house, with each reiteration of "There is a tape in the bedroom" (or the dining room, or the basement) sounding more like an instruction than like a helpful hint - other than roaming purposelessly around the house or stopping play, your only option is to go and find it. The game toys with you in ways that are sometimes quite overt, even playful. At one point a tape gives you a disturbing description of the basement's role in the house's psyche before sending you down there, and then, when you emerge, your new tape tells you that basements are harmless and bedrooms are what you really have to worry about. But it gets even more powerfully disorienting effects from its apparently dysfunctional game mechanics, in particular the way each replay looks and feels different from the last. The breakdown in image quality, sound quality, and playability escalates quickly, but there is a period early in the second replay, when the player is still expecting the crash and restart to lead to an opportunity to do things differently, when the effect is quite subtle - the house layout feels a little different, the object glitches are a little more frequent. You might, at first, wonder if you are imagining things, misremembering.

Anatomy's 'dysfunctional' effects are clearly intentional, where *Anchorhead*'s are probably only partially so. It seems likely, for instance, that the text parser is as good as the game designer could make it, while the complexity of the game's layout and the possibility of silent failure is probably more intentional. Writing on the uses of intentional or unintentional dysfunctionality in digital narratives, Marie-Laure Ryan mentions Gonzalo Frasca's "September 12" as an example of "political dysfunctionality" - a game where no points can be won, and "players usually quit

out of frustration, after realizing the futility of their efforts […] The lack of entertaining gameplay is meant to reflect on the hopelessness of the military action depicted in the game" (Ryan 2010). *Anatomy* and *Anchorhead*, however, are able - intentionally or not - to use dysfunctionality for artistic purposes in a way that, while it could certainly backfire and push the player away, also has the potential to engage the player more deeply with their storytelling. The games' intractability, rather than separating the player's experience from the actant's, forces the two into the same position: you are retracing your steps over and over to find a way out, you are unable to get your husband to talk to you, you wonder if you are losing your mind, you are stuck, lost, trapped.

Jesper Juul describes how a player can gain knowledge that the actant lacks by observing the actant's death and then starting over: "death gives you information, both on how you died and what happened afterwards. Again you step out of character and acquire another view on the events, and again you gain additional knowledge" (Juul 1999). *Anchorhead* allows you to learn from the actant's death; some of the puzzles are almost impossible to solve without repeatedly dying and restarting from a save point. But in *Anatomy*, death is not an option. "I don't bother with death or fail states because they don't interest me," says Kitty Horrorshow in an interview (Hudson 2016). Some reviewers describe what happens at the end of the third playthrough as the house 'biting down' on you and killing you, but since the game crashes before we actually see this happening, and you are still able to return to the game for another playthrough, this feels more like part of a continuous ramping-up of tension than like a final climax. But if dying is impossible, so is learning from the past. *Anatomy* lacks any clear objective other than continuing to move around the house and listen to tapes, and each replay makes even this modest goal more difficult: the crashes and restarts give you no useful information that might help in the next playthrough, and in fact, continuing to play only makes everything worse.

Anchorhead does have a victory condition. If you make it to the end with you and your husband still alive, you are told that "you have banished the evil and saved your husband from a fate most hideous." But this reassurance is undercut by the end scene itself: in what must be your new home, since the Verlac mansion was set ablaze along with the rest of the own in the previous scene, you are waiting for the results of a pregnancy test. As the test turns positive, you are seized by "inexplicable horror" as you remember Edward Verlac's last words: "And besides; who could say whether the crafty devil Croseus might not concoct some new way to enter the world, through a new body -- through that of one of my daughters, perhaps? The ritual has always demanded a grandson, but Croseus was never one to let such a trivial inconvenience stop him. He would find a way. He always returns to his blood." This ending separates the player's experience from that of the actant, allowing the player to feel a sense of victory at beating a difficult game even as the actant feels despair and terror. The actant has failed to end the cycle of repetition; her fresh start in a new home is, yet again, already haunted. But you, the player,

have become a successful Gothic protagonist. You have uncovered the haunted house's secret and solved its mystery, and for you, at least, the game's repetitions can now end.

Anatomy avoids opening up this final separation between player and actant by not actually ending. A not-uncommon horror trope, not least in digital narratives, is the open-ended game - a game in which the promise of an ending is deferred or broken, or that seems to have ended when in fact it is still going on. In the creepypasta story "NoEnd House", for instance, the protagonist is promised a reward if he makes his way through a house with a sequence of nine increasingly horrifying and reality-bending rooms, and does so, only to go home and find the number 10 on the door of his own house (Russell 2011). Where "NoEnd House" describes this trope in narrative form, *Anatomy,* on a smaller scale, puts it into practice.

The game's lack of any clearly defined ending on the game-mechanical level is part of this effect. In *Anatomy* playthroughs on YouTube, the final few minutes generally involve the players trying to work out whether they are still playing. In KatFTWynn's playthrough, both players describe the ending they think they are about to get: "I think it's just gonna fade to black," says one, while the other is anticipating a final jumpscare: "Nope. Nope! Like waiting for a face… or teeth" (KatFTWynn 2016). When neither of these things happen, she adds, "I don't know. I don't wanna ruin it by exiting." At the end of MrKravin's playthrough, the player switches uneasily between attempts at his usual wrapping-up talk and a continued immersion in the game: "Great! So, holy shit, that was the end… I think? [A few seconds of silence] So I'll see you guys when I get back from [abrupt stop, lengthy silence as he scans the screen] I'll see you guys when I get back from PAX, I have a week's worth of content planned, I hope you all enjoy it. [Lengthy silence as he scans the screen again] Holy shit, this game. Can you even call this a game?" (MrKravin 2016).

One reviewer describes *Anatomy* as "a game that ruins your day in real life" (Melody 2016), and in my reading, the game's open-endedness - its ability to make you feel, after you finally abandon the game, that you are still somehow inside - is as much a result of the narrative itself as of the game mechanics. *Anatomy* is a haunted house narrative that is not about *a* haunted house: rather, as its tagline reads, it argues that "every house is haunted." The generic, low-detail design of the house contributes to this: in the first playthrough, before the house starts to degrade, there is nothing especially remarkable about it, and it may even feel in some way familiar. You might have been there before - it might be any house, even your own house. But while *Anatomy* sets up the human body as a metaphor for the house, it ends up working just as well the other way around: as you explore the house the voice on the tapes anatomises you, describing your thoughts, feelings, and fears about the space where you live. Finally, as it becomes clear that the voice on the tape is the house

itself, it casts you as both an abandoner and an invader. What is haunting this house (any house, your house), the game implies, is you.

In an interview, Kitty Horrorshow points out that unlike stories, "locations don't have endings" (Hudson 2016). By letting you roam more or less freely through imagined houses, these two interactive narratives hold the promise of a more direct, immediate sense of Gothic space than a linear narrative might be able to give. But where linear haunted-house narratives eventually resolve their cycles of repetition from the reader's perspective, if only by bringing the narrative to an end, interactive narratives have the potential to continue the haunting indefinitely. While it takes advantage of the Gothic potential of interactivity, *Anchorhead* finally does give a sense of closure: getting to the 'good' ending solves the mystery and ends the haunting for the player, if not for the game's protagonist. But *Anatomy*, in which you appear as the ghost already present in your own home, leaves you still within its walls: for you and this game there was no fresh start, so there can never be an ending.

References

Bailey, Andrew. 2018. "Hauntological Remediation Within *P.T.* and *Resident Evil 7: The Beginning Hour*." *First Person Scholar*. Accessed 19 November 2019. http://www.firstpersonscholar.com/hauntological-remediation

Blume, Harvey. 1997. "Q&A Adam Phillips: A Post-Freudian Commonwealth of Quotes". Accessed August 30, 2019. http://www.harveyblume.com/1997/01/q-adam-phillips-post-freudian.html

Bolter, Jay David and Richard Grusin. 1999. *Remediation: Understanding New Media*. Cambridge: MIT Press.

Dias, Bruno. 2018. "1998 Text Adventure Anchorhead is an Uncanny Addition to 2018's Lineup." *PC Gamer*. Accessed August 30, 2019. https://www.pcgamer.com/uk/1998-text-adventure-classic-anchorhead-is-an-uncanny-addition-to-2018s-lineup/

Darley, Andrew. 2000. *Visual Digital Culture: Surface Play and Spectacle in New Media Genres*. London: Routledge.

Freud, Sigmund. 1914. "Remembering, Repeating and Working-Through". *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud, Volume XII (1911-1913): The Case of Schreber, Papers on Technique and Other Works*, 145-156. London: Hogarth Press and the Institute of Psycho-Analysis, 1958.

Gentry, Michael S. 1998. *Anchorhead.* Accessed 30 August, 2019. https://anchorhead-game.com/ Video game.

Gilbert, Sandra M. and Susan Gubert. 1979. "A Dialogue of Self and Soul: Plain Jane's Progress." *The Madwoman in the Attic: The Woman Writer and the*

Nineteenth-Century Literary Imagination. New Haven: Yale Nota Bene, 2000. 336-371.

Hill, Susan. 1983. *The Woman in Black*. London: Vintage, 2011.

Hogle, Jerrold E. 2006. "Introduction: The Gothic in Western Culture". In *The Cambridge Companion to Gothic Fiction,* edited by Jerrold E. Hogle, 1-20. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Hollis, Line. 2012. "I am bad at interactive fiction." Accessed 30 August 2019. http://www.linehollis.com/2012/02/02/i-am-bad-at-interactive-fiction/

Horrorshow, Kitty. 2016. *Anatomy*. Accessed August 30, 2019. https://kittyhorrorshow.itch.io/anatomy. Video game.

Hudson, Laura. 2016. "Scare Tactics." *Slate*. Accessed August 30, 2019. https://slate.com/culture/2016/06/the-indie-horror-video-games-of-kitty-horrorshow.html

Hunt, Will and Matt Wolfe. 2015. "The Ghosts of Pickering Trail". *The Atavist Magazine*. Accessed August 30, 2019. https://magazine.atavist.com/the-ghosts-of-pickering-trail

Juul, Jesper. 1999. "The Player and the Game". In *A Clash Between Game and Narrative: A thesis on computer games and interactive fiction*. Accessed August 30, 2019. https://www.jesperjuul.net/thesis/

KatFTWynn. 2016. "Anatomy: Every House is Haunted (Kitty Horrorshow) ~Full Playthrough~ THE HOUSE WANTS OUR BODY!" Accessed August 30, 2019. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Fgs7U8SRkc4

Kirkland, Ewan. 2009. "*Resident Evil*'s Typewriter: Survival Horror and Its Remediations." *Games and Culture* 4, no. 2: 115-126.

Krzywinska, Tanya. 2002. "Hands-on Horror". In *Screenplay: Cinema/Videogames/Interfaces*, edited by Tanya Krzywinska and Geoff King. London: Wallflower Press.

Krzywinska, Tanya. 2015. "The Gamification of Gothic Coordinates in Videogames." *Revenant: Critical and Creative Studies of the Supernatural*, vol. 1, no. 1, 58-78.

McCrea, Christian. 2009. "Gaming's Hauntology: Dead Media in *Dead Rising, Siren* and *Michigan: Report from Hell*". In *Horror Video Games: Essays on the Fusion of Fear and Play*, edited by Bernard Perron. London: McFarland.

Melody. 2016. "Body Horror: Explore A Spooky House In Anatomy." *Rock Paper Shotgun*. Accessed August 30, 2019. https://www.rockpapershotgun.com/2016/02/27/anatomy-vhs-horror-game/

MrKravin. 2016. "Anatomy - The Most Unnerving Game I've Played". Accessed August 30, 2019. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PnOSFzGLVTE

Nitsche, Michael. 2009. "Complete Horror in *Fatal Frame*". In *Horror Video Games: Essays on the Fusion of Fear and Play*, edited by Bernard Perron. London: McFarland.

Priestman, Chris. 2015. "Recapturing the Low-Res Horror of Early 3D Worlds." *Killscreen*. Accessed August 30, 2019. https://killscreen.com/articles/kitty-horrorshow/

Russell, Brian. 2011. "NoEnd House". Accessed August 30, 2019.
    https://www.creepypasta.com/noend-house/

Ryan, Marie-Laure. 2010. "Between Play and Politics: Dysfunctionality in Digital
    Art". *Electronic Book Review*. Accessed August 30, 2019.
    https://electronicbookreview.com/essay/between-play-and-politics-
    dysfunctionality-in-digital-art/

Wolfe, John. 2016. "ANATOMY - SCARY Psychological Horror Game - Kitty
    Horrorshow". Accessed August 30, 2019.
    https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MhQml17VP38

Contributor Details

Erika Kvistad is associate professor of English at the University of South-East Norway, and works on sexuality, horror, digital narratives, and the nineteenth century. Her Ph.D. is on sexual power dynamics in Charlotte Brontë, and she has previously published on sexual consent negotiation as a textual and cultural phenomenon, domestic spaces in Victorian horror, and the idea of the monstrous in university pedagogy. She is currently writing about digital haunted houses, and her chapter on haunted spaces in creepypasta and Twitter horror is forthcoming from Palgrave in 2020 in *Gothic Handbook: Modern Gothic.*

Email: erika.kvistad@usn.no
Twitter: @erikakvistad

HILARY WHEATON
RMIT University

Playing with *Call of Cthulhu: The Official Video Game*: A transmedial Gothic experience

ABSTRACT

Lovecraft's The Call of Cthulhu, *published in 1928 and classed within a series of stories labelled the "Cthulhu Mythology," exemplifies the modern Gothic and Lovecraftian or cosmic horror. This article explores* Call of Cthulhu: The Official Video Game, *released in 2018 by Cyanide Studios, as an artifact of the Lovecraftian transmedia storyworld. This storyworld contributes to the reader-player's knowledge of quintessential Lovecraftian themes, tropes, and motifs as they occur in game; these can be evidenced as consistently woven between the ludic and narrative elements of the role-playing horror game by drawing upon literary discourse and game studies analysis. The* Call of Cthulhu *story (intradiegetic plot) exists both within the wider narrative structure of the Lovecraftian transmedia storyworld, as well being emergent through the system and mechanics of the gameplay. The story and gameplay operate within this frame of reference to draw upon Gothic themes, tropes, and motifs to create the player experience. In doing so, the reader-player's affective expectations of both the narrative and ludic elements of the game align to this broader framework, situating the playspace within the storyworld; consequently, the game achieves a harmonious ludonarrative primarily through the reader-player hermeneutic dynamic. The culmination of this analysis is an interpretation of* Call of Cthulhu *as an intertextual and multimodal instance of Gothic media that utilises its interactive medium to offer an authentic and affective experience of cosmic horror.*

Keywords: Lovecraft, transmedia, ludonarrative, multimodel, game design

The works of H.P Lovecraft, originally considered a minority interest, have increasingly emerged in both popular culture and academic research in recent years. As Jones (2013) states, Lovecraftian imagery, concepts, and modes have come to permeate media and popular culture. It is no surprise therefore that Lovecraft's mythos has been utilised in *Call of Cthulhu: The Official Video Game* by Cyanide Studios (2018). *Call of Cthulhu* offers an opportunity to explore how the Gothic genre is continued across multimedia as an experience for the reader-player, woven between ludic and narrative elements in a role-playing horror game. As Marshall McLuhan (1964) famously stated, "the medium is the message," and consequently to posit *Call of Cthulhu* as Gothic, drawing upon established literary conventions, the thematic aspects of Gothic must be analysed within the broader narrative of Lovecraftian mythos, as well as the game story, system, and gameplay mechanics operating in its playspace.

When studying digital games that utilise both the conventions and narratives of a genre, such as Gothic or more specifically Gothic horror, it is valuable to engage various approaches for analysis. In this article, I will consider how *Call of Cthulhu* makes use of Gothic themes, tropes, and motifs by establishing its diegetic story as existing within the transmedia narrative of the Lovecraftian storyworld, thus facilitating its interpretation as both Gothic literature and participatory media. This article will therefore begin with a discussion of the history of Lovecraft's fiction within the Gothic genre and its various transmedia incarnations; specifically, those media contributing directly to *Call of Cthulhu* and their common conventions.

The scene is then set for a closer analysis of the Gothic themes appearing in the story but also in the affective ludonarrative created by the game system and mechanics. It becomes apparent that two types of narrative elements exist that relate to the storyworld, both of which draw upon anticipated Gothic conventions; the intradiegetic of the story visible to characters (playspace) and the extradiegetic visible to player-reader (mechanics/systems) of game menus, loading screens, and dialogue boxes (Ryan 2014, 37-38). Specific tropes and motifs aid in the revelation of their complementary application between the wider transmedia narrative of Lovecraftian mythos and the game, informing the relationship between reader-player and avatar, protagonist character, and firmly establishing the Gothic experience.

The Gothic of Lovecraft

To discuss H.P. Lovecraft one must acknowledge his influence in mainstream popular culture, and how various adaptations, continuations, and imitations of his Gothic fictional elements have emerged across various media (Jones 2013, 227). Lovecraft's work has been heavily influential on the modern horror genre, and his propensity to provide the reader with a sensation of existentialist terror is seemingly

relevant to the postmodern condition (Kneale, 2006; Simmons, 2013). It is therefore important to acknowledge not only Lovecraft's original story, "The Call of Cthulhu," within the context of the Gothic, but also within the broader modern influence of transmedia narratives that expand its mythos and subgenre of Gothic and cosmic horror. By doing so the various precursors to *Call of Cthulhu* are contextualised to meaningfully discern the emergence of the broader Lovecraftian narrative of Gothic themes, tropes, and motifs that frame the distinct affordances of the digital game.

H.P. Lovecraft was an American writer whose works of fiction can be classified as modern Gothic, and by being written in the early twentieth century are linked to later nineteenth-century styles of the Gothic genre (Botting 2005, 103). The central fiction of this discussion is Lovecraft's "The Call of Cthulhu," published in 1928, which sits within a series of stories classed as the "Cthulhu Mythology" that focus on "the idea that a pantheon of ancient beings, the "Great Old Ones," once ruled earth but have since fallen into a deep slumber from which they are increasingly threatening to awake" (Simmons 2013, 2). The stories of Lovecraft, and those specifically within "Cthulhu Mythology," are situated within the subgenre of Gothic known as Gothic horror, and for Lovecraft his particular fictional works exemplify a theme of horror that has been referred to (often interchangeably) as Lovecraftian or cosmic horror. Lovecraft himself described this specific horror theme as:

> A certain atmosphere of breathless and unexplainable dread of outer, unknown forces must be present; and there must be a hint, expressed with a seriousness and portentousness becoming its subject, of that most terrible conception of the human brain—a malign and particular suspension or defeat of those fixed laws of Nature which are our only safeguard against the assaults of chaos and the daemons of unplumbed space. (2009, para. 6)

Within this realm of horror, monsters can be found that are different from other Gothic beasts. The reader encounters those that are "massive and indifferent creatures, operating on an utterly dissimilar scale to human life and values" (Jones 2013, 232). These monsters also "mark the limits of representation and imagination" (Kneale 2006, 120), and consequently do not easily conform to notions of 'good' or 'evil', such terms being irrelevant in the scope of teratological beings who offer only indifference to humankind.

Apart from the teratological beings and cosmic horror that distinguishes Lovecraft's work, it is also situated within the Gothic genre that Manuel Aguirre describes as utilising:

> strategies associated with the Graveyard School of Poetry, the sentimental novel, and generally the valorisation of the non-rational (feeling, the passions, the Burkean Sublime), but it also relates to a type of realism which, shunned

by earlier fictions, dwelt on defeat or powerlessness in the face of forces greater than the enlightened will of the individual or of society. (2014, 106)

The exploration of human existence in regard to our mind and body, particularly its transient state and our attempts to rationalise this within the context of society, death, and religion can be considered as a central narrative theme of Gothic. The Burkean sublime offers the connecting thematic thread between this Gothic narrative and Lovecraftian horror, as it is:

> a question not of the subject's increasing self-awareness but of the subject's sense of limitation and of the ultimate value of that experience within a social and ethical context. (Ryan 2001, 266)

Ryan argues that, for Burke, the sublime is a violent and natural force; an affective response by our body to an aesthetic experience that lies beyond our control. The anticipated Burkean response to the sublime is why Gothic horror features such repeated motifs as darkness and gloom, impenetrable mists, and deformity. These aesthetic values triggered an instinctive response for self-preservation and emotions that included "reverence and awe, anxiety and fear" (Davenport 2016, 73).

The Transmedia History of Lovecraft

Understanding how the themes, tropes, and motifs of Gothic literature emerge in *Call of Cthulhu* necessitates situating it within the historical transmedia contributions to Lovecraft's work, providing a context for the digital game. Leavenworth posits the nature of the Lovecraftian storyworld as transmedia, with its transmedial adaptability that occurs through "unauthorized, denarrativized" development based on organic and shared thematic focus (2014, 260). Harvey also helps identify *Call of Cthulhu* as a type of transmedia approach called "mono-medium stories," whose "individual components produced in different media—a film, a book, or a game, for instance—contribute distinct but related stories that add up to the wider storyworld" (2014, 221). Transmedia is linked more broadly to the Gothic genre as a whole by Kirkland, who comments that it is "a mode which translates across different cultural forms" (2012, 106). Kirkland also states that:

> Gothic tropes and preoccupations are not simply translated but transformed in their transition to the digital game, according to the distinct manner in which the medium operates and the artistic possibilities in affords. (2012, 107)

While a single coherent narrative by Lovecraft is absent across multiple platforms, the quintessential Lovecraftian tropes and motifs appear consistently in contributions to the transmedia storyworld. Thus the Cthulhian mythos, and Lovecraftian horror, is expanded coherently as a multimodal narrative across the multiple incarnations of novella, role-playing game, and digital game. From the

original novella to the *Call of Cthulhu* game under discussion, we find a repetitive focus within each story on the broader narrative tropes and motifs of memoirs (books, diaries, photographs or drawings, cryptic messages), antiquarians and detectives, uncanny dreams and dreamscapes, cults and human deformities, teratological beings, derelict ships and mad sailors. These are not instances of the same story adapted across various media, but instead a series of stories featuring remixed and remediated tropes and motifs that enable the consistent interpretation of larger Cthulhian narrative. A reader-player who is familiar with Lovecraftian lore can experience environments, characters, and objects that similarly evoke the cosmic horror of Cthulhu across multiple mediums and their affective conventions. Daniel Liuzzi (2018) provides a great example of this in his explanation of *Call of Cthulhu*'s story, accompanied by detailed intertextual references linking the narrative, ludic, and playspace of the game to other Lovecraftian works.

In referring to Lovecraft in popular culture, Jones (2013) focuses on the successful mythos-related role-playing game (RPG) by Chaosium called *Call of Cthulhu: Fantasy Roleplaying in the Worlds of H.P. Lovecraft* (Peterson, 1981). For Jones, this is perhaps the most faithful derivation of Lovecraft due to the game's "fixation on conflict, conspiracies, and cults as the essential aspects of the mythos, along with the potential for defeat and madness" (2013, 229). This pen and paper role-playing game is what inspired Cyanide Studio's *Call of Cthulhu* (2018) and it adapted the conventions of the RPG to inform the system and mechanics of the digital game, despite their distinct stories. The conventions of the pen and paper RPG collide and reinforce the cosmic horror of Lovecraft's mythos; the conceptual and rational game rules evoke the curiosity of the players, whose investigators must hunt for knowledge, but will inevitably result in the characters going insane, forcing a loss of control and failure to play strategically (Jones 2013, 229; Leavenworth 2014, 266). Thematically therefore, the recurring trope of Lovecraft's mythos operates through the dynamic of the ludic conventions and narratology, expressed as "the loss of control that occurs when human characters encounter knowledge of the cosmic reality and the inability of any human communication to express this knowledge" (Leavenworth, 2014, 267).

Another relevant instance of the Lovecraftian storyworld specific to the Cthulhuian mythos is Bethseda's digital game *Call of Cthulhu: Dark Corners of the Earth* (2005). The conventions of this medium similarly offer yet another entry point into the cosmic horror of Lovecraftian mythology. As Krzywinska states, "a high proportion of video games generally employ techniques, tropes, iconography, characters, or narrative types developed elsewhere within the broader generic context of horror" (2009, 268). Again, familiar storyworld transmedia tropes emerge in both the narratological and ludic conventions of the game: a central playable protagonist who is a detective, locations drawn from Lovecraft's stories, a search for knowledge (to find a missing person), hallucinations and insanity (Krzywinska, 2009). Similarities can be drawn between Bethseda's and Chaosium's games, including the use of a detective as the central protagonist and playable character

using first-person perspective. As detective, the player is both narratively (story) and ludically (mechanics) forced to progress the game through knowledge acquisition; curiosity is both rewarded and punished in response to the scenarios that emerge from interactions with the environment and NPCs (non-player characters). As for the pen and paper RPG, insanity becomes a pivotal trope tied into the video game's mechanics. We once again see the theme of cosmic horror play out as:

> These [insanity] effects have a host of implications. They provide a very direct way of linking the character's psychological state to the perceptual and action field of the player, providing in some way an equivalent of literature's unreliable narrator. (Krzywinska, 2009, 282)

Consequently, it is important to note how the transmedia storyworld of Cthulhlian mythos adapts the themes, tropes, and motifs of Gothic horror using intertextuality and multimodal narratives.

Cthulhuian Ludonarrative Gameplay: Storyworld > Playspace > Story

For the Lovecraftian transmedia storyworld of *Call of Cthulhu* to create an affective Gothic experience in the player-reader, there must be ludonarrative harmony. Despain and Ash (2016) provide a model of ludonarrative harmony for game designers that includes: gameplay mechanics, narrative, context, and emotional fulfilment. A mechanic can be considered the means by which a player can achieve an action in the game playspace, the narrative is why a player would undertake that action, the context is both the where and why of the action, and the emotional fulfilment explains how the action serves the player (Despain and Ash 2016, 11). To this the game designer must also incorporate the necessary system to sustain ludonarrative harmony in interactions throughout the game (Despain and Ash 2016, 16). There is insufficient space in this article to unpack the entire model, but to elucidate for the purpose of *Call of Cthulhu*, an example is the *mechanic* of *speaking* serves the *narrative* of *exploration* in the *context* of *gathering knowledge* to satisfy the *emotion* of *curiosity*, using the *system* of player selected *dialogue options*. For Despain and Ash, designing for ludonarrative harmony means the theme of a game should influence the mechanics and narrative (2016, 2), and this will be shown to hold true for *Call of Cthulhu* in the analysis that follows.

The interdependency between mechanics and narrative for ludonarrative harmony can also be examined by considering how the game conveys its story using the playspace. Jenkins (2004) defines several techniques for environmental storytelling in the playspace, including the use of evocative spaces (the Lovecraftian transmedia storyworld), enacting stories (the player-reader navigating the semi-open world, reading a book that prompts sanity loss, choosing specific responses when interacting with NPCs or events), and finally the embedded narrative (most clearly articulated by the detective aspects of the game such as reconstructions,

finding clues and objects). In the analysis of both the Gothic discourse of *Call of Cthulhu* and its gameplay, these environmental storytelling techniques will become apparent. They rely on the player's expectations of the Gothic by virtue of the transmedia storyworld, as well as the playspace experiences enabled by systems and mechanics.

The affective emotions in *Call of Cthulhu* relate not only to those of the intradiegetic story, but also to the necessary interrelation the player-reader undertakes between intradiegetic and extradiegetic narrative elements, as participatory interaction is central to experiencing the Lovecraftian storyworld. Lazzaro's "four fun keys" explain player experience through motivation and affective response, resulting in a classification of games as hard, easy, serious, or people fun (2008, 318). *Call of Cthulhu* contains all four types of fun, applied in varying degrees and to varying levels of success: hard fun is evident in Chapter 6 with the challenge of defeating the Shambler monster; easy fun occurs throughout the game roleplaying as detective and satisfying curiosity; serious fun is the literary exploration of Lovecraft through the game; and social fun occurs through interactions with NPCs.

These elements taken together help establish the interrelated experience of *Call of Cthulhu's* ludonarrative, whereby the hermeneutic experience of Lovecraftian Gothic is encompassed by its transmedia storyworld, the playspace of the game (Darkwater and its associated environments), and the intradiegetic story situated within both.

A Narrative Experience: Call of Cthulhu's Gothic Discourse

Within the intradiegetic story of *Call of Cthulhu* a range of Gothic and cosmic horror themes, tropes, and motifs are present. I will pay particular attention to those that can be described as the following: memory and time; the sublime versus the beautiful; art as ritual and uncanny threshold; the body as liminal space; and finally, the environment as boundary space not place. This collection of themes can be considered as predominantly concerned with the trope of 'crossing the threshold,' which both Salomon (2002) and Botting (1996) typify as part of the Gothic genre, and thus commonalities exist across various tropes and motifs that sit within these broader themes. However, I will explore each theme and examine the use of Gothic tropes or motifs, many of which are also relied upon in the extradiegetic elements of narrative that call upon the reader-player's comprehension of the Lovecraftian transmedia storyworld.

Memory and time are prominent thematic elements for the central protagonist of *Call of Cthulhu*, detective Edward Pierce, who slips between past and future states of himself and others. Pierce relies heavily on deductive reasoning as he investigates the presumed death of the Hawkins family from a fire at the Hawkins Manor. The

manipulation of memory and time serves to reinforce a sense of powerlessness for the character of Pierce, simultaneously establishing him as emotional and unreliable for the reader-player, who relies on his subjective narration as a witness to events. One type of manipulation is through dream states, which are closely coupled with memory. Moore (2016) discusses the role of memory in the Gothic, with it operating as an unsettled space between history and dream, tangible and intangible, and often serving as a companion to the protagonist. The game narrative begins (Chapter 1) with a disorienting scene in which Pierce finds himself covered in blood, surrounded by the carcasses and remains of various sea creatures, most notably a shark. Pierce fades in and out of consciousness, until he seemingly regains control once further inside the cave and witnesses a scene with cultists, before finally awakening in his agency office in Boston. Neither the reader-player nor Pierce at this point, know that the events just witnessed occur again, later in the game - and what was initially presented as a nightmare served also as a premonition to reinforce the inevitable destiny of the protagonist - a fact repeatedly stated by various characters in the narrative (including Sarah Hawkins, Captain Fitzroy, and the Leviathan).

This tension between memory and premonition also plays out in the narrative when Pierce's mind is transferred to the other characters, occurring at three instances: Chapter 8 with Dr Marie Colden, Chapter 10 with Sarah Hawkins, and Chapter 11 with Cat. This transferral of mind situates the events of the narrative for Pierce as both dreamlike (as other), premonitory (as they often come before a terrible revelation), and memory (his awareness of them, once transferred back, allows him to use the knowledge he has gained influencing his actions). This transferral is not controlled by Pierce, being either the result of his interaction with the Necronomicon or as a result of interacting with the Leviathan (an embodiment of him). The interaction with the Leviathan prior to this transfer is telling, advising Pierce that:

> Your dreams have been gently shepherded by the being they call the Oracle. But it is your curiosity and your fate that have led you up to this moment. You are here to accept the knowledge and follow the path that leads to your freedom...The more you bend your human spirit to make it able to receive the Truth, the closer you will come to embrace his power...Where is the Oracle? Is she not the very object of your quest? I'll let you see for yourself. But do not forget. Your fate has already been written. (Cyanide Studios 2018, Chapter 10)

The story explicitly couples the motifs of dream, memory, and premonition to the detective trope, whose curiosity for knowledge necessitates eventual madness. Pierce is controlled by powers beyond his comprehension, and his curiosity as a detective is part of his inevitable fate - madness and the loss of his humanity, powerless in defiance of the Leviathan and Cthulhu, the ultimate cosmic horror.

The polarization of aesthetics, specifically Burke's sublime versus the beautiful as opposing values with their accompanying human emotions, is also a common theme within the story. Various motifs are utilised within this theme,

including the use of light and dark, monstrosity and beauty, as well as the picturesque. There are many transitional points within the story where Pierce finds himself within a dark, menacing and oppressive space only to then awake or travel to a location that is light filled, cosy, and open (such as caves under the Hawkins Manor or the Riverside Institute, vs the Hawkins Manor Library). Light also operates to transform environments; Pierce's initial exploration of the Hawkins Manor sees him encounter a dark, decaying environment, tinged with greenish hues, while later his companions use it as a hideout, or safe space, with the large library windows letting in light, warmer hues, and a cosy yet spacious atmosphere filled with floating dust motes. However, the continual presence of decay and evidence of traumatic events renders the environment not as beautiful, but instead as picturesque; an observation in keeping with that of Davenport (2016) and her analysis of landscape aesthetics in Gothic texts. The picturesque inspires curiosity (Davenport 2016, 74) and the Hawkins Manor Library and the wider manor rooms, is a location that prompts curiosity with its various books, pictures, and artefacts. Indeed, in Chapter 9, Pierce must search the mansion to find 'The Amulet of the Ancients' to protect Sarah and Drake from the influence of the cult.

Associated with this theme are repeated yet interconnected motifs that contrast the monstrous with the beautiful. Merivale makes reference to the presence of classical artefacts in Gothic tales, seemingly to operate as a deliberate antithesis of 'light' in 'darkness', as Gothic imagery is normally "almost exclusively from Christian and pre-Christian Teutonic mythology and folklore, medieval rather than classical in its immediate provenance" (1974, 960). In *Call of Cthulhu* the classical references operate to show the transgression of beauty into the grotesque and can be considered to evoke the Burkean sublime. With Pierce's arrival on Darkwater Island in Chapter 2, the narrative reveals that the famous last whaling ship at the docks is called the Scylla, which brought back to Darkwater the 'Miraculous Catch'. The catch is revealed later in the story as the body of the Leviathan, whose flesh has inevitably cursed the town and led to the formation of the cult. In classical mythology, Scylla was a monster who attacked sailors, but was once a beautiful human who metamorphosed into a monster as a result of a jealous Goddess. This classical motif reinforces both the antithesis of light and dark, and the beautiful and grotesque, while simultaneously highlighting the transgression from one to the other. Another reference, albeit far more indirect, to classical mythos is that of Sarah Hawkins as the Oracle. Although present in other cultures, the most notable oracle in classical antiquity is the Oracle of Delphi. Oracles speak on behalf of the gods, and for Sarah Hawkins it is not only a case of her spoken word but her art, in the form of her paintings, that take on this prophetic power.

This classical allusion to the prophetic prompts another theme connected with thresholds: that of Sarah Hawkins' paintings as ritual and the uncanny. For Sarah Hawkins, her painting operates in a ritualistic manner; painting is not a ritual activity, but it is transformed into an act of ritual as a result of Sarah's status as Oracle in the cult. Her paintings operate as an uncanny threshold between dreams,

the prophetic and alternative dimensions. When Pierce meets Sarah in Chapter 9, in the basement of the Riverside Institute she remarks: "It comes in my dreams. Our minds melt like colours on a palette. Its, is of the oldest green. Violently living, vibrant… A sea green, maybe? No. No." This vibrant green clearly represents Cthulhu while that which Pierce refers to, and based on Sarah's response, is either an allusion to the Shambler or most likely the Leviathan. Many of Sarah's paintings that Pierce encounters are premonitory; depicting Charles Hawkins' grotesque transformation, or the arrival of Pierce himself and his role in invoking Cthulhu, thus prompting his comment "You painted me. That's where you saw me." The painting of The Shambler operates as the most explicit instance of ritual and uncanny threshold; as motif, the painting appears repeatedly across the narrative (Chapter 6, Chapter 9, Chapter 10) and is frequently coupled with occult activity (placed within a ritual circle, stabbed with a ritual dagger, or used as part of a ritual ceremony). By creating the painting, Sarah Hawkins also performed a ritual to invoke the Shambler, who uses the canvas as a portal for entering the world from its other dimension, as explained by Algernon Drake in Chapter 9.

While cosmic teratological beings such as the Shambler cross dimensional boundaries, so do we also find evidence in the *Call of Cthulhu* narrative of various bodies as a liminal space or occupying a liminal space. The Star-Spawn Leviathan operates as a motif for both; his body for its flesh and transformative abilities, and a spirit that can project its intent into the minds of others. The Leviathan is both living and dead, his carcass encountered by Pierce in the Abandoned Whaling Station and yet also seemingly alive during Pierce's other encounters (as projected spirit and monster in the depths); thus the body operates as a motif signifying this liminal state. As Dr Fuller comments in Chapter 13, "See, it's one of the exquisite effects of this incredible creature…Don't fear. I created the mythological Ichor from the Leviathan's flesh." Fuller's experimentation with the flesh of the Leviathan is a clear attempt to pervert the natural order; preventing death and healing the human body, but also transforming human bodies into half human, half cephalopod teratological beings. As the narrative progresses, it becomes evident that both Pierce and Bradley died in their initial exploration of the caves beneath the Hawkins Manor, and were revived as a result of Dr Fuller's experimentation; their bodies therefore come to signify an unholy transgression which curses them with nightmarish dreamscapes. The body of Charles Hawkins is an explicit motif of this transgression; as Pierce continues to uncover the truth of the fire it emerges that the injuries Charles suffered were treated by Dr Fuller, producing a grotesque and deformed monster with writhing tentacles that visually represents his status in the Cthulhian cult.

Finally, the various environments represented on Darkwater Island operate frequently as a boundary space and not simply as physical space. As Pierce continues his investigation, he encounters various locations where a tension exists between the seen and unseen that influence his perception. This theme plays out acutely at the Sanders' Residence in Chapter 6 and The Riverside Institute in Chapter 9. At the Sanders' Residence, Pierce interacts with the painting of The

Shambler and he witnesses a dramatic shift in his environment, the warm lighting of the room and red walls transform as the ambient lighting shifts to pale green and darkened walls, only to drastically shift back to 'reality' upon Cat's question "What is the matter with you?", which prompts Pierce to ask "You didn't see anything?" It is clear through Cat's comment, "You're losing it, detective. At this rate, you're right: the bottle will get you before I do," that Peirce's actions are perceived by others as a slip in sanity, not a response to the physical environment. Meanwhile, at the Riverside Institute, a clear boundary exists between the relative normality above ground, and the nightmarish insanity below in the basement. Pierce, in his attempt to rescue Dr Colden again experiences this environment acutely as a boundary space alternating yet again between dimensions that the Shambler occupies; as Pierce explores his surroundings the layout of the rooms change, his movement is restricted, and the security guards cease to exist. Most importantly, in this alternate dimension a loss in light will result in the reappearance of the Shambler and Pierce's death. I shall explore these occurrences further as part of the ludonarrative.

Ludonarrative and Gameplay Mechanics: Affective Performance of the Gothic

Riddle suggests that "games that opt for a highly narrative structure, especially ones with cinematics and cut scenes, often follow a somewhat Gothic feel" (2015, 58), while Kirkland posits that Gothic themes, aesthetics, and narratives are explicitly pronounced when using the conventions of the horror genre (2012, 106). It would be fair to state that the game *Call of Cthulhu* has a distinctly linear (albeit with multiple endings), plot-heavy structure and is classed as horror, with reader-player interactivity explicitly interwoven between what Seraphine would label as the narrative structure's directives and the ludic structure's incentives (2016, 2). In *Call of Cthulhu* the primary directive (story/plot) of the game is to solve the Sarah Hawkins case and consequently to save her from her 'fate', while the incentive (ludic) is to uncover the truth of Darkwater Island (including the Leviathan and Pierce's 'fate' as 'Truth Seeker') and thus to conceive the inconceivable of the storyworld's cosmic horror. The distinction between directive and incentive is harmonious, enabling ludonarrative harmony, but while they align for the player-reader they do not necessarily align for the player-avatar (character).

Although the directives and incentives are not always aligned for the player-avatar (character) this does not necessitate ludonarrative dissonance by virtue of *Call of Cthulhu's* transmedia context, a proposition upheld through analysis of the alternate ending mechanic. At times the player is driven by incentives to gather additional knowledge to satisfy their curiosity of all things Cthulhian, but this places Pierce at great risk of insanity (thus not in the character's best interest) which simultaneously limits available endings and impacts the experience for the player. Pierce's role as narrator using first-person perspective creates unstable subjectivity on events occurring. The alternate endings, available based on choices made by the player in the playspace, and consequently influencing the experience of the

narrative, offer no true 'win' conditions for the characters aligned to the directives of the story:

- In the default ending, everyone dies;
- In the counter ritual ending, Pierce ends up in a mental hospital;
- In the sacrifice ending, Pierce dies;
- In the 'it's over' ending, Sarah kills herself.

Each ending can be hermeneutically consistent for the player due to the assumptions implicit in the Lovecraftian transmedia storyworld, that to be an authentic experience of cosmic horror is to be bleak and nihilistic (Jones 2013, 230) and that there is no redemption or salvation (Krzywinska 2009, 278). Thus, the ludic and narrative contracts established between game design and player participation remain intact (Roth, Nuenen and Koenitz 2018, 95-96). This is aided by avoidance of avatar bias (Seraphine 2016, 4) as the game alternates first-person perspective between various characters, including Pierce, Marie Colden, and Sarah Hawkins, in alignment with the point-of-view shifts that occur in many classic Gothic novels (Riddle 2015, 65). This point-of-view shift is most affective in the narrative experience of the player and is perhaps at peak affective impact in the default ending of the game.

Additional gameplay mechanics of interest in *Call of Cthulhu* include: Pierce's reconstructions as detective; the strategic use of cutscenes emphasising insanity; and the extradiegetic narrative operation of the game menu and chapter descriptions. The 'Reconstruction' mechanic is a fitting ludic player element aligned with Pierce's detective profession, allowing him to temporarily enter a 'subjective space' to interact with various clues (objects) in the environment dependent on skills chosen. This mechanic draws upon Gothic themes of memory and time, with the reader-player's interactions in 'Reconstruction' mode triggering replays of events that have already occurred, accompanied by interactions with objects and narrative commentary by Pierce. However, for the reader-player it remains unclear whether the ludonarrative space within the 'Reconstruction' is a dreamlike representation of Pierce's making, or a reflection of reality; regardless, knowledge is gained, and the player must decide whether to accept it as reality or imagination.

Reader-player agency is stripped away in the various cutscenes of the game. The cutscenes evoke powerlessness, often occurring when Pierce is disempowered within the intradiegetic story and simultaneously applied through extradiegetic mechanics, breaking the first-person performative agency of player-avatar. Cutscenes occur when Pierce's psychological state is altered, extensively towards the end of Chapter 4 and at the beginning of Chapter 5, where Pierce witnesses a cult ritual in the caves under the Hawkins Manor and awakes in the Riverside Institute, witnessing horrifying scenarios of experimentation by Dr Fuller and the death of Francis Sanders.

Other extradiegetic narrative elements that contribute to ludonarrative harmony through coherent Lovecraftian storyworld tropes and motifs include the game menus which the reader-player can toggle between, as well as the Chapter descriptions that appear in the loading screens. In keeping with the detective trope, and the consequent curiosity of the reader-player protagonist Pierce, the game menu functions as a notebook. The reader-player can access the following: details of the current narrative, the case (specifically the context and player objectives), knowledge discovered about Darkwarter's inhabitants, places, the occult, and clues discovered. The use of this extradiegetic menu and the information provided emphasises the degree to which the reader-player and their protagonist simultaneously experience the storyworld and progress the narrative; Pierce as detective must uncover knowledge by investigation, which populates the extradiegetic menus for the reader-player and progresses the narrative. In contrast, the Chapter loading screens operate in an extradiegetic manner to provide contextual game design narrative that supports the presentation of the playspace as Gothic storyworld. In the loading screen for Chapter 9 at the Riverside Institute, the following narrative primer appears

> The book projected Pierce into the body of Dr Colden. The detective watched, helplessly, as Bradley's friend carried out her inquiry. Confronted with the experiments of Fuller, she got into his office and discovered that the director of the Riverside Institute was hiding information on, if not the body of, Sarah Hawkins. But she was discovered by Fuller. Pierce must save her before it's too late (Cyanide Studio, 2018).

This playspace primer reminds the reader-player that Pierce was helpless inside the body of Dr Colden in the story, even though the reader-player was able to control the character as avatar to progress the ludonarrative. The Chapter loading screens therefore direct the narrative trajectory, while also facilitating the enacted story of the reader-player to reduce the influence of any ludonarrative dissonance.

As Riddle states, the reliance on setting as an important element in the narrative of video games reflects themes in Gothic literature (2015, 64) and the geographical landscapes of *Call of Cthulhu* offer an evocative playspace for the reader-player as Lovecraftian storyworld. The various locations use a muted colour palette and low lighting, creating an ambience that is affectively experienced by the reader-player as oppressive, claustrophobic, and daunting even when visually expansive. Davenport explains the powerful affective response landscape can evoke in the reader-player if utilised by the game designer:

> As in Gothic novels or Gothic films, the judicious use of other landscape elements helps draw the viewer-player into the storyline and adds emotional complexity to the experience. For example, game designers can use ugly-sublime scenes to ensure generous doses of Gothic horror for the player; but

designers can also interpose episodes of beauty to allow the player to draw a breath. A good videogame designer will often use aesthetic values both to provide narrative depth and to move the storyline forward. (2016, 89)

This is exemplified in the repeated transitions between the Riverside Institute and Pierce awakening in the Hawkins Manor library (Chapters 5-6 and Chapter 9). The basement of the Riverside Institute is ugly-sublime, filled with grotesque imagery of violence, death, and decay in contrast to the Hawkins Manor library with its warm colour palette, expansive interior space and soft filtered light. In these instances a strong affective response is generated in the reader-player that is disorientating, dis-empowering, but also of momentary relief from the mounting insanity evoked through the first-person protagonist Pierce.

The construction of Pierce as central character, protagonist, and predominant first-person avatar, influences the reader-player's affective ludonarrative experience based on interactions within the playspace which progress the story. The reader-player's interactions in the playspace and storyworld as Pierce allow for useful commentary (with Pierce as narrator) on the events unfolding, and to meaningfully drive forward the narrative as detective. Character skills equipped influence the dialog options available during the game and consequently the alternate endings. The character skills available are: Eloquence, Strength, Instinct, Investigation, Psychology, Medicine, and Occultism. The first-person perspective of Pierce reinforces the ludic and narrative contracts explicitly as his development of Medicine and Occultism skills require knowledge that can only be gained by interacting with and collecting various books in the playspace. The reader-player enacts knowledge gathering by reading books as avatar, the character translates this knowledge to skill. Similarly, the reader-player accumulates mental trauma for Pierce reducing his sanity from interactions in the playspace. This is an effect reliant on the first-person avatar perspective in Pierce's responses to various stimuli, such as his panic attacks triggering a temporary loss of sanity and influencing playspace experience. When this occurs, Pierce and the player become disassociated from the playspace, reinforcing the overall Gothic ludonarrative of powerlessness. In essence, this mechanic helps simulate the literary trope of powerlessness that Gothic protagonists must endure, simultaneously incorporating the interdependence of perception and empathy that Mărgău refers to as vital to the affective response for the Gothic reader (2015, 35).

Conclusion

Call of Cthulhu is an exemplary instance of both a multimodal Gothic literary narrative, but also a participatory experience of the Gothic that capitalises on its affective opportunities for the reader-player. The authenticity of this achievement rests on the reader-player's awareness of the transmedia Lovecraft storyworld that combines the presence of Gothic themes, motifs, and tropes to reinforce the multimodal narrative of the extradiegetic and intradeigetic elements of the game for

ludonarrative harmony. The game depends on the reader-player's familiarity with the transmedia storyworld as part of its enjoyment. As a result, this analysis also provides an opportunity for game design and game design analysis, in that it postulates an opportunity for achieving ludonarrative harmony through the utilisation of existing conventions, such as transmedia storyworlds, to create games that account for the hermeneutic expectations of the player. Consequently instead of simply relying on limited player agency or entirely open world approaches, game designers may meaningfully play with ludonarrative opportunities to create affective experiences by safely aligning the intentions of the designer using Despain and Ash's (2016) methodology, with those of the reader-player hermeneutics (Roth, Nuenen & Koentiz 2018, 104) by utilising transmedia storyworlds. Thus, a mixed methods approach for game designers could disrupt the existing discourse around ludonarrative harmony. Nevertheless, regarding Gothic and cosmic horror, this article illustrates that both the narrative and ludic contract of *Call of Cthulhu* hold true to the anticipated themes, motifs, and tropes established in a manner that satisfies the reader-player's expectation of Lovecraftian narratives.

References

Aguirre, Manuel. 2014. "'Thrilled with a Chilly Horror': A Formulaic Pattern in Gothic Fiction." *Studia Anglica Posnaniensia* 49 (2): 105-23.

Botting, Fred. 1996. *Gothic (The New Critical Idiom)*. London: Routledge.

------------------- 2005. *Gothic*. London: Routledge.

Chaosium. 2019. "Call of Cthulhu - Presentation." *Call of Cthulhu Game*, access August 26, 2019. http://www.callofcthulhu-game.com/en

Cyanide Studio. 2018. *Call of Cthulhu: The Official Video Game*. Paris, France: Focus Home Interactive. Video game.

Davenport, Alice. 2016. ""Beauty Sleeping in the Lap of Horror": Landscape Aesthetics and Gothic Pleasures, from the Castle of Otranto to Video Games". In *Gothic Landscapes: Changing Eras, Changing Cultures, Changing Anxieties*, edited by Sharon Yang and Kathleen Healey, 71-103. Springer International Publishing.

Despain, W and Lauryn Ash. 2016. "Designing for Ludonarrative Harmony." Accessed November 18, 2019 https://www.academia.edu/34283487/Designing_For_Ludonarrative_Harmony

Harvey, C B. 2014. "A Taxonomy of Transmedia Storytelling." in *Storyworlds across Media: Toward a Media-Conscious Narratology*, edited by Marie-Laure Ryan and Jan-Noël Thon, 219-231. Lincoln: UNP - Nebraska Paperback.

Headfirst Productions. 2005. *Call of Cthulhu: Dark Corners of the Earth.* VIDEO GAME. Mayland, US: Bethseda.

Hillard, T J. 2009. ""Deep Into That Darkness Peering": An Essay on Gothic Nature." *Interdisciplinary Studies in Literature and Environment*. 16 (4): 685-95.

Jenkins, Henry. 2004. "Game Design as Narrative Architecture". In *First Person: New Media as Story, Performance, and Game*, edited by Noah Wardrip-Fruin and Pat Harrigan, 118-130. Cambrige, MA: MIT Press.

Jones, Mark. 2013. "Tentacles and Teeth: The Lovecraftian Being in Popular Culture." In New Critical Essays on H.P. Lovecraft, edited by David Simmons, 227-47. Palgrave Macmillan.

Kirkland, Ewan. 2012. "Gothic Videogames, Survival Horror, and the Silent Hill Series." *Gothic Studies* 14 (2): 106-X.

Kneale, James. 2006. "From Beyond: H. P. Lovecraft and the Place of Horror." *Cultural Geographies* 13 (1): 106-26.

Krzywinsk, Tanya. 2009. "Reanimating Lovecraft: The Ludic Paradox of Call of Cthulhu: Dark Corners of the Earth." In *Horror Video Games: Essays on the Fusion of Fear and Play*, edited by Bernard Perron, and Clive Barker, 267-287. McFarland & Company, Inc., Publishers: Jefferson, N.C.

Latham, Brandon. 2016. "Cobblestones and Doppelgängers: How Gothic Literature Contributed to the Dawn of Film Noir." *Film Matters* Vii (2): 17-21.

Lazzaro, Nicole. 2008. "The Four Fun Keys." In *Game Usability: Advancing the Player Experience*, edited by Katherine Isbister and Noah Schaffer, 317- 343. CRC Press.

Leavenworth, Van. 2014. "The Developing Storyworld of H.P. Lovecraft." In *Storyworlds across Media: Toward a Media-Conscious Narratology*, edited by Marie-Laure Ryan, and Jan-Noël Thon, 260-273. Lincoln: UNP - Nebraska Paperback.

Liuzzi, Daniel. 2018. "A Psychological Tightrope: Final Thoughts Of 'The Call of Cthulhu: The Official Video Game'." Horror Fuel. Accessed November 18, 2019. http://horrorfuel.com/2018/11/08/a-psychological-tightrope-final-thoughts-of-the-call-of-cthulhu-the-official-video-game/

Lovecraft, H.P. 2009. "Supernatural Horror in Literature." *The H.P. Lovecraft Archive*, accessed August 26, 2019. http://www.hplovecraft.com/writings/texts/essays/shil.aspx

Mărgău, Paul. 2015. "Changes of Perception in Gothic Literature. An Inquiry into the Effects of Reading Gothic." *B.A.S. British and American Studies*, 21: 31-38.

McLuhan, Marshall. (1964) 1994. *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man*. Reprint, Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.

Merivale, P. 1974. "The Raven and the Bust of Pallas: Classical Artifacts and the Gothic Tale." *Publications of the Modern Language Association of America*. 89 (5): 960-66.

Moore, Erica. 2016. "Haunting Memories: Gothic and Memoir". In *Gothic Landscapes: Changing Eras, Changing Cultures, Changing Anxieties*, edited by Sharon Yang and Kathleen Healey, 169-198. Springer International Publishing.

Peterson, Sandy. 1981. *Call of Cthulhu: Fantasy Roleplaying in the Worlds of H.P. Lovecraft.* Oakland, CA: Chaosium.

Ralickas, Vivian. 2007. ""Cosmic Horror" and the Question of the Sublime in Lovecraft." *Journal of the Fantastic in the Arts* 18 (3): 364-98,436.

Riddle, E W. 2015. "Narrative-Heavy Games as Neo-Gothic Literature: Beyond: Two Souls and the Player/Viewer in Contemporary Cultural Anxieties." In *The Play Versus Story Divide in Game Studies: Critical Essays*, edited by Matthew Wilhelm Kapell. Jefferson: McFarland & Company, Incorporated Publishers.

Roth, Christian, Hartmut Koenitz, and Tom Van Nuenen. 2018. "Ludonarrative Hermeneutics: *A Way Out* and the Narrative Paradox." In *Lecture Notes in Computer Science (including Subseries Lecture Notes in Artificial Intelligence and Lecture Notes in Bioinformatics)* 11318: 93-106.

Ryan, Vanessa L. 2001. "The Physiological Sublime: Burke's Critique of Reason." *Journal of the History of Ideas* 62 (2): 265-79.

Ryan, Marie-Laure. 2014. "Story/Worlds/Media: Tuning the Instruments of a Media-Conscious Narratology." In *Storyworlds across Media: Toward a Media-Conscious Narratology*, edited by Marie-Laure Ryan and Jan-Noël Thon, 29-45. Lincoln: UNP - Nebraska Paperback.

Salomon, Roger B. 2002. *Mazes of the Serpent: An anatomy of Horror Narrative.* Ithaca, NY: Cornell UP.

Schmeyer, DM. 2018. "Video Game Review: "Call of Cthulhu Review"." IGN. Accessed November 10, 2019. https://au.ign.com/articles/2018/10/30/call-of-cthulhu-review

Seraphine, Frédéric. 2016. "Ludonarrative Dissonance: Is Storytelling about Reaching Harmony?" Academia.edu, accessed November 10, 2019. https://www.academia.edu/28205876/Ludonarrative_Dissonance_Is_Storytelling_About_Reaching_Harmony

Simmons, David. 2013. *New Critical Essays on H.P. Lovecraft*. New York: Palgrave
    Macmillan US: Imprint: Palgrave Macmillan.

Tibbetts, John C. 2011. *The Gothic Imagination Conversations on Fantasy, Horror, and
    Science Fiction in the Media*. 1st ed. New York: Palgrave Macmillan.

Contributor Details

Dr Hilary Wheaton is a member of the Editorial and Advisory Board for the Centre
for Media and Celebrity Studies (CMCS), Editorial Board Member for Water Hill
Publishing, and former Executive Committee Member for Open & Distance Learning
Association Australia (ODLAA). She currently works at RMIT University in
Melbourne, Australia as the Lead Learning Design and Technology within the
Education Portfolio. Her academic interests stem from her undergraduate and
doctoral research within the disciplines of media and communication, and
specifically internet studies, with a focus on sexuality and embodiment, persona and
celebrity, and more recently as part of her professional work, learning and teaching
in higher education.

Email: hilary.wheaton@rmit.edu.au

VÍTOR CASTELÕES GAMA AND MARCELO VELLOSO GARCIA

University of Brasília

Beyond the Walls of *Bloodborne*: Gothic tropes and Lovecraftian games

ABSTRACT

Throughout history, literature has been intimately connected with other forms of art. Video games are no exception. Many well-known games allow players to enjoy a series of events intrinsically connected to plot and machinations based on famous names in literature. Recently, Lovecraftian literature has been on the rise, as many different games are being based on its storyworld. This article investigates the manifestations of Gothic literature and, more specifically, Beyond the Wall of Sleep (1919) *by H.P. Lovecraft in* Bloodborne (2015) *from Fromsoftware studios. We intend to identify and interpret the adaptations of literary content in this game in order to analyse typical traits of the Lovecraftian style and show how they might be adapted to a video game scenario. This paper also aims to make a brief contribution regarding the use of imagetic resources that intensify, mitigate and reshape the literary scenarios in digital game media. Furthermore, this study aims to acknowledge which types of images are chosen and how it may be related to Gothic fiction. We argue that, in* Bloodborne, *the settings, the abjection, the Gothic horror, and the destabilization of the natural order all validate it as a Lovecraftian game.*

Keywords: Gothic; Games; Lovecraft; *Bloodborne*; Storyworld

Defining a genre is, undoubtedly, a laborious challenge. The distinctions used often refer to a specific time frame and/or characteristic elements that involve many a similar trope in terms of style, themes, and approaches. Thus, saying "precisely what constitutes the Gothic, of course, is – and will no doubt remain – a highly contested issue" (Punter and Byron 2004, ix). In this article, we intend to treat the Gothic as an evolving mode, for its manifestations might be found outside its original period. According to Punter and Byron, it is true that the Gothic may be seen as an historical phenomenon, but it is also true that few literary works today could satisfy past standards:

> [T]he Gothic is more to do with particular moments, tropes, repeated motifs that can be found scattered, or disseminated, through the modern western literary tradition. Then again, one might want to think of Gothic, especially in its more modern manifestations, in terms of a collection of subgenres: the ghost story, the horror story, the 'techno-Gothic' – all of these would be ways of writing that have obvious connections with the 'original' Gothic, but their differences might be seen as at least as important as their similarities. (Punter and Byron 2004, xviii)

We believe it is important to note these complexities before moving into our analysis because one might not identify what is to follow as 'pure' Gothic. Given that this purity does not exist, we see both of our subjects, a game and a short story, as part of the Gothic, for they resound with the quote above.

H. P. Lovecraft is one of many writers that, even if not directly enmeshed in the original Gothic period, have surely contributed to the longevity of the Gothic genre in contemporary times. The connection between Lovecraft's work and the Gothic may lie within his usage of horror and the weird, not to mention his use of avant-garde cosmic settings and "techno-Gothic" tropes. Technology is constantly used as an explanation for how seemingly supernatural events occur in his novels, while fear of the unknown and fear of change are continually explored in the Cthulhu mythos. His pantheon of deities, alongside his somber environments and the devices he creates are able to generate an eerie and malign atmosphere which renders not only the characters, but also the readers as powerless before the colossal proportions of the beings and power described in his work.

This article argues that these settings and tropes are the basis for the game *Bloodborne (*Fromsoftware 2015). More specifically, we suggest that Lovecraft's 1919 short story *Beyond the Wall of Sleep* contributed to the construction of characters, lore, and gameplay mechanics. In *Bloodborne*, the playable character is immediately identified as a hunter, guardians of the defiled streets of Yharnam, an environment resembling the one from the Castle of Otranto by Horace Walpole (Langmead 2017). Your quest is the search for a mysterious item called "paleblood," which is revealed to be the concealed nemesis of the whole plot, behind the game's environmental

storytelling. The journey, then, flows through insidious paths which gradually unfold into an endeavour to escape the nightmare the player discovers they are trapped inside. Arguably *Bloodborne* draws from Lovecraft's mythos through the correspondence between madness and knowledge and, of course, the settings; an example of this connection can be found in some of the items, in the insight status, not to mention the transitions between dreams and nightmares that shape countless environments in the game.

For many years, digital games have been divided between those who advocate for narratology and those who favor ludology. Tanya Krzywinska (2015) believes that although the debate may seem trivial, since a well-rounded outlook of gaming is necessary for such a complex media, it might have caused the dismissal of Gothic games as a research topic, despite many games drawing from Gothic tropes. However, the same difficulties in identifying Gothic novels or short stories, also apply to video games. To remedy that, Krzywinska (2015) proposes an analytical framework: 1) The presence of a false hero; 2) The mise-en-scène; 3) The representation of aberrant psychologically affective emotional states; and 4) The style. We understand that having these elements might help to shape Gothic narratives, but not define them as Gothic. A further unifying principle seems to be necessary in order to place *Bloodborne* in the genre. That is even more so in the case of the Cthulhu mythos, which is used in many different ways, often times completely unrelated to Gothic tropes. To try to solve this matter, we believe that Van Leavenworth's suggestions on what a unifying principle is might clarify this matter:

> although the theme of humanity's hopeless encounter with an indifferent cosmic reality is the cornerstone of the Lovecraft storyworld, recurring beings, locations, and occult tomes may help to conjure it. [...] these well-known elements without employing the unifying themes do not evoke the storyworld but merely allude to details in Lovecraft's fictional legacy. (Leavenworth 2014, 333-334)

Allusions to what might constitute the Gothic, thus, are not what make a story Gothic. One needs to engage them with each other by creating connections between events, places, items, concepts, and so forth. We argue, alongside Langmead (2017), Leite (2017) and Schniz (2016) that *Bloodborne* is Gothic and Lovecraftian for that reason. *Bloodborne* goes beyond occasional nods to the mythos by creating a cohesive storyworld which unifies disparate elements and links them with what we understand as Gothic fiction. What the game brings to life is an expansive interpretation of the original Lovecraftian novels, for the elements that appear in its microcosm are unique in terms of interaction, influence and playability. One cannot see it as a mere allusion to the original pantheon of hideous deities, due to the fact that the dimensions of the game unfold in unprecedented ways. That is, before its release, one could only imagine what it would be like to dwell in a Lovecraftian universe, without really understanding what an oneiric realm would look like. After

its release, what was shapeless and unimaginable found its representation in the imagery of the game. Thus, it shapes itself into a Gothic narrative by making use of the typical literary and cinematic horror tropes, conceiving, aesthetically and narratively, the final product of the game.

Still, stating that literary and cinematic tropes are incorporated into the game is not enough. It is necessary to investigate **how** these tropes are incorporated from the novels into the imagery of the game, and interpret the way it is reshaped, either through intensification or mitigation, in comparison to their original literary settings. Understanding the reasoning behind those choices and their working principles may contribute to the ever-expanding environment of digital media, game studies, and Gothic scholarship.

Analysing the works

Before delving into the microcosmos devised by Lovecraft and its links to *Bloodborne*, let us begin with a brief summary of *Beyond the Wall of Sleep* and its characters. A seemingly innocuous man named Joe Slater is brought to a mental facility. An intern responsible for taking care of some of the inmates decides to tell the reader this story, and the narrator poses questions inciting doubts regarding the dream reality:

> I have frequently wondered if the majority of mankind ever pause to reflect upon the occasionally titanic significance of dreams, and of the obscure world to which they belong. Whilst the greater number of our nocturnal visions are perhaps no more than faint and fantastic reflections of our waking experiences – Freud to the contrary with his puerile symbolism – there are still a certain remainder whose immundane and ethereal character permits of no ordinary interpretation, and whose vaguely exciting and disquieting effect suggests possible minute glimpses into a sphere of mental existence no less important than physical life, yet separated from life by an all but impassable barrier (Lovecraft 2011, 37)

While Slater appears harmless, he displays vicious behaviour that only reveals itself at a particular time of the day. The surge of violence comes by means of vigorous displays of power which could only be contained after the help of four orderlies. Befuddled, the intern decides to find a way to communicate with this, supposedly, second personality. By means of a telepathic communication device attached to himself and Slater, the intern makes contact with the mysterious being. Upon the response from the being dwelling inside Slater, the horror begins. Concepts that shape reality are put to the test at the very instant the creature is revealed. The intern is transported through the universe and told that all beings, without their bodies, are made of light. He learns that the higher being would leave to face its nemesis, *Algol*. Joe Slater dies then, and there are no further signs of communication with the protagonist. The night Slater dies, a huge star is seen, moving towards another one and vanishing into the cosmos.

To our analysis, we intend to draw parallels between the game and the story and use the topics listed by Gama-Khalil (2014) as characteristics of horror genres, for they reflect a variety of resources which both the story and the game share. They are: 1) the settings, including time of day, buildings, objects and so forth; 2) the abjection and the horror, specifically focusing on how they are provoked; 3) the resources used to destabilise the natural order of things, in this case, how they reshape reality and our notions of their physical applications into metaphysical ones. Although these topics are to be analysed in separate sections, it is difficult to separate them from one another as they are intricately connected. For this reason, metareferences can be found in the text. Furthermore, the first coordinate of Tanya Krzywinska's (2015) framework will also be analyzed: the false-hero. The other three coordinates (mise-en-scène, psychologically affective emotional states, and aesthetic style) are similar to those from Gama-Khalil, and therefore, they will not be emphasised.

To draw our first parallel between the story and the game, we start by analysing the settings. The game exempts itself from 'describing' any environment since it is, primarily, a visual media. Instead, the atmosphere of Gothic horror is built into the game space. Elements that intensify the ominousness of its environment relate to cobblestone roads littered with items that provoke puzzlement, fear and disgust (Langmead 2017). The presence of castles remind us of familiar Gothic tropes, particularly when it comes to the religious institutions that devised and studied the occult and the unknown, as seen in many Gothic novels. The game also draws from specific Lovecraftian elements when setting the environmental storytelling of the game, specifically when referring to mental institutions and madness.

Beyond the Wall of Sleep is set in a mental institution (in the story, psychopathic institutions) that, in previous centuries, were often regarded as gruesome, for many a treatment was not only psychologically aggressive, but also physically. It is no wonder that these asylums are still used as sets for horror movies and games, and that Lovecraft might have chosen them to emphasise madness as a unifying principle of his stories. *Bloodborne* adapted this trait into a core mechanic by making *insight* (an in-game status that enhances the player's perception of the environment) based on the knowledge of a madman (*madman's knowledge*). Mental trauma is translated into an element of the mise-en-scène by relating scenery revelations to odd metaphysical events. Changes in perception are linked to physical changes in the game's setting, for instance, the result of making contact with great ones is the access to nightmares. Creating such connections provokes a cathartic feeling on the player, leading them to try to relate seemingly different, or even similar, environmental settings to one another by the use of items, observation, and lore. This sort of gameplay places the player in the position of a scholar, a fundamental character archetype that is part of both Lovecraftian stories and *Bloodborne*. Players are invited to study the pieces and bits of lore given and interpret them according to

their own perception of what that universe might actually be. Leavenworth (2014, 336) states that "the appeal of the Lovecraft storyworld is the fulfillment derived from hunting for knowledge about specific elements of the cosmic reality". Differently from the books, in the game, the path the player follows in their pursuit for knowledge is intertwined with an adventurous one. This intensifies something typically found in video games and also in *Bloodborne*'s narrative, which is the feeling Lovecraft so profusely tried to bring to their readers: verisimilitude, towards the fear of the unknown in the physical and metaphorical universe of the game. In short, *Bloodborne* presents the appeal Leavenworth states and also something else.

Regarding the construction of the plot, *Beyond the Wall of Sleep* is based on long monologues and only occasional interactions with other characters. The development of the plot is brought to the reader through the experience of the intern, the supernatural event regarding a higher being, and the disturbing memory resulting of their interaction. It follows a linear path to help those who are reading understand the sequence of events. *Bloodborne's* plot, on the contrary, barely lets the main character engage in any sort of conversation. Most of the construction of the plot occurs via in-game notes, items and eventual visual changes. Of course there are non-playable characters (NPCs) that guide the player into finding their path through the game, but the most puzzling questions come from silent interactions. Given that the path within the game is not linear, one can find deceiving pieces of information and paths that might lead the player to side with malign NPCs whose behaviours are insidious. The deeper the player goes into the game, the more confusing it gets, the more somber the environment becomes, and the more macabre the slayings.

As one ventures into the game, motivated by the search for paleblood and/or the hunters' cause (slaying those who have succumbed to the 'old blood', blood taken from the 'great ones' who are higher beings inspired by the Old Ones from Lovecraft), the player is led to situations which make them question the nature of their quest and the universe that surrounds them: who are the monsters, after all? Djura, a NPC who used to be a hunter, explicitly says "The things you hunt, they're not beasts. They're people. [...] It's you... You're the beast... Can't you see what you're doing? It's madness…" This emphasizes the feeling of discovery and curiosity. As Schniz suggests:

> Environmental storytelling is a central means for the communication of a virtual world's ideology. In brief, the term refers to the interplay of level geography, audio-visual design, as well as the specific placement of objects in a virtual world. These properties "tell" stories without being obvious. (2017, 2)

Schniz's quote is corroborated by the fact that one might never interact with Djura and, thus, never discover what he has to tell them. The fact that this encounter is optional provides multiple layers to *Bloodborne*'s plot, allowing the same player, within the same game, to go through different experiences based on the paths they

choose. This is not new in terms of role-playing games and video games. Conversely, it is imperative. Nonetheless, it adds an extra layer of complexity when it comes to Lovecraftian stories; once they were written in a format that did not allow the reader to make choices, apart from doubting the facts given in the story.

Another significant aspect of the setting that appears to be part of both stories is the moment protagonists are confronted by deified entities, which is either at dusk or dawn. This event is often used to characterize tropes that might resemble those of an oniric environment, given these are the times one might be sleepy, either from waking up, or going to sleep. When one is not able to identify whether they inhabit reality or a dream, madness ceases being a suspicion and becomes an integral part of both stories. In Lovecraft's short story, the intern barely believed the chain of events witnessed:

> The climax? What plain tale of science can boast of such a rhetorical effect? I have merely set down certain things appealing to me as facts, allowing you to construe them as you will. As I have already admitted, my superior, old Doctor Fenton, denies the reality of everything I have related. He vows that I was broken down with nervous strain, and badly in need of a long vacation on full pay which he so generously gave me. He assures me on his professional honor that Joe Slater was but a low-grade paranoiac, whose fantastic notions must have come from the crude hereditary folk-tales which circulated in even the most decadent of communities. (Lovecraft 2011, 45)

All of his interactions had happened at dusk, suggesting the idea that his whole story might have been the product of lack of sleep. To emphasise this sensation, *Bloodborne* relies on the use of words that directly allude to dreams by naming locations in the game such as *The Nightmare of Mensis* and *The Hunter's Dream*. The interesting point here is that, even though one might reflect on the nature of the reality they are dwelling in when playing, and even though such strong hints are given by the game, one is only sure about the nature of the dream, or nightmare, they are dwelling after a direct invitation to be freed from it. The resource we see exploited was not, unlike in *Beyond the Wall of Sleep,* the perception of the character, but instead, the perception a player might have of the environment surrounding them.

In other ways, the imagetic resources which establish the oniric realm in both stories vary drastically. Lovecraft opts to use rites or gadgets to establish the connection with the unknown. We believe he does so to emphasize that the only way to ascend is through contemplation and scientific advances. In *Beyond the Wall of Sleep*, the intern communicates with Algol's nemesis through a telepathic device. Even though technology is deeply exploited in *Bloodborne*, the ultimate sign of success for men who were able to contact higher beings is a consumable item named *Great One's Knowledge,* which grants three points of insight. The item itself doesn't let the player contact the Great Ones, but it is a sign of success for those who contacted

them, translated into an interactive item. The other items one can find that also allude to the Great Ones are cords. These can only relate to women and work, in practical terms, just like *Great One's Knowledge.* However, what they represent is not the same trope; instead, it is the willingness of the Great Ones to make contact. They are described as such:

> **Workshop's Cord**: Every Great One loses its child, and then yearns for a surrogate. The Third Umbilical Cord precipitated the encounter with the pale moon, which beckoned the hunters and conceived the hunter's dream; **Arianna's Cord**: Every Great One loses its child, and then yearns for a surrogate, and Oedon, the formless Great One, is no different. To think, it was corrupted blood that began this eldritch liaison. (Fromsoftware 2015)

Each item is conceived through different happenings. Arianna's cord relates, in our interpretation, to blessings (or curses), in order to (similarly to John Slater's case) find a vessel to fit the power of the gods, or their child. Workshop's cord, lore-wise, is similar to the latter, however, the identity of the vessel is concealed. To be able to understand what lies beyond the fabric of reality, one has to commit with body and blood, not only their minds. We also believe that the umbilical cords are an imagetic choice to emphasise feelings of infamy and disgust, once it is not possible to grasp what is beyond visual reach. The in-game item closely resembles a tentacle, rather than a human cord, granting it a profane nature, even though it is a divine item, rather than the one from a child.

On infamy, Gama-Khalil (2014) states that the use of aromatic and malodorous smells are ways of intensifying the pleasantness or disgust within a given story. In *Beyond the Wall of Sleep*, Lovecraft does not make use of any means to evoke olfactory senses. Nonetheless, this is commonly exploited in other of his stories such as *The Call of Cthulhu*; in which repugnant properties and smells are described. In *Bloodborne*, this feature is often revealed by the presentation of the setting, items and gameplay strategies. One specific item that depicts this is the *Pungent Blood Cocktail*: a "mature blood cocktail that releases a pungent odor when thrown that attracts bloodthirsty beasts." Once the hunter throws this item, particular beasts follow the trajectory of the projectile, mesmerised by the odor it exhales. Not only are the in-game streets visually filled with detritus ranging from limbs and bodies to chariots and coffins, but they are also fetid, putrid and polluted based on the figures and creatures one can find lurking in them. This connection can also be drawn when it comes to the textures one can get by observing the materials used in the "additional offerings" available to players. For example:

> **Sage's Wrist:** Special material used in a Holy Chalice ritual. A body part of a saint, sacrificed by the Healing Church in their search for Truth - **Sage's hair**: Special material used in a Holy Chalice ritual. A body part of a saint, sacrificed by the Healing Church in their search for Truth. - **Inflicted organ**: Special material used in a Holy Chalice ritual. Special

body parts collected by the Healing Church. What was this gruesome bait used to lure? (Fromsoftware 2015)

These items bring a mixture of repulsion and shock, for they are not found in our everyday lives. As Umberto Eco comments, they embody events that relate to "something that happens as it should not happen" (2007, 311), such as dismembered parts of a body, collectable haze, dead infants with ominous powers, and so forth. Even though death is a natural part of any person's life, being reduced to an amorphous mass is not. The use of these supernatural objects evokes horror and shock, reminiscent of events in *Beyond the Walls of Sleep*: "Family and neighbors had now fled in a panic, and when the more courageous of them returned, Slater was gone, leaving behind an unrecognizable pulp-like thing that had been a living man but an hour before" (Lovecraft 2011, p. 39).

Colours like brown, red and purple are common in the palette of Gothic literature. These are intense colours that might refer, respectively, to decay, blood or passion, and holiness. When mixed with other colours, the oddities of a story might be intensified: yellow and orange bring back the twilight/dawn scenery when added to the first three mentioned, thus shaping the oneiric imagery once again. Additionally, pale tones of blue, yellow, green and grey are also a valid resource whenever one wishes to emphasise the impact of olfactory or visual scenes that allude to mold, parasites, decay, and extraordinary events. In *Bloodborne*, all colours from the Gothic palette are used in a plethora of different ways. They help intensify the feelings of a given setting, aiding us to understand the sobriety or somberness of its composition. This resource is explored through many a different chapter of the game in ways that favours variety; that is, there are castles, caves, lakes, forests, cemeteries and ancient sites that make use of the Gothic palette. The castles are eerie, with red tapestries, halls and labyrinthine stairways, and rooms with humongous dark-brown bookcases. Furthermore, the colors relate to the last element we wish to discuss: the destabilization of the natural order.

In *Beyond the Wall of Sleep*, this is brought to the reader through fantastic trips in space and anthropomorphic beings that haunt people's dreams. There's no extraordinary event, apart from the ones described, that make the player question the fabric of reality. In comparison, *Bloodborne* uses plenty of visual resources to emphasise the feeling of confusion and hopelessness. Entering two seemly identical places, documents about massacres and failed experiments, cries for help when fighting so-called enemies; all are elements that evoke doubts about the reality that surrounds the player. Even the warp mechanics of the game make the player wonder about their reality; purple-colored lamps, analog to the weird and the mystic, transport the main character into the dreams of the first hunter. This is a subtle, classic trait of Lovecraftian novels, for their protagonists are often tormented by their dreams and, wherever the character goes, the dream seems to be there as well. It is worth noting that in the first interaction with these lamps one can read "return to the hunters' dream", as if the protagonist's origin had a connection to that

place. *Bloodborne* destabilizes the notions of consciousness because, until reaching the end of the game, you cannot tell whether you are dwelling inside a dream or reality. Only upon Gehrman's dialogue, one is lead to the truth "Good Hunter, you've done well, the night is near its end. Now I will show you mercy. You will die, forget the dream, and awake under the morning sun. You will be freed from this terrible Hunter's Dream."

Conclusion

From this analysis, we feel confident to say that the key to adapting Gothic literature into video games is making its features dynamic and interactive. This is made evident in the items, colours and settings of *Bloodborne*, where the mystery behind Lovecraft's story is rediscovered. Players are drawn by the destabilization of the natural order and the oneiric in a similar way to how readers gathered around to study the complex logic behind the Cthulhu mythos in literary form. Marco Caracciolo (2014, 242) argues that oneiric levels or settings invite "players to align themselves with [them] by drawing both on their firsthand familiarity with dreams (at the perceptual and emotional levels of the background) and on cultural stereotypes about dreams— for instance, horror film clichés." What the author calls a "feedback effect" is especially significant in the case of Lovecraftian storyworld:

> such a feedback effect is elicited through recipients' empathetic engagement with characters whose consciousness is distorted by hallucinations and dreams. I have found that in these cases the character's experience tends to reflect itself at a higher, culturally mediated level in the recipients' own experiential background by challenging their cultural values and the medium-specific conventions of narrative presentation. (2014, 246)

Bloodborne's attractiveness is not only because it is an interactive game, but also because it evokes the player's previous experiences, which are important for a full appreciation of, and engrossment in, the game. Furthermore, another aspect that needs to be revised is what constitutes Gothic tropes, as this is, again, changing. Our initial quote from Punter and Byron regarding the scattered and evolving nature of the Gothic might be restated here. It has become harder to put a finger on what makes a text Gothic due to the many transformations that the visual and interactive aspects of video games have brought to the conversation.

When showing how Lovecraft's tale connects to *Bloodborne*, not only were we studying what had already been seen, but also trying to observe new contributions in the ways one might interpret, or make, an adaptation from a literary story. We decided to work with *Beyond the Wall of Sleep* particularly for its differences from most of Lovecraft's stories, without being disconnected from his whole storyworld. We were able to locate the typical elements that characterise his stories in this tale and show how they could be turned into an interactive game, based on what we observed in *Bloodborne*. In summary, we suggest it is the level of engagement,

alongside an update of the imaginative contract a reader accepts when reading a fantastic story, which validates Bloodborne as a Lovecraftian game.

References

Caracciolo, Marco. 2014. "Those Insane Dream Sequences: Experientiality and Distorted Experience in Literature and Video Games". In *Storyworlds across media: toward a media-conscious narratology,* edited by Marie-Laure Ryan and Jan-Noël Thon. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press.

Fromsoftware Studios. 2015. *Bloodborne*. [PlayStation 4]. USA: Sony. Video game.

Gama-Khalil, Marisa. 2014. "Representações Espaciais do Horror na Literatura de Lygia Fagundes Telles". In *Espaço, Literatura e Cinema.* Edited by Sidney Barbosa and Ozíris Filho. 1ª ed. São Paulo: Todas as musas.

Krzywinska, Tanya. 2015. "The Gamification of Gothic Coordinates in Videogames". Revenant 1.1. Accessed November 16, 2019. http://www.revenantjournal.com/contents/the-gamification-of-gothic-coordinates-in-videogames/#sthash.1oL0dxKx.dpbs

Langmead, Oliver. 2017. "Grant us eyes, grant us eyes! Plant eyes on our brains, to cleanse our beastly idiocy!". In Bloodborne, and the New Frontier of the Gothic. *Press Start (online magazine)*, vol. 4, Issue I. Accessed October 29, 2019. https://press-start.gla.ac.uk/index.php/press-start/article/view/76

Leavenworth, Van. 2014. "The developing storyworld of H.P Lovecraft." In *Storyworlds across media: toward a media-conscious narratology,* edited by Marie-Laure Ryan and Jan-Noël Thon. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press.

Leite, Gabriel R. 2017. *Kos or Kosm? A comparative analysis between Bloodborne and H.P. Lovecraft*. Universidade Católica de Brasília (UCB), Accessed October 29, 2019. https://repositorio.ucb.br/jspui/bitstream/123456789/9056/1/GabrielRibeiroLeite.pdf

Lovecraft, H.P. 2011. *H.P Lovecraft - The Complete Fiction*. New York, Barnes & Nobles, inc.

Punter, David and Byron, G. 2014. *The Gothic*. Vol. 10. London, UK, Blackwell Publishing Ltd.

Schniz, Felix. 2016. "Skeptical Hunter(s): A Critical Approach to the Cryptic Ludonarrative of Bloodborne and Its Player Community". *Lecture*, The Philosophy of Computer Games Conference, Malta.

Contributor Details

Marcelo Velloso Garcia is a master's student at Universidade de Brasília (UnB) in which he studies Sociolinguistics, Sociocognitive approaches in education, language teaching and acquisition. He holds a degree in English - Language and Arts - by the same university.

Email: marcelovg91@gmail.com

ORCID ID: 0000-0003-0733-7602

Vítor Castelões Gama is doctoral student at Universidade de Brasília (UnB) where he researches about the Amazon in Brazilian Science Fiction. His research interests include Brazilian and International Science Fiction, the intersections between literature and other arts (cinema and music) and in electronic literature.

Email: vitorcasteloesgama@hotmail.com

ORCID ID: 0000-0003-2343-3047

BOOK REVIEW

Maisha Wester and Xavier Aldana Reyes (eds). *Twenty-First-Century Gothic: An Edinburgh Companion.* **Edinburgh University Press, 2019. 326 pp. Hardcover. ISBN: 978-1474440929**

Reviewed by Maria Alberto (University of Utah)

In *Twenty-First-Century Gothic: An Edinburgh Companion*, editors Maisha Wester and Xavier Aldana Reyes have collected a wealth of perspectives on the Gothic, examining how this tradition has been adapted to suit the needs and interests of twenty-first century readers. As Wester and Reyes note in their introduction, the Gothic has become a mode of storytelling even more than a genre; they maintain that "Now more than ever, the Gothic is not created in a vacuum" (4), but instead exists in conversation both with its past and with contemporary, real-life developments. For Wester, Reyes, and their contributors, the Gothic's continued relevance is visible across a multitude of hybrid, global, and transmedia forms, some of which have received little critical attention. This collection sets out to rectify this lack, drawing upon its introduction and twenty diverse chapters to demonstrate how "as a mode intrinsically connected to the repressed, the oppressed and the forgotten, the Gothic is in a perfect position to critique lasting notions of convention, propriety and discrimination" (13).

To this end, *Twenty-First-Century Gothic* is divided into four parts: I. Updating the Tradition, II. Contemporary Monsters, III. Contemporary Subgenres, and IV. Ethnogothic. Each part in turn features five chapters introducing various subtypes, so that I. Updating the Tradition establishes the postcolonial, queer, postfeminist, neoliberal, and digital Gothics, while II. Contemporary Monsters examines today's

manifestations of zombies, vampires, serial killers, werewolves, and ghosts. Meanwhile, III. Contemporary Subgenres looks at the new weird, ecoGothic, Gothic comedy, steampunk, and posthuman Gothic, while IV. Ethnogothic introduces South African, Asian, Latin American, Aboriginal, and Black diasporic takes on the Gothic. Each chapter introduces, situates, and theorizes its particular type of Gothic narrative, demonstrating how it participates in the larger Gothic mode and focusing on at least one – and sometimes more – primary sources as an example.

The collection's division into these four parts is an exemplary choice, as it acknowledges the wide variety of ways in which today's iterations of the Gothic have drawn upon their predecessors – referencing them, complicating them, enlarging them, and so forth. For instance, chapters in II. Contemporary Monsters do an admirable job contextualizing the current trend of focalizing monsters and making them more sympathetic, heroic, and even romantic interests. It is also refreshing to see how the collection's authors and editors avoid reifying implicit divisions between "high" and "low" cultural forms, which can certainly happen even when discussing genre. Here, Sorcha Ní Fhlainn does not flinch away from *Twilight* in her chapter on vampires and Reyes does not omit *Warm Bodies* or *Generation Dead* from his chapter on zombies.

Much like previous titles in the *Edinburgh Companions to the Gothic* series, *Twenty-First-Century Gothic* also offers a fine balance between the accessible and the informative. For instance, chapters such as Joseph Crawford's "Gothic Digital Technologies" and Bernice M. Murphy's "Contemporary Serial Killers" face a tricky challenge: on the one hand, these may be readers' first academic encounters with the Slenderman mythos or ongoing reincarnations of the serial killer character, while on the other, Crawford and Murphy are also describing figures that readers could be familiar with from non-academic settings like the movies or internet.

In such cases, the authors must account for all levels of reader familiarity while also working to situate their subjects within an academic conversation that might not include much additional research on that particular subject. However, all of *Twenty-First-Century Gothic*'s contributors rise to this kind of challenge admirably, while Wester and Reyes themselves also do some of the heavy lifting with their outstanding introduction. (To be honest, I would consider teaching the introduction on its own for the ways in which it reiterates how the Gothic as a mode is flexible across cultures, media, and technologies, and for the claim that its capacity for socio-political commentary "has actually become an indicator of the Gothic itself" [7].)

Among the many things that I appreciated about this collection, one of the most outstanding is in regards to the chapters that locate Gothic narratives beyond the United States and Great Britain, traditionally understood as early homes of the Gothic tradition. As Wester and Reyes observe, "Appropriating the Gothic is a complex project for non-Western (postcolonial) populations, given that the mode is fraught with problematic racial and ethnic representations and discourses" (10):

Charlotte Dacre's 1806 *Zofloya* is a particularly striking example, where the dark-skinned title character eventually reveals himself to be Satan and claims the heroine's soul. Yet Wester and Reyes also note that the Gothic "provides non-Western authors access to a mode through which they can articulate and critique the pressures of the new world order and the traumas of national history" (12), as Aboriginal and Black diasporic Gothic in particular do: Katrin Althans and Wester herself reiterate this complicated engagement well in their respective chapters.

Ultimately, I recommend *Twenty-First-Century Gothic* highly, both for experienced readers seeking new ideas and for new readers looking to learn about today's Gothic for the first time. Interesting and accessible while also meticulous and well-argued, this collection can serve both populations adeptly.

Reviewer's Email: maria.alberto@utah.edu
Reviewer's Twitter: @MariaKAlberto

BOOK REVIEW

Tracy Fahey. *New Music for Old Rituals*. Black Shuck Books, 2018. 234 pp. Paperback. ISBN: 978-1-913038-19.9

Reviewed by Gwyneth Peaty (Curtin University)

Building on the success of her first short story collection, *The Unheimlich Manoeuvre* (2016), Tracy Fahey presents nineteen new tales of the uncanny in this exciting and thought-provoking volume. As an academic, Fahey has written extensively on folk horror and is well-versed in the Gothic as a topic of study. This breadth of knowledge is evident in *New Music for Old Rituals*. So too is her nuanced understanding of Ireland as a mythic space, as the collection offers an intimate window into Irish folklore, history, culture, and landscapes.

As the title suggests, encounters between past and present lie at the core of *New Music for Old Rituals*. Each story forges a connection between historical Ireland and Ireland as it is today; temporal boundaries fold like origami paper in Fahey's careful hands. Fairies, ghosts, and other less familiar, unsettlingly formless creatures make their presence felt in contemporary spaces as the past refuses to stay relegated to a book or buried under the ground. Time is both an implicit and explicit topic of concern throughout. For instance, I particularly enjoyed the description of a boring village in the story 'Scarecrow, Scarecrow'; a drooping location in which "time is drawn out, like old, stringy chewing gum" (99). I also appreciate that the power and tragedy of old knowledge, traditions and rituals are rarely romanticised in this collection. While beautifully observed, these are not especially gentle fairy tales. Fahey has mastered the art of an impactful, at times brutal ending. As a result, I found it impossible to read the whole collection at once, as the conclusion of each

story seemed to evoke its own special moment of revelation, solemnity, or further thinking.

I won't spoil the stories by outlining their particulars. However, I will say that many overlapping themes hold the collection together. The themes that caught my attention most, in addition to time, were nature and queerness. The organic spaces of Ireland are not a backdrop in these stories, but an essential element and participant in the action. This is most obvious in stories like 'The Green Road,' 'Under the Whitethorn,' and 'Come You Who Want to Come,' in which natural elements such as vegetation and rock not only house supernatural creatures, but appear to have a power of their own. As such, the volume is an excellent example of botanical or eco-gothic, and deserving of analysis in these terms. Queerness is more subtly interwoven into the stories, and I found 'The Changeling' one of the most powerful and traumatic tales in the collection as a result.

As Jarlath Killeen points out in *The Emergence of Irish Gothic Fiction* (2014, 2), there is a "[long] cultural tradition that figures Ireland as a zone of weirdness, the supernatural and the pathological." *New Music for Old Rituals* certainly taps into this vein of writing, however it does so, I think, without depicting Ireland a space of horror or pathology in itself. Instead of looking in from the outside, through a frightened stranger's eyes, this collection feels like it originates from the centre; Fahey invites us to feel what it is to inhabit these sacred spaces, to share the unique sensations of a diverse range of Irish characters embedded in a stream of history that perpetually flows and crashes back upon itself.

As an excellent example of Irish Gothic and a potential topic of analysis, I highly recommend the collection to both academic and non-academic readers. It may also provide a source of inspiration for scholars dreaming of expanding their writing beyond academia or nonfictional prose. Now, if you will excuse me, I must go write a story. If the results are half as good as anything in *New Music for Old Rituals,* I will count it a success.

Reviewer's Email: G.Peaty@curtin.edu.au
Reviewer's Twitter: @peaty_g